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Revelation Space

Written by Alastair Reynolds

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REVELATION SPACE

Alastair Reynolds



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ONE

Mantell Sector, North Nekhebet, Resurgam, Delta Pavonis system, 2551

There was a razorstorm coming in.

Sylveste stood on the edge of the excavation and wondered if any of his labours would survive the night. The archaeological dig was an array of deep square shafts separated by baulks of sheer-sided soil: the classical Wheeler box-grid. The shafts went down tens of metres, walled by transparent cofferdams spun from hyperdiamond. A million years of stratified geological history pressed against the sheets. But it would take only one good dustfall – one good razorstorm – to fill the shafts almost to the surface.

'Confirmation, sir,' said one of his team, emerging from the crouched form of the first crawler. The man's voice was muffled behind his breather mask. 'Cuvier's just issued a severe weather advisory for the whole North Nekhebet landmass. They're advising all surface teams to return to the nearest base.'

'You're saying we should pack up and drive back to Mantell?'

'It's going to be a hard one, sir.' The man fidgeted, drawing the collar of his jacket tighter around his neck. 'Shall I issue the general evacuation order?'

Sylveste looked down at the excavation grid, the sides of each shaft brightly lit by the banks of floodlights arrayed around the area. Pavonis never got high enough at these latitudes to provide much useful illumination; now, sinking towards the horizon and clotted by great cauls of dust, it was little more than a rusty-red smear, hard for his eyes to focus on. Soon dust devils would come, scurrying across the Ptero Steppes like so many overwound toy gyroscopes. Then the main thrust of the storm, rising like a black anvil.

'No,' he said. 'There's no need for us to leave. We're well sheltered here – there's hardly any erosion pattering on those

boulders, in case you hadn't noticed. If the storm becomes too harsh, we'll shelter in the crawlers.'

The man looked at the rocks, shaking his head as if doubting the evidence of his ears. 'Sir, Cuvier only issue an advisory of this severity once every year or two – it's an order of magnitude above anything we've experienced before.'

'Speak for yourself,' Sylveste said, noticing the way the man's gaze snapped involuntarily to his eyes and then off again, embarrassed. 'Listen to me. We cannot afford to abandon this dig. Do you understand?'

The man looked back at the grid. 'We can protect what we've uncovered with sheeting, sir. Then bury transponders. Even if the dust covers every shaft, we'll be able to find the site again and get back to where we are now.' Behind his dust goggles, the man's eyes were wild, beseeching. 'When we return, we can put a dome over the whole grid. Wouldn't that be the best, sir, rather than risk people and equipment out here?'

Sylveste took a step closer to the man, forcing him to step back towards the grid's closest shaft. 'You're to do the following. Inform all dig teams that they carry on working until I say otherwise, and that there is to be no talk of retreating to Mantell. Meanwhile, I want only the most sensitive instruments taken aboard the crawlers. Is that understood?'

'But what about people, sir?'

'People are to do what they came out here to do. Dig.'

Sylveste stared reproachfully at the man, almost inviting him to question the order, but after a long moment of hesitation the man turned on his heels and scurried across the grid, navigating the tops of the baulks with practised ease. Spaced around the grid like down-pointed cannon, the delicate imaging gravitometers swayed slightly as the wind began to increase.

Sylveste waited, then followed a similar path, deviating when he was a few boxes into the grid. Near the centre of the excavation, four boxes had been enlarged into one single slab-sided pit, thirty metres from side to side and nearly as deep. Sylveste stepped onto the ladder which led into the pit and moved quickly down the side. He had made the journey up and down this ladder so many times in the last few weeks that the lack of vertigo was almost more disturbing than the thing itself. Moving down the cofferdam's side, he descended through layers of geological time. Nine

hundred thousand years had passed since the Event. Most of that stratification was permafrost – typical in Resurgam's subpolar latitudes; permanent frost-soil which never thawed. Deeper down – close to the Event itself – was a layer of regolith laid down in the impacts which had followed. The Event itself was a single, hair-fine black demarcation – the ash of burning forests.

