

Chapter Thirteen

Jules

The sun is just beginning to rise when I finally stir from sleep.

True to his word, Dimitri roused me twice in the middle of the night, our bodies moving together in a dreamy haze. Slow. Tender. As if we had all the time in the world, which I suppose we do.

The thought tugs a smile from my lips, and I curl my toes into the mattress. I couldn't have slept for more than a few hours, but I feel lazy and euphoric as I roll over and reach for Dimitri.

My hand brushes over cool empty sheets, and I sit up in bed. Dimitri is slouched in the partially broken chair where I bound him, his laptop open on his knees.

The bluish glow from the screen illuminates the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw, and for a moment, I just stare at him.

"Working already?" I ask, hoping I can entice him back to bed.

"I was just answering a few emails," he says. "Nothing —"

Dimitri's brows pull together as he breaks off, and his expression turns steely. He sits up straighter and clicks furiously at the computer, his eyes moving rapidly back and forth as he reads whatever he found.

"What's wrong?" I ask, pulling the covers up to my chest as the postcoital haze ebbs away.

He shakes his head once, a muscle working in his jaw. "Those fucking pricks."

"What?" I just stare at him in confusion, and Dimitri lets out a frustrated growl.

"I can't *believe* they ran this fucking article — all because I punched that pretentious asshole Gray!"

Before I can say or do anything, Dimitri explodes to his feet. His laptop goes flying, and I flinch. It lands upside down on the rug.

"What article?" I ask, my gut clenching with dread as I slide out from under the covers, pulling a sheet tight around me.

Dimitri is too incensed to speak. I can practically feel the rage pouring off him.

I bend down to pick up his expensive laptop, wincing when I realize that the hinge holding the two halves together is a little loose. The screen is cracked, so half the article is obscured, but it looks to be an article in some online tech gossip publication.

I don't have to read the article to understand what's got Dimitri so angry — just the headline. *Maid in Aspen.*

Below the splashy text are two photos — one of me walking into the gala on Dimitri's arm and another of Dimitri and Ian Gray mid-brawl.

Somebody seated behind us must have snapped the photo. Opportunistic bastards.

My gaze travels down to the caption below the photos, and my stomach clenches.

Has Lazos finally lost it? The billionaire founder of Nesteg appeared at the Tech Today gala with hired help for arm candy and assaulted a prominent influencer.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, bile burning my insides as a few snippets of text catch my eye.

The woman in question, our source confirms, is none other than Lazos's live-in maid . . . Apparently, the tech mogul has resorted to bribing the help to accompany him to events.

"It's not so bad," I lie, my skin heating with rage. "I've never even *heard* of this site."

"Every tech and finance executive in the country reads this daily," he growls. "And it's only a matter of time before the bigger outlets pick up the story."

I shut my mouth as Dimitri begins to pace, the vein in his temple throbbing. My stomach keeps twisting into tighter and tighter knots, and I have no idea what to say.

"Somebody was bound to report on the incident with Gray," I whisper. "That place was crawling with journalists."

"It's not the part about Gray I'm worried about."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I instinctively wrap my arms around my middle. "That's what's bothering you?" I blurt. "That they learned you brought your *maid*?"

"Yes." He shakes his head. "No. I don't know."

"Because I *am* a maid," I say, fisting the sheet tighter and lifting my chin.

"I thought I made it clear last night that you are officially retired." Dimitri shoots me a sideways look, and I feel my cheeks heat at the memory of his hand on my throat.

I swallow. "That's not your decision to make."

“I won’t have you scrubbing floors,” he says in a dismissive tone. “It’s beneath you.”

“It’s a *living*,” I growl.

Dimitri gives a small shake of his head. “They didn’t need to report on it.”

“I’m not ashamed of what I do,” I snap, my neck flushing with hurt and rage. “And if you are, then —”

“I’m not *ashamed* of you,” Dimitri grits out.

“Really?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and sticking out my chin. “Because it sure seems like you are. That’s why you’re mad about the article, right? Now the whole world knows I’m your maid.”

“What? No.” He thrusts a hand toward his broken laptop, which I’ve set on the edge of the bed. “I’m pissed that the article makes it sound as though I took advantage of you. The way they described our arrangement, it’s . . . fucked up.”

“Really?” I ask. “You’re not just upset that they implied you had to pay your *maid* to be your date?”

