

You Should Come See This

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The *F.S.S. Radiant Moon* sat nestled in the heart of the Flowerpot Nebula Cluster. All about the vessel -- crescent shaped, the sharp points sweeping backward, rounded on top with four sleek nacelles nestled under the belly -- were dozens of the massive stellar-dust clouds. Blooming forth in a myriad of shapes and colors.... And spitting out damn near every type of lethal radiation as well, in barely quantifiable amounts. Thanks to the *Moon's* new and improved metaphasic shielding, she was the first ship of the Orion-Arm Concordance to survive the voyage through to the center. To see it from the inside.

In the observation pit of a spacious bridge stood Captain Theodora Noxolo. Behind the Painted Dog, up the sloping walkways to either side of her, sat the helm console. Further behind that, the rest of the bridge stations. Before her lay an unobstructed view of the Cluster.

It was breath-stealing. Awe-inspiring. A testament to the intrinsic grandeur of the universe, and all that could be accomplished when sentient beings set aside their differences and worked together. Pride swelled in her heart for all eight hundred and fifty members of her crew, and the thousands of engineers, scientists, crafts-furs who had made it possible to be standing on this spot at this moment. For the newly-minted Captain herself, this moment stood as the culmination of a lifetime of training. And of sacrifice; her own, her parents,' her ever-understanding wife and cubs back home.

"Engineering to Bridge," came a mildly concerned voice over her commclip. "Captain, you should come see this."

Six words brought Noxolo's triumphant high crashing down. With a reserved sigh, the Captain tapped her wrist. Asking herself, not for the first time, '*Of all the furs in the fleet, how did I get stuck with Arjun Brewer for a Chief Engineer?*'

"What's the problem?" she asked, not taking a step. "I assume there is one?" Nobody ever said 'you should come see this' for anything positive. 'You should come see this perfectly secure brig.' 'You should come see these weapon bays that aren't having trouble locking on enemy ships.' 'You should come see how the holobooth isn't trapping anyone inside it this week.'

"I think it'd be easier if I showed you," Brewer replied.

The orange and black patches of her neck-fur ruffled in irritation. "This is a *Jovian*-class science vessel, Chief. It would take precious time to reach Main Engineering from here. And that's assuming I disrupt vital crew traffic by prioritizing my own magnolift. What exactly is harder about telling me the problem *now*?"

"Well, it's sort of hard to explain..." The Ferret sounded almost apologetic. "In laymen's terms, I mean."

She couldn't help but feel slightly insulted. "I took the same general engineering courses as every other Command School graduate. And I've had fifteen years of hands-on experience since. I'm sure you can talk me through it."

"I suppose I could do this visually," he persisted, pushing his luck. "Are you near a vidpanel?"

"I have a lot of things on my plate up here," she interrupted, sensor-dish ears flicking irritably. Turning her back to the starscape outside, she regarded the Operations Status panel embedded into the wall. Ignoring the vidpanel right next to it. "At this moment, there are ten sensor teams collecting data on the Cluster. Astrometrics is inundated trying to sort it all. Communications is struggling to adjust for the Cluster's effect on FTL communication. Your own Engineers have their work cut out for them just maintaining the metaphasic array. And that's just the *top* of the list. To say nothing of the more personal matters, such as the pirate fleet that's still gunning for our Chief Of Security. Dozens of crises waiting to happen. And I need to be here, at the head of the ship, ready to respond to any and all of them." Her voice had grown sterner with each word. Now it became louder. "My time is precious. And you have wasted enough of it. I am *ordering* you to tell me the problem, Lieutenant Commander. *Now.*"

Sheepishly, the answer came. Along with a quite satisfactory tone of deferment. "I... Uh... There's an abnormal energy cloud building up in the FLT core. It's a hazy blue... And sparkling... There's an odd pattern to the sparks. Regular but erratic. I've powered down the ramscoops to keep any more of whatever it is from getting into our engines. But we can't flush it out of the core. I'd almost say it is *resisting* our efforts."

"Has it syphoned engine power? Or contaminated the flux crystals in some way?"

"No, ma'am. It doesn't seem to be doing anything but holing up in the core."

"Thank you," her reply betrayed a whisper of consternation. "Prep the backup core for emergency insertion. If this... thing... even begins to *look* like it's creeping into another system, dump the core you're looking at into space. Noxolo out." She tapped an end to the very vexing conversation.

The Captain straightened her two-tone uniform. Walked coolly up the starboard ramp to station level. Passed her authoritative gaze over a number of professionals who were trying very hard to do their jobs and pretend they hadn't heard any of that. Turned to the senior Science Officer. Told the Axolotl, "There's an anomaly in the FTL core. Possibly an energy-based lifeform. Gather a team of specialists in theoretical phenomenon and give Brewer all aid in identifying it."

The individual who was *actually needed* in Main Engineering nodded curtly and made for the nearest magnoshaft. Speaking into his wrist along the way to summon his fellow investigators.

Noxolo then gave the conn to her lupine X.O., and turned on her heels to depart the Bridge herself. *Not* in the direction of any magnoshaft. Retreating instead to her Ready Room. To start going over personnel files. *'I'm going to break Brewer of this obnoxious habit, or dammit I'll find someone else to do his job!'*

The cosmic plumes of light beyond offered no judgment.