

Laws of Survival

Written by Nancy Kress

My name is Jill. I am somewhere you can't imagine, going somewhere even more unimaginable. If you think I like what I did to get here, you're crazy.

Actually, I'm the one who's crazy. You—any “you”—will never read this. But I have paper now, and a sort of pencil, and time. Lots and lots of time. So I will write what happened, all of it, as carefully as I can.

After all—why the hell not?

I went out very early one morning to look for food. Before dawn was safest for a woman alone. The boy-gangs had gone to bed, tired of attacking each other. The trucks from the city hadn't arrived yet. That meant the garbage was pretty picked over, but it also meant most of the refugee camp wasn't out scavenging. Most days I could find enough: a carrot stolen from somebody's garden patch, my arm bloody from reaching through the barbed wire. Overlooked potato peelings under a pile of rags and glass. A can of stew thrown away by one of the soldiers on the base, but still half full. Soldiers on duty by the Dome were often careless. They got bored, with nothing to do.

That morning was cool but fair, with a pearly haze that the sun would burn off later. I wore all my clothing, for warmth, and my boots. Yesterday's garbage load, I'd heard somebody say, was huge, so I had hopes. I hiked to my favorite spot, where garbage spills almost to the Dome wall. Maybe I'd find bread, or even fruit that wasn't too rotten.

Instead I found the puppy.

Its eyes weren't open yet and it squirmed along the bare ground, a scrawny brown-and-white mass with a tiny fluffy tail. Nearby was a fluid-soaked towel. Some sentimental fool had left the puppy there, hoping . . . what? It didn't matter. Scrawny or not, there was some meat on the thing. I scooped it up.

The sun pushed above the horizon, flooding the haze with golden light.

I hate it when grief seizes me. I hate it and it's dangerous, a violation of one of Jill's Laws of Survival. I can go for weeks, months without thinking of my life before the War. Without remembering or feeling. Then something will strike me—a flower growing in the dump, a burst of birdsong, the stars on a clear night—and grief will hit me like the maglevs that no longer exist, a grief all the sharper because it contains the memory of joy. I can't afford joy, which always comes with an astronomical price tag. I can't even afford the grief that comes from the memory of living things, which is why it is only the flower, the birdsong, the morning sunlight that starts it. My grief was not for that puppy. I still intended to eat it.

But I heard a noise behind me and turned. The Dome wall was opening.

Who knew why the aliens put their Domes by garbage dumps, by waste pits, by radioactive cities? Who knew why aliens did anything?

There was a widespread belief in the camp that the aliens started the War. I'm old enough to know better. That was us, just like the global warming and the bio-crobes were us. The aliens didn't even show up until the War was over and Raleigh was the northernmost city left on the East Coast and refugees

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There was a widespread belief in the camp that the aliens started the War. I'm old enough to know better. That was us, just like the global warming and the bio-crobes were us. The aliens didn't even show up until the War was over and Raleigh was the northernmost city left on the East Coast and refugees poured south like mudslides. Including me. That's when the ships landed and then turned into the huge gray Domes like upended bowls. I heard there were many Domes,

some in other countries. The Army, what was left of it, threw tanks and bombs at ours. When they gave up, the refugees threw bullets and Molotov cocktails and prayers and graffiti and candle-light vigils and rain dances. Everything slid off and the Domes just sat there. And sat. And sat. Three years later, they were still sitting, silent and closed, although of course there were rumors to the contrary. There are always rumors. Personally, I'd never gotten over a slight disbelief that the Dome was there at all. Who would want to visit us?

The opening was small, no larger than a porthole, and about six feet above the ground. All I could see inside was a fog the same color as the Dome. Something

came out, gliding quickly toward me. It took me a moment to realize it was a robot, a blue metal sphere above a hanging basket. It stopped a foot from my face and said, “This food for this dog.”

I could have run, or screamed, or at the least—the very least —looked around for a witness. I didn’t. The basket held a pile of fresh produce, green lettuce and deep purple eggplant and apples so shiny red they looked lacquered. And peaches . . . My mouth filled with sweet water. I couldn’t move. The puppy whimpered.

My mother used to make fresh peach pie.

I scooped the food into my scavenger bag, laid the puppy in the basket, and

backed away. The robot floated back into the Dome, which closed immediately. I sped back to my corrugated-tin and windowless hut and ate until I couldn't hold any more. I slept, woke, and ate the rest, crouching in the dark so nobody else would see. All that fruit and vegetables gave me the runs, but it was worth it. Peaches.

Two weeks later, I brought another puppy to the Dome, the only survivor of a litter deep in the dump. I never knew what happened to the mother. I had to wait a long time outside the Dome before the blue sphere took the puppy in exchange for produce. Apparently the Dome would only open when there was

no one else around to see. What were they afraid of? It's not like PETA was going to show up. The next day I traded three of the peaches to an old man in exchange for a small, mangy poodle. We didn't look each other in the eye, but I nonetheless knew that his held tears. He limped hurriedly away. I kept the dog, which clearly wanted nothing to do with me, in my shack until very early morning and then took it to the Dome. It tried to escape but I'd tied a bit of rope onto its frayed collar. We sat outside the Dome in mutual dislike, waiting, as the sky paled slightly in the east. Gunshots sounded in the distance. I have never owned a dog.

When the Dome finally opened, I

gripped the dog's rope and spoke to the robot. "Not fruit. Not vegetables. I want eggs and bread."

The robot floated back inside.

Instantly I cursed myself. Eggs? Bread? I was crazy not to take what I could get. That was Law of Survival #1. Now there would be nothing. Eggs, bread . . . crazy. I glared at the dog and kicked it. It yelped, looked indignant, and tried to bite my boot.

The Dome opened again and the robot glided toward me. In the gloom I couldn't see what was in the basket. In fact, I couldn't see the basket. It wasn't there. Mechanical tentacles shot out from the sphere and seized both me and the poodle. I cried out and the tentacles

squeezed harder. Then I was flying through the air, the stupid dog suddenly howling beneath me, and we were carried through the Dome wall and inside.

Then nothing.

A nightmare room made of nightmare sound: barking, yelping, whimpering, snapping. I jerked awake, sat up, and discovered myself on a floating platform above a mass of dogs. Big dogs, small dogs, old dogs, puppies, sick dogs, dogs that looked all too healthy, flashing their forty-two teeth at me—why did I remember that number? From where? The largest and strongest dogs couldn't quite reach me with their snaps, but they

were trying.

“You are operative,” the blue metal sphere said, floating beside me. “Now we must begin. Here.”

Its basket held eggs and bread.

“Get them away!”

Obediently it floated off.

“Not the food! The dogs!”

“What to do with these dogs?”

“Put them in cages!” A large black animal—German shepherd or Boxer or something—had nearly closed its jaws on my ankle. The next bite might do it.

“Cages,” the metal sphere said in its uninflected mechanical voice. “Yes.”

“Son of a bitch!” The shepherd leaping high had grazed my thigh; its spittle slimed my pants. “Raise the

goddamn platform!”

“Yes.”

The platform floated so high, that I had to duck my head to avoid hitting the ceiling. I peered over the edge and . . . no, that wasn't possible. But it was happening. The floor was growing upright sticks, and the sticks were growing crossbars, and the crossbars were extending themselves into mesh tops . . . Within minutes, each dog was encased in a cage just large enough to hold its protesting body.

“What to do now?” the metal sphere asked.

I stared at it. I was, as far as I knew, the first human being to ever enter an alien Dome, I was trapped in a small

room with feral caged dogs and a robot .
. . what to do now?

