

## CHAPTER-20

Thomas looked out at the white.

Winter at his grandfather's differed from at home. The snow was white, not the gray-brown that it quickly turned into in the city. Other than as it fell and an hour or two after, white snow wasn't a thing.

The car was silent. Nearly sixteen hours on the road was enough to drain anyone, even Thomas, in spite of sleeping for part of it. They'd taken turns driving, except for Roland, who, even now that he had his license, their parents wouldn't let drive in winter conditions yet.

There had been two pit stops, both mandated by Nadia having difficulty keeping her hands off Eric. Judith had offered they'd just switch, with the parents in the back, but Roland and Thomas had both protested. The one time, during the drive, the two of them had spoken together, if not at each other.

Now, they were on the last stretch, south out of Bozeman, on ever smaller roads with ever fewer houses further and further away from said road.

The property was announced by an open gate with a large sign over it with the family name, Hertz. It was reminiscent of cattle ranches from shows, even if his grandfather had never gotten close to live cattle, as far as Thomas knew.

The ranch-style house came into view, with the smattering of pines and firs around it, growing thicker at the back, before joining the national park the property was close to.

The older rat waited on the porch, wearing a heavy jacket and steaming cup in hand.

"Glad you guy made it!" he yelled as they exited the car.

Thomas cursed as the cold cut through his winter jacket and

jeans. When had the weather turned so cold?

“Wouldn’t miss this, Dad,” Eric called back.

Roland was already at the back, pulling a suitcase out by the time Thomas got there, and headed for their grandfather before he’d located his among the jigsaw that was their belonging.

“How have you been, Magnus?” Nadia asked, hugging her father-in-law, and Thomas used the time to sneak by and avoid the bone-crushing hug his grandfather always gave. “Do you have one of your girlfriends over this time?”

“I’m taking a break from them over the holidays.”

Thomas’s mother laughed and her reply was lost as Thomas headed deeper in and away from the cold. The living room was large, compared to that of his house, with a fieldstone fireplace and wood stacked next to it. The kitchen was on the right, and deeper in the house, with a dining table that could accommodate everyone in the Hertz family.

On the left was the hall leading to the bedrooms. Roland was in the first one and Thomas went past the next, hoping Judith would take it. Neither Thomas and Roland wanted to be next to their parents. If Magnus didn’t have a girlfriend over, then it was on less possibility for him to have to listen in to rutting.

He snorted. Rutting, he was now down to thinking of it as some animalistic act. It seemed all the stocking up he’d done before the trip wasn’t going to be of any help. At least he still had his hand.

He left the bedroom and returned to the living room to his parents in conversation with Magnus, each with a steaming cup of hot chocolate in hand.

“Thomas, how is university? I hear you’ve joined Sigma Theta Gamma.” His grandfather grinned. “Having fun yet?”

Thomas’s ears burned. “Does everyone know about their reputation?” He took the offered cup, then submitted to the hug. At least now he could return the favor and elicited a surprised look from

his grandfather.

"Anyone who's been to university has heard of them," the old rat replied. "They're an institution among the frats." He grinned. "You can't imagine the trouble they had back in the twentieth century, when it was 'gay is a sin' nonsense. If not for how much money the frat put into the university they were part of, I doubt they'd still exist."

"Thomas has managed to maintain good grades," Eric said, "despite the distraction the men there have to be causing him."

Nadia elbowed her husband. "Oh, don't say that like it's a bad thing. Thomas is now living up the standard we're worked so hard to set." She grinned at her son. "Don't slow down."

Thomas started at the liquid in his cup and decided he should have stayed at the frat with the others.

"Roland, how is your football career?" Magnus asked.

"I made MVP for the last three games," he answered. "Coach says that if we continue playing like this, we're sure to make the playoffs."

"Roland's a sure bet for the NFL," Eric said proudly.

"And how about the romantic life?" Magnus asked. "You're sixteen, so have you found yourself a girlfriend or three? Or are you interested in guys? Or both?"

Roland shook his head and hunched in on himself. Thomas had to fight the urge to come to his brother's defense. Magnus was as interested in their sex life as their father was in their academic one. Maybe obsessing about other people's lives was a Hertz trait and Thomas would inherit it in some fashion?

