

CRYSTALIS
ALPHA
PART 6



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

Copyright © 2013 James Bullock

Copyright Registration #: TXU001847418

Cover art and design: Vickie Bullock (vickiesart.com)

All rights are reserved to the author. No part of this ebook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, character, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Other World

With power outages occurring throughout Gonaga, the search for Empress Oni became increasingly difficult for Princess Serena and her companions Dash, Jas, Jake, and Ken as night fell. The five's original theory of Jarad's supreme ruler and her militia stationing themselves inside Gonaga's Grand Hospital proved fruitless.

Another hour of wandering caused Jas to speak up, "Guys, it's getting really dark. Maybe we should look for a place to get some sleep."

The group's general consensus agreed with Jas, but they didn't have a clue where to go being so far from Gonaga Castle with the returning to Princess Serena's home impeding their progress.

A man's scratchy voice abruptly echoed behind the five during their discussion, "Hey, kids!"

Upon turning around in the sound's direction, the Princess of Gonaga locked eyes with an elderly man and woman standing near a visibly fortified home.

This man singled out the princess by saying, "We couldn't help but overhear your dilemma and it'd be an honor for Gonaga's princess to sleep in our home. It's warm and barely touched by those Jaradians wreckin' homes lookin' for people 'worthy' of bein' taken. It's the least we can do for a member of the royal family."

Huge smiles appeared on the princess and her fellow travelers' faces before they shouted, "Thank you!" in unison.

The couple's spokesman quickly reiterated his offer, "What I said was *only* meant for Princess Serena of Gonaga."

Even when Ken tried to explain their involvement in the princess's mission, the gentleman stuck to his Princess Serena-centric proposal. Jas' growing sleepiness made the usually jovial fighter a belligerent individual. The potential host didn't back down when Jas came chest-to-chest with him.

“I like that fire, kid,” this elderly man responded to Jas’ aggressive behavior. “Like me when I was your age. But the difference between you and me is I know when to fight and when not to. You wanna fight? I showed some of those Jarad fools a thing or two. I can give you the same treatment.”

Before the situation escalated any further, Princess Serena stepped between Jas and the feisty senior.

With a very sophisticated tone in her voice, Princess Serena informed her hopeful host, “These young men are with me, sir. If they can not come in, then I shall stay outside alongside them.”

Dash leaned toward Jake to ask him, “When did she get so proper?”

All Jake could do was shrug his shoulders in mutual confusion alongside Dash.

From the home’s weakened doorway stood a woman voicing her opinion, “If they’re with the princess then they must be good people. They deserve to rest just like the princess.”

As everyone followed the gracious couple inside, Jas muttered at Dash, “Old goat should be happy that his old lady stopped me, ‘cause he was gonna get a few not-so-kind words.”

Dash elbowed Jas in the back; telling his friend afterward, “Shut up so you don’t ruin it for all of us.”

Everyone walked through the living room, entering the couple’s hallway. Beyond their foyer stood two doors blocking a staircase leading to a well-lit, comfortable basement with enough space for ten sleeping people. While everyone grabbed a wool blanket and took a cup of water from their hostess, a feeling of déjà vu swept over Jas.

The thought that maybe he had encountered the welcoming family in his past made Jas ask the home’s owners, “Before tonight, do you think we’ve ever met? I know it’s a weird question, but it just feels like we’ve come in contact in the past. Maybe you or I did something to each other. That’s why we were so eager to fight.”

“I highly doubt you did anything before tonight to light my fire,” was his male host’s response. “First of all, you’re not old enough. And second of all, I’ve been in a fightin’ mood since them Jarad

fools showed up. If we've met, it musta been a long time ago – before Oni captured you; and it's just not like me to fight a kid.”

Jake nearly dropped his half-full cup of water upon hearing this man's words. Like Jake, no one believed what he or she heard.

Breaking the room's silence was the man responsible for the conversation's halting, “I guess you're wonderin' how I know this. You four boys got a look in your eyes that I've only seen once. A girl around the same age as y'all somehow escaped Oni's fortress. She swam almost two miles before passin' out. Facin' the cloudy sky, she drifted until a Gonagan cargo ship returnin' home picked her up.”

Staring intently as if he could still see the runaway's face, the elderly gentleman continued speaking, “I remember watchin' her aimlessly wonderin' around, lookin' for somethin' to eat; somewhere to sleep. We opened our home to her – just like y'all. She couldn't remember her family, where she came from, when she was even born. She did remember her name. What was it now? Megan? Morgan? Mor--”

“Morana,” the lady of the house reminded him. “Her name was Morana. Beautiful name if I do say so myself.”

The man smiled prior to saying, “Aw, Morana. Such a sweet, quiet girl. She coulda stayed. Stayed in Gonaga. Stayed with us at least until she got on her feet. Got enough money for her own place. But she didn't stay around long enough for things like that. That week flew by. And by the end of it, she left in the middle of the night. Never saw her again. The only thing we can do is pray for her safety. Maybe one day she'll return. Visit the old pair that gave her a home when she didn't have one. But I doubt that'll happen if Oni gets what she wants.”

