Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Dark City
The Last Apprentice

Written by

Imogen Rossi

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

With special thanks to Rosie Best

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Copyright © Working Partners Limited 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0250-0

1

This book is typeset in 11pt Sabon using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.
www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

Chapter One

I'm racing along the dim passageways, gasping with laughter. It's like I'm flying, my feet barely touching the floor. I'm running so fast that the glowing starscape of paint specks on the stone walls blurs into a sparkling rainbow in the corner of my eye.

I don't think I've been this happy in a long time – not since the death of Master di Lombardi. But now the traitors who killed him are gone I can spend my days painting, and racing my friends through the world that di Lombardi created.

We're coming to the last corner . . . and I'm definitely going to win this time!

But another peal of laughter rings out right behind me.

No! 'Not this time, Your Highness!' I yell.

I clench my fists and put on a burst of speed, but it's no good. Just as I round the bend, Duchess Catriona passes me in a rustle of silk, her red hair streaming out behind her like a banner.

'Bad luck, Bianca!' Catriona cackles. I push on, ignoring the Duchess's taunts. I can see the white door that marks the finish line – just a few more steps and I'll be back in the lead.

Then the door beside the white one bangs open and Marco tumbles into the passage, his dark curls dripping with sweat. He leaps across the passage and slams his hand on to the white door.

'I win!' he gasps. The Duchess and I both stagger to a halt, leaning on our knees to catch our breath. 'I had to . . . jump across from the palace roof, and climb down the tower of San Fernando's, and run through the monks' herb garden, but I beat you!'

'Being an acrobat is cheating,' the Duchess says. She grins and pats Marco on the back. 'No normal person could beat us from my drawing room to here without using the secret passages!'

'Not my fault I'm so talented,' Marco says. He pulls the paintbrush key from his pocket and presents it to me with a flourish. 'Mistress.'

My stomach twists uneasily as I accept the brush and turn it over in my hand, running my finger over the thin copper key and then over the soft hairs of the paintbrush on its other end. 'Don't, Marco,' I say, as we walk away from the white door. 'Don't treat me like a courtier, I am –'

I step around a corner, and my throat closes over the words.

Two figures stand just ahead of me, their faces and bodies swathed in sweeping dark cloaks. One carries a lantern, and as he raises it to check the symbol on one of the doors, the light falls on his features.

The round, red face of the Baron da Russo.

I seize Marco and the Duchess's sleeves and drag them back before the Baron can see them. I press myself to the

wall and peer around the corner, trying not to breathe.

'Hurry!' The whisper is unmistakably real, horrifyingly close. 'We must get through!'

I know that voice. A chill lifts the hairs on the back of my neck. A glance at my friends tells me that they've recognised it too – Marco's face is pale, and Catriona's a furious red.

The voice belongs to Piero Filpepi, the artist who helped the Baron poison Master di Lombardi. They attempted to kill the Duchess too.

'Traitors!' Catriona hisses.

'It can't be,' whispers Marco. 'They vanished into that dark world – how can they be back?'

'This is the one,' the Baron says. I watch as the door swings open. It's painted black, the panels edged in a blue so bright they seem to glow.

Strange . . . I've never seen that door before.

The two men step through the door, and I clench my fists. They aren't going to get away from me, not again!

Duchess Catriona puts a restraining hand on my shoulder. 'I won't let you endanger yourself,' she snaps. 'Marco, run and fetch Captain Raphaeli and the palace guards.'

'There's no time!' The traitors are gone and the door is swinging shut. I shrug off the Duchess's hand and sprint along the corridor, reaching out to grab the door, and leap through.

Darkness envelops me, but I breathe in cool, fresh air. It only takes a second for my eyes to adjust, and then I can make out the lines of buildings rising all around me. The Baron and Filpepi are disappearing through a stone archway ahead. I

start after them, vaguely aware of the door closing behind me.

On the other side of the archway I stop, taking in the strange beauty of the place I find myself standing in.

It's the dark city! This is the place I caught just a glimpse of as the two traitors made their escape.

Their hooded figures hurry away down a wide avenue beside the glittering black waters of a canal. There are no bright stars or moon to light the streets as they would do in La Luminosa. Coloured beams of light spill from the doorways and windows of the houses by the canal. Instead of the blazing lanterns that line the streets of La Luminosa at night, blue and green bolts of lightning crackle in thunder-lamp orbs on top of tall black iron poles.

