

Secrets of Aesperia Book 1/2: Stratalian Ambitions

Joshua N. York

Secrets of Aesperia Book 1/2: Stratalian Ambitions

Joshua N. York

This book is for sale at

<http://leanpub.com/StratalianAmbitions>

This version was published on 2013-03-24

This is a [Leanpub](#) book. Leanpub empowers authors and publishers with the Lean Publishing process. [Lean Publishing](#) is the act of publishing an in-progress ebook using lightweight tools and many iterations to get reader feedback, pivot until you have the right book and build traction once you do.



©2013 Joshua N. York

Also By Joshua N. York

Secrets of Aesperia: Stratalia Conspiracy

Chapter One

Chapter 1: Intro, Reminiscing on the faithful day.

Haki; he's not the most becoming of sorcerers, especially considering that he is of a somewhat noble lineage. This short and scrawny lad with his commoner hair cut, nothing but a brown nest on the top of his head, cut by his own two hands...and scissors of course...whenever it starts to droop over his eyes or tickle his neck; not that it matters considering he typically wears a large pointed blue hat with yellow star and moon patterns over it. As silly as that might sound it matches the cape he wears; thankfully his parents talked him out of wearing a shirt and pants like that and instead he wears a thick black shirt and thick black baggy pants; both covered in more pockets than one would think could fit on cloths, pockets filled with little magical trinkets. For this unbecoming lad is of the royal sorcerer lineage in service of the royal family of the Kingdom of Crimdalina.

Back home he was something special, the heir to the seat of court sorcerer to the royal family, despite his appearance, although back home the normal attire of the court sorcerer would look to most more like that of a stage magician, but that's another culture for you. His home was a giant villa off to the side and connected to via an underground path, the great white fairy tale castle of Crimdalina; all looming over the walled in great royal city; at least he thought it was a great city until now. Back home his status caused many in the court to whisper of his future, a potential bride amongst the people, some even

dared whisper of him finding a bride in his present location; a thought at the time he entertained, but now sees as the words of men who never left their own country. Yes, back home Crimdalina and its neighbor Postorina, who they once had a famous war with are the two great kingdoms between the great lakes. Two massive, practically in-land fresh water sea lakes; although at the southern end of it, they are considered part of the land of a million kingdoms that makes up the vast forested and lake filled expanse of Northern Ravashira. It's due to his family's history, the events of the war, and his own insistence on learning magic from different parts of the world that he was able to come to where he is now, the school of Stratalia.

A school...a school...this is something Haki has to remind himself of, as this so called school, this world famous institution for magic and adventurer training, known as the place that trains champions who via their own private air-ships travel here from the far corners of the world, is in fact more massive than his home, the castle, and the entire royal city combined. The port where the air-ships land alone dwarfs the castle of Crimdalina. The female adventurers he has seen here are by Crimdalina standards emasculating in appearance, or at least he believes so, even for the best knights of Crimdalina the girls here would be intimidating, their often revealing costumes, attitudes, not to mention their dangerous powers and magic. The men of the court back home spoke of him finding a wife here, the result of which was his first night here having a dream of a beautiful warrior woman coming home with a boar

slung over her shoulder while he was wearing an apron and cooking, for Crimdalina a very backwards thought. He constantly feels out of place in this land, although over the last semester or two he has made a few friends, girls, but definitely not girl friends. Three of which graduated last semester, three of the four he would often join up with on training adventurers and lab exercises, the three that he could talk to without stumbling over his own words, that girl is still here, is always here. He is once again lost in thought, sighing as he looks at her sitting further down from him in the lecture hall; her long straight clean brown hair shining in its own way from the crystal lights above them, her white priestess like robes making her stand out like a divinity to him amongst the many colorful outfits of the other students from across the world. The instructor is once again doing an over the top dramatic re-telling of an ancient legend, the famous story told to children all throughout the Stratalian territories, and throughout all of Northern Ravashira as well, the story of the ancient hero Gyro-Lee and his quest to defeat the evil empress Rhulan.

She is Holly-Lia, although she has insisted time and again he just call her Hollia for short, her three friends, his friends as well, did. They graduated last semester and returned home, their homes are in a nearby small town, so she does see them, but they can't join them on adventures regularly anymore as they have work to do, their town apparently has some charter requiring training at this school to take up the jobs they have there. Hakidoesn't understand this, but he does know that since then Hollia

has had a harder time getting adventurer jobs to earn credits for adventuring experience, even with Haki tagging along most people prefer to hire larger groups, students of Stratalia or not.

He smiles as he sees her dozing off again, the very thing that lets her get away with that is the very thing that makes Haki so nervous around her, he was trained to always talk respectfully to royalty, but it's weird here. Hollia as it turned out is the daughter of Tyros-Lia and the Elven maiden Jasma, two of the heroes spoken of now as if they were ancient legends who stopped the war between Crim-dalina and Postorina, although this was only a little over twenty years ago. They aren't spoken of so much as king and queen here as the heads of the Merchant Guild, and Adventurer Guild. Her grandfather, the equally famous Jinron Lia, the Mushroom Magician whom stories from his parents' and grand-parents' time are written about. In either case her shy and kind demeanor always put him in mind of a princess, her attire and magic power in mind of a priestess, and her station in life alone as the heiress of the school of Stratalia or as a head of the two greatest guilds in the entire world, all act to make Haki not know how to act around her, that and although he won't admit it, the boy does have a bit of a crush on her; did even when he first arrived and saw her for the first time.

The moment he saw her that first day two semesters ago, the light of the sun shone off her robes walking down the hall next to one of the school's gardens, her hair flowing slightly in the breeze, her large round intelligent eyes, her

small nose, her dainty lips, and soft skin all struck his heart. He was delighted to learn she was in his classes, and despite tripping over his own words, she actually accepted his assistance on a training mission, along of course with her three other friends. Although it struck him as odd then and even odder now that he knows her station, she seemed confused that he would want to help her, and still seems confused when he offers, as though she were the one beneath his station.

He looks over at another girl in the room, Yurataki, a girl from the Croix Empire, pale of skin as though she avoids light like a ghost, contrasted by her burnt orange witch outfit, complete with wide brimmed pointed hat the same color as her cloths yet with a black belt with gold buckle on it, a short shoulder blades length cape, a ridiculously short and frilly skirt, black shoes with the same gold buckle as her hat, with weird orange and black stripped knee high socks. Sitting next to her on either side, and one in the row in front of her are three girls who look almost exactly alike to each other, all three are tall for their age, athletically built, have long straight brown hair cut in a straight line half way down their backs with long pointed strands on either side of their faces in front of their ears, and wearing silver knight armor cut in a way that reveals their midriffs, arms, and legs, more designed to look sexy than protective. The only difference in their armor is an eagle design on their left shoulders, a green one, a red one, and a blue one. These are Yurataki's "Three Amazons". Haki has no idea what an "Amazon" is supposed to be, but if he had

to guess these girls are it.

His distracting thoughts are distracted themselves by the instructor stopping his lesson to wake Hollia up, his chiding sounding more apologetic than threatening, as being who she is, and living here at the school, which is her family's palace, royal town as Haki thinks of it, and school all rolled into one, she knows the story he is telling by heart and has attended this class far more semesters than most students, as most students only stay a few semesters for specific lessons to take back to their respective lands.

Out in the hall after class, Hollia is quick to leave, heading off to go train; more than likely going to her "hidden training ground" as their mutual friend Yumi had told him about once, although he hadn't seen it himself. Although all it really comes down to as far as he can tell is that it's her back yard. While most students have to train in the halls and courtyards with each other around Hollia; since part of the school is actually her family's residence, has her own special areas off limits to the general student population that she can train in; a fact that doesn't help much with the jealous students.

Yurataki with her "Three Amazons" are standing around, Yurataki is talking to someone new whom Haki doesn't recognize, some girl in a black counterpart outfit to what Yurataki is wearing. Yurataki is sneering at Hollia as she leaves saying to this new girl, "That girl, the teachers treat

her special, she gets a free ride you know, because she's the dean's grand-daughter."

Haki tones out anything else she has to say. Normally her gossip spreading would annoy him. She was here before he arrived, and she was just as mean then, best he can tell her family spent a fortune for her to come here so she could return with the reputation of having come here, or something, Haki hasn't really had the opportunity or the means really to find out what her back story is. But the fact that Hollia lives here and thus learns for free essentially and Hollia being the head of the class both rub her the wrong way; not that this is anything close to being an excuse to go about spreading mean spirited rumors and gossip.

However; today Haki does know what is bothering Yurataki, and it brings a sly little smile to Haki's face; for the reason why her gossip would normally annoy him but not today is because there is going to be a special festival here shortly, the best students the school has had from across the world are going to be there as part of a demonstration of skills and magic event for the festival. Hollia has been chosen, her skills are amazing, while most think its because she lives at the school Haki believes her powers are beyond what one could normally learn regardless of the amount of time they have to just study and train, especially after knowing her as a friend for two semesters. However this alone isn't what is really bothering Yurataki, she had put in a request form to the Croix Empire to be its representative at the school, there had even been a scout for the event that she had demonstrated her skills for right out in the

main courtyard for all to see, along with a few others. Amongst those others she had clearly been the superior, and rumors spread that she was a shoe in to represent the entire Croix Empire, rumors she helped spread of course and made no qualms about hearing, even going so far as to do that annoying dominatrix laugh thing where she puts the back of her hand up to her face. Of course she wouldn't be in a bad mood if that actually happened, nope, word came just last week when a Croix merchant ship arrived that someone else was representing the Croix Empire at the festival; someone from some kingdom in Western Croix called the Dynast Kingdom, the name on the flyer for the festival called him, "The Golden Wizard Zord"; Haki can only guess that the chosen representative coming from Western Croix might be a double insult for Yurataki as she's from Eastern Croix, but he can only guess after all; internationally studies about a land clear on the other end of the world weren't big on his kingdom's concerns for his lesson plans.

Haki walks off in the other direction from Yurataki, Yurataki is headed for her next class, and for Haki the day for classes is pretty much over. Normally students are expected to either study, do homework, train, or attempt adventure tests; which with the student body as large as it is, is a really daunting task, another reason why those with quests normally only want larger groups; that and not too many are actually that local. Most students doing quests take them on a weekend, over a break, or sign up for special times to do adventures and enter the adventure

guild credit courses (doing adventures for equal credits as taking classes); of course that last one is a real gamble as they have to actually get adventures, the types worth different numbers of credit points, the guild of course is connected to the school so it equals out, and compete with each other and adventurers already out there. Most students try to get far away from the school, some traveling all the way to Bostonia and the port towns, others up north even as far as the great river and into Northern Ravashira. Haki remembers that some would even do adventurer jobs for school credit in Crimdalina. Credit jobs work out for the employers as they only have to pay half what the job is normally worth.

Haki remembers back though, the last two semesters, Yurataki would make it a point to stay nearby and intentionally try and get the same local jobs that Hollia would go after, as Hollia wouldn't travel too far from the school for some reason that Haki decided never to try and pry into. However once Haki joined the team, they went from four girls just like Yurataki's team, to five adventurers, thus those jobs that just looked at numbers (which was by request by the school so more students at once could get credits, but no team is permitted more than eight members at a time, as they are adventurers not mercenary bands) would be more inclined to take them up on the offer. But ever since Yumi, Amia, and Pima all graduated last semester its just been the two of them, and a two person team is almost never taken, thus instead of doing adventure jobs Hollia has just been training normally and taking only

small solo jobs which are more to help local people than anything else. Haki has felt totally useless as a result.

He sits down on a stone bench beneath a tree in one of the more secluded court yards he has found, an outside entry and exit between smaller not often used areas of the school; he has found several such spots. In a school larger than most cities it's not too strange some parts would go un-used at times and some areas totally missed by students and faculty as they go about their daily routines through specific parts of the school.

As he sits down, the play of shadow and light dozes him off, lying down on the bench he dreams a memory, a memory of the last adventure he, Hollia, Yumi, Amia, and Pima, all went on together before those three graduated.

[Final Exam Adventure Team Roster Sign In]

Team Leader: Front Line Combatant Name: Yumi
Gender: Female Nation: Stratalian Merchant Confederacy
Home Town/City: Agate Town

Descriptive Data for identity confirmation

Skin Tone: Peach Hair color: Blue Hair Style as of exam: Shoulder Length, outward curved Eye color: Green
Specialty / Ability: Energy Weapon of Choice: Hand to Hand / Ability Based combat

Examiner note: student is proficient in most small blade and bludgeon weaponry

Team Member: Front Line Combatant: Name: Pima
Gender: Female Nation: Stratalian Merchant Confederacy
Home Town/City: Agate Town

Descriptive Data for identity confirmation

Skin Tone: Peach Hair color: Violet Hair Style as of
exam: Short, twin hairbrush pigtails Eye color: Violet
Specialty / Ability: Blur Speed (3 times shockwave point)
Weapon of Choice: Knives / Daggers

*Examiner note: Student is best suited at hit and run
tactics, great stamina for extended battles.

Team Member: Back Row Distance Combatant: Name:
Amia Gender: Female Nation: Stratalian Merchant Con-
federacy Home Town/City: Agate Town

Descriptive Data for identity confirmation

Skin Tone: Peach Hair color: Green Hair Style as of
exam: Long, straight, mid-back length Eye color: Blue
Specialty / Ability: Plant Manipulation (none-combative
level) Weapon of Choice: Bow and Arrows

*Examiner note: Student is considered a top class none
specialty marksman, and possesses a good deal of knowl-
edge in regards to special items and alchemical production
of assist type items.

“Are you sure”, says Hollia, “I mean...like, you know,
it’s your final exam quest, I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Are you kidding,” says Yumi with a wide smile, “you
really need to get some confidence girl, you are the best
sorceress around and you know it Hollia.”

“Yeah!” chimes in Pima speaking rather quickly, “I’ve never seen anyone use White Light without casting a spell before, or anti-venom, or cure, or heal, or anti-...anti-...uh...that plant poison cure spell, or insect repel, monster repel, or wind, or fire womph, or...”

“Pima,” says Yumi, “you’re doing it again,”

“Sorry,” says Pima sticking her tongue out.

“uh...yeah...” says Amia softly, “You’re our friend Hollia, you have been on our team this whole time, so...it...”

“It wouldn’t be the same without you!” states Yumi with confidence, “So, sign your name girl, and let’s get this show on the road.”

Yumi hands Hollia the magic light pen to sign the light tablet. She looks at Haki who is slowly nudging away towards the wall, “and you too boy!” she practically thrusts the pen into Haki’s hand taking him back a bit.

Haki looks at Hollia and blushes slightly, “Uh...uhm...I...guess...sure...”

Amia looks at Haki and then at Hollia who has started to fill out her information for their team and thinks while slightly blushing, “He sure is cute when he’s being shy...Boy the things I’d do if he’d just crush on me...”

Her eyes shoot wide open and she blushes while shaking her head slightly.

Yumi leans in to her and whispers, “Had another pervy thought huh?”

“No,” says Amia meekly, “I...I...mean...”

“I keep telling you,” says Yumi, “you should just speak your mind girl, let the perv out a little, you might like it.”

Yumi looks away and acts all nonchalant about it, “You

know, you really don't look the soft voice shy type, Pima does...you...not so much."

Amia blushes and twiddles her fingers.

Pima appears behind them, "Come on you two, comic relief time over, fight, fight, fight, time."

"Okay," says Yumi, "maybe Pima wouldn't work as the soft talking one of the group."

Yumi thinks for a moment remembering the look Amia gets in heated battle sometimes and how she starts to talk, "Then again..." whispers Yumi, "if they way you get in battle IS that pervy side..." she remembers Amia with a twisted smile and mean looking eyes whispering with a hiss during a mission to take down some rogue golems *Take my shaft and love it you stiff and slow moving stone bastards*, "maybe it's better you not let it out." Yumi giggles a little at her half-joke.

Team Member: Back Row Assist Sorceress: Name: Holly-Lia Gender: Female Nation: Stratalian Merchant Confederacy Home Town/City: Stratalia

Descriptive Data for identity confirmation

Skin Tone: Peach Hair color: Dark Brown Hair Style as of exam: Long, straight, full back length Eye color: Blue (Light blue) Specialty / Ability: Wind Weapon of Choice: Long Wand / Short Magic Staff

*Examiner note: Holly-Lia possesses extraordinary skill when casting assist type magic despite this not being her specialty.

“Assist sorceress?” asks Yumi, “really? Come on girl, why not mid-row, or front line, super ass-kicking sorceress?”

“Not an option,” shoots Pima really quick.

“I think it’s just assist and offense,” whispers Amia while thinking, “Yeah, ass-kicking, pin any man you want beneath your heel super-chick fighter sounds better.”

Team Member: Mid-row Item Specialist: Name: Haki
Gender: Male Nation: Crimdalina Home Town/City: Crimdalina Royal City

Descriptive Data for identity confirmation

Skin Tone: Peach Hair color: Brown Hair Style as of exam: Short, shaggy, kept under a tall hat Eye color: Brown
Specialty / Ability: Enhanced Memory (none-combative)
Weapon of Choice: Magic Items

*Examiner note: This student possesses a large number of magically enhanced items that he carries around in numerous pockets, both offensive and defensive in nature.

“Item Specialist?” says Yumi patting Haki on the back, “Well boy, you sound like a teacher haa haa haa, too bad you can’t put down, carries tiny bombs and tops that turn giant right.”

“Uh...right...” says Haki trying to laugh slightly, yet sounding nervous unintentionally.

Yumi shakes his shoulders, “come on Haki, you are always so stiff...” she whispers in his ear, “when Hollia is around right...”

Hollia is standing a little ways off talking with Amia and Pima, while they all wait for the examiner to enter their team roster through the quest analyzer and find a current job nearby that fits the exam parameters, roster size, and type combination.

Haki is blushing bright red, while Yumi laughs and shakes his shoulders again, “Come on boy, shake it off man.”

“May I have your attentions.” Announces the guild window examiner, “A job is currently open that fits your team and the parameters for an exam quest, however I should remind you...as I am required miss Holly-Lia...that the exam test only applies as an exam test for Miss Yumi, Miss Amia, and Miss Pima, for you and Mr. Haki here it will count as twenty class credits, are you okay with this?”

“Uh...yes...yes sir,” says Haki

“Yes sir,” says Hollia

“Okay then,” says the examiner who clears his throat, “then you have until noon tomorrow to get your gear ready, as the job is in Volstick, about two hundred miles north, I have already sent a clearance for, and acceptance from a trade wagon heading up that way, but it heads out tomorrow. Is this alright?”

They all look at each other and nod with a group, “Yes.”

As they are given the specifics around the corner someone has been eavesdropping on them, Yurataki. “Volstick,”

she says, "Like you need twenty more credits little witch, and helping your friends pass their exam? Hah! You're going to do all the work aren't you, giving your friends a free ride too, like that little piss antHaki and those three goody good no magic weaklings."

She smiles wickedly, "Volstick, heh, I bet my wind runner horses can get me and my vassals there long before you do and take that job."

what a little bitch comes an extremely soft woman's whisper that can barely be thought to have been heard rather than imagined.

Yurataki looks at a nearby hallway mirror and does a double take, thinking she saw a see-through woman's face backed by dark hair or shadow, and with deep blue eyes looking at her in the reflection. On the second look she sees nothing, shrugs it off, and goes back the other way down the hall so Hollia and the others don't see her.

Hmm, you have potential kid, with a specialty like Umbrakinesis you would someday be able to see and really hear me...still a little bitch though

The next day:

The Wind Runner horses are backed up against the back of their pens, any attempt to coax them forward results in terrified neighing and kicking until they can back up again.

"What is wrong with my horses!" demands Yurataki with her three vassals, (the Three Amazons) standing be-

hind her, their horses, which by default are also Yurataki's horses are three brown steeds while Yurataki has a thick shouldered white steed.

"I don't know," says the burley woman in over-alls.

"What do you mean you don't know," says Yurataki with a snooty tone, "You're a beast-tamer right? Then just read their emotions and calm them down."

The stable keeper resists giving the kid a stern look, she's dealt with these know-it-all kids for years, "Miss Yurataki," she says, "I have, they're terrified, but the focus doesn't make any sense, and I can't calm them down, no matter how much I project calmness, the sense of there being no danger, they just keep staring at that one spot and freaking out."

"spot?" says Yurataki.

The woman points across the stable near the gates, "I've looked all over the place, I can't detect trace emotions from any predator being near the gate, my scent tracker pal even came down here when they started, he couldn't smell anything, I sent him to find a spirit sensor."

As though called on queue a tall man in black robes appears, Yurataki recognizes him as the instructor of the exorcism class for freshman.

He looks around, waves a talisman around the spot the horses are looking at and shrugs, "Nothing, I can't detect any evil spirits, which is only natural given the anti-spirit wards around the university are the best in the entire world. Whatever is spooking your horses it's not a spirit."

Yurataki swears she hears a soft laughter, but it could

just be a breeze blowing past her ear. In this same moment, the horses calm down.

“Finally,” says Yurataki, “now we can leave.”

“Not so fast,” says the beast-tamer, “I’m sorry, I know these are your animals, but the school regulation says despite that fact, given that we have no idea what set them off, we can’t let you ride them for a while until the vet checks them out, it’s a safety liability thing you know.”

“For how long?” says Yurataki impatiently.

“Well,” says the beast-tamer, “I’m only a novice, given that I have no clue what set them off, we’re going to need our animal psy-expert to look at their minds, make sure there aren’t any curses or psionic tricks going on that the rest of us would have missed, and then he has to sign off on them; not to mention the vet checking them out for illness and being in good health or not,” she pauses, “and fix whatever is wrong...if anything...I can’t really say, I’m not the psy-expert or the vet.”

“Well then,” says Yurataki, “call them down here.”

The beast tamer shrugs, “Sorry, the psy-expert’s in Agate Town right now, and won’t be back till tomorrow. But I have already set up an appointment with the vet for later today.”

“Damn,” thinks Yurataki, “You did this, didn’t you Holly, somehow you knew I was going...not that it would be hard to guess...any way, this only gives you a day’s head start. I will get that job you little white witch wannabe.”

The beast tamer just gives her a weird look as Yurataki’s eyes betray she is having an inner monologue.

Volstick is a typical small forest clearing community, a few houses spread out, an Inn with a restaurant with a bar in it downstairs, an item shop / supplies shop, and a weapon / armor shop; this part of the town catering to travelers, traders, the locals, and of course adventurers. However while the local Adventure Guild job posting and clerk located in this town in the weapons / armor shop was a required stop for the party they had no other business in the town its self, instead they now find themselves out away from the town to the real businesses of Volstick, the farms. This town has a few small herb farms, a butcher shop located away from the town, and this is the place they are here to help, a deer farm.

It's a farm in the sense that there are predator wards placed around a certain area so prey animals can live, feed, and breed without fear, and the local farmer brands the deer in the this area has his. Typically a job out here might be to brand the deer without harming them, usually of course in the fowling season. This job however, is a little different, something has been getting in past the predator wards, their job is to find the mysterious predator or how it's getting in past the wards and fix the problem. Thus the party finds themselves standing out in the muggy woods, well they are actually traveling the outside length of this stretch of forest checking the predator wards to insure they are all working properly. Not the most exciting work, Pima especially is not happy, with her speed she could check on each one in a flash, unfortunately she has no way of

actually telling if they are all working other than if they are in one piece and sticking out of the ground (which she did do) but Hollia and Haki know thanks to their more mystic skills based training that being in one piece isn't enough to tell if a ward is working properly. So Pima is now forced to trudge behind, Amia and Yumi as well feeling more like body guards for Hollia and Haki, more so Haki, than adventurers out to stop some beasts from preying on the farmer's deer. But they know that aimlessly wandering the woods looking for some unknown fangy beast is the least likely way to find something, especially when you're not certain what exactly you're looking for.

"Unbelievable," says Yurataki as her horse stops before a town called [Gatlu], a small...tiny, hamlet placed around a Happy Apple orchard.

"Check the map again," she commands the Amazon next to her, the one with the red eagle crest on her shoulder.

"M'Lady," says the Amazon, "The town of Gatlu is half way between Stratalia and Volstick.

rrrr growls Yurataki through her teeth, as late as they left, and the speed of the wagon that wouldn't have stopped in this town, or the one before it to eat as they did as the wagon would have had food for Hollia's party, Hollia's party no doubt reached Volstick way ahead of them, hours without a doubt. As fast as Wind Rider Horses are, on these "un-civilized" as Yurataki thinks of them; thin dirt roads half overgrown by brush these horses can't even come close

to reaching their full speed, instead stuck in a line it a slow gallop at most.

Yurataki's stomach growls, "very well," she says checking the sun, "We left late, had our brunch in the last town, so we'll stop here for our full lunch."

"Yes M'Lady," say the Three Amazons in unison, and trying to hide their enthusiasm for this break in this clearly fruitless journey.

(A pack of Forest Wolves have appeared)

whiff

Pima appears, socks a wolf in the side of the head and vanishes

whiff

Pima appears, kicks another wolf and vanishes

whiff

Pima appears next to the others as they are surrounded on three sides by Forest Wolves.

"Magical Top!" yells Haki as he throws what looks to be a toy top into the pack of wolves, where it grows giant and spins amongst the wolves knocking them from side to side.

"Goddess Wind!" yells Hollia sending a spinning blast of green wind directly at a wolf lunging for her, throwing it back into the brush.

flep

Amia fires an arrow between a group of wolves

boom!

The arrow explodes without flames, throwing back a few wolves with the shock wave.

Yumi punches a wolf that lunges at her with a chi-infused fist, as she steps back she notices the ward and thinks, “hold on a second.”

“Everyone,” she screams, “get behind the wards...Chi-Flash!”

From her hands, held together wrist to wrist with her palms out like a cannon barrel she releases a bright flash of light as they all head back behind the wards.

A little way into the woods they ready for battles, Amia drawing her bow.

“Hold on,” says Yumi motioning for Amia to lower her weapon, “look”

One of the wolves hits an invisible barrier as it tries to get at them, it paws the unseen wall, makes a huffing noise and turns away. The entire pack follows suit giving up and leaving.

“What in the name of the goddess!” says Haki.

“I see,” says Hollia, “then the wards are working after all.”

“Yeah,” says Yumi, “I noticed during the battle the wolves weren’t trying to get behind us like you’d think they would.”

“That means,” says Hollia, “that they are just a pack circling the barrier for any prey that wanders out of the protective field, which would explain why they gave up once we were inside so easily.”

Haki looks at Hollia thinking, “she’s so smart, I can’t

believe she didn't notice it before Yumi did...no Haki, she did notice it, she let the leader of the group get credit...maybe...oh why does she make me doubt her?"

"Hollia," says Yumi, "would the barrier be that strong if any of the wards were down?"

"Uh, well," says Hollia thinking, "No, I don't believe so, I mean if some where down they wouldn't have been repelled so strongly, they could have walked a little ways in with a resistant current."

"And we've walked almost the whole way around," says Yumi.

"Finally," says Pima, "so slow, so slow, soooo slow."

"Well then that's it," says Haki with a smile, "the wards are working so no predator is getting in."

"yes they are," whispers Amia.

"Huh?" says Haki, "but the wards are working we just saw that."

"and yet," says Yumi, "the job said deer were being killed inside the barrier not around it, so that wolf pack isn't what's getting to the deer in here."

"That means," says Hollia looking around, "in these woods we just circled or nearby is something not repelled by the wards and strong enough to kill deer with claws and fangs."

Haki looks into the deep woods and shudders.

smack

Yumi smacks him on the back playfully saying, "We're adventurers remember, this is what we're here for."

"Exactly," says Hollia, "whether it be a known creature,

or some mystery, it's the duty of the adventurer to get the job done and protect the people and their well being."

Haki blushes looking at her, she goes from mousy to symbol of justice so quickly that it catches him by surprise every time. At the school she tends to be so quiet, yet on adventures, especially alone with her friends she becomes so much more bold.

"We going to stand around all day or hunt?" says Pima quickly, "come on, come on, come on, come on, let's get into the woods and get it!"

"It's getting dark," says Yumi.

"Maybe we should head back to the inn and rest till tomorrow," says Haki.

"No," says Hollia, "I want to check the rest of the wards just in case something funny is going on."

"Good idea," says Yumi, "maybe it's an industrial spy planting a gate way through a working barrier, or a magic glitch, or...I don't know."

Pima sighs, "fine, more slow poke walking it is."

Amia thinks to herself, "I feel sorry for any romantic who tries to bed that girl."

In the darkness of the forest a single glow could be seen, a warmth stone, sitting atop a pile of other stones in a cleared out spot with logs around the stone upon which sit the party, Haki next to Yumi, Amia next to Pima, and Hollia on her own log with her staff sitting next to her knowing

that if what has gotten past the wards is something magical her Saint's Barrier spell will be their best defense.

The party is not here to sleep for the night, no they are brainstorming, they fully intend to find out what's going on and then head back to the village for the night. They have been puzzling over what could be out there, they know from earlier it's not Forest Wolves, Flame Raptors and Necro-Squid never come this far north and wouldn't be able to get past the barrier either.

"What about werewolves," says Haki, "they're supposed to be smart, maybe they're plucking up the wards and then going back out...or maybe were-cats, or even Bunny Girls?"

"No," says Hollia puzzling as she looks at the forest, "they wouldn't be able to even touch the wards, even being intelligent and all."

"Maybe it's some kind of horrible tentacle thing from beyond time and space," says Pima making squiggly hand puppet shadows from the glow from the warmth stone, "like you know a traveling wizard came out here, and did a spell, and tried to summon a...something...you know, and then it got loose, and it started to eat deer, and its waiting for us, and..."

Hollia stands up breaking Pima's chain of thought, her staff glows and then dims.

"No," says Hollia, "no summoning was done out here any time recently..."

"I wander," says Yumi, "Hollia, you have the job description with you right?"

Hollia sits back down, and summons a piece of paper from out of a blue flame, Haki jumps back slightly from the sudden burst of magic fire.

Haki is embarrassed as he sees the others looking at the paper Hollia has produced, he jumped earlier when Hollia summoned her staff from the same blue fire, he always does that when she uses that holding spell. Although after the initial startling, he always fills a bit jealous, Hollia can store up to thirty items in that spell space and he has to use pockets.

Hollia reads through the paper, in it is a description of their location, the wards being checked before they got there by local hunters, and the condition of the corpses found describing numerous small triangular bite marks with drying around the bite areas and the deer being ripped apart by the abdomen and eaten seemingly from the inside and then back out.

"I think," whispers Amia, "that farmer said something like that too."

The party all look at each other a bit embarrassed, they had it planned out before they even got to Volstick what they were going to do.

After a brief silence Yumi says, "Well...that just goes to show you that on adventures you really should pay attention to what the villagers say and any notes you get huh."

Amia whispers, "and we made this mistake on our final exam," she looks forlorn, and the others except for Pima look really embarrassed.

“No we didn’t” says Pima smiling, “We just remembered it really late, but we did remember, just late, so we can...we can...we can still do something about it.”

Pima looks at the others, “Right, so what animal does this, and can get past those paper guards, and we find out what it is, and we fight it, right, right?”

“Maybe it’s a bunch of small animals that could get past the predator wards.” says Haki.

“They don’t work that way,” says Hollia while thinking it over, “I mean...no predator of any kind regardless of size should be able to get through unless there was something special about them.”

“Well that’s the mystery,” says Yumi looking around, “but that also makes it really difficult, I mean how do we track an unknown creature.”

“So butch,” thinks Amia, “yeah...” she shakes her head while Yumi sees her from the corner of her eye with a raised eyebrow.

Pima is looking into the woods, Hollia is also looking out into the woods, clearly the idea of an unknown creature being out there has peaked their interest.

Yumi does a fake cough saying, “Amia, see if you can see anything out there, you are our marksman after all and...Haki...”

Haki is going through his pockets and pulls out a compass.

“Ah Hah!” he yells out gaining everyone’s attention, “I knew I had a tracker somewhere.”

“A what?” asks Yumi.

Hollia peers at the device, a little too closely, making Haki blush... “uh...” he says backing up a little, “this...this...is uh...*gulp*...”

“A tracking compass,” says Hollia, “wow, the school never lets anyone use these on adventures,”

She eyes Haki

“Too convenient and cheating,” whispers Amia.

“Oh...” he says, “I...it’s not a gold tracker or anything...this...one is rigged to only look for animals, hunters back home use them to find deer.”

“But we’re looking for something that eats deer.” Says Yumi.

“Yeah,” says Haki, “With a little tweak it can find predators too, or just any animal larger than an insect.”

“What about giant insects,” says Pima, “like Giant Scorpions, Giant Fire Beetles, Giant Centipedes, Giant...uh...Giant Ticks, Giant Spiders, and...”

“Pretty sure he means little bugs,” whispers Amia, who Pima actually hears over her own rambling.

Haki adjusts the compass and a hologram like screen appears, and shows about six red dots not fifty feet away.

“Got it for predators,” says Haki, “guess there are some huh...”

The party gets their gear together; Hollia deactivates the warmth stone and stores it away in her spell space, however this time Haki is not surprised by the flames as he

focuses on the movements of their query on the compass screen.

As they move towards the unknown creatures the dots on the screen do not show them fleeing, or heading towards the party. Rather the dots spread out a little, in a pattern they recognize as a clear indication of an ambush; but despite this what they hear next they could not have been prepared for.

Help Me

A soft whisper, as though spoken by a small child trapped beneath a log, and had been so for days.

Help Me

The sound is coming from straight ahead, from one of the dots they are following.

“Uh Haki,” says Yumi, “would that thing pick up other people?”

“No,” says Haki, “it’s designed to screen out people when looking for predators and that includes other humanoids as well. It’s kind of an annoyance; if you want to find other humanoid creatures then you also have to let it seek out people as well.”

Help Me

The creepy whisper interrupts his train of thought.

Hollia raises her staff and says confidently, “Then it’s some un-natural creature, some vile demon summoned elsewhere and released here by a sorcerer seeking to harm the farmer’s income, or the food supply, or simply to sow destruction on the local ecology, as adventurers we must seek out these demons and destroy all of them.”

Yumi smiles while thinking, "There she is."

Amia, "Oh yeah, the mousy chick shows her true dominating colors."

Pima, "Why can't you act this cool at school, you'd totally get Yurataki off your back with that personality."

Haki just blushes as they head on.

A horrific growling sound erupts as they get close to the *Help Me*,

"Saint's Barrier!" yells out Hollia, erecting a blue shield of energy around them, upon which clash the snarling, growling, hard to describe vicious sound of their pint sized opponents.

There are indeed six of them, but even with the size of the bite marks on the deer one would have expected something larger. What they see look to be otters, only their fur is a dirty white and their heads are oversized and triangular in shape like the head of a viper. As the little beasts growl and snarl they reveal their huge mouths, these muzzles which have no nose on the end like one would expect and instead have several little flaps along the top ridge of the mouth like vents, open as wide as the head and are filled with tiny little shark like triangular teeth.