God, he hoped not.

He exchanged a roll of the eyes with Roland, then sat before the fire to soak in as much of the heat as possible.

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Thomas joined his family on the porch as a car came to a stop next to theirs. Corina jumped out. "Dad!" and ran to hug Magnus.

The rat behind the wheel took longer. Looking out mournfully before shutting it down and opening the door. He put on an extra heavy jacket before taking the bags out of the car and joining them.

"Dad, this is the man I told you about." Corina flashed her engagement ring.

Magnus looked Ettore over critically. "Isn't that a lot of layer?" he asked.

Thomas groaned. "Can we do this inside, where it's warm?" the extra wool shirt he had one wasn't helping.

"Corina, are you sure?" Magnus asked. "He looks on the thin side. Is he going to be able to carry you over the threshold?"

Corina pushed her father inside the house. "He is plenty strong for me. Inside, I'm with Thomas. There's a reason I moved south the instant I was old enough. I swear, you're some sort of arctic rat."

Magnus shook his head. "I knew I should have taken you kids to the father country. You'd know what cold is if you spent a winter in the north of Germany."

"You guys are from Germany?" Ettore asked. "Do you know the Brukammers?"

"I know of them," Magnus said, while his children rolled their eyes.

"Honey, our family's *from* Germany, it's been over a century since a Hertz called it home."

Ettore seemed surprised. "But you still know them?"

"I know of them," Magnus said. "As heavily involved in manufacturing as they are, it was impossible for me not the ear of the family. I was a financial adviser in my old life."

“Old life?” Ettore asked.

“Before I retired,” Magnus answered, and Eric snorted, then wiped his muzzle as his father glared.

“Yeah, sure,” Eric said. “Retired.” He looked to Ettore. “My dad’s a workaholic.”

“Says the son of mine who barely sleeps,” Magnus replied. “Do you manage to keep him from heading out to his classroom before the sun comes up?” He asked Nadia.

“Oh God, yes, she does,” Judith replied. “The two of them are like an alarm clock. Every God damned morning.”

“You’re just jealous you don’t get to compete with them,” Roland said.

“I would if they’d let me keep a guy overnight.”

“Can we not talk about my parents having sex?” Thomas asked.

“What do you do for a living, Ettore?” Magnus asked, smirking at Thomas.

“I’m something of a corporate troubleshooter,” the rat answered. “My family owns a chain of Hotel, and I go around making sure they are performing.”

“And before you ask, Dad, Ettore performs quite well.”

The old rat smiled. “Of that, I have no doubt. No Hertz has ever picked a mate who wasn’t able to keep up.”

“I thought it was the Royers who were the overly sexed ones,” Ettore said.

“You’re a rat, aren’t you?” Magnus asked. “Are you telling me your family isn’t sexually active?”

Ettore’s smiled turned into a smirk. “Oh, my family is very sexually active. You could even say we bring the curve way up high.”

Magnus raised his hot chocolate. "To being a rat." The adults joined in and Thomas could already see the stay being hell on him. He'd now have to deal with two couples who were going to be loud. He just knew it. At least his grandfather didn't have a girl over.

"So, you have a good job, you keep my daughter satisfied." Magnus nodded thoughtfully. "But I do have to wonder, can you provide for her?"

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Thomas walked behind his grandfather, father and Ettore, his boots crunching the layer of hardened snow before sinking to his ankle. Roland walked on the opposite side from the group. He and Thomas had argued they should stay at the house as loudly as Corina had argued she should come with the men. After all, she was a better shot than Eric ever was. They'd all lost. Corina because Magnus had explained that this was about seeing how good of a hunter Ettore was and giving him the opportunity to answer questions without worrying about what she would think of them. The boys, because their grandfather said so, that was why.

So, they'd bundled in the heaviest, warmest clothing available, Thomas having to borrow some from his grandfather. He and his parents had forgotten that his bulking up meant some of the clothing he'd brought no longer fit him. And followed Magnus as he led them into the denser trees behind the property.

Within half an hour, Magnus had located hares, and Ettore brought down two before the group scattered, impressing the older man. Eric brought down an owl, then they were moving again. Magnus asking the questions that would make an inquisitor proud. Did he really need to know how often a day Ettore and Corina did it? And did Ettore have to be so willing to answer?

