

TITAN TRAILS

EPISODE 3: ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE

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Hozier's "Take me to Church" was playing in the background. "No signal" flag had been a permanent addition to the monitor for the last two weeks. The photo of Ramona hanging in the kiosk of Mod's core was vibrating and swinging, as the drill went about grounding the ice to pieces. He looked at her pristine face beaming with that heart-melting smile. It had been more than hundred days since the drill had been initiated. The ice below the surface was harder than a diamond. The last two cutters in the drill came out twisted. This was apparently the last one, with a few hundred metres left to drill, to reach the "scintillation point", as Elinor called it. He always thought, there was nothing more exhilarating than achieving a goal in life.

Elinor had more hair on his face than a Mississippi wood stump. He never thought he would be a beard man, but there he was, spouting fountains of youth on his face. He was drinking diluted fuel, as he sketched a face on a crumpled piece of paper. The water(fuel) recycling plant groaned, and then went silent.

"El, that fluid is not going to make the days less prosaic. You knew the risk when you applied for this job.", Ramona remarked.

"Oh, why will it not darling? Killing my own personal brain cells is none of your damn business, woman", Elinor mumbled, almost like a drunkard, handling his last night's hangover. "You have grown to be a real...woman you know. A totally real one! I don't even remember what those 'Overriding' configurations were about.", Elinor was hysterical. "You know, Ramona", Elinor said with a sardonic air, "You think you are so full of consummate elegance. You know, you truly deserve my wife's name. It's so apt.", Ramona was silent.

"It's all so freaking dumb, I am sitting here, waiting for all the little earthlings to get infected and my brilliant plan is to wait out this apocalypse. Sometimes I think, do I deserve to live? Do any of us, deserve to live after what we have done in our lives. After what we have done to nature. After what we have done to each other", Elinor took another sip of the refined fuel. "Good people like Wilford, are hurt because they love someone from their own gender. People wage wars, to become powerful. They play politics, disregard other people's welfare, and preach about sacrifice to soldiers, and run the model citizen circus in their town. Ordinary people are no less. They look and laugh at a person's burning house. They gossip and debate, passing remarks on their nation's problems, cavorting around, amusing themselves with asinine videos, otherwise castigating their leaders, or the herd of the tramps. God sits there watches us destroy ourselves, while the religious folks sing his ballads and tales, to curb this pandemic. I am telling you, God is nothing more than a child with a joystick in his hand. One move and humans will be wiped from the face of the Earth. No one will be there to mourn their non-existence. My wife ..."

His vision suddenly blurred, and a low mind-numbing hum started to resonate inside his head. That bee hive was coming back, the humming grew. He screamed like someone had cracked his skull with an axe. He bent down and retched. He lied flat on the floor, staring at the roof of the Mod. "Scintillating conversation huh? "

“Conversations are generally defined as a two way mode of interacting....”“Oh shut up! Just shut up!”, Elinor bellowed, as he vomited last night’s mashed potatoes. “Just shut up. Eat metal or drink machine oil or something. Just go away!”

“You know what they called the person who went to Mars for the first time, in 2012?”, Ramona spoke hesitantly.

“The Martian?”

“Guess what they would call you?”Elinor smiled a little, with the lines on his forehead relaxing.

“They would call me Titanium!”, they both burst out laughing.

The drill went on, the module hummed as all the gears and cranks worked seamlessly. Elinor got up and sat in his chair. He again started to sketch the lady he once pined for.

SOL 235

The drill had hit the rock layer, underneath the ice blanket. The time to insert the Construction brackets was near.

“Ramona, why is the transmission signal getting interference?”, Elinor asked. This time he was sober enough to actually do something about the communication.

“Thought you would never ask! Unfortunately, Titan has entered the dark phase cycle with a bonus of PAD. The alignment of Saturn, Titan, and the Sun is going to last for more than a month. Gaining transmission will be like trying to surf on a high tide at night.

”“Hey, where are you getting all this stuff from?”