The little freaks circle about the barrier, making constant attempts to break through, their tiny snake like red eyes with black slits studying them. As one starts to try and dig under the barrier the party nod their heads in agreement, and each faces in a different direction, weapons at the ready, the barrier drops.

twang! Amia strikes one dead center in the heart with

her arrow killing it instantly.

Whiff Pima faster than the blink of the eye slices the head clean off one that was leaping in her direction with her backhanded serrated knife.

Slam...ffffff Yumi grabs two in midair and fries them right in her hands as she focuses her energy into her palms while holding the furry beasts.

“Chill Wind!” yells Hollia who before dropping the barrier had begun the quick incantation for this low level, yet effective ice spell. The beast leaping for her throat is caught off guard by the ice spell and falls to the ground where Hollia continues the chilling breeze like stream of air till the creature is a block of ice.

Meanwhile they find Haki on his back, but no real alarm is raised as while he is huffing and puffing in terror he has one of the animals impaled on a small dagger he pulled out.

“It.” he stammers, “it just...it just leapt right onto the blade like a rabid doag...I...I got it.”

They brought back the creatures to Volstick, just as Yurataki and her three Amazons were arriving to the town and making plans to stay at the inn till the next day; of course it was too late the job was done. None of the locals knew what sort of creatures these were. Nothing like them had been seen before, other than an Opossum, but even then not really.

Haki and the others would learn upon bringing back the remains of the unknown creatures to Stratalia that they weren't some demons, or creations of a sorcerer, or even an unknown local predator, these are animals from the distant continent of Croix, known as Crocotta. Small predators that imitate the sounds of their intended prey, both grazers and even larger predators, to lure them into an ambush; however their imitation of people is normally only done towards children, it came as quite the puzzlement to the instructors that animals well fed on deer meat would actually attempt with such a small group as six of them to lure in adventurers and attack them, especially after hitting a barrier.

"Never did find out what was going on with those," says Haki as he wakes up from his dream on the stone bench.

"Hold on..." he says, "How'd I dream about what they were thinking or the parts where I wasn't there to see..."

The memory of the dream, especially those parts, fades as quickly as they had come... "what was I saying?"

He shrugs his shoulders and heads inside, after all he can't spend the rest of his day sleeping, he had only meant to come here to think not take a nap. As he leaves to head back to his dorm he sees a most unusual sight, Hollia is walking behind a woman he has never seen before heading down the hall towards the faculty offices. Hollia's head just comes up in height to this woman's ample breasts, and everything about her seems to scream of regality, her black

robes with their red linings, her long dark red almost black hair kept neat and straight, and her piercing dark blue eyes looking straight ahead like a wild animal zeroing in on her prey.

Haki wants to go and greet Hollia but something about this situation tells him to keep back, Hollia looks tense, glad, and confused all at the same time, Haki isn't sure how he or anyone for that matter could get all that from a simple expression but there it is.

"Is she a new tutor or something?" whispers a student to an instructor in the hall.

From this Haki starts to hear all sorts of whispers from down the hall, he isn't the only one evidently this strange new woman with Hollia walking behind has caught the attention of.

As the two walk Haki sees them pass right by Yurataki who is exiting from a meeting with one of her instructors. Haki raises an eyebrow as Yurataki does a double take at the woman and shudders briefly before composing herself and walking on as though nothing happened.

"Weird," is all he can say to himself wandering if this tutor might have come from over-seas, maybe someone from Croix whom Yurataki recognizes, he makes a mental note to ask Hollia about it the next time he sees her, if he can get himself to talk to her straight without stepping all over his words again. But right now he needs to get to his dorm and get to work on his class projects.

Chapter 2: Getting Started:

This has been a very strange day for Hollia. It hasn't

been but a few days since she was told she would be representing the school at the upcoming festival, something to which diplomats and past students from those nations would be attending, the past students showing what they have learned since leaving the school and thanks to its teachings. Not only that but business relations of her parents from alien worlds will be attending the festival as well, as well as her friends and pretty much everyone from all the small towns nearby as well who will have booths set up there.

But that was a few days ago she was told of that, today has been even weirder, she has been pondering these last few days over what spell or spells to use at the festival, she knows a great deal of being that she has lived at the school since she was born; being the dean's grand-daughter has its perks, something that hasn't exactly won her over with many of the long distance big spending students, she knows this of course, but it doesn't bother her much. After a long night of research over some of the higher level, yet not high end elemental or destructive spells she finally settled on one that she felt would show off her assist magician skills, that being the position she would put herself under when going along with her friends on missions as it felt only natural. The spell of "Detoxification" is a rather simple sounding name for a spell that supposedly encompasses healing, cure, exorcism, and pretty much all physical and spiritual restoration properties within its self.

She had gone out to her secret garden, an area off limits to other students as it's the property of the main household,

although it's not really shaped any differently than any other dorms. Far out in this garden is where she would go to conduct her spells, and out here just doing that spell she did the impossible, she brought a statue back to life, and that statue as it turns out is an ancient sorceress who was...and she blushes thinking of this...aware the whole time as a statue of everything Hollia has been doing out there and has now become her tutor, even impressing her grand-father enough to accept her as the tutor of the school representative.

Hollia sighs thinking about all this as she lays back on her pink sheet bed and lacey pillows, thinking about the statue, now missing...or rather walking about now as flesh that she found so long ago, thinking about that as she drifts off too sleep.

A five year old little girl, her brown hair tied up in brush like pigtails, and wearing what could only be seen as a miniscule mock-up of a lab coat, would look out of place in a class teaching the basics of fire magic; then again given the white tile floor, white sliding door shelves, round plastic like group lab tables, and what at first glance resemble florescent lights (although as bright as day light and no where near as hot, in fact rather tepid) one wouldn't normally think this was a classroom about magic, maybe a class where you'd dissect a fetal pig but certainly not one with metal bowls in the tables with pieces of paper to ignite for basic fire conquering practice.

It is here that little Hollia, is at a table with three others, her memory is fuzzy on two of them other than being a woman and some man with thick glasses, the third person, a large some what overweight bearded man with short shaggy dark hair is the one fixed into her mind. Hollia was happy that day, she had never been too good at fire magic, or anything really other than wind based attack spells and an assortment of healing spells that she had memorized thanks to playing doctor with her dolls and stuffed animals. But today she was certain of her self as she drew a sigil on her paper, folded it, and put in the metal bowl, she chanted the words "Salamandra,Hokai, Pyris, Infernus, spirits of fire grant me thy power and open the seal." With this her paper burst into brilliant blue flames, she giggled and clapped her hands of course.

The man was not amused, she didn't know it at the time and would only hear about it almost a decade later that the man had been up all night the night before studying on the focus techniques and mental imagery and how to draw the sigil for this test; for him this was a very serious moment. He drew the sigil, he said the words but only a few errant blue sparks floated about. What happened next could hardly be blamed as a reaction from a five year old, Hollia...giggled. The man however was not amused, it wasn't a loud giggle, or some back of the hand over the mouth sly entitled giggle, just a soft little giggle lasting less than a second really, but the man was not amused, he really was not amused. His face turned red and he did something no one would ever think to do to the grand-daughter of the

dean, the daughter of the head of the merchant guild and the adventurer's guild; he shouted at her...at the top of his lungs.

This deep loud and angry voice is something Hollia had never heard before, not from her grand-father when being scolded, not from her father when being told she needed to listen, not from a teacher, and most certainly not from another student. His words stuck with her, well most of them anyway. He shouted over and over again about her being a little brat that had no business in a class for adventurers being taught skills to save their lives when in battle, that this was just a game to her, that she had no place there and was only there because of who she is. Had she been older she might have reacted different, scratch that, she would have reacted differently, but being a five year old, somewhat pampered child, she did the only thing her little mind could do; she ran from the room screaming for her mommy...had she stayed behind a moment she might have seen the man calm down and a terrified expression pass over his face as he uttered a single sentence, "oh shit".

She ran to her living quarters, her parents were not there. This time of day even though they were home they were in a business meeting. So she ran out into their private courtyard, but she wanted to be alone, and being a child she thought about *running away*. She went further into the bushes where she was told to never go. At this point her young mind shifted from fear to exploring as she came across a pile of rocks out of view thanks to the trees and near the edge of the creek leading into the woods away

from the school, she could see in the distance down the hill a dirt road, beyond which were the wards that kept dangerous creatures out of this area. No one came back here, it was basically a rock pile, what was left of the rocks that were taken from some old castle she had been told about that crumbled here long ago, the villagers had taken the rocks to build homes, bridges, and even to put into the school. All that was left were little rocks, and that is when Hollia saw something in the pile as she was flipping a few of the hand sized rocks into the woods pretending she was throwing fire balls at monsters...that she pretended looked a lot like the man who yelled at her, she saw a hand in the pile. She examined it, a statue's hand, a woman statue's hand.

It was in this moment however that she heard her mom calling for her. She ran around the bushes into the open courtyard, where she found her mother, the tall long haired blond elf woman towering over Hollia as she picked her up and held her close to comfort her. Hollia didn't see the man again, but she had been taken from the class only to be reinstated at an older age. She would learn much later that the man had been expelled, and that was how a number of rumors about being careful around her began.

Over the weeks to months, to years, Hollia dug out the statue, even though the stones weren't that heavy for her, especially given her lineage, digging down was work, and the statue was unusually heavy. The statue of a sorceress in full traditional garb with her hand outstretched as though either casting a spell or blocking one with a defiant look

in her eyes. This image stuck in Hollia's mind, she even went so far as to construct a pedestal out of the rocks to put the statue on. This became her own private garden off the family court yard with her own inspiring statuary image of a proud and powerful woman.

Hollia mumbles in her sleep, "She was alive, really alive."

The woman who calls herself Rurona, the first time Hollia saw her...well...technically the first time she saw her was as a statue when Hollia was a little kid, no the first time she met her was only yesterday. It was like meeting her favorite actress for the first time, one that she had written all the plays for and acted out as fantasies. Hollia knows this is not the woman in her dreams, the one she pretended to for years to be partnered with on great adventures and whose image was the source of her inspiration and desire to be an adventurer rather than simply stick around here and become the next dean. On top of all that, this woman knows all of this and then some, she knows Hollia's fantasies, at least the parts acted out...Hollia blushes at the thought as she dons her scholarly white sorceress robes preparing for the day ahead. Rurona, the name she called herself, the woman truly is a powerful sorceress with boundless wisdom, knowing skills that even impress the dean of Stratalia, is now her tutor.

Hollia heads out, meeting Rurona in front of the missions office, the man behind it leering at Rurona's ample

breasts, barely hidden in her scholarly black attire, which shows off her cleavage and her curves in a way that would seem un-natural for cloths which are loose like a skirt around the legs and open sleeves on the arms to do, especially as this outfit which looks to be of one solid piece has no belt, or zippers, or true straps. Of courseHollia knows the truth of this, when Rurona was a statue she was dressed in a cape, tight leggings tucked into boots, and a short tight top. Before they went and saw Hollia's grandfather Rurona conducted a spell that shifted her cloths into their current form; Hollia believes it is a long forgotten type of advanced alchemy known as "Shadow Cloth".

All that is not important however, Rurona asked her here last night, as a statue she confessed she could send out her astral body to explore the school and nearby areas, but her range was severely limited as she couldn't travel as far as Bostonia or Volstick, not even as far as Agate town. Rurona; before embarking on tutoring Hollia in combat magic wishes to see what she is capable of fighting along side her on a mission.

"Well", says the mission office attendant, "There are a few jobs available right now, there is the Crocotta hunting, a repeatable job to keep down the numbers of these invasive predators up north, then there is of course the Mirror Maze, easy credits, low level stuff, I know you know that's there of course Miss Holly, just saying for your tutor. I couldn't help but over hear she wants to see you fight and so..."

“A real job,” says Rurona, “Crocotta are a problem, but not a real mission, and the Mirror Maze shouldn’t even be on a mission list, it should just be a class exam.”

“Well,” says the attendant, “we did just get this new one in today, from Agate town, a man by the name of Mann is looking for bodyguards to help him explore some underground ruins he found on his property behind the weapon shop. This kind of job however is normally only offered to groups of three or more.”

Hollia looks at Rurona who smiles, “Sounds perfect, what do you say Hollia?”

Hollia nods slightly and looks at the attendant, “Yes sir, we’ll take it.”

As the pair walks off the attendant says, “I can’t put my finger on it but that woman seems somehow familiar...and Holly...one day and her tutor is already calling her by that silly nick-name her friends made up for her...then again Miss Holly really wasn’t acting like she just met her yesterday...”

A moment later another figure reveals herself from the corner of the hall, Yurataki. Her presence comes as no surprise to the attendant and knows exactly what job she wants. Ever since Hollia’s friends graduated it’s been harder for a single sorceress, even the dean’s granddaughter, to get jobs, even when teamed up with Haki so there are two of them; as the law says larger groups get the higher priority, both for safety reasons and for class credits amongst students.

Agate Town, a small hamlet not far from Stratalia, while the school is large enough to be its own city with food, lodgings, and shops, many of the students find they have jobs out this way and stop by Agate town to and from Stratalia, although it's a far more common stop for merchants traveling from the west at the Great River port to pass through on the way to Stratalia and along their route to many of the small towns nearby. Although it's a great place for students to find better armor and weapons than what the school sells, with its policy of only selling basic needs for training to its students. The path to this mostly quite hamlet isn't a dangerous one, there aren't any bandits, dragons, or even really large predators other than Forest Wolves, mostly one might come across a small swarm of hungry Blue Blobs or Blue Rippers, perhaps a few Stealth Crows and Flash Doves; but unless one is just starting out these aren't really anything to look out for, certainly not something Hollia and Rurona need worry about as they travel, a slight wind spell here a little show of fire and even the most vicious small beasts will think twice about attacking.

The town its self, a place Hollia knows well enough, her friends, Yumi, Amia, and Pima are all from here, in fact the man who sent the job Hollia is Yumi's father; but why he wouldn't just ask his daughter, a graduate from the school, to help him out instead of using their own money to hire someone she can't tell.

"It's been a long walk," says Rurona, "how about we stop for a bite?"

The little restaurant, really the downstairs of the local inn; inside there are at least twenty people eating.

“Rush hour?” says Hollia

As though on cue a pink blur whizzes past them to a table, a pink blur that when stopped is a short girl with pink hair up in brush style pig tails.

“Okay!” says the girl after taking the order of the table and in the blink of an eye is at their table.

“Okay, whatwillitbetoday *all in one breath*...sorry...I mean...Hollia?”

The girls eyes shoot open, “By the goddess it is you Hollia, so what you doing here, come to visit, have you seen Amia, have you seen Yumi, is Haki with you wink wink, oh, whose this, is this your friend, a class mate, she looks like a teacher,”

“Pima,” says Hollia, “this is my tutor Miss Rurona, Miss Rurona this is my friend Miss Pima.”

“Oh,” says Pima, “glad to meet you, I haven’t seen Hollia since I graduated, then again no one has, so busy, busy, busy, busy, we meant to go visit, maybe do a job, but this place keeps me busy, got the inn, got chores, got working down here, got customers...oh my!...customers, oh I’m so sorry,”

Pima rushes off seeing the man behind the counter just shaking his head.

“Pima’s parents own the inn,” says Hollia with a smile, “that’s her cousin behind the counter, I think she told me once her father actually runs the whole downstairs while her mother runs the up stairs, so I guess she and her cousin

kind of work for her parents.”

“Good to see your friend, is doing well.”

—After they eat Hollia says good bye to Pima and promises to come by when she is less busy to visit—

Outside Rurona smiles, “well I suppose we should check to see what they have at the item shop and armor shops, just in case we find anything useful of course.”

Hollia smiles with out saying a word as they walk over to the item shop.

The item shop, really the general trades shop, healing items, cure items, down to general wares like pots, pans, and the place to exchange trinkets found on adventures, it’s the one thing Stratalia doesn’t have amongst its shops, granted they do have an item shop but it doesn’t buy things from the students like this one will.

The shop is clean, a very short distance from the door to the counter, the house is really a two long storage wagons set on top of each other, the bottom being mostly storage with a counter at the front and a thin wall with a door in it separating the front of the main structure. Behind the counter is Amia, looking the same as she always has, her long green hair kept neat, and wearing a sunny little dress outfit.

“Oh my, hello Hollia,” says Amia in a soft sweet tone and a soft sweet smile.

She sees Rurona come in and her mental state emits a lewd smile, although her real face never changes.

“Miss Rurona,” says Hollia, “This is Miss Amia, Miss Amia this is my tutor Miss Rurona.”

Amia smiles saying with a short bow, "A pleasure to meet you Miss Rurona," while thinking, "Yowza! Hollia got herself a sex goddess! Good going girl!"

"What else can I help you with Hollia...and Miss Rurona?"

-Hollia and Rurona stock up on a few healing herbs, some Red Fruit which is a great antidote, and some soothing salve for potential burns, amongst other basics needed for going to an unknown danger-

Hollia gets out her magic bag, the same thing she keeps her staff in allowing her to summon it to battle with a blue flame effect with out needing to carry it around in the open the whole time. To her surprise Rurona buys a little extra and summons a flap from her dress, a flap that could only have belonged to her cape which Hollia had seen, except now the inner lining is black, into which Rurona places some items, vanishing into the shadow. Amia thinks nothing of this, she has seen magic cloaks from all over the world from students with magic pockets in them to hold items, granted none looked exactly like this.

They say there good byes and head out.

"Well then," says Rurona, "that only leaves the local weapon shop, which if I'm not mistaken is also where we'll find our client."

As they head across the street to the side garage like building off a fairly large house for the area marked as the weapon shop Rurona looks down the street and smiles to herself with a slight under her breath chuckle.

The weapon shop is larger than expected, although there are a lot of the same weapons, Steel Sword, Steel Axe,

Bronze Claw, Silver Staff, Iron Mace, and various item type weapons such as Iron Spike Balls, Fire Bombs, Deadly Tops, and such.

“Yo!” yells out Yumi seeing Hollia enter brushing a bit of her blue hair aside as she gets up from pounding a sword over the forge, “Long time no see Hollia!...”

She eyes Rurona for a moment, “So Hollia who’s your new friend?”

“Miss Rurona,” says Hollia, “this is Miss Yumi, Miss Yumi this is Miss Rurona my tutor.”

Yumi lets out a laugh, “Always so polite Hollia, tutor huh? So I guess you’re here for dad’s job right?”

“Yes, Yumi.” says Hollia.

“Well the lazy bastard’s out back, you tell him if he doesn’t get some work done then I’m just going to fire him and hire myself a nice stud to do all the work around here.”

Hollia is sure there is an innuendo in there somewhere but learned long ago to just let those slide, bows to her friend and heads out back.

“heh,” smiles Rurona to herself thinking, “this family has a bit of Homunculus in their ancestry, she should be out fighting on adventures not tending an armory.”

The space behind the weapon shop is a bit more spacious than one might think, the larger structure isn’t actually a house, but a storage place for scrap metal, and forges to melt down and pound metal. Local adventurers bring by old weapons and scrap metal they find to trade in for

money. Yumi and her dad melt them down and make new weapons out of them, or melt them down for rods, pipes, and such for others in Agate Town.

True to what Yumi said her father, a man who looks like he could hold his own in any bar fight, is sleeping out by a well, scratching his bushy brown beard.

“Mr...” Hollia stops, embarrassed that she doesn’t know the name of Yumi’s father, she remembers the client name on the job offer “Mann”...the name is a bit odd but she says it,

“Excuse me...Mr...Mann.”

“Huh,” says Mann, “just call me Mann, miss...” he pokes his eyes open seeing Rurona,

“Misses, sorry thought you were a shadow...or a tree or something.”

“Not much of a flatterer are you,” says Rurona, “we are here for the job you offered, needing body guards...”

“Oh yeah,” says Mann

“Tell me where he is!” comes a familiar voice screaming inside, “I don’t care if we did get beaten here, we deserve...it’s our right to let the client know he has a better option, if you are telling us we can’t see your father for this job I will report you to the guild for showing favoritism!”

Mann with Hollia and Rurona go inside to see the young woman with her orange witch costume, with its overly short skirt and pop star lay out arguing with Yumi, the girl well known by those here as Yurataki and her three Amazons, the three girls with their matching overly revealing knight like armor, long broad swords, and straight line

cut long brown hair, the only thing telling them apart being different colored eagle symbols on their left shoulder plate, one green, one red, one blue.

“Now what is this commotion,” says Mann walking into the store.

“My many pardons,” says Yurataki in a false tone of apology, “I am Yurataki the Witch of Eastern Croix, these three are my vassals the Three Amazons, skilled swordswomen, each equal to fifty men. I have come here to your humble abode seeking the request you sent to the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Well,” says Mann indicating Hollia and Rurona, “these two beat you here, and...”

“I hate to do this,” says Yurataki, “but the law clearly states that groups with the greater number are to be chosen over those with fewer.”

“Actually,” says Mann, “It says the larger number has priority, it also says that the client gets the last word, so long that if he can justify his decision.”

Mann thinks, “I’d like to just give this to Yumi’s friend, but this little tramp might cause me some problems with the guild.”

“What about a contest?” suggests Yumi.

“Indeed,” says Yurataki, “I, Yurataki the Witch and my vassals the Three Amazons challenge you, Holly-Lia of Stratalia, and your tutor, to a battle in the street, the victor will take the request and the other go home.”

“Silly child,” says Rurona, “What do you think this is? Some sort of fantasy play game, the rival shows up, a fight

ensues, and the loser walks away only for no one to be harmed? Or perhaps you would take this opportunity as an excuse to inflict harm upon the future dean of Stratalia, a kind of humiliation that doubles to enforce your own reputation as a powerful sorceress.”

“Why you impudent...” sneers Yurataki

“But a contest,” interrupts Rurona, “is not a bad idea, a demonstration of power that indicates with out doubt which team is the mightier. Now Mann here when he was at Stratalia excelled at the creation of statues and metallurgy as I recollect, I would suggest he create a target, we take our shots at it, and who ever inflicts the most damage as a group gets the job.”

“Recollects?” thinks Mann shrugging.

“That works for me,” says Mann cracking his knuckles, “I can whip up a real bute right out in the street there, get that old hag next door to referee maybe, you know impartial and all. Yumi head on next door and get her for me would you?”

“Yeah, sure,” says Yumi heading out the door.

Rurona looks at Hollia, “being awfully silent, are you okay with this?”

“y...yeah,” says Hollia unsure, she has had a few run-ins with Yurataki, but its always been ending lately with Yurataki getting the jobs. Haki has argued with the clients a few times but nothing ever going this far.

In a few moments a shrunken old woman comes in, a woman in charge of a small garden for the locals, “okay, okay, you kids get on with this already, I have Red Fruit to

water you know.”

In the street, with people poking their heads out the windows and doors, Pima and Amia amongst them, Mann erects with his magic, chanting and summoning a blue slowly spinning sigil upon the ground, a very solid pillar, which in a moment constricts into its self forming the body of a large muscular man.

“A golem?” asks Yurataki, “you want us to fight a Stone Golem? Are you crazy old man, what do we look like battle axe wielding super soldiers or giant robots or something?”

“Heh, heh, heh,” says Mann, “it’s not a complete Stone Golem, it’s just the dense body of one, I’d have to work for a whole week just to make the power core for it to actually move about, let alone nearly another month for any kind of command system. There’s a reason there isn’t much demand for these things you know. What did you kids think I was just going to make a few little rocks you’d all be able to smash to pieces? Give this old crazy man a little more credit than that.”

He thinks a moment and then does the spell again, creating a second one, “Okay, hag, check them both out, you’ll see I made them equal.”

“Don’t call me hag, damn-it all, ever since you were a brat I swear.” She peers at both, “yes, yes, I can see they are the same” she taps them, “yes, yes, same strength and all.”

“Uh, how would she know?” demands Yurataki.

“Young lady,” says the woman, “I too went to Stratalia, I am an expert at the strengths and weaknesses of things, not to mention my specialty happens to be manipulating

rock.”

“Very well then,” says Yurataki, “we will be going first. Amazons don’t leave a single pebble standing!”

“Wind Slicer!” yells one as a green arc of magical wind flies from her swinging sword, the arc hits the golem dead on, chipping the stone body slightly.

“Lightning Shocker!” yells the second with the blue eagle on her armor. Her blast however leaves little more than a slight scorch mark.

“Fire Slash!” yells the third, her blade consumed in fire as she strikes the golem, however she drops her sword and staggers back in pain from the vibration going through her arms, her sword had only chipped the left shoulder a little.

Yurataki steps forward, takes out a green vial from her magic Jack-O-Lantern bag and throws it at the golem’s face, melting it with acid.

“There,” says Yurataki, “in a real battle it would now be harmed and unable to see. Top that.”

In the other direction is the golem for Hollia and Rurona.

Hollia summons her cane in a puff of blue flames, a white staff with a spiral design. She chants

“By the power that is with in In the form of the heat and flame I call the power forth to destroy that which stands against me Saint’s Fire!”

A blast of blue spiritual fire flies like a wave from the swing of her staff and flows over the golem. When the flames depart the golem is still standing, although there is steam rising from its body through little cracks over its

surface.

“All show,” says Yurataki, “That’s all just surface damage, we actually left deep marks and melted its face off.”

crash!

She is silenced as the head just falls off and smashes into the ground.

Rurona walks over and flicks the body which crumbles to pieces on the ground. “It would appear,” says Rurona, “that Hollia destroyed the golem.”

“This isn’t over,” says Yurataki and she and her three amazons leave, “The guild will hear about this old man.”

The job was outlined in the contract they read back at Stratalia, escort as bodyguards the client through a ruin he discovered on his property. Of course it didn’t mention that his property is mostly taken up by a house, a workshop, and a storage facility for scrap metal; it also doesn’t mention for reasons Hollia and Rurona aren’t going to ask about, that Yumi lives in the big house and her father; their client; lives in what is essentially...or rather actually, an old tool shed with a room added on, which he clearly built himself so it would connect to an outdoor toilet. The main house has its own indoors toilet of course implying that Mann has been outside for sometime or something else has been going on requiring him to have built an outdoor toilet, and then live in the shed, and then build a room connecting to the outdoor toilet. At any rate this back lot is rather small,

too small to find some ancient forgotten ruins, at least until one looks down the well.

On the surface the well is just this ten foot wide stone circle with a bucket big enough for a single person to be lowered down in. Looking down at mid-day one can clearly see a sandy bottom with water around it. This is filter sand and these large wells are common to keep the water from getting muddy and have plenty of room to fight back the constant encroachment of roots from the rather fast growing plant life around this area...lets put it this way a tree will grow one foot a day after germinating till reaching full size and then if cut down will grow back from the stump at the same rate (regenerative trees, now imagine the weeds, and other plants that could grow through stone mortar into the water).

After they are all down however another fact dawns on them, this well has some interior lights and the shape is off.

"This clearly wasn't originally used as a well," says Rurona.

"Yep," says Mann, "my family bought this lot from another family three generations ago, they said this was originally a basement until they moved the house forward off of it, and converted the basement into a well."

Hollia looks around spying the crystal lights, the same old model the school uses for its class rooms that look like blocks of ice causing them to be dubbed "Cold Lights".

splash, splash, splash

Mann walks over to the wall and sticks a knife into the wall. A blue light line in the shape of a domed door forms,

the stone within the line vanishes like a mist.

“Hmmm,” says Rurona

“Miss Rurona,” says Hollia, “you...you recognize it?”

“Nope,” says Rurona, “Not a clue what this place is, interesting though.” She crosses her arms as she walks behind Mann through the water, he raises an eyebrow as she comes out of the ankle deep water totally dry stepping up onto the stone walkway of the lit and obviously large structure beyond the door, a place with lit ceilings, lit by the cold lights, with a labyrinth of walkways standing a few feet above a watery canal system clearly made much deeper than the main body of the well.

Rurona backs away from the door and gestures Mann to the same. Hollia takes a running start and sort of leaps onto the water yelling, “Air Skimmer,” as she slides over the surface of the water as though on a board made of air slicing the surface as she goes and landing between Rurona and Mann.

“Wow,” is what escapes Hollia’s lips looking at the vast structure just twenty feet below the surface of the woods next to Agate Town.

Hollia stares at the water for a moment.

“Well ladies,” says Mann, “we best,”

“It’s glowing,” says Hollia.

“Excuse me?” says Mann

“The water,” says Hollia, “It’s glowing,”

“I see, so it is,” he says while scratching his beard, “Is...is that odd...I figured this was some old ruin, maybe something really old you know, perhaps even a relic of the

Rhulan Empire.”

“Nope,” says Rurona quickly, “This isn’t the right style I mean, and glowing water is very suspicious, it means it’s enchanted, or...”

She looks at Hollia.

“Oh,” says Hollia, “Um, the water has either been directly enchanted, or it’s been in contact with something that is, or has been for a long time.”

“I am Miss Hollia’s tutor,” says Rurona to Mann who shrugs and nods as they turn from the water to traverse the passages, which he has not yet explored. Rurona takes the lead, while Hollia stands behind Mann, as the adventurer guide states when traveling as body guards along a path too narrow to keep the client in a safe inner position one must walk ahead while the other walks behind.

Smash!

It is not long after walking over the path that they are attacked, what was an enemy is now pieces of rubble on the floor, brown stone pieces, a mere moment before, faster than Mann could see something came flying out of the water and in that same instant Rurona destroyed it with her bare hand...well bare hand glowing blue, he assumes this to have been the “Aura of Destruction” a technique his daughter knows as well. It is a fighting move enhancing the defensive aura into a weapon, the defensive aura being the first technique taught to potential adventurers as a sort of soft force field that lessons the harm attack can do. The

stronger someone gets spiritually the stronger this gets as well, but even so to see a sorceress, especially one dressed like Rurona using a hand to hand attack is strange.

“Then again,” he thinks, his mind wandering, he turns to see Hollia, shortly after they entered this chamber she summoned her staff, a twisted white wood like cane, a normal weapon for a sorceress, but her tutor summoned no weapon at all, and just now...

“A stone beast golem,” says Rurona interrupting his train of thought, “It was in the form of a squid,”

Indeed in that brief moment as fast as half a blink a three foot long stone bodied squid had flown from the water directly at Rurona, resulting as seen, it being smashed to pieces, however...

“Look at this Hollia,”

On the floor the stone pieces are disintegrating, turning to sand and flying back into the ever glowing water around them.

“That...” says Hollia, “I...don’t know...”

“Weird,” says Rurona, “A stone beast is nothing more than a golem with an animal shape, even one made to magically float as though it were swimming shouldn’t do this...”

She looks around for a moment, “It’s going to reassemble, there is a spell in the water, not just to make it glow, but also to conceal what’s in it, and repair it...an ever lasting number of enemies protecting someone’s treasure.”

“Treasure?” speaks up Mann interested in this part of the story, the lesson on stone beasts being nothing but recap

for someone who specialized in stone creations in school.

“Of course!” shouts out Hollia, “Some fiend, or sorcerer, or someone who hired a sorcerer, they would build giant labyrinths filled with traps, puzzles, and fill them with all sorts of monsters, all to protect a special item, something powerful, or special, hidden away, its one of the basics of all adventures.”

“Indeed,” says Rurona with a smile, “A classic scenario, of course this is one long left abandoned to run on its own, well Mann, let’s see what treasure awaits you then.”

They journey through the wall-less maze, a few treasure chests with tiny bobbles and gold coins, pointlessly left at the end of long walk ways, no doubt both as distractions and as lures to keep would be thieves wandering about away from the main direction, not hard to see for one who just takes the time to look around, there not being walls and all, it also seems to give time for the creations in the water to attack. There is no rhyme or reason to when or why they are attacking, it’s not when they go near a treasure chest, or hit a lever to open a path, or even at certain intervals of time, they truly are random encounters. What they encounter as far enemies go to Hollia and Rurona are truly jokes, if they were low level adventurers just starting out they might have given them trouble, maybe required them to go back and buy more healing items or stop a moment to consider their plans, but as things truly are these enemies are a joke, although for Mann it means having to hide

as these two women make him look bad, he is so out of practice he can't even keep up with their motions as Hollia smashes a Stone Squid with her cane, Rurona blasts a Stone Crab with a mystic bolt (something he could have sworn was a higher level move requiring a chant but she just flings these purple energy bolts off her hand like she was fling water off her fingers). He does see it though when Hollia summons a magical cyclone to dispatch a group of seven of these monsters, and when Rurona just taps a Faux Blob with her foot sending it flying and smashing against a far off wall, making Mann's eyes bulge in disbelief that such a simple motion could do so much damage, even to such a small enemy.

"You have got to be kidding me," says Rurona as they come to a circular door way blocked by a stone.

To their far left along a long narrow passage is a pedestal with a floating white orb above it, and to their far right is a narrow passage with a pedestal with a floating blue orb above it.

"It says something on the door," says Hollia summoning a small gust of wind to blow away the loose chalky dust, which suddenly causes weird ominous music to start playing.

"An enchanted door?!" shouts Hollia as they all jump back,

"A protection spell, perhaps," says Rurona, "to summon a guardian, Mann stay back."

"Don't have to tell me that," he says backing up a ways but not that far as he looks at the surrounding water in

fear something else may pop up, he did notice that while random more and more were coming up at once as they got closer to this door.

From the dust the form of a skeleton appears, floating in mid-air, however rather than attacking its skull moves in un-natural ways as though made of clay...it very likely is made of chalk or clay actually...and as though imitating having flesh, in other words the damned thing smiles and its eye sockets move to imitate a friendly expression as it gestures towards the white sphere and speaks in high pitched and somehow comical voice given its appearance.

“Welcome treasure hunters and brave adventurers, remember before facing the boss of any dungeon its important to heal and save your progress....er...I mean, save your ass perhaps, yes, it has been ages since I had to come out here and do this...sorry, please use the white sphere over there to heal your party.”

It gestures to the blue sphere, “and please us this one to save your pro...ass...or was it to warp back to the Volpose town?”

“That name sounds familiar.” Whispers Hollia.

Rurona whispers back, “Volpose Town was a small town not far from where Agate Town is now, the town was ruined a century and a half ago by several bad fires and abandoned to the forests, the residents moved to Bostonia, or went north , although some came here and founded Agate Town. Agate Town really is the surviving form of it, except this was a forest back then, and if I remember correctly there was a tower...”

Rurona's eyes narrow and she frowns, "A tower...right where we're standing....the giant dome well...must have been the foundation of the tower...and all this the bottom level."

"Huh?" says Hollia, "these are bottom of the tower level enemies?"

Rurona shrugs, "I don't know for certain, but it seems the tower wasn't that big a deal...after all it was torn down to help build Agate Town, they must have just forgotten about all this stuff here."

In the mean time the Skeleton is just looking at them, "Ahem...if you are done I will be going adventurers."

