

## Chapter 13

“How’d it go?”

He stepped out of his sweatpants, shook himself. “What you’d expect.” He ran a hand through his hair, then scratched vigorously. He looked around the room in a way that was becoming familiar to me. I knew he didn’t see what I saw when he did that. He rolled his shoulders, growled softly, his chin tipping up. I could almost imagine the brother behind him, nipping gently at his jaw, teasing.

I tried not to feel anything when he did that. I knew he needed ... more than I could provide. It would be beyond pathetic to be jealous of people that didn’t even exist.

He dropped onto his bed. “I told her that she was my sister and I would protect her if she needed it. That I shouldn’t have said what I said. That I’d spoken out of anger. That Paul and Maggie and Becky loved her.” He raised his eyebrows. “Okay?”

“Not that *you* did?” Too tired to censor myself, and anyway, this was something I’d wondered about.

He stretched slowly, then settled into place. “But I don’t.” His eyes were gray and steady.

He didn’t really care, I realized. If he’d said anything a quarter as hurtful as that to me, he’d have been stricken to the heart, desperate to make amends, but this ... I couldn’t imagine anything as cruel as what he’d said to her, his own sister ... and he didn’t care.

“Why did you bother?” I don’t know what was in my voice, but he looked at me sharply and sat up. If he told me he’d apologized because I’d asked him to, I didn’t know what I’d do.

He said without hesitation, “Because she’s my sister. She belongs to the Pack. I shouldn’t have hurt her like that.” He hesitated then. “We’re not kind, little brother.” Another pause. His eyes grew anxious. “Does that bother you?”

I thought about that. “It should bother me a lot more than it does.” My voice dropped even lower — though, having been so dramatically reminded that Kathryn’s room was next door, I’d already been speaking very softly. “She’ll

never forgive you. And she'll never forget."

"I know." His voice was tight, but I didn't think it was because of what I'd said. He didn't care whether she did or not. He hadn't got as far as thinking what sort of revenge she might take, and it wasn't anything I wanted to mention.

I answered what I thought was his concern. "It should bother me more than it does." *Yeah. It really should.* But it didn't, and however lousy that made me feel, he deserved to know that. "Yeah, it shocked me, how cruel you could be. But you want to know something horrible? It was kind of ... reassuring. Like ... if you could be that mean to her, it really said something ... all the patience and ... kindness, you show to me."

"I *love* you. You really have a lot of trouble getting that through your thick head, don't you?"

I felt my lips twitch. "I can be pretty dumb at some things."

His grin faded. "Yeah. You can." He looked across at me and there was a world of need in his eyes. I swallowed. I thought of Kathryn bursting in on us, thought of how I'd been feeling before she did that. Want and fear rocked me back and forth across the line. Then I reached up and turned the light out, and rolled off my bed and went over to Mike's. And sat down on the edge and put my hands in his hair.

I was so tired. Tired of everything. Tired of too much emotion, too much fear. Tired of not knowing what I wanted, or more honestly maybe, of not letting myself admit what I wanted.

Mike said very softly, "Would it freak you out to lie down? So I could play with your hair while you groom me?" He was trying hard to sound casual, but I could hear the aching need.

And that was me lying to myself, because it wasn't for his sake I wanted this. *He's not human*, I reminded myself. Like that made it all right.

I made a grunting noise; couldn't actually bring myself to say the word. But he understood me, as I knew he would. He scooted over, giving me plenty of space, and I stretched out, right on the edge of the bed, and tried to relax. I played with his hair. He played with mine. And, yeah, surprise surprise, eventually I did relax.

And sometime later, when I was really relaxed and drowsy, I heard someone say, "I'm scared I'm like him."

"Your dad?" The disbelieving voice jarred the peace.

I said that. I couldn't believe I'd said that. But I'd said that.

Mike said, "You are *nothing* like that bastard." Then I heard his breath catch, as if he'd remembered what I'd said earlier, and he pushed his nose into my hair in a way that was so like a puppy seeking forgiveness I had to smile.

And I could say it. "I grew up with it, Mike. I know you can't see anything bad about me, but I grew up with it. With violence."

"I know you can't be untouched by that, little brother." Such aching sadness in his voice. And still, that edge of anger. More than anger. Rage. A fleeting image of him furiously, deliberately, battering my father, crossed my mind. Each blow so precise, his whole being intent, his face ...

I pushed it out of my mind.

He shifted on the bed, moving closer, though scrupulously not touching. His eyes shone in the darkness like a cat's. "David." I blinked. He said it again, with slightly less intensity. "David. I know what it's like to be someone who enjoys the pain of others. But that's not all I remember. I remember being a person that had never thought of hurting anyone. The idea was so ... completely alien ... we couldn't understand what we were seeing when we saw the humans behave like that. When ... when they did what they did to our sister ... I went into shock, little brother. And it lasted a long time. Years. Before the anger started. Before I realized what was happening to us, what the humans were doing to us. Then one day, the anger was there."

He made a noise, not a human noise. Then said, "It was like ... a slow-burning fire that had been growing underground all those years. And suddenly, one day, boom ... it was there. Full-blown rage. That's never died." He took a deep breath, made a slight movement of his hands, as if trying to downplay what he was saying. "And I remember the joy I took then, in killing the men, raping the women.

"But, Dave, it was the joy of revenge. Of doing to them what they had done to her, to us. It was simple, then. For thousands of years, that was how we were. Crazy. Angry. Doing what we did because it ... satisfied some sense of ...

rightness. You know? An eye for an eye, sort of thing.”

He settled back, eyes not leaving my face. “It was thousands of years, before we learned to take ... a different sort of pleasure ... from what we did.” He cocked his head. “You understand what I’m saying?”

I nodded.

“Little brother, do you really believe I can’t recognize that sort of perversion in another person? Particularly one I know so well?”

“But —” I couldn’t sustain that burning stare any longer. I looked away, concentrated on pulling my fingers through the hair on his chest. “I know I’m not like that now. Yet. I’m worried I’ll become like that. If I ... let myself ... feel.”

I didn’t know if he could understand this; wasn’t sure I understood it myself.

“Dave, don’t you think I know your soul?”

A shock, a small tight blow to my sternum. I gave a sharp intake of breath, then let it out carefully.

“You won’t feel like that. You won’t want what he wants. Trust me.”

“I trust you. And yeah, I think you know me better than I know myself.” I tried to smile. “But ...” I felt the heat suddenly in my face. Why was this so much harder to admit to? *Because this is the one you really believe.* I swallowed. “There’s another way ... kids who’ve had that done to them ... can go.”

He frowned. I knew this would be a lot harder for him to understand. I waited, heart pounding.

And eventually he worked it out. “You think you’ll want to be hurt. That you’ll let yourself be a victim all your life.” Nothing in his tone. Because he believed it? Because he didn’t?

I made a small noise that was supposed to be agreement. Mike said, “Okay, I guess that’s reasonable, in theory.” Controlling his tone very tightly. Because he was angry? Contemptuous? I felt myself drawing in tighter, all my muscles contracting as if I was trying to become too small to be seen. Mike made a noise, then said, “I’m sorry.” Speaking quickly. “Dave, I love you. This is hard for me to hear. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t say it, or that I ... think any less of

you, or anything like that. I'm just ... I hate that I let you go through all that, you know?"

I did know, and I was grateful, but ... "You think I'm like that."

"No!" He ran a hand through his hair. "No." He grimaced. "I don't believe you're like that, but I have to agree ... if you went one way or the other, that's the way you'd go." He leaned forward. "But it doesn't have to be one or the other. It *doesn't*, Dave." He reached out a hand, hovered it a finger's-width from my face. I tipped my head toward it, and his hand cupped my face, then slid up into my hair. We were so close I could feel the tension leave his body.

He said, "You're too strong for that, little brother."

I wished I could believe that.

I didn't want to talk about this anymore. But I didn't want to leave. I really didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay here forever, cocooned in darkness, feeling someone else close, someone who lo- cared about me. I wanted to hear him purring, pretend ... what? That he was one of my animals?

*No!* No, I didn't think of him as an animal. I wasn't going to let him think of himself as an animal.

He'd wanted to know how the Pack was related to humans. That was why, wasn't it? Because he and Paul thought of themselves as wild animals. And so did the rest of us, however hard we denied it.

Well, maybe not Becky. But Kathryn obviously did, and Maggie and I ... well, we denied it, but underneath it all ... Why else were she and Paul ... Not going there. But here was I, in bed with Mike. And was there any way that would be happening if I really thought he was just another guy?

Great. I needed him not to be human, and he and Paul needed not to be animals.

