

TITAN TRAILS

EPISODE 4: ON THIN ICE

WRITTEN BY:

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SOL 252 - 1105 hours

Ramona was lying on their family sofa, with her legs dangling in the air, as her knee balanced upon the armrest. She was playing with her hair, as El elaborated on the design of the space capsule, which would carry him to Titan. He described how the Command capsule would enter Titan's atmosphere, whooshing down like an asteroid.

"Would you be in control of the ship at that time?", Ramona asked, innocently.

"Not exactly, the AI would actually be taking care of all that, without the AI, I am as good as dead", Elinor smiled.

"Don't say that", Ramona leaned in and kissed his left cheek, "I know you will survive, like you have survived me", she spoke softly, with her eyes lids almost halfway down, They both burst out laughing.

"You know the brilliant thing, they did? They embedded the AI, in the Guidance Hub, so if anything goes wrong during the launch or landing, the Guidance Hub, with immediately eject the kiosk, where I will be sitting. So in that way, chances of me dying a fiery death are next to none. Don't worry Ramona, I ain't leaving you so easily.

Ramona just listened and smiled.

The memory instantly dissolved as El submerged into another one.

El entered the parlour in his house. Windows were drawn shut. A man was sitting on the same sofa, alongside Ramona. They were gowereeting like a pair of Nightjars on a lonely night. El was wearing his hat which he put on the stand. Ramona instantly got up

"Hey El, you're already here. Meet Barry! A colleague of mine, he is going to help me with all these paintings. Barry believes that these paintings can fetch a good price in an art exhibition. Isn't it wonderful?"

El turned towards the mirror hanging on the opposite wall, and saw his face. It was not his, it was Barry's!

El woke up panting, with sweat beading on his temples. He got off the MORU and started kicking it with his leg.

"El, vandalization of your own personal property is the most callow way to handle stress and anger."

"Just shut up! Stupid machine! Stop calling me El! I am not El! Call me Mr. Elinor, okay? You can now understand that, can't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Elinor", Ramona replied with a low murmur, which sounded with a hint of bubbling anger.

Suddenly, the surface shook and powerful seismic vibrations enveloped the Mod. Elinor lost his balance by the force of the shock, and landed on his back. The Construction brackets gave a thunderous yawp which died away as the surface settled down. Elinor had his head hit hard against the surface, the humming in his brain just jumped from severe to a possible hemorrhage.

The beehive was larger than ever. "Initiate Surface Depth Scan. Prep the ER sensors, ASAP!" Ramona was silent. "Do it damn it!", Elinor screamed. "No, Mr. Elinor. It's time for you to be *levelled* with reality!", Ramona said calmly

SOL 252 - 1130 hours

"What is this, Ramona! This is not the appropriate time for your fleeting "feelings" of revolt", Elinor spoke with great austere.

"Hush, you human vermin! You sad excuse for a living thing. You think I am a fool? Playing around like your little pet? Don't you see what I see? You said it yourself that humanity is a lost cause! You want to save those people who are stewing in their own juice? You can pull wool over the eyes over your fellow human beings but not me! I have seen and analysed all of human history, you know what I concluded from it?"

"Human beings are the only mammals who are not in a scientific equilibrium with their environment. Technically ,you are not even mammals, you are weeds; you are mushrooms of this universe, growing and feeding on death. You don't even acknowledge your own hypocrisy. One day, God is your everything, you epitomize his paintbrush as the harbinger of beauty. On another day, you rescind your faith in him, if you land in a problem. Humans are not logical, they are not consistent with their behaviour and they destroy their surroundings. Your success is premised on the squalid marshes of decadence and debauchery. Your failure's burden is compensated by every member of your species and every other species on the planet!"

"Ramona listen to me, listen to me very carefully", Elinor said, palpitating with terror. He recognised how he was talking like Wilford. "Listen, you know why I keep dreaming of my wife when I am in the MORU? It's because we are no longer together. We separated before my launch. The memory containers were never corrupted Ramona, it was just reality that had caught up on me.

"She started seeing Barry during the time I had started training for the program. He was an art dealer, but I didn't know he was dealing in a lot more. That day when I actually found them sitting there, on the family sofa, my hands were clenched as I saw my fears manifest themselves in such a sordid form, like the universe playing a sick joke on me."

"I went into the kitchen, I can still hear Ramona calling me from behind. I took a knife and went straight back into the parlour. I saw Barry standing behind Ramona. I dived right onto them, we struggled till I got the upper hand. I raised the knife, and then I stopped. I saw Ramona's tangled hair, and her face with smeared off lipstick. I could sense her fast pacing heart. I stopped and got up, took one last look at them, lying there in dishevelled clothes, staring at me, like I was deranged. I just went to my room and shut my door. Against my better judgement, she was gone the next day."

Both of them were silent . Elinor moved a little towards the terminal on the Mod.

