They were crouched in the tall grass, the pond to their backs. The summer sun sounded like croaking frogs, and smelled like old pond scum and fresh sweat. She felt a bead of it trickle down her nose, but didn’t move to flick it away. She was suspended in anticipation. This was a good spot for this early in the game. In the grassy fields, there were no hills that could have offered the advantages of high ground and observation, so everyone would start far from the outpost and then slowly creep their way inwards, as stealthily as possible, listening, trying to ambush each other.

The game was deceptively simple. Sneak in to Gobo’s trading hut and steal two of whatever sweet the older witch had traded with the humans for. Winners would split one, losers would split the other. But try doing that when five other fledgling witches have the same goal, and it’s just an open grassy field.

Normally, Sunalei played alone. She wanted the bragging rights, and she didn’t want to share them with a big team.

But today’s prize was peaches.

Sunalei whispered as softly as swaying cattails. “Yiki,” she mouthed, “go now.”

So yes, normally, fifteen-year-old Sunalei, a fledgling witch just coming into her power, would have never asked her baby sister to play. Ayiki couldn’t use her magic yet, she was only eleven. “You’re sneaky,” Sunalei had said. “And there’s no rules saying you have to cast to play.” She had been firm. “But if you don’t listen to me, I’ll never invite you again.”

They had gone over the plan. Ayiki knew what to do. And at the instruction, she let her anticipation peek through in a wide grin. She palmed the ground, and slowly, silently, slid backwards. Her toes touched the cool mud of the pond first. The rest of her followed quickly, and she submerged into the water.

The pond was murky and deep. The upper few feet of water was like a warm blanket over a frigid body, thick with lily pads and weeds. She ducked under that blanket as she swam parallel to the shore. The deeper she swam, she reasoned, the fewer ripples she would cause. The water had too much silt to navigate by sight, so she had to go by feel when she surfaced, trying to avoid disturbing patches of lily pads. She surfaced regularly, patiently, taking gentle breaths of air. Loud gasps could give her away. And above the water she blinked open her eyes and checked for signs of the others that Sunalei had said may also have passed through this area. It took a few minutes of swimming, but eventually she saw what she was looking for.

A circle of depressed grass, about the size of an adolescent witch, with a trail leading right to the outpost. She smiled, took a deep breath, and whistled twice like a redwing blackbird.

To her left, she saw her sister’s head peak out from her hiding spot. Ayiki pointed to the trail. Sunalei nodded.

A few seconds later, there was movement at the bank of the pond. Long tendrils of grass started to push up from the soil and accumulate, weaving and knotting themselves into a thick green rope.   
The rope twisted and thickened further, and its form took on a more definitive shape as its movement became a slither. It was very impressive. Sunalei had gotten good.

Ayiki tried to bite down her envy. Her sibling was going to be a powerful summoner, just like their mother. And here she was, swimming through murky, muddy ponds, because that’s all she was good for. No magic, no power, just… sneakiness.

But, she reassured herself, she had at most only a couple of years before she was able to cast too. She was eleven now, and Sunalei had started when she was thirteen.

The summoned grass snake broke free from the spot where it had sprouted and, imbued with Sunalei’s will, began its quest confidently, but directly into the pond, where it immediately sank. Small patches of loose grass morosely floated to the surface.

Ayiki winced. But Sunalei was undeterred, and succeeded on her second attempt.

Now Sunalei whistled like a dove, signaling the next stage in their plan. Ayiki began the swim to shore, the need for noiselessness slightly reduced. She pulled herself up and out of the water with minimal dripping, her shoulders and black hair bearing an equally-distributed layer of pond scum. Then she started along the path down which the grass snake had disappeared.

Half an hour later, Ayiki and Sunalei said goodbye to their friends and began the walk back home, trading a peach back and forth with the matching grins of victors. The sun was beginning to lower over the fields to the west, a wide expanse of peaceful rolling country. A much different environment than their mother, who was waiting for them at home to help with dinner, had grown up in. The forest was the traditional home of witches, and it was half a mile east of the village. That was where the Hollow was, and it was where their mother had grown up. After the war ended, she had been assigned to this village. She had been given the fruit, and told to build a life for her offspring here. Sunalei had been born eleven months later.

