

ABSOLUTION GAP

Alastair Reynolds



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ONE - Ararat, p Eridani A System, 2675](#)

[TWO - Lighthugger Gnostic Ascension, Interstellar Space, 2615](#)

[THREE - Lighthugger Gnostic Ascension, Interstellar Space, 2615](#)

[FOUR - Ararat, 2675](#)

[FIVE - Ararat, 2675](#)

[SIX - Ararat, 2675](#)

[SEVEN - Approaching Hela, 2615](#)

[EIGHT - Hela, 2727](#)

[NINE - Hela Surface, 2615](#)

[TEN - Hela, 2615](#)

[ELEVEN - Hela, 2727](#)

[TWELVE - Hela, 2727](#)

[THIRTEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[FOURTEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[FIFTEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[SIXTEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[SEVENTEEN - Hela, 2727](#)

[EIGHTEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[NINETEEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY - Hela, 2727](#)

[TWENTY-ONE - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-TWO - p Eridani 40, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-THREE - Hela, 2727](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-SIX - Hela, 2727](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT - Ararat, 2675](#)

[TWENTY-NINE - Ararat, 2675](#)

[THIRTY - Ararat, 2675](#)

[THIRTY-ONE - Near Ararat, 2675](#)

[THIRTY-TWO - Hela, 2727](#)

[THIRTY-THREE - Near Ararat, 2675](#)

[THIRTY-FOUR - Interstellar Space, Near p Eridani 40, 2675](#)

[THIRTY-FIVE - Hela, 2727](#)

[THIRTY-SIX - Interstellar Space, Near Epsilon Eridani, 2698](#)

[THIRTY-SEVEN - Interstellar Space, Epsilon Eridani, 2698](#)

[THIRTY-EIGHT - Hela, 2727](#)

[THIRTY-NINE - Hela Surface, 2727](#)

[FORTY - Hela Surface, 2727](#)

[FORTY-ONE - Hela, 2727](#)

[FORTY-TWO - Hela, 2727](#)

[FORTY-THREE](#)

[FORTY-FOUR](#)

[FORTY-FIVE](#)

[FORTY-SIX](#)

[FORTY-SEVEN](#)

[FORTY-EIGHT](#)

[FORTY-NINE](#)

[FIFTY](#)

[*EPILOGUE*](#)

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Alastair Reynolds



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For my Grandparents.

“The Universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine.”

SIR JAMES JEANS

PROLOGUE

She stands alone at the jetty's end, watching the sky. In the moonlight, the planked boarding of the jetty is a shimmering silver-blue ribbon reaching back to shore. The sea is ink-black, lapping calm against the jetty's supports. Across the bay, out towards the western horizon, there are patches of luminosity: smudges of twinkling pastel-green, as if a fleet of galleons has gone down with all lights ablaze.

She is clothed, if that is the word, in a white cloud of mechanical butterflies. She urges them to draw closer, their wings meshing tight. They form themselves into a kind of armour. It is not that she is cold—the evening breeze is warm and freighted with the faint, exotic tang of distant islands—but that she feels vulnerable, sensing the scrutiny of something vaster and older than she. Had she arrived a month earlier, when there were still tens of thousands of people on this planet, she doubted that the sea would have paid her this much attention. But the islands are all abandoned now, save for a handful of stubborn laggards, or newly arrived latecomers like herself. She is something new here—or, rather, something that has been away for a great while—and her chemical signal is awakening the sea. The smudges of light across the bay have appeared since her descent. It is not coincidence.

After all this time, the sea still remembers her.

“We should go now,” her protector calls, his voice reaching her from the black wedge of land where he waits, leaning impatiently on his stick. “It isn't safe, now that they've stopped shepherding the ring.”

The ring, yes: she sees it now, bisecting the sky like an exaggerated, heavy-handed rendition of the Milky Way. It spangles and glimmers: countless flinty chips of rubble catching the light from the closer sun. When she arrived, the planetary authorities were still maintaining it: every few minutes so, she would see the pink glint of a steering rocket as one of the drones boosted the orbit of a piece of debris, keeping it from grazing the planet's atmosphere and falling into the sea. She understood that the locals made wishes on the glints. They were no more superstitious than any of the other planet-dwellers she had met, but they understood the utter fragility of their world—that without the glints there was no future. It would have cost the authorities nothing to continue shepherding the ring: the self-repairing drones had been performing the same mindless task for four hundred years, ever since the resettlement. Turning them off had been a purely symbolic gesture, designed to encourage the evacuation.