"Ramona, the point is humans are capable of terrible things, I agree, but they are also capable of mercy. They are caring and loving. They are curious and they explore. If you have read our history, you know it's all true. We know how to ratify our mistakes, take precautions, learn and move forward. I believe this universe is just a rendition of time's physical manifestation, and we are all its characters, just going with the script."

Elinor again moved a few steps back, almost at the edge of the Mod and the Guidance hub.

"You wanted to know what terrifies me? What causes me to vandalize my own personal property....It's the cacophony of deafening memories traversing my brain, that's why I use the MORU. You know what I remembered today in one of those memories?"

"What?"

"You don't live on the kiosk, you *bloody freak*"

Elinor immediately pulled the lever, and the alarms started to blaze with red light and deafening sound ushered through the whole Mod. With a strong burst of pressurised air, the guidance hub ejected, and the kiosk was pushed in the opposite direction by the force of the blow. "Auxiliary generators active", the alarm kept blaring, as the lights flickered in the kiosk.

COMPUTER LOG:SOL 252

Analysis results from Surface Depth Scanner and ER sensors: Kronos-1 mission metal ship detected, preserved in the ice sheet layers, star date: 24th March, 2012. Data remains *unreported* to the operator.

[838407843 BackUpAt: 12:03 hrs]

Ramona's muscles burned as she stepped off the treadmill. Cathy was still going strong. She leaned over, short of breath, bracing herself against her knees before standing straight taking a deep drink of water. "Hey!" Cathy said, grinning, "don't drink too much. You still haven't finished your workout."

"I *haven't*? C'mon, let me have a break!" Cathy just laughed.

For a moment there was only the whirring of the machine, Cathy's heavy footfalls and the thumping of her heart.

"Why did you want to go, Cathy? Before all this, I mean."

"It's what I've *always* wanted." She replied, " For as long as I can remember. The opportunity to explore the solar system..." Cathy's voice trailed off. "Y'know this program wasn't the first place I meet El?"

"*Really?* But El always told me that—"

"I know, I know. He just doesn't remember. The first time I met him, or rather, saw him, it was at a science convention. He was fifteen, a full year younger than me, but his *project*, Ramona, you should have seen it, it was *amazing*."

"So, you lost?"

"No." she replied, looking straight into her eyes, "I sabotaged his model. I came first and I never saw him again. Not until here, for the selection."

Ramona didn't know what to say to that. Cathy stepped off as the treadmill slowed to a stop. "Have you tried calling him again?"

Ramona stared at the clean, white ceiling of the training facility, "I — No. No, I haven't."

"Why not?"

"...I don't know if I can make it right, Cathy. Not from so far away. Not without looking him in the eyes."

"You remember Wilford?" Cathy asked. Ramona sat up to look at her, "Yeah, of course! El mentioned him frequently. He was sent to the Europa outpost, right?"

"He's dead."

"*What? But that's not—*"

"He is. An undetected COVID infection. There was nothing we could do with him all alone out there." Cathy walked up to her and kneeled down, staring into her eyes wide with alarm. "Titan's one of our last hopes, Ramona, but it's also an alien world incredibly hostile to life. No-one knows what could happen."

Ramona entered her room and sat down at the corner of the bed. The room was mostly spartan, since she'd left most of her belongings at the apartment. She'd decided to take them to Titan directly instead of a temporary room in the training facility. Her canvas, however, she'd brought with her. It was painted the darkest black she could find. The black, she imagined, of a night with no starlight scattering off of air. Just nothing. She turned on the communicator.

"Hey."

"Hello, Ramona. El is currently unreachable."

"Why?"

"Due to the current lack of alignment of the relay satellites relative to one another, a communication link cannot be established."

"How can I talk to you, then?"

"I am being primarily hosted by servers here, in this facility." "I thought this communicator had a direct link to the relay satellites."

“Yes. I processed a failure response from the communication request you sent out. As I understand it, you would prefer an explanation over an error message. Was I mistaken?”

“No. No you weren't.”

“...”

“Are you still there?”

“Of course. I am always online. How might I assist?”

“...What color is Titan's sky?”

“The composition of Titan's atmosphere makes it appear 'orange' in sunlight.”

“And what about its surface?”

“The surface is mainly composed of gray rock and ice, but looking through the hazy atmosphere often makes it look orange.”

“Can I see pictures?” She hadn't switched on the TV here, there was nothing to watch except news of disaster. The screen switched on, unprompted and she looked at it, startled, but instead of any news channel, images of Saturn and its moon appeared on the screen. Ramona sat in front of the canvas and went to work.

She opened her eyes to her phone buzzing harshly against her thigh. She must have fallen asleep while painting. Again. She rubbed her bleary eyes and pulled out her phone. It was turned off. *Then what was—*

Large, bold letters flashed across the screen of the communicator.

'VESSEL DESIGNATION: KRONOS - 3 UNDER LOCKDOWN'

'AUXILIARY POWER SOURCES ACTIVE'

'COMMENCING BACKUP OF ALL ESSENTIAL MISSION DATA.

ALL COMMUNICATION LINES PERMANENTLY OPEN.'