Greyson’s children scarcely saw him in the week leading up to his coronation. Constantly being whisked away to meetings, he was largely absent from meals and other activities. But he made time in the evening to kiss his children goodnight.

“Father, will you be this busy when you are King?” Audrey asked on one of these evenings, passing her weight from one bare foot to the other.

Greyson paused and looked at her seriously. “I hope not. But I could be.” He knelt down and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Would that make you sad?” She shook her head, but Greyson knew when his only daughter was putting on a brave face. He smiled, all four children. “Our family is about to grow to include every man, woman, and child in Renwick. I will have to look after them, the same as I look after you. You don’t feel neglected when I spend time with your mother or one of your siblings, do you?” The children, to varying degrees, shook their heads. “Then remember that I love the four of you with my whole heart, and being a busy King won’t change that. Everything I do will be for this family, for this country.”

Greyson’s wife, Theresa, was the daughter of the merchant king of Kyostili. Their marriage had been arranged by Gideon. The week prior to their wedding was the first time he had ever laid eyes on her. They had both been nervous, but were both pleasantly surprised with the other. Greyson was kind, considerate. Theresa was as intelligent as her father, but quick to laugh. Neither was unattractive. Both enjoyed reading. And three sons and a daughter later, their marriage was a success by every measure.

It was custom that Queens were not consulted for day-to-day decisions made by their husbands. On larger items, however, Greyson would sometimes break with this and invite his wife to meetings. She was a welcomed addition to conversations involving tax and trade. Had she not been born a princess, Theresa would have made a shrewd businesswoman.

But in the week leading up to the coronation, no such invitation occurred. Instead Greyson would return to their chambers too tired to keep his eyes open for longer than a bare-bones conversation that followed a comfortable script.

“Good evening, my love. How was your day?” Theresa would ask, raising herself from the seat at her vanity to move into bed.

Greyson would yawn and lazily exchange his royal garb for a light tunic as he replied, “It went well. Yours?”

As she would bring up the covers around her, “Uneventful.”

Greyson would blow out the candle, and then join her in bed. “Goodnight, Theresa.”

After a minute she would whisper, “Goodnight Greyson.” But he would already be asleep.

Theresa wanted to help him. She knew what was happening, what all these meetings were for, but the lack of invitation was his way of declining her help. And in the silence between Greyson’s light snores, she lay tense with anxiety.

Ruto was also feeling anxious that week, but for a different reason. She had made a decision, and though she was resolved, a bit of sadness pulled at her. She was able to catch the King-to-be on his way to lunch one afternoon.

“Prince Greyson,” she stepped forward from the wall where she had been waiting as he walked by with several of his father’s advisors. “I wonder if you could spare a few minutes?”

The entire party stopped. Ruto stood quietly, the bottom of her gray wool robe lightly brushing the stone floor. Greyson muttered something to his advisors, who carried on, and then he turned his attention to Ruto. A small smile. “Ruto, it’s good to see you.”

Ruto knew this was a half-truth at best, and at worst a downright lie. Her relationship with Gideon’s heir had always been estranged. All the same, it was nice of him to say it, so she smiled back. Humans expected this kind of feedback during conversation. “I have something important I want to discuss with you. Might we have a word in private?”

Greyson nodded, and motioned toward a small balcony overlooking the royal garden. The royal garden… Most humans would call it beautiful, artfully trimmed hedges blooming with small red flowers, cobblestone walkways gently guiding wanderers through colourful displays of seasonal and exotic flowers. Robins and sparrows bathed in the white marble fountains. Most witches would call it quaint and artificial, an imitation of nature by a limited human mind concerned with its own convenience. But for Ruto, it was still her favourite place in the castle. Sometimes she felt more human than witch.

They stood in silence on the balcony. Greyson, leaning his forearms on the bannister, overlooked the greenery. Ruto stood a respectful distance away. “You were one of my father’s greatest friends, Ruto. You can speak freely to me.”

She had mulled over the words for long enough. “I wish to return home. To my sisters.”

