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Mortal Heart (His Fair Assassin Trilogy)



Synopsis

In the powerful conclusion to Robin LaFever's New York Times bestselling His Fair Assassins trilogy, Annith has watched her gifted sisters at the convent come and go, carrying out their dark dealings in the name of St. Mortain, patiently awaiting her own turn to serve Death. But her worst fears are realized when she discovers she is being groomed by the abbess as a Seeress, to be forever sequestered in the rock and stone womb of the convent. Feeling sorely betrayed, Annith decides to strike out on her own. She has spent her whole life training to be an assassin. Just because the convent has changed its mind, doesn't mean she has. ^

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mortal Heart - Deleted Scenes Robin LaFever, author of the His Fair Assassins series shares some deleted scenes from Book 3.

Chapter One The faint crunch of a footstep on the rookery floor causes my head to snap up even as my hand shoves the message I should not have been reading out of sight. But it is only Ismae. The muscles in my shoulders begin to unclench, until I see that she wears a traveling cloak and is carrying a large satchel. She is leaving. Again. Not wanting her to see the sharp ache of disappointment that stabs through me, I return my attention to resealing the message I have just read. ^ Sister Claude will catch you,^ she says, her voice teasing, as she picks her way across the room. For once the stubbornness which I have been chided for all my life serves

me well; it alone allows me to answer in kind. *And I will argue that this is what they have trained me for.* I even manage to flash her an impudent grin. *True enough.* When she reaches my side, she stands awkwardly, as if she does not know what to say next. I work hard^{so very hard} to keep my voice light. *You are going out again?* At first she will not meet my gaze, and then when she does her eyes are full of silent apology. *I am to become a member of Viscount Duval's household.* Now it is I who looks away, my mind churning. *The one who burst in on the reverend mother this morning?* This is no short, quick assignment then, but a long, extended mission at the duchess's court in Guerande. As Ismae rushes to tell me of all that has transpired since she left^{her assignment to kill Martel at the hunting lodge, being discovered by Lord Duval, and their ensuing argument in the abbess's office} my mind cannot help but fill itself with all the ways this could go wrong. My own envy is quickly overtaken by worry for her safety. While Ismae is eager to serve Mortain, there are too many gaps in her education. Gaps that will make her vulnerable and could cost her her life. *It should be me.* I say, suddenly furious. Whatever reason the abbess has for holding me back, it cannot be worth the danger she is putting Ismae in. *I know.* I can only think that she must have something truly special she is saving you for. *For a moment, a thin trickle of despair slips through my defenses.* *It must be because I failed at the lesson with the corpse,* I whisper. It is one of my greatest failures^{one that could cost me all that I have worked for.} *Faltering, not failed,* Ismae reminds me. *And you did it in the end. Sister Arnette said you passed. That cannot be it. Mayhap it is simply because you are younger?* I look at her askance. If she truly thinks such a paltry excuse will fool me, then I am right to worry about how well she will be able to deceive the court. *I am only a year younger than you and Sybella,* I point out. *And Sybella was my age when they first sent her.* Sybella also arrived at the convent after many years of suffering and hardships, hardships that made her uniquely suited to Mortain's work. And while Ismae has also suffered, it has been in an entirely different manner. *Do they know how many classes you've skipped?* *Sister Serafina needed my help in the workshop!* And while that is true enough, it is also true that Sister Beatriz^{lessons on dancing and womanly charms} made Ismae acutely uncomfortable and she sought any excuse to escape them. *Even so, I am better at dancing and coquetry, not to mention that I can beat you seven times out of ten in our practices.* *But even more important, I fear that she will see every confrontation* *no matter how minor* *as an opportunity to use her skills.* There is an excellent chance she will try to start a fight with any Breton lord who dares to flirt

with her, or that she will slip a knife into the ribs of an unsuspecting noble hoping to only steal a kiss.