“Experience, El! That’s how I work. Might as well have graduated in Artificial Intelligence.”

“Ah, I see, your humor setting needs to be revised.”Both of them laughed.

“Never underestimate an army biologist, dear. They come in handy in ways you can’t imagine. Tell me one thing, do you record every emotion?”

“Yes, I have a database for emotions and best matched reactions. I have a database for wars, ideas, history, future plans, literature, art, science, business, morals, ethics, religions, human nature. It’s all there. Even your observations from SOL 214. Duly noted!”

“I don’t remember. What did I say?”

COMPUTER LOG: SOL 251

An earthquake read with an epicentre at a depth of 5 Km. Richter scale reading at 6.9; tenuous vibrations felt in Sandra Region. PAD increasing at a 109% growth, unknown factor unidentified. Damage rate, Construction Brackets : 47%. Data remains *unreported* to the operator.
[489497444 BackUpAt: 12:03 hrs]

The air inside the clinic lay stale and Ramona caught the smell of disinfectant and sweat. Sophia wasn't hard to find, but the reception was so occupied that she wasn't quite sure how to get her attention. Sophia saw her first, though, before she could think of anything to try. Sophia asked her to go through the back to get better protection than her flimsy cloth mask.

"I'll just get to it then, where do you want me?"

"Triage and testing. We need help sorting out all the COVID patients from everyone else. Go to the larger waiting room near the back. Follow Paul's lead there." As Ramona began to leave, Sophia called out to her again, "And thank you, Ramona! It's incredible that you came."

The supply room had protective goggles, better quality masks, and protective bodysuits. Ramona quickly put them on and went further in to find Paul.

The waiting room was filled with cheap plastic chairs, cots, stools— anything that could be used to seat people. A small section of the large room was blocked off with a thick, white curtain hanging from the ceiling. The whirr of multiple exhaust fans filled up the room along with muted voices, instrumental music, and incessant coughing muffled by people's hands moving in front of their faces. There seemed to be enough space to house everyone. Barely. For now.

Everything until now had been familiar. Normal, though a little crowded, perhaps. The local news had said their town wasn't hit very hard, comparatively. She'd known that people were sick. But, with the streets so empty it'd seemed calm instead of catastrophic. In here though...

How could this happen? It's just been a few months since—

Paul looked haggard and sleep-deprived, with messed up hair and dark pits beneath his eyes. Even so, his eyes were focused and determined. He looked relieved when he saw her and walked up to her briskly.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, "we can use the help. I need you to get saliva samples from, well— everyone." He smiled like his face felt too heavy to lift. "Follow me, the swabs were moved with everything else, so they're kind of hard to find." He paused as he was turning away, "Hey, you okay?" Her alarm must have shown, even through the mask and goggles.

“Paul, this is— all these people “, she looked around, her eyes wide, “ I didn’t realise how dire things were!”

She looked back at Paul to find him frustrated. “Oh you don’t know the *least* of it, “ he said, as he began walking away, she had no choice but to follow. “ All these people keep coming in and we don’t have the facilities to house them all.”

“Why isn’t Sophia restricting admissions, then? Or else, transporting the COVID patients to a larger facility?”

“Most of these people are from poorer neighbourhoods. Sophie doesn’t want to refuse anyone until it’s completely untenable. You know how she is.” Paul led her to a closet on the opposite side of the room, away from all the patients. His hands dipped into his pockets, feeling around for the keys. “And it’s not just us, *everywhere* is overburdened so we can’t expect relief anytime soon.”

“The power outages must have been *devastating*.” It had been all the news for days. The utility distribution systems were mostly automated, so they were holding on for now, but a lot of the power came from thermal plants which were experiencing fuel shortages. Eventually, though, the system was gonna need *people* to keep it from breaking down.

“Not yet,” Paul replied.” Designated medical facilities are getting gasoline rations for local generators, along with other essential services. Some good from all those cars not driving around.

