



THE ROSIE BLACK CHRONICLES

BOOK TWO

EQUINOX

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The Rosie Black Chronicles
Equinox
by Lara Morgan

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Chapter 1

Rosie took a steadying breath, licked her finger and touched it to her eye. The identification distorter lens stuck to her skin and she lifted it off her iris. First one, then the other. She stuck them in her mouth and swallowed them. Gross. She gagged and leaned on the sink. They always tasted foul, like rotten fish scales.

“That’s three minutes,” Riley’s voice came through the receptor in her ear.

“Put the new ones in and get out of there.”

Rosie didn’t bother replying. He couldn’t hear her anyway; they never used reverse coms for a job because the signal could be tracked. Helios thought Riley was dead, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Rosie rubbed her eyes. The disintegrating lens made her nauseous, no doubt affected by the message capsule she’d swallowed earlier. She ignored it as best she could, her hand only a little shaky as she carefully slipped the replacement lenses on. Now any ident readers would clock her as Bridget Faraday, a scientist’s daughter. The lenses had a microscopic camera in them as well, so when she looked in the mirror Riley could see her. She blinked, speaking slowly so he could read her lips.

“Are they working?”

“Vision’s clear,” he said. “Get out of there.”

She tossed the Central dress she’d been wearing in the rubbish

disintegrator, ran the decolouriser over her hair to strip out the blond, and chucked that in as well. She ripped her clothes out of her bag and re-dressed in her own pants, black singlet and white over shirt. She gave herself a final once over in the mirror.

“Rosie, get going.” Riley’s tone was sharp.

She resisted the urge to mouth something else at him and turned to the corner above the bathroom door and pointed the jammer at the invisible surveillance hub. The jammer flashed once, giving her ten seconds before the shuttle station cameras kicked in again. Rosie slipped the device in her pocket and headed out.

Four minutes and fifty-three seconds. Was that a record? She pretended to be idly checking her personal com as she walked back down the corridor to the street.

Outside Central Shuttle Station A, the sidewalks weren’t as crowded as usual. Instead of the usual mass, only a thin stream of pedestrians passed her, and it left her feeling exposed.

The station was the hub for the city’s cosmetic alteration parlours and because it was so busy Riley often used it as a pick-up point for messages from his contacts. A good crowd made it easier for Rosie to become just one of the masses. Today she’d met a Central party girl called Sharia in one of the enhancement cafes. She’d disguised herself as a Central and it seemed to go okay but she couldn’t help being nervous. Plus what the girl had told her was doing her head in. Hadn’t anything they’d done on Mars made a difference?

She’d thought after she’d leaked Riley’s parents’ files about the MalX to the news wavers and they’d gone global that they’d dealt Helios a massive blow.

Now everyone knew Helios existed. More importantly, everyone knew Helios had created the MalX. They’d heard how MalX-infected mosquitoes had been accidentally sent to Earth in a shipment and escaped, spreading the disease. The Senate and Orbitcorp had publically denounced Helios, calling them enemy number one. The Mars Enclave was gone, blown up. She’d seen it happen – made it happen – and damn near died in the process.

But now Helios was at it again. If the message was right.

She increased her pace, going straight past the elevator tubes shooting people up and down to the suspended station. It was depressing to know Helios hadn't been destroyed, but deep down she wasn't surprised. Only low level operatives had been caught in the manhunt the Senate and Orbitcorp had run, and most of them had mysteriously died in custody. Hardly a shock, given the moles Helios had in both the Senate and Orbitcorp. Riley said it was likely some of them were still there, despite their much publicised declarations that they were rooting out any Helios supporters in their ranks.

We won't rest until our corridors are once more places of safety and hope for the people, was the latest sound bite from the authorities.

Security and hope. Rosie snorted. She and Riley had blown a damn base up and Helios were still around. With that sort of power, why wouldn't the invisible puppet masters behind Helios be as strong as ever? After all, no one even knew who they were. Not even Riley.

It was ferociously hot and she was suddenly thirsty as the sweet scent of engineered berries from a juice bar assailed her. She wondered if she could risk stopping for a drink. Maybe not. Half a dozen Senate guards were strolling in her direction. One was talking non-stop into a com and they all had one eye covered by opaque shields. Scanners. Rosie slipped alongside a group of fat guys in noodle franchise uniforms. Helios had impersonated Senate guards before. It didn't hurt to be too careful, even with the fake iris ident. She forced herself not to turn around as they passed, keeping alongside the noodle guys, who were bitching about a club they'd been in the night before.

