

Cathedral in Ice

The Aurora was a pearl white lozenge that swirled with color as it reflected radiation and heat, both of which could be converted into fuel for atmospheric flight or weaponized. Attached to the middle third of its eighty meter length were two wings with oval intakes that tapered five meters beyond the rear of the ship. At the midpoint of the ship was a bisected teardrop that contained the bridge and captains quarters. Behind that were two smaller engines whose primary function was emergency flight, which rose up at forty degree angles extending just beyond the rear of the ship.

The interior layout of the Aurora had not changed from a lifetime ago, before Ceren, a time when he was a level one agent shadowing Agent Gloria Gale. The lower half of the ship contained the majority of the functional equipment with the exception of the area allocated to the cargo bay which took up the rear quarter of the lower level.

The upper level from bow to stern was a corridor lined with four basic cabins on each side. This was followed by a kitchen on the left and a small fitness room directly across from it. At the end of the corridor was a wide staircase that wrapped around toward the bow with the left passage leading to the captain's quarters in the rear of the teardrop or the rear of the tear as the crew called it.

The passage to the right led to the bridge, which was dominated by a panoramic screen which could be unplated and function as a windshield during atmospheric flight. Along the screen three seats stood prominent, each among an array of hard wired instrumentation that was used in combination with the crew's implanted software. The rear of the bridge was wrapped by a bench and accompanying table that ran parallel to its curve.

Carver quietly walked down the corridor to the staircase and turned right toward the vacant bridge. Jones had left his crew behind. They had followed him on countless risky missions, but this one was also highly illegal. He did not disclose the nature of his mission. This made leaving them on Oasis a tough sell, especially for Ken, who felt a sense of rejection and jealousy toward Carver, but refused to display it. Jones asked for their trust in the matter which was reluctantly given.

Carver stepped forward standing before the screen mesmerized by the nothing/ everything that filled the view. Deep space brought back memories of his former life. A younger version of him had once stood in that very spot on a then crowded deck.

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Gloria Gale's black curly hair was contained in a bun as tightly wound as she was. She was a good agent, but rigid, like she was at war with chaos. Zion, a planet dominated by red and yellow foliage loomed large on the screen.

Jones held the tip of his tongue to his upper lip, a symptom of his thought process. "On approach, prep for equatorial orbit. Launch probe for thirty-one-seven north, thirty-five-two east." As the probe rounded the planet, they stood waiting for the first images that would reveal the fate of the settlement of New Jerusalem.

Leaving Earth thirty-five years before the Newton, Orwell, and Ashoka, the Creationist Christians has set out to form a purely Christian society, based on the belief that the Old and New Testaments were an outline describing a society that God had tasked them with creating. They believed that the holy books relayed the message as an allegory in the context of the times, a prophecy that was yet to be fulfilled as described by the prophet Elymas Bar. Their message upon landing was a triumphant account of their exodus. They were never heard from again.

The Historical Society of Oasis and Planetary Defense jointly funded Jones' expedition. In accordance with P.D. policy, an agent was to accompany all voyages in which contact with other societies was likely. Their directive was to ensure an expedition did not violate Oasis' isolationist laws. No member of the crew was to act as a diplomat or establish any type of

commerce. The expeditions were purely for observation and historical documentation. The unofficial directive of an agent was to assess the threat level and covertly obtain new technology if possible.

Agent Gale's expression did not change as the probe relayed its ominous message. Static turned to stretched initial sound as if the man's voice was carried on the wind. "To all who approach, turn back. A plague of the first born has descended upon Zion, a test from the unborn god. This is Bishop Manteo, the Shephard of None."

A long uneasy silence fell upon the bridge. Jones looked around then met eyes with Gale. "Sounds like things are going well." He turned to Ken. "What's the point of origin?"

"Sixty kilometers off of magnetic north."

Jones looked puzzled. "Take us into polar orbit." He turned back to Gale. She gave him a nod toward his quarters.

The door closed behind Carver. Jones looked at him then turned to Gale with a compounded annoyance. "Does your puppy follow you everywhere?"

Carver smirked. "Be careful. This puppy bites."

Jones plopped into an oversized chair offering no accommodations to the two inconveniences in his quarters. "I think the message is bullshit, scare tactic to keep us heathens out."

Gale considered hands clasped behind her back, posture rigid. "We have to proceed as if the threat is real. We'll take an exploratory party down in the shuttle until we can assess the legitimacy of his claim."

Jones gives a false salute. "Ey, ey, captain."

"You don't agree?"

"I do, I just don't like taking orders on my own ship."

"You took the funding. If you want to dance with the Devil, you can't complain if he wants to lead."

Jones stood his tall frame too thin to be imposing. "You have ice in your cunt."

Gale delivered a quick blow to his abdomen, recoiling back to her statue form before he impacted his chair. He curled up, clutching his gut. Through gritted teeth he managed. "Ok, now I'm turned on."

She turned to leave with Carver in tow.

Jones asked in an almost breathless gasp. "Can I call you?"

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The shuttle's sharp decent evened out over the choppy water and floating ice. In the cockpit, Marco the shuttle's pilot, kept it on manual as Jones stared, mesmerized by the new world. Carver and Gale sat in the cramped jump-seats facing Kuzou and Mule, their black environment suits a stark contrast from the crew of the Aurora's white and blue.

As the landscape became more ice than water Jones squinted from the glare but didn't seem to blink. The land rose and black sections of rock peeked out with horizontal icicles where the wind whipped water had frozen. In the distance, one such outcrop began to take on a more defined shape. Carver pressed foreword against his restraints and squinted as a cathedral in ice came into view.

