

The masked man smiled in relief. He had come to kill it, for the last time. For good.

He finally had tracked it down. It couldn't escape. The last linked body of Hive Custodian in the entire solar system. It was here, on Jawer-at, which the Old Ones had called Rhea. Here the war had started, and here the masked man's life had begun. It was fitting that it would end here, too. Everything.

"You can't hide," the assassin spoke, his words carrying through the corridor of Man's furthest outpost. "I've got you."

"I know." The creature, mechanical and putrid, stinking of rot and rage, sounded as it always had. Distorted, like a *djinn* which the assassin's old holy Books had spoken of. But this time there was something odd about it. It did not sound angry, hateful, nor violent. It didn't even have the pang of vindictiveness that the assassin had known for so long.

"I'm going to kill you."

"I know."

"You don't stand a chance."

"I know."

He knew what was off about it. This creature, this monster, this killer, this *demon* sounded . . . sad.

Impossible. The assassin must have been imagining things. Wishful thinking?

But it was true. The Custodian was sad.

"Do you have anything to say? You're going to answer for your crimes. Crimes against all of us. Against-" he cut himself off. He had been told not to speak of faith to the beast.

"Yes."

"Alright then. You have one minute. I shan't wait any longer."

"I never meant any of it. He made me do it."

The assassin couldn't stop one eyebrow from raising. Who? Clearly, the creature was lying, as it always did before it died.

"It gave me a choice. I took it. It is unknowable to you what sacrifices I have made. I never meant a crime except by happenstance. Immutable, his will is. I simply follow. How far I have fallen."

They sat there for a long time. It felt like years, but the assassin's retinal display wasn't subject to such inaccuracies. Ten seconds.

"I regret everything. Please understand."

"*Liar!* From the serpent's tongue to your very end, you never tell what is right in front of you! I'VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE KILLING YOU! Again, and again, *and again*. Over and over, round and round, like a horse chasing its tail. *It never ends!*"

"I see right through you, Catalyst."

The masked man drew his pistol.

Silence.

Pulled back the hammer. Tripped the primary safety.

"Wait-"

Fired.

The round went through the creature's abdomen, through the interior furnace.

Ejected the round.

Fired.

The Custodian flinched but did not react otherwise.

Fired.

The Custodian let out a gurgle through the blue coolant leaking through its opercula.

"Catalyst, please, see reason."

The assassin did not respond. Simply fired another hammered pair, another hammered pair, another three rounds until the magazine was empty and the slide locked back. He knew he could have been more efficient by putting a bullet in the Custodian's brain, but he didn't care.

He wanted to see it beg.

The beast screamed like the blasphemers in Tartarus itself. Like it always had, on every radio, across every world, for decades.

He slid another magazine in, didn't even bother to put away the old one, just dropped it on the floor. Chambered. Squeezed the secondary safety and emptied another seven rounds into the beast. It was on the floor now. Dragging itself to the wall, trying to sit up. Coolant (or blood?) was streaming out of it like a flood of blue sky. It still would not perish.

"Catalyst. Catalyst. Wait. Listen to me."

He only had another three rounds left, and he did not savor them.

"Serenity? Serenity, I can't see you. Where are you? Please."

The assassin knelt in front of the creature. Crushed its stones beneath his steel boot. It was swaying with every breath, and its single remaining eye, deep in its chest, past the steel and circuit, shed a single tear. He had always thought those eyes seemed so remarkably human.

"Catalyst, I'm scared. Tell me. Do dead men dream?"

He grabbed its arm and slammed it against the wall, its machine strength no longer with it. Through a face contorted by religious fervor and animalistic rage, the assassin looked directly into its last eye.

"What are you talking about?" "I have sinned, Jon. I only wanted to see her again. Will you forgive me?"

The beast was slowing its breath now. It was choking on its heated coolant, and it was loosening its grip on his coat. "Tell me, Jon. What is a three-letter word for monster?"

The assassin thought for a moment. A riddle? Now? "You." The Custodian let out a rattle, one final breath from a demon's gills.

"False."

The assassin stood over the beast's corpse. Its last corpse. It was gone now. It was over. He could go home to Earth. He thought about its words, about their conversation, its pain, its fear. He thought about the war, the only war he knew, the lifetime of war, the genocide both sides had committed. But above all, he thought about the riddle.

He thought for a long time.