

## Chapter One: Subject Real

"Five to you."

The mezzanine of the *Orion* was quiet, relatively. Only a few dozen drinkers in what passed for the early morning, ship's time. The stack of chips hit the glass tabletop with a snap.

In the hollow vaults of glass and steel a metallic voice was chanting. "*Please have identification and travel papers prepared for-*"

"Hey, you playing?"

Ivan Steponovich folded his cards and tossed them face down toward the table's center.

"Right. Bid's to you, Max."

"Hell, if Ivan's out, I'll call."

"*All baggage may be subjected to search. Contraband items will be confiscated. Possession of items in violation of the Ak-Hemet Act is-*"

"Ivan, new deal. Ante up."

He flicked a plastic chip across the table and kept his gaze fixed on the entrance from the Arrival Bays. Cards shot across the glass and only the dealer's accuracy kept them from continuing onto the floor.

"—welcome you to the *Orion* and wish you a pleasant stay. Station maps are available—"

"Max raises fifty to you, Ivan."

"Call."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. You could at least look at your hole cards."

"Sure, Max." He curled the edge of his cards upward and flicked his gaze from door to table and back again. "Yep. Call."

"Flop comes Diamond Two, Diamond Eight, Club Eight. The bet is to Max—"

"Fold and cash me out," Steponovich interrupted, standing. "Sorry, Dell, time for work."

"No wonder they call you Crazy Ivan," groused Max. "Worst card playing I've ever seen."

The automatic doors sighed open and disgorged a wave of new arrivals—overweight tourists, gambling wannabes, curious aliens. Ivan put his back against a support beam disguised as a marble column, letting them sift past.

"Birds don't change feathers," he muttered to himself as three men entered, trailing behind the main crowd. Two were obviously hired muscle: low brows, stiff walks, nervous eyes. He mentally dismissed them and stepped to intercept the third.

"Cayce Martin!" Ivan said in a voice just under a shout. "In accord with the Stone Hunting Act of-dammit." While the hired goons were staring

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around in surprise, Cayce was already running. Steponovich sprinted through the mezzanine after him. Behind him, Cayce's men groped for their guns-guns that had already been confiscated by *Orion* customs.

Cayce was almost halfway through the room when he collapsed in a cyclone of arms and legs, folding over himself as he was slammed to the floor. Even with the shouts of confusion from the tourists, the mezzanine still seemed eerily quiet. Ivan stood deliberately still as the automated security turrets swiveled back to their normal position and whined down into passive mode.

"Thanks Dell," he said at last.

The dealer ignored him, pressing a finger against his earpiece. "House wants to see you in his office."

Ivan nodded and released a slow breath. "Thought he might."

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The *Orion* began its life as a mobile refueling station. Two years and a bankruptcy later, a smuggler-turned-pirateer bought it for a fifth of gin and a carton of cigarettes. In six years, he had transformed the *Orion* into the premiere tourist liner and gambling center in stabilized space.

As the station grew, so did its owner. House had always been tall, but the matching width was a late addition. "Sit. Have a drink. Real scotch."

An angry House Ivan had expected. A happy one was much more frightening. "Thanks, I'll stand."

"No, you won't. We could be here a while."

Ivan relented. "Light on the scotch, heavy on the water. It's morning somewhere."

"Technically, it's morning here. Congratulations on your bounty, by the way. I think it's great when friends can exchange favors."

"So that's how we're going to play it."

"How else? If someone were to use my station and place my clientele and employees at risk for their own purposes, why, that would be a dangerous precedent. It would undermine my authority and cause a whole host of problems. I might have to shoot someone or at least ban them from the station." House paused to drink. "No, much better to trade favors with a friend. Why did you want this guy so bad anyway?"

"Long list. Call it personal and let it drop."

"Fair enough...but I'm keeping your bounty money."

Ivan shrugged, unsurprised. "What's my, um, return favor?"

"A rescue. Retrieval actually. Hardly work for a man of your talents." House stabbed a button on his desk. "Send up Doctor Pell."

Ivan arched an eyebrow. "Pell?"

"The circumstances are a bit unusual..."

