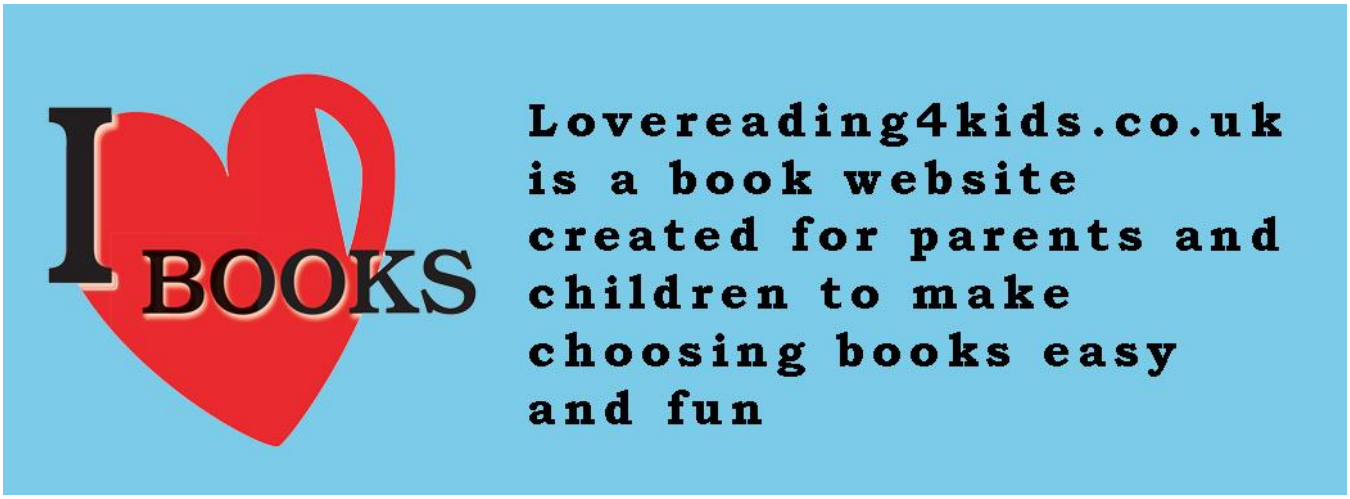


Opening extract from

Magisterium: The Bronze Key

Written by

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& Holly Black

Published by

Corgi Childrens an imprint of Random House Children's Publishers UK

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MAGISTERIUM

BOOK THREE

THE BRONZE KEY

HOLLY BLACK *and*
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SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-52231-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, September 2016

Book design by Christopher Stengel

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FOR JONAH LOWELL CHURCHILL,
WHO MAY BE THE EVIL TWIN



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CHAPTER ONE

CALL MADE A few final tweaks to his robot right before sending him into the "ring" — a section of garage floor outlined in blue chalk. He considered it the fighting zone for the robots he and Aaron had painstakingly built out of car parts, metal magic, and a lot of duct tape. On that gasoline-soaked floor, one of their robots would be tragically rent to pieces and the other would emerge victorious. One would rise and the other would fall. One would —

Aaron's robot chugged forward. One of its little arms shot out, wobbled, and beheaded Call's robot. Sparks fizzed in the air.

"No fair!" Call yelled.

Aaron snorted. He had a smudge of dirt on his cheek and some of his hair was sticking straight up after he'd run his hands through it in frustration. The relentless North Carolina heat had left him with a sunburned nose and freckling on his

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cheeks. He didn't look at all like the polished Makar who'd spent the previous summer at garden parties, chatting with dull, important grown-ups.

"I guess I'm just better at building robots than you," Aaron said carelessly.

"Oh, yeah?" Call replied, concentrating. His robot began to move, slowly at first, then faster as metal magic reanimated its headless body. "Take *that*."

Call's robot lifted an arm and fire shot out like water from a hose, spraying Aaron's robot, whose whole body began to smoke. Aaron tried to summon water magic to douse it, but it was too late — the duct tape was burning. His robot collapsed in a pile of smoking parts.

"Woo-hoo!" Call cried out — he'd never taken any of his dad's advice about being a gracious winner to heart. Havoc, Call's Chaos-ridden wolf, woke suddenly when a spark landed on his fur. He began to bark.

"Hey!" Call's father, Alastair, yelled, running out of the house and looking around with slightly wild eyes. "Not so close to my car! I just fixed that thing."