“Why . . . why am I here?” I hated myself for the brief stammer and vowed it would not happen again. Law of Survival #2: Show no fear.

Would a metal sphere even recognize fear?

It said, “These dogs do not behave correctly.”

“Not behave correctly?”

“No.”

I looked down again at the slavering and snarling mass of dogs; how strong was that mesh on the cage tops? “What do you want them to do?”

“You want to see the presentation?”

“Not yet.” Law #3: Never volunteer

for anything.

“What to do now?”

How the hell should I know? But the smell of the bread reached me and my stomach flopped. “Now to eat,” I said. “Give me the things in your basket.”

It did, and I tore into the bread like a wolf into deer. The real wolves below me increased their howling. When I’d eaten an entire loaf, I looked back at the metal sphere. “Have those dogs eaten?”

“Yes.”

“What did you give them?”

“Garbage.”

“Garbage? Why?”

“In hell they eat garbage.”

So even the robot thought this was Hell. Panic surged through me; I pushed

it back. Surviving this would depend on staying steady. “Show me what you fed the dogs.”

“Yes.” A section of wall melted and garbage cascaded into the room, flowing greasily between the cages. I recognized it: It was exactly like the garbage I picked through every day, trucked out from a city I could no longer imagine and from the Army base I could not approach without being shot. Bloody rags, tin cans from before the War, shit, plastic bags, dead flowers, dead animals, dead electronics, cardboard, eggshells, paper, hair, bone, scraps of decaying food, glass shards, potato peelings, foam rubber, roaches, sneakers with holes, sagging furniture, corn cobs.

The smell hit my stomach, newly distended with bread.

“You fed the dogs that?”

“Yes. They eat it in hell.”

Outside. Hell was outside, and of course that’s what the feral dogs ate, that’s all there was. But the metal sphere had produced fruit and lettuce and bread for me.

“You must give them better food. They eat that in . . . in hell because they can’t get anything else.”

“What to do now?”

It finally dawned on me—slow, I was too slow for this, only the quick survive—that the metal sphere had limited initiative along with its limited vocabulary. But it had made cages, made

bread, made fruit—hadn't it? Or was this stuff grown in some unimaginable secret garden inside the Dome? "You must give the dogs meat."

"Flesh?"

"Yes."

"No."

No change in that mechanical voice, but the "no" was definite and quick. Law of Survival #4: Notice everything. So—no flesh-eating allowed here. Also no time to ask why not; I had to keep issuing orders so that the robot didn't start issuing them. "Give them bread mixed with . . . with soy protein."

"Yes."

"And take away the garbage."

"Yes."

The garbage began to dissolve. I saw nothing poured on it, nothing rise from the floor. But all that stinking mass fell into powder and vanished. Nothing replaced it.

I said, “Are you getting bread mixed with soy powder?” Getting seemed the safest verb I could think of.

“Yes.”

The stuff came then, tumbling through the same melted hole in the wall, loaves of bread with, presumably, soy powder in them. The dogs, barking insanely, reached paws and snouts and tongues through the bars of their cages. They couldn't get at the food.

“Metal sphere—do you have a name?”

No answer.

“Okay. Blue, how strong are those cages? Can the dogs break them? Any of the dogs?”

“No.”

“Lower the platform to the floor.”

My safe perch floated down. The aisles between the cages were irregular, some wide and some so narrow the dogs could reach through to touch each other, since each cage had “grown” wherever the dog was at the time. Gingerly I picked my way to a clearing and sat down. Tearing a loaf of bread into chunks, I pushed the pieces through the bars of the least dangerous-looking dogs, which made the bruisers howl even more. For them, I put chunks at a

distance they could just reach with a paw through the front bars of their prisons.

The puppy I had first brought to the Dome lay in a tiny cage. Dead. The second one was alive but just barely.

The old man's mangy poodle looked more mangy than ever, but otherwise alert. It tried to bite me when I fed it.

“What to do now?”

“They need water.”

“Yes.”

Water flowed through the wall. When it had reached an inch or so, it stopped. The dogs lapped whatever came into their cages. I stood with wet feet—a hole in my boot after all, I hadn't known—and a stomach roiling from the stench

of the dogs, which only worsened as they got wet. The dead puppy smelled especially horrible. I climbed back onto my platform.

“What to do now?”

“You tell me,” I said.

“These dogs do not behave correctly.”

“Not behave correctly?”

“No.”

“What do you want them to do?”

“Do you want to see the presentation?”

We had been here before. On second thought, a “presentation” sounded more like acquiring information (“Notice everything”) than like undertaking action (“Never volunteer”). So I sat cross-legged on the platform, which was

easier on my uncushioned bones, breathed through my mouth instead of my nose, and said “Why the hell not?”

Blue repeated, “Do you want to see the presentation?”

“Yes.” A one-syllable answer.

I didn't know what to expected. Aliens, spaceships, war, strange places barely comprehensible to humans. What I got was scenes from the dump.

A beam of light shot out from Blue and resolved into a three-dimensional holo, not too different from one I'd seen in a science museum on a school field trip once (no. push memory away), only this was far sharper and detailed. A ragged and unsmiling toddler, one of thousands, staggered toward a cesspool.

A big dog with patchy coat dashed up, seized the kid's dress, and pulled her back just before she fell into the waste.

A medium-sized brown dog in a guide-dog harness led around someone tapping a white-headed cane. An Army dog, this one sleek and well-fed, sniffed at a pile of garbage, found something, pointed stiffly at attention.

A group of teenagers tortured a puppy. It writhed in pain, but in a long lingering close-up, tried to lick the torturer's hand.

A thin, small dog dodged rocks, dashed inside a corrugated tin hut, and laid a piece of carrion beside an old lady lying on the ground.

The holo went on and on like that, but

the strange thing was that the people were barely seen. The toddler's bare and filthy feet and chubby knees, the old lady's withered cheek, a flash of a camouflage uniform above a brown boot, the hands of the torturers. Never a whole person, never a focus on people. Just on the dogs.

The "presentation" ended.

"These dogs do not behave correctly," Blue said.

"These dogs? In the presentation?"

"These dogs here do not behave correctly."

"These dogs here." I pointed to the wet, stinking dogs in their cages. Some, fed now, had quieted. Others still snarled and barked, trying their hellish

best to get out and kill me.

“These dogs here. Yes. What to do now?”

“You want these dogs to behave like the dogs in the presentation.”

“These dogs here must behave correctly. Yes.”

“You want them to . . . do what? Rescue people? Sniff out ammunition dumps? Guide the blind and feed the hungry and love their torturers?”

Blue said nothing. Again I had the impression I had exceeded its thought processes, or its vocabulary, or its something. A strange feeling gathered in my gut.

“Blue, you yourself didn’t build this Dome, or the starship that it was before,

did you? You're just a . . . a computer.”

Nothing.

“Blue, who tells you what to do?”

“What to do now? These dogs do not behave correctly.”

“Who wants these dogs to behave correctly?” I said, and found I was holding my breath.

“The masters.”

The masters. I knew all about them. Masters were the people who started wars, ran the corporations that ruined the Earth, manufactured the bioweapons that killed billions, and now holed up in the cities to send their garbage out to us in the refugee camps. Masters were something else I didn't think about, but not because grief would take me. Rage

would.

Law of Survival #5: Feel nothing that doesn't aid survival.

“Are the masters here? In this . . . inside here?”

“No.”

“Who is here inside?”

“These dogs here are inside.”

Clearly. “The masters want these dogs here to behave like the dogs in the presentation.”

“Yes.”

