

Meeting

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This is the story of how Marinia and Koji really met...the first paragraph is the first of another story, {The tale of Marinia} which isnt posted yet, i place it here to explain something that happens later in this story.

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1 - A village in the forest

Prelude

The tale of Marinia

Sadwa, Koji, and Gindi walked through a dark forest, their two escorts on either side of them. The night was dark, and the escorts, though trained fighters, were not comfortable traveling at night in a strange forest. Strange sounds emanated from the trees and bushes all throughout the forest.

Suddenly, the bushes on either side of the path started rustling.

In an instant, they were surrounded by twelve dark clad fighters wielding strangely curved swords with dangerous, cruel looking hooks. The two warrior guards were no match for the guerilla soldiers, and they were both soon overwhelmed.

It seemed like all was lost.

Then the mysterious figure appeared.

Like a phantom hawk the dark form dropped from the sky on wings that seemed to span the entire sky above the clearing. Its single, straight bladed sword spun in an arc before becoming nothing but a blur as it parted the circle of attackers, throwing them in all directions. Swiftly it dealt with the ones who rose and tried to resist, then it turned to face the three young travelers and their recovering escorts.

The three children stood planted where they were. Never had they seen such a strong, agile warrior.

Silently, it removed its hood.

Before them stood a female, who looked little older than their guards- who were both barely over 17.

"You must be careful here. Come. I will see you safely to your destination."

She turned without another word and lead them the rest of the way to the village where they had been headed. Soon they were settled in one of the rooms in the inn.

Exhausted, Koji found it surprisingly hard to fall asleep.

Still in a state somewhere between a dream and the waking world, he saw the female warrior appear in the doorway to his room. Surrounded by a strange mist, she was outlined by the lantern light from the open staircase behind her.

Her voice seemed hollow and sure as she spoke.

"We shall meet again someday, when you are old enough."

She was gone by morning, her words only a haze in his memory. He walked downstairs; his guards and companions were already sitting at tables eating. He took a seat alone in a far corner, wishing to be alone with his confusion from the night before.

An old innkeeper walked over to him with a warm bowl of porridge and sat down beside him.

"So, you're feeling better." he smiled.

Koji stared at the steaming food.

"That warrior last night-who was she?"

"No one knows. She comes and goes keeping this, and who knows what other areas safe. Some say she comes from beyond this world, others that she is a ghost. All that is known about her is that she is a great healer and has roamed freely across this land sense hundreds of years ago."

Chapter one- a village in the forest

Crack! Thud! Smash!

The blade whirled and sliced with precise accuracy as its wielder's arms rose and swung with each new blow.

Kathunk! Boom! Crash!

The sharp double-edged sword became nothing more than a glinting silver blur of the iron and steel tempered with dimonite as the deadly weapon sang in a graceful arc on its way to contact with its adversary.

Marinia leaned back against a tree resting the tip of her blade on the ground before her as she surveyed her work. The pile of dry sticks that now lay before her had only an hour ago been an old dead pine tree. Sighing, she sheathed her blade and hefted the first in the series of bundles making up the pile over her shoulder.

Several years ago, she had agreed to stay with the people making up one of the many tribes inhabiting the forested moon of Kerrista. She had been warmly adopted into their tribe after returning their chief's children to him. She was considered a narsheesh or a sort of guardian of life and wellness due to her healing skills, as well as being secretly revered as a strong and wise leader by many.

A few years earlier, the chief whose children she had saved had died of old age, and his son, Urodi, had taken his father's place at the head of the tribe. Urodi was young and rash. He did not share his father's values or love for peace, and he shunned the advice of his elders.

At first, he had listened to Marinia.

Then one day a group of slave traders had come through the area. While Marinia had secretly freed some of the slaves, Urodi had met with the trade master and learned about buying and selling slaves. It started with a couple of sisters he had bought. Naturally, Marinia had been outraged. Immediately, she had ordered them released and sent back to their homes and families, and had spent the rest of the afternoon chiding Urodi.

Never the less, he had gone ahead and bought several more slaves by the end of the week.

Once in a while, he was able to sell them on before Marinia found out, but on a more and more regular basis she caught him, more often than not only a short time after a purchase rather than a sale. He had become quite heedless of even her reprimand, and thus more careless about letting her catch him.

He had only recently constructed a lock and bolt secured shack behind his own hut, and Marinia found that she had to keep an eye on that shack for slave activity quite often.