Towering black smart steel loomed like a gothic skyscraper, too ornate for appreciation from their current distance. Craggy rocks and ice surrounded it feeding the monstrous appearance it projected. The one distinguishable feature was a massive round stained glass window located about three-fourths of the way up.

Marco pointed out a relatively flat area among the labyrinth of rock and ice peaks that surrounded the cathedral. Jones nodded and Marco banked the shuttle right. As he did, they noticed the back of what looked like a massive blue eel covered in white tubules, surface then dive as it made its way through one of the rivers of icy water that veined through the area.

They exited the ship and Jones led the expedition through an icy path that descended as it wound toward the cathedral.

There were two points when rushing water had to be traversed. The first was short enough for each member of the expedition to jump across, although the icy floor of the passage made it awkward. As Gale landed, she slipped and was caught in a hug with Jones. "Nice form."



She shrugged away.

To cross the second river, Mule launched a grappler across and the expedition crossed chest deep in the current pulling themselves along the steel cable. As was tradition, Marco, being the pilot was the last to cross. Jones reached down hauling the man up onto the ice, looked back down the path then turned to follow the group.

As he did, the eel surfaced, first sliding on the ice, then propelling itself a few meters with its tubules. Thoughtless predatory eyes shone a pale blue as its mouth sphinctered open revealing endless rows of hooked teeth. Jones tried to run, but was slow on the ice. Two black tongues shot fourth from the creature's mouth grabbed Jones and pulled him into its jaws with elastic speed.

The creature then slid back into the water as quickly as it had surfaced. The shocked members of the expedition ran toward the water. Marco and Carver were the first to reach it but arched back when the creature's tail whipped as it dove revealing its length to be close to fifty meters.

Both men slid on their backs. Carver crashed into a wall. Marco, unable to stop, fell into the current and was swept away but regained purchase on some exposed rocks twelve meters down where the river curved off to the south east. Mule fired a grappler that impaled itself into the ice less than a meter from Marco's head. Marco fought the current, making his way back to the group as Carver plunged his head into the water to see the creature's ghostly form slithering into the depths.

It disappeared then a blinding flash brought it back into view. Ten meters back from the creature's head an explosion split it open. Its slithering motion ceased and its head turned back at a strange angle as it examining its tail. A cloud of deep purple diffused into the water, then through it rose Jones, his white suit trailing a stream of purple blood and bits of alien biology.

He surfaces like a submarine bubbling up as Carver and Mule grabbed him, hauling him ashore. He sat for a moment resting against the shore of the path. He was upset but not shaken, more angry at having killed the first thing he encountered on this new world. He looked toward the water and seemed to offer some silent words of consolation to the creature, then looked up at Carver. Carver extended a hand, helping him up.

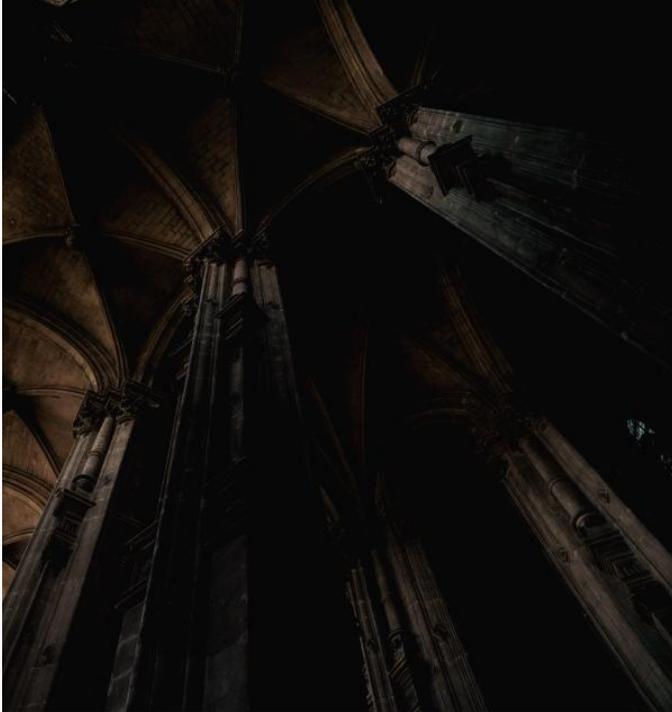
The path straightened out and the six members of the expedition got their first view of the cathedral's imposing presence. The massive black doors of a fortress tapered up to a point. On either side of the doors, covered in a thick layer of ice, stood eight meter statues of arch angles holding spears, on the left Michael, on the right Auriel. Their gaze of proud righteousness fixed on the southern horizon.

They stood for a moment taking it in. Mule spoke first. "Now what?"

Gale approached the doors, her Rosettaware attempting to communicate with the cathedral's system. As it struggled to establish a connection, Jones grew impatient. "Hello." Ice shattered and Gale stepped back as the angles crossed their spears before the door. Still coated in ice from the chest up they looked down examining the group.

Auriel spoke in a booming voice, his face motionless, his eyes a glossier black than the rest of his frame. "State your business."

Gale looked up. "We're a historical expedition from Oasis. We've come to learn of your culture and share ours with you."



There was no response. After a long moment, the angles returned their gaze to the horizon and the massive doors opened. The expedition stepped into the darkness.

Carver felt his implant scramble then shut down. The room was cavernous and only given boundaries when torches ignited around its perimeter. The flickering firelight suggested the presence of ornate carvings and statues, but the darkness obscured their detail. The main feature of the room was a golden gate directly ahead of them. The group walked around examining the walls, which up close seemed to depict a chronology of their exodus.

