



Lunar Inc. Base, Civilian Sector
Day-Cycle 02

The Moon has quakes. They were everyday. Part of the routine. Most Lunar Inc. personnel didn't flinch at the sound of the alarm any more. But then, most personnel hadn't been through what Aggie had.

She clung to the edge of her bed as the quake took hold, and listened to the rhythm of her belongings smashing to the floor. Her blinds clattered against the walls, slivers of pale lunar sunlight escaped into the darkness.

She concentrated on pushing her breath into slow ins and outs. But the quake had shaken her memories loose.

They rose up around her in the darkness of her pod like ghosts.

Aggie would relive Adrienne tonight, or not sleep at all. The reactor room started to materialize around her. The phantom smell of smoke and burning metal stung her nose – she pushed it away. Too painful. Too real.

Her heart beat in time with the drone of the alarm. Not the alarm in her pod, but an alarm from a different place, in a different time . . .

The great lumite reactor pulsed – its spinning saltwater jets cooling the violet crystal at its core. Her father was at his desk, his hands a blur as he worked the shaking control panel. Something was wrong. There was too much dust, too much heat—

In her pod, the screen beside her bed flicked on, casting grey light into the room. ‘No, no, no,’ Aggie moaned.

When he saw her, his eyes grew as wild as his red hair. His grip tight and feverish on her arms as he threw her into the clear plastic booth and pulled the hatch. ‘Daddy?’ He was getting in with her, wasn’t he? He wasn’t going back to the reactor, was he?

Outside, in the corridor, the other Lunar Inc. personnel whooped and hollered as they made their way to their shifts, the quake providing nothing more than entertainment for their commute. But Adrienne refused to let Aggie go. Not yet. Not until the part that hurt the most . . .

Her breath fogged the wet glass inside the booth; the hot, thick air sticking like glue in her lungs; the rush of water, the shudder of the reactor room rattling her bones away from her skin—

‘Hey Agatha.’ A strangely detached voice shook from the ceiling, but to Aggie it was distant, underwater, far away—

There was a click, then a popping noise that sucked up all the sound. Suddenly, she was flying . . . She squeezed her eyes shut as a blinding light washed into her small, dark space.

‘Hey Agatha,’ the voice echoed again, ‘your heart rate is currently out of the healthy spectrum.’ This time, Aggie clung to the sound, using it to pull her foggy brain back to reality.

‘No!’

Aggie opened her eyes. She was standing in the centre of her room, covered in sweat, panting. She took a deep, shuddering breath and fell back onto the damp sheets.

It’s not happening again. You’re safe. You’re safe.

Above her head, the small red light of the Eye camera danced in the rumbling darkness.

‘Hey Agatha,’ the voice rang out once more, ‘we’re experiencing a routine moonquake in this sector.’

It was Celeste, the base’s computer system, speaking from the swirling Ether panel beside her bed. The billion electrified atoms that made up the computer’s shifting 3D interface swirled back at her creepily. It always looked to Aggie as if someone had trapped a black hole in a tiny picture frame – a really annoying black hole.

Celeste was the AI system that ran the entire Lunar Base, from operating the giant, gravity-producing domes that kept their feet on the ground, right down to assessing whether you’d had the right amount of vegetables in your lunch. Celeste’s eerie, spinning Ethers and black and red Eye cameras were everywhere on the base. Wherever you looked, Celeste was there looking back. The AI was designed to be a happy, positive and supportive influence

on the personnel; Aggie just found her a bit creepy.

‘For your information, Agatha, the time is currently 6.15 a.m., Lunar East. Your shift begins in fifteen minutes.’

‘Thanks,’ Aggie muttered, as the mattress went from a shake to a dull simmer and finally became still. The quake was over, but despite her best efforts, Aggie’s heart continued to flap pathetically inside her like a frightened bird.

‘How about we try some calming breathing exercises?’

‘I know how to breathe, Celeste,’ she said to the ceiling.

Aggie leant up on her elbows and surveyed the damage to her room; pillows and blankets lay in jumbled heaps around her bed, the old paper books and rocks she’d smuggled up to the Moon from Earth had sprung from her shelves and lay in heaps on the white plastic floor. To her left, a bottle of something that was probably noxious had spilt and was slowly oozing into a puddle under her bed. She silently hoped it wasn’t one of the botched toilet water samples she’d hidden under there a few weeks ago. Though it smelt as if it might be.

Aggie sighed. To be honest, her room didn’t look that much different from the way it usually did.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and pulled herself up.

At the first sign of movement the blinds on her round pod window began to lift, allowing crisp, cold sunlight to flood into the room. Aggie lifted her arm to her eyes.

‘No, Celeste! Earth’s sake, I’m awake!’ she grumbled.

