

The book cover features a sci-fi illustration. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair, wearing a purple jacket and a green scarf, holds a red and black handgun. She is looking towards the right. In the middle ground, a green-skinned alien with a white sash looks up at her. In the background, another alien with a spear is positioned near a dark, industrial building with spotlights. The sky is dark with a large moon and several planets. The title 'BLOOD LINE' is written in large, red, stylized letters at the bottom.

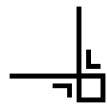
Lynn
Ward

**BLOOD
LINE**



BLOOD LINE

LYNN WARD



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BLOOD LINE

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**To Judith, Paul, Linda and Ardath—they
read, listened and encouraged.**

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PART ONE

OUTCASTS

Lauren was haunted. Terry was everywhere, making mischief, flickering across the vid screen in front of her.

"Please, stop," she told her dead son. Told herself, for the ghost was made of memory.

"Stop what, Chief?" the man next to her said.

"Nothing, Meyer."

Swiveling her chair, she eyed the Security Hub's array of screens. It was a patchwork quilt of images—some fixed views, others from the mobile darter cameras that swooped and scanned by remote control. Two other security specialists worked the remotes, constantly changing the configuration. Except for its stuffing of equipment, the place was a square utilitarian barn.

"Wait a minute," she muttered, turning back to her screen. Fingering one of the square, wafer-thin remotes, she slowed a darter and lowered it to a close-up view of the sidewalk. "Walks need inspection. There's grass poking up between the tiles. Remember, to the Krhyllans external appearance is all-important."

"I got it," Meyer said. "Can't be too many planets where Security moonlights as gardeners."

"We're an open station, they walk through here a lot. They're not happy, the Pan-Galactics could throw us out."

"Yes, ma'am," Meyer said dutifully.

"Don't get an ulcer," Lauren said. "Station safety is first priority. Krhyllan is pre-technical. We've got lasers and sonics to counter knives and swords."

He nodded. "Guess it's not bad if the worst thing to worry about is pollen."

"Death by allergy." Lauren chuckled.

"Is that going to be on the promotion exam?" Meyer asked, straight-faced.

This time she laughed out loud.

"It won't, I promise. You know, you'll be the third security chief I've turned out." He'd be a good one, with the mix of competence and compassion she preferred.

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“Then you send us on somewhere else,” Meyer said. “And you stay. Ever think of transferring?”

Lauren’s mood plummeted.

“No,” she said, deactivating her screen. Its darkened, polished surface made a halfway decent mirror. She saw herself—lean and long-boned, with a high-cheekboned face and short unruly hair. Not visible were the premature grey streaking her auburn hair, and her troubled hazel eyes.

Next to her, Meyer’s stocky frame and features seemed to attract more light.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s none of my business.”

Lauren mentally bit her lip. Terry had unsettled her.

“No problem.” She pushed her chair back, suddenly restless. “I’m going for a walk. I’ve got a comm unit and a sonic handheld.” Automatically, she patted the pockets of her shorts.

Meyer took her place at the terminal, and Lauren left. A major perk for being chief of security was not having to pull a regular shift in the Hub. The closely packed terminals and screens seemed like staring eyes.

Outside, it was nearing sunset. Lauren breathed deeply; the air was sweet but damp, hinting rain.

Something nudged her foot. It was the local version of a frog, lying on its back, legs thrashing. She turned the creature upright with her toe and watched it hop furiously away.

“Don’t let that happen again,” she mock-warned. “Second chances are hard to come by.”

She hurried past the station’s other buildings, squat and square like a congregation of turtles, and the greenlabs. Beyond them was the slide-roofed hanger for the two hovercraft. All had abstract swirls and shadings of color grossly resembling Krhyllan designs.

The greenlabs were officially why Terrans had a station on Krhyllan. Its fertile soil was used to birth hybrid grains for colonies on harsher worlds. They’d made planetfall and established a station under the distant gaze of the Pan-Galactics. Older, technologically superior worlds, they could help Earth expand into the galaxy or stop it cold.

Pausing at the station perimeter, Lauren looked skyward, wondering who was watching whom. She stretched her arms, feeling tight and sore back muscles. Whenever Terry was around, old injuries flared. Massaging her shoulder, she felt the bones in sharp relief.

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“Getting old, lady,” she muttered, imagining her whippet-lean muscles grown stringy. In fact, she was barely thirty-six.

She studied the green crescent valley spread out below. Beyond it, the ocean sparkled in last light, rolling indigo to the horizon. Farther on, to the south, lay an island chain that was Krhyllan’s only other land mass.

Lauren couldn’t appreciate the water’s indigo beauty. Once there had been a platform a half-mile out for hydro experiments. Terry’d been visiting the platform the day it exploded.

She focused her mind and gaze on the land. Krhyllan’s capital city lay hidden in the green valley, stone and mortar set into the hillsides, huddled under stretches of thick forest. Subtle, cunningly beautiful. The Krhyllans wanted their gods, the Asham, to overlook them. Or, should they look, to be pleased by what they saw. The Krhyllan deities were unpredictable and dangerous.

Footsteps and the rustling of high grass broke into Lauren’s thoughts. An elderly man walked up the gently sloping path from the city. He wore a *risha*, the basic Krhyllan garment, a single square of cloth they draped and tied around their bodies in a dozen ways.

This risha was made of the local cotton, dyed dark-green. Peasant dress—tradespeople and artisans could afford multicolored ones. The wealthy had rishas that were tapestries; scenes from their history and mythos were painted on.

This man’s only adornment was a woven bracelet of colored threads. Gems were scarce. Metals, as well—they were used almost exclusively for weaponry. Like the sword he carried.

Lauren’s gut tightened. All Krhyllans wore a weapon hanging from a belt or shoulder. Carried in hand, it meant trouble.

