



THE FIFTH WORLD
CHILDREN
OF
WORMWOOD

A novel by

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CHAPTER ONE

ROBIN

My little brother came into this world with half a skull. He stayed for a day, then left again, taking my mother with him. He didn't live long enough to earn a name, but we called my mother Pelica.

She had darker skin in life. I tried to hold the color in my memory as it faded. I clung to the sound of her laugh and the rhythm of her footsteps and the nimbleness of her fingers. The baskets she'd made would fall apart. The people who knew her in life would die. But I wanted to remember her for as long as I could.

Mourners flooded our little village – aunts and uncles and cousins and friends, some from as far away as Raccoon Creek, some I'd never even met. I'd never even seen a funeral with my own eyes before – not a funeral for a dead person, anyway.

Elder members of my family generally saw their deaths approaching and left to join the Vulture Priests upriver. We held living funerals for them, to mourn and to say goodbye and to thank them for their sacrifice, but then they walked away on their own legs to the Beaver Valley Temple, leaving us with no body to give to the spirits. We never saw them again.

I thought a dead funeral might feel different, but it didn't. I still felt like my mother had simply walked off into the forest, even as I joined my aunties in laying out the bodies. They felt heavy and empty at the same time. We knelt around them in a circle, a gourd of rust paint at each of the four directions. We washed their cold bodies and massaged the stiffness out of their limbs and painted their skin with rust. I mostly watched Aunt Vervain and followed her lead. I had only started bleeding a few months before she died. We'd arranged for me to take part in women's initiation at next Christmas. Now Christmas lay less than a month away, and my family called upon me to join in a woman's task early. I might have felt honored under other circumstances, but at that moment I didn't feel anything at all.

I pressed the rust onto the rumpled crest of my brother's skull, the closest thing he had to a forehead. It felt rough and smooth, like a cascade of river rocks. His eyes bobbed liquidly atop his flat head, like a frog's. The entire head fit easily into the palm of one hand. His body's smallness and fragility frightened me. I took care applying the rust, distantly worried that my fingers might hurt him.

What had it felt like to live in that body? Had he felt pain? Had he seen anything of the world he'd just entered? He had breathed and cried, so he must have felt something. Why would a soul visit this world for so brief a time? Like dipping your toe in a river. A day of pain, then up to the sky. What sense did that make?

We arranged the bodies on a bed of banana leaves in the center of my house, near the fire. You could keep a fire inside a

whale skin house, not like the woven grass houses the rest of the family lived in. Though we lived in Pittsburgh, my father never quite abandoned his Arctic traditions: the too-warm house, the central fire, the dark season spent sitting around not doing much of anything. He'd built it on proper stilts, at least – he'd made that much accommodation to the southern floods – but it still looked so strange and out of place, like an elephant on spindly legs among the neat green squares that blended into the jungle around them. Pelica never seemed to mind the difference. She had married an outsider and accepted all the strangeness that came with that decision.

On the first night, my father and I sat by the fire and let the flood of mourners rush over us. The skin of our house stretched taut, struggling to contain the mass of kin that filled it, sometimes as much as six people at a time. They climbed in and out of the house, crowded around us, hugged us.

My kitten, Pillbug, hated all the strangers and commotion. She crouched behind my back, hiding under my sleeping mat, even though she also hated the smell of the insect-repelling leaves I'd woven into it. Her tiny body couldn't carry her out of the house without my help.

We painted our bodies with ashes from the fire. My family members wept and wailed. Their tears carved dark streaks down their ash-smeared cheeks. My ashes remained unbroken. I had forgotten how to cry. In place of the sadness I'd expected to feel I found only helpless bafflement. I just stared at the bodies, laid out like mother and child, in a pose that neither had lived long enough to lie in: the baby in his mother's arms, the mother lying

back as if in contented sleep. Between the rust on their skin and the mourning ashes on ours and the flickering light in the darkness, they looked alive and we looked dead.

That night lasted a long time, since the solstice approached. My father and I could have slept, but didn't. I didn't want to sleep in that suffocating house with the fire and the bodies and the weeping, but I also didn't want to leave my mother's side. Neither, I guess, did he. We didn't talk about it. We couldn't see well enough in the darkness to sign much, though I don't think he wanted to talk any more than I did. The fire glinted off the tears in his eyes and the glass spear point he wore around his neck. He stared vacantly in the bodies' general direction with his arm around me. As the night wore on, he clutched me tighter and tighter, as if only his arm kept me from floating up into the sky with the rest of our family. My arm started to hurt, but I didn't complain.

I had known death before, of course. Everything I ate, everything I wore, every house I lived in, had once lived. Each died for my benefit, sometimes by my own hand. From a young age I had hunted tarantulas, pressed them down with sticks and roasted them over a fire until their cooking legs screamed. I had walked with my mother to uproot tubers from their soils. I lived because I killed, or because others killed for me. I knew that we, like everything alive, surrounded ourselves with the dead, filled our bellies with the dead, and walked on the decomposed dead with every step we took. But none of that had shaken the certainty of what death meant.

