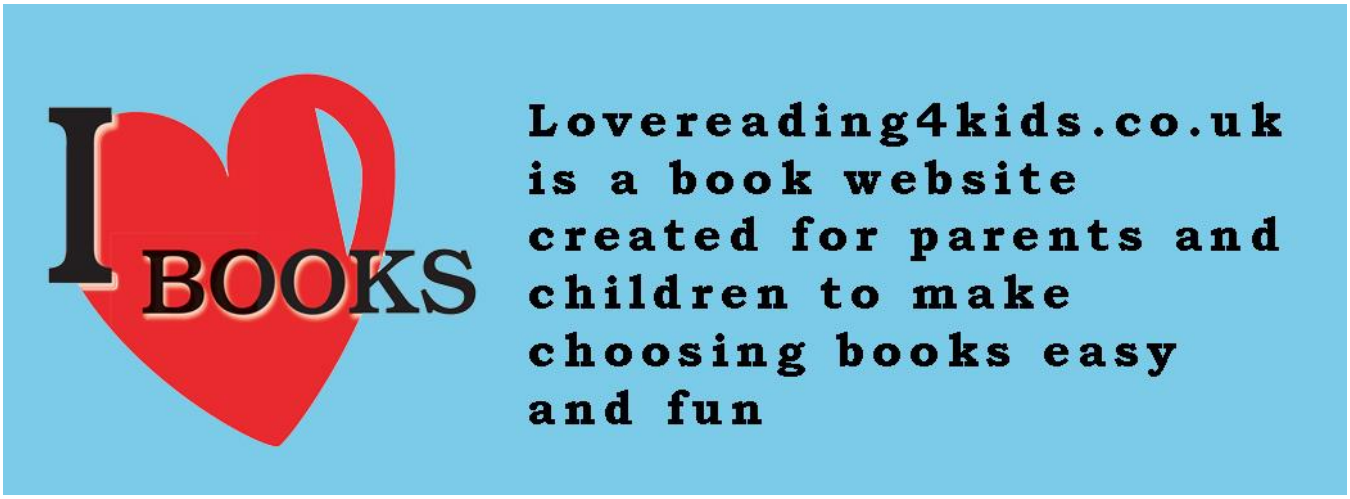


Opening extract from

Black Light Express

Written by

Philip Reeve

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What if you found a gateway that could take you beyond everything you'd ever known? To somewhere where nobody knew who or what you were? Where nobody was hellbent on getting their revenge on you? Where nobody knew about the terrible thing the two of you had done?

Well then, you'd go through that gate, wouldn't you? You'd take your chance in a whole new world, just the two of you, off to start a new life together. At last maybe it won't matter that one of you is a human and one of you is a Motorik—this is your chance to leave all those old prejudices behind, and just be yourselves.

But you'd better be ready for some surprises. Because the new world you're heading to is a wild, strange place full of creatures and customs you've never come across before. You'll need every ounce of courage and resourcefulness to carve out a new life for yourselves there. And even that might not be enough to keep you safe—because the past is a hard thing to leave behind, and who you are and what you've done has a nasty way of catching up with you . . .

BLACK LIGHT EXPRESS—STEP ON BOARD AND EXPERIENCE THE START OF A DAZZLING ADVENTURE IN THIS SPECIAL PREVIEW SAMPLER.

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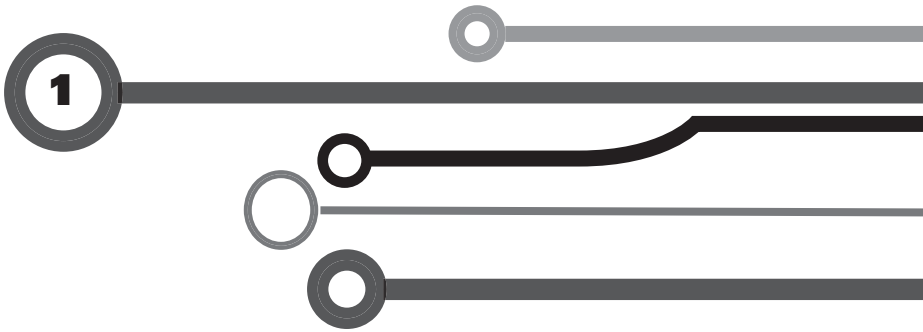
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The tunnel was only a few minutes old. Its walls still steamed, and even glowed in places, as if it had been bored by something intensely hot. Along its floor ran twin railway tracks, stretching for almost a kilometre into the heart of the mountain, where the tunnel ended abruptly at a blank rock face. Something was fused into the walls and roof there: an archway made from a substance which looked a little like bone, but not much like anything.

The arch began to glow. The light had no colour, and seemed to have no source. It filled the archway like a gently billowing curtain. A breeze blew through it, bringing a scent which mingled with the smell of scorched granite from the tunnel's still-warm walls. It was the smell of the sea. A breath of air from another world.

And suddenly, where there had been nothing, there was a train. An old red locomotive towing three carriages, pouring itself impossibly out of nowhere through that curtain of light. Trainsong and engine-roar rolled ahead of it along the tunnel. In the first carriage a lean, brown boy named Zen Starling and a girl named Nova who wasn't really a girl at all pressed their faces to the windows.

At first they saw only the seared, glassy rock of the tunnel walls rushing past. Then they shot out of the tunnel mouth; the walls were gone and the train was running across an open plain. Looming shapes

flashed by, weird hammerhead things rearing up on either side of the rails, scaring even Nova until she realized they were only rocks. Wide lagoons like fallen mirrors lay on either side of the tracks, reflecting a dusty blue sky, several suns, and a lot of daytime stars.

This was not the first time Zen and Nova had ridden a train from one world to another. They came from the Network Empire, whose stations were scattered across half the galaxy, linked by K-gates through which trains sped from one planet to the next in a heartbeat. But the gate through which they had just passed was a new one: it was not supposed to exist at all, and they had come through it not knowing where it led.

'A new world,' said Nova. 'A new planet, under a new sun. A place that no one but us has ever seen . . .'

'But there's nothing here!' said Zen, half disappointed, half relieved. He was not sure what he had expected. Mystic cities? Towers of light? A million Station Angels doing dances of welcome? There were just lagoons, and low islands of grass and reddish rock, and here or there a cluster of pale flag-like things standing in the shallows.

The train spoke. The old red loco *Damask Rose* had a mind of her own, like all the locos of the Network Empire. 'The air is breathable,' she said. 'No communications that I can detect—I'm getting no messages from signalling systems or rail traffic control . . .'

Nova was a Motorik: a humanoid machine. She scanned the wavelengths with her wireless mind, looking for this world's Datasea. There was nothing. Just static rolling like surf, and the mindless warble of a quasar a million light years away.

'Maybe this world is empty,' she said.

'But there are rails here,' said the *Damask Rose*.

'Real rails?' asked Zen. 'Ordinary ones? The right gauge and everything?'

'Hmmm,' said the train. 'There's a simple test we can do which will tell us that. Are we crashing? No. So I'd say the rails are just fine. Just

like the rails at home.'

'But where did they come from?'

'It's the Worm,' said Nova. 'The Worm is laying them . . .'

The Worm was the alien machine which had prised open the fabric of reality to form the new gate, and melted that tunnel out of the mountains' heart. As it sped away from the mountains it let out its sleek new rails like spider-silk. Soon Zen and Nova could see it on the *Rose's* cameras, a cloud of dust moving steadily ahead of them. Inside that cloud sometimes the waving spines and colourless lightning crackle of the Worm could be seen, and the hunched mass of it, like an immense half-mechanical maggot, a rolling cathedral of hi-bio-tech, spewing vapour and weird shears of light. Within it and beneath it huge industrial processes were happening at dizzying speed. It wasn't just a matter of laying the ceramic cross-ties like eggs and running the rails over them and bolting the rails down. There were ridges which needed cuttings or short tunnels melted through them. And there had to be some foundation for the tracks to lie on, so something was being done to the ground beneath the Worm, leaving it harder and shinier than the ground around and fizzing with odd motes of light which danced a while then faded and were mostly gone by the time the *Rose* reached them.

