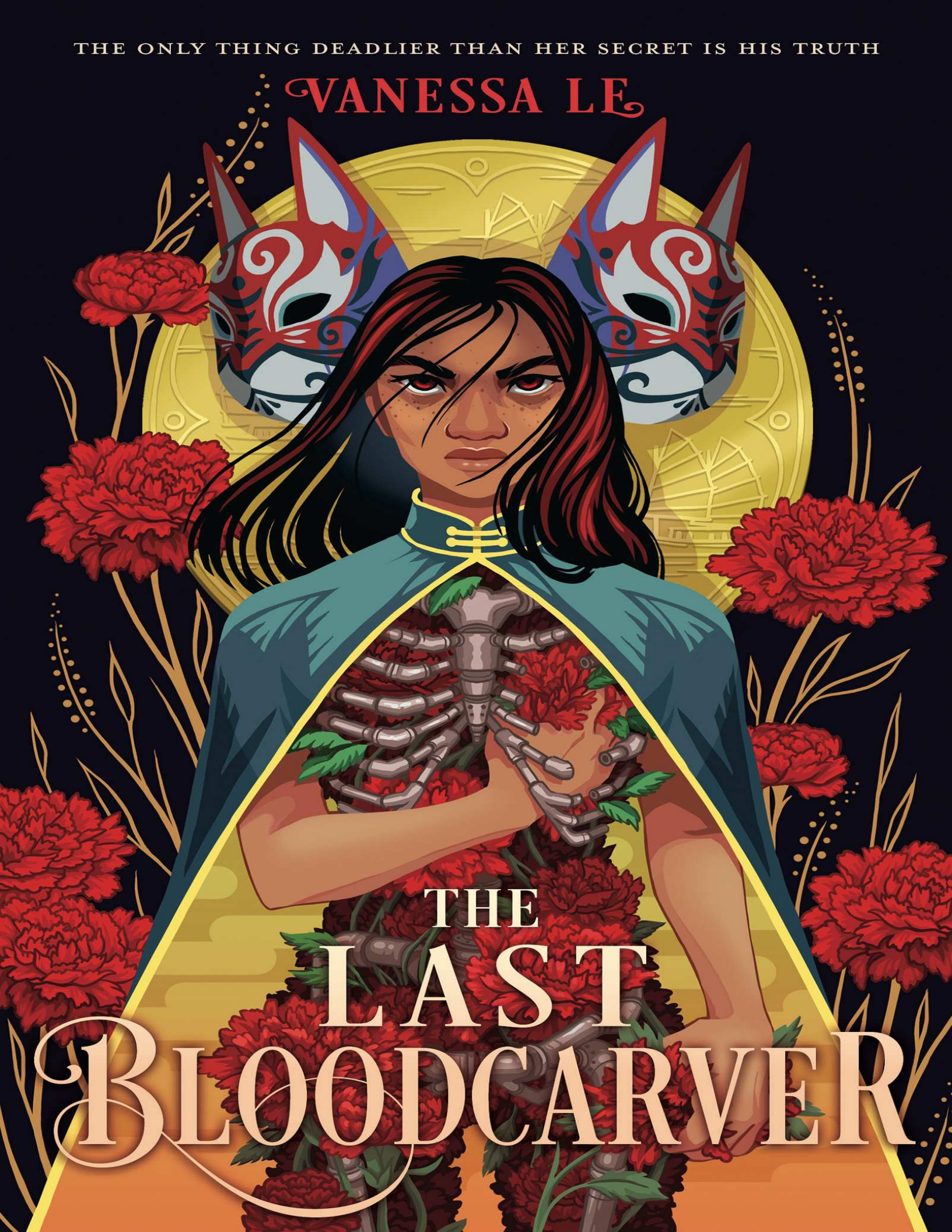


THE ONLY THING DEADLIER THAN HER SECRET IS HIS TRUTH

VANESSA LE



THE
LAST
BLOODCARVER

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VANESSA LE



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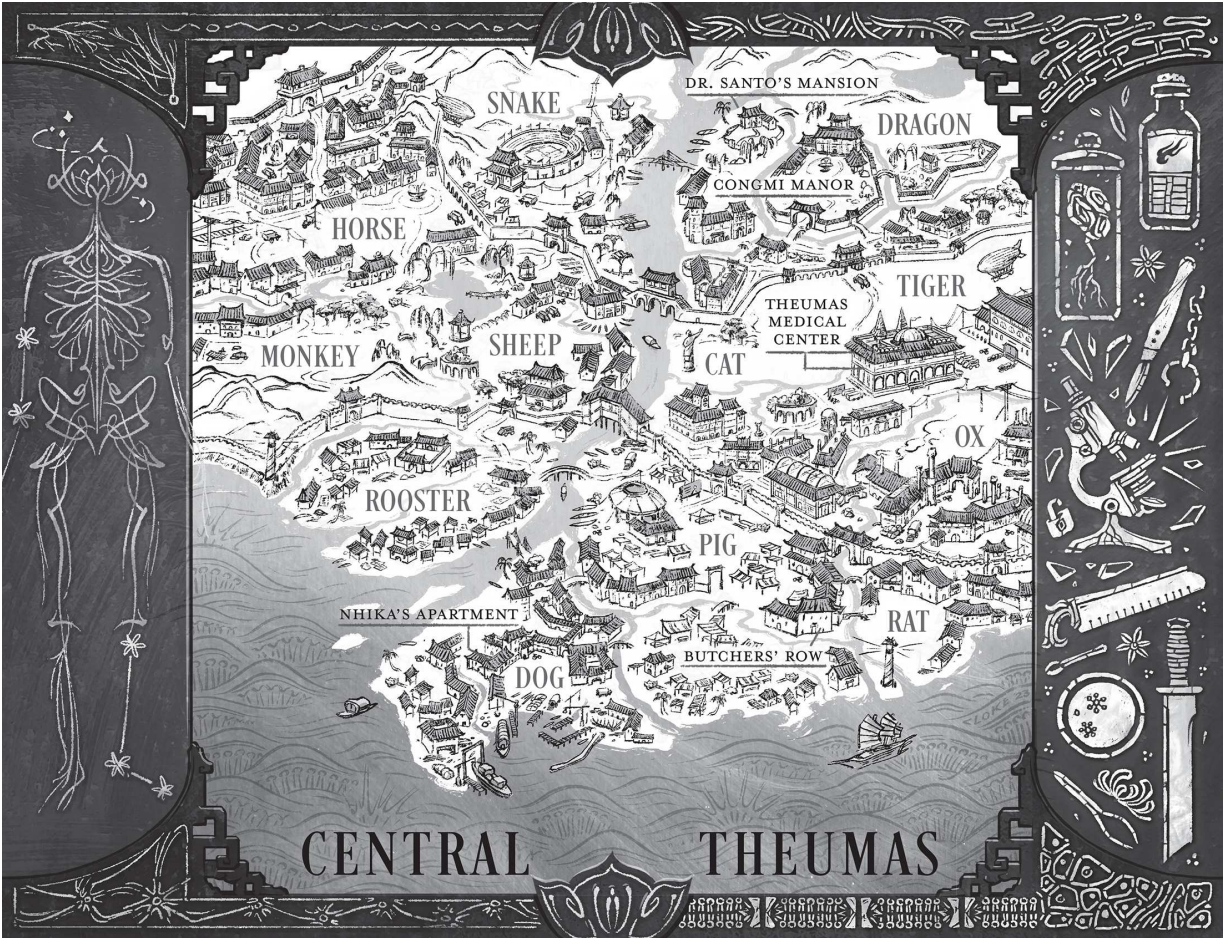
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*For my mother, my father, and my bà ngoại.
May I make you proud.*



ONE

Someone like Nhika, with her fidgety smile and frayed satchel of snake oils, didn't belong in these streets.

In the Dog Borough near the harbor, she never would've stood out in this attire, with her cropped sleeves and bare hands. There, residents traded silk for cotton and wool, and the cogwork of their automatons crackled with rust and crusted sea salt. Here in the Horse Borough, women wrapped themselves in tight silk dresses and men in boxy robes, concealing every inch of skin with long gloves and high collars. It was the fashion, stemming from the fear of people like her.

