

## **Splitting Hares**

By Lauren Rivers

One of his favorite childhood memories was coming to the café after school with his brother. Jake had been surprised when Mark had asked to meet him here. The details had been scarce, with him only saying that he had something he wanted to talk to him about. He assumed it had to do with their mother's birthday or something. The two usually planned it together, although it was a couple months early for that. Whatever it was, he'd invited him via text rather than the usual phone call.

He stared at his cell phone. Still a few minutes before the meeting time. No texts had come in since he'd gotten here so with luck he would be on time. He held up a paw to order a coffee and rubbed his feet paws together under the table. It was a nervous habit of his, one he'd had ever since he was young. Maybe it was just the way he liked to feel them rubbing against each other, or maybe it was just a hare thing. Either way, he always found it soothed him. It was also why he never wore shoes.

Some species walked around with those things on their feet, while some of the hoofers had them literally nailed on. But Jake preferred to sense the ground beneath him, whether it was earth, wood, or tile.

Checking his phone again, he confirmed the time. His brother was almost always a little late. The picture of the two brothers smiled back at him. They had just won a high school soccer game. Hares were good at soccer, due to their strong legs and fast running ability. Some people thought they should ban particularly gifted species from certain sports, feeling it gave them an unfair advantage, regardless of how factual that was. Certainly, hares were no faster than rabbits or squirrels. Yet some people thought they needed to be protected from anything that threatened their concept of normalcy.

The photo had been his cell phone background for almost two years. He had his arm around his brother, who was a shade or two lighter than his own chocolate brown fur. His ears were a bit more pointed, and he usually wore his hair a bit loose. Their jerseys were green, for their local team.

The door opened and a young doe entered, scanning the room. He looked at her thinking she was familiar somehow, but unable to place her name. It was at her smile of recognition and wave that he realized it was his brother.

He managed to wave back though he was certain his expression was one of a stunned hare in a predator's crosshairs. Doing his best to recover, he gestured for Mark to take a seat. "Hey," was all he managed to say.

“Hi.” She set her purse down on the floor and smiled. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

“I just got here a few minutes ago,” he said.

“I know that this all comes as a bit of a surprise.” She brushed a stray hair from her eyes.

“No,” he lied. After a momentary glare from his sibling, he surrendered. “Okay, yes.”

She placed her paws on the table on top of each other. “I wanted to talk to you first since you always understood me. I was hoping if you could understand this, you could maybe help me explain it to mom and dad.”

Jake sighed. Their parents were loving and understanding, but they were also a product of their upbringing. They had grown up in a world where there were only two genders, and you were either one or the other. They hadn’t ever heard the words aromantic or transgender and had only just gotten used to seeing gay people on television. True, Hollywood tended to take its time reflecting the world. For a long time, all they showed on television was men in terrible drag or gay fashion designers and that was it. Usually, it was to make the hero look good or give him an interesting friend. Only recently had they started being portrayed as characters in their own right. Progress tended to take time, and most of the time places like Hollywood were risk averse.

“Well, first you might have to explain it to me.” He gestured at her. “What brought this on all of the sudden?”

“Not all of the sudden,” she said. “I’ve been feeling like a doe for a long time. You remember when I used to sneak into mom’s closet and wear some of her clothes?”

Jake nodded. “But we were just kids then, and we were only pretending.”

“We were, but I was always pretending I was a girl.” She shrugged. “Back then I didn’t even know what to call it. Or what I was supposed to do with it.”

“And you do now?” he asked, mostly to buy time to collect his thoughts. There were so many questions, and some things he wasn’t even sure he should ask. He tried to smile as the waitress came over and took their order. He just ordered a coffee.

His sibling ordered peach tea. “I know that I can’t ignore it anymore. I’m a doe, and it feels right. I was never happy being a guy. I always wanted to be like the girls I saw in the magazines, so pretty and graceful. Maybe I just wanted an excuse to wear jewelry.” A moment later the waitress returned with their orders. “So, what do you think?”

