



# **TITAN TRAILS**

## **EPISODE 2: GOD'S PAINTBRUSH**

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“What are you saying, Wilford? That can't possibly be true...”, Elinor remarked hesitantly.

“I think I am infected with COVID-19. Last thing I remember is checking the biological plant containers before boarding on the space mod. They were the closest biological contact I've had, before I reached here”, Wilford sniveled.

“Wilford, listen to me....”, Elinor was interjected with a loud rasp. “NO! You listen to me Elinor. Listen to me very carefully! Humans can take their chances on Europa, however, I have not received the data from my probes. I am sending the initial analysis and statistics. See for yourself, Elinor, and decide”, Wilford sneezed twice and then rubbed his runny nose. “I don't know how long I am going to survive this thing. I am going to shut down all the reception devices and I am switching to the auxiliary power source. If I am going to die, I am going to die on my own accord, rather than living in fear of some bat virus toying with my body.

Elinor knew better than to interrupt. Wilford was one of the most intrepid and austere soldiers he remembered from his days in the army. It was almost heartbreaking to see him like that. Once their unit was deployed on the north-west border of Iran, which was generally well-fortified with guns and ammo smoking like it was bloody 4th of July. Many friends were wounded or found dead after the bloodshed. In the med-camp, Elinor found Wilford crying, as he rested his head on James's bed, his boyfriend. Elinor didn't even have the slightest idea that Wilford was a homosexual, or a 'queer' as the Hooligans called them. After that day in the med-camp, half the unit was struggling with the idea of Wilford's newly discovered sexual orientation . He continued his days in the camp, after he buried James' body, with all the commemoration he deserved. He used to show up with fresh bruises every morning. The Richmond chaps had some aggressive homophobes. Wilford was not a milksop, but a man with an unusual control over his words and actions. Now seeing him trying to grab the rope, while he was drowning, seemed so difficult to digest for Elinor.

“You know Elinor?”Wilford shifted the camera, a vast, unending land embellished with rugged rocks, came into view. A violet shade was spread across the whole sky, with Jupiter arching over, like an over-inflated football. “Isn't she a beauty? You can almost see the Giant Red Spot. You know, God's Paintbrush never ceases to surprise. Every evening is new, and every dawn is like a rebirth. I hope this can be the new dawn of human civilization. I just wish James was here to see this.”, tears again started to roll down Wilford's sunken cheeks. His broken spirit was reminiscent of a time, Elinor couldn't bear to remember.

*He saw Ramona's face with her brown locks lying lazily over her shoulders, her small eyes glancing at him from under the bed sheet. Those eyes had enough pain in them, for a harp to cut its own strings with a doleful melody of melancholy. It was his wife, Ramona.*

He never did fathom the reason why he named the AI after her, but he knew a quest for that would be a futile exercise. Suddenly the bedsheet vanished, it was just El, trapped in the kaleidoscope of thoughts of his own making.

“Elinor, just remember this view for me. Remember there is so much beauty in this universe, yet to be discovered.” The screen dissolved in blackness of the digital abyss.

## SOL 113

The Probes returned back from almost a hundred kilometers dig , with flummoxing data. The crystallized ice under the surface seems to be stable and was as near as two kilometers from the surface, maintaining a temperature of four degrees, as a result of high pressure.

Elinor was standing at the hillcrest, in the Sandra region, where the Mod had landed. Scientists were sure of the presence of crystallized ice and methane lakes, in the region. The surface itself was a broken up patch, with shards of ice pounded flat as Elinor trampled over them in his neoprene spacesuit.

“Do you see this land Ramona? It’s an ocean of sailing shards. One wrong step, and they have your jugular. How can humans possibly survive here? It looks so beautiful, but alas, no less than a venus fly trap. Wilford may have been right. God might as well be a painter, but I can tell, his paintbrush doesn’t have mercy.”, Elinor grumbled.

“ ‘Paintbrush doesn’t have mercy’, that’s a curious metaphor El. It’s almost poetic. Duly noted!”, Ramona replied in an uncanny cheerful female voice. “I am glad those ‘Overriding’ configurations worked!”, Elinor replied with a hint of euphoria, which he had forgotten how it felt for sometime.

“The ice sheet is stable and ready for the Construction Module, to be inserted for the *second wave*.”

“Good. Initiate the drill”, Elinor said with aplomb.

## COMPUTER LOG: SOL 178

The ice sheet near the location has been identified as unstable with 0.89 probability of caving in. Significant deviation recorded in PAD, unknown factor hindering the signals that are being received. Dark cycle phase coming up in 30 days. Data remains *unreported* to the operator.

[932065586 BackUpAt: 12:03 hrs]

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“Miss?”

Ramona turned to look at the man who’d driven her to the facility. Apparently, the travel restrictions didn’t apply to everyone.

He pointed to the door in the corner, away from what looked like the main entrance. “Kindly go through the entrance on your right. You’ll have to go through checkup before entering the building. Testing and sanitation is mandatory for all visitors.”

“Of course.”

The unremarkable building was a training facility for astronauts engaged in long distance space travel. She knew this because El came here to train for several months. The building's corridors were undecorated but very clearly marked with directions; she had no trouble finding the residential block.

Cathy opened the door after she knocked. The room was small, but the decor was tasteful and mellow so it didn't feel cramped. A table for two was set up in a corner.