When the rat started describing how he and his fiancée performed, Thomas decided he had enough and headed in another direction. He was familiar with the woods from multiple trips to his grandfather over the years. And this destination had been marked in his memory by how he'd found it.

A ten-year-old boy getting separated from his family during a late fall hunting trip didn't get forgotten easily.

He found the grotto and felt the warmth as soon as he stepped in, enough he unzipped his jacket. There were no hot springs in the area as far as Thomas had uncovered, but he suspected one of them ran under the ground and was the reason for the heat. His breath still fogged, but it had made that late fall day when he'd taken refuge from the cold bearable until his family found him.

He sat on the stone outcropping and rested against the wall. He loved his family, but he was happy for the silence. He closed his eyes and soaked in his surroundings.

The silence wasn't absolute. Birds sang, animals ran and caused the snow to crack. A coyote howled in the distance.

Little by little, Thomas relaxed. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been. This was a family trip. He shouldn't be tense. But with his father's talk of his academic performance, his parents over sharing, now Corina and Ettore doing the same, and Roland in such proximity.

Why couldn't he just stop thinking of his brother that way? They were brothers, for God's sake. Laurence mentioning he and Roland should fuck hadn't helped. Being stuck in the car hadn't helped, and with Ettore and Corina taking the bedroom Thomas had claimed for himself, and being relegated to sharing the one Roland had...

"The bed's big enough for the two of you," Magnus has said, unconcerned, when Thomas had pointed out there was only one bed.

The moment Thomas rolled over, he was going to smack his brother with his erection and what a mess that was going to be. And not the good kind.

Damn it. Even on his own, he couldn't seem to stop.

The crunching of snow pulled him out of his thoughts, someone approaching. Solitude wasn't so precious it couldn't be interrupted, it seemed.

Eric became visible. "I figured I'd find you here." He looked around and smile. "You were curled up over there. You'd managed to fall asleep."

"I'd cried myself out," Thomas said. "I guess there's only so much I could feel before exhaustion took me."

Eric sat next to him. "How are you doing? You've seemed tense driving up here. If you're worried about your grades, you don't have to be, you—"

"Will you stop it?" Thomas sighed. "Can't you just stop being my adviser for like five second?"

"I'm not talking as your adviser, son. This is me as your father saying you are going—"

"And you don't get how that's even worse, do you?"

The confusion in his father's eyes was answer enough.

"Didn't you wonder why I've been working so damned hard to avoid you at school?"

Eric frowned. "I just figured you were busy with your studying."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Yeah sure, and other stuff, but I've been running in the opposite direction the instant I saw you."

"Why?"

Thomas stared at his father. "Why? Because I don't want this." He motioned between them. "This constant hovering, looking over my grades asking what I want. You didn't even ask if I wanted you as my adviser, you just pulled strings and made it happen. Fuck, did you even ask Roland if he wants a second coach?"

"I..." Eric trailed off. "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"Because you never bothered asking," Thomas snapped, then sighed. "Sorry."



"I'm trying to do what's best for you."

"How do you know what's best for me, dad, when I don't even know what I want?" he sighed again, then they were silent.

"University," Eric said, "did you go because I pushed you to it?"

"No, I'd have gone, anyway. It's not like I can get much of a job these days without proper schooling. Maybe I'd have taken a year to figure myself out instead of going there directly. Maybe I'd know what I want to do with myself if I had. Now I feel like I'm just wasting time, since I can't find a major I like."

They were quiet again.

"You do know there's nothing wrong with a liberal arts major, right?" Eric asked.

"If I'm okay with minimum wage, I guess."

"Don't be like that, Thomas. We've had presidents who had a liberal art's major. I'll admit it doesn't make your future easier, but it doesn't end it either. And I'm sorry for pushing you so hard. I thought it would help you get further. I'll do my best to give you more space from now on."

"And Roland?"

Eric smiled. "Still looking after your brother, despite the tension between you two. Yes, me and your mother have noticed it. I'll talk with him. But football was something he loved before I got involved."

"But an NFL career?" Thomas asked.

Eric was thoughtful. "Alright, maybe I am pushing a little too hard there. But in my defense, his coach thinks he had what it takes."

