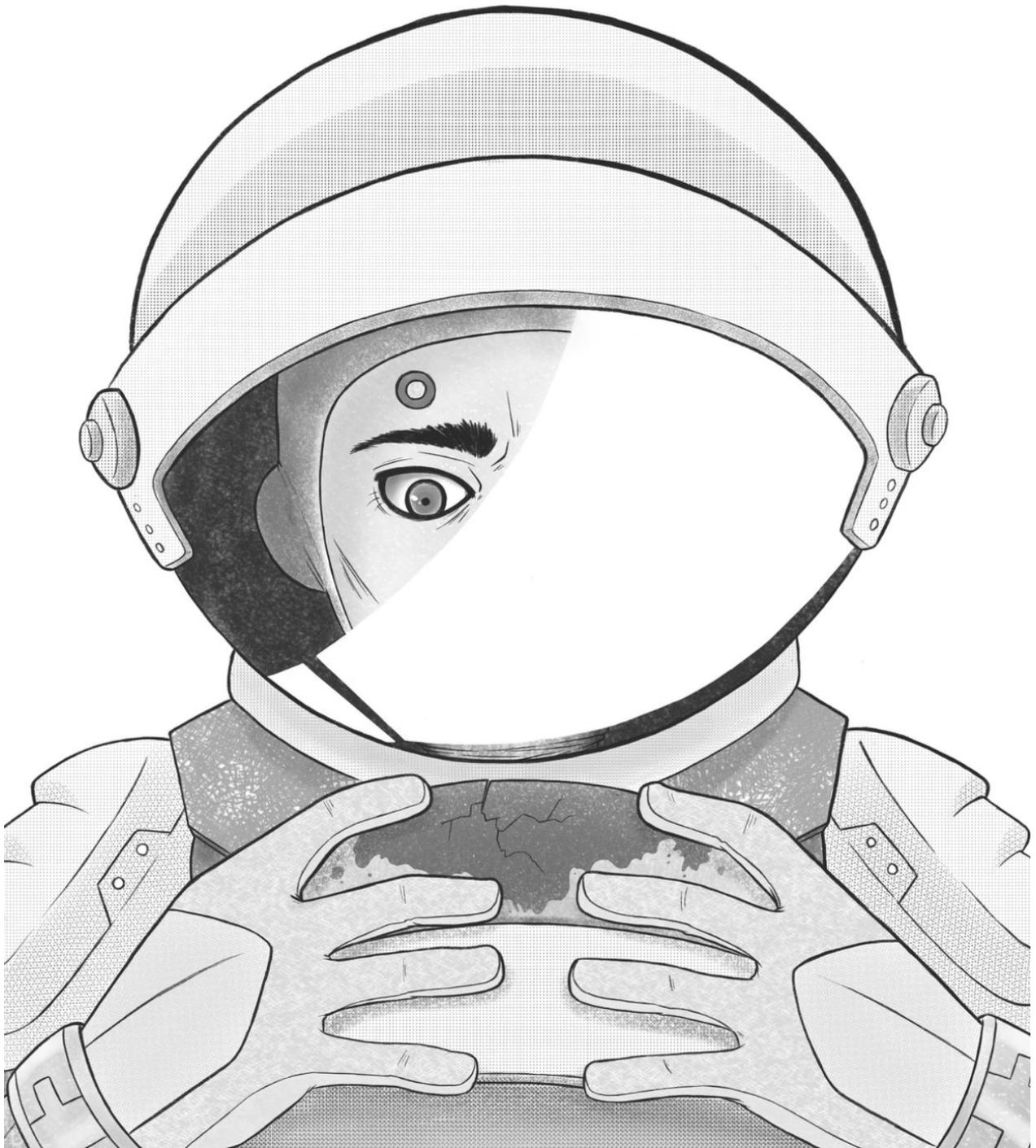
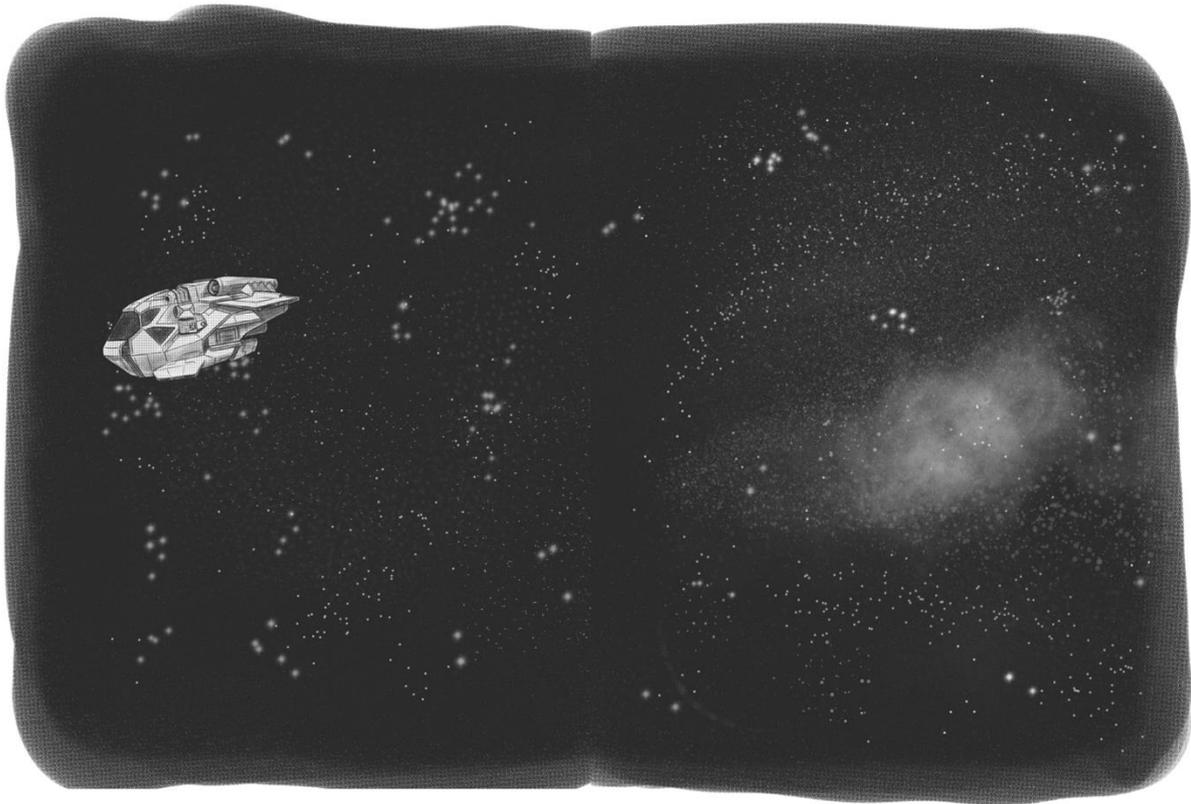


