

The Abyss Beyond Dreams: A Novel of the Commonwealth (Commonwealth: Chronicle of the Fallers Book 1)

By Peter F. Hamilton

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The year is 3326. Nigel Sheldon, one of the founders of the Commonwealth, receives a visit from the Raiel—self-appointed guardians of the Void, the enigmatic construct at the core of the galaxy that threatens the existence of all that lives. The Raiel convince Nigel to participate in a desperate scheme to infiltrate the Void.

Once inside, Nigel discovers that humans are not the only life-forms to have been sucked into the Void, where the laws of physics are subtly different and mental powers indistinguishable from magic are commonplace. The humans trapped there are afflicted by an alien species of biological mimics—the Fallers—that are intelligent but merciless killers.

Yet these same aliens may hold the key to destroying the threat of the Void forever—if Nigel can uncover their secrets. As the Fallers' relentless attacks continue, and the fragile human society splinters into civil war, Nigel must uncover the secrets of the Fallers—before he is killed by the very people he has come to save.

Praise for *The Abyss Beyond Dreams*

“The work of an author at the top of his game.”—*Science Fiction and Fantasy World*

“Incredibly robust and exciting and rousing, sharing flavors of Jack Vance, John Wright, China Miéville, Orson Scott Card, and A. E. van Vogt . . . Hamilton’s deployment of lots of grand super-science is utterly deft and

convincing.”—*Locus*

“Solidy engrossing fare . . . The characters, always Hamilton’s strength, remain as distinctive as ever.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Everything one wants in sf—great characters, mind bending stuff, adventure, politics, romance, revolution . . . just superb.”—*Fantasy Book Critic*

“Hamilton does a particular kind of planetary politics and space opera very well, and this is a perfect example of it. . . . [*The Abyss Beyond Dreams* is] a satisfying and well-oiled story, with potential for more epic adventure to come.”—*Booklist*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Peter F. Hamilton's many novels include *Fallen Dragon*, *Judas Unchained*, and the bestselling *Night's Dawn* trilogy, *The Reality Dysfunction*, *The Neutronium Alchemist*, and *The Naked God*. He is also the author of *A Second Chance at Eden*, a novella and six short stories set in the same brilliantly realized universe.

John Lee has read audiobooks in almost every conceivable genre, from Charles Dickens to Patrick O'Brian, and from the very real life of Napoleon to the entirely imagined lives of sorcerers and swashbucklers. An AudioFile Golden Voice narrator, he is the winner of numerous Audie Awards and AudioFile Earphones Awards.

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Chapter 1

Laura Brandt knew all about coming out of a suspension chamber. It was similar to finishing the old--style rejuvenation procedure she'd undergone back in the day, before biononic inserts and Advancer genes being sequenced into human DNA and practically eradicating the aging process. There would be that slow comfortable rise to consciousness, the body warming at a steady rate, nutrient feeds and narcotic buffering taking the edge off any lingering discomfort and disorientation. So by the time you were properly awake and ready to open your eyes it was like emerging from a really decent night's sleep, ready to face the day with enthusiasm and anticipation. A full breakfast with pancakes, some crisp bacon, maple syrup, and chilled orange juice (no ice, thanks) would add that extra little touch of panache to make returning to full awareness a welcome experience. And when it happened this time, there she would be at the end of a voyage to a star cluster outside the Milky Way, ready to begin a fresh life with others from the Brandt Dynasty, founding a

whole new civilization—one that was going to be so very different from the jaded old Commonwealth they'd left behind.

Then there was the emergency extraction procedure, which ship's crew called the tank yank.

Someone slapping the red button on the outside of her suspension chamber. Potent revival drugs ramming into a body that was still chilly. Hematology umbilicals withdrawing from her neck and thighs. Shocked muscles spasming. Bladder sending out frantic pressure signals into her brain, and the emergency extraction had already automatically retracted the catheter—oh, great design, guys. But that wasn't as bad as the skull-splitting headache and the top of her diaphragm contracting as her nauseous stomach heaved.

