

parched

GEORGIA CLARK

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Summary: Feeling guilty after her mother's accidental death, sixteen-year-old Tessendra Rockwood leaves the abundance of Eden to fight for survival in the drought-devastated Badlands, but when she joins the rebel group, Kudzu, to fight the tyranny of Eden's government, she is in for some big surprises.

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*For Mum and Dad,
for always being my biggest fans*

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part 1

chapter 1

My eyes snap open with familiar panic. *Bang*. Awake.

There used to be a time when waking up was a gentle seesaw in and out of dreams, safe in a cocoon of warm blankets. Back then, the word *sleep* perfectly matched what I was emerging from: a long, drawn-out, sultry affair: *sleeeeeeep*. These days, I jerk awake with all the subtlety of unexpected vomit. This is because I live in the Badlands. And more specifically, because someone is pinching my big toe.

Heart leaping, I fumble for Mack. My bone-handled hunting knife is still under my pillow, never more than an arm's length away. Before I can even bring the room into focus, I'm shoving Mack out in front of me, and in the direction of . . . Mileka. My landlord's ancient skinny mother, crouching at my feet. My shoulders slump in relief as she opens her toothless mouth and laughs at me.

"Yes, funny," I mutter, yanking my foot out from her thumb and forefinger. "Glad to see my abject terror is a source of such hilarity for you."

My room—well, really more of a hole in the wall—is in its usual state of bomb-went-off disarray, managing to look messy despite my meager possessions. I drag myself up from the lumpy bedroll and pull on a pair of loose black pants that fall mid-calf. Like almost everyone in the Badlands, I sleep in my underwear. Too damn hot not to.

Mileka cocks her head to one side. I'm speaking English. She doesn't. Out here we speak Malspeak, a mangle of English and old languages like Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian. Dialects from a time when the land was defined by many borders. Now there's only one that matters. And I am on the wrong side of it. "*Ni me pugat*." I tell Mileka she scared me.

“Zhukov,” Mileka replies, grinning her strange, toothless smile at me. “*Quiere the fangzu.*”

My heart manages to sink and shoot into my mouth at the same time. Mileka’s son, Zhukov, is my current landlord and boss, and he wants his rent. The five dollars I owe him for the pleasure of staying in this flea-bitten hovel of a room for another week, I don’t have. Again.

“*Donde nar Zhukov?*” My attempt at sounding unconcerned when inquiring as to his whereabouts fails.

Mileka shrugs, ducking her head to retreat to the low doorway. Sharp eyes watch me as I slip my arms into my sun robe and try to tame my sleep-crazed hair. I’d been routinely shaving an undercut since I’d gotten out here to keep it off my neck. I scrape what’s left into a long black ponytail. This includes three thin plaits threaded with speckled feathers that snake behind my left ear. A local custom that helps me blend in.

A bellow from below answers my question. “*Donde nar ella?*”

Mileka and I widen our eyes at the same time, so quickly it’d be funny if I weren’t in a stack of trouble. Finding a new place to sleep would be a major hassle. Plus, I like Mileka. Maybe one of these days I’ll even tell her my real name.

“*Lillith’s nyet là!*” Mileka screeches, covering for me.

“*Mentirosa!*” Zhukov roars back, not believing her. The stairs wheeze and creak under his weight.

Mileka presses a worn silver key into my palm, voice low and urgent: “*Zhuan ban ba al bar.*” She’s offering me her shift at the water bar. If Mileka pretends to leave for work as usual, Zhukov won’t look for me there.

I hook the worn straps of my backpack over my shoulders and breathe a quick thanks, “*Danke bolshoi.*” I find a hard chili candy in my pocket—Mileka’s favorite—and toss it over. She catches it neatly and rewards me with another gummy grin, waving her hands at me to go, now.

As Mileka disappears to face her beast of a son, I push open the dirty glass window. A whoosh of dry heat hits me in the face, momentarily sucking the air from my lungs and burning my eyeballs. I blink fast a few times, squinting in the glare. Then, after hooking one leg over the open window, I shimmy expertly along the narrow stone ledge and start climbing down the bone-dry drainpipe. My boots kick up tiny puffs of red dust as I land squarely on my feet.

