

Cheyenne Goetz

To the Moon and Back (Revision)

I flipped the bird in the direction of Saturn. I muted the helmet television screen just as a spacesuit clad woman completed the final piece of the new habitable biodome.

“Fuck you, Vivian,” I said, turning off the live newsfeed from Saturn’s moon Titan.

When I stood up I noticed how enormous my butt print in the moon dust looked because of the thick spacesuit. “God damn it.”

I trudged slowly back through the moon dust toward the lunar station, dragging my feet through the soft surface to kick up angry clouds as I walked. I could hear the news reporters in my head “Oh Vivian how does it feel to have completed your third extraterrestrial station in six months?” or “How does it feel to be the most accomplished woman in history, Vivian?” or “Vivian how can you possibly be so amazing?” I kicked up more moon dust and for good measure flipped off the patch of space where Vivian was hopefully at this moment giving a news interview to the whole world with a giant zit right on the end of her nose.

I punched the little pad to open the outer chamber door of the station, touching the name plate above the door which read “Extremely Large Lunar Observatory Station”, as was tradition. Inside the outer chamber I closed the exterior door and hit the airlock switch in the room right next to the handwritten sign which read “Welcome to ELLO Station, Moon Heaven.” Pressurized air rushed into the room, blowing the remaining lunar dust off my suit. A green indicator light lit up on the inside of my helmet and I removed it from my head, long brown hairs adhering to the surface with static cling as I pulled it away from my head.

Once removed, I hung the heavy suit on a rack under my name plate. The inner door swung open easily now that the chamber was pressurized. The narrow hallway expanded into the

main dome of the living area. The clear, octagonal panels of the dome allowed for a spectacular view of the universe beyond. The open space of the room was sectioned off only by the furniture within in. I zig-zagged my way through the seating area toward the kitchen section of the dome. Ella sat at the long dining table, reading something on her portable tablet.

“Have a nice walk?” she asked, without looking up.

“No, Vivian just installed the final piece on the Titan station.”

“Oh my god, Lori!” Ella put the tablet on the table and looked up at me. “Can we please go one god damn day without talking about Vivian?”

“What?”

“It’s been seven months, honey. Seven months of listening to you bitch and moan about her.” Ella put her hands over her eyes. “Can I have one day of Vivian free moon time?”

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “I wasn’t aware my being stabbed in the back was so bothersome to you.” Not wanting to look at Ella anymore I walked into the kitchen area and opened the cupboard filled with freeze dried food.

Ella let out a great huff of air. “Sweetie, she didn’t stab you in the back, she stationed you on the moon.”

“The *dark side* of the moon.” I said, snatching a packet of chicken alfredo out of the cupboard and placing it in the rehydrator.

“Even so,” Ella started.

“God Ella, are you on her side?”

“I’m on whoever’s side makes you stop complaining about her.”

“You would be alright with getting screwed out of jet-setting around the solar system making history?” I asked, listening to the hiss of the rehydrator behind me.

“No, but I also wouldn’t be a winy, baby about it either.”

The rehydrator buzzed obnoxiously. I retrieved the now warm, expanded packet of alfredo, and a spoon from the utensil holder. Ella put her packet of chili into the rehydrator and shut the door.

“Well at least I didn’t come to the moon because no one on Earth loved me,” I said, her back turned to me.

“Excuse me?” she asked, turning around slowly. I shrugged. The rehydrator hissed in the silence. Ella opened her mouth to speak, but the exterior door opened, letting Akim into the biodome.

“Hello, Ladies!” He saw the looks on our faces and stopped in the middle of the room. “If I was interrupting the beginnings of a chick fight, please don’t let me stop you.” His Russian accent lilted his words ever so slightly. I rolled my head around to look at the tall Russian. His brown hair was ruffled from the helmet of his suit and his mouth curved up at one corner. Glancing back at Ella I saw her face contorted in the same expression as mine. I smiled a tiny smile at her. What were we doing getting at each others throats like that? I saw a little glint in here eye.

“Sorry, Akim. No chick fights today,” I said.

“We were planning to have a pillow fight later, but we just aren’t feeling it,” Ella added.