The myth of them, anyway.

People watched as she slipped by, this little soot stain in a city of silvers and blues. Eyes didn't linger; they gave her as much space as she wanted. Paper-vendor automatons raised newspapers on segmented arms as she passed, so clean that her warped reflection greeted her in bronze. Today's headline was about the death of Congmi Industries' founder, all the buzz in Theumas despite being week-old news. This tabloid had made a grasp at relevance by adding a bite of scandal to the headline: ACCIDENT OR ASSASSINATION?

Nhika checked the slip of paper in her hand again, nervous about getting lost. In a planned city-state like Theumas, she shouldn't have worried. Every road had been numbered, the cross streets alphabetized, but she would look a sorry scrap of rags and tinctures if she showed up at the wrong door.

In the Horse Borough, the city was flatter, spread out. Not so layered—no boxlike homes stacked atop one another. Every building demanded its own space, tall and painted, the awnings curved in the style of pagodas. It wasn't hard to find her client's home: one of many town houses, so even and identical—differentiated only by the wrought iron number nailed above the door. They were a simple kind of elegance, with a tiled roof and multiple

stories and a balcony at the very top. With a breath, she approached the door and knocked.

There was no immediate response. Nhika looked both ways up and down the street, feeling exposed on the doorstep. So, she waited as folks around here did, crossing her arms and tapping her foot and trying to look like, maybe, with a shower and a haircut and a complete change of clothes, she might've belonged.

At last the door opened, just a crack, caught on chain locks. Through it, half a man peered at her, eye narrowed. He knew who she was from a glance and ushered her in hastily, undoubtedly wanting her off his doorstep just as much as she did.

"We have a back entrance," he muttered. His voice dripped with disdain. Nhika had a great many retorts to use against him, but a sharp tongue had never made her any chem. No, she had other talents for that.

"My apologies," she said, brushing past him. If he noticed her sarcasm, he didn't acknowledge it. They didn't exchange names. Their interaction would not require them.

His home was smaller on the inside than it looked, the furniture made of dark, lacquered wood and inlaid with nacre. She caught sight of a wall-mounted rotary dial, too. Few were rich enough to afford their own home telephones. As she observed the twin place settings, the double armchairs, the two pairs of shoes by the door, she understood why the house was so small despite the man's obvious wealth. She understood why he was desperate enough to hire someone like her.

It was a home meant only for two, and one must've been on their deathbed.

"Where is the patient?" she asked, holding her bag of tinctures close as though she were a home doctor.

"Upstairs," the man said, squeezing the thin scraggle of hair on his chin. "Follow me."

Nhika trailed the man to the stairs, glass clinking in her bag. "Now, I'll have you know, I don't believe in this homeopathic nonsense," he insisted as they climbed, each hardwood step creaking underfoot. "Whatever you use, your salves and whatnot ... I want to know the *scientific* premise."

She'd heard this disclaimer in some variation from all her clients. Nhika couldn't blame them—coming from a technocratic city like Theumas, of

course he had to renounce homeopathy for that shiny, modern medicine. But, with a contemptuous smile, she understood that somewhere, deep inside, he did believe. He wouldn't have sought her out otherwise.

Or perhaps the physicians had already written off this patient as a lost cause, and he was desperate enough to hope that ginger and ginseng could do a damn thing against death.

But of course they couldn't.

That was Nhika's secret—well, one of many. She didn't believe in this homeopathic nonsense, either.

They came to a bedroom on the uppermost level, its curtains flung open to look out onto the balcony. A woman slept alone on the wide bed, wrapped beneath the heavy comforter. She looked almost like an automaton in the making, with a skeletal frame and catheters hanging out of her. A large boxlike machine sat at the opposite side of her bed, slowly eating its command roll as its cogs worked, dripping fluids and medicine through her lines. The heavy breathing of its bellows filled the room.