Through the veil of the ring, she sees the other, more distant moon: the one that wasn't shattered. Almost no one here had any idea what happened. She did. She had seen it with her own eyes, albeit from a distance.

“If we stay . . .” her protector says.

She turns back, towards the land. “I just need a little time. Then we can go.”

“I'm worried about someone stealing the ship. I'm worried about the Nestbuilders.”

She nods, understanding his fears, but still determined to do the thing that has brought her here.

“The ship will be fine. And the Nestbuilders aren't anything to worry about.”

“They seem to be taking a particular interest in us.”

She brushes an errant mechanical butterfly from her brow. “They always have. They're just nosy.”

that's all."

"One hour," he says. "Then I'm leaving you here."

"You wouldn't."

"Only one way to find out, isn't there?"

She smiles, knowing he won't desert her. But he's right to be nervous: all the way in they had been pushing against the grain of evacuation. It was like swimming upstream, buffeted by the outward flow of countless ships. By the time they reached orbit, the transit stalks had already been blockaded: the authorities weren't allowing anyone to ride them down to the surface. It had taken bribery and guile to secure passage on a descending car. They'd had the compartment to themselves, but the whole thing—so her companion had said—had smelt of fear and panic; human chemical signals etched into the very fabric of the furniture. She was glad she didn't have his acuity with smells. She is frightened enough as it is: more than she wants him to know. She had been even more frightened when the Nestbuilder followed her into the system. Their elaborate spiral-hulled ship—fluted and chambered, vaguely translucent—is one of the last vessels in orbit. Do they want something of her, or have they just come to spectate?

She looks out to sea again. It might be her imagination, but the glowing smudges appear to have increased in number and size; less like a fleet of galleons below the water now than an entire sunken metropolis. And the smudges seem to be creeping towards the seaward end of the jetty. The ocean can taste her: tiny organisms scurry between the air and the sea. They seep through skin, into blood, into brain.

She wonders how much the sea knows. It must have sensed the evacuation: felt the departure of so many human minds. It must have missed the coming and going of swimmers, and the neural information they carried. It might even have sensed the end of the shepherding operation: two or three small chunks of former moon have already splashed down, although nowhere near these islands. But how much does it really know about what is going to happen? she wonders.

She issues a command to the butterflies. A regiment detaches from her sleeve, assembling before her face. They interlace wings, forming a ragged-edged screen the size of a handkerchief, with only the wings on the edge continuing to flutter. Now the sheet changes colour, becoming perfectly transparent save for a violet border. She cranes her head, looking high into the evening sky, through the debris ring. With a trick of computation the butterflies erase the ring and the moon. The sky darkens by degrees, the blackness becoming blacker, the stars brighter. She directs her attention to one particular star, picking it out after a moment's concentration.

There is nothing remarkable about this star. It is simply the nearest one to this binary system, a handful of light-years away. But this star has now become a marker, the leading wave of something that cannot be stopped. She was there when they evacuated that system, thirty years ago.

The butterflies perform another trick of computation. The view zooms in, concentrating on that one star. The star becomes brighter, until it begins to show colour. Not white now, not even blue-white, but the unmistakable tint of green.

It isn't right.

ONE

Ararat, p Eridani A System, 2675

Scorpio kept an eye on Vasko as the young man swam to shore. All the way in he had thought about drowning, what it would feel like to slide down through unlit fathoms. They said that if you had to die if you had no choice in the matter, then drowning was not the worst way to go. He wondered how anyone could be sure of this, and whether it applied to pigs.

He was still thinking about it when the boat came to a sliding halt, the electric outboard racing engine he killed it.

Scorpio poked a stick overboard, judging the water to be no more than half a metre deep. He had hoped to locate one of the channels that allowed a closer approach to the island, but this would have done. Even if he had not agreed to a place of rendezvous with Vasko, there was no time to push back out to sea and curl around hunting for something he had enough trouble finding when the sea was clear and the sky completely empty of clouds.

