



THE FIFTH WORLD
CHILDREN
OF
WORMWOOD

A novel by

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CHAPTER TWO

NARLUGA

I'll say this for the yinzers: all those hills keep the bugs at bay. Mostly. Of course, they have to throw their big yearly festival in a floodplain, the one place in all their lands where midges swarm almost as wretchedly as in the Arctic. At least they don't live full-time in their low, swampy areas and try to farm them like the dirt-diggers up north. They flee back up to their hilltops as soon as they can. But they still gather here once a year, and invite all the traders here, so I have to assure my friends year after year, "No, really, most of the time it doesn't get this bad." They don't believe me. *I* wouldn't believe me.

Not that I don't like Christmas. I do, really. The poinsettias, the oranges, the cinnamon, the candles in the trees (which do strike me as kind of dangerous, not that I should make it any of my business and anyway, they haven't set the whole place on fire yet), it all looks very nice. I find it adorable how they consider this a lot of darkness, so much darkness that they need to burn thousands of animals' worth of fat just to make themselves feel better about it. And they seem to think all Christmas cheer comes from some guy who lives in my area, so that makes me kind of a celebrity among the kids, especially when I wear red and white.

So that cools, until they realize I won't give them candy, at which point it abruptly stops cooling.

Anyway, I don't come here for the candles. I come here for family. I come from a people who sail everywhere, a people known for moving around a lot, and I spend most of my time with traders who move around even more, and I *still* don't know anyone else with family that lives so far away. When Glassknapper decided to leave, he didn't take any half measures, he really *left*. Frankly, sometimes it amazes me that he didn't run all the way to Antarctica.

And yeah, I feel bad about it. Whether or not I should, I do. I don't see Robin nearly enough. I didn't even know Pelica had gotten pregnant again, much less died in childbirth. You can't blame me – Glassknapper chose to move all the way down here, not me – but for Robin's sake, I still try to cram a year's worth of doting and spoilage into twelve days of Christmas. I don't even know if she likes it. She talks so little, and takes so much time to open up, and every year I start from scratch, so by the time she's finally warmed to me, we all have to pack up and go back home.

And now this. Apparently, I just wandered into a major family crisis, and how should I have any idea how to react? How to help these people I barely know? I hug Robin because that helps, I guess. I think. I hope.

After Robin leaves for her initiation, Glassknapper turns to me and says, "I want to come back home with you. I can't live in Beaver Valley anymore."

My eyebrows leap almost to my hairline. In twenty years, he hasn't come home, not even once, not even to visit. "For good?" I ask.

"I think so, yes."

"And Robin?"

"She can come if she likes. She can make her own decisions. I hope she does come."

"Me too, but still. You moved to this land. You joined this family. Just because your wife died doesn't mean you lost your whole family here."

"I never really felt like one of them. Even so, I'd like them to come too," he says. "But again, they have to make that decision for themselves."

"They'll never come. You know they'll never come. They don't know how to live on the ocean. I don't care how many rivers they have, rivers don't ocean."

"I learned to live here, they can learn to live there." He brushes his fingertips against the little bag of bones. "I can't leave him here. I can't bury him here, in this poisoned land."

I bite my tongue. Or hold my fingers, or something. He's become a lot more like them than he thinks. He just called a dead infant "he" instead of "hen." Before, he'd talk about the baby in Pelica's belly or the baby they'd recently lost or babies they may have in the future, and call them all "hen" – the way our people refer to children. Now suddenly, he says "he," like the yinzers say: male or female, one or the other, no difference between sex and gender. Their language can't even handle someone like me, and whether he knows it or not, Glassknapper's absorbed that.