The floor of the pit was not level, but followed narrowing steps down to a final depth of forty metres below the surface. Extra floods had been brought down to shine light into the gloom. The cramped area was a fantastical hive of activity, and within the shelter of the pit there was no trace of the wind. The dig team was working in near-silence, kneeling on the ground on mats, working away at something with tools so precise they might have served for surgery in another era. Three were young students from Cuvier – born on Resurgam. A servitor skulked beside them awaiting orders. Though machines had their uses during a dig's early phases, the final work could never be entirely trusted to them. Next to the party a woman sat with a compad balanced on her lap, displaying a cladistic map of Amarantin skulls. She saw Sylveste for the first time – he had climbed quietly – and stood up with a start, snapping shut the compad. She wore a greatcoat, her black hair cut in a geometric fringe across her brow.

'Well, you were right,' she said. 'Whatever it is, it's big. And it looks amazingly well-preserved, too.'

'Any theories, Pascale?'

'That's where you come in, isn't it? I'm just here to offer commentary.' Pascale Dubois was a young journalist from Cuvier. She had been covering the dig since its inception, often dirtying her fingers with the real archaeologists, learning their cant. 'The bodies are gruesome, though, aren't they? Even though they're alien, it's almost as if you can feel their pain.'

To one side of the pit, just before the floor stepped down, they had unearthed two stone-lined burial chambers. Despite being buried for nine hundred thousand years – at the very least – the chambers were almost intact, with the bones inside still assuming a rough anatomical relationship to one another. They were typical Amarantin skeletons. At first glance – to anyone who happened not to be a trained anthropologist – they could have passed as human remains, for the creatures had been four-limbed bipeds of roughly human size, with a superficially similar bone-structure.

Skull volume was comparable, and the organs of sense, breathing and communication were situated in analogous positions. But the skulls of both Amarantin were elongated and birdlike, with a prominent cranial ridge which extended forwards between the voluminous eye-sockets, down to the tip of the beaklike upper jaw. The bones were covered here and there by a skein of tanned, desiccated tissue which had served to contort the bodies, drawing them – or so it seemed – into agonised postures. They were not fossils in the usual sense: no mineralisation had taken place, and the burial chambers had remained empty except for the bones and the handful of technomic artefacts with which they had been buried.

'Perhaps,' Sylveste said, reaching down and touching one of the skulls, 'we were meant to think that.'

'No,' Pascale said. 'As the tissue dried, it distorted them.'

'Unless they were buried like this.'

Feeling the skull through his gloves – they transmitted tactile data to his fingertips – he was reminded of a yellow room high in Chasm City, with aquatints of methane icescapes on the walls. There had been liveried servitors moving through the guests with sweetmeats and liqueurs; drapes of coloured crêpe spanning the belvedered ceiling; the air bright with sickly entoptics in the current vogue: seraphim, cherubim, hummingbirds, fairies. He remembered guests: most of them associates of the family; people he either barely recognised or detested, for his friends had been few in number. His father had been late as usual; the party already winding down by the time Calvin deigned to show up. This was normal then; the time of Calvin's last and greatest project, and the realisation of it was in itself a slow death; no less so than the suicide he would bring upon himself at the project's culmination.

He remembered his father producing a box, its sides bearing a marquetry of entwined ribonucleic strands.

'Open it,' Calvin had said.

He remembered taking it; feeling its lightness. He had snatched the top off to reveal a bird's nest of fibrous packing material. Within was a speckled brown dome the same colour as the box. It was the upper part of a skull, obviously human, with the jaw missing.

He remembered a silence falling across the room.

'Is that all?' Sylveste had said, just loud enough so that everyone

in the room heard it. 'An old bone? Well, thanks, Dad. I'm humbled.'

'As well you should be,' Calvin said.

And the trouble was, as Sylveste had realised almost immediately, Calvin was right. The skull was incredibly valuable; two hundred thousand years old – a woman from Atapuerca, Spain, he soon learned. Her time of death had been obvious enough from the context in which she was buried, but the scientists who had unearthed her had refined the estimate using the best techniques of their day: potassium-argon dating of the rocks in the cave where she'd been buried, uranium-series dating of travertine deposits on the walls, fission-track dating of volcanic glasses, thermoluminescence dating of burnt flint fragments. They were techniques which – with improvements in calibration and application – remained in use among the dig teams on Resurgam. Physics allowed only so many methods to date objects. Sylveste should have seen all that in an instant and recognised the skull for what it was: the oldest human object on Yellowstone, carried to the Epsilon Eridani system centuries earlier, and then lost during the colony's upheavals. Calvin's unearthing of it was a small miracle in itself.