Silence swept through their talk once again. Unlike last time, the verbal nothings continued as everyone eventually dozed off. During his sleep, Jake heard someone calling his name. When Jake opened his eyes, he found Princess Serena standing over him.

The Princess of Gonaga whispered her simple reasons for being awake, “I couldn’t sleep. I’m too worried about my mother and Athena.”

Half-conscious, all Jake could say was, “Just get some sleep. We’ll talk in the mornin’.”

Princess Serena heeded Jake’s words and returned to her original spot. Cracks in the basement walls allowed faint sunrays to hit Jake’s closed eyes some two hours after the princess’ failed attempt at fully waking him. Jake never noticed he wasn’t the only person awake while leaving the basement. Entering the home’s backyard, Jake discovered Ken practicing his sword techniques.

Following a shared smile, Jake told his friend, “You’ve always been one step ahead of me.”

“Only in practice,” Ken regretfully noted. “No matter how hard I try, there’s something about me that never matched your, Jas, or Dash’s moves. I guess it’s because--”

Jake cut off Ken’s externalized feelings by saying, “It’s not because you’re a clone if that’s what you think. The only thing we have over you is the ability to not think in battle. It just comes natural to us. We were born fighters, I suppose. But if you watch us, our styles are too chaotic at times. We let our anger and frustration get the best of us. Your mind is so analytical; so calculatin’. You’re mostly calm in the heat of battle. I’m actually jealous you can solve and adjust problems in your technique so well when you’re against the wall. What you lack in rawness you make up for in skill, proficiency, and tactics.”

During Jake and Ken’s friendly sparring session after their conversation, Princess Serena watched them through a shattered bedroom window. Every time Jake gained an advantage, the princess jumped a little. Unbeknownst to her, Dash entered the room almost five minutes after she did.

“Osmosis,” Dash said to the Princess of Gonaga, startling her. “I learned the same way. I watched everyone when I wasn’t doin’ it myself. But in the end, it was goin’ out there and doin’ it myself that made the difference.”

Serena never moved when she replied, “It’s funny. The more I watch, the more I wanna be like you all. It took so long for you to get as good as you are, right? I don’t have that kind of time. I have to

be ready now. I'm not ready. I won't be ready in time. I..."

Princess Serena suddenly realized she was having a peaceful talk with Dash.

Before the moment passed, Dash figured out why she stopped speaking; asking Gonaga's eldest princess, "You still don't care for me much, do you?"

To Dash's shock, there was no animosity in Serena's answer, "I've seen the real you recently. You truly aren't the same individual who attacked my father and I. I might not like you as much as Jake, Jas, or even Ken, but I know now that you're not the person I first met."

Dash wanted to say something else, but their hosts calling everyone for breakfast derailed his train of thought. A wood stove sitting in the basement's corner heated a pot of oatmeal while the couple's guests gathered in a circle on the floor.

As the five ate, the elderly man restarted their past conversation about Empress Oni's child abductions, "Nobody ever figured out how Oni got people over here – let alone convince them to kidnap kids from their families. There are some evil people out there, I guess. Oni's a good example of that, right?"

After Jake finished his bowl, he asked if the old man had experienced a kidnapping personally.

"My only son," he confessed with his voice even raspier than usual following a few moments to compose himself. "I never even heard them come in. I never heard him scream. (The elderly woman) is in the same boat. Her son got taken, too. For some reason, they didn't take us like they did other families. We had to suffer with the knowledge we lost our only children and no one could figure out how until too many agonizing years later. I think that's why we're so invested in you five – even if I wasn't the most inviting initially. We don't wanna see that happen again. We don't wanna see people suffer like we did. That's why we got a little present for you, young man."

The old woman approached Jas with something wrapped in a dirty cloth. Underneath this fabric lay a pair of golden sickles connected by a steel chain.

Shaking away his confusion, Jas attempted to hand his present back, "Thank you, ma'am, but I

can't--"

This surprising gift giver insisted, "You will. Just take good care of it. It's the last family heirloom I have. I know you'll use it well."

Laughing was the elderly man as Jas gained a good grip of his present. Jas couldn't accept the sickles without giving something in return.

For his hosts, Jas handed his original weapons to them with the verbal message, "If you need some help protecting this place... or even if you don't."

Both Jas and the elderly man smiled after Jas' statement. A sparkle of light suddenly bounced from Dash's sword, grabbing everyone's attention.

"In all my life I've never seen a sword like that," the gentleman said. "It's like God himself crafted that thing. I guess you'd need somethin' close to God if you wanna beat Oni."

The old man noticed Dash's broad shoulders slumping with each breath. Deep within Dash he understood that when the time came he would use the sword his host was admiring to cut down the only mother figure Dash knew. Handshakes and well wishes moved through the room shortly after the elderly man handed the sword back to its owner. With smiling faces, the gracious couple waved their guests off as the five continued north in hopes of saving Gonaga and its people.

Like Jake following his conversation with the robed woman who gave him a new sword, Jas suddenly stopped after walking far enough that he could no longer see the home that housed him for the evening. Dash stepped beside his friend, patting him on the right shoulder.

Several seconds of silence settled between them until Dash asked his friend, "Jas, you know?"

