

For your Aurora Awards consideration

Transubstantiation

by
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The Catholic priest on the viewscreen looked bewildered. “So you’re telling me that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has returned as a Jewish girl in a Catholic schoolgirl’s uniform on a space station in orbit around Mars?” said Father Kelly.

Paul Devane, director of Space Station Troika, looked back at the viewscreen and nodded. “That’s who she says she is.”

Paul heard footsteps on the metal floor of Troika’s control room. He turned around and saw the teenaged girl standing by the entrance. The rhinestones on her silver tiara sparkled under a bright light above the entrance.

“You still don’t believe me, do you?” she said.

Paul looked back at the viewscreen. “She’s by the entrance. Do you see her? Did you hear her?”

The priest shook his head. “I don’t see anyone standing by the doorway.”

“But I can see her,” Paul insisted.

“Alright, maybe you can, and for some reason, I can’t,” said Father Kelly. “Have you talked to her? What does she want?”

“She wants to crash our shuttlecraft onto the Martian surface,” Paul said. “She thinks that’s how God is going to create life on Mars.”

All of Space Station Troika’s sensors and cameras were aimed at the Martian surface below. As Troika orbited the planet, its crew searched for signs of survivors.

In Troika’s control room, Paul Devane waited for the station to pass over Redsands Base. He looked at a shiny videoscreen and saw his reflection and cringed. Only forty years old, he looked like fifty, with gray streaks in his brown hair, a weary look in his eyes, and lines of age etched into his face. Living in space did that to some people.

He ran his hand through his greasy, disheveled hair to try to comb it. He hadn’t taken the time to wash his hair since the disaster on Mars.

He yawned and sighed. He hadn’t slept much since he had killed that girl at Redsands Base.

The videoscreen suddenly flickered, and an image of Redsands Base replaced Paul’s reflection.

Paul glanced at a woman wearing a yellow polo shirt with the Charging Duck mascot of the University of Oregon. Erin Malloy looked at him and turned back to her computer monitor. An

aerial video image of a collapsed dome-shaped building appeared on the monitor. Nothing moved in the mangled mess of steel and plastic half-buried in loose dust and dirt. The only movement came from beside the dome: a geyser of water gushing from a pool created when geologists had dug into subsurface water.

“No body heat readings. There’s nothing moving on the video,” reported Erin. She turned away from her monitor. “There’s nobody alive on Redsands.”

Paul looked sadly at the video picture. “There were ten people down there. I was hoping to find at least one.”

“Sorry, not at Redsands.”

The video image began breaking up into static. “We’re passing out of range of Redsands,” Erin said.

“Thank you,” Paul murmured as he returned to his chair and bit into a round hardtack cracker. The crumbs fell on his wrinkled blue shirt with the NASA logo.

All the combined nuclear weapons of Earth could not destroy the largest meteor to hit Mars in millions of years. The missiles and bombs had merely dented the rock. When the rock smashed into the Martian surface, it gouged out a gigantic crater, heated the surface a thousand degrees, and threw billions of tons of dust into the atmosphere. The shock wave and dust storm shook and smothered the Martian settlements. Now dozens of spaceships were evacuating the survivors to space stations in orbit around Mars.

Troika, being a small station carved out of a captured asteroid, had no room for refugees. Still, the disaster was keeping the three crew members busy. They usually surveyed the geography of Mars from their orbit, but now they had a new job: watching the Martian surface for signs of human life.

Another man approached Erin. She gave him a small smile. When Dr. Thomas Hall had arrived in Mars orbit a year ago, Erin had noticed how handsome the doctor was. A year later, he still looked like a buff, blond, Californian surfer dude. Living around Mars hadn’t aged him prematurely, at least not yet.

He wore silver caduceus symbols of the medical profession on the collar of his clean, white shirt, and he looked at the brainscanner monitor in his hands. “The electrical activity in your frontal lobes went up while you were looking at the data coming from Mars,” said Thomas.

“That’s what’s supposed to happen when I concentrate on something, right?” Erin said as she poured water into a pack of rehydratable tuna casserole. “God, this stuff is awful.”

She looked at her reflection in the shiny metal control console. “This brainscanner is messing up my hair,” she complained as she straightened the headpiece. It was a silvery band around her forehead with other bands arching over the top of her head. Small lights blinked on the bands.

“How long do I have to keep it on?” Erin asked.

“Another twenty-four hours,” replied Thomas. “Then I’ll have enough data. Is it uncomfortable?”

Erin shrugged and looked back at her reflection. “No, it’s not too uncomfortable. It’s lightweight. But I put waves into my hair to give it some body only to have you plunk this brainscanner on me.”

“Ah, you still look beautiful, just like in that photo.”

Erin glanced at a photo taped to her computer monitor: her wearing a white evening gown, silver tiara, and the sash of Miss Oregon. She was flanked by her black American mother and her white Canadian father. They were all smiling on that night, when she had won the crown of Miss Oregon.

None of them could have predicted the tragedy that winning the beauty pageant would

bring.

“Yeah, just like in the photo,” she muttered, lost in her memories.

“Thanks for keeping the brainscanner on during the emergency,” Thomas said. “This is a rare opportunity to study the neurological activity of deep space crews.”

Erin looked up and smiled. “No problem. Scientific research: that’s what we’re here for.”

Paul gazed grimly at the digital clock counting the seconds and minutes on his computer monitor. “It’s been four days since we found anyone alive. There probably isn’t anyone left.”

“Probably not,” Erin agreed.

“Are you okay?” Thomas asked Paul. “Get some rest. Doctor’s orders.”

Paul nodded as he slowly rose from his chair. “Maybe I should. I feel really tired.”