"You still here creation?" asks Rurona not really expecting a response, and not waiting for one as she walks up and brushes her hand through it causing it to blow away as chalky dust caught in some unfelt wind.

"A mere guide post," says Rurona, "With a preprogrammed response, all that oh for so long garbage was just to make adventurers and thieves feel like they were the first to make it this far and give them a false sense of security, I have no doubt the treasure and the real guardian of it, is just beyond this door."

Hollia is trying to hold in her excitement, after all, there is a client with them.

"Uh ladies," says Mann, "That healing orb thing, does that really work?"

Rurona looks over at it, "I can sense that it does, and yes it also has a protective field around it, as does the blue one, where enemies can not attack you, feel free to stay there

while we deal with the guardian and retrieve the treasure,”

“Oh thank you ladies,” says Mann

She says quietly as he walks away, “Also keep in mind that our job was to escort you, not to destroy any guardian or retrieve any treasure, as while the well is your property, the labyrinth isn’t, and we have walked well beyond your property line.”

“Miss Rurona,” says Hollia semi-astonished, “As per the adventurer guild by-laws, under the title of (body guard) any and all treasure deemed of value can rightfully be kept by the client if they so want, this stipulation can only be gone around if the job description or client describes us as explorers not body guards.”

“Very good,” says Rurona, “However he isn’t really exploring the final room, and we are, but as you say if he wants I suppose he can keep the treasure, after all, part of all this is also to gain a good reputation as an adventurer, something you really can’t get if you so easily give in to temptation and move through loop holes to snake treasure out from under a client.”

Hollia blushes thinking, “She was testing me! Thank the goddess.”

Hollia however doesn’t see Rurona shrug and smirk as Hollia is stuck in her thoughts.

“Wait a minute,” says Hollia realizing the door is still there, “Uh...Miss Rurona...how do we open the door?”

Even upon examining it, there are no handles, there were no special levers on any walk ways, or buttons, or a puzzle to be solved on the door, and the golem that came

out didn't challenge them to battle or ask any riddles, or even give any clues to finding any special keys.

"I imagine," says Rurona, "The wizard or who ever built this place didn't really expect anyone...or rather really didn't want anyone to enter here, maybe you have to use both orbs in order to unlock it...or."

Smash!

Rurona to everyone's surprise kicks the door and smashes it in.

"Or," she continues, "I could have read the inscription on the door saying [To enter here you must have the three gems of tower guards] and realized this is the final door to a maze that is only one-fourth still here and thought to myself screw it and smashed the door in."

Hollia looks over at Mann who apparently has decided to take a nap in the safe zone, not even to be awakened by the sound of stone being smashed to pieces, "Makes sense...I guess...".

Hollia is more focused on Rurona's dress, the shadow cloth once again surprising her as despite its tight and regal appearance moved with out restraint to allow Rurona to kick down the door, and Rurona's demeanor, calm and collected one moment like some queen of a nation or instructor, the next reminding her a bit of Yumi or how she'd always imagined a powerful sorceress full of confidence might act, how she herself imagined herself acting...not that she would ever confess the idea of dressing like Rurona did when she first saw her...only in white so people know she's a good guy, and laughing as she defeats her enemies

with powerful magic and strong physical strikes from her cane...or maybe even kicking them...or maybe also even punching them...imagine the look on some evil warlord's face if this petite sorceress punched him in the face as he's preparing for a magical attack and is sent flying through a wall.

Hollia's face is beet red at the thought, as she holds her cheeks imaging such an embarrassing act in her mind, she was always taught to be still and strong, taught in classes that is how a sorceress fights...granted her own mother uses advanced martial arts and two swords while leaping through the air...but no she reminds herself with mental conviction, the mental image of herself back in robes standing on a hill top casting spells as her fellow adventurers, in the form of her friends Yumi, Amia, Pima, and Haki fighting below against an army of Skeleton Knights that she chose the path of the sorceress not the swords woman; the day dream she's had before shifts as the mental image of Rurona dressed as Hollia first saw her flies down into the army of Skeleton Knights, her friends standing back in astonishment as Rurona punches the enemies into dust and kicks them using the same martial arts her mother uses...which come to think of she did see Rurona using the night before in the clearing when being asked about non-magical fighting skill...huh."

"Hollia," says Rurona interrupting her thoughts, "Our boss of the tower basement awaits us...lets not keep him waiting any longer shall we?"

"Y...Yes Miss Rurona," says Hollia sheepishly as she

follows her into the some what darker room beyond the door.

An inky black darkness stands before them, not a natural one by any means, it's as though the walls and floor themselves are absorbing the light. As they walk in a new door forms from the wreckage Rurona created sealing them in, however thoughts of escape do not pass their minds even as a strange ominous music begins to play. In a clearly programmed sequence straight lines with right angle turns of blue light appear under foot and move rather slowly as they illuminate the room, rather intentionally attempting to be intimidating, towards the far wall and up it, and then across the ceiling. The room is now lit up in this eerie blue light, a dome like room much like the well was, and probably about the same size.

roar

Over a short ledge into a small lagoon of water at the other end of this odd room a very unusual thing crawls from the water. Its body appears to be made of glowing blue ice or stone, however that really isn't the weirdest part, while it has the body of turtle, albeit with cone spikes sticking out of the center of the plate segments along its back, its claws, tail, and head are those of a sky dragon, a beast not of this continent but that across the Great Ocean in the eastern regions of the continent of Oriatea; with antlers instead of horns, long whispers, an almost human nose, and wild orb eyes.

"Saint's Barrier!" screams out Hollia as the beast with out warning shoots a stream of water from its mouth. The

frothy white water splashes off her barrier.

However just as soon as it does this the cones from its back launch into the air with cold rocket streams behind them, just as they fire new ones form on its back.

Rurona raises her hand to the air, "Fire Lightning!" and with this odd phrase a sight Hollia can hardly believe takes place, red bolts that appear to be a mix of fire and electricity shoot from her hand and blasts not one but all the cones, dancing between them like a net or a serpent that moves at the speed of light. The cones vaporize in the air, an attack they both know as (Ice Cones) an ice type technique that is both flashy as it shows focus in forming shapes and dangerous in how thick, sharp, and heavy the ice is that it creates. But this is not what amazes Hollia, the attack her new tutor has displayed is a dual element spell, the hardest type of spell for anyone to learn even if they have a specialty ability for one of the two elements used, intense focus and a lengthy incantation are usually required, but she did it in an instant.

"Are you going to day dream all day or fight this monster?" asks Rurona.

"Right," says Hollia embarrassed, "I...I'm sorry Miss Rurona."

She turns her focus at the monster, which seems to be trying to decide who to attack, it fires a blast of cold from its mouth.

"Spirit Shield." Says Rurona erecting her own barrier, "It's your turn to attack it..."

"Is?" thinks Hollia, "Is she using this battle to train me?"

Like a lesson..."

She sees the monster's attacks are even weaker against her barrier than Hollia's own, the water doesn't even splash, it's as though it's absorbed.

"It's ice right?" says Hollia aloud not really asking, "Okay then."

Her cane becomes enveloped in blue flames and with a mighty swing and yelling out, "Saint's Fire" she sends massive wave of these blue flames over the battle field and engulfs the monster. When the flames subside however the creature is still standing, except it's covered in cracks.

"Huh?" says Hollia dumb founded, "Isn't...Isn't it made of ice?"

"Aqua-marine gem stone golem." says Rurona, "it looks like ice, but I guess who ever made this place thought ice would be too weak for a boss monster, especially considering stone ones were used as general opponents in this labyrinth."

The monster launches another volley of ice cones,

"Fire Lightning!" once again Rurona dispatches this attack easily.

"Hollia," she says, "erect a barrier, as I recall the Saint's Barrier allows things to exit but not enter. I believe it's time we ended this game."

Hollia nods, and waves her cane over her head, "Saint's Barrier" this time a dome of a barrier forms over them.

Rurona hold out her palm and chants,

"Sonya, mistress of sound Master of vibration and destruction With the power of the Celestial Whole as your

empowerment I gather your strength into my hands, Into a sphere of divine force!”

Hollia has never seen this attack, the wording is similar to a dual spell she knows as a spirit sphere type attack, but this is not a (Sonic Sphere), which would be a clear sphere with a golden ball in the center as the symbol of sound. This entire sphere is yellow, larger than Rurona’s palm like holding a game ball for an outdoors sport, save that this ball is made of energy and is vibrating like crazy, the very air ripples around it and it’s making a slight humming sound as though it were straining against its own power. She sees Rurona’s hand vibrating as well, so much vibration for most people even the strongest of fighters would hurt too much to hold such a thing for long, at least not without gnashing of teeth and scrunching of faces in pain; yet Rurona just smiles and throws it while the monster unleashes another blast of water, its head turned towards Hollia even though its attack can’t get through, as though it knows who is making the protective spell.

As she throws the sphere she yells out, “Vibration Sphere!”

The sphere doesn’t explode like a Sonic Sphere would upon hitting the target, instead it phases into the body. The monster stops attacking, yellow light now being emitted by its eyes, mouth, and every crack on its body.

“Keep the barrier up.” says Rurona watching straight ahead.

Hollia merely nods as her gaze is transfixed on the sight before her.

Cra-koom!

A massive blast, something between an explosion and shattering glass, pieces, a million pieces plus, of tiny fragments of the golem explode in all directions, any one piece could have been a tiny lethal missile to anyone not protected by at least a level three defensive aura.

Aqua-Marine Turtle has been defeated

With the monster gone the door behind them turns to dust and the whole room lights up proper; now giving them a good look around. They were standing their backs to the wall on a small half oval of land with glowing water on three sides, the sides on either side of them flowing out into the labyrinth.

Rurona walks to the front, smiles, and laughs while shaking her head, "Hollia, I believe I found the source of the water in this well...as well as the source of the enchantment."

"Really?" asks Hollia as she runs over, looks into the water..., "oh..."

Her expression looses a bit of its excitement, as much as she loves adventure and mystery, what's in the water is something she's seen before. A palm sized blue orb, known as a Water Orb, a device for purifying and even creating water by focusing the humidity in the air and converting any hydrogen and oxygen molecules it finds in abundance into water as well. Hollia has seen these a dozen times if not as many as a hundred times, used to purify water on her parent's space ship when visiting alien worlds, used by the school in the water tanks for the

same purpose; for the students have clean drinking water, and by merchants for pretty much the same purpose, not to mention for removing humidity from the air on muggy summer days and converting it to clean refreshing drinking water.

“In the past,” says Rurona, “Water Orbs were nowhere near as common as they are today, this tower...well the one that was here anyway...likely belonged to a wizard researching their creation, and decided to hide one of his masterpieces down here for safe keeping. It also seems he found another use for it that even the people at Stratalia haven’t figured out.”

“Huh?” says Hollia, “its just drawing water from the ground and cleaning it in this well isn’t it?”

“The golems,” says Rurona, “This Water Orb is their power source, this wizard figured out that the enchantment on golems could actually pull energy from a magic item like this as a power source.”

“Really?” says Hollia looking at the everyday item in the glowing water, she knows about golem construction, between normal golems and the more complex ones that use golem cores, but never heard of using a Water Orb to power and maintain numerous normal golems and one big one in a labyrinth.”

“It’s likely,” says Rurona, “the special spell is on the golems allowing them to drain energy from the item, and not so much the item. That grey sand on the bottom of the water is probably all golem, rather than being invisible there is a chance this golem dust both on the bottom and

floating through out it forms a body and then attacks. This gem one was the last resort guardian.”

“Wait...” says Hollia, “does that mean all those little golems were really one big golem?”

“Something like that,” says Rurona turning towards the exit, “well better collect Mann, seeing as he hasn’t run in here despite that explosion.”

Hollia takes one look back, and sees the small gem pieces slowly moving towards the water, inching along, before following Rurona out.

Mann had indeed heard the explosion, but stayed in the safe point...however he is a bit disappointed to learn that all that was down here was a Water Orb; however Rurona whispers in his ear, whispers about the sand all being one giant golem, about the gem one, and confirming for Hollia that she indeed saw the gem pieces moving to the water to reform; and upon confirming that the teleporter save point thing does indeed teleport back to the surface, whispers the idea in his ear of turning this place into a repeat quest job for students...something to take up with the Dean Jinron-Lia at a later date. The school would pay him, and the students would get experience and class credits; of course being a deadly labyrinth would mean only the highest level students would be allowed in; but such real world type training is hard to come by around here outside of jobs to guard merchants from bandits. Thus the quest regarding the labyrinth in the well comes to an end; with adventure,

no treasure though, and the client getting a possible money making attraction for adventure seeking students willing to face real danger that isn't controlled by a teacher.

"Really," says Yumi a few days later when a representative of the school comes by and hands Mann a contract, "Now that bastard will never do any real work again."

Chapter 3: Lost Moments between the chapters of Stratalia Conspiracy:

Just Before Chapter 3:

Rurona and Hollia are sitting outside in the sunlight as the birds chirp around them; Hollia has in her lap a rare book from her family's private library; the very tome from which she learned the Detoxification spell she had used to free Rurona.

Rurona looks over her shoulder, "Hollia, you may want to use a different spell."

"huh?" says Hollia startled as this was study time, Rurona herself had said so, "M...Miss Rurona?"

"You do intend," says Rurona, "to use this spell for the festival correct? As your demonstration of your skills yes?"

"Yes, Miss Rurona," says Hollia.

"That spell," she says, "Isn't very flashy when its not used on something, and even if it is used on a target it won't usually work, this spell requires the user to fully and completely want with all their heart for it to work, one must then normally have some deep connection with the one they are using it on."

Hollia blushes as Rurona speaks

"It's not like a normal healing spell in other words, you're going to need something flashier and more guaranteed to work...or...perhaps something completely unique."

A sly smile crosses Rurona's face, Hollia's however is a bit downtrodden, she had been studying this spell for some time now, although her use of it on Rurona had been her first time practicing it; she thought perhaps she had just gotten the knack of it easy...but...Rurona said *want with all their heart for it to work, one must then normally have some deep connection with the one they are using it on* Hollia's face turns beet red again.

"Hollia," says Rurona while placing her hand on the girl's shoulder snapping her back to reality, "I know of books rarer than anything in your family's private stash, and can be reached easily; and believe it or not they're right in the library, hidden away and locked away from sight and memory."

"Really?" asks Hollia,

"Oh yes," says Rurona, "Although we'd have to stay after closing to make sure no one sees where they are hidden of course; but don't worry about that, I'm sure I can convince the staff to let us stay."

Just Before Chapter 4

The night before Rurona and Hollia had snuck into the depths of the school's library, through a strange passageway battling foreign monsters. Beyond the creepy catacomb hall they had entered a forgotten library, perhaps even a piece of the ancient Metal Castle upon over whose

ruins Stratalia was built. Down here they had met the strange man Scraggs, a thief trying to find something valuable, but who was easily persuaded to leave by Rurona who showed the ability to access and use the library beneath the school.

Rurona brought up a single book; something special for Hollia. She had discussed with her briefly before about something unique; this book has something completely unheard of for the current student body. In Hollia's room Rurona is discussing with her the various rare spells in the book, but there is one in particular she wants Hollia to look at.

"This spell," she says, "Isn't something to agree to lightly, but it is something completely unique, and requiring a great deal of skill to perform."

"and I could perform it in the stadium?" asks Hollia

"No," answers Rurona bluntly confusing Hollia, "you must perform this spell ahead of time, it's the end result that will surprise everyone."

Rurona with a twist of her fingers makes the book flip pages, a picture of a woman in a silk gown kneeling in a giant glowing summoning sigil takes up the top half of the first page of the spell and its tutorial [Summoning a Familiar]

"But," says Hollia, "Miss Rurona, lots of the students have familiars, the summoning spell is well known...although,"

"Although," finishes Rurona for her as Hollia looks at the picture depicting a very different ritual and starts to read down the page as Rurona speaks, "This clearly isn't

that spell, those familiars are little more than pets or spare batteries for magical energy, they are hardly partners or true mystical companions. This spell will summon and create a special familiar just for you; and that is where the conviction lies, you will have a constant companion floating about you, needing you, loving you, helping you, defending you, as you need it, love it, help it, and defend it, in return.”

Rurona smiles as Hollia looks at the pages, fully engrossed in the ritual and the descriptions of what to do and how to do it. In Hollia’s fantasies about being an adventurer, aside from her companion the statue she would always play out these fantasies with who is now alive and standing before her, she would also have a cute intelligent animal like side-kick; while the form would vary each time based on descriptions of such side-kick creatures from ancient stories in her books to things her parents would describe on their journeys (AKA business trips). *Is this Rurona helping her fulfill this fantasy* is a thought rolling in her head...or would be if not for the fact that the opportunity has been laid out before her.

“I..” says Hollia reading the pages and wide eyed wonder, “...can really do this...I can...”

“Good,” says Rurona, “as you no doubt are reading; it will take prep time, take as long as you need and tell me when you are ready; if you don’t feel you can do it before the festival, just tell me and we’ll find another spell. Of course you can still do this one later on when you’re ready.”

Rurona heads to the door, “but for now, it is getting late;

you should get some sleep as well.”

Hollia is still reading as Rurona heads out the door, a wide smile on her face.

It isn't long before Hollia says she's ready, the next day in fact she is ready to start preparing for the ritual; a week's preparation, gathering materials, focusing, and preparing herself and studying the procedure to the ritual carefully. Everything is going smoothly, save for one detail even Rurona is missing, that something else is aware of this preparation, and that this something else does not like what it is seeing.

Chapter 3.5 (AKA: chapter 4 of “Stratalia Conspiracy”):
Summoning:

The next day had flowed by with very little relevance to Hollia. The usual classes seemed like an alien world from where she had been last night, so foreign in fact from the book she had been reading. Her history instructor had tried to ask her how she met Rurona. Thankfully they had worked out a believable back story, that they had met while Hollia was out practicing, almost true in that account. Of course that alone wouldn't be enough for the more inquisitive minds of those like the history instructor Prof. Mortaz. The story went that Hollia had been practicing some potent higher class spells on her own in the woods when Rurona flew over head seeing her. The fabrication went on to explain that Rurona was a master sorceress looking for a promising student, but learning that Hollia was a devoted student opted to be her personal tutor rather than magic master.

A good story, and this being the mystical continent at the end of the world as so many across Aesperia call it, it was to be expected that many strange individuals existed amongst the numerous kingdoms of the continent of Ravashira. No doubt there exists hidden here many a prodigy in magic, after all skill alone does not get one into the school of Stratalia on the far east coast; one must have money, as is the case with any private school or college.

All such exposition aside for Hollia the next week in fact flew by, she barely paid any attention to her school courses, not that she really needed to with her talent, as she focused on the book of summoning her tutor had given her. At last came the faithful night, with two weeks still remaining till the school's carnival she would at last and in time perform the ritual of summoning.

In the dark of the night Rurona had selected to perform the spell in the clearing where Hollia had practiced so many of her spells over the years as the area was ripe with Hollia's mystical energy. This saturation of magic made it the perfect place to perform such an intimate spell.

Dressed in a white gown looking more like a wedding dress than a sorceress attire Hollia sat down in the middle of a great white sigil on the ground, hands clasped together as though in prayer. From this point on Rurona could not help her, serving only as the witness to the ritual.

The environment is filled with an electric hum, a song not heard but instead felt as Hollia's mystical energy flows through the sigil and the local environment. This ritual can not be done with words, not with audible words in any

case, no it is a ritual done with the highest form of magic, soul invocation, the magic from one's own spirit. The sigil glows blue as the points of contact between the lines burst into blue torches. A cyclone of this same energy swirls up from the center as Hollia retains her voiceless chanting, her focus unbroken, the ancient inner words recorded in heart, mind and most importantly of soul.

When all is said and done, when the theatrics of the magic is complete, seeming to exist more to test the will of the summoner than to display their power, all the energy focuses above her and blasts down as though it were a bolt of lightning focused into the pin point of an artist's hand. Before her, directly in front of her gown covered knees a small blue circle appears. From it an oval of energy, looking to all the word as a celestial egg, something one may imagine lightning may give birth to, if lightning gave birth.

The light faded and the sigil evaporated, it was now over, for the most part. A peculiar creature now stood and cooed at Hollia. The strange little animal looked for all the world to be a mere white ferret, save for having a head like a baby fox adorned with small antlers between its ears.

"Hello little girl." says Hollia in a friendly tone as one talking to a baby.

The strange little creature coos again, a strange sound somewhere between a ferret's chortle and a bird's song.

"Per the right of the summoning spell I dub thee, LinLin." This was it, the creature born from her soul's own magic, her own true familiar. The spell had been a

complete success; all that is left is the introductions.

"I am your master," she says, "and mother, my name is Holly-Lia, however I am called Hollia by most everyone."

She gestures to Rurona sitting on the stone pedestal she had before been a statue upon, "and this is Miss Rhulan, she is my tutor and friend."

Rurona pauses looking at Hollia with a worried expression on her face, "Hollia?"

Hollia smiles looking at her, "the spell said I had to be truthful to my familiar. Especially right at creation, I would be lying if I told her your cover name."

"Okay..., when did you figure it out?" she asks leaning back on one arm.

"I kinda knew for about two years now."

Rhulan gives her a curious look.

"Yeah," she continues, "Well I'm not stupid. I mean stories of a sorceress turned to stone and all. Plus...I mean, to everyone else the story is just a legend, but in my family its reality. When I turned thirteen I got the whole story, even where the Metal Castle had been located. I put two and two together."

She looks up at Rhulan, with her familiar now resting in her arms blanketed by her long white silken layered sleeves.

"I didn't want to say anything," she says, "I mean what if I was wrong, although the clues clearly added up to you being the Empress Rhulan. But, I know there is goodness in everyone's hearts. After a few days I just couldn't believe all those old stories were true, besides my parents told me the stories the Stingers told about you on their dealings

with them, how 1800 or so years ago you had saved the world from their ancestors. Of course these are stories we couldn't tell anyone, I mean yeah we've known them, but I guess no one wants anyone to really know you existed, or that you weren't as evil as everyone around the world says..."

"okay, okay," says Rhulan holding up her hands as though in defeat, "I get it, guess I'm just surprised you figured it out so soon. Usually, well the cliché thing would be for you to not figure it out for a lot later. But then again if you were that dense you'd hardly be a worthy student."

"You mean?" asks Hollia eyes wide.

"Yeah, so long as you don't think I'm going to turn you to the dark side or something?" Rhulan stands and laughs, arms crossed.

Hollia had been a little tense, but now her body relaxes, unsure of the future but knowing she really wants Rhulan to stay around no matter what. The small creature in her arms however, LinLin, who had been silent save for a soft purr, perks up her ears. The little new born spirit creature senses something nearby, a rustling in the bushes.

Rhulan floats down beside Hollia, "Looks like the freaks that were wandering around the woods have decided to pay us a visit. How kind of them to wait till our dramas were over."

She winks to Hollia, "Okay my dear lets see what we have here."

With hand outstretched a mystical bubble sphere appears with a small green swirl inside, "Sphere of Wind!"

she yells out throwing it. Upon impact the bubble bursts releasing a cyclone of green wind that rips the bushes and surrounding vegetation out of the ground revealing the strange creatures hiding behind them. A small group of strange oddities even Rhulan is unfamiliar with, zombies, but not ordinary decaying undead, no these creatures have spikes coming from their shoulders, elbows, knees, and even wrists. The normal decaying flesh is green in color, as though it were sludge and moss imitating the corroded carcass of a normal zombie. Other than this they have all the normal appearances of zombies, sunken eyes, bad teeth, thin hair, and a stink of rotting meat, which had been oddly missing until Rhulan's attack. A spell of concealment, one broken by Rhulan's attack.

The muscular, if it could justifiably be called that, one in front moaned, "Rhuuu-laaaaan, ebeeeeel, emprissssss." while pointing its crooked decayed finger at her.

With a raised eye, "You can pronounce a puh sound?" she asked not expecting an answer, "Also I'm not evil." She looks at Hollia, "Well, not like I could control every single magistrate under my control."

She shakes her head, "Never mind, I make no excuses, yeah I messed up, and I have been imprisoned in stone for a thousand years as a result, my triple gods damned empire didn't last that long. And besides."

She points at the zombies, "Why in the name of the first Hell would I even try to justify myself to some clearly artificially made flesh golem freaks? I don't know who or what sent you, but your attempt to expose me is too late."

Hollia faces the zombies her stance making her gown now resemble more the flowing robes of a Nipponian princess than a wedding dress, “that’s right evil minions of darkness. Miss Rhulan may have been the evil empress, fallen down the path of darkness from the temptation of power, but she is now my friend. I know she is good, she has served her sentence, I won’t allow any monsters like you to come near her.”

To everyone’s surprise a blue beam suddenly blasts the zombie in the face, burning a hole in it, followed a second later by a shock wave that smashes what remains of its face in.

The source of the blast was LinLin, the cute and cuddly creature in the sleeves of her robe.

“A low level Devastation Beam.” states Rhulan.

“What?” asks Hollia.

groooooaannn

The zombies start to slowly shamble forward.

“This.” Rhulan says with a smile.

Hand raised and arm crooked as though to hail a carriage a light blue flame appears around her hand. She thrusts her arm back and forward with a mighty push yelling out “Devastation Beam!” the blue beam is accompanied with a wide shock wave that devastates the animated corpses, reducing them to ash and smashed remains.

“That.” she says, “Is a higher level version. Looks like little LinLin there has an impressive breath weapon. Hmm” with a smile she looks at the now calming down again creature, “well, well, Hollia, looks like your spirit

animal is a dragon. A true spirit dragon.”

Hollia looks down at LinLin concerned for a moment before its cuteness brings a broad smile to her face, “you are so cute LinLin. My precious baby familiar dragon.”

Rhulan smiles, however her expression quickly turns looking at the remains, “Hollia, begin cleansing those remains. Those weren’t some old monsters of mine trying to turn me evil again or anything like that. Everything I made is long gone, it all collapsed when I was turned to stone. You remember the story, when I was defeated the world was set back to before I returned.” she shakes her head thinking, “That was meant to keep the different kingdoms from going to war with each other as I could shut everything down in their lands at once, but that’s not the point right now. Those things weren’t my making; I have no idea where they came from. But they had an aura to them that’s not from this world.”

Rhulan watches as Hollia cleanses the remains, her new familiar jumping to the ground and walking behind, looking to be trying to copy her spell and do it as well. The timing of their appearance concerns her, “how did they know we were here? We’re they programmed to try and expose me? Why?” a specific pale woman’s face comes to mind, their passing in the hall outside the dean’s office coming back to her mind, “Couldn’t be, is she really back?”

Chapter 4: Haki’s Ambition

Holly-Lia, the grand-daughter of the dean, has a familiar. This news has spread like wild fire all throughout Stratalia in less than a day; of course Hollia has had her

new familiar, the small dragon like Lin Lin, with her since the morning; sitting on her shoulders, in her lap, on her desk, and even at times coiled on top of her head like a silly little turban; making cooing and chirping noises all day long. A very noticeable and distracting sight indeed with her serpentine like body covered in white fur, her almost canine like head, and tiny little antlers; at times she has even playfully snapped at the tuft on the end of her tail.

One would think other girls would be all over her trying to get a look and say how cute she is. A few have, others are jealous that they can't bring their own familiars into class, believing Holly-Lia is getting special treatment.

"of course it's special treatment," says Yurataki during a lunch hour to a group of female students sitting opposite her, and her three always armored vassals The Three Amazons, "she is the dean's grand-daughter after all; and besides look at that weird thing she is carrying around with her all day like a cat, with its weird antlers, weird eyes, weird colors, and weird behavior; you know she didn't buy it or call it like any of us would have to do; oh no, no doubt she summoned that weird thing from some horrible evil dimension, or you know..." she leans over the table, index finger raised and producing a fake whisper loud enough for everyone to hear, "her parents bought that weird thing for her from some alien world, totally ignoring the law;" Yurataki shrugs her shoulders with a smug look, "but you know, that's the aristocracy for you."

The girls across the table nod like obedient dogs being taught a trick.

“and just look at the timing,” says Yurataki, “it’s not long before the festival, you know they’re letting her perform...oh sorry...demonstrate there right? No doubt she is going to do some silly little dance with that thing looking all cute for the royals and perform some ridiculous illusion to go along with it; just sickening.”

Yurataki places her hand to her chest in smug confidence, “While I on the other hand will no doubt be chosen to represent Croix based solely on my merits and achievements.”

“Of course,” says one of the girls.

“No doubt about it Miss Yurataki,” says another.

Yurataki looks around, hiding her anger that she couldn’t say these things while Holia was in the room, or the truth that she has yet to receive a response from Croix about being accepted to represent them; merchant and trade ships have come and gone four times since she sent that letter and not one brought mail from the Empire accepting her as representative. Who else could it be she wanders, “I am after all,” she thinks, “the most deserving, and have worked the hardest, and the best magician in this whole damned place from Croix for crying out loud.” “Miss Yurataki?” says one the girls noticing a glare in her eyes to which Yurataki is quick to dismiss with a, “Oh its nothing, just thinking over my own demonstration is all.”

Which is met with more “of course,” and “you will do it,” and such praise.

On the other end of the spectrum is Haki, the gangly youth as it were with his heavy sweaty sorcerer robes, the proper attire for a royal sorcerer from Crimdalina, and his numerous pockets stuffed with magic items. For the last week he had been worried about how Hollia had been acting strangely; sneaking off after class to her dorm and only speaking with her tutor in parts of the school only members of her family or the faculty could go to. Not long ago when Yumi, Amia, and Pima, were at the school he would team up with them and Hollia on class quests; but now not so much. He had been trying to get jobs with Hollia that had been snagged by Yurataki; but he was still happy, he got to spend time with Hollia, alone, the very thought makes his face blush and gives him a slight case of the hiccups as though he were drunk for a moment. But ever since Hollia's tutor, this Rurona woman showed up they have been going on jobs together, in fact their very first quest together uncovered a new labyrinth, and one the school is now paying Yumi's dad to use for advanced training for adventurers and those training to return home as heroes and champions; a quest outside his training, and truthfully to himself outside his abilities. He imagines a scenario of the two of them, Hollia and Rurona, back handing the stone animals he has heard are down there and laughing; although he has never seen Hollia act like that in person but he always imagined beneath that intellectual shyness was a dominating personality...and now his nose has started to bleed.

"Of course, if I were there," he imagines himself there,

stepping forward to fight a stone bear *a golem not actually down there, but he doesn't know that* , “I shall protect you ladies from this dastardly monster,” he imagines himself saying...and then imagines the bear is chasing him away only for Rurona to grab it and snap its head off while Hollia in an exaggerated pose with her eyes wide and sparkling and hands clasped together saying, “Wow, you’re so cool Miss Rurona.”

“Oh come on,” whispers Haki plopping his face in his text book in his dorm, “Even my own imagination is against me.”

He looks at his text, and a guide for his upcoming alchemy exam, and says, “Then again...”

A mission sent to Hollia’s room, not an impossible type of mission, just one she hasn’t gotten since that time when Yumi decided that she and Hollia were going to be friends, back when they first met. Yumi had sent this “request for assistance” to Hollia for a beginner’s mission to chase off crows from a field as a pretense to get to know her better and become friends. This one is from Haki, asking for assistance to gather ingredients to use for an alchemy test; he could do just about any level 2 or higher combination to pass it; but the mission states he has signed himself down for a level 5 combination and can’t back down from it; but didn’t realize how dangerous the circumstances would be to get the ingredients so needs extra help. Hollia looks at Lin Lin coiled up on the bed in a little nest of sorts she

made from pushing the sheets around, and over to Rurona standing by her desk; having come in shortly after the letter arrived for Hollia's evening tutoring.

"Miss Rhulan," asks Hollia

during the events of the summoning/creation spell for Lin Lin Hollia revealed to Rurona that she has known for some time that she is really the ancient sorceress Rhulan, and much to Rhulan's surprise doesn't seem to be put off by this, and actually prefers to call her Rhulan when the other students and faculty aren't around to hear them

"I'm a little concerned,"

"About that mission?" asks Rhulan puzzled that Hollia would be concerned over that.

"No," says Hollia, "it's a bit embarrassing but, Lin Lin, she's eaten a squid on a stick, a few apples, and some other snacks here and there along with the herbs you told me about to feed her since yesterday...but...well...she hasn't you know...relieved herself."

"Oh..." says Rhulan, "that...well she doesn't do that, this type of familiar converts everything they consume into energy and stores it inside a pocket dimension inside their body where the matter and energy can be used later along with their normal extra dimensional energy sources. It's one reason the spell is practically forgotten, I suppose technically something like Lin Lin gone out of control on a feeding frenzy and growing to insane proportions could threaten an entire world like some great devourer of worlds."

Rhulan laughs a little, Hollia tries to imagine a moun-

tain sized Lin Lin chirping as she devours mountains and castles and trees, the image is still weirdly cute, but looking at her tiny familiar can't really believe she could do such a thing.

"Of course," says Rhulan, "that's a farfetched scenario; the original designer of that spell may have intended something like that to create a world eater but the end result as you well know is far from it."

Hollia pets Lin Lin on the head.

"The Dragon that Swallows the Moon," thinks Rhulan, "Anu Huran, you really were a lunatic, good thing I altered the spell."

The Alchemy Exam Ingredients Quest: Item 1: Feather of a Blue Ripper:

The dirt road between Stratalia and Agate Town, the rules of Stratalia strictly forbid hunting or gathering of items for missions and quests on the school grounds; however Haki isn't bothered by that, while he was joyous as could be without showing it that Hollia accepted to join him...however...he looks back and close behind Hollia is her tutor, Rurona, her dark black robes making her look to him like a mourner at a funeral...or a reaper following close behind them like some foreshadowing of doom for their adventure.

Haki stops in the path, "Okay, I think this is good time to find this blue ripper monster!"

Hollia and Rurona exchange glances,

“Haki,” says Hollia

“Don’t worry,” says Haki, “I will protect you both against this fiendish...this...”

He takes out the alchemy list, “...feathered...? Uh...”

“Haki,” says Hollia, “you...do know what a Blue Ripper is right?”

“Sure,” says Haki trying to play it off, “It’s...blue...and its...a ripper...maybe...”

He imagines a blue feathered version of a Flame Raptor in his head, or the man sized predatory desert birds he has seen pictures of from the Great Desert to the west beyond the Archae Sea, “it’s like a Kokaroo...maybe...but...I’ve never seen anything like that around here...so...a-ha! It’s a super-rare animal...no wonder its feathers are used for potent magical ingredients.”

He nods to himself,

Rurona chuckles under her breath, “Kid,” she says, “It’s a Scrambler, we just call them Blue Rippers in these parts.”