Nhika approached the bed and the man sucked in a breath through his teeth, as though about to change his mind and usher her out the door. Perhaps he just now noticed her Yarongese features: her golden-brown skin, dark irises, and hair the color of coffee rather than ink. Growing up in Theumas had wrung some of the island influence out of her, but that didn't deter clients from their paranoia. Nhika glanced back at him, awaiting a verdict, and he held open a palm to let her approach.

She took a spot at the bedside to inspect the woman. The patient held a placid expression, her eyes closed, and Nhika might've thought she was napping if not for the mottled look of her skin. Even for a Theuman, she was unusually pale.

This position was eerily familiar—a memory pulled from years ago, her at the bedside while her mother lay beneath a thin sheet. Only, there weren't so many catheters and machines, just Nhika's hand in hers, and her mother had never looked so sallow, not even in death.

She blinked out of her thoughts. "What's happened here?"

"It began as chest pain, and one day she collapsed. Since then, she hasn't been the same—weak, in pain. She's asleep now from all her medicine, but the doctors say it's only to make her comfortable. Not cure her. They say

there's no more hope, but..." His gaze swept over the woman, his expression forlorn. "I don't believe that. We had plans. It's not over."

Nhika inched closer to the woman. "And what do the doctors think it is?"

"A disease of the blood, probably from her mother's side. But her mother was never like this." The man straightened his robe, clearing his throat with the air of a scholar. "If I had to guess, I would say it's those invisible micromes, some form of onslaught on her heart. We'd just gotten back from a trip out of the city. Perhaps she contracted something there."

He said this haughtily, and Nhika realized he didn't know a true lick of microme theory. He was just repeating words he'd seen in the papers, or perhaps from the physicians. She could say whatever she wanted, and he'd probably believe her.

Nhika rolled her neck. This would be easy.

"I'll be doing my own exam now," she said.

"No gloves?" he asked, the curl of his lip betraying his suspicion. He wouldn't have asked that question if she were Theuman, but a touch from a Yarongese like her had become a dangerous thing among the superstitious.

"I can't feel a pulse through leather and, as you might've noticed, I'm hardly in a position to afford silk," she said. Nhika bit back the bitterness; he was not the first to question her bare hands.

With a hesitant nod, he permitted her to work, and she feigned a brief physical exam. Then she extended a hand toward the woman's neck—slowly, to show she meant no harm. With two fingers in the cradle of the jawline, it looked like she was taking a pulse. And she was, but it was so much more than that.

With the interface of skin against skin at her fingertips, the limitlessness of her awareness exploded forth, racing first across the woman's vascular system—every vein and venule, branching and collapsing in waterways across the woman's body—and then her nervous system, snapping from synapse to synapse as electrical impulses did. Nhika layered herself into the woman's skeleton, wove herself into the vibrant workings of bone and marrow, and then the muscular system, her consciousness picking through corded tissue and wrapped sinew.

Nhika felt the ghost of the woman's pain mirrored in her own chest, bursting against the rib cage. The pain expanded with her empathy and she

quelled them both, but not before she learned the source of the injury. There was a mass of damaged tissue staining the woman's heart, starved of blood.

Nhika gleaned all this in a matter of seconds, less than it required to take a pulse. When she drew her hand away, she knew every ailment this woman had, could see the history of this woman's body etched in the unfurled tapestry of her anatomy.

But she didn't reveal any of that, because then even an idiot such as her client could put two and two together. Even an idiot could realize what Nhika truly was, something far worse than a sham healer.

Instead, she opened her pouch of tinctures—all just a couple drops of aromatic oil in water. Placebos.

"For the pain, I suggest some licorice extract, either taken in tea or directly as drops. As for the micromes, I would suggest—" *What did she have in excess at the moment?* "—eucalyptus, applied topically on the chest for a week."

He nodded, and then seemed to remember he was a more discerning gentleman. "What does it all do?"

"The licorice has a certain structure of carbon rings that synapse with pain receptors to alleviate them," she said, waving a hand as if the details bored her. Now she was talking out of her ass, too, drawing from words she'd seen in stolen textbooks. "And the eucalyptus, well ... It has natural anti-micromial properties. With my titer, it's stronger than fermicillin."

"Stronger than fermicillin?" he repeated, and suspicion snuck into his voice. Had she pushed his ignorance too far?