Despite the scolding, Call felt relaxed. He'd felt pretty relaxed all summer. He'd even stopped assigning himself Evil Overlord Points. As far as the world knew, the Enemy of Death, Constantine Madden, was dead, defeated by Alastair. Only Aaron and Tamara, frenemy Jasper deWinter, and Call's father knew the truth — that Call *was* Constantine Madden reborn, but without any of his memories and, hopefully, without his penchant for evil.

Since the world thought Constantine was dead and Call's friends didn't care, Call was off the hook. Aaron, despite

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being a Makar, could go back to goofing around with Call. They'd be heading back to the Magisterium soon, and this time they'd be Bronze Year students, which meant they'd be getting into some really awesome magic — fighting spells and flying spells.

Everything was better. Everything was great.

Also, Aaron's robot was a smoking wreck.

Really, it was hard for Call to imagine how things could get better.

"I hope you guys remembered," said Alastair. "Tonight is the party at the Collegium. You know — the one in our honor."

Aaron and Call looked at each other in horror. They had forgotten, of course. The days had gone by in a blur of skateboarding and ice cream and movies and video games, and both of them had completely blanked out on the fact that the Assembly of Mages was throwing a victory party at the Collegium, in recognition of the fact that the Enemy of Death had been defeated after thirteen long years of cold war.

The Assembly had chosen five people to honor: Call, Aaron, Tamara, Jasper, and Alastair. Call had been surprised that Alastair had agreed to go — Alastair had hated magic, the Magisterium, and everything to do with mages for as long as Call could remember. Call suspected Alastair had agreed because he wanted to see the Assembly clap for Call and for everyone to agree that Call was on the side of good. That he was a hero.

Call swallowed, suddenly nervous. "I don't have anything to wear," he protested.

"Neither do I." Aaron looked startled.

"But Tamara and her family bought you all those fancy

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clothes last year," Call pointed out. Tamara's parents had been so excited at the thought that their daughter was friends with a Makar, one of the rare mages who could control chaos magic, that they had practically adopted Aaron, bringing him into their house and spending money on expensive haircuts and clothes and parties.

Call still couldn't quite understand why Aaron had decided to spend this summer with him and not the Rajavis, but Aaron had been very firm about it.

"I grew out of those," Aaron replied. "All I have are jeans and T-shirts."

"That's why we're going to the mall," said Alastair, holding up his car keys. "Come on, boys."

"Tamara's parents took me to Brooks Brothers," Aaron said as they headed toward Alastair's collection of refurbished cars. "It was kind of weird."

Call thought of their tiny local mall and grinned. "Well, get ready for a different kind of weird," he said. "We're going to travel backward in time without magic."



"I think I might be allergic to this material," said Aaron, standing in front of a full-length mirror in the back of JL Dimes. They sold everything — tractors, clothes, cheap dishwashers. Alastair always bought his work overalls there. Call hated it.

"It looks fine," said Alastair, who had collected a vacuum cleaner somewhere along their travels through the store and was examining it, probably for parts. He'd also picked up a jacket for himself but had failed to try it on.

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Aaron took another look at the alarmingly shiny gray suit. The legs bagged around his ankles and the lapels reminded Call of shark fins.

"Okay," Aaron said meekly. He was always very conscious that everything bought for him was a favor. He knew he didn't have money or parents to get him things. He was always grateful.

Aaron and Call had both lost their mothers. Aaron's father was alive, but in prison, which Aaron didn't like for people to know. To Call, it didn't seem that big of a deal, but that was probably because Call's secret was so much bigger.

"I don't know, Dad," Call said, squinting into the mirror. He was wearing dark blue polyester that was too tight underneath his arms. "These might not be our sizes."

Alastair sighed. "A suit's a suit. Aaron will grow into his. And yours, well — maybe you should try something else. No use getting something that's only good for tonight."

"I'm taking a picture," Call said, pulling out his phone. "Tamara can give us advice. She knows what you're supposed to wear to stuffy mage events."

There was a whoosh as Call texted Tamara the photograph. A few seconds later she texted back: *Aaron looks like a con man who got hit with a shrink ray and you look like you're going to Catholic school.*

Aaron looked over Call's padded shoulder and winced at the message.

"Well?" Alastair asked. "We could duct-tape the legs. Make them look shorter."

"Or," Call said, "we could go to a different store and not embarrass ourselves in front of the Assembly."

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Alastair looked from Call to Aaron and gave in with a sigh, putting back his vacuum cleaner. "Okay. Let's go."