The golden gates opened and Father White stepped out of a wide ornate elevator, his head and hands glowing white, shone in the darkness. As he approached, the group gathered in the center of the room. The android wore a black cassock with a purple liturgical vestment. He smiled his face and eyes devoid of color, mannequin-like. "Welcome. I am Father White."

"I'm Brad Jones." Gale retracted her visor and Father White looked upon her with as much bewildered reverence as his blank face could show. Jones continued. "We're on a historical expedition from planet Oasis." Father White forced his gaze from Gale to Jones then addressed the group.

"You must be weary from your long journey. Let me show you to your accommodations." He ushered the group into the elevator and the golden gates closed.

Carver had expected the elevator to ascend due to the towering stature of the cathedral. To his surprise, it briefly descended, the gates opening to a small room lined with simple metal tables. "Weapons are not permitted in the Cathedral of Genesis. Please deposit them in the vault."

Jones and Gale exchanged glances. Father White offered as much reassurance as his barely featured face could project. "Trust is a most divine quality." He offered. Reluctantly, the six members of the expedition placed their weapons in the vault.

The elevator ascended to what Carver assessed to be half of the cathedral's height and opened. Carver's general sense of uneasiness focused for a moment on the figure that stood before them. Sister Eleanor's feature devoid face glowed white from behind her veil. Her perfect black habit met the floor and flowed slightly as the warm air from the elevator filled the hall, lending to her already ghost-like appearance.

She smiled and took a step back and to her left with a ballroom dancer's grace, her hands never leaving their place, clasped behind her back. The walls, ceiling, and carpet were slightly varying shades of deep red with a gold fleur-de-lis pattern running through the carpet.

As the group stepped out of the elevator, Sister Eleanor lightly guided Gale by the arm. "I'll show you to your quarters." They started down the corridor to the right.

Father White gestured to the left. "This way gentlemen." As Carver followed the men, he glanced back at Gale, who turned and met his eyes. Her look was not quite nervous, but apprehensive about being separated on an alien planet. She turned, not allowing her apprehension to breach their apparent religious custom.

After a real shower with real water, Carver pulled on the plain cotton clothes someone had laid out for him. He returned to the main room that was the hub of the suite. The room was round, with the entrance to the hall dividing the six rooms three to a side. On the western half of the circle two statues of saints Carver couldn't name stood on either side of a tall gothic window which was set out on a jetty. The floor had the same red and gold carpeting as the hall and two white sofas with gold ornamentation sat facing each other, the main feature of the room.

Carver apparently the first to be ready, stepped over to the window and took in the lifeless icescape. There was a comfortless peace about it. Carver's eyes began to water from the brilliant cheerless light. He blinked it away. He could tell by its angle at this hour that the sun never set on the Genesis Cathedral. A blue twilight would come then give way to a sun that also never rose.

Soon the men joined him and waited, then waited more. There was some talk about checking on Gale but although never explicitly stated, they felt it would be a breach of custom. The men talked on the couches. Carver was more of a witness to the conversation and keenly aware of an institutional rather than personal resentment as the conversation frequently reverted to past journeys and acquaintances that he could only be peripherally involved in. Jones was difficult to read. He had advanced degrees in history, journalism, and an encyclopedic knowledge of space, yet he seemed genuinely engaged in asinine conversations like having to take a shit in a space suit. Carver wondered how much was strategic morale building, being one of the guys, and how much was his mischievous nature.

Carver returned to the window. The blue twilight was beautiful and mesmerizing. He hadn't expected to see so many stars. When he finally broke from his spell he was about to suggest they check on Gale partially out of concern and if he was being honest, partially so he

didn't have to attempt to reengage in conversation when Father White entered. "Bishop Manteo will see you now."

The antechamber was dark, the only light a dim red emitting from lights that ran along the perimeter of the floor, six wall sconces, and a backlit red window which prominently displayed the Creationist Cradle.

Seated behind a massive black desk, Bishop Manteo was a mountain of indeterminable composition. Beneath the black doulette and layers of red, white, and gold ornamental clothing he seemed solid and imposing but his face had the low tone slack of a weakling. Everything about the man was pale, especially in contrast to his dark surroundings. His voice was the grim deep gravel from the transmission. "Welcome to Genesis Cathedral."

Jones spoke for the group. "We appreciate the hospitality Most Reverend."

Carver turned back as Father Drake, an android identical to Father White entered and joined him in the rear of the chamber, their glowing heads appearing to float freely in the dark. He had expected it to be Agent Gale. She would not allow this meeting to take place without her. He became concerned and broke in. "I think we should wait for Agent Gale before proceeding." Jones looked annoyed. He had wanted the opportunity to speak to the bishop without her restricting presence.

The bishop reassured Carver and waived his hand in a faint upward motion. "Agent Gale has an audience with the Pope." Jones chewed his lip. He had believed that the bishop was in charge, now she had subverted him. She would hear about it.

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Alone, Agent Gale ascended to the top floor of the cathedral. She looked down feeling awkward in the loose fitting floor length linen dress and wide hood that Sister Eleanor had delicately placed on her head before stepping back to admire her, like a proud mother on her daughter's wedding day.

The door opened to the most beautiful room she had ever seen. It was round, roughly fifteen meters in diameter. The floor was white marble with a gold flur-de-lis pattern running through it. The ceiling was a ten meter high dome with art derivative of the Sistine Chapel, except the roles of God and man were reversed. God was depicted as an infant, but with an expression of calm omnipotence. The glass walls curved around almost the entirety of the room offering a panorama of icy, silent, twilight. Stares shined clear through the blue glow.

