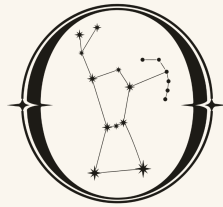


BOOK ONE OF THE ORION UNIVERSE

THE SAINT OF ORION

PROLOGUE

Jackson Tran



An extract, issued unrestricted. The serial begins 1 September 2026.

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THERE WERE A LITTLE OVER TWO HUNDRED MINDS in the Greybriar mess at midday, and Dan Park could feel every one of them.

It was something like standing in a field of two hundred small candles, each giving off its own faint heat, the warmth registering as a general impression he couldn't isolate until he chose to focus.

They had warned him about the headaches and the nosebleeds; had sat him down eighteen years ago in a gray room and told him in gray voices that he was *rare*, that he was *valuable*. They had told him he'd be looked after. Nobody mentioned the part where a team, an organization, the whole damn world would lean on him for the rest of his life.

He came off the stairs with the boys strung out behind him and ran the room on reflex, because checking the exits and reading the crowd were the same habit underneath. Lab-coats at the near tables, thinking in numbers he couldn't follow and didn't try to.

Bunch of nerds, really.

A knot of Section Five kids by the windows, all about nineteen or twenty, terrified under the swagger. The sad part was that even the Bleeders — the ones like him — flickered like candle flames in a draft, bright enough to burn but too weak to hold steady. Most were weak Singles, a Charism with one expression.

A TK-2 here, a CT-3 there. Here and there a TP-4. The future state of Greybriar was bleak indeed.

The file waiting on him downstairs was somebody like that. Or near enough. Two days of incident reports off the San Francisco downtown terminal. A departures board that came off its bolts. Things moving when no one was watching. Somebody was burning scared. A Single, perhaps, who had no idea what they were or what they were capable of.

“—and I'm telling you, Chef, the woman had a *husband*,” Paddy was saying, close on Dan's shoulder. “Which I learned, mind, *after*.”

“You learned it after,” Diego said, in the voice of a man who'd heard the front half of this story and wanted nothing to do with the back, “because you weren't *listening*. You never do.”

“I listen when there's something interesting to listen to,” Paddy said. “And anyway, she was more someone I *did* something to. Not someone to *listen* to. Know what I mean?” He jabbed Diego in the side with an elbow.

“I swear to God, Cabbage—” Diego sighed.

The line moved. Dan took a tray and got something the menu swore was beef. Whatever it was, it was not beef. But it was nutritionally dialed in the way Section Three dialed everything in.

Dan felt Diego clock the imposter-beef mush and despair without a word, the big man's whole soul folding in on itself at the sight of institutional gravy.

"Say, Chef, why don't you quit the team and go rehabilitate the cafeteria kitchen?" Dan said, slopping onto his tray the next food item that he wouldn't have been able to name if his life depended on it.

"I don't think rehab is possible for this," Diego said, pushing around the slop with the ladle and deciding not to take any. "I think it's something that needs to be put down, Padre."

Behind them Thomas drifted up to the rail, long blond hair neatly combed. He looked at the steaming trays the way he'd have looked at a target he'd decided not to waste a round on.

"They realize that I put good money into this facility, right?" Thomas said.

"Your parents do," Dan corrected. "And I think it goes mostly toward Three. Not food."

Thomas selected a banana and a black coffee like a man ordering at a hotel he intended to complain about.

"He's going to eat a *banana*," Paddy announced to the room. "Cupid. We are about to go to work. You need protein. You need fat. You need — Christ, look at him, he's got the wrists of a girl who plays the harp."

"And this harpist can shoot you from a mile away," Thomas said easily. Paddy blinked at him.

"He could," Dan agreed with a shrug. "Alright, ladies. After you all put on your makeup and curl your eyelashes, it's prep at thirteen-thirty. That means trays down by twenty-five past, not twenty-*nine*, Cabbage—"

"Listen, Padre," Paddy said, taking away Thomas's banana and pointing it like a gun at Dan. "I need food, okay? I'm a growing boy. You don't want me passing out on our op, do you?"

"Trays down at twenty-five past," Dan repeated. "Junior. You herding, or you want me to do your job for you?"