Urodi didn't like Marinia's high status among his people, especially since it was that status that kept him from doing anything about her. The people were just as loyal to her as to their chief, perhaps more, otherwise she wouldn't have half as much influence on them as she did.

It was a long walk through the forest back to the village from the grove of dead pines, and when she arrived back at the village she was tired. It was around midday, and as she set the bundle of wood down on the severely diminished community pile, she noticed that something was different. It was quiet- too quiet- for this time of day especially. Almost immediately sensing what was going on, she purposefully stalked to the 'town's square', a clearing in front of the chief's hut used for gatherings and meetings.

True to her suspicions, the entire clearing was crowded with every man, woman, and child- every occupant and member of the tribe. As she drew nearer the crowd, her ears were met by the same awkward silence that hung over the rest of the town- a silence that hung heavier here.

Each member in the gathering was aware that Marinia was due back any minute now, and they knew all too well what her reaction would be when she found out about this.

Urodi, oblivious to the crowd's uneasy knowledge concerning Marinia's eminent return, was rather enjoying himself gloating over his newest slave acquisitions, albeit they did not even understand a word of the language he spoke.

Koji sat alongside a mess of random fellow captives of just about any imaginable collection of species,

most of whom were just as baffled as he as to what their new slave owner was saying. He had never heard this kind of language- it sounded like the complicated language of an isolated jungle tribe- pretty much what it was. A few of his fellow captives spoke the same language as Koji did, but the ones who could actually make out what the chief was saying did not speak Koji's language, though from the looks on their faces, he figured that he probably didn't even want to know what their gloating captor was saying.

Suddenly, mid-sentence, the strange chieftain was silent. A look of disappointment and bewildered hopelessness formed a slight scowl over his features.

Koji turned to see what had caused such a drastic change in the mood of the prideful young leader. The sea of people that had gathered behind the captives parted simultaneously to let a strong, short, somewhat youthful looking, and direly furious warrior woman pass.

With one stern glance Marinia had seen what had taken place in her absence.

Storming through the crowd of nervous looking people, her eyes blazed with the fire of pure wrath.

Without even looking at the new bought slaves, her glare penetrated Urodi's eyes, burning to his very soul.

"What is this?!" she snapped with rage, "Did you think I wouldn't find out this time?"

Even Urodi had never seen Marinia this angry, and he cringed under her flaming stare.

Without once blinking an eye she continued her reprimand.

"You call your self leader of this tribe, yet you deliberately go against the one main fundamental this tribe was founded on!"

Her eyes narrowed,

"Freedom!"

Koji watched as the female figure stood for a moment when she had finishes growling snappishly and angrily in the strange tribal tongue to their most recent captor.

She then turned to the captives, a small, sharp dagger drawn. Moving lightly, she knelt beside him and in one swift movement sliced the ropes that bound his wrists and ankles. Several others from the crowd stepped forward to assist in releasing the remainder of the slaves. Koji sat rubbing the places where the ropes had encircled his wrists. A hand reached down and offered to him.

He was amazed at her strength as his liberator practically pulled him to his feet.

"My name is Marinia. You will have to forgive this incident- I should have known this would happen again." She smiled apologetically as she spoke to Koji perfectly in his own language. He stared at her, dumbfounded at her knowledge of his language.

"But you must be exhausted. Come. I will show you a place where you can wash and sleep." with that she turned and guided him to her own hut, as the other prisoners had already either left or been taken care of by her other friends in the crowd.

Dinner that night was an open, starlit feast laid out on low tables connected end to end to form one long table by the banks of a stream that flowed by the town's northern border. Everything had been cooked simply over fires; corn, fresh trout, and thin wafers of sweet bread with a dipping sauce made from raspberries and strawberries with fresh black raspberries sprinkled on top made up the main course. Simple and delicious.

Koji sat next to Marinia as the two ate and spoke.

"Again, I am really sorry that we had to meet like that. Our chief, Urodi here, seems to enjoy ignoring his elders. I have told him-warned him really- about the slave trade, but he doesn't listen to me any more then he did to his own father."

Koji looked taken aback a bit. "He must be at least 28, but you don't look a day over 18...." Marinia smiled fondly at her new friend's common misconception. "Friend, he is well 29, but I haven't been 18

for many, many years now.....no. I am nearly 6,587 years old now.”