The elders had told me this: all life danced in a circle. Our souls returned to the air from whence we'd breathed them in. Our bodies returned to the web beneath and turned into plants that fed animals that fed our descendants, our bones returned to the web beneath once more. But did we remember? I didn't remember living as soil. Wherever my mother had gone, whether she knew and perceived things in the living world, she could no longer talk to me about it.

I tried to reach my hand into the emptiness she had left behind, feel out its boundaries, calculate the weight of her absence. I stared straight ahead and told myself: "She has left. She will never come back. She will not finish the skirt she started to weave for your initiation. She will not help you in your initiation tasks. You will not talk to her again. You will not hear her laugh." I understood, but I didn't quite believe. How do you feel the lack of something? How do you know for sure it hasn't just hidden, momentarily out of sight, waiting to return to your field of vision? How can someone just vanish?

I thought about that the whole night.



The next morning, we wrapped the banana leaves around the bodies as a shroud and carried it into the heart of the forest. White clouds stretched all the way from the sky down to the village grounds. I wondered if Pelica's soul dwelt in the fog, knowing it belonged in the sky, but still clinging to earth. I understood the impulse.

People sang and cried and said things I didn't listen to, and then we walked back to the village, leaving the bodies for the spirits to take. I looked back only once.

One day blended into the next as we waited for the spirits to do their work. One of the more distant relatives checked on the bodies daily, watching as the spirits came up out of the ground from their great underground cities. They marched into the narrow spaces between banana leaves and back out again, taking tiny bits of my mother and brother, and carrying them down into the underworld.

The dead's closest relatives stayed in the village, forbidden from doing anything. I woke up every morning with the sun, reapplied my ashes, brushed my teeth with my miswak, and wandered aimlessly. The guests did all the hunting and harvesting and cooking and patching-up.

My father hated it. He told me that sitting around only made him feel worse. He didn't understand this custom of distant relatives doing everything so the immediate family had nothing to do but think about their sadness. He said keeping busy would help. The deaths had filled him with a nervous energy. He paced or tapped his foot or shook the ripe fruit out of orange trees.

After a few days of this, a great-half-uncle from the west decided to give my father an early Christmas gift: good knapping stones from Flint Ridge. My father's particular skill had earned him the name Glassknapper, but I thought he could knap just about anything. He had spoken rapturously about Flint Ridge, which he had visited only twice. It held such a wealth of flint that humans had mined it for as long as humans had lived there,

and to this day it continued to provide more. So many holes and hills from generations of mining had left a landscape that dipped and swelled like waves on the long-vanished ocean that had once covered it. When my father described it, his arms flowed like water.

In the days after the funeral, he kept his hands so busy knapping that flint into arrowheads and spear points and knives that most of the time he couldn't use them to talk to anyone else. I'd awaken at dawn to the click-clack of rock on rock and find him squatting under our house, flakes of stone scattered at his feet, his eyes fixed on the blade taking shape in front of him. That sound echoed through the village. The trees called it back to us. It made us all uncomfortable, this inescapable song of his grief that everyone could hear but him.

I took his advice and found ways to keep myself busy and away from the sound. Luckily, I had initiation tasks to complete. I had to finish the dress my mother had started for me and prepare my contribution to the initiation feast. Each girl had to bring certain ingredients for the feast, which she had to harvest and prepare herself. The mistress of ceremonies had stuck me with the dessert course, plants from the last milpa before our food forest gave way to towering hardwood trees. Of all the courses, this one presented the greatest difficulty, particularly the cocoa and vanilla beans. I complained bitterly when they told me.

By that time, the child that would kill my mother already hung heavy in her belly. He didn't seem to like the food she ate for both of them, because he made her vomit much of it up. She lay in the shade most of the time, fanning herself and groaning.

We would all scour the forest floor for ginger to bring her. I began to associate the smell of ginger root tea with her. Whenever I complained about the fourth course, she smiled weakly and joked, "Would you rather have the third course?" The third course included ginger, which we surely would have eaten through by the time initiation came.

She assured me that they only assign the fourth course to the most capable and trustworthy girls. Even through her sickness, she helped me. She told me how to pollinate the vanilla orchids by hand. She wove the baskets that I filled with cocoa beans and told me how to ferment them, dry them, and grind them. Now I had to do this all myself.

A few cousins around my age tried to help. One had gone through women's initiation only the year before. I rarely saw these cousins and never knew how to talk to them. They all knew each other and grew up in villages teeming with children. When I visited, they would invite me to the little villages that the children of their families had all built apart from the main encampment. The older girls bragged about the little houses they'd built for themselves, where they'd entertain boys. They found it strange that I still lived in my parents' house.