Laura opened her eyes to a blur of horrible colored light at the same time her mouth opened and she vomited. Stomach muscles clenched, bringing her torso up off the padding. Her head hit the chamber's lid, which hadn't finished hinging open.

"Hell's teeth." Red pain stars joined the confusing blur of shapes. She twisted over to throw up again.

"Easy there," a voice told her.

Hands gripped her shoulders, supporting her as she retched. A plastic bowl was held up, which caught most of the revolting liquid.

"Any more?"

"What?" Laura groaned.

"Are you going to puke again?"

Laura just snarled at him, too miserable even to know the answer. Every part of her body was forcefully telling her how wretched it felt.

"Take some deep breaths," the voice told her.

"Oh for .??.?"

It was an effort just to breathe at all with the way her body was shuddering, never mind going for some kind of yoga--master inhalations. Stupid voice—

"You're doing great. The revive drugs will kick in any minute now."

Laura swallowed—disgusting acid taste burning her throat—but it was fractionally easier to breathe. She hadn't felt this bad for centuries. It wasn't a good thought, but at least it was a coherent one. Why aren't my bionics helping? The tiny molecular machines enriching every cell should be assisting her body to stabilize. She tried to squint the lights into focus, knowing some of them would be her exovision icons. It was all just too much effort.

"Tank yank's a bitch, huh?"

Laura finally recognized the voice. Andy Granfore, one of the Vermillion's medical staff—decent enough man; they'd met at a few preflight parties. She shuddered down a long breath. "What's happened? Why have you brought me out like this?"

"Captain wants you out and up. And we don't have much time. Sorry."

Laura's eyes managed to focus on Andy's face, seeing the familiar bulbous nose, dark bags under pale--brown eyes, and graying hair that was all stick--out tufts. Such an old, worn face was unusual in the Commonwealth, where everyone used cosmetic gene--sequencing to look flawless. Laura always thought that humanity these days was like a race of youthful supermodels—which wasn't necessarily an improvement. Anything less than perfection was either a fashion statement or a genuine individualistic screw you to conformity.

"Is Vermillion damaged?"

"No." He gave her an anxious grin. "Not exactly. Just lost."

"Lost?" Which was possibly an even more worrying answer. How could you get lost flying to a star cluster that measured twenty thousand light--years in diameter? It wasn't as if you could lose sight of something of that magnitude. "That's ridiculous."

"The captain will explain. Let's get you to the bridge."

Laura silently asked her u--shadow for a general status review. The ubiquitous semi--sentient utility routine running in her macrocellular clusters responded immediately by unfolding a basic array of mental icons,

slender lines of blue fairy light that superimposed themselves within her wobbly vision. She frowned. If she was reading their efficiency modes correctly, her bionics had suffered some kind of serious glitch. The only reason she could imagine for that level of decay was simple aging. Her heart gave a jump as she wondered how long she'd been in suspension. She checked the digits of her time display. Which was even more puzzling.

"Two thousand two hundred and thirty--one days?"

"What?" Andy asked.

"We've been under way for two thousand two hundred and thirty--one days? Where the hell are we?"

Traveling for that long at ultradrive speeds would have taken them almost three million light--years from Earth, a long long way outside the Milky Way.

His old face amplified how disconcerted he was. "It might have been that long. We're not too sure about relativistic time compression in here."

"Whaa—"

"Just .??. Let's get you to the bridge, okay? The captain will give you a proper briefing. I'm not the best person to explain this. Trust me."

"Okay."

He helped her swing her legs off the padding. Dizziness hit her hard as she stood up, and she almost crumpled. Andy was ready for it and held her tight for a long moment while she steadied herself.

The suspension bay looked intact to her, a long cave of metal ribs containing a thousand large sarcophagus--like suspension chambers. Lots of reassuring green monitor lights shining on every unit as far as she could make out. She gave a satisfied nod. "All right. Let me freshen up and we'll go. Have the bathrooms been switched on?" For some reason she was having trouble interfacing directly with the ship's network.

"No time," Andy said. "The transport pod is this way."