I keep close to the shadow of the houses and follow Filpepi and the Baron. They scuttle through the darkness, across a bridge and down a small alley which comes out into a crowded market square. Merchants and their customers stroll from stall to stall. It's a lot like the Piazza del Fiero in La Luminosa – I can see stalls selling dangling black sausages and huge flat brown mushrooms, piles of books with dark leather covers embossed with silver writing, gleaming iron tools for cooking or building . . .

'Fine silk, get your fine silk here, only two silver pieces a yard!' a lady's voice cries, and I turn to look at a stall laden with huge rolls of cloth. All of it black. 'Good quality wools and cottons! Ribbons and threads in every shade!' the stallholder says, pulling away a sheet to unveil a rainbow of brightly coloured ribbons that stand out like flames against the dark cloth.

She's just setting up her stall. Does that mean it's morning here?

I realise that the people here are all dressed like the citizens of La Luminosa, except that almost every piece of clothing is dark – at first I think they're all in black, but as I watch the customers crowd around the fabric stall I start to make out deep reds, blues, browns and greens.

A lady in a deep midnight-blue dress turns and stares at me. She taps the shoulder of the woman beside her, who wears a sea-green feather in her velvet cap, and nods towards me. I freeze, my heart in my mouth – I've let myself get distracted. Where are the Baron and Filpepi? Are these people all in league with the traitors?

But then I realise that my plain, cream-coloured linen dress stands out in this place. Just as someone wearing full funeral black would in the Piazza del Fiero.

I ignore the women and hurry to the other side of the square, but there's no sign of the men. Craning my neck to see over the crowd, I search for the two hooded figures, but they've vanished.

I feel a twinge of guilt . . . but as I gaze back at the market square, a different feeling floods over me. The traitors have escaped, and I'm lost in this unfamiliar city – but I don't feel lost. I'm not worried. I want to stay here.

I feel right at home.

Bianca blinked awake as the piercingly bright rays of a La Luminosa sunrise fell over her face. Shielding her eyes with one hand, she sat up in bed, curling her feet under her, and sighed.

Another dream about the dark city.

She ran her hands over the silky covers of her bed, still not quite used to the comfort of her new room in the Duchess's palace. The bed was an enormous four-poster, with feather pillows and clean cotton sheets – nothing like her small bed at the very top of Master di Lombardi's tall, cramped old house.

Slipping out of bed, she slid her feet into her soft, fur-lined slippers. She crossed the room, put out the night lamp, and went over to the window.

As the newest in a long line of Royal-Artists-In-Residence, Bianca had been given one of the best chambers in the palace. It was on the east side, where it caught the morning sun, and gave her a perfect view over the palace walls, across the sparkling waters of the Grand Canal, and down into the city itself.

She closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the sunrise on her face. But the dream didn't melt away, like other dreams did – she could recall every stone of the dark city, every flash of bright colour, as if she'd really been there.

Opening her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the window, torn between two completely contradictory desires: she desperately wished her dreams were real, so that she could go back to that wonderful place, but the idea of the Baron or Filpepi finding their way to di Lombardi's secret passages again sent a shiver down Bianca's spine.

What if they really did come back?

Perhaps her sleeping mind was trying to work out what

she would do if the traitors returned. If so, it wasn't doing a great job. She always lost them right before she woke up.

It was a childish dream, a flaring of her wild imagination, and nothing more.

If only she could shake off her longing to stay in the dark city.

Chapter Two

Bianca pinched the bridge of her nose, trying not to let her frustration show.

'Please, Your Highness, if you would go back to your sketches –'

'Oh, Bianca, don't fuss!' said Duchess Catriona, rising from the low couch. She crossed the room and picked up a crystal jug filled with orange juice. 'I'm only getting something to drink.'

Bianca took a deep calming breath. It wouldn't do to raise her voice at a Duchess, even if Catriona was only two years older – and her friend. 'I'm sure one of the servants would be more than happy to bring you a drink, so you don't have to leave your work . . .'

'Nonsense. Helena's got plenty to do without me calling her in here. Lady's maids don't just sit around waiting for me to give them orders, you know, they have other tasks.'

Well, at least someone in this palace is getting something done! Bianca thought as Catriona poured out a glass of juice, drank it and poured another. She turned as if she was about to go back to her seat, then wandered over to the window instead.

