

# Grave Mercy: His Fair Assassin, Book I Study Guide

## Grave Mercy: His Fair Assassin, Book I by R. L. LaFevers

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## Plot Summary

In the novel "His Fair Assassin: Grave Mercy," the once abused Ismae Rienne not only learns how to love and follow her heart, but also realizes that her gift of death can be used mercifully, not just as a means of vengeance. Set in the duchy of Brittany in the late 1400's, the novel addresses the themes of religion, the roles of women and the questionable nature of blind obedience. Ismae must weigh her own knowledge and instincts against information being sent to her by her convent in order to save Brittany and its young duchess as well as the man whom she has learned to love.

Because she survived an attempt to abort her, it has been declared that Ismae is the daughter of Death. Because of this identity, she is hated by her father and abused by the people of her community. At seventeen, she is sold to a man in an arranged marriage. When her husband realizes her lineage, he beats her badly and threatens to turn her over to the church. Ismae is saved by the hedge priest who married the two and spirited away to the convent of St. Mortain where she learns the art of assassination.

In the third assignment given to her by the convent, Ismae is placed with Gavriel Duval, half-brother of the duchess of Brittany, to determine if he is a traitor. During her time with Duval, Ismae falls in love with him and realizes that he is not a traitor even though others are trying to make it appear that he is. Although it goes against the orders the convent has sent to her, Ismae teams up to help Duval ensure that his sister, Anne, is crowned as the duchess of France. The two also try to arrange an acceptable marriage for the young duchess that will insuring that she has a decent husband and that the interests of Brittany are protected.

Realizing that it is not Duval who is behind the treacherous acts being committed against Anne and her court, Ismae seeks out the identity of this traitor. She learns that it is Chancellor Crunard, who also serves as liaison for the convent, who is sowing the seeds of distrust against Duval. In addition, Crunard has also been poisoning Duval in an attempt to kill him. In a twist at the end of the novel, Ismae realizes that she has the ability to save Duval from the poison.



# Chapters One-Four

## Chapters One-Four Summary

In the novel "His Fair Assassin: Grave Mercy," the once abused Ismae Rienne not only learns how to love and follow her heart, but also realizes that her gift of death can be used mercifully not just as a means of vengeance. Set in the duchy of Brittany in the mid-1850's, the novel addresses the themes of religion, the roles of women and the questionable nature of blind obedience. Ismae must weigh her own knowledge and instincts against information being sent to her by her convent in order to save Brittany and its young duchess as well as the man whom she has learned to love.

In Chapter One, Ismae Rienne is saved from an arranged marriage to an abusive man by the hedge priest who performed the marriage ceremony. The priest takes her to the abbey of St. Mortain where she will be safe from the Church. Because Ismae survived her mother's attempt to abort her, it is believed that she is the offspring of the devil.

In Chapter Two, Ismae learns that her job in the convent will be to assist people in death. She tells the abbess that she sometimes can tell when people are going to die, even has premonitions. The offer that the abbess gives her is attractive because so many people have been cruel to her in the past, she believes she can kill anyone whom she is asked to kill with no reservations.

In Chapter Three, Ismae is taken to the infirmary where she is given a tisane that she is told will make her feel better. Annith tells Ismae that Ismae and Sister Serafina are the only ones in the convent who aren't affect by poison. While she is in the infirmary, Ismae is disturbed by a girl who is tied to a bed in the same room as she.

In Chapter Four, Ismae wakes to find Sybella standing above her claiming they are sisters, offspring of the devil. She wants to go back to her old life, but with the permission of the nuns, Ismae is able to help convince her to stay there. The following day, Ismae begins her work in the poison workshop.

## Chapters One-Four Analysis

In the first chapter of the novel, Ismae's background is summed up. She believes that her mother hated her so much that she wanted to kill her even before she was born. She has grown up with a father who hates her and has finally sold her in marriage to a man to whom she does not love. When he sees the scar and realizes that she is the daughter of Death, Guillo beats her badly. As a result of the way that she has been treated all of her life, Ismae believes that she will be able to kill anyone without a second thought.

Also in these first chapters, the idea of religion is introduced. This religion, however, seems to be a reversed sort of religion. Where some religions celebrate and attempt to



sustain life, this religion into which Ismae is introduced is involved in death. Ismae is taken to the convent of St. Mortain, the god of death, where it is indicated that she will be safe from the Church. Although it is not fully explained, it is assumed that if those in the Christian churches were to learn of Ismae's lineage, they would arrange to have her killed. The convent to which Ismae has many parallels with Christian convents with each of the nuns referring to each other as "sister." Each of the women has a special task to which she is assigned and their lives are structured around molding their lives so they can be better servants to Mortain. Unlike a traditional convent, however, these women are taught how to kill with the belief that Mortain will communicate to them his wishes as to whom they should put to death.



# Chapters Five-Eight

## Chapters Five-Eight Summary

In Chapter Five, Ismae sees Sybella again. This time she is calm, but haughty. She gives Ismae a special pleasure by sitting next to her but shuns Annith. She will not eat the stew served to her until the nuns threaten her to do so. In the remainder of the chapter, Ismae and Sybella are taught how to fight, use weapons and seduce men. Ismae takes to her lessons, especially poison making, quickly.

In Chapter Six, time moves forward three years. Ismae has her first assignment. She is sent to kill Jean Runnion and the assignment goes well except that she is approached by a fieldworker named Herve. When she returns to the convent, she goes through defensive motions with Annith. As they fight they talk about Ismae's mission and Sybella's. Sybella has not been heard from since she left on her fourth mission. Annith has yet to be sent out at all.

In Chapter Seven Ismae receives her second assignment. She is to kill a man named Martel who is being sent as a spy by the French government to buy the loyalty of the Baron Lombart. Before she leaves on her assignment, she is given the Tears of Mortain by Sister Vereda. These tears give her the ability to both see and feel more clearly. Sister Vereda also tells Ismae they allow her to experience life and death as Mortain does.

In Chapter Eight, Ismae successfully kills Martel. Before she leaves the room in which the murder took place she is accosted by a man named Gavriel Duval. Though she doesn't know how, Ismae gets the feeling that Duval knows why Ismae is there and what she has done. She is able to escape from him, and she and Crunard flee the hunting lodge together.

## Chapters Five-Eight Analysis

Ismae successfully completes her first two assignments from the convent. As she had believed, she does not seem to have any difficulty killing the men whom she is assigned to kill. The only issue that comes up in both of her assignments is an interruption by a man both times. The first man claims to be named Herve. He enters the room where Ismae is carrying out her duties just after she is finished. During her second killing, a man named Gavriel Duval comes in the room demanding to know what she has done with the man with whom he is supposed to meet.



# Chapters Nine-Twelve

## Chapters Nine-Twelve Summary

In Chapter Nine, the reverend mother is in the act of asking Ismae everything that she remembers about her interaction with the man named Duval when he bursts into the room even though Annith has tried to stop him. Duval is angry because he is trying to question the men whom Ismae has killed about their role in the plan to keep Anne from being crowned duchess. Duval allows himself to be trapped by the reverend mother as she suggests that he take Ismae to live with him for several weeks so they can coordinate efforts. Ismae is to act as his mistress. Ismae is not happy with the plan, but obeys as she has been commanded.

In Chapter Ten the reverend mother visits Ismae in her room to give her the gift of a dagger of Mortain. Although it is only Ismae's third assignment and she is not a full initiate yet, the reverend mother has decided to give her the gift early. Before she leaves, Ismae goes to say farewell to Annith. Annith is angry that she is being skipped over and believes that she would be better at this assignment than Ismae. Ismae agrees, asking that her friend not be angry with her. As she leaves in the boat with Duval, she feels as if she has been doomed to a special hell.

As Ismae and Duval ride toward Quimper in Chapter Eleven, Ismae feels the chill of death. Duval notices the change in her demeanor and motions for her to follow her sense to whatever has died. When Ismae gets closer to the spot, she realizes that it is the grave of Martel that she has sensed. She tries to make contact with Martel's soul but is only able to get snatches of what the man was up to when he died. Duval feels this bit of information has secured the idea that Martel was looking for a port from which the French could launch attacks. Duval treats her kindly after her ordeal with the spirit, then rushes them toward the city.

In Chapter Twelve, Duval asks Ismae if the fact of her not knowing the reasons for which she is killing people bothers her. He adds that he often wonders if the people of the convent who translate Mortain's wishes ever made mistakes as he know that Runnion, the first man whom Ismae killed was working for the duchess.

## Chapters Nine-Twelve Analysis

It is in these chapters that the real meat of the story begins. When Ismae returns from her second assignment, the reverend mother questions her closely about the man who accosted her after she killed Martel. Although the Reverend Mother seems to doubt that Duval would be a traitor, Crunard seems to believe anyone could be a traitor. Although they had at first intended to send Ismae with Crunard to see what she could learn about Duval, Duval himself bursts into the room insisting that the two groups work together with more unison.



When the Reverend Mother sends Ismae with Duval, she feels as if she has been betrayed. She had hoped to move out of the world of men and escape to the convent but instead, she feels as if she is being sold in a sort of marriage to Duval. She does not like the idea of acting as his mistress. Even though he appears not to like Ismae, there are points at which Ismae feels an uncomfortable attraction toward Duval.

Although she doesn't like to admit her doubts, Duval asks her penetrating questions that make her think about the role in which the convent has placed her. While the convent requires unquestioning obedience, Duval cannot accept that a person can kill without knowing why they are killing. His question to Ismae makes her wonder if it is really acceptable for her to do as the convent bids without asking questions. Duval suggests that the people who make the decision about the killings might be wrong. Although he does not realize it, Duval has put his finger on an issue that will become very important later in the novel as decisions about who is to be killed are influenced by bad information.





# Chapters Thirteen-Sixteen

## Chapters Thirteen-Sixteen Summary

In Chapter Thirteen, Duval and Ismae arrive at the inn where they are served supper. During the meal, both Ismae and Duval try to get information from the other that will answer their questions about Runnion. Duval begins to tell Ismae about Martel when a huge, ugly man enters the inn. Ismae believes at first he intends to do Duval harm but then realizes they are friends. The man is Sir Benebic of Waroch whom Ismae knows as the Beast. Another man, who is attractive but not mannerly, named de Lornay also travels with him. Duval escorts Ismae to her room intending to have time alone to talk to his friends but Ismae looks for a way to eavesdrop on them at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter Fourteen, Ismae listens in on the conversation between Duval, the Beast and de Lornay. Duval does not say anything to his friends that he has not already told Ismae. The next morning the group gets an early start and the Beast and de Lornay go on ahead. Duval and Ismae are not able to reach Guerande by the end of the day so they stop in La Roche Bernard to spend the night in the Baron Geffoy's chateau. Here, Ismae learns that Duval is the son of Madame Hivern, the late duke's mistress. He is a half-brother of the duchess.