"No. Confiscate my pay. Ban me from the station. Do whatever you have to but I don't do the psycho work. Anyone dumb enough to get stuck in

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a hologram or virtual reality or any of that swill is on their own and deserves whatever they get."

House held up a hand. "Simmer. Normally, I'd agree with you. This is an exception." He pulled a folder from a drawer in the desk and passed it to Steponovich. "Forty-seven days ago, standard, a slow transport shipped out of NevRio. Seven hundred eighty-one souls; three hundred tons of supplies, mostly medical, all bound for the colony on Webster. Never made its refuel at FarGone. Last contact was the usual check twenty-one days out. Eight days ago, a patrol in Hedge space picked up part of the slo-po's passenger compartment."

"Raiders."

"Obviously. Brutal ones at that. Looks like they cut the ship apart with combat lasers and used tugs to move the sections-drag it in and strip it, no need for transports. It's efficient. When the lasers breach the hull, bulkheads seal on either side, links of sausage."

"Also kills everyone in the breached section. Explosive decompression." Ivan thumbed through the folder. "Drift time and distance leaves a helluva lot of space to cover."

"It's bloody business. I'd be involved even if the *Orion* didn't cover the NevRio-FarGone run." A light flickered on his desk. "Pell's on his way in."

"Where do I come into this? And why is Pell involved?"

House drained the last of his scotch. "There was a survivor. A kid was inside the cycling chamber of an airlock. The locks won't cycle while the bulkheads are down so she had to have been hidden there after the slo-po was towed in and stripped. It's not great, but there's a chance she saw someone or something. Even if all she can give us is which side of the ship was hit first, we'll have something to work from."

"And?"

"And she's catatonic. Post-trauma shock or such-like. The *Orion* was the nearest medical facility that could handle her."

"You mean with the right equipment for Pell to go poking into her brain."

"Hardly," a baritone voice boomed behind Ivan. "House treats the brat like she's his own kid. No, better-like she's his own money." Pell dropped the base of his pear shape into a chair alongside Steponovich. The doctor's face was too wide and had the hair on upside down-bald with a brushfire beard.

"She is my money," snapped House. "Even if they don't endanger the stations, pirates cut the bottom line-supplies lost, labor costs go up, fat dumb tourists afraid to travel..."

"Always the humanitarian," interjected Ivan.

"Point is, she's too important to use blunt tools. Pell, tell him what you've done so far."

"She's a Jane Doe, unlisted on the ship's manifest. Most colony brats aren't; it keeps the official tonnage down so the shippers pay less fuel tax. Apparent age is around fourteen years standard. We treated her first for exposure, abrasions, malnutrition, and all the other usual you'd expect given

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the situation. Psychologically, she's completely dissociative. Delta waves are high and she responds to a minimum of survival stimuli-she'll eat if you put food in her hand-but most high order cognition is disengaged.

"We simulated her neural patterns, did the same for one of my best assistants, calibrated the overlap, and did a transitory imprint."

"Translated?"

House answered. "The kid's scared out of the world, so he sent someone in to coax her back out."

"Except neither one came out," added Pell.

Ivan nodded. "So, you want to put me in to bring them both out. Why me?"

"If I understand Pell correctly, the only reason they would not be able to come out is if something did not let them out. In the kid's head, she must still believe she's being held captive. It's her mind. If she believes it, it's real."

"So? Pell's proxy just believes something else stronger and they come out."

Pell shook his head. "Not so easy. The problem is believing instead of deciding. In a neural landscape, no matter how hard you want to, you can't jump thirty feet. Your mind knows better. Your brain believes experience stronger than will or self-deception. It's the same playing field, just rearranged or with a different cast. So much so, in fact, that before we send someone under, we have to physically give them the tools they'll want in the psychic landscape."

"No matter what the kid believes, your assistant knows better."

"Home field advantage," muttered House.

Pell elaborated. "It might be possible, but there's a lot of damage that comes from pulling someone away from where they want to go. It would literally be shattering her reality."

"Bottom line, you think the kid believes she's still held prisoner by your pirates. I go in, guns blazing, give her an experience of being rescued and she'll snap back."

