

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 351

Aria's POV

Claim

I held Elona tight against my chest as we stepped back into the shattered heart of the altar ruins. Behind me, the vampire host fanned out like a living shadow. Viktor stood at my shoulder, the rest of them fanned around us, silent and hungry.

My daughter's small body was warm, solid, and real. That was the only thing keeping me from fracturing right there.

The moment we stepped into the clearing, I sensed them... wolves, dozens of them.

Then I heard a roar.

"Aria!"

It was Damon. My heart clenched. I turned. He stood at the edge of the ruins, surrounded by

warriors, his eyes burning gold, power rolling off him in waves. Noah and Ryder were beside him.

Their eyes were fixed on me.

They froze.

I watched the shock hit them one by one. The way I stood among the vampires with Elona in my

arms instead of against them.

Damon's nostrils flared as he drew in a breath. His eyes narrowed.

"Aria." My name came out broken.

Damon took a step forward. "What did they do to you?"

I said nothing. His gaze dropped to my neck, then moved over my face. His expression changed

when he noticed the unmistakable signs of the transformation.

My skin was paler. My eyes carried the faint crimson glow of a vampire. His face drained of color.

“No.” The word barely left his lips.

I held Elona tighter.

Damon shook his head slowly. “No. This isn’t possible.”

“Damon,” Noah warned.

He ignored him. He stepped even closer, his Alpha aura exploding outward. “Aria, look at me.”

I did. I could feel the aggression rolling off him.

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His jaw tightened. “Tell me they didn’t turn you.”

swallowed. “They did.”

His face crumpled for half a second before hardening again.

“No, that isn’t true.”

Clai

Damon closed his eyes. He stretched his hand as if he could still reach me through whatever wall now stood between us. I felt him yank hard on the mate bond desperately, the way an Alpha calls/

for his Luna when the world is ending.

Nothing answered.

His eyes snapped open. Confusion crossed his face. He tried again... Nothing.

His breathing became ragged. “Why can’t I feel you?”

I forced my expression to remain blank. “Because there is nothing left to feel.”

Damon stared at me. I could almost see the words striking him.

“No.” His voice cracked. “You’re my mate.”

I said nothing.

“Aria, you’re my mate. You wouldn’t betray us like this.”

I kept my face cold and empty, like the perfect traitor.

“I already did.”

He reached toward me. I stepped back. His hand fell. Something savage flashed across his face. Then his gaze shifted to Viktor, who had been watching everything with narrowed eyes.

“You did this,” Damon snarled.

He launched himself at Viktor. Pure Alpha rage, claws already half-shifted, Rhein’s power flooding

the clearing.

I moved before I could think, stepping between them, one arm still locked around Elona, the other slamming into Damon’s chest hard enough to send him skidding backward across broken stone.

We collided in a blur of snarls and flashing teeth. He reached for our daughter. I twisted, using my

strength to keep her out of his grasp.

Elona cried out, her tiny fists clutching my shirt. The sound cut through me sharper than any silver

blade.

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In the chaos of bodies and shouting, I did the only thing that made sense.

shoved her into Damon’s arms.

Clain

He caught her on pure instinct, cradling her against his chest like she was the most precious thing

in either of our worlds.

For one heartbeat, our eyes met over her head. Something wordless and frantic passed between

us, too fast for the vampires to catch.

Then I stepped back into Viktor's shadow and wiped every trace of softness from my face.

Viktor's crimson eyes narrowed. He had felt the shift in the air, the deliberate way I had handed Her

over.

"You gave the pup back deliberately," he said, his voice silk over steel. "Are you playing some little

trick, Aria?"

I met his stare without flinching.

My voice came out loud and calm, almost bored. "I don't want to waste time tangling with Damon. I've become a vampire, Viktor."

I gestured toward the altar. "And once I release the power stored here, every wolf in this territory will be under vampire control."

Silence fell. Viktor looked toward the altar, then back at me.

"You expect us to believe that?"

"You don't have to believe me." I met his gaze. "You only have to understand that I have no reason to fight Damon over Elona. She is my daughter. I'll reclaim her when this is over."

Viktor frowned. "And you think Damon will simply let you?"

A faint smile touched my lips. "Damon will never use Elona to threaten me."

Damon's expression tightened. He knew I was right. Whatever else had happened between us, he would never turn our daughter into a weapon against me.

Viktor studied me for several seconds. Then the tension in his shoulders eased. He believed me.

“Fine,” he murmured. “Then stop talking and do it. Release the altar’s power now.”

I stared at the ancient stones. Then I smiled.

“Gladly.”

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Axia’s POV

I walked toward the altar. Viktor followed.

I stopped in front of it, drew in a slow breath, and reached for the power buried beneath my skin. It

answered immediately.

Golden light flickered beneath my veins, beginning as a faint warmth in my fingertips before spreading through my arms, my chest, and finally my entire body.

The air around me thickened. Every instinct screamed at me to stop, to run, to protect myself from

whatever was about to happen. But I couldn’t. I had come too far to stop.

I lifted my hands toward the altar and deliberately released my bloodline power. The reaction was

instantaneous.

The altar came alive. Golden symbols carved into the ancient stone ignited one after another, racing across its surface like fire spreading through dry grass. A deep vibration rolled through the chamber, so powerful that I felt it in my bones.

Viktor stared at the altar. “Yes...” His voice trembled with excitement. “Release it.”

I gritted my teeth. “I am.”

Across the ruins, Damon suddenly moved. “Stop her!”

The wolves charged toward me. Damon was leading them. Noah and Ryder were close behind, but Viktor’s guards reacted instantly.

“Protect the altar!”

Vampires surged forward. The two forces collided. Claws tore through the air. Fangs flashed.

Growls shook the ruins. Damon fought through the first line.

“ARIA!”

I couldn’t answer. My focus was slipping. The altar had begun to pull. Power ripped out of me. I staggered forward, my palms slamming against the cold stone as an unbearable force dragged at

everything inside my body.

It wasn’t like losing blood. It wasn’t even like being drained. It felt as though someone had reached

into my chest and wrapped their hands around my very soul.

“Agh!” A scream tore out of me. My knees buckled. I caught myself against the altar, my fingers

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digging into the stone hard enough to hurt. The golden light beneath my skin intensified.

Then the pain came again. It tore through my veins, burned through my muscles, and spread into every nerve in my body.

My vision blurred. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t even tell where my body ended and

the altar began.

“What is happening?” one of the wolves shouted.

“The altar is feeding!” another yelled.

I gritted my teeth. Of course it was. That was what we had expected. The altar needed my bloodline power to activate, and I needed it activated long enough for Viktor to become vulnerable.

Hold on. My mind clung to the plan. Just hold on.

I could feel power pouring from me in waves. The altar drank every bit of it, and Viktor felt it too.

He stood just a few feet away, watching the golden energy spread across the altar. His face had

gone pale.

“What...” he whispered. His hand rose to his temple. He swayed. The pressure radiating from the altar was affecting him, exactly as we’d predicted.

His eyes narrowed as he tried to focus, but the golden energy continued to pulse through the

chamber. The air seemed to distort around him.

“Viktor!” one of his men called.

He didn’t answer. His breathing had become uneven. He took a step backward, then another.

I lowered my head, pretending the pain was consuming every thought I had. In reality, I was

watching him through the corner of my eye and waiting.

Come on.

The fighting continued around us. Claws struck flesh. Someone screamed. A body crashed into a pillar. Viktor was too dizzy to notice the shadows moving toward him.

Ryder and Noah were coming, slowly and carefully, keeping low and using the chaos around them

as cover.

My heart hammered against my ribs. Please work. I'd planned this with them. We had calculated

every step. If the altar could drain enough of my bloodline power, it would overwhelm Viktor

through the connection he had established with it.

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While he was distracted, Ryder and Noah would get close enough to strike. One opening, that was

all we needed. I just had to survive the altar long enough to give it to them.

A new surge of power ripped through me. I screamed. Viktor staggered again. His knees nearly

buckled. He stared at the altar with awe.

"Magnificent..." His voice was almost reverent.

He didn't see Noah step closer. He didn't see Ryder raise his claws. He didn't see the trap closing

around him, but I did.

Through the agony, I watched them move. Ryder's gaze met mine. I gave the smallest nod. Noah understood. They were ready.

I held on to the altar. The pain consumed everything, but I refused to let go, not until Viktor was exactly where I needed him.

Behind Viktor, Ryder raised his claws. Noah moved into position, and I endured the agony as the

altar continued to drain me.

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Akia's POV

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For one precious second, I thought we'd caught Viktor off guard, but he had anticipated it. Before either Noah or Ryder could strike, Viktor's head snapped toward them. His expression changed.

There was no surprise in his eyes, only cold satisfaction.

"Did you really think I wouldn't see that coming?"

He disappeared. Ryder's claws struck empty air. A blur flashed behind him. Viktor drove his hand

into Ryder's side. Ryder grunted and crashed to the ground.

Noah attacked from the opposite side. Viktor turned and drove his fist into Noah's stomach. The

impact lifted Noah off his feet. He slammed into the wall, his head striking the stone hard enough

to leave a c***k in the surface.

"Noah!"

My attention shifted for one fatal second. Viktor was suddenly in front of me. His hand closed

around my throat. My back slammed against the altar. I gasped as his fingers tightened.

"I knew it," he said quietly.

I clawed at his wrist, but he didn't even flinch. "You cooperated too easily. You let me believe you

had accepted your fate." His eyes narrowed. "You were planning something."

I couldn't speak. His grip tightened.

"But you made one mistake, Aria." His face came closer. "You assumed I would be foolish enough

to trust you."

My lungs burned. I kicked at him, but Viktor barely moved. He looked almost amused.

"You really thought Ryder and Noah could overpower me?"

I glared at him without saying a word. His fingers tightened again. Then his eyes flashed. "You

should have known better than to challenge me."

Something inside me twisted. I felt it before I understood what he was doing. The blood. The blood I'd drunk. It suddenly moved through my body like molten metal.

My eyes widened. "No... make it stop."

Viktor smiled. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

Pain exploded through me. I screamed. Every vein in my body seemed to ignite at once. The blood

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Clar

inside me boiled, rushing through my veins with a vicious heat that made my entire body convulse.

dropped my hands from Viktor's wrist. My fingers curled uselessly. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I could only feel the agony.

"Please stop!" I choked.

Viktor watched me without mercy. "The blood I gave you was not a gift."

My body shook violently. The vampire side of me reacted to the blood coursing through my veins but there was something unnatural within it, something Viktor had deliberately planted, something

he could control.

“You drank it willingly,” he continued. “That makes this even more satisfying.”

I wanted to tear his throat out. I wanted to shift. I wanted to call for Lydia, but there was nothing,

only that terrible emptiness.

My heart twisted. I was beginning to understand how terrifying it was to face something like this without her. I had spent my entire life with another consciousness beside mine, a presence that had always been there, even when I was alone. Now there was nothing.

“Keep going,” he ordered.

I stared at him through my blurred vision. “What?”

“The altar.” His grip loosened just enough for me to breathe. “Keep releasing your bloodline power.”

I shook my head. “No, I won’t.”

His eyes hardened. “Let me remind you, Aria. You don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t care. I won’t continue.”

He smiled. “I knew you would say that.”

The burning inside my veins intensified. I screamed again.. My fingers dug into the altar.
Golden

light erupted beneath my palms.

“Release it!”

I fought him. Every instinct in me screamed to stop, but my body betrayed me. The altar pulled. Power ripped out of me in violent waves. Golden energy streamed from my hands into the ancient

stone.

“That’s it,” Viktor whispered. “More.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’ll kill you.”

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Claire

“Perhaps.” He tightened his grip around my throat again. “But first, you’ll release all of the altar’s

power to me.”

Another wave of power left my body. My knees buckled. The altar responded with a deep, thunderous pulse. The entire ground shook. Ryder groaned somewhere behind me. Noah tried to push himself upright, but one of Viktor’s men kicked him back down.

“Don’t touch him!” I screamed.

Viktor laughed. “You are still worrying about everyone else while you’re dying.”

The altar suddenly flared. The force around it expanded. A violent wave of energy exploded outward. Viktor released me and stepped back. I collapsed against the altar, coughing

desperately. Then I realized I couldn’t move.

Golden energy had wrapped around my body. It wasn’t simply surrounding me. It was binding me. Light coiled around my arms, my legs, my waist, and my chest. It held me against the altar as though invisible chains had been fastened around every part of me.

My bloodline power was being ripped from me faster now. My vision darkened.

“Aria!”

It was Damon. My head snapped toward the sound. He was charging toward me. His eyes were blazing, and the fury radiating from him was unmistakable.

“Get away from her!” he growled as he lunged forward.

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Aria’s POV

The altar reacted. A wall of golden energy exploded between us.

“Damon!”

The force struck him in the chest. He was thrown backward. He hit the floor hard and rolled

several feet before coming to a stop.

“No!” I struggled against the restraints. “Damon!”

He pushed himself onto one elbow. His face twisted with pain, but he looked at me. “Aria...”

Don’t worry about me. I am fine.” The lie barely made it past my lips.

Damon’s eyes darkened. “You’re not fine.”

Clai

I wanted to tell him to stay away. I wanted to tell him to run, but the altar pulled again. My entire body jerked. I screamed.

Damon immediately tried to stand.

“No!” I shook my head desperately. “Don’t come closer!”

The golden barrier crackled between us. Damon froze. His fists clenched. “Aria, I’m getting you out

of there. I don’t care what happens.”

“Damon!” My voice broke.

For one second, we simply stared at each other.

“Please,” I whispered. “Stay back.”

His jaw tightened. Then another pulse erupted from the altar. A wave of golden energy exploded

outward. The entire ruin shook. The altar opened fully. Light erupted from its center and shot into the sky.

The vampires fell to their knees. The wolves shielded their faces.

Viktor stared upward. His eyes widened.

“Finally! It’s mine.”

He stepped toward the energy and lifted both hands. Golden energy poured into him. His body trembled. His veins glowed.

He laughed. “Yes!”

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Clair

He absorbed more. I watched in horror. He was taking the altar’s power directly into his body.

“You see?” he shouted. “This is what we were meant to possess!”

I could barely breathe, but something was wrong. Viktor’s smile faltered. He looked down at his hands. Dark veins appeared beneath his skin. He staggered.

“What... What is this?” he roared.

I stared at him, barely able to keep my eyes open. The altar wasn’t giving him its power. It was using him as a vessel, and now it was destroying him from the inside.

The altar answered with another surge. Viktor was thrown backward. He caught himself before he fell, but the force immediately drove him forward again, forcing him to retreat step by step.

I stared at him, barely able to breathe. The power wasn’t attacking him randomly. It was rejecting him. I understood why.

My gaze dropped to my hands. I had made everyone believe I had lost something inside myself. Lydia, my wolf. But I hadn’t lost her. I had suppressed her.

When Viktor had invited me into the vampire territory, I immediately suspected he wanted to turn me completely into a vampire as a show of loyalty before making me release the power at the

altar. That is the kind of man he is.

I had been terrified of losing myself in the process.

So before I went to him, I had gone to my mother's house. I met the head of my mother's family and asked her if there was any way to stop the transformation from taking everything that made

me a wolf.

She had looked at me for a long time before revealing a secret their family had guarded for generations. Our bloodline was different. We could suppress our wolf in such scenarios.

She had explained that when someone from our bloodline drank vampire blood and began turning, they could force their wolf into dormancy, allowing the vampire transformation to take place without destroying their wolf nature completely. When the time came, they could call their wolf back.

I had listened to every word. Then I did it. I had suppressed Lydia. I had buried her deep inside. while drinking Viktor's blood because I needed him to believe his plan had worked. I needed him to believe I was becoming what he wanted.

I had never truly become a complete vampire. I had only silenced the part of me that made me a wolf. Until now.

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Clair

I drew a slow breath and closed my eyes. I reached inward, past the vampire blood, past the darkness, past every layer of suppression I had built around myself, and I found her.

Lydia.

Something stirred deep within me.

My heart slammed against my ribs. Lydia, come back to me.

The silence inside my mind broke. I've been waiting, Lydia said.

My eyes snapped open. Lydia's presence rushed through me like a wave.

I closed my eyes again and released the final thread of suppression. The moment I did, Lydia surged forward. Power exploded from my body. Golden light erupted around me, spiraling through

the chamber as a deep growl tore from my throat.

The floor beneath my feet cracked. The air shook. I staggered, grabbing my chest as an overwhelming rush of wolf energy flooded every part of me.

It hurt, but it was a familiar kind of pain. A pain that reminded me I was alive.

I could feel my senses sharpening. I could hear every heartbeat in the chamber. I could feel Damon's presence somewhere behind me, his mate bond burning against my skin, and beneath everything else, I could feel Lydia.

We're back.

A laugh almost escaped me, we are."

I opened my eyes. Viktor was staring at me. He looked frightened. The altar's power continued driving him backward, his boots scraping against the stone.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

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Aria's POV

I looked at him. "I called my wolf."

His face went pale. "No, that's not possible."

The word was barely audible.

I took another step forward. "It is."

Lydia snarled inside me. He thought he took me from us.

Clair

I clenched my fists. "He thought he could turn me completely into a vampire, but he was wrong."

Viktor shook his head. "You drank my blood. Your body changed. You became a vampire."

I smiled bitterly. "No. I suppressed my wolf."

His eyes widened. I could see the realization spreading across his face. “You...”

“I never lost Lydia.”

The altar suddenly erupted. A deafening blast of energy struck Viktor directly in the chest. He

screamed. His body flew backward before slamming into the stone wall. The impact cracked the

wall behind him. He dropped to his knees.

“What are you doing to me?”

The altar gave him no answer. It simply continued pouring power into the chamber.

I felt Lydia growl inside me. It knows what you are.

I stared at the altar. The golden energy that had been tearing through Viktor suddenly shifted.

Instead of passing around me, it began moving toward me. I froze.

The power touched my skin. It didn’t burn. Warmth spread through my body. Golden markings began appearing beneath my feet. One, then another, then another. They formed a perfect circle

around me.

Viktor looked down at them. His eyes widened. “No.” There was genuine fear in his voice.

I felt Lydia rise beside my consciousness. It knows.

“What does it know?”

It knows what you are, Aria. The daughter of the bloodline. The altar has just made you its guardian.

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The altar didn’t consume me the way it did my mother. It had instead made me its guardian.

Another pulse of power shook the altar. The golden markings brightened. Viktor stared at me as

though he were seeing me for the first time.

“How is this possible? You were supposed to give me your power!” he shouted at me. “You were supposed to die! How can you become the altar’s guardian?”

I stared at him. He had spent so long believing he could control everything. He had manipulated people and used me. Now the very power he had sacrificed everything to obtain had decided he

was unworthy of touching it.

Viktor snarled and forced himself upright. “You think this changes anything?” His body was already deteriorating. One side of his face had begun to c***k. “You still belong to me. You still have my

blood in your veins.”

I felt the mate bond flare behind me. Damon’s presence was a steady pulse at the edge of my

senses, and Rhein’s roar thundered through the bond.

Aria.

I turned my head toward him. His body was tense, his eyes glowing with the unmistakable gold of his wolf. He looked at me, then at Viktor.

His jaw tightened. “It is time to finish this,” he said.

Viktor’s gaze shifted between us. Then he looked at me again. Something twisted in his expression. “You think Damon can protect you?”

I didn’t answer.

Viktor coughed, black blood spilling from the corner of his mouth. “You think your little mate bond makes you safe, Aria?”

Damon stepped forward. “Don’t ever say her name again.”

Viktor smiled. “Still possessive.”

Rhein snarled through the bond. Let me tear him apart.

Damon's wolf was barely restrained. I could feel the fury rolling through him, but before he could

move, the altar struck Viktor again. He screamed.

His body lifted into the air. Golden energy wrapped around him like chains. His fingers clawed

uselessly at the air.

"No!" His voice cracked. "This was supposed to be mine!"

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The altar answered with a deafening roar. Viktor's body began breaking apart. His skin turned

black. Cracks raced across his chest. His arms disintegrated from the fingertips upward. His face

wisted in agony.

I watched him fall apart. I couldn't look away. For everything he had done, part of me still couldn't

believe it was ending.

It's over, Lydia whispered.

Viktor's body hit the ground.

Damon moved fast. He crossed the distance in a blur. His hand transformed, claws extending as

his wolf surged forward.

Viktor looked up. His eyes met Damon's. "You..."

Damon didn't hesitate. He drove his claws straight through Viktor's chest.

The chamber went silent. Viktor's mouth opened. No sound came out.

Damon pulled his hand free. Viktor's body collapsed. For a moment, he remained motionless. Then his body crumbled. Skin, bone, and blood. Everything turned to ash. The ash scattered across the

stone floor.

But before Viktor completely disappeared, his head lifted one last time. His eyes found mine.

There was no fear left in them, only hatred and a promise.

"You'll never be free of me."

Then he scattered into ash.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 356

Arja's POV

I barely remembered being carried back to camp. One moment, I was standing at the altar, surrounded by the stench of blood and death. The next, my body had gone completely limp, and strong arms had caught me before I could hit the ground.

My vision kept fading in and out. I heard voices around me, but they seemed to come from underwater.

"She's still breathing."

"Her pulse is too fast. Get the healer!"

"Move!"

I tried to open my eyes, but even that felt impossible. Every muscle in my body burned as though I had been thrown into a furnace. My veins felt like they were filled with fire, and beneath that fire

was Viktor's blood.

He was dead, but whatever his blood had done to me hadn't died with him.

Aria. Lydia's voice trembled inside my head. Wake up.

I tried to reach for her. I couldn't.

Lydia...

I'm here. Her presence flickered weakly against mine before retreating again. His blood is still

inside us.

That realization sent panic through me. Viktor had given me his blood to drink in a bid to turn me completely into a vampire. I had suppressed Lydia when I needed to, forcing my wolf deep inside myself so his vampire essence couldn't consume her.

But now Viktor was dead. There was nothing controlling the blood anymore, and my body had

become the battlefield.

My eyes finally opened. A canvas ceiling came into focus above me. I was at camp, in my pack. I tried to move. Pain ripped through me.

"Don't move." It was Damon's voice.

My head turned toward him. He was sitting beside the bed, his clothes still stained with blood and dirt from the battle. His hair was disheveled, his jaw covered with the faint shadow of stubble.

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There was dried blood across his knuckles. His eyes were fixed on me. The relief that crossed his face lasted only a second before worry replaced it.

"Damon..." My voice barely existed.

He leaned closer and took my hand carefully. "I'm here, Aria."

I looked down at our joined hands. His fingers were warm. For some reason, that warmth made my

eyes sting.

I closed my eyes. Another wave of heat tore through my body. I gasped. My back arched off the

mattress.

Damon immediately stood. “Where is the healer?”

My fingers curled into the sheets. Something sharp pushed against my gums. My heartbeat

accelerated, then became a violent pounding.

“Aria, look at me.”

I couldn’t. My vision blurred. The world suddenly became too loud. I could hear every heartbeat around me. The guards standing several feet away. Damon’s heart and another small, familiar

heartbeat.

“Mommy?” Elona’s voice reached me.

I forced my eyes open. She was standing near the entrance of the camp, tears running down her

cheeks.

“Elona,” I whispered.

She took a step toward me. Damon immediately moved between us. “Stay there, sweetheart.”

“Mommy is hurting. I want to be with her.” Elona’s lower lip trembled.

Something inside my chest twisted. “Let her come.”

Damon looked at me. “Aria...”

“She’s not going to hurt me.” I didn’t know if that was true. I didn’t know what I was anymore. But I

couldn’t bear seeing fear in Elona’s eyes.

Damon hesitated before stepping aside. Elona hurried to my bedside. I reached for her. The

moment her tiny hand touched mine, something inside me settled, if only for a heartbeat. Then my

vision turned red.

My pupils widened. My fingers tightened around hers.

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Elona whimpered. I immediately released her.

“Mommy?”

I stared at my hand in horror. My fingernails had lengthened into dark, curved claws.

“Get away from me.” I looked up at Damon. “Get her away from me.”

Chery

Everyone in the tent went still. I could feel my fangs pressing against my lips. The vampire part of

me was rising.

Damon crouched in front of me. “Look at me.”

