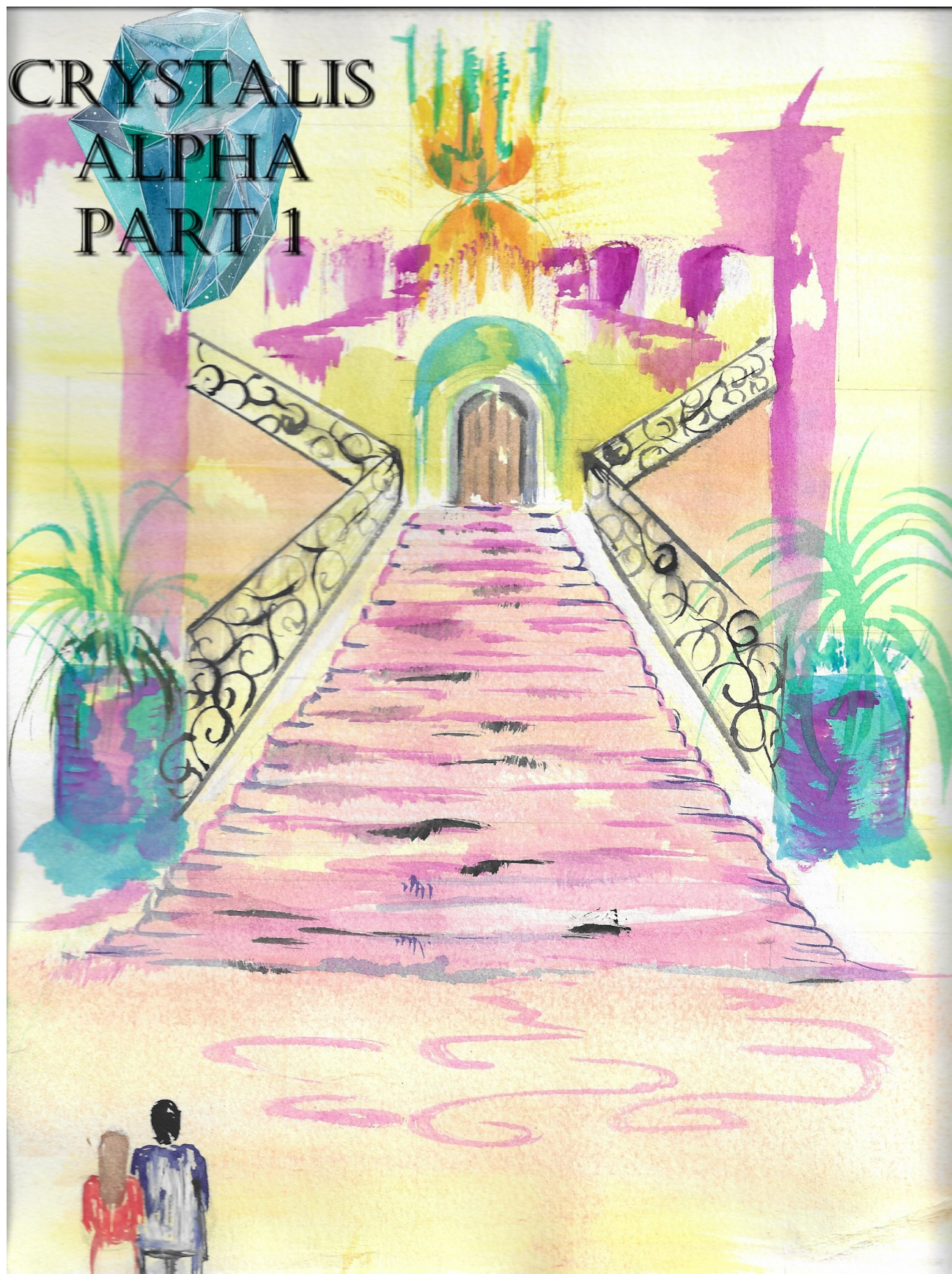


# CRYSTALIS ALPHA PART 1



*Crystalis Alpha* (A Part of *The Crystalis Saga*)

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## The Message

It is believed that over an eon ago a great planet was born. Though several lands formed during the planet's evolution, only two produced kingdoms. Empress Oni ruled one of those powerful expanses. History says barely into her teens, the future ruler killed her parents and ascended to the throne of a land built on military strength and ravaged by the sea and storms – this place became known as “Jarad”. On the other side of the world was a budding kingdom benefiting from a country full of long-swaying green grass fields, pristine mountains, and areas excellent for future sea porting challenged Jarad's resource productions and military efforts as the years progressed. The people of Jarad's opposing nation named their land “Gonaga” after their first king and his father.

