-they go into the forest to reconnect with the rest of the coven

-on a new moon

-chance for Kinoko to point out the hammocks in the upper foliage, she was from the overcrowded generation, she and her sisters slept in them before the war

-as they get closer to the center of the forest, the witches from the village feel stronger. The kids become hyper, playful, running around. This is a chance to show how the witch children play, what the education system for witches is (which is go explore, follow an elder around and learn from her), the kids kind of take it into their own hands (while receiving some instruction from their mothers) until they become independent of their mothers.

-dscribe critters of the forest…

* poisonous lynxes (scorpion tails? Albino?),
* armored toads
* eyeless black salamanders (dots on them that glow.. star slaamanders?)
* dik-diks
* sighing mushrooms
* corpseweed (foul smelling grass)
* branch fish
* spider squirrels that weave webs to catch acorns
* puff mushrooms
* singing treehoppers
* glowdust moths
* acid-green ants
* worms with transparent skin
* hemlock frogs that spray hemlock oil when startled
* small dart owls that dart between trees to hunt for small game.
* Moles, normal moles, make holes from the forest surface to the hollow deep beneath, allowing air to circulate, and allowing subterranean creatures to go to and fro. Moles are well protected.
* Ferns that open and close each day, they make small protective beds for creatures to sleep in. They benefit by the creature that sleeps in them spreading their pollen, and leaving behind some old hair/compost. Witches sometimes slept in the bigger ones. They are not for eating (poisonous).
* Fiddleflies that are pollinators, their flying makes a different noise depending on their altitude. They pollinate flowers, and these flowers have glowing pollen, which make the fiddleflies glow too.
* Bats, blind as usual, that eat fiddleflies. Their echolocation confuses the fiddleflies, makes them easier to round up.
* Woodpeckers the size of ravens.
* Furry slugs.
* Albino hummingbirds, that also spread spores for mushrooms in addition to pollinating
* enormous colourful lillies and poppies and orchids.
* All floral/fruit type plants should be like real things wed find on earth, but popart size. More enhanced. Magical properties n shit, which they get from being in the forest.
* Snakes? Average gardner snakes, they eat the moles.

-everyone brings food

-forage during the day, children get to run around and learn the forest (v. important if they are growing up in an outside village)

It was high noon, and the sunlight peaked through narrow slits between the leaves competing for space. The forest floor basked in the dappled light. Twists of curling plum vines and clusters of puff mushrooms swelled and shrank where the sun lingered, undisturbed by the passing column of witches. They stepped effortlessly through the forest life. The adults moved quietly, meditatively. The deeper they walked, the fuller they breathed, and they began to reach out and caress the flora they stepped over, they way you might reach to reassure a child. But if the adult witches were graceful and poised, the witch children were crazed and barbaric. They hurled themselves through thickets of turquoise poppies, whose petals were the size of a forearm, screaming happily as they gave chase to one another. They orbited the main group like bees around a hive. They bounded savagely through the tall branches and leapt fearlessly to plummet into the beds of sleeping ferns. These sturdy ferns, like a parent humouring its offspring, would lazily curl their long soft tendrils into a nest around the giggling child, who would wait a moment, then clamber out and go again. The cacophony of noise, however, didn’t seem to perturb the adults in the main column. And it certainly didn’t seem to perturb the forest. Indeed, where the children raced carelessly, they left no damage to the flora. Their little feet seemed to evade every fragile cluster of mushrooms as if by magic, and the noise drew out the small critters of the forest. They soon found themselves running along with a herd of dik-diks, small deer that lived in the forest. Woodpeckers the size of ravens swooped overhead, and darting albino hummingbirds paused their work to watch the witches pass.

There would be a gathering in the hollow tonight. All witches who still belonged to the forest were making their way there now, so that they would exchange food, stories, and lessons. It was a chance for the witch children who lived in the villages outside the forest to return to their natural environment and learn the skills they could not develop living outside of it. It was a chance for all witches to return to their forest roots.