He opened his eyes and looked at a small wooden icon that Troika’s original crew, the Russians, had nailed to the wall. The multicolored icon showed the Old Testament Trinity, the three angels who visited Abraham and his wife Sarah. In Eastern Orthodox tradition, the three angels represented God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

When the United States took over Troika, Paul had decided to leave the icon on the wall despite Thomas’s protests. “Oh, what harm can it do?” Paul had said. “It adds some charm to the place. Besides, it might bring us some good luck.”

In a sense, Troika’s crew had been lucky because the meteor had missed them, but eighty-four people on the Martian colonies had not been so lucky. Whatever divine grace the icon attracted did not reach down to the Martian surface.

In his quarters, Paul called Father Raymond Kelly by video. Father Kelly lived on Space Station Exeter, which was circling Mars in an orbit lower than Troika’s. Each week, Paul and Father Kelly would talk by video encoded to preserve privacy. Not even the Mars disaster could disrupt this sacrament.

The man on the video monitor wore the traditional black uniform of a Catholic priest and a European Space Agency badge. He was young for a priest, just forty-five years old, and though his face was still handsome and smooth, some of his brown hair had started turning white. The hardships of space colonization could age anyone prematurely.

“How are things on Exeter?” Paul asked.

“A bit messy and very busy,” Father Kelly said. “We’ve got refugees all over the station. Our infirmary is overflowing with the injured, the medical staff is overworked, and we’re running out of food.”

“I offered our food supply to Bronson,” Paul said.

“He’ll want it, now that he’s got more people than he had expected,” said Father Kelly. “Okay, let’s get down to business. Do you have anything to confess today?”

Paul cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I caused a woman to die three days ago.”

He paused, took a deep breath, and continued: “She was on Redsands Base, and the interior of the dome building was on fire. She was trapped inside the dome. I tried to use the teleporter to take her out, but I failed.”

Each Martian space station, surface base, and colony had a teleporter booth. An object would be placed in one booth, broken into an energy stream, transmitted to another booth, and rematerialize as the object: mass into energy into mass again. The technology was still in its primitive stage and prone to accidents, though. If spacers needed to send something important, they would send it by shuttlecraft or supply rocket, not by teleporter.

“Hush, Paul,” Father Kelly ordered. “Bronson told me about Redsands. You don’t have to confess to something that wasn’t your fault.”

Paul nodded but continued: “But it still bothers me. I tried to teleport her out of there. I knew the teleporter is safe only for non-living, inorganic matter. I knew I shouldn’t have tried sending a human being by teleporter. But I tried anyway. Now she’s just atoms scattered somewhere.”

“You had no choice but to use the teleporter.”

“I could have used the shuttlecraft.”

“And you know why you didn’t. You didn’t have the time,” Father Kelly reminded him. “There was plenty of pure oxygen on Redsands; the fire gutted the dome in twenty minutes. You couldn’t have reached her in time.”

“The University of Waterloo’s been researching ways of making the teleporter safe for people. They say they might have developed a new program code for the teleporter, but we haven’t received the new code yet,” said Paul. “Maybe if I had a usable code — ”

Father Kelly interrupted him. “But you didn’t, and you still don’t, so stop speculating.

“Look at it this way,” the priest suggested. “Be comforted in knowing that you had only one choice, and you had the courage to use it. She is with God now, and God does not blame you for her death, I’m sure.”

Paul smiled weakly. “But I did violate transportation regulations by using the teleporter on a human being.”

“Okay, if it will make you feel better, say three ‘Hail Marys’ as penance and consider yourself forgiven. Now be done with the matter.” Father Kelly made the Sign of the Cross to bless Paul. “Now, anything else you want to discuss?”

“Yes. I haven’t gone to Mass since I came to Troika a year ago,” said Paul.

“It does get difficult to go to the only church out here. You do watch my televised Mass, though.”

“It’s wonderful, and I really enjoy watching it, but for me, something’s missing. I miss receiving the Eucharist.”

“The body of Christ,” said the priest, referring to the Roman Catholic belief that consecrated bread becomes the body of Jesus.

“A TV show is no substitute for the real thing, especially after all that’s happened,” Paul said.

“Spiritual healing through the Eucharist. There must be some way I can help you,” Father Kelly mused. He paused for a moment, pondering an idea.

“I can try teleporting a jar of consecrated bread to you.”

Paul look startled. “You’re going to try that?”

“You think there’ll be an accident? Actually, accidents occur in only ten percent of attempts to teleport organic matter. That means I still have a ninety percent chance of sending the bread to you by teleporter.”

“But it’s the body of Christ.”

“If anyone can survive the teleporter, it will be Jesus.”

Paul returned to the control room just as another video message from Space Station Exeter popped onto his computer monitor. The image of Alfred Bronson, Director of Space Station Exeter, appeared.

Bronson, with his brown hair looking disheveled and greasy, stared sleepily. Exeter’s crew had been working over eighteen hours each day since the disaster on Mars.

“What can we do for you?” Paul asked.

“You said you have some food to spare,” Bronson said.

“We’ve got enough for ourselves and nine extra people for two months, which is when the re-supply ship arrives.”

“Every bit of food is essential. Could you please give us what you have in excess of your own needs?”

“We’ll be happy to. How do we transport it? We can’t use the teleporter,” Paul said.

“No, no, even with the alleged ninety percent safety rate on organic matter, I don’t want to risk it on food,” Bronson agreed.

“Can you send a shuttlecraft to pick it up?”

Bronson shook his head. “Not for a week. Both our shuttlecrafts are in the search for survivors at the planet’s poles. Can you fly over here in your shuttlecraft?”