In Chapter Fifteen, Ismae uses the time at dinner to make sense of what she has learned about Duval. She wonders why there is such animosity between Duval and his mother. She isn't sure if it is a matter of sibling rivalry or if he believes that she is trying to take another lover too soon after his father's death. Later that night, Ismae is woken by the sounds of Duval and Hivern arguing in the next room. She runs to Duval after she hears a door slam and glass break. He treats her crudely and she leaves. After they have ridden a short while the next morning, Duval apologizes to her for his behavior.

In Chapter Sixteen Duval and Ismae find the city of Guerande crowded with people who are there for the Estates Assembly. Ismae catches a glimpse of Sybella in the crowd and is glad her friend is alive. As Ismae and Duval try to make their way through the town, they are attacked by seven men. Ismae's horse is cut with a poisoned sword and Ismae must put her out of her misery. Duval fears that Ismae has been poisoned as well and takes her to his home to be cared for.

## Chapters Thirteen-Sixteen Analysis

So far, Ismae has not been able to gather any information about Duval that would prove him to be a traitor. Although she eavesdrops on the conversation between Duval and his friends, he does not tell them anything that he has not already told Ismae. What is disturbing to Ismae is learning that Madame Hivern is Duval's mother. She notices there is obvious animosity between Duval and his mother and wonders what has caused



these ill feelings. After Ismae goes to bed, she is awakened by Hivern and Duval fighting in Duval's room but is unable to tell what the argument is about.

When they are entering the city, Ismae gets a glimpse of her friend, Sybella. Duval and Ismae are also attacked by a band of men with poisoned weapons. They are able to take one of the men as a prisoner. Duval is noticeably concerned when Ismae's horse shows signs that it has been poisoned. Duval is not aware that Ismae is immune to poison. Ismae chooses not to tell him any differently.



# Chapters Seventeen-Twenty

## Chapters Seventeen-Twenty Summary

In Chapter Seventeen, on her first night in Duval's house, Duval spends time in Ismae's room to make their story that she is his mistress look real. The next morning when Ismae goes to find him, Duval is busy at his desk writing a letter. Duval lets Ismae know that he was correct in assuming that the meeting of the Estates was called without the duchess' knowledge. He tells her that while he will be going to have meetings with the duchess, she will be getting fitted for a dress and she should be studying the members of the royal family. He makes her wonder if the people at the convent have really prepared her for her assignment. He uses a chessboard to demonstrate the position in which Anne has been put. He says that in order for them to protect the duchess, they must get her married, and have her crowned. He asks if Ismae is one who will remain faithful to the duchess. She wonders to herself if he is faithful.

In Chapter Eighteen, although she doesn't let on, Ismae is impressed with the job that the maids have done on her dress. Duval also appears to be impressed with the change in Ismae. At court, he introduces her to Captain Dunios, Marshal Rieux, and the French envoy Gisors. Ismae also has the opportunity to meet Count d'Albert, the man to whom Anne's father has promised her in marriage.

In Chapter Nineteen, Duval takes Ismae to meet Anne. When he introduces her as a member of the convent of St. Mortain, Anne is interested to learn how the members of the convent learn who they are to kill. Although Ismae does not want to give out this information, especially with Duval present, she feels as if she has to because the duchess is asking.

In Chapter Twenty, Ismae has learned nothing during her time in the court. She hopes sleeping will clear her mind but Duval visits her room again. She falls asleep while he is still there and has a nightmare in which both Gullio and d'Albert try to rape her. She dreams that she stabs d'Albert with the knife but wakes to find that she has scratched Duval, who was trying to wake her from her nightmare, instead. His wound is not serious but the next morning Louyse believes that the blood on the sheets is a sign that Ismae and Duval have had intimate relations.

## Chapters Seventeen-Twenty Analysis

The theme of chess and chessboard is introduced in these chapters. In Chapter Seventeen, Duval uses these game pieces to visually explain to Ismae the predicament that his sister, the young duchess, is in. The white queen represents Anne while the white pieces gathered around her represent those whom Duval believes are her supporters. The black pieces represent those who work against Anne and Brittany.



Also in this section, Duval continues to spark a feeling in Ismae that she isn't as prepared as she believes that she could have been for the mission on which she has been sent. Duval has chided her for not recognizing him as a son of the duke, and make Ismae embarrassed when she referred to his mother as "the French whore," the name by which she was called at the convent. Instead of allowing her to accompany him to Anne's court on that day, he suggests that she spend time trying to learn the identities of the people with whom they will be dealing.

In Ismae's first day in Anne's court, she meets both Anne, who she finds intelligent, and d'Albret, a suitor whom she finds disgusting. As she sleeps, she dreams that she is being raped by Guillo and d'Albret, a sign that Ismae still feels threatened by men even though she has the means to kill them at her disposal. Duval is still in her room when she has the nightmare and she cuts him with a knife as she tries to fend off her attackers in her dream. She is surprised by the feelings that she has as the two of them sit close together as she tries to clean the scratch. The blood that is dripped on the sheets leads the maids to believe Duval has had sex with Ismae for the first time, breaking the hymen and causing the blood.

Ismae's meeting with d'Albret is also significant as she finds him disgusting and crude. When she has an opportunity to ask Duval why Anne's father promised her in marriage to this man, Duval tells her that he was desperate for forces to help protect the country and that d'Albret could provide them with the forces necessary. It is in this instance that Ismae realizes that although Anne is of royal lineage, she really has no more choice over her own life than Ismae did at one point. Ismae must remember her own arranged marriage and wonder how Anne must feel about the prospect of being married to a person as cruel and old as d'Albret.



# Chapters Twenty-one—Twenty-four

## Chapters Twenty-one—Twenty-four Summary

In Chapter Twenty-one, Duval informs Ismae that he has a private meeting and that she needs to find something to keep herself occupied for the morning. Instead, she follows him and eavesdrops on his meetings. She only hears him promise to meet the man's liege, but gets no other details of the meeting. As she is trying to get out of the palace without being seen, Ismae happens to run into Duval's mother. She speaks to the lady, hoping to learn some of the family's secrets. Duval's brother also joins them. It is in this company that Duval finds Ismae. Ismae believes he seems angry and perhaps a little afraid that she has been visiting with his family. He escorts her away quickly.

In Chapter Twenty-two, Duval walks with Ismae back to his home. When she arrives, the maids are busy unpacking her trunks, which have finally come from the convent. They have also sent a crow with a secret key to open a small locked trunk. This trunk is full of weapons and poisons. Two letters have also come from the convent. One tells that Sister Vereda has not yet determined who she is to kill. Another letter is from Annith. At court that evening, Duval is called to question his prisoner, who is finally awake. He leaves Ismae in the care of de Lornay, who seems to resent his duty as much as she resents being left in his care. She manages to break away from him and is accosted by the French envoy, who tells her that Duval and his mother are planning to usurp Anne's throne and put Francois in her place.

In Chapter Twenty-three, Ismae confronts Duval with her knowledge of his family's plan to take Anne's throne. He admits that he knows of the plan but that his mother is the one who came up with the idea and that he refused to be part of the plan. He convinces her that he does not think the plan a good one and wants his mother and brother to give up on the idea. She agrees to work with him. The next morning Duval and Ismae, with Beast and De Lornay ride into the country to attend Duval's secret meeting. They avoid a confrontation with men who appear to have followed them by pretending to be two lovers out on a leisurely picnic. After the men ride on, Ismae takes them on a back way to the church in St. Lyphard where the meeting is scheduled to take place.

In Chapter Twenty-four, Duval and Ismae enter the church at St. Lyphard under the guise that she is there to offer a sacrifice to Saint Amourna for true love. They meet with Fredric, Duke of Nemours. He makes a bid for Anne's hand in marriage, saying that his wife and son were killed in the plagues. He hopes to beat the French because they killed his father. He can offer only 3,000 troops, but is also aware what marrying d'Albert will hold in Anne's future. He adds the Queen of Navarre will send 1,500 pikemen as well. Ismae is pleased not only that this is a promise to the end of Anne's problems, but also that it will clear Duval's name of possible treason. Duval leads them through town on their way home. Even though Ismae sees her father working in his fields, she realizes that he is nothing to her.



## Chapters Twenty-one—Twenty-four Analysis

This section of chapters holds a difficult journey for Ismae, as she must travel with Duval back to her hometown. She does not believe that anyone will recognize her, and she is correct. No one expects the daughter of the turnip farmer to be in the company of nobles. As they ride out of the town, Ismae even sees her own father, the man who raised her, working in his fields. It is at this point that she realizes that man is nothing to her. Not only is her not her real father, but Ismae also finally realizes he no longer has control over her and her actions. She is free to be who she wants to be.

The tone of these chapters is a little lighter than the others as Ismae and Duval believe they have found a suitable suitor for Anne. This man can offer fewer troops than d'Albret, but they know that he will not turn the duchy over to the French because the French killed his father. Ismae and Duval also take part in a little role-play of their own as they adopt the pose of a man and his mistress out for a secret picnic in order to avoid spies who might have been sent to follow them. Ismae is embarrassed by the feelings she has for Duval while Duval pokes fun at her lack of acuity for this type of role-play.

It is also in this section of the novel that Ismae believes that she has learned from the French envoy information proving that Duval is, indeed, a traitor. The envoy tells her that Hivern has a plan to displace Anne and put Duval on the throne. When Ismae confronts Duval with this information, she is surprised that he admits so easily that he knows about the scheme. His mother had approached him with the idea, but he refused to be part of the plan. For this reason, his mother has been angry with him, and has teamed up with Francois instead.

It is after learning that Duval has not agreed to work with his mother against Anne that Ismae agrees to work with Duval to help that Anne is assured the throne. Ismae takes a great risk in committing herself to Duval in this way as it has not been approved or commanded by the convent. It is at this point, however, that Ismae has begun to weigh the facts and evidence that Duval is not the traitor that the convent believes that he is, and think for herself.