“The masters want these dogs here to provide them with loyalty and protection and service.”

No response.

“The masters aren't interested in human beings, are they? That's why they

haven't communicated at all with any government.”

Nothing. But I didn't need a response; the masters' thinking was already clear to me. Humans were unimportant—maybe because we had, after all, destroyed each other and our own world. We weren't worth contact. But dogs: companion animals capable of selfless service and great unconditional love, even in the face of abuse. For all I knew, dogs were unique in the universe. For all I know. Blue said, “What to do now?”

I stared at the mangy, reeking, howling mass of animals. Some feral, some tamed once, some sick, at least one dead. I chose my words to be as simple

as possible, relying on phrases Blue knew. “The masters want these dogs here to behave correctly.”

“Yes.”

“The masters want me to make these dogs behave correctly.”

“Yes.”

“The masters will make me food, and keep me inside, for to make these dogs behave correctly.”

Long pause; my sentence had a lot of grammatical elements. But finally Blue said, “Yes.”

“If these dogs do not behave correctly, the masters—what to do then?”

Another long pause. “Find another human.”

“And this human here?”

“Kill it.”

I gripped the edges of my floating platform hard. My hands still trembled.

“Put me outside now.”

“No.”

“I must stay inside.”

“These dogs do not behave correctly.”

“I must make these dogs behave correctly.”

“Yes.”

“And the masters want these dogs to display . . .” I had stopped talking to Blue. I was talking to myself, to steady myself, but even that I couldn’t manage. The words caromed around in my mind—loyalty, service, protection—but none came out of my mouth. I couldn’t do this.

I was going to die. The aliens had come from God-knew-where to treat the dying Earth like a giant pet store, intrigued only by a canine domestication that had happened ten thousand years ago and by nothing else on the planet, nothing else humanity had or might accomplish. Only dogs. The masters want these dogs to display—

Blue surprised me with a new word. “Love,” it said.

Law #4: Notice everything. I needed to learn all I could, starting with Blue. He'd made garbage appear, and food and water and cages. What else could he do?

“Blue, make the water go away.” And

it did, just sank into the floor, which dried instantly. I was fucking Moses, commanding the Red Sea. I climbed off the platform, inched among the dog cages, and studied them individually.

“You called the refugee camp and the dump ‘hell.’ Where did you get that word?”

Nothing.

“Who said ‘hell’?”

“Humans.”

Blue had cameras outside the Dome. Of course he did; he’d seen me find that first puppy in the garbage. Maybe Blue had been waiting for someone like me, alone and non-threatening, to come close with a dog. But it had watched before that, and it had learned the word “hell,”

and maybe it had recorded the incidents in the “presentation.” I filed this information for future use.

“This dog is dead.” The first puppy, decaying into stinking pulp. “It is killed. Non-operative.”

“What to do now?”

“Make the dead dog go away.”

A long pause: thinking it over? Accessing data banks? Communicating with aliens? And what kind of moron couldn't figure out by itself that a dead dog was never going to behave correctly? So much for artificial intelligence.

“Yes,” Blue finally said, and the little corpse dissolved as if it had never been. I found one more dead dog and one close

to death. Blue disappeared the first, said no to the second. Apparently we had to just let it suffer until it died. I wondered how much the idea of “death” even meant to a robot. There were twenty-three live dogs, of which I had delivered only three to the Dome.

“Blue—did another human, before you brought me here, try to train the dogs?”

“These dogs do not behave correctly.”

“Yes. But did a human not me be inside? To make these dogs behave correctly?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to him or her?”

No response.

“What to do now with the other

human?”

“Kill it.”

I put a hand against the wall and leaned on it. The wall felt smooth and slick, with a faint and unpleasant tingle. I removed my hand.

All computers could count. “How many humans did you kill?”

“Two.”

Three’s the charm. But there were no charms. No spells, no magic wards, no cavalry coming over the hill to ride to the rescue; I’d known that ever since the War. There was just survival. And, now, dogs. I chose the mangy little poodle. It hadn’t bit me when the old man had surrendered it, or when I’d kept it overnight. That was at least a start.

“Blue, make this dog’s cage go away. But only this one cage!”

The cage dissolved. The poodle stared at me distrustfully. Was I supposed to stare back, or would that get us into some kind of canine pissing contest? The thing was small but it had teeth. I had a sudden idea. “Blue, show me how this dog does not behave correctly.” If I could see what it wasn’t doing, that would at least be a start.

Blue floated to within a foot of the dog’s face. The dog growled and backed away. Blue floated away and the dog quieted but it still stood in what would be a menacing stance if it weighed more than nine or ten pounds: ears raised, legs braced, neck hair bristling. Blue said,

“Come.” The dog did nothing. Blue repeated the entire sequence and so did Mangy.

I said, “You want the dog to follow you. Like the dogs in the presentation.”

“Yes.”

“You want the dog to come when you say ‘Come.’”

“Love,” Blue said.

“What is ‘love,’ Blue?”

No response.

The robot didn’t know. Its masters must have had some concept of “love,” but fuck-all knew what it was. And I wasn’t sure I knew any more, either. That left Mangy, who would never “love” Blue or follow him or lick his hand because dogs operated on smell—

even I knew that about them—and Blue, a machine, didn't smell like either a person or another dog. Couldn't the aliens who sent him here figure that out? Were they watching this whole farce, or had they just dropped a half-sentient computer under an upturned bowl on Earth and told it, "Bring us some loving dogs"? Who knew how aliens thought?

I didn't even know how dogs thought. There were much better people for this job—professional trainers, or that guy on TV who made tigers jump through burning hoops. But they weren't here, and I was. I squatted on my haunches a respectful distance from Mangy and said, "Come."

It growled at me.

“Blue, raise the platform this high.” I held my hand at shoulder height. The platform rose.

“Now make some cookies on the platform.”

Nothing.

“Make some . . . cheese on the platform.”

Nothing. You don’t see much cheese in a dump.

“Make some bread on the platform.”

Nothing. Maybe the platform wasn’t user-friendly.

“Make some bread.”

After a moment, loaves tumbled out of the wall. “Enough! Stop!”

Mangy had rushed over to the bread, tearing at it, and the other dogs were

going wild. I picked up one loaf, put it on the platform, and said, “Make the rest of the bread go away.”

It all dissolved. No wonder the dogs were wary; I felt a little dizzy myself. A sentence from some long-ago child’s book rose in my mind: Things come and go so quickly here!

I had no idea how much Blue could, or would, do on my orders. “Blue, make another room for me and this one dog. Away from the other dogs.”

“No.”

“Make this room bigger.”

The room expanded evenly on all sides. “Stop.” It did. “Make only this end of the room bigger.”

Nothing.

“Okay, make the whole room bigger.”

When the room stopped expanding, I had a space about forty feet square, with the dog cages huddled in the middle. After half an hour of experimenting, I got the platform moved to one corner, not far enough to escape the dog stench but better than nothing. (Law #1: Take what you can get.) I got a depression in the floor filled with warm water. I got food, drinking water, soap, and some clean cloth, and a lot of rope. By distracting Mangy with bits of bread, I got rope onto her frayed collar. After I got into the warm water and scrubbed myself, I pulled the poodle in. She bit me. But somehow I got her washed, too. Afterwards she shook herself, glared at

me, and went to sleep on the hard floor. I asked Blue for a soft rug.

He said, “The other humans did this.”

And Blue killed them anyway.

“Shut up,” I said.

The big windowless room had no day, no night, no sanity. I slept and ate when I needed to, and otherwise I worked. Blue never left. He was an oversized, all-seeing eye in the corner. Big Brother, or God.