Koji’s eyes widened, his moving lips barely making a sound. “You’re....how....old???”

She always found people’s reactions to her age somewhat amusing.

One of Koji’s companions, Vincent, had been listening to their conversation and now his fork clattered to his plate. His eyes were the size of saucers as his jaw dropped. “Ffrohwhacha?!?” He whispered unintelligible syllables in his shock.

Marinia shook her head

“Actually, though I hate to admit this, it was a good thing for you that Urodi was the one who bought you. If he hadn’t....you probably would never have been free again.”

Koji shuddered at the thought.

“Y....yes....T....thank you.”

Marinia again shook her head and forked a piece of fish on her plate.

“The slave trade is an awful thing. When its end does come, it won’t come easy.”

“No, it won’t.”

Their conversation soon drifted to more pleasant topics.

All the while, Vincent sat staring blankly at Marinia, his brain still completely fried. It was late that night when Koji and Marinia finally sent someone who led him off to a bed, where he lay for the rest of the night, still staring blankly into thin air.

2 - To the portal and beyond

The next morning, Marinia lead a group of guides to help the former slaves return to where they had come from. Koji, though he didn't really have anywhere to go at the time, had already decided to come with the group to the portal where Marinia would send everyone back to where they belonged.

Each member of the escort group was one of the tribes warriors, armed with the tall, narrow, lance-like spears, the choice weapon of the tribe. Each was dressed in the simple, bright robes and smocks that were traditional in the tribe.

Marinia, who had never really taken to the tribe's manner of dress, looked little like them in her plain, belted, long, green shirt, knee length boots, and matching green leggings. A purple cape was draped about her shoulders and simple, round, deep red-purple gemstones adorned her belt, clasped her cape, and rested in the small tiara dipping over her forehead. Her healers pouch hanging over her left shoulder, as always, and sword each rested at either hip. Her long, red-brown hair was tied back with a leather string and her wings, calmly and slowly, rose and fell ever so slightly as she stood surveying her group. The dusky tan points of her ears stood erect, matching the shade of her wings as perfectly as her hair did that of her tail.

Koji, standing off to the side, was clad in his newly mended grey vest and long, brown pants. His short, white hair shifted slightly as his grey, wolfish ears slid up, revealing the twin yellow stripes on his left cheek. His grey wolf tail swished gently in the breeze as his dark eyes watched Marinia's tail, slightly longer than his own and like that of a fox, as it nearly touched the ground.

Marinia had been reluctant to go, but as she was the only one in the entire tribe and group of prisoners combined who knew how to work the portal, she had to go. She knew that Urodi was glad of her leaving and would take full advantage of her absence, so without his knowing she had had a tunnel dug from under the slave shack to a place in the forest under the cover of trees and left three of her most loyal friends to help any new prisoners to escape. Only with these precautions in place had she been willing to leave.

Several hours out from the village on foot and it was clear that Vincent had recovered; he was the source of ceaseless, pointless jabber and naggings.

"I'm hungry. I want a cookie. My grandma used to make good cookies...."

Marinia turned and grumbled in Koji's ear, "Won't someone please shut that nut-case up?"

Koji sighed.

"He's usually at least this annoying. The best thing we can do is ignore him."

He snuck a glare at Vincent.

"Shut up, will you?" He hissed.

Suddenly, Vincent emitted a screech much like that of a girl. "Now what is it?" Marinia groaned as she, Koji, and several other travelers turned to look at the petrified Vincent.

"What the...."

Koji stared at the strange eight legged creature which had attached itself about Vincent's neck and waist. Marinia's features turned from an expression of disgust to pure mirth. The escort team burst out in laughter as she explained to Koji and the startled, panicking Vincent.

"Heh, heh, heh....it...it seems you've found a jiroatian spider monkey...hehehe... oh, I say....hahaha! It seems to like you!"

At this point, she burst out in helpless, hearty laughter. Soon Koji was joining in.

Vincent blushed as he gingerly detached the spider monkey's front two paws from around his neck- an action which resulted in the dark brown furry creature scurrying over his shoulder and attaching itself even more firmly to his back.

At first, Vincent wasn't too happy, but soon he was engaged in ceaseless chitter-chatter; this time talking to the monkey, who seemed to hang on his every word, eyes huge and face locked in a comical expression of mock seriousness.

