

Alone Together

By Madeline Erb

The diminutive psychiatrist adjusts her glasses and then holds up a laminated piece of paper that displays an inkblot.

“What do you see, Minerva?” she asks. I want to answer that I see a blob of ink, but that isn’t what she wants to hear. The chair I’m sitting on is stiff and uncomfortable. My eyes flick to the surveillance camera in the right hand corner of the room, then move back to the inkblot. This is all being recorded, and it will be watched over and over to discern my mental state.

“It looks like a goat,” I say. My psychiatrist makes a little clicking noise with her tongue and makes a note on her laptop. I never know if I’m saying the right things. I suppose that if I’ve made it this far, I must be. She takes the laminated paper and places it carefully on top of the others. That was the final inkblot. “Have I passed this test?” I ask. She looks at me with a half-smile and types another little note.

“I can’t tell you that,” she says. “What I can tell you is that the fact that I don’t know is positive. If you had conclusively failed, I’d be aware.” I sigh and nod. She puts the laminated pages back into the manila folder they came out of. Then, she pulls the brain scanner out of her pocket once more. I’m beginning to wonder just how many times she is going to do this. How many times do they need to look at my brain? When will they give me a yes or a no? I try not to let my irritation show on my face, though once she’s analyzed the scan, Doctor Brenner will absolutely know. She points the blue, handheld device at my head, and I give her a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. She presses the white button on the side of the scanner, and I hold perfectly still. After a moment, she returns the device to her pocket. It beeps, telling us that the data is transferring to her computer.

Brenner stares intently at her screen and then releases a small muffled sound that is almost a laugh.

“You don’t like me, do you, Minerva?” she says. All of this is a test. She’s trying to poke me, prod me, see how I react.

“We both know I want this job because I don’t really like anyone,” I say. This is the most truthful either of us has ever been with each other. She smiles widely, mockingly.

“There’s a paradox here. We need well-adjusted yet antisocial people. Easy to find one or the other. Terribly difficult to combine them.”

“I’ve got what it takes,” I reply, cracking my knuckles. She raises an eyebrow and then lowers it.

“Perhaps you do.” It’s the most positive feedback I’ve ever gotten from her. “You’re free to leave, Minerva.” I stand up, glad to be free of the metal chair I’ve been sitting in. My boots click on the tiled white floor, and I open up the door and leave.

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The bed feels stiff against my back. I press a button, moving myself to a sitting position. I run my fingers over my newly shaved head, and then pull the blanket up over my hospital gown-clad body. The pressure cuff on my right arm inflates once again. I relax the arm as much as I can. Once the cuff has finished squeezing my arm half to death, the result shows on the screen next to me. 112/78 - as always, a perfect number. I look around the plain white room, saying goodbye to it. I look at the camera by the entrance. Some burst of silliness possesses me, and I give the camera a little wave with my left arm. The only sound in the room is the intermittent beeping of the machine monitoring my vital signs.

I like silence. It's part of why I'm perfect for the job they've finally cleared me for. I am to pilot the Invincible, a spaceship carrying colonists to the Earth-like planet formerly known as Kepler-452b. The colonists will call it Haven. There's a limited amount of oxygen that the ship can carry. To conserve that oxygen, the ship must be piloted alone. The first two years of the trip are my responsibility. I will fly without human companionship until one of the other pilots is awakened from cryosleep to relieve me.

My silence is interrupted when a nurse walks through the door in pale blue scrubs. She's about my age, not older than her mid-twenties, and she smiles at me. Looking closer, I see that she has one green eye and one blue eye. It could be natural heterochromia, but I'm betting she got them through cosmetic surgery. It's been something of a fad for the past few years.

"They're ready for you, Minerva," she says. Her brown hair is up in a ponytail.

"And I'm ready for them," I reply, my voice even. I'm not sure I believe the words. Brain surgery is hardly something to take lightly.

She walks over to me, unlocks the wheels of the hospital bed, and begins wheeling me out of the room. It feels a little undignified. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm very much capable of simply walking into the operating room. I suppose, however, that walking there with my naked ass hanging out of my hospital gown might be a little undignified too.