Scorpio moved to the bow and took hold of the plastic-sheathed rope Vasko had been using as a pillow. He wrapped one end tightly around his wrist and then vaulted over the side of the boat in a single fluid movement. He splashed into the shallows, the bottle-green water lapping just above his knees. He could barely feel the cold through the thick leather of his boots and leggings. The boat was drifting slowly now that he had disembarked, but with a flick of his wrist he took up the slack in the line and brought the bow around by several degrees. He started walking, leaning hard to haul the boat. The rocks beneath his feet were treacherous, but for once his bow-legged gait served him well. He did not break his rhythm until the water was only halfway up his boots and he again felt the boat scrape the bottom. He hauled it a dozen strides further ashore, but that was as far as he was prepared to risk dragging it.

He saw that Vasko had reached the shallows. The young man abandoned swimming and stood up in the water.

Scorpio got back into the boat, flakes and scabs of corroded metal breaking away in his grip as he tugged the hull closer by the gunwale. The boat was past its hundred and twentieth hour of immersion, this likely to be its final voyage. He reached over the side and dropped the small anchor. He could have done so earlier, but anchors were just as prone to erosion as hulls. It paid not to place too much trust in them.

Another glance at Vasko. He was picking his way carefully towards the boat, his arms outstretched for balance.

Scorpio gathered his companion's clothes and stuffed them into his pack, which already contained provisions, fresh water and medical supplies. He heaved the pack on to his back and began the short trudge to dry land, taking care to check on Vasko occasionally. Scorpio knew he had been hard on Vasko, but once the anger had started rising in him there had been no holding it in check. He found this development disturbing. It was twenty-three years since Scorpio had raised his hand in anger against a human, except in the pursuit of duty. But he recognised that there was also a violence in his words. Once, he would have laughed it off, but lately he had been trying to live a different kind of life. He thought he had put certain things behind him.

It was, of course, the prospect of meeting Clavain that had brought all that fury to the surface. To much apprehension, too many emotional threads reaching back into the blood-drenched mire of the past. Clavain knew what Scorpio had been. Clavain knew exactly what he was capable of doing.

He stopped and waited for the young man to catch up with him.

“Sir . . .” Vasko was out of breath and shivering.

“How was it?”

“You were right, sir. It was a bit colder than it looked.”

Scorpio shrugged the pack from his back. “I thought it would be, but you did all right. I’ve got your things with me. You’ll be dry and warm in no time. Not sorry you came?”

“No, sir. Wanted a bit of adventure, didn’t I?”

Scorpio passed him his things. “You’ll be after a bit less of it when you’re my age.”

It was a still day, as was often the case when the cloud cover on Ararat was low. The nearer sun—the one that Ararat orbited—was a washed-out smudge hanging low in the western sky. Its distant binary counterpart was a hard white jewel above the opposite horizon, pinned between a crack in the clouds. P Eridani A and B, except no one ever called them anything other than Bright Sun and Fair Sun.

In the silver-grey daylight the water was leached of its usual colour, reduced to a drab grey-green soup. It looked thick when it sloshed around Scorpio’s boots, but despite the opacity of the water the actual density of suspended micro-organisms was low by Ararat standards. Vasko had still taken a small risk by swimming, but he had been right to do so, for it had allowed them to sail the boat much closer to the shore. Scorpio was no expert on the matter, but he knew that most meaningful encounters between humans and Jugglers took place in areas of the ocean that were so saturated with organisms that they were more like floating rafts of organic matter. The concentration here was low enough that there was little risk of the Jugglers eating the boat while they were away, or creating a local tidal system to wash it out to sea.

They covered the remaining ground to dry land, reaching the gently sloping plain of rock that had been visible from sea as a line of darkness. Here and there shallow pools interrupted the ground, mirroring the overcast sky in silver-grey. They made their way between them, heading for a pimple of white in the middle distance.

“You still haven’t told me what all this is about,” Vasko said.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Aren’t you sufficiently excited about meeting the old man?”

“Scared, more likely.”

“He does that to people, but don’t let it get to you. He doesn’t get off on reverence.”

