

# ONE

**Standard Consortium Date: 03.06.2538**  
**25 kilometres south of Port Gabriel, Redstone**  
**Colony**  
**Port Gabriel Incident +45 minutes**

It was like waking up and finding you'd just sleepwalked through the gates of hell.

Dakota drew in a sharp breath, feeling like she'd first awakened into existence only a moment before. She stood stock still for several seconds, the touch of freezing rain clear and sharp on her skin.

Trying to take it all in.

Bodies were scattered all around her, under a slate-grey sky from which snow fell in sporadic squalls. Most had been cut down as they ran for safety. It was a scene of appalling carnage.

She remembered with dazzling clarity what it had felt like to kill them.

Her hands hung limply by her sides, Consortium-issue assault pistol still held in one fist. Fat-bellied Consortium transports rumbled far overhead, dropping

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down from orbit, looking to salvage something – anything – from the disaster of the assault.

The worst thing was that she remembered so much. Every moment, every scream, every death: it was something she was going to have to live with for the rest of her life.

That made the decision to kill herself a lot easier.

Dakota wandered away from the transport and the bodies of the Freeholder refugees it had been carrying, walking along the side of the highway and seeing where bodies had slumped into the snow-filled ditch running parallel to it.

A woman had died tangled up in the thick, hardy roots and foliage of a jugleaf bush. Dakota pulled her free, ignoring the plant's sharp barbs that tore at her skin and survival suit. She laid the woman down on the side of the road, peering into her face. Middle-aged, motherly looking, a few strands of grey among the black roots on her scalp.

Dakota closed the dead eyes and remained kneeling by the corpse for a minute or so.

Finally she stood and looked around, listening to the rasp of freezing air coursing through the filtration systems in her breather mask, and felt her lungs heave into a scream that felt like it would never end.

Eventually her chest began to hurt from the exertion of screaming, and she stopped.

She started walking again, stripping off her survival suit bit by bit as she went. She dumped the suit in the

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roadside ditch, then pulled off her insulated undergarments, until she stood naked under the Redstone morning sky.

The subzero temperature was instantly numbing. She kept her breather mask on, however, because a quick death by asphyxiation in this alien atmosphere somehow felt too easy an end. Flecks of snow danced over the soft pale flesh of her bare shoulders, and against the close-cropped stubble of her scalp.

Dakota managed to stumble a few more steps, her vision blurring as she stared over towards the trucks and buses and long-distance haulers that had been carrying the refugees to safety. Some of them were burning, staining the Redstone sky with oily smoke.

She collapsed beside the statue of Belle Trevois, the Uchidan child-martyr, that stood in eternal vigil by the roadside. Its arms reached up into the air in a gesture that seemed all the more forlorn in such a lonely and desolate spot. The plinth was stained with ugly Freeholder graffiti.

Dakota realized death was very close, and curled up in a ball beneath the statue's feet. From there she gazed up at its blank features.

Inside her head she could still hear the sound of running feet, the sound of the refugees' screams as they burned.

Then she heard other voices – soldiers shouting to each other, coming closer.

Coming to rescue her.

# TWO

**City of Erkinning, Bellhaven Colony**  
**Consortium Standard Date: 03.02.2536**  
**Two years prior to Port Gabriel Incident**

Dakota stared out over the distant rooftops of the shanties clustering beyond the city's grim stone walls. The seven stars of evening shone down on her like an Elder's blessing.

The instant she glanced up at the night sky, her new Ghost circuitry – freshly installed within her skull – unloaded a deluge of mostly useless information into her thoughts: without any effort she knew instantly how far away each star was, its declination in respect to the galactic equator, and how many planets and dark companions orbited each of them. A rich cornucopia of similar detail in relation to thousands of other stars, all scattered within a sphere hundreds of light years across and centred on Bellhaven, waited on the fringe of her mind. She imagined she was a spider at the centre of some vast cybernetic web, her implants like thousands

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of dainty multiple limbs that could reach out and tug suns and moons out of the sky for her to play with.

She pulled her gaze back down, her breath frosting in the cold night air after escaping from under the scarf wrapped tight up around her mouth and throat. A chill winter wind whipped across her freshly shaven skull where it emerged, exposed, from beneath the protection of the thick leather cap she had pulled over her head and ears. She glanced behind her to see Tutor Langley standing only a short distance away.

Langley wore a small goatee beard against his dark skin, and his long black coat resembled that of a preacher from some past century, its high stiff short collar pressing tight around his neck, while its skirt fluttered around his boots. It was a uniform intended to remind citizens of the authority of the City Elder's controlling religious oligarchy.