Only a few weeks ago, Bianca had been sitting in this same room watching Master di Lombardi giving the Duchess her art lessons. She'd found it funny and endearing when Catriona fidgeted or argued or played pranks on her teacher.

It was very different now that *she* was the teacher.

How did Master di Lombardi manage to teach her anything? Bianca wondered. 'Please come back to your seat, My Lady,' she pleaded. 'I was explaining about the muscles in the leg . . .'

'What's the rush? Marco can hold that pose for days, can't you, Marco?'

'Mm-hmm,' said Marco. He was standing on a table in front of the Duchess's couch, balanced on one leg with the other curved up behind him and both arms out, as if he was walking a tightrope. Last week, after Bianca had spent an hour rearranging the walled garden outside the windows so that she would have new scenes to sketch, the Duchess had called them 'stupid old chairs and ferns and things' and insisted that she wouldn't have another lesson until she could draw some people. So Bianca had found people to draw – Marco – but the Duchess's concentration hadn't improved.

Duchess Catriona finally returned to her couch and Bianca walked around behind her to look at her sketch. It was still just a stick figure in messy charcoal. The Duchess had given its circular head a crude smiley face.

'All right,' said Bianca. 'As I was saying. The muscles in the leg –'

'Honestly Bianca, do I really need to know?' Duchess

Catriona complained, flicking her charcoal up in the air and catching it. 'I'm here for a lesson in art, not medicine!'

Oh, so you do know why you're here. Bianca squashed the thought before it could make it to her lips. 'My Lady, your figures will be flat and dull if you don't understand something of how the body works.' She pointed over to a gold-framed painting on the other side of the Duchess's chamber; it depicted riders resting by a stream in the rolling hills south of the city. The enchanted horses and riders moved as if alive – one figure dismounted from his horse as the great animal bent to take a drink from the sparkling pool. 'Look at that rider – see the way he pants, out of breath from the ride? You could never paint such a *respirare* if you didn't know how people's muscles move when they breathe.'

Catriona barely glanced at the painting, instead eyeing her own subject before her. 'Well, then, let's have a closer look, shall we?' said the Duchess, leaping to her feet again.

Bianca was wary of this sudden enthusiasm, but said,'Yes, I suppose that can't hurt. See here.' Bianca pointed to the back and then the front of the leg that Marco was holding up in the air. 'These muscles are pulling tight, but these are more relaxed. That's what controls the position of the leg.'

'Yes, I see,' said Catriona. Bianca met her eyes and saw the flash of mischief in them. 'And what happens if I do *this*?' The Duchess whipped out her charcoal pencil and ran it along the bottom of Marco's foot, tickling him. He let out a spluttering laugh and his knee buckled. He crashed down on the table, catching himself on his hands at the last minute and tumbling onto the floor.

‘Marco! Are you all right?’ Bianca gasped, rushing over to him.

Marco rubbed his knee. ‘Fine!’ he said, through a brittle grin. ‘Very funny, Duchess,’ he said.

Bianca shook her head. ‘Well, I don’t think it was funny.’ She stood and turned to face the Duchess. ‘Duchess Catriona, that was a very mean thing to do, and I . . .’ Catriona was staring down her nose at Bianca now, with that imperious look that meant she wanted whoever was speaking to stop *at once*. But Bianca folded her arms across her bodice and pressed on. ‘There’s no point in me giving you lessons if you don’t even try. Art is hard, Your Highness, but it’s important – at least to me.’

‘It’s important to me too!’ Duchess Catriona said. ‘I love my art lessons! You just need to relax, Bianca. Art should be fun!’ She turned to Marco. ‘I’m sorry if I hurt you, Marco. But come on, Bianca, you can be Artist-in-Residence and my friend at the same time, can’t you?’

‘Of course,’ said Bianca. ‘It’s just that this residency is such an honour – I don’t want to let you down. If I’m going to teach you then I’m going to make you the best artist I can.’

‘And you are! Look, I’m sitting down, see?’ Catriona sat in front of her sketching paper and grinned up at Bianca. ‘Teach me. Go on. I promise I’ll try to pay attention.’

Bianca grinned in relief. But before she could suggest Marco take up another, safer pose, the curtain over the door was pushed aside and a gaunt-faced old man in a blue velvet robe stepped into the room. Secretary Franco.