# am i dreaming?



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The air was getting stale, harder to breathe.

The main engines of the ship had shut down.

Propelled through the vast unknown of space by some kind of storm. Sylvia didn't quite understand how it happened, some mystery of deep space.

Thirty days, and another twenty or so since departing the little spaceport she had called home for the past few years, Sylvia found herself sitting in the pilot seat of the sleek cockpit. She would stare at the displays, hoping something would jump out at her, but nothing ever did.

The dim lights hummed gently, and the small amount of recycled air being pushed through the vents echoed throughout the ship's tiny metal passageways and down into the cargo bay below. It was enough to drive a person insane over time, that and the intermittent beeping of the distress signal on the ship's dashboard. Illuminating the various switches and controls every five seconds with its bright red light. Every five seconds. Every five god damn seconds for the past thirty days.

The heating systems were the first thing to go after the engines. She noticed this a few days ago and started wearing a cot blanket over her pilot's overalls like a cape. Combat boots became a necessity to stop her feet from sticking to cold grated metal flooring.

Sylvia's head was feeling it the most, shaven so that the metal implants on her crown and forehead could interact with her helmet and help with tactical manoeuvrability in combat. A common practice for naval space pilots.

*"Is this ship going to be my tomb? Am I going to be rescued? Maybe there will be another ship out here, drifting like me..."* These thoughts seemed to be the only things that kept her going some days, they helped keep her mind active, even if some of them sent her into an anxious panic.

## AM I DREAMING? – TRAVIS EVANS

With little oxygen left, the power reserves sounded like they were about to die at any moment. She prepped her space suit in the cargo bay, making sure everything was connected and ready to wear when the engine finally stopped, and the oxygen tanks ran dry.

Sylvia was lightheaded. Her heart was pounding. Fast. Faster than she had ever felt it beat before, like it was coming out of her chest, but something was constricting it at the same time. The amount of combat she had seen and still her heart hadn't beat this fast before now. Her eyes were swelling with tears and her knees buckled under her weight. She fell to the ground and into the foetal position. The cold metal floor against her face. The thought of dying in space, the thought of never seeing her parents or her little cat again daunted on her. Like her future had already been set.

She lay on that floor for hours, to the point that the panic subsided, and she felt calm about the situation. Letting her thoughts drift away from her inevitable doom. Eyes, heavy from exhaustion, she drifted into a deep sleep. Making sure to rest her head on the blanket to avoid becoming one with the floor. She wanted to get up and lay in her cot, but her body wouldn't move. It was still recovering from the shock.

A slow thumping sound stirred Sylvia from her slumber.

THUMP...THUMP...THUMP...

Disorientated, she looked around and tried to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. It was nearly impossible with the echoing sounds of the reserve engine over clocking. Chugging away as it kept the last of the support systems online for a little while longer. She donned the fluoro orange space suit and screwed on the white helmet. Double checking that everything was intact and sealed, she made her way back up the ladder chute to the flight deck. The red light on the dash was solid, illuminating the room with its glow. She froze. This meant only one thing...contact. With who or what she did not know but the thumping sound increased in pace, almost in tune with the thumping of Sylvia's heart.