The narrow street shimmers unevenly in the relentless heat, empty but for some barefoot kids playing stones. Over a hundred degrees and it's still early morning. After only a few steps, I have to pull up my sun robe's hood to stop my hair from feeling like it's melting.

Welcome to Kep Sai'an. Population: who the hell knows.

Zhukov's water bar is only a few blocks away, and by *blocks*, I mean a few twisting back streets of rundown shacks and gutted buildings housing dozens of families. Some of the shacks are alive with noisy chatter, crying babies, even the occasional waft of cooking food. But many are quiet, no signs of life at all. Some have been quiet for weeks.

It was kind of Mileka to offer me her shift. If I'm lucky, I'll scrounge my rent together in tips. But it's unlikely. What little money the locals have is not being spent on the guarded girl who serves them the crappy *aqua ferro*—iron water—that dribbles from Zhukov's taps. It's being spent on the *aqua ferro* itself.

But before I start serving out said water, it's time for breakfast. Breakfast used to mean eggs and coffee and creamy yogurt swirled with fat berries, all fresh and organic and harvested in the Farms. Now it means *pourriture*.

I suppress the urge to gag.

The compact little stall I've been eating at in Kep Sai'an is sandwiched tightly between two buildings whose tall walls provide coveted shade. This one tends to get my business because it's slightly less horrible than the hundreds of others littered around town.

I find a seat between a silent old man with a face like a gnome and a couple of women wearing colorful patchwork dresses and conical straw hats. They all ignore me.

I nod at the *pourriture* mama and hold up one finger. She ladles a spoonful of gelatinous gray porridge into a wide plastic bowl and drops it in front of me. A little slops over the edge, and my stomach turns in disgust. Lifting the plastic spoon—reused, no less—I let the cheap millet stew drop in globs back into the bowl. It's as slimy as snot and the color of snails.

Eat it, I command myself. *Eat it!* It may not taste good, but it will fill me up for the day. I swallow mouthful after mouthful. Just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that.

The women next to me are gossiping intensely in Mal. "*Un mes*," one woman insists.

The other disagrees, shaking her head vigorously. "*Un semana*."

I can guess what they're talking about. Water. And how quickly it's going to run out.

The old man next to me rises like a ghost. "*Danke.*" His thanks to the pourriture mama sounds painfully hoarse.

After I finish, I leave a couple of copper coins on the table and head toward the bar. I'm almost looking forward to a quiet morning; maybe I can crash out for a nap if there are no customers. I'm stretched thin with exhaustion, and not just from the heat. I haven't had a good night's sleep since, well, since my life fell apart and I ended up stuck out here. But as I round the last corner, I see that I won't be alone at Zhukov's water bar.

Dozens of local kids, their dark eyes wild with dehydration, are gathered silently around the entrance. There are more every day, ever since they lost their jobs in the Manufacturing Zone. Their coat-hanger bodies hunch on the unpaved street. Their limbs look as gaunt as the dead trees that shoot up from the hard, red earth.

Even after a year of seeing kids like this, I still feel a flush of something raw and sad. But I can't help them. There are too many. I'll just have to deal with dozens of pleading eyes staring me down. Or maybe this time they won't just be staring. I've heard rumors that water bars are being held up for even the tiniest amount of *aqua ferro*. Maybe today these kids will work it out that together, they could overpower me.

Another bad day in the Badlands. Is there any other kind?

I draw in a deep breath of dry, searing air and remind myself: this is the way it is. I move confidently through the crowd. Thankfully, they scatter to make way.

The metal shutter rises with a screech, spilling light into the dim, dusty bar. A long wooden counter runs along one wall, facing a few mismatched tables and chairs that sit unevenly on a packed dirt floor.

I toss my sun robe and backpack under the bar, then begin twirling Mack through my fingers. Casually enough so it won't be mistaken as an invitation to fight, but fast enough so the kids outside can see I know how to use it. I traded my scratch for it the first week I was here. Technology won't protect you from being attacked for fresh water. A badass blade will. Back in Eden where I grew up, the closest thing to knifework I'd experienced was cutting up a loaf of warm bread. Last night, I'd gutted a wild prairie chicken after scaling a rock face to find its nest and slit its throat.

What a difference a year makes.