'It is slowing,' said the train at last, and she slowed too. 'It's moving off the line. It's making a siding for itself . . .'

They went past the Worm at walking pace, reflections from the carriage windows rippling over its high flanks. It had lost its iridescent sheen, that restless movement. It seemed burned out: a black hill, cooling like clinker. Somewhere inside it lay the dead body of Raven, the man who had built it, entombed on this new world.

The sound of the wheels changed.

'Are there still tracks?' asked Zen.

'Let's see,' said the *Damask Rose*. 'Again we must ask ourselves, are we crashing? Ooh, and again, no . . .'

'I mean, how are there tracks?'

The Worm had fallen behind, lost in the hazy light that hung above the alien lagoons, but on the *Rose's* screens the rails still stretched ahead, not quite so shiny now. They ran all the way to the horizon, where perspective pinched them together like an arrowhead.

'These rails were here before,' said Nova. 'The Worm made a spur to join the new gate to a line that was here already.'

With a rattle of dry wings a big insect launched itself sleepily from a luggage rack and started battering at the glass in front of Zen's face, as if it was eager to get outside and explore this new world. A Monk bug. Zen flinched. He had been through some bad stuff recently, and some of the worst had involved those insects. If enough of them got together they formed a hive-intelligence, and one of those hives had attacked him back in Desdemor. This bug must be a survivor from it. Mindless without its million friends, it had blundered aboard the train.

Nova caught it gently between her cupped hands. Zen thought she should kill it, but she said, 'That's mean. Poor thing. We can let it out when we find somewhere suitable . . .'

So he went to find a box to put the bug in.

The train's three carriages had been prepared by Raven. Zen and Nova had not yet had time to explore them. The front carriage was a grand old state car with a bedroom and bathroom on the upper deck, living quarters downstairs, a small medical bay at the rear. The middle one was a buffet car, its freezers packed with food. In the rear carriage was a store of things Raven must have thought he'd need: an industrial 3D printer, a small flatbed truck with off-road tyres, two shielded compartments stacked with spare fuel cells. There was a locker full of spacesuits, a dock where flashlights and butterfly drones were charging. There were racks of guns, and ice-axes, and coils of rope, and box upon box of other supplies.

Just glancing at all that heaped-up stuff was enough to make Zen

feel a warm glow of ownership. He'd done it, made himself rich, the way he'd always dreamed of. He had his own train now. Except that there was no one he could show it off to. The Guardians, the wise Artificial Intelligences who watched over humanity, had not wanted a new K-gate opened. Raven had done terrible things in order to open it, and Zen and Nova had been his pawns. They had wrecked the Emperor's train, and the Emperor himself had been killed. They could never go back to the Network Empire. Zen's mother, his sister, and the people he'd called his friends were all cut off from him as surely as if he'd died. Running his fingertips over the smooth surfaces of Raven's livewood cabinets, he sensed the first sharp twinge of homesickness.

He tipped some packets of Railforce emergency rations out of their plastic box and went back with it to the state car. Nova was standing where he had left her. The trapped bug made rattly, rustly sounds inside her cupped hands. She had tipped her head to one side, and looked as if she was listening.

'What is it?' Zen asked.

'Voices,' she said. 'Way down around seventy-five kilohertz. Very primitive radio transmissions. I *think* they're voices . . .'

The *Damask Rose* cut in. 'I hear them too. And there seems to be a station ahead . . .'

She opened a holoscreen and showed them the view from a forward-pointing camera on her hull. A low hill rose from the mirror-lagoons. The line ran towards it, and Zen could see other lines converging there, curving across the lagoons on low embankments, one crossing a long white bridge that looked like fishes' bones. There were more white things all around the edges of the hill—maybe trees, or maybe buildings, but with the look of things put there deliberately. And up on the hill's top were larger structures, strange angles shining.

'Raven was right,' said Nova quietly. For her, saying 'Raven was'

instead of 'Raven is' seemed stranger than anything this world could show her. Motorik did not have parents, but she thought that she felt about Raven the way a human being might feel about their father, if their father was brilliant, secretive, and rather dangerous. She had not exactly loved him, but she had never imagined herself outliving him. She wished he could have seen all this.

The insect fluttered impatiently between her hands. Zen held out the box and tried not to look as she bundled the bug inside and sealed the lid. It gave him a nasty thought about the approaching station. The Station Angels, those mysterious light-forms which appeared sometimes near the K-gates of home and had told Raven how to open his new gate, had looked a bit like insects themselves: giant mantis shapes made out of light. Perhaps they would be waiting here to welcome the *Damask Rose*. But Raven had said they were just projections—so what if the real Station Angels were actual giant bugs? Insects as big as climbing frames?

Nova had put the box with the bug in it into her jacket pocket. Now she was standing at the window, gazing out. Zen went to join her. She did not take her eyes away from the sights sliding past outside, but her hand found Zen's, and he twined his fingers through hers. Back on Tristesse, in the desperate hours before the new gate opened, he had told her that he loved her, and they had kissed. He wasn't sure how she felt about that now. It was a strange thing, wanting to kiss a Motorik. It was probably just as strange for a Moto to want to kiss a human, and he wondered if she would want to do it again. He didn't know anything about love. He had always hidden his emotions, even from himself. In the type of places he came from you never showed that you cared about anything, because other people might take it off you, or smash it just to hurt you. He felt almost frightened by his feelings for Nova. But he was very glad that she was there.

Outside the window he saw pale spindly trees with plate-shaped leaves spinning in the breeze, and between them . . . were those

buildings? Were those *people*? Apart from the trees there was nothing that looked like anything Zen had seen before. And then a long shape moving . . .

'Is that a *train*?'

'It's a Worm,' said Nova.

'Not quite,' said the *Damask Rose*. 'It's smaller, and simpler.'

It had the same half-built, half-grown look as Raven's Worm. A silvery shell through which long spines stuck up, waving to and fro as if they were feeling the air. There were patterns on its flanks like the markings on cowrie shells, and a horny plate beneath it which seemed to be bolted to sets of metal wheels. It was towing a line of wagons. When Nova opened the window a crack they heard a deep, discordant, wavering call.

'Trainsong?' asked Zen.

'If it is,' said the *Rose*, sniffily, 'it's not very good.' But she replied with a song of her own, and the alien train slowed to let her pull ahead. She drew to a stop beside something that could only be a station platform, seemingly made from a single slab of ancient glass. Upon its frosted surface the people of this world were gathering to stare curiously at the *Damask Rose*. Their voices spilled through the window, squawking and hooting, like birdsong, like a jungle at dawn. Nova frowned and set her translation software to work.

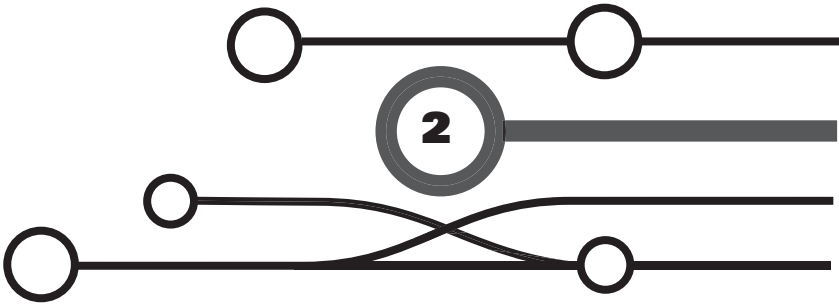
'Someone is jibber-jabbering at me on a very obscure channel,' the *Damask Rose* announced primly. 'I have no idea what they want.'

'I expect we're mucking up their timetables,' said Zen nervously. 'If they were waiting for the next train to Planet X they must be annoyed to have us turn up instead.'