With the assistance of hundreds, King Gonan – son of the great Goga I – helped build Gonaga into something worth being envious of. The king was an imposing figure that made the most rugged man look weak in comparison. King Gonan's square face with its hard jaw seemingly couldn't be broken by the hardest punch; forest fire-colored eyes able to cut through any man daring enough to confront him without permission or acceptance; hands as hard as iron skillet from years of physical labor to accent his skin bronzed by the sun; tree trunk-like thighs and calves.

King Gonan made it his duty to keep peace between Gonaga and the world's other fledgling countries. Empress Oni refused to cooperate with Gonaga's figurehead, bringing violence upon his kingdom. The battle between Gonaga and Jarad became known as “The Great Ocean Cry” due to the numerous bodies the sea gave up at the war's conclusion. Even in victory, King Gonan's instincts prepared himself and his empire for the worst.

On his deathbed, the King of Gonaga gave his only child, Goga II, three small, shimmering, crystals shaped like keys; followed by one last command, “Son, protect these keys. If even one falls into the wrong hands it could mean the end of Gonaga as we know it.”

King Gonan died less than a week after handing the keys to his offspring. Five years following

The Great Ocean Cry, Goga II attempted to fulfill one of his father's last wishes by bringing harmony between Gonaga and Jarad through a treaty. King Goga met Empress Oni on his personal ship to discuss the pact's terms. The Empress of Jarad offered no input, willfully agreeing to King Goga's offer.

Three decades slowly passed without a shred of aggression between Gonaga and Jarad. Empress Oni's reclusive nature created rumors that she'd secretly passed. The only recurring footage of Jarad's empress was of her signing the peace treaty and returning to Jarad via a private plane. King Goga II started suffering from an unknown illness following the birth of his son, Goga III. During the king's sickness, Gonaga was silently invaded by a renegade group of nomads. These violent people captured families with children between the ages of five and eight. Gonagan officials investigated each kidnapping, but found no common link or lead.

Ripped apart from their parents and loved ones after being forced to use ransacked homes for a few days following their capture, the young boys and girls who were abducted found themselves in a desolate wasteland without food or water. In groups of thirty or less, they searched for days in hopes of returning home. Many children died during their journey; with less than three hundred of the near one thousand adolescents from across the globe finding haven near a fortified building.

Being escorted into this mysterious structure by sword-wielding men, the children were given new clothes and as much food as they could eat. Those injured or sick were treated with the best of care by one of the world's most renowned, yet reviled scientists. After filling their stomachs and given a chance to rest, the children met the person responsible for saving them.

Empress Oni stood in front of these thankful kids to ask them, "What do you think of Jarad?"

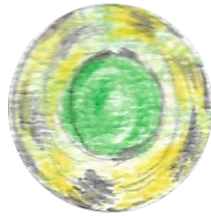
When no one answered her, Empress Oni continued speaking, "That's good. Talkers aren't needed. You all will stay silent and listen to everything I command. I've waited far too long to complete my goal. And the only way to do that is by investing in some new blood. I won't lie to you. What you'll experience in the coming years will be worse than anything you went through out there. But it will all be worth it in the end. Now, I'll leave you to my underlings so they can ready you for

tomorrow's activities.”

Jarad's sole ruler watched the training of each student on a daily basis. Three boys quickly adapted to their surroundings and grew in understanding the methods Empress Oni wanted to impart upon them.

The empress would say to herself, “These three have a mindset like no other children in this world. If only we had a whole army like them.”

After twelve years of unmitigated hardship, two of the empress' prized pupils planned an escape. They constructed a raft with discarded wood and bed sheets under the cover darkness as everyone slept. Two weeks of secretive work led to one fateful night when they sailed toward Gonaga to tell King Goga III of Empress Oni's impending plan.



Following fifteen hours of paddling, the two young men from Jarad – Jas and Jake – approached Gonaga on their poorly crafted catamaran just at sunrise. Even with the time to think, Jas still couldn't fathom what happened during their last days in Jarad.

Jas initiated the first conversation since their trip began, “Can you believe him? First he agrees with her. Then he tries to kill us during a sparring session. We're supposed to be friends for life.”

“We can't do anything about it,” Jake responded while keeping his eyes on the nearing shore.

“She has him brainwashed and there's nothin' we can do but tell the king what's gonna happen.”

“You think the king will believe us?”

“I hope so,” left Jake’s body like the long sigh that followed his response.

Jas was rather small for his age, but incredibly strong. His fellow Jaradians initially picked on Jas for an easy fight, but little did they know Jas was stronger than most of them. Jas’ blue eyes, small nose, and thin lips highlighted his egg shaped head. Jas’ short blond hair was the most unique feature on his body. In the entire world, only ten percent of the population was blond.

