

Rude Awakening

Waking up and coughing blood is always awful. Waking up and having nowhere to expel the blood except the ice-covered porthole in front of your face is worse. This is the situation Ensign Jackson has found himself in. Lying in an upright position on top of a small black bed. His body's muscles, his hair, even his attire feel frozen solid and yet his brain can process information and the urge to cough. Upon coughing up another round of blood he watches as the now slush-covered porthole begins to rise. He can also hear the motor of the Cryopod starting to hum. His eyes dart back and forth trying to figure out what is happening. Why is he awake? Why is he coughing?

Suddenly the door to the Cryopod is quickly opened. Upon its opening, a large expulsion of white fog can be seen exiting the pod. Ensign Jackson attempts to swath the fog away, yet his arms do not move. At this time, the motor of the Cryopod stops and the pod itself rattles. Jackson's body is shaken from its quite frozen state, and it begins to lean forward. Despite having no control of his body currently, he begins to brace for impact as his body slowly tilts forward. Entering free fall, he begins to swiftly move through the lingering fog and starts to see the metallic grate just below the pod. Closing his eyes before impact, Jackson waits to feel the cold grate slam against his face. Yet, it never comes. Opening his eyes, the ensign sees a large arm draped across his chest, preventing his fall.

"I got you. Let me lay you back up in your bed" a voice said.

The ensign is moved back up to his former position. The fog has dissipated and now the ensign is able to get a good look at the person behind the arm. Standing before him is a tall woman with broad shoulders, long black hair, and a uniform with rank of commander attached to

it. He recognizes the individual as Commander Lipton, the ships medical doctor. Jackson watches the doctor as she begins to press neon blue buttons on a control panel next to the pod.

“Now Ensign can you hear me?” Lipton asks.

“Barely.” Jackson replies raggedly.

“Well that’s good. Hopefully the damage isn’t too severe then. I’m going to jolt up your systems now, hopefully that will help with the Cryo burn.”

The doctor presses another button on the panel. Within an instant Ensign Jackson begins to feel static build up within his feet. After that his body jolts, feeling as though his entire body has been electrocuted. In this moment Jackson’s muscles begin to awake, starting with the muscles in his feet and then eventually the muscles in the rest of his body. Though now having regained control of his muscles, they weren’t quite ready for him to control. Jackson begins to attempt to move his leg out of the pod. In doing so he begins to fall once more, this time only falling to his knees.

“Sorry about that. Probably should have told you to wait a bit after the jolt.”

Opening his mouth in an attempt to speak to the doctor the ensign begins to cough once again. This time much deeper and having a raggedy liquid sound attached to each cough. Jackson begins to cough up huge globs of blood. Some quite normal in texture, others almost crystalline in nature. He watches as the globs begin to break against the metal grate below him and as the remnants fall down to the next level below him. They break apart again on the metallic grate below them as well.

“Let’s get you to the sick station.”

Lipton wraps her arm around Jackson as he continues to cough up blood. They begin to walk past the line of other Cryopod’s adjacent to Jackson’s. Each one housing another member

of the crew. Each resting peacefully all frozen in time. Reaching the end of the room, Jackson notices another pod that is wide open, this one with flashing red lights and an automatic voice repeating the phrase “Emergency Cryopod 57.” Lipton stops at the entrance of this pod and presses a red button on the panel next to it. The voice and lights cease, and the pod begins to close up once again.

They step out into the hallway. All lights except a few minimal pathway lights are on. By now Jackson has gained better control of his movements and is able to walk without the aid of Lipton. Though not saying a word Lipton acknowledges that Jackson can move on his own and continues walking towards the sick station. After a few minutes of labored walk down the hall passing other Cryopod rooms and locker rooms, each with closed off doors, they reach the station. Lipton opens the door and flips a switch turning on a bright neon white light. Jackson and Lipton recoil from the sudden brightness, as they have been in dim lighting since awakening. Lipton dims the light to an acceptable level.

“Sit down on the bed. I have good news and bad news.” Lipton says

“I have Cryo sickness, don’t I?”