The platform was filling fast. There was nothing human-like or even human-shaped out there, and such a wild variety that Zen knew he must be looking at creatures from a dozen worlds, not one. There were a lot of three-legged antelope things with indigo robes and black glass masks, and some transparent giant newts whose internal

organs he could see fluttering and pulsing in their misty insides. A squid which had somehow learned to walk on land oozed its way to the front of the platform and started reaching up to feel the *Rose's* windows with its tentacles . . . If it hadn't been for Nova's hand in his, Zen would have thought he was lost in a bad dream.

But Nova just turned and smiled at him and said, 'Come on, then! Let's introduce ourselves!' And before he could ask her to wait, or run to the rear carriage to fetch one of Raven's guns in case these clustering creatures tried to eat him, she had opened the doors and they were stepping out, still hand in hand, into the noise and the smells and the light of the alien station.



The mass of beings drew back a little, as if shocked by the strangeness of the travellers. Then some things which Zen had thought were old bleached tents came suddenly to life. They were the same creatures he had seen standing in colonies out in the lagoons, only he hadn't realized that they were creatures then. They crowded round him, making buzzing, rattling sounds by quivering the papery swags of skin which stretched between their beanpole limbs. They reached out little starfish hands to feel his clothes and face. He shrank back from them, wondering if he should be afraid. It was like being a tiny child, new to everything. Except even a tiny child had instincts, and Zen's instincts were useless here. Were the tent things attacking him, or just being friendly? He wondered if he should bow, or smile, or say, 'We come in peace.' But with no mouths of their own, how would they understand a smile? Bowing might be a deadly insult, and his words would be no more than noise to them.

Then Nova opened her mouth, and the same buzzings and rattlings that the tents were making came pouring out of her.

They went still, quivering, opening, and closing their little hands. Dark eye-spots which lay like seeds inside the outer layers of their skin slid to focus on her. The crowd fell silent, listening. Nova turned, and let out hooting, whinnying sounds which seemed to please the

three-legged antelopes; they raised their triangular heads, and dim lights flickered behind their masks.

She glanced quickly at Zen and smiled, pleased with herself. 'They say we're welcome.'

'How did you do that?'

She tapped the side of her head. 'Decryption software. It's crude, but I'm already starting to translate some simple phrases. I've recorded their sounds so that I can speak back to them . . .'

The antelope things hooted and whinnied, dipping their heads.

They say welcome to . . . to Yaarm. That's the name of this place: "Yaarm in the Jewelled Garden". Pretty! They are glad to meet us. They say it is a long time since a new race found its way onto the Web of Worlds.'

The conversation continued. The see-through newts had voices which sounded like someone farting in the bath. The things with tentacles used a complicated sign language, and when Nova tried to talk to them by waving both arms and one leg they rippled with oily rainbow colours which Zen guessed was their way of laughing. Sometimes she would send a message to his headset, explaining something she had just been told: *It sounds very big, this Web of Worlds—thousands of stations . . . They call those living locomotives morvah* . . . But mostly she was too busy trying to keep up with the talk, and edit and play back her own responses.

Zen started to feel left out. Nova was so much cleverer than him. Frightened by all the strange creatures, he looked past them at the station buildings. Behind the platform rose one of the big structures he had noticed from the train. It was made from the same glass-like stuff as the platform, and it looked just as ancient, and sort of abandoned. Cracks and fissures ran across its surface, and it was overgrown with a creeping weed. The shadows were lengthening by then, the alien suns dipping towards the horizon. In the places where the shade lay deepest, the creeper glowed with a wavering, ghostly light,

as if all its leaves and stems were made of glass, and hollow, and filled with summer multitudes of fireflies. Through the shining strands Zen could just make out some carvings on the walls . . .

'That's odd,' said Nova.

'What is?'

'I told them we came to meet the Station Angels, but they don't seem to understand. I mean, I know they probably don't *call* them Station Angels, but you'd think they'd recognize a description: giant insect things made out of light. You wouldn't think they could have missed things like that . . .' She tried to imitate the way the Angels moved, but that just made the squid things ripple with brighter colours.

So Zen did have something to add to the conversation after all. 'You mean those,' he said, pointing to the carved wall.

Enough of the aliens seemed to know what pointing meant that all heads eventually turned to see. He made his way cautiously through the crowd and pulled some of the glowing weed aside so that the carvings showed more clearly. Station Angels, flat as painted pharaohs in a tomb. They gestured with their mantis legs at stylized suns and fading lines of what might have been lettering. A noise ran through the platform crowd.

'Railmakers,' said Nova, coming to stand with Zen, while the antelope and the tents and the see-through things all explained it in their different languages. 'They call them "the Railmakers". But they say we are too late. The Railmakers are gone, long gone . . .'

'How did they call to us then? Those projections they sent through the K-gate, the ones which Raven danced with . . .'

'I think maybe those were recorded messages,' Nova said. 'The Railmakers opened the gates, and laid the rails, and raised these buildings here, but then they went away—they died—there was something called "the Blackout"—some sort of dark age, I suppose. Now younger races use the Web of Worlds to trade. But somehow

the Railmakers' projections are still running, still calling and calling . . . Oh, Zen.'

She looked sad, but Zen felt relieved. The Angels or Railmakers or whatever you called them hadn't just been giant insects, which was bad enough; they must have been incredibly powerful, to build a railway that spanned the whole galaxy. They would have been like Guardians. Like gods. But these younger races seemed no more advanced than human beings, and maybe less so.

'Tell them we've come to explore this Web of theirs,' he said. 'Tell them the Network Empire has asked that nobody travels through our K-gate until we have visited their worlds, and met their leaders, and shown them the things we have to trade. Tell them I'm the Ambassador for Humans, and I've come to look round before our Empire opens trade links with these worlds of theirs.'

Nova frowned. 'But that's a lie. We can't ever go home. The Guardians and the Noon family would kill us.'

'I know that. That's why we want to get away from the gate, out into this Web of Worlds, just in case they decide to send anything after us. And it's not all a lie; we *will* be trading. The *Rose's* third carriage is full of Raven's stuff, and it's all unique here. Unique is valuable.'

Nova laughed. She had been worried about Zen. She was glad to see he was still scheming. 'But one day we'll have to admit that we can't go back.'

'We'll be far away by then.'

Nova thought about that for a microsecond, then turned and told the crowd. They seemed pleased. They understood why the humans would want to see the Web before trade was opened. The Herastec themselves (she thought that meant the antelope-y ones) had kept the gateway to their homeworlds closed for many years after they first made contact. A barrier would be erected, so that no trains could pass onto the humans' homelines without permission. And they would be welcome at all the stations of the Web: among the Herastec, the

Deeka, the Chmoii . . .

Nova found the box in her pocket. The Monk bug seemed to have woven a cocoon for itself in there; she could just make out the dark cigar shape of its body through the silken strands. She held it up to ask if it would be all right to release an insect like this on Yaarm, but some of the Herastec misunderstood and thought she was trying to sell it. Yes, yes, they would buy! They had no use for insects themselves, but they traded sometimes with the Neem, and the Neem liked insects, or ate insects, or collected insects, or perhaps were insects themselves (Nova's translation software had not yet learned to cope with all the inflections of their whinnying language). She gave them the bug box, and they gave her in return three little rods of metal. She had made her first trade on the Web of Worlds.

After that, the newcomers were taken on a tour of the station city. Both small suns had set by then, but it was not much darker. Zen had never seen so many stars, nor such bright and brightly-coloured fans of glowing gas: plumes and swags and curtains of it filling the night sky with the stars wrapped up in them and shining through.

'The Jewelled Garden!' said Nova, looking up at it, then down at the star-fields reflected in the still lagoons. 'This world must lie in the heart of a nebula. It's beautiful!'

