The rustling in the brush as Jack ran by only fueled his desire to get out of these woods as quickly as possible. A forest, dense with trees and undergrowth howled with mysterious sounds from a planet out of our known solar system. Looking around desperately trying to gauge a direction, Jack made a quick turn and found himself face to face with what he could only describe as a monster. Great flapping wings, like those of a moth except this creature has a body over a meter in length. A terrifyingly large moth that when flapping its wings, sprayed its prey in a powder, causing paralysis. Jack was quick to roll to the side, bringing out his knife.

“Fuck!” Jack exclaimed. “Where the hell did you come from?”

The creature opened its large mouth exposing row upon row of teeth. Drool dripping from the upper jaw down the lower jaw, the moth creature let out a low grumbling growl. Jack watched as the massive bulbous eyes turned to look where he had dashed to. Seeing this as his chance, Jack leapt at the creature, bringing his knife down through one of the wings, tearing it off the creature’s body. Howls of pain erupted from the mouth as it kicked and thrashed its small spindly legs. Falling to the ground with an audible thump, the creature dowsed itself in its own powder and slowly stopped moving and screaming. Jack watched as the moth lay motionless.

Knowing what the RRH would do to this thing, Jack did the only humane thing he could. Taking his knife and driving it through the head of the monstrosity, killing it. Better it dies here and now and let the other forest monsters have at it, then let the RRH take it and experiment on it. Wrenching his knife out, being careful to not get sprayed with the juice that erupted from the wound, Jack took notice of his surroundings.

All around him, trees of varying sizes, with leaves of every shape and color. The twin moons in the sky, one pink and one blue left a purple hue to the air. Listening, he could hear the stream nearby, and knowing the RRH were after him, he decided to avoid the stream and head in the opposite direction. Away from the water source, and away from the camp. Nicholas was sure to be close behind. Reaching into his pocket, Jack felt for the pocket sized cryo pods, the icosahedrons, or as they were commonly referred as, the Hedron. Not wanting to linger too long in one spot, Jack moved on towards the small clearing before the mountain pass.

Eyes watched as Jack moved slowly through the forest. Working very hard to make himself silent, he held his knife out, but no other monsters showed their head. Knowing they were out there, Jack started to recall the common ones that were probably watching him. There were spider and scorpion like monsters as big as a mid-size sedan, large snake type beasts with four mandibles that opened to reveal a tongue that also housed four long articulating teeth. The snake beast, or Gorger as it was known in camp also had several eyes upon his head. The one that concerned Jack the most though, was the Leatherback. An enormous beast with a horned head and hide that was thick, thick as leather. The Leatherback stood a good three men tall and had large muscular arms that could crush you.

“Well, damn.“ Jack said out loud to himself. “It’s dark, I’m alone, and armed with just a knife. I’m totally screwed.”

A rustling in the bushes near his left brought Jack out of his trance. Crouching to make himself seem smaller, let letting himself have enough room for a jump if needed. The rustling got closer, and eventually a small mouse looking miscreant emerged. Completely orange, with a flame on his tail. At first, Jack thought the creature may be on fire, but this was not the first time he has met a beast like this. The fire is a part of the animal. Using the fire to attack his food preferring to eat it scorched. A few within the RRH camp have attempted to befriend the little things, only to end up at the medic getting their burns wrapped.

“I would prefer you not to light me up.” Jack said to the fire mouse. “I would very much prefer you to fuck off.”

Jack attempted to shoo the mouse, only to be the victim of an attempted bite. Not wanting to antagonize the animal any further, Jack stood up and decided to head away from the rodent. Heading towards what he hoped was the clearing he remembered seeing on the map before his daring escape. What a long way he has come from the world he left behind.

Jack grimaced as he heard his voice over the loudspeaker.

“Jack Corbyn to the manager’s office.” Rang the voice in a long dull monotone.

“Well fuck.” Jack said.

Customers in the vicinity glared in his direction. Jack did not care; he knew what was coming. Walking the long way through the store, Jack contemplating just setting fire to the building. Walking into the long hallway towards the employee breakroom, only to take the door to his immediate right and into the dragon’s lair that was his manager’s office.