"House does," Pell said. "I find it...plausible."

"And if I refuse?"

House clucked his tongue. "You won't."

"I want my own technician on the outside."

"Of course. Beta Max is still on station. I know you've worked with him before."

"Max is fine if I can afford him."

"I'll pay. I'll cover all your costs including a second, if you want one."

"A second?"

"We've got the equipment for a total of three insertions. We can put someone in to watch your back."

Ivan laced his hands behind his head and leaned back, thinking. "Human?"

"Anyone. Sentience is pretty standardized. Even higher order A.I.s can be used."

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"I'm in. Pell, bring Max up to speed on your equipment. House, do me a favor. Have your people locate Red Dog's last passage and lend me a shuttle to pick him up."

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Entry into interstellar space proved to be a clarifying moment in human history. The nature of man did not change, but the transition demonstrated certain aspects of the human psyche beyond contest-most notably, the aggression of man.

For the first few centuries, the transition was peaceful. The majority of alien races encountered were passive, almost gregarious, and more interested in trade and profit than power and possession. The few that were not were isolationists, refusing to travel beyond their home worlds. Humanity seemed to hold a monopoly on violent ambition and aggression.

Then came the Blank.

The Blank originally had another name, but if anyone remembered it, they were wise enough to keep it to themselves. The Blank were the first militant race humanity encountered, and the war started at first contact. Humanity soon learned that, in a field filled with prey, the predators were extremely vicious.

While humans fought planet by planet for control of the spaceways, the Blank did nothing. Abruptly, two years into the war, the Blank bulled a fleet straight to Earth, bypassing numerous outposts and flanking fleets that quickly cut their supply lines. Reaching Earth, the Blank pounded the planet until their ships ran out of munitions, then crashed the ships themselves into the world's surface. Tactically, it was a disaster, stripping the Blank of the bulk of their fleet and doing very little damage to the human military or its industrial capacity.

The attack also fractured the crust of the planet Earth, effectively destroying the human homeworld.

Mankind's 'allies' were quick to explain that this was how interstellar war was conducted and why very few wars were ever fought. With their homeworld destroyed, the aliens reasoned, humanity would obviously surrender. For two months, the universe waited for a disheartened mankind to acknowledge their defeat. Tired of waiting, the Blank finally demanded that humanity announce their unconditional surrender. Instead, there came only an oblique, one-word reply: "Nuts".

It was then that mankind demonstrated that they were truly unique in the universe. After another lengthy delay, a united human government demanded the immediate surrender of every race in known space. Those who joined with humanity would be treated as equals and allies; those who did not would be considered enemies.

To demonstrate their sincerity to a stunned universe, the human fleet attacked and annihilated, not the Blank, but the first race who declared themselves to be neutral.

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Within three years, mankind controlled known space with the exception of the home systems of the Blank and a handful of their servitor races. Predictably, the Blank offered to surrender.

Man's reaction was unequivocal-the destruction of the Blank homeworld and the total genocide of the Blank race, a three-year process that progressively became less of a war and more of a systematic, world-by-world witch hunt. The 'civilized' races of the universe were horrified. They were also smart enough to remain silent. Humanity renamed its central planet 'Earth' and stepped comfortably into its role as uncontested ruler of known space or, as it came to be known, the Human Hegemony.

The servitor races were given a choice: share the Blank's fate or accept survival on a permanently quarantined homeworld, forever denied a return to space. Those of their number currently located outside the quarantine could return, never to leave again, or accept permanent exile.

Very few chose to live as eternal outcasts; fewer still survived. Only one prospered: Red Dog.

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AM4561-a world so desolate that it had no name, only its industrial survey designation. It was the kind of world where a man goes to hide; the kind of world where a bounty hunter quickly follows. Ivan was hardly surprised that it was Red Dog's last port of call. That Red Dog was being held in the provincial sheriff's jail was even less of a surprise.

As Ivan pushed through the swinging door, a clerk with a star on his chest looked up from his desk. "Help you?"

"S'pose. I'm here for that." Ivan nodded toward the creature locked in the single cell.

