Shape

Description automatically generated

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.

Jack could hear distant footsteps and rustling in the bushes. Making every attempt to remain silent, Jack pressed on. Having witnessed the coup that happened back at camp, he was sure he would not make it off this planet alive if stayed there. He needed to get away, needed to find a new strategy.

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, a spring loaded switchblade. A hip flask, a small monocular, a pencil and paper, a multitool, a ferro rod for starting fires, and a small pocket first-aid kit. 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.

Jack got his gear on and went to greet his friend in the hall.

“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?”

“You cornered me.” Nick said. “That’s not true sportsmanship.”

“You backed yourself into a corner, I just saw the opportunity.” Jack replied.

“Backed myself in!?” Nick said starting to become enraged.

Jack knew at that point; their friendship had come to a screeching halt. From that moment forward, they were rivals.

Jack awoke to sunlight streaming onto his face. Startled, he attempted to get up, but the events of the night had taken a toll on his body, especially his arm. Slowly sitting up, Jack noticed he was mostly dry, which means he had been asleep a long while. It’s a wonder Nick or any of the Hands didn’t find him lying there on the beach, vulnerable. Jack also wondered how a wild animal didn’t happen upon him and decide to indulge in a tasty snack.

Taking in his surroundings, Jack saw that he was still on the river’s edge near the forest where the Red Right Hands are stationed. Turning slowly, he could se ethe mountains behind him, realizing that he was north of the camp where he attempted to go during the night.

“Now, lets take a look at my arm.” Jack said to himself.

“Well, it isn’t broken, I think…” Jack mused.

Attempting to move the arm shot searing pain up and into the back of his head. Something was torn and would require some sort of sling to help heal.

“That oryc hasn’t seemed to tear too deep either.” Jack noticed looking at the cuts from the great beast.

Thinking back to his training, Jack got up, taking stock of the rest of his body before heading to the waters edge. Taking out his pocket flask and filling it, Jack turned and started to walk towards the mountains.

“Well, now what.” Jack said. “Stuck on a planet with no way off, and no…food.”

Jack’s stomach had started to growl at him. Becoming acutely aware that he was very hungry, he started to form a plan.

“First, need to get some paste into these cuts, then build a sling from, hopefully, some vines.” Jack said as he looked towards the little tree line that was left on his side of the river.

“Then, food. I need food.” Jack stated. “I know these animals are eating something, each other maybe? Some of the flora?”

Being content with his new to-do list, jack set about finding some rocks and pulling out what was left of his pocket first-aid kit. Finding some herbs and an antiseptic paste, Jack sat down and began making his liquid bandage. Once that was complete, he tore the bark off some smaller trees and weaved a small length of rope that he fastened into a sling.

“Well, the Hands taught me enough to keep me alive.” Jack laughed. “I was so naïve.”

Jack stood up, looked down at his battered self, being help together with sticks and paste and laughed. A good hearty laugh that filled his lungs and made him feel a little less fucked.

“Onwards to food then.” Jack muttered and set off north towards the mountains.

He hadn’t gone more than one hundred meters before he started to hear something scratching at the rocks near the natural path he was following. Panicking, Jack pulled out his knife, knowing that it would most likely be a futile attempt. Crouching to hopefully make himself smaller and less detectable, he slowly creeped around the corner, and stopped dead in his tracks. Eyes wide, Jack saw what looked like a great big lion. A white lion, but not a lion. The head was like the large cats, including a great mane, but the body, was different, it was made entirely of rocks. Lots and lots of stones made up the creature’s body. Shining white stones, not a scratch on them, even though the animal seemed to have been scratching at an itch, that Jack was usure of how it felt. Jack held his breath as the lion creature looked at him, locked in a staring contest. The creature slowly started to crouch down on its large back legs, in a pouncing position. Fearing for his life, Jack stood up and attempted to back away.

The rock lion leapt, but not at Jack. It leapt at another beast that had gone unnoticed until now. A small four-legged thing. Head like a frog but covered in brown fur and orange spots. It had several fluffy orange tails, but none of that mattered as the rock lion, tore it to pieces. Blood splashed the rocks and pooled under the small dead beast. The rock lion remained white, like the blood didn’t touch or affect it.

“That’s strange.” Whispered Jack.

Remembering the Oryc and the ghoul that Nick had, Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out the small icosahedrons. Looking at the twenty-sided sphere, he noticed there were two ‘X’s etched into one of the triangles. Tapping that face, the ‘X’s glowed blue. Taking a wild guess, Jack through the hedron at the rock lion.

A blue light erupted, surrounding the creature, sweeping it into nothingness and then the icosahedron sucked all the blue light in. The ‘X’s flashed madly as Jack walked towards the curious miniaturized cryo chamber. Without warning a blue light erupted from the device. The rock lion burst forward, a look of bewilderment upon its face, sending pieces of the icosahedron in all directions. Looking at Jack, the rock lion turned and ran off towards the mountain, not wanting to be forced into the cryo chamber again.

“Well, that’s…” Jack started. “That’s…interesting. I wonder how it was able to break out.”

Jack pulled the rest of the icosahedrons from his pocket. Counting five left, Jack made a mental note that the beasts can burst from them.

“Then how did Nick get his to stay?” Jack wondered. “Is it the type of creature?”

“Or perhaps it’s the strength of the creature? Do I have to fight one and...” Jack laughed at himself. “Weaken it?”

“What wild engineer at the Red Right Hand’s office dreamed up this contraption.” Jack said.

Concluding now that this entire mission was not at all what he was led to believe. The feeling of betrayal seeping into his bones, making his blood boil.

“It’s one thing to lie to me, sure.” Jack spat. “It’s another to fucking use me.”

“Fuck you, Nick!” Jack yelled. “Fuck you and the Red Right Hand! I’m coming for you! You Hear Me!? I’m! Coming! For! You!”

Leaving the Medical wing, there was no sight of Nick anywhere, Jack was sure he would be sulking about the loss. Deciding to grab a quick bite in the cafeteria, Jack ran into the other recruits.

“You beat Nick!?” One asked.

“I heard he punched the medic.” Another said.

“I’m sure Nick is just blowing off steam.” Jack said attempting to calm the group.

“No man, He’s really pissed off right now. I’ve heard him throwing things around his dorm for the last 20 minutes. Another said solemnly.

Jack was unsure how to respond. On one side, Nick was his friend, but on the other, he beat him in a fight and that was sure to drive Nick to the deep end. The Red Right Hands have been recruiting heavily lately, and Jack had noticed that more than one seemed a bit unhinged. Not wanting to drag the conversation about Nick on, Jack took his leave, preferring the quiet of his dorm to the busy life of the rest of floor ‘151’. On his way through the maze of hallways, Jack was stopped by a suited figure.

Having been here for a while, Jack was used the surly gentlemen and their barking orders, but this one was different. He was clean shaven and bald. He also wore sunglasses inside, but the thing that set him apart from the others was his gloves; instead of one black and one red glove, they were both black. The man looked down at Jack and gestured for him to enter the room to his right. Jack took the invitation.

Once inside, the man walked Jack over to a large black window and started to speak.

“Jack Corbyn.” He said.

“Yes.” Jack replied.

“You are aware of our mission here? Yes?”

“Yeah, We are going to another planet in the Tau Ceti system.”

“Precisely. To explore and document everything you encounter there.”

“Um, are you suggesting that we will encounter something?” Jack asked.

“There have been new reports that an atmosphere and water were detected.” The man replied. “The probability of life forms is favorable.”

“Life forms?” Jack asked incredulously.

“Yes, life forms. However, we do not know for certain, but that is what you and the team are travelling there to find out. We want you to document everything. Terrain, flora, wildlife.” He stated.

“I’m not sure I’m the right person…” jack started.

“It is the prerogative of the mission Jack Corbyn.” The mad said flatly. “Enough of what you will be doing there, I brought you here to show you how you will be going.”

The man pressed his hand to a palm reader in the wall and the window lit up revealing a lab on the other side. Engineers and scientists were clamoring about doing their jobs at several different computers and machines. There was a machine analyzing flight and ground suits, there was an engineer soldering circuit boards for a range of different equipment that would be used on the planet. Jack barely noticed the large almost spherical device in the center of the room.

“That is the cryo chamber, an Icosahedron.”

Jack turned his attention to the twenty-sided sphere. Taking up a big area, the machine was the focal point of the room. Large triangles made up the face, looking like a very large role-playing dice, minus the numbers. The panels were anodized black metal of some sort. Shiny, but not reflective. There appeared to be smooth, and on the surface of triangle in the center appeared a panel to place you hand.

“That is the cryo chamber that will allow you to sleep and travel through space undisturbed.” The man explained. “The time it will take to get there has been greatly reduced thanks to the magnificent engineering team we have here, but the force the flight would have on your body would kill you.”

“So I’m going to be asleep in the giant dice?” Jack asked.

“I wouldn’t call it sleep. More of a suspended state.

A glaring bright blue light erupted from the window, seeming to fill the room, pouring out of the icosahedron. The scientists all stopped working and turned to see what was going on. One stood off to the side with a pocket watch and a clipboard. Then a shadow emerged from the light, a man was there where there wasn’t one before.

“Ah good, we hadn’t missed it.” The man was delighted when he spoke.

“Missed what?” Jack asked staring at the man materializing before him in the room.

“He has been in cryo stasis for 168 hours.” He spoke. “We are testing it.”

Jack watched as the man was questioned and notes written down on the clipboard. Everyone had smiled on their face, suggesting that the experiment was successful. The suited man pulled out his phone and checked the notification that just chimed in.

“Glorious.” He spoke. “I apologize Jack Corbyn, but I must take my leave. I can assume you know your way back to your dorm?”

“Yes, of course, sir.” Jack added the sir as an afterthought.

The man then walked through a door to the side leaving Jack in the room watching the man be questioned. One of the engineers looked over and noticed Jack watching; he then walked up to the window and placed his hand on a control panel, turning the window black again.

“Well fuck you too then.” Jack said irritably.

“An icosahedron cryo chamber.” Jack said to himself. “Travelling through space to a new planet with possible aliens!”

Jack exited the room and made his way to his dorm, not a single person could ruin his good mood. Before he could enter his dorm, he heard his name.

“Jack Corbyn.” Nick slammed the words from his mouth violently.

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Looking over, Jack saw what the rock lion, which he aptly named ‘Lanka’, had left of the slain creature, that he decided to call a bullpix. Still hungry, and unsure of where else he could get food, Jack approached the butchered animal. The carcass was splayed open, large chunks ripped from the underbelly. The short stubby legs left untouched. Knowing very little about hunting back on Earth, Jack went for one of the hind legs. Taking his knife, he slowly cut several chunks of meat. Figuring he could start a fire and cook a couple and attempt to smoke the rest of the meat.

Taking note of which direction the lanka had run off towards, Jack followed suit. Not wanting to be near the river’s edge to avoid Nick and the Hands. Feeling a safe distance from the water, Jack set about finding what small scraps of timber he could find and build a fire pit. Looking around, he noticed this was a lot different than the forest area he was familiar with. Having only been on the planet for a couple months, he was only tasked with surveying the surroundings of the camp. Looking up, Jack saw the mountain range he remembered seeing from the observation deck while the ship was in orbit.

The range was much more impressive this close. Piling the limbs and small bushes Jack was able to scramble up, he pulled out his ferro rod and using the back of his knife like they showed him in training, struck the rod sending sparks flying. Taking a few tried, Jack got a fire started. Making some skewers for his bullpix meat and propping it up to cook and smoke; Jack took out the remaining icosahedrons and examined them.

“You look exactly like your bigger counterparts.” Jack said turning them over in his hand. “Except for the two ‘X’s on here. What do you imagine the actual purpose was for these. Was it to capture creatures on some far away planet, or was there a more sinister idea? Perhaps imprisonment for rivals to the Hands.”

Jack mused a while longer then put the cryo chambers back into his pocket. Not wanting to risk losing or damaging one of the devices, he made a mental note to not put anything else into that pocket. Taking one of the skewers of meat and cutting it open with his knife, Jack guessed it looked done. Braving the mystery morsel, Jack took a bite. Chewing, slowly, expecting some poison to come screaming out and strangle him, Jack swallowed.

“A bit bland, could use some salt and pepper.” Jack said examining the chunk of meat. “But passable, I’m too fucking hungry to be picky.”

Continuing to eat the meat and drinking from his flask, Jack surveyed his surroundings. There seemed to be several paths leading towards different parts of the mountains. Wanting to get a higher vantage point, Jack finished his basic meal, put a few more sticks on the fire, and followed one of the path’s that looked like it headed to a good look out spot. Strange noises could be heard in every direction, but nothing ever showed itself to Jack.

“I should take out one of these.” Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out an icosahedron. “I can probably scare them off, maybe? Hopefully…”

Following the path, Jack got to a good vantage point. Crouching down near the edge, he took out his monocular and started to scout. He was able to find his fire going below him some 200 meters. Looking farther down the mountain ridge, he could see the raging river that brought him here. Following the river upstream, and looking slightly in towards the forest, Jack could make out the top of a structure.

“There’s basecamp.” Jack said as he pulled out his paper and pencil. “Probably should map this, I may need it.”

A loud rustling behind him brought Jack out of his cartographer trance. The noise was close, very close. Jack was high on a ridge, surrounded by large rocks with another ridge behind them. The path leading up was narrow and dangerous, but the view was worth the risk. The sun was starting to come down into the evening hours, and casting shadows on the rocks and ridge wall. The creatures shadow appeared. Jack gasped.

“That’s fucking huge.” Jack said nervously. “Fuck. Me.”

The shadow was getting closer, the rocks started to shake. Jack pulled out an icosahedron and prepared himself for a quick getaway. Shoving his belongings into his pockets, Jack crouched, and waited. The beast came flying out and Jack could not believe his eyes.

“A dragon!?” Jack gasped. “A small purple little dragon!”

The small flying reptile like creature landed on a large boulder in front of Jack and stared. Jack stared back, rolling the icosahedron in his fingers. Remembering the lion breaking out seemingly easy, Jack was unsure how he would weaken this small creature.

“I would surely smash it, if I attempted to hit it.” Jack said under his breath.

The small dragon tilted his head at Jack, then looked at the discarded meat chunk near where Jack was laying. Following its gaze, Jack bent and picked up the small chunks of meat.

“You’re hungry?” Jack attempted to talk to the small lizard. “You want this?”

Jack then tossed a piece of meat, bouncing off the boulder and rolling back to his feet. Looking down, feeling a sense of embarrassment, Jack picked it up and offered the chunk with an outstretched hand. The purple winged beast took to the air, hovering carefully above Jack’s hand, and grabbed the chunk with its front claws. It began to devour the small chunk.

“You want some more?” Jack said, offering another piece.

The dragon then proceeded to take several more scraps of meat from Jack, who had now sat down on the ground. The small dragon, once finished, had landed and started to investigate Jack. Staying still so not to frighten it, Jack relished in the thought of having a dragon.

“Perhaps I should try.” Jack stated. “Or. Let me try something.”

Slowly reaching his hand out, Jack touched the head of the dragon and began to stroke its spine. The small animal enjoyed the touch, making cooing sounds. Jack then touched the beast with an icosahedron. A bright blue light erupted and engulfed the purple dragon, and then vanished. The ‘X’’s on the cryo chamber blinked feverishly, then went solid. Jack stared at the device.

“Did I fucking do it!?” Jack said elated. “I fucking captured a dragon!?”

The following weeks were full of more training, sparring and lessons. Jack, Nick and the other recruits were always busy. There was very little downtime. The success of the cryo sleep chamber meant that the flight could commence, and soon. Jack noticed a slough of new faces in and out of floor ‘151’, but he never did see the mysterious man who had shown him the chamber. The identity of which, no one would disclose, always the same answer.

“I’ve never seen anyone who fits your description in this company.”

It had been three months since the experiment, and the recruits were being brought in to see it for the first time. Upon entering the lab, the scientist that had been taking notes with the clipboard was waiting.

“Good day.” He said. “Today, we will be going over how the sleep works in the cryo chambers.”

“Cryo Chamber?” Nick said.

“Yes, this.” The scientist indicated the icosahedron. “This is how you will be transported through space to Tau Ceti. As the speed at which the ship will fly would kill you from the force of propulsion.”

The recruits just looked in awe at the large machine.

“Which one of you is Jack Corbyn?” He asked. “I’m told you will be first to try.”

Nick turned and looked at Jack, hatred cascading from him.

“Why the hell is he going first? I volunteer.” Nick spoke, not taking his eyes off Jack.’

“I have a note here saying to allow Jack Corbyn to try the device first.” The scientist said.

Jack stepped forward, and without instruction, placed his hand on the palm reader. The room filled with a blue light, and Jack evaporated from view. Jack saw nothingness, felt nothingness, was nothingness. No thoughts, no dreams, nothing, then a blue light.

“Jack, how do you feel?” The scientist asked.

Jack looked around and didn’t see Nick or the other recruits.

“Where did everyone go?” Jack asked.

“This sleep lasts three days.” The scientist said. “You couldn’t possibly expect them to wait around that whole time.”

“Three days!?” Jack was shocked. “There’s no way that was more than an instant. It doesn’t even feel like anything happened.”

“That’s precisely what is supposed to happen. You become a digitized version of yourself, stored in the memory of what is essentially a quantum computer, and when called forward, you materialize from memory.” The scientist explained. “That’s about as simple as I can make it.”

“And the blue light is what does this?” Jack asked scratching the back of his head. “Fuck I’m hungry.”

“The light is blue, purely because we wanted a very obvious indication when it was activated.” The scientist laughed. “And yes, if you enter hungry, you will be hungry when you come out. Haven’t quite got the code manipulation right to fill your stomachs while in stasis.”

“What’s next?” jack asked.

“I imagine lunch.” The scientist said laughing. “It’s twelve thirty.”

“Has everyone else done this? Are you going to bring them out?” Jack asked.

“You were the first. This machine only holds one person at a time. The rest of the recruits will have their turn, one at a time.” The scientist explained. “On the ship, there will be several of them.”

Laughing, Jack left the lab and went down to the cafeteria to get food. Upon entering, the recruits surrounded him. Hounding him with questions.

“Let me eat first.” Was all Jack said.

“What was it like?” Came Nick’s voice. “Did you reach some higher sense of self?”

“Being facetious won’t get you answers.” Jack replied.

“But what was it like” Asked another recruit. “What did it feel like?”

“It didn’t feel like anything.” Jack said. “It’s like I never left. One second, I was pressing my hand to the control, and then I was staring at a blue light, three days had passed and all of you were gone.”

“Hmmph.” Nick snorted.

Rolling his eyes, Jack finished his meal, then went back towards his dorm. The evening schedule was filled with lessons on space flight. They would only be asleep while the main engines were engaged. During the launch and the descent, they would be awake. Everyone on the ship needed to know how to perform certain duties, and Jack was determined to not be dead weight.

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Elated, Jack rushed back to his camp clutching the icosahedron. Once there, he grabbed a chunk of the bullpix meat and started to cut it up into smaller bite sized morsels. Knowing the creature would be bound to his cryo chamber, Jack wanted to befriend it, not control it. Getting the meat in a small pile next to him, intending to hand feed his new dragon, Jack took the icosahedron and rolled it on the ground.

“Where’s the light?” Jack asked perplexed. “Why is it not working? Did I break it? Fuck. Did I kill the dragon!?”

Picking up the dice-sized device and tossing it a bit harder, Jack was met with more disappointment. With a heavy sigh he looked up, the sun was starting to set, and Jack was not all too excited to sleep here in the open, let alone set off a bright blue beacon for Nick to find him easier. Packing his things and removing his sling, Jack was able to bundle up the remaining wood. Deciding he would rather sleep up higher near his lookout point, Jack smashed the fire out and departed.

Along the path to the mountain viewpoint, there was a small outcropping in the rocks. Not very large, but big enough for Jack, a fire pit and a place to stack some wood. Not facing out towards the river and shielded by large boulders along the cliff edge. A good temporary camp until he could move on. Making the decision to move further away from the forest, Jack started another fire for the night. Jack took out the chopped meat and the icosahedron.

“I know I didn’t break it.” Jack said rolling the device in his hand. “OH!”

Jack had rolled the icosahedron so the triangle with the two ‘X’s was facing him, They still glowed blue. Tapping them with his thumb, the cryo chamber vibrated slightly causing it to roll out of his hand. A blue light filled his vision and a small purple dragon materialized there. Confused, the creature started to flap it’s wings furiously taking flight, spinning and finally settling on Jack, who had picked up the icosahedron.

“I have more food!” Jack said excitedly, presenting a piece of meat.

The dragon snatched it up quickly and landed just out of Jack’s reach, watching him as it devoured its meal. The flames cast dancing shadows on the walls as the fire crackled causing the dragon to twitch and take flight again. Again, spinning until it found the source. Upon seeing the fire, it landed and walked closer. Jack watched as the dragon walked directly into the fire and curled into a ball and went to sleep.

“Uh…Little buddy?” Jack said. “Did you just say fuck life and walk into the fire?”

The dragon opened one eye and looked at Jack, then closed and went back to sleep. Jack watched as the flames danced around the purple beast, not burning it. Taking a piece of the smoked meat and gnawing on it, Jack set about finding a comfortable place to lay down knowing sleep wasn’t coming. Jack lied there holding the icosahedron watching the dragon sleep in the fire.

As the sun dropped below the horizon and the two moons shone brightly in the sky, Jack fell asleep. Pure exhaustion had taken its toll on his body. Jack woke with a start as the sun dripped through the outcropping landing on his face.

Panicking, he stood up, dropping the cryo chamber and pulling out his knife looking wildly around. Realizing no one was around, he looked at the fire. It was out and the dragon was no where to be found. Spinning around searching, Jack found him laying a top a rock near the entrance staring at him. When Jack met his eyes, the creature chirped. Relief fell across Jack as he walked over to the not so small dragon.

“Did you get bigger?” Jack asked the beast. “Let me get a better look at you.”

During all the excitement from the day before, Jack never got a good look at his purple friend. The dragon, Jack could swear was only about 30 centimeters. The creature now was closer to 45 centimeters. The large eyes set into the dragon’s triangular head. The ridges down it’s back reminded Jack of an Ankylosaurus. The tail was long and had stubby spiked along the back all the way to the tip. The tail appeared to be about one third of the dragon’s total length. It stood on four legs each armed with devastating looking claws. The small wings protruding from the back where shoulder blades would normally be, were equally as impressive. Long armatures with a leathery skin flap. The entire dragon, again Jack was sure was entirely purple the day before, was now a deep rich purple with black spots.

The dragon chirped again, and this time took a few steps toward Jack. Understanding that the creature was hungry, Jack offered some meat to it. The creature took flight, snatched the meat and went and sat near the fire pit and started to chew.

“Well, you’re a mystery, aren’t you.” Jack said. “What should I call you? Dragon seems to plain; Draco is too cliché. Drakon? Nah, Kraken? No.”

As Jack was repeating the names out loud, the dragon would look at him, and then go back to eating.

“Abeloth? The bringer of chaos?” Jack said, the dragon perked up, looked at Jack a long while and went back to eating. “What about Nocturne? Or Nox?”

The dragon chirped, and Jack knew at a deeper level that the creature liked the name *Nox.* Having settled on a name, and had breakfast, Jack set about preparing to leave. Having seen a path up to a mountain pass Jack grabbed the icosahedron and was about to tap the two ‘X’s when he looked over at Nox. The dragon looked back, and Jack decided that he didn’t need to cage the animal.

“Let’s go Nox.” Jack said and the beast took flight and started to circle around him.

The team in charge of running and flying the ship were trained astronauts recruited by the Red Right Hand. A fact that calmed Jack’s nerves considerably. Having elite personnel in charge of a vehicle hurtling through space at speeds unimaginable did very little to set Jack at ease.

“Most of the flying will be done by the AI.” The instructor said as Jack and the recruits were asking questions about the journey. “The advanced AI that was designed here in house will launch, fly, control the cryo chambers, decelerate and eventually send the landing pods to the ground.”

“A computer will be flying?” Nick asked. “What good is a computer?”

“As stated, the flight will be at speeds that will kill you from the force, every organic being on that ship will be in stasis while in transport.” The instructor explained.

“So, the AI will have us go to sleep, then wake us when it’s time to go down to the planet?” Jack asked.

“Not quite. The AI will instruct you to go into statis, then bring you out of stasis once the declaration has reached a point where you can live. There will be preparations needed before you can embark on your journey to the surface.”

“Preparations? I thought that’s what we are doing here, now?” Another recruit blurted out.

“Yes, you are training here, as best we can, but the planet is still at a distance from even our advanced telescope technology. There will undoubtedly be unforeseen changes needed to any plan we construct.”

Knowing they were all travelling to a distant alien world, was exciting, yet terrifying. They could all perish in an explosion before launch or get there and die from lack of resources. At the same time though, they will all be in the history books. The first humans to travel to deep space and visit an alien planet. The atmosphere in the room was tense, but excited. They were making history.

“What do we know about the planet’s surface?” Jack asked.

“Oh, well, the planet has an atmosphere, and from what we can tell, it’s breathable. Probes will be sent once you reach orbit to determine that for sure. The landscape, we estimate will be similar to ours. Oceans, continents, mountains and possible forests with life.” The instructor stated, “This is all hypothetical based on research gathered from a telescope millions of miles away. You could all get there, and the planet is a red barren land like Mars, but I doubt that’s the case.”

“What is the point of us going?” Nick asked.

“What is the point!?” The instructor said sounding like Nick just killed her first born. “The point is to make history. To find other life in the universe. The mission parameters are simple. Land, set up camp, and explore the surrounding area. Once in orbit the AI will determine the best place to land based on a multitude of factors.”

“Explore the surrounding area?” Another recruit spoke up.

“Yes, explore and document. Bringing back samples is a second prerogative if removing the sample does not damage the ecological balance of the area.” The instructor stated. “We want to gather as much information, but we do not want to interfere or damage anything in the process.”

Jack looked over at Nick, ever since their sparring match, they have been at opposite ends of the spectrum. Nick was less focused on training for the mission and learning and more focused on training for battle. Jack was apt to learn as much as possible before leaving and unsettled in the fact that he had to be in stasis in space, alongside Nick.

Since the stasis training took place, Nick has been absent from some of the classes the recruits were to attend. Granted anyone could leave at their own free will, but Nick wasn’t leaving. He just seemed to be other places talking with other instructors. The entire act seemed very shady to Jack. As the training concluded, Jack decided to talk to Nick.

“Hey Nick.” Jack said “Where are you off to? Since the sparring match, things have been a bit off between us.”

“Yeah, you showed your true colors during that match.” Nick said shortly.

“Regardless, we need to get passed it. Where are you headed?

“I’m headed elsewhere. You’re not the only one who has made friends with the personnel here.” Came Nick’s retort. “Some of us just picked better ones.”

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Before Jack could get down the path, he heard a familiar voice echo up the mountain face. A chill ran down the back of his spine as he shuddered.

“Oh Jackie! Are you across the river?” Nick rang out.

“Fuck.” Jack said under his breath. Nox sensing his anxiety, landed at his feet and started to growl in the direction the voice came from. “Nah, fuck him, he doesn’t know I’m up here.”