From those great heights the place gave the impression that it existed somewhere between the world and heavens with a silence that stopped time. The thought that there is no greater art than nature occurred to her then fearing she was losing focus, getting enveloped by the ambiance, she turned her attention to the room's main feature.

On the far side of the room, directly across from the elevator's golden gates, stood a five meter wide ornate golden wall that rose to meet the base of the dome. Infinite meaning was

imbedded in its design that would take a lifetime to fully appreciate. Centered and slightly above the halfway point was a round design featuring the Genesis Cradle.

Gale watched it, mesmerized then at the edge of perception, the ornate clockwork of the circle began to slide. Larger parts shifted silently until white light blazed from the opening. A figure ascended from the curve of the shaft silhouetted in glory.

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Jones looked at the bishop. "What happened here?"

Bishop Manteo stared with eyes the pale green pallor of death, his expression unchanging for a moment, as if somewhere else. Then without any perceivable shift in his mental presence, he spoke. "To understand our trials, one must understand our beliefs. What do you know of us?"

"Just what was in the records from Earth. You left to found a Christian world. You want to create God."

The bishop flashed a humoring smile. "All true, but what is not contained in those records is that we developed the biotech to take that first step before setting foot on the arc. Every citizen of Zion was integrated with a Semita in Aeternum, which allows them to continue existing post mortem until they can be downloaded into Iudicium Machina where their deeds are processed and they live on in the everlasting light of salvation or suffer the toils of damnation."

The group was in awe. Jones spoke. "You achieved permanent existence in a virtual state?"

The bishop nodded proudly.

"Where is everyone? I mean, why is the cathedral here?"

The bishop looked distant again. "Our original settlement is now a land of demons. When Bethlehem was completed, we all rejoiced. When we came down from the arc there was much work to be done but we were finally free from Earth's oppression. We had a planet of our own, beautiful, a suitable birthplace for God.

Then came a sign, a gift that reaffirmed our mission. We were elated to find that all of the women even the virgins, were with child. As the pregnancies progressed, anomalies appeared in the anatomy of the first generation but we welcomed it. Who were we to question a miracle? All life is precious, or so we thought.

The infants appeared relatively normal but with more pronounced features and eyes a thousand variations of red and yellow, with the long pupils of a serpent. They had the strength of animals, crawling, climbing, running days after birth. Soon after they became wild, violent, attacking their nursing mothers, feral.

Many escaped into the tropical wilderness. We rounded up the ones that we could as they slept in the day and purged the demons in a great pit of fire, hundreds then thousands. They kept coming, gestating more rapidly in litters until it was decided that the vessels needed to be purged as well."

Jones interrupted. "The women, you burned the women?"

The bishop continued ignoring his half question. "Some disagreed with that decision, and there was a movement to return to Earth or seek another home but we could not allow this demon to spread."

The expedition exchanged suspicious glances.

"Like Abraham, our devotion to God was tested. There was a conflict between the devoted and those who had gone astray. Righteousness prevailed and I ordered the great arc into our star."

Jones looked puzzled. "Where was the Pope?"

"Unfortunately, he was one of those led astray."

"This organism, what is it? Have you studied it?"

"The demon can corrupt any form as we later discovered when examining the DNA of the native life. That is why we have come to this dead place at the top of the world."

"Where is everyone?"

The bishop looked puzzled. "Long deceased, repenting in Hell or in Heaven building God. Our people do not delay judgment. I alone have taken to the longevity treatments of Earth so that I may shepherd us in this physical plane. For the demons are plentiful now, wandering the jungles living as animals."

The crusaders search these untamed lands even today seeking to reclaim the souls of the initiated and extinguish the demons." The bishop pointed out two figures standing in the shadows that Carver had not noticed enter the room.

They were androids of the same type as Father White but with a body of silver. They wore a white cloak and tunic with a blazing red cross on the chest. Carver pictured blood splattering on the flawless pure white as the deadly androids cut their way through monstrous abominations of the human form.

The bishop looked at the men fully present, the vague fog of remembrance gone. He smiled. "All that has changed now. The chosen one has arrived. This lifeless place will be the birthplace of a new generation, pure as light."

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Gale watched as a shining gold form floated from the opening on two golden cables attached to its back. Ghostly and motionless, the Golden Pope glided toward her, its serene face not evoking its intended effect. It hovered before her a meter and half above the floor, admiring. When it spoke, its face remained unchanged. A warm lullaby of a voice came from everywhere. "And the vessel of God will descend from the stars."

Gale reflexively stepped back.

"Fear not my child, come." He glided, his cables trailing smooth and powerful, serpent-like. Gale followed him to the center of the panorama's curve and looked upon the horizon where ice met twilight. "You are the chosen one, the mother of a new generation."

Gale was taken aback by the words but felt strangely calm. "I think there's been a misunderstanding."

"You are truly of the stars, beauty and power unbound, yet unaware of your glory. That innocence, that purity, it magnifies their brilliance."

Gale's sense of calm became an absorption of warmth, her body so relaxed it almost felt foreign, separate from her being. The world began to disappear around her, all but the twinkling of the stars. She turned and they spun a brilliant swirling dance.

The Pope opened his arms. "Come to me child."

She staggered and braced herself palms against the glass. She focused on the landscape trying to gain some context in existence but her reflection came into focus instead. Mother Mary stared back at her. A partial realization came to her like a ray of light through the cloudy sky of her mind. Go! Now! Go!

