

1.

Let me show you where I was born. Shut your eyes and imagine skies so blue they dazzle, snow so white the glitter bursts against your closed eyelids, mountains dancing in the winter sunshine, dancing all the year round. In summer, the high peaks swirl their veils of heat-haze and tease with sudden nakedness to catch your breath, the chain of summits stretching beyond the horizon, whispering the ancient southern names, Pic de Viscos, Pic de Néouvielle, Pic du Midi de Bigorre, Pic de Macaupera. The shadow of a cloud drifts on the wind, lazy as a grand raptor surveying its domain, darkening an entire valley, the Val du Lavadon. I was born in the Pyrenees, with my two sisters and four brothers, seven little white rat-sausages jostling blindly to reach our mother's teats. I've seen a few pups born in this long life of mine, so what I can't remember, I can imagine. The warmth and smell of mother, the sleepy pleasure of a milk-full tummy and the newness of an outside world on this body after nine weeks growing to a curled-up ball inside my mother's baby-sac.

So much to learn... stretching, wobbling on four legs, squeaking for food, pushing Stratos off the teat I wanted (if you'd known Stratos, you'd have pushed him too), cuddling up to Snow, Sancho and Septimus to sleep in a pile of puppy fluff. The first thing I really remember was when I was about six weeks. You know how it feels when someone niggles you and niggles you; a push here, a little nip there and then one of those sideways looks just to make sure you knew it was deliberate? One sideways look too many, big brother! I can still feel that rush of power into my brains, paws and, most importantly, teeth, which sank into that plump cushion of flesh like a claw into mud. I've tried again and again to explain the pleasure of biting but words just don't do it. The first time, there's the slight hesitation as the points of your little teeth puncture the skin and then you're in! And he's squirming and squealing ... and then it all goes wrong. He's spoiling it by asking for help, real help, and he's your brother so it hurts you to hurt him and you have to stop – and you hate him for making you stop.

So you've discovered how complicated life is for a dog. You can't just do what you want because the want splits in two and fights itself, confusing you.

When Stratos and I met up again, years later, and were telling our stories by the light of the moon, that was something we shared. First bite. One good thing about the animal refuge was that you did get to see the moon. If I think of anything else that was good about the refuge, I'll be sure to let you know, when the time comes. But each bit of the story has its place, time and smell, and the moment for extra-strong disinfectant, ears oozing pus and dog-breath sweet with worms, has not yet come. What Stratos and I did agree on was that the second bite was more dangerous, sweeter with the knowledge of breaking the taboo, knowing you had to be strong enough to follow through. I'm talking about biting dogs of course, not about – whisper the very words! – biting Humans. Though Stratos and I had to talk about that too, given his situation. He's my hero, you know? But as I said, everything in its own time.

So, there we were, puppy-fighting and of course Stratos bit me back as soon as I let up on him. And if you don't forget the first bite you've given, boy do you remember the first time you got bitten, which is usually the reply to your own attempt! I was so shocked, I screamed before it hurt and then the pain flooded me with rage and I turned right back on him once more. He was shocked in his turn, and stopped biting me, with just that little shake he always gives. From then on we worked out that it was safer to stop at the squealing stage but Stratos' extra power was already starting to weigh in for him, even as a pup.

Dominant? Stratos? Maybe when he was little. When he was grown up, he didn't need to do anything. He'd just walk. And when Stratos walked you felt this urge to roll over in front of him, wag your tail, look at some far-distant imagined mountain, look anywhere but at Stratos himself. You'd want to say, 'Hey Stratos, did you skip breakfast? Here have my throat. I don't really need it.' You'd know that once you'd cleared up the niceties of status, you'd follow him to the ends of the earth and that same big brother would protect you to the death. We were pack.

Our talents were very different and I could hold my own in some ways. Not always the brightest puppy in the pack, my brother, and he didn't get the chance to learn like some of us did. 'University of Life,' he told me later. 'Some of us learned

the hard way, Sirius, and some of us ARE hard.’ But even then, I wondered. What if things had gone differently for Stratos?