He's absorbed other things, too. This language we speak with our hands, we made that, me and him and Mom and Dad and all the family. We built it from scratch, even if we did borrow some gestures from other sign languages we encountered in our travels. It came from our family, from our place, from the Nares Strait. I still speak it the old way, the way we spoke it before he left. But every year, his dialect drifts further and further from what I remember. His motions get less fluid. Each time, his grammar changes just a little more to match the spoken grammar of his new family. Pelica and Robin and the people he lives with now, they all had a hand (hah) in changing his words. And as he changes his words, he changes his outlook. Or maybe the land changes his outlook. Or maybe both. Maybe they swirl around each other, the land shaping the people and the people and the land all shaping him, all molding him into their own shape. Still, I don't understand how someone raised on the sea could think of radiation as something he could escape, or places as discrete units that don't all blur at the edges.

"You know we have radiation in the Arctic too, right?" I ask. "The ancestors may not have built temples there, but they dumped their waste in the sea, and that spread everywhere. We have Vulture Priests up there too, remember, and I'll bet they have an even harder time containing it than these do."

"I know, I know, I just..." He wrings his hands helplessly. "It doesn't work the same way. All of that waste spread across the entire sea generations ago, and I suppose that must have diluted it enough, because we never had these problems. You know just as well as I do, maybe better, about those places where no one

can go because the poison soaked in so deeply that if you go there, you'll die. I can see Beaver Valley turning into one of those places, right in front of my eyes."

He makes a convincing point, but then, he's always had a knack for rationalizing whatever he wanted to do anyway. And right now he wants to run away, like he always does, but he doesn't want to admit it. I don't say that, but I know my brother. Even after all these years, I know when he bullshits himself.

"So have you spoken to Robin about this?" I ask.

"A little, back during the burial. She said we should wait until after Christmas and see how we feel then."

"Smart girl. And I gather you haven't changed your mind since then."

"I haven't. I don't know what she thinks now; I haven't brought it up with her." He pauses. "I sort of hoped you might."

I laugh. "I won't convince your daughter to move for you, Glass. You can't dump that job on me."

"I don't want you to convince her to move," he says. "Just talk to her about it. She knows how I feel, but you have less of a stake in this. She might feel more comfortable talking to you."

Why would Robin would feel more comfortable talking to someone she only saw once a year than her own father? I don't know if I buy that. Then again, how many times have I found myself tipsy on palm wine and pouring my heart out to some stranger because I know I'll leave for the next trading post in the morning and never see her again?

I grudgingly agree to talk to her. And as we wind through the crowd to the hillside, I wonder how it might feel to really *know*

Robin, to become a proper uncle to her. Maybe she only likes me because she sees me rarely, and when she does, I bring her presents. I get to play Cool Uncle Lulu, who she only sees when both of us keep our smiley festival faces on. If I see her more often, if she really gets to know me and stops associating me with gifts, maybe she won't like me so much. Seems like a flimsy reason to hope she doesn't leave Beaver Valley – and if the local Vulture Priests really *have* fallen down on the job, I'd never want her to stay – but it rattles around in my brain while I wait for Robin to climb down.

I get ready to hoot and cheer for her and pepper her with over-the-top grown-up honorifics when she does. But when she finally hits the ground, she starts crying – definitely not with happiness – and falls into Vervain's arms. She and Glassknapper and Vervain all hug each other, this family that knew Pelica and misses her. I stand off to the side, watching, making myself scarce. I know I don't really belong in this family. But Glassknapper does, whether he wants to or not.



The next day, I make some traditional Nares comfort food for the four of us: squid in its own ink sauce with thinly-sliced seaweed. Glassknapper's eyes light up when he sees it. He knows what it took to get squid this far inland, fresh and without breaking its ink sac, just to give him a little taste of home. Robin and Vervain look slightly ill, and I hope I haven't just made them feel worse. Maybe I misjudged the situation. Maybe I should have

tossed some corn or potatoes into it, I don't know. I try, okay? My brother digs in. Robin pokes at it cautiously. Vervain nibbles at the seaweed but looks visibly disgusted with the black sauce. Well, I can name one member of this family who definitely won't come to live in the Nares.

