

A DROWNING

WORLD



S.R. RUARK

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

Chapter 1

“Hello, Lauranya.” Captain Alen Jameson smiled at her. “Ready for the lift-off?” His smile was in place, but his eyes were looking over the buildings, his hands clenching and unclenching his faux leather belt.

Dr. Lauranya Torvins gave the dark-skinned captain a smile in return. Slower than his, as if smiling used muscles long forgotten. Once the smile started though, she grinned shyly at him, brushing her blond hair away from her face in unconscious reaction to his kind interest and charming smile.

“Ready to stay and do more research...Arianya!” She turned from the captain, catching her daughter about to jump into a well filled rainwater pothole. “Please do not jump into puddles that are over your waistline!” The small blond child of 7, looked up and giggled at her mother. The captain joined in the laughter, which made Lauranya smile, erasing the frown.

Arianya or Arie, as almost everyone called her, was enjoying the relative freedom and the lighter hand of her mother, outside. Water puddles were still a novelty to the child, and she wanted to enjoy every chance to splash that she could. Not to mention the fun of wet stuff falling from the sky into her hair and her skin. It was like taking a shower with momma but warmer and with clothes on!

“Well, doc if you don’t mind, I need to round up the scientists and their children for a pre-takeoff cocktail.” The captain’s slow smile was infectious and his quirked eyebrow a novelty to her. “Meet you in the conference lounge.” With that, he nodded and headed back toward the shuttle bay.

Lauranya took a deep breath working to control her obvious interest in the captain, trying to enjoy her last moments outside. The rain had stopped, into a moment of broken clouds and blue skies, but that wouldn’t last. She breathed deeply; water and fresh air were what she smelled. She wanted fresh air before her lungs were filled with recycled air and the smell of metal, oil, and people living too closely together. The shuttle would be filled to capacity, always on the edge of almost too small. A few others were enjoying the last few minutes in the open air before being hustled into the shuttle port.

Camdia was sitting on the curb around the shuttle port, her shoes next to her, her feet submerged to the ankles, in flowing runoff rainwater. Camdia’s tightly woven hair, had droplets of rain, glinting like diamonds in the dark strands, making her look younger than her 30 years. She grinned up at her boss like a small kid, flashing bright teeth against dark skin, taking a few more years off.

“Just another hour and we’ll be strapped down heading back to the world ship.” Camdia looked happy at this prospect.

“Eight weeks in close quarters.” Lauranya shuddered.

“Again,” they said in unison. Laughing as only those sharing the same miserable short-term conditions could.

“Dead Gods, I can’t believe we’re leaving so soon.” Camdia started.

“Well, it has been five years,” Lauranya said looking at Arie splashing in the rainwater. Her clothes would dry quickly having the advantage of being made from finely woven synthetics. Lauranya touched her own shirt. Captain Jameson had given her a shirt woven from this world’s natural fibers yesterday, as a take-off gifting. She made a face. Her husband was sure to ask about the shirt. Thankfully, their marriage contract finished as soon as she delivered one more child or two more years had passed. Arie might stay with her, when his family sent Lauranya packing, back to her own family but she could not sure. They could be spiteful when given even the slightest provocation. Lauranya was going to have to hide the shirt well. Maybe among Arie’s things, which he never bothered looking through.

“I’m going to miss you singing for us in the evenings. And your research has barely begun!” Camdia’s voice brought Lauranya back to the present. Lauranya smiled slightly. Camdia was more outraged than she was. Oh, she was disappointed, but the Dead Gods and Lords decided to shut down this world’s research during the flooding years, so ship ward bound they were. Lauranya bit her lip to keep from saying what she should not. There were no Overseers, but that did not mean no one was listening. Dissension was not tolerated. Scientists were given a certain latitude, but they were not allowed to actually have an opinion other than what they were told when the final orders were given.

“At least I will not have to fix every computer routing issue or downed screen some idiot savant forgot to turn on, on top of my daily work.” That part Lauranya didn’t have to fake being happy about. Gods forefend the other scientist could remember how to log into their computers or backup their data. She hated computers, preferring the beauty of water and the creatures in, but computers ran everything, and she had a knack for solving puzzles, biological or electronic. This made her valued, which meant better placements. She said a small prayer to the goddess Yemoja for a water research placement for her next assignment.

“I didn’t get any more whip marks this assignment!” Camdia chirped happily. “I hope the next place is as nice.” Lauranya didn’t have the heart to tell her it had been a close thing once or twice. The girl was brilliant in her narrow field of stress reproduction. Some days though Camdia couldn’t focus on other things that didn’t pertain to her specialty or hide her true thoughts.

“I hope so too dear.” Lauranya feared Camdia would end up strangled by an Overseer for verbally, or Gods forbid physically, stepping over the line. Camdia wasn’t a Free Person; she had just spent too much time around scientists who were usually free and very open in their thoughts around their equals and underlings. Camdia would have to have a very good marriage contract to buy out her freedom or any children she produced. She was smart, maybe smart enough for that type of marriage.

