

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 21

Aria's POV

The hand holding the showerhead trembled. Just once. But he didn't turn the water off. He just stood there, letting it fall.

"You were separated from your wolves. You were unconscious for six hours, on the verge of death." I looked up at him from the cold water rising around my thighs. "I fed you my blood."

"It was me." The desperation in my voice surprised me. I collapsed while I was out looking for herbs for you. When I came back, you were gone—only the scent of wolves remained. Your pack had taken you."

I

"I know what it looked like. I know what the sky looked like at hour three when the cloud cover broke, and the temperature dropped another six degrees."

A cold laugh escaped Damon. "Still drunk out of your mind, Aria. Still trying to play me?"

"Five years ago—Claudia saved me. Not you."

"She wasn't there." My voice sounded as hollow as my claim.

Even I barely believed myself.

No proof. No evidence. Just my word—and what was that worth?

It was almost laughable. Almost.

"She described the pass. She described it exactly." He looked almost impatient.

"Then she described something she heard from someone else." I wiped the water off my face with the back of my hand. A hollow laugh escaped me.

Bang!

His answer came in a single, brutal sound—the showerhead tearing through air, then metal against bone

It hit my shin. Hard. Direct. Like he'd aimed.

The world went white. Then red. Then nothing.

Pain-sharp, splintering-ripped through me before my mind could even name it

When I could see again, he was already above me Looking down Always looking down

“Aria Last warning Drop the act”

His voice was ice His eyes were colder

“Claudia was there She held my hand when I woke She stayed You didn’t

“if you’re going to play drunk- then stay here until you’re sober

The words hit harder than the showerhead ever could

didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Just sat there in the cold water, letting it numb everything it could reach.

Because what was left to say?

He’d already decided. Years ago. Tonight. Always.

He left.

The door hit the frame hard enough to rattle the mirror.

I sat on the floor, pulling my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them.

I wasn’t crying anymore. I’d run out of tears somewhere around the second hour of that dinner. Or maybe the third.

Then, the water went cold.

The blood on my lip had dried into a crust.

Everything blurred together after a while.

My wolf had gone quiet.

Since I’d walked out of that bathroom, she wasn’t snarling anymore.

Wasn’t clawing.

She was just... done.

I reached up and turned the water off. Water dripped from my dress and my hair.

I wrung out the hem, pushed myself up, and changed into sweats without looking at the mirror.

I lay down on top of the covers and stared at the ceiling.

I listened to the house settle back into silence and told myself, Tomorrow. Courthouse.

I held onto that thought like a lifeline.

It was the only solid thing I had left. I don't know when I stopped thinking and started dreaming, but somewhere between the two, the fever found me.

I woke up broken. Heat that didn't come from the shower, but lived in your bones and veins. Then Amy's voice came, low and urgent, from somewhere far away Then another voice, cutting through the fog

"Why didn't you come to me immediately?"

I forced my eyes open looked at the clock, and saw it was 4 in the morning

The room swam at the edges

Damon stood beside the bed, his white shirt's sleeves shoved up and collar open

Dark circles under his eyes He looked like he'd been awake all night

But not for me. For Claudia

hapter 20-

+know it all too well.

~"Mr. Hawthorne, I tried to tell you-Mrs. Hawthorne has a terrible fever." Amy's voice was careful, nervous.

"You were in your offree And your phone... it wouldn't go through."

I saw his hands clench, and a muscle in his cheek jumped.

Then he asked, "How long until the fever breaks?"

"We've given her a shot. Normally, it should go down in about half an hour," the pack doctor answered.

Amy stood by the bed, still uneasy. “But last time she had a fever, it didn’t break all night. I’m worried this time might be-”

“Fever?” Damon turned to her. “When did she have a fever before?”

Amy hesitated. Then, quietly: “It was the night of the family dinner. Mrs. Hawthorne came back soaked through from the rain. That same night, the fever hit. I called you then, too—but no one answered.”

Damon didn’t move.

He went completely still.

Then—a du!! pain struck my chest.

Our mate bond is still there. Of course I can feel his pain.

But this isn’t his.

I know it all too well.

Damon Hawthorne doesn’t ache for me.

This pain—it’s mine.

How pathetic.

I’m still aching for him.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 22

Aria’s POV

I woke up—same side of the bed, same cold spot where he should have been. Five years of mornings, and they all felt exactly the same.

The armchair in the corner caught my eye. Someone had sat there. Long enough to leave an impression.

I looked at it.

Then I looked away.

Don't, I told myself. Don't do that.

The fever had burned itself out overnight. Still there—that dull heat behind my eyes, that ache deep in my bones—but the worst was over.

I sat up, and the room didn't spin. Progress.

Amy came in, carrying a bowl of pumpkin porridge.

"Luna, you had a fever last night after drinking. This should help you feel better."

"Thank you, Amy. I appreciate it."

"No need to thank me! If anyone deserves thanks, it's—Alpha! Are you heading out?" She stopped mid-sentence, spoon in hand, eyes fixed on the doorway.

I looked up.

Damon stood there, framed by the door, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit.

"Mm," he murmured. "Got a groundbreaking ceremony today. Dinner's part of it—so don't wait up."

Groundbreaking ceremony....

Something clicked.

A conversation—casual, from days ago—surfaced in my mind. Something a colleague had mentioned.

The Voss Tower—landmark commission, new waterfront district—the kind of thing that made careers. It had been in the industry papers for months.

And... Claudia had designed it. Of course she had.

Pain twisted in my lower abdomen. Same as yesterday, same as the days before. I pressed a hand against it and breathed through the ache.

"Luna, are you okay? You look terrible!"

Damon stepped forward.

I shook my head, gritting my teeth against the pain, and tried to reassure Amy. "I'm fine."

And then—

Ding!

His phone rang.

“Damon, the ceremony starts at ten. Are you on your way?” Claudia’s voice drifted through the speaker-

soft, gentle.

Damon glanced at me.

For a moment—just a moment—I almost thought he hesitated.

Then he turned away. Looked past me. Through me.

“Yes. I’m on my way.”