“Yes, only 0.02% of soldiers have it. We are all tested for it before going into space.”

“I was. The corpsman on Earth said I was fine and granted me full clearance.”

“Well that doesn’t matter now. Especially since you have it and are currently in space.”

“What’s the good news?”

“That was the good news. The bad news is that it has only been three months.”

“Three months! That can’t be! We have so much time left in the journey. What am I supposed to do?”

“I know ensign and I am sorry. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. However, for the next two and a half years, you are going to have to sleep naturally. Otherwise, you risk death going back into Cryo. Now, I will be returning to my Cryopod once I have gotten you all situated out here but I will be sure to schedule wake ups every couple of months to check on you.”

Ensign Jackson began to feel as though his body was shutting down once again. Listening to Lipton talk about returning to the Cryopod only made him envious. Not just of her but everyone currently laying in one. For them time, will only have passed for a few seconds. Whereas it will be two long years for him. Alone. Lipton stopped talking and started to write down a list of instructions that Jackson will have to follow. Maintenance and vitals checks. What food he will have to ration during his two years. Also importantly, what decks of the ship are off limits to him.

“What about when we get to the colony? What then?” Jackson asks.

“Well, we will most likely leave you with the colonists. Cryo sickness is pretty much a discharge sentence. We also wouldn’t want you to spend another three years by yourself. However the captain will have the final decision.”

“I see.”

For the rest of the time Jackson and Lipton sat in silence as Lipton prepared her instructions. Most things she left to him to decide, such as which bedroom to sleep in or what bathroom to use. However, she did make sure to include a rigorous workout routine fearing his body would become weaker in space. Upon finishing her orders, Lipton stood up and walked out of the sick station. Jackson followed her back to the Cryopod room in which they had both awakened in. Now standing in front of Lipton’s pod she pressed a green button on the panel, opening it once again.

“Listen, if you feel like an emergency is happening, medical or ship-wise, do not be afraid to wake me or other crew members. Once I'm in the pod, press the red button on the side.”

“I understand.”

“Good luck, ensign, and I am sorry that this has happened. I wish we'd caught it sooner.”

“Me too.”

Lipton began to lie back into her pod and watched as Jackson pressed the button. The pod's motor began to hum, slowly bringing down the door onto itself. The viewing port hole started to descend closer and closer to Lipton's face and she began to slow her breath as the pod shut. Upon shutting a loud hiss could be heard as the pod sealed itself. Jackson looked inside in the porthole similar to the one he awoke to, just not covered in blood and ice. He watched as Lipton began to close her eyes and mouth and watched as a blue flash engulfed the pod. As the Cryopod began freezing Commander Lipton's body, he knew this would be the last time he would talk to another person for some time.

Jackson leaves the Cryopod room closing the door behind him and begins to wander into the halls of the ship. Out of a ten deck ship the Cryo deck, as it called by those on board, is deck five. Perfectly centered in the middle of ship is a box transport elevator that ferries individuals and cargo up and down the ship. Smaller elevators exist throughout the ship but this one connects the whole ship. The ensign walks to the elevator and begins to pry open a panel. Dropping the panel onto the floor of the ship. A large handled lever mostly metallic and chrome is revealed and sitting in an upward fashion. Jackson grasps the lever with his hand pulling it downward. Despite having only woken up a few hours ago Jackson's strength has returned to its natural state. The lever quickly falls and the massive elevator doors open revealing the inner workings on the shaft. While the ship is in Cryo state, a large majority of its systems are down to

conserve power. This includes the power to the elevator and most lighting on the ship. A set of ladders exist on each side of the shaft. Jackson begins to climb with the intent of heading to deck three, the mess hall.