“I don’t even know where to start. I mean, what do I call you now?” He fiddled with the handle of his coffee mug. “Are you still Mark?”

“I prefer Susan.” Her ears perked up slightly. “And I’d appreciate it if you use female pronouns for me.”

“This is going to take some getting used to. I mean, wow. That’s a lot.” He looked up at her, still recognizing his little brother in her, but also seeing that she had changed a lot since they had last gotten together. He took a deep breath. “Okay, she and her. I think I can do that. But take it easy on me if I mess up, okay?”

“I understand,” she replied. “It’s a big deal, and you haven’t had the years to think about it like I have. All I ask is that you try, and if you can’t, that you at least do me the courtesy of letting me tell our parents.”

Jake looked at her, searching for the right thing to say. He loved his brother, or he supposed, sister now. But after so many years of thinking of him as Mark, it was tough for him to rewire his brain to think of her as Susan. “Okay. But Mark... I mean, Susan, you might have to give me some time.”

Susan took a sip of her tea, seated with her legs crossed and her saucer held directly under the cup. She set them down on the table and nodded. “I get it. I do. But as difficult as it is for you to wrap your head around it, it was just as hard for me. For a long time, I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I wondered why I didn’t fit the molds that everyone else seemed to. But then I realized that I was transgender, and then it all made sense. I knew a couple of trans folks back in college, but for a long time it just didn’t click. Then one day I asked myself a simple question. Would I be okay if I never pursued this? And I found out my answer was no.”

“So, did you have... procedures done?” he asked.

“Well, that’s a little direct, but yes, I still have my carrot. I’m not dysphoric about it and I don’t feel like I need to have it removed, but I am still a woman. I haven’t had top surgery. These are breast forms.” She gestured at her bra. “But I feel so much more like me since I got them.” Her cheeks reddened slightly.

Jake held his mug and stared at it, embarrassed at having looked at his sister’s breasts, even if it was only through her dress and he hadn’t actually seen anything. “I’m sorry if I’m being weird.”

“You’re my brother, I absolutely understand. I want you to ask questions now because I need you on my side. I know that for some trans folks, things don’t always go so well. Some folks end up with nothing. Their folks don’t want anything to do with them. Coming out as trans is a big gamble. You risk everything to be who you really are.” She touched her chest. “But for the freedom that everyone else takes for granted, it’s worth it.” Her ears lowered. “At least to me.”

Jake considered the idea. He knew that some people had trouble accepting things outside of their comfort zone. He liked to think that he was the sort of hare that didn’t sweat the small stuff. He liked learning new things and meeting different kinds of people, and he always tried to

reexamine his beliefs to be sure he wasn't being a jerk for no reason. More than once he'd realized he was being biased without knowing it, if for no other reason than he'd never had cause to examine his behaviors before.

He looked at her again. "Ma— Susan, sorry. Am I the only one who knows?"

"Out of our family, so far, yes." She offered a weak smile. "You were my canary. I figured if I couldn't convince you I didn't stand much chance of convincing anyone else." She lowered her muzzle. "But you haven't walked away, so there's that."

He nodded. "Have you changed your name?"

"Yeah." She presented her driver's license, and on it was a picture of his sibling looking very much as she did now, though with a different outfit, and a wide smile on her face. And next to gender, the letter 'F' stood proudly. "I was even more excited to get this one than my first driver's license."

Picking it up, he examined it for a moment. "You look good." He handed it back.

"Thanks."

"You know that this is going to take a while for mom and dad to accept." He said it more as a statement, knowing that regardless of how they took it, that it would throw them off.

Susan lowered her ears. "I know. That's why I want to tell them sooner rather than later. I'd rather know than live with the uncertainty."

He looked at her downcast expression. "Are you scared?"

She nodded. "Terrified. You know how when you're a kid and your parents promise they'll never stop loving you? It's scary to think that the part of you that matters most might do just that."

