

CRYSTALIS
ALPHA
PART 7



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

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The Crescendo

Standing in disbelief of Empress Oni's body were Jake, Dash, and Ken after she obliterated Jas' body from her created reality; engulfing his energy and spirit. But Jas didn't "die" without destroying the first of the empress' four forms. From her long, lanky, pale body protruded several spikes covered in blood. As the Empress of Jarad shivered in anticipation, Ken whispered to his friends that it'd be best if he and Dash attack their transformed enemy while Jake worked on reviving Princess Serena – who was still unconscious after being slapped down prior to Empress Oni's standoff with Jas. Without hesitation, Jake agreed with Ken's plan.

Dash and Ken charged the heavily breathing empress with their swords by their left and right sides respectively. Following a licking of her lips, Empress Oni readied herself for an energy beam Ken shot at her. With his target's attention on his clone's attack, Dash leapt to Oni's left. Dash's plan was to stab Empress Oni after Ken's energy beam hit her. Unfortunately for Dash and Ken, their once motionless mark lunged forward to swat Ken's streak of energy into the blackness – causing Dash to fail in cutting Empress Oni as intended.

Like Dash, Ken became focused on using a distraction—be it Dash's relentless, yet failed sword swings or his own energy – as his way to get through Empress Oni's defenses. Ken thought he had his chance to strike when she caught Dash's incoming sword with her bare hands. The empress' obsession with pulling Dash's weapon away seemingly left her prone to an attack. Leaping over her allowed Ken to aim for the empress' back.

Empress Oni muttered, "Imbecile," as she relinquished her grip of Dash's sword prior to back flipping.

In a moment that felt like time had slowed down to a snail's pace, Ken found his enemy floating over him. Before Ken could stop whatever the Empress of Jarad had in mind, she drove her spike-

heeled boots into Ken's back with a powerful double foot stomp. Empress Oni jumped from Ken's descending body, landing on the ground in a handstand. Dash hadn't even registered what happened to Ken when Empress Oni pushed off her hands to dropkick Dash in the chest.

Jake's attempt at reviving Princess Serena halted as Ken collapsed at his feet. Instead of keeping his post at the princess' side, Jake rushed the woman responsible for dropping his friend. The only thing stopping Jake was Ken's hand grabbing his left ankle.

"Jake, please let us handle this," Ken requested.

Empress Oni grinned in anticipation of Jake's impending actions while Dash crept behind her. To Dash's surprise, Jarad's ruler spun around as Dash pushed his sword in her direction. Ducking the approaching weapon allowed the empress to kick Dash's torso again. The force of Empress Oni's strike slammed & slid Dash across the rocky ground with him nearly falling into the abyss. When Dash rose to his hands and knees, Empress Oni kicked Dash's abdomen so hard that it felt like she stabbed him. This time, Dash couldn't stop himself from falling over the foundation's edge.

The Empress of Jarad actually smiled at Dash dangling by his gripping left hand. Due to a sudden, piercing sensation running through his hand, Dash couldn't pull himself up to temporary safety. Dash tilted his head skyward to find Empress Oni's right boot pressed against the appendage. Empress Oni realized one good stomp would destroy Dash's grip.

Dash abruptly felt the pain slightly subside; followed by a single drop of blood hitting his throbbing left wrist. Dash threw his right hand on the ledge, looking upwards again. Above Dash stood a wondrous sight: Ken's sword sitting halfway through the empress' heaving torso.

There was nothing but silence prior to Empress Oni yelling, "Is that it? You pathetic worm!"

Jarad's powerful leader reached behind her in hopes of pulling the sword out the same way it entered. Seeing that her original plan wasn't working in a timely manner, the empress fell forward to the ground. Empress Oni began doing push-ups to remove what should have been a debilitating intrusion. Dash dragged himself atop the rock as Oni approached a stunned Ken with his own weapon

in hand.

“Is this yours?” the Empress of Jarad said with a bloody smile. “You went the wrong way when you stabbed me. This is how you mortally wound someone.”

Empress Oni reared back, driving the sword into Ken’s chest before he could move. The mix of lost plasma & oxygen forced Ken off of his feet.

Jake asked himself with Princess Serena’s head cradled in his arms, *How are we supposed to beat that? Why would Dash make us believe we had a chance? Why would he lie about Serena? He’s set all of us up for death by that witch’s hands.*

Dash limped his way toward his horizontal clone, but ended up getting hit by a dark energy ball from the empress – who now stood above Ken.

Leaning on Ken’s sword so he couldn’t pull the weapon out, Jarad’s sole leader asked Ken, “Now, don’t you feel great?”