Jas patted Dash's back prior to whispering, "Yeah, I know."

Behind the two conversing friends stood a concerned Princess of Gonaga.

"What are they talking about?" Princess Serena said in no one's direction.

Instead of answering her question, Jake continued forward with Ken trailing behind him. Talks of Empress Oni's whereabouts moved with each Gonagan searching for haven. Jas overheard a

conversation that notified him about several Jaradian troops moving toward Gonaga's National Armory.

With great disappointment in his voice, Jas informed his friends, "Guys, we've been going the wrong way this entire time!"

The five arrived at the armory less than two hours after Jas learned of Empress Oni's possible whereabouts. Patrolling the fence nearest Princess Serena was a lone Jaradian. The princess wanted to test her elementary sword skills on the guard, but Dash insisted otherwise.

Dash explained while keeping an eye on the soldier, "If we cause another stir we'll put ourselves in a poor position before takin' on Oni. We gotta be quick & quiet. Just watch."

Dash's four allies squatted beside a stonewall for a good view of him in action. Trampling over Gonaga's cracked concrete alerted the sentinel. Before the soldier could fully turn in the sound's direction, Dash grabbed him by his waist. Dash's left leg swept in front of his stunned prey, tripping the soldier off of his feet.

Dash kneeled on the now recognizable soldier's back for a quick interrogation, "Where's Oni, Cani?"

"You know I can't tell you that, Dash," Cani responded. "If I--"

Dash punching the trooper's lower back immediately ended the man's rebuttal. As quickly as Dash struck the Jaradian, the guard finally admitted Empress Oni was inside the armory's hangar. To everyone's surprise, no other soldiers surrounded the nearby entrance. Gonaga's National Armory was made up of two buildings: a 200 foot by 200 foot room separated from the hangar by two steel doors that could only be opened electronically. Princess Serena led her followers around the armory's outside while watching for any remaining militia. Everyone was understandably concerned over the fact Empress Oni only stationed one soldier outside of her new sanctum.

"Maybe they're waiting inside for us," Ken remarked.

When they approached the armory's entrance, Jake noticed Jas' pace had slowed dramatically. The color in Jas' face also changed from its usual fair tone to a paler shade.

Jas' unusually trembling frame voiced, "Guys, I've been thinking a lot since we left that old couple. I don't know if I'm right, but more than likely they know when they were born. They know what year, what month, maybe even what day they were born. All we have is an estimation from what we assumed all these years. For all we know, my birthday could be tomorrow. And tomorrow... I might--"

Princess Serena heard enough, stopping Jas' distressing words with a boisterous response, "Don't you say another word! We're this close and now you're giving up? You're giving up because you don't know your birthday?"

"It's not that, Princess," Jas confessed. "When Jake and I left Jarad, we thought all we needed to do was tell King Goga what Oni was planning and he'd take care of the rest. But look what happened. Oni came here, nearly killed King Goga, captured Athena and the queen; ravaged half of Gonaga. I just.... I don't want this to be the last day I see. I don't wanna die yet."

Still speaking, Jas turned his attention to Dash, "You know her powers better than anyone. Jake won't say it, but he knows Oni let us wound her in the castle. She wanted to see if we had it in us to attack her. She wanted to know if we'd choose Gonaga over her. Now that she knows we will, Oni's not gonna hold back."

Unfortunately, Dash confirmed Jas' assumption was correct, "That's exactly what Oni did. As evil as she is, she does have a certain level of trust for those she handpicks and trains. She also trusts in the power of her brainwashin' machines. I don't think she understands the limitations of her mental persuasion techniques. Oni's smart and strong, but she's not a scientist. She needed proof that you and Jake were betrayin' her."

Her companions' growing lack of confidence rattled Princess Serena.

I don't understand, ran through the princess' mind. *They talk about wanting revenge. They want to rid Gonaga of Oni's evil. But when the time comes, they're just like me. They're scared, too. I can't take this!*

The eldest Princess of Gonaga confronted Jas to tell him, “You listen to me! You and Jake escaped Jarad. You crossed the sea on a raft you two made. You’ve injured Oni once and, no matter what you, or Jake, or Dash says, you can do it again.”

Princess Serena’s eyes moved past Jas to the somewhat stunned Dash as she continued speaking, “Then there’s you. Dash, you said I’m the most powerful? Am I more powerful than Oni?”

Before Dash could answer Princess Serena’s question, Jas replied to the princess’ prior statements, “That’s the best you can do?”

No one understanding what Jas meant forced him to explain, “Princess, I like you. I think you’re a nice girl. But your little speech is nothing more than a tired cliché used in stories that don’t happen in real life. In all of those stories, someone stands up to empower the downtrodden group of rebels about to fight in their final battle against some tyrant. Your little ‘ra-ra’ diatribe won’t make me feel better. It won’t make me forget how I feel.”

“I don’t want you to forget,” Princess Serena retorted while coming face-to-face with Jas again. “I want you to accept your ‘fate’. Jas, you really believe you won’t be alive after we fight Oni? Well, what do you have to lose then? If you don’t know if you’ll see tomorrow, why not fight like it’s the last day you’ll ever experience? If your ‘destiny’ is to die today, then fight with no regrets. Fight knowing that today you’ll die for something greater than each of us.”

