

CHAPTER 02

"I can't take this anymore," Thomas exclaimed as he and the golden tiger walked out of the parking lot. "Every time I think I'll get a moment of peace, bam, there he is. It's getting to the point where I jump anytime I walk by another rat in the halls." He glared at his friend as Paul chuckled. "I'm serious. If I'm going to deal with him at school, I can't also live under my father's roof. I was up two hours early, hoping to have some time to myself, but he was already moving around the house. He never sleeps!"

The tiger rolled his eyes. "I was there picking you up, remember? And what are you complaining about? Your father wasn't hounding your steps. It's your brother he was loading in the car. Roland didn't even look awake. Don't be so hard on your father. He's only looking out for you." Paul motioned around them, to the booths on The Knoll's lawn, and the buildings behind them. "University is a big step."

It was Thomas's turn to roll his eyes. "I got in with him hovering over me like a spy drone. He could trust me not to crash and burn, you know."

Paul's tone became overly formal. "And how is settling you your major coming long, Mister Hertz? Shall we expect a decision to be reached before, or after the end of the year?"

Thomas winced and looked around. "Don't do that. You act like a teacher speaking to me like that and he's going to appear out of nowhere."

Paul shook his head. "I'm sure you aren't the only student taking up his time. But knowing what your major is would make picking a fraternity easier."

"Unlike you, Paul, I didn't load up on AP courses, so I have more than enough general classes to get through to let me delay the decision until way later."

"But a major gives you and the frat something in common,

makes living with them easier." Paul stepped away From Thomas. "And on that note, I'll be right back."

Thomas watched his best friend head for a lemming handing out pamphlets for Alpha Chi Sigma. As they spoke, Thomas looked around at the booths.

Alpha Chi Sigma was a biochem-related frat because that was what Paul was on the accelerated path to. And the beakers and periodic table at part of the banner. Looking further, Thomas saw one where the students were in lab coats with stethoscopes around their necks. Another possibility for Paul,

One was related to mechanical engineering, with lots of machines on display. Another looked more like it was manned by business representatives in finely pressed suits than a frat looking to attract students to them.

His perusing was interrupted as a couple passed by, a muscular bear and curvy lioness, both in tight-fitting sportswear. He didn't want to stare, but he also wasn't the only one.

He envied her a little. The guy looked like he belonged on the football team.

Thomas touched his left eye, the thought bringing back the cost he'd paid for kissing the high school quarterback during the prom. If that kind of reaction hadn't turned Thomas off that body type, nothing would.

"I'm glad you aren't letting such an opportunity go to waste," Paul said, suddenly next to him.

Thomas fixed his gaze on his friend, then, with a motion in the retreating couple's direction. "Have you looked at him?"

Paul managed a simultaneous nod and shrug. "He is definitely an exemplary specimen." He paused, contemplated something, and looked at Thomas. "Have you kissed him yet?"

"It's pretty obvious he's with someone."

“That didn’t stop you from that kiss at Prom.”

Thomas rubbed his temple. “And after that, I swore to never accept one of Nathan’s dares. Also, I had six cups from the punch, and it had to have been spiked.”

Paul leaned in and whispered in Thomas’s ear. “If you aren’t taking Nathan’s anymore, do you want me to dare you to kiss him?”

Thomas jumped away, startled. “Don’t you dare. You’re the level-headed one of the group. Don’t start causing shit just because Nathan decided New York City was more worthy of him than the Twin Cities.”

Chuckling, Paul placed his arm over Thomas’s shoulders and get him walking again. “College is about expanding your horizons.” The tiger pointed. “What about them?”

Thomas looked at the two there. “The gorilla’s kind of on the thin side, but he has good posture. The corgi could be a case of good things in small...” he trailed off when he noticed what they stood in front of. “You mean the frat, don’t you?”

With a laugh, Paul took out his phone. “Let me check something. Maybe there a fray for people who can’t make up their mind.” He Paused. “But wouldn’t that require them to make up their mind to form it in the first place?”

“I can make up my mind,” Thomas replied, trying, and failing, not to sound like he was whining. “It’s just that picking a major is a major decision.” He stopped as what he said sunk in. “Not one word,” he told the grinning tiger.