Ismae shifts uncomfortably on her feet. *Ã¢ÂœIÃ¢Â™m sure the abbess knows that.* *Ã¢Âœ* But does she, I wonder? At one time I would have claimed to understand precisely what the abbess knew or was thinking, but no longer. Not when she has once again chosen to send someone else instead of me. True despair wraps its cold hands around my heart. *Ã¢Âœelf it is not the corpse, then it makes no sense,* *Ã¢ÂœI whisper.* *Ã¢ÂœHave you asked the abbess?* *Ã¢Âœ* A snort of disbelief escapes my throat. *Ã¢ÂœAnd have her question my faith and dedication to Mortain? I think not.* *Ã¢Âœ* From the courtyard comes the sound of a male voice, as distinct and foreign as spice from the Indies. Ismae takes a step toward me. *Ã¢Âœl must go. Please donÃ¢Â™t let us part in anger.* *Ã¢Âœ* I close the space between us, wrap my arms around her, and hug her as if I could memorize the very feel of her. *Ã¢Âœl am not mad at you.* *Ã¢Âœ* I blink back a hot stinging sensation, for handmaidens of Death do not cry. Not even during hard farewells. *Ã¢ÂœPerhaps you will join me at court soon?* *Ã¢Âœ* she suggests. *Ã¢Âœl will pray for it nightly,* *Ã¢Âœ* I assure her. Along with prayers for her safety and SybellaÃ¢Â™s. Almost as if I had uttered the name aloud, Ismae glances down at the parchment on the table. *Ã¢ÂœNo word from Sybella?* *Ã¢Âœ* *None.* *Ã¢Âœ* I do not let Ismae see how much this worries me, for of all the initiates out on assignment, Sybella is the only one whom we have expected to hear from and have not. A thought occurs to me, the one sliver of sun peeking from behind this dark cloud. *Ã¢ÂœPerhaps you will learn of her at court,* *Ã¢ÂœI suggest.* *Ã¢Âœelf so, I will send word.* *Ã¢Âœ* Unable to stop myself, I hug her one more time, then force myself to step back. But even as her kiss of farewell still lingers on my cheek, a sense of profound wrongness tolls through me. Unable to linger among the crows while my dearest friend sails off to claim the life that I have trained for since I took my first toddling steps, I quickly hide the evidence of my tampering where Sister Claude will not find it, then hurry toward the door. Ismae is no longer visible on the path, so I lift up my skirts and follow her to the rocky beach. As I come around the convent wall, I see a tall nobleman helping Ismae into the boat. I cannot even find it in myself to smile when she jerks her arm from his and nearly tips herself over. Why? The single word hangs in my mind like a piece of malformed fruit clinging to a barren branch. Why has she been chosen and not me? What skill does she possess that I lack? In what way has she pleased Mortain that I have not? While I want to believe it is some twist of timing or fate, I know it could be something more. A punishment, perhaps, for all the failings I have exhibited over the years. Or for faltering when I should not have. The hot flush of old shame floods my face, and I hate myself^{Ã¢Â”}and my weaknesses^{Ã¢Â”}anew. I still do not understand why I faltered with the corpse. Especially when I

had faced so many other, more difficult challenges at the hands of the Dragonette. My fingers ache and I glance down to see that I have twisted them in knots. I force them to relax and press them firmly against my skirt. Despair pounds on my door like a determined suitor, but I refuse to let him in. Next time, I promise myself. There are no other girls left to send except me. The next assignment will surely be mine. As I begin slowly making my way back to the convent, I am startled to hear my name called. "Annith!" I look up to find Matelaine heading my way, her red hair bright against the gray stone of the convent walls. At fifteen, she is the closest to me in age now that the others have left. She waves at me. "Annith!" Instead of hurrying forward to meet her, I turn and look back toward the beach to give myself a moment to compose myself. I do not want the other girls to know how disappointed I am. They must think this is precisely what I was expecting. When Matelaine reaches me, I smile brightly at her, as if I have not a care in the world. She peers over my shoulder. "Ismae gone?" She is. And she left with the most intriguing nobleman. "Really?" Matelaine cranes her neck, as if by some slim chance they might still linger. "I would like to have seen that," she says wistfully. Then she glances at me, her brows creased with concern. Before she can ask how I feel about this unexpected turn of events, I tuck my arm through hers and steer her back up the path. "Why were you looking for me?" Her face clears. "Oh! All of our lessons and other duties have been canceled. We are to report to Sister Beatriz's chambers at once so we may help prepare Ismae's gowns for court. The abbess wants to be able to send them to her in Guerande as quickly as possible." "Very well, then. We would not want one of our own sisters to appear as plain as a peahen in front of the entire Breton nobility! Come, I'll race you." And even though I have not run through the halls of the convent in years, I drop her arm and bolt ahead before she has even agreed to the race. "Cheater!" she calls out, laughing as she hurries to catch up. But I do not care, for the diversion has worked and she is no longer wondering what poor Annith might feel about being passed over yet again.