Ayiki did not run with the rest of the children as their village neared the hollow. She walked behind her mother, at the back of the line, short legs stretching to match each footstep, following close. Occasionally a little too close.

“Ayiki,” came her mother’s voice after the third time she had failed to slow with the line and subsequently squashed into her. The body twisted, and hands moved her backwards. “Wouldn’t you have more fun playing with Sunalei and the other children?”

At that moment, Sunalei came tearing past her, a blur of squealing laughter as she cut in and out of trees, avoiding being caught by Osa, who was chasing her.

“No,” she said sullenly, eyes lingering on were Osa and her sister had sprinted by.

“Why?”

She shrugged.

The line of witches ahead of them hadn’t stopped walking, but her mother stayed. “You don’t know, or you don’t want to tell me?”

A bare toe dug into the mossy soil. The line was drawing farther and farther away, the sounds of delighted children growing distant. But her mother stayed rooted to the spot. She wouldn’t let this go now, not until she had an answer, and there was no point lying.

Ayiki tried to pick an explanation that would satisfy without inviting more questions. Then she looked up, and spoke firmly, “It’s not as fun when you’re the smallest.”

Her mother considered the answer. Released a barely noticeable sigh. Then her hand brushed the top of Ayiki’s head, squeezed lightly. “There will always be someone faster, or stronger, or cleverer than you. You might as well try to have fun anyway.”

They continued walking in silence, quickly catching up the larger group. Ayiki pondered the wisdom her mother had offered, and found it wholly inadequate. Her mother’s point was that there was no witch who was the most-everything. But what about the Queen? There had to be someone who was the most-something. How was that supposed to help Ayiki keep up with her older, cleverer, more talented sister?

The trees passed overhead, becoming taller, older, and more gnarled as they journeyed onwards. Once Ayiki thought she saw the red fur of a spider-squirrel. Spider-squirrels were strange creatures, even to the witches. They wove webs beneath the trees to intercept falling nuts. Where they were plentiful, the webs formed a second layer of life in the forest, a plane of twisting white strands favoured by nimble animals. But as the group of witches continued deeper into the forest, Ayiki watched how the irregular clouds of web became more frequent and changed shape. Instead of a thin-but-wide web, they became narrow, sagging bridges between branches. Ayiki could see that nearly every tree held at least one of these hammocks.

Her mother had told her about them. When she had been very young, before the war with the humans, the caves inside the Hollow had become crowded and living space was cramped. “Witches were meant to live in a community, but this was more like a collection of acorns. You couldn’t roll over in your sleep without bumping into someone,” she had said.

So the more industrious witches, like her mother, had begun sleeping outside the caves. It had never been done before, and at first they made their beds inside sleeping ferns. But while sleeping ferns provided shelter, they didn’t let a witch curl up into the ball she usually slept in. It was quite unnatural for a witch to lie flat, rolled up inside a blanket of matted leaves. That’s when they began to collect the spider-squirrel webs. The strands were strong but elastic, and most importantly, summonable. Where they had cuttings of the webs, Ayiki’s mother could summon more, and weave it to her will. Even now, thirty years after the war had ended, they looked strong.

Ayiki decided she had another question, and pulled at the back of her mother’s robes. “Mama,” she demanded excitedly. “When you slept in the hammocks, didn’t you get rained on?”

“No, dear. We summoned wide leaves from the branches over our heads.”

She looked up into the branches, seeing them only in her imagination. “Where did the big leaves go?”

“We stopped using them, and they fell off.” She paused, then, “Oh lovely. We’re here.”

The trees ahead parted, and even though Ayiki had been to these gatherings every other month since birth, she had to stifle a gasp.

The clearing was only half the size of their village outside of the forest, and dwarfed even further by the size of the Queen’s Tree. It was the same height as the trees lining the clearing, but its trunk was so wide it could have held two of Ayiki’s huts inside of it. But the roots were the most fantastic. Other trees had roots like tentacles, wrapping around eachother like worms and plunging into the earth. The Queen’s Tree had roots that began a quarter way up and flowed to the earth like ribbons pulled against the forest floor. From far away, it looked quite like a mountain range. The blades of ribbon cut outward into the clearing, creating inviting, meandering paths to the trunk where the roots cast the deepest shadows.