The knife handle glides through my fingers, under and over in a fast figure eight. It's a neat trick, and easier to learn than you might think. Easy, that is, if you have a lot of time on your hands and nothing to distract you.

A shadowed figure appears in the doorway, blocking the sun. I whip the handle into my palm.

The figure steps inside.

A girl.

My age—sixteen—maybe a pinch older. I relax my grip. She doesn't look like a threat. Her sharp, almond-shaped eyes move around the dingy bar with the precision of a tracking beam. On seeing me, she double-takes, eyes pulsing in a split second of what looks like recognition.

Apprehension shoots up my spine. My fingers tighten around Mack's hilt.

Without breaking eye contact, the girl slides onto a stool at the end of the bar, loosening her copper-colored sun robe. Her look is typical Badlands: a loose-fitting, hand-sewn dress constructed from mismatched scraps of material and leather boots as brawny as a bull. A few stripy feathers are woven into a handful of tiny plaits. But there's no hiding the sheen of her thick, black bangs or the plump swell of her cheeks and arms. Her sun robe's not nearly as stained as mine.

"*Poká, coméstá?*" She greets me eagerly in Malspeak, but it lacks the confidence of a local.

"*Poká,*" I murmur back.

"*Un acqua, qing beaucoup?*"

"*Shì.*" I drive Mack's blade into the soft wood of the bar where the kids can see it while I tend to the girl. The aqua ferro that trickles from the faucet runs opaque yellow, dribbling like syrup. It smells like wet dog.

"No." There's a light, if frustrated, laugh in the girl's voice. "*Acqua azul.*" Lake water. Eden water.

"A dollar," I challenge. "And you owe me ten cents for the *ferro.*"

She slides a red ten-dollar note across the bar. "Keep the copper."

I grab it before the kids catch sight of it: ten dollars is a week's wages around here. She's a tourist, then. Slumming it in Kep Sai'an to regale wide-eyed friends back in Eden with a daring anecdote or two. Time to show her some classic Kep Sai'an service.

"Hey! Robowrong!" The substitute that'd been standing motionless

at the far end of the bar jerks its head up. Flat, mechanical eyes aim themselves in the direction of my voice. “City girl wants a city water.”

The large, ungainly machine rolls bumpily toward us. It’s a head shorter than me and stout, like a dirty bronze troll. I cross my arms, a satisfied smirk creeping across my mouth. Being the world’s biggest cheapskate, Zhukov has the world’s shoddiest substitute.

Eden is full of sophisticated, beautifully designed substitutes, but in this backwater part of the world, we have the oldest, clunkiest subs around. It would take this hopeless hunk of metal five minutes to hand the girl a bottle of water. She knows it, but if she’s annoyed, she doesn’t show it.

“I haven’t seen that model of substitute in a while—a Builder, right?” She gives me a quick, deliberate smile. “Did you make the modifications so it could work in here? You strike me as someone who might know her way around a substitute.” Her eyes are all questions that she already has the answers to.

She knows who I am.

Time to change tack. I give her a big, dumb smile, and force a chuckle. “You’ve certainly got me pinned wrong. I don’t know the first thing about all that stuff.” I cock my head, the too-friendly smile still slapped on my face. “You’re not from around here, right? You know, there’s a pretty decent *pourriture* stall nearby. I eat there all the time and have never gotten sick—”

“I’m not here for travel tips,” she interrupts. “My name’s Ling Sun-Yi.” She sticks her hand out. I don’t shake it. “And you are?”

“Lillith.” My fingers find the sharp tip of the small gold sword dangling from my necklace and press into it, hard. A nervous gesture I can’t shake.

Her dark eyes practically swallow me whole. “Wasn’t Lillith the woman who was cast out of Eden? According to myth?”

My skin shivers but I keep my eyes and voice hard. “Ping, was it?”

“Ling,” she corrects.

“Here’s a travel tip for you, Ping.” I frame my words like a question, but they sound like a statement. “Why don’t you get out of here before I tell those kids to roll you for all that spare cash you have.”

The girl’s eyes drill into me, unblinking. “Are you sure your name isn’t *Tess Rockwood*?”

Despite the heat, I freeze.

Ling’s fist pops the bar in triumph. “It is you! You’re hard to find,

Tess. I've been looking for you for a month!" Her words are lit with excitement. "Got a tip-off at a trading market an hour north. They remembered the tattoo. Not many people around here have electronic ones."