“It’s not about you being my maid!” Dimitri yells — his voice so angry that I take a step back.

His chest is heaving with every breath, and there’s a manic look in his eyes that I haven’t seen before. They’re that molten gold color again, but his face has gone ashen. He’s quivering with the force of his rage, and his muscles look as though they’re straining against his skin.

An involuntary tic makes his chin jerk, and for the first time since I’ve known Dimitri, I’m a little afraid of him.

“You’d better go,” he growls, staring at the floor. His voice comes out low and dangerous, but it only makes me angrier.

“What? No!” He doesn’t get to come crawling home with an apology, make love to me all night, and then dismiss me at the first sign of trouble. We’re in this together — whatever *this* is.

“Get — out,” he rumbles, his jaw clenching so hard I’m worried he might crack a tooth. “Before I do something I regret.”

Something like remorse breaks in his voice, but I don’t let him off the hook.

“You don’t get to do that,” I shoot back, taking a tentative step toward him. “I’m not your employee anymore, remember? You don’t just get to send me away.”

“I said — *get out!*” Dimitri bellows, all traces of his earlier tenderness gone.

I open my mouth with a furious retort burning on the tip of my tongue, but when the light falls across Dimitri’s face, I see that something’s really wrong with him. His spine has gone stiff, fists clenched at his sides, and his shoulders are hunched as though bracing for an attack.

I’m unprepared for the agonized growl that rips from his throat — or the sickening crack of joints.

I stare as Dimitri doubles over in pain, his face twisted in concentration.

Panicked, I take another step forward, but then Dimitri’s head snaps up, and I catch a glimpse of long white fangs.

My stomach lurches, and I jerk back, watching in horror as he bends double once again. I can see every bump in his spine straining at the skin on his back. He squeezes his eyes shut as another spasm hits him, and tears blur my vision when I hear the unmistakable crunch of bone.

The pain forces Dimitri to his knees, his whole body undulating in a retching motion as muscles ripple beneath his skin.

“I’m calling nine-one-one!” I say, my voice surprisingly steady despite my rising panic.

“*Don’t!*” he rasps, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes as though that one syllable cost him everything.

It’s then that I realize Dimitri’s body is changing. His spine arches as he writhes on all fours, his muscles and tendons rippling. What looks like fur is sprouting all over his body, and his facial bones seem distorted.

I stagger back and hit the nightstand, gripping the bedpost for dear life as I stare down at Dimitri. A feeling of helplessness swamps me, melding with the terror, as Dimitri’s fingers curl and shorten.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to block out the sound of his agonized cries and the horrible snap of bone.

This is all a dream. It *has* to be a dream. There’s no way this is real.

When I open my eyes, Dimitri is gone. In his place is a huge gray wolf.

For several seconds, all I hear is the animal’s pants and the thud of my own heart. My palms are sweaty, my legs are locked, and my lungs don’t seem capable of inflating fully.

All this time, I thought Dimitri was bullshitting about the bear in his study, but there's a *wolf* in his fucking bedroom. A fucking *huge* wolf.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, I start to inch around the bed. I half expect the thing to pounce, but it just stands there — staring.

I chance a glance into the animal's eyes and see Dimitri staring back at me.

No. Not Dimitri — a wolf. A wolf with glowing amber eyes. Eyes that look remarkably like Dimitri's.

But how is that even possible?

Even though I saw Dimitri shift with my own eyes, my logical brain won't accept that it's him. Werewolves aren't *real*.

Then the huge predator blinks, and my stupid human instincts finally kick in. Clutching the sheet around my middle, I turn toward the door and run.



DIMITRI

It's a good forty minutes before I'm calm enough to shift back and take stock of the damage I've caused.

The bedclothes are in ribbons. The bedpost closest to me is chewed to bits. Broken glass glistens from where I broke the lamp on my nightstand, and the room is covered in a thin layer of goose down.

Most fully grown shifters don't behave like destructive puppies, but I've been suppressing my wolf for far too long. I haven't been shifting. Haven't been running in wolf form or hunting wild game. And when a shifter suppresses his wolf, the beast always finds a way to act out.

Losing it on Ian Gray should have been a clear warning that I was no longer in control of my wolf. But I was so caught up in my feelings for Jules that I ignored just how far gone I was.