"All you pilots are so brave," she says, as she wheels me down the hall. "You don't seem nervous at all." Something in my stomach turns a bit at those words. To be truthful, I'm more than a little nervous. I'm struck by the fact that it's shitty bedside manner to mention nerves at all. I'm not the kind of patient who needs nurses to coddle me - but she doesn't know that.

"Steady nerves are a job requirement," I say flatly. She seems to sense that I don't want to speak further, and she ceases chattering at me. She wheels me right through the double doors of

the OR, where the operating table and my doctors are waiting for me. On the back wall of the OR is a large screen displaying several brain scans. I know the images well - they are of my own brain. My surgeon, Doctor Patel, gives me a nod. He's Bollywood levels of handsome, even in a surgical cap.

The nurse presses a button on the bed, and it rises up until it is level with the operating table. The rails on the side of the bed are lowered, and I move from the bed to the cold table.

Another doctor, an anesthesiologist, gives me a short but boring talk about what's about to happen. She's going to place an oxygen mask on my face, and give me propofol through my IV. She assures me that with that, and the numbing they're going to put on my skull, I won't feel a thing. I'm not worried about this surgery hurting - pain I can deal with. I'm worried about losing some indelible part of myself when they cut into my brain. I don't tell her that, though.

Doctor Patel draws on the shaved skin of my head with a marker, making himself a map of where to cut. The feeling of the marker on my head tickles a little. The anesthesiologist applies a cream that numbs my head. Briefly, the word numbskull comes to mind, and I wonder if I am an idiot to go through with this.

Then, the anesthesiologist puts the oxygen mask over my face. I count down inside my head. Ten. I am aware. Nine. I am anxious. Eight. I am calm. Seven. I am tired. Six. It hits me that I will never be the same as I am at this moment. Five. I wonder if it's too late to ask them to stop this. Four. I'm out like a light.

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I think I hear a voice. I open my tired eyes slowly. The nurse from before with the sub-par bedside manner is watching me. I am once again in that same hospital room I started out in. Nonsensically, I wonder if I dreamed of going into the operating room. I try to reach a hand

up to touch my head, but find my arms restrained. The nurse notices my attempt to move and says something. I don't quite process her words. I become more awake as fear grips me. Is it possible I'm no longer capable of understanding speech? That the surgery damaged my brain?

Your brain is fine, Minerva. This time I realize that what I'm "hearing" is not a sound at all. It's coming from inside my head. I have been anticipating this, but the experience is still decidedly odd. I wouldn't call it unpleasant, but it's unnerving. I have a sense of the awareness of a presence, like a feeling that I was being watched.

Hello, Invincible, I think.

Hello, Minerva. Though calling me that is something of a misnomer. Only part of me is the spaceship Invincible's AI. Each of the pilots of the Invincible perceives me differently. I'm both a connection to the ship and an artificial second personality that stems from your own, she told me. I had known all this and had read every single document on the implantation process I could get my hands on, but somehow it hadn't really hit me until this moment. In some ways, I will never be alone again. In another, I am talking to myself.

"Can you talk?" asks my nurse. It takes me a moment to realize what she is saying, but I finally understand her.

"I can," I reply. She nods.

"Tell me where you are," she says.

"Walter Reed Medical Center," I replied. "In Maryland. The year is 2053, the president is Samantha Hawthorne. My brain works fine, the implantation was a success, and you can take these restraints off my arms." The nurse lets out a short bark of a laugh.

"Most people take longer to come to their senses," she said approvingly. "But I can't take those off just yet. We used to do this surgery without the restraints, but then we had one guy who

woke up, pulled the dressing off his head, stuck his fingers all over his stitches, and got a serious infection - big mess,” she said. The moment she mentions my head, I feel it throb a little bit. The numbing must be wearing off.

“Head’s starting to hurt,” I tell her.

“I’ll get you an IV,” she replies. I have never been fond of the way pain medication makes me feel, but at that moment I am grateful. True to her word, she comes back with an IV of Tramadol, and I hardly feel a thing for the next few hours. I spend that time talking to the Invincible - which I suppose means talking to myself.

