

CRYSTALIS  
ALPHA



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

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## The Message

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

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

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

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

King Gonan died less than a week after handing the keys to his offspring. Five years following The Great Ocean Cry, Goga II attempted to fulfill one of his father’s last wishes by bringing harmony between Gonaga and Jarad through a treaty. King Goga met Empress Oni on his personal ship to discuss the pact’s terms. The Empress of Jarad offered no input, willfully agreeing to King Goga’s offer.

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

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

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

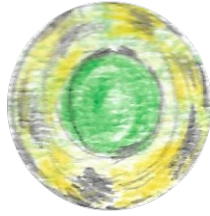
Empress Oni stood in front of these thankful kids to ask them, "What do you think of Jarad?"

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

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

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

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



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

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

“We can't do anything about it,” Jake responded while keeping his eyes on the nearing shore. “She has him brainwashed and there's nothin' we can do but tell the king what's gonna happen.”

“You think the king will believe us?”

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

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

Jake's light caramel complexion made Jas' fair skin look whiter than it actually was. Jake towered over his friend both in height and weight. But Jake's size hid his

incredible agility. Many considered Jake one of the most graceful trainees in all of Jarad. Even with their “special” traits, Jake always considered himself and Jas average.

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

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

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

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

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

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

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

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

The little girl giggled upon answering, “Athena.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Athena moved from her hiding spot, grabbing Serena's right hand with her left. Serena led her sister toward the wall Jake and Jas were now leaning against.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In disbelief Jake and Jas motionlessly stood.

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

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

“No you didn’t,” retorted Jake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An infuriated Jas responded, “You think?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With his arms crossed, Jake leaned against a concrete pillar that held the left half of the castle's front gate. Jas motioned for Jake to speak, but Jake threw his eyes toward the ground, not saying a word. Abruptly, Princess Serena knelt in front of the quiet Jaradian so she could look at him from his new vantage point.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grabbing Princess Serena’s wrist, Jas pulled the questioner away from Jake to tell her, “He has memories, and so do I. But they’re all jumbled up. The only timetable that makes any sense is the one after we arrived in Jarad. Oni.... She has methods... devices. Memory erasers, scramblers, or something. They mess with your head so much that the only thing that seems real is what Oni tells you. But that conversation we overheard was a trigger, y’know?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

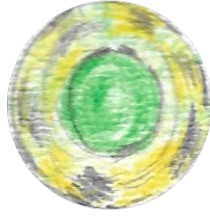
"Jas, I highly doubt she's thinkin' the same way you are right now. And aren't you already spoken for?"

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

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

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





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

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

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

After slightly grunting, Jake said, "Okay, Princess, Jas talked me into it, and... and you can come with us."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No she won't."

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

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

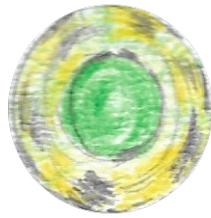
Witnessing Princess Serena entering the castle without them out of the corner of his eye caused Jake to moan, "Can't she stay still?"

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

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

No answer exiting Jake caused Jas to repeat himself.

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



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

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

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

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

Almost a half an hour after ordering members of his military to confront a part of Jarad’s army, the King of Gonaga asked a returning, pale General Bridges about the empress’ reason for arrival, “So, Bridges, what did she say?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What agreement?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Empress Oni questioned the bewildered leader, “You think I didn’t know what we were up against?”

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

Empress Oni’s right hand moved from her side. So busy trying to get a follow up response from General Bridges, King Goga didn’t pay attention to her right palm turning from its normally ghastly white to red. That reddening of the empress’ hand was actually energy being produced from her body to a single point of interest. Finally feeling this condensed energy emanating from his fellow ruler grabbed the King of Gonaga’s

attention. King Goga's paralyzed stillness allowed the Empress of Jarad to turn her energy into a beam without being stopped. The ray shot from Empress Oni's hand, piercing King Goga's chest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to Empress Oni, Princess Serena only had one option, “Take the key from your dying father’s neck and bestow it unto me. You know the only way a person not of pure Gonagan royal blood can attain that key is by having someone of pure royal blood entrusting it into the recipient’s possession through a verbal declaration. Do it and maybe I’ll let you live.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A simultaneous shouting of, "Dash!" exited Jas and Jake's mouths upon hearing the familiar voice.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After returning his sword to his captor's neck, Dash explained to Princess Serena, "That's from an arrow head that I used on myself to show them how their attacks weren't hurting me. But it wasn't all bad. That's the day I put myself above all others. That's the day I became the most powerful person in Jarad... behind Empress Oni of course. And if

you don't want the princess and I to have matchin' scars, Jake, I suggest you tell her to give up that key."

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

Before Jake could execute his plan, they heard someone chokingly whisper, "I give up the key of my ancestors to Empress Oni of Jarad; the key that gives you possession of the Gonagan Crystal."

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

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

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

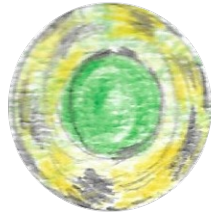
...to be continued

## The Attack

Princess Serena of Gonaga and the Jaradians Jake and Jas gazed into the sky as Gonaga crumbled around them. After helping a woman out of her destroyed home, Jas realized something vital.

“Serena!” Jas said to gain the princess’ attention. “We still haven’t seen your sister.”

Only a couple of hours earlier the three were facing death. Now the entire land of Gonaga had a chance to perish. Only a couple of hours earlier...



Empress Oni of Jarad made her presence in Gonaga known for the first time in nearly half a century by ordering her army to kill most of Gonaga’s militia. Trying to stop the empress’ commanded onslaught, King Goga III found himself badly wounded by his enemy’s energy. Jake and Jas were able to injure Jarad’s supreme ruler with their sword and sickles respectively, causing the empress to retreat with the help of Jas and Jake’s old friend, Dash. But Empress Oni didn’t leave Gonaga without the key handed down to King Goga III by his ancestors – a key that allowed someone to gain possession of the powerful, yet mysterious Gonagan Crystal.

Several guards stumbled into Gonaga Castle's Conference Room when they saw Empress Oni leave. The sentinels instantly found Princess Serena slumped over her father's motionless body. Two of the guards grabbed their majesty, taking him to the royal family's personal medical area. Plopping on the ground alongside a staggered Serena, Jas and Jake attempted to console the mentally collapsing princess.

Thinking for a few moments, Jas wanted to know, "Princess, where's your mom? A king has to have his queen, right?"

Princess Serena explained that her mother was from a country less than three hundred miles north of Jarad, "Yafan. My father... my fa--!"

Jake didn't know what to do as the rising Princess Serena fell against him. Jake motioned for Jas to take his spot, but his friend refused. Two injured Gonagan sentries hobbled into the room to check on their princess after being alerted about King Goga's injury. Quickly telling them why the princess was crying and why they suspected that her mother was in trouble, Jas practically ordered these defenders to recover their queen.

"Who is this kid?" one Gonagan asked the other.

Jas puffing his chest made Jake physically shake the princess back to their present moment before his friend did something that got them in trouble.

Collecting herself mentally, Princess Serena explained the possible situation her mother was in, "If Oni gains contact with Mother's ship she'll--"

Jas interrupted the princess by warning her listeners, "If you goons don't get out there and find out where your queen is you'll have another situation like we had in here!"

When Jas finished his blunt statement, Princess Serena let out a horrific wail followed by tears.

Jake punched Jas' left arm; wondering out loud, "What is wrong with you?"

One guard tried to help his princess to her room as the other told Jake that they couldn't go after the Empress of Jarad.

Jake verbalized his lack of understanding, "Your queen – the Queen of Gonaga – might be in life-threatening danger, and you're not gonna find her?"

Crestfallenly shaking his head beforehand, the sentry explained, "Oni's army took out too many of our men. The king retired all of our battleships several years ago. I don't know the status of the planes or if we have any capable pilots not injured. There is King Goga's traveling ship."

Jake responded upon processing the guard's answer, "You're tellin' me the most powerful land in the world is doesn't have a single war-ready ship with an army probably in the low double-digits? Do you think you can get that one ship ready for war?"

"That ship wasn't made for war. And even if we did arm it, it'd take at least a week with our crew in such dire straits."

As Jake and the castle guard continued their upsetting conversation, Jas noticed the other sentinel who escorted Princess Serena to her room had returned to his spot near the door.

Jas asked the princess' former escort, "Why aren't you guarding Serena's room?"

Jas' eyes almost popped out of his head when the guard told him, "She said she needed to take a walk."

Turning to Jake, Jas yelled, "Serena's run off!"

Jake shoved the talkative guard out of his way as he left the Conference Room.

Staring at the lush blue sky from her position atop Gonaga Castle's front steps, Princess Serena said to herself, "What can I do? I can't do anything to save Mother like this."

A familiar sound of the castle's large, immaculately designed, steel doors sliding open concluded the princess' soliloquy. Not wanting to be a part of anything or speak to anyone at the moment, Princess Serena ran toward the streets. Gonaga's first princess slipped around the front gate just as Jas and Jake exited her home.

Jas decided it'd be best for them to split up, "Jake, you go that way, I'll go this way."

