The old king was dying. He went about it the way he went about most things – calmly. Inevitable as his death was, it had treated him patiently, and he was happy to return the favour.

At his request, they had taken him to the south tower where the chambers had windows on all sides. Were he able to stand, Gideon would have been able to watch the sun set and rise over the panorama stretching from the castle gardens to the peaceful farmland beyond the city walls. But seeing as he could not stand, his deathbed was well lit, and he enjoyed the occasional cross-breeze when the windows were open.

Gideon had been sick for a long time, now. Fifteen months ago, though he could no longer be sure, he had developed a cough. His healer had given him vials of bitter potions, and the cough disappeared. Only to return with a vengeance three weeks later. One after the other, his handkerchiefs stained scarlet and were burnt. The healer’s potions lost their effect and her attempts to cure him became desperate. The old woman took him to a barren room lit by rows of candles, and had him sit naked in a piled mound of earth. Her eyes had rolled up into the back of her skull, and pupil-less, she murmured things Gideon couldn’t understand.

The witch’s name was Ruto. She had been the royal healer for forty-four years. The first ever witch granted legal entry to the city, her original purpose had been to heal the human Queen and leave. The war had only just ended. The treaty brokered between King Gideon and the Witch Queen allowed witches to build villages outside of their sacred forest, and through trade, humans were given access to the medicinal herbs and exotic fruits found only in the forest. The Witch Queen had sent Ruto to heal the king’s pregnant and gravely-ill wife as a gesture of goodwill. But the atrocities of the war wouldn’t be erased so easily. Many humans thought their queen’s illness had been the work of the witches, and they scoffed at the idea of a witch healer. But Gideon had strictly ordered that no one in the castle would lay a hand on her, so she was avoided like the plague everyone thought she was anyway.

Ruto hadn’t minded the isolation. She tended to agree with the witches who called humans rats. Filthy, ugly, selfish creatures who held nothing of importance sacred. She had seen human soldiers wearing the bones of her fallen sisters into battle. Traditionally, the body of a dead witch was taken to the hollow in the forest and buried at the foot of the tree in the Witch Queen’s antechamber. The remains would dissolve into the earth and their vitality would pass into the tree. But the rats had bleached their trophies with sour chemicals, so they were just bones now. By the end of the war, Ruto had seen enough of humans. She would have been happy to never set eyes on one again. When the elders had relayed the Witch Queen’s orders, she had stood frozen and silent. One of them had put a hand on her shoulder. She left the next morning. She had the King’s letter of invitation, which would get her inside the castle without being skewered by an overambitious glory-thirsty soldier, a change of clothes, and as many herbs and fungi as she could fit. No keepsakes. The taste of bitterness in her mouth lingered, but it would fade with time.

When Ruto failed and the Queen died, along with her unborn child, the humans’ unpleasantries escalated to ambushes with knives. “Heal these,” the soldiers had spat as they carved into her. She did, easily. The King, who had more of an excuse than most to hate witches, reacted quickly. The soldiers who attacked her were arrested and jailed, and in his announcement, the King said that those looking to start another war with the witches by attacking their emissary would be placed in the front and only line of the human army. Gideon had believed the explanation Ruto had given upon her arrival that healing magic was only able to truly heal witches. The medicines she could create were still better than any a human healer could concoct, but they were not miraculous. She could not persuade a human body to divert from a course it was already determined to take. And Gideon, though still grieving, invited her to stay as the royal healer. Ruto knew that this was exactly what the Witch Queen had been hoping for, so she accepted Gideon’s offer. Over time, as she lived in the castle and healed the sick and injured, she saw what so many of her kind swore was impossible in humans: a tenderness for other living creatures. They sometimes hesitated and demonstrated thoughtfulness. Ruto and Gideon became great friends, but she grew to love his grandchildren best. They reminded her of her sisters. Human children could see the simplicity of right and wrong where their adult counterparts saw only necessity. Perhaps children were naïve, but at least they would feel sorrow for a felled tree or a slaughtered animal. They were wise little creatures, and Ruto often told them so.