“He pulled the closet open. About half of it was filled with supplies. The other half, however, was empty. ”

“Where’s all the rest?” Ramona asked, looking at the empty space.

“There’s some more stuff in the supply room but not much. The suppliers are having ‘internal problems’, apparently.” Paul snorted, “ we just aren’t big enough to be priority customers.” He handed her a tray filled with swabs in bottles.

Her hands were clammy under the gloves and her fingers quivered as she took the samples.

Why am I so nervous?

She moved on from patient to patient, not stopping for any longer than necessary. It wasn’t the first time she’d taken samples from sick people. Her eyes flitted around the large room, noticing it’s too dirty walls.

This place was always sanctity and meaning. Dependable and steadfast. A sanctuary. That was why she took that vocational nursing course, right? She looked up to them, this place. It *accomplished* something. Now it barely seemed to be holding on.

She realised she’d been staring at the toothless, open mouth of a trembling old woman for too long. As she reached out to get a sample, the woman retched and let out a huge heaving cough. Phlegm flew onto her face. Her eyes shut tightly despite the goggles and the tray fell from her hands. Her stomach fell leaving a hollow void as her heart pounded blood into her head. Her steps staggered and she held herself up by her arm on a nearby chair. A callous hand, cold and damp with sweat, touched her hand with uncertainty. Her hand flinched away.

"Paul stepped up behind her and guided her back through the crowd, his hands on her shoulders. "Come on," he said, "let's get you cleaned up".

Standing alone by the sink, she gingerly removed her goggles and mask, careful not to get any more of the spit on her skin. She threw all the protective garments into the bin marked 'hazardous' and with copious amounts of disinfectant soap, she began rubbing off the vile goo from where it stuck to her cheeks.

"He named you what?" I asked, in disbelief.

"Designation: Ramona, R-A-M-O-N-A" the AI's synthetic voice replied.

"Don't spell it out." It was just a machine. It couldn't understand what that meant, to her. To him.

"...Your distress has been duly noted."

"Let me talk to him," I said. My voice quivered and my fingers curled into a fist.

"Elinor is currently unavailable."

"There's nothing on Titan!" I heard my voice rising, "What could he possibly be engaged in?"

"He is currently in deep memory immersion. After which, he is scheduled to supervise operations." The answer was unexpected and made her thoughts stumble.

"What? Memory immersion? Why do you have...?"

"Tests show that treasured memories ground the psyche of—"

"Alright! Alright, stop." I placed the little silver box on the table. I couldn't trust myself with it right now and I wasn't sitting in front of the beanie.

"What is he dreaming of?"

"..."

"AI?"

"Processing request for private data retrieval."

"..."

"Data request accepted. He seems to be recollecting memories of you, Ramona."

My eyes felt damp as I let myself fall into the couch behind me. Clutching the pillow to my chest I ask, "Are they— are they happy memories?"

"Evaluating physiological data."

"..."

"The recollection pod indicates— distress."

I breathe deeply to stifle the sob that wells up my throat. "Ca—" I clear my throat and start again, "cancel communication request."

"Request canceled. Do you wish to delete communication logs?" A snort comes up, unbidden.

"You're certainly helpful. Yes. Delete the logs."

Her face was red and raw from scrubbing, but she still couldn't still her heart. She wasn't infected since none of it was ingested. Not yet, anyway. She'd thought she could do something here, but it all seemed too much. She held herself against the sink as the walls seemed to close in.

I can't die. Not here, not like this.

She put on the fresh mask and goggles Paul left for her. Going back into the room, she pulled Paul aside.

"You okay now? You were in there quite a while."

She breathed deeply and looked him in the eye. He deserved that, atleast. "I'm sorry Paul, I can't do this. Not here. Not now."

"What do you mean you can't— Ramona? Ramona!"

She kept her gaze to the ground as she marched into the supply room and into the alley. She pulled out her phone and typed rapidly,

'Hey Cathy, I want to be on the second wave.' 'Surely you guys want nursing staff? Or artists maybe?'