The coronation was simple and elegant. In the background, nobles cheered and clapped appropriately. The only disruption came from little Prince Declan, who had let out a yell of excitement during the solemn moment of the crown being placed on Greyson’s head. The toddler’s exclamation, loud and unexpected, echoed around the enormous stone cathedral. For a second, Greyson’s solemnity slipped, and a chuckle escaped him. The rest of the cathedral followed suit, but politely let it die away after a few seconds. Kiara, the nursemaid responsible for Declan and Gabriel, quietly ushered them out to avoid any other outbursts.

Rejoining with the twins after the ceremony, the royal family boarded a carriage and paraded through the safest and widest streets, to meet the cheer and return the waves of the common folk. The family waved enthusiastically, and smiled as they moved through the throngs. Theresa had been practicing this with the children. After several hours of this, they returned to the castle, where the children were sent off for a nap and a quiet lunch, to recoup after such an exciting afternoon. No one needed any tantrums during the feast.

During the feast they sat as a family at the long table to allow nobles the opportunity to offer well wishes, and bestow gifts. The gifts were mainly for the children, and occasionally for Theresa. At his own coronation, Gideon had been very clear that gifts for him would be regarded as attempts to curry favour, and therefore he would not accept any. Greyson was of the same opinion.

A northern lord gave Landon a handsome set of throwing knives, and the same lord’s son gave Audrey a pair of riding gloves and offered to go riding with her before he returned home. Another young noble, reaching perhaps higher than his station, had given Audrey a pearl bracelet. In fact, most of the gifts seem to be for Audrey. Landon came in close second. All the same, Greyson decided he would have to start keeping a closer eye on these young lords.

The food was served, and the mingling guests began to take their seats. Musicians came out and began a joyful serenade. One of Greyson’s advisors, a smaller man named Frederick, carefully passed him a nearly empty hourglass, which Theresa eyed for a few seconds as her husband promptly thanked Frederick and set the timekeeper next to his goblet. Wine flowed freely, but Greyson kept to one cup. He allowed Landon to try a glass, Audrey a sip. The twins had long since taken off to go run around with some boys of a similar age at the other end of the hall. The revelries were beginning to peak, and the volume inside the hall was reaching a fever pitch. The hourglass had only a few minutes of sand remaining.

He motioned for Kiara and instructed her to find the twins and send them to bed. He was about to give his speech.

He pushed his chair back, and stood with his goblet raised. “My honored guests,” he began, at a normal volume because the sound of his chair scraping the flagstones had silenced the rowdy crowd. He smiled, “Thank you all for the generous gifts, my family appreciates your kindness and thoughtfulness.” He paused, then, “And to those among you that have been trying to buy my daughter’s affections, I am happy to report that you have succeeded too well. You’ve made certain she’ll never be able to pick a favourite.”

The hall laughed, and Audrey rolled her eyes.

“But I believe it is time to properly address you all as your King. As is tradition, I have prepared my first decree, and am ready for it to be received.”

This announcement was greeted with a thundering of applause. Gideon’s first decree had been to disband the Renish army. Before Gideon’s father’s untimely demise, divisions of the army had been roaming purposelessly along the borders of Renwick to intimidate and warn other countries who may be thinking of invading. Most had been farmers, gone from home for several years, and were sorely missed. Returning them home had been a resoundingly popular first decree. What would Gideon’s son do?

Greyson began slow and purposeful. Every word was carefully chosen. “My father’s legacy is one of compassion, and compromise. The greatest evidence of this is the peace with the witches. King Gideon lost his wife and his eldest son during the war, but forged ahead and brought forth a peace that Renwick did not want. He did this because he understood the cost of allowing the fighting to continue.” The hall seemed to sober immediately. No one liked to talk about the war. “It is an enormous challenge to control bloodlust in men, and all of Renwick was bloodthirsty. Starved of vengeance for the villages massacred, for the soldiers slaughtered. It was only my father’s fierce leadership that defended the peace. My father made no exceptions for violators, and in time, the people of Renwick fell in step behind him. And we have prospered.” He gestured about the room, to his goblet, still half full. “To our prosperity! To King Gideon!” he toasted, and the hall echoed with the response. All drank deeply. One man in the far corner leaned so far back into his cup that he fell off the bench. His friends helped him back to his seat quietly, and shushed him when he burped.

Greyson continued as if he were having a casual conversation and allowed the acoustics of the hall to carry his voice for him. “I have had the great privilege of studying our histories, and to a lesser extent, the histories of the continent at large. I would like to share some of my insights with you today. As you know, we are by far the oldest country, we surpass Kordum by several centuries. We have the largest population, and we enjoy some of the most fertile territory.” He raised his eyebrows. “We did not come by this territory by good fortune. Every neighbouring country we have ever had, at some point, has attempted to carve themselves off a slice of our land, and so we have fought many wars, and won many wars, against every neighbouring country we have ever had. As my father defended his peace, we have defended our land, fiercely.” He paused again, and set down his goblet. “But we have made an exception.”