Upon entering, Jack was greeted with the whale of a woman who called herself *Hope*. Hope was not her real name, but she thought it made people believe she was a happy and friendly person. It did not give Jack that opinion. The woman was a monster. The usual bitchy manager type, constantly on you for not doing a job that is technically not yours to do anyways. If something goes wrong that she oversaw, it wasn’t her fault. The type of manager that reeks of toxicity in the workplace. The sheer size of the woman though, Jack has caught himself wondering how she fits through doorways, even sideways it looked like it would be a challenge. As only ever seeing her in the manager’s office, he has not had the pleasure of watching the struggle.

“Sit down Jackie.” Hope barked.

“I would really appreciate you not calling me that,” Jack started, but was caught off.

“I’ll call you as I please. I am the manager after all.” She said, with forced glee.

Jack took the seat opposite her desk, staring at her. Hope stared back, with a sly grin plastered on her face. He wondered if she finally figured out how to order food for delivery, or she finally found a place where she could order soda by the barrel instead of a small bottle. Not wanting to sit here long, jack spoke first.

“Was there something you needed..” jack began.

“Jack, how long have you worked for us?” Hope asked.

“Oh, um, four wonderful years.” Jack managed to squeeze out with a smile.

“Four *wonderful* years.” Hope repeated. “In those four years, you have continued to stay in your entry level position. Why?”

Not wanting to let on that jack would rather slurp rancid tuna salad out of a homeless persons rotting carcass than work closer to her, Jack lied.

“Oh, um, I never really saw myself as leadership material.” Jack stated.

“Never saw yourself as leadership material.” Hope repeated. “Well, that’s the problem Jackie.”

“Please don’t call me…” Jack began but was abruptly stopped as Hope raised her hand for silence.

“I’ve been observing you, Jack.” She started.

Jack found that hard to believe considering she never left the office.

“Watching how you interact with other coworkers, customers, and upper management.” She started, “And do you know what I’ve seen?”

“No?” Jack asked, not really caring to know the answer. He could see where this conversation was headed. The toilet.

“Well Jackie, it has not been great.” Hope said. “I can see why you don’t fancy yourself in a leadership position. You lack people skills. You lack conviction in your voice. You lack confidence in yourself. You lack confidence in the brand.”

“Cool.” Was all that jack could muster.

“I’m sorry to say it Jack, you’re not that great of an employee.” Hope said faking empathy in her voice.

“Why has this not been brought up by my supervisor in my bi-annual reviews?” Jack asked, knowing the answer.

“Your supervisor Derek, was too lenient, he was let go yesterday.” Hope said gleefully. “Need to have my supervisors better aligned with what the company wants after all. Can’t be having anyone who lacks leadership capabilities in charge you see.”

“So, you called me in here to tell me I’m awful?” Jack asked.

“Not at all, I’m just making conversation.” Hope said. “You see, this is how great leaders build relationships with their underlings, with conversation.”

“Conversation?” Jack began, but again was halted prematurely by Hope’s hands.

“I actually called you in here to fire you.” Hope said delighted. “Another great quality in a leader is to know a bad apple when you see one. And I definitely see one now.”

“Did you look in a mirror?” Jack said stone-faced.

“Excuse me?” Hope said heatedly. “I have given you every opportunity to come to work and better yourself, and this is how you treat me? Insulting me!?”

Jack stood up and made for the door, but before leaving, he turned around and asked.

“How is it you get through doorways?” Jack asked.

“What!?” Hope started, but jack cut her off.

“Well, judging by your size, even sideways it looks like you won’t fit. So, just being curious, how do you?” Jack laughed as he left the office.

Hope started screaming profanities towards Jack as he closed the door behind him. Seeing a few coworkers on the way out, he took off his work vest dropping it in the aisle, again contemplating burning the building down, but ultimately decided that orange was not his color, didn’t. Once out in the open, Jack felt freer than he has in a few years. Broke, probably will end up homeless, but free. Making his way home, Jack went ahead and splurged at the local sandwich shop for his favorite. Coming home to his barely furnished apartment in the cheap end of the city, jack sat on the couch and clipped on the tv and indulged himself in his food.

“The Red Right Hand needs you!” Came an advertisement catching jack’s attention.

