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 descent I the pods during landing.

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.