*Doesn't matter what you need.*

I said quickly, "You know, when the climate changed around ten million years ago, only one line of apes survived. They did it by making increasing use of the open savannah at the forests' edge." *Okay. That's out of the nowhere. Mike'll think you've gone bananas.* I felt him move back, my eyes adjusted enough now to see his head tilt as he stared at me. I swallowed, and soldiered on.

“That was a marginal habitat. They had to change to survive. That’s the point about evolution. If your environment stays the same, a species can survive without change for millions of years. Sharks have. The oceans are a much more stable environment than the land. On land . . . hundreds of thousands of species have evolved, and become extinct. You know there used to be at least 200 species of rhinoceros? At least 150 species of elephant? Maybe 6500 primate species?”

Talking too fast and throwing too many facts at him. Goodness knows what he thought. But I didn’t slow, just continued to babble, my fingers lying quiescent in his hair.

“When the environment changes, you have to change, or die. That’s why we have sexual reproduction. Mutations can still occur among your genes when you reproduce, but your chance of a beneficial mutation is much, *much* lower than ours. Evolutionary change happens faster in a challenging environment. That’s what happened with the apes. I think that’s what happened with you. I think *Homo sapiens* pushed you into marginal habitats, into areas where it was much harder to survive. You could have died out, as the Neandertals did. Instead, you changed.”

I ran out of breath, paused. And Mike said, “The Pack died.” So much grief in his voice. “I remember them leaving me. Remember living without them.” I didn’t know what to say. There was such aching loss in his voice. What could I offer him? For the first time I felt it in my gut. He was tens of thousands of years old. He’d lived a thousand lifetimes. What could I possibly say to a person like that?

I felt my fingers tighten their grip on his hair. Feeling totally, hopelessly, inadequate, I heard myself say, “Brother.” And his body relaxed its tension as if I’d waved a magic wand.

*Okay.* I started to pull my fingers gently through his hair again. “I’ve been thinking about how to get a fix on where and when the first brother lived. It seemed to me the type of animals hanging around might be a good place to start. What do you remember?”

There was a pause, long enough for me to worry that this wasn’t a good idea right now, and then he said slowly, “I remember First Brother hunting after he

left the Pack. He went away. Past the Pack's normal summer hunting grounds. Farther north."

"You're sure of the direction?"

"Yeah, course." There was a smile suddenly in his voice. "Put me upside-down in a barrel and I'd still know which way was north."

"That's interesting. Migratory animals are supposed to have some sense for magnetic fields." I paused. I'd said the *a* word. I moved on quickly. "You said summer hunting grounds. The Pack migrated for the winter?"

"Too cold in the winter. That's why we had problems with the humans."

"Lost me there."

"Not explaining it very well, am I?" He sounded embarrassed. "The big animals were in the far north. We'd go there in the summer to hunt, but it was too cold in the winter, even with these fur coats we've got. When it got too cold we'd head south, into human territory."

"They didn't move north in the summer to hunt?"

"Too cold for them."

I thought about that. After a moment, he asked, "That tell you something?"

"Maybe. Tell me some more." A pause. I prompted, "What sort of animals did you hunt in the north?"

"Big ones." He laughed suddenly. "Woolly ones. You know there were woolly rhinoceros?" I felt his head move as if he was shaking his head. "And horses, and ... buffalo? Something like buffalo anyway. And the horses had these long beards, and really shaggy feet. And mammoth of course. Their skin was really thick. The rhinos and the buffalo-types too. And they had these huge neck muscles. Made them bloody hard to kill, we had to —" He stopped abruptly.

This was ... really cool. Fascinated, I asked, "Any other animals?"

"We weren't the only predators, of course." He sounded wary, as if not quite sure of my reaction. "There were some big cats around. Not just the saber-tooth — lions too." He gave a soft snort. "Always thought of lions as hot-country animals, it was weird to see them running around the grass. Though I suppose the country was sort of like that African savannah stuff you see on TV. Real bare. Just grass."

“Did they look like modern lions?”

“No manes. I thought they must be females at first, but no. The males just didn’t have manes. Didn’t seem to hang around in, what do you call them, prides? Usually just see one.” He hesitated. “In the summer we went after horse and reindeer mostly. Thinner hides. Not so hard to get through to the meat. But when we prepared to move south, we’d kill as many buffalo as we could. For the meat, and the fat.”

“You said you hunted mammoth.”

“Not often. It was a ... ritual thing, you know?”

“Ah.” I thought about this, and the wariness in Mike’s voice, and asked, daringly, “You embarrassed?”

“Well, it’s all a bit primitive, isn’t it?” I saw his head move again, his eyes shining as they looked at me, and was reminded that he could see perfectly well in this darkness. “It’s not history, Dave. I remember doing it. My hands remember tearing through hide. I remember gorging on the fresh meat. Licking the blood from my hands like you’d lick an ice-cream. I remember what it’s like at the end of a hard winter, when prey’s been non-existent, and your ribs are sticking to your backbone.” His voice shook, though whether the cause was remembered emotion or what he was feeling now, I didn’t know.

I gave it a moment then said carefully, “You told me that the memory thing wasn’t a new mutation — that it was something the Pack already had, before First Brother.”

“Sure.”

“So you should have older memories.”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” He sounded surprised. “They’re not as ... sharp, you know?”

“But if you want to know how your species is related to humans, we need to go further back. So, what’s your *very* oldest memory?”

There was a long pause. I concentrated on his hair, pulling my fingers gently through the knots. After a while he said hesitantly, “I remember ... this bear. I guess it was a bear, although it was enormous, I mean really huge. I was terrified, I guess that’s why I remember it. It was ... there was a group of them, asleep in a cave. We’d gone in and ... whoa ... we were out of there.”

Suddenly, from nowhere, I felt this huge grin spread over my face. This was so ... unbelievably ... cool. He *remembered* when we were cavemen. “What did you look like?”

“You’re enjoying this!” Disbelief in his voice.

I started to stutter, my excitement shattering, and he said quickly, “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, if you ... I mean, that’s fine. Better than fine. It’s great.”

I said tentatively, “Don’t you think it’s kind of cool? Remembering this stuff, from way before we had history?” *Oh yeah, dick-brain, remembering raping and killing people and dying, and living in icy caves and not finding enough food to survive — who wouldn’t want to do that?* “Sorry, sorry. God that’s thick of me. Mike —”

“No, I mean it. It’s great that you’re interested in this stuff.” He shifted position, touching me on the arm. “Really, brother.” Not giving me a chance to respond, he went on briskly, “But I don’t know what I looked like. We didn’t have mirrors, you know.”

“You said we. I’m guessing you weren’t alone.”

“Duh.” His hand moved and I heard a soft scratching sound. “No, we didn’t look like we do now. Looked more human than we do now, actually.” He sounded surprised, as if he hadn’t realized it until I asked.

“In what ways?”

“The memory’s real foggy.” There was a frown in his voice.

“Well, it is a very long time ago.”

“I don’t think that’s it. I think ... it’s the brain itself, I think. It just doesn’t ... think that well, you know?” His head was tilting back and forth as if trying to see something he couldn’t quite make out. “They were taller than we are. And skinnier. They wouldn’t be out of place among humans today.” His head moved again. “Basically, from the neck down, we look human. We’re not hairless, but it’s finer and I don’t think we’ve got the bottom layer. And our faces ... they’re sort of ... they’re really big and heavy at the top, around the eyebrows. And the forehead slopes back, you know? The jaw juts out further, too.”

“Do you have a proper nose?”

“Depends what you mean by proper,” he sounded faintly offended, “but yeah, it looks fairly human.”

“I wonder if it’s *Homo erectus*. He was the first one with a proper nose, I think. And Neandertals, they were more like you in body shape — short and stocky.” I thought about this, feeling the grin come back. “You got any idea where you are?”

“Well, it’s cold. Colder than it should be. And the place is new ... it’s strange territory, that’s why we’re so nervous.” He shrugged. “Like I said, the memory’s pretty fuzzy. Just images — of the bears, of my ... group. And feelings. Cold, fear. Hunger.”

“Well, *Homo erectus* was the first hominid to spread out beyond Africa. He went all over.”

Mike said uncertainly, “You were talking about Neandertals before.”

“I didn’t say you *were* Neandertals. And right now I’m trying to track when you diverged from hu— *Homo sapiens*.”

“But if I remember ... doesn’t that mean we must already be different from humans? Humans don’t remember like that.”

I shrugged. “Ancestral memory’s been around as an idea for a long time. Maybe it’s something we had, and lost.” Mike made a sound, a pleased rumble. “Like I said, finding fossils is a chancy business. Partly it depends on burial practices. What did the Pack do with their dead?”