“Trust me.” Paul took his arm off the shoulders and was typing again. “I don’t have to say anything to repeat what you just said to Donna.” With a chuckle, the tiger danced away from the rat’s attempts at grabbing the phone.

When he showed Thomas the screen, it stopped the rat. Instead of the app, their group used to chat, it was the page for a frat.

“Didn’t you even look up which frats are around the UMn?”

Paul asked. "A little research would have gone a long way since you knew we were coming here."

Thomas did a quick read of what this frat was about then gave the tiger a humorless laugh. "A research fraternity. How clever. You realize one of those will almost certainly have an arrangement with my father, who is part of the science teachers, that would let him just at me out of the shadows." He pushed the phone back to Paul. "No thanks. I'm just happy he was too busy planning Roland's football career to notice I was planning on coming here. If my father realized I was considering a frat, I would have gotten all the sales pitch for them back home, along with his rating on which ones he considers the best and all that."

Paul was typing now, and Thomas knew he wasn't being ignored simply by the roll of the eyes the tiger gave him.

"I'm serious. He got himself assigned as my adviser and he has my entire course load planned not just for these two semesters, but he's already booked my entire summer, not one, both summer semesters."

"I guess you're going to be done with the general education part faster than you think."

Thomas glared at his best friend and continued once the smirk went away. Paul kept typing, pausing only when he glanced in his direction and saw the look on the rat's face.

"You know your dad's only doing this because he wants you to succeed, right?"

Thomas narrowed his eyes even more. "Don't take his side, Paul, or I might revoke your best friend status. He was supposed to have gotten the helicopter parenting out of his system with Judith and Victor. I have no idea how either of them survived all that stifling."

"Maybe they were where he trained for you," Paul said, attention back to his phone. "And maybe you're training for when your brother will get to college."

“Roland’s getting a football scholarship, unless Dad’s regiment has him bypass that and lands him in the major leagues right out of high school. I wouldn’t put it past that man to be aiming for that.” Thomas sighed. “That or it’s going to kill him before he graduates. I can just see our matching gravestones, side by side. Taken too young. Smothered by Fatherly Love.”

When Paul kept on looking at his phone, Thomas grumbled. “You transcribed my rant to Donna, didn’t you, now she’s commenting on it.”

The golden tiger shook his head. “I’m looking for a fraternity that was recommended to me while in the chemistry study hall, but I haven’t seen them here, so I’m crowdsourcing the answer.”

“You can’t find a frat you’re interested in?” Thomas asked suspiciously.

“It’s not for me.” He smiled as he read something, then looked around. Before the rat could push for details, Paul grabbed his hand and pulled him along.

Thomas wondered just what frat his best friend could think would be good for him, as the signs and paraphernalia on display in the booth they passed became less academia related and more... social. Did Paul want him to enroll him in a social club?

When Paul slowed close to a plain table manned by two smoking hot guys, Thomas figured they were getting close.

He eyed the lean monkey who was looking around, and Thomas was sure he’d encountered him before. The buff armadillo was speaking with a lion, gazing into his eyes and stroking a hand over the fur on the lion’s arm. The armadillo leaned in, whispered something to the lion, who jerked away and walked off stiffly.

The monkey laughed, then suddenly stopped, just as Thomas realized they weren’t almost to their destination. This booth was their destination.

“You’re here!” the monkey exclaimed. He turned to the

armadillo. "When will you stop doubting me? I said he'd come, and here he is." Thomas couldn't place the accent. But he was focusing on his face. The brown so dark it was nearly black that transitioned into the white crest of fur around it should make him memorable, but even with that, Thomas still wasn't sure where he'd seen him before.

Said armadillo didn't seem to be listening, looking the golden tiger up and down in appreciation.

Thomas looked away from the monkey to the booth, well, table, to get a sense of what frat they were, but it was only the table, a white cloth over it, with a tablet in a heavy-duty metal case and display of pamphlet. By the time he noticed they didn't have the name of the frat on display, he was looking at the monkey again, he was standing so close they could kiss.

"Woe, there," Thomas said, taking a step back and froze. Kissing. "I remember you."