Gods, please do not let Camdia be harvested for her genetics, Lauranya prayed silently. The world ships needed more upbeat and lively personalities.

Lauranya had a thought. “Camdia, did you put the animals we were testing down?” Brilliant but not always focused was Camdia.

“Yes.” Camdia stopped for a second. “I’m pretty sure I got them all.” she amended. “I was sad; they were just so cute.” Camdia made a face. “Would rather the ship have room to take them with us. I would have loved to see how the stress levels of the flight affected their hormones for reproduction.”

Arianya took that moment to come running up to her mom, blond hair flying in the wind, wrapping her arms around mom’s knees. Lauranya scooped up the wet child and blew zerbets on her tummy. Arianya squealed in a high-pitched baby squeal of happiness. Arianya planted a kiss on mommy’s cheek before squirming to be let down to splash and get wet.

Lauranya gave a quick nibble to the neck and put her only daughter safely back on her bare feet. No sense in getting her soft leather shoes wet. Lauranya thought of how she might be able to trade the shoes for something of value on the ships. Leather was as rare as fresh water. She reached a hand out to the slight splatter of rain, licking the fresh water from her hand, sweet and free of chemical traces — a rarity on the ship.

She should be able to sell the shoes and the shirt for either food or medicine, possibly even amnesty if things got very bad at the next assigned world or ship. Overseers tended to take bribes and gifts made to the world Lord or the presiding ship’s God. Lauranya sighed again at leaving so soon.

Jacks and his two children waved at them through the shuttle port’s thick sliding glass doors.

“Looks like it’s time to move up,” Camdia said, sounding less than thrilled with a definite pout.

“Well, the company will be good for the trip back.” Lauranya gave the younger woman a quick hug.

Camdia gave her a sideways grin. “Bet you are glad Tine’s left on the second shuttle with the twins. Will give you and the captain a chance for a quickie or two.”

“Camdia!” Lauranya said. The girl could not keep her thoughts to herself.

“What? It’s no secret ya’ll were barely on speaking terms, or that he spoiled the boys.”

Lauranya pressed her lips together thinking of the twins, crossing her arms over her not quite ample chest. “Yes, the boys were a bit rambunctious.”

The boys had favored their father, and not just in their lovely dark luminous eyes or dark velvet skin. They had become more demanding as if they were little Lords and not children of Free, a dangerous attitude for children on the ships before mental and physical evaluations. Lauranya shook her head; Tine favored the boys too much. Lauranya knew that culled for gladiatorial entertainment or to the tender mercy of the military was a real danger if they did not pass mental evaluations. She could do nothing but pray for them.

“Luckily your contract only has two more years.” Camdia continued on blithely as she stood, brushing off the bottom of her pants.

“Or I give him another child.” Her voice was tinged with a bitterness she could not quite hide. Lauranya tapped a finger on the opposite arm in annoyance. She took a deep breath trying for a measure of calm.

“He has to actually spend the night with you and not Micah.” Camdia said slyly over her shoulder with another quick smile.

“His body slave has no choice. And if I slip the right word into his mother’s ear, the conception of another child will be that much faster.” Lauranya looked away to hide the distaste for either action.

“Duty but no love.” Camdia shuddered, hugging herself. Camdia enjoyed the emotional upward spiral of love. Very few of her lovers left angry or bitter when there was a parting of ways.

“Love costs too much,” Lauranya said sadly, her eyes distant for a moment.

Camdia shot her favorite boss a worried look, giving her a quick hug. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to bring up...”

“Camdia, please. Stop.” Lauranya sighed gently. “Maison died a long time ago. And his little brother knows he will never measure up to what I felt for him. I can’t fault Tine for keeping time with Micah then me, except when I am ovulating.”

“But still.” Camdia was working on her outrage.

“Stop.” Lauranya put up a hand to fend off Camdia’s next few words. “We have a shuttle to catch, and I have to arrange my notes for maximum effect. I want a good placement next assignment, preferably without my overreaching husband and his family.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Camdia said hunching her shoulders, finally catching the hint.

“Thank you.” Lauranya smiled to take the sting out of her rebuke. Camdia gathered up her leather sandals, heading inside with a swish to her generous hips. Lauranya had always been envious of the girl’s lush hips where her own were not nearly so generous.

“The Gods gift everyone differently,” Lauranya said to herself with a smile. Her smile faded as a thick misting drifted over the road, before fading into the scientists’ apartments. She frowned slightly. Lauranya couldn’t summon ghosts, but she did see the occasional wisp of one. Kori had been the stronger of two of them, able to raise the dead and control ghosts. Lauranya shook her head banishing the thought of her twin. The shuttle would wait for none of them. The ghost could find its own way to Obatala.

She would mention the ghost to Jacks. He might know of someone still left who might be able to lay the ghost to rest, but she didn’t think it likely. No other necromancers were on the planet, and she barely qualified being on the threshold of power.

