

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?  
—William Blake, "The Tyger"

They say that at the point they have reached they must examine the principle that has guided them. They say it is not for them to exhaust their strength in symbols. They say henceforward what they are is not subject to compromise. They say they must now stop exalting the vulva. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. They say that any symbol that exalts the fragmented body is transient, must disappear. Thus it was formerly. They, the women, the integrity of the body their first principle, advance marching together into another world.

—Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

When Heaven sends forth its engines of destruction, the stars are moved out of their places and the constellations metamorphosed. When Earth sends forth its engines of destruction, dragons and snakes appear on the dry land. When Man puts forth his faculties of destruction, Heaven falls and Earth is overthrown. When Heaven and Man do so in concert, all the disorganised phenomena are re-established on a new basis.

—ascribed to the Yellow Emperor, *The Yin Fu Ching*,  
trans. Fredric Henry Balfour

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## SALTWATER CITY

Isabelle Chow, inventor, CEO of HÖST Light Industries  
Chan Ling, a factory worker, founder of Grist Village

## FIRST QUARANTINE RING (SALTWATER FLATS)

### *Woodward's Building*

Kora Ko, a fifteen-year-old girl  
Kai Wai Ko, her uncle  
Charlotte Ko, her mother  
Godwin Austen "K2" Ko, her older brother  
Stash Sacks, K2's friend  
Delphine, Kora's pet goat

### *Cordova Dancing School for Girls*

Madame Aurelia Dearborn, headmistress  
Myra Mao, leader of the dancing girls  
Tania Manuel, a different kind of leader

Velma  
Modesta  
Soraya  
Mirabelle  
Anna  
} *dancing girls*

### *Pacific Pearl Parade*

Marcus Traskin, lord and CEO of the Pacific Pearl  
Parade, leader of 100 tiger men

**COAST SALISH TIMEPLACE (SOVEREIGN)**

Jemini (a cloning company, in exile from Saltwater City)  
Kai Tak Ko, Kora's father  
Everest Ko, K2 Ko's twin brother

**SECOND QUARANTINE RING (COSMOPOLITAN EARTH COUNTRY)**

General Manuel, leader of the CEC  
Cousin Sloane, Tania's cousin, a border guard

**THIRD QUARANTINE RING**

*Pente-Hik-Ton*  
Billy Armstrong, a Sylx man  
Maria Armstrong, his mother (deceased)

*New Origins Archive*

Elzbieta Kruk, high priestess of the New Origins Archive

Buttercup  
Vera  
Rose  
} *attendants*

**FOURTH QUARANTINE RING (GRIST VILLAGE)**

Kirilow Groundsel, a groom  
Glorybind Groundsel, her mother double  
Peristrophe Halliana, a starfish, Kirilow's lover  
Radix Bupleuri, a doubler  
Bombyx Mori, Radix's groom  
Corydalis Ambigua  
Calyx Kaki  
} *Grist sisters*

CASCADIA YEAR: 127 TAO (TIME AFTER OIL)  
UNITED MIDDLE KINGDOM CYCLE 80, YEAR 42 (WOOD SNAKE YEAR)  
GREGORIAN YEAR: 2145



"Mother fuck! Get off me! Who the hell are you?"  
Actually, she recognizes him. He's a friend of her brother's—Stash Sacks. He looks awful. His face is covered in weeping sores. His eyes ooze pus.

"What happened to you? How did you get up here?"  
"K2 gave me the keys. We lost our jobs this week because we're too sick to lift the elk at the abattoir."

"That's awful."  
He grips her tighter, nibbles her ear.  
"Please let go."  
He doesn't.  
"I mean it."

"You don't want me to hug you anymore?"  
"Stash, I would rather hug a Grist sister. Let go, really."  
"Dirty Kora Ko," says the boy. "There's no such thing as Grist sisters. They're just a story told by scared old men." The bear hug from behind turns aggressive.

"Let go of me!" Her scales writhe.  
"When I wasn't sick you liked me just fine."  
"I did not. I hardly know you."  
"The last healthy member of the Ko family." He leans in, licks her face with his white tongue.

"Aghi! What are you trying to do?"  
He bites her cheek hard enough to break skin.  
"Trying to give me your disease?"

He's fierce, but he's thin, even thinner than Kora. She might be hungry, but she's tough as an old shoe, whereas he's pale and wasted. She kicks a foot out from under him.  
"Little whore! What did you do that for?" He pulls her to the

the occasional lesion. Miraculously, they thrive in the privacy of the Pacific Pearl Parkade, doors closed to the world.

Although the tiger flu has a taste for men, it doesn't discriminate against the wealthy. In fact, the first to succumb to the fourth wave was the hated despot Aloysius Chow-McPherson. The citizens of Saltwater City rejoiced, as did the denizens of the surrounding quarantine ring known as Saltwater Flats. Then Chow-McPherson's kindly brother, Ferdinand, took ill. The people still rejoiced, because, though kind, Ferdinand was a high-ranking member of a despotic family. The family company, HöST Light Industries, ruled the city in its own best interests. Chow-McPherson's wife, Sophia, took charge. But she too got sick. Then his daughter, Isabelle, took over. As Kora is all her family's got, Isabelle is all the city has got. She

better be enough.  
Far behind Chang, the backup mainframe Eng rolls in her expanding orbit. If Isabelle could open diplomatic channels with the Cosmopolitan Earth Council, which controls the last remaining rockets outside the United Middle Kingdom, perhaps they could be convinced to help right the orbits of Chang and Eng. Otherwise, Eng's elliptical orbit will only deepen, and hundreds of years will pass between sightings.

Delphine lies down in her bed of straw. "See you tomorrow, sweet goat." Kora places her hands on the highest rung of the fence, hikes herself up so she can lean in and plant a kiss on the goat's rough forehead.  
Something rustles behind the shed. She drops her feet back to the ground.

"Who's there?"  
No answer. She goes to look, but before she's taken half a step, a young man leaps out and grabs her from behind. "Boo!"

ground with him. Rubs his face into hers, tries to stick his tongue in her mouth.

"Get off me!" Rolls him over.

Gripped by jealousy and desire, he won't let go. On the battered concrete floor that once kept water out of the apartments below, they roll over one another, closer and closer to Uncle Wai's potato jars and the crumbling wall. They'll go over the edge if they aren't careful. Kora throws her weight in the opposite direction, towards Delphine's pen. She's heavier than Stash. Back they roll. Her weight on him makes his heart pump. He finds fresh strength. Towards the wall they turn again.

"You little shit! I'm going to beat the fuck out of you." Kora won't be defeated. She jams her shoulder hard against his and forces their momentum back Delphine's way.