My fingers move automatically to my tronic, the glowing scrawl of text implanted on the underside of my left arm, from the crook of my elbow to the bottom of my palm. Four words: *No feeling is final*. I'd never guessed it could be used to track me down. "I know my rights," I say. "It isn't against Trust law for Edenites to be in the Badlands."

"Tess—"

"Leave." My fingers hover over Mack's hilt. "Or I'll be forced to get persuasive."

"It's taken me a month to find you," Ling says, incredulous. "I'm not leaving."

"You can't make me come back with you," I all but yell. "I don't care what you do for the Trust!"

"I don't work for the Trust!" She takes a deep breath, eyes burning bright. "I'm part of a group called Kudzu."

That stops me short. "Kudzu?" I stare at her in shock. "You guys actually exist?"

I'd heard of Kudzu. Or, I thought I had. It was years ago now.

It was winter, when the temperature in Eden is dropped into the high forties, cool enough to warrant wooly scarves and morning mugs of hot apple cider. Our Year 7 teacher, the endlessly enthusiastic Ms. Hutchinson, had taken our entire class ice-skating. I remember careening forward, legs wobbling, breath steamy in front of me. I remember feeling like I was flying.

And then I remember the rats.

Hundreds of rust-brown desert rats, suddenly skittering on the ice. Instant chaos. Kids were screaming, falling over each other, scrambling to get out. And that's when sheets of paper tumbled from the sky like snowflakes. I'd only ever seen paper in collectibles like books and posters, never like this; rough and slightly uneven, as if it was handmade. But what was stranger was the message it contained: KUDZU RATS OUT THE TRUST. It had to do with the Badlands. Something about people having to live on scraps like rats. I remember words like *desperate*, *drought-stricken*, and *dying*. I was stunned by this different take on the Badlands—after all, we all thought of the Badlands as exotic, not dying.

But everyone knew dissent created instability, which was why it was against Trust law. When Ms. Hutchinson snatched the paper from my hand, I didn't argue. In fact, I felt relieved.

That night, a news stream explained the rats as a freak infestation. There was no mention of Kudzu. When I asked Ms. Hutchinson about it the next day, she looked pained, then patted my shoulder and told me not to worry about it. And not to talk about it.

After that, I'd heard vague rumors of other stunts over the years. Poisoned grass in a park spelling out *Untrustworthy* in thirty-foot letters. A painted ladder on the inside of the city walls, all the way to the top, and the word *Welcome*. But no one ever talked openly about Kudzu. My best friend, Izzy, didn't believe in them, and made me feel babyish the one time I brought it up, saying it was like believing in the tooth fairy. In the end, I assumed the group wasn't real.

"We definitely exist," Ling assures me. "We're a nonviolent collective working to undermine the Trust and free the Badlands. Once the Trust is exposed as lying and corrupt, we believe Edenites will do the right thing. Open the borders. Save the Badlands." Ling lowers her voice with deliberate control. "Kudzu is going to destroy something called Aevum."

I hesitate, curiosity trumping caution. "What's Aevum?"

"Aevum is being developed by Simutech," she replies. "It's their second attempt at creating an artelect."

No. No. No, don't say it—

"You might remember the first attempt." Ling smiles cannily. "Magnus."

Magnus. The word punches me in the stomach. I struggle to keep my voice even. "That's impossible. After Magnus—Simutech shut it down, his programming was destroyed. Artelects are over, they're *done*."

Ling rocks back on her stool, looking relieved. I realize too late I've just confirmed everything she thought she knew about me.

"It's not over." Ling leans across the bar, her voice barely a murmur. "The Trust restarted everything six months ago. It's just top secret this time. No information is public."

Dread prickles my body like a rash. "Then how do you know all this?"

Her smile is sly. "We're not the public."

I realize I'm clenching the edge of the bar. I drop my fingers, not

wanting her to see the full effect of what she's saying to me. My heart-beat is crashing in my ears.

Magnus.

A black volcano is boiling up inside me and before I can stop it, Mom's face shoots into my mind, her brilliant blue eyes wide with horror. The memory of my voice, alien in its terror: "*Get away from my mother!*"

Frantic, I push the image away. I push everything out and away. Disconnecting.