He hung up and turned to leave.

And I realized... I was wrong. Again.

“Alpha!” Amy hurried after him. “Luna really doesn’t look well—could you please stay with her?”

“Didn’t you just hear her say she’s fine?” Damon’s voice was ice-cold.

Amy pressed on, desperate. “Luna only says she’s fine so we won’t worry. The doctor said with her condition, gastric bleeding is a real risk-”

“The doctor said to observe her overnight. Nothing happened last night. And now—right as I’m leaving- she’s suddenly about to bleed?” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Aria, I didn’t know you’d learned to fake being sick.”

He didn’t look back.

The front door opened.

Then it closed.

I sat on the bed with my hands pressed to my stomach and stared at nothing.

“He’s going to stand with her on stage,” I said quietly.

Amy didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

I turned to the window. The estate grounds were blanketed in frost, the morning light gray and thin. It looked peaceful. Deceptively so—step outside and the cold would cut right through you.

My wolf stirred, restless.

He was here all night, she said.

And then Claudia called, and he left.

“Should I bring up breakfast, Luna?”

“In a bit.” I crossed to the closet. “I want to get dressed first.”

had work. Jade had texted last night about the showcase. I was covering the morning session, but the afternoon presentation still needed someone. Three project submissions sat finished in my files—submissions I’d kept pushing off for reasons that were starting to feel less like reasons and more like fear.

I pulled a blazer from the closet. Dark, structured, professional.

Things are exactly like this. They have always been exactly like this.

The pain sharpened.

I set the blazer down, pressed both hands flat against my abdomen, and breathed slowly and steadily, the way the hospital doctor had shown me. Don’t tense up. Let it pass.

The pain twisted harder. A full-body clench that bent me forward over my knees, my breath catching in my throat.

“Luna.” Amy’s hand touched my shoulder.

“It’ll pass,” I managed. My voice came out thin, strained.

And then I felt it—the world pulling away, going hazy.

I heard Amy call my name.

I heard the water glass tip over and shatter.

The floor rushed up to meet me.

Amy screamed.

I heard her calling Damon, and then, one busy tone after another...

And then...

Everything went quiet.

Darkness swallowed me whole.

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Chapter 23

Aria's POV

Ten days.

That's how long I was in the hospital.

Amy came every morning. Astrid came every evening, bringing tea and settling into the chair beside my bed with her feet tucked under her, pretending she wasn't monitoring every number on the display behind my head.

Neither of them mentioned Damon.

On the fourth day, Astrid arrived with her laptop and a look that meant she'd been turning something over for a while and had decided to say it.

She sat down, opened her laptop, and turned it toward me.

Pacific Architecture Prize. The banner filled the screen: regional competition, open submissions, deadline in two weeks.

"Just hear me out." She placed the laptop between us on the bed. "I ran into someone on the prize committee. Late registration is still open, and I mentioned you should enter."

"You know why I can't."

"I know you think you can't." She looked at me directly. You haven't entered a competition since. That's five years. And I need you to hear me say something that I don't think anyone has said to you plainly."

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to.

"What happened wasn't your fault." She said it without softening it. "You know that. I know that. And Aria, you are one of the best structural designers I've ever seen work. The way you solved the wind shear problem in the original brief-

“You have been making yourself small at that firm for years while people with half your instincts get their names on things, and I am done watching it.”

The room was so quiet—just the sound of our breathing.

I thought about the Harlow competition, about being twenty-two and walking into it like it was something I’d been waiting for my whole life. Three hundred hours in that submission.

In the end, nothing.

“It’s a different competition,” Astrid said. “Different platform. Different judges. Just your name and your

work.”

I looked at the screen for a long moment.

Just my name. Just my work.

No history. No baggage. No what happened.

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Chapter 23-

Just me.

My hands gripped the sheets.

“Astrid... send me the entry form.”

It took a long time for me to recognize the voice as my own—hoarse, foreign, like it had traveled through something thick to reach the surface.

I made the decision.

The convention center smelled like coffee and cologne and the particular energy of people performing ease around each other. I signed in at the desk and walked into the hall.

but

I’m here for the showcase, covering for Jolly, my colleague. She’s out sick, so I’m presenting.

“Claudia Stone is coming to this one too?”

“Her? Wasn’t she just at the Voss Tower groundbreaking with Mr. Hawthorne? The two of them together- quite the sight, from what I heard.”

Two women from the second division stood near the entrance, wrapping up a conversation they didn’t think anyone important was close enough to hear.

I walked past them.

My wolf made a low sound—something that had stopped expecting to be surprised.

Forward, I told her. Just forward.

Then something hit my shoulder from behind. The folder went down, pages scattering.

“Oops.” The woman standing behind me looked at the mess with open satisfaction. I recognized her face.

Renate, a colleague from the second division who’d been part of the group gossiping near the entrance.

I crouched and began collecting pages.

Renate moved to block my path.

“What’s the matter? Too good now to even acknowledge your colleagues, Ms. Grayson?”

“Move.”

The second division and the third division—friendly on the surface, but underneath? All competition.

And I’d just closed the deal that the second division had been chasing for months. So yeah, they weren’t exactly thrilled with me.

No point in playing nice.

“Oops.” She shifted to the center of the narrow space between the tables, planting herself there deliberately. “Oh, my ankle. Can’t move.”

Childish,” I said.

Her face went red. “What did you say?”

“You’re happy being used? That’s your problem, not mine.” I looked her dead in the eye and walked right past her.

She stumbled.

I crouched and picked up the last scattered page, and a hand came down to collect the final sheet before

I could reach it.

“Pacific Architecture Prize entry form?”

I looked up.

Claudia held the page, reading the header. She turned it toward Damon, who stood behind her.

“Damon, this is the competition I mentioned.” Her voice was warm, perfectly calibrated. “What a coincidence. Aria’s entering too.”

Damon’s eyes moved to me like a question.

“Aria.” Claudia turned back. “I’m on the regional jury panel this year. If there’s anything you need—guidance on the process, anything at all—”

“Thank you for your concern, but no thanks.”

