

Grave
Mercy

by Robin LaFevers

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For Mark,
who first showed me what
true love looked like.

➔ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ➔

ISMAE RIENNE

HER FATHER

GUILLO THE PIG FARMER

THE HERBWITCH

At the Convent

THE ABBESS

SISTER THOMINE, martial arts instructor

ANNITH, a fellow novitiate

SISTER SERAFINA, poisons mistress and convent healer

SYBELLA, a fellow novitiate

SISTER WIDONA, stable mistress

SISTER BEATRIZ, instructor in womanly arts

SISTER EONETTE, convent historian and archivist

SISTER ARNETTE, arms mistress

SISTER CLAUDE, sister in charge of the rookery

SISTER VEREDA, the ancient seeress

RUNNION, traitor to Brittany and Ismae's first kill

MARTEL, French spy and Ismae's second kill

The Privy Council

VISCOUNT MAURICE CRUNARD, chancellor of Brittany

MADAME FRANÇOISE DINAN, the duchess's governess

MARSHAL JEAN RIEUX, marshal of Brittany and the duchess's tutor

CAPTAIN DUNOIS, captain of the Breton army

The Breton Court and Nobility

ANNE, Duchess of Brittany, Countess of Nantes, Montfort, and Richmond

DUKE FRANCIS II (deceased)

BARON LOMBART, a Breton noble

GAVRIEL DUVAL, a Breton noble

BENEBIC DE WAROCH, the Beast of Waroch and knight of the realm

RAOUL DE LORNAY, a knight of the realm

BARON GEFFOY, a Breton noble

LADY KATERINE GEFFOY, his ladywife

MADAME ANTOINETTE HIVERN, mistress of the late Duke Francis II

FRANÇOIS AVAUGOUR, a knight of the realm

ALAIN D'ALBRET, a Breton noble with extensive holdings in France, and one of Anne's suitors

CHARLES VIII, king of France

ANNE DE BEAUJEU, regent of France

NORBERT GISORS, ambassador for the French regent

FEDRIC, DUKE OF NEMOURS, one of Anne's suitors

MAXIMILIAN OF AUSTRIA, the Holy Roman emperor, one of Anne's suitors

Chapter 7

“Careful!” Sister Serafina scolds. “Don’t let it boil or it will turn to resin and be of no use.”

“Yes, sister.” I keep my eyes fixed on the small flask I hold over the flame. Tiny bubbles have begun to form along the sides of the glass, but it is not boiling. Not yet.

“Excellent,” she says from just behind my shoulder. “Now put it over here to cool.”

Using iron tongs, I lift the flask and set it on a cooling stone. We are brewing up a fresh batch of night whispers. In its current volatile state, it will kill anyone who breathes its fumes, causing the lungs to harden and become rigid and brittle as glass.

Anyone except for Sister Serafina and me. We are immune.

“Once it cools,” she says, “we’ll add it to this candle wax, and then—” A knock on the door interrupts her. “Don’t come in!” she calls out in alarm.

“I won’t.” It is Annith, who surely knows better than to enter.

“Reverend Mother has asked that Ismae come to her office right away.”

The thrill of this summons makes my heart flutter. The only time I have been called to her office since I arrived is to

receive news of an assignment. Without waiting for the nun to dismiss me, I hurry to the stone basin, where I begin scrubbing the last traces of poison from my hands.

Sister Serafina heaves a sigh of annoyance. “How the holy mother expects me to supply all our poisons without help is surely one of Mortain’s great mysteries.”

I glance sideways at her. “You’d think she would send Annith instead.”

Sister Serafina pins me with a severe look. “The reverend mother has her reasons. Now go. Do not make her wait.”

I go, being sure to curtsy so as not to antagonize her further. She thinks she has told me nothing, but it is just the opposite. I now know that there is an actual reason that Annith has not been sent out. And if Sister Serafina knows what it is, surely Annith and I can find out as well.

On my way to the reverend mother’s office I straighten my veil and brush a bit of dust from my skirts. I pause at the door, take a deep breath and compose my features, then knock.

“Enter.”

When I step into the office, the sight of a man sitting there is as shocking as a clap of thunder in the quiet room. His hair is white, as is his neatly trimmed beard. A heavy gold chain with a bejeweled pendant winks at me from the fur collar of his thick brocade robe.