Climbing upward for what feels like ten minutes, he finally reaches the closed off elevator doors of deck three. Jackson wraps his arm around the ladder and reaches for another chrome lever, pulling it downward. The doors open identically to the ones below and Jackson steps out of the shaft and begins to walk down the hall of deck three. Entering into the mess hall, a large room with a kitchen attached to it. The kitchen was located to the left of door, while the sitting area was to the right of the door. Jackson wanders to the left entering into the kitchen. From here he pulled out the now-folded list that Lipton gave him. It read that he was only allowed to unpack three MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) a day. Jackson opens a massive cupboard labeled emergency storage to see shelves full of MRE's packed from the bottom to the top with an eerie blue light emitting from the room. Grabbing the first brown plastic bag, Jackson returns to the mess hall and sat at the far end of it next to one of the few windows on the ship and began to unpack the bag.

The instructions on the bag explicitly states to eat everything included in the MRE to ensure proper nutrition. Jackson begins to remove its contents revealing a large meal bag labeled chicken and dumplings with a flameless ration heater with it and another bag labeled freedom cookies, a set of jam and peanut butter and finally some snack bread. Jackson follows the instructions on the bag and begins to cook his dumplings. Upon closing the bag and letting the heater sit, he begins to hear a sizzle come from the bag. Letting the meal cook, Jackson stands up and walks toward the window. It is rare for an ensign to get to see the ship in motion all by himself. Jackson watches as and stares out into the void of space, as specks of light all different

colors move past each moment. Unsure of the science behind the engines, Jackson did know they were traveling far greater speeds than the travel speed of light. Continuing to stare out the window of the ship, Jackson begins to notice the sizzling of the heater die down. In doing so, he wanders back into the kitchen and grabs a plate and utensils. Returning to his table, Jackson placed down the plate and opened up the MRE. With it came a burst of steam escaping from the bag, wrapping itself all over the ensign's nose. Jackson opens the bag containing the dumplings and poured them onto his plate.

The consistency of the meal is white slop and flows slowly out of the bag onto the plate. The expression on Jackson's face begins to drain, watching as chunks of chicken and dough began to fall out of the bag bit by bit. An awful stench permeates the air. Jackson begins to read the instructions on the bag again. It states to let the bag sit for twelve minutes in total. Unsure of how long he let the bag sit for Jackson knew he would have to attempt to eat the white chunky slop. Grabbing his metal spoon, Jackson dips it into the slop, lifting out some chicken and broth. Getting an up-close smell of the meal he can't help but gag, then retch at the sour smell. Dropping the spoon into the slop, he pushes the meal away. Opening the package of bread, also the jams and peanut butter, he quickly makes himself a sandwich. Jackson stares back out the window as he begins to slowly eat the sandwich in hopes to savor the flavor. He knows meals like this will be his life for the next two years. Finishing his sandwich he grabs the package of freedom cookies, exits the room and decides to explore more of the ship.

Returning to the elevator Jackson stows his cookies into his back pocket and once again ascends the ladder. This time he stops at deck one pulls down the chrome lever opening the doors revealing the command deck, the smallest deck on the entire ship. Most of the ships officers reside here outside of Lipton. Near the Entrance are seven Cryopods with blue key pads each

housing members of the bridge crew who are currently on ice. Jackson doesn't seem to mind them all too much as he pulls off another panel of the wall. This panel being located next to a much smaller door, pulling the red lever inside. The door quickly opens revealing the bridge of the ship. Most of the instruments are powered down and the lights here are dim as well. Yet despite the dark nature of the room, it is still illuminated by the light that is berating the ship while it is in deep space movement. In the front of the bridge is a large window with a view of spectacular fashion. During transit the ship is moving at such speeds and breaking through gaseous clouds and solar dust. This results in a barrage of colors all combining against the ship. The windows and other parts of the ship do not get to experience it to the fullest as they are not located at the bow of the ship. The bridge is.