Yet the flush of shame he felt stemmed less from ingratitude than from the way he had allowed his ignorance to unmask itself, when it could have been so easily concealed. It was a weakness he would never allow himself again. Years later, the skull had travelled with him to Resurgam, to remind him always of that vow.

He could not fail now.

'If what you're implying is the case,' Pascale said, 'then they must have been buried like that for a reason.'

'Maybe as a warning,' Sylveste said, and stepped down towards the three students.

'I was afraid you might say something like that,' Pascale said, following him. 'And what exactly might this terrible warning have concerned?'

Her question was largely rhetorical, as Sylveste well knew. She understood exactly what he believed about the Amarantin. She also seemed to enjoy needling him about those beliefs; as if by forcing him to state them repeatedly, she might eventually cause him to expose some logical error in his own theories; one that even he would have to admit undermined the whole argument.

'The Event,' Sylveste said, fingering the fine black line behind the nearest cofferdam as he spoke.

'The Event happened to the Amarantin,' Pascale said. 'It wasn't anything they had any say in. And it happened quickly, too. They didn't have time to go about burying bodies in dire warning, even if they'd had any idea about what was happening to them.'

'They angered the gods,' Sylveste said.

'Yes,' Pascale said. 'I think we all agree that they would have interpreted the Event as evidence of theistic displeasure, within the constraints of their belief system – but there wouldn't have been time to express that belief in any permanent form before they all died, much less bury bodies for the benefit of future archaeologists from a different species.' She lifted her hood over her head and tightened the drawstring – fine plumes of dust were starting to settle down into the pit, and the air was no longer as still as it had been a few minutes earlier. 'But you don't think so, do you?' Without waiting for an answer, she fixed a large pair of bulky goggles over her eyes, momentarily disturbing the edge of her fringe, and looked down at the object which was slowly being uncovered.

Pascale's goggles accessed data from the imaging gravitometers stationed around the Wheeler grid, overlaying the stereoscopic picture of buried masses on the normal view. Sylveste had only to instruct his eyes to do likewise. The ground on which they were standing turned glassy, insubstantial – a smoky matrix in which something huge lay entombed. It was an obelisk – a single huge block of shaped rock, itself encased in a series of stone sarcophagi. The obelisk was twenty metres tall. The dig had exposed only a few centimetres of the top. There was evidence of writing down one side, in one of the standard late-phase Amarantin graphicforms. But the imaging gravitometers lacked the spatial resolution to reveal the text. The obelisk would have to be dug out before they could learn anything.

Sylveste told his eyes to return to normal vision. 'Work faster,' he told his students. 'I don't care if you incur minor abrasions to the surface. I want at least a metre of it visible by the end of tonight.'

One of the students turned to him, still kneeling. 'Sir, we heard the dig would have to be abandoned.'

'Why on earth would I abandon a dig?'

'The storm, sir.'

'Damn the storm.' He was turning away when Pascale took his arm, a little too roughly.

'They're right to be worried, Dan.' She spoke quietly, for his benefit alone. 'I heard about that advisory, too. We should be heading back toward Mantell.'

'And lose this?'

'We'll come back again.'

'We might never find it, even if we bury a transponder.' He knew he was right: the position of the dig was uncertain and maps of this area were not particularly detailed; compiled quickly when the *Lorean* had made orbit from Yellowstone forty years earlier. Ever since the comsat girdle had been destroyed in the mutiny, twenty years later – when half the colonists elected to steal the ship and return home – there had been no accurate way of determining position on Resurgam. And many a transponder had simply failed in a razorstorm.

'It's still not worth risking human lives for,' Pascale said.

'It might be worth much more than that.' He snapped a finger at the students. 'Faster. Use the servitor if you must. I want to see the top of that obelisk by dawn.'

Sluka, his senior research student, muttered a word under her breath.

'Something to contribute?' Sylveste asked.

Sluka stood for what must have been the first time in hours. He could see the tension in her eyes. The little spatula she had been using dropped on the ground, beside the mukluks she wore on her feet. She snatched the mask away from her face, breathing Resurgam air for a few seconds while she spoke. 'We need to talk.'

'About what, Sluka?'

Sluka gulped down air from the mask before speaking again. 'You're pushing your luck, Dr Sylveste.'

'You've just pushed yours over the precipice.'