Our mouths go black – one of the great joys of squid ink – and Robin and I stick our stained tongues out at each other for a while. I like seeing her act like a kid. I mean, I guess she doesn't count as a kid anymore, as of this morning, but she acted too much like an adult for a long while before that, long before her mom died. It worries me.

“What does womaning feel like, Madam Robin of Beaver Valley?” I ask her.

She laughs. “Pretty much the same as girling.”

“Oh? You don't feel the sudden urge to get married and have lots of babies?” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I cringe. Robin gives me a tight smile. She knows I didn't mean to remind her. And apologizing would just make it worse. I flounder for a change of subject. “So!” I say. “Corn. You eat corn, right?”

She looks at me sideways. “Yes...?”

“I should try some of that. Corn, I mean. They've got popcorn balls over that way. Do you like them?”

Robin shrugs. “I like them okay.”

“Nice, let's go get some popcorn balls.”

“The kernels tend to get stuck in your teeth, though.”

I hesitate. “Let's go get some popcorn balls and then brush our teeth.”



One not-so-great thing about Christmas? No peppermint. Oh, they have peppermint *candy*. They have peppermint *cocoa*. But just plain peppermint, the leaves? Or spearmint, even? Something minty that doesn't have sugar cane or honey mixed into it? Nada. I go up and down the shore asking about it and no one can help me.

"What do you need peppermint leaves for?" asks Twelve-Toes. (Guess how he got that name.) He has a raised eyebrow and a smirk, like no matter what I say in response, he'll make fun of it. I could tell him I need peppermint for my sick and dying mother (dying from lack of peppermint or something, I don't know) and he'd probably still make vicious fun just because I see him stringing himself up for it and he couldn't waste all that built-up energy.

"I need it for my miswak," I say.

He laughs, revealing his yellowed teeth. He thinks dental hygiene is stupid. Clearly. "I didn't know you needed peppermint leaves for that."

"You don't *need* them, but you know, you have to soak the miswak in water overnight, and if you crush some peppermint leaves in the water, that cleans it some and keeps the midges from jumping in and also makes your breath fresher."

He shakes his head. "I'll never see the point of any of this."

"And you wonder why no one wants to kiss you. Look, do you have peppermint or not?"

“Nope. Try Mandrake over that way. She always brings a lot of herbs and spices, I hear. But she probably only has dried. Keeps them preserved longer.”

I sigh, debating with myself over whether dried will work as effectively as fresh. If I can't get anything better...

Mandrake seems more wizard than trader, one of the type who make themselves look less threatening to the normal folks. I guess she doesn't mind getting peppered with demands to heal every head cold because she's set herself up as some kind of itinerant healer – come all the way from someplace in the Quebecois territories, by the looks of the clothes. She sits on a little bench, holding herself up with a gnarled walking stick – fracking wizards, always with the gnarled walking sticks! – and wrapped up in such an excessive length of cloth that if you unfurled it, you'd probably have a pretty decent tent. It makes her look even tinier and more wizened than she would otherwise, which impresses me because she already kind of looks like a withered turnip. And as soon as I see her, I recognize her as someone like me. Maybe her people only have two genders, like Robin's, and she walks the woman's path. Maybe they have three, like mine, and she got dumped in the “other” category along with me. In any case, whatever her culture calls people like us, however they categorize us, we definitely form part of an “us.” And she recognizes me, too, judging by the broad, knowing smile.

“Well hello, and a very merry Christmas to you,” she says. “You may call me Mandrake. I woman and wize at the mouth of the great St. Lawrence.” (Called it.) “Where do you hail from, and what do your people call you?”

“I come from the north, too – the Nares Strait – and my people call me Narluga.”

“Narluga! I’ve heard of them, the great unicorn-whales of the northern seas. I’d always hoped to see one, and now I have.”

“They don’t have horns, actually.”

She smiles. “Ah, but they do in dreams. They remember the horns of their ancestors. And tell me, Narluga, what brings you to my little tent? Surely, you have healing magic as great as my own. Do you have a particular challenge for me?”