Pushing Nick to the far reaches of his mind, Jack pushed forward. Following the mountain pass down a windy path. Sheer cliff side up his right, and two his left was a rocky barren terrain. Something in the distance caught his eye. Something looked familiar about that group of rocks. Pulling out his monocular, and waiving Nox down, though Jack was not sure the dragon knew what he was meaning, Jack investigated. The group of rocks was about 50 meters out and was startling white. Following his line of sight, Jack took in a breath, as a large black eye opened and looked in his direction. Jack had found where the lanka had ran off too, or at least Jack assumed this was the same lanka.

Getting up, the white stone lion stretched and then started to make its way towards Jack. Panicking, Jack put away the monocular and pulled out an icosahedron. Holding it up for the lanka to see, Jack was attempting to show the lion what he was going to do. The lanka, stopped for a brief second, and walked up to Jack, but Jack did not touch the icosahedron to the beast. Nox was circling above, chirping and growling at the lion, not pleased with the situation happening. The monster was not posing a threat, but instead seemed to emanate friendship. The lanka then proceeded down the path Jack was following, Jack followed suit.

“Where are you taking me?” Jack asked but was give no indication of a response.

Nox was on edge, circling, diving and chirping showing its displeasure at the escort. The trio eventually found themselves at a fork in the path. The lanka stopped, turned and looked at Jack, then indicated for Jack to go right, then the lanka followed the left path. Jack watched as the lion made of white rocks left his company and wondered if he should have *captured* the creature. Feeling satisfied with his choice, Jack and Nox followed the path to the right.

A short while later, and the pair were greeted with the mouth of a large cave. The opening looked well-traveled, and almost, at least Jack thought, intentionally made. Not wanting to rush into a cave system wholly unprepared, Jack set upon eating the last of the dried meat. Nox made his presence known and was given morsels of delight to chew on.

“Well, the lanka pointed us in this direction.” Jack said to Nox. “This cave must be a tunnel to someplace. Perhaps my doom, or perhaps freedom from the Red Right Hand.”

Chirps and a clicking of the tongue were Nox’s reply.

“I agree Nox.” Jack laughed as reached down to rub the back of the dragon’s head. “Well, lets go in, shall we?”

Jack set off into the cave, Nox, walking, was leading the way. Not having any indication of where they were going, Jack relied on his dragon friend to guide him. As the pair got deeper inside, the visibility went down. Light was disappearing, and Jack was struggling to see. More than once he had walked into a wall or been pulled back from a pit by Nox. Nox, on the other hand, seemed to be able to see perfectly fine in the dark. Jack guessed that the creature had vision that saw in different light wavelengths than humans. The beast kept Jack on a short leash and guided him deep into the mountain; then Jack saw a familiar glow of fire.

Radiating in clusters, Jack could make out the floating fires and flashbacks of the ghoul that Nick had floated through his mind. The black orbs, levitating in flame that gave off no heat, turned to look at Jack.

“Fuck.” Jack stated. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

The ghouls began to float towards Jack, but Nox took flight, and began to growl at the orbs. The eyes on the black surface of the sphere opened, along with a wide mouth filled with teeth. No sound came out, but Jack’s head was filled with agony as if someone was screaming in his ears. As the ghouls were torturing Jack, Nox flew towards them, clawing at the orb. The fires all began to glow brighter and started to lick at Nox. The dragon, unaffected by the flames, landed atop a ghoul and started to bite down on the floating ball.

An actual screech was echoed through the cavern as the ghoul stopped flying and hit the ground as Nox tore flesh with its claws and clamped down with its crocodile like jaw. The other ghouls all started to move in towards Nox and began to fly themselves into the beast. Hit after hit, the black spheres rammed into the dragon, eventually pulling Nox off its prey. Knox started to fight back, but the ghouls had numbers on their side. Jack counted 13 ghouls pummeling into his dragon friend. Reaching into his pocket. Jack pulled out an icosahedron and did the only thing he could think of. He tapped the two ‘X’s and filled the room with blue light. Squinting through the brightness, Jack could make out the path.

Sprinting down and away from the ghouls clutching the icosahedron that now contained the beaten Nox within it, Jack could see light, then his vision was filled with darkness.

Jack awoke the next morning to a knock on his dorm room door. Groggily, Jack sat up and looked at the time.

“It’s early.” Jack slurred his words. “What do you need?”

“Jack Corbyn.” Came an official’s voice. “I come to deliver a message.”

“Oh, uh, hang on.” Jack muttered getting up and opening the door. A man wearing the customary suit and red glove was waiting.

“Jack Corbyn?” He asked.

“Yes?” Jack said in a question form, unsure of what was going on.

“You and the other recruits have been given a holiday. You are to report to the cafeteria, and you will be escorted to the elevators and the ground floor.” The man said.

“A holiday?? Jack was confused. “Like a vacation?”

“A holiday, like a few days off to relax.” The man said. “Management believes you and the other recruits need to *‘live a little’* before you go to space.”

“Oh!” Jack said. “So, when are we leaving?”

“I am here to escort you.”

“I don’t suppose I could put pants on before we leave.” Jack laughed.

“Be ready in ten minutes.” The man said with the usual stone-face.

Jack closed the door, took the fastest shower that has ever been taken, got dressed and followed the man to the cafeteria. The other recruits, except Nick were waiting.

“Last to arrive.” One of the others jibed towards Jack.

“No? I don’t see Nick.” Jack said looking around.

“Nick has already left.” Came his escorts voice. “Everyone, please follow me.”

The group walked towards the far end of the room towards a table that had backpacks for each of them. Simple in design, black in color with the letters ‘RRH’ embroidered on them in red.

“Inside, you will find supplies to get you anywhere in the world. Including a card with enough credits to last you a lifetime.” The man explained. “The holiday is for one week, but if we feel you need to come back sooner, we will come get you.”

“Come get us?” A recruit asked.

“Yes, we have offices in every major city around the globe.” The man stated. “You are part of the Red Right Hand and will conduct yourself accordingly. You represent this company and are expected to uphold the values.”

Murmurs spread through the group as they were led down the hall to the elevator. Jack looked upon the doors as he approached. The same doors that he walked through long ago and began his new life here, with the Red Right Hand. Leaving his old life behind and finding himself here, now, with a purpose and a mission to travel the stars. Walking back through these doors felt awkward. As the elevator descending, Jack peered into his backpack. Inside was a map, a flask of water and an envelope full of money, a passport in his name and a red credit card. As they reached the ground floor, natural light flooded the entrance way and Jack was left as the other recruits hurried out the door hailing cabs.

Jack left the building, looking up attempting to see where floor ‘151’ was, but could not make out an indication. Looking around, Jack found the nearest bus stop and got on the bus. He knew where he had to go, who he had to see. As the bus traversed the city, Jack was reminded at how much he did not miss it.

“I wonder what happened to my apartment?” Jack mused. “I haven’t paid rent in months. Have I been evicted? Is someone new living there? Fuck it. Who cares.”

Looking out the window, Jack saw his destination. Reaching up and pulling on the cord, the bus came to a stop, and he departed. Walking across the parking lot, Jack had his eyes fixed upon the place of his misery. The person who tormented him. The one who pushed him so far that he was forced to join the Red Right Hands. As Jack walked into his old workplace, he was greeted by an old coworker. Jack looked at her, she was completely oblivious to who he was. Jack marched up to the two-way mirror that separated the office from the service floor and knocked.

Jack knew she was behind that glass, and he was determined to make her get up and come out to the service floor. Giving the window his middle finger, he heard a chair creak under pressure.

“Sir, what are you doing?” Came a voice behind Jack.

“Just giving the manager a fresh outlook on life.” Jack said

“Jack Corbyn.” Came hopes voice. “Some nerve you have showing up in *My* Store.”

“Some nerve you have getting up and using your wobbly knees.” Jack said stone-faced. A technique he picked up talking to the suited officials every day. “Just came by to wish you a hearty cholesterol filled day.”

“What did you just say?” Hope asked, starting to get red in the face. “Get out or I’m going to call the police.”

“Oh yeah? Go ahead.” Jack said as he grabbed a snow globe off a nearby holiday display. “Call them.”

“Fuck you Jack, get out.” Hope said as she pulled her cell from her pocket.

“No Hope, Fuck You.” Jack said as he hurled the snow globe at Hope’s head. Smashing into her face and shattering. Blood spurting from the fresh cuts as Hope screamed in pain.

“9-1-1 dispatch, what is the emergency.” Came a voice from Hope’s phone.

“Assault!” Hope screamed. “Police!”

Jack was throwing more snow globes at Hope. Anger flowing through him. An audience had circled the pair and was cheering. Hope was flailing her stubby arms as Jack pelted her with ball after ball of glass. Sirens could be heard in the distance, Jack stopped throwing snow globes.

“Fuck you Hope!” Jack screamed as he took off past her and towards the back where the emergency door was located.

“Someone stop him!” Screamed Hope. “Stop him or you’re all fired!”

No one moved to stop him as Jack burst through the door setting the emergency alarm off. Running into the back alley, and sprinting down the street, Jack felt the adrenaline fueling his body. The satisfaction he got from the altercation with his previous manager was gratifying and Jack was charged up. Not knowing where to go, Jack did the most reckless thing he could think of and headed to the casino.

“Hell, it’s not my money,” Jack said as he walked through the doors.

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As Jack adjusted to the darkness again, feeling the walls of the cave, he could hear something strange. A flapping of wings and clicking sounds. Several different sets of wings were flapping above and ahead of Jack.

“Bats?” Jack whispered. “Of course there are bats on this damn planet.”

Standing still Jack was able to avoid detection, for now. Hair ruffling under the gusts of the wings, Jack squatted down to get under the flying creatures. Flashes of light started to appear as the exit appeared and disappeared between beasts. Noticing the large scale of the bats, Jack was unsure he could move without detection. The shadowy silhouettes showed long lanky wings and a short body and tail. The most frightening feature that Jack could see was the head, except it was much of a head, but more a single giant mouth with enormous teeth.

“I can’t tell if they have eyes.” Jack said to himself. “Fuck evolution. The damned things are using sonar like Earth bats.”

Staying frozen to his spot, Jack contemplated running for the entrance, but then he saw it. He got a good flash of light and was able to make out the creature. He was right with the long lanky wings, leathery like Nox’s, but these had a distinctive claw in the middle. The body was short, but muscular and the tail was short. The large mouth that kept opening and closing causing a clicking noise showed substantial teeth, both in size and number, dripping with gel like drool.

“I didn’t see any eyes; I wonder if I can make it then?” Jack said. “Or…”

Jack slowly felt around along the ground with his free hand, looking for anything that may help. Eventually finding a sizable stone. Planning in his mind, Jack stood up slowly. Carefully took the stone and threw it behind him in his best guess of where the cave turned. The rock clattered against the sides of the cave sending echoes in all directions. Knowing the ghouls would have heard it along with these eyeless monsters. Jack dove to the ground as the cascading sound of wings flitted and flapped towards him. Crawling forward, the light of the exit now visible, Jack got up quickly and started to sprint for the exit. Hearing noises behind him, Jack chanced a glance and saw the snapping jaws of the bat-like creature behind him.

Emerging from the dark cave, bathing in light, Jack stumbles on fallen branches. Turning as he hit the ground, he watched as the winged monster flew out of the cave and felt the sunlight. An ear-piercing screech penetrated the air as it landed on the ground writhing in pain. Then a ghoul appeared next to it. Jack couldn’t see where it came from, it just *appeared.* It was different though, there were no flames, just the orb. The black orb of the ghoul, watched as the bat burst into flames, a fire that surrounded the floating ghoul. As the body of the bat turned to ash, the fire remained surrounding the floating orb.

“Fuck, that’s what a ghoul is!?” Jack said in shock. “That’s…That’s...”

The ghoul turned toward Jack, eyes opening, the mouth appearing. Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out an icosahedron and threw it at the ghoul. Hoping, because it was just *born* that it wouldn’t be strong enough to break out. The cryo chamber hit the orb, and a blue light emerged, encapsulating the ghoul. Landing on the ground, Jack watched as the two ‘X’s flashed. Then they stopped flashing and remained solid. Walking over and picking up the icosahedron, Jack rolled it over in his hand.

“Another one.” Jack said. “A ghoul too. Makes me wonder how Nick ran into his. Had he come to this same cave during one if his expeditions?”

Putting Nick out of his mind, Jack took in his surroundings. Another forest at the base of the mountain. This one was different than the camp forest, it was more open and spread out. Visibility was better, and more light shone through the canopy. Looking around, Jack saw the indication of a path. Overgrown, but a path was clearly there.

“That’s odd.” Jack said out loud. “I don’t recall the RRH travelling this far. Although, I wasn’t privy to a lot of the mission parameters now that I think of it. But this path, is old.”

Lost in thought, jack followed the path through the forest. Being cautious as he was completely unprepared for any fight Jack started to become aware of his hunger. Having eaten all the meat from the bullpix the night before, he found himself in search of food. Figuring the mysterious path would still be around, Jack shifted priorities, water, food, fire. Listening, he was unable to make out any water source. Picking a direction, Jack went in search of one. Heading, what he believed to be north Jack was greeted with another problem.

Emerging from the undergrowth, a nantu stood up, looked at jack, and clicked it’s mandibles. Slowly walking towards Jack with movements that would make anyone who watched uncomfortable.

“Oh fuck.” Jack said. Remembering the nantu from his run in with Nick, Jack quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out his icosahedrons. Having placed Nox into a separate pocket, Jack found the ghoul and tapped the ‘X’s. Throwing the cryo chamber, a blue light erupted, and a fiery black orb appeared. Turning to look at Jack, the orb’s eyes showing signs of confusion at what has happened to it, Jack stared straight back.

“Help.” Jack asked.

The ghoul turned and saw the nantu approaching. With no hesitation, the flames grew hotter as it flew towards the four-legged monster and began to incinerate it. Jack watched as the nantu screamed in agony as its body was charred and eventually turned to ash. Once finished, the ghoul turned its sight back to Jack. Approaching, Jack reached out his hand, but felt no heat from the flame.

“Thank you.” Jack said to the orb.

A stare was all Jack received in return, but he could sense the orb’s acceptance of their new alliance. Picking up the cryo chamber, and tapping the ‘X’s, the ghoul returned to statis with a flash of blue light.

Sounds of slot machines and jackpots rang Jack’s ears as the casino’s gambling floor was laid out before him. Walking over to the exchange booth, Jack presented his Red Right Hand credit card, and feeling bold, asked for five thousand credits. A few moments later, jack was walking up to a machine and a handful of tokens. Putting one into the slot machine and pressing the button, Jack watched as the symbols on the screen spun. Press after press, he watched as he dwindled five thousand credits into several slot machines.

“You know, statistically, I should have won at some point.” Jack said frustrated.

Heading back to the exchange booth and getting ten thousand more credits, Jack proceeded to the card’s tables. Feeling the sting of loss from before, Jack played more conservatively. Lowering his bet as we played different card games, eventually making money. As he was on a hot streak, Jack was approached by security.

“Sir, you need to come with us.” Came a strong voice.

Two large burly men, wearing all black stood behind Jack. Putting down his cards and taking a sip of his drink.

“Is there a problem?” Jack asked?

“Just come with us.” One said plainly and reached for Jack’s arm.

“Do you know who I am!?” Jack asked bluffing.

“Yes. Now, Mr. Corbyn, we ask that you come with us.” The other said.

“Fuck.” Was all Jack could mutter as he was escorted away from the tables and towards a set of stairs. A sign on the wall indicated ‘Staff Only’ as Jack walked by. Upon entering the vast office, Jack was told to sit and wait, someone will be in shortly. As Jack sat, he took in the office. Something familiar about the bookshelves behind the desk to him. As he was about to get up, the door to the office opened and a familiar clean shaven, bald, man entered.

“Jack Corbyn.” He spoke.

“I know you!” Jack said.

“Do you?” he asked.

“What is your name?” Jack asked.

“That’s probably the smartest question you’ve asked.” The man laughed. “I am Grigori.”

“Grigori?” Jack repeated? “As in ‘*The Grigori*’ The founder of the Red Right Hands?”

“The very same actually.” Grigori mused. “You can call me Greg.”

“Greg?” Jack laughed. “Not as impressive sounding as Grigori. Greg.”

“No, but it helps keep my persona less known.” Greg said. “Easier to blend in.”

“I suppose.” Jack started.

“Now, Jack. What are you doing here?” Greg interrupted. “And I don’t mean in this office. What are you doing at the casino?”

“Well, I…I don’t have anywhere else to go really.” Jack said. “All the money in the world, and I’m more interested in leaving the world.”

“Jack. Go live. Get out of this place and do something worthwhile.” Greg said. “In a few days, you can come back to the Red Right Hand and continue to train.”

Jack looked at Greg and sighed. Knowing he had no choice but to leave, Jack accepted the ultimatum.

“Alright, I’ll go.” Jack said.

“Good. Any ideas on where?” Greg asked conversationally.

“Not yet, but I’m sure inspiration will come.” Jack said.

“On that note. I bid you farewell. I assume you can find your way out then.” Greg said, then he got up and left Jack alone in the office.

“Well, fuck.” Jack said. “Where to go, where to go.”

Jack got up from his seat and left; left the office, then the casino and he was back out on the street. Lost in thought about having met Grigori, the leader of the Red Right Hand. The reason he is going on this mission. The visionary who believed this was all possible. Sirens in the distance reminding him that the police are probably still looking for him.

Not wanting to stick around and get caught, Jack headed for the train station.

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Wandering the forest Jack came upon a source of water. A small stream flowing down from the mountains, crystal clear. Checking the surroundings for any other threats, Jack brought out both the ghoul and Nox. The ghoul floated in the air, while Nox appeared on the ground, still beaten from his spelunking episode. Nox instantly jumped up at the sight of the ghoul and started to growl.

“Calm down Nox. This is Ghoulie. He is one of us.” Jack said easing the tension. “It’s cool.”

Nox eyed the fiery orb suspiciously, then settled down. Jack filled his flask, then set about looking over Nox. His injuries seemed superficial, and he suspected most of the injury was to the creature’s pride. After the small break, Jack turned to Ghoulie.

“I need you to go find food. Something to eat for us.” Jack said.

The ghoul looked at jack with its large eyes and then flew off in a seemingly random direction. Jack began to gather wood for a fire. Wanting to be prepared for Ghoulie’s return. Quickly Jack was striking his ferro rod and flames took life. Dancing in the daylight and providing warmth. Nox perked up instantly upon seeing the blaze and crawled into the fire. Knowing it wouldn’t hurt the small dragon, Jack piled more wood around him.

“As long as you’re comfortable Nox.” Jack said amused.

A while later, while Jack was whittling skewers, the familiar glow of his ghoul returned. In his mouth, he clutched part of a creature. Blood trailing behind him. Ghoulie had gone hunting and tore a monster to pieces and brought a large chunk of the hind quarters back for Jack. Watching his orb drop his future meal, Jack smiled and thanked his ghoul, who was now floating about idly.

Wasting no time, Jack got to work cutting and slicing large slabs of meat and placed them upon the skewers to cook above the fire. The fire, which looked very small compared to what it had previously. Nox now looked as if it was laying completely on top of the fire pit versus laying inside.

“You’re getting bigger!” Jack said in surprise. “What the hell is happening Nox!”

Nox, who had been sleeping in the fire looked up at Jack. No longer a small dragon, Nox had grown to be a full meter in body length and another meter in tail. The wingspan also grew comparatively, and Jack was in awe of his now dark colored dragon. Nox had become a dark, dark purple grey.

“Come out of there and let me take a look at you!” Jack exclaimed. “You’re not purple anymore!”

Nox stepped from the fire, unfolded its wings and stretched. The darker skin tone was a stark comparison to the purple before. The black eyes looked right into Jack’s. There was a red ring on each of Nox’s shoulders and on his forehead. Those were new, and Jack wondered what the signified. The injuries of the little beast were gone, and before Jack stood a magnificent beast.

“Well Nox, you look great!” Jack said, reaching his hand out and stroking the dragon’s head. “And all this from the fire?”

Jack contemplated making a larger fire, but fatigue was starting to set in. The meat was finally cooked, and Nox started to bite off chunks from the skewers. Not wanting to be left out, Jack grabbed a few pieces. Offering some to Ghoulie, Jack was disappointed when the black orb looked at Jack and denied any food.

“We still got a good bit of daylight left.” Let’s finish eating and get back on that path.” Jack said.

Finding the path was not as easy as Jack had hoped. Having been overgrown and hard to see at times, it had been lost. Even sending Ghoulie out to search for it yielded no results. Determined to find it, jack and his monsters walked on.

“What’s that?” Jack asked no one in particular. “Looks like some structure. Nox, be ready.”

Cautiously approaching the mysterious building, Jack could make out more in the surrounding area. Abandoned, and in ruin the buildings were small. The material used was not quite a stone substance, but not metal either; something mixed between. Investigating the nearest building Jack could tell it was a warehouse of some sorts, broken down shelves and pieces of containers were strewn about. The forest had begun to retake the village.

“How long has this been here?” Jack said. “Where did they go? Where did they come from?”

Jack had many questions, but no answers. Wandering into the next small building, Jack was met with a small device in the middle of the room. A pedestal with a screen inlaid into the surface. Looking around for any sort of switch or power source, Jack couldn’t find one. Reaching down, he touched the glass panel. A flash of white light lit up behind it. Symbols appeared on the screen, scrolling in different directions. Attempting to tap on the screen, made no difference.

“It’s just a view port?” Jack wondered. “Pretty sure this indicates intelligent life.”

A chirp came from outside.

“Yes Nox, you are intelligent too, but this is different.” Jack laughed.

Coming back outside, Jack inspected more buildings. All the smaller ones appeared to be living quarters and had the pedestal in them, albeit not all were working nor upright. There were a few larger buildings, Jack speculated they were used for storage or gatherings. Pulling out his map, he started to update it. From the mountain, he drew the path, stream and then the village. Drawing a question mark and circling it.

Once on the train, Jack sat back in the chair. Having purchased a ticket to the other side of the country, Jack was in for a long ride. Reveling in the fact that he has met Grigori, knowing that Nick and the other’s won’t believe him, Jack began to dream about what space would be like. Images flashed through his mind of space suits and jump-walking. A woman pushing a trolley down the aisle snapped him back to reality.

“Anything from the trolley dear?” The woman asked.

“Oh, I’ll take one of those and can I get one of those.” Jack said pointing at a pile of sandwiches and bottles of water.

The woman pushed the cart away and Jack enjoyed his midnight meal as the train carried on. Some time passed as passengers got off and boarded, then the train came to its last stop. The announcement woke Jack from his sleep as the sun poured in from the windows. Exiting the train and looking around Jack saw one thing, a new adventure. Never having money, he had not been able to travel much, but now that Jack was a Red Right Hand member, he had all the money in the world. Figuring the largest city on the west coast would be a good first stop.

“Food. I want food.” Jack said out loud.

Figuring he was far enough away from anyone who would know and recognize him, Jack found the restaurant district. Greeted with every kind of food imaginable, Jack chose sushi. Walking up to a quaint outdoor sushi place, he ordered his food to go. Walking on to towards the heart of the great city, devouring his delicacies, Jack entered the square. The center of the city, the area where all things are announced, and all things happen.

Seeing a large crowd gathered around a small stage, Jack looked up to see large displays broadcastings off the huge skyscrapers. A familiar face appeared on screen, Grigori. Suddenly his voice boomed.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, Boys and Girls. Everyone. As you all know, The Red Right Hand has been working diligently on research and development for space travel. Today, I am here to announce, we have made that breakthrough. Not only have we made the breakthrough, but we are almost ready for launch.” Grigori said to thunderous applause. “In the coming days, we will be finalizing all our preparations to make way for the first, in history, space flight to another planet. Tau Ceti….”

The uproar and commotion that announcement made drowned out anything else Grigori was saying. The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck began to rise as he saw his face along with the other recruits, scientists, engineers, and astronauts flash on the screen.

“Oh, oh. That’s me.” Jack whispered to himself.

People around him started to make the connection and started to scream his name.

“JACK CORBYN!” They repeated.

“Jack Corbyn is here?” Came Grigori’s voce over the speakers. “Make way, let him come to the stage.”

The crowd opened like the Red Sea to Moses leaving a direct path to the stage. Walking, people kept reaching out and touching Jack. Clambering up the stairs, Jack stood next to Grigori, whom he had spoke with in his casino office only the night before and was poised there for photos. The crowd was yelling questions upon questions at both Grigori and Jack. Grigori took the lead and answered all the questions, letting the shock Jack was beginning to feel from the attention settle.

“No further questions at this time.” Grigori finally said. “I will be making more announcements in the coming days.”

Suited men, with a red glove came up on stage and surrounded both Grigori and Jack escorting them off stage and into a private limo.

“I’m surprised to see you here Jack.” Greg said. “Pleasantly.”

“I, uh...” Jack stammered. “I thought I would travel a bit.”

“Completely understandable.” The Red Right Hand leader said motioning for the driver to go. “Travelling is good for the soul. Had I known you were coming, I could have prepared you better for that onslaught of attention.”

“Yeah, that was…” Jack started. “A lot.”

“You better get used to that.” Greg spoke. “The fame will only increase once the mission starts. You will be a household name by the end of the week.”

Jack looked at Greg and thought hard about that sentence. ‘*A household name by the end of the week.’* Knowing there were a lot of people whom Jack knows who would not believe he had made it.

“A household name?” Jack laughed.

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It had started to become dusk before Jack finished exploring all the abandoned ruins. No traces were found of the previous inhabitants, but something was itching in the back of Jack’s mind. He could not understand why the ship’s AI didn’t land here. There was a scan of the planet to determine the best landing site. It had to have known this was here.

“So why not land here.” Jack said thinking out loud. “This seems more adequate for a landing site to set up camp.”

Nox was curled up watching Jack go between the buildings, while Ghoulie floated along behind him. Determined to get one of the screens to do something besides generate random symbols, Jack found the most intact pedestal and began to examine it in more detail. Having attempted to move some of the broken ones to see what was beneath them, only to be disappointed, Jack knew the key was the pedestal itself.

“How the hell do you work.” Jack said frustrated as he watched the symbols dance on the screen. “Do something!”

Nox poked his head into the doorway to see what the commotion was about. Jack watched as the massive dragon gracefully maneuvered through the entrance and came to sit next to him.

“Hey Nox. Do you know how this works?” Jack asked. “Because fuck. And it’s dark out now. Great. Guess we will call this home for the night.”

Taking refuge in some abandoned ruins was not something Jack found exciting. He knew something had happened to the residents of this place, but he could not figure out what. Jack sent Ghoulie out to find more food as he wandered outside the small building and gathered firewood. Lighting the fire, he watched as Ghoulie brought back another hind quarters of some poor beast it found. As with the meat earlier, Jack set about cooking and curing it over the fire. Nox had started to crawl into the fire when Jack forced him out.

“You’re too big for this one. I’ll build one for you in a minute.” Jack said pushing the dragons head out of the flame. “I’m hungry.”

Jack sat on the ground, resting his back against a wall and looked up. Seeing so many strange stars in the sky had always amazed him since he landed. There was something missing though.

