

## **The Man Who Would Kill God**

At the onset, there had been a thousand. Now, he found himself alone. The fog was tyrannically thick this far up the mountain; so much so that the handholds wind had scarred into stone were made invisible to his eyes. Instead he climbed on blind faith, grasping for something to hold just as the drunk fumbles for a bottle in the dark.

Nothing would stop him from reaching his destiny.

Had it been weeks since the legion departed from basecamp? Months? Years? It mattered little. The others had all turned away, retreating to the falsehoods of The Crossroads with tails between their legs. Not all, he should say. No; some had fallen from the aeries, screams swallowed by the mist and driving snow. Those had died a noble death, at least.

Looking skyward, it was impossible to speculate how much of his journey still lay ahead. Unfaltering, he staggered forward. Burning hatred warmed him against the frigid squalls, as strong as a raging bonfire in the deepest depths of his heart. Dark notions festered like an untreated wound until all other thoughts rotted away and the mission dominated every modicum of his being.

It was disheveling how suddenly his destination appeared. As he had a million times before, he plunged his fingers through the smothering haze, but instead of jagged edges, they swept across smooth stone. For countless hours, he pressed himself against the rockface. How long had he awaited this moment? The next step frightened him now that it was nigh.

After an eternity, The Assassin ascended.

What he saw betrayed imagination. In the center of the summit was a polished stone table, chipped and eroded by the cruelty of time. Two dilapidated chairs rested opposite one another across the slab, their pale wood splintering in places. He had expected golden gates,

mansions of marble, and a thousand winged seraphs barring his path. Instead there was a lone, wretched man posted at the precipice, gazing upon the world below.

There was no wind, here. The cold had dissipated, leaving behind a gentle warmth that permeated to his core. The light was radiant but possessed no blinding quality; even staring directly into the sun caused not the slightest discomfort to his eyes. Sky of deepest blue and floor of impartial gray met like two halves of a unified piece in the sphere of his vision.

The old man tilted his head at the most miniscule of angles, throwing a glance in The Assassin's direction.

"I'd begun to doubt you'd ever make it. At long last, the Ambassador of Man arrives," he sighed. His voice was quiet and the distance between them great, but still the words echoed like a thunderclap.

The Assassin drew his revolver, holding it arrogantly in hand as he sauntered to join his quarry at the brink.

Looking over the edge tossed the bile in his stomach. It was *unnatural*. From this vantage, the world below twisted in incomprehensible fashion so that all of creation spread before him. The Earth flattened like a map in such a way that the farthest vista directly ahead was the same face of the mountain that lay behind him; the path he had ascended from but a moment ago.

As his eyes scurried to absorb the scenery before him, the areas they lingered on seemed to grow until he could behold them in fine detail. As if compelled, his focus was drawn west, coming to rest on a shaded valley he knew all too well.

Slowly, a sun-kissed cabin blossomed into view. Half a world away, a woman watched as her child played. His wife. His son. A single tear slipped before he could repress it; how long had it been since he'd seen their faces?

“Have you come to kill me?” The old man asked, bringing attention back to the moment.

He was swathed in a simple white robe that grazed the rock below, sandaled feet protruding slightly beneath the hem. Hair in the same tone as his garment hung shoulder length, with a long, bushy beard framing a wrinkled mess of a face. His eyes matched the sky, but peering into them was draining. They seemed to pierce deep into the soul.

“Yes,” The Assassin replied.

The old man gestured an open hand to the stone table and shortly thereafter the two sat facing one another.

“Why do you wish me harm?” His quarry whispered.

“Because you damn us with your very existence!” A lifetime of repressed thoughts erupted to the surface, words spewing like lava from his mouth. “What gives you the right to breathe life into dust and then abandon it to wander meaninglessly in a hell of your own creation? You sit upon your Liar’s Throne and condemn mankind to death, doing nothing to ebb the trials and tribulations that you yourself beset upon us! A reckoning has come. I am the hangman long overdue. Now you are the one who will be judged for your sins!”

The old man shook his head. “You have the wrong impression.”

“Then help me understand,” The Assassin demanded, placing his revolver upon the slab. He reclined against the wooden chair, which creaked threateningly under his weight.

For a long moment, the old man sat, lost in pensive thought. Where was his all-knowing zeal? Why did this immortal being seem so exhausted? Perhaps it was a ploy for sympathy – an

attempt to save his pitiful life? The Liar would be disappointed if he expected mercy. None had been shown to mankind. An unpaid favor cannot be returned.

“What did I do to cause you so much pain?”

“There is no greater evil than to have power to do good but refusing. You sit idly by as my brethren murder one another! Up here in the clouds, you watch us struggle with *unforgivable* disinterest. Do you not care that your children suffer? We die while you live on, mocking us with your silence!”

