

Intro: The Jesus Probe

Author's note: This story first appears in my anthology, *Stalking Kilgore Trout*. I used these two characters, Gabe and Mike, and their career problems, as a subplot in my science fantasy novel *Book of Answers*. This story as seen below is as originally published barring minor line editing corrections. When you meet Mike and Gabe again in *Book of Answers* you will find their characters and work situation have advanced, but they are essentially the same two guys.

The Jesus Probe

We were in hot isotopes, me and Mike. I expected the announcement when it came over the intercom—“Angels First Class Gabriel and Michel report to Control immediately”—but I jumped anyway, not smart in low-G orbit. The last time I heard Control demand our immediate appearance, they were really unhappy. Instead of preventing a religion, we started one. But it wasn't our fault.

We wore ship-whites, all cleaned up, even our wings were groomed, white on white on white. The corridors, floors, and walls—even us—all gleamed white, company policy. We bolted from our cabins at the same time. I almost crashed into Mike. If Mike's wings weren't fluttering, I'd have run him over. He was as nervous as a sacrificial dove.

On our way to the meeting, we hardly said a word to each other. With all the spyware onboard, it wasn't smart to talk off the top of our heads. All sentry ships were the same. With so many races working together, only factual honesty was permitted. The ship's computers saw to it that everyone knew what everyone said. Just ask the computer for an accounting. No holds

barred. Thankfully, our thoughts were our own. At least we had that union rule to rely on. No mind-reading.

We walked in silence. The corridor walls, floors, ceilings, and every part of this ship were stark white, but I wasn't feeling too bright.

Speaking of dull bulbs, Mike voiced one thought aloud.

"You know, Gabe, this isn't our fault. We can't help what a stupid probe thinks, especially the AI-7."

I answered him as anyone on this ship would. Mike knew I was giving him the pat answer. "That may be so, but, we're still responsible."

Mike's face went glum.

"We shouldn't have used an AI-7. We screwed up. We trusted Control," he said. "Artificial intelligence is fine for gathering intel, but you never know for sure what they're thinking, or how they decide an action. They're not much different from Control in that way."

Mike laughed. I couldn't help it, I laughed too. It was a good joke. This was going to cost us. No need giving the computer any more ideas so I didn't share what I was thinking. But, to cover our asses and rub a little salt...

"Hey, we didn't want any probes on this job, remember," I said. "They ordered it, got what they asked for."

Mike rolled his eyes as we entered the conference room. Blindspot in the ship's eye scan system, management had to miss it. It was a small gathering, just the ship's captain, two project controllers, and a rep from the record keepers' union. The keepers were a throwback to the old days, but they did have value. They recorded what the computers could not, they sensed emotions. You never knew what they were feeling themselves because of their environment

suits. I could ask the keeper, union rules after all, but it's hard to hold a conversation with an eight-foot bubble and maintain a straight face.

Me and Mike were the only bipeds on this mission, actually the only beings on board that looked Earth-human at all. Take away the wings and feathers and we look exactly like them. Resonance shift cloaking changed our skin and hair and hid the wings easy enough. Our union brothers walked with humans undetected for thousands of years. Infiltration was easy; the rest, not so much.

That's how we got these great jobs in the regional Planet Molders Union as field operatives working for the Primitive Planet Economic Development Department of this sector's Galactic Operations Detachment. In one way or the other, everyone onboard worked for the G.O.D. But God, as me and Mike liked to call them, was never happy. It wasn't our fault. God made unreasonable demands.

Our ship's contract was based on progressive results and this planet keeps going backwards. Only mature, rational beings can join the trade conglomerate. Our job was to help Earth's people evolve mentally by feeding people bits of technology, like metallurgy, and dissuading logic-killing social trends like mythologies and religions.

It wasn't going well. If things didn't turn around soon, Me and Mike would become the ship's next sacrificial lambs. Unless, of course, Control really screwed up and took the hit instead of us for a change. That would qualify as a miracle.

We took white plastic chairs at the white metal table. My wings were buzzing like hummingbirds sucking plutonium. They only had two chairs. The other crew members didn't have asses to sit on. The Control guys were both Salmelions. They looked like hairy five-hundred-pound Earth slugs with a spiny mane. The front and back looked exactly alike and were

interchangeable. With the ass-chewing we were about to get, I thought, these two chairs were about to become obsolete.

The captain, who passed for a giant four-legged tree frog, popped up his eyestalks. The Controller's spines bristled. The gestures meant both men were serious. The Recorder, well, inside his environment suit, it was impossible to say what he was thinking. Damn tinted windows.

"Mr. Mikilow, Mr. Gaberilow, so glad you could break away from your busy schedule to join us," Control One said.

I hate when Control's sarcastic.

"What is the status of the probe?" It asked.

Control Two chimed in. "We don't have to tell you two how important this project is. You know the Empire needs the resources this planet has to offer. With this recent turn of events, it may be another thousand years, if ever, before the G.O.D can invite them to join the trade conglomerate."

