

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha – Mindlinks 3 |

Chapter 3

Aria's POV

After Damon left, I slipped into a dream. Not the cold operating table. Not *Damon's* contempt. Only my father.

The once towering, unyielding Alpha of the Grayson pack, a man who had never bowed to anyone in his life, kneeling before Walter Hawthorne. His head bent low enough that his forehead nearly touched the marble floor.

"Please, Alpha Walter. Protect Aria."

"The Moon Goddess has given me a sign. She is Damon's fated mate. I beg you— *accept* this *bond*. It will end the feud between our families. And... it will save her life."

I watched the gray at his temples, watched his proud spine curve into a bow of humiliation. I wanted to run to him, to scream at him to stop. But no sound came. I stood frozen, forced to watch him trade **away** his dignity so I could earn the title of Mrs. Hawthorne.

So that I would be protected. So that I could live.

"No, I won't agree to this—"

I jolted awake, sitting bolt upright, my nightgown soaked through with cold sweat.

The sheets beneath me still held last night's marks. The dull ache deep in my abdomen hadn't faded. The tooth-mark on my tongue still throbbed at the slightest touch.

I stroked my lower abdomen, where my wolf cubs, my hope, once grew. But now my hope is gone.

I lay in the dark for a few *seconds*, forcing my breathing to slow. Only then did I notice my phone had been ringing. Damon's mother.

"Don't forget Walter's birthday banquet next night. You and Damon need to be there on time." Madam, Duran's voice was as crisp and cold as ever. "And as Luna, dress properly. Don't embarrass this family again."

I remembered, belatedly, the last Hawthorne gathering—I'd worn a plain white dress and been scolded for dressing like I was attending a funeral. Every single person in that family looked down on me.

I didn't know how much longer I could hold on.

Damon didn't come back that night. He might be with Claudia or somewhere else. But I didn't care

anymore.

The next evening, I sat, tiredly and mechanically, and began dressing. By Hawthorne tradition, the Luna was required to attend the Alpha's grandfather's birthday at his side. I hesitated for a long time before calling Damon.

"Damon was busy. Did you need something?"

apter

Claudia's **voice** came through the receiver.

I stared out at the flat, grey sky beyond the window and let two seconds of silence pass.

"Never mind. Wrong number."—1 hung up quickly.

That night, I went to the Hawthorne estate alone.

+25 Paints

The old manor blazed with light. The long table was set with gleaming silver and clusters of fresh white roses, the low, mournful notes of a cello drifting through the air.

The hall was already half full, laughter and the clink of glasses filling the space. I'd barely taken my seat in a corner when Madam Duran's voice cut through half the room.

"Oh, Aria. Where's Damon?"

"He should be on his way." That was the only excuse I could come up with. In reality, I had *no* idea.

She clearly didn't believe it and looked at me with open mockery. "You've been married into this family two whole years now, and still unable to control your husband, and even no sign of a pregnancy. I'd love to know what exactly you do with all that free time at home."

A ripple of laughter went through the room.

I lowered my eyes to the empty china plate in front of me and said nothing. I'd heard worse over the past **two** years. I was used to it by now.

"Speaking of which," Riley, Damon's sister, leaned in from her seat beside her mother, her voice pitched low like she was sharing a secret—though loud enough for the entire table to hear.

"Mom, did *you* know Claudia's back? She just posted on i*****. She's back, and gorgeous as ever. She's the real Luna. Not like... well. Some people."

"Oh, I heard that too!" a woman across the table chimed in eagerly, practically fawning.

"Someone spotted her at **that** pack hospital this morning, Damon was personally taking care of her."

"No wonder he's been neglecting pack business, always running off to the hospital."

My hand, resting on my lap beneath the tablecloth, curled slowly into a fist.

Then, a small commotion at the entrance told me Damon had finally arrived.

The laughter in the room dropped a notch. His gaze swept over his mother, over the rest of the family. before finally landing on me, cold and unimpressed. The same familiar disdain.

"Sit down" Walter, Damon's grandfather spoke from the head of the table, his voice quiet but carrying absolute authority "Damon, you're late to my own birthday, and you left your Luna sitting alone Is this how an Alpha behaves?"

Every eye at the table turned toward us like spotlights

Damon sat beside me, his movements controlled but rigid with barely contained fury. He leaned in close

"Running to Grandfather already? Trying to embarrass me in front of him, Aria? His voice was cold, edged with a blade.

+25 **Points**

+didn't say anything." I kept my eyes forward, my tone flat. "And there won't be a repeat of this."

"Won't there?" He looked at me sideways, sharp and suspicious. "What new game are *you* playing now?"

I **didn't** bother answering. Whatever I said; he'd already convicted me two years *ago*.

From across the table, Walter's gaze settled heavily on us. "Damon, your wife looks like she's lost weight. Be a good husband and fill her plate."

Damon's fork hovered mid-air for a second before he finally relented under his grandfather's authority, dropping a rare venison onto my plate.

The heavy, gamey smell hit me instantly. I clapped a hand over my mouth, pushing my chair back, trying to escape. But I was too weak. Before I could even stand steady, I retched.

"Oh my," Madam Duran's hand flew to her chest, her disgust flipping into pure delight within seconds. "Damon! Could she be... pregnant?!"

The hushed whispers around the table went dead silent, every eye locked onto my stomach.

Damon looked equally stunned.

"Impossible, " I answered calmly. "It's just an upset stomach."

"And besides, Damon has a health issue. There's no way I could be pregnant by him."

The entire table fell into a dead silence. Whatever had flickered in Damon's eyes went out at once.

He stood abruptly, seized my arm, and dragged me down the hallway.

"Say that again." His *voice* was low and cold.

I lifted my chin and laughed coldly. "Didn't catch it? I said you're not capable. Want me to call a doctor for you, Alpha? Get *you* something for it?"

"I'm not capable?" A cold laugh tore out of him, "Every full moon, when have I ever failed to satisfy you? When haven't you been the one crying, begging me to fuck you deeply?"

His scent—cedar, dominant, suffocating—crashed over me. His face closed in, his mouth dropping toward mine.

The next second, Crack!

A slap rang out through the silent corridor. I'd put every last scrap of strength left in my broken body into

that hit

Damon's head snapped to the side. His whole body locked in place

I met his eyes without flinching

"Don't touch me, Damon"

"I find it disgusting"

Damon went completely still. Fury raged across his handsome face, veins standing out at his temples-

25 Points

but beneath all that rage, for just a second, panic flickered in his eyes.

"Fine. Very fine, Aria. Look how far you've come."

He let go of my arm, his voice cold enough to have crawled straight out of hell.

"Remember what you said today. Even if you get down on your knees and beg me, I won't grant your need either."

He turned and strode away, his footsteps ringing hard and furious against the marble floor.

I slid down against the cold wall, pressing a hand hard against my aching abdomen.

Good. Remember that, Damon.

Because I would never ask you for anything again.