He had seen these in the past but paid no attention. Now, being unemployed, he perked up a bit to see what this was about. Taking note of the phone number at the bottom of the screen, he called.

*“Thank you for reaching out to the Red Right Hand Recruitment Center.”*  A voice answered. “*We have pre-determined based on a background check done through your phone number that you will be a great fit. Please come down to our local office in the morning for an in-person interview.”*

“Uh, okay?” Jack stated more as a question than an agreement.

“*Great! We look forward to meeting you!”* The voice rang out before ending the call.

“Well, that was weird.” Jack said as he stared at the phone screen in disbelief.

Jack spent the rest of the evening watching the tv absently until he fell asleep. Waking to his usual alarm from his phone and starting his morning on autopilot. Wasn’t until he was getting out of the shower that Jack remembered that he was let go from that dreadful workplace. Taking note of the time, he finished getting ready and decided to head down to the Red Right Hand’s offices.

Arriving downtown at the local Red Right Hand branch, Jack was always humbled by the sheer size of the buildings. All around, skyscrapers were doing just that, scraping the sky. Buildings so high that it’s a wonder the wind doesn’t just blow them over. Jack knew, of course, that the engineering prowess that went into designing the mega structures as well as other improvements to society has been proven to work, and work well.

Walking into the main entrance, Jack was greeted by the front desk.

“Hello! What may I assist you with today?” The receptionist stated in a sweet voice.

“Oh, um, I called last night...” Jack started.

“Oh Yes! you must be Jack Corbyn. We have you on the calendar here.” The woman indicated by pointing at her screen. “You will take the elevators to the left. Floor ‘151’.”

Jack looked towards the elevator and thanked the woman. Behind him, another walked in. Jack couldn’t help but overhear a very familiar conversation.

“Hello! What may I assist you with today?” The receptionist stated.

“I have an interview, I called yesterday.” The newcomer said.

“Oh Yes! you must be Nicholas Lambertye. We have you on the calendar here.” The woman indicated by pointing at her screen. “You will take the elevators to the left. Floor ‘151’

Jack reached and pressed the up button for the elevator and Nick joined him. Jack looked at Nick, a young-looking guy. Similar in age to himself. Medium build, short messy red hair. Nick then reached his hand out.

“Hey, I’m Nick.” He spoke. “You also heading up to 151?”

“Oh yeah.” Jack said taking Nick’s hand and shaking it. “Interview thing.”

“Yeah, I heard they have some fancy spaceship and a new planet.” Nick said.

“A new planet? Like spaceflight?” Jack started to ask as the elevator doors opened.

A man inside the elevator wearing a black suit and leather gloves, the right of which was red.

“Will we be going to floor ‘151’?” The man asked in a gruff tone.

Jack looked the guy up, and noticed he was muscular under that suit. Not your usual elevator operator.

“Yes.” Nick answered before Jack could say anything.

The two new friends entered the elevator but remained silent all the way up. The large, suited man did not exude a ‘*lets talk*’ type of aura. Reaching the floor, the two filed out into an open floor. Another large man, dressed in the same attire as the elevator operator greeted them.

“Which one of you is Jack Corbyn?” He asked.

“I am.” Jack said with an air of false confidence that he was sure the man saw right through.

“Then you must be Nick Lambertye.”

“Jack! Oh Jack!” Came a familiar voice in the darkness. “Stop hiding Jack, we just want to talk.”

A shiver crawled up Jack’s spine. They had guessed which way he went. Starting to panic, Jack took a sharp right in the woods. The forest was thick, and it was hard to judge which direction you were going. He could hear footsteps in the dark, they were close.

“Jack, we know you’re around here. Don’t make this hard on yourself.” The voice called out.

Jack started to pick up his pace, entering a clearing he came to a stop at the tree line. Looking out, he saw a creature. Nothing like he had seen before. Great big discs for eyes, yellow with a slight glow. A slim and gangly frame, but you could see the muscles this creature had. It stood hunched over on four backwards legs, like an insect. With long outstretched arms with fingers that were grotesquely longer than one would call normal. Small spikes raked down its spine and what you could call a mouth, more a slit in the head opened. The two mandibles clicking in the night. The black of its gaping jaw was darker than then night sky and gave an ominous presence. The lack of teeth made Jack feel quite uneasy. This monster just lingered in the field before him.