“Wait, really?” Akim asked, walking toward us again.

“No,” Ella and I said together.

“You should be nicer to the only eligible bachelor for 200,00 miles.” He pursed his lips and raised his eyebrow at us. I shook my head and sat down with my packet of beige goop. Ella

sat down next to me, hurriedly closing the “Summer’s Desire” E-book open on her tablet. I met her eyes for a split second and she blushed bright red.

I leaned closer to her so Akim wouldn’t hear. “I’m sorry, I’m just on edge because Vi- because I have a lot on my mind.” Ella put her arm around my shoulder for a minute, removing it quickly before Akim could make any comments.

“I fixed the ticking atmosphere generating, annoying piece of crap,” Akim said, drumming his hands on the rehydrator while it hissed.

“What was up with it?” I asked.

“Piece of rock caught in the circulator. Whoever put the thing together let it in there.”

Akim shook his head.

“Wasn’t that you?” Ella asked.

Akim looked over his shoulder grinning. “Not according to the log.” I rolled my eyes at him.

“Angling from that Christmas bonus from the motherland are we?”

“Wouldn’t do much good. Next supply ship isn’t due for three months.” Akim sat at the table opposite us and jabbed a spoon down into a packet of mashed potatoes with gravy.

“Think we can convince them to send a kumquat on it?” I asked, chewing alfredo slowly.

Ella made a disgusted face at the sight of half mashed pasta in my mouth.

“What the heck do you want with a kumquat?” Akim asked.

“You know, first to grow a kumquat tree in space, worth something right?”

Akim rolled his eyes at me. “They will write whole history books about it.”

Just then the door opened and Alyona came in. She smoothed her shirt as she walked across the room. I nodded to her, as did Ella. “The gangs all here,” Akim said, giving her the thumbs up as she walked by.

“I bet Alyona would know if they could get a kumquat on the next ship,” Akim said, turning to face Alyona behind him.

“That’s alright-“ I started but Akim cut me off, speaking to Alyona in Russian. After a few seconds, she gave squinted at me and shook her head really slowly. Akim said something else in Russian and she put her hand over her mouth, turning away from me quickly.

“What did you say?” I asked, my voice rising higher.

“I asked her the question,” Akim said, a grin not well disguised on his face.

“You told her something else. Tell her I just want to grow a tree.” Akim turned to Alyona and said two words in Russian.

“There’s no way that’s what I said.”

“Hey, I didn’t make the Russian language.”

“Akim,” Ella started.

“Oh all right.” Akim turned around and said something else to Alyona, who glared at me for a moment. She turned back to Akim and talked for a few minutes. When the rehydrator buzzed she plucked a fork from the dispenser before taking her food packet into her living pod.

“Looks like we got ourselves a mission.” Akim smiled broadly.

“What?”

“The lovely Alyona thinks that one of the repeaters on the light side is malfunctioning. So we,” He pointed to himself and me. “Get to go see what’s up with it?”

“Why me?” I asked.

“I’m taking the biodome engineer with me in the new rover in case your fancy chitin polymer breaks on the road. I can do without a blast of cosmic radiation today.”

“Can I tag along? Shoot some video?” Ella asked.

“Oh course my documentarian friend, our glory needs to be captured! Alyona suggested it, she thinks it will be good publicity for her astronomy research.” Ella nodded. “She also thinks Lori want the kumquat to lure aliens here.” I stood up from my chair and hit him on the arm.

“God damn it, Akim,” I said.

I collected one of the day bags from the entry chamber near the rover bay. The weight of the food, water, emergency shelter, and coms, didn’t feel like much through the thick insulation of my suit. I tucked my helmet under one arm and waited with Akim for Ella, who was gathering camera equipment. She passed the door frame heading in one direction, then another, biting her nails in thought.

“How exactly is the repeater malfunctioning?” I asked.

“Apparently its only sending signals part of the time. I think is probably a corroded wire connection.”

“So my role here is?”

“Aesthetics.” I hit him on the arm again. “Well making sure the rover glass works like you said it should.” I rolled my eyes, knowing full well the glass would work. “And just in case the malfunction is something else, bounce ideas off you.”

