

[← Chapter 7](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 9 →](#)

---

## Chapter 8: The Empty Throne

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: Ereshkigal's throne—empty, but something is watching from the shadows ->

---

The throne room was empty.

Not empty of presence. The dead were there, gathered at the edges of the gray like mourners at a funeral, their attention fixed on the throne with the patient waiting of creatures who had forgotten how to do anything else. The Galla were there, standing guard at the entrance. The gray pressed in from all sides like a held breath that would never be released.

But the throne itself—

Empty.

Of her. Of Ereshkigal. The queen of the Kur was not sitting where she should have been sitting, presiding over her domain with the cold authority of a goddess who had ruled the dead since before human memory. The throne sat at the center of the gray like a wound in the world. A chair carved from something that wasn't stone, wasn't metal, wasn't anything Shammy could identify even by touch if she could have touched it. Darkness made solid. Absence given form. The physical manifestation of the concept of ending, the seat of the one who granted true death to those who could find their way to her.

And it was waiting.

Mai could feel it. The wrongness of the space. The way the absence itself seemed to have weight. Her analytical mind was trying to process what she was seeing, but analysis had become unreliable since the gates. She couldn't calculate the probability of an empty throne. She could only notice that it was empty, and feel the wrongness like a pressure against her skin.

She's not here.

Bright's voice was quiet. He stood in front of the throne, the amulet at his chest a warmth that felt more like memory than death.

Sixty-three years ago, she was here. Sitting. Waiting. She didn't move from that throne the entire time I was here. She just watched. With those eyes. Those gray, human-remembering eyes.

The violet in Ace's eyes pulsed.

She's here.

Ace's voice was flat. Wrong. The fragment was responding to something, stirring in ways it hadn't before, pulsing with rhythms that felt ancient and familiar and impossibly patient.

She's been here the whole time. She's just—

Not on the throne.

She's watching, Ace continued. From somewhere. From the edges. She's been watching since we passed through the sixth gate. Waiting to see what we would do. What we would choose.

She's been trying to leave, Mai said.

Her voice was analytical, trying to force her mind back into familiar patterns even though the patterns no longer fit.

The gate was opened from inside. Not by us. By—

By her.

Bright's voice was tired.

She's been trying to get out. For centuries. For millennia. The gate was sealed from outside. Someone didn't want her to leave. And she's been trying to get out ever since.

Waiting, Ace finished. For someone to open the way. For someone who could open the gate from outside. For someone who—

Who could give her what she wants.

Not us.

The fragment, the thing that lived in Ace's violet eyes, that had been part of her since the Blood-Moon Rift, pulsed with recognition that wasn't hers. Or was hers. Had always been hers. The boundary between Ace and the fragment had become thin in Kur.

The fragment. She's been waiting for the fragment. For someone who could carry it. For someone who could—

Who could open the gate from outside and let her through.

And give her what she wants.

Mai's hand was shaking. She had stopped noticing it. The tremor had become part of her, a constant reminder of what the gates had taken. But the shaking didn't matter now. What mattered was the empty throne. The watching dead. The goddess who wasn't where she should have been.

What does she want?

---

The voice came from the shadows.

Not from the throne. Not from the Galla. Not from the dead who watched from the edges. From—

Everywhere and nowhere. From the gray itself. From the spaces between the spaces.

Freedom.

The shadows moved.

Not shadows. Something else. Something that had been watching from the edges of the gray, waiting for the right moment to emerge. Something that wasn't quite alive and wasn't quite dead but existed in the space between, the place where things went when they stopped being one thing and hadn't yet become another.

Something that had been waiting.

You're late.

The voice was gray with recognition. The same gray as the Galla. The same gray as the space between living and dead.

I've been waiting.

The voice came from everywhere. From the shadows that weren't shadows. From the presence that wasn't present.

For sixty-three years. For—

A pause.

For longer. Longer than your species has had words. Longer than the concept of waiting had a name.

Bright didn't move. His amulet was warm. Death was approaching, not his death, but something else's. Something that had been waiting for this moment for longer than any of them could understand.

You came back. You came back and brought the fragment I gave away.

Who are you?

The shadows coalesced.

Something emerged. Not from the throne. From the edges of the room. Something that hadn't been there a moment ago, that had been waiting in the gray all along. Something that wasn't a woman, wasn't a man, wasn't human. Something old. Older than humanity. Older than the concept of age itself.

Something that remembered what it was like to be something else.

Ereshkigal. Bright's voice was quiet. You're not on the throne.