She seemed not to have heard him. 'We care about your work, you know. We share your beliefs. That's why we're here, breaking our backs for you. But you shouldn't take us for granted.' Her eyes flashed white arcs, glancing towards Pascale. 'Right now you need all the allies you can find, Dr Sylveste.'

'That's a threat, is it?'

'A statement of fact. If you paid more attention to what was

going on elsewhere in the colony, you'd know that Girardieau's planning to move against you. The word is that move's a hell of a lot closer than you think.'

The back of his neck prickled. 'What are you talking about?'

'What else? A coup.' Sluka pushed past him to ascend the ladder up the side of the pit. When she had a foot on the first rung, she turned back and addressed the other two students, both minding their own business, heads down in concentration as they worked to reveal the obelisk. 'Work for as long as you want, but don't say no one warned you. And if you've any doubts as to what being caught in a razorstorm is like, take a look at Sylveste.'

One of the students looked up, timidly. 'Where are you going, Sluka?'

'To speak to the other dig teams. Not everyone may know about that advisory. When they hear, I don't think many of them will be in any hurry to stay.'

She started climbing, but Sylveste reached up and grabbed the heel of her mukluk. Sluka looked down at him. She was wearing the mask now, but Sylveste could still see the contempt in her expression. 'You're finished, Sluka.'

'No,' she said, climbing. 'I've just begun. It's you I'd worry about.'

Sylveste examined his own state of mind and found – it was the last thing he had expected – total calm. But it was like the calm that existed on the metallic hydrogen oceans of the gas giant planets further out from Pavonis – only maintained by crushing pressures from above and below.

'Well?' Pascale said.

'There's someone I need to talk to,' Sylveste said.

Sylveste climbed the ramp into his crawler. The other was crammed with equipment racks and sample containers, with hammocks for his students pressed into the tiny niches of unoccupied space. They had to sleep aboard the machines because some of the digs in the sector – like this one – were over a day's travel from Mantell itself. Sylveste's crawler was considerably better appointed, with over a third of the interior dedicated to his own stateroom and quarters. The rest of the machine was taken up with additional payload space and a couple of more modest quarters for

his senior workers or guests: in this case Sluka and Pascale. Now, however, he had the whole crawler to himself.

The stateroom's décor belied the fact that it was aboard a crawler. It was walled in red velvet, the shelves dotted with facsimile scientific instruments and relics. There were large, elegantly annotated Mercator maps of Resurgam dotted with the sites of major Amarantin finds; other areas of wall were covered in slowly updating texts: academic papers in preparation. His own beta-level was doing most of the scut-work on the papers now; Sylveste had trained the simulation to the point where it could imitate his style more reliably than he could, given the current distractions. Later, if there was time, he would need to proof those texts, but for now he gave them no more than a glance as he moved to the room's escritoire. The ornate writing desk was decorated in marble and malachite, inset with japanwork scenes of early space exploration.

Sylveste opened a drawer and removed a simulation cartridge, an unmarked grey slab, like a ceramic tile. There was a slot in the escritoire's upper surface. He would only have to insert the cartridge to invoke Calvin. He hesitated, nonetheless. It had been some time – months, at least – since he had brought Calvin back from the dead, and that last encounter had gone spectacularly badly. He had promised himself he would only invoke Calvin again in the event of crisis. Now it was a matter of judging whether the crisis had really arrived – and if it was sufficiently troublesome to justify an invocation. The problem with Calvin was that his advice was only reliable about half the time.

Sylveste pressed the cartridge into the escritoire.

Fairies wove a figure out of light in the middle of the room: Calvin seated in a vast seigneurial chair. The apparition was more realistic than any hologram – even down to subtle shadowing effects – since it was being generated by direct manipulation of Sylveste's visual field. The beta-level simulation represented Calvin the way fame best remembered him, as he had been when he was barely fifty years old, in his heyday on Yellowstone. Strangely, he looked older than Sylveste, even though the image of Calvin was twenty years younger in physiological terms. Sylveste was eight years into his third century, but the longevity treatments he had received on Yellowstone had been more advanced than any available in Calvin's time.

