

The
Crown Rose



THE CROWN ROSE

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THE HEALER

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GALILEO'S CHILDREN: TALES OF SCIENCE VS. SUPERSTITION

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THE PRODIGAL TROLL

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PARADOX: BOOK ONE OF THE NULAPEIRON SEQUENCE

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HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE

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STAR OF GYPSIES

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THE RESURRECTED MAN

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FIONA AVERY



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For Joe

My Compass Star

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If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

(I Corinthians 13:1–3)

Part One
BOOK OF
VOWS



Preface

The women in my family were all queens. My great-grandmother was Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen of both France and England. Her daughter Eleanor, my grandmother, was queen of Castile. My mother Blanche was queen of France, and daughter of Castile.

I, Isabelle, failed them in this honor.

I am not a queen. I sit alone nights, without husband or family. I read. I have read books by poets, and the works on philosophy, science, reason, religion, literature. At one time or another my eyes have glanced the pages of nearly every book ever written. My mother Blanche never had time to read, or sew, or hunt. She signed treaties, held feasts, knighted sons, went to battle. She loved words, but she could never just sit and read.

Now, I am old, and as I sit beside the fireplace, I think about how my mother and I once seemed nothing alike. It is an odd thing, then, that today I should feel so very much like her. We argued constantly about what was right. We fought so much that we never saw we were talking about two sides of the same coin.

There were times when I didn't think she understood, but I see now that she always understood and had come to the same conclusions I have, long before I knew they existed. She had a wisdom I didn't want to learn, and a life I never sought. In straying from her life, my own became just like it. Though I fought against it, I too have stumbled upon the same unique fate that awaited all my ancestral line.

Though I was never a queen, I was destined to do great things. I

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would make changes that lasted forever, and influence the very world with my own imprint.

I was never a queen, but I was always a leader.

Editor's Note

The preceding letter was recently found along with the complete, original text of the manuscript *L'Histoire d'Isabelle*, first assumed penned by court chronicler Sir Jean Beaumont. But the recent discovery of this letter validates the theory that this is not a *biography* of Isabelle's life but rather a memoir. *L'Histoire d'Isabelle* means the story *she* told, in her own words. Why she chose to conceal that fact in the way the work is written is still a mystery.

It is one mystery among many that surround this royal family. King Louis and his sister Isabelle were canonized as saints after their deaths. But why Isabelle and Louis, of all the monarchs living in 1245, including the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and the emperor of Jerusalem? Why this royal brother and his sister? What could possibly have touched their lives and immortalized their names?

Perhaps we finally have the answer, by Isabelle's own hand.

Foreword

12, février, l'an de notre Seigneur 1244

An overwhelming sense of time lay across the heavy stones of the tower. The first time she had come here, there was a road that answered only to *Him*; once departed, there were no roads that could take her back to this place if she came alone. Now the road was open to anyone who chose to brave the forest.

The rain polished the tower's dark stones and slipped down the mortar with searching fingers of running water. The tower's peak disappeared into the twilight mist that curled about the top of the forest. The passage of time was recorded in every stone; the convergence of dormant centuries overwhelmed the lumbering vehicle of her thoughts. She could sense it but not express it; it was as elusive as an odor; pungent, pervasive, and defying analysis.

Isabelle walked to the great oak door, afraid to open it. Afraid to look inside.

"I did this." She was as heedless of her voice as she was of her hair matted against her head and her skirts heavy with rainwater.

Her wet hand touched the oak door. It was cold, barren, and slick. She pushed.

Beyond the door, the tower was dark and deserted. She passed silently through the empty parlor, a trace of rainwater trailing behind her.

She climbed the weathered stone stairs, winding ever higher inside the massive tower. She climbed until she reached the Great Room at the top of the stairs and then stepped inside. The room was dark and nearly empty.

In one corner, across from the window, there was a withered rose in a pale glass vase. The sight of it made Isabelle's heart tighten. She knelt beside the vase, feeling the itch of damp skirts clinging to her legs.