Noticing Jas’ eyes shifting further downward, Princess Serena grabbed her listener by his shoulders to make him look up and fully hear her next statements, “I could have accepted my ‘destiny’ to be a real princess, but more than likely I’d be in the same position as the rest of my family. I wouldn’t be with you all. And just so you know... I’m ready to die. I don’t want to die, but I’ll do so to protect the land I hold dear.”

Everyone got real quiet until Ken started clapping.

Following his applause, Ken excitedly said, “That was absolutely riveting, Princess! A little too ‘ra-ra’ for my taste, but effective nonetheless. Princess Serena’s right about this being our last day if we

don't fight like it is. If we survive and Empress Oni lives, she'll kill us whenever she wants. No matter what we do, if we don't defeat the empress, she'll find us and kill us like the traitors and enemies to her rule that we are. So there's no point of worrying if we'll live or die because if we don't win, we won't have another day to call our own."

Jake shook his head at Dash before saying, "Okay, this is gettin' too cliché with each speech, man. All we need to worry about is goin' in there and kickin' Oni's butt. Simple."

Entering the armory through its front door didn't alert the five soldiers of incoming presences. Princess Serena's comrades hastily realized these guards weren't regular soldiers; wearing sleek, formfitting, red & black colored full body suits rather than the dirty green shirts and beige pants that made up the average Jaradian's uniform.

Dash informed the intrigued princess, "Those are 'The Selected' as we call 'em. Behind Oni stand the best of the best. Jas and Jake were gonna be a part of The Selected. If Ken wasn't so nice, he woulda been a Selected, too. But I think one of us can take all five. To make you feel better Jas, how about you take care of 'em."

Not needing much encouragement, Jas removed his sickles while rushing the half-aware soldiers. The sound of footsteps growing louder turned the Jaradians' attention toward a lunging Jas. Jas pitched his sickles at the nearest soldier, allowing the chain that connected the two blades to wrap around the Jaradian's neck. The Selected first attacked went sailing backwards until he collided with two of his fellow fighters.

Before the two standing troopers could react, Jas dropkicked them off their feet. Jas back flipped after the kick, landing in front of the grounded Selected.

Why are these guys Selected? Jas wondered.

The two Selected that were knocked down by the choking soldier unsheathed their swords. Jas ducked and dodged every swing of the Jaradians' respective swords; bringing his enemies closer together with each miss.

A smirk slowly grew on Jas' face when he realized, *One more misstep.*

Just as Jas hoped, his aggressors' failed connection against his body caused their swords to clash. With The Selected stunned by their rattling radius bones, Jas threw two energy spheres that slammed his targets against each other. Jas' arrogance got the better of him when he focused on his friends instead of the once-chained enemy removing his sword.

Before anyone could warn Jas about the incoming attack, Empress Oni's Selected swung his sword at Jas' back. Thankfully, Jas sensed the approaching sword; sidestepping the strike while tossing another energy ball in front of him. Jas' third orb of energy hit the rising Selected Jas dropkicked with his left foot moments earlier. Jake bellowed Jas' name as his friend rolled to his feet. A stinging pain ran through Jas' lower back prior to finding out why Jake was calling him. The source of Jas' anguish came from the approaching Selected's sword pommel. Jas kept his balance until his current attacker side kicked Jas' jaw.

Jake grumbled, "Forget this," running at the Selected now holding his sword over Jas' body like a guillotine.

Sliding beside the Selected and Jas as this enemy brought his sword down, Jake used his golden weapon as a blockade between life and death for Jas.

Jake, struggling to keep his leverage, desperately asked his friends, "You know you guys can help me anytime you want, right?"

Ken's stunned silence ended with a slight battle cry. To Ken's surprise, his attack was stopped by an energy blast from the other Selected Jas dropkicked; temporarily blinding its target.

During Ken's sightless flailing, Princess Serena said to herself, "They can use their energy, too?"

Instead of responding to the princess' inquiry, Dash charged forward. The Selected responsible for this projectile prepared to unleash another. When Dash saw this Jaradian's palms light up, Dash somersaulted over his stumbling clone. Another sight-debilitating blast hit Ken again instead of

colliding with the Selected's intended mark: Dash.

The Selected having his plan of attack halted by Jake quit his intention of cutting Jas' head off. Instead, this fighter decided to handstand on his own sword while Jake and his weapon held the Selected's sword upright and balanced. With Jake and the Selected's swords forming something similar to an upside down "T" breaking away, Jake quickly understood that this individual wanted to assist in driving Jake's blade through its own wielder's body. Jake's sword inched closer and closer toward his chest as his arms tired.

Before the steel could pierce Jake's torso, a pair of hands latched onto Jas' sickles still dangling around the Selected's neck. Unbeknownst to the Selected, Jas had risen from his once-precarious position during the struggle. Jas used his sickles to yank the Selected from his handstand perch, dropping his former fellow soldier on his head. Instead of releasing his grip, Jas pulled back on his sickles to choke the Selected unconscious.

