

IMAGE NOT FINAL

The thrilling first instalment in the Rosie Black Chronicles
by talented WA author Lara Morgan

BOOK ONE: GENESIS

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CHAPTER 1

Rosie shone her torch down among the scattered bricks. The light picked over dust and thick spider webs then slid down into a deep fissure in the tunnel wall. She leaned forward to peer into it, then let out an exclamation that echoed in the darkness.

“What is it?” Juli said.

“There’s something in here.”

Rosie bent over and reached down into the gap. Her fingers brushed past sticky webs then touched something hard. It felt like the corner of a box. She grasped it and pulled, wagging it from side to side until it came free.

“Ew.” Juli recoiled at the thick dust and cobwebs sticking to Rosie’s arm.

“It’s only dirt.” Rosie held up her find. It was definitely a box, slightly larger than her hand and with a raised design of some kind on the lid.

“Hold this.” She thrust her torch at Juli who shone both beams of light down. Rosie rubbed at the dirt covering the design, but not enough came off for her to make it out.

“I wonder what’s in it,” Juli said. “Maybe it was buried before the Melt.”

“I don’t think it’s been here that long.”

“It’s dirty enough.” Juli clamped a torch under one armpit and shrugged her pack off. “We should clean it up so we can

see what it is. Here.” She pulled a water bottle from her pack, flipped open the lid and tipped it towards the box.

“Wait, what’re you doing?” Rosie grabbed her hand.

“What? Oh, yeah.” Juli looked embarrassed. “I forgot it wasn’t a refill.”

“You mean this isn’t even recyc? It’s pure?” Rosie couldn’t believe Juli had been about to tip out a bottle of spring water that cost more than her shirt.

Juli made a face and snapped the lid back on. “Sorry, vacuum suckage brain. You better have this.” She shoved the bottle into the pack Rosie was carrying and grinned at her. “Come on, let’s blast it out of here. This place is creeping me out. Also, I’m starving.”

Rosie rolled her eyes and took her torch back from her. For a skinny person, Juli was hungry a lot. “Okay. We can wash the box in the river,” she said.

They climbed up and out of the tunnel, both of them squinting as they emerged back into the much brighter afternoon.

“We should be able to get down to the water over there.” Rosie pointed towards a narrow opening between some trees and a dilapidated building on the riverbank.

“You sure that wall is all right?” Juli said. “It’s really leaning.”

“We just came out of a half-collapsed tunnel and you’re worried about that?”

“Better safe than squished,” Juli said.

Rosie dropped her pack on the ground and tugged on her arm. “Come on, it’s been there hundreds of years. I don’t think

it's going to fall down right this second.”

“Suppose not.” Juli sounded doubtful but followed her as Rosie pushed through the clumps of knee-high salt reed to the water's edge.

Far out in the middle of the river and further west towards the sea, the tips of a few old skyscrapers rose above the swirling current and King's Island, the tall stone memorial to the city that had once been, was a dark spike against the slowly dropping sun. In stark contrast were the glimmering towers and buzzing shuttle lines of Newperth upriver. The city was high-density, geothermal-powered shiny brightness – well, Central was, anyway. Outside Central things were less shiny and more prone to murk and power outages, but from where Rosie crouched on the riverbank of the Old City it was the apartment towers of the wealthy that stood out, the reflective UV shields shimmering in rainbow hues, and beyond them the enormous monolith of plasglass and biostone that was the Orbitcorp complex where her aunt worked. Orbitcorp had its own spaceport. There was also a Senate-controlled spaceport and a public port south of the city, but Orbitcorp's port was right in the middle of Newperth. Even now she could see the faint trail of ultra-heated vapour extending up into the atmosphere from one of the transports. She wondered if Aunt Essie knew anyone on it.

“Mars to Rosie.” Juli tapped her on the back. “Are your coms skived? The tide will be in soon if you don't hurry.” Juli dumped her pack down and squatted beside her.