Rage grips him, makes him superhuman for a moment. They spiral furiously into a jar. It tips over and hits the wall. Fragments of loose concrete clatter to the ground forty floors below. The wall gives. The jar crashes overboard and smashes onto the sidewalk.

"I'm not gonna die just 'cause you are!" She forces him back, and they roll all the way to Delphine's fence. The old goat bleats panic. "It isn't fair!" He pushes on top of her again. Rolls her towards the brink as she attempts to pull her arm free to punch him. Here's the edge. There's no wall to protect them. Holy shit, holy shit, they're going to fall! Over the ledge they go. Kora grabs a coil of loose rebar. The sick boy clings to her waist. "I don't want to die!" She could kick him in the belly and he would plummet.

She feels the temptation. Her arm begins to quiver. She can't hold their weight for much longer. She has to decide now. She hoists them both back up to the safety of the rooftop garden.

"You little fuck!" she hisses.

The monsoon clouds burst open and shower them. Stash trembles, flat on his belly beside her. Gets ahold of himself and gives her a crooked grin, half-malevolent, half-teasing. "Piss off," Kora says. "I don't care if you are my brother's friend. You're not welcome in my house."

floppy as an old sock. Still juicy to her young groom, who loves her. For me, nothing about her is juicy. Everything is duty. That means grit and grin, through every whim and tantrum.

I sigh. I clean then sharpen my knives on my precious whetstone. Don't you know that diamonds are a girl's best friend? We made the whetstone ourselves, crushed so many engagement rings from skeletons of the time before, six glass towers full of nice ladies, sweet

so sweet. Purty, the scavenger Aunties tell me, purty as covergirl, wonderful wonderbra, guess? by georges marciano.

Purty and thin as skin and bones. They had time to work off the weight. Time to rot, time to mummify. For every season there is a reason. Off their skinny dead fingers the scavenger Aunties took their diamonds. Crushed those doggies to a coarse salt and

made me my whetstone. Now I smooth my blade, one, two, three. All that love from the time before rushes into my shiv.

That's the way the cookie crumbles, I tell my beloved Peristrophe Halliana, as I work my knives. Once they are good and sharp, I wipe them down with mother moonshine. We make it ourselves in

claw foot tubs from the time before. With potatoes cropped from our own fields, you know, Mistress Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? We pretty maids, we Sisters Grist, some call us tub puppets, fuck moppets, matchstick monkeys. Who cares? We will outlive them all, in beds of our own making.

As I prepare my knives, I rant the chant the grannies gave me, the one that Grandma Chan Ling heard from the dirt, so long ago. My mother double, Glorybind Groundsel, smoking medicinal marijuana in the old rosewood pipe she inherited from Grandma Chan Ling herself, chants with me to make sure I get the words right. She teaches me my genealogy. You know, like, where we came from. What we're here for. "You must hold these things, Kirilow,"

KIRILOW GROUNDSEL // GRIST VILLAGE (FOURTH QUARANTINE RING)

# THE STARFISH GROOM

NODE: KERNELS PLUMP  
DAY: 1

EVEN IF SHE IS OUR LAST DOUBLER, I DON'T WANT AUNTIE RADIX TO

have Peristrophe Halliana's eyes. Auntie Radix already took Peristrophe Halliana's liver a week ago, and one of her kidneys four weeks before that. Auntie Radix says that it is the duty and nature of a starfish to give. I tell her it is the duty and nature of a doubler to know when to stop asking. Peristrophe Halliana and I have seen the new monsoons only nineteen times each. We are barely old enough to do what we do. Auntie Radix has been drenched by the rains forty-eight times. It should be her job to sacrifice for us, not the other way round. It's a good thing that memory is not a part of the body that can be cut out, or no doubt she would ask for Peristrophe Halliana's memory too.

I bite back my resentment. Radix Bupleuri is our queen, not to mention the eldest of the eighty-three sisters who live at Grist Village and a direct descendent of Grandma Chan Ling. She is well past a healthy age for child-bearing, but she is also our last doubler. With our death rates, we Grist sisters go the way of the dodo, unless she keeps birthing puppies. Yes, from her midnight egg space and—pop!—out her hoo, once plump and fresh, now



Our Mother of elk  
 Blessed are the sheep  
 And blessed are the roses  
 Blessed are the tigers  
 Wind, bones, and onion flowers  
 We remember you and we remember rain  
 We remember mushrooms holding the globe  
 in their mycorrhizal net  
 We remember dust  
 We remember meat  
 We remember fibre in its weave and fibre  
 in its weft  
 The shifting and wobbling of the intentional  
 earth

she tells me. "We hold all that remains of the old world's knowledge in our raw brains. That means we need to be extra smart."

She teaches me how to be a good groom to my beloved Peristrophe Halliana, the last starfish among us, the last giver. It isn't easy, you know—to have and to hold, to kiss and to cut. Silt slits, that's what they call us in Saltwater City. I'm not ignorant, I know what they say. It's why they expelled our grannies eighty years ago. For having and holding. For slicing and stitching. What did they expect from us anyhow? That they could keep making us again and again and again and again? Bust us from their greasy bottles like so many cheap gene genies? As if.

Grandma Chan Ling invented the partho pop, you know, how we egg ourselves along—I mean, the long, lizardy love of the Grist sisters. We split, we slit, we heal, we groom, self-mutated beyond the know-how of the clone company Jemini that spawned us, and the HoST scale and microchip factories that bought our grannies to work for them. But there are flaws in our limited DNA—the DNA of just one woman. We mutate for better and worse, for sickness and health. But more for sickness and worse. Only our starfish can save us, by regrowing whatever grooms like me cut out of them. Grandma Chan Ling invented the kiss cut, the repair job—what do you say? The fix, the patch. The first starfish gave her liver, her kidneys, and, at last, her red-hot heart to the first doubler. And so it was, in the beginning.

Belly:

Our Mother of milk and mildew  
 Our Mother of dirt  
 Our Mother of songs and sighing

Peristrophe Halliana sips six slugs of mother moonshine infused with forget-me-do. I wipe down the last blade with a seventh. Then the flame, hot so hot. My precious bunsen burner salvaged from the very lab where Grandma Chan Ling was made, in old Saltwater Town, the ruin that somehow keeps on being a city. All

After we escaped the sister factories of Saltwater City, Grandma Chan Ling herself doctored it all. Our great progenitress—not only the first doubler but also the first groom, inventor of the loving transplant, the sexy suture. It feels good, you know, don't doubt it. We mutated the first forget-me-do, not that Isabelle Chow, not those Saltwater killers who claim it for who knows what new wickedness. Forget-me-do makes you feel pain as pleasure. It takes away all memory and feeling of pain, leaves nothing but a craving to be cut again. We cultivated it for the sisterly insertion and the doublers return, two holy ways for one to become two.