The clanging of Dash and his battling adversary's swords put Jas and Jake's attention on them. Ken had finally regained his sight when the Selected quarreling with Dash used his thrusting sword as a diversion to sweep Dash off of his feet. A shocked Dash couldn't stop his fall, hitting the concrete while producing a sickening thud. Peering from his horizontal position, Dash found the Selected's sword coming at him. By arching his back off the ground, Dash threw his legs up, catching the incoming blade with his boots.

Like Jake, Dash found the strength of Empress Oni's Selected quite impressive. Dash held his position long enough for Ken to assist his friend by grabbing this enemy's waist. Before Ken could complete his attack, the Selected headbutted Ken across the bridge of his nose. Even though Ken didn't help Dash as planned, Ken's interaction made the Selected lose his focus on Dash and The Selected's sword. Dash opened his legs, allowing the blade to slip between them. When The Selected realized what was going on, Dash kicked the blade toward the Jaradian's left leg.

The Selected's loose grip gave his sword enough swing room to complete Dash's task of

stabbing his attacker with his own sword. Blood spilled from his wounded limb and a piercing scream exited the Selected's body until Dash threw a dark energy ball that knocked the last conscious aggressor out cold. Princess Serena stood in awe of her companions' abilities.

Why are they worried? Gonaga's eldest princess contemplated. They wiped the floor with Oni's best soldiers. Those 'Selected' were an example of what Oni's capable of and they beat them. And Dash said I might be stronger than all of them; that I might even be stronger than Oni. I'm going to save you, Mother, Athena... all of our people!

Princess Serena shook away her stunned admiration to tell everyone, "Well, Oni's troops are out of the way, right? Lets go into that hangar and make her pay for everything she's done!"

Behind the hangar's only doorway stood Empress Oni's greatest work.

"What happened to this place?" Princess Serena asked. "What did she do to it?"

Instead of the usual steel surroundings that made up the hangar being in full view, hazy darkness surrounding a narrowing staircase led into a swirling portal stood before the five. Dash's mumbling put everyone's focus on him.

Empress Oni's former second-in-command collected himself before admitting, "I never thought it was possible. Guys, there's somethin' I didn't tell you about Oni's powers. You ever wonder why our memories really started returning when we were a certain distance from Oni's fortress? Oni has the ability to warp reality. In Jarad, it was just from a mental aspect. The machines make us susceptible to her true methods. She constantly produced an energy that kept our minds filtered inside her fortress. It wasn't until we were out of that energy's radius did everything start comin' back."

Dash pointed at Jake, Jas and Ken as he started speaking again, "That's why you were able to remember everything in Jarad. You moved out of Oni's energy radius and she never got the chance to use those machines on you again to restore her mental hold on you guys. I just happened to unknowingly do the same in Gonaga and Ken used it to his advantage."

Returning to the doorway, Dash continued his revelations, "When Oni obtained that key from

King Goga, her powers increased ten fold. Before we left for this attack, Oni finally understood that the key wasn't just a key to unlock somethin' that contained the crystal like a safe, but it actually was the Gonagan Crystal. Oni figured she hadn't even released the crystal's true power before we left. And here stands the greatest example that she was right. If we don't beat her, Oni will be able to change the entire world to what she wants; no machines needed. And if Jarad's any example, the world we live in now will be nothin' short of paradise in comparison."

Princess Serena suddenly said, "That's not the only reason she picked the National Armory. Gonaga's National Armory is sacred ground. It's here following the construction of this building, the castle, and the main hospital that Gonaga's first priest consecrated the land. The belief was no one could use Gonaga's weaponry against the land because it's under holy protection. I guess that didn't pan out too well. But there's another part to the story. The old theory is if royal blood is spilled on hallowed ground, the Gonagan Crystal's blessed power is released."

The Princess of Gonaga turned her back to everyone while she continued speaking, "When the crystal's power discharges, the power will bend to the owner's needs. If what's behind me is any indication of what Oni wants, we're in big trouble. We can't lose."

Not saying a word since Jas saved him during their fight moments ago, Jake's mind processed the possibility that the princess could be Empress Oni's first target when the battle begins, *If Dash is right, and Serena's the strongest among us, Oni killin' her first would be a two-fold blow that'd cripple any chance of us winnin'. What am I sayin'? Why am I anticipatin' Serena's death? Is it because I can't keep my promise to her?*

Jas noticed Jake's distressed expression and needed to know from his dear friend, "Why are you looking so worried?"

Instead of answering Jas, Jake neared Dash because, according to him, something wasn't adding up about Empress Oni's powers.

Dash confessed Jake's assumption had some validity, "Always the investigator. Beyond Oni's

ability to manipulate the mental and warp the physical, she's also trained herself in energy evolution through transformation. When each boundary of energy she once had breaks, her body changes to sustain that incredible surge."

Dash's answer to Ken's follow-up question of how many stages Empress Oni could attain shocked everyone except Jas, "She thinks her max is four countin' where she's at right now."

"That's it?" Jas responded. "Four levels? I know we can match that easily."

Dash hastily informed Jas and his friends, "These aren't just some small increases. Each stage is almost twenty times what we're used to. The Oni we sparred with all those months ago is only one-fourth of warrior she believes she will become in a real battle."

