“Were are tree leopards afraid of an army of rats!”

When important decisions needed to be made, they were voted on by Elder witches, to avoid disturbing The Queen. Rarely was The Queen present among her seeds. Elder witches were witches who had gone through their second growth (which occurred around the age of 200). During a second growth, a witch’s flesh begins to quicken with natural elements. The transformation is unique to every witch. Sometimes soft skin becomes bark, crops of fungi sprout from where there once was hair. Her magic will grow stronger, and she will grow bigger. Taller, wider, it didn’t matter. What was once a human appearance becomes something much less so, and these characteristics continue to develop until the witch passes away. But the Elder witches were not required to vote on whether or not they would go to war with humans, because to the shock of everyone, The Queen emerged from her cavern unprompted. An unknowable age, she stood an enormous fifteen feet tall. Her even voice carried over the crowd gathered outside the hollow where the discussion was being held. “Our future is not bound to this forest.”

Witches were of course magical creatures, and their talents were subdivided into useful categories. Most witches were competent in all of these, but some tended stronger towards one, and this was where they specialized. There were healers, like Ruto. There were summoners, who could conjure and control a small creation from natural elements around them. There were also elementals. Elementals were able to manipulate natural physical materials. They could light a fire to boil water, or soften the earth to ease the labour of gardeners. Hunters were often physically stronger or faster than the average witch, and could heighten their senses to detect creeping deer or a flighty squirrel in the treetops. But they would soon be called warriors instead. And technically, witches also had the potential to be seers, but there was only one seer in all their history. And that was The Queen. She alone was able to have insight into the future, usually in the form of a symbolic vision or a general feeling, and judge how to act in the present, and what information she shared was her prerogative. When she proclaimed that the future of witches was not bound to the forest, it was an absolute declaration of war, and there would be no retraction.

A week later, when the evening sky had settled, twenty witches left the forest. They were a combination of hunters and summoners, among them two healers, and five of them were elders. Witches had never been to battle, so they didn’t have battle weapons, but they made due. There was no subtlety to their approach. They entered the little village and laid it to waste. To the humans cowering behind feeble walls, watching the elder hunter fight must have made them doubt the validity of what was happening, made them wonder if it was perhaps a strange nightmare. The elder hunter held elongated spears in both arms

that she used to slice, and above her head hovered a sm

that sat a half-hour hike from the forest, and