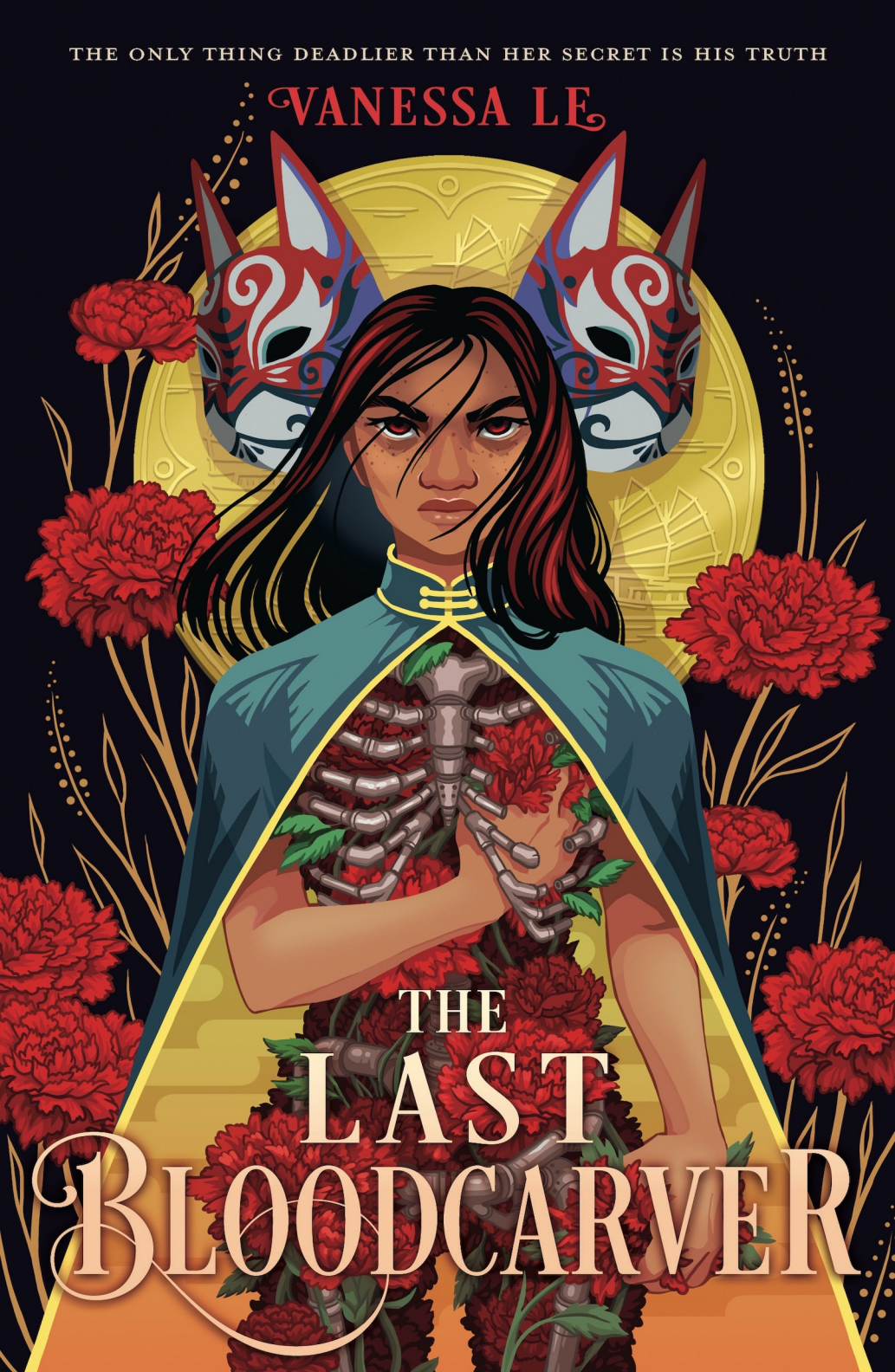
THE ONLY THING DEADLIER THAN HER SECRET IS HIS TRUTH