"Right," Jake agreed; stepping off the castle grounds. "She couldn't have gotten too far."

The former members of Jarad's army scoured the town, asking anyone if they'd seen Princess Serena.

One woman told Jake she thought she saw little Princess Athena, "...but she was being dragged by the arm from the castle. I just thought it was a Gonagan soldier escorting her out of the area. Please don't tell me I was wrong."

Almost an hour had passed since his search began when Jas found Princess Serena on a bench near Gonaga's famed Marketplace – the main source of shopping in the land. Jas honestly didn't know if he should confront the Gonagan princess or just watch from afar. The sounds of footsteps turned Jas' attention from his original target to whoever was approaching him. Thankfully, the person responsible for those steps was Jake.

After Jake asked his friend why he was just standing and watching Serena, Jas said to his questioning comrade, “Look at her. Her father almost got murdered. She doesn’t know where her mom is--”

“And Athena might be in trouble,” Jake interrupted.

Telling Jas about his encounter with a townspeople during his search for Princess Serena revealed that Gonaga’s youngest child in the land’s royal bloodline may have been kidnapped.

“I don’t think we should tell her,” Jas whispered. “She’s already got enough on her plate. If we tell her about Athena possibly missing she might go off the deep-end. And who knows; maybe the old lady was wrong. Lets get Serena back to the castle as soon as possible and find out if that woman was right on our own.”

Jake understood where his friend was coming from, but felt they needed to confront Serena, “We can’t just stand over here in the shadows all day and wait for her to come our way.”

Moving from his position and taking a seat beside her, Jake tapped the unresponsive princess.

In a monotone voice, Jake said to Princess Serena, “You know we’ve been lookin’ all over for you? I wish you would’ve told me you were goin’ somewhere.”

Following a few moments of awkward silence, the princess solemnly responded, “Sorry, Jake. But I heard what the soldiers said. I don’t know how they’re going to get to Mother in time. If Father were...”

Jas finally left his hiding spot as Princess Serena stopped speaking – their royal host lost in thought for a moment.



The princess asked a nearing Jas, “How did you guys get here again?”

“We sailed,” Jas hastily answered.

“So where’s your boat?”

Jas stood in front of the princess with his left hand in the air so he could explain while counting down what was on his mind, “First of all, it took us almost a day to get here. Second, our *raft* was destroyed when we hit the shore. Third, we couldn’t catch Oni on a raft even it was still in good shape with three of us since me and big boy almost capsized the thing several times by ourselves.”

Princess Serena, Jas & Jake sat together on the bench, staring downward; all seemingly thinking of a way to get to the Queen of Gonaga before Empress Oni could. Neither of the three had enough time to really ponder on the situation because a slight rumble suddenly quaked Gonaga. Princess Serena’s face turned pale when she peered up. Above her homeland floated several small planes – mostly Gonagan military property. One of the aircraft’s doors unlocked as the plane lowered. A couple of people stood on the plane’s opened ledge.

Jas nudged Princess Serena with his elbow so he could ask her, “Is your mother with them?”

The Gonagan princess didn’t recognize who these individuals were. Fearing for her safety, Jas told Princess Serena that she should remove herself from the Marketplace.

Jake concurred with his friend, “Princess, if you know any good hiding places in the castle, find one and stay there as long as you can.”

Serena refused until Jake yelled at her to leave. Huffing loudly, Princess Serena followed Jake’s order and returned to the castle.

Jas trailed the princess after telling his other comrade, “I can’t let her go alone. You never know, y’know? You just find out what’s going on.”

Jake’s travel for answers quickly became a failure as Gonagans ignored him while scurrying for safety. Realizing that his best bet was to protect Princess Serena, Jake made his journey back to the castle. With his destination in sight, Jake felt a sense of relief flow through his body. That alleviation turned into anger when two Jaradian soldiers from a group of four tackled Jake from behind.

Kicking away two of the attackers responsible for taking him down, Jake found himself being beaten to his knees by stolen batons they took from the fallen Gonagan soldiers during their most recent invasion. Jake removed the sword holstered to his back instead of guarding his body from the heavy blows. Aiming for legs, Jake sliced the two soldiers who gave him an opportunity to rise from his prone position. The troops rolled in agony as blood poured from the deep cuts in their thighs. Jake sensed someone coming behind him. Spinning around, Jake sliced the approaching Jaradian’s baton-holding right hand off.

Smiling at the fourth and visibly youngest soldier, Jake motioned for him to, “Come on.”

The final standing Jaradian rushed Jake, only to meet Jake’s sword’s pommel sternum first. Barely able to breathe, the young warrior asked if Jake could put him out of his misery.

Derisively, Jake replied, “You’re not gonna die. You just shouldn’t do anything like blindsidin’ me. But if you don’t get outta here now, I *will* grant you your wish.”

“Are you sure?” the downed and fearful Jaradian asked. “I can go?”

“Go.”

Jake watched his former fellow soldier rise from the cobblestone road, hobbling from where he came. Just as Jake moved to restart his walk, he felt someone watching him. Jake turned to find a golden sword at his throat. The person holding this weapon, clothed in a hooded robe with his or her face masked, circled Jake. By the person’s movements, Jake figured out the swordsman was actually a woman of advanced age. Jake devised and successfully executed his plan of tripping his most recent attacker after she forced him to drop his sword.

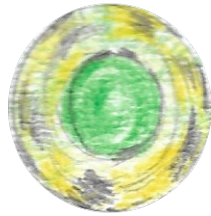
What Jake didn’t predict was the swordswoman catching herself by using her weapon as a crutch. When she pushed herself from her near horizontal position, the woman prepared another attack. Jake leapt over her incoming swing, catching the sword’s fuller with the palms of his hands. The struggle to keep this sword from slicing him in two left Jake open for a kick to his abdomen that weakened his legs. A now-kneeling Jake glanced up after losing his grip of the enemy’s weapon to find her sword aimed for the top of his head.

Rolling backwards, Jake kicked the quickly approaching sword back at his foe. This mysterious attacker’s sword flew from her hands, landing tip first in the dusty ground. This swordswoman losing her weapon gave Jake the chance to retrieve his own. Not allowing the woman to grab the lost item by jumping in front of her sword, Jake pointed his blade at her now visibly masked face.

Jake asked, “Who are you?” as they circled each other like two hungry wolves over a fresh piece of meat.

Abruptly, the woman stated, “Just a test. You passed with flying colors. Don’t worry. We will meet again.”

Before Jake could attain a real answer, the woman slung something toward the stone road. A ball of smoke exploded from this thrown object, giving her the chance to escape.



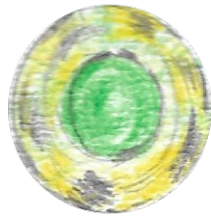
Princess Serena led Jas to a secret hiding spot below Gonaga Castle. After the princess situated herself in the small, bomb shelter-like room, Jas figured it’d be okay if he went back out to find Jake. As thoughts of playing with Athena only hours ago still running through her mind, Serena just nodded to answer Jas’ question regarding if she’d be all right by herself. Jas gave the eldest Princess of Gonaga a hasty hug before taking his leave. While Jake ran through the castle’s front gate he noticed Jas heading his way. The look in Jake’s eyes explained their situation.

But Jas had to confirm his assumption was right by asking his friend, “Oni’s fleet’s back and they’re heading for the castle, right?”

Jake admitting Jas was correct brought another question from him, “Did you see Serena’s sister on your way back? That little mud pie isn’t anywhere in the castle, or she’s hiding somewhere not even your favorite princess can find.”

Jake verbally ignored Jas' comment about Jake's "opinion" of Princess Serena by telling his friend that Gonaga's most secure building wasn't so safe anymore, "Whatever you do, take Athena somewhere far away from here if you find her. I'll get Serena and we'll meet up at the shore where we wrecked."

"Okay. She's in a room underneath the castle. There's a trap door between the foyer staircase and the wall. Just hurry up and get outta the castle after you find her."



Sitting in the dark, Princess Serena's mind started pondering, *Father, can you imagine if Athena grew up and took Mother's place? Wouldn't it be great if she took the throne so I wouldn't have to? Father...*

A rumble rocked the princess' thought process; asking currently unanswerable questions. Following the shaking, Princess Serena heard someone walking in her shelter. Gonaga's first princess moved from her seat in case this person was here to capture her. She felt her way around the room to potentially avoid this unknown individual before her intended exit.

Serena's heart rate slowed to normal when a recognizable voice came from the intruder, "Princess, are you down here?"

The princess answered with a question of her own, "Is that you, Jake?"

"Yeah, it's me. I can't see a thing down here. Where's the light?"

As Princess Serena touched the wall behind her, Jake thought of a solution to their dark situation. The princess' eyes turned from the darkness to a sudden flickering light dancing in front of her. Princess Serena wanted to know where this illumination originated, but Jake's concern was about their current predicament.

"We gotta get outta here now!" Jake said. "Oni's sendin' a bunch of her soldiers this way for you and your sister."

Before they could leave, Princess Serena had to find out, "Where are Athena and Jas?"

"Jas is lookin' for Athena now," answered Jake. "I don't think she's even in the castle. I guess she's smarter than any of us."

