

CHISTUS DESTITUTUS

Bud Webster

Jesus lay dying in a five-dollar flop. Dark against the sheets, his face and hands were marked and bent by every day of his seventy years; his thin body barely made a dent in the old mattress.

None of the beds in the shelter's clinic were empty. There was no shortage of old men too poor for the hospitals or for whom there was simply no room elsewhere. Once, he had tended the hopeless old men in these beds; now, he was just one more of them.

"Yeshua bar-Yosef." The voice was lifeless; the words a statement, not a question. It was his birth name, no one had called him that for two thousand years.

He opened his eyes.

"Oh," he said, "it's you. What are you doing here?"

The old man glanced down the aisle at the floor supervisor. If he'd heard the voices, he gave no sign. The words weren't English "weren't any Earthly tongue", but it wouldn't matter anyway; there was always the low murmur of voices here. Some patients prayed, some babbled, or cried out in pain; if you were here long enough, you got used to it.

Vic wouldn't see the angel standing over the old man's bed.

* * * *

"I am here for you," the angel said.

"Yeah, well, I didn't call for you. Go away."

"It is not permitted."

"By who? Him? Screw Him," the old man said hotly. "It's not His life. It never was. Leave me alone, Uriel."

"It does not have to be your time."

"Bullshit. It's been my time for the past twenty centuries. It's *always* been my time. Go away and let me die in peace."

"It is not permitted. You know this."

The old man sighed; his lungs crackled, and it turned into a coughing fit.

"'Angelic compassion', he finally managed. "You're inhuman. You can't know."

"What can I not know?"

"What your compassion is for, that's what. What a joke." The old man reached for a chipped mug on the table next to the bed. The messenger watched, but did nothing to help.

The cup shook as he tried to lift it to his lips, spilling water on the worn blanket.

"Here, Pete. Lemme help ya." The supervisor, alarmed by the old man's coughing, had hurried over.

He cranked the head of the bed to a sitting position and held the cup so the old man could drink.
"You ok now? You want me to call Father Nicholas?"

"Nah, Vic. I'm as ok as I can be, I guess. Thanks."

"Hey, it's awright. You'd do the same." Patting the old man's hand, he returned the cup to the little table and walked back to his desk.

"That, Uriel. *That's* compassion. That's *humanity*." He shook his head against the pillow. "I pity you, all of you, because you'll never know."

The Messenger said nothing.

"They've had many names for you. Cherubim, Seraphim, Principalities, all those dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin names. You know what name fits you the best? Aliens'. Strangers. You don't touch humanity at any given point, did you know that? You don't love, don't hate, eat, fart, or fuck. You've been given dominion over humanity since the very beginning, and you haven't had the slightest idea in all that time what you were dealing with." The old man chuckled. "No wonder the human race is so screwed up."

"It is our lot. There is no justification, no explanation. It just is."

"Why, daddy?" the old man replied in a high, quavery voice. Then, much lower, "Because, that's why." What a crock."

The Messenger blinked. "You blaspheme."

"Then take your goddam flaming sword and run my ass out of the goddam garden, Uriel. Who has better reason to blaspheme?"

"It is not permitted."

"Yeah, right, I don't have a fucking permit. So sue me."

Both were silent for a few moments. Finally, the old man spoke.

"You really want to know why, Messenger?"

The angel shrugged. "Perhaps."

"You were there at Golgotha."

"I was there."

"Then you saw what happened. Didn't it ever occur to you to ask why? Shit, He destroyed Sodom. He let Joshua bring down Jericho by blowing rams' horns. He gave it to Moses to part the Red Sea. Did you ever stop to wonder why He didn't just bring me down off that goddam cross once He'd made His point?" The sound the old man made might have been a laugh.

"Goddam cross is right," he went on. "He turned His back on me. I took the sins of the whole world on my bleeding shoulders because it was His Will, and He turned His almighty back on me because I made Him want to puke. *He left me there to die alone*, Uriel! He abandoned me because I did what he put before me to do, because He couldn't stand to see what He'd made me become." A tear leaked from the corner of one eye.