She lingered outside for a moment more. Arianya was soaked and splashing, her laughter infectious. Lauranya knew that the next few weeks would be

torturous for the child in the small space of the ship. Lauranya smiled at her daughter, committing this moment to memory for her own pleasure later on.

Her pouch phone rang.

“Yes?”

“Time to come in Lauranya.” The captain’s voice was warm and rich over the receiver. Lauranya shivered. Damn Camdia for pointing out the obvious.

“We will be there in 60 seconds.” Lauranya’s voice was throaty, breathless.

“Can’t wait.” The voice was almost like a physical touch. Warm and lingering. Lauranya looked at the small phone when it went dead.

“He was purring at me. Camdia, damn you.” Lauranya smiled at the phone only slightly vexed at her lab assistant. Eight weeks and no privacy. Luckily, exclusivity had not been part of the marriage contract, only genetic combination between her and Tine. Maybe something nice would happen before she had to rejoin her husband. Another good memory to add to her hoarded stash.

“Arie,” Lauranya called to her splashing child. The child looked up giggling from a particularly large set of waves in a small puddle, from her stomping. “Time to go in.”

“No! Want to play in the water.” The child said with an outthrust chin. Lauranya could feel her jaw tightening. She had seen that stubborn look on her husband when he was losing an argument.

“That’s nice dear, but we have to go. We’re off to see your brothers and father.” Lauranya kept her voice calm as she walked towards the child.

Arie seeing her freedom about to be curtailed took off towards their apartments to hide. Ten steps and Lauranya had caught up with the small child, picking her up and putting her on a hip, walking back towards the shuttle pad. Arie went stiff, howling in the unfairness of it all, trying to squirm her way out of her mother’s lean arms.

Arie was still howling and crying when the two of them arrived at the Lounge. Everyone else, from adult to small child had either wine or juice in hand with crackers. Lauranya walked in, both wet and slightly embarrassed at her child’s behavior.

Jacks tried to give her a glass and Arianya a small juice box. Lauranya smiled gratefully at her fellow research scientist, shifting Arianya to her other hip to accept. This set Arianya into a second screaming fit with flailing legs and arms. The child managed to kick the glass with her mother’s fuzzy drink up, into Lauranya’s face, and down the front of her cotton blouse.

“Damn it child!” Lauranya through clenched teeth, grasping the child tighter so she didn’t fall to the floor like the wine and juice box. “I just started getting us somewhat dry!”

“You’re both covered now,” Tass observed unhelpfully with a snide grin. He, of course, was looking collected and well-coiffed with studied grace holding a wine cup. The snide look was the usual for the tall, willowy blond man.

“Yes thank you for pointing out the obvious, again, Tass.” Lauranya snapped at the other marine biologist. There were a few soft chortles at his expense. He

glared around the room turning to see who was laughing at him. Those who were above him didn't hide their contempt, the others kept a straight face, knowing from experience it wouldn't help sooth his petty ego. He sneered at her before turning his back shunning her from his sight. Lauranya rolled her eyes but was grateful for his turned back. She shuddered to think of what his attention would be like.

"You won't be able to change for a few hours once we aboard the shuttle," Camdia said from the side, twisting her hands together tightly. She had had a few run in's with Tass before, only Lauranya's intervention had kept her from being whipped. Aria's howls were not diminishing, which caused Tass to smirk even more. Jacks' youngest child, a tow-haired little boy, took a few absorbent napkins from his dark-skinned sister to hand to Lauranya. She smiled at the children while juggling Arianya and drying herself off.

"Captain says we are leaving as soon as we finish off these four bottles and the snacks." Jacks said. He edged Tass off to the side with two steps and a twisted hip inserted into their little cluster. Jacks gave Lauranya a wink from his honey brown eyes, handing her a few more absorbent towels.

"If only I had your skill at keeping idiots away," Camdia muttered softly.

"Camdia!" Lauranya hissed in shock, looking up from wiping herself off.

Jacks laughed. "It's all in the hips," he said with a suggestive wink and wiggle of the aforementioned part. Camdia blushed hard looking down at the floor. Jacks was a tease, but the exclusivity of his marriage contract with a major penalty for straying kept Jacks suggesting but never following through. Both families were moderately successful. The penalties for breach of contract on either side were job crushing punitive.

"And a few years of battle training," Lauranya said with admonition, handing Jacks the sopping napkins. Lauranya did not mention his very exclusive marriage contract.

"That too." His grin was bright. Tass would never be able to do anything to him or challenge him. He had no fear of reprisal from the blond man who was slinking off glaring in a not so subtle fashion at the smaller but wiry dark man. Jacks just grinned wider.

"Stop teasing the animals, Jack," Lauranya said softly. "Not everyone has your immunity." She nodded to Camdia. Jacks moused in disappointment for not being able to antagonize the other scientist but he did stop making eye contact.

"Damn." Lauranya sighed. Her shirt was still damp and clinging, outlining her upper torso and lack of undergarments. Hardly worth noticing, Lauranya thought dismissively of her own physique more worried about the shirt as the drink had started spreading a pink stain across her chest.