Everything had seven shadows, cast by the seven brightest stars. In that strange light the place seemed still more dreamlike. A blue-furred worm went by trailing a sort of bird on a silver chain, and Zen could not tell which one was the pet. The leaves of the windmill trees spun softly in the night breeze. There were food stalls giving off smells like chemical factories, and engine shops whose fumes smelled of peanut sauce. There were things so far outside his frame of reference that his brain refused to take them in and his gaze glanced off them, baffled. And then there were things which seemed startlingly familiar, like the jewellery stall where a couple of glass-masked Herastec

were selling delicate spirals of silver and jade designed to decorate the tapering antelope horns of their kind.

Zen paused there for a moment, studying the display with a thief's eye. He was pretty sure he could sneak one of those horn-rings up his sleeve without either of the jewellers noticing. Maybe they didn't even know what theft was in this corner of the galaxy.

But he didn't need a horn-ring, and anyway, Nova knew what he was up to. (The first time she had ever seen Zen he had been stealing a necklace from a jeweller's stall at the Ambersai Bazar.) She squeezed his hand and led him onwards. 'No mischief, Zen Starling. You have responsibilities now. You're an Ambassador for Humans. So am I. We have to be on our best behaviour if we're representing our whole species.'

'So do these things not realize that you're a Motorik?'

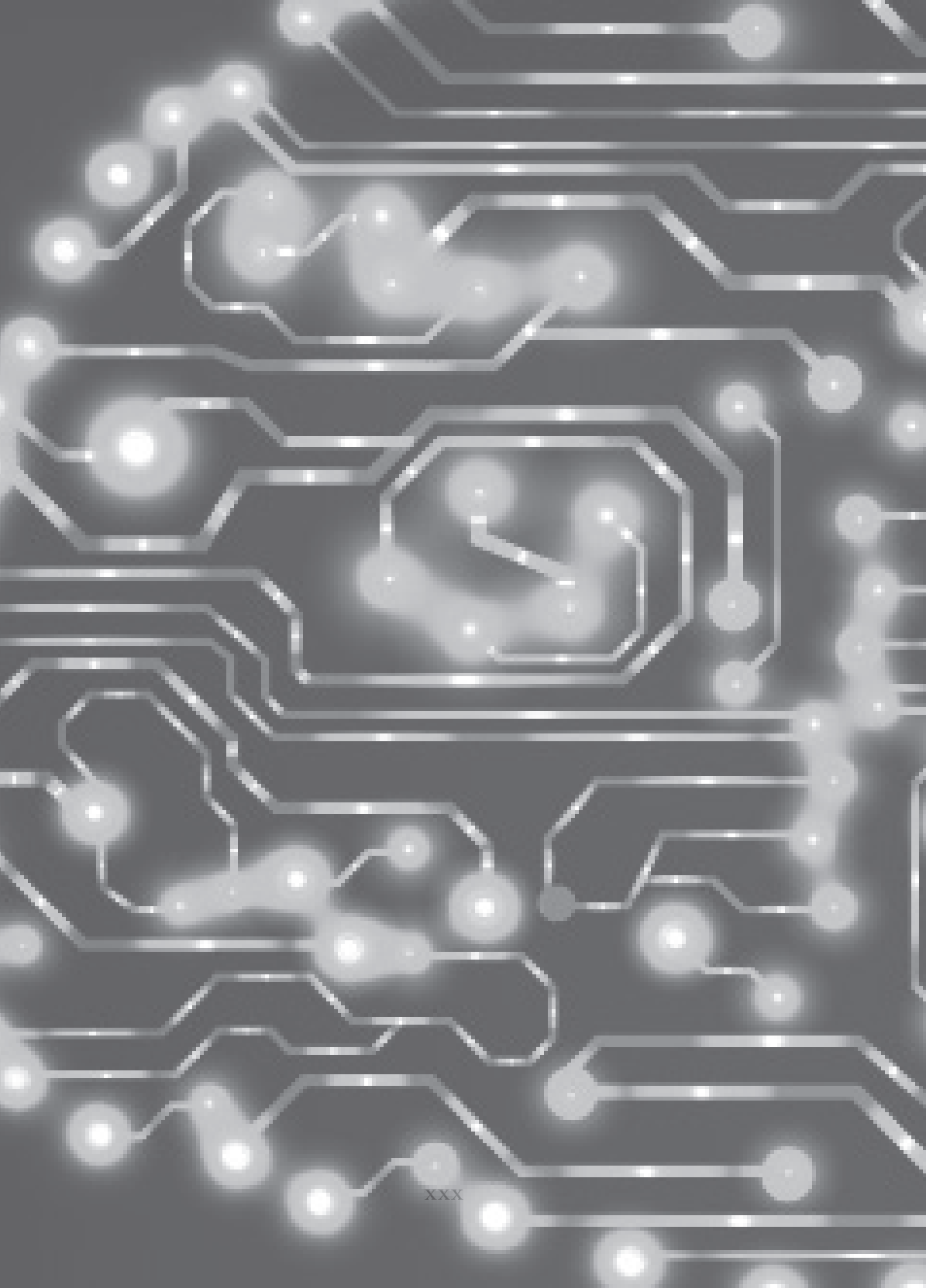
'I think they believe we're male and female humans,' said Nova happily. She was always pleased when someone mistook her for a human. 'They don't have many machines here. I've not seen anything yet that's more advanced than Old Earth tech from the twentieth century, except for those bio-trains of theirs, and I think those are born, not built.'

'So are you going to tell them what you really are?'

'No' said Nova. 'I'm not going to tell them you're a thief, either. These are new worlds, Zen. We don't have to be what we were any more. We can be anything that we want. We can be humans together.'

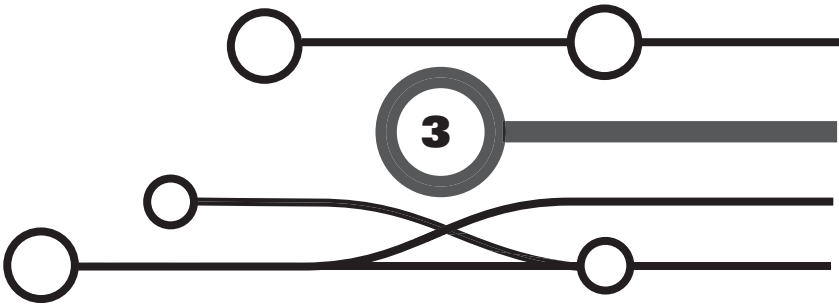
That night a warm wind blew across the lagoons, whispering around the *Damask Rose* where she rested on a siding near the water's edge. The wind stirred the curtain in the window of the sleeping compartment, lifted it and let it fall, so that the light of all those nameless stars spilled on the bed where Nova lay holding Zen. If he had turned his head he could have watched star-gardens glowing in the sky and water, but he could not look away from her face. The light

of a thousand suns and suns-to-be brushed her too-wide mouth and shone in her not-quite eyes. The shadow of the curtain slid over her almost skin, her custom freckles. He was giddy with homesickness and culture shock, and a thousand strange stations lay ahead, but he knew somehow that he would be all right, as long as he had Nova.





PART TWO
POPSICLE GIRL



The worst part of being frozen was thawing out again. She woke up to blurred underwater aquarium light and horrible confusion. She was floating in a coffin-shaped bath of thick, cold fluid. The stuff wasn't just all around her, it was inside her, filling her lungs and her throat. She should have been used to it, a repeat offender like her, a three-time popsicle girl, but she panicked, as she always did, flailing and clawing her way up through the still-frozen slush on the surface, puking and choking till the wire dollies who'd woken her took hold of her arms and legs and hauled her out of the freezer onto a cold floor.

Then she was shivering under a tepid shower, the last of the cryo-sleep gel swirling away down a grating between tiles the colour of old men's teeth. Peeling off adhesive sensor patches. Staring at her face in the shatterproof mirror above a metal sink. A brown face, still frost-bite blue around the lips. Her name was Chandni Hansa. She would have been quite pretty if they hadn't shaved her head, and if her eyes didn't look the way they did.