I had no siblings or close relatives my age. No child had come into my family after me. My parents had tried for years to have another and only produced stillbirths and miscarriages, and now death. Other girls my age seemed to share a common language I didn't know how to speak. I struggled to relearn it year after year without much success. I didn't want that difficulty on top of my initiation preparations. I didn't want to hear my cousins' well-

intentioned attempts at the vanilla orchid song – they sang it all wrong – or their accidental reminders that I had grown up strangely, that something about my family didn't work the way families should. I didn't want to think about why my mother died, why my brother never finished weaving his skull.

I invited the cousins to come with me while I took a basket of food to the Vulture Priests, as we always did. They bit their lips and looked away. They inspected Pillbug, ruffling her fur, pretending they only wanted to cuddle her. She had black stripes on speckled brown, not a hint of green, so we had nothing to worry about. They still didn't go with me. Secretly, I felt glad.



Aunt Vervain didn't try to push me into speaking. She'd lost her only sister, but she had always kept herself contained and at a distance. Grieving didn't change that. If anything, it made it worse. But I eventually ran out of initiation food to prepare and gave up trying to wrestle the Spanish moss of my half-finished skirt into submission. Lacking any better excuse to keep busy, I started following Vervain around with a basket. When she picked fruit, I joined her and filled the basket. When she peeled sweet potatoes, I filled the basket with scraps. Most of the time, only Pillbug filled the basket and meowed indignantly whenever I tried to put anything else in with her.

She had many more years than my mother, almost enough to mother *her*. I didn't know how she and Pelica related to each other, exactly, whether they shared a father or not. I don't think

anyone did, including her. Their mother never married or named her lovers. Vervain had darker skin and a sharper face than Pelica, but that didn't provide much of a clue, and Vervain kept as many secrets as her mother.

For as long as I had noticed such things, Vervain would occasionally disappear into the forest for long stretches of time but return empty-handed. No one else mentioned this, so I assumed either all aunts did this or we just shouldn't talk about it. I wondered, though.

On that day I followed her into the forest, if only to see if she would stop me. She silently led me south through the Four Sisters garden and under the fruit tree canopy. My mourning ashes had hardened and started to crack in the heat, and it made me feel like a roasting pig. The cool shade of the forest felt good on my skin. Ahead of us birds warned each other of our arrival. Around us they fell silent. The jungle thickened as we followed Little Blue Run south through increasingly more mature milpas.

I'd found Pillbug along this creek. I spotted her mother not too long ago while walking on this very path. She lay dead on the bank, her fur as green as ginkgo leaves. Four tiny green kittens huddled against her dead body, afraid of me but even more afraid to leave her side, mewling their confusion and grief.

I gathered them up in a soft grass basket and brought them to my mother. Whenever someone in my family accidentally killed a nursing mother, we knew to bring the orphaned animals to her. She made no secret of her wish for more children, but had suffered miscarriage after miscarriage, and eventually came to accept her lot as mother of animals.

The kittens hadn't yet weaned and couldn't eat solid food. My mother and I made a formula from coconut milk and animal blood that we hoped would keep them alive. We poked little holes in four waterskins, filled them with the mixture, and gently squeezed it into their mouths. Either I'd found them too late or our formula failed to nourish them, or perhaps a bit of both. One by one, they faded away.

We knew from the color of their fur that they would probably die. The Vulture Priests themselves taught us what it meant when a cat turned green, and a green cat lying dead on the bank of a creek downstream from a temple left no ambiguity. The radiation had flowed down the Ohio River, into Little Blue Run, and would soon spread to all the waters around us. But when we took the kittens home, their fur changed back into brown and we never saw them turn green again.

In the end, only one survived. She clung to me, kneading her little paws on my chest and slobbering on the folds in my dress in a fruitless attempt to suckle. But she lived. I named her Pillbug, for her tendency to curl into a tight ball. I guess all cats did that, but I'd never had one before, so everything she did felt novel.

The canopy thickened and the trees got taller. The forest held fast to the night until we reached a clearing where the day broke through. I had to rub my eyes against the glare. An ocean of veviver grass lay before us. I felt the basket in my arms shift as Pillbug lifted herself above the rim to sniff.

"In my youth, we called this place the Ash Flats," Vervain said, "because all across here stretched a desert of toxic ash. Our parents told us never to go near it, and certainly never to breathe

too deeply around it. But ash doesn't stay in one place. The wind picks it up and carries it. Your grandmother planted this field. She knew which plants could heal people, but she also knew which plants could heal the land. She started planting at this end and she pushed further and further south until no ash remained. And when she finished, she went to join the Vulture Priests."

"So... did she do it?" I asked. "Did she heal it?"

Vervain squinted over the field. "Can you ever say that anyone has truly, completely healed?"

"Well, I mean, can I walk here?"

"I would rather you didn't."

She waded into the tall grass and knelt down to weed with bare hands, the vetiver drawing a veil around her. She must have done this a hundred times before, and she looked healthy enough. I snuck a peek at Pillbug. Her fur remained brown. But the ancestors left behind other poisons besides radiation.