Home was a large hut. The walls very much resembled the grass snakes Sunalei had summoned. Only instead of grass, it was as if three oak trees had woven themselves into an impenetrable barrier against wind and rain. The roof was a steep and twisted collection of branches that went up another fifteen feet, and they would open or close depending on the weather. Today, they were open. There hadn’t been rain for a few days, and the skies were still clear.

Kinoko, their mother, had built the hut when she first left the forest. She had summoned all the huts in the village. During the war she had been a powerful summoner, respected for the size and strength of the creatures she could create to plow through the lines of human soldiers. The summoned creatures were impervious to arrows. After all, the creatures were never really alive, only a manifestation of Kinoko’s will. They could only be destroyed if they were set on fire, or if the witch controlling them lost consciousness.

But after the war, summoners became farmers and labourers. Kinoko’s talent for summoning was used instead for building houses, for fixing wagons and tools, for helping the crops to grow, and the war was not discussed in her home.

They reached the hut, and Sunalei gave the last bite of the peach to Ayiki. “Good job today,” she said. “I told you you’d be useful.” Then she entered through the wide gap between the oak trunks.

Anyone who has ever had an older sibling will understand that the ultimate social triumph was breaking through the status of annoying little kid, and into the status of tolerable friend. Tolerable friends got invited to things that annoying little kids didn’t.

Ayiki paused on the threshold, about to take the last bite of the peach, but she hesitated, thought better of it, and ran inside after Sunalei.

The inside of the hut was lit by sunlight tricking in between the leaves, producing lacey shade on the dirt floor. Witch-sized alcoves budded off the side of the main area, where the oak trees grew outward. These alcoves were where they slept, the bark as their burrow. Smaller divets in the trunks occurred at eye-level, and were used for storage. Instead of a hewn wooden table, a cluster of ivy had been summoned to weave a long flat surface, which hung supported from the trunks. The chairs were similarly constructed.

The ingredients that would be used for tonight’s stew were spread out on the floor. Carrots, potatoes, vine beans, and nifet mushrooms were ready to be cut and cooked. In the center of the hut was a circle of white ash left over from the last cooking fire, and it was where Kinoko knelt, carefully arranging a pile of kindling while instructing Sunalei to take the pot outside and fetch some ground water. Without looking up from her task, she added, “Ayiki, cut the vegetables please.”

She stood aside for Sunalei, who was carrying a medium-sized stone pot outside. She hid the peach behind her back, ran over to where her mother was concentrating, and leaned in. “Ma,” she began. “Look!”

Then she took the peach out from behind her back, and presented it (very directly) to her mother.

Kinoko jerked backwards. No one likes having something foreign shoved into their face, even if the hand doing so is connected to their child. But exercising her well practiced patience, she gave the object a sniff first.

Her eyebrows lifted, and her dark eyes glanced over at Ayiki. “A peach? Where on earth did you get a…” then her eyebrows dropped back down. Dangerously far down. A muscle twitched in her temple. “Tell me where you got this peach.” Her tone had lost its warmth.

Ayiki stood very still and her soaring mood plummeted. She had thought her mother would just be excited to hear how well she had done, grateful for the leftover piece. Could she say Gobo had just given it to her?

As if reading her thoughts, Kinoko interrupted. “Don’t you dare lie to me.”

Her heart felt like those desperate moths that sometimes got trapped inside the hut. She spoke, but her voice fought back, “Sunalei and I won it.”

“You broke into the trading post?”

Ayiki nodded. Sunalei was going to kill her. She would never be invited out to play *ever again*.

Kinoko turned away very suddenly, and motioned briskly toward the pile of vegetables and mushrooms. “Go cut those.”

She went to her task without protest. Apart from the sharp sounds of cutting vegetables with a carved wooden knife (the carrots were especially loud), and the soft crack as the small fire began to catch, the hut was silent.

Sunalei came back in, labouring under the weight of the pot (now filled), and she noticed the change in atmosphere immediately. She put the pot of sloshing water down carefully next to the growing fire. Her mother didn’t look up. “What did you and Ayiki do today?”