But that’s me, Sirius, the sort of dog who wonders ‘what if?’ The sort of dog who started as a little rat-sausage, jostling his siblings to reach a teat, unaware that there could ever be more to life than Mother. That’s something else that Stratos and I talked about – Mother, otherwise known as Morgana de Soum de Gaia. She’d been a beauty queen and even though we were dragging her down, ‘draining her haggard,’ she complained, there was something about the way she carried herself that said ‘Princess’. She knew it and she made sure that we knew it too. ‘A Soum de Gaia never does *that*,’ Mother would sniff contemptuously at some puppy pee or worse fouling the straw, ‘in its own den!’ and then the offender would be picked up by the scruff of his neck and tossed into the yard, where the rest of us would mock and nip whoever was suffering Mother’s discipline, just to show her our support. And because it was fun, of course. And doubly fun if it was Stratos in trouble and not allowed to answer us back. Not so much fun when it was your own wrinkled rolls of neck fat gripped firmly between forty-two maternal teeth and your own four waddle-paddles pedaling in mid-air, not as keen on flying as you’d thought.

‘A Soum de Gaia stands like this,’ she told us and made us practise standing very still, head high and stretched out a bit, front legs straight and parallel, back legs uncomfortably far back, as if you were having a stretch and then someone said, ‘Hold it there!’ and kept you like that. Still, practising ‘the position’ with Mother made it easier when Alpha Human took us one by one, put us up on a table and did ‘grooming’ and ‘the position’. Mother had not prepared us for ‘Show me your little ears,’ when our Human flicked them back and rubbed them clean with olive oil. You can imagine how much fun we had afterwards licking oily ears. I reckon we were the puppies with the cleanest ears in the whole Pyrenees. Nor were we prepared for ‘Show me your little teeth’. In fact Mother tended to be averse to seeing too much of our little teeth and had shown her own once or twice when someone really caught her teat on the raw. We didn’t have much option about showing our little teeth to our Human as she put her fingers to our mouths and curled our lips back. If you’d seen the expression on Stratos’ face you’d have bust a gut laughing. I wasn’t convinced he’d

be a Beauty winner, even at that age; no-one checking Stratos' little teeth could look in his eyes and think how cute he was. And 'little teeth' was not the worst for the boys although at that age we weren't too fussed really. But when I look back, I do wonder now whether Humans ought to be quite so free and easy in checking out our masculinity. But at the time I just thought that it was part of being a Soum de Gaia to have that tickly feeling you get when a Human puts her hands down there and checks there are two. Perhaps I was right, because I've met a few dogs since then who feel strongly enough about their rights to consider the very idea sufficient provocation to justify the B-word. I don't know. I think you have to take their intentions into account with Humans and they mean well, you know, in their own strange way. And Stratos surprised me there. He always got that slightly glazed look in his eyes that meant he liked it. No accounting for tastes. Anyway both of us achieved the 'one, two!' tally without any trouble at all. No surprise there.

Not only was Mother a Princess, but she knew her realm from puppyhood and had grown up with most of the other dogs, the Soum de Gaia aunts, uncle and sisters. But Father was from Away and at twilight, the hour for wolf-tales before dark and real work, Mother would tell us the story of how they met and a slightly abridged version of how they mated. Amados de los Bandidos, my father. The very name was enough to make you want to run off into the mountains and howl with him, according to my mother, and she'd heard enough about him from our Human to make any bitch salivate. Amados this and Amados that and more importantly Amados for THE marriage. Even a Soum de Gaia can look at a rottweiler swaggering along the street, or the local hero with half an ear, mange and fleas, and wonder what he might be like... or so we heard during the twilight stories. But youthful fancies are only that and dynasties are founded on parents like ours, so Morgana accepted her destiny (and so should we, was the maternal message).

They met at the annual gathering, the Great Show at Argelès-Gazost, with snow sparkling on the mountains and dogs everywhere, not just the Pyreneans, but the little Pyrenean and Catalan Shepherds, and the great Matins with their bleary, bloodshot eyes. There were music, dancing, cafés overflowing with dogs and their owners, festive with horse-drawn tour-carts. Pennants were strung between the houses, the

horses were wearing garlands, and even some of the dogs were wearing Béarnaise red and yellow kerchiefs round their necks. Apparently this was all to celebrate the meeting of my parents. And where did The Event take place? Where else but in the Show Ring of course. While she was strutting her stuff with the girls, he was leaning casually against the fence-post, starting one of those competition drools that can reach tail-length if you're lucky.

Stratos and I have discussed drool technique and he admits that he loses from impatience. At about half-tail length, the urge to shake your drool is just so strong that he can't resist it, the way the dewlaps vibrate, the ears flap, and the cool slobber sprays your scent as far as a good head-shake will send it. I have told him that if, like me, you hold out, stay very still, focus your mind on the longest stalactite of drool in history, the satisfaction of the shake is even greater but he just can't do it. Still, both of us have elicited squeals of pleasure from our masters at the quality of our drool-sprays – I've even seen mine rushing round to add some water to what I've already provided on his clothes and body. All very satisfying.