The rose petals were wilted and brown. She was afraid to even breathe, for fear of scattering them. And she knew . . .

This rose had been left. For her. Alone.

She reached out to touch a wilted petal. It fell from the rose to the floor.

"Oh." She spoke as if she'd caused it pain. The scent from the decaying rose reached her, faint and elusive, then faded altogether. She cried and couldn't bear to look anymore. After a moment, she stood and walked over to the window.

Isabelle watched the western sky as the sun went to sleep beneath the trees of the ancient Western Wood. In the distance, silent geese were flying south. The shadows of the tower closed around her.

Her gaze fell to the grounds at the base of the tower. Despite overwhelming heartache, she spoke. "I can do this. I can build a wall, make dormitories and even a sewing hut. I promised, and I will . . ."

She sighed. "I will . . . when it doesn't hurt so much." The thought of the work ahead, building a convent with her bare hands, almost overwhelmed her. Yet that was the reason she owned this land, and had endured the cost it had exacted of her. The dream was all that remained. There was so much to do, so many things that must be started before anything could conceivably begin to begin.

As she turned and headed for the door, something caught her attention in the dark corner. Resting one hand on the door frame, she paused to look back. The rose sat in its pale vase. And it was in full bloom. Red as wine. Vibrant . . .

And alive.

Isabelle gasped, remembering the touch of the petals on her hand. She looked down and rubbed her fingers absently together.

"Where do I start?"

Greater things are believed of those who are absent.

Tacitus, *Histories* (A.D. 104–109)

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26, mai, l'an de notre Seigneur 1234

Young Isabelle crept into Louis' room before dawn. The wooden floor was cold under her slippered feet, and the air was clammy against her white nightgown. A dressing gown of heavier fabric hung over her flat, girlish chest. She was only nine years old. Louis, asleep under the covers, was twenty.

She shuffled over to his large, ornate bed and crawled under the warm covers next to him. He stirred at the contact, but before he was fully awake, Isabelle cupped her icy little hand near his ear and whispered, "Why are you going away today? I want you to stay here!"

Louis, eyes still closed and one side of his face smashed against his pillow, smiled and said nothing. Little Isabelle took her fingers and brushed the curly, yellow strands of her brother's hair from his face. "*Maman* won't let me go with you today; she says I am too young to travel. Please let me go with you. You are the king. Make her change her mind, Louis."

Since he could no longer pretend, Louis rolled over and grasped his only sister with one arm. He placed the other one beneath his yellow locks of hair and stared up at her. Her eyes, like his, were a deep blue. Isabelle and Louis shared many of the same traits, and her eyes met his with an inquisitive, pleading stare.

"*Maman* is queen regent, Little Rose." Louis spoke with a voice

still waking. It was lower and more gravelly than usual. "I can't go against her wise judgment on the frailty of little girls on long voyages. She has more experience than I do in these matters."

"Then please stay."

"I cannot stay, either."

Isabelle frowned. "But I am your favorite! Marry me!"

Louis laughed. "I don't think the Church would look too kindly on that, Little Rose. It's that prickly issue called *consanguine marriages* we'd be guilty of. They'd never allow it. But the thought is appreciated." He looked deep into her little girl's eyes. "I promise no one will ever take your place in my heart."

"You are mine, Louis," she said. It was the voice of an adult, reaching far past her youth. He knew how much his sister idolized him, and it touched him deeply.

"And I will always be yours," he assured her, though she seemed unconvinced. "I will be back, and things will not be different."

In the hallway, voices approached and footsteps shuffled across the cold, bare floors. As Isabelle looked back over her shoulder, baby-fine, golden locks spilled out of her nightcap and over her little shoulders. *One day*, Louis thought, *she will win a man's heart with that beauty and understand the entire affair that marriage is. But not today, not at nine years old.* Louis knew that he was her sanctuary, sheltering her small frame when the world turned about her and left her alone in confusion. He hugged her close.