Jake’s light caramel complexion made Jas’ fair skin look whiter than it actually was. Jake towered over his friend both in height and weight. But Jake’s size hid his incredible agility. Many considered Jake one of the most graceful trainees in all of Jarad. Even with their “special” traits, Jake always considered himself and Jas average.

Knowledgably entering Gonaga for the first time, the weary travelers were still wet and muddy from crashing into the side of the bay. Walking into the town saw Jake and Jas leave a trail of caked mud that fell from their black, steel-toed boots.

The two friends’ matching pair of dirty green cargo pants and black, collared, button down shirts made several townspeople wonder aloud, “Why are they dressed alike?”

These wandering Jaradians eventually found a shop where they could attain a free town map.

Flipping the map upside down, and back again, Jake informed his friend, “It says the castle’s a few miles north.”

Jas had a question for his friend after Jake handed him the map, “Hey, how are we gonna get into the castle and talk to King Goga?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

A few miles and an estimated ninety minutes of walking were prolonged thanks to Jas joking with anyone he felt he could get a laugh out of. Finally nearing the castle, Jas spotted a little girl who looked to be around ten years old playing in an alley. Jas approached this child, noticing her creating mud people.

Jas asked the girl after squatting beside her, “What’s your name?”

The little girl giggled upon answering, “Athena.”

Athena smiled, looking down at her project before asking Jas if he would like to join her. Jas grinned back, doing as the little girl requested.

Speaking up was Jake, “Jas! We don’t have time for this. We’re almost there. We gotta get to the castle.”

Jake’s statement seemingly shocked little Athena. Before Jas could say goodbye to her, his playmate ran down the alley; disappearing behind a set of trash cans. Jake ignored Athena’s abrupt departure, heading toward the street. As Jake exited the alley, he bumped into a woman wearing a hooded robe. He feverishly apologized to her, but the woman continued her stroll; never saying a word. Ignoring the isolated incident, Jake followed his friend until Gonaga Castle’s front gates came into sight.

“Jake, that thing’s huge!” Jas said; obviously surprised by the sight of their destination. “It’s like Oni’s home times three. How are we supposed to get in?”

A feminine voice suddenly echoed from somewhere nearby, “It’s easy if you know how to talk to the guards.”

Similar in age to the two Jaradians, a young lady stepped from her spot beside a concrete pillar supporting the castle fencing. Her dark brown hair floated down her slender back as she stepped gracefully around the stagnating puddles. Moving her hair back, she displayed her light hazel colored eyes. She batted her long eyelashes prior to scratching her small chin and pouting her lips in slight thought. This girl’s skin was beautifully tanned from a sun that Jas and Jake rarely saw in Jarad during their training inside Empress Oni’s fortress. She was visibly in better physical shape than most girls; even compared to some guys her age.

“My name is Serena,” this stunningly beautiful individual informed the somewhat frazzled boys. “My little sister.... Where is she? Come here.”

Athena moved from her hiding spot, grabbing Serena’s right hand with her left. Serena led her

sister toward the wall Jake and Jas were now leaning against.

She quickly explained why the Jaradians gained her sister's attention, "She said she saw two boys she's never seen before. And one was really cute. Which one is it, Athena?"

Athena instantly pointed at Jas. Noticing no one behind him, Jas suddenly realized their identifier was referring to him. Athena's admittance of her interest in Jas had Jake laughing hysterically. Jas stomped so Jake would stop chuckling.

When that didn't work, Jas demanded, "Shut up, Jake! We've got more important things to think about. You said you could get into the castle?"

Serena's smirk turned into a full-blown smile before she told Jas, "Of course. I'm the first Princess of Gonaga."

Simultaneously asking were her two intended guests, "How are *you* a princess?"

"So you don't believe me?" Serena asked the unbelievers. "I see you need proof. Watch this."

With Athena still latched onto her arm, Serena approached the castle's ten-foot tall, solid steel front gates.

"Oh, guards!" Serena gleefully said – causing two Gonagan soldiers to leave their posts near the castle's front entrance to hear what this girl wanted.

"I need to escort these two men to my father," Serena told these attentive men. "They have business with him."

"Yes, Princess," the guards responded before opening the gates.

In disbelief Jake and Jas motionlessly stood.

Serena peered back at her stunned colleagues; eventually saying, "I suggest you leave your little toys outside," referring to the sickles attached to Jas' belt and Jake's sword holstered by a brown leather strap that traveled from his right shoulder to the left side of his pants.

When they entered Gonaga Castle, walking up the immaculate staircase near their entrance, Jas poked and whispered to his friend, "I told you she was a princess."



“No you didn’t,” retorted Jake.

“She’s too nice looking to be anything but.”

A now grinning Jake admitted, “I’ll give you that one. But what about her?”