End to end, Red Dog was over seven feet long-four feet of length horizontal, the other three upright. Six segmented legs supported his two-ton exoskeleton while four more limbs waited, curled against the upper body, covered in fine cilia. The caricature of a bright red millipede was topped with a flat triangle of chitin and two multifaceted eyes fronted with a double pair of mandibles.

"I don't know who you think you are, but there's no way in hell you're taking that *thing* anywhere."

Ivan ignored the man and spoke directly to the alien. "Mornin' Red. What're you in for?"

The answer came in a series of hums and clicks augmented by an implant. The vibrations resembled speech. "Three men killed. Not by Red Dog. Fool human there blames alien. Too lazy to investigate."

Ivan turned back to the sheriff. "You heard the man; he didn't do it. Let him out. He's got work to do."

"Paying?" buzzed Red Dog.

"Orion. Working for House."

"Good rate. House pays for quality. Hey! Fool human! Unlock door. No more play."

The lawman surged to his feet. "This thing killed three men-"

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"Not if he says he didn't. Cillians can't lie."

"What's a Cill-"

"His race. You mean to tell me you lock up an alien and don't even check its racial profile?"

"How I do my job is none of your business!"

"It is when it keeps me from doing mine. Let him out."

"Fool human thinks Red Dog fool too," interjected the alien.

"What's it talking about?"

Ivan shrugged. "Explain it to him, Red."

"Listen to Red Dog. Red Dog hates men. Kill as many men as possible. For this, must stay *in law*. Red Dog smart, must be *more* in law not out. Others like Red Dog go out law, killed quick. Red Dog in law, hard to kill. Red Dog hunts bounties. Kill many men *in law*. Do math, fool human. Most kills possible *in law*! Red Dog does not need murder or ambush. No human can beat Red Dog in fight. Red Dog is mighty."

"The desire for mass murder with a healthy dose of pride naturally leads to a very law-abiding citizen. The defense rests," Ivan drawled. "Sheriff, we're leaving now. What you do with your local problems is your own business." Ivan started to turn back toward the door, then hesitated. "By the way, pull that gun you've got your hand on and there's going to be a job opening in this office."

While Ivan spoke, Red Dog grasped the door to the cell and casually twisted the door from its hinges, bending the iron bars and snapping the lock. The sheriff drew a long breath and slowly sat back into his chair.

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After the fourth attempt, Max gave up trying to explain the concept of neural overlay to Red Dog, much to Ivan's relief. As far as the Cillian was concerned, if it shot at you, it was real. The rest of the discussion was a waste of his time.

"Ivan!" Max's voice cut across the darkness of the medical lab from the intercom. "We're almost ready to insert. How're you two?"

"Bored," Red buzzed back.

"Same here," Ivan added. "We're ready when you are."

"Right. Last check on the feedback loops now. Ivan, I'm reading the body armor in your duster and your laser, but I'm having trouble with the slug thrower."

"It's a .45 custom. How about Red?"

"Looks good. The shotgun and stick bombs were easy. The charge on his laser is still pushing the red line on the meters but I should be able to handle it...Okay, I'm green on the .45. That's a full panel. Good hunting, kids. Inserting now."

The first sign of change was a rise in the level of ambient light. As his eyes adjusted, Ivan made out the familiar lines of the inside of an airlock. "Red?"

"Did Max warn us?" asked the alien beside him.

"You said you were bored. Can you get this lock open?"

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"Stronger than human." Red Dog gripped the manual release crank and began to turn. The lock surrendered with a squeal of metal and a hiss of equalizing pressure.

"Must be the airlock where the kid was stashed." Ivan stepped out of the airlock, eyes and gun muzzle sweeping the area beyond. Red Dog followed, shotgun ready.

"Cargo hold," noted the alien. "Stripped."

Nothing remained in the four-hundred-yard metal hemisphere. According to the information House provided them, when the slo-po shipped out it had been packed top to bottom with supplies for the colony on Webster. New colonists had jammed the corridor in the center.

Red Dog rapped on the bulkhead behind them and Ivan glanced back to see the alien pointing to long gouges in the metal around the airlock.