The door opened and their mother Queen Blanche stood in the doorway with several attendants. "*Bon Dieu*, Isabelle! My heart stopped when I saw you were away from your bed, *cherie!* What are you doing in here pestering the king? This is not allowed. I can't make these exceptions."

"It's fine," Louis said. "She was saying good-bye to me."

Blanche threw up her hands. "I don't run a royal household, I run a menagerie!"

Louis rubbed Isabelle's back with the flat of his palm. "Well, our little monkey from the Orient is here with me. No need to worry now."

He could tell Blanche did not approve of his leniency. It was important to be patient with the younger siblings. They were confused and easily left out. He remembered being nine years old once, feeling insignificant among the large and looming rituals that were a part of palace life, and he wanted it easier for his brothers. And for Isabelle.

The servants began lighting the braziers around them in the Great Room. The fireplace crackled merrily as the smell of woodsmoke filled the air, closely followed by the scent of smoking sausages and sides of meat that hung high inside the chimney on little hooks. Isabelle knew the smell well.

Blanche stood perplexed at the foot of the bed. Her Castilian features were most prominent when she was still in her dressing gown, with her long, raven hair hanging down in a thick braid. Her eyes were brown and shimmering, and they had a lovely almond shape. Unlike Isabelle's or Louis' pale skin, her skin was olive hued, rich against the white of her nightgown.

"I expect you to hurry then. We leave at midmorning today." She seemed harsh, but under the surliness was the rough affection Louis had known all his life. He loved her for it.

"Of course, Mother," he replied. "I'm just getting out of bed now."

The queen and her entourage left the Great Room to Louis and his sister. Isabelle hopped out of bed and warmed herself at the brazier, which had wheels like an iron wheelbarrow and could be pushed to wherever heat was needed. While Louis slipped out of the covers and dressed himself in his undergarments, Isabelle regarded his naked, thin body with no special curiosity.

"Water for your ears and face?" she offered, going over to a nearby stand with the pitcher and basin.

"Not today. They're going to bathe me."

Isabelle was jealous. "You get a bath?"



After his bath, Louis was dressed in splendid silks and rare cottons, and capped with a leather hat. By the time he was finished, his great four-poster bed had been turned back into a dais where the royal family could sit and attend to matters at court in the Great Room. The royal throne was actually assigned double duty as the royal bed for King Louis. It was a very comfortable dais by day, with many pillows propped up against the wall to form a seat from what had been a bed the night before.

As was the custom, four long tables were placed in the middle of the room, then four pans of charcoal were slipped under the tables to warm royal feet.

Isabelle was dressed in plain clothing, as was appropriate around the house when there was no special occasion. This depressed her even more. While they tightened the gown around her chest, she watched several servants adjusting an ermine cloak on Louis' shoulders. It just wasn't fair.

Suddenly Robert's voice echoed through the chamber behind Louis. "You look almost worth marrying!"

Much to the chagrin of Isabelle's handmaidens, Isabelle stretched away from tucking fingers to look at her brother Robert, who was also wearing fine clothing. Isabelle truly adored him: his looks and his might! And today she thought Robert looked even more dashing than usual.

Robert had their mother's hair, so black it had a purple-blue sheen in the sun, and a wet beard smoothed down in a duke's cut over pale, smooth skin. His eyes were a light gray under dark, rich eyebrows. And the deep purple overcoat he wore offset his eyes like an orchid to ice.

Louis turned at his tailor's behest and faced Robert, letting the tailor tuck the last of his garments together. The king smiled at his younger brother. They were only two years apart, and there was a joyous rivalry between them. Robert looked over Louis' outfit and whistled.

“Right down to the shoes, Your Highness!” He grinned, and then leaned in close. “But in the end, I’ll be the one she longs for, and it’ll only break her heart when she sees what she *could* have had.” Robert tugged at his jacket collar in a distinguished manner.

Louis only shook his head and blushed. He never joked about women, and Robert knew it. Though Isabelle didn’t understand the jest, today was a day Robert had obviously longed for: the chance to tease his older brother about lovemaking, the one thing King Louis couldn’t handle in outright conversation. Robert had already handled lovemaking numerous times.