"The shuttle boys haven't loaded the luggage just yet. Think I saw the bags downstairs." Camdia said, bringing more napkins and taking the sodden ones Lauranya handed to her.

“I’ll get us changed and see if I can find her stuffed rabbit as well,” Lauranya said giving up on trying to dry off the two of them. Arie was settling down to whimpers, laying her head on Lauranya’s shoulder.

“Might want a blanket as well for her.” Jacks said over his shoulder as his daughter brought him another cookie while she ducked a shy smile to Lauranya.

“Thank you!” Lauranya said with feeling as she moved through the door. In her own rush, she would not have thought of that. Shaking her head at her lack of foresight, Lauranya moved quickly down the side stairs to stay out of the shuttle crew’s way. They might need the wider passage hallways for last minute moving of equipment from the labs onto the shuttle.

The inside landing area by the tarmac was still filled with their luggage. Lauranya frowned. There was no way they would be leaving in 15 minutes with all of the bags still unloaded.

Lauranya sighed in annoyance. “The edge of a foot may be how they plan to load our things.” Sometimes Overseers were useful, she thought, searching through the bags for her and Arie’s. Arianya’s bright green bag and her own yellow and maroon were visible among the other brightly colored bags. Seeing the bags made her smile. The vinyl bags had been presents from her family when the announcement came that she would be accompanying Tine on a very plum assignment. She pulled the bags to the side of the curving stairs. Again, she did not want to get in the crew’s way if they decided to load in the next five minutes. No one needed more interruptions when the Gods gave a task, especially the menial tasks.

Arianya had stilled to just mostly unhappy whimpers until she saw her bright green bag. Then she was cooperative with helping momma move the bags to the side. “Bunny? May I have bunny now?” She asked, wiping tears from her red blotched cheeks.

Hearing none of the crew coming up or down the stairs, Lauranya stripped off her damp shirt and wiped down with a small cloth in her toiletry bag. “Yes, love we can get your bunny, but we need to get you out of your wet dress as well.” She said reaching for the small child’s wet hem. “We cannot have bunny getting wet!”

She stripped Arianya from her dress without issue until the child started being wiped down. “Blech! Momma cold!” Arie exclaimed with a pout, wrapping thin arms around her torso.

“Yes, I know!” Lauranya giggled at the imperative statement from her daughter. “We would be warm and dry if you had not had the tantrum.”

“But rain is more fun,” Arie stated to her mom with the complete conviction of a child pronouncing a truth so obvious even a dense grown up should see what was in front of them. “Don’t wanna go!” Arie started to sniff as her eyes filled with tears, tears that welled up and fell more and more quickly down her baby cheeks.

Lauranya pulled the child close. “Oh, baby.” Lauranya rocked the crying child close to cuddle warm damp skin to warm skin. Neither do I, my dear. Neither do I.” Lauranya held the girl close trying to push back her own tears. She swallowed

hard looking over Arie's head to the grey sky that was growing darker by the second, rocking back and forth to soothe both of them. She swallowed again the bitter resentment and anger for their orders to leave. "The Gods will." she murmured the catechism all people of the Dead Gods learned in the cradle.

"They are wrong!" Arie said with a quivering lip looking up into her mother's blue eyes that mirrored her own blue eyes.

"Arianya, we never say that!" Lauranya said with a gasp, pulling her close, looking furtively around to make sure no one heard her child's blasphemy.

"But, they..."

"No. We follow, they lead. That is how it is." Lauranya said firmly. Arie stuck out her chin but she knew from her mother's tone there would be no winning this argument.

"Can I have a cookie?" She wheedled instead.

Lauranya smiled indulgently at the shift in her child's tone. "If you stop kicking wine all over me, yes."

"I can do that!" Arie hugged her bunny close, with a smile and mercurial change of temperament that only small children can do.

Lauranya took a deep breath for calm. "Let's get you dressed, and you can play with Marion and Mia after we get into space." She said, reaching for the child's things.

"Will we be floating?!" Arie asked. The idea seemed to both excite and scare her.

"Yes. For the next eight weeks, you can hang upside down like a monkey and walk on the ceiling."

"Oh! That will be fun!" Arie clapped delightedly, jumping from her mother's lap to hop up and down excitedly. "Bunny! Don't forget bunny."

Lauranya reached into the bag for the patchwork bunny, with its four eyes and six legs. Arie hugged her favorite stuffed animal close. Wrapping the foot long fluffy faux fur tail around her arm and chewing on the small-cupped leather ears.

"We must get dressed now dear and meet back up with the others, and you have to be on your best behavior, or the captain will ask that you be leashed to your seat.

"I wouldn't like that," Arie said looking up at her mother with a serious expression.

"No, probably not. It would be rather boring."

"Okay, let's get clothing." Arie gave a long-suffering sigh. Lauranya just managed to contain her own giggle, chewing on her lip in amusement. Arie was usually trying to get out of her clothes, not into them.