“We could, but our shuttlecraft is low on fuel. We’ll have to wait until we’re at our closest position to Exeter. Then we’ll have enough fuel for a one-way flight.”

“How much longer until you’re in range?”

Paul typed a few commands at his keyboard, and computer animation of the orbits of the two space stations appeared on his monitor. “Twenty-four standard hours.”

“That will be okay, but what about you? Since it’ll be a one-way flight, you’ll have to stay here.”

“Don’t worry about three extra mouths to feed. We’ll bring our own food supply, and we’ll do work.” Then, with resignation, Paul said, “I think NASA will let us abandon Troika. We’ve done all we can do to find survivors.”

After Paul ended his video call with Bronson, he heard a soft chime. The message “TELEPORTER CARGO INCOMING” appeared on his monitor.

“That must be the consecrated bread from Father Kelly,” Paul said.

“You’re receiving consecrated bread from Father Kelly?” Thomas asked.

“Yes. I haven’t received the Eucharist for months.”

“It’s all very silly if you ask me.”

“Nobody asked you,” Paul replied.

Erin looked surprised as she read the data from the teleporter. “That’s a lot of bread: forty-nine kilograms or about one hundred and eight pounds.”

“What?” Paul blurted. He looked at the computer monitor. “That’s impossible. I’m going to the teleporter booth.”

“I’ll come with you,” Erin said as she followed Paul out of the control room.

As they approached the teleporter booth, Erin gasped. Paul suddenly stopped and stared in surprise at the booth.

There was no jar of consecrated bread.

Instead, a slim teenaged girl stood in the teleporter booth. She looked pretty, had her reddish-brown hair tied into a ponytail, and wore a white shirt, green school tie, and a green tartan schoolgirl skirt. She wore a silver tiara with glittering gems.

“I haven’t seen that uniform in years,” Erin remarked.

Paul stared at the stranger. “What is it?”

“St. Joseph’s College School in Toronto. My high school.”

The girl looked bewildered as she stepped out of the teleporter booth. She hesitantly walked forward as she glanced around her.

She stopped a couple yards away from Paul and Erin. Her big brown eyes looked around in wonder.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“Space Station Troika in orbit around Mars,” Paul replied.

“Yes!” the girl shouted as she clapped her hands together and jumped up. “Mars! Mars! I made it to Mars!”

She danced and squealed and swung her arms. “This is totally awesome! I have returned, glory, hallelujah!”

“Who are you?” Erin demanded.

The girl stopped prancing, smiled at Paul, and held out her hand so he could shake it. “My name’s Jessica.”

Erin noticed the gold necklace with a Star of David pendant around her neck. Why was a Jewish girl wearing a Catholic school uniform?

“Are you from Redsands Base?” Paul asked.

Jessica’s eyes lit up. “Redsands! I belong there. I have to go there.”

Paul shook his head. “No, no, you can’t go back there. It’s in ruins.”

“That’s not important. I can walk, I can talk, and I can go to Mars!” she chirped as she danced around again.

Paul whispered to Erin, “I think she’s the girl we lost trying to transport up from Redsands Base.”

“If she is, she must be suffering from some sort of strange shock,” Erin said.

Jessica spun around in a pirouette and strolled back to Paul and Erin. She threw her arms around Erin, hugged her, and said, “It’s *sooooo* good to have a warm body again!”

Erin laughed and gently pushed Jessica away. “You mean you know what it’s like not to have a body?”

“Believe me, having flesh and blood feels better than being just a spirit floating around,” Jessica said.

“Then you remember what it was like -- after the teleporter accident?” Paul asked incredulously.

Jessica nodded. “Oh, yeah, for a long time, I was in a place of neither the living nor the dead but something in between.”

“That’s incredible!” Paul remarked. “And now you’re back three days later!”

“Was it just three days?” Jessica said. “I thought it was two thousand years.”

Erin showed the empty cabin to Jessica. “You can stay in here,” Erin said. “There used to be a fourth person on the crew, but she got transferred to Exeter.”

Jessica smiled. “Thanks for your hospitality. It’s *sooooo* decent. I’ll be comfortable here, but I won’t be staying long.”

“Oh? Are you in a rush to go somewhere?”

“To Mars. I have work to do down there.”

“Everyone’s being evacuated off Mars. What could you possibly do down there?”

“My father’s work.”

“Your father? I didn’t think people brought their children to Mars. Who’s your father?”

“Yahweh,” Jessica said casually.

Also known as ‘God’, Erin realized. How weird.

“So you must be Jesus, eh?” Erin joked.

Jessica nodded. “I am. Isn’t that awesome?”

Holy Mary, Mother of God, we have a crazy one aboard, Erin thought.

Thomas stepped out of the shuttlecraft, through the airlock, and onto the floor of the shuttlecraft dock. On the dock floor sat boxes of food, all destined for Space Station Exeter.

Jessica walked to Thomas and smiled and waved at him. “You must be Thomas,” she said.

“Yes, I am,” Thomas replied. “And you must be our visitor, Jessica. Are you hungry?”

Thomas grabbed a box of crackers from a table, pulled a folding knife from his belt, cut open the box, and held it out to Jessica.

She was staring at the folding knife clipped to his belt, Thomas noticed. But she quickly looked up, smiled, took a round cracker, and began munching it.

Thomas glanced at the gold Star of David on Jessica’s necklace. He asked, “So what’s a nice Jewish girl like you doing in a place like this?”

“Checking out the shuttlecraft,” Jessica said, pointing at the small spacecraft. “Is it powered by a nuclear reactor?”

“You’ve done your homework. Yes, it’s a Tsiolkovsky Service Shuttlecraft model 3, the first to be powered by nuclear energy.”