Dash cried, “Ken! I can’t do this without you!”

Slightly choking on his own blood, Ken confessed, “You don’t need me to win. You know her ... [cough] ... you know her better [cough] ... better than anyone. I’ll see you... when you guys stop her. Se-see you later ... [cough] ... Big Brother.”

Lying not far from his clone – his little brother – Dash woefully watched Ken’s pierced chest until it stopped moving.

Dash pleaded with Ken, “Wake up, you son of a...!” while reaching for Ken’s extended right hand. “You can’t do this to us! We need you! We’re gonna--”

Before Dash could continue his wailing, Ken’s body deteriorated into sand. A quick burst of wind scattered Ken’s remains throughout the abyss. Dash sat on his knees, grabbing at the insignificant piles of sand; barely noticing Empress Oni attaining a piece of the flying sand. With a grain of sand on her palm, the empress licked her hand. Swallowing the sand, Ken’s very essence entered her body.

Empress Oni’s attention turned to Dash and his sudden significant energy growth. With his

entire body covered in a dark aura, Dash's power levels increased tenfold. The floating rock they stood on cracked even more from the enormous power Dash produced. In correlation with Dash's power, blinding lightning strikes forced Empress Oni to shield her eyes. Upon dropping her arms following the last lightning bolt, the supreme figurehead of Jarad found herself face-to-face with Dash. Empress Oni couldn't move in time to avoid Dash shooting a powerful energy beam from his right palm.

The ray's force pushed Empress Oni backwards; followed by an explosion enveloping her immediately after. Princess Serena and Jake's bodies also went flying due to the energy's percussion. Jake struggled from his horizontal position, discovering Gonaga's unconscious princess lying precariously near the rock's edge. Pushing with his hands and knees as hard as he could, Jake landed beside the Princess of Gonaga; grabbing her before Serena fell into the abyss. While Jake held the princess' motionless body, Dash watched the swirling dust surrounding Empress Oni's body dissipate. In front of Dash stood an image that startled him once the flakes of cracked stone settled.

"I only knocked off her arm?" Dash asked, observing the lone limb lying in the middle of a moderate crater. "Where's the rest of her? Hey, Jake, do you see her?"

Never taking his eyes off of Princess Serena, Jake answered Dash, "No. You must've blown her away. That's probably the only thing left of her."

Dash's heart suddenly started beating faster. The slight mollification he experienced seconds ago left Dash as quickly as this new, distressed feeling took hold of him. Dash's uneasy sensation turned into horror when his eyes shifted upwards. Floating above Jake was a one-armed Empress Oni preparing to toss an energy sphere encased in fire.

Dash ordered Jake with his hand pointed in the empress' direction, "Get outta the way!"

Instead of following Dash's instruction, Jake looked up. All Jake saw was a fiery ball heading his way. Jake hastily realized that he had two options: run or protect the princess. Choice two was the only one Jake could live with. Throwing his body over Princess Serena's frame to shield her, Jake felt the scorching heat from Empress Oni's approaching attack vaporizing his shirt before burning his back.

Jake gripped the princess tighter, preparing for what would surely disable him.

Mustering up the energy he thought could combat the blazing orb, Dash fired off another energy beam. Jake's eyes caught a glimpse of Dash's energy shooting through this large fireball. An implosion of Oni's sphere illuminated the sky. With a quick jump, Dash reinitiated combat against his former leader as Jake checked to see if the fireball hurt the princess in any visible way. Dash started increasing his power behind each sword swing; giving Jarad's empress the chance to presumably predict Dash's movements like she did when clashing with Jas. A missed horizontal slash of Dash's sword allowed Empress Oni to slip behind him. Dash couldn't react fast enough to avoid her forearms slamming against his back. Dash's chest-first landing made Empress Oni visibly assume she had an advantageous spot in this fight. When the Empress of Jarad bent to grab Dash's shirt, Dash vanished.

Staring at her fellow person of royalty and the man protecting her, Empress Oni asked, "Is that the best strategy he can form?"

Dash's voice echoed behind the questioner, "No, but it's enough to beat you."

The alerted ruler did a 180-degree turn to discover Dash standing in front of her again. Jarad's empress taking a hard left hook punch from Dash slammed her face against the ground. Empress Oni's brute strength stopped Dash's takedown attempt after she rose from her horizontal position. Pushing Dash backwards allowed the Empress of Jarad to unleash her own punch that stunned Dash long enough for her to break free of his grip. Knowing the death strike was coming, Dash hooked Empress Oni by her legs for a successful completion of his second takedown effort.