“Where are the moons?” Jack said looking around the sky. “It’s really dark out without them. That’s a tad unnerving.”

The snap in the trees in the dark made Jack stand up quickly. The noise happened to his right, and he squinted hard to try to see. Nox was looking around wildly trying to find the source of the noise. Jack, not wanting the RRH to find his creatures, reached into his pocket and activated the two icosahedrons. A flash of blue light illuminated the surrounding area and that’s when Jack saw the silhouette of something massive and leggy.

“Was that a giant fucking spider.” Jack said unusually calm. “I hate spiders.”

Before Jack had time to react, the spider reached out and pulled a leg out from under him. Tumbling back, Jack saw the monster. A great big dark red spider. Three meters in height, the carapace was the size of a compact car and the thorax housed two massive fangs that danced in the fire light, dripping with liquid. Jack watched as the fire reflected off several eyes, then the spider reared up on its four hind legs, reached the four front ones to the sky. The massive venom-soaked fangs started clicking.

The color drained from Jack’s face as we saw the giant arachnid come down onto all eight legs and begin weaving a web. Getting up slowly, Jack reached into his pocket to pull out his knife, but the spider was faster. Webs latched onto Jack, pinning his arms to his sides.

“Fuck.” Was all Jack could manage to say before the monster was able to finish making his sticky tomb.

The spider picked jack up, mandibles clicking in delight as it found itself a new meal. Something new, something foreign. A delicacy it hasn’t had in a long time. Weaving in and out between trees, finding its way in the dark, more from memory than seeing. The spider knew these woods better than anything. Having lived in them for so long. Watching, waiting, and devouring any that stays in its hunting grounds.

Jack was conscience but pinned. Unable to move more than a few centimeters. He listened as he heard the rustling of several feet rushing through the forest floor, crunching leaves and twigs beneath its paws. The arachnid had started to slow down, coming to its destination. Jack hit the ground hard on his left side as the spider dropped him. Listening, Jack could tell the spider was moving around him at a blistering pace.

Jack continued to wiggle parts of his body hoping that some of the web would break free. Realizing he still had his knife in his hand, Jack found the switch to slide the blade out. Cutting through the web like butter, Jack slowly worked its slicing power around his hand until hi had was free. Turning the blade and maneuvering it, Jack was able to free most of his arm. Jack couldn’t hear the spider anymore; it had stopped moving. Wrenching his whole arm free, Jack sliced the web cocoon, he found himself in, open.

The cold air hitting his face, refreshing him. Jack spun his head around in different directions looking for the eight legged monster. He could not see it or anything in the dark. Not wanting to take on a spider by himself, Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out Ghoulie’s icosahedron. Jack had carved into the smooth metal earlier in the day to differentiate the two cryo chambers.

Ghoulie appeared in a flash of blue light, illuminating the area around him. Jack saw the spider, crouching in wait beyond the nearby trees. Ghoulie turned and looked at Jack.

“Burn brighter, we need light.” Jack said.

Ghoulie intensified its fiery blaze and lit up jack and the surrounding areas. A screeching noise was heard from where the spider stood. Clicking of the massive fangs started.

Faster than Jack could see, the arachnid rushed forward for Jack. Without hesitation, Ghoulie flew to intercept causing the spider to back up. Spinning a web with its back legs, the spider attempted to take down the floating orb. Jack watched in horror as the ghoul he had was brought to the ground in a giant sticky mess of webs. The spider then started to come for Jack.

The limo ride with the leader of the Red Right Hand had taken then pair to an airstrip. A large private jet waited on the tarmac for Greg.

“Come along Jack.” Greg said. “It’s time to get back to work.”

Jack got out of the limo and followed Greg onto the plane. Once back on floor ‘151’, Jack was greeted in his dorm by a suited man holding a duffel bag.

“Am I late?” Jack asked.

“No, put this on.” The man said handing Jack the bag.

“Um, okay, hang on.”

Jack closed the door and looked in the duffel. Inside was a black jumpsuit with a Red Right Hand patch on the left shoulder. The plainness of the garment left a lot to be desired, but Jack knew what this meant. They were launching, and they were launching soon. Opening the door, the man had Jack follow him to the cafeteria where the other recruits and Nick awaited them.

“Jack Corbyn, you’re the last one, yes?” a scientist asked peering at his clipboard.

Yes.” Came the suited mans voice before Jack could answer.

“Good, good.” The scientist spoke. “This way then.”

Following the white lab coat that sported the same red hand patch on the left shoulder, the recruits made there way to the elevator. The man pressed the button, and when the doors opened, Jack noticed there was no operator inside. As they all clambered in, Jack saw that Nick had a symbol on his red hand patch. Before he could ask what that was about, the scientist spoke.

“We will be heading to the sub-floors, to the garage. From there you will be escorted to the launch site.” He spoke.

“When is launch?” Nick asked.

“Five hours.” The man said. “In five hours, you make history.”

Jack and everyone else got out of the elevator and into large black SUV type vehicles. The ride to the launch site was quiet. Jack supposed everyone, like himself, was contemplating what was about to happen. They were going to get onto a spaceship and travel to another planet. If someone had told Jack a year prior this is what he would be doing. He would have laughed and laughed hard.

“Everyone follow me.” A suited man said. “I will be taking you to the briefing room.”

The briefing room was a temporary shelter built for this exact moment. Scientists and engineers spent the next forty-five minutes explaining the mission and the mission prerogatives. The recruits all knew them by heart and could recite them word for word with what was being explained to them. Once the briefing was over, they were brought into a room to finish being suited up.

A group of young enlisted Red Right Hands stood at the ready to help Jack and the others into their flight suits. Jack wondered what the purpose was, as they were going to be put into the large icosahedron cryo chambers and remain in stasis until they started their descent on Tau Ceti. Jack obliged regardless and suited up with the rest of the crew.

“A photo please!” Shouted an eager looking man holding a camera. “One for the books.”

Everyone posed together, individually and had some action shots taken. A few of the flight crew and engineers that were going on the trip were busy with interviews with various press as Jack and the others were ushered towards the elevator that would take them to their ship. On the elevator, Jack looked around at his fellow recruits and at Nick.

“What the hell are you staring at Jack.” Nick said.

“Just getting a good look at you Nick.” Jack retorted. “Trying to figure out if they planned on shaving off a few pounds of that ego of yours.”

“You watch your tongue.” Nick spat. “You’ve no idea who you are speaking to.”

“Oh?” Jack laughed. “Is it because you got a cool little letter ‘R’ on your red hand patch?”

“I noticed you don’t.” Nick laughed, louder than Jack. “Even with all the time you spent with Grigori, you weren’t told the whole plan.”

“The whole…” Jack started, but the elevator stopped and the doors opened, cutting the conversation short.

Following the ground crew, Jack was led into the ship. The interior looked something out of the movies but had the added cryo pods circling a deck on the ship. Jack was escorted to his pod, across the room from Nick. The room started to fill with blue light as Jack watched as the other recruits place their palm on the reader and fade away into stasis. Reaching out, jack placed his hand on the smooth glass surface.

“Fuck it.” Jack said as blue light engulfed him.

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As the giant spider started to move towards Jack. Panicking, he reached into his pocket and pulled out an empty icosahedron. Taking aim, Jack through the cryo chamber at the great arachnid, and with a flash of blue light, it disappeared. The ‘X’s on the small device were flashing rapidly, Jack knew he only had seconds before the beast escaped, confused and more angry. Jack quickly started to cut open Ghoulie from the webs. A violent blue light burst from the shattering icosahedron as the massive three meter tall spider materialized. Spinning madly on its eight legs, the beast focused on Jack, who was wildly attempting to cut free the ghoul. A swift kick from the spider shot Jack backwards.

Landing with a loud thump, pain shot through his ribcage, Jack saw the spider rear up on its hind legs like it did before. The spider was preparing to cocoon Jack again.

“Fuck You!” Jack shouted at the monster. “Fuck You and your eight creepy legs!”

Jack knew it was doing nothing to deter the spider from killing him, but he was damned if he was going without a fight. Still clutching his knife, Jack got up and started to sprint at the spider. The large fangs clicking in delight as it’s prey was coming to it. A sudden explosion of light rocked the forest, illuminating everything around them. Ghoulie had burst out of its web coffin and its flames were burning blue and white. Jack veered off path and rolled out of the way of an oncoming kick from the spider. Jack saw the fierce look in the orbs eyes, then darkness.

Ghoulie had gone dark. The flames no longer burning, Jack felt a shiver run up his spine. A shadow appeared where ghoulie had been floating. Deep purple flames erupted around the shadow. Four long gangly shadowy arms protruded from the torso. There was no head, but two white eyes cast in a shadow where a head should have been. The bottom of the torso showed no legs, but just darkness, almost like smoke trailed out. Ghoulie had changed.

The arachnid monster had shrunk back into the shadow watching the orb transform. Ghoulie turned and looked at Jack, who watched terrified at what was happening in front of him. The spider shot a web at Ghoulie, who caught it in its shadowy grasp. Igniting the silk rope with the purple flame, the fire quickly spread up towards the source. Jack watched the spider as it danced and cut the roped with its back legs. Ghoulie popped up directly in front of the spider. Shrieking, the spider reared up clicking its massive drooling fangs vigorously.

Ghoulie revealed a mouth and shrieked back. Nothing could have prepared Jack for the noise that came out of his ghoul. High pitched, but with bass tones mixed in. It was beautiful to listen to, but a sound of nightmares at the same time. The spider, clicking its hangs, started to advance forward. Ghoulie reached out and grabbed the four long spider legs that were up in the air. Jack watched, too scared to move from where he had rolled to, as the spider tried to wrench its legs from the clutches of a shadow. The spider started to kick with his rear legs, but could not make contact with the smoky, legless, darkness that was Ghoulie. More arms appeared from the shadowy torso, eight in total, all grappling a leg of the spider.

Fear, was what Jack saw in the spider’s last moments. In a blink of an eye, Ghoulie burned brighter, Purple flames dancing in the dark night, and grew in size. As the darkness grew, It pulled on the eight legs. A tearing sound ending with a loud pop as legs were being torn off. Ichor spraying the surrounding areas, bursting from the spiders thorax as its limbs were removed, one at a time. As Ghoulie tossed legs to the ground the spider fell with a crash. Thrashing its body around, screaming in horror, the spider started to shoot a web. Then there was silence.

The spider had perished, thanks to Ghoulie who was not floating idly near Jack. Jack, who had been holding his breath for the last while, took in huge gulps of air. Staring at the lifeless corpse of the arachnid monster that, moments before, was about to eat him. He passed out.

Hours had passed, the sun was in the sky before Jack awoke. Taking in the scene around him, memories of the night flooded in. Clambering to his feet and spinning around Jack spotted a shadowy figure floating nearby. The rear end of some defenseless beast was at Jack’s feet, along with a piled of wood to start a fire. Looking at Jack with the empty white eyes, Jack knew it meant him no harm, this was his ghoul.

“Ghoulie. Thank you.” Jack said staring at the shadow. “What happened to you?”

No response came from the darkness, but Jack could see some indication of a shrug from four shoulders.

“Well, whatever it was. Thank you.” Jack said. “Fuck. That spider…Fuck.”

Jack got up, admired the large chunk of meat and began to slice it. Releasing Nox so that he may enjoy some food, Jack started a fire and began cooking. After eating, Jack got up and looked around. A lot of the nearby area was cleared out, not a lot of trees. Large stone boulders, covered in tunnel webs that were covered in bones. Lots and lots of bones. Varying sizes, colors, and shapes the bones were strewn everywhere. The spider had not let anything in the forest live.

“I bet this is what happened to that village.” Jack said. “A giant fucking spider ate them.”

The ship hurled itself at speeds incomprehensible. Flying towards Sol, to use as a slingshot to gain acceleration faster. AI guiding the ship, shooting itself toward a distant star, Tau Ceti. Had the ship been travelling at a speed that humans could handle, it would take over two hundred years. With the new technology the Red Right Hand developed, it takes the trip down to two years.

Two years that Jack and every other soul on the ship had to stay in stasis. Two years that anything could go wrong, and if something did go wrong, there was no one there to fix it. If something happened to the power, the cryo chambers would shut down and that would be the end of everyone on board. Great care was taken in the design of the ship to protect the power generators as well as the charging systems.

A flash of blue light was all Jack could remember. After placing his hand on the panel, it felt as if Jack had just blinked then everything changed. Materializing back in front if his cryo chamber, the lights were dimmed, and the place smelled musty. Looking around, he could see his fellow recruits, a long with a few of the engineers trying to comprehend what was happening. Even with practice, the act of going into stasis was disorienting.

“Well, we didn’t die.” Someone said out loud.

“Nah, we did, this is afterlife. Welcome to Hell.” Another said.

“This isn’t Hell. This is just the journey.” Came Nick’s voice. “Actual Hell will be down there.”

Following Nick’s gaze, he could see a planet outside the viewport. They had decelerated enough to begin orbit and scanning the planet for possible landing zones. Jack and the recruits were only one of several teams that had their assignments. First, they were to report to the loading hall and take inventory of the ship. As they entered the hall, medical staff who were awoken first began to assess everyone for health and status checks.

“Jack Corbyn?” The medic asked.

“Yes.” Jack replied.

“How do you feel?” The medic began as he started to probe Jack with several instruments and taking notes on a clipboard.

“Like nothing even happened. Saw a blue light, blinked, and now you’re jabbing me with that thing.” Jack laughed.

“This *thing* is making sure stasis materialization didn’t misalign your body when you were reconstructed.” The medic retorted.

“Oh.” Jack said.

“Yes, oh.” The medic said. “You’re clear.”

“Oh good.” Was all Jack got out before the medic was off to another recruit.

Once cleared, you were to report to your unit chief and get your assignments. Jack watched as Nick was cleared then he disappeared through a doorway. On the door, Jack saw the red right hand symbol that matches his patch, but this one had the ‘R’ on it. Jack walked towards the door, but as he approached, he heard his name.

“Jack Corbyn.” A man said.

“Yes.” Jack said turning around.

“This way to your assignment.” He spoke.

Jack, disappointed, turned and followed the man into a supply room. Inside, there was the rest of his team that he trained with, minus Nick. Looing around, Jack saw boxes and crates of tools that would be used once on the ground.

“Everyone take a clipboard and match the information on the sheet to the crate. Report any differences.” The man said, then disappeared through the door. Jack noticed the ‘R’ on his patch.

“Well, this is absolute bullshit.” One of the recruits blurted out. “Here’s a dark room with no viewports for you to sit in and count small twenty sided dice in while we orbit a new planet.”

The sarcasm dripped out of the recruit’s mouth, and Jack whole heartedly agreed. They were orbiting Tau Ceti, *making history* as Grigori said, and they were shoved into a supply closet.

“What are these things anyways?” Someone asked. “They can’t be dice, there are only two ‘X’s on them.”

“At this point, it doesn’t matter. Count them, so we can get out of here.” Jack said as he began to count as fast as he could.

It didn’t take long for everyone to finish their assignments. Once completed, the recruits were allowed to traverse the ship and take in the sight of the planet. Jack noticed that the Tau Ceti star burned the same color as Sol did. The planet though, took Jack’s breath away. He had seen images if Earth from space, and of Tau Ceti and they did not look the same, but here in person was a different story.

Looking at the planet through the viewport, Jack could see massive oceans surrounding continents. Each continent support multiple biomes. There were forests of varying color, mountain regions and deserts. Jack could not see any obvious sign of civilization, although he would admit, he wasn’t sure what to look for. Looking out and seeing the planet, knowing there were about to embark on a mission that would change what we know about life in space, swelled Jack with pride. He was grateful for the Red Right Hand.

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Eager to move on and put space between himself and the giant webs, Jack finished eating and set off. Worried there might be more giant arachnid monsters, Jack was not one to stick around and find out. Not actually knowing if it was south, but while he ate, Jack pulled out his paper map and compared the large mountain range he knew the cave was in to what he had documented and using the top of the paper as north, Jack went south. The forest started to get denser. The underbrush grew more wildly as Jack continued. Nox, taking his time, was lumbering behind Jack, like a crocodile ready to pounce. Ghoulie idly floated alongside Jack.

Not having been on the move for very long, Jack found himself walking along an old road once again.

“Hey, I found it.” Jack said amused. “Where the fuck you been?”

Following the path, Jack saw a break in the trees. The dense undergrowth and trees started to disperse. Opening up, the forest led into rolling hills and wide open plains. Smaller bushes and wild, what Jack would call flowers, dotted the landscape. Small long stems of teal, one could call grass, dominated the view. Jack stopped and looked on awe stricken at the marvel.

“Again, A better landing zone than the damned forest.” Jack said irritably. “What the hell did the AI even scan?”

A cool breeze ruffled Jacks matted hair as it wafted over the fields. The road that he had been following stretched on through the plains and into the distance. Spotted here and there were groves of trees. Jack could see outcroppings of large boulders dotting the horizon. Strange screeches and howls could be heard in the far distance, as monsters and beasts roamed their lands. Jack could see the small orange rodents from the landing zone scurrying about before him. There were more bullpix ungracefully moving in the distance.

“Well, let’s not waste daylight I suppose.” Jack said.

Moving through the open field was a welcome change to the forests. The sun shone brightly in the sky, albeit it was starting to set and Jack could see all around him. The chances of another sneak attack by a wild man-eating monster were slim. Coming to a small grove of a dozen trees, Jack took the time to survey what was around him. Climbing a tree as high as he could, Jack could make out waters to his west, forest and mountains to the north and east, and what appeared to be a Tau Ceti desert towards the south. Not wanting to be out in the wide open at night, Jack called it for the day and started to set up a camp in the small grove.

Not long after Jack got his fire started and was chewing on some of his dried meat, the moons showed themselves in the sky. Jack noticed they didn’t seem to have any visible phases, they were either in the night sky, or they weren’t.

“Life on this planet is definitely different than back on Earth.” Jack said to himself. “It’s a toss up of where I’d rather be though.”

Nox had curled up next to the fire, upset at Jack for not making it larger. Ghoulie lazily floated around as the wind blew. Jack, paranoid something was going to come get him, had trouble falling asleep. A sharp crack as a branch broke woke Jack with a start. The sun was starting to rise on the horizon as Jack jumped up, drawing his knife and looking around wildly for both the source of the sound and his creatures.

Nox had wandered around the grove chasing the small orange rodents with their fiery tails, and knocked a limb from a tree pouncing on one. Looking up, the tail dangling from its mouth as the Charchu struggled for life. As Nox bit down, the flame was extinguished casting shadow on the dragon as it chewed its meal.

“Damn Nox, you scared the hell out of me.” Jack sighed in relief. “Chew quieter next time.”

Laying back down, more at peace knowing Nox was relaxed enough to play with its food, Jack fell back asleep. As drool fell, spattering the ground near Jack, splashing his face, he groggily opened his eyes and found himself staring at somethings feet. A yell escaped the monster, and Jack, wide eyes, jumped to his feet again. A terrifying cyclops beast had stumbled upon him in the night. Nox and Ghoulie were nowhere to be found.

Having been granted leave for the first couple days out of stasis as the engineers looked over the ship, jack found himself wandering the corridors. Only ever seeing the plans of the ship on data slates and blueprints, Jack was fascinated by the engineering marvel he found himself in. Coming through the doors to the docking bay, Jack watched as several Red Right Hand mechanics worked over the exploration probes for the planet. Icosahedron devices, one meter in diameter, with numerous antennas and a jet propulsion system to keep them levitating and allow them to fly.

Jack enjoyed exploring the ship, looking at everything that made the trip possible. Meeting up with the other recruits for mealtimes or the occasional briefing, Jack was always one to initiate conversation. Jack began to feel rift form between himself and everyone else he trained with. It’s not as if they were close friends, but they were travelling through space together.

A couple recruits had new ‘R’s on their red hand patches of their uniform. Every time Jack attempted to ask about it, they would give a vague answer like, ‘*if you know, you know’* or they would completely avoid answering altogether. Nick was also no where to be found. The ship was only so big, and Jack knew that Nick had to be going out of his way to avoid him.

“Jack Corbyn.” Came a voice from behind.

“Um, yes?” Jack said turning around.

“Come with me please.” A woman said.

“Yes, Coming.” Jack replied.

Jack followed the woman out of the cafeteria and down the hallway. The door they arrived was the one Nick went in the first day. The door Jack attempted to follow through before being pulled away. On the other side of the door was a meeting room. Complete with a rectangular table and seven chairs.

“Have a seat.” The woman said. “We just have some questions to go over.”

“Oh, um, yeah, alright.” Jack said taking a seat opposite the woman.

“My name is Kiera.” She spoke. “You are Jack Corbyn from floor ‘151’?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jack replied.

“Alright, good.” Kiera started to write things on a clipboard. “You have shown good scores in all of your testing. How did you feel the stasis went?”

“There was a flash of blue light, then we were here, in orbit around Tau Ceti.” Jack replied. “I guess it felt, disorienting, yet lack luster.”

“Mmhmm.” She said. “And you know what the Red Right Hand is doing here at Tau Ceti?”

“Exploration, and documentation of an alien planet. A planet that has water and possible signs of life.” Jack started. “Well, now that we are here, there is definite life on the planet. If the rumors are true, thriving species are down there.”

“Yes, I will confirm the rumors to you in confidence. There is life on Tau Ceti.” Kiera said flatly.

The rest of the interview was uneventful. Kiera continued to ask generic questions that were seemingly unrelated. At the end, she told Jack she has more questions, but has run out of time. Jack left the meeting room, utterly confused on the purpose of the interview. The medics and unit chiefs asked all those questions when Jack came out of stasis.

“I see you had your interview.” Came Nick’s voice.

“My interview?” Jack replied. “Interviewing for what?”

“If you know, you know.” Nick said offhandedly.

“What the fuck does that mean.” Jack asked getting irritated at the vagueness.

“It means, unless you are chosen, you are not worthy.” Nick said coolly. “I told them you weren’t worthy, but they said you had *potential.*

That last word being emphasized with sarcasm so rank, Jack could physically smell it.

“Is this what that ‘R’ is for on your patch?” Jack asked.

“What is your obsession with my fashion, Jackie?” Nick replied.

“Don’t fucking call me that.” Jack spat. By now, there were onlookers watching the argument.

“What are you going to do Jackie, pin me in a corner again?” Nick laughed.

“Not at all, I know where you sleep.” Jack lied. He had no idea where Nick has been since coming out of stasis.

“Oh yeah?” Nick said challenging the bluff. “Then what? Are you going to get in and spoon with me?”

“I’d rather gouge my eyes out with a rusty fork.” Jack said. “I would simply put a blade to your throat and watch you bleed out, gasping for air, as your open your eyes for that briefest second, you would see my face.”

“You don’t have a big enough dick to pull that off.” Nick laughed. “And you have no idea what I do on this ship.”

Nick’s last words were accompanied by his large middle finger waving in the air as he turned and wandered through a door that had a palm reader.

“Dude, Fuck that guy.” Jack said under his breath.

Jack turned and walked back to the observation deck to cool down. Along the way, Kiera joined him.

“I’ll join you.” She said.

“Alright. Don’t expect much company.” Jack said.

“I watched the altercation.” She replied. “You’re interesting.”

“Interesting? How?” Jack asked as they came up to the large viewing platform that looked out to the planet.

“You show no aggression during interviews or testing, but when presented with an adversary…” She trailed off.

Jack watched the clouds form around the planet. The landmasses like little islands in the vast oceans of Tau Ceti.

“You can’t push me easily.” Jack said. “Because I’ll push back and I’m good at what I do.”

“I’ve no doubt you will be one of the greats.” She replied.

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The cyclops, whose large eye was inset into the chest cavity, stood two meters tall. Had large muscular arms that ended in 3 fingered clawed hands. The torso under the eye held a long vertical indent, and the beast stood on two muscular legs. The entire monster was covered in a thick matted fur. Jack stared as the cyclops’ eye blinked slowly staring at Jack. Jack stared back, there was no head, just a large broad body that housed a great big singular eye. Behind him, Jack could see little streaks of fire light dashing to and frow, occasionally one would vanish. Jack supposed that was Nox, hunting, but where was Ghoulie. Had the wind really blown him around?

Jack slowly reached into his pocket for his knife, but the beast twitched, causing Jack to jump back anticipating a strike. No strike came and Jack, once again, reached into his pocket. Not sure what good his small knife was going to do. Jack’s first strategy was to blind him. Sliding the knife from his pocket and sliding the blade out, Jack was ready. Before he could attack, however, the cyclops swung a massive arm and backhanded Jack. Jack was sent to the ground, wind knocked out of him, and his knife was thrown out of reach.

“Fuck.” Jack wheezed. “Super Fuck.”

Touching his tender ribs, Jack winced at the pain. Knowing a rib was broken, Jack reevaluated his situation. A large one eyes monster was staring him down, his one weapon was out of his reach currently, and his two creatures were out gallivanting with the locals. Looking around Jack for something to help and picking up a few stones. Jack stood back up, slowly, the pain in his body increasing with every move.

No longer within the beats range, Jack took a quick glance around hoping Ghoulie would do its appear and rip the limbs off trick again, but the ghoul never showed. Jack took a rock and threw it as hard as he could at the cyclops’ eye. Quicker than perceivable, the beast closed his eye and the stone bounced off the eye lid. Jack watched in horror as the monster opened its eye, then opened its mouth.

The long vertical slit on the torso under the eye opened, revealing the monstrous mouth lined on both sides with an uncountable amount of sharp needle like teeth that articulated. A long tongue wriggled out flinging gooey saliva around.

“What in the actual hell is that!?” Jack yelled.

The Cyclops bellowed back. Taking a step forward, the beast swung its arm at Jack trying to grasp him. Jack ducked and attempted a roll, but his ribcage ached in pain, and all he managed was to flop around like a fish. The monster kicked Jack, propelling him forward and Jack was able to grab his knife. The immense pain he was in started to blur his vision, but Jack was determined to not die tonight.

“Fuck you and fuck your mouth.” Jack said, wishing he was cleverer.

His hand patting the ground in a desperate attempt to find his knife found it. Jack stood back up, the pain searing through his entire body. Jack crouched into an attacking position, his thighs burning from the attack, when out of the darkness, a gust of wind blew in from above. Nox had heard Jack scream and came in to defend its master. Growling at the cyclops, Nox hunched down and started to circle the beast. The cyclops screamed at Nox, swinging its deadly clawed hands wildly to sway the dragon.

Jack watched the dance unfold before him. Nox and the cyclops locked in battle. As one beast attacked, the other parried. Nox would swing its tail at the great cyclops. The cyclops would grab the tail and try to bite it. Then the cyclops would swing its arms at Nox, who would duck out of reach. Watching, Jack began to see openings in the cyclops defense. Openings, that could be exploited, by himself.

Waiting for the cyclops to have his back to him, Jack found the opportunity. As the cyclops back was turned, Jack came in under his wild swinging arm, taking his knife blade and driving it deep into the monster’s eye. Jack was backhanded again as the beast howled in agony. Nox saw the chance and took to flight. Grabbing a leg, Nox pulled the cyclops up into the sky. Jack watched as the dragon released the monster to fall to his death. As the cyclops hit the ground, Jack could hear the snapping of bones, it sounded like someone was snapping long concrete bricks.