Ayiki felt the inexorable pull towards it, as she always did during gatherings. The clearing was filled with witches, witches from other villages, witches who lived inside the Hollow permanently, witches who lived with humans but had returned for the festivities, all milling about, lounging in branches overhead, or exchanging stories over cauldrons of stew. The presence of such abundant power seemed to magnify the pull in her heart, like there were two sources of gravity. It seemed quite obvious to Ayiki that every living witch would be able to feel this, urging them home. Even the Queen’s Tree seemed satisfied, as though if it could speak, it would be humming contentedly.

Her mother was already moving into the clearing, having located Khione, one of her closest friends. Khione was laying in a patch of moss next to one of the cauldrons, chatting with the witch stirring it. Her hands were busy cleaning a particularly large puff mushroom, fingers scooping out the bitter yellow parts. She was chuckling at something the witch stirring the cauldron had said, then noticed Ayiki’s mother striding towards her, and nimbly jumped to her feet.

“Kinoko!” she said warmly, opening her arms and taking her mother into a firm embrace. They released eachother, and Ayiki could see that her mother was smiling. Khione turned to where Ayiki was standing, a little ways behind her mother, and squinted, looking around. “Did you lose Yiki somewhere?”

Her mother looked around as well, eyes sliding right over her daughter. “Oh! I thought she was right behind me,” she bit her lip. “You don’t think the… Guardians got her, do you?”

Khione clapped her hands to mouth, eyes wide. “Oh no, I thought I saw one prowling around earlier! You know how much they love munching on little witches!” she paced towards Ayiki, still not seeing her, calling her name loudly.

Ayiki stood in place, giggling, knowing the game.

Khione was standing right next to her now, calling out towards the trees. “Ayiki! Has anyone seen Ayiki? She’s about this tall,” she continued, placing her hand down, directly on Ayiki’s head. No one answered, of course, and she turned back to Kinoko and shrugged. “I guess she’s been eaten,” she announced.

Then Ayiki launched herself at her mother’s friend, jumping up onto her back, and wrapped a skinny arm around her neck. Khione made a choking noise and toppled to the ground. Ayiki rolled away, and Khione rolled over, her eyes narrowing, zeroing in on her target. “I see she’s gotten quicker.”

The witch’s arms darted out, and before she knew it, Ayiki was in a bear hug. “But not quick enough,” came the muffled voice in her ear.

Now that they had said hello, they all sat down around the cauldron, which was nestled into the outskirts of the Queen’s Tree’s roots. Ayiki sat close to Khione, with her back against the vertical surface of the ribbon roots. Khione handed Ayiki the mushroom she had been cleaning, and asked her to begin breaking it apart into chunks. The witch stirring the cauldron, whose name was Biloba, added spice sprigs to the warm broth, until pleasant earthy aromas hung heavy in the air. The three adults chatted as they cooked, and Ayiki’s mother pulled a bundle of carrots and beans from her pack, which Bilboa exclaimed excitedly over. Ayiki only barely listened to their conversation as she broke apart the mushroom the size of her torso. It was hard to pull her gaze from the Queen’s tree. The sun was still high in the sky, and even in the shade there was such a pleasant warmth that Ayiki couldn’t imagine wanting to be anywhere else.

“Is Ruto coming tonight?” asked Biloba.

Ayiki noticed her mother stop cleaning the carrots for a moment. “Haven’t you heard?”

Her voice was sharp. “Heard what?”

Khione, who had retaken the mossy spot she had been sitting in before they arrived, answered. Her usually jovial tone replaced with something harder. “Gideon Amberall is dead.”

“Dead?” Biloba looked outraged. “When?”

“Two nights ago.” Ayiki’s mother resumed her cleaning of the carrots.

“How did you hear?”

“A rider came to the village yesterday.” Ayiki’s mother looked at Khione, who nodded.