After ten minutes of further walking, Scorpio had recovered the strength he had expended hauling the boat. In that time the pimple had become a dome perched on the ground, and finally revealed itself to be an inflatable tent. It was guyed to cleats pinned into the rock, the white fabric around its base stained various shades of briny green. It had been patched and repaired several times. Gathered around the tent, leaning against it at odd angles, were pieces of conch material recovered from the sea like driftwood. The way they had been poised was unmistakably artful.

“What you said earlier, sir,” Vasko said, “about Clavain not going around the world after all?”

“Yes?”

“If he came here instead, why couldn’t they just tell us that?”

“Because of why he came here,” Scorpio replied.

They made their way around the inflatable structure until they reached the pressure door. Next to it was the small humming box that supplied power to the tent, maintaining the pressure differential and providing heat and other amenities for its occupant.

Scorpio examined one of the conch pieces, fingering the sharp edge where it had been cut from some larger whole. “Looks like he’s been doing some beachcombing.”

Vasko pointed to the already open outer door. “All the same, doesn’t look as if there’s anyone home at the moment.”

Scorpio opened the inner door. Inside he found a bunk bed and a neatly folded pile of bedclothes. A small collapsible desk, a stove and food synthesiser. A flagon of purified water and a box of rations. An air pump that was still running and some small conch pieces on the table.

“There’s no telling how long it’s been since he was last here,” Vasko said.

Scorpio shook his head. “He hasn’t been away for very long, probably not more than an hour or two.”

Vasko looked around, searching for whatever piece of evidence Scorpio had already spotted. He wasn’t going to find it: pigs had long ago learned that the acute sense of smell they had inherited from their ancestors was not something shared by baseline humans. They had also learned—painfully—that humans did not care to be reminded of this.

They stepped outside again, sealing the inner door as they had found it.

“What now?” Vasko asked.

Scorpio snapped a spare communications bracelet from one wrist and handed it to Vasko. It had already been assigned a secure frequency, so there was no danger of anyone on the other island listening in. “You know how to use one of these things?”

“I’ll manage. Anything in particular you want me to do with it?”

“Yes. You’re going to wait here until I get back. I expect to have Clavain with me when I return. But in the event he finds you first, you’re to tell him who you are and who sent you. Then you call me and ask Clavain if he’d like to talk to me. Got that?”

“And if you don’t come back?”

“You’d better call Blood.”

Vasko fingered the bracelet. “You sound a bit worried about his state of mind, sir. Do you think he might be dangerous?”

“I hope so,” Scorpio said, “because if he isn’t, he’s not a lot of use to us.” He patted the young man on the shoulder. “Now wait here while I circle the island. It won’t take me more than an hour, and my guess is I’ll find him somewhere near the sea.”

Scorpio made his way across the flat rocky fringes of the island, spreading his stubby arms for balance, not caring in the slightest how awkward or comical he appeared.

He slowed, thinking that in the distance he could see a figure shifting in and out of the darkening

haze of late-afternoon sea mist. He squinted, trying to compensate for eyes that no longer worked well as they had in Chasm City, when he had been younger. On one level he hoped that the mirage would turn out to be Clavain. On another he hoped that it would turn out to be a figment of his imagination, some conjunction of rock, light and shade tricking the eye.

As little as he cared to admit it, he was anxious. It was six months since he had last seen Clavain. Not that long a time, really, most certainly not when measured against the span of the man's life. Yet Scorpio could not rid himself of the sense that he was about to encounter an acquaintance he had not met in decades, someone who might have been warped beyond all recognition by life and experience. He wondered how he would respond if it turned out that Clavain had indeed lost his mind. Would he even recognise it if that was true? Scorpio had spent enough time around baseline humans to feel confident about reading their intentions, moods and general states of sanity. It was said that human and pig's minds were not so very different. But with Clavain, Scorpio always made a mental note to ignore his expectations. Clavain was not like other humans. History had shaped him, leaving behind something unique and quite possibly monstrous.

Scorpio was fifty. He had known Clavain for half his life, ever since he had been captured by Clavain's former faction in the Yellowstone system. Shortly after that, Clavain had defected from the Conjoiners, and after some mutual misgivings he and Scorpio had ended up fighting together. They had gathered a loose band of soldiers and assorted hangers-on from the vicinity of Yellowstone and had stolen a ship to make the journey to Resurgam's system. Along the way they had been hectoring and harried by Clavain's former Conjoiner comrades. From Resurgam space—riding another ship entirely—they had arrived here, on the blue-green waterlogged marble of Ararat. Little fighting had been required since Resurgam, but the two had continued to work together in the establishment of the temporary colony.