It was well mid-afternoon by the time the procession reached the portal. Marinia got to work right away. The first group to be set off included two men and a boy who were from the planet around which the forest moon revolved. As they lived near one of the portals on the planet below, they would require no escort, therefore they were the easiest to send. The next group was a mother and her child along with several strong men and an old grandfather. With them went two warriors, who would be sent back to the moon by people on the other end. The next few groups were children from various planets who were sent with escorts and a note instructing the escorts return.

Then were three groups of men varying in age from 13 to 55.

By the time the last five groups were sent, it was early evening and Marinia and Koji were alone, Vincent and his monkey having left for earth with the second to last group.

The mirage view of the last planet accessed faded then vanished with a liquid-like static sound. Marinia turned around and walked into the clearing customary in front of all portals. Koji was sitting on a large rock and Marinia joined him.

The sun was setting over the treetops casting an orange glow on everything it could reach.

Marinia leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"So, do you want to head back now or camp here until morning?"

3 - Changes; as chaff in the wind

Koji glanced toward the forest and shrugged. "I don't really mind either way."

His companion sighed.

"Well, I don't really feel like trekking through the woods at night. I brought some supplies for camping out anyways, so we may as well spend the night here."

She rose and strode toward the trees on the left side of the clearing. Selecting a smaller patch of cleared forest from which they could watch but not be seen by the portal, she pulled out a canvass and some rope. Tying the cloth between four trees, she formed a lean-to type tent. Koji stood admiring her chosen campsite and tent off to the side.

"Would you mind getting some firewood? Just be sure it's dry."

Koji nodded as he walked into the surrounding forest.

"Sure, yes 'm."

When he returned, Marinia had cleared an area in which she had dug a shallow pit. Using moss, bark, flint, and her sword, she soon had a fire going. Warming bread and thick stew over the small blaze, Marinia and Koji soon had dinner ready.

Once they had finished and their food and cooking supplies were cared for, Marinia unpacked two blankets. One she gave to Koji, the other she wrapped about her own shoulders. Sitting beside the fire, she stared into the glowing embers as she had so many nights before. She had always found this a restful ways to think about things. Koji silently joined her, the warmth of friendship just as comforting as that given by the fire. Hours had passed as Marinia turned to look at Koji's sleeping form beside her. Memories flooded back through her mind of the many friends she had had throughout her life. She was a kit, a kind of people who lived to be at least 100,000 years old. She was a somewhat young kit at 6,587 years, but already she had seen many friends come and go, some she had been at their births, and a few she had been the birthing healer for. These friends she had watched grow old and die, while she remained in her youth. A tear came to her eye. Even though it had been so many years – thousands in some cases, she remembered each friend as if it had been only yesterday that they had been together.

Gently she lifted the blanket that had fallen to one side and placed it over her sleeping friend. Laying back herself, she was soon asleep beside him.

Dawn broke early the next morning, and by the time Koji awoke, Marinia had breakfast nearly ready. As he bit into the mixed wild berry-filled thin pastry, warm, jam like sauce oozed onto his fingers. "I'll never get tired of this kind of cooking" he thought to himself as he licked his lips clean.

Marinia had already put away their food and sleeping supplies away by the time he had finished, and now she was extinguishing the fire with dirt and water. She dusted some dry leaves and soil over the fire pit as she spoke.

"I need to visit another tribe before we head back to the village today. I suppose you'll be coming with me?"

Koji shrugged. "Sure."

He picked up the sack carrying the blankets, canvass, rope and food, then turned to his companion. "If you don't mind my asking, why do we have to visit this other village?"

Marinia half smiled and gestured toward her pouch.

"I am a healer. I have been meaning to check in on this village for some time now when I got the chance. I am the only healer in this area, and you never know when they will need services, but it has

been quite a while since my last visit.”
He nodded, “Oh, like a country doctor.”
“Sort of.”

The forest was bright and clean, and the air was crisp as the two travelers made their way to the secluded village. Marinia led her new friend along the slightly longer, scenic path. It was only slightly before midday when the small tribe nestled in a sunlit valley became visible. Several of the village children had seen her coming and came running to meet her, begging for her to take flight.

Many times while traveling alone she had flown from stop to stop, as it took much less time, and the children had met her that way several times before when she had come to visit them. She usually only flew when she was traveling alone, and she hardly ever carried anyone when she did. Today she decided to humor the children. Skip-running forward amongst the cheering children she took off into the sky. She spun around in the air to face the small group below, her wings spread gracefully as if reaching toward either horizon.

