

CRYSTALIS
ALPHA
PART 5



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

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The Reunion

A startled Jas stared blankly at this smiling, white-haired version of Dash – his friend-turned-enemy – after Dash saved Princess Serena from an attempted attack by a Jaradian soldier. Dash stood perfectly still as Jas circled him.

When Jas came face-to-face with Dash again, Jas couldn't help but ask, "Is that really you, Dash?"

The same laugh that once calmed many a circumstance or situation – a laugh silenced by Empress Oni's training – rolled out of Dash's mouth before he answered, "Of course it's me! Even though I can be replicated physically, my essence can't be duplicated. Just ignore the hair and you'll see nothin' but pure Dash."

Moving from Princess Serena's side, Jake finally spoke up, "Dash, I think the last thing we need to talk about is your new hair."

Dash pondered on an easy response, but realized the full truth was his best option, "How do I explain this? Almost an hour ago, our mutual Jaradian – Ken over there – decided he should attack me. In my warped mind, I thought Ken wanted my head on a pike. Instead, he needed to save me from everything I've been hidin' from. He was determined to break the hold Empress Oni had on me. Ken wanted the real Dash back."

Jas didn't understand how Ken beating their old friend down restored Dash's mental state.

"It wasn't the actual fight that brought me back," Dash said with everyone listening intently. "The physical interaction opened the floodgates of memories Oni's mind warps kept hidden. Come to find out, the only person with the ability to bring me back was myself. You know what? Maybe I should let Ken tell the rest."

Immediately, Ken became the focus of his comrades' attention.

“You really want me to do this, Dash?” Ken asked the silent, yet grinning Dash.

After Ken received a positive confirmation from Dash, Ken revealed his origin, “Jake, Jas, Princess... I’m in no way connected to you in a human aspect. I never experienced a natural birth like you all. I was created from Dash. I’m Dash’s clone.”

Contemplating what Ken just said made Jas shout, “How can you be a clone if you don’t look exactly like him?”

Ken visibly examined Dash prior to answering Jas’ question, “I guess that’s how Oni wanted it. She didn’t want you to know that she could do such things – playing God in hopes of becoming one. But since I’m made from Dash, she couldn’t change every physical similarity. That’s why the princess’ eye caught my hidden truth. Her mind is clear and pure; not muddled like ours. When I got a hold of Dash, the connection missing between our energies finally synchronized. With that connection came the clearing of Dash’s mind from Oni’s control. Okay, I think that’s enough talk about such wild occurrences, right? It’s time we help the people of Gonaga before it’s too late.”

Behind the reuniting friends stood Princess Serena trying to figure out what just happened, *Seriously, what did I get myself into? Clones. Energy connections. A guy that almost kidnapped me is suddenly being nice. And worst of all is Jake and Jas accepting Dash like nothing ever happened. What is wrong with them? What’s wrong with me...? Did I just hear that? Sounded like a stampede...*

Princess Serena’s ears weren’t playing tricks on her. The sounds of yelling Jaradians heading their way grew louder with each passing second.

“Hey!” the forefront Jaradian said at his fellow soldiers when he spotted the familiar faces ahead, “Dash is with those traitors! Empress Oni will probably give us a hunk of Gonaga if we capture ‘em and bring ‘em to her! Lets get ‘em!”

Dash halted Ken, Jas, and Jake as they prepared for battle by telling them, “Friends, leave this to me. The least I can do is show off a little.”

With his sword by his right side, Dash pressed toward Gonaga’s numerous threats. When Dash

came within ten feet of his targets, he stopped walking; stabbing the cracked street with his clear sword. The Jaradians froze in their tracks as they noticed the embedded weapon somehow producing a smoke-like substance alongside its owner. This opaque haze emanating from Dash and his sword quickly moved through the fractured road. Even though they tried to outrun this anomaly, the thickening cloud caught up to and enveloped a majority of the fleeing Jaradians before exploding.

Looking beyond the seven unconscious bodies, Dash noticed four Jaradians running away. Dash leapt over his targets after chasing them. To the soldiers' horror stood Dash; now in front of them with his right arm pointing in their direction.

One soldier decided against retreating, telling everyone around him, "It's four of us against one of him. Come on, we can take him!"