“Hello,” she said, tongue stumbling over the polysyllabic Krhyllan language. Her own hands dangled open and empty. “It’s a peaceful time?” Krhyllan style—half-assertion, half-question.

The man paused and finished the ritual greeting.

“It’s a peaceful time.” His face was seamed with wrinkles but vigorous. A grandfather’s face. Sometimes, they look so human, Lauren thought.

But they weren’t. Up close, differences showed. Of one genotype, they had thin, fragile bodies and straight black hair that seldom grayed. Their noses were flat, their jaws extremely long and narrow. Spidery fingers and toes gave them incredible dexterity. Their skin had a smooth olive tone.

“Are you coming to the station?” she asked the sword-wielding grandfather.

“No,” he said, “I’m going home.” He pointed the sword toward the hills above the station.

Lauren fished for information.

“Have you been to the market today?”

“Yes. Too many Islanders. Thief’s people.” Scowling, the Krhyllan spat in front of his feet.

He spoke of history made myth. Long ago, two brother-kings fought to rule the planet. The loser and his followers fled to the chain of islands. One had an active volcano. It exploded, birthing tidal waves, turning the atmosphere coldly toxic for decades. History belonged to the winners—the mainland king was the Inheritor, those in the islands were Thieves. Worse, to the *karasham*, Khryllan’s priesthood, the catastrophe showed their gods’ anger at the war.

Suddenly, the station lights flared on full. Blinking against the hurtful brightness, Lauren saw a blond woman in Security uniform hurrying toward them.

“Chief Pell?” the woman called. “We heard some noise. Didn’t know it was you.” She’d pulled her laser pistol from its holster.

Lauren shook her head.

“Easy with your burner, Spec. There’s no one to shoot. I’ll be up in a moment.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She saluted, holstering the pistol.

“No need to salute,” Lauren said. “We’re Explorer Service, not Fire Fleet.” After the spec retreated, she turned back to the Krhyllan.

“Too many Thieves,” he said, chopping the air with his sword. He stopped, frowning.

Lauren guessed what was wrong. Killing, even the thought of it, was ugly. The Asham knew people’s thoughts. They needed to be placated.

“Do you want to make beauty?” she asked.

“Yes,” the grandfather said. “With flowers.” In the station light, the Krhyllan’s spider-fingers worked. Quicker than any human, he picked luminous white flowers and broad green leaves that were velvety soft. Then he knelt at Lauren’s feet. “Here.”

Lauren dropped to one knee and helped craft a flower arrangement—a bed of green with an explosion of pearl-white on top. Her coordination paled beside the Krhyllan’s, but she’d made a necessary gesture.

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Perspiring by the time they finished, she leaned back on her heels. The old man's fearful intensity was contagious, his pace swift and practiced. Ceremonies of beauty were taught to the young; usually, the elders and the wealthy practiced them the most.

Then the Krhyllan prayed. Fingers twining, he lowered his head.

"If the Asham look this way, may they be pleased, may they see tranquility and beauty." Voice trailing off, he got to his feet.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Lauren asked.

"No. I live just below the Forbidden. It's a long way. Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome."

The Krhyllan disappeared into the dark. He did have a long trip. The Forbidden was a collection of ruins several miles higher, at the edge of a plateau leading to a craggy mountain range. Krhyllan's original capital city, now off-limits by royal and religious decree.

The postwar city below her was a prettier sight. Torches and lamps were lit, winking through the greenery. Terry had loved to see it at night. She'd hoist him on one arm, saying the lights played hide-and-seek. He'd always giggle...

"Terry, go away!"

She smiled respectfully down at the eloquent floral arrangement. It took courage to live—to create beauty—when you kept expecting your gods to destroy you. Then she walked back inside the station perimeter.

Returning to the Hub, she saw Meyer and the others at their terminals, fingers doing a St. Vitus' dance on the keys and the remotes. Views of every possible nook and cranny blinked into focus and out.

"Anything there?" she asked.

Meyer looked up. "Nothing. Doctor Chen buzzed us, said the infirmary was ready if anyone came for medical help. Don't know what set off the alarms. Oh, Commander Hester wants to see you. She sounds kind of mad."

"On my way," Lauren said, voice carefully neutral. "If I'm not in her office, I'll be in quarters."

"Ma'am." Meyer's fingers renewed their high-stepping.

Lauren didn't hurry to the station commander's door. Pausing outside, she untied the tails of her shirt and tucked them into her shorts then smoothed her tousled hair. Finally, she knocked.

"Come in."

The new commander sat behind her desk, staring at her vid terminal. Hester was a small, pale ramrod of a woman, hair piled in

tight braids on her head. Looking at her, Lauren felt grungy. Explorer personnel had clothing choices, all in nondescript beige—shirt and pants, shirt and shorts, jumpsuits, or the high-collared formal uniform. Hester opted for formal, every crease in it razor sharp.

“Reporting as you ordered, Commander.”

Hester swiveled in her chair to face Lauren.

“Meyer told me there was a short yellow alert. Why did I hear it from him and not you?”

Lauren tightened her fists behind her back.

“It was a false alarm, Commander. I met an elderly Krhyllan outside the perimeter. We talked, and I helped him make beauty.”

“Did he know anything?” Hester asked.

“Nothing, except there are more Islanders than usual in the city.”

“Meyer also told me the infirmary’s holding open house, as usual.”

“It’s been station policy for sixty years, Commander. Since land-fall.”

Hester bristled. “Tell me something new, Chief.”

“Sorry, ma’am.” Lauren halfway meant it, although she heartily disliked the woman. Hester was highly competent, very authoritarian. Whatever she felt about Lauren, the station or anything else, she gave no clue.

“What if the Mainlanders decide we’re siding with the Islanders—the Thief’s people?”

“That’s never happened, ma’am, in sixty years.” Not exactly true—some Mainlanders were chronically suspicious of Terran sympathies.