# EARTH APPLES

KORA KO // SALTWATER FLATS

NODE: KERNELS PLUMP  
DAY: 1

## UP IN THE ROOFTOP GARDENS OF THE CRUMBLING WOODWARD'S

Building, where the Ko family has lived for generations, Kora spills potatoes and earth out one of the large earthenware jars. The jar is huge—big enough to hold three Koras and her beloved goat. Although one is lost, there are eleven more on the rooftop. They are old and cracked now, and so fragile that the earth Uncle Wai filled them with last fall pushes at their walls and threatens to split them open.

She picks up a potato. It is not very big—barely the size of her fifteen-year-old fist. Gnarled and slimy, its rotten surface crawls with wireworms. It smells, not of sweet earth but of putrefaction. "Soil's depleted, uncle," Kora says. "Do you think we could convince the wet market gardeners to sell us more?"

Uncle Wai coughs. They both know the wet market farmers will never help them. It's 2145, and the dollar is dead. The wet market farmers want renminbi, a currency no one in the Ko family earns. She examines the potato in her hand, watches a fat white worm wriggle over its rotting skin. She shudders. But if she can accept

railway tracks, mouldy stucco, and tarnished glass skyscrapers. All of civilization. Not that I've ever been there, but my mother double teaches me all the songs and all the history she remembers.

Thinking about the fith of Saltwater City makes me will my knives super clean. Pour more vodka in to burn baby learn. I'm being followed by a moonshine shadow. Peristrophe Halliana is prone to infection. The cutting might be no big deal, but healing's a bitch. So knives must shimmer clean, a lean mean clean. I mean, sparkle, twinkle like the lemon muscle man from the time before. Clean as mister. Even though the mistresses are master here.

The first cut is the sleekest. At the corner of the eye, at the zygomatic process, where the top of the skull attaches to the side of the head. I know my bones. My mother double taught me well. Foot bone connected to the heel bone. Heel bone connected to the ankle bone. Peristrophe Halliana sighs a sleepy sigh of pleasure-pain. I move my fingers beneath her eyeball, the tiniest blade concealed between middle and index. Nudge it out and softly slice the root. She groans. I tug at the globe, and it releases with a gentle squelch and click.

"Those are pearls that were her eyes," I sing as blood gushes from her left socket. I cinch it shut, and suture with my finest lichen fibre thread. From her right eye, she gazes at me with love. I give her another couple of slugs of mother moonshine. Then, careful so careful, I work my blade on the right. Again, the root. Another squelch, another click. How can Peristrophe have so much blood in her head? I staunch the flow with mushroom gauze, press into the wound until the hot pulse of blood subsides. I stitch her up quick.

the flow of earth and potatoes with the other. But today, it takes two of them, one old man who is not actually very old and one young woman who is actually still a girl.

"Soon, niece, you'll be strong enough to do this on your own. You just need to eat more meat." He glances up at her through the enemy eyes.

She works quickly now, wills herself to focus. From the darkness of the rickety shed, Delphine bleats. The goat is already seven years old. Uncle Wai says they'll have to slaughter her soon, to do it without hurting her. Kora has known the goat since Kora was eight. She dreads having to play a part in the goat's death, but Uncle Wai says Kora can't be so soft if she wants to survive in the world that is coming.

"We'll do it kindly," he says.

"I love the goat, uncle."

"I know, child. I know."

She begins to tilt another jar. The clouds open suddenly, and the acid torrent drenches them. The water is slightly viscous. Her hand slips, and the jar crashes to the garden floor and splits into a hundred sharp pieces. Dirt and potatoes scatter everywhere.

There is no time for recrimination.

"You get the potatoes. I'll get the earth," says Uncle Wai. He dashes for the broom.

Kora digs out a bamboo-fibre sack from the storage bin beside the goat shed and gathers potatoes as fast as she can. Many of them are so rotten, they squelch in her hand, but there is no time to sort. She fires them into the bag while Uncle Wai sweeps the precious dirt into a corner and covers the heap with waxed bamboo cloth.

this horror, then she can accept the unknown horrors coming. She imagines dislodging the white squirmer and putting it in her mouth. "Stop daydreaming, Kora," shouts Uncle Wai as he quickly sweeps earth back into the jar. "Hurry up. Looks like monsoon season is early this year."

She raises her gaze skyward. Clouds the colour of bruises rumble across the face of Chang. Kora worries about his increasingly close orbit. Although HöST has vast powers over the citizenry of Saltwater City and Saltwater Flats, it has little power over objects in space, even when that space is relatively close. If HöST were friendly with the neighbouring Cosmopolitan Earth Council, it might be able to push him back out to his original orbit. But HöST is not on friendly terms with the CEC.

Chang's actual size doesn't change, but to those on Earth his lumbering form appears larger with each passing day. The clouds that drift overhead cover his logo-pocked face, grow thick, and threaten to split.

"Come on, Kora. Let's go."

She can't help it. The worse things get, the more her mind turns to visions of the future. She sees the men waste and die. She sees whole houses shut their doors against the flu-ridden city, only to be consumed from the inside. Houses packed to the rafters with the corpses of men and boys, and the girls and women who stayed too close. Houses bursting with rot and sorrow. She sees these things so intensely that they have become the world she already inhabits. She moves through the present as though through mud.

"Kora!" Uncle Wai's got a jar lowered halfway, and it's slipping from his grip. She rushes to help him.

There was a time when he could empty the jars on his own, guiding them to the garden floor with one hand, while controlling

He covers the rain barrels too. This rain is too contaminated to

be useful.

Soaked through, they scurry down the rooftop hatch, carrying the bag of potatoes between them.

They lurch downstairs like an old bear with two heads. Inside

the apartment, they wipe their hands and faces with towels hanging at the foot of the stairs. They remove their tattered raincoats.

Kora's coat hasn't protected her from much. She goes to her room to change. There, she discovers a new rain burn in the blue cotton dress sent to her by Kai Tak Ko, the father she's never met. She

likes it because it has lots of pockets. She shouldn't have worn it to the roof. She rinses the burnt corner in the basin of good water

reserved for washing face and hands. Where the fabric was stained by bad rain, a hole presents itself. *Damn it.* She pulls on her only

other dress, the one made of mud-brown bamboo fibre that Uncle Wai gave her for her birthday two years ago. She goes to the kitchen.

At the kitchen table, Kora's mother and older brother sit, peeling and cutting potatoes. They slice out the rotten parts. They squish wireworms. Charlotte and K2 have a pot going on the stove to

cook the good parts into a soup that they can freeze at least until they run out of bamboo to fuel the generator. If the potatoes were healthy and whole, they'd store them in the empty apartment next door, abandoned by their neighbours after the father and brothers succumbed to the flu last winter. But these motley chunks of potato

flesh won't keep on their own.