Chris McIntyre had been half a step off the whole time, holding the tray like someone might call for an inspection. Dan could feel him already running the prep in his mind, the bright, over-ordered hum of a kid who'd decided that if he was thorough enough, the world couldn't surprise him.

Twenty-four years old — twenty-five in a couple weeks, Dan realized — and built like a recruitment poster. A face any good ol' American mother could be proud of, and broad through the shoulders. The kid was so tightly wound Dan sometimes wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake one human mistake loose, just to watch the relief on everyone else's faces.

"On it, sir," Chris said. His watch was already turned up on his wrist. He started moving the boys toward the doors with grim efficiency. He was, Dan thought, a man who'd never once in his life been allowed to be young. Poor thing.

"Junior's *on it*," Paddy stage-whispered. "We can all relax now because *Junior's on it*. I might as well skip breakfast."

"Leave the kid alone," Dan said. "He's going to be all our boss someday."

Paddy rolled his eyes and peeled Thomas's banana and took a bite.

"Hmm," Paddy said. "Not bad. Tastes like rich people paid for it."

Dan looked back over the sea of people. Team Orion had their own kitchen, but he had always liked being in the cafeteria. It gave him a reason to scan, to notice, to see who was up and coming from Section Five.

And that was when Dan saw the redhead looking at them.

She was over with the other Fivers, a little apart from them — perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three. Red hair came down in waves to her shoulders, a spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She possessed a beauty that wouldn't halt conversation but would improve it, that particular glow of someone who made ordinary rooms feel lived-in. It put him in mind of porch screens and parish picnics, of a girl who'd been taught to look adults in the eye when she said *yes, sir* and *yes, ma'am*.

But what was he doing noticing a young thing like her? He had a small velvet box sitting in the bottom of his locker two floors down, and the woman it was for — that woman he could *not* take his eyes or mind off. She had a tongue on her that put Paddy to shame. Had, many times. Sasha would notice him looking at the young redhead and say something like *down, boy* without even glancing up from her coffee.

He chuckled and turned to follow his team, and his link brushed the redhead unconsciously on the way past —

— and caught.

Hub.

She was a Linker like him. But more. Much more than a Linker. If the other Fiver Charisms were candles, she was a porch light left burning in the middle of the night. Her Throughput *and* Capacity were enormous.

He pushed a bit further and felt not her power but her mind. A dry, low, private amusement, like she was watching the whole room and finding most of it funny. Her edge sat in a wholesome face like a knife in a fruit bowl. And something else.

She was trying not to look at Marcus.

His best friend was walking beside him and was not noticing that a cute, sharp, redheaded Fiver kid was actively *not* watching him with way more than a flicker of interest.

Dan felt the grin come up before he could stop it. It was almost too good.

"Hey, Mr. Smiles," Dan said, low, just for the two of them. He dropped a hand on his best friend's shoulder. "Don't look now, but—"

"You know that just makes me want to look," his friend said, the Creole-Louisiana accent filed smooth but still showing the grain.

"Window side. Fiver kid. Redhead." Dan let the grin into his voice. "She's cute as a button. And my bet is she thinks you are too. You've got an admirer, brother."

Marcus didn't look. His face didn't change. That was Marcus through and through. But Dan felt it land — the smallest, almost imperceptible flicker of something. So he *had* seen the redhead. The sly dog.

"She's a baby, Padre," Marcus said.

"Well, if that's how babies look nowadays—"

"Don't be crass, Padre," Marcus said. "That's Cabbage's job."

"She doth protest too much," Dan said, grinning. "I'm only saying, Marky Marc. A man could do worse than a girl who makes ordinary goodness look like something you could fall into. Or on top of."

"I don't know what that means."

Dan winked and clapped his shoulder once. "Just saying. Be a shame to die a mystery."

"I'm okay with dying. Death and I are engaged."

"A joke from Marcus Miles. What has the world come to?"

"Oh, are we talking engagements?" Paddy crowed from up ahead, because of course Paddy had been listening the whole time. "Lads, Father Dan's getting *married*, did you know? Who's going to officiate your wedding, Padre? You can't officiate your own. Maybe Junior will do it for you so he can follow in his father's footsteps."

"Quinn—" Dan began.