“Fair enough.”

Ella charged into the entry chamber, three bags of gear slung around her body. “I’m ready,” she huffed, sounding slightly out of breath. I helped her fix her helmet to her suit, then fastened mine.

“Everyone sealed and ready?” I asked. The crackle of both their replies came through the helmet earpiece. I opened the exterior door to the covered rover bay, walking over to the newest and largest vehicle which had been delivered on the last supply ship.

“Shotgun!” Ella cried through the earpiece.

“What?” Akim said, heading toward the driver’s door.

“It means I get the front seat.” Akim chuckled and I clambered up into the tall vehicle. All three doors snapped closed with a thud. Akim pressed the console on and keyed in the engine start code. The rover rumbled satisfactorily beneath our feet. I pressed in the code to open the bay door, and Akim eased the vehicle outside. The clear glass panels of the roof, made from the same material of the biodome, let the starlight into the rover. Nearly the entire body of the rover was constructed of clear Cosmiglass.

“This stuff you made hold up to force?” Akim asked, slowly angling the rover in the direction of the light side of the moon.

“Yeah, it’s the toughest glass in space.” I let the note of pride slip into my voice.

“Good,” he said and slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The rover lurched forward every so slightly, and slowly picked up speed to 30 miles and hour. I pursed my lips to stop from laughing at the look of disappointment on Akim’s face.

“Damn electric car.” He said. Ella burst out laughing and I could no longer contain it. Beneath the weight of the space suit, my lungs seemed to struggle to find air between burst of laughter.

When she could hold herself together again, Ella got out a camera from one of the bags and began taking test shots, adjusting the settings on the camera, and testing the lighting. I looked out of the window at the surface of the moon and where it gave way to a sea of dark and stars. The light of the millions of stars was enough to give the faintest pale light to the lunar dust, just enough to make the dark side less dark. Crater rims and basins filled with flood basalt rolled by outside the window. The moon was really quite beautiful when you got out of the flat spot we built the station in. Even the stars seemed more vibrant this small distance away from ELLO.

The view was similar to what I had seen in photographs as a child, brought back by the first people to land on the moon. Vivian popped into my mind again. Of all the places she could have stationed me as a biodome engineer, she chose to put me on the one rock in the solar system that people have already been. No doubt saving the glory of seen Mars, Titan and Europa for herself. I felt my cheeks flush hot at the thought. I was co-director of the team that discovered how to engineer Cosmiglass. I was second author on all our published work and of the four members of the team she puts me on the dark side of the moon, where I have to grow a fucking kumquat tree to hold any sort of record. What I wouldn't give to be on Titan right now. I certainly would have given up the 10 minute make out session with Vivian's brother that landed me here. What had I been thinking? You don't fool around with the leader's brother on her desk, even if you're celebrating a patent on the world's first cosmic radiation blocking glass. No, this is her pettiness. I am here because she put me here out here.

The small whirring sound of the camera refocusing brought me out of my trance. The lens of Ella's camera was six inches from the glass of my helmet. "What are you doing?" I asked

gently pushing it back a few inches.

“Nothing,” she said. Pointing the camera at Akim instead.

“Where are we going, Akim? She asked, movie voice in place.

He glanced at the camera nervously for a moment before answering. “Cassiopeia crater to fix the repeater placed on the crater rim edge.” Ella asked him to explain what a repeater was.

“It’s a piece of equipment that receives a signal and sends it somewhere else. It’s how we get messages to the dark side of the moon.”

“And what’s wrong with it?”

“Aliens took a piss on it and messed with the wiring,” Akim said, glancing back at me.

“They like kumquats you know.”

“Be serious,” Ella pleaded from behind the camera.

Akim slowed the rover, stopping next to a large rock in the debris field of the Cassiopeia crater. “Let’s go see what’s wrong with it then.”

I hopped down from the rover, which was a slightly farther drop that I had expected, my feet touching down on the rocky side of the crater wall. I looked up the steep edge of the rim, spotting the electronic device poised a few hundred feet above.