"He's a Hertz, he'll excel at anything he puts his mind to, won't he?"

"So will you, Son."

Thomas nodded. If only there was something he wanted to put his mind toward. Other than sex. Really, his mind was already plenty focused on that.

“How about we rejoined the others before they launch a search party?”

Thomas nodded, and they left the grotto.

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“Not a bad hunt,” Magnus said as they approached the house. “We’ll make a great hunter out of you yet, Roland.”

Thomas’s brother was grinning from ear to ear, holding the hare he’d taken down. Ettore had been the one to give him instructions, another test his grandfather gave the future son-in-law.

Thomas hadn’t killed anything. His mind had been on what his father said about figuring out what he wanted and that he’d be good at it, no matter what it was.

“The hunters have returned,” Nadia yelled from the back porch. “And they bring food.” She sat in a chair, sun on her, and wrapped in blankets.

Corina stepped outside, arm fur red to her elbows. “I guess that can be for tomorrow, because I have tonight’s meat just about ready.”

“What happened?” Magnus asked, worried and hurrying.

Corina smiled. “While you brave men when out looking for food, food came looking for us.”

“Is everyone alright?”

“It’s just me and Nadia, Dad. And we’re fine.”

“She shot the cougar at what, three hundred feet?”

“Three-fifty,” Corina corrected.

## Faith

“One shot and down it went.”

Magnus’s smile was brighter than the sun. “That’s my girl.”:

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## CHAPTER 1.5-20

Thomas looked out at all the white.

Winter at his grandfather's was different from the city. Minneapolis wasn't the worst city on air pollution by any margin, but it still only took hours for fresh fallen snow to turn a grayish brown. Out here even day old snow looked fresher than anything he saw newly fallen on outside his window back home.

The car was silent. Nearly sixteen hours on the road was enough to drain anyone, even those like Thomas who managed to get in a nap. They'd taken turns driving, with the exception of Roland who still wasn't trusted in winter conditions no matter what his freshly issued license might claim.

There had been two pit stops, both mandated by Nadia having difficulty keeping her hands off Eric. Judith had suggested they just do it in the back seat, and in a rare case of brotherly unity both Roland and Thomas adamantly opposed the idea.

Now they were in the last stretch, south of Bozeman, moving down progressively smaller roads with the houses both fewer in number and farther from the road.

The property was marked by an open gate with a large sign over it that read Hertz. It was reminiscent of the old westerns grandpa liked to watch, though as far as Thomas knew grandpa had never gotten within ten feet of a cow much less Texas.

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The ranch style house came into view, with a smattering of pine and firs around it, growing thicker towards the back before joining the national park the property was adjacent to. An older man waited on the porch, wearing a heavy jacket and holding a steaming cup.

“Glad you guys made it!” he yelled as they exited the car.

Thomas cursed as the dry cold cut through his winter jacket and jeans. When had it gotten so cold?

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world, Dad,” Eric hollered back.

Roland was already at the back, pulling a suitcase out by the time Thomas got there, and was headed into the house well before Thomas found his own luggage in the jigsaw of belongings.

“How have you been, Magnus?” Nadia asked, hugged her father in law. Thomas used the distraction to sneak by, avoiding the bone crushing hug his grandfather always gave. “Do you have one of your girlfriends over this time?”

“Nah,” grandpa replied playfully, “I’m taking a break from them over the holidays.”

Thomas’s mother laughed, and her reply was lost as Thomas headed deeper into the house and away from the cold. The living room was large, with a fieldstone fireplace with wood stacked next to it. The kitchen was on the right, and deeper in the house was a dining table

that could accommodate everyone in the Hertz family.

On the left was the hall leading to the bedrooms. Roland was already in the first one, so Thomas went to the third. He hoped Judith would take the second, as neither he nor Roland wanted to be next to their parents. If Magnus didn't have a girlfriend over then it was possible he wouldn't have to listen to anyone rutting this vacation.

He snorted. Rutting. He was now down to thinking of it as some animalistic act. It seemed all the stocking up he'd done before the trip wasn't going to be of any help. At least he still had his hand.

He left the bedroom and returned to the living room to find his parents in conversation with Magnus, each with a steaming cup of hot chocolate in hand.