‘My Lady, I apologise most sincerely for interrupting,’ he

said. Bianca noted that he didn't ask if he should go away again. He crossed the room and bowed low in front of the Duchess, holding a large bundle of papers under one arm. 'I have urgent business from Your Highness's captains, and the evening tide will not wait for . . . *art*.' His lip curled a little, as if just saying the word 'art' left a foul taste in his mouth. 'If I may borrow you from your *lessons* for just a few minutes . . .' He cast Bianca and Marco a withering glance.

I suppose he's wondering what an apprentice and an acrobat can teach a Duchess, Bianca thought. She glanced at Catriona's sketch again and sighed. *And I don't blame him.*

The Duchess stood and swept Secretary Franco a mocking bow. 'At your service, My Lord. Let's get on with it.'

Secretary Franco laid out his bundle of papers on the table and produced quills, sealing wax and string from the pockets of his robe. Bianca and Marco stood respectfully aside, Marco still rubbing his knee, while Duchess Catriona signed her name ten or twelve times and Secretary Franco lit the wick on the sealing wax. Then Catriona picked up her seal, with the letter C and the blazing sun symbol of La Luminosa engraved on its metal end, and slammed it down into the soft wax on each document. She barely missed the old man's fingers.

'Is this all?' Catriona asked. 'You just needed me to sign these papers? If it's so urgent, couldn't I have done them yesterday, rather than in the middle of my art lesson?'

Secretary Franco gathered up the papers and cast another withering glance at Bianca and Marco. He leaned forward in a bow, and lowered his voice – though not enough that

Bianca couldn't hear every word. 'Your Highness may do as Your Highness pleases, of course, but . . . is Your Highness sure that drawing pictures is a good use of Your Highness's very precious time?'

'My Highness is completely sure of it!' Catriona barked, loud enough that the old man recoiled. 'Now go away!'

Secretary Franco bowed out of the room without another word.

Bianca took a deep breath. 'All right,' she said brightly. 'Why don't we try it with Marco sitting on the edge of the table? Duchess, let's –'

'How rude!' Duchess Catriona muttered, still glaring at the doorway. 'Franco, I mean. How dare he interrupt?'

Bianca sighed. 'Well, he obviously doesn't think he's interrupting anything important, Your Highness.'

The Duchess folded her arms over her bodice and went ominously still. Then she turned around, and Bianca realised they were never going to get back to the lesson. That mischievous light glinted in Catriona's eyes, just like it had before she'd tickled Marco's foot.

'I think Franco deserves to be taught a little lesson, don't you?'

I think he was just trying to do his job, thought Bianca. *Even if he was being rude about it.* She didn't really want to hesitate – she wanted to grin back at Catriona just like Marco was doing. Maybe the Duchess was right, maybe she was letting her new post get to her and she just needed to relax.

'How about after your lesson . . .' she began.

'No. After my lesson it'll be time for lunch, and then he always spends the afternoon with the scribes. We've got to get to him while he's in his study. You've got the key with you, right?'

'Well, yes, always, but – but you did bring me here to work, Your Highness, and you have to . . .'

'. . . *do the work you were set to do*.' Duchess Catriona spoke along with Bianca, finishing her sentence.

Bianca let out a giggle, recognising one of di Lombardi's well-worn sayings. Was she turning into her dour old master? As much as she had loved him, she didn't want to *be* him. 'Oh my stars. I really am getting old!' She grinned cheekily and whipped Master di Lombardi's magical paintbrush key from her pocket. 'Come on, let's do it! Let's have a bit of fun with that old grouch.'

They hurried over to the magical painting in the alcove beside a potted orange tree. It was a scene of a balcony overlooking a beautiful leafy landscape, enchanted so that it looked like a real extension of the room that you could walk into. The sun in the painted sky glowed and the leaves of the trees waved slightly in a magical breeze. Bianca smiled as she remembered Catriona hiding Master di Lombardi's special blue chalk underneath the painted couch inside the picture. That *had* been pretty funny. She hoped that secretly di Lombardi had thought so too.

Holding up the paintbrush, Bianca whispered, 'Hidden rooms, secret passages, second city!' The minuscule cogs inside the thin wooden handle of the paintbrush clicked and whirred as the handle slid away and the copper prongs

folded out into the shape of a key. With another grin at the Duchess and Marco, Bianca stepped over the threshold into the painting and turned the key in the lock of the small wooden door at one side of the balcony. It swung open and she stepped through into the secret passages.