Charlotte looks exhausted. Although she's not yet forty, her dull black hair is streaked with white, and dark pockets of loose skin sag beneath her eyes. She's the only family member who still has a job, as night nurse at a nearby hospice, and she looks after the whole family on top of that.

The tall, once handsome Godwin Austen "K2" Ko slouches at

the table, thin and pale. Although his twin brother, Everest, never lived with them, the absence that has always haunted K2 seems to

scream from his skin. There's a red, angry lesion on his cheek that could be a rain burn or a sign of the flu worsening. He just turned

twenty, but he's so malnourished and sick with flu, he looks sixteen. He had a job working at his friend Akai Arnouse's abattoir, just over the border in the Second Quarantine Ring, but Akai was forced to fire him when K2 could no longer lift the carcasses.

"Your icky friend Stash was here yesterday."

"I gave him a key. He's lost his family and has nowhere to go.

I thought maybe he could hang around here sometimes."

"He knocked a potato jar over the ledge. Me and Uncle Wai cleaned it up this morning. So that's two jars we've lost in two days."

Uncle Wai grunts his displeasure.

K2 says nothing.

Kora says, "Don't you even give a shit? Where do you think our food comes from?"

"Stash has lost more than a potato jar," says K2. "Cut him some slack already."

"He's kind of gross." Should she tell K2 what actually happened? He's so demoralized already.

"Yeah, I know, Kora. He's sick okay? And sad. Be nice to him." Kora doesn't want to be nice to Stash. "Tell him he's not welcome.

He gives me the creeps."

More intense than her loathing for Stash is Kora's fear of losing them all. It's not just a fear. It's a coming certainty. With the heat from the stove and the burden of her grief and worry, Kora can hardly stay awake. Her limbs weigh like depleted earth. The light

of the bare fluorescent bulb stings her eyes and her lids drop, then fall.

She goes down into the dark. In her dream, she sees the Marine Building, engulfed in the flesh of an earth-crawling squid. She has a knife and slices flesh from its side. It makes a thin wailing sound. She puts the flesh in her mouth and chews. It tastes like raw goat.

In the dream, families line up outside the building and their sons, Avery, Adam, and Archer. The Blooms go into the building through the door that has become a toothy mouth. The sides of the squid-building pulse with a soft pink light. It reaches its tentacles into its crown and tosses the Blooms up into the sky so high they land on the moon.

Kora has seen the moon lots of times, during monsoon season, when the heavy rains wash the acid sky and reveal what lies high above. But she knows about the moon mostly because of the memory scale that Uncle Wai gave her last year for her fourteenth birthday.

With the scale neatly planted in her brain through her halo, she remembers the moon in all its phases—waxing, waning, full, gibbous, new. She remembers that the moon still pulls the tides, though Chang's deteriorating orbit interferes with the original pattern more and more.

Avery, Adam, and Archer sit on the surface of the moon, smiling and waving. And then someone else is smiling and waving, so close their face is like the moon. The moon speaks: "Kora, come back to us."

A hand passes over her still-closed eyes, making the flickers of light she dreams go suddenly dark. She blinks her eyes open. Her pupils narrow, adjusting to the nasty fluorescent light of the

family kitchen. It is not the moon speaking, it is her mother. She is talking to Uncle Wai now.

"I wish you wouldn't give her those things, Wai."

"She needs memory scales to understand the world that was. They don't hurt her. She's gifted is all. And her gift will help her live."

Charlotte notices that her daughter is awake. She pats Kora's arm. "I saw the Drs Bloom," Kora tells them. "I saw Avery, Adam, and Archer. They walked into a giant squid. It tossed them to the moon."

"She's lost her senses," Charlotte says, stroking Kora's sweaty hair. Her hand catches on the memory scale and Kora's brain vibrates gently. For a second, she sees the moon again, round and full.

**THEY HAVE EATEN THEIR POTATO SOUP. KORA IS IN HER ROOM NOW,** trying to sleep. She can hear Wai and Charlotte fighting about the goat.

"You have to do it now, Wai. Before—before—"

"Before what?"

"Please. Don't argue, just take care of it."

"Before the muscle wasting sets in? Before the lesions? Before the dementia? Or just sometime before I give up the ghost entirely? What?"

"Please don't."

"You're like a child. Do you understand what it means when you act like a child? It means that the children have to act like adults. They need a mother, Charlotte. Kora especially. You see how she sleeps all the time? She's depressed ..."

"What do you mean, 'Kora especially'? It's because you favour her. It's because you think Godwin Austen is going to die. Who's equivocating now, Kai Wai?"

The rain stops at dawn, and a thin yellow light comes through the sheer curtains. She sits up, drops her feet to the cold floor, and shuffles around until she finds her tattered bamboo-fibre slippers. She pushes the curtains of her window aside. That yellow light all through the heavy layer of pollution that lies over Saltwater City presses the heavy layer of pollution that lies over Saltwater City rises. She gazes at him and wonders about all the things he once did for the people of the time before.

Kora wills her music scale to rattle through its song list, seeking the strongest antidote to family dysfunction. It takes her a few seconds to find the song she's looking for, during which fragments of their argument continue to seep in.

"We shouldn't have—"

"It's the only way."

"Talk to K2. Perhaps we can change our minds."

"One of us must survive, and she is the only one with a chance. This is how we give her the opportunity."

"So it's too late. You're a coward."

She wills them to shut up. They don't, but soon the voice of Molten Mabel slides over her, claustrophobic and smooth as heavy cream. She shuts out the noise of their fighting by falling into the lyrics.

*In the world that is coming*

*Under the reign of ancient Chang*

*The Weather Girls are so lonely*

*So lonely, so holy*

*So hopeful, so different, so changed*

She doesn't remember the album finishing. This could mean she slept, though she doesn't feel rested. It's so early that the sky is still dark. Eng hangs low over the glass towers and emits a pale blue light through the smoggy clouds that cover her face. Kora imagines her family sleeping. She thinks of potatoes growing slowly in the dark. The rain that began yesterday afternoon intensifies, beating against her window. She wants to cry and she wants to sleep but can do neither. She is miserable in a way an old stone is miserable, present to everything but cold, still, and stuck.



dear one." I tell her, thinking about how I'll release the mushroom stitches in a week or so, when her new eyes begin to push into the empty slashes. "To ensure the memory of the pain won't linger"

"So tired," she whispers.

