## The Bands of Titan

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I once accepted a guest of honorship for a convention in Toronto and was later informed that one of the requirements was that I write them a story for a booklet to be sold to raise money for their favorite charity. This struck me as the equivalent of inviting a painter to dinner and then asking him to paint your wall in a charitable spirit. I make my living this way, and my writing time is also my income. Fortunately, I suppose, I had a short, light idea about then. And very visual.

It was like a midnight rainbow—the sunside half of Saturn’s rings as viewed from our position above the golden planet’s pole. It also sort of reminded me of something else, but metaphors are not my forte and the rainbow had just exhausted my abilities along these lines for a time.

As the great grooved plate with its dark subdivisions rotated beneath our observation vessel and a black band swam through the northern hemisphere of the world below, I heard Sorensen say, above the eerie sounds from the receiver, “We’ve pinpointed the source now, sir.”

I turned and regarded him—young, light-haired, enthusiastic—as he manipulated a paper accordian decorated with machine grafitti.

“Where is it located?” I asked him.

“Near to the inner edge of the C Ring,” he stated, “and it’s rather small.”

“Hm,” I observed. “Still no idea what it is, though?”

He shook his head.

“Nope.”

There was a kind of strange asynchronous beat behind the wailing, stringy effect coming in over the receiver, and an occasional burst which sounded like a French horn being played in a cave. It was broadcast at an odd frequency, too. In fact, we’d only caught it accidentally, when a micrometeoroid striking an unmanned flyby had thrown the machine’s receiver out of whack for a time. Later, we tuned for it. We’d been picking up the sequences for years since then and we were never able to correlate them with any natural phenomena in the vicinity. Running down their source, therefore, had been added to the already lengthy list of experiments and investigations to be conducted on this, the first manned visit to the area.

“McCarthy,” I called to the navigator—a short, dark-haired, unenthusiastic man. “Find us an orbit that will take us close enough to this thing to get a good camera fix on it.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” he said, accepting the papers.

Later, as we jockeyed for the proper plane and accelerated toward the necessary velocity, Sorensen remarked, “Some sort of disturbance on Titan, sir.”

“Storm? Ice volcano?” I asked.

“Hard to say,” he answered. “I’m only picking it up on visuals. A strong focus of atmospheric turbulence.”

I shrugged.

“Storm, probably. Check on it periodically. Let me know if it turns into anything really interesting.”

It was the source of the sounds we were tracking which proved the next interesting item we encountered, however. I was dozing on my couch after checking the crew’s alcohol rations for spoilage when McCarthy shook me awake.

“You’d better come and take a look at this, captain,” he told me.

“What is it?” I mumbled.

“We seem to have located a genuine alien artifact,” he said.

I got to my feet and crossed to the viewscreen, where I beheld the thing in full focus. I had no idea as to the scale, but it was a dark metallic satellite; it looked like two squat cones joined together at their bases. It hovered above the ring plane, and its nether vertex glowed with a brilliant light which flashed downward into the ring itself.

“What the hell do you make of it?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “It’s in synchronous orbit—we’re matching it now—and that’s coherent light shining out of it. It is definitely the source of the broadcast.”

I listened again to the sounds, which seemed to be rising to some sort of crescendo.

“Captain!” Sorensen called. “There’s more activity on Titan. It’s in the upper atmosphere now and—”

“Screw Titan!” I said. “Are you taping this thing?”

“Yes, but—”

“Are you monitoring everything that can be monitored concerning it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We’ll talk about Titan later. An alien artifact is infinitely more important than a methane storm.”

“Very good, sir.”

We watched for hours, and our diligence was rewarded by our witnessing a sudden peculiar maneuver on the part of the device. It was preceded by an abrupt cessation of all broadcast sounds. I had had the stuff pumped into the control room for days, hoping that immersion might stimulate some ideas as to its nature; also, it was not unpleasant in its rising and falling, its unexpected runs and glissandos. When it stopped, I was momentarily overwhelmed by the silence. My attention was quickly taken elsewhere, however, as the light beneath the satellite—which had now advanced itself within the orbit of the C Ring—was suddenly extinguished.

Simultaneous with our remarking upon this, the satellite shot upward—that is, it accelerated in a direction perpendicular to the ring plane.

“Keep a fix on it!” I shouted. “We can’t let it get away!”

McCarthy and Sorensen rushed to comply.

Could we ourselves have triggered some damned warning device in it? I wondered.

“It’s changing course, sir!” Sorensen yelled.

“Don’t lose it, for God’s sake!” I cried.

“It seems to be heading in-system,” he said later.

“That’s something, anyway,” I replied. “Once you’ve established its course, plot one of our own to follow it.”

“Right, captain. By the way, Titan—”

“Shove Titan! Follow that satellite!”

This proved less difficult than we had feared, for once the device had crossed the ring-system, it set itself into a new synchronous orbit just beyond the tenuous, braided F Ring. As we tracked and followed, I finally turned to Sorensen and said, “All right. What’s the story on Titan?”

He smiled.

“Something in the nature of a large vessel rose above its atmosphere some time ago, sir,” he told me. “It is even now headed inward toward Saturn’s northern hemisphere.”

“What?”

“... Further,” he continued, “it appears to be towing a large, flat, circular object of a metallic nature.”

“You have a fix on it?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been monitoring it, also—on the auxiliaries.”

“Let’s have a look.”

He moved to a sidescreen and began typing at its keyboard.

“There’s a particularly good sequence along about— here!” he said, as images swam by. He jabbed a key suddenly, and the blur settled into normal time. “There.”

I saw the wedge-shaped ship above the streaked and mottled gold of the planet. Behind it was the enormous disk of which Sorensen had spoken, turning slowly. Several seconds later, the light fell upon it so as to reveal—

Sorensen’s finger stabbed again and the picture froze.

There was an image on the disk. It was that of a gigantic four-eyed face, a pair of short antennae jutting from its high forehead.

I shook my head.

“What is it doing right now?” I asked him.

He switched from the tape to the vessel’s real-time position, spiraling in, far nearer to the planet now.

We waited for a long while as it fitted itself into the proper orbit, achieved the altitude it apparently desired. We waited. It waited.

Much later McCarthy announced, “Something’s happening!”

A fresh surge of adrenaline drove us near to the screen again. The disk had been disengaged from the ship, and as it drifted planetward, the vessel accelerated. Fascinated, we monitored its progress as the disk descended in such a fashion as to disappear entirely into the dark band we had noted earlier. The band narrowed and vanished shortly after that, and the vessel orbited the planet and later cut a course back toward Titan.

“Captain!” McCarthy said. “The artifact!”

“What about it?” I asked, moving to the screen which held its image.

But he did not reply, as I could see it for myself. The device had begun moving once again, crossing the F Ring. After a time it descended to hover above the outermost edge of the A Ring. With a bright flash the laser came on, focused downward into the groove. The one long-silent receiver still set for the thing’s frequency came suddenly alive; its hookup to the ship’s speaker system had not been broken when the satellite went silent. Abruptly now, the speakers brought us the wailing, the crashes, the blaring, the beat.

Later, when we sent a probe far beneath the murky skies of Titan near to the area from which the wedge-shaped vessel had come and to which it had returned, it sent back pictures: Beneath red clouds, through haze, on the shores of a methane sea, cyclopean figures swayed and spun; blizzards of fiery flakes fell like confetti about them.