Jackson had heard tales of the magnificent views that could be seen from the bridge of a starship from his father, a former captain of one. Ensign Jackson knew this would be the one and only time he would ever get to experience this view. Never would he get to be the captain of a starship, let alone ever be allowed on one again. In this moment is when it all hits Jackson. The sickness, the borderline discharge and even the awful meal. His life was over, he would have to spend the next two and a half years of his life, on this ship, eating crappy meals and being by himself. No one to talk to, just himself. He begins to weep at the thought of this quietly sitting down in the doorway. After some time, Jackson looks up at the window once again Jackson can see as the particles shift from yellow to blue, as though they just passed through some ice particles. The blue light from outside the ship washes over him, Jackson began to think back on how Lipton's face looked as she was frozen over. She seemed content with it. Now, with blue light engulfing his face, he feels terrible sorrow. The sensation of sorrow washes over him just as the light has. In this moment Jackson arrives at impasse of whether to spend the next three years

alone or to only spend one day alone. Jackson knows if he chooses the three years he will be left at a colony with strangers. Knowing he would never be able to return home. His eyes are still wet from the tears, yet he knows his decision.

Jackson walks deeper into the bridge and sits down in a chair. The captain's chair. He takes out the package of cookies that he kept with him and tears into the bag. Taking out one sugary cookie and placing it into his mouth. Jackson sits as the blue light begins to fade away and an orange light begins to roll in. He sat for some time, eating the cookies and watching the colors change every few minutes. Jackson doesn't care about the crumbs he is leaving all over the captain's chair. He tells himself it's his parting gift to the captain.

Finishing the cookies and leaving the bridge of the ship. Jackson returns to the shaft once more this time descending to the deck where he awoke. Returning to the sick station from before, he opens a glass cabinet methodically searching for a bottle. He starts to pull out bottle after bottle, most of them filled with medical liquids and pills but none of these are what he is looking for. Jackson begins to doubt it would be here at this station, but he knows it is on the ship somewhere. The question is where? He thinks to himself as though he is Lipton. Where would Lipton hide the bottle. She wouldn't keep it on her person but she would keep it nearby. Her quarters Jackson thinks to himself. Lipton's quarters are on deck six. Jackson exits the sick station and returns to the shaft once more. He climbs one level down and forces open the doors. Before him are six doors, one is labeled with a red cross. Jackson believes this to be Lipton's quarters. Walking towards the door he notices a handprint scanner next to the door, he attempts to access with his own. A red flash brightens up the hallway and the word denied appears. Jackson annoyed with this outcome is unsure how to proceed. He knows he can't wake Lipton up

just to get her to open her quarters. She would be beyond inquisitive as to why he needs access to them.

Jackson starts to pace around the deck trying to think as to how he can get access to the bottle. Jackson knows that most quarters have two ways in, his father would tell him stories about he would have to use the emergency hatch on few occasions. All decks have minor accesses to each other, the emergency hatch of Lipton's quarters would be accessible via the hatch network. Jackson quickly begins to search the deck for an entry point into the hatch network. Looking around he notices a hatch in the far-right upper corner of the floor, Jackson quickly climbs the ladder underneath the hatch and grabs ahold of the hatch and attempts to pry it open. Despite all of his regained strength the hatch doesn't budge. Jackson tightens his grip on the hatch yet begins to lose his footing on the ladder. He feels as his feet slip off and he begins to dangle from the hatch. Letting go he falls back down floor. His feet slamming into the metal echoing throughout the deck. Keeping his balance on the ladder and attempting to open the hatch is proving to be too difficult for Jackson. Returning to the shaft Jackson knows one of the ten decks must have an easier access hatch. He climbs down once more.

Stopping at deck seven Jackson pulled the all too familiar lever at this point, opening the doors and entering into the hallway. Unsure as to what deck seven was, Jackson was curious to search around. Before both feet hit the floor of the hallway Jackson felt himself become lighter, as though passing through the elevator doorway had lightened his mass. Jackson came to realize that deck seven had much less gravity than the other decks. He was able to float around with his now weightless state. Unsure as to why the deck was like this, Jackson began to search around the hallway. Looking in the same place as the deck above him the emergency hatch was not there. Jackson began to search the deck for the hatch. While the majority of rooms on the deck

were locked by handprint scanners, one room in the far-right corner wasn't. The door was fully opened. Jackson floated over towards the door and entered. The room was full of small neon blue boxes, each stacked five high throughout the entire room. Jackson began to search the room hoping to find the hatch. Indeed, he did find it. In the back of the room was an emergency hatch.