VANESSA LE



THE LAST BLOODCARVER

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VANESSA LEE

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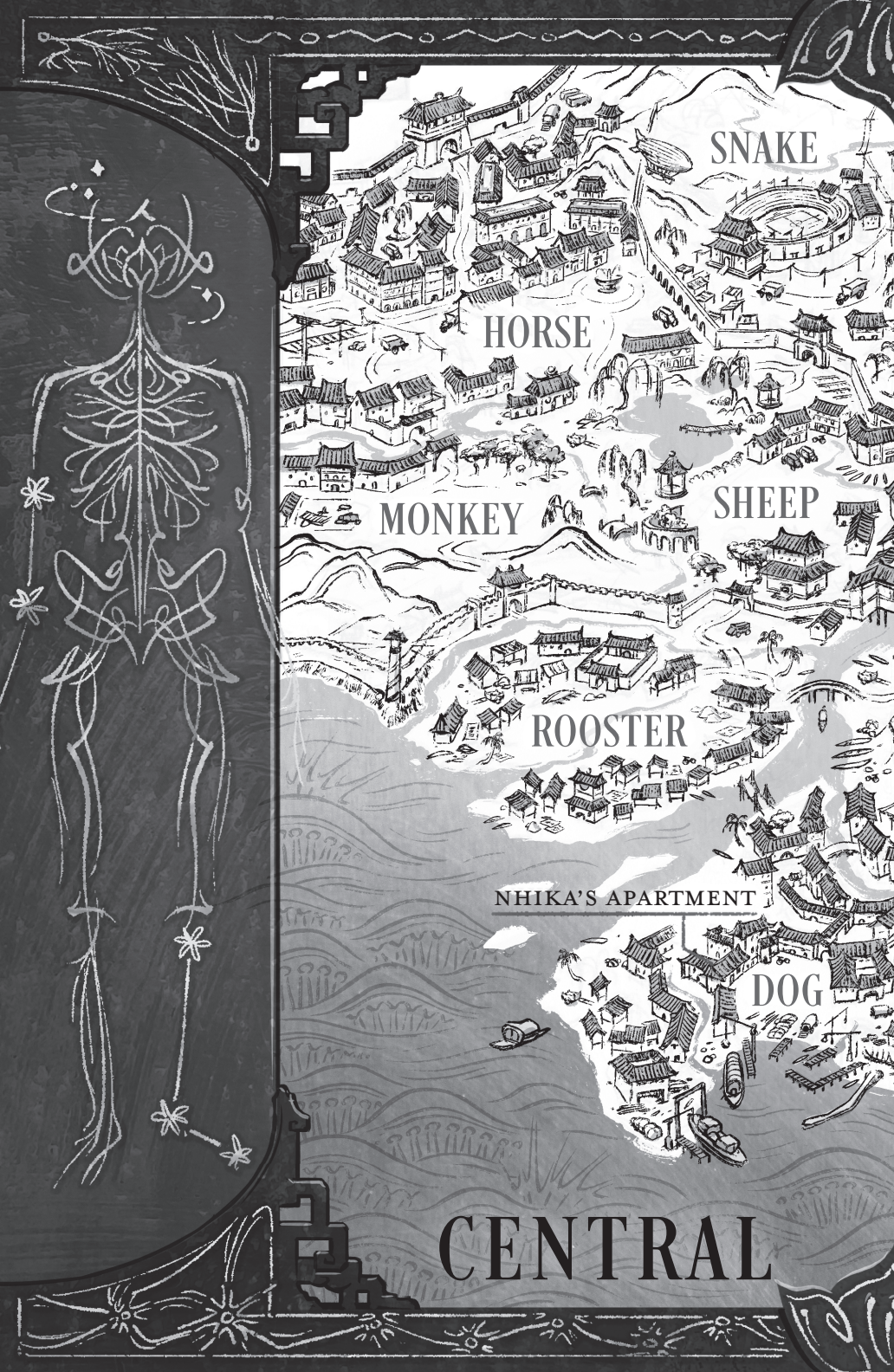
For my mother,

my father,

and my bà ngoại.

May I make you proud.


SNAKE
HORSE
MONKEY
SHEEP
ROOSTER
NHIKA'S APARTMENT
DOG
CENTRAL

DR. SANTO'S MANSION
DRAGON
CONGMI MANOR
TIGER
THEUMAS MEDICAL CENTER
CAT
OX
PIG
RAT
BUTCHERS' ROW
THEUMAS

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 nightside 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 feinted 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.

Nhika followed the slope of the hill, dropping down onto tiled roofs where the neighborhood terraced itself on the incline. Soon, she'd left the suburbs of her client's house for the thicket of downtown, a girl adrift in a sea of peaked roofs and busy roads. Theumas was a landscape of dark blue facades, silk-black rooftops, and silver accents. Against it all, she and her brown garb looked painfully misplaced.

The Butchers were close behind, albeit clumsy on the roofs. Nhika caught sight of a trolley at the bottom of the street and hope flared in her chest. If she could make it, the Butchers wouldn't be able to drag her off without calling the attention of law enforcement. She slid off the rooftops and dropped down to the streets below. The distant clatter above her reminded her the Butchers were still in fervent pursuit, but all she had to do was reach the trolley and—

As she rounded the corner, Nhika collided into someone in a

flurry of paper. She stumbled to regain her balance, annoyance rising in her chest as she sized up the young man she'd crashed into. He was clearly a boy who belonged in this part of the city, well-fitted vest suit peeking out underneath the folds of his robe, shoes shined to a mirror finish, and black hair combed to frame a handsome face.

"Watch it!" he chided, his indignant expression mirroring her own as he collected his scattered papers and file folders. But his irritation melted away to surprise as he swept his eyes over her—her torn shirt, baggy pants, bare hands. Golden-brown skin, scattered freckles, dark eyes. He was her opposite in many ways, features sharp where hers were soft.

From down the alley, litter clattered with the Butchers' distant approach. The young man must've noticed it, too, because he grabbed her wrist to help her up. Only then did she realize that his hands were bare, and that he'd touched her without hesitation, skin on skin. She met his eyes, waiting for him to realize she was Yarongese, but the disgust never came.

"Are you all right?" he asked instead, drawing her onto the safety of the sidewalk.

"I . . ." Few had ever asked her that question in earnest, so she struggled to find her answer. Before she could, he threw a glance down the alleyway just as the Butchers rounded the corner.

His eyes flared with concern. "Are those—"

Nhika didn't let him finish his question before she fled.