She dried herself on the threadbare prison towel and put on crisp new underwear and a paper prison smock. Then she followed a red line on the floor through to another room to wait for another wire dolly to bring out a plastic bag containing the clothes she had been wearing when they arrested her. They were good clothes: a

video-fabric kurta and swishy trousers, a pair of little silver sandals. She'd bought them with the last of the money she'd stolen from a rich boy called Tallis Noon.

Trouble was, she thought, pulling on the trousers, all these things would be out of fashion now. The shopping spree which she remembered as happening a few days back, just before the Bluebodies caught up with her, had actually been ten years ago. That was part of the punishment, maybe. You did your time and then ended up back out on the street wearing styles that were ten years out of date. Which let everybody know you were straight out of freezer-prison, which meant that you couldn't get a job or anything, so pretty soon you'd wind up doing something that would earn you another stretch as a human popsicle. This had been Chandni's third time on ice—or was it the fourth?

She'd stolen Tallis Noon's headset as well as his money, but they hadn't given that back. It had been a beautiful headset, a delicate little bronze thing like a flower stem, with tiny flower-shaped video and audio terminals which pressed against your temple and behind your ear. Chandni guessed they'd given it back to Tallis, like he didn't have enough money to buy another one. They'd given her a clunky-looking disposable one in a plastic envelope, which turned out when she put it on to offer strictly limited access to the Datasea and a lot of helpful hints on how to rejoin society. It seemed to be broken, though: it showed a date that was just six months since she'd been put in the freezers. Then she tried a few of the vanilla Datasea sites she was allowed to look at, and they all had that same date.

That made her feel hopeful, and slightly suspicious. If she'd really only been in the ice for six months, that wasn't too bad. Her clothes might still be in fashion. She might still have a chance to hook up with some of the people she'd known, not like the other times. But she'd never heard of anyone getting time off from a freezer sentence. (What for? Good behaviour?) So maybe there had been a mistake.

Maybe they were letting her out instead of some other poor popsicle.

She decided to keep quiet about it as she followed the red line through to the final room. There were actual windows in this one; sunlight outside, a train crossing the viaduct which curved above the cold-prison. There was an actual person, too, although she didn't show any more interest in Chandni than the wire dollies had. She locked a tracker bracelet on Chandni's wrist and said, 'Your sister's waiting.'

'My what?'

The woman gestured to the glass doors which led out into a carpeted lobby. Another woman stood out there, face hidden by a wing of black hair as she leaned forward to study one of the posters on the wall. 'Your sister. Come all the way from Grand Central to collect you. You're cleared to travel back there with her. I suggest you stay there. We don't need your sort on Karavina.'

Which was interesting, because Chandni was pretty sure she'd never had a sister. So most likely the person waiting in the lobby was the sister of the other prisoner who should have been defrosted instead of Chandni. So most likely she would spot the mistake as soon as she saw Chandni, and Chandni would be dragged back inside and flash-frozen into a bath of gel for another nine years and six months—a prospect which suddenly seemed so frightening to Chandni that she started shaking, almost started crying like a little girl.

She held it together though. 'OK,' she said, and strolled towards the lobby doors, telling herself there would be a moment's confusion when the lady outside saw they'd defrosted the wrong person, and in that moment she would take her chance and run. Her legs felt weak from the freezers, but if she could make it to the K-bahn station maybe she could get aboard a kindly train that would take her to another planet.

The doors slid open. The woman in the lobby turned. She was older than Chandni, and a total stranger. But when she saw Chandni

her plain, yellowish face split suddenly into a lovely smile. 'Chandni!' she said too loudly, and came forward to wrap Chandni in the first actual hug Chandni had been given since she was a kid.

'Well, this is odd,' said Chandni, muffled in the fake-fur collar of her fake sister's coat.

'I've got so much to tell you, little sis,' the stranger said, still too loud, taking Chandni's hand and more or less dragging her outside into the misty sunlight. 'I'll explain once we're on the train. Come on! If we hurry we can catch the twenty-six thirty-two . . . '

The 26.32 to Grand Central was waiting at the platform: a big Ngyuen 60 loco with a line of double-decker silver carriages. Chandni started to relax when she saw it. She liked trains. However strange it was coming out of cold-prison, however much things had changed while you'd been frozen, the trains were always there, threading their patient way through the K-gates which carried them from world to world. You knew where you were, with trains. Plus, there were lots of people on them, so if the strange woman who had just collected you from cold storage pretending to be your long lost sister turned out to be some kind of psycho who wanted to murder you and use your skin to cover scatter cushions, a train journey would offer plenty of chances to give her the slip.

To her surprise, the woman had first class tickets, which didn't seem to go with her cheap coat. She led Chandni to the front carriage and into a classy private compartment. As the doors slid softly shut she took her coat off, and underneath she was wearing black clothes which looked both very simple and very expensive and made Chandni feel a bit overdressed.

'My name is Kala Tanaka,' said the woman. 'I work for the Noon family.'

'You mean the people who got me frozen for ten years because

their son said I took some of his spare money?' asked Chandni.

'The Noons are a corporate family,' said Kala Tanaka patiently. 'That means they have many branches, many different interests . . .'

'I don't need a history lesson about the Noon family . . .'

'Yes, you do,' said Kala Tanaka. 'Sit down.' She said it quietly, but so firmly that Chandni fell silent, and sat down. As she sank into the soft seat cushions the train began to move. 'I am *L'Esprit de l'Escalier*,' it said, through speakers set in the tortoiseshell ceiling. 'I will be calling at Przedwiosnie, Glorieta, Bhose Harbour, and Grand Central . . .'

'You do need a history lesson,' said Kala Tanaka. 'You may only have been in the freezers for six months this time, but a lot has changed.' She pointed out through the window, where the buildings of Karavina's small station city were sliding by at gathering speed. Like all the station cities Chandni had ever seen, it had found wall space for a holographic portrait of the Emperor as high as a couple of houses. Only, for some reason, this one didn't show the Emperor. It showed a young woman of about Chandni's age with blue hair and a kind of ordinary face.

'A few days after you were frozen,' said Kala Tanaka, 'there was a train crash on the Spindlebridge. The Emperor Mahalaxmi was killed. There was some debate as to who would succeed him, but eventually Railforce decided to support his younger daughter, Threnody Noon. She is the new empress of the Great Network. She is the person I work for. And she is the person who arranged for you to be released early from the freezers, though if you tell anyone that you will find that there is absolutely no proof of it, and we will deny everything. The Empress Threnody wishes to talk with you, and she wishes to do so in absolute confidence. You know what that means?'

'I'm not stupid,' said Chandni. 'It means secret.'

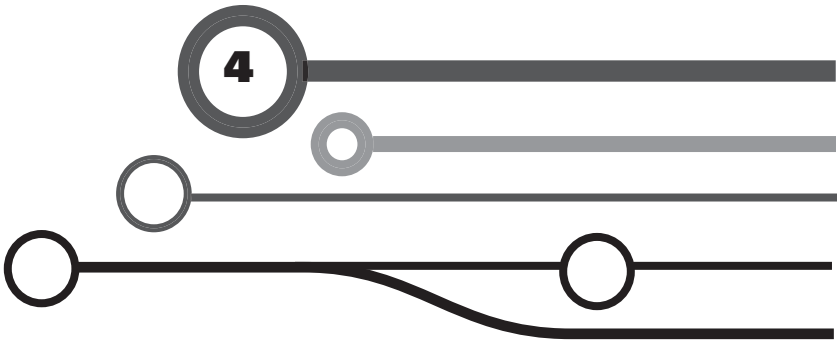
Kala Tanaka smiled at her. 'Good. I'm glad you're not stupid. It is a long haul to Grand Central and it might have been boring, but I can see we're going to get along very well. Are you hungry yet? I'll order

us something from the dining car. But we'll eat here, I think. Best if you are seen by as few people as possible.'

They were outside the city by then. The famous vapour lakes of Karavina went past, and then the mountains. The train was gathering speed, heading towards the K-gate which would take it to Przedwiosnie, thirty thousand light years away. Chandni thought about food, and decided that she liked the idea. She was still confused though.