Princess Serena and Jake exited her home to find a horrible sight before them. Staring at the princess and her ally were eight Jaradian soldiers.

Quickly, Princess Serena asked, "Jake, what are we gonna do?"

Jake pulled out the sword holstered to his back, swinging it around as the invading Jaradians rushed them. Cowering behind Jake, the princess watched as her protector kicked and elbowed each charging Jaradian into unconsciousness. Jake periodically glanced behind him to make sure someone hadn't grabbed the princess while he fought their attackers. Jake's third momentary attention shift of attention in Princess Serena's direction allowed a recovering Jaradian trooper to grab his legs. Raising his weapon in the air, Jake prepared for freedom by driving the sword's pommel against this soldier's head.

Before Jake could complete his action, another one of the eight soldiers tackled Jake from his left side. Several of Empress Oni's militia stumbled to their feet, stomping

their fellow Jaradian as Jake struggled from his horizontal position atop the castle's front stoop. Peering into Princess Serena's fearful eyes, Jake demanded she run.

Suddenly, the scared princess bellowed, "Get off of him!"

An extra exclamation to Serena's order came when a bright golden aura exploded from her body. The troops surrounding and attacking Jake were sent sailing across the castle's front yard by this immense energy. Stunned by the princess' action lay Jake gazing at the color of Serena's eyes changing from hazel to emerald. The aura that surrounded Princess Serena's body started whipping around to hit each rising soldier between their eyes. Jake couldn't believe what he was witnessing as his former mates collapsed. When the energy dissipated, Princess Serena fell to her knees.

"How did you do that?" was all Jake could ask after Princess Serena opened her eyes.

Between coughs, the first Princess of Gonaga responded, "I-I-I don't know."

Hoisting Serena off the ground, Jake asked if she needed him to carry her.

Thankfully, the princess said she could make it on her own – causing Jake to restart his walk.

"That's it?" Princess Serena said after following Jake for several silent seconds.

"You're just going to take me at my word and not ensure I'm okay?"

Jake never looked back or stopped walking as he responded, "Usually when someone of impressive power says what they say, they mean it. Hard to believe, I know."

Jake's response made Princess Serena think, *Did he just say I'm impressive?*

The princess and her fellow traveler were barely ten yards from the castle when Serena spotted someone out of the corner of her eye. That someone turned out to be a

running Jas trying to gain the princess and his fellow sailor's attention. Jake met his friend before Princess Serena could catch up.

“Did you find Athena?” Jake immediately asked.

In a disappointing fashion, Jas shook his head. Jas' mouth opened so he could say something when another explosion rocked Gonaga. Jake and Jas couldn't help but notice the paleness in Princess Serena's face as Gonaga continued shaking. Turning around, a shadow of concrete & mortar covered all three awestruck individuals. Before anyone could react, the castle's steeple crashed into the streets, atop the three fearful watchers.

Several eerily quiet moments passed until Jake pushed a few concrete blankets off of his body. Dust & debris clouded his vision, but Jake physically insisted on finding the other missing bodies. When Jake attempted to stand, an incredible pain shot through his left leg. Glaring down to see what was wrong with his left leg, Jake discovered a jagged piece of metal piercing the appendage.

*Okay, Jake thought while clenching his fists. I can pull this out.*

Noticing a piece of someone's shirt blowing from the stones in front of him, Jake grabbed the item so he could bite down on something. With one hard yank the metal slid from Jake's leg. Immediately after removing the unwanted insertion, Jake used his newly found cloth as a tourniquet. Jake pushed himself upwards, trying to get some feeling back in his leg. Before Jake could fully gain his balance, his eyes were taken away from his leg and placed on his surroundings.

Fires roared around Jake while homes crumbled from aftershocks. Jake started calling out for his friends until a slab of concrete moved beside him. A sigh of relief left



Jake's body when Jas revealed himself and Princess Serena. Jas wiped the dirt from his blond hair after helping Gonaga's downed royalty to her feet.

Princess Serena said after she stopped coughing, "It was like a comet. A giant red ball came out of the side of the plane, destroying everything in its path. I saw her do it. I saw Oni do it."

As Jake and Jas conversed minutes after reuniting, Princess Serena tried to calm the hysterical survivors nearby. The circling of another plane overhead turned everyone's eyes to the sky.

Hovering above the crumbling buildings, a proclamation echoed from this unknown aircraft, "We have destroyed your land, your people, and King Goga! Now, we have the princess! We have Princess Athena!"

Serena screamed for her sister as the plane's door opened to reveal her gagged sister being held by Dash. Running in the castle's direction, Serena yelled for Dash to let Princess Athena go. Princess Serena's mind was racing so fast she couldn't understand what Jake tried to tell her as he grabbed her right hand. Realizing she didn't comprehend Jake, he hoisted Princess Serena off of her feet and forcibly carried her behind Gonaga Castle. Jake marched into the castle's garden even though Princess Serena was pounding his back with her fists. Near the garden's back wall stood a patch of grass not the same color as the rest.

When Jake let her down, she screamed, "What are you doing? I need to get my sister!"

Rather than answer the princess, Jake found a handle in this discoloration of grass. Pulling this handle revealed a trap door that went underground. Princess Serena

begrudgingly trailed Jake down the tenebrous stairway when he wouldn't let go of her hand.

During their trip downward, Princess Serena admitted, "I've lived here my whole life and I never knew there was another underground passage."

The two kept walking until touching solid ground.

After Princess Serena asked if Jake had a clue where the lights were, someone seemingly awaiting their arrival said, "I got it."

With the sound of a switch flipping, lights flickered on to reveal a huge hangar housing a small passenger plane Jas – the person already in the room – called, "My newest toy."

Jas continued speaking to Princess Serena, "This baby can get us to Jarad in less than a few hours. And it's got enough room for all of us."

Gonaga's only free princess leapt for joy, embracing Jas.

She neared Jake to hug him too, but Jake stopped Princess Serena by saying, "We can be happy after we get the queen and your sister back."

The princess ignored Jake's words, continuously thanking him.

"What about me?" Jas asked; halting princess' display of gratitude to Jake. "I'm the one who found this place thanks to some clever interrogating of some military officials. I'm the one who told Jake about it. I'm the only one who can fly between us. He even turned you down for a hug."

To make Jas feel better, Serena kissed him on the cheek.

The Princess of Gonaga asked following the smooch, "Now, can we get going?"

Jas clutched his chest as if his heart was beating uncontrollably while Princess Serena opened the plane's only door.

"I think I'm having a heart attack!" Jas jokingly said at a red-faced Jake.

Jake shoved his stumbling friend out of his way prior to telling Jas, "You'll be havin' a real heart attack soon if you don't get on this thing and find Serena's family."

Hopping into the cockpit after making sure everyone was situated and opening the doors leading to a tunnel running underneath Gonaga toward the sea, Jas wanted his comrades to know, "This could be one of the craziest rides you'll ever experience."

Princess Serena slowly turned to see if Jake was laughing, only to have him inform his nervous associate, "Princess, he's not joking."

King Goga's daughter quickly grabbed her seat's sides when Jas yelled, "We're comin', Oni!"

...to be continued

## The Revelation

Several Gonagan fishermen guarding their boats waited for the invading Jaradians. When a rumble shook the docks, those same fishers assumed it was time to defend their property and, most importantly, their land. Instead of battling, the fishermen watched this small plane shoot from a hole that formed in the seawall near Gonaga's main port.

Unbeknownst to the anglers, in the plane rode Princess Serena of Gonaga and Jaradians Jas & Jake who were heading toward Jarad in search for Gonaga's youngest princess/Serena's sister; and maybe the Queen of Gonaga herself. Impatience moved through Jake after flying for almost an hour.

“Can't this thing go any faster, Jas?” abruptly Jake asked.

Jas had a quick response for his friend, “Hey, you could always come up here and take my place. Or did you forget that you never learned how to fly?”

A visibly fatigued Princess Serena ordered her two companions to stop their bickering so she could take a nap. Jake moved from his seat at their plane's back-end to the front row directly behind Jas so their conversation wouldn't disturb the other third of their possible empress-crushing trio.

The first thing Jake said from his new position was, “Whaddya think's gonna happen if we can't get Athena back?”

When Jas didn't respond, Jake asked his question again.

Jas quietly barked, “I heard you the first time!” before calming his tone. “I don't know what we'll do. I don't even know if we can save that little girl with Oni backed by a whole army.”

Jas' train of thought slowly drifted off track when he noticed the sky becoming dense with fog. Jake observed the princess shifting in her seat as if something was bothering her. As Jake approached her, he could hear Serena talking to herself. The princess' mumbled words weren't understandable. Suddenly, Princess Serena released a deafening scream. Jas yelled for his comrade to calm the wailing princess, but Jake couldn't hear a word. Lazily opening her eyes and closing her mouth after nearly a minute, Princess Serena found Jake kneeling in front of her; clutching his ears.

A surprised Serena asked her wallowing ally, "What's wrong, Jake?"

All Jake could say was, "Huh?" until his hearing mostly returned.

Staring at Jake regaining his composure, Princess Serena needed to know what caused him to fall in front of her.