From the tree line, I watched Vervain work. She didn't waste any time, moving smoothly and efficiently. Her silence and composure, which had comforted me before, now made me feel worse. I needed to talk, but only to the person who didn't talk to me.

"Should we feel sadder?" I asked her. "Why don't you cry? Do you feel like crying, and you don't? Or do you act the way you feel? Does working here help you? Do you work here to keep your mind off things or just because you do it everyday? Do you worry about yourself, that you haven't cried?"

Vervain sat up, rubbed her sweaty forehead with the back of one dirty wrist, revealing swirls of brown skin under the melting

ash. “You shouldn’t worry,” she said. “It just hasn’t hit you yet. When it does, it will hit you all at once. Take care with that.” And she bent back down and kept working.

I sat down in the moss beneath a tree. Now the vetiver hid every bit of her. “Did it hit you all at once, when your mother died?” I asked.

“That went a little differently,” she said, a disembodied voice wafting out from the vetiver. “She joined the Vulture Priests, so she just left. We called her Deathweaver for a reason. She knew more than anyone about the connections between life and death, the dance that goes on in the web beneath. I don’t know if she even thought of herself as leaving.

“I resented her, honestly. She had at least another decade left of life in her. She could have helped raise you, but instead she chose to leave. I regretted my anger later on. But grieving people do strange things. In time I realized that she didn’t leave. All the important parts of her stayed right here. I just have a harder time talking to her now.”

“Do you ever talk to her, then?”

Vervain leaned forward and pushed aside some vetiver to meet my eyes. “Why do you think I came here?” She’d spoken gently, but I still felt a flush of shame. I walked back to the village alone. As I looked down into my basket, I could swear I saw a little tinge of green in Pillbug’s fur, but maybe my fear only made it look so.



One day the distant relative returned from the forest and announced, "The spirits have done their work." We thanked them with an offering of sugar cane juice and carried the bundle back to the village. Inside lay two skeletons, both picked completely clean, the bones all mingled together as though the baby had never left his mother's womb. I could hardly tell which bones had belonged to whom, but that little skull stood out. It looked flattened, like someone had stepped on it. Warped bone surrounded the gaping hole at the top.

We separated the skeletons as carefully and completely as we could. Still, we would have buried them in a single bundle if my father hadn't stopped us. He brought us two deerskin bags, one much smaller than the other but both lavishly decorated with colorful beadwork, and placed them at the head of the shroud.

"You don't want Pelica and the baby buried together?" Aunt Vervain asked.

My father shook his head. "She belonged to this land," he signed. "The child didn't."

The women around me stiffened like new corpses.

"You conceived him in this land," Vervain said with gentle, looping gestures. "Pelica birthed him in this land. She knitted his bones from the food of this land. He died in this land. Where else could he possibly belong?"

My father's jaw clenched. "I don't know. But certainly not here. This land hates men."

With that last wave of his hand, he had dropped something heavy on our heads. We all felt it. Even in all the years he had lived here, he had never quite lost his outsider's eyes or his Arctic

directness. He said the things we only whispered – not all the time, but often enough to keep him on the outside, to remind the family that he had come from far away – and each reminder looked as out of place as a whale skin house in the jungle. I belonged to this family just enough to cringe for him, but not enough to take our ways for granted.

Vervain drew herself up and selected her words. “His ancestors fed him,” she said, “and his bones will return to the web beneath to feed the next generation.”

“What next generation?” Glassknapper snapped. “This village has no children and no old men. No baby has lived since Robin. The men die young. Why should I trust a man-killing land with my son? I can’t stop thinking about those ants breaking him apart, taking his poisoned flesh back into the poisoned soil, passing the sickness on to the next generation – if we have one. I wish I hadn’t given them his flesh. I certainly won’t give them his bones.”

“Everyone dies in time,” Vervain said.

“Some earlier than others.”

Vervain’s hands moved faster, more sharply now. “Your son came into a family sworn to help the Vulture Priests. You came into a family sworn to help the Vulture Priests. Of your own volition. Of your own free will.”

“Don’t we grow these crops for them so they’ll protect us?” Glassknapper demanded. “They did the last time we had our village here, when I first arrived. And then we cycled west and south, further away from the temple and had a few children, and when we cycled back north and east, the children stopped com-

ing and the men started getting sick. You may not want to see it, but I do. The priests have failed us. Radiation leaks out of the temple, through the water, and into us. We swore to sacrifice some crops, not our lives. We never gave our bodies to the vigil.”

They didn’t have Vulture Priest temples where he’d grown up. He knew, but he didn’t understand, our relationship with them, our gratitude to them. For all the years he’d lived here, he’d never really gotten that. They seemed predatory to him: ominous black figures that came to take our elders away and spin prophecies of doom.

Vervain winced. “My mother – your mother-in-law – did, and you know that. I will too, someday, when I have ventured close enough to death.”

“Your people give too much for nothing in return.”

Your people.