His spines were blue with malcontent. He needed another six hundred years before he could retire. Of course, he figured it was our fault. Management always blames the peons. I think it's a job requirement.

"I hope you two can salvage this mess," Control Two said. "The contract is due for renewal in only one hundred years and that will not happen unless we show the PPED progress. What is your report?"

I swallowed hard. I felt like an asteroid without an orbit. This really wasn't our fault, I reminded myself. We only do what management tells us. Why are we always in the hot seat when their directives don't work? I wanted to ask but I had to report.

“As you know, this probe is an AI-7,” I began. “It’s a device well known for having bugs. I know that’s no excuse for letting it get out of hand, but there were difficult circumstances.”

“What kind of circumstances?” Control One asked.

His bristles rippled a sign of displeasure.

Mike jumped in. “We didn’t pick this probe you know. I didn’t want an AI-7. We needed a twelve to override the damage Moses did. This one wasn’t designed to reverse the effects of religion. You guys know that.”

Control didn’t like Mike’s contribution. Union rule number two: cover your ass, if you have one.

“If you had extracted Moses quietly, as instructed,” Control One said, “we would not have this problem.”

“Sending a boat was too visible,” Control Two added.

Mike was about to blow a portal seal. Job sent that boat down, not us. Junior management did that one. So, I kicked Mike under the table. Management is always right, right? I need my job.

“Stick to the current facts,” Control One and Two said in unison.

“Yes, Sir,” I said.

I began my report again.

“Things were going well. The subject seemed perfect for the probe. He was a Hebrew, right bloodline, and the woman was never pregnant. We couldn’t have asked for a better receptor. The probe went in nice, not a hitch.”

“Not a hitch,” Mike repeated. “She wasn’t even married yet.”

I kicked Mike under the table again.

“But,” I continued, “by the time the subject was thirteen-years-old, in Earth years, we started having problems. The human was tentatively accessing the probe, apparently, but the probe did not report it. The probe and the subject wanted the same things—”

“I should have known something was up when the probe named itself ‘the Holy Spirit,’” Mike interrupted.

I kicked Mike again. Thankfully he shut up. The Controllers were not all that well informed about Earth’s social structures and how that worked within religions. We didn’t need to open up a can of antimatter.

“You did not detect this anomaly?” Control One said.

“No,” I said, “when a subject and probe are on exactly the same cerebral bandwidth it’s impossible to read their interactions. This was a real fluke. Who would’ve think it?”

“Go figure,” Mike said with a half-smile. “I bet the probe liked it.”

“You should have been looking out for that,” Control Two said. “We had this sort of problem with the Moses probe. We had to pull the Enoch probe.”

I didn’t need the reminder of past failings, and Enoch was a low blow. That thing should have been scrapped eons ago. Both probes had different technical issues due to rushing the use of equipment that wasn’t tuned properly for humans. It was management’s bad call. Never use the wrong tools. I let them push me. I got blamed for that one. I should have called the union rep.

My wings fluttered uncontrollably. Were these guys trying to sell me down the river? I needed this job. The unemployment rate back on Heaven is ridiculous. What’d they expect from an experimental probe anyway? This AI-7 probe wasn’t tuned right; it wasn’t tested. I continued.

“So, the probe and the subject melded, we’re not sure when. But the last three years of the host’s life showed us something weird was happening. We stayed back, tried to figure it out...but, although it was going off script, the probe was working correctly.”

I took a big breath. I really didn’t know if it ran right or not. I kept talking.

“The subject said all the right things to counter-act the earlier bad social consciences implants. You know stuff like, ‘forget Moses, here is the new way.’ People were following. Social molding was in full swing. Things looked good. But soon after...the probe clearly lost control. The subject took over the probe.”

Everyone in the room knew the implications, and how unlikely that was—a new binary life force with so many complex variables just didn’t spring up like that. There was either something special or something spooky about Earthlings.

“Why did you not immediacy kill the subject and extract the probe?” The captain said.

“We tried,” Mike said. “We even sent in our S.A.T.A.N. kill-bot. The robot tried everything. No help. Satan eventually tossed the guy off the Temple roof. The subject must’ve learned to access the energy stream, he just floated away. Then, he turned around and killed the kill-bot.”

I interrupted again. Mike had a tendency to say too much.

“They were working together,” I said. “The probe and subject were going in the same direction. Rather than use an ionizer nuke, scrap the whole project again, and really set us back, we tried direct intervention. We became part of the subject’s inner circle. We steered him. We thought it was working good.”

Control Two sneered in green, “but things did not stay good, did they?”

My stomach was in my mouth. I almost spit up a feather ball. Never preen before a big meeting.