Aria was swiftly dressed, and Lauranya had a new top and bra in hand when she looked down to her skin, scratching. She was itchy from where the wine had splashed through the shirt, touching skin. Lauranya frowned taking a closer look. This was not a normal reaction for her to wine. Sticky, she could understand but a dermatological reaction was odd. She would take a closer look once they were on the shuttle. Until then she pushed the skin issue to the back of her mind, finishing

dressing and rooting for the last minute comfort items either of them might need but would not be available for hours after takeoff.

Lauranya picked Arianya up onto a hip, the child clutching the bunny tightly, humming softly. The humming made Lauranya smile. “Glad to see someone having a good day now.” She murmured into Arie’s soft hair.

Arie grinned up at her mother blowing kisses. Lauranya blew kisses back carefully navigating the stairs, with one hand on the stonewalls, back up to the lounge. They came into the main hallway, to the gold and scroll worked door without any further delays.

Lauranya pushed on it inward, the door sticking slightly before cracking open. Lauranya frowned in annoyance. The door had not stuck on their way in or out last time. She pushed harder putting her hip and shoulder into the push. The door swung free from what it was caught on, letting Lauranya into the room.

She stopped stunned at the scene and site before her. Every man, woman, and child were collapsed on the floor or chairs. Jacks was staring at the ceiling with foam at his mouth drying, clutching his youngest. The towhead child was rigid in his arms. His nails dug into his father’s biceps. His daughter, with her large lovely eyes, had tried to escape through the door. It was her hand the door had stuck on as she had collapsed a few feet from the passageway with her hand outstretched on the carpet. She had been inches from the door when the poison hit. Camdia was on the floor. Her neck, hands, and chest covered in tattered flesh and blood. It looked like Camdia had tried to claw out her own throat. Each person had died in pain and horror, with sphincters loosening at death’s onset.

Lauranya could not move. The horror was overwhelming. Arie’s tugging on her sleeve and whimpering brought her out of her stunned daze.

“Mommy, someone’s coming.” Arie whimpered.

Lauranya tried not to panic. She clutched the child closer, stepping over the bodies of her friends and co-workers. Lauranya moved to one of the couches next to a large multi-paneled floor to ceiling window with a stunning view of the drowning lake. With three feet between the wall and couch, there was just enough room for her and Arie. She dropped down behind it. Luckily, no one had died behind here. The one favor death had done for them.

She put her mouth to Aria’s ear. “I need you to be very still and close your eyes till I say open them. Can you do that baby?” she whispered

Arie’s eyes were huge, frightened but she nodded stuffing a fist in her mouth to chew on for comfort.

“Shhhh, shhhh” Lauranya arranged them both on the floor with her back to the couch and Arie spooned against her stomach, an arm draped over the child with her fingers just touching the window in an artful display. Lauranya then shook her hair out over both their faces to cover any telltale facial twitches. The hair blanketed over them as if they had collapsed looking out the window. Arie still clutched her bunny.

“No mamma! No hair! It’s itchy!”

“Shhhh. Just for a few minutes and we are playing the hiding game. No noise and no movement.” Lauranya whispered desperately, trying to convey the urgency to a seven-year-old without scaring her.

“Is everyone else playing the hiding game too?” Arie whispered back, snuggling close to the body warmth and comfort of her mother.

“No dear. They are playing the very still game.” Lauranya choked out the lie to her very young child.

“Oh! I can do that.” Arie whispered back excitedly. She loved games and loved getting treats after games that she did well at. Arie went very still closing her eyes.

Lauranya combed her hair back over them as voices came from just outside the room. The door opened, with a shush over the carpet. She tensed up then relaxed. Using the same technique for when sex with Tine was especially bad, slowing her thoughts and concentrating on slow, shallow breathing. Footsteps could be heard. Several sets of footsteps into the room. Lauranya opened her eyes to a slit, peeking through her lashes.

“All accounted for captain.” A twangy voice said somewhere on the other side of the couch. Lauranya did not know which ship tech it was. They had kept separate from the civilians and scientist.

“I know Jorgie. I know.” The captain’s voice was at the end of the couch. Lauranya worked very hard not to breathe.

“She’s dead. Just like the others.” A different voice said from the captain’s right. “Easier than most it looks like.”

“Doesn’t help Tiron.” The captain’s voice sounded heavy. “I found her to be...a delight.”

“Nope, but we can feed our own families now. But...”

“But we have to beat the oncoming storm and deluge.” A deep breath sounded. “Right. Let’s move out.” The captain’s tone took on the tone of command. The death of 37 men, women and children brushed under the rug for the survival of his crew.

The door swooshed open again. Lauranya lay still for another five minutes, her mind digesting the captain’s words and the horror of the room.

Arie squirmed. “Momma...I gotta potty!” she whispered urgently.

Lauranya nodded into the child’s hair. “Ok dear. But we have to be very quiet still.”