Dash crawled atop the scrambling Empress Oni to hammer her body with a succession of strikes. The empress coughed blood following each powerful connection. Using his knees to pin Oni's arms by her sides, Dash sat on the empress' chest. Dash slowly raised his clasped hands above his head as a cloud of black energy surrounded Dash's appendages to deliver the final blow.

Dash explained, "Oni, don't think I'm ungrateful. You showed me the power I needed for today. Even with that gratitude, I won't give you the chance--"

Dash's words were halted when the empress slipped her left arm from underneath him. A quick flash of purple energy shot out of Empress Oni's palm, sending Dash flying. Immediately upon hitting the ground, Dash found himself covered by his attacker. Jarad's empress lifted Dash to his feet by his right hand, punching him in the face repeatedly. Once again, Empress Oni exploited Dash's energy increase by using it to figure out what he had in mind. Just as Dash felt the empress' clasp loosen, Oni elbowed her current target's chest.

The Empress of Jarad told Dash after he started heaving, "You should've stayed by my side... like a good little servant would."

"I'm no one's servant anymore," retorted Dash as a precursor to spitting in his enemy's face.

In a sickening display, Empress Oni used her right index finger to guide Dash's thick phlegm into her mouth.

After swallowing Dash's saliva, the Empress of Jarad remarked, "Oooh, fear tastes so good," before kicking Dash's prone body.

Empress Oni took a moment to mouth at Jake, "You're next."

During the empress' silent proclamation, she couldn't observe Dash crawling toward his sword. Dash lay and waited atop his weapon for his attacker's next approach.

When the empress grabbed Dash by the back of his shirt, she leaned near his left ear to whisper, "Now, will you beg for your miserable life?"

"It was only miserable when you were alive," Dash said, pushing off the ground with all of his strength.

In one swift motion, Empress Oni's former second-in-command plunged his sword through her chest. Stumbling while blood spurted from her new wounds, the Empress of Jarad clutched this sword's grip in hopes of removing Dash's weapon of choice. A boosting of Empress Oni's energy also brought back the lightning strikes. Each electric bolt moved closer and closer to the increasing power's source. With a quick tug, the Empress of Jarad wailed in agony upon removing Dash's sword. Before Empress

Oni could toss the weapon away, a thunderbolt struck Dash's sword and its target. Dash and Jake watched as Empress Oni's electrified body shook violently.

"You can't stop me!" the empress bellowed.

Empress Oni's quaking body started producing smoke as her skin burned away. The empress' sizzling agony quickly reached its climax with a disturbingly loud implosion emanating from her chest. A mix of hot flesh & blood coated the nearby area where Empress Oni once stood. Dash struggled from his seated position, but found himself too weak to do so on his own. Following several failed tries, Dash asked Jake for some assistance.

As he walked toward Dash, Jake wondered out loud, "How are we gonna get down from here?"

Dash glanced from side to side to find Jake's inquiry was completely understandable. They were still floating in the abyss with no way down. The stone slab vibrating and splitting again interrupted Jake trying to help his downed friend. Their respective fearful feelings subsided when this violent rumbling concluded. Infectious laughter spread through Dash and Jake; seemingly hopeful the worst was over. But their amusement seemed premature thanks to a blinding light shooting from the dark gorge. Jake's eyes searched for Empress Oni's body, but found nothing including her detached arm. Inside this radiance floated a human figure. Gliding from her position onto the rock, Empress Oni revealed herself and her new latest form. For a second time, Empress Oni's body drastically changed; draped in a black gown dripping of blood. The spikes originally covering portions of her anatomy only encompassed her hands now. Empress Oni's energy increase visibly bulked her arms and legs.

Jarad's supreme ruler stood with her back facing the bewildered duo. When Empress Oni turned in Jake and Dash's direction, a small beam of purple energy shot from her right hand. Reacting quickly, Jake scooped Dash up, tossing him beside Princess Serena's unconscious frame. Peering back after his throw, Jake saw the deadly beam still following him. Jake continued running, hoping Empress Oni's energy would shoot past him if he made the right turn at the appropriate time. Unfortunately, glancing behind him after an eternally long minute of running caused Jake to trip over his own feet. Another

assumption arrived in Jake's head that this concentrated energy would fly over him, into the unending darkness.

Jake's theory was only partially correct because the energy beam did fly over his horizontal body, but didn't sail into the distance. Directing her energy with the tip of her right index finger, Empress Oni aimed the traveling beam at Dash. When Jake looked up to see where the energy ray was, a distressed yell from Dash immediately changed into gurgling. Jake's eyes focused on his friend clutching at his own throat. Blood seeped through Dash's fingers. Crawling near his seemingly injured ally revealed to Jake that Empress Oni's energy had burned through Dash's neck.