“Okay, okay.” Rosie sluiced warm river water across her find.

A dark blue, round-edged box made of lightweight metal emerged from under the dirt. There were four silver buttons, each the size of a fingernail, on the front and stamped into the centre of the lid was the raised design of a half-sun with the rearing figure of a horse and rider rising above it.

“What is it?” Juli traced the sun with her finger.

“Don’t know.” Rosie frowned. It looked familiar but she couldn’t quite grasp where she’d seen it. She tipped the box upside down, searching for a handle or opening mechanism of some kind, but there were no indents, no keypads or slots, only the silver buttons. She turned it over again and something clinked inside. They looked at each other. Juli’s eyes widened. “I wonder—”

She didn’t get to finish as a branch cracked behind them and someone said, “What are you two doing here?”

They scrambled to their feet and turned around, Rosie hiding the box behind her back.

A boy with dark hair twisted into a mass of greasy plaits was watching them and Rosie’s insides lurched as she guessed he had to be a feral. He was about her age and his bare chest and arms were wiry with muscle and he had a knife tied around his waist with string. He stood with his weight resting on one hip, snapping a twig between his fingers.

Rosie tried to appear confident, despite her thudding heart. “We were just looking around,” she said. “We were about to leave.”

“That your boat I saw, is it?” The feral’s gaze was sceptical as he took in her faded shirt and pants.

“No, it’s mine,” Juli said, “and you can’t have it.”

The feral smirked at her. “How you going to stop me?”

Juli looked scared, but mad enough to say something to get them into more trouble, and Rosie sent her a furious look and shook her head as Juli opened her mouth to retort. She shut it again and the feral smirked some more.

“What you got there?” He nodded at the arm Rosie was hiding behind her back.

“Nothing,” she said quickly.

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Really, it’s nothing,” Juli cut in, “but I’ve got some food and fresh water in my pack. You can have that.”

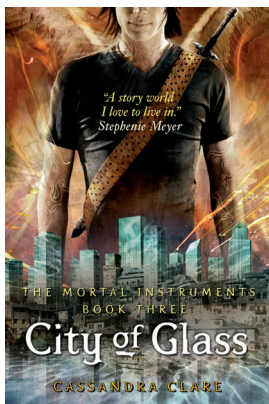
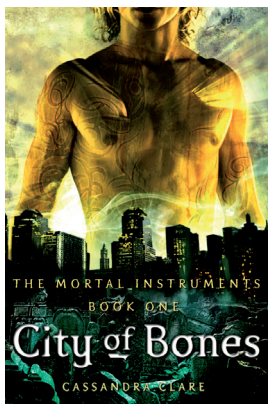
Crap. Rosie almost groaned aloud. Why did she have to say that?

The feral’s smirk disappeared. “I don’t need your charity.” He snapped the rest of the twig, tossing it away, and Rosie felt real fear constrict her throat.

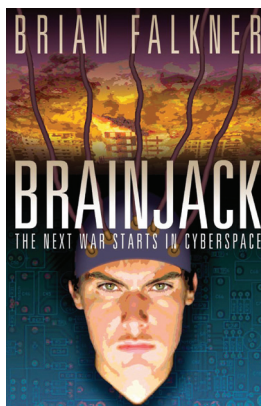
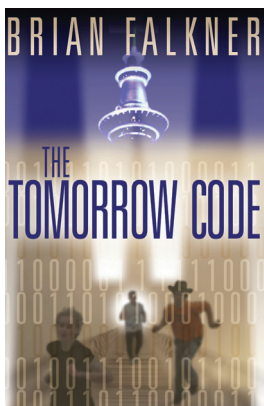
“Wait.” She held out her free hand, palm up. “It’s not charity really, that’s not what she meant. Take the pack, we just want to go home.”

“Too late now,” he replied and began to walk towards them, his hand on his knife.

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