Jake pulled Jas’ eyes away from their royal escort’s backside by pointing at a painting on the wall to their right. Princess Serena looked back to see Jake and Jas admiring a woman in one painting.

“That’s my grandmother,” the princess informed them.

Jake’s eyes shifted one painting over – an artistic rendition of a huge battle. Recognizing a woman in the painting caused Jake’s face to lose all color.

Jake punching Jas in the arm made Jas yell, “Hey, whaddya do that for?”

Immediately after his rude attention-grabbing technique, Jake asked Jas if the woman in the painting resembled Empress Oni.

Jas’ inability to formulate a quick answer allowed Princess Serena to chime in, “That’s because it is. It’s a painting of the battle between my great-grandfather and Empress Oni when Gonaga was in its infancy. Did you somehow know Oni?”

Jas was about to tell the Princess of Gonaga that they indeed had interacted with Jarad’s empress, but Jake verbally stopped him, “Jas, shut up. If they know, they might throw us out.”

Princess Serena paid no attention to her guests’ low-toned conversation as she continued walking toward their destination. At the hallway’s end were two twenty-foot tall, golden doors. Before they could enter the Throne Room, Princess Serena stopped her followers so she could check on the king’s current status. Inhaling deeply, Princess Serena opened and stepped through the golden barricade for a minute prior to hopping back out.

“Okay,” the princess said; visibly relieved. “He said you could come in.”

In awe was Jas upon entering this circular room decorated with marble and paintings from various sources throughout the world. Jake approached a platform constructed in front of King Goga’s enormous, golden throne.

The princess introduced her guests, "Father, these are the two young men I spoke of."

Jake and Jas gazed at the statuesque king whose body resembled that of his grandfather – something unbeknownst to the king's visitors. King Goga's square face appeared as if it was carved from stone. The king's hair and beard looked like that of a wild animal, with only minuscule patches of black hair in the covering gray. Both Jake and Jas were almost paralyzed by the cold stare coming from the King of Gonaga's light brown eyes.

After several seconds of uncomfortable silence, Jake decided he better speak before King Goga became agitated, "My name is Jake, and this is my friend, Jas. King Goga, we have urgent news for you. You see, we come from Jarad... and... well...--"

"Speak up, boy!" the king commanded; halting Jake's rambling. "I have no time for innocent chitchat."

Jas blurted out, "Oni is planning to attack and take over Gonaga!" as Jake mumbled through his words. "See, Jake, that's all you have to do."

Shifting in his seat after cracking his neck, King Goga asked to hear Jas' proclamation again. Jas repeating himself as the king had requested forced a hearty chuckle out of his questioner.

Following King Goga's amused expression, he told Jas, "That's absurd. We've had an agreement between the lands of Gonaga and Jarad for over half a century. You boys need to stop wasting my time with this stupid joke and leave. Now!"

Jake pleaded with the King of Gonaga to reconsider his thoughts, "You don't understand! Oni's been trainin' my friend and I our whole lives. She's got more soldiers than you can imagine. You gotta listen to us!"

Once again, King Goga ordered them out; calling for the guards that stood beside him to escort Jas and Jake off his castle grounds.

Jas sarcastically remarked at his friend as one of the guards unsheathed his sword to show he meant business, "Well, that went well."

With Athena by her side, Princess Serena exited her home shortly after the sentinels completed their task of dismissing the king's unwanted guests.

Princess Serena told the frustrated Jaradians, "Sorry about my father. He can be stubborn at times."

An infuriated Jas responded, "You think?"

Jake immediately nudged Jas' right arm to keep him quiet.

The five minutes of pacing in front of Gonaga Castle's front gate gave Jas the opportunity to come up with another plan.

Jas, verbalizing his thoughts, said, "Hey, Jake, how about we beat Oni? We know everything about her. We're stronger than anyone she's ever sparred with. We could do it!"

Before Jake could respond, Gonaga's eldest princess spoke up, "Maybe he's right. And by the way, what are your names again?"

In shock, Jas peered at his friend before slowly turning in the princess' direction.

A stunned Jas said to Princess Serena, "We've been talking for almost three hours and you don't know our names? You were standing right there when we introduced ourselves to your father. I guess that's a princess' mentality. My name is Jas – the handsome, smart, funny one of this tandem. And he's Jake. Um, he's pretty cool, too."

Jas' eyes shifted from Princess Serena to a squatting Jake whose face was turning red after his friend's comment. Jake returned to an upright position, putting his back to the talkers as Princess Serena questioned Jas about Empress Oni and how they knew her. Before responding, Jas asked Jake to move closer to the princess and himself.

Jake moved like Jas requested; allowing his friend to answer Princess Serena's question, "Yeah, we used to work for her. Oni's pure evil. You know what – Jake, you tell the story. He might not be better looking than me, but he's a heck of a storyteller."