So there was Dad, starting a drool but, as I say, you need a bit of luck, and it wasn't to be. His Human had the towel clamped to Father's mouth before he'd even reached a respectable drop and, when Mother sent a flirty look in his direction, what she saw was the sheepish and sullen upper face of her fiancé, his fine head cut in two by the pink towel wiping his jaw. She says it made her laugh so much the judge awarded her 'best expression' and commented on how lively and spirited she was in the Ring. She won of course. That goes without saying. I have no intention of boring you with all the Shows and the prizes, and anyway that wasn't how my life went.

Then it was her turn to watch him and this time his Human was more of an asset. He knew she was watching and every prance, the lift of his head, every sparkle in his eye was for her and when he took his static pose, he was looking right at her with melt-your-heart-brown eyes and she was won. The judge commented on his fine aroundera and his 'star quality' as if he were performing for a special audience. You bet. For those of you new to my world, the aroundera is what we in the Pyrenees call the wheel, that high circle we make with our tails when we're happy or excited or just saying, 'Hey, world look at me'. Human words are so limited compared with what a

dog can say with just its tail alone, but the gist of it is, aroundera=good mood. And the better the tail, the better the aroundera. Father's tail was perfect, a feathered curve cascading in perfect proportion but his master-stroke was to stand with his tail in repose – down, relaxed with the little hook in the end ready to rise – then when the judge looked at him, up went that tail and like the great seducer he was, my father timed the moment impeccably. He won of course. That goes without saying. I think that by this stage he was already Champion of France, Spain, the World, the Universe and Everything, so it's difficult not to be blasé about shows.

The two of them had a chance for some more personal, nose to bottom, contact while their Humans talked travel and transport, then two months later my mother headed over the mountains. Just because he had 'won her' at the show didn't mean she made it easy for him. Oh no. She enjoyed the chase as much as the next girl and the chase used every gallop of ground she could run round, every bush she could turn behind, and every insult she could hurl at him when he caught up with her. No-one would have given them beauty prizes, or dared to check their little teeth, as Mother finally stopped running away and succumbed to the oldest instinct in the world. And though she hadn't seen him or heard of him since, she left us in no doubt that his name was on our birth certificates. And what a name. What a dog. Someone for us to live up to.

'No pressure there then,' I told Stratos. Some of the others drank it all in, the shows, the father from away, the romance of a name – and nothing more than a name and your imagination – but Stratos and I, we always wanted something else. We had no idea whatsoever *what* we wanted but we were already sure we wanted something else. And we'd reached eight weeks, the age of the Choosing, when our chance for Something Else might come knocking on the door.

2.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an eight-week old puppy in possession of an excellent pedigree must be in want of a master. There were seven of us. The girls, Snow and Stella, could be real bitches, even at eight weeks. As soon as you found a really chewy piece of straw, one of the girls would be thwacking you with a paw and whining, 'I want that' and of course if you were sleepy and couldn't be bothered to give her the snap and nose-clamp she deserved, but actually let her have the bone of contention, guess what – chewy straw abandoned within two seconds in favour of someone else's shiny pebble – as long as someone else was still interested in it. Now if I saw one of the others with something particularly interesting, I'd at least enjoy it for a while, preferably with him watching, after I'd stolen it. But that was girls for you, or at least some of them.

So it was no surprise that Snow had been jumping on straw-piles from the age of six weeks, announcing to the world that she was STAYING. She'd heard the Human discussing Which One with another Human and It Was HER. No matter how many times Mother cuffed her and told her not to think she was Top Soum de Gaia Show Queen, not for a few years yet, she sparkled her little teeth and shook her little ears for anyone who could be watching. Stratos and I worked on our drools and caught her a few times, which made us feel a bit better. And even though Mother declared that Champion Qualities have a long way to develop beyond eight weeks and – with a glare at Snow – good character is Very Important, Stella was irritated enough to compromise her own champion qualities with a sly snap at Snow's neck.

