

Close Encounters

By Nathan Warner

INTRODUCTION: On a routine survey mission through a nebulous region of space, the U.S.S. Titan has a brush with an unidentifiable spatial object that refuses to divulge its nature. Perhaps one in millions of such unexplained encounters logged with Starfleet by ships across the Alpha Quadrant, will Captain Riker be content to let this one get away?

“Report!” Riker bellowed as soon as he could fill his lungs with air against the pressure squeezing them flat. He was lying face down, pressed against the deck of the Bridge by massive inertial forces as the U.S.S. Titan spun out of control. He felt on the verge of passing out. The inertial dampers strained against the forces that would have squashed the crew in the early years of space exploration.

“Re...report,” Riker gasped as he sensed he was losing consciousness. He realized his command meant little as his blurring vision settled on the empty Con – everyone was in the same predicament he was – pressed against the deck by the invisible vice of physics.

His thoughts reached out through his fading mind and he focused on the object outside. What was it? What was it

doing to them?

Just a few minutes earlier, the Titan had been cruising along the boundary of a nebulous region in the Argosian cluster – day 3 of its survey mission to catalogue unusual readings inside the stellar gasses – when sensors picked up an anomaly exiting the nebula.

“Contact, Sir – bearing 78, mark 92,” Lt. Arkin reported from the Con.

“Identify,” Riker ordered, looking up from the yesterday’s report of unremarkable scans of the nebula.

“Unknown,” Arkin replied, and then muttered loudly, “the power signature is off the chart!” Riker shifted in his chair.

“Hail it,” Riker commanded.

The chime of the hail going out sounded from the Con, but after a moment, Arkin shook his head.

“They’re not responding, Sir,” he reported.

Riker set his PADD down and sat forward. “Onscreen,” he ordered. Arkin struggled at his console.

“I...I’m having a hard time locking onto its position,” Arkin faltered. Before Riker could ask what the problem was, Arkin turned from his post with alarm.

“Sir, it’s accelerating!” he cried. “Captain, we’re on a collision course!”

“Evasive maneuvers!” Riker bellowed to the helm. Ensign Bailee scrambled to adjust their heading and the Titan

barely banked to port before the object buzzed their starboard quarter. A massive displacement wake trailing behind the object slammed into the ship, pitching it up and rolling it back over itself. Spiraling in the turbulence, the ship spun out of control. Everyone on the bridge was slammed onto the deck under the acceleration.

Riker tried to shout for the dorsal thrusters to fire, but he couldn't breathe, squeezed as he was against the dark gray carpet of the Bridge. Not that a command would have mattered as his helmsman was also wrestling in vain against the invisible forces that had also pinned her to the deck. For a moment, Riker's eyes fixed on the empty First Officer's chair – Commander Chrisine Vale was on assignment at the Verteron Observation station several lightyears out in the Pentach system – she'd be joining them in a couple days.

It's strange the things you think about when you're dying, Riker thought. His vision blurred. Darkness seeped into the edges of his sight, but just before he lost consciousness completely, the Titan righted itself just enough for Ensign Bailee to crawl to the helm and restore the ship.

The Titan leveled out, and now free from inertia's shackles, Lt. Arkin scrambled to his console at the Con just as Riker found his own seat.

"Object bearing 21, mark 34. Warp 7 with a massive displacement wake!" Arkin reported, pale as a sheet. Riker didn't hesitate.

“Pursuit course – maximum warp!” he ordered, rubbing the life back into his own face. “Put it on the viewer.”

The viewscreen blinked from its dazed gaze upon the stars to a mysterious shimmering object of light retreating rapidly from their position, even as the Titan picked it out from the stars and leapt to warp after it.

“What is...that?” Riker asked, gaping at the amorphous object of lights snaking through space, zig-zagging in sharp, unnatural movements on its way. Arkin shook his head in frustration.

“Sensors aren’t telling us much, Sir,” he said. Riker leaned back slightly. The Titan had matched speed and direction with the unidentified object. The stars outside warped past in long tails, telling of their velocity. Riker tugged at his beard.

“A close encounter?” he muttered to himself. There were literally hundreds if not thousands of unexplained sightings and encounters with unidentified spatial objects in the galaxy every year. Most of which remained mysteries filed away at Starfleet headquarters for the Starfleet Investigative Division to follow up, but most remained unexplained.

As a child, Riker had loved pouring over the published cases of these mysterious phenomena. Among his favorites were the shimmering “orbs” of Pentaxia 6, which appeared in orbit of the planet, rapidly changed shape before vanishing, leaving behind diamond dust, which coalesced

into a shimmering planetary ring. There was also the saucer-like object of the Debloadike asteroids that was rumored to abduct miners who wandered out alone into the dark reaches of the field. And then there were the

“Lights of Antiochas 3,” which sometimes appeared inside the nebulas of that region of space. Many ships had been lost in the dangerous cyclones of that turbulent region chasing after the lights.

It was the allure of mystery that Riker had loved with the stories – The cosmos truly was a vast and unknown thing to be explored. And the more Starfleet discovered, the more mysteries seemed to be waiting for them, just behind the horizon or even in the backyards of well-established colonies.

Riker focused his attention back to the screen with his own close encounter.