# Chapters Twenty-five—Twenty-eight

## Chapters Twenty-five—Twenty-eight Summary

On their way back in Chapter Twenty-five, Ismae and Duval are met by a messenger who tells them that their prisoner, one of the men who attacked them, has escaped. They go to the cell where he is held and Duval asks how it happened. Ismae, however, realizes that the man was killed in the cell and did not escape alive. Duval asks for a list of names of the people who have visited the man in his cell, then he and Ismae go to tell the duchess what they have learned from Fredric. He advises his sister that her best course of action on other suitors is to claim that it is too soon after her father's death to think of marriage. Ismae is surprised that even though she is a duchess, Anne has little say in her future.

In Chapter Twenty-six, the meeting takes place and though Anne argues her plea for more time, d'Albert is as firm in his insistence that they marry quickly. He tells the court that if he is not given Anne's hand willingly, her will take it by force. Before this assertion, the French envoy had spoken to those gathered telling them to remember the Treaty of Verger which indicates that Anne cannot marry unless France has approved the union. After the meeting Chancellor Crunard calls for Ismae to ask her if she has learned anything of Duval's intentions. She does not tell what she knows about a possible new suitor on the horizon for Anne even though Crunard tells her that Duval has once broken an oath that he made to his own saint. At the conclusion of the chapter, Anne believes that it is time for Anne to meet Nemours.

In Chapter Twenty-seven, Ismae takes Anne to meet her new suitor. As they talk, Ismae gets the feeling that the two of them are well suited for one another. After they meet, Ismae decides that she must find some way to determine if there is a hidden marque on d'Albert. She enters his room pretending to have come to him because she is left alone too often by Duval. Just as d'Albert puts his hand on her in his attempt to make a move, Duval bursts through the door and rescues her. She is angry with him for interfering but at the same time happy to be away from d'Albert. He tells her that the betrothal between Anne and Fredrick must be put before the Privy Council for approval. When Duval leaves Anne alone in her room, she prays that she is not falling in love with him.

In Chapter Twenty-eight, a meeting is held with the Privy Council concerning Anne's betrothal to Nemours. Rieux and Madame Dinan both vote against the union. The others appear to be in favor. Before the meeting completely ends, someone enters the room in which Anne is both guarding and eavesdropping on the meeting. The intruder uses the door to slam her against the wall then runs. She can not get a good look at the man and is unable to catch up to him as he jumps out a window and runs away.

Later, Ismae and Francois flirt with one another as they play chess. Ismae also tries to glean information from Francois and learns that he had admired his brother deeply until Duval had been distracted by his duties to Anne. Duval interrupts the game to ask



Ismae if she has had any instructions from the convent without mentioning to him. When she asks him what he is talking about, he offers to show her.

## Chapters Twenty-five—Twenty-eight Analysis

The tone of this portion of the novel darkens when Ismae and Duval learn that the man who attacked them, and whom they had taken prisoner, has escaped. Ismae asks to see his prison cell and can tell that the man did not leave the cell alive. Duval had hoped to question the man about who had sent him to attack them. Since the only living attacker is now dead and that death covered up, it makes their attack seem even more suspicious that it was planned by a person working against Anne.

Also in this section of the novel, Anne tries to bide for more time before having to commit to a suitor by telling her court that it is too soon after her father's death for her to think of getting married. D'Albret is obviously angered by this attempt to postpone and threatens to use force against Brittany to get what he wants. After d'Albret's outburst, Crunard invites Ismae to meet with him. Although he doesn't discourage Ismae from seeing if d'Albret has a *marque*, his questioning also seems to be leading Ismae to give away some incriminating information about Duval. It seems that he is unwilling to think that Duval is anything but a traitor.





# Chapters Twenty-nine — Thirty-two

## Chapters Twenty-nine — Thirty-two Summary

In Chapter Twenty-nine, Duval takes Anne to the private chambers where Nemour's crumpled body is laying on the flagstones of the courtyard about two stories below his window. He is dead. Since no one but the members of the Privy Council know of Nemour's existence, they assume that one of them must have been responsible. Ismae connects with Nemour's soul to try to determine his last thoughts. He is grieved by being overtaken, but more grieved that he is leaving Anne alone. Through his spirit, Ismae learns that Nemour was pushed from behind, but that he did not see his murderer.

In Chapter Thirty, Duval has joined the other men on the planned hunt because he feels no need to make a big ordeal over what has happened to Nemour, since no one knew who he was. Ismae seeks out where the man lays and is about to release his soul when she is interrupted by d'Albret who has come out of curiosity. He questions Ismae why she is there but the two are interrupted by Anne and her governess before he can question her further. Anne asks to be left alone with Ismae and when she learns what Ismae was about to do, she gives her permission to continue. Once she is alone with Nemour's body, she sets his soul free. He begs only that she protect Anne.

In Chapter Thirty-one, Ismae is drawn to Nemour's rooms. Once inside, she sees one of his guards. The man has a marque on his forehead. Ismae tries to question him before she kills him but he will tell her nothing, only lunges at her. After she has killed the first man, she is attacked by another whom she kills in self-defense. Through her communication with the souls, she learns that the man killed Nemour because his wife and child were being held captive. He was also paid for the job. She meets Duval and he realizes she has been injured. He takes her to his rooms in the palace where he intends to care for her wounds.

In Chapter Thirty-two, when Duval takes Ismae to his rooms to clean her wound, she realizes that he will see her scar. She tries to avoid this occurrence, afraid that he will make fun of her, scorn her or even treat her as Gullio did. He reminds her that if the wound does not heal properly, she might lose the use of her arm, making her useless to Mortain. Duval traces her scar tenderly when he sees it and asks what it is from. He stitches her wound and to Ismae's surprise, he kisses her. A knock at the door interrupts them. After he speaks to the visitor, Duval goes for Ismae's clothes and helps her dress. The two talk briefly of Anne's options now that Nemour is dead and decide the Holy Roman Emperor is the next best choice. Duval arranges for her to eat in her room instead of with the rest of the court. He comes to check on her later that evening but decides it is best for him not to stay the night.



## Chapters Twenty-nine — Thirty-two Analysis

The tone of the novel turns even darker when Duval discovers that Nemour has been killed. Since the only people who knew that Nemour was in the castle were the members of Anne's Privy Council, Duval and Ismae wonder who it is that might have killed him. Ismae tries to connect with his soul, but Nemour was pushed from behind and has no idea who was responsible for his death. He is, however, grieved that he is leaving Anne alone. He begs Ismae to protect her. Later in Nemour's rooms, Ismae kills two men whom she finds there. One of the men is the one responsible for killing Nemour. Unfortunately, he does not have information about who ordered the killing. He only followed orders because his wife and son were being held captive.

It is also in this section of the novel that the relationship between Ismae and Duval deepens. She suffers a deep cut on her back which requires stitching. Although Duval is the only one who knows it was she who killed the men, she does not want to let him see the scar because she is afraid that he will reject her or even hurt her like all the others before have done. Instead of being repulsed, however, Duval seems to pity Ismae. He tells her there is no shame in her scar, words that break down any final hope of a defense against her feelings for him. When Ismae turns to face Duval she sees tenderness on his face. Duval kisses her and she finds herself responding to his kiss.

When they meet later in Duval's study, Duval again returns to the chessboard to decide what the next move should be. Now that Nemours is dead, they must start back at square one searching for a suitable suitor. They decide their next move should be to confer with the Holy Roman Emperor. After Duval leaves, Ismae takes the opportunity to search his rooms. It doesn't surprise her when she finds nothing that would identify him as the traitor.



# Chapters Thirty-three — Thirty-six

## Chapters Thirty-three — Thirty-six Summary

In Chapter Thirty-three, Ismae is to spend the day sewing with the duchess and her crew as Duval goes again with the men to hunt. Madame Dinan tries to encourage Anne not to spend time with Ismae, but Anne will not listen to her. They talk of the coming Advent festivities, then Madam Dinan brings up d'Albret. Anne tells her again that she will not agree to a meeting with him nor will she marry him. Madam Dinan leaves the room and Anne indicates that Ismae should follow her. Ismae follows Dinan to a room where she speaks to d'Albret. She learns that Dinan is campaigning for the marriage between her half brother and Anne. Rieux also is in support of the union, Ismae learns. As she is returning to Anne, Ismae meets Sybella in the halls. Sybella looks thinner and has the look of madness in her eyes. She warns Ismae to trust no one.

Back in her room that night, Duval and Ismae briefly discuss what is happening between them. They both agree that where they are in their lives, they cannot be with one another. They leave the situation with the wish that one day, they will be able to love each other.

In Chapter Thirty-four, Ismae is to sit with Isabeau while Anne attends her meeting with the Privy Council. While she is with the child, she gives her a couple of drops of a poison that she knows will help her rest with a small dose. Anne and Duval are both angry when they return from the meeting. Madame Dinan has found a written contract of marriage between d'Albret and Anne that Anne has supposedly signed. The council members would not even consider the option that the Holy Roman Emperor offered. They are angry at Duval for not having protected Nemour's better and blame him for his death. At the conclusion of the chapter Duval vows that the only way that d'Albret will have Anne is over his dead body.

In Chapter Thirty-five, Ismae tries to visit Anne in her chambers but Madame Dinan tells her that Isabeau has taken a turn for the worse and will not allow her in. Later that day, Ismae gets a note from Sybella asking for a meeting. When Ismae heads for the place, she meets Madame Dinan who is trying to detain her from entering the hallway. Ismae goes ahead and finds d'Albret and Anne together alone. He is fumbling at her skirts. Ismae takes charge of the situation, pulling her knives on the man. She slices the front of his shirt, seeking a marque but does not find one. She orders both he and Madame Dinan away from Anne.

Once back in Anne's rooms, Anne sends her servants away and requests a bath. Ismae assists her. After they are finished, she calls Duval to tell him what has happened. He is angry but tells them they cannot spread the word that the duchess has been attacked by d'Albret as this will call her own virtue into question.



In Chapter Thirty-six, Ismae receives a letter from Annith telling her that Sister Vereda has been sick. The sisters want to put Annith in her place, an idea that Annith despises. After she reads the letter, Ismae prepares for a meeting with the duchess and barons. During this meeting, Anne openly rescinds the marriage agreement between herself and d'Albret. Both d'Albret and Madame Dinan leave the meeting angry.