With his arms crossed, Jake leaned against a concrete pillar that held the left half of the castle's

front gate. Jas motioned for Jake to speak, but Jake threw his eyes toward the ground, not saying a word. Abruptly, Princess Serena knelt in front of the quiet Jaradian so she could look at him from his new vantage point.

“Come on,” Princess Serena whispered at Jake. “I want to hear you tell a good story like your friend says you can.”

Jake let out a slight sigh prior to conceding to the princess’ request, “About eighteen years ago I was born in a hospital...somewhere. I don’t know where, but I know it wasn’t in Jarad. I somehow ended up in the middle of Jarad, fightin’ dust and sand to find some haven. One day, this goofball over here and I stumbled upon this huge steel fortress. Come to find out, it was Empress Oni’s home.”

Jas jumped in front of King Goga’s first child after Jake’s statement, making “spooky” gestures by wiggling his fingers.

Shoving Jas out of the way, Jake continued his tale, “Oni took us under her wing and trained us. A few weeks ago, I overheard her talkin’ about what happened to my parents and how she planned another raid soon. Oni has a group of mercenaries to capture people from other places and return them to her. Those people – the children she acquires – become her army and death squad. Years of gruelin’ trainin’ prepared us for Oni’s latest attack on Gonaga. We planned to leave Jarad as soon as possible after findin’ this out.”

After realizing Jake’s enthralling story had ended, Princess Serena asked, “Do you remember anything before you were captured?”

Neither Jake nor Jas had a complete memory from their pre-Jarad life.

Somewhat frustrated over the open-ended story, Princess Serena started audibly prodding Jake, “You gotta remember something. You’re just shy, aren’t you?”

Grabbing Princess Serena’s wrist, Jas pulled the questioner away from Jake to tell her, “He has memories, and so do I. But they’re all jumbled up. The only timetable that makes any sense is the one after we arrived in Jarad. Oni.... She has methods... devices. Memory erasers, scramblers, or

something. They mess with your head so much that the only thing that seems real is what Oni tells you. But that conversation we overheard was a trigger, y'know?"

Seeing Princess Serena shake her head in confusion as to Jas' question, Jas explained himself, "Things that Oni didn't want us to remember somewhat came back that day. I can see pictures; broken shards of those memories Oni didn't want us to have. More importantly, we finally understood what she was training us for. So we came up with a plan to escape by raft. After a couple of weeks of work, we headed here. It took us almost a day, but we made it. The problem is Oni has to know we're here."

"Oni will come after us," Jake suddenly said while looking at Jas, "with Dash by her side."

The princess wanted to know whom this Dash was. Princess Serena nodded at Jake for an explanation, but he refused.

Jas took it upon himself to answer Princess Serena's question, "Dash is... was our best friend. He went through the whole brain-warping thing worse than we did. His mind's just so strong that they had to break him physically. When Dash rebelled, they'd beat him until he couldn't stand. He still has the scars of that injustice. It's sad that now he believes her."

Gonaga's first princess needed to know, "Um, Jake, how long do you think it'll take for Oni to get here?"

Jake – still staring at the ground – said to himself, "She was plannin' and remodelin' her jets when we left. A couple of weeks if nothin' happens; maybe more if things don't go right."

Enthusiastically, Princess Serena responded, "Okay, let me go get my stuff and we'll be on our way!"

Beaming with a smile, King Goga's oldest daughter ran back to the castle as Jake audibly tried to figure out what just happened, "Wait one minute! Who said she's goin' anywhere with us?"

"Why fight it?" Jas asked his confused friend. "Plus, she's a good-looking piece of royalty who would love to be with a good-looking man."

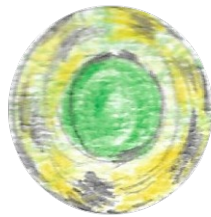
"Jas, I highly doubt she's thinkin' the same way you are right now. And aren't you already

spoken for?”

His friend didn't have a clue of who Jake was referring to. Jake's eyes shot from the ground to little Athena playing in front of the castle. Jas ignored Jake's motion, restarting his campaign for Princess Serena accompanying them.

Arguing against Jas' verbal crusade was his fellow Jaradian, “There is no way I'm gonna get the Princess of Gonaga involved in a battle like this! I'll admit she's kinda cute, but she's a princess. Princesses don't fight. I bet she's never even held a sword. She'd just be a liability.”

Glancing at the castle grounds again, Jake nonchalantly noticed Princess Athena was suddenly gone.



Princess Serena had no time for her little sister, leaving Athena in Jake and Jas' views so she could pack some clothes.

*I better hurry up or they might leave me,* Serena thought.