"Emergency lockdown. Had to pry it open to put the kid in." Ivan started walking the length of the barren hold. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"You got the same briefing as I did."

Red Dog made a loud, untranslated chattering noise. "Real, not real, subject real. Nobody knows. Red Dog stopped listening. Gun real, Red Dog real, as for rest, Red Dog lets Ivan figure out."

"Then stop asking questions and follow."

The hold ended in an unbroken wall of steel, an emergency bulkhead that had slammed down when the hull ruptured. Ivan waited at a respectful distance as Red Dog burned through it, using his laser pistol as a cutting torch. Satisfied, the alien primed a pair of his stick bombs, effectively glorified grenades on short handles for throwing, dropped them at the foot of the bulkhead, and scurried back to join Ivan. Their explosion left a ragged arch punched through the steel. Beyond was a landscape of red sand and shattered soapstone beneath a smoke-blackened sky.

"This Ivan did not expect," deadpanned Red Dog.

Ivan nodded slowly. "This, I did not expect."

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Red Dog's shotgun broke the silence of their destinationless trek across the sweltering landscape. "Snake. Maybe."

Ivan didn't respond. It was not the first time the Cillian had fired at some vague motion in the red sand. His wideset eyes gave him great peripheral vision but cost his race dearly in depth perception and visual clarity.

"What Ivan do with bounty for job?"

Steponovich stopped, wiping his face with a rag to clear the sweat. "I'm not getting paid. This one's a favor for House."

"No pay? No wonder call Ivan Crazy Ivan." It wasn't, but it was better than the real reason. "Red Dog buy more guns, more explosives, play poker."

"Do you ever buy anything else?" Ivan asked sarcastically, wishing again they had thought to bring water.



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"Keep some for bail money. Maybe, Red Dog do current job for free too. Been thinking about subject real-" Red Dog interrupted himself as Ivan began to walk again. "Why Red Dog and Ivan walk? No real place to go. Maybe Red Dog and Ivan wait for trouble come to Red Dog and Ivan."

"Maybe. It seems to make more sense to me to walk. Wait here if you want to."

"Fine. Red Dog walks. Grumpy Ivan."

"Yes, grumpy! I'm hot, I'm tired, and I'm stuck with a partner that jabbars like a magpie. How you can talk in an alien language through a mechanical implant and still never shut up, I have never understood."

"Red Dog no fool. Red Dog practices. Talk make men upset. When men get upset, make bad decisions. Easier to kill. Maybe, some even start fight, then Red Dog can kill."

"You want to draw on me, Red?" Ivan snapped.

"No. Not Ivan. No man can kill Red Dog in fight. Red Dog is mighty. Ivan too smart; shoot Red Dog in back."

Ivan didn't argue; the Cillian was right. He sighed. "Tell me why you might've done this for free."

"Ivan apologizes; Red Dog is flattered."

"Don't push it. What's your sudden interest in subjective reality that's more important than money?"

"Red Dog live in object real. Now in subject real. Max say subject real also object real for Ivan and Red Dog now."

"I follow that, almost. And so?"

"If Red Dog kill man in object real of subject real, object real man still alive. After here, House will send Red Dog after same man in object real. Yes?"

"Hadn't thought about it but, yes, if Pell gets the information he thinks he will from the girl, House will probably send someone out."

"Good. Red Dog has chance to kill same man twice. Very special chance for Red Dog. Never done before."

Ivan almost laughed aloud. The logic was impeccable and eminently Red Dog. "I'm happy for you. But first we have to find...something. This empty wasteland doesn't make any sense."

"Subject real. Makes sense to owner of reality." Red Dog's shotgun spoke again.

"Snake?"

"Bored." They walked on in silence for several minutes before Red Dog spoke up again. "Why did Ivan tell fool man sheriff Red Dog cannot lie?"

"Fastest way to get you out."

"How does Ivan know Red Dog did not kill men?"

"I've played too much poker with you. Hold up, something's coming. And it's no snake; don't shoot it."

"Coming fast. Looks human." Red Dog was right on both counts. Their visitor was a twin of the mousy-haired child they had last seen lying in the *Orion's* medical facilities. She closed the distance from the horizon with

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unnatural speed. Ivan barely had time to note that she wore tan buckskins rather than the frayed muslin of her 'real' counterpart before she stood in front of him, fists on hips.