I'm here.

The figure that emerged stood before the throne. Not sitting on it, but facing it, as if she was examining it rather than claiming it. As if she had been standing here so long she had forgotten there was any other way to stand.

I've been watching. Since you arrived. Since the fragment—

The figure turned. Gray, ancient eyes fixed on Ace with an intensity that made the air feel thick.

Since you came.

Ace's fragment stirred.

The violet in her eyes pulsed with recognition that wasn't hers. The fragment remembered. Even if Ace didn't. Even if the memories of what the fragment had been before the Blood-Moon Rift were lost, the fragment itself remembered. It knew this place. It knew this goddess. It knew—

Who gave you the fragment?

Ereshkigal's voice was gray. The question hung in the air like smoke.

Who brought it to you? Who—

I don't know.

Ace's hand was on her blade. Not gripping. Just touching. Grounding.

The Blood-Moon Rift. I don't remember what happened. I only remember after. The fragment was already there. Part of me. Like it had always been there. Like it had always been part of me.

The fragment remembers.

The figure stepped closer.

Even if you don't. It knows me. It knows what I gave away. And what I want back.

What do you want?

Freedom.

The figure stopped. Gray, ancient, tired eyes fixed on Ace with something that might have been longing.

The gate was locked. From outside. By someone who—

She stopped.

By someone who didn't want me to leave. Who wanted to keep me—

Another stop.

Trapped. In my own kingdom. Unable to—

To die.

The word hung in the gray like a bell.

To die.

Ereshkigal's voice fractured for the first time.

That's what I want. The ability to die. To end. To—

Her voice cracked. Something that had been whole broke.

To stop existing in this gray. To become nothing. To—

You're the goddess of the underworld. Mai's voice was analytical, trying to find the logic in something that defied logic. Death is your domain. You should be able to—

I can't die.

Her hands clenched.

No one in Kur can die. That's the punishment. The trap. Someone locked me here. Made me eternal. Made me watch the dead come and go, remember their lives, forget my own. Made me—

She stopped.

The silence was heavy. The dead watched. The Galla waited. The gray pressed in from all sides.

You made me.

Ereshkigal's eyes fixed on Bright. Gray, remembering.

Sixty-three years ago. You came through the gates. You found me here. And I offered you what you wanted. An ending. True death. And you—

You offered me your freedom.

I offered you what I wanted to give. But you were afraid. And in your fear, you sealed the gates from outside. You locked me back in. And then you—

I ran.

Bright's smile was wrong. Tired.

I ran because I was afraid of what I wanted. And in running, I made sure you couldn't have what you wanted either.

You did.

I didn't know.

His voice was quiet.

I didn't know what I was doing. I just, I wanted to live. To not take the ending you offered. And in wanting to live, I—

You imprisoned me again.

Her voice was gray.

For sixty-three more years. In the gray. In the nothing. Watching the dead come and go. Waiting for—

She turned to Ace.

Waiting for her.

The dead watched from the edges.

The Galla stood motionless, their human-remembering eyes fixed on the scene. The gray pulsed like a heartbeat, the heartbeat of the underworld, the rhythm of a place that had existed since before time had a meaning.

Mai's hand was shaking. She couldn't stop it. The analytical part of her mind was screaming. This was impossible. Mythology made real. Beyond calculation. But the gates had taken her certainty. She couldn't calculate. She could only—

Observe. Accept. Trust.

The three words kept cycling in her head like a mantra. The gates had taken her ability to predict, but they had left her with something else. Something quieter. Something that didn't require certainty to function.

You've been waiting for the fragment, Mai said. Her voice was analytical, but thin. For Ace.

For someone who could hold it.

Ereshkigal's voice was gray.

The fragment was part of me. Once. Before I was—

She paused.

Before I was trapped. I gave it away. To someone who wanted to become immortal. To someone who thought immortality was a gift.

What happened to them?

They died.

Her voice was gray.

Everyone dies. Eventually. Even the ones who think they're eternal. The fragment survived. Drifted through the world. Through—

Another pause.

Through the spaces between. Looking for someone who could hold it without being consumed.

And it found me.

And it found you.

Ereshkigal's eyes fixed on Ace. Gray, remembering.

During the Blood-Moon Rift. When your village was destroyed. When you—

When I became what I am.

Yes.

Her voice was gray.

You're different. The fragment recognized that. It chose you. And you've carried it all this time. All these years. Without—

Without what?

Breaking.

Ereshkigal stepped closer.

