

Chicon 7 Contest Story (start)

by Mike Resnick and ?

They say religion is making a comeback. Not on Demosthenes, it isn't.

I don't know that we're any less moral than any other world. We do our share of sinning, sure, but no more than they do on Earth or New Leningrad or Oceana VI, Maybe it's that Man thought he'd find God out here among the stars, and God turned out to be just as elusive as ever. Maybe it's because most of the people on Demosthenes are in transit to somewhere else. Maybe it's the heat, or the humidity, or the gravity.

Or maybe it's me.

I'm the only minister of the only church on the planet. You want to learn to live with loneliness? Don't be an explorer. Don't be a mountain climber. Don't be a deep-sea diver. Run a church on Demosthenes.

I'd never planned to be the minister of a church, not on Demosthenes, not anywhere. I like women, I like to drink, and when someone hits me I don't turn the other cheek. Then I got shot up pretty badly in the Omega War, and as I was bleeding to death in the mud I offered God a bargain: if He would just keep me alive, I would dedicate the rest of my life to serving Him. (Truth to tell, it wasn't much of a deal for Him; I hadn't accomplished a hell of a lot with my life up to that point.)

But God heard me, and a year later I was walking again, even if one of my legs had been purchased from a factory that created it. They cloned my spleen and left lung, forced their growth in a nutrient solution, and kept me alive until they could replace the damaged organs with the new ones.

I figured God kept His end of the bargain, and it was up to me to keep mine. I went back to school, even though I was in my early thirties, and got ordained in two more years. I know I've got a lot of rough edges—I've been a soldier a lot longer than I've been a minister—and I guess my superiors felt the safest thing to do with me was ship me off to Demosthenes, where there were less people to be offended by my rough

edges. I think the last census was 800,000 Demos—that's the native, mildly humanoid, life form—and 5,000 Men.

The church wasn't doing much business when I got there, and it was doing even less a year later. I don't know why they even kept the place open. A good Sunday morning might find thirty people in the congregation, half of them snoring off Saturday night's binge. The poorbox was usually empty. As a matter of fact, so was the church.

For the longest time I had a feeling that the problem was me. Maybe it was my sermons, which varied between dull and salty. Maybe it was just my attitude. I'm no dummy; I know I don't have the dignity the parishioners expect of their minister. I had hoped my sincerity would make up for it. I don't know; maybe they didn't think I was sincere, either.

I told my superiors that they should probably replace me, but they told me that God was in my corner, and that Jesus wouldn't have quit, and by the time one of them started comparing me to Job I realized that I was on the very bottom rung of the ladder, that if I couldn't make it on Demosthenes there was no place left to send me—you simply couldn't get demoted from Demosthenes.

Things got so bad they even laid off Harvey Wilkens, who'd been our only maintenance man since the church was built nine years ago. I figured the next step was for them to tell me that my duties now included mopping the floors and mowing the stuff that passes for grass out here.

I don't know what I'd have answered if they'd ordered me to take over Harvey's chores, but as it turns out I didn't have to. About a week after he left I walked the half mile from my cottage -- it's all titanium and glass and strange angles, but I don't know what else to call it -- and I saw that some two robots mowing the lawn. When I entered the church another was scrubbing the floor.

Great, I thought. Harvey may not have been the brightest guy in the galaxy, but at least when he was here I had someone to talk to.

I don't like robots much. Any time you see a robot working, you know there's a man somewhere who should have had that job. But robots don't complain, they don't unionize, they don't ask for raises, and they don't take breaks.

I'd served six years in the Omega War. I'd seen a lot of brave young men and women die right in front of me. I never saw a robot take a laser or a pulse blast for a man, or storm an enemy position so a human wouldn't have to. I made up my mind to tolerate their presence—it was better than *my* moving the lawn or scrubbing the floors—but not to say a word to them.

That lasted about three days, but when you've gone 72 hours without saying a word to another human being, you can go a little stir-crazy if you don't talk to somebody—or *something*.

Of course, they didn't know squat about religion, and I found it especially comforting that they didn't know anything about warfare, either local or intergalactic. Truth to tell, what they mostly knew was yard care and interior maintenance, but before long I got them interested in the murderball scores—well, maybe *interested* is an overstatement, but at least I got them to where we could discuss the game, the players, and the league standings.

And when that palled, I taught them poker, but since they had nothing to bet it lacked a certain excitement, and I settled for teaching them bridge. It could be frustrating, because of course they could compute the odds for any card showing up, or for anything that might still be in your hand after five or six tricks, while I was confined to educated guesswork. They'd come to me without names, and I didn't want to call them 1 through 4, so I finally dubbed them Club, Diamond, Heart and Spade. I suppose if a fifth had shown up I'd have called it No Trump.