"Thomas, how is university? I hear you've joined Sigma Theta Gamma." His grandfather grinned. "Having fun yet?"

Thomas's ear's burned. "Does everyone know about their reputation?" He took the offered cup, then submitted to the hug. To both his and grandpa's surprise he didn't crack like a twig; one can sometimes forget how much one has bulked up when squeezed next to their behemoth brother.

"Anyone who's been to a university with one of their chapter houses knows of them," the old rat replied as he unzipped Thomas's jacket to check just how much his grandson had bulked up. "Back in the twentieth century they were basically the gay sanctuary of any campus, what with all that backward mindedness back then. One can

only imagine how much money their families tossed at the universities to allow them to exist.”

“Thomas has managed to maintain good grades,” Eric said, “Despite the distraction the men there have to be causing him.”

Nadia elbowed her husband. “Oh, don’t say that like it’s a bad thing. Thomas is now living up to the standard we worked so hard to set.” She grinned at her son. “Don’t slow down.”

Thomas felt like his ears were going to catch on fire as he stared at the cup of liquid in his hands to avoid making eye contact with anyone.

“Roland, how is your football career?” Magnus asked as he shifted attention to his other present grandson.

“I made MVP for the last three games,” he answered. “Coach says that if we continue playing like this, we’re sure to make the playoffs.”

“Roland’s a sure bet for the NFL,” Eric said proudly.

“And what about romance?” Magnus asked. “If you’re the star of the team you must have attracted the attention of a girl or three by now? Or maybe one of your fellow players?”

Roland shook his head and hunched in on himself, making

Grandpa move his attention to Judith who was more than happy to share everything. If the Royer side of the family was obsessed with sex, then the Hertz side had obsessions to optimize their children's lives. With dad it was academic, while grandpa was sexual. Needless to say he highly approved of Nadia.

Thomas was very glad being gay ment he wouldn't need to worry about finding out what his own form of overparenting would manifest as.

He exchanged a glance with Roland, and in a silent truce the two of them just faded into the background as the rest of the family talked.

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Hearing the commotion, Thomas joined the rest of his family on the porch as a car came to a stop next to theirs. Corina jumped out, "Dad!" and hit the ground running into Magnus's arms.

The rat behind the wheel took longer, looking out mournfully before shutting it down and opening the door. He put on an extra heavy jacket before taking the bags out of the car and joining them.

"Dad, this is the man I told you about," Corina said as she flashed her engagement ring.

Magnus looked Ettor over critically. "Isn't that a lot of layers?" He asked.



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Thomas whined. "Can we move this inside before we freeze our tails off." The extra wool shirts grandpa lent him wasn't helping.

"Corina, are you sure?" Magnus asked, ignoring his grandson. "He looks on the thin side. I don't know if he's going to be able to carry you over the threshold?"

Corina pushed her father inside the house. "He's plenty strong for me. Now inside. I swear you act like you're some kinda arctic rat."

Magnus shook his head. "I knew I should have taken you kids to the father country. You'd know what cold is if you spent a winter in the north of Germany."

"You guys are from Germany?" Ettore asked. "Do you know the Burkhammers?"

"I know of them," Magnus responded as his children rolled their eyes.

"Honey," Carina said, "Our family has some roots in Germany, but it's been over a century since any Hertz called it home."

Ettore seemed a bit surprised, "But, you still know the Brukammers?"

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“I said I know of them,” Magnus corrected, “I used to be a financial advisor, and knowing which industries were connected to the Burkammer was a critical part of analysing the German markets. Doubt that’s changed since I retired.”

Eric snorted, pausing to wipe his muzzle as his father glared at him. “With the way you still have your nose in the market, retired might be a strong word to use.” He looked at Ettore, “My dad’s a workaholic.”

“Says the son of mine who barely sleeps,” Magnus replied. Looking at Nadia he continued, “Has he managed to slip out of bed and get to work without waking you yet?”

“Not once,” Judith answered for her mother. “They’re like an alarm clock, only now it goes off an hour earlier so he can drive Roland to practice.”

Roland rolled his eyes, “Like we’d get any sleep if they allowed you to have guys stay overnight.”

Thomas covered his face, “Can we not add Judith’s love life on top of our parents, please?”