The hall was quiet now. Greyson’s breath seemed to echo, as if all the party guest were collectively inhaling in preparation. The revelries were over, the energy of the crowd became something deeper, more focused.

“There is no other country I have ever studied that did not possess all of the land within its borders. No foreign body within its own sovereign territory. It simply does not exist. The only exception is Renwick.” There was no joy to be found in his expression. How long had he been waiting to say these words in the open? How long had the people in front of him been waiting to hear them? “How can we defend our land from invaders, but also allow a powerful coven an independent rule? We are at peace now, it is true. But witches still think of humans as rats. With the new territory outside of their forest, afforded to them by the treaty, their population has doubled, and they have grown like a cancer. They have now infiltrated our cities, they breed with us freely. Should the old winds of resentment stir within them again, Renwick will fall within a week, and their unholy queen will be your sole sovereign.”

Every eye was transfixed on Greyson, many heads were nodding slowly, worriedly. A few guests, particularly the younger ones who had never fought in a witch war, looked concerned.

The King’s voice became kind. “Some of you, perhaps, would argue this assessment. You will say that the witches have kept true to the peace for thirty years, why now would they break away and risk their own? Why would they seek to attack? And I tell you, for the same reasons that our neighbours over the past fourteen hundred years have attacked without warning. A growing population demands more territory. The war thirty years ago started for the same reason.”

More were nodding, now. Even the young people understood Greyson’s logic.

“The witches needed land outside of the forest, and now they have it. How long before they want more? How long before necessity turns their gaze further from their forest, to the fields of your farmers, desired by so many others throughout history? Like a strangler fig, reaching for more. How do we expel an enemy that is already inside our borders?” He threw the question to the crowd, and it was not obviously rhetorical. Nobles seemed to glance at one another, still uncertain in this sudden reversal of attitude from Gideon’s strict intolerance. They had been trained to never speak like this, and now here was Gideon’s heir, suddenly and unexpectedly giving them permission to entertain thoughts they hadn’t dared for thirty years. Did Greyson want an answer?

One man, the northern lord who had given Landon the throwing knives, broke the silence. “Hear hear!” he yelled, and the call was taken up at the other end of the hall by another lord.

Greyson spoke over them, the wind was in his sails now. “So let me again speak of my father. Make no mistake, King Gideon was wise, and his actions saved this country tremendous hardship and grief. He cooled the violence. As a son, I must honor and respect my father’s legacy. But as a King, I must safeguard our future.”

The head nodding seemed to have spread across the entire hall, now. They had all been searching themselves for a way to reconcile the father’s philosophy with the son’s sensical arguments, and Greyson seemed like he was going to give it to them.

“As I have been standing before you, I imagine some have wondered why their new King has brought an hourglass with him. Perhaps I am keeping it here to remind myself not to drone on until my audience has fallen into a stupor, an easy thing to do after such an excellent feast.” A pause for a tittering of laughter, and Greyson plunged ahead. Now, now was the time.

“This is one of eight hourglasses, each with enough sand to last two days. Two days ago, I ordered seven of Renwick’s top commanders to each pick twenty of their best men. I gave each of these commanders an hourglass, a destination, instructions, and supplies. They were ordered to carry out these instructions when the hourglass empties.” Greyson spared a glance back at Landon and Audrey. Andrey was staring at her plate, glum, appetite lost. Landon was staring back, unreadable. Greyson turned away, back to the crowd that hung on his every word. “Tonight, my father’s legacy will be honored by preventing unnecessary Renish deaths, while safeguarding our future. Our children will never need know the same suffering of thirty years ago.” He paused, then proclaimed in his most booming voice, “I, King Greyson, hereby decree that witches are no longer permitted residence inside Renwick. Any witch found within our borders is to be killed, or bound and brought to court, where she will be put to death. When this hourglass empties, so too will the hourglasses given to my commanders. At that moment, the villages outside the forest will be destroyed, and the great forest put to the torch. The strangler fig will be burnt before it can suffocate us all.”

People gasped, and there was a scattering of applause. Greyson spoke over it. “For the next two days, anyone who brings a witch to me, dead or alive, shall be given a hundred gold pieces from the crown treasury. After two days, the price will drop to fifty gold pieces. Then, twenty five. In seven days from now, the price will drop to ten gold pieces, where it will stay for the remainder of my rule.” Greyson closed his eyes, and exhaled. “These are my orders. Let them be proclaimed across Renwick, so that the common people can hear my words and join together to rid our country of this parasite.”

By the time he had reached his last word, the entire audience was on its feet, taking up the cry of “Long live King Greyson!”. The festivities carried on well into the night.

And if a few people noticed the hourglass empty, none said anything.