I bristle. “I don’t heal, I just trade goods. And I just want some peppermint leaves.”

Mandrake purses her non-lips. “You don’t heal? Not at all?”

“Nope, just here for the peppermint leaves.”

She looks a little disappointed. “Well, I suppose some of us must not have the wizard sickness. A wizard’s power comes from the ability to hold many perspectives, and people like us begin with a perspective so few can truly understand, it means wizarding comes naturally to many of us. But I make too many presumptions. If you’ve never had the dreams, you’ve never had the dreams.”

“Yeah, so like I said, do you have any peppermint leaves? I’d prefer fresh, but dried will do in a pinch. Hah! Pinch. Because... herbs? Right? Yeah... anyway... what do you want in return? I’ve got a hull full of real Siberian diamonds, big ones you could sharpen and use for a good, strong knife – it’ll cut anything and last forever – and some smaller ones, good for earrings, pendants, even rings. I know a goldsmith here, he could hook you up...”

She sees right through me. I hate the look of pity in her eyes. “How long have the dreams hunted you?”

I tap my foot. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters quite a bit, child. A wizard sickness left untreated will kill the sufferer. To cure it, you must learn from an experienced wizard how to survive the dreams. If you don’t, they will keep hunting you, and they will kill you.”

I grit my teeth. My ink-stained teeth. That don’t smell appropriately minty. And who can I blame for that? “I’ve had the dreams every night for sixteen years,” I say, “and they haven’t destroyed me yet.”

Mandrake’s eyes widen. At least she added a little awe to that look of pity. “Sixteen years. Every night. And you remain. My word, but you have power. Why do you hide this? Why do you deny this power to the world?”

“Because I don’t want to become a fracking wizard!” I snap. I can feel some people’s eyes on me. I lower my voice. “I like sailing. I like meeting new places, seeing new people, exploring the north, trading nice things. I enjoy it, I do it well. I don’t have any interest in—in sitting around some village doing weddings and funerals and setting bones.”

“Do you really think that defines us? Narluga, wizards serve as ambassadors between the human and other-than-human words. We walk between them. The spirits have called you to this sacred task.” She recites a quote, but I don’t know who said it: “If you bring forth what lies within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what lies within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

“Yeah, well, nobody tells me what to do, not even the spirits.” I reach above her head – not exactly a challenge – and grab some dried peppermint leaves hanging in a bundle from the roof.

“What do you want in exchange for this?”

She folds both hands over the top of her walking stick and sets her wrinkly, rheumy eyes on me. “I would like very much to train you, Narluga.”

“I’ve run fresh out of that. What else do you want?”

“You don’t have to come back with me. Just let me teach you what I can before the festival ends. At the very least, I can help you endure the dreams more easily.”

“I will literally give you a sword for this peppermint. An honest-to-God ancient sword, real metal, not even rusted at all.”

She chuckles. “I have no need for swords, child. You know that.”

“I *don’t* know that. Maybe you collect antiques in your spare time. I don’t know your life.”

She gives me that look again. I stare right back at her, unblinking, to show she doesn’t intimidate me. Unfortunately, I don’t intimidate her either.

“I know it frightens you,” she says. “They want to kill you, and that would frighten anyone. But they only want to kill you so they can bring you back even stronger. I know it goes against all your instincts to embrace death, to let them tear you apart and have the faith that they’ll sew you back together. But if you don’t let them kill you in the dream world, you will die a slower and more painful death, one from which you will not return. This I promise you.”

I back up, sucking in my teeth to hide the fact that my jaw is trembling. “I’ll come back with that sword and a bag of diamonds. You can tell me which one you want.”

I go back to my tent and crush the dried peppermint leaves into the bottom of my water gourd, and stir it with the miswak. It smells good, at least. Maybe it’ll do the trick.