Jas said from the cockpit, "You were screaming so loud we almost went deaf! Even the plane starting shaking! What in the world was that?"

Gonaga's princess hastily apologized for her unintentional action before changing the subject by asking Jake, "What's Jarad like?"

With his balance still unstable, Jake took a seat to the princess' right. Silence swept through the plane with Jake staring forward. Princess Serena's mouth slowly opened to ask her question again.

Before she could form a word, Jake looked at Princess Serena to say, "Jarad's nothin' more than a big boot camp surrounded by miles and miles of desolation. Imagine if a volcano exploded, leveled everything, and left nothin' but ash for someone to build a fortress on. Only hatred and depression grows from its soil. And any person who attempts to stay on its poisoned ground for an extended period of time takes that poison with them.

They can attempt to hide it. They can try and pretend they're just like everyone else. But deep down they know they shouldn't exist. They shouldn't exist for the simple fact no one should force them to sacrifice their lives for an evil cause. That's Jarad."

Jake's attention shifting toward a window beside him made the princess whisper to herself, "I see."

While he prepared to lower their transportation, Jas told his fellow passengers, "Hang on. I'm hoping for a soft landing, but you never know."

The passengers heeded their pilot's words by buckling up and grabbing the sides of their seats. Glancing at Princess Serena, Jake noticed something golden dangling from her right hand. Focused inspection revealed the object to be a locket. Swinging back and forth, the jewelry hypnotized its admirer.

Jake contemplated after shaking himself from a mesmerized state, *Man, I know she never believed somethin' like this could happen to her. Her mother. Her sister. Her father. Everyone taken from her without a second thought. And why would Oni care? It's just a maniacal quest for power. Maybe we shouldn't have come. King Goga didn't believe us anyway. Even with the warnin', Goga still got caught off guard. But if I didn't come, Serena could be in the same position Athena's in... or worse.*

Jake's eyes shifted left, staring at the princess' quivering legs as he continued pondering, *Serena, I know you can't hear this, but know that I'm gonna save your family. I'll make sure your life is just like it was before I came. I swear on my life that I'll protect you.*

Even in the turbulence, Princess Serena noticed little things going on like Jake slowly lowering his head against his knees.

“What’s wrong?” the Princess of Gonaga asked without looking at the person she was questioning.

Never breaking his sight from the floor, Jake somberly answered, “You.”

Hearing the princess take a deep breath made Jake explain himself, “I really wish you didn’t come with us because I don’t know what’s gonna happen. And I’d... Serena, since the first time I met you, I knew you were different. And I don’t mean because you’re a princess or nothin’. I mean, you represent a lot of people. They look up to you. And they can’t sustain themselves without you if somethin’ happens. They feel for you like I... I don’t think Gonaga could survive without you if something terrible happens.”

Gonaga’s eldest princess verbally disagreed with Jake’s statement, “The people of Gonaga are strong-willed. Even without me, they’d survive. But you shouldn’t be mad or upset for allowing me to come with you and Jas.”

Princess Serena gracefully moved from her seat before squatting beside Jake. As Jake peered to his left, he found Serena crouching, yet steadfast in their rocking, descending plane.

“I would’ve come if you liked it or not,” a smirking Serena informed her distressed companion. “It’s just the way I am. I’m only a princess in title. I can’t think of myself as a queen. I never have. I’m more comfortable being like a regular person than royalty. Athena, she’s what Gonaga needs. She might be young, but she’s the real future Queen of Gonaga. I know it. That’s why I came with you. I can’t sit back and let Gonaga’s future be hurt by some evil witch.”

A soothing warmth came over Jake when he felt Serena grab his left hand with her right.

The princess heard from Jake after he grasped her hand back, “Serena, you have somethin’ in you. I saw it in Gonaga. I’ve never.... it--”

When Jake went to look at the Princess of Gonaga’s face, Jas yelled from the cockpit, “Hey, Princess! You better sit down before we hit in about ten seconds!”

Gonaga’s flying royalty heeded Jas’ warning, retiring to her seat as Jake’s eyes returned to the floor. Thankfully for everyone the landing was relatively smooth.

After exiting their plane and staring at the gray haze in front of them, Princess Serena asked, “How far are we from Oni’s castle?”

Quickly correcting the princess was Jas, “It’s not a castle. It’s a giant torture chamber with an ‘optional’ brainwashing center. And to answer your question, we’re not too far. The plane’s radar showed one blip on Jarad about five or six miles east of here. Oni’s ‘palace’ is the only thing that’d give off a signal. So, east we shall go! Everyone ready?”

Barely a mile into their trek, a quiet groan exhaled from someone. The continued moaning sounded closer following each step they took forward.

Jake urged Jas to stop his ongoing joke, but Jas denied any involvement, “It’s not me. It doesn’t even sound like me.”

Before Jake could interrogate Jas any further, Princess Serena yelped, “Let me go!”

Turning around, Jas and Jake found the other third of their group kicking away something attached to her right leg.

The Jaradians simultaneously said, “Ken?” while staring at a visibly wounded body before Princess Serena.



Kneeling at this hurt individual's head while Jake calmed Serena, Jas asked, "Ken? Hey, Ken? Ken, is that really you? What are you doing out here?"

Princess Serena bumped Jas out of the way to confront her "attacker", but Jake pulled his fellow confused traveler away from this near-lifeless person before the princess could speak.

"Serena, let Jas handle this," Jake said. "I know Ken didn't mean it."

Following a stomp and a huff, Princess Serena turned her back to everyone. The man – this "Ken" – opened his eyes to find the voices he heard were truly those of Jake and Jas.

The first words from Ken's mouth reassured his questioner and protector alike that he knew who two of the three voices belonged to, "Jake. Jas. My friends... why did you come back?"

Instead of answering Ken's query, Jas had a question of his own, "Who did this to you?"

Jake helped Ken sit up as his injured comrade explained through his cracking, barely audible voice, "Oni's troops attacked me when I tried to escape. I thought I could get off Jarad like you guys. Maybe find you in Gonaga. But they caught me before I could make it to shore with one of Oni's emergency rafts. They beat me, took the raft, and left me for dead. When that girl came near me, I grabbed for her thinking they were here to finish me off."

Serena's "royal" attitude reemerged as she barked at Ken, "I'm not *some girl!* I'm the first Princess of Gonaga."

Floating in and out of consciousness, Ken insisted his friends leave him to continue their journey.

All three refused; with Jas telling his friend, “You’re probably suffering from starvation and dehydration. There’s no way we’re gonna leave you here to die. The plane we came back on is stocked with a few emergency supplies. We can take you to it and get you back to your old self.”

Jake and Jas took turns carrying their injured friend on the trip back to their vessel. Gonaga’s princess administered health care for Ken before assisting him in drinking three bottles of water. Barely an hour passed after the princess’ help did Ken feel his energy and strength returning.

“Your body will play tricks on you,” Princess Serena said as a warning for Ken to not get up too fast.

After a couple of moments of stretching, a slight, but deep laugh exited Ken’s body; followed by, “I can’t believe this is happening. The Princess of Gonaga is helping a man who was trained to destroy her?”

Princess Serena’s eyes lit up as the color drained from her face.

“What do you mean?” the stunned princess asked. “Destroy me?”

Immediately, Princess Serena’s attention turned to Jake in hopes that he would say she heard wrong.

Unfortunately for Princess Serena, Jake confirmed Ken’s words were true, “What Oni did to your father is what she wanted us to do to you. Oni wants to wipe away every bit of your family’s bloodline. When we found out about her plans to kill your family,

something else clicked. We finally understood what side we were on: the wrong one. Serena, please don't hold this against us. We--"

"I understand," interrupted the listening princess. "Whatever you were going to do isn't what you did. The boys I've met – those same boys who've helped me so much already – are good people who would never take an innocent life."

The plane's inside became quiet for a while as Jas stitched up a large wound above Ken's right shoulder.

Once again, Princess Serena tried to stop Ken from moving too quickly after her assistance, but Jas verbally defended their "patient's" actions, "Ken's a fast healer. When he gets the right stuff in him, or on him, he's good as new in no time."

Jas' attention turned to Ken as he told his recovering friend, "You know you don't have to sit here and wait for the end of the world as we know it. You could be an incredible help against Dash if it comes down to that. I mean..."

When Jas saw his statement about Dash affected Ken enough for Ken to turn his head away, Jas tried to explain himself.

Ken quickly stopped whatever Jas had in mind by saying, "No, I understand. Dash isn't the same anymore. It's beyond the brain scrambling. Dash is on another level of insanity. And I think the only way to snap him out of it is to beat some sense back into him. No disrespect to you or Jake, but I think the only one who can do that is me."

As Ken turned his back to everyone, Princess Serena noticed something familiar about him.

“Ken,” the Princess of Gonaga said. “You look like someone I’ve seen before. You.... Wait a minute. If your face wasn’t so square, and had some scars on it, I would say you’re a dead ringer for Dash.”

Peering at their friend together, Jas and Jake couldn’t believe they never noticed Ken and Dash’s similar facial features.