Within a few weeks—maybe—I had Mangy trained to come when called, to sit, and to follow me on command. I did this by dispensing bits of bread and other goodies. Mangy got fatter. I didn’t care if she ended up the Fat Fiona of

dogs. Her mange didn't improve, since I couldn't get Blue to wrap his digital mind around the concept of medicines, and even if he had I wouldn't have known what to ask for. The sick puppy died in its cage.

I kept the others fed and watered and flooded the shit out of their cages every day, but that was all. Mangy took all my time. She still regarded me warily, never curled up next to me, and occasionally growled. Love was not happening here.

Nonetheless, Blue left his corner and spoke for the first time in a week, scaring the hell out of me. "This dog behaves correctly."

"Well, thanks. I tried to . . . no, Blue . . ."

Blue floated to within a foot of Mangy's face, said, "Follow," and floated away. Mangy sat down and began to lick one paw. Blue rose and floated toward me.

"This dog does not behave correctly." I was going to die.

"No, listen to me—listen! The dog can't smell you! It behaves for humans because of humans' smell! Do you understand?"

"No. This dog does not behave correctly."

"Listen! How the hell can you learn anything if you don't listen? You have to have a smell! Then the dog will follow you!"

Blue stopped. We stood frozen, a

bizarre tableau, while the robot considered. Even Mangy stopped licking her paw and watched, still. They say dogs can smell fear. Finally Blue said, “What is smell?”

It isn't possible to explain smell. Can't be done. Instead I pulled down my pants, tore the cloth I was using as underwear from between my legs, and rubbed it all over Blue, who did not react. I hoped he wasn't made of the same stuff as the Dome, which even spray paint had just slid off of. But, of course, he was. So I tied the strip of cloth around him with a piece of rope, my fingers trembling. “Now try the dog, Blue.”

“Follow,” Blue said, and floated

away from Mangy.

She looked at him, then at me, then back at the floating metal sphere. I held my breath from some insane idea that I would thereby diminish my own smell. Mangy didn't move.

“This dog does not be—“

“She will if I'm gone!” I said desperately. “She smells me and you . . . and we smell the same so it's confusing her! But she'll follow you fine if I'm gone, do you understand?”

“No.”

“Blue . . . I'm going to get on the platform. See, I'm doing it. Raise the platform very high, Blue. Very high.”

A moment later my head and ass both pushed against the ceiling, squishing me.

I couldn't see what was happening below. I heard Blue say, "Follow," and I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting. My life depended on a scrofulous poodle with a gloomy disposition.

Blue said, "This dog behaves correctly."

He lowered my platform to a few yards above the floor, and I swear that—eyeless as he is and with part of his sphere obscured by my underwear—he looked right at me.

"This dog does behave correctly. This dog is ready."

"Ready? For . . . for what?"

Blue didn't answer. The next minute the floor opened and Mangy, yelping, tumbled into it. The floor closed. At the

same time, one of the cages across the room dissolved and a German shepherd hurtled towards me. I shrieked and yelled, “Raise the platform!” It rose just before the monster grabbed me. Blue said, “What to do now? This dog does not behave correctly.”

“For God’s sakes, Blue—”

“This dog must love.”

The shepherd leapt and snarled, teeth bared.

I couldn’t talk Blue out of the shepherd, which was as feral and vicious and unrelenting as anything in a horror movie. Or as Blue himself, in his own mechanical way. So I followed the First Law: Take what you can get.

“Blue, make garbage again. A lot of garbage, right here.” I pointed to the wall beside my platform.

“No.”

Garbage, like everything else, apparently was made—or released, or whatever—from the opposite wall. I resigned myself to this. “Make a lot of garbage, Blue.”

Mountains of stinking debris cascaded from the wall, spilling over until it reached the dog cages.

“Now stop. Move my platform above the garbage.”

The platform moved. The caged dogs howled. Uncaged, the shepherd poked eagerly in the refuse, too distracted to pay much attention to me. I had Blue

lower the platform and I poked among it, too, keeping one eye on Vicious. If Blue was creating the garbage and not just trucking it in, he was doing a damn fine job of duplication. Xerox should have made such good copies.

I got smeared with shit and rot, but I found what I was looking for. The box was nearly a quarter full. I stuffed bread into it, coated the bread thoroughly, and discarded the box back onto the pile.

“Blue, make the garbage go away.”

It did. Vicious glared at me and snarled. “Nice doggie,” I said, “have some bread.” I threw pieces and Vicious gobbled them.

Listening to the results was terrible. Not, however, as terrible as having

Vicious tear me apart or Blue vaporize me. The rat poison took all “night” to kill the dog, which thrashed and howled. Throughout, Blue stayed silent. He had picked up some words from me, but he apparently didn’t have enough brain power to connect what I’d done with Vicious’s death. Or maybe he just didn’t have enough experience with humans. What does a machine know about survival?

“This dog is dead,” Blue said in the “morning.”

“Yes. Make it go away.” And then, before Blue could get there first, I jumped off my platform and pointed to a cage. “This dog will behave correctly next.”

“No.”

“Why not this dog?”

“Not big.”

“Big. You want big.” Frantically I scanned the cages, before Blue could choose another one like Vicious.

“This one, then.”

“Why the hell not?” Blue said.

It was young. Not a puppy but still frisky, a mongrel of some sort with short hair of dirty white speckled with dirty brown. The dog looked liked something I could handle: big but not too big, not too aggressive, not too old, not too male. “Hey, Not-Too,” I said, without enthusiasm, as Blue dissolved her cage. The mutt dashed over to me and tried to

lick my boot.

A natural-born slave.

I had found a piece of rotten, moldy cheese in the garbage, so Blue could now make cheese, which Not-Too went crazy for. Not-Too and I stuck with the same routine I used with Mangy, and it worked pretty well. Or the cheese did. Within a few “days” the dog could sit, stay, and follow on command. Then Blue threw me a curve. “What to do now? The presentation.”

“We had the presentation,” I said. “I don’t need to see it again.”

“What to do now? The presentation.”

“Fine,” I said, because it was clear I had no choice. “Let’s have the presentation. Roll ’em.”

I was sitting on my elevated platform, combing my hair. A lot of it had fallen out during the malnourished years in the camp, but now it was growing again. Not-Too had given up trying to jump up there with me and gone to sleep on her pillow below. Blue shot the beam out of his sphere and the holo played in front of me.

Only not the whole thing. This time he played only the brief scene where the big, patchy dog pulled the toddler back from falling into the cesspool. Blue played it once, twice, three times. Cold slid along my spine.

“You want Not-Too . . . you want this dog here to be trained to save children.”

“This dog here does not behave

correctly.”

“Blue . . . how can I train a dog to save a child?”

“This dog here does not behave correctly.”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but we haven’t got any fucking children for the dog to practice on!”

Long pause. “Do you want a child?”

“No!” Christ, he would kidnap one or buy one from the camp and I would be responsible for a kid along with nineteen semi-feral dogs. No.

“This dog here does not behave correctly. What to do now? The presentation.”

“No, not the presentation. I saw it, I saw it. Blue . . . the other two humans

who did not make the dogs behave correctly . . ."

"Killed."

"Yes. So you said. But they did get one dog to behave correctly, didn't they? Or maybe more than one. And then you just kept raising the bar higher. Water rescues, guiding the blind, finding lost people. Higher and higher."

But to all this, of course, Blue made no answer.