Jake begged his friend to hold on, but similar to his companions before him, Dash's body abruptly collapsed into a pile of sand following his final breath. A fierce wind emanated from nowhere, blowing Dash's remains in Empress Oni's direction. Opening her hand, Empress Oni absorbed Dash's essence by catching a modicum of Dash's sandy carcass. That familiar, twisted grimace found its way onto the Empress of Jarad's face as Jake slowly rose from his kneeling position.

With a few tears dripping down his face while staring at the inert princess, Jake lowly proclaimed, "I promised Serena that I would bring her mother and sister back to her. I promised Jas that we'd be playin' checkers when we're seventy-five. I promised Dash and Ken that I would help them grow stronger. I promised myself that I would live... or die savin' my friends."

Moving to a fully vertical position, Jake took a deep breath so he could say, "I failed at savin' my three best friends in this reality. But I won't.... I can't fail now. I won't let you take her like you did them. No matter how powerful you are Oni, you can't defeat her. And you can't defeat me! Oni, welcome to *my* world!"

Staring at his once-smirking enemy, Jake released a deafening roar. Following Jake's powerful audible display, a raging flood of unbound energy surged through his body & soul. Empress Oni's scowling expression didn't truthfully reflect the fear in her eyes. Empress Oni watched a circle of red energy engulf Jake's form. Around him, lightning ripped through the darkness.

Surrounded by this red cloud of his own energy, Jake mumbled, “Oni, you brought this on yourself.”

“You don’t think you can defeat me, do you?” responded the empress. “If we were measuring your power on a scale of one to ten, you’d be an eight. While I... I would be a twelve.”

Jake physically questioned her theory by raising his energy output double of what it was before Empress Oni spoke. The force from Jake’s energy growth actually forced his adversary to take a few steps back. As she tried to regain her balance without Jake knowing, Empress Oni noticed that Princess Serena’s body was unharmed by Jake’s flowing power.

The Empress of Jarad said to herself, “There’s no way he could be that powerful. He can’t be human.”

Reading Empress Oni’s lips, Jake informed her, “I’m human all right. You just trained me a little too well.”

Another energy outburst following Jake’s statement almost knocked Empress Oni off of her floating rock.

With the cloud of energy surrounding him dissipating, Jake told the rising leader, “I’ll crush you and throw you into the wind. I won’t give you the chance to change into another form.”

Empress Oni’s expression of contempt left when Jake disappeared. Frantically looking around, Jarad’s empress found no one on the rock but herself and Princess Serena. Although she didn’t see a body, the sounds of Jake’s heckling got louder with each passing second.

“Why can’t you catch me, Oni?” Jake’s voice echoed. “Think fast, Oni! What’s wrong, Oni?”

Frustrated, the empress demanded Jake appear in front her and fight, but the insults continued without Jake standing still to spout them, “Can’t follow me, Oni? To have amazing strength is one thing, but to lose sight of your enemy while blinded by that same strength--”

“Stand still!” Empress Oni barked.

“Sure thing.”

The empress quickly realized that Jake stopped behind her. Spinning around only caused Empress Oni to get punched in her neck. Hastily, the struck empress rolled to her feet after the forceful blow knocked her down. Empress Oni was unprepared for the right uppercut Jake had readied. Once again, the incredible strike sent Jarad's ruler flying backwards. Jake ran toward the empress during her descent, catching Oni by her waist from the back. Upside-down, Empress Oni was stuck in Jake's clutches. Before she could do anything, Jake jumped some ten feet off the ground to drive the empress head first against the rocky base she created. The sick sound of cranium colliding with stone excited Jake. That enthusiasm increased when he noticed his attack ripped open the top of Empress Oni's scalp. Nearly half a minute passed until the Empress of Jarad staggered to her feet.

Jake gleefully spoke up, "Catch me if you can, you old hag," as his bleeding enemy wiped the blood from her eyes so she could watch Jake disappear and reappear from one end of the area to the other.

Figuring out Jake's pattern allowed Empress Oni to start trailing her target. After some quick maneuvering, Oni's right hand found Jake's back. As quickly as Jarad's empress gained her grip, Jake shook himself free and vanished again. When Jake didn't appear or make his voice be heard for several moments, Empress Oni seemingly decided to lure him out by using the eldest Princess of Gonaga as bait.