Isabelle’s third brother, Alphonse, and Queen Blanche entered shortly after this exchange. Isabelle could hear them arguing down the hall. Alphonse was a small man with an emaciated build and hair that was somewhere between blond and brown. His eyes were almond shaped like his mother’s but green-gray hazel. They were kept behind the latest technological development: pince-nez spectacles. His one saving grace was a keen intellect. He was especially accurate with numbers, and Blanche had placed him as head of the family coffers.

Isabelle rarely paid much attention to Alphonse. She didn’t understand his rapid arguments with Blanche about finances. Blanche heard none of his arguments either, as usual. That’s why she’d placed him in his position, so she wouldn’t have to worry about it.

“Mother, it would be inappropriate to pay that much for a tent when we can—”

“Oh, enough already, Alphonse! This is a king’s wedding, and I spare no expense for Louis. So *forget* the coffers!”

Alphonse stopped walking, at a loss, as the rest of the family stared at him. Robert was grinning as he poured water from a clay pitcher into a bronze cup and then took a big gulp. It was time for breakfast bread.

Blanche seated herself at the foot of one of the main tables. Louis sat at the head. The youngest children sat nearest to Blanche, where she could keep an eye on them. Robert sat next to Isabelle, then Alphonse

across from Robert. Their places had long been established as children and had not changed. Charles, the youngest, was unaccounted for—again.

“Where is Charles? That boy is never present!” Blanche called to the table of servants across from them. “Go and find the boy! He can’t go without breakfast! And I won’t have him missing Mass again!”

But Charles could not be found. That was Charles’ main trait: absence. His worse trait was that he was a peculiarly angry little boy, known for kicking and biting. Isabelle hated him. The two had had to be separated in the nursery when she was four years old, because she’d wake up with Charles biting at her arms.

After breakfast, Isabelle sat through the family sermons and marveled at the quiet grace of the tower’s inner chapel. Mass was her favorite part of the day, and she pondered the wondrous rituals every morning, listening to the chants, smelling the incense, and hearing the Latin wash over her. She wanted to learn Latin one day, because she knew Latin was the very voice of God, the tongue of saints, and if she mastered it, she believed it would allow her to speak directly to God.



After Mass, distinguished royal guests arrived at the *palais*. The German emperor Frederick and his royal entourage were joining the Parade of Royals to Provence. They would be present at the marriage of France’s great king to the noblewoman Margaret.

Isabelle paid little attention to all this until the royals lingered and mingled together, talking and laughing. They spoke French and then German, speaking pleasantly while the children who had come with them ran around in circles. Then they pushed two little red-haired boys over to Isabelle, who cringed with shyness. One of them held an offering of friendship: a flowerpot.

“Go on, Henry,” the German queen said, standing firmly behind the older red-haired boy.

“No, I don’t like her,” he said. Isabelle’s little mouth fell open in shock. Henry handed the flowerpot to his younger brother, also red-haired, then walked away.

Much to the giggles of all women present, the younger brother knelt on one knee before Isabelle. “I give thee this present as a token of Germany’s affection for France’s Little Rose.”

Isabelle looked into this little boy’s eyes. She had no idea what he meant. Neither did he, she realized. She took the flowerpot he offered, then ran to the corner of the room without saying a word.

Blanche called after her, “Princess Isabelle, you must say *merci!*”

She looked up from the dazzling little thorny bush in the flowerpot. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Charles had finally appeared after Mass, and had started a game of tag with the young German prince Henry. Henry was Frederick Barbarossa’s grandson—a big boy, a bully of sorts—and it wasn’t long before Charles and he were roughhousing all over the Great Room floor.

“*Ow!* You can’t pinch me! I’m to be king someday!” Henry shouted. The families turned to see Charles underneath the German prince, pinching the latter as hard as he could on the arm in order to get the stocky princeling off his chest.