I wracked my brains to remember what I had ever heard, read, or seen about dog training. Not much. However, there's a problem with opening the door to memory: you can't control what strolls through. For the first time in years, my sleep was shattered by

dreams. I walked through a tiny garden, picking zinnias. From an open window came music, full and strong, an orchestra on CD. A cat paced beside me, purring. And there was someone else in the window, someone who called my name and I turned and—

I screamed. Clawed my way upright. The dogs started barking and howling. Blue floated from his corner, saying something. And Not-Too made a mighty leap, landed on my platform, and began licking my face.

“Stop it! Don’t do that! I won’t remember!” I shoved her so hard she fell off the platform onto the floor and began yelping. I put my head in my hands.

Blue said, “Are you not operative?”

“Leave me the fuck alone!”

Not-Too still yelped, shrill cries of pain. When I stopped shaking, I crawled off the platform and picked her up. Nothing seemed to be broken—although how would I know? Gradually she quieted. I gave her some cheese and put her back on her pillow. She wanted to stay with me but I wouldn't let her. I would not remember. I would not. Law #5: Feel nothing.

We made a cesspool, or at least a pool. Blue depressed part of the floor to a depth of three feet and filled it with water. Not-Too considered this a swimming pool and loved to be in it, which was not what Blue wanted (“This

water does not behave correctly”). I tried having the robot dump various substances into it until I found one that she disliked and I could tolerate: light-grade motor oil. A few small cans of oil like those in the dump created a polluted pool, not unlike Charleston Harbor. After every practice session I needed a bath.

But not Not-Too, because she wouldn't go into the “cesspool.” I curled myself as small as possible, crouched at the side of the pool, and thrashed. After a few days, the dog would pull me back by my shirt. I moved into the pool. As long as she could reach me without getting any liquid on her, Not-Too happily played that game. As soon as I

moved far enough out that I might actually need saving, she sat on her skinny haunches and looked away.

“This dog does not behave correctly.”

I increased the cheese. I withheld the cheese. I pleaded and ordered and shunned and petted and yelled. Nothing worked. Meanwhile, the dream continued. The same dream, each time not greater in length but increasing in intensity. I walked through a tiny garden, picking zinnias. From an open window came music, full and strong, an orchestra on CD. A cat paced beside me, purring. And there was someone else in the window, someone who called my name and I turned and—

And woke screaming.

A cat. I had had a cat, before the War. Before everything. I had always had cats, my whole life. Independent cats, aloof and self-sufficient, admirably disdainful. Cats—

The dog below me whimpered, trying to get onto my platform to offer comfort I did not want. I would not remember.

“This dog does not behave correctly,” day after day.

I had Blue remove the oil from the pool. But by now Not-Too had been conditioned. She wouldn't go into even the clear water that she'd reveled in before.

“This dog does not behave correctly.”

Then one day Blue stopped his annoying mantra, which scared me even

more. Would I have any warning that I'd failed, or would I just die?

The only thing I could think of was to kill Blue first.

Blue was a computer. You disabled computers by turning them off, or cutting the power supply, or melting them in a fire, or dumping acid on them, or crushing them. But a careful search of the whole room revealed no switches or wires or anything that looked like a wireless control. A fire in this closed room, assuming I could start one, would kill me, too. Every kind of liquid or solid slid off Blue. And what would I crush him with, if that was even possible? A piece of cheese?

Blue was also—sort of—an intelligence. You could kill those by trapping them somewhere. My prison-or-sanctuary (depending on my mood) had no real “somerheres.” And Blue would just dissolve any structure he found himself in.

What to do now?

I lay awake, thinking, all night, which at least kept me from dreaming, I came up with two ideas, both bad. Plan A depended on discussion, never Blue’s strong suit.

“Blue, this dog does not behave correctly.”

“No.”

“This dog is not operative. I must make another dog behave correctly. Not

this dog.”

Blue floated close to Not-Too. She tried to bat at him. He circled her slowly, then returned to his position three feet above the ground. “This dog is operative.”

“No. This dog looks operative. But this dog is not operative inside its head. I cannot make this dog behave correctly. I need a different dog.”

A very long pause. “This dog is not operative inside its head.”

“Yes.”

“You can make another dog behave correctly. Like the presentation.”

“Yes.” It would at least buy me time. Blue must have seen “not operative” dogs and humans in the dump; God

knows there were enough of them out there. Madmen, rabid animals, druggies raving just before they died, or were shot. And next time I would add something besides oil to the pool; there must be something that Blue would consider noxious enough to simulate a cesspool but that a dog would enter. If I had to, I'd use my own shit.

“This dog is not operative inside its head,” Blue repeated, getting used to the idea. “You will make a different dog behave correctly.”

“Yes!”

“Why the hell not?” And then, “I kill this dog.”

“No!” The word was torn from me before I knew I was going to say

anything. My hand, of its own volition, clutched at Not-Too. She jumped but didn't bite. Instead, maybe sensing my fear, she cowered behind me, and I started to yell.

“You can't just kill everything that doesn't behave like you want! People, dogs . . . you can't just kill everything! You can't just . . . I had a cat . . . I never wanted a dog but this dog . . . she's behaving correctly for her! For a fucking traumatized dog and you can't just—I had a dog I mean a cat I had. . . . I had. . . .”

—from an open window came music, full and strong, an orchestra on CD. A cat paced beside me, purring. And there was someone else in the window,

someone who called my name and I turned and—

“I had a child!”

Oh, God no no no . . . It all came out then, the memories and the grief and the pain I had pushed away for three solid years in order to survive . . . Feel nothing . . . Zack Zack Zack shot down by soldiers like a dog Look, Mommy, here I am Mommy look . . .

I curled in a ball on the floor and screamed and wanted to die. Grief had been postponed so long that it was a tsunami. I sobbed and screamed; I don't know for how long. I think I wasn't quite sane. No human should ever have to experience that much pain. But of course they do. However, it can't last too long,

that height of pain, and when the flood passed and my head was bruised from banging it on the hard floor, I was still alive, still inside the Dome, still surrounded by barking dogs. Zack was still dead. Blue floated nearby, unchanged, a casually murderous robot who would not supply flesh to dogs as food but who would kill anything he was programmed to destroy. And he had no reason not to murder me.

Not-Too sat on her haunches, regarding me from sad brown eyes, and I did the one thing I told myself I never would do again. I reached for her warmth. I put my arms around her and hung on. She let me. Maybe that was the decision point. I don't know.

When I could manage it, I staggered to my feet. Taking hold of the rope that was Not-Too's leash, I wrapped it firmly around my hand. "Blue," I said, forcing the words past the grief clogging my throat,

"make garbage."

He did. That was the basis of Plan B; that Blue made most things I asked of him. Not release, or mercy, but at least rooms and platforms and pools and garbage. I walked toward the garbage spilling from the usual place in the wall.

"More garbage! Bigger garbage! I need garbage to make this dog behave correctly!"

The reeking flow increased. Tires, appliances, diapers, rags, cans,

furniture. The dogs' howling rose to an insane, deafening pitch. Not-Too pressed close to me.

“Bigger garbage!”

The chassis of a motorcycle, twisted beyond repair in some unimaginable accident, crashed into the room. The place on the wall from which the garbage spewed was misty gray, the same fog that the Dome had become when I had been taken inside it. Half a sofa clattered through. I grabbed Not-Too, dodged behind the sofa, and hurled both of us through the onrushing garbage and into the wall. A broken keyboard struck me in the head, and the gray went black.

