

The next morning, Laz loaded only a few cans from his stash, and instead of going straight to Vivipartum, he found himself headed into Pack of Four territory. He had five stones in his left hand and one in his right as he walked down the middle of every street, so nothing could spring at him out of hiding.

Apparently I'm stupid enough to pick a fight with four hungry dogs. I'm glad they aren't wolves. Or woolly mammoths.

It took a little bit of walking at random through downtown and residential blocks, but eventually, well before noon, there they were. Two a block away on the left, one a block away on the right, and one padding along directly behind Laz. The leader.

Laz stopped.

Leaderdog slowed down, but kept coming. Tongue lolling out. Maybe the tail was wagging, though it was held low enough that Laz couldn't see it well.

Laz scanned left and right, and sure enough, the other three dogs were now approaching. Are they telepaths? Or did they all see me and they knew what to do?

Laz reared back to throw.

Leaderdog didn't seem to care. Just kept coming.

This might work better if I were aiming at his side instead of his nose, thought Laz.

He threw.

The stone landed about three feet in front of Leaderdog and ricocheted up to his throat. Lucky, lucky, lucky shot.

Or did I side step to this timestream just to get that lucky shot?

No. I'd remember.

Leaderdog yelped and jumped back a few steps.

The other dogs also stopped and retreated a little.

The other dogs were broadside to Laz, and therefore much easier targets. But would it matter to Leaderdog if Laz hit one of his pals? No, because if Laz turned his attention to them, Leaderdog would have a chance to spring at him.

So Laz focused his attention on Leaderdog, reared back, and let fly.

The stone struck a glancing blow on Leaderdog's jaw. Leaderdog leapt to the side, yelping. This exposed some of his flank to Laz, and already he had another stone in his right hand, and without any elaborate pitching routine, he simply flung the rock at the side of Leaderdog's body.

Direct hit on his hind haunch. Who says practice is a waste of time?

This time Leaderdog ran away, limping quite noticeably, and giving whiny little yips to his team. They seemed reluctant to -follow—after all, you don't remain the alpha dog if you run away—but when Laz pitched his largest rock at the nearest of the dogs and hit it solidly on the hip, the dog actually fell over. It got right back up, but it limped off even more panicked than Leaderdog. The other two didn't wait around for further demonstrations.

Laz waited till they were gone, then walked around and gathered up his spent ammunition. Why search for more river rocks when these had already proven their worth? Unlike hand grenades, rocks were pretty much reusable.

A good day's work, and it wasn't even noon yet.

He continued toward Vivipartum. Lots of time left in the day.

Weirdly, though, he couldn't stop thinking of how the two dogs he hit had run away, crying out in pain. Sure, they would have attacked him and eaten him without feeling a qualm, but they were dogs. Laz wasn't. Laz was supposed to be a good guy. What was he doing setting up dogs for injury and pain?

No, I'm training them, Laz told himself. I'm training them to leave human pedestrians alone. That's a good lesson for them to learn—for my safety.

Of course, these rocks are going to be meaningless if I run into a bear. Getting hit by a rock probably won't even annoy the bear. And if it does, it won't make the bear yell the bear equivalent of "owie" and run away.

Definitely need to see if I can find a working bow and arrows. I'd have to practice with *them* way more than I did with the stones.

Laz did not ride the elevator down. The stairs revealed more floors than the elevator went to, and eventually he found a door whose buttons were still working. The door slid open and inside was a serious array of computers stacked in trays. He had seen arrays like this in animation studios. He wasn't sure what these computers were for, but what mattered were three facts. First, all the upstairs computers had been removed, but these were still here. Second, there were blue, green, and amber LED displays in many places, proving that there was still electrical current running through this room. And third, on a single desk in the middle of the room, there was a computer monitor with a blinking cursor in the upper left corner of the screen.

So when he woke up and got out of his coffin, it hadn't caused everything to shut down. Maybe that meant there really was another living person somewhere in this place.

If Laz messed with the computer, he might trigger some self-defense system with unpredictable results.

Instead, he knew he had to go in search of a functioning healing cave. And the obvious place to start was the big coffin room where *he* had woken up.

He found it pretty quickly. At first he turned on the overhead lights, but then realized that he didn't want to have to look down into a thousand boxes that contained withered corpses that had died at various stages of development. So he turned the light back off, shut the door, and then stood there letting his eyes get used to the dark.

The first thing he noticed was the absence of green lights inside the coffins. They had all been on, displaying zeroes, when he first awoke. So he started to walk, slowly, among the coffins, touching them to make sure he kept going straight.

There it was. The green light from the only wide open, empty coffin in the place. The one Laz had come out of.

He only saw it when he was about four coffins away, and then only because he was on the correct side. He continued his slow patrol, and never saw another light.

Why were they all off now, except his? This might mean that the computer system had noticed that he was awake and his box was empty, so it switched off all the other lights. But why not his?

He was not going to be able to outguess the computer, and still less the programmers. But if somebody else was alive, he needed to know it.

It's worth looking, he reminded himself. I have to try.

He went to the coffin room one story above the one he had awoken in, and again darkened the space and patrolled slowly among the boxes. After a long time, discouraged, he thought of quitting, and turned back to face the other way. That was when he saw a tiny green light in a box he must have already passed. But now he could see what was on the other side of the interior.

Maybe it was another working coffin. Maybe somebody alive.

When he got there and shone his brighter light through the clear lid of the sleeping box, it wasn't a mummy. It was a girl. Sleeping, but she seemed to be alive. Laz wasn't sure what the instruments were saying, but they were saying *something*, unlike the zeroes that the instruments on Laz's own empty coffin now reported. For a moment he imagined her naked, as clearly as if it were a memory, but he instantly told himself to grow up. She was wearing the same kind of bland lightweight pajamas that Laz had been wearing. Laz couldn't guess her age—she could have been younger, she could have been older.