“Scrambler?” says Haki, his mental image of the deadly Kokaroo, the large six foot long road-runner giant with its deadly claws to accompany its talons and blade like beak, shrinks, turns fatter, keeps claws on its wings, but is small enough to fit in his hand and is really just a small blue bird with a silly crest of feathers on its head.

Haki’s knees shake a little in embarrassment, “Uh...” he says while thinking,

“all that posturing just now, all over...a...scrambler”

“Uh...” he says, “I...well...sorry...I mean...” he turns beat red.

"It's okay Haki," says Hollia, her smile brightening his day, "they may not be dangerous but they are hard to catch and can be kind of mean if cornered."

Haki looks into her eyes, and looks away, he looks back and yelps, "ah!" and leaps back as he looks directly into the face of Lin Lin, who is floating in the air, Hollia mean while has walked over to Rurona.

"You..." says Haki to Lin Lin, "can fly...er...float?"

chirp is the only response he gets from Lin Lin.

"We're in luck," says Hollia turning to Haki as he walks over, "Miss Rurona has a cage we can use for a trap."

"Great," says Haki slightly sarcastically with out thinking that amongst all the magic items he brought he didn't bring anything to catch a small bird; why would he, he thought they were going after something called a -Ripper-.

"Unfortunately," says Rurona, "we still need bait,"

"Oh well in that case," says Haki regaining some confidence, "we'll just have to got to Agate town and get some..."

"No need," says Rurona, "Now watch students, I am about to show you a useful trick for acquiring bait for catching small predators or even just for fishing."

She walks over to the side of the road and leans down on the dirt, her palm on the soil. Hollia watches the ground, Lin Lin looking over her shoulder, Haki stands next to her and looks over at her; Lin Lin flicks her tongue out at him causing him to take a step back with a confused look on his face.

Rurona closes her eyes and opens them quickly, the fact that her eyes flash for a moment catches Haki's attention;

not that it's too unusual for powerful magic users to have eyes that can glow, it's just something he's never seen before without someone casting a spell out loud.

"Vibration." says Rurona, not loudly, not whispering, just saying it normal.

They can feel a slight trembling in the ground.

"Quickly," says Rurona catch the worms before they go back under.

"Neat," says Hollia as she scoops up a few and places them in the cage past the one way trap door.

Rurona takes the trap and hangs it in a tree.

"Miss Rurona," says Hollia, "will that be enough to catch a Blue Ripper?"

"Good point," says Rurona looking around, "Not if we don't want to rely on chance of one happening by and seeing it, they hunt by sight and smell, and despite their colors are in the same family as crows so a bit of fresh or rotting meat along with the squirming worms...which should stay alive in that cool cage in the shade for a while, they shouldn't be able to get out of those thin bars with their inscribed charms either...but..."

She points her finger at some pushes and with a come here gesture actually says, "come here" and a mouse comes literally flying through the air to her hand which she grabs around its head between her thumb and forefinger; and with a quick twist of her thumb and forefinger crushes its skull.

Haki's eye twitches, "I really wish I hadn't seen that."

Rurona places the head and still twitching mouse body

in with the earthworms which squirm over the corpse.

blarg

Haki vomits by the side of the road.

Rurona says to him, "Don't forget to kick sand over that least your prey goes to that to feed instead of the cage."

Haki holds his hand over his mouth and runs to the other side of the road to throw up some more behind a bush.

As Lin Lin floats around them looking at the ground, back at the cage, and over to where Haki is Rurona says, "Your friend is a rather strange boy isn't he?"

"Oh you know Haki," says Hollia, "Miss Rurona, he's always being silly, but he's always a truly reliable friend on a quest."

"I wouldn't know," says Rurona, "but I know you are a good judge of character and he always came back alive; although your stories do hold true so far."

It occurs to Hollia that she really has never seen Haki on an actual quest, just around the school, Rhulan couldn't travel far enough as an astral body leashed to her stone body away from the school to see them out in the field; she'd only know the stories Hollia would tell her as a statue, back when she thought she was just talking to herself pretending to relate her adventures to an imaginary leader. Combining these facts together, that the statue and the woman next to her are one and the same, although something she's come to accept is still after this time so weird that she finds herself forgetting it at times.

-A little while later; *snap* the trap has sprung...for the third time, they had waited hidden by an invisibility

spell by the road watching the trap...and basically having a picnic. The first time another mouse came to trap...its body ended up joining the first to add to the smell, the second time a crow made a play for the trap and had to be chased off; this time however they have what they wanted.

Rurona carries the trap with its thrashing bird inside over to Haki, the thing has splattered the mice bodies around as it ate them, what remains it has thrashed about in its frustration at not being able to escape. She hands the trap to him, it's all he can do to hold it with its screeching prisoner. Lin Lin hides behind Hollia.

"heh," thinks Haki, "even the dragon is afraid of it."

All the times he had seen Scramblers back in Crim-dalina, wandering about the royal garden and around his family's house, and all the times he had seen them back in Stratalia, he never once thought of them as something dangerous, just some small birds that would run and fly away when approached. But right now, this close to one, he can see the serrated edge of its beak, the wild look in its eyes, the razor sharp claws it uses to catch prey and climb trees, and its talon feet; not to mention the horrible high pitched noise it's making.

"It's your capture," says Rurona, "You just need a feather right?"

"Right," says Haki.

He looks at it, the bars are too close to get his fingers through, and he just needs a feather not the whole bird. He'd have to open the cage, take out the thrashing animal with claws known to leave marks in stone while they climb;

a problem for the garden walls back in Crimdalina that occurs to him just now, a small fact he had pretty much ignored and is amazed he actually remembers. He could just kill it with one of the magic knives he keeps amongst his arsenal, he looks over at Hollia.

“What would she think of me if I needlessly killed it? Would she think I was smart...no, no, no, she’d think I was a coward...I am a man after all...time to be a man and...”

screech!

The Blue Ripper makes a play for his hand as he reaches for the door, causing him to nearly drop the cage.

“What a shame,” says Rurona in a weird, clearly fake nonchalant tone, “that it’s not asleep, you would be able to take the feather without hurting it so easily if that were the case.”

“Right,” thinks Haki practically whipping his own brain for not realizing that sooner, he has dozens of items with sleep and even paralysis as side effects, including the oh so simple and oh so obvious...sleep powder.”

“I...” he says trying to keep face, “was...just thinking of something like that.”

Hollia smiles looking at Rurona and back at Haki thinking, “Miss Rurona really is such a great teacher.”

Haki takes out a little bag of powder, sprinkles it on the Blue Ripper, the bird calms down and goes to sleep; at which time Haki opens the cage and timidly takes the bird out, and looking at his guide plucks a tiny feather...jumping a little when the bird twitches at this...from its head and places the feather in his pack.

"If that's all you need the bird for," says Rurona picking up the Blue Ripper and holding it in her hand, "wake up."

Haki and Hollia watch in amazement as the Blue Ripper awakens immediately, Lin Lin is sort of interested, hard to tell; but she does watch as the Blue Ripper takes off to the nearest tree trunk and scrambles up to the branches.

Item 2: Pink Moss:

Haki has crossed out Blue Ripper Feather from his list and reads aloud right there on the dirt road where they caught the Blue Ripper, "Pink Moss."

He looks around, "What...is Pink Moss..." he looks at Rurona and speaks again before she has the opportunity, "I mean...sorry...I know its moss, and it's pink...but..."

"Come to think of it," says Hollia, "I don't think I've ever seen Pink Moss in person."

They both look to Rurona and are surprised when all she does is shrug her shoulders and says, "Not a clue, but I can tell you it grows on trees and rocks, but usually deep in the woods near running water."

She pauses a moment, "although I seem to remember a special condition for which they would grow the most..."

She smiles, "Aw, yes, I remember now, Pink Moss is most abundant near a Pink Water spring."

"Pink Water?" asks Haki, as he turns to Hollia, her expression telling him she knows what Rurona is talking about.

"Oh," says Haki as he remembers, "that sweet water the healers use."

"Haki?" asks Hollia, "You mean they use it as an

ingredient for healing potions right?”

He raises an eyebrow as she gestures towards Rurona watching him, reminding him that she is Hollia’s tutor and thus on par with them being out on a quest with a teacher from Stratalia.

“oh,” he says thinking it over, “yes, I remember the healing potion pink formula having it as an ingredient, no, the palace healers have their own spring in a greenhouse that they keep year round...I’ve had some in fact, it’s very sweet.”

“Interesting,” says Rurona a bit nonchalantly, “Tell me then, what makes it useful for healing?”

Haki realized he has put himself on the spot, “Oh...um...it’s magic water?”

Rurona shakes her head while smiling before turning to Hollia, “Can you tell us Hollia?”

Hollia smiles, “It’s the algae, the Pink Water Algae, has mystical healing properties, although it dies off in winter and may or may not return to the same spring the next year; a good way to tell which springs may have them is too look for springs that are still with Red Tip Grass growing in them.”

Haki looks at her; she practically recited the text book word for word and thinks, “That’s Hollia for you, the perfect student, no doubt she’ll be a great dean some day...”

He looks over at Rurona, “and the tutor to the perfect dean, okay...get it together Haki this is YOUR quest, they’re here to help YOU, and you’re supposed to be showing off what you know, not making yourself look like you need

them to spoon feed everything to you.”

“Okay!” says Haki a little louder than he intended, “sorry,” he says a lot lower, “I got it, we just need to find a Pink Water spring, and then we’ll find the Pink Moss.”

Haki looks down the road toward Agate town, and then down the other way back towards Stratalia, “sooo, do we know anywhere where they have a spring?”

Hollia shrugs, “Sorry Haki, but the only spring is in the school’s garden and we aren’t allowed to use school grounds for the class quests.”

“Right,” says Haki, “but that means either wandering around the woods hoping to find one, or...” He thinks of Amia’s item shop in Agate Town and says, “maybe the item shop in Agate Town has a map to the location of known springs, I can’t believe...”

He looks at them and decides to rephrase himself, “I mean I just remembered that back home in Crimdalina that peasants would mark the locations of possible springs on maps and every year in the spring go out and find which ones turned pink.”

“I don’t think we do that here,” says Hollia thinking about it, “but...then again...I’m not...you know...” Hollia looks sad for a moment, reminded of the things some of the other students would say about her when they thought she couldn’t hear them, about being spoiled, having everything she needs right at the school and for free. The garden at the school belongs to her family, but she has always used Happy Apples and Milk enhanced with healing potions when she felt a little under the weather; she never got so

sick that she needed anything serious. Lin Lin cocks her head looking at her, and Haki kicks a little dirt wishing he hadn't said anything.

"I don't believe so," interjects Rurona surprising them, "Everyone out in this particular area has Happy Apples, and the healing facilities at Stratalia are free for the local towns, perhaps if we were further out west or north some towns might have maps to their areas."

She pauses a moment and walks a little, "However...you must ask yourself if this one ingredient for your test is worth a five days if not more walk through woods filled with Steel Claw Bears, Forest Wolves, Werewolves, and all manner of other hazards and annoyances when for all we know," she points at the woods right next the path, "there could be a spring or just some stray moss near a stream coming from such a spring, only a few yards away."

"Yeah," says Haki, "but...doesn't...you know...I mean..." he can't form the words.

Hollia speaks up, "Miss Rurona, doesn't that take us back though to wandering around looking at random? I mean I'm not against exploring in the woods, it's just."

"It's just," finishes Rurona for her, "unnecessary, when we can just fly above the tree line and look for a bright pink splotch sticking out amongst the green and brown."

Hollia looks at Lin Lin, "Miss Rurona, do you think Lin Lin would be able to lead us?"

"Lin Lin?" asks Rurona genuinely confused, "Why would we need Lin Lin to lead us when we could just fly ourselves?"

Rurona starts to hover a few inches off the ground.

"She," thinks Haki, "didn't even recite a levitation spell."

Haki looks at Hollia, expecting her to fly, he imagines himself scrambling through the tree limbs and mud trying to keep up with and follow them as they fly over-head, smiling in the warm breeze above the trees; he is brought back to reality however when he sees her downtrodden expression.

"Hollia?" he starts as she says, "I...I can't fly."

Rurona lands and walks over to her, "You...can't fly? Hollia? If I am not mistaken your specialty power is wind? You are descended from Strata-Lee, you..." she remembers Gyro-Lee from a thousand years ago who couldn't fly, at least not for very long and had to get a running start to take over short distances at high speeds up or straight ahead, mostly using an adaptation of the skill "Air Skimmer"; of course her great grand father was known as "The Sky Warrior".

"I'm sorry," says Hollia looking about to cry.

"Now don't do that," says Rurona smiling, cheering her up a bit, "You just should have told me sooner," she remembers as a statue even then Hollia never mentioned this, and there would really be no reason to needlessly fly around the school, she just figured she missed her learning it...or plain just didn't notice; that this must truly be embarrassing for her, to know so much about so many spells but not even be able to do the most famous skill for her own specialty type.

"All this means," says Rurona in a scholarly manner, "is

that from now on, we have something of high priority to tutor you over, every day from now on we must take time to practice your flying and levitation skills and spells; and in no time you'll have it down pact."

"You...you really think so?" says Hollia looking up at Rurona with a twinkle in her eye and cupping her hands like she's practically praying to her.

Rurona places her fist to her chest, "You can count on it Hollia, with me teaching you, we'll have you flying in no time."

"Thank you?" says Hollia, "Thank you, thank you," Lin Lin even starts to chirp as though she too were thanking Rurona.

Haki looks off to the distance with some tears in his eyes thinking, "They totally forgot about me, it's like I'm not even standing here."

He looks back at them standing there and looks away again, "damn it should be me comforting Hollia, but it's like Rurona is her brave prince, the hero to lead her party."

He shakes his head, "Don't be silly Haki," he thinks, "they're both girls, and besides she's her tutor that's her job."

"Okay," says Rurona, "no time like the present, Hollia," Rurona takes a few steps back, "show me what you can do, and we'll design a training regiment around that."

"Oh...okay," says Hollia, She focuses and levitates a few inches before *woah!* and falls on her butt, like she actually slipped on the air.

"Hollia!" yells Haki running over even as Lin Lin beats

him to her *by just levitating down and looking as confused as a creature with no complex facial expressions and for whom levitating is second nature can look.*

"I'm alright," says Hollia standing up and brushing a little dirt off her dress which returns to its brilliant white as though the very dirt dare not sully her appearance, adding to her whimsical nature in Haki's mind; making him stand there in awe.

"Okay," says Rurona, "we can work from there, but for now it's getting late in the day I suggest we head to Agate Town, we can't get back to Stratalia before dark."

"Wait a minute!" says Haki surprising everyone including himself, "Sorry...I mean, weren't we going to you know...look for some Pink Moss?"

"Oh right that," says Rurona not really showing any concern, "As I recall from the last time Hollia and I came out this way there is a whole bunch of it growing near the stream next to Agate Town you can collect some while we fish for some dinner before heading to the inn."

Haki has an impression on his face like *you have got to be kidding me*

-an impression he still has on his face several hours later as he sits next to the stream holding a bottle glowing with a preservation spell holding some scrapings of Pink Moss in it, whole looking at not just some, but a whole lot of Pink Moss growing on the rocks while right behind him not only are Hollia and Rurona fishing and basically having a tea party at the same time, but Yumi, Pima, and Amia have joined them and are all enjoying themselves as

they fish.

“Come on Haki!” yells out Yumi, “if you don’t catch your fare share I’m eating all the ones you would have gotten!” He shakes his head and thinks, “Pink Moss, Pink Water...what...the...hell?”

Item 3: Milk Stone:

In the dark of the night Haki rests in a room to himself at the inn in Agate town, Hollia and the woman he knows as Rurona rest in another down the hall. It has not been long since darkness fell, and Haki finds himself disturbed. It is not the first time he has slept in an Inn, although he much prefers his dorm room; or better yet is room back at his home in Crimdalina. But this night he finds himself listening to every noise outside, as though the darkness has given him a new fear; a shriek, the sound of an animal in the distance snaps his eyes open as he tries to shut them to sleep; after all tomorrow they are going hunting for a Milk Stone and plan to head out into the woods early or else he’ll be forced to bite the ropes and go clear all the way to Volstick where he remembered they have a Milk Stone farm; Stratalia would be much closer but as always the school forbids gathering ingredients for alchemy tests on the school grounds, and that includes buying them there.

The sound outside reminds him of the Blue Ripper, the animal he always called a Scrambler back home, the fearful little beasts he would chase off as a child, The image of it shrieking at him in the cage returns to him making him

shudder. He always thought of himself as brave, but now, he finds himself looking out the window, at the edges of Agate Town, unlike Stratalia with its moats, walls, and security wards, or the royal grounds of Crimdalina with its walls and guards, this town has no more defenses on its borders than the fences of yards. He had always heard the towns in the Merchant Confederacy ruled over by Stratalia were walled in towns for protection; but Agate Town doesn't have them. So he looks at the dark woods and is reminded of what is out there, aside from wolves and bears these woods are said to be home to were-cats, bunny-girls, dragons, dinosaur like creatures, living hostile plants, and werewolves...

His eye brows furrow and he takes out his list from one of the pockets of his coat which he has laying over a chair while he wears only his white underclothes to bed...

-oh shit!-

His brain practically screams..., "how?...why?"

Right on his list of ingredients for what he thought would be a small easy to gather ingredients item for this test is [werewolf fur]. But thankfully it's still a little ways down the list, 6th item. But then again the idea is to finish up the rest of the list tomorrow; after all waiting for a trap took them longer than they had hoped.

creak

A soft sound, someone stepping on a wood board in the hall; by this time all the patrons of the restaurant down stairs should be to their rooms or gone home. He throws on his coat and cape and leans his ear against his door.

Another soft *creak*, coming from down the hall towards the room Hollia and Rurona are sleeping in.

"I am a man," he says as he puffs himself up with confidence and goes out his door, and down the hall he sees...a sight that is just weird.

A woman dressed in weird ninja wannabe cloths and sandals is kneeled down and leaning her ear against the door of the room Hollia and Rurona are in. She is wearing a weird thing on her head, a kind of handkerchief with the ends tied just below her nose, but this isn't really hiding her face, or her identity, especially with her long green hair sticking out the back.

"Amia?" asks Haki, "how?"

The girl stands, makes some wild *you got it wrong, don't pay any attention me* somewhat comical gestures with her hands while saying, "Amia? Who's Amia? I'm...I'm just your run of the mill pervert...er...I mean thief...don't pay any attention me...go back to sleep Haki...er...I mean...who ever you are...okay...bye."

And...she runs away down the hall and down the stairs. Haki looks at the door and down the hall before heading back to his room, before he goes to sleep he thinks, "Can an archer also be a thief?"

In the room of Hollia and Rurona, there are two beds separated by a desk, on one Hollia is sleeping dressed in her frilly night cloths her robes folded neatly on a table, Lin Lin is resting on a pillow next to her head. On the other Rurona is sleeping, her robes nowhere to be seen of course, even though while asleep she is only wearing black

panties, a black bra, and weirdly enough a choker with a red gem in the middle that normally would be the gem acting as a clasp for her robes or cape; she is Rhulan after all, and her clothes are shadow cloth, an extension of her own power taking whatever form she wants them to take; and right now she is concerned with comfort, which even when sleeping may explain why she is in such contrast with Hollia; while Hollia sleeps with the covers up to her neck, arms neatly folded; Rhulan is sleeping with the covers kicked off at some point while sleeping, arms and legs out and about as it were as though they were the tentacles of an octopus looking for prey; eventually snagging the second pillow on the bed. She curls over and snuggles the pillow, spooning it, and stops her night movements as she goes into a now peaceful rest; all that fidgeting about no doubt causing all sorts of squeaky bed spring noises.

Outside the green haired “thief” is climbing over the fence of the backyard of the Inn to get to the backyard of the Item Shop, a quick pink blur appears next to her with her hand out, Pima.

“Amia,” she says, “the key.”

“Oh right,” says the sneaky Amia without any of her usual timid tone as she pulls the key to the inn’s backdoor from her pocket.

Amia falls over the fence and Pima goes back inside the inn thinking, “She’s got to have a split personality...” *giggling to herself*, “pervert Amia took my key again.”

She does a weird sneak thief pose, “By day a timid Item Shop clerk, by night transforming into The Pervert Ninja,

peeper on guests.”

The next morning, the restaurant is already bustling not long after the sun has risen; the local farmers, adventurers who also stayed the night, and other patrons are already enjoying a hardy breakfast. With the towns best cook, Pima’s father, and the fastest service imaginable thanks to Pima it isn’t any wonder this Inn’s down stairs restaurant is so popular.

Rurona, Hollia, Lin Lin, and Haki are sitting at a small round table eating what looks to be pancakes, some sausages, and glasses of orange juice (really from a citrus like fruit that grows on pine trees known as Orange Pine Fruit and can be found fruiting every two months even through the winter).

“Any who,” says Rurona interrupting a casual conversation in which Haki was trying to, very clumsily, bring up the topic of someone sneaking around last night, “Tell me something Haki, where do you plan to search for a Milk Stone?”

Haki is surprised to find himself on the spot like this, but this is his quest after all, “well,” he says, “There is a farm up in Volstick;”

“Which would mean a good days walk,” says Rurona, “walking back to Stratalia then heading out the north gate; unless you plan to cut across the forest of course.”

“We could...” starts Hollia, “I mean Miss Rurona, we could search the woods, it’s just a white mushroom despite

being able to be made into milk right? We might be able to find some growing on some logs.”

“That’s right.” says Haki excited, “I know they have farms for them, but they do grow wild around here too don’t they; just have to make sure we don’t pick a poison mushroom by mistake.”

Rurona sets her glass down slowly, “I see something has been lost.”

They both look at her, and her serious expression, “You are both not mistaken that they can be found growing wild; however I must inform you, being your tutor and all Hollia, that Milk Stones are not mushrooms, they are animals; forgetting this fact you may overlook the prime growing spots for one.”

“Really?” asks Hollia whose texts always place Milk Stones in with mushrooms.

“But,” objects Haki, “the royal library, and Stratalia’s library say they’re mushrooms, so...”

“So then,” says Rurona, “where would you look?”

“Oh,” says Haki, “um...well dead logs, rotting trees, wet leaves I guess, you know places like that.”

“And then,” says Rurona, “you’d be lucky to ever see one, ask the farmers some time who grow them; I’m sure they can tell you that they wouldn’t be found in such places.”

With a flick of the hand Rurona conjures up an image of a Milk Stone, much like a hologram, “Look here,” she says pointing out the six slits on the cone like cap, three on either side, “these are mouth slits, using a combination of static

attraction and suction they pull in biomass particles from the air to feed on as well as moisture and air to breathe.”

She makes the illusion turn into a cross section revealing eight black seed like structures inside the stem, six of which lead up to the mouth slits, “these are its primary organs, hard cased as they are they are easily mistaken for seeds, six are stomachs, one is its lung, and the other its central nervous system; or in other words what could be considered its brain.”

“Wow,” says Hollia watching the projection intensely, taking mental notes. Lin Lin tries to take a bite out of the illusion before Rurona makes it vanish.

“How,” thinks Haki, “how does this lady know something that Crimdalina’s library or even the library of Stratalia don’t know?”

Haki thinks for a moment imagining a Milk Stone farm, and places Rurona there, “maybe,” he thinks, “maybe she grew up on a farm *no...or...maybe* lived near a farm *maybe...or...maybe* she’s from a wealthy family with their own farm and was taught this by their farmer or something *I bet that’s it...*” he nods to himself.

“Any who,” says Rurona distracting him, “if we’re done with breakfast I suggest we pay and head out, “after all, this time of year there are bound to be other creatures also going after any obvious Milk Stones.”

A shadow looms over their table, looking up they see a rather large man with a bald head smiling down at them past his stained apron, the cook, and owner of the establishment.

“My apologies in advance,” he says with his deep voice, “my daughter while waiting tables eavesdropped on your conversation, now I know she’s your friend and all, but still she shouldn’t be eavesdropping.”

He looks back at Pima whose trying not be too obvious about eavesdropping again, “Now my daughter tells me you all are looking for Milk Stones, but don’t want to go all the way back to Volstick for ‘em; yeah I remember those quests when I was a kid, guess they still don’t let you just buy what you need at school huh?”

He doesn’t wait, nor seems to except an answer, “well, normally I wouldn’t tell anyone this but...”

He looks around, “on second thought follow me back into the kitchen please.”

They follow him as he asked curious about what he has to say; and while inside he continues, “Okay, you know out back we got our own groves and gardens, and a special spot for Orange Pines and such; well there is also a spot I know full of Milk Stones; now I know, okay, you’re not telling people about this so you don’t have students and other folks picking them, themselves right...well, yeah, but there’s a better, not so selfish reason too.”

He looks around to make sure the kitchen staff isn’t listening in and whispers to them, “this area is just west of town, down a path I have hidden behind a large grey rock with an hour glass carved on it; I figure most people will think its just a hunters path or a warning about some danger right...well...it is, you have to be careful out there and make sure to always carry a strong monster ward or

several with you, the place is crawling with were-cats; a whole pack of them live out there just outside of town and they love them Milk Stones.”

-a little bit later

The sun shines down on the dirt road going west and they stand now in a row looking at a very large grey boulder, about the size of a house, with a little hour glass carved in it near the bottom.

“He,” says Haki, “said it was a marker?”

“Um,” says Holia, “he said it’s a warning and people will believe its hiding a hunting path?”

Rurona looks to the right at the trees, and to the left at some more trees, “You wouldn’t even know there was a path behind this thing, *she laughs to herself*, guess when he wants something hidden he really means it.”

Without so much as uttering a word she flies up to the top of the stone and looks off into the distance, “I see, Holia, Lin Lin...Haki, there is a clean clear path back here, a stream a little ways down with a bridge, and it looks like a pretty descent garden of Milk Stones a little ways in the distance.”

It is just as she said, a dirt path, nothing much to speak of, some small creatures such as Blue Blobs, Blue Rippers, and other animals in the brush, but nothing that could be seen as a threat to them. Upon reaching the stream they find a flat homemade bridge, clearly made by their host back at the inn, however as they start to cross it the rocking

of the bridge stirs up something beneath it, a great deal of hissing.

A swarm of Dagger Snakes, their knife like blades jutting from their heads glistening in the sun slither out from under the bridge and hiss at them.

“Telekinetic Hold!” says Rurona as two of the snakes levitate in the air, “Telekinetic Thrust!”, with a wave of her hand and these words two of the snakes vanish into the grass by the side of the road, likely stunned by the impact.

Haki and Hollia jump back as a few of the other snakes take swipes at them with their venomous blade horns.

“What is wrong with these snakes?” asks Haki wild eyed at the sight of a swarm of these creatures just staying at the other side of the bridge.

“Maybe they’re under a spell to guard the Milk Stones?” suggests Hollia.

She looks at Rurona who gives her a curious look, Hollia says sheepishly, “I...I...don’t really know much about snakes.”

Rurona shrugs, “It’s a mating swarm,”

Hollia and Haki look at each other and back and Rurona who says, “If they were just resting or being territorial than tossing a few of them should have scared the rest off; no they are claiming this cool spot, yet open for the warmth, as their nest and will protect it with their lives.”

“Then,” says Haki chest puffed out, “As adventurers we will defeat these monsters,”

He pulls out a top, “A Top of Doom, should do the trick,”

“Or,” suggests Hollia, “no offense Haki, but as adven-

turers we have to respect nature and not just kill things because they are in the way unless we have no choice.”

She summons her staff and chants,

“Hypnos Morpheus Great lords of sleep and dreams
Grant thy gift of silent rest To that which stands before
us”

A green mist flies from her staff, making Lin Lin float back a little, surprised by the weird effect. The mist encircles and engulfs the hissing swarm, their hissing stops with in the cloud; which upon dispersing reveals a pack of sleeping snakes.

“It’s best to allow them to live if we can help it, right Miss Rurona?” asks Hollia,

“Sure why not,” says Rurona looking at the sight with a raised eyebrow, she is quick to shake her head and smile at Hollia, “er, I mean sure, er, yes of course Hollia.”

Rurona thinks back to smashing a mouse’s head as bait, “Note to self, don’t just slaughter things around Hollia.”

“Telekinetic Hold.” says Rurona with her hand pointed at the swarm, her power now lifting the entire swarm of Dagger Snakes, this time however rather than throwing them, she gently lets them down by the side of the road thinking, “that spell should keep them asleep; granted now there is a good chance something else will just come along and eat them and if I let them down in the water like this they’ll just drown; might as well have blasted them apart with a wind sphere or that kid’s top.”

Rurona looks off the trail past the snakes into the woods sensing something, “speak of the devil,” she smiles, as she

turns and says, "Okay, we'd better get moving and get your Milk Stone."

It's not long further down the path before they come across more Milk Stones than they could ever have hoped to see in one place outside of a farm. Hollia examines one close, "wow," she says, "It really is sucking in air through the slits, I can't believe I never noticed that before."

"Good head for spells and adventurer rules," thinks Rurona, "but she really should be taking more classes related to zoology and botany."

Haki takes out the jar he brought with him...and realizes most the Milk Stones are too big to even fit through the top.

Noticing this Rurona says, "They are squishy, just pick a medium sized one and plop it in head...cap first."

Haki shrugs picks up a smaller one, surprised that it really wasn't rooted like he expected, instead noting it was holding on with tiny caterpillar like lumps on the bottom and shoves it into the jar which he latches back onto his belt.

chiiirp! Lin Lin lets out a loud alarming chip making Hollia jump up and stare back the way they came at what has Lin Lin in so much of a scare that the mane on her back is raised up.

"What..." starts Haki as he freezes in place, white as a ghost.

Rurona just crosses her arms and says, "speak of the devil,"

Before them is a were-cat, but not one like anything

Haki has ever seen. He knows them to be built like lithe women covered in brown striped fur, with mostly human faces save for the fur and cat like nose and mouth, their shoulder length shaggy hair only disrupted by the two pointed ears on top of their heads. Having hands and feet more closely resembling paws, and a long swishing tail behind them.

While this one does have the same cat eyes staring back at them, the fur is instead white with black stripes, and the hair is a metallic silver color; the eyes may have slits pupils, but they are also blue eyes. Otherwise this one does look how he'd expect.

"Albino were-cat?" stammers Haki, "I...I...I...m...m...mean...were-cat...wha..."

"A Cyber Cat-girl?" says Hollia wide eyed, "I...don't believe it, I thought they only lived in Nipponia?"

"Cyber?" says Rurona, "Hmm, I'd have thought the name Byakko-Kia would have been the one that survived, or Metal Claws would be more common, to think a term like Cyber is still used for them despite that term not even having relevance in this world anymore...for the most part."

"mine," growls the Cyber Cat-girl, "that is mine!"

The jar starts to rattle on Haki's waist, and is yanked from his side through the air by an invisible force towards the Cyber Cat-girl.

"Not so fast," says Rurona casually as she turns and catches the jar with one hand, "A metal lid, with metal straps, not normally an issue; but when facing something with magnetic powers a real problem indeed."

She turns towards the Cyber Cat-girl who points her paw at Rurona and hisses, but stops and cocks her head in confusion.

“My power trumps yours my dear,” says Rurona with a smile, “The Cyber Cat-girl, indeed Hollia I have heard too that the only survivors were in Nipponia, but I would find it hard to believe such a powerful species wouldn’t have some survivors, or its genes hiding in amongst other cat-girl species like our very own were-cats waiting to pop up again. Did you know these were once plentiful across the world until the age of the dragons when the Shining Black Dragon put a bounty on their heads...and I bet you’d never guess the reason why, believe it or not my dear students of Stratalia, but just one of these could have killed that massively over powered monster that Gino-Lee fought and lost his life too...well...eventually...poison is a bitch.” *cough*, “I mean a shameful and painful way for any adventurer to die. But while most know of these being able to crush a man in full armor and shred shields with their claws, and shoot lightning off their bodies, I bet you didn’t know the reason the Shining Black Dragon wanted them all dead is because its own brain had metal in it...machines...and just one of these could have killed him had they been given the chance or reason to...a shame Gino-Lee never found one to join his party.”

“Really?” says Hollia, who has heard stories of Gino-Lee, her ancestor who fought the Shining Black Dragon, in fact the man would be her Great-Great grandfather.

“wow,” she follows up looking at the creature standing

before them.

“Um...” says Haki, “excuse me, I know Miss Rurona you’re a tutor and all, but shouldn’t we be a bit more concerned about the large dangerous cat monster in front of us?”

hm, hm, hm, hm silently laughs Rurona, “Hollia step over here please?”

“Yes Miss Rurona,” as she steps over and blushes as Rurona grabs her hand and stretches her arm out towards the Cyber Cat-girl.

“Now be calm,” says Rurona to the blushing girl, Lin Lin floats back to where Hollia was standing and watched.

Rurona turns to the Cyber Cat-girl and says rather low and quickly, “Byakko-Kia, Rhulan set command.”

The Cyber Cat-girl’s head jerks slightly as blue electric streaks shoot across its eyes, making Rurona think, “a little degraded it seems, but its still in there.”

Rurona says to her, “Set command, sniff and identify.”

The Cyber Cat-girl walks over on all fours and sniffs at Hollia’s hand, which is being held gently in Rurona’s, and of course sniffs Rurona’s hand.

To Hollia’s surprise, and to Haki’s jaw dropping disbelief, the Cyber Cat-girl sits down and bows her head purring. Guiding Hollia’s hand Rurona has Hollia pet the cat-girl behind her ears making her purr louder, “wow,” is all Hollia can say as she slowly takes her hand away.

“Now then,” says Rurona as she tosses the jar back to Haki, “If you would my dear,” she says to the Cyber Cat-girl, “please stand aside and allow us here to pass; and as

compensation for the Milk Stone help yourself to a bundle of sleeping snakes by the creek down the path we are walking.”

She ushers Hollia with Lin Lin to head down the path while Rurona stands there, “young man,” she says, “Haki, if you’re done being confused I’d suggest heading down the path before I do.” She gestures with her head towards the Cyber Cat-girl now lying down in the grass next to Rurona. Haki makes it a point to make as wide an arc as he can on the other side of Rurona away from the cat-girl as he heads towards Hollia who is walking towards the stream.

“now then,” says Rurona, “stay here until we are all out of sight, and don’t forget there are some nice juicy snakes sleeping and easy prey by the stream.”

“thank you master,” says the Cyber Cat-girl in her feline like voice.

Rurona is certain to keep her senses about her in case more are nearby as she is quick to catch up with the others.

As they leave the path back to the main road, Haki lets out a huge breath of relief, as though he had been holding it this whole time, and nearly vomits on the road, or right onto the jar with the Milk Stone; which he just stares at in the jar trying to mentally piece together what the hell just happened.

“What?” says Haki between breaths, “how, huh, I...what?”

“Hypnotism!” says Hollia really fast.

“Miss Rurona used really powerful hypnotism.” She says with her arms crossed and nodding.

“Oh,” says Haki, “right.”