“Cool. Awesome. It’ll be perfect for taking me to Mars.”

“Going to Mars?” Thomas asked. “Nobody’s going down to the surface.”

“I have to, totally. I have to finish my father’s work down there, at Redsands,” Jessica explained.

“Your father worked at Redsands? You can’t go back. All its people are -- dead. Except you.”

Erin’s eyes lit up. “But that’s the reason why I have to go there. From the dead of Earth, my father will create life on Mars.”

“Huh? I heard of no such project.”

“Not on your scientific stations, but it has been planned. Life has grown on Earth, and now it’s time for God to create His other children on Mars.”

Thomas smiled wryly. “God’s your father? Come on, you really can’t think that, at least not literally. I know you God believers call God ‘Our Father’, but you really don’t think He’s your father in a family sense, do you?”

“He is truly my father, and I am Him,” Jessica declared.

Thomas shrugged. “Okay, if God is going to create life on Mars, how’s He going to do it?”

“With the same principles that He used on Earth,” Jessica explained. “The bodies of the dead on Mars contain amino acids and proteins, the necessary substances of life. The ruined Martian bases also have oxygen and water imported from Earth. There’s also subsurface water on Mars that has come to the surface by the digging of your geologists.

“When the shuttlecraft crashes into a ruined base, the nuclear explosion will start the chemical reaction that will convert the amino acids, proteins, oxygen, and water into living cells.”

This is crazy, Thomas thought. The girl wanted to play God, Book of Genesis.

“I don’t believe in God,” he retorted.

“That doesn’t matter. I believe in God, and that’s good enough for me.”

In the kitchen, Paul slid the tray of rehydratable salmon chunks into the oven. He looked at the box that had held the salmon. “One of the ingredients is salmon flavoring,” he observed. “They actually have to add artificial flavor to make the salmon taste like salmon.”

“There’s a restaurant in Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco, where the chef grilled fresh salmon in garlic and paprika,” Thomas remembered as he poured a cup of coffee. “Too bad we can’t get food like that in Mars orbit.”

“It would take a miracle,” Paul said.

“Speaking of miracles, where’s our visitor?” Thomas asked.

Erin put down a fourth plate on the table. “She’s taking a shower. She says she hasn’t had a bath for over two thousand years.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” Thomas said, repeating an old proverb. “Do we know who she really is?”

Paul shook his head and looked at his handheld computer pad. “When Redsands Base burned up, we didn’t get a good video picture of the woman we tried to teleport up. I’ve looked through the personnel list of Redsands, and there was a Jessie Montega, a biologist, but she was twenty-seven years old.”

“Our Jessica looks a lot younger than twenty-seven,” Erin said. “Can you get a picture of Jessie Montega?”

“No. Our records don’t have photos, but Exeter’s might. I’ve asked Father Kelly to search for her photo,” Paul said. “Here’s an idea: could the teleporter have reconstructed her as a younger person?”

“I don’t know,” Erin said. “Anything is possible.”

Thomas sipped his coffee. “Whoever she is, she’s crazy. She thinks that she’s Jesus.”

Paul nodded. “Yeah, that’s weird. Maybe Jessica had a weird, out-of-body experience when the teleporter lost her atoms, and now she thinks she’s Jesus. Or maybe she had already gone loony on Mars. That happens to some people in space.”

“The consecrated bread didn’t arrive, but the girl did,” Erin observed. “Could the bread have turned into Jessica?”

Thomas put down his coffee mug. “Oh, that’s ridiculous. I usually think of you two as intelligent people, but sometimes your religiosity is too much. Any rationale person knows that God doesn’t exist.”

“Not necessarily,” Erin replied. “I believe in Him, and so do a lot of other people in the space colonies. Exeter Station even has a chapel.”

“A waste of space if you ask me,” Thomas complained. “I don’t know why NASA let a priest come out here. Christianity is the last thing we need in space.”

“I disagree, I think we need to bring our religions out here,” Paul said. “That’s what makes us human.”

“It’s what makes us morons. Think how ridiculous your religion is,” Thomas snapped. “Do you really think a real Son of God would spend thirty years as a carpenter, unknown to everyone? And did the crucifixion really mean anything? If he really were a god, he could have used his godlike powers to come back from dead or his father could have brought him back to life, so the suffering was unnecessary and meaningless. It was just a publicity stunt to convert the superstitious. Jesus was probably just a guy who faked his own death — assuming he actually existed, and there’s no real historical proof that he did. Christianity is just one big fraud.”

“I am not a fraud,” said a voice from behind.

They turned around and saw Jessica standing at the doorway.

“Don’t take it personally,” Thomas said. “I oppose superstitions of all kinds, not just the Christian kind.”

Jessica frowned.

“Uh, dinner’s almost ready,” Erin said, hoping to change the topic. “Will you join us?”

The schoolgirl smiled again. “That would be awesome. I haven’t eaten for a long, long time.”

The oven bell rang, and Paul put on his oven mittens, opened the oven, and pulled out the tray.

“Oh my God! What’s this?” he blurted.

Instead of plain rehydrated salmon chunks, the tray held grilled salmon fillets bathed in a tomato sauce. The aroma of garlic and paprika wafted through the kitchen.

Paul, Erin, and Thomas stared wide-eyed at the fish. After a long, stunned silence, Erin

finally spoke.

“You were saying it would take a miracle to get fresh salmon here?” she said to Paul.

Jessica grabbed the tray from Paul and put it on the table. “Don’t be shy; everybody dig in!” she urged.

At first, Paul, Erin, and Thomas were reluctant to eat the fish, but with Jessica’s prodding, they nibbled hesitantly at it. Then, when they tasted how delicious the fish had become, they ate it eagerly.