What does this new Empress want to talk to me about?' she asked.

'She will tell you that herself,' said Kala Tanaka.



At the centre of the Network lay the planet called Grand Central, a hub-world whose K-gates gave access to all the major lines of the galaxy. A sprawling city had grown up there: a green city, more like a beautifully managed forest with tall buildings rising here and there above the trees. A broad river, dotted with the sails of pleasure boats, wound through it to the ocean. Along the river's banks were some of the great buildings of the Empire; the K-bahn Timetable Authority, Railforce Tower, the pyramids which housed the central data centres of the Guardians. In the hills further north, where the river began, stood the imperial palace, the greatest of them all.

Its proper name was the Durga, but that just meant fortress or stronghold or something in one of the Old Earth languages, and didn't really suit it. It had probably started out as a fortress, thousands of years ago, but after so many generations of peace it had grown distinctly palace-y. It was built on, and in, a flat-topped granite mountain. The first humans to arrive on Grand Central, before it even had a proper atmosphere, had made their homes in the caverns inside it. Later, when things were more stable, they had started to build on the sides and top too, extending it upwards in spires of bio-tech ivory and specially grown bone. It was the kind of architecture you needed a degree in higher maths to understand. The walls of these upper sections weren't solid, but a basketwork of swirls and

filigree, like fancy icing on a huge stone cake. Broad decks jutted out, planted with elaborate gardens. On one of the highest of them the Empress herself sat looking out across her capital.

No one had ever intended that Threnody Noon should become Empress. Her mother's marriage to the late emperor had only been a temporary one, designed to seal some business contract between her mother's family and the House of Noon. Threnody had grown up knowing that the heir to the throne was her half-sister Priya, who had been destined to rule since before she was born, and whom the family geneticists had ensured would look the part: glossy, exquisite Priya, the Empress-to-be. But somehow, in the confusion which had followed her father's death, Priya had failed to convince Rail Marshal Lyssa Delius that she would be a good Empress. Since Lyssa Delius commanded Railforce, with all its troops and wartrains, her opinion tended to be listened to, and she had decided that she would rather see Threnody rule the rails. Priya had vanished, and Threnody had taken her place upon the Flatcar Throne of the Empire.

Even now, six months after her coronation, she still felt numb with the strangeness of it all. There were so many parties and functions to attend, so many visiting dignitaries who needed to pay their respects to her, so many official portraits to pose for and new clothes to be fitted for. That was why, whenever she could, she liked to escape from her ladies-in-waiting and hairdressers and make-up advisors and social media strategists and security people and come up here, to the most overgrown and least fashionable of the palace's many gardens. She was still not technically alone—her cloud of personal security drones, disguised as hummingbirds, hovered around her at all times, while bigger machines cruised above the garden, ready to put a warning laser-bolt across the bows of any paparazzi drone which tried to snatch a photo of her for the gossip sites. But she could *feel* alone, and that was important. At home on Malapet, she'd had whole days to herself, walking on the beach of black sand below

her mother's house while her mother worked on paintings of the icebergs which the currents stranded there. She had found solitude boring then; she had longed for something to happen to her. Now it had, and these quiet times in the high garden were one of the few things that kept her sane.

So she was annoyed at first when Kala Tanaka messaged her headset to say that she was on her way up. And then she wasn't, because Kala said, 'I am bringing the girl.'

Kala Tanaka was another of things that kept her sane. Everybody seemed to think it must be wonderful, to live in the palace, and go out every night to dinners and balls. The rest of her vast family envied Threnody, wishing that Lyssa Delius had picked them for the job. Only her uncle Nilesh seemed to understand that the new Empress might feel frightened and alone. He was Threnody's favourite uncle, a mild, lazy, completely unambitious man who seemed quite content as Stationmaster on the little end-of-the-line tourist moon Khoorsandi. 'And even that would be too much for me,' he had told Threnody at her coronation ball, 'if I didn't have my assistant to take care of me. You should borrow her for a while. Kala has been with me for years and years, and Khoorsandi isn't to everyone's taste. I expect she'd enjoy a stay at the palace.'

Kala Tanaka had come to Grand Central with him, and she stayed on after he left. She was plain and kind and clever and extremely efficient. She was not afraid to tell the highest ranking members of the family to leave Threnody alone if she thought the Empress was too tired to listen to their latest schemes and proposals. She would even stand up to Rail Marshal Delius when the schedule of official duties grew too frantic. She was the sort of person who could clear time in a busy Empress's day for a walk in the gardens. She was also the sort of person you could send secretly to Karavina to arrange the early release of petty criminals from freezer-prisons.

Threnody felt a little nervous as she watched Kala and the girl come

towards her along the overgrown paths. She'd not had much experience of lower class people, except for smiling politely at them from the observation car of the imperial train while they stood on station platforms waving tiny flags at her. She had only really ever known one, and that had not turned out too well. This girl, this Chandni Hansa, looked pretty frightening. She was short and wiry. Kala had made her wear a headscarf to hide her shaved head, but her clothes were alarming, all video-fabric and cultured diamonds, the sort of thing you'd see . . . well, Threnody wasn't sure where you'd have to go to see clothes like those. And although her face was pretty, it lost its prettiness when she looked at you; her eyes seemed too old for her: bitter and suspicious.

'Bow,' said Kala Tanaka, bowing herself, and the girl gave a sullen little nod, glaring at Threnody.

Threnody inclined her own head slightly in response, and said, 'Welcome to Grand Central, Miss Hansa. I hope your journey was comfortable?'

'It would have been more comfortable if she'd told me what you want me here for,' said Chandni Hansa, with a quick, sharp look at Kala Tanaka. 'I haven't done anything.'

Threnody's cloud of drones sensed the hostility in the girl's voice and adopted a defensive formation. Threnody reminded herself that she was the Network Empress and could not be intimidated by people like Chandni Hansa.

'That's not true, is it?' she said. 'Six months ago you made friends with a young man called Tallis Noon, whom you met on a train at Przedwiosnie. You took him with you to Karavina, and while you were there you robbed him.'

Chandni Hansa glared past her into the blue parkland beyond the palace, where gene-teched dinosaurs were calling.

'It's all right,' said Threnody. 'I met Tallis Noon at my coronation. He is very boring, and he probably deserved to be robbed. You probably

taught him a valuable lesson. It was wrong of him to demand that you were frozen for such a minor crime.'

Chandni Hansa looked at her again. She wasn't used to people in power talking to her like that. She was suspicious. 'That why you let me out?'

'Partly,' said Threnody.

There was a stone bench overlooking a chess garden: a chequerboard lawn with topiary chess pieces clipped out of yew. The yew had been spliced with crustacean DNA, and the pieces moved slowly to and fro on crab-like roots, laboriously playing out a game of chess. Threnody sat down on the bench and gestured for Chandni to sit beside her. Chandni looked back at Kala Tanaka as if she suspected a trick. Then, reluctantly, she sat down.

'While you were on Karavina with Tallis Noon,' Threnody said, 'a young man came aboard the Noon train. He said he was Tallis Noon, and he looked enough like the real Tallis that we believed him. But he turned out to be an imposter. His real name was Zen Starling. He sabotaged the train somehow, on Spindlebridge, killing my father and a lot of other people. Later on, he showed up on Sundarban, and caused more trouble there, before he vanished down the derelict Dog Star Line on an old train. And I've never been able to find out what it was about, or why any of it happened. An actual, living, breathing interface of the Guardian Anais Six took charge of things on Sundarban and went off after Zen Starling down the dead line with a Railforce officer named Malik, and nothing has been heard of either of them since. There's no mention of any of it in the Datasea, Rail Marshal Delius claims to know nothing about it, and I'm the Empress—you'd think I'd be able to find out the truth about something like that!'