She turned and staggered toward the elevator gates. "I have to go."

A look of pity emanated from the Pope's face as he tracked her on his silent serpent coils. "Soon you will be free of fear. Your mind will be free of the impurity of thought. Your body will exist in a state of eternal glory."

Gale pulled at the locked gate then clung to it, her legs like pillars of water. She screamed for help but it was slurred, distant, as if in a dream. The Pope caught her as she fell and held her cradled like a child.

"No! Let me go!" She slurred, squirming to no avail in the iron grip of his love. She screamed a submerged cry of rage and struck his face until the blood from her fist ran down it like crimson tears.

His soothing voice chanted from everywhere as the coils carried them back toward the light. "Hac tum practoria nane purgabit sordid ae. Et torque auream habebit in salva ero. Incunabula dues lucidum. Cunabula dues. Cunis lucis. Cunabula dues. Cunis lucis. Cunabula dues. Cunis lucis,"

Her desperate cries morphed into a helpless half conscious weeping as he carried her into the brilliant shaft. "Cunabula dues. Cunis lucis. Cunabula dues. Cunis lucis." Rather than an absence of sound, what filled the room was a presence of silence as the clockwork of the golden wall closed rebuilding the cradle.

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The feeling that something was very wrong swept over the man. Jones searched his mind for the most diplomatic was to address the implications of the bishop's words. Carver decided that the time for diplomacy had passed. "I want to see Agent Gale."

The bishop stood, his clothing like architecture holding his substantial mass. "I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Sensing aggression the two crusaders moved to flank the bishop. Carver didn't turn but got the sense that Fathers White and Drake had moved in closer behind them. "You can't see her because you're dead, killed by the savage demons of the equatorial jungles I'm afraid. At least that's what we'll tell your ship." The bishop looked toward the sky in mock communication with the ship. "I'm truly sorry for your loss. Their bravery and hunger for knowledge will be remembered. I'll prey for them."

Carver evaluated his chances of killing the man with the deadly looking crusaders so close. Before he could make a decision, a low pulse blasted from the crusader to his right and night fell upon his thoughts.

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Carver awoke to the sensation of falling. He hit and the falling sensation was replaced by one of being partially submerged in something. It took a moment to grasp his surroundings. He was in a cylindrical pit roughly fifteen meters in diameter. The pit was filled with charred bones the surface of which ended six meters below the edge. The walls of the pit were a scorched and scratched metal.

Mule and Izoku lay not far from him in various states of consciousness. He could only see the sky but the air felt thick and tropical. He could hear Jones struggling then a moment later the two crusaders tossed him flailing into the pit. He landed on his side to the clacking of dead wind chimes.

He grabbed a femur and desperately hurled it at the androids. It clicked off of the side of one's head who hadn't registered it as a threat or bothered to evade it. He screamed. "Suck a rusty dick you fucking appliance." The crusaders ignored him, returning to the transport to retrieve Marco. A moment later a barely conscious Marco was tossed in by the arm. He did a two hundred and seventy degree spin then crashed into the bones.

As Carver evolved further into consciousness, he found himself staring into the empty sockets of a woman's skull.



He noticed that there were many skulls but the ones belonging to the children were strange. They were slightly elongated with a ridge that bisected it bilaterally from crown to base. The eye sockets were smaller than normal and closer together. The most noticeable feature was the longer jaw and rows of tiny razor-like teeth. The sound of a puff of gas igniting paired with a sensation of warmth from under the bones brought more clarity.

An instant later he realized that his implant was live again. He scrambled awkwardly through the bones, trying to get as close as possible to the side where the crusaders appeared. If he was lucky, he would be in range to shut them down. The crusaders did not appear.

Close to where they had been Father Drake appeared. He looked down upon them, then up to the heavens. "Dim isit emundationem adustionem ignis. Fiet emundet mundi horum impuras animas. Dim isit emundationem adustionem ignis. Fiet emundet mundi horem impuras animas."

Carver called to Jones, who seemed to be the most present when he entered the pit. "How many are up there?"

"Two crusaders and this creepy freak show." He said gesturing to Father Drake.

Not wanting to tip his hand, Carver waited, hoping the crusaders would come into range. His patience reached its limit as Father Drake's chanting became more intense and he feared the fire beneath him would become an inferno at any moment. He decided to shut down Father Drake hoping to lure the crusaders in.

Before he could make that thought kinetic, it happened. Father Drake's attention snapped to a faint growling to the west. More growling and father Drake stood perfectly still for a moment then approached the sound. There was silence for a long moment, then a vicious snarl.

Immediately there was a chorus of snarls, the fleet shuffling of androids in action, more snarls, a pulse, and animal yelping, then silence. Two gravelly thuds sounded and Father Drake's head dropped into the pit landing near Carver, facing a woman's skull. His language center apparently undamaged, prayed with perfect clarity. "Hail Mary full of grace. The lord is with thee."

Carver picked up the head but instantly shifted focus when he noticed the faces of the other men. He followed their gaze to the edge of the pit craning back to get a better perspective, when a snarling beast appeared peering down at him.

The beast's head was a larger version of the child's skull he has seen, hairless with the exception of a shock of black fur that grew around its head, shoulders, and upper back. Its skin was yellow with many deep red blotches, its eyes small and black, close set, predatory. Its form was roughly human but with a musculature halfway between gorilla and man. Most demonstrative of its deviation from human form was its massive trapezius, latissimus dorsi, rounded rhomboids, and long claw-like hands which consisted of three fingers with a thumb on either side.