Knowing that Charles was a mean boy and had no qualms about snagging in a blow below the belt, Blanche rushed over to stop him from an assault that could diminish the odds of any future German heirs.

Isabelle watched it all from behind the white robes of her governess, Neci, a kind woman with much patience. She hid behind Neci’s long brown hair and heard that the other little boy who’d given her the rosebush in the flowerpot was named Conrad. Like Henry, he was pale and large, but unlike his brothers, he was also gentle and quiet.

She thought perhaps it was because he had a bit of a stutter. Henry and Conrad were introduced *again* to Isabelle, who shrank back only to be dragged to the front by Neci. Henry was talking about how

many toys he had, while Conrad stood staring at Isabelle's gown. Isabelle wasn't listening to them, because she was looking around at all of the adults, who had gotten strangely still.

The women were staring at Isabelle, occasionally making remarks about the two red-haired boys in front of her. They were . . . watching her . . . for some reason. They had never paid any interest before. Isabelle turned her face to Neci's robes and buried it. She felt Neci's hand on the back of her head and suddenly, she was soothed and everything melted away into comfort.

Neci had that way about her. Nothing could harm Isabelle if Neci was near. She could hear the adults laughing, and saying things she didn't understand.

"She was talking marriage just this morning with Louis," Blanche said, and the others laughed.

"Come, Mother, or we'll be late," Louis insisted, and it seemed he was trying to push attention away from his little sister. His voice seemed strained.

"Well, it was good to see the three of them together. Instructive." The German queen, with her strange accent, was speaking to Blanche on the way out the door. "Come, children!"

Isabelle did not turn around to say good-bye, even though Henry and Conrad both said good-bye to her and bowed before running off to join the group. Then there was blessed silence.

Isabelle didn't go down to the carriages. Nor was she missed, for the excitement of the impending journey shut out all other peripherals.

Isabelle was such a peripheral.

She stared down from the tall tower, her little frame upon Louis' bed, her knees bent and legs tucked under. As Neci stood nearby, she held onto his pillow, because she could smell him on it: a sweet cinnamon smell that she loved. The window distorted the carriages and the horses, making them swell slightly.

"Good-bye, Louis," she said.

Isabelle pointed to the two red-haired boys getting into a wagon. “Why do *they* get to go with *their* parents?”

“Because they’re German and their parents decided it was fine for them to travel,” Neci replied. The governess sat on the dais behind Isabelle, holding the yellow-budded rosebush from Germany in her hands.

“I miss Louis already.” Isabelle tried not to cry. She held onto his pillow and bit her lip.

“I will keep you company, Little Rose. You will not miss your brother for long,” Neci replied.

“How do you know that?” Isabelle asked, looking back at the rosebush in Neci’s brown hands.

Neci seemed sad. “Because it is what I was told once when I was very young.”



Despite her assurance, Isabelle found that Neci was wrong. Every day without Louis was terribly long. There was no Robert for company to fall back on, either. Isabelle passed her days close to Neci, for want of affection. Neci gave her plenty, and sometimes Isabelle sensed a deep sadness within Neci that only a child could discern.

Isabelle missed Louis at bedtime most of all. He would often tell her the story of Montlheri. It was a special bedtime legend about her very own family. It centered around the three attendants who had been with Queen Blanche since the early days of her reign. According to the story they had mysteriously appeared to Blanche when Isabelle’s father was killed during the Crusades.

Blanche was in the town of Montlheri when the news came that her husband had been killed. She was trapped in the city without an armed escort. *L’Ordre de la Rose*, three sisters who went by the name “of the Rose,” came to her aid on that day. Without them, Louis said, the whole family would certainly have been killed by the barons.

And from that day forward, Neci, Norea, and Sofia pledged their lives to Blanche's service. Even now that Isabelle was older, the Order of the Rose helped Blanche maintain control over the powerful southern barons.

Neci, Sofia, and Norea all looked strikingly alike, only their temperaments were far different. Of the three, Neci was the most approachable.