When she turned at the bottom of the street, she found the trolley already pulling away, and panic thrummed in her throat as she heard the thunder of Butchers behind her. Cursing the

Mother, she dipped into the first alleyway she saw, stealing one last glance at the young man she'd crashed into. As the Butchers emerged onto the street, he spilled those papers again, delaying them as they attempted to round him.

"My bad," he said, kneeling to regather them. The Butchers scowled as they swerved around him, one of them tripping over an extended leg.

And then they spotted her. As they trampled across the young man's papers, Nhika dipped away into the alley.

She barreled down the narrowing street, following it as it angled, before staggering to a halt when the alley ended at an unyielding brick wall. Heart pounding, Nhika turned, only to see the Butchers blocking the other end.

Frantically, she searched for an exit, finding one in a low fire-escape ladder. With a running start, Nhika scaled the wall, fingers catching the bottommost rung and feet scrabbling against brick as she pulled herself up. She'd made it a few rungs up before the Butchers reached her, the tallest of the crew craning up to snag her shoe.

With a twist of her ankle, she kicked him off, losing her slipper in the process. Her bare foot slipped against the cold metal rungs, slick with blood from her still-bleeding palm, but she hauled herself higher and higher until—

A loop of wire caught her ankle and she felt a tug against her leg. She slipped as another catchpole snagged her other foot. Her fingers burned with the tightness of their grip as the Butchers yanked, until at last she lost her hold on the rungs, nails clawing metal, palm smearing blood.

Alarm spiked in her chest as she fell. Somewhere along her descent, her body slammed against the edge of a railing, but she couldn't reorient herself before she tumbled down onto the pavement. Something cracked in her ribs and she turned off the pain receptors as soon as the burning came.

Her first thought was not of any broken bones, but of something far more valuable: Her hand went to her sternum, feeling for the ring she wore around her neck on a string. For a moment she panicked, thinking it lost or broken, until she felt the coolness of it against her skin. Only then did she remember escape. Tasting blood, Nhika pulled herself forward. Her body was breaking down, but she'd heal it later. *With what energy?* That was also a problem for later.

With blood-caked fingernails, she yanked at the cords wrapping her ankles. Nhika silenced the pain receptors as they twinged to life, opened her airway as it filled with fluid, set the broken bones of her ribs—until she was doing too much at once, her attention so spread across her body and the catchpoles and the rooftops that it thinned to smoke.

The Butchers leaned over her, figures blotting out the sky. She crawled away with the pitifulness of an ant plucked clean of its legs, but one grabbed her by the hair to tilt her head back. She heard the grind of broken bones that she didn't feel—another problem for later. Nhika flailed against them, trying to catch skin but finding only thick gloves and long sleeves.

"Is it a real one?" one of them asked, and the man who'd grabbed her shook her hard.

"Course not, but she sure looks the part, huh? Probably full

Yarongese," another said. He tapped her with his boot. Though they didn't believe she was a bloodcarver, their superstition was evident in their layered garb. Their only mistake was in not concealing their faces.

Nhika darted out a hand, grabbing a Butcher by the face. They touched for only a moment before he reeled away, but it was enough. He staggered backward, coughing and gagging, with a bloodied nose and bloodshot eyes. He clutched his face and stared at her, eyes bulging.

She'd burst every blood vessel in the man's body she'd managed to grab.

"Shit, she's real!" he choked as a bruise bloomed in the shape of her handprint. Nhika took the opportunity to squirm away, but the plan was ill-conceived—another Butcher grabbed her with ease, pinning her arms behind her back with gloved hands.

"And to think, I almost sat out on this call," said the man who'd grabbed her. He pulled out a length of cloth to bind her hands, winding until it burned.

The pain receptors were turning back on, one by one. She'd expended too much energy. Nhika smelled blood with each breath as every ounce of pain returned, slowly at first and then all at once, until her vision pulsed. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and she felt her consciousness ebb, though she clung to it with gritted teeth. The Butchers' dialogue muffled to a drone as she turned her attention inward, dousing fires across her anatomy. Already, she felt herself succumbing to the pain.

The edges of her vision darkened, breaths growing short. Through the foggy ringing in her ears she managed to discern

the Butcher's words: "Would you look at that? A real, live bloodcarver. How many of these do you reckon are even left?"

Then the tenuous cord of her consciousness snapped.

Nhika blinked out of her heartsoothing stupor, slow to recall her surroundings: a warmly lit room, the windows flung open to let in fresh air, and her mother's bed beside her. It had been her mother to pull away, disconnecting Nhika's heartsoothing with the loss of their touch, but Nhika shook her head.

"I can do it," she said, grabbing her mother's hand again. Her heartsoothing enmeshed itself within thin skin, sank into frail muscle. It felt the frayed spindle of nerves, atrophied on her mother's right side. When her influence climbed the spinal cord, it fought against a buzzing, itching feeling—something viral, like claws against Nhika's own skin. Then, in her mother's skull, there was such a mess of her dura and brain tissue, but Nhika had no idea where to begin. Was it the swelling? Perhaps—she could take some pressure off the nerves, give back the function of her mother's limbs. Or perhaps it was all this dead tissue, but Nhika had no idea how to begin repairing it, not when her grandmother had passed the year before, not when she was barely a heartsooth, not when—

Again, her mother pulled her arm away. "Nhika, dear," she said, the words coming haggardly. She swallowed, but it looked painful.