"Fermicillin is made from mold, you see, so there's lots of processing to make sure it's safe for human consumption. It's diluted, so to speak. But eucalyptus oil is all-natural, so no need to dilute its anti-micromial properties." She gave him an innocuous smile, ready with the lie. "It's a secret the drug manufacturers would kill me for divulging."

That seemed to satisfy the man, and he nodded again, as though she had made any sense at all. "How much do I owe you?"

She pinched her chin, trying to discern how much she could swindle from him. While he seemed desperate, an exorbitant price might only deepen his doubt. So, maybe something middling, just to get her to her next rent. "I want to see your wife make a full recovery, so I'm willing to lower the price for such a critical case." Nhika looked back over the woman, corpselike in

her bed. She could heal her, truly, if she wanted. For a moment, she had almost considered it. But her stomach flipped with hunger, and she remembered that she couldn't spare the energy.

"Fifty chem for the eucalyptus regimen, and I'll lower it to twenty for the licorice," she decided. Nhika watched his expression, half expecting him to accuse her of conning him for chem. But his eyes held only resolution as he traipsed to the bedside, taking the woman's hands into his.

"Honya, love, I've found something that might help. It's not over."

His frostiness had left him, replaced only by tenderness, lips in a half smile and eyes soft. Nhika almost expected his love alone to melt the paleness from the woman's lips, to return the rosiness to her skin. She looked away, biting the inside of her cheek. When her eyes landed on the nightstand table, she found the woman's doctor's note, a misdiagnosis of hematic disease alongside a question: *Would you like to donate the body of your loved one toward the Santo Research Initiative?* The man had marked *No*.

As she watched the man and his wife, sympathy wheedled its way into her chest, but she dug her nails into her palms to silence it. *Nhika, no. Don't fall for that.*

But the man clearly had no one else.

Neither do you, and you haven't the energy for this.

He'd pay her enough for a big dinner.

And if you get caught?

She'd healed blocked vessels elsewhere in the body before. She knew she *could* do it.

You're going to heal her, aren't you? Curse your wretched little heart.

Nhika placed a hand on the bedside, calling the man's attention. "If you would, there is just one final physical examination I'd like to conduct, just to make sure I'm not missing anything."

He blinked, the words slow to catch. When they did, he stammered, "Of course."

"For the patient's modesty, may I have the room?"

"I'm her husband," he tutted.

"Well, then, to preserve the secrets of my trade." She flashed him a tight-lipped smile. He seemed to weigh it, but only for a moment, before relenting.

She walked him out of the room, closed the door behind him, and drew the curtains over the windows. Once concealed from snooping eyes, she settled at the bedside, turning her gaze to the woman. “I pity you, poor thing. Having to be wed to a fool who loves you.”

Then, eyes closed, she took the woman’s hand.

They connected, and she was once again privy to all the layers of her anatomy. Wading through the nausea of the woman’s medications, Nhika teased her influence toward the heart, where she tasted the acridness of dying tissue. There, she found the offending ailment: a narrowed vessel, obstructed by a clot.

This, she could work with. When she was young, her grandmother had taught her on fat deposits and scabs. Then, her father had formed a blockage like this deep in his leg. Now, Nhika stretched her control first to the vasculature, where she wrapped her influence around the clot. All she had to do was force the clot to degrade—after her grandmother’s tutelage, it was second nature. However, she didn’t burn the woman’s energy stores; her patient would need those to recuperate. Instead, Nhika burned her own, feeling the core of her abdomen heat. The fire carved a path up her chest and through her arm, warming the place where skin touched skin. She felt a surge of power as her energy, raw and healthy, flooded into the patient’s bloodstream.

It took a moment to reach the site of the heart, but as it did, her influence strengthened, a fist tightened around the clot. Nhika leveraged that influence, willing the clot to shrink: cells bursting, fats shriveling, proteins dissolving. It followed her command as surely as a trained muscle, the blockage withering to rot as her own energy burned.