Chapter Two Sister Beatriz's chamber is ablaze with color and chattering young voices. Like large, drab birds, novitiates have perched themselves on every stool and bench, all of them stitching away at a profusion of silks and satins and velvets. The youngest girls have been given the linens and small clothes to work on so their lack of fine stitching skills will be less noticeable. "There you are, Annith!" Sister Beatriz says. "I thought you'd never arrive. Here. You are the best seamstress and this one will be the hardest to take in." She shoves a gown into my arms and pulls me to a stool near a window. She shoos Loisse out of the

way and pushes me down. "Stitch," she orders. "And quickly. There will be a boat leaving in two days" time, and the abbess wants Ismae's entire court wardrobe to be on it. Matelaine! Sister Beatriz shifts her attention to the other girl and I am left staring at a lapful of plum-colored velvet. After pelting Matelaine with similar instructions, Sister Beatriz excuses herself to go consult with Sister Arnette over a sleeve width that will allow Ismae's knives to be easily drawn. As soon as the nun steps out of the room, fourteen-year-old Sarra looks up from her stitching. "So? Is it true? Have they really sent Ismae out on another assignment instead of you? Again?" Her dark eyes glitter wickedly as she utters that last word, letting me know that the bite of it is fully intended. Ever attuned to discord among us, young Audri and Florette stop their stitching and watch us tensely. Before I can reassure them, Matelaine speaks. "Pay no attention to Sarra." She casts a sly glance the younger girls' way and lowers her voice so that they will not hear. "She is also sullen because now I will be your training partner and she will most likely be paired with Loisse." I glance quickly at Loisse, but she is busy trying to untangle a knot in her thread and has not heard us. Sarra tosses her long brown hair over her shoulder and shrugs. "If you think that saddens me, you are dumber than you look." But we all know it is not true, for Loisse is a serious, earnest girl who tries hard but is all elbows and knees and clumsiness. Even worse, she was born with the birth cord wrapped round her neck, making her impervious to a chokehold, which makes her difficult to defeat.

Sarra leans forward, a look of unholy glee on her face. Even though it was Matelaine who goaded her, she directs her venom at me. "Do you ever wonder what Sister Beatriz's skill might be?" Her eyes are bright with curiosity. "What manner of birth makes one so proficient at womanly arts?" I have no idea, I admit. With a gloating smirk, Sarra leans back in her seat. "Sybella once told me that she thought Sister Beatriz could pull men's souls from their body through sexual congress." I want to reach out and poke Sarra with my needle, for this is no idle gossip of hers. She intends for her words to draw blood, reminding me of my own lack of special skill. For years, my long-awaited gifts from Mortain were like a much-anticipated present the entire convent was waiting to open. But they never came. It happens, sometimes, I was told. His gifts are not always gaudy and bright and magnificent. Sometimes they are quiet skills that few but He would ever recognize. A sharp pang of jealousy nips at some tender place deep inside me. I force a cheerful smile to my lips, thread my needle, and return my attention to the gown in my lap. Carefully I insert the needle into the thick velvet. Instead of allowing myself to wallow in self-pity, I remember the way Ismae glowed with quiet pride and remind myself how happy I am for her. I focus on my sewing and turn each stitch into a silent prayer