I felt him stiffen. Had I offended him, crossed some taboo? But he said, reasonably easily, “They buried them. Buried them where they lived, then moved on. They were ... nomadic, I suppose.”

“No signs of habitation.”

“What?”

“If they didn’t stay in one place for long, there wouldn’t be much sign that they’d ever lived there,” I explained. “Nothing to attract the fossil-hunters.”

“Oh.” He nodded slowly. “No, there wouldn’t be much evidence. The Pack was big on not leaving traces.”

“Because of the humans.”

“Nah, just a natural hunter’s instinct. The Pack wasn’t scared of humans. They just ...” He paused. “They felt that their time was over. The Pack’s time.”

That it was the humans' time now." Another pause, but before I could speak, he blurted out, "They rejected us because we dared to fight the humans! Because we dared to kill!"

I froze. He settled back, muttering an apology. I tried to redirect him. "It's funny, you don't think of nomads feeling as strongly about a place as you seem to."

"I didn't say *we* were nomadic." There were still traces of anger in his voice, but I could tell he was trying to get past it. "We're much more tied to a place than the Pack was. Maybe because we lost the Pack. Maybe because the humans took more and more of our world."

*Okay, moving on from what the humans did.* "Was there any special place you buried your dead? Like in a cave, or in a barrow? That's a ... a grave-mound, I guess you'd call it."

"We didn't bury our brothers."

"You said —"

"The Pack did. We didn't."

"Did you burn them?"

I felt him shudder. His voice was shocked. "We remember being burned *alive*. No way would we burn a brother."

*Way to go, Dave.* I stumbled through an apology, but he cut me off, saying grimly, "You want to know what we did with our dead brothers? We ate them. Ate the flesh, cracked the bones and sucked out the marrow, ground the bones and teeth to powder and put it in the blood we drank." And now the anger was loose and raging. "They were our *brothers*. We loved them. We held their memories, we held their *souls*. We weren't going to put our own bodies in the ground. We didn't want scavengers and carrion-eaters gnawing on our bones. They were part of us. We wanted to keep them within us. Can you understand that?"

I swallowed. "Yeah. I understand."

I heard him give a long, shuddering breath, and then say, "I'm sorry, brother. You know it's not you I'm angry at."

"I know." Except I was human, one of the enemy. "Mike, all this stuff. Does it really help?" I guess I wanted him to say it did, that there was

something I could do that would help him, something I was good at. And it was something that I really wanted to know, that any scientist would want to know. But that wasn't why Mike wanted to know and it couldn't be my reason for digging into it.

He said wearily, "I don't know. I know we're a different species; I don't know if it makes a difference how close we are to human." He drew in a breath and touched my hair lightly. Then pulled me closer to him, burying his face in my hair, his arm around me. And murmured, "You think I don't know the only reason you can do this is because you think of me as one of your animals?"

## Chapter 14

Kathryn managed to avoid us at breakfast — or we avoided her — and we ignored each other at the bus-stop. She didn't come home after school, and she wasn't there at dinner-time either. There wasn't a place set for her at the table, and Maggie didn't say anything about her absence, so I guessed she knew where her daughter was. I wanted to know, just so I had some idea whether she was about to walk through the door, but no way was I going to bring the subject up.

After a bit, I did manage to relax. I had to admit, though it felt mean, the atmosphere was a lot calmer without Kathryn. A lot of that was down to Becky. I mean, everyone else was doing their bit to fake it, but Becky was quite honestly bouncy. As long as noone was openly slagging off at other people, her natural sunniness won out. I felt myself smile, watched the others — even Mike — relax and brighten.

We took a lot longer over dinner than usual, and after we'd cleared everything away, we sat around the table with hot drinks. Noone seemed to want to break up the happy party. Not that it was a party. It was like I remembered meals at the Jaegers' being: easy, comfortable, sort of ... warming. It had been a while.

And all because Kathryn wasn't there.

I wasn't stupid enough to think all our problems were down to her, or that we couldn't generate enough tension on our own without her, but I guess it's like when you haven't done your homework and it's due and you get to class to find your teacher's off sick. I mean, you still have to do it, but for the moment all you feel is relieved.

Becky got her homework and sat at the table doing it, asking us for help from time to time, as we drank our respective drinks — coffee, tea, chocolate — and talked about nothing important. Enjoying the moment, with Becky there to keep anyone from saying anything dangerous, and no Kathryn to provoke any of that.

It was nice, really nice. Until Kathryn walked in.

She came through the laundry from the back door, and took one look at the

cozy scene in front of her, and just lost it.

Not that it seemed like that at first. She started slow, with a quietly bitchy remark. “Oh look, it’s the Waltons.”

It escalated quickly after that. Within thirty seconds she was screaming. It started with the obvious: noone wanted her; we were happier when she wasn’t around. Then she disowned Mike.

“He’s a *dog*! Get him a kennel, and a dog-bowl for his food! Put him on a *leash*!” Her voice was high-pitched with hysteria. “Throw him a stick and take him for runs and brush the fricking knots from his hair!” Maggie had come round to her and put her hands on Kathryn’s arms. Kathryn shook her off and backed up, her eyes wild as she stared at Mike. “*Show them!* But they all know, don’t they? Mom’s gotta know, and I know Dave knows.” Something lit in her eyes. “Show Becky. Dear little Becky, the perfect little sister. Show Becky what you are!”

She paused for breath, and Mike stood up fast, the chair clattering behind him. Paul and I both put a hand on the arm nearest us. Maggie said, “Kathryn,” and Paul said, “Mike,” and Becky looked at us all in bewilderment, and Kathryn spat at her mother, “You love a *dog* more than me!” and ran out of the room.

We stood there, frozen, listening to the clatter of her shoes on the stairs. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, we all started moving again. Paul and I released Mike; Mike picked up his chair and sat down; Maggie looked at her youngest daughter, then at the door Kathryn had gone through, and then back at all of us.

Becky said, in a small voice, “What did Kathryn mean?”

We all looked at each other. Maggie came and sat down again and said carefully, “Honey, you know about Daddy and Mike being ... different ... from other people.”

Well, that was one way of putting it. I nearly smiled, it was so absurd.

But maybe his mom’s caution annoyed Mike. He pulled off his shirt, then the skivvy he wore underneath it. “This is what she was talking about, Becky.” His eyes met Maggie’s defiantly.

She didn’t say anything, though she didn’t look happy. Becky’s eyes

widened and she jumped to her feet. She came round the table to him and reached out a hand, then paused. “Can I touch?”

“Sure.”

I watched his mom’s face as Becky stroked carefully down his arm, her face shining with simple pleasure. “It’s soft!”

He grinned. “It’s pretty new.”

Her eyes went to her father. “Is Daddy like that?”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Paul said, “Thicker. Not as soft. A bit greyer.” If you listened for it, you could hear the tension, but it was a pretty good attempt at casual.

She thought about that for a while, then asked, “Are you like that all over?”

Mike said, “Pretty much.”

“Is it itchy?”

He laughed. “A bit.”

She stroked him again. He spread the long covering hair apart and showed her the dense layer of short wiry hair underneath. She prodded at it with a finger.

Mike laughed. “It’s very tough, Becky. You’re not going to hurt me.” He released his claws, showing them to her. Her eyes widened. “This is what we use on each other. You’re not going to hurt me with those soft little fingers.”

She giggled and reached out a finger toward the claws. He re-sheathed them quickly. “Nah, I wouldn’t do that. They’re razor-sharp.” She studied his hands.

“I can see where they come out.”

“If you’re looking.” He shrugged. “Humans aren’t very observant.”

Her face clouded. “Why do you say “humans” like that? Do you hate us?”

*Jesus.*

Mike said, “Of course I don’t hate you, Becky. I love you. You’re my little sister.”

“I’m human. And Kathryn’s human. And Mommy. And Dave.”

Mike sighed. “Yeah, I know.” He looked up at me and Maggie. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” He looked back at Becky. “My brothers fought the humans for a long time. Sometimes I just —.” He cut that off. “I don’t hate humans, Becky. There’s too many I love.” He smiled at her and flicked her

hair with a finger.

She smiled back, then looked around at us all, seeing the tension. She looked at her father, then back at Mike. “Do you mind?”

“How do you mean?”

Her bright blue eyes were solemn. “Not being human.”

I heard his breath catch. He blinked unhappily. “Oh Becky, of course I mind. But I can’t change it.” We were all standing there as if frozen. Mike looked at us, then back at Becky. “Do *you* mind?”

The sadness faded from her eyes and she grinned vividly. “I think it’s cool.” The smile disappeared. “But I wish you and Daddy were happier about it.” Her small kitten face clouded over. “I wish everyone wasn’t so unhappy.”