Father Drake rages at the site of the beast. "Heathen! Satan spawn! Our father who."

The beast stared at Father Drake, a low rumbling growl persisting like the idle of an ancient combustion engine. Carver tossed Drake's head aside and held up his hands in a universal gesture of, it's all yours. The growling ceased and the beast paced near the edge of the pit for a moment. Some primitive grunting behind the beast distracted it for a moment then it turned back to the pit with a snort, surveying the men once more then left as abruptly as it had arrived.

With everyone conscious and with mule serving as the base, the men formed a shaky human ladder allowing Carver to climb out of the pit. He found that the pit was located in the center of an overgrown area paved with cobblestones at the edge of a ruined town. To the south and west was about forty meters of scorched earth which bordered dense, yellow and red, tropical forest. There was no signs of the beasts' presence but Carver could feel them watching from the buildings, trees, or both.

At the far end of the cobblestone yard, Carver noticed their shuttle and a second one of different design intended to return the androids to the cathedral. He moved cautiously past the dismantled bodies of the two crusaders and the decapitated body of Father Drake whose prayers from the pit had become white noise in an otherwise silent town.

Carver retrieved a grappler from the shuttle and helped the other four men out of the pit with Izoku casually tossing Father Drake's head up to him. The men took in the strange ruins and alien ecology as they moved in an instinctive amoeba-like formation ever conscious of the fleeting peripheral movements all around them.

Jones was the first to reach the shuttle his head on an awe struck swivel but froze as he rounded its rear, almost walking into one of the beasts who stood just outside the entrance. The beast was somewhat smaller than the one from the pit but still frighteningly powerful. It regarded Jones, tipping its head to one side like a dog studying Jones' clothing then the shuttle. It looked back at Jones and did something strange. It pointed up with its three fingers.

The group looked up but noticed nothing but sky drifting with cumulus clouds. The beast hopped and snorted in frustration startling the men. Carver considered using his implant but

waited. He was not sure how it would affect the beast anyway. The beast ceased its hopping and pointed to Jones, then up, and they understood.

Jones took a shuttering breath and smiled. He nodded. "Yes." Then pointed to himself then up repeating the beast's gesture. The beast's gaze shifted now regarding the group. Jones teared up but did not cry. Without warning the beast turned and made his way across the scorched ground disappearing into the forest.

Marco pushed the shuttle north at full throttle. Jones examined a hole with sharp protrusions in the console. "I think the transponder may be damaged." He said in his patented overly obvious way. Marco broke off the acceleration. "I'm on it." They could not communicate directly but could be tracked. He stuttered the acceleration sending an S.O.S. to the Aurora then shot back to full burn.

Carver sat holding Father Drake's head, his implant working to access him. It had taken over two hours but by the time the shuttle had crossed into Zion's polar region he had access. "I'm in." He translated access to the group's civilian implants.

Father Drake spat the words. "Forgive me bishop."

Carver held up the head to eye level. "Father, I have a confession to make. I think you're an asshole." Carver looked to Izoku and Mule who were seated across from him in the rear of the shuttle. "Anyone else?"

He tossed the head to Izoku, who tossed it back. He tossed it to Mule who tossed it back to Izoku. The three men tossed the head around with no one wanting to claim possession of it. Father Drake ended the game, thundering at Mule. "You're too late. She's been erased."

Mule took the head and simulated it performing oral sex on him. "What's that Drake? It's bad manners to talk with your mouth full." The men laughed then Mule slammed the head into Izoku's crotch. With some effort Izoku batted it away. Father Drake's head dropped rolling to the rear of the shuttle.

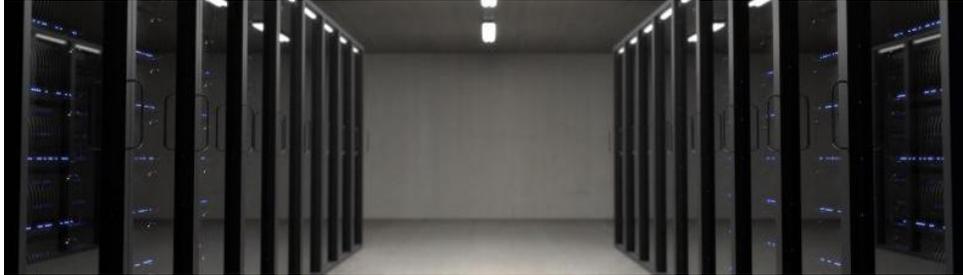
With no further need for etiquette Marco brought the shuttle in hot landing on the ice bank nearest Auriel. Carver shut the arc angels down as the men climbed down to the entrance. They breached the main room and entered the elevator without resistance.

As the men reclaimed their weapons, Carver's implant brought up a map of the cathedral. Carver turned to Jones and Mule. "The server is on the second level. Get that tech."

Jones began moving. "I've got to get those people out of Hell."

Carver nodded and turned to Marco and Izoku. "We'll find Gale." With the agent missing no one questioned his orders. Jones and Mule exited on the second floor. The elevator gates closed behind them as Carver, Marco, and Izoku continued up to level 6 where the bishop was detected.

Jones and Mule found themselves in a rounded corridor with scenes of human struggle embossed throughout, surrounding them. They continued toward more golden gates under angles, demons, swords, and fire frozen in conflict. Like the rest of the cathedral, the gates allowed them passage recognizing them as Father Drake.