## Chapters Thirty-three — Thirty-six Analysis

Conditions in Anne's court become even more dire as certain members, Madame Dinan specifically, continues to push Anne to agree to marry d'Albret. Madame Dinan has come up with a betrothal agreement that she claims Anne has signed even though Anne has no memory of this action. To make matters worse, Madame Dinan sets Anne up so that she is forced to meet alone with d'Albret, a meeting that Anne has refused in the past. Luckily, Sybella was able to get a note to Ismae requesting a meeting that put Ismae in the hallway just in time to witness d'Albret groping Anne. Ismae approaches d'Albret with her knives pulled, an action that leads d'Albret to realize that she is not an ordinary mistress. Ismae also slices d'Albret's shirt, hoping to see a marque on him.

Ismae's actions seem to have the effect of bonding her completely to Anne. Anne orders all of her servants out of her room and requests a bath. Knowing that the young duchess has never had to bathe alone, Ismae assists her. It is this action, this kindness on Ismae's part that shows Anne that she will support her and do what is needed to aid her. Ismae also understands Anne's desire to get the feeling of d'Albret's hands off of her as Ismae feels the same way as Anne does about d'Albret.

Anne further angers her Privy Council by formally denouncing the betrothal agreement between herself and d'Albret. When Duval tells them that he has started negotiations with the Holy Roman Emperor, the council will not even consider this as an option. In fact they blame Duval for Nemours' death because Duval did not have the man properly guarded.



# Chapters Thirty-seven — Forty

## Chapters Thirty-seven — Forty Summary

In Chapter Thirty-seven, the court prepares for a festive Christmas feast complete with entertainment. Ismae senses desperation and betrayal in the crowd. When the entertainers enter, Ismae notices them getting too near the main table where the duchess sits. Just as a hellequin jumps onto the table, brandishing a knife, Ismae takes a shot and kills the man. In the midst of the following pandemonium, Anne and Isabeau are taken back to their rooms. Chancellor Crunard orders all of them to meet in Anne's chambers. Ismae wonders who is behind the assassination attempt, d'Albret or another enemy.

In Chapter Thirty-eight, when the others learn who Ismae is, they ask her to leave their meeting. She and Duval go to the body of the dead hellequin. Ismae is able to connect with no soul in the man's body, only the chill of death and wonders if this is because she has acted out of accord with Mortain's will. Meanwhile, the council asks Duval to leave or be imprisoned, believing that he is a bad influence on Anne and her decisions. Duval chooses not to leave, but to hide in the secret passages and walls of the palace. Ismae wonders who in the game is lying and who is being truthful.

In Chapter Thirty-nine, Ismae searches Madame Dinan and Marshal Rieux's rooms hoping to find some proof that they are traitors. She does not and decides to move on to Chancellor Crunard's room. He is in the room with another man. They are near the door, about to leave, so Ismae knocks quickly. She makes up an excuse of asking Crunard if he has seen Duval. She notices he has been meeting with the French envoy. When she returns to her room, Ismae has a letter from the convent. The reverend mother is asking her to kill Madame Hivern.

In Chapter Forty, Ismae finds herself stressing over the best way to kill Duval's mother. The prior evening she had pretended to be asleep when he entered her room so that she would not have to tell him of her orders. Ismae decides the poisoned candles are the best way to go about killing Duval's mother.

## Chapters Thirty-seven — Forty Analysis

Order in Anne's court continues to diminish even further as there is an assassination attempt on Anne. Ismae kills the man who pulls the knife on the duchess. This public killing gives away Ismae's identity to the entire court. The Privy Council chooses to keep her out of their meetings. At one of these secret meetings the Privy Council accuses Duval of being a bad influence on Anne. He is told to leave or be imprisoned. Duval's loyalty to his sister will not allow him to leave in order to save himself. He instead hides out in the secret passages of the castle. Ismae sneaks him food and keeps him apprised of what is happening.



Meanwhile, Ismae has finally gotten the orders from the convent for which she has been waiting. She is ordered to kill Madam Hivern, Duval's mother. Although Ismae is aware of the small threat that Hivern brings to Anne, she does not seem to completely believe that Hivern is capable of doing all of the mischief that has taken place so far.

Since she has been kicked out of the Privy Council meetings, Ismae takes this time to search the rooms of the members. Madame Dinan and Rieux's rooms are clean. When Ismae goes to search Crunard's room, however, she catches him in a meeting with the French envoy.



# Chapters Forty-one — Forty-four

## Chapters Forty-one — Forty-four Summary

In Chapter Forty-one, Ismae begins her commanded murder of Hivern but as she talks about her life and her children, Ismae begins to feel a sympathy toward the woman. She realizes that the two of them are very much alike. It is when Hivern begs for Francois' life that Ismae realizes that she cannot kill her. She puts out the candle meant to kill Hivern and makes her walk to run the poison from her body. She tells Hivern that if she and Francois will appear before the duchess and swear loyalty, she will allow them to live.

In Chapter Forty-two, Ismae tells Duval of the marque against his mother and her plan to let the woman make retribution for her sin. The plan works, Ismae believes, because as Hivern and Francois make their oaths, the marque disappears from her mouth and throat. When Ismae returns to her room, however, Vanth is there with a message for her. The reverend mother is upset because she has not killed Hivern. Crunard has also led the mother to believe that it is Duval who is acting as a spy from the French and who planned the assassination attempt on the duchess. It is requested that Ismae kill Duval, then return to the convent.

In Chapter Forty-three, Ismae searches her mind for information of Duval that she might have missed or misunderstood. She cannot think of any. She tries to pray to Mortain, but cannot hear his voice. She is certain that the convent has made a mistake. When Duval comes in from the secret passages, he picks her up and whirls her around telling her that the deal is complete with the Holy Roman Emperor. He kisses her and Ismae tastes poison on him. Although she searches his clothes, she cannot find any place that the poison might have been placed. Although she doesn't tell Duval, she knows that he will die if she doesn't determine what is being used to poison him.

In Chapter Forty-four, Ismae goes to visit the herb witch in the hopes that the old lady can give her an antidote for Duval's poison. She has not antidote, but does tell Ismae about her mother. It turns out that it was Ismae's earthly father who wanted Ismae aborted while her mother did not. Ismae suddenly realizes that the things her mother did that she had once interpreted as dislike for her were actually done because she cared. It was upon her request for the herb witch to watch over Ismae that caused the witch to have Ismae taken to the convent.

When she returns to her room, Sybella's crow has come to her with a message. Sybella has written that Rieux and d'Albret have taken over the duchess's palace at Nantes, a besiegement from within. The only good information that Ismae is able to take away from this note is that she is now sure that Crunard is the traitor.



## Chapters Forty-one — Forty-four Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Ismae's worst nightmare comes true. Because of information given to her by Crunard, the Reverend Mother insists that Ismae must kill Duval. She knows that she is not able to do so. Her desire not to have to kill Duval is put on the back burner when Duval comes in from the passages of the castle and she realizes that he has been poisoned. She tries to think who might be poisoning Duval and what they might be using to poison him. Ismae is afraid to seek an antidote for Duval from the convent as she is afraid she has already made the Reverend Mother angry because she did not kill Hivern as she was asked.

When Ismae talks with Madame Hivern as she tries to poison her with the night whispers candles, Ismae realizes that they are more alike than what she had ever imagined. Ismae wonders if she had stayed with Guillo and had children if she would have wound up like Hivern. She decides to give Hivern a chance to repent of her treachery against Anne and resolve her ways. Ismae is relieved when she sees the marquis disappear from Hivern's face and neck when she pledges allegiance to Anne. The Reverend Mother only understands that Ismae did not follow orders, a mistake for which she wants Ismae to make retribution by killing Duval.

It is also in this section of the novel that Ismae gets information from the herbwitch that is contradictory to what she had always believed. Ismae had always assumed that her mother was the one who wanted to abort her. She learns from the herbwitch that it was actually her father who insisted that Ismae be aborted. Knowing this new information, Ismae is now able to view her relationship with her mother in a different light. She now realizes that the things her mother did were an attempt to help her and protect her.





# Chapters Forty-five — Forty-eight

## Chapters Forty-five — Forty-eight Summary

In Chapter Forty-five, Ismae gathers Crunard, Captain Dunios and Anne to tell them about the news that Marshal Rieux and d'Albret have overtaken Nantes. Although both Rieux and Anne believe that Beast, with a group of peasants and farmers could hold off any attack until forces can arrive from the Holy Roman Emperor, Crunard is against the idea. Ismae wants to discourage the group from doing anything that Crunard suggests. When Duval enters Ismae's room that evening, he is obviously worse from his poison. Ismae makes him eat before telling him the news. After a good night's sleep, Duval seems better. Since she knows that Crunard will be meeting with the Privy Council that morning, she decides to try to search his room.

In Chapter Forty-six, Ismae finds a gold signet ring locked up in Crunard's office. It is the same ring that she saw in the images when she communicated with Martel's soul. This find leads Ismae to believe it is indeed Crunard who has been working with the French. Later, at the Privy Council meeting, the group is discussion the possibility that the duchess needs to be moved to a better fortified area, de Lornay enters the room and tells them that the cities of Ancenis, Vitre, and Fougeres have been taken by the French as well as Guingamp in the north. Captain Dunois suggests that they try to bargain with Marshal Rieux. Although Crunard is against the idea, Anne and a small party prepare to make the trip to Nantes the following day.

In Chapter Forty-seven, Duval does not come into Ismae's room when she had expected him. She gets Beast and de Lornay to join her in the hidden passages of the castle to find him. His legs have become numb from the poison he is being given. While he eats, Ismae tells him of the new information in the country's status. He is afraid the duchess and her party will be walking into a trap and insists that Ismae go with the group to protect her. As she fears that Duval is dying, Ismae lays with him in her bed as he sleeps.

In Chapter Forty-eight, the group leaves for Nantes. Crunard is not going with them. He has decided instead to stay with Isabeau who has taken a turn for the worse. Ismae is concerned that Crunard is being left unattended with Duval and Isabeau but Beast assures her that he believes that Crunard will not hurt Isabeau and that there is nothing more that he can do to harm Duval.

## Chapters Forty-five — Forty-eight Analysis

Ismae finally finds what she sees as concrete evidence that points to Crunard as traitor. When she finally has the opportunity to search his room, she finds the gold signet ring that she remembers from Martel's soul. In addition, Ismae suspects that Crunard is the



one who is poisoning Duval because he had access to her trunklet of poisons before it was delivered to her.