Before Sunalei murmured in answer, Ayiki caught her death glare. But Sunalei didn’t bother lying, “We broke into Gobo’s hut and stole some fruit.”

Their mother stood. She was almost six feet tall.

“I know you don’t like it when we play, but…” she was cut off.

“Why do I not like it? Repeat back to me the reasons why.”

She crossed her arms and spoke to the ground. “Because stealing is wrong. And summoning isn’t for fighting.”

“Correct.”

She moved her arms out in front of her, “But *Mom*, we always pay Gobo back, and we…” she waved a hand at her little sister. “We did really well!”

Kinoko gestured back as well. “I’m astounded that you involved your sister after the last talk we had about this.”

“She wasn’t doing any casting!” Sunalei protested. “I had her sneak into the hut while I had everyone else distracted, and she got the peaches even though Gobo was home! She’s more capable than you give her credit for. And Mom,” she pleaded again. “I summoned a snake!”

Ayiki felt that now was a good time to add her voice. “It was really good!”

Her voice was promptly ignored. “Sunalei, I have told you, over and over, that this is a useless game. Summoning creatures isn’t a skill that’s going to help here.”

Sunalei gritted her teeth. “It’s *not* useless. I want to practice.”

“Practice for *what*?” demanded Kinoko, finally raising her voice. “If the humans decide to attack next week, it won’t be the children who will be fighting them!”

Sunalei snapped. Yelled back, “Well it won’t be you either, you’re too scared to buy metal knives from humans, let alone fight them!”

Silence echoed in the hut, which was finally broken by Sunalei. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

Ayiki couldn’t see her mother’s face, but she could see her hunched shoulders, and she was uneasy with the silence. She pushed to her feet and grabbed onto the tensed hand. “Ma,” she tugged.

Her mother glanced down, but her face was obscured by black hair. She sighed, “Yes?”

“If you’re scared, we would help you, you wouldn’t be alone. Me and Sunalei would help.”

Ayiki thought for a second that the hand she was holding recoiled. But, “Child.” Kinoko knelt down, and now Ayiki could see her face. It was a mask of worry. “You wouldn’t be able to help, and even if you could, I wouldn’t want you to. You’re too young.”

Now it was Ayiki’s turn to cross her arms. “I’m not too young. I’m eleven.”

“You can’t cast yet,” she said, as if that settled it.

She was about to turn back to the fire, but Ayiki spoke up again. “So what? I’m good at lots of other things. I snuck into Gobo’s hut without *anyone* even noticing!”

Kinoko’s temples jutted out as she rubbed her forehead, her eyes closed. “Both of you… I am your mother. Until the elders say otherwise, you will listen to me.” She stared at both of them in turn. Her voice was loud and commanding. “If I say you’re not allowed to play that stupid game, you *will not play that game*. If I say that you are too young to fight, then you are too young for it, and that’s final!”

Ayiki and Sunalei both stood with their arms crossed, glaring at the floor.

“Now Sunalei, bring over the stand so we can boil the water. Ayiki, finish cutting those vegetables.”

They both went to their tasks, unsmiling. Dinner, when it had finished cooking, was a silent affair. The sound of tree frogs echoed outside and in. Long faces were lit only by the flickering fire. They each settled into their separate alcove, curling inside the extruded bark, and fell asleep to the dying fire.

But Ayiki didn’t fall asleep. Her mind’s eye kept replaying her mother’s expression, the way it had frozen. *You can’t cast yet*. As if Ayiki wasn’t aware, as if casting was the only qualifying factor. Ayiki didn’t even want to fight, why would she, she just didn’t want to be treated like a child when she was capable of so much! She could feel it in her core, she had power, or she would have it, and the sooner everyone else realized it the better. She had snuck in to Gobo’s hut. But Kinoko, even Sunalei, hadn’t seemed to have realized that sneaking into that hut, while Gobo was home, meant that she had been *soundless*. Who else could do that? Could her mother have done that, even with her summoning? Ayiki didn’t think so.