"Take the Rim line," Riley's voice came again in her ear. "Central West C just had a quarantine scare; it's closed for UEDC."

United Earth Disease Control. That was the third MalX scare in Central this week. That explained the sidewalk space. Rosie changed her direction, dodging past the noodle guys and swinging towards the sky street crossing.

It was a long walk to the closest Rim station, and by the time she got there the nanos in her over shirt were struggling to evaporate all the sweat. Rosie looked up at the entrance scanner and made sure it clocked her fake ident as she went in. She'd passed another dozen guards on her

way and was jumpy with nerves. Riley must have picked it up on the bio patch in her earpiece. He spoke softly, “Calm down. The message capsule has another seven hours at least before it disintegrates.”

Easy for him to say; he wasn’t the one who’d swallowed it. It sat in her gut like a lump of congealed starch. She threaded her way through the busy station, looking for the next shuttle east. She had to go through a convoluted shuttle switching process – one of their security protocols – before she headed to where Riley was.

Rim South Station was more crowded than usual thanks to the Central line closure and it took her almost ten minutes to push through and find a shuttle. The shops that lined the station projected loud advertisements for their wares, and huge floating screens hovered above the commuters, showing news wave after news wave. She stood in the line for a shuttle and watched as she waited.

The latest quarantine news flickered silently on one screen, alongside what shuttles were delayed due to disease carriers detected and also vision from the southern Asiatic States, where the MalX had taken the strongest hold. There was also a constantly changing tally of the dead in glowing orange numbers. It was now just over five million.

“Can you believe that?” A short man in a brown coat that stunk of rancid oil pushed up next to her and stared at a news wave about the Oceanus mission. It showed images of a deep-space freight ship with debris drifting from a massive hole in its hull.

Oceanus colony ship hull breeched. Leviathan breaks apart, scrolled along the bottom of the screen in big black type. Five hundred dead. American Republic claims UEC delays on the wormhole project to blame.

“Sons of bitches,” the man murmured still staring at the wave. “I was going to sign up to go.”

Oceanus was one of the projects Aunt Essie was now assigned to. It was a recently terraformed planet in the Gliese system, twenty light years from Earth, and the UEC had been calling for colonists. It took months to reach it on the current ships. The United Earth Commission had been promising to build a stable wormhole to cut the distance, but so far nothing had eventuated. The planet had become the shining hope for people desperate to escape the MalX, especially now Mars was closed

to colonists since Helios had been exposed. Oceanus was a water planet with pristine new growth, touted as some kind of utopia, but getting there was risky. Ships didn't always make it – maintaining power and shields all that way was difficult. There was plenty of space junk out there waiting to tap a hole in the side of your ship, and all the money in the world couldn't stop a hull breach in space.

Rosie could understand people wanting to take the risk; she might live in the Rim now, but she still felt like a Banker. She knew the odds, and at the moment they were stacked in the MalX's favour.

As she stood watching, the news wave vision suddenly blurred. A high-pitched beeping cut through the noise of the station and a new piece of vision began streaming along the bottom of the Oceanus news wave. Bold black letters cut over the now frozen picture of the Leviathan.

Not gone, not forgotten, they said. An image of the Helios logo of the horse and rider over a sun flashed on the screen, followed by pictures of people dying of the MalX, their limbs wasted, skin red with the rash. *What will they do next?* The black words proclaimed. *What will you do to find them? Stop Helios. Save our world.* An image of a man in silhouette, one raised hand brandishing a sword, appeared, followed by the words, *Rogue Waves. You can't stop the fight.*

Rosie's eyes filled with tears at the pictures of the dying people and she looked quickly away. It reminded her too much of her mum in the final days before the MalX took her. Around her, people were exclaiming and staring at the screens.

"Tell it, Rogue!" someone shouted.

"Bastards!" someone else called.

It was a common reaction when one of the anonymous broadcasts cut through. They'd been happening more regularly lately.

"Well-timed distraction," Riley's voice was soft, and tinged with pride. He wouldn't tell her, but Rosie was sure he knew who was making the broadcasts. Maybe he was making them himself.

"Shuttle," someone called. The crowd surged forwards and she had to fight to stay on her feet. She ended up jammed up against the brown-coated man as they crowded though the doors.

Rosie rode the shuttle system for the next two hours, switching lines

four times until she finally got on the North Coast route. It was her last change. The shuttle reached the river and paused at the bridge check point where the Senate scanned the carriages for any people infected with MalX. The cabin was half full and she'd been lulled into a relaxed state by the low hum of conversation and wasn't prepared for the sudden screeching alarm. It split the air like a blade scraping down metal. She jerked up, heart racing, and immediately felt ill. Her vision blurred. The sound was disorientating, designed to make you dizzy to reduce resistance. The doors burst open and two men in full disease control suiting came in.