"I can heal *you," Nhika insisted, blinking back tears—they weren't helpful. She was only twelve, but she knew she had to be strong; she was the only one who could be. The two of them were all that was left of the family.*

Her mother blinked, tilted her head. That was all the motion she was capable of. Even now, muscles thin and face gaunt, she was beautiful: the

sun-loved skin, each freckle a kiss, and eyes a beautiful shade of black. Her cracked lips managed a smile. "You tried. It's okay."

Tears burned; Nhika bit them back. "I've been reading grandma's books—it must be a matter of dead nerve cells, if only I could heal them, then I—"

"No more, Nhika," her mom said, and the sternness of her voice was enough to still Nhika. Her limbs stirred beneath the sheets, each move a labor as she reached for something under her shirt.

It was their family bone ring, the only thing to survive the fire that took Nhika's grandmother. Even as her mother winced from the pain of removing it, Nhika didn't help—because that bone ring meant the end. It meant there was nothing else to be done.

Her mother extended it to her. Nhika didn't take it. Now the tears were falling.

"Please. Don't leave me," she said. What would she have left?

Tears welled in her mother's eyes, too. Her gaze fell to the ring, every band of white bone against the black onyx a promise of remembrance. Once it was her grandmother's, and once her great-grandmother's, and once her great-great-grandmother's, and . . .

And now it was hers.

Nhika swallowed. Stared. Sat frozen at the bedside, because what was she to do? If she could not save her own mother, then what was the point of heartsoothing?

With much effort, her mother swallowed, working up strength for her next words: "Just because I can't stay doesn't mean I'm leaving you."

Only then did Nhika place her palm in her mother's and accept the ring.

Consciousness returned to her in the form of monkey chatter and birdsong, and then the chill of a cold floor beneath her. Pain came last, itching its way back under her skin despite her attempts to silence it. Every leak she plugged only caused another to spout.

Her cheek stung against the gritty concrete. With a groan, Nhika collected herself to a sitting position, eyes adjusting to the dark. Now she saw where the chatter came from—she was in a menagerie, turtles and colorful birds and monkeys stacked in cages, some dead. And she, a bloodcarver, was just another caged animal sitting in the midst of it. It was a small warehouse, and yet the Butchers had managed to stuff in as many black-market commodities as they could—ivory tusks spanning one table and powdered something or other caked into squares on another. Still more merchandise lay behind stapled wooden crates, labeled HAZARDOUS MATERIALS.

So, this was the Butchers' Row.

With a jolt, she remembered her ring. Nhika fumbled through her layered clothing with shackled wrists, ribs and shoulders wailing at every movement, until she found it still tangled around her neck; the Butchers must not have deemed it valuable enough to take. And truly, it wasn't—not to anyone but her. It was made of bone and onyx, with a fracture down the center from the fire. No one else could read the inscription on the inner band, three characters that formed her familial name: *Suonyasan.* No one else would find value in those insets of bone along the onyx, each fragment taken from a heartsooth in her lineage. No one else would notice that the band was incomplete,

with space yet meant for her grandmother, for her, for those who were supposed to come after.

She tucked the ring back under her collar, then rose. Each breath came with a stabbing ache, but she knew her body intimately enough to understand what it was trying to tell her. Nhika staggered forward, fingers catching the chicken-wire mesh of her cage as she scanned for an escape.

Now she'd really done it. She'd played into many Yarongese stereotypes when she learned most Theumans wouldn't see her any other way—the blood-hungry bloodcarver, the sea-loving immigrant, the hapless charity case—but now she'd fallen into a new one: a ware in the Butchers' Row. Another item to cross off the list. Nhika felt no one could put her in a pigeonhole if she climbed in there herself, but this particular trope was deadlier than the rest. She tried not to think about how the Butchers' Row had commodified other bloodcarvers before her as exotic goods, and she didn't linger on the fate that awaited her if the wrong client purchased her. No, she was going to get the hell out of here.

A monkey perked up at her movement, then moved to the corner of its cage to watch her, head cocked.

"Hey, little guy," she cooed, dragging herself toward him. "We're stuck in this together, aren't we?" She extended a hand, three fingers pressed together as though she held a treat. It piqued his interest and he reached out, tiny fingers scrabbling at hers.

With newfound speed, she snatched his arm. From that touch, she flooded his anatomy with her own consciousness. She made

it quick, shutting down his pain receptors before stopping his heart. That was easy to do with animals, much harder on humans; humans could feel her influence, so their own anatomies fought her for control. Animals were never so lucky; the monkey collapsed, and from his still-warm body she siphoned all his energy stores before they could dissipate in death.

With the newfound calories and nutrients, Nhika restored some of her wounds. She released the calcium from his bones to deposit into her own, reappropriated the components of his lustrous hair to seal the splits in her skin. Tissue generation was always an expensive process, and she sucked the monkey dry of his energy, watching as his body stiffened and seized with rigor mortis. It was a kinder fate than what awaited him on the Butchers' Row, if the table of severed monkey paws was any indication.

Some of her pain ebbed, the receptors satisfied with her soothing. Nhika stood, giving the monkey a grateful look. "Thank you. And, erm . . . sorry about that."

His corpse twitched in understanding.

Now, for her escape.

She yanked at the chicken wire, but it'd been fastened tightly. Then she jiggled the door, not surprised to find it locked. Nhika frowned. In Yarongese folklore, there were bloodcarvers who could give themselves superhuman abilities: a rhino's strength by maximizing the chemistry of their musculature, or unbreakable bones by perfecting their calcium matrices. Of course, she knew only of the legends. Her parents had fled Yarong long before she'd been born, and those abilities—if ever they truly existed—had been left on the island.