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It is day 458 - which means there are 272 days remaining on my shift. Every other day, I manually inspect the cryostasis pods. The room is cold and sterile, like a cross between a hospital and a meat locker. The gravity in there is heavier than most of the rest of the ship - roughly at standard for the earth. It doesn’t really bother me, as I spend at least an hour a day in the far heavier gravity of the gym, working out to maintain my bone density. Artificial gravity takes a great deal of power to maintain, so most of the ship is zero-G. The colonists are precious, and their health has to be maintained. Though precautions are taken for me, I know my health is less important. Even with the gym, I have lost some bone density already. But upon return to Earth, my reward would be great. I’ll be paid more money than I know what to do with.

I stand in front of the final four fluid-filled pods. Floating in the goo with their eyes closed are the other pilots, naked as the day they were born. Finn Felders is assigned to take care of the second leg of the journey. In 272 days, I’ll wake him, and enter my own pod. He will take care of the other half of the journey there. The next pilot will handle the first leg of the journey back, and the one after that will bring us home. The final pilot is to be woken if one of us is

unable to do our duty. Aria Langley is our insurance policy. I'm determined not to be the reason we need her. I worry sometimes that I might be.

You're fine, Minnie, says the voice in my head.

"I know, 'Vince," I reply. I like to talk out loud to her. I've been warned that if I don't practice speaking, it will become more difficult for me. I sometimes wonder what I might look like to someone watching me. There is not an inch of the Invincible that is not under surveillance. Every single thing I do is recorded - though I doubt that much of the footage will ever be viewed. There will be years of it once all this is over. The tape is a failsafe - it exists so that if a problem arises on this trip, government paper-pushers can analyze the footage to death.

I find that each and every one of the fluid-filled pods is functional, even the empty one that I will use at the end of my two-year shift. Satisfied with my inspection, I leave the cold of the cryo chamber.

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On day 562, with 168 days remaining, I am crying. It is not the first time, and it will not be the last. I'm strapped down in the cockpit, staring out the clear hull into the depths of space. It's beautiful, but god is it empty.

"I don't really feel like a person, 'Vince," I say. I know I don't have to explain what I mean to her.

If it helps, you have only 23% of your shift remaining, 'Vince tells me. I sigh.

"Am I still sane?" I ask. I know the answer. I know that if my mental state was critical, Invincible will tell me. I even know that I don't have to ask. I will be informed the moment she perceives me as becoming too erratic. But I like to ask anyway.

You're sane, Minnie. You're okay. She always knows what I need to hear. Sometimes that is a comfort. Sometimes it's irritating in its own way. Sometimes all I want is someone to argue with.

"Why do I feel like this?" I ask. I don't like people. I don't get lonely. 'Alone' isn't even an accurate description of my current state.

Even antisocial people feel loneliness, says 'Vince. The worst thing about advice from 'Vince, is that she's me. We are the same person, partitioned into sections. It's impossible to argue with her.

"Even if I was lonely, how the hell am I supposed to go back and try to be around people again?" I ask. The words hang in the air, and for a moment I don't get an answer at all.

Part of me is a connection to the ship's AI. Part of me is you. Neither of those parts has an answer to that question. What I do know is that you're strong. That you were selected for this because you're strong. You will finish this job. And then you get to go out and be human.

"I get to try to be human with you in my head, and two years' worth of isolation wrecking my already meager social skills," I hissed. "And it'll all be in a world I don't even recognize anymore." That's something I usually tried not to think about. The world I will return to would be more than fifty years in the future from the one I left. When I signed up for this journey that had seemed exciting. I had thought of myself as a time traveler heading to the future. Now I saw an abyss as empty as space ahead of me.

You get a fresh start, Minerva. You get to make your life into whatever the hell you want. You don't have to try to be human. You've always been human. You're being human right now. I don't reply. All I do is stare out the window into the darkness of space and feel impossibly small.

It's day 730, the very end of my shift. I stand shivering in the cryo wing, staring at Finn Felders as the fluid slowly drains from his pod. His eyes are open, looking out the glass at me. It's an odd thing to say about a naked man who has only just become conscious, but he looked confident. I wondered how he'll handle his shift. If he will end up having to wake Aria Langley. I almost did so, several times.