Koji shielded his eyes against the sun as he looked up at her.

Marinia’s cape swirled around in the wind, its hood rising ever so slightly.

The children ran off screaming with delight back to the village to tell their friends.

Suddenly, without warning, Koji remembered a night many years ago in his earlier youth when he had seen such a flight before. He sat down where he was, unable to tear his eyes from Marinia. Through his mind flashed a vision of the same figure soaring overhead in a dark forest so many years ago. Her words came back to him faster and clearer than they had since they had first been said.

“We shall meet again one day, when you are older...”

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

His vision cleared and before him knelt Marinia, eyes cautiously radiating concern. With hardly a thought he spoke. “That night...when I was little...you were the warrior who saved us...”

Marinia’s eyes clouded with the memory.

“Yes...I said we would meet again, did I not?” she smiled and rose offering Koji her hand.

They walked together to the village, the reality of Marinia’s age really sinking in on him for the first time.

Their time at the village went by quickly, and by early afternoon they were once again on their way, this time following the river upstream. About mid-afternoon, they stopped to rest on the riverbank.

Marinia removed her boots and waded around in the water. Koji sat on the bank untying his shoes.

Marinia turned in the middle of the river, eyes shining mischievously.

“Hurry up, slowpoke.”

Koji had his feet in the water and was wading along the river stones. Marinia smiled and splashed at him playfully. The water was surprisingly warm and refreshing, and Koji splashed her back, joining her laughter. Soon they were engaged in a full fledged water fight, splashing at each other while giggling and thrashing about like small children. Marinia threw herself at her friend and they both fell back in the shallows laughing uncontrollably.

“Aaah...hehe...I haven’t laughed so hard since Zhinari...” Her smile faded as her voice trailed off and a tear came to her eye as she sighed.

Koji stared at his feet as he sat on the mossy bank unsure of what to say.

Marinia sat down beside him. “It’s been so long...” Koji could only imagine just how many friends Marinia had seen die in her time- being old enough to be his most ancient ancestor’s great grandmother, there must have been many friends she had grown close to that were gone.

“W...who was Zhinari?” he asked cautiously. Marinia half smiled and wiped the tear from her face. “Who

is Zhinari, you mean.” her eyes took on a far-away look as she pulled her boots back on. Without waiting for Koji to say anything, she spoke absently. “Zhinari is the most independent person you may ever meet. She has a good and witty sense of humor and a...almost musical laugh. She may not laugh often, but when she does...when she laughs, you can't help but join her. ...and she is so understanding...even when you don't know how to explain yourself...” she shook her head and rose. “I can't even explain it myself.” For a moment they stood looking at each other in the late afternoon sunlight. “...well, we had better be on our way.” Marinia turned back to the trail.

The forest grew dark swiftly as the two travelers followed the path back toward the village. Just before the sun sank out of sight, Marinia tied a strip of blanket dipped in oil to the end of a still sturdy branch from an old, rotten tree. Once the sun's light was gone, she struck flint to steel and they had a torch. If alone, Marinia would not have bothered with a light- she knew these forests as well as she knew anything else, and she would have been flying. As it was, however, she also knew that the forest floor, especially here, was latticed with roots that had risen above the ground which would easily snare a foot that did not know the way. Also, there were wild animals which roamed freely throughout this area, and most of the nocturnal ones were dangerous, if not deadly and ruthless hunters. Aware that it was better to be safe than sorry, she soon handed the torch to her companion and held her sword at the ready in case of any attacks.

Cautiously she led the way through the darkened tangle of trees, vines, and roots. Speaking in whispers she sought to ease the oppression of the silence that clung around them; broken only by the occasional hoot of an owl or rustle of bushes. “As I said before, I prefer not to travel in the dark. These woods are no place to be at night.” She sighed and glanced moodily at a small patch of sky above them. “We can't chance stopping to make camp. Not here anyways. Too many wild animals.” It was obvious that she was half talking to herself. Peering into the darkness ahead, she tapped a fallen log beside a boulder. “Only about four miles left now.” Noting the weariness on Koji's face despite the dark, she added “We can rest here for a few minutes before we finish the walk.”

Gratefully, he sat on the log and leaned back against the boulder. Marinia crouched on the boulder, completely awake and alert for any movement whatsoever in the surrounding area.