“It could, though. Particularly since you’re friends with the king’s wives. We’re not the Fire Fleet, we don’t have a military mission. But we do represent the Terran League and uphold its policies.”

“I’m friendly with one of them,” Lauren specified, thinking of the sad-eyed Aranthé. Once, they’d both had sons.

“Mother of the crown prince.”

“Yes, she is.”

Lauren endured this conversation with every station commander. They came and went, en route to bigger things, not wanting careers sabotaged by local politics.

“And she’s an Islander, too. The token Thief, if you will.”

“Not a token, Commander. The king and his wives rule together. They’re called the Voices because they speak for different parts of the continent—”

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“I know the local political structure, Chief.” Hester paused then went on. “How long have you been here, Pell?”

“Twelve years, ma’am.” Lauren groaned inwardly.

“You came here with your husband as an administrative team?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She hoped Hester wouldn’t pursue the issue. “He was base commander, I was security.” She seldom thought about Mark. They’d conceived Terry on Krhyllan, hoping to strengthen a shaky marriage. It died when their son did. Mark left, she stayed.

Hester changed course. “After twelve years, you may have forgotten how volatile Terra’s political climate is. Nothing’s gotten better.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

Human politics were chronically at boiling point. Earth was governed by the Terran League, a loose association of regional sub-governments. For every strong and stable one, there was a poor one weakened by archaic ethnic and religious feuds. The League’s actual power structure functioned most efficiently in space exploration and in playing diplomat to a number of highly developed planets and cultures—the Pan-Galactics—who looked skeptically at the acquisitive humans.

“Ma’am, we didn’t even have an alert,” Lauren replied. “One of the specs heard us talking...heard noise...and investigated.”

“We’re on probation in the galactic community, and they’ve got ways of keeping an eye on us. Please report everything. Literally.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Hester paused, then let her off the hook.

“That will be all for now.”

Lauren left gladly, retreating to her home.

Living quarters were spread out between administration and the greenlabs, barracks on the left, family and officers’ quarters on the right. Explorer Service was more democratic than League’s Fire Fleet, with a simplified command structure. Still, it *was* a paramilitary organization.

Lauren’s home was at the perimeter’s edge. The outside was square and functional, made of the same metalloy as everything else. Inside, it had identity. The bed frame, table, chairs—all were carved from handsome blue-black wood. Screens with sly, delicate Krhyllan designs hung from the walls. Some showed landscapes, others figures from Krhyllan mythology. A long bookshelf divided the bedroom and living area. That was Terry’s place. Photos and holos were arranged on it; some of his toys sat displayed below.

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Lauren touched an old-fashioned photo at one end gently, as if it were baby's flesh.

"Not much doing tonight," she told Terry. "Except you were giving me a hard time. Ease up. I don't want any more counseling or medications, okay?"

Prowling the edges of the room, she picked up the vid remote, flicked the screen on and off. Looked at the chiller in the small kitchen then decided she wasn't hungry.

Finally, she hauled a box from under her bed. Out of it, she took a grey case with carving tools and a piece of driftwood. The tools were Krhyllan, metal and scalpel-sharp. Metals were used only to make beauty, royal jewelry and the weaponry carried by the king's guardsmen. She'd been trying to sculpt a wave. It was practice, before an attempt with the harder dark wood.

Lauren sat at the table, turned the overhead light on bright and began working. She slipped with the knife and nicked her finger, tended it, started again. The world narrowed to repetitive strokes. After an hour or so, she straightened. Her back hurt, and a headache threatened, but she'd done better than the last time.

Marginally satisfied, she put the tools and wood away, lowered the lights and stretched out on her bed. Punched a pillow into submission, embraced it and drifted into sleep.

Terry stood on the silver deck of the sea platform, waving to her. She stood on shore, waving back. The platform began to smoke, heat lines everywhere. Terry screamed silently.

Run, hurry, dive into the water! Lauren's shrieks, too, were voiceless. Terry stood where he was, mute, hollow-eyed. Around him, the platform writhed and buckled. He melted like wax, flowing onto himself, down into the flames...

Lauren woke smothering. She threw off the pillow and sat up, shaking. She drew up her knees, wrapping her arms around them.

"No fair, Terry," she rasped. "No fair." Stripping off her clothes, she went to the shower and scoured herself to the point of raw. Calmer, she took her sleep robe from a wall hook and walked back to the bedroom.

There was a tapping on the sliding door, the sound like electric shocks to her nerves.

"Who's there?" she called, seeing a shadow outside.

"Peter Chen, space doctor extraordinaire," came the answer, faint through the Plexiglas. "Need an operation? There's a special this week on appendectomies. Lauren? Hey, can I come in?"

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“Wait a moment,” Lauren said, almost smiling. She let him in. “What are you doing here this time of night?”

“You invited me,” he said, lifting a bottle of wine. “We’d scheduled a mad debauch, remember?”

“I’m sorry, Peter, I forgot. Anyone show up at the infirmary?”

He squinted at her in the dimness.

“No. Aren’t you feeling well?”

“I dreamed about Terry. Nothing fatal.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Yes.” She walked past him to the tiny kitchen, where she took a water carafe from the refrigerator, poured a glassfull and drank it, then another. “I’ve been fuzzy around the edges all evening.”

Peter had followed her.

“Hold still,” he commanded then touched her forehead. “You haven’t got a fever.”

“It was just the dream,” Lauren said, brushing his hand away. “You want something to eat?”

He shook his head. “No, thanks. I had a run-in with Hester. That ruined my appetite. The woman shits rules.”

“You shit *on* them,” Lauren said.

“It’s all they’re good for.” Peter smirked.

She refilled the carafe and drank some more.

“Hester’s just more ambitious than the last commander. They all move on after a while.”

“Just leaves us old folks.” Peter was thirty-two and had come to Krhyllan when Lauren did. They’d been friends long before they were lovers.

