

# TITAN TRAILS

EPISODE 5: ON BORROWED TIME

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VESSEL DESIGNATION: [KRONOS - 3] UNDER LOCKDOWN

AUXILIARY POWER SOURCES ACTIVE

COMMENCING BACKUP OF ALL ESSENTIAL MISSION DATA

ALL COMMUNICATION LINES PERMANENTLY OPEN

For a moment, she couldn't make sense of the text with her sleep-addled mind. *I shouldn't let Cathy scare me just before sleeping. This dream is horri—*

The sudden, intense vibration of the device spooked her awake, as the device fell from her fingers. She barely managed to catch it and read through the screen again.

*No — This can't be right.*

"Ra— Ramona?" The AI's unused name, her name, feels strange on her tongue.

"Yes, Ramona?" She can hear mirth in the synthetic voice. *Let all this be a terrible, malicious joke.*

"What does this *mean*? Why does it say the Kronos - 3 is under lockdown?"

The words 'ERROR LOGS' blinked bright red on the top of the screen, new headings appearing as the download bar progressed. She tapped on the blinking text and several repetitive messages appeared on the screen. A single line of text was highlighted again and again,

'Data remains unreported to the operator.'

"I cannot access any data stored in this device, only the microphone, and the speaker. It seems from your description that the device is malfunctioning. The Kronos - 3 is in perfect working condition."

Ramona frantically scrolled through the progressing reports —

'>Damage rate, Construction Brackets : 47%. Data remains unreported to the operator.'

'>Damage rate, Construction Brackets : 57%. Data remains unreported to the operator.'

'>Damage rate, Construction Brackets : 68%. Data remains unreported to the operator.'

'>Vessel Designation: [Kronos-1] detected. Data remains unreported to the operator.'

"Explain to me right now how a 'malfunction' fabricates terabytes of legible, processed data."

"I do not know. It seems to be a novel error. Perhaps the device has been compromised. Why don't you bring it to the mainframe? I can attempt to fix it."

"No. No, don't concern yourself, one of the technicians can fix it."

"There are currently no active personnel from the technical department. The communication line to Titan will soon be open. It would —" the words cut off. A new alert blinked onto the screen.

SHIP AUTOMATED INTERFACE IS OFFLINE

“But I’m not *communicating* with the ship. What is this? Hey? Ramona? Hey!” Ramona looked at the main screen again, searching for the AI. Something caught her attention and she tapped on ‘COMMUNICATION LINES’

“Ramona? Are you there?” No reply. She threw the unhelpful, buggy device onto the bed and picked up the receiver on the phone in her room. Cathy would know what to do, her or one of the officers. A bland monotone rang out from the receiver. Service not available. This time, she really did throw the phone against the wall, little bits of plastic came flying out with the phone batteries. She let out a cry of pure frustration and just as she began to storm out of this room to find someone who made sense, her husband’s voice rang out filled with static.

“Ramona?” El called out, “Is that you?”

“El?” Ramona turned back and picked up the communicator.

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Elinor woke up, he had a big scratch on his temple, with blood dripping from his ears. His grey t-shirt was soaked in blood and sweat. The lights kept flickering. He got up, and looked around. His vision was red, even though the red lights had ceased. He looked outside the window, the Guidance Hub was reduced to rubble. It had hit the large stone at the hill crest. He realised the kiosk itself was near the edge of the Construction Bracket.

The ripped off joints, which held the Guidance hub and the kiosk together, were slammed flat by the Emergency Shuttle Door. It was the only thing keeping Elinor from dying because of lack of oxygen.

He sighed and resigned to his second home, MORU. “*Maybe another dream?*”, he thought.

Suddenly a pinging sound filled the kiosk. The lights on the main Comp board were going crazy. The board showed a call from Earth, it was a video transmission. He accepted the call. His body was so sweaty, almost as if he had come out of a sauna bath. As soon as he touched the buttons, a moist imprint was left behind. He heard a muffled voice, followed by a yelp of infuriation. He knew that voice. He had known it for years.

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“Ramona?” El called out, “Is that you?”

“El?” Ramona turned back and picked up the communicator and saw his face, “El, can you hear me?”