Jas exclaimed, “She’s right!” as he circled a surprised Ken. “Dash’s head’s a little rounder, but other than that, I’d think you guys were twins. I guess since you two are so different, I didn’t pick up on it. Or maybe I did, but just didn’t remember. I’d hate to be a criminal on the run if Princess saw me because it’d be over with those skills.”

For some reason, Ken didn’t want to talk about his resemblance to Dash; changing the subject, “Do you have anything I could use to protect myself?”

Before Ken could get an answer, the ground slightly rumbled. They ran out of the plane to find another aircraft soaring above them.

According to Ken, “It seems like we’re not the only ones heading toward our old home.”

Instead of walking, Princess Serena insisted they fly closer to Empress Oni’s fortress. Barely five minutes after takeoff, Jas landed the plane near an old, destroyed village a few miles south of the empress’ training facilities.

When asked about his abrupt grounding, Jas couldn’t explain his actions too well, “It-it’s like something’s telling me to stop. It’s weird. I’ve never felt an urge like this before.”

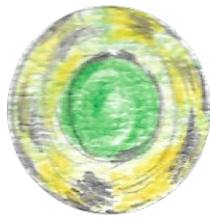
Ken sat at the village’s edge as Jake searched through dilapidated homes alongside the princess. Inside one of the few houses still standing, Jake found an old

picture lying by itself. Dusting off the picture revealed a moment captured in time of a baby-cradling woman while a statuesque man stood with her. Princess Serena crept behind Jake, peering over his shoulder to find out what had Jake's attention for so long.

"That's a cute baby," the princess said.

To Princess Serena's astonishment, Jake muttered, "I think... I think that's me as a baby. I think this is a picture..."

Before he could finish his thoughts, a rush of emotion overcame Jake, bringing tears to his eyes.



Closer to their plane, Jas explored through the rubble of a collapsed home in hopes of finding something that could aid him and his friends during their travel. To Jas' surprise, a trap door leading into the basement was still intact. He slowly walked down the creaking stairs until he touched solid ground. Taking a few steps to his right, Jas felt something touch his face.

Jas started swinging his arms like a madman until he realized, *Oh, it's just a string. Glad the guys didn't see that.*

Pulling the cord turned on a weak light bulb. In the middle of this small basement sat a single wooden chest. As Jas approached the trunk, a cold wind swept through the room. With that gust came the sounds of people talking.

“Who’s there?” Jas asked the unidentified conversationalists.

Seeing no one in the room with him, Jas calmed himself. Another chilly rush of air hit Jas when he bent over to open the trunk. Individuals chatting reentered Jas’ ear, forcing him to turn around.

Jas’ eyes widened as he watched several hazy figures circle each other. The ghostly figures opened their physical enclosure for Jas to enter. Jas stared at the focus of these ghosts’ attention: a tired, pregnant woman. A surge of energy shot through Jas’ body; topped by the feeling of something moving through him. Before he could figure out the cause of this sudden energy rush, Jas witnessed another specter dressed as a doctor appeared in front of him. This physician handed the pregnant female a baby.

“Congratulations!” Jas heard the doctor gladly bellow. “It’s a boy!”

Following the announcement, all of the apparitions vanished except a fairly tall man, the woman and her baby. In awe, Jas watched this new mother wiggle her index finger at the life she produced.

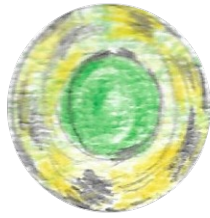
The mother whispered to her son, “I know you can’t say it yet, but just respond with your eyes. Do you know who I am?”

Simultaneously with the baby, Jas blinked.

A smile stretched across the lady’s weakened face before she exclaimed as best she could in her tired state, “That’s right! I’m your mother. And this big man is your father.”

When the boy entered his dad’s arms seconds later, the father boastfully said to his newborn, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you as long as I live.”

Following a nice breeze, the figures spirited away like sand near an ocean.



Waiting for what seemed like an eternity, Ken decided he wanted to investigate the former township, too. Ken entered the same house Jas searched first. The sounds of people talking inside the dilapidated building startled Ken. Ken called out for his friends to make sure it just wasn't them conversing. Hearing no response, Ken noticed a door in the ground open. Assuming the people talking were still in this house's basement, Ken took a trip downstairs. The flickering light below the destroyed home revealed a paralyzed Jas staring at the cracked, concrete wall all by himself.

Ken tried to shake Jas out of his stupor by asking, "Are you okay, man? What's wrong with you?"

Jas couldn't hear or feel Ken. Before he could slap Jas, a crisp wind surrounded Ken's raised arm. Through Ken's mind, everything Jas just witnessed played out. Finally understanding what was going on, Ken stepped back; taking a seat on the stairs. Jas' body gradually turned to the chest behind him as the phantom father reappeared. The son – seemingly around the age of five or six now – sat near his dad as he loaded several items into the wooden container. One item that caught Jas' eye was a little black book titled *For Our Little One*.

Grabbing the little boy by his hands, the father commanded his child, "Son, this might seem like a no-win situation for us, but there's something about you that'll survive

this. Please, come back here one day for this.”

Pointing at the chest was the boy’s only visible parent as he continued speaking, “It’ll give you everything you need to live like we wanted you to before they took us. Son--”

Noise of someone kicking in their front door interrupted the father’s words. Ken watched his friend’s head tilt upwards until Jas abruptly screamed, “No!” Quivering a second before his mind returned to reality, Jas wondered aloud, “What just happened?”

Someone whispered behind Jas, “So, you’re having them, too?” When he realized Ken asked the question, Jas needed to know what his friend meant.

Ken took a deep breath, exhaling the word, “Memories.” Taking his one-word answer a step further, Ken explained that Jas’ recollections were returning due to Empress Oni’s brainwashing finally wearing off, “With that constant haze the manipulation causes decreasing day after day, our minds are finally able to remember memories from our past. The only thing I don’t understand are the ghosts. You’d think we’d just remember stuff. Why are our returning memories becoming physical manifestations?”

Leaving the dilapidated home, Jas and Ken reunited with Princess Serena and Jake. No one felt like talking during the walk toward Empress Oni’s palace; causing the blustering wind moving throughout the land to sound more profound. On the south side of the empress’ fortress stood a warehouse. When they approached the warehouse’s side



door, Jake motioned for everyone to huddle up so they could formulate a plan of attack. Suddenly, Ken sprinted from his position to enter the warehouse on his own.

Jake wanted to yell at his running friend, but Jas stopped him prior to telling both his best friend and the Princess of Gonaga, “Ken’s incredibly smart. He’s up to something that could help us. I just wish he would’ve told us beforehand.”

It didn’t take long before the group ran into Ken inside the facility.

Ken stopped his fellow intruders as they approached an opening to his right by informing them, “Jake, there are a few guards up ahead. You know, the masked ones. If we can knock them out, we can take their outfits.”

Taking their time to study the four soldiers’ patrol patterns, Jas, Jake & Ken rushed the targeted Jaradians from behind. Jas leapt, dropkicking two of the patrolmen into unconsciousness. When the two remaining guards turned to see what the commotion was, Jake and Ken used two respective elbows strikes to the sides of their necks to put them on their backs as well.

In awe, Gonaga’s eldest princess said, “They just disposed of four soldiers without breaking a sweat. Not even the best soldiers in Gonaga can do that.”

Princess Serena made sure to keep an eye out for any other troopers while her comrades took the unconscious soldiers’ uniforms for themselves.

The Princess of Gonaga wanted to tie the guards up, but Jas had a rebuttal, “Princess, they’re not waking up anytime soon. And if they do, the last thing they’re gonna do is run around in their underwear.”

All of the boys turned their backs to Princess Serena when she grabbed her new outfit.

Jas poked Jake's right arm; jokingly telling his friend during the princess' wardrobe change, "Don't you go peaking now. If she wanted you to see her naked she would've let you by now."

The urge to punch Jas in his face overwhelmed Jake, but Ken stopped their conflict with a simple, "Guys, save it!"

Just as Princess Serena adorned the cracked, brown, face-covering mask, a siren sounded.

Ken informed the princess that the alarm meant a mandatory assembly in the armory was about to occur and how they could use the grouping to their advantage, "This is our chance to blend in and find out what Oni's complete plan is. We must be calm, stay still, and watch before doing anything."

Led by Ken, his disguised friends converged with the rest of Jarad's militia. Many soldiers noticed Princess Serena immediately after lining up in front of a small stage near the armory's back wall.

One Jaradian whispered to his neighbor, "Man, I didn't know we had any female recruits left."

Another trooper startled Serena by elbowing her.

"Ow!" came from Gonaga's princess following the uncalled for strike. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I've never seen you before," the soldier responded.

When the princess didn't answer, Jake nudged Princess Serena to tell her, "You gotta answer someone if you don't wanna look suspicious."

Princess Serena heeded Jake's words; hastily saying to this inquisitive Jaradian, "Um, I'm new. I just got in from Gon--.... Uh. Uh, I come from Yafan. You know, that place near here."

Hearing Jake sigh made Serena think she said something wrong.

Instead, Jake's exhaling was that of relief when he heard the soldier speak again, "Oh. Yeah, I heard about some raiders being sent up there for recruiting. I guess you went willingly. Knowing what's about to happen, I don't blame you. Nice to meet you."