"Aevum is completely outrageous," Ling continues. "The Trust shouldn't be funneling resources into a stupid science experiment. They should be fixing the problems out here."

I can't believe this is happening. It's been a whole year. I changed everything. I speak to no one. I have nothing so that nothing can hurt me.

"C'mon, Tess. You, of all people, can see how bad things are getting, especially since the dam was built." Ling's voice swells with insistence. "We've been monitoring the project and believe it to be in the final stages. We have to act *now*. You, of all people—"

"Stop saying, 'You of all people'" I choke out, spinning back around. "I am *not* involved in—"

A crash cuts me off. I whip around. Shards of glass fall from Robowrong's metal fingers. It had gripped the bottle too tight. At the sound of the breaking water bottle, the kids outside jerk to attention, like pack animals picking up a scent. A few of the braver ones dart forward but stay beyond the open doorway.

Ling looks at me pointedly. "Not involved? Those kids'll be dead in a month if Lunalac runs dry."

"Don't be so sure," I snap. "Badlanders are more resourceful than the Trust gives them credit for." But even as I say it, I know Ling is right.

At over ten thousand square miles, Moon Lake keeps Eden flush with clean water. Until a month ago, it also fed a sizable river in the Badlands called Lunalac, which provided a limited but livable supply of water for the locals. The Trust changed that by building a dam to block off the aqueduct. Now, Moon Lake suckles the shining city exclusively, leaving the Badlands to fend for itself.

Damming Moon Lake wouldn't kill everyone in the Badlands right away. The survival instinct of two hundred million people is too strong.

We're already making a day's worth of water last a week. But millions will still die without Lunalac. It might take a year; it might take ten. But it'll happen.

Ling draws in a breath and lets it out slowly, as if to help distill everything she's saying to me. Her words come with calm control. "Kudzu are going to destroy Aevum to draw attention to Moon Lake being cut off from the Badlands," she says simply. "That's the whole point of the mission—*No new life until all life is equal*. But we need your help."

I know why.

For years, Simutech had been trying to make an artelect, a different kind of substitute that could think and feel and reason. Artificial intelligence. Magnus was the first attempt. The reason Ling had left the safety of Eden to track me down was because Magnus had been created by, and then had killed, my mother.

According to the official story, Magnus killed Dr. Francesca Rockwood accidentally: a test went tragically wrong with no one to blame. The true reason for her death was something only my mom, Magnus, and I knew. And I am the only one of those three still alive.

Ling swats a fly away. "We have information that they're working with a combination of robotic and biological technology."

I blink and refocus, the words coming more on instinct than by design. "Robotic neurocircuitry."

Recognition sparks behind her eyes. "That sounds familiar."

"The biological side of things is to make sure it has a nervous system."

Ling wrinkles her forehead. "Why does Aevum need a nervous system?"

"So it can feel things, respond emotionally to what's going on. That's a part of being alive." I feel like I've stepped outside my body and am watching someone else reeling off facts as easily as breathing. I can't believe I remember all this. Listening to my mom, reading her reports, doing my homework at Simutech surrounded by scientists—it seems like a lifetime ago. "The processing speed of the singularix would have increased exponentially."

"The singu... What?"

"Singularix." I pause. "Their brain."

"Tess, you know more about this than any civilian out there." I can

almost taste the passion in Ling's voice. "More than any of us, that's for sure."

"I sold my ID for iodine. I can't get back over the border."

"I figured as much." Ling unzips a hefty-looking bag slung over her leg and pulls out one of the shiny red ID cards every Edenite is supposed to carry. For a moment, I'm mesmerized by the five-second loop of me—the old me—that plays on the card. My eyebrows slowly rising, then a smile that's more of a smirk, followed by a toss of silky blond hair. The way Izzy taught me to take a loop. Looking at it now, I almost see my best friend's face instead of mine. I barely recognize myself. The loop ends and starts again, thin eyebrows rising in an endless cycle.

The name, however, is not mine.

"Carin St. Clare?" I ask.

"Completely fictional," Ling assures me. "I'll prep you on her background so you can pass border control. That ID will pass a DNA scan."

"How did you get my DNA?" I ask, alarmed.