Dash smiled at this brave man lunging toward him, using his extended arm to deflect every incoming punch the Jaradian threw. Humor turned into boredom quickly for Dash during his agile display. Throwing his right foot forward as he backed from the continued, yet slowing strikes, Dash tripped the Jaradian. The poor soldier lost his footing, colliding face first against his stone base. Blood spewed out of the downed trooper's broken nose. When the brave fighter tried to push himself off the ground, he felt Dash's right boot slam against his back. The Jaradian's face met the cement again, losing consciousness in the process.

"Okay, enough of this," muttered Dash before sprinting forward.

The remaining soldiers lost track of Dash until he punched each one in the torso. The three-hit assault by Empress Oni's former second-in-command ended with a trio of Jaradians on their stomachs just like their unconscious "leader". A smile reappeared on Dash's face as he dusted himself off.

Directed at his spectating friends, Dash said, "I tell you, no matter how you feel a nice fight is the remedy to all the world's problems. It's just so.... Ain't that somethin'! Got blood on my boots. I love these boots."

Dash ripped off a tattered piece of a nearby unconscious Jaradian's shirt to clean his black

leather boots. While all of her associates stood happily alongside their old friend, Princess Serena wondered if Dash's return was all a ruse.

Princess Serena couldn't take it anymore; shoving herself between Jake and Ken before verbally confronting Dash, "What's your plan?"

For the first time since reappearing, confusion became etched on Dash's face.

"Don't play stupid!" said the Princess of Gonaga before slapping Dash across his left cheek.

An audible, "Oh!" exited Jas' mouth when Princess Serena wound back for another wallop against Dash's throbbing face.

Dash hastily called for Jake after the force from each hit became more and more powerful, "Get your girlfriend off me!"

"You gotta calm down!" Jake commanded after grabbing the princess by her waist.

Instead of heeding Jake's order, Princess Serena elbowed Jake in his face. Before Dash could react to Jake losing his grip of the princess, she tackled her target. Taking Jake's spot in pulling Princess Serena off of Dash was Jas.

When Serena finally settled down, Jas asked Gonaga's eldest princess, "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" the princess responded. "What's wrong with you? What's wrong with you, Jake? Just a couple of days ago you two were talking about how you wanted to pay Dash back for betraying you. You wanted nothing more than payback. My family didn't matter as long as you settled your little vendetta!"

Even with his nose dripping mucus and his eyes teary, Jake could see an unrestrained rage boiling inside Princess Serena.

Jake whispered into his chest, "I do care about your family... and you. That's why I'm here."

Jake's mumblings restarted the princess' tirade, "Seriously, how can I trust any of you? Not only did you admit you were planning to capture and kill me, you also allowed Oni to live when you

wounded her because Dash stood in your way. How do I know this isn't some elaborate scheme to hand me over to Empress Oni? You think I haven't contemplated that?"

Jake's mind absorbed Princess Serena's words; forming the conclusion, *She doesn't trust me. Even after I promised....*

The princess yelped as Dash approached her, "Don't come an inch closer!"

Several tense, quiet seconds passed between the four until Jas said, "Serena, I know what's happened has changed your view of everything. I think all of us understand that the Princess of Gonaga couldn't trust four men who were planning to wipe out her family and her home. I know I'm not the most serious guy all of the time, but know that I'm dead serious about my allegiance to you, your family, and Gonaga. I won't stand here and let this beautiful place burn."

Just like his voice upon speaking. Jas' eyes burned with conviction, "I will not let Gonaga die because of mistrust. Jake, Ken, Dash, you guys are with me. And if that's all that matters, then let it be. From the little time I've gotten to know you, Princess, I confidently assume you'd rather stand and fight than be a distrusting, regretful, future slave."

Princess Serena admitted as her bracing, ready-to-fight figure slumped, "It's not just about what happened or your inability to prevent it, Jas. I actually *do* trust you. I trust Jake. I even trust the 'clone'. But as much as I trust you three, I don't believe a word Dash has to say even more. You may have known him before his mind got torn apart, but I didn't! The only Dash I know is the man who threatened to slit my throat if I didn't give up my father's key."

Ignoring Serena's earlier command about not coming near her, Dash moved toward the princess. Dash eventually stopped only a few inches in front of the hesitant Princess Serena.

Though Dash's eyes focused on the one person questioning his change of heart, his words were directed at Jas, "Don't be angry with her, Jas. She's completely right. She has every right to not only distrust me, but to hate me. I've tormented her family. I ruined her life. To her, I'm scum."