She leaned against him, feeling his arms go around her. He stroked her back and neck gently, not pushing for more. She rested her head on his shoulder, appreciating his tact. His fingers left warm trails, and after a while she wanted more. She kissed his neck then looked up.

“I’m not up to a debauch, but...”

Peter stepped back, took off his shirt and pants and sandals. He was a trim, smooth-skinned man with gentle features and an unexpected smile. His black hair was pulled into a ponytail, which he kept courtesy of Explorer’s laxer rules.

Lauren dropped the sleep robe and led him to the bed.

They teased each other, lips and fingertips roaming. Peter pulled her closer, began kissing her breasts. Lauren responded in kind, nipping lightly with her teeth.

“Ow,” he said then laughed.

She wound her fingers through his hair, appreciating the fact he kept it so soft and clean. She pulled his head up and kissed his mouth, tongue penetrating.

Peter moved his body over hers, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him. He slipped into her, drawing her into a slow, familiar rhythm. Lauren clung tight, willing to be passive tonight.

They finished together, low cries echoing, then were still. Lauren was crying—whether from old pain or new pleasure, she didn’t know.

Peter separated from her and rolled onto his back. She nestled against him, more or less at peace.

“I shouldn’t use you for therapy,” she said.

“There’s worse things to be used for.”

“I don’t give you enough back, Peter.”

He answered her sideways.

“Need something to help you sleep?”

“No. I can’t do my job drugged out. And that wasn’t a very ethical suggestion, Doctor.”

He grimaced. “You’re right. Want to schedule a session with Doctor Muhrti?”

That was tempting. Indira Muhrti, second-in-command for medical services, was also the station psychiatrist. Muhrti had done more for her than any drug, but Lauren didn’t want to look back.

“No, I’ll take my nightmares cold turkey. Or give you a call.”

“Move in with me, and you won’t even have to call.”

She put the flat of her hand against him and pushed.

“Peter, don’t! ‘Let’s get married, have a cohabitation contract, just live together...’ Hell, you’ve already got me.”

“Not really,” he said. “You won’t let anyone that close.”

“Will you let up!”

“I will not. Terry’s been dead for three years, and you’re still in a goddamn holding pattern. No change, no commitment.”

Lauren sat up, her peacefulness gone.

“I warned you, told you I couldn’t give back. Maybe someday...”

“Not until you stop blaming yourself for Terry’s death. It was an accident, a freak thing. Nobody’s fault.”

“I don’t blame myself.”

“The hell you don’t.”

“Shut up!” Lauren covered her ears for a moment then, shame-faced, uncovered them. “That was really a grownup thing to do. I won’t

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listen, and you can't make me," she said in a child's singsong. "You're a masochist, putting up with me."

"I'm a patient man."

"Pun intended?"

He laughed then grew serious.

"I want to be with you permanently." He laid a hand on her abdomen. "I can give you another son. I'd make a good father."

The comm unit over the bed buzzed. Aggravated, Lauren punched it hard.

"Pell."

It was Meyer. "I'm sorry to bother you, but, um, you had a visitor."

Lauren shook her throbbing hand.

"Pardon?"

"A messenger from the king came up the hill about ten minutes ago. We thought he was going to the infirmary, but he asked for you. Said the king wanted to see you, and to come inoffensively."

"Inoffensively," to a Krhyllan, meant *sneak in unseen* or close to it. Something was seriously wrong.

"Where is he now?" Lauren flexed her sore fingers.

"He took off soon as the message was delivered. We informed the commander and called you."

"Understood. I'll get dressed and head down the hill."

"Commander Hester wants to see you, too."

"When I get back," Lauren said. "Whatever's wrong might affect the whole station." She flicked the comm off.

"Hester's gonna love waiting," Peter said. "Gee, maybe she'll get an ulcer."

Lauren threw back the covers.

"If you're hungry, rummage in the kitchen. I'll be back whenever."

She sponged herself off, got into a jumpsuit and boots and slipped the sonic disruptor into one pocket and a flashlight in the other. Peter was sitting up when she came out of the bathroom.

"This is weird enough to be dangerous," he told her. "Wish I could go with you."

Lauren half-smiled. "Don't get paranoid. I'll be careful. I've got a sonic."

"Those aren't lethal unless you're practically touching noses with someone."

"That's why I like it," she said, already out the door.

She went to the perimeter and beyond, finding one of the footpaths mainly by memory. Krhyllan's moon wasn't out tonight, and the station lights were left behind. She set the flashlight on low, following its tight beam down the hill. The path was narrow and twisted, meant for hiding. Uneven footing fit for long, splayed Krhyllan toes strained Lauren's ankles.

Finally, she was at the outskirts of the city-in-hiding. Most buildings were dark; those with a lamp still lit peered at her from behind trees and sloping earthen barricades.

The walls of the palace were covered with intricate vine lattices. Swirling designs were cut deep into the soft stone. A rope ladder hung down—it was the “inoffensive” entrance. Lauren put the light into one pocket, zipped it shut and started to climb.

Stupid way to get inside a building. Tricky as well—the ladder wasn't made for humans. At the top, she straddled the wall and looked into the palace garden, a fairyland within the larger beauty of the building itself. A servant stood there, his risha wrapped like a snake around his body. He wore a multicolored latticework scarf of cotton, sign of his status. Lauren knew the dominant color—red—was Tesik's, but she'd never learned the correlations between rank and the different lattice patterns.

The servant turned his hands palms-up then made a polite summoning gesture. Lauren climbed down and at the bottom mentally reset herself to speak Krhyllan.

“It's a peaceful time,” she said, puffing slightly.

He made another follow-me gesture, and they walked through hallways, across mosaic floors with swirling abstract patterns. The walls were painted a luminous teal, lit by lamps in small alcoves. The flames made the teal seem to flow.