I took the entry form from her hand and walked directly to the registration desk, submitted the form

without stopping; and signed: Aria Grayson.

Then I turned to leave—

Renate’s voice cut through, sharp and close.

“Of course she doesn’t need help! Someone who just copies other people’s work doesn’t deserve to be in this competition anyway!”

My breath stopped.

The accusation came from behind me, high and carrying.

“She’s a plagiarist.”

“What? Didn’t think I’d know?” Renate stepped right up to me, her voice loud and dripping with triumph. “Aria—five years ago, the Harlow competition? I was there too!”

People turned their heads.

“That’s Aria Grayson, whatever she’s calling herself now. She stole her roommate’s design at university. Got her disqualified from a competition. The girl tried to prove her innocence by jumping off a building.” She pointed at me. “She’s been hiding it for years. And now she wants to enter a major competition.”

The people from the second division were practically glowing—watching the show, barely hiding their

smirks.

+25 Posts

Renate, you’d better have proof before you throw accusations like that,” one of them chimed in, dripping with fake concern. “Aria might just sue you for defamation!”

“Defamation?” Renate laughed. “Go ahead—ask her if I’m lying!”

She turned to me, looking way too pleased with herself.

“Aria? Got nothing to say? They’re all waiting to hear you deny it. Go ahead—deny it.”

All eyes turned to me.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 24

Aria’s POV

I stood there with the entry form in my hand, feeling its familiar weight. The accusation I’d been carrying for years had just been spoken out loud in a room full of people whose professional opinions mattered. My throat closed up the way it always did

I tried to defend myself.

Just like five years ago.

But it was useless. I’d tried that before.

No one believed me. No one wanted to.

“See? I told you—she can’t even deny it!”

“Had enough?”

A low, familiar voice cut through the noise.

I looked up.

Damon.

Why would he... speak up for me?

His gaze swept the room—cold, cutting. The chatter died instantly.

“Aria.” Claudia stepped forward and touched my arm lightly. “Don’t let this get to you. Whatever anyone says, I believe in you.”

“Damon’s taking me to the exhibit. If you need anything, you can always come to me.”

I looked down at her hand on my arm—then gently moved it away.

So that’s it.

He thinks this whole scene is keeping Claudia from the exhibit?

Damon. The way you care for her... it’s really something.

“I have work to get back to,” I said.

I kept my back straight. Just walk away.

Or... escape.

Damon’s POV

I got back late.

A

The lights were off downstairs.

I stood in the entrance hall for a moment, then went to the study and sat down without turning the lamp

Claudia’s voice echoed in my mind.

“I just worry about Aria. If the plagiarism story gets out again during the competition, the attention could be brutal. I thought you should know.”

“And then—it gets worse. It’s not just her problem; it becomes a story about the Hawthorne family. I’m only saying this because I care about both of you.”

For five years, that voice had been the one I trusted, and the habit of trust ran so deep I’d stopped examining it.

Then another voice slipped in.

“The investigation confirmed it—the design submitted under Aria’s name was identical to her roommate’s work. When they questioned the roommate, she broke down and admitted she’d stolen Aria’s design and submitted it as her own. The judges disqualified her.”

“As for the roommate—she jumped from the third floor. An awning broke her fall, saved her life, but she suffered severe brain damage and lost both legs. She’s been in a wheelchair ever since.”

Dead silence swallowed everything.

Time slipped away.

Until footsteps on the stairs pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Amy, where are the medications? In the cabinet above?”

Her voice.

The study door was half open. Aria appeared on the landing.

I stepped out.

“What medicine? Are you sick?”

I thought about ten days ago—her lying in bed, that pale face.

Was she really not okay back then?

“No. You misheard.” Her voice was ice. She turned to leave.

Like I was nothing but polluted air. Like standing near me for one more second disgusted her.

Something hot and tight lodged in my chest.

I crossed the room in three strides and caught her wrist on the bottom step.

“Aria. Are you avoiding me?” A pause. “Or is this another one of your tricks to get my attention?”

A soft laugh escaped her throat.

She was one step above me. She looked at me with that directness—the kind that still held something

cold.

“Don’t worry. I won’t bother you anymore. From now on, I’ll even wish you and Claudia well.”

I froze. Just for a second.

“If you don’t believe me, I can say it now.” She pulled at the corner of her mouth, looked me in the eye, and spoke—one word at a time.

“Damon. I wish you and Claudia a lifetime of happiness. May you-”

“Aria!”

I cut her off. Trapped her between myself and the railing. “What are you doing? Trying to piss me off?”

Silence.

“Say something!” I gripped her chin. Forced her to look at me.

“What do you want me to say?” She smirked. “Tell me. I’ll say whatever you want.”

Rage tore through my veins. Her reaction—it was like punching cotton.

My chest felt hollow.

Like I was losing something. Something I couldn’t name.

No. I have to catch it.

I looked at her lips. Leaned in.

I need something—her surrender, her fight, her tears, her moans—anything. I need her to react.

So I can feel her. Here. With me.

Our lips almost met.

She turned her face away.

Her cheek brushed against my mouth. Cold. And I snapped back to myself.

What am I doing?

Begging her?

Ridiculous.

I stepped back. Two steps. My vision cleared.

“Don’t submit that entry form,” I said as she turned around.

Aria’s POV

“Don’t submit that entry form,” he said. “You’re not entering the competition.”

I stopped. I turned around

“Is it because of the plagiarism?” said it flatly and watched his face anyway.

Still the same.

Just cold, with the unshakable calm that comes with being an Alpha.

My wolf made a sound in the back of my mind that I didn’t have a word for.

Hurt. Anger. Maybe both.

In the end, it all dissolved into a hollow laugh.

“I get it. You think if I compete, someone will dig up the Harlow story—and then it’s not just my problem anymore. It’s your name. Your family. Your reputation standing next to mine in the papers.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? You’re trying to protect your name from me.”

“But Damon, I didn’t plagiarize anything. Not one thing.”

He looked at me—not a flicker of feeling, like my words were a script he’d already read, already judged, already dismissed.