Sofia had always intimidated Isabelle. She was silent and stern, and her dark stare was penetrating. Isabelle had fibbed a few times at dinner, and it was always Sofia's painful stare that made Isabelle confess her sins immediately.

Norea was never around very much. She always seemed to be Queen Blanche's errand girl. Whenever the queen mother had a letter to be sent, she often left the delivery in Norea's capable hands.

Louis called the three sisters guardian angels of the royal line. But they had a name of their own.

The Order of the Rose.



Neci watched over Isabelle day and night, and was never far from the girl at any given point. She was an admirable governess: kind and constant, never raising her voice and always allowing Isabelle to follow her compulsions. Many of which took place out-of-doors.

The day after Louis had departed, they had planted the Crown Rose, the little rosebush given to Isabelle by Conrad. Isabelle spent her afternoons picking flowers out in the courtyard behind the great tower of the *palais*. This day, like the others, was warm and sunny, and the little wilting bouquet of wildflowers and daisies and marigolds was a pleasant distraction from her loneliness.

She found the buzz of black and fuzzy bumblebees prowling the garden hedge soothing, and the smell of honeysuckle wafting on the air turned the world into a sweeter place. Isabelle stood by the patch

of daisies and swung back and forth, deliberating on which daisy would be added to her little fist of flowers.

The sound of conversation was carried on the wind, as many servants were also outside in the pleasant hours, going about the washing or sewing, or tending *le jardin*. Courtiers strolled idly about the yard. The sun was hot but the air cool, a benefit of the months of change.

As Isabelle leaned over to pick another daisy, she heard a sound and looked up. A giant black bloodhound was prowling the inner keep. It slavered and chewed at its own jowls, and blood and froth formed on its muzzle. Its eyes were red with pain and hatred.

The growling mass of fur and muscle stood only a few feet away from her. She froze with terror, unable to cry out in fear. The eyes of this hound were bloodshot, red-rimmed, and leaking. She had heard her brother say a word once: “rabid.” The young girl could see the need for blood in the beast’s wild eyes.

She felt the hair on the nape of her neck stand straight up. She couldn’t move, could only stare at this feral, demonic hound, who crouched down for the killing leap.

Then its eyes slid past her face, and she realized it was staring just over her right shoulder. It cringed, its muscles contracting involuntarily, and it looked past her with such hatred and anger that Isabelle wondered what it was looking at.

Fighting her own fear, she turned and looked behind her. Neci was standing next to a tall, thin man whose hand was extended, index finger raised slightly. His dark eyes were staring directly into the hound’s eyes behind her.

The stranger spoke only one word: “*Go!*” But that one word held the *power* of the *world*. Isabelle turned to look at the hound.

The dog was scampering away even before it had time to take its eyes off the man behind her. It turned tail and fled. Then it was completely gone from view. Isabelle stared after it, breathing fast, her heart beating hard against her ribcage.

She heard the sound of hurried footfalls and realized that Neci had approached and was calling her name.

“. . . Isabelle?” Neci knelt down to look at the girl before her. Isabelle looked down at Neci.

“Yes?” Her breathing was easing up now, and she realized her knees were weak.

“You need to go into the house now, Little Rose. It is getting late, and it’s not safe outside.”

Isabelle frowned, but given the circumstances, she no longer wanted to stay outside anyway. The dog had frightened her. It was the kind of fright that consumes the world, its taste sharp at the back of the throat. Isabelle never forgot the first time she experienced that fear.

But she was *safe*. The dog had fled. The man had made the dog leave. Isabelle turned and looked behind her.

He was gone.

“Who was that?” Isabelle asked.

“Who?” Neci asked.

Isabelle pointed to where He had been standing a few moments earlier. “The man. He stopped the dog.”

“You should run inside, Little Rose. Wash your hands for dinner. They’re covered in soil.” Neci stood and patted Isabelle on the back.

“But he was there . . .” The little girl trailed off in wonder.

“Dinner,” Neci urged.