She itched to prove herself. To *really* prove herself. She wanted everyone to look at her and see her potential. But what could she do? She cast around her mind for an idea. Her mother wouldn’t be impressed with stealing something, that was very clear from tonight. But what if she hunted something? Something that really required light footsteps and sneaking? She imagined herself, standing outside the hut holding the body of a dik-dik, the quickest animal in the forest, and she saw the delighted surprise take hold in the faces of her mother and her sister. *Wow*, Sunalei would say. *Ayiki, how did you…* Kinoko would trail off. *I underestimated you, child.*

Once the idea was in her head, like a burr caught in a wool-spun sweater, it refused removal. Each time she was about to drift off to sleep, it came back. *I underestimated you, child*. Yes, she would smile. Yes you did.

After an hour of this, Ayiki realized she wasn’t going to sleep, because she had already decided to go. She had decided, really, the moment she’d had the idea. And if she left now, she could get back before sunrise. Wouldn’t *that* show them. While they had been sleeping, Ayiki had been hunting.

She sat up, and crept out of the hut. No one stirred.

Then, knowing where the dik-diks took shelter at night, she began the walk east towards the huge black mass that was the Witch’s Forest.

Kinoko nodded, still silent, and returned to tending the fire. She began to add more substantial pieces. Sunalei brought over the stand – once again, woven from vines – that would support the pot over the fire.

Sunalei was just over five feet, but stood her ground.

The snaps and and took out her feelings on the fat mushrooms and stiff carrots. Osa’s mother had bought a knife from the humans. But Kinoko didn’t like having metal in the house, so they were stuck cutting food with the wooden knife. It was sharp, but it struggled with the carrots, and Ayiki had to break those apart by hand.

-they still hunt in the forest, forest is still the primary food source (squirrel, bat, rabbit, small deer). They just supplement with what they grow outside the forest now.

-forage for berries, fruits, nuts, inside the forest

-they grow gardens of mushrooms and vegetables outside the forest

-one species of mushroom is particularly common in the forest, they farm it off rotting logs etc.

-starting to farm this species outside the forest and trade it with humans (very hearty mushroom, filling, nutritious) – Called Nefet mushrooms Nefit Nefet Nifet

“Mother, guess what?” she blurted excitedly.

Kinoko was

Maskwa, Niski, Kuri

Sunalei had chosen this spot for a reason.

Like any elevAyiki had been so delighted at being inc

If you had an alliance, maybe you could fight your way out, but you have the disadvantage of your opponent knowing where you are, while their location remains a mystery.

The goal was to sneak two of whatever sweet treat Gobo had traded for, and kept stored in the outpost. The victor (or victors) would get one, and the losers would get the other. This method incentivized small alliances, if any. Sunalei usually worked alone for this very reason. But today she had decided to change tactics.

She heard her sister whisper as softly as the brushing of tall grass in the wind. “Yiki, go now.”

And Ayiki, who had been utterly delighted to finally be included, let her anticipation leak through in a wide grin. The prize today was peaches. Usually, fifteen-year-old Sunalei, a fledgling witch just coming into her power, would have never asked her baby sister to help her. But today’s prize was peaches. And Ayiki, she had said, might be useful, so long as she followed her sister’s instructions.

Ayiki

Today it was peaches.

Once you reached the outskirts of the outposts,

And if you made it close enough to the outpost to see that Gobo wasn’t there, the creep would inevitably devolve into a sprint.

s was empty, it would inevitably de

Her body hummed in anticipation.

Game: trying to sneak into Gobo’s trading cabin and steal some of the sweet fruits the traders had just given to Gobo in exchange for some medicinal mushrooms. You steal two, the rule is your alliance gets one fruit and everyone else has to share the second. Prevents big alliances from forming, everyone still gets to taste, but you get all the glory.

Sunalei is bringing her in on the game as a secret weapon. Sunalei is fifteen, her friends are between fourteen and eighteen. Ayiki is eleven.

Younger sister – Ayiki

Older sister – Sunalei

Friends – Kuri, Osa, Maskwa, Niski

Mother – Kinoko

Other older witches – Gobo, Askhatik

Khione

Amako

Akame