She rose to her feet and crept to the door, cracking it just a hair. Arie started her potty dance, with a little humming song that accompanied it. Lauranya looked both ways quickly. No one about. She grabbed the child’s hand and ran quickly to the bathroom, three doors down and across the hall, their feet barely whispering on the plush fiber carpet.

The bathrooms were huge, multi-tiered, with beige, and gold granite floors and seats, done with painted walls in vivid colors and gems. A bathroom for the Gods and Lords, when visiting. Lauranya felt only a mild twinge of guilt using this necessity instead of the plebeian one downstairs. She took Arie to a bathroom

counter with a child-sized opening for her to sit on. Lauranya started to help Arie with her panties when the girl refused.

“I can do it!” Arie said emphatically.

“Ok, sweetie. Please hurry though.” Lauranya said in a soft voice. She left Arie sitting, turning back to the door, with an almost tiptoe gait. She cracked the door a hair to listen if anyone was heading towards them.

Two shuttle crew members were roaming down the hallway to the reception room and the bodies. Close enough for her to hear them.

“Thought the boss said 37 bodies?”

“He probably miscounted.” one voice said in a deeper baritone dismissively. “Bodies ain't his strong suit.”

“Blood ain't his strong suit!” The other voice said derisively.

Both men laughed.

“Remember Thimas hanging from the post and how grey and swollen he was? And Capt going “Oh my Gods!” I thought he was going to puke then and there!” Said baritone voice. The men stopped walking to laugh in braying tones. They were almost to the door, shadows on the carpet.

“I've never seen a more squeamish person in my life. You'd think he'd never seen a game or been around the whipping stocks.” The first voice with a derisive sniff.

Lauranya held her breath, whispering “Keep walking, damn it just keep walking by!” Her luck ran out when baritone stopped laughing. “Gotta take a piss. See you on the ship.”

“Durn, that's the women's.” The other voice said with apprehension.

“And do you see any round here? Other than the dead ones?” Baritone asked with a sneer. Lauranya imagined him curling a lip while saying that.

“Sick man. Just sick and wrong.” The other voice just kept walking, passing by the bathroom door, as his earbud started to beep. A slight, younger man, in his mid-20's. “Yes, boss. We're doing the last round of scavenging now.” A pause as the man passed out of sight but not hearing. “No sir we'll be right there without dicking around.”

Baritone waived his friend off as he grabbed a drink from the water fountain. Lauranya shut the door and stepped behind it with her back to the wall, slipping off a shoe. Two things happened, the man with the baritone voice entered into the bathroom and Arie finished going to the potty.

“All done!” she sang out, wiping off and dropping the soiled toilet napkin down the waste hole. She hopped down to find her mother. The man stopped his forward momentum to stare at the blond child in front of him.

“What are you doing here sweetie?” Baritone asked in a soft, happy voice, his hand had been reaching for the stolen Overseer's asp on his hip but stopped, changing course mid-action starting to reach for the little girl instead. Arie froze looking up at him, like a small animal caught in the gaze of a large predator.

Lauranya stepped forward, soft as a ghost wisp, from behind the door, to stand behind baritone while he was distracted with Arie. She took the shoe, in her right

hand, swinging it as hard as she could onto the sweet spot on the back of his head, driven by fear and fury. The man hit the floor stunned, shaking his head while groping ineffectual to his side for the asp. Lauranya skipped to the other side of him, braced by a hand on the floor to kick him on the side of the head, with her shod foot, as hard as she could.

Arie started to scream.

“Arie quiet! Put your hands over your mouth!” Lauranya snarled, fear making her harsh with her daughter, as she brought the shoe down on the stunned man even harder than the first time.

The child did stifle her sobs behind small chubby hands. She watched her mother bludgeon and kick the much bigger man until he stopped moving.

Lauranya came out of her fear and fury filled fugue when her shoe started to sink through crunching facial bones. She backed up sobbing, dropping to her knees. Arie ran to her wild-eyed mother. Lauranya hugged the girl close the view of the destroyed face hidden from the child. Lauranya rocked Arie back and forth on her knees, as much to comfort Arie as herself.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” She repeatedly whispered in Arie’s hair to no one in particular.

Arie pulled back for a moment. “Mommy, are you going to do that to anyone else?” She asked in a very quiet voice, her eyes filling with tears as she looked into her mother’s wild eyes.

Lauranya ran a hand over her face to scrub off the tears, giving one more sob.

“I hope not baby, but we aren’t safe here.”

Arie nodded solemnly, taking her mother’s hand in her own. Lauranya squeezed the child’s hand but let go to approach the body cautiously. She rifled through the pockets, belt, picking up the asp and communicator, and then ran to the sink to rinse off her shoe, and blood splattered hand. There was nothing she could do for her clothing.

“Ok sweetie, stay with mommy. We need to leave here without being seen and quickly.” Lauranya walked back to the door, cracking it just a hair to check the hallway. Clear. Lauranya slipped out the door silently.