A lonely wolf howled its misery at the full moon, several crickets chirruped to one another in the grass. The bushes behind the two friends rustled and Marinia spun around, keen eyes watching the low foliage for the sound's source.

Koji peered up at his friend. “I don't like this.”

Without shifting her gaze Marinia replied in a low tone, “Neither do I.” She shook her head, repeating what she had already said several times. “This is no place to be loitering around at night. We should be going.” Leaping from the large rock she landed noiselessly on the ground alongside Koji.

The bushes stirred again.

Marinia raised her sword to a defensive stance in the direction of the bush. Speaking under her breath in Koji's ear, she stepped back. “Righto- let's be off. Follow me and stay close.”

Two glowering, beady eyes appeared from the heart of the bush.

Koji froze.

Marinia took his hand, cold and clammy with fear, and edged him away from the savage, glaring beast.

The creature pounced free of the foliage, revealing its long, sharp fangs, rough matted fur, and fierce, ghastly features in the quivering torchlight.

Koji's eyes grew wide as he frantically squeezed his friend's hand.

“Mmm....mma....Marinia!!!” He cried out in terror as the torch quivered in his shaking, vice-like grip.

Pushing him to safety while grabbing the torch with her free hand, she leapt between the beast and her frightened friend. Fox like, she growled fiercely. As the beast pounced at her, she dashed aside and dealt a blow to its side with the sharp of her blade.

Enraged, it turned and lunged at her side. Despite finding both flame and blade in its way, its claws managed to lodge themselves in her shoulder before being thrown aside.

Ignoring the wounds, Marinia turned as the monster again sought to attack.

This time its teeth struck true, burying deep into her side. Horrified, Koji watched as she went down under the savage beast's powerful grip.

All hope seemed lost as the beast released her limp form and turned toward the place where Koji was hiding, looking as if he was grinning in a terrifying, sinister way.

Just as it was about to attack, the beast slumped to the ground, dead, fiendish grin fixed eternally on its face. The torch had been extinguished in the fight, and now as his eyes adjusted to the dark, Koji made out a form standing over the corpse out of which the sword was still protruding. Squinting, recognition instantaneously dawned on him; Marinia had risen and dealt the final, fatal blow once the beast had turned away from her.

Swaying slightly, she staggered forward half a step.

Instantly he rushed forward to catch her as she collapsed beside the log. He knelt beside her as she leaned back, winded, and smiled. "Well....that's what....what happens when....you hang around this area....at night...."

Her eyes closed and she sighed, then leaned forward and rummaged through her medical bag. Using the last of her bandages and several strips torn from her cape she bandaged her wounds with a combination of several herbs crushed into a paste. Half heartily she leaned back once again.

"Fetch....my sword....and the camp pack...." She gasped and again closed her eyes. "Do what you canto set up a tent and start a fire....we move on in the morning" again she caught her breath in pain and pulled what was left of her cape closer about her shoulders.

"O....ok...." Koji rose and backed away, still unsure of what would happen next and frightened. Trembling nervously, he withdrew the blade from the dead monster's body and wiped it clean on the grass. After placing it beside his sleeping friend, he fetched the pack from the bush where he had left it and unpacked the canvass and rope. Carefully he draped it over the log behind Marinia's head and secured it. He then tied the other edges to the boulder and the convenient branch of a nearby tree. Unrolling the blankets, he draped one around his friend's shoulders, laying the other on the ground nearby.

Recalling all he could about how Marinia had started their campfire the night before, he cleared an area of dirt and gathered dry moss, twigs, and fire wood. With the small pile of moss, he struck the piece of flint against the sword edge. After a few tries, a spark followed by a spiral of smoke and a small flame rewarded his efforts. A short time later he had a small fire going and a decent stock of firewood nearby. Sighing, he sat back with his blanket to get some rest. Despite his nervousness about the surrounding dark forest and wondering what other monsters might be waiting in the shadows for the chance of an easy meal, he was surprised at how tired he actually was.

Soon he was sound asleep, his worries and troubles temporarily forgotten as he drifted into the merciful mists of dreams. A woman with long white hair and deep blue eyes sat atop the boulder, surrounded by a soft, blue glow, staring deep into him. She appeared vigilant. Her mouth did not smile, or even move, yet her voice echoed clear through his mind. "Be watchful, friend. I will watch over you for now. One day I will need your help." Her eyes stared into his imploringly as the rest of her started to vanish.

"You must help me when I need you...."