No one said anything or made a move. My father surveyed the women sitting cross-legged on the woven mats, all silent, some looking down at their hands so even if he did say something, they wouldn’t have to see it. But he said nothing more. He knelt down before the tiny skeleton and placed it carefully, bone by bone, into the little deerskin bag. No one moved to stop him. He cinched the bag shut, hung it from the string of his loincloth, and looked at me. He didn’t motion for me to follow him, but I knew that I faced a choice in that moment.

I followed him back to the house. I couldn’t think of a reason not to. When I went inside, he had the bag open, his head bowed over the little pile of bones inside. I put my hand on his shoulder,

though he'd probably seen me coming from the light that slanted in when I pushed the flap aside.

Once he raised his eyes, I started signing. "Did it just hit you?"

He stared blankly at me for a moment through wet red eyes. "I shouldn't have raised you here," he finally said. "I bear the blame for this."

"What? How?"

"This land, downstream of the Temple. I knew the danger, we all knew it. But we chose to trust in the priests – your mother's family because they always had, and me because I loved your mother. To hell with tradition. I should have brought her back to the Nares. This land killed Ginkgo."

I blinked my confusion.

"I would have named him Ginkgo," he said. "*Did* name him Ginkgo. These past few days, I thought to myself... it didn't seem fair for him not to have a name. So I named him Ginkgo. Ginkgos have great strength. Ginkgos survive." He paused to pick up the little skull and run his fingers over the top of it before gently placing it back in its bag. "What a cruel joke, to 'return' Ginkgo to the land that killed him, the land that hates him. I won't leave him here to rot in poisoned soil."

"So where?" I asked. "Where would you bury him?"

He picked up the skull, turned it over in his hands, and gently placed it back in the basket. "The Nares Strait. My home. I never took you there. We'd give him a proper sea burial."

"So we leave him at the bottom of the strait and come back, and then what? We can never visit his grave. He can't join our ancestors. We'll lose him forever."

My father met my eyes, and I knew what he would say before he said it. “I don’t want you to spend another moment here. Drinking this water, eating this food, watching your ray-cat green. Watching me die too young of radiation poisoning, and then following me far too quickly. We’ll all die here, Robin. This land will kill us just as surely as it killed Ginkgo. But we have people in the Nares, family. We can live.”

I sputtered. Leave my home? The forest I’d tended for as long as I could remember, and thought I would tend for the rest of my life?

“Christmas nears,” he went on. “We’ll meet up with Lulu there, leave with hens trading caravan. One last Christmas here, with this family. Maybe we can even convince some of them to come along.”

I shook my head. His plan made it all too real. “I – no, slow down. We should sleep on it. We have time before Christmas. Maybe you’ll change your mind.”

He looked at me skeptically, but consented.

We buried Pelica’s bones in the traditional way, but Ginkgo stayed with us in his little bag. Sometimes when I found myself all alone, I’d loosen the drawstring and look at the skull. It repulsed and horrified and fascinated me. Its toothless smile, its crushed flat top. But I never took it out around Glassknapper, and I always drew it closed so he wouldn’t know I’d touched it. I don’t know if I wanted to spare his feelings or if I felt guilty for feeling so drawn to it. Maybe a mix of both.

I told myself he would change his mind, that it made no sense to leave, but already I felt the truth of it. He just had to

mention Pillbug. I saw her again as an infant, in my mind. I saw her dead green mother.

From beyond the veil of death, the ray-cat mother had told us to leave, but we didn't want to listen. We grew our food from seed here and lived among other families who did the same. We had no place to go without invading someone else's territory and no way to feed ourselves outside of our gardens.

Our ancestors dwelt here, in the web beneath our feet and in the plants that grew from their soil and in the animals that ate those plants and fed us. They had sworn to care for this land. They planted this forest that fed us and generation after generation of us maintained the forest for ourselves, for the animals, and for the Vulture Priests who relied on us. We couldn't just abandon that, even if it did kill us.

Yet my father had it right: we couldn't stay, either. Just as the kittens had dwindled down to one, so would we. I had become a ray-kitten burrowing into my dead mother's side, terrified to stay but even more terrified to leave, and almost certainly doomed.



We took Ginkgo to Downtown. It seemed fitting for him to visit the place where the rivers met, the cultural center of the nation he would have grown up in, had he grown up.

Everyone tiptoed around us. No one said anything about the infant skeleton in the bag that Glassknapper carried on his back like a living baby.

I remembered what Vervain had told me, that it would hit me all at once. It still hadn't, though. I still felt emotionless, which gave me comfort and shame all at once. I started to think it would never hit me, maybe that I would never feel anything again. I didn't know what to think about that.

It had hit my father, I guess, hard enough to run back home and take me with him if I chose. When it hit me, would I jump aboard this move to the Arctic? Would I do something else crazy? Would I dig up my mother's bones and run away to the Gulf? I hoped not. It troubled me, this idea that I could become a helpless puppet of my grief.