“Come in, Ismae,” the abbess says. “I’d like you to meet Chancellor Crunard. He is a patron of our convent and acts as the liaison between us and the outside world.”

He is also head of one of the oldest and noblest families in Brittany and a hero of the last four wars. He has fought long and hard for our independence. Indeed, every one of his sons has died fighting against the French. I sink into a respectful curtsy. “Good day, my lord.”

He nods a brief greeting, his eyes giving away nothing of his thoughts.

“We have another assignment for you,” the reverend mother says, and a fierce triumph rises up in me at this newest opportunity to prove my worthiness.

The abbess leans back in her chair and folds her arms. “What has Sister Eonette told you of our political situation?” She asks the question lightly enough, but, with the reverend mother, everything is a test. She will not care how many of Sister Eonette’s lectures I have missed because Sister Serafina needed my help or because I was stuck in the scriptorium, struggling with my letters.

I fold my hands primly in front of me. “Our beloved Duke Francis died nearly two months ago, harried unto death by the aggression of the French regent. He and the other nobles fought hard to halt France overreaching her authority, but they were defeated. Because of this defeat, our duke was forced to accept the Treaty of Verger, the terms of which are favorable to the French and make it difficult for our country to maintain its independence.”

The abbess looks pleased and casts a glance at the chancellor as if to say *See?* He nods, then raises his eyebrows in a question. At her assent, he speaks, the deep rumble of

his voice jarring in this place where I have only ever heard women. “What of our young duchess? What do you know of her?”

I shift slightly, uncomfortable with this strange man quizzing me. “I know that her hand in marriage has been promised to half the princes in Europe and that she has vowed to keep our country’s independence.” I cannot help but feel sympathy for our poor duchess. “She has been sold to the highest bidder, for all that she is noble born.”

The chancellor’s eyes widen in surprise and he gives the abbess a quizzical look. “Is that what you teach them?”

“Not in so many words, Lord Chancellor, but you must understand that those who are drawn to Mortain’s work, by their very natures, have no love for the married state or for forced or arranged marriages. Indeed, many have joined our convent to escape those very things.” The abbess’s cold blue gaze clashes against the chancellor’s tired brown one, and some unspoken thing passes between them. Chancellor Crunard looks away first, and the abbess turns back to me.

“We have reason to believe that the French are sending a spy to meet with Baron Lombart in an attempt to purchase his loyalty. The port Lombart controls will be critical should war break out again between our countries. We wish you to intercept this contact before he meets with Lombart. We cannot afford to lose another of our nobles to the French.”

My heart quickens at this new task. It is much more complex than the tavern, a true test of all I have learned, and I am eager to pass it.

“You will accompany Chancellor Crunard as his paramour at Lombart’s hunting lodge in Pont-Croix this evening,” the abbess says. I sneak another glance at the chancellor. He is so old, I am sure everyone will see through this deception. If anything, they will think I am his daughter. “Now,” the abbess continues, “there is much to prepare – ah! Here they are,” she says at the knock on her door.

Without waiting for an invitation, Sister Arnette and Sister Beatriz enter the room.

“Go with the sisters and they will see that you are given what you need for tonight. When they are done, they will take you to Sister Vereda. She has Seen this, Ismae, and will tell you all you need to know. Then you will meet Sir Crunard in the courtyard.”

“Yes, Reverend Mother.” I dip into another curtsy. As I follow the two nuns from the room, I struggle to keep from skipping in my excitement.

“We will go to the armory first,” Sister Arnette announces as we step into the hallway.

Sister Beatriz protests. “I think we should dress her first. How will you know what she can carry if you do not first see her gown?”

“True enough,” Sister Arnette says, but the sigh that escapes her makes me think she holds no greater love for Sister Beatriz’s womanly arts than I do.

Even so, when we enter Sister Beatriz’s inner chamber, I gape. It is the first time I have been here, and gowns of every sort hang from pegs or are folded in stacks, silk upon velvet,

velvet upon brocade, in every color imaginable. Sister Beatriz's eyes are already searching among the finery. "Ah. This one might work." She plucks a russet velvet gown from a stack. It has a gold and green embroidered stomacher, and I have never seen anything so fine. She holds it up to me and squints, then shakes her head. "Makes you look sallow." I am not sure what sallow is, but it is a lovely gown and my eyes follow it longingly as she tosses it aside.