"Everyone sit down!" the first one shouted, his voice amplified by his helmet. They were dressed head to toe in white and one carried a small case and scanner. The first man had a pulse gun and was plainly the soldier escort for the medic. Fear rippled through the carriage like a contagion.

The woman next to her screamed, clutching at the child on her lap. She wasn't the only one. At the other end, a man started to kick desperately at the plasglass window.

"Stop!" The soldier ran toward him, people scrambling out of his way. The alarm abruptly shut off. Rosie's vision cleared and she heard the unmistakable whine of a pulse weapon charging.

"Stop!" the soldier shouted again.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" the man cried, but he was still trying to kick through the glass. The soldier fired, the sound a concussive whump in the confined space. Everyone screamed and Rosie flinched down behind the seat in front of her.

The pulse hit the man in the back. He slumped down, head lolling, and the red rash of the MalX on his neckline was exposed as the soldier pulled him backwards by his shirt. Rosie had seen it that bad before. If the shot hadn't killed him, the man would be dead in a few months.

The cabin of the shuttle was still with shock and suppressed fear; everyone thankful it wasn't them, terrified one day it might be. It was barely a comfort to know she was immune to the MalX.

She wondered if the man had a family. He was around the same age as her dad. The guilt hit her hard. Helios had taken her dad, tortured him and infected him with the MalX and Pip had saved him. This man wasn't

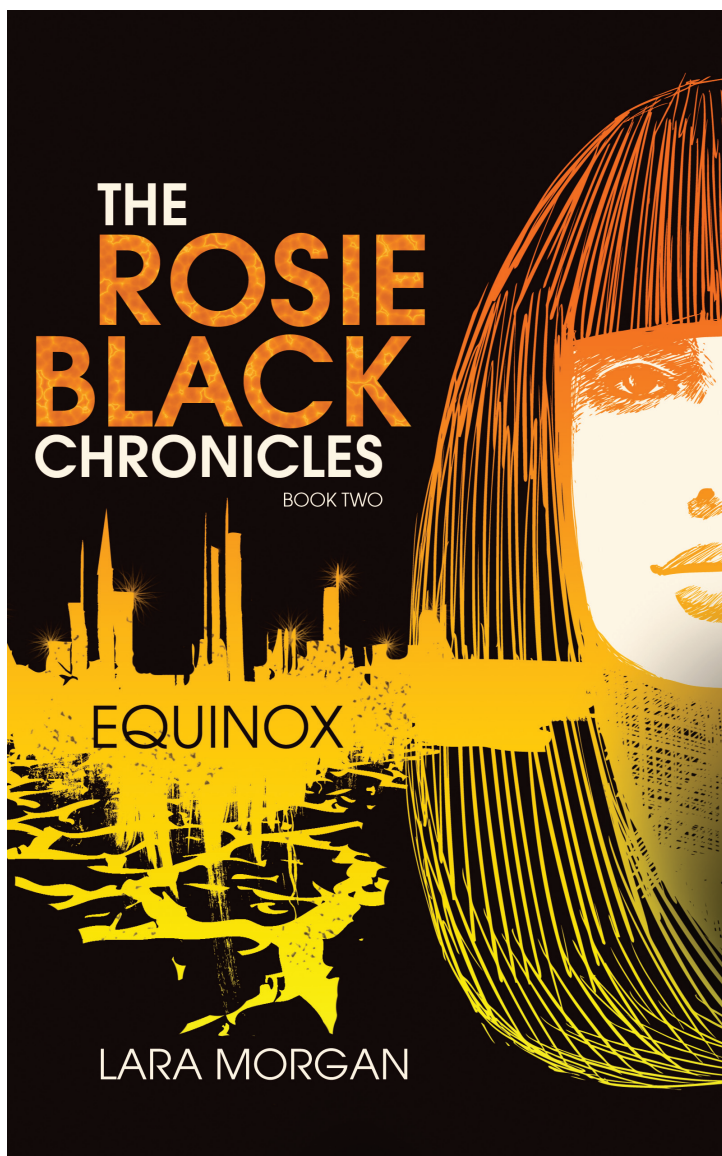
going to be so lucky. Unlike her dad, or her aunt, and even her, the MalX cure in Pip's blood wasn't something this man could get. He would die, as would thousands of others, and there was nothing she could do about it. Pip was gone and she had no idea where he was.

