*Story synopsis: Thomas Garoux hunts monsters to make himself alchemic HRT. A job goes wrong and he contracts lycanthropy, and the changes are affirming in a way he never could have dreamed. But now he’s the newest mark for his crush-slash-rival Lucas von Skyhawk. A von Skyhawk never fails, for if he does, Lucas will be outed as a trans man and his reputation destroyed.*

*This is the first scene of the first chapter.*

Every day he went without, Thomas grew weaker. His muscles were wasting away, body growing colder, no appetite. The only thing that cut through the mental fog was the resolve to best this, to return his body back as it should be.

But the longer it took, the lower his chances were at a successful hunt. Failure was not an option. Finding another shingleback could take months. Time he didn’t have.

*Focus.* He took a deep breath to calm himself, cloth tightening across his chest. The smell of pine and decay filled his lungs. He paused, exhaled quickly and inhaled again.

*There!* The wind had shifted, carrying the scent of his quarry. It was musty, sour, unpleasant but not yet overwhelming. Thomas nocked an arrow and drew back his bow, waiting. Keeping the tension high was risky, but so was drawing when the motion could be noticed. If this was *just* a pig, then he could get away with that, but this was a monster; some spark in their flesh and bones made them different, dangerous. Hunting them required radically different thinking than if it were just a beast.

The subtle sounds of hooves picking through the leaf litter drew closer. Snuffling, shuffling, the shingleback was more concerned with finding breakfast than paying attention to its surroundings.

*Closer…a few more meters…* He counted each step the monster took, re-calculated his chances at getting a clean shot. The wind could change again at any moment, giving him away, or it could notice him by chance, or—

*Shit, I can’t….* His arms were trembling from the strain of the bow. He had a few seconds, tops, until his arms would give out.

An inhale to calm his heart, an exhale as he released the bow string. As soon as it left his fingers, the shingleback twisted and leaped towards the underbrush.

There wasn’t time for his thoughts to be put into words, that was too slow. Thomas moved solely on instinct, on that predatory urge that kept his ancestors alive. He landed on his feet, grabbed the javelin from the pile of objects beneath the treetsand. There was a spearthrower somewhere in there, but that took time to set up, to think about what he was doing. Time he couldn’t afford to waste.

The monster ran as if unstoppable, that it already had the sharp spines and plates of an adult razorback. But the soft plates only caught the tree limbs, pulling them free and shocking the air with the scent of pine. Each tug slowed it down, the distance between it and the hunter shrank.

The wind suddenly shifted, pressing into his back and making him stumble. A storm was blowing in, which meant more factors to track, more ways the hunt could go wrong.

The hairs on his arms stood on-end and the sky suddenly darkened, turning the thick boughs into a mass of black.

*This better not be—*

A jagged line of white appeared before him. Thomas threw himself to the ground and covered his head. The thunder jolted the ground, making everything feel askew and blowing his hearing to nothing. The ground rumbled once more, staccato and approaching.

Thomas scrambled to his feet and ducked behind a tree. A small herd of deer rushed by, tails flagging the danger. With them came the acrid smell of the shingleback.

*I need to end this, and fast.* Now there was *competition*, another hunter, one who relished in storms. He pursued the panicking animals. The shingleback was in the center, leaping deer blocking a clear shot to the side and the scales protecting its back.

The ground gently swelled into a hillock, hiding what was ahead; this area was unfamiliar, far outside of Thomas’ normal territory. But the deer turned and went in either direction, avoiding it; the shingleback rushed ahead up and out of sight, followed by a dull thud.

It was enough warning to get Thomas to skid to a stop and keep from careening over the edge himself. There was a creek, no wider than a few yards, thick forest on the other side. The shingleback was struggling to get up, hooves slipping on the large wet, rocks.

*My chance!* A quick adjust of the grip, arm pulled back and then everything rushed forward and the javelin shot out of his hand. His heart soared at the perfect shot, the despair upon realizing the momentum wasn’t just from himself. Another line of lightning drew before him. There was just enough time to cover his ears and turn his head.

The boom shook him to the bone. There was the croaking of ravens taking flight, the reek of burnt flesh saturated the air as his heart pounded in a tumult of emotion. A large splash and a downward streak of steely-grey at the edge of his sight. Thomas shakily pulled himself over the hillock to see a huge bird hunched over the dead shingleback.

“*Lucas*!” Thomas shouted. “Where the hell are you!” His voice sounded distant, far, warped and deeper than it truly was; any joy that would have brought was overshadowed by the failure of the hunt. The bird lifted her head, pale blue eyes looking past him. Her shiny grey beak was smudged down the midline, the only indication that she had directed the lightning.

“You really can’t tell?” The voice was only a few feet away, making Thomas jump. The other man’s movements made it obvious, the mottled pattern of his cloak blending in with the broken light and dark pines. He stepped forward. “You’re lucky that you’re not my prey.”

“You could have *killed* me!”