When I read the demeaning things that journalist wrote about Jules, it snapped the last of my self-control.

I don't know which is worse — Jules thinking I'm ashamed of her or the look on her face when she saw me shift. As long as I live, I'll never forget the raw terror in her eyes — or the disgust at watching all my bones break and reshape themselves.

But worse than Jules's reaction was that I let it happen in the first place. I denied the beast within me too long, and I lost control.

I could have killed her. It could have happened when I was asleep or while we were having sex. So close to Jules's tender human flesh, I could have eviscerated her in an instant.

Self-loathing suffocates me like a lead blanket as I sit slumped against my bedroom wall. I never meant for this to happen — never meant for her to find out so soon. I thought I had time — months, maybe years — before I'd be forced to tell her the truth.

Deep down, I knew Jules would never accept that side of me. I should never have allowed myself to get so close — never allowed myself to entertain the possibility that we could ever be together.

Jules is human, and I'm a monster.

The sun is low in the sky when a noise finally rouses me from my fog of misery. I jerk my head toward the door, thinking it might be Jules, but it's only Beckett.

He's dressed in a crisp charcoal suit, and he's holding a plate of food. My stomach rumbles at the scent of ribs, but I don't lunge for the meat.

"What the fuck happened?" Beckett snaps, his nostrils flaring as he surveys my bedroom.

I let out a heavy sigh, hanging my head in shame. I can't even look at Beckett. "What the fuck does it look like?"

"I thought . . ." Beckett trails off, and I can tell he's choosing his words carefully. "It just seemed like things were getting better ever since Jules came around.

"Jules is part of the problem," I snarl, still not meeting his gaze.

"I don't understand."

"I can't have her!" I yell. "What don't you understand? I can't *have* her like this!"

I'm on my feet, blood boiling in my veins. I feel like tearing the room apart all over again.

Beckett's eyebrows are nearly at his hairline, but he doesn't cower. That's one thing I've always loved about Beckett. He's never been afraid of me.

“Well, no,” he concedes, running a hand through his hair. “You’d need to get a handle on . . . all of that.” He gestures broadly at my naked form, not the destroyed room, which I almost find hilarious.

I shake my head, too exhausted to fight, and I remember I haven’t eaten.

“You should have seen her,” I say in a hoarse whisper. “The way she looked at me . . .”

“Well, yeah . . .” Beckett shrugs. “It was probably a bit of a shock.”

I try to swallow, but my throat is sticky. I desperately need a drink of water. “It was more than that,” I manage finally, flicking my eyes up to meet his.

Beckett’s gaze is steady but unsympathetic. I can tell he’s sick of my bullshit. Hell, so am I.

“She was . . . terrified.” I shake my head. “There’s no way I’m ever going to fix this.”

“Do you *want* to fix it?” Beckett asks, leveling me with that stern look of his. For a second, I see the sniper he once was — the man who could snuff out a life from eight hundred yards away and not bat an eye. “Because sometimes it seems like you’d rather just go on being a fucking miserable bastard on a crash course to self-destruction.”

I suck in a breath, unable to speak around the hard lump in my throat. In this moment, I don’t feel like Beckett’s alpha. I feel like a scared pup.

“She’s my mate,” I rasp. “My fucking *fated* mate.”

Beckett’s eyebrows shoot up, and all the blood drains from his face. For several heartbeats, he just stands there — breathing. Then he goes to sit on the edge of the bed, setting the plate of ribs beside him.

His forehead creases as he processes that information, and I can tell he’s just as shocked as I was. “I always thought that was a myth.”

“I know.”

“Well, shit.”

“I *know*.” I shake my head. I don’t have to tell Beckett what that bond means — or what it means to try to live without it. “I blew it, man. She was so scared she ran from me, and I . . .” I finally release the knot of shame that’s been twisting my guts ever since. “I didn’t go after her.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” says Beckett after a pause, the corner of his mouth twitching in a smirk.

My heart gives a treacherous leap, and I want to punch it back into place. I want to punch Beckett, too, for the glimmer of amusement dancing in his eyes.

“Jules hasn’t gone anywhere.”

“What?” I ask, the word barely a whisper. He has to be fucking with me. It’s too good to be true. But my pack brother wouldn’t do that. “What do you mean?”

“She’s waiting for you downstairs.”