to Mortain to keep Ismae safe, as if I can sew my love for her into the very gown itself. And don't forget about Sybella, I remind Him. You must keep her safe too. I try to ignore the cold sense of fear that clutches at my heart whenever I think of her. Would that they had given me time to stitch words of love and protection into her gown as well. Many hours later, far past the dinner bell, Loiselle, who is clumsy, and Florette, who is too young, both pierce their fingers on their needles and nearly drip blood on their sewing. "Out!" Sister Beatriz squawks. "Away with you all before you ruin all our hard work. Be back here tomorrow as soon as there is enough light to work by." And with that, she sends all the girls eagerly scurrying to freedom and their dinner. She turns to me. "You may go as well." "Thank you, Sister, but I wish to finish this gown first. If you do not mind." "Of course I do not mind." She sniffs. "I only wish the others had half your dedication and a modicum of your skill." Although she is only speaking of stitching, her words of praise are a balm to my bruised pride. "However, my eyes are too old to see well enough by candlelight to be of any use." "I do not mind finishing up alone. If you will just leave the candles for me I will be able to manage." "Of course, child." She does as I ask and then rustles from the room. When I am alone at last, the forced cheerfulness I have worn all afternoon falls from me like crumpled armor. This newest blow is hard enough to bear, but to be forced to bear it cheerfully and to pretend it means nothing is exhausting. When at last I have finished with the gown, I put down the needle and thread and rub my tired eyes. When I stand up, I reach my arms up high over my head and stretch, then pick up the plum-colored gown and carry it over to the wall where the others are hung. It is a dizzying array of bright colors and rich textures, all begging to be touched. I let my fingers skim over the cool silks and velvet as soft as thistledown. Peacock blue, a gold as bright as sunlit honey, rich plum, a deep rose the exact shade of the late-spring blooms, and a green as dark and mysterious as the forest itself. Each of the gowns feels like the key to a new world. A new life. A new self. The desire to be someone who wears these sorts of gowns"even if only long enough to carry out Mortain's will in the world" is overwhelming. With no one here to see, I lift the deep rose gown from its peg. Before I can marshal my own arguments against it"it is a vain, shallow, and far too earthly curiosity I am feeling" I pull my work habit over my head and slip into the rose-colored silk. Whether it is the different fabric or merely some trick of perception, this gown feels shockingly different against my skin. Cool and heavy as it grazes its way down my body, it feels as lush and sensuous as I imagine a lover's caress would be. Lifting the unhemmed skirt so it will not drag along the floor, I cross over to the single full-length mirror against the far wall. Who is that girl looking back at me? Her cheeks are pink, her eyes bright.

Donning the gown makes me feel as if I have suddenly stepped into a world of infinite possibilities. I narrow my gaze and imagine who I would kill in this gown. A French ambassador? Some traitorous Breton noble? Some contemptuous scum who is selling our secrets to the French regent? And how would I kill him? I would wear at least one of Sister Arnette's garrote bracelets. I would strap a long knife at my ankle, and the sleeves are easily wide enough to have two more at my wrists. But the gown wants something else—it is missing a bit of finery, I realize, as I peer into the mirror. I move to the chest where Sister Beatriz keeps the jewelry, then open it and search among its contents until I find a long thin chain of silver with a small filagree ball at one end—the sort a noble would fill with a pomander. But of course we at the convent have designed it to be filled with poison. I fasten that around my waist, then return to the mirror. There. That is perfect. Soon, I remind myself. Soon I too will be busy on my own assignment and will no longer have to listen to Sarra's taunts. After another moment, I reluctantly take off the gown and replace it on its peg, then slip quietly back into my own habit, which now feels twice as heavy as it did before. As I begin making my way to the dormitories, I resolve that I will talk to the abbess tomorrow. I will be humble and contrite and beg to know how I have failed, and how I can make restitution, for I will happily yank those faults from myself like a thorny weed from the convent garden. As I pass the abbess's office, a light shines from underneath the door. She is working far later than usual. Is this Mortain's way of granting my wish to speak with her privately? Or is there some urgent business she is working on that would be foolish to interrupt? Of their own volition, my feet cease their walking. It could be the perfect opportunity—the dark stillness of the convent inviting the admission of fears not willingly admitted to in the light of day. But as I reach out to rap on the door, an old, ugly memory rises up, stilling my hand. For many novitiates, the convent is a refuge of sorts, an escape from the horrors of their past. For me it is something else entirely. Ismae and Sybella have always thought that everything came easily to me and that I enjoyed a position as convent favorite. Little did they know of how my early years were truly spent. I was only three years old when I first stepped into this very office. The abbess back then was called the Dragonette, and she had summoned me. It was the first time I remember being alone with her—it was just she and I this time, no ten-year-old Widona to hold my hand or kindly Sister Etienne to send me reassuring glances. I had not interacted with her overmuch, as I was so young as to be beneath her concern. Or so I thought. It turned out I was wrong. She had only been waiting for me to become old enough to understand what she had planned for me. "Child, do you know why you are here?" I resisted the urge to stuff my fingers into my mouth. Sister Etienne had warned me that the Dragonette would not like it—and