The servant moved rapidly. Lauren struggled to keep up. Krhyllan floors were as up-and-down as the footpath.

Overhead, squares of grey glass were inlaid checkerboard-style in the ceiling. They were a crude but effective form of solar collector, copied from the sophisticated ones used at the station. No one had explained the technology; the Krhyllans simply looked and learned.

Soon, they were in the portion of the palace set into the hillside. The air was drier, more evenly cool. It seemed resoundingly empty. No, a figure lurked behind a pillar, another peered around a hanging screen. There were flower arrangements and circles of exquisitely carved figurines. Small islands of beauty, dozens of them. Every palace arti-

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san must have contributed. All Krhyllans made beauty, but only the privileged pursued it to this extreme.

The servant led her through the council meeting hall that was the palace's centerpiece. No one sat on its throne or smaller chairs. They came to the living quarters for the king and his co-rulers—one room for the king, five others for the wives and children. All were carefully separate and equal.

The servant pointed toward Aranthé's quarters and walked away. Lauren saw a palace guard standing by a pillar. He looked back at her then retreated. Everyone was afraid tonight.

"I come with my hands open, saying it is a peaceful time," she said quietly, rattling the bamboo screen covering Aranthé's door.

The screen was pulled back, and Lauren saw more guards. They carried spears, swords and "war hands"—gloves of leather with iron spikes. Some had spikes on the knuckles, others in the palm. So much for a peaceful time.

Tesik was there, his risha around his waist. A snakelike sea creature was painted on it. Fists clenched, body taut, he looked like a trapped creature himself.

"Come with me," he said.

More following? Bridling her impatience, Lauren complied.

Aranthé's bedchamber was behind another painted screen. There was a low table with large pillows scattered around it. Aranthé sat on one, cradling her nine-year-old son Deran. Deathly pale, she rocked back and forth, staring at nothing. Her risha had storm scenes on it... and large bright bloodstains. Beside her was a body covered by a blanket. The blanket was sodden with gore.

Lauren's breath caught in fright. Then she saw Deran's small ribcage rise and fall. He wasn't dead. *Thank you, God.*

She knelt next to Aranthé. "What's wrong?"

"You'll have to take him."

"What's wrong?" Lauren repeated, staring at the sleeping boy. He was Tesik's heir, the first in decades born to an Island wife. She'd seen little of him since Terry died. Being around small male children was painful.

"Take him to the doctor," Aranthé said. "He did this—he'll have to keep Deran."

"Huh? I mean, what did Peter do? Is Deran sick?" Ignorance made Lauren stupid.

Tesik came to loom over the two women.

"Deran limps. He has the Thief's sickness."

“Oh, no.” Lauren leaned back on her heels, slightly dizzy.

Tesik spoke of disaster. The disease was a neuromuscular disorder resembling multiple sclerosis. The brother-king who fled to the islands suffered from it. Anyone who limped wore their Mark of Cain. They were outcast at best, slaughtered at worst.

She stroked Deran’s face; the skin was dry and hot.

“You want him treated,” she said.

Human medicine could cure the disease, so over the years a few frightened, desperate Krhyllans had come to the infirmary. But never a member of royalty.

“Yes, yes, treat him,” Tesik said in a fit of impatience. “Just take him out of here. He’ll be quiet. Aranthe gave him a sleeping potion.”

Lauren looked at the corpse. “Did someone try to kill him?”

Tesik pulled the cloth back, showing the body of a middle-aged woman. She’d been gutted, her entrails pulled out.

“She was Deran’s nursemaid,” Tesik said. “The Blood Painters killed her.” He pointed to the woman’s face, contorted in an eternal scream. “Look at her forehead.”

“Christ,” Lauren muttered, recognizing the jagged mark like lightning cut deep in the flesh. The Blood Painters were professional assassins whose art was creatively savage killing. “Do you know who hired them?” she asked.

“Not yet,” Tesik said.

“Tell the doctor,” Aranthe repeated, hissing like a snake. “It’s his fault, he and the other one.”

“Other one? You mean Doctor Breslin?” He was Peter’s predecessor, now dead for three years.

“Yes. They did it,” Aranthe said.

Did what? Lauren thought the question only.

“I’ll tell him. I promise.” She covered Aranthe’s tendril-fingered hands with her own.

“Please take care of him,” Aranthe said, speaking as one mother to another.

“He’s not to blame. The doctors did it.”

“I’ll send you with a man to carry him,” Tesik hissed.

His guards fashioned a blanket into a harness. Deran was hoisted like a sack of potatoes onto a guard’s back.

“He knows where he’s going,” Aranthe said, even paler than she had been. “But he’ll be frightened when he wakes up.” She looked at her husband. “Tesik, I have to go with him. Please.”

BLOOD LINE

“No,” Tesik said. “Aranthe, you’ve got to speak for him when the council meets.” His tone was gruff, urgent, not commanding.

She bowed her head. “All right, I’ll stay,” she said in calm despair.

The king turned to the guard.

“Go inoffensively to the Earth station. Go quickly.”

Lauren longed for him to touch Deran, to make any show of caring, but the king kept his distance, physically and emotionally.

“The doctor knows what to do.” Aranthe wrapped her long fingers around Lauren’s arm.

The guard strode from the room, carrying his burden lightly, making Lauren hurry after him. They retraced her route over the palace wall and down the rope ladder. She led the way back to the station, feeling predawn coolness in the air. The trip was peaceful, broken only by bird cries and the Krhyllan versions of crickets and cicadas. The local versions of squirrels, rodents and other small mammals still slept.

At the perimeter, she found Meyer waiting.

“The commander wanted to know when you came back,” he told her.

“Tell her I’m back, then.”

Lauren moved past him with the guard, wanting to reach the infirmary. It was lit up, although the only person she saw was Doctor Muhrti, hair pulled into a bun, oval face contrasting her infirmary greens. Muhrti said nothing, but Lauren saw her eyes widen.