“Same. Though I don’t think he’d ever been to a witch village before, he barely made it to my hut to give me the message before he turned tail and ran his beast home.” Khione snorted, “Honestly. Their farmers have more courage.”

Biloba resumed stirring her stew, but didn’t look happy about it. After a minute, she muttered, “I suppose it’s not unusual that we wouldn’t hear, our village is usually forgotten. Furthest one from the capital, and the rats assume that if they tell one village, it’s the same as telling all of us.”

Ayiki’s mother fought a smile, but said, “Biloba, that language isn’t helpful. You shouldn’t call them rats.”

The older witch shrugged. “Maybe if I met more than two a year, and if they didn’t scurry backwards when I offer them a basket of tomatoes, I’d think differently. But, just like your messenger, they all think I’m going to,” she screwed up her face then, and her voice became startlingly nasal as she waggled her fingers, “curse their families with the devil’s magic!”

Ayiki’s mother giggled, but Khione nodded at a group of witches not far away, keeping her voice low. “What’s half a rat, then? A mouse?”

Ayiki turned to look, and then did a double take. Humans and witches shared the same anatomy, but witches had distinct slanted eyes and lightly coloured skin, as opposed to wide-eyed, pale humans of Renwick. The two witches Khione was staring at bore the appearance of ordinary witches, but for their eyes. Their eyes were wide and round.

She pulled lightly on her mother’s robe to get her attention, but her mother shot her a look before she could ask. “Halflings,” she whispered.

Ayiki’s eyes went big. Her mother told her about witches who left to go live with humans, and then gave birth to half-human children. It happened very rarely, but it was always a cause for gossip. Halflings were born barren of magic, and were thoroughly disliked by both cultures. These ones looked full grown.

Being half human meant that of the few halflings that existed, even fewer were able to enter the forest and survive, and fewer still were deemed worthy by the Queen. Those that she did deem worthy were taken into the deepest parts of the hollow, where magic was bestowed to them.

The fact that these halflings were here, participating in the gathering, meant that they had met and been approved by the Queen, and Ayiki had never been so full of questions in her life. But she kept them to herself, and compromised by glancing at them, discretely, every few seconds, trying not to draw attention to herself. She couldn’t help wondering if they felt the same pull towards the Queen’s Tree that she did.

Her mother, Khione, and Biloba’s discussion returned to the death of the human king. Biloba seemed the least concerned about it, “Good riddance,” Ayiki heard her snort.

The two halflings, accompanied by another two witches that Ayiki assumed were their mothers, were looking around curiously. She saw them glancing up at the Queen’s tree, making comments to one another, and Ayiki had to fight a surge of jealousy. It didn’t seem right to have humans here in the forest. Even half-ones. It was *her* family who lived here. Humans weren’t allowed, and certainly not during a gathering.

Her mother must have noticed her expression because she nudged her. “What’s wrong, child?”

“They…” she gestured towards the halflings. “They’re part human.”

“That’s true,” came the reply, but that was all.

Ayiki had expected more and looked up at her mother. “But isn’t that bad?”

“Sometimes.”

It was going to be an evening of unsatisfying answers, apparently. She huffed loudly, the gust of air tossing the hair out of her face.

Khione sighed. “Yiki, if they meant us harm, the Guardians would have killed them. Be nice.”

Her brow furrowed, and her volume shot up. “But you were calling them—”

“Shh!” her mother hissed, loudly, her face betraying her irritation.

“But—” she gestured vaguely, nonsensically, toward Khione.

“I’m an adult,” Khione stated firmly, as if this settled it. “I’ve earned the right to my feelings. These m—halflings have done nothing to harm you, so you have no cause to be rude to them.”

Ayiki bit her tongue, and did not respond. But she looked back at the half-witches. They were laughing with eachother, and they looked happy, but also relieved, as if a worry was dissipating. Then the one on the right caught Ayiki staring, and before she could look away, the half-witch gave her a small smile.

That smile caught her, like a snare, and Ayiki smiled back. It was one thing to resent a stranger, quite another to refuse an offered smile. But the very act of smiling altered her feelings towards the halflings. They couldn’t be that bad, if they were friendly.