*Out of the mouths of babes ...*

Maggie said stiffly, “Becky, it’s time you were getting ready for bed.”

“Okay.” She went back to the table to gather up her pens and paper. On her way to the door she stopped and glanced back at Mike. “Will you read to me tonight?”

Mike and his mom exchanged looks. Then he said steadily, “Sure. Ten minutes?”

“Cool.” She beamed at everyone indiscriminately and skipped out.

There a long silence and then Maggie said, “I better go and talk to Kathryn.”

After she’d gone, Mike and Paul exchanged a long look, then, suddenly, both grinned identical grins. I had no idea what was in their heads.

I said, “I’m going upstairs.”

They turned toward me. Mike said, “We’re grateful for Becky.” And I had to smile.

“We’re all grateful for Becky.” Which just made me feel worse for Kathryn, of course.

I went upstairs.

I settled down on my bed with a book. I stared at the words, and my eyes ran down the page, but all I could think of was Kathryn. I couldn’t blame her. I surely felt sorry for her. And for me, and for Mike, and for Paul, and for

Maggie, and for Lin, and ... *Oh let's just be sorry for the whole damn world, shall we?* This wasn't getting me anywhere.

She hadn't said anything about my dad; she hadn't said anything about finding me and Mike together like that. I wasn't sure what that meant. Maybe she was saving it up.

*Why do you think she cares? Why should she?*

But it wasn't about her caring. I couldn't see Kathryn passing up the chance to hurt me, or Mike, by using it.

There was a knock at the door. I felt a reflexive tightening in my gut. I was so sick of that. There was nothing to be afraid of, why couldn't my stupid gut be persuaded of that?

I said, "Come in." The door opened and Paul stood there. The feeling in my gut sharpened. *What now?*

Paul tilted his head. Mike's gesture. I looked down.

He said hesitantly, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

I shook my head. "I was just trying to distract myself. Not doing too good a job." I tried to smile.

Paul nodded. "Yeah." He made a gesture toward Mike's bed. "Could we talk?"

"Sure." Trying not to sound wary, but knowing he'd pick up on it anyway.

He sat on the edge of Mike's bed, elbows on his thighs, head bowed. I waited.

After a bit, he raised his head, looked at me. "I'm sorry. I'm not really sure what I came here for, except ..." A long pause. I didn't try to fill it. Eventually he sighed. And said, "You're his brother. Which makes you *my* brother."

Okay, that was a weird concept.

He looked away again. "You know what they call me?"

I took a breath. "Brother who wants to be human."

He made a noise. "Yeah." He looked back at me. "And you *are* human. The brother who is human." He understood my reaction. He said quickly, "I know you've got as much as you can handle right now, I don't mean to add to your load. I just ... need someone to talk to."

I blinked. *Hello? Brother? Wife?* Why on earth would he prefer to speak to

the screwed-up teenage son of a neighbor?

I guess that wasn't a hard thought to read. "I can't talk to Maggie about Mike in the same way I can you." His eyes were darkening. "And that's probably wrong, but ... she loves both of us, you see. And she hates the Pack. I can't blame her for that."

I didn't understand. He hated the Pack too. Well, probably not anything as simple as hate. But it would seem like Maggie was more on his side than Mike's, more than me certainly. So why ...?

"You're on Mike's side. You don't have these other ... complications." I still didn't understand. He must have seen that. He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "I feel like I'm betraying him when I discuss him with Maggie."

"You're his parents."

He stood up quickly. Moved over to the window, turning his back to me. "Maggie's his parent. I'm his brother." He thrust a hand into his hair and I saw him shudder. The he relaxed and turned around. "She doesn't understand. I can't expect her to."

I looked down, away from those probing eyes, so like Mike's. "What makes you think *I* understand?"

"It doesn't matter whether you do or not. What I know is, you're on his side. Whether he's right or wrong, or completely crazy." He paused. I could feel his eyes still on me. Waiting. Eventually I gave in, looked up.

"Yeah."

"So it's no betrayal to talk to you."

*Now* what was I going to say?

He leaned against the wall. "He kept your secrets for ten years. Do you have any idea how hard that was for him? Not knowing what to do, having no one to turn to?"

I closed my eyes. "I never thought about how it was for him. Not till ..."

"Till *you* were worried about *him*?"

"Mm."

He came and squatted beside my chair. As Mike would. "Dave, I'm not blaming you. You were a child, as he was. You had enough to contend with, I wouldn't expect you to think about the burden you were placing on Mike." But

I should have thought of it. "It's *now* I'm talking about."

I looked up, frowning.

He settled back on his haunches. "Don't you ever worry about Mike? About the way he behaves, or things that he says? Wouldn't you like to be able to talk to someone about it?"

*God yes.* I was shocked and surprised at how strongly I reacted to that. *It doesn't matter.*

He read my thoughts with Mike's frightening accuracy. "It's not a betrayal, Dave. You know, if you asked him, he wouldn't even understand why you needed to ask. We're his brothers."

My head understood that. It still felt like a betrayal.

He rose and went over to the window, stood there looking out. He was so like Mike. It comforted me and freaked me at the same time.

"Does he ever talk about Lin?" I froze. He went on quickly, "I don't suppose he does. He loves her, you know." He leaned against the window frame, still looking out. "I suppose a human father wouldn't take that seriously. I know Maggie doesn't. But we don't know how to change." He turned his head and met my eyes. "He'll always love her as he does now. Like he'll always love you. And he'll always hate your father." Sighing. "We remember too well. We can't stop remembering, so we can't change our feelings."

I wondered about that. Hadn't *he* changed his feelings?

Somehow he read what I'd never have said.

"I always loved my father, and I was always scared I'd grow to be like him."

*It's weird, isn't it, how you want to be understood, and yet when you are, you can't bear it?*

Paul said, "They're natural feelings, Dave. You don't need to be ashamed."

"Are you?" I surprised myself.

But not Paul. Without hesitation, he said, "Not ashamed. We don't do shame very well." A ghostly smile didn't lighten his eyes. "Guilt, yes. I felt guilty growing up, knowing what I wanted, what I felt. And I've felt guilty ever since. Even when I couldn't remember why I felt guilty."

I was stunned. "You blocked it out that much?"

Dropping his gaze, he wrapped his arms around himself as if cold. His voice scraped the bottom of his register, the words barely distinguishable. “I couldn’t bear to remember.”

A long silence, then he lifted his head and met my eyes. “You understand that.”

*Yeah, but ...*

He read my thoughts. “Yes. It was a little more extreme for me. Memory is ...” His voice trailed away and he looked down at the ground again.

I said carefully, “Forgetting is something humans are designed to do. It’s not something the Pack does.”

He made a noise that might have been a laugh. “Mike told you, I’m insane.”

I tried to shrug it off. “He tells me that about himself, too.”

He shook his head, smiling without humor. “He’s insane by human standards. But we’re not human, so that doesn’t really count. *I’m* insane by the standards of the Pack.”

I said hesitantly, “Is that why you and Mike ... find it so hard?”

“Trying to block out the Pack ... that’s ... like I say, it’s insane. Beyond understanding.” He rubbed the back of his neck and gave an unamused laugh. “Well, we understand it with our heads, I guess. But in our guts ... even I can’t really understand how I could do this, why I keep trying to do this.” He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them. “I don’t *want* to push him away, but I keep doing it.”

Our eyes met in perfect understanding. I said, because he’d opened up to me and because he looked so much like Mike and because we shared so much, “I’m getting better.”

“Good.” I wasn’t sure whether he meant it was good for me or good for Mike, but his next words wiped any concern about that from my mind. “Right now the two of you are in love, and that’s great. Both of you need that right now.” He stopped. “Dave?”

There was a blush working its way up from my throat right up to the roots of my hair. Had he said what I thought he said? He couldn’t have.

“I’m sorry.” Paul gave that short, unamused laugh again. “I berate Mike for forgetting you’re a teenage boy, and then do the same myself. I didn’t mean

that the way you probably took it.”

There was another way of taking it?

He said, “Have you ever seen a newborn baby, Dave?”

I blinked.

“Watch a newborn baby. See how it looks at its mother’s face. Learning it. Studying it. Entranced. As the mother is by the baby. They can’t get enough of each other. What an amazing, wonderful person. They hate to be parted. There’s a tension there, that never goes, until they’re with each other again. And then everything’s fine. I mean, there might be problems, small unhappinesses, discomforts. But the big discomfort, the being-away-from-each-other stress, that’s gone.” He smiled suddenly, his eyes bright. He looked so like Mike at that moment. “Remind you of anything?”