Chill. Cold with a spot of heat, which turned out to be Not-Too lying on top of me. I pushed her off and tried to sit up. Pain lanced through my head and when I put a hand to my forehead, it came away covered with blood. The same blood streamed into my eyes, making it hard to see. I wiped the blood away with the front of my shirt, pressed my hand hard on my forehead, and looked around. Not that there was much to see. The dog and I sat at the end of what appeared to be a corridor. Above me loomed a large machine of some type, with a chute pointed at the now-solid wall. The machine was silent. Not-Too quivered and pressed her furry side into mine, but she, too, stayed silent. I couldn't hear the

nineteen dogs on the other side of the wall, couldn't see Blue, couldn't smell anything except Not-Too, who had made a small yellow puddle on the floor.

There was no room to stand upright under the machine, so I moved away from it. Strips ripped from the bottom of my shirt made a bandage that at least kept blood out of my eyes. Slowly Not-Too and I walked along the corridor.

No doors. No openings or alcoves or machinery. Nothing until we reached the end, which was the same uniform material as everything else. Gray, glossy, hard. Dead. Blue did not appear. Nothing appeared, or disappeared, or lived. We walked back and studied the overhead bulk of the machine. It had no

dials or keys or features of any kind. I sat on the floor, largely because I couldn't think what else to do, and Not-Too climbed into my lap. She was too big for this and I pushed her away. She pressed against me, trembling.

“Hey,” I said, but not to her. Zack in the window Look, Mommy, here I am Mommy look. . . . But if I started down that mental road, I would be lost. Anger was better than memory. Anything was better than memory. “Hey!” I screamed. “Hey, you bastard Blue, what to do now? What to do now, you Dome shits, whoever you are?”

Nothing except, very faint, an echo of my own useless words.

I lurched to my feet, reaching for the

anger, cloaking myself in it. Not-Too sprang to her feet and backed away from me.

“What to do now? What bloody fucking hell to do now?”

Still nothing, but Not-Too started back down the empty corridor. I was glad to transfer my anger to something visible, real, living. “There’s nothing there, Not-Too. Nothing, you stupid dog!”

She stopped halfway down the corridor and began to scratch at the wall. I stumbled along behind her, one hand clamped to my head. What the hell was she doing? This piece of wall was identical to every other piece of wall. Kneeling slowly—it hurt my head to move fast—I studied Not-Too. Her

scratching increased in frenzy and her nose twitched, as if she smelled something. The wall, of course, didn't respond; nothing in this place responded to anything. Except—

Blue had learned words from me, had followed my commands. Or had he just transferred my command to the Dome's unimaginable machinery, instructing it to do anything I said that fell within permissible limits? Feeling like an idiot, I said to the wall, "Make garbage." Maybe if it complied and the garbage contained food . . .

The wall made no garbage. Instead it dissolved into the familiar gray fog, and Not-Too immediately jumped through, barking frantically.

Every time I had gone through a Dome wall, my situation had gotten worse. But what other choices were there? Wait for Blue to find and kill me, starve to death, curl up and die in the heart of a mechanical alien mini-world I didn't understand. Not-Too's barking increased in pitch and volume. She was terrified or excited or thrilled . . . How would I know? I pushed through the gray fog. Another gray metal room, smaller than Blue had made my prison but with the same kind of cages against the far wall. Not-Too saw me and raced from the cages to me. Blue floated toward me . . . No, not Blue. This metal sphere was dull green, the color of shady moss. It said, "No human comes into this area."

“Guess again,” I said and grabbed the trailing end of Not-Too’s rope. She’d jumped up on me once and then had turned to dash back to the cages.

“No human comes into this area,” Green repeated. I waited to see what the robot would do about it. Nothing.

Not-Too tugged on her rope, yowling. From across the room came answering barks, weirdly off. Too uneven in pitch, with a strange undertone. Blood, having saturated my makeshift bandage, once again streamed into my eyes. I swiped at it with one hand, turned to keep my gaze on Green, and let Not-Too pull me across the floor. Only when she stopped did I turn to look at the mesh-topped cages. Vertigo swooped over me.

Mangy was the source of the weird barks, a Mangy altered not beyond recognition but certainly beyond anything I could have imagined. Her mange was gone, along with all her fur. The skin beneath was now gray, the same gunmetal gray as everything else in the Dome. Her ears, the floppy poodle ears, were so long they trailed on the floor of her cage, and so was her tail. Holding on to the tail was a gray grub. Not a grub. Not anything Earthly. Smooth and pulpy, it was about the size of a human head and vaguely oval. I saw no openings on the thing but Mangy's elongated tail disappeared into the doughy mass, and so there must have been at least one orifice. As Mangy

jumped at the bars, trying to get at Not-Too, the grub was whipped back and forth across the cage floor. It left a slimy trail. The dog seemed oblivious.

“This dog is ready,” Blue had said.

Behind me Green said, “No human comes into this area.”

“Up yours.”

“The human does not behave correctly.”

That got my attention. I whirled around to face Green, expecting to be vaporized like the dead puppy, the dead Vicious. I thought I was already dead—and then I welcomed the thought. Look, Mommy, here I am Mommy look The laws of survival that had protected me for so long couldn't protect me

against memory, not any more. I was ready to die.

Instead Mangy's cage dissolved, she bounded out, and she launched herself at me. Poodles are not natural killers, and this one was small. However, Mangy was doing her level best to destroy me. Her teeth closed on my arm. I screamed and shook her off, but the next moment she was biting my leg above my boot, darting hysterically toward and away from me, biting my legs at each lunge. The grub, or whatever it was, lashed around at the end of her new tail. As I flailed at the dog with both hands, my bandage fell off. Fresh blood from my head wound blinded me. I stumbled and fell and she was at my face.

Then she was pulled off, yelping and snapping and howling.

Not-Too had Mangy in her jaws. Twice as big as the poodle, she shook Mangy violently and then dropped her. Mangy whimpered and rolled over on her belly. Not-Too sprinted over to me and stood in front of me, skinny legs braced and scrawny hackles raised, growling protectively. Dazed, I got to my feet. Blood, mine and the dogs', slimed everything. The floor wasn't trying to reabsorb it. Mangy, who'd never really liked me, stayed down with her belly exposed in submission, but she didn't seem to be badly hurt. The grub still latched onto the end of her tail like a gray tumor. After a moment she rolled

onto her feet and began to nuzzle the grub, one baleful eye on Not-Too: Don't you come near this thing! Not-Too stayed in position, guarding me. Green said—and I swear its mechanical voice held satisfaction, no one will ever be able to tell me any different—“These dogs behave correctly.”

The other cages held grubs, one per cage. I reached through the front bars and gingerly touched one. Moist, firm, repulsive. It didn't respond to my touch, but Green did. He was beside me in a flash. “No!”

“Sorry.” His tone was dog-disciplining. “Are these the masters?”

No answer.

“What to do now? One dog for one . . .” I waved at the cages.

“Yes. When these dogs are ready.”

This dog is ready, Blue had said of Mangy just before she was tumbled into the floor. Ready to be a pet, a guardian, a companion, a service animal to alien . . . what? The most logical answer was “children.”

Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, Benji, Little Guy. A boy and his dog. The aliens found humans dangerous or repulsive or uncaring or whatever, but dogs. . . . You could count on dogs for your kids. Almost, and for the first time, I could see the point of the Domes.

“Are the big masters here? The adults?”

No answer.

“The masters are not here,” I said. “They just set up the Domes as . . . as nurseries-slash-obedience schools.” And to that statement I didn’t even expect an answer. If the adults had been present, surely one or more would have come running when an alien blew into its nursery wing via a garbage delivery. There would have been alarms or something. Instead there was only Blue and Green and whatever ’bots inhabited whatever place held the operating room. Mangy’s skin and ears and tail had been altered to fit the needs of these grubs. And maybe her voice-box, too, since her barks now had that weird undertone, like the scrape of metal across rock.