I rock her gently. "Sleep, my sweet." I refuse the fear that I've really done it this time, imagine tamping it under a thick layer of warm earth. Still, doubt seeps into me like the draft that has entered the room. Does she feel it too? Her body exudes a mournful kind of trust so palpable it is almost heat. I could not bear to lose her.

And bad as it would be for me, it would be worse for Grist Village. She is our last starfish.

NODE: KERNELS PLUMP

DAY: 9

WHEN AUNTIE RADIX ASKS FOR PERISTROPHE HALLIANA'S HEART, I

tell her no. I'm at her bedside, summoned here after her new groom cut her wrong. Her old groom died last year of the flu, and her new groom is young and green—too green for the job she does. She should still be with the other initiates, running ice down from the mountains on clear days when the air at altitude is breathable. Her small hands are dexterous but unpractised. Her eyes glow the emerald green of excess forget-me use.

"Green grow the rushes O," I sing.

The new groom doesn't sing with me. She doesn't know this song. The initiates have no one to teach them the rhymes of the time before.

I feel dirty, cutting Auntie Radix for her, slipping my digits into Auntie Radix's floppy sockets. This isn't the ritual. This isn't the way it's done. The chivalry of the shiv says each groom takes

A STRANGER IN THE WOODS

KIRLOW GRONDSEL // GRIST VILLAGE

NODE: KERNELS PLUMP

DAY: 1

I LAY OUT THE PRECIOUS HARVEST ON ICE BROUGHT DOWN FROM THE

mountains by our first-year initiates, all thirteen-year-old girls from Grist Village. At the door to my cave, Auntie Radix's young groom is waiting. Soon the eyes that are darkening in that old doubler's head will shine bright as halogen headlights. Not that I've ever seen halogen headlights, but I know the songs. Maybe you can wash my car, yes, I'm gonna flee a star. I know what stars are. They twinkle a little. They light up my wife. I know what cars are too. They are what the people from the time before used to get around, instead of walking. They doubled as wheelbarrows, for transporting food and herbs and found treasures.

"I'm so tired, Kiri," my beloved Peristrophe says when Auntie Radix's young groom is gone.

"I know, my love, I know." I gather Peristrophe's frail, over-harvested body into my arms. The exhilaration of the cut has left me, and I'm gripped by a sudden melancholy. Our old cave, with its battered armchairs and tattered tiger-skin rug from the time before, suddenly looks grey and grim. The herbs I hang from the rafters shudder as the room grows colder, casting sinister shadows on the crumbling earthen walls. "Take some more moonshine,



care of her own—doubler or starfish, depending on fate. You don't take care of another groom's sexy suture. It's not right. It'll make Chang fall faster than he is already falling. This is the alternate hour, when he hangs directly above Grist Village, too round and too low in his deteriorating orbit. His gross gravity tugs at my liver

and makes me queasy.

I stay with Old Radix and her new groom until Eng rises on the southern horizon, blue and small but still visible through the smoky air outside the four windows built into the wall that closes off Auntie Radix's cave. The elites of Saltwater City control Eng's insides, as they control those of her brother, Chang, but we can still enjoy her glow. We worship her an avatar of Our Mother. As her period lengthens, her gravitational effects get weaker. My heart aches the special ache it only aches for her. I should get back to Peristrophe Halliana.

Auntie Radix blinks her peepers open, gazes at me through the true brown eyes of my own best beloved. Jeepers creepers.

"My heart is failing, Kirilow," she says, misty mournful as lonely Eng, though not nearly as sweet.

Oh no, I think, though I don't say it. She's our last doubler, and coming to the end of her fertility. We should have stopped calling upon her to pop out young ones a decade ago. She's a miserable whiner, but the teachings of Our Mother say,

*Behold, the last*

*Doubler is gold*

I sat that class carefully.

It means, Glorybind Groundsel told me, if the Grist is dying down to the last doubler, her word is flesh, her word is god. You can't say no.

But all my fibres scream it. No more I love yous. My own

heart howls like a child's. My mouth says, "I don't quite get your meaning, auntie."

She takes a deep breath, then narrows her eyes. "Arrhythmia, Kirilow. Don't pretend you don't understand."

I sigh. "I hear your concern."

"Well, then?"

"If Peristrophe Halliana gives her heart so soon, she might not make it." I would really rather not be having this conversation.

"Not my problem," says Old Radix. "You may not respect me much, Kirilow Groundsel, but you have a duty to the Grist sisterhood. Without me, the sisterhood won't make it."

"Who says I don't respect you?" I protest, alarmed as I say it to feel whatever respect I had for her dwindle to nothing.

"Spoiled child. Don't you dare think I don't know. But I don't care what you think. I need a new heart soon. You know your duty."

I cogitate with all my being. Too slow, I say. "The Grist sisterhood won't survive without the starfish Peristrophe Halliana. Mama Glory says a balance must be struck."

"Humph," says Old Radix, because she knows I have a point. "I'll consult with my mother double and tell you what's possible."

I escape Auntie Radix's dark cave and rush out into the night air, fresh and bright as the day's smog recedes back to the city it came from.

NODE: KERNELS PLUMP  
DAY: 12

**I FEEL THE PULL OF CHANG AS HE RIDES UP THE EVENING SKY. TONIGHT,**

he faces us, and through the smog I can see the logo of H&ST, the company who made and launched him in the long-ago days of oil. Every day he orbits closer. Old Glorybind says that he and Eng are

hello kitty. I catch a whiff of its shit and sweat stink on an updraft, and gag softly.

It stumbles into a clearing. Gotcha! I throw a knife at it, neatly severing its left hand. It screams and dashes into the brush.

The severed hand lies there in the clearing, reflecting Chang's metallic light. Blood pools from the cut veins. I step off the path onto the loose gravel, through more eucalyptus and spindly sage that give onto the valley floor. My first step lands solid, but the second sets a cascade of gravel flowing down the escarpment. I ride it, thankful for the sturdy elk-skin boots that Peristrophe Halliana sewed for me while recovering from her last surgery.

I walk cautiously forward, brace through the thighs to keep it slow and steady, though the slope wants me to run. When I turn it around and climb backwards as though down a ladder. When I reach the narrow ledge at the bottom of the drop, I turn again. A pair of eyes watches me from the forest just beyond the clearing. The Salty I saw? What if there is a full Saltwater City militia in the forest, watching and waiting to ambush me?

My gaze darts between the eyes in the forest and the severed hand, that gleaming horde of genetic treasure, right there in the middle of the clearing. To nab it on my own would be risky. If I were smart, I'd leave it, bide for a better chance when I have Glorbynd Groundsel or a posse of initiates with me.