Bianca smiled as she breathed in the cool, fragrant air and ran her hand over a wall that looked and felt like stone but smelled like canvas and paint. This whole place had been painted into existence, a way to travel between every one of the magical paintings in La Luminosa. She guessed it had been di Lombardi who'd created the passages – but she still had no idea how, why or when it had been done.

'Lead the way, Bianca!' Catriona said, coming after her with Marco on her heels.

Bianca turned left from the Duchess's drawing room, then took the next right, and counted ten doors along as Marco and Catriona hurried behind her, laughing. She'd started to learn her way around, at least when it came to the most useful paintings inside the palace. The trick was to try and put the real world out of your head completely – paintings that were next door to each other in the secret passages might be miles apart in the real city. And there were still areas of the painted world she hadn't explored.

The painting in Secretary Franco's office was a sombre depiction of San Pietro studying the Elder Mysteries, surrounded by teetering piles of books, glimmering scientific instruments and a large, bleached white skull. The saint moved a little, not too much, just enough to give the impression that he was reading the page in front of him

with great attention and wisdom.

Bianca opened the door at the back of the painting a tiny crack and Catriona and Marco crowded up behind her to see through into the office. Looking past the saint's elbow, Bianca could see Secretary Franco in almost the exact same pose, poring over a huge pile of parchments and scrolls. His beaky nose practically grazed the surface of the document on the top of the pile. The letters that Duchess Catriona had signed and sealed sat in a neat basket by his left hand.

'What should we do?' Marco whispered.

'I bet I could hit the back of his head from here, but I don't have anything to throw,' Duchess Catriona said thoughtfully, patting her pockets. 'Apart from my rings.'

'No.' Bianca pushed the door shut. 'Even if he didn't see us, where would he think it came from? I've got a better idea, let's just ruffle his feathers. I need something long and pointy.'

'I've got just the thing.' Duchess Catriona bent down, her huge, silky skirts pooling around her. Bianca winced as she grabbed the hem and ripped along the seam. 'It's all right, it's always getting caught on the roses when I go walking in the garden – Helena will just think it's torn itself on a bush.' She fiddled for a second and brought out a long, curved strip of thick wire.

Bianca took the wire with a grin. 'This is perfect!' She pulled it straight and reopened the door. Secretary Franco was still reading the same document – if anything he was moving even less than the painted saint.

Slowly, Bianca poked the stiff wire into the room until

it was right behind the secretary's back. As he reached for a pen on his right, Bianca jabbed to the left, toppling the basket of sealed documents onto the floor. Secretary Franco jumped several inches into the air, his velvet robe rippling around him. Bianca tugged the wire back quickly. Behind her, she heard the muffled sound of Duchess Catriona giggling through a mouthful of her own sleeve.

Secretary Franco sighed and bent down to his left to pick up the basket – so Bianca poked the stack of papers to his right. They flew up in the air like a flock of birds leaping from the branch of a tree. With a gasp, the secretary stood up and stared at the scattered papers, his mouth hanging open.

'Let me, let me!' whispered Marco. Bianca sniggered and pressed her finger to her lips. Marco took the wire and Bianca strained to see over his shoulder as he waited patiently for Secretary Franco to place the basket of trade agreements back on his desk and walk around to pick up the mess on the other side.

Marco hooked the big document that the Secretary had been studying and flipped it into the air, yanking the wire back at once. Secretary Franco spun around in time to gape in horror as the document floated back down to the desk.

'What in the name of the Duchess is going on?' he whispered to himself, standing by his desk as if ready to grab any other documents that decided to make a break for freedom, and Bianca saw Duchess Catriona sink to her knees in a puddle of silk skirts, her shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

Bianca looked back into the study just in time to catch

the large, elaborately written title of the big document as Secretary Franco seized it.

She gasped aloud, and then clamped her hands over her mouth. She felt as if she'd been slapped.

Franco didn't seem to have heard her gasp. He was muttering as he scribbled on a piece of paper. 'To whom it may concern . . . a summons . . . the reading of the will . . . reckoning of properties . . . final wishes . . . tomorrow, the twelfth of May, in the presence of Duchess Catriona, Her Royal Highness, Supreme Ruler of, etc, etc.' He signed the note with a flourish and folded it into an envelope.

Bianca slowly closed the door, and turned to Duchess Catriona and Marco. 'It's being read tomorrow.'

'What is?' asked Marco.

'My master's will,' she said.