“You never believed me. Not once.”

I’ve always known this truth—cold, sharp, undeniable/But every time it touches me, it still tears something open. Like a crack in my chest splitting wider all over again.

We’re fated mates. We can hear each other’s thoughts. We’re supposed to trust each other completely- never look over our shoulders, fight side by side like we’re one.

But the truth?

My mate is the only person who’s ever really hurt me.

My only enemy.

“Damon.” I heard my voice go even. “I’ve always wondered. Why? Why do you never believe me? Why is that so impossible for you?”

His jaw shifted slightly in that particular way he arranged himself when he was about to deliver a blow.

“I will believe you,” he said. “If you were the person in that wheelchair.”

My breath caught.

Damon, you always knew exactly where to press the knife into my heart.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 25

Aria’s POV

My brother Joshua’s birthday fell on a visitation day—the one day I could see our dad.

I let myself believe it was the Moon Goddess making up for something. A small, quiet gift, just for me.

Processing dragged on longer than usual—some new guard didn’t know the pre-approved list. I stood there, answered the same questions twice, and didn’t let anything show on my face.

Dad was already in the room when the guard brought us back.

He'd aged since the last time I saw him three months ago—grayer, more worn. He opened his arms, and I stepped into them. The hug was familiar, solid like always, but something about it felt different.

"You look terrible," Joshua said.

"Happy birthday to you, my son," Dad smiled.

We ate the cake. Joshua complained that the slice I gave him was smaller.

"Eat your cake and shut up!"

"Aria, you gave Dad the piece with the cherry. I get the scraps. And I'm the birthday boy."

"Be grateful you're getting anything at all!"

Dad watched us the way he always had. "Both grown now, and you're still just like when you were little—" He broke off, coughing.

The coughing came suddenly.

Three or four harsh coughs, pressing his fist to his mouth. When it passed, he straightened and reached for his water, and I watched him carefully.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"It's just a cold that's taking its time," he said, offering a reassuring smile. "Don't make a mountain out of a

molehill."

I pressed my lips together.

Was it really just that?

Something I couldn't name crept through me—slow, quiet, wrong.

Then a hand landed on my shoulder.

"No more sad faces, okay? It's my birthday. Show a little joy. Besides—I've got good news for you both today."

Joshua set his fork down and placed a folded document on the table.

Petition for early release," he said. "Restitution paid in full. Clean record. There's a real chance you can get out in under a year."

Under a year.

My heart slammed against my ribs.

A year. In a year, I'd see Dad—at home. No phone calls through glass. No guards. Just him.

Dad looked at the petition without touching it. saw tears in his eyes.

“Good news,” he said. “It’s wonderful news.” His hands were shaking on the table.

We had twelve minutes left. Dad laughed at something Joshua did—a real, full laugh—and the three of us sat in a windowless room under fluorescent lights eating birthday cake, and it was, in its own specific and limited way, enough.

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When the guard signaled time, Dad held me longer than he had at the start. A few beats past when we normally would’ve let go.

“My girl,” he said quietly into the top of my head. “Next time, let’s meet outside.”

I nodded against his shoulder. “See you soon, Dad.”

He walked through the door, and it closed.

“He looks tired,” I said.

“He’s okay.” Joshua pressed his hand flat to the table. “Today was good. Let today be good.”

In the hallway, he hugged me.

“Under a year,” I said into his shoulder.

“Under a year.” He stepped back.

“Go home. Get some sleep. And don’t let anybody talk you out of the competition.”

He stared at me. “It’s yours. You earned it.”

I picked up my bag.

“Already submitted,” I said.

After saying goodbye to Joshua, my phone rang before I reached the car.

It was Dana. My supervisor.

“Aria. Where are you?”

“Ten minutes out.”

“You need to go. Hawthorne just called—they want you to deliver some documents to their Building B. Specifically requested you.”

The B building—nothing like the flagship. Three stories, open in the middle, glass walkways all around. Clean. Efficient. But something about it felt cold and unwelcoming.

Just like its owner, Damon Hawthorne.

I went through security and took the elevator to the second floor, where finance was.

“The manager’s still in a meeting. Just wait over there.”

No chair. No water. Just me standing.

People came and went. No one said a word.

I shifted my weight. Left foot. Right foot. The ache starting to build in my legs.

Forty-five minutes later, I walked to the assistant’s desk.

“Has the manager’s meeting ended?”

She looked up with fake surprise. “Oh! Didn’t I tell you? She finished like half an hour ago.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ve just been completely slammed.” She turned back to her screen and kept typing.

I got it.

Someone had set this up today—wanted to make me wait, make me squirm.

Damon? Or someone else?

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 26

Aria's POV

"So your manager's in the office right now, right?"

The assistant glanced at me and said nothing. Then she looked down and started admiring her nails.

Bang!

I slammed the folder onto her desk.

She flinched. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh—so your ears do work." I smirked.

Her face went pale, then red.

"Then be a dear and take this to your manager. Thanks."

I turned and started walking away.

I understood exactly what this was now. And I knew who had arranged it.

Not Damon.

Whoever wanted to make me wait—it wasn't him. He wouldn't pull something this cheap.

"Aria! Don't you dare walk away!"

I recognized the voice before I turned around.

Lilith Hawthorne.

"The documents are delivered. Why can't I leave?"

"Because you're about to mess up the deal."

She grabbed the folder from the front desk and stormed over to me.

"Aria—if this deal between your company and the Hawthorne Group falls through because of you, do you really think you'll still have a job?"

"What exactly do you want?" I frowned, my patience wearing thin.

She let out a sharp laugh.

“What do I want? Watch closely.”

She opened the folder, pulled out the drawings, and walked with them to the railing overlooking the atrium.

Dread washed over me.

“Lilith!” I tried to stop her, but it was too late.

She let go.

A

Forty pages. They separated in the air, catching the draft from the atrium, floating down in wide arcs toward the first floor. Pages scattered across the floor in ones and twos.

Lilith leaned against the railing and looked down at them.

“Oops,” she said, turning back to me, her voice dropping.