Laura managed to coordinate her facial muscles enough to give him a piqued expression before she allowed herself to be guided along the decking to the end of the bay. A set of malmetal quad--doors peeled open. The pod on the other side was a simple circular room with a bench seat running around it.

"Here," Andy said after she slumped down, almost exhausted by the short walk—well, shuffle. He handed her a packet of clothes and some spore wipes.

She gave the wipes a derisory glance. "Seriously?"

"Best I can offer."

So while he used the pod's manual control panel to tap in their destination, she cleaned up her face and hands, then stripped off her sleeveless medical gown. Body--modesty was something most people grew out of when they were in their second century and resequenced like Greek godlings, and she didn't care about Andy anyway; he was medical.

She saw in dismay that her skin color was all off. Her second major biononic re--form on her ninetieth birthday had included some sequencing to emphasize her mother's northern Mediterranean heritage, darkening her epidermis to an almost African black. It was a shading she'd maintained for the entire 326 years since. Now, though, she just looked like a porcelain doll about to shatter from age. Suspension had tainted her skin to an awful dark gray with a multitude of tiny water--immersion wrinkles—except it was paper--dry. Must remember to moisturize, she told herself. Her hair was a very dark ginger, courtesy of a rather silly admiration for Grissy Gold, the gulam blues singer who'd reveled in an amazing decade of trans--Commonwealth success—232 years ago. That wasn't too bad, she decided, pulling at badly tangled strands of it, but it was going to take liters of conditioner to put the gloss back in. Then she peered at the buffed metal wall of the travel pod, which was hardly the best mirror .??. Her normally thin face was horribly puffy, almost hiding her cheekbones, and her emerald--green eyes were all hangover--bloodshot with bags just as bad as Andy's underneath. "Bollocks," she groaned.

As she started pulling on the dreary ship's one--piece suit she saw how flabby her flesh had become after such a long suspension, especially around the thighs. Oh, not again! She deliberately didn't look at her bum. It was going to take months of exercise to get back in shape, and Laura no longer cheated by using bionics

to sculpt bodyform like most; she believed in earning her fitness, a primitive body--pride that came from those five years hiding away from the world at a Naturalist faction ashram in the Austrian Alps after a particularly painful relationship--crash.

With the drugs finally banishing the worst of the tank yank, she sealed up the suit and rotated her shoulders as if she were prepping for a big gym session. "This had better be good," she grunted as the pod slowed. It had taken barely five minutes to travel along the Vermillion's axial spine, past the twenty other suspension bays that made up the giant starship's midsection. And still her u--shadow couldn't connect to Vermillion's network.

The pod's quad--door opened to reveal Vermillion's bridge—a somewhat symbolic claim for a chamber in the age of homogenized network architecture. It was more like a pleasant franchise coffee lounge with long settees arranged in a conversation circle, and giant high--rez hologram panes on the walls.

About fifteen people were in there, most of them huddled in small groups on the settees having intense exchanges. Everybody looked badly stressed. Laura saw several who had clearly just been tank yanked like her and recognized them straightaway; also like her, they were all from the starship's science team.

That was when she became aware of a very peculiar sensation inside her head. It was like the emotional context of a conversation within the gaiafield—except her gaiamotes were inactive. She'd never really embraced the whole gaiafield concept, which had been developed to give the Commonwealth the capability of direct mind--to--mind communication through an alien adaptation of quantum entanglement theory. Some people loved the potential for intimate thought sharing it brought, claiming it was the ultimate evolution of intellect, permitting everyone else's viewpoint to be appreciated. That way, the argument went, conflict would be banished. Laura thought that was a bunch of crap. To her it was the creepy extreme of voyeurism. Unhealthy, to put it mildly. She had gaiamotes because it was occasionally a useful communication tool, and even more sporadically helpful for acquiring large quantities of information. But for day--to--day use, forget it. She stuck with the good old--fashioned and reliable unisphere links.

"How's that happening?" she grunted, frowning. Her u--shadow confirmed that her gaiamotes were inactive. Nobody could connect directly to her neural strata. And yet .??.