Dakota noticed the expression on his face and flashed him a grin. She didn't mind that her shaven scalp still looked bruised and battered from the surgeon's intrusions.

In the streets far below the Garrison, on whose roof she stood, she could see people clustering at food stalls lining a busy crossroads she had wandered past a thousand times. She could just make out their faces gathered in a few small patches of light. Snatches of their conversation drifted up to her, along with the smell of cooking, making her hungry.

Dakota was suddenly aware how easily these odours

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could be broken down into specific categories. Words like *hydrolysates*, *esters* and *caramelized sugars* popped into her head, broken down into percentages that changed with each sudden gust of wind. Far below, people hid from the winter cold and rain under sheet-metal awnings, or warmed themselves around communal fusion heaters set up at each corner of the crossroads.

Jesus, Uchida, Buddha; these and a dozen more effigies glowed in incandescent hallucinatory colours from dozens of niches as they did in so many other parts of the city. They bestowed their luminous blessings on the fossilized layers of posters and public notices pasted over and over again on every available flat surface.

Just then she realized Marlie had joined her by the railing, her mouth wide in a grin under dark eyes.

‘Did you hear the latest about Banville? Now they’re saying he’s defected, gone over to the Uchidans, and abandoned his family in the process.’

‘Are you sure?’ Dakota replied. ‘Last I heard, they were claiming he was kidnapped.’

This was significant news. Banville was the scientist personally responsible for much of the cutting-edge Ghost tech on which the world of Bellhaven had long built its scientific reputation. Both Marlie and Dakota, and everyone else with Ghost implants, carried a piece of Banville’s work inside them.

Marlie shrugged happily. She had a way of smiling completely regardless of what she was actually saying, which indicated a lifelong – and to Dakota deeply irri-

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tating – dedication to perkiness beyond reason. ‘I picked up a *City Bulletin* just before I got here. Looks like he left voluntarily, after all, and the Elders are going crazy because of it.’

Dakota nodded. The news of Banville’s disappearance had already inspired riots in the Grover Communities, as the Elders preferred to call them. *Shanties* would have been a better word – they’d been growing out beyond the city walls for three years now, packed as they were with refugees flooding in from the failed Grover colony a thousand miles further north.

Dakota quickly performed the visualization routines that opened her subconscious to a flood of data and news from the local tach-net. Her eyes widened in shock as a torrent of new information was dumped into her skull: Banville had disappeared less than a day before, but within the past few minutes a recorded message had surfaced in which he claimed to have joined the Oratory of Uchida willingly, and had left Bellhaven for ever.

She looked over at Marlie, knowing instantly that she was getting the exact same information.

‘This is bad,’ Dakota said unnecessarily.

Marlie nodded. ‘Yes, Dakota, it’s very bad.’

There were reports of a dozen more riots erupting across the globe as the shock revelation of Banville’s defection spread. Dakota watched a pall of smoke rising from two different sectors of the Grover camps as she

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stood on the flat roof of the Garrison's East Quadrant Tower, the perimeter of which was ringed with ancient battlements. Steel and ceramic mountings for pulse weapons, which had defended Erkinning during the First Civil War, lay pitted and rusted from a century and a half of neglect.

Given the current circumstances, the celebrations surrounding Dakota's graduation were a touch muted. Still, as the night wore on, Langley had set up his telescope as he'd promised, upon this selfsame rooftop, so they could all take a look at the new supernova sliding towards the horizon as dawn approached.

The telescope looked positively medieval to Dakota, a fat tube of gleaming copper and brass mounted on a rotating equatorial base, as if some machine-arachnid invader from beyond the known worlds were stalking the city rooftops.

'Did you say something, Dakota?' Langley peered over towards her.

She gestured upwards with her chin, indicating the supernova. 'I said, I'd like to go someplace like that some day, and see what a dying star looks like up close.'

Her gaze met Aiden's and she faltered, her pale skin flushing red as she recalled their fumbled intimacies in the dormitories.

'You're kidding, right?' said Aiden, a touch the worse for wear from drinking. 'Go visit the *supernova*?' he laughed, eliciting nervous chuckles from any remaining students who were still awake and hadn't already

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passed out. Marlie sat cross-legged, ignoring the damp tiles under her as she fixed her attention on Langley, who in turn was fully aware of her unrequited longing. Martens' owl-like features were distracted by some personal reverie, lost to the world around him. Otterich and Spezo looked bored and tired, while the rest had since made their apologies and retired for the night. Exploding stars didn't hold much interest for some students.

