The dik-diks were harder to catch than Ayiki had expected. Thinking back on it, she supposed she had imagined that she would just jump down from the trees onto an unsuspecting herd in the first half-an-hour, and that would be that. Return home, leave the dead creature by the smoldering fire, crawl back into her nook to catch a bit of sleep, perfect. But she was at least three hours into her hunt and had nothing to show for it. She was tired, she was a bit damp, and she was sorely tempted to just return home.

But she didn’t. She knew she could do this, it was an absolute fact. So she wasn’t going to give up just because she wanted a nap. She just had to find where they were hiding!

Though she was alone in the forest, there was no fear of predators for her. The forest had none. Except, she allowed, in the case of small game, for whom witches were the predators.

And the little deer seemed to know better than to hide somewhere obvious. Ayiki had already checked the obvious spots and found only disappointment. There may not have been a trodden path inside the forest, because the witches were careful not to destroy growth with their footsteps, but everyone certainly kept to a general route when travelling. And the dik-diks slept well away from this route.

She wove through the forest, well out of familiar territory now, scurrying up the bark of large trees as only a child could. She would sit and listen for something that sounded like a small herd of dik-dik sleeping.

The forest was filled with life, and so it was filled with noises. None of them were loud, but there was a lot to sift through, and Ayiki concentrated very hard on differentiating them.

A lunar moth, perched prominently on the trunk above her, made a soft flutter with its luminous wings, trying to attract a mate. High above her was a more aggressive flutter accompanied by squeaking. Bats. In the trunk of a neighbouring tree, a squirrel repositioned itself in its sleep. Leaf struck leaf in the dense bush below, indicating that some beetle or caterpillar had fallen or was meeting their fate as a snack for a frog. She guessed it was the latter, because she heard the subsequent croak of what she imagined was a satisfied frog. To her right, there was a particularly insistent cricket.

Yes, there was life in every conceivable direction. In the trees, on the forest floor…

She stopped. She had been leaning forward, about to reach out for another tree that she could hop to.

There was something different about the forest floor to her left. She focused on it, listening carefully, and realized what was odd. It was quieter. No crickets, no hunting frog. It was as if there was a large space being taken up by something else.

Ayiki crept forward along her branch, making as much noise as the squirrel turning over in its hole. She lowered her head, and listened again.

There was the faintest sound of relaxed breathing. Of not just one creature. Of at least a half-dozen.

She didn’t feel like she needed a nap anymore.

She continued to creep forward, until the branch was flexing under her weight, but she was directly above the sleeping herd. They were surrounded by dense bush that she would have never been able to pass through silently. Even from above she had difficulty spotting them. But her eyes were drawn to a motion, the twitch of a sleeping creature. Only then was Ayiki able to identify the outline of a sleeping dik-dik.

She dropped. The air whistled past her. Her arms were outstretched. She crashed loudly through the bush and fell directly on the dik-dik that had twitched. The startled herd took off loudly, and the one trapped beneath her was left behind.

She looked down into its terrified eyes. “Sorry,” she whispered. Not that it understood.

The walk back was easy. She wasn’t worried about making noise now, and the dead dik-dik didn’t weigh very much. She found her way back to the main route she was familiar with, and then started the trek home, mindful of not getting her prize caught in tangles of vines.

An orange glow was coming from the direction of the village. For a horrified moment, she thought it was the sunrise. Had she lost track of time? Her mother would be wondering where she was, she would be worried… But then Ayiki remembered that she was walking west. If the sun was rising, its glow would be coming from behind her.

The orange glow became brighter as she walked. She neared the forest’s edge, and through a parting of trees, saw what was casting the glow. The dik-dik dropped, forgotten.

Her village was engulfed with fire.

She was running before she had made the decision to.

She tore through the forest and didn’t stop when her feet met the grass. Her lungs were burning with her village. The smoke was like a heavy fog, but the burning village shone through it. It stung her eyes, her nostrils, her already laboured lungs. The village was eerily silent, as quiet as when she had left.

She ran up to her hut. The surrounding grass was blackened, and the three great oak trees shone red with embers and flicking tongues of flame. She couldn’t get very close. It was as if the hut was surrounded by an invisible wall of heat, and it wouldn’t let her through. Each time she tried, she reached the same spot where her skin felt like it was going to melt off, and her body stepped back on its own accord.

Her breathing was loud, haggard, and her voice caught on each exhale. “Ma,” she moaned.

She ran around the hut and further into the village. Someone, someone would be there. Her mother and sister wouldn’t have stayed in a burning hut.

Her foot caught. She tripped and landed on charred ground, throwing up a small cloud of soot. She coughed and rolled to see what she had tripped over.

It was Askhatik, Osa’s mother. There was an arrow through her neck.

Ayiki’s scream was silent. She scrambled to her feet, and looked at the ground around her.

There were bodies everywhere. Small bodies, full-grown bodies. Littered on the black earth as if spilled from an overturned wagon.

“Ma!” she yelled, growing more desperate. Her haggard breathing had become panicked hiccups. She spun, and such a terrible thought sat in her chest.

She should check the bodies. She should see if anyone was missing. She should at least count them.

But to take a step in any direction felt like a bad idea. She didn’t know what to do. “Ma!” she called again, spinning in place. “Ma!” she screamed. “Sunalei!”

But there was still no answer. There was no sound except for her, and the crackling of burning wood. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead.

Her hiccups were full, racking sobs now. Maybe they were still in the hut. Maybe they had escaped to the forest. She should wait here, so they could find her when they came back.

So she sat down amongst the dead. She sat and waited. She took big, shuddering breaths of smoke-scented air, which were expelled as big, shuddering sobs. She curled into a ball and then didn’t move. She would wait here.

\*\*description of dead bodies, not just “it’s a dead body”

\*\*approached the fire too quickly…. Could she think it was a search party? Everyone thinks she’s missing?

\*\*not a good enough feel for the forest. Thick? Dark? What’s the bark like?

\*\*rushed.

\*\*effective if she didn’t kill the dikdik? Looks it in the eye, can’t do it. We’ll flip her from a pacifist to something darker.

\*\*concept of time in the forest? Maybe add some background, some reflections on past experiences

She needed her mother, needed Sunalei.

She couldn’t approach any of the huts, so she started checking the bodies. She saw all of their empty faces, she tried not to pay attention to how they died, but Niski’s neck was almost split in half, so her head lay at an extreme angle that was hard to ignore.

She felt

She heard her

Her heart was in her throatHer feet met the grass, and she sprinted faster than she ever had in the life.

-what’s the situation here?

-she left just as the soldiers were getting there.

-the village has been burning for a couple of hours, then

-are the soldiers still there?

-no. they would have killed everyone, run inside the horeshoe to kill any stragglers/children, and then peaced. Why would they stay?

-well the witches bodies they killed won’t burn if they’re in the middle of the grass. Greyson would want them burnt. That’s why the soldiers are sent back the next morning.

She sprinted through the trees