Jas knew exactly what Jake was thinking after the possible situation blew over; saying to his observing friend, "For a princess, she knows how to talk her way out of a potential problem."

"It's easy when you're me, Jas," Princess Serena whispered.

Jake, who was standing between the Princess of Gonaga and an impressed Jas, poked both of them to remind his companions that they needed to keep quiet.

Right after Jake closed his mouth, Princess Serena retorted, "Jake, I don't have a loud mouth."

Frustrated over the princess' lack of proper composure made Jake explain to her, "If the people in front of you can hear you, then you have a loud mouth around here."

At the conclusion of Jake's statement, a noticeable shift in Serena's body language occurred.

Recognizing the princess' demeanor change immediately, Jas told Jake, "You messed up again, didn't you?"

Instead of reacting to Jas' comment, Jake turned his attention to the stage as several soldiers applauded an arriving Dash.

Dash quieted his fellow Jaradian defenders with a mere utterance, “Today, we have captured the Princess of Gonaga.”

The soldiers who stayed stationed in Jarad during Empress Oni’s attack on Gonaga were amazed and joyous.

Once more, Dash’s words calmed the enthusiastic soldiers, “Yes, yes, it is wonderful. But I have even bigger news. During our securing of the princess, we also seriously wounded King Goga. Now there’s only one more step before Gonaga falls completely. We must retrieve the Gonagan Crystal and have someone of Gonagan royalty present it to our empress. Once the crystal is in Empress Oni’s hands she will be the most powerful being that ever existed!”

Dash finishing his bold announcement gave the Empress of Jarad her cue. Stepping onto the stage with a kneeling Dash in her direction, Empress Oni watched her troops ferociously clapping. A sickening smile stretched across Empress Oni’s face before she lifted her left hand. Dangling from the leader’s bony index finger was a beautiful emerald necklace. Princess Serena gasped at the sight of this piece of jewelry.

Upon seeing the assumed treasure, Serena cried out, “That’s my mother’s necklace!”

Thankfully for King Goga’s first child and her friends, the Jaradians’ applause drowned out Princess Serena’s distressing proclamation. Standing to the princess’ left, Ken latched onto Princess Serena’s left hand to stop her from doing something that could reveal her identity.

“Your mother isn’t dead,” Ken whispered to the concerned member of Gonaga’s royal bloodline. “Oni knows that you won’t give her the info on the crystal. Your sister

probably doesn't know. And Oni can't return to Gonaga to get any answers out of your father. Your mother is the only person able to give her the information she needs. And if your mother's anything like you, she won't give in. Now be quiet and wait. We will get her back, without harm."

Princess Serena wanted to say something else, but Empress Oni's glaring at her captivated crowd removed any thoughts the princess had.

Standing before her loyal soldiers, Jarad's sole ruler declared, "This is a new dawn for my land. We have captured Gonaga's queen; interrogating her as we speak. It is only a matter of time before we conquer the land of Gonaga!"

...to be continued

## The Invasion

The usual silence heard from Jarad's militia disappeared when their empress revealed the capture and interrogation of Queen of Gonaga via a verbal decree and the queen's one-of-a-kind emerald necklace. After Dash informed his fellow Jaradians about Empress Oni's plan to attain the Gonagan Crystal, Dash threw his sword into the crowd. The soldiers scattering gave Dash's sword an open path to land tip first in the ground.

Dash remarked about his upright standing sword piercing the floor, "This ability to stay standin', even in the solid foundation that is Gonaga's power & heritage, is what every Gonagan will feel when we make their precious land ours. Isn't that right, Ken?"

In an impressive show of agility, Dash jumped from his position behind Empress Oni, sailing over four rows of Jaradian troops prior to landing in front of a masked Ken.

As Dash walked around Ken, Princess Serena wondered to herself, *How did he know Ken was standing there? If he recognized Ken, he might recognize me.*

Wanting to humiliate Ken while putting more fear in the soldiers who fled when Dash pitched his sword, Empress Oni's second-in-command pulled up Ken's shirt; showing off his healing wounds. The soldiers gazed in wonder at Ken's bruised and stitched body.

Still holding his victim's covering, Dash continued speaking to his fellow soldiers, "As you can see, Ken has learned what happens if you defy us. And through that knowledge, Ken now realizes that the only place for him is in the ranks of Jarad's best."

Ken's right arm shot from his side, clutching Dash's left wrist.

Before his friend could do anything, Jake grabbed Ken's powerful arm prior to saying, "This isn't the time."

Dash's attention quickly turned to this intervening soldier.

*Who is that? Dash thought. It sounds like.... But it can't be Jake. He and his little buddy are stuck in Gonaga. And even if they did make it back, the two of them couldn't beat me. My mind is just playin' tricks on me.*

As Jake forcefully lowered Ken's arm, Dash said, "You see – this is a man of strength! A man of fortitude! And most importantly, he's a man of loyalty! He's not only loyal to his fellow soldiers, but he's also, most importantly, loyal to the empress and Jarad. Look at the way he stands. Head high, shoulders back, ready for battle. Almost reminds me of myself. What's your name?"

Lowering his voice in hopes of disguising it, Jake started rambling, "My... name. The, uh, the only thing about my name... it, uh, represents--"

Dash vocally stopped Jake's bumbling words, "You know what? It doesn't even matter. Your name is 'Jarad' because that's what you so proudly represent. All of you! Your names represent your love for this land and nothin' else. This man understands that. He curses the name handed down by his father and mother to be a part of Jarad's history."

Dash returned to the stage with his sword in hand before Empress Oni resumed her speech, "In its history, Gonaga has experienced my hand touch its soil thrice. The fourth feeling of my power will leave Gonaga bare of hope. My hand will take away any and everything Gonaga holds close to its heart. And then, it can be rebuilt for us... for me. All the years of waiting, all the years of being 'bound' by that treaty, I will stand atop Gonaga as its only queen. Now prepare yourselves for the greatest moment of your lives!"

While the soldiers filtered from the armory, Princess Serena, Jake, Jas, and Ken snuck back to the destroyed village for a wooden trunk Jas discovered while searching through the area's remains.

"It's the only physical connection I have to my past," Jas told his friends during their trip. "I can't leave it here not knowing what could happen."

After retrieving the chest, Princess Serena trailed behind her friends as they carried Jas' trunk. During the four's trip, a siren sounding from Empress Oni's palace stopped the Gonagan princess in her tracks.

Princess Serena hastily asked her walking companions, "Hey, you guys hear that?"

Instead of answering, the boys picked up speed. Jas, Ken, and Jake knew the sound meant Empress Oni's ships were being boarded. The decision to stay alongside their enemies and not make the trek back to their own plane was unanimous among the princess and her allies.

Three ships had already set sail after the Princess Serena-led group arrived at the docks.

When the four disguised comrades attempted to enter the fourth ship, the ushering Jaradian told "fellow soldiers" Princess Serena and Jake, "Only got a spot for two more people. You two will have to get on the last ship."

Following the usher's order, the two incognito soldiers took a seat on fifth ship's back row.



A Jaradian noticing no conversation happening between the last two entering passengers took it upon himself to talk to the lady, “You’re that amazing female soldier, right?”

The unidentified Princess Serena pointed at herself before confusingly asking the questioning individual, “Me? You think I’m--”

“Of course,” he replied. “You must be amazing to make it as a soldier in Empress Oni’s army. So how about you and me go out after we take over Gonaga? Let me show these goons how to treat a real woman. Whaddya say?”

Jake watched the princess trying to ignore her suitor without giving any indication she wasn’t one of them.

Several moments of constant questioning from this trooper angered Jake enough for him to speak up, “Shouldn’t you be concentratin’ on the task at hand? Worry about the ladies later. And when I say ‘ladies’, I don’t mean her. She-she’s... spoken for.”

Princess Serena’s mind couldn’t believe what she heard, *Did he just say...?*

Upon realizing Jake wasn’t bluffing, this flirting Jaradian came up with a pathetic excuse to get himself out of this predicament, “Aw, she ain’t that great anyway.”

Princess Serena nudged Jake when the situation ended to tell him, “That was very nice. But you didn’t have to do that.”

Jake disagreed, “No, I had to. You’re doin’ everything like we want, and I can’t let some testosterone-driven idiot mess it up.”

“If I can go into ‘princess mode’ for a moment, may I ask by whom am I spoken for?”

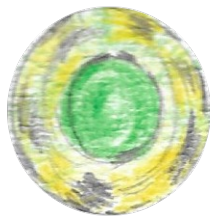
Jake's eyes dotted back and forth underneath his brown mask as he responded, "I didn't.... Seriously, do we have to get into that right now?"

With Jarad's vessels continuing through the foggy sea, the princess' thoughts had the chance to vocalize themselves, "Something bad could happen if we're not careful. Many people could die if we lose. My home, my family, everything could come crashing down without a thing to stop it."

Jake peered down when he felt Serena's right hand grab his left wrist prior to her asking, "Jake, when everything starts... can you promise not to leave me?"

Even with a mask on, Jake could see the angst disfiguring Princess Serena's face.

