

DOG = GOD

ORION SAINT

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THE NOVEL AND TWO COMPANION BOOKS

Collected edition

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First edition, 2026

Published independently.

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PART ONE

First Impressions of the Two-Legged Species

1. He Smelled Like Bread and Sadness

The shelter described itself as a place of new beginnings. This was printed above the door through which people left without us.

I had been there nineteen days. Thirty-eight meals, allowing for the afternoon they forgot and the additional scoop the evening volunteer gave me when she discovered it. Humans regard apologies as a form of nourishment. That woman understood the limits of the arrangement.

My card said BUDDY. Below this were three facts about me, two of which had been disputed by the staff. I was a shepherd mix, a Labrador mix, or an administrative inconvenience. My age was ADULT. There was room on the card for a more precise answer, but nobody had used it.

One of my ears stood up. The other had considered the available evidence and declined. My coat was the colour of toast after the conversation has become more interesting than the toast. Visitors said I had kind eyes. They usually said this on their way to a younger dog.

To my left, Biscuit was conducting a campaign against the existence of walls. To my right, Daisy shook even when she slept. Across the aisle, Murray, a Great Dane, stood with his forehead against the bars. Of all of us, Murray had the least spare dog to turn around in.

At weekends the families came. Children wanted puppies. Parents wanted dogs who would not become work. The volunteers, who had spent the morning removing work from the floor, tried to find a tactful way of discussing this.

I watched shoes. Shoes tell you where a person has been, which is more useful than where they claim to be going. Most stopped briefly at my kennel. Some did not stop at all. The shoes that stopped longest generally belonged to volunteers with cleaning equipment.

Steve arrived after the morning meal. His coat had recently been rained on and not entirely dried. There was bread in one pocket, or there had been bread in it so often that the distinction no longer mattered. He held a folded form. A woman at the desk had given him a pen attached to a string, as though writing his address might provoke him to flee with it.

He walked past me.

This was disappointing without being new. I rested my chin on my paws and watched his trousers travel down the aisle. At Biscuit he stopped. Biscuit explained the walls. At Daisy he bent his knees but did not put his fingers through the wire. He stayed longest with Murray.

Murray leaned forward. Steve leaned forward. For a while it looked settled.

I closed my eyes. There is a point in waiting when the muscles around your face become tired of expressing an interest in your future.

The shoes came back.

I knew before I opened my eyes that he was looking at me. People have an odour when they are about to make a decision. It is not quite fear. It is fear putting on decent clothes.

Steve crouched. His knees made a noise. He looked at my upright ear, then at the other one, and a breath escaped him

that might have been the beginning of a laugh if it had known where to go.

“Hello,” he said.

Nobody had required him to say it. The volunteers spoke to us because we were there; visitors spoke to us because they were visiting. Steve said hello as though he had entered a room and found somebody in it.

I raised my head.

Under the bread was the smell I had been trying to place. A closed room. Fabric left folded. The water in a vase after the flowers have been taken away. It was not a bad smell. I would have preferred a bad smell. Those can often be addressed by opening a window.

He held his hand near the bars. I approached at a speed that allowed either of us to reconsider. There was soap on his fingers, printer dust, and the old trace of another dog.

“This is Buddy,” said the volunteer, arriving with her clipboard.

Steve glanced at the card.

“Is that his name?”

“It’s what we’ve been calling him.”

He looked back at me. “Doesn’t seem like his name.”

It wasn’t. It was a useful noise, and I had accepted it because accepting it made meals arrive. But there was something agreeable about his noticing that a label could be inaccurate without its subject being at fault.

The volunteer described my temperament. I stood beside them while she explained me. Apparently I was calm, affectionate, and suited to a quiet household. This last assessment had been made in a building where Biscuit was trying to remove a wall by shouting at it.

“He may need a little patience,” she added.

Steve nodded. “So might I.”

She did not write that down. I appreciated her discretion.

We went into the meeting room, which contained a chair, a rubber ball, and a poster listing the benefits of companionship. Steve sat. I inspected the corners. The ball had been consulted by many dogs and had very little left to contribute.

For a minute he let me investigate without calling me over. Then he rested his hand beside his knee, palm open. I crossed the room and put my nose in it.