“Any who,” says Rurona, “I suggest we head back to Agate Town now for a snack before heading on, Haki what’s next on your list.”

Haki straightens himself out shaking his head thinking, “damn it Haki don’t...don’t pass out...be a man, it wasn’t THAT terrifying...only just looked right at a monster that can hold its own against a dragon is all, a legendary beast thought to be extinct except in one small area in a distant country...oh shit I’m going to vomit...no...”

“Haki?” asks Hollia, “are you ill,”

“No,” says Haki standing up and forcing a smile, “No, No, No, I’m fine...just perfectly fine, just a little winded you know, all the excitement, adventure, you know.”

“Yes,” says Hollia with a bright smile, “It’s so exciting isn’t it, imagine experiencing something so magnificent when just looking for a Milk Stone, imagine all the adventures to be had out there in the world!”

“Uh” says Haki, “yeah, sure.”

“Haki,” says Rurona, “Not to interrupt but you wanted to be done today right? Well then we need to move on to the next thing on your list; we might just be able to find it in Agate Town while we’re there.”

“Right,” says Haki taking his list out, “It’s...A Lightning Orb.”

Item 4: Lightning Orb:

-Back in Agate Town they stop by the restaurant for something light to eat and some water before heading out again; Haki decides to go to the Item Shop by himself to see if he can buy a Lightning Orb.

-At the shop

"Welcome Haki," says Amia in her usual near whisper tone.

"Hello Amia," he says, "Would you by chance happen to have a Lightning Orb here?"

"Sorry, but we don't carry anything that rare here, if you need one Stratalia's shop should have them."

"Yeah," he says, "But it's an item on a quest so I can't just buy one, the rules you know."

"I'm sorry," says Amia bowing, "we have Warmth Stones, Plant Growth inhibitor stones, Plant Growth enhancer stones, shock stones, and various smaller stone ingredients but no Lightning Orbs, sorry again."

"No," he says, "you don't have to apologize Amia, I mean, its not that serious, just means we have to go buy one someplace else...er...I...don't know where though."

A map forms in his mind with Stratalia at the middle, north is Volstick...they wouldn't have something like that, he remembers their item shop from when they went after the Crocotta, it was all Happy Apples, Red Fruit, Astral Viles, and minor beast repel wards. He thinks further north, he knows there is...nothing but forest till they reach a river, but its just a hamlet, there are some military like outposts near the larger rivers, small fur trapper towns, deer farms, but by then its all too far north, and besides they don't have what he needs. Going further west is pretty much the same story till they hit the major rivers; but east...oh right...east...Bostonia would have shops with such items, a long walk if they can't get a coach, and a walk

of several days and...nights...through bandit filled forests.

“Haki?” asks Amia seeing him being noticeably indecisive to himself like he’s acting out two sides of a conversation, “I...think you could check the guild at Stratalia, they sometimes have side quests with rewards like Lightning Orbs and other items to help students in situations like this...we took some like that when we were there you know.”

Haki stops, more so because that is the longest sentence he has ever heard Amia say, granted still in her usual mousy whisper tone. He smiles and nods to her, as he leaves he turns and says, “Oh, and by the way Amia, thank you for keeping an eye out for Hollia, you really are a great friend for her; I don’t trust that tutor of hers either, there is just something about her you know...”

He leaves not even noticing Amia has turned beet red with embarrassment and whispers to herself, “He recognized me?!”

“Of course!” shouts the excited voice in her head, “He must be a closet pervert too, you know what they say Amia, it takes one to know one.”

-At the restaurant

After Haki returns with the news that the item shop doesn’t have any Lightning Orbs, but Amia suggests trying to take an additional quest from the school if there is one available. Rurona and Hollia are now alone...with Lin Lin of course, in their room gathering up their supplies.

“This is for the best,” says Rurona, “We need to unload some stuff, and Haki should get what he has so far stored

away in his room.”

“Miss Rhulan,” asks Hollia, “Can I ask you something now that we’re alone?”

“Of course,” says Rhulan.

“Back there,” asks Hollia, “with the Cyber Cat-girl...how...did you really do that?”

“Oh that,” says Rhulan, “Its simple really, do you remember the story of Gyro-Lee?”

“Yes,” says Hollia

“Remember the role the Cyber Cat-girls played in it?”

“Well,” says Hollia, “they were the elite guards of the Metal Castle and elite stealth forces alongside the Shadow Cat-girls for the empire.”

“Exactly,” says Rhulan, “What it doesn’t tell you is that we actually created them, by combining the traits of were-cats with the Byakko from Xiang.”

“Like a chimera?” asks Hollia.

“Similar,” says Rhulan, “except what we made weren’t sterile, we were creating a new species, but not just for weapons...we...had other reasons too; mostly out of concern for how limited cat-girls are in their genetic drifting with their near clone like reproduction; but I digress; I made sure to have implanted into their very genes a trait that allows them to obey my commands; I know, it’s like enslavement, but the commands can’t be anything that would go against their natural instincts or something they’d object too; in truth it really just makes them recognize my scent and treat me...well, pretty much to them like meeting their creator...awe...and reverence and all that as it were.”

“Oh,” says Hollia, “I had a feeling it was something like that, thank you Miss Rhulan.”

“She’s a smart one,” thinks Rhulan.

-Back in Stratalia (lots of small talk along the way there, nothing worth writing about, not much between Agate Town and Stratalia on the path that’s a real threat to anyone unless they were really low in power.) Just an hour’s walk really from Agate Town.

“A Lightning Orb?” asks the clerk at the quest window, “Well...now that I think about it, I do recall seeing a quest that hasn’t been taken yet today with that listed as a prize.”

He brings it up on his screen, “Here we are, it’s a first level mission though is that okay?”

Haki looks to see Hollia and Rurona playing with Lin Lin or discussing something, “Y...yeah,” he says, “I just need one for another quest we’re on.”

“I see,” says the clerk, “a few more extra credits doesn’t hurt either?” saying this with a raised eyebrow.

“I...guess,” says Haki with a shrug.

“Okay,” says the clerk while trying not to roll his eyes, “In that case, here’s the ticket of proof, you will also be supplied with six cages, the mission is to capture five Blue Blobs and one Dagger Snake.”

“Hold on,” says Rurona walking over, “Who is the client if you please?”

“Well,” says the clerk, “it’s the pet shop in Bostonia.”

“and they gave a quest to Stratalia to poach wild animals?”

“Oh no,” says the clerk realizing what Holly-Lia’s tutor, who is in good with the dean perhaps is implying, “No, this is not poaching, they occasionally give us a quest or two like this each year or so to provide new breeder animals, their old ones either get...well...old, die, or they need more individuals so they don’t get too much inbreeding.”

“And people keep Dagger Snakes as pets now?” says Rurona but not waiting for a reply, “well to be honest I’ve seen weirder things.”

“So,” says the clerk looking between Haki, Rurona, and Hollia who is standing a little ways behind Rurona.

Rurona says, “I have no further objections, just curious was all.”

“Then?” says the clerk turning to Haki.

Haki looks at the two women and back at the clerk and says confidently, “Yes.” While thinking, “It’s either this or dish out half my weekly allowance to buy one and go all the way to Bostonia.”

It’s boring, once again they are sitting waiting to catch animals in traps; although this time they thankfully have appropriate scent bait and have put the traps out near a creek and areas known to have an abundance of Blue Blobs and Dagger Snakes, although they can’t help but think back to the swarm they encountered earlier when looking for a

Milk Stone; of course they had no way of knowing at the time they'd need one of them.

snap!

It isn't long, not long after setting a trap and walking away to have lunch that one goes off; and has not one but two Blue Blobs crammed together inside it trying to get at the scent bait that had been provided.

"Sheesh," says Rurona, "what'd they give you mating pheromones?"

Not a moment after saying it Rurona looks at the cage, "yes, it would seem so."

It isn't long till they have all their targets captured.

"Wow," says Hollia looking at the cages, "this couldn't have been faster had they jumped out at us randomly as we walked around."

"Would have been more interesting," says Rurona, "but this is out of Haki's way after all."

-they take the creatures back to the clerk and receive the Lightning Orb right on the spot as payment.

"That really took me back," says Hollia surprising Haki, "it was like the quests I used to take when I was younger." She pets Lin Lin on the head as they sit at a table for lunch.

"Haki," says Hollia surprising him, and Rurona looking up briefly from her cup, "what was your first quest like?"

Haki practically blushes from ear to ear, she'd never asked him anything like that before,

"W...well," he says, "I guess it was just before I came here..."

He perks up, "Right, get this, I had to capture by myself

no less than six Red Ear Snappers that had gotten into the royal palace's fish pond and were killing the koi."

"Some overgrown aggressive turtles," thinks Rurona, "although for a kid that would be a big deal."

"Wh..." says Haki, "what about you Hollia?"

"Me?" says Hollia, "Wow, I mean...I don't know really, what counts as my first adventure or quest, I mean the first one I did for classes was just I think looking for a white flower for a potion, but...Oh I know; when I was little my parents would take me everywhere with them, when I was five they took me the Water Roots Country; they were setting up trade relations with a lost colony of Aesperians there."

Haki has a confused look on his face.

"Hollia," says Rurona, "I don't believe that's common knowledge, however as you spilled the beans."

She turns to Haki, "The Water Roots country is one of the small continent worlds in the Makai Cluster...you know...alien worlds. Back during the era of the Rhulan Empire, well the latter part of it at any rate, exploration and the establishment of outposts were being done; partly to seek out any survivors from the...well...legendary colonization event to see if anyone was still out there; and of course to open the way to creating settlements off world. "

takes a sip of her drink

"Of course you know the story of the fall of the Rhulan Empire, anyone still out there would be stuck after that and for the last thousand years forced to survive or vanish."

"And one such colony," says Hollia, "is in this really

weird land that is like all water with giant vines and roots everywhere that connects to that giant tree ball the Stingers come from.”

“Oh,” says Haki still not fully understanding, “So you went...off world...” He thinks back to being a kid and running scared with tears in his eyes as the Red Eared Snappers chased him as he was bait for the trap cages his uncle had set up in the garden.

“How about you Miss Rurona?” asks Hollia.

Rurona raises an eyebrow, “Me? Well, that was a really long time ago as you might have guessed.”

It dawns on Hollia that her innocent question was asked with other people around, and isn’t really all that innocent considering who Rurona really is.

“Well,” says Rurona, “It’s hard to remember, but I do believe the very first mission I ever went on was to capture a thief. I didn’t really do much as a kid as I can recall.”

Haki thinks, “Where is she from that her first adventure training quest would be something so dangerous?”

“Any who,” says Rurona, “Haki, what’s next on your list?”

“Oh,” says Haki taking his list out, “A warmth stone.”

Item 5: A warmth Stone:

“Haki, Hollia,” says Rurona, “I do believe this deserves a brief important lecture.” She turns to Haki, “Haki, does your quest assignment here require you to acquire each item in this specific order of seven items?”

“Well, no” says Haki a bit sheepishly.

“Then allow me to give you both a tip on something for

these item retrieval type quests, look over your entire list carefully, and remember what's on it, that way if along the way you encounter one or more of the easier ones while going after a harder one you can just grab it. Understand?"

"Yes, Miss Rurona." Says Hollia with a bow as Lin Lin chirps happily.

"Hollia is sure lucky to have such a great big, sexy, older sister, dominant type tutor." thinks Amia who had just handed Haki a warmth stone that he just bought in her shop in Agate Town.

Haki looks at the stone in his hand, remembers when they were here earlier for the Pink Moss and the Milk Stone...Amia had even mentioned warmth stones to him while he was looking for a Lightning Orb.

"Damn it," thinks Haki, "All your bravado, you think she's impressed by stories of you chasing turtles? Sitting around while we catch critters in cages, and I just made us have to walk all the way back here..."

He realizes Rurona stopped her lecture, "oh," he says, "Y...yes...sorry everyone."

"It's no problem," says Hollia, "I love coming back here," she looks at Amia, walking over to chat with her.

Hollia is nice, Haki knows this, but the tone her tutor has; it practically tells him, "You want to be a royal sorcerer, a respected position in your kingdom, then shape up and get your head in the game." He's sure she isn't thinking those exact words, but it's the vibe he gets.

Especially if it weren't for Hollia and Rurona remembering this shop has warmth stones...well...by himself he

might have just been wandering all over the place trying to remember where he saw one before, for sale. In fact as he looks back ever since the first item they've been doing all the real work, knowing how and where to find these things; it was even thanks to Pima being Hollia's friend...well she's his friend too...maybe she'd have gotten her father to tell him where the Milk...a vision of him being pounced on by that Cyber Cat-girl pops in his head.

Rurona is over with Hollia now, they are talking about something about healing herbs near the town Amia could use if they want to help her pick them in a few days; and something about the fishing they did yesterday and about doing it again sometimes. Haki takes out his list and shudders, [Werewolf fur]

Item 6: Werewolf fur:

The forest is disturbed by the sounds of battle, the snarling form of a large brown wolf lunges past Rurona towards Haki only to be grabbed by its tail and tossed by Rurona into a nearby tree, smashing the tree in half. The beast rises to its four feet, the front two more closely resembling hands than paws. Four others surrounding the group rise on their long back legs, their bodies now resembling a cross between a man's and a wolf's. Drool drips from their snarling maws as they eye the group who have their backs towards each other.

The battle did not just start; they had been wandering through the forest following the tracks of a werewolf, only to find themselves in this mess. Hollia had attempted a sleep spell; that werewolf is now over in the tall grass

sleeping; however five of its companions were alerted by its howl before it went down.

“Goddess Wind!” shouts Hollia, summoning forth a spinning blast of green wind sending one of the werewolves flying through the trees.

“Damn!” screams Haki as another lunges at him.

poof, he tosses a smoke bomb in its face making it drop to the ground whimpering.

“Um,” says Haki rummaging in his pockets, “Oh, okay,”

He tosses a pill like item at the werewolf which explodes into sticky pink goop trapping its feet to the ground. A nearby companion tries to chew at it.

Lin Lin coils up, a green mist appearing around her which forms into the shape of a wyvern, rises up and explodes into a green cyclone at these two werewolves sending them flying and knocking them out upon impact with the ground.

“Enough of this,” says Rurona.

Haki turns to see an impossible sight; Rurona has the two remaining werewolves by their throats, their clawing bouncing off a defensive aura around Rurona.

bonk Rurona smashes their heads together knocking them out.

“Now then,” says Rurona, “If we are done playing nice with our would be predators I suggest getting that fur clipping off of one of them before more show up.”

“Y...yes,” says Haki taking out some scissors and clipping a little fur from one werewolf and putting it in a jar.

rrrrr

The werewolf that had been thrown by the goddess wind spell is back; as it lunges at Hollia it's blasted into a smoking carcass by a thunder bolt from Rurona.

"Important to note," says Rurona, "If something is trying to kill you, you don't hold back...of course neither should you go overboard, but staying alive is the most important thing."

Hollia is ashamed of herself, she doesn't want to hurt or kill anything, but it's true, she held back on the Goddess Wind, it was far weaker than any version of it she'd use against golems, zombies, or any other such monsters; she knows Rurona is right though, push come to shove she has to make sure her opponent stays down.

Haki too is reflecting, when the fight started he was barely able to move; even when they were facing just one werewolf he just stood there as Lin Lin distracted it and Hollia cast a sleep spell on it. When the others showed up it was Hollia whacking them with her staff and Rurona's amazing strength that he never expected that kept them off of him long enough for them to get back to back; and all he managed to do was throw a smoke bomb and sticky gum at some; Hollia's familiar finished off the ones he was fighting.

He looks at Hollia and Rurona, already chatting with each up ahead smiling as though Rurona hadn't just chided her; and Lin Lin, that cute little creature; it had smacked a werewolf on the nose with its tail, and even performed that strange wind attack.

Item 7: A twig from an Oak at least 500 years old:

“By the way,” asks Hollia as they exit the woods back onto the main road to head east towards Agate Town, “What are you making for your exam anyway Haki?”

“Huh?” he says, “well...” he had picked something without looking up its ingredients, although every item on the exam was guaranteed to have ingredients that could be found near the school; although he doesn’t want to admit he didn’t look into it, and just picked the simplest looking and easiest sounding item, “well,” he continues, “It’s a healing wand; yeah, I thought I’d make something I don’t have yet so I’d have one; I have all these attack items, and status effecting items, but nothing for healing so I figured I’d make one...you know.”

He looks at his feet a little sheepishly thinking, “Why the hell does a healing item need werewolf fur?”

“Neat,” says Hollia surprising Haki who was expecting to be scolded, “You must really want to help people? That’s so cool.”

Haki feels a little better until he sees Rurona’s expression who says, “Feather of a Blue Ripper, Pink Moss, Milk Stone, Lightning Orb, Warmth Stone, and now werewolf fur...Haki...you do already have the last item needed I hope.”

“Huh?” says Haki taking out the list, “I...it’s a twig from a 500 year old oak tree...that shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Maybe,” says Hollia, “there is a tree like that nearby...um...how can you tell how old a tree is just by looking at it?”

“By the goddess,” says Rurona, “If you don’t want to harm it, then you need to learn how to sense its life force.”

She looks at Hollia, "Okay, now aside from flying lessons, I am making a note to include sensing the presence of other life forms to your lessons."

"Wow," says Hollia, "You think I can?"

"I am sure of it," says Rurona with a smile, "and no time like the present."

What Haki sees them doing has him once again confused, as it just looks like Rurona is having Hollia touch a tree with her eyes closed and concentrate on something; but in a moment Hollia looks happy and excited.

As they walk back towards him he hears Rurona saying, "It will take more time to tell apart different things, but you'll get it down before long; however in the mean time I do believe my assistance will be needed if we don't want to be wondering all over the woods for who knows how long hoping there is a tree old enough that hasn't been cut down already."

She floats into the air, Haki looks up for a moment but quickly looks away towards the ground realizing he was looking up her dress.

It's not long before she comes down and points out a direction, "it may take a little longer on foot," she says, "but there is a very old tree just a little north of Agate Town; after a quick stop to rest we should be able to reach it before long."

Haki is standing next to Hollia, Lin Lin floating behind her, and Rurona to the far right, before them the trees part

ways for a spring clearing, shallow water filled with lily pads and a sandy with stones bed, the giant oak tree stands in the center, its branches reaching high yet not appearing to block any sunlight.

The voice of Yumi pops into Haki's head, "The giant tree up north of town...I know about it, but guys, no one in town goes anywhere near it, they say its protected by spirits or something"

The voice of Pima too, "Wow, the big ole tree up north? Really, really, you're going there, like really, wow, I've never been there, you know, its like haunted, yeah my dad says so, he says there are evil spirits like all around it, its crazy dangerous you know."

And the whispering voice of Amia, "The...old tree, yes, I...know, uh huh...it's...guarded by...spirits."

Rurona's eyes narrow as she looks at the tree thinking, "damn it, I went senile, why'd I bring them here?"

Hollia takes a step towards the edge, but backs up suddenly as stones float to the surface of the water, and a door of light appears in the trunk of the tree.

"Wow," says Hollia, "What...is this place."

"We should just get a twig and get out of here." says Haki trying not to look at the door.

"Now Haki," starts Hollia who is quickly interrupted by Rurona, "I agree," much to Hollia's surprise who was intending to go on about the job of an adventurer also being to explore new things.

"Not so fast," comes a high pitched, feminine voice from the door of light, "This tree is our home, if you so much as

want a leaf off of her you have to make a deal with us.”

“By the goddess!” says Haki backing up, “there really are spirits in the tree, we’re doomed.”

“Miss...Rurona?” asks Hollia backing up a little too.

“Why not,” says Rurona more to herself than anyone as she steps forward, “Are you still open for business?”

Haki and Hollia look at each other with a confused expression as the voice beyond the door says, “What?...well yes, yes we are...been a while since we’ve had Aesperian costumers, come on in.”

Rurona walks over the stone path towards the door as Hollia and Lin Lin follow behind; Haki on the other hand is hesitant.

“Um,” says Haki, “Shouldn’t we...I mean how...do we know...its safe.”

“Because Miss Rurona is going in first,” says Hollia with a smile.

Haki shakes his head and follows after.

A blinding light yet not harmful to the eyes, and then...a store; it’s an item shop.

Hollia and Haki look around in bewilderment at the shelves lined with strange looking items, weapons, shields, masks, wands, all manner of stones, including Lightning Orbs which is something Haki notices right away.

The shop keeper is also something neither of them has ever seen before, although only three feet tall this blue skinned woman is perfectly proportioned to that of a mature woman; as though she were some kind of doll wearing a rather skimpy costume barely covering her with

leaf designed armor for a bra and a loin cloth. Upon this woman's back is a pair of wings, whose structure looks to be two silver metal poles with the length part of the wing coming to a sharp point; the poles are joined at a hinge hidden beneath an ornate silver armor. The membrane of the wings looks to be a blue shimmering material, Hollia can't imagine these can actually fly, but knows anything is possible. Her pointed ears and silver eyes are nearly hidden by her long white hair.

Rurona doesn't look to take any notice, as though this were an every day occasion.

"What is this place?" asks Haki.

"Yes," echoes Hollia, "Please Miss Rhula...Rurona...where are we?"

"This," says Rurona, "is a place I had forgotten about, although I had heard stories that it was still in business; it's a very expensive magical item shop. In fact,"

She indicates two more doors, on either side of them, "these are spirit doors, using them alone costs money, and will take you to any destination you've already been in your life."

She smiles, "Oh, yes, I remember now, it explains why your friends thought this was haunted."

Hollia and Haki exchange another confused look, "I trust you are both aware of the war between Crimdalina and Postorina? Well as you should know Tyros-Lia, Hollia's father," she says this last part while looking at Haki, "was involved, and while in Postorina met up with the two light elf siblings; what isn't common knowledge though

is that Tyros had three other companions with him, his body guards slash fellow adventurers; who were in fact the fathers of your friends Hollia, Pima, Yumi, and Amia; the master swordsman with an obsession for cooking, the golem summoner with the laid back attitude, and the master Archer with great healing magic.”

Haki, being that he is from Crimdalina and knew the story before even going to Stratalia is more than a bit embarrassed by the fact he never knew Hollia’s friends were the daughters of the other three warriors...or that he didn’t recognize one of them when meeting him.

“Wow,” says Hollia, “I...I had no idea my friends are...the daughters of my dad’s friends....weird.”

Hollia looks around almost laughing at the serendipity, Lin Lin giving her a curious look.

“That said,” says Rurona, “To answer your most likely follow up question, they knew about this place, and it ties back into that adventure as I hear as they stumbled upon it, or were told about it possible by another shop located north of Postorina.”

Haki does a double take hearing that.

“Excuse me,” says the shop keeper, “How may I be of service to you fine folks today?”

“Yeah!” says Haki to everyone’s surprise jumping forward, “How much is one of those Lightning Orbs?”

The shop keeper rather than telling him, writes it down and shows him, his jaw drops. Hollia can see from a fold in the paper over his shoulder more zeroes than there should ever be for something like that.

“Like I said,” says Rurona, “very expensive.”

She turns to the shop keeper, “Tell me something homunculus what would it cost for us to simply take one tiny, insignificant, maybe about a foot long, twig, from your tree?”

“hmm,” says the shop keeper, “From what you say I’d say you are either very old for an Aesperian, or very smart for anything, we haven’t been called Homunculi for centuries, we are shop sprites now.”

She looks around, “but to answer your question dear customer, I’d say, this is a special tree that we’ve enchanted, you are in fact not even in the tree, but between the tree.”

“What?” says Haki.

“Sub-spacial fold,” says Rurona nonchalantly, “As you were saying shop keeper shop sprite?”

“Yes,” she says, “placing a value on a twig is hard, so how about as a prize, we are prone as you might know like all true faerie to enjoy a good game or two.”

She smiles wickedly as the spirit door to the right stops glowing and a stair case is displayed beyond it going down.

Another of her kind, female as well and basically identical walks up the steps and indicates for them to follow her. Down the stairs they find themselves in another room, with a third shop sprite. In this stone cavern the third shop sprite is standing at a desk with two doors behind her, one orange, one yellow, both have monstrous gargoyle faces on them.

“One door,” says the shop sprite, “has a gargoyle that only tells the truth, the other has a gargoyle that only

tells lies, you may ask one of the doors one question, and the guess which door is the one that tells and which tells truths.”

“I think I know this one,” says Hollia.

Haki says, “Yeah, okay, we have to be careful...”

He blushes as Hollia is leaned in close for the huddle, but sees Lin Lin smiling as much as something like her can be said to smile, at him out the corner of his eye.

“Um...” says Haki, “Okay...soooo...what do we ask?”

“I think,” says Hollia, “the answer to this riddle is to ask, if you were the other one what would you say you are the liar or the truth teller...”

“Sounds good,” says Haki,

crash!

The both look up to see Rurona has smashed one of the gargoyles in.

“What are you doing!” yells Haki

Rurona just looks at him and then turns to the shop sprite, “Which are you?” she says, “a truth teller or a lie giver?”

“Me?” says the shop sprite?

“Never mind,” says Rurona, “One tells lies, the other truths, but a lie and a truth are subjective, and besides I hate this riddle.”

“Miss Rurona?” asks Hollia.

“Any who,” says Rurona, “just sell us the damned twig off the tree for crying out loud, making these kids do this riddle, did you even...”

She snatches a piece of paper off the desk, “intend on

telling them the details of this contract?”

“Contract?” says Haki and Hollia in unison.

“Yes,” says Rurona, “as soon as you agreed to play this game the shop keeper here would have stopped you from asking your question until after signing the contract, you’d get the twig if you won...and if you lost...”

She hands it to them, “we’d all have captured and sold into slavery, transported via these doors to some far off land.”

She smiles at the shop sprite, “They have truly evolved into true faeries, truly they are no longer homunculi by any means; and like true faeries prone to strange twists of morality.”

Her tone gets a bit vicious, “I don’t like to be tricked little sprite, we will give you 200 gold for a twig, not a bad bargain considering the external special properties are all illusion and this oak has no more magic than any other 500 year old oak now does it?”

“Ye...yes,” says the shop sprite in fear as it looks back at the smashed in stone gargoyle face and back at Rurona.

They head out; Hollia and Haki behind, Haki taking a look back seeing the shop sprite fix the gargoyle with the wave of its hand as though all that damage amounted to little more than a smudge. Upon reaching the front desk Rurona pulls out a bag of gold from her robes and drops it on the desk.

The front room shop sprite follows them out, “No hard feelings of course,” she says, “but also, as you can see the branches are very high, perhaps another thirty gold for me

to retrieve it for..."

kra-koom

A bolt of lightning from a clear sky strikes the tree sending a six foot branch down.

"Impossible." Says the shop sprite, "even with magic...no especially with magic, our spells protect this tree from all lightning and magic."

Rurona snaps off a twig and hands it too Haki.

As they leave and the shop sprite waves good bye to them, vanishing back inside with the door disappearing and the stones vanishing Rurona says, "Hollia, Haki, remember this event clearly, true faeries are dangerous tricksters never think anything they say is straight forward, or trust even the most innocent of games, simple riddles will have twists to them, common questions not so common answers, they have their own standards and rules; no doubt this is the reason your friends were told to never come here and told stories of spirits, after all sprites are little better than spirits."

Haki holds the twig in his hand in silence as they leave.

The ritual and completion:

-some time later he is again looking at the twig, this time however he is alone in his room, the quest is done, Hollia and Rurona have each been given the required prize he had to offer the guild office to set up a quest, even if certain people were requested as they could have turned it down and then he would have had to have gotten anyone else the guild office got for him; he is ashamed at the prize of only fifty gold each.

Before him on his floor is a six point star alchemic circle, at each point one of the six other ingredients they gathered, and in the center he places the twig. With a bit of chanting and hands placed before the circle, it glows a brilliant blue, each item at the points vanishes, turning into a blue mist like energy that flows into the center, into the twig. The twig changes, the body turning to crystal that is colored like the wood, the leaves being replaced by pink crystals.

he huffs from the effort

The ritual done, all those ingredients now gone, he gathers up the healing wand and wraps it in a silk cloth before placing it in a sleeve that can be strapped to a belt.

“Okay,” he says to himself, “My exam item is ready, good work Haki.”

However he thinks, “but...I barely did anything, I asked Hollia along so I could prove myself to her...but...if not her, her familiar, and her teacher...I’d...I’d have failed...okay Haki, don’t think of this as a setback, you just have to do better next time; then she’ll see how cool you really are.”

Chapter 5: Haki in the Labyrinth:

“Woah,” says Hollia as she spins around, her feet held close together and her arms out, floating a few inches off the ground. Lin Lin is coiled up on a stone bench in the private garden of the Lia family watching.

“Okay,” says Rurona as she catches Hollia by the arms keeping her steady as she floats, “need to work on stability a little more, you’ve gotten yourself off the ground now, so...”

“Excuse me,” says a messenger, a little guy, nothing worth noting, “but I have a request letter for Miss Holy-Lia.”

“This is a good time to take a break on the flying lessons,” says Rurona, “after this quick break we’ll get back to your life sensing lessons, followed up by some light training with Lin Lin before lunch and your afternoon...classes begin.”

“Here we are again,” says Rurona her voice echoing in the dome like well before the now open door to the labyrinth she and Hollia explored for Mann not long ago.

“Yep,” says Hollia as she looks, and Lin Lin floating behind her imitates her head movement, to her left at Haki, and the man to his left whom Hollia and Rurona met once before, a man in green cloth this day with his leather strap armor, if it can honestly be regarded as such, over it, throwing knives strapped to pouches across his chest and along his belt.

Hollia remembers only a moment before, on the surface when she and Rurona arrived to see Haki, Mann, and this individual she knows as Scrag waiting for them; she feels she hid her surprise well; especially upon learning that Scrag is the client, asking for an escort into the labyrinth...or rather a duo client, as he talked Mann into hiring him as a surveyor to insure that there were no hidden passages or treasures that were over looked the first time. Scrag was even so bold as to say right in front of them,

“adventurers can be powerful, but sometimes a little too straight forward, going right for the boss, not taking the time to really look around; you never know what might be down there” the sly smile he tried to hide betraying his own intentions of marking anything valuable down there to come back for later.

Now before the door Scrag leaps over the water separating the hill of sand from the labyrinth passage and turns, “After you your majesty.”

“Majesty?” echoes Haki in confusion.

“You are mistaken,” says Rurona to Scrag, “I am merely a tutor at Stratalia, any thoughts you may have to the contrary are as I said mistaken.”

“My mistake,” he says in mock defense, “One look at you and I thought you looked like someone else I heard about in a far away...well...maybe not all that far away.”

“Any who,” says Rurona, “Scrag, was it? I believe you hired young Haki here to act as your escort, you not being a registered adventurer and all, through Stratalian property to survey correct?”

“Why, yes, yes I did.” He says

“Then by all means,” continues Rurona, “you just stay out in front of us...with Haki by your side of course; and we ladies will keep up the rear and keep the golems off your back.”

Scrag shrugs, “Okay, come on boy let’s do our jobs and let the super powers do their jobs.”

“Super powers?” thinks Haki as he remembers Rurona tossing around werewolves, hypnotizing a Cyber Cat Girl,

and Hollia blasting the werewolves with a goddess wind, blasting the Crocotta with a goddess wind, and further back he once saw her on a job with Amia, Yumi, and Pima throw a really powerful Saint's Fire spell that took down instantly a massive Mulberry Bush that was taking over a client's yard.

"Dad?" says Yumi seeing her father resting next the well, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Huh?" says Mann, "why I'm resting of course."

sigh, "Dad, you let Haki and Hollia go down alone with that guy? Don't you remember the plan? How is Haki supposed to get a moment alone with Hollia to finally get up the courage to ask her out, if they are both stuck keeping an eye on that thief?"

"Thief?" says Mann.

"Uh, yeah dad, remember what I told you, last night I caught that guy, Scrag trying to sneak into the well, but he's just a thief, so I made a deal with him you know, you go down the well with him, we sent a request for Haki specifically, and I of course talked Haki into sending another request to Hollia; so you and that Scrag guy would wander off and go look around just so he'd see there really is nothing else down there for him to try and steal, and that would give Haki and Hollia a chance to be alone together; I mean really dad, I know you're lazy, but you're not forgetful, I mean yeah I know Hollia can handle herself if that guy tries to pull something but..."

This whole time Mann has been opening and closing his mouth and raising his finger to try and get a word in edge wise, but now, “Yumi!” he yells out finally getting her attention, “Didn’t you see them come out back? That friend of yours brought that teacher with her again...um...I think her name was Rurona, yeah that’s right I think, she’s down there with them.”

Yumi puts her hands on her hips and eyes her father.

“What?” he says,

“And does she know the plan?” asks Yumi.

“Oh,” says Mann, “I guess...no...yeah...no would be my guess.”

sigh

This time in the Labyrinth is even easier than before, what with knowing the way, where all the levers are to move the platforms and bridges, the lean passages really don’t allow much room for anything like hidden passages, a fact that is noticeably bothering Scrag as he looks around, Hollia even spies a smile from Rurona at this. This adventure isn’t really filled with much in the way of problems for them with only a moment here or there really worth being memorable; in fact if one were to try and visualize it, they would think of it like a snapshot memory album, Scrag surprising them as he shows he can fight, his throwing knives encased in blue flame and exploding as they hit the stone squids flying at them, Lin Lin enjoying herself as she smashes Faux-Blobs with her tail, Haki nearly falling back

into the water as a Stone Squid flies at him and grabbing onto Rurona's sleeve earning a giggle from Hollia.

"Here we are," says Rurona as they stand before the door to the Aqua Marine Dragon's room, the skeleton on the door giving them the same speech it did last time.

"Hey Haki," says Hollia, "want to see something funny?"

"Huh?" says Haki, "wha..."

Smash!

Haki jumps back and even Scraggs is startled as Hollia, a blue flame around her staff, smashes the skeleton to pieces and the door collapses.

"Neat huh?" she says as both Haki and Scraggs nod wide eyed and look at each then back at her, and at Lin Lin...who is swatting at the dust on the floor with her tail...and at Rurona who is just standing there...looking back at them.

"*cough*, okay," says Scraggs, "Now what's past here then?"

"The boss monster," says Rurona, "a gem golem made out of aqua marine and shaped like a Turtle Dragon from Xiang."

"So," says Scraggs, "you two already took the treasure then huh?"

"Treasure?" says Rurona, "It's just a Water Orb in there, this is the basement level of an ancient tower; and gold and jewels would have been taken by the towns people long ago as the tower above was taken apart for stones to build the town."

"Oh," says Scraggs as he turns, "then I'm just going to take this exit here back up, later."

He waves and vanishes through the return zone.

“Miss Rurona,” says Hollia, “What if he comes back later to try and check out the boss chamber alone, I mean...he’s a thief right? He might think there is you know, a bigger treasure in there.”