“It’s Deran,” Lauren said. “He’s got the limping disease. Set up one of the private rooms for him.”

Muhrti’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes, Chief.” She gestured to the guard, who carried Deran after her with stoic determination.

Left alone, Lauren fidgeted. She wanted Peter to explain what the hell was his fault. As if on cue he arrived, also dressed in pale green.

“Hello,” he said. “I was getting worried.”

“It’s Deran,” she blurted. “He’s got the limping disease. Tesik and Aranthe sent him for treatment.”

Peter’s face went slack.

“It figures,” he said after a moment. “Son of a bitch, it figures.”

“What figures? Peter!”

“I need to see Deran,” he said, looking past her. “Then I’ll tell you.”

“Thank you for your kindness and consideration.”

LYNN WARD

“Shove the sarcasm, Lauren. You won’t like what you hear. Now I need to see my patient.”

“Doctor Muhrti’s getting him settled in. Aranthe gave him a sleeping potion of some kind, but he knows he’s going to wake up in the infirmary.” Suddenly lightheaded, she leaned against a wall.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel kind of woozy. My blood sugar’s low. I haven’t eaten anything since lunch yesterday.”

“Your electrolytes are screwed after last night, too,” Peter said, placing a hand on her forehead.

“Where’s the guard?” Lauren looked over his shoulder.

“He left. Went out the other door,” Muhrti said.

“Damn.”

“What else is going on?” Peter asked.

“Aranthe said you and Doctor Breslin did this to Deran. Tell me what she’s talking about.”

He dropped his hand.

“Let’s go to my office.” He looked back at Muhrti. “Finish the setup. Let me know when he wakes.”

“Yes, Doctor,” she said, keeping her own puzzling to herself.

Peter's office was a wreck, its desk and chairs buried in hard copies of reports, coffee cups and other, unidentifiable, things.

"Put everything onto the floor," he said, taking his own advice.

Lauren did, more carefully than he, and took a seat.

"Peter, explain. Please." She put a hand on her knotted, grumbling stomach.

"Be right back," he said, left and returned with a glass of what looked like lemonade. "Drink up," he instructed. "It's a carbo cocktail. Sugars, potassium, liquid proteins. Even some water."

Lauren did. It was tasteless, but her body welcomed it.

Peter shifted in his chair, watched her, saying nothing. Lauren shifted in hers, a nervous mirror to his behavior.

"Well?" she asked.

"Remember ten years ago, when there was fighting in the palace?"

Lauren nodded. Two guards had gone rogue, tried to assassinate Aranthé. Another of the wives, a Mainlander named Ruala, was caught in the middle. Other guards killed the would-be assassins but not before Ruala and Aranthé were injured.

Tesik had brought his injured wives to the station infirmary, partly because Krhyllans respected Terran medicine, partly because the station was a safe haven. The same reasons Deran was here now. Robert Breslin had been infirmary chief then, with Peter his assistant.

"Remember Breslin put the women in one of the private rooms?" Peter said. "He treated them himself."

"Peter, I was there. I set up the security. That was when I met Aranthé. Please get to the point."

"The Mainlander wife was dying—and she was pregnant. It would've been Tesik's firstborn. He and his wives had their group wedding—what, about a year before?"

"It was early on in the pregnancy, so the fetus wasn't injured. Breslin removed it and put it into a gestation tank. Then he went to Aranthé and offered to implant the fetus in her. If an Island wife gave

LYNN WARD

birth to the king's heir, the 'Landers wouldn't like it, but Aranthe would have political clout."

"You helped him?" Lauren slid down in her chair, boneless with shock.

"No. I found out about a month later. He just had to tell somebody."

"For God's sake, why?" The words were a lump in Lauren's throat.

"Because Breslin loved Krhyllan," Peter said. "So much he's even buried here. He wanted to give the Islanders more political clout. It worked. Deran was born, he's the heir apparent."

"And he's got the limping disease."

"Which he inherited from his father and his biological mother. A *Mainland* female," Peter countered. "The disease has a genetic trigger, and both parents have to carry it."

"The Krhyllans won't give a damn," Lauren said. "You've got a limping heir with an Island mother. You and Breslin created a monster."

His gaze bored into her.

"Deran's a monster?"

"No!" She shut her eyes against the dilemma then opened them. "But the situation is."

"Are you going to tell Hester?" he asked softly.

"Why didn't you tell Mark, at the beginning? He was station commander then."

"Because it couldn't be undone. And Breslin was right to give the Islanders a more level playing field. Lauren, there'll be war if this gets out. Cut my balls off if you want, but keep Deran safe."

"I'll take care of him," she said. "But I've got to tell Hester."

"Why?"

"Deran's nursemaid was murdered tonight. Whoever's after him hired the Blood Painters. Nobody's safe from them. They came into the palace, and they won't consider the station off-limits."

Peter banged a fist on the tabletop. "Shit."

"A mountain of it."

He got up, circled the desk and knelt beside her.

"Lauren, I made a judgment call, I'll live with the consequences. Hell, I've *been* living with the consequences. After Deran was born, I figured I'd have to stay on Krhyllan to see what happened. When we got involved, I was glad you wanted to stay here. If you'd left, I'd have been trapped." He offered a lopsided smile, the one he used when

BLOOD LINE

they made love. He squeezed her knee gently. "Lauren, I'll take my punishment when it's time, but don't tell Hester right now. Wait until Deran's treatment is finished."

"You usually want to hit things head-on," she said.

"If Hester knows everything, she'll put me in confinement. Murhyi can treat Deran, but he's my responsibility. Besides, you don't want to give Hester any excuse to kick the boy out."

"She can't do that." Lauren's tone was thin on conviction.

"Don't bet on it."