Dash noticed Princess Serena's fists unclench as he continued speaking, "In life, I coulda been

better. Like my friends, I coulda confronted my past – let it empower me. Instead, I gave into Oni’s will so I wouldn’t mentally suffer from bein’ motherless anymore. Even though I knew she was the reason I had no family, I still settled for evil instead of loneliness.

“Under Oni’s command, I took children from their families. I became everything I hate. Thanks to Ken, I found the only way I can atone for my many sins; for all the heartache I’ve caused and families I’ve wrecked. I know what that key is. And if we defeat Oni, we’ll save Serena’s people from becomin’ monsters like I once was.”

Dash walked past the Princess of Gonaga in hopes of retrieving his sword when Serena’s right hand latched onto his left wrist.

The princess’ grip tightened before she said to Dash, “I hope your future actions look as good as your words sound.”

When Princess Serena’s statement concluded, the sight of her hand loosening around Dash’s wrist brought a nice sigh of relief from Jas. Ken patted Jake’s shoulders after he noticed the blank stare emanating from him.

“You okay, Jake?” Ken asked his stoic friend.

Shaking his head removed the mental cobwebs covering Jake’s mind; allowing him to answer Ken’s inquiry, “Yeah. I just remembered what I have to focus on.”

After inspecting his sword, Dash asked Princess Serena, “Is there anywhere we can go that’s a little quieter than this?”

Jas didn’t give the princess a chance to answer by blurting out, “Yeah, I know where we can go! There’s a hidden hangar underneath Gonaga Castle. Even Serena didn’t know about it. What do you have in mind?”

The sight of Dash’s ever-returning grin sickened King Goga’s first daughter.

Dash explained that he wanted to show Princess Serena what he believed could turn the tides in their favor during this fight to save Gonaga, “I felt it. That girl is who she is for a reason. Just like her

father, she's strong in will and body. An ocean of energy flows through her, and I think I can bring it out. Lets hurry up and get this thing done."

Princess Serena stopped halfway through their trip toward Gonaga Castle so the lagging Jake could catch up to her.

Immediately after Jake found himself beside Serena, the princess asked, "Do you know what he's talking about?"

Rather than give his questioner any kind of response, Jake walked past her. Jas and Ken intently watched the interaction between the princess and their friend.

Whispering, Jas told Ken, "She says one wrong thing and now he's mad at the world."

Hearing the optimism in Jas' voice made Ken jokingly remark, "So you're going to sweep Princess Serena away from him now?"

"Hey, if she comes running, I'm not gonna push her away."

Without a single confrontation between themselves and Empress Oni's troops during their trek, the five arrived at Gonaga's damaged castle in a short amount of time.

Dash motioned for everyone to sit in front of him after entering the underground hanger so he could further explain his earlier statement, "The reason I wanna do this is because a couple of days ago, while we were invadin', I felt a tremendous amount of energy surge from somethin' or someone. When Princess Serena grabbed my wrist, I realized she was the source of that energy. What if I told you that Oni knows a way to harness her energy and physically manifest it into a powerful projectile?"

A disbelieving Jas responded, "Get outta here!"

Jake spoke up, "He's not lyin'. I know it can be done."

Empress Oni's former confidant declared his words were true, "Don't believe me? Just watch this."

Dash pointed his right index finger at everyone before producing a small, dark, hazy ball from that same finger. Everyone but Jake gasped at the incredible sight.

Dash told his admirers, "If you guys want, I can teach you."

Sitting in a circle, Dash demanded everyone to concentrate, "What you wanna do is clear your mind."

This first task caused no problems for Jake, Ken, or the princess.

Jas, on the other hand, began fidgeting until Dash calmly said, "Relax, man. Just don't worry about anything around you."

Jas' body eventually settling caused Dash to start speaking again, "With your minds clear you can now focus on only one thing. The thing I want you to focus on is a ball of energy. Think of a sphere swirlin'; forceful, woefully heavy at first, but light as a feather after its formation sittin' in the pit of your stomach. That energy wants to move to a single point on your body; be it your hands, feet, or even your mouth. Visualize that ball moving from your abdomen to that single desired point. If you concentrate hard enough, you'll make that energy appear. You can expand the ball. You can change its shape when it arrives. Crazy, right?"