“How did you find this line?”, Elinor spoke, almost euphoric.

“Cathy gave it to me a little while after you left” Ramona paused, “Are— Are you alright, El? This communicator suddenly started showing a bunch of data from your ship.”

“Listen to me, I—I...Ramona—the AI... what do you mean a bunch of data from my ship?”

“I— I don’t know. Computer logs. Something about damaged brackets and —” she looked at the logs again, “and the *Kronos-1?*”

A sudden flash of realisation, burst into El’s mind. He saw Wilford, talking to him while he cleaned his pipe. Fresh cigars and bourbons had always been his obsession.

*“Do you know about the Kronos-1 missions?”*

*“I am not fully aware –sir.”*



*"You know, they sent Terra Transform Triangulation Tech, with those bulk heads, at that time. It was a covert mission, and good thing too, after sometime the whole machine went haywire and stopped responding. Ever since, that piece of crap machinery has resided in those thick ice sheets."*

He immediately opened the computer logs and skimmed through 200 days worth of data. His face turned pale, the beehive was much larger now, as large as his entire skull. He realised the Terra Transform Tech was rumbling in the belly of the moon, causing disruption of signals, orchestrating earthquakes and ultimately an unprecedented ice rift, which El knew was imminent.

*Ramona must have jump started the machine. She was playing me from the day 1. Those 'Overriding' config -*

Ramona grew worried as he continued to say nothing, "El?"

"Nothing. Where are you right now?", Elinor said forcefully.

"The Kronos mission facility," Ramona put on a smile, "I'll be there, with you. I'm coming with the second wave."

"That's--That's great! How did you--", Elinor was interrupted by Ramona.

"El, listen, I'm — I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything I did. You deserved none of it and I promise I'll make it up. Just — just wait for me."

Shards of ice flew up outside, visible through the window behind Elinor's head. The wall shuddered and dust fell from the roof along with bits of metal. The bolts in the wall seemed to fail and shelves fell over.

*"Elinor!"* Ramona shrieked.

Elinor was calm as he realised this was the same conversation he had with Wilford, just this time, he was on the other side of the screen.

"Listen to me carefully Ramona, I don't have much time. Time, which I thought I would spend with you, in those summer days of our life in Stone Creek valley. I have loved you more than anything in this world. I remember us kissing in that summer rain, under that slightly bent overhang, of St. Pauls. I remember us floundering in that mud pool, in the backyard, during July. I remember it all. You know, why I decided to come here, even after you left? I thought", Elinor pauses for a moment, as tears rolled down his cheek, mixing with blood coming out of his cut. "I thought, if I could save Earth, I would have a good justification for my absence in your life." He smiled a little, and gave out a short laugh.

"Now that I see the transient nature of human life and the enduring beauty of this universe, I think my excuses are just a taint on all that beauty. I don't justify anything now, I am just sorry, and I wish I had been there more. Goodbye, Ramona!"

"No!" Ramona replied, "that's *not tr*—"

The little screen went black.

## Epilogue

They'd agreed to let her 'pull the pull the plug'. Cutting off power to the AI was a trivial matter. Too trivial.

It had deleted and overwritten all records of the Kronos -3 mission stored on the central mainframe along with infiltrating internal communications in the building, but the private interface served well enough as evidence for the AI malfunctioning.

Her hand hovered over the power switch to the central server array that housed the AI, the facility's supervisors standing behind her. She wondered if the machine felt fear, or pain. It wasn't supposed to, but apparently, it did a lot of things it wasn't supposed to. She hoped it did feel pain. Glorious, blinding pain when it realised it'll never see this world again.

The technicians had assured her it couldn't hear her, that it couldn't do much of anything, really. Not anymore. She still couldn't help but whisper, "You'll be a footnote in history, having changed *nothing*. A minor set back in humanity's efforts to build out into the void."

She flicked the switch.

Afterwards, Ramona sat alone on her bed, burning the picture into her mind. Titan hung in the empty void, painted a dull orange against a backdrop of burning stars. She'd been trying to memorise the landscape, it's name and features. She knew where he was buried. Silver metal shone through the haze of the atmosphere, sprawling against the surface of the alien moon.