“In that case,” says Rurona, “He’ll be fighting the monster in there by himself, a tough lesson indeed to learn that I don’t lie.”

Haki is surprised to see that this explanation actually cheers Hollia up, he was expecting her to be more concerned over that man’s well being... “hold on,” thinks Haki, “did she just call him a thief? Does she know him? Does Hollia know a thief?”

Haki looks at Rurona with a sneaky expression, “This woman, this really powerful woman, she’s a sorceress alright, that man acted like he knew her, maybe she’s a spy from a kingdom up north, or maybe a queen of thieves.”

Haki imagines Rurona sitting on a gold throne surrounded by mountains of treasure of all shapes and sizes, from gold coins to giant gold statues of fantastic beasts.

“Wait a minute,” thinks Haki as he pictures Hollia standing next to her, as wild burly men eat boars and deer at wooden tables, with all sorts of fruit before them, and beer galore.

“Haki?” comes a soft voice into his vision which continues to picture Hollia looking scared, “no” he thinks, “she wouldn’t be scared,” now he imagines her laughing while talking to Rurona whose still sitting on a golden throne, and hands Hollia a diamond egg, which hatches into Lin

Lin, “she bought her off didn’t she?”, he thinks, “what kind of things is she teaching Hollia...”

“Haki?” comes the soft voice again,

“No way,” thinks Haki shaking his head, “my Hollia is being corrupted I bet, I bet its bandits....it has to be...I...”

“Haki?”

“Huh?” says Haki looking around to see Hollia talking to him, Lin Lin looking at him like a confused dog, and Rurona standing there with her arms crossed watching him.

He turns red faced realizing he must have been standing there pantomiming the whole vision...he hopes he didn’t say anything out loud.

“Any who,” says Rurona turning to Hollia, “if there is nothing else we should head back now.”

Haki turns towards the portal that Scrag took and stops, “Um,” he says to the others who are walking back the way they came, “Uh, shouldn’t we go out this way?”

“and ruin all the fun?” says Rurona, “there are plenty of little monsters to smash to pieces down here, all you could ever want in fact.”

“yeah!” Hollia smiling as she holds up her cane and Lin Lin circles around her head and the cane chirping, “I’m really getting the hang of actually hitting things with my cane, and this is wonderful experience for learning how to cast spells quickly.”

The two girls, and Lin Lin, turn smiling back down the long winding walk ways with Haki walking behind them, his mental image of Rurona as the queen on a

throne in a bandit's hide out rips in half and falls away revealing behind it Rurona standing atop a mountain skulls with a black and red background and flames shooting up from some unseen bottom. Rurona stands, hands on hips, laughing towards the sky.

Haki's eye twitches as he watches a still shot in his mind of the moment in front of him of Rurona punching a Stone Squid to pieces and Hollia summoning a Sylph Cyclone spell to take out a group of Faux-Blobs as LinLin breathes out a Devastation Beam taking out some Stone Crabs on the path. He thinks watching this before him, "She's no bandit queen...she's some kind of crazy monster."

"Not so fast!"

Haki was still something in a daze, a moment frozen in his mind. He looks around, the voice having snapped him awake, he's outside, in front of the weapon shop, Rurona, Hollia, and Lin Lin are there, but the source of the voice is in front of them; Yurataki, her Three Amazons standing behind her.

"Maybe we wasted our time coming here," says Yurataki in a snooty tone, "is this Labyrinth so much fun that you haaad to come back again."

With a dismissive hand Yurataki and her Three Amazons walk past them as she says, "Well I guess we might as well get this credit quest over with."

-later that day as night falls Hollia is taking a shower and bathing Lin Lin in their room in Agate Town, Haki

is in his room writing in his diary about the weirdness of this day; Rurona however is downstairs, as the bar is still open indulging herself with a little wine; something that is rather hard to come by at a school. She watches silently at the bar as Yurataki and her Three Amazons come in, beat up, cloths torn and exhausted heading to their own rooms. Rurona turns back to the bartender, lays down her gold, smiles and heads back to the room she's sharing with Hollia.

Chapter 6: Haki's Ambition to Bostonia:

The sun shines upon a wide dusty road, wide enough two carts can easily pass with out one needing to put a wheel off the side. It winds between the trees which seem to watch as though wanting to creep upon the road, their roots and branches coming right to its dusty edge, yet not crossing beneath or above; not cut, just not crossing. It's something so common on this road few even remember the cause is ancient stones beneath the surface enchanted over a thousand years ago to keep vegetation from overgrowing a merchant road; although the stones that once paved it have long been removed to build homes and walls. The dust its self might be seen as a mystery, the crunched down dead leaves that fall in autumn, dirt from the forest floor, always there packed down, and concealing the magical monolith like stones only a few feet beneath the surface. Although an observant individual would also know that Stratalia and Bostonia do have school/city employees who maintain the road near their own territories, but not so much the middle of it; and all this plus something about

the politics between Stratalia and Bostonia Haki has had to listen to as Rhulan talks with Hollia walking behind him.

Haki practically cries in his mind even as he hears Hollia, Rurona, and Lin Lin (in her own way) all laughing behind him as he remembers his plan. He told Hollia in person that he had gotten a job that required him to go to Bostonia and meet the client in person to get the details of the job; that it came from the Bostonian branch of the Adventurer's Guild so personal details of the job weren't shared with the school's office. He simply told her he didn't feel safe going by himself along the unfamiliar road and asked if she could accompany him to Bostonia. He looks back briefly, "of course," he thinks to himself, "If she thought it was dangerous she was going to bring that woman along too, I mean really Haki, don't..."

"Ha!" comes a burly scream from the bushes as a large man carrying a cross bow jumps out in front of them, which is followed by another man in the same dull brown leather armor and dull yellowish tunics shaking his head and coming out from the other side as he swings his sword around in a way meant to intimidate others.

"Excuse my friend if he scared you ladies...lady...and kids. He is new at this whole bandit game; I personally prefer to keep things civilized."

He points his sword at them, "So kindly empty your pockets and we'll see if you have enough to pay the toll."

the cross bow carrying bandit laughs with clinched teeth like a madman trying to hold back his maniacal laughter, "yeah, toll, heh shnick, shnick, shnick."

“Bandits?” says Rurona stepping forward, “My, my, it seems the rumors were true, to think that this area would have such scum.”

“Hold it lady,” says the sword wielding bandit, “I’m not stupid, I can tell just by looking at you that you’re some high class wench with body guards....or maybe a sorceress, so you just keep that mouth shut and...”

swoosh

A great white arc of wind flies up from the ground between the bandits, they both look down in unison to see the tips of their weapons have been demolished, and there is a crack in the ground not inches from their feet, on closer inspection their shoulder guards also show signs as though someone had just sliced right through them with an incredibly sharp sword. They both look up at what to them is just some fancy clothed sorceress; she slowly raises her fist, palm up, with her index finger pointed at the space between the two bandits.

They didn’t see it the first time, Haki either, but Holia and most likely Lin Lin did; while the bandits were speaking Rurona raised her hand like this quickly and said something under her breath, the strange attack happened, and then her hand was down again.

“I suggest you move aside,” says Rurona as with a flick of her wrist she substitutes one finger for two, her index finger and middle finger, now pointing at the two bandits.

“Don’t think too little of us,” says the bandit, “we were just being nice before, but you have to know you’re out numbered.”

“Out numbered?” asks Haki counting two fingers on his hand, then three for their own group, and then four counting Lin Lin when he looks up at her.

“There are fifteen in the woods to your right,” says Rurona, “but numbers mean nothing to someone who can bend the very fabric of reality to her whim with but a mere utterance from her mouth.”

The sword wielding bandit smiles, the other bandit who did have a cross bow, now has kindling grasped in his hand.

The sword wielding bandit begins to say, “cocky bi..”

“Combustion,” says Rurona drawing her hand back.

*fwoosh!”

High flames engulf the two bandits, Haki and Hollia jump back out of surprise. When the flames stop the two men’s armor is charred black, their hair is frizzy and their facial hair missing, they stare blankly forward, collapse to their knees, and fall over in opposite direction, either end of the road in direction.

“Did...she...kill...them?” gasps Haki between breaths.

“Miss Rurona?” starts Hollia.

“They’re alive,” says Rurona, “I only slightly roasted them, we Aesperians have thick skin after all.” *she laughs at this comment, but Haki and Hollia only shrug their shoulders not getting it, after all, everyone is an Aesperian*

Rurona turns towards the woods, “Hear me bandits! That first attack you saw was a special attack called an Earth Cutter, I could just as easily used a Duel Earth Cutter and sliced those two men apart, flinging their corpses into

the air to rain down their blood and guts all across this road; but I chose to show leniency this time.”

She points her finger at the woods, “However should you pursue us, then the very sky, earth, and forest shall be my weapons against you, you shall be rendered limb from limb...and possibly violated *says that part quickly*...by the very world around you.”

She turns forward, and with a flick of her hand and the words, “Telekinetic Push” the two unconscious bandits are shoved by the road side like garbage. As they walk she gives a glare to the woods, now filled with fifteen men with sweat drops on their temples and freaked out expressions in their eyes.

As they walk past the two men Hollia looks back at them. Rurona says in a stern voice, “Hollia, I showed leniency to them, however they would have killed us in an instant, there is a chance if they could have they would have taken our money then kidnapped us either for ransom or to sell as slaves up north or out west; there are men in this world who do not play by rules, do not take turns on attacks, and don’t wait for you chant a spell or try and fight back; you must remember while distasteful sometimes you must treat some people like monsters, not showing them any mercy, for deep down, they can be worse than any beast.”

Haki is in total disbelief, he had known about wolves, even imagined before this a scene in his mind of what to expect on this adventure; of Hollia and himself fending off wild beasts; a wolf attacks and he throws a dizzy bag while

Hollia uses a Sylph Cyclone to send it away. But now the image changes to him and Hollia tied up in the back of a wagon with bars on the window to be taken away to some unknown land; “or worse he thinks”, as the scene changes in his mind to Hollia alone in a dark room the light on her obstructed by the bars on the window as generic looking large bald ugly men approach her hunched over, their fingers wiggling like snakes and their tongues out like thirsty dogs.

Haki shakes his head, “or even worse,” he imagines a massive green cyclone engulfing a wagon camp as Hollia and Lin Lin fly around like heroes, and Hollia picks up Haki, still tied up in ropes, carrying him in her arms like a damsel in distress. Haki tries not to cry at the thought, but his tears are pulled back as he imagines this other woman, shadowed in darkness with her eyes glowing red smashing open the door that he imagined Hollia being held in before and grabbing the men by the throats like he saw her do to two werewolves before, and the whole camp engulfed in flames, bandits screaming, as Rurona and Hollia walk away...*poof*...Haki now imagines himself still tied up being carried under Rurona’s arm like a sack of potatoes.

“Pull it together Haki,” he thinks to himself, “Remember what you’re doing, you know you can’t be all tough guy to impress Hollia, you know that, you should be thankful she brought her tutor along, I mean I know I had no idea there were actually bandits on this road; it just makes you needing protection make sense is all.”

He looks up to see Hollia and Rurona chatting up ahead,

his head droops thinking, “still it would have been nice to get some alone time with Hollia.”

“Let me get this straight,” says a very large man with a very bald head, yet a very big mustache, and wearing a very big vest with very big fur trims, and of course sitting on a very big throne like chair decorated by very big stag antlers, as women with very big breasts serve him very big drinks, while behind him is a very big pile of loot, in their not so very big hide out in the woods, with a...semi-large group of bandits made up of generic looking rough made men and women with the occasional weird looking one like this girl with pink hair shaved down with a spiky skunk tail cowlick of hair hanging above her face like a canopy, with pink fur trimmed punk cloths made of pink leather with black leopard spots (there is no such animal so she definitely painted this herself or bought it in a novelty store...or stole it), and her girl friends, one with spiky long green hair and another with spiky grey hair done up like a kabuki demon’s hair. But they aren’t who the guy on the make shift throne is talking too, no he is talking too two men covered in bandages with a group of fifteen others behind them who just got back...

So too iterate he says, “Let me get this straight, you two...and...” he looks past them at the other bandits who came back, “you’re whole group return with nothing...” he puts his hand up, “excuse me, no you return with less than nothing, you return with two men who needed to use up

our medical supplies, and you tell me it's because of one woman and two kids."

"They had a pet dragon thing too," says one man in the group who immediately shuts up when the large bandit king glares at him.

The bandit king points at the men, "and did this pet dragon do this."

The one man looks at the ground, "No boss."

"Then shut up," says the Bandit King who takes a swig of the beer handed to him by one of his large breasted Bandit Queens, *sigh, spits in the dirt*, "Okay, you people know there are sorcerers and sorceresses who come from that school right? I mean hell, half of us here graduated from that goddess forsaken place."

He stands up and speaks loudly, "We are the adventurers that could have been my people! We were taught how to fight, how to win, how to cast spells, how to use our specialty powers to their best! And what did they expect us to do? They expected us to go home and tend shops, to work behind counters, to police the woods, to be good little reserve soldiers at bases, or just farm or some shit!"

spits again

"So, I ask again, how the bloody fuck did some students beat you?!"

"Sir," says the bandaged man, "I...I don't...I don't..."

"Speak up now," says the Bandit King with his hand on his ear with a wild look in his eyes, "I can't hear your excuse..."

"I..." he continues, "I thought she was some wealthy

customer....but...I...I think she was a teacher.”

deep exhale from the Bandit King.

“A teacher?” he says, “A teacher who is out walking with students instead of taking a clearly marked Stratalia personnel cart, or leaving in one of those flying machines? You sure it wasn’t just some fancy dressed rich bitch from over seas taking classes?”

He takes a gulp of beer, “Get out of my sight you two, I’ll figure out what to do with you two later.”

As they head away he stops them and says loudly for everyone to hear, “One more thing, I want to make sure you all remember the deal, every student and merchant coming and going knows the deal, this is a toll road, they go too or from Bostonia, they hand over 2000 gold or equivalent in magic item or else we beat the shit out of them, and if we ever see Enforcers snooping around, then we start kidnapping and selling them into slavery...or killing them.”

He points to the punk looking group; specifically the pink one, “Tell me Tatania did your group have any trouble with that little orange witch girl and her three scantily clad paladin friends?”

Tatania smiles a wicked smile and yells out proudly, “No sir!”

“See,” he says, “That one did fight back, but Tatania knows how to deal with sorceresses.”

He points an accusing finger at the bandaged man, “That newbie friend of yours I’d expect getting hurt but you man...not you...” he points at the rest of them, “and I sure as fucking hell wouldn’t expect the rest of you to go

chicken shit on me either!”

He takes another big gulp of his beer and eyes one girl in particular in the group of fifteen who came back with the two bandaged men, “Friska,” he says, “meet me in my tent, the rest of you go get some sleep or something, you came back with no loot, you don’t get shit tonight.”

The girl named Friska, wearing tight brown leather pants, a tight leather top showing her midriff and cleavage, held together by just a few strings, and wearing a light tan fur trim open vest, her short semi-brown, kind of reddish hair with thin pink strands in it tied back and held tight in a bun by the strap to her large goggles. Upon entering the tent she takes her vest off, and her goggles, revealing her pink glowing eyes.

The Bandit King takes a gulp of his beer and throws it to the side, his two large breasted Bandit Queen wives come in, their curly long hair, one blond, the other platinum, close the tent straps behind them as the Bandit King click on a crystal light and pulls out a large white screen with a metal stand that he sets up on the opposite end of the tent.

“Okay,” he says with a much softer tone than outside, “Friska, Um...if you’d please...uh...please show us what happened today...okay...if it’s not a problem.”

“If it was a problem,” she says in a cold tone, “I wouldn’t have followed you in here...if it was a problem I would have killed you ages ago Jard and taken over this stupid bandit scam slash operation a long time ago.”

Her eyes glow with an intensity and shine a light upon the screen, showing what happened on the road earlier

from her very eyes and hearing from her very ears. As it goes on Jard the Bandit King says, "Stop!..." a sweat drop appears on his temple as he looks at Friska, "I...mean please stop right here if you could."

"I already stopped it," she says coldly.

"Oh," says Jard looking back, "Uh...good...thanks...Friska."

A worried look comes over his face, "That girl," he says pointing at the screen, "Please tell me that's not who I think that is."

"Well," says Friska, "If you think that is Holly-Lia, the daughter of Tyros-Lia, also known as Tyros the Fire Fist, the daughter of Jasma the high elf master of the twin katana, the sister of Byron-Lia the master of scroll magic, and grand-daughter of Jinron-Lia also known as The Mushroom Magician, then yes, you would be right about who that is."

He tries a worried laugh between his teeth, but then points at the woman in black, "but then whose she? She sounds like the guy Markus was describing."

Friska gives an irritated sigh, "I'll continue the feed," the scene goes on, showing the woman quickly attacking, so quick it makes Jard the self proclaimed Bandit King jump and explain "holy shit" under his breath. After it's done and the feed stops he turns the crystal light up brighter.

"Well," he says, "that was some bluff,"

"Really?" says Friska with an annoyed tone that catches Jard off guard, "You think I would stand down from a bluff like that? It was no bluff."

Jard looks at his two Bandit Queen wives who give

each other worried looks and then look down at Friska from behind her.

“That woman,” says Friska, “Even amongst those like me who can sense the powers of others barely ever mention the sort of power I felt from her, even with our sacred orbs to know the...scent...of every power that one is never sensed...ever...she is dangerous...the sheer amount of magic coming from her combined with that...power...she is someone dangerous, someone I don’t think would even be a teacher...”

She looks at him with a very serious look, “If I had what she has, I’d have taken over a country or two by now.”

Jard looks at his wives who nod, rubs his chin, gets up, and walks out mumbling, “Shit, now I have to figure a way out of snapping at Markus.”

After he’s gone Friska rises up and turns, “Maria,” she says looking at the blond, and then “Merriam” looking at the one with platinum hair, “I’ve been your friend since we were kids, but that husband you chose...that man...” she snaps her goggles back on hiding the glow of her eyes, “Is a coward and a fool...on many levels.”

“So you tell us every time,” says Maria *the blond*, “but we still love the big teddy bear,” says Merriam *the platinum hair*.

“What ever,” says Friska putting her vest back on and leaving, “But I wasn’t lying, that lady....she gave me the willies, and the fact she looked like she was body guarding Holly-Lia...and who ever that kid was maybe...” *she shrugs* “...has me worried. If some students... or merchants

yapped, then they sent out some crazy shit out after us, I hope you two aren't as rusty as Bandit King lard ass."

The two Bandit Queens just smile, "Don't worry Friska, we can still put a dragon on its ass if we have too."

"I hope you're right," thinks Friska heading out, "because you just might have to."

The rest of the way down the road to Bostonia was pretty un-eventful, being the middle of the day by the time they reached the first watch tower there was little threat of Forest Wolves attacking them. Oh yes, the watch tower, a series of four watch towers each at a little over a mile apart mark the path to Bostonia, relics from when Bostonia had The Four Great Walls, each a half circle connecting around the city to the shore line and circling out, each wide enough for soldiers to walk on, and only the military had barracks in the space between the outer three walls; the fourth wall surrounding the city its self. Bostonia's history is one filled with war, legends stating how chaos fell upon the land after the fall of the Rhulan Empire, the citizens of Bostonia were in turmoil as most of the city crumbled to dust, only the most ancient part, that part near the shore with its stone buildings and streets remained; according to Bostonia's traditional re-telling of history the military that had served the Rhulan Empire shifted to protecting the city and perhaps even to keep the citizens from leaving by building a wall around the old city and three additional walls outward toward the edge of the

Land without Seasons, marked by the first watch tower or fourth watch tower depending on the way one goes.

They stopped at the tower as Rurona retold this history and even marked a line on the dirt road at the exact spot the Land without Seasons ends and normal space begins; of course everyone knows about this phenomenon, and that Stratalia is built at the very center of this circle where it's always spring, never summer, winter, or fall. The School actually takes up most of the space; in fact Agate Town is right outside it. While many overseas and across the lands believe Stratalia is somehow behind the phenomenon, perhaps to enforce the idea of it being a grand mystical school in the mind of its students, the truth is no one knows why it's like this, even though there is still a branch in Stratalia who study it regularly.

"Truth be told," says Rurona looking away from the watch tower, now mostly a ruin as the only watch tower with guards still stationed in it is the one at the city wall, "There are several spots like this around the world, one in Nipponia where it's always winter, there is the Wedge out west, right across from Osopika on the western shore of the Sea of Archae, where it's always a mild summer desert day, amongst a few other interesting spotsworld wide."

As they pass the tower Haki looks back, remembering the bandits and thinking, "Maybe they should re-post guards here...and the school should have a guard tower too; I bet I'll be praised for suggesting it, rewarded for my insight, the teachers will be amazed they never even thought of it I bet."

He looks up realizing he had stopped walking but the others hadn't, "Hold up guys, don't forget about me!"

Now the rest of the way to Bostonia was un-eventful, save for seeing the city its self, this was truly Haki's first time seeing it, Hollia had seen it many times before, and the last time Rurona, back when she was better known as Rhulan Empress of the World, it was much larger; but even as it is now it dwarfs the capital city of Crimdalina. Seen from the air one would see a city of over 10,000 people, many double story houses packed close together, their red roofs making the land look tiled with little cracks where the streets are between them. Many larger businesses, a few larger mansions just near the outskirts, and a very impressive harbor, although not with too many of the massive ships one might expect as they are still out, not due back for a while yet, but of course smaller fishing vessels and privately owned vessels, as well as a few Enforcer Sea Way Patrol vessels out to keep pirates away from the bay or smugglers can all be seen.

Despite the watch tower, and the massive red armored gate in the solid cream colored wall, entering the city was a fairly easy task, just some simple customs checks; one might even suggest the only reason the watch tower and the gate are even still there is for ambience.

As they walk to the Adventurer Guild Office Haki freezes in his tracks, a drop of sweat on his forehead, "Um...guys..." he says nervously, "I..." he looks straight

ahead at the office, “Um...well,” he looks back at Holliawho has a very confused look about her, Rurona raises an eyebrow, Lin Lin...Lin Lin’s sleeping in Hollia’s arms, “The client,” he says quickly, “Yeah, I just remembered, that the contract said I had to meet him alone, you know being the guy who took the job and all, yeah, sooo....you know the client is secretive and wants to give the details only to the one person who took the job, so I...I have to go alone...so....you know...”

“We’ll meet you back here,” says Rurona who puts her hand on Hollia’s shoulder, a gesture that makes Haki feel angry deep inside for some reason. Rurona points out the Item Shop nearby, “We’ll just check out the local item shop and see if there is anything we need there, you can find us either in there or in front of there waiting when you...finish...with the client.”

With a slight push Rurona turns Hollia, Hollia looks back as Rurona slides her hand from Hollia’s shoulder, “Haki,” says Hollia, “Don’t worry so much, I know you’ll be able to handle Mr. secretive just fine, just think *I’m not nervous, I have no reason to be, I am an adventurer.*” (she says ** in a fake deep voice). She giggles as she turns and follows Rurona to the item shop.

Haki turns and walks into the Adventurer Guild Office, the little old lady receptionist giving him a curious look, just as Rurona and Hollia walk into the Item Shop, the young and very hot lady behind the counter giving them a seductive smile.

Nearly as tall as Rurona, she wears a red dress skirt,

mostly hidden behind the desk. Her top is an impossibly skin tight even cleavage revealing white tunic with a red long sleeved over shirt showing off the top of her cleavage with little red straps criss-crossing them; something looking more like something a barmaid would wear than a shop keeper. Her long black hair framing her pale face with its green eyes and red lips, cascading down her back to complete her look as some docile, despite her expression, shop keeper.

“Hello, Hello, Hello,” says the Shop Keeper as they come in, “and what can I do for such a pretty young couple...er...of adventurers like you this fine day?”

Hollia’s eyes catch something weird as the woman moves, her hair at about mid-neck looks to be disconnected, as though the length were just some illusion and her hair is actually shorter; and that her cloths don’t move right, her top is too tight in places it shouldn’t be with out several more laces and straps, and she could swear part of the counter top actually went into and then out of her dress skirt.

Hollia blushes thinking, “Her clothes are an illusions spell...she...she isn’t actually naked is she?”

“You must be Launia,” says Rurona, “I have heard a great deal about you from my student and her friend Amia...your daughter I believe.”

“Oh,” says Launia with a playful expression and tone as she looks at Hollia, “Well then...you must be one of my precious little Amia’s friends then...let’s see...your hair’s not pink so you’re not....Pima...it’s not blue...so you’re not

Yumi...oh...OH!..." she smiles, "you must be Holly-Lia, well, well, well, you are as beautiful as ever..." She smiles while looking Hollia up and down, "and grown some since I last saw you, I certainly hope my daughter has been...treating...you well...and vice versa."

"We," says Hollia, "Do look out for each other," Hollia blushes, "I...I'm proud to be your daughter's friend Ms. Launia."

"Oh, you are a little flatterer aren't you," says Launia, who turns from Hollia to Rurona, looks her up and down and smiles while nodding slightly, "And may I ask who this gorgeous creature is...I do believe I've...not had...the pleasure of making your acquaintance before."

"I am Hollia's...Holly-Lia's tutor,"

"Oh my, oh my, oh my," says Launia playfully, "Amia did tell me about that nick-name, so you're on a pet name basis already miss beautiful teacher...I wish I had such a devoted tutor when I went to Stratalia."

"Wow," says Hollia spotting an odd device on the wall, "I heard the guild offices were going to get their own messenger orb stations, but I didn't know they had them put in an item shop already."

Rurona smiles as Launia goes over and describes how they were the first to get them installed and starts to brag about being such a major item shop and thinks, "Hollia, I see has learned a great deal indeed from Amia about her mother and how to distract her from her flirting."

After being distracted Launia seems to revert to a more professional tone as Rurona requests various items such as

healing potions and others to help them on their journey, however as they turn to leave..., “Now, you two come back again, it’s always so nice to have two such gorgeous young ladies in my shop; and Miss Rurona, if you ever want to go on a little adventure with someone with some more...experience...you just come look me up okay.” *wink and a smile*

As they exit the shop, they spot Haki poking his head out of the Guild Office across the concrete walkway, apparently spotting them, closing the door, and then coming out fully. When they walk over to him he says, “I...um...okay, the client he...said...he agreed that is to meet with all of us...at the boardwalk....at sunset, and...in the meantime...we should...you know....explore around Bostonia...is...is that okay?”

“It’s...a little different,” says Hollia, “but I don’t have a problem, it’s been so long since I’ve been here it might be nice to just spend the day walking around...I mean...”

She looks back at Rurona, Lin Lin waking in Hollia’s arms and looking back as well, who just shrugs and says, “I don’t have a problem with it, after all I too have not been here in a very long time.”

Walking around, is there a bigger way to waste time in a town? Checking out (AKA Window Shopping) in an area of a few streets near the Guild Office, the Adventure’s Guild Item Shop, Weapon Shop, and Armor Shop, all near the boardwalk where Haki says they are to meet the client

come sundown. If this were a game they could spend the extra time talking to random people on the street or exploring back alleys for gold and what have you lost in pots, but unlike the stories and table top adventurer games they've played in real life it doesn't make much sense, or is polite for that matter, to do these things. However as they check out different shops, Haki checking out the various things Hollia is checking out, keeping close to her but not so close it's awkward; Rurona questions the shop keepers. She asks them about anyone complaining about bandits, or with more subtlety about any problems between Bostonia and Stratalia; the responses from the small shop keepers tend to be so uniform one could swear they were reading from a script or were somehow pre-programmed responses. They simply act nervous eyeing them saying there is no problem, or say that they shouldn't talk about stuff like that; one little old man in a home wares shop whispers to her that it's a bad idea to go stirring up trouble because the bandits are really pirates who left the sea, or so the rumors say.

The party's next stop is a short one, an early dinner so they aren't hungry when they go to meet the client, nothing special. Bostonia being a large city and a major stop for merchant Air Ships and sea faring craft along the coast line is privy to some unusual foods such as the breaded chicken stuffed with white cheese that Rurona is enjoying, the "World Mix Salad" as the menu calls it that Hollia is sharing with Lin Lin with lettuce, tomatoes, bits of chicken, shredded cheese, and a semi-spicy dressing with chopped

nuts. Haki has chosen something he's heard of but never tried, a Hot-Pod, a Sea Corn based bread stuffed with a Red Fruit jam, a very spicy concoction. Holli giggles as Haki practically spits fire and gasps after taking a bite; washing it down with the sparkling water they all got as their drinks; a specialty of Bostonia quickly gaining popularity across the world.

"Anything else for you folks today?" asks the cute waitress as she comes to their table to collect their empties.

"Well," says Rurona, "we are just killing time till this evening, anything going on in town that might kill some hours?"

"Welllll," says the cute waitress, "there is all the stuff down at the boardwalk...but...oh, actually here in just a few minutes down stairs a stage show is going to start; it's just a small short show done more for practice for the bigger theaters by some of the actresses who pay the owner to use it and charge a small fee for people to watch."

"A theater under a restaurant?" asks Haki

"Yes sir," says the cute waitress, "this used to be back in the day a...private club, so up stairs are old rooms that are now used as living space for the current owners and downstairs an old stage."

Upon paying their bill and thanking the cute waitress they head to the little doorway around the bend of the bar counter, easily mistaken for an employee entrance and pay the bartender who is also doing the part of the ticket taker for this small show. Down the red carpet stairway they come to a well lit room, two rows of bench seats with the

red carpet down the middle to the small stage. The stage looks better suited for dancers than performers, something so small twenty people could easily crowd it. One could easily imagine only a small dressing room behind the curtains. The audience is small, a handful of men, and a few women. The party takes their seats three rows back from the stage with no one in front of them.

Haki blushes as a performer comes out from behind the curtain, a woman dressed in tights and wearing a bunny-girl costume; as much as ears and a puff ball tail can be called a costume.

"I think we came to the wrong show." Whispers Haki, but the woman behind them quickly goes *shhh, please*.

Rurona just puts her finger to her lips when he looks at her.

"Welcome to our mid-afternoon show!" announces the woman in the bunny costume, "As always I am your host-ess the great white rabbit, today's tale is one of romance, intrigue, and dastardly plots, enjoy!"

-The show is played entirely by women, doing the parts of the women, men, and animals with crude backgrounds. The show is nothing special just a hero in weird garb wooing a princess who is betrothed to a demon king so the kingdom can have great crops; granted it does seem to be based loosely on something from long ago that Rurona heard about from students from Croix at Stratalia; but it could just be coincidence. The hero battles the demon king, saves the princess, and they enjoy a passionate kiss as the curtain falls at the end. During the show Rurona

would occasionally look over, Haki was purely embarrassed watching, while Hollia was totally engrossed in the show while Lin Lin slept in her lap. Rurona smiles as Hollia claps, waking up Lin Lin who just yawns, looks around, and goes back to sleep.

The cast takes their bows, the white rabbit coming out after the current drops and thanking the audience for watching and hopes they enjoyed the show.

As they walk out they over hear some of the audience say, "Those girls are getting good," ; "I hear Martha got a role in the musical show at the big theater down town, good for her."

"That..." says Haki as they leave the restaurant, shaking his head.

"Was awesome!" says Hollia much to Haki's surprise, "I can't believe we only had to pay three gold each to get in, oh the fighting, that demon king, and the romance, oh it's exactly every adventurer's dream adventure."

Rurona smiles at Hollia's remarks, as Haki looks around awkwardly.

"Um..." says Haki, "It's still not quite sunset...so...how about,"

He looks around, "Oh, how about we check out the boardwalk."

Hollia looks at Rurona.

"Sounds like fun," says Rurona, "We, I assume have a bit of time, and besides that is where you said the client was meeting us correct Haki?"

She raises her eyebrow as Haki stammers, "Ye...Yes, of

course, I ma...I remember, so we'll just have a look around while we wait for the sunset and meet him...at the...look out..." he practically blushes as he stammers all this.

The Bostonia Boardwalk, a place that looks like it shouldn't exist on this world; well...except to the locals who see it as a common thing; but even to Haki it looks out of place. Back in Crimdalina he's seen all manners of circuses, carnivals, and such travel about the land stopping at larger cities or between towns in make shift carnival towns to attract travelers from several local towns at once. He's seen performers, jugglers, animal trainers, even monster tamers, petting zoos, freak shows, fortune tellers, and of course various stage performances. But he's never seen anything like this, the game booths aren't just the toss a ball and knock over bottles or fish out pet goldfish with a paper net amongst various similar ring toss games and such; although those are also here. There are games for tossing darts to pop balloons, shooting a water pressure gun into a target shaped like a Blue Blob to explode a balloon above it, games with pop guns to shoot down metal targets shaped like ducks. There are some more familiar games like shooting arrows or sling shots at targets, and very exotic game like a fishing game with a large tank to snag golem fish filled with prizes. But all this pales in comparison to the rides, a Ferris Wheel, a ride with metal carts that spin while being held by metal poles, and even a spinning swing set that lifts into the air.

"All thanks to the power of golem tech." says Rurona as Haki marvels at the designs.

“Yep,” says Hollia, “at the school there are students and professional alchemists who get paid to design these rides and figure out how to make them move and power them; I even heard a rumor they are based on ancient blue prints that were found in Hanalan.”

“It’s true,” says Rurona as Hollia looks at her, “these rides are very ancient designs indeed.” She smiles the smile of someone proud.

“How...” Rurona’s words trail off as she turns and looks at the balloon popping dart game.

Hollia traces Rurona’s line of sight to a small doll amongst the prizes, a white cat stuffed toy wearing a purple dress, however it looks to have four ears. She squints, no two are cat ears, but there are two white shark fin like structures on the back of its head...it seems vaguely familiar somehow.

Rurona walks over the booth, “excuse me,” she says pointing at the doll, “how many balloons would I have to pop to win that?”

“That?” says the attendant with a raised eyebrow, “just one balloon for that silly old thing.”

“Just one?” says Rurona, “for a Sanu Sanu Sala doll? Really?”

Hollia can’t believe her ears, but then again she’s heard Rurona talk like this before, back when they first met, when Rurona, Rhulan that is, first awoke from stone and greeted her, it wasn’t the instructor’s tone she used but this more laid back voice. Hollia likes it, the mix of her mature experienced voice with this pleasant approachable tone.

“Oh yeah,” says the attendant, “So that’s what that’s called, I think I remember the girls carrying these things around when I was little.”

He looks at it, “Not too popular now-a-days I suppose.” He shrugs, “that’s fads for you,”

“Any who,” says Rurona, “I will play this game.”

“Okay,” says the attendant taking her 2 gold and handing her five darts.

She throws one, hits one balloon, and says, “okay, now I will take the Sanu Sanu Sala doll.”

“You...” says the attendant, “have four more darts, you sure you don’t want to try for something bigger?”

“I’m sure,” says Rurona, her voice startling the attendant with how strangely threatening it sounds.