She realized that her voice had been growing louder and louder, more and more angry. Chandni Hansa looked scared of *her* now. She calmed herself, and said, 'The only thing I was able to find out is that

the real Tallis Noon was on Karavina when it all happened, with a girl he'd met on a train, who ended up robbing him. And I thought that seemed like a bit too much of a coincidence. So I thought I'd bring you here, and ask you if you had anything to do with it, and I'm not even going to punish you if you say you did, I just want to know.'

'I didn't know anything about sabotaging the Noon train,' said Chandni Hansa.

'So you just got talking to Tallis Noon because you fancied him?' asked Kala Tanaka, who was standing guard a little way off, watching the slow movements of the chess pieces.

Chandni made a scornful sound. 'Fancy him? That stuck up Noon boy? No. I'm not interested in boys. I'm not interested in girls, either, in case you're getting any ideas. A man paid me to make friends with Tallis Noon and take him to Karavina, that's all. Said I was to keep him there for a week, but after a few days I was sick of him, so I stole his headset and his cash and took off.'

'This man who paid you,' Threnody said. 'Was it Zen Starling?'

'I've never heard of any Zen Starling,' said Chandni. 'He sure didn't look anything like Tallis Noon. He was old.'

'How old?'

'Hard to say. Old and weird. White. With white hair. And skinny. Like someone out of a history show, some duke or something from the Old Earth times. Said his name was Raven.'

'Do you know where I can find him?'

Chandni shook her head. 'I'd seen him a couple of times on Glorieta. The night he talked to me I ran into him down near the old station, the boarded-up one . . .'

'The Dog Star Line station?' asked Threnody.

'Yes . . .' said Chandni. 'He said he had a job for me. Said he thought I might like to earn a cool thousand and do a bad turn to the Noon family, and I was up for both of those. He paid in advance, too. Said if I didn't do the job like he told me he'd know about it and come

and find me, but I don't see how, and I wasn't scared of him anyway.' She shrugged. 'I guess your Zen Starling must have been working for him too.'

'Anything more you can tell me about this Raven?'

Chandni thought. Six months in the freezers left holes in your memories. 'The night he hired me he was on his own, but once before I saw him with a wire dolly. She was a funny looking one. Dressed like a real girl, and had, like, freckles on her face, but she was Motorik all right.'

'Nova,' said Threnody.

'I never heard him call her anything. They just went past me one night and I thought, they're an odd pair.'

Out on the chessboard lawn, the red queen made a surprisingly quick move and landed on a black pawn, crushing the smaller bush to the ground, tearing at it with her crab-claw roots. Threnody would have liked to tear at Zen Starling like that; at him, and this Raven, and the Motorik called Nova. Those three had caused all this, she was sure of it. But they were gone, and talking to Chandni Hansa had given her no answers, only more questions.

'Why were you so keen to do the Noons a bad turn?' she asked.

Chandni shrugged again. She was surprised at how much she had told the stuck-up little Empress. It made a change to talk to someone. She didn't see it would do much harm to talk some more, before they threw her back onto the streets.

'My family used to be all right,' she said. 'My dad was Stationmaster on a place called Shelan Junction that you've probably never heard of. But Shelan Junction was a Noon world, and the Noon Emperor decided to get rid of him so some stuck-up useless Noon boy could have his job. My dad went downhill after that. Things fell apart pretty fast.'

Threnody was shocked. 'I'm sure my father would never have thrown someone out of a post in that way!'

'Not your father, Empress,' said Kala Tanaka. 'This would have been the emperor before him: your great uncle. He was notoriously corrupt.'

'But Chandni Hansa can't be old enough to have been alive when he was on the throne!'

'You don't age in the freezers,' said Chandni Hansa, with a kind of bleak pride. She pulled her headscarf back and Threnody saw the prison barcodes tattooed on her scalp.

'Chandni has been in the freezers a lot,' said Kala Tanaka. 'The first spell was the longest—fifty years for burning down the Stationmaster's villa at Shelan Junction. Since then it's been five years for this, ten years for that. She's about nineteen years old if you just count actual life, but she was born ninety-six years ago.'

Chandni shrugged again, an odd, somehow aggressive little movement. 'It's hard to fit back in once you've been in the freezers,' she said. 'I got out the first time and everything was different, everybody I knew had moved on. I couldn't even talk right; people who used the slang I used were all grandparents. So I got in trouble again, cos that's the only thing I'm any good at. After a few goes, it's kind of a relief to go back in the fridge.'

On the chessboard, the red queen had almost finished destroying the pawn. Torn leaves blew across the garden. The first of Grand Central's twin suns was sinking into the bank of low cloud which lay along the horizon. Chandni Hansa stood up, and Threnody's drones buzzed angrily, tracking her movements. 'So do I make my own way out?' she asked.

'No!' said Threnody. She wasn't sure what she was doing, only that she could not let this damaged girl go back out into the world, back into her life of crime and another spell on ice. She turned to Kala Tanaka. 'How did you get her into the palace without anyone knowing?'

'If anyone enquires,' said Kala, 'they will find that Miss Hansa

is a friend of a friend whom you were considering for a job here, Empress. An act of charity.'

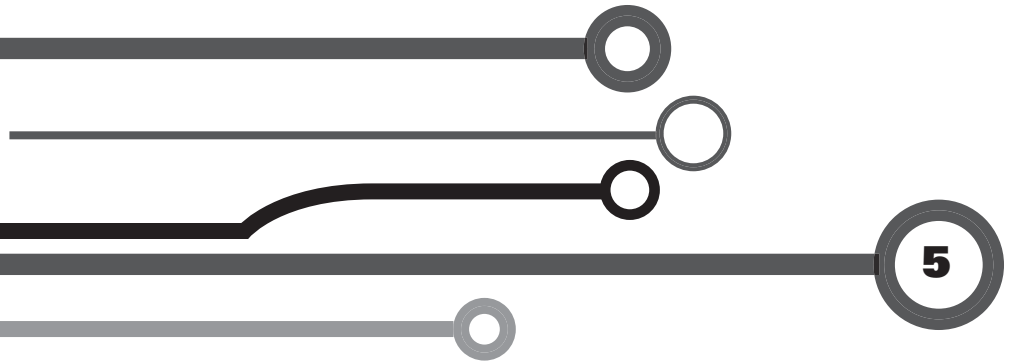
'I don't need Noon charity!' said Chandni angrily.

'Quiet,' Kala told her. 'You didn't say that when I bought you dinner on the train.'

'Then I shall offer her a job,' said Threnody, quite softly, but loud enough to silence them both. She smiled to herself. When she became Empress she had acquired ladies-in-waiting: a lot of daughters of distant Noon cousins and other minor families, whose job it was to help her dress and keep her company. Most of them were much more posh and sophisticated than Threnody. They scared and annoyed her, but she was pretty sure that Chandni Hansa could cope with them, just as Kala Tanaka could cope with Chandni Hansa.

'Chandni will be my new lady-in-waiting,' she said. 'Madhur Noon can go home to Golden Junction; she is always boasting about that boyfriend she has there, and how she misses him. Chandni will take her place.' She felt quite commanding for a moment, then spoiled it by looking at Kala Tanaka. 'I can do that, can't I?'

Kala Tanaka bowed. 'You are the Empress of the Galaxy, Empress. You can do whatever you want.'



So Chandni became a kind of jumped up servant. The palace staff and the Motorik and the security guards all called her 'Lady Chandni', but a servant was what she was. 'Bring the Empress's coat, Lady Chandni,' 'Wake the Empress for her breakfast with the Stationmaster of Vagh, Lady Chandni,' 'You will accompany the Empress on her pilgrimage to Mars, Lady Chandni.' The other ladies-in-waiting were all horrified by her—she had known they would be, and she thought Threnody had known it too. She didn't know what to say them and they didn't know what to say to her, so they quickly reached an arrangement where she didn't speak to them at all, and that was fine by her.