I'm not smart. I scramble the rest of the way down, half running, half rolling, and dash through rough bush and brambles into the clearing. The Salty rushes out. Dives into the clearing, blood still dripping from its hastily bound wound. It snatches up the severed hand just seconds before I get there, then stumbles back into the woods. I tear after it, muttering, "Our Mother who art artful, Our

the same size, and that once upon her time, they had periods of twelve hours each and appeared to earthbound Grist sisters just slightly larger than the moon. Now, Chang rules our sky, rises and sets every two hours, while Eng spirals away from us, high and unpredictable.

"HEO," says Mother Glorbynd. "For highly elliptical orbit. Once upon a time, people could calculate. Maybe in Saltwater City they still can. We Grist sisters feel our way to other knowings."

I nod, though I have no idea what she is talking about. Gotta learn faster, before I lose her. I don't want to think about that and push it from my mind.

Tonight, Chang's gravity tugs at the spindly trees and makes their leaves rustle. A thin metallic light drifts through the pollution and illuminates the forest floor, making everything glimmer ghostly. Below the bluff that shapes the path between my cave and Auntie Radix's, I see something shift and jerk against the wind. The bluff rides high and steep over the valley below. Invasive eucalyptus crowd in on me and hide the figure running down there. A body of smoke from the forest fires up north fills the valley. A breeze nudges trees in the valley, revealing then obscuring the forest floor. There's a red flash of hair. It's a biped, like us. One of those sneaky creeps from Saltwater City? But unlike us, tall, pale, and gangly. Our genes don't express like that. We manifest crow-black hair, autumn-leaf skin, and short legs.

I shudder, remembering last year's militia attack. We were lucky. It was a small advance guard, and we got them all. In my humble opinion, we should have moved the village afterwards, but Auntie Radix was against it.

I track the Salty along the edge of the bluff, meek and sweet as

Mother of moss ... " I follow the shuddering of the trees and the intermittent blood spatter staining needles, earth, leaves, and stone. I follow fast as the winds that hail the new monsoons. Slam! Here's Mourning Rock. The forest lies dead still. The blood trail is gone, and the Sality is nowhere to be seen.

"WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE IT WAS LOOKING FOR?" I ASK PERISTROPHE

Halliana back at our cozy cave.  
She sits up. "Will you take out my stitches? My new eyes are

deuce itchy."  
My tunic is torn, my hair is full of burrs, I'm covered in bruises,

and my hands are filthy. "Give me a minute to wash up." I open

the tap and let run a precious trickle of water from our rooftop  
cistern, opened to the sky only on clean rain days. Dip a dry rag

into the half-full sink, and in the precious mirror from the time

before, check my face for dirt and blood.  
"I suspect it was looking for us," she says. "You better catch it."

She slumps back onto her mushroom-fibre pillow.

# WET MARKET ENCOUNTER



KORA KO // SALTWATER FLATS

NOTE: KARNELS PLUMP  
DAY: 2

KORA WATCHES THE SKY BRIGHTEN. SHE GAZES AT CHANG UNTIL HE

is full and round. Then she puts on the brown bamboo-fibre dress

Uncle Wai gave her and layers on her warm padded jacket. She slips

out of the quiet apartment and up the stairs to the roof to begin

the morning's chores. She can hear Charlotte and Wai shouting

at one another the moment she lifts the rooftop hatch. She comes

up into the light. Her eyes burn with the horror of what she sees.

Delphine swings by her hind legs from the ceiling of the shed.

Thrashes fearfully. Blood gushes from her hooved friend's throat

and soaks the bamboo-fibre mat on which the goat slept last night.

Charlotte stands before the pen wielding a bloody knife, eyes

blazing sorrow and desperation.  
Uncle Wai clutches the kicking body, trying to calm the goat and

staunch the gushing blood. At the same time, he yells at Charlotte,  
"No shame and no self-control! You're a child. How will Kora and  
Godwin Austen feel? You're selfish. You think of no one's feelings  
but your own."  
Charlotte doesn't yell back. Instead, her voice comes deep and

low and slow. "If you'd agreed to kill that bleating nanny a year

out shimmering flakes and tendrils of information in a desperate attempt to know and so fix the broken world.

Uncle Wai lumbers along behind her like a sick bear. In her mind's eye, Kora sees the goat's throat gush red and furious. She runs faster, turns the corner, and scuttles into the wet market. She darts in and out among the stalls of cans recovered from the time before, whirls and turns through the market in a frantic, antic dance, tears past sellers of salmon jerky from the Coast Salish Timeplace, lush fruits from the UMK, salvaged coffee from Seattle Before, squashes and fresh rabbit from Houston North, elk-skin gloves and raw forget-me-do purportedly from the mythic village of Grist. Everywhere she turns there are women from all walks of Saltwater City life—vendors and engineers, dockworkers and office staff.

At last, the flap of Uncle Wai's tired feet against ancient concrete stops. She pauses to catch her breath by a stall of can sellers.

"Hey!" shouts a voice. "Thief!"

"I'm not stealing," Kora turns to face a girl her own age, a fearsome one with kohl-rimmed eyes and spiky scales jutting out

in all directions.

"Well, what are you doing then?" The girl taps the counter beside her, on which are laid out a heap of precious-because-extinct tuna tins. "Empty your pockets."

"As if," scoffs Kora. She turns to find the next corner around which to disappear. But there are two more ghoulish girls behind her, their eyes rimmed dark. One of them hisses at her through a set of brown and jagged teeth.

Kora empties her pockets. There is nothing in the left but a dirty handkerchief. The right has a hole in it and produces nothing. "Paw," says the girl behind the counter, glaring. "Pathetic! All

ago, the kids would have had some decent food to eat instead of your lousy rotten potatoes. K2 might not have gotten sick. You're the selfish one, protecting Kora's feelings at the cost of K2's life. "Don't be melodramatic. K2 is still alive, and he might get better. Like he's gone for a swim in a red pool.

"You don't know anything of what I've suffered. I should never have left your brother."

"Don't say that." He grips the goat as its thrashing slows. "We'd be living in wealth and comfort instead of shame and poverty."

"Our love was real."

"Was it, Kai Wai? Really? Aren't you a little old to believe in such garbage?"

The goat kicks, then grows still. Uncle Wai gazes into its dying eyes. "Yes," he says. "I believe in such garbage. And I believe in Kora." "Well, good," Charlotte says. "You better treasure her and make sure she lives. Because I have only two children now."

He stares at her.

"That's right. My eldest son, Everest, is dead."

Kora realizes she's been holding her breath.

"Dead?"

"His father left a message this morning."

Though she never knew Everest, a wave of grief slams Kora. She draws in a great, gasping gulp of air.