Other than that, their features and build were the same, both of them possessing a permanent amused curve to the lips. Calvin wore his hair shorter and was dressed in Demarchist Belle Epoque finery, rather than the relative austerity of Sylveste's expeditionary dress: billowing frock shirt and elegantly chequered trousers hooked into buccaneer-boots, his fingers aglint with jewels and metal. His impeccably shaped beard was little more than a rust-coloured delineation along the line of his jaw. Small entoptics surrounded his seated figure, symbols of Boolean and three-valued logics and long cascades of binary. One hand fingered the bristles beneath his chin, while the other toyed with the carved scroll that ended the seat's armrest.

A wave of animation slithered over the projection, the pale eyes gaining a glisten of interest.

Calvin raised his fingers in lazy acknowledgement. 'So . . .' he said. 'The shit's about to match coordinates with the fan.'

'You presume a lot.'

'No need to presume anything, dear boy. I just tapped into the net and accessed the last few thousand news reports.' He craned his neck to survey the stateroom. 'Nice pad you've got here. How are the eyes, by the way?'

'They're functioning as well as can be expected.'

Calvin nodded. 'Resolution's not up to much, but that was the best I could do with the tools I was forced to work with. I probably only reconnected forty per cent of your optic nerve channels, so putting in better cameras would have been pointless. Now if you had halfway decent surgical equipment lying around on this planet, I could perhaps begin to do something. But you wouldn't give Michelangelo a toothbrush and expect a great Sistine Chapel.'

'Rub it in.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Calvin said, all innocence. 'I'm just saying that if you had to let her take the *Lorean*, couldn't you at least have persuaded Alicia to leave us some medical equipment?'

His wife had led the mutiny against him twenty years earlier; a fact Calvin never allowed Sylveste to forget.

'So I made a kind of self-sacrifice.' Sylveste waved an arm to silence the image. 'Sorry, but I didn't invoke you for a fireside chat, Cal.'

'I do wish you'd call me Father.'

Sylveste ignored him. 'Do you know where we are?'

'A dig, I presume.' Calvin closed his eyes briefly and touched his fingers against his temples, affecting concentration. 'Yes. Let me see. Two expeditionary crawlers out of Mantell, near the Ptero Steppes . . . a Wheeler grid . . . how inordinately quaint! Though I suppose it suits your purpose well enough. And what's this? High-res gravitometer sections . . . seismograms . . . you've actually found something, haven't you?'

At that moment the escritoire popped up a status fairy to tell him there was an incoming call from Mantell. Sylveste held a hand up to Calvin while he debated whether or not to accept the call. The person trying to reach him was Henry Janequin, a specialist in avian biology and one of Sylveste's few outright allies. But while Janequin had known the real Calvin, Sylveste was fairly sure he had never seen Calvin's beta-level . . . and most certainly not in the process of being solicited for advice by his son. The admission that he needed Cal's help – that he had even considered invoking the sim for this purpose – could be a crucial sign of weakness.

'What are you waiting for?' Cal said. 'Put him on.'

'He doesn't know about you . . . about us.'

Calvin shook his head, then – shockingly – Janequin appeared in the room. Sylveste fought to maintain his composure, but it was obvious what had just happened. Calvin must have found a way to send commands to the escritoire's private-level functions.

Calvin was and always had been a devious bastard, Sylveste thought. Ultimately that was why he remained of use.

Janequin's full-body projection was slightly less sharp than Calvin's, for Janequin's image was coming over the satellite network – patchy at best – from Mantell. And the cameras imaging him had probably seen better days, Sylveste thought – like much else on Resurgam.

'There you are,' Janequin said, noticing only Sylveste at first. 'I've been trying to reach you for the last hour. Don't you have a way of being alerted to incoming calls when you're down in the pit?'

'I do,' Sylveste said. 'But I turned it off. It was too distracting.'

'Oh,' Janequin said, with only the tiniest hint of annoyance. 'Very shrewd indeed. Especially for a man in your position. You realise what I'm talking about, of course. There's trouble afoot, Dan, perhaps more than you . . .' Then Janequin must have noticed Cal for the first time. He studied the figure in the chair for a moment before speaking. 'My word. It is you, isn't it?'

Cal nodded without saying a word.

'This is his beta-level simulation,' Sylveste said. It was important to clear that up before the conversation proceeded any further; alphas and betas were fundamentally different things and Stoner etiquette was very punctilious indeed about distinguishing between the two. Sylveste would have been guilty of an extreme social gaffe had he allowed Janequin to think that this was the long-lost alpha-level recording.

'I was consulting with him . . . with it,' Sylveste said.

Calvin pulled a face.