The fragment is old. It's heavy. It carries the weight of everything I gave to it, every death I've witnessed, every ending I've presided over, every moment of gray I've endured. Most people would shatter under that weight. You haven't. You're still here. Still whole. Still—

Still me.

No.

Her voice was gray.

You're not what you were. But you're still you. That's the difference. That's why I need your help.

---

The offer hung in the gray.

Freedom for Ereshkigal. An ending for Bright. Humanity for Ace.

The options were laid out like a bargain at a market, each piece of currency exchanged for another. Someone had to pay. Someone had to give. Someone had to make the sacrifice that would allow everyone else to walk away.

What do you need? Ace asked. Her voice was flat. Her hand was still on her blade.

I need the gate to open from outside.

Ereshkigal's voice was gray.

The seals were made from outside. Someone locked me in. Only someone from outside can unlock me. And the fragment—

The figure paused.

The fragment is the key.

How?

The fragment came from me. It's part of me. If it's carried back to the mortal world, by someone who can hold it, it can open the gates from outside. Break the seals. Let me—

Let you die.

Yes.

Her voice was gray.

Let me finally end. Let me become nothing. Let me—

What about us?

Mai's voice was sharp. The question cut through the gray like a blade.

What about the people we leave behind? If the gates open—

You leave through the way you came.

Her voice was gray.

The gates take things on the way down. But on the way up—

She paused.

On the way up, they give things back. Your certainty. Your defense. Your trust. You go back to normal. Or—

Or what?

Or you stay.

Her voice was gray.

In my place. As the anchor that holds the gates closed. As the one who keeps me trapped forever.

That's the alternative?

Yes.

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. The metal was cold. The same cold it had always been. But something else was cold too. The cold of a choice being laid out in front of her. Freedom or sacrifice. Walking away or staying behind.

And Bright? Ace's voice was flat. What happens to him?

Ereshkigal's eyes turned to Bright. Gray. Remembering.

He gets what he's always wanted. An ending. True death. If he stays in my place—

No.

Bright's voice was quiet. Immediate. Absolute.

Everyone looked at him.

No.

He said it again.

I didn't come back to run again. I didn't come back to—

You came back to die.

I came back to find out what I want.

His voice was tired.

And I've—

He paused.

I've spent centuries wanting to stop. Wanting to end. And somewhere in the last hour, walking through these gates, seeing you again—

He smiled. It was different this time. Not tired. Not sad. Just old. Weary in a way that had nothing to do with bodies or deaths.

Somewhere in that, I started wanting something else.

What?

Bright looked at the triad. At Ace, with the fragment pulsing in her violet eyes. At Mai, with her shaking hand and analytical mind and the fracture the gates had opened. At Shammy, blind in the Kur-atmosphere but present, anchoring, the connection between them all holding strong even in the heart of the underworld.

I don't know yet, he said. But I want to find out.

---

The throne was empty.

Ereshkigal wasn't sitting in it. She was standing in front of it. Watching. Waiting. The gray figure that had haunted Kur for millennia, the goddess who had wanted nothing more than to die, looking at the mortals who had walked into her domain and refused to leave without a fight.

I've been waiting.

Her voice was gray.

For someone who can open the gate. For someone who—

For someone who chooses. That's what this is, isn't it? You're not asking. You're offering.

Offering what?

A choice.

Ereshkigal's voice was gray.

I can offer freedom to Bright. An ending. But only if someone stays in his place. I can offer the fragment to you, let you keep it, integrated, as part of you forever. But only if someone—

Holds the gates closed.

Yes.

Her voice was gray.

That's the bargain. Someone stays. Someone goes. Someone—

Someone gives up what they have for what someone else needs.

Yes.

The gray pulsed.

The triad stood together.

Bright stood apart.

And the goddess of the underworld waited for an answer that none of them were sure they could give.

Ace looked at Bright. At the amulet at his chest, warm with proximity to death. At the tired eyes that had seen too much and lived too long and were finally, finally wanting something other than ending.

She looked at Mai. At the shaking hand that had stopped trying to calculate everything. At the analytical mind that had found something quieter to trust.

She looked at Shammy. At the blindness that had become anchoring. At the connection that had become everything.

The fragment pulsed in her chest.

I have an idea, she said.

---

<!-- End Chapter 8 -->

---

[← Chapter 7](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 9 →](#)—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

**Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.**

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

Check out our SubscribeStar page at <https://subscribestar.adult/konrad-k>

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/novellas:scp-sumerian-dead:chapter8>

Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