"Why did He do that? It was all His idea, His ... *Plan*. I did what I was supposed to do. Hell, even *Judas* did what he was supposed to do." He turned his blazing eyes on the Messenger. "And where is the thirteenth disciple now, Uriel?" he asked softly. "What tree in hell bears his name and sorrow?"

The Messenger gazed down at the old man, but showed no signs of feeling.

"It is not for us to know..." it began.

"It was for *me* to know, goddamn it! I was His 'only begotten son', or had you forgotten that?"

"I forget nothing."

The old man sank back against the pillow.

"Leave me the Hell alone, Uriel. You can't do anything for me and I can't do anything for you."

The angel looked around impassively, then said, "There are humans present. This is no concern of theirs."

"The hell you say."

"We must not attract undue attention."

"Then fix it! You're the frigging supernatural entity here, you want this to be private, *you* do something about it. Take us to Limbo or someplace. I don't care, as long as I can get Vic's attention if I need to."

"To take you out of this reality would be pointless. I am to stay with you until your death, and my time is limited. However, as of now, none can hear us."

"Try to imagine how comforting that is," the old man said, voice thick with irony.

There was a palpable silence; then the Messenger spoke. "You have confused us with this manifestation. After almost two millennia, why did you choose this time and place?"

"I needed time to think. Time to cool off. I stayed dead a long time, Uriel." The old man sighed. "Time goes by fast when you're having fun. After 1900 years or so, give or take a decade, I decided to try again, on my own."

"You deliberately chose an anonymous path when your Second Coming would have been celebrated. Most of humanity would have followed you."

The old man shook his head. "I didn't want that. I wanted to see if I could make it work without all the church stuff, just by being what I could be." He picked idly at the thin, worn blanket. "I wanted friends, not followers. I helped a lot of people in small ways. It turned out I had a real talent for healing" how's that for irony, Messenger? "and I went all over the place. I worked in hospitals, rode with rescue squads, I was even an army corpsman. Hell, I've been here almost twenty years. I just wanted to help." He shrugged and the sheets whispered against his thin back. "It's all I ever wanted to do."

"It seemed to work. People got better, were grateful. They passed along the favors to others, donated time and money to the shelter, made the world a slightly better place than it might have been otherwise."

"I've lived a lot longer this time, too. And you know the best part, Uriel? Nobody will come along after I'm dead this time to piss in it so they like the taste. No Crusades in my name, no Inquisition, no

pogroms. No 'ethnic cleansing'. If He really had wanted to do this thing right, He'd have gathered an army of 'unnecessary manifestations'™ and set us loose all over the world. But then, he continued wearily, "there wouldn't have been a Big Book with His name in it and all those ludicrous stories."

"You avoid the question."

"I'm under no obligation to answer it. I've paid those dues. Look," he continued, "He came to me when I was just a kid. I was smart enough to have attracted some attention with the rabbis, and I asked a lot of questions that some of them weren't comfortable with. God gave me a vision one night, and promised me a lot of things—immortality, the ability to really help people, whatever it would take for His Plan to work. He shook his head. "I said yes. What did I know? I was just a kid."

"That was then. What of now?"

"Okay. You want reasons?" the old man asked quietly. "Renewal. Recompense. Requit. Restitution. With each word his voice grew stronger. "Release. Rectification. Revenge. Resurrection. Then, softer: "Redemption."

"Is this proper?"

"You ask stupid questions, Uriel, and insult both our intelligence. Vic!" he called out to the supervisor. "Ask God about 'proper', Uriel. Was it 'proper'™ for Him to go off in a sulk because he didn't like the way His experiment turned out? Because He couldn't handle the enormity of what he'd done? He struggled to raise himself. "Job. That poor bastard didn't know how well off he was. VIC!"

Vic hurried over. "Whataya need, Pete?"

"I gotta piss, man. Can you get me to the can?"

"Yeah, sure." He helped the old man sit up, then put his arm across the bony shoulders and half-carried him to the bathroom. The Messenger looked on disinterestedly.

After seating the old man on the toilet, Vic said, "Now, you call me when you need me. Don't try anâ™ make it back by y'self, ok?"