The cyclops laid on the ground in tangled heap of bone and flesh. The great eye leaking fluid and pus as Jack wrenched his blade out. The once menacing mouth, now lay agape and the tongue no longer flailing. Jack stared at the beast, then vomited from the pain. The adrenaline was subsiding as Jack made his way back to his small campfire, tossing on a few more logs, then passing out.

Jack turned and looked at Kiera, wondering what she was playing at. Had this been an exchange back on Earth, he may have assumed she was flirting with him, but as they are light years away, Jack knew there was some ulterior motive. Looking back at the planet below, he decided to play the game.

“You said we would meet again.” Jack said. “Is this what you had in mind?”

“You’re under review.” Was all she replied.

“Review? For what?” Jack laughed. “Am I getting promoted? Do I get a fun little ‘R’ to hang on my patch?”

“What do you know about the ‘R’?” She asked.

“I know I’m one of the few that does not have it. At first, I only noticed Nick having one.” Jack started. “Then others started to get them.”

“Yes, as we complete the interviews, we have been giving them out.” Came Kiera’s reply.

“What do they mean?” Jack asked bluntly.

“If you know, you know.” Kiera said automatically.

“And if I don’t know?” Jack asked irritably.

“Then you will either pass the interview and find out, or you will not know.” She said.

“How do I pass then?” Jack asked. “Or do I want to pass?”

“What do you mean?” She said.

“Well, Nick was the first I noticed to get one, and fuck that guy.” Jack said. “If he passed, maybe I’m not interested.”

“Your blatant problem with authority is what is holding you back, Jack.” She spoke with certainty. “You seem to have something to prove, and that won’t work long term for the company.”

“Long term? Then why am I here?” Jack asked.

“You’re here because you have shown an aptitude for what we need for the mission.” She said.

“An aptitude for the mission, but not suited for long term?” Jack was unsure of what Kiera meant.

A beep sounded from Kiera.

“Thank you Jack, I will meet with you again.” Then Kiera left.

Jack watched as the woman walked down the stairs and out the door into the hallway.

“What did she mean *not suited for long term.* We are on a mission to a new planet. How much more long term could she mean?“ Jack said to himself. “I have an aptitude for this mission, but I have a problem with authority.”

Jack thought to himself then agreed with that last point, however, it wasn’t all authority. Some, like Hope, Jack had issues with. Some like Grigori, however, Jack respected. A businessman, who started with nothing and built an empire that spanned the globe.

Jack continued to stew about the conversation he had with Kiera as he watched the planet. Clouds wafting about, Jack could make out what he thought was some sort of storm over a large mountain range. Something about the planet did seem odd, besides the two moons that were pink and blue, Jack couldn’t see any ice caps on the planet. Earth has the north and south poles that are on snowy caps, but Tau Ceti had no large white continents, at least from what Jack could see.

Going into the observatory, Jack walked up to some monitors. Using the controls on the panel, he rotated the 3D render of Tau Ceti, and found that he was correct, there are no large ice caps.

“Interesting.” Nick said behind Jack.

“Oh?” Jack said disdainfully.

“Yeah.” Nick started. “That I would find you in here.”

Jack turned around and looked at Nick. Nick, if possible, seemed larger than he did during that sparring match. Jack suspected Nick was using steroids, not wanting to be bested in the ring again.

“What do you want?” Jack asked, obviously tired of dealing with Nick.

“To toss you into an airlock and open the doors.” Nick shrugged. “You’re lucky though, I have been told I am not allowed to do that.”

“Happy days.” Jack said, the sarcasm dripping off his tongue.

“Anyways, you need to clear out of here. I have work to do.” Nick said.

“This is a common area; I can be here if I want to.” Jack replied.

“Not anymore.” Nick said.

Others started to come into the room. Jack recognized the other recruits followed by Kiera and a few of the engineers. Kiera was the only one that spoke.

“Jack, would you mind leaving, we have some private matters to discuss.” Kiera said.

Jack looked at Kiera, then back to Nick. Holding up his middle finger to the large rival, Jack left. As the door closed behind him he heard Nick say something curious.

“Now that the loose end is gone, lets go over the actual reason why we are here.” Nick said.

Jack turned, but the palm panel on the door turned red, indicating it had been locked. Putting his ear up to the door trying to hear anything, Jack was disappointed, even though he doubted that would work.

“Actual reason why we are at Tau Ceti?” Jack said. “What the hell are they not telling me?”

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As Jack lay unconscious on the ground, Nox and Ghoulie stayed and watched. The sun rose and was beating down on his bruised face, causing Jack to stir. Waking up, feeling the pain from the night’s events burn through his body reminding him of the horrors he has seen on the planet. Then Jack felt something else on his body. Soft and fuzzy, it crawled over his legs. Sitting up quicker than he should have, Jack saw what looked like a pompom with feet. Two large eyes looked at him as it made a strange gurgling coo.

Looking down, expecting fangs and claws to erupt from beneath the long soft fur, Jack slowly patted the ground looking for where he had dropped his knife when he passed out. Sensing Nox and Ghoulie nearby, he looked at them. Ghoulie lazily drifted above a batch of the fuzzy creatures, and Nox was on his back tossing a fuzzball in the air like a cat.

“What in the world are you doing Nox?” Jack asked. “Are these things friendly?”

Nox rolled his head towards Jack and stopped tossing the fuzzball around. Getting up and walking over to where he was sitting Jack watched as Nox nudged the small fuzzy monster off of his legs. Standing slowly, Jack took in the scene around him. There was a pile of bones where the cyclops lay, and there were two dozen of the furry things roaming around.

“Did they come out of it? Or come here to eat the damned thing?” Jack asked himself. “Either way, as long as they’re not trying to bite my ankles…”

He had been ignoring the pain until that point but was unable to anymore. Jack felt his body ache. Exhausted from the fight Jack looked over his body. Bruises forming on his chest and legs where the cyclops had hit and kicked him. Feeling his ribs, Jack could feel one was broken, but lacked the medical knowledge on how to fix it, so he left it as is, dealing with the pain.

Taking care to bandage up all the cuts and scrapes, Jack looked int the med kit and pulled out some pain killers. He had been wanting to save these in case a real emergency had arisen. Deciding now was the real emergency, Jack took them and took a final drink from his flash, emptying it. There was no wind today, and Jack could see more of the landscape. Looking south, he saw a large group of strange rock formations.

“Could that be another village?” Jack asked absent mindedly. “Let’s go check it out.”

Nox and Ghoulie, reluctant to leave their fuzzy playthings, followed Jack. Strolling through the green fields, Jack could see lots of charchu, among other beats he had not seen before running around, chasing each other. Jack presumed they most likely were not friendly, as the charchu sent bolts of fire charring the various creatures before leaping upon their corpse and eating them. Nox watched with envy, as Jack wretched again.

Coming on the monolithic stones, Jack could tell these were not natural forming. Some of the stones were very straight and purposely stacked upon themselves, and Jack knew *‘Nature doesn’t build in straight lines.’* Jack could see the bay to the west, and fields and groves of trees surrounding them, but no other big groups of rocks. Looking up, Jack guessed the stones were about four meters in height, and a meter square. Long rectangular building blocks. Walking past the outer layer of rocks, Jack saw the ship that lay in the center.

Gasping quickly sending Nox to frantically search around for the threat. Walking up to the ship, ignoring the scattered technology littering the ground, Jack tried to find any indication of a door or even windows. Strange symbols were etched along the surface of the ship, jack recognized a few symbols from the pedestal screens in the forest village.

“They’re from the same civilization.” Jack deduced. “I wonder if they’re from this planet or like us, visiting.”

Looking around the ship, Jack noticed piles of screens, tools and other debris scattered around the ground. Squatting and taking a closer look at one of the tools, a long pen-like shape with a strange flat edge on one end, and several buttons along the side. Putting it into his pocket, he picked up a screen and tapped it. Flashing images of the same symbols in seemingly the same pattern flowed to life.

“Where they all eaten by that giant spider monster?” Jack asked. “When, how old is this?”

Ghoulie had floated to the top of the ship and was idly staring into the distance. Jack always wondered what he was thinking about. Nox had found himself a fallen stone to lay on and was napping. The sound of crushing rock startled Jack, causing him to jump. Nox opened an eye to see what the commotion was about. Looking around Jack couldn’t determine the source of the noise. The group of rocks he was in caused even the smallest sound to echo and magnify.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw a shadow of something large on a tight group of stones. The sound of thudding footprints echoed closer. Jack took the screen and back away closer to Nox.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.” Jack whispered loud enough for Ghoulie and Nox to hear him. “I don’t want to fight whatever that is.”

Leaving the stone circle, Nox at his heals, his side-to-side walk mimicking that of a crocodile from Earth, made Jack chuckle as he saw it. Looking back, Ghoulie was no where to be seen, only to appear in front of Jack as they made their escape. The large stone hand of the creature emerged above the stones. Jack gave a sigh of relief realizing he wouldn’t have to face that monster today.

Coming up to the waters edge, Jack sat down on the beach. Taking his flask out and filling it, Jack took a long drink before filling it again. Taking out the pen tool and the screen, inspecting them again.

“I need to get back to the ship.” Jack said. “Fucking Nick though.”

Nox got in the water and was swimming around before screeching. Taking flight leaving a trail of water, Jack saw what the commotion was about.

Jack spent a lot of his free time in the coming days in the observatory scanning screens and data slates trying to find out what that cryptic message Nick said was about. Pouring over reports and studies but coming up with nothing. Jack saw less and less of his fellow recruits in those days. Taking to eating and spending time by himself, Jack wasn’t sure who to trust. Stuck in deep space near a new planet, he was determined to see the mission through.

Kiera would make a daily appearance, asking probing questions, and giving vague answers in return to Jack’s.

“Why are you still interviewing me?” Jack asked. “You’ve already made your decision.”

“Everyone has chance.” Kiera said.

“A chance at what?” Jack stated.

“To do what is right.” She spoke.

“What is right?” Jack laughed. “With whose perspective in mind?”

“The Red Right Hand.” Came her response. “We are a multi-planetary corporation whose purpose is the betterment of mankind.”

“Then what is the real reason we are here?” Jack asked flatly.

“We are here to document and observe the planet.” She recited.

“Bullshit.” Jack spat back.

Kiera smiled, turned and left. Jack watched as he walked out of the observatory, turning back to the page turner he was reading. *‘Potatoes in space. A guide that may save your life.’* Flipping through, Jack’s only conclusion after ingesting as much information as he has.

“Are they planning on colonizing the planet?” Jack pondered. “Or is there a resource on this planet?”

Looking out towards the planet, Jack could only wonder, what great mysteries the world would show him. His stomach grumbling, Jack made his way to the cafeteria and got some food. As he ate in silence, Jack heard someone approach from behind.

“Jack Corbyn.” The familiar voice sounded.

“Yes.” Jack said without turning around.

“Come with me. It’s time.”

Jack shot up.

“Its Time!?” He asked rhetorically.

“Come with me to be briefed.” Came the reply.

Jack followed into the small meeting room that Kiera had initially interviewed him in. Inside was the fellow recruits, including Nick and there was one of the engineers. Jack took his seat and avoided eye contact with anyone else in the room.

“It is time.” Came the engineer’s voice.

“After several orbits around the planet. Several scenarios have been executed with the help of AI. The engineer explained. “A suitable landing spot has been determined. We have also sent probes to the surface in search of any life forms.”

“Have the found any!?” someone blurted out.

“We have no indication of intelligent life on the planet.” He explained.

“Have you found any life?” Another asked eagerly.

“Yes.” Was all that he said.

Jack listened intently as the engineer explained the situation on the surface. The air was thinner than Earth’s, but breathable. He expressed caution when removing the helmet and to thoroughly test everything beforehand. The life that they have been able to scan has been small mammal type creatures roaming the forest. The gravity of the planet was similar in Earth’s and they most likely would not feel any difference.

The landing spot that they decided on was in a large clearing in the gamma quadrant of one of the smaller landmasses. Thinking back at the charts, Jack tried to accurately recall how they mapped the planet in sections. None of science behind that really made any sense to Jack.

“What kind of small creatures?” Nick asked calmly, giving Jack a sense that something was amiss.

“All we can tell from the readings is they’re about the size of a wild rabbit, and fast.” The engineer explained. “Now, if we can all head to the loading docks, we will be launching soon.”

Jack followed the rest of the recruits down the familiar hallway into the loading dock. Crews were there, suiting up and boarding crafts. Crewmates came up to Jack and helped him into his flight suit and handed Jack his helmet. It reminded Jack of a large fishbowl with a sun visor. Following his team, Jack went to the third landing craft and boarded. Putting his helmet on as he sat down, the pilot walking down and strapping the passengers in before returning to the cockpit.

“This is it. We are launching.” Said the pilot, and Jack felt a sense of weightlessness as the spacecraft released from the ship and plummeted to the planet below.

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Jack was greeted with a giant sea monster. Shooting out of the water ten meters into the sky after Nox, this long snake looking beast snapping its large, fanged mouth at the dragon. Nox pumping its wings with more effort than Jack had seen from it, was rising higher and higher. The snake creature had a long body, and above the surface of the water, Jack could see six legs protruding out from near its head, with two gangly arms that looked like twigs near its mouth. Each appendage was equipped with two finger like claws. The head was shaped like Nox, triangular, except the back of the head went back past the base, presumably to protect the neck. Several tendrils protruded from the head flailing in different directions. Large, spiked mandibles surrounded the large snapping mouth, and Jack felt a sense of unease at the sight of the aquaneki. Jack could almost make out several more limbs attached to the monster below the surface of the water.

Nox, who had finally gained enough altitude to be out of reach, snarled at the water dragon. Looking to Jack, Nox waited for his command. Ghoulie, who had up until now, been lazily adrift near the waters edge, was at the ready. The purple flames of the ghoul burning brightly, the four shadowy arms poised to attack if needed. The aquaneki stopped snapping at Nox and turned its head towards the shore. Towards Jack. Jack watched in horror as the water monster dived back below the surface. Jack moved back, away from the water; Nox landed next to him and Ghoulie stayed close.

The aquaneki erupted from the depths, sending water splashing the fiery phantom. Ghoulie, unphased moved in to attack.

“Rip his limbs off!” Jack yelled at Ghoulie who started to increase his size. “Damn Nox, if only you could breathe fire.”

Nox looked at Jack, then at Ghoulie and opened his mouth. Looking down at his dragon expecting to be surprised but was met with disappointment as Nox let out only a puff of smoke. Looking up, Nox looked into Jack’s eyes. Jack understood. *Fire.*

“Hold him off Ghoulie, I have an idea.” Jack yelled.

Ghoulie had stopped increasing in size, its purple flames struggling to keep up. The aquaneki had lurched forward, snapping its large teeth at the ghoul. Using its shadowy strength, Ghoulie held onto the front arms of the monster, stopping it from advancing. Jack scrambled around to find wood and started a fire as fast as he could. Nox, seeing what his master was up to, took to the air and began to bring back large branches and logs. Stoking the flames to life, Jack added more wood increasing the fire’s size. Taking his place in the inferno, Nox landed.

“You do your thing Nox, but hurry.” Jack pleaded. “Ghoulie, don’t you have more arms?”

Ghoulie turned to face Jack, his large empty eyes piercing Jack’s very core. More arms shot out of the shadowy depths of the creature and started to pull on more legs. The aquaneki began to pull back, pulling Ghoulie back into the water. Latching onto the shadowy monster, dragging it into the water. The purple flames sizzled as water boiled around it. Struggling to stay on dry ground, two of ghoul’s arms evaporated, and two legs appeared. Watching Jack started to make the connection.

Ghoulie was a sphere, but once attached by the spider, it changed into a multi armed monster. Counting, Jack saw his ghoul had eight limbs. At first it was arms, now its six arms and two legs.

“Interesting.” Jack said. “Nox! Fire!?”

Nox stood in the fire, the flames tickling its underbelly, and opened its mouth. Blue flame started to appear in the back of Nox’s throat, growing. Nox spit a fireball at Ghoulie. As the large blue ball of flame collided with the ghoul, The purple flames surged, and Ghoulie grew.

“More Fire!” Jack yelled at Nox.

Nox obliged. Fueled by the fire it bathed in, Nox sent flame after flame towards the ghoul defending them. Ghoulie got bigger, and stronger. Stopping the aquaneki from dragging it to the deep water and pulling the water monster back onto dry land.

A large stone boulder splashed into the water next to the fighting beasts. Looking around frantically for the source, Jack saw a large green lumbering mushroom. The body was made of a mossy covered wood. A head topped with a large green mushroom, framing two glowing green eyes. Long vines covered a mouth and shaped a beard. Muscular in stature, the mushibo stood four meters tall and bellowed.

Sending another large boulder towards the sea creature, this time smashing the back in under the water, the mushibo closed in. Ghoulie released the aquaneki as its screamed in pain, coiling itself to wrench its tail free. Nox crouched in the fire, absorbing as much as it could. Ghoulie backed up towards Jack, shrinking in size, but flames glowing brighter.

“Jack! Is that you!?” Came a familiar female voice.

Jack looked around at his fellow recruits, each with the same expression, determination. The pilots voiced echoed into the comms of the helmet.

“Approaching the surface. One thousand meters.” The pilot stated. “Nine thousand meters.”

Jack listened as the ship broke through the atmosphere. The pilot announcing the altitude as the fell. Jack felt the ship slow down and tilt as they approached five hundred meters. Wishing there were windows in the ship, Jack and the others waited with anticipation as the craft touched down.

“And we have touchdown.” The pilot rang out. “We are on the ground.

A great whooshing noise was heard as the landing gear impacted the ground, absorbing the force. Clicks sounded off as the team’s restraints were released. Jack, freed, now waited for the green light above the door to flick on. Once it did, the door swung down acting as the ramp to the ground. The recruits were all wide eyed as they disembarked the ship. Looking at the great big trees, meters in diameter. Red leaves, green leaves, blue leaves, and so many more. The forest looked like a rainbow of colors.

As Jack’s feet touched down, he instantly became aware of how far form home he had travelled. No longer was he jus Jack Corbyn. He was now Jack Corbyn, of the Red Right hands, one of the few to explore deep space. Commotion all around him, Jack fell into pace to set up camp. No one had taken off their helmets yet, waiting for the ground engineers to test the atmosphere. Once the all-clear had been given, one by one, everyone removed their helmet and flight gear.

Jack, along with the other recruits were awaiting their assignments. Nick was not with them, and Jack wondered where he had wandered off to.

“Corbyn, Jack.” Said the chief ground engineer.

“Yes.” Jack said stepping forward.

“You and your team are going on reconnaissance first.” He said. “Get your gear now.”

Jack and the other recruits grabbed their gear, a knife, flask, monocular, pencil and paper, a multitool, a ferro rod and small first aid kit. Everything fit into pockets on their persons.

“You five will be sent here. That mountain there, is this mountain here.” He said pointing at places of interest in a roughly drawn map and then pointing at the large mountain in the distance. “Document what life forms you see, and landmarks you find and anything else that may be of use.”

“Yessir.” The recruits said in unison.

Jack took the lead and set off first. The others trailing behind him. Entering a strange dense forest on a new planet seemed crazy to Jack, but so did this whole mission. The light of a fire appeared on a tree and Jack stopped. A small rodent appeared from behind a bush. Completely orange, but his tail was on fire. One of the recruits, rushed in to try and put out the small flame.

The small mouse creature did not like that. The flame, as small as a quarter, grew hot and then the mouse shot fire from its mouth at the recruit. Charring the skin, then mouse then darted off into the underbrush. Clutching at his face, the recruits all pulled out their med kits and started to apply burn cream. Jack pulled out his paper and wrote down in detail about the creature, calling it a Charchu. Making a note that the creature was potentially dangerous if threatened.

“What the hell was that thing?” one of the recruits blurted out.

“Fuck if I know, but I called it a Charchu.” Jack said. “First thing that came to mind.”

More charchus darted in and out of their path, each person taking care not to startle or threaten the little beast in fear of getting burned. As they made their way through the forest, they came across a river. It was calm, but wide. One of the recruits took a drink from his flask, dumped it out and filled it back up from the river.

“Take this back for testing.” She said. “Be nice to know if we can drink the waters here.”

“It’s time to head back.” Jack said. “Hoping they could find their way.”

As they made their way back, Jack noticed more things lurking in the shadows. Charchus continued to harass the recruits during their time in the forest. Upon returning to camp, more tents were set up, tables with lab equipment were strewn about. Men and women of the ground crew running back and forth getting things set up.

“What did you find?” The chief engineer said approaching the recruits. “Anything goo- What happened to you!?”

He was looking at the charred face, courtesy of the charchu. Jack recounted the events to the chief as they pulled out their notes to show what the found and documented. A scientist was rushed over to test the water for drinkability.

“It seems, we could survive here. This water is fine to drink.” They said.

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“Fuck.” Jack said. “Fuck. Fuck.”

“Jack!” Kiera said. “What are you doing here!?”

“Oh, you know, out for a stroll.” Jack said sardonically.

“Jack. I mean what are you doing here. Near the bay.” She asked. “That bonfire of yours is a beacon for Nick.”

“Yeah, and I suppose you’re here to tell me you you’re on my side?” Jack suspiciously eyed the woman before him.

“Actually, yes.” She said. “Nick has gone off the deep end.”

“No shit.”

Nox and Ghoulie were watching the exchange with anticipation. Waiting for the signal from their master to strike. Kiera looked over at the two beasts.

“Is that a dragon!?” She asked excitedly. “I only have Shantrell here.”

Jack eyed the great mushroom looking monster. It seemed friendly enough now that Jack got a good look at it. A stark contrast to what the last few days have been.

“You’re on my side then.” Jack said, still not believing the woman. “What was the main reason for coming to this planet?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She said. “You have obviously witnessed the power of the icosahedron cryo chambers.”

“Yeah, they sort of work.” Jack said remembering the stone lion, wondering where and how it was doing.

“Not just the small ones, but the large one used to transport you here.” She explained. “The blue light emitted was supposed to make you more susceptible to suggestion.”

“Oh?” Jack said, thinking back at Grigori and his first interaction. “I don’t understand.”

“You were not suited for this mission long term, because you had a natural resistance to the stasis.” Kiera went on. “You went in and came out with no change in your perception of the world. You were able to comprehend what was happening to you.”

“And the others?” Jack started.

“The other recruits were able to be manipulated. That’s why there were interviews done on the ship. That’s why the got the ‘R’ on the patch. *Ready.”* She said.

“Ready for what?” Jack asked.

“Ready for orders.” Kiera said. “We are on this planet to capture the life forms. The Red Right Hand plans to take them home, and essentially take over the planet.”

“World domination.” Jack’s tone showing his disbelief.

“More or less. I wasn’t privy to all of the information, but I do hear things.” She said. “Nick, however, rose through the internal ranks quickly after you bested him. He’s determined to make you suffer.”

“Yeah, well, he can try,” Jack replied.

“You have no idea what he has been up to at camp.” She spoke. “They’re almost finished…”

“KIERA!?” Came a voice in the distance. “DID YOU FIND HIM?”

“NO, BUT HE CAN’T HAVE GONE FAR.” She replied. “Run Jack, run fast, they’re coming.”

Jack took a long look at Kiera. Her entire demeanor towards him was different than on the ship. Had she been telling the truth? Was the Red Right Hand planning on unleashing monsters on Earth? Taking no time hesitating. He turned and left. Running back towards the large stone outcropping, Nox and Ghoulie at his heels.

He could hear Kiera behind him explaining that she found the fire deserted but had been attacked by the aquaneki. Jack took a quick glance back towards the shore. He could see the familiar glow of ghouls and other dark shadows of creatures he hadn’t seen before. Once at the large stones, Jack heard the thumping of footsteps inside, and carefully traversed the perimeter. Not wanting to give any large beast an excuse to try and kill him, again, Jack was careful to make as little noise as possible.

Heading farther south, wanting to get passed the beacon he created on the beach with his large fire. Jack found another small grove of a dozen trees. The sun had started to set, but Jack resisted the urge to make a fire, not wanting any nightly visitors again. Nox, who Jack hadn’t noticed hadn’t grown, but showed more signs of change. The stubby spikes along the spine were larger, The scales more formed into defensive armor all over his body. The red rings on the dragon’s shoulders, reflective and glowing. Nox’s legs had developed more, stronger, with larger claws.

“You look downright deadly.” Jack said looking at Nox. “And you spit fire now?”

Nox looked at Jack, a hint of smile was smeared across the dragon’s scaly mouth. The tongue darting out in approval. Ghoulie had been floating nearby, Jack noticed the specter had resumed its normal size. The purple flames, a dull glimmer compared to what they become during a battle.

“Ghoulie, you are also a force to be reckoned with.” Jack said.

Ghoulie’s shadowy figured wavered a moment. Jack took that as a positive sign and smiled.

“So, Nick is hell bent on finding me.” Jack said. “And fuck, he’s close. Nox, I need you to keep an eye out tonight. If I fall asleep, make sure nothing comes near us.”

Jack pulled out a small bit of dried meat from his pocket. Covered in dirt and sand, he brushed it off as well as he could. Grimacing, he ate.

Finding out the water was drinkable was game changing. The recruits were not ordered to stay out longer and explore farther. Mapping out kilometers surrounding the landing zone, Jack and the others encountered many different beasts. All of which, were to be memorized by everyone at the camp. The documentation of life forms was paramount to the mission.

Jack was out to the east of the landing zone. Crossing a river, he and two other recruits came upon a large body of water. To the north, Jack saw a long mountain range, and across the water, he could see land. Not able to make out anything past the visible shore, Jack made notes on his map about the bay. A scream shattered Jack’s concentration.

“HELP ME!” the recruit shouted.

Water erupted, as a large snake like beast had grabbed the recruit by the leg. He dangled in the air as the centipede like arms of this water monster grabbed each half of the body and ripped him in half. Blood spattered against the beast’s face, a long tongue darting out. The water below ran red as the monster began eating each half.

Not wanting to be dessert, Jack and the other recruit ran, hard and fast back to camp. Splashing quickly through the shallow part of the river, tripping over fallen branches and undergrowth. The pair stumbled into camp, bruised and scared.

“What is going on here!?” The chief engineer demanded. “Where is the other?”

“Dead.” Jack panted.

“Eaten.” The other recruit managed.

“Torn. Half.” Jack said.

“Water monster.” The other recruit said.

“Slow down.” The chief replied. “The other recruit is dead? Was torn in half by a water monster and eaten?”

“Yes.” They spoke in unison.

“Well, that’s quite unfortunate.” The chief replied flatly. “Get some rest, eat something, and I want you two back out in the field first thing after supper.”

The other recruit started to cry. Jack stared dumbfounded at the chief.

“Everyone knew the risk coming here.” The chief said at the pathetic display before him. “Casualties are expected.”

Expected as they were, when they came, they were a shock to those around. Several more crew members died over the next few days. Another by the aquaneki, the name given to the water monster. Two were from charchus. They attempted to capture and cage the small rodents, suffering burns in response. A large four-legged bug type creature roamed the forest, it had eaten the heads off two unfortunate recruits who took a nighttime lovers stroll in the woods.