"I'll keep Terry safe, Peter."

"His name's Deran," Peter said quietly.

Lauren rubbed her face with both hands.

"I heard what I said. Christ!"

She got up, scared of her rioting feelings. Peter stood at the same time.

"You'll do what's right, Lauren. You always do." The lopsided smile again. "Even when you're a pain in the ass about it."

"Thanks for the compliment."

Taking refuge in physical movement, she hurried outside, breathing deeply of the cool dawn air, clearing the haze from her mind. Security, she thought. Security procedures needed to be in place. A stage-one alert, laser rifles available in each building, sonic or burner sidearms mandatory. Extra guards for the infirmary. She couldn't postpone talking to Hester. What would she tell her? That the station was in danger, and why, and how to protect it.

About what Breslin and Peter had done? Peter was right—Hester would find a reason to throw Deran out.

She wouldn't let that happen.



Hester was at her desk, face carved from icy disapproval.

"You've got Tesik's son in the infirmary," she said, eyes pinning Lauren like a butterfly to a wall. "Doctor Chen called me. Why do I keep learning things from everyone except you?"

"I needed information from Doctor Chen," Lauren said, only a little insubordinate. "There's a problem."

"What?"

She told Hester about Deran's illness, and the threat of the Blood Painters, and nothing more. A sin of omission was easily committed.

LYNN WARD

Hester said nothing for far too long. Some reaction, any reaction, would've been better. Lauren finished, fighting the impulse to look away from the commander's glare.

"You're sure the station's defenses are adequate?" Hester asked.

"In terms of firepower, yes. If we used all of our coherent light weaponry, we could wipe out the city. In terms of someone sneaking in? Maybe. We haven't got a force wall or hyperalloy plates. The infrared cameras and motion sensors do give us good protection."

"But not enough?"

"It's foolish to consider an open station totally secure. If the Blood Painters really want in, they'll make Krhyllans who've spent time here talk about the layout, they'll watch us from a distance, find a weak spot. It's better to be paranoid in this situation."

"All because of Deran."

Guessing where she was going, Lauren headed her off.

"Ma'am, if you're suggesting we refuse treatment..."

"We're supposed to be politically neutral, Chief."

"Denying the king's son medical help isn't being neutral." Lauren made herself speak mildly.

"I'm not denying him anything. But maybe he can be treated in the palace."

"He's safer here, Commander."

"The station is your first concern," Hester said. "Not what Tesik or Aranthé—or you—wants."

"I've got to set security in place," Lauren said after a moment. "I'll ask Pe—Doctor Chen about the course of treatment, and get a status report to you. We'll go yellow alert, if that's acceptable."

"It is." For a moment, Hester shed the reptilian impassivity. "I don't want to see the boy hurt. But we can't intrude in local politics. Just keep me informed."

"Ma'am."

On the run again, Lauren left and went to the Hub, glad again for a routine to follow. She briefed Meyer.

"What if a Krhyllan comes to the infirmary saying he's sick?" Meyer asked when she finished.

"Have Doctor Muhrti or a med tech examine him. Admit him if there's something wrong."

"Do you want the perimeter sealed? We've got trapwire."

Lauren shook her head. "Krhyllans walk through the edge sometimes going home. I don't want anyone getting sliced up."

BLOOD LINE

“Yes, ma’am. Is that all?”
She nodded. “I hope it’s enough.”



She returned to Peter’s office. He was at his desk, half-buried in a pile of hard copies.

“What did Hester say?”

Lauren sat down in the chair she’d used earlier.

“She wants Deran out of here. She also wants to know if he can be treated in the palace.”

“No, he can’t!” Peter slapped the printout file he was holding onto the table. “He’s got infusion packs plastered all over him feeding directly to his nervous system. You can’t do that kind of invasive treatment outside of a regular hospital, particularly without nanite bio units.”

“Then he stays here.”

Peter leaned forward. “Hester can override you.”

“If he’s kicked out, Tesik will be outraged. Politically, keeping him here is the lesser of two evils.”

“What did she say about Breslin, the switch he pulled?”

“I didn’t tell her.”

A slow smile spread across his face.

“Thanks.”

“Stop grinning.” She wanted to slap herself...Peter...both.

“You’re so honest it hurts. Why did you keep quiet?”

“So you can treat Deran, idiot.”

“Were you protecting me, too?”

Lauren took a long while before answering.

“Maybe.” She shook her head. “I wanted everything in place. Deran needs treatment, you’ll treat him without Hester getting in the way, and I’ll maintain security. Everyone will be safe.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Peter saluted her then grew serious. “But when it’s time to tell Hester, will you warn me?”

She got up. “Yes.”

She left his office, and the infirmary, hurrying. There was more to do. More guards, more surveillance, more weaponry—layers of safety, for the station and Deran.

III

Very late that night, she visited Deran. Walked past the guards, finger to her lips in the dim lighting.

The boy slept, his legs splayed and lifted on pillows. The infusion packs covered them; smaller ones were on his arms and chest. He breathed in unison with the humming biomonitors.

Lauren sat on the chair by his bed, hands clasped between her knees as if in prayer.

“You’re safe,” she said, intruding on the thick quiet. “I promise.”

He awakened, eyes widening when he saw her.

“It’s me, Lauren,” she said, patting his one bare arm.

“Laur-en,” he said, stretching the syllables.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I was dreaming,” he said, implying a nightmare. His long fingers snared hers, reaching to her wrist. “Peter said the medicine gives you strange dreams.”

He seemed older than nine. Physically, Krhyllan children developed at a rate similar to humans. Psychologically, they matured faster—in adolescence, Deran would function as an adult. Right now he was a frightened child.

“You’ve grown so much since I saw you last,” she said, trying to soothe him with small talk.

“Not since Terry died,” Deran said. “I miss him. I miss talking to you, too.”

His simple honesty hurt.