When she finished, King Goga's daughter snuck out of her home through the window above her bed. Moving around the castle grounds undetected proved very easy for Princess Serena, but the thought of Jake and Jas leaving without her made the princess move that much faster. Thankfully for Princess Serena, Empress Oni's former soldiers hadn't moved an inch when she made it over the gate to their right.

After slightly grunting, Jake said, “Okay, Princess, Jas talked me into it, and... and you can

come with us.”

The noticeable, almost haughty smile forming on Princess Serena’s face proved to be a precursor to her response, “Like you had any other choice. Let’s--”

Before the princess could finish her sentence, a loud explosion rumbled throughout the land. When the reverberations passed, a bell in the town’s center rang.

Distressingly, Jake asked, “What was that, Princess?” as he watched people exiting their nearby homes.

Princess Serena told her new associates that the bell’s ringing signaled an attack on Gonaga. Almost immediately did Jas verbalize his belief that Empress Oni had to be the reason for this commotion.

Abruptly, the eldest Princess of Gonaga said in Jake’s direction, “But how did she get here so fast? You two said we had at least two weeks.”

Rather than answer his questioner, Jake turned to a pacing Jas with a query of his own, “Do you think she knew the whole time?”

As Princess Serena and her Jaradian followers reentered the castle’s front yard, Jas asked Jake without responding to his friend’s question, “You think we can beat her?”

“We’ll have to find out now or never,” Jake replied. “The only problem is the princess might get in our way.”

“No she won’t.”

Frustration shown on Jake’s face as he tried to understand why Jas thought Serena wouldn’t cause them a hindrance.

Jas explained himself, “I don’t know if she’ll get in our way or not. But I do know she’s not waiting for us to find out.”

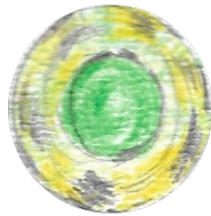
Witnessing Princess Serena entering the castle without them out of the corner of his eye caused Jake to moan, “Can’t she stay still?”

Minutes later inside Gonaga Castle's western corridors, Jake peered in various rooms during his search for Princess Serena. Not far from the princess-seeking Jaradian was Jas freaking out over the thought of being executed if he and Jake were held responsible for the Princess of Gonaga being injured in any way.

Jas suddenly asked his buddy when they finished searching through the last set of rooms, "You think she's even in here?"

No answer exiting Jake caused Jas to repeat himself.

After a third try, Jas finally got a response from his visibly upset comrade, "How should I know? She's like a ghost. Disappearin' like she ain't even real. Maybe she's on the other side of the castle."



King Goga had become as hysterical as his townspeople unbeknownst to him at the time.

"What's going on out there, General Bridges?" the king asked when he entered the castle's Situation Room.

While trying to keep up with King Goga's frantic pace, Bridges answered his ruler, "Empress Oni's fleet has infiltrated the castle's holding bay."

King Goga immediately commanded General Bridges and any troopers near the holding bay to see what Empress Oni's fleet was doing in Gonaga unannounced.

Almost a half an hour after ordering members of his military to confront a part of Jarad's army,



the King of Gonaga asked a returning, pale General Bridges about the empress' reason for arrival, "So, Bridges, what did she say?"

Taking a few moments to collect himself, the man in question finally responded, "Well...I can't really say. Her army was too fast and killed most of the men we sent in."

Unable to truly comprehend what he had just heard, King Goga yelled, "Her men were able to kill them all? Her army is that powerful?"

Before General Bridges could reply, a soldier entered the room.

The Gonagan notified his majesty, "Empress Oni wants to see you, King Goga."

"So Oni wants to see me? Is this some kind of elaborate scheme to kill me, too? If so, she picked the wrong land to invade, again. Tell Oni that I'll meet her in the Conference Room in twenty minutes."

From the largest chair in the Conference Room, King Goga watched Jarad's empress enter the room before blurting out, "Explain yourself!"

Empress Oni's dark eyes scanned the table until they reached the stunned king.

Instead of a reply, Jarad's only ruler had a query for her questioner, "This land was created as an escape, correct? There's a key to every lock and there's something very special about that clear key hanging from your neck. That key unlocks the seal that helped your grandfather defeat me and allowed your father to figuratively hold me hostage in Jarad. But the powers of this nation aren't enough for an entire army, are they? I want that key so I can return to a state of being that I was robbed of by Gonan!"

"You've gone mad, woman!" King Goga shouted as he rose from his seat. "You agreed to the terms my father laid out. Are you planning to break that agreement?"

"What agreement?"

"The agreement that if you attacked Gonaga we would destroy Jarad."

An angry King Goga immediately sent out a message through the castle's intercom following Empress Oni's lack of a response, "General Bridges, lay waste to Jarad!"

Without apparent provocation, Empress Oni laughed when the king didn't get a response after several minutes.