Next, she holds up a gown of vermilion brocade. Not caring for the brightness of the color, I mutter, "Why not just paint a sign on my forehead?"

"You think appearing in stark black like a crow among peacocks will aid your stealth?" she asks.

"No, sister."

She gives a snort of satisfaction that I have taken her point, then begins pulling down dozens of gowns from the pegs. But they are too loose or too short or the color does not suit her. Or me. At last she takes down a claret velvet gown and holds it up. She and Sister Arnette exchange a glance. "It is perfect for her, no?"

"Except it is missing a bodice," I point out.

Sister Beatriz waves my concerns aside. "The bodice is just cut low, in the Venetian style, the better to display your womanly charms."

Sister Arnette studies the gown, her fingers tapping against her chin while she thinks. "I can work with that," she finally says, and my heart sinks. I am not sure *I* can work with it. Or *in* it, as the case may be.

But that is the end of the discussion, and Sister Beatriz shoves the gown at me. “Try it on so we may see if it fits.” She motions me to a dressing screen in the far corner. I hold the gown as gently as a newborn babe, afraid my fingers will crush the soft fabric.

Behind the screen, I quickly slip out of my habit.

“Here.” Sister Beatriz drapes a delicate piece of linen over the screen. “You will need a finer shift under that.”

Painfully aware of the two older women on the other side of the screen, I slip out of my old chemise, shivering in my nakedness. I am relieved when I finally have the new shift on, then I quickly step into the rich velvet skirt and tie the ribbons at my waist. I slide my arms into the tight sleeves and marvel at how perfectly they fit, as if they’d been made for me.

As I ease the bodice up over my shoulders, I see that Sister Beatriz is right. It does cover my bosom, but only barely. I have always known that I must on occasion pass as a noblewoman, but I am loath to dress as a harlot. “I don’t think this will work!” I call out, too embarrassed to emerge from behind the screen.

Then Sister Beatriz is there, swatting my clumsy fingers aside and doing up the lacings herself. “It is perfect. It will capture every man’s attention so that no one will bother to watch what your hands are doing. Now come with me, Sister Arnette is waiting in the armory. Here are your slippers and cloak. I’ll dress your hair when she is done with you.”

Even though the armory pales by comparison to Sister Beatriz's dressing room, I much prefer it. Indeed, it is one of my favorite rooms at the convent. In addition to every size and shape of knife and dagger, it holds razor-edged rondelles, used to kill from a distance. Crossbows of all dimensions hang from the rafters, and rows of bolts are lined up on trays. Garrote wires are looped from hooks, as are all manner of leather harnesses and sheaths for concealing the weapons on our bodies. A sharp metallic tang hangs in the air and mixes with the scent of goose fat used for polishing the blades.

Sister Arnette grabs my hand and pulls me to an entire wall lined with knives. She gives my tight sleeves a quick glance. "We'll never get blades under those. Here." She tosses an ankle sheath at me. As I bend over to strap it on, my womanly charms nearly tumble out of my bodice. *Merde*.

Once the ankle sheath is secure, I am handed a thin stiletto encrusted with jewels. I nearly drop it in surprise. "Tis so fine."

"It is all the rage in Venice. But this will be your main weapon tonight." She produces a finely wrought bracelet that looks like heavy cord dipped in gold and wrapped round and round. She grasps the ends, then pulls, uncoiling it to reveal a length of thin, deadly wire.

"You have only to put your hands to his neck for an embrace. If you move quickly enough, he will not know what's happening until it is too late. If need be, you could even do it in the darkened corner of a crowded room."

She re-coils the bracelet and hands it to me. I slip it on my wrist.

Sister Beatriz studies me thoughtfully. “Perhaps I should rouge her nipples with red ocher.”

“Sister!” I am well and truly shocked. Annith has warned me that Sister Beatriz has the makings of a fine lightskirt, but I have missed too many of her classes to see this side of her.

“Don’t be tiresome.” She dismisses my distress with a wave of her hand and turns to Sister Arnette. “If she raises her arms like so” – the old nun raises hers as if putting them around someone’s neck—“her bodice will gape. Since Venetian women rouge their nipples, we should do the same to hers, don’t you think? To keep the disguise complete?”