'About what?' Janequin said. He was an old man – the oldest person on Resurgam, in fact – and with each passing year his appearance seemed to approach fractionally closer to some simian ideal. His white hair, moustache and beard framed a small pink face in the manner of some rare marmoset. On Yellowstone, there had been no more talented expert in genetics outside of the Mixmasters, and there were some who rated Janequin a good deal cleverer than any in that sect, for all that his genius was of the undemonstrative sort, accumulating not in any flash of brilliance, but through years and years of quietly excellent work. He was well into his fourth century now, and layer upon layer of longevity treatment was beginning to crumble visibly. Sylveste supposed that before very long Janequin would be the first person on Resurgam to die of old age. The thought filled him with sadness. Though there was much upon which Janequin and he disagreed, they had always seen eye to eye on all the important things.

'He's found something,' Cal said.

Janequin's eyes brightened, years lifting off him in the joy of scientific discovery. 'Really?'

'Yes, I . . .' Then something else odd happened. The room was gone now. The three of them were standing on a balcony, high above what Sylveste instantly recognised as Chasm City. Calvin's doing again. The escritoire had followed them like an obedient dog. If Cal could access its private-level functions, Sylveste thought, he could also do this kind of trick, running one of the escritoire's standard environments. It was a good simulation, too: down to the slap of wind against Sylveste's cheek and the city's almost intangible smell, never easy to define but always obvious by its absence in more cheaply done environments.

It was the city from his childhood: the high Belle Epoque.

Awesome gold structures marched into the distance like sculpted clouds, buzzing with aerial traffic. Below, tiered parks and gardens stepped down in a series of dizzying vistas towards a verdant haze of greenery and light, kilometres beneath their feet.

'Isn't it great to see the old place?' Cal said. 'And to think that it was almost ours for the taking; so much within reach of our clan . . . who knows how we might have changed things, if we'd held the city's reins?'

Janequin steadied himself on the railing. 'Very nice, but I didn't come to sight-see, Calvin. Dan, what were you about to tell me before we were so . . .'

'Rudely interrupted?' Sylveste said. 'I was going to tell Cal to pull the gravitometer data from the escritoire, as he obviously has the means to read my private files.'

'There's really nothing to it for a man in my position,' Cal said. There was a moment while he accessed the smoky imagery of the buried thing, the obelisk hanging in front of them beyond the railing, apparently life-size.

'Oh, very interesting,' Janequin said. 'Very interesting indeed!'

'Not bad,' Cal said.

'Not bad?' Sylveste said. 'It's bigger and better preserved than anything we've found to date by an order of magnitude. It's clear evidence of a more advanced phase of Amarantin technology . . . perhaps even a precursor phase to a full industrial revolution.'

'I suppose it could be quite a significant find,' Cal said, grudgingly. 'You – um – are planning to unearth it, I assume?'

'Until a moment ago, yes.' Sylveste paused. 'But something's just come up. I've just been . . . I've just found out for myself that Girardieau may be planning to move against me a lot sooner than I had feared.'

'He can't touch you without a majority in the expeditionary council,' Cal said.

'No, he couldn't,' Janequin said. 'If that was how he was going to do it. But Dan's information is right. It looks as if Girardieau may be planning on more direct action.'

'That would be tantamount to some kind of . . . coup, I suppose.'

'I think that would be the technical term,' Janequin said.

'Are you sure?' Then Calvin did the concentration thing again, dark lines etching his brow. 'Yes . . . you could be right. A lot of media speculation in the last day concerning Girardieau's next

move, and the fact that Dan's off on some dig while the colony stumbles through a crisis of leadership . . . and a definite increase in encrypted comms among Girardieau's known sympathisers. I can't break those encryptions, of course, but I can certainly speculate on the reason for the increase in traffic.'

'Something's being planned, isn't it?' Sluka was right, he thought to himself. In which case she had done him a favour, even as she had threatened to abandon the dig. Without her warning he would never have invoked Cal.

'It does look that way,' Janequin said. 'That's why I was trying to reach you. My fears have only been confirmed by what Cal says about Girardieau's sympathisers.' His grip tightened on the railing. The cuff of his jacket – hanging thinly over his skeletal frame – was patterned with peacocks' eyes. 'I don't suppose there's any point my staying here, Dan. I've tried to keep my contact with you below suspicious levels, but there's every reason to think this conversation is being tapped. I shouldn't really say any more.' He turned away from the cityscape and the hanging obelisk, then addressed the seated man. 'Calvin . . . it's been a pleasure to meet you again, after such a long time.'