“This is wonderful,” Paul said. Erin nodded, and even Thomas grunted in agreement as he chewed.

“Thank you,” Jessica said, grinning. “I’m very good with fish.”

“I must be dreaming,” Thomas mumbled.

“No, you’re not,” Jessica said. “That fabulous gourmet dinner was real.” She looked at each of them in the eye. “Now, can you do a favor for me?”

“What can we do for you?” Erin asked.

“Can I have the ignition key to the shuttlecraft?”

A stunned silence followed.

Erin reached out and touched Jessica’s hand. “Dear, you’re a special person, but you don’t really believe you’re Jesus, do you?”

“Like, yeah!” Jessica blurted with a sigh of exasperation. “Look at the Jesus thing I did. I turned chunks of dry fish into -- uh, fish with tomato sauce.”

“Turning fish into fish,” Thomas quipped.

“Okay, maybe that was a bit lame,” Jessica admitted.

Thomas shrugged, raised his glass to his lips, and put the glass down. “I ran out of water.”

“Oh, I’ll get some,” Jessica said as she grabbed the pitcher from the table. “Hey, water is so plain. Do you have any wine here?”

“You’re too young,” Erin warned.

Jessica giggled. “I know I look underage, but I’m a lot older than I look.”

“We have no wine,” said Paul. “We’ve got only water.”

“Just water? How boring.” Humming the old Jewish folk song “Havah Nagilah”, Jessica skipped to the kitchen counter and filled the pitcher with water from the faucet.

She set the pitcher in the middle of the table. Thomas lifted the pitcher and began pouring water into his glass.

“Oh my God,” he muttered as he saw red wine pour into his glass.

Paul took the pitcher, poured a glass of wine for himself, and sipped it. It tasted very sweet. He remembered a sugary red wine that a friend had given him at a frat party in university. It was a kosher sacramental wine drunk at Passover.

“Next time you drink wine, remember me,” Jessica said.

“Do you need any help cleaning up?” Jessica asked.

Erin smiled and shook her head. “No, dear. We’ll clear the table.”

“Okay with me.” Jessica yawned. “Wow, that was a lot of food. I feel tired now. I’ll go to my room and take a nap.”

“Sure. Sweet dreams,” Thomas said.

“Oh, and think about letting me borrow the shuttlecraft,” Jessica urged. “I really, seriously, totally need it.”

The crew’s eyes silently followed Jessica as she walked out of the kitchen.

Erin broke the silence: “Was any of this real?”

“It must have been real,” Paul concluded. “All three of us can’t be dreaming or hallucinating about the same thing.”

“How did she do it?” Thomas wondered.

“It’s a miracle,” Erin said.

“No it’s not,” said Thomas. “She’s not Jesus.”

“She could be the woman I tried to teleport out of Redsands Base,” Paul said.

“That still doesn’t explain how she turned rehydrated salmon chunks into salmon fillets in tomato sauce,” Erin said.

“Maybe she got superhuman powers when the transporter reassembled her,” Paul guessed.

“Maybe she’s an alien,” Thomas suggested seriously.

“Whatever or whoever she is, one thing is certain: she wants to crash the shuttlecraft into Mars,” Paul said. He took out a metal key from his pocket. “But she can’t start the shuttlecraft’s reactor without the ignition key. Do you know where yours is?”

Erin and Thomas felt in their pockets and pulled out their keys.

“Keep them with you at all times, and don’t leave them lying around,” Paul advised. “We need that shuttlecraft to carry the food and ourselves to Space Station Exeter.”

Erin returned to her cabin and lay down on her cot. She looked at another photo of her and her parents, this one from the night before the Miss America pageant.

Her parents had met at a tourism industry convention in Toronto, where her mother was a visiting American tour operator, and her father was an engineer who designed flying amphibious tour buses. They settled in Toronto, where she attended St. Joseph’s College School on Wellesley Street.

After graduating from “St. Jo’s,” she went to study business administration at the University of Oregon in Eugene, her mother’s hometown. In her second year of university, she entered the beauty pageants billed as “scholarship programs”: first, she won the crown of Miss Willamette Valley, and then, the Miss Oregon crown. Her next step was the Miss America pageant, to be held in Salem, the state capital of Oregon, that year.

It was also the year of the Vernacular Wars, when the Sudanese declared *jihad* on the United States for allowing American Moslems to recite the Koran in English instead of Arabic. But despite the orange alert, ordinary life, including the Miss America pageant, continued in America.

Erin had just stepped off the stage in her evening gown when the terrorists charged into the auditorium. With their guns blazing, they slaughtered over a hundred people in ten minutes. Screams and moans filled the air. As the walls and floors turned red with blood, the police and National Guard unleashed their own storm of tear gas and bullets.

Erin found her father covered in blood but still alive. Her mother did not survive, though.

If only she hadn’t been enthralled with the clothes, the gifts, the glamour, the attention, and the scholarships; if only she hadn’t won Miss Willamette Valley and Miss Oregon; if only she hadn’t entered the Miss America pageant, her mother might still be alive.

She dropped out of university and went to Toronto with her father. She returned to Oregon a few years later to earn a degree in science, and she volunteered to work in the space colonies, far away from Earth.

She sat up and felt the brainscanner still strapped to her head. When was that wretched headpiece due to come off?

She heard a knock on her door. She opened it and saw Jessica.

“Jessica,” Erin greeted softly. “What can I do for you, dear?”

“You wish you could have had one last moment of quality time with your mother, don’t you?” Jessica said as she strolled into the cabin.