An hour of practice passed as everyone except Gonaga's princess started utilizing Dash's technique. No matter how hard she tried, the only thing Princess Serena produced was frustration.

Eventually, Princess Serena whined, "I can't do it," while watching Ken and Jas show off by spinning ring-shaped energy around their fingers.

Princess Serena's eyes moved to Jake as he copied his friends by turning a red sphere of energy into a small ring, twirling the energy around his middle finger. Noticing the princess staring at him, Jake extinguished his glowing light before walking toward the steps leading above ground. With one foot touching the bottom step, something stopped Jake from proceeding upward. Jake peered back to find Dash grabbing his left arm.

"She's only gonna get it if you teach her," whispered Dash to his exiting companion; causing Jake to sneer in disgust.

Jake could feel the princess' eyes locked on him during his one-sided conversation with Dash.

After some more coaxing, Dash convinced his friend to assist the Princess of Gonaga in completing what seemed to be an unattainable goal. Everyone's attention moved from themselves and their energies to Jake squatting in front of a pouting Princess Serena.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Jake asked her, "So you havin' a hard time, aren't you?"

"I'm the first daughter in Gonaga's royal bloodline," Princess Serena replied. "Something that seems so simple shouldn't be this hard."

Jake's response caught Serena off guard, "You really are a piece of work. One minute you're screamin' at the top of ya lungs about how we're untrustworthy. And now you're sittin' in the middle of a dark room with those same individuals who angered you."

With her chin pressed against her chest, Princess Serena quietly apologized, "I'm sorry for letting my anger get the better of me. Jake... if there's anything you should know about me it's that you've earned more than my trust."

A loud, "Ah!" from Jas echoed around the room.

Ignoring Jas' attempt at humor, Jake thought for a couple of moments before telling the princess, "If you really don't believe you can produce energy like the rest of us, I want you to stand up and point your palm at me. I'm givin' you an easy target. If you can't hit me, then you can't fight with us."

Princess Serena, like her allies, couldn't believe what Jake was asking of her.

The princess started stuttering, "I-I-I... I-I can't--"

"You're not gonna hurt me," Jake interrupted. "If you wanna help your people – Gonaga, Athena, your mother, and everyone else depending on you – you better learn how to..."

Jake's train of thought slowly dissolved when Princess Serena's palm lit up. Everyone stared at the princess' energy turning into a translucent ball. Fear shown in Jake's eyes as the energy ball shot from Princess Serena's hand. Jake couldn't react fast enough to avoid the Serena's sphere colliding with his chest, knocking him across the hangar. Shock ran through everyone watching while Jake

struggled from his horizontal position. Several seconds passed prior to Jas assisting his downed friend.

Of course, Jas had some words for Jake, “Man, she had you spinning like a.... Well, I don’t know what you were spinning like! But you were going around and around and around until, bam! You okay, man?”

Shaking his throbbing head, Jake replied, “Yeah. A baby blow. Nothin’ serious. Just help me up.”

A scared Princess Serena neared Jake after he gained a vertical base to say, “Jake, I didn’t.... I mean, you told me--”

Jake’s words stopped the princess’ incomplete statement, “Don’t apologize. You only did what I ordered. Just make sure the next time you’re aimin’ for me you turn down the power. I don’t know how many times I can take a shot like that.”

Clutching Jake’s shoulder, Dash gleefully said, “These senses never fail, do they? Oni never imagined that sittin’ under King Goga’s family tree was someone possessin’ more energy than anyone in Gonaga’s history. Maybe even in the world’s history.”

From Jas came the question, “Wait, wait, wait, wait, what do you mean that she might be more powerful than anyone in world history?”

Dash refused to go back on his words.

Instead, Dash prepared everyone for their next lesson, “To defeat Oni, we must be able to fight like her. And one of Oni’s greatest techniques is the art of flying.”

Once again, Jas spoke in astonishment, “Oni can fly?”

Dash explained that flying was just energy used to move one’s body, “Like tossin’ energy from your hand, you can force that power down to your feet. The energy will push you. And with enough focus, you can move in any direction. Think of it as walkin’ on air. Just watch.”

Dash closed his eyes, slowly lifting off the ground. Widening eyes stared at Dash while he floated around the room with glowing feet. As everyone started practicing, Princess Serena found

herself one step behind again. Unfortunately for the five, even with everyone's support and encouragement, King Goga's daughter couldn't get the hang of flying.