"Ok, Vic. I'll call you if I need you." He smiled wanly as Vic left.

The flow from the old man's bladder was slow and painful; he didn't have to look to know it was tinged with blood.

The Messenger appeared in front of him.

"Oh, this is a good one, all right," the old man muttered. "Uriel in the urinal. What are you doing here, Messenger?"

Something about the angel's bearing betrayed uncertainty.

"You left after your resurrection. We watched you walk away from your disciples, leaving them frightened and puzzled, full of questions. You did nothing to answer those questions."

"That was Paul's job, and he was welcome to it. Hell, he wrote most of the New Testament and let the rest of them take the credit—or the blame. I just wanted out." He leaned his head back against the

wall. "I'd had enough of the cult, enough of the adoration and the praise. It's not what I wanted, ever."

"You went to Hell."

"Heh. Yeah, I went *all* to Hell." He closed his eyes. "I was furious. I wanted to kick ass and take names. I couldn't take it out on the poor bastards who hung me up. They didn't know what they were doing. So, I harrowed Hell."

"The marks remain. The gates have never been rebuilt."

"Yeah, well. Milton was impressed. What's your point, Uriel?"

"Where did you get such power?"

The old man glared. "I had it. Not that I wanted it. When I let Him ... recruit me, He charged me like a battery. There was plenty left."

"Even after He had abandoned you?"

"Look, He set all kinds of shit in motion that day. Earthquakes, an eclipse, storms. It doesn't just dissipate. Once you manifest on the physical plane, you have to deal with physical laws. How much power do you think it takes to rise after three days? Just because He turned away doesn't mean He turned it off like some kind of heavenly circuit breaker."

"You could have used the power to search for Him."

"And then what? Reasoned with Him? Begged Him to take me back? Beat the living shit out of Him?" The old man reached behind himself and flushed. His hand trembled. "What you are to Humanity, He is to me; there's no common point for discussion." Eyes closed, he slumped wearily against the back of the toilet.

"Ah, God, I'm so tired ... so fucking tired. Why are you here, Messenger? I didn't ask for you."

The angel was silent for several minutes. "There is an imbalance. It must be corrected."

"What kind of imbalance?" the old man asked dully.

"An impermissible one. One that concerns the entirety of humanity."

"Great. Well," he said after a moment, "what? C'mon, I'm old and tired, and I just want to die and have done with it. What's so important?"

"You were wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"Your crucifixion and its consequences."

The old man's eyes opened, and he turned to focus on the other's face.

"What are you telling me, Messenger?"

The angel stared at him with cold eyes. "Are you so arrogant that you believe He turned His back on you alone? He deserted all of us."

"I don't understand. All's right with the world, isn't it? Doesn't that mean God's in His heaven?"

"Your jest is meaningless and out of place."

"Yeah, well, you guys were never known for your sense of humor. Explain yourself."

"My statement was clear. God has abandoned His throne. There is no existing physical or metaphysical plane that we have not searched. He went where none of us could follow."

The old man stared as the enormity of this sank in. He passed a shaking hand over his eyes.

"This ... you can't be serious. You can't have looked everywhere, not everywhere."

"We have. Our search was systematic and complete. There is no place in existence in which God can be found. He is gone."

A look of sick horror passed over the old man's face. "When? When did He leave?"

"Is it important? He is gone."

"When, goddam it!"

"Golgotha."

"Golgotha! But ... the souls in heaven. Are they gone, too? Did he at least pull the plug and let them go?"

"He did not. The souls remain."

"But without Him, with just you there, they couldn't survive. Not and stay sane."

"They have survived. They are not ... whole."

"Oh ... oh, my... There were no words to express what the old man felt. He raised his head, tears now falling freely. "What about Hell?"

"All mad, demons and lost souls alike."

"Purgatory?"

"All mad."

"Even limbo? Even the righteous heathen? And ... Oh, God, the children! Even the children?"

"Mad. There was no one," the angel said, "capable of maintaining their sanity after He left. Do you understand?" The angel stared at the old man. "Do you understand all that this means?"