The surface was at the start of its day-cycle – days and nights lasted two Earth weeks on the Moon. The light was

faded after the wane, but still stronger than the soft, atmosphere-filtered sun on Earth, and it was just too much at this time in the morning.

Outside, the lunar surface lay like a great tan and grey desert, broken up by a cluster of squat buildings that made up the Lunar Base's Civilian Sector. Not a great view, but if she pressed her cheek right against the glass, Aggie could just make out the glittering cathedral of the Whole Earth Complex, its great rainbow-coloured windows pointing towards the patch of space where the whole distant Earth hung like a marble.

Aggie's pod was part of the messy sprawl of science blocks and dorms which housed all the civilian personnel: surface analysts, astro-geologists, lunar chemists, security guards, management and lifestyle staff, medics, mining operatives, tech engineers, mechanical engineers, admin personnel and all the others Aggie couldn't remember.

Beyond the Lunar Base and spreading out to the horizon were the vast white mining domes and low red buildings of the Prison Sector, where prisoners mined and processed the lumite crystal that powered the Earth. No one from Civilian ever went there, unless you were a guard, or a mine op, or an engineer, or just mental.

'OK, Agatha,' said Celeste, 'please run your diagnostics. I've noticed that your sleeping patterns are currently out of the healthy spectrum. My psychological analysis systems would suggest this is the result of the upcoming tenth anniversary of the Adrienne—'

'Not now, Celeste.'

‘Disrupted sleep encourages disease, Agatha.’

Aggie looked at the Ether uneasily and walked to the mirror.

What she saw made her want to get back in bed. Thick red curls stuck up on one side of her head and lay flat on the other. She pulled her StraightBrush from the wall and ran it through them quickly.

‘Hey Agatha, I must remind you to—’

‘In a minute,’ she spat, hairpins sticking in her mouth as she tried to pull her newly straightened hair into the standard Lunar Inc. bun – not easy with trembling hands. ‘Just one minute.’

Why did the moonquakes have to do this to her every time? Adrienne was ten years ago. Ten years – and her flashbacks had only got worse. She cursed herself for being so weak.

Her hair roughly bunned, Aggie popped two tiny blue plastic circles from the container beside her bed. She sighed and placed the blue contact lenses over her violet eyes. She blinked away the water and took a step back. She was finally starting to look like herself – or the version of herself she had become after the disaster.

The thick geometric panelling on her canary-yellow Lunar Inc. overalls emphasized any unwanted lumps and bumps beneath, and the colour clashed horribly with her red hair. It wasn’t a great look, but it was safe. She looked just like everyone else. Anonymous.

Still, Aggie pulled the sleeves self-consciously, covering up the shiny skin showing through at her wrists. Not scars

exactly, but the side effects of the nano-healers that had saved her after the explosion.

Her identification lamp shone in the centre of her chest, pulsing a soft, yellow light with the beat of her heart. Silver, semi-opaque comms panels were located on her forearms, their flexible screens glowing in sleep mode.

‘Hey Agatha—’

‘I’m here, I’m here!’ Aggie stepped back to the side of her bed, flipped her forearm over Celeste’s Ether screen and sat back to wait. A tiny 3D graph appeared out of the black-grey swirl as Celeste inputted her data.

‘Great, diagnostics completed. I have updated your health alerts to level six, a priority level.’

With a familiar hiss, the locks on the pod door released. Aggie was free to leave.

‘Stay bright, Agatha.’

‘You stay bright too, Celeste,’ she muttered as she made her way into the corridor, the quake still rumbling away in the back of her mind.

The bustle of personnel in the corridor only renewed the fluttering in Aggie’s chest and she had to stop and take a few deep breaths. She’d never liked crowds, but she’d got used to the familiar multicoloured, dead-eyed commuter traffic on the base. Not this morning though, apparently. She leant against the curved wall and checked for the ridge of her contact lenses under her eyelids. She hated getting flustered – it drew people’s attention.

Pull yourself together, she told herself harshly. No need to

panic. No one knew who she was.

She began to weave her way through the busy corridor. Now if someone could just tell her heart that everything was normal, that would be cosmic.

‘Hey, watch it!’ a green-overalled geologist cried as she accidentally whacked him with her shoulder.

‘Sorry! It’s busy in here,’ she said, looking down, avoiding his eyes.

As she turned the corner she spied the white LED outline of a security scrambler ahead – one of the fat-wheeled, dual-gravity scooters that looked like the love child of a three-wheeled trike and a golf cart. A familiar figure was in the driving seat.

Aggie’s heart skipped. Instantly, the tight feeling the quake had given her melted away into the crowds. She grinned and rushed forwards. Creeping up behind the scrambler, she jabbed the figure sharply in the back of his black overalls.

‘Oh, hey there Earthling!’

The guard let out a noise like a boiling kettle and jumped a mile into the air. The coffee in his hand leapt out of the cup and cascaded down his overall.