I was afraid my parishioners might be a little resentful of them -- Harvey was a sweet guy and everyone had liked him—but they seemed to understand that we weren't pulled enough people to pay for him. Or me. And I know robots are cheap, but I never figured out how we were able to pay for them. Probably donated by some church that was doing turnaway business on some other world.

I even went to a couple of nearby worlds, listened to the sermons, studied the congregations, examined the placement of the churches in the communities. Didn't help. Most of them were doing turnaway business, while mine couldn't draw flies at a watermelon party.

You know when I got my first inkling of what was happening?

It was when Heart walked up to me one afternoon to ask why we had all the crosses planted in the ground behind the church. Well, actually, he didn't ask *why* they were there, because he wasn't programmed for curiosity; he asked if he should clean them. Seems he'd assumed they were some kind of leafless plant until we buried old Jessica Montrose, he saw me planting the cross, and felt compelled to ask if his duties included keeping it clean.

I told him that it would be a good idea, then added, even though I knew he had no sense of humor, that it seemed unlikely that Jessica would give a damn. He asked why not, and I explained that she was dead, and in fact that the cross marked her grave, that all the men and woman who died on Demosthenes had their graves marked with a cross, except for Billy Kaplan, who was planted under a Star of David but who we buried in the cemetery anyway since there weren't any temples on the planet.

"Contradiction," said Heart, who one would never call loquacious. .

"About Billy?" I asked, frowning.

"About crosses."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said.

"They are not buried under crosses in the Demos' cemetery," said Heart.

"Of course not," I answered. "Only Demos are buried there."

"Contradiction," he said.

I stared at him for a minute. "Explain," I said at last.

"Seven Men have died since I was shipped to Demosthenes. Only Jessica Montrose is buried under a cross."

"You think we just left the other six out to rot in the sun?"

"They are buried in the Demos' cemetery."

I saw it coming half a dozen sentences before we got there, but it was still a shock, as well as a revelation.

The Demos had a religion. That figured. Damned near every sentient race has to believe in *something* greater than itself.

But the operative word wasn't "believe," but "alien."

They had life expectancies of a century and a half. They were covered with an orange fur, and didn't wear clothes. They could see into the infra-red. They were tone-deaf. They had evolved from a race of

browsers, not predators. They had almost no technology, and had never developed spaceflight. They gave birth to litters. They had wars that were more brutal than anything I saw on Omega or Banitor IV. They weren't inimical to our colonists, but for the most part they paid them no notice whatsoever.

And my parishioners were visiting *their* church, worshipping *their* God, being buried in *their* graveyard.

It took me quite a while to wrap my mind around the thought. It wasn't just one crazed man or woman. I was drawing less than one percent of a small population, and their cemetery—and, I assumed, their church—was filling up with human beings.

I went to my office, poured myself a stiff drink—yeah, ministers don't do that, except when we do—and tried to puzzle it out. Did the Demos worship the same God that I did? Did Jesus die for *their* sins as well as ours? Or were our beliefs a demonstrable myth, so much so that once exposed to theirs most of my parishioners deserted a human religion for an alien one. We merely spoke of miracles; did they perform them?

And why had not a single fallen-away member of my church ever approached me to say *why* he had left, what the Demos' religion offered that ours lacked?

I couldn't make myself walk up to one of the men or women who no longer came to church on Sundays. I didn't want to sound like I was accusing them of something, not if they had found a religion that brought them the comfort ours clearly didn't...and if they hadn't left my church for the Demos, then I already knew the answer: my sermons bored them to tears.

Finally I decided to send Club to the Demos church with a friendly note from me, stating that I was offering him to them for a week's time as a gesture of goodwill, from one neighbor to another. I half-thought they'd send him right back, but it stayed away for seven days, and when he came back the first thing I asked him was how many Men were attending the Demos' church.

"183," he answered.

"*Why?*" I demanded in exasperation.

But of course he didn't understand the question, and merely stared at me.

That night, just before I went to bed, I went into the chapel and dropped to one knee.

“God,” I said, “I know You're there. You saved me back on Omega, and I've never doubted Your existence. But if the Demos have found a better way to communicate with You, maybe I'd better learn what it is and spread the word to not just my flock but my superiors. And if they haven't, if it's some kind of scam and the souls of the Men who believe in it are at risk, I'd better learn that too.”

I walked slowly back to my quarters, my mind filled with questions.

Was Jesus just a man?

Was there a heaven and a hell?

And the most troubling question of all: was it the Demos and not Men who were created in God's image?

Somehow I knew I was going to have to learn the answer.

OK, take it from here.—Mike