Another not-so-great thing about Christmas, and this applies to festivals in general: the bloom falls off the flower mighty quick. Oh sure, you show up the first day and wow, the excitement! So many things to see and do! All the people! You never see so many people gathered in one place except at a festival! And the sounds! The mix of dialects and languages and music and singing and laughter! But by day five or six, you wish you didn’t have to see quite so many people. And they didn’t make quite so much noise. And you realize how much shit that many people can produce, and how quickly they run through all the really soft leaves, and maybe putting so many people in one place doesn’t actually work out that well. And you kind of just want to go home.

At least, *I* only take a few days to start feeling that way. But I’ll often jump from one festival to another, especially during the dry season. Believe me, the novelty wears off right and quick.



I swim in the sea. I dive deep down, further than any human can go. But I don't need air. I keep myself breathing somehow. I swim in the darkness of the deep, and I feel at home. The pressure feels like a hug. The cold feels refreshing. And then the narluga comes, headed straight at me. I try to swim away, but now the pressure works against me. First it constricts my breathing, and then I remember I can't breathe at all. The cold slows me down. I feel myself dying even before the narluga rams me. I black out from the blow, or maybe just the lack of air.

When my vision returns, I think I see double, but no: more than one narluga whale swims around me, a whole pod of them, and they've got me surrounded. As I spin around looking for an opening, one of them grips my arm in its massive jaws, and even in the dim light of the deep, I can see a cloud of blood floating up.

I start to scream, but I know if I do, I'll lose what little air I have left in my lungs. So I bite my lip until that bleeds too. I feel another one's jaws clamp down on my other arm. Then one has my leg, then another has my other leg. They don't rip my limbs clean off, even though they have the teeth and the jaw strength to do it. Instead, they all back up and they pull. I may have blacked out again, or maybe all my blood in the water makes the world go dark. I can't see anything, can't feel anything but the searing pain of my flesh tearing apart, my bones straining to keep my body together.

As usual, I wake up before I die. I sweat, I pant, I burn, I tremble. You'd think I'd have gotten used to it by now. I collect myself a little before I walk out of my tent, nice and casual,

yawning even. I don't think anyone can tell that I've come outside out of desperation, to breathe as much and as deeply as I possibly can. Twelve-Toes brews coffee over the fire. A couple traders sit around it, drowsily taking the piss out of each other. He calls me over by way of looking at me and holding up a steaming gourd. I keep my hands steady by clutching it tight and taking frequent sips.

"Did you ever get your peppermint?" Twelve-Toes asks.

"Sure did," I say.

"What'd you trade for it?"

"Your balls." Sip. Laughter.

I'll take the sword over later. Who doesn't want a sword? So old. So rare. So shiny.



You see a big international presence at these kinds of festivals, but they mostly exist for the benefit of the families who live in the area. The festivals give them their big chance to get together, meet people outside their own families, hook up with said people, get married, hear the latest gossip, and – in the yinzers' case – hold Congress.

Yeah, they have a thing where each family chooses two people, usually elders, to represent them. And then all these representatives get together and talk on other people's behalf, and then they go back to their families and convince them to go along with the decision, usually leaning heavily on, "Well, we all agreed to it at Congress, and you don't want to let down the

other families, do you?" I find it slightly less ridiculous than the dirt-diggers' various presidents and prime ministers, but still pretty ridiculous.

Glassknapper's family sends Vervain and a woman I don't know very well named Ash. Vervain plans to talk about Pelica and Ginkgo. And incidentally, the Beaver Valley Vulture Priests send their own representatives. I don't usually go to Congress because why would I, but I won't miss this. I bring popcorn. I don't usually eat popcorn either, but hey, 'tis the season, right? I don't know how you 'tis a season – it must involve corn, I guess, like everything around here – but anyway, I'll make an exception just this once.

So anyway, representatives from each family gather under this big pavilion that they built just for the occasion and talk about their problems and argue with each other, and they call this Congress. Lots of onlookers have gathered around the pavilion to watch and chatter. They fall silent when the Vulture Priest representatives show up, and of course I can understand why.