Magnus smirked a little at Thomas before turning his attention back to his future son in law. “What do you do for a living, Ettore?”

“I’m something of a corporate trouble-shooter,” the rat

answered. "My family owns a chain of hotels, and I go around making sure they are performing to our expectations."

"And before you ask, dad," Corina says as she clings onto Ettore, "Ettore performs quite well."

The old rat smiled, "Of that I had no doubt. No daughter of mine could settle for a man who couldn't keep up."

Ettore raised an eyebrow and glanced at Eric, "I thought the open sexual discussions was a Royer thing?"

Eric shrugged, "This is more of a dad thing." His ears flushed slightly as Nadia leaned up close to him. "Needless to say, he approved of my marriage."

"We're rats," Magnus stated, "A healthy sex life leads to a healthy life. Don't tell me your family are prudes, Ettore?"

Thomas almost choked on his own tongue, while Ettore just smiled. "Not at all. In fact you could even say we raise the curve up quite a bit."

Magnus raised his hot chocolate. "To being a rat." Only Thomas and Roland didn't join in. Thomas, as he watched his parents dash out of the room for a quickie, got the feeling peace and quiet wasn't going to be in the cards for the rest of the vacation.

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“So, you have a good job, and you keep my daughter satisfied,” Magnus nodded thoughtfully. “But I do have to wonder. Can you provide for her?”

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Thomas trudged along on the left flank of the wing formation the group of rats had formed, his boots crunching the layer of hardened snow before sinking to his ankle. Even bundled with clothes borrowed from grandpa, it was still freezing out here in the dense forest that lay behind grandpa’s property. Thomas was surprised at how many of his winter clothes didn’t fit him anymore; if Madoc really wanted him to get any bigger, he was going to have to chip in on the clothes budget.

On the opposite side of the formation, Roland trudged along. He and Thomas had argued about staying behind almost as hard as Corina had argued she should go with them. But this excursion was less about actual hunting and more about Mangus getting a feel for his future son in law without the presence of Corina. As for the boys, if their grandpa wanted them then the grandkids didn’t get much of a vote.

Judith must be so smug and warm right now .

Within half an hour, Magnus had located hares, and Ettore brought down two before the group scattered, impressing the older man. Eric brought down an owl, then they were moving again. Magnus was asking the kind of questions that would make an inquisitor proud. Did he really need to know how often a day Ettore and Corina did it? And did Ettore have to be so willing to answer?

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When the details of exactly how they performed started to get too much, Thomas checked out. He was familiar with the woods from eight years of hunting with his grandfather, and the destination Thomas was heading to was burned into his mind.

Ten years old. Separated from his family on his first ever time out in the woods with them. He was scared and frightened, mind filled with thoughts of never finding his family... and then he found the grotto.

Stepping into the small cave, Thomas felt the warmth right away. Finding a comfortable stone, he unzipped his jacket and sat down. There were no hot springs in the area according to the research Thomas had done online, but he suspected something was running just under this cave to create this sanctuary. It kept him warm and safe until his family could find him.

Leaning back against the wall, letting the silence soak in. He loved his family, but sometimes they just didn't know when to stop. Sometimes you just need to stop, and listen. Birds singing... animals cracking the snow as they run... a coyote howling in the distance.

Little by little, Thomas relaxed. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been. This was a family trip, he shouldn't be tense. But with his father's talk of his academic performance, his mother's oversharing, now Corina and Ettore doing the same, and Roland in such close proximity.

Why couldn't he just stop thinking of his brother that way? They were brothers. Not that family seemed to matter to the Rowlings

or the Mercier. Then being stuck in the car right next to him whenever it wasn't his turn to drive. And then finally he was forced to share Roland's room again when Ettore and Corina arrived . And worse they didn't have any air mattress or anything, just the one bed.

Thomas was going to roll over in the morning and smack his brother with his erection, and then things were going to explode. And not in a good way.

Damn it. Even in his sanctuary he couldn't seem to stop.

The crunching of snow pulled him out of his thoughts. Someone was approaching; solitude wasn't so precious it couldn't be interrupted it seemed.