"Come with me. Quick, we can't talk here," she snapped with authority and turned on her heel, leaving as fast as she had come.

"Shut up, Red," Ivan said preemptively, jogging after the child.

The alien ignored him, speaking as he trotted effortlessly alongside. "Perspective. Present world is girl's, revolves around girl. Ivan and Red Dog join girl, Red Dog and Ivan move fast."

"I thought you were the one who wasn't going to worry about the details," Ivan muttered. Red Dog pretended not to hear him.

"In here," ordered the girl, pointing to a large outcropping of rock. A low opening darkened the leeward side. Ivan hesitated. The girl gave him an angry glare and he ducked inside. The interior of the hideout was taller, allowing him to stand upright. Red Dog lumbered behind him, barely able to fit through the entrance.

The girl knelt at the opening. "Stay here. I'm going to lay a false trail. Be right back."

"Tough grub," rattled Red Dog.

Ivan surveyed the interior of the crude redoubt, impressed at what he saw—a pile of blankets that looked to serve as a bed, a scattering of primitive tools including a sharpened bone knife and a sling-staff fashioned with some kind of animal gut, even a banked fire in spite of the heat. "Tough indeed. Not too surprising though. She's a colony brat; they grow up fast. Have to."

The girl backed into the hideout, dragging brush behind her to block the entry. She sat cross-legged on the floor and held out a dented aluminum canteen toward Ivan. He accepted it, unscrewed the cap, and drank deep. The water tasted metallic but it was a welcome relief. He passed the canteen to Red Dog and lowered himself to the ground facing the girl.

"Dig in the shadow of the larger stones," she said without preamble. "Water's usually about three feet down. Make a pit and let it collect."

"Good to know," hummed Red Dog. The Cillian worked to fold his legs underneath himself, lowering his head to only a few feet above the girl's. He recapped the canteen and held it out. The girl took it without looking.

"I've never met a talking monster before. You trust it?" she asked, fixing Ivan with a piercing gaze.

"Enough. I'm Ivan. He's Red Dog."

"All right, Ivan. Why don't you tell me why the two of you are in Hell."

"Tough grub," quipped Red Dog. "As rude as Ivan."

Ivan ignored him, speaking directly to the girl, "We're here to get you out." He paused. "You've done pretty well on your own."

"My folks would've done better. They were hunt guides before we...moved planets. You're the rescue mission, then."

Ivan took the statement as a question. "We are."

"Let's hope you're better than the last one."

"Woman? A doctor in her early twenties?"

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The girl nodded. "The Devil's got her now. He'll keep her for a while as bait for me. I can't escape, but he can't catch me if I'm careful and stay hidden. That's what Da told me before he..."

"Put you in the airlock," Ivan offered.

"Before the world went to hell," she growled instead.

He nodded. "You know this area?"

"Like the back of my hand."

"And the Devil?"

"I've scouted his compound. I know what you're thinking and the answer is no. There's no way to rescue your doctor and no way to escape. The Devil sees everything that moves out there; you're lucky I reached you first. Even if you could work around him, he's got at least thirty demons disguised as men guarding his place."

"What about you? Why don't you get out?"

"Don't you listen? No one can escape the Devil!"

"Then Red Dog and Ivan kill Devil," interjected Red Dog.

"Can't," the girl replied. "I saw when he came, when he came into the transport. He can't be killed. Can't be!"

Ivan sighed and dabbed sweat from his forehead. "Can't stay; can't go. Maybe the two of us can-"

"Three," the girl interrupted softly. "I'm not naive enough to think there'll be another rescue mission. If I'm going to make a move, it needs to be now. May as well be with you. Besides, I've never had a talking monster on my side before."

"If I told you it wasn't safe, you'd tell me where to get off and follow along anyway." Ivan held her gaze then nodded. "All right, kid, you're in. Got a name?"

"Kylee."

"Kelly?" buzzed Red Dog.

"Ky-Lee."

"Kelly?" repeated Red Dog.