Vulture Priests look like death. They do that on purpose. They *want* to scare people away. They cover their whole bodies with long black robes. Black feather collars hide all the skin between the necks of their robes and their tight red hoods, and the hoods hide all the skin before you hit those mask: all white with curved beaks. The beaks even have nose holes. They keep burning aromatic herbs in the tips of the beaks and the smoke rises out of the nostrils like smoke from a dragon. They hide their eyes with the bottoms of old glass bottles, embedded somehow in the eye

holes of the masks. (You think Glassknapper provided these particular lenses? You think he regrets it?)

They even wear black gloves and black shoes – heavy ones. Who even wears shoes? They must all roast, even without the radiation. But they cover up for just that reason: because the radiation eats them alive. Under all those robes, their hair falls out and their skin rots on the bone. The burning herbs cover up the smell, and their overall creepy look drives people away. It also prevents people from recognizing them. Once you join the Vulture Priests, you leave your family. You can't care about people and still kill yourself like that. You've already died, and you know it. Only a specter remains, carrying out one final task.

The Vulture Priests sent two new representatives this year, just like last year, and the year before that. They don't survive long enough to attend Congress twice. One of them looks at the magical symbols scribbled on some banana leaves. They have their own secret way of talking to each other through these symbols, even with people far away or long dead. This priest probably wants to study what last year's representatives said. Do the promises made by last year's representatives bind them, or do you never know what you'll get from year to year? Who even knows with these people?

In any case, Congress begins and it doesn't take long before I regret coming here. Every topic of discussion amounts to petty bickering between two or more families about who killed whose pig. And the representatives take every little feud seriously and debate this nonsense for hours upon hours.

I finish my popcorn ball and start weighing whether or not to go on a little wine run when Vervain finally stands up. Now, she has your average tiny-old-lady build and your average tiny-old-lady voice, but she also has this air of dignity that makes you want to listen to her. She keeps her voice quiet and soft, which you'd think would allow people to ignore her, but instead they quiet down themselves and listen more carefully. I have no idea how she does it. When I try that trick, people just talk over me. Maybe I have to live for another thirty years or something, maybe gray hair makes the difference, I don't know.

"My sister died last month," she says, and you can feel the entire audience lean in closer to hear. "We called her Pelica, and she didn't live long enough to see her only daughter, Robin, become a woman. She died giving birth to a baby with a half developed brain that showed through a hole in his skull. He died the same day. A tragedy, yes, but this befalls us as only the latest in a clear pattern of tragedy. Pelica wanted desperately to have another child, but the women of my family have endured miscarriage after miscarriage. Pelica's daughter, who might I remind you just became a woman, remains the youngest member of our family. Not one child has entered the world alive among us, across the entire span of her childhood.

"We live downstream from Beaver Valley Temple. And shortly before Pelica died, she and Robin found a ray-cat. They found her along the shore of a creek that flowed off of the Ohio River. They found the cat green, and they found the cat dead."

One by one, everyone looks at the Vulture Priest representatives. Some sneak furtive glances, some openly gawk,

but everyone looks. You can't see much. Under those masks, who knows what their faces look like?

"I stand as one of a small handful of elders in my family," Vervain goes on, "all of us women. The men get sick young. We have sent all of them to the temple, to keep the vigil, to keep others from getting sick. We give you the food you cannot grow, forage, or hunt yourself. What has it gotten us? We die younger and younger. Our numbers dwindle. Soon, perhaps, we will disappear. Some of us have already discussed leaving this land, this beloved land of our ancestors, for good." Vervain turns to look at the Vulture Priests directly. "You have all vowed to keep the radiation contained, to sacrifice your own lives to spare the lives of others. You have either broken that vow knowingly, or something has gone terribly wrong. You owe us answers."