"Padre's settling down. Hardest man in the building, going to be picking out *curtains* and counting thread—"

"I will murder you in your sleep," Dan said, "and I will tell your mother it was a training accident. She will believe me, because everyone believes me, because I have a kind and trustworthy face."

"You look like you run a Ponzi scheme," Thomas said around a new banana. "I would know. I run a few myself."

They went out laughing — all of them, except Chris.

Dan let the door of the mess swing shut behind the six of them.

. . .

THE BOARD NEVER TOLD YOU the part that mattered.

Dan stood in prep and looked at what Three had handed them: a grainy still off a transit camera, a woman's face half-turned, the kind of face you'd never look at twice. The boys kitted up around him and pretended they weren't listening.

"Junior, your op. Get briefing." Dan moved over to the nearest chair and sat in it, groaning a bit as his bad knee sighed in relief. *A young man in an old man's body*, Sasha always complained. But who was she kidding? Forty-two and divorced, Sasha didn't mind a lick that his body was breaking down. Made her feel the younger of the two.

“We have a single subject,” Chris said, voice catching on the words. He cleared his throat. “The big terminal downtown in San Francisco. She’s leaking.”

“Leaking how?” Marcus said, threading his vest. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“The way your m—” Paddy got three words out before Diego snapped a pen at his temple. Chris’s eyes flicked to Dan. Dan just shrugged and crossed his arms. He leaned back in his chair, kicked his boots up onto the table, and smiled. Chris did not look amused.

But when did the kid ever find anything amusing?

“The way a cracked main leaks,” Chris said. “Three’s logged four incidents off that station in two days.”

“Why’s the subject even there?” Marcus asked. “Seems like a weird place to stay for two days.”

“Maybe she’s hiding,” Diego offered. “Maybe someone’s after her and she figured a place like that, with all those people, it’s harder to grab her.”

Chris tapped the still. “Whatever the reason, I don’t think she knows what she’s doing. She’s scared.”

“Yeah, still doesn’t explain the terminal,” Thomas said. “Seems a weird place to be.”

“Ever been homeless, Trust Fund?” Diego asked.

“I have at least five vacation homes.”

“Well, I have. Anywhere that has people that don’t want to hurt you is a place you want to be,” Diego said without humor.

“The mission’s simple—” Chris began. Marcus barked a laugh.

“Simple. All we need is to get there first, get her quiet, get her in the truck *before* she goes berserk. We do it in front of three thousand commuters at rush hour *without* one of them remembering us.” Marcus shook his head.

“Sounds simple,” Thomas said too calmly. “And if she goes batshit, I put a bullet in her head.”

“Does anyone else worry about Cupid?” Paddy said, clicking Diego’s pen over and over. And over.

“Cabbage, I will put that through your eye,” Dan said. “And no, Tom. We will not be putting a bullet in her head. Jesus. There are tourists. Travelers. We need to do this quiet. You’re high — find a perch. Stay a ghost. For God’s sake, don’t shoot anyone.”

Thomas shrugged and looked through his scope.

Chris continued, “Diego and Paddy work the floor in a loose box. Dan’s with me. Marcus—”

“Reserve and the door,” Marcus said. “She comes apart, I’m the door, we all get home.”

SAN FRANCISCO UNION TERMINAL — JULY 2006

THREE THOUSAND MINDS UNDER ONE VAULTED CEILING at the worst hour of the day was like trying to listen to a bunch of howler monkeys in a zoo while hungover. Dan had experienced that once. Unfortunately, it had also included a half-naked Paddy. And not the half that Dan particularly wanted

to see.

He had the boys the way he always ran them, four separate leads in one fist, every one a live thing pulling its own direction, and the fifth thread, the quiet one, running from the middle of his chest to Chris: the live feed. Chris could feel Dan's tank and know exactly how much Capacity he had.

Dan had slept well last night. Especially after Sasha's enthusiastic response to the first phase of his proposal: asking her to vacation with him in Cabo. Her enthusiasm had carried to the bed. Which led, afterward, to a contented sleep.

His tank was full from the night's charge. Or as full as it could be, given the steady drain. Four hours of Dan's Capacity against a ninety-minute op window, and the grease over three thousand heads drinking steady. All of it pocket change, though.

Sound off, Chris sent through him to the team. Dan felt them answer down the leads, one after another, clean.