I did. His eyes had shifted. Gold burned around his pupils. Rhein was close to the surface. I could feel the Alpha’s presence pressing gently against the chaos inside me.

“You’re still here,” Damon said quietly. “You’re still Aria.”

My breath shook. “I don’t feel like Aria. My body is changing.”

A low growl came from somewhere inside me. Damon’s eyes narrowed. I wasn’t sure whether the sound had come from Lydia or the vampire inside me.

“You’re scared,” he said.

“I’m terrified. I can hear everyone’s heartbeats faster. I can smell their blood. I want to tear into

something.”

His expression didn’t change. “Then tear into me.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

Damon didn’t move. “If the vampire in you wants blood, take mine. If Lydia wants to run, I’ll run with you. If you need someone to fight, fight me.”

“Damon, stop.”

“Then tell me what you need.”

I stared at him. My throat tightened. “I need this to stop.”

His expression softened. “We’ll make it stop.”

A sharp cry escaped me. My body jerked violently. The sheets ripped beneath my claws.

A pulse of power exploded from my body. The camp shook.

Elona, Justin, and a few warriors who had come in stumbled backward. Damon barely moved. He

planted his feet and absorbed the force.

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“Everyone out now,” he ordered.

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Axia’s POV

Clain

Everyone rushed outside. Elona remained frozen beside the bed. Damon turned toward her. “Elona,

go with Justin.”

“No, I want to stay with Mommy.”

Damon immediately called Justin. He appeared at the entrance. “Get her out.”

Elona didn’t argue. Justin hurried toward her. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Mommy!”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Damon watched them disappear. Then he turned back to me. The moment they were gone, I collapsed. My claws dug into the mattress.

My body convulsed. A black vein spread across my wrist.

Damon’s expression changed. “That’s the vampire blood.”

I looked down. The darkness was moving beneath my skin. “It’s spreading.”

Damon stood. “The healer is on his way.”

“No. I don’t need a healer.”

I remembered the last thing Viktor had told me. His blood was too deeply intertwined with mine. A

normal healer wouldn’t be enough.

I needed someone who understood both sides of my bloodline. Someone who knew what Viktor

had done. Someone who knew what I was.

“The head of my mother’s house needs to come.”

He didn’t question me. “I’ll send someone immediately.”

He turned toward the entrance and shouted for Justin. “Get word to the head of Aria’s mother’s

house. Tell her Aria needs her immediately.”

I closed my eyes. Hold on. Lydia’s voice sounded farther away now. Please.

I'm trying.

No. You're fighting me again.

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My eyes opened. "What?"

Damon looked at me. "What is it?"

Claim

Before I could respond, another surge tore through me. My vision went black. I felt myself falling. This went on for what felt like an eternity until a familiar voice cut through the darkness.

"Enough."

The voice wasn't loud. It didn't need to be. Power rolled through the tent.

My eyes snapped open. The head of my mother's house stood at the entrance.

He walked toward me without hesitation. His eyes studied my face, then my veins, then the faint glow gathering beneath my skin.

His eyes narrowed. "Now that your wolf is no longer suppressed, the ancient wolf bloodline is rejecting Viktor's blood."

I struggled to sit up. "You knew this could happen?"

"I knew it was possible."

"Can you stop it?" I asked.

"I can stabilize it." His gaze shifted toward Damon. "Alpha Hawthorne, I need you to leave."

Damon's expression hardened. "No."

"I need to perform bloodline purification on Aria if she is to get better."

"I can stay by her side while you do that. She's my mate."

"That is precisely why your presence may interfere with the rite."

Damon's jaw tightened. I reached for his hand. "Damon."

He looked at me. "I'll be fine."

He didn't look convinced. "Aria..."

"Trust me."

He squeezed my fingers before releasing them. "I'll be outside."

The patriarch waited until he left. Then he looked at me. "I will separate what doesn't belong to you."

He placed a small stone bowl beside me. Inside it was a dark red liquid mixed with silver powder. He dipped two fingers into it and drew a symbol across my forehead. The moment the mark

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touched my skin, I screamed.

Viktor's blood erupted through my veins. Black energy surged beneath my skin.

Lydia roared. Hold on, Aria!

I'm trying!

Claim

The patriarch began chanting. The words were ancient. I didn't understand them, but my blood did. Golden light spread from the symbol on my forehead. The vampire darkness fought back. My body twisted violently.

Outside, I heard Damon shout my name. "Aria!"

The patriarch's voice remained calm. "Do not fight the purification. You're holding onto the vampire

blood."

My eyes widened. "No, I am not."

"Yes, you are. You need to release it, Aria."

Images flashed through my mind. Viktor. I thought about drinking his blood from the cup. I thought

about his blood entering me. I thought about the tiny part of me that had believed I would never be

myself again.

I screamed. "I release it!"

The golden light exploded. Something tore through my body. The darkness beneath my skin began

to recede. I felt Lydia surge forward like she had finally come home.

I'm back.

I collapsed against the mattress. You're back.

The vampire blood burned one final time. Then it vanished.

My body went still. The patriarch lowered his hands. For several seconds, neither of us spoke.

I looked at my arms. The black veins were gone. My claws had disappeared. My fangs were gone. My heartbeat had returned to normal.

I let out a shaky breath.

The patriarch sat beside me. "You survived."

I didn't know why, but his words made my throat tighten.

The patriarch touched my shoulder. "You are a strong woman, Aria. You have done something your

own mother never could."

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Clair

I looked at him. “What is that?”

His expression was solemn. “You neither became the sacrifice nor allowed the power inside your blood to devour you.”

He studied me for a long moment. “Your mother fought the power all her life, but she could never fully master it.” His voice became softer. “You did not only master it, but became the altar’s guardian. You survived the altar, Aria.”

I stared at him, unable to speak. I had never realized until now that surviving the altar was the very thing my bloodline had been waiting for me to accomplish.

The patriarch gave me some candid advice, then rose to leave. “Rest, Aria.”

I closed my eyes and soon fell asleep.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 358

Aria’s POV

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I heard was a slow, steady, and familiar heartbeat.

Clar

It was Damon’s. I blinked several times, trying to focus. He was sitting beside my bed at the camp, his head resting against the back of the chair. His eyes were closed, but I knew he wasn’t asleep.

His wolf was too alert.

He’s been watching us. Lydia sounded calm.

I frowned. “Damon.”

His head snapped up so fast the chair scraped. Relief crashed across his face, raw and unguarded.

“Aria.” He leaned in, his forehead pressing to mine, his breath shaky. “You’re awake. Thank the goddess.”

I closed my eyes. “How long was I asleep?”

He hesitated. “You have been asleep for three days.”

My eyes flew open. “Three days?”

I tried to sit up. Pain flared along my ribs and the half-healed bite marks on my shoulder, but I pushed through it. “Elona...”

“She’s safe. Ryder and Noah have been distracting her daily. She has been asking about you.”

My eyes burned. “She saw what happened.”

“I know.” Damon’s expression softened. “But she’s all right.”

“I need to see her.” I started getting out of bed, but Damon stopped me.

“You will, as soon as the healer checks your vitals and confirms you are okay.”

The healer eventually cleared me to leave the bed. By then, I had already spent enough time

arguing with Damon to prove I was alive.

The moment I stepped into the corridor, I heard familiar footsteps. Elona came running toward

“Mommy!”

My heart shattered. I dropped to my knees just as she threw herself into my arms. I held her tightly.

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“I’m okay,” I whispered against her hair. “I’m okay.”

She sniffled. “You slept for a long time. I almost thought you weren’t going to wake up.”

My throat tightened. “I’m sorry.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “It’s alright, Mommy.”

Clair

Damon stood several feet away, watching us. Ryder was beside him. Noah stood on Ryder's other

side.

The Werewolf Council session was held that evening. I stood before the Council in the main chamber, with Damon beside me and the representatives, including Ryder and Noah, seated in their usual positions.

The head Council member rose.

"Aria Grayson."

I straightened.

"The Werewolf Council formally recognizes you as the Alpha of the Grayson Pack."

The words echoed through the chamber. For a moment, I simply stared at him. They had talked about stripping me of my title after they saw me transform into a vampire. They even suggested that I sacrifice myself to the altar for the greater good.

Now, they had changed their minds.

The Council member continued. "There are no conditions attached to this recognition. Whatever happens, you will remain an Alpha."

Something inside me finally loosened. I hadn't realized how much I had been waiting for those

words. No conditions. No one could take this from me.

I stepped forward. "Thank you."

The Council members exchanged glances.

"There is one matter I wish to address," I said.

The head Council member nodded. "Speak."

"It is about the altar."

The room became silent. I looked around at the Council.

"The power left behind by the altar is too dangerous to remain unprotected. I want the remaining

power sealed.”

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<Chapter 358

One of the Council members frowned. “How?”

“With a seal strong enough that no single person can break it.” I looked directly at them. “And I want the key divided between the Grayson Pack and the Council.”

Murmurs spread across the chamber. “You are suggesting joint custody?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Claim

“Because I believe no Alpha should possess access to that kind of power alone.” I paused. “And

neither should the Council.”

Silence followed. Damon’s mouth twitched slightly. I knew that look. He was proud of me.

One by one, the Council members nodded. “Agreed.”

The decision was made. The altar’s residual power would be sealed. The key would be divided and

kept separately, ensuring neither the Council nor my pack could access it alone.

I should have felt relief, like I had accomplished something.

Instead, a cold unease sat heavy in my stomach, the one that had never fully left since the purification.

I remembered the patriarch’s thin fingers against my collarbone three days ago, right after the

blood had been burned out of me. His voice was soft as he instructed me.

We might have removed Viktor’s blood, but do not lower your guard, Aria. The vampire bloodline is

still inside you. One day, it may try to seize control again.

Lydia growled low in the back of my mind.

I stood in the empty chamber long after the others had gone, Damon's presence steady at my back, the warning echoing louder than any victory.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 359

Aria's POV

The old Grayson estate had never felt this peaceful. As soon as I arrived with Elona, she ran towards the entrance before I could stop her. "Grandpa!"

Ronan laughed heartily as he opened his arms. Elona ran straight into them. "I missed you!"

He lifted her up from the ground. "I missed you too, little one."

Clau

He was still recovering from the attack by Viktor, but his strength had returned, and with it came the stubborn determination that had always defined him.

I watched them for a moment. My heart felt strangely full.

This is what we fought for, Lydia whispered.

I nodded silently. I know.

My father eventually looked at me. "You look tired, Aria."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're starting to sound like Damon."

Ronan smiled. "You have been through a lot, my child. Take it easy on yourself. Ensure you get all

the rest you need."

I returned his smile. "I will, Father."

After my return, my father threw himself into the pack archives almost immediately. He spent hours in the old records room, surrounded by dusty books, handwritten reports, maps, and

documents that hadn't been touched in a while.

Joshua had found his place too. He had taken command of the rogue-wolf units and completely

transformed their training.

I watched him from the edge of the training grounds one afternoon as he moved between groups

of wolves.

"Again!"

The wolves shifted. Joshua folded his arms. "You're not fighting like a pack. You're fighting like individuals. Again." They obeyed immediately.

I smiled. He noticed me. "Aria."

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I walked toward him. "How's everything going?"

Cham

"Better than expected." He glanced toward the training grounds. "They're already great, but I know they still have it in them to be greater."

"I've decided something."

His eyebrows lifted. "What is that?"

"The southern-line defense is yours."

He stared at me. "You're serious? Aria, that's a major responsibility."

“I know.” I looked at the wolves training behind him. “I completely trust you to excel in it.”

For a moment, he said nothing. Then he nodded. “I won’t let you down.”

I smiled. “I know.”

That was the difference now. I didn’t need to hold everything myself. Joshua had his responsibility. Dad had his archives. The pack had its leaders, and I finally had people I could rely on.

Lydia hummed softly. You can breathe now.

I smiled. You bet I can.

Damon came to the estate that evening. I knew he was there before I saw him. The mate bond stirred the moment he drove in. Warmth spread through my chest. Rhein’s presence brushed

against Lydia.

Our mate is here. Lydia sounded almost amused.

I stepped outside. Damon stood near the garden, watching the sunset. When he heard me, he

turned, and our eyes met. Neither of us spoke for several seconds. A thought crossed my mind.

You’re still chewing on her words, Lydia murmured, her voice low and velvet inside my head. The

ones about the vampire bloodline.

Yeah. I don’t know if it is wise to tell Damon.

You should tell him, Aria. He is your mate.

I thought about it for a few more seconds and decided against it. I shouldn’t burden Damon or anyone else with that. It would only have them worrying about me.

Damon stepped closer. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel a lot better.”

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Clie

He studied my face. "You know I am your mate, and I can tell when you're lying." His voice

softened. "You seem worried, Aria. What is the matter?"

et out a sigh. "It's nothing. I am just stressed."

Damon placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. "You are not allowed to overwork

yourself. I need you to be healthy at all times."

The mate bond pulsed. I swallowed. There was still a part of me that feared getting too close. But

another part wanted exactly that. I just wasn't ready to admit it.

Later that night, I tucked Elona into bed. She looked at me sleepily. "Mommy, can I ask you

something?"

I sat beside her. "Of course."

She hesitated. "Do you love Daddy?"

My heart stopped. I stared at her. "Why are you asking that?"

She shrugged. "Because he loves you, and you're happier when he's here."

My throat tightened. I didn't know what to say.

She reached for my hand. "I want you to be happy."

My eyes burned. "You don't have to worry about that."

"But I do." She yawned. "I hope you choose your happiness, Mommy."

I squeezed her hand. "I'll try."

She smiled. "Good."

Within minutes, she was asleep. I stayed beside her, staring at her peaceful face. Her words kept

echoing in my mind. Choose your happiness.

My gaze drifted toward the window. Damon was still somewhere outside. I could feel him through

the mate bond.

Lydia stirred. You know what you want.

I swallowed. Do I?

Yes, you do.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to seriously consider something I had been afraid to think

about. Maybe it was time to stop running from Damon.

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Maybe it was time to find out whether we could truly start again. Maybe it was time for me to choose my own happiness.

Clair

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 360

Aria's POV

Things between Damon and me changed after that night. He started visiting the estate more often. Sometimes he came to see me. Sometimes he claimed he was checking on Elona. Other times, he simply appeared. And I stopped pretending I didn't notice.

There was something different about him now. The Damon who had once looked at me as though I were a damsel in distress who needed help had disappeared.

In his place was a man who watched me carefully, who listened when I spoke, and who believed in

Lydia noticed it too. He is trying.

I glanced toward Damon as we walked through the garden. He was speaking to one of my guards, but his eyes kept drifting back to me.

Very hard, Lydia added smugly.

I rolled my eyes. You sound pleased.

Of course I am.

I suppressed a smile. Damon caught it.

His brow lifted. "I just saw you smiling. Mind telling me the reason behind that?"

"I wasn't. You saw wrong."

I increased my pace. His low laugh followed me.

Elona became convinced she was responsible for our relationship. She would deliberately disappear whenever Damon came around.

One evening, she walked into the sitting room while Damon and I were talking. "Daddy."

Damon looked up. "Yes?"

"You should take Mommy somewhere."

I nearly choked on my drink. Damon looked at me. I looked at Elona. "Somewhere?"

She nodded seriously. "Yes, take her on a date."

My cheeks warmed. "Elona."

"What?" She looked genuinely confused. "You love Mommy, right?"

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Damon's expression softened. "Yes, I do."

"Then take her on a date."

Damon looked at me. “What do you think?”

I should have refused. Instead, I heard myself say, “Fine, let’s do that.”

Elona’s face lit up. “I knew it!”

I shook my head. “You planned this.” I lifted my brow. “Just so you know, I am only agreeing to this

because it’s been a while since I dined outside the house.”

She grinned. “Whatever reason you give is fine, Mommy, as long as you go.”

The date was nothing extravagant. That was what surprised me. Damon didn’t take me somewhere crowded or overly luxurious. He took me to a quiet restaurant overlooking the lake.

There were no guards surrounding us. It was just us.

For the first time in a long while, I wasn’t thinking about war, bloodlines, vampires, or threats. I was just Aria, and Damon was just Damon.

He told me how beautiful I looked and helped me into my chair.

He sat across from me, watching me as we ate, as though I were the most precious thing in the

world.

He reached across the table, but he didn’t touch me immediately. He waited. That small gesture

affected me more than it should have. I placed my hand in his. His fingers closed gently around

mine.

“I almost lost you,” he said, his expression serious. “When I thought you were going to die...” His jaw

tightened. “I couldn’t breathe, Aria. I couldn’t think. Rhein was tearing through me, screaming that our mate was dying.”

My chest tightened. The mate bond pulsed softly between us.

“I’ve never been that afraid,” he continued. “And I never want to feel that way again.”

I squeezed his hand. “I am not dying anytime soon. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I will make sure of that.” He looked directly into my eyes. “I will protect you and Elona whenever I can, even if I have to die doing so.”

“Damon, don’t say that. I don’t want you to die.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them.

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Silence fell between us. His eyes softened.

“Then I won’t.”

I looked away, pretending to be fascinated by the lake. Lydia stirred. You love him so much.

My heart thudded at her words. I closed my eyes briefly. I don’t know what I feel.

Yes, you do.

I hated how easily she could see through me.

When I looked back at Damon, he was still watching me. At that moment, I didn’t feel the urge to run from what was happening between us. I simply let myself enjoy it.

We returned to the estate later that night. Elona was already asleep. Damon walked me to my room. We stopped outside the door. Neither of us moved.

Damon looked at me. “Goodnight, Aria.”

He turned to leave.

“Damon.”

He stopped. I took a breath. “I want you to stay.”

He slowly turned around. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I am.”

He stepped closer. “Aria, I don’t want you making this decision because of the mate bond or

because Elona wants us together.”

“I’m not.” I reached for his hand. “I’m choosing this.”

His expression softened. “I need you to be certain.”

“I am.” I looked into Damon’s eyes. “I want you to stay with me tonight.”

He didn’t move immediately. Then he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “Then I’m

staying.”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 361

Aria’s POV

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As soon as we got into my room and the door clicked shut behind us, Damon’s mouth found mine in a passionate, hungry kiss. I answered it, fingers curling into the front of his shirt, pulling him closer.

The bond flared bright and hot between us.

Yes, Lydia breathed, almost a growl of satisfaction.

Clothes became obstacles. His shirt hit the floor. Mine followed. His broad hands kissed my skin sliding down my back, over the curve of my hips, claiming.

I pushed him toward the bed. He went willingly, drawing me down with him until I straddled his lap

the hard length of him pressing against me through the last thin barriers of fabric.

“Aria.” My name was rough in his throat. “Look at me.”

I did. The gentleness was still there, but threaded now with fierceness.

I reached between us, freed him, and sank down slowly. The stretch stole my breath. Damon’s

hands tightened on my waist, a low growl tearing from him.

Our bond locked tighter, pleasure and possession braided together until I couldn’t tell where one

ended and the other began.

I moved. He met me, rising to thrust deeper, one hand sliding up to cup the back of my neck, the

other gripping my hip hard enough to leave marks I would feel tomorrow.

Every roll of my body drew a sharper response from him. The room filled with the sound of skin, of

breath, and of the soft, broken noises I couldn’t hold back.

Yes, Aria, feel him, Lydia urged, her voice thick with shared pleasure. Feel Rhein and Damon. They’re

both here.

I did. Damon’s controlled strength and Rhein’s raw, possessive power wrapped around me until I

was shaking. Damon flipped us without warning, pinning me beneath him, driving deeper.

His mouth found the sensitive spot just below my ear, then went even lower.

“You are mine,” he growled against my skin, the word more wolf than man.

“I am yours,” I answered, nails scoring down his back.

The c****x hit like a breaking wave. Mine came first, then his, the bond flooding with shared

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release until I could barely breathe.

Soon, we both fell asleep. I didn't know how long I slept before the dream began.

I was standing in darkness.

"What's happening?"

A laugh echoed behind me. I turned. Viktor stood there. His eyes were glowing red.

"You really thought you were free?"

My heart began pounding. "What are you doing here?" My voice trembled. "You're dead."

He smiled. "Am I?"

Clain

He disappeared. A second later, he was standing in front of me. I tried to step back, but my feet

wouldn't move. Then his hand closed around my throat. Pain exploded through my body. I

screamed. Something cold entered my veins. My body convulsed. I could feel my wolf fighting

beneath my skin.

Aria! Lydia's voice was frantic. Fight him. He's changing us!

"No!" I clawed at Viktor's hand.

He only laughed. "You were always meant to belong to us."

"No, I don't belong to you!"

My vision blurred. I felt my fangs push painfully through my gums. A cry escaped me. My body started changing. My heartbeat slowed. My skin became unnaturally cold, and then I heard

another voice.

"Aria?"

It was Damon. I turned. He was standing several feet away. His eyes were fixed on me. Fear

flashed across his face.

“Stay away from me,” I whispered.

He took a step forward. “Aria, look at me.”

“Don’t!” My voice came out as a growl.

Damon stopped. Rhein surged forward inside him. She’s not herself.

Damon’s eyes flashed silver. He moved toward me again. I could smell his blood. My vampire instincts screamed at me to attack. I tried to fight them. I tried to move away, but my body

wouldn’t listen.

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“Run,” I whispered.

Damon shook his head. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Please!” I could feel the monster inside me taking control. My claws emerged. My fangs lengthened. I lunged.

Damon barely had time to react. My claws tore into his chest. His eyes widened. I froze.

“No.” Blood spread across his shirt.

“Damon?”

He staggered backward. I stared at my hands. “No, no, no...what have I done?”

He collapsed.

“Damon!”

I rushed toward him. He looked up at me. There was no anger in his eyes, only sadness.

“It was not your fault, Aria.” His fingers weakly closed around mine. “Don’t ever blame yourself,” he

whispered.

Then his eyes closed.

“No!” I screamed. I dropped beside him, pressing my hands against the wound.

“Wake up.”

There was nothing. I pressed my ear against his chest. His heartbeat was gone.

Something inside me shattered.

“Damon!” I pulled him against my chest, sobbing so hard I could barely breathe. “Please!” I buried my face against his neck. “Please, don’t leave me.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 362

Aria’s POV

I woke up with a strangled gasp. My entire body jerked upright, and for a moment, I didn’t know where I was. Darkness surrounded me.

Clair

My chest heaved as I clawed at the sheets, my heart pounding so violently I could hear it in my ears. Sweat coated my skin, and the lingering scent of blood from the nightmare seemed trapped inside my nose.

Damon. My gaze snapped to him. He was already awake, sitting beside me with one arm wrapped

securely around my waist while his other hand cupped the back of my head.

“Aria.” His voice was low and rough with sleep. “What happened?”

I stared at him. For one horrible second, I could still see the dream. His blood soaking through his

shirt. My claws buried in his chest. His lifeless body going cold in my arms.

I swallowed hard. “Damon...”

“I’m here.” His arms tightened around me. “I’m right here.”

The warmth of his body seeped into mine, but instead of calming me immediately, it made my

chest ache. Because in the nightmare, I had felt that warmth disappear.

I reached for him without thinking, gripping the front of his shirt. He didn’t question it. He simply pulled me closer.

“Was it a nightmare?”

I nodded against his chest. “Yes.”

“What did you see?”

I closed my eyes. I couldn’t tell him. If I told him I’d killed him in my dream, he’d worry. He’d start watching me every second, wondering if the vampire bloodline was returning. I couldn’t do that to

him. Not after everything we’d already survived.

“It was nothing.”

Damon immediately went still. “Nothing?”

I forced myself to smile. “Yeah...Just a bad dream.”

His hand moved gently through my hair. “Aria, you’re shaking.”

THU

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“I’m fine.”

He stared at me for a few seconds. “You don’t look fine.”

“I said I’m fine.” The words came out sharper than I intended.

Damon’s expression changed, and I immediately regretted it.

“I’m sorry.” I lowered my gaze. “I just...don’t want to talk about it.”

Clai

For a moment, he said nothing. Then his fingers gently lifted my chin. “You don’t have to talk about

anything you’re not ready to talk about, but you don’t have to pretend with me either.”

I stared into his eyes. The silver in them softened.

Damon pressed a kiss against my forehead. “Whatever it was, you’re safe now.”

I closed my eyes. I wanted to believe that I was safe more than anything. I wrapped my arms

around him and held him tightly. He didn’t ask anything else. He simply held me until my breathing

steadied.

