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

Dark Triumph: Book 2 of His Fair Assassin Series

Written by

Robin LaFevers

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in 2013 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in 2013 in the United States of America by
Houghton Mifflin Books for Children

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

The right of Robin LaFevers to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by her
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Robin LaFevers, 2013

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 84939 575 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter 1

Nantes, Brittany, 1489

I did not arrive at the convent of Saint Mortain some green stripling. By the time I was sent there, my death count numbered three, and I had had two lovers besides. Even so, there were some things they were able to teach me: Sister Serafina, the art of poison; Sister Thomine, how to wield a blade; and Sister Arnette, where best to strike with it, laying out all the vulnerable points on a man's body like an astronomer charting the stars.

If only they had taught me how to watch innocents die as well as they taught me how to kill, I would be far better prepared for this nightmare into which I've been thrust.

I pause at the foot of the winding steps to see if I am being watched. The scullery woman scrubbing the marble hall, the sleepy page dozing against the doorway – either one of them could be a spy. Even if neither has been assigned to watch me, someone is always willing to tattle in the hopes of earning a few crumbs of favor.

Caution prevails and I decide to use the south stairs, then double back through the lower hall to approach the north tower from that side. I am very careful to step precisely where the maid has just washed, and I hear her mutter a curse under

her breath. Good. Now I can be certain she has seen me and will not forget if she is questioned.

In the lower hall, there are few servants about. Those who have not been driven out are busy with their duties or have gone to ground like wise, clever rats.

When at last I reach the north wing of the palace, it is empty. Quickening my pace, I hurry toward the north tower, but I am so busy looking behind me that I nearly stumble over a small figure sitting at the base of the stairs.

I bite back an oath of annoyance and glare down to see it is a child. A young girl. "What are you doing here?" I snap. My nerves are already tightly strung, and this new worry does them little good. "Where is your mother?"

The girl looks up at me with eyes like damp violets, and true fear clutches at my gut. Has no one thought to warn her how dangerous it is for a pretty child to wander these halls alone? I want to reach down and shake her – shake her mother – and shout at her that she is not safe, not on these steps, not in this castle. I force myself to take a deep breath instead.

"Mama is dead." The child's voice is high and quivery.

I glance to the stairs, where my first duty lies, but I cannot leave this child here. "What is your name?"

"Odette," she says, uncertain whether to be frightened of me or not.

"Well, Odette, this is no place to play. Have you no one to look after you?"

"My sister. But when she is working, I am to hide like a little mouse."

At least her sister is no fool. "But this is not a good place to hide, is it? Look how easily I found you!"

For the first time, the girl gives me a shy smile, and in that moment, she reminds me so much of my youngest sister, Louise, that I cannot breathe. Thinking quickly, I take her hand and lead her back to the main hallway.

Hurry, hurry, hurry nips at my heels like a braying hound.

"See that door?" She nods, watching me uncertainly. "Go through that door, then down the stairs. The chapel is there, and it is a most excellent hiding place." And since d'Albret and his men never visit the chapel, she will be safe enough. "Who is your sister?"

"Tilde."

"Very well. I will tell Tilde where you are so she may come and get you when her work is done."

"Thank you," Odette says, then skips off down the hall. I long to escort her there myself, but I already risk being too late for what I must do.

I turn back around and take the stairs two at a time. The thick wooden door on the landing has a new latch, stiff with disuse. I lift it slowly to be certain it will not creak out an alarm.

As I step into the cold winter sunshine, a bitter wind whips at my hair, tearing it from the net that holds it in place. All my caution has cost me precious time, and I pray that I have not been brought up here only to see those I love slaughtered.

I hurry to the crenellated wall and look down into the field below. A small party of mounted knights waits patiently

while an even smaller party confers with that braying ass Marshal Rieux. I recognize the duchess immediately, her dainty figure poised on her gray palfrey. She looks impossibly small, far too small to carry the fate of our kingdom on her slender shoulders. That she has managed to hold off a French invasion for this long is impressive; that she has done so in spite of being betrayed by a full half of her councilors is close to a miracle.