Nick and a few others seemed to thrive knowing there were life threatening monsters lurking around. Volunteering every chance they got to go out on an expedition. Jack took time, when he wasn’t out documenting the life forms, plant life and terrain, to explore the camp. Fascinated by the scientists working diligently to understand the planet’s ecosystem, Jack watched as they dissected and examined everything that was brought before them.

The creatures on the planet were carbon based, similar to Earth. From what could be gathered, some of the beasts had similar anatomy. Bones, muscles, circulatory systems, the like. Not understanding a lot of the scientific terms they used, Jack was still able to make out that life may have evolved here in a way like it had on Earth.

Jack also spent time exploring the warehouses set up. Finding the boxes of the small icosahedrons that he had been tasked with counting had been brought to the surface. Curious about what they were, Jack had cornered one of the engineers, but before he could get any answers, Jack had been called away to go out on another foray into the wilderness.

Noticing a pattern, when Nick was in camp, Jack was being sent out along with the same crew. Always the same crew. Jack also noticed that the recruits he was with did not have the ‘R’ on their patch. He hadn’t given up on finding out what the real reason it was they were doing on this planet; Jack was still determined to do the job he was tasked with doing. Believing that The Red Right Hands, Grigori, were changing the world.

As night fell on Jack and two others, they began to make a temporary camp. Starting a fire and pulling out what food they carried with them, Jack sat down and reflected on the day. An uneventful trip into the northwest. No creatures were sighted, no new landmarks to report. As the two moons reached their apex in the sky, Jack heard the snapping of twigs around them. Looking over he could see his companions heard it too. One leaned over, and took a branch from the fire, using it to illuminate the area where the sounds were heard. As he stood up and shone the light in the direction, clawed fingers, dripping with blood were thrust through his chest. A loud shriek escaped the creature as you could hear its mandibles clicking.

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Knowing the Hands are out looking for him, Jack decided that having both of his beasts out at the same time was not the right strategy. One at a time would be better. That way, on the unfortunate chance that he was caught, he would have one monster out and ready, and the other waiting to be unleashed.

“Now, which one should I do.” Jack thought as he toyed with the icosahedrons in his hand. “Ghoulie has a shock factor, but Nox is a dragon. Easy choice.”

Having made up his mind, Jack looked Nox in the eye and laid his hand on the dragon’s head. Knowing what was happening, Nox accepted the plan, closing its eyes waiting for the stasis. Jack tapped the two ‘X’s on the cryo chamber and in a flash of blue light, Nox was gone. Ghoulie, who was standing guard, turned and looked at Jack with its large white eyes.

“Stay hidden Ghoulie, surprise will be our best weapon.” Jack said. “Stay hidden, but watchful, It’s about time to try and get some rest.”

Jack knowing full well that rest would not come easy, laid down and closed his eyes. Ghoulie faded away into the night, doing as instructed, and staying hidden until called upon.

“Well, look who we have here.” A voice rang out in the early morning.

The sun was peeking over the distant mountains. Jack looked up and saw the two moons setting. A rush of fear cascaded through his body as he heard the sound of many footsteps rushing toward him. A familiar sound, a monster with many legs was rushing for him. Pulling out his knife, Jack stood up as fast as he could.

“Jack!” a voice rang out. “Stop there or Spike will strike!”

Spike was a mammoth of a scorpion. Following the Atrax in body size but having a shorter stature. Only one and half meters tall. The tail, scaled and tipped with a deadly telson, the venom-injecting stinger. Along with the six exoskeletal legs, two very large man crushing pincers were equipped on the front arms. Jack studied the creature in horror as it’s mandibles clicked furiously, dripping poisonous venom from its mouth.

Rearing its hind quarters up, ready to strike, it stopped just outside the grove of trees. A man ran up beside it, wearing the same clothes as Jack, but complete with a red glove on the right hand. One of the recruits that trained with Jack on Earth.

“Jack Corbyn.” He said. “Fancy running into you here.”

“Well, stranded on a new planet.” Jack said. “Not a lot of hotels in the area.”

“Very funny Jack.” He replied. “Nick has been awaiting your return, why not come easy.”

“Why not fuck off?” Jack replied shrugging his shoulders. “I was doing great without you.”

“Spike, warning shot.” The recruit said.

Spike’s body glowed with a light from inside his body. Lightning started to whip around its tail and shooting into the stinger at the end. The pouch that would contain the venom in any normal scorpion began to fill with light. Jack rolled out of the way as a bolt of electricity came shooting out and charring the ground where he had stood.

“What. The. Fuck. Is. That!?” Jack shouted.

“You like that?” the recruit laughed. “Spike here, is an electric scorpion. Similar in nature to the charchus.”

“Well, that’s neat.” Jack said, impressed, but horrified at the same time.

“So Jack, lets go.”

“I’m still going to pass.” Jack replied.

“That’s not an option here. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Jack gave the recruit the finger as he started to back farther into the trees. Any cover would be better than the exposed he was out front. Wanting to hold Ghoulie back, if possible, Jack remained as calm as he could be. The recruit was not happy with Jack’s attitude. Spike began a barrage of strikes.

Scurrying around attempting to get the best shot at Jack, sending blast after blast into the trees. Jack struggled to maneuver through the small bushes that were in the grove, but managed to evade the attacks. The recruit, beginning to get irritated started to scream profanities.

“Spike. Take down these *Fucking* trees!” he shouted.

Spike stopped the electricity charges and using its large front pincers, began to cut down the grove. Watching as his cover was toppling over, Jack leapt out with his small knife, hoping to get under the belly of the monster. Sensing his attack, the beast swiftly eluded Jack’s attack. Instead, Jack was caught in a pincer and pinned to the ground. Gasping for breath, Jack played his move.

“Ghoulie!” Jack wheezed out. “Ghoulie, rip this bitch’s legs off!”

A bright purple fire erupted from the grove, engulfing the smaller bushes around it. Jack knew Ghoulie was absorbing the fire to build his attack. A shadowy beast with four arms materialized in the flame. The ghoul turned its gaze upon the scorpion, then everything went dark.

Jack, anticipating the bright light returning, closed his eyes. A searing bright light erupted above him, and Jack knew what was about to happen. He could hear the cackle of electricity as the scorpion dropped Jack and retreated. Scrambling up, Jack opened his eyes and witnessed Ghoulie grabbing the scorpion’s tail and ripping it from the body. Bolts of lighting cracked and shot out of the wounds. The shrieking caused Jack and the recruit to cover their ears. Looking over, Jack could see the white-faced horror of the attack happening on the recruit.

“Finish it!” Jack shouted.

“NO!” The recruit pleaded.

Spike clenched Ghoulie in a massive pincer, stopped the ghoul’s advance. Using the other pincer, the scorpion attempted to rip the ghoul in half. Ghoulie materialized four more arms and pried open the pincers. Once free, the shadowy beast proceeded to remove the from arms from the scorpion. Loud popping noises could be heard as the arms were torn from the carapace and thrown towards the recruit. Ghoulie began to glow brighter. Purple flames charring the ground, and the recruit screamed as he watched the ghoul roast his scorpions bleeding corpse.

“What did you do!” cried the recruit.

“Fuck you.” Jack shouted.

The recruit turned and started to sprint back towards the bay. Not wanting to be found again, Jack did what he had to. Chasing the recruit, he caught up to him. Tackling him to the ground and turning him over. Jack places his knife at the recruit’s throat.

“Please.” The recruit pleaded, fear in his eyes.

“You brought this on yourself.” Jack said, pushing the point into his neck. Warm blood gushing out. Jack looked into his eyes and watched the life fade away.

“Fuck you.” Jack said, wrenching his knife free.

Watching the nantu rip its claw free from the recruit, Jack scrambled to his feet. The torch had been tossed to the side from the force of the kill. The nantu moved to the side, Jack looking at the great big yellow disks for eyes. Clicking its mandibles, it leaped towards Jack. Fumbling in his pocket for his knife, Jack was forced to the ground the knife having been knocked from his hand. Looking over, he saw the other recruit turn and run for their life back through the woods.

Grasping around for anything of use, Jack evaded the nantu’s foot coming down for a kill. Grabbing a branch, Jack swung towards leg, knocking the beast off balance. Able to free himself, Jack pushed himself up. Finding his knife on the ground, Jack grabbed it and held the branch at the ready, studying his opponent. Kicking at Jack, the nantu missed and penetrating a tree, splintered wood shards ricocheted like shrapnel. Jack brought the branch down on the exposed leg. Cracking sounds echoed as the leg snapped.

Screaming, the nantu crawled back into the darkness, pulling the dead recruit with it, leaving a trail of blood. Not wanting to stick around for more beats of the night to decide he was dinner, Jack packed up what he could, grabbed the fallen torch and set off after the other recruit.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What was that.” Jack panted as he ran through the woods.

Wondering where the other recruit had gotten to, Jack ran into a clearing. The recruit was standing in the middle, white as a ghost.

“What the hell man!?” Jack shouted.

Coming closer, Jack could see the recruit was floating inches off the ground. Stopping, Jack quickly looked around, swinging the torch wildly in every direction. Not seeing anything, Jack looked back towards the recruit, and saw something that sent fear shooting down his back. Every small hair on the back of his neck rose as he saw a large menacing grin floating above the recruit’s head. No eyes, no head, no body, just a grin.

Slowly backing up, Jack witnessed the mouth opening, wide. Teeth, razor sharp needle teeth filled the mouth. Taking the recruits head into the phantom’s mouth, Jack could see four splotches of blood form on the recruit’s body as the head vanished and the body fell. A hideous laugh echoed into the trees then everything was quiet.

Panicking, Jack started to swing the torch in every direction searching desperately to find the phantom mouth. It had vanished into the night leaving Jack alone, with the corpse laying in a pool of its blood.

“Jack Corbyn!” came a voice in the distance. “Hello!? Is anyone out here!?”

“Here!” Jack’s voice cracking from fear. “I’m here.”

Waving the torch, jack saw as the chief engineer and two others approached him.

“Where are the others?” the chief asked, looking around.

Jack pointed to the headless body on the ground.

“What. Happened.” Was all the chief could manage.

“Mouth. Floating. Laughter.” Jack stumbled for words.

“And the other?” The chief asked indicating to the medics that showed up where the body is.

“Eaten.” Jack said.

“And you were left alive?” The chief asked, turning towards jack and eyeing him suspiciously.

Jack looked at the chief engineer. A big guy, who like the others, wore a red glove upon his right hand. Not saying a word, the chief nodded and left. Jack, not wanting to be left alone in the forest of monsters, followed.

“There are creatures out here.” The chief said. “Creatures that we should capture and tame.”

“Capture?” Jack said adrenaline subsiding. “And *tame*?”

“Yes. They could be useful in extending our research of the planet.” The chief replied smoothly without looking at Jack. “That is our mission after all. To discover and document the planet.”

Jack agreed, but knew the chief was hiding something. He was normally a straightforward leader. Looking you in the eye when speaking and laying out the facts in a logical manner. This time, however, he was vague and cryptic in the message. A message that left Jack feeling like he knew what the *real reason* they came to this new planet was.

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Jack stood there, above the recruit who would have turned him. He would have told Nick everything. Jack could not have that, not if he was going to get off the planet alive. Taking note of where he was, jack could see the bay and in the distance to the north, the mountains. Thinking back, Jack recalled a fork in the path, one that went northeast.

“I think it’s a good time to go deeper.” Jack said, Ghoulie floating up next to him. “What else is hidden on this forsaken world?”

Jack patted down the corpse at his feet, taking out what small amount of food he found and set off at a quick pace. Not wanting to stop and rest until he was at the tree line to the north. Jack passed the stone monolith that housed the fallen ship, a rustling noise inside told him the monster was still hidden inside. Passing the first grove of trees, where Jack could see the rainbow of fuzz that were the small creatures dotting the distance.

The sun was setting as Jack’s legs began to faulter beneath him. He was across the plains, coming up to the tree line. Jack could feel the change in the air. This forest felt different now. Perhaps it was because the giant spider than cursed the woods had been slain.

“Fuck, I’m tired.” Jack said. “I made it though, the forest. Ghoulie, check around, see if you find any threats.”

Kicking himself, for not thinking of that earlier, he watched Ghoulie fly off into the dusk. Looking around, he found a small divot in the ground. Gathering sticks and branches for a fire Jack struck his ferro rod. Light building from the flame he brought to life, Jack took out the easy meal tin he grabbed from the recruit’s dead body.

Ghoulie reappeared shortly after, a calmness emanating from the shadowy figure reassuring Jack that he was in no immediate danger. Finishing his meal, Jack rested his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. Knowing Ghoulie would warn him if something, anything, approached.

Waking up when the sun was high in the sky, the warm breeze whistling through the trees.

“Damn it!” Jack spat. “I overslept. Damn.”

Quickly getting up, Jack crushed what was left of the coals with his boot and set off. Having a vague memory of where the path was and knowing the fork would be quick to find after. Having Ghoulie do the vanishing trick it does, Jack found the path and the fork.

Looking back towards the grassy plains, Jack could see smoke in the distance.

“The Hands must not be far behind.” Jack said out loud to himself. “Won’t be long before they find the body, and realize it was a knife that killed him.”

Jack turned back and followed the path to the northeast. A cool wind blew in from the mountain pass down into the forest below. Reaching the break in the forest where the rocky road up the hill started Jack began to quicken his pace. Not wanting to be in the forest longer than needed, and to get a better vantage point.

The falling rocks from high up the cliff side made Ghoulie reappear.

“What…” Jack started before knowing what.

A monster dropped down from the mountain pass. A new species, something Jack hadn’t seen or heard before. The catalogue of beasts the Red Right Hands have at the camp was extensive, and being naïve about the planet, Jack figured it was nearing complete. How wrong he was. Jack was looking at a Grootslang.

An elephant’s head greeted Jack, followed by the two front legs, but the back half of the body was that of a snake. A long slithering blue tail followed the great beast. Spikes flowed down the spine culminating with a very large horn upon the forehead, which was a large plate like a triceratops. The eyes glowed green, smoking as if they were on fire. The tusks, Jack could count six, grew out pointing different directions. The trunk was long, and the ears were floppy, but the mouth. The mouth open as it should, except the bottom jaw split horizontally, connected by a thin flap of skin. Each side, and to Jacks horror, the tongue were lines with short stubby sharp teeth.

Ghoulie recoiled at the sight of the monster. Jack, frozen to the spot, panicked. Rolling out of the way as the trunk flung stones towards him. Ghoulie vanished leaving Jack alone. Backing up slowly, Jack pulled out his knife.

“Fuck. What the hell is this.” Jack said. “Did this entire planet evolve to just kill everything?”

Quick as a flash, the elephant snapped towards Jack. Ghoulie appeared and grabbed the tusks and stopped the beast from snatching Jack its mouth.

“Ghoulie!” Jack shouted. “Do you have this!?”

The ghoul’s purple flames erupted and burned bright, causing Jack to shield his eyes. More rocks started to fall from the cliffside. Fear rocking Jack that another Grootslang was dropping in to join the party. Searching the ridgeline, he couldn’t see anything at first, but looking again, Jack could make out the outline of a familiar creature. The stone lion jumped down.

Jack was escorted to a tent and given some food and drink. Having been told to wait here, he was content with eating and enjoying the peace and quiet. Peace that was soon interrupted. Looking up at the commotion at the door, Nick walked in.

“Jack.” Nick said. “I heard you’re telling ghost stories.”

“Now’s not the time Nick. Could you just *fuck* off?” Jack replied flatly.

“Now, now. That is no way to talk to your superior.” Nick’s words laced with the gloating embellishment he was attempting to push at Jack.

“Nick!” Came the chief’s voice. “Get out of the tent.”

“I’ll be seeing you again Jack, we have mush to discuss.” Nick said smiling menacingly, leaving the tent.

Kiera walked in, bumping shoulders with Nick.

“Kiera, how are you?” Nick asked smiling.

“Go away Nick.” Kiera said, ignoring his blatant gaze at her. “I’m busy.”

“Don’t waste your time on…” Nick started.

“Nick Lambertye. Get out.” The chief said sounding irritated at having to repeat the order.

Snickering, Kiera sat down opposite Jack.

“Hello Jack.” She said.

“Morning.” Jack replied.

“We have a few things we need to discuss.” She started.

Kiera interrogated Jack about the events, asking, in detail, to describe what he saw. Jack relived the evenings events in painstaking detail to the woman. All the while, she kept a plain expression. Not showing any emotion at anything Jack was telling her began to frustrate Jack.

“Do you not care that two people were killed?” Jack asked mid story.

“We do, but that is not the important part at the moment.”

“Oh? And what is?” Jack asked.

“If you intentionally killed your partners. Also, if you brought the creatures back.” Kiera said matter of fact.

“Why the hell would I bring them back!?” Jack asked. “And no. I did not kill them.”

“You could bring them back to start panic.” Kiera suggested.

Jack just stared at the woman. He was witness to two people being mutilated and killed and he was on trial for it. Jack stood up and made for the door.

“Where are you going Jack?” Kiera asked.

“Does it matter?” Jack replied.

“Yes, we are not finished.”

“We’re on a new planet with monsters that want to eat us. I’ll be around.” Jack said as he left the tent.

Tired of being questioned, Jack returned to his quarters. A small tent set up on the other side of the camp. Knowing he would have no privacy, and most likely not be able to keep anything personal in the tent, Jack always kept everything of value to him on his persons. Using the tent for sleeping and the occasional escape from the day’s activities. Coming around to where his tent should be, Jack was not surprised when he saw Nick emerging.

“Hello Jack.” Nick said smiling.

“What do you want Nick.” Replied Jack.

“You to kiss my boots.” Nick suggested, shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s going to be a hard pass.” Jack said.

“Whatever.” Nick said airily. “The chief wants you.”

Jack stared at Nick, who proceeded to kick down the small tent. Sighing, Jack turned around and walked back to where the chief was at. Busy looking at reports, the chief didn’t notice Jack when he arrived.

“Ahem.” Jack cleared his throat.

“Jack Corbyn.” The chief said without looking up. “Kiera said you’re clear. I need you to go onto the landing pods and begin bringing down these boxes.”

The chief engineer handed jack an inventory sheet with a list of numbers correlating to the boxes that would be on board. Reluctantly, Jack went and retrieved the boxes. Once he was on the landing pod, he recognized the crates he was unloading. These were the same ones that held the small twenty-sided icosahedrons he was tasked to count on the ship. Double checking his list, he began unloading the stack of twenty-five boxes.

Having taken him the better part of the day, Jack reported the list back to the chief.

“Good. Get some food.” The chief said, again without looking up.

The unnerving feeling Jack got when the chief engineer was talking to him, made him nervous. Jack was sure there was about to be a change in the camp. The prerogatives of the scientists seemed to have shifted. Something was up with the entire camp, and Jack was being left out. Taking his time getting food, Jack sat down at a table with a few engineers.

Attempting to eavesdrop on any conversation he could, Jack decided it was time to piece together what was conspiring. He could only get bits and pieces.

“The devices have been unloaded.” One said.

“We tested them extensively.” Another went on.

“The Red Right Hands will be famous.” A woman was talking.

“Our timeline is shifting.” A man said farther back.

Jack turned to see who it was, not recognizing the voice.

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Dust flaring up with the lanka’s impact creating a small cloud. Opening its large mouth and letting out a ferocious roar, the white stone lion squared up against the grootslang. Ghoulie, taking the hint backed away from the oncoming battle. The grootslang, not caring what it attacked first, coiled up and struck out towards the lanka.

Jack winced as the massive jaw of the elephant but into the lion’s flank. Not phased by the attack, the lion swiped with its massive paw and knocked the snake back. Growls and hisses were exchanged between the two monstrous beasts.

“Ghoulie!” Jack shouted. “We need to help!”

The ghoul looked at Jack with its large white eyes, then disappeared. The lion pounced on the grootslang, biting into the neck. Using its massive tusks, the elephant was able to pry the lanka off, throwing it violently into the cliff side. Smashing into the ground in a lump of stone, Jack looked on in horror as the great stone lion laid there motionless.

A blinding purple light flared, causing the grootslang and Jack to wince and cover their eyes. Ghoulie had reappeared in the commotion, this time behind the snake. The fires burning hot, the shadowy monster formed legs, and using its four arms, gripped the elephant’s tail. A loud wail escaped the beast as it was pulled backwards away from the fight with the lanka.

Jack, taking his cue, ran to the side of the lion.

“Get up!” Jack said.

Reaching into his pocket and pulling out a cryo chamber, Jack released Nox.

“Nox!” Jack said to the materializing dragon erupting from the blue light.

Nox took to the air surveying the scene. Finding Jack and seeing the lion on the ground, the dragon landed, nudging the lion with its snout.

“Nox. Fire!” Jack said pointing towards the fight. “Ghoulie needs help.”

Turning towards the grootslang and watching the ghoul hold it back, Nox flapped its wings and was back in the air.

“Fire! Nox. Fire!” Jack shouted.

The lion stirred; Jack turned his attention back to the lanka. Nox sending a torrent of flame towards Ghoulie, engulfing both the ghoul and the elephant. A great shriek was heard, and Jack watched as a dark mist flashed before him. The grootslang had flung the ghoul away, releasing its tail. Nox dove in, stopping the snake from striking Jack. The dragon clamped its massive jaws down on the elephant’s trunk.

Flailing its massive head back and forth trying to remove Nox, the grootslang large feet tumbled about. Ghoulie reappeared next to jack, its purple flames dancing angrily. Jack noticed the darkness of ghoulie’s shadowy form was darker and could sense the anger of the specter. A splash of blood whipped across Jack’s face as the elephant knocked Nox off.

From behind Jack, the lanka jumped and clamped his jaw around the snake’s neck again, hanging below it. Avoiding the stomping feet, the lion managed to pull the head closer to the ground. Nox, resuming his flamethrower approach to filling Ghoulie’s need for fire, was in the air. The ghoul feeding off the dragon, formed two more arms, and grappled the elephant’s tusks. Holding all six, Jack back away knowing what was unfolding before him.

As the elephant attempted to wrench his head higher, the stone lion weighed him down. The purple flames were violently flickering, radiating heat like the sun in the sky. Tearing, like the sound paper makes was heard first. Followed by a loud pop and a cracking sound. The shrieks from the grootslang echoing off the cliff face, causing small rocks to fall from above.

One by one, the tusks were ripped, blood oozing, from the elephant’s massive head. The grootslang jerking in every direction, flinging its tail back and forth in every attempt to stop the punishment that was happening. Jack, now covered in blood and other liquid that poured from the snake gave one final order.

“Rip it apart.” He spoke the words with calm ease.

The ghoul with its six shadowy arms, ripped the remaining tusks from the face of the monster. The stone lion ripped the throat out, blood splashing the ground. Nox had stopped engulfing everything in fire, and grasped the trunk, and tore it from the head, causing the great beast to fall, twitching to the ground. Jack and his beasts, watched as the life drained from its body.

“I need to get the fuck off this planet.” Jack decided.

Turning to face the stone lion, Jack saw it tearing flesh from the snake, eating. Taking his last icosahedron out of his pocket, he approached the lanka.

“Look, I know I tried this before.” Jack said, holding out his hand. “But I could really use your assistance.”

The lanka stopped eating and looked at Jack. Great stone eyes blinked in understanding. The lion, then bowed its head agreeing to help Jack. Tapping the lion with the small cryo chamber, a blue light erupted, and the lion evaporated. Falling to the ground, Jack watched as the ‘X’s blinked, then went solid.

“Thank you.” Jack said picking up the icosahedron and holding it. “Thank you.”

Pulling out Nox’s and Ghoulie’s icosahedrons, Jack tapped each of the ‘X’s and recalled the beasts. A sharp pain emanated from the back of his head as Jack saw stares before his eyes, passing out.

The atmosphere at the camp changed. Scientists, engineers, recruits and even Nick himself seemed to move quicker. More determined. Noticing the change, but not given any specific orders, Jack quietly observed, attempting to discern what was happening. All around him, people were talking about the prestige of the Red Right Hand. What it will mean when they return to Earth.

Nick was boasting most of all, at being champion, the worlds greatest. All the conversation that was happening, and Jack was still clueless on what was actually happening.

“What the hell is everyone talking about?” Nick said to himself.

The chief engineer rarely spoke to Jack in the weeks that followed his interrogation. Relying on his subordinates to give Jack his daily duties. Duties that were mundane and included things like, kitchen duty, or night watch on the north end of camp. Jack took each duty as it was, chores to keep him busy. Making the most of his time and observing what was happening.

More and more expeditions were taking place. Most went south, some went east, and everyone came back smiling. Smiling, which had Jack thoroughly confused. Monsters in the wild were eating the crew and they came back smiling. Whispers were held in secret, as there were others like Jack, others that *were not suited for long term with the company*. Jack avoided them.

The secret conversations are what interested Jack. Eavesdropping whenever he could, listening intently at the words of capture and fight. Not knowing what was happening, drove Jack mad. There was one scientist who had started being a bookie, taking bets, but would not speak with Jack when he approached wanting to take a bet.

Getting frustrated, Jack began to lapse on his assignments.

“Not like anyone checks up on me.” Jack said one day. “Maybe I should just wander out into the forest.”

Jack was standing on the north end of camp. Nothing of note has happened on this side since Jack came back by himself. Staring into the trees, Jack saw flashes of blue.

“I know that color.” Jack said squinting into the distance. “What the hell is it doing out there?”

Slowly creeping into the tree line, Jack could hear laughter. Two recruits were standing in a small clearing and watching two charchus fight. Each one was yelling orders at the rodents, who would then start sending flames towards the other. Cracking a branch, Jack knew the recruits had heard him. As they played with something in their hand, a blue light flashed and the charchus vanished.

“Whose there!” Yelled one of the recruits.

Staying hidden and silent, Jack held his breath.

“I know you’re there!” The other said. “Show yourself!”

“Lets just go back to camp, we will continue the rematch later.” The first one said. “Probably one of the rejects spying again.”

The two recruits darted back to camp, leaving Jack with more questions than he had before. What were the rematching? The cryo light? For what? What was in their hands? Was it the small icosahedrons?

“Fuck.” Jack said out loud as everything started to become clearer. “Those were the small icosahedrons. Small cryochambers used to house the monsters.”

Jack went back to camp, slowly. Finishing up his watch on the north side, he made his way to the warehouse tents. Standing guard were two engineers, each holding a clipboard. Casually walking up, Jack was stopped.

“Jack, you’re not on the list.” Said one of the engineers flipping pages on his clipboard.

“I, uh, was told I needed to recount the icosahedrons.” Jack feinted.

“Jack Corbyn.” Nick’s voice rang behind him. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Jack just stared at Nick.

“Lambertye, Nick.” The other engineer said. “Go ahead and enter.”

Nick pushed past Jack, shouldering him out of the way and disappeared into the tent. Jack was forced away by the engineer’s threats to call the chief. Not one to be deterred, Jack slipped behind the tent, pressing his ear to the thick canvas. Muffled voices came from inside.

“He’s getting persistent.” Nick’s voice came through.

“Maybe an accident should befall him.” Came the chief’s voice.

“That could be fun.” Nick replied.

“We could string him up, put him on display for the other undesirables.” Came a third voice.

“You lack imagination.” Nick said. “No. We need something more fitting. It is Jack Corbyn after all.”