Jake wanted to tell his sibling that it would never happen, but although he thought his parents weren't closed minded, they were used to having two sons and changing that might be more of a shock than they were able to handle. "I don't know what you're going through, but I'd like to find out." He placed a paw on top of hers. "Can I ask you a question?"

"It's why we're here," she reminded him.

"Do you still like sci fi movies?" he asked.

She looked at him with raised ears and a tilted eyebrow. "Of course. Why would you think I wouldn't?"

"I don't know, isn't that more of a guy thing?" Jake thought back to when he and his brother would play space marines in the backyard, with guns that shot foam balls and cardboard

armor that their mom taped together. They had spent hours saving the neighborhood from the deadly aliens that seemed to invade whenever there was a Saturday afternoon.

She laughed. "Being trans doesn't change who I am. I'm still the same person."

"But you just said it does," he pointed out.

Susan paused. "Well, okay, it changes me in some ways, but not in the ways that really matter. I still like scifi and boy bands and the color green. It's just that now I wear dresses and go under a name I chose for myself."

"What was wrong with your old name?" Jake leaned back in his chair.

"Nothing, but it doesn't fit who I am anymore. I'm still a Whitmore, just now I'm Susan. You know, I always thought we should get to pick our own names. Tell me if you had a choice that you'd have picked Aloysius."

Jake bristled at the mention of his middle name. His parents had chosen it because it sounded dignified, although as a young hare he'd never disclosed to anyone what the A in his name stood for. "Point taken."

"Look, I'm still the person that played with you in the yard and watched movies about saving the world from aliens. Think of it this way. You're not losing a brother. You're gaining a sister."

"Yeah, but I don't know how to handle a sister." He looked at her. "I know how to be a good brother."

"And that part won't change. You're still my big brother, and we're still family. At least I hope so. I still think of you as the person that I call when I need help or the one, I'd turn to when I need someone to give me advice. But now I just want to know if you still feel that way about me."

Jake lowered his ears. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I mean, I know things have changed, but I don't know how to respond to it just yet."

"That's fair. That's absolutely fair. Believe me, I get what a big deal this is. I know it'll take time, and this is going to be a big adjustment." She fiddled with the bracelet on her wrist. "I figure that I should tell mom and dad at the same time. This way I only have to do it once." Meeting his glance, she took a deep breath. "If I have to, I'll do it alone, but it would be a lot easier with you at my side."

Jake looked at his new sister, recognizing some of those same features he'd always known among her longer hair and cute clothes. He thought back to their days playing in the yard, and all the times he'd stepped in to be his sibling's big brother. With a nod, he extended a paw. "You can count on me, sis."

“You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that.” She let out a heavy sigh. “All I want is to be acknowledged. To be seen by people who respect me for who I am. What I call myself, what’s in my pants, shouldn’t matter to people. All that should matter is the kind of person I want to be.” With a genuine smile, she rubbed the back of her brother’s paw. “Thanks for meeting me today.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll always be there when you need me, no matter what. And although I might slip up from time to time, I’m going to try, because you’re my sister, and I love you.”

“I love you too, big brother.” She slid her chair closer so she could wrap an arm around him. Jake returned the favor, picking up his cell phone with his free paw. As his sister spotted the lock screen, she smirked. “You still have that picture on your phone?”

“Of course. It’s the two of us. So, what do you say? Shall we take a new one?” He entered his passcode and activated the camera, holding it up as far as his arm would reach. “Smile!” The shutter sound clicked, indicating the photo had been taken, and he nodded in approval at the preview. “It’ll make a great phone background.”

“You’ll send me a copy of that, won’t you?” Susan slid her chair back to where it was.

“Of course. And don’t worry about mom and dad. I know they’ll have questions, just like I did, but you’re still their child, and you’re still my sibling. They’ll come around. We just need to give them some time.” Jake signaled to the waitress they were ready for their bill. “I’m looking forward to getting to know the new you.”

Susan smiled. “Believe me, so am I.”