“Those are officially your responsibility. Your firm’s name is on that delivery. If I make a call right now and say they arrived in that condition-” she glanced over the railing “—your job, your firm’s account with us, your reputation. All of that’s on the line.”

She smiled. “So if you don’t want to get fired... I’d suggest getting down there and picking up those documents. One by one.”

My hands clenched, nails biting into my palms.

I realized then—all these years of holding back, of letting things slide—they’d given Lilith the wrong idea.

But the only reason I ever put up with her was because of him. And now? I didn’t even want Damon anymore. So what was she to me?

“Go ahead. Make the call. Tattle.”

I took a breath, turned, and headed for the stairs.

All I wanted now was to get through this year quietly. Wait for Dad to come home. Let my family be whole again. Then leave. Start over. Let everything begin again.

‘Aria! Who said you could leave?! Stop right there!’

Footsteps rushed up behind me. Then a hand shoved hard against my shoulder.

The push was brutal.

The staircase yawned below me. I was already pitching forward over the rail when my hand caught the banister.

I hung there for one horrible second.

At the same time, Lilith's momentum had carried her too far forward. When her hands left my back, there was nothing to stop her—just a choked gasp and the frantic scrape of heels slipping on hardwood.

I spun around. She was right there—arms flailing, one foot already over the edge. I lunged and grabbed her.

But I could barely hold on.

I watched her, cold. Loosened one finger.

“Ah! E-Aria—if you let go, I swear I'll make you pay!”

“Really? Good.” My voice was flat. “Whether I let go or not, you were never going to ‘let me off’ anyway. So...”

Hoosened my grip just a little more.

Lilith went pale. A sharp cry escaped her.

“No—don't! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, okay?! Aria, please—don't let go!”

“Fine. Answer one question.”

She turned her head with effort, on the verge of tears.

“W-What question?”

“What did Claudia say to you?”

Lilith had never liked me—that was nothing new. But she never went out of her way to start trouble unless we actually ran into each other.

If no one had said something to her, I didn't believe it for a second.

What I couldn't figure out was Claudia.

Why?

For Damon? But he was already hers.

“Nothing–AHH! I swear!” Lilith felt my grip loosen and her voice shot up an octave. “I’m not lying! It was me... I wanted to teach you a lesson!”

“I just can’t stand it–someone like you, replacing Claudia. Becoming my brother’s wife?”

That was it?

She expected me to believe that?

A laugh escaped my throat.

She stared at me, waiting for my reaction–waiting for me to fight back, to sink to her level like I always did.

But something in me just... stopped,

It didn’t matter anymore.

Her. Damon. All of it–none of it mattered.

I had my own path to walk.

“Think whatever you want.” My free hand shot out–caught her wrist–yanked.

She came crashing back onto the landing, collapsing in a heap. One knee hit the floor hard. Her hair fell

over her face.

Beside me, she gasped for breath, still in shock.

“Lilith-” A low voice cut through the air.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 27

Aria’s POV

I looked up. Damon stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“Damon!” Lilith’s mouth fell open. Her eyes went wide and pale. “Help me! It was Aria! She pushed me!”

Damon’s face darkened—visibly.

There was no doubt in those eyes. No hesitation. Just pure disgust.

“Aria. Explain.”

Again.

Just like always.

He can believe anyone—just not me.

My hands clenched at my sides. Then relaxed. Clenched again. Then relaxed.

In the end, I just smiled. A release.

“Fine. I’ll explain.”

I walked down the steps, one by one, toward Lilith.

Her pupils shrank. She stepped back instinctively. “W—What are you doing?! Stay away!”

“What are you afraid of, Lilith?” My voice was flat—so flat it even chilled me. “Weren’t you just insisting I pushed you on purpose?”

“I—I’m not afraid of you-!” Her heel caught the edge of a decorative pot at the corner of the stairwell. She stumbled—about to fall.

I caught her arm. Steadied her.

She exhaled, relieved, just beginning to find her footing—

I let go.

“AHH!”

Crash.

Lilith landed straight in the pot, toppling it as she went down.

“ARIA!!!”

“This time, I meant it.” I looked down at her. “Lilith, if I’d wanted to let go on purpose earlier, I wouldn’t have waited for your brother to show up. And your face? It’d be a lot more than scratched.”

I turned. Cold. Toward Damon.

“Mr. Hawthorne. Does that explanation satisfy you?”

His brows were tight. The anger was there—I could see it.

I was used to it.

In the two short years of our marriage, it was always like this.

I’m tired of it.

I didn’t wait for his answer.

Just walked out.

“Announce it—effective immediately, Aria Grayson is banned from the Hawthorne Group. Anyone who lets her in? Fired.”

“And cancel the Grayson Design contract. Immediately. All active projects, all pending work. Done.”

Damon’s voice cut through from behind me—cold, heavy.

I paused. Just for a second.

A dull ache spread through my chest.

But this time—it faded quickly.

Like I hadn’t heard a thing, I kept walking. Straight out of the Hawthorne Group.

Minutes later, I stood on the sidewalk and called Dana.

“The documents were delivered,” I said. “There was a situation with the manager. I’ll write up the full timeline when I’m back. If anyone from Hawthorne/Group calls before I get there, don’t agree to anything.”

“Are you alright?” Dana asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m fine.”

I hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

Yes, I was fine.

I was better than fine.

With that thought, I turned and started walking across the street.

“Aria! Watch out!”

“Beep-beep-”

A voice cut through the sharp blare of a car horn. I instinctively glanced to the side and saw a car racing toward me at full speed.

My breath stopped.

There was no time to get out of the way.

Suddenly, an arm grabbed mine and yanked me back.

I stumbled forward into a warm, broad chest, and the car whooshed past just behind me.

“Aria, are you okay?”

At the sound of his voice, I snapped back to reality. Looking up, I found myself staring into a pair of dark eyes filled with concern.

It was Caleb Hawthorne. Damon’s younger brother.

Realizing I was still in his arms, I stepped back to put some distance between us and took a moment to compose myself. “I’m fine.”