After a while, we stopped reacting. Every time Snow started, I reminded Stratos that we wanted adventures and everyone knows that adventures are elsewhere. Little did I know. And then, just when we'd grown immune to Snow chanting all the time, Stella told us She was going to Fly. Not that we were stupid enough to believe her, of course, but we rolled her in a puddle just for having the cheek to try it on. We'd seen flying. The chickens did it sometimes but not very well. Even though they were two enclosures away from us we could see them through the wire fence, squawking, clucking and flapping. Then there were the buzzards, hawks and eagles. If you were

lying on your back after being rolled, you might hear a screech or a whistle and there, high, high in the sky, glided a speck. Not really what we called flying, or rather what Septimus called flying. That required frenzied activity.

My eldest brother had a real thing about flying. According to him, a jay was perfect. He liked the hop, run and power launch; he demonstrated for us, sometimes flying up as high as the apple crate. Then a hop, a run and a tease along branch, followed by a low swooping flight among the trees in the orchard, or in this case, one bounce along an apple crate, followed by a hard landing on concrete. But he still thought he could do it one day if he got the technique right and he spent hours by the fence on the left of our run, the orchard-side.

So when Stella said she was going to fly, we all thought she was making it up to spite Septimus, even though no-one could work out why. We were just sorting her out in a mass pile-up when Mother arrived. Some deft snaps, a paw to the left, a paw to the right and the puppy pile re-arranged itself into suitably cowed individuals. Of course, Stella said straight off that we were picking on her when all she'd done was tell us that she was going to fly. We waited for Mother to tell her she was too old for making up stories. All she said was, 'And?'

'And they didn't believe me,' Stella whined. At least I will say this for Snow; she wasn't a whiner. And when I met up with her later on, she tried to put in a good word... but that's jumping too far ahead.

Mother bared her teeth at us all, just a little reminder how far we could go with her – I'd estimate it at less than one claw-space. 'Stella is going to fly,' she stated. 'The Human says so.' And with that, off she stalked, ears back, tail low, clearly not in the best of moods. It would have taken a very brave or very stupid pup to chase her and play 'how far up your bum can I sink my teeth' and none of us were that stupid. Septimus slunk off to be alone and watch the orchard with his sad, dreamy eyes. When Stella was out of earshot, the rest of us discussed whether or not Stella might nose-dive when she was learning to fly, and crumple her sweet face. It wasn't as if she was likely to do what she was told... at which thought we cheered up considerably and went back to wondering what was in store for us boys.

I suppose I ought to describe our Human to you. It's difficult not to be influenced by what came later and to view events through my puppy innocence about the world but I'll try. Our Human was a female giant who towered above us, who said things and made them happen. When we started getting hungrier and Mother was snapping at us as we sank our little teeth into her tender parts, the Human brought us some very tasty new food. Of course we tried to suck on it and spluttered it all over the place. She organised us. Each of us had a bowl. If one of us tried to help himself to someone else's food, he found a Human foot blocking his way and nudging him back to his own bowl. Like Mother, she didn't like us using our little teeth on any part of her, even on the cloth she wore around her legs, and she would push us away with her feet, more and more roughly. We grew to hate her feet and we jumped away from them. We hated the broom even more, a giant stick rushing towards us and prickling our little legs. Sometimes she used the broom to push us out of the way, to 'save her shoes,' she told another Human, who often came with her to see us.

Everything was organised and she was very careful to make sure that the bowl was full of clean fresh water each day, and that we had – I think it was more than three feeding times each day - but it's a long time ago and I forget things now. I do remember that you could tell feeding time by the pointer on the farmhouse wall and she was never late. She organised cuddling us too, picking up each one in turn, saying his name, rolling him over and tickling his tummy, smiling and laughing sometimes. Those were the good times. I've already told you about little teeth, little ears and 'the position'. At about six weeks, we met more Humans, little ones, and she told them 'good for socialisation,' and the little Humans followed the same routine of picking each one of us up, giving a cuddle. One little Human used to whisper in my ear, 'You're my favourite,' and it felt like a breath of love, a promise that something special could happen between a Human and a dog. Now, I wonder whether he said that to all the puppies.