But even after I closed my eyes again, I couldn’t forget the nightmare, and somewhere deep inside

me, fear whispered that it hadn’t been just a dream.

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The next morning, I went to see the head of my mother’s house. I needed answers. I couldn’t keep

pretending the nightmare hadn’t shaken me.

His chambers were quiet when I entered. His eyes immediately settled on my face.

“You didn’t sleep well.”

I sighed. “Is it that obvious?”

“It is.” He gestured toward the chair. “Have a seat.”

I obeyed. I narrated my nightmare to him and asked if the vampire bloodline had rebounded.

He placed his palm against my forehead first, and a faint golden light flowed from his fingers. I felt the energy move through my body, reaching deep into my veins. Then he placed both hands over

my chest.

The moment his power touched my heart, Lydia stirred. What is he doing?

Examining us.

The patriarch closed his eyes. The golden light intensified. For several seconds, he remained

completely still. Then he withdrew his hands.

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“Your vampire bloodline hasn’t rebounded.”

Relief washed over me so quickly that my shoulders sagged. “So the nightmare...”

“Was not caused by the vampire bloodline,” he finished.

I frowned. “Then why did it feel so real?”

“Because your mind is still carrying what your body survived.”

I looked down at my hands. The blood from the nightmare flashed through my memory again.

thought I had moved past it.”

“You have survived it,” he corrected. “That is not the same thing as healing from it.”

His words struck harder than I expected. I remained silent.

Clain

He continued. “You suppressed your wolf once because you had to..You fought the vampire bloodline because you had to. You survived betrayal, manipulation, loss, and fear. Your body may have recovered, Aria, but your mind remembers everything.”

I swallowed.

His expression became serious. “You need to deal with it. If not, your negative emotions can become an opening for the vampire bloodline.”

I froze. He leaned forward. “The bloodline has been suppressed, not destroyed. As long as you

remain balanced, it will remain dormant. But fear, hatred, grief, anger, or overwhelming despair can

weaken that balance.”

“So the nightmare was a warning?”

“Not necessarily. But it is a reminder that you cannot allow yourself to be consumed by what happened.”

Lydia growled softly inside me. We won’t.

I took a slow breath. “How do I stop it?”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 363

Aria’s POV

Clai

The patriarch studied me for a while. “You can stop it by healing. You need peace, Aria. You need

to stop fighting yourself.”

I frowned. “That’s easier said than done.”

“Then begin with the people who make you feel safe.”

My thoughts immediately went to Damon. The image of him from the nightmare flashed through my mind again. My chest tightened.

The patriarch noticed. “You already know who I’m talking about.”

I looked away. “Damon.”

“Yes.”

I didn't answer. She sighed softly. "Whatever happened between you and Damon, carrying all this alone will not help you."

My fingers curled against my knees.

The patriarch's voice softened. "You need him, Aria. You do not have to pretend that everything between you is perfect. But if having him beside you brings you peace, then allow yourself to have

that."

My heart gave a painful squeeze. Damon had always been a powerful anchor for me in recent times. A place where I could breathe when everything else became chaos.

Maybe I'd been so focused on protecting him from my darkness that I'd forgotten he had never asked me to face it alone.

Lydia's voice came quietly. He is our mate, Aria.

I closed my eyes. I know.

Then let him stand beside us.

I inhaled slowly. The fear inside me began to loosen. Maybe the answer wasn't to run from Damon in hopes of protecting him. Maybe it was to reconcile with him, to let him back into the parts of me I had been keeping locked away.

If having him beside me could help me heal faster, then that's exactly what I would do.

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Chair

Things between Damon and me continued to change, not in some dramatic way. There were no

grand promises or declarations. It was the small things. The way he would reach for my hand Whenever we walked together. The way Rhein seemed to settle whenever Lydia was near.

But just when I thought I could finally breathe, the Council reminded me through their actions that being recognized as Alpha on paper was one thing, but actually being allowed to lead a pack was

another.

This became painfully obvious during the next Council meeting. I sat at the long table, my fingers resting against the polished wood while councilors argued over the latest trade allocation.

“The Grayson Pack cannot receive the same territory allocation as the larger packs,” one of the councilors said. “The numbers simply don’t justify it.”

“They don’t justify it because you’ve been restricting our access to the northern routes for months,” I replied.

His expression hardened. “We’re discussing logistics, Alpha Aria.”

“No. You’re discussing control.”

A murmur passed around the room. I kept my gaze fixed on him. “The northern route is the most efficient path for our trade caravans. You’ve given access to three other packs while forcing mine to take the longer southern route. That increases transportation time and costs.”

“Your pack is still rebuilding after what happened with

your

beta.”

“My pack is recovering,” I corrected. “There’s a difference.”

The head of the Council leaned back in his chair. “That is precisely why we believe you should reconsider your current arrangement.”

My stomach tightened. “What arrangement?”

He exchanged a look with the councilor who had spoken previously before answering. “Your lack of a male mate at your side.”

There it was again.

Lydia’s growl rolled through my mind. Say the word and I’ll bite him.

I kept my face expressionless. “My marital status has nothing to do with trade routes.”

A few councilors shifted uncomfortably. The head sighed. “Alpha Aria, the Grayson Pack is a new pack that is still finding its feet. You are young, and while we acknowledge your strength, leading a pack requires more than strength.”

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I stared at him. “What else does it require?”

Clair

He cleared his throat. “It requires experience. The Council believes that the situation would be better managed if you had an experienced, strong Alpha beside you.” He leaned forward. “Alpha

Damon Hawthorne would be an obvious choice.”

The mate bond reacted before I could stop it. A faint warmth spread through my chest/I hated that my body could betray me so easily.

Across the table, Damon remained perfectly still. He had been invited to the meeting/because of the territorial negotiations between Silvermoon and Grayson. Until that moment, he hadn’t said a word. Now his eyes hardened.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 364

Akia’s POV

The head councilor looked at him. “You don’t?”

“No.” The answer came immediately.

Claim

I glanced at Damon. He didn’t look at me. He looked directly at the councilor. “Aria doesn’t need me to hold her pack in hand.”

The words struck me harder than I expected. Something in my chest loosened.

The head councilor frowned. "That isn't what we meant."

"It is exactly what you meant." Damon's voice remained calm, but his Alpha aura rolled through the room like distant thunder. Every wolf in the chamber felt it.

"You've recognized her as Alpha," he continued. "If you've done that, then treat her like one and stop disrespecting her."

There was silence. My pulse quickened. I should have been grateful. I was. But instead, an uncomfortable thought slipped into my mind.

Damon could say he didn't believe the Council's view. He could defend me. He could insist I was capable of ruling alone. But I couldn't ignore what our union would mean.

It would mean two packs, two territories, becoming connected through their leaders. The Council wouldn't see a relationship. They would see an alliance, a political advantage, a consolidation of power, and I refused to let my relationship become another tool for people to control my pack.

"I will manage my pack," I said, meeting every pair of eyes at the table. "With or without anyone's preferred arrangement. That is not open for debate."

"We shall see how long that remains practical, Alpha Grayson," the head councilor said.

I walked out into the cool evening air, Lydia pacing under my skin.

They will not stop, she said. Not until they force the choice.

I knew that, and for now, the only choice I could make was to set the thought of Damon and me being together aside.

The Council didn't stop. If anything, they became more persistent after I refused to let them dictate my relationship with Damon.

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Clair

The sealed Grayson territory was supposed to be under my authority. That had been agreed upon. The seal had been established. The key was held jointly by me and the Council. Yet somehow, they

till found a way to interfere.

They began breathing down my neck, sending one demand after another and dressing each one

up as an official request.

They wanted access to the sealed territory. They wanted to station a research team inside it. They wanted to study the strange power buried beneath the land and, more importantly, figure out how

to harness it.

Every time I refused, another letter arrived.

I sat at the head of the long table in the Grayson estate, staring at the latest Council document in my hands. “They really don’t know when to stop, do they?”

Lydia’s presence stirred inside me.

They think we are weak. They smell an opportunity.

Then let them keep smelling.

Lydia gave a low, approving growl.

I folded the document slowly. “They’re assuming that because I’m young, I’ll eventually get tired

and give in.”

Then show them how wrong they are.

I glanced toward the large windows overlooking the estate grounds. The sealed territory lay beyond the northern boundary.

It was glaringly obvious that the Council’s purpose for wanting to put researchers inside it was not because they cared about understanding it. It was because they wanted to control it. That was

never going to happen.

I pushed the Council documents aside. “If they want a political game, I’ll give them one.”

Lydia’s ears seemed to prick inside my mind.

What are you planning?

I leaned back in my chair. “The Council has influence because every individual pack territory

answers to them.”

I reached for another file. There are nine peripheral territories bordering Grayson land and maintaining cooperative relationships with us.

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For years, the Council had treated them as pieces on a board. They issued policies, and those territories complied.

Clain

But that arrangement had worked because no one had offered them another structure. I intended to change that. “I’m going to bring the nine territories together.” I smiled faintly. “I will form a political alliance with them.”

The more I thought about it, the clearer the plan became. If those nine territories entered a formal political framework with the Grayson Pack, they would no longer have to rely solely on the Council.

The Council’s influence over them would weaken, and if the alliance became strong enough, the Council would have no choice but to negotiate with us instead of ordering us around.

I began drafting the proposal that same afternoon. By evening, I had summoned the heads of the nine territories for preliminary discussions. It was risky, but it was exactly what I needed.

The following morning, I was reviewing the first responses when the doors to my office opened. Damon walked in. He didn’t bother knocking.

I looked up. “You know, most people knock before entering.”

He closed the door behind him. “Most people aren’t your mate.”

My heart gave an involuntary thump.

Damon pulled out the chair opposite my desk and sat down. His dark eyes immediately settled on the documents scattered across my desk. “What are you doing?”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 365

Aria's POV

I leaned back in my chair. "Starting a political war."

His eyebrow rose. "That sounds like something I should be concerned about."

Clawy

"You should." I pushed the proposal toward him. "The Council won't stop pressuring me about the sealed territory. As you already know, they want researchers stationed there so they can access its

power."

His expression hardened. "Don't ever let them get that access."

"I won't," I let out a breath. "But they'll keep trying."

Damon picked up the proposal and began reading. I watched his expression change as he went through the details. Finally, he looked up. "You're forming an alliance with the nine peripheral

territories."

I leaned back. "Yes. I must do that to reduce the Council's influence."

Damon's mouth curved slightly. "That sounds like a good idea."

I blinked. "That's it?"

"What did you expect?"

"An argument, a warning, or at least one speech from you about how dangerous this is."

He raised a brow. "Well, I can give you those if you want."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't."

"Then we're done." He set the proposal down. "Hawthorne will join the alliance."

I stared at him. “You’d really do that?”

His expression softened. “Of course I would.”

The mate bond warmed beneath my skin.

“You realize the Council could retaliate.” I studied him. “Are you really willing to stand with me while I challenge them?”

“I will not just stand with you.” His gaze locked onto mine. “I’ll build it with you.”

Something inside my chest tightened. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Damon reached for the proposal. “Call the first meeting with the pack representatives.”

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“I already did.”

His lips twitched. “Of course you did.”

Clair

Over the next few days, I held the meeting with the representatives from the nine packs/Most of them were already in support of what I wanted to do. The rest needed time to think about it.

Word of what was happening reached the members of the Council.

They issued a statement to every pack before sunrise. By breakfast the next day, the entire region

was talking about me. I stood in my office, staring at the message projected across the screen.

ALPHA ARIA GRAYSON ACCUSED OF DIVIDING WOLFKIND

Below the headline was the Council’s official declaration. They accused me of creating a faction, undermining the authority of the existing Council, and threatening the unity of wolfkind.

Then came the threat. I had until the end of the week to halt my preparations. If I refused, they

would open a formal clan-betrayal investigation against me.

I read the statement twice. Then I laughed.

Lydia growled inside me. They're threatening us.

They've been threatening us since I became Alpha.

This time they're serious.

I folded my arms. So are we.

The door opened. Damon walked in. He didn't need to ask what had happened.

"I saw the statement." His expression was grim. "They're trying to frighten the other territories."

"They're trying to frighten me too." I turned away from the screen. "They gave me a deadline."

"I know."

"Do you think I should obey?"

Damon was quiet. That silence told me everything.

I looked at him. "Say it."

He sighed. "I think you need to be careful."

My jaw tightened. "Careful?"

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& Chapter 365

"Aria, the Council's influence goes deeper than you realize."

"realize exactly how much influence they have."

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“No, I don’t think you do.” He stepped closer. “They’ve spent decades building relationships with neutral territories. Some Alphas may not like them, but they depend on them for arbitration, trade agreements, border disputes, even military support.”

I looked toward the maps on my desk. “The nine territories are still with me.”

His voice softened. “Some are. Remember, not everyone has chosen a side yet.”

Those words settled heavily in my chest.

Lydia paced beneath my skin. He’s right.

Damon continued. “If you completely disregard the Council, some of those neutral territories may decide you’re too dangerous to support.”

I looked at him. “So what do you want me to do?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 366

Aria’s POV

Damon held my gaze. “Nothing that gives them an excuse to turn against you.”

I shook my head. “No. I won’t let them decide my pace.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “What are you planning?”

I walked toward the maps. “I plan to move faster.”

He stared at me.

Clai

“They gave me a deadline because they believe I will panic.” I placed my hand over the territories already considering the alliance. “I won’t.”

I looked at him. “I’ll make the alliance stronger by making everyone understand that joining us is safer than standing alone.”

Damon remained silent.

I continued. "I don't need to destroy the old Council." I pointed toward the map. "I need to make

them irrelevant."

Lydia growled approvingly. That's better.

Damon walked toward the table. "Then you'll need more than political agreements. You'll need

military cooperation."

"I am already working on it."

"You will need trade and information networks too."

"Joshua is handling that," I replied.

Damon's expression changed slightly. "You've thought this through."

"I've had to." I looked at him. "They assume I would eventually fall into line." My voice hardened. "I'm going to show them exactly how wrong they were."

Damon's eyes softened. "You've totally changed, Aria."

I frowned. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No." He smiled. "I'm proud of you."

The words caught me off guard. I looked away. "Don't make this harder."

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His smile faded. "I wasn't trying to."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Damon stepped closer. "You know what I want."

My chest tightened. "Don't."

He halted. "Aria, I'm not going to pretend I don't hope things will change between us."

I swallowed. "We're not talking about that now."

“I understand.” His voice was gentle. “But once you’ve built this new council with these nine territories, I hope you’ll reconsider us again.”

I looked into his eyes. The mate bond pulsed between us.

Lydia whispered. You still want him, Aria.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I know.

When I opened them, Damon was still watching me. “I can’t promise you anything.”

“I don’t need a promise.” He reached for my hand. I let him take it. “Just don’t close the door completely.”

My fingers tightened around his. “I won’t.”

Clair

He smiled. Then he released my hand and walked toward the door. Before leaving, he looked back. “Make them regret underestimating you.”

I smiled faintly. “That’s the plan.”

The door closed. I turned back toward the maps. The Council had given me a deadline. They thought it was a threat. I saw it as a challenge. If they wanted to know whether I was strong enough to lead, I would show them. Not with empty words or fear, but with results.

I would build something stronger than anything they had expected. Something that made my allies believe in me. Something that made the neutral territories want to stand beside me.

Something that forced the old Council to understand that they could no longer control the future

of wolfkind.

After a few days of ignoring their threat, the old Council sent warnings directly to all nine territories I wanted to build an alliance with.

I was standing in the meeting room when Joshua placed the document on the table.

Damon stood across from me, his arms folded over his chest. Noah leaned against the edge of the table, his expression unreadable. Ronan stood beside him with his arms crossed.

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I picked up the document and scanned the first few lines. My jaw tightened. “They actually sent

this to all nine territories?”

Joshua nodded. “Every territory that formally agreed to join the new council received the same warning two days ago.”

I read the message again. The old Council had declared that joining the new council was an act of betrayal. They threatened disciplinary action, loss of political recognition, and isolation from territories that remained loyal to the old order.

A low growl escaped me.

Lydia stirred beneath my skin. They are afraid.

I lowered the document. “They’re not afraid of the new council,” I murmured.

Damon’s eyes narrowed. “They’re afraid of losing control.”

Exactly.

For decades, the old Council had survived because every territory depended on it for something. Trade agreements, protection, resource allocations, political recognition.

Even disputes between packs were often settled according to rules established by the Council. They had built a system where independence existed only as long as everyone remained dependent on them.

But I had offered the nine territories something different. I had offered them autonomy. Each territory would retain control over its own internal laws, borders, resources, and Alpha.

The new council would coordinate economic cooperation and collective defense without taking authority away from individual territories.

No territory would have to surrender its sovereignty simply to gain protection. That was what the old Council could not tolerate.

“There is good news, though,” Joshua said with a smile.

I raised a brow. “What is it?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 367

Akia’s POV

Joshua delivered the news. “Not one of the nine territories has withdrawn.”

A small sense of relief passed through me. The nine territories had trusted me. That trust mattered more than anyone could think.

“What did they expect?” Noah asked. “That nine territories would willingly give up their independence because someone sent them a threatening letter?”

Ronan’s lips curved slightly. “They expected fear to do what diplomacy couldn’t.”

Damon pushed away from the table. “Then they miscalculated.”

Joshua cleared his throat. “The old Council has already made its next move.”

The warmth in my chest vanished. “What did they do?”

He hesitated. “They’ve imposed an economic blockade.”

Silence filled the room.

I stared at him. “Explain.”

Clair

“They’ve frozen the resource quotas of every old Council member territory that trades with

the nine new council territories.”

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My fingers curled against the edge of the table. “So they’re punishing everyone, not just the

territories that joined us.”

“Exactly.” Joshua placed another set of documents on the table. “They’re targeting their own

members too. Any old Council territory that continues trading with one of the nine new members

will have its resource allocations frozen.”

My stomach twisted.

Lydia growled. Pathetic cowards.

I couldn’t disagree. The old Council had failed to intimidate the nine territories directly, so now they

were trying to make cooperation with us too expensive.

Damon’s expression hardened. “How extensive is the blockade?”

Joshua took a breath. “Food supplies are the immediate concern. Several territories rely on Council-controlled agricultural quotas. Then there are medical supplies, weapons-grade metals,

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Clair

fuel, and certain mineral resources.”

Ronan’s face darkened. “They’re willing to hurt their own people just to preserve their authority.”

“They’re willing to make everyone believe they have no choice,” I corrected.

Everyone looked at me.

I pushed myself away from the table. “That’s what this is about.”

I walked toward the windows, staring at the trees outside. “They want the Alphas to panic. They want them to look at their empty warehouses and shrinking supplies and blame us for it.”

Damon came up behind me. His presence settled over me like warmth. “And then they’ll abandon

the new council.”

I nodded. “That’s what they want.”

Lydia paced restlessly inside me. They attacked our allies because they couldn’t reach us directly. I

think we should attack back.

I almost smiled. We will do just that.

Damon’s voice came quietly from behind me. “What are you thinking?”

I turned to face him. “The old Council just gave us the opportunity to prove why the new council

needs to exist.”

His brows drew together.

I continued. “They’re trying to create scarcity. It is time for us to eliminate it.”

The old Council thought freezing resource quotas would force us into submission. They were wrong. I had prepared for this long before they made their move.

I walked back to the table and pulled out the second set of records I had kept hidden beneath the

council documents.

Damon looked at the papers, then at me. “You already have another supply network.”

I nodded. “I suspected this might happen, so I started working on it weeks ago.”

Noah’s eyebrows rose. “How?”

“Ryder.”

Damon went still. I caught the brief flicker of jealousy in his eyes. It was gone almost immediately,

but I noticed it.

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<Chapter 367

I spread the documents across the table. “Ryder has been helping me secure supplies through channels the old Council doesn’t control. Independent merchants, neutral territories, private Stockpiles, and several old trade routes that haven’t been used in a long time.”

Joshua scanned the figures. “This is enough to keep the nine territories supplied for months.

“Longer, if we ration properly.”

Damon picked up one of the documents. “You arranged all of this without telling me?”

“I didn’t know whether the Council would retaliate against you directly.”

His jaw tightened. “You should have told me.”

“I know.” I stepped closer to him. “But if I had told everyone everything and the information had leaked, the entire network could have been compromised. I was protecting everyone.”

Damon stared at me for a moment before his expression softened. “I understand.”

The meeting continued. We made plans to completely put an end to any issue the old Council

might bring our way.

Later that afternoon, Ryder came to my pack upon my request. When he saw me, he smiled.

“You look exhausted.”

“I’ve had a long day. The old werewolf Council has blocked access to resources for the nine territories that joined hands with me.”

His smile disappeared. “So they finally did it.”

I nodded. “They are trying to choke the territories that joined us.”

Clair

Ryder pushed away from the pillar he had been leaning on. “Which is why I assume you called me.”

I nodded. He glanced toward the council building.

“How bad is it?”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 368

Aria’s POV

I sighed. “Bad enough that I need every shipment we arranged.”

“You’ll have them.”

I stared at him. “Thank you, Ryder.”

He shook his head. “Don’t.”

I frowned. He looked at me for a long moment before continuing.

“You don’t need to thank me every time I help you.” His voice was softer now. “Aria, I know what you’re trying to do. You’re building something bigger than yourself. If I can help, I’ll help.”

I lowered my gaze. There was something different about him.

“You have completely changed,” I said.

His expression tightened. “What do you mean?”

Clairy

I told him exactly what I meant. I told him how much less guarded and less competitive he had become. He no longer pursued me as he did before. He also only came when I reached out to him,

unlike before.

He smiled sadly. "It isn't without reason, Aria. I saw what happened during the vampire crisis." He looked directly into my eyes. "I saw what Damon would do for you."

My heart tightened.

Ryder gave a quiet laugh. "I also saw what you'd do for him."

I didn't know what to say.

He continued. "So I finally stopped lying to myself." His smile became faint. "I know I can't come between you and Damon."

My chest tightened. He looked away for a moment.

"I care about you, Aria. I probably always will. But I also care enough about you to know when to let

go."

The words hit harder than I expected.

He looked back at me. "I hope we can remain friends. Maybe best friends even, that is if you're willing to tolerate me."

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A laugh escaped me. "I think I can manage that."

He smiled. "Good."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Ryder extended his hand. "My blessing, Aria."

I stared at it before taking his hand. "Thank you."

He squeezed my fingers once before letting go.

Clai

By evening, I had barely stepped into my office when Noah appeared at the door. His expression was serious. "Can I talk to you?"

I nodded. "Of course."

He entered and closed the door behind him. For a moment, he simply stood there. I knew that look. Something was bothering him.

"What happened?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Noah."

He sighed. "You know me too well."

I settled into my seat and leaned back. "I've had enough practice."

He smiled briefly, but it disappeared almost immediately. "I heard about what happened with

Ryder."

My heart sank. "What did you hear?"

He walked closer. "He told me he gave you his blessing."

I nodded. "He did."

Noah took a breath. "He gave me some advice."

I remained silent. I already knew what he was about to say.

Noah held my gaze. "He told me to give up the idea of being with you. He said I should step aside and let Damon be with you." He shook his head. "I am not going to do that, Aria. I love you so much that I am willing to keep putting up a fight until you choose me."

My chest tightened. "Noah..."

He came even closer. "I just need one thing from you, Aria."

I stared at him. "What is that?"

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“Please do not make your decision so quickly. Do not choose Damon yet.”

The room suddenly felt too quiet.

Clair

Noah’s voice lowered. “I’m not asking you to choose me right now.” His expression softened. “I am asking you to just hold on a little longer before making your choice. Allow me to prove myself to you the way Damon has been doing.”

Lydia growled softly. He’s trying to delay you.

I know.

I looked at Noah. Some part of me understood. Noah wasn’t asking me to abandon Damon. He was asking me not to close the door on him yet.

“I care about you,” he said quietly.

My heart ached.

“But I don’t want you to choose Damon simply because the mate bond is pulling you toward him.”

Noah looked at me for several seconds before continuing. “Please take your time, Aria.”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 369

Axia’s POV

The blockade failed. Within days, the old Council realized that freezing resource quotas had

accomplished nothing.