"I've made a lot of promises – known and unknown," Jake admitted. "I haven't done too well at keepin' them lately. But if there's one I know in my heart I can keep it's this one: Prin-... Serena, no matter what happens in Gonaga, no one will rip me from your side."



As Jas and Ken situated themselves on the fourth of five ships, a trooper close to Jas commented on his trunk, "Lotta stuff for a Jaradian."

Jas responded with a story he thought any fellow Jaradian soldier would believe, "Yeah, I got this when we hit Gonaga last time. Poor sap never knew what hit 'em, y'know?"

The inquisitive soldier slapped Jas' left shoulder before enthusiastically shouting, "I hear ya!"

Unbeknownst to Jas and Ken, they were placed on the same ship as Dash.

Dash slowly rose from his seat so he could address Jarad's forces, "Like Empress Oni said earlier – this day is ours. This is the day we finally make the world understand how great we are. Not only are we gonna win, we will be as kings known around the world!"

All the motivated, brainwashed soldiers screamed in approval of Dash's words.

Jas shifted to his right to ask Ken, "You think we can pull it off?"

Instead of verbally answering, Ken simply nodded his head up and down.

Moments later, the pilot informed Dash Gonaga's damaged docks were in sight.

Dash decided to tell his allies once more before they landed, "I'm almost frothin' at the thought of what we're about to do. No man, woman, king, or queen thinks the mighty Gonaga can fall through unnatural causes. And you know what? They're right. The planet spawned this moment. As controlled as our attack will be, it's also organic. This is what the world needs."

In front of Gonaga's recovering townspeople floated an army ready to destroy everything those men, women and children held dear. When Jarad's ships docked, the fishermen scurried to warn the unaware Gonagans to find haven while searching for safety themselves. Princess Serena stopped at the ship's hatch during her exit. In front of the first Gonagan princess flowed violence like she'd never seen.

"They aren't just taking over," the princess whispered to herself. "They're trying to enslave us."

Jake frantically said to her, “We gotta go now!” in hope of shaking the princess out of her distressed-induced stupor. “If we don’t meet up with Jas and Ken...”

Princess Serena paid no mind to Jake not completing his thoughts. Jake’s eyes were the reason for Jake’s concentration loss upon seeing a robed woman standing in the middle of Jarad’s invading fury. Just as Jake stepped forward in hopes of confronting this woman, she vanished between the fleeing bodies and rampaging soldiers.

When Ken and Jas left the fourth ship, Ken observed Princess Serena and her Jaradian companion glaring aimlessly; yelling for them to get moving like himself. The duo heeded Ken’s words, with the princess leading her friends toward a ransacked building on the docks.

Princess Serena told Jake and Ken after they assisted Jas with his trunk, “We can get these dusty clothes off before anyone spots us.”

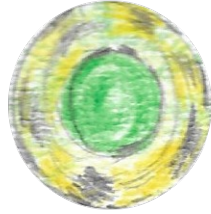
Almost immediately, Jake noticed that Ken seemed distracted as they reentered the war-torn streets with their swords unsheathed. Before Jake could question his unfocused friend about his current thought process, Ken ran off for his own mission. Ken’s form disappearing in the mix of smoke and celebrating Jaradians tying up captured Gonagans made Jas ask if they should go after him.

Jake decided against a pursuit of their running comrade, “I think Ken’s got plans we can’t comprehend right now. We had a plan that was meant for three people anyway. The three of us are here and we can complete it. Lets go!”

Jas stopped their progress by questioning if the princess could handle herself without a weapon.

The Princess of Gonaga vocally denied her lack of weaponry, “I brought this.”

In the princess' hand lay a little pocketknife. Princess Serena's proud smile turned into a grimace when Jake and Jas started laughing.



Ken's travel took him to the source of his personal mission.

*I know you're close*, Ken thought when he heard a man navigating Jaradians around foreign soil.

Ken realized the voice was that of his target. Walking around the building in front of him, Ken found Dash standing atop a destroyed water fountain. The hunting Ken ran forward with his sword in hand. During his commanding, Dash felt someone powerful nearing him. Quickly turning his attention toward the direction of this unidentified individual, Empress Oni's right-hand man discovered something quite unnerving: a sword-carrying Ken charging toward him. Understandably surprised was Dash; hastily bracing himself for Ken's thrusting sword.

The weapon barely missed its target when Dash fell to the ground. Before Ken could react, Dash leg swept his attacker onto his back. A backwards rolling Dash kicked Ken's sword out of his hands. Several spectating Jaradians decided it was time to intervene on Dash's behalf.

Empress Oni's second-in-command demanded that the approaching soldiers, "Stay out of this!" as both he and Ken returned to a vertical stance. "I don't need your help to beat this failed experiment."

Ken lunged for his sword, but Dash stopped his aggressor by tackling him. With Ken pressed against the street, Dash wound back in preparation to drive his right fist through Ken's face. Something abruptly stopped Dash just as his fist came within millimeters of his adversary's nose. Dash peered down to find Ken's right hand clutching Dash's left wrist. Tears formed in Dash's eyes; his body shivering.

A stunned Dash vehemently asked, "What's this? What's all of this? Ken... what are you doin' to me?"

Energy unlike anything Dash ever felt surged through his body, forcing him to bellow, "No! I can't... Not now! Not ever! Empress Oni doesn't want me.... Mother! Don't let her...! No, I don't wanna remember this! I don't wanna remember any of it! It's too painful! Ken, please don't take me back there! Don't take me back there!"

Ken's grip tightened while sternly telling the pleading Dash, "This is for your own good. This is you. Everything about me is you. Every memory. Every moment. Every dream. Let your mind be free. You don't want Oni to control you anymore. Let it go!"

Following Ken's statement, an explosion of energy in the form of white light emitted from Dash's body. Everything in a thirty-foot radius went flying, including Ken. People nowhere near the blast felt a rumble and saw its blinding elegance. When the light died, and his energy level returned to normal, a now smiling Dash stared into the dusty sky.

Barely an hour after landfall, Empress Oni's two abduction squads had captured over one hundred Gonagans; taking them to a designated rendezvous point close to the nation's main armory. The groups' leaders wanted to find out what that mysterious, yet powerful light burst was. Those two commanding officers arrived at the flash's point of origin, finding Dash sitting on his knees in the middle of a crater.

"What happened, Sir Dash?" came from the taller of the two scouts after they approached their empress' steadfast confidant.

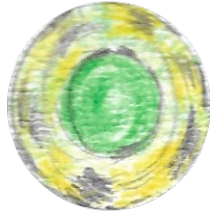
Rather than answer, Dash grabbed the hilt of his sword. The crystal clear double-edged weapon strapped to Dash's back wasn't so clear anymore due to a blood-colored hue wavering on the sword's tip. Holding his weapon toward the sun, Dash could see a change in his appearance through the sword's reflection.

*What happened to my hair? Dash asked himself. Why isn't it brown anymore? Why is it white? And what is this energy?*

Against better reasoning, the statuesque soldier grabbed Dash's shoulders to ask him, "Sir Dash, do you need some assistance?"

To the soldiers' surprise, Dash tossed his sword into the sky. The sparkling light from Dash's flying weapon crossing the sun like an eclipse startled his subordinates. Before the Jaradian troopers could regain their proper vision, Dash spun around to connect with a pair of debilitating kicks against their jaws. Ken couldn't help but smile when he returned to the area to witness Dash catching his descending sword by its handle before it touched the ground.

Dash said after holstering his sword against his back, "Ken, I think it's time we help our friends."



Two miles east of Ken and Dash were Princess Serena, Jake & Jas defending several Gonagans to prevent another capture. The Princess of Gonaga followed Jake's prior suggestion of standing behind Jas and himself while they fought. Without using their weapons, Jake and Jas awed the princess with their fast strikes and quick avoidances of counterattacks. Unbeknownst to a battling Jas and Jake or the watching Princess Serena crept a lone Jaradian ready to strike her down.

His plan was almost complete; all this soldier had to do was follow through with what he had in mind. With Princess Serena's back to the preparing soldier, and his former comrades distracted by their fight, the trooper made his move. The Jaradian's sword rose near Princess Serena's unsuspecting head. As this man's arms descended for the first and possible final cut on Serena, he felt something sting his right side. Before the eldest Princess of Gonaga could be struck down, she heard a painful grunt exhale behind her. Princess Serena turning around revealed an unconscious foreign soldier lying at her feet. Above the wannabe attacker, being bathed in waning sunlight, stood a white-haired man. Princess Serena quickly recognized this person. The princess' cry for help alerted Jake immediately.

"What's goin' on?" Jake asked Gonaga's startled royalty after knocking out their last assaulting Jaradian.



When Jake's eyes locked on this stoic individual, Jake commanded, "Get away from her right now!"

"There's no need for that," a familiar voice echoed from a short distance.

Princess Serena, Jas, and Jake watched as Ken moved from his hiding place to position himself beside Serena's unexpected savior.

Jas verbally confronted Ken, "You've turned traitor like him?"

The silent man everyone knew, but didn't trust, clutched Jas' incoming hand before his appendage could grab Ken's dirty white shirt. After Jas yanked his limb from the person's grip, Ken asked for everyone to settle down so Princess Serena's protector could speak.