He lowered his hand, looking a little disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” Caleb sighed. “I’ve already heard about what happened just now. Lilith has been spoiled by all of us since she was little. She’s arrogant and difficult. Let me apologize on her behalf...”

I shook my head, my voice calm. “The one who should apologize is Lilith, not you. You don’t have to say sorry for her.”

“But I’m her brother. I should-”

“I’ll only accept an apology from her in person. Thank you for what you just did.” I glanced at my phone- Dana had messaged again, asking how things were going. “I need to get back to work. I’ll be going now.”

But he caught my wrist.

The gesture was too intimate.

Frowning in confusion, I looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

He seemed startled, then immediately let go and touched the tip of his nose. “Aria, let me drive you back.”

“No need. I can just take a taxi.”

“It’s no trouble. Consider it my way of making up for Lilith.” Caleb said as he started walking across the street. “As for the apology, I’ll bring Lilith another day and we’ll come see you in person.”

After a couple of steps, he stopped and turned back to me. “Come on, Aria. My car is just up ahead.”

It looked like there was no refusing.

With a sigh, I walked over to him.

Caleb hadn’t lied-his car really was parked nearby. I bent down and slid into the passenger seat, gripping the door handle. Just as I was about to close the door, I paused.

“What’s wrong?”

I looked up and glanced outside. Ever since the near miss with the car, I’d had a nagging feeling that someone was watching me.

The sunlight was blinding. I couldn’t see anything.

after

“Nothing.”

I looked away and pulled the door shut.

But that uneasy feeling still lingered, refusing to fade.

**

Damon's POV

She walked past me, toward the elevator. Without looking back.

The doors closed.

Something in my chest pulled tight.

I went back to my office.

Through the wide glass windows, I watched Aria walk out of Building B and get into a car.

I knew that car.

Caleb Hawthorne. My younger brother.

Something cold and sharp cut through me.

Since when? Since when were they close enough for her to get into his car?

She didn't look back. Not once. Just opened the door and disappeared inside—like she'd done it a hundred times before.

My jaw tightened, a low growl rumbling in my throat—the sound torn from somewhere deep in my chest.

It wasn't just a growl.

It was the roar of everything mine being ripped away.

Aria. In his car. My brother's car.

Mine.

Wasn't she?

The sound kept coming, low and raw, like my body knew what I wouldn't admit.

That she was never really mine.

And now—she was gone.

Justin pushed the door open and stepped in.

“Alpha The security footage from the second-floor stairwell—Building B. I've got the copy.”

“Play it.”

I sat back at my desk and turned toward the large screen across the room.

apter / L

Ten minutes of footage. Clear as day.

Every moment—Lilith provoking Aria, lunging at her, trying to shove her down the stairs.

When Lilith charged, Rhein erupted inside-me—a roar of pure fury.

One second. That’s all it would have taken. One second slower, and she would’ve been the one falling.

I drew a breath, forcing the rage back down where it burned.

“Get Lilith up here.”

Comments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 28

Damon’s POV

Twenty minutes later.

Justin came back in—Lilith with him, her scrapes already patched up.

“Justin. Book her a flight. Tonight. Anywhere out of the country.” I glanced at her—just enough to watch her muscles lock. “Three months. Not coming back without my permission.”

“Three months?!” Lilith’s head snapped up, eyes wide, voice climbing. “That’s insane. Damon, what’s wrong with you? You’ve never—never done anything like this to me. Not once.”

She stared at me like I’d become a stranger. “And now—because of Aria? Whose father killed Liam? You’re punishing me?!”

Because of Aria?

Yes. Because of Aria.

When I watched that footage—when I saw Lilith’s hands shoving toward her—something in me broke.

In that moment, I just wanted to protect her. Pure instinct.

“Have you forgotten? She’s been awful to Claudia. You’ve seen it.”

She looked at me then—half uncertain, half accusing. Waiting for me to see reason. To remember whose side I was supposed to be on.

Whose side was I on?

I didn’t know anymore.

She kept talking. The words blurred together.

And something in me—snapped.

“Lilith.” I looked up at her, eyes narrowing. A warning. “Quiet. Unless you want something worse.”

She froze. Stared at me like she was seeing me for the first time.

I knew that look. I’d never turned on her—my little sister. The one I’d always protected.

And now? Now I was threatening her. Over Aria.

What was happening to me?

Why?

Aria. Getting into that car. Caleb’s. My brother’s.

The way she’d disappeared inside it—like she belonged there.

Chapter

Justin led Lilith out. The door closed.

Silence.

Dead silence.

I could hear my own pulse—blood rushing through veins I couldn’t calm.

Rhein had gone quiet in the back of my mind. Not the peaceful kind of quiet. The kind that felt like licking

wounds.

He was afraid. His mate was leaving.

No. She'd already left.

The image wouldn't leave—Aria, sliding into that car. Not looking back. Not once.

What were they doing in there? Holding hands? Kissing? Or something... more?

Bang-

I slammed my fist onto the desk.

Damn fated mate. She was going to haunt me forever.

I tried to calm down. Told myself what I needed to believe.

It was nothing. Caleb was just being polite. A coincidence.

That's all it was..

Wasn't it?

But the thought wouldn't settle.

I picked up the files. Stared at the timestamps until the numbers blurred.

Then I reached for my phone.

"Drinks. Now."

Tim and William were already in the booth when I arrived, bottle between them, looking comfortable and patient.

"Look who it is." Tim lifted his glass toward me. "Damon Hawthorne voluntarily hanging out. Write it down, this is historic."

I sat down. Poured.

"Bad week?" William asked.

"I don't want to talk about it."

“Great.” Tim refilled his glass. “We’ll talk about something else then.”

I

The private room was quiet. I drank heavily.

Tim and William talked. I let the conversation flow around me the way I always did in rooms like this, present enough to respond, absent enough to be somewhere else.

Then Tim said, “Do you remember the snow?”

I looked up.

I didn’t understand why Tim had suddenly brought it up.

And then–Aria’s voice hit me–inside my head.

“I saved you–why do you always have to be so cruel to me?!”