Nhika didn't dare try those tricks now for fear of wrecking her own anatomy in the process. A stone of calcium deposited in the wrong place, a muscle grafted to the wrong bone . . . She'd need more than monkeys to fix all of that. While Yarongese people with her gift had the ability to alter anatomy through touch and thought alone, it was as much a science as medicine, each procedure requiring practice and study like any surgery might. But desperation was a powerful motivator.

Before she could get desperate enough to experiment, the click of lights echoed around the warehouse and the rafters came alive with incandescent bulbs. Nhika's eyes adjusted again, blinking away the temporary blindness as the broad expanse of the warehouse came into full view. Creatures woke from slumber in the corners of the building, and she could see a metal door on one side, crowded with boxes, from which a group of people emerged.

They meandered their way between pillars of crates toward her, admiring wares on the way. A crocodile here, some snakes there—yes, yes, all fascinating, but Nhika knew she was the true marvel.

"And here we have her," said a woman at the front of the group. Her clothing was a mere imitation of refinement, with wraps of colored rayon and scarves to conceal a too-tight dress. Two of Nhika's captors were in her attendance, followed by a stately gentleman she assumed was the client. He had the posture of an aristocrat, back straight and neck angled, as though he was accustomed to looking down on people. A fine black

robe, embroidered with silver herons, draped his shoulders to reveal a well-tailored dress shirt underneath.

He narrowed his eyes as he scrutinized her.

Good, there was a doubt there, and his lips pursed with the haughtiness of a man with something to prove. He looked her up and down, seeming unimpressed by what she had to offer, before passing the Butcher a trenchant look that held a silent question: *Is she real?*

"She fell down the side of a building just this morning," noted one of her captors, as though by way of explanation. "Now look at her. Back on her feet. She's healed herself."

"Oh? Was I meant to act injured?" Nhika quipped.

The client leaned forward, hands clasped behind his back and eyes narrowed. "I want proof before purchase. I'm not interested in consuming a regular human."

"Proof?" The Butchers looked uneasily between one another, but all Nhika heard was that he was planning on *eating* her. Panic spiked, slipping through her control, and she staggered backward in the cage. She'd heard of the superstition, something about how eating the heart of a bloodcarver could grant immortality, or good health, or libido—it changed with each iteration. All false, of course, but that had never stopped the Butchers' Row.

The woman cleared her throat. "Certainly. I, um . . ."

"A knife, if you would," the man said, holding out a gloved hand.

"What are you intending?" the woman asked, eyes narrowed.

"If she's a bloodcarver, she would heal a fatal wound," he

said. When they didn't give him a weapon, he scoffed and perused the tables, finding a knife near the animal cages still crusted in monkey blood.

The Butcher opened and closed her mouth with quiet protests, and at last she managed, "You would injure one of my wares?"

"Yeah, you would injure one of her wares?" Nhika echoed.

"It would not be an injury if she's truly a bloodcarver," the client reasoned. "Isn't that right?"

Nhika prayed the Butchers would keep insisting, but they only exchanged nervous glances before the woman dipped her head in resignation. Nhika threw up her hands. "Hold on a moment. Let's talk this through. You're a smart man—you caught the farce. I'll admit it: I'm a fake! No need to trouble yourself for proof," she babbled, her eyes trailing from his knife to his face. His impassive expression told her that murder was little more than an inconvenience to him.

Her gaze flicked to the monkey cages. Would she have enough energy to heal a fatal wound? And even if she did, her fate was determined—he'd buy her and chop her up for parts. Her bones would get powdered into tea and her liver eaten with shark fin soup, as though her gift of bloodcarving could survive beyond the grave.

Nhika swallowed. Perhaps, if she could feign death, bleed out in front of his eyes without dying, he'd pass her over. That'd give her more time for escape. But how? *How?* Her mind raced for ideas, recalling the old anatomy books she and her grandmother had stolen from medical colleges. How to die without dying? How to survive as a corpse?

The jangle of the padlock rattled her back to the present focus. The client was unlocking the door and she considered escape. But her legs and hands were chained—how far could she go? She searched the Butchers for a key ring.

"Careful, Mr. Zen, sir," the woman cautioned, her expression pained. Not for Nhika, but for her client. "One touch and she has access to all your vital organs. It's a certain death."

"I'm well aware," Mr. Zen said, but he opened the door anyway.

Nhika bolted, but he grabbed her wrists with a gloved hand and drove the blade straight into her gut.

The pain came before she could react. Nhika doubled forward, then fell to the floor as he withdrew the blade. She gasped on the concrete as her blood pooled beneath her. Her mind reeled with panic, so many emotions lighting up her attention at once, all her body's alarms flaring, every muscle clenched against the threat of death. Too much to parse through. Overwhelming. So much blood. She was dying.

No. Her focus returned to her, sharp above the muddle of her pain. *Breathe, Nhika, breathe.* She would not survive all these years alone only to die here, in the Butchers' Row—no, she'd make sure her death meant something.

Pain receptors off. Her skin fizzled to silence. There, now she had room to think. Next, she muted the buzz of adrenaline and stress hormones coursing through her—she'd take it manually from here.