Next, she flitted to the damaged tissue of the heart, finding it warped compared to the rest of the anatomy. It stood out like a wrong note in a smooth melody, discordant every time her influence passed by. She didn’t salvage what had already died, but the muscle clung to its livelihood, and she bolstered it: scaffolding the structure of the heart chamber, reinvigorating it with electricity.

At last, Nhika pulled away, not daring to expend any more of her own energy. But she’d done enough for the woman to recover. She drew a deep breath to regain her grounding in the world around her, her senses slow to return as they trickled through a wall of nausea. The silk sheets came first,

crisp underneath her, and then the firmness of her feet against the floor. Her chest deflated with fatigue and she felt the knot of hunger in her stomach expand, reaching her skull as a headache.

She smoothed the hair out of her face, her palm coming away with a sheen of sweat from the effort. “Your husband owes me a great deal,” she huffed, mostly to herself. Through her fatigue, Nhika smiled; it had been a while since she’d healed another. This was what her ability had been meant to do, after all. It was not, however, meant to be used in secret, hidden away behind placebo oils and false examinations.

She stood shakily, drawing out tinctures of licorice and eucalyptus and leaving them at the bedside table. As she turned to leave, the woman gave her first indication of life, a noise in the back of her throat as she flinched. Nhika felt a bite of jealousy—that this illness had been so simple to heal, where her mother’s had not.

She went for the door, but when she turned the handle the man was already there, opening it from the other side. They blinked dumbly at each other for a moment, and Nhika narrowed her eyes, wondering how much he’d witnessed. He only stepped past her and into the room.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Seems like you were correct about the micromes. The tinctures I left on the table should work. I’ll leave a card with instructions for their use.”

“And how much do I owe?”

“Seventy chem,” she said. As she watched him draw out his wallet, her eyes narrowed.

Gloves. He wore gloves. Did he have those on before? No—she’d seen him hold his wife’s hand without them. And now that she scanned him over a second time, she noticed how his collar had been tightened around his neck and how he’d put shoes on, even though they were indoors.

He handed her the chem and she snatched it a little too quickly. Nhika backed toward the door, but he held out a gloved hand to pause her.

“Won’t you teach me how to use the tonics?” he asked. He was stalling. Had he called the constabulary? Did he suspect what she was?

No, of course not. For people like him, her kind didn’t exist anymore. He would be calling the constabulary on a myth. But then again, he had been superstitious enough to hire a yarb doctor.

“You’ll find it intuitive,” she said, inching toward the door. He stepped forward. Would he grab her?

When she reached for the handle, he drew a kitchen knife from the folds of his robe. His arms shook, his grip poor. Nhika scowled, her fingers flexed in anticipation beneath her sleeve.

“What’s this?” she asked, forcing disinterest. Underneath it, she hid the quiver of her hand, knowing she might have to use her gift in a way her grandmother had never approved of.

“What did you do?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he demanded, the trembling of his jaw betraying his fear. Ah yes, fear—the form his gratitude took after she’d saved his wife from a sure death. Nhika remembered now why she’d stopped bothering with the others, why she’d left them with only placebos and tea oil. Wretched little heart, indeed.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” she seethed, drawing backward. “Do you mean Yarongese? Yes, my family is from the island. A sham? Certainly not, you’ll find my methods tried and true. Before you hurt yourself, sir, I’d advise you to put down the knife.” That last part was more for her sake; she didn’t want to sour her act of healing with an act of violence, though she wouldn’t hesitate to defend herself, if it came to that.

“No,” he said, jabbing the knife through the air. “I know what you are. *Bloodcarver*.”

“Bloodcarver?” She scowled at the word. “There’s no such thing.” Nhika was giving him a final out. A smarter man would’ve known that bloodcarvers didn’t exist anymore, that they were a breed that fell with the island. But the man’s ignorance was wide enough to come full circle and he was somehow, miraculously, correct.

“I saw it, what you did to her,” he insisted, jerking the knife.

Well then, no point in keeping up the charade now. She eyed the knife testily, but his stance and grip were noncommittal. He’d probably never wielded a weapon in his life.

“I’ve been called many things,” she said, stepping forward. He stumbled backward. “Witch. Liver eater. Necromancer.”