The Human gave us some toys, fluffy dogs and plastic bones, which gave us something new to fight over. It felt good to have new textures in your mouth and it was much safer playing tug-of-war with Stratos over a blue rabbit than using your teeth on Stratos himself. The word 'blue' is interesting. You Humans don't have good

hearing and your sense of smell is so bad it's useless so you've had to make up for this by developing your eyesight in strange ways. Nothing useful, like seeing in the dark, but you can see things further away than we dogs can. Even when something stays very still, and we would have to wait for the give-away movement, you can pick it out. And you Humans can discriminate colours. Unfortunately, like a city dog discovering the scents of a country walk, the average Human is obsessed with colour and goes completely off the track. So our Human thought it was important that we had different coloured toys when what we would have liked were some different scents for our noses or shapes for our mouths. We sorted it out though. We could tell the blue rabbit from the green rabbit with no problem; the blue rabbit smelled of dead mouse and the green rabbit smelled of rosemary. Obviously we all preferred the blue rabbit and the Human pointed this out to people as an indication of how intelligent we were. She was right.

With more Humans coming and going for our 'socialisation', we'd got quite used to the routine now and if someone was sleepy, it really wasn't exciting enough to wake up just for a pick-up and cuddle that we could catch up on the next time. And that's how Stratos missed his first chance. It was the very day of our eight-weeks, early afternoon and hot. And I mean hot. We were all lazing around, occasionally opening one eye to check on how far one little cloud had moved in the blue, blue sky, or sniffing a whiff of rose, cherries or cheese, whatever came our way. Stratos was flat out, lying on his back, snoring like a chainsaw. I heard the Humans coming, all those chattering noises they make, like a gathering of jays, except that jays have more sense than to group together and make all that noise. I was happily musing on why jays are better organised socially than Humans, who don't seem to realise how much noise they make collectively, when the Human's voice made a more individual impact. 'They're absolute darlings,' she was saying. 'The best litter I've ever had, so much promise, and of course they're all reserved already...' Reserved? First I'd heard of it. And she had that voice, not the one she used with the usual Humans, or with us normally. Even then, I knew it was different and now I've heard that tone again and again so I know exactly what's going on. Humans trying to win votes, Humans with their in-laws to dinner, Humans behind counters in shops.

My Human picked up Snow. ‘This is the little girl I’m keeping. Look at her head...’ Snow gave a sleepy crumple to show her little eyes and teeth ‘... and her static pose...’ Hawled upright, Snow gave a version of ‘the position’ that suggested she would collapse back into slumber if a feather blew against her back legs. ‘And this one,’ the Human picked up Stella, turning her round for admiration and getting some ‘oohs’, ‘aahs’ and ‘isn’t she lovely’ from the four new Humans, two big, two small, ‘this one is spoken for.’ Stella re-joined her sister, shuffled into a more comfortable position, nose tucked inside Snow’s elbow, and was soon chasing sleep rabbits, back legs cycling as she raced through dream woods, where none of the rabbits were blue.

Then, to the surprise of everyone, not least the puppy she scooped up, our Human displayed Savoie-Fer to the newcomers. ‘And this little boy is going to even higher mountains.’ This was news to all of us. ‘He’s been chosen by a Breeder in the Alps as his new stud so we’ll see you again at the shows, won’t we, sweetie.’ I’m not sure which was more shocking; ‘sweetie’ – which we had certainly never ever heard before – or ‘stud’ which we had heard often enough, usually followed by our father’s name. But Savoie-Fer, or Savoie-Frère as we called him, a Stud? Don’t make me piddle myself laughing.

‘But as you’re the first to come, you can have the pick of the other boys...’ I cocked an ear but it was so hot and I didn’t know the first thing about these people so I wasn’t going to rush in with licks and tail-wags, was I. No, I’d just listen, think and wait. Male New Human was talking to his female and his little ones. ‘Now remember all the things we talked about. It’s not just which one looks the cutest, it’s about character and we want a pup that’s confident.’

My Human interrupted, ‘Do you want me to tell you about them?’

Monsieur New Male smiled at his female, ‘Thanks but we’d rather choose for ourselves,’ and when he thought my Human wasn’t looking, he did a funny thing with one eye, shutting it quickly and cocking his head to one side at the same time. ‘Now then, you puppies.’ He loomed over us, then suddenly yelled, ‘Here, puppy, puppy!’ in his booming voice. I was nearest to him and I couldn’t help it; I jumped. The girls snuggled closer together. Sancho and Savoie-fer rolled to their feet and yapped. Only two of us were apparently unmoved. Stratos didn’t move a muscle. There he lay on his

back as if men shouted near him every day. He'd stopped snoring though, which told its own story. And Septimus was lying apart, totally focused on his jays, muttering his latest observations on flight to himself.

