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Approx 1400 words

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## THE AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 16 – HOLLOW JUSTICE

by  
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Father Matthias stood in the arched hallway of St. Michael’s Cathedral, the filtered sunlight painting patterns on the worn stone floor. His hands were clasped in front of him, and he fought the anxious tremor in his fingers. Bishop Alcott’s office door stood ajar, and he could hear the familiar, measured voice inside, speaking on the phone. He didn’t have to strain to catch the words—the bishop was speaking loudly, perhaps purposefully.

“Yes, I understand, Senator. The church’s position remains clear. Digital consciousness is not a soul. The data stored in the Forever Program is merely a simulation—a shadow, not a person.”

There was a long pause, and Alcott’s tone softened, his voice dropping just slightly. “We cannot endorse the idea that humanity can be digitized. Doing so would undermine the fundamental tenets of faith. Yes, of course. Thank you for your understanding.”

A soft click signaled the end of the call, and Matthias hesitated before lightly knocking on the doorframe.

“Come in,” Alcott called, his tone instantly warm and welcoming.

Matthias stepped inside, offering a polite nod. Alcott, a tall, stately figure with graying hair and piercing eyes, gestured for him to sit.

“I’ve been meaning to speak with you, Father Matthias,” Alcott began, folding his hands on the desk. “You’ve no doubt heard about the upcoming congressional hearing.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Matthias replied, his voice steady despite the unease gnawing at his stomach. “I was informed this morning that they expect me to testify.”

Alcott nodded, offering a reassuring smile. “There’s no need to worry. The church’s position is firm and unassailable. You will simply affirm our long-standing doctrine—that digital entities are not souls. We must not allow modern technology to blur the lines of our faith.”

Matthias forced himself to nod, though his thoughts raced. “Of course, Your Grace. I understand.”

Alcott gave him a thoughtful look. “You’ve always been a reliable voice of reason, Matthias. I have faith that you will handle this with grace and conviction. Remember, the church cannot be seen as wavering. If we concede ground on this, we risk compromising our moral authority.”

Matthias hesitated, guilt swirling within him. “What about the people who have suffered because of the Forever Program? Those who feel betrayed or harmed?”

Alcott’s expression darkened. “Their pain is real, but it is not our responsibility. We did not create this technology. Our only concern is maintaining theological clarity. If we begin sympathizing with the notion that data can feel pain, we risk opening a theological crisis.”

Matthias swallowed back his unease. “Understood.”

Alcott gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Go with God, Father Matthias. Speak with conviction and protect the integrity of the church.”

As Matthias left the office, a knot of dread tightened in his stomach. He couldn’t shake the faces of the families that had come to him—parents like Theresa, who had lost everything in the hope of preserving their loved ones. The church’s stance felt increasingly hollow and heartless, and his conscience gnawed at him.

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The congressional hearing room was a grand, imposing space with high ceilings and polished wood. Rows of seats stretched in neat lines, filled with reporters, politicians, and concerned citizens. Matthias sat at the witness table, feeling exposed and vulnerable under the scrutiny.

Ava Moreno sat at the opposite end of the table, poised and confident. Her presence was commanding, and Matthias couldn’t help but feel a pang of resentment toward her ease. He knew her previous role as an Eternity Inc. Lead Family Counselor - a euphemism for regional sales manager – but now she was Eternity Inc.’s face of PR. Her polished public relations face was always composed, always on-message.

Senator Harris, a stern woman with sharp eyes, adjusted her microphone and began. “This session will continue the examination of the ethical and moral implications of the Forever Program, including whether the program has exploited vulnerable individuals. Father Matthias, thank you for your willingness to testify today.”

Matthias offered a nod. “Thank you for allowing me to speak, Senator.”

Harris glanced at her notes. “Father, what is the church’s position on what are the entities that are stored in The Forever Program by Eternity Inc? Are these entities human? Or are they souls?”