Langley himself flashed Aiden a warning look. Then he glanced at Dakota, apparently satisfied at last with the minute adjustments he had been making to the telescope. 'I share the sentiment, but the Large Magellanic Cloud is a little further away than the Shoal are prepared to transport either you or anyone else.'

'Yeah, what is it again?' sneered Aiden. 'Hundred and sixty thousand light years, right?' He flashed Dakota a grin, and she shot him back a look of pure hatred. 'So we're seeing an event from about the time the Shoal first developed faster-than-light technology. Loooong way away, right?'

The first supernova had appeared six years before, early in the autumn, and just a couple of days after Dakota's sixteenth birthday. It had blossomed like cold fire, briefly one of the brightest elements in the night sky, before gradually fading out over the following weeks. Then, over the next several years, dozens more had appeared at irregular intervals, shining brightly for a few brief weeks before again fading back into stellar

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anonymity. And all this had occurred within a relatively tiny sector of a neighbouring galaxy.

‘What you’re all forgetting,’ Langley told them in his soft-spoken way, ‘is that these novae still represent a mystery. And there’s nothing people like more than a mystery. It’s in our nature.’

He stepped back from the telescope and rested one hand gently on its glinting carapace. ‘Martens, since you’ve been studying the novae, why don’t you remind us of some of the background detail? What is it that’s so remarkable and unusual about them?’

Martens wasn’t entirely sober himself, and he blinked and stuttered, caught unawares by the Tutor’s potentially dangerous line of enquiry. ‘Uh, Sir, up until now our understanding was that most stars that go nova are part of a double-star system.’ His foot kicked over an unfinished bottle of beer that sat forgotten by his foot. He reached for it, but changed his mind halfway. Dakota caught the look on Aiden’s face, and even he suddenly looked a lot more sober. ‘One of these stars sucks up material from its companion, and as a result you get a stellar detonation. But, as far as anyone can tell, none of these new novae was either massive enough to go nova, or even part of a double-star system.’

‘And there’s also the double neutrino bursts,’ Dakota added impulsively, whereupon Martens looked grateful not to have to say any more. Langley turned to her with a look of appreciation, even admiration, which made her blush.

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‘Deep space scanners have always recorded a neutrino surge occurring a few minutes before any visual observation is made,’ she continued. ‘But every one of the recent Magellan novae has been preceded by a neutrino echo: not one but two neutrino bursts, separated by a few seconds, followed by the normal visual confirmation. Yet that should be impossible. Maybe a couple of novae appear every century in our own galaxy, but now there’s a couple of dozen occurring in a neighbouring galaxy made up of only a tenth as many stars as our own Milky Way. That’s in the space of a few years, and almost literally next door to each other. It just doesn’t make sense.’

Langley smiled. ‘See, that’s a girl with genuine curiosity, Aiden. She likes to ask questions, while you just sit around and complain.’

There was nervous laughter from Martens, which Otterich joined in with after a moment. Aiden forced a smile as if to say *You win*, and Dakota suddenly found it hard to remember what it was she’d liked about him enough to let him climb on top of her not so long ago. She put it down to a combination of alcohol and the undeniable fact that he was far from unattractive.

She sighed and pulled her thoughts away from the memory of their bodies tangled together between warm sheets. It was one thing for them to climb up here on a frozen rooftop because yet another new star had appeared in the sky, but even coming close to asking the reason why could, in some quarters, lead to problems.

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When those first novae had appeared, the City Elders, who ruled Erkinning and all the other cities of the Free States, had been quick to label such stellar manifestations as part of God's Ineffable Purpose, and, therefore, not open to scientific or indeed any other kind of speculation.

The Consortium – the name by which the administrative and military body that controlled human-occupied space was known – had little interest in local politics, yet the fact remained that of Bellhaven's several different nations, the Free States had been heavily invested in by the Consortium itself due to the remarkable advances that technicians in Erkinning and certain other Free State cities had achieved in developing Ghost technology. Under the circumstances, this clampdown on public speculation over the novae was little more than sabre-rattling: an attempt by the Elders to show they remained the real authority in Erkinning, when everyone knew otherwise.

Aiden looked grim. He had an uncle sitting on the Council of Elders, and getting involved in this kind of speculation wasn't going to help advance his career. Dakota's next words came out in a rush, lest Aiden accuse Langley of deliberately courting heresy.

'The supernovae have thrown everything we thought we knew about stellar mechanics out the window, but the Shoal won't even discuss them, which makes everyone think they're hiding something.'

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For a moment, there was only silence, and the sound of the night wind blowing across the parapets.