In a last ditch effort to save Anne's duchy, Anne, Ismae and a group of knights and advisors ride to Nantes to try to bargain with Rieux. Ismae almost backs out of the trip when she learns that Crunard has decided to stay behind with Isabeau. Ismae is afraid that Crunard will take this opportunity to kill Duval. Beast encourages Isabeau to go with Anne and her group because it is what Duval would want her to do.



# Chapters Forty-nine — Fifty-two

## Chapters Forty-nine — Fifty-two Summary

In Chapter Forty-nine, the group reaches the village of Paquelaie after riding two days. Ismae gets the duchess settled in, then goes to Dunois to tell him of her suspicions about Crunard. Dunois is shocked when he learns that Duval is being poisoned. Dunois tells Ismae that they cannot return to Guerande if the purpose of their trip were to fail. Ismae promises Dunois that if makes their trip successful, she will find some way to get Isabeau away from Crunard.

In Chapter Fifty, the following day is Sunday. As Ismae thinks of all the things that have passed, she escapes outside with her thoughts. The duchess follows her. As she and Ismae look over the city of Nantes, Anne tells Ismae that she was born there. She describes how her father held her up on the ramparts so she could see her kingdom. She also points out the gate through which Duval took her and Isabeau when he took them out of the city to safety. She asks Ismae why Duval has not come with them now, and Ismae feels compelled to tell her about the poison. She also tells Anne that she suspects that it is Curnard who is doing the poisoning.

On the following day, Marshal Rieux will not speak with de Lornay but insists on talking to Anne in person. Although they are afraid that d'Albret and Rieux have something planned, the group agrees to the meeting. When Rieux tells Anne he will not let her in the city with her full armoured guard, Anne tells him that the French have taken Ancenis. He sends men to check out this claim. As Dunois and Rieux continue to talk, Ismae gets an urge from Mortain to look at the top of the ramparts of the keep. Sybella is there making motions with her hands as if she is scattering something. As Ismae looks down to determine what Sybella is indicating, she notices two columns of d'Albret's troops leaving the castle. Sybella is warning them to flee.

In Chapter Fifty-one, Beast and de Lornay are ordered to lead the forces against the ambush as Anne is taken away from the fighting. Before they leave, Beast gives her a kiss which he tells her is from Duval. Ismae knows that neither he nor de Lornay will be coming back. As Ismae and the others ride away from the battle, they are met by forces riding in the opposite direction. The reinforcement troops from Rennes have arrived to help on the battlefield. Francois is with them. He tells Ismae that it was Gavriel's idea to send the troops.

Anne asks Ismae to go back to look for de Lornay and Beast. She finds de Lornay and frees his soul. Beast, however, was taken inside the city. As Ismae realizes that she can use her powers for more than just punishing people, she goes about the battlefield releasing the souls of the injured soldiers. She realizes that she is being watched. It is her father, Death, who is watching her. As he kisses her, she realizes that he is pleased with her. She realizes that he does not expect her to be completely obedient as the



Reverend Mother did. She realizes that all she must do is serve Death with her whole life.

In Chapter Fifty-two, Ismae rides back to the castle. She finds Duval where he has collapsed in the passages of the castle and makes love to him, pulling the poison from him. After they have finished and Duval regains his strength, Ismae remembers Isabeau. Duval tells her that the child is safe. They share their news with one another and then Duval heads for Crunard's rooms.

## Chapters Forty-nine — Fifty-two Analysis

The theme of religion resurfaces in this section of novel as Ismae comes in contact with her real father. While the nuns told her that the whole of her religion was dependent up her willing to be completely obedient and unquestioning. Ismae holds guilt because she is afraid that she has angered the Reverend Mother and distanced herself from her father. When her father kisses her, though, Ismae realizes that he does not expect this complete obedience to his will. He wants her to serve him, but also realizes that she has free will to make her own choices and decisions.

The theme of chess resurfaces again as Dunois uses the term "gambit" to describe what they will be doing in Nantes. A gambit is a move in chess where one chess piece is sacrificed in order to save another. Here, it is Duval who is being sacrificed in order to save Anne.



# Chapters Fifty-three — Fifty-four

## Chapters Fifty-three — Fifty-four Summary

In Chapter Fifty-three, Ismae stands in the passageway and listens as Crunard tells Duval that he betrayed the family because he believed that he would be able to get his son back. The second time that Crunard suggests they finish their chess game, Ismae steps out and keeps Duval from touching the poisoned pieces. Although she wants to kill Crunard, she remembers the mercy that her father has shown her and remembers that she has sworn to not kill anymore out of vengeance. She does, however, use her crossbow to knock him out.

Ismae and Duval take three days to ride and meet the forces at Rennes. They enjoy the time alone together. On the last day, Duval asks Ismae if she would marry him if he asked. She tells him she is not sure, but that she needs to speak to the Reverend Mother first. She does tell Duval that she no longer trusts the integrity of the orders the convent gives.

In Chapter Fifty-four, Anne, Isabeau and Duval have a joyful reunion at the old abbey of Saint Brigantia. Ismae is surprised to find the Reverend Mother waiting for her in the room in which she has been assigned to stay. Ismae tries to tell the Reverend Mother what she has learned of the marques but the Reverend Mother is offended by Ismae's attempt to share information. The Reverend Mother also appears to be upset that Ismae has come face to face with death, an honor that the Reverend Mother has never had. The Reverend Mother tells Ismae that she will not be allowed to take her final vows.

On the day that the duchess is crowned, Duval pledges his love to Ismae. He tells her that even if she never decides to marry him, that he is pledging his heart to her for eternity.

## Chapters Fifty-three — Fifty-four Analysis

Although Ismae desperately wants to kill Cunard for what he has done to all of them, she remembers her vow to no longer kill out of vengeance. Just as believers in Christian religions believe that God has shown them mercy and forgiven them, Ismae believes that her god, her father has forgiven her and shown her mercy. She follows her vow to show others that same mercy.



# Characters

## Ismae Rienne

Ismae Rienne is the heroine of the novel. She is the daughter of Death, a lineage that is proved by the scar on her back caused by a poison intended to abort her while still in her mother's womb. Because of the hate that has been shown to her all of her life, Ismae believes that she will fit in well at the abbey of St. Mortain. She believes that she will be able to kill anyone that she is asked to kill until she gets to know and learns to love those with whom she is working. In direct disobedience to the abbess, Ismae teams up with Gavriel Duval, half-brother of the duchess, to help protect her from some traitor that they fear is in the midst of her most personal advisors. Ismae does not believe the reports from the abbey that indicate that it is Duval who is putting the duchess in danger. She instead chooses to follow her own heart and her own instincts to learn that it is actually Chancellor Crunard who is the traitor in Anne's court.

It is after the battle scene at Nantes that Ismae realizes her own calling. She has been sent back to the battlefield by Anne to look for Beast and de Lornay. It is as she frees de Lornay's soul from his body that she realizes that she can be a giver of mercy as well as a giver of vengeance. She works her way through the rest of the downed soldiers, freeing their souls and sending them to their own peace. It is at this point that Ismae sees her father standing in the shadows watching her. As he kisses her, she realizes that while she may have disobeyed the orders the convent gave her, she has not disobeyed her father. It is also from this interaction with her father that Ismae realizes how she can cure Duval of the poisoning.

At the conclusion of the novel, Ismae and Duval work together to see that the duchess is crowned and the fate of Brittany secured. They also realize that they love one another. Duval realizes that Ismae is not ready to give him a full commitment. She has still not decided if she will return to the convent or not, but he tells her that whenever she is ready, his heart is hers.

## Gavriel Duval aka Herve

Gavriel Duval is the half-brother of Anne. He is the son of the duke and his mistress Madame Hivern. Although others try to peg him as the traitor in Anne's court, Duval has his sister's best interests through all of his actions. The first of Duval's actions that is called under question is a vow that he broke years in the past. Ismae learns, though, that Duval broke his vow so that he could save Anne and Isabeau from their home and take them to safety. While Ismae is trying to determine if Duval is a traitor, he causes her to think about the consequences of her blind loyalty to the convent. It is Duval who helps Ismae to realize that human judgment can be wrong. Although he doesn't realize it, it is this independent thinking that Duval instills in Ismae that helps to save his life.



Ismae learns that when Anne was born, their father put Duval in charge of taking care of and protecting Anne. To this point, Duval has done his best to fulfill his charge. It is for this reason that Duval refuses his mother's plan to overthrow Anne and put him on the throne as duke instead. Even after he had been threatened with arrest, Duval continues to work for his sister's cause. He arranges a marriage with the Holy Roman emperor which Anne not only finds more palatable than her marriage to d'Albret but will also aid the duchy of Brittany with needed troops.

In an attempt to keep Duval from taking care of his sister, Crunard has been poisoning Duval through a substance smeared on the chess pieces that Duval has used to represent Anne, her enemies and those loyal to her. Duval does not die because Ismae realizes that she is able to draw the poison from him. At the conclusion of the novel, Duval pledges his heart to Ismae even if she never decides to marry him.

## Chancellor Crunard

Chancellor Crunard turns out to be the traitor in Anne's court. He had believed that all four of his sons had been killed in battle but had recently learned that one of them was still alive. Crunard had been told that if he would hand Anne over to the French, he would get his son back in return. It is in the conclusion of the novel that Ismae realizes that it is Crunard who has stolen poison from her stash and is using this poison to slowly kill Duval.

Crunard also works with Ismae's convent as a liaison between the nuns and the outside world. Because of this connection, it is easy for him to give the Reverend Mother incorrect and leading information about what is happening in Anne's court. It is based upon information supplied by Crunard that both men who were working for Duval were killed by Ismae. It is also because of false information given to the convent about Duval that the Reverend Mother sends order for Ismae to kill Duval.

On Ismae's second assignment, Crunard serves as her escort to the party where she is to meet the man whom she will kill. Crunard also goes with Duval and Ismae to Anne's court. Ismae's suspicion of Crunard being the traitor in Anne's court is backed by solid evidence when she finds the signet ring that she got an image of during her visit with Martel's soul in Crunard's things.