Jackson grips the hatch and attempts to pry it open. Despite the lessened gravity Jackson feels himself getting nowhere with the hatch. He grips the hatch placing his feet against the wall and pulls as hard as he can. In a sudden snap the hatch unclasps from the wall. Due to the sudden snap Jackson loses his footing on the wall and begins to float away from the hatch. Still holding onto the now removed hatch Jackson flings the hatch back into the room, as he makes his way to the now open emergency network. While entering the network Jackson hears a small crack and thump from the room he just left. Believing it to be the hatch hitting the wall. He begins to climb up the hatch network. Despite the networks entrances being quite small the network itself is quite spacious. Floating upward he quickly feels a rush of gravity take hold of him and grabs onto a ladder in the network shaft. Knowing he has crossed over into deck six's network. Reaching a point where a ladder is no longer needed. Jackson begins to enter into a long hallway.

He quickly begins to see other hatches. Most of them are labeled with proper identifiers or tags. Just as her door outside, Lipton's is labeled with a Red Cross. Jackson grabs ahold of the hatch and rips it from the wall. Revealing Lipton's quarters. He crawls into the room and begins to search. He knows it is here somewhere. Lipton's quarters contains a bed, a desk, two shelves full of medical books, a dresser and an attached bathroom. Opening each drawer of the desk Jackson finds no bottle. Entering the bathroom he opens a cabinet. Within the cabinet is a toothbrush, floss and some mouth wash. Normal hygiene things. A few pill bottles as well, but not the bottle he needs. Jackson also notices a white key attached to the side of the inner cabinet.

He quickly grabs ahold of it. Knowing it belongs to something. Entering her room again, Jackson begins to look for anything of note. Jackson lifts up the bed and looks under it. Finding nothing he opens the dresser and also finds nothing as well. Jackson starts to simmer at the hassle it is becoming to find this bottle. He sits down in Lipton's chair and begins to stare at her books. All of them stacked properly and ordered by height it would appear. Most of the books are hardcover paper backs, however one book appears to be plastic? Jackson thinks to himself that can't be right. Standing up he grabs the "book" and opens it. Revealing a bottle containing enough mixture of toxic liquids that consuming the entire bottle would confine him to being alone for only one day. Grabbing the bottle and throwing the package to floor he exits the room the same way he came in. Leaving the mess behind him. Crawling back down to deck seven he feels the loss of gravity yet continues onward returning the blue boxed room.

Entering the room, he sees what caused the loud thump and crack. In his haste of throwing the hatch he was not aware as to where it was heading. The floating hatch nicked one of the stacked blue boxes causing it to crack. Something was out of place; the blue coloring of the box had now disappeared. All that remained was a clear cracked box floating within the room. Jackson looked throughout the room in search of the blue liquid, however he could not find any. Exiting the room and returning to the hallway he looked up and down the deck seeing no trace of blue. He decided to return to the elevator. Grabbing onto the shaft's ladder, he felt the effect of gravity take hold. The sudden rush of mass caused him to lose his footing on the ladder. Still holding onto to ladder, he was able to prevent himself from falling. As his legs were dangling, Jackson regained his footing. He looked up the shaft and saw blue marks all along the rungs of the ladders and quickly climbed back to deck three where the blue markings had stopped. Exiting the shaft and just sitting in front of the doorway, relaxing his body.

Following the blue marks led him to the mess hall, Jackson walked back into the mess hall and noticed that the marks had stopped. He sat down at the table next to the window once again. Wondering how the blue marks had disappeared. He rested his head on the table just trying to relax and then noticed a hint of blue appear before him. Jackson quickly lifted his head and looked across the table. There before him was a sludge of blue, having a striking similarity in shape to a salamander. It appeared to have much larger arms, legs, head, and a few fins scattered throughout. Looking back at him were two black and beady eyes.

“Uh hi.”

The creature tilted his head back and forth while looking over Jackson. It quickly moved its arms forward and floated closer towards Jackson. Jackson recoiled in fear, but the creature stopped in its path and opened its little mouth making the sound of a pop. This caused Jackson to relax and start looking over the creature. He stuck his finger out towards the creature in the hopes to touch it. Before he could react the creature quickly grabbed hold of the finger and started to climb down his arm then wrapping himself around Jackson’s forearm. The creature then looked up at Jackson. Tilting his head once again.