Her uncle sees her and dives towards her. But Kora has already turned. She runs down the stairs, through the apartment, out the door, and into the main stairwell, all the way to the ground level. Down Hastings Street she flees, past the N-lite junkies stoned on history, past the scale exchange where denizens routinely swap



Through the magnification of my marvellous opera glasses, I can  
By Our Mother's blues and shoes, its hand has grown back!

from the light.  
its gaze to the bluff and draws its right hand up to shield its eyes  
and weak now. It pauses, as though it senses my presence. Raises  
up to my eyes. It's the same Salty I saw two days ago, grey-eyed  
stops. I draw my opera glasses out of their pouch and whip them  
moves through them. It steps into an open patch of light and  
notice the trees rustling and shivering below us as a creature  
I'm absorbed in selecting the brightest leaves and at first don't

of Peristrophe Halliana.  
I developed my own strain to suit first and foremost the needs  
to make Grist history. Under my mother double's watchful eye,  
use, we cultivate what we remember and what we forget in order  
and now seeded through mallow, agave, and sage. Through its  
the factories of Saltwater City, refined by us here at Grist Village,  
most precious crop, bred alongside us three generations ago in  
MY MOTHER DOUBLE AND I ARE OUT HARVESTING FORGET-ME-DO—OUR

NOTE: GRAIN IN BEARD  
DAY: 1

KIRILOV GROUNDSEL // GRIST VILLAGE

## THE SALTY'S HAND

that scurrying about and you don't even have a little can of clams  
in your pocket?"

Kora has bought cans like these from Cordova Dancing Girls  
before, very rarely, for her uncle when he couldn't get out of bed. But

the only conversations she's had with them have been bartering ones.  
She swallows phlegmy fear and shrugs her shoulders. "Should I?"

"Well, why are you darting around like a little robber if you  
aren't one?"

The girl with bad teeth exhales foul breath in her ear.  
Kora digs deep for bravado. "None of your business, tin-can

lady."  
"Ooooooh, feisty, is it?" says the counter girl.

Kora takes a long silent inhale, then snatches her handkerchief  
back. "Well, see ya."

The fearsome girl grabs Kora's wrist. "Not so fast. What  
sheltered brat comes running into the wet market unless she's after

something? Or running from something, is that it?"  
Kora tries to pull her arm back, but the other two girls close

in behind her so tight that lice leap from their dirty skins and  
scamper across Kora's bare neck. She draws her knee up quick and

gives the table a good swift kick. Cans of salmon, tuna, crab, and  
char roll off in all directions. The fearsome girl lets go. Kora turns,

elbows one henchwoman sharp in the guts. Gulps. Slaps the other  
hard across the cheek. Then runs back the way she came, suddenly

eager to be home.

"When will you grow out of this murderous phase?" Old

Gloryblind Groundsel sighs.

One of the needles is a little tarnished. I pull out a cloth and begin to polish it. "I don't know why you're so squeamish," I say.

"The Salty barbarians want us all dead. You should thank me."

"We need this one for its starfish wisdom."

"At least let me bleed it a little."

"Kirilow."

"All right," I say. "I wasn't going to hurt it anyway. But you can't stop me from hating. You yourself told me the stories—of how they rounded our grandmothers up by the thousands, lined them up along a barbed wire fence, and shot them. And didn't they discover, raid, and torch our far far forget-me-do fields just last year? Why should you care if I hurt it or not?"

"The war is over now, Kirilow. Just stun it."

"The war is not over. It's just quieter than it was in Grandma Chan Ling's day."

"Stun. That's all."

"Pardon, master. I will be correspondent to command."

"That's enough cheek for one day," says my mother double. "The knowledge I feed you from the time before is solid jade. You have no right to abuse it."

Tenderly, as though this putrid Salty were my own best beloved Peristrophe Halliana, I tap a needle into its skull and then all down the meridian of sleep. The Salty stops weeping. Its eyes dim and its eyelids flicker down. It dozes softly.

I pick up one end of the womb bomb, and my mother double picks up the other. Swinging the Salty between us, we take it back to our lab and lay it out on the examination table.

see that although the hand is not to size, it is perfectly formed. It looks a little pink and raw but healthy. A new starfish!

I rush along the bluff.

It stumbles, vulnerable. My heart beats faster. A clearing opens down the path in front of it. I take my chances and hurry ahead to a spot just above the clearing. Watch like a young coyote, eyes intent, tail twitching. Quick as a brown fox, I drop a womb bomb over it—Gloryblind Groundsel's latest invention, a translucent wrapping sack made from modified black squirrel bladder cells.

With a quick, sharp tug I draw the wounded rabbit as I rush down the bluff to where it flails. Whistle for my mother double. Gloryblind Groundsel emerges from the trees seconds after I reach the sobbing Salty. These creatures are so pathetic. I don't understand how they could ever have disdained us, much less expelled us from Saltwater City.

"Whenever I want you, all I have to do is preen," I tell it. "So shut up, Little Susie."

The thing whimpers.

My mother double says, "There's no need to be cruel, Kirilow." I glare at her. I say nothing but lead her gaze with my own

to its new hand.

*It can starfish*, she mouths.

I nod.

"Let me go," blubbers the thing.

I yank the womb bomb tighter. "By the foulest breath of Our Mother, would you please shut up?"

It bawls.

"I can't stand these things, Mother Gloryblind," I say. I pull out my needles.



I'M IN THE KITCHEN WARMING A BIT OF RABBIT STEW FOR PERISTROPHE  
Halliana when I hear rustling in the lab. I pull aside the curtain  
to see what's going on. The Salty is awake.

"I found you," it hacks. "You have to come to Saltwater City.  
The people are dying. You have to cure them."

"Why would I do that?" I ask, eyes incredulous wide. "Far as  
I'm concerned, the sooner you murderers go extinct, the better for  
me and my sisters. It's about time you brewed a flu strong enough  
to kill yourselves off."

I move towards the medicine pot to get it a cup of forget-me-do  
tea. I open a small hole in the womb bomb where its mouth is and  
press the cup to it, urging it to drink.

"Please, no," it begs. "Not yet." And then, "We didn't all want  
rid of you, you know. It was the Chow-McPherson government. It  
was the militias. Some of us hate them as much as you do."

I put on a mushroom membrane glove, stretch its thin elastic  
skin over my rough hand. I press my palm to its stomach. Even  
through the glove and the thick fibres of the womb bomb, I can  
feel the excess bile in its belly. Sickly and sickening.

"I don't believe you," I tell it. "So drink."  
"Please," it wails. "When you see them, your heart will fill  
with pity." Tears dribble down its pimply cheeks. A river of snot  
runs from its nose. How can they be so repulsed by us when they  
themselves are so disgusting?