“Oh Jack. Are you scared of the Nantu?” A familiar voice called out from the darkness.

Without looking, Jack knew who the voice belonged to.

“Fuck off Nick.” Jack stated bluntly.

“That’s no way to treat an old friend, now, is it?” Nick teased, then threw something into the darkness.

There was an eruption of blue light and then a black orb that materialized and floated in the air. The flames erupting around it gave it an eerie presence in the twilight. The Nantu grunted and clicked its two large jaws in anticipation. The ghoul that Nick had brough with him, opened his eyes and screamed. A high pitch shriek that would cause anyone not familiar with it to cover their ears in fear. The two eyes opened and fixated first on Nick, then towards the Nantu. The four-legged creature leapt at the ghoul, arms outstretched, claws bared. The ghoul closed its eyes and the fire around it started to get brighter. A torrent of flames was sent towards the bug, causing it to stop its forward attack and crumple to the ground.

Nick made some gesture to his ghoul, and watched as the ghoul swelled in size, the flames surrounding the floating orb emanating so much heat, yet the ground around it remained untouched. The only that that seemed to feel the heat and burn was the Nantu, writhing in pain on the ground. Nick laughed as he watched the poor insectoid stop twitching as the charred remains were then turned to ash. With a flash of blue light, the Ghoul had returned to the icosahedron that was in Nick’s hand.

“Well, that was nightmarishly unnecessary.” Jack said turning to look at Nick.

“As was your unneeded tour through the forest.” Nick said pocketing the cryo chamber and pulling another out. “Why did you run?”

“Why did I run?” Jack asked incredulously. “We could start with you and the Hand’s attempting to kill me.”

“Jackie, now we both know that’s not what happened.” Nick said feigning sympathy.

“Um, the knife to my throat would tell someone different Nick.” Jack said trying to ignore the blatant jab at his name.

“Do you remember when we were back on earth in that training facility?” Nick asked.

“How could I forget.” Jack said.

Jack and Nick were placed in the same class with four other recruits. Entering the classroom area on floor ‘151’, Jack sat down next to Nick. A suited man walked in, turned and faced the class and spoke.

“Welcome to your training.” He said plainly.

“Why are we being trained?” One of the recruits asked.

“To prepare you for the mission.” The man stated.

“What mission?” Jack asked.

“You six have been selected, along with another class, and some internal teams to travel to a nearby exoplanet.” The man explained. “It is humanities first attempt at exploring the unknown.”

“You’re sending us to space!?” Nick exclaimed. “I knew it!”

The instructor went on to explain the plan in the Tau Ceti system’s habitable zone was recently discovered to have an atmosphere similar to Earth’s and contain water. Two important ingredients to grow life on the planet.

“How will we get there?” Another recruit asked.

“We have developed a space craft capable of travelling the long distance.” The man said. “You are not here to become engineers; you are here to help on the ground with exploration. That is what you will learn. No more questions.”

Silence fell over the recruits as they began to learn how to survive in the wilderness. Jack noticed the Red Right Hand had spent a good deal of money on learning what they could about the planet and possible ecosystems. As they were dismissed from the orientation, Jack, along with Nick headed to the next phase of their training.

As they entered another room, they were greeted with a forest environment. The Red Right Hand’s building was massive. Floor ‘151’ was home to several different environments for training, forest, mountains, water areas. The building itself was a super structure that housed thousands of members and had its own ecosystem to be self-sustaining. Food was able to be raised and grown in house. Basic goods, like clothing, were manufactured in the same building. Jack was in awe as he walked into a room filled with trees taller than he could see. Estimating they were at least 30 meters tall.

“Welcome recruits.” Another suited instructor said. “Here you will learn how to survive in the wilderness.”

The man indicated a table with a set of tools for each recruit. Jack walked up to the table and looked over the items in front of him. A knife, simple, but effective, flip out model. A hip flask, a small monocular, a pencil and paper. Following the new instructor’s direction, Jack and his fellow team learned basic survival skills.