With little delay, his father became visible in the entrance. "I figured I'd find you here." He looked around before pointing at a flat bit of rock, "You were curled up over there. You'd managed to fall asleep."

"I'd cried myself out," Thomas said, "I guess there's only so much I could feel before exhaustion took me."

Eric sat next to him. "How are you doing? You've seemed tense driving up here. If you're worried about your grades, you don't have to be. You--"

"Will you stop it?" Thomas closed his eyes and held his own head by the temples. "Can't you stop being my advisor for like five

seconds?"

"I'm not talking as your advisor, son." Eric said in his usual even tone. "This is me as your father saying you are doing-"

Thomas snapped his eyes open and looked directly at his father, "And you don't get how that's even worse, do you?"

The confusion in his father's eyes was answer enough.

Thomas sighed, and ran his hands over his face as he forced himself to calm down. "Twelve years. I spent all of grade school and highschool just doing fine. And then you were in my face reminding me how I had no idea what I was going to do with my life."

That Eric seemed prepared for, "Thomas, college is more work than highschool. Sure, the classes seem easy now but-"

"-things get exponentially harder as you're expected to both manage your time and retain and apply what you have learned in previous classes." Thomas finished in his father's monotone delivery. "It's not the lessons I have a problem with. It's the constant hovering over my shoulder trying to make sure I'm in the top of my class as if it will make up for not graduating highschool as valedictorian."

His father rebounded, "Son, just because Judith and Victor were both valedictorian doesn't mean-"

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“Well since you brought them up,” Thomas said, bouncing to his feet, “There’s something I really want to get off my chest.” He looked directly at his father, and from the face he was making Thomas knew Eric thought he knew what he was going to say. “I know you’re only treating me and Roland exactly like you treated Victor and Judith all their lives.”

That seemed to shock Eric slightly, “...Thomas, if you ever felt neglected growing up-”

“I was grateful!” Thomas shouted, before stopping himself and taking a deep breath. “OK... maybe that’s rose colored glasses talking, but still... I grew up with you dad. I know you have trouble focusing on more than one thing at a time, so the fact you were able to balance two kids is a miracle. I just never expected one of those kids to be me ...”

Eric was silent for a bit, and Thomas didn’t feel like poking a hornet nest so he just turned around. When Eric did speak up, “It snuck up on me. The fact that you were growing up.” Thomas turned around to see his father dreamily staring at the floor. “I was in the middle of helping Judith plan her graduate thesis and giving Victor advice on raising twins... and then suddenly there you were with a highschool diploma and a college acceptance letter. I always thought we’d have more time.”

Thomas sighed and ran a hand down his face. He... really didn’t know what he wanted to do. Both overall and right now; scream at him, comfort him... there just were no easy answers when it came to his father. “I do need someone pushing me, even Paul seems to realize that. But intensity aside, I don’t even know which direction I need to be pushed towards.”



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This father looked up at him with a melancholic grin, "I guess even a Liberal Arts degree needs to be composed of the right courses to be worth anything." He bit his lower lip for a bit. "Have you considered that Madoc's offer to build you into the next Mister Universe?"

Thomas stared at his father before slapping his face. "OK... while we're at the topic of you grasping for low hanging fruit, does Roland even WANT to be in the NFL?"

Eric looked shocked, "He loves football-"

"That doesn't mean he wants to make it a career." Thomas said, his hands held out for emphasis. "Have you even talked to him about it? Because as you said, he loves football; if it's between playing along with your ambitions for him or quitting, he will just play along."

Eric flinched, but didn't look away. "It's not just me. His couch also thinks he has what it takes."

Thomas shrugged, "He's a Hertz. He's going to excel at whatever he puts his mind into."

Eric stood and put a hand on Thomas's shoulder. "So will you, son. Now let's go find the others before they launch a search party."

\* \* \*

Thomas followed his father out, his mind filled with the conversation he just got done having. It was nice to finally air the laundry, but it only brought back the fact that he needed to decide what he wanted to do... and he just didn't know. Aside from sex, of course, but he couldn't see himself becoming one of the frat brothers secretaries with benefits.

Seriously, he was nowhere near hot enough.

#####

"Not a bad hunt," Magnus said as they approached the house. "We'll make a great hunter out of you yet, Roland."