It was a relief to get out of the airless, overheated mall. A short car ride later Call and Aaron were standing in front of a thrift shop that dealt in vintage stuff of all kinds, from doilies to dressers to sewing machines. Call had been here before with his dad and remembered that the proprietor, Miranda Keyes, loved vintage clothes. She wore them constantly, without much respect for matching colors or styles, which meant she was often seen wandering around their town in a poodle skirt, go-go boots, and a sequined tank top with a pattern of angry cats.

But Aaron didn't know that. He was looking around, smiling hesitantly, and Call's heart sank. This was going to be even worse than JL Dimes. What had started out kind of funny was starting to make Call feel a little sick inside. He knew his dad was "eccentric" — which was a nice way of saying "weird" — and he'd never really minded, but it wasn't fair that Aaron had to look "eccentric," too. What if all Miranda had was red velvet tuxedoes or something even worse?

It was bad enough that Aaron had spent the summer drinking lemonade from a powder mix, instead of from fresh lemons the way they made it at Tamara's house; sleeping on a military cot that Alastair had set up in Call's room; running through a sprinkler made from knife holes in a garden hose; and eating regular old cereal for breakfast instead of eggs cooked to order by a chef. If Aaron showed up at this party looking stupid, it might be the final straw. Call might lose the Best Friend War for good.

Alastair got out of the car. Call followed his dad and Aaron inside with a sense of foreboding.

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The suits were in the back of the room, behind the tables of odd brass musical instruments and the jadeite bowl of rusty keys. It was a lot like Alastair's own shop, Now and Again, except that the ceiling was hung with fur-collared coats and silk scarves, while Alastair specialized in the more industrial end of antiques. Miranda came out of the back and talked to Alastair for a few minutes about what she'd brought back from Brimfield — a huge antiques show up north — and who she'd seen there. Call's dread grew.

Finally, Alastair found his way to telling her what they needed. She gave each of the boys a sharp evaluating look, as though she were looking through them and seeing something else. She did the same thing to Alastair, her eyes narrowing before she disappeared into the back.

Aaron and Call amused themselves by wandering around the store, each one of them trying to find the weirdest object. Aaron had discovered a Batman-shaped alarm clock that said "WAKE UP, BOY WONDER" when he pressed the top, and Call had unearthed a sweater made out of taped-together lollipops, when Miranda reemerged, humming, with a pile of clothes that she stacked on the counter.

The first thing she pulled out was a dressing jacket for Alastair. It looked like it was made from satin with a subtle, deep green pattern to it and a bright silk lining. It was definitely old and weird, but in a not-embarrassing way.

"Now," she said, pointing at Call and Aaron, "your turn."

She handed each one of them a folded linen suit. Aaron's was the color of cream and Call's was dove gray.

"Same as your eyes, Call," said Miranda, looking pleased with herself, as Call and Aaron threw the suits on over their

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shorts and T-shirts. She clapped her hands and gestured for them to look in the mirror.

Call stared at his reflection. He didn't know much about clothes, but the suit fit him, and he didn't look bizarre. He actually looked kind of grown up. So did Aaron. The light colors made them both look tan.

"Is this for a special occasion?" asked Miranda.

"You could say that." Alastair sounded pleased. "They're both getting awards."

"For, um, community service," said Aaron. He met Call's eyes in the mirror. Call guessed it was only sort of a lie, though most community service didn't involve severed heads.

"Fantastic!" said Miranda. "They both look so handsome."

Handsome. Call had never thought of himself as handsome. *Aaron* was the handsome one. Call was the one who was short, limped, and was too intense and sharp-featured. But he guessed that people selling stuff had to tell you that you looked good. On a whim, Call pulled out his phone, took a picture of his and Aaron's reflections in the mirror, and sent it to Tamara.

A minute later the reply came back. *Nice.* Attached to the message was a short video of someone falling off a chair in surprise. Call couldn't help laughing.

"Do they need anything else?" Alastair asked. "Shoes, cuff links . . . anything?"

"Well, shirts, obviously," Miranda said. "I have a lot of nice ties —"

"I don't need you to buy me anything else, Mr. Hunt," said Aaron, looking anxious. "Really."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Alastair said with a surprising lightness in his voice. "Miranda and I are in the business. We'll work out a trade."

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Call looked over at Miranda, to find her smiling. "There was a little Victorian brooch at your store I had my eye on."

At that, Alastair's expression stiffened a little, then relaxed almost immediately into a laugh. "Well for that, we're definitely taking the cuff links. Shoes, too, if you've got them."