The Empress of Jarad said while King Goga continued listening for feedback from General Bridges, "How can you destroy the land without a general or an army? By the time I finish this sentence, the decimation of your general, his men, and the men you sent to find us will be complete."

A lone guard ran in to alert his land's highest leader, "King Goga, Oni's troops have killed every stationed soldier."

The king's face instantly lost all color. Beads of sweat formed on King Goga's forehead as his body slightly wavered.

"This can't be," King Goga said; his voice starting to crack like his frame under the pressure of this unbelievable news. "Our numbers are too vast for domination, let alone slaughter."

Empress Oni questioned the bewildered leader, "You think I didn't know what we were up against?"

Nearing King Goga, the empress continued talking, "Each of my soldiers can kill an average of ten soldiers without being touched. Every person has the will to live. But I've trained them to fight like they're wounded beasts from start to finish. You have no power over us anymore. You are weak. You are nothing like your ancestors. And now I'll let you tell Gonan that his grandson has disgraced him and his entire family personally."

Empress Oni's right hand moved from her side. So busy trying to get a follow up response from General Bridges, King Goga didn't pay attention to her right palm turning from its normally ghastly white to red. That reddening of the empress' hand was actually energy being produced from her body to a single point of interest. Finally feeling this condensed energy emanating from his fellow ruler grabbed the King of Gonaga's attention. King Goga's paralyzed stillness allowed the Empress of Jarad to turn her energy into a beam without being stopped. The ray shot from Empress Oni's hand, piercing King Goga's chest.

The Empress of Jarad proclaimed as her target slowly collapsed, “Gonaga will finally have leadership worthy of her.”

Turning around after sensing another person nearby, Empress Oni found Princess Serena standing in the Conference Room’s doorway. Locked were Serena’s eyes on the stream of blood flowing from her father’s body.

“Do not worry about him,” Empress Oni coldly stated. “You will be seeing him real soon.”

Fear stiffened the eldest Princess of Gonaga as Jarad’s leader approached her. Suddenly, Empress Oni noticed two people running toward the room’s entrance.

One of the individuals barked, “You gotta go through us first!”

The familiar bodies of Jas and Jake moved in front of a motionless & frightened Serena, guarding Gonaga’s first princess. The Empress of Jarad smirked at her former pupils following Jas’ declaration.

Empress Oni said, “So if it isn’t my second best warriors. Do you really think you can defeat me when the pressures of being a member of my militia were too much for you both?”

Jas quickly retorted, “Easy! We’ll take you out like we disposed of every training partner you threw at us.”

Empress Oni acknowledged his statement, but she knew Jas was forgetting something, “I will admit that you and Jake are powerful. Though you were never as strong as Dash, were you?”

Seeing their former commander’s words had struck a nerve with Jas, Jake told his angered friend, “Jas, calm down! *We* have to think this through before she harms the princess.”

Before Jake and Jas formulated a plan, Jarad’s empress charged across the room. Empress Oni grabbed Princess Serena by her hair, dragging her from the doorway with lightning-fast speed.

Princess Serena tried to kick & claw her way to freedom while screaming, “Let me go, you stinkin’ witch!”

According to Empress Oni, Princess Serena only had one option, “Take the key from your

dying father's neck and bestow it unto me. You know the only way a person not of pure Gonagan royal blood can attain that key is by having someone of pure royal blood entrusting it into the recipient's possession through a verbal declaration. Do it and maybe I'll let you live."

Jas had seen enough, rushing King Goga's attacker. The empress easily smacked Jas out of her way, sending him sailing through the room. After landing on the large oak table in the room's center, Jas tried to regain his bearings. Jake moved beside his friend to see if he was okay.

When Jas confirmed his injuries were superficial, Jake quietly voiced his plan, "You get behind her and wait for my cue."

Jake ran in front of Jarad's invading leader after removing his sword from its holster.

Yanking Princess Serena closer to her, Empress Oni loudly mocked Jake, "What are you going to do with that knife? You want to cut me, don't you?"

Jas pulled out his sickles prior to jumping on the empress' back. Jake stabbed the left side of Empress Oni's torso as Jas used the chain that connected his sickles to choke his former leader; allowing Princess Serena to free herself in the process. When she hit the floor, the princess ran for the Conference Room's entrance. Princess Serena glanced behind her to see Jake and Jas still fighting Empress Oni. Before the princess' head matched the direction of her moving body, something knocked Princess Serena off of her feet. Peering up, Princess Serena's eyes met a man staring blankly at her.

As she tried to get up, this unknown individual asked the surprised princess, "Leavin' the party so soon?"

The Princess of Gonaga scooted backwards into the Conference Room, hoping to get away from this possible enemy.

