

Planetary Pilgrims' Progress

By Nico Carroll

Creation's vast firmament glistens with innumerable stars. Amongst these scattered jewels, a massive star-ship glides through the lightless depths. A lofty central dome perches atop a craggy base, flanked by two long arms that each end in a smaller dome. This is the Galactic Cathedral, home of the Cosmic Cult.

Father Ivir, Archimandrite of the Cult, paces impatiently within the central dome of the Chapel Vault. His two companions, Sister Rassi and Brother Stavro, stand at their stations, heads bowed toward their work. Eerie green light plays across Sister Rassi's features, as the Holy Holography displays glowing, shifting figures that hang in the air before her.

"Where's that sensor-data analysis?" Ivir barks.

"Nearly complete, Father," responds Rassi. "There, yes, we have truly been blessed! The star system we approach contains a planet rich in useful minerals."

"Increase speed and prepare to commit a hyperspace beacon," orders the Archimandrite. "Once that beacon's in place, we'll have a trans-light conduit leading back here, should we need to return with haste," he muses, mostly to himself, "not to mention that it substantiates our legal claim to this system."

"Aye, Father, we will soon be in range," says Rassi.

"Father!" Brother Stavro bursts in, "The telepathic scanner detects an approaching vessel of unknown configuration. Correction, several vessels, they appear to be some sort of space-borne robots."

"Is there time to deploy the beacon before they arrive?"

"Negative, they're moving quite..."

Brother Stavro's report is interrupted by the crackling of the loudspeaker. A message comes in over the Universal Translator: "Your presence is disrupting in the Mechagen Administrative Zone. Ceasing your disorderly conduct and withdrawing immediately! Alternative is forceful expelling!"

"Sister, send the following response," commands the patriarch, "The Cult of Cosmic Inspiration recognizes no previous claim on this or any other unbeaconed system. It is you who shall withdraw or face the consequences!"

The loudspeaker erupts with an ear-splitting shriek; controls and displays throughout the chapel dome flash wildly.

"What's happening?" Ivir demands.

“Scanning beams, perhaps,” Brother Stavro responds, “extremely powerful, they’re disrupting our systems!”

“Engage the Prismatic Screen!” Ivir yells over the keening of the loudspeaker.

Brother Stavro focuses his psychic energies toward the towering crystal prism in the center of the dome. He quickly breaks off, clutching his head in both hands. Tears trickle from his eyes as he wails “something’s wrong with – with the Prism. It’s not responding.”

“I’m detecting an energy surge,” Sister Rassi announces, “Hostiles are powering up their weapons. Firing some sort of magnetic disruptor.”

“Summon the Mystic Ward,” says the Archimandrite, “quickly now!”

The three disciples bow their heads and mumble a prayer. A low hum resonates through the entire cathedral.

“It’s not enough” cries Rassi, “they’re overwhelming our defenses. I’m raising the Celestial Deflector.”

“Is the Prism back on line?” Ivir asks.

“Negative,” Stavro replies “I’ve no idea what’s wrong with it.”

“Sister, purge the Prism!” Ivir shouts.

Rassi adopts a serene expression and places both hands against the Prism. It flashes chaotically for a moment, then winks out. The next second, a deep droning emanates from the crystal, as it resumes its accustomed pale-green luminance. “Yes, I believe that did it,” Rassi sighs with obvious relief.

“What’s the position of the hostile?”

“Scanning,” says Rassi as he stares into his sensor displays, “by the Lord, they’re right on top of us!”

A thunderous boom echoes throughout the ship. Arcs of electricity jump from ceiling to floor, the stinging smell of ozone fills the dome, the cultists’ skin tingles as their hair stands on end. An instant later, everything goes dark.

The Galactic Cathedral tumbles, cold and dark, through deep space. Slowly, lights begin to flicker across its surface. Inside the chapel dome, the shaken crew begin to struggle to their feet.

“Status report,” Father Ivir grumbles.

“Checking Holo-Records,” Rassi says thinly, “it appears we were attacked by some unknown, fourth-dimensional weapon. We sustained heavy damage to the hull and the Gravity Well Drive. Auto restoration systems are functioning properly, thank Providence. I’m searching the Holography for a star-chart to identify our position.”