“Five years ago,” William said carefully. His voice pulled me back. “The Ashmark summit. The ice–wolf ambush. You were...”

“I know what I was.” I cut him off. The restlessness in my chest grew stronger–pressing against my ribs from the inside.

“We never talked about it.”

“We don’t need to.”

“You nearly died,” Tim said. “You were missing for six hours, and we spent three of them thinking the worst.” He stopped. Picked up his glass. “We just never talked about it.”

The snow. The collapse. Six hours in the cold and the dark. I remembered the sound of the structure failing, the cold after, waking up outside the perimeter with my security team crouched over me, and Claudia’s face the first thing I saw, her hands on my cheeks, her voice calling my name.

What I didn’t remember was how I’d gotten out.

I had never let myself ask that question too directly.

“Enough,” I said. “Different subject.”

“Fine.” Tim shifted. “Actually, funny thing. On the way in, I thought I saw–” He glanced toward the frosted glass panel that separated the private room from the main floor. “Is that your..”

“Don’t.”

“No, actually. I think it is.” He leaned forward slightly. “Grayson Design team. Looks like a celebration. Your mate’s supervisor just got a promotion, I think someone said.”

William craned his neck. “She’s there. Third table from the left.”

“She’s good, by the way,” Tim said, settling back. “The Meridian project. I heard about it from the Coastal board. They were impressed.”

I poured another drink.

“And,” Tim made a sound, “hmm.”

“What?”

“One of the guys at her table. He’s asking her something. Quite seriously.”

“Tim.”

“I’m just observing. It looks like a confession.”

“Drop it.”

The table went quiet.

Aria’s POV

The moment Jack’s confession left his lips, a growl tore through the air—low, guttural, barely human. The sound of someone’s territory being invaded.

Damon was here.

Bang!

Before I could even finish turning Jack down, the private dining room door exploded inward.

Damon filled the doorframe like a storm given form, his eyes already locked on Jack. There was no warning, no word, just a fist connecting with Jack’s jaw in a brutal, bone-crunching arc that sent him crashing into a nearby table.

“What the—Ahhh!”

He grabbed Jack by the collar and slammed him into the wall with a force that shook the photographs from their hooks.

Glasses shattered. Dana screamed.

Someone shouted in alarm, and the crowd scattered in every direction.

And Damon's fist was already swinging—again—aimed straight at Jack's face.

“Damon! Stop!” I shouted, lunging forward to put myself between them.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 29

Aria's POV

The punch was already coming—my whole body tensed, and squeezed my eyes shut.

But the pain I expected never came.

I opened my eyes slowly. Damon's face was dark—frighteningly so. His eyes swirled with a storm, his fist frozen just inches from my nose. The veins bulging on the back of his hand were proof of just how much force he'd been ready to unleash.

If he'd held back even a second later, at best I'd be bruised and bloodied. At worst, I'd be unconscious in a hospital bed.

Jack seized the moment to catch his breath, scrambling away on all fours.

They were all gone. The way they'd looked back at me before they left—like I'd been caught red-handed—made my stomach turn.

The room had emptied out. Now it was just us.

Me. And Damon.

His hand closed around my nape, forcing my head up.

In that look, I saw coldness, rage, disgust—and what I'd become to him: a possession.

To him, I was just a thing to be owned. Not loved. Owned.

“Aria, I've been too soft on you, haven't I?”

His grip threatened to crush my bones. I tried to struggle, but the Alpha pressure rolling off him was suffocating—thick as water filling my lungs, heavy as stone crushing my chest.

My wolf, Lydia, cowered. My knees threatened to buckle.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Each breath was a battle. I was drowning.

“You don’t?” His voice was sharp as a blade. “You think I don’t see what you’re doing?”

“Everywhere I turn, there’s someone new. First Caleb, now this. Are you really that desperate?”

“No, I—I didn’t... ahh...” I curled up in pain. “Let go of me, Damon. You’re hurting me!”

The vein at Damon’s temple bulged. The more I struggled, the tighter he held on. His large hand easily captured both my wrists, pinning them above my head and pressing down hard.

“Damon!”

“What? Hit a nerve because I’m right?”

I clenched my fists. So in his eyes, I really was that kind of woman? That easy?

Looking at the man I’d loved for so many years, felt like a complete joke.

Fine. I’d just let it all burn.

“Yes! I’m that desperate! It’s not like you didn’t already know what kind of person I am!”

Damon’s aura was terrifying, crushing the air from my lungs. But I was tired of backing down. I met his gaze and sneered, “What’s there to be angry about, Mr. Hawthorne? I found someone else. I won’t bother you anymore. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Or what—did you just change your mind? Fall in love with me?”

“Love?” The vein at his temple throbbed. “Don’t flatter yourself, Aria. You’re not worth it.” Each word seemed ground out between his teeth, laced with icy venom.

“Then let me go! Leave me alone!”

Ding.

Just then, a phone rang.

It was mine.

Damon's gaze darkened. He pulled it from my pocket. The caller ID flashing on the screen caught his blazing eyes-

Caleb.

"So you really did hook up with him?"

Damon's voice dripped with danger. The dim light from the screen cast shadows across his face, making him look dark and menacing.

Bang!

He suddenly slammed the phone down.

My heart lurched with the sound. Before I could even process what was happening, Damon shoved me hard onto the sofa.

"Damon! What the hell is wrong with you?! Let me go!" I tried to push myself up, but he pressed down on me, pinning my arms behind my back.

"Let you go so you can run to Caleb?" Damon leaned in, gripping my chin. "In your dreams."

The phone kept ringing, relentless. Suddenly, he pressed the answer button.

I stared at him, dread clawing at my chest. "Damon, what are you-ahh-"

He leaned down and sank his teeth into my neck, hard-like he wanted to tear through my vein.

"Aria? Aria, is that you? What's wrong?"

Caleb's voice cut through the air. My heart stopped. I stared at the phone in Damon's hand in disbelief, my breath catching in my throat.

"Go on. You're so good at making noise, aren't you?" Damon lifted his gaze, his finger pressing down on the spot where he'd just bitten. His voice was cold, commanding. "Aria. Let him hear you moan."