Only a few feet behind Princess Serena, her homeland's greatest enemy lay on the same white marble floor with Jas standing over her. Raising the sickles above his head, Jas prepared to kill the woman who groomed him to become the fighter he was at that very moment.

The man in front of Princess Serena abruptly asked Jas, "You would murder the only mother we

know?”

A simultaneous shouting of, “Dash!” exited Jas and Jake’s mouths upon hearing the familiar voice.

The scars on this individual’s – Dash’s – face matched those of Jake and Jas’ stories. Wearing a tattered, white collared shirt and black slacks, Dash grabbed the first Princess of Gonaga by her hair. Princess Serena screamed for Jake to help her until Dash removed his sword; laying his weapon’s tip against the princess’ throat.

Jake hastily asked, “Dash, what happened to you? Why did you let her take it away from you? You’re nothin’ like the Dash, our best friend--”

“I grew up – just like you two should’ve,” Dash interrupted Jake’s spiel before pointing his sword at Jake & Jas. “You see, when we were hangin’ out, we were weak. Then Empress Oni taught me how to be strong. She trained me to be the best.”

Jake demanded that Dash prove his manhood by releasing the princess and fight him instead of hiding behind visibly incapable of matching fisticuffs.

After laughing at Jake’s request, Dash informed his friend-turned-enemy, “I will let her go when she gives Empress Oni what she wants. Princess, all you have to say is, ‘Empress Oni, I offer you the key of my ancestors – the key that can unlock powers dormant for far too long. It is my gift to you to spare my life.’ It’s all so simple. Maybe she’ll do it if you tell her, Jake. Don’t think I arrived with everyone else. I saw her when you told her those stories. She hangs on your every word. Like when you told her about me. Princess, you wanna hear a little story he didn’t tell you.”

Dash repositioned himself against the nearest wall with Princess Serena still in his clutches so he could start his story without fear of someone attacking him from behind, “It’s about the time when I saved him from complete annihilation. Seven years old is when myself and Jake started basic combat trainin’ after spendin’ a year just runnin’ and doin’ cardio exercises. Jas was eight and on his way to begin the real trainin’ regimen. You know, sinkin’ enemy ships and such. But poor Jake was havin’ all

kinds of trouble gettin' through basic combat. And every time he failed a routine, he'd start cryin'. That big, brick wall of a boy in front of you used to cry until he couldn't make any more tears. Looks like he might cry right now. But I guess that's because he knows I can kill you whenever I feel like, and there's nothin' he can do about it."

Jas yelled for Dash to shut up, but his fellow Jaradian hadn't finished the story.

"May I continue?" Dash asked a seething Jas.

Rather than let Jas answer, Dash started talking again, "One kid decided to pick on your little storyteller about his inability to overcome the simplest things. I stood up for my 'friend', knockin' the kid's right eye out with my trainin' sword. As punishment for not standin' up for himself, Empress Oni ordered Jake to be taken to 'The Wall'. The Wall is a place where fellow trainees beat you with anything they can get their hands on. That crybaby blubbered so much that I decided it'd be best for me to take his spot. I was the one who was really out of turn. Through my actions, I took away Jake's opportunity to prove his worth. They put me against The Wall and whipped me like a rabid dog. You see this scar on my face, don't you?"

Dash used his free right hand to point at a wound that ran down the bottom of his right cheek from his right temple.

After returning his sword to his captor's neck, Dash explained to Princess Serena, "That's from an arrow head that I used on myself to show them how their attacks weren't hurting me. But it wasn't all bad. That's the day I put myself above all others. That's the day I became the most powerful person in Jarad...behind Empress Oni of course. And if you don't want the princess and I to have matchin' scars, Jake, I suggest you tell her to give up that key."

Princess Serena kept her mouth clamped shut as she felt the cold steel press against the right side of her head. Jake hastily thought of a way to disable Dash while protecting Princess Serena following Dash's statement.

Before Jake could execute his plan, they heard someone chokingly whisper, "I give up the key

of my ancestors to Empress Oni of Jarad; the key that gives you possession of the Gonagan Crystal.”

Princess Serena, Jas, and Jake instantly realized it was King Goga III speaking. Through the king’s words he relinquished possession of his family’s key to ensure his daughter’s safety. Dash shoved Princess Serena down, yanking the key from her father’s necklace before assisting his wounded leader. Gaining her footing after Dash handed her King Goga’s key, Empress Oni felt her wound slowly healing.

The Empress of Jarad ordered her second-in-command, “Take me to the plane.”

Dash walked his leader through the Conference Room’s only door; never fearful of Jake or Jas attacking them. After Empress Oni and Dash left the area, Jas and Jake approached Princess Serena sobbing over her bleeding father. The hurt in Serena’s face made Jake question if she’d be the first of many Gonagans crying in the near future thanks to his past comrades’ actions.

...to be continued