

Chapter 22: Clean Up

Commander Emily Montane returned to sick bay with a fresh coffee. The door was closing when the alarms began howling. She spun to check where the sound was coming from and froze. The vitals of the captain weren't there; the screen was blank.

'What the...' she cried as she leapt for the control panel, her coffee mug crashing to the floor. 'No... this can't be happening.' Her fingers flew over the console, with no result. She opened a comm channel, 'Sick Bay to bridge.'

Not now, doc, we've got an emergency on the planet. Bretany Colaris's voice replied.

'So have I, the Captains life signs have vanished.'

What do you mean vanished? The comm system demanded.

'Just what I said, they are no longer there, and I can't get any response from the transmitter. What's going on?'

There was a slight pause before the First Officer answered; *you better come to the bridge, Doc.* Emily wasted no time, she switched the Med centre back to Auto operation and double timed to the POD. A couple of minutes later she walked through the bridge entrance.

'OK Number One, what gives...' her voice trailed off as she took in the image on the main screen. 'Is that...?'

'Yes, Doc... that's where the skipper is; and no, we can't raise her.' Bretany spoke quietly.

With the alarms silenced, the bridge was deathly quiet, for all of ten seconds. Suddenly one of the sensor alarms began wailing.

'What now?' Colaris called.

'Sorry, Ma'am, it's a radiation alert. It's from the site of the explosion.' Lieutenant Dugrati explained.

'What radiation?' Bretany left the command chair and went to the sensor station. Together she and Dugrati interrogated the system, ran a quick diagnostic and repeated the scans. As First Officer Bretany Colaris was responsible for the ship and crew, if there was a radiation problem, she had to get her people out of harm's way.

The results flashed up on the screen. 'That's not possible, no-one uses that now; it was outlawed hundreds of years ago.' Doctor Montane spoke softly.

'Looks like someone didn't get the message.' Bretany turned to the comm office., 'Get me a line to the planets defence command, now.' Her tone left no doubt that she wanted action, immediate action. She felt a hand on her left arm, turning to see the look on the Doc's face. 'Yes, Doc, I know what has to be done.'

Colaris moved to the command console; great sadness edged her voice as she spoke. 'Computer access ships command structure and modify.'

Records accessed... authorisation? The computer replied.

'Authorisation Colaris, Alpha, three, seven, niner, X-ray, Four Two.'

Authorisation code accepted.

Bretany hesitated; then began speaking with conviction. 'As of this time and date,' she tapped an icon on her console to record the exact time and date, 'Captain Malloy is no longer in command of the Solarco. It is suspected she has been killed in an incident on Klarin 5. As per Space Corps Regulations and Coalition Space Transit Rues, I Captain 1st Bretany Colaris assume command of the ECS Solarco. I further promote Commander Borak Cepris to acting First Officer. These changes will remain in effect until such time as the fate of Captain Malloy is officially ascertained. Enter this into the ship's log and transmit a copy to Space Corps Headquarters.'

Complied, one word from the computer and the deed was done.

'Ma'am I have Klarin 5 Defence on comms.' The comms officer announced.

'On screen,' she said as she turned to the main view screen. A couple of flickers and the face of an older woman filled the screen. 'Who am I talking to?' Bretany didn't recognise the face in front of her.

My name is Stevens, Julia Stevens. I'm secretary to General Hogarth, but he was at the reception. The woman was obviously in shock, Bretany knew someone had to take control.

'Listen Julia, listen very carefully. Do not send anyone to the explosion site, there is a dangerous level of radiation there. Do you understand?' Bretany could see that Julia was close to losing it big time.

But there may be survivors; we have to get to them.

'No, under no circumstances go anywhere near that island, if you do everyone you send will die as well. Do you understand?' Bretany was almost shouting now, and still the woman on the screen looked totally confused.

I've got to go now; I've got to organise the rescue. And the comm ended.

Bretany swore, turned to her new First Officer and spoke. 'Get me a shuttle, an armed shuttle... NOW!' Her orders were interrupted by the comm officer.

'Captain, priority one comm from Space Corps.'

Bretany stopped and turned towards the ready room, 'I'll take it in there, what's the dwell?'

'Only about two minutes,' this meant that each part of the conversation would be separated by a four minute transmit time, two minutes each way. 'Bugger,' Bretany swore to herself.

She entered the ready room, an uneasy feeling that she was somehow betraying her friend and Captain by being in here, but it soon passed; she had a job to do and she was going to do it.