They had schemed and plotted whole communities into existence. Often they had argued, but only ever over matters of the gravest importance. When one or the other leant towards too harsh or too soft a policy, the other was there to balance matters. It was in those years that Scorpio had found the strength of character to stop hating human beings every waking moment of his life. If nothing else, he owed that to Clavain.

But nothing was ever that simple, was it?

The problem was that Clavain had been born five hundred years ago and had lived through many of those years. What if the Clavain that Scorpio knew—the Clavain that most of the colonists knew, for that matter—was only a passing phase, like a deceitful glimpse of sunshine on an otherwise stormy day? In the early days of their acquaintance, Scorpio had kept at least half an eye on him, alert for any reversion to his indiscriminate butcher tendencies. He had seen nothing to arouse his suspicions, and more than enough to reassure him that Clavain was not the ghoul that history said he was.

But in the last two years, his certainties had crumbled. It was not that Clavain had become more cruel, argumentative or violent than before, but something in him had changed. It was as if the quality of light on a landscape had shifted from one moment to another. The fact that Scorpio knew that others harboured similar doubts about his own stability was of scant comfort. He knew his own state of mind and hoped he would never hurt another human the way he had done in the past. But he could only speculate about what was going on inside his friend's head. What he could be certain about was that the Clavain he knew, the Clavain alongside whom he had fought, had withdrawn to some intense private personal space. Even before he had retreated to this island, Scorpio had reached the poi-

where he could hardly read the man at all.

But he did not blame Clavain for that. No one would.

He continued his progress until he was certain that the figure was real, and then advanced further until he was able to discern detail. The figure was crouched down by the shore of sea, motionless, as if caught in some reverie that had interrupted an otherwise innocent examination of the tide pools and their fauna.

Scorpio recognised him as Clavain; he would have been as certain even if he had thought the island uninhabited.

The pig felt a momentary surge of relief. At least Clavain was still alive. No matter what else transpired today, that much had to count as a victory.

When he was within shouting distance of the man, Clavain sensed his presence and looked around. There was a breeze now, one that had not been there when Scorpio landed. It pulled wild white hair across Clavain's pink-red features. His beard, normally neatly trimmed, had also grown long and unkempt since his departure. His thin figure was clad in black, with a dark shawl or cloak pulled across his shoulders. He maintained an awkward posture between kneeling and standing, poised on his haunches like a man who had only stopped there for a moment.

Scorpio was certain he had been staring out to sea for hours.

"Nevil," Scorpio said.

He said something back, his lips moving, but his words were masked by the hiss of the surf.

Scorpio called out again. "It's me—Scorpio."

Clavain's mouth moved a second time. His voice was a croak that barely made it above a whisper. "I said, I told you not to come here."

"I know." Scorpio had approached closer now. Clavain's white hair flicked in and out of his deep, recessed old-man's eyes. They appeared to be focused on something very distant and bleak. "I know, and for six months we honoured that request, didn't we?"

"Six months?" Clavain almost smiled. "Is that how long it's been?"

"Six months and a week, if you want to be finicky about it."

"It doesn't feel like it. It feels like no time at all." Clavain looked back out to sea again, the back of his head turned towards Scorpio. Between thin strands of white hair his scalp had the same raw pink colour as Scorpio's skin.

"Sometimes it feels like a lot longer, as well," Clavain continued, "as if all I've ever done was spend each day here. Sometimes I feel as if there isn't another soul on this planet."

"We're all still here," Scorpio said, "all one hundred and seventy thousand of us. We still need you."

"I expressly asked not to be disturbed."

"*Unless* it was important. That was always the arrangement, Nevil."

Clavain stood up with painful slowness. He had always been taller than Scorpio, but now his thinness gave him the appearance of something sketched in a hurry. His limbs were quick cursive scratches against the sky.

Scorpio looked at Clavain's hands. They were the fine-boned hands of a surgeon. Or, perhaps, a

interrogator. The rasp of his long fingernails against the damp black fabric of his trousers made Scorpio wince.

“Well?”