He shrugs takes down the doll and hands it to her.

Rurona just holds it in her hands looking at it, turning it over as though in total disbelief at what she is holding.

“25 years ago,” says Rurona, “these were very popular, everyone had one, even if they did keep it secret amongst the older girls...I...didn’t.”

She looks around and says, “Any who,” as she tucks the doll into her sleeve, the red inner lining usually hidden from sight turning black as the doll vanishing into darkness, “I’ll decorate my room with this when we return.”

She spies the attendant grabbing up the remaining four darts, “hold on a minute,” says Rurona to the attendant and then turns to Hollia, “Do you want to try it?” she looks over at Haki who is pretending to look at the goldfish in the net game so as not to seem like he is spying on this instructor

being lost in her childhood as he thinks of it...that and the image of Rurona in his mind cuddling a stuffed cat toy is totally clashing with his mental image of her as a shadowy menacing figure.

“Or perhaps,” says Rurona, “Haki might like to try and win something?”

He looks at her and sees her smile and perhaps slightly nodding towards Hollia, “does she know?” thinks Haki, “Is she...”

Haki puffs out his chest and walks over, “I...” he says and exhales, “I...I’ll try...unless Hollia you want...”

“I can go next,” says Hollia, her words kind of deflating his ego, “if you want to go now.”

“It’s just the four darts left,” says the attendant, “and you folks already collected on a one dart prize, so you could only get four more one dart prizes, or two, two dart prizes, we don’t have a four dart prize, but there is a five dart if you have a silver piece or twenty five coppers to cover the expense for the extra dart.”

Haki looks at the prizes, all girly stuffed toys, the kinds of things a man wins for his girl friend at a carnival the five dart ones are over sized stiff lizards and bears, the kinds of things he can’t carry on him and is sure would crowd up Hollia’s subspace pouch, what with her cane and adventuring items in it; and he’s not about to ask the instructor to carry the thing he wants to win for Hollia.

“It’s not about the prizes,” the voice in his head says, “it’s about showing off your skills, just get her two of those little rainbow hedgehog toys and she’ll be happy and able

to carry them.

“Okay,” says Haki picking up the darts, and quick as a flash he throws all four and hits four different balloons.

“Woah,” says the attendant as Haki smiles, while the attendant thinks, “I guess these people really are adventurers dressed like that and not just cos-playing as some while out on the town.”

“I’ll take the two rainbow hedgehogs,” says Haki confidently.

The attendant shrugs and hands them to him, and Haki then hands them to Hollia.

“Thanks Haki,” says Hollia, her words filling Haki’s ears with bliss until he hears, “Here you go Lin Lin, Haki got you some cute little toys to play with wasn’t that nice of him.”

Lin Lin sniffs at the toy and then chomps out on, the toy letting out a squeak.

“They...” thinks Haki, “they’re...Doag toys?”

Rurona holds her hand to her mouth and turns her head trying not to laugh at Haki’s expression watching Lin Lin playing with one as Hollia teases her and plays with the second one as one does when playing with a small fuzzy animal with their toys...or a baby with their toys.

Hollia’s turn was quick; she won a stuffed lizard for herself and put it in her magical pouch.

They aren’t dressed for any of the rides here and most of the games are just playing with skill or for showing off to win prizes, they can’t be cluttering up their pockets and pouches with anything more like that and for Hollia and

Haki the skill games are too much like training back at school that it feels wrong to pay money to try out the simple stuff. Besides the day is about over now, so it's time to head to the edge of the board walk where Haki said they are to meet their client.

The sun sets, over the horizon, not the sea, it's the east coast of this continent after all. But the approaching twilight over the water is still beautiful, as they watch the Tolphins play and the fishing vessels can be seen coming in down the coast to the docks. Haki leads them all to a spot near the docks, looking around nervously.

"Haki," says Hollia startling him.

He turns to see her not looking at him but looking around as she continues, "so, what does this person look like that we're waiting for."

"Um..." says Haki, "about...that, I, I have something to confess."

Hollia looks at him confused while Rurona just smiles, "I'm going to leave you two alone for a moment, it's been ages since I...looked at the sea."

She walks about fifty feet away and stares out at the sea.

As Hollia turns that way Haki says, "Hollia...I lied."

"Huh?" says Hollia turning back towards him as she pets Lin Lin sleeping in her arms.

"Sorry," says Haki, "I...I just wanted to...oh man...I mean...I wanted...to...spend more time with you without Yumi or Pima or Amia around; but you know, somewhere where you know our lives wouldn't be you know...in

danger.”

Hollia just gives him a confused look before saying, “Why?”

Haki looks at her and is kind of surprised that she genuinely looks confused.

“I...” says Haki, “I...*gulp*...I...like you, I mean like...like you.”

“Huh?” says Hollia taking a step back, “I...think I didn’t translate that right. Sorry.”

Haki takes a deep breath, “I love you!” he yells quickly and then turns beet red with embarrassment, not believing he finally said it.

“Haki,” says Hollia softly, her own face a bit red.

“Yes,” says Haki taking a step forward but stops as Hollia takes another step back smiles and says, “sorry.”

She smiles and says, “I...like you too...but as a friend, I...always thought of you as my friend, still do, like...you know, part of the group like all my friends.”

They just look at each other not sure what to say for a moment.

Hollia takes a breath, “I...want you to stay my friend Haki. I believe that someday you’ll find a girl back when you get home that will love you back like you want...but.”

Hollia looks over at Rurona and then back at Haki, “don’t take it personally Haki, you’re a very nice guy, like I said I’m sure you’ll find someone to love you, it’s just...you’re not my type...sorry.”

“Sorry,” says Haki looking at his feet, “I...shouldn’t have done this, I shouldn’t have embarrassed you, I shouldn’t

have told you all this, I shouldn't have, sorry, I mean, now you'll be all worried when I'm around, you...sorry I mean I don't mean I know what you'll think, I...sorry, I..."

"Haki," says Hollia stopping him but all she can do is smile, not sure what else she can say.

"Any who," says Rurona coming back, "if we've had all our fun today, I do believe tomorrow we really should start our actual mission here."

Haki and Hollia look at each and then back at Rurona as she pulls a scroll from her sleeve and show it to them.

"A contract," says Hollia.

"Correct," says Rurona, "and from Stratalia, it's a job to verify that bandit activity is indeed present on the road between Bostonia and Stratalia and investigate the extent of it and if possible locate the bandit base so that enforcers can be alerted to its location. We may have taken advantage of being here today but it's best we get to work."

She smiles as Hollia nods and smiles as she follows Rurona.

As they head towards the inn Haki hears Rurona's voice in his ear, a vocal projection technique or spell as far as he can remember, "you didn't really think the school would allow this trip without permission did you? You may have used this study break between your regular courses and exams, but Hollia has no such break time right now, she could only go out here on an official job; so congrats as far as she knows the only part you lied about was meeting the client out here as an excuse for your little play date."

Haki looks up and realizes that Rurona and Hollia have

been having a conversation this whole time, but a look from the corner of Rurona's eye and sly smile tell him she was also talking to him somehow. A shudder goes down his spine as the mental image of his of her cuddling a stuffed toy is butted aside by the older image of her as a shadowy figure laughing to the darkened sky.

Chapter 7: The Bandits:

The road between Bostonia and Stratalia is once again being gifted with a well lit warm sunny day. This road despite being between two major economical entities is a lonely road hardly traveled by except by local merchants and students as air ships supply Stratalia once every few months with all its necessities, or they grow and produce their own. Bostonia is primarily a coastal city, relying on the sea and the ocean going merchant ships that routinely travel up and down the coast. This day however does see a small wagon, barely twelve feet long being pulled by a lone mule. The driver is clad in a black robe with a face concealing hood. The way the folds of the robe fall upon this driver however one can easily see that a youthful or otherwise beautifully framed woman is beneath them. This woman is none other than Rhulan the sorceress, now calling herself Rurona on her way back from Bostonia after the false mission the aspiring student Haki had invented in an attempt to have an incognito unto its self date with Hollia. Why she is dressed this way driving a mule driven small merchant's wagon, and why Hollia, Lin Lin, and Haki are in the back of the wagon with their weapons at the ready for battle at any moment is something Haki has on

his mind.

Haki remembers earlier that day, as they stood before a small shop and Rurona purchasing the wagon as she had explained to them back at the inn in her and Hollia's room so no one could overhear her plan to pose as a small time merchant traveling the road towards Stratalia. She had explained that the bandits might either avoid them or attack in mass, and they need to confirm the existence of a bandit base if there is one and not just a few thugs or just bandits passing through the area. Of course of all this the thing that stood out the Haki was seeing Rurona's cloths turn into a kind of living liquid darkness as he imagined it upon seeing it. The image in his head being a metamorphic demon with glowing red eyes hugging her body; a bit more erotic of an image than Haki liked and shook it off at the time; no he was more surprised to see Hollia not reacting at all to this transformation like she already knew of it, and the fact that it was Hollia who explained to Haki that Rurona wears a special mystical cloth called Shadow Cloth.

His memory of that moment earlier in the day is but a summary as the bumping road and his attempts to focus on possibly being attacked at any moment by bandits is keeping his mind relatively clear.

"Okay, okay," thinks Haki as he stares at the tiny window in the back of the wagon showing the road behind them as they bump along, "okay, Haki, this lady...why am I lying to myself, I know her name its Miss Rurona,Hollia's teacher. Okay, this Miss Rurona, she somehow got a contract in my name; and somehow knew what I was

planning to do or found out what I made up and knew I made it up so made a contract that she somehow got in my name without my knowing. A...contract to confirm bandits have a hide out, out here, which...really...I know we ran into some yesterday but...I mean come on, bandits out near Stratalia is crazy; I mean all the field enforcers are based in Stratalia, it's like having your criminal den right next to the guard barracks or in the courtyard of the royal palace."

Haki looks over at Hollia who is ready to fight; Lin Lin is coiled above her ready to spring out the door at a moment's notice. Haki remembers his fear from before, of Hollia and himself being captured and sold into slavery.

"Even if Miss Rurona is powerful," he thinks to himself, "she's just one woman, what could she do against a whole bandit camp?"

He makes a *hmm* sound out loud without realizing it, his eyes open wide when he realizes it but notices Hollia isn't paying him any mind, "she's really focused," he thinks, "I should be too...we haven't run into any bandits yet, maybe if we turn back now we can cancel the contract..."

He resists actually shaking his head as he thinks, "I can't do that, this close to final exams it would be a black stain on my record and would embarrass my family name."

He looks at the little window again while thinking, "besides Haki that'd be impossible now anyways, you'd have to go back to Stratalia to make that official and that's where we're heading; heh, maybe if we're lucky we won't run into any bandits...yes I'm sure those were just some

random thugs and there really isn't any bandit hide out, I mean come on its Strata...."

"Hold it right there," comes a man's voice from outside the wagon, bringing them to a bumpy halt.

Outside the cart a rather generic looking man in leather armor, ratty brown hair, and wielding a sword stands before the cart.

"It's her," comes a woman's voice from the bushes. This small woman is a sight to behold, with her tight leather top and leather pants, midriff showing. All in all that wouldn't be too surprising, although her large for her size breasts are barely being held in the leather vest by thin straps. Her unsmiling face with its dark red painted lips, and dark goggles are what stands out to Rurona, although she finds the bun her hair is tied back in kind of cute.

Another woman coming up behind the cart would stand out more with her pink fur trim cloths made of pink leather with leopard spots and pink hair trimmed down to her head save for a fluffy cowlick sticking up in the air over her forehead like a skunk's tail; although the other thugs with her don't stand out as much.

"Miss Friska," says the man in front to the smaller woman bowing to her; bringing Rurona's attention back to them.

The woman named Friska looks at Rurona, "this is the woman," she says, "who so easily defeated our men yesterday and put the rest of us on edge."

Friska takes off her goggles looking Rurona right in the eyes with her own glowing pink eyes, Rurona's eyes flash

with a blue light.

“As I thought,” says Friska, “defended even from my powers, at any rate woman I have the ability to know the powers of anyone I see. We were hoping you’d come back this way; our...leader would like to meet you.”

She takes a step back, “However, I can’t help but feel you’ve set a little trap for us here our mysterious friend.”

She nods to the pink haired girl, “Tatania, open the back up and see if the other two are hiding back there.”

slam! Tatania is knocked back as the doors fly open with Hollia leaping out, “go Lin Lin”

Lin Lin’s mouth glows with an inner blue light.

“Shit!” yells Tatania followed by, “Saint’s Barrier!”

Her barrier is raised just in time to take a Devastation Beam head on from Lin Lin, deflecting it into the dirt sending the other bandits scrambling out of the way of both the beam and the flying stone as the road is cut to pieces.

“Block this!” yells Hollia aiming her cane at Tatania followed by, “Goddess Wind!”

A horizontal column of spinning green air shreds through the space between them and throws Tatania, now encased in a bubble of protective energy, through the air into the tree line, smashing through limbs and smaller trees.

“My turn!” yells Haki as he throws a top that spins and grows in size as it does so towards a swordsman in blue leather with white trim.

“Ha!” yells the swordsman followed by, “Supreme Slice!”

He brings his sword down with a blue aura, slicing the top in two, and in the blink of an eye, so fast Haki can’t even

follow the motion the man closes the gap with his sword at Haki's throat. He grabs the surprised Haki twisting him around with his sword to the kid's throat.

"Okay you sorceresses," says the man, "Unless you want your porter here to lose his head I suggest you surrender.

Rurona vanishes from the driver's seat and appears back next to Hollia.

"I'm not shitting around here lady," says the man.

"Calm down, Bardis," says Tatania coming out of the forest, "but lady I'd do what he says, my pal Bardis there isn't the type to make idle threats."

"At any rate," says Friska who was apparently unmoved by the short battle, "Our...leader, as I said wants to meet you, so unless you want these students to get caught in the cross-fire I suggest you have them come along quietly and not give us anymore trouble."

Hollia looks at Rurona, who gives her a nod.

Friska nods to someone in the forest, a girl in grey leather with a blue tream, similar to Tatania's clothes only this girl has wild spiky silver hair, "Rana, bring us the spell locks."

Rana hands Friska a black velvet box.

The bandit camp, Rurona, Hollia, Haki, and even Lin Lin are presented ahead of the group in chains...yes Lin Lin even has a little cuff around her neck. The strange cuffs appear to be a mix of metal and stone with green glowing

squiggly line glyphs in them. The cart with the donkey have been taken elsewhere by the other bandits, only the ones known as Tatania, Rana, Friska, and Bardis, with about four lower level grunts are escorting their prisoners into the camp. Rana breaks off from the group over to the girl with a green themed version of her outfit and green spiky hair and gives her a passionate kiss,

“welcome back Rana,” says the girl.

“Later, Tara,” says Rana back to her.

The Bandit King sits before them on his throne with his wives on either side of him standing, the camp with its carts and crates laid out to make this area resemble the throne room of a palace after a fashion. What the Bandit King does next surprises the camp, especially as the escorts walk off the sides leaving their prisoners’ backs exposed to the way out; not that there aren’t about fifteen more bandits waiting along the sides of the camp to pounce should they make a run for it. No, what surprises them is that the Bandit King stands up, smiles, opens his arms wide and says, “Welcome to our humble abode my guests, I am Jard the Bandit King.”

He gestures to the large breasted blond standing by his throne, “and this is my wife Maria.”

He gestures to the other large breasted woman, the one with platinum hair, “and this is her sister, my other wife, Miriam.”

“Two wives?” thinks Haki, “and twins?”

He imagines the man Jard lying in a large bed with the two women on either side of him, the mental image somehow changes Jard quickly into a giant muscular ver-

sion of Haki. Haki shakes his head as he thinks, “Hold on Haki, they’re sisters...that’s just...I mean two wives is one thing...but both at once and together...that’s....just sick Haki...hold on, hold on, get a grip man.”

“Is that boy sick or something?” asks Jard seeing Haki shaking his head and looking down.

“Haki?” asks Hollia.

“Huh?” says Haki looking around, “...I...I...”

“Just don’t throw up from fright brat,” says Jard making the other bandits laugh.

He points at the woman they know as Friska, “I do believe you’ve all met Friska here, and...” he gestures to the trio of punk rock looking girls, “The pink haired one is our elite warrior Tatania, her two...associates, Rana and Tara.”

He even gestures to two men in bandages, “I believe you met Marcus and Iggis last night...when you roasted them.”

He glares at Rurona, “although you were much better dressed yesterday.”

Friska makes a *cough* sound.

Jard looks at her quickly and back at the prisoners, “or so I hear.”

He gestures for Miriam to give him a swig of something from a large golden cup, something clearly meant for decoration that his group stole from someone at sometime that he’s decided to use for his drinks.

“I suggest,” he says, addressing the party directly, “you get comfortable, you’ll be staying with us for a little while. That is until we get our pay off from you.”

“Oh man,” whispers Haki, “I knew it, I just knew it,

they're going to sell us into slavery."

As Rurona is shaking her head and before Hollia can say anything Jard says loud enough for the whole camp to hear, "What was that boy? Slavery? HA!"

The camp laughs a little, more a sinister noise than real laughter.

Jard steps down from the (steps) of his throne, (really boxes with a rug over them), and walks towards Hollia pointing at her, "This girl,"

Rurona hisses at him loudly, "You so much as touch her and I will take your head off so fast even your best swordsman would barely have time to blink let alone save your worthless life!"

"Oookaaay," says Jard with a mocking smile and putting his arms out in mock surrender, as he takes a few steps back, "Seems our guests have forgotten they're in spell lock cuffs."

he laughs loudly and boisterously

The rest of the camp laughs with him until he suddenly stops, takes a swig from a cup from his other wife, pops his knuckles, and continues, this time addressing everyone to hear him loud and clear, "This girl, my friends, is none other than Holly-Lia, the heir to the deanship of Stratalia!"

This is actually news to some of the camp, well most of the camp, some of which give worried whispers amongst themselves.

"Don't worry my friends," says Jard, "after we ransom her off..." he gives a dismissive wave to the others, "and her friends...and I guess that pet dragon thing, back to Stratalia

we will be rich, and naturally be leaving this area.”

He smiles at the party, “and I’m not so dumb as to say in which direction with the future dean right in front of me; guess that makes me smarter than most bandits huh? Bet you three thought we were just some thugs in the woods, didn’t expect elite class warriors with some real skill huh?”

Rurona laughs hysterically

Her laughter catches everyone off guard, more so when her cloths start to melt. Her hooded black robe turns to something resembling liquid and hold tight to her body, much of the length re-shaping into a cape, her dark red hair moving of its own accord; lifting, to then cascade over the back of the cape. The tight shadow on her body retracts leaving her the appearance of wearing tight black leather pants with high heeled calf hugger boots. The top retracts and re-shapes to form a tight lifting bustier and a corset like piece barely covering her abdomen. It is not the outfit Haki recognizes, but Hollia does and is surprised she changed into.

As Rurona’s laughter subsides she lifts her hands, still shackled at the wrist and points at them, “Maria, Miriam, and Friska,” says Rurona with a commanding tone as though she were the one in charge and not in chains, “you three disappoint me.”

She looks around and then back at them, “I guess I should not be that surprised these others, these weaklings turned to being bandits, with no standing army, bases, or further proving grounds these youngsters grew restless indeed; but lack the power to do anything worthwhile with

their lives in this world it would seem. But you three were very promising students of Stratalia, trained to be field enforcers, up holders of the law and justice of this land.”

She pauses to smile and give a slight in throat chuckle as her eyes gleam at them as a cat eyes a mouse, “to think you three were actually members of the secret Sanu Sanu Sala club as well.”

Her tone becomes a bit lower and bit more condescending, “Tsk Tsk to think members of the club would turn into bandits, it’s truly a shame.”

Haki and Hollia look at each other, Haki more confused than Hollia, and even more so after noticing her expression reveals her not to be as confused.

Hollia and Haki look up to see the three women are also confused, Friska, Maria, and Miriam look at each other and back at this woman before them; now clearly revealed to be a sorceress of great skill. These three women remember those club meetings, the wearing of robes, the white cat masks, no one who didn’t know each other already outside the club were supposed to reveal each other’s identities to the other members. But they know, Friska, being the ever curious type did find out most of their identities, its how they met Tatania, Rana, and Tara after all; who upon being looked at by Friska across the way just shrug their shoulders to say they don’t know who this lady is either.

“Hey!” yells out Miriam in a surprisingly shrill voice, “you just broke the sacred rule of the club!”

“And you,” says Rurona, “became dishonorable bandits, so why should I care?”

“Enough!” yells out Jard who had been standing there between all this like a lost dog, “I have had enough of this talk about some stuffed toy!”

He shuts up and gulps when Friska looks back at him with a glare, “Sanu Sanu Sala,” she says coldly, “wasn’t just a stuffed toy;” but switches to a more girly voice as she traipses mentally down the nostalgic road, “she was also a graphic novel, lunch boxes, used to advertise all sorts of sweets, and...” she looks around and focuses her voice back to something more menacing like she usually does, “I mean...it was also used for various other merchandising and entertainment avenues.”

Jard rubs the space between his eyes and looks over at the bandaged men, “You two, are to take three look outs with you and deliver a message to Stratalia, follow me to my tent as I write out the ransom demands.”

“Not so fast,” says Rurona in a confident tone, followed by the manifestation of that confidence as without a word a dome of opaque energy appears over her and the rest of the party.

Bardis lunges at the dome, “Supreme Slice!” but he bounces off of it, “well don’t just stand there,” he yells, “you men help me take this shit out already!”

Most of the men charge in, smashing at the dome with swords, clubs, axes, pieces of wood for some reason despite the weapons on their belt straps.

Jard pulls out his sword.

“Get down!” loudly whispers Friska and she walks around behind the throne, Maria and Miriam practically

dragging him back there, and finding Tatania's group already back there, only a bit further away.

"Why are we cowering," growls Jard, "I..." he looks at Friska, his two wives, and his elite bandits...or rather in this grouping with none of his men around his wives' elite guards, "I mean, my men are fighting, we should show them whose boss thinking they can duck away like turtles."

"Idiot," says Friska, "I warned you she was powerful, "no force your men exert will break that barrier, because it's not a barrier, their efforts are being sent elsewhere. However they are blind inside the dome, we are safely outside that spell's range, when its done it will leave her completely drained."

Friska's wicked smile chills Jard's heart and sends a shiver up his spine, "after all did you forget they are still wearing the spell locks? Her students, the little princess, her pet, and her porter boy won't be able to do a thing, and she'll have drained all her power to use such a spell through the spell locks."

"My men!" growls Jard surprising even Friska, "I can't allow this."

"They'll be fine dear," says Maria.

"Yes don't worry hun," says Miriam, "we know what spell it is too, they'll be fine, you'll see...just very...confused."

Jard raises an eyebrow, but flinches as he sees a bolt of blue/green light shoot up into the sky and then scatter in all directions.

"Now," says Friska, "Tatania go get the S-class spell lock shackles I keep in my private trunk, even if she gets her

strength back she wont be pulling this again through those.”

Tatania, Rana, and Tara all look at each other.

“Uh...captain,” says Rana, “when you said how strong she was last night, I...got the S-class spell lock shackles....those are what...I put on her.”

Friska looks at them with a raised eyebrow and whispers a “what?”

-a brief moment earlier, inside the dome Rurona says, “Don’t worry and keep away from the edges you three.”

Haki and Hollia duck down, Hollia shielding Lin Lin with her body.

Rurona stands, the light in the shackles vanishes, she pulls her arms apart, snapping the chain as she does so, and as though, or rather likely, by her will the shackles fall off.

She looks forward her arms together before her as though in prayer and chants,

“Norda Aerda Verda Schweiz By the four directions Scatter!”

She flings her arms out to the sides, the dome vanishes with a ring shock wave of energy, the bandits hit by it also vanish.

“By the goddess!” screams Hollia, one hand over her mouth, the other holding a confused Lin Lin,

“Woah, that...was nuts...” says Haki.

Hollia looks at Rurona, “did you...did you just...”

“No,” says Rurona, “that was a teleportation spell, if they were killed there would be charred remains or piles of ash all around us.”

Hollia gives out a relieved sigh.

"They're just a bunch of punks after all," says Rurona, "real bandits are cut throats and murderers, I'm sure Haki's fears were well founded based on how bandits are in Northern Ravashira."

Haki is stunned as Hollia looks at him, he can only think to just nod and say, "yeah."

"However," says Rurona as she taps their shackles with her finger, causing them to open with a green flash of light and the sound of breaking glass, Lin Lin flying up around Hollia's head and around her waist happy to be able to fly again.

"We shouldn't stick around," continues Rurona, "it only scattered them for a few miles around us."

At this time they are being watched through a crack in the throne by Friska, Jard, and the others hidden behind said throne.

"Our mission," says Rurona, "as the contract states is the confirmation of bandit activity and to report it. We can safely say we have confirmed at least one group of ex-students turned bandits, the local field enforcers should take care of the rest after we report the results. I can't imagine they can run far, and looking at some of them I'd say they regularly go back home to shower and...style up."

As she turns she notices Hollia practically blushing as she looks at her while saying, "Uh...miss...Rurona."

Hollia points to her body, Haki she notices is kind of looking away a little. Rurona looks down, "Oh..."

She looks at Haki, "he really is still just a kid isn't

he, can't blame him for the awkward way he acts around a woman, those two...Maria and Miriam must have half baked his brain, guess that's why he was acting sick back there."

Her smile to Hollia is partially out of amusement at this thought as Rurona grabs the edge of her cape and with a quick twirl changes to her scholarly black robes in the blink of an eye.

"Wow," says Hollia, "you can do it that quick?"

"Of course," says Rurona, "the melt effect is more for the awe effect than anything. More dramatic that way."

Rurona starts to walk towards the path leading out of the camp the way they came in, seeing Haki kind of pretending to look at a crate like he was trying to ignore her back there she says,

"Haki..." getting his attention, "I'm back in my...normal professional instructor attire."

As they leave the area Rurona is surprised to hear Hollia say to Haki, "Haki, you should get more used to sorceresses dressing like that, and other adventurers, I bet when Yumi, Amia, and Pima are fully grown they'll wear costumes like that just like their mothers do, and so will I."

Haki blushes, and if Rurona didn't know better she'd have thought Hollia was being flirty rather than just trying to be informative. Although Rurona does find it surprising he'd be so shy, he's seventeen after all, granted most men don't reach their full size and build till they are twenty eight, women conversely not till between twenty three and twenty six, but full adult mental maturity should be

reached much sooner or at least not so shy around women.

“Crimdalina high society must be sheltered,” she thinks as they turn the bend in the path leaving the bandit camp out of sight.

Hollia and Haki are ready in case any bandits were only teleported near the camp, not knowing Rurona’s spell sent them more than just a few miles, the only stipulation for her spell was that they land on flat solid ground with roughly the same air temperature but anywhere but within a few miles not with-in a few miles like she may have implied. After all while she knows she could easily handle them, and Hollia likely hold her own as well, getting Hollia’s friend killed trying to fight seasoned ex-students would not be a good idea.

Back in the camp Jard and the others get up and step out.

“Okay,” says Jard, “better plan, they haven’t gotten far yet, they think we’re all gone, that kid is no trouble right? So we just need to take out that sorceress, snipe her or something right Friska? So then we can re-kidnap Holly-Lia and get that ransom.”

He looks at Friska remembering that all his men have vanished, “er...I mean...if that’s alright with you.”

“She’s dangerous,” says Friska, “and knows some kind of way around the spell locks clearly, must be why she surrendered so easily. If we are going to do this, we are going to this my way.”

"The pirate way," comes a man's voice out of nowhere.

"Who's there?" demands Friska.

A man appears out of thin air, or rather had been cloaked.

"Scrags the thief," says Tatania.

"Oh so one of you recognize me after all these years?" says Scrags.

"How could anyone forget you?" says Friska.

"I'm flattered," says Scrags.

"Don't be," says Friska, "you still owe me for shorting us on that treasure that you took all the good pieces out of, your contract with us from the Thieves Guild..."

"Is old news," says Scrags, "besides I hear..." he slumps down into the throne and grabs an apple off the table next to it with its various fruits meant to be fed to Jard by his wives to look more (boss like) to his men, "you're all bandits now, and right next door to Stratalia at that, a risky venture even for you infamous sea dogs."

He looks at Jard, "well six of you are infamous sea dogs, don't think I ever met this guy before."

"Don't speak ill of him," says Maria, "he is more than a match for you thief."

"Exactly," adds Miriam, as though that added anything, more out of habit of adding something to what her sister says.

"Well at any rate," says Scrags as he jumps up, takes one bite of the apple and flings it into the wood, "I was just going to loot this bandit hide out I heard about while following tall dark and scares the shit out of me around."

Got to keep my distance though, she knows I'm following her after all; get too close or too noisy and she'll probably vaporize me when she's sure that little pet of hers aint looking, the dean's grand-daughter that is...you know...not that other thing...that little...dragon thing...pet...no...."

He shakes his head, "let me start over, I followed them, I found you, was sure she'd kill you all, but had a hunch she wouldn't in front of the kid...kids...no just one of them...not sure she gives a shit about the other one, but who am I to try and think a thought that would go through that woman's head...if I'm right, if not, good, If I am, I should probably know better than to push my luck, but like you know I like to push my luck."

"Hold on!" yells out Jard, "Who the fuck are you? And what the fuck are you doing here?"

"Wow," says Scraggs, "such language, and in front of the ladies at that. I'd be taken back if I were a gentler man. Well before I go...the scary woman broke the only good stuff you still had, I thought I'd warn you before you tried any sniper stunt or whatever that, that woman, she'd probably kill you out of principle, and be able to do it without those kids noticing if you tried to pull something like that. Trust me, she's something scary; if I were you I'd forget about this place and just go back to being pirates."

As he starts to turn invisible again, he stops and reappears, "Actually, speaking of which you were one of the most infamous pirate crews...minus this...Jard...no offense pretty sure you're scary too if the twins like you."

"Not really," says Friska.

Maria and Miriam grab his arms and say in unison, "Our teddy bear is tough enough,"

"Oookaaay," says Scrag looking at Jard making them both manly blush in embarrassment, "moving on, so why'd you leave the sea anyway? And come all this way from the Pirate Cove."

Maria, Miriam, Friska, Tatania, Rana, and Tara all look at each other and are a bit silent before Friska says, "It's embarrassing, but most of the pirate crews have left or are forced to pay tribute to one really big pirate, has herself a massive ship, bigger than anything we've ever seen before on the waters."

"She shouldn't even be a pirate," spits Tatania.

"and why's that?" asks Scrag genuinely interested.

"Because," says Maria, "she not an Aesperian,"

"She's a Kuhrai," says Miriam.

"Crazy alien bitch," says Friska, "even calls herself by a self mocking name like Cata and still everyone is afraid of her."

"Even so," says Maria, "we can't stay here now."

"I have some contacts down south," says Friska, "It won't be as luxurious, but my cousin's pirate crew in Hanalan might take us in."

"Oh not him," says Tatania.

"Well that's why we were here," says Friska, "we tried...Jard's forest bandit idea, and now we're more than likely going to have artist renderings of us all over the country side for attempting to kidnap Holly-Lia, so it's go south to Hanalan and on to Caprish...or...go north to...Mom's...in Bazan."

The girls look at each other and say in unison, “Hanalan”

Scraggs shrugs and vanishes leaving them to pick up what they can from their camp before heading out.

“So,” he says to himself, “the Pirate Cove has been taken over by an alien cat-woman named Cata...heh...sounds interesting.”

Chapter 8: The Final Exams Showdown:

The bandits are far behind them now, now in the comforts of Stratalia. As comfortable as it can be, for Haki at least it's a bit awkward seeing as he has to be the one to report the findings of the scout mission to the guild office. Hollia while holding Lin Lin stands back near the wall with Rurona chatting about minor things and getting back to her levitation lessons; a peaceful conversation that is interrupted by a loud, “What?!” by Haki.

“As I said,” says the woman behind the counter today, “Mr. Haki you have a formal challenge from a Ms. Yurataki and group for their final battle exam.”

“M...me?” says Haki as Hollia and Rurona come in closer, their interests peaked by this odd turn of events.

“Well, not just you of course,” says the clerk, “we have already informed and gotten acceptance notes from three others who have already graduated, a Ms. Pima, Ms. Yumi, and Ms. Amia. Aside from those three and yourself we still need to send requests to two others who...oh...are...”

The clerk looks up and sees Hollia and Rurona standing there, “also on the same mission away right now with Mr. Haki here...or were...yes, Ms. Holly-Lia, and Ms. Rurona...oh...and...this is odd. It seems Ms.Yurataki also

has your familiar listed for the challenge as *Holly-Lia's pet dragon*.

chirp goes Lin Lin.

The clerk shrugs, "It is unusual, she's requesting to challenge current students, three graduates, and even a tutor. But as a final exam challenge she can request up to a group double her own size; they can get extra credit for doing well against a larger group after all. So, Ms. Holly-Lia and Ms. Rurona do you accept the challenge? Oh and of course Mr. Haki?"

"By my honor I really have no other choice." says Rurona.

Hollia smiles and says, "Yes, as the heir of the Lia family and an adventurer in training I also accept this challenge."

All eyes are now on Haki who would really rather cry as he stiffens up his face, forces a smile and in his best attempt at a dignified regal tone...not good but his best...he says, "I accept."

They receive the information, the battle exam will be at the end of the week, only a few days away, it had been issued just before they left on the bandit mission but was unable to reach them before now; and the end of the week is now only two days away. It's not much time to prepare. However right now is no time to think about this as they have just gotten back and need to head to their respective rooms to rest.

Outside of Haki's door, just exiting his room is his

next door neighbor in this dorm, a rather common looking young man with scruffy blond hair, green tunic, and leather armor.

“Heading off on a quest?” asks Haki noticing his pack as Haki fumbles with his key.

“Yeah,” says the young man as he closes his door behind him, “my team has a nice job clear up north to Fort Bazan.”

Just as Haki is about to head inside this young man turns and says, “Oh yeah, Haki, you’d better keep an eye out for that Yurataki chick.”

“Huh?” asks Haki.

“Yeah,” says the young man, “while you were out I heard that a message from her home country arrived. You know how she’d been bragging for weeks now that she’d be chosen to represent the Croix Empire in the festival? Well guess what, nope, she got axed on that. She’s been furious all week. Last I overheard she plans to show them how wrong they are by challenging Holly-Lia herself...and I think that tutor of hers too if you can believe it, for her final battle exam; but my friend tells me he heard your name mentioned when she was making a list of...friends or something for Holly-Lia. She’s dangerous man, I’ve been on a few battle exercises with my team alongside her team; what with sharing the same classes and all for adventuring. If she includes you in that challenge, just turn it down man.”

“Uh,” says Haki trying to force a crooked smile despite a twitching eye, “th...thanks Don.”

