

Mourning Light

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Chapter One

The sudden downwash of hot air informed Caro of the dropship's departure. Engines streaming fire as it attempted to reach safety in the empty void of space, the dropship drove through the flocks of aerial carrion feeders like a bullet before punching in the lower atmosphere.

Caro saw none of this, she was already moving to the next dropship, head low to avoid the sand being whipped up by the dropship's thrusters cycling up to speed, a chorus of angry voices cut through the rising whine of the thrusters. Moving to toward the ramp at the rear of the vehicle she was met by a group of her soldiers trying to shepherd an extremely agitated woman wearing a lab coat into the hold, already filled with a variety of civilians in various states of strapping into the holds seating.

"Do you know who I am!", the woman was brandishing her lab coat like a weapon at the soldiers arranged in a rough semi-circle around the base of the ramp, stabbing her finger at the black and green epaulettes "I am Dr Holimion, the head of hydroponics and flora identification and I demand as your superior that you take me back to my lab immediately!" Dr Amelia Holimion was a stern woman in her late 50's, auburn hair pulled into a severe bun which framed her face in hard lines matched only by the wrinkles that spoke of a life dedicated to the advancement of a career which didn't believe in 2nd place.

Pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration, Caro permitted herself several moments to steel herself against the inevitable barrage of abuse from the aging doctor. The

evacuation point was a frantic hive of activity backdropped by the looming sandstorm slowly pushing in from the west and right now Caro would rather be leading her troops into the unknown heart of it than babysitting stuck up civilians. Soothing her hair back into a semblance of order and replacing her peaked cap she stepped around the rest of the dropship and pushed through the cordon to address the squawking scientist.

“Report!” Caro snapped and watched as her troopers as one saluted her, from his position closest to the scientist Jasper gratefully turned away from the increasing pain in his ass to address his Captain, snapping a salute he replied with a slight cringe, “Sorry Captain the rest of the ship is ready to go but we’ve encountered stiff opposition to the proposed plan from Dr Holimion here, thought it was above the intelligence of us footsloggers so thought you might like to deal with it yourself.” He spat the words ‘intelligence’ and ‘footsloggers’ like he had gotten a mouthful of the thrice dammed planets sand in his mouth, inclining his back towards the now quiet doctor.

Nodding her approval of jaspers logic and internally echoing his sentiment, Caro turns to the source of her current headache. Doctor Holimion was furiously scribbling something onto a tablet as the two soldiers turned back to confront the unfolding situation, “Right then Doctor is there a legitimate reason why you want my soldiers to return you to your facility even though high command has given the order to withdraw all non-combat personnel back to the Deliverance?” Not looking up from her tablet the doctor responded, “Because I have important research to undertake

here before your jackbooted thugs destroy anything that they cannot comprehend, which I imagine is the majority of potential sentient life upon this planet". Caro was proud that such an inflammatory remark drew no response from her soldiers and curtly responded "So that's a no then", this caused the doctor's head to snap up as she puffed herself up "Do you know who I am! I am the..", waving a hand in impatience Caro cut in "yes, yes, yes head of hydroponics and flora identification" Caro rhymed the title off, "I heard you berating poor Jasper here" pinching the bridge of her nose once more she held up a hand as the small doctor was being to turn purple with anger and puffing herself up again, "I appreciate that your research is important, however you are not a combat unit nor do you have any combat training which means you staying here is a direct violation of high commands orders which is punishable by execution at the behest of the nearest military command figure, that would be me and while personally I would be more than happy to just shoot you right now and let the individuals on the ship get on to safety you are an important asset to the endeavour". Caro paused to allow herself to catch breath, the sandstorm appeared to be getting closer faster than expected and many of the civilians already on board were starting to look extremely agitated.

The doctor was busy shouting something at Caro about having her fired and a board of governors, Caro having finally had enough shouted back at the doctor "FINE", this took her and the assembled troops by surprise, "you can stay provided you agree to three simple stipulations" the look of smug satisfaction on the doctors face was little more than

concealed at her apparent victory. "One, you must carry a firearm on you at all times, two.." the doctor began to speak up but Caro continued "you are not to get in the way of my troops or any other in this current active combat environment, you want to go to your lab sure but we're not babysitting you"

Doctor Holimion, not used to not getting her way was positively bristling with rage, stepped forwards and right up to Caro's face "listen here you miserable worm, I am your superior and you will do what I demand cause the entire army here could die and still wouldn't come close to being as valuable as I am, so you will escort me to my lab and you will provide my lab with dedicated protection and if need be die so" saliva flew from the small woman's mouth as she spat the demands at Caro.

Several of her troopers had raised their rifles at the furious doctor but without flinching Caro continued her list "three, we will provide you with evac if you become injured and pose and ongoing liability to the success of combat operations taking place here". Infuriated at her ignoring her demands doctor Holimion spat "Didn't you hear me you will take me to my lab now!" jabbing a bony finger against the fatigued chest of Captain Caro. In an instant there was a crack like a whip and the doctor suddenly crumpled to the hard-packed sand ground.

Captain Caro loomed over the crumpled scientist, the barrel of her standard issue service pistol glowing and though her voice had not raised it cut through the din of the surrounding evacuations, "let me enlighten you to the realities of the

situation you are in” Caro’s troops stances had relaxed though many of the civilians in the dropship looked on in horror at the unfolding situation. “I can let you bleed out right here and now and at most I will get a chewing from the brass for losing a valuable asset, but that is what you are doctor” Caro dropped down onto her hunkers next to the still bleeding doctor who was now whimpering in pain. “Valuable yes but not irreplaceable, now you are gonna be a good little civilian and let Michaela here patch up that flesh wound, you will then get on the dropship and you will return to Deliverance and there won’t be any issues, now do I make myself clear?”

Caro stood back up and dusted off her fatigues as the squad’s medic strode over with an expression that suggested this wasn’t the first time a conversation like this had taken place. Through gritted teeth Doctor Holimion spat “of course” while holding onto her blood soaked trouser leg, “Excellent now wasn’t that not hard” Caro beamed at the injured doctor, without waiting for a reply she turned to Jasper, “stay with Michaela would you to ensure there aren’t any further complications and once they’re airborne meet us at staging post Echo”. With a wiry grin Jasper snapped a salute and turned back to where the good doctor was already beginning to criticise the medic’s examination of the wound.

Turning to her troops and only mildly annoyed that several of them wore wicked grins upon their faces Caro addressed them, “okay funs over now it time to earn your keep, staging post Echo move out on the double” with practised ease the squad formed up and moved off to their next assignment,

Caro turned and walked past the bickering form of doctor Holimion and into the hold of the dropship.

The din instantly died down as she entered, and every face turned to look at her. Removing her peaked cap Caro spoke "I am sorry you had to witness that and I just want to reinforce that we are here to protect and serve you but when this is taken for granted or exploited and innocent lives are put at risk it does not matter if you are the head of hydroponics and flora identification or in charge of waste collection, you will be treated the same" returning the her peaked cap to her head and giving her best reassuring smile to the assembled civilians "now I'm sorry for the delay in your flight and everything will be back to normal shortly, thank you and safe journey".

The hold of the ship was deathly silent except for the grumbling of doctor Holimion who was currently being helped into her seat. With a nod to Jasper and Michaela she strode back out and down the ramp, cleared the landing zone and began moving through the warren of containers that constituted the base of operations "fucking civilians" she grumbled and set off towards staging post Echo.