I felt the blush deepen, flooding my face with heat.

“There’s more than one way of being in love, Dave.”

That ... wasn’t actually any less embarrassing.

He left about a minute before Mike came in. Coincidence? I didn’t think so. The awareness they had of each other, for all it wasn’t enough for Mike, was something I really didn’t like thinking about. And I wasn’t comfortable being their go-between. I still wasn’t sure why Paul had come right then. He hadn’t said anything about Kathryn, and yet there must have been something about the scene that had triggered the visit. Or maybe he was just taking advantage of Mike’s absence. Thinking about it, I realized that if he’d wanted to talk to me alone, this pretty much was the first opportunity for him since Mike had come back.

That was embarrassing.

Mike was practically humming when he came in. His happiness was an aura around him, and I hated the way it collapsed the moment he registered my ... I didn’t know what I was feeling. Embarrassed mainly, but there was a lot of confused emotion running around with it.

“Dave?” He paused halfway to my bed and his tongue flicked out and he said, “Paul was here.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Yeah.” Should I apologize, tell him what

Paul had said, what?

Mike tipped his head to one side, considering me. His tongue tasted the air again. “You okay?”

“Sure.” I nodded vigorously, then, with a sigh, said honestly, “You know me, get embarrassed about every little thing. I’m fine.”

And that was it. He nodded, smiled, and started to chuck off his clothes.

Not looking at him, I said brightly, “So, how did your reading with Becky go?”

I heard the springs bounce as he threw himself down on his bed. “Didn’t read.” His tone said that had pleased him. “She asked for a story. About my brothers.”

I felt my jaw drop as I sucked in a breath. I looked at him and he rolled his eyes. “Some of them are suitable for a ten-year-old!”

“Sorry.” I didn’t really think he’d tell Becky stories of rape and torture. Of course I didn’t.

He bared his teeth. “Really not sure of my grasp of reality, are you?”

I thought of denying it, then, sighing, admitted, “Sometimes it seems a little shaky, but I know you wouldn’t say anything to distress Becky.”

The words echoed between us, then he said quietly, “Not quite true, is it?” Then he grinned, dismissing it, “But I’m sane enough right now.” He tilted his head. “Your doing, you know.”

“Mine?”

“You need me. You’re letting yourself need me. It keeps me grounded.”

*Okay. Yeah, okay.* That helped, to know there was an upside to the whole messy falling-apart thing.

I managed to coax Mike into doing some work, though I’m pretty sure he did it only to humor me. I hadn’t had any luck convincing him the coming exams mattered to him. Maybe because I didn’t want to push the issue of what he was going to do with his life. He had enough on his plate at the moment.

Anyway, I kept him at it as long as I could, then he curled up on his bed and dreamed with his brothers, and I kept working till I realized I’d read the same paragraph three times and still had no idea what it said. I packed the books

away, and turned, seeing Mike twisting on the bed, growling softly. I looked away quickly, and my eyes caught the clock on the bookcase and I frowned.

“Mike?”

I wasn't sure he'd hear me, but he answered readily, though his voice was barely understandable. “Yeah?”

“When are you going out?”

He stilled, then rolled onto his back, stretching out. His eyes opened. Clearing his throat first, he spoke carefully. “Actually, we thought we'd give it a miss tonight.”

I gave it a moment. I wanted him to know I'd thought about this, that I meant it. “My dad's not going to come back. Not for a while anyway.”

“I don't have to run every night.”

I took a breath and got up and took the steps I needed to put me by his bed. “Mike, I know you want to protect me, but you can't stand guard on me 24/7.” He opened his mouth, probably to say he could, and I said quickly, “And I don't want you to.”

I'd said it because it would work, not because it was true, but I hadn't thought about it enough. I saw the hurt in his face, and closed my eyes briefly, then opened them. Honesty.

“Okay, I do want you to. But it's not good for me, Mike. I need to learn to manage without you from time to time. Okay?”

His face said he didn't understand that, and I guess it wasn't something that would ever occur to a Pack-brother, but he nodded, and the hurt faded. “I know you have different needs from a Pack-brother.” He said it as if reminding himself. “Sometimes you have to tell me what they are.” His eyes were a deep navy, searching me.

I nodded slowly. He couldn't see into my head. He could smell my emotions, but he didn't know my thoughts. It was stupid, and cowardly, to hope he'd know everything I wanted or needed without me having to find the words and admit to feelings I didn't want to acknowledge half the time.

And the thing was — if you thought about it, the really amazing thing was — that he accepted them. Whatever I told him, he'd accept. He wouldn't stop lo— caring about me, and he wouldn't try and change me, tell me I was stupid

or that I could be better, or whatever.

He accepted what I was.

There was a smile on my face. “Go for your run, Mike. I’ll be fine.”

I felt strong enough, right then, to face the thought of being alone with equanimity. In fact, I was kind of looking forward to it, in the way you can get when you think you can do something and you want the opportunity to prove it.

But I didn’t get the chance to find out.

## Chapter 15

Five minutes after Paul and Mike left on their run, Maggie knocked on the door.

I let her in, because what else could I do? She sat on the edge of Mike's bed right where Paul had sat, and gazed at me, her eyes looking as if she was using every bit of control she had to act calm. "What's going on with you and Mike, Dave?"

I flushed. Okay, Kathryn had talked, and she'd chosen who to talk to really carefully. I felt my face getting hotter and hotter, knew it was blazing like a sunset.

She bent her head, her eyes closing, and she sighed the words out, talking to her feet. "I don't want to embarrass you, Dave. But I'm worried. You're very vulnerable right now. And Mike ..." Her voice trailed off.

I had to push the words past the obstruction in my throat. "Mike's not making me do anything I don't want to." That didn't come out right. I didn't want her to think I wanted —. Oh damn. "It's nothing like ... what you're thinking. They like to touch, that's all."

She raised her head. "What about you, Dave? What about what you want?"

I looked away. "I need to get used to being touched." I took a breath, made myself meet her eyes. "He wouldn't ever do anything I wouldn't like."

She searched my face, searching for the truth. I let her, though all I wanted to do was hide. Then she threw me completely. "He's not the same person, Dave." I didn't think that was anything to do with what I'd said.

I said, carefully, "No. He's not."

Something went out of her then, like I'd fractured the wall she'd buttressed herself with. Her body went limp, and her head dipped, and the expression on her face hurt me to look at.

"I don't understand." Shaking her head, on and on, her head still bent, her eyes closed. Then her head jerked up and her eyes flew open. "Tell me! He talks to you. more than Paul's ever done with me. Tell me why he's changed so much. Tell me why he's so different from Paul. Tell me what's wrong between them."

Oh God, I really didn't want to have this conversation.

She was still in the bedroom when we heard the back door slam. She wasn't happy; I wasn't happy. I'd said a lot less than I could, but even keeping it as generalized as I could, it was more than I felt comfortable with. She was Mike's mother, Paul's wife, but it was for them to tell her this stuff, not me.

When we heard the door slam, we both stood up abruptly. Maggie said quickly, "We don't need to bother them with this. I'm grateful —."

I cut her off. She really didn't get it. Not that it was her fault. "We need to go down and talk to them." I hurried to the door, not wanting a discussion about it, a little stunned that I'd interrupted her and was now preempting the issue. I heard her start to say something but I opened the door and was gone.

When I appeared in the kitchen, Mike had a tall glass of water in his hand and was pouring it all down his throat in one long thirsty swallow. Paul was at the sink filling another one. Mike finished and put the glass on the bench. His tongue flicked out.

Paul turned around, the glass in his hand. I said, a little breathless from hurtling down the stairs, "How about some coffee?"

Paul blinked. He glanced at Mike. Mike studied me, then he nodded slowly. And without any more than that, Paul put his glass down and reached for the kettle.

Then Maggie appeared. I hadn't been absolutely sure she would.

Paul froze.

Mike said, like we were in the middle of a conversation, "Yeah. I guess we need to do this."

Paul gave him frantic eyes. Mike nodded at the kettle in his hand. "Put the water on, brother." He started to get mugs down.

Maggie went quietly past me and sat down at the table. *Okay*. I sat down too. We both watched the two of them making the drinks. They were so alike, more even than usual, in their gray sweats. It was weird enough for me; I didn't want to think about how it was for Mike's mom. It would be all right if Mike still acted like a kid, but he didn't. Sometimes he seemed older than his

dad.

In a way he was, if Paul truly had blocked out the memories.

Noone spoke until we were all sitting around the table with drinks in front of us. And then, still noone spoke. After a moment, I realized it was up to me.

*Okay.*

I had no idea how to do this.

I opened my mouth, and surprised all of us with what came out.