shook my head. "No, Reverend Mother." "Here, come closer. Do not be afraid. You may sit if you like." Still hesitant, with Widona's and Sister Etienne's warnings flapping through my head like the hungry crows in the rookery when they knew Sister Claude was about to feed them, I nevertheless decided to take a seat. It did not seem wise to refuse the Dragonette anything. She folded her hands on the desk and leaned forward. "Child. I believe that Mortain has granted you and I the chance of a lifetime. Nay, of a dozen lifetimes. Do you know what this opportunity is?" I stuffed my hands under my bottom and shook my head. "Do you know what makes you special?" I thought for a long moment, for as best I knew, I was not special. I was the least special person at the convent. I could not hold my breath or move quickly like some of the other girls. I did not run especially fast or seem especially skilled at anything. Once again I shook my head. "Because you arrived here far younger than any novitiate ever before. We have had you since birth, which means that every thought that fills your head, every morsel of bread that passes your lips, and everything your physical body touches has been blessed by Mortain. You and I, Annith, will do great things together." Her excitement at these great things caused her to quiver in the way of the barn hound when he spies a rat and is waiting to pounce. Mortain had seen fit to grant me an infant so that I can turn it "you" into a perfect weapon, the ultimate deliverer of Mortain's will here on earth. I can still even, fourteen years later, remember the radiant glow that emanated from her as she explained the opportunity Mortain had placed before her "before us" as she spoke of the exemplary role model I would make for the generations of handmaidens who would follow. Being the unappreciative child that I was, and unschooled as yet in the ways of hardship my unique position would require of me, I finally gave in to the urge to suck on my fingers and asked if I could return to Sister Etienne now. At first I thought I had displeased the Dragonette, for a faint ripple of annoyance crossed her face. But then she smiled. "Not just yet. I have something for you first." I flinched in apprehension as she arose from her chair, but instead of approaching me she went to the cupboard behind her desk and poured something into a goblet. When she brought the goblet to me, I was afraid to touch it, for it was the finest thing I had ever laid eyes on, as clear and shimmering as the sun glancing off the ocean. But the Dragonette pressed the crystal goblet into my small hand and closed my chubby fingers around it. "Drink," she bid me. And so I did. At first, the liquid was crisp and light on my tongue, even though it burned slightly as it slid down my throat. Uncertain, I glanced up at her. She waved at the goblet, indicating I should take another drink. I can still remember thinking how kind she was as I took that second drink. But before I could take a third, a horrible burning

sensation began in my gut, and sharp pains lanced out from my belly along my limbs, up into my heart. I opened my mouth to call out, but instead a great rushing of the contents of my belly spewed out onto the clean marble floor. I will be in trouble now was the last thought I remembered before passing out. Soured by the flood of old memory, I slowly pull my hand away from the door, curl it into a fist, and continue down the dark hall.

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