Too much time had passed in Dash's opinion, "This didn't take as long as I thought, but we've spent a lotta time down here. Those Gonagans can't wait for us to become masters of these various skills."

Gonaga's hopeful defenders exited the hangar to discover several Jaradian soldiers patrolling the now desolate castle grounds. In what appeared to be an apparent lapse in judgment, Dash tossed a rock to garner the soldiers' attention.

Dash yelled in the troops' direction, "Are you guys lookin' for me?" after the rock smacked a soldier's back.

Murmuring from the Jaradians made Dash speak again, "You guys really have a lotta guts actually standin' around when you know what I single-handedly did a few hours ago."

Before the soldiers moved from their positions, Dash vanished; reappearing behind them seconds later. Dash hooked two soldiers by their belts, tossing the Jaradians forward. The sailing enemies landed at Jas and Jake's feet.

"I'm guessin' you want a piece of some action before the big fight?" Dash asked his friends after knocking the remaining three Jaradians out with punches between their respective eyes.

Following Dash's lead, Jas and Jake pulled the soldiers in front of them off the ground. Two quick punches from Dash's comrades sent their targets tumbling backwards.

Jas said to Jake when they saw one of the soldiers closest to Dash crawling away, "I think I wanna try something."

Throwing his left arm upward, a blue lasso of energy swirled from Jas' elevated, spinning limb. Jas swung the energy lasso, wrapping it around the fleeing soldier's neck when it reached him. With one quick tug, Jas' target flew into a small pile of unconscious Jaradians beside Dash. To everyone's shock, the soldier was still awake after the energy disappeared from his throat.

Jake hoisted this hurting Jaradian to his feet; asking him, “You really wanna leave, don’t you? Well, I think we can work out somethin’. If you tell us where Oni is, we’ll let you go without makin’ an example of you like Dash did to your friends earlier.”

“You’re nothing more than a traitor,” the soldier retorted. “You, and Jas, and Dash... you guys were heroes to us. You betrayed our support. You betrayed Jarad. You betrayed Empress Oni.”

Instead of responding, Jake placed his palm on the soldier’s chest. Anxiety seemingly ran through the only conscious Jaradian as energy flowed from Jake’s hand.

The distressed voice of Princess Serena halted Jake’s possible fatal attack on this soldier, “Jake! Don’t do it, Jake! Don’t let his words take you back to who you were!”

Jake’s energy dissipating following the princess’ statement allowed Jas to approach Jake and their mutual adversary.

Jas informed Empress Oni’s trooper, “You should be glad she said something. Jake was about to wipe you out! Now, tell us where Oni is or I’ll take up where Jake left off. And don’t think Princess’ words will stop me.”

The Jaradian admitted he didn’t have a clue of where Empress Oni stationed herself in Gonaga, “But it doesn’t matter if you find her. Gonaga as you know it will perish!”

Jake’s hand relinquishing this uninformed soldier shocked the Princess of Gonaga. Even though Princess Serena didn’t want Jake to obliterate one of Gonaga’s invaders, she couldn’t understand why he’d let the soldier go after a failed interrogation. The puzzled look on Princess Serena’s face made Ken step beside her.

“It wasn’t your voice that stopped Jake,” Ken explained to the stunned princess. “That soldier is incredibly brainwashed – just like we were. He’s prepared to die for Oni and her cause. Jake could have slowly tortured him, but he wouldn’t have said anything important. Jake’s not a remorseless monster. But I guess you know that already.”

Princess Serena of Gonaga stayed on alert for any Jaradian soldiers while she and her

companions helped the several injured townspeople they came across. One of Empress Oni's abduction squads passed a few burning homes when they overheard Dash talking. The Jaradian group of seven hastily formulated their attack.

Jas alerted his friends about the arriving soldiers, "Guys, we've got company!"

Creating a rope with his energy, Jas' lasso hooked & dragged the nearest soldier toward him. But Jas couldn't follow up with another attack after four soldiers tackled him. Out of nowhere, a pair of red energy spheres collided with the two standing troopers. Jake – the person responsible for this energy attack – pulled two of Jas' attackers off of his friend, throwing them several feet by their shirt collars. The lassoed trooper grabbed Jake from behind when Jas' energy vanished around the soldier's neck. Jake dropped to his knees, shaking the Jaradian off of his back and knocking the wind out of his attacker. By his head, Jake clutched the aggressor. Dash and Ken freed Jas from his horizontal position by elbowing each Jaradian holding their friend down at the base of the soldiers' skulls. Moving to his feet allowed Jas to make a run toward Jake's kneeling body.

