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 seriously 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. “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. “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 customary 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 the witch. 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 bursting with begonias and petunias. 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 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, 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 for the humans was similar to being in exile, except that she was welcome to return to the colony whenever she desired.

A pregnant pause. “No. I would return permanently.”

“You are asking for my leave to go?” His hands clenched.

“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."

“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.

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

It was Greyson’s turn to smile. He picked at a spot of rock on the railing. “Some would call that being unreliable.”

She returned his smile. “Most witches would. 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.

Greyson was proud of all of his children, but Landon held prominence. Declan and Gabriel were a bit too young to assess, and Audrey was a clever little chatterbox, but Landon had his own demeanor. He wasn’t as talkative as his sister, and instead listened carefully. When he had something to say, he did so, and it was often more insightful than people were expecting. Some found it unnerving, but it reminded Greyson of his own brother.

He sat there a long while, finding solace from his own worries in the peaceful breathing of his heir. When Greyson caught himself beginning to nod off as well, he decided he should return to Theresa. She would be wondering where he was.

He pushed himself to his feet, but the old armchair’s sides squeaked in protest of the new distribution of his weight. The noise was loud, and Landon tossed in his sleep. Greyson froze, and swallowed a curse as the boy’s eyes blinked open. “Father?” he whispered, mindful of his sleeping brothers.

Not as sneaky as he used to be. Greyson forced a smile, “Yes, I was just leaving. Go back to sleep.”

The boy nodded. It seemed he was about to put his head back to the pillow, but he hesitated. “Father, why did Ruto want to leave?”

“Did she not explain? I asked her to see you before she left.”

“She did, she said she missed home, but… I thought we were her family too.”

The father sighed, and knelt to comfort his child. “Witches are a different creature than us. Being around them, we imagine they think the same way as you and I, but they don’t. I believe she loved us, but in her own way. A witch’s family is other witches. They are like a hive of bees.”

Landon considered the offered explanation. “She’s like Mikan?”

It was an old story, old enough that Gideon’s grandfather had been told it as a boy, a dark children’s tale. Lanir, a farmer’s son during a time of war, was taken prisoner by a group of raiding soldiers who killed is mother and father. It was a long story, but Lanir befriended a young wolf who became separated from his pack and named him Mikan. Lanir became a great warrior in the war, Mikan his brother in arms, equally fierce at his side. When the war was over, Lanir was awarded a castle and a wife. They began a family, Mikan a part of it. But the story ends with Mikan chasing after a pack of wolves that were passing through the forest by the castle. The wolf left without a glance back to the orphan, now grown, who had made him his brother.

“Yes,” replied Greyson, finally. “She is like Mikan. A wolf among children.” Landon yawned then, and Greyson seized the opportunity. “You should go back to sleep, child.”

“Yes, father,” came the murmur.

He kissed the boy gently on the forehead, and then slipped out quietly.

Theresa was long asleep, but in her kindness, had left a lit candle next to the bed for her husband. He crawled into bed next to her and blew it out.

Greyson woke with a start at the first touch of dawn. It couldn’t have been more than a few hours of rest, but he was wide awake. Adrenaline, his body’s response to some quickly fading dream, had snapped him into alertness.

He wanted to lay back against his pillow, and disturb Theresa’s sleep by pulling her close to him. Half asleep, she would shift her hair to the side, and they could rest in a tender embrace as the sun rose. But he didn’t move to her. Did his best, in fact, to not disturb her at all as he got to his feet.

Greyson found himself feeling suddenly grateful to have such a caring wife and wonderful children. He had studied enough history to be sure that a happy royal family was a rarity, and Renwick’s history stretched back nearly fourteen hundred years.

One of the oldest civilizations in the world, Renwick’s history was proud and well documented. The secret to its success was an enormous population, lots of land in which to spread out, and competent leadership. As it always is with a monarchy, some rolls of the dice resulted in some weak links and subsequent periods of decline, but Renwick’s vastness allowed it to absorb these blows, for a short period, and then flourish when they were over. Quantity had a quality all of its own.

But Renwick was not immune to time. Greyson’s rule, as it would begin today, would one day become just another entry in that history book. Another name in a sea of names. And one day, as all civilizations do, Renwick would fall, and be replaced by another. The books containing his name, along with more consequential portions of Renwick’s history, the very thing Greyson had studied, would be lost and forgotten. The impermanence of it all seemed like insanity. But this was the insanity that had put Greyson in his position as King, and he saw the path through it. His wife, his children. Their children. If they continued to govern adequately, Renwick, or at least its memory, would endure.

Greyson watched the sky slowly brighten on a day that would indeed be no more unique than any other, but to creatures bound to this place and age, would be catastrophic.

He should get on with it.

Like

Like all of human life was as free-flowing as the winds of a Kaselee sandstorm. Or, perhaps, as random and chaotic as the whims of some cosmic toddler who was easily bored.

But it was best to keep such thoughts to himself. Comparing The God to a toddler was unlikely to incite loyalty from the Magora.

Greyson watched the sky slowly brighten on a day that would indeed be no more unique than any other. But to creatures bound to this time and age, it would be catastrophic.

He should get on with it.

The soldiers found him beneath the floorboards while sacking his home, and saw that he was young and strong. In those early days the boy hated the soldiers but dared not try to run from their horses.

As they travelled, the raiding soldiers left a trail of death behind them, and a pack of wolves was often close behind. One evening, now with a taste for manflesh, the pack became too bold. They attacked a soldier who had strayed from camp. Furious, the soldier’s companions took after the wolves, and Lanir was left with the other prisoners at camp and ordered to tend the fire. The young boy obeyed. Looking in the underbrush for more wood to burn, he spotted a wolf cub who had been separated from the rest of its pack in the chaos. Lanir fed it the leftovers of a rabbit carcass. When he woke the next morning, the wolf cub was curled up against him.

The soldiers found the cub amusing, but told the boy that if he was going to keep the wolf, it would have to fend for itself. Lanir was stubborn to keep his new friend and chose to share his meals with the cub until its foot had healed and could hunt for itself. Over time, even the soldiers grew fond of the wolf, who the boy had named Mikan, and eventually the boy grew fond of the soldiers. Lanir joined their cause, and the soldiers trained him to fight. The farmer’s son showed surprising promise. Within another year, Lanir was fighting in the war, and winning battles, the ferocious and now grown Mikan at his side. Lanir and Mikan became famous as the war continued, eventually leading their own contingent of men. When the war was over, Lanir was made a Lord and was awarded a small castle for his valor. He married a noble maiden and started a family. One night, a roaming pack of wolves passed by the walls of the castle, and the story ends with Mikan chasing after them without a glance back to the orphan, now grown, who had made the wolf his brother.

At first he hated the soldiers for killing his parents, but over time saw that their cause was righteous. but as the years passed The soldiers raised him, trained him.

Lanir was farmer during a time of war, whose village was sacked by a raiding party of soldiers while he was far out in the fields. His wife and daughter were killed. He buried them, grief-stricken. That night a pack of wolves who had learned that the raiding party left a trail of death next to footsteps

He ran back when he heard the screams, but upon his return, saw that his wife and daughter were dead, his home stripped of supplies, and the soldiers gone.

kind child, fair-minded, intelligent for his age, and 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,