“No, Sir,” I said. “When things got hairy, pardon the term, we tried to isolate them and nuke them, small scale, without major impact on the population. But it was too late. They just wouldn’t leave the populated areas: Too many damn disciples. We didn’t want another Sodom on our hands. The salt fallout alone cost us millions to clean up. We made a perfectly good sea into a dead sea. We switched to plan B. We’d try and get the probe as the guy died.”

“We got lucky on that,” Mike added.

I kicked Mike again.

“The guy actually believed he was a real deity,” I continued, “but a few nudges at the Sanhedrin, a few dreams planted in the governor’s mind and he was a marked man.”

“We set it up real nice,” Mike interjected, “all we had to do was tail him and wait.”

Control One and Two looked confused. Their bristles stood straight up.

“What is tail?” They said together.

I ignored the question. My gullet started grinding. We almost lost the game. As I searched for my next words, Mike jumped in.

“We couldn’t predict how hard following would be. The entire city turned out for this guy. They were in the streets. We couldn’t get within a hundred yards of him. The government had him, sure, execution was a done deal, but we couldn’t get close enough to do a probe rescue.”

Mike and I were both gritting our teeth at that memory, thongs of people pushing and crushing us. My wings are still a mess. We almost didn’t save ourselves, much less the project.

“We got lucky,” I said. “The guy, the probe, and the people were going nuts. The city was on fire with emotional turmoil. We were desperate. We had to get out. The raw emotions were going to wipe our holographs. We jumped over a city wall and landed in a refuse dump. We decided to hold up there and rethink it. Then we saw, the guy was hanging on a tree on the hill overlooking the dump. He wasn’t even dead yet.”

“It may not have been luck,” the bubble said.

Everyone made sounds of agreement. Maybe the AI had regained control.

Mike went on.

“So, we saw our chance, see. The guards were keeping people back. Gabe and I became guards. We got in on a dice game so we got really close, we needed to extract at just the right moment. I talked to the probe in mind speak. I let it know we were ready. I told it to give me a signal, give me a sign when it was ready to evacuate.”

I cut Mike off.

“After a while, the probe took over. The guy was nearly dead. This human was way ahead of his time, fully integrated. When he said, ‘into your hands, I commend my spirit,’ Mike stuck the extractor into the guy’s side and sucked the probe out. Just in time. The guy dropped dead, and started glowing.”

Control One was not happy. A glowing dead guy was not a good thing. I braced for the hit.

“It is good that you removed the probe,” Control One said, “but a host body will not decay normally. You must remove the body. We must not leave evidence on the planet. If we break regulations, we don’t get paid.”

He was right, of course. But not many Earthlings saw it. Mostly Romans and nobody local believes them. Jews hate Romans.

“They’re a primitive people,” I said. “We all know it will be a long, long time before they become rational.”

“Nonetheless,” Control One said, his bristles showing annoyance. “We can’t leave a host. What are you going to do about it?”

Mike beamed.

“We already took care of that,” he said. “It was simple. After the riots calmed down, about three days later, we went and got the guy. He’s in sickbay now. The probe programming department wants to see what makes him tick so we don’t make this mistake again.”

Control’s bristles went pink with approval. No real damage done. So, I took the opportunity and offered an idea.

“Once he gets through re-education we could use him on the team,” I suggested.

“We really can use a local adviser,” Mike said.

“That is good,” Control One said, “I am sure he will make a fine crew member.”

“Did you get away clean?” Control Two asked.

“Pretty much,” I said.

“Please clarify,” the captain directed.

“No big deal,” Mike said. “When we were collecting the body, a couple of women walked into the tomb. His wife and mother, I think. We weren’t in holograms so they freaked and ran.”

“It won’t be a problem,” I added. “Females have no status in this primitive society.”

“Make sure, send him back, to explain,” Control One said.

“Are you sure that’s wise, Sir?” I asked. “I mean, remember what happened with—”

This time, Mike kicked me under the table. I shut up.

“Don’t question my authority,” Number One said, bristling irritation. “Had I been more involved, this would not have happened. Do what I ask.”

I was thinking to myself what an ass. He doesn’t know squat about Earth. Mike and I have been on the ground for a thousand years. I was getting really ruffled, my feathers, too. I knew this was a huge mistake, but I needed this job. I had to bite my fork tongue.

It was then I noticed Mike’s sidelong smile. He’d be happy to let Control One fall flat on his face, or whatever passed for a face, which may have been his ass as well. Mike had something up his robe’s sleeve.

“Yes, Sir,” I said. “I will go and brief Jesus.”

Number One looked perplexed. “Who is Jesus?”

“The new guy. Christ, this going to be interesting,” Mike said fighting to keep a straight face. “I can’t wait to see how Jesus works out.”

Mike loved to mess with Control. Control didn’t know sarcasm from sacred prayer. I smiled widely, hoping the bubble saw it as approval regarding Control’s newest bad call of a decision, and not the way I really felt. I knew in my soul that the next ass-chewing to come down from G.O.D. won’t be chopping on me and Mike’s asses. I’d bet my union halo on it.

END