Walking toward the unconscious princess, Empress Oni told the quiet & invisible Jake, "Don't you understand, boy? I know all of your tricks. Just give up now and maybe I'll let you live long enough to watch me kill your little infatuation."

Empress Oni's vigil for Jake's reappearance proved fruitless. Little did the empress know that her original target wasn't on the ground. Rather, Jake found a nice spot directly above this threat to the world. With his sword in hand, Jake propelled from his energy-assisted perch. Too focused on Princess Serena was Empress Oni until she noticed a familiar energy hastily approaching her.

Turning from left to right, the Empress of Jarad didn't understand where this feeling was

coming from until Jake yelled, “Look up!”

The empress threw her arms up to stop her descending attacker with an energy blast. Empress Oni’s palms lighting up was Jake’s signal to disappear once more. Before her arms returned to their original position, Empress Oni heard the sound of a sword cutting through air. A stinging sensation abruptly ran through her wrists. Warm liquid started streaming down Empress Oni’s numbing arms. The Empress of Jarad peered up to find the source of this pain and fluid. Lowering her arms caused the empress’ spiked hands to fall from her limbs. A blood geyser spewing out of her arms didn’t stop Jake from adding insult to injury by grabbing and waving Empress Oni’s dissected left hand in her direction.

In physical and mental shock, Empress Oni couldn’t complete her statement, “You... you... you mon--”

Jake interrupted Jarad’s babbling leader, “What? ‘You monster’? Now you know how I felt when you took my friends’ souls. Oh, and by the way – you might be needin’ these.”

Another smile formed on his adversary’s face when Jake pitched Empress Oni’s hands at her feet.

Following the happy expression came a bold statement from Empress Oni, “I don’t need your pity. Just watch and learn.”

Jarad’s empress put her bleeding arms by their sides. A gray haze suddenly engulfed her torso. Steadfast, Jake watched two blades of energy spring from his enemy’s bleeding arms. Hoisting his sword in front of him, Jake was ready for anything Empress Oni had in mind. The Empress of Jarad lunged at Jake, trying to slash him with her right arm. Prior to each swing of Empress Oni’s right blade, Jake jumped backwards to avoid the intended attack. Jake suddenly found himself coming face-to-face with the left blade. Being distracted by the empress’ left weapon allowed her to sweep Jake off of his feet by using her right foot. Jake’s fall knocked him loopy for a slight moment. Regaining his senses just in time, Jake rolled to his feet only milliseconds before Empress Oni could drive her blades into his chest.

The sole ruler of Jarad admitted, “I grow tired of this,” before detaching her blades by shooting them at Jake.

Jake leapt over the left blade and kicked the right one in midair. Rushing his target, Jake’s sword connected with nothing but air as his mark became airborne. Jake wanted to continue his intended assault when Empress Oni hit the ground, but met a barrage of energy spheres that knocked him on his back instead. Empress Oni hovered a few feet above the floating rock, watching Jake rise. The immense energy flowing through Jarad’s empress started concentrating to one area of her body – her mouth. Jake mentally confirmed it was now or never. As Empress Oni opened her mouth, Jake created a red ball of energy, placing the sphere on his blade’s tip. Rearing back, Jake threw his sword like a spear.

A flood of purple energy spewed from Empress Oni’s mouth in hopes of stopping Jake’s now energy-encased sword. To Empress Oni’s surprise, Jake’s sword parted and dissolved her energy. The empress couldn’t halt or avoid this sword while it picked up speed during its flight. Jake’s weapon impaled her stomach, only stopping when the sword’s guard hooked its target’s flesh. Once again, blood oozed from Empress Oni’s body due to a sword-related injury.

But the wound didn’t stop Jarad’s most powerful being from asking Jake, “Is... is that it, boy?”

Rather than answer with words, Jake showed he had more for his enemy by producing three blades of energy similar to what Empress Oni did with her hands. Throwing the energy blades at Empress Oni, Jake directed his projectiles toward the floating, yet motionless enemy. The first blade ran through the empress’ kneecaps from her left side. She looked down to find her legs failing her, only for the second blade to cut off the Empress of Jarad’s left and right arms at the shoulders. Empress Oni’s waning power hindered her floating, but not her sight. In front of Empress Oni lingered the last energy blade.

“This is it!” Jake exclaimed. “Oni, I’d just like to say... thanks for nothin’!”

The final energy blade turned, bisecting its mark’s torso. Jake happily watched the empress’

falling body dissolve into a mixture of loose flesh & blood alongside his energy blades in the opaque sky. Stabbing the concrete was Jake's sword following the splatter of Empress Oni on her rocky creation. As Jake approached his weapon, he noticed Princess Serena finally moving. Jake ran over to her, trying to get some feedback on the princess' condition.