“You assume too much of me, child. Nothing you’ve said so far is true.” The old man’s voice was a booming murmur, like a muted avalanche crashing down the slopes.

“Then what is the truth?” The Assassin asked The Liar.

It was nighttime. There had been no phasing of the sun or slow ripple as light faded. One instant it was day and the next the stars were shining above. All the constellations, nebulas, and far-off galaxies twinkled in enigmatic splendor overhead.

The newcomer found his vision well adjusted, as if he’d been cloaked in darkness all his life. As he shifted his attention from one star to another the distant orbs ripened into sight, just as the strongholds of man had from the brink. The longer he stared, the nearer they appeared. After a short while, a planet – lightyears distant at the very least – was as plain to him as the revolver upon the tabletop. Closer and closer it magnified, until he could make out odd shapes upon the surface; fantastic, organic cylinders bending at aberrant angles. He pried his eyes away, unable to comprehend what was before him.

The old man nodded in understanding. “Do you know why the stars exist?”

“Because you created them!” The Assassin spat. “Why don’t *you* tell *me*? It all seems so pointless when viewed from below.”

“No,” The Liar replied sadly. His piercing eyes carried the weight of a thousand lifetimes. “They were here long before me. You see, I did not create this universe; only the world you call home. I don’t remember being born. One moment I wasn’t, the next I was. There were no instructions. I found no inherent sense of purpose within myself. I was alone, floating like a vagabond through the great tide of the cosmos.

“After eons of drifting through the veil, the star you call Sol burned before me. Tired of my endless wandering, I weaved the rock and ice nearby to form the Earth and raised this mountain as my home. Ages passed and the planet remained barren while I scanned the universe for an answer to my many questions. Alas, those answers transcended the grasp of my solitary mind!

“In my desperation, a twisted fever dream took root. For millennia, I fought to suppress it as one would a passing fancy, ashamed by the selfishness of my own desires. I was lonely, you see. I thought, ‘Perhaps if there were others, they would take heed of something I failed to notice?’ From my study of the galaxy, it was clear to me that life was plentiful; why not here? So, with a flick of my hand there was an ocean. I amassed every element available to me into a primordial pot, striking it again and again with the spark of life until the first organisms bubbled on their own.

“My children!” I cried. I was a father! I nurtured and guided the lifeforms I created so they could evolve and flourish, hoping that – through the ordeals beset upon them – they would adapt and overcome; eventually surpassing me in their comprehension of what it *means* to be alive.

“But then something unexpected happened,” the old man whispered. “One day I looked down to see that the everchanging mask of life had shifted towards something closely resembling

my own visage. My hubris was deep; a trait that humankind has inherited in great measure! I was proud that this lifeform was akin to me, so I took measures to ensure its success – my own experiment now tainted by egotism. Instead of creating something greater than myself, I only served to impart my worst qualities into you!

“In your kin, child, I saw myself. The hatred, the worry, and the futile sense that comes with realizing that we are but tiny specks of dust when measured against the inconceivable *immenseness* of existence. As your father, I have failed, for you turn to me for answers and I possess none. In my shame, I sequestered myself far away from the land of my creation, unable to cope with the grief that resonates through me into the world below.”

The Assassin meditated on the old man’s words. It disheartened him to know that the being in front of him had none of the answers he sought. “Why let the suffering continue, then?”

“Many times, I have considered shattering the rock beneath our feet, starting fresh, and endeavoring once more. I find myself unable to go through with such destruction! It pains me to admit that I have been so lonely for so long a time that losing something so reminiscent of myself would obliterate the last iota of joy in my possession! In the end, the results will *always* be the same. The universe is cyclical and to believe I would fare better with another attempt is vain delusion. Though I am infinite, it only serves to make my life infinitely *futile*. I am flawed – in the same way that my creations are flawed.”

The Assassin was disappointed in The Liar’s humility; it was far too human for his liking.

“What happens when we die?” The mortal asked.

“I have no answer for that, either,” the immortal replied. “It frightens me! I do not know what it means to not exist.”

“Stand,” The Assassin commanded, unwilling to hear one false word further. “For soon you shall discover firsthand what lies beyond the veil! Weep as the fate damned to those you have created is hammered upon you!”

Wearily, The Liar obeyed. The Assassin stood at arm’s length, revolver trained to the forehead of his prey. His finger rested on the trigger, a hairsbreadth from extinguishing the being that had both given him life and condemned him to die, simply on a whim.

The Liar’s eyes shifted fearfully as they stared down the barrel of the gun.

He wept.

The Assassin’s resolve faltered. Lowering his weapon, he retreated to The Crossroads below.