Humans have such slow reactions that I'm sure they missed what happened next. A jay took off from the orchard, jumped onto the fence by Septimus, and hopped, skipped and danced right into the middle of our pen, behind the New Humans, where it pecked repeatedly at a plank of rotting wood. The moment the jay reached the fence above him, Septimus jumped almost as high, turned in mid-air to gallop towards his flight hero. I could hear him wuffing, 'Just one little aerodynamic question,' as he used Stratos' stomach as a trampoline, knocked me to one side and Sancho into our two sisters, dashing towards his jay as if his life depended on it. Which as it turned out, it did.

'You little beauty!' declared the booming voice triumphantly as New Human scooped up Septimus before he could run past. 'See everyone? This is the Alpha Male in this litter, no question. Am I right?' and he turned to our Human.

'Yes,' she said brightly. 'I'm amazed at how you did that.'

'Experience,' he beamed, while his female said nothing. 'See the way he came when I called him? See the way he was respected by the others? See how scared the others were? This is the dog for us. We'll call him Killer.'

'Can I hold him Dad, can I, can I?'

'Cool! Killer, Killer, here boy!'

The Female's voice was quiet but cut across them with ease. 'Perhaps he already has a name, dear,' and she looked questioningly at our Human.

'Septimus. We've called him Septimus because he was the seventh and last puppy. And of course it's an S registration year.'

'So that's what's on his birth certificate,' the Female continued.

'Yes and it will be on his pedigree when you get the official form back from the S.C.C.'

'And you've been calling him Septimus so he's used to it...'

'Yes,' our Human played along happily, although as I remember, we'd been

told our names but in practice were all called ‘Puppy,’ so at least Booming Voice had been in with a chance of us coming to our name when he shouted.

‘I know Killer’s a lovely name, suits him really well, but it would be a pity to waste all that early learning, don’t you think, dear? And you’ve been telling us it’s important that a dog knows its name as soon as possible ... here let me try.’ She took Septimus in her arms and cradled him to her, so loving you could feel the warmth just watching, and she purred, ‘Timmy, who’s the most beautiful, who’s the best, who’s the brightest, Timmy, Timmy...’ and Septimus was so excited and happy - and relieved – that he piddled, narrowly missing New Female who laughed. ‘Now that’s a good sign. How’s about it everyone?’

Little female was reaching out already. ‘Timmy,’ she tried, and my brother wagged his little tail as he was passed into another pair of arms, New Female giving instructions on how to hold him.

‘Yeah, Timmy’s OK. Killer’s good,’ Little Male looked at Big Male, ‘but I dunno. My friends might expect a rottweiler or something, and he’s a bit white and fluffy....’

New Human shrugged. ‘OK, Septimus... Timmy. But make no mistake, son. This dog will be as good a guard dog as any rottweiler – and bigger!’

‘Guardian, not guard dog,’ our Human corrected. ‘Patous have been bred for centuries to guard the sheep in the mountains. They’ll take on a wolf to protect their sheep – and their family – and that means you now.’ She smiled her bright smile at the Small Humans. ‘Come on in the house to do the paperwork and I’ll show you photos of the spiked collars they wore in the old days to protect them against the wolves – and to keep them awake. Not a lot of people know that the collars were meant to be uncomfortable to stop lazy patous sleeping on the job.’

‘There are wolves here again now, aren’t there?’ New Human was booming again as he and our Human headed for the door out of the compound. Quietly, the Female took Septimus in her arms and there it was again, the look and the feeling all round a Human and a Dog, that you’ll never forget when you’ve sensed it once. You can call it Love if you like but there ought to be a special word for it. Somehow she even included the Small Humans in the whole feeling. A Family. Septimus had

become a Family Dog. And I just knew he was going to be good at it. I hoped there'd be jays for him to watch. 'Good hunting, little brother,' I wuffed and the others joined in.

There was an ostentatious yawn and you could even hear Stratos stretching. 'Have I missed anything?'

'We've lost our Alpha Male,' I told him. 'Septimus. He's got a Family now.'

'Septimus,' Stratos drawled. And lay down again, stretching his back legs out like a frog's, front legs straight out, head between them as he muttered into his paws, 'Hot today. Heat addles your brains, you know.' He couldn't even be bothered to rise to comments like 'Who'd notice the difference with you!' that someone inevitably sent his way. I often wonder, what if it had been a cold day. What if there hadn't been a jay. Would it have been me instead of Septimus? Or could it have been the real alpha male that New Human was looking for? Could he have picked Stratos? And would it have saved him? Would the Female have been strong enough?