Floor's pretty, Junior, Diego sent, drifting past the ticket machines with a coffee he wasn't drinking, because Diego only drank the fancy kinds. *Regulars own the benches on the east wall. Cop by the flower stand hasn't moved in ten minutes. She's the one to watch.*

Oh, she's the one to watch, alright, Paddy said. *And I'm about to make a friend of her. And by friend, I mean—*

Tom? Chris cut Paddy off.

Mezzanine, west, Thomas said, settling into stillness up over the hall. *I have the concourse, both stair heads, three of four platform mouths. It's a beautiful building. Makes me want to buy it.*

Who the hell says "mezzanine"? Dan made a grunting noise as he thought it at them.

Posh people, Padre, Paddy replied. *Very, very posh people.*

Marcus? Chris continued.

East doors are ours, Marcus said. *Wedged the far one. Truck's on the curb. Janitor thinks I'm an inspector. We all go home through that door, so nobody get creative.*

Dan found the Charism under the departures board inside a minute. She was slick with fear, her powers leaking into everyone near her.

He skimmed the Bleeder. A Mixed, not a Single. Telepathy and telekinesis. A Linker and Thrower, then. That could be useful if they could train her. Now they just needed to get her out of here.

She's walking, Thomas said. *South. Toward the platforms.*

The board flipped its tiles with a sound like a flock of birds taking off. The 12:52, Platform 6, boarding in twenty minutes. If she got on a train, they lost her into a steel tube with two hundred civilians and a tunnel at the end of it.

Nobody spooks her, Dan sent. *Junior, your op. What's the call?*

Box slides with her, Chris said, no hesitation, and Dan heard the kid's watch in his voice, the little metronome under everything. *Chef, if she gets on a train, try to get a seat ahead of her. Cabbage, work your magic on that cop. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid if the Charism gets spooked. Dan, keep her calm. We are nineteen from boarding.*

The crowd thickened, the rush deepening, the terminal filling like a lock chamber. The bleed poured from her like water through a sieve, yet no one looked twice. And that was because Dan was leaning gently on the ones who might notice. Concealing was an art as much as anything, and learning to make sure you didn't drain your entire tank required finesse. A pocket that moves drinks double; every step the Bleeder they were following took, Dan had to re-lay the grease over new ground and let it go off the old. He was burning through his Capacity at a rate he could actually feel. He chose to ignore it anyway. Chris would be nagging him about it soon enough.

Paddy had the flower-stand cop laughing inside ninety seconds, an Irish hand on the blonde woman's shoulder, and she was *leaning in*. He'd somehow made the woman look young and attractive where she had been dour and severe the last time Dan looked.

If Dan hadn't known any better, he would've sworn Paddy was a Charmer-type Charism. Through the link, Dan could hear the Irishman telling some story about a sergeant and a goat, and the woman's attention went wherever Paddy's hands went, which was nowhere near a drifting woman in a plain coat.

Padre. Chris, on the private thread, the feed humming between them. *You're burning hot. I'm reading you lower than you should be, and my watch agrees. We're coming up on my number.*

Call it two hours in the tank, Dan sent back, easy. *I've more than enough.*

I'm not reading two hours, Chris said. *Sir. She's drifting, the burn's double, and if she boards, we do this again at the next station on fumes. Wave off. We take her at the street tonight — my op, my call—*

Chris, I know what I'm doing. And anyway, your watch is fast.

Silence on the thread. Dan felt the kid holding the number and holding his tongue, both.

Twenty years, kiddo, Dan sent, gentler. *I've been reading this tank since you were still toddling around. One approach. We close now, while she's calm, and we're home in time for Sasha to whip up drinks for all of us. Deal?*

Copy, Chris said after a pause. *Closing. Fourteen to boarding.*

They closed. Forty feet. Thirty-five. Diego was ahead of her. The cop gave Paddy her number, her fingers lingering on his for a brief moment. Thomas was still above, the crosshair patience of him like a held breath at the top of Dan's mind. Marcus was at the east doors, far away, exactly where he was supposed to be.

At thirty feet, the woman's mind went quiet.

The slick of fear shut off between one step and the next, like fingers pinching a wick. One breath she was a frightened person dripping into the room, and the next her entire *self* was gone. Everything about her signature had changed.