But their friendship was coming to a close. Gideon’s illness remained. Exhausted from her futile bid to heal him, Ruto had slept for four days afterward. When she woke, she came before him and sank to her knees. She spoke quietly. Gideon’s disease was beyond her abilities, and he would not survive it.

As for the King, his age showed. He was nearly seventy-five, and his prominent features had been obscured by wrinkles both fine and deep that made his face look like a field plowed by a drunk farmer. But his mind was anything but slow. He had known, or rather felt, for a long time that this disease would take his life. He was happy to let Ruto try and save him, after all, what if she succeeded? But he wasn’t taken aback by her news. “I suppose this is what I get for keeping the peace,” he sighed.

Ruto squinted.

Gideon shifted in his seat and smiled. “My father always expected me and my siblings to die in glorious battle. I expect his spirit is furious right now.”

Her expression eased. Ruto herself was nearly a hundred-and-forty, though most humans would have guessed that she was in her late thirties. She had heard stories of Gideon’s father. He was a war-maker, who made threats and broke promises to surrounding human countries in the hope of becoming a feared and respected opponent who other countries would rush to appease. Instead, the other countries ignored him. Renwick was ignored in trade deals, alliances, even parties. It led to a significant rise in poverty among the human citizens. Fortunately for Gideon, his mother was a quiet Renwickan noblewoman who introduced a gentler temperament into the family. And King Geffery died as he had lived, an idiot, from wounds sustained during some inconsequential skirmish on one of Renwick’s borders. Though as a credit to his intelligence, *he* had never attempted to fight the witches.

The war between witches and humans had been a long time coming. Human farmers feared the mysterious and strange women that lived in the forest in the corner of the kingdom, and they would never dare to enter it. They thought it was an entrance to hell, and that hell was where the witches, the servants of the devil, had come from. So if any witch was caught outside of the overgrown canopy, she was killed. The human religion preached the same philosophies, which didn’t help. But this was the way it had been since the humans had settled these lands. As for the witches, who were happiest in the forest anyway, these attacks had never been great tragedies. The only witches who left the forest were those who had known the risks and had chosen to leave regardless, which was rare, or those who had been exiled. To be exiled was to be permanently cut off from the forest and the other witches, and it was a severe punishment reserved for the most severe of crimes: murder or treason. Exiled witches were not expected to live long after having been banished, and if they were killed by marauding humans, it didn’t bother anyone.

But the forest-dwellers had been experiencing a population boom. Pushed by cramped living conditions inside the hollow, the younger generation innovated and made homes above the forest floor in the dense canopy of trees. They slept in hammocks woven from dried vines, and they cast spells that diverted rainwater around them when they slept. They built raised structures for cooking fires on the forest floor. And aside from the occasional twisted ankle if a witch slipped from a height, life continued as normal. But the population kept growing, and soon even the canopy became cramped.

The war began when a young witch child lost her way while looking for some sour fruit for her mother. Such delicacies had been growing scarcer as the forest struggled to support the needs of so many witches. In her search, she came close to the edge of the forest, close enough to be seen by passing humans, but she knew not to venture outside of its boundary. Her body was found that evening, sagging against the fabric of the cloak pinned to the tree at her back. She was a pin cushion of arrows. Some passing humans had spotted her and shot at her, and when they had the child trapped, they used her for target practice. A child of only six, she had no magic yet, she posed no threat, she had not even left the forest. The uproar from the witches demanded vengeance on the nearby human village where the humans had likely come from. How could these rats think of the witches as demons when they themselves were capable of such savagery? It was not enough to murder every witch that stepped outside the forest, but now they weren’t even safe inside? The anger spiraled over days, kindled greater by the much-discussed fact that a single witch was more powerful than twenty humans. Soon it became an outcry to destroy the human kingdom altogether.