I thought about that as we canoed up the Ohio. This time of year, the calm waters made paddling upstream easy. We finally came to the point where three rivers meet, and mingled with the crowds already gathering on the Christmas grounds.

The Christmas grounds consisted of a floodplain on the southern bank of the Monongahela, from which one could clearly see the ruins of Downtown. Every monsoon season, the river would flood. In the dry season, the water receded to reveal soft, loamy soil. The People of the Hilltop dwelt amongst the steep southern hills and only came here to host the Christmas festival. They took great pride in their role as Christmas hosts. They had planted a number of Caribbean pines along the base of the slopes just for that purpose, and spent the entire year collecting fat and beeswax to make into candles.

I let Pillbug out of her basket. She seemed glad to get back on solid ground, hopping about, sometimes sniffing curiously, some-

times fluffing her fur and arching her back at unfamiliar people, noises, and smells.

The sheer number of people who showed up for Christmas boggled my mind. The hills echoed with shouts and laughter from hundreds of people. Families from villages all across Pittsburgh gathered here, as did traders from even farther away.

I found Narluga, my father's younger sibling, among those travelers, come in to barter their wares. We didn't have anyone quite like Lulu in Pittsburgh. My father's people recognize three genders: man, woman, and something in-between. Among my people, hen would have chosen to walk the men's path or the women's. But as far as I could tell, hen walked no path but hens own. Narluga hunted only exotic goods and gathered only stories. A sea trader, hen circled the north, from the Arctic coastlines to Pittsburgh – about as far south as northern traders would normally venture, and even then only in the dry season, because any further south the hurricanes howled too furiously for any sailors accustomed to the Arctic Ocean.

I saw Lulu only once a year, but each year hen brought me a Christmas present more fascinating than the last. Last year, hen had given me a treasure unearthed from one of the ancients' midden heaps: a shining blue disc with a hole in the middle, through which hen had strung woven hemp to make an enormous medallion. I'd felt terribly self-conscious wearing it, but I did enjoy looking at it, tilting it in the sun to watch the rainbows dance on its surface before carefully folding it back into its soft leather wrapping. Others like it existed – usually chipped or scratched or broken into jagged shards. I had never seen a more

intact one. I couldn't bear to risk harming it, so I wore it only once: today, to show Lulu. It drew a lot of attention, shining white and blue on my chest. I didn't like the attention. I planned to take it off as soon as I could.

Lulu stood in the center of a group of boisterous traders, emptying a drink-skin and laughing uproariously. I could tell which traders came from the Arctic by their strangely pale skin and elaborate tentacle-like tattoos, but even among them, Lulu stood out. Her fair skin shone with oil. She had braided her silky black hair and piled it up on her head with shining plastic ribbon.

"Lulu!" I shouted, waving my arms.

She spun around unsteadily and gradually focused her eyes on me. "Robin! Oh, my little Robin! Everyone, meet the newest young lady of Beaver Valley!"

Traders raised their drink-skins and gourds and horns in my direction and shouted in a manner that seemed generally positive, though I got the feeling they would cheer for just about anything in their current state.

I barreled into Lulu's chest. She smelled like citronella and lemongrass. With a laugh, she lifted me up and spun me around in a hug. "You've grown so much since last year! How did you get so big? How have you already reached your initiation? Seems like just yesterday I first held you." She cringed. "My bad. I sound like such a grown-up. I always used to hate hearing that stuff at your age. But by the lights, you've shot up like knotweed! Your father must catch enough fish for you to eat from this little river of yours. And you use your miswak every day, right?"

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Lulu.”

“Good. You people eat too much starch. I won’t have any niece of mine with teeth falling out of her head.”

My father’s people fished or traded, living on the water, traveling all the time. They didn’t grow food and Lulu didn’t think very highly of those who did. Hen never called my family dirt-diggers like the mainland farmers in the north, but hen also didn’t do much to hide hens disdain. I had to admit, though, hen and my father did have better teeth than most of my family.

“Come with me, I have something to show you,” Lulu said. “I know I should wait until Christmas Day, but I got you something special and it just can’t wait.”

Hen dragged me back to the circle of tents where hens trading company stayed – the only Arctic-style tents around, except for mine. For a moment, life returned to me. I smiled and laughed and reveled in Lulu’s whirling energy. I felt happy and then ashamed to feel happiness only days after I’d washed off my mourning ashes.

Hen ducked inside hens tent and emerged with a package wrapped in leather. Hen carefully unwrapped the gift and draped it over my arms. I held it out in front of me: a dress made of the softest material I’d ever felt, in the tightest weave I’d ever seen, dyed a brilliant purple and beaded with iridescent freshwater pearls. It took my breath away.

“For your initiation,” Lulu said. “I know you don’t like drawing attention to yourself, but a woman should look beautiful. And for your first day as a woman, only the finest dress in the North will do. Well? Do you like it?”

“I love it,” I breathed, running my fingers over the zigzag line of pearls. “Where... how did you get this?”

