**Chapter 1 – New King**

"I'll make it right as rain."

The words hung in the air for one heartbeat before blue flame engulfed Rasslow. His skin blackened, peeled, vanished. A scream died in his throat as fire consumed him from the inside out. Three seconds, and only ash survived, spiraling down through still air.

Shandar's hands shook violently. Her pupils had shrunk to pinpoints.

Rika moved without hesitation, catching Shandar's face between her palms. "Breathe." Her voice cut through the roaring in Shandar's ears. "One. Two." She counted each breath until Shandar matched her rhythm. "Tell me."

Shandar clutched Rika's wrists. Tears tracked down her face, but her eyes remained fixed on the ashes. "I need you inside." The words scraped raw from her throat. "Please."

The others formed a circle around them, a wall of turned backs. Finrod stalked toward the prisoners, his cloak snapping against his ankles. Kumar and Arbor positioned themselves at opposite corners, scanning for threats. Dagmar shadowed Finrod, one hand resting on his sword. Salem drifted to Baltan, wings pulsing with agitated light.

Only Blair remained close, two precise steps away, distance carefully measured for dignity's sake.

‘I'm here.’

Rika's consciousness flowed into Shandar's mind like warm water into cracked earth. Immediately, she felt the jagged edges of Shandar's terror, not fresh pain, but old wounds torn open.

A midnight corridor stretched before them. Doors lined both walls, some ornate with gilded handles, others simple wood, a few barely more than gauzy curtains. All closed, except one. It stood ajar, its frame worn from repeated use. Through the gap came sounds, fabric tearing, a girl begging, a man's laugh. Rika didn't hesitate. She pushed it shut.

‘Lock it’, Shandar's thoughts fractured around the words. ‘Don't tell me what you use.’

Rika summoned a silver moonstone lock. It sank into the wood, sealing the door with pale light that pulsed once and steadied. The corridor fell silent.

‘Where did you learn this?’ Rika asked.

‘My mother taught me.’ Shandar's mental voice sounded distant. She created the need, then provided the solution.

‘The doors hold...’

‘My life.’ The words echoed hollowly. ‘She'd sell me to clear her debts. Men for a night. After, she'd show me how to lock it away.’ A laugh like breaking glass. ‘I'm damaged goods.’

The revelation hit Rika physically. Her body tensed, breath stopping mid-inhale. Blair moved forward, concern etched on his face, but Rika's raised hand halted him.

‘Wait for me,’ she whispered, withdrawing carefully.

Shandar felt Rika's absence like a sudden chill. Through tears, she watched Rika rise and pull Salem aside.

"What do you know about mothers who betray daughters?" Rika asked, her voice so low Salem had to lean closer.

Salem's wings dimmed. "Such cheerful conversation." She pulled Rika against her, creating a pocket of privacy. "Why?"

Rika spoke quickly, describing the corridor and what she'd glimpsed behind the door. Salem's face hardened, something ancient and dangerous flickering behind her eyes.

"Lashnar chose her," Salem murmured. "Unlimited power for a woman carrying a fortress of demons." Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Gods have peculiar humor."

"How do I help her?" Rika glanced back at Shandar's huddled form. "That wagon over there, that dead man, they're from when she was eleven. Her mother arranged it." Her fingers dug into Salem's arm. "Rasslow said the same words her abuser used. It wasn't him she was seeing."

Salem's wings flared once, casting strange shadows. Salem's expression turned ominous. "I'm afraid," she said in a steely, unyielding tone, "that you must convince everyone here to cast Rasslow aside. Assure her it was the only possible course. Even if it's a lie, it must be done for her to move onward." Her eyes bore into her empty palms, an unsettling aura radiating from her as she tried to offer Rika a strained smile.

Before they could return to Shandar, an agonizing, bone-chilling scream ripped through the air.

The King’s crown materialized on Blair’s head, ancient gold catching the firelight like a flare of judgment. In that instant, prophecy became flesh.

"Father!" he cried, but the word came out tangled, half-laugh, half-sob.

His laughter rang out, brittle and wild, like glass shattering in a quiet room. It wasn’t joy, it was disbelief cracking open under pressure, a sound too sharp to be celebratory. His cheeks flushed violently as blood surged to the surface, not from pride but from the sheer force of emotion tearing through him.

Then his soul let out a holler so deep it hurt him inside.

A sharp, stabbing pain bloomed in his chest, radiating outward like fire through dry brush. He staggered, one hand braced against the earth, the other clutching his chest as if to hold himself together. His breath came in ragged gasps, each one harder to catch than the last.

The mountain air had carried the scent of pine moments before. Now it tasted of ash and endings, acrid, bitter, final. The world around him seemed to recoil, mirroring the loss that gripped him from within.