Alive. Apparently alive.

Laz studied the instruments, trying to figure out what condition she was in, trying to figure out how to tell the machinery to wake her up safely. He was pretty sure that prying up the lid with a crowbar would have deleterious effects. And even if he did get it open and she woke up and didn't die, what then? "Why did you wake me up?" "Well, see, I was alone for three months and I needed somebody to talk to." "So what's this wonderful thing you were dying to say?" "I don't know." "For this you woke me up?"

And if he woke her without first getting the coffin to play her memories back into her head, she might be a full-grown person without memories. Not just forgetting whatever happened to her in

third grade, but forgetting human speech, walking, reading. What would he do then? Hand feed her for a few years?

I'm so glad I came back to Vivipartum. Now I know there's another living person in a healing box, and I'm still just as helpless, as ignorant, as solitary as before.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting around at Vivipartum all evening, feeling sorry and timid, deciding to access that one computer and then deciding not to access it ever. Everything he did might be wrong, and even if he could side step his way out of disastrous errors, it was quite possible that *every* choice would be bad, and he really needed the girl to wake up on her own when her healing box declared her ready.

But that wasn't what Laz had done for himself. He had reached up and pushed his own coffin lid out of the way. He had taken action. Why shouldn't he take action to release a potential companion?

He actually stood over the girl's healing box with the pry bar under the edge of the lid, deciding whether to use brute force to liberate the girl. Then he put the pry bar back into his backpack and walked to the door.

Someone else is alive in this town, someone who is not a dog or a squirrel, and I can't figure out what to do about that fact. Why had someone cloned her? Was she the clone of a supermodel? A hyper-rich pop singer? A famous athlete? Why would she give the time of day to Laz? He was as close to a nothing as you could be without becoming invisible.

How long had he stood there staring down through the lid at her faintly illuminated face? Long enough to memorize her features. Long enough to decide she was good-looking, even without

makeup or any kind of facial expression. Even with stringy hair of no particular color except the faint green from the LED display.

His current home base was no longer going to work. He needed a point of supply and a safe sleeping place much closer to Vivipartum. Because now that he knew she existed, he didn't want to leave it to chance whether she woke up and found him. He wanted to be there, so they could start working out whatever relationship they were going to have.

He walked over the couch in the main entrance and back into the street. To the south was a poorer neighborhood that didn't support a major grocery store. He understood this town well enough to start walking northward.

Because he was thinking of other things now, the Pack of Four took him by surprise. But this time there was nothing menacing about them. The follower-dog that Laz had struck in the side was lying down on the ground, panting heavily. The two who hadn't been hit were standing vigil.

Leaderdog, though, *he* keyed in on Laz and watched, rotating his body to keep Laz in his line of sight. But he was also limping as he turned.

Apparently Laz's rocks had landed with more force than he expected. So two of the four dogs were not fit to forage, and that might spell the difference between eking out a living and dying of starvation.

Why should killing hungry dogs be part of his agenda in this place?

Laz stepped a few dozen paces away, squatted down, and opened the backpack. His larder wasn't huge. A can of tamales. A can of corn. No dog food, alas.

A couple of cans of tuna fish.

Laz used the lid-removing opener to expose the chunks of tuna inside one of the cans. When Laz had eaten from previous tuna cans, he hadn't been impressed by the flavor. But hey, it was tuna, it was cooked, and Laz himself had eaten a lot of tuna in his life. If he had anything that would appeal to a dog, it had to be this can of StarKist tuna.

Laz used the narrow handle of the can opener to dig down into the tuna and pry it out. He dumped it onto the sidewalk.

Leaderdog was alert to everything Laz was doing—but the dog made no effort to come closer. Injured as he was, Leaderdog probably preferred to stay out of Laz's throwing range.

Laz gathered up the tuna in his hands and walked slowly and obliquely toward the dogs.

Leaderdog gave a low warning growl.

Laz stopped approaching and knelt down with the offering of tuna fish. He held out his hands. Leaderdog came and sniffed.

"Hey, come on, I'm sorry," said Laz. "I know this stuff has lost a lot of its food value on the shelf for umpty-odd years, but it's the same stuff I eat, so I'm pretty sure it isn't poisonous."

He spoke low and soft, and Leaderdog kept coming closer.

Then its mouth was in Laz's hands, using tongue, lips, and teeth to pick up every scrap of tuna.

Then he ran over and spat out a lot of it, maybe all of it, right beside the dog with the more serious-looking injuries. Leaderdog stepped back a little, then nosed one of the healthy dogs toward it.

Soon they were all eating.



But Leaderdog didn't take his fair share. Instead, he ran over to where Laz had left his backpack and picked up the now-empty tuna can and trotted back with it. He pushed it onto Laz's lap, then into his hands. Laz wasn't quite sure he could interpret the gesture, but it sure seemed to him like Leaderdog was asking for more StarKist tuna.

"StarKist, huh?" asked Laz. "Can't have Chicken of the Sea, is that it?"

Laz got up and walked back to his backpack and found the other tuna can. He started cranking the opener.

Meanwhile, back with the rest of his little pack, Leaderdog had his nose inside the now-empty tuna can, as if he were licking up the last dregs of meat.

"So you now worship the god StarKist," said Laz. "The source of all goodness, the teat of all survivor dogs."

Laz brought over the second can of tuna—the last in his pack—and dumped the contents onto the grass and left the empty can for Leaderdog to clean out.

Leaderdog wasn't a name, it was a job description. "Your name is StarKist now," Laz said. "And I'm Laz. Let's see if we're friends tomorrow."