“Mike hasn’t told me much about the parent species. The memories are a lot less clear. But my best guess is that when *Homo erectus* wandered into Europe, a beneficial mutation arose in one of the bands.” Paul and Maggie were staring at me with looks of bemusement; Mike was looking ... amused? I soldiered on.

“Mutations occur all the time, but most of them are useless or even deadly. Occasionally one happens that gives the individual a big advantage. If the population he or she lives in is a small one, and isolated from other potential breeding partners, the mutation can spread through the group really quickly. That’s how new species are formed.” That was a simplification, but I didn’t think they wanted to get into the grown-up version. Maggie was still looking as if she wondered what the heck this had to do with anything, but Paul was starting to tense. But noone spoke. They were going to let me do this my way.

“Okay. Well, that’s what I figure happened. Now it might not have been *Homo erectus*, but he was the first species that you could really call human, even though *Homo habilis* has the *Homo* prefix.” Irrelevant; stick to what’s important. “Anyway, *Homo erectus* is the first one to have got as far as Europe, and it does seem that that’s where the Pack arose.”

Paul asked hesitantly, “How human were they, Dave?”

That was good, that he’d managed to ask a question. It meant he was trying. I knew he didn’t like talking or thinking about this. But I wished he’d asked another question.

No, that was cowardice. This was what it was all about. I said carefully, “They were as tall as modern humans. Stronger. Fully bipedal. Intensely social. They used some tools, they may have had some ability to vocalize, although modern humans have extra nerves to their stomach and chest muscles, which may give us better breathing control.” I hesitated. Truth. This wouldn’t work if

I was less than truthful. “They’re thought to have the brain of a human toddler.”

I gave them a few seconds to absorb all that, then said with more firmness, “Homo erectus were our ancestors too. Mine and Maggie’s.” I spread my hands. “All I’m suggesting is that erectus was our last common ancestor. But it’s also possible that archaic Homo sapiens was. Or there’s another species they’ve named recently. Homo antecessor.” I shrugged. “Don’t have enough data. But the point is, even if we separated that far back, the same process that pushed humans’ increase in brain size must have worked on the Pack too.” I tilted my head, looking at Mike and Paul. “The proof’s right here, after all.”

Paul said stiffly, “How long ago, Dave?”

“At least 300,000 years.” Paul looked appalled. I added quickly, not sure he understood, “I’m talking about the last common ancestor between the humans and your parent species.” *Don’t think that helped.* I looked down at my hands, then reached for Mike’s hand and held it in mine, palm up. I stroked his palm with my forefinger and watched his fingers flex and the claws spring out.

A sharp intake of air from Maggie. I said softly, “Mutations can spread quickly in an isolated population, but the differences between you and humans need some time in which to occur. I think our separation would have had to occur at least that far back, and maybe more. It could be as much as a million years.” Truth, I had to give them truth, whatever the cost.

“There are thousands of hominid fossils, but there are very few complete skeletons or skulls. Our ideas of how these fossils should be classified — which ones belong to new species — change all the time. Fossils classified as Homo erectus may well belong to several different species. Some are more like Homo sapiens than others.”

I looked up, stared at Paul and Mike. “But the point is, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter whether your species and mine split from each other 300,000 years ago or a million years ago, or ten thousand years ago.” Though I was damn sure the last was implausible. “It doesn’t change anything about who you are.” The looks on Paul and Maggie’s faces said I was wrong about that. Mike’s was more relaxed. Not as if I’d convinced him, but as if he was waiting, confidently, for me to make my point.

Okay. “Do you know why our brains got bigger?”

They all shook their heads.

“Well, we don’t *know*, of course. But there are a couple of interesting theories. The first point to note is that we probably couldn’t have grown these hefty brains without eating meat. Brains require a huge amount of energy.” I grinned. Despite the tension in the room, I was feeling better. Lecture mode relaxes me. “Why carnivores are usually brighter than herbivores. So, don’t condemn hunting.”

Maggie found a smile. I could see the effort, but it said she was trying, and that was comforting. She said, lightly, “Are vegetarians dumber then?”

I laughed. “I think you’re pretty safe, but you might be in trouble if you only ate rabbit-food.” Maggie’s smile widened. I went on, “Anyway, that’s just a prerequisite. The important question is, what are brains good for? It’s not as obvious as it might sound. Like I said, brains are really expensive to run, and most animals manage fine on what they’ve got. Something had to drive our increase in brain size.”

Maggie frowned. “So what was it?”

I shrugged. “Maybe divvying up the meat.”

They all stared at me. I explained, “We needed meat, right? And it wasn’t something everyone could get for themselves. If you’re not a hunter yourself, you want to be friends with a hunter, right? And you’ve got to offer him something.” I blushed suddenly. I could see from Maggie’s face that we’d both thought of the same thing, but no one was going to say it.

I went on quickly, “Like protection. If I see you’re in danger, I’ll let you know, and I’ll help you out, because you’re my ally. It’s a dangerous world out there, you need people you can count on.” The words hit me. Involuntarily, I looked at Mike, and he smiled.

I tried to regain my casual tone. “So, the thing is, um, you need to remember who your friends are. Who you can count on, and who you can’t. Who’s done what for you, that sort of thing. And that’s what we need brains for.” I paused.

Paul was still tense, but he looked intrigued as well. So did Maggie. Mike was looking thoughtful. Okay. Maybe this would work. With renewed energy, I said, “Tell you the really interesting thing. Among monkeys and apes,

alliances are maintained by grooming. The larger the group grows, the bigger the grooming group. There's a pretty good fit between the size of the neocortex — that's, like, the 'smart' part of the brain — and the size of the group. So, a current theory is that humans evolved language because they needed to spend too much time grooming, because their group sizes were too big. On the basis of our neocortex, humans can live comfortably in groups of about 150, but to do that they'd have to spend about 40% of the day grooming each other! So maybe language has taken its place — because you can talk comfortably with three other people, rather than the one-on-one situation you have with grooming, you get more for your time.

“I think the Pack evolved its mind-to-mind communication for the same reason. It was an alternative strategy. You did one thing, we did another. But we both needed big brains to do it. We followed, like, parallel paths?” I stopped. *Was* this going to help?

Paul said, “We're *animals*.”

*Jesus*. “We're all animals! You both obsess about this whole human-animal thing. Why? Because you've got coats like a German shepherd? So what? It doesn't make you a dog. Human versus animals is something humans thought up to bolster their egos. Don't fall into their trap!” Shocked, I closed my mouth with a snap. I couldn't believe I'd spoken to him like that. I stared down at the table, not looking at anyone, feeling myself trying to shrink into invisibility.

Mike touched my arm. His voice was soft. “Thank you.” I looked up, and saw approval and, was it gratitude?, in his face. I straightened.

Paul said tightly, “You think there's no difference between humans and other animals?”

Mike's hand was still on my arm. It gave me the security to say firmly, “There are differences between humans and other animal species, like there are between any different animal species. There's not some huge divide between humans and all other animals.” I didn't know if I was getting through to him, but I was convincing myself anyway. “You know, one of the reasons humans found it easy to imagine a huge gap between themselves and everyone else is probably because the hominid line hasn't been very successful.”

Paul frowned. Maggie was back to looking bemused. Mike was just waiting

patiently for me to make everything clear. Okay. “How many hominids roam the earth today? As far as most humans know, one. Just one. That is not a successful line. There’s a gap next to humans because of all those hominids that didn’t make it. The closest relatives humans know of are the chimps and the gorillas. You know how much difference there is between chimps’ DNA and ours?” I held my thumb and forefinger apart so they were just short of touching. “Less than there is between two different types of gibbon. If biologists weren’t prejudiced in favor of their own species, chimps and humans would be grouped together.”

Paul said, “So?”

I made myself meet his eyes. Paul was the important one. Mike was willing to be persuaded, but if he and Paul were ever to be comfortable together, Paul needed to be able to accept what he was. I didn’t know whether this would help, but it was all I had. “In Lake Victoria, in Africa, there are about 200 different species of this little fish called a cichlid. Some of the species eat fish, and others eat insects, and others nibble at fish scales, and some are herbivores, some are plankton-eaters, some crush snails. You see? Different life-styles, different eating habits, different species. They all descend from one single ancestor who lived 200,000 years ago. Like humans.”

“So?” he asked again.

“So there’s only a fraction of a percent difference in their DNA, but they’re all different. Biologists say they’re different species.” I took a breath, came down hard on the words. “Because of their different life-styles. Because of —” I grinned suddenly, “cultural differences. That’s what the problem is here. I don’t think there’s much difference between us genetically. You’ve got some physical differences from us, but you can pass for human. What makes it so hard for you is ... cultural differences.”