Arie was wide-eyed and as scared but slipped out the door as quietly as her mother. The hallway was empty. Lauranya could not run with Arie in tow, but they did go at a very quick walk. Lauranya kept looking over her shoulder trying not to run, as she desperately wanted to. Arie struggled to keep up, running on short legs, whimpering at the quick pace but she didn’t stop. Arie sensed stopping would be very bad; she tried to keep up still clutching her bunny tightly.

Lauranya stopped at the end of the hallway before the main lobby area. The marble floor and arched gleaming windowed lobby looked pristine belying the bodied 12 doors down. Lauranya heard the radio before the man. Ten seconds between the voice and the man gave her the chance to grab Arie and duck behind one of the many large planters with wilting tropical vegetation. She turned the volume down on the radio she had from the dead man.

His partner was in the hallway they had just vacated.

“No boss. I don’t know where he is.” Pause. “I saw him heading into the women’s lavatory.” pause. “How the hells should I know? Maybe he was changing his tampon!” Pause. “Soon as I find him he’s all yours!” The crewmember snapped into his radio. He was moving down the hall towards the bathrooms.

Lauranya picked up Arie and ran for the front door. Arie clutched her mother’s neck in an almost choking grip.

“Rooms. Have to hide! Rooms are too easy. Lab! Lab was close. Can go there.” Lauranya muttered to herself, running and panting through the whooshing opening doors across the water-filled street. Her feet never slipped on the wet pavement even as she was hobbled by a child around her neck and the street was ankle deep in runoff — fear giving her sure-footedness in the rain.

“Mommy, I’m hungry!” Arie whispered into her mother’s ear.

“We’ll get something in a moment dear,” Lauranya said ducking into the science building entryway to fumble with her passkey still attached to her pants belt loop.

“Dr. Jhen had trade bars in his office,” Arie said trying to be helpful.

Lauranya grimaced at the thought of the bars, but Jhen had been fond of the overly sweet crumbly things. She juggled the card and child to get the doors to open ignoring her daughter’s comments for a brief moment of necessary fumbling.

“Could I have one? Do you think he would mind?” Arie was trying to remember her manners.

Lauranya choked back a sob while swiping her card against the reader. “No baby, I don’t think he will mind at all.” The door lock showed green, sliding open. The cold interior air whooshed out raising goosebumps on chilled wet skin.

Lauranya ducked into the tidy five-story complex moving to the stairs. Just in case, she did not want a power signature of the lift giving her away. She managed the two short flights without stumbling or loss of breath, trying to breathe through her nose so she could hear if anyone came through the lab’s front door instead of drowning out her hearing with loud panting.

Jhen’s office was on the third floor overlooking the lower valley. Spacious and sparse, natural light, even on this cloudy day, filled the room enough Lauranya did not need to turn on the lights.

Jhen had packed up most of his books and notes for the trip. His studies always a benefit for his God, so he had been given greater latitude than even most pampered scientists. She had enjoyed the banter and discussions she could have with him, covering a large array of subjects. He had seen her as a person and colleague, never “just Tine’s wife” who was a scientist on the side.

Lauranya swallowed, pushing down her grief, to search his office drawers for the bars. The desk bars were cleaned out; however, he had forgotten two boxes worth of bars on a lower side shelf.

Lauranya smiled at the memory when he had 12 boxes there at one time, Jhen had grown up a slave, only to win his freedom with his second scientific

discovery. Successful as he was he could not break the habit of having extra food as a “just in case”. He would forget he had a box and would stash another there just in case. His need to squirrel away the bars for at least a two month supply, a gentle joke among his friends. Everyone on the ships had his or her little quirks. Jhen’s was safe compared to the quirks of a few Lauranya could think of off the top of her head.

Lauranya frowned then searched the other lower compartments. She laughed aloud. “Thank you Jhen and your fear of hunger!” Three more boxes were still there. “I wonder how many boxes he actually had on him when he packed.”

“Oh, chocolate!” May I have chocolate please?” Arie squealed in excitement, her hand inches from the bar before she remembered her manners, as she looked at her mother.

“Yes dear.” Lauranya gave Arie a bar before she sat down on the sidewall leather couch. She swallowed hard twice. She had promised she would allow herself an indulgent crying session later, but right now, she needed to plan.

She looked out and saw the valley basin had already been swallowed by the center lake, swollen over its normal shore and ring of trees. The trees were drowned with only the very crown branch tips on two or three of the very tallest now showing over the water surface; the remaining trees were just ripples in the newly formed lake. She could see flashes of whiskered cats with glimpses of other animals, on the high grounds melting in and out of the brush. A wave of panic threatened to engulf her.

“Breath! Breath!” she whispered to herself, clutching her knees to her stomach. Burying her head into her knees, taking deep breaths, she tried not to panic. A child hiding under the blankets from the monsters in the room.

Arie was happily munching on her travel bar, going to the cabinet the doc had stocked with interesting things for his children and their friends. She found the Doctor's plastic loc-n-stack set. She pulled them out, after licking her fingers clean, to play with, burbling happily to herself.