The server was a maze of hardware, the tiny white and blue lights lending the appearance of it being a miniature city at night. The almost two-meter Jones felt even larger than usual. They came upon an access console. Jones sat and engaged as Mule stood watch at the nearest intersection.

Once in, Jones navigated through files and code. He left them untouched as he searched for the digitized population. He came to three portals similar to W2, Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. Each had an extensive list of identification numbers. The IDs in Hell and Purgatory had a counter associated with them tracking their penance. Jones decided to set their counters to zero and get out, but the explorer in him compelled him to glance into these worlds.

Mule kept his head on a swivel waiting, occasionally casting a glance back to Jones. Although he was engaged in a virtual space, his body was becoming increasingly agitated, letting out the muted and slurred utterances of a dreamer. The utterances became more frequent and intense finally culminating in a distinct cry of “No!”

Somewhere in the dark maze Father Dare’s head began to glow.

* * *

Carver, Marco, and Izoku steadied themselves as the elevator approached the sixth floor, but could never be ready for what they witnessed when the gates opened. The room was serene, windowless, and warm, lit with a dull blue that emanated from the ceiling. The heavenly ambient sounds that filled the background were disturbing when juxtaposed with the rhythmic slapping as the Bishop worked his holy seed into the vacant peaceful incubator that was Agent Gale.

Her body was cradled in an amalgamation of examination table and religious art. Neatly organized tubes that supported her with life and fertility supplements swayed in rhythm with the Bishop’s divine gyrations. The Golden Pope hovered on his cables above, arms outstretched, blessing the union. The Bishop turned with tears of joy in his eyes, not stopping, simply slowing. Lost in the experience, he seemed to not register the implications of their presence for a moment.

Carver considered himself a strategic thinker, one who carefully considered his options, but as he witnessed the semi-necrophilia, the Bishops pasty mass, the golden voyeur, the music, the tubes, the sweat, there was no room for strategy.

Carver simply fired into the Bishop's face removing a good deal of his pathetic open mouthed expression. He flopped foreword onto Gale spurting blood onto her beautiful vitamin enriched skin, one final insult. He slid to his knees then back, his wet erection the only thing left standing.

The Pope's scream came from everywhere as he recoiled. "No!" He shot foreword at Carver who dove to the right. Marco, too close to fire, jumped onto the Pope, drew his knife, and stabbed furiously at one of its cables. With its right hand the Pope reached back penetrating Marco's abdomen and pulled out a handful of torn intestine. Marco flopped to the floor.

The two remaining men opened fire. The bullets and Carver's implant had no noticeable effect as the Pope lived in the server. The golden idol before them was simply an extension, a physical representation of their beliefs.

He sprung foreword again grabbing Izoku by the arm and face. As they hit the wall, Izoku's skull shattered, its contents splattering on the flawless wall. Carver raised his weapon to fire and the Pope backhanded him to the floor.

He turned back to his bloody virgin, scooping her up, cradling her. As Carver sat up, the Pope's momentary nurturing turned back to rage. The tubes tore free from Gale's body as the Pope recoiled into the shaft in the wall. It closed leaving the image of a golden cradle.

The cathedral's system indicated that the Pope was moving to the top level. Carver scrambled into the elevator in pursuit. A gust of freezing wind struck Carver as the gates to the Pope's heavenly panorama opened.

* * *

Sickened by what he had witnessed, Jones released all of the damned souls to Heaven. He was ready to disengage when a new soul appeared. The indicium machine condemned Bishop Manteo to one thousand years in Hell. Jones did not alter the sentence.

Mule perceived movement in his peripheral and looked to the left, down the longest of the dim corridors. In the dark, Father Dare's head glowed white appearing disembodied, floating. He approached, his gate quick but dignified. "You are not authorized to be here."

Mule turned to Jones, who had his head in his hands, recovering from what he witnessed on his tour of Hell. The words did not register. The gunshots did. Father Dare sidestepped back into the maze with graceful but terrible speed. "We've got to go."

Jones engages in the present and drew his pistol. They stalked through the maze of electronics as they made their way back to the elevator. Mule fired as Father Drake crossed into another section of the maze in an attempt to head them off.

They reached the corridor and stood back to back with Jones covering the elevator, Mule covering the rear. They waited as the elevator made its way from the top floor. The seconds ticked away.

Silently, without warning, Father Drake charged into the corridor with inhuman speed. His charge progressed as an awkward stop-motion nightmare as Mule unloaded his weapon. Father Drake dropped to the floor dragging himself toward them, transparent whitish fluid spilling out on the carpet. He lurched a final time reaching for Mule's leg. A shot from Jones' pistol extinguished his light. Through the shattered portion of its head they noticed small mechanisms struggling to maintain function.

The elevator gates slid open startling the two men. They entered and ordered the elevator to ascend in order to join the man on the sixth floor, then Carver who they could see on their map, had split off from the others.

The elevator ascended smoothly allowing Jones and Mule a moment to breathe. Any remnants of these breaths were expelled when the gates slid open revealing the aftermath of what had occurred on the sixth floor. Jones and Mule froze in step.

The Bishop's blood had formed a red carpet to the elevator gates that trickled down the space and down the shaft. Mule held the gate for a moment as they panned their weapons reviewing the scene. Neither of them spoke as the gates closed and they headed up to meet Carver.

Two floors later, the elevator stopped and powered down. Jones and Mule pried the gates open and found themselves in the cathedral proper. It was the largest space in the cathedral roughly forty meters from entrance to altar and thirty meters wide. On either side of the rows of pews, pillars rose into the darkness that the twilight from the stained glass windows could not penetrate. Dim shadows danced to the flickering of candles in ornamental blue glass that stood on either side of the altar.