‘Captain Colaris responding,’ she replied to the hail on her screen, she checked the time and set a timer so she could track the dwell time.

Four minutes later Sam Grogan’s face appeared, and began speaking. *Captain Colaris, I know what has happened, your transmission has been logged here. Now here are your orders... under no circumstances are you, or any of your crew to land on that planet. You are to use any shipboard sensor systems to investigate; you may send expendable drones but no people. At the same time, you will not allow any people currently on the planet to board your ship, or any of its shuttles. You are to bring your ship to an immediate red alert status, if you haven’t already done so, and keep a long-range scan of the system in constant operation. Those are your orders; please respond with your confirmation.* The comm ended, and Bretany swore again.

She sat for a moment before responding. ‘Admiral, I have received your orders and must protest. I have just had comms with a secretary who seems to be running things down there, it appears that the entire military and civil emergency command were at the reception. She is sending rescue teams in, if she does, they will all die but worse still, some may survive long enough to irradiate others. The death toll will be catastrophic; please allow me to go down there and sort this out, before more die needlessly.’ She ended her comm, now to wait.

Time seemed to slow down, the first minute she was sure lasted for five, and each subsequent minute of dwell got longer; four minutes—still no reply. Five, six—at nine Bretany was about explode when the link activated again.

Sorry for the delay, Captain Colaris your orders stand, and before you carry on, these orders are from the President himself... do you comply? Again, the link died.

Her heart was like a dead weight as she replied, ‘Admiral Grogan, I comply but under protest and I want my protest noted.’

On Earth, Sam Grogan sat in his office, waiting for Colaris’s reply. Her face flashed on his screen and he smiled, deeply as she spoke. Sam nodded and replied, ‘Captain your protest is duly noted and I expected no less. Now carry out your orders, I’ll contact you in 24 hours; Grogan out.’

Sam leaned back, he felt Bretany’s frustration, her anger at being effectively relegated to the status of a spectator to what may end in genocide; but his orders were clear. ‘Fuck!’ He swore. ‘Sometimes I hate this job.’ He knew what he needed to do, but was procrastinating, *I’ll wait for official confirmation* his thoughts brought a feeling of shame, shame at his own cowardice.

The next call he received was a reprieve, of sorts. ‘Sam, Skye here, what happened?’ His boss Admiral Skye Wilson had just seen the comm from Solarco.

‘To be honest, I have no idea. The report seems to indicate some sort of missile attack, but the residual radiation is the problem; Trisidium.’ He left the word hanging.

And Captain Malloy, what is her status? Why she asked that, even Skye Wilson had no idea. If the explosion didn't kill her, the radiation would seal Malloy's fate. *Forget I said that, a stupid question. Come to my office, there's a lot to discuss.* The line died as Sam stood and made his way slowly to the door.

On board Solarco things were heating up. Bretany ordered the ship to a higher orbit, despatched 4 sensor drones to the site, with a program that would allow them to get as close to the danger zone as possible. On completion of their mission the program would send each one into Klarin, the star at the centre of this system. The medical department were running through the captain's data, trying to ascertain her condition, knowing all the time that death in the explosion was preferable to Trisidic poisoning.

The comm officer was running through all the planetary contacts, trying to find anyone who had authority to take command, finally raising a Colonel in the military who assumed command, the rescue mission was placed on hold until the drones did their job. Unfortunately, they only confirmed what the ships sensors had uncovered, massive Trisidic radiation, and the cloud was spreading. With the prevailing weather conditions, it was only a matter of time before a large part of Klarin 5 was irradiated, most of the populated area.

Whoever fired that missile, knew full well what they were doing. As it is we have no way of saving very many, can you help? Colonel Andrew Stanton, now in command of Klarin 5's military asked.

Bretany felt the well of hopelessness he must be feeling tear into her soul. 'Sorry, Colonel, at this stage I have orders to watch and report, and before you ask my orders came direct from the President, but I'll go back and ask again. But bear in mind, we can only take a few, Solarco isn't a large ship. What about Klarin 4, surely, they have the capacity to help?'

They seem to be having their own problems, with all the senior government officials at the function, there is no working government. The only workable force there is the rebel faction, and they won't talk to us. Look, I know the situation you're in, and I sympathize, but at the present rate the cloud is spreading, we can survive for about three days. We've already started to evacuate areas that are in the most danger but very soon there'll be nowhere we can go. Stanton's voice conveyed his frustration.

'Look, I'll go back to command...' Bretany paused, hearing the emptiness of her own words, 'I'll call you back soon.' She cut the link.