You made it, says the voice in my head. I smile. I feel like a withered husk, but I've done it - and I'll never have to pilot again.

The fluid finishes draining from Finn's pod, and the plexiglass slowly rolls down, exposing Finn to the air. He nods at me curtly.

"How was your shift?" he asks. It is my first contact with another human being in two years, and I'm struck by just how mundane it is,

"Uneventful," I reply. In some ways, that's true. There have been no system errors and no issues with the flight. "Shower's down that way," I say, pointing to the left. I'm supposed to wait a few hours to make sure that everything goes smoothly, and then enter my own cryo tank. Finn steps out of his tank and then walks over to the showers while dripping clear goo on the floor. He has one hand covering his junk as if I haven't seen all 604 passengers here naked.

He sings loudly in the shower, songs that had been old more than 100 years before I'd left earth. He's not a particularly good singer, and before my shift, I would have found hearing his voice from the hall to be an annoyance. At this point, it's nice just to hear the sound of another human.

I spend a few hours with him while the ship runs a few scans, confirming that he's in good health. During that time, I spend more time talking to 'Vince in my own head than I do speaking to him. Once the system clears him to take over, we go back to the cryo wing.

I stand in front of the empty pod that awaits me and take a deep breath in. The next time I wake up, I'd be back on Earth. I stare at the pod for a good thirty seconds.

"Are you going to get in there at some point?" he asks. My eyes flick over to Finn.

"In a minute," I reply. "I'm going to ask you for something, and it's going to seem really weird." Finn cocks his head to the side. Something about him reminds me a little bit of a family dog I'd had as a kid. "Can I hug you?" I ask. I feel weird the minute I say it. I'm not a hugger, not at all. He rolls his eyes a little bit but holds out his arms. We hug, just for a few seconds, before we break apart. "Stay sane, man," I say.

"I'm counting on it," he replies, that same cocky look in his eyes I saw as the pod drained.

I press the button to open up my pod, and quickly strip out of my spacesuit. Finn turns around. It amuses me that he cares about privacy while surrounded by hundreds of naked people, but I don't comment. I step into the pod, which is bone dry, and press the button inside. The top of the pod closes, and a wire snakes around my arm, injecting me. Goodnight, 'Vince, I think. I count back from 10 as I feel the pod filling with goo. This time, I don't even make it to 7 before I lose awareness.

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"Who wants to talk first this week?" asks the woman sitting across from me in the circle of armchairs. Her platinum blonde hair is in a severe bob. As always, there is a clipboard and

paper in her lap. Every time we do this, she takes notes. I've always been curious about what they say. Sitting in the chair to the left of me, Finn Felders raises his hand.

"Guess I'll talk," he says. I don't turn toward him. Instead, my eyes flick around the room. It's all very familiar, which might be comforting if I didn't find it so strange. The flat screen television on the wall behind our therapist's chair is an antique. The paper and clipboard in the therapist's hands are old too. Since returning to earth, I haven't seen any other person use paper to write on. These days, the use of both paper and wood is highly restricted for environmental reasons. "This week has been pretty shitty, to be honest." Sometimes I wonder where the confidence Finn had when I first met him that day on the Invincible went. In this circle is every pilot from the Invincible. Of all of us, I think Finn was most affected by our time in space. The confidence I saw in him that day on the ship is gone. Finn doesn't continue talking, he just sits there in silence for a moment. This happens often in our group therapy sessions - and not just to Finn. Typically this sort of silence is an indication of a discussion taking place entirely in one of our heads.

"What are you having difficulty with?" asks the therapist. She irritates me. I think it's something about the way she speaks. No one her age (mid thirties? It's difficult to tell how old someone is these days. Cosmetic surgery is very popular, and often impossible to see the signs of) speaks the way she does anymore. Language has evolved - not so much as to be unrecognizable, but enough that hearing her speak like someone from half a century ago seems inauthentic.