The ensuing war was a savage one, and lasted several years. It came to a head when King Gideon set fire to the forest in the hopes of burning the witches’ legendary tree. The fire burned so hungrily that the Witch Queen herself couldn’t put it out until a lucky rain, and by that time the forest was half its original size. Fortunately, the hollow was safe in the untouched half. The witches pulled back to the forest, and in the fighting, King Gideon’s eldest son was killed. To make matters worse, his wife became ill. These losses, atop the mutual loss of lives, forced the Witch Queen and King Gideon to the table to broker a treaty. The meetings took place in neutral territory. The King attended personally, and brought his priest with him. The Witch Queen sent one of the few remaining elders, and this elder conjured a surrogate of the Queen from mud and sticks, through which the Queen was able to speak. Several meetings took place before the two rulers came to an agreement. The war was ended, and from then forward, Renwick knew peace. There were six witch villages now, outside the forest, protected under the orders of King Gideon. Trade with humans was able to flow freely and bountifully through these villages, as humans were still forbidden from entering the forest. Some witches even fell in love with human traders and chose to live with them in the capital and raise half-witch children. These children were not especially celebrated by either culture (tensions after the war were slow to settle), but they represented the coming of a new age. An age that King Gideon had helped coax into being.

As for Gideon himself, he was satisfied with his life. He had seen and done more than most, and he had left the world better than he had found it. To be so accepting of one’s own mortality at the young age of seventy-four was a strange concept for Ruto, but she was glad that her friend was happy. She helped numb his pain, and eased the worst of his fevers. This gave him fifteen months he otherwise would not have enjoyed.

On the day of his death, Gideon was seventy-five, and the south tower was crowded. He commented that this probably wasn’t a good sign for his longevity. Greyson, Gideon’s last remaining son, sat nearby with his wife and children. The youngest of them were oblivious toddlers, but the older ones, Landon and Aubrey, understood what was going on. Their concern scrunched their faces and they looked to their father for cues on what to do. Greyson’s face was beginning to show wrinkles, and Gideon wished they were not so pronounced. His son was too young to look so old. He reached his hand out.

Greyson moved forward to kneel next to his father, wrapping the frail hand in his. Gideon closed his eyes and licked his cracked lips. With great effort, he whispered, his lungs gurgling, “Don’t mourn for long, child. You’ll do great things, I know.”

“You’re a difficult act to follow, Father,” the man muttered, ever the child burdened with expectations. “I’ll do the best I can.”

“Well that should be enough, then,” nodded Gideon, as though he and Greyson had been bartering over a vase in the market and Greyson had finally come to an agreeable price. Then, something in the old King’s face creased deeper. “Ruto,” he coughed. “I think I feel a…” he kept coughing.

Ruto stood solemnly at the foot of the bed. “It’s alright Gideon. This is what we spoke about.” Gideon quieted, and Ruto smiled. “Are you ready?”

The frail man nodded, and a priest stepped forward. The priest spoke quietly and rubbed scented oils on Gideon’s forehead. The words were some sort of blessing, and when the priest was finished, Gideon’s eyes were closed and his breathing had stopped.

The entire room was silent, even the toddlers had stopped squirming.

“So passes King Gideon Renwick,” the priest whispered.

Greyson’s hands were clenched fists.

Gideon continued. “We are living through history. This is a new age, and here you are, ready to rule. You will lead Yuta to heights I have only dreamt of.”

The healer stepped forward

Around his deathbed sat his son and grandchildren

it had always kept a few paces behind him. But now he was seventy-four and his paces had slowed enough that this separation was closing. For seventy-four years, death had been patient with him. His long-passed wife did not enjoy such courtesy. But Gideon had lived to see his son grow to a man, and, now a husband with many children, a proper heir his kingdom. So why would Gideon shrink from death? Is that how you treated an old companion?