Our supply channels remained open. The nine territories continued trading, and instead of breaking apart, our cooperation grew stronger.

Clair

So the old Council changed tactics. They announced an internal motion to formally investigate me.

Their justification was almost laughable.

“Preventing the division of wolfkind.”

I stared at the official notice in my hands, then let out a humorless laugh. “They really expect

anyone to believe this?”

Ronan sat across from me, his expression grim. “They don’t need everyone to believe it.”

I looked at him.

“They only need enough Alphas to vote for it.”

He was right. The investigation was supposedly about maintaining unity among werewolves, but everyone knew what it really meant. They wanted to put me on trial politically.

They wanted to question my authority, examine every agreement I had made with the nine territories, and portray the new council as a threat to the existing order.

If they succeeded, they could use the investigation to pressure the territories that had joined me.

Lydia snarled inside me. They want to put you on your knees.

They won’t.

That’s right. We will make them regret trying.

I folded the notice. “I won’t give them that satisfaction.”

Ronan raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t going?”

I shook my head. “No, Father.”

His eyes widened slightly. “The vote is tomorrow. This isn’t a normal Council session, Aria.”

“I know.”

“Then why aren’t you going?”

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Clark

I leaned back in my chair. "Because showing up would make it look like I'm defending myself. I

have nothing to defend, Father."

My voice hardened. "They're the ones afraid of change. Let them stand in front of everyone and explain why nine territories choosing cooperation is somehow a crime."

Ronan's expression softened. "You've already made up your mind."

"Yes, I have."

He nodded slowly. "In that case, I'll represent you."

I looked at him. "You don't have to."

"I know." He smiled faintly. "But I want to."

Something tightened in my chest. My father had spent so long unconscious, trapped inside his

own mind, that seeing him sitting across from me still felt unreal sometimes.

I reached across the desk and squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

His fingers closed around mine. "Don't thank me yet. Wait until I survive the Council."

A small laugh escaped me. I assured my father that everything would be all right.

The next morning, the Council session began without me. I immersed myself in work within the Grayson Pack. If the old Council expected me to spend the entire day worrying about their vote, they had badly underestimated me.

I spent the morning reviewing trade agreements with Joshua before personally inspecting some new storage facilities.

My territory was changing. Everywhere I looked, there were signs of it. More supplies arriving. More guards training together. More wolves from different territories working side by side.

The old Council wanted to call this division. I saw unity. There was a difference.

Damon joined me around midday. He found me near the eastern training grounds, where several warriors were practicing coordinated formations.

The hours crawled by. Every few minutes, I checked the time. My father wasn't home yet.

Lydia paced restlessly. I don't like this, Aria. We should have gone instead.

No.

Why?

I took a slow breath. Because sometimes the strongest thing you can do is refuse to play by

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someone else's rules.

Lydia considered that. I still don't like it.

I smiled faintly. Neither do I.

Damon remained nearby. He didn't try to distract me. He simply stayed, and that was enough.

Then, near sunset, my father came home bearing news.

"Aria." His voice carried exhaustion. "It's over."

My heart slammed against my ribs as I searched his face. "What happened?"

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 370

Axia's POV

He paused briefly. Then a smile spread across his face. "The motion failed by seven votes."

I closed my eyes. Relief rushed through me so quickly that my knees almost weakened

Damon caught my arm and smiled. "They couldn't even get enough votes."

Ronan removed his coat and dropped it over the back of a chair. "They pushed hard/Several Alphas were pressured privately before the session, but they still lost by that many votes."

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Silence settled between us. Then he smiled again. "You understand what that means, don't you?"

I nodded slowly. "It means they don't have enough control."

"No, not just that." He shook his head. "It means something bigger."

I frowned.

Ronan stepped closer. "It means your alliance already has real influence. The territories didn't just join because you offered them better trade terms. Their Alphas were willing to stand against the

old Council's pressure."

He pointed toward the Council notice still lying on my desk. "They voted against this motion because they believe in what you're building."

His words settled heavily inside me.

The old Council had tried warnings. They had failed. They had tried an economic blockade. They had failed. Now they had tried formal political action, and they had failed again.

But instead of feeling victorious, I felt something colder settle inside my chest.

Damon noticed immediately. “What is it?”

I looked at him. “They won’t try formal procedure again,” I said. My voice came out flatter than I expected. “Not after this. The old Council doesn’t like losing in public. From here, they’ll switch to

other, dirtier means.”

Ronan’s expression tightened. “You think so?”

I nodded.

Damon came beside me. “I agree. They’ll switch to other means.” His expression hardened. “They might try to sabotage...”

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I looked at him. “Or even assassinate me.”

The word hung in the air.

Damon’s wolf surged so violently through the mate bond that I felt Rhein’s fury like a wave/ His

hand closed around mine. “They’ll have to get through me first.”

I looked toward the training grounds outside. My warriors were still moving through their

Clair

formations. Our borders were growing stronger. Our alliance was expanding, but none of it was

enough yet.

“We need to accelerate everything,” I said.

Damon frowned. “You mean training?”

“Training, security, intelligence... Everything.”

Ronan nodded. “You’re expecting them to make their move soon.”

“I am.” I looked at the darkening sky. “They’ve tried every method that required them to follow their own rules.” My fingers tightened around Damon’s. “Now they’ll stop following the rules.”

Lydia’s growl deepened. Then we get stronger before they strike.

I stared into the darkness. As fast as we can.

I had no doubt that the next attack wouldn’t come through the Council chamber. It would come from the shadows, and I had to build up my strength before they made their move.

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A few days later, news arrived from my mother’s family before breakfast. I was sitting at the dining table with Damon when Joshua walked in, a tablet in his hand and a look on his face that immediately told me something was wrong.

“Aria.”

I looked up. “What happened?”

“The patriarch of our mother’s house has announced his abdication.”

My brows pulled together. “Abdication?”

Joshua nodded. “Effective immediately.”

Damon leaned back in his chair. “Who will replace her?”

Justin hesitated. “Her successor is already in place.”

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He turned the tablet toward me. The moment I saw the name, something inside me went cold.

knew exactly what this meant.

Lydia's claws scraped against my consciousness. This is a trap.

Clair

I scrolled through the announcement. The new head had no real history of independent leadership,

no reputation for challenging the Council. In fact, everything about them screamed obedience.

"They've installed a puppet," I said.

Damon's eyes narrowed. "You're sure?"

I nodded. "I'm certain."

Joshua nodded. "Our intelligence confirms that the new head has been meeting with several Council representatives for weeks."

My fingers tightened around the tablet. "They lost the vote. Their economic blockade failed. Their formal investigation failed."

Damon's expression darkened. "So they're going after your mother's family."

"Not my mother's family." I looked at him. "They're going after me through my mother's family."

The realization settled heavily between us. The old Council couldn't touch me directly without making themselves look even more desperate.

But if they could control the head of my mother's house, they could claim authority over matters involving my bloodline.

My stomach tightened.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 371

Aria's POV

Chair

Later that morning, I went to the training grounds. Elona was already there. She stood in the center of the enclosed field wearing a small training outfit, her dark hair tied back while one of the senior warriors crouched several feet in front of her.

She looked tiny compared to the warriors surrounding her. But there was nothing timid about her.

“Again,” the trainer said.

Elona nodded. She closed her eyes.

I watched carefully. Formal wolf nature training was different from ordinary physical training. We weren’t simply teaching a child how to shift.

We were teaching her how to recognize the wolf beneath her human instincts, how to control heightened senses, how to establish a mental connection with her wolf, and eventually how to shift without losing herself.

For a young wolf, that process could take years. Elona had barely begun.

The trainer stepped backward. “Listen.”

Elona’s eyes remained closed.

“Tell me what you hear.”

She tilted her head. “I hear the birds.”

“Keep listening.”

Elona’s expression changed. Her eyes opened. “I hear the warriors behind me.”

The trainer smiled. “How many are there?”

Elona glanced over her shoulder. “Six.”

The warriors exchanged surprised looks.

The trainer pointed toward the trees. “How many wolves are outside the training perimeter?”

Elona frowned. I held my breath. She closed her eyes again. A few seconds passed. “Three.”

The trainer looked at me. I raised an eyebrow. He nodded toward the perimeter guards. “There are

three.”

Damon, who had joined me, folded his arms. “She’s sensing them from this distance?”

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I nodded. “Yes.”

Elona opened her eyes. “Was I right?”

I walked toward her. “You were, my child.”

Her entire face lit up. “I was?”

I crouched in front of her. “Yes, you were.”

She smiled proudly.

Chair

The training continued for about an hour. Elona was able to shift into her beautiful silver-white wolf

and move at a terrifying pace. The instructor had gone quiet. Damon had gone still beside me,

Rhein’s presence rolling off him in a wave of pure Alpha satisfaction.

“She’s strong,” Damon said simply.

“That comes as no surprise,” I answered.

I looked at my little girl. Pride filled my chest. She had extraordinary talent. Suddenly, the fear I’d been trying to ignore returned because talent attracted attention, and the people watching Elona were no longer only her family. The old Council was watching too.

That evening, I was discussing the situation with Damon when someone knocked on the front door. I straightened. Damon’s expression changed instantly. His Alpha instincts rose.

The guards opened the door. A man stood outside. He wore the formal colors of my mother’s house. Behind him were four warriors.

I walked toward the entrance. "Who are you?"

The man bowed. "Alpha Aria Grayson. I am an envoy of the new head of your mother's house."

My eyes hardened. "What do you want?"

He straightened. "I have come regarding Elona."

My wolf snarled.

Damon stepped forward. "You can speak to us without mentioning her again."

The envoy remained composed. "By the traditions of your mother's bloodline, Elona is the recognized heir. As such, she is required to undergo proper bloodline training within the maternal territory."

There was silence. I stared at him. Then I laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh.

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"Required? By whose authority?"

"The head of the maternal house."

I stepped closer. "You came into my territory and demanded that I surrender my daughter?"

"Alpha Grayson, this is not a demand. It is a family tradition."

"Then your family tradition can stay at the border."

The envoy stiffened. "Refusing could be interpreted as a rejection of your daughter's rightful

bloodline."

I felt my blood heat.

Lydia's growl became thunderous. Touch her and I'll tear them apart.

Clam

I took one step forward. "Listen carefully." My voice dropped. "Elona is my daughter. She is under my protection. No tradition gives you the right to remove her from my territory."

The envoy's expression hardened. "Her bloodline does."

Damon moved beside me. The Alpha pressure that rolled from him made several of the visiting warriors instinctively lower their heads. His voice was cold. "Leave."

The envoy swallowed. "This matter will not end here."

"I know." Damon's eyes flashed. "That's why I'm giving you one chance to walk away."

The envoy hesitated. Then he bowed stiffly. "We will await your response."

He turned and left. The doors closed behind him.

I stood there, staring at the door. The Council had found another weapon. My daughter. And this time, they had crossed a line I would never forgive.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 372

Akia's POV

Clairy

I didn't sleep that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the envoy standing at my door. Elona is

the heir. The words kept repeating in my head.

Lydia wasn't sleeping either. She prowled restlessly beneath my skin, her claws scraping against my ribs whenever I thought about someone trying to take Elona away.

They want our pup. We should go to them.

I opened my eyes. That's exactly what we're going to do.

By sunrise, I had already made my decision. I wasn't sending a reply. I was going there myself.

Damon found me in the hallway as I was fastening my weapons beneath my coat. His eyes immediately narrowed. "Where are you going?"

I looked at him. "To meet the head of my mother's house."

He stepped closer. "I won't let you go alone. I'm coming with you."

"I expected that."

A faint smile touched his lips. "Good."

We departed for my mother's house to meet the new head. The moment we arrived, the guards at the gate stepped forward. "Alpha Aria."

"I want to see the new head."

One of them hesitated. "She knew you would come. She is expecting you."

The gates opened. Damon walked beside me, his presence immediately drawing attention from every wolf nearby. They could feel his Alpha aura. They could also feel mine.

We entered the main hall. The new head was waiting at the far end. She was an older woman with silver threaded through her dark hair, dressed in the formal robes of the maternal house. She didn't rise when we approached.

"Aria Grayson."

I stopped several feet away. "You're the new head."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I am."

"I came to see you about my daughter, Elona."

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"I assumed you would," she said calmly.

Lydia growled. I don't like her.

Neither do I.

Clany

I kept my expression neutral. "You sent an envoy to my territory demanding that my daughter be brought here."

“Not demanding.” Her eyes hardened. “I was inviting her to where she belongs. It’s family tradition

“Explain that to me.”

She folded her hands. “Elona is the heir to this bloodline. Her education and upbringing are matters

that concern this house.”

I stared at her. “You can be concerned, but she remains my daughter.”

Her expression tightened. “Your daughter, yes. But also our heir.”

Damon stepped forward. “She is only six.”

The woman’s gaze moved toward him. “Alpha Damon.” Her jaw tightened. “This is a matter of

bloodline.”

I raised a hand slightly, stopping Damon. I wasn’t going to let her turn this into a confrontation with

two Alphas.

I looked at her. “I’ll agree to bloodline training.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You would send her here?”

“No. She will continue to stay with me, her mother.”

There was silence.

I continued. “I know this bloodline better than anyone currently alive in this room. I carry it. I can

teach her what she needs to know.”

The woman shook her head. “Your power is unstable. Elona needs our guardianship.”

My expression changed. There it was. The real reason, or at least the excuse they intended to use.

“You’ve been discussing my power with the Council, haven’t you?”

“We are only concerned about you.”

I smiled. “I’m touched.”

Her eyes narrowed. “This isn’t a joke, Aria.”

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“Neither is my daughter.” I stepped closer. “You claim Elona needs guardianship because my

power is unstable. Yet you’re the one working with the people who have repeatedly tried to

ndermine me.”

“We are trying to protect the child.”

“No.” My voice hardened. “You’re trying to control her.”

The room went silent. The woman stood.

“You are allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment.”

“My emotions are the reason I’m standing here.”

I could feel Lydia pressing against my skin. Her rage was becoming mine.

Clair

The woman’s expression remained firm. “Your recent displays of power have been unpredictable.

The Council has documented multiple incidents.”

“And they conveniently forgot to document why those incidents happened.”

“That is irrelevant.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s everything.”

I took another step. “If my power were truly the concern, you’d be offering me help. Instead, you’re

asking for my daughter.”

Damon's hand brushed mine. The mate bond steadied me.

I looked at the new head. "You don't get to hide behind bloodline tradition."

Her voice became colder. "You are forgetting your position, Aria."

I laughed softly. "My position?" I pointed toward myself. "I'm the Alpha of the Grayson Pack, and I have the support of nine territories that were willing to stand against the old Council."

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. I saw it. So did Lydia.

She is afraid.

As she should be.

The woman took a breath. "We have a duty to protect Elona."

"Then protect her." I stared directly into her eyes. "Protect her from anyone who means her harm.

Protect her from enemies. Protect her from threats."

My voice dropped. "But don't pretend you're protecting her while handing her over to people who

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want leverage over me."

She said nothing.

I turned toward the doors. Then stopped. I looked back at her. "Let me make something very

clear."

The room seemed to grow colder.

Clair

"If you join hands with the old Council and make a move against my daughter, I will consider it an

act of war.”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 373

Aria’s POV

Damon’s aura surged beside me.

Clair

I didn’t look away from the new head. “I don’t care about old traditions. I don’t care about Council

pressure. And I don’t care who you think has the authority to interfere.”

My voice was steady. “You come for Elona, and I will come for you.”

The woman’s face went pale.

I turned around. Damon followed me. We walked out of the hall without another word.

Damon didn’t wait for the maternal house to make another move. The morning after we returned,

he walked into my office with a document in his hand and an expression that told me he had already made up his mind about what he wanted to say.

“I sent this to the Council.”

I looked up from the reports on my desk. “What is it?”

He placed the document in front of me. I read the first paragraph. Then the second. By the time I

reached the end, my chest felt tight.

“Damon...”

“I formally declared myself as Elona’s father.”

I looked up. His eyes held mine. “I made them understand that the Hawthorne family and Silvermoon Pack do not recognize the maternal house’s unilateral claim to guardianship over her.”

I read the declaration again. There was no ambiguity, no loophole. Damon had made his position

clear to the Council, my maternal house, and every Alpha who might try to interfere.

Elona wasn’t only my daughter. She was his daughter too, and her bloodline belonged to two families.

Lydia stirred inside me. He is protecting our pup.

I almost smiled. He is our mate. He did what he felt was right.

“The Council has to acknowledge the declaration.”

“They could reject it.”

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His voice carried the certainty of an Alpha. “They could try, but they won’t.”

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He was right. By midday, the response came. The Council had formally acknowledged that Elona’s likeage extended through both the Grayson and Hawthorne families. The maternal house could

not claim unilateral guardianship. The motion had failed again.

I stared at the message. “They conceded.”

Damon nodded. “Publicly.”

That distinction mattered. The old Council had been forced to acknowledge something they had

tried to avoid. They couldn’t use my mother’s bloodline to isolate Elona from her father’s family.

They couldn't decide her future without us, and they certainly couldn't take her from me.

A slow breath left my lungs. "I would have celebrated, but this is only temporary."

Damon looked at me.

I nodded toward the message. "The hardliners in my mother's house won't accept this forever. They'll wait for the perfect time to strike again."

Damon's mouth curved slightly. "We will certainly be ready for when that happens."

Something warm spread through my chest. I admired him for those words.

Despite the good news, I increased Elona's security. Her training area was moved deeper into Grayson territory, and I doubled the number of guards surrounding it.

The warriors assigned to her weren't ordinary patrol wolves. They were some of the strongest wolves in my pack. Every entrance was monitored. Every unfamiliar scent was investigated. Even the healers and trainers were screened.

Elona noticed the change almost immediately. One afternoon, she looked around at the warriors standing around the training field. "Why are there so many guards?"

I crouched beside her. "Because you're very important to your father and me."

She frowned. "I already knew that."

I laughed softly. "Of course you did."

I spread my arms. "Come here."

She hugged me, and I embraced her tightly. No Council, bloodline, or old tradition was going to

take this child from me. Not on my watch.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 374

Aria's POV

Damon had been away for a couple of days. He finally returned to Grayson territory that evening, and the exhaustion was evident on his face.

I poured him a drink. He took the glass from me and leaned back in his chair, letting out a quiet breath as though he had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Then he studied me. "I need to talk to you about something, Aria."

I raised an eyebrow. "What could that be?"

He hesitated for a moment before saying, "I want you and Elona to stay in Hawthorne territory for a

while."

I stared at him. "Damon, you know that isn't a good idea. The safest place for Elona right now is

Grayson territory. We have already put measures in place to ensure her protection."

"So have I." He held my gaze. "That's what I've been doing these past couple of days. I've made

arrangements in Hawthorne territory. I personally inspected the training grounds, changed the patrol rotations, increased security around the family estate, and assigned several trusted warriors

who will remain close to Elona while you're there."

"Damon..."

"Please, Aria," He placed his glass on the table. "You know this will also help with her training. She needs to become very familiar with both territories, especially if she's going to grow up understanding where she comes from."

He rose from his chair and stepped closer. My heart immediately began beating faster, betraying me before I could stop it.

His expression softened. "I also want to know what it's like to live together as a family, even if it's only for a short while."

My chest tightened. I hadn't expected him to say that.

The idea was simple. Almost painfully simple. Living together, waking up under the same roof, eating breakfast together, watching Elona train, letting her run through Hawthorne territory with her wolf while Damon and I watched her, having him beside me at night.

The thought should have frightened me. Instead, it made something deep inside me ache.

You want this. Lydia's voice was strangely quiet, almost gentle. He said it's only temporary, so you

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have nothing to fear.

swallowed. I know.

Then say yes.

I looked at Damon. "Are you sure about this?"

A small smile touched his lips. "I've never been more sure about anything."

I lowered my gaze. There were still too many threats surrounding us. The Council. My maternal

house. The enemies we had yet to uncover.

Everything that had happened to us had taught me not to trust happiness too quickly. Every time W

allowed myself to believe we were finally safe, something came along to remind me that peace

was never guaranteed.

But maybe that was exactly why I needed this.

A chance to breathe.

A chance for Elona to have both of her parents around her without worrying about the next attack.

A chance for Damon and me to stop living like two Alphas constantly preparing for war and, even if

only temporarily, simply become a family.

I looked back at Damon. “All right.”

His eyes brightened. “Really?”

I nodded. “We’ll come and stay for a while.”

His smile widened. It was the kind of smile I rarely saw these days, one that reached his eyes and

made him look less like the Alpha carrying the weight of an entire pack and more like the man I

loved.

He stepped closer and pulled me into his arms.

I didn’t resist. I simply rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his

heartbeat beneath my ear. The familiar scent of him surrounded me, and the mate bond warmed

between us, wrapping around my heart like a quiet reassurance.

For a moment, there were no enemies, no Council, no threats, and no battles waiting for us.

There was only Damon, his arms around me, and the possibility of having something I had almost forgotten how to want.

A family.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 375

Aria’s POV

By sunset, Elona and I had moved into Hawthorne territory. Damon had insisted on preparing everything himself. I expected a guest room. Instead, he had arranged an entire set of quarters for

Elona had her own bedroom, a small sitting room filled with books and toys, and a balcony

overlooking the eastern gardens. My room was directly beside hers, and Damon had placed his

room right next to mine.

I stood in the doorway, staring at the arrangement. "You planned this."

Damon leaned against the opposite doorframe. "Obviously."

I glanced at him. "You could have put your room farther away."

His mouth curved. "I could have, but I like having you close."

The mate bond warmed instantly.

Lydia purred. He does know how to make a lady melt. He is so good with words.

You like everything he does.

Not everything.

I raised an eyebrow. Name one thing you don't like.

She went silent. I chuckled lightly.

That night, everything became quiet.

I was lying in bed when I heard Elona moving around in the room next door. I sat up. A few seconds

later came another sound. A soft whimper. I immediately got out of bed.

When I opened her door, she was sitting upright, clutching her blanket. "Mommy."

I crossed the room. "What happened?"

"This room is too big." Her lower lip trembled. "I can't seem to fall asleep."

I sat beside her. "You'll get used to it."

She shook her head. "I want my old room."

I pulled her into my arms. She buried her face against my chest.

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I stroked her hair. "I'll stay with you."

Before I could settle beside her, a voice came from the doorway. "I can help."

Damon stood there. Elona immediately looked up. "Daddy?"

He smiled. "How about I tell you a story?"

Her eyes widened. "What story?"

"A nice story about a wolf hunter."

She grinned. "All right, Daddy."

She immediately eased herself out of my grip. That was my cue. I stood.

"Then I'll leave you two."

Elona grabbed her father's hand and led him to her bed. Damon sat beside her. I walked into the

corridor but didn't return to my room. Instead, I leaned against the wall outside her door.

A few minutes later, I heard Damon's voice. "Once upon a time, there was a wolf hunter who

believed he was the bravest man alive."

Elona giggled. "Was he?"

"No, he was actually terrified of wolves."

She laughed.

Damon continued. "One night, the hunter entered the forest and heard a howl." He lowered his

voice dramatically. "Then another howl answered."

Elona whispered, "What happened? Did the wolves eat him?"

“No, they didn’t.”

“Why?” Elona asked curiously.

“Because the wolves weren’t hunting him.” There was a pause. “They were protecting their family.”

My chest tightened. I listened as Damon continued the story. The wolf hunter eventually discovered that the wolves had been guarding a small pup whose mother had been injured.

Instead of killing them, he helped the wounded wolf and returned the pup to its pack, and from

that day on, he stopped hunting wolves.

A few minutes later, I heard Elona’s breathing even out. Damon remained beside her for another moment. Then the bed creaked softly. The door opened. He stepped into the corridor and gently

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closed it behind him. Then he found me standing there.

His eyebrows rose. “You’ve been listening.”

“I wanted to make sure she slept.”

He smiled. “Of course.”

I looked toward the closed door. “That was a good story.”

“Thank you.” He raised a brow. “Do you want a drink?”

I nodded. “I was actually going to suggest that.”

We ended up in one of the smaller sitting rooms. The fire was low, casting warm light across the walls. Damon poured two drinks and handed one to me. I took a sip.

For several minutes, neither of us spoke.

Damon leaned back. “She really liked the story.”

“I could tell she did.”