Erin's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

Jessica smiled. "I know things. I can tell that her death has tormented you for years." She put her hands on Jessica's temples, as if trying to touch her mind. "Stop punishing yourself. You have no reason to feel guilty, no reason to flee out here."

"If only — if only I hadn't been so selfish, thinking only about myself."

"Hush. Will you believe me if you could speak to your mother again?"

"How can you do that?"

Jessica grinned. "Oh, I can do all sorts of cool things."

"Erin, I'm so happy to see you again," chirped a voice from behind.

Erin spun around and stared at her mother.

She threw her arms around her mother and hugged her.

Her mother looked young and wore the blue tour guide uniform that Erin had seen in her childhood, years that they remembered over tea and crackers.

Eventually, they talked about the present. "How's your father?" asked Erin's mother.

"Oh, he's really happy in his retirement," Erin replied. "I just got a video message from him last week. He won a trophy at a model airplane contest. His glider flew over one hundred feet, farther than all the other gliders."

"Ah, he was always designing buses and boats and planes. I have to ask: did he ever remarry?"

"No, he never did."

"Hah, hah, I spoiled him for other women," Erin's mother bragged. "He would never find another one like me, I told him."

Erin laughed. "Oh, you were unique, and he knew that."

She suddenly stopped smiling. Her mother *was* unique. She had used the past tense because her mother had died.

"Mum, you died," Erin stated plainly. "How can you be here now?"

Her mother reached out to take Erin's hands. "Dear, I can only come back briefly, so let me say what I need to say."

She pulled Erin closer to her. "Stop blaming yourself for my death. It wasn't your fault."

"What are you saying?" Erin mumbled.

"Don't blame yourself. Blame the Jihadists."

"But if I hadn't entered the pageant — " Erin started.

Erin's mother interrupted her. "No, no, don't think that way. You enjoyed what you did, you didn't harm anyone, and your father and I were so proud of you."

"You were?"

"Of course, we were." Erin's mother smiled. "You looked so beautiful, so poised, and so confident when you were competing on stage. You grew up a lot in those two years at university."

"That's nice to know."

"So will you finally stop blaming yourself?"

"Yes, yes, I'll stop, I'll stop," Erin promised.

Erin's mother walked her to the cot and laid her down. "You've been tired for a long time." She kissed her on the cheek. "Get some sleep now."

Erin closed her eyes, smiled, and fell asleep. When she woke up, her mother was gone.

And so too was Jessica.

Erin felt inside her pant pockets as she rose from the cot.

The shuttlecraft's ignition key was gone too.

On the viewscreen, Father Kelly said, “God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are the same person in mainstream Christianity. If this girl thinks she’s Jesus, then she also thinks she’s God.”

“She does; she thinks she can create life on Mars,” Paul said, glancing at Jessica and back to Father Kelly again.

“God does not wear a miniskirt,” declared Father Kelly.

Jessica giggled and said, “Oh, but I do, especially with this schoolgirl uniform. Isn’t it cute?”

“It’s not unusual to find someone who thinks she’s Jesus or Moses or Elvis or whoever; they appear in Israel all the time,” Father Kelly commented. “But in orbit around Mars?”

Jessica joked, “Elvis has come back from the dead more times than I have.”

“Be careful,” Paul cautioned the priest. “You’re talking about her as if she can’t hear you, but she’s right here.”

“I’m not sure the girl is actually there.” The priest paused for a moment and continued: “Paul, have you considered the possibility of mass hysteria? Or that something is controlling your minds?”

Paul looked back at Jessica and said, “I don’t think it’s mass hysteria or mind control. What could possibly do that to us out here?”

Father Kelly asked, “Did you say that Dr. Hall sees the girl too?”

“Yes, he does.”

Father Kelly smiled weakly. “Dr. Hall is an atheist fundamentalist. If he sees the girl, she can’t be God or Jesus.”

Jessica laughed. “How ironic: the atheist can see me, but the priest can’t.”

“Then she’s Jessie Montega from Redsands,” Paul said.

“But if she is, why is she invisible to me?” Father Kelly asked. “Look, here’s a radical idea: perhaps Troika was carved out of a Siren Stone.”

Thomas fell into a stunned silence. The Siren Stones were a modern myth: asteroids haunted by beautiful spirits who lured lonely spacers to their deaths. They explained why space crews went crazy or disappeared without a trace.

Father Kelly, Vatican astronomer, did not believe in myths and superstitions. He was a rational scientist -- but so too were the first spacers to talk about Siren Stones.

“You believe in Siren Stones?” Thomas asked.

Father Kelly shrugged. “No, but we’re running out of explanations for what’s going on.”

The priest’s cell phone beeped. He answered and listened to it, and then he looked eagerly at Paul.

“My friends found a photo of Jessie Montega,” Father Kelly reported. “I’m going to my quarters to download the file.”

He looked at his watch. “Paul, your launch window is coming in seventeen hours. You need to get off that rock and come to Exeter. Don’t let anyone -- or anything -- hijack the shuttlecraft.”

“Not even Jesus?” Paul asked.

“Especially not Jesus,” urged Father Kelly as he ended the transmission.

Paul spun around in his chair and looked at Jessica. “Who are you, and what do you want?” he demanded.

“You already know,” Jessica said.

“You’ve suffered a lot. You might have post-traumatic stress,” Paul said. “There are people on Exeter who can help you. Come with us.”

“Look, I don’t have a lot of time. There’s something you need to know before I leave,” Jessica said. “Jessie Montega died for a purpose.”

“What are you saying?” Paul asked. “You’re not dead.”

“I tell you again, I’m not Jessie Montega. Jessie Montega’s body is dead in the ruins of Redsands Base. Her soul is living with God now.”