Behind her and to the right is Ismae, sister of my heart and, possibly, my blood, if what the nuns at the convent told us is true. My pulse begins to race, but whether in joy that I am not too late or in panic at what I know is coming, I cannot tell.

Keeping my gaze fixed on Ismae, I gather up all my fear and dread and hurl them at her, like stones in a catapult.

She does not so much as glance in my direction.

From deep in the bowels of the castle, off toward the east, comes a faint rumble as the portcullis is raised. This time when I cast my warning, I fling my arms out as well, as if I am shooing away a flock of ducks. I hope – pray – that some bond still exists between us that will allow her to sense me.

But her eyes remain fixed on the duchess in front of her, and I nearly scream in frustration. *Flee,* my mind cries. *It is a trap.* Then, just as I fear I must throw myself from the battlements to gain her attention, Ismae looks up. *Flee,* I beg, then sweep my arms out once more.

It works. She looks away from me to the eastern gate, then turns to shout something to the soldier next to her, and I grow limp with relief.

The small party on the field springs to life, shouting orders and calling to one another. Ismae points again, this time to the west. Good. She has seen the second arm of the trap. Now I must only hope that my warning has not come too late.

Once Marshal Rieux and his men realize what is happening, they wheel their mounts around and gallop back to the city. The duchess and her party move to fall into a new formation but have not yet left the field.

Flee! The word beats frantically against my breast, but I dare not utter it, afraid that even though I stand on this isolated tower, someone from the castle might hear. I lean forward, gripping the cold, rough stone of the battlements so hard that it bites into my gloveless fingers.

The first line of d'Albret's troops rides into my sight, my half brother Pierre in the vanguard. Then, just when I am certain it is too late, the duchess's party splits in two, and a paltry dozen of the duchess's men turn their mounts to meet the coming onslaught. Twelve against two hundred. Hollow laughter at the futility of their actions escapes me but is snatched up by the wind before anyone can hear it.

As the duchess and two others gallop away, Ismae hesitates. I bite my lip to keep from shouting. She cannot think she can help the doomed knights? Their cause is hopeless, and not even our skills can help the twelve who so valiantly ride to their deaths.

"Flee." This time I do utter the word aloud, but just like my laughter, it is caught up by the cold, bitter wind and carried

high above, where no one can hear it. Not the one it is meant to warn, nor those who would punish me for the betrayal.

But perhaps something has carried my warning to Ismae all the same, for she finally wheels her mount around and gallops after the duchess. The iron band squeezing my lungs eases somewhat, for while it is hard enough to watch these men meet their deaths, I could not bear to watch Ismae die.

Or worse, be captured.

If that happened, I would kill her myself rather than leave her to d'Albret, for he will grant her no mercy. Not after she ruined his plans in Guérande and nearly gutted him like a fish. He has had many days to hone his vengeance to a razor-sharp edge.

It is folly for me to linger. I should leave now while there is no chance of being discovered, but I cannot turn away. Like the rushing water of a swollen river, d'Albret's forces swarm the duchess's guard. The resounding clash is like thunder as armor crashes into armor, pikes break through shields, and swords meet.

I am astounded at the ferocity of the duchess's men. They all fight as if they have all been possessed by the spirit of Saint Camulos himself, slashing through their attackers much as farmers scythe through stalks of grain. By some miracle, they hold the oncoming line, and their efforts delay d'Albret's forces long enough for the duchess's party to reach the safety of the trees. D'Albret's greater number of men will be less of an advantage if they all must duck and dodge branches and bracken.

From the east, a trumpet sounds. I frown and look that way, fearing d'Albret has thought to arrange for a third mounted force. But no, the black and white banner of the Rennes garrison stands in stark relief against the crisp blue sky as an additional dozen men ride into the melee. When the duchess and the others finally disappear over the horizon, I allow myself to draw my first full breath.

But even with the infusion of new troops, it is a crushing defeat. The duchess's guards have no chance, not against so many. My hand itches for a weapon, but the knives I carry will do no good from this distance. A crossbow would work, but they are nigh unto impossible to conceal, and so I watch helplessly.