I press the cup harder against its lips. "Drink, Salty."  
"I have a mother and a father," it says, smiling ever so slightly  
through the mass of snot and tears. "And two brothers. We could  
help you."

Vomit pools in my throat. I grip its jaw and force it open. Pour  
the tea into its already gurgling, foaming mouth. As soon as I let

The Tiger Flu

go, it coughs and sputters, then spits the whole cup of tea over its  
front. I want to be sick, and stumble away towards the water closet.  
I hear old Glorybind's voice then and am astonished to realize  
she's been sitting in her rocking chair this whole time, smoking  
a pipe of sage and pot. "Steady, Kirilow. A good groom doesn't  
get excited over nothing. What will you do when you have a real  
emergency on your hands?"

Chang stares right in through the middle of the three windows  
that grace our cave's sister-built wall. I choke back my puke. If I  
don't learn everything my mother double has to teach me before  
she leaves this world, then Peristrophe Halliana doesn't have long  
to live, and nor do I.

"These things disgust me, Mother."

I know they have a second sex they call "men," and that men  
are useful in Salty doubling technology. When I was a sprout,  
Glorybind Groundsel showed me a pair of post-storm slugs on a log  
slipping and sliming over one another. She intended to demonstrate  
that it was natural.

"It's not so bad," she said. "Some Grist sisters like the idea of  
reintroducing men to the Grist. Not you, I suspect."  
I remember so clearly the great glob of mucus that dripped  
from the combined bodies of the two slugs, oozed over the log,  
shimmered wetly, and plopped to the ground.

"Not me," I told her.  
"My mother double laughed. "When you get older, you might  
not find the idea so repulsive."

"It will be repulsive no matter how old I get," I told her. I took  
forbidden sips of forget-me-do for a whole week afterwards to try  
to erase the knowledge of how Salty doubling was done.

Larissa Lai

and prod. I don't want to see. I let go of the things hand. Shuffe over to the plant bench and begin to prepare substrate for mushrooms.

"You'll help me then?" whispers the Salty.

"What are you?" I hiss.

"I dream about time," says the Salty. "Time past and time to come. I can show you your history."

"My mother double teaches me my history," I say.

"I can show you how the Grist sisters might survive. I can show you how they might die. I can help you make a path." Its eyes plead. Its weird independent hairs wave. I don't trust it.

"All your kind ever did was use us and lie to us. Your word is dross!"

"I know you saw your sister," says the Salty. "I can show you things. In Saltwater City, they hate the ones who dream about time. But we have our place. The city is changing. If you help me now, you'll pave the way for the Grist sisters to return as full and beloved citizens."

"What kind of mark do you take me for?" I snarl. I throw a fresh womb bomb over it and yank. Inside, the thing whimpers. That's better.

I DON'T WANT THE SALT TO KNOW THAT IT HAS UNSETTLED ME. I GET to work preparing substrate for ganoderma as though the Salty isn't there. The music of the spores will soothe. Perhaps the path to Our Mother's salvation lies not with animals but with plants. If I could make the perfect substrate, I could capture the perfect spores. If I were a perfect groom, I could modify the longevity bestowed by the ganoderma to become immortality, and then there would be no need for doublers or starfish. Auntie Radix could cut the greedy

Now, Old Glorybind draws a great puff of smoke into her lungs and exhales. "Sometimes it is all right to feel pity."

"Am I obliged to feel it? They made us to use us. When they ran out of uses, they murdered as many of us as they could and exiled the rest. Why should I feel anything at all for them?"

"They aren't all the same," says my mother double.

"They lack sisterly feeling."

"I'm just as human as you are," the Salty whines through the walrus goo that oozes from its facial orifices. "Will you please unbind me?"

"We aren't human," my mother double informs it. But then she puts down her pipe, goes over to it. She pulls the womb bomb back farther, until its head is free from the tidy wrapping. Strangely

wistful, she strokes its head, still covered in sticky, threads from the bomb. A loose hair pokes up from the Salty's temple, seemingly with a will of its own. It looks like a cockroach antenna. Two more spring up. They quiver with curiosity. Disgusted, I shudder.

"You shouldn't honey it," I say. "What would happen if it told the other Salties where we are? We'd be finished then, wouldn't we? Done and dusted like so many rusted-out car shells." I hold its face steady and take a swab from its nose. "Let's see what kind of disease it has. With any luck, it's a plague that'll kill them all good and dead, and then the Grist will be free at last. High day!"

"Kirilow, be careful what you wish for. The Grist may have evolved beyond its former masters, but we are not immune to their illnesses."

I reach into the casing at the creature's shoulder and pull its right arm out, grab its wrist, and feel its slippery pulse. An unbidden image rushes into my head—Peristrophe Halliana's mother double laid out on a white table under bright lights as Salty doctors poke

Old Glorybind casts it a glance. "Just bundle it, Kirilow. This might be serious."

I sigh like a put-upon old lady. If she hadn't freed the Salty from its second womb bomb, I wouldn't have to waste a precious third. I draw it from the deep pocket of my tunic and, with a flick of the wrist, cast it over the Salty.

This time, the Salty doesn't struggle. It curls up and seems to

sleep.

My mother double and I take our elk-wool overcoats from their hooks and hustle into the ashy air. The forest fires that have been

burning through the dry season rage on to the north. I wish the rains would come, as Glorybind says they have on the coast, but here it's much too early.

grasping. Peristrophe Halliana and Glorybind Groundsel would stay with me forever.

These are the things I think as I water my substrate, massage and knead the sweet, earthy-smelling stew of rotted fibre and bone, fruit and flesh.

I'm so absorbed, I don't hear the snipping and cutting sounds until it is too late. Old Glorybind has cut the sick Salty from its sack. They whisper together.

"Mother Glory, what are you doing? I bagged that thing up for a reason!"

The Salty passes something dry and purple to Mother Glorybind. She tucks the strange gift into the folds of her robe, then passes a hand over the Salty's forehead.

"Stop that! You of all people should know how dangerous those things are. Bomb it now before it's too late."

I move towards the Salty to wrap it up again, but there's a thump at our old wooden door. My mother double opens it. Standing

there in the piss-pouring rain is Auntie Radix's new young groom. "Kirilow, you have to come quick," she says. "There is something

wrong with Radix Bupleuri's heart."

"Did you take her pulse?" I ask. "Did you take her temperature?"

"There is no time," says the groom. She sweats and jitters. "Bring your mother double too."

"Naw," I tell her. "Auntie Radix's every sneeze is an emergency." "This time there's really truly a problem," the young groom

says. Her eyes brim with shameful tears. "I better come with you," says Glorybind Groundsel. "Someone has to stay with that. We can't let it run amok through the lab."