“Father!” yelps Stavro, “the Telepathic Scanner is picking up an alien star drive’s ion signature. There’s something peculiar about these readings, though...”

“Elaborate, my child.”

“There’s a star drive, but as far as I can tell, no ship. It’s surrounded by, well, life-form signatures”

“What in Heaven does that mean? Report!”

“The only explanation I can offer is some sort of cyborg – a living ship. Initiating deep scan...Father, it’s vanished from my screens. Perhaps it was only a spirit, or a malfunction resulting from the attack.”

“I have a fix on our position,” Sister Rassi breaks in, “The damaged GW drive forced us 2.3 parsecs off course.”

“By God’s grace,” rumbles the Archimandrite, “That first-contact planet was meant for us! No soulless machine has the right to take it from us!”

“Of course you’re right, Father,” coos Rassi, “But perhaps the Lord has sent us here for a reason. I’m detecting a very promising star system not half a parsec from here.”

“Very well, move in and prepare a beacon,” orders the patriarch.

“Father, my scans detect that the fourth planet is extremely rich in geothermal energy,” Stavro announces, “Surely it would glorify God to make this world ours.”

“Deploying beacon,” Rassi says, “Stand by.”

“Brother, keep your scanners at maximum,” commands Ivir, “I want to be ready if that that iron-plated infidel tries to interfere again.”

“Roger that!”

Sister Rassi’s hands begin to dart amongst the dancing figures of the Holography.

“Programming beacon coordinates,” she says as her eyes fixate upon its ghostly icons, “Charging...deploying...the planet is ours, Father!”

“This truly is a benefaction, my child. But it is no time to rest. This galaxy is not safe from atheists and idolaters, whose godless avarice would snatch this planet from us. Sister, have ExoBot 2 remove the ventral transept plating and take it to the surface to protect our beacon.”

“Deploying ExoBot.”

In the airless silence of space, a spider-like droid detaches itself from its holding pod. It crawls across the surface of the Cathedral, skittering to the underside of the starboard transept arm. The intense blue glare of its arc welder pierces the hollow dark, as it cuts free the armor plating and clamps it to its back. Scuttling to the port transept, it repeats the process, then leaps free and plummets to the planet below.

“ExoBot away, Father. Engaging gravity well drive.”

The space before the cathedral warps into an eye-baffling four-dimensional cone, a point of infinite blackness at its point. The cathedral falls into the gravity well, simultaneously pushing it away. In this wise, the ship rapidly accelerates to relativistic speed.

“Perhaps we should investigate that mysterious reading,” Stavro proposes, “God willing, we should revealate as much as we can about this potential threat.”

“Agreed,” says Ivir, “plot a pursuit course for our enigmatic interloper.”

The cathedral hurtles through time-dilated space, while Brother Stavro’s scanners probe the emptiness. Then, a blip appears.

“We’ve moved into sensitivity range of an unknown vessel. I’m also detecting low-frequency electromagnetic radiation, possibly primitive transmissions...confirmed, the unknown vessel is in orbit around an inhabited planet.”

“Sister Rassi, move us closer,” the patriarch commands, “Brother, what more can you tell me of this unknown vessel?”

“It’s the same strange readings as before. Long range telemetry is coming in now...yes, it’s as I suspected. The vessel appears to be some giant animal, its body blasphemously fused with machines. I’m detecting a star drive, shields...and extensive weapons systems. Wait, scanners are now detecting a second life-form. It shows similar bio-signatures, but it’s much smaller. By the saints, it’s deploying its own offspring as some sort of biological beacon!”

“Do we have visual contact?”

“Yes, Father, on screen now.”

A spectral view-screen shimmers into existence before the Archimandrite, projecting forth from the scintillating psychic prism. It shows an enormous red arthropod orbiting a black planet. The planet’s surface shines with the light of numerous cities.

“It looks like a gigantic crawfish!” Father exclaims, “Truly a remarkable example of the Lord’s infinite invention. It’s unfortunate that this dumb beast has decided to settle here, though. Brother Stavro, fire the Aeon Beam!”

“Firing.”

A triangular religious symbol rises from the top of the chapel dome. Arcane runes pulsate with light, growing rapidly in intensity. Suddenly, a fissure opens in space, running from the triangle toward the crustacean’s airtight carapace. A flood of extradimensional tachyons ages the very fabric of matter, dismantling it at the subatomic level.