## Raoul de Lornay

Raoul de Lornay is one of Duval's friends and a knight whom Ismae does not like at all the first time that she meets him. She describes him as being the most beautiful man she has ever met but as having no manners. De Lornay is not shy in telling Duval how flimsy that he believes the lie about Ismae being his cousin is. De Lornay also accompanies Duval and Ismae on their trip to the church in St. Lyphard. Ismae learns from Anne that De Lornay was with Duval when he took Anne and Isabeau out of their nursery before the French could get to them. When Duval is being poisoned and has not come out of the secret passages of the castle as Ismae had anticipated, de Lornay



is one of the men whom she calls to help her find him. When de Lornay first learns that Duval has been being poisoned, he suspects that it is Ismae who has poisoned him. De Lornay is the knight sent to try to bargain with Rieux and d'Albret at Nantes. De Lornay is killed when the group is ambushed a short time later. Ismae goes back to the battlefield, realizing for the first time how much she had learned to care for de Lornay. As he lays dying, de Lornay tells Ismae he had not wanted her around because he was afraid that she would hurt Duval. De Lornay asks Ismae to kill him, but instead she uses Mortain's dagger to set his soul free.

## Madame Antoinette Hivern

Madame Antoinette Hivern is the mother of Francois and Gavriel by the duke. She is described as being beautiful and elegant. Ismae had been taught to reference her as "the French whore" while at the convent. Hivern has concocted a plan to put one of her sons on the Brittany throne as duke. When Duval refuses to go along with his mother's plan, she decides to work with Francois instead. Hivern is one of the people whom the Reverend Mother insists must be killed because of her threat the Anne's throne. On the night that Ismae is to kill Hivern, Hivern tells her the Duval is indeed smitten with Ismae even though Ismae claims their relationship is only a working one. Although Hivern does not appear to be afraid to die, she does not want Ismae to kill Francois. She speaks of the way that her life has been ruined by men who wanted her for nothing but pleasure. She feels that she has had no choices over her life, not even over her children. She tries to explain to Ismae that everything that she has done, has been to done assure respect and a future for her children. Ismae allows Hivern to live when she promises that she and Francois will declare their loyalty to Anne.

## Anne

Anne is the daughter of Duke Francis II. She is the heir to the duchy of Brittany. She is sister to Isabeau and half-sister to Duval and Francois. Anne is at the center of all of the controversy in the novel. While the people of Brittany want to keep their independence from France, the monarchy of France wants to make Anne their ward so that they can determine who she should marry. At the same time, Anne's late father has signed the Treaty of Verger that disallows Anne to marry unless France approves of her husband. If France does approve of her choice, however, the treaty states that Anne will be allowed to keep her duchy. Anne has been promised to a number of suitors including d'Albret. It is d'Albret who pushes his case the hardest and whom Anne wants to marry the least. Until Anne is married and crowned as duchess of Brittany, the area remains vulnerable to France.

## Sybella

Sybella is another initiate who enters the convent at about the same time that Ismae does. When Sybella first joins the convent, she appears to be crazy. Ismae is one of the





ones who helps to calm Sybella down the first day that she arrives at the convent. When Ismae is working in Anne's courts, it appears that Sybella has been assigned to work with d'Albret. Ismae sees Sybella that first day she is in Guerande. She sees her again in the hallway of the castle where Sybella warns her not to trust anyone. Sybella also sends Ismae asking her to meet her in the hallway again. When Ismae goes to the indicated place, she finds that d'Albret is attempting to molest the duchess. The final time that Sybella appears in the novel is when she appears on the ramparts and motions to Ismae that she, the duchess and their men need to flee.

## **Madame Dinan**

Madame Dinan is Anne's governess and d'Albret's half-brother. She is part of Anne's Privy Counsel. Although Anne has made it clear that she does not want to marry d'Albret, Madame Dinan continues to push her brother on the young girl. It is believed that Madame Dinan called the Estate meeting even without Anne's permission. Madame Dinan seems to take an immediate dislike to Ismae and at one point forbids her from spending time in Anne's chambers. Madame Dinan sets Anne up one day in the hallway of the castle as she leaves the duchess alone with d'Albret. It is also Madame Dinan who brings to the Privy Counsel a betrothal agreement between her brother and Anne. Anne, however, has no memory of signing this document.

## **The Abbess of St. Mortain Etienne de Froissard**

The abbess of St. Mortain is the lady who first interviews Ismae about the possibility of her joining the convent. It is the abbess who realizes that Ismae is immune to poison. The abbess is most often called the Reverend Mother. She has high hopes for Ismae when she first enters the convent. During Ismae's third assignment when Ismae does not follow commands as the Reverend Mother gives them, she becomes angry with Ismae. She tells Ismae she will not be allowed to take her final vows. When Ismae tries to share the information that she has learned from her short experience, the Reverend Mother becomes angry with her. She also seems upset because Ismae has seen Death face to face, an honor that she has never had.

## **The Herbwitch**

It is to the same herbwitch who gave Ismae's mother poison in an attempt to abort Ismae that Ismae goes to for help in saving Duval. Although the woman does not have what Ismae needs to save Duval, the lady does give her some valuable information about her mother. Ismae learns that it was not her mother who wanted her killed but her father. The herbwitch tells Ismae that her mother did everything possible to protect Ismae including asking the herbwitch to watch over her. It is also this herbwitch who sent Ismae to the convent soon after her marriage to Guillo in an attempt to protect her.



## Captain Dunois

Ismae feels Captain Dunois, who is the captain of the Breton army as well as a member of the Privy Counsel, is a person whom she can trust when she originally meets him. As a member of the counsel, Dunois seems to be interested in Anne's marriage not only because of what it will mean for their country, but also what the union could mean to Anne. He does not want to see Anne married to d'Albret but tells her that she must come up with a suitor who can provide forces to protect their country. When Ismae kills the hellequin, Dunois admires her shooting ability.

## Martel

Martel is the second man that Ismae is assigned to kill. Martel's soul is the first one with whom she comes in contact. She sees in the flashes of memory from his soul the signet ring that she later finds in Crunard's things, connecting that man to the treachery that is affecting Anne's court. Later, when Ismae and Duval find Martel's body, Ismae tries to communicate with him again in an attempt to discover for whom he was working. Duval tells Ismae that he was interested in Martel because he believed the man could have been persuaded to tell the identity of the traitor in Anne's court.

## Guillo

Guillo is the pig farmer to whom Ismae's father arranges for her to be married. Guillo is not told that Ismae is the daughter of the devil and is very scared and angry when he discovers this to be the case. When Guillo sees the scar on Ismae's back, he beats her badly and tells her that he will turn her over to the church. He believes that she will either be drowned or burned at the stake. While Guillo has Ismae locked in the cellar, the hedge priest who had married the two of them frees her and takes her to the abbey of St. Mortain.

## Francois Avaugour

Francois Avaugour is Gavriel's younger brother by Madam Hivern. Hivern appears to prefer Francois to Gavriel but later learns the rift has been caused because Duval refused to help him mother in her attempts to put one of her sons in the position of duke of Brittany. After Ismae forces Francois and his mother to vow their fidelity to Anne, it is Francois who saves Anne from the assault at Nantes. At Duval's request, Francois brings troops from Renne just in time to take care of his sister.

## Annith

Annith is another novice at the convent with whom Ismae connects. Although Annith has been in the convent much longer than Ismae, she has yet to be sent out on a mission.



Annith is unhappy because the convent is not sending her out. She is even more unhappy when she learns that the nuns are considering using her to replace Sister Vereda, the convent's elderly seeress as this would mean that she would never get to go out on a mission.

## **Sister Vereda**

Sister Vereda is the seeress for St. Mortain's convent. She is blind and old, and generally keeps to herself. She speaks to the others only when she has a vision. This nun is able to tell the initiates who Mortain has marked as well as where these people can be located and what they look like. It is Sister Vereda who applies the Tears of Mortain to Ismae's eyes before Ismae is sent out for her second assignment. While Ismae is stationed in Anne's court, Sister Vereda becomes sick and stops having visions.

## **Benebic of Waroch**

Benebic of Waroch is a large and ugly knight who is also known as Beast. Ismae takes an immediate liking to this man. Beast accompanies Duval and Ismae to the church in St. Lyphard and also helps Ismae rescue Duval from the secret passages of the castle when he is being poisoned. Although Ismae wants to stay at the castle instead of going to Nantes with Anne when she learns that Crunard is staying at the castle, it is Beast who insists that she go with them. During the ambush at Nantes, Beast is captured.

## **Baron and Lady Geffoy**

It is with the Baron and Lady Geffoy that Duval and Ismae stay the night on their way to Guerande. Ismae believes the baron seems distressed to see Duval but later realizes that this distress might have been caused by the fact that Duval's mother is also staying with the family. Lady Katherine is described in the novel as the perfect hostess, trying to steer dinner conversation away from uncomfortable topics.

## **Count d'Albret**

Count d'Albret is a Breton noble who has land holdings in France. D'Albret claims to be the first suitor in line to claim Anne's hand in marriage. The young girl does not want to be married to the man who has already had several wives and is a grandfather. He is also crude and abusive. When Anne dismisses d'Albret from her court, he plans an ambush for Anne and her troops when they try to visit the city of Nantes.



## Ismae's Father

It is Ismae's father who insists that the herbwitch give Ismae's mother a poison that will make her abort the baby. Ismae's father is cruel to her most of her life and finally tricks a pig farmer into marrying Ismae in exchange for three silver coins. When Ismae sees her father again, she notices that he looks old and without purpose now that he does not have her to torment. It is at this point that Ismae realizes that man is nothing to her.

## Fredric, Duke of Nemours

Fredric is the man whom Duval introduces to his sister as a suitor to keep her from having to marry d'Albret. Although the two get along well, Nemours is pushed from a window and killed before any formal arrangement can be set in place. When Ismae reaches out to Fredric's soul after his death, he begs her to protect Anne, a sentiment showing that he really cared for the young girl.

## Ismae's Mother

Up until the time that she goes to the herbwitch seeking a cure for Duval, Ismae believes that it was her mother who had wanted the poison in order to abort her. During her visit with the witch, this old lady tells her that her mother did not want the abortion and did everything that she could to protect her child.

## Marshal Jean Rieux

Marshal Jean Rieux is a member of Anne's Privy Counsel. Rieux is haughty and seems to have a high opinion of himself. Rieux shows outward irritation that Anne will not marry d'Albret as he believes this is what is best for Brittany. Rieux has no consideration for Anne's feelings or her happiness.

## Sister Eonette

Sister Eonette is the nun who is in charge of teaching lectures about the political position of the country. She serves the convent as historian and archivist. She also teaches the lineage of the royals of Brittany as well as their histories. Ismae becomes upset with Sister Eonette because she did not school her on the bastard children of Duke Francis II.