Once the puff mushroom was reduced to a pile of acorn-sized chunks, Ayiki was sent to fetch sticks to feed the cauldron’s fire. She did so, leaving the clearing and wading through branches and undergrowth to find fallen sticks, collecting them in a bundle beneath her arm. Then the corner of her eye caught a motion up and to her left. Her head turned to where the movement had come from, high up in the trees. She squinted.

She spotted the tip of a grey robe, wrapping around to the other side of the tree. Why was someone hiding up in the trees?

She placed the sticks she was holding on the ground, quietly, and reached for a low-hanging branch over her head. She began climbing, as quietly as she could. The trees in the forest were well suited to climbing, they grew in such proximity that their branches intersected one another. If you weren’t able to climb one tree because of a high branch, it was always possible to find one of its neighbours that offered an easier route, and then travel laterally from tree to tree. This is exactly what Ayiki did now.

She approached the tree concealing the witch from the opposite side and settled into a comfortable crouch. She reached out to the bit of cloak, grinning in anticipation. Then she tugged.

Ayiki heard a small yelp, and the cloak slipped from her fingers. She very quickly wished she hadn’t come up the tree, because face jutting out from behind the trunk was Sunalei’s.

“Yiki,” she looked relieved for a second, before her face contorted and she hissed. “What are you doing up here?”

Ayiki’s grin evaporated. She crossed her arms. “I saw someone, I didn’t know it was you. What are *you* doing up here?”

Sunalei rolled her eyes. “We’re playing hide and seek. Now go away, or everyone will know that I’m here.”

Still scowling, she turned and began the climb down. She wouldn’t beg to be included in a stupid game with Sunalei and her stupid friends.

“Wait.”

A hand closed over Ayiki’s wrist, stopping her progress. “What?” she snapped.

“How did you get up here?” The older siblings characteristic distain took a brief step back.

“I climbed,” she said impatiently, and glanced down at the ground below where the bundle of sticks lay in a haphazard pile.

A cheek caved inward as Sunalei pondered. “But I didn’t hear you.”

Ayiki tugged her hand away and shrugged, trying to make it seem as rude as possible, and she reached down with a foot for lower branch.

“But… I didn’t even hear you walking.”

Her pride was smarting from being sent away by her older sister. She wouldn’t give Sunalei the satisfaction of looking as though she *wanted* to be included, so she kept climbing down and didn’t look up. “Well maybe you should pay more attention.”

Sunalei didn’t say anything else. As Ayiki reassembled her bundle, she glanced up at her sister’s hiding spot, but couldn’t see anything.

Ayiki made her way back to the clearing, and plunked the bundle of sticks next to the cauldron. The stew probably wouldn’t be ready for another couple of hours. The adults were passing the time with a game of matchsticks. It seemed complicated. Each witch was holding a bundle of sticks, coloured tips hidden inside their hands. They would each take turns placing down a stick, and occasionally one of them would make a triumphant sound and scoop them all up. Ayiki was never able to follow along, though her mother had tried explaining it to her.

It was getting into the late afternoon now. Content to be ignored, Ayiki settled back in amongst the roots of the Queen’s Tree, passively watching the clearing. Some of the younger children were being instructed by elder witches. The children sat in a disorganized bunch around the elder, who was gently handling a mole. The mole scurried in, through, and over the elder’s hands in a never-ending loop, as both hands continuously cycled over one another to catch the small creature before it fell. The children stared, rapt.

The elder lecturing them was Ginko. She was crouched to deliver her lesson, and even crouched she was still double Ayiki’s height. Her voice carried gently over the meadow, and Ayiki remembered receiving the same lesson from Ginko several years ago. “—lets air into the hollow. Without the moles, we wouldn’t be able to breathe. Does anyone know what eats moles?”

One child answered snakes, and another said lynxes. One, particularly enthusiastic, said spider squirrels.

“Well, primarily snakes. Lynxes also, but they’re more suited to larger prey like the dik-diks. Spider squirrels… well, they prefer trees and are less likely to see a mole. If a mole came to them, then perhaps. But snakes are the typical culprit.”