First, stop the bleeding. She'd lost too much already in her floundering, but now she pulled every last ounce of energy

out of her stores to mend tissue, starting from the inside out. Organs first, to stop the internal hemorrhaging. And then the peritoneum, to hold her viscera in place. As for her skin, she let that weep a little, just for show—convince him she wasn't a bloodcarver; give him nothing to bid for. She would not heal herself today just to get eaten tomorrow.

She'd have to fake shock. That wouldn't be hard; her body was already preparing for it. But she shunted her remaining blood inward, constricting superficial vessels, until she was sure she looked as pale and colorless as a Theuman. She felt the remainder of her fuel dwindling like a candle on its last inch of wick, and she bled it conservatively to feed her charade.

The client clicked his tongue. "Just Yarongese. Figured as much."

"No!" one of her captors protested. "She's faking it. I can assure you. She'll have a pulse."

Oh, Mother. If they checked her pulse, it'd be over. She couldn't risk shutting off her carotid, or else she'd truly be dead.

Keys jangled again. Nhika considered giving up her play and accepting her fate. Instead, she prepared to jump him, to suck him dry of his energy stores and escape the place. At the moment, with her body in torpor and her energy reserved, the very thought of moving sowed fatigue into her bones.

But when he stooped beside her, he didn't check her neck. Instead, he took her hand. Nhika resisted the smile. While she couldn't shut off blood to her brain, she didn't mind clamping off a radial artery.

The client placed gloved fingers at the edge of her wrist, but

she'd already constricted the vessel. His fingers pressed deeper, trying to feel for a pulse through his silk gloves, and he waited a laboriously long time. Numbness needled its way into her thumb, tingles spiking across her palm, before he finally lifted his fingers.

Blood flooded back into her hand. The client clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Look what you've made me do. I've killed a girl for nothing."

"She's still breathing, I assure you," the woman protested. Nhika remembered to hold her breath.

"Enough of this," the client snapped. She heard the clatter of a knife. "The next time you call me, make sure it's not over a ghost story."

There was silence, and then footsteps, growing farther away from the cage. In the distance, the door opened and banged shut.

Someone slammed a fist against her cage, rattling the bars. "You insufferable witch," the Butcher growled, the malice in her voice lethal. "Wake up. I know you're alive."

Nhika opened an eye. Then another. Only the Butchers remained, and she rolled herself onto her back, too spent to sit up. Blood stained the floor, caking her hair to her face and wetting her clothes. She was alive, though she must've looked like a corpse.

"You won't be able to pull that trick every time," the woman spat.

"What trick?" Nhika rasped. "Your client wanted a demonstration. I thought I put on quite a show." She licked blood from

her teeth, her stomach flipping with hunger at its sweetness. "If you don't mind, I need food."

"You think you can make demands here?"

"Healing expends a tremendous amount of calories. If you don't feed me, my death won't be an act."

"No more tricks, bloodcarver."

Nhika drew herself up against the back of her cage, feeling the mesh dig into her skin. Everything felt a little raw, the skin learning to feel again after she'd shunted away its blood. "Let's make a deal. If you can find a buyer who doesn't plan on killing or eating me, I'll be cooperative."

The woman gathered her things to leave, hesitating with an answer. Nhika wondered if she was actually considering it, making bargains with her merchandise. But she turned to leave with her lackeys and gave a huff as a final parting gift. "We'll sell you to the highest bidder. What they plan to do with you is not my concern."

THREE

AFTER ALL THAT, THEY DID BRING HER FOOD, IF IT could be called that. She figured it must've been the same stuff they gave to the animals: leftover meats, bones, and vegetables all ground into a slop. Nhika turned off her taste receptors to get it down but couldn't deny the nutrition it provided. Taking her time to avoid scarring, she expended the new energy to tend to her wounds.

If anything, perhaps there was a bright side to this. It'd been a long, long time since she'd had reliable meals. While she wanted to resent the client and his wife who had landed her here, she couldn't. Nhika had done this to herself, really. Once upon a time, her gift was meant for selfless purposes. It was intended to be shared, celebrated, known, but she didn't have that luxury anymore. Now, it was used solely for survival.

They kept her in the dark most of the day, turning on the lights only when they brought in new clients or wares. She wondered where this place might've been—probably near the Rat Borough, where no one cared if a few girls went missing, where the constabulary relaxed their supervision. The city couldn't eliminate the Butchers' Row even if it tried; it was not a place but a concept, a vast economy of purloined goods and poached animals. It was a stain on Theumas, where people worshipped

the scientific method over the gods of old and ignorance followed faithfully in the shadow of achievement. They claimed that innovation conquered all, but Nhika knew best that fear and superstition were immortal.

Maybe the Butchers did heed her bargain, because the next bidder was an elusive and shadowed man who wanted her not for food, but as an assassin. He looked to be one of those underworld types, with gold rings marking his fingers and dragon tattoos lacing his skin where it wasn't covered. He made an ostentatious display of not being afraid of her, reaching into her cell with bare fingers and lingering near the bars with open robe. Nhika considered maiming him for it, but that would land her nowhere. Besides, all things considered, his was not the worst gig.

He placed his bid: five hundred thousand chem. More money than Nhika had considered in her entire life, enough to buy a house outside the Dog Borough and retire comfortably.