Jack felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. Stars danced in his vision before everything went blurry then dark. The last thing jack remembered was the coldness of the ground as his face hit it. A blinding light shining in his eyes as he was slapped awake.

“Jack!” Came a sharp muffled voice. “Jack!”

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Thud, thud, thud. Jack felt his body being drug across the field. Bound and gagged, he found himself unable to move much. Opening his eyes, he could see that it was morning, shortly after sunrise; the two moons setting in the distance. His captors were Hands.

“Why are we dragging him back to the boat?” One asked.

“Orders.” Came the reply.

“Orders? Why does the chief want Jack?”

“The chief isn’t in charge anymore.”

“The chief engineer, who has ran the camp since we landed, is not in charge?”

“C’mon, you know Nick has been running the show since the get go.”

“Nick? Yeah, I s’pose you’re right. Nick is the one who wants Jack? Why?”

“Beats me, but I’ve heard rumors.”

“Rumors?”

“Apparently Jack has beat Nick in hand to hand.”

“What!? No Way.”

“I heard it was twice. And Nick’s pissed.”

“Jack beat Nick. Now I know you’re lying.”

“Look, It is just what I heard. And nick is looking to make an example of him.”

“Damn dude, I would pay to see Jack beat Nick.”

“Better keep your mouth quiet about that, or you’ll be the one who hangs instead.”

“Damn… Well can we take a break, I’m hungry.”

Dropping Jack’s legs, they turned to look at him. Jack quickly closed his eyes, wanting to keep the element of surprise on his side. The two recruits sat off to the side, facing away from their prisoner and indulged themselves on the rations they had.

The sound of the bay could be heard in the distance and Jack wondered how long he had been unconscious for them to be this close to the water. From his view, Jack could see the distant grove of trees, covered with colorful fuzzy monsters over the shoulders of the recruits. This gave Jack a good indication of where he was. He just needed to figure out how to escape.

As the recruits ate and talked, Jack started to test the limits of his restraints. His knife was out of the question, but the icosahedrons were within grasp. Working slow as to not attract attention, Jack began to wiggle his hand into his pocket. Feeling the small cryo chambers, Jack searched for Ghoulie’s. Having a creature be able to disappear and reappear when needed seemed the most strategic. Looking down at his pocket, Jack saw a flash of blue from within and then the shadowy presence of his ghoul.

Struggling to say disappear before the recruits, who noticed something happening behind them, Ghoulie got the hint and vanished. The two recruits turned around and looked at jack incredulously.

“Is he awake?”

“I don’t know. Did you tie those knots good.”

“There is no way he is getting out of his restraints.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if he is awake. Not like he can come at us with his knife.”

“Yeah, I heard about the body they found.”

“Jack murdered the poor sod in cold blood.”

“Maybe we should return the favor…”

“No, Nick wants him alive.”

“Damn. You’re right.”

They returned to eating, and Jack moved to roll. Before he could make it very far, the recruits finished eating and got up. Walking over to Jack, they picked up his legs and continued dragging him. Opening his eyes, Jack jerked out of their hands.

“Ghoulie!” Jack managed to gurgle through the gag.

The purple flames were first to show. Ghoulie manifested itself between Jack and the recruits. Jack worked his hand into his pocket again, releasing the stone lion. The two recruits watched what was happening with glee in their eyes. The distinctive blue glow flashed as two monsters erupted from the recruit’s icosahedrons.

“I didn’t know they gave him the stasis chambers!”

“They didn’t! He must have stolen them!”

“It doesn’t matter now. Let’s do this!”

“Right. Oryc, You ready?”

“Mushibo, Let’s go!”

The familiar bunny like creature stood tall next to a red mushroom monster. Jack’s lanka had been busy chewing at the ropes binding jack, freeing him. Ripping the gag off, Jack stood up.

“He’s up!” One of the recruits shouted.

“Good! This will be good beating for him.” The other said. “Soften him up for Nick.”

“Ghoulie.” Was all Jack said.

The purple flames went higher, and jack saw the ghoul had split himself into two different shadowy figures. Each with two legs and two arms. Sharing the purple flame between them, Jack wondered how long his ghoul would be able to keep up the division. Lanka jumped to the ghoul’s side and growled towards the oryc.

“Oh, a ghoul! Nick has one like that. My mushibo will make quick work. Attack!” The recruit shouted.

The large green eyes glowed as the mushroom monster lurched forward, swinging a great big wooder arm at the specter. Reaching out and catching the fist, one of Ghoulie’s forms took the brunt of the force, sending it backwards as the other shadow ducked and sent purple fire towards the mushibo’s feet, charring the ground.

The oryc jumped towards the lion, using its powerful legs. Landing atop the stone beast it began to claw and bite the lanka, who roared in agony. Shifting the stones, the lion rearranged and was now on its back, giant clawed stones smacking the rabbit. A gurgle was heard as the mushibo was ignited in flame.

Ghoulie had merged back into one form, using its four arms to hold back the great monster. The purple fire raging around them. Jack saw the recruit shouting something at mushibo, who stopped trying to advance; it’s feet sprouted roots that shot into the ground. Ghoulie jumped back as trees erupted form the ground forming a wall.

“Burn it down.” Jack calmly spoke to the ghoul. “Burn it all down.”

The ghoul turned and looked at Jack, it’s white eyes showing signs of fatigue. Jack took the hint, and reached into his pocket for Nox. Taking out the icosahedron and touching the ‘X’s, Jack through the device into the air. In a flash of blue light, his dragon materialized, flapping it’s massive wings hovering above the battle.

“Nox! Light it up!” Jack ordered.

“Is that a dragon!?” One of the recruits shouted. “Oryc, stop playing with the pile of rocks! Take that thing down.”

Nox ignited the wall of trees, flooding the area with fire. Ghoulie took advantage and floated into the arena of flame, its own purple fire burning bright. The oryc leapt off the lion, who was snapping its great jaws at the rabbit, and flung itself towards the flying dragon. Nox feinted a dive and avoided the ambush from the oryc.

“Ghoulie, tear that fucking mushibo to pieces!” Jack shouted. “Lanka!”

Blinking furiously, eyes struggling to adjust to the blinding light, Jack found it hard to determine the direction of the voice.

“Jack Corbyn.” Came the muffled voice again. “Time to come back to the land of the living.”

“For now.” Another spoke.

“Nick.” Jack said slyly. “Have to hold me down to slap me around.”

“I have to do no such thing.” Nick said. “I just wanted your complete attention.”

“Going to show me your rock collection?” Jack asked.

Trying to stall, Jack found himself bound to a chair. From what he could make out in the shadows, they were inside a tent. He could make out three different people, one of which was his rival, Nick Lambertye.

“Jack, if you knew what was happening, you would show me some respect.” Nick replied.

“You threw a bitch fit when you lost.” Jack said referencing the sparring match back on Earth. “You lost my respect then.”

Jack felt the sting as Nick punched him in the stomach.

“I could have destroyed you.” Nick said matter of fact. “It’s not even a competition.”

Laughter was heard from the other two behind Nick. Muffled in their masks, but Jack could still tell it was forced laughter. Nick had brought lackies to this altercation. Nick took another swing and rocked Jack in the chair.

“That one was just for fun.” Nick said.

“Fun, yes glorious fun.” Jack said spitting blood. “How about you turn that fucking light off and be man about this.”

“You can’t goad me into being your friend Jack.” Nick replied.

“You’re as dumb as you look Nick.” Jack said, goading him. “And I can’t eve see you right now.”

“Jack, you’re tied to a chair, in a tent, where no one knows where you are.” Nick said laughing. “I could kill you right now, and not a soul would miss you.”

“Then untie me and let’s go for round two.” Jack said “You’re the big man now. Why not let your peons behind you watch as you pummel me.”

“You know what Jack. I just may do that.” Nick said, smiling. “Untie him.”

Nick turned the bright light off. As his eyes adjusted to the dimmer scene in front of him, he counted four people and Nick. They were in a spacious tent, but Jack couldn’t hear the normal camp noises.

“I see you have expanded your accommodations on my behalf.” Jack laughed. “How thoughtful.”

One of the crew started to untie Jack. Standing up, and slowly walking around, jack took note of what was in the room. A tall shop light, the wooden chair he was tied too, and three smaller string lights to illuminate the tent. Not hearing anything specific form outside the tent, Jack wagered they were no longer in the camp.

Sizing up Nick, Jack noticed the infamous red glove on his right hand. Nick had been initiated into the company officially, no longer a recruit.

“Hopefully you got a pay raise.” Jack said indicating the glove.

“You wish you could have what I have.” Nick said.

“Not really.” Jack calmly spoke the words while looking at the tent.

Wanting to piss Nick off, Jack avoided eye contact, and changed the tone of his voice.

“You don’t really have all that much to be honest.” Jack chuckled. “I mean Grigori and I...”

“Are you ready to die Jack?” Nick said cutting Jack off and taking a swing.

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As the fire raged around Ghoulie, everyone witnessed the ghoul’s power increase. The purple flame that surrounded the shadow burned hot as the form shifted. Swirling in a great ball of darkness, Ghoulie materialized six arms and grappled with the mushibo. The mushibo’s feet, still rooted to the ground, gained energy from the planet’s greenery. Around the mushroom monster, grass and bushes wilted and died as their life force was drained. Two colossal beings locked onto each other.

The oryc was relentless in its pursuit of Nox, who was keeping the rabbit busy. Going higher and diving, snapping its great jaws towards the oryc. The lanka, was up, and pacing around the battle, seeking its opportunity to rejoin. Jack winced as he saw the mushibo swing and made contact Ghoulie, causing it to take a step back.

“Yeah! Mushibo! Smack it around!” The recruit screamed. “Show him how it’s done!”

“Stop playing with your food Ghoulie!” Jack quipped. “And Nox! Just fucking light up the hands!”

“Wait! You can’t do that!” The recruits yelled.

It was too late. Nox stopped playing with the oryc, soaring higher and higher. The lanka made his move and pounced on the unsuspecting rabbit monster, pinning it to the ground. Nox circled above as the two recruits scrambled in panic. Roaring into the sky, Nox began to build the fire in his throat.

“Mushibo, leave the ghoul, take the dragon!” One of the recruits pleaded.

The mushibo unrooted itself and made to turn around, but Ghoulie stopped it. Having been waiting for the right time, the ghoul made its move. Grabbing the monsters head and using its flame, it scorched the ground, causing the mushibo’s feet to ignite. Feeling the burn, the great mushroom monster fell to the ground. The ghoul vanished.

“Where the…” The recruit started.

Nox had spat a fireball at the pair of hands causing them to roll off or risk being burned. In a flash of purple fire, the darkness that was Ghoulie consumed the mushibo. Engulfing it in shadow and flame. Cracking of wood and tearing of flesh was all that could be heard as bits of the beast were torn off and tossed in different directions. Ghoulie had ripped it apart.

“NO!” The recruit shouted, running forward.

Nox swooped in and grabbed the recruit with its massive front claws. Landing on the poor man, all Jack could see was Nox’s wings flap, and a giant fire erupt where the recruit had been standing. Shrieks of horror echoed as the hand was burned alive.

The oryc had freed itself from the lanka but was quickly surrounded by Jack’s three monsters. The lanka was the first to make its move, punching again on the rabbit. Nox sprayed fire, consuming the lanka and the oryc. The white stones of the lion were unaffected by the flame, but the oryc twisted and thrashed in pain as its flesh melted from bone. The lanka took his paw and held the rabbits head down, then bit into its neck. Blood shot in every direction, but the lion’s stones stayed white, absorbing the blood.

Ghoulie had vanished again, leaving Jack face to face with the hand.

“You! What! But!” Stammered the hand.

“I what? Survived?” Jack spoke calmly.

“You killed them.” The hand said, terror shaking is voice.

“You shouldn’t have threatened me.” Jack said, looking the man in the eye. “Ghoulie.”

The hand’s eyes filled with fear as the ghoul appeared behind him. Taking its six arms and grasping the recruit’s body and pulling it to pieces. Blood poured onto the ground staining the scorched land red. Surveying the scene, Jack knew what he had to do next.

“Well. That.” Jack started. “It had to be done.”

Nox, Ghoulie and the lanka walked up to Jack, waiting for the next move. Jack pulled out the icosahedrons and recalled the beasts back to their cryo chambers. Pocketing them, Jack looked to the bay. Searching the nearby coast, he found their boat. A small rowboat and sighed.

“Well, at least I’ll get some exercise in.” Jack said exasperated.

Climbing in and taking up the oars, Jack rowed.

“That fucking aquaneki is out here someplace.” Jack said to himself. “Fuck.”

Having been caught up in the moment, he had forgotten about the water monster, but jack could not see any sign of it.” Expecting the snapping jaws of the monster to burst form the surface and devour him, Jack rowed on with fervor. Looking over his shoulder to see the western coast of the bay, Jack saw a long snake-like beast cut open on the beach.

“The aquaneki~” Jack gasped. “They killed it!?”

Jack was relieved, but still apprehensive. Something that large may had been the only one in the bay, but like the spider, what else lurked in the deep. Continuing his journey across the water trying to stay silent, Jack knew he couldn’t just go to the camp. Jack drifted for a moment before he came up with his plan. Jack required knowledge of the camp and what was guarding it. He would sneak to shore, do some surveillance, then in the night, Jack would sneak aboard the drop pods and launch one. All he had to do was get back to the ship and persuade them to return home.

Nick was relentless. Punch after punch, swing after swing. Jack, having already been beaten when he was tied up could only dive, duck and dodge. Jack was quickly attempting to formulate a strategy for attack, but the constant jeers and occasional push from the onlookers were vastly distracting.

“Come on Jackie.” Nick roused. “What was with all that big talk, if you’re just going to avoid everything.”

Jack didn’t say anything. Not wanting to play into Nick’s games, Jack quickly went for one of his own. Waiting for one of the lackies to push him, Jack grabbed his arm and shoved him into Nick. Nick quickly pushed him to the ground out of the way.

“Got to have your backup help you in a fight Nick?” Jack said trying to incite Nick’s anger. “Big Nick can’t take poor jack alone?”

“Stay out of this!” Nick bellowed at everyone. “This is between Jack and I.”

The four spectators back up, giving Jack and Nick more room. Circling, Jack was eyeing the tent for anything of use. Nick launched another assault. A right hook struck jack across the face causing him to jerk and tumble. Blood pooling in his mouth, Jack spat it out. Wiping the remaining drool and blood from his face, he saw his opportunity.

The chair he had been tied to was moved, but since the hands all moved back, it was now within reach. All Jack had to do was get Nick in position. Another jab caught Jack off guard. Doubling over, clutching his stomach, Jack gasped for air as the pain from the punch subsided. Knowing he couldn’t keep this up for as long as Nick could, he attacked. Not with the chair, not yet at least, Jack swung at Nick wildly, hoping anything would make contact. One did.

Jack took Nick across the jaw as Nick had done him. Nick’s head jerked sharply to his right, blood dribbles showing at the corners of his mouth.

“That was good Jackie.” Nick said smiling, blood streaked across his white teeth. “But that won’t save you.”

Nick lurched at jack, grasping him in an embrace, attempting to crush his ribs. Wheezing, Jack slammed his head up, smashing into Nick’s chin. Stars danced in front of Jack as the pain from earlier and the pain for the headbutt combined. Nick released Jack in a fury of dry insults.

“That was a lucky shot!” Nick yelled.

“Fuck you, Nick.” Jack shot back.

Recovering, Jack and Nick started to circle the room again. Jack was working towards the chair. Needing to have it behind him, Jack slowly made his way around the room. Nick stepped and swung, then pulled back, continuing to slowly circle. Reaching the chair, Jack feinted a swing, causing Nick to back up. Taking advantage of Nick’s pause, Jack turned and grabbed the chair.

Swinging hard and fast, Jack struck Nick across the face and chest with the chair legs. The sound of snapping wood echoed in the tent as wood splinters were sent in every direction. Nick clutched his face as blood dripped between his fingers.

“WHAT!” Nick screamed. “GET HIM!”

Jack was overtaken by the hands. Dropping what was left of the chair, his arms pinned behind his back. Nick faced him, the dim glow of the lights casting a ghastly shadow across his bloody face. Grimacing, Nick took out his knife.

“Still need help with your fights.” Jack spoke with calm words. “Bitch.”

“You, are going to die Jack.” Nick spoke, equally calm. “And I am going to be the one who enjoys killing you.”

Nick held his knife to Jack’s throat. Their faces centimeters apart. Jack could taste the bad breath coming from Nick. Nick was caressing Jack’s cheek with the knife blade.

“I’ve patiently waited for this day to come Jack.” Nick said quietly.

“Yeah?” Jack said. “It’s going to be disappointing.

“Oh no, Jack, it will be most satisfying.” Nick replied.

“Probably not.” Jack said, avoiding Nick’s eyes and looking over his shoulder.

Jack saw the tent entrance and quickly formed a plan. Nick was hell bent on dragging this out as long as possible, playing to Jack’s advantage. Just needing the right jab at his ego, Jack knew Nick would faulter. Nick stopped for a moment, turned and following Jack’s eyes saw what he was looking at.

“You won’t make it Jackie.” Nick chuckled.

“Oh, I’ll make it and you’re going to be pissed about it.” Jack laughed out loud, making Nick stumble and drop the knife below Jack’s neckline. Stomping his foot down, Jack’s capture yelped and released him. Taking a jab into Nick’s stomach and catching off and causing him to drop the knife. Jack took his chance at escape and sprinted for the tent opening. Into the dark cold air of the planet’s night, Jack looked up and saw the two moons beaming down at him.

“Jack!” Nick shouted. “You can’t run from me!”

“Fuck you Nick!” Jack shouted back before taking off at a sprint into the dark forest.

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Rowing to shore, Jack hid the boat in some brush near the aquaneki’s massive head. The smell emanating from the corpse caused Jack to wretch and vomit. Distant sounds of the camp could be heard, and Jack made sure to keep his footsteps silent. With care and precision, he made his way down the path and close to the camp’s perimeter.

Assuming watch patrols were still in effect, Jack laid low. Staying hidden in the tree line he peered out and saw the mass of tents. The landing pods were in the distance on the west side of the clearing. Cheers sounded from in the camp, a long with a massive explosion and a shriek of something being slaughtered. Using the creatures for sport.

Waiting until the planet’s moons were high in the sky, the noise down to a dull drone, Jack made his move. Slowly creeping towards camp, he hadn’t seen any hands or recruits keeping watch all day, he was unnoticed. Coming up on the first tent, he snuck around the side. No one was in site.

“They must all be watching the battles.” Jack said to himself. “Barbarians.”

Treading lightly, heading towards the pods, Jack had a sudden realization.

“I could just get in and launch.” Jack said.

Hope rising in his chest, he went a few more meters and squatting behind a smaller tent, he heard a couple men chattering about the previous battle. A nantu versus a charchu, where the charchu was the biggest they’ve seen and roasted the nantu in one flame. Waiting until they passed, he took his chance and made a break for the pods. Once inside, Jack went straight for the cockpit and sat in the pilot’s chair.

“How hard could this be.” Jack said staring at the controls in front of him.

Looking for anything that said ‘*Launch*’, Jack was met with disappointment when it required a biometric palm scan along with a numeric pin number.

“Damn!” Jack hissed. “Now what? Threaten them?”

Jack sat in the chair, pondering his dilemma. He was stuck on a planet where everything wanted to kill him, eat him, or a combination of both. A noise from behind made him jump. Panicking, Jack crouched behind the chair and peered out.

“You shouldn’t be here.” Kiera’s voice whispered in the night. “They’ll find you.”

“Yet, you haven’t signaled them?” Jack shot back.

“I’ve been given no incentive to do such a thing.” Kiera said, her tone sounding hurt.

“Then let’s get the fuck off this rock.” Jack suggested.

“We need a pilot, they’re the only ones with the launch codes.” Kiera spoke. “They’re all locked up currently.”

“Locked up?” Jack asked. “What do you mean locked up? Like prisoners?”

“Exactly like prisoners. Nick had them caged after the pilots all rioted, wanting to return to the ship and leave.” Kiera said.

“Why didn’t Nick go?” Jack asked, although he knew the answer.

“You.” She said. “He is determined to watch you die.”

“Lucky me.” Jack said. “Where are the prisoners being held?”

“There’s a large cage near the arena.” She revealed. “In case they need bait to entice the creatures for battle.”

“The arena?” Jack questioned. “What the hell are they doing?”

“They claim they are passing the time.” She said. “Like the Romans of old.”

“This is insane.” Jack said. “But I think I have a plan. I’ll need your help.”

“My help?” Kiera said.

“Yes.” Jack said looking into her eyes. “Your help. I assume the cage has keys?”

“Yes, the chief engineer has them.” Kiera said.

“We will need those.” Jack said.

“How do you expect me to get the keys?” Kiera shot back.

“I’m sure you will think of something, but don’t make a move until you get the signal.”

“Signal? What signal?” She said as Jack started to make his way off the drop pod. “Jack, what signal?”

“You’ll know it when it happens.” Jack said disappearing into the night.

Jack made his way back into the forest. Heading down the path back to the bay, the smell came first then the quiet sounds of water splashing against rocks. A crack of a branch to his side made him duck and roll off the path. The two hands from before, still conversing about the battle were marching down towards the bay.

“Fuck.” Jack whispered.

“What was that!?” One of the hands said, turning and looking towards the direction of Jack.

Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out Ghoulie. In a flash of blue, the shadowy figure erupted in purple flames. Jacks stood up and showed his face. Stunned, the two hands stared at him.

“Jack Corbyn.” One hand finally spoke.

“We need to sound the alarm.” The other said.

“Yeah, how about we don’t.” Jack said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Nick will kill us if we don’t.” The first said.

“I’m going to kill you if you do.” Jack said, pulling his knife out. “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

“Wha wha what do you want with us?” One asked.

“I want you to come with me.” Jack said. “Ghoulie, vanish.”

The ghoul’s shadow began to disappear as the purple flames vanished.

“You…you…have a ghoul?” The other hand asked.

“Not important. March.” Jack said indicating the path towards the bay.

The two hands led the way down to the bay where the aquaneki corpse lay.

“Fuck. That smells.” Jack said indicating the aquaneki.

“It was a glorious battle.” One of the hands said. “Nick has this monster, with two hor—”

“Shut up!” Said the other hand elbowing his friend in the ribs.

“It makes no difference.” Jack said.

Jack got the hidden rowboat out from the brush.

“Get in.” Jack said. “Each get an oar.”

The three piled in, the hands grabbing the oar, and Jack sitting facing them.

“We row north.” Jack said.

Wheezing, the pain in his sides aching from the fight and now the run, Jack stopped. He could not hear anyone chasing him and he needed to get his bearings. Looking up, the blue and pink moons shone brightly in the sky, ever watchful. Wishing he knew more about astrology and reading the stars for navigation, jack took to finding a tree he could climb.

“Need to get higher.” Jack thought out loud. “Find some landmarks.”

Slowly making his way, Jack saw a faint glow. Panicking, he dropped to the ground. Not wanting to be seen by Nick or his hands, Jack crawled forward under some underbrush. As the glow got closer, he realized there were no footsteps, or any sound of that matter. Glancing from underneath the brush, he saw a floating orb of inky blackness. The ball was surrounded by fire and there were several of them.

One stopped, and Jack saw two large eyes turn and look at him. A mouth opening, almost cutting the sphere in two, revealing rows of teeth. The heat from the flames intensified as the ghoul dove forward in an attack. Quickly, Jack rolled and got up. Backing up, the rest of the orbs began to turn around and join the first. Each opening its mouth and baring sharp needle teeth.

“Fuck.” Jack managed before turning and sprinting into the darkness once more. He could feel the heat on his back as ghouls kept nipping at his heels. Running for his life, his lungs on fire, Jack ran face first into a nantu. Rearing up on its hind legs, the nantu shrieked.

Terrified, Jack yelped. The nantu swung its long lanky arm smacking Jack across the chest and sending him stumbling back on his feet. One of the ghouls managed to catch up and saw the nantu. A terrifyingly horrible screech sounded from the ghoul. Deep and guttural, yet high pitch. Jack found himself stuck in place, covering his ears feeling the blood drain from his face.

The nantu turned and lurched towards the ghoul. Slashing and clawing at the dark orb but missing. The claws of the bug monster just passing through the shadowy mass of the ghoul. Jack getting feeling back in his legs, did not want to stick around and see what happened, so he turned and ran. There was a blinding flash of light as the ghoul sprayed fire at the nantu, igniting the creature in a ball of hellfire. The nantu screaming in anguish suddenly stopped. Jack didn’t turn around to find out what happened.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Jack panted while holding himself up against a tree. “I need to get back to camp.”

Not having any indication where he was, Jack searched around for the anything to climb. Finding a large boulder positioned near enough to a tall tree, he started to climb. Getting himself up and into the canopy of the forest, Jack could make out the landscape. Looing around, Jack saw the large mountain range to the north.

“There’s the mountain, so that means the bay should be over there. “Jack said turning and looking at the dark water. “And there clearing should be there.”

Jack oriented himself and climbed down the tree. Knowing the trip back would take a few hours, he needed to rest. Gathering up a few branches, Jack started to build a shelter in the crevice between the boulder and the tree. Wanting to stay hidden, incase any other monster came crawling through and stumbling upon his defenseless body.

Satisfied with his bushcraft shelter, Jack pulled out what little rations he had on him still and finished them off. Feeling a bit better, Jack pulled out his first aid kit and started to take care of some of the exposed wounds. The rest, he decided, could wait. As the night progressed, he found he could not sleep, and pulled out his paper map. Making necessary markings on it indicating where he was and what creatures lurked here. Taking note that he again, found himself to the north of the camp and that made him uneasy. Looking around in the darkness, he could feel something watching him.

“Does everything on this planet want to kill me?” Jack said to himself.

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As they rowed farther north, the sun began to rise over the mountains. Jack kept an eye on the distance they have traveled by comparing the shoreline to his hand drawn paper map. There was a small outcropping of rocks that look like they fell into the water.

“Turn and start heading towards the shore.” Jack ordered, the command in his voice sounding very foreign to him.

“Ye yes sir.” The hands said.

The boat was turned and started to drift to the shore. As they got closer, Jack made sure to prod the hands with his knife.

“If you try to run, you die.” Jack spoke calmly. “If you try to scream, you die.”

“What are you going to do with us?” One asked.

“If you follow my directions, you will probably live.” Jack replied.

“Probably!?” The other shouted.

“Move.” Jack replied

The hands got out of the boat, followed by Jack. Standing on the shore, he compared his surroundings to the map.

“This way.” Jack said.

“Where are we going?” A hand asked.

“Where this nightmare began.” Jack said coldly.

The three men walked into the forest following a dotted line on Jack’s map. A line that led them deep into the northern forest, where Jack had witnessed death up close. The charchus flitted around, occasionally sending sparks towards them, but nothing to cause any panic.

“How many cryo chambers do you have?” Jack asked.

“How many what?” The hand asked.

“The icosahedron cryo stasis chambers.” Jack said impatiently. “the small devices used to capture the creatures.

“Oh!” The hand replied reaching into his pocket.