Torak, the Vermillion's chief xenobiology officer, gave her a lopsided grin. "If you think that's weird, how about this?" A tall plastic mug of tea floated through the air toward him, trailing wisps of steam. Torak stared at it in concentration, holding out his hand. The mug sailed into his palm, and he closed his fingers around it with a smug grin.

Laura gave the bridge ceiling a puzzled look, her ever--practical mind immediately reviewing the parameters of ingrav field projector systems. Theoretically it would be possible to manipulate the ship's gravity field to move objects around like that, but it would be a ridiculous amount of effort and machinery for a simple conjuring trick. "What kind of gravity manipulation was that?"

"It's not." Torak's lips hadn't moved. Yet the voice was clear in her head, along with enough emotional overspill to confirm it was him "speaking."

"How did you .??.???"

"I can show you what we've learned, if you'll let me," Torak said.

She gave him an apprehensive nod. Then something like a memory was bubbling up into her mind like a cold fizzy liquid, a memory that wasn't hers. So similar to a gaiafield emission, but at the same time definitely not. She had no control over it, no way of regulating the images and voices. That scared her. Then the knowledge was rippling out inside her brain, settling down, becoming instinct.

"Telepathy?" she squeaked as she knew. And at the same time, she could sense her thoughts broadcasting the astonished question across the bridge. Several of the crew flinched at the strength of it impinging on their own thoughts.

"In the purest sense," Torak responded. "And telekinesis, too." He let go of the teacup, which hung in midair.

Laura stared at it in a kind of numb fascination. In her head, new insights showed her how to perform the fantasy ability. She shaped her thoughts just so, reaching for the teacup. Somehow feeling it; the weight

impinged on her consciousness.

Torak released his hold on it, and the cup wobbled about, dropping ten centimeters. Laura reinforced her mental grip on the physical object, and it continued to hang in midair. She gave a twitchy laugh before carefully lowering it to the floor. "That is some serious bollocks," she murmured.

"We have ESP, too," Torak said. "You might want to close your thoughts up. They're kind of .??. available."

Laura gave him a startled glance, then blushed as she hurriedly tried to apply the knowledge of how to shield her thoughts—intimate, painfully private thoughts—from the scrutiny of everyone on the bridge. "All right; enough. Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on? How are we doing this? What's happened?" Captain Cornelius Brandt stood up. He wasn't a particularly tall man, and worry made him appear stooped. Laura could tell just how worn down and anxious he was; despite his efforts to keep his thoughts opaque and calm, alarm was leaking out of him like ethereal pheromones. "We believe we're in the Void," he said. "That's impossible," Laura said automatically. The Void was the core of the galaxy. Up until 2560 when the Endeavor, a ship from the Commonwealth Navy Exploration fleet, completed the first circumnavigation of the galaxy, astronomers had assumed it was the same kind of supermassive black hole that most galaxies had at their center. It was massive. And it did have an event horizon, just like an ordinary black hole. But this one was different. It wasn't natural.

As the Endeavor soon learned, the Raiel—an alien race more technologically advanced than the Commonwealth—had been guarding the boundary for over a million years. In fact, they'd declared war on the Void. From the moment their first crude starships encountered it, they'd carefully observed the event horizon undergoing unnatural expansion phases. Incredibly for anything that large on a cosmological scale, it appeared to be an artifact. Purpose unknown. But given the severity and unpredictability of its expansion phases, it would eventually inflate out to consume the entire galaxy long before any natural black hole would have.

So the Raiel invaded. Thousands upon thousands of the greatest warships ever built tore open the Void's boundary and streaked inside.

None returned. The entire armada had no apparent effect on the Void or its atypical, inexorable expansion. That was a million years ago. They'd been guarding the boundary ever since.

Wilson Kime, who captained the Endeavor, was politely but firmly ordered to turn back and fly outside the Wall stars that formed a thick band around the Void. After that, the Raiel invited the Commonwealth to join the multispecies science mission that kept a constant watch on the Void. A mission that had lasted since the Raiel armada invaded, and in those million years had added precisely nothing to the knowledge of what lurked on the other side of the event horizon boundary.