Isabelle walked with weak legs toward the door of the family tower. For a moment she was afraid that the dog was right behind her, stalking her, ready to jump on her back and knock her down to the ground. She wanted to speed up and run to the door and slam it shut behind her.

But then she remembered the man, and suddenly she knew that there would be no dog. She was *safe*, and he had made certain of it before leaving. Even if the dog came back, she *knew* he would be there to stop it. Isabelle didn’t wonder why or how. She *believed*.



The morning after the dog attack, they sat at the table eating bread and drinking water. As Isabelle sat beside Neci, picking at some bread, she asked, “Why is your hair wet every morning?”

“Because I wash it at dawn.”

“Why?”

“It’s a part of my oath,” Neci replied.

“Knights take oaths, too.” Isabelle had just finished reading about King Arthur’s court with her tutors the week before.

“*Oui*, they do.”

“But what is the oath?” Isabelle asked.

“To protect the king and his family,” Neci replied, and Isabelle was uncertain whether or not she meant the knight’s oath or her own.

“You protect the king?”

“I do, little one.”

“Does that man also protect the king?” Isabelle asked again, for the sixth time since yesterday.

“What man?” Neci asked innocently.

“The *man*! The man who made the dog go away!”

“There was no man, Little Rose. Say no more on it.”

“*Non*, Neci. Don’t lie. You were with him!”

Neci leaned down, her wet dark hair sloping a bit against her face. “Isabelle, do you love me true?” Neci asked quietly.

Suddenly things seemed very serious. Isabelle replied in a low voice, “Yes.”

“Then you will not speak of the man again. Ever. It is our secret, do you understand?”

Isabelle only nodded and swallowed. Neci’s voice was serious, but still kind.

“Can you keep secrets?” Neci asked.

“*Oui*, I can keep secrets.” Isabelle looked back at Neci, who leaned

in with a smile spreading across her long cheeks, turning the corners of her eyes into small crow's-feet of delight.

"Then as your reward, I'll show you another secret. All right?"

Suddenly all was forgotten. "Yes! I'm very good at secrets, I keep many for Louis!"

"Hand me that rosemary needle over there from your bread," Neci said. Isabelle picked the rosemary off her bread and handed it to Neci, who put it in the palm of her hand and closed her fingers around it tightly.

When she opened her slender fingers again, inside, resting on her palm, was a tiny flower no larger than a pea. It was a pale lavender color and so delicate that Isabelle feared her breath would blow it out of Neci's hand.

Isabelle was stunned. "How did you do that?"

"A little divine inspiration," Neci said. "Perhaps one day, if you're very good, you will learn how to do it too."

And despite much prodding, that is all Neci would say about the incident. Isabelle desperately wanted to make flowers from leaves, but Neci would not show her how. Isabelle was always curious about Neci and her two sisters from that day on. She also grew very fond of Neci and carried her secrets faithfully in her young heart.



In the weeks that followed, Isabelle passed the time by reading as she sat by the window in the Great Room. Sometimes Neci would read aloud to her, as she stared at the road that led to the castle, in the hope that Louis would come charging up the center of it on his horse. Coming back home. Coming back to his Little Rose.

Then one day, she heard trumpets, and the thunder of hooves, and as she rushed down the long stairway, she knew that the wait was over.

She ran down the road to the castle gates as the large party paraded

past. Finally, Isabelle spotted Louis. Isabelle fought her way through the legs of all the hangers-on, the courtiers who were at every public—and certainly tried to be at any private—gathering, in an effort to reach her brother Louis.

Isabelle had always been afraid of the hangers-on, fearing the way their eyes drank her in, and the yawning hunger they seemed to show through needy arms with grasping fingers. She strove to wriggle through them, and fought against them to reach her brother on the other side of the throng.

His blond hair, like hers, was shining in the sunlight. He had a smile so bright, it made her heart quiver. She ran up to him before he could dismount his horse.