“Here and there. Cotton from mainland dirt-diggers, dye from the Mediterranean, pearls from all over. You’ll find no dress like it anywhere. I know you probably already have a dress, and I don’t want to step on Pelica’s toes or anything, but surely you have more local jewelry and flowers for your hair and all that. If your mother raises a stink about it, you can always save it, maybe for your wedding day, if of course you choose to marry—”

“Pelica died,” I said. “Along with the baby she carried.”

Lulu gaped at me, hens eyes filling with tears, then hugged me again. “Oh, Birdie... Birdie... I can’t imagine how you must feel... and Glassknapper...”

I felt hens hot tears trickle into my hair and gave hen an awkward pat on the back. “Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I feel fine, really.”

Hen pulled away, hands still on my shoulders, and examined me. “Do you?”

I saw my father walking up to us with two oranges in his hands. He handed one to each of us, freeing up his hands to speak. “I finished setting up the house. I brought these for you. From our forest.”

He and Lulu hugged and said the same things everyone said, the same things I’d heard for weeks. I could recite it all from memory – “she lives with the ancestors now...” “if I can do *anything*...” “and how did Robin take it, really?” I didn’t want to see any more of that talk, so I ducked inside with my orange. Lulu had a mirror in hens house, a real one, uncracked and well pol-

ished. I changed into the dress, smoothing out the wrinkles with my hands and looking at my reflection. I certainly looked more like a woman than the last time I'd seen my reflection. In fact, I looked a little like my mother.

We had talked about how I'd look at initiation. We'd planned on elaborate braids for my hair, swept up into a bun with little flowers stuck in it. Now my hair formed its usual puffball and I no longer cared enough about initiation to do anything special with it. I half-heartedly fluffed it into a mostly-round shape and reminded myself to find a nice flower to tuck behind my ear, preferably one that would match my dress or the medallion. I never did end up doing that.

On the first night of Christmas, Light-Up Night, the People of the Hilltop dotted all the pines with candles and lit them one by one. As night fell, stars flickered to life above in the sky and below on the trees. My father, Lulu, and I watched in wonder as the hills lit up, a tapestry of shining lights in the longest darkness of the year.

Once they had lit all the candles, I oiled my skin, picked up my bag of ingredients, waved goodbye to Glassknapper and Lulu, and headed to women's initiation alone.

Tonight I would become a woman, and women endure.



Halfway up the steep mountain, the initiation tunnels opened. Our ancestors had dug two passages right through the mountain, side-by-side, and generations had maintained them for

initiation rites – east for women and west for men. A jagged platform of rusted metal, wood, and woven rope jutted out from the two tunnels.

A woman from the Hilltop guided me to a shady spot at the foot of a mountain, where a group of other girls about my age, all from different families, stood talking. All had either begun their monthly cycle in the past year or, in one girl's case, simply felt moved to walk the women's path. I remembered a few of them from past festivals. They greeted me politely and complimented my outfit. I stiffened and stretched my mouth and rubbed the soft threads of my skirt and mumbled a greeting in return. Thankfully, the girls I knew introduced me to the ones I didn't, and we whittled down some time comparing lineages until we had figured out how we all related. They talked about how much they'd miss living in the children's villages. I nodded and smiled as if I understood.

We didn't wait long before the Hilltop woman came back and motioned for us to follow her. We strapped our ingredients to our backs and followed her west along the river until the mountain sunk low enough to walk up. The moon cast just enough light for us to walk by. Once we'd gotten to the other side of the mountain, we turned around and headed back east. By the time we finally reached the mouth of the initiation tunnel, the moon had risen almost to the top of the sky.

An old woman in a mask of red and black and white waited by the mouth of the tunnel. She carried a bundle of firewood, a waterskin, and a dried gourd with a stopper. She would not tell us her name. I followed her into the tunnel with the other girls.

We carried no torches, just our ingredients, and she led us all deeper and deeper into the darkness. And when we had walked far enough that we could no longer see a single drop of moonlight, the old woman stopped. We heard the snapping of stones and saw bright sparks, and soon the old woman had awoken a little baby flame in a handful of tinder. I saw now that we stood in front of a fire circle, which someone had already prepared with a cone of sticks. An ancient cast-iron cooking pot hung above the circle. She placed the tinder inside the cone and nurtured the fire until it could sustain itself. She did all this slowly and deliberately, and while she did this she started to tell us a story.

“The cycle began again with fire, as it always does,” she said. “Long ago and far away, a family awoke a fire like humans always do, like humans had done for generations before them. But this time, it spread out of control. It spread across the land, devouring everything in its path. It spread even across the sea, to every continent, and burned the world. It burned so much, the skies got hot and the seas rose up to put the fires out.”

She gestured to the walls around us. “From the time of fire, our ancestors left us things like tunnels and cast-iron pots.”

And radiation, I added silently. “The fire that burns in flesh,” as the Vulture Priests call it. Spreading invisibly, uncontrollably, long after the original fire went out.