"No! Wait! Who are you? Come back!"

A hand was firmly shaking him by his shoulder. The eyes slowly changed from deep blue to green with a hint of purple. The face surrounding them faded from the strange vision's begging one to Marinia's concerned features.

"Koji! Koji! Wake up!"

His vision cleared to see her kneeling over him.

"Hush! I haven't gone anywhere!" She looked confused, "What were you shouting at?"

Koji shook his head. "There....there was a woman....she wanted my help...."

Marinia's eyes took on a distant look of recognition. "A being like an angel- appearing in a glowing vision.... then vanishing....replaced by someone you know...."

Koji's eyebrows rose. "Yeah....How did you know?"

"I was visited by such a being long, long ago." Her gaze became serious and focused. "They are angels. Or she is an angel. Occasionally, though very rarely, they become trapped in a mortal body for one reason or another, and usually when this happens they make contact with a mortal who has not passed on before the process is complete. The contact is usually the only person who can help the angel." She smiled. "Don't worry. It will be a while before you meet in the waking world, and by then you will be far better prepared. I'll help you."

"Hmm....ok."

The first rays of dawn sunlight crept across the horizon. Marinia, despite being slowed by her injuries, re-stoked the fire and unpacked what was left of their dried fruit and oats. Koji fetched some water from a nearby stream in the cooking pot, and soon their meal was ready. Koji was starving; he ate as if he had been underfed all his life. Marinia didn't eat much at all and Koji ended up finishing her portion too. After the canvass, ropes, one blanket, and utensils were put away, Koji shouldered the pack. Marinia drew her blanket tighter about her shoulders and took her friend's hand. With a bit of effort she managed to stand. It took a few moments for her to gain her balance.

Limping alongside Koji, she made good progress in spite of her wounds.

About half an hour out, however, she was slowing. Leaning against a tree to catch her breath, Marinia looked around. Spotting what she wanted, she drew her sword and hobbled off into a dense patch of shrubbery. Koji watched, hesitant to follow her into the thicket, but a little concerned about what she was doing.

Thud! Thwack! The bushes rustled a bit and a minute later Marinia emerged, a long, staff-like pole in one hand while brushing twigs and leaves from herself with the other.

"A walking stick?" he asked.

Marinia's eyes twinkled mischievously as she tested the flexibility of her pole. Seeing that it was acceptable, she used it to vault forward a few steps, landing nimbly on her feet. Turning back to her friend, she smiled at his surprise.

"Pole vaulting." she explained. "Rather useful for going long distances- especially when one can't walk proper." She leaned into the bushes again and handed Koji a pole identical to her own.

"Go ahead, try it."

Taking a deep breath, he ran forward a few steps and dug the pole into the ground. The pole sprung upright, flinging Koji through the air. Caught completely off guard by the pole's sudden vibration, he released his grip and was sent flying into another large patch of bushes head first.

Marinia giggled and limp-skipped over to her friend. "You ok?"

Koji sat rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah, I'm fine."

About an hour of instructions and practice later and Koji was good enough to travel. Marinia had him go ahead of her though several times she sprung out in front of him, feet barely touching the ground as she

maneuvered through the forest, one handedly pouncing with her pole.

They arrived back at the village only an hour before lunch time. Panting and gasping, happily, the two landed on the bank of the stream opposite the village. Marinia smiled painfully and held her side. Rising and wading across the stream she headed for her hut. Upon reaching the stream's opposite side, she turned to her friend. "I'll see you tonight. I am going to take a nap." She paused and glanced toward the town. "You may as well come with me."

The Village seemed to be in a lull as they entered. Women sat in front of their houses, children were not running in the streets as usual, and the men were no where to be seen. Every person in the street looked up and watched as she and Koji passed, but remained silent and still. Instinctively, Marinia knew something was wrong. Only a select few from the village were warriors, and usually the men would be home by now for lunch.

Dust rose from the dry ground upon which they trod, slowly floating in the sun's oppressively hot rays. Even Koji could feel that something was not right.

As they approached Marinia's hut, a pack of creatures like the one that had attacked them the night before cut them off. The men of the town crowded behind them, blocking retreat armed with stout clubs. A sinister, cackling laugh echoed about as the two trapped friends turned to face the blockade, standing back to back. The monsters parted as a strangely dressed man with pure evil stamped all over his body stepped from Marinia's hut with Urodi, who now looked nothing like the naïve chieftain she had left behind, with a stony, icy cold glare in his eyes.