‘Ow, ow, it’s hot! Oh, it’s burning. It burns,’ he spluttered.

‘Ooh no, Seb!’ Aggie cried. ‘I didn’t see. Here, let me help.’

‘It’s on my skin. It’s burning my skin!’

‘Ah! Hold still.’

Aggie swung herself up into the passenger seat and

began to flick the coffee off his overall and out of his frizzy brown curls. The globs flew towards the control panel, fizzing and sputtering onto the swirling black of the Ether.

‘Hey Sebastian,’ Celeste’s voice drifted up from the controls, ‘there seems to be liquid contamination on this scrambler. Please wait a moment while I reconfigure the system.’

‘Aw, man, look what you’ve done, Aggs!’ Seb wailed. ‘Third-degree burns and a system reconfigure, all in less than five minutes!’

‘I’m sorry! I was trying to help. Who holds a coffee when they’re driving a scrambler anyway? You know what I’m like!’

Seb’s eyes widened. ‘I got it for you! I hate this SimStim stuff. I just wanted to have a proper conversation without you being all grumpy. Wish I hadn’t now, though – look at me!’

Aggie looked at Seb fondly. ‘Aw, did you really? Thank you,’ she said, leaning forwards to give her friend a squeeze. Suddenly her horrible morning didn’t seem so bad any more. Seb’s easy Californian aura always had that effect on her. He was like a human happy pill.

Aggie grabbed the SimStim and sipped on what was left. It tasted a bit like soil, but it was better than nothing.

‘So, how was it?’

‘What?’

‘Your leave, you black hole. Earth! How was it? Tell me.’

Seb put the scrambler in gear, ‘Oh, OK.’

Aggie raised her eyebrows. ‘Aaand?’

‘Aggie, it was forced leave, I wasn’t having fun. I didn’t even want to be there.’

Aggie let her mouth fall open theatrically.

Seb glanced at her, smiling. ‘I dunno, what do you want me to say? There was some lovely clean air.’

‘Wow, so insightful.’

‘Aggs, it was boring. I dunno, they brought back this animal called a tiger from extinction. That looked cool, but I only saw it on the news so, not really news or anything . . . They’ve finally finished the Hyperloop between the New South American state . . .’

Aggie shook her head. She loved the Earth. She’d give anything to be able to go back, feel the wind in her hair and the smell of plants and trees – the Lunar Base had been her home for two years now, but she missed the nature of Earth almost as much as she’d missed Seb these past two weeks. She guessed you always wanted what you could never have.

‘C’mon,’ Seb said, grinning, ‘you know I’d rather be here. I’m not like you. I’m built for space.’

Aggie laughed. Seb was allergic to everything on Earth: flowers, trees, certain types of wood, gluten. If it was natural, it was out to get him. The manufactured world of Lunar Inc. suited him perfectly.

‘Stupid rock,’ he added sulkily.

Aggie smiled. ‘Hey, you can’t blame the rock. The rock didn’t put the base into level one shutdown, did it?’

Seb put his head in his hands and groaned. ‘Ugh, no I guess not.’

‘And we all know aliens don’t exist.’

Seb half smiled, ‘Hey, that rock looked a lot like an alien, in my defence. I swear it moved.’

Aggie shot Seb a look.

‘OK, OK, also in my defence, and this is what I told the disciplinary dudes too, you’ve not even seen the Borderlands, man. It’s not like the Near Side at all. There are rocks everywhere, they’re all crazy shapes and all these creepy shadows and you’re all on your own. There are noises, Aggs, I swear, like creaking, wooing . . .’

‘You don’t get noises like that on the Moon . . .’

‘Well, I’m telling you: that place, it does weird things to your head.’

Aggie nudged Seb playfully. ‘How long was the base in shutdown again – seventeen hours? Or was it eighteen?’

‘Enough!’ Seb laughed and kicked the scrambler up a gear as it came back online.

They left the white corridors of the dorms and entered the migraine-inducing yellow of the Analysis Department.

‘Sorry about the coffee,’ Aggie said, putting her head on Seb’s shoulder as they drove. ‘It’s been boring without you.’

Seb patted her head. ‘Aw, I know.’

A bleeping noise high overhead signalled the start of the morning shift, and the yellow corridor started to fill with personnel. Aggie looked at them nervously, but the best friend and coffee mix had been like a medicine and she felt a bit better. Seb stopped the scrambler right outside the doors to Aggie’s department.

‘Lunch, tomorrow?’ he called from the driving seat. ‘By the custard?’

Aggie nodded and waved as Seb disappeared into the throng.

She fumbled with her fringe in front of the retina scanner. It buzzed negative three times. Aggie blinked her contacts into the right place and was finally allowed through into the cold rush of her quiet, sterile world: Domestic Analysis 1.