

TITAN TRAILS

EPISODE 1: THE MARTIAN? NAH!

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The air was damp on a hot August afternoon. One could smell the petunias on the window sill, and the recently put white lilies. "Oh Elinor, your breakfast is ready. Rise and shine, buttercup! You have your training today, remember?" , a honey laden voice soared in the afternoon air. The lady of the house was a beautiful jubilant woman with lean arms and voluptuous legs. She had covered her brown hair with a red striped bandana. "Coming honey! Almost ready!" , a male voice came from down the hall. A man appeared. He was strong in his build, with a stolid face.....wait, his face, his face!

Elinor woke up with a jolt from his Memory Organization Recollection Unit (MORU), a nasty hum resonating in his skull, as if bees had made a hive inside. His vision was blurred, and his gullet, begged for water. He shifted his legs, and forced them outside the MORU, hanging from the edge. He looked at the small white room, with machines on the Module(Mod) humming silently. The ordered shelves cast long shadows, as the sun set. The counter in the opposite corner was absolutely clean, even after Elinor's late night fiasco. Apparently, the cleaning bots never complained. It was completely spotless and sparkling like a thousand white dwarfs. "If only my mind could be this room", Elinor thought.

"Good morning Mr. Elinor. You have a sporadic heartbeat with elevated stress levels. Should I activate the med-kit?", a sharp female voice barged in on the sweet hums.

"No need Ramona. I am just fine. What is bothering me is how many times do I need to remind you to call me El! I thought Artificial Intelligence is supposed to beintelligent?", Elinor remarked with his born-into Kentucky accent.

"You have to override my internal instructions for reassignment of operator's name, Mr. Elinor", Ramona spoke in the same clear, digital voice, " Mr. Elinor, your blood pressure is still on the rise.

"Don't worry Ramona. I just got spooked by one of the memory containers. I was back on Earth, in Stone Creek Valley, back at home. It was one of the early days of the training program after my selection. My wife, she looked gorgeous! I shifted my gaze towards the corridor and found a man coming up from around the corner. It was supposed to be me. Only, it wasn't!". Elinor went silent for a minute."I think the memory containers have started to go corrupt! For God's sake! It's 2020 people! Is infallible technology too much to ask for?".

"Your grievances have been recorded, Mr. Elinor.", Ramona said sincerely.

"Load the latest mission updates from Earth", Elinor ordered, as he got up from the MORU and got dressed in his favourite grey T-shirt. His army honour blade hung from his neck, dangling to and fro, as he bent down to wear his shoes.

"The highly contagious and pathogenic viral infection caused by SARS-CoV-2 has engulfed 23 percent of the surviving population. All countries are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. The spread of the virus is uncontrollable, even after complete lockdowns in most of the countries. Efforts in finding a cure have been futile. The mission agenda remains the same, analyse Titan's geography and air composition for the possibility of future human residence, in addition to extraterrestrial life. Major Brown sends his regards. The message has taken approximately 2.6 days to reach us due to Titan's dense atmosphere and Planet Alignment Distortion (PAD)", Ramona went silent.

Elinor knew two days were enough for a fast-contracting virus to overwhelm an entire city. Elinor thought, *"There goes another neighbourhood, wheezing and coughing. Waiting to infect others."*

"Status updates from the other outposts", Elinor said out loud. "A video chat request from Europa outpost. Sergeant Wilford", Ramona replied calmly. Sergeant Wilford was an old friend of Elinor from his Hooligan gang in the army. "Initiate video call.", Elinor said queasily.

After a few minutes of tense silence, a pale man with emaciated arms, came into view. He was sitting in his Mod, in his nightgown. Whatever hair he had left, formed a crown with a shiny bald top. His dark circles were deep, with rheumy eyes. He croaked, "I think I have it El!"

COMPUTER LOG Day 70

Gravitational anomalies detected in the Northern Sandra region. The polar vortex on the south pole has shown recent expansions. Deformation in crystal structure of ground ice with unstable ice sheet, scanned and logged. Data remains *unreported* to the operator. [180308646 BackUpAt: 12:03 hrs]

Ramona stared at the blank canvas which she refused to fill with colors. The cool morning breeze scattered old sketches and parted the window curtains, letting in the barest hint of pre-dawn. It was finally morning.

His other hand tucks strands of her messy hair behind her ear as he pries the paintbrush from her fingers. His smile is amused but kind. "Get some sleep, love," he says, "The canvas won't go anywhere."

"She hadn't looked up from the canvas in hours. She couldn't. Not when their home was just as empty. His absence had a physical presence, and this blank, white sheet was her personal shield. Her fingers absently traced the outline of her phone bulging against the fabric of her jeans. She pulled it out to look again. She'd read it half a dozen times since last night, but she was yet to feel anything."

The exhibition stands cancelled. Health concerns.’ said Barry’s text. ‘Okay,’ she’d replied, ‘that’s understandable.’ There was nothing more to say, though there should have been. Barry had amounted to this opportunity, it was gone and then nothing remained. She caught up on her news feed only to be bombarded with event cancellations, interviews with health experts, and baking tutorials.

Her eyes slid across all the loud text on her screen, everything demanding attention she didn’t have to give. Markets and restaurants were closing down, taxis and bus routes were getting shut, not just from the fear of the virus spreading, but from a simple lack of personnel to man it all. Videos of domestic and foreign refugees all over the country demanding to be allowed into overfilled hospitals were being circulated on social media.

A feeling of restless, empty frustration raced across her skin, crawling under and out of the fabric of her clothes. She swiped the screen aggressively until the black and white and the odd, out-of-place bit of color merged into an indecipherable haze before she chucked her phone away. Immediate regret flooded in to mix with frustration, only partly relieved when the device plopped onto their beanie. The screen lit up with a new message alert. Ramona glanced at the clock, 5 A.M.

He lifts me up and spins me around. Joy leaks into his words, punctuated with breathless gasps. He probably ran all the way from work. “I made it!” El says. His exaltation is infectious and I can’t help but laugh. He puts me down and I pull him closer for a kiss. He’s still a little out of breath and he smells of sweat. His lips keep twitching into a smile against mine. I push him away and laugh. “What about Cathy?” I ask, “Did you check in with her?” His smile slips for the first time in the last several minutes, “She says she didn’t make it.”

Not many people she knew were awake at this hour, fewer still expected her to be. Only one person might have had something to say. ‘Would like to talk’ said Cathy’s text, ‘my place for lunch?’

For the first time that morning, she looked at their apartment. Books, papers, and little figurines lay scattered on the floor where he’d shoved the shelf on the floor. She’d thought of cleaning it up several times, could never bring herself to. Though she couldn’t see it now, she knew that their bed wasn’t made and dirty dishes lay ignored in the kitchen sink. She stood up and knocked over the cup of water kept by her feet. It was supposed to have been used to paint. The spilled water spread along the floor of the corner of their apartment she had set aside for her art.

Stepping carefully over the wet floor, she pulled the window curtains open. The sun was not yet up but there was enough light to see. Her town was small and isolated, no tourism to speak of, and travel was being restricted anyway. The silence of the streets around her seemed to muffle the sounds of a screaming world. Staring at the unnerving, empty streets, she didn’t want to go back inside. Not after breathing in the cool morning air.

‘Sure’ she replied, ‘I’d love to. Let’s meet at 2?’ Her fingers hovered over the keypad, hesitant. ‘And thank you’ she added, ‘for reaching out. It means a lot.’