His knife arm shook and he held the small hilt with both hands, as if her look alone could fling it from his grasp.

She glared at him, anger rising as a scowl. “But that might be the most accurate one. *Bloodcarver*.” Now, she relished in the fear, because if he could not show his thanks, what else could he offer her but fear?

Nhika fainted forward, scaring him with a shout, and he fell backward. Taking the opportunity, she threw herself at him, hand clawing for his neck.

When they touched, she inlaid herself within his anatomy, his body secondary to her own. For a moment, she considered killing him instantly, burning all his fuel stores or stopping the impulse of his heart—maybe something poetic, sadistic, a blockage in the vessel just like the one she’d taken from his wife.

“What did you do to her?” he asked, voice hollow, and she hesitated. In his last moments, her hand around his neck, he was still thinking about *her*. His knife slacked in his hand, but not from her control—it must have been acceptance, then, that she would kill him. Yet the deep sadness in his eyes was not for himself. She could not source something as ephemeral as love with her gift, but now it poured from him like blood from an open wound, torrential and infectious. For a moment, she almost wondered what that must feel like, a love that weathered the threat of death.

Through the redness of her rage, she saw his longing, and it stopped her from carving death into him. With a visceral growl, she ripped the knife from his hand, drawing blood as the blade caught her palm.

“I healed her,” she spat. “You *idiot*.”

A muffled pounding on the door downstairs drew her attention, and she pushed herself off the man. Another second and she heard the front door slam open, followed by the sounds of footsteps and shoved furniture.

Nhika raced to the windows. With a grunt, she yanked down the curtains, pulling the rod from the ceiling. It crashed into the medical machine, denting the box’s iron shell, but the woman wouldn’t need that anymore. She threw a glance over her shoulder, finding the man trembling at the door, fingers massaging his neck. He didn’t come for her.

Nhika kicked the door open and dragged the curtains to the balcony. They were heavier than she’d expected, heavier still from the fatigue that tugged at her muscles, but she hefted the weight over her shoulder as it trailed broken glass. With a heave, she tossed the bulk of the curtains over the railing, then tied the end to the baluster. Across the street, curtains parted

behind windows, and she caught glimpses of the curious eyes that watched her behind locked shutters.

Nhika positioned herself onto the curtain just as the constabulary burst through the door.

Only, it wasn't the constabulary. No blue uniform, no silver trim. No service cap, no badges. Just bolas, wooden catchpoles, and gold-toothed smiles.

Her client had called in the Butchers.

TWO

Nhika scaled down the town house's facade, easing the silk curtain through her fingers. Her cut palm smeared blood on the fabric, red leaching into gold. This shouldn't have been so difficult, but her muscles shook with fatigue from healing that woman. *Never again.* But that's what she'd said the last time.

She hit the ground, feeling the rough landing in the rattle of her ankles. The Butchers didn't follow her from the balcony, but from inside the house she heard the crash of furniture and the clomp of boots on stairs; they'd be out soon. She turned down the street and ran.

The Butchers burst from the door like rats from a flooded gutter, finding her quickly against the pale limestone motif of the city. She flew into an alley, pushing past trash-collecting automatons and anyone who blocked her path. Aristocrats huffed with indignation as she shoved through them, but their complaints fell to shock when they saw the Butchers tearing after her.

She'd heard ghost stories about the Butchers, black-market bogeymen who dealt in rare goods—and what was rarer than a bloodcarver? For aristocrats, Butchers were a way to get children to eat their vegetables. For the Yarongese who the Butchers labeled and sold as bloodcarvers, the name “Butcher” was never more apt.

Her cut palm throbbed as she sprinted through the alleyways. She quelled those pain receptors. She'd heal the cut later when she had the time and energy to expend. But now, a heavy muddiness dragged at her spent muscles as she clambered through narrow streets and hurdled into private lawns. They bulled after her, uncaring of the mess they made of gardens and service automatons.

Her feet took her south, toward the parts of the city where she'd blend in: the tight roads of the Dog Borough or the bustling fora of the Pig. Throwing glances over her shoulder, she let her instinct guide her through familiar passageways and sharp turns.