"I didn't say we had your DNA. I just said it'll pass a scan." Ling leans toward me intently. "I can get you back over the border. But we have to leave now."

I could go with her. Part of me knows I should. "Why do you think you can trust me?" I ask. "What makes you think I'd want to help?"

Ling holds my gaze unflinchingly. "Because I read about what happened to your mom. I know Magnus killed her."

And just like that, the itching, driving urge to flee takes over. I pluck Mack out of the bar and drop him into the leather sheath on my belt, then slip both arms into my sun robe. My backpack pulls down on my shoulders. "Thank you for a fascinating conversation. Let's never do it again."

As I head for the door, I feel undone. Angry at Ling for tracking me down. Angry at Zhukov, at the Trust, at everyone. The barefoot kids part for me as I stride through them. I don't need to join Kudzu to help them. I spin back to the small crowd and call, "*Acqua azul, à porte! Dalé!*"

They just stand there, staring at me in dumb disbelief. I gesture at the open doorway. "*Dalé! Dalé!*"

One darts inside. The rest keep staring at me, and I nod encouragingly. "*Acqua azul,*" I repeat, pointing at the bar. "Lake water." Another kid follows the first. Then another. Then en masse, the kids rocket inside

the bar—a dam bursting. I watch them scamper past Ling to jump over the wooden counter, shouting with delight. My anger disappears, flipping into amusement. My mom always said my impulsiveness was my best and worst quality. Right now, it feels like the best. Satisfied, I spin around and head up the street.

The sun turns everything into hot metal, even the shadows. After half a minute, I hear Ling call after me, mocking, “What are you going to do, Tess? Keep running?” She’s chugging behind me on one of the bulky solar floaters most Badlanders ride. The castoffs from Eden hover a few inches off the ground. This one has faded red-and-yellow flames painted on a silver body that has definitely seen better days. “How’s that working out?”

“Perfectly,” I snap. But the truth is, I’m not even sure how I’ll get a ride out of town. I’m about to celebrate a year of aimless backpacking. I’ve spent everything I had on pickup rides, tasteless food, and thin bedrolls in airless rooms. I don’t even have a floater. No possessions, no plan.

Maybe this whole Kudzu thing is an option. Head back to Eden, where life is lush and sheltered and easy. Take a shower for the first time in a year.

Meiyou—no. I squash the idea before it can bloom.

Ling’s voice is urgent. “Tess! You *know* this is important. Come with me!”

I spin around to address her directly. “Ping.”

She scowls. “It’s *Ling*.”

“You’re looking out for the Badlands. That’s great. But you know what I’m looking out for?”

She squints at me. “What?”

“Myself.”

“*Scucha!*” A huge, angry voice cracks up the street. A swarthy, shirtless man with a long ponytail made of real horsehair fights off the riot of kids looting his bar.

Zhukov. The kids are scattering, but it’s too late. Dozens already have armfuls of expensive *acqua azul*, because I let them steal it.

He points at me, yelling at someone to bring him the *fuega*. Not someone—*something*. Substitutes. The two old Divers Zhukov had repurposed as his own personal security emerge from the shadows, motors sputtering into action.

I swear loudly.

Divers could haul me back to Zhukov in a heartbeat.

“Get on,” Ling urges.

“No.” The Divers begin gunning up the empty street toward me, their three large wheels zooming easily over the unpaved roads. I can see their weird, open mouths from here, set in a permanent O to suck out floodwater that no longer exists. I start to run but the Divers are gaining ground.

“Tess, get on!”

I hesitate for a nanosecond before swinging my leg over the floater, leaping in front of Ling and shoving her down the seat. “I’m driving.”

“Hey!” She barely has time to grab on to my backpack before I shoot us forward.

“I know the streets better!” I yell over the roar of the engine.

We race jerkily up the narrow, twisting street, weaving around men lugging canvas bags of spare sub parts and barefoot kids playing chase. Zhukov once gave a local boy a black eye for refusing to pay for a bottle of lake water. I shudder to think what he’d do to me now.

I take a turn so tight we tip to one side, so close to the ground my ponytail skims the earth. My stomach rockets into my mouth. Ling lets out a little shriek, but I manage to pull us upright, heart drumming furiously in my chest.

We pause at a cramped cross street. Left or right? In a roar of twin engines, the Divers appear at the far end of the street to my right. They whip themselves in our direction. *Left*.