Using Jake's shoulders as a springboard, Jas leapt over his comrade's body from behind. Jake released the soldier as Jas' hands extended from his sides. The Jaradian Jake relinquished abruptly felt Jas latch onto him. With a quick tug, the falling Jas whipped his enemy's face against Jas' knees; cracking the soldier's jaw in the process. Following Jas' attack, someone screamed behind Dash. Ken spun around before Dash could, confronting two of the Jaradians he believed Dash elbowed into unconsciousness.

The abduction troopers swung their broadswords at their former allies, only for Ken and Dash to jump. In an amazing show of agility and balance, Dash and Ken landed on the ends of the incoming weapons. The Jaradian soldiers lost their balances and the grips of their swords due to the unexpected added weight. Dash was the first to leap from his descending perch, dropkicking both soldiers' chests.

During the commotion, no one noticed a sneaking Jaradian nearing Princess Serena from behind. As the Princess of Gonaga watched Dash and Jake stack the knocked out soldiers on top of

each other, she suddenly heard footsteps. A powerful urge overcame Serena when the soldier rushed the princess. Without thinking, Princess Serena dodged the wild haymaker of a punch from her latest attacker. The princess avoiding every strike this soldier threw attained her friends' attention.

Pumping his fist in the air, Jas exclaimed, "Look at her go!"

Princess Serena's speed amazed Jake to the point he began talking to himself, "She's movin' so fast. He can't find the real target. She's leavin' a realistic image of herself every time she sidesteps him. I knew she had some extraordinary power, but not like this."

The continuing failure of connecting with any punch caused the soldier to switch his attack. Princess Serena couldn't stop this Jaradian's takedown when he feigned a strike prior to moving forward. With her focus shaken, the princess found herself struggling to get off of her back. Dash glared behind him to discover Jake moving to save Gonaga's downed royalty.

"Don't do a thing!" Dash ordered Jake. "She's gotta understand the depths of her powers; the depths of her very being. If not, she'll have a harder time against Oni."

Just as Dash finished his statement, a scream echoed from Serena. Following the deafening yell, the princess' body emitted an incredible golden dome of energy that sent her mounted attacker flying several yards away. Princess Serena slowly rose as the hurting soldier did the same. Unfortunately for the princess' attacker, he found himself in front of Ken and Jas.

Jas plucked the horrified soldier on his nose for his own amusement before stating, "You know you're not gonna win, right? Just look at her and tell me you feel good about your chances."

The trooper did as Jas commanded, witnessing a trembling Princess of Gonaga standing behind him after the energy dome dissipated. When the soldier blinked, Princess Serena disappeared. Similar to what Dash did earlier, Gonaga's first princess reappeared in front of the dumbfounded Jaradian. A quick jabbing punch from Princess Serena broke her aggressor's nose. Princess Serena's right hand clutched the soldier by his throat before he fell.

The increasing pressure around his neck caused Serena's prey to beg, "Pl-please do-don't kill

me.”

““Please?”” King Goga’s daughter said at her weakened opposition as he attempted to spit out the blood pouring down his throat. “How dare you come here, ruin the lives of so many people, and then ask me to spare your life. You are scum. Someone needs to make an example out of you.”

The calling of the princess’ name stopped Serena from finishing whatever she had in mind when she placed her right hand directly in front of the soldier’s face. Hearing her name again shook Princess Serena out of her violent trance. Grabbing Serena’s right arm stood the crier’s source – Jake.

Demanding the Princess of Gonaga to lower her steadfast hand, Jake stated, “You can’t do this.”

Instead of heeding Jake’s words, Serena forcibly separated herself from his grip by pulling away. The energy surging from Princess Serena’s palm caused Jake to intervene again, sliding between the princess’ hand and the hopeless soldier.

Jake told a shaking Gonagan princess, “I’m not gonna let you do this.”

Audibly, Princess Serena didn’t understand why Jake would protect a person who was trying to kill her.

“Simply because that’s not who you are,” Jake told her. “You can’t allow your newfound powers to mix with your emotions; with your rage. Don’t let yourself become the person you thought I was.”