“The creature reacts with incredible speed!” Stavro declares “It has avoided the brunt of the beam.”

“More power,” Ivir demands, “This brute will feel the Lord’s wrath!”

“Increasing power” says Rassi.

“Something is happening,” Stavro cries, “the beast is using some sort of quantum inverter, turning the Aeon beam against itself. The beam is banished!”

“Father,” Rassi announces “the attack has strained our power relays. Our defenses could be compromised.”

“The beast is launching a stream of high-velocity particles at us,” Stavro proclaims, “I don’t think we can take this barrage.”

“Very well,” the Archimandrite’s lip curls in rage, “retreat.”

Once more, the cathedral slides toward its ever-retreating singularity, easily outpacing the crustacean’s attack. Time expands and space contracts as the ship rushes toward an unknown destination.

“We’ve achieved a safe distance”, reports Rassi, “Disengaging gravity well drive.”

“Status report” Ivir says.

“The telepathic sensor is detecting high-energy discharges around a nearby star,” Stavro replies.

“Sister Rassi, move us closer. Brother Stavro, scanners at maximum.”

“Performing full scan” Stavro announces, “Stand by...energy signatures centered around the second planet...life signs detected on the planet...atmospheric composition is consistent with widespread and abundant photosynthesis.”

“On a world such as this, the faithful might till the soil most fruitfully,” muses Ivir, “Now, what of these energy readings?”

“I’m scanning two ships, apparently in the throes of a violent conflict. I can verify that one is our metallic friend from before. The other is unknown, I’m only getting a silhouette.”

“Well, let’s see it,” the patriarch enjoys, “Sister, are we on course toward that planet?”

“Yes, Father,” replies Rassi “We’ll be within weapon’s range in a few seconds.”

“Silhouette on screen now,” says Stavro.

The viewscreen appears, displaying a dark outline against the starry cope. It traces an ovoid shape, flanked at each pole by a profusion of thick filaments.

“Father,” Stavro begins, “something is happening to those infernal robots. This strange egg-shaped ship has possessed their systems. Their power output is off the charts!”

“We’re being engulfed by an unknown energy field,” Rassi declares “emanating from those Mechagens. Our systems are overloading, approaching critical!”

“Get us out of the field, sister,” commands the Archimandrite.

“Activating gravity well for short range elusive acceleration,” says Rassi, “We’ve escaped the energy field, power levels normalizing.”

As the cathedral narrowly evades the strange attack, bright bursts of light flash and play across the robots’ hulls. Clouds of debris and smoke spiral forth as the Mechagens spin wildly out of control, plunging toward the nearby star and out of sight.

“Blessedly, we barely avoided a massive systems overload,” Rassi pronounces, “It appears those robots didn’t fare as well.”

“Is the Aeon Beam ready to fire?” Ivir asks,

“Not yet, Father”, answers Rassi, “but the Numinous Disruptor is on line.”

“Very well, summon the Numen and attack!”

The chapel dome is surrounded by a golden glow, coalescing into an angelic shape. It rises from the cathedral and leaps toward the egg-ship, only to be turned back by a disk of flashing sparks.

“The enemy is protected by a screen of antiparticles,” Stavro relates, “our attack can’t penetrate it.”

“Pray, my children, pray that God’s vengeance rains sorrow upon this wretched unbeliever!”

The three disciples join hands around the Psychic Prism, heads bowed, lips moving in prayer. Their devotion channels through the crystal and into the void beyond, curving the fabric of space itself. The numen presses forward with a vengeful vigor, tearing at the egg-ship's screen.

"The numen's strength grows with our prayer," Stavro declares, "but it is not enough!"

"Very well," Ivir sighs, "use the entropic accelerator."

"This will consume our power reserves," Rassi complains, "we will be left completely vulnerable."

"This planet must be ours!" shouts the patriarch, "Engage the accelerator now!"

The screen flickers as the numen drives toward the egg ship and corroded pock-marks form on its shell. With a burst of coruscating sparks, the screen vanishes. The attack slams into the battered egg, sending it flailing across the interstellar void.

"Our faith has triumphed over the heathen!" Stavro cries.

"Yes, let us give praise to the Lord," Ivir suggests, "By His will, soon the whole galaxy will be ours!"