“Any chance of a moon escalator?” I asked. Akim shook his head a little and started to walk up the crater wall, avoiding the larger rocks as he went. I looked at Ella, who motioned me forward, camera poised over her face. “Don’t shoot my butt too much, it looks huge in this suit.” She smiled and I started up the crater wall after Akim.

The interior of my helmet began to fog up from my labored breathing about half way up the crater wall. Stupid meteors, going and making such huge ass craters. Akim seemed to be slowing down, but didn’t stop even though I could hear a tiny wheeze in his breath through the

earpiece in my helmet. Macho man, climb hill. I rolled my eyes and turned down the volume on the earpiece.

I crested the crater rim and almost fell down the other side into the bowl. I teetered for a moment, waiving my arms in wild circles before balancing on the thin top of the crater rim. Ella tried to laugh, but it came out strangled and raspy because she was so out of breath. Akim was hunched over, staring at his boots. I put my hands on the top of my helmet and took a few deep breaths. From this height, the lunar landscape spilled out all round me, falling away under the curvature of the moon. The line of sunlight was clearly visible a few hundred yards in the distance, advancing this way slowly.

After a minute Akim and I started toward the repeater, tethered to the thin crater rim with a tangle of cables and metal tethers. Ella hung back to shoot the vista. Akim pulled a screwdriver out of his small pack and went to work opening the casing around the repeater. I inspected the cables to feel productive. Whoever had placed this here certainly had not wanted it to go anywhere. The top of the housing fell to the ground and I stopped it from falling down the hill with my foot. Akim glanced at me, his eyes a little wide and continued working on the rest of the housing, carefully.

Ella joined us at the repeater, silently filming Akim's every move, framed against the dramatic view. After 10 minutes of silence I sat down on the hard rock, crossing my arms and hooking them over my knees. Ella shot me a disappointed look.

"Sorry, I'm not terribly interesting here." I contemplated all the amazing things I could be doing on Titan or Europa right now. Exploring worlds never seen before, building biodomes for scientific research, advancing the knowledge of human kind. But no, that's what Vivian gets to do, bitch.

Akim tinkered with the wires and small bits of the repeater for a few more minutes. He started humming a tune I didn't recognize, but I thought that was a good sign. The edge of the sunlight crept ever closer to us, and all at once the sun appeared over the horizon, piercing us with gold. I closed my eyes to the bright light. The warmth crept into my helmet through the glass in the front and I blinked my eyes open slowly. The sky was still black, stars visible, but the sun was materializing over the lunar surface. Just then a crackle of noise came through my ear piece and Akim raised his hands in triumph.

"Titan Station this is Control; you are not approved for a personnel change. Vivian, your stuck with him." I jerked a little at the mention of Vivian's name.

"Control, that is not acceptable." Vivian's voice came through my earpiece, it slithered into my ear like a slimy worm.

"Why are we hearing this?" I asked Akim.

"We're within the audio radius of the repeater." He motioned me to be quiet.

"Titan Station, this is non-negotiable. Take your team to Europa, we will consider your request in six months when the Europa supply ship loads up." There was a great huff of air let out from Vivian. Apparently she wants to get rid of everyone. It hit me suddenly that if I were on Titan or Europa, I would be around Vivian everyday. I chill went down my spine.

"ELLO Station, ELLO Station, this is Control come in."

I pulled the com out of my backpack, drawing my thoughts back to the moon. "This is ELLO Station; we have you Control."

"Hello Lori, I see the repeater is back online."

"Akim worked some magic," I said. Ella grinned behind the camera pointed directly at my face.

“Just in time, Akim, we have a large solar storm headed your way. If you’re still at the Cassiopeia crater, you may want to put the pedal to the metal.”

Akim took the com from my hand. “Will do but the freaking rover is electric, no promises.”

“Let us know when you arrive back at ELLO safe and sound, Control out.”

Akim gestured down the steep hill. “Ladies first.”