Somewhere there was an OR. I didn't want to be in that somewhere.

Green seemed to have no orders to kill me, which made sense because he wasn't programmed to have me here. I wasn't on his radar, which raised other problems.

“Green, make bread.”

Nothing.

“Make water.”

Nothing.

But two indentations in a corner of the floor, close to a section of wall, held water and dog-food pellets. I tasted both, to the interest of Not-Too and the growling of Mangy. Not too bad. I scooped all the rest of the dog food out of the trough. As soon as the last piece

was out, the wall filled it up again. If I died, it wasn't going to be of starvation.

A few minutes ago, I had wanted to die. Zack . . .

No. Push the memory away. Life was shit, but I didn't want death, either. The realization was visceral, gripping my stomach as if that organ had been laid in a vise, or . . . There is no way to describe it. The feeling just was, its own justification. I wanted to live.

Not-Too lay a short distance away, watching me. Mangy was back in her cage with the grub on her tail. I sat up and looked around. "Green, this dog is not ready."

"No. What to do now?"

Well, that answered one question.

Green was programmed to deal with dogs, and you didn't ask dogs

“what to do now.” So Green must be in some sort of communication with Blue, but the communication didn't seem to include orders about me. For a star-faring advanced race, the aliens certainly weren't very good at LANs. Or maybe they just didn't care—how would I know how an alien thinks?

I said, “I make this dog behave correctly.” The all-purpose answer.

“Yes.”

Did Green know details—that Not-Too refused to pull me from oily pools and thus was an obedience-school failure? It didn't seem like it. I could pretend to train Not-Too—I could

actually train her, only not for water rescue—and stay here, away from the killer Blue, until . . . until what? As a survival plan, this one was shit. Still, it followed Laws #1 and #3: Take what you can get and never volunteer. And I couldn't think of anything else.

“Not-Too,” I said wearily, still shaky from my crying jag, “Sit.”

“Days” went by, then weeks. Not-Too learned to beg, roll over, bring me a piece of dog food, retrieve my thrown boot, lie down, and balance a pellet of dog food on her nose. I had no idea if any of these activities would be useful to an alien, but as long as Not-Too and I were “working,” Green left us alone. No

threats, no presentations, no objections. We were behaving correctly. I still hadn't thought of any additional plan. At night I dreamed of Zack and woke in tears, but not with the raging insanity of my first day of memory. Maybe you can only go through that once.

Mangy's grub continued to grow, still fastened onto her tail. The other grubs looked exactly the same as before. Mangy growled if I came too close to her, so I didn't. Her grub seemed to be drying out as it got bigger. Mangy licked it and slept curled around it and generally acted like some mythical dragon guarding a treasure box. Had the aliens bonded those two with some kind of pheromones I couldn't detect? I had

no way of knowing.

Mangy and her grub emerged from their cage only to eat, drink, or shit, which she did in a far corner. Not-Too and I used the same corner, and all of our shit and piss dissolved odorlessly into the floor. Eat your heart out, Thomas Crapper.

As days turned into weeks, flesh returned to my bones. Not-Too also lost her starved look. I talked to her more and more, her watchful silence preferable to Green's silence or, worse, his inane and limited repertoire of answers. "Green, I had a child named Zack. He was shot in the war. He was five." "This dog is not ready."

Well, none of us ever are.

Not-Too started to sleep curled against my left side. This was a problem because I thrashed in my sleep, which woke her, so she growled, which woke me. Both of us became sleep-deprived and irritable. In the camp, I had slept twelve hours a day. Not much else to do, and sleep both conserved energy and kept me out of sight. But the camp was becoming distant in my mind. Zack was shatteringly vivid, with my life before the war, and the Dome was vivid, with Mangy and Not-Too and a bunch of alien grubs. Everything in between was fading.

Then one “day”—after how much time? I had no idea—Green said, “This dog is ready.”

My heart stopped. Green was going to take Not-Too to the hidden OR, was going to— “No!”

Green ignored me. But he also ignored Not-Too. The robot floated over to Mangy’s cage and dissolved it. I stood and craned my neck for a better look.

The grub was hatching.

Its “skin” had become very dry, a papery gray shell. Now it cracked along the top, parallel to Mangy’s tail. She turned and regarded it quizzically, this thing wriggling at the end of her very long tail, but didn’t attack or even growl. Those must have been some pheromones.

Was I really going to be the first and

only human to see a Dome alien?

I was not. The papery covering cracked more and dropped free of the dog's tail. The thing inside wiggled forward, crawling out like a snake shedding its skin. It wasn't a grub but it clearly wasn't a sentient being, either. A larva? I'm no zoologist. This creature was as gray as everything else in the Dome but it had legs, six, and heads, two. At least, they might have been heads. Both had various indentations. One "head" crept forward, opened an orifice, and fastened itself back onto Mangy's tail. She continued to gaze at it. Beside me, Not-Too growled.

I whirled to grab frantically for her rope. Not-Too had no alterations to

make her accept this . . . thing as anything other than a small animal to attack. If she did—

I turned just in time to see the floor open and swallow Not-Too. Green said again, “This dog is ready,”

and the floor closed.

“No! Bring her back!” I tried to pound on Green with my fists. He bobbed in the air under my blows.

“Bring her back! Don’t hurt her! Don’t . . .” do what?

Don’t turn her into a nursemaid for a grub, oblivious to me.

Green moved off. I followed, yelling and pounding. Neither one, of course, did the slightest good. Finally I got it together enough to say, “When will Not-

Too come back?”

“This human does not behave correctly.”

I looked despairingly at Mangy. She lay curled on her side, like a mother dog nursing puppies. The larva wasn't nursing, however. A shallow trough had appeared in the floor and filled with some viscous glop, which the larva was scarfing up with its other head. It looked repulsive. Law #4: Notice everything.

“Green . . . okay. Just . . . okay. When will Not-Too come back here?”

No answer; what does time mean to a machine?

“Does the other dog return here?”

“Yes.”

“Does the other dog get a . . .” A

what? I pointed at Mangy's larva. No response. I would have to wait.

But not, apparently, alone. Across the room another dog tumbled, snarling, from the same section of wall I had once come through. I recognized it as one of the nineteen left in the other room, a big black beast with powerful looking jaws. It righted itself and charged at me. There was no platform, no place to hide.

“No! Green, no, it will hurt me! This dog does not behave—”

Green didn't seem to do anything. But even as the black dog leapt toward me, it faltered in mid-air. The next moment, it lay dead on the floor.

The moment after that, the body disappeared, vaporized.

My legs collapsed under me. That was what would happen to me if I failed in my training task, was what had presumably happened to the previous two human failures. And yet it wasn't fear that made me sit so abruptly on the gray floor. It was relief, and a weird kind of gratitude. Green had protected me, which was more than Blue had ever done. Maybe Green was brighter, or I had proved my worth more, or in this room as opposed to the other room, all dog-training equipment was protected. I was dog-training equipment. It was stupid to feel grateful.

I felt grateful.

Green said, "This dog does not—"

"I know, I know. Listen, Green, what

to do now? Bring another dog here?”

“Yes.”

“I choose the dog. I am the . . . the dog leader. Some dogs behave correctly, some dogs do not behave correctly. I choose. Me.”