'Look after yourself,' Cal said, elevating a hand in Janequin's direction. 'And good luck with the peacocks.'

Janequin's surprise was evident. 'You know about my little project?'

Calvin smiled without answering; Janequin's question had been superfluous after all, Sylveste thought.

The old man shook his hand – the environment ran to full tactile interaction – and then stepped out of range of his imaging suite.

The two of them were left alone on the balcony.

'Well?' Cal asked.

'I can't afford to lose control of the colony.' Sylveste had still been in nominal command of the entire Resurgam expedition, even after Alicia's defection. Technically, those who had chosen to stay behind on the planet rather than return home with her should have been his allies, meaning that his position should have been strengthened. But it had not worked like that. Not everyone who was sympathetic to Alicia's side of the argument had managed to get aboard the *Lorean* before it left orbit. And amongst those who had stayed behind, many previously sympathetic to

Sylveste felt he had handled the crisis badly, or even criminally. His enemies said that the things the Pattern Jugglers had done to his head before he met the Shrouders were only now emerging into the light; pathologies that bordered on madness. Research into the Amarantin had carried on, but with slowly lessening momentum, while political differences and enmities widened beyond repair. Those with residual loyalty to Alicia – chief among them Girardieau – had amalgamated into the Inundationists. Sylveste's archaeologists had become steadily embittered, a siege-mentality setting in. There had been deaths on both sides which were not easily explained as accidents. Now things had reached a head, and Sylveste was in nowhere like the right place to resolve the crisis. 'But I can't let go of that, either,' he said, indicating the obelisk. 'I need your advice, Cal. I'll get it because you depend on me absolutely. You're fragile; remember that.'

Calvin stirred uneasily in the chair. 'So basically you're putting the squeeze on your old dad. Charming.'

'No,' Sylveste said, through clenched teeth. 'What I'm saying is that you could fall into the wrong hands unless you give me guidance. In mob terms you're just another member of our illustrious clan.'

'Although you wouldn't necessarily agree, would you? By your reckoning I'm just a program, just evocation. When are you going to let me take over your body again?'

'I wouldn't hold your breath.'

Calvin raised an admonishing finger. 'Don't get stroppy, son. It was you who invoked me, not the other way around. Put me back in the lantern if you want. I'm happy enough.'

'I will. After you've advised me.'

Calvin leaned forward in the seat. 'Tell me what you did with my alpha-level simulation and I might consider it.' He grinned, impishly. 'Hell, I might even tell you a few things about the Eighty you don't know.'

'What happened,' Sylveste said, 'is seventy-nine innocent people died. There's no mystery to it. But I don't hold you responsible. It would be like accusing a tyrant's photograph of war crimes.'

'I gave you sight, you ungrateful little sod.' The seat swivelled so that its high solid back was facing Sylveste. 'I admit your eyes are hardly state of the art, but what could you expect?' The seat spun round. Calvin was dressed like Sylveste now, his hair similarly

styled and his face possessing the same smooth cast. 'Tell me about the Shrouders,' he said. 'Tell me about your guilty secrets, son. Tell me what really happened around Lascaille's Shroud, and not the pack of lies you've been spinning since you got back.'

Sylveste moved to the escritoire, ready to flip out the cartridge. 'Wait,' Calvin said, holding up his hands suddenly. 'You want my advice?'

'Finally, we're getting somewhere.'

'You can't let Girardieau win. If a coup's imminent, you need to be back in Cuvier. There you can muster what little support you may have left.'

Sylveste looked through the crawler's window, towards the box grid. Shadows were crossing the baulks – workers deserting the dig, moving silently towards the sanctuary of the other crawler. 'This could be the most important find since we arrived.'

'And you may have to sacrifice it. If you keep Girardieau at bay, you'll at least have the luxury of returning here and looking for it again. But if Girardieau wins, nothing you've found here will matter a damn.'

'I know,' Sylveste said. For a moment there was no animosity between them. Calvin's reasoning was flawless, and it would have been churlish to pretend otherwise.

'Then will you be following my advice?'

He moved his hand to the escritoire, ready to eject the cartridge. 'I'll think about it.'