This was all wrong.

Hold, Dan sent, and it came out harder than he meant it to. *Everybody hold*.

The woman under the platform sign turned around and looked directly at him across thirty feet of moving crowd. Her face had the expression someone wore when they were quite fond of you.

Hi there, it said, into the middle of his head, gentle as a hand on a fevered brow. *I am glad you came so quickly*.

Dan understood the way you understand a fall already in progress. Somewhere between one breath and the next, the Bleeder had changed. It was like looking a bulb swapped in its socket. What was looking at him now was very different than the scared woman from earlier.

And she was *glad* he was there.

The woman suddenly reached. Not to Throw him. Not to read his mind. The thing inside her poured itself toward the rooms where he lived, patient and enormous.

So Dan shut every door he had and put his whole weight on them.

It cost him more than he expected. He felt his tank drop at a furious rate, fifteen minutes for every minute that he held against it. The tank he had claimed was plenty was down to — what? Maybe forty minutes. And it was depleting at an alarming rate.

He had to cut his men loose. They were still tethered to him through the leads, and whatever this woman was attempting — if she succeeded while he held all those connections in his fist — it would channel straight through him into each of them.

So he began handing his boys back to themselves. He let them all go. Thomas, Diego, Paddy.

When it came time for Marcus, his friend gripped hard. The man reached back down the dying lead with everything a mind that isn't gifted has, a hand closing on a rope as the rope left him — and the lead went anyway.

What's going on, Dan? came Chris's voice.

I— Dan began.

You don't have to fight it, sweetheart, the thing told him. *You'll all be so much happier*.

Dan, you're burning too fast. Let go of the crowd.

I let go of the crowd and then what happens, Junior? This thing creates mass panic, and we have a stampede on our hands. No. I just have to hope I have a bigger Capacity than this untrained Bleeder.

It's not about Capacity, Dan. It's about burn rate. You're burning hot.

Dan knew that, of course. He didn't need a boy to lecture him about his own powers. But there was nothing he could do. He had to hold on, and it felt like being on a treadmill that kept increasing its speed.

Junior, he sent, and kept his voice level, because the feed would be screaming the truth into the boy's ribs anyway and one of them should sound calm. *You need to evacuate the building. Get everyone out before I run out. Get them out.*

Copy, Chris said, and Dan felt the boy stop being twenty-four.

"All units." Chris's voice went out flat over the radio, and Dan heard it twice — thin through the air of the hall, and warm through the thread in his chest. It was doubled, like a man standing in two rooms at once. "Dan's engaged, net is down, we are on comms from here. The building goes empty in ten minutes. Paddy, we need your cop. Get her to believe there's been a gas leak. We need transit authority here. Now."

"On it." And then Paddy's voice, farther off, pitched for an audience of one frightened young woman in a uniform: "Claire. Officer Belland. Listen to me very carefully. There's a gas main under Platform Four—"

"Diego, you have the floor. Where do they go?"

"Not the street doors. Three thousand people through four doors is a meat grinder, and not the good kind. The 12:52 is sitting on Six with its doors open. Two hundred empty seats and a driver. Two hundred won't take the building, but it doesn't have to. Every body on that platform is a body not folding back into a doorway."

"We split the hall. Good idea, Chef. Let's do it," Chris said. Then, "Tom, you're eyes. Call the flow. Marcus—"

"East doors," Marcus said. "Yeah, yeah."

The alarm went off like the building had been waiting for permission. And under the alarm, the cop's voice on the PA, steadying as she went, because Paddy was standing at her shoulder feeding her the words.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are conducting a precautionary evacuation. Please proceed calmly to Platform Six or the marked eastern exits." The great furnace of the hall began, slowly, to pour itself out.

Dan held the grease over all of it and drained through his time like a leak he couldn't plug. Would not plug. And all the while, he kept his doors shut.

Across thirty feet of emptying floor, the woman stood under the platform sign with perfect patience. But Dan could tell: she was spending everything she had at top flare to try to get through him.

Maxing out on Throughput was a bad idea when your Capacity was low. She was an untrained Bleeder, driven beyond her limits. She was using everything she had dialed all the way up hoping to take him before she ran out of fuel.