“Continue hailing them with all known friendship greetings,” he said. Arkin nodded, his dark eyes bent religiously over his console.

“Still no response,” he reported.

“They don’t seem to be hostile,” Riker mused and then turned to Ensign Bailee.

“Alright, Ensign, bring us alongside,” he ordered.

“Aye, Sir,” Bailee nodded brushing her dreadlocks out of her eyes as she calmed her nerves and gently caressed the ship’s controls. The Titan gracefully picked up speed as the

Warp engines drew them forward.

The Luna class starship gained on the object, which jittered ahead through the cosmos like a lightning bug. Slowly, Bailee brought the Titan alongside the anomaly.

She wiped away the perspiration condensing on her dark skin as she struggled to keep a smooth approach and not collide with the anomaly.

Riker stared in wonder at the object, which was completely obscured inside a powerful radiation source. Eight or nine smaller, distinct lights seemed to flash, wane, and wax around its circumference, pulsating in a gentle rhythm.

“Alright, Arkin, I’ve given you front-row seating,” Riker said. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Captain,” he answered. “All our scans appear to be reflected back at us. But whatever it is, it has enormous power – I don’t think it is trying to get away from us – It could easily outrun the fastest ship we have and...”

At that moment, the object began to draw ahead of them.

“Helm, keep us alongside!” Riker commanded.

“Aye, Sir,” Bailee practically yelled in reply. Riker didn’t blame her – the excitement was getting to everyone. She kept glancing at her console, taking in the object’s speed and heading. “Sir, it is accelerating to warp 9.”

“Follow up!” Riker ordered. The Titan kicked up its heels

and drew back alongside the object. But just as they reached parity again, the anomaly drew ahead again.

“Sir, accelerating to warp 9.8!” Bailee reported.

“Match them!” Riker replied. “We want to record as much as we can about their behavior – whoever or whatever they are!”

At that moment, Riker’s comm sounded.

“Riker here!” he answered.

“Will, what is going on?” Deanna’s voice entered the bridge.

“Sorry about the ride, Deanna,” he answered, realizing she was probably pretty shaken from what had happened. “I think you should get up to the Bridge,” he continued. “We’re trying to make First Contact with a reluctant anomaly, and we could use your insight.”

“On my way!” Deanna replied.

By the time the Counselor stepped onto the Bridge, the object had reached 9.9 on the warp scale and didn’t appear to be breaking a sweat. The Titan, on the other hand was nearly flat out and Riker could almost sense the engines straining to their limits.

Deanna found her seat next to Will distractedly as she gazed upon the object outside.

“Do you sense anything?” Will asked.

Deanna nodded, almost reluctantly, but Will knew it was

owing to her mental concentration.

“I sense...curiosity,” she said.

“Curiosity?” Riker asked in surprise. “From us or from them?”

“It is definitely from outside the Titan,” she replied, placing her fingers against her temples. “But it almost feels more like a reflection...a reflection of our feelings.”

“Sir, it is now at warp 9.99!” Bailee reported. Riker opened his mouth to raise the ship’s speed to their maximum velocity, but at that moment, the Bridge was flooded with white light. A rushing wind seemed to wash over everyone. Riker sensed he was floating – his feet were off the floor! And then, in a flash of light, he was standing on the deck again, the light was gone with the wind, and the Titan was stationary several light years from their last position.

“What..what happened?” Deanna asked.

“I think we were scanned!” Arkin answered, turning from the helm. “But that isn’t all, we’ve covered distance not accounted for with our last known speed.”

“Did we lose sense of time?” Riker asked.

“How long were we scanned?”

“I have no idea, Sir,” Arkin sighed. “But we’ve lost time, or space, or something!”

“Anything on sensors?” Riker asked, hoping they could track the object.

“Negative,” Arkin answered. “Whatever it was, it is gone.” Riker sat down with the weight of this strange encounter.

“I think it is safe to say we just had a close encounter with an unknown life-form, being, or...something,” he said.

“The word ‘something’ seems to be the best way to describe this whole experience,” Deanna commented. Riker sat forward in his seat.

“Ensign Arkin,” he said with a slight smile, “the honor of naming an anomaly goes to the officer who first saw it.” Arkin turned in his chair and his eyes grew distant as he began to recite ancient words:

“As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire.”

“What was that?” Bailee asked. “My hair is standing on end.” Arkin nodded.

“It is from the ancient Hebrew texts of my ancestors,” he replied. “It is the description given by the Prophet Ezekiel of the throne of God that descended in the clouds near the River Chebar in Babylon.”

“And the name you’d like us to log, Lieutenant?” Riker asked.

“How about we call it the ‘Chebar’, if you don’t mind, Sir,” Arkin said.

“Chebar it is,” Riker smiled, turning his gaze back to the screen. “Well, whatever or whoever the Chebar are, it is only a chance that we will bump into them again.”

“Orders, Captain?” Bailee asked, itching to get the ship back under way. If there was one thing she hated, it was a stationary ship.

“Set a course back to the Argosian cluster,” Riker smiled. “Let’s see what other mysteries we can scare up!”

“Aye, aye!” Bailee grinned.

The Titan banked on its starboard nacelle, located the nebula out of the stars and leapt to warp leaving behind, for the time being, the mystery of its first close encounter in the cosmos with a still unidentified spatial object.