“And you don’t sound very grateful that I hadn’t.”

Thomas grit his teeth. “What do you even want with a mark like this? Isn’t it beneath you?”

Lucas pulled down his hood to ensure Thomas wouldn’t miss his smirk. “I could say the same thing. Can’t handle anything bigger on your own?”

*You’re* smaller *than me!* he wanted to scream. Or *You’re not alone, Outlaw does all the hard work!* If this was only a bounty or credit with the guild, he would have. But he had bargain his way to get what he needed, and soon, before it went bad. Or the monstrous bird did even further damage.

“Besides,” Lucas continued, “Outlaw was hungry. We wanted something quick and easy.”

The bird stretched one wing behind her, then the other, then began to preen. If it wasn’t for her, Lucas could never be a hunter; he didn’t have the proclivity to dirtying his hands. But he was a von Skyhawk, they were known for their monstrous hunting birds. He didn’t need to hunt to make a living or a name for himself, but because it was something intriguing to do. It was somewhere he could beat others, other living things, other hunters, which he *always* did. As a von Skyhawk should.

Thomas glanced at Outlaw. Her copper claws pierced the shingleback’s flesh. It was an odd metal, one that could react to different compounds. He didn’t know enough alchemy to know if this was a danger. Regardless, she could still eat the whole shingleback if she wanted.

“I’m not doing this for the guild,” Thomas said, forcing his voice to be even. The precariousness of the situation was drawing his emotions to the surface, threatening to spill out of his weakened body. Crying would only make this situation worse.

“Oh?” Lucas crossed his arms. “This wasn’t a private job.”

“I need the materials.”

Both Outlaw and Lucas glanced at the shingleback. “Then you should have gone after an adult,” he said. “A razorback is useless without the razors, even you should know that.”

“It’s the organs.”

“Whatever alchemist told you that has been handling too much quicksilver.” Lucas brushed past him and slid down the bank, approaching the body.

Now panic was added to the tumult. Thomas was running out of time; the longer it took to process the body, the less potent the compounds would be. And even *if* there was another juvenile shingleback around, it took him a week to find this one. He couldn’t afford to get worse, he couldn’t spend another day like this.

“I don’t know how it works, it’s just what they wanted,” he heard himself say. His voice was weak, quavering. It physically hurt to hear it, but if he said nothing, he’d lose everything. “I need this. Please.”

Lucas scoffed. “I’m won’t—“

Outlaw clacked her beak, drawing her master’s attention. She shifted her body, tilted her head, feathers lifting from her skin the smallest amount. Lucas then looked at Thomas.

Those green eyes pierced right through him. Thomas shifted nervously, straightening his shoulders, adjusting his footing. It was like Lucas was seeing right through him, to the *real* him. It was probably the longest he’d ever looked at him, and it was exciting, and nervewracking.

Whatever it was Lucas saw, it made him scowl. “Fine.” He turned away from him. “This is the one and only favor you’ll ever get from me, Garoux.”

Thomas blinked, taking a minute to process what he heard. *He believed me…?*

Outlaw held the body steady as Lucas chopped off the head. She was clearly intelligent, and she was the only being Lucas ever took into consideration. So did she take pity on Thomas? Or could she tell that—

*No, monsters aren’t* that *smart. Gaganas don’t have a good sense of smell, and I doubt she’s part vulture. She was reacting to something else.*

As Lucas readied to leave, Outlaw ripped off a back haunch with her beak. She tweaked its position with a set of talons before tossing her head back and swallowing it whole, the lump sliding down her throat before disappearing beneath the feathers of her chest. She then took off, the bright eye-spots under each wing flashing in the light.

Lucas turned back and glared at the other hunter. “And clean yourself up before returning to the guild. Don’t make me regret this.”

Thank you so much for the story! I really loved the pacing. You definitely get the sense of a long, held breath before the strike, and then the sudden rush of adrenaline as the hunt progresses. I got a very good sense of how the shingleback moved throughout, and the name 'shingleback' itself is very evocative of what the animal looks like.

With the caveat that I know this is just a scene and just from the first chapter, one thing that I was left a little confused by was the time in which this takes place. While bows and arrows are fairly timeless, guilds are very of a medieval through Victorian time, but spears and throwers put me in mind of a very particular time and a very particular place, notably Central and South America with the atlatl. However, Thomas and Lucas speak of a very different time and culture. Ditto the last names, Garoux evokes french and von Skyhawk german. Its perfectly acceptable to use these tools to signify a place and time to the reader even in a fictional world, I was left a bit confused as to what sorts of clothing they'd be wearing, the structure of their speech, and so on. Again, this was just a scene within a first chapter and this is likely sorted out later, but it might help to at least keep an eye on first impressions for the reader.

I'm really excited to see how this story progresses, and really, *really* interested in alchemical HRT and the interplay between lycanthropy and identity. I know weres are a bit shaky in the large press world, but there's *so* much to play with there, and I'm super pleased to see that! Thanks again for sharing.