"Ky! Lee!" she shouted in frustration. When she did, the room seemed to bend and the air shivered. Ivan smiled to himself. They might just have a chance.

"K'eye-lee," pronounced Red Dog at last. "Tough grub."

"Well Miss Kylee," interposed Ivan, "We're going to need more water, some food, some sleep, and an awful lot of planning."

Red Dog tilted his head toward Ivan. "What is plan?"

Ivan shrugged. "We storm the gates of Hell."

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The Devil's lair was about what Ivan had expected, a mixture of gothic cathedral and extended manor house—a central building surrounded by a waist-high stone wall, bordered on one side by a cluster of squat storage buildings. A short distance away, the Devil's men spent their off-duty time in a crude shanty town of a half-dozen bars and bunkhouses. The Devil and his prisoner were inside the building Kylee had named the Chapel.

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As he studied the building now, Ivan found her designation disturbingly accurate. The building had a T-shaped footprint about ninety feet long. The trunk of the T was a good thirty feet across, leaving the ends of the crossbar to bump out an extra ten feet like blunted horns.

Worming his way forward across the sand, Ivan watched the two men standing guard on either side of the double doors to the nave and silently cursed them for their seeming invulnerability to the suffocating heat. He crawled to a cluster of rocks and scrub, deciding he was as close as he could safely get. Several hundred feet of open ground remained.

Ivan rolled onto his back, letting the scrub shield his movements, and unwrapped his pistols. He had bundled them in strips of Kylee's blankets to prevent the telltale clank of metal and keep the mechanisms free of the red sand that ground itself into every gap in his clothing. He let the guns rest on his stomach and pulled down the cloth keeping the grit out of his mouth and nose. Ivan gulped air until he felt lightheaded. Now came the waiting.

He didn't have to wait long. As usual, Red Dog started early. The air split with the roar of explosions one after another until they merged into a rolling drumbeat like peals of thunder, and the sky flashed with red lightning as goutts of flame reflected from the smoke-black clouds. Red Dog's instructions had been simple: level the shanty town and kill anything that moves, the noisier the better. With four throwing arms and as many stick bombs as he could carry, it was a task the alien set to with efficient relish. Ivan grasped a pistol in each hand. Holding them straight above his head, he rolled from behind his screen. The two door guards cast worried glances toward the disturbance but refused to join the shouting crowd rushing to investigate. If Kylee's count was correct, that left Red Dog outnumbered twenty-eight to one. Ivan considered the odds slightly in the alien's favor.

Act Two began several minutes into Red Dog's party as an explosion gutted the first of the storage huts. Red had surrendered a half-dozen of his precious bombs and the girl was putting them to good use. Two more found their mark, then a third. A series of firecracker blasts ripped apart a hut as flames reached munitions stored there.

It was finally enough for the door guards, and they ran toward the new conflagration. Ivan rose to one knee and burned down the slower of the two men from behind, the laser effectively silent amidst the chaos. The other man never looked back. He was Kylee's problem now. With a spray of sand, Ivan was up and running for the doors of the chapel.

He hit the doors with a shoulder, staggering as they gave inward. Twisting to regain his balance, he fired two slugs over his head on principle. Inside, the building truly was a chapel, wooden pews lining a wide central aisle, vaulted ceiling above. In the apse, where an alter should have been, stood the Devil, one hand on the shoulder of Pell's wild-eyed assistant.

In her mind's eye, Kylee had painted the original pirate into something larger but still basically human. The Devil was big, almost seven foot, and broad. His clothing Kylee translated into a kind of gothic vestment, but Ivan recognized the blurred lines of servo-assist body armor. His face was hazy,

## Calamity's Child

deliberately unclear with features popping from it-black hair, intense black eyes, the cruel twist of a grinning mouth.

Ivan let his guns drift downward, holding his arms away from his body. "Let her go." The Devil shrugged and threw the woman, one-handed, to crash several rows deep into the pews. As he did, Ivan fired, the ruby splash of his laser flaring across the Devil's chest, ineffectual. The Devil snapped an arm up and Ivan dove to the floor as a stream of white hot plasma ripped into the wall above him. He hit, rolling forward under the pews. He slapped the overload lever on the laser, surged to his feet, threw the gun overhand like a grenade. The pew in front of him disintegrated in a blast of energy and he fell backward. As fast as he went down, Ivan was up, running, zigzagging forward, vaulting for cover again.