“Hold it!” Jack shouted, shoving his knife to the hands back. “If you release one, my ghoul will tear it to pieces and beat you to death with the corpse.”

Slowly pulling his hand from his pocket, he opened it to reveal seven cryo chambers. Jack smiled.

“Good. And you?” Jack said to the other.

“I have six.” He said.

“Good. Good. We will be using them here in a bit.” Jack said. “Or, you will be. Hope the creatures stay in and don’t burst out and..”

The last words were drowned out by the shrieks of two scorpions. Smaller in size to spike, but just as formidable. Rearing up, they began to charge their tails. The two hands rolled out of the way as the first scorpion sent a bolt of lightning towards them. Striking in front of Jack, who had jumped back himself. Then the first scorpion’s tail was ripped off in a massive burst of purple fire. Ghoulie had intervened.

“What is happening!?” One of the hands shouted.

Ghoulie ripped the front pincers off the scorpion. Thrashing about the monster collapsed, leaking ichor all over the forest floor.

“Save the second one.” Jack told Ghoulie.

“Save it!?” Said the other hand.

“Capture it.” Jack told him.

Hesitantly, the hand pulled out one of his six icosahedrons, and threw it at the remaining scorpion. A flash of blue light burst out and the cryo chamber was on the ground. The blue ‘X’s blinking furiously.

“Pick it up.” Jack said.

“It’s…”

“Pick it the fuck up.” Jack said calmly.

The hand slowly crept forward and picked up the icosahedron and put it into his pocket.

“Let’s keep moving.” Jack said, leading the way. “Keep up.”

Checking his map often, the sun was starting to set before the three men had reached the destination. An old campfire and the remains of the campsite were strewn about. Inspecting the area, Jack saw the tree where the nantu’s leg had hit.

“This is the spot.” Jack said. “Now we wait.”

“Wait?” One hand asked. “For what?”

“The nantu will come.” Jack said, sitting down.

“The nantu!?” The hand exclaimed.

“Yes, and when they come, we will capture them.” Jack replied.

The two hands, stared at Jack in disbelief. He forced them through the northern forest to capture nantu. A dangerous bug monster that preyed on wandering recruits in the night. Jack had a plan, and the nantu were only a part of it. He needed a distraction. The three waited. The sun set and the two moons shone brightly above. A snapping sound caught their attention.

“What was that!?” A hand said.

“They’re coming.” Jack said smiling.

Five nantu danced around the trees, mandibles clicking. Their bodies gangly and ready to strike. In a flash of blue, Jack released Nox. The dragon burst forward, and roared at the nantu, causing them to stop clicking for a moment.

“Create a ring of fire Nox!” Jack yelled.

The dragon, flying above the group began to ignite a large fire surrounding the nantu. Crawling back and forth, the bug monsters were trapped. Jack gave the cue to begin capturing the monsters. One after another, blue lights flashed as the cryo chambers found their mark. All five nantu were captured. Jack recalled Nox, thanking him as he vanished into stasis.

“Everything is coming together.” Jack said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s go.”

“Go? Where now!?” A hand asked pocketing the last icosahedron.

Jack pulled out his map and used the firelight to trace the path with his finger.

“This way.” Jack said. “Ghoulie.”

The ghoul appeared behind the hands and gave them a push. Reluctantly they followed Jack. Through the dark forest, sounds were heard in every direction. Charchus, more nantus, the occasional scorpion, but none dared attack the party with Jack’s ghoul out in the open. Coming into a familiar clearing, Jack stopped at the edge. Thinking about that night, Jack had a spark of inspiration and turned to one of the hands.

“Run across the clearing.” Jack said. “And run fast, your life depends on it.”

Jack put his knife to the other hand’s throat.

“Run.” Jack said to the first. “Now.”

Looking at his friend, the hand took off at a sprint across the open clearing. Jack watched as the man got near the center. A glimmer of teeth appeared stopping the hand. Floating, the man started to scream. The mysterious mouth opened, and bit the man’s head off.

“Capture it! NOW!” Jack yelled.

The other hand, reached into his pocket for the empty cryo chambers. Shaking with fear he began to drop one. The smell of urine wafted into the air and Jack knew this man was of no use anymore. Taking his knife, Jack drove it into his neck. The blood poured out and Jack watched as he drowned in his own blood.

Reaching down, Jack picked up the icosahedrons and began throwing the remaining empty ones at the floating smile. Flashes of blue light erupted to life as the monster would vanish into stasis, only to break out again. Jack through the last one and in a flash of blue light he watched as the ‘X’s blinked, then went solid.

“Yes!” Jack swelled with accomplishment. “This will be glorious.”

Jack turned over the body of the headless corpse and rummaged in his pockets for his icosahedrons. Now having the five nantus, the scorpion and now the mysterious smile, Jack was ready to return to camp. He had one last idea.

Ghoulie, would you bring the bodies with us, I still have use of them.” Jack said.

Not sleeping at all, Jack watched as the moons set in the distance and the sun began to peek over the mountains. Jack crawled out of his small shelter, relieved that he survived the night. Not wanting to go back, Jack searched for some running water.

“I need to wash.” Jack said to himself.

The search did not take long, Jack had found the river. Getting undressed and wading in, Jack felt the water rush over him as he scrubbed his body. The refreshing feeling of being clean reinvigorating him. Jack got out and got dressed.

“Fuck You!” Jack shouted into the forest. “Fuck. Now what?”

Jack sat neat the river and pondered the situation. He’s on a different planet. Nick was out for blood. The Red Right Hands changed their prerogatives. He needed to know what the icosahedrons did.

“I have to steal some.” Jack said standing up. “Steal some and…”

The worlds trailed off as Jack knew he would have to run. Go into hiding away from the hands. The depth of his plan started to sink in. Jack knew there was a high probability that he may never return to Earth.

“Fuck it.” Jack said.

Jack took in his surroundings and pulled out his map. Figuring out where he was, he traced the quickest path back to camp on the map. Planning on getting close to camp, he would stay near the north side and wait for darkness. More monsters come out at night, but he would have a better chance of sneaking in unseen.

It took Jack the better part of the day to navigate the dense forest underbrush. The evening hours were well underway by the time Jack was in position on the north side. Peering in, he did not see anyone on watch duty.

“That’s odd.” Jack thought. “There’s always a recruit on watch.”

As the sun set, and the moons made their appearance, no recruits came for watch. Taking that as a sign, Jack started to creep in. Hiding behind the tents and slowly making his way. The warehouse tent was near the center of camp and was typically in the middle of a throng of people. Getting close would be no issue as he creeped around the corners of tents and canopies but getting into the warehouse would be.

Coming up on the warehouse tent, Jack surveyed the area. There were no recruits to be seen. There were two guards outside the tent opening and Jack knew they would be a problem. Circling back, Jack went into a nearby tent to search for something to use as a distraction. Once inside, he found the recruit had left all the basic tools behind. Taking the knife and monocular, Jack found nothing else of use.

“Fuck.” Jack said.

A loud explosion happened across the camp. Jack saw a large plume of smoke climb over the tents.

“What the hell was that!?” Came one of the guards.

“I don’t know. Let’s go check it out!” The other said.

Leaving their post, Jack rushed in. Tables were set up; boxes and icosahedrons were piled in troves. Jack took a handful of the small cryo chambers and pocketed them. Jack heard the two guards returning.

“Fuck.” Jack said.

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The sound of screams brought Kiera out of her tent. Panic through the camp as engineers and hands ran in every direction. Looking around, Kiera found the chief. Running towards him she saw the bewildered look in his eye. Blood smeared down his front. Thick smoke from tents burning on the north side lit up the scene. Someone was walking in from the forest. A shadowy figure next to him. Purple fire hid their features, but she knew who it was. Jack was back, and this was the signal.

It was now or never. Kiera had been hesitant at first, not knowing if she should follow Jack, or stay with the company. However, the direction the chief engineer had taken the expedition to this planet was so for off the original prerogative that she was uncomfortable. The amount of destruction and death that was promoted, made her sick. Her mind was made up. She was getting off this planet, and Jack was her ticket.

Following the chief engineer to his command tent, Kiera saw Nick there. There was a man with a lot of power and not enough intelligence to control it. Large ego and quick to throw a punch, Nick was what the Red Right hand would call prime candidate material. Screaming brought her out of her trance. A severed arm was thrown onto the table they were standing at. A nantu stood outside the tent canopy. Mandibles clicking with anticipation as it eyed the group.

“I’ll take care of this.” Nick said.

A flash of blue erupted under the tent, and the wild pink oryc was chasing after the nantu with Nick.

“Good. He will take care of that as we get these fires under control.” The chief said in a wavering voice. “We also need to figure out why there are bodies falling from the sky.”

Kiera couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She knew Jack was pissed at everyone but didn’t think he had the nerve to do all this. Releasing creatures on the camp, burning it down, and killing. Jack Corbyn was proving to be more the antihero type she liked.

Shaking her head, she threw those thoughts from her mind. She needed the keys to the cage. Casually glancing around and at the chief, she found them. Hanging on a keyring on his belt. On them, she knew the keys to the warehouse as well. She had an idea.

“Chief, I need in the warehouse.” She said.

“Now’s not the time.” He replied.

“I’m out. I need more if I’m going to help control the wild beasts.” She pleaded.

“You’re out? Didn’t you get a new set yesterday?” He asked suspiciously.

“I did, some I used attempting to catch a new creature in the bay, and the others are in my tent. That’s currently on fire.”

Eyeing Kiera, the chief slowly reached for his keys. A bolt of electricity hit the ground at his feet, causing him to step back. Reaching into his pocket, he threw an icosahedron. In the flash of blue, Kiera reached in and took the keys. He was too distracted to notice as his mushibo turned up to face the scorpion.

Turning and running from the tent, she could hear the chief ordering his mushroom monster to chase down and kill the scorpion. Crackling of thunder drowned out the rest. As she bolted for the arena, she ran into more hands. One handed her a bucket and grabbed her arm.

“C’mon its all hands on deck!” He shouted, ushering her along.

Not wanting to defer from her goal, she took the bucket and splashed the water into the hands face the ducked behind a nearby pile of crates.

“What the fuck Kiera!” He shouted before running off. “Fuck you too then!”

Kiera sighed. She knew she should be helping her colleagues, but she had other priorities. She needed to get to the cage. As she got closer to the arena, she could see the chief walking onto the battle ground.

“Jack Corbyn!” His voice rang out.

As Jack approached the campsite, he released two nantus. Materializing, confused, they began to hobble too and frow.

“Stop.” Jack ordered.

The nantus stopped and look at Jack. Their mandibles clicking as they tilted their heads looking at him.

“There.” Jack said pointing towards camp. “Go.”

The two nantu clicked their jaws, and with a swift pace launched themselves towards the camp. Jack heard screaming in the distance as the two monsters found the first set of people. Jack watched as blood shot into the sky as the bug monsters tore into their first victims. Turning to ghoulie, who was still carrying the two bloodied corpses.

“Throw them into the middle of the camp. Near the command tent.” Jack ordered the ghoul. “Make it rain.”

The ghoul absorbed two of its arms and started to increase his size. Growing to fifteen meters tall, the massive shadowy figure sent the two bodies, bloody and mangled soaring into the camp. The screaming intensified when the bodies landed on the ground. Jack could hear the chief yelling incomprehensibly in the distance.

“Good.” Jack said calmly, looking around. “Burn it to the ground.”

With a flash of purple flame, the nearby tents were set ablaze. Quickly turning into a raging out of control fire storm. Jack and Ghoulie walked slowly into camp. Hands were running in every direction, pouring water on tents and screaming for help. As Jack passed, they all had the same look. *Fear.* Jack had been presumed dead, and now he was walking into camp, in a fiery maelstrom.

Reaching into his pocket, Jack pulled out the scorpion’s icosahedron. Tapping the ‘X’, Jack threw the cryo chamber deeper into camp. A flash of blue light was followed by electricity sparking. The scorpion had materialized, confused and angry, and started to attack those around it. Captured creatures started to race towards Jack, who released the two more nantus.

“Kill them.” Jack ordered the bug monsters. “Kill them all.”

The nantus rushed forward top the other monsters and started to devour them. Ripping limbs off, tearing into the flesh and executing the onslaught of creatures threatening Jack. Reaching the battle arena area, Jack saw the cage of prisoners on the far end. The arena’s ground was soaked in blood. Dead creatures were scattered about. A scoreboard and a judge’s station had been erected to one side. Had he not been shunned; Jack may have found this a sport he could enjoy. As it is, Jack was shunned, and now he was forced to fight for his life.

The fire behind him was beginning to die down as several hands had gotten the blaze under control, removing tents and structures in the path so the flames had no where to spread. Jack could see two of the four nantus had been killed, the other two were busy battling a pack of oryc. The scorpion’s electricity was shooting off on the far south end of camp. Shrieks were still heard.

“Jack Corbyn!” The chief shouted.

Jack turned and looked at the large man. Blood streaked down his front. Muddied and bruised, he looked like hell had chewed him up and spat him back out.

“The one and only.” Jack replied.

“What the absolute hell do you think you are doing!?” The chief started into Jack.

With a wave of his middle finger, Jack’s reply was evident. The look on the chief’s face as he reached into his pocket and pulled out cryo chamber was enough. Jack reached in and pulled out two. The last nantu and the bodiless smile.

“You will die Jack.” The man said.

“Everyone keeps trying.” Jack said. “Good luck.”

A flash of blue blinded Jack.

Panicking, Jack quickly started to rush through ideas. The guards outside prevented an unnoticed escape. Someone would eventually find him inside. Nick already wanted him dead, and Jack wasn’t sure whose side the chief was on. The only one who seemed to prefer Jack alive was Kiera, but she was impossible to read. Pacing back and forth Jack knocked over a box. Small icosahedrons scattered.

“Who is in there!?” One of the guards said entering the warehouse.

“You’re not supposed to be in here!” He shouted at Jack. “Quick! Get the chief.”

Jack heard the other guard run off. The first guard stood in front of the door blocking Jack’s escape.

“What do you think you’re doing Jack?” He asked.

“Just um, counting the crates.” Jack said attempting to mask his nervousness with confidence.

“Liar.” The guard said with a smile. “You were in here snooping around. Curious to know what is happening. Not used to being the center of attention, are ya?”

The second guard had returned and to Jack’s horror, he brought Nick with him. The chief engineer was right behind him, and all four stood in front of the only door. Looking around quickly, Jack saw no other way.

“What do you think you’re doing in here?” The chief asked.

“He is stealing Company Property.” Nick said in a fake official voice.

Jack reached over to a nearby table and took a handful of the cryo chambers. Unknowingly, he activated them with his fingers. He threw the lot at the four blocking his way. Flashes of blue erupted causing confusion. Jack elbowed and thrust his way through the doorway. Looking back, he could see only outlines of the people inside.

“JACK!” Came someone’s voice from inside, distorted and far away.

Running, Jack took off to the north. The only direction he was sure few would follow. He could hear Nick and the chief ordering others to grab him as he ran by, Jack didn’t stop for anyone, or anything. Reaching the north end of camp, he could hear his pursuers stopping. Not wanting to follow into the north.

“I’m going to kill you, Jack!” Nick’s voice echoed behind him.

Chancing a quick glance back, he saw Nick closing the distance. Sprinting into the tree line and entering the forest, Jack was once again running for his life.

The chief had released his monster. A massive charchu. Normally the creatures were quite small, maybe the size of a raccoon. This charchu, however, was much, much bigger. Jack heard the chief give orders to the monster to kill him. In a fiery blaze, the charchu dashed forward, smoke trailing from its mouth. Quickly Jack plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out one of the cryo chambers. A nantu crawled from the blue light.

“Hah! A nantu!? Against my charchu!?” The chief laughed. “You will burn like my camp has!”

Jack didn’t want to pull out Nox or the lanka just yet. Wanting to rely on his new untrained beasts as the distraction for the time being. Ordering the nantu to evade the charchu’s blazing fast attacks. Jack watched as the bug monster began to tire.

“Tear the legs off that rodent!” Jack yelled.

The nantu’s eyes gleamed with delight as it got a second wind of energy. Returning the charge, it chased the large rodent around the arena. However, it was no match against the firestorm the charchu unleashed. The nantu’s skin boiled and turned to char and ash. A small breeze wafter through the battle and blew the bug monsters ashes away.

Jack, holding the bodiless smile in his hand, hesitated. Worried, Jack wondered what else the chief had.

“What did you do? Pump the charchu full of steroids!?” Jack yelled.

“Rigorous training and a good diet!” The chief said. “Something you wouldn’t know anything about!”

Tossing out the icosahedron, Jack watched the blue light emerge, then vanish. Nothing was in the arena. The charchu had hunched down waiting for the next monster to come.

“What was that Jack!?” The chief chuckled. “Your hopes and dreams coming to die?”

“Kill it.” Jack said calmly.

The charchu’s eyes widened, then it started to dash around the arena wildly.

“What the fuck are you doing!?” The chief screamed at the rodent. “Stop fucking around and light his ass up!”

The rodent stopped and began to charge its fire. A red glow aura surrounded the large creature. For a small second, Jack thought the charchu was going to attack him, but the fire it unleashed engulfed itself and something else. The bodiless smile had a body, albeit invisible. In the torrent of flame, you could make out a tall skinny body. Jack guessed it was two meters tall with arms that reached the ground. Gaunt in body shape, jack was unable to make out any distinguishable features in the fire, except the unmistakable smiling mouth.

As the fire raged on around it, the smiling fiend seemed unaffected. Reaching down and picking up the charchu that began thrashing about in its unusually long skinny arms. The mouth began to open, wide, wider than humanly possible. The shining teeth bared; it brought the charchu up to its mouth.

“What the hell is that!?” The chief stammered. “Let my charchu go! You fuck!”

“Do it. Do it now.” Jack said.

In one swift graceful movement, time seemed to stop. The charchu’s fiery tornado halted, as the smiling monster bit the rodent in half. In a split moment, fire outlined the tall gaunt body, then when the charchu was killed, it vanished again. Leaving only a smile over the floating corpse of the chief’s beast. Blood poured from the remaining half of the charchu, then it was dropped to the ground. A diabolical laugh escaped the smile. Chills ran down Jack’s spine.

“Wha—” The chief stared in disbelief. “What the…”

“My floating smile.” Jack said. “Don’t you remember?”

“Your tall tale is real!?” The chief said staring at Jack. “And you brought it here!?”

“Just for you chief. Jack replied. “Kill him. And be free.”

“Hold on just one minute!” The chief yelled as he threw out another cryo chamber. “I’m not finished.”

Out of the blue light, a giant monster erupted. A massive turtle type creature. Short to the ground with a massive shell on its back. Powerful bone crunching jaws with teeth lining the sides when the mouth is closed. When the creature opens its mouth, you couldn’t begin to count to the amount of needle point razor sharp teeth. The six flesh tearing claws on each foot were enough to shred every ounce of meat from its prey. The shell, used for defense, was lined with small spikes around the brim and large swooping ridges along the top. Glowing teal eyes matched the glowing underbelly that would occasionally show when the monster attacked.

“Jebels.” The chief yelled. “Finish them off.”

The smile vanished, then a sudden high-pitched screech was heard. The turtle’s face was dripping with blood as the smiling fiend started to rip it open. Shaking its massive form, the jebels stopped the smiling monster for a moment. The turtle monster turned and looked at Jack and the teal eyes glowed. Jack looked into the glowing orbs then out of nowhere it turned its head so fast and took a bite of nothing. Jack barely followed the jebel’s move, and it took him a moment to realize what had happened. In his mouth, hung a smiling form, fading. The beast and seen the smiling fiend coming and made the first move.

Shocked, Jack pulled out his two icosahedrons and looked at them. One was the lanka, the other was Nox. Ghoulie had done his vanishing move, but Jack could feel him hovering nearby, waiting for orders. A commotion erupted as a large green lumbering mushroom burst onto the arena. Kiera had joined the battle.

“Good. Kiera, Finish off the bastard.” The chief said pointing towards Jack.

“Oh, I’ll finish off the bastard.” Kiera said smiling.

Jack panicked. He had thought Kiera was on his side. Someone he could rely on.

“Had she been playing me this whole time?” Jack said to himself. “Leaving me crumbs so I would come back here?”

“Mushibo!” Kiera yelled. “Rip the shell of that jebels!”

Jack watched the engineering chief turn and look at Kiera with utter disbelief.

“You traitorous bitch!” The chief yelled at her.

“Don’t call me a bitch.” Kiera replied. “It’s not becoming of a man of your station.”

The giant mushroom punched the turtle’s head. Twisting from the impact, the turtle sidestepped to stop from falling. Taking one of its massive, clawed feet and swiping towards the mushroom monster, the jebels carved six long gouges into it. A howl of pain pierced the darkened sky. The teal underbelly glowed, distracting Jack from the battle. The chaos around him had stopped.

Looking around, Jack saw a crowd of people standing and watching the battles unfold. How long they had been there, Jack did not know. The mushibo had now planted its feet and was using the ground and the roots below to torment the turtle. Great vines shot up through the dirt, entangling the shelled monster’s feet. Shrieking, the jebels began to chew at the roots binding it.

“Poison!” Kiera yelled an order.

Reaching up, the mushibo ran its hand slowly through its mushroom head and a green dust started to emerge. People all around the arena began to scramble and run. One hand ran into Jack.

“Get the fuck out. That’s poison spores!” he screamed before running off.

The mushroom had released a toxic cloud towards the turtle. Still bound, it began to thrash uncontrollably. The glowing teal of its eye’s dulling. The life was being pulled from its body.

“You! Can’t!” The chief yelled.

The mushroom monster released the roots on its feet and stepped towards the jebels. The binding roots then breaking free, the turtle beast swayed back and forth before trying to bite the mushibo. Reaching in, avoiding the blind attacks from the jebels, the Mushibo grabbed the shell. Still snapping its jaws, the jebels bit the mushibo’s leg. Again, a howl of pain erupted forth before the mushroom monster planted a foot on top of the jebels head. Rooting into the ground again, pinning the head under its foot and the mushibo began to wrench the shell. Every pull on the hard shell sent a shriek through the jebels.

Heaving with heavy arms, the mushibo started to break the shell free. Tearing of flesh and cracking of bone shattered the silence.

“Stop!” The chief yelled. “I concede!”

The mushibo kept pulling up. Blood spewed out in every direction, soaking the chief and the mushroom monster. Kiera managed to duck behind a nearby crate before it happened, and Jack was on the other side of the arena out of reach. With a loud crash, the shell was tossed to the side. The jebels was convulsing with pain before the mushroom monster reached into the open body and ripped out the heart. Still beating, the mushibo crushed it in one might squeeze.

“Fuck.” Was all the chief said before turning and running.

Leaving the mushibo to munch on the jebels carcass, Kiera ran towards Jack.

“I got ‘em.” She said reaching Jack. “I got the keys.”

“Good!” Jack exclaimed. “You showing up here had me worried for a minute.”

“Worried? That I wouldn’t turn traitor and help?” She asked coyly.

“Yeah actually.” Jack chuckled. “Let’s get the fuck off this planet.”

“Lets.” She said.

Both Kiera and Jack went over to the cages.

“Jack!” one said.

“Quick, unlock the cage!” Jack told Kiera.

“What!?” Several shouted.

“Hurry, before more hands come back.” Jack hissed.

Fumbling with the keys, Kiera unlocked the cage. The men inside piled out.

“We are leaving.” Jack said. “Tonight. Who are the pilots?”

“We are.” Three men signaled themselves.

“Good. Get to the pods.” Jack said. “The rest of you. Gather any and everything you can. We launch in ten minutes.”

“Where are you going?” Kiera asked Jack.

“I have one last thing that I need to do.” Jack said.

“You won’t beat him.” Kiera told Jack. “He is out for blood.”

“I know.” Jack replied. “So am I.”

Jack turned and walked off towards the north side of the camp. A strong feeling in his gut told him that is where he would find Nick Lambertye. His rival.

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Following the chaos to the north end of the camp, Jack found himself surrounded by torched tents and corpses littering the ground. The fire had died out while Jack was in the arena with the chief. Searching, he found no one alive on this side of the camp. Feeling rushed from his short time limit, Jack sprinted towards the west where the drop pods were getting loaded up.

“Jack Corbyn!” Nick’s voice rang out in the silent darkness.

Coming to an abrupt halt outside the landing zones. He turned and found Nick holding Kiera by the scruff of her shirt.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going with my ships?” Nick asked coyly. “You don’t think I would let you off this planet?”

Looking around, Jack could see the released crewman being wrangled up by a matted pink bunny, Nick’s deadly oryc. He made eye contact with one of the pilots he spoke to earlier and returned the nod he gave him. Looking back at Nick, Jack fumbled in his pocket for a cryo chamber. In a flash of blue light, the lanka was sulking between himself and his rival.

“Oh, you want to battle?” Nick asked laughing. “With that pile of rocks?”

The lanka stared Nick down, then let out a horrific roar that rattled the metal guy wire used to steady the drop pods.

“Oh? The kitty wants to play?” Nick goaded. “Where did my oryc go?”

The oryc’s ear twitched as it heard Nick speak its name. Looking back at the nearest pilot and growling at him, the oryc came to Nick’s side. Bouncing on the heels of its feet and staring down the stone lion, the oryc’s patience was wearing thin.

Nick through Kiera to the ground, who quickly crawled away to the safety of some large metal bins nearby.

“Fuck you, Nick!” Kiera said. “Jack’s lanka will kill you!”

“Silence! Nasty traitor!” Nick spat on the ground towards the scared woman. “You will be dealt with next. First, Jack would like to battle, and I am never one to turn down a battle to an *old friend.*”

“Lanka!” Jack shouted as the stone lion pounced towards the pink bunny.

Rocked off its feet, it shoved Nick to the side with its long muscular arm. The lion had taken the bunny by surprise and gotten the creature on the run.

“Stop running and rip the stones from its spine!” Nick yelled.

The oryc instantly stopped running and the lank overtook it. Using its powerful legs, the oryc kicked the stone lion, making it stumble. Growling, the lanka got up and swiped with its massive paws at the oryc’s waist. Twisting and hopping back the bunny was able to evade the lion’s attack.

“Use stomp!” Nick yelled.

The oryc instantly lifted its leg and began to stomp the ground. At first, Jack didn’t notice anything happening, then after each stomp the ground began to shake. Jack was shocked when the ground below lanka started to open up and sink.

“Lanka!” Jack screamed.

“You don’t know any of the lion’s attacks!?” Nick said stunned. “Oh, this will be easy then. Oryc, Swift!”

Stomp! As the foot came down on the ground, the bunny quickly ran around to the back side of the lion and began to punch its rear end. The sound of clashing stones echoed through the camp as the lanka roared in pain.

“Jack! Do something!” Kiera shouted.

Jack watched as the bunny was pummeling the lion and thought hard. Trying to remember what the lion has been able to do in the past. Remembering the last battle the lion had with the oryc Jack had an idea.

“Lanka, evade!” Jack yelled.

Waiting for a pause in the onslaught sent by the oryc, the lion leapt out of the way.

“Fool!” Nick said. “Oryc, get on top of that beast!”

The oryc heard the order and instantaneously used its powerful hind legs for a long jump.

“Lanka, switch your stones around.”