Jas whispered, “Dash, you don’t think she’ll.... I mean...”

Not getting an answer to his incomplete statements made Jas notice a sudden spike in Dash’s power.

Jas’ mind started racing with the thought, *I hope he’s not thinking about attacking Princess.*

Also feeling Dash’s energy increase, Jake wondered, *Is he tryin’ to match her?*

Removing his focus on Princess Serena, Jake looked in Dash’s direction with a command, “Dash, don’t do it! Don’t you even think about it! She’s not--”

A sudden beam of light shooting from Princess Serena’s right palm interrupted Jake’s

proclamation. All Jake could feel was the energy's heat as this attack neared him. The princess' energy moved around Jake's blocking body, knocking the soldier into the pile of Jaradians her allies created earlier. Thankfully for the trooper Princess Serena blasted, her energy only pierced his padded shirt and knocked him into unconsciousness.

Dash approached King Goga's daughter once her energy level normalized to tell her, "You really had me worried for a second. Now do you see what I'm talkin' about?"

Princess Serena ignored Dash's question, talking to Jake instead, "Thanks for helping me keep my head on straight. I've never felt anything like that. I just became so overwhelmed--"

The warm embrace of Jake's arms halted Serena's verbal gratitude. In return, Gonaga's eldest princess wouldn't let Jake go even when his arms started sliding in an effort to free himself.

After a couple of awkward seconds, Jas had no choice but to jokingly say, "Don't you two think it's time to find Oni? Or are you gonna hug for the rest of the night?"

Princess Serena finally released Jake from her grip, allowing the men to plan their next move. Following a quick conversation, everyone decided to head east toward Gonaga Grand Hospital.

Ken convinced his friends that Empress Oni's militia needed a station full of medical supplies and somewhere to house the captured Gonagans, "And the best place to accomplish that goal would be at a hospital."

During their travel, a woman wearing a long, hooded, black robe sighted Princess Serena and her fellow travelers.

The robed woman called out, "Young man!"

All five heard the person's shout, but only Jake turned in her direction.

Jake exclaimed upon seeing her, "You! You're back for another round?"

After quickly explaining to his friends what happened the first time Jake came in contact with this woman, Jake braced for battle. But the woman didn't want a fight, or meant any harm toward Jake and his friends.

“I’m only here to give you this,” this mysterious woman informed Jake.

Beneath the robe fell a brown sack following her statement. She insisted Jake take the sack and its contents. To Jake’s surprise lay the same sword the woman used against him in battle.

Jake examined the mesmerizing golden blade containing four various colored orbs in its handle; refusing to take the precious item from her when his amazed awe melted away, “I can’t take this ma’am. This--”

Her wrinkled left hand stopped Jake’s refusal before she affirmed, “It’s okay. It belonged to my late husband. He would want a nice young man like you to have it; especially when that man is using it to help people unable to help themselves. You and your friends have hearts forged from gold – just like that sword.”

Some verbal convincing from Jas persuaded Jake to graciously accept the weapon. Sudden increasing winds lifted the woman’s hood, giving Jake a quick glimpse of her face.

The woman’s appearance made Jake ask, “Have I ever seen you before our little sparring session?”

Somberly she answered, “That memory is faded and painful. I think deep down you know where we’ve met. I’m just thankful I could give you one last gift. You better keep going. If you wait any longer, I don’t know how much of Gonaga will be left. Just make sure you let everyone hold that sword. Let them become one with it just like you will in battle.”

When she walked far enough away from the five that she was barely visible, the robed woman shifted with an obvious gaze at what stood behind her.

Jake took a step forward with his mouth opening when he abruptly stopped.

Dash had to know, “Is there somethin’ you’re not tellin’ us, Jake? Who is she, really?”

It took a few moments before Jake could answer, “She was a warrior. If she had the opportunity to train like us, I think... I think she could’ve defeated Oni. I sensed it when we fought; kinda like Serena in that regard. Speaking of which – Serena, take this.”

To the princess' astonishment, Jake handed his old sword to Gonaga's princess.

Jake said immediately after his presentation, "This is my gift to you, Princess Serena of Gonaga. I know you'll use it in a fashion nothin' short of extraordinary."

Jas' face lit up with a smile prior to shouting, "Oh yeah! Now I know it's time for us to find that witch!"

...to be continued