Matthias hesitated, his mind flashing back to Alcott’s warning. “Senator,” he said slowly. “The church’s position is that the soul transcends the physical body at the moment of death. What remains in the Forever Program is not a soul.”

Ava gave a satisfied smile, and Matthias felt a pang of guilt. Senator Harris continued, “And yet, many people believe that these digital entities demonstrate emotions, memories, and responses consistent with human consciousness. How does the church reconcile this with its stance?”

Matthias struggled for words, his thoughts a jumble of conflicting emotions. “Theologically speaking, the presence of memories and responses does not constitute a soul. It is... a simulation—a preservation of thought patterns, not the essence of life.”

Harris raised an eyebrow. “Then why are families reporting severe emotional distress after seeing their loved ones mistreated within the program? How do you explain the sense of suffering reported by these digital entities?”

Matthias felt his pulse quicken. “I... I cannot speak to the specifics of how the program functions, but suffering, real or perceived, should be addressed with compassion.”

Ava leaned forward, her voice calm and assertive. “The Forever Program offers solace to those who have lost loved ones. We ensure that residents are treated with dignity and respect. Any claim to the contrary is either unverified or exaggerated.”

Harris shot Ava a sharp look. “We have testimony that says otherwise, Ms. Moreno. Residents have reported being exploited—used as personal servants or subjected to torment for the amusement of wealthy patrons.”

Ava maintained her professional smile. “We conduct regular audits to ensure compliance. Patrons violating our guidelines are promptly banned. These incidents are isolated and do not reflect our overall mission.”

Senator Porter, a burly man with a bristling mustache, cut in. “Father Matthias, your parish received significant donations from Eternity Inc., did it not?”

Matthias hesitated. “Yes. The church has received contributions to support community outreach and charity initiatives.”

Porter’s gaze sharpened. “Would you say these donations influenced your willingness to endorse the Forever Program?”

The question hung like a noose tightening around his throat. Matthias thought of Theresa—how she’d come to him, weeping, after her husband Martin was uploaded. He remembered her anger when she found out that the program wasn’t an eternal rest, but a living nightmare.

Matthias looked at Ava, whose confident facade remained unmoved, and then back at the senators. He realized that if he continued to lie, he would betray not only his faith but also the people he had promised to protect.

He took a deep breath and spoke. “Those donations... came with expectations. Eternity Inc. wanted public support from the church. I didn’t see it at the time, but it was... a transaction—a way to legitimize their program. I cannot in good conscience continue to claim that the Forever Program is ethical or humane. I have seen the pain it has caused. People in my parish, like Theresa... they believed they were saving their loved ones. Instead, they condemned them to suffering.”

Gasps echoed from the audience, and Ava’s face froze, her carefully maintained smile slipping.

Senator Harris leaned in. “So you’re saying the church’s endorsement was influenced by financial incentives?”

Matthias felt his stomach lurch. “Yes. I failed to see it then, but I see it now. We allowed ourselves to be complicit in legitimizing something that is, at its core, morally corrupt.”

Ava cleared her throat, trying to regain control of the narrative. “Father Matthias’s statements are his own and do not reflect the church’s official position. Eternity Inc. has always operated transparently—”

Senator Harris cut her off. “We’ll be looking into those donations, Ms. Moreno. As for you, Father Matthias, thank you for your honesty. This committee will take your testimony into consideration.”

As the session adjourned, Matthias remained seated, his hands still trembling but his conscience strangely clear. He knew that the church would denounce him—that Alcott would likely strip him of his position. But for once, he had chosen truth over obedience, and that decision felt painfully necessary.

As he left the building, reporters swarmed, but Lara was there, guiding him past the chaos.

“You did good,” she whispered.

Matthias gave a weary nod, unsure whether his actions would bring justice or just more pain. But he knew one thing—he could no longer pretend that doctrine was more important than human dignity.

End – Part 8