“Memory,” Mike said softly. I nodded.

Paul said stubbornly, “We’re either human or we’re not, Dave.”

“You’re missing the point,” I said. It was hard to argue with him, but Mike was still looking at me like I had all the answers, and it gave me the strength. “It’s the wrong question. You get the wrong answer because you’re asking the wrong

question. Does a platypus care whether biologists label it a mammal or something else? It's irrelevant. The label doesn't matter. The only reason you think it's important is because you have this big "either I'm a human or I'm an animal" idea. Humans are animals, okay? It's meaningless. You've got to ask yourself the right question. What is it that really worries you? What do you mean when you compare a human with other animals?"

They both went still. I flicked a glance at Maggie and she was frozen too, her eyes on me. All of them wanting the answer; all of them looking to me to provide it.

I took a breath. "Does eating your meat raw make you less than human? Humans eat raw meat. Raping? Killing? Torturing? Humans do all that. Because you can touch each other's minds? How does that make you inferior?" Another breath. "There's nothing your ancestors have done that our ancestors haven't. Trace anyone's line back 40,000 years and you'll find plenty of terrible stories. Humans are not a nice species. The difference is, you remember it. That's your grief. It shouldn't add to your shame." I was shaking. I'd tried to be calm about this, but I couldn't be. It wasn't some academic theory.

Paul said, "But we *are* animals. Maybe humans were animals, too, but they can get past it, they can leave their history behind. We can't. We can't forget what we were. Can't forget what we did. *Can't stop wanting it.*" He stopped. He was shaking too.

Mike leaned toward him, his arm going around him, his tongue flicking out to taste Paul's face, and Paul shuddered, but he didn't pull away. I didn't want to watch. I looked away, and saw Maggie staring at them. I couldn't read her face, but as I watched, tears sprang into her eyes. I looked down, away from all of them. I shouldn't have —.

Maggie said, "I don't think the two of you are animals." I looked up, in time to see her smile at me. She'd wiped away the tears. "Or no more than humans are. Dave's right, humans can be nasty."

I risked a look in the opposite direction and saw Mike licking Paul's face. Paul's eyes were closed. Then Mike drew back, and Paul opened his eyes. "He

knows what I'm feeling, Maggie. He always knows what I'm feeling. And I want to touch him, like he wants to touch me, all the time."

Her face changed, and he added quickly, "Not like that!"

Mike said easily, "We communicate by touch, Maggie. And this hair of ours needs to be groomed. How long is it since you've ever even *seen* my brother naked?"

Maggie blushed, looking faintly shocked. I blushed too. Paul muttered something. Mike looked exasperated. "He can't keep denying what we are! Mom, do you have any idea how screwed-up he is? Or what the consequences are?"

That got her. The blush faded. "What consequences?"

"Do you know how careful I have to be around him? I can't keep doing it. There's going to come a time —." He broke off, shook his head. "I'm sorry. But he's my line-brother, and he's half-dead inside."

Maggie looked at her husband. "Is that true?"

Paul bowed his head, not saying anything. He was pale, his eyes black. As Mike's were now. On his own account, or was he simply reflecting Paul's emotion? Did it make a difference?

Maggie looked at Mike. "What can I do?"

"Accept him as he is." He shook his head. "No. Accept him as he should be."

"I don't know what that is."

Paul said softly, "I don't want to be the person you want me to be, Mike."

Mike's jaw tightened, but he took a deep breath and said steadily, "I know. But you can't be the person you want to be either." He leaned forward and touched Paul's hair lightly. "You know that, brother."

A long pause. We all waited in silence to see what he would say. And then he nodded, and raised his head. "I know."

*This is stupid.*

I stared up at the ceiling, trying to force my body to relax, thinking, *I can do better than this.*

No. I couldn't.

I knew what I should do. I'd be doing us both a favor, for heaven's sake. So why did I fight it?

*Scared to stay, scared to go. Heck you're pathetic.*

I thought of Paul. After his admission, we'd all talked for a long time, about what the Pack was, what Mike needed, what Paul needed. Part of me had felt uncomfortable being part of that discussion, but the one time I'd tried to leave them to it, Mike had stopped me. And not only Mike. Everyone had seemed to feel better if I was there. I got the feeling they were all, in their separate ways, scared of being alone together.

So, I'd been useful, which always made me feel better, but that wasn't the point right now. The point was, Paul was trying, and I could see how difficult it was for him. But he'd sat there, and let us all talk about stuff he'd prefer to keep buried, and he'd found the courage to say what he wanted, and ... heck, this was only Mike and me. This should be easy.

Well, easier.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of my bed, moving quickly, before I changed my mind. I got as far as standing up, then froze. *What are you so scared of?*

Mike's deep rumble came out of the darkness. "You're the bravest person I know. And the kindest, and the smartest, and the funniest. And we will always love you."

My usual stomach flip. I tried to lighten the atmosphere. "You gonna say that every time I —" *What? Tell myself I'm pathetic?* I didn't want to finish that sentence.

"I can't read your mind," he reassured me, sitting up. "I don't know what's in your head when you smell like that. But I know it means you're..." He paused. Sighed. "Don't hate yourself, little brother." Another, briefer, pause, then his voice lightened. "And yeah, I'm gonna say that every time you feel like that."

I took a couple of steps toward him. "So, um, what does it smell like?"

A thoughtful pause. I took another step, and bumped into Mike's bed. He reached out and put his fingers lightly on my wrist, against my pulse. I don't know

why he liked doing that. He said, “You ever eaten a mango?”

I blinked. “Um, they’re a fruit.” His heartbeat synchronizes with his Pack brothers, it must be something to do with that.

A smile in his voice. “Yeah, brain-box, it’s a fruit. You ever tasted one?”

I shrugged. “Not to notice. Why?”

“They taste funny. I’m not sure how to describe it. But if you knew what a mango tasted like, and if you imagined it about a month past its use-by date ... well, that’s sort of how it smells, when you’re hating yourself.” His hand curled around my wrist, taking confidence from the fact that I hadn’t drawn away, maybe.

I took a deep breath. “Sounds rancid.”

“Yeah.”

His hand was so warm around my wrist. He wasn’t holding it tightly. Securely. That was the word. Like the way he made me feel.

It wasn’t him I was afraid of.

I took another breath. “You got room for another one?”

“Always.” Quick, surprised, ... amazingly happy. He slid off the bed and I pulled back the duvet and crawled over to the far side. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. Mike scooped the duvet around me, clearing it away from his side. And lay down beside me, keeping his distance.

My heart was pounding.

I tipped my head to the space between us, knowing he could see me plain as day. “Someone there?” Managing to grin.

“I wouldn’t let a brother do that.” Serious. Hurt, even?

I closed my eyes. “I didn’t mean —”

“I know.” His voice was suddenly close. “This what you meant?”

I opened my eyes. Close enough to touch, but he wasn’t. Was ... scrupulously ... not touching. His eyes were darker pools in the shadowy blur of his face. Intense, dark pools.

I didn’t know what I wanted.

Yeah. I did.

I tucked my head down. "Tell me something? A memory."

He made a low humming sound. It meant he was thinking.

I liked his noises.

I felt myself, sort of, leaning toward him. Felt myself remembering the feel of his hair ... thick, now, like an Alsatian's ... no, thicker. Like a wolf's. An Arctic wolf.

I realized I'd slid right into him, my head tucked under his chin, my hand burying itself in his hair. I felt myself tense as I realized what I'd done, and I clenched my eyes tighter and pushed myself harder into him, angry at myself. At my stupid, pathetic, babyish ...

"Don't, little brother." His voice was so deep. His mouth was against my hair.

I pushed into him, and his arms came around me tentatively. I heard myself say, "At least before I had a reason to be scared."

His hand was on my head, cupping the back of my head, not moving. Just ... there. Warm, and ... comforting.

"I'm scared all the time, and I don't know what I'm scared of. Not you." I added the last words hastily.

"This?" He didn't move. Just lay there beside me, his body radiating heat, his voice so deep it was almost a purr, his arms holding me lightly but ... securely.

My security blanket.

I went limp. Like a marionette with its strings cut. Clip, someone cut my strings, and there I was, unable to move, enfolded into his warmth.

I didn't want to be able to move.

I mumbled into his thick coat of hair, like that would keep him from hearing me, "I don't know what I'm scared of."

Another low hum. Then, "New stuff's always frightening. Better the devil you know, huh?" A different sound, amused. "You should see us when we come up against something we haven't experienced before. Panic city."

I found it hard to imagine a brother panicking. Well, that was stupid, I'd seen Mike panic, but ... *Before. When he didn't know what he was. Not now.*

He said, "What surprises you about that?" He still sounded amused.