Shaking her unsteady head, Princess Serena said to Jake, "I feel like I just got kicked by a wild animal. Where's Oni?"

Jake asked the princess, "You really didn't see it?"

"See what? Where's Jas, and Ken?"

Before she received an answer, Princess Serena observed that they were still shrouded in darkness; drifting on the huge rock slab. Jake's belief that their surroundings would gradually revert to normal faded away when another strong wind swept across their cracked foundation. Jake helped the princess to her feet, motioning for her to stay by his left side.

Blowing winds congregated to one point, producing a small whirlwind. Those powerful lightning bolts returned, striking all around the Princess of Gonaga and her protector. A series of electrical discharges converged inside the whirlwind while it moved from the surface. Princess Serena and Jake noticed something in the swirling dust. A final lightning flash blinded the two. Uncovering their eyes seconds later, the two watchers discovered Jarad's empress standing before them once more.

From the neck down, silver metal covered Empress Oni's body. A pale white mask now protected the leader's face featuring several names including their allies. Under her mask, Jake knew the fiendish ruler was smiling after observing the frustration etched on his face. Pushing Princess Serena behind him, Jake braced himself for an attack. Seeing Empress Oni remain still for several moments convinced Jake to make the first move in this latest round.

With sword in hand, Jake charged his enemy; but Empress Oni effortlessly avoided Jake's weapon until another lightning bolt struck the ground behind him. This unnatural occurrence startled Jake, breaking his attempted onslaught. The electric distraction allowed Empress Oni to throw her left

arm forward without Jake's knowledge. A painful groan exited Jake as he felt Empress Oni's cold arm enter his chest.

In one last attempt to save himself, Jake grabbed the piercing limb so he could pull it out. When Jake hands gripped Empress Oni's appendage, a powerful energy surged from her core; moving into the arm. Throughout Jake's body, the empress' energy slowly cooked him from the inside until Jake was nothing more than a twitching mass. With Jake dangling from her limb, Jarad's empress approached Princess Serena before slinging his charred frame beside her final adversary. Princess Serena leaned forward, wanting to hold Jake's nearly lifeless body; but the heat exuding from it almost burned her.

Coughing blood and shallowly breathing, Jake comforted Princess Serena with these words, "I'm not gonna break my promise."

Like their friends, Jake's body collapsed into itself; becoming nothing more than sand before blowing away. Even though she felt the urge to weep, something in the princess prevented her emotional outcry.

Princess Serena struggled off of her knees, gaining a firm base while thinking, *I can't let you win. I won't let you win. For my family. For Gonaga. For my friends. They believed in me. I can't lose. I won't!*

Upon finishing her personal declaration, magnificent colors flashed around Princess Serena's body. The beautiful illumination increased in size as a physical change began in Serena. The princess' dark brown hair transformed until it was a shimmering emerald in color.

Princess Serena's eyes flickered in the flowing wind until she ordered the other last woman standing to, "Come on."

The Empress of Jarad laughed at her enemy's bold request.

"I have something to show you as well, Princess," Empress Oni said as she reached into her back.

Unbeknownst to Princess Serena, the Gonagan Crystal in a new, cubic form had implanted itself

inside the empress' lower back. Removing the crystal, Empress Oni informed her enemy that the Queen of Gonaga didn't reveal the crystal's whereabouts; though she did know of someone who had a grudge for the royal family and knew its secrets.

Pacing in front of the stationary princess, the Empress of Jarad said, "Your grandfather appreciated his medical and scientific mastery. But as the years passed by, King Goga II felt the doctor had gone mad and banished him from Gonaga. He found his way to Jarad and has helped me ever since. When my search for this crystal became too difficult, he assisted me. Maybe you remember hearing about him. His name is--"

A boost in the incredible amount of energy coming from Princess Serena stopped Empress Oni's words; making the ruler force the Gonagan Crystal inside of her back for another round of fighting. Even though it seemed the princess was prepared for a battle, she didn't move. After creating an energy sword, Empress Oni decided to take the fight to Princess Serena by lunging at her with the ferocity of a hungry, wild carnivore staring at a fresh piece of meat. Using her bare hands, Gonaga's first princess deflected every swing of Empress Oni's energy sword without injuring herself. Her aggressor's increasing speed caused Princess Serena to distance herself from the powerful aggressor.