"Rosie. Rosie!" Riley was calling her name.

She blinked. The medic was now pushing a shot of something into the fallen man's neck and she realised her hands were curled in fists.

"Rosie, are you all right?"

She forced her hand to uncurl and raised it in front of her eyes, forming an O with her thumb and finger. Okay. There was an audible short breath. "Good," he said. "You know what to do. I'll see you soon." The com went dead as he cut off its signal.



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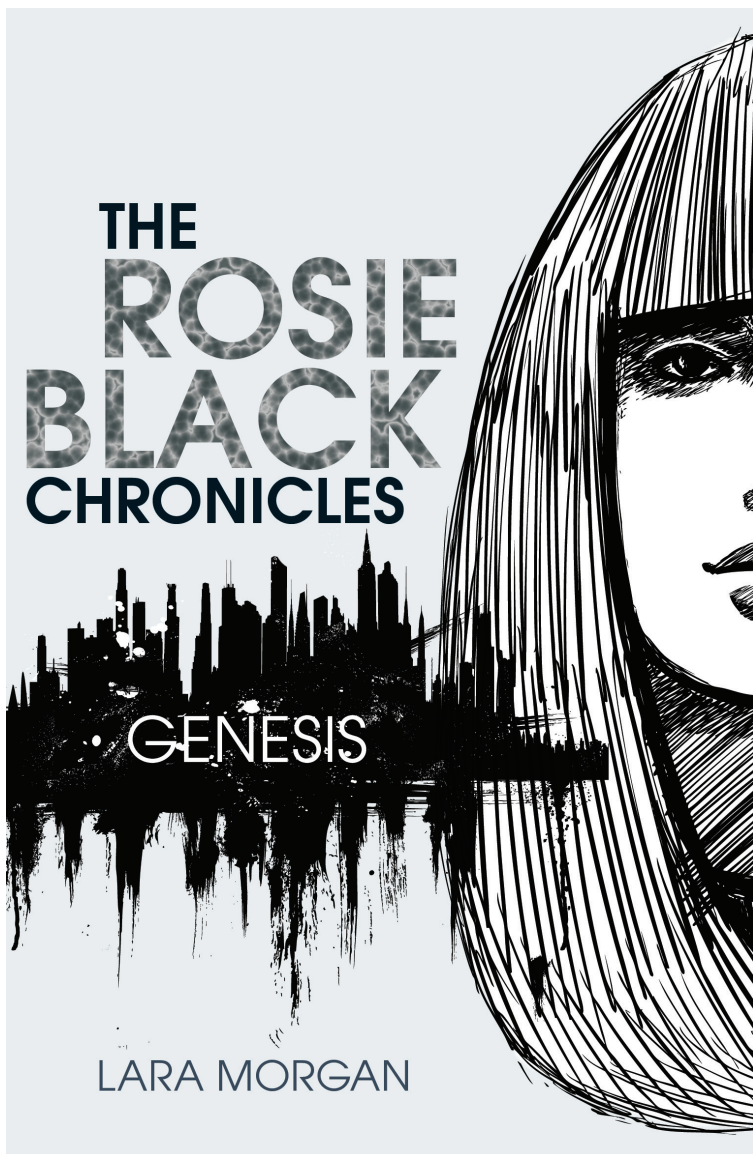
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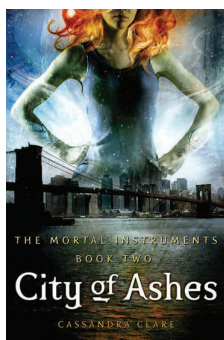
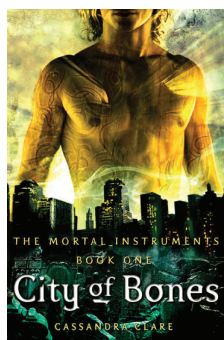
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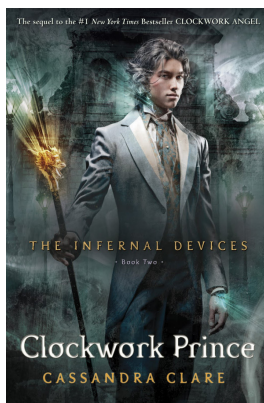
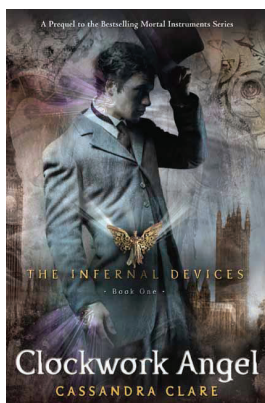
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