He knelt on the trampled ground, prince no longer, his body trembling with the force of his grief, the vibrant color draining from his face, leaving him pale and hollow-eyed. Shandar moved to him, her red hair falling forward as she knelt. Her leather armor creaked. "Lashnar be damned," she whispered, her voice carrying in the sudden silence. "Blair is king."

Blair's fingers dug into the dirt. "I wasn't ready."

Across the fire, Rika turned away. Her throat tightened with grief not just for the king she'd served, but for the loss she saw in Blair's eyes. Something else twisted beneath her grief, something she refused to name. She had no right to jealousy when a son mourned his father.

The freed Norsemen conscripts dismantled their camp at the clearing's edge, their movements quick, deliberate. They averted their eyes from the scene, the crown, the magic, the grief. The tales of their childhood made flesh, terrifying in their reality.

Finrod knelt, his elven posture perfect despite days of hard travel. Beside him, Arbor and Kumar joined hands, forming a circle as they whispered their mourning rite in their native tongue.

Baltan stood apart, the young guardsman's face drained of color. When Rika touched his shoulder, he flinched.

"The king is dead," he said. "I swore to protect him."

"We all failed him," Rika said.

Salem wound between them, shifting from smoke to fur to something between. "The living need you now," the elemental said, eyes fixed on Blair.

Blair pushed himself to his feet. The crown sat heavy, too large for his brow. His gaze found Rika across the clearing.

"My mother?" he asked.

The question carried everything: Is she alive? Does she know? What do I do now?

Rika settled cross-legged on the ground. "I'll find her."

She closed her eyes. The familiar separation came more easily now her consciousness lifting from her body, amber and translucent. She directed her spirit southward, toward Newburg, the journey passing in heartbeats.

She materialized above the eastern gate. Below, a wagon waited off the main road, archers positioned around it. Not refugees something else. Rika drifted closer. The archers wore no insignia, emerald cloaks, their faces grim.

Raised voices drew her toward the harbor. A wooden platform stood at the water's edge, torchlight pushing back the gathering dusk. Queen Ellis stood at its center, facing a red-faced man in expensive robes.

"...cannot accommodate so many based on rumors!" the man was saying. "No scout has confirmed this army."

"Crenwelge has fallen," Ellis said. Her voice remained controlled, though Rika saw the cost of that control in the tension of her shoulders. "My husband ordered the evacuation himself."

"And where is the king? Why is he not here making these requests?"

Rika allowed her form to shimmer into visibility before Ellis. Gasps rippled through the crowd. The queen's eyes widened the only break in her composure.

Rika placed her translucent hands on either side of Ellis's face, setting up their connection.

'Brace yourself,' Rika thought. She waited until she felt Ellis's mental shield strengthen. 'Blair is King.'

Ellis's knees buckled. For just an instant, the queen vanished, and a grieving wife took her place. Then iron discipline reasserted itself.

"How is he?" Ellis asked aloud.

'Lost. Afraid. Trying to be strong.'

'Bring him to me.'

Ellis squared her shoulders. "Lord Steward, prepare the eastern courtyard. The King of Monde approaches."

Tears cut clean tracks down Ellis's face, but her voice hardened. "Move now."

The steward lunged forward. "Lies! All lies to steal power while the king is away!"

Ellis moved a single fluid motion. Her leg connected with the steward's temple. He crumpled at her feet.

Ellis faced the stunned crowd. "Now we can speak like civilized people."

Leagues away, Rika gasped as her consciousness slammed back into her body. When her vision cleared, Blair knelt before her, the crown askew on his head.

"Your mother lives," Rika said, reaching up to straighten the crown without thinking. Her fingers brushed his hair. "But Newburg stands on a knife's edge. The steward resists. Your mother needs you there."

"Then we go," Blair said, rising. "My people need to see their king."

Shandar caught Rika's eye across the circle. A silent understanding passed between them. Whatever came next, they would face it together.

"It will take days to reach Newburg," Finrod said. "Even riding hard."

"Not necessarily." Rika touched the Star of Serenity at her throat. The blue stone pulsed beneath her fingers. She extended her hands. "Circle together. Touch."

They formed a ring elf, humans, elemental, fairy. Baltan hesitated before joining, his soldier's instincts wary of magic.

"What happens now?" Blair asked.

"I move us," Shandar said, and pulled the world inside out.

Reality compressed. Rika's stomach lurched as space folded around them. For an instant, they existed everywhere and nowhere.

Then they materialized on the platform in Newburg with a thunderclap of displaced air.

The crowd recoiled. Before them stood creatures from legend three elves with luminescent skin, a shimmering elemental being, a fairy warrior, two women crackling with magical energy, a royal guard, and a young man wearing a crown too heavy for his years.

Bedlam erupted. Men shouted accusations of witchcraft. Women pulled children behind them. Some fell to their knees in terror. Others drew weapons.

Blair stepped forward, his hand raised. "People of Newburg..."

But his voice was lost in the chaos. Then Ellis was there, moving through the crowd to the platform. Blair broke from the group, stumbling toward her.