He smiled. “I’ve always wanted to be a father.”

I looked at him. He stared into his glass.

“When I was young, I used to imagine what I’d be like as a responsible father.”

I smiled. “You?”

He laughed. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m serious.” His expression softened. “I wanted to be the kind of father who was present. Someone his children could trust. Someone who didn’t make them wonder whether they were loved.”

My smile faded. There was something vulnerable in his voice.

“My father wasn’t around much when I was growing up, and being raised in an Alpha family came with its own expectations.”

He looked at me. “It required strength, discipline, and duty.” He took another sip. “Sometimes I wondered if there was even room for being a normal person.”

I understood that feeling more than I wanted to admit. “That’s why you care so much about Elona.”

“Yes.” He looked toward the hallway. “I want her to know she doesn’t have to earn our love.”

My heart tightened. “You’re doing well.”

His eyes returned to mine. “Really?”

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I nodded. “Yes.”

A small smile appeared. “I am glad.” Then his expression changed. “Am I doing well with you?”

I blinked. “What?”

He set his glass down. “You said I’m doing well as a father, but what about as your mate?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 376

Aria’s POV

My pulse quickened. The room suddenly felt warmer, and the mate bond pulsed between us, warm

and insistent.

Damon rose from his chair and walked toward me slowly.

Lydia lifted her head. He’s getting closer.

I noticed.

I didn’t move. He stopped only a few feet away, his eyes fixed on mine.

“You are not saying anything, Aria.”

He took another step. My heartbeat accelerated as he stopped directly in front of me.

“You are still under evaluation,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

The air between us felt charged. His wolf brushed against the mate bond, and Rhein’s presence

flowed through it, warm and steady.

Damon moved closer. “In that case...” His gaze held mine. “Keep evaluating until I become a good

mate.”

I didn’t know how long we stood there, so close that I could feel every change in his breathing. His eyes never left mine, and neither did mine leave his.

The mate bond pulsed between us, warm and insistent, as though our wolves had already made

the decision our minds were still struggling to accept.

Lydia was unusually quiet. You know what you want.

I swallowed. I do.

Then stop being afraid.

Damon's arms wrapped around me, and the moment our bodies touched, the tension that had

been building between us finally broke.

He kissed me.

There was nothing uncertain about it. It wasn't the desperate kiss of two wolves caught helplessly in the pull of a fated bond. It was a kiss between two people who had chosen each other.

The rest of the night belonged only to us. For once, there were no Council meetings, no threats,

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and no enemies waiting in the shadows. There was only Damon, my mate. The man I had spent so long trying not to love.

When I woke the next morning, sunlight was spilling across the room. For several seconds, I simply stared at the ceiling before I realized something.

I hadn't had any nightmares.

There was no darkness, no screams, and no images of blood and helplessness dragging me awake in the middle of the night.

Lydia stirred. You slept like a child.

I closed my eyes. I did.

You haven't slept like that in a long time.

I turned my head. Damon was still asleep beside me, his breathing slow and steady. I watched him for a moment. There was something almost peaceful about seeing him like this.

The Alpha of the Silvermoon Pack, the man who could command an entire territory with a single word, looked completely different when he slept. He looked handsome and vulnerable.

The thought made my heart race.

Lydia purred. Our mate is a beautiful young man.

I smiled faintly. He is.

Damon's eyes opened, and he caught me staring.

"Good morning."

I immediately looked away. "Morning."

A smile tugged at his lips. "You were staring."

"I wasn't," I lied.

"Yes, you were," he argued.

I sighed. "You're insufferable."

"Yet you stayed right here in my bed."

Heat rushed to my face. He laughed softly.

I reached for a pillow and pushed it against his chest. "Get out of bed and freshen up."

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"Why? It's still quite early."

"Early?" I glanced at the wall clock. "It's already nine a.m., and I'm going to get Elona ready. Don't forget you told her yesterday that training starts at ten."

That wiped the teasing expression from his face. He sat up and climbed out of bed.

“That’s right. I wouldn’t want to disappoint my little girl by not keeping my word, would (?”

I shook my head, unable to wipe the smile from my face as I watched him disappear into the

bathroom to freshen up.

At exactly ten a.m., Elona and I were already at the training grounds waiting for Damon. The

moment she spotted him, she immediately ran toward him.

“Daddy!”

Damon crouched just before she reached him. “Are you ready?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I’m ready!”

Damon glanced at me. “She’s energetic.”

“She’s been waiting for you since sunrise.”

Elona tugged at his hand. “Come on.”

Damon laughed. “All right. Let’s start.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 377

Aria’s POV

Clan

I stayed near the edge of the training field, watching them. I had expected him to be strict. Instead,

he was patient. But he wasn’t soft. There was a difference.

“Do it again,” he told Elona after she lost her balance...

She frowned. "I got it, Daddy."

"You almost did." He smiled. "Now do it again."

Elona sighed dramatically, and I covered my mouth to hide my smile.

Lydia was amused too.

He is teaching her properly.

Yes.

He doesn't underestimate her.

That was exactly what impressed me. Damon never treated Elona like she was fragile. He adjusted the training to suit her age and abilities, but he never lowered his expectations simply

because she was young.

They continued training for a while before Damon decided it was time to see how well Elona's wolf would perform in a race. With his guidance, Elona shifted into her wolf.

The change was still young and imperfect. A small silver wolf appeared where the child had been,

her movements awkward for only a second before she found her balance.

My heart swelled.

Damon shifted beside her. His silver-gray wolf was massive compared to Elona, but he lowered his

body so she wouldn't feel intimidated.

Elona's little wolf yipped excitedly.

Rhein answered with a deep, affectionate rumble.

Lydia stirred inside me.

Look at them. Father and daughter. Look how beautiful they are.

I smiled.

The two wolves raced across the field. Damon deliberately slowed down. Every time Elona

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stumbled, he waited. Every time she fell behind, he stopped and gave her time to catch up.

He never let her believe she wasn't capable.

And when she finally managed to keep pace with him for several seconds, Damon lifted his head and let out a proud howl.

Elona answered with one of her own.

The sound echoed through the training grounds.

I stood there watching them, my chest aching with happiness. Perhaps this was what happiness

truly felt like. Quiet. Warm. Safe.

It was the kind of feeling I had almost forgotten existed.

When they finally shifted back, Elona threw her arms around his neck.

"I love training with you, Daddy."

Damon hugged her tightly. "I love training with you too."

I watched them quietly.

Lydia's voice softened. She trusts him absolutely.

I nodded. She does.

As I watched Damon carry Elona back toward the house, laughing as she excitedly described everything she had learned, I realized something.

He had gradually become a father she could rely on.

Noah arrived just after lunch. Elona was sleeping in her room, Damon was in his study, while I was

at the lounge at the back of the house, resting when one of the guards came and informed me that

he was waiting.

When I walked into the sitting room, Noah was standing near the window, his hands behind his

back. He turned when he heard me. "Aria."

"Noah, how did you know I was here?"

"I heard from Joshua." He covered the distance between us. "I came with something important."

That immediately caught my attention. "What is it?"

He reached into his coat and pulled out a thin folder. "I found something on the old Council's

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elders."

My eyes narrowed. "Something useful?"

"Very useful."

Caur

He handed me the folder. I opened it. The first page contained financial records. The second contained names. By the third page, I understood exactly what I was holding. My pulse/quickered.

They were records of payments made through intermediaries, secret agreements, resource deals that had never been disclosed to the Council. There was enough here to make several of the

Council members very uncomfortable.

I looked up. "Where did you get this?"

“I got it from a source that prefers to remain anonymous.”

“How reliable is this source?”

“Completely reliable.”

I flipped through another page. “I could use this as leverage in the negotiations.”

Noah smiled. “That’s why I brought it to you.”

I closed the folder. “Noah, thank you.”

He smiled faintly. “I knew you’d find it useful.”

“I do.” I studied him. “And I want to repay you.”

His expression changed. “You don’t have to.”

“I do.” I placed the folder on the table. “You’ve helped me repeatedly. If you need resources, I can provide them. Access to our supply network, trade agreements...”

“No.” He shook his head, stopping me. “I don’t want any of that.”

I frowned. “Then what do you want?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 378

ia’s POV

He stepped closer. “You.”

The room went completely silent.

Lydia’s ears immediately flattened inside my mind. No, he is still being insistent.

I swallowed. “Noah.”

Clair

“I told you I wouldn’t give up, and I meant it.” His eyes remained fixed on mine. “I don’t want your resources. I don’t want political influence. I don’t want favors.” His voice softened. “I want a chance with you. I want to be with you forever.”

My heart tightened. I looked away. “Noah, I’ve already made my decision.”

Something flickered across his face. Pain. He tried to hide it, but I saw it. “You really love him.”

The question was so quiet that it almost hurt. I hesitated. Then I answered honestly. “Yes, I do.”

His jaw tightened. “But you’re not formally bonded with him, Aria.”

My expression hardened. “Noah.”

“I’m not asking you to leave him. I’m asking you not to close the door.” He stepped closer. “As long as you and Damon aren’t formally bonded, I still have a chance.”

My heart sank. “Noah, that’s not how this works.”

“It is for me.”

“You can’t build your life around waiting for me to change my mind.”

“I can.” He gave a humorless smile. “I want to do that.”

Lydia growled. He is very stubborn. Make him leave, Aria.

I almost wished it were that simple.

I stared at Noah. “Why? Why are you so fixated on me?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he looked toward the window. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter. “Because I’ve tried to love someone else.”

My chest tightened.

He continued. “Before you, I tried to convince myself I could find someone who would make me

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feel the way you do.” He gave a small laugh. “It never worked.”

remained silent.

“I dated women. I allowed people to get close. I tried to build something with them because I

thought eventually the emptiness would disappear.” His eyes met mine. “It didn’t.”

Clunt

He looked down. “At first, I blamed them. I thought they weren’t right for me.” His fingers curled.

“Then I realized the problem wasn’t them.”

I already knew what he was going to say.

“It was me.” His voice was almost a whisper. “I couldn’t love them.”

Something inside me ached. “Noah...”

“I tried.” He looked at me again. “I really did.” His eyes were filled with an honesty that made it difficult to look away. “Then you came into my life, and suddenly I understood what I’d been

missing.”

I swallowed. “That’s not enough reason to hold on to someone who has made it clear through her

actions that she has chosen another person.”

“I know.” He sighed.

His answer surprised me. “Then why are you still doing this?”

“Because I haven’t stopped loving you. I don’t know how to stop, Aria. I have tried, Aria, but I just

can’t. I am not like Ryder.”

I closed my eyes for a moment.

Lydia was restless. You feel sorry for him.

I do.

Don’t confuse pity with love, Aria.

I opened my eyes. I'm not.

But the truth was, Noah's words affected me. It was not enough to change my decision, but enough to hurt. I thought about everything he had done for me. How he was there for Elona and

me when no one else was. It hurt even more.

"I care about you," I said.

His eyes brightened.

"But... But I have chosen Damon."

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Clan

The light disappeared. Noah's jaw tightened. "I'll respect that choice when it's final." He held my gaze. "You said it yourself. You're not formally bonded."

He took a breath. "Until then, I'm not giving up."

Before I could respond, the door opened. Damon walked into the room. His gaze immediately moved from me to Noah. I felt the shift in the air before either man spoke.

Rhein surged through the mate bond.

Lydia growled. He's angry.

Damon's eyes settled on me. For one brief second, his expression softened. Then he looked at

Noah.

"What are you doing here?"

Noah didn't move. "I am talking to Aria."

"I can see that."

Damon walked toward us. His Alpha aura filled the room. Noah's shoulders stiffened. The tension between the two Alpha wolves was immediate.

Rhein's growl vibrated through the mate bond. She's mine.

My heart jumped. I touched Damon's arm. "Damon."

He looked at me. Something in my expression must have told him I was unsettled. His gaze softened. Then he looked back at Noah. "Did you get what you came for?"

Noah's eyes narrowed. "I came to deliver a message."

Damon didn't look away from Noah. "I am assuming you are done, considering you were discussing something else."

Noah raised a brow. "You are right about that. I was done with delivering my message." He looked directly at me. "Then I decided it wouldn't be okay to leave without reiterating to Aria how I feel."

Damon went completely still. The room seemed to drop several degrees.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 379

Aria's POV

Noah's voice remained calm. "I told her that as long as she isn't formally bonded to you, I won't give up on her."

Damon's eyes flashed.

Rhein roared. His Alpha aura surged so hard that I felt it press against my skin.

"Damon."

He stepped closer to me. His hand settled around my waist. The possessive gesture sent a pulse through the mate bond.

Lydia purred despite herself. That's how I expect my man to act.

I almost rolled my eyes.

Damon held Noah's gaze. "It's time to leave."

Noah's expression hardened. "That's not your decision."

“It is when you walk into my territory and tell my mate you’re waiting for an opportunity to take her

from me.”

“I’m not taking anything.” Noah’s gaze moved to me. “I’m waiting for her choice.”

Damon’s arm tightened around my waist. “She’s already chosen.”

I looked up at him. His eyes met mine. There was something raw in them. It was a mix of fear,

possessiveness, and love.

I placed my hand over his. “I have.”

Noah stared at us. For several seconds, nobody spoke. Then Noah nodded slowly. “I heard you.”

Damon’s expression remained hard. “Good.”

Noah picked up his coat. He paused at the door. “Aria.”

I looked at him.

“I’m not going to pretend this doesn’t hurt, but I’ll leave.” He glanced at Damon. “For now.”

Damon’s eyes narrowed.

Noah opened the door. Then he stopped. “You know where to find me if you change your mind.”

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The door closed behind him. Silence returned.

exhaled slowly. Damon didn’t release me.

“I heard you say you have chosen me.” He smiled.

I looked at him. "Yeah, but at that moment, I was conflicted."

His eyes searched mine. "About him?"

I sighed. "About hurting him."

His jaw relaxed slightly. "Aria. You don't have to carry his feelings for him."

I looked away from him. "I know."

Clar

"No, you don't." His fingers gently touched my cheek. "You've spent so much of your life trying to protect everyone around you that sometimes you forget you are allowed to choose what makes you happy."

My heart clenched. "What if choosing you hurts someone else?"

"Then I'm sorry for them." He leaned closer. "But I'm not sorry for loving you."

The mate bond pulsed between us. Lydia went completely quiet. Then she whispered, He's right.

I swallowed.

Damon's forehead touched mine. "I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not letting someone else convince you that what we have isn't real."

My fingers tightened around his shirt. I closed my eyes. "It is real."

His arms tightened around me. "Exactly. Allow me to prove that to you."

I opened my eyes. Our gazes locked.

Damon kissed me before I could say another word. His hands settled around my waist as he pulled me closer, and the mate bond flared between us.

I felt his emotions before he spoke. He seemed as though he was afraid of losing me.

"Damon."

He kissed me again. I smiled against his lips. "You don't have to convince me."

He pulled back slightly. His eyes searched mine. "You were wavering."

"No." I shook my head. "I wasn't. I was worried about Noah. That's different."

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Clar

His jaw tightened. I touched his cheek. "I wasn't questioning my choice."

His expression softened. "You're sure?"

I nodded. "I'm sure."

Lydia stirred beneath my skin. Tell him he is the only one for us.

I looked directly into Damon's eyes. "I chose you."

Something inside him seemed to loosen. Rhein's presence washed through the mate bond, warm

and relieved.

Lydia purred in response.

Damon rested his forehead against mine. "You have no idea how much I needed to hear you say

that directly to me."

His thumb brushed my cheek. "I've spent too long wondering whether I would lose you."

I smiled. "You won't."

He kissed me again. This time, there was no desperation, only love.

I wrapped my arms around him and let myself sink into the warmth of the bond. I had been afraid for so long. Afraid of choosing wrong. Afraid of trusting someone. Afraid that loving Damon would

make me vulnerable.

But standing there in his arms, I realized something. Being vulnerable wasn't the same as being weak. Sometimes it meant allowing someone to see the parts of you that the rest of the world

never got to touch.

Damon saw mine, and I saw his.

Night soon came, and we shared a passionate time together, wrapped in the warmth of our bond and the certainty that neither of us was willing to walk away.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 380

Aria's POV

The next morning, I woke with Damon's arm wrapped securely around me. For a moment, I simply

lay there, listening to his slow, even breathing.

There was something comforting about waking up like this. No fear. No tension. Just warmth and the steady presence of the man beside me.

Lydia was content. We love it here. It feels like home.

I smiled faintly.

Damon stirred beside me, and moments later, his eyes opened. He looked at me for several seconds before a small smile tugged at his lips.

"I meant what I said yesterday."

I raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"I'm not waiting anymore."

My heart skipped. "What do you mean?"

He reached toward the nightstand. When he turned back, there was a small velvet box in his hand.

I stared at it, my breath catching. "Damon."

He opened the box. A ring rested inside. It was elegant without being overly elaborate, a silver band surrounding a deep stone that caught the morning light beautifully.

I stared at it for several seconds before looking back at him. "You bought this?"

“I’ve had it for a while.”

My eyes widened slightly.

“I hoped I’d get the chance to finally give it to you.”

He took my hand, his fingers warm against mine.

“I know we’re not formally bonded yet.”

I swallowed.

“But I don’t want anyone questioning where you stand.” His eyes held mine, his expression serious. “I want everyone to know you’re my mate.”

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My chest tightened. “Damon...”

want you to wear this.” He lifted the ring from the box. “Not because I own you.” His voice softened. “But because we have chosen each other.”

The words settled somewhere deep inside me.

Lydia practically purred. Wear it.

I smiled. You’re not even pretending to think about it.

Why would I?

I looked back at Damon. “What happens if I say yes?”

His eyes softened. “You become impossible to get rid of.”

I laughed softly. “I thought you had already decided that.”

“I did.” He took my hand again. “So, what do you say? Will you marry me?”

I looked down at the ring.

In the past, a ring like this would have felt like a trap, something that bound me to a man who treated me as though I didn’t matter. A man who had controlled me whenever he pleased.

A man who had once been so different from the person in front of me now.

Damon had changed. Not because I had forced him to, but because he had chosen to become

someone better.

I smiled. This felt different. This wasn't someone deciding my future for me. It wasn't a cage disguised as a promise. It was a declaration, a choice we were making together.

I looked up at Damon. His eyes were fixed on me, and there was a nervousness in them that I had

never seen before.

The Alpha of the Silvermoon Pack, the man who could command an entire pack with a single word, was waiting for my answer as though it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

My lips curved into a smile. "Yes, I will marry you... again."

His expression changed instantly. Relief swept through his features before happiness took its place. He slid the ring onto my finger, his thumb lingering against my knuckle as though he needed to make sure this was real.

The moment the ring settled into place, the mate bond between us pulsed. Warmth spread through my chest, and somewhere deep inside me, Lydia stirred happily.

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He is ours.

I smiled wider. Yes, Lydia. He is.

Damon lifted my hand and pressed a kiss against my knuckles.

"You're really going to marry me."

I laughed softly. "You sound surprised."

“I am.” His eyes softened. “I have spent so long fighting for you that I almost forgot there could be a day when I didn’t have to.”

My heart squeezed. I reached up and touched his cheek. “You won’t have to fight for me anymore.

His hand covered mine.

“Good,” he murmured. “Because I intend to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 381

Aria’s POV

Damon leaned closer and pulled me into his embrace. We stayed like that for a few moments, simply enjoying the quiet certainty of what we had chosen.

We left Silvermoon Pack later that day. Damon drove while I sat beside him, my fingers resting on

the ring he had given me.

Elona was in the back seat, practically vibrating with excitement. We had broken the news to her earlier. Now here she was, talking about the wedding for the entire journey home.

“What color will my dress be?”

“I don’t know yet,” I replied.

“It has to be pretty, Mommy.”

Damon glanced at her through the rearview mirror. “Everything you wear is pretty.”

Elona giggled. “You are right about that, Daddy.”

She turned toward me. “Mama, can I have flowers in my hair?”

I laughed. “We’ll see.”

Elona leaned forward between the seats. “Also, I want to walk down the aisle with you.”

My heart softened. “Walk down the aisle with me?”

She nodded. “Yes, at the wedding.”

The word still felt strange in my mind. Wedding. I looked down at the ring again.

Lydia practically purred. You’re very happy.

I smiled.

By the time we reached Grayson territory, Elona was already waiting impatiently to tell everyone. The moment we entered the old Grayson estate, she ran ahead.

“Grandfather!”

Ronan was in his study. Seeing him healthy and surrounded by familiar faces still felt like a blessing I never took for granted.

Damon and I entered together. Ronan’s gaze immediately dropped to my hand. His eyes widened.

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“So,” he said slowly. “You accepted.”

smiled. “I did.” I could tell he was already aware something like this was going to happen. Damon

must have told him first before asking me.

Damon reached for my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. Ronan’s expression softened.

“I’m happy for you, Aria.”

Those simple words touched something inside me. “Thank you, Dad.”

He looked at Damon. “And you too, Damon.”

Damon nodded respectfully. Elona climbed onto the edge of the bed. "We're having a wedding in a

month!"

Ronan looked at her. "A month?"

She nodded. "Mama and Daddy are getting married in a month."

His gaze returned to me. His eyebrows rose. "One month?"

I nodded. "We thought it would be enough time."

He smiled. "Then I had better start preparing. I'll have to dig out the silverware your mother left

behind."

I blinked. "The silverware?"

"Of course." He looked almost offended that I would question it. "Your mother kept it for special occasions. I think this is the best time to use it."

I smiled through the emotion gathering in my chest. "Thank you, Dad."

Joshua was waiting in the sitting room when we joined everyone later.

He looked at my hand and grinned. "So it's official."

I lifted my hand. "It's official."

He laughed. "Finally."

I narrowed my eyes. "Finally?"

"You two have been circling each other forever these past few months."

Damon looked at him. "I have really been patient. Your sister was quite difficult."

Lydia stirred. He's lucky he's our mate.

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I fought a smile. Very lucky.

Clar

Joshua glanced between the both of us. "I must say I like the man you have become, Damon. You have changed tremendously." He leaned close to Damon. "You were the one I was rooting for when I found out she was going to choose one of three Alphas."

I pointed at him. "Don't encourage him."

Joshua raised both hands. "Fine. I'll stay out of it." He paused, then looked at me. "But I'll keep an eye out during my southern patrols for flowers."

I blinked. "Flowers?"

"Yes. Flowers for the wedding." He smiled. "There are some wildflowers that bloom around the southern border this time of year. If I find anything suitable, I'll bring them back."

My chest warmed. "You don't have to."

"I know." His smile softened. "But I want to."

I looked at my brother, unable to stop the smile spreading across my face. "Thank you."

He nodded. "Anything for my little sister."

The news spread through Grayson territory quickly. Within hours, everyone knew. Aria Grayson and Damon Hawthorne were getting married. The wedding would take place one month later in the courtyard of the old Grayson estate.

The courtyard had always held a strange kind of beauty. Ancient stone walls surrounded it, covered in climbing vines and greenery. Old trees stretched their branches over the open space, and the fountain at the center had stood there for generations.

Now, everyone began transforming it. Pack members cleared the grounds. Others repaired the old stone paths and trimmed the overgrown vines. Tables were planned, decorations discussed, and arrangements made between the Grayson and Silvermoon packs.

The atmosphere throughout the territory changed. There was excitement everywhere.

Everyone is happy, Lydia said.

They are. We all are. I smiled.

Damon and I each began making our own arrangements.

Everything was moving according to plan, and for once, I allowed myself to believe that nothing

could take this happiness away from us.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 382

Aria's POV

The wedding preparations had taken over every corner of the old Grayson estate, but there was one part I wanted to do myself. My daughter's flowers.

Elona sat beside me on the floor of my room, her little legs crossed beneath her as she carefully sorted through the flowers scattered between us.

"These ones are pretty. They should go on your wreath," she said, holding up a cluster of small

white flowers.

I smiled and added them to the growing arrangement.

"What about these?" I asked, picking out some more flowers.

She immediately shook her head. "No. Those are for the basket."

I laughed. "You're very particular."

"I have to be, Mommy. It's your wedding."

Her tiny voice carried so much seriousness that I couldn't help smiling. "You're right."

She leaned closer, examining the wreath again. I had never imagined I would have moments like this. After everything I had survived, sitting on the floor with my daughter while we prepared flowers for my wedding felt almost unreal.