Spending weeks on the training took its toll on his body. Jack stepped out of the shower and looked at himself in the mirror. It had been twelve weeks since he joined, and the physical appearance of his body looked like he was ready for war. Muscles shown where they weren’t before. His black hair was shaved on the sides, and longer on top. His paler complexion matched with his tall frame made him look almost vampiric.

“Damn I need to get some sun.” Jack laughed at himself.

“Jack, hurry your ass up!” Nick called from outside the dorm room. “It’s sparring day!”

Jack took one last look at himself in the mirror.

“It’s sparring day.” He whispered to himself.

“You were always the favorite.” Nick said, the venom seeping from his words.

“You seem to have done well yourself Nick. You’re what? Basically, running the Hand now?” Jack said.

“You have no idea the work I have put in to get to where I am!” Nick spat.

“Oh I know what you have done to get to where you are.” Jack turned and faced Nick, pulling his knife out.

“You think *that* will help you here?” Nick laughed, seemingly tossing something to the side.

A flash of blue light erupted around them. Jack looked around, expecting to see the familiar glow of the flame and the black orb floating inside it. To his horror, what he found was much, much worse. Nick had been busy on his expeditions, capturing and taming other monsters. What stood before them, heaving and drooling was a beast unlike any Jack had seen yet. Standing on two muscular legs, with two long muscular arms hanging down. Claws opening and closing as the great beast looked at its master with two black eyes. The long ears upon his head give the impression of a rabbit, but the mouth that hung agape was full of row upon row of tiny sharp teeth. The entire creature was covered in what looked like a matted pink fur.

“Isn’t she glorious?” Nick asked in awe of his own. “I call it an Oryc.”

Jack didn’t say anything, sensing what was to come of him. Without warning, the oryc turned and screamed towards Jack. Instinct took over causing Jack to turn and run. Through the clearing towards the mountain. The thumping of loud footsteps behind him signaling the oryc was closing the distance quickly. Taking his knife, turning quickly Jack braced himself for the imminent attack. Using his left arm as a shield he took the knife and stepped towards the massive beast. The oryc wasted no time and slashed with a massive claw tearing into Jack’s arm. Searing pain shot through his entire body as his knees buckled. Swiping with his knife attempting to catch any sort of flesh, he missed.

This close to the creature, Jack could tell it wasn’t pink fur covering the body, it was white. The fur was stained with blood, causing the pink hue. The oryc screamed again, the putrid smell of rotting flesh rolling out of its mouth caused Jack to wretch. Another swipe from the beast sent him flying, landing in a clump a few meters away. Jack could hear Nick laughing in the distance and yelling orders to the oryc. The sound of water could be heard over the commotion and Jack knew his only escape if he wanted to get out alive. Putting the knife away knowing its uselessness, he slowly got up. His left arm torn up; he did the only logical thing he could think of in his desperate mind. He took a swing at the monster. A right hook, which contacted the jaw. The oryc stepped back more in surprise at the daring of this puny human to attempt such a futile attack, but it was all Jack needed. He turned and sprinted towards the sound of the water. Hoping beyond hope that it was more than a trickle of a stream. The heavy stomps could be heard behind him.

“You can’t run Jackie!” Nick screamed. “The oryc is faster than you could ever be!”

“Fuck you Nick!” Jack screamed over his shoulder.

Pain coursing through his body, his lungs burning from exhaustion, Jack found the sound of water. A glimpse of relief came in the form of a raging river. Gambling his life on his swimming abilities with one good arm, He leapt. The oryc stopped dead at the river bank, screaming.

“You think this river will save you!?” Nick cursed at Jack. “You are only prolonging your death.”

Jack struggled to keep his head above water as he watched Nick and his monster disappear from his view. The water carrying him down river. Struggling to keep his head above water, fatigue setting him, but the adrenaline was still fueling his will to live. For what seemed a lifetime, the river finally slowed. Bringing Jack to a part of the forest he had not been before. The two moons of the planet were starting to set as the sunrise was beginning to emerge over the horizon. Choosing the opposite bank from Nick, Jack made for shore. Dragging his body up and out of the water, he stayed lying on his back. Sleep overtook him.