As the bunny started to arc down, the stones of the lion seemingly became one misshapen pile. As the oryc got closer, the stone pile erupted with paws in the air and open mouth. The lanka had rearranged and was now on its back. The entire scene unfolded in mere seconds but was just quick enough to get the upper hand.

The lion took one of the oryc’s arms in its great mouth and bit down. Tearing its head to side to side, the bunny had no choice but to flop. Blood began flowing around the white stones. The pink fur of the oryc changing to a deep red as it was stained with its own blood.

“Rip the fucking arm off.” Jack yelled.

“Kick the damned head!” Nick yelled watching his oryc get tossed around.

The lanka switched up the rock formation and landing on its feet, planting them for its next move. The oryc, however, was ahead of the lion. In one swift quick motion, the bunny had kicked the lion’s head causing the mouth to open releasing the mangled, bloody, arm. The oryc backed away quickly as the lanka launched another bite at its prey.

“Maybe you do know something.” Nick said eyeing Jack. “But it still won’t save you.”

“Lanka! Stop playing with your food!” Jack yelled ignoring Nick’s quips.

The lanka was running after the oryc who led it between nearby tents. The mangled arm dangling behind as it weaved in and out of obstacles.

“Enough of this horseshit!” Nick yelled throwing another icosahedron into the fray.

In a flash of blue, Jack saw the familiar purple fire erupt, but instead of Ghoulie’s form, it was a different shadowy figure. Shaped like hyena, Nick’s ghoul ran on four legs and showed a powerful and muscular stature. The white empty eyes eyed Jack suspiciously.

“Shikari I want that stone nuisance ripped apart.” Nick told his ghoul. “Quickly.”

The shadowy figure vanished, and Jack knew what was coming. Wanting to have waited longer, Jack made the decision.

“Ghoulie!” Jack shot out.

“You’re in for it now! Nick.” Kiera yelled.

The specter materialized next to Jack; its four arms folded as it floated impatiently.

“Help lanka.” Jack said as he watched the ghoul vanish as Nick’s had. “Lanka! Watch for the ghouls and finish killing that fucking bunny!”

The lanka pounced through a tent at the oryc knocking it to the ground. In a quick instant, the oryc’s might arms punched the lion’s head sending it to the side. The lanka roared as before and shook the ground they stood on. In one movement, the lion reached down on the oryc’s head and crushed the skull in a single bite.

Nick howled with anger. That was his first monster. The one he used to torment the camp, his partner. The lion’s stones showed no sign of blood as it chewed the bunny’s face. The ground around them soaked in the red liquid that poured from the oryc’s lifeless body.

A purple fire erupted around the lanka, igniting nearby tents. The lion was knocked from the corpse back towards where Jack and Nick stood giving orders. The four legged demon leapt on top of the lanka and released a torrent of flame around the pair.

“Don’t try and kill it with fire. Just tear the damned stones out!” Nick yelled furiously.

The shadowy hyena began biting at the lanka. Using its paws, the lanka was fending off the attacks successfully. Shikari feinted and came on the inside of one of lanka’s arms. Taking a bite from the lower neck, the ghoul ripped stones from the lion.

Jack watched in horror as Nick’s ghoul killed the lanka. The mighty stone lion that had protected him. Ghoulie’s purple fire lit the ground below the lanka and the four armed shadow picked up the hyena and tossed it aside. It was too late. The stone lion was a pile of white stones. Lifeless. Dead. Jack felt his eyes beginning to tear up.

“No.” Jack wheezed. “Lanka.”

“Shikari!” Nick yelled. “Good work on the worthless pile of rocks.”

“Ghoulie!” Jack screamed, pointing at the burning tents.

Ghoulie caught on to Jack’s idea and went to the fire that had been reignited by Shikari. Nick was busy admiring his work on the lanka and hadn’t noticed.

“Well Jack, we seem to be one for one.” Nick said.

“Well Nick, it still seems you’re an ass.” Jack replied, attempting to keep Nick occupied as long as possible.

“How many more monsters you have?” Nick asked causally.

“Thirty-seven.” Jack replied with the first number that came.

“Cute.” Nick said. “I hear tale of a dragon.”

“A dragon? Now that would be awesome.” Jack faked a laugh.

Ghoulie was busy soaking up the fires that were raging about, Shakira vanished. Jack, using his peripheral vision searched for the specter, but was unable to see where it had gone.

“Stop wasting time Jack.” Nick said, his voice showing malcontent. “Let’s just settle this.”

“Let’s.” Nick said.

“Shikari!” Nick yelled keeping jack’s eye contact.

A circle of fire raced around Jack, engulfing him in a ring. Taken aback, Jack looked wildly around, but he was surrounded by flame.

“This is where you die, Jack.” Nick said. “Your pets can’t help you now.”

Ghoulie appeared next to Jack and began siphoning the fire. The ghoul had been careful to not show any extra power while this was happening. As the ring of fire was extinguished, Jack watched as a tornado of flame was sent towards them.

In a burst of purple flames, Ghoulie unleashed its own fiery tornado. As the blazing torrents collided in a firestorm, heat radiated in all directions. Kiera, who was closest to the action left her hiding place and disappeared into the camp. Jack had to shield his eyes from the brightness. The night sky was on fire with the battle. Laughing, Nick had backed away from the heat, also holding his hand to his face.

“The power!” Nick yelled. “Imagine if we had this on Earth! We would be treated as gods!”

“You’re insane!” Jack yelled.

“Everyone who advances the human race was thought to be insane!” Nick yelled back.

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The tornados danced around the ghouls, each adding fire to flame. The blaze began to scorch the earth, killing all the greenery.

“Burn them all!” Nick yelled.

“Ghoulie! Get rid of the fire!” Jack yelled through his hands.

Shikari’s ghastly form pulsed, sending more energy to the fire. The tornado went from red flames to white. The heat was so intense, the drop ships were beginning to visually heat up. Ghoulie, who had been absorbing as much energy as possible, vanished., along with its torrent of flame. The hyena pulsed again and sent the firestorm towards Jack.

Jack watched, wide eyed, as a spinning torrent of fiery doom crashed towards him. In an instant, Ghoulie reappeared, all eight arms outstretched and caught the inferno. Changing form again, Ghoulie’s head expanded. Opening a giant jaw like feature, the ghoul swallowed the fire. As the torrent vanished into the dark shadow, Jack saw his ghoul’s purple flames begin to fade as the shadowy form flickered in air.

“Shikari! Now!” Nick screamed, pointing at the diminished form of Ghoulie.

The hyena shaped specter leaped towards the fallen shadow then a flash of blue light shown bright in the dark. Jack had shown his hand, he released Nox. The dragon burst from the ether and flew forwards towards Shikari.

“Nox! Stop the ghoul!” Jack ordered the dragon.

Taking in the surrounding chaos, the dragon flapped its massive wings. Beating the wind into a gust causing Nick’s ghoul to waver and stop.

“Nox! Light up Ghoulie! Fireball!” Jack commanded.

The dragon, still sending wind whistling through the new battleground, sent fiery rain down on the fallen Ghoulie.

“There is a dragon.” Nick said staring at Nox. “Too bad it will die with you.”

Nick had pulled out another cryo chamber and in a flash of blue light, released his next abomination, Isoptera. A monster that was two meters tall, standing on powerful legs. The arms, muscular, ended with claws with three sharp fingers. The creature was like the Inguar in shape only. The horrific characteristics of the isoptera were unmistakably different. Two inset red eyes sat above a vertical mouth in the abdomen. The mouth was in laid with teeth that pulled in the food as if they were lips. The two horns that formed, came forward and swooped back. The horns were covered in thorns, pointing in every direction. The exoskeleton of the carapace body reminded Jack of a termite’s body.

Clicking sounds erupted as the teeth moved inside the isoptera’s mouth. Jack shuddered at the noise as a chill ran down his spine.

“You like my isoptera?” Nick asked. “Found him lurking in the swamps to the south. An insatiable hunger it has.”

Nox still sending fire to Ghoulie, reared its head back and howled down at the newcomer. Ghoulie had started to regain some form to its shadow and the purple flames were returning.

“Isoptera, take care of that ghoul. Use your poisonous sting!” Nick ordered.

Shikari slowly crawling out from under the pressure Nox was putting down, raced to the isoptera’s side. Nick’s maniacal smile would frighten children, and Jack stifled a laugh.

“What’s so funny Jackie?” Nick asked coyly.

“That stupid fucking smile.” Jack began to laugh.

The smile was dropped from Nick’s face.

“Kill him.” Nick said pointing at Jack. “And his pathetic beasts.”

“Nox! Firestorm!” Jack yelled.

Nox turned in the air and began to breathe fire into the gusts it was creating. The swirling vortex of fire resembled what the ghouls had done earlier, but on a larger scale. Jack caught the hyena out of the corner of his eye, but the torrent of purple flame knocked him off his feet.

The shadowy demon dog was standing upon his chest, and Jack looked into the white eyes. Feeling power and contempt emanating from the beast, Jack yelled for Ghoulie to help.

The weakened specter appeared at his aid and using what remaining strength it had, threw Shikari from Jack. A great weight being lifted from his chest, Jack stood up and watched as the isoptera was ripping through Ghoulie’s shadowy form. Taking each arm and smoke trail, the nightmarish monster devoured the ghoul. Eyes wide with terror as he watched his ghoul be eaten by this fiend, Jack saw Nox dive.

Nox took the isoptera in its claws, dragging it into the sky. The tornado of fire crashed into the camp, uncontrolled by the dragon any longer. Screams of survivors were heard and silenced as they fell victim to the torrent of flame.

Jack and Nick were too busy with the battle to pay any attention to what was happening around them. The pilots had finished loading the drop pods as quick as possible and were in the midst of flight checks. Kiera was no where to be seen, and Nox had the isoptera in the sky.

As the two beasts rose higher, the isoptera’s massive claws ripped at Nox’s side. Blood trickled down as its flesh was tore open.

“Poison it!” Nick yelled.

The isoptera released a noxious plume of smoke from the thorns on its horns. Nox dropped the creature and attempted to get away, but it was too late. The isoptera’s fumes had entered the dragon. The effects were near instantaneous, the dragon plummeted. Jack, panicking, pulled out the icosahedron and pressed the ‘X’s. In a flash of blue light, Nox vanished before crashing into the charred ground.

“What a waste!” Nick yelled. “But now you’re defenseless.”

Jack pulled out his knife. Refusing to go down without a fight, he prepared himself for the oncoming attack. As the isoptera and Shikari regrouped and started their slow advance towards Jack, he saw a flicker in the isoptera’s eyes. A purple glow.

“Give up Jack. It’s no use.” Nick said. “You have no hope to kill, or even hurt my monsters.”

“Fuck. You. Nick.” Jack breathed, breath shortening with the anxiety of what was about to happen.

The ghoul broke off and started to flank jack as the isoptera began to run across the burned field towards Jack. Jack, knowing the monsters would kill him, started to walk out and meet his fate head on. Everything on the planet had tried to kill him, and now he was standing face to face with just the latest threat. Except, jack didn’t want to try and kill the creatures, he wanted to kill the monster. He wanted to kill Nick. The isoptera stopped running towards Jack.

Grasping at his abdomen, the isoptera’s eyes turned bright purple, then deep blue.

“What the fuck! Go kill that bastard!” Nick yelled at his beast.

Jack, saw the distraction, and went for it. Nick was busy yelling at his isoptera and didn’t see Jack approach from behind him. Taking his knife, Jack came up behind Nick, sliding his knife to the front of his throat; Jack drove the blade out the back of Nick’s neck, then ripped the handle to the side tearing the flesh from bone. Blood sprayed, Jack wad covered, and Nick fell to his knees. Turning as he fell, he looked into Jack’s cold eyes, gurgling.

“I win.” Jack said, wiping his blade on Nick’s shoulder smearing blood across the ‘R’.

The blue light pulsing from the isoptera increased. Shikari’s shadowy figure stopped and watched as the terrifying monster began to rip open. Cracks begin forming around the carapace. The beast began to scream and thrash. Two shadowy arms burst from the shoulders and grabbed the horns of the isoptera. Tearing them from the body, the arms then gripped the sides of the mouth and ripped the body in two. Out stepped a dark specter.

Ghoulie had survived the attack. Like the giant spider, the ghoul had changed. No longer was there a purple flame, but a deep blue. No longer was Ghoulie a floating four armed ghoul, but a shadow clone of the isoptera. The white eyes remained. The mouth of Ghoulie now vertical in the abdomen, you could see through to the other side, and along the edges were countless small teeth. The darkness that filled the flame, Ghoulie, turned and look at Jack.

Standing above Nick’s fallen corpse, covered in his blood, Jack looked at his ghoul. Shikari shrieked and started to run at Jack. Ghoulie vanished and reappeared in front of the hyena. Grappling with the shadow dog, Ghoulie brought the head of the ghoul to its mouth. The teeth started to tear bits of dark smokey tendrils from Shikari. The entire head went through the opening and then vanished. The body twitched and fell to the ground. The purple flame faded, and the body turned to ash blowing away in the wind.

Nick and his monsters, finally defeated, Jack fell to his knees. Tears falling from his face.

“FUCK!” He yelled into the sky. “FUCK!”

“Jack!” One of the pilots yelled.

Snapping back into reality, Jack sprinted to the drop pod, his ghoul appearing behind him. The blue glow reflecting on the metal ship.

“Are we ready to launch!?” Jack asked eagerly, but tired.

“All preparations are made. We just need Kiera.” The pilot said.

“What?” Jack asked. “She’s not on the ship?”

“No.” he replied. “And we will need her palm and her access code”

“What? *Her* palm?” Jack asked perplexed. “And her access code? But you’re the pilot?”

“I am, but we need a Red Right Hand official to launch. The computer flied the ship, I’m just here for backup.” The pilot said. “Kiera is the only official left.”

Confused, Jack looked at the pilot. Kiera had told him they needed a pilot to launch. Jack and Kiera were in a ship earlier. She could have just typed in her code and pressed her palm and launched. Why did she say they needed a pilot for?

“Jack Corbyn.” Came a voice from behind him.

Jack turned and looked Kiera in the eyes.

“Jack Corbyn.” Kiera said. “You killed Nick? I’m impressed. You’re the only one who has overcome so much on this planet and came out alive.”

“What game is this?” Jack asked, ignoring her attempt at praise.

“There is no *game*, Jack.” Kiera chuckled. “There is only the Red Right Hand.”

Jack just stared at the woman. The one who had helped him evade and kill hands. She had devised the escape plan with him, could have told the chief and Nick, but didn’t.

“You’re having trouble figuring everything out?” Kiera asked, tilting her head.

“Why help me?” Jack blatantly asked.

“The chief was short sighted.” Kiera stated. “And Nick, well, Nick was a loose cannon.”

“I was used.” Jack said more to himself.

“You’re nothing more than a pawn in a—“ Kiera paused. “Well, I guess it is a game, and now it’s time to end your turn.”

Kiera summoned her mushibo in a flash of blue light. The great mushroom monster stretched its massive arms as it came to be.

“Kill him.” Kiera said pointing a finger at Jack.

“Why!?” Jack asked.

“As I’ve told you before. You’re just not meant for long term at the company.” She said blandly.

The mushibo took a step forward and swiped at jack, who rolled and dodged the giant’s hand. Wishing Nox hadn’t been injured when battling the isoptera, Jack back away slowly.

“There is no use running Jack.” Kiera laughed. “Either I kill you, or this planet does. You’ve no idea the monsters that lurk around the corner. You have only tasted a mere speck of what this planet has to offer.”

Jack looked at her bewildered. If what she said was true, then every creature he has came across was nothing more than an appetizer.

“This landing spot was chosen as an entry point.” She went on. “Yes, there were better options as far as landscape was concerned, but the immediate danger here is low.”

“Not low enough.” Jack yelled.

“If you’re meaning the pathetic monsters that eradicated an ancient race.” She started. “Then you’re more naïve than you let one Jack Corbyn.”

The mushibo was growing impatient at the babble. Stepping towards Jack and attempting to grab him. Jack rolled behind a crate that was picked up instead. The mushroom monster proceeded to crush the metal box like a tin can and tossed it to the side. The sheer strength of the beast sent shivers down jack’s spine.

“This planet is host to a number of collectible monsters.” Kiera added. “And the Red Right Hand has plans.”

“Plans? Like to capture them and take them back to Earth?” Jack chided.

“Yes, actually.” Kiera said thoughtfully. “Not only will we advance our global medicine needs with what the planet has to offer, we will also be able to send in certain monsters to eliminate pesky threats.”

“You mean anyone who opposes the RRH!” Jack corrected.

“Don’t interrupt me.” Kiera said matter of fact. “The peace the Red Right Hand could bring with the knowledge and creatures this plant holds would change the world.”

“Change it. Or mold it.” Jack asked incredulously.

“Both.” Kiera said. “Poison cloud.”

The mushibo lunged towards Jack and released toxic pores into the air. The cloud of gas wafter towards Jack who ran back. A blue flame burst forward and burned the toxins from the air. Jack watched as Ghoulie materialized in his new form. Blue flames burning around him.

“I see your ghoul has changed yet again.” Kiera said in awe. “See, this is the type of creature the Red Right Hand could use.”

“Ghoulie, this woman is insane.” Jack said. “Let’s end this.”

“End this?” Kiera burst out laughing. “Mushibo. Crush them.”

The mushibo planted its feet and roots began to grow. Trees erupted from the ground, creating an arena and caging the four of them in. More trees started to sprout up, tall and massive. Jack watched as a nearby one cracked and began to fall towards him.

Ghoulie speared in front of Jack, reaching up and catching the falling tree. Once in its hands, the ghoul threw it back at the mushroom monster who batted it out of the air with ease. Another tree cracked and was falling, but instead of catching it. Ghoulie encased it in fire and turned it to ash.

“The mushroom monster is made of wood!” Jack yelled. “Ghoulie, Firestorm!”

The ghoul’s blue flames erupted in chaos around the specter. A fiery twister formed and Ghoulie stared to push it towards the mushibo. Adding more power to the tornado, the flames burned bright and hot causing Jack and Kiera to cover their faces.

The mushibo broke free of its rooted feet and was backing away, grabbing nearby trees and throwing them at the darkness pushing the flame. The trees were caught in the maelstrom and added fuel to the fire.

“Stop throwing wood at the fire you stupid beast!” Kiera yelled.

The mushibo stopped backing up and Jack saw its green eyes began to glow brighter and a large toxic cloud filled with small mushrooms began to form around it. The mushrooms that were floating in the toxin were sent, one by one, into the fire. As they entered the storm, they began to explode, causing the flames to flicker.

“One last push Ghoulie!” Jack urged. “Burn that monster to the ground!”

The mushibo had backed itself into a corner and was running out of its mushroom bombs. The firestorm got closer and closer, and the wooden skin of the beast began to darken. Shrieks of pain broke the night as the mushibo was slowly burned.

Kiera through herself towards her monster, wanting to shield the beast from the fire. Jack tackled her and pinned her to the ground.

“I need you alive!” Jack yelled, holding a knife to her throat. “Finish it Ghoulie!”

The tornado of flame surrounded the mushroom monster and the screams of pain stopped. Ghoulie added more power and Jack and Kiera watched as the shadow of the mushibo slowly vanished. As Ghoulie began stopping the attack, Jack saw the ground had been torched to dirt. In the middle of the large ring was a pile of charcoal and ash. All that remained of the mushroom monster.

“There, it’s done.” Jack said. “You have nothing.”

Kiera started to struggle, and Jack drew a bit of blood with the knife. A stream began forming down her neck and Kiera’s eyes widened.

“I just need your palm scanned.” Jack stated. “Doesn’t matter if you’re still breathing,”

“What about the access code?” Kiera smirked.

“You can use mine.” Came a voice from behind Jack.

“Ghoulie!” Jack yelled. “Hold her.”

The ghoul appeared at Jack’s side and placed a shadowy foot upon Kiera’s chest, holding her in place. Turning, Jack found himself looking at the chief.

“I..” The chief started.

“The code.” Jack said.

“Take me with you.” The chief pleaded.

“Give me the code, and I’ll consider it.” Jack replied coolly.

“it’s eight five eight seven.” The chief said.

“Confirmed!” Came the pilot’s voice. “Just need a palm scanned.”

Jack looked at the chief, he was beaten, scarred, and done. The look of defeat on his face and the demeaner in which he held himself. Jack felt pity for the man. He was once a proud engineer of the Red Right Hands but had let his ego take hold.

“Get on the pod.” Jack said to the chief.

“Thank you.” The chief said.

“Make sure he is restrained.” Jack yelled at the pilot before turning back to Kiera. “Now what do we do with you?”

“Take me home.” Kiera pleaded.

“No.” Jack said. “I should kill you.”

Kiera’s eyes widened as Ghoulie put pressure on her chest.

“But I think I’ll let the planet do its work.” Jack said. “The supplied of this camp will be what you get.”

“The fires destroyed everything.” Kiera cried. “Even all the cryo chambers are ash.”

“Not my issue.” Jack said shrugging.

Turning away from Kiera, Jack walked towards the drop pod. In a flash of blue light, he recalled Ghoulie, releasing Kiera.

“Jack!” The chief yelled.

Jack turned and found Kiera lunging towards him, her knife out. Still holding his, he plunged it into her stomach before she brought her arm up. Looking into her eyes, Jack watched as the life drained. His hand was warm with blood and her body started to become heavy. Dropping the woman, his knife still embedded, Jack climbed into the drop pod.

**Bestiary**

**Charchu** - mouse looking creature. Completely orange, with a flame on his tail. Prefers to eat charred food.

**Nantu** - 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

**Oryc** - 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. (Blood-stained white fur)

**Ghoul** - black orb that materialized and floated in the air. The flames erupting around it gave it an eerie presence in the twilight. >> Changes at some point into a shadowy version of what it was killing/attacked

**Jack’s Ghoulie** - A shadow appeared where ghoulie had been floating. Deep purple flames erupted around the shadow. Four long gangly shadowy arms protruded from the torso. There was no head, but two white eyes cast in a shadow where a head should have been. The bottom of the torso showed no legs, but just darkness, almost like smoke trailed out

**Lanka** - A white lion, but not a lion. The head was like the large cats, including a great mane, but the body, was different, it was made entirely of rocks. Lots and lots of stones made up the creature’s body. Shining white stones, not a scratch on them

**Bullpix** - A small four-legged thing. Head like a frog but covered in brown fur and orange spots. It had several fluffy orange tails

**Nox** - closer to 45 centimeters. The large eyes set into the dragon’s triangular head. The ridges down it’s back reminded Jack of an Ankylosaurus. The tail was long and had stubby spikes along the back all the way to the tip. The tail appeared to be about one third of the dragon’s total length. It stood on four legs each armed with devastating looking claws. The small wings protruding from the back where shoulder blades would normally be, were equally as impressive. Long armatures with a leathery skin flap. The entire dragon, again Jack was sure was entirely purple the day before, was now a deep rich purple with black spots

No longer a small dragon, Nox had grown to be a full meter in body length and another meter in tail. The wingspan also grew comparatively, and Jack was in awe of his now dark colored dragon. Nox had become a dark, dark purple grey.

There was a red ring on each of Nox’s shoulders and on his forehead.

**Dracul** - long lanky wings, leathery like Nox’s, but these had a distinctive claw in the middle. The body was short, but muscular and the tail was short. The large mouth that kept opening and closing causing a clicking noise showed substantial teeth, both in size and number, dripping with gel like drool.

**Atrax** - A great big dark red spider. Three meters in height, the carapace was the size of a compact car and the thorax housed two massive fangs that danced in the fire light, dripping with liquid. Jack watched as the fire reflected off several eyes, then the spider reared up on its four hind legs, reached the four front ones to the sky. The massive venom-soaked fangs started clicking.

**Inguar** - The cyclops, whose large eye was inset into the chest cavity, stood two meters tall. Had large muscular arms that ended in 3 fingered clawed hands. The torso under the eye held a long vertical indent, and the beast stood on two muscular legs. The entire monster was covered in a thick matted fur.

**Pompom** – Small fuzzy creatures with two large eyes and feet that protrude from beneath their soft fuzzy fur. Range in colors.

**Aquaneki** - Jack was greeted with a giant sea monster. Shooting out of the water ten meters into the sky after Nox, this long snake looking beast snapping its large, fanged mouth at the dragon. Nox pumping its wings with more effort than Jack had seen from it, was rising higher and higher. The snake creature had a long body, and above the surface of the water, Jack could see six legs protruding out from near its head, with two gangly arms that looked like twigs near its mouth. Each appendage was equipped with two finger like claws. The head was shaped like Nox, triangular, except the back of the head went back past the base, presumably to protect the neck. Jack could almost make out several more limbs attached to the monster below the surface of the water.

**Mushibo** - large green lumbering mushroom. The body was made of a mossy covered wood. A head topped with a large green mushroom, framing two glowing green eyes. Long vines covered a mouth and shaped a beard. Muscular in stature, the mushibo stood four meters tall and bellowed.

**Spike** - Spike was a mammoth of a scorpion. Following the Atrax in body size but having a shorter stature. Only one and half meters tall. The tail, scaled and tipped with a deadly telson, the venom-injecting stinger. Along with the six exoskeletal legs, two very large man crushing pincers were equipped on the front arms. Jack studied the creature in horror as it’s mandibles clicked furiously, dripping poisonous venom from its mouth,

**Grootslang** - An elephant’s head greeted Jack, followed by the two front legs, but the back half of the body was that of a snake. A long slithering tail followed the great beast. Spikes flowed down the spine culminating with a very large horn upon the forehead, which was a large plate like a triceratops. The eyes glowed green, smoking as if they were on fire. The tusks, Jack could count six, grew out pointing different directions. The trunk was long, and the ears were floppy, but the mouth. The mouth open as it should, except the bottom jaw split horizontally, connected by a thin flap of skin. Each side, and to Jacks horror, the tongue were lines with short stubby sharp teeth.

**Jebels** – A massive turtle type creature. Short to the ground with a massive shell on its back. Powerful bone crunching jaws with teeth lining the sides when the mouth is closed. When the creature opens its mouth, you couldn’t begin to count to the amount of needle point razer sharp teeth. The six flesh tearing claws on each foot were enough to shred every once of meat from its prey. The shell, used for defense, was lined with small spikes around the brim and large swooping ridges along the top. Glowing teal eyes matched the glowing underbelly that would occasionally show when the monster attacked.

**Smiling Fiend** - The bodiless smile had a body, albeit invisible. In the torrent of flame, you could make out a tall skinny body. Jack guessed it was two meters tall with arms that reached the ground. Gaunt in body shape, jack was unable to make out any distinguishable features in the fire, except the unmistakable smiling mouth. A diabolical laugh escaped the smile.

Isoptera – A monster that was two meters tall, standing on powerful legs. The arms, muscular, ended with claws with three sharp fingers. The creature was like the Inguar in shape only. The horrific characteristics of the isoptera were unmistakably different. Two inset red eyes sat above a vertical mouth in the abdomen. The mouth was in laid with teeth that pulled in the food as if they were lips. The two horns that formed, came forward and swooped back. The horns were covered in thorns, pointing in every direction. The exoskeleton of the carapace body reminded Jack of a termite’s body.