“No problem man,” says the young man named Don as he heads out leaving Haki to go into his own room and stare

at the wall.

“Oh...shit.” whispers Haki looking around his room at all his text books and alchemy diagrams pertaining to his courses for training to be a court magician.

Rurona, no, Rhulan, stands in the middle of her room, the room provided for her by the school as a tutor. She is quick to shift her cloths to her preferred tight black pants, same boots of course, corset like top, and cape. She takes her cape off and lays it on the single bed next to the criss-cross frame window. Next to this plain looking bed is a similar boring looking waist high dresser with a palm switch sitting on it for turning the overhead crystal light on after getting up. Rhulan eyes the dresser, then turns and looks at the desk across the room by the door to her private restroom. On the desk she has some notes and a log book for the official record of Hollia's lessons per her role as a tutor as hired by the school officially. Just a simple desk, these dorms are all pretty much the same for either students or staff.

“I think the dresser would be better.” She says as she reaches for her cape. Rather than pick it up she puts her hand into it, the red inner lining turning black as her hand extends towards it. She reaches elbow deep as though rummaging through a pack.

“Here we are.” She says pulling out the Sanu Sanu Sala doll she had won at the boardwalk game in Bostonia. She holds it in her hands examining it for a moment before

looking around, more out of reflex than anything knowing full well there couldn't be anyone in this locked room; that or making sure she didn't miss Scrags hiding in her closet and invisible or something equally improbable. She smiles and hugs the doll to her ample buxom staying like that for a whole minute, even closing her eyes for a moment as though to fight back a tear.

She laughs slightly with her mouth closed as she opens her eyes. She places the little stuffed toy next to the switch on the dresser while saying, "here you go you cute little thing, this will be your home for now."

She smiles once more looking at the toy before she turns to her cape, a somber look coming over her face as she says, "come to think of it, there is something I need to check on."

She places her cape on the ground, whispers some words over it, the red lining turning black again, and leaps into the cape as one might hop into a pool. The cape vanishes behind her, leaving a glowing purple hologram like star sigil floating over the floor. She re-appears with her cape on again someplace else, not in the school, possibly not even on Aesperia, a large dark ware house with many rows of shelves each holding numerous cubes with little black tablet (turned off) screens in front of them.

"Awaken." says Rhulan, the result of this being that the space fills with light, revealing a much more massive space than one might have believed with shelves over two stories tall going back hundreds of feet. If one were to look around they'd see stairs by the corners of the ware house

going to lower floors, many, many lower floors. Behind Rhulan however is a small hallway, leading to office like rooms, one seemingly designed for resting in with cots and sleeping bags along its wall, the room across it looking like the break room of some facility with a fridge, a metal desk, and even a TV on the metal desk.

“It seems the nanites have kept this place in perfect order over the last thousand years,” she says checking everything out, and checking inside the fridge, the inside of which looks nothing like the inside of a fridge but rather some blue device with many buttons and claw like limbs.

“Lemon lime soda,” says Rhulan to the machine. The limbs manufacturing a cup, and then a nozzle from above coming down and filling the cup with the sparkling sugar drink.

She takes her drink, sipping on it as she leaves the little hallway and then effortlessly floats into the air over to her right. As she flies the great distance across the ware house she finishes her drink, “trash,” she says, summoning a little black circle that follows her as she flies. She tosses her empty cup into the little black circle, causing it to vanish right after.

At the far end of the ware house she opens a hidden panel on the wall entering an elevator, “Phoenix Project Room.” she says as the door closes, hiding the elevator in this already hidden place.

Far below the doors open, revealing a room with blue stasis pods along the wall, the mist of the clear chambers inside barely hiding the fact that various bodies are inside

them, almost all female bodies with the same figure as Rhulan, with long hair, some however would appear to be red or blue, some even appear to have wings, tails, ears like a cat on top of their heads, and even varying heights. The wall upon which the chambers are connected clearly is designed to move, rotating the chambers up or down or across the wall and onto a moving sidewalk on the floor.

She waves her hand over the floor calling a control panel to rise; she places her hand on it and says, "Phoenix Project Two Five Zero Three". A stasis pod is moved from the wall to the belt next to her. Inside is a woman who looks much like Rhulan with long black wavy hair and wearing a tight black leather like battle suit.

"Good," says Rhulan, "the auto-retrieval function got you, Bio-Android Unit 1002, Code Named *The Jackal*."

Rhulan smiles as she sends the pod back to its resting place as she looks over a status screen, "I would love to have seen Shina's face when this disappeared out of no where. Hmm, you're in pretty good condition seeing as I left you behind a century ago...and it seems the system didn't grab you till...I was freed from stone...weird."

She looks over the control panel a little to make sure all the systems are still working properly with what she retrieved before she heads back the way she came. In the upper ware house floor she stops by one of the cubes on the shelves, the little computer screen displays a small box, she presses a button and the palm sized box materializes from a light like stream from the cube. "Perfect," says Rhulan before she heads back through her cape to Stratalia.

Elsewhere Hollia's journey to her room could hardly be called as eventful as either Haki's or Rhulan's, changing her clothes, showering, brushing her teeth, and going to bed with Lin Lin sleeping by her head.

The next day is a day of preparation; Hollia, Lin Lin, Haki, and Rhulan are too head to Agate Town to meet up with Pima, Amia, and Yumi to get their strategy and gear ready for the upcoming exam; no one is liking the short notice but it being Yurataki's final battle exam there is little that can be done about the time after agreeing to the challenge. As Hollia is getting ready a knock comes to her door.

"Who's there?" asks Hollia.

"Rurona," comes the answer.

"come on in," says Hollia, "Miss Rurona, we're just about ready to leave."

Rurona comes in, wearing her usual tutor attire, and holding a small box with her.

"I have a gift for you," says Rurona.

Hollia looks around, "Miss Rhulan," she says, "a gift...for me?"

"Yes," says Rhulan opening the small box as Hollia looks on, and at its contents with confusion seeing a white goop like substance filling the box.

"its shadow cloth," says Rhulan with a smile, "the same material my clothes are made of, only this version is white in color, I know you like white."

She looks up at Hollia, her robes and cape all being white.

“So, I’ll be able to change my clothes at will with this?” asks Hollia as she is handed the box.

“No,” says Rhulan, “there isn’t enough here and this particular sample has a pre-designate form to take...that of a bra. It’s just waiting for an owner to take on the right...shape.”

“and,” adds Rhulan after a short pause, “it’s also a form of armor, even this small amount will boost your defense aura, protect what it covers as armor against physical strikes, and will even absorb some kinds of magical attacks.”

“Wow,” says Hollia, “thanks Miss Rhulan.”

She looks at the box in disbelief that it can take on such a shape and turns the box around in her hands.

“Oh,” says Rhulan, “My mistake, you wouldn’t know how to activate it. If you remove your top garments we can fit it.”

“Right,” says Hollia taking her cape, outer shirt, under shirt, and bra off rather quickly as she sits down next to Rhulan with her back turned to her. Her not really small, but also not really big breasts and nipples exposed to the air chilling them and making her blush as she realizes she just undressed right in front of Rhulan, and its Rhulan’s hand on her back and shoulder as she presses the slightly cool to the touch box against her skin.

“Now relax,” says Rhulan, her right hand still on Hollia’s shoulder as she removes the box.

Hollia can feel the warm smooth material on her skin

as it begins to move and spread out, the sensation sending a shudder through Hollia, not sure if its pleasure or being un-nerved by it as it's not like anything she's felt before.

"Oh," says Hollia out loud and wide eyed as the material spreads over her breasts and lifts them just like a bra.

Rhulan takes her hand away and says, "It's fitted now, stand up and see for yourself."

Hollia stands and turns around, Lin Lin chirps as though in approval of it. Hollia looks down at herself, it looks just like a white bra, it even has a lacy trim like those she normally wears, making her wonder if her mind helped give it this shape, aside from giving her support it doesn't feel like it's even there, like a second skin. She moves her hand over her back where the strap is, rather than a strap going across her shoulder blades the strap too is on her skin, a line of smoothness indicating its presence. She moves over to the mirror she keeps above her dresser and checks it out. Moving around in circles to see it from every angle, and with out thinking about it also cupping her own breasts in disbelief. In the reflection however she is brought back to reality as she sees Rhulan watching her with a smile on her face, a bright look she hasn't seen since Rhulan watched her summon Lin Lin.

Rhulan looks up to see Hollia's gaze looking at her in the mirror.

"Any who," says Rhulan standing, "I am glad you like your present, I should leave you to finish getting ready."

"Thank you again Miss Rhulan," says Hollia bowing deeply.

Rhulan smiles as she meets Hollia's eyes, "well," says Rhulan putting her hand on the door knob, "time to go back to being Rurona for a little while longer." and heads out.

Once Rhulan is out of the room Hollia turns back to the mirror examining herself and the bra. She touches the center thinking about how it comes off and it just pops right off, sending her breasts jiggling in the air.

"Oh," says Hollia, holding the cups over her bare breasts, "and...come back on?"

The cups suck onto her breasts making her blush and let out a surprised breath at the sudden sensation on her young nipples. The straps wrap around her back reconnecting and smoothing out. It's back to what it was like when it was fitted on her.

"Amazing!" says Hollia to Lin Lin lying on the bed before she turns back to the mirror.

"Miss Rhulan said it is armor, and boosts my defense aura, and will absorb magic."

She makes a pose in the mirror, "its super magical..." She blushes and freezes, "lingerie."

She stares at her breasts in the mirror and whispers with a smile and surprised look in her eyes while blushing beet red, "Miss Rhulan...gave me...lingerie."

skipping ahead to the coliseum battle

The Stratalia Coliseum, a massive structure dating back to the age of the Rhulan Empire, built from Faux Magitian it is nearly indestructible as it will absorb magic. This

arena is used for students to practice attack spells, offensive magic research, and for what it's being used for today for battle exams; normally held with students against golems or illusions; a student does have the option to challenge instructors and/or other students so long as they accept. The arena however doesn't look the way it normally does, this massive indoor space has been converted to resemble a desert climate with a sandy ground and boulders in random locations, the crystal light above has even been turned up to resemble bright sunlight.

In the box where one would expect to see an emperor sitting, ready to give a thumbs up or down, there is the dean Jinron-Lia; not normally one watch battle exams one can easily assume he is here because one of the students being challenged is his grand-daughter; at least that's what everyone is assuming. Yurataki though is beaming as she believes this will give her, her chance to show off in front of the dean and show how much better than Holly-Lia she is. Next to him is a woman with her hair up in a bun and pretty much looking like a librarian; which makes sense given that she is the school's librarian, as well as the battle courses instructor.

In a flash of pink light she vanishes from the box and appears down on the ground, a white line separate the two halves of the arena with the two groups on either side of it.

"Today is a battle exam," says the woman, "I am Nasca I will be your instructor and referee. The battle exam will be held in a simulated environment not native to any of the participants home lands; a desert simulation. Normally

these tests are held against golems, however no one on either side need fear as just with those exams when the golem would be certain to destroy the exam taker I will be watching and will teleport you out of harms way when you either surrender, are too injured to fight, or it's certain you would lose. There is still some risk, even though my own pride would normally not allow me to confess as such, thus anyone who wants to back out can now."

Nasca looks at both groups, Haki's knees are shaking but he says nothing, "very well then," says Nasca, "As per the rules you may use any abilities you have, weapons you would normally use as were checked before you came in here, and for the sake of fairness you may not begin the battle till I give the word; you will both start on either side of the line side by side with your group, but don't have to remain there when the battle starts of course. And for the sake of fairness and for the test as those challenged will receive points for their own courses based on the results both sides will be announced."

Nasca glows pink and levitates into the air, "Now then, on the side taking the exam we have Yurataki from the land of Eastern Croix, specialty ability Umbrakinesis...that is shadow manipulation, course focus adventurer, with her are her vassals in the similar looking armor to each other and same course focus, with the green crest is Auda otherwise called in our records *Green Amazon*, specialty ability Aerokinesis, course focus adventurer, with the red crest is Etna otherwise called in our records *Red Amazon*, specialty ability Pyrokinesis, with the blue crest is Hina

otherwise called in our records *Blue Amazon*, specialty ability Electrokinesis.”

She floats slightly towards Hollia’s side.

“On the challenged side, is a slightly larger group, we have Holly-Lia, specialty Aerokinesis, course focus Adventuring. With her is her familiar Lin Lin, listed as multi-elemental in abilities. A fellow current student is Hakifrom Crimalina, specialty ability is...”

Nasca’s eyes glow pink looking down at him as she takes out her tablet, “None, no specialty ability, item user, course focus is Court Magician and Alchemy.”

Nasca shakes her head before continuing, “Next we have three graduated students, all from Agate Town here in the Stratalian Neutral Zone. First up with the blue hair is Yumi, specialty ability energy manipulation, graduated Adventuring. Second with the green hair is Amia, specialty ability is Florakinesis...none combative level, uses arrows instead. Third with the pink hair is Pima, specialty ability is super-speed, utilizes blade weapons...” she whispers to herself, “likely hood of exam takers getting injured by her while wearing half-assed armor kinda high going to have to watch her closely”

Nasca looks down at Rurona, “finally we have Holly-Lia’s private tutor...” Nasca looks at her tablet, “Rurona, specialty ability not listed officially as she’s not a student, but for the sake of fairness...”

Nasca’s eyes glow pink as she looks at Rurona, “specialty ability...uhm...WOW...sorry...I mean Quantum distortion...best I can tell...so teleportation, mystic bolts, and

boosted magic attacks like what I use...likely," she shakes her head thinking, "what the hell Yurataki I told you time and time again that pride of yours could get you killed and you go and challenge a sorceress with such a rare specialty ability. Guess that bad news she got really pushed her."

Nasca vanishes and re-appears in the box next to Jinron-Lia. She projects her voice, "Okay! Test! Begin!"

(Sorry, to interrupt the narrative, but I who am not bound by time and space shall do the readers of these events a favor. To describe the battle all at once would be insane, requiring a clear visual wide view, during even which much of the details of this battle would be lost to the viewer. So for the sake of truly knowing what happened with each person fighting we will narrow our focus down to them, and take the reader back to what was happening with the others at the same time till the climax of this event.)

As the fighting starts Rurona swiftly vanishes and appears on the outskirts of the battle field observing as the two teams split up and face off.

"Interesting," she says, "Hollia's team is just splitting off in reaction to Yurataki's team splitting up; but they did so out of strategy...heh...divide and conquer. Well let's see how this works out."

Blue Amazon chases down Haki, herding him away from the others.

“Top of Doom!” shouts Haki throwing out his enlarging top weapon, Blue Amazon comes down with a mighty slash, her blade leaving a blue streak in the air. Haki’s mind flashes back to the road when the bandit used the same move *Supreme Slice* on his weapon.

Haki is now fumbling while running backwards, searching his pockets.

“Where is it,” he mumbles, “come on come on, where is that blast pow...”

A cold steel tip of a sword at his throat catches his attention, “...der...”

Blue Amazon smiles at him, “didn’t even have to trip you.”

Haki vanishes in a pink flash and re-appears next to Jinron-Lia.

“Welcome to purgatory,” says Nasca.

“Let me see that board,” says Jinron-Lia to Nasca who hands it over.

“Hmmm,” he says, “Haki Cordan, ah, the Cordan aristocratic family of Crimdalina, many generations of court magicians there. So its true your classes were all on Alchemy and court magician lessons...hmm...not a single battle class, yet you have...” he flips through the papers, “many adventure quests under your belt. Hmmm, most with the others down there, including my grand-daughter; but you know my boy because you don’t technically have any battle courses you could have been exempt from this

challenge.”

He looks at Haki who just hangs his head and looks down at the chaos below, “and my boy, you wouldn’t have lost any honor you know, it’s not like this counts like say a duel or anything.”

Haki looks at him with a confused look and then back out.

Jinron-Lia smiles to himself thinking, “I see, so this boy was out to prove something, going by his list it’s clear he was trying to prove himself to Holly; aw, young love. Perhaps in a few years you’ll be ready to come back and court her properly; heh marrying off Holly to a Crimdalina aristocrat, hate to think it but that would then force Byron back here to take over where I could keep a better eye on that way ward brat.”

Meanwhile, right after Haki vanishes, Blue Amazon looks past where he was standing to spy Rurona standing alone. Blue Amazon smiles thinking, “thinking like a teacher and forgetting she’s part of this challenge? I’ll beat this lady and prove myself to the mistress. I might even become the head of the guard back home when she’s the Duchess.”

aahhhh screams Blue Amazon as she brings her sword, with bolts of electricity dancing along the blade, down on Rurona whose face is turned away towards explosion of fire and blue energy at the far end of the arena.

“what the hell?” says Blue Amazon as she finds her sword has been stopped by just two fingers. Rurona turns her head casually and says, “Shocker.”

Bolts of electricity blast from Rurona’s fingers, down the sword, and send Blue Amazon flying backwards twenty feet onto her back in the sand.

“Impossible,” huffs Blue Amazon trying to right herself.

“Not really,” says Rurona in an instructional tone, “one may be immune from the backwash of their own power, but not from the element its self when coming from another source.”

“I don’t care,” says Blue Amazon as she stands on her feet again.

“Rather angry aren’t you.” says Rurona, “if I weren’t as powerful as I am that blow might have killed me. You know even though it’s a test you really should try to hold back from actually trying to kill someone.”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Blue Amazon, “It’s all for the mistress, all obstacles in her way must be cut down.”

“Now die sorceress!” screams Blue Amazon as she lunges into the air with her sword ready to bring it down on Rurona.

Rurona puts out her palm and says, “Telekinetic Thrust.”

oomph is the only sound Blue Amazon can make she finds herself suddenly thrown back through the air many dozens of feet by the unseen force.

Blue Amazon drops her sword and just before she would slam into a large boulder she vanishes in a flash of pink light. Blue Amazon re-appears in the box next too but

below that of the one Jinron-Lia is in, a kind of sub-imperial booth. She is coughing as she tries to regain her feet, the wind completely knocked out of her. Back on the field her weapon vanishes in the same pink light and appears in Nasca's hands who places it against the wall.

Back on the field Rurona looks around thinking, "by my honor I am required to accept even this kind of challenge. However these kids ruined any chances they might have had of winning this challenge outright in doing so."

In the booth Jinron-Lia looks over at the girl who has mostly regained her composure and glares angrily at the field.

"Nasca," says Jinron-Lia, "why didn't you teleport Miss Rurona from the battlefield when this young lady brought her sword down on her?"

"Sir?" says Nasca, "you really should trust my abilities better than that, you know I can sense anyone's powers, their strengths, and even those of their weapons and armor, both mundane and magical."

"I mean no offense," says Jinron-Lia, not sounding like he really meant it.

"Well sir," says Nasca ignoring that, "between that tutor's defensive aura, her armor, and the strength of that sword swing; even if she hadn't...blocked it...if you could call it that...she wouldn't have been harmed. Personally I would have let the sword strike the shoulder for a bigger psychological shock to the student on the futility of their attack, but I imagine this woman might be a bit more sadistic than I am."

Jinron-Lia looks over to her briefly, before looking back out at the field, thinking, “hard to imagine.”

“Hold on,” says Jinron-Lia, “...what armor?”

“Shadow Cloth sir,” she says, “Her entire attire is made up of nothing but, it’s a very rare material...in that until I first saw this woman walking down the hall to your office with Miss Holly-Lia I had only ever seen one item made up of the stuff before. It was a pair of gloves in Croix, in the Dynast Kingdom, a royal treasure said to have been taken from the palace of the demon king Lahk Fhar and able to allow the wielder to wield cursed items with impunity such as the demon sword also in their royal treasure museum and also said to come from that same demon king’s palace...it’s also said that shadow cloth is incredibly strong and resistant to magical attacks.”

“I see,” says Jinron-Lia, “the woman becomes more mysterious.”

“What the hell?” thinks Haki trying not to turn his head and turning pale, “The dean doesn’t even know anything about her and he let her teach Holliia? And...Shadow Cloth? That so sounds like something an evil monster would use.”

The image of Rurona standing upon a throne of bones and laughing returns to Haki’s mind briefly before the battle before him snaps him back to reality.

Nasca looks out to the field while thinking, “Holly-Lia...sorry sir but I don’t know how or why, but she too is also wearing some shadow cloth...but it’s different somehow. If I told you, no doubt you’d confront MissRurona about it, and something tells me that would be a bad

thing...namely Friska's letter back home to mommy for the first time in forever..."

Nasca shakes her head and focuses on the battle, knowing that lives may be in her hands if she lets herself lose focus.

Meanwhile;

"Would you hold still," growls Green Amazon as she attempts to slash Pima who is zipping back and forth at incredible speeds, leaving behind an after image that Green Amazon repeatedly slashes through one after another.

whistle sound

"What the hell..." says Green Amazon spying the source of the sound, an arrow striking the ground not far from her; an arrow which now spews out green gas.

"I see," thinks Green Amazon as she covers her mouth with her free hand and spying the green hair of Amia in the distance ducking behind a rock, "distract me with the little speedster while their archer takes me down with knock out gas...how humane."

She finishes out loud, "but foolish!"

She raises her sword, a green aura encompassing it, and brings it down, "Wind Slash!"

With a burst of green energy she kicks up a small horizontal cyclone that quickly blows the gas away.

whistle sound

Another arrow is coming down, this one right for her, the head of it oddly shaped like the last one. Green Amazon

leaps into the air and slashes the arrow with her sword.

Ka-Boom!

Much to her surprise, this arrow explodes with a mighty blast; the shock wave throwing her back.

“Ha!” she yells rising quickly to her feet, “It’s going to take more than some little explo...”

She stops short as she feels a cold blade against her throat, despite Pima’s short height she has her blade to the taller woman’s throat.

Green Amazon vanishes in a flash of pink light, leaving Pima standing in mid-air a foot and a half off the ground.

Pima hops down onto the ground, snaps her finger, and a blue light outline where the edges of a box would be appears and then vanishes. She zips over to where Amia is and says, “Hey, they never expect Pima’s ultra, impressive, out of nowhere totally secret technique, invisible box of huh you can fly now.”

“Woah,” says Pima, “what’s with the light show?”

Off in the distance at the far end of the arena she spots explosions of fire and blue energy.

“Oh that,” says Amia with a soft tone, “you know, Yumi just taking her time with that other armored girl.”

Amia thinks, “total sadist, with that rugged boyish hair cut, strong build, man if only she were a boy she’d make a great husband for me...maybe..., but I like to be the sadist too.”

Amia is brought back by Pima’s hands waving in front of her eyes...

“Sorry,” whispers Amia blushing.

“Riiight..” says Pima, “and where’s Hollia at?...and like where’s that Rurona lady...did we really chase that wind swordswoman this far away from everyone else? Man this place is huge...was it always this huge?”

Meanwhile,

Utter chaos, blasts of fire, blue chi-energy, boulders being blasted to pieces by both, sand melted into glass then blasted away, craters litter this end of the battlefield. One wouldn’t think anyone could move around this fast without super speed, let alone move around like this wearing armor, even as skimpy as it is, and carrying a sword. Yumi had expected the fight would be over quickly, keeping her distance, flying, shooting chi-bombs. But Red Amazon has kept up with Yumi for the most part, throwing fire balls from her sword, fire waves, even Inferno Blasts (white hot single directional flames capable of pulverizing stone).

“Enough of this!” yells Yumi as she lands on large boulder, “time I shut you up!”

“What?!” yells Red Amazon, “Shut me up? You’re the one who’s been trash talking this entire fight you long winded fist fighting back woods gutter trash.”

She aims her sword at Yumi, “If anyone is ending this fight it’s me!”

She holds her sword blade into her hand and raises it above her head, flames circle up from the ground around her as little line white fire flows along her blade.

Yumi likewise has raised her arms above her head as her body glows with an intense pulsing blue light, a sphere of energy forming in the air above her hands.

The fire around Red Amazon circles and gathers into an immense ball of fire above her.

The sphere above Yumi grows, Yumi's eyes even begin to glow, the light blue in her eyes changes into dark blue, the ever growing sphere changes as well into a dark blue.

Red Amazon Yumi "Solar Sphere!" "Mega Chi Bomb!"

They both release their attacks at once, the giant ball of fire and the giant ball of chi energy flying towards each other and then....*pink flash* both attacks vanish into thin air. Before either combatant can wait to wonder or launch another attack they both vanish, both into their respective penalty boxes.

"What the hell?" says Yumi to Nasca, "why am I here?"

"No!" screams Red Amazon from her box, "why am I here?"

"You," says Nasca addressing Red Amazon first, "would have been killed by the explosion, her blast would have consumed yours, gotten stronger in the process then exploded upon impact with the very ground upon which you stood."

"Don't smile," says Nasca turning back to Yumi, "you are no dubitably Morohi's daughter pulling a stunt like that."

"Oh please," says Yumi, "I would have survived it, it's my energy after all, it's not like it would have hurt me."

"That's true," says Nasca, "but can you say the same

about the debris it would have kicked up, hidden by the intense blast of light and flying in all directions with you standing so close to ground zero?”

“Oh,” says Yumi with a look of concern on her face, “woops, guess I forgot about that.”

“and you’re a graduate, have you not been in battle since you graduated?”

Yumi shrugs, “not really, I run the Weapons and Armor shop in Agate Town right now.”

The Three Amazons had been talking amongst themselves, Red Amazon glares back at them and turns to the other two and growls, “I...lost...to a shop clerk?”

“Heh,” says Green Amazon, “didn’t you read up on them? I was ganged up on and lost to a shop clerk and a waitress, but don’t forget they are all graduates from this school.”

Blue Amazon smiles, crossing her arms in her chair, “Well, I took out my target.”

“Oh really?” says Red Amazon, “and what then are you doing here instead of helping the mistress down there?”

Blue Amazon glares, “I beat the boy, but I told you I should have been the one to fight the energy manipulator.”

“Strongest fighter,” says Red Amazon, “fights their strongest fighter.”

“Yeah,” says Blue Amazon, “and that’s who beat me, right now the mistress is down there with the future dean of this school and her private tutor...who is insanely strong...she grabbed...she stopped my sword with just two fingers and tossed me around with out barely moving a

muscle...”

Blue Amazon looks past at the box above them then whispers to her comrades, “something isn’t right about her, she didn’t even utter a spell, she used two totally different kinds of attacks like they were both her specialty.”

“Like I’ve been saying,” says Green Amazon, “this whole place is screwy.”

“Are you questioning our Lady’s decision to come here?” asks Red Amazon.

Green and Blue look at each other and back at Red and say in unison, “No, of course not.”

Back in the imperial box Haki asks Yumi, “I can’t see from here, but how’s Hollia doing.”

Yumi looks out, she can make out Hollia’s and Rurona’s shapes standing near each other, “Did the arena get bigger?” she asks.

“The arena,” says Nasca, “distorts space to fit its needs, your battles were bigger than we anticipated, so the arena expanded its internal space; don’t worry about the outside...it’s...hard to explain how this ancient arena works.”

“Okaaay,” says Haki not even letting himself think about that, “but what about Hollia?”

“Miss Holly-Lia?” asks Nasca pointing outwards, the arena appearing to shrink as she does so bringing them closer, or the box closer to them, or something between or not at all the two, “her fight is wrapping up now.”

Everyone, the Three Amazons included, watch the surreal change in the space of the arena as they focus on the confrontation between the final combatants.

Meanwhile, As the fighting begins, Yurataki stands still looking right at Hollia and Lin Lin, Hollia stands ready, her staff out and Lin Lin floating above her. Both know the other isn't much for hand to hand combat and wait for an opening. Red Amazon charges directly at Yumi, the two of them heading backwards, Red Amazon pushing the assault further and further away from the two. Green Amazon locks her eyes on Pima and runs to the side as though attempting to circle around; this ruse makes Pima keep her pace with the swordswoman and watch her for any signs of attack. Amia likewise dashes off, her eyes focused on Green Amazon and her bow at the ready. However she plans to use the rocks for cover; a ploy she and Pima know well from their own days at Stratalia when facing a single strong opponent. Blue Amazon chases after Haki. All are seemingly unaware that Rurona vanished from sight the moment the fighting started.

As the fighting starts, and the sounds of explosions and screams can be heard around them the two stare down each other until Hollia breaks the silence, "Miss Yurataki, I don't know why you wanted to fight us, but please, I ask you to surrender...I...I really don't want to hurt you or your friends, this doesn't make any sense, maybe if you quit now you can ask to fight the golems you'd normally fight. No one would think any less of you."

Yurataki's expression is one of utter disgust, "Surrender?" she growls, "You're the one who should be surrendering, your friends are being dealt with as we speak; now

it's just me and you. I am going to show the dean, your teacher...and those fools in Croix that I deserve to represent the Croix Empire and that you are nothing but talk and book knowledge."

"It...no," says Hollia, "I...please, you have to know this is crazy, I...my friends...and Miss Rurona...you can't win, so just please surrender Miss Yurataki; or...I'll have to hurt you."

Yurataki laughs

"Do you think I'm a fool?" she says, "your little plan to distract me or put my guard down so you can get off a quick spell or have your pet dragon attack me isn't going to work...besides..."

A shadow leaps from the ground like tentacles and wraps around Hollia, surprising Lin Lin who tries to strike the shadow on the ground, which leads back to Yurataki's own shadow, only to instead become stuck to the shadow like glue.

"That's what I was doing," says Yurataki with an over top haughty laugh, "You are so full of yourself, so prideful, of course I knew I couldn't beat you one on one."

Yurataki starts to walk towards Hollia as the shadow constriction tightens on Hollia, and the part Lin Lin is stuck too flips up off the ground and then down on top of Lin Lin pinning her to the ground.

"But I knew your friends would take the bait and fight my vassals, they do seem stronger than me don't they, me the little witch who always stood back and threw potions and simple spells. But I expected the fools back home to

know better, I had to prove it to them, and this, is...is..."

As Yurataki gets closer she starts to feel dizzy and look at the shadow constriction over Hollia's chest, it's not solid but wavy...like sinking, being sucked in. "What..." says Yurataki dizzily, "is..." The shadow constriction snaps from Yurataki's shadow, quickly flows over Lin Lin releasing her, up onto Hollia's body and vanishes over her chest.

"I..." says Hollia, "I...don't know..."

"Lie..." says Yurataki trying to hold her balance, "you...tri..trick..."

fwop

Yurataki falls to the ground, her eyes closed.

Hollia puts her hand to her chest as Lin Lin flies up and gives her a quick lick on the cheek.

"How?" says Hollia.

"Shadow Cloth..." says Rurona walking over, "shadow magic is the worst kind of power to use against it and..."

a pink flash

But Yurataki doesn't vanish.

"No!" screams Yurataki flying off the ground dodging the teleport field, shadows tightly wrapped around her waist, between her breasts, and wrapped around her arms like straps; straps that form long wrist sword blades.

"It...It's not over!" screams Yurataki, "I...shadows...Umbra Dimension Swords!"

Yurataki raises her blades as she flies; darkness glowing from them as she prepares a mighty blow, and by pure instinct Hollia aims her staff forward and yelling out, "Goddess Wind!"

A mighty blast of green circling wind shoots forward

striking Yurataki sending her flying backwards, her eyes glazing over, this time the pink flash grabs her and sends her now completely exhausted and unconscious to the penalty box right behind her three vassals the Three Amazons.

“You okay Hollia?” says Pima zipping over, “saw that really, really, really cool blast, you got her right? Of course you got her,”

Amia walks over and whispers, “Miss Hollia, congratulations.” While thinking, “That’s our bad-ass sorceress.”

“Where’s Yumi?” asks Hollia looking around.

“Up here!” yells Yumi from the imperial booth, with Haki next to her, a sheepish look on his face.

“Now how the hell did you get up there?” asks Pima.

Yumi shrugs before jumping down and flying over to them, “I kind of went overboard, guess I would have blown myself up too.”

“Just so you’re all right.” whispers Amia while thinking, “Maybe she’s more of a masochist than a sadist after all.”

“This ends the battle exam.” announces Nasca, “The challenged contestants are free to leave, those of you who are students will receive battle credits, more so those who weren’t defeated...which would just be Miss Holly-Lia come to think of it, the rest of you will receive monetary compensation for the assist.”

A little bit later, a few hours in fact, Yurataki is still a little dizzy but able to move around.

“You’ll have a headache for a while,” says Nasca standing at her desk with the four exam takers before her, “that desperation move was foolish, with most of your energy already drained out of you, you left yourself wide open; but...it did earn you some hero points.”

Nasca shuffles some score sheets that she hands to them, “Now I know you think you lost, but this was never a pass fail exam, given your strategy, skills displayed in battle, along with the curve given for fighting both a larger number and superior force you all pass the exam.”

Yurataki looks less than thrilled as they head out of the room.

“I wonder,” says Nasca thinking back to the battle exam. She vanishes in a pink flash

She reappears on the roof above the Lia family section, overlooking the private garden, she’s flown over this area many times as she comes and goes from her own home out in the village, there is something on the ground she’s seen before, but hadn’t really paid much attention too, something she landed near just once years ago that at the time only garnered her a “huh” at the time. Being the Lia family’s private area she didn’t ask about it because that would mean confessing to trespassing and didn’t think it was very important.

She flies over to where it was before, and is now gone.

“That statue,” says Nasca standing where it had been before, “and what Friska said, and I could sense my-

self...huh...I wouldn't think so...but...it's gone now. Well, that is weird, Rurona huh, interesting, I'll have to take this up with Mom and see if she can make anything out of it the next time I get some vacation time."

She vanishes again, leaving the garden silent.

Graduations at Stratalia are not huge celebratory events, each semester many students receive their diplomas and head back to their home nations. This semester Haki has graduated, he is now recognized as a Court Magician class sorcerer and despite wanting to stay at Stratalia to be near Hollia he is obligated to return to his home nation of Crimdalina. But not before receiving odd words from Jinron-Lia about perhaps someday sending Holly-Lia his grand-daughter to study there, perhaps in a few years, as Jinron-Lia put it when Haki has had time to grow.

Yurataki and her Three Amazons also graduate this semester, returning via their private air ship on the long journey; with many stops through Northern Ravashira, Xiang, and Hindis, before returning home to East Croix. There she is greeted as a champion, the future baroness of her home kingdom of Obera.

It is not long after this that the festival takes place, Yurataki's vessel even crosses paths with the delegates from Croix, many high level aristocrats whose representative is of the Imperial Capital, and several merchants using this as an excuse to access Stratalian territory early before the annual merchant ship runs.

In fact it's only two weeks after the exam takes place that the festival takes place, that time when a mysterious foe attacks the school and unleashes Dah-Hoth upon it. That time when Tyros-Lia, Jasma, and Jinron-Lia all learn that Rurona, Hollia's tutor, is in fact Rhulan, the very woman who once ruled the world and had been trapped in stone for the last thousand years; and not long after this, a few short months, Rhulan and Hollia's adventure truly begins, out into the world.