She sits back down. One of the Vulture Priests, with the help of a cane, rises shakily to his feet and shuffles into the center of the circle. "We have long had a sacred contract between our people," he says in a hoarse, quivering voice. "But those not in the priesthood often don't understand the work we do. They think us miracle workers. Listen: the fire that burns in flesh will haunt us for eternity. It can never be destroyed. Eventually, over the course of too many lifetimes for us to imagine, it will burn less fiercely, but for as far as we can see, it will never go out. Our ancestors left us sacraments and artifacts to contain it as best they could. But even these were not perfect when they were made, and we do not have the tools they had to remake them.

"We do what we can, but it is not enough. It will never be enough. We polish metal to keep it from rusting for as long as

possible, but it will rust before the fires go out. We slather broken casks with more and more concrete, but they will crumble before the fires go out. Every hurricane, every flood, every earthquake undoes at least a year of work. We lose more progress than we make, no matter how hard we try, no matter how hard we drive ourselves.

“I understand the pain your family is in; all the Vulture Priests do. I wouldn’t have joined this order if I wasn’t willing to do whatever it took to protect all the families of Pittsburgh and those further downriver. But you must understand: we will fail. This will keep happening – at our temple and at others. It will get worse. Enough time has passed that we are hearing about temples all over the world, even the best-maintained ones, falling apart. They’re just too old. They were never meant to last this long. The tombs in which the ancestors buried as much of the fire as they could, those will last longer, but they too will fall. We priests want even more than you do for this not to be the case. We throw ourselves on the fire to delay the inevitable. Our scholars at Three Myland scour the words of the ancients for some kind of solution. So far, we have found none.”

Hen turns to look directly at Vervain through those dark glass goggles. Hen looks sad somehow, but maybe I just read that into his mask. “I can only recommend that your family leave its land while you still have a family. I’m sorry.”



That night, I have dinner with the family outside Glassknapper's tent. They all brood, understandably – everyone except Pillbug, who happily laps from Robin's bowl with no interference from Robin. No one says much of anything. Even I refrain from pointing out that letting a kitten eat from your bowl seems pretty unhygienic. It doesn't seem like the time.

"I've come to a decision," Vervain announces, putting her bowl down. She speaks with voice and hands, and both have a tone of finality. She does this kind of thing, as I've learned in bits and pieces over the last twenty years: she won't tell you anything she intends to do until she's already finished doing it.

"When Christmas ends, I will go back with you most of the way. We will part at the temple, and I will join the Vulture Priests."

I look to Glassknapper and Robin to see how they react because I don't feel enough of a proper family member to have and express a reaction of my own. Glassknapper's mouth hangs open, his chopsticks stuck midair with seaweed hanging from them, dripping broth. Robin's face turns to stone. She puts down her bowl, picks up her kitten, and walks away without a word. Hard steps, angry steps.

Glassknapper finally finds the wherewithal to put his chopsticks down and say something. "Why don't you come back with us to Nares? Why would you join the Vulture Priests when they just said the Beaver Valley Temple will fall, that all the temples will fall?"

"Because doomed causes need more help than any other," Vervain says, signing without speaking now that Robin has left.

(She's never cared what I think about anything.) "And because I do have hope yet. Our land suffered long before the radiation started seeping out. Some might have called it doomed then, but we still lived there. My mother brought the Ash Flats back to life, and then gave her life to the vigil. She will have died in vain if I don't do the same for you, for Robin, for everyone who comes after. I've carried on her work, nursing the Ash Flats in her absence. I must follow in her footsteps once again. Whether I succeed or fail, I owe you my best attempt."

I don't see any more of the conversation. My eyes follow the back of Robin's head as she stomps away, and then the rest of my body joins them. When I finally catch up with her, her feet rest in the water and Pillbug rests in her arms. She watches the ruins of Downtown as they turn black in the setting sun. I walk up next to her, lean out too far and wave in her face. She scowls at me. At nine, she'd have loved that. I keep forgetting she didn't stay nine.

"So," I say.

"So," she says.

We marinate in a long, agonizing silence.

"Seems kind of strange that she doesn't even want to wait long enough for a living funeral, huh?" I ask.

