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Grave Mercy

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Whilst still in the womb, and against all the odds, Ismae survives her mother's attempts to abort her, though the poison dispensed by the local herbwitch leaves her with a mysterious red stain that runs across her body from the day of her birth. Though ostensibly of humble peasant stock, Ismae is destined for higher things: the stain of her survival marking her out as a girl with special powers, a daughter of Mortain, the ancient god of death. Aged seventeen, she is plucked in the nick of time just as her forced marriage to a brute of a local farmer is about to be consummated, and spirited off to the island Convent of St Mortain. Here is she groomed and steeled to become his handmaiden: a trained and deadly assassin who will kill according to his bidding. She delivers Death's vengeance to the victims of her first two assignments quickly and simply. But then, an infinitely tougher calling: a command to infiltrate the court of the duchess of Brittany, and kill those who dare to spy for the French throne, seeking to invade the Duchy and deprive it of its independence. Before long, Ismae is caught inextricably up in all the cloak and dagger intrigues of the court, and a fight to the death to preserve the Breton nation. And she also finds herself falling for the high-born Gavriel Duval, whose fate ? unbeknownst to Ismae - will soon be in her hands.

?Move over Katniss and make way for Ismae: Young, beautiful and trained to kill,? says Andersen, keen to position **Grave Mercy** for **The Hunger Games** market. Yet it is its 15th historical setting which gives this new series its chief appeal as it sweeps the reader up in a page-turning tale of clashing factions, dangerous ambitions and simmering romance, taking in an extensive cast of characters, for which a dramatis personae is helpfully provided at the front. And at the centre of this game of thrones is Ismae, an alluring heroine but one whom we are not allowed to forget is also a dab hand with the crossbow, the garrotte, the deadliest of poisons and the sharp blade of the misericorde.

Absorbing as all the court machinations are, I would willingly have heard more about Ismae's training at the convent, in particular the potions and poisons she helps distil (being herself helpfully immune to most of their effects); and the weapons training she undergoes. These elements give the story some of its most intriguing historical components, yet the period of Ismae's education is dispatched rather swiftly, despite providing her with all the vital arts she needs. Still, **Grave Mercy** is an original, and sophisticated beginning to a worthy new YA series.

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/grave-mercy>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/195>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/caroline-sanderson>