The next bidder went even higher. It was an aristocratic lady with a dead husband. Still in mourning silks, she must've been desperate, because even the Butchers seemed to know a bloodcarver couldn't bring back the dead, though they conveniently forgot to inform their client. Selfishly, Nhika hoped this client would win her auction anyway, because she looked too frail to put up a fight if Nhika wanted to run away. She bid seven hundred thousand.

Throughout the next couple days, bidders came and went through the warehouse doors. Whenever Nhika hoped for a high bid, she demonstrated her gifts. Other times, the Butchers

had to threaten it out of her. She hadn't forgotten escape, but it became apparent that here, under cage, lock, and key, escape was a narrow prospect. Instead, her best chance was to be bought by a fool who underestimated her, someone she could intimidate or escape from with ease.

The last bidder of the day came later, when Nhika was already drowsing off in the corner of the cage. The lights forbade rest as they blared to life, and she blinked annoyedly at her moonlight bidder.

He came with the female Butcher, but they were otherwise alone at this hour. Nhika narrowed her eyes at his approach, trying to discern his attire, but everything about him was nondescript—black tunic, belted at the waist; ebony hair, peeking out beneath a hood. Everything, that was, except the mask he wore.

It was one of those old theater masks, plain bamboo with stark features painted in saturated color. A bit theatrical—literally—but she understood why an aristocrat might not want to show his face around these parts. The mask was some kind of animal.

A fox.

In Yarongese folklore, the Trickster Fox was a shape-shifting villain, beguiling and wicked. Nhika's grandmother had orated stories about how the Fox deceived the Mother's heartsooths to their deaths, how he defiled their gifts, and how the Mother punished him duly—carving his nine tails down to one and cursing his predecessors to forever walk the earth as shadows of their former selves. Whether or not this man's mask was an intentional allusion, it struck fear all the same.

"Why is she covered in blood?" the masked man asked, voice low in a strained kind of timbre, as though he were modulating it.

"A previous client requested a demonstration," the Butcher said. "And she proved to be a true bloodcarver."

The man looked at the Butcher, his expression concealed. "Heartsooth. In their culture, they call themselves heartsooths. Isn't that right?" Hearing that name—one she hadn't heard in a long, long time—shocked her. It was a name passed through her family, uttered between mother and grandmother. A name she called herself, when no one else would. A name that felt appropriated on a Theuman tongue.

In her surprise, it took her a moment to realize he was addressing her.

"Y-yes," she stammered. When had she lost her wits? Now she saw how tightly collared his robe was, how his black gloves ascended far up his sleeves, how the mask concealed the last bit of his skin. Her blood grew cold; this was no ordinary client. This was someone who had researched her and her kind.

And that terrified her.

"Would you like a demonstration?" the Butcher offered, drawing a knife from her sleeve.

The man held up a hand to dismiss her. "No. I'd like to place a bid."

Bid low, she prayed. If this man bought her, what might he do? Something warned her she would not be able to easily escape him.

"The current highest offer is eight hundred thousand chem,"

the Butcher said. Nhika wished she could see his face to gauge his expression. She could make do with a mourning woman, or even a man who wanted her to be his assassin, but this bidder was unreadable. Expressionless. And that made him dangerous.

"I'll offer a clean million," the man said after a pause.

Nhika's heart sank.

But the Butcher's expression sparked with enthusiasm. "You may as well consider her yours, sir," she said, sweeping a voracious look at Nhika. "The listing ends tomorrow. My associates will be in contact should we close with you."

The masked man nodded. It was simple, resolute, but terror lightninged through Nhika's chest. As he turned to leave, she found her voice to blurt, "Who are you?"

He hesitated, and their eyes caught. His were dark behind the mask, hardly discernible and shadowed in thought. When at last he spoke, he said, "Someone who has been looking for someone like you for a long time." As if that answered her question at all.

Only when he left did her breath return to her lungs, her wits slowly after.

A million chem. Who had that kind of money?

Or rather: What did he plan for her that made her worth that much?

With morning came her reckoning. Nhika weighed her options in the corner of the cage. She could try to escape now, before

the man returned to collect her. But that meant fighting her way out of the warehouse in chains. Or, she could take her chances with the bidder. In the clarity of the morning, she wondered why she'd been so afraid before—so, he knew what a heartsooth was. Perhaps the knowledge was more common than she'd thought.

Still, she paced back and forth, smudging the bloodstain in her cell. The animals were garrulous today, birdcalls competing with anxious monkey hollers. It left little space for her to think.

In the chaos, her thoughts returned to Yarongese legends, those immortalized heartsooths who used their arts for more than just medicine. Her grandmother had raised Nhika on those stories, such that when her heartsoothing first manifested, she'd thought herself one of those heroes, able to shape her anatomy any way she wanted—until she'd knotted her muscle into a painful lump in her bicep and cried until her grandmother could soothe it out.

Then, her grandmother had taken Nhika's hands between hers, her skin a shade darker than Nhika's, and straightened out the strands of muscle one by one. "Do you know why the art of heartsoothing is dying, Nhika?" her grandmother had asked.

"Because Daltanny took over." As a youngling, she only understood that Theumas's neighbor, Daltanny, had invaded the island of Yarong and driven those like her family out. Only later would her mother harrow her with the details of genocide and colonization.