D'Albret had only ever planned for a trap – a quick in-and-out, thrust and parry, and then return with the prize. Once he realizes the quarry has escaped and he no longer has the element of surprise, he gives the signal for his soldiers to fall back behind the castle walls. Better to cut his losses than waste any more men in this failed gambit.

The battle below is nearly over. Only one soldier continues to fight, a great big ox of a man who doesn't have the sense to die quickly like the others. His helm has been knocked from his head, and three arrows pierce his armor, which is dented in a dozen places. His chain mail is torn, and the cuts beneath it bleed profusely, but still he fights with a nearly inhuman strength, stumbling ever forward into the mass of his enemies. *It is all right,* I long to tell him. *Your young duchess is safe. You may die in peace, and then you will be safe as well.*

His head jerks up from the blow he has just taken, and across the distance our eyes meet. I wonder what color they are and how quickly they will film over once Death claims him.

Then one of d'Albret's men lunges forward and cuts the knight's horse out from under him. He gives a long, despairing bellow as he goes down, then like ants swarming a scrap of meat, his enemies are upon him. The man's death cry reaches all the way up to the tower and wraps itself around my heart, calling for me to join it.

A fierce wave of longing surges through me, and I am jealous of that knight and the oblivion that claims him. He is free now, just like the gathering vultures who circle overhead. How easily they come and go, how far above danger they fly. I am not sure I can return to my own cage, a cage built of lies and suspicions and fear. A cage so full of darkness and shadow it may as well be death.

I lean forward, pushing my body out past the battlements. The wind plucks at my cloak, buffets me, as if it would carry me off in flight, just like the birds or the knight's soul. *Let go,* it cries. *I will take you far, far away.* I want to laugh at the exhilarating feeling. *I will catch you,* it whistles seductively.

Would it hurt? I wonder, staring down at the jagged rocks below. Would I feel the moment of my landing? I close my eyes and imagine hurtling through space, rushing down, down, down, to my death.

Would it even work? At the convent, the sisters of Mortain were as stingy with their knowledge of our deathly skills and abilities as a miser is with his coin. I do not fully understand

all the powers Death has bestowed upon me. Besides, Death has already rejected me twice. What if He did so a third time and I had to spend the rest of my life broken and helpless, forever at the mercy of those around me? That thought has me shuddering violently, and I take a step away from the wall.

"Sybella?"

Fresh panic flares in my breast, and my hand reaches for the cross nestled among the folds of my skirt, for it is no ordinary crucifix but a cunningly disguised knife designed for me by the convent. Even as I turn around, I widen my eyes as if excited and curve the corners of my mouth up in a brazen smile.

Julian stands in the doorway. "What are you doing out here?" he asks.

I let my eyes sparkle with pleasure – as if I'm glad to see him rather than dismayed – then turn back around to the battlement to compose myself. I shove all my true thoughts and feelings deep inside, for while Julian is the kindest of them all, he is no fool. And he has always been skilled at reading me. "Watching the rout." I am careful to make my voice purr with excitement. At least he did not find me until *after* I warned Ismae.

He joins me at the wall, so close that our elbows touch, and casts me a look of wry admiration. "You wanted to watch?"

I roll my eyes in disdain. "It matters not. The bird slipped the net."

Julian tears his gaze away from me and looks out onto the field for the first time. "The duchess got away?"

"I'm afraid so."

He glances quickly back at me, but I keep the look of contempt plastered to my face like a shield. "He will not be happy," Julian says.

"No, he will not. And the rest of us will pay the price." I look at him as if just now noticing he is not dressed for battle. "Why are you not on the field with the others?"

"I was ordered to stay behind."

A brief spasm of fear clutches my heart. Is d'Albret having me watched so very closely, then?

Julian offers me his arm. "We need to get back to the hall before he returns."

I dimple at him and cozy up to his arm, letting it almost but not quite brush against my breast. It is the one power I have over him – doling out favors just often enough that he does not need to grab for them.

As we reach the tower door, Julian glances back over his shoulder at the battlement then turns his unreadable gaze on me. "I will not tell anyone that you were up here," he says.

I shrug, as if it is of no difference to me. Even so, I fear he will make me pay for this kindness of his.

Already I regret not jumping while I had the chance.