“What are you?”

“Wa r ou?” the creature said.

Jackson once again recoiled upon hearing the creature not believing it could talk. Jackson quickly asked it many questions. What are you? Who are you? Do you have a name? Do you need to eat? Each time he asked a question the creature would tilt its head and every time repeating the same phrase “Wa r ou?”. Jackson’s posture began to slouch as he realized the creature had no idea how to talk and that it was just mimicking sounds. At this moment Jackson let out a large yawn, then the creature did as well.

“You’re tired too, huh? Well, let’s get some sleep I guess. Jackson pulled out his list of instructions from Lipton and began to fully read over it. He noticed at the top of the instructions a section titled “Sleeping Arrangements.”

“Since you are unable to enter Cryo you will have to use one of the navy cots located on deck four. Officially, you need to be using one of these cots. However, since you will be stuck alone for the next two and a half years, you may use this code (951B) to enter the cook’s quarters located on deck three.”

Jackson reading this looked up immediately and wondered where the cook’s quarters were. He looked down at the creature still wrapped around his arm. Getting up from the table, he returned to the kitchen and began to look around. Searching throughout the kitchen Jackson was only able to find pots, pans, and the large cache of rations waiting for him in the cupboard. Continuing to search the rest of the deck looking for anything that resembled a doorway or quarters, Jackson was unable to find anything. Unsure as to where the cook’s quarters were, Jackson returned to the window and sat on the floor of the mess hall. The blue creature had now crawled onto Jackson’s shoulder, resting against his neck. Jackson took his finger and brushed it against the creature. Feeling it’s soft skin. Looking out the window and watching as the light particles quickly moved passed him. He watched as the remnants went from green to yellow to an eerie blue in quick succession, noticing that the creature had mimicked each color as they passed. Unsure as to what the ship had just passed through, it did result in an interesting sight as the creature had now stopped at its original blue.

Jackson looked at the creature who had now dozed off closing his eyes. Jackson then quickly shot up from his seated position and began to return to the kitchen once again. The blue light from the window caused him to remember the eerie light coming from the cupboard,

quickly he returns to it. Jackson began to move boxes of rations around some out into the kitchen itself. Removing the last box Jackson exposed a doorway with a blue keypad similar to the ones located on the bridge. Entering the code given by Lipton, the door quickly opened, revealing the private quarters for the cook. The room consisted of a cot, three shelves full of books, a small desk and chair. There were also bowls, trays, and what appeared to be a set of aprons hung on a rack. Jackson was caught off guard by all of this. The key piece of the quarters was the large, door-sized window adjacent from the entry way. The window faced the bow of the deck and resulted in the same stream of light and particles appearing once more.

The light particles were much different at this window than the bridge or even the window out in the mess hall. Deck two sticks out above deck three, because of this the light and gasses that are slamming into deck two. While the majority of them are rolling off to the sides of the same, some of them are falling down. Jackson watches as the particles begin to fall like rain, each drop a different color. Some red, some blue and even pink drops begin to appear. This results in a constant stream of color flowing down the window. Jackson sits down in the chair next to the desk and watches as the particle rain falls. Jackson, for the first time since grabbing it, pulls out the bottle. Slamming it onto the desk. The loud thump awoke the creature who made a quiet cry upon waking up.

“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

The creature looked up at Jackson and began to nuzzle against his neck. In the moment Jackson looked at the bottle then the creature. Then the creature let out a deep yawn causing Jackson to watch as its tiny blue mouth stretched wide open revealing a bluish tongue. This caused Jackson to yawn as well. Looking back down at the creature who was looking back up at him. Jackson smiled for the first time today. The creature smiled back at him then once again

began to nuzzle against his neck again and starts to drift off. Jackson looked back over to the bottle. "Maybe tomorrow." He lays down on the cot, watching the window shift colors, the creature began to snore.