He scratched behind the ear that did not stand up. He found the place at once. I leaned before I intended to. He did not make a ceremony of it, or withdraw his hand to see whether I would ask again.

“You don’t have to decide today,” the volunteer said from the doorway.

Steve’s fingers stopped.

I had been in rooms before where a human said something reassuring and a second human used it as permission to leave. I kept my head against his knee. This was not dignity. Dignity had had nineteen days to find me a home.

“No,” he said. “I think today.”

There followed a period of paperwork during which I was prevented from eating the paperwork. Steve signed three times. He was given instructions, a bag of food, and a telephone number to call if things went wrong. The volunteer asked about a yard and about his working hours. He answered without making himself sound particularly impressive. She seemed to prefer this.

At the final question he paused.

“You’re sure?”

“No,” he said. He looked down at me. “But I’m taking him home.”

The volunteer smiled properly then. She clipped a blue leash to a blue collar and handed it to him.

On our way out, Biscuit interrupted his campaign to watch. Daisy was curled at the back of her kennel. Murray lifted his head. I had no useful explanation to offer any of them. I had not become a better dog that morning. A particular pair of shoes had come back.

At the front door Steve stopped to put the bag under his arm. The leash made a loose curve between us. I could have walked faster. I could have dragged him towards the light. Instead I waited while he arranged his possessions, including me, into something he could carry.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

The word was unfamiliar in its application to me. I understood the going.

Outside, a breeze moved across my face. There was hot rubber, distant grass, a sandwich in a bin, and the trail of every dog who had come through the door before me. Some had left willingly. Some had been carried. I stood still long enough to learn that leaving had many smells.

Steve waited. Then we crossed the parking lot together, towards a grey machine with an open mouth.

I had selected my human with considerable care. It was becoming apparent that this did not guarantee his judgment.

2. The Moving Room with Windows

The car was the colour of weather that has been referred to a committee. It sat within two white lines, making the occasional ticking noise. Steve approached it with the confidence of a man who had forgotten that other people were entitled to find his arrangements appalling.

He opened a rear door.

“In you go.”

I sat down.

He tried a different tone. The proposed destination remained unchanged.

Cars and I were not complete strangers. Before the shelter there had been vehicles, but my recollection of them was mostly a door closing and no opportunity to contribute to the route. I could smell the old dog in this one. He had occupied the seat for years. That was either a recommendation or a warning, and he had neglected to leave instructions.

Steve placed the food bag on the ground and crouched beside me.

“It’s all right.”

He said it quietly enough that I could inspect the claim. His hand was steady. The rest of him was less certain. I liked that he had not attempted to conceal it by becoming loud.

He spread a blanket across the seat. It had come from the trunk, where it had absorbed oil, cardboard, and the previous dog’s weather. I put my front paws on the sill. Steve supported my back end without commenting on the need for this. Then I was inside.

He attached a strap to the harness the shelter had fitted. I disliked the strap but approved of the blanket. A dog can hold several political positions at once.

When the door closed, I pressed my nose against the window. Steve disappeared from view. For a moment the parking lot contained all the things I could not get to, and he was one of them.

Then he came around the front and opened his own door.

This improved the situation. Whatever the machine intended, it would have to deal with both of us.

Steve settled behind the wheel. He adjusted a mirror until it contained my face. I looked back at him through it. He smiled, cautiously, as if the smile itself might require prior experience.

“Right,” he said.

The car woke underneath us. The vibration entered my paws and continued into the parts of me that had not volunteered to travel. I stood, sat, and stood again. Steve looked in the mirror.

“You can lie down.”

I was aware of the procedure. The question was whether the floor would remain where I put it.

We moved.

The shelter slid backwards. A person carrying a box became a smaller person carrying a smaller box. The white lines left without asking. I made a noise which caused Steve to stop before we reached the road.

He switched off the engine.

For a while neither of us did anything. Outside, a shopping bag travelled along the fence and caught on a wire. I watched it struggle. Steve watched me in the mirror.

“We don’t have to do it quickly,” he said.

This was the first sensible thing anyone had said about the journey.

He got out, opened my door, and sat sideways on the edge of the seat. I could smell his coat without reaching. He rested his hand against my shoulder. The bag remained

trapped on the fence. The world appeared to be continuing under its own power.