Jack and Nick entered the sparring room together. A spacious room filled with several rings. Ropes creating a boundary for the rings, like that of a boxing ring. The familiar sight of the suited instructors always there to greet them. The other recruits were already in the rings beginning to fight each other. Sparring day was always Jack’s favorite. He excelled in strategy, and even though he was physically smaller than the other recruits, was able to beat them. Today was the first time Nick and him would be sparring. Their friendship started a competition between them, and today was the pinnacle of that competition.

“Corbyn! Lambertye!” a voice called. “Get in the ring, it’s time to get started.”

“Yes sir!” Jack and Nick repeated out of habit.

Getting in the ring with Nick, Jack could see he was physically outmatched. Nick was taller, and broader than himself. Taking in the scene, any sane person would put money on Nick. Jack watched as Nick did a few stretches to warm up attempting to notice any weakness, he didn’t. The sheer fitness of Nick showed years of training. Nick was in shape and fighting well before joining the Red Right Hands.

“Fighters, begin!” a voice called.

Nick had always been the aggressor during his other matches, but this time Jack, who usually waited for his opponent to make the first move, moved forward and threw a right hook. Taking Nick by surprise.

“Woah Jack, what’s with the aggression?” Nick asked taken aback.

“Just trying something new.” Jack stated.

Up until this point, Nick has come out on top in every fight, while Jack has had a more up and down streak. Jack took a step back, bobbed and took another right hook towards Nick.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Nick asked laughing, again blocking the attack.

Jack didn’t answer as he took a step back. Nick took the opportunity to launch a barrage attack against Jack. Right, right, left, right; Jack did all he could to block the oncoming assault. A left jab coming in contacted Jacks face. Blood splattered out of his mouth.

“Yeah! That’s how it’s done!” Nick exclaimed.

Jack spit the blood from his mouth. Having taken the first couple swings towards Nick, Jack could see how he blocked the attacks. Letting Nick attack with such ferocity showed Jack the footwork. Nick may be a larger opponent, stronger, and better suited to fighting, but Jack was smarter. Chancing a glance towards the officials in the suits watching the match, Jack saw them scribbling some notes. Their stone-face expression always impossible to read.

“You ready to call it Jack?” Nick asked condescendingly.

“I’ll let you call it when you’re on your back.” Jack jibed back.

“Fat chance!” Nick snorted. “There is no competition here. I’m easily the superior.”

While Nick was ranting about himself, Jack was circling. Getting Nick’s back to the corner of the ring was paramount for Jack’s strategy to work. The rules of the match were simple, first to knock their opponent off their feet wins, but they had to remain in the ring. Nick circled with Jack, eventually getting into position.

“Are you trying to dance with me?” Nick asked laughing.

“Always.” Jack replied.

Jack watched as Nick’s feet started to adjust for the next barrage of attacks, but before they started to come, Jack attacked. Coming in, dodging the first swing, coming in under the predictable swing, Jack was now on the inside taking Nick by surprise. Before Nick could react, Jack began to lay into Nick’s left side. Swing, after swing, Jack found his mark. Pummeling the kidneys of his opponent, causing pain to the side of Nick, eventually pushing Nick back into one of the four posts that created the corners of the ring.

Nick, getting tired of being pinned back pushed Jack. Expecting this, Jack slipped through Nick’s push and brought a left jab into Nick’s face breaking his nose. Blood erupted like a volcano, splattering everywhere. Nick screamed in agony.

“The fuck man! You broke my nose!” Nick yelped.

Jack ignored him and began his next attack while nick was distracted. Coming inside, jack crouched and took a right swing into Nick’s knee, then Jack sprung up and using his leg, pulled Nick’s from under him. Nick landed with a loud thud on his back, completely in shock.

“Match!” came from one of the officials. “Good job Corbyn. Both of you go get looked at by the medical wing.”

“Yes sir.” Came Jack’s voice.

Jack reached down and offered Nick a hand. Looking down at his friend, he could see fury in his eyes. This was the first match Nick lost, and he lost to Jack. Slapping Jack’s hand away, Nick got up on his own.

“Good fight.” Jack said.

“You cheated.” Nick said sourly.

“I cheated?” Jack asked. “How?”