Robin frowns at the sand. "She probably wants to spare us another one. But she doesn't understand that she won't spare us the worst part. She'll take away the part we need and leave the part that hurts."

"Birdie..." I put an arm around her shoulder. "She wants to save you, to do what she can to keep the radiation contained so you don't have to—"

“I don’t have to *what?*”

She knows I meant to say, “end up like Pelica.” *I* know I meant to say, “end up like Pelica.” I can’t see any point in even finishing the sentence at this point. “So you don’t have to worry about it.”

Robin wrenches herself out from under my arm. “But I *will* worry about it. And I’ll end up in that temple, too. And any children I have. If I can even *have* children. If I even live long enough to try. You know, my father told me we should leave, that the land hated us and we’d die if we stayed. That Vulture Priest basically told us the same thing. Should I ignore both of them? Why should I give my life for a lost cause? Why should I spend my life caring for a land that’ll only die anyway?”

I nod to Pillbug. “That kitten will die someday.” The kitten looks up at me with clueless round eyes. “I hate to tell you, kid, but you will.” I look back to Robin. She has the ghost of a smile on her face, but looks pretty resentful about it. “Vervain had some things to say about that. She said something about how an impossible task needs the most help. Or something like that. Maybe you should hear her out.”

“I thought you’d want me to come live in the Nares,” Robin says.

“I do, but I also don’t want anyone to blame me if you disown your aunt right before she... right before you can’t ever see her again.”

Robin looks back at Downtown, and at the sloshing waves of the Mon, reflecting back slivers of stars. Her eyes get some waves of their own. “I want to go back with you, though. If only to bury

my brother at sea. Maybe I'll come back, maybe I won't. I don't know what to do. I don't want anyone else to die."

"No one does."

She snuffles, furrows her brow, and suddenly her anger has returned. "It all just feels so pointless. Someone out there must have found a better way. We can't just throw generation after generation of people at the radiation until everything the ancestors built to contain it rusts away. How can we possibly put up with it for any longer? With so many people dead and dying, and so many more people who'll die? How can we accept it?"

"What else can we do?" I ask. "It won't go away, not for a long, long time. We don't have any alternatives."

Robin turns to face me again. "Don't we?" she asks.

I shrug. "If the Vulture Priests knew of a better way, they'd do it. They know how to read the ancestors' books. They understand how it all used to work."

"And the ancestors never knew what to do with it, so they sealed it up. They couldn't put answers in their books that they didn't know, could they?" she asks.

"Then where could you find it?"

"I don't know. Out there somewhere. Maybe somewhere between here and the Arctic." Her mouth wavers in a half-hearted smile. "I love my home, Lulu. I don't want to abandon it. But maybe I have to go away for a while, to find a way to protect it. For good."

"Birdie, you have to prepare yourself for the possibility that maybe no other way exists."

“Didn’t Aunt Vervain just say that an impossible task needs the most help?”

“I don’t know, I think I mangled it pretty badly.”

“Well, she said something like that.”

“I suppose she probably did.”

Robin cuddles Pillbug closer for comfort, but the kitten squirms, wanting to jump down and play. Grudgingly, Robin lets her down onto the sand. Pillbug races off as fast as she can with her little paws sinking into the wet sand.

“At least you’ll have someone to warn you if it gets too dangerous,” I say. “I think it would make your mom happy to know that one of the kittens survived, and that you’ve got a friend to look out for you.”

Robin wipes her eyes and snuffles again. This time, it sounds like more of a snort. “And a really cool uncle.”

I grin. “I really do nail this uncle thing, don’t I?”

“I guess,” she says. “I don’t really have another one to compare you to.”

“Excellent. I win no matter what.”

Robin’s laugh sounds thick with tears, but she laughs nonetheless.

“You want to go back now?” I ask.

“Yeah, I think so.”

We head back to the tent, where Glassknapper and Vervain wait for us, their food untouched and growing cold.

“You’d better eat up,” I tell them. “We have a long trip ahead of us.”