Moving too hastily for Empress Oni to keep up, Princess Serena frustrated her adversary enough that Oni changed tactics. The princess went from dodging Empress Oni's energy sword to avoiding a barrage of fiery energy orbs. Princess Serena focusing on not being hit by the energy made her lose sight of her target. Everything was quiet outside of Princess Serena's footsteps. When she stopped moving, Empress Oni revealed herself behind the princess. Princess Serena swung a back elbow, but her foe caught the incoming arm. Empress Oni hoisted Princess Serena into the air by her captured limb. With a quick swing, the Empress of Jarad slammed King Goga's daughter back first against the solid ground.

Empress Oni jumped as the princess – whose energy level started fading upon impact – squirmed in pain. Princess Serena opened her eyes to find a slew of purple energy spheres falling in her

direction. The princess' inability to process her situation fast enough allowed this dangerous energy to blast around her. Peering into the settling dust, Empress Oni discovered her last obstacle bloodied and her clothes singed. Princess Serena tried to sit up, but her frame didn't permit the once simplistic action. As her body began giving up, Serena's eyes rolled into the back of her head.

After thinking, *You said I could beat her*, Princess Serena heard someone calling her name.

Several voices originally saying her name ordered Gonaga's eldest princess to use golden sword Jake left behind. Empress Oni paid no mind to the princess crawling toward Jake's weapon.

Resonating through Princess Serena's mind, the voices told her, "Look at the four orbs. There's a portion of our energies still connected to those orbs. The red one represents Jake, and the blue one is Jas. The black and white one is Dash and Ken. And the final one – the gold one – is you. Use the sword. You can defeat her!"

Empress Oni glided from her elevated position, squatting beside the horizontal princess. Yanking Princess Serena by her hair, the empress lifted up her seemingly helpless foe so she could gaze into the princess' weak eyes.

While gently wiping the blood streaming from the left corner of Princess Serena's mouth with her free hand, the Empress of Jarad said, "So, Princess, you like that insect's sword? Well, I'll let you see him very soon inside of me."

Princess Serena slapping the hand away actually brought a laugh from Empress Oni prior to Gonaga's intended conqueror pitching her final adversary back to the ground. Reentering the opaque sky, Empress Oni prepared and threw a row of five purple energy spheres. Barely standing on one knee was Princess Serena; holding Jake's sword in front of her. Even with the energy barreling toward her, Princess Serena still heard the voice familiar coaching her on. The Princess of Gonaga struggled to her feet by using Jake's sword as a crutch; staring at this descending attack the entire time.

The voices suddenly ordered Princess Serena to, "Swing!" Jake's sword at the first incoming sphere.

With hesitation, the princess followed the bodiless commands. With each slash, Princess Serena cut through the energy orbs one by one. Seeing Princess Serena still standing infuriated the empress, but she still had an ace up her proverbial sleeve. Extending her left index finger in the princess' direction, Empress Oni produced an energy ball erupting with flames that almost shadowed the ground's entirety. Once this energy fireball grew to the empress' planned size, she threw it at her steadfast enemy.

Princess Serena held Jake's sword above her head as she felt a great force run through her body and the weapon. The sword's four orbs glowed alongside this emerging energy inside Princess Serena. Joining the encouraging voices coaching Princess Serena were three others. With Empress Oni's fireball creeping closer, the stone underneath Princess Serena splintered and shattered. In the middle of this forming crater stood a rejuvenated princess.

The Empress of Jarad yelled from her perch while the fireball started engulfing Jake's sword, "I'm so happy you've accepted your fate! Let the world become what.... What's going on?"

Empress Oni watched in awe when her fiery creation stopped descending before touching the ground and destroying its intended target. After several seconds of hovering, the fireball began moving again. But this time the Empress of Jarad's energy shifted toward its maker. Empress Oni's prior jubilation turned into fear when her fireball – backed by a stream of beautiful, multi-colored energy emanating from the princess' body and Jake's sword – picked up speed. Throwing energy beams and spheres alike, Empress Oni hoped to destroy the fireball before it returned to her. All of the ruler's attempts failed as the fireball absorbed each of her projectiles. Empress Oni refused to change her strategy – unprepared to feel the strength of her own creation.

Jarad's empress bellowed as the flames overtook her, "No! I cannot die! I must rule--"

Cut short was Empress Oni's declaration when she, like her energy, became one with the fire. Painfully trembling inside of her of own making, Empress Oni couldn't break free of its agonizing binds until the entire contraption exploded; lighting up the brooding darkness.

Similar to a comet, the empress' burning body crashed against the surface; the broken rocks extinguishing the fading flames. A startled and exhausted Princess Serena entered the crater. Motionless, Empress Oni lay in front of the woman who caused her injuries with the bottom half of her now unmasked face scorched; her left leg grizzly amputated at the knee; the right arm smoldering & black.