After we finished the wreath, we moved on to the flower basket. Elona took her responsibility very seriously, arranging each flower before stepping back to inspect her work.

Then came the flower-girl dress. She had already chosen it days ago, but she insisted on trying it on again. She twirled in front of the mirror, the skirt lifting around her little legs.

"How do I look, Mommy?"

“You look very beautiful, my princess.”

She beamed. “I will walk behind you and I’ll throw the flowers?” She looked thoughtful for a

moment. “Then everyone will look at me.”

I laughed. “They probably will.”

She seemed pleased with that answer. Then her expression suddenly changed.

“Mommy?”

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I raised my eyebrows. “Hmm?”

“Can I have a little brother?”

My hands stilled. I looked at her through the mirror. “A little brother?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. I want a brother.”

A laugh escaped me. “Why?”

“So I can teach him things.”

She climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged. “And I want him to play with me.”

I sat beside her. “You’re going to have to ask your father about that.”

Her eyes widened. “Can Daddy make a baby?”

I nearly choked. “E-Elona!”

She giggled. “What?”

I covered my face with my hands. Lydia was practically howling inside my head. She is very direct.

I lowered my hands and looked at my daughter. “How about we just focus on the wedding for

now?”

She sighed dramatically. “Fine.” Then she smiled. “But I still want a little brother.”

I kissed her forehead. “We’ll see about that.”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “Okay.”

The room gradually grew quiet. The excitement of the day had finally caught up with both of us.

We lay down side by side, and I pulled the blankets over us. Elona curled against me, her tiny hand

resting on my arm.

I smiled and kissed the top of her head. Within minutes, her breathing evened out. I stared at her

for a while, listening to the soft rhythm of her heartbeat. Then my own eyes grew heavy. I fell

asleep beside her.

The dream began with blood. It always did.

I stood in the middle of a village I didn’t recognize. Screams filled the air. Bodies lay scattered

across the ground. The scent of blood was so strong it burned through my nose. I looked down at

my hands. They were covered in crimson.

“No.”

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Unclaimed Prizes Inside

Tap to claim your bonus before it’s gone

“Stay away from me!”

I tried to move toward her. “I won’t hurt you!”

But my body wouldn't listen. My fingers curled into claws. My teeth sharpened. Something cold spread through my veins. I looked at my reflection in a shattered window. My eyes were no longer

mine. They glowed crimson. Pale skin stretched across a face I barely recognized.

I have become a complete vampire.

"No..." I shook my head. I wasn't one of them. I couldn't be.

But then hunger tore through me. It was savage and primal. I lunged.

The dream shifted. I was in another village. There were more bloodied bodies. Everywhere I went

people died. I tried to stop myself. I couldn't. I screamed until my throat burned.

Aria. Lydia's voice sounded distant. Wake up.

I couldn't. The darkness swallowed me again.

I saw myself standing over another body. Blood dripped from my mouth. I looked down in horror.

"What have I done?"

A voice whispered behind me. "You belong to us now."

I spun around. No one was there. Then the screaming started again. I ran. But no matter where I

went, the blood followed. I tried to escape it. I couldn't. I was trapped inside the nightmare.

Aria, wake up! Lydia's voice became louder. You need to wake up now!

I gasped. My eyes flew open. But the nightmare hadn't ended. I was standing, cold floor beneath

my bare feet, darkness surrounding me. My heart was hammering violently against my ribs. For

one confused second, I didn't understand where I was.

Then I heard a sound. A frightened, strangled cry.

It was Elona. She was awake. Her eyes were wide with terror, and my hand was around her throat.

My blood turned to ice.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 383

Aria's POV

Elona struggled beneath my hand. "Mommy..."

The word shattered me. I released her instantly. She sucked in a desperate breath and burst into

tears.

I stumbled backward. "No, no, no..."

My hands shook violently. I stared at them as though they belonged to someone else. I hadn't been dreaming. It had been real. I had been standing beside my daughter's bed. My hand had been around her throat. I had done it myself.

The door slammed open.

"Aria!"

Damon rushed inside. His Alpha presence exploded through the room, and Rhein surged forward beneath his skin. Damon's gaze immediately landed on Elona. Then on me.

"What happened?"

Elona cried harder. I couldn't answer. I backed away until my shoulders hit the wall.

Damon rushed to the bed and scooped her into his arms. "Elona."

She buried her face against his chest. "Mommy hurt me."

The words nearly stopped my heart.

Damon's face tightened, but he didn't look at me with hatred. He looked terrified. He lowered his

gaze and soothed Elona.

“I am so sorry, baby... I am so sorry, my child.”

Elona shook against him, still sobbing.

I pressed myself farther into the corner. My entire body was trembling.

“I didn’t...” My voice broke. “I didn’t mean to.”

Damon looked at me. I couldn’t bear the question in his eyes.

“I thought it was a dream.”

He didn’t speak. I looked down at my hands again. The same hands that had held my daughter. My breathing became ragged.

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“I thought it was only a dream.”

Lydia was silent. She also had no answer, and that frightened me more than anything.

Clar

I slid down the wall, shaking uncontrollably. I had spent so long believing the nightmares were only nightmares. I had never imagined they had become real.

I barely slept after what happened. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Elona beneath my hand. saw the fear in her eyes. I heard her tiny voice calling me Mommy, and every time the memory

returned, my stomach twisted.

By morning, I had already made my decision. Elona couldn’t stay with me, not until I knew what was happening to me.

Damon seemed to reach the same conclusion. He came into my room shortly after sunrise, his

face drawn from a sleepless night.

“Aria.”

I looked at him from where I sat beside the window. "I can't have her here. I almost killed her."

"You didn't." He walked toward me, but stopped several feet away. That distance hurt more than I

expected.

"Elona needs somewhere safe for a few days," he said quietly. "I'll send her to stay with your father."

I nodded. "All right, but please don't tell them."

Damon stared at me for several seconds before nodding. "All right. They won't know."

I lowered my gaze. "Thank you."

Later that morning, Elona stood in front of me with her little bag. She looked completely different

from the frightened child I'd seen hours earlier. She was still cautious around me, but she wasn't

crying anymore. That somehow made me feel worse.

She reached for my hand. I hesitated before taking hers.

"Mommy? Are you still sick?"

My throat tightened. "A little."

"Are you going to get better?"

I forced a smile. "Yes, I will."

She looked at me suspiciously. "You promise?"

I nodded, my eyes clouding with unshed tears. "I promise."

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She wrapped her arms around my waist. I froze. Then I slowly hugged her back. Her warmth seeped into me.

For one horrible second, I remembered my fingers around her throat. I almost pulled away, but I couldn't. I couldn't let the nightmare take this from me too.

"I love you, Mommy."

My eyes burned. "I love you too."

She pulled back and looked toward Damon. "Are you coming with me to Grandpa's place?"

Damon nodded. "Yes, I'll take you there. You will stay with Grandpa for a while until Mum gets

better."

She nodded. Then she looked at me again. "Don't be sad, Mum."

The words broke something inside me. "I'm not."

She frowned. "You are."

I swallowed hard. "Maybe a little."

She reached up and touched my cheek. "Don't worry, everything will be all right."

She kissed my cheek before turning toward Damon. He took her hand. I watched them walk away. When the door closed behind them, the room became unbearably quiet. I stared at the empty space where my daughter had been standing.

That night, Damon returned. I heard his footsteps before he entered. The mate bond reacted immediately. Warmth spread through my chest.

I shut my eyes. No. I couldn't do this.

The door opened.

"Aria?"

I turned away. "I need to be alone."

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 384

Aria's POV

Damon stopped. "Why?"

"Just... go, please." I begged.

He didn't leave. Instead, I heard him close the door behind him.

I stood. "You shouldn't be here."

"I'm not leaving you alone."

I backed away when he stepped closer. He stopped immediately. Something flashed across his

face. It looked like pain.

"Are you afraid of me?"

I looked away. "No. I'm afraid of myself."

He said nothing. I laughed bitterly. "I woke up with my hand around Elona's throat."

"You were asleep. You didn't know what you were doing."

"That doesn't change what happened." My voice broke. "I tried to kill her, Damon."

He moved closer. I immediately retreated. "Don't come any closer. I could hurt you too."

He stopped. "You won't."

"You don't know that. You don't know what I'm becoming." I pressed my hands against my

temples. "I dreamed I was a vampire again. I was killing people. Everywhere I went, there was

blood."

Damon's expression hardened. "We will find a solution to this together."

"What if there is no solution?"

He clenched his fists. "There is. There has to be."

"What if this monster is just who I am now?"

He shook his head. "You're not a monster."

I laughed bitterly. "Then what am I?"

"You are my mate, Aria." His answer came without hesitation.

I looked at him. He stepped forward slowly, giving me enough time to move away. I didn't. His

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hand reached for mine. The moment our fingers touched, the mate bond surged. Warmth rushed

through my body. Rhein's presence brushed against Lydia.

She is afraid.

I know, Lydia replied.

Damon's thumb moved gently over my knuckles. "We'll figure this out together."

I shook my head. "You keep saying that."

"Because it's true." His gaze held mine. "I won't give up on you, Aria."

My eyes filled with tears. "Damon..." I looked down. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You don't have to know yet." His voice softened. "But we will get to the root of this."

I closed my eyes. For a moment, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to let him hold me. I wanted to pretend that tomorrow would be normal. But all I could see was Elona's frightened face.

"I want to call off the wedding."

"No." Damon's answer came so firmly that I almost flinched. "We're not calling off the wedding."

My chest tightened. "Damon, I just told you that I'm afraid I could hurt you."

"And I just told you that I'm not abandoning you because you're afraid."

"That's not your decision!"

His eyes flashed with Alpha authority. “And it’s not yours alone either.” The force behind his words

made my wolf stir uneasily.

He’s angry.

So am I.

I pushed away from him. “You just don’t understand how I feel.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I don’t know how!” I wiped furiously at the tears gathering in my eyes. “How am I supposed to

explain what it feels like to be terrified of your own hands? To wake up wondering whether you’ve hurt someone? To look at the person you love and wonder if you’re going to become the thing that

kills them?”

His expression softened. But I was too frightened to accept the sympathy in his eyes.

“You keep telling me everything will be fine because you need to believe it.”

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Clair

“Because I do believe it.”

“But I don’t!” The words echoed through the room. I shook my head. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Aria.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

He stared at me.

“Please.” Something in my voice must have reached him because he stopped. I turned away. “I

don't want to keep arguing."

He remained silent for several seconds. Then I heard his footsteps retreat. The door closed. I

stood there staring at it. My heart hurt.

Lydia was quiet for a while. Then she spoke softly. You don't actually want him gone.

I closed my eyes. No.

Then why push him away?

Because I'm afraid. I am afraid of what I'll do to him.

I didn't expect Noah to come to Grayson territory. But by afternoon, I heard a familiar voice outside

my room.

"Is your Alpha in her room?"

I froze. It was Noah. A few seconds later, there was a knock. I opened the door. He stood there,

concern written across his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard you weren't well."

"I'm fine." I forced a smile. "I'm just tired."

"You don't look fine." Noah studied me. "Did something happen?"

I looked away. "No."

He lowered his voice. "Did Damon do something?"

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 385

Aria's POV

My head snapped toward him. “No.”

Clamp

The answer came too quickly. Noah noticed. His expression became serious. “You don’t have to

defend him to me.”

“That’s not what I am doing.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong, Aria. You look like you are about to fall apart.”

I couldn’t. How could I tell him that I had nearly strangled my daughter in my sleep? How could I explain the nightmares? The blood? The fear that I was becoming something I didn’t recognize?

So I said the only thing I could. “I’m just overwhelmed.”

Noah stared at me. “It’s because of the wedding, isn’t it?”

I was quiet.

Then he sighed. “Whatever happened between you and Damon, you don’t have to face it alone,

Aria.”

“There is nothing between us. I’m just tired.”

He didn’t believe me. But he didn’t push. Instead, he said, “I just want you to know that whatever

happens, I’m on your side.”

I looked at him. “Noah...”

“I’m serious.” His gaze held mine. “If Damon has hurt you, if something has gone wrong, if you need somewhere to go, I’ll help you.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then make me understand.”

My heart twisted. For a moment, I wanted to tell him everything. But I couldn’t tell him how I

I I

almost killed my child.

“I’m handling it.”

Noah nodded slowly. “All right.” He paused. “But remember what I said. You don’t have to fight alone.”

I managed a small smile. “Thank you.”

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Clem

We continued talking. Maybe for a bit too long. Because when the door opened again, Damon was standing there. His expression immediately hardened when he saw Noah.

“What are you doing here?”

Noah turned. “I heard Aria was unwell, and I decided to come.”

Damon’s eyes flicked toward me. “I see. How long have you been here in her room?”

I sighed. “Damon...”

Noah answered for me. “Long enough to make sure she’s okay.”

Damon’s jaw clenched. “She’s my mate. There should be boundaries. You have no reason to be in

her room for this long.”

“She’s my friend, and you are not married to her yet to be making such ridiculous statements.”

The room suddenly felt too small. I stepped between them. “Stop.”

Neither moved. Damon’s Alpha aura pressed against the room. Noah’s eyes sharpened, but he didn’t back down. I could feel Lydia becoming restless.

There is too much Alpha energy.

I know.

Damon finally looked at me. "You need to rest."

"I know."

"Tell him to leave."

Noah scoffed. "She can decide that herself."

Damon's eyes narrowed. "And she has."

I looked at Noah. He seemed to understand. He gave me a small nod. "I'll go."

He turned toward the door, then stopped beside Damon. His voice dropped. "But I'm warning you."

Damon stared at him. "If you still can't make Aria happy by the time that wedding comes around, I'll take her away from you."

My heart stopped. "Noah."

He looked back at me. "I mean it."

Damon stepped forward, his expression cold. "You won't get the chance."

Noah smiled faintly. "Then make sure you give her a reason to stay."

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The tension between them became suffocating. Finally, Noah walked away.

I waited until my breathing had steadied before leaving my room.

It took more effort than it should have.

My hands were still trembling, and there was a strange pressure beneath my ribs, as though

something inside me was warning me not to take another step.

Lydia remained close to the surface, restless and alert, sensing the turmoil I was trying so desperately to hide.

You need to stop running from him, Aria, she said quietly. He is your mate.

I almost laughed bitterly.

Running was easier than admitting how terrified I was. Damon had always been the person I could

lean on when everything else fell apart. But this was different.

After all that had happened, I couldn't shake the fear that something inside me had changed permanently after I drank Viktor's blood. The nightmares wouldn't stop coming.

What if I became like Viktor?

What if one day I looked at Damon, Elona, my father, the people I loved, and saw nothing but

enemies?

The thought made my stomach twist.

I found Damon in the guest room. He was standing near the window with his back to me, his broad

shoulders tense as he stared into the darkness beyond the glass.

The moment I entered, he turned, his eyes locking onto mine as though he had been waiting.

"Aria?"

I closed the door behind me. "We need to talk."

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 386

Aria's POV

Clau

His expression changed instantly. He crossed the room toward me, his Alpha aura settling around

us like a protective shield.

“Are you okay?”

I forced myself to meet his eyes. There was so much trust in them. That made this harder.

“I’ve been thinking about what happened with Viktor.” I drew in a shaky breath before he could answer. “I don’t mean the attack. I mean the curse he left behind before he died.”

I lowered my gaze, my voice dropping to something smaller than I wanted it to be. “I am afraid,

Damon.”

Damon reached for my hand, but I pulled it back. He stopped immediately, and I hated myself for doing that. I hated the flicker of hurt he tried to hide, but I needed to say everything before I lost

my courage.

“I’m afraid I’m going to become like him.”

His face hardened. “Aria.”

I cut him off before he could continue. “What if this curse changes me, Damon? What if I keep

having these nightmares and end up killing everyone I love one day?”

“It won’t happen.”

“You don’t know that.” I shook my head, my arms wrapping around myself as if I could hold the fear

Damon stared at me for a moment before stepping closer again. “Aria.”

I stepped back. That stopped him, and I held his gaze even as my chest ached with the weight of

“I had a premonition, Damon. It was very strong and clear. I’m never going to be free of Viktor’s curse. It’s in my blood. In my bones. And if we go through with the marriage...”

“Aria...”

“No. Listen.” I stepped closer, fists clenched at my sides. “You’re the Alpha of Silvermoon. You have responsibilities. You have a legacy. People who depend on you. No one knows what happens when a wolf and a vampire... when we... fully bind. The consequences could be catastrophic. I don’t

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want to ruin you.”

Damon was in front of me in two steps, one hand sliding to the side of my neck, his thumb brushing my jaw. The contact sent a pulse of warmth straight through the mate bond, and Lydia

leaned into it hard.

Do you feel that? she whispered. That’s real, not the curse. Damon is real.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Damon said, his voice low and absolute.

“I am not afraid of the blood in your veins, or of Viktor’s leftover poison, or of whatever storm you think you’re carrying. Whatever comes, we face it together. Do you understand me?”

I almost smiled through my tears. Damon pulled me against his chest, and I buried my face there, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

His scent wrapped around me, familiar and comforting, and the mate bond responded immediately, warmth spreading through my chest and down my limbs. The pressure I had been feeling inside me eased.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I whispered.

“You won’t. I promise.”

My arms tightened around him, holding on like the words might slip away if I let go.

“And our marriage...” Damon pulled back enough to look into my eyes. “I am not reconsidering it.”

“Damon...”

“No.” He said firmly. “You don’t get to decide that I’m better off without you.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “You’re incredibly stubborn.”

“I’ve been told many times, usually by you.”

I smiled despite myself, and he kissed my forehead like it was a small promise.

“Whatever consequences come with us being together, we’ll face them.”

He pulled me into his arms, and this time I didn’t resist. I needed him, Damon, the very man who had looked at the darkest parts of me and chosen to stay anyway.

That night, I stopped fighting the fear long enough to let myself feel safe.

We lay together in silence, his arms wrapped securely around me, my head resting against his chest and his heartbeat steady beneath my ear. Lydia was quiet now, no longer restless.

For once, I listened. Damon pressed a gentle kiss to my hair.

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“Goodnight, Aria.”

“Goodnight.”

His arms tightened around me, and with the warmth of my mate beside me and Lydia finally at peace, I allowed myself to drift into sleep.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 387

Aria’s POV

The next morning, Damon and I left before sunrise. Neither of us spoke much during the journey.

The conversation from the previous night remained between us.

Damon had promised he would face whatever came with me, but I couldn’t stop wondering

whether he truly understood what that meant.

I didn’t even understand it myself.

We soon crossed into my mother's ancestral territory. I looked toward the road. The former head of my mother's house had lived here for decades.

He was one of the few people who knew enough about my mother's bloodline to understand what was happening to me. At least, that was what I hoped.

We eventually arrived at his estate. The former head of my mother's house was waiting for us in

the main hall. His eyes settled on me, then on Damon.

"I could sense both of you approaching from miles away."

"We need your help," Damon said.

The old man studied me for several seconds. "Come closer, Aria."

I obeyed. He looked into my eyes, then reached for my wrist. The moment his fingers touched my

skin, his expression changed, and he released me.

"What?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he turned toward the staircase. "Follow me."

Damon and I exchanged a glance before following him upstairs into a private study lined with

ancient books and records. Once the door closed, he gestured toward two chairs.

"Tell me why you are here, Aria. I can already smell the unrest on you."

I sat down. Damon remained beside me, his presence a quiet, steadying warmth at my shoulder.

"I've been... changing," I began, forcing the words out. "I have been experiencing heightened sensitivity to scent, especially blood."

My throat tightened. "I have been sleepwalking, waking up in places I don't remember walking to."

I told him about what happened to Elona, how I almost killed her, and the premonition I had about

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becoming a complete vampire and killing everyone I love.

When I was done, the former head of my mother's house leaned forward. "That confirms it."

"Confirms what?"

He looked directly at me. "The erosion has begun."

My stomach dropped. Damon stepped forward. "What exactly does that mean?"

The old man didn't look away from me. "It means the vampire bloodline is taking root. It is gradually eroding what remains of your human and wolf nature."

I shook my head. "No."

"It has already altered your instincts."

"But it can be reversed, can't it?"

He said nothing. Fear engulfed me. I stood, the chair scraping behind me.

"There has to be a way."

His expression softened, but only slightly. "Aria, I need you to listen carefully."

Damon moved beside me, close enough that I could feel the tension radiating off him.

"The symptoms you described are not merely side effects. They are signs of progression. Your

senses becoming unnaturally acute. Sleepwalking. Heightened responses to blood. Instinctive

reactions toward those around you."

Clas

He paused, and something in his stillness terrified me more than his words. "Those are the early stages of vampire conversion."

The room seemed to tilt. "No."

Damon's voice was low. "You're saying she's turning?"

"Yes. She is slowly turning into a complete vampire."

My breathing became shallow. "There must be a way to stop it."

He shook his head. "Not once it reaches this stage."

Damon's eyes flashed gold. "You haven't even examined her properly, and you are drawing

conclusions."

The Alpha command in Damon's voice made the room vibrate.

The former head of my mother's house looked at Damon, unmoved. "You think anger will change

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centuries of knowledge?" He shifted his gaze to me. "I don't need to examine her to know what is already happening."

Damon stepped closer. "I think you should be certain before telling my mate that she's doomed."

The word mate echoed through me, and my heart clenched around it even in the middle of everything else falling apart.

The head studied Damon for several seconds before sighing. "Very well."

He approached me again and placed one hand against my forehead, closing his eyes. A strange

warmth spread through my body. The patriarch's expression slowly changed, and he removed his

hand.

"There is no mistake." He held my gaze. "The vampire blood has integrated itself too deeply into

your system."

My stomach sank.

Damon shook his head. “That doesn’t mean she can’t recover.”

The head looked at him. “I wish it did.”

His next words shattered whatever hope I had left. “Not one person in recorded history who developed these symptoms in our bloodline has ever truly recovered.”

I stared at him. “Not one?”

He shook his head. “Not one.”

My legs felt weak, and Damon caught my arm before I could fully register that I was swaying.

“Aria is different. That will not happen to her,” Damon insisted.

“Aria is strong,” the patriarch admitted. “Her wolf is unusually resilient, but that doesn’t change

what the vampire blood is doing.”

I shook my head. “There has to be a solution.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 388

Aria’s POV

“There isn’t.” He looked at me sadly. “Your wolf can fight it. She can slow it. She may even help you

retain your human and werewolf instincts for a long time, but it will not stop the progression

forever.”

I looked at Damon. His expression had gone rigid, carved from something that looked almost like

grief.

The patriarch continued, his voice quieter now. "You will slowly become a vampire, Aria."

The words echoed inside my head.

"No." My voice cracked around the word.

He stepped closer. "Once the transformation is complete, there will be no undoing it."

Lydia went completely silent, and that terrified me.

Lydia?

There was nothing.

Lydia, answer me.

Still nothing. I pressed a trembling hand against my chest, and Damon wrapped his arms around me. I didn't fight him. I couldn't, because at that moment, the fear I had been trying to outrun ever since Viktor's blood had entered my body had just caught up with me, and there was nowhere left

to hide.

Damon refused to accept what the former head of my mother's house said. The moment we left the estate, he was already making calls.

"Contact every healer you can find," he ordered Justin through the phone. "I don't care if they're retired, exiled, or living on the other side of the world. Find them."

He ended the call and immediately dialed someone else. I watched him from the passenger seat, his jaw tight, his eyes cold and focused in a way that told me he was already fighting a battle everyone else had declared impossible.

"Damon."

He ignored me.

"Find the oldest records on vampire-werewolf blood contamination," he said into the phone. "Not

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hapter 388

modern research. I want ancient records. Coven archives, pack archives, anything.”

reached over and touched his arm. “Damon.”

He finally looked at me. “We’re going to find a solution.”

His voice was so certain that for a moment, I wanted to believe him.

Lydia stirred inside me, faint but present again. He means it, Aria. Let’s not give up.

Claus

I looked away, wanting so badly to be as strong as they both seemed to think I could be. But the patriarch’s words kept repeating in my head, relentless.

You will slowly become a vampire. There will be no undoing it.