“We’ve found something,” Scorpio said. “We don’t know exactly what it is, or who sent it, but we think it came from space. We also think there might be someone in it.”

Lighthugger *Gnostic Ascension*, Interstellar Space, 2615

Surgeon-General Grelier strode through the circular green-lit corridors of the body factory.

He hummed and whistled, happy in his element, happy to be surrounded by humming machines and half-formed people. With a shiver of anticipation he thought about the solar system that lay ahead of them and the great many things that depended on it. Not necessarily for him, it was true, but certainly for his rival in the matter of the queen's affection. Grelier wondered how she would take another of Quaiiche's failures. Knowing Queen Jasmina, he did not think she would take it awfully well.

Grelier smiled at that. The odd thing was that for a system on which so much hung, the place was still nameless; no one had ever bothered with the remote star and its uninteresting clutch of planets. There had never been any reason to. There would be an obscure catalogue entry for the system in the astrologation database of the *Gnostic Ascension*, and indeed of almost every other starship, along with brief notes on the major characteristics of its sun and worlds, likely hazards and so forth. But the databases had never been intended for human eyes; they existed only to be interrogated and updated by other machines as they went about their silent, swift business executing those shipboard tasks considered too dull or too difficult for humans. The entry was just a string of binary digits, a few thousand ones and zeroes. It was a measure of the system's unimportance that the entry had only been queried three times in the entire operational lifetime of the *Gnostic Ascension*. It had been updated once.

Grelier knew: he had checked, out of curiosity.

Yet now, perhaps for the first time in history, the system was of more than passing interest. It still had no name, but now at least the absence of one had become vaguely troubling, to the point where Queen Jasmina sounded a trifle more irritated every time she was forced to refer to the place as "the system ahead" or "the system we are approaching." But Grelier knew that she would not deign to give the place a name until it had proved valuable. And the system's value was entirely in the hands of the queen's fading favourite, Quaiiche.

Grelier paused a while near one of the bodies. It was suspended in translucent support gel behind the green glass of its vivification tank. Around the base of the tank were rows of nutrient controls like so many organ stops, some pushed in and some pulled out. The stops controlled the delicate biochemical environment of the nutrient matrix. Bronze valve wheels set into the side of the tank adjusted the delivery of bulk chemicals like water or saline.

Appended to the tank was a log showing the body's clonal history. Grelier flicked through the plastic-laminated pages of the log, satisfying himself that all was well. Although most of the bodies in the factory had never been decanted, this specimen—an adult female—had been warmed and used once before. The evidence of the injuries inflicted on it was fading under the regenerative procedure: abdominal scars healing invisibly, the new leg now only slightly smaller than its undamaged counterpart. Jasmina did not approve of these patch-up jobs, but her demand for bodies had outstripped the production capacity of the factory.

Grelier patted the glass affectionately. "Coming along nicely."

He walked on, making random checks on the other bodies. Sometimes a glance was sufficient though more often than not Grelier would thumb through the log and pause to make some small adjustment to the settings. He took a great deal of pride in the quiet competence of his work. He never boasted of his abilities or promised anything he was not absolutely certain of being able to deliver—utterly unlike Quaiche, who had been full of exaggerated promises from the moment he stepped aboard the *Gnostic Ascension*.

For a while it had worked, too. Grelier, long the queen's closest confidant, had found himself temporarily usurped by the flashy newcomer. All he heard while he was working on her was how Quaiche was going to change all their fortunes: Quaiche this, Quaiche that. The queen had even started complaining about Grelier's duties, moaning that the factory was too slow in delivering bodies and that the attention-deficit therapies were losing their effectiveness. Grelier had been briefly tempted to try something seriously attention-grabbing, something that would catapult him back into her good graces.

Now he was profoundly glad that he had done no such thing; he had needed only to bide his time. It was simply a question of letting Quaiche dig his own grave by setting up expectations that he could not possibly meet. Sadly—for Quaiche, if not for Grelier—Jasmina had taken him exactly at his word. If Grelier judged the queen's mood, poor old Quaiche was about this close to getting the figurehead treatment.