A stale, potent odor of death hung around the strange man and his beasts. Still snickering, he rattled his bone decorated spear at his captives. "Thought you could return to life as normal, aye?" his voice faded dryly. "Not after that stunt you pulled." His eyes became as hard as stones as he grew defiant against Marinia's glare, his voice cold as steel. "Bring out the prisoners!"

Koji felt Marinia's body quiver as her three friends were dragged forth, bound and beaten. The armed mob formed a large, dense circle around the bound three and the beasts, which snarled in anticipation. Held back by several club wielding mobsters, Marinia and Koji watched helplessly as the monsters circled their friends.

Marinia drew her sword, cast aside the guards holding her back, and surged forward. Beating her with their clubs, the crowd dragged her back, disregarding her weapon.

The three prisoners fought valiantly for their lives using the ropes that bound them, but were overcome after a good long struggle by the sheer power and massive number of the savage beasts. Soon there was nothing left of them but bones and bloody shreds.

Marinia's face had become pale and her body was shaking with horror at the ruthless murder. She stared blankly at the spectacle as the strange man spoke. "Know that I could have the same done to you both. Out of respect for your long standing service to my tribe, you will be allowed your lives. Do not expect any help or mercy from my people – if you ever set foot in this area again, you or any of those traitor soldiers of yours, you will be killed on the spot." The guards stepped away from the two friends, none too gently pushing their way past them.

A pained, shocked expression with a hint of rage covered Marinia's face as she staggered half a step forward and collapsed to the dirt covered ground. Koji half caught her. Kneeling at his friend's side, he looked up into the two leader's eyes, a tear in the corner of his own for the rage and hurt he felt on his friend's behalf. Suddenly, he found himself speaking in a voice hardly his own, a voice shaking with anger and emotion that caused even the strongest of those present, even the new leader, to shudder and step back.

“How....dare you? I may have only been here a few days, but even I can see how much good she did for your tribe!” He raged at Urodi, “She only did what was best for you- for all of you! She never hurt you or any of your friends!”

His eyes glinted.

“After all she did....how could you?”

Over his initial shock, the new chief had lost his patience and interest for the two now-outcasts.

Throwing a rough sack of Marinia’s things to the dirt beside her partially-conscious form, he addressed the two.

“Take her things and be gone,” He spat at them, “Traitors.”

The crowd left, the new chief returned to Marinia’s former hut where he had taken up residence, and Urodi marched off back to his own hut, leaving Koji with Marinia, the monsters to follow them as they left, ensuring that they wouldn’t return; the corpses to rot in the sun’s blazing rays.

Slowly but surely Marinia returned to consciousness. Weakly she was able to rise with her friend’s help and limp slowly from the village, Koji carrying her sack.

Just outside the town in the fringe of woodlands, Koji found Marinia’s sword, cast aside like any common possession of a traitor-scornfully. Buried beyond the hilt in mud and a good part of the blade tangled in the roots of a massive tree, it took quite a bit of work before he had it free. He then found their bag of camping supplies where they had left it near the poles beside the river. Bringing the poles with him, he carried it back to a small clearing near the path that led to the portal where Marinia lay, once again in a half-conscious stupor. Fighting back panic he forced his trembling hands to set up a makeshift lean-to tent. Mindless at times of even what he was doing, Koji managed to keep himself busy for a good part of the afternoon.

After preparing a fire pit and gathering a good sized pile of firewood, he sat down against a tree near exhausted.

Evening was coming on faster than he had expected, and not knowing what else to do, he leaned his head back and tried to relax.. The worry for his friend, however, refused to abate.

He had just drifted into a slight doze when a soft, weak voice startled him to wakefulness once again.

“I.... I told you I was going to....take a nap....”

Marinia was awake and Koji was at her side in a split second. She seemed a bit dazed and confused-she knew what had happened in town but remembered nothing after she had collapsed. She shivered and glanced at the last fading light from the sunset. “It’s cold....”

Koji looked at the unlit pile of kindling in his makeshift fire pit unsurely.

Marinia motioned toward the bag of supplies. “Give me a blanket....please....” He handed her one of the two blankets, leaving the bag beside her.

Cautiously he took some flint and Marinia’s carefully cleaned and dried sword. Striking them together, gingerly at first, then catching the hang of it he finally got a small fire going.