Before the deafening silence could continue following Dash's words, Princess Serena put everyone's attention on Jake by saying, "I want to know what Jake thinks? You've been really quiet since Dash started talking. Do you think we can win?"

Jake scratched his chin before stating, "Dash knew about Oni's abilities prior to tellin' us. And he still said that Serena might have a good chance of beatin' Oni. So to me it's not about if we can beat Oni, it's about us makin' sure Serena can defeat Oni."

After Jake's bold proclamation, he took his first step onto the staircase.

"And helpin' Serena stop that witch is a promise I'll die to keep," Jake said as he glared into the darkness.

Everyone followed Jake up the seemingly never-ending flight of stairs. At the top of this staircase stood a bloodstained door. Behind this door were two more Selected – one barely four feet tall and the other towering over his partner by almost three feet – and another portal. A smile formed on Dash's face when he recognized who these Selected were.

Dash remarked, "Rune and Rook. Incredible. Oni's usin' you guys as her personal second wave?"

These Jaradian troopers' answer wasn't verbal, but physical with them pointing at Jake and Jas.

The tall individual – Rook – grumbled after his movement, “Our greatest rivals.”

With a common nod, Jake and Jas removed their weapons prior to rushing their latest adversaries. Empress Oni’s Selected leapt over each incoming attacker. Before Princess Serena could warn her friends, Jake felt two kicks aimed at his lower back rattle his spine. The swinging of his sickles left Jas prone to Rook’s left-handed uppercut against Jas’ jaw. A slight anguished squeal exited Serena’s body as she watched Jake spit a small amount of blood upon being kicked again. Princess Serena’s need to help Jake overwhelmed her. The feeling of Serena’s energy level rising garnered Rook and Rune’s attention.

Ken and Dash stepped to their respective lefts while the Princess of Gonaga commanded, “Leave him alone.”

Rook turned around, connecting with a spinning back fist that slammed Jas against the stone floor. As Rook stood over Jas’ writhing body, Rune squatted beside Jake. Now glaring at Princess Serena, Rune clutched Jake’s throat.

Rune asked Gonaga’s seething princess with Jake in his clutches, “You don’t like me beating him up? So I guess you won’t like--”

A flash of blinding light halted Rune’s next action. The energy behind this illumination engulfed Rune, stiffening his frame as it slammed against the ground. Gazing from Jas’ horizontal body toward the person responsible for Rune’s disabling shocked the once-unconcerned Jaradian soldier. In front of Rook stood Princess Serena with her right extended in his direction. Rook’s eyes slowly moved from the princess to Rune’s rigid body.

“Ho-how, how did, did you?” stammered Rook when he realized one attack from the woman standing before him had knocked out his ally.

Grunting after his potential responder didn’t answer him, Rook charged the princess in hopes of tackling her. When Rook leaned forward for his takedown attempt, an explosion of energy rolled from his target. Princess Serena’s power collided with Rook’s face, shattering his orbital bones, nose, and

some of his teeth. Quivering in astonishment stood Dash and Ken.

Ken wondered aloud, “How did she do that?” while unable to take his eyes off of Princess Serena’s golden energy-enveloped body.

Patting Ken’s chest with his fist, Dash told his clone, “With a power too long dormant on this planet.”

Looking in Ken’s eyes, Dash could see Ken knew exactly what he was talking about.

While the princess’ energy level finally normalized, she approached Jake – being helped to his feet by Jas. Princess Serena kneeled in front of Jake, offering her right hand.

“Need some assistance?” she asked her seated ally.

After spitting a wad of blood, Jake smirked at the princess’ show of kindness. Jake’s mouth opened to say something when a loud roar echoed from the dark depths in front of them. Swirling in the short distance was something similar to a black hole.

Dash moved from his position beside Ken so he could tell everyone, “I think Oni’s gettin’ impatient. And I don’t blame her. If I felt the kinda power Serena produced I’d be ready to fight right now, too.”

Entering the portal brought the five atop a floating rock in the middle of the same darkness that surrounded them since entering Gonaga’s National Armory’s hangar. Once again, a bellow sounded throughout the area. The staircase leading below disappeared without anyone noticing. The noise’s source became evident when a thick haze before them separated to reveal Empress Oni sitting on a black marble throne. Cracking her knuckles and neck, the supreme figurehead of Jarad groaned like a tired lioness. Empress Oni slowly opened her eyes to find Dash standing at the forefront of his group.

The Empress of Jarad smirked while greeting her vengeful guests, “Welcome to the final day of Gonaga as you know it. Actually, this is the final day of the planet as you know it. This is the day I finally ascend to my rightful place as ruler of this world.”

“What are you babbling on about, you old witch?” Jas asked.

Empress Oni rose from the throne to explain herself; “I assume Dash told you about my ability to form my own reality. But I’m not powerful enough to change an area like the entire the world. No one is. That’s why I needed the Gonagan Crystal. With it I can unleash a power unlike anything ever seen – using that same power to shape the world as I see fit. I will create a world of gorgeous darkness where only those who have the ability to serve me can live.”