## Sister Widona

Sister Widona is the nun who cares for the horses at the convent. She is apparently put in charge of Sybella when the girl is first brought to the convent. When the other girls



first see Sybella in the refectory, she is under the care of Sister Widona. It is this nun who forces Sybella to eat when she tries to refuse the stew she is offered.

## **Jean Runnion**

Jean Runnion is the man whom Ismae kills on her first assignment from the convent. This man was believed to have been a traitor to Brittany. Ismae learns later that although Runnion had at one time been a traitor, he was working for the duchess at the time that he was killed.

## **Baron Lambert**

Because the Abbess and Crunard believe that Baron Lambert is meeting with a French spy to pledge his allegiance to the French, Ismae is sent to kill the man whom they believe is the spy before this meeting can take place.

## **Sister Thomine**

Sister Thomine is the martial arts instructor for the convent. It is she and the Reverend Mother whom Annith overhears talking about making Annith the new seeress for the convent.

## **Sister Beatriz**

Sister Beatriz is the convent's instructor in "womanly arts." It is she who tells Ismae that people see and hear what they want to see and hear. She is the one in charge of outfitting the girls when they go out on their assignments.

## **Sister Serafina**

Sister Serafina is the sister in the abbess of St. Mortain who makes poisons for the entire convent. She is also the doctor, or healer, for the convent. When Ismae first joins the convent, she is sent to work with Sister Serafina because she is immune to poison.

## **Isabeau**

Isabeau is Anne's younger sister. She is sick and weak with a disorder of the lungs. Ismae suspects the young girl's heart is weak as well. Isabeau takes a liking to Ismae and requests that she sit with her one day while Anne is involved in meetings.



## **Anton**

Anton is Chancellor Crunard's youngest son, about the same age as Duval. Crunard has learned that Anton is still alive. He had been made a deal that if he turned Anne over to the French monarchy, he would receive Anton back.

## **Vanth**

Vanth is the messenger crow sent to Ismae by the convent in order for them to be able to exchange letters.

## **Sister Arnette**

Sister Arnette is the nun who is in charge of the armory at the convent. She is the one in charge of assigning weapons to the girls when they are out on their missions.

## **Nocturne**

Nocturne is the horse that Anne uses from the convent. Nocturne is poisoned when Ismae and Duval are attacked when they first enter the town of Guerande.

## **Agnez**

Agnez is one of the maids who takes care of Ismae while she is staying in Duval's home.



## Objects/Places

### Deep Red Stain

This scar on Ismae's back that runs from her left shoulder to her right hip is a result of a poison used by an herbwitch in an attempt to abort her.

### Three Silver Coins

Three silver coins is the amount of money that Guillo pays Ismae's father for her hand in marriage.

### Guillo's Cottage

Ismae is uncomfortable because she is married to Guillo in his cottage instead of in a church.

### Brittany

Brittany is the duchy in which the story takes place. It is located in the northwestern portion of modern day France.

### Crystal Goblet

When she talks to the abbess at the convent the first time, the abbess offers Ismae poisoned wine in a crystal goblet. Ismae drops this goblet when the abbess tells her the purpose of the convent is to kill people.

### The Marque

It is by this marque that Ismae knows whether or not a person has been condemned by Mortain to death.

### Matrona's Curse

Sister Serafina identifies the poison used to try to abort Ismae as Matrona's Curse.



## **Tears of Mortain**

The Tears of Mortain are considered to be a gift to the people who serve him. They allow the recipient to experience life and death the way that Mortain does.

## **Lombart's Hunting Lodge**

It is at Lombart's Hunting Lodge that Ismae kills Martel. It is in this lodge that Ismae meets Gavriel Duval for the first time.

## **Pont-Croix**

Pont-Croix is the city in which Lombart's hunting lodge is located.

## **The Silver Oak Leaf of Saint Camulos**

Gavriel Duval wears this oak leaf, the symbol of the patron saint of battle and soldiers, on his cloak.

## **Guerande**

Guerande is the city in which Duval lives. It is to this city that Ismae is sent to get information from the convent about what is happening in Anne's court.

## **One of Mortain's Own Swords**

The Reverend Mother gives Ismae one of Mortain's swords before she leaves for her duty in Guerande. This knife is able to release a living man's soul just by piercing the skin. Its use relieves the soul from the days generally spent lingering around the body and pondering sins and wrongdoing.

## **A Polished Silver Coin**

Many pheasants keep these polished silver coins on their doors as a safeguard to keep away death.

## **Three Days**

Three days is the amount of time that it is said that a man's soul lingers in his body after he is dead.





## **La Roche Bernard**

La Roche Bernard is the place where Duval and Ismae are forced to stop for the night on their way to Guerande.

## **A Chessboard**

It is with a chessboard and chess pieces that Duval keeps up with the men who are supportive of Anne and those who are her enemies.

## **Treaty of Verger**

Anne's father was forced to sign this treaty which states that Anne will be allowed to marry only if the French rulers approve of her husband.

## **A Smear of Blood on the Sheets**

Although this smear of blood on Ismae's sheets comes from a cut Ismae gives to Duval when he tries to wake her from a nightmare, Louyse assumes the blood is from Ismae because she has had sexual relations with Duval for the first time.

## **Mortain's Caress**

It is this poison that Ismae gives the Isabeau in a small dose to help her sleep.

## **Night Whispers**

It is these poisoned candles that Ismae intends to use to kill Duval's mother.

## **Poisoned Pearls**

Ismae keeps a hairnet decorated with these poisoned pearls so that she will have an easy means of killing a man at her fingertips.

## **St. Arduinna's Snare**

When Ismae realizes that Duval is being poisoned, she discovers that the vial that holds this poison is only half full. This poison is rubbed on surfaces and absorbed through the skin.



## **Church in St. Lyphard**

It is at the Church in St. Lyphard that Duval and Ismae meet with Fedric, Duke of Nemours to talk about an engagement to Anne.

## **Small Loaf of Freshly Baked Bread**

It is under the disguise of offering this loaf of bread to Saint Amourna that Ismae and Duval make their trip to the Church in St. Lyphard.

## **The Duchess' Solar**

The Duchess' solar is the room where Anne spends much of her time with her sister, her governess and her ladies-in-waiting.

## **A Betrothal Agreement**

Anne's governess, Madame Dinan, produces this betrothal agreement between Anne and d'Albret which was supposedly signed by Anne although Anne has no remembrance of signing the agreement.

## **A Bezoar Stone**

A bezoar stone is what Ismae goes to the herbwitch's cottage to look for in an attempt to save Duval from the poison.

## **A Heavy Gold Signet Ring**

Ismae finds this signet ring among Crunard's possessions. It is the same ring that she saw when she came in contact with the last memories from Martel's soul.

## **Rennes**

It is to this city that Duval tries to convince Ismae that they must take Anne so that she will be safe from the attacking forces.

## **Paquelaie**

After traveling two days away from Guerande, Anne and her group stop for rest at a hunting lodge in Paquelaie that belonged to the late duke.



## **Old Abbey of Saint Brigantia**

It is at this abbey that Isabeau and Anne are reunited with Duval after Ismae has cured him of his poisoning. It is also here that the abbess of St. Mortain confronts Ismae with her wrongdoing.

## **Red Ribbon from Ismae's Hair**

Duval ties nine knots in this red ribbon, invoking blessings of the nine saints, a wedding ritual. Although Ismae is afraid he is about to propose marriage to her, he only tells her that his heart is hers even if she never decides that is what she wants.

## **Chess Pieces**

It is not until the end of the novel that Ismae realizes that Crunard had been smearing poison onto the chess pieces with which Duval represented Anne, her enemies and those loyal to her in order to kill him.



# Themes

## Obedience

Obedience is one of the qualities that is required for Ismae to serve in the abbey of St. Mortain. During her first interview with the abbess, the Reverend Mother stresses that Ismae is not to question the orders given to her by the convent or by Mortain but only to follow these orders without question. It is this command for obedience that seems to trouble Ismae from the beginning since one of the first things that is asked of her when she is taken to the infirmary is for her to take off her clothes. Ismae pauses, not wanting the women, especially Annith, to see her scars. Later, Ismae realizes that her first assignment to kill a man is a test of her obedience, a test that she passes.

It is after Ismae becomes involved with the duchess, Duval and the workings of Anne's court that Ismae begins to disobey the abbess. At first, she just doesn't send along information, such as the fact that she has agreed to work with Duval in protecting Anne. Next, Ismae's actions are a downright rejection of what the abbess has asked her to do. First, Ismae allows Hivern to live even though the abbess has demanded that she be killed. Second, Ismae realizes that she cannot kill Duval even though the abbess has required her to do so.

At the conclusion of the novel, Ismae realizes that although she may have disobeyed the abbess' orders, she is still in good standing with her father. Just as Duval had planted the seeds of doubt in her mind about the abbess and Ismae's blind devotion to her commands, Ismae realizes that the humans who interpret the signs of the saints can be wrong. Because the abbess was being fed wrong information by Crunard, she was misinterpreting actions and misdirecting Ismae. Although the abbess does not agree, Ismae did well by following her own common sense and intuition about her situation than blindly following the orders of someone with no real sense of the situation.

## Roles of Women

This story is set in the late-1400's, a time when women were treated much like possessions instead of people. It is in the abbey that Ismae first feels real affection. Before this, she was raised by a man who did not love her and did not hesitate to use his fists against her. In an attempt to get rid of her, her father sells her to a man in marriage. Although Ismae believes that life must be different for other women, she soon learns that even women from different classes of people are treated much the same as she had been.

One of the most clear example of the unjust treatment of women is the way that Anne is used as a political pawn. She really has very little say in what happens to her even though she will be the duchess of her country. Her advisors expect her to marry the person who will offer the most benefit to the country regardless of what this marriage



means for Anne. It is for this reason that it is so hard for Duval to arrange a marriage for his sister that will both benefit the duchy and also not be horrible for Anne.

Hivern is another woman who Ismae learns has been abused by men. Hivern was taken by the French king when she was only a young teenager. After this, she felt she had no choice but to turn to the duke of Brittany who wanted her as his mistress. Because her children aren't full blooded nobility, she realizes that they will never have the respect that she believes that they should have. Ismae realizes that what the woman has done, she has done for her children.