Lauranya rocked back and forth muttering quietly. “Cannot go to the hills. Everything will be moving to high ground. A boat? Not certified on the current models. Storms are too severe to chance the inexperienced to... That leaves the building or a platform of some sort.” Her mind running in circles when the stat phone on her hip squawked, jolting her out of her circular panicked thinking.

“Dr. Lauranya, I know you can hear me. Respond.” The captain’s voice came over the phone, urgent yet calm.

Her hands shaking, Lauranya switched on the voice, no video, looking fiercely into the blank screen.

“Why?” her voice shook with fear and rage.

“Why?” The captain repeated, clearly not expecting this singular question.

“Why were....why did you have to kill everyone? We will be missed. You can’t think no one will ask questions.” Her voice was hoarse from the force being used to speak through unshed tears.

“Orders were to drop the scientist off at whatever port we made and arrangements would be made from there to their next travel destination. The escaped slaves are closing in on this quadrant. Every ship for itself. If there were no drop-offs, there would be no questions and no red tape. You will be missed in a few months or years, maybe, but not until we’ve had time to clear out.

Lauranya laid her head back on her knees. Truth. They would not be missed for a long time. A thought wove through her brain to her mouth.

“The others? My husband? My sons?”

There was a long pause before the captain’s voice came back. “The other captains were dumping all their passengers into space once the thermosphere had been hit.” His voice was emotionless. “No one is coming back to this planet till the water levels are stabilized or before those bodies would have fallen back to the earth and burned in the atmosphere.”

A sob escaped from her.

The captain heard this small muffled sound, taking pity. “Doc...Lauranya, I am truly sorry. I...didn’t want you to learn this...from me. We...” A heavy sigh. “I thought the poison would be an easier death than implosion.”

Lauranya’s hand shook on the phone. “Why?” She cleared her throat from the clenching tightness. “Why did you have to kill all of us? What did we ever do to you?!” She whispered glaring at the phone as if he could see her through the blacked out screen.

“Will you come to the ship?” the captain asked, avoiding the question.

“No!”

“There is a critical shortage of food on the outer colonies and sub ships. What we make is sent to the main ship worlds with little left for most of our families. Wives, husbands, children starving to feed the Dead Gods.”

Lauranya made the connection. The pilots and their crew needed food and medicines from this failed colony. Everything and everyone else was a liability. Stolen to start fresh away from the Dead Gods, their freedom for everyone else’s lives.

“So you stole the food and medicine for yourselves.”

“And our families.”

“Our families don’t count do they?” Her bitterness bled through the fear. “Babaluaye curse you! I hope you like the taste of blood!” Lauranya hissed the old curse at the Captain, switching off the stat phone with a savage twist of the knob. She pulled her knees up to her chin hugging them close sobbing softly at her losses.

“Should we go find her?” the second mate asked. He was worried. Loose ends had a way of biting people in the ass.

“No matter how beautiful and well-made a coffin might look, it will not make anyone wish for death. Especially not a scientist.” The captain chewed his lower lip. “How long till the water reaches the buildings?”

“Three weeks or so.” Came the pilot’s answer, the handcuffs around smooth dark skinned wrists to the controls, rattled softly as she tried to gesture with chained hands. Her eyes were dark and wide. She hadn’t been agreeable to the killing, but they had needed her to get the shuttle off the ground, so she had been chained to the controls till take off.

“Think she’ll survive moving to higher ground?” the second mate asked.

“With those damn long-whiskered cats or the sun spiders? Pfft.” The pilot didn’t hide her scorn for the second mate’s comment. She didn’t try to duck his blistering backhand that caught her across the cheek and nose. She gave him a sneering glare through the tears while touching the tip of her tongue to the blood dripping from her nose.

“You hit like a pussy.” She said softly, with a curl to her lip. The second mate was breathing hard at the physical outburst. He raised his hand for another blow when the captain caught his wrist.

“Stop.” His voice was calm, but he turned his hooded eyes to the pilot. “That is what I was thinking.” His comment was on the doctor. He shook his head. “No, we’ll leave her and let the world do our killing and burying. We have our own families to pick up. This world can hide one or two more bodies. Start the flight check.” He released his second in command’s wrist with a look the smaller man couldn’t meet.

He grabbed the pilot by the back of her neck, digging fingers into her skin, bruisingly. “Do not piss me off anymore. I need a pilot, but we have lots of time to learn how to do this without you before we get to our first destination. Understand?” His voice was cold velvet with controlled violence underneath.

“Yes sir!” The woman swallowed hard.

“Good.” He nodded walking out of the cockpit. “Release her once we are in space, Nori. And don’t take your bruised ego out on her.”

“Yes sir!” came the second’s snarled reply.

“Good luck to you doc. May your death be easy.” the captain whispered, as he went to check on the rest of his crew, the only blessing he knew to give to the doomed scientist.