Her grandmother had accepted the answer, but her frown

was still dissatisfied. She'd always been a woman to wear her emotions plainly on her face, all her wrinkles and papery skin a ripe canvas. "Because there are no more people to remember it as it's meant to be remembered. We are losing teachers. Children who get the gift don't know how to use it properly. Now, I'll teach you how to soothe, but no more playing around like this, okay, *khun*?" The term of endearment held an edge of sternness.

"What's the point of heartsoothing if I can't play around with my own anatomy?"

Again, her grandma had looked crestfallen, but not disappointed in Nhika herself. "To heal" was her short answer. Her longer one: "That is the core of heartsoothing. Not to harm. To heal."

That had all been good and well until her grandmother died. Then Nhika had messed around with her anatomy by necessity, had bruised constables and carved Butchers, with nothing but a bad pinkie to show for it. For the last six years, her heartsoothing had been many things—hidden, forgotten, misused—but it had seldom been nourished, not without a teacher or anatomy books. Those were things she'd lost with her family.

The lights came on again, and Nhika readied herself. It was still so early, considering how late the masked bidder came the day before—she hadn't even had time for breakfast. But when the Butchers rounded the corner, it wasn't with the masked man.

It was with a girl.

She was dressed in the long white dress and silk pants of a socialite, face hidden behind a painted fan and heavy makeup.

It aged her, but Nhika discerned the youth beneath the veneer. She must've been a few years younger than Nhika—maybe fourteen or fifteen. Much too young for a place like this. She was the image of Theuman beauty: lips like lily petals against pale skin, straight black hair like a river of ink, and monolid eyes touched with blush. If Nhika had to guess, probably a bored debutante who'd caught word of a bloodcarver and wanted to see for herself.

The girl leaned close to the cage, fingers tracing the bars. The clean fabric of her gloves came away with rust, or perhaps dried blood, and she rubbed the sediment between her fingers with a look of distaste. "How much for her?" she asked as though inquiring about a new pet.

"Highest offer on the table is a million chem, flat," the Butcher replied. Nhika raised an eyebrow—why humor this girl? But this was someone Nhika could escape, a youth with a large wallet and a dangerous curiosity.

"Are you a true bloodcarver?" the girl asked, leaning close enough to whisper. Her perfume wafted off her, floral and sweet.

"Tried, true, and worth every coin," Nhika said, flashing a grin. "I can demonstrate if you'd like."

"Oh?" The girl turned up her nose, undoubtedly observing the ungodly amount of blood caking Nhika's clothing.

"Come closer." If the girl were keen, she'd see how Nhika's arm hairs twitched at her command, or how her pupils dilated and constricted as she wished. And if Nhika were a kinder person, she would've scared the girl home, would've saved her from the Butchers' Row and ushered her back to her jade palace

and stone gardens. But, Nhika had already paid once for her sympathy.

When at last the girl noticed Nhika's small demonstration, her eyes flared with fascination. She leaned close, so close, that if Nhika swiped her hand past the bars she could grab a fistful of the girl's hair and carve her. But Nhika stayed her hand.

The Butcher cleared her throat. "So, what is it, girl? Here to spend Daddy's money or not?"

At the comment, the girl flinched. With a snap of her fan, she regained her composure and drew back from the cage. "One million chem, you say?" She tapped the fan against her lips.

"The bidder collects later today."

"What do they want with her?"

"Damned if I know."

The girl hummed with thought and Nhika wondered if she was actually considering this, or pretending for show. But then she smiled, and said, "I will not bid."

"Figured so," the Butcher said.

"Instead, I will make an offer. One and a half million chem, but I get her now. Take it or leave it."

Nhika's lips parted with disbelief. What purpose did an aristocratic teenager have for a bloodcarver? And how did every bidder have so much money to throw around? No one had cared about her value when she peddled snake oil to put food on the table, yet she was somehow so priceless when bought and sold. If Nhika was lucky, she'd be an expensive novelty, and the girl would quickly lose interest in her. She was hoping, praying, that the Butcher would take the offer.

"We have other bidders who may want to compete with that price," the Butcher began.

"If that's a no, then I'll take my leave." The girl turned—was it a bluff, or was that relief Nhika caught in her expression?

"Wait," the Butcher said, holding out a hand. She squeezed her chin, brow furrowed in consternation. Her thoughts were easy enough to discern: One and a half million chem was more than enough to retire her, but would the masked man increase his bid?

"When will I get the money?" the Butcher asked.

"Up front. I'll send it in paper, unless you prefer gold." The girl kept her poise. Behind the fan, it was hard to discern her true emotions, whether she closed the deal with ease or trepidation. For Nhika's purposes, it hardly mattered.

"Paper will do," the Butcher said.

"I'll return later with the chem. As for her, I'd appreciate it if you found her a new set of clothing. It won't do to pick her up like . . . that." The girl's eyes flicked over Nhika's bloodied garb. "I'll be back by autocarriage. Please, have her ready for me by noon."

The Butcher nodded, grin wide. "Certainly."

"Splendid. I'll see you both then." She lifted the fan over her face again, and then she was gone. The exchange had happened so quickly that Nhika had hardly gotten a witticism in. All she could do was stare, unsure how to feel about her future prospects, as the Butcher hurried to usher the girl out of the warehouse.

When the lights flicked off, she settled again in the corner,

parsing through the events of the past couple days. A last-minute offer, too good to pass on. A mysterious man in a fox mask, outbid by a teenager. And here Nhika sat, sold to the girl in white.

A smile spread over her lips. This—this, she could work with.