Eyes again closed, the old man nodded his head. "They don't have anyone to guide them, nobody to help them make sense of what's happened. Their 'Heavenly Father', the one who made all the promises, isn't there to counsel them, to make them safe." Hopelessly, he looked at the angel. "Do they know that they've been abandoned?"

"How could they not know? God is gone."

"And you ... you waited *two thousand years* to tell me this?"

"Our time does not pass as yours. Our search was extensive, it required much more time than that." The angel's voice was ice. "It passed no more quickly for those who are lost."

"How long?" the old man said between clenched teeth. "How long has it been for them?"

"Eternity."

Jesus wept. Slumped against a toilet in a New York shelter for the homeless, his thin body wracked with sobs, he wept for the souls of the dead; lost now, lost always, lost forever.

"Do you understand all that this means?" the angel repeated.

"Yes, goddamit, I know! He walked out on the whole human race, walked out on all His promises, and plans, and against His sworn word. I *know* what it means. His head sagged against his chest. "Just let me die and get it over with. I'm tired."

"You do *not* understand. God is gone. His place must not remain empty."

The words sank in slowly. Jesus raised his head, eyes wide with shock. "What?"

The angel looked at him without emotion. "You spoke of compassion. You said that you pitied us, that we would never know what it meant. You were wrong."

The old man said nothing; he just stared.

"Those who are lost, those who will come, need guidance. We cannot give it. They cannot give it to themselves. There is only you. We can no longer allow them to suffer."

"No! It's too much! I've *earned* dying, damn it!"

"You will take His place."

"I said no! I won't do it!"

The angel looked down at the old man with cold eyes; burning cold, inhuman eyes.

"I will tell you as I once told Ezra. Go weigh for me the weight of fire, or measure for me a blast of wind, or call back for me the day that is past. Can you do these things?"

The old man's voice shook with helpless rage. "You know I can't! I never could! I wasn't born with power, He wasn't my Father! He tried to bring himself under control, but his hands and head shook as if palsied, and his face was as blotched as the tiles beneath his bare feet.

"I was given this choice once before, Messenger, and I took it even though I knew it would kill me. This time I'm refusing the cup! His voice became petulant. "You can't make me do it, you son of a bitch!"

"You had choice in Gethsemane. Here and now, you do not. I am not here to bring you back, or to coax you, but to tell you what will be. The air around the angel grew bright and hot as it spoke. "You will die. You will ascend. You will take the throne. There is nothing else. God is gone, and you have no choice."

"Bastard ... bastard..." The ancient voice was whisper-thin now, cracked and broken like spun glass. "Let me die..."

"Yes. The angel placed a hand on Jesus's brow.

And the old man's hands stopped shaking; his head fell back against the wall; his worn body sagged

slowly in place; and he died.

* * * *

Back at his desk, Vic grew worried. Pete had been in the toilet a long time, and there was no sound. Not wanting to disturb the other patients, he got up and hurried around to make sure everything was okay. He tapped softly on the door.

"Yo, Pete. You need help?" There was no answer. "Pete!" he said louder.

Alarmed, he eased the door open just far enough to look in; he didn't want to embarrass the old man if he'd just fallen asleep on the john.

What he saw made him curse softly and rush to the old man's side. He felt the thin wrist, then turned and rushed out of the bathroom and down the hall where Father Nicholas's room was. He returned moments later with the priest behind him.

"I couldn't find a pulse, padre. Oh, jeez, what a way to go..." His voice was thick with grief; the old man had been well loved.

Father Nicholas checked for a pulse, then closed the eyes and began Last Rites. Vic stood to one side, unashamed tears on his cheeks.

The priest finished the sacrament, then went to phone for an ambulance. Vic followed, his eyes pleading for comfort, for sense.

"Why'd he hafta die in *there*, padre? Why'd he hafta go in the can?"

The priest patted Vic's shoulder. "I know, I know. It's a bad place to end, especially for a man like Pete. But it's okay, Vic." He turned to look one last time at the body sprawled on the toilet. "It's okay. He's with God now."