“We have to lose them!” calls Ling.

“You don’t say!” I call back.

Red dust sprays out on both sides as if we were cutting through water. We curve left, then right, shooting up streets as squiggly as noodles. Through an upcoming archway, I spot a flight of stairs. My teeth chatter as we hurtle up them and I almost run straight into a woman with a huge basket of pots and pans. The basket goes flying. She curses at me furiously over the oddly musical sound of metal clattering down the stairs.

“Sorry!” I yell over my shoulder.

At the top of the stairs, I pause. We’re on the second floor, which overlooks a square interior courtyard. A handful of young girls are playing in it, amid trash and debris. “This used to be a school,” I tell Ling quietly. “But people live here now.”

Slowly, I begin chugging us down the corridor. Dirty clothes are

strung up between gray concrete pillars. Most people can't afford water to wash them, but sunlight gets rid of some of the smell. Through the open doorways, we pass classrooms repurposed as one-room apartments. Some are jam-packed with dozens of makeshift beds, some contain no more than a bedroll and a bucket. Looks of surprise morph quickly to anger, and within a minute, we've attracted a trail of men and women yelling at us to get the hell out of their building.

"Tess?" I hear Ling say uncertainly. "I don't think we're exactly welcome."

"We'll just be a minute," I mutter. I need to stretch out our hideout as long as possible.

In a familiar roar of engines, the Divers appear at the top of the stairs behind us.

I power us forward at full throttle. "*Yídòng, yídòng!*" I shout at the Badlanders coming out of doorways in front of us to see what the fuss is. I hear Ling gasp as we take the first turn. The dull buzz of the Divers behind us echos around the corridors. Another turn. Another. Then we're in the final stretch. "Hold on!" I yell to Ling as we careen back down the stairs. The woman with the pots and pans is standing in the stairwell entrance chatting to someone. "*Yídòng!*" I yell, and she does, just in time.

Back in the streets, my foot jams on the accelerator. "Are they behind us?" I yell to Ling. I feel her body twist as she turns to look.

"Yes!" she calls. "Gaining!"

"C'mon," I mutter anxiously, scanning the storefronts for a way out. An alley. I wrench the floater into it, barely keeping us horizontal. We fly toward the bright light at the end and burst out onto a market square.

Hundreds of men, women, and different kinds of junky substitutes—Divers, Sweepers, Strongs, Mulchies—crowd around us. Beat-up old floaters laden with cages of cackling prairie chickens are crammed next to guys haggling viciously over livestock and solar bars and barrels of aqua ferro. I almost laugh in relief. We're saved.

Amid a chorus of honks and beeps and yells, we start blending into the ragtag crowd. After a few minutes, I'm sure we've lost the Divers. Eventually, we pass all the way through and emerge on the other side. With no particular destination in mind, I join a throng of floaters heading for a main road.

"There's another reason you might want to come back," Ling calls from behind me.

“Oh yeah?”

“The new head of Innovation at Simutech is Dr. Abel Rockwood!”

I’m stunned. “My uncle? That’s not possible.”

“What?” she calls over the roar of hundreds of old floaters.

“He split—quit!” I call back. “He told me himself he’d quit Simutech. He promised he’d destroy Mom’s research!”

“Guess they made him an offer he couldn’t refuse!”

My *uncle* is the head of Innovation? The position that got his own sister killed? I wouldn’t have picked Abel as a career-hungry grave digger. The idea tastes as bad as *pourriture*. All my fear and panic and guilt begins to solidify into another emotion, as clean and pure as a flame. Anger.

“That’s why we need you, Tess!” Ling continues. “Dr. Rockwood is our best way in, and you’re the only person who knows what to look for!”

Going back to Eden means getting close to secrets—horrific, ugly secrets that I’ve worked hard to bury. But if I don’t *really* get involved with Kudzu and Simutech and Aevum, those secrets will stay where they belong—unknown, and then lost forever. I can pretend I’m interested, take the free passage, then disappear as simply as smoke clearing.

“Okay!” I yell. “I’m in!”

“Then I guess we’re heading the right way!” Ling points to the hand-painted sign we’re passing under. It has one word on it: *Vuelvol*. Airport.

I’m going home.