Ayiki stopped paying attention. She was quite happy to be finished with those lessons. Now, during gatherings, she could do as she pleased. Though she had still enjoyed being taught by the elders. There were only a handful of them, each as impressive as the last. Around the age of 200, witches began a second growth, becoming taller, broader, stronger. Their bones pooled on the outside of their skin like a shell armour. They suddenly found clothes to be extremely uncomfortable. But there were changes individual to the witch. Some had thicker plates than others, some grew horns. Ginko in particular had a magnificent set, striking outward from her head and then up into sharp points. There were recesses in her plated chest, where she cultivated fungi in dense clusters. Since she was a healer, Ayiki had no doubt these small fungus gardens had valuable properties. Ginko preferred giving lessons on forest life. When Ayiki was younger, Ginko would guide them through the forest for many hours, pointing out nearly-identical low-lying leafy plants and explaining their subtle differences, and then quizzing everyone on which one would kill them, which one would cure swelling, and which one tasted nice as a tea.

The hard plates of bone that covered her naked skin folded into one another in a way that

Her naked skin was plated with a thick This show of gentleness

-what do elders wear, are they just naked?

The rest of the afternoon, and into the early evening,

Khione was right, half-witches had never done anything to her.

“Because the Queen

Khione spoke up, “Some half-witches can cast, and some can’t. Those who can’t, who are more human than witch, can’t enter the forest, just the way humans can’t. The fact that these ones were able to enter the forest means that they belong.”

Why leave their sisters? but she was young who had left their sisters to go live with humans, and then mated with their men. Her brow furrowed.

meant they had human fathers.

Whatever they were called, they had human fathers. So the true witches sitting with them must be their mothers. Why would they go live with the humans, why leave their sisters? Ayiki knew that Ruto lived with the humans, but that was because the Queen had told her to serve the human king, she never would have left voluntarily. Why have half-human offspring? Half-witch children were strange. What would their lifespan be? A true witch could live to over 300. Ayiki’s mother, for example, was over seventy, but wouldn’t show her age for another hundred years or so. Why would you want to risk outliving your child? Were half-witches even capable of magic? Could they summon things? Would they be unaffected by witch healers, the way humans were? She had so many questions.

Night had begun to fall, but the forest did not lack for light. The sighing mushrooms released their glowing spores, and the fiddleflies came out to feed on them. They were small insects, but they glowed blue with the spores, and the hum of their flight changing pitch with their altitude. Swarms of them danced together, creating peaceful harmonies as they dodged the lighting-quick tongues of star salamanders lurking in the trees. Ayiki could see them nestled between cracks of bark, speckled backs glowing with faintly blue, luring the fiddleflies closer. Soon the bats were out as well, their squeaks confusing the flies and herding them into easily picked clusters.

Nocturnal flowers bloomed as well, petals unfurling to reveal luminous pink centers. Glowdust moths were busy drinking the nectar, their wings flapping with the pink particles. The salamanders left the moths alone, but the bats were happy to indulge. And soon the low hoots of dart owls were heard, and Ayiki saw the silhouette of a dart owl clutching a bat in its talons.

A voice cut through her

She knew that there were different types of humans, some humans

And having their pull, and her heart



<https://anewbreedofdragon.com/inspirational-trees-buttress-roots/>

20\*6= 120

+80

=200

She said as much to her mother.

“You’re right. So it’s useful to remember that your sister, even though she is bigger than you, isn’t therefore better than you at everything. You can still find your own strengths. If you use the excellence of others as an excuse to stop striving for your own, then you’ll never be excellent at anything.”

she turned around and continued walking, a bit faster now to catch up.

“You’ll be just as strong as them in a couple of years. And you won’t lack for playmates when we arrive.”

She didn’t want to tell her mother that she wasn’t as strong or as quick as the other, older children in the village. They called her a baby, they tolerated her. If they wanted to play with her, it was only because they thought it was funny when she couldn’t catch them.

The dappled light moved over c

The rest of the forest floor was cast in green hues.