"Improbable," Cornelius corrected. "Not impossible."

"Well, how did we get inside? I thought our course took us around the Wall stars."

"Closest approach to the Wall was three thousand light--years," Cornelius said. "That's when we fell inside. Or jumped. Or got snatched. We're still not sure how. Presumably some kind of teleport connection opened up inside hyperspace. It would take a phenome-nally advanced technology to create that—but then as we've all suddenly been granted superhuman powers, quantum hyperfield theory is the least of our problems."

Laura gave him an incredulous stare. "But why?"

"Not sure. The only clue we have is Tiger Brandt. Just before we were brought in, she said she experienced some kind of mental contact, like a dream reaching through the gaiafield, but a lot fainter. Something sensed us or her. Next thing we knew .??. we were inside."

"Tiger Brandt?" Laura asked. She knew all about Tiger, who was married to Rahka Brandt, the captain of the Ventura. "Wait, you mean the Ventura is in here with us?"

"All seven ships were pulled in," Cornelius said gloomily.

Laura looked at the teacup again, ignoring all her tank yank discomforts. "And this is the inside of the Void?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. As far as we understand, it's some kind of micro--universe with a very different quantum structure

from spacetime outside. Thought can interact with reality at some fundamental level, which is why we've suddenly acquired all these mental powers."

"By the action of watching, the observer affects the reality of that which is watched," she whispered.

Cornelius raised an eyebrow. "Neatly understated."

"So how do we get out?"

"Good question." Cornelius indicated one of the large holographic images behind him. It showed her space with very few stars, and a number of exotic and beautifully delicate nebulae. "We can't see an end to it. The inside of the void seems to be some kind of multidimensional Möbius strip. In here, the boundary doesn't exist."

"So where are we going?"

Cornelius's mind leaked a sensation of desperation and despair that made Laura shiver again. "The Skylord is taking us to what it claims is an H-congruous planet. Sensors are confirming that status now."

"The what?"

Cornelius gestured. "Skylord."

With a stiff back, Laura turned around. The high-rez image behind her was taken from a sensor mounted on the forward section of the starship, where the ultradrive unit and force field generators were clustered. The bottom fifth of the image showed the curving carbotanium hull with its thick layer of grubby-gray thermal foam. On the top of the hologram was a small blue-white crescent, similar to any of the H-congruous worlds in the Commonwealth—though its night side lacked any city lights. And between the hull and the planet was the strangest nebula Laura could conceive. As she stared, she saw it had some kind of solid core, a long ovoid shape. It wasn't truly solid, she realized, but actually comprised sheets of some crystalline substance warped into an extraordinary Calabi-Yau manifold geometry. The shimmering surfaces were alive with weird multicolored patterns that flowed like liquid—or maybe it was the structure itself that was unstable. She couldn't tell, for flowing around it was some kind of haze, also moving in strange confluences. "Serious bollocks," she grunted.

"It's a kind of spaceborne life," Cornelius said. "Three of them rendezvoused with us not long after we were pulled into the Void. They're sentient. You can use your telepathy to converse with them, though it's like talking to a savant. Their thought processes aren't quite like ours. But they can fly through this space. Or at least manipulate it somehow. They offered to lead us to worlds inside the Void where we could live.

Ventura, Vanguard, Violet, and Valley followed two Skylords. Vermillion is following this one along with Viscount and Verdant. We decided that splitting the starships gives us a better chance of finding a viable H-congruous planet."

"With respect," Laura said, "why are we following any of them to a planet at all? Surely we should be doing everything we can to find the way out? All of us are on board for one reason, to found a new civilization outside this galaxy. Now, granted the inside of the Void is utterly fascinating, and the Raiel would give their right bollock to be here, but you cannot make that decision for us."

Cornelius's expression was weary. "We're trying to find an H-congruous planet, because the alternative is death. Have you noticed your biononic function?"

"Yes. It's very poor."