After slightly kicking her wounded adversary to find no movement, solace enveloped the princess' words, "It's finally over. World.... Gonaga, return to me."

"No!" came from the crater. "Gonaga is mine!"

Empress Oni's right eye shot open following her proclamation. Using her only working arm, the sole leader of Jarad clutched the princess' right ankle.

"I will not let you remove me from this planet," Empress Oni continued. "You will die by my hand."

As hard as she struggled, the princess couldn't relinquish herself from the empress' grip. Empress Oni dragged Princess Serena to the ground, only for the Princess of Gonaga to start kicking her attacker's charred face. When Empress Oni bit Princess Serena's incoming right leg, the brutal chomp gave the empress an opportunity to crawl atop her royal foe. Unable to remove herself from beneath the empress, Princess Serena felt Oni's burned, yet working left hand wrap around her neck. From the corner of her tearing eye, the princess discovered Jake's shimmering sword was only out of arms' reach. Princess Serena found her left hand touching the sword's handle as Empress Oni's death grip tightened. The extra force disabled any little bit of oxygen from entering the princess' struggling body as it slowly went limp. Releasing her hold of Serena's neck, Empress Oni collapsed to the right of the princess' lifeless form.

Almost mumbling, Empress Oni's half-deformed face voiced, "I told you I would wipe your kind from this planet. But I commend you for hurting me to this extent – something your ancestors could never do. And I must also thank you for something else. Without you and your friends, I

wouldn't be the most powerful being in the universe.”

Closing her eyes, Empress Oni concentrated on repairing her injured body. To the empress' surprise, she heard someone else breathing seconds later. Opening her working eye allowed Empress Oni to witness and feel Jake's golden sword run through her chest. Gazing down in shock, Empress Oni watched the sword slice across her torso during its exit; cutting off her left arm in the process. Blood spewed from Empress Oni's wounds, soaking her and her butcher.

With her own sanguine fluid pooling around her, the gurgling empress lowly muttered, “You... you can't do this to me. I'm not meant to die in my world and I shall not!”

“This isn't your world,” the person responsible for Empress Oni's stabbing – Princess Serena – responded. “It's not mine either. This world belongs to everyone. That's why you can't win. No matter what you think, this planet doesn't want someone changing it for their own evil intentions. And this world will give the people its strength to make sure that an evil person like you doesn't succeed. Powers beyond our own made sure this moment happened thanks to the people you helped raise. Jas, Dash, Ken, Jake... they were placed in your care for your own demise.”

Empress Oni's conqueror moved from her kneeling position by her enemy's mangled body. The Gonagan Crystal shown brightly in the empress' back as she lay atop this powerful object.

The princess squatted beside Jarad's sole leader to tell her, “Just like the world, this crystal doesn't belong to you,” prior to rolling Empress Oni onto her stomach.

Ripping the Gonagan Crystal out of Empress Oni's back with her bare right hand and placing it in her only pants pocket, Princess Serena felt the empress' energy level drop significantly.

The Princess of Gonaga abruptly offered her fallen foe one last opportunity to surrender, “Empress Oni of Jarad, understand that you are the one who broke the treaty between yourself and my grandfather. Without that treaty, I have every right to kill you in battle. But I can also forgive you. Accept your defeat, return to Jarad, and rule your land as a true empress should.”

Empress Oni's found a strength unexpected when she retorted, “The only promise I make to

you, Princess Serena of Gonaga, is if you let me live I will recover. I will form another army. And I will take Gonaga from you undeserving worms. You speak as if without that crystal I'm unable to stop you. Let me live and you will fall at my hands because I am forever linked to Gonaga and the Gonagan Crystal."

Before the ruler of Jarad's lips could part to continue her soliloquy, Princess Serena drove Jake's sword through Empress Oni's neck. Only seconds later did a single lightning bolt strike the sword, disintegrating the empress' body; knocking the woman responsible for her death backwards. Princess Serena ended up landing on nothing. Barely conscious upon feeling the thunderbolt's immense power, Princess Serena didn't realize she'd fallen into the abyss.

This has been nothing short of a nightmare, Serena thought. I've loss so much, but I hope I've honored you all.

Without Princess Serena's knowledge, the Gonagan Crystal fell from her pocket during her descent. Brightly, a light exploded underneath her. This illumination spread throughout the darkness. Princess Serena lazily opened her eyes due to the exuberant light before shutting her orbitals one last time.

...to be continued