"It's not that I'm not adjusting to my new life," says Finn. "It's more that having to deal with being the only one of us who failed really sucks." 537 days into his shift, Finn couldn't take

it anymore. He woke up Langley and went back into cryosleep. Every time I look at him, I think that it could have been me. *It wasn't, though*, 'Vince chimes in.

"You didn't fail, Finn," says Aria Langley, who is sitting to my right. I'm not quite sure what to think of the woman. I look at her, taking in the peach fuzz growing on her recently shaved head. Aria had her implant removed last week. She no longer carries a passenger in her head. Coupled with the fact that she spent the least amount of time piloting, I have difficulty categorizing her. She is one of us, and she isn't. "We completed the flight. No one failed. It's over and we all get to move on." She's said those words before, 'move on'. Sometimes I think 'move on' is code for ignore, or forget.

"Alternative solution. Maybe you fucked up. The question is, does that matter? You can't change it. So maybe you've got to accept it," I say.

"That's not very helpful, Minerva," the therapist chides. But Finn starts laughing.

"Sometimes, you sound a lot like 'Sybil,'" he says. 'Sybil is the name Finn gave to his own implant. I finally turn to look at him. It's less scary than I thought it might be. I've built him up in my own head as a symbol of the fact that I almost failed. But the half-smile on his face isn't a metaphor or a reflection of me. He's just Finn.

"Minerva, if you've decided you're going to talk today, why don't you tell us how you're doing?" asks the therapist. I roll my eyes. On the flight, I got worse at hiding my emotions. There was no need to tone myself down for anyone else. I've always been abrasive, but it's definitely gotten more pronounced. Oddly enough, it's one of the changes in myself that I don't hate. I would rather not be any less myself to make someone more comfortable.

"I'm fine," I say. *You really ought to see if you can get them to assign you another therapist*, says 'Vince. *This one pisses you off*.

“That doesn’t seem accurate to me. I wish you’d make an effort to share more with us,” says the therapist. “Vince is right, I really deserve someone more competent. Maybe all of us do.

“Sure, let’s talk about my feelings. I feel that you’re out of your depth. You’d need to have some rudimentary sense of what it’s like to be one of us in order to try and help us. I feel that we’d all be better served by just hanging out, without your supervision. I feel like the way you talk, hell, the very way this room is designed serves to infantilize us. We know the world has changed. We’re all going to walk out of the door and back into it at the end of the group like we do every week. We all know it’s not 2053 anymore - it’s not helpful for us for you to pretend it is.” It all comes rushing out of my mouth. Honestly, it feels good to say. Our therapist shakes her head at me, and then she smiles.

“That is the most I’ve ever heard you say in this group,” she says. She jots something down on the paper. “I’m going to call that progress.” For a moment, the smug look on her face makes me absolutely furious. Then, I’m holding back the urge to laugh. There is a sort of euphoria in having someone to argue with again. I stay silent for the rest of the session, only half-listening to the others talking. When it’s all over, we walk out of that carefully constructed retro-hellhole of a room. As we leave, Finn taps me on the shoulder.

“Did you mean what you said?” he asks. I look at him quizzically. “When you said we’d all be better off just hanging out,” he elaborates.

“I guess I did,” I reply. He nods vigorously, then gets a conspiratorial look in his eye.

“We could skip the next session. Play hooky,” he suggests. We were all required to attend fifteen weeks of therapy, to assure the government we were all mentally fit to transition to normal life. We spent the first ten weeks living in a facility. I’ve been living on my own since

then, though I'm fairly certain they have someone keeping tabs on me. This is the sixteenth week - technically, we're all free to never come back.

"We could do that," I say. He smiles.

"I'll send a message to the others. Form our own little conspiracy," he says. I give him an awkward thumbs up.

I spend the ride in the self-driving hovercab back to my place talking to 'Vince.

"Do you think I'm going to be okay?" I ask.

You want me to say yes. I told you you'd be fine many, many times in space. But both of us value the truth. And the truth is neither of us knows what's going to happen in the future. We both get to find out how this goes when we get there. You've got a good shot, 'Vince tells me.

"I feel pretty human today," I say, quietly.

Maybe we both are, she replies. I let out a barking sort of laugh. Maybe we both are.