"Same for any chunk of technology on board. What passes for spacetime in here is corroding our systems a percentage point at a time. The first thing to fail was the ultradrive, presumably because it's the most sophisticated system on board. But for the last year there have been fluctuations in the direct mass converters, which were growing more severe. I couldn't risk leaving them online. We're using fusion reactors to power the ingrav drive units now."

"What?" she asked in shock. "You mean we've been traveling slower than light all this time?"

"Point nine light speed since we arrived, nearly six years ago now," Cornelius confirmed bitterly.

"Thankfully the suspension chambers have remained functional, or we would have had a real disaster on our hands."

Laura's first reaction was, Why didn't you get me out of suspension back then? I could have helped. But that

was probably what everyone on board would think. And from what she understood of their situation, the captain had done pretty well under the circumstances. Besides, her specialist field of molecular physics probably wouldn't be that helpful in analyzing a different spacetime structure.

She was drawn to the bright crescent ahead. "Is it H--congruous?"

"We think so, yes."

"Is that why you tank yanked me? To help with a survey?"

"No. We're six million kilometers out and decelerating hard. We'll reach orbit in another two days. Heaven alone knows how we'll cope with landing, but we'll tackle that when it happens. No, you're here because our sensors found something at the planet's Lagrange One point." Cornelius closed his eyes, and the image shifted, focusing on the Lagrange point one and a half million kilometers above the planet's sunlit hemisphere, where the star's gravitational pull was perfectly countered by the planet's gravity. The area was filled with a fuzzy blob that either the sensors or Laura's eyes couldn't quite focus on. It seemed to be speckled, as if it were made up from thousands of tiny motes.

"What is that?" she asked.

"We're calling it the Forest," Cornelius said. "It's a cluster of objects that are about eleven kilometers long, with a surface distortion similar to our Skylord friend."

"More of them?"

"Not quite, the shape is wrong. These things are slim with bulbous ends. And there's something else. The whole Lagrange point is emitting a different quantum signature from the rest of the Void."

"Another quantum environment?" she asked skeptically.

"So it would seem."

"How is that possible—?" Laura's shoulders slumped as she suddenly realized why she'd been tank yanked—she and the other science staff sitting in the bridge. "You want us to go and find out what it is, don't you?"

Cornelius nodded. "I cannot justify stopping the Vermillion in a possibly hostile environment to conduct a scientific examination. My priority has to be getting us down intact on an H--congruous world. So you'll command a small science team. Take a shuttle over to the Forest and run whatever tests you can. It might help us, or it might not. But frankly, anything that can add to our knowledge base has to be considered useful at this stage."

"Yeah," she said in resignation. "I can see that."

"Take shuttle fourteen," he said.

Laura could sense that shuttle had some kind of significance to him. It was the sensation of expectation running through his thoughts that signaled it, but her brain still wasn't up to working out why. She told her u--shadow to pull the file from her storage lacuna. Data on the shuttle played through her mind, and she still didn't get it .??. "Why that one?"

"It has wings," Cornelius said softly. "If you have a major systems glitch, you can still aerobrake and glide down to the surface."

Then she got it. "Oh, right; the shuttle doesn't need its ingrav units to land."

"No. The shuttle doesn't."

Laura's blood seemed to be chilling back down to suspension levels again. The Vermillion, over a kilometer long and not remotely aerodynamic, was utterly dependent on regrav to slow to zero velocity relative to the planet and ingrav to drift down to a light--as--a--feather landing. Of course there were multiple redundancies built in, and no moving parts, making failure just about inconceivable. In the normal universe.

"Once we've confirmed H--congruous status, I'll be launching all twenty--three shuttles from orbit,"

Cornelius said. "As will the Viscount and Verdant."

Laura told her u--shadow to recenter the bridge display on the -planet. It still couldn't interface with the starship's net. "Uh, sir, how did you load your orders into the command core?"

"Gaiafield. The confluence nest is one system that hasn't been affected by the Void."

And the confluence nest that generated the local gaiafield was hardwired into the ship's network, Laura

realized. Funny what worked and what didn't in the Void.

Users Review

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