She wasn't planning to stay long, anyway. The imperial palace was no place for a girl who'd run with zip gangs in the submarine slums on Ayaguz. She didn't like being Threnody Noon's little charity project. As she followed the Empress through the bewildering maze of the palace—the Jade Room, the Mirrored Ballroom, the Waterfall Room—she eyed up the valuables. Pretty much everything here was valuable; even the stuff that looked like junk turned out to be priceless antiques from Old Earth. Chandni hoped that if she took a few good pieces with her when she left, Threnody might be too kind or too embarrassed to send Railforce after her.

But somehow she kept on finding reasons to stay. The food was

good, and free, and she told herself she needed feeding up before she hit the streets again. She had a room of her own that was about the size of the house she had grown up in, the one she'd wound up burning. The room was next to Kala Tanaka's suite, on the floor below the Empress's quarters. All the things in it were bigger or better or just nicer than anything Chandni had been around before. Even the light looked expensive, filtering through the decorative screen which walled her bed space off from the living area. The bed was circular and as soft as cartoon clouds. She sprawled right out in it and slept on her back, snoring. She could have spent all day in that bed, but Kala Tanaka made sure she was always up early and ready to go and do whatever stupid duties needed doing.

Every time Kala Tanaka woke her up, or ordered her about, Chandni told herself that this was it, she wasn't a slave, she was going to load up with some portable wealth and slip out of a back entrance that very night. But somehow when Kala came banging on her door the next morning before first sunrise there she still was. Well, it would be a pity to skip town before the K-bahn Timetable Authority's banquet; she had never been to an actual banquet before. And if she was staying till then, it would be pity not to go along for the ride when Threnody made her pilgrimage to Mars . . .

Mars was a pointless kind of desert-y planet away off down at the end of the Hydrogen Line, but it had been the first station on the Network, where the Guardians had opened the very first K-gate. So for some reason each new Empress or Emperor had to go there, and be photographed looking thoughtful while they peered through the pressure-dome at Earth itself, which you could see sometimes if there wasn't a sand storm raging. Other things you could see from the pressure dome included the remains of some of the spaceships which human beings had ridden to Mars in so they could board the first trains and go through the Mars gate to explore and settle all the other worlds. Threnody stood on the viewing platform and pointed out the

sand-covered hulk of the *Benares*, the ship on which the ancestors of the Noons had made the crossing. It gave Chandni a strange feeling, kind of shivery, like she used to get in history lessons when she was little, thinking about how far human beings had come. And there wasn't a sandstorm blowing, and there was Old Earth, hanging in the Martian sky like a tiny blue star. Chandni thought it would be nice to go there, but there wasn't time—for some reason the Guardians had never opened a K-gate on Earth itself, and it took months and months to get there by spaceship. The Empress needed to be back on Grand Central in time for her summer party.

It was on the way back from Mars that Chandni had her first chance to talk to Threnody since that day in the chess garden. Actually, that wasn't quite true: on most days since then Threnody had said, 'How are you settling in, Chandni?' or 'Are you happy, Chandni?' but this was the first time that Chandni had felt she wanted a real answer.

They were riding on the new Noon train (everybody said it wasn't a patch on the old Noon train, but it still seemed pretty fancy to Chandni: sixty carriages, pulled by an enormous old loco called the *Crystal Horizon*. Threnody's quarters were in the middle of the train: a carriage for her clothes, and two for herself and her staff, with wardrones buzzing along outside the windows and then nipping quickly into hangars in the carriage roofs whenever the train approached a K-gate, since nothing could go through a K-gate unless it was on a train. One night Chandni was trying to sleep, and finding it difficult because the train kept passing across worlds where it was daytime, so she went from her cabin downstairs into the saloon part of the carriage and found that Threnody was having the same problem. The Empress of the Network, with her halo of little drones, was standing at a window with a glass of hot chocolate in her hand and a little chocolate moustache where she'd been drinking it.

'So what do you think of this life, Chandni Hansa?' she asked.

Chandni, who had been about to make an excuse and go back to her cabin, stayed where she was, and shrugged. She wanted to say something about the way she'd felt when she stood on Mars and looked up at Old Earth, but she couldn't find the right sort of words. 'It's like living in an advert,' she said at last.

Threnody laughed. 'You're right! It is! We *are* living in an advert. My whole life is just a great, big-budget advert, designed to show the people of the Network that everything is under control and all's well with the worlds. And we're just actresses, playing our parts.'

Chandni frowned. 'But you're the Empress . . .'

Threnody laughed some more. 'Have you not noticed Lyssa Delius?'

'The tall black lady with the tall white hair? The Rail Marshal?' Chandni had noticed the Rail Marshal all right. And she had only been in the Empress's service for a few days before the Rail Marshal had noticed her. Chandni had heard her ask Kala Tanaka who the new girl was. Kala Tanaka, who had just magicked Chandni through all the palace employee security checks and had her tracker bracelet removed, had trotted out her friend-of-the-family-charity-job story, but Chandni could tell the Rail Marshal didn't buy it. She had narrowed her wise old eyes and said, 'I trust you know what you're doing, Kala . . .'

'She's the real ruler of the rails,' said Threnody. 'I'm just her puppet. That's why she chose me. I'm young and I don't know how things work and I don't have any ideas of my own. I'm just a Noon doll she can prop up on the Flatcar Throne while she tries to get the senate to pass new laws in my name. If I tried to argue she'd probably do with me whatever she did with my sister Priya, and no one knows what's become of Priya. Lyssa Delius comes from some horrible industrial world; she grew up poor, and she wants laws that will help other poor people. Banning Motorik labour, and raising wages and stuff like that. But you can imagine how that goes down with my family and all

the other corporate families. They say I'm bringing in dangerous laws and risking instability because I'm young and foolish. But it's not my fault! I'm just her puppet!'

Chandni thought she liked the sound of Lyssa Delius and her laws. She wondered if it would be worth asking her to bring in another, so that people couldn't be frozen for years at a time and end up skipping across the surface of the decades like a skimmed stone. But all she said was, 'It's the Guardians who really run things, isn't it? Even I know that.'

Threnody peered into her hot chocolate as if there might be answers there. 'The Guardians haven't said anything about what Lyssa Delius is up to. They stay in the Datasea and don't share their thoughts with anyone. If they approve, they ought to say so, so everyone would know.'

'If they don't approve, they could burn you and Lyssa Delius up with a lightning bolt or something,' said Chandni. She'd never really given a lot of thought to those all-wise AIs who were supposed to watch and guide everybody. It was pretty obvious they didn't care about her, so why should she care about them? Still, she had a vague idea that if they didn't like you they would say it with lightning bolts.

'I met a Guardian once,' said Threnody. 'It was an interface of Anais Six. On Sundarban. The night Zen Starling and his Moto girl escaped. The night Lyssa Delius woke me up to tell me I was going to be Empress. That was the last time I saw Kobi.'

Chandni sat down, sensing that this was going to be a long chat. Her father used to get in this mood at the end, although he'd done it on rice wine, not hot chocolate. The train passed through a K-gate and ran out across a plain of what looked like ice beneath two red suns which appeared to be eating each other. Chandni and Threnody, experienced rail travellers, barely bothered glancing at the view.

Chandni said, 'Who's Kobi?'

'He and I were supposed to get married, before I was Empress,'

said Threnody. 'It was just a business marriage, meant to link the Noons to a Sundarban spacer clan, the Chen-Tulsis. Kobi was an oaf. Well, he used to be an oaf . . . But just at the end he was quite brave. You know how, when things get bad, you see people as they really are? And Kobi was all right, really. I think he truly cared about me. But once I was Empress it was all off. The Empress can't go marrying into some little family nobody's ever heard of. I'll have to marry an Abayrek or a Ngyuen or somebody . . .'

Chandni sat there in the glow of the dying suns and watched tears run down the face of the Empress of the Galaxy and thought what a strange turn of events this was for a popsicle girl.

'I wasn't in love with him or anything,' said Threnody. 'I don't know why I'm crying. I haven't thought about him much, till tonight. I'm just tired. Kobi Chen-Tulsi! I'm lucky to be rid of him, really. I wonder what he's doing now?'

To be continued, October 2016