“For a visit?” A reasonable question, Ruto would usually return to the forest once a year. Being away from other witches for too long would lead to her deterioration. Being the Royal Healer was in a similar to being in exile, except that she was welcome to return whenever she desired.

A pregnant pause. “No. I would return to the colony permanently.”

It was difficult to gauge his reaction, he didn’t turn around. He was very still. “You are asking for my leave to go?”

“I have served the royal family loyally for thirty years. Your mother, your father, your wife, your children, even you at one time, I have done my best to heal and nurture. But now that King Gideon has passed…”

“He is the only reason you stayed for so long?”

“I stayed because I felt it was right. But thirty years of service is no small thing. I could continue to serve, but at what point will I be finished? I will outlive your grandchildren, Greyson. I fear that if I do not go now, I will never leave.” Ruto’s slanted eyes moved back to the garden. “I hope you are able to understand.”

Greyson sighed, and then finally turned to look at her. His eyes were sad. They belonged to someone who bore the weight of the earth on his shoulders. “When would you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. Before the coronation.” The pull of the tide within her, the one she had felt since the moment Gideon had died, was growing stronger by the minute. She had completed her duty, so staying for Greyson’s coronation would be worse than pointless.

He sighed again, and then, nodded. “You will say goodbye to the children tonight, and explain to them why you are leaving. Then you will have my leave. Thank you for your service to my family, and the people of this castle."

“Of course.” She bowed quickly, awkwardly, relieved, though she hadn’t anticipated him refusing her. Straightening, she let out a small smile. “You shouldn’t worry about the children. I don’t expect that they will miss me for too long.”

“No? Why is that?”

Ruto spoke kindly. “They are humans.”

“You doubt the attachment of my children because they are human?” His tone dipped into ice.

Ruto was unruffled. “Perhaps I misspoke. I only mean to say that your children will adapt, because they are human, and humans change.”

It was Greyson’s turn to smile. “Some would call that being unreliable.”

She returned his smile. “Most witches would. It’s because human lives are so short and accelerated, all of your changes must happen quickly. You do not stay the same for very long.”

Greyson turned back to the gardens. Absentmindedly, he brought his palm up to his chin in a show of boyish pondering. Ruto, who had known him since the age of six, recognized the motion well. She had been dismissed. She bowed, quietly, and then left to begin packing.

That night, the King-to-be-crowned did not return to his wife until the night was long settled. This was partly because of his work, which had taken up the majority of his evening, but it was also because of the detour he took to visit his children.

He could hear Audrey snoring from her room, so he went into the boys’ room, quietly closed the door, and found a seat for himself in the old armchair in the corner. This room was Landon’s, technically, but the twins had wanted to share with their older brother, and Landon hadn’t minded. Gabriel and Declan slept in makeshift beds close to the servant’s entrance. Landon was closest to the window in his four-poster.

The boys were all deep asleep, their small faces slack-jawed and stress-free. Landon was nearly eight, a kind and fair-minded child who was quick to laugh.

, and he looked after his younger brothers the way Greyson had hoped he would. He was a kind child, fair-minded, and quick to laugh.

looks and in temperament. Not rash like his namesake.

Landon was the name of the hero from an old story, a low-ranking knight who became legendary for his defeat

who fought every battle like it was his last, and won glory and riches, rising through ranks. The Landon of the legends

But he would sometimes discuss larger goals with her

the four of you are the most important things in my life.

“I’m sorry that I can’t be around as much as I used to. I doesn’t mean that I love any of you any less. Being King is like having thousands of

“I understand. I missed my own father when he was off doing his duty. But he told me something that made me feel better. Do you want to know what he told me?” Greyson smiled. “He told me that the High Priest had given him a blessing of such force, it could stop a charging horse in its tracks. So he was always safe, and he c”

The young girl’s eyes were saucers. “

-kids hang out with Ruto a bit. Talk about their grandpa. Ask Ruto to tell them more stories about witches.

-Gideon’s already burried

Landon and Audrey, the eldest at fourteen and twelve, understood the importance of their father’s role. The twins, Elliot and Declan, were less understanding.

his children were not completely

held little leisure time for the soon-to-be king.

Gideon’s funeral was perhaps the larger event of the two,