Ismae realizes that her own mother was also a victim of a man. Because she got pregnant by Death, Ismae's father wants Ismae's mother to abort her. Instead of giving his wife a choice, he takes her to the herbwitch's cottage by force in order for her to get an abortion. The medicine the witch gives her does not kill Ismae, however, and she lives despite her father's attempt to kill her.

## Chess

The game of chess is used as theme to illustrate the game being played in the novel between Anne's supporters and those who are against her. For instance, Duval uses a chessboard and chess pieces to illustrate Anne's supporters and her enemies. The language of chess is often used in the novel as Crunard uses people like pawns in the game he is playing. In fact, when Duval finally confronts Crunard, Crunard refers to the game of chess that he has been playing with Duval. In addition, Crunard has been using the chess pieces to poison Duval by smearing them with poison that he has stolen from Ismae's stock.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel is written in the first person point of view of Ismae Rienne, the heroine of the novel. In addition to being written in the first person, the novel is also written in the present tense. This use of tense makes the reader feel as if he is experiencing the action of the book at the same time that Ismae is. Since much of the novel deals with Ismae's emotional growth and maturation, it is important that the reader is able to experience this growth as it is happening through Ismae's own words and emotions.

The majority of the story is told through exposition as Ismae talks about and describes what is happening to her and around her. Ismae also explains interactions between herself and other characters. This use of exposition keeps the reader focused on Ismae and the way that her thoughts and emotions are changing and maturing. The story is also told in a linear fashion with no flashbacks. The beginning few chapters of the book take place three years prior to the remainder of the story. The story starts when Ismae is first taken to the convent then skips three years while Ismae is in training. The story picks up again when Ismae is given her first assignment.

## Setting

This novel is set in the duchy of Brittany, an area that is now part of modern day France. The beginning of the novel is set in 1845 while the time moves forward three years to 1848 for Ismae's time in Anne's court. While Ismae's story is one of fiction, the story is based on the history of the small area of France.

Settings for the story occur in sections with the beginning few chapters taking place in Guillo's cottage where Ismae is married to the pig farmer. The next major setting is the convent of St. Mortain. It is here that Ismae gets her training as an assassin. During her time as an assassin, Ismae visits a tavern where she goes to kill Runnion. She also accompanies Crunard to the Baron Lombart's hunting lodge where she is to kill Martel.

The majority of the novel takes place in the residence of Duval in Guerande as well as in Anne's palace in the same city. Other settings include the church in St. Lyphard, where Ismae and Duval meet with Nemours about a possible betrothal between himself and Anne. The fields outside of the city Nantes are another setting as it is here that d'Albert's forces try to ambush Anne and her warriors.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is very relaxed and flows very easily. For a book with such a dark theme, there are many places that are very funny. Ismae and Duval make a good couple with their quick wits. For instance, on the night that Ismae receives Vanth from



the convent, Duval trips over the bird's cage on his way to his accustomed seat. He is good-natured in his accusation that Ismae deliberately blocked the way to the chair.

Also common in the novel is the language of the game of chess. Ismae speaks of Crunard using people like pawns. When Duval confronts Crunard about his treachery, Crunard refers to what has been taking place as a game of chess. Chess is also important in the story as Duval uses this game to keep up with how many people are loyal to Anne and how many are not on her side. It is also the chess pieces that Crunard has smeared with the poison from Ismae's stock in order to kill Duval.

Religion is another aspect that figures into the language of the novel. Instead of worshiping the Christian god, Ismae and the other members of the convent worship St. Mortain, who is referred to as one of the old gods. St. Mortain is the god of death. Just like the god of the Christian religions has offered mercy to his followers and recognizes their free will, Ismae learns that her father, the god of death, does the same with his followers.

## Structure

The novel is divided into fifty-four chapters each of which is given only a chapter number to identify it. The first five chapters of the novel take place in 1485. Between the fifth and sixth chapters there is a gap of three years.

The novel has one main plot that undergoes many twists and turns throughout the story. The novel deals with Ismae's realization that she cannot be completely obedient to the will of the convent of St. Mortain. She is sent out to find if Duval is a traitor to Anne, the duchess of France. She finds not just that Duval is not a traitor, but also falls in love with him.

The novel moves along quickly and is hard to put down once one gets into the main plot. Despite its dark themes and topics, the novel is written in a manner that is surprisingly light. The relationship between Duval and Ismae almost works as comic relief against the treachery that is going on in Anne's court.



## Quotes

"That I survived, according to the herbwitch, is no miracle but a sign I have been sired by the god of death himself." Chapter One, p. 1

"We carry out Mortain's will when He wishes to alter the warp and weft of life's weave for some purpose of His own."  
Chapter Two, p. 15

"The sounds he makes are ugly and desperate and fill me with uncertainty. Then I remember that this man is betraying my country, my duchess, and I pull tighter, praying to Mortain for strength." Chapter Eight, p. 76

"'Ismae,' she says, serious once more. 'Duval is one of the duchess's most trusted advisors. It is critical we know where he stands.'"  
Chapter Nine, p. 85

"Twice now you have gotten to men before I did. And while you and your saint are interested in meting out retribution, I am interested in information that can guide our country out of this wretched hole we are in."  
Chapter Nine, p. 87

"But until we place that crown upon her head before her people and the Church, we are vulnerable."  
Chapter Nine, p. 89

"I have joined the convent to withdraw from the world of men, not to be thrust upon the mercy of one." Chapter Nine, p. 93

"Besides, if Duval is a traitor, as the abbess and Chancellor Crunard suspect, perhaps Martel's soul will reveal that to me." Chapter Eleven, p. 112

"It is not the saint I doubt, demoiselle, only the humans who interpret His wishes. In my experience, humans are all too fallible."  
Chapter Twelve, p. 121

"If someone is feeding our secrets to the French, it is one of Anne's closest advisors. And now we must wonder if that traitor is the same one who called this estate meeting or if there is a second traitor we must deal with."  
Chapter Twelve, p. 139

"At first, I think it is his arrogance that has made me angry, but then I realize I am angry because he has planted tiny, wicked seeds of doubt within me." Chapter Seventeen, p. 184





"Perhaps Duval is exactly who he says he is, a devoted brother intent on seeing his sister crowned duchess and safely wed to a man who can stand with her against the French." Chapter Twenty, p. 212

"The utter betrayal of this leaves me speechless, for while the price paid was considerably higher, the arrangement was not so very different from my father's bargain with Guillo." Chapter Twenty, p. 214

"I tell myself that my happiness has nothing to do with coming that much closer to removing the suspicion that clouds Duval's name." Chapter Twenty-four, p. 267

"But if you do not support this marriage, I will have no choice but to hold the house of Montfort in breach of contract and will use all of my considerable resources to get by force what I could not gain by reason."  
Chapter Twenty-six, p. 278

"This is my job, my calling. It is why I am here. My duty is to my god, not to you and your political maneuverings. I am here to do His will, not yours."  
Chapter Twenty-seven, p. 293

"Someone close to the duchess is working for the French. It could very well be Duval. Do not let your youth and naïveté cloud your vision, demoiselle."  
Chapter Thirty-three, p. 357

"I feel as if we are on a vessel moving inexorably toward some unseen destination. There is no one steering or tending the sails; only the dark tides and currents carry us to their preordained destination." Chapter Thirty-five, pp. 372-373

"She has been working on schemes and plots since his birth, most involving him. Until I was born, he tolerated it. Once I was put in his charge, he would have nothing to do with her plots." Chapter Thirty-five, p. 382

"Once again, Sister Beatriz's words come back to me: People hear and see what they expect to hear and see." Chapter Thirty-six, p. 391

"It hits me with the unwelcome force of a crossbow bolt: we are alike, Hivern and I. Both women, both powerless over our own fates." Chapter Forty-one, p. 432

"It is one thing to agree to work with Duval on behalf of the duchess, one thing not to tell Crunard of Duval's whereabouts, but this . . . this is to move in direct opposition of the convent's orders— and Mortain's." Chapter Forty-one, p. 433

"I have been ordered to kill Duval. The desires of my convent have collided with the path of my heart." Chapter Forty-two, p. 442

"It would be easy enough for him to feed us information that supports his claims and withhold information that does not. When my own reports contradict his, how easy it is to dismiss them as the work of an unskilled novice." Chapter Forty-four, p. 455



"Perhaps Mortain knew I could not kill him even if he bore the marque. I cannot kill the only man I have found it in my heart to love." Chapter Forty-eight, p. 494

"For I have realized that I love not only Duval, but also Beast and de Lornay, each of them in a different way. I do not think on how I will reach them or how I will dodge any enemy that still lingers on the field. I know only that I will do so with my last breath if necessary." Chapter Fifty-one, p. 517

"Yes. This is what I want to be. An instrument of mercy, not vengeance." Chapter 51, p. 521

"'Father?' I whisper, then fall on my knees and bow my head, every particle of my being trembling. I am afraid to look upon His face, fearing His wrath, His retribution for all the wrongs I have committed, from loving Duval to disobeying the convent to releasing these fallen men's souls." Chapter Fifty-one, p. 522

"His divine spark lives within me, a presence that will never leave. And I am but one of many tools He has at His disposal. If I cannot act— if I refuse to act— that is a choice I am allowed to make." Chapter Fifty-one, p. 523

"Four sons, Gavriel. I have lost four sons to this never-ending war with the French. And for what? So they can turn around and invade our borders once again? In the end, do you really think it matters to the people who rules over them? Do you really think maintaining Brittany's independence is more important to their lives and prosperity than ending the constant war?" Chapter Fifty-three, p. 535

"All I had to do was deliver Anne into the hands of the French regent— something that was clearly inevitable— and my son would be returned to me."  
Chapter Fifty-three p. 536



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss arranged marriages as it pertains to the novel.

How is Ismae and her story similar to that of the duchess? How are they different?

For what reasons does Ismae believe that she is especially suited for the role she is being given at the convent? What makes her change her mind at the end of the novel?

What is Sybella's role in the novel?

In what way does the idea of each person having a purpose in life fit into the novel? How does Ismae discover her purpose in life?

Discuss the relationships between parents and children as they are presented in the novel.

How are Hivern and Ismae similar? What ultimately keeps Ismae from killing Hivern?

Why is it significant that Ismae is impervious to poison?

How does the game of chess play a role in the novel?

Why is it so important to the country of Brittany that the duchess be crowned or married?

Discuss the relationship between Duval and Anne.

Why is the Reverend Mother angry with Ismae at the conclusion of the novel?