The laser overloaded, exploded, pitched the Devil forward to his knees. Ivan fired, both hands on the .45, running down the aisle. Slugs ripped into the Devil and Ivan kept firing until he was at point-blank range, until the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

The Devil looked up, grinning, uninjured. Ivan struck him across the face with the pistol, snapping the Devil's head back. Ivan reversed his momentum, bringing the backhand swing from the floor, throwing the whip of his legs and back into the blow. The Devil caught the swing and Ivan's shoulder wrenched in its socket, muscles screaming. The Devil stood, forcing the arm up. Bones ground and Ivan's vision exploded with pinpricks of light.

"Son of a-" Ivan drove a boot heel at the Devil's knee, missed off-balance, raked his shin instead. The Devil shoved, inhuman strength driving Ivan's arm back into the socket. Ivan fell, bile clawing at the back of his throat.

Somewhere, at the edge of a spinning world, came buzzing. "Hello! Cavalry!" A shotgun belched, cracked, roared again. "Kiss Red Dog!" Another crash of thunder and another. Ivan rolled to his knees scrambling for his dropped .45. Found it, staggered upright.

The Devil staggered back, giving ground under the punches of Red Dog's shotgun, hit the wall, sagged against it. Ivan saw the Devil grin.

"Red!" he yelled, too late. The Devil raised his arm and fired point-blank into the Cillian. The super-heated blast enveloped the alien, igniting the explosives remaining in his bandolier. The blast swallowed them both and threw Ivan onto his back. He tried to rise, failed, cradled the pistol in his good hand, waiting. He heard a muffled gasp, felt Kylee's hands on his shoulders, pulling, wondered when she had arrived.

The Devil strode out of the blood-red mist of smoke and flame. Ivan tried to lift the .45, staring up as the Devil grinned, lifting his arm.

Behind him, the smoke swarmed. The droning of a thousand frenzied beehives shook the building. A pew slammed into the Devil, swatting him aside. A giant darkness moved in front of Ivan, lifted the pew, brought it down on the Devil's prone form. The heavy wooden bench disintegrated with the force of the impact. Red Dog's exoskeleton was seared charcoal, cracked and smoking, and the Cillian's entire body vibrated with the intensity of his

M. Keaton

bombilating roar. The alien lifted the Devil, shook him, drove the twisted wreckage of the shotgun through the Devil's chest.

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*"Final boarding for Farhnam now open to all seating-"*

"New deal. Ivan, you in?"

"Take the blind off my stack." Even without any physical damage, it still hurt Ivan to move his arm. He could only guess how Red Dog felt.

Alongside him, Beta Max slid in his chips. "Nice to have you back. All I could do was watch the gauges and hope."

"S Okay. We won."

"Where's Red?" asked Dell, spitting cards. "I expected to have half his check by now."

"Still down in the medical lab with Kylee. Last I saw, he was arguing with House. Trying to claim the girl as part of his payment." Ivan looked at his hold cards; pocket aces. "Raise fifty."

Max looked down then nodded. "Call. He's not serious is he?"

"Nah. He's just giving House a headache."

Dell spread the flop. "Spade eight, club deuce, club eight. Board pairs eights. What do you think will become of the kid?"

*"Please have identification and travel papers prepared for-"*

"She'll be fine. Raise fifty again. House'll make sure she's taken care of, probably put her on the payroll."

"Reraise twenty." Max kicked a pair of chips to Dell. "What I don't understand is what happened to Red Dog. His readings flattened for about three seconds there."

Dell turned another card. "Another eight on the turn."

Ivan hesitated, riffled his chips with his good hand. "Best I can figure it, even in someone else's reality, Red Dog flat really does believe that no human can beat him-no matter what." He looked at his cards again then back at the board, arranging them in his head. Full house, aces and eights. "Fold. Maybe being superstitious is not a bad thing at that."