I held my breath. Green considered, or conferred with Blue, or consulted its alien and inadequate programming. Who the hell knows? The robot had been created by a race that preferred Earth dogs to whatever species usually nurtured their young, if any did. Maybe Mangy and Not-Too would replace parental care on the home planet, thus introducing the idea of babysitters. All I wanted was to not be eaten by some canine nanny-trainee.

“Yes,” Green said finally, and I let out my breath.

A few minutes later, eighteen dog cages tumbled through the wall like so much garbage, the dogs within bouncing off their bars and mesh tops, furious and noisy. Mangy jumped, curled more protectively around her oblivious larva, and added her weird, rock-scraping bark to the din. A cage grew up around her. When the cages had stopped bouncing, I walked among them like some kind of tattered lord, choosing.

“This dog, Green.” It wasn’t the smallest dog but it had stopped barking the soonest. I hoped that meant it wasn’t a grudge holder. When I put one hand into its cage, it didn’t bite me, also a

good sign. The dog was phenomenally ugly, the jowls on its face drooping from small, rheumy eyes into a sort of folded ruff around its short neck. Its body seemed to be all front, with stunted and short back legs. When it stood, I saw it was male.

“This dog? What to do now?”

“Send all the other dogs back.”

The cages sank into the floor. I walked over to the feeding trough, scooped up handfuls of dog food, and put the pellets into my only pocket that didn't have holes. “Make all the rest of the dog food go away.”

It vaporized.

“Make this dog's cage go away.”

I braced myself as the cage dissolved.

The dog stood uncertainly on the floor, gazing toward Mangy, who snarled at him. I said, as commandingly as possible, “Ruff!”

He looked at me.

“Ruff, come.”

To my surprise, he did. Someone had trained this animal before. I gave him a pellet of dog food. Green said, “This dog behaves correctly.”

“Well, I’m really good,” I told him, stupidly, while my chest tightened as I thought of Not-Too. The aliens, or their machines, did understand about anesthetic, didn’t they? They wouldn’t let her suffer too much? I would never know.

But now I did know something

momentous. I had choices. I had chosen which room to train dogs in. I had chosen which dog to train. I had some control.

“Sit,” I said to Ruff, who didn’t, and I set to work.

Not-Too was returned to me three or four “days” later. She was gray and hairless, with an altered bark. A grub hung onto her elongated tail, undoubtedly the same one that had vanished from its cage while I was asleep. But unlike Mangy, who’d never liked either of us, Not-Too was ecstatic to see me. She wouldn’t stay in her grub-cage against the wall but insisted on sleeping curled up next to me, grub and all. Green

permitted this. I had become the alpha dog.

Not-Too liked Ruff, too. I caught him mounting her, her very long tail conveniently keeping her grub out of the way. Did Green understand the significance of this behavior? No way to tell. We settled into a routine of training, sleeping, playing, eating. Ruff turned out to be sweet and playful but not very intelligent, and training took a long time. Mangy's grub grew very slowly, considering the large amount of glop it consumed. I grew, too; the waistband of my ragged pants got too tight and I discarded them, settling for a loin cloth, shirt, and my decaying boots. I talked to the dogs, who were much better

conversationalists than Green since two of them at least pricked up their ears, made noises back at me, and wriggled joyfully at attention. Green would have been a dud at a cocktail party. I don't know how long this all went on. Time began to lose meaning. I still dreamed of Zack and still woke in tears, but the dreams grew gentler and farther apart. When I cried, Not-Too crawled onto my lap, dragging her grub, and licked my chin. Her brown eyes shared my sorrow. I wondered how I had ever preferred the disdain of cats.

Not-Too got pregnant. I could feel the puppies growing inside her distended belly.

“Puppies will be easy to make behave

correctly,” I told Green, who said nothing. Probably he didn’t understand. Some people need concrete visuals in order to learn. Eventually, it seemed to me that Ruff was almost ready for his own grub. I mulled over how to mention this to Green but before I did, everything came to an end.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

I jerked awake and bolted upright. The alarm—a very human-sounding alarm—sounded all around me. Dogs barked and howled. Then I realized that it was a human alarm, coming from the Army camp outside the Dome, on the opposite side to the garbage dump. I could see the camp—in outline and

faintly, as if through heavy gray fog. The Dome was dissolving.

“Green—what—no!”

Above me, transforming the whole top half of what had been the Dome, was the bottom of a solid saucer. Mangy, in her cage, floated upwards and disappeared into a gap in the saucer’s underside. The other grub cages had already disappeared. I glimpsed a flash of metallic color through the gap: Blue. Green was halfway to the opening, drifting lazily upward. Beside me, both Not-Too and Ruff began to rise.

“No! No!”

I hung onto Not-Too, who howled and barked. But then my body froze. I couldn’t move anything. My hands

opened and Not-Too rose, yowling piteously.

“No! No!” And then, before I knew I was going to say it, “Take me, too!”

Green paused in mid-air. I began babbling.

“Take me! Take me! I can make the dogs behave correctly—I can—you need me! Why are you going?

Take me!”

“Take this human?”

Not Green but Blue, emerging from the gap. Around me the Dome walls thinned more. Soldiers rushed toward us. Guns fired.

“Yes! What to do? Take this human! The dogs want this human!”

Time stood still. Not-Too howled and

tried to reach me. Maybe that's what did it. I rose into the air just as Blue said, "Why the hell not?"

Inside—inside what?—I was too stunned to do more than grab Not-Too, hang on, and gasp. The gap closed. The saucer rose.

After a few minutes, I sat up and looked around. Gray room, filled with dogs in their cages, with grubs in theirs, with noise and confusion and the two robots. The sensation of motion ceased. I gasped, "Where .

.. where are we going?"

Blue answered. "Home."

"Why?"

"The humans do not behave correctly." And then, "What to do now?"

We were leaving Earth in a flying saucer, and it was asking me?

Over time—I have no idea how much time—I actually got some answers from Blue. The humans “not behaving correctly” had apparently succeeded in breaching one of the Domes somewhere. They must have used a nuclear bomb, but that I couldn’t verify. Grubs and dogs had both died, and so the aliens had packed up and left Earth. Without, as far as I could tell, retaliating. Maybe. If I had stayed, I told myself, the soldiers would have shot me. Or I would have returned to life in the camp, where I would have died of dysentery or violence or cholera or starvation. Or I

would have been locked away by whatever government still existed in the cities, a freak who had lived with aliens, none of my story believed. I barely believed it myself.

I am a freak who lives with aliens. Furthermore, I live knowing that at any moment Blue or Green or their

“masters” might decide to vaporize me. But that’s really not much different from the uncertainty of life in the camp, and here I actually have some status. Blue produces whatever I ask for, once I get him to understand what that is. I have new clothes, good food, a bed, paper, a sort of pencil. And I have the dogs. Mangy still doesn’t like me. Her larva hasn’t as yet done whatever it will do

next. Not-Too's grub grows slowly, and now Ruff has one, too. Their three puppies are adorable and very trainable. I'm not so sure about the other seventeen dogs, some of whom look wilder than ever after their long confinement in small cages. Aliens are not, by definition, humane. I don't know what it will take to survive when, and if, we reach "home" and I meet the alien adults. All I can do is rely on Jill's Five Laws of Survival:

#1: Take what you can get.

#2: Show no fear.

#3: Never volunteer.

#4: Notice everything.

But the Fifth Law has changed. As I lie beside Not-Too and Ruff, their sweet

warmth and doggie-odor, I know that my first formulation was wrong. “Feel nothing”—that can take you some ways toward survival, but not very far. Not really.

Law #5: Take the risk. Love something.

The dogs whuff contentedly and we speed toward the stars.