Jones caught a glimpse of something moving at the edge of the shadows. Silently, he gestured to Mule nodding up and to the right. A blur of darkness scurried quick and spider-like into the wall's umbra. They stared, weapons trained as Sister Eleanor's head illuminated under its hood. On all fours, it scurried down a column blocking their exit.

Mule aimed then Jones put his hand on the weapon, lowering it. Mule was confused until he followed Jones' gaze to the ceiling where dozens of priests illuminated their heads peering down from predatory perches.

* * *

Carver shielded his face from the wind whipped glass shards. He noticed the Golden Pope cradling gale out in the freezing twilight, his cables extending through a shattered portion of the glass and into the shaft at the far end of the room.

The Pope was praying as he gently rocked her. He noticed Carver and became agitated, slithering on his cables. He held her up like a virgin sacrifice. "You did this. She was our salvation." He shook her. "She's just meat now." With that, he dropped her.

Carver ran, his hands slapping against the cold curvature of the glass wall and watched her drop until she became a small stain on the icy rocks below. He screamed and fired at the Pope's cables, then at the pope as he reentered the room.

The Pope backhanded Carver to the floor with immense strength, his gun tumbling across the carpet. The Pope reared up, hovering above Carver. "Now you suffer heathen. Now you feel the wrath of God."

From his back, defiance through a the Pope reared up to Carver thought he was had been the Pope golden snow, sparkling,

He sat up and twist and writhe as they shaft. He noticed a small center of the damaged it, in the distance, the Aurora hovering a kilometer away.



Carver stared in blood soaked mask as strike. For a moment, dead as particles that drifted down like beautiful.

watched the cables slithered back into the black hole near the glass wall and beyond

He stood, noticed Jones' and mule's signature on the eighth floor, and called the elevator. It soon became apparent that it had powered down. Trapped on top of the world he approached the shattered portion of wall in the hope that he could climb down a level. He quickly ruled that out when he noticed that the base of the room was smooth and sloped seamlessly inward.

He reentered the room and attempted to pry open the gates to the shaft to no avail. He had similar results when he attempted to breach it, running as Father Drake. He looked out and

wondered how close the Aurora could come, when his implant told him something strange. Jones and Mule had left the building.

* * *

The wind threatened to rip them from the cathedral as Jones and Mule scaled the icy ornate exterior features making their way up, firing at the androids that had attacked them when they escaped through a stained glass window and now poured out climbing with terrible, inhuman, motions. Jones yelled to Mule above the wind. "Is it too late to convert?"

Mule's automatic pistol detached the closest priest, who fell periodically striking parts of the cathedral, its dark vestments flapping in the wind as it twisted violently. "I don't know. They seem forgiving."

* * *

Carver leaned out through the damaged wall to communicate directly without using the cathedral's system, which was most likely monitored. "Jones, you there?"

"Level eight exterior. You coming to join the party?"

"I'm trapped up top." Carver looked out at the Aurora and signaled for them to loop around to help Jones.

He looked down at Gale's body again then just stared at the landscape, eyes not focused on anything in particular. It was then that he noticed it.

* * *

Jones and Mule did their best to fend off the hoard of holy androids but they began to fan out surrounding them. They were on the verge of becoming overwhelmed when the Aurora, now less than one hundred meters away broke the horizon of the cathedral and began disintegrating the androids with white beams that cooked the air as they flashed.

Jones and Mule continued firing as the androids closed in, then coming down from above, was the shuttle. Carver stood in the rear hatch calling for them to jump. Mule who was positioned three meters up and to the right of Jones, noticed one of the priests drop toward Jones. Mule kicked off, intercepting it. They bounced off of the roof of the shuttle then fell man and machine continuing their struggle even as they plummeted to the icy rocks below.

Jones just stared at the twisted amalgamation of meat and machine that lay at the foot of the cathedral. Carver called out. "Jones, jump. Jones." Carver shot a priest closing in on Jones from the right. "Jones,"

With that, Jones snapped out of it and on legs of rubber he leapt toward the shuttle, landing on his side. Carver helped him as he clambered on the floor then shut the door and pulled away just out of reach of a diving android. From above another launched and latched onto the rear of the shuttle. A moment later, a fist smashed through the hatch reaching then

retracting. Two hands gripped the puncture tearing at it. Carver shut it down and it fell away. Through the hole Carver watched the androids crawling around the cathedral's exterior like insects.

Carver guided the shuttle via implant back to the Aurora. The two men sat in silence trying to process everything that occurred, the people they lost, the fate of the creationists. When the shuttle docked in the Aurora, and both men rose to leave, Jones broke the silence, putting his hand over the hatch. "I didn't take the tech."

"We barely got out with our lives. That's understandable."

"No, I mean I was in. I could have. But I didn't"

"That's post physical life. Humanity has been striving for that for."

Jones put his hand up in a gesture of knowing. "I know. I know how valuable it is but it would destroy us. We already have infinite life spans. If life were permanent it would be completely devalued."

"Some would say it's devalued now. It's not a reason."

"Our society can't function if old regimes don't die out. It's ok for a dogmatic culture like the Creationists. Religions think they already have the answers, but democracies need to evolve, to learn, to progress."

"We would never lose anyone."

"We would never have anyone."

Later, alone on the bridge, Jones sat staring out at the stars, wondering how the damned would exist in heaven. Could they find happiness after such torment or would they be forever haunted. Could they forgive their digital God?