By the time they left, they had huge bags filled with clothes and Call was feeling pretty good. They drove back to the house with barely enough time to take showers and comb their hair. Alastair came out of his bedroom reeking of some ancient cologne and looking snappy in his new jacket and a pair of black trousers he must have unearthed in the back of his closet. Muttering, he immediately started hunting around for his car keys. He barely looked recognizable to Call as the dad who worked around the house in tweed and denim overalls, the dad who'd spent all summer helping them make robots out of spare parts.

He looked like a stranger, which meant Call started to actually think about what was soon to happen.

All summer he'd been feeling pretty smug over the Enemy of Death's demise. Constantine Madden had been dead for years, preserved in a creepy tomb, waiting to have his soul returned to his body. But since no one had known that, the whole mage world had been waiting for Constantine to start up the Third Mage War again. When Callum had brought the Enemy's severed head back to the Magisterium, proof that he was incontrovertibly dead, the whole mage world had breathed a sigh of relief.

What they didn't know was that Constantine's soul lived on — in Call. Tonight the world of mages was going to be honoring the actual Enemy of Death.

Even though Call had no desire to hurt anyone, the threat

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of a Third Mage War was far from over. Constantine's second-in-command, Master Joseph, had control of Constantine's Chaos-ridden army. He had the powerful Alkahest, which could destroy chaos wielders like Aaron — and Call. If he got tired waiting for Call to come over to his side, then he might attack all on his own.

Call slumped down at the kitchen table. Havoc, who'd been sleeping under the table, looked up with his disturbing coruscating eyes, as if sensing Call's distress. Although it should have made Call feel better, it actually made him feel a little worse.

He could almost hear Master Joseph's voice: *Good job getting the whole mage world to lower their guard, Call. You can't escape your nature.*

He pushed the thought back firmly. All summer he'd worked on not constantly checking himself to see if he was showing signs of maybe turning out evil. All summer he'd been telling himself that he was Callum Hunt, who had been raised by Alastair Hunt, and he wasn't going to make the same mistakes Constantine Madden had made. He was a different person. He *was*.

A few minutes later, Aaron came out of Call's room, looking dapper in his cream-colored suit. His blond hair was brushed back and even his cuff links shone. He looked just as happy as he ever had in the designer suits that Tamara's family had given him.

Or at least he looked happy until he saw Call and did a double take.

"You okay?" Aaron asked. "You look a little green around the gills. You don't have stage fright, do you?"

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"Maybe," Call said. "I'm not used to people looking at me a lot. I mean, people look at me because of my leg sometimes, but it's not a *good* kind of looking."

"Try to think of it as the end scene in *Star Wars* where everyone cheers and Princess Leia puts medals on Han and Luke."

Call raised an eyebrow. "Who's Princess Leia in this visual? Master Rufus?"

Master Rufus was the teacher of their apprentice group at the Magisterium. He was craggy, gruff, and wise, and had a lot more gray hairs than Princess Leia.

"Later," said Aaron solemnly, "he will wear the gold bikini."

Havoc barked. Alastair held up his car keys, triumphant. "Would it help you boys if I promised that tonight is going to be boring and uneventful? The party is supposed to honor us, but I guarantee that it's mostly for the Assembly to congratulate itself."

"You sound like you've been to one of these before," said Call, standing up from the table. He smoothed his suit anxiously — linen wrinkled fast. Already he couldn't wait to get back into jeans and a T-shirt.

"You've seen the wristband Constantine wore when he was a student with me at the Magisterium," said Alastair. "He won a lot of awards and prizes. Our whole apprentice group did."

It was true that Call had seen the wristband. Alastair had sent it to Master Rufus the first year Call had been at the Magisterium. All students were issued wristbands of leather and metal: The metal changed whenever the student entered a new year at the school, and the wristband was also studded

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with stones, each one representing an accomplishment or talent. Constantine's had more stones than Call had ever seen before.

Call reached to touch his own wristband. It still showed the metal of a second-year Copper student. Like Aaron's, Call's gleamed with the black stone of the Makar. Call's eyes met Aaron's as he dropped his hand, and he could tell Aaron knew what he was thinking — here he was, getting an award, being honored for doing good, and it was still something that made him just like Constantine Madden.

Alastair shook his car keys, jangling Call out of his reverie. "Come on," Alastair said. "The Assembly doesn't like it when its honorees are late."

Havoc tailed them to the door, then sat with a thump and a thin whine. "Can he come?" Call asked his father as they walked out the door. "He'll be good. And he deserves an award, too."

"Absolutely not," said Alastair.

"Is it because you don't trust him around the Assembly?" Call asked, though once he did, he wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

"It's because I don't trust the Assembly around him," Alastair replied with a stern look. Then he headed out the door, leaving Call no choice but to follow.