By the time we returned to Grayson territory, Damon had already contacted more people than I could count. Every few hours, another call came in. Every time someone suggested a possibility, he pursued it immediately, only to have another dead end thrown in our faces.

Ancient remedies, forbidden rituals, bloodline healers, vampire scholars, werewolf elders. He reached out to all of them, but nothing worked.

Eventually, I knew there were two people I couldn’t keep in the dark any longer...my father and

Joshua, my family.

My chest tightened at the thought. Damon accompanied me to the Old Grayson house.

When we arrived, we walked toward the house. I found Joshua and our father together in the sitting room. Ronan was seated, reading through a document. Joshua sat beside him.

Both of them looked up when I entered.

My father smiled. “Aria.”

That single word almost destroyed me.

Joshua immediately noticed something was wrong. His eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

I stood there for several seconds, unable to speak. Damon remained beside me, his hand still

wrapped around mine. My father slowly stood. "Aria?"

I took a breath. "I need to tell you both something."

Joshua put the documents down. "You're scaring me."

My father's expression changed. "What is it?"

I looked between them. I told them everything that had been happening to me. I told them about

my visit to the former head of my mother's house and what he had said.

G

I told them I might become a vampire soon and that there was no way to stop it from happening.

Joshua's expression darkened as soon as I finished. "Bullshit. There's always a way."

Damon stepped up beside me, his hand firm on the small of my back. "I told her that. We're already working every angle. I won't accept that outcome."

My father, though shattered by the revelation, hugged me tightly and told me we would all find solution together. They all tried to plant seeds of hope in me.

I wiped my eyes before leaving the sitting room. Damon followed me. We found Elona in another part of the house, safely occupied. The moment I saw her, my heart shattered.

She looked up at me with that innocent smile that always made the world seem less cruel.

"Mommy!"

She ran toward me. I dropped to my knees and caught her in my arms. Her little body fit against mine perfectly. I held her too tightly.

She giggled. "Mommy, you're squeezing me."

I loosened my arms immediately. "Sorry, sweetheart."

She looked at my face. Her smile faded. "Why are you sad?"

I couldn't answer. Damon crouched beside us. Elona looked between us. "You are here to take me

home, right?"

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 389

Axia's POV

I cupped her cheeks, forcing a smile that felt like glass. "I'm so sorry, baby. There's something inside me that's changing. I might... I might have to leave you here for a while longer."

Elona's eyes filled with tears. "No! I don't want to stay here. Please don't leave me. I want to go

with you. I'll be good, I promise..."

Gla

Her sobs tore straight through my chest. I pulled her tight, rocking her while my own tears slipped free. Damon knelt beside us, one big hand on Elona's back, the other on my shoulder.

We eventually succeeded in convincing her to remain with her grandpa and uncle for a bit longer, and that we would come and take her home soon.

That evening, the notched Ryder. He came to the estate immediately. Damon explained everything

tly beside him, watching Ryder's expression grow darker with every

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nished, Ryder stood abruptly.

Has to be another way."

We're still searching," Damon said.

Ryder paced across the room, then stopped. "I know someone who might be of help."

Damon looked up. "Who?"

"Devin. You guys know him."

I frowned. “Devin, your family elder?”

Ryder nodded. “He has spent decades studying the oldest bloodline rituals, and he had a relationship with your mother. If anyone knows something about this, it’s him.”

Damon stood. “Call him.”

Ryder pulled out his phone. The call connected after several rings. Ryder put it on speaker and briefed Devin on what had happened. When he was done, there was a brief silence.

Then Devin spoke. “There may be a method we can try.”

My heart stopped. Damon immediately stepped closer. “What method?”

“The ancient texts speak of a purification sigil combined with a bloodline transfer.”

Damon’s eyes narrowed. “What would that do?”

“The sigil would strip away the vampire component, while the bloodline transfer would anchor Anja’s original werewolf essence back into her body.”

Hope flickered in my chest. It was fragile but real.

“Then we can do it.”

Devin was silent. My hope began to falter. “Devin?”

He exhaled. “There’s a problem.”

“What is that?”

“The method has only worked once in all recorded history.”

I stared at Damon. His expression had gone completely still.

“Once?” I whispered.

“Yes, once.”

Damon’s voice hardened. “What is the success rate?”

There was a pause before Devin spoke. “Under one percent.”

Gla

The room seemed to tilt beneath my feet. I gripped the edge of the table. Under one percent. That wasn't a solution. That was a gamble with my life.

The next day, I was willing to give the treatment a try after thinking about it, but Damon was not

buying it.

"I will not let you do that, Aria." He stepped close to me. "I am not going to stand here and watch you gamble your life on a ritual that has killed nearly everyone who attempted it."

"It's still a chance."

His jaw clenched. "If the choice is a less-than-one-percent chance of saving you, I would rather

stay beside you while we find another way."

My heart twisted. "You don't understand what staying beside me could mean."

"I understand perfectly."

"No, you don't." I stepped closer. "If I become a vampire, I won't be able to live with my family

because of the blood thirst."

G

I wrapped my arms around myself, forcing the words out even as they scraped my throat raw.

"A vampire's instincts aren't like ours. The closer the blood relation, the stronger the pull can

become. My father, Joshua, Elona..." My voice broke on her name. "I already react strangely around Elona. I tried to strangle her."

Damon's expression changed, but I pushed through before I could lose my courage.

"I can hear her heartbeat from farther away than I should. I can smell her blood, and if the

transformation continues, that hunger will only become stronger."

“We’ll control it until we find another solution.” He reached for my hands. “Whenever you lose

control, I’ll be there.”

A tear slipped down my cheek. “You make everything sound so simple.”

“No. I make it sound like something we can survive.” His thumb brushed away my tear. “We will

survive this together.”

I wanted to believe him. Goddess, I wanted to. But another truth sat between us, one I hadn’t let

myself say out loud yet.

“There is something else you should know.”

Damon waited, watchful.

“If I become a vampire, I won’t be able to have pups.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 390

Aria’s POV

Damon’s fingers went still. I looked away.

“We never really talked about children, but we both knew we wanted that.” Damon’s eyes softened.

I swallowed hard. “That future disappears if I turn into a vampire.”

Damon stepped closer. “Aria.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to lose that.”

“You won’t.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can promise that I don’t need a child to love you.”

“I know.” I looked into his eyes. “But I want one.”

His expression broke slightly. “So do I.”

The admission nearly destroyed me. I pressed my lips together, fighting another wave of tears.

Damon pulled me against his chest, and I didn’t resist. His arms closed around me, strong and

warm, and the mate bond flared between us.

The door suddenly opened. I looked up. Damon turned sharply. My heart skipped when I saw my

father and brother.

“Father...”

slightly weakened condition, there was determination in his eyes. Beside him stood Joshua.

For a moment, I couldn’t move. Seeing them there made something inside me c***k. They had

heard. They knew what I was considering, and they had come to stop me.

Joshua’s eyes were already red. “Aria,” he said.

I looked away. I couldn’t bear it, not when I could still remember everything we had been through, not when the thought of losing them if I were to ever become a complete vampire was already tearing me apart.

Ronan slowly approached. “My daughter.” I looked at him, and he reached for my hand, his fingers trembling slightly when they closed around mine.

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Clain

“Father...”

His eyes filled with pain. “Your mother traded her life for your freedom.”

I froze.

Ronan's voice broke slightly, but he continued. "She didn't sacrifice herself so you could spend the rest of your life afraid of what you might become. She didn't give you your freedom so that you

could throw it away on a mere chance."

Tears burned my eyes. "Father, I don't know what else to do."

He shook his head. "Choosing this treatment that might cost you your life isn't the right thing to

do."

Joshua stepped closer. "That's right, Aria." I looked at him, his expression pleading. "We can find

another way," he said.

"What if there isn't one?"

"Then we keep looking." His voice cracked. "But don't choose something this risky because you're

afraid."

I lowered my head, their words surrounding me. Damon's hand tightened around mine. Ronan's eyes never left my face. Joshua looked like he was barely holding himself together.

It made me realize more vividly something I already knew. I wasn't the only one afraid of losing me.

They were too.

Everyone I knew opposed the treatment. They all believed I could overcome the vampire bloodline

on my own.

Everyone except me.

I stood there listening to them, forcing a smile onto my face while their words settled heavily

inside my chest.

“I understand,” I finally said.

Damon studied me suspiciously. I knew that look. He could always tell when I was hiding something.

“What do you understand?” he asked.

“That I shouldn’t give up.”

His expression softened slightly, and I smiled at him. “We’ll find another way.”

You don’t believe that. Lydia’s voice was quiet.

kept my expression steady. I have to.

Because what else could I say? That every time the vampire thirst rose inside me, I felt a little less

certain that I could control it?

That the hunger wasn’t fading? That sometimes, when I heard someone’s heartbeat, my fangs threatened to descend before I even realized what was happening? That I had begun to recognize

the scent of blood from farther away than I ever had before?

No. I couldn’t tell them that. Not when they were already terrified of losing me. So I lifted my chin

and gave them the only thing they needed from me. Hope.

“I’ll overcome this,” I said firmly. “I’m a werewolf. I’m a Grayson. I’ve survived worse than this.”

Damon stepped closer. “And you’re my mate.” His voice was low, and the mate bond pulsed

between us, warm and steady.

I looked into his eyes and smiled. “Yes, I am your mate.”

His fingers brushed against mine. “Promise me you’ll tell me if things get worse.”

I hesitated for half a second, then nodded. “I promise.”

The lie tasted bitter on my tongue, but Damon didn’t need to know that.

I went to the Old Grayson house with Damon that evening. I told everyone I needed some time with Elona, and no one questioned me. Perhaps they thought I needed comfort.

The moment I stepped into the room, I saw my daughter sitting on the bed. Her eyes brightened.

“Mommy!”

. She rushed toward me, and I caught her in my arms. The moment her little body pressed against

mine, something inside me melted. I buried my face against her hair and inhaled her scent deeply.

She was my pup, my daughter, and my entire world.

Then my stomach twisted. I froze.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 391

Aria’s POV

The scent of her blood suddenly seemed much stronger. I could hear her heartbeat. Thump. Thump. Thump. My fangs pressed painfully against my gums.

Aria. Lydia’s voice sharpened immediately.

I know. I immediately loosened my hold on her.

She looked up at me with innocent eyes. “You don’t look happy, Mommy.”

I forced a smile and kissed her forehead. “I’m just tired.”

She accepted the answer without question. That night, she clung to me, not wanting to be apart. carried her to the bed and settled beneath the blankets with her.

Elona curled against my chest, her tiny arms wrapped around me. I stared into the darkness. The house had gone quiet. Outside, I could hear the distant footsteps of the guards patrolling the house, and every now and then, a wolf howled somewhere beyond the walls.

I looked down at Elona. She was already asleep, peaceful and completely unaware of the battle raging inside me. I gently brushed a strand of hair away from her forehead.

You need to sleep. Lydia's voice was barely more than a whisper.

I can't.

You have been awake since yesterday. You need to rest, Aria.

I swallowed. What if I lose control?

* Lydia went silent.

I closed my eyes. What if the hunger becomes stronger while I'm asleep?

Then I will wake you.

And if you can't?

There was a pause. Then I will fight it with you.

I opened my eyes again. I wanted to believe her. But I could still feel the vampire blood moving through my veins. It was different from my wolf's power. Lydia's presence was familiar. It belonged

to me.

The vampire bloodline felt like something foreign that had been invited into my body and had

decided it wasn't leaving.

Ch

Every few minutes, the hunger returned. A sudden ache in my throat. A sharp awareness of every heartbeat beyond the bedroom.

I could hear the guard outside. I could hear someone moving through the hallway. I could hear the faint heartbeat of a servant downstairs. Each sound pulled at something inside me. My mouth

watered. I clenched my jaw. No, I won't give in to that desire.

The hunger pushed harder. My fangs descended. I covered my mouth immediately. Elona stirred against my chest, and I stopped breathing. For several seconds, I didn't move. She settled again,

and I slowly exhaled, my hands trembling.

Aria, stay with me. Don't lose control.

I'm trying.

Look at her.

I looked down. Elona's face was peaceful, her little fingers curled into my nightclothes.

That's your daughter. She trusts you absolutely.

My eyes burned.

"I know," I whispered, so quietly that even I could barely hear myself. I pressed my lips to her

forehead. "I would never hurt you."

But the words felt like a plea rather than a promise.

The hunger surged again, stronger this time. My body stiffened, my eyes burned, and my fangs

lengthened. I could smell her blood. It was so strong.

. I moved away from her immediately, sliding out of bed and crossing to the opposite side of the

room. My hands gripped the edge of the dresser, my breathing ragged.

Aria!

"I know!" My voice came out sharper than I intended, and Elona stirred. I immediately lowered my

voice.

"Shh." I turned toward her. She remained asleep.

I pressed my palms against my face. This was exactly what I had been afraid of. Everyone thought

I could overcome it. Everyone thought the bloodline would eventually settle.

But what if it didn't? What if this was only the beginning? What if one night I wasn't strong enough to step away?

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My eyes filled with tears. I can't do this.

Lydia came closer inside my mind. You can, Aria. Her answer came without hesitation. Always

remember who you are.

I slowly lowered my hands. I was Aria Grayson. A daughter, sister, mother, mate, and Alpha of a pack. I had survived things that should have destroyed me.

Curr

I had fought for my family. I had fought for my pack. I had fought for my freedom. I could fight this

too. Couldn't I?

I walked back to the bed, slowly and carefully, and sat beside Elona without touching her at first)

The hunger was still there, but it hadn't won.

I reached out and gently touched her cheek. Then I leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"I won't let it take me from you," I whispered.

Elona murmured something in her sleep and moved closer. My arms instinctively wrapped around

her, and I held her against my chest.

This time, when the hunger surged, I didn't run from it. I breathed through it and held on. Minute after minute, hour after hour, I didn't close my eyes the entire night.

Every time the thirst rose, I forced it back. Every time my fangs descended, I made them retract. Every time my senses locked onto Elona's heartbeat, I reminded myself that she wasn't prey. She was my pup, my child, and my reason to fight.

By the time the first faint light of dawn slipped through the curtains, my body felt exhausted beyond words. But Elona was still safely asleep in my arms.

I looked down at her, and a shaky breath escaped me. I had made it through the night. At least

tonight, I had kept control.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 392

Aria's POV

Damon proposed we hold our bonding rites early, on the night of the next full moon. He hoped the

mate bond would help steady my wolf nature.

The day soon arrived. I stood at the center of the ceremonial circle in my courtyard, my bare feet

pressed against the cold stone while the night wind moved through my hair.

Around me, the pack's ancient runes glowed faintly beneath the moonlight, their markings carved

into the ground for the purpose of the bonding rite.

My pulse hammered against my ribs.

Across from me stood Damon, impossibly calm in his black ceremonial clothing, but I could feel the tension rolling off him through the mate bond that already existed between us.

It was faint and incomplete, yet it was there like a thread that kept pulling me toward him no matter how complicated everything had become.

Damon's eyes remained fixed on mine. Noticing my uneasiness, he reached for my hand, and the instant our fingers touched, warmth rushed through me.

Damon squeezed my hand. "Ready?"

I looked into his eyes. No, I wasn't ready. But I nodded anyway. "Let's do it."

Devin stood at the edge of the circle, dressed in the traditional robes of a ritual keeper, his expression solemn as he raised both hands.

"Tonight, beneath the full moon, we call upon the ancient bond between two wolves."

The pack members surrounding us fell silent. I could hear everything. The wind, the beating hearts

around the courtyard, the distant howl of wolves in the forest, even Damon's heartbeat. Thump.

Thump. Thump.

Devin continued. "Alpha Damon Hawthorne, do you stand before your pack willingly?"

"I do."

"Aria Grayson, do you stand before your pack willingly?"

I swallowed. "I do." The words echoed strangely inside me.

Devin stepped closer. "Then face one another." Damon turned fully toward me. "Place your hands together."

G

We did.

"Look into each other's eyes."

Our gazes locked, and the world seemed to disappear. For a moment, there was only him, only me,

only that invisible thread between us.

Then Devin began the ancient invocation, and the air changed. I felt it before I saw anything. Power stirred beneath my skin, and my fingers tightened around Damon's.

"Aria?"

"I'm okay." But I wasn't. Something was moving inside me. It wasn't Lydia. It was the same strange, power that had surged through me before, when I was still connected to the altar.

Aria. Lydia's voice sharpened. Something is happening.

I feel it.

The runes beneath our feet suddenly flared. A gasp swept through the gathered wolves, and

Damon's eyes widened. "Devin."

"I can see it." The ritual keeper's voice remained steady, but I could hear the concern beneath it.

"Do not break contact."

I tried. I really did. But the pressure inside my chest kept building, my bones tingling, my blood feeling like fire. Then Lydia cried out. It was not a growl or a warning, but a keening cry of pain. I

doubled over.

"Lydia!"

I can't hold it! Her distress slammed into my mind, and I dropped to one knee.

Damon immediately moved toward me. "Aria!"

"Don't!" I shoved my palm against the ground, and the moment I touched the stone, a burst of

golden energy exploded outward. Everyone stumbled back. The ceremonial flames went out. A

wave of power tore across the courtyard, rattling the windows of the surrounding buildings.

Damon caught himself before falling. "Aria!"

I lifted my head. His face blurred before me. Something was wrong with my vision. Everything seemed brighter, sharper. The moon above us appeared enormous. And then I saw my reflection

in the polished ceremonial stone.

My eyes. My irises had changed. For one terrifying second, they weren't the color they were supposed to be, they were glowing with an unfamiliar hue before flickering back.

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My stomach dropped. "What is happening to me?"

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 393

Aria's POV

No one answered. Damon rushed toward me and grabbed my shoulders. "Look at me."

I stared at him.

"Aria, breathe."

I shook my head. "I can't..." Another cry tore through my mind.

Aria!

I clutched my head.

Lydia, what's happening?

The bond. It is pushing against something inside us.

Damon's expression hardened. "Devin, stop the rite."

Devin was already moving. "Everyone back!"

The wolves around the courtyard retreated as he raised both hands and began speaking another incantation. The runes beneath us flickered violently.

Damon pulled me against him, and the moment my body touched his, the mate bond surged.

Warmth flooded through me.

For one glorious second, I thought it was working. The thread between us expanded. It became stronger and brighter. I could feel Damon and his emotions.

Then the power inside me slammed into the bond. Pain exploded through my chest, and I screamed.

Damon staggered. Devin was thrown several feet backward. The ceremonial circle cracked beneath our feet.

Damon caught me before I hit the ground. "Aria!"

I could barely breathe. "Lydia..."

I'm here. Her voice trembled.

I clung to Damon as the last traces of golden energy faded into the night.

Silence descended over the courtyard.

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O

Damon looked toward Devin. "It failed, didn't it?"

Devin slowly pushed himself upright, studying the shattered runes, then me. "It didn't completely

fail."

Damon's jaw tightened. "What does that mean?"

Devin walked toward us, studying me carefully. "The bond responded. That much is certain."

"Then why did it break?"

"Because something interfered with it." Devin's eyes met mine. "Your wolf or your bloodline. Perhaps both."

I stared at him. "So what happens now?"

He exhaled slowly. "We cannot force it."

Damon's arm tightened around me.

"The full moon's energy is too strong right now," Devin continued. "If we attempt to complete the

bond again tonight, we could cause serious damage to both of you."

Damon glanced at me before returning his gaze to Devin. "In that case, we stop?"

"For tonight, yes."

I lowered my gaze, disappointment settling heavily inside me. After everything we'd endured, after everything we'd risked, I had wanted this to work.

I'd wanted one thing in my life to finally feel certain. But apparently, even the mate bond had become another mystery I couldn't control.

Damon tilted my chin upward. "Don't blame yourself. None of this is your fault." His thumb brushed gently across my cheek. "We'll figure it out."

I looked at him. "You still believe that?"

"Absolutely." A faint smile touched his lips. "You're stuck with me, Aria. Bond or no bond."

Despite everything, a small laugh escaped me. Lydia stirred. He's right.

I almost smiled. About being stuck with me?

No. Her voice softened. About figuring it out.

Devin cleared his throat. "There is one other option."

Damon turned toward him. "What is that?"

O G

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"We could wait and try this again."

My brows drew together. "For how long?"

He glanced between Damon and me. "Until the next full moon."

I stared at him. "Another month?"

Devin nodded. "The rite wasn't a total failure. The bond was touched. It simply did not complete."

He looked directly at me. "At the next full moon, we can attempt the rite again."

Damon's hand found mine. I looked down at our joined fingers. The faint thread between us was

still there. It was fragile, incomplete, but alive.

I closed my eyes. One more month.

Lydia's voice answered from within me. One more month.

Three days after the failed bonding rite, it happened again without warning.

One moment I was sleeping on the bed, the next, I was already throwing myself against the door, fists pounding, a raw, wordless sound tearing from my throat.

I staggered back, my chest heaving. The door held. I'd locked it on purpose before lying down, terrified of exactly this.

My hands trembled as I stared at the fresh dents in the oak.

I walked to the bathroom and splashed cold water over my face. It did nothing. The moment I

lifted my head, I caught my reflection. I looked exhausted. My hair was tangled, my face pale, and

my eyes haunted. I looked like someone who had been fighting a war in her sleep.

I gripped the edge of the sink. “Am I really losing control of myself?”

Lydia didn’t answer.

I closed my eyes. Talk to me, Lydia.

A long moment passed. I don’t think you’re losing control of yourself.

I exhaled shakily. “Then why does this keep happening?”

The vampire bloodline is trying to take control.

Before I could respond, a sharp pain tore through my head. I grabbed my temples as images flashed through my mind: the ceremonial circle, the broken runes, Damon’s face, the golden energy, Lydia screaming, then darkness.

I gasped and collapsed against the wall.

O

Aria! Lydia called out.

“I’m fine.”

No, you’re not.

+25 Pointe

“I said I’m fine.” My voice cracked, and I hated how frightened I sounded. I hated that I couldn’t even trust myself anymore and, most of all, I hated what this could mean for Damon.

The thought came suddenly: What if I hurt him? What if the next time I lost control, he was standing in front of me? What if the mate bond amplified whatever was wrong with me instead of fixing it? What if I killed him?

LAY

C

H

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 394

Aria'scaafaaaPOV

My heart clenched. "No, I can't let that happen."

Aria...

"I can't do this." I sank onto the floor, pulling my knees toward my chest.

You aren't alone. You need to stop carrying this alone.

I gave a bitter laugh. "How am I supposed to do that when I don't even have control over what's happening inside my own body?"

Lydia went quiet. I knew she had no answer. Neither did I.

The next morning, Damon found me in the dining room. I hadn't slept again. I'd spent the rest

of the night sitting awake with my back against the headboard, terrified that if I closed my

eyes, I'd wake up doing something I couldn't remember.

Damon entered carrying two cups of coffee and stopped immediately when he saw me. His expression changed. "You didn't sleep." It wasn't a question.

I shook my head. "I did."

He frowned. "Aria."

"I slept briefly," I confessed.

He walked toward me, placed one cup on the table, then crouched in front of my chair. His expression softened. "What happened?"

I stared at my hands, then looked up at him. I told him everything that had happened. When I

was done, he reached for my hand. I instinctively pulled it away, and his expression faltered. I hated myself for it.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

He shook his head. “Don’t apologize.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

His eyes darkened. “You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.” I stood abruptly. “I don’t think we should try the bonding rite again if

we do, I could hurt you.”

Damon rose slowly. “The full moon is not for another couple of weeks. We don’t have to decide anything today.”

“I’ve already decided. I don’t want to do it again.”

Damon stared at me. I forced myself to hold his gaze.

“It already failed before. It is bound to fail again.”

Damon stepped closer. “Please stop saying that, Aria...”

His words made something inside me snap, and I cut him off. “I said I don’t want to try again.”

He searched my eyes. “You’re terrified.”

My jaw tightened. “Of course I’m terrified. I’m the one who could hurt you.”

His eyes hardened. “And I’m your mate. I’m not going to stand by while you’re falling apart

and pretend there’s nothing I can do.”

The word mate struck something deep inside me. My wolf stirred. Mate.

I pressed my fingers against my temple. “Don’t call me your mate right now.”

Damon’s expression flickered with hurt. “Why?”

I looked away. "Because it makes this worse."