Eventually my breathing slowed. Steve waited a little longer than necessary, which turned out to be necessary.

On the second attempt I lay on the blanket. We travelled to the gate, paused, and joined the road. Things went past much too fast to be examined. A bush appeared and was gone before I could establish who had visited it. I began to understand why humans looked dissatisfied when they returned from places. They had missed almost everything.

Steve talked while he drove.

He told me there was a yard. He apologised for its size, then for the state of the grass, then mentioned a garden he had intended to start. By the time we reached the first red light he had presented a detailed account of the yard's failures. It sounded excellent.

"There's a tree," he added.

At last, relevant information.

In the car beside us, a child pointed. Her father looked over. His expression changed when he saw me. For a moment he was no longer a man waiting at a light with somewhere else to be. He waved. I considered acknowledging him but decided not to overextend myself on my first day.

Steve saw the wave and gave a brief nod. It seemed to embarrass him pleasantly that we had become a visible arrangement.

The light changed. We went on.

"I haven't done this since Buddy," he said after a while.

He did not seem to be speaking to me. His eyes stayed on the road, but his voice had entered another room. I recognised the name from my card and then recognised the smell from the blanket. Humans reuse words. Dogs have to do the finer work ourselves.

“Different circumstances,” he said.

He waited, as though someone might answer from the empty place beside him.

I put my nose between the front seats. The harness allowed this much. His elbow was near enough to touch, and I touched it.

He looked in the mirror again.

“Yeah,” he said. “You don’t need all that on the way home.”

He turned the radio on. A voice offered him a more efficient way of managing his future. He turned it off before the price was announced.

At the next light he reached back and let my chin rest in his palm. His hand could not stay there when we moved again. I accepted the limitation. There were other machines on the road, and their operators did not appear notably more capable than ours.

The fear did not disappear. It changed its size. There was now room beside it for the pressure of the blanket and the warm smell of Steve’s sleeve. I lay down and kept one eye on the mirror.

We passed a shop whose window contained pictures of dogs enjoying objects that had been purchased for them. Steve slowed, considered the entrance, then kept going.

“Got a bowl,” he said. “Got the old bed. We can work the rest out.”

He sounded as though he was informing a department that the minimum requirements had been met. I would later learn how much of his life he spent trying to satisfy departments. None of them ever lay down against his leg.

The streets became quieter. There were houses, bins, a bicycle on its side. Steve turned into a driveway and switched off the engine. Without the vibration the car seemed unexpectedly empty.

He did not immediately open a door.

“Well,” he said.

I sat up. Through the window I could see a green door and a tree thin enough to take personally. Steve looked at the house. I looked at Steve.

He had brought me all the way here and now appeared uncertain about going in.

I gave the sound I used when a human had stopped performing an essential service. It was not a bark. It was an inquiry with a deadline.

He laughed once.

“All right. Coming.”

He opened his door, came around, and unfastened my strap. I waited for the supporting hand before I stepped down. The driveway stayed where it was. The car had delivered us without visible loss of personnel.

Steve picked up the food bag. I stood beside him while he searched his pockets for the key.

Some journeys end with a view. Ours ended with a man discovering that the key was in the hand holding the dog food.

We were going to need each other.

3. A House Full of Ghosts I Can Smell

The house had been waiting with its windows closed.

When Steve opened the door, the air came out past him. Soap. Laundry. Bread. Coffee that had ceased to be a drink and become a feature of a cup. Under these was the previous dog, spread through the lower part of the building with the thoroughness of someone who had never expected to leave.

Steve stood aside.

“This is it.”

His tone suggested he had hoped to offer something better. I crossed the threshold before he could withdraw the invitation.

A house is not one smell. It is several arguments about what has happened there. Fresh detergent makes an assertion. The chair beneath it disagrees. A visitor leaves a trace on a cushion; sunlight removes some of it; the cushion retains the rest. Humans paint their walls and believe they have started again. We let them.

In the hall were two pairs of shoes. The left heel of one was more worn than the right. A bowl on a table contained keys, coins, and a screw that had lost its employment. On the wall was a paler rectangle where a picture had hung. I could smell the hands that had taken it down.