It was going to be close. God help him, it was going to be close.

Hold, old man, he told himself, in Sasha's voice. He could see Sasha's crooked smile, the wrinkles that had begun forming around her eyes, the ones she hated so much. He could almost hear her voice: *Outlast the girl, and I'll throw in something extra tonight.*

Dan almost laughed out loud.

“Flow’s jamming at the stair heads.” Thomas, from up in the dark. “Kiosk knot, forty people, about to fold back into the concourse—”

“Cabbage,” Chris said.

“*Folks!*” Paddy’s voice rose over the alarm like a big brass instrument, warm as a fairground. “Plenty of train for everyone. No pushing, ma’am — that’s lovely, straight on—” and the knot unwound, because there has never been a crowd born that Patrick Quinn could not talk into an orderly line.

The east doors swallowed people in gulps. Dan could see the dark, hulking form of Marcus working the threshold: catching an old man by the arm before the crowd took him under, passing a dropped child back to its mother without letting the flow stop, one hand always on the steel of the door like the door was a patient he refused to lose.

They were all getting home. That part was working. Two thousand. Fifteen hundred.

Chris, over their link: *You’re burning faster than she is. When the floor’s clear, I’m sending Marcus and Diego back in for you—*

No, Dan said, and it was not a suggestion. *Nobody comes back in. That’s the last order I’ll ever give you, Junior, so it had better hold. The moment you clear, you stay the hell away. If I come out of this terminal, you shoot me dead. You hear me?*

What are we up against, sir?

I don’t know, kiddo.

Then give me a target, Chris said. *Cupid’s had her since the second minute. You said no in the brief. I say we take her out. Now.*

Dan looked at the woman-shaped thing across the floor.

Your op, Dan sent. *Your call.*

“Cupid,” Chris said without hesitation. “Light her up.”

The mezzanine cracked once, sharp over the alarm.

The round came in true as a plumb line and *bent*, a hand’s width. Center mass became shoulder. The impact spun her half around. There was no staggering, no crying out, only a brief pause — and Dan felt relief as the minutes remaining in his tank began to match reality once more.

It took a TK-9 to stop a bullet. And even then, it was fifty-fifty. Something like this Mixed had no hope of it. But she *had* moved it, which meant the thing wearing her had Master-level precision. Even through a weak, guttering body, it had performed a near-impossible feat.

But the flood had cost her. And her tank was now significantly lower than it had been. He could feel it, her flame losing its fuel source. He was about to tell Thomas to shoot again when he felt her light swing toward the mezzanine, thin and stretched at that range. The weapon tore itself from Thomas’s grip. And then, the moment it reached outward, Dan felt that blocking it would cost him everything he had left.

He threw a door in front of Thomas's mind and felt the round oak of it land true. He felt the bottom of himself. Everything in him, his whole tank, gone to the last drop, spent, dry.

The pressure came back against his doors, and now there was nothing behind them but rooms. It had, in the end, outlasted him by seconds. If he had let it take Thomas, the rest of them would've gone home.

But Thomas would not have.

The link vanished out of the middle of his chest, and the silence that replaced it was the loudest thing in the empty building, and he stood alone inside his own head with the thing that had waited so patiently to have him.

"Tell Sasha that I'm sorry, Junior."

"Dan!"

The hall was down to stragglers and sirens.

"Junior." He made it level. He had enough craft left for level. "They're yours now. All of them. You were always going to be good at it. Better than me, because you'll believe your instruments. Show 'em who's boss, Cap."

"No, Padre! I'm coming for you!" Marcus was yelling.

"No, you're not, Mark," Dan said gently. "And you're going to forgive me for this someday. All of you. That's an order too. Chris, get them out of here. Now."

There now, it said, kind as a mother's kiss. *That's everything. You didn't have to be so difficult, sweetheart.*

It came through the last doors like light through a curtain, and it did not hurt. It felt like coming home.

Room by room, the walls took on its color. And somewhere in the taking it was telling him something, turning over his shelves with the happy greed of a guest who means to stay, and finding a thing it wanted, a thought about someone he knew very well —

END OF THE PROLOGUE

The Saint of Orion begins serialising 1 September 2026. New installments weekly, free, at orionuniverse.net.