Sister Arnette gives me a sympathetic grin. “I think if he catches sight of her nipples, it won’t matter whether they’re rouged or not. He’ll be dead within seconds.”

It is Sister Arnette who leads me to the convent’s inner sanctum, where Sister Vereda resides, and I am glad, for I am heartily sick of Sister Beatriz. At the seeress’s door, the nun pats my arm.

“Good luck,” she says, and I do not know if she means for my assignment tonight or my visit with the ancient nun. Sister Arnette leaves and I turn back to the door. Before I even knock, a voice calls out, “Come in.”

I step into the seeress’s quarters, which are as dark and warm as a womb. There is a faint reddish glow from a charcoal brazier. Sister Vereda has no need of light, but her

old joints are fond of heat. I peer into the darkness to try to see her better. She cocks her wimpled head to the side and studies me with her blind eyes. It is unsettling. “Come closer,” she says.

I fumble my way across the darkened room, the heavy, unfamiliar skirts hampering me as much as the lack of light. “Reverend Mother says you have Seen my assignment this evening and can give me directions so I may strike true.”

“Strike true? Is that your heart’s desire then?”

“But of course! Mortain and His convent have raised me up from a root cellar and given me a more glorious life than I could ever have imagined. I will repay that debt in every way I can.”

She stares at me in silence, her milky white eyes unnerving. “Remember, true faith never comes without anguish.”

Before I can respond, she reaches into a small pouch at her waist, pulls out a handful of something – it looks to be small bones and a tangle of feathers – and tosses it on the brazier.

Flames spring to life and an acrid tang fills the room. Sister Vereda stares into the small fire as if reading the red-gold flames reflected in her unseeing eyes.

“Twenty paces, then up a staircase. Small for a man, and wiry, like the fox he resembles. The dust of Amboise clings to his boots, and a red ruby given to him by the French regent winks in his ear. Martel is his name. That is who Mortain has marked.” The flames sputter out, and Sister Vereda’s eyes return to their milky white.

Not knowing what else to do, I curtsy. “Yes, sister. Mortain’s will be done.”

Next, she lifts a small box from the shelf under the brazier. Her eyes may be blind, but her fingers are nimble and quick, and she opens the small leather case and pulls from it a heavy bottle. It is of deepest black, its polished surface catching small sparks of light from the embers so that it looks as if she holds a piece of night sky filled with stars.

“Even though you are not a full initiate, the reverend mother says that you are to receive the Tears of Mortain. Kneel,” she orders as she pulls the stopper from the bottle.

Keeping my eyes on the sharp, tapered point of the stopper, I kneel at her feet.

“By the grace of Mortain, I grant you Sight so you may see His will and act on it. Do you promise to obey the saint and act only when He bids it?”

“I do.”

She dips the point of the stopper into the contents of the vial, then gropes gently for my face. “Open your eyes wide, child.”

Even though I am sore afraid of that sharp wand, I do as she commands. She moves it unerringly toward my eyes, one single heavy drop hanging from the tapered end, and I pray her hand is steady.

There is a touch of warmth, then my vision blurs and all the colors and light in the small room run together. My eyes grow warmer and warmer until I fear they will burst into flames. For a moment, I am afraid she has blinded me, but

then the sensation passes and the heat and the blurring cease, and I can see again. It seems to me that everything is somewhat brighter now, all the edges sharper, as if the same milkiness that clouds Sister Vereda's gaze has been ripped away from my own.

But it is not only my sight that is different. My skin, too, has changed, and I feel the air as an almost solid thing against my arms and face. I am aware of Sister Vereda in a way I was not before; I can *feel* her, feel the spark of life that shines so brightly within her.

“These Tears of Mortain are a gift to those of us who serve Him,” she explains as she returns the vial to its box. “They allow us to experience life and death as He does. Now go,” Sister Vereda says. “And may Mortain keep you in His dark embrace and guide your hand with His own.”



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COMING SOON:
HIS FAIR ASSASSIN, DARK TRIUMPH

Sybella sought refuge at the convent of St. Mortain but was instead trained as an assassin, her broken, tattered spirit pieced back together by the nuns so she could do her god's dark bidding. But Death, sensing how very close to despair and madness she truly is, sends Sybella a glimpse of hope in the form of a wounded knight whom she must risk everything to rescue – never suspecting that it is her own heart that stands in the balance.