Jessica walked to a computer monitor and began typing commands. Animated images of molecules, from *The Spacer’s Encyclopedia*, appeared on the monitor. Paul recognized them from chemistry class: amino acids, proteins, and DNA.

Jessica pointed at the images of the protein molecules. “Jessie Montega’s body contains amino acids, proteins, and DNA. When I crash the shuttlecraft onto her body, the nuclear reaction will start the chemical reactions that will create life. Her death has meaning and purpose. She died so that Mars can live.”

Paul stared at the girl. “Now I know for sure: you’re crazy,” he said.

Jessica breathed in deeply. “You’re the one who will go crazy if you keep blaming yourself for Jessie Montega’s death. Believe me, it wasn’t your fault, and she died for a purpose.”

She marched out of the room, leaving Paul crumpled in his chair, alone with his memories of Jessie Montega’s plea for help.

Thomas watched Jessica walk towards the shuttlecraft. He crossed his arms and moved to block her path to the airlock.

“Where are you going, young lady?” he asked.

“To Mars,” Jessica replied.

“Sorry, but we need this shuttlecraft to deliver food to the people of Space Station Exeter. You wouldn’t want them to starve, would you?”

“I’ll find another way to get the food to Exeter. Just let me have the shuttlecraft.”

“Can’t you just wave your hand and make a one-celled organism?” Thomas asked. “Why does God need a nuclear spaceship?”

“I don’t know,” Jessica whined, her voice growing more agitated. “God works in mysterious ways. Only He knows.”

“Did God crash the meteor into Mars? Did God want all those people to die? What kind of God is He?” Thomas accused.

“I don’t know!” Jessica cried. “I don’t know if all those people had to die. But I know that if I don’t go down to Mars, at least one of those deaths will be meaningless!”

Thomas eyed her suspiciously. Her right hand was clasped shut.

“What are you holding in your hand?” he demanded.

Paul and Erin ran into the shuttlecraft dock.

“She’s got my shuttlecraft key!” Erin yelled.

Jessica darted forward, but Thomas grabbed her. Paul and Erin rushed to Jessica, and they struggled to pry the key out of her hand.

“Got it!” Paul shouted as he held up the key.

Jessica stumbled backwards away from the crew and glared at them. “But I got this!” she hissed.

She unfolded Thomas’s knife and held it over her wrist. “Give me the key or I’ll kill myself.”

“So what? If you’re Jesus, you’ll just come back from the dead,” scoffed Thomas.

“Dear, put that down,” Erin urged. “You don’t want to hurt anybody.”

Paul stepped towards Jessica. “Jessie, put down the knife. You need help that we can’t give you here. Come to Exeter with us.”

A chime sounded from a videoscreen. Erin went to the videoscreen and looked at the message scrolling in.

"It's Father Kelly," Erin said.

"Relay the transmission into this room," Paul ordered.

Father Kelly appeared on the videoscreen. "Hey, why are you all in the shuttlecraft dock?" he asked.

"We've got the girl here," Paul said.

Father Kelly looked puzzled. "I still can't see her, but tell me if she looks anything like this. Here's Jessie Montega."

A color photo of a woman appeared on the screen. She was in her late twenties, had long black hair, and looked Filipino.

"You look nothing like your photo," Paul said to Jessica.

"Now will you believe that I'm not Jessie Montega?" Jessica pleaded.

"That means she's dead, she's truly dead," Paul muttered. His eyes grew sad. "I really killed her."

"Paul, you didn't kill anyone," Father Kelly said. "You have to trust yourself again."

The video transmission suddenly ended. Jessica looked at the videoscreen and said, "Forgive me, Father, but I don't need another person adding to this retarded mess."

She turned to Paul. "Would it help if you talked to her?"

Before Paul could answer, he heard someone say, "Paul, how nice to finally see you."

The voice sounded familiar. Paul turned around. Jessie Montega stood there, smiling.

"Do you see her too?" Paul asked.

Erin and Thomas, both looking shocked, simply replied, "Yes."

Thomas looked at the lights flashing quickly on Erin's brainscanner headpiece. He took the brainscanner monitor out of his pocket.

"Uh, maybe you should see this," he said.

But Paul wasn't listening to him. Instead, he stared at the ghost from Redsands.

Jessie Montega looked into Paul's eyes. "Thanks for trying to teleport me up. I know it didn't work, but I appreciate all that you did for me."

She held her hand out to Paul. "Feel my hand. That's the DNA, the amino acids, the proteins, the water, the carbon, and the oxygen that will become the first Martian life forms."

Paul took Jessie Montega's hand and gripped it. It felt smooth and solid and warm, not like what he had expected of a ghost. He marveled at how human the ghost felt.

"Are you dead?" Paul whispered, barely able to speak.

Jessie Montega nodded. "My body lies on Mars, but my spirit is in heaven with God. It's a good place, so don't worry about me."

"Thanks for letting me know."

As Paul released her hand, Jessie Montega said, "There is a purpose of my life and my death. Let me fulfill my purpose." Then, looking at Jessica, she said, "Let her fulfill her purpose too."

With a wave of her hand, Jessie Montega faded away.

Paul looked at Jessica. "You really are Jesus."

"Finally, you believe me!" Jessica said. "Listen, you've done nothing wrong. Be at peace with yourself again."

Paul tossed the ignition key to Jessica.

"What are you doing?" Thomas shouted.

Jessica dropped the knife on the floor, caught the key, and dashed through the airlock and into the shuttlecraft.

"She's just a crazy kid!" Thomas yelled as he ran to the airlock.

He tried to pull open the door, but Jessica had locked it from the other side. The whirring sounds of machinery began. Thomas backed away from the door.