‘All right, then,’ said Langley, unable to suppress a grin. ‘I brought this telescope out here for a reason. The Consortium expects a good return on its investment, so you have to understand just how much you’ll still need to learn after all your studies here are just distant memories – and by then, you won’t have to worry about the Elders telling you what you can or can’t think.’

He tapped the side of his head with one finger. ‘Nothing ever happens without a reason, and that includes a neighbouring galaxy lighting up like an explosion in a fireworks factory. So here’s a question to consider. Assuming some as yet unknown force has caused a considerable number of very distant stars to detonate, despite apparently lacking sufficient mass, does that suggest the same thing could eventually happen here?’

‘But that’s an unanswerable question,’ Aiden protested, a touch of defensiveness now apparent in his voice. ‘Even the Shoal’s ships would take centuries to get there and investigate, and whatever happened there, it happened when we were still swinging around in the trees back on Earth. There’s no point in speculating if we’ll never be in a position to find out the answer.’

Langley closed his eyes for a moment, and Dakota thought she heard him swear quietly under his breath. When he opened his eyes again he looked over at Dakota and motioned to her.

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‘Dakota, would you like to be first to take a look?’

She stepped forward, bending over to peer through the telescope’s viewfinder. Clearly, Langley hadn’t responded to Aiden’s statement because what he had said was true. The only reason humans had ever reached the stars had been down to the help of the Shoal. Twenty-second century experiments in long-distance quantum entanglement had resulted in tach-transmission, a form of instantaneous communication already long put in use by the Shoal’s vast interstellar fleets of core-ships. Among all those millions of inhabited star systems, they claimed to be the only race who had developed a faster-than-light drive, and in return for a promise that humanity would never attempt to replicate this technology, mankind would be allowed to colonize other planets within a specified bubble of space approximately three hundred light years in diameter.

It was an offer that couldn’t be refused, but there had been stories and rumours of subsequent human attempts to replicate the transluminal drive, regardless of the Shoal’s original threats. But all those attempts had apparently ended in abject failure. Similarly, there was never any public admission that human governments used covert satellites and remote observation technologies to constantly observe Shoal coreships in those vital moments before they translated into transluminal space, yet it was widely believed to be the case.

Without the Shoal, therefore, there would now be no colonies, no interstellar trade, no carefully licensed

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alien technologies provided by the Shoal's other client races, and certainly no original colonists to build Erkinning, the Free States, and all the other human cultures here on Bellhaven.

Without the magnanimity of the Shoal, none of this would ever have happened.

Dakota pressed closer against the telescope's viewfinder, feeling the cool circle of plastic against her eyebrow and cheek. Points of light then jumped into sharp contrast. Once again she was made very aware of details concerning the stars she now viewed that she couldn't possibly have registered without the aid of her implants. But her Ghost was already learning to anticipate her desires, so the information evaporated as quickly as it had appeared.

It was true that orbital telescopes and distributed radio scanning networks were far more accurate for the business of stargazing, but there was still a visceral rush in the physical act of peering through a simple lens. It made her feel like Galileo looking at the moons of Jupiter for the first time.

'Maybe somebody blew them up,' Dakota muttered. 'The Magellanic stars, I mean.'

Aiden laughed uproariously, and Dakota's face grew hot with embarrassment.

'If you've got any better ideas, feel free to share,' she snapped. At that point, Marlie, clearly embarrassed by the sniping, stepped forward to take her turn in peering through the telescope.

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Langley's features had reverted to their usual granite-like impassivity, but he was doubtless taking in every word they said.

'You know, Aiden,' he said at last, 'it's entirely true that the Shoal have us over a barrel. There's thousands of other species out there, we're told, but we've so far only ever encountered the Bandati and one or two others. But you never know. Maybe it won't always be that way.'

Aiden smirked, but Dakota could see he wasn't so sure of himself anymore. 'Tutor, those are dangerous words in some places,' he said quietly.

Langley's stony features didn't even flicker. 'Then let's just say that once you, too, realize just how many restrictions the human race labours under, then you'll know how it feels to dream of changing the status quo. Then you'll know how frustrating it is to get only so far, and be told you can go no further.'

'Well, it's still far enough, isn't it?' Aiden replied, looking slightly bewildered. 'I mean,' he continued, a cocky grin now tugging up one corner of his mouth, 'it's still better than sticking around here for the rest of our lives.'

Dakota caught the look on Langley's face, even if Aiden was oblivious to it.

'You have,' Langley muttered, each word rasping as it emerged from his throat, 'a worrying lack of adventure.'