Noticing Jas mimicking the empress during her speech infuriated Empress Oni enough for her to say, “Poor little fool. You and your friends will be the first examples of what I have in store for this new world. In this realm, you cannot die, but your body can give up your spirit. Once your filthy vessel releases your very being, I’ll consumer it. Your memories, your will, and most importantly, your collective energies will all be mine. And when I delete this reality, the people of Gonaga will witness the public execution of your soulless bodies... before I kill them, too. Everyone will know that their only hopes were no match for a god.”

Jas couldn’t help but say, “Shooting for the stars, aren’t ya?”

Peering around the darkness, Jake contemplated on the time he’d spent before arriving at this moment, *I never thought I’d make it this far. Oni pushed us to the brink of death in trainin’. Now she wants to push us over the edge. I can’t let that happen. I will not let Oni kill Serena.*

Empress Oni’s eyes locked on Jake due to his energy level increasing.

Everyone turned in Jake’s direction when he shouted, “I won’t let you take her from the people who need her the most! I won’t let you take her from me!”

Before Jake unsheathed his sword, Jas and Dash rushed their former leader. Jas swung his sickles overhead to distract Jarad’s empress so Dash could attempt to drive his sword through her chest. Unfortunately for them, Empress Oni seemingly knew what Dash and Jas were planning. She easily sidestepped Dash’s lunging sword prior to grabbing his left wrist. With a quick twist of her arm, Empress Oni sent Dash flying in Jas’ direction. Jas jumping over Dash’s body ended with his incoming friend cracking against Jas’ airborne legs; whipping Jas against the concrete.

As Ken ran toward Empress Oni with his sword by his right side, Jake told the hesitant princess, “Serena, we can’t wait for your powers to kick in. You’re gonna have to use my old sword and fight with us. Can you do that?”

A loud thump of Ken’s body hitting the ground after being kicked in his stomach forced Jake to enter the fray without receiving an answer from Princess Serena. The Empress of Jarad easily stopped Jake’s onslaught by ducking his angry sword swings before leg sweeping him. Losing grip of his weapon left Jake defenseless. Throwing her left leg high, Empress Oni prepared to pierce Jake’s torso with her heeled boot. Just as the ruler’s limb descended, a blast of energy blinded her. Dash – the person responsible for this timely attack – charged his former leader while Jas moved behind her. Dash’s next energy maneuver engulfed Empress Oni and threw dust around her illuminated body.

“This is where you go down!” said Dash with his sword in position to cut through the Empress of Jarad; similar to what Jas had in mind using his golden sickles.

Swinging into nothing but dust alerted Dash and Jas; forcing them to stop in mid-motion. When the grit cleared, Jas found himself standing in front of Dash with Dash’s sword at his throat. Even though he knew Dash’s attacks weren’t enough to kill her, Empress Oni’s missing body brought a slight, fist-pumping celebration from Jas. But Jas’ jubilation proved to be premature. Above Princess Serena floated their tenacious enemy. Suddenly, the foundation everyone except Empress Oni stood on started shaking. This intense quaking caused the Princess of Gonaga and her allies to lose their footing.

Following the rumbling, several pillars and walls rose from the ground. Empress Oni landed atop one of the newly formed stonewalls that happened to sprout behind Princess Serena. Using a wall adjacent to the one Empress Oni was standing on as a springboard, Jake soared through the air with the intention of knocking her off of her perch. Moving within cutting distance of his mark didn’t help Jake thanks to a shield of dark purple energy suddenly surrounding Empress Oni that slammed Jake back to the rocky surface.

While Jake writhed after his twelve-foot fall, Ken ran up the empress’ stone platform. The

Empress of Jarad could sense Ken approaching from behind. Empress Oni somersaulted backwards when Ken swung his sword upward. Unable to react fast enough, Ken was stomped on his head by both of Empress Oni's boots; bouncing Ken's skull against the rock wall. Like Jake, Ken hit the ground from an incredible height. Still floating high above Princess Serena, Empress Oni spun around to discover Dash and Jas flying toward her. A shockwave of energy exploded from the Empress of Jarad that knocked her latest aggressors some twenty feet away.

Princess Serena felt her legs weaken and her eyes become watery upon asking herself, *Why can't I do it? Why can't I use my energy like last time?*

An evil aura abruptly settled in front of the questioning Gonagan. Princess Serena looked through her tear-filled eyes to see Empress Oni standing inches in front of her. The Princess of Gonaga fumbled with Jake's original sword until the empress smacked it out of her hands. Empress Oni laughed before she slapped King Goga's first child across her face. The force of Empress Oni's strike flung the princess' body into a wall behind her. Princess Serena's lifeless frame gracefully descended to the cracked, hovering base she once stood on.

Jas gained Empress Oni's focus by screaming her name immediately after her sickening attack on Serena. Jarad's only leader saw Jas running in her direction with his sickles swinging overhead. Grabbing one sickle by its handle, Jas whipped the other curved blade at his target. Jas couldn't believe how fast Empress Oni moved to avoid his weapon's trajectory.

"It's like she knows what I'm about to do next," Jas mouthed.

Empress Oni confirmed Jas' assumption with her echoing voice, "Your energy is flowing through your sickles with each usage. Against someone like me, those things are worthless."

With a slight smile, Jas responded, "Well, guess I gotta switch things up."

