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REVELATION
SPACE

"BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL OF THE YEAR"
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REVELATION SPACE

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 gravimeters 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 crepe 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