Grelier stopped at an adult male that had begun to show developmental anomalies during his last examination. He had adjusted the tank settings, but his tinkering had apparently been to no avail. To the untrained eye the body looked normal enough, but it lacked the unmarred symmetry that Jasmina craved. Grelier shook his head and placed a hand on one of the polished brass valve wheels. Always a difficult call, this. The body wasn't up to scratch by the usual standards of the factory, but then again neither were the patch-up jobs. Was it time to make Jasmina accept a lowering of quality? It was she who was pushing the factory to its limit, after all.

No, Grelier decided. If he had learned one lesson from this whole sordid Quaiche business, it was to maintain his own standards. Jasmina would scold him for aborting a body, but in the long run she would respect his judgement, his stolid devotion to excellence.

He twisted the brass wheel shut, blocking saline. He knelt down and pushed in most of the nutrient valves.

"Sorry," Grelier said, addressing the smooth, expressionless face behind the glass, "but I'm afraid you just didn't cut it."

He gave the body one last glance. In a few hours the processes of cellular deconstruction would be grotesquely obvious. The body would be dismantled, its constituent chemicals recycled for use elsewhere in the factory.

A voice buzzed in his earpiece. He touched a finger to the device.

"Grelier . . . I was expecting you already."

"I'm on my way, ma'am."

A red light started flashing on top of the vivification tank, synchronised to an alarm. Grelier cuffed the override, silencing the alarm and blanking the emergency signal. Calm returned to the body factory, a silence broken only by the occasional gurgle of nutrient flows or the muffled click of some distant valve regulator.

Grelier nodded, satisfied that all was in hand, and resumed his unhurried progress.

At the same instant that Grelier pushed in the last of the nutrient valves, an anomaly occurred in the sensor apparatus of the *Gnostic Ascension*. The anomaly was brief, lasting only a fraction over half a second, but it was sufficiently unusual that a flag was raised in the data stream: an exceptional event marker indicating that something merited attention.

As far as the sensor software was concerned that was the end of it: the anomaly had not continued and all systems were now performing normally. The flag was a mere formality; whether it was to be acted on was the responsibility of an entirely separate and slightly more intelligent layer of monitoring software.

The second layer—dedicated to health-monitoring all shipwide sensor subsystems—detected the flag, along with several million others raised in the same cycle, and assigned it a schedule in its task profile. Less than two hundred thousandths of a second had lapsed since the end of the anomaly: a eternity in computational terms, but an inevitable consequence of the vast size of a lighthugger cybernetic nervous system. Communications between one end of the *Gnostic Ascension* and the other required three to four kilometres of main trunk cabling, six to seven for a round-trip signal.

Nothing happened quickly on a ship that large, but it made little practical difference. The ship's huge mass meant that it responded sluggishly to external events: it had precisely the same need for lightning-fast reflexes as a brontosaurus.

The health-monitoring layer worked its way down the pile.

Most of the several million events it looked at were quite innocuous. Based on its grasp of the statistical expectation pattern of error events, it was able to de-assign most of the flags without hesitation. They were transient errors, not indicative of any deeper malaise in the ship's hardware. Only a hundred thousand looked even remotely suspicious.

The second layer did what it always did at this point: it compiled the hundred thousand anomalous events into a single packet, appended its own comments and preliminary findings and offered the packet to the third layer of monitoring software.

The third layer spent most of its time doing nothing: it existed solely to examine those anomalies forwarded to it by duller layers. Quickened to alertness, it examined the dossier with as much actual interest as its borderline sentience allowed. By machine standards it was still somewhere below gamma-level intelligence, but it had been doing its job for such a long time that it had built up a huge hoard of heuristic expertise. It was *insultingly* clear to the third layer that more than half of the forwarded events in no way merited its attention, but the remaining cases were more interesting, and it took its time going through them. Two-thirds of those anomalies were repeat offenders: evidence of systems with some real but transient fault. None, however, were in critical areas of ship function, so they could be left alone until they became more serious.

One-third of the interesting cases were new. Of these, perhaps ninety per cent were the kind of failures that could be expected once in a while, based on the layer's knowledge of the various hardware components and software elements involved. Only a handful were in possibly critical areas, and thankfully these faults could all be dealt with by routine repair methods. Almost without blinking the layer dispatched instructions to those parts of the ship dedicated to the upkeep of its infrastructure.

At various points around the ship, servitors that were already engaged in other repair and overha

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