

MACALANIA Forest was full of things that had to be seen to be believed, but even so, Shelinda almost failed to notice the woman who stood motionless in front of a tree, her green clothing blending into the undergrowth.

“Greetings, sum –” the woman began, and then she hesitated. “You’re not a summoner,” she said, “are you?”

“No, my lady,” said Shelinda, bowing apologetically. “I am a mere acolyte of Bevelle Temple.”

“As I thought,” the woman muttered.

“Can I help you?” Shelinda asked her. “Lady –?”

“My name is Belgemine,” replied the other. “It matters not, then – I shall wait here until a summoner comes along. Be off, now.”

“If you’re looking for a summoner, Lady Belgemine,” said Shelinda, “last I saw Lord Isaaru, he said he planned to come this way. But he was intending to stop at Guadosalam for a while – I don’t think he’ll be here for a few days.”

“Then I shall wait,” said Belgemine.

“You’ll,” said Shelinda, “begging your pardon – you’ll wait? You mean, until he arrives?”

Belgemine inclined her head slightly, fixing Shelinda with a stern look that it was difficult not to shy away from, and said, “That is so.”

“Then perhaps I can bring you some food, if you’re going to be standing here that long,” Shelinda suggested. Summoners’ business was of the utmost importance, after all, she thought.

“Thank you,” said Belgemine gravely, “but I have no need of it.”

“I insist,” said Shelinda; several encounters with a certain young lady summoner had made her more bold than usual of late. “Wait here,” she added, before turning to head down the path away from Belgemine, back towards the merchant she had met earlier who could no doubt sell her a little food that she would be able to bring back.

There was no reply, not even a protest; and something possessed Shelinda to turn back and look behind at the spot where Belgemine stood. Or, indeed, where she *had* stood: because where there had once been a woman, now there was nothing at all, just the shape of a tree whose branches spiralled gracefully into the sky.

“Yevon preserve me,” she whispered, capitulating to the mysteries of the forest with a reverent bow.