I took a deep breath, shook my head a little and started down the slope. The rocks my elephant sized boots dislodged tumbled down the hill in front of me, followed closely by those pebbles knocked loose by Akim and Ella. My foot caught, I stumbled but didn’t go down. Thank god! That’s not what I needed to be in the documentary. Toward the bottom I gave up and just started running, letting the reduced gravity drag me down the hill. Akim appeared out of the corner of my left eye. I speed up just a little to keep ahead of him. The dust at the bottom plumed up around our feet as we charged onto the level ground at the bottom of the crater.

Ella landed a little more gracefully a few seconds later, camera still attached to her face. We dashed to the rover, a little laugh starting in the pit of my stomach and bubbling up in my chest until it burst out of my mouth. In my earpiece I could hear Akim and Ella both laughing with me. The sunshine glinted off the glass of my helmet and I laughed. We piled into the rover once more, still chuckling a little. Akim dramatically pressed his foot to the floor and the rover started forward disappointingly. I gave out another burst of laughter, not really sure why.

Ella left the camera rolling while we started our drive back, pointing it out the window, then around the vehicle at Akim or I. I stared out the window, unusually calm. We drove toward the dark side of the moon once more away from the golden sunlight, but I was somehow looking

forward to the starlight. To the subtle comfort of it, the gentle calmness. Ready to be home at ELLO again. Home, how weird it was.

Out the window of the rover I saw the first licks of the solar storm toss fine, lunar dust up into the air. The invisible gusts of solar wind swirled the dust creating intricate patterns until the particles became too numerous to distinguish from one another. I had to lean away from the window a little to stop my breath from fogging the glass. The surface of the moon, usually so still and so stagnant, danced in the jets of solar wind, kicked off by a ball of light millions of miles away. For the first time since my arrival, the dark side of the moon seemed a wonderful place to be.

The storm held no window rattling power or terrible claps of thunder to remind you of its dominance. Instead a silent kicking up of angry moon dust and battering the structures with these tiny particle weapons, every one of which pelted against the glass windows of the rover.

“How much farther we got Akim?” I asked, looking through the windshield at the shrinking visibility.

“Only a mile,” he answered, but his voice sounded tight. The view through the windshield closed in upon us. The silent storm seemed like it was trying to swallow the rover along with the rest of the moon. I felt a fluttering in my throat and tried to swallow the sensation away.

ELLO station came into view as if it had sprouted out of the ground in front of us. I punched in the code to open the bay doors and Akim guided the rover inside. We sat in the vehicle for a few moments, the tension slithering out of our muscles. I popped open my door first, and got out.

Inside the entry chamber we climbed out of our suits, leaving a horrendous pile of dust of the floor. We would have to draw straws later on who had to clean it up. The airlock seal opened to admit us to the main biodome, through which the full fury of the solar storm could be seen.

“You sure this glass is strong enough?” Akim asked.

“Why do you keep asking me that? You wouldn’t hurt it that much if you smashed into it with that speed rover of ours.”

“I don’t know, just want to make sure your proud of it,” Akim said. I plopped down on the couch in the middle of the biodome, watching the dust swirl around outside. Alyona emerged from her living pod, nodded to Ella and I. She said hello to Akim and sat down in the chair next to the couch, following my gaze out to the storm. Ella put her camera gear down and joined me on the couch. I heard the tinkling of glasses from the kitchen and a moment later Akim handed me a glass of vodka. “From the motherland,” he said, dispersing glasses to everyone else. He took the last seat on the couch.

We all sipped from our glasses and watched the storm silently for a while. After a long time, Ella said, “Lori, if they wanted to transfer you to Titan or Europa would you go?”

I thought about it for a moment, hearing Vivian’s voice in my head again, I had almost forgotten what it sounded like before today. How much I hated it. “I don’t think so; I think I need to be here right now.”

Ella pulled out her camera and began to watch the playback of the footage, skipping around to see different things. She turned the camera to show Akim and I running down the side of the crater, the dust kicked up by our shoes sparkling in the sunlight. Alyona said something in Russian and smiled at me. I recognized the Russian word for sun in what she had said. Maybe I was picking up some Russian after all. Ella and I both turned to Akim expectantly.

“She thinks you have a huge ass,” Akim said.