“She’s starting the nuclear engine,” Erin said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Back at the control room, they watched the shuttlecraft blast away from Troika and shoot towards the red planet below.

“We’ve got our cameras aimed over Redsands again,” Erin said as she finally removed the brainscanner headpiece.

The viewscreen showed an aerial shot of the ruined station. The shuttlecraft fell quickly like a blur onto the broken dome. A blinding flash of white light erupted. A nuclear mushroom cloud arose.

In horrified silence, the Troika’s crew watched the thick radioactive smoke climb hundreds of feet into the Martian sky.

“Nothing could have survived that,” Paul said.

Thomas scowled and turned away from the viewscreen. “We let that kid kill herself,” he spat.

A tear ran down Erin’s cheek. “Poor Jessica,” she muttered.

Paul put his hand on Erin’s shoulder. “I think she’ll come back.”

Thomas looked at another viewscreen, this one showing animated graphics of the orbits of Space Station Exeter and Space Station Troika.

“Exeter is now at its closest position to Troika,” Thomas announced. “Well, we’re stranded here. Neither we nor Exeter have a shuttlecraft. How are we going to take the food to Exeter?”

Numbers and words suddenly appeared on the Erin’s computer monitor and began scrolling upwards.

“This information’s downloading onto our mainframe,” Erin observed. “What is it?”

Paul looked at the monitor. “It’s program code for the teleporter. Is the University of Waterloo sending it to us?”

“No, it’s not coming from Earth,” Erin reported. “It’s coming from — Mars.”

Paul looked at his computer monitor. Instead of the program code, it showed a message:

Your teleporter is now safe for people and food.

XP

Paul grinned at the signature: XP, the first and second letters of XPICTOC. Kristos: Christ in Greek.

All the food they teleported to Space Station Exeter arrived complete and unchanged. “Just as hard and tasteless as it originally was, no miracle this time,” Thomas joked.

Finally, the crew had only themselves to teleport to Exeter. But Thomas had to something to show Paul and Erin before they abandoned Troika.

Thomas pointed at brain scans of Erin on a computer terminal. Different parts of her brain glowed and pulsated in red, green, and yellow.

Thomas pointed to an area that suddenly lit up and expanded in red. “That’s the electrical activity in the left temporal lobe at the time when you first saw Jessica. It’s all red, showing an increase in electrical activity.”

He showed another brain scan with the left temporal lobe lit up in red. “And this is a scan of your brain at the time when you saw Jessie Montega’s ghost.”

Erin gazed at the brain scans. “And what about the time I saw my mother?”

“Same results,” Thomas said. “The temporal lobe is where the emotions of religious experience, feelings like awe and joy, are created,” he explained. “Religious mystics experience increased brain wave activity there when they see visions or go into altered states of consciousness.”

“Does that mean Jesus and my mother and Jessie Montega really did come to us?” Erin wondered.

“Or something triggered these visions in our minds,” Thomas suggested. He opened a three-dimensional computer graphic of Troika. Animated waves poured from the centre of the space station.

“I detected electrochemical signals from Troika itself,” Thomas said. “The signals are coming from the core of the asteroid that the station is built in.”

“Electrochemical signals?” Paul said. “You mean the rock is sending out brain waves of its own?”

“It seems to be. The rock could have planted visions of Jessica, Erin’s mother, and Jessie Montega into our minds,” Thomas said.

“And that’s why Father Kelly couldn’t see Jessica,” Paul realized. “He wasn’t here to receive the signals.”

Erin leaned forward to look at the graphic image of Troika. “But my mother’s ghost knew about me and my family. How could the rock have known all about our lives?”

“I think the rock is also absorbing our brain waves,” Thomas said. “It’s probably taking our memories and turning them into visions of people we knew.”

“Incredible,” Paul said. “Siren Stones are real.”

Thomas shrugged. “I don’t know if this is a Siren Stone or not.” He paused. “But now I’m sure that God and Jesus are just figments of our imagination, created in our brains.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Erin protested. “Maybe God gave us temporal lobes so that we can experience Him.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t prove that,” Thomas retorted.

“What about the missing shuttlecraft?” Erin mentioned. “Someone flew it into Mars. And that nuclear explosion was no illusion. Other space stations saw it.”

“And then there’s the new program code for the teleporter,” Paul said. “Where did that come from?”

“Okay, I don’t know how to explain everything,” Thomas admitted, “but before we jump to conclusions about God, we need to look at all the possibilities.”

“There’ll be plenty of time to study all the possibilities, but not now; Exeter’s going to move out of range,” Paul said as he looked at his watch. “Let’s go to the teleporter.”

As they walked to the teleporter, Paul said, “It’s too bad we have to leave now. We don’t know anything about this rock. How can it send and receive brain waves? Is it living? Is it intelligent? There’s plenty for a future crew to study.”

They teleported themselves safely to Space Station Exeter.

Later that day, Father Kelly celebrated Mass in the chapel. He gave the Eucharist to Paul and Erin, thanked God for the safe evacuation of Troika’s crew, and included Jessica in the prayers for the dead.

Thomas also attended Mass that day, in memory of Jessica, the girl who had cooked a fish dinner in the way he loved from Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco.

Nothing remained of Redsands Base except for hundreds of pools of chemical soup scattered on a charred red landscape. In one pool of chemicals, a geyser of water continued spraying up from the center. Water, oxygen, carbon, proteins, and amino acids swirled together after feeling the burst of nuclear energy.

Long after the Earth people had left, membranes formed around proteins and chemicals, and the first cells appeared. The cells absorbed energy from the radiation and the sun, and chemical

reactions began inside the cells. One day, a cell split into two.
Life had sprung on Mars.

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