She kept what little she brought with her before departing in a small quarter behind the cockpit. Tearing open the locker at the foot of her cot and discarding the top layer of clothes, she found the energy pistol that was tucked away under the belongings. One magazine, that's all she brought with her. Sylvia never intended to use it, it was a precautionary measure.

"Better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it," her drill sergeant would say to her in basic training.

Sylvia quickly checked over the gun, making sure the barrel was clear and the magazine slipped in with ease. It had a nice weight to it considering how bulky it was in her small hands. The first time she used one the recoil almost sent her off her feet, she wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Flicking a switch on the main console, the shutter of the cockpit window ground open. The first time she had looked out into space for a few weeks, it would have been peaceful if it weren't for the bloodied space suit thumping on the window. The visor cracked, the same fluoro orange of her own suit.

*"Is this another pilot?"* Sylvia thought to herself.

It took her a few minutes to get through the airlock, being cautious and closing the inner cargo bay door before opening the large, vaulted door that led to the outside. To the void of space.

Attaching a wire from her belt to the ship, she made her way around the tiny vessel. Trying not to lose her grip on the railings, remembering a few weeks ago when she did

## AM I DREAMING? – TRAVIS EVANS

exactly that and almost threw up in her suit. Heart still pounding, she didn't want to be out here too long.

The mysterious space suit was in sight. She grabbed another wire from her belt and attached it to the other suit, being careful not to push it off the ship.

Getting the suit around to the airlock was no problem, it floated with ease. Once she was inside the ship it was a different story. The deadweight, a body was definitely inside of it. Sylvia dragged them through the airlock and propped them up against the wall next to the ladder. The inside of the visor was covered in blood, making it hard to see who, or what, was inside.

She unholstered the energy pistol from her hip and cautiously proceeded to nudge the suit with her foot whilst pointing the pistol at its seemingly lifeless form. No movement. Not even a slight reaction from it.

Sylvia holstered her pistol and started to unscrew the helmet from the suit. It was exactly the same as her own, bit worn and bloodied but the little details were all the same. Her heartbeat got faster, she was trying not to breath too heavily, trying to preserve the oxygen in her own suit.

The helmet finally came undone. She slowly pulled it off. The human face underneath was familiar... it was her own.

Their nose broken; the doppelgangers face was covered in dry blood. Sylvia was frozen in place, helmet still clutched in her hands. Was she dreaming, was this some warped reality caused by the past month of loneliness?

The doppelganger opened their eyes opened, an ocean blue, just like Sylvia's. She was expecting them to be black, like some sort of creature from the depths of the warp. The doppelganger was calm, unlike Sylvia, as if they knew exactly what was happening. The doppelgangers mouth opened, but it took a moment for the words to form, as if being in space had frozen the ligaments in their throat.

"Hello."

Sylvia was visibly shaking; she couldn't control it. Not being able to grasp the fact that the voice she was hearing was her own, that the person in that fluorescent suit was indeed herself. "*I must be dreaming.*"

Before Sylvia could respond the doppelganger leapt up, foaming at the mouth, blood spurting from in-between their teeth. The doppelganger tackled Sylvia to the ground, grabbing the helmet from her and smashing it into Sylvia's. It took a few hits to make a dent in the thick plastic visor.

Sylvia reached for her pistol, as she drew it the doppelganger slammed down on her hand if they knew exactly what Sylvia's next move would be. Sylvia dropped the gun, the pure shock of her hand hitting the ground loosened the grip. A swift jab in her ribs and Sylvia momentarily lost her breath.

The doppelganger got to their feet and picked up the energy pistol. Sylvia noticed a tear in its suit, as if an energy bolt had grazed it.

"*How did this thing last out there with a hole in its suit?*"

"This was you," the doppelganger aggressively shouted, pointing the gun at the torn suit. "You did this to me, and I don't know why, but now I understand. This time," they pointed the pistol at Sylvia, "I... won't... mi—"

In a moment of pure instinct Sylvia hurled the doppelganger's helmet at them, knocking them off balance. The pistol let out a squeal and an energy bolt pierced the air, tearing a hole in Sylvia's suit, scorching the metal floor beside her. She jumped up and ran to the airlock control, smashing open the emergency release lever and slamming it down with all her might.

## AM I DREAMING? – TRAVIS EVANS

A sinister laugh came from behind. The doppelganger had affixed themselves to the ladder with the wires from the spacesuits belt. “Goodbye, Captain” It cackled.

Both the airlock doors opened simultaneously, abruptly sucking everything out of the pressurised ship like a vacuum. Sylvia tried to grasp at the lever, thinking it would help hold her in place, but it snapped under the sheer force of the pull. Her body shot out of the airlock like a cannon ball. Her helmet once again colliding with the frame on the way out, forcing her face to smash into the visor and crack it from the inside. She looked back at the doppelganger, but they weren't there. Sylvia checked her belt, the pistol still safely latched in the leather holster.

She was floating. Her nose bloody and pulped from the blow it took against the visor, oxygen very slowly seeping out of the space suit from the tiny crack in it. Her ship becoming a small white blip in the distance.

She was alone. Floating through the darkness.