I paused at the living-room entrance. There was a couch, and in front of it a low table with a cold cup and opened envelopes. A dark screen hung on the opposite wall. Books occupied less than half the bookshelf. One shelf held a black cylinder plugged into a socket. I inspected it, found no food, and moved on.

This was not the only error in my first survey.

The round object beside the baseboard was, for the moment, furniture. The distinction between furniture and enemy depends more heavily on movement than humans appreciate.

The couch required a name adequate to its promise. I selected the Soft Mountain. The table became the Offering Table, because it was at a practical height for receiving things and Steve kept putting things on it. I understood that some of the offerings would be disputed. We would establish precedent.

Buddy had slept on the left cushion. He had also slept on the right cushion, across the middle cushion, and at an angle that suggested ambitious use of the armrest. There was no need to dislike him. He had left a detailed account of how the premises should be used.

Steve watched me sniff the seam.

“It’s been cleaned,” he said.

I could tell. Cleaning was one of the smells.

He took off my leash and hung it on the hook beside his coat. I remained attached to the collar. This seemed a fair division of responsibilities.

In the kitchen I discovered the refrigerator. No account of my spiritual development is complete without it. The door opened and cold air carried out cheese, cooked meat, and a container whose contents Steve examined with distrust. He put the container back. Humans will preserve doubt for weeks if it has a lid.

“Water first,” he said.

He took a ceramic bowl from the cupboard. BUDDY was written on the side in blue. It was chipped near the base. He turned the name away from me, hesitated, and turned it back.

“It’ll do for tonight.”

I drank. Whatever objections the bowl had to the arrangement were not communicated through the water.

Behind the bin was a grain of rice with a considerable history. I investigated it while Steve opened the food bag. Near the dishwasher the floor remembered cheese. There was oil under the stove, and along the cabinet an older trace of Buddy's paws. I followed him through the room. He had known where to wait.

The counter held mail sorted into two categories: opened and not yet bearable. Among the second was a handwritten envelope. Steve moved it to make room for the measuring scoop, then moved it back so that its edge lined up with the tile.

I knew the movement. In the shelter there had been a volunteer who straightened the blankets whenever a dog left. After the blankets were straight, she could continue with the afternoon.

I ate while Steve leaned against the counter in his coat.

He did not use the time to do anything. He watched the bowl empty. When I looked up, he said, "Good," with relief far beyond what the achievement warranted. Eating had never been my weak area.

Afterwards I inspected the hallway. Bathroom to the right. An office door closed. Bedroom at the end. The bathroom contained a great deal of water under unnecessarily complicated management. The office smelled of warm equipment and Steve's weekday tension. I left it closed.

In the bedroom a photograph stood on a table beside the bed. Two older humans on a beach. I knew neither of them, but the hands that had touched the frame were Steve's. There was a folded blanket in the corner and, beneath it, the strongest trace of Buddy in the house.

I put my nose to it.

Steve came to the doorway. "That was his."

The sentence stayed unfinished. I did not require the rest. I had already read it.

On returning to the living room, I assessed the Soft Mountain. Getting up required more effort than it would

have required some years earlier. Steve took half a step towards me, then stopped when I managed it. I turned three times and lay down on the left cushion.

He looked at the cushion. He looked at me.

For a moment I thought he would ask me to move.

“Yeah,” he said. “All right.”

He removed his coat at last. It had left a damp mark on his shirt. He hung it beside the leash, came back, and sat on the right cushion, leaving a respectable distance between us.

The distance was inefficient. I extended one paw until it touched his trousers.

He looked down. Neither of us commented.

The wall screen came on. A man with extremely white teeth explained that the country was in serious difficulty. Steve listened for a few minutes, then changed the channel to people having different difficulties in a house larger than ours.

I could hear his breathing beside me. It had altered since the doorway. His hand rested on the cushion between us, and when I shifted my head he scratched behind my ear without looking away from the screen.

The previous dog was under us, around us, in the fabric and the wood. He had occupied this man long before I arrived. I could dislike the inheritance or lie on it. I lay on it.

At some point Steve said, “You can stay there.”

I had already reached that conclusion. It was decent of him to catch up.

Near the baseboard, the round furniture made a click.

I opened one eye. Nothing moved.

Tomorrow, I decided. There was a house to understand, and for the first time in nineteen days I was sufficiently safe to be tired.