He took another step. "The bond is already there, Aria. It might not be fully there, but it is real."

I shook my head. "You don't understand."

Damon's chest rose and fell heavily before he said quietly, "I understand how you feel"

"You don't, Damon. I don't even trust myself!" The admission tore out of me, and Damon went

still. I turned away, fighting the tears burning behind my eyes.

"I woke up last night trying to break down my own bedroom door, Damon I didn't even know I

was doing it. How am I supposed to trust myself after that?"

He came up behind me. "Aria." I felt his hand touch my arm, and I flinched. "Don't touch me."

+25 Pants

He didn't listen. His fingers tightened around my wrist. "Let me feel the bond."

I spun around. "What?"

"If the bond is unstable, maybe we can strengthen it manually."

My eyes widened. "Devin said we couldn't force it."

"We're not forcing it." Damon stepped closer. "Just let me try."

"No, step away."

He didn't move away. Instead, he reached for my hand. I pulled back. "Stop."

He grabbed my wrist, and the moment his skin touched mine, the mate bond flared. Pain shot through my chest. Golden light flashed beneath my skin.

Lydia surged forward. Aria!

I tried to pull away. "Damon, let go!"

“I’m trying to stabilize it.”

“You can’t!” The pressure intensified, my vision blurred, and I shoved against his chest. He

caught my other wrist. For one terrifying second, I saw nothing but gold.

Then instinct took over. I twisted violently, and my hand struck something sharp. Damon jerked backward.

“Ah!”

The room went silent. I stared at him. Blood dripped from his palm, a thin cut running across

it, and my heart stopped. Then I smelled it. Damon’s blood. The scent hit me like a physical

blow. It was warm, metallic, and powerful.

My pupils widened.

Lydia went completely still. Then she whispered one word. Run, Aria

My breath caught. I backed away.

Damon looked at his bleeding hand. “Aria...”

“Don’t come near me.”

His expression changed when he saw my eyes. “Aria.”

425 Pants

“Stay back... Please.”

The scent became stronger. My throat burned, my fangs pressed against my gums. I could hear his heartbeat, every beat, every pulse. My wolf clawed against the surface. We need to

leave.

“I know.”

Now, Aria, or you might kill him.

B

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 395

Aria's POV

I didn't wait. I turned and ran, tearing through the door and into the corridor. Someone shouted behind me.

"Aria!"

I kept running. The pack's corridors blurred around me as I pushed through the main doors.

and sprinted into the forest.

The cold night air struck my face, and I didn't stop. Branches whipped against my arms. My

lungs burned.

Lydia was screaming inside me. Go faster.

"I am!"

I ran deeper into the forest. Only when the scent of Damon's blood finally disappeared did I

collapse against a tree, bending forward, gasping, my hands shaking violently.

"I almost attacked him. I wanted his blood."

You were overwhelmed.

I pressed my forehead against the tree. "I can't keep doing this."

Lydia's voice softened. We have to find a way to put an end to this soon. The urge keeps getting

stronger.

I closed my eyes. The memory of Damon's bleeding hand flashed through my mind. I had done that. I had hurt him. Even if it had been accidental, the result was the same.

"I can't risk it again."

My breathing slowly steadied. I remained in the forest until the hunger faded and my emotions settled. When I finally heard footsteps approaching, I knew who it was before I smelled him.

Damon. He emerged from between the trees, his palm wrapped in a clean bandage, his eyes

immediately finding mine. "Are you all right?"

I almost laughed. "You came here to ask me that?"

"I wasn't going to leave you out here alone." His answer was immediate.

I looked away. "Your hand... I hurt you."

"You didn't mean to. Besides, it is fine now."

"That doesn't make it better."

Damon walked closer but stopped several feet away, as though he remembered my earlier warning about him not coming close.

"I should never have tried to force the bond."

I looked at him. "I told you no."

"I know." His voice was filled with regret. "I'm sorry."

I swallowed. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Damon. I don't want that to ever happen again."

"I know, and we'll find a way to make sure you don't."

I stared at his bandaged hand. There was still a faint scent of blood beneath the herbs and cloth, and my stomach tightened. I looked away quickly, trying not to focus on it.

“I’ve made my decision.”

Damon’s expression immediately turned serious. “What decision?”

“I’m going to accept Devin’s treatment.”

Damon didn’t argue with me. Instead, the moment we returned to Grayson territory, he made

his own decision.

He took me to the Old Grayson mansion and somehow convinced my father and brother to have me confined there so I couldn’t go ahead with the treatment.

They told me they were acting in my best interest, but that didn’t make it any less infuriating.

“You can’t confine me,” I argued after I was placed in a room with guards stationed outside.

“I’m not confining you, Aria. This is for your protection.”

I laughed bitterly. “That’s what everyone says when they’re taking away my choices.”

Damon’s expression hardened. “Joshua will stay with you.”

I turned toward my brother. Joshua gave me a pleading look. “Please listen to him, Aria. Dad

has been so worried about you. We can’t risk him having a heart attack.”

My chest tightened. Of course, they had found a way to make me feel guilty for fighting back.

Damon looked at me one last time. “I won’t risk losing you.”

Then he walked out, and the door closed behind him.

I stared at it. For several seconds, I couldn’t speak. Then Lydia growled inside my mind.

I don’t like this.

“Neither do I.”

We should leave and get the treatment done. It is for everyone’s protection.

I glanced toward Joshua. “Apparently, that’s not an option.”

Joshua gave me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.”

I folded my arms. “You don’t have to apologize.”

I turned away, my jaw tightening. Damon had found a way to make me feel like a prisoner without putting chains around my wrists. And somehow, that was worse.

The next couple of days passed in a blur. Damon barely came near me. He spent his mornings helping handle my pack affairs, afternoons with our daughter, Elona, and most nights buried in reports from the Silvermoon territory.

I knew because Joshua told me. I could also feel his exhaustion through the faint thread of our bond. Sometimes I felt Rhein stirring restlessly inside him. But Damon didn’t come to me.

Instead, he sent people, healers, researchers, pack physicians, anyone who might know something about what was happening to me. Every report came back the same. None of them had a solution that wasn’t life-threatening.

I hated being confined, and what I hated even more was not being able to do anything about

Three days later, someone came to see me. I immediately sensed something was different. Joshua wasn’t the one approaching, the guards hadn’t announced anyone, and the footsteps

were too quiet.

I turned toward the door. It opened, and Noah stepped inside.

My eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 396

Aria's POV

Noah closed the door behind him. "Keeping my promise."

"What promise?"

"That I wouldn't disappear when things got difficult."

I stared at him. "How did you get past the guards?"

He smiled faintly. "I have my ways."

sighed. "You're going to get yourself killed, Noah."

"Probably." His expression softened. "I heard what happened."

I looked away. "Everyone has."

"Not everyone understands." He stepped closer. "But I do."

I shook my head. "You don't."

"I know everyone is making decisions for you instead of letting you decide what's best for you. They are all against you."

My gaze snapped back to him. "Damon isn't against me."

"I didn't say he was."

"No. You just implied it."

Noah shook his head. "I'm not here to turn you against Damon."

"Then why are you here?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "I am here because you need someone to stand on your

side."

My chest tightened. "Noah..."

"If

you decide to take the treatment, I'll support you."

I stared at him and shook my head. "You shouldn't get involved."

"I want to be involved, Aria." His eyes held mine. "And that's because I care about you."

I looked away. "Noah, I don't love you. I don't feel what you feel."

"I know that." His calm response surprised me. He continued, "You don't owe me love because I care about you."

I swallowed.

He continued. "I'm not supporting your decision because I want you to choose me."

He stepped back, giving me space. "I'm supporting you because it's your decision."

I stared at him. "You'd really do that?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Even if I choose Damon?"

A faint smile touched his lips. "Even then."

I felt something twist painfully in my chest. "Noah..."

"I understand, Aria." His voice was quiet. "I know your heart belongs somewhere else."

I lowered my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He smiled again. "I'd rather make peace with your honesty than have false hope."

Silence stretched between us.

Then Noah said, "If you need one person to stand beside you when everyone else tells you that you're wrong, I'll be that person." He paused. "Not because I'm trying to win you, but because you're my friend."

Something inside me cracked. I hadn't realized how badly I needed to hear those words.

"Thank you."

Noah nodded. "You don't have to thank me." He turned toward the door, then looked back at

The door closed behind him. I stood there staring after him. Lydia stirred. He has changed.

He isn't asking for anything.

"I know."

Noah's words stayed with me long after he left.

Whatever you decide, make sure it's your choice.

I repeated them in my head that night while staring through my bedroom window.

Outside, Grayson territory was quiet. The guards Damon had stationed around the house moved through the grounds at regular intervals.

I could hear their footsteps even from my room, my heightened werewolf senses making it impossible for me to miss them. I was being watched. Protected, Damon would call it. I called it a cage.

Lydia shifted restlessly beneath my skin. We can't stay here forever, Aria. We need to find a

way to get better.

I closed my eyes. That was exactly what I intended to do.

Two days later, I asked Noah to come back. He arrived through the same discreet route he'd

used before, slipping past the guards without attracting attention.

The moment he entered my room, he studied my face.

"I can't keep hiding here. I need to find a treatment for my problem."

His expression became serious. "I am already on it. I'll find one soon."

I raised my brows. "You've already been looking?"

He nodded. "Since I left. I knew you wouldn't want to sit around in this room, feeling helpless

while Damon stops you from getting the help you need."

He pulled a folded piece of paper from inside his jacket. "I contacted several pack healers, shamans, old bloodline specialists. Anyone who might know what is happening to you."

My eyes moved across the names. "Did you find anything?"

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 397

Aria's POV

"Most of the people I contacted had nothing." Noah held my gaze, his expression grim. "Some had heard rumors, but they knew better than to get involved. Others were simply too

afraid."

My fingers tightened around the paper in my hands. "I can understand that."

After everything that had happened to me, I couldn't exactly blame anyone for wanting to stay

away.

Noah leaned back slightly, studying me for a moment before continuing. "There was one name, however, that kept coming up."

I looked up. "Whose?"

"Mara. She's a witch."

I stared at him. "A witch?"

He nodded. "She lives in a forbidden zone beyond the outer territories. Packs don't patrol that

region, and wolves aren't supposed to cross into it."

A chill ran down my spine. “Why?”

“Because the land isn’t governed by any pack.” His voice lowered. “There are no Alpha laws.

No pack borders. No authority. And the creatures that live there don’t answer to an Alpha.”

I swallowed. A place where Alpha authority meant nothing sounded less like a sanctuary and

more like a death sentence.

“Then why would anyone go there?” I asked.

“Because sometimes, when you’ve exhausted every option within pack territory, dangerous becomes preferable to hopeless.”

His words settled heavily between us. I looked down at my hands, thinking of the strange power inside me, the changes in my eyes, Lydia’s instability, the failed bonding rite, and the

way my body seemed to be reacting to vampire forces I didn’t fully understand.

Everything was becoming harder to control, and every attempt to fix one problem seemed to

create another.

I lifted my eyes to Noah. “Tell me more about this witch.”

“According to the rumors, she’s one of the oldest practitioners still alive.” Noah’s expression

grew thoughtful. “She’s particularly knowledgeable about ancient bloodlines.”

My heart began beating faster. “Ancient bloodlines?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

This woman might just have a solution to my problems.

“What did you say her name was again?” I asked.

“Her name is Mara.”

The name seemed to hang in the room. “Mara,” I repeated quietly.

Noah nodded. “The packs that know about her don’t speak of her openly. Seeking her help is forbidden.”

I frowned. “Then why are you telling me?”

“Because I’d rather break a stupid rule than watch you destroy yourself trying treatments that could kill you.”

I went still. There was no hesitation in his voice. He meant every word.

Noah leaned forward, his expression becoming more serious. “Aria, this woman supposedly

deals with things most healers won’t even touch. Ancient bloodline curses. Dormant abilities.

Unstable transformations. Magic that has been passed down through generations.”

My heart thudded harder. “Transformations that shouldn’t be possible?” I asked.

He nodded. I glanced away, my thoughts racing.

“Then I need to see her.”

Noah’s expression barely changed, but I caught the faint relief in his eyes. “I thought you’d say that.”

“When can we meet her?”

“I can get us there tomorrow.”

My eyes widened slightly. “Tomorrow?”

He nodded. “If we’re going, we should go quickly.”

I turned toward the window. Tomorrow was too soon, perhaps. But if I waited, Damon would

find out, and if Damon found out, he would never let me go.

Damon would see the danger first. He would think about everything that could go wrong and

find a hundred reasons to keep me safe. I couldn't allow that. This was something I needed

to do for myself.

I looked back at Noah. "We can't tell anyone."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Anyone?"

"Especially Damon."

Silence filled the room. Noah's expression became unreadable.

"If he finds out, he won't let me go," I continued. "And if he comes with us, we'll never be able

to enter the forbidden zone unnoticed."

Noah considered my words before slowly nodding. "I agree. Keeping this quiet is probably the wisest choice."

A strange mixture of relief and guilt settled in my chest. I hated keeping secrets from Damon,

but I hated feeling powerless even more.

"We leave tomorrow morning, then."

Noah stood. "Before sunrise."

I nodded. He gave me a small nod before leaving. The door clicked shut behind him. For several seconds, I remained completely still.

Then Lydia stirred inside me. We're really doing this? Without Damon?

I sighed and lowered myself onto the edge of the bed. "Yes. We have to."

He'll be very angry and hurt.

I closed my eyes. “I know.”

I opened my eyes again and stared at the closed door.

Keeping this from Damon already felt wrong, but I couldn’t keep living like this. I needed to

put an end to what was happening to me before it consumed me.

I looked toward the window. The forbidden zone lay somewhere beyond the borders. Somewhere no Alpha ruled. Somewhere a witch who understood ancient bloodlines waited.

Hope stirred within me. Maybe Mara could help me put an end to all of this. Maybe she could

give me back the one thing I had been losing piece by piece, control over myself.

I glanced toward the bedroom door. Damon had no idea. Tomorrow, before sunrise, Noah.

and I would leave Grayson territory without telling him. And whatever waited beyond the border, I was ready to face it.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 398

Aria’s POV

Points

Noah and I set out on the journey the next day. The forest seemed to grow quieter the deeper we

went.

Lydia stirred inside me. We’re close. I can smell something strange.

I drew in a slow breath through my nose. There it was. Smoke. It was not the ordinary scent of a campfire. This smelled bitter, mixed with herbs and something metallic that prickled against the back of my throat.

“That’s it,” I whispered.

Noah nodded. We continued forward until the trees suddenly opened into a small clearing.
A

crooked wooden house stood in the middle of it. It looked as though it had been there for centuries.

Moss covered the roof, vines crawled up the walls, and bundles of dried herbs hung from the

porch. Strange symbols had been carved into the wooden posts surrounding the entrance.

My pulse quickened.

“This has to be the place.” Noah studied the house. “Stay behind me.”

There was something in his voice that made me stop arguing. We approached the house cautiously. Noah raised his hand and knocked. Nothing happened.

He knocked again. “Is anyone there?”

The door flew open. A woman stood in the doorway. She was older than I expected, with long silver hair and eyes so dark they seemed almost black.

Her gaze moved from Noah to me. The moment her eyes landed on me, her expression changed. Her nostrils flared. Then her eyes narrowed.

“Vampire.” The word was barely a whisper.

My stomach dropped. Before I could react, she thrust her hand toward me. Power exploded through the clearing. I was thrown backward.

“Aria!”

Noah moved faster than I could think. He stepped directly in front of me just as another burst of energy tore through the air. The impact sent him crashing sideways.

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“Noah!” I screamed.

He landed hard against the ground. A sharp gasp escaped him. Then I saw the blood. His left arm had been cut open from his shoulder nearly to his elbow. Blood soaked through his sleeve, dripping onto the leaves beneath him.

My heart slammed against my ribs. “You’re hurt.”

Noah gritted his teeth as he pushed himself upright. “I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding a lot.”

“I said I’m fine.”

The witch stepped forward, her hand still raised. “What is a vampire doing in my home?”

“I’m not a vampire,” I said.

Her eyes flashed. “I can smell it on you.”

I took a step forward. “My name is Aria Grayson. I’m a werewolf.”

The witch’s expression remained cold. “A werewolf carrying vampire blood.”

“I never wanted it. It just happens to exist in my bloodline.”

“That does not matter.”

Noah moved in front of me again despite the blood running down his arm. “Listen to us.”

The witch’s gaze snapped toward him. “You have five seconds.”

Noah swallowed and forced himself to stand straight. “We came because we need your help.”

“I help no one who walks into my home smelling like a vampire.”

“Noah,” I whispered.

He ignored me. “There is vampire blood inside her,” he continued. “It is supposed to be dormant but got activated after her encounter with a vampire. She hasn’t lost her wolf. We’re trying to find a way to remove the vampire bloodline before it takes hold completely.”

The witch stared at me. For a moment, something flickered across her face. It looked like interest. Then it disappeared.

Noah stepped forward. "There has to be something you can do."

The witch was silent. Then she said, "There is."

My breath caught. "What?"

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She looked directly into my eyes. "There is a ritual capable of stripping a vampire bloodline from a living body."

Hope surged through me so quickly it almost hurt. "You can help me?"

"No, I won't help you."

The single word crushed that hope just as quickly. I stared at her. "Why?"

"Because I don't help people who have touched vampires."

"I didn't ask to be infected. I am still a werewolf."

"For now. It won't take long before you lose your wolf nature."

My fingers curled into fists. The witch looked at Noah. "Take her away."

Noah's jaw tightened. "We came here because she's running out of time."

"Then let time take its course."

My chest tightened. "You know what will happen if the vampire bloodline spreads."

"I know exactly what will happen."

"Then why won't you help me?"

The witch's expression remained completely emotionless. "Because I have seen what vampires

tied to them in any way will get no help from me."

“I didn’t choose this!” My voice echoed through the clearing.

The witch didn’t even blink. “Leave.”

Noah stepped forward. “Please, help us.”

Her eyes flashed. The air around us trembled. “Do not make me ask twice.”

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 399

Axia’s POV

Points

Noah looked at me. There was frustration in his eyes, but he knew there was nothing more we

could do. He lowered his voice. “Come on.”

I didn’t move. I pleaded with the witch. “Please help me. I don’t want to become a vampire.”

She turned away from us. “Then go find someone willing to trust a creature carrying vampire

blood.” The door slammed shut.

Silence filled the clearing. I stared at the closed door, barely breathing. Then Noah touched my

shoulder. “Aria.”

I looked at him. Blood was still running down his arm. “We should go.”

I glanced at his wound. "You took that attack for me. You could have been seriously hurt."

He shrugged despite the pain. "It is nothing. I've been hurt worse."

"That doesn't make this okay." I glanced back at the woman's door. "Let's get out of here."

The moment we were far enough from the witch's dwelling, Noah stopped beneath a large oak tree and leaned against the trunk. "Sit down."

He looked at me. "I'm fine."

"You're bleeding all over the forest."

He glanced at his arm, then gave me a resigned look. He finally lowered himself onto a fallen log. I crouched in front of him and pulled the small first-aid pouch from my bag.

The cut on his left arm was deeper than I'd initially realized. The witch's magic had sliced through his clothes and skin with frightening precision. I cleaned the wound carefully before wrapping the

bandage around his arm.

Once the bandage was secured, I sat back on my heels. "It should hold until we get somewhere with proper medical supplies."

Noah flexed his fingers. "Thank you."

I nodded and started packing everything away. The image of the witch's face returned to my mind. Her eyes, her disgust, her certainty that there was a way to remove the vampire bloodline from me. My chest tightened.

Lydia stirred. She knows something.

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I know.

Then why are we leaving?

I stared toward the direction of the witch's dwelling. Because she doesn't want to help us.

That has never stopped you before.

I almost smiled. You make me sound reckless.

You are reckless.

I ignored her.

Noah noticed my expression. “You’re thinking about what she said, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.”

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He leaned forward, resting his good arm on his knee. “If she claims a method exists, then it exists.

I looked at him. “You believe her?”

“I believe she knew exactly what I was asking about.” His gaze hardened. “She didn’t hesitate when

I mentioned removing the vampire bloodline. She knew what I meant. That wasn’t a guess.”

He let out a sigh. “I think if we keep persuading her, she might eventually cave.”

I shook my head. “No. We don’t need to approach her again.”

Noah frowned. “Aria, she might be the only person who knows how to help you.”

“She confirmed the method exists. That’s enough.”

I stood and brushed the dirt from my clothes.

Noah stared at me as though I’d lost my mind. “Enough?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Noah looked confused. “How can knowing there is a method be enough when she refused to tell us what it is?”

“Because now I know I’m not fighting something impossible.”

I looked down at my hands. For days, I’d been carrying the fear that there might not be a solution except the treatment that had a 10% chance of working. But now I knew there was

another possibility. There was a way to strip the vampire bloodline out. It was out there, somewhere.

I just had to find it.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 400

Aria's POV

I glanced toward the sky. The sunlight was already beginning to fade, casting long shadows across the forest. My stomach tightened. I needed to get back. Damon couldn't know I'd been out.

I picked up my bag and turned to Noah. "We need to leave."

Noah studied my face before nodding. "You're worried about getting back before Damon notices you're gone?"

I looked toward the path leading out of the forest. "Yes. I need to be back before dark."

He gave a quiet nod. "Then let's move."

By the time I reached the estate, the sun was already sinking behind the trees. I quickened my pace, my boots barely slowing as I crossed the grounds.

The moment I passed through the perimeter, the familiar pull of the pack's territory settled over my skin. Wolves moved through the grounds, guards patrolled the entrances, and the distant sounds of training drifted from the eastern field. Everything looked normal.

I had barely stepped inside the main building when I felt him.

Damon.

His Alpha presence pressed against mine before I even saw him, heavy and unmistakable. My steps slowed as I made my way toward my room.

He was standing inside, his arms crossed over his chest. His expression was cold, but it was the stillness in his eyes that made my instincts tighten.

“Where were you?”

I stopped just inside the doorway. There was something dangerous beneath the calmness of his voice. “I stepped out to handle some pack work.”

His eyes narrowed. “What pack work?”

“Something that needed my attention.” I held his gaze. “Why are you interrogating me?”

“Because you disappeared. You left secretly without telling me or anyone else where you were going.”

I felt irritation rise in my chest. “I don’t have to report every step I take to anyone, Damon. I am the Alpha of this pack.”

His jaw tightened. For a moment, neither of us moved. The silence stretched between us, charged with the tension of two wolves refusing to back down.

Then he spoke quietly. “You’ve been meeting Noah.”

My stomach dropped.

So he knew.

Lydia immediately stiffened.

He’s angry.

I forced my expression to remain calm.

Damon pushed away from the wall. “I’ve known for a while.” –

I folded my arms, feigning innocence. “What exactly does that have to do with any of this?”

He took a step closer. “He came this morning, Aria. A guard saw you sneaking out with him.” His jaw tightened. “Do you actually expect me to believe you’ve been meeting him repeatedly for innocent reasons?”

My temper flared. “What exactly are you accusing me of?”

His eyes burned into mine. “You tell me.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “You’ve been suspicious of me?”

His nostrils flared. “Shouldn’t I be? You’ve been meeting Noah in your room, and today you disappeared with him. Then you come back expecting me not to question it.”

I could feel Lydia pacing beneath my skin, her claws scraping against the edges of my control.

He’s angry.

So am I.

Damon stepped closer. “Have you been unfaithful to me?”

The words hit harder than I expected.

For a second, I couldn’t believe he’d actually asked me that. Then anger exploded through me.

“How dare you?”

“I need an answer.”

“You don’t get to stand there and accuse me of betraying you because you don’t like the fact that I have

secrets.”

His expression darkened. “What secrets?”

“That’s none of your business.”

His eyes flashed. “I’m your mate, Aria.”

“And I’m still my own person.”

The words hung heavily between us.

His chest rose and fell. Mine did the same. The mate bond pulsed violently between us, reacting to every surge of anger, every ounce of hurt neither of us was willing to acknowledge.

Chapter 400-

Damon stepped closer. I refused to move.

“You don’t trust me enough to tell me what’s going on?”

I laughed bitterly. “Trust you? How do you expect me to trust a supposed mate who just accused me of sleeping with another man?”

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