“How much do you know about your treatment, Deran?”

“Did my mother say when she’d come?”

“No.”

“When I stop limping, she’ll come for me.” Tears welled in his dark eyes, visible even in the meager light.

Lauren embraced him gently.

“Sssh, please don’t cry,” she crooned against his wet cheek. “Your mother will come for you.”

Deran sniffed then snorted.

BLOOD LINE

“Maybe she can’t. She’s the Voice of the Islands. She has to care for them, too.”

“Deran...”

The small-adult part of him surfaced.

“I’ll be good until she comes for me. But she has to take care of the islands, too, like she takes care of me.” He was well schooled in Krhyllan politics.

“You know she loves you.”

“Yes, Laur-en,” Deran said dutifully. He made a face, and she deciphered it.

“You need to go to the bathroom?”

“I didn’t want them to put that stick in my penis,” he said. “Can’t they bring me a pee thing?”

Lauren daubed a stray tear from his cheek.

“I’ll get you one.”

“W—will you help me?”

“Glad to.”

“Will you come back and see me?”

“If I can.”



Lauren prepared and anticipated to the point of being frustrated when nothing happened. A day passed, then two. No infiltrators, no screams in the night.

On the third morning, Terry made mischief in her dreams. Chased to wakefulness, she went to the dining hall in the first dawn light. She got a plate of bacon and eggs then sat and watched them grow cold.

“Are scrambled eggs good for fortunetelling?” Low and pleasant, Peter’s voice still made her jump.

“I wish,” she said.

He sat across from her, a crowded tray in front of him.

“Eggs, bacon, fruit, biscuits. You could’ve gotten a hernia carrying all that.”

He chuckled. “Everyone’s nervous as cats around here. When I’m nervous, I eat. You stare at your food until it petrifies.” He looked at his plate. “Everything’s genetically engineered to be low-fat, or else it’s soy. That should appeal to your puritan soul. Eat up.”

Almost laughing, Lauren dutifully picked up a forkful.

LYNN WARD

“Deran enjoyed your visit,” Peter said between sips of coffee. “Why don’t you drop by again?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Bullshit.”

“Peter, stay away from my sore spots.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment. Then he spoke.

“You are getting very sleepy...sleepy...”

“Oh, shut up.” She giggled, looking around her. “We don’t want to attract an audience.” Her comm beeped. She pulled it from her pocket. “Pell.”

“It’s Meyer, ma’am. We’ve got something at the back perimeter. You need to come.”

Her breakfast did a somersault in her stomach.

“Have you contacted Hester?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Don’t. I want the first look. Pell out.” She jammed the unit back into her pocket.

“Maybe the other shoe finally dropped,” Peter said.

She pushed her chair back.

“Is the infirmary ready for...whatever?”

“Full alert status.”

“Good.” She ran out into the strong, bright Krhyllan sunlight.

At the back of the station, a thick stand of trees reached to the perimeter’s edge. Meyer and two other security specs stood guard over the “something.” A gaggle of people were gathered around, staring.

Seeing what they stared at, Lauren wished she hadn’t eaten anything at all.

“It’s ugly, chief,” Meyer said.

The body of a Krhyllan woman, stiff with rigor mortis, lay at Meyer’s feet. She’d died quickly—her face was expressionless. Her throat was cut, but there was hardly any blood.

Lauren knelt, brushing flies from the ruined throat and trademark slash on the forehead. Both wounds had traces of blackened crusting.

“We didn’t see anything,” Meyer said. “But, Chief, there wasn’t a moment we...”

She looked up. “Yes, there was. Only a few seconds, maybe, but enough. They waited in the trees, beyond the cameras and sensors. They dumped her between the times there’s a guard here.”

“The Blood Painters?”

“Yes. They waited until no one would see.”

BLOOD LINE

"It'd take superhuman patience to do that," Meyer said.

"Assassin's patience," Lauren amended. An image of Deran flashed through her mind, bed-bound, helpless.

"Do you want the body autopsied?"

"No. The Blood Painters killed her and left her to scare us witless. They succeeded. End of report."

Shifting from her left knee to her right, she lifted the dead woman's hands. Calluses and scars covered the long fingers. Fisherman's skin. She'd been an Islander.

Lauren removed a multicolored woven bracelet from one wrist and gave it to Meyer.

"This looks like a family or clan weave pattern. Take it to the dockside market and find them. Meantime, put the body in cold storage."

"The Mainlanders will think we're helping the island people," Meyer said.

"Maybe, but Krhyllans on both sides observe burial rituals. I don't think the Islanders would like it if we left her to rot. Now, get a body bag."

"Yes, ma'am." He left, taking one spec with him.

Lauren tugged at the woman's torn clothing, trying to cover her exposed genitals.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But we'll find your family. I promise."

"When were you going to tell me about this, Pell?"

Madeleine Hester's voice cut into Lauren's reverie. The commander stood behind her, all prim and rigid authority. Lauren stood and faced her. Strange and unwelcome, to see her out of her office.

"As soon as the body was put in storage," she said, matching Hester's icy politeness. "I got here less than ten minutes ago myself."

"I'm aware of the time involved. I was on my way to the dining hall when I heard the commotion. Why wasn't I notified?"

"I was coming to tell you."

"As an afterthought? I want to see you in my office."

"Yes, ma'am."

Hester had her dead to rights this time.

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Blood Line tightens slowly, precisely, like a well-built watch, and then springs to a wonderful finish. — Katharine Eliska Kimbriel, author of *Night Calls* and *Fires of Nuala*

I was not surprised at the high quality of *Blood Line*. Original, with an alien context that seemed real...the story also has wonderful humanity and emotional impact. In a time when too much SF has become terribly derivative, it is a joy to find a book that satisfies my old need for the fascinating and unfamiliar. — Ardath Mayhar, SFWA Author Emeritus

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