As she sat down, Ramona didn't know what to expect. They didn't meet very often without El, and this was the first time they'd met since he left. The first time any of their friends had met her, really. Cathy turned slightly to call her to the table and she was relieved at seeing a welcoming, if a little reluctant, smile.

They exchanged pleasantries and small talk. Then, for a little while, neither of them said anything.

"There was lots I wanted to say when El told me. I held back because he didn't need more outrage, he needed support and clarity."

"I'm—"

"You broke his heart, Ramona. You did so when it could break his dream. I couldn't let that happen and I hate how close it was."

Ramona's heart thundered in her chest. Cathy's dark eyes had always made her glares seem intense and she was at the receiving end of one of the most fierce. The truth ringing in her accusations was, however, worse by far. She was glad she was sitting since her legs won't be able to support her right now.

"I *know*" her breath hitched, "really, *truly* I know and I'm—I'm *sorry*." This was what she's been avoiding, but she couldn't do so now. "El had found his dream and— and it seemed like I wasn't even *there*. Then Barry came in with *my* dream and— I *know*, I know that doesn't justify anything but that was how I felt back then and now, those days barely feel *real*— It's like I don't even truly remember living them and I don't know what to do, Cathy." Ramona looked up to see a pale hand — Cathy's hand — holding up the table napkin.

Cathy stared into her eyes, weighing, doubting, searching. Ramona didn't quite know what she was looking for. The look vanished before she could guess.

"You make it up Ramona. That's all you can do. Despite all this mess, El does need you."

Ramona kept the napkin down, her face flushed but tears wiped. "How do you mean?"

"Before that, how's the exhibition coming along?"

"Cancelled." Ramona replied, "Health concerns."

“So all this trouble’s been worth nothing at all, huh? And Barry’s ...”

“Not involved anymore,” Ramona confirmed.

“Good.” Cathy said,

“Then I have something for you.” She pulled out a small rectangular device from her pocket and offered it to Ramona. It looked like a sleek silver smartphone. She looked for the power button, but the surface seemed smooth all along the edges.

“What’s this?”

“A communication interface for the AI aboard El’s ship –The Kronos-3. It’s a direct link to the ship’s computer, with only relay satellites in between.”

Ramona quickly and carefully deposited the not-a-smartphone on the table. “How did you even *get* something like this?” She knew how top-secret El’s mission was, there weren’t supposed to be any hotlines except for very official ones. Her surprise turned into suspicion, “am I even allowed to hold it?”

She saw Cathy grinning weakly and she relaxed just a bit. “Yeah,” Cathy said, “you’re allowed to hold it. El had this specially commissioned for civilian use. For you, I assume. For all the cosmic splendour, Titan’s a *lonely* place.”

“And this was supposed to be a way for us to talk.” *Oh, El.* “I never even knew about this.” “I’d guess so.” Ramona flinched.

“But, isn’t the AI supposed to provide company?”

“The AI mimics humans, but it’s not a substitute. Even more so for the restricted state active on the ships. This is one of the reasons why the previous Kronos missions were so grueling. Well that and dangerous and experimental terra transforming tech. We just didn’t have the setup for this sort of thing. Even now, communication’s not fully reliable, but it is what it is.”

Ramona picked up the interface and turned it in her hand. “Why do you have it?” she whispered.

“Before he left, El told me he couldn’t face you. Not then. So he gave it to me. To reach out, he said, if I ever wondered what Titan is like.”

“And you’re –you’re giving it to me after all? Even after you—”

“Didn’t make it? Yeah. He might not be comfortable with it, but I’m not the one he needs to talk to. Besides, I’ve not given up on Titan yet.”

“You mean – *the second wave?*”

“Cathy stared at her for a moment, “I’m surprised you know. The information’s highly confidential, for El to tell you about it...” she shook her head and smiled,” Whatever, it doesn’t matter anymore. In any case, yeah. Once the firsties have set up all the infrastructure, they’re going to need more people. El’s ahead of me for now, but it’s not gonna stay that way.”

Ramona didn’t know whether to smile or to cry. “Cathy, I can’t tell you how much all this means to me. I *promise*—” Her phone rang and for a moment, the sound felt unfamiliar. It’d just been so long since...

“I’m sorry, just let me—”

“Yeah, sure” Ramona dug around in her bag and pulled out her phone, ‘Sophia’ it said in large white letters.

“Hello, Sophia?”

“Hey Ramona, I wanted to ask you something.” Ramona looked at Cathy apologetically, who crossed her arms and just nodded. She was used to this. “Okay, go on.”

“Do you maybe plan on volunteering at the clinic soon? We could really use your help.”

“Sophia, I... I’m honestly not sure. Especially with *everything* that’s happening—”

“I know that you’ve got a lot on your plate right now, Ramona, but with this virus, we just don’t have enough hands to take care of everyone. I *promise* to do everything I can to prevent you from getting infected. We’re open all through the week and no one’s gotten sick yet.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Alright.”

“Hey, just a second,” Sophia paused, “I know, I said a lot of things and I’m not sure I regret saying them, but...” Ramona heard a sigh and kept listening.

“Just don’t let that influence your decision.” Ramona didn’t know what to say. “Hey, you there?”

“Goodbye, Sophia. I’ll think about it.” Ramona cut the call.