"You do? The monkey asked in surprise, the pursing of his lips going slack. Even Paul and the armadillo were looking at him, curious."

"He was in our Freshman orientation tour, Paul, you remember him. Him and..." Thomas tried to pull who the other guy had been. "And a margay were pretty much attached at the hip. When I left the ice cream social to look for the restroom, the two of them were..." he trailed off and blushed. Making out had been so much not what the two of them were doing. Not when hands were in the front of their pants stroking. He cleared his throat in the stretching silence, with the monkey grinning at him as if he'd realized what Thomas had seen them do and was pleased with it.

"Yeah, but you're also in my Studied for Success class." The last detail finally surfaced. "Adesida, right?"

"They have a fuck your way to the top class here?" the armadillo asked in dismay his Texan accent noticeable, "how did I miss that when looking the curriculum over?" He sat on the edge of the table, making it lean forward enough that the tablet on the other end of it slid forward, stopping only as it was about to tip over and fall off.

“Why are you bothering with that, Lim? Didn’t your family invent fucking their way to success?”

The monkey flipped the armadillo to the bird. “I’d tell you to sit on it and spin, Rowling, but you’d enjoy it too much.” The monkey didn’t stop looking at Thomas. “I remember you too. You had the giant sunday.”

“That’d be him,” Paul said, barely holding back the snickering.

“You should have seen it, Lo, it was huge. I mean Chima kind of huge.” He frowned. “But you barely touched it by the thing was over. What was up with that?”

“Oh,” Paul said between snickers and Thomas glared at him. “Just a father showing how proud he is of his son.”

He was going to kill his best friend for that, Thomas thought as he felt his face burning.

“You’re the Thomas the teacher kept calling out?” the monkey said, eyes wide. “Why didn’t you step forward?”

Thomas tried to will himself smaller, or away, anywhere but here before his head burst into flame from embarrassment. Why they weren’t stepping away from him in fear of getting burned he didn’t know why. His black fur had to be glowing red at this point.

“Your dad’s a teacher here?” the armadillo asked, “what does he teach?”

Thomas focused on that to get himself to breathe again. In that time, the monkey noticed the precariously balanced tablet and picked it up, glaring at the armadillo, as he placed it behind the pamphlet display, that seemed secured to the table.

“What?” the armadillo replied with a smirk. “You saying you didn’t see that happening?”

The exchange made Thomas breathe easier as they no longer focused on him.

“So, what does your dad teach?”

“Mostly advanced physics,” Thomas answered. “But he’s sub for just about every science department.” Which was why Thomas would never go into the hard sciences. He could just imagine his father pulling strings so he’d teach all his classes.

“That’d explain why there’s no rat on my list of dilt teachers.” The armadillo offered his hand. “Laurence Rowling, junior in industrial management, with a current assignment of keeping that nut job from screwing up too badly.”

“Thomas Herts,” he answered shaking the hand. “Undecided Freshman.”

The monkey grabbed the hand as soon as Laurence let go of it. “Limbani Adesida, also undecided. And for the record, I screw amazingly well.” He pulled Thomas, who blushed at the brazenness of the innuendo, into a hug and whispered. “And you are going to find out first hand... so to speak.”

The monkey let go and manage an innocent expression as stepped away from Thomas that had the armadillo roll his eyes.

Thomas couldn’t move as he processed what had just happened. That hug had been more forceful than the monkey’s lean body hinted at, and what he’d felt as Limbani ground his crotch against him did more than hint at a substantial package.

“And what about you?” the monkey asked Paul, who had been where he’d headed. “It’s rude to let your friend be the only one exposing himself like that.”

Thomas blushed more as he fought the urge to look down and check if his erection was visible.

“Paul Heeran, Freshman, destined for biochem.” The tiger replied with a smile. He lightly stepped away from the hand projected in his direction. “I’m going to pass. I don’t know you well enough to go for the kind of greetings that involved you rubbing your crotch against mine.”

Limbani shrugged, stepping back to the table and leaning against it, and spreading his head. His erection was clearly defined. "I'll be happy to let you grind yours against mine if you prefer."

Thomas looked at the armadillo, who gave a 'what are do you want me to do' shrug.