Empress Oni watched Jas throw several energy balls above him; using his sickles to bat them at his target. Instead of moving, the empress braced herself for each of Jas' energy spheres. One by one, Jas' energy hit his old ruler; but they didn't visibly hurt or even budge her. Jas' inability to react quickly

allowed Jarad's empress to vanish again. Empress Oni's male targets stared into the darkness above them, thinking they'd catch a glimpse of the missing empress. That familiar, disturbing laugh of Empress Oni's ran through each person's ears after feeling a cold ambience float beside them.

Jas quickly noticed the coldness stayed behind him for no more than two seconds before the air returned to normal. Hearing Empress Oni snicker when the chilling of Jas' body occurred again alerted him. Jas spun around, driving his sickles into his enemy's stomach. Stumbling backwards, Empress Oni found the only thing holding her up was a pillar behind her. Jas quickly created an energy lasso. Whipping his roped energy at Empress Oni caused the lasso to open and wrap around her ankles. With a quick tug, Jas yanked his former leader from her vertical position. The empress' body slid across the slightly jagged surface until Jas pulled his energy attack upwards, smashing her against a rock wall beside him.

"Don't think I'm done with you yet," Jas said when he swung the lasso to his left.

Empress Oni's body went sailing into an adjacent wall to the one she collided with seconds earlier – the same wall she used as a pedestal earlier. Bleeding from her stomach and mouth, Empress Oni rose to her feet when Jas let his energy snare dissipate. Jas charged his former leader during her attempt at regaining an erect stance. The wall Jas had pinned Jarad's empress against was beginning to breakaway as he unleashed a barrage of strikes aimed at various points on her body. Using all of his strength, Jas drove Empress Oni through the concrete slab with a powerful left uppercut. As Gonaga's greatest threat plummeted off the rock's edge, the Empress of Jarad was aware enough to wrap her legs around Jas' waist before she fell out of reach. The suddenness of Empress Oni's grip caught Jas off guard. Losing his footing, Jas sank into the abyss alongside the woman who helped raise him.

Dash and Ken ran to the foundation's ledge where their friend plummeted horrendously. Across from the pair gazing downward was Jake shaking Princess Serena's unconscious body. Jake looked up upon hearing the same thing that ran through Ken and Dash's ears – thunderous clapping sounds echoing from the dark depths underneath them. Before Jake could ask Dash and Ken what they thought

was happening below, several brilliant flashes of light illuminated the area.

Dash hastily told Ken, “I can’t believe they’re still fightin’.”

A final blast of radiance swept through the hazy bottom. Succeeding the luminous moment was an explosion so powerful Dash, Ken, and Jake felt the rock they stood upon shift upward & shake violently.

“He did it!” Jake said to his friends when the trembling concluded. “Jas did it! He beat her! I know it!”

Dash wasn’t convinced like his celebratory ally, but Jake reassured him, “If Jas survived that fall – which it seems like he did due to that battle down there – there’s nothin’ Oni could do that would stop him.”

The slight smile starting to appear on Dash’s face suddenly disappeared when another uneasy rumbling shook the three standing fighters. A slight crack between the bodies of Princess Serena and Jake quickly morphed into a fissure that separated the two and almost caused Jake to slip into the darkness. Dash yelled for Jake to move from the crevice, but the sights in the abyss hypnotized Jake. A ghostly figure that resembled Jas stood in a pool of clear blue water. The gorgeous cerulean liquid turned blood red as the apparition screamed toward its wide-eyed viewer.

“Jas, get up here!” Jake demanded while the chasm closed.

Just as the gap sealed and Jake pulled himself to safety, he witnessed what really happened prior to the explosion that almost knocked everyone off the rock: Empress Oni driving her right arm through Jas’ chest, releasing all of his energy before absorbing it for potential future usage while a cocoon-like structure enveloped Jas’ lifeless body. With his legs quaking, Jake wobbled until he collapsed; pounding the ground as Dash and Ken approached him.

Jake didn’t give his friends a chance to ask why he was so angry by crying out, “No! Dash, she killed him! That witch killed Jas!”

Pulling Jake to his feet, Dash had to make sure his friend understood, “She didn’t kill him! Her

goal is to take our spirits – our energy. And when we beat her, Jas will come back. Just stay focused and help Serena regain consciousness. I hate to say this, but we're gonna need her more than we'll ever need Jas."

Standing beside Dash, Ken vocally noted, "That last quake destroyed the walls. Maybe she wants to take us down without any barriers. May--"

Lightning striking behind Ken interrupted his words. The once non-existent wind picked up prior to several electric bolts striking beside the four bodies stuck in the middle of this perpetual darkness. A final thunderclap followed the last lightning streak. Preceding the flash stood an unidentified figure twenty or so feet in front of Dash, Ken, Jake, and the horizontal princess. This individual's body visibly had spikes sticking out of their frame.

Dash whispered, "Oni's second stage," after realizing Jake's earlier statements about Jas' demise were true.

"I'm glad someone recognizes my gift," Empress Oni said with her reverberating voice. "Now princess and paupers, welcome to the first day of a new reality. Welcome to my world!"

...to be continued