He hopped down to greet his Little Rose and was pushed back by the force of her impact. Isabelle held him tightly about the waist, and a small tear rolled down one cheek. She didn't want to cry, but it had escaped. She had missed Louis—in fact everyone—but Louis the most. Now at last the stretch of eternity seemed over.

A voice from behind broke the tender moment. “Who is this, my dear?”

Isabelle turned and saw a woman with dark brown hair and blue eyes looking down at her.

“This is the Crown Rose of France, my little sister, Isabelle,” he replied to the woman. Then he added, “Isabelle, this is my bride, Margaret.”

“How do you do?” Isabelle said, and forced a smile.

“Very well, *merci*. Pleased to meet you.” The grasp of the woman's gloved hand was soft and dainty as they shook hands. Isabelle felt odd, not sure what it all meant. The smile was nothing more than a formality. It was not unkind, but under the circumstances, there was no way it could ever be genuine.

Margaret took Louis' arm in her own and quietly pushed past Isabelle toward the castle walls. “Your Majesty, you must show me

everything here that has meaning to you. Tell me all about your favorites. I want to know them so that I may better know you. . . .”

And then the royal couple were out of earshot. Isabelle stood alone in the road and watched them enter the castle. *But I am his favorite*, she thought as she watched Margaret doting on Louis. Her cheeks were hot, and another tear rolled down her cheek. *Louis? Why don't you tell her? Louis? . . .*

All that we do is done with an eye to something else.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 B.C.)

2

1, mars, l'an de notre Seigneur 1237

There was something warm and magical about the *palais de la Cité* during the reign of King Louis. Visitors commented on how the *palais* was always lit, even on dark nights, as if an inner light shone from the depths of the castle and into the night. Peace reigned no matter the argument. King Louis was often sought out to mediate disputes for other countries, because his presence, his castle, and his lands were hospitable to resolutions.

No one asked why; no one ventured a guess as to the nexus of the grace that favored the halls and its inhabitants. The children who grew within the walls of the *palais* grew to be straight as yew, firm in opinion, and kind in mercy.

In the year of 1237, when Isabelle turned the bright age of twelve, she was finally an adult of full stature and could attend court.

In appearance, she seemed a young woman of resolute character, good breeding, modesty, and piety.

But in her heart, she constantly fought to rein in her emotions, which were tempestuous and passionate. Her disposition was out of place against the cool cerebral qualities of the queen mother. Of all her brothers, only Robert understood her impulses.

But Robert often scandalized the family, and the queen mother began to insist in consistently more serious tones that he become

serious about his duties, marry, and settle down to rule Artois, the province he would receive upon knighthood.

“If he ever achieves it,” Louis would often joke, much to Isabelle’s dismay. The thought weighed heavily on her.

“There’s very little real passion in the royal court, isn’t there?” Isabelle asked Neci as they walked the open courtyard halls of the *palais*.

“What do you mean?” Neci asked.

“People in my family never seem to get excited or angry. Haven’t you noticed it?”

Neci walked silently for a little bit, and it seemed to Isabelle that something restrained her from answering directly.

“Is that why you read so much?” Neci said at last. “To stay out of the world as it truly is?”

“I like my books,” Isabelle said. “They have passion, even if it’s arguing geometric theory. But it’s clear to me that *Maman* thinks passion is best discarded in favor of courtly manners. I am supposed to be judicious, wise, and contemplative. This is how Louis is, and how *Maman* expects us all to be.”

“And so you’re lost in a disposition that doesn’t suit you?” Neci asked.

Isabelle thought about this. Three years earlier, Isabelle had learned to suppress her feelings for Louis when he brought Margaret home as his bride. She’d practiced containment over these last three years as Margaret and Louis became fast friends. Louis now studied his lessons and went gaming exclusively with Margaret, leaving his brothers behind. Louis’ new favoritism often angered Robert. But Isabelle had realized the day that Louis brought Margaret home just how well the blessed art of detachment helped where matters of the heart were concerned.

She had somewhat replaced her passion for Louis with a passionate friendship with Robert. They were known for heated debates over