I loosened my grip on him, feeling calmer. Rolled my head back onto his shoulder. “It just seems, I dunno, a little strange, the thought of a Pack-brother panicking. I don’t know why. The stories you’ve told me ...” I shrugged a shoulder. Emotion fixed memories in the genes. It wasn’t surprising all Mike’s stories involved strong emotion, including fear.

“You’ve seen Paul panic,” he reminded me. “And me.”

“Yeah, but ...” I wasn’t sure I should say this. Didn’t matter. Mike read my thought.

“But Paul isn’t really a Pack-brother?” Grief there. Never fading. It hit me then, as it sometimes did. For them, grief never fades. It’s always as deep and ... and *gutting* ... as it was when it was fresh. The death of someone you love. A brother, a son. Always feeling what you felt when it happened. Was it any wonder they’d developed these hallucinations? I didn’t see how anyone could stay sane if their memories didn’t lose their edge.

Mike said, “You’re right, we usually contain our panic pretty well.” A pause. “But I don’t think that’s why you feel like that.” He shifted his head a little closer to mine, and blew softly into my hair. “It’s okay, little brother. I know you need me to be a rock. Which I wasn’t able to be for a while. But I can, now. I promise.”

How could he promise that?

“Because you need me, little brother. Because you’re letting yourself need me, not shutting me out. I can’t handle being shut out. You’re my brother.” He bumped his head lightly against mine. “I can handle anything else.”

I sighed, and rolled my face back into his chest. “I don’t know what I want. Or what I’m scared of.”

“They’re probably the same thing. Don’t you think?”

I liked his smell. It wasn’t ... heck, it wasn’t like anyone. Not human, not animal. Something in-between.

Like his noises, that weren’t language, but weren’t meaningless either.

I *didn’t* think of him as a pet, I was sure about that. But I didn’t think of him as human, either. And wasn’t that what I’d been saying? They weren’t human, but they weren’t animals either. Aliens. Maybe I should think of them as aliens..

I found myself smiling.

He said, very gently, “You’re scared of what you want because you don’t know what it is. If you knew what you wanted, you wouldn’t be so scared of it.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“We’re not going to work out what you want if you let it all stay inside your head. I know it’s not going to come out right, first time. Just say it, little brother. We’ll work it out, together.”

I breathed in his smell. Not human. Not animal. My brother. And said, quickly, trying not to think, not to censor what I was saying, “I like you holding me. But it makes me feel ... I don’t understand what I feel, and that scares me, and I ... I’m scared, if I start, I’ll never want to stop. I’ll want you to hold me forever. Which is stupid. I know it’s stupid. I’m just ... shit ... “

His arms tightened. I felt his nose in my hair. “I wouldn’t mind holding you forever.” A smile in his voice. More seriously, “Dave, of course you’re desperate to be held. You’re seriously deprived. You think, if someone doesn’t eat for a long time, they’re going to say, oh no, don’t worry about me, I don’t need food anymore? Mm?”

“Food’s a biological necessity.”

“And who was the one telling me about what happens to monkeys if they’re reared at arm’s length, with noone touching them?”

“I wasn’t —” I stopped. I didn’t want to go there.

“That deprived? Maybe not. But you’re not a monkey, either.” His hand stroked my hair. “Little brother, I need a son as much as you need a parent. It’s okay.”

There they were, the words I’d been too scared, too embarrassed, to find. Yeah, that’s what I wanted from him.

I mumbled, “I’m sixteen. We’re both sixteen.”

“I’m thousands of years old, and I’ve fathered a thousand sons. And you can be six again, if you want. No extra charge.” Pleased. He did that low hum again.

“You know, that’s not such a bad idea. I reckon that’s what you need.”

I shifted position, tipping my head back. “To be six again?” It didn’t come out as sarcastic as I’d meant it.

“To grow up again.”

I rolled back into the crook of his arm, frowning, not sure what he was getting at.

“We play with our memories, you know. I told you that, didn’t I?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “We remember things exactly as they happened, sure, but we’re not above changing them. Well, not *changing* them, but ... we exchange them, we ... merge them. It’s ... I don’t know ... an art. You know? It’s our art.

“I remember everything about you, little brother. Together, we could remake your childhood.” Something reacted in me when he said that, though I wasn’t sure what it was I felt. Maybe Mike did. He hurried on, “Not make it like the bad stuff never happened, we can’t do that. But ... we could make our ... responses ... to it different. You understand?”

“No.”

“Mmmmm. I need to show you. I’ll try and pick something easy.” Another hum, longer this time. “After I’d promised to talk to Paul. Before I had. You came through the window at two in the morning. You walk over to your bed, and then just stand there, head down, arms hanging loose. You feel ... empty. At the end of your rope. Don’t know what to do, maybe don’t know what you’re doing here, but, where else would you go? I say, ‘I’m awake.’ And you tense. And I turn on the light and after a moment you turn around, and come over to the bed, and you see I’ve dealt the cards and you sit down on the bed.

“You smell of whisky and cannabis. You’re shaking. I say, ‘You hungry?’ and you shake your head. I say, ‘Want a drink?’ And you shake your head again. I lean forward and wrap my hand around yours. It’s very cold. ‘A hot drink,’ I say. ‘Hot chocolate.’ And I go and make it.

“I’m gone, little brother. I’ll be gone several minutes. Think. What do you need? When I come back, what are you going to tell me?”

Okay. I could see where this was going. Re-writing the past. Getting it right, this time.

If only I knew what I *should* have said. Or done.

I sucked in air, let it out heavily. Shut my eyes and let myself remember that

night. Remembered how long I'd stayed with the animals, getting colder and colder. Couldn't go back to the house. Wasn't sure I could deal with wherever Mike was at, that night. Scared he'd talked to his father. Scared he hadn't. Either way, there'd be fallout.

I'd wanted everything to be the way they'd been, before Mike had ...

"Say it." A deep rumble close to my ear. "Whatever it is, just say it."

"Unbalanced." That wasn't what I meant to say. Well, that was what it was all about, wasn't it? Just ... letting it out. I wondered what I was going to say next.

"What ... was happening to you. It ... unbalanced me." A giggle. *You're hysterical.*

Mike said, "Yeah, it is like that, isn't it? Like they say, about people doing things 'when the balance of their mind is disturbed'. I never realized how true that was. How ... easy ... it is ... to fall off that balance." A soft sigh. "Unbalanced both of us, that's for sure."

"I owed you. I should have been stronger."

"Shit, brother, you'll give anyone the benefit of the doubt except yourself, won't you? You were great. You were *there*. You did your best."

I snorted. "Yeah, that about says it all, doesn't it? Did my best. That's what you say when people can't make the grade."

"Brother, *noone* could've saved me from what I was going through. Except maybe Paul. Who — do I need to point out? — I still love. Even though, yeah, he failed me big time. Which *you* have never done."

"I should've ... I don't *know* what I could've done. I just know I didn't ... I wasn't ... I didn't care enough about *you*, I was just worried about *me*. That you couldn't ... be ... what I ... needed. That you'd let me down."

"Mmm. Can you see yourself on the bed? Cards in your hand? I'm coming through the door. Hand you your mug. Can you feel the heat of it? Can you smell the chocolate?"

It wasn't hard. A familiar event. No strain to see myself sitting on the bed, to imagine the smell of the hot chocolate, the weight and heat of the mug in my hand. No strain, either, to feel what I was feeling then.

Mike said softly, "And I'll say what I should have said. I'm glad you came

tonight. I needed you. Something happened today that really freaked me out. I need to talk about it, and I need you to tell me what happened to you tonight. Because I can't stand your silence anymore. And I can't stand imagining what he might be doing to you."

My eyes closed, curled into Mike's heat, I saw me sitting on the bed, holding my hot chocolate. Saw Mike standing by the bed, felt the weight of his gaze on me. I kept my eyes down. Breathed in. Heard myself say, wearily, "It was just the usual stuff. He was drunk. And stoned. Bad combo." In my mind's eye, I forced myself to look up, meet those black eyes. "I'm just ... finding it harder to handle right now."

"Because of me."

"No!" Reflexive. I gave a small, unamused laugh. "Yeah. Because of what's happening to you."

"Because you depend on me, and you think I'm going crazy."

It was easier to admit now. I couldn't have admitted it then. "Yeah. Because I depend on you."

"I need you too, Dave. You think it's scary, what's happening to me? Do you know how scary it's been, all these years, letting you go home ... to that? To him?"

My chest was tight. I breathed in hard. Forced the words out. "I never thought about it."

And we talked about that.