Didn't just about molesting other students qualify as screwing up?

"We're looking at waltzing levels of getting to know you before that happens," Paul replied.

Limbani looked at the armadillo.

"What are you looking at me for? I know one dance, and that's only because line dancing is mandatory in Texas."

The monkey closed his mouth, then shrugged. "At least I know Thomas is interested." He licked his lips.

Was he that much of an open book? "You're awfully sure of yourself," Thomas said, trying to sound like he was dismissing Limbani.

"Oh, you have no idea," Laurence said with a groan.

"Anyway." Limbani rubbed his hands together. "You two are here to sign up for the party." He reached for where he'd put the tablet.

"Here," Laurence said, offering it, no one, no... the one behind the display wasn't there anymore.

How had Thomas missed the armadillo moving to grab it? Had having the monkey in his personal space been that distracting?

"What?" Thomas asked as the statement sank in.

"Do you have to sound like they don't have a choice?" the armadillo asked.

"How do you spell your last name?" Limbani asked, tapping the stylus against the tablet's casing.

“Wait a minute.” Thomas fought to get his mind into a gear that let him think clearly. “We didn’t agree to anything, right Paul?” He looked at the tiger, who smiled.

“Why not go? When is it?”

“Friday,” the armadillo answered. “It’s the frat’s big Welcome to all Freshman blow out.” He smiled. “Just means you guys have priority of the more experienced guy’s who’ll be there to show you a good time.”

Thomas nearly said yes as the implications of what Laurence said would take place, but stopped himself and looked at Paul. The tiger had been the one to say yes, but maybe he hadn’t realized what would take place?

“Are you sure you want to be at a party where the guys are... well, you know?” even if there was no one by them within earshot, Thomas couldn’t get himself to be as brazen as the monkey.

“It’s not like I’m going to be forced to participate in that part of the party, right?” Paul asked.

“Of course not,” Laurence said. “There’s going to be plenty of fully dressed stuff taking place. We, at Sigma Theta Gamma, pride ourselves on respecting other guys’ decisions.” He paused. “Present monkey excepted.”

Limbani snorted. “I have no problem respecting the guys who want to sleep with me.”

“Except he thinks they all do,” he told Paul.

“Then I’ll keep my distances from Limbani,” Paul said, smiling at the monkey. “Don’t worry Thomas, how am I going to find guys to dance with if I never do where the dancing’s happening? And I know that if I don’t go, you won’t either.” He looked at the armadillo. “Thomas is getting so stressed over his dad managing every aspect of his studies here and at home that he’s looking for a frat to join once he’s a sophomore.”

Laurence’s expression turned serious, while the monkey’s was

speculative.

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding down the line,” the armadillo said. “Sigma Theta Gamma is an exclusive brotherhood. We don’t take outsiders.”

“But that doesn’t mean we won’t do everything we can to relieve your tension.” Limbani smiled so innocently that Thomas had trouble believing the entire park wasn’t exploding with laughter.

“I want to.” Thomas swallowed. “But you know my dad’s never going to agree to this, Paul.”

“Then sneak out of the house,” Limbani said. “That is something that happens out here, right? It’s not just in the movies?”

Thomas stared at the monkey, his blood was draining out of his face do face it had to be taking the black of his fur with it. It would end up more white than the rest of his body. “You don’t know my father.” Thomas swallowed harder. “The guy never sleeps.” He shook his head. “And as much as I want to, one night of fun isn’t worth the aggravation it’s going to cause.”

“He’ll let you come,” Limbani said with enough assurance, Thomas stared.

“Look,” Paul said, placing a hand on Thomas’s shoulder, also looking stunned by the monkey’s proclamation. “You have nothing to lose by asking him. Give Limbani your name, and if you can’t go, you can’t go.”

“And let’s not forget you, mister hot gold,” the monkey said. “We might end up dancing, you never know.”

Paul smiled. “I don’t mean dancing the way you mean it. But it’s Heeran, two Es.”

Thomas let out a breath. Paul was right. It was one party, maybe his father would say yes. It wasn’t like one party would impact the rest of his life after all.

“It’s Hertz. Spelled H E R T Z.”