Their embrace silenced the crowd, the desperate clutching of two people who'd lost everything but each other.

"Father?" Blair whispered against her shoulder, a question only she could hear.

Ellis shook her head once. "Gone. Your brothers too."

Blair's shoulders stiffened. He turned to face the crowd, his mother's hand in his.

Rika found Shandar staring at the chaos below, her hands trembling.

"They'll tear each other apart," Shandar whispered. "Just like at Crenwelge."

Rika stepped behind her, wrapping her arms around Shandar's waist. She brushed red hair aside and leaned her head against Shandar's shoulder.

"You're not what they made you," Rika said softly. "You survived. It wasn't your choice."

Shandar's fingers brushed against Rika's. "Sister," she said, "you anchor me when the fire threatens to consume everything." She gestured at the frenzied crowd. "But what do we do about them?"

"We show them the truth," came a voice from the edge of the platform.

Two figures approached, Tartus and Sholin A'Tai, carrying between them a wooden frame etched with glowing runes. The waarzeggerij. The truth-seer.

Ellis and Blair faced the crowd together.

"I am Queen Ellis Whyte-Willow," Ellis said, each word carrying over the noise. "My husband Vardon Willow is dead. My sons Glorin and Saad Willow are dead. Murdered by the horde that now marches toward your city."

The crowd grew quieter, drawn by her certainty.

"My youngest son, Blair Willow, now stands before you as your king."

Blair stepped forward. "I didn't want this crown," he said, his voice steadier than Rika had expected. "But I will wear it to protect my people."

"Where's your proof?" someone shouted. "There is no horde!"

Ellis nodded to Sholin. As guards hauled the groggy steward to his feet, Tartus positioned the waarzeggerij before the crowd.

"Blood," he said to Rika.

Rika pricked her finger and traced the frame's edge. The runes flared brilliant blue, then faded to smoldering red.

Shandar approached, her hands steady now. "Let me."

With a gesture, she expanded the waarzeggerij until it formed a window into another place. Through it appeared an army row upon row of monstrous soldiers marching beneath banners of rot and flame. The crowd fell silent, horror replacing disbelief.

The steward struggled to his feet, swaying. His bloodshot eyes found Shandar, narrowed, then widened with horrified recognition.

"You." The word fell between them like a stone. "The red-haired witch. My son's letters described you."

Shandar went rigid. One word escaped her. "Rasslow."

The steward lurched forward, desperation replacing shock. "My son where is he?"

Shandar's fingers curled inward. The platform beneath her feet seemed to tilt.

"Dead." The word hung in the air, bare and cruel. "He betrayed us to save your family." She paused, something raw breaking through her composure. "He triggered something in me I couldn't..." Her voice caught. "I never meant to harm him."

The steward stared at her, uncomprehending, then understanding. His face transformed, grief carving deep lines around his mouth, rage darkening his eyes to black pits.

"Murderer." The word was barely audible, then louder: "MURDERER!"

He lunged, fingers outstretched for her throat.

Rika moved, but too late. Shandar's hands flashed upward, wreathed in sudden flame that cast her face in terrible light. She caught the steward by his collar, the fire licking dangerously close to his skin.

For three thundering heartbeats, Rika saw death in Shandar's eyes.

Then something shifted. Shandar pivoted, dragging the man toward the magical window. With a grunt of effort, she hurled him through the waarzeggerij straight toward the approaching horde displayed within.

The crowd gasped as one. The steward's body tumbled through impossible space, vanishing into the distant battlefield where monsters marched.

Shandar turned back to Rika, her eyes hollow. "Now he can join his son."

The barrier shattered. The steward materialized directly in the horde's path. A soldier swung a poleaxe wreathed in sickly green flames, cleaving through him. The pieces tumbled beneath marching feet, trampled without pause.

The window collapsed, leaving only silence.

Blair stepped forward, the crown no longer seeming too large for him.

"Now you've seen what comes for us," he said. "This is what murdered my father and brothers. This is what will destroy us all unless we stand together." He extended his hand toward Shandar, who stood with her arms wrapped around herself, shaking. "Human and magical beings alike."

The crowd stared at their new king standing beside creatures of legend, offering not protection but alliance.

Ellis moved to Blair's side. "We evacuate to Tiereny tonight. Those who wish to live, come with us."

Shandar turned to Rika, her eyes haunted. "I killed another man today."

"You showed them the truth," Rika said, though the words felt hollow.

"Truth and death seem to follow me everywhere," Shandar whispered.

In the crowd below, a child pointed at Shandar, then at Blair. "The prophecy," the child said, voice carrying in the silence. "Fire and crown united."

The prophecy had begun its fulfillment, and none were ready for what that meant.

The stage fell silent. Where moments before a crowd had gathered, now only empty space remained save for a solitary figure approaching through the void.