Thomas's brother was grinning from ear to ear, holding the hare he'd taken down. Ettore had been the one to give him instructions; another test his grandfather gave the future son in law. Thomas hadn't managed to kill anything, his mind too distracted by the conversation he just had with his father.

"The hunters have returned," Nadia yelled from the back porch. "And they bring food." She sat in a chair, sun on her and wrapped in blankets.

Corina stepped outside, arm fur red to her elbows. "I guess that can be for tomorrow, because I have tonight's meat just about ready."

Ettore frowned, hurrying, "What happened?"

\* \* \*

Judith poked her head in the doorway, "Aunt Corina decided to out do mom's bear story ." And then she disappeared back inside where it's warm.

Ettore reached Corina's side, looking at Nadia questioning. "Later," the mother answered, "And it's not like it was a competition. Corina just happened to see a cougar passing by the house and she took advantage of the opportunity. It must have been three hundred feet."

"Three fifty," Corina corrected.

"She got it in one shot," Judith shouted from inside the house.

Magnus's smile was brighter than the sun, "That's my girl!"

## OUTLINE-20

### Chapter 23

###

Montana Homestead, Thomas, Hertz Family, Ettore: Mood: arriving in the great outdoors

Eric's father lives south of Bozeman[Only reason I choose Malta was because I was looking for hospitals in Montana so we have someplace in state for Thomas to be brought to. If you have a better location, we can change things.Honestly I don't even know if there is good hunting in the area. Would be the only reason to change it.considering we know at least 1 cougar is shot, and I looked at a(hopefully accurate) cougar distribution map, we might want to put grandpa further west. Bozeman MT has a hospitalhe could still live away from the city proper to have the same atmosphereSounds good. As said about a lot of the details, I'm shooting from the hip so it's not like I'm married to them.] Montana. It's a little far from civilization, but it has wide open spaces with plenty of hunting space, just like grandpa likes it. There are days the family worries about him retiring to someplace so remote, but his health appears to be holding. Something he holds the country air completely responsible for.

There is a lot of jovial family greetings when people arrive, though they don't have too long to rest. Ettore and Corina arrive only half an hour later, meaning it is time for grandpa to evaluate his future son in law. Which with him only means one thing.

###

Montana Wilderness, Thomas, Hertz Men, Ettore: Mood: the measure of a man(woman) is by the weight of his gun

Corina was a little put off out of being left out of the hunting trip, as she's just as capable a hunter as Eric and considers it part of the fun of visiting her grandfather. But the entire point of this trip is to evaluate

Ettore away from his fiancée, and if any bears attack the homestead then someone needs to stay behind to protect them from Nadia.

Also, both Thomas and Roland need new hunting gear. A drastic oversight in the winter vacation preparations. Thankfully there's plenty of space for them to just stay away from each other and wallflower, as their grandfather is using Eric as a kind of measuring stick against Ettore's skill. And Ettore is actually measuring up rather well, as he surprisingly knows his way around a gun. What did he say his job was again?

Eventually Thomas has enough watching grandpa grill Ettore and avoiding checking out Roland that he slips away. Where he goes is a personal place for him. When he first went hunting, he got lost. And of course when he was lost he got scared. When he was close to terrified... he found this little spot; a small natural grotto in the middle of the Montana wilderness [note to self, the grotto is warmer than it should be, should look for a way to mention the existence of a hot spring in the area.].

Of course, the family eventually found him... just like now. Eric father walks in on. He says grandpa has switched over to testing Ettore's skill to testing his teaching abilities on Roland. So in this brief moment, in a quiet place, Thomas and Eric get to maybe air some laundry if they choose [with the new angle we take on Thomas, I think that we need to decide if he just hunches down and play it as if everything is okay, or if we do want to create the situation that would show Thomas becoming a little more assertive. I think the assertiveness would work well, especially with making making him more aggressive sexually now that he's a top Will really depend on the feel of the actual prose once this chapter is written.].

###

Montana Homestead, Thomas, Hertz Family, Ettore: Mood: coming

## home to the better hunter

The boys don't bring home any big game; most typical catches like deer isn't in season. What is in season? Mountain lions. Which is what they come home to see that Corina has bagged while they were out. Not even married yet and she's already leaning from her sister-in-law.