My back hit the wall. His thumb found the mark on my neck, the scarred mating gland, and pressed hard. A jolt of heat shot down my spine, involuntary and humiliating.

Don't, I begged. Don't react to him

But my wolf, Lydia, was already stirring, already leaning into the touch like a starving creature. My breath came shallow, and my skin flushed.

And I hated myself for it.

Damon's fingers pressed into the bite mark without mercy. Pain and tremors kept firing through my nerves.

I pressed my lips together, refusing to make a sound.

"So afraid of him hearing you?" Damon's gaze was dark, terrifying—like a beast ready to tear apart the person in front of him.

His cool fingertips traced slowly from the bite mark to my jaw, gripping it. His voice dripped with cold mockery: "Fine, Aria. Let's see how long you can hold out."

My mind went blank. A rush of familiarity surged through me—the scene from the family banquet flashed before my eyes.

In front of all those servants... and now, he was going to do it again.

Comments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 30

Aria's POV

Right there, with Caleb listening.

No. I couldn't let him win!

"Let me go!" I snarled, writhing beneath him, struggling with everything I had.

"Dream on."

Damon's face was stone cold. He pressed his knee down on my legs, seized both my wrists, and pinned them above my head—stripping me of any chance to fight back.

Rip!

A chill ran over my skin. The sound of fabric tearing cut through the silence, sharp and jarring against our ragged breathing—unbearably intimate.

"Damon—"

The words died in my throat. Damon gripped my jaw and kissed me.

My body went rigid. A jolt of electricity shot from my spine through my limbs. An overwhelming wave of sensation crashed over me, almost too much to bear.

His cool fingertips moved with practiced ease, finding every sensitive spot on my body—from my collarbone, trailing down, step by step, until they reached my lower abdomen.

His touch stripped away my control. My breaths came in ragged gasps, my body trembling beneath him—a pleasure I hated myself for feeling.

Deep in my blood, the primal instinct for a mate was tearing me apart.

Piece by piece, until there was nothing left of me.

I'm falling—desperately.

“Aria? Aría, are you okay?” Caleb’s voice came through the phone, anxious and concerned.

I clenched my fists, instinctively biting down on my lip.

“Heh.”

Damon’s lips curled into a cruel smile. He reached up and brushed his fingers lightly over my lips, stopping me from biting down. His breath was warm against my ear. “Aria. Let it out. Don’t hold back.”

Then his fingers pressed down on that sensitive spot between my legs.

“Mmm...”

A soft moan escaped my throat.

Barcly audible. But humiliating.

On the other end of the line, Caleb must have heard something. There was a moment of silence. “Aria-”

Click.

The dial tone rang out sharply. The call had ended.

Like a bucket of ice water, it shocked me back to my senses.-

Damn. What had I just done?

Like some cheap whore. Moaning beneath Damon. Letting him humiliate me.

And the worst part? I'd let him win.

"Let go of me," I said, shoving at his chest. He didn't budge.

"Still pretending you feel nothing?" His thumb traced the edge of the mark, slow and deliberate. "Your body says otherwise."

'My body is a hostage,' I snapped, my voice shaking with fury. "You're humiliating me in front of your brother, Damon. Is that the goal?"

He'd spent years making sure I knew I meant nothing to him.

And now, because another man had shown me kindness, he wanted to claim ownership?

His jaw tightened, and his grip on my neck flexed—not quite painful, but the threat was there.

'Tell me. How far did things go with Caleb? Did he touch you? Where?"

My throat tightened. "You have no right to ask me that."

'I don't?" His eyes blazed. "You're my mate. Answer me!"

'Am I?"

The words came out steadier than I felt.

I'd never seen mates like us. One side constantly on guard, tormenting, loathing the other.

Even with our bodies pressed together, the distance between us felt like opposite ends of the earth.

No. We weren't mates. Just puppets, forcibly bound together by the Moon Goddess.

The veins in his neck bulged.

The Alpha pressure intensified, a crushing weight that made my wolf whimper in submission.

If I keep pushing like this, I'll break.

I forced myself to meet his gaze, my jaw clenched tight. "Damon, you're insane!"

"Insane?" Damon let out a cold laugh. "Then let me show you what insane really looks like."

“No-mmpli-”

Aria, you brought this on yourself!”

His hand moved between my legs, tearing away the last shred of my defenses—brutal, without reason. Then, without mercy, he thrust inside.

A sharp, searing pain made me curl in on myself.

I struggled, twisting, trying to push him off.

But how could I ever overpower an Alpha?

I could only endure as he pressed forward, inch by inch. My chest heaved. My vision blurred. I stared up into the depths of his eyes.

What I saw there was disdain. Mockery. Coldness. But no desire—not even a trace. It was as if he was looking at a toy he held in the palm of his hand.

Something roared inside my veins—a raw, bitter refusal.

Why? Why did he have to do this to me, again and again?

I clenched my fists, my eyes burning. And somehow, I found the courage to bite down on my own tongue.

Blood trickled from the corner of my lips.

“Aria! Have you lost your mind?!”

His hand clamped down on my jaw. And then I heard it—his roar of fury.

“Yes! I have lost my mind!” The words tore out of me. “Lost it from everything you’ve put me through!”

The pain of it all finally broke me, and tears slipped down my face.

“You want to know what I feel? I feel disgust. For you. For myself. For this whole pathetic charade. Is that enough for you?”

He went very still, and then the mask slipped. I saw something raw beneath.

He looked confused—wounded, even. My disgust had cut him deep. Why? Because he thought I’d love him forever? Endure his moods, his cruelty, his everything?

Dream on.

“Ugh-”

The nausea hit me out of nowhere. I shoved him away and ran for the bathroom, dropping to my knees in front of the toilet, retching until there was nothing left.

When the spasms finally stopped, I slumped back against the wall, my whole body shaking.

Footsteps echoed across the floor.

Damon stood in the doorway, looking down at me. And then he asked the question that made my blood

run cold.

“You’re pregnant?”

H