“But they also left us a very different world than the one they’d known,” the old woman continued. “The ancestors who lived in those days feared that the world had ended, that nothing would ever grow again.”

The fire illuminated all sorts of paintings and handprints covering the tunnel walls. The old woman poured some water into the cooking pot. As it boiled, she turned to one of the other girls and took her bundle of food. From the bundle, she pulled a smaller bag of cornmeal and poured some of it onto her hand.

“Corn Generation came first. They had it the hardest. They had no history but fire and destruction and had to feel their way back to the soil. They didn’t do very well. But they grew as tall as they could, and they provided something on which their children, Bean Generation, could grow. And Bean Generation put good things into the soil. And their children, Squash Generation, kept safe the progress they had made. And because of all this hard work, *their* children, Amaranth Generation, had the luxury of making themselves beautiful. And their brilliant red flowers told all the bees and butterflies that the danger had truly passed, and they could come back to us. It took this many generations to create something worth making, but our ancestors had really started to get somewhere!”

The old woman directed us in preparing the squash and told us when to throw in the cornmeal and dried beans, and together we made a stew as she told us stories about those first four generations.

“Those hands belonged to them,” she told us, pointing to the faded handprints on the wall. “Those hands built the world you live in. Those hands pulled the world back from the brink of oblivion, in the days when the fire seemed like it would leave nothing alive. Those hands have become your hands.”

We filled our bowls with the stew and ate it, and when we had finished, the old woman took a stick from the fire, and we carried everything down the tunnel to the next fire circle, with its own iron pot. And it went that way all through the night. Each time we stopped and woke up the fire with a stick from the last one, and each time we stopped and made another course from the namesakes of the next generations in the line – tomato, chili pepper, onion, and garlic at the second fire; banana, sweet potato, lemongrass, and ginger at the third – and the old woman pointed out the handprints and the paintings and told us stories from our history.

The smell and taste of the ginger nearly chased me from the tunnel. I could feel my mother there, hovering among the paintings that told the tales of Ginger Generation. The old woman didn't tell any stories about her. No one wanted to hear stories about nice women who raised children and animals, even if they gave their lives to do so. I kept my eyes low and hoped that if anyone noticed my tears, they'd attribute them to the smoke of the fire.

By the time we got to the last fire circle, we could see the light at the other end. Here the walls had no paintings and very few handprints.

The old woman filled the last pot with water. Once it had boiled, she nodded to me. I handed her my two gourds of coconut milk. She unplugged the stoppers and poured the milk into the cooking pot.

“For thirteen generations, we have lived here. With each generation, we heal a little more of the damage our ancestors

caused. With each generation, we grow the forest back. Coconut Generation, you stand taller than any of your ancestors. Your children will grow in your shade. Only you can cast the shade they need to survive.”

She held out her hand to me again and I gave her my three bags. She sniffed each one before taking it.

“Coffee Generation – your children,” she said, dipping the bag into the pot to steep. “Cocoa Generation – your grandchildren,” she said, pouring the cocoa into the pot. “They will grow in your shade. Vanilla Generation – your great-grandchildren,” she said, pouring the vanilla powder into the pot, “they’ll grow on the strong limbs of your grandchildren. But they need you to shelter them, just as you needed your ancestors to prepare the world for you. I can’t tell you your stories. You’ll have to live them, and tell them to each other. I can only guess what a delicious world you’ll make.”

And with that, she pulled a waterskin out from beneath her robes. She put one finger to her lips, and stirred something green and sweet-smelling into the pot. Sugarcane juice! We all laughed and though her mask hid her face I could swear she winked at us.

She told us more stories while the drink simmered, and once ready, we all drank. It tasted delicious. Then she painted the palms of our right hands red. One by one, we pressed them against the walls of the tunnel, leaving our marks alongside the line of our ancestors going back to the beginning, where our own daughters would see them one day. I wondered which among the many handprints in Ginger Generation belonged to my mother, but I couldn’t tell. They all looked the same, an anonymous

crowd of red right hands. She had truly joined the ancestors: no longer a person, not even a legend. Just one of an undifferentiated mass of the dead for their descendants to remember and honor collectively. If my family ever left any more descendants. I felt the feast churn in my stomach.

The old woman took a stick from the fire and stomped the fire out. We walked in darkness through the rest of the tunnel, with its plain walls that waited for our stories, and soon the walls fell away to reveal the ruins of Downtown ablaze in the red of the rising sun. Across the river, at the point where the three rivers met, tumbled this maze of old towers, twisted and fallen and alive with greenery.

Below, on the riverbank, everyone at the festival cheered us. We all climbed down ropes to the bottom, and the other girls' mothers rushed to embrace them, to greet them again as real women.

All but mine.

Glassknapper, Narluga, and Aunt Vervain came to congratulate me. I collapsed into Vervain's arms, sobbing uncontrollably. "It hit me," I finally managed to choke. "It hit me."