Flashing a bright, toothy grin, the man standing beside Ken reintroduced himself, "Hey, everyone. My name is Dash. You may not remember me, but I remember you. It's good to see you again, my friends."

...to be continued

## 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 muddied 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 sparrin’ 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 gazed 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

## 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

agonizin' 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

## 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. 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 percussive force. 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

## The Denouement

“Serena? Serena, are you okay?” ran through the princess’ ears moments after drifting into unconsciousness.

A warm glow that only the sun could produce greeted Princess Serena alongside this concerned voice. Princess Serena opened her eyes to find Jake kneeling beside her, clutching her hands. Sitting up, the Princess of Gonaga enthusiastically embraced her worried friend.

Princess Serena whimpered, “It’s finally over. I never imagined we--”

“You,” Jake interrupted. “You survived for us. You saved us. Serena... I... I think I--”

“Jake, if you don’t mind, can we continue this later? I’d like to check on my family.”

Jake wanted to say something, but decided it was best for the princess to witness what he had in mind for herself. Being helped to her feet by Jake, Princess Serena gazed in astonishment at everything around her.

“It’s all here,” Gonaga’s eldest princess said to herself. “It’s like Oni never attacked.”

Walking with Jake toward the castle, the princess’ prior statement proved truer than she ever imagined. Everything from homes near Princess Serena to the Marketplace was back to normal. Even the peoples’ minds were restored to their original states before Empress Oni’s invasion. At the castle gates awaiting their returning daughter and sister alike was the royal family.

Princess Athena yelping, “Sister!” warmed Serena’s heart upon seeing and hearing her.

The princesses’ mother, Queen Helena, grabbed her eldest child; congratulating Serena for doing something beyond comprehension. King Goga III bowed in his daughter’s presence, making the princess question how her family knew what happened while everyone else didn’t.

King Goga explained to his confused offspring, “The Gonagan Crystal. That’s the only way Gonaga could return to this state. You must have saved the crystal before Oni completely drained its

energy. Retrieving it, you allowed the crystal's blessed powers of restoration to unlock and save Gonaga."

"So that's why it was in the shape of a key before?" Serena responded. "And why do you remember everything and the people don't?"

The king immediately answered his oldest daughter, "It's simple, my dear. Coming into contact with the crystal, our minds retained everything. Our family, your friends, and of course, yourself. We'll remember those horrific days for the rest of our lives, but your people won't have that burden. They will live as they did before."

*My people*, Serena thought while her mother insisted the family's doctor perform a physical on her daughter as soon as possible.

While the women entered Gonaga Castle, King Goga approached a quiet Jake – who was leaning against one of the front gate's stone pillars.

Gonaga's king ordered Jake to, "Stand up," with Jake following the command immediately.

Looking at this young man standing at attention, King Goga said, "I want to thank you for attempting to warn me. My stubbornness almost cost me my land and, more importantly, my family. I know you and your friend were responsible for my daughter defeating Empress Oni. I don't know what exactly happened in the National Armory, but it was you two who saved my daughter. If there is anything I can do for you and your friend, feel free to ask."

It didn't take long for Jake to come up with a request.

When the King of Gonaga turned around to follow his family inside, Jake spoke up, "King Goga... I have no home now. I'm a traitor to a land that bares no life. If you could--"

"I'll set up something right away for not only yourself, but also your comrade," the King of Gonaga said without a second thought. "Every hero needs a place to lie his head at night."

"Actually, it's comrades, King. Two others broke free of Oni's brainwashing and fought alongside us. They'll need homes, too."

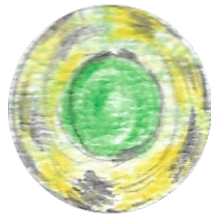


“As long as you and your friends work, you’ll have a home in Gonaga. Bring them here so they too can hear this promise.”

“I will, King Goga.”

What both King Goga and Jake didn’t know was the actual whereabouts of Dash, Ken, and Jas. Jake scoured the city, describing his friends to anyone whose face Jake remembered prior to Empress Oni’s attack.

With night nearing, Jake wondered, *How much power did Oni take from that crystal? It’s almost like she didn’t use hardly anything for so many people to forget.*



The royal family sat in the castle’s Dining Room with a wonderful fest of poultry, pork, multiple vegetables and fruits before them. Sadly, as enthusiastic as her family was, Princess Serena couldn’t eat anything.

Athena asked her sulking sister, “You miss them?”

His daughter not replying made a turkey leg-chewing King Goga speak up, “I talked to the one who escorted you home.”

“His name is Jake,” the princess whispered.

“Yes,” her father restarted. “I talked to him during your checkup. I promised to find his friends and himself homes in Gonaga. I believe he went searching for them following our conversation. Hopefully he finds them soon.”

Restless was Serena’s sleep that night.

Her mind focused on Jake's delighted expression when he woke Serena from her unconscious state almost a day ago, *Of all the people to be by my side after that, it had to be him. What would they think if a princess...? What am I saying? When I arrived here, he left. Even if he wanted to see Jas and everyone sooner than later, you'd think he'd stay here.*

Princess Serena moved from her bed, continuing her thoughts while staring at the starlit sky through her room's only window, *They know where the castle is. They know it would be the first place we'd go. He did the smart thing. Being under the watchful, judgmental eye of Father wouldn't make for a happy experience. Maybe we'll cross paths someday. But until then, this is farewell. May you find happiness during our time apart.*

With slight daylight peeking through the foggy sky, a noise awakened Princess Serena from her barely hour-long sleep. The sound of someone going through the kitchen's storage room didn't frighten her. In actuality, the person's rude loudness excited the Princess Serena. Exiting her bedroom, Serena hastily ran through the castle's halls until she arrived to find the rumbling's source.

The princess squealed, "Jas!" at seeing her friend searching through various cabinets.

Jas warmly greeted her with a question, "Hey, Princess, where do you keep the food around here?"

"What do you mean? The refrigerator is full."

"I mean some real food. Meat! Something I can sink my teeth into."

"My dad gives any whole leftovers like that to the soldiers if they want it."

"Well isn't that nice for them, but what about the heroes? Where's our leftovers?"

"Our'?"

"Oh, yeah. Dash and Ken are wandering around here somewhere. I think this is the first time Dash's been in here with a clear mind. And Ken's never been out of Jarad until now."

Asking about the only name Jas didn't mention, Princess Serena's face blushed, "What about Jake?"

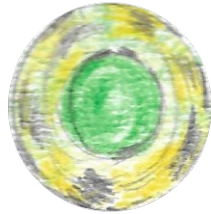
“I don’t know. I thought we’d catch up with him here, but--”

“He went looking for you when he brought me home,” the princess interrupted.

“Well, that’s not good.”

“Why?”

Deciding to find something sustainable in the aforementioned fridge, Jas answered Princess Serena’s inquiry while beginning another search, “If there’s one thing about Jake it’s that he never gives up when he has something on his mind – especially when it comes to his friends. That’s why he fought so hard to protect us... to protect you.”



In the castle halls walked Dash and Ken discussing their respective futures.

Dash said while patting Ken’s back, “It just feels so nice to not be seen as an enemy anymore. For the first time we can just live normal lives. So what are you gonna do?”

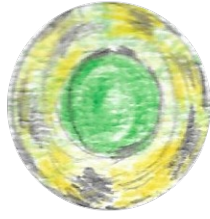
Ken stopped moving, halting Dash’s progression as well.

“Dash,” mumbled Ken before upping his voice so Dash could hear the rest of his words, “that’s what I want to do. I want to live. The entirety of my life was spent in Jarad. I now have the chance to see the rest of the world.”

“You don’t wanna live it up in Gonaga?”

“Why stay stationary now that the world is free of evil like Oni?”

Noticing Dash’s silence, Ken tried to verbally comfort him, “I’m not saying I’m leaving today or tomorrow. I’m just saying that sooner than later I’m going to explore the world.”



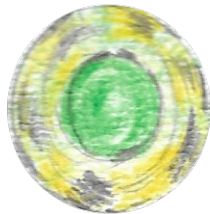
Another night passed without Jake returning. The worry Princess Serena experienced a night before increased tenfold; thus distressing her concerned family. Serena spent the next day sitting on the castle's front stoop with Athena playing in front of her. Behind the castle's front doors, Dash, Ken, and Jas conversed about Jake's whereabouts.

Jas asked his fellow heroes, "What's wrong with him? He's literally got a girl sitting and waiting for him to return. We used to talk about finding that special someone. He finds her and doesn't come back!"

Dash replied, "Do you think he was worse off than they thought? It took us a while before we could even move. Maybe--"

"You can't say such things," Ken interrupted.

The three friends stood in silence after Ken stopped Dash's statement. But in their minds, they all worried that Dash's sentiments might be true.



Princess Serena barely slept for a week, waiting and hoping for Jake's return though she pretended she had moved on. As he'd promised, the King of Gonaga found homes for four of the five heroes. King

Goga even employed Dash, Jas, and Ken in the Gonagan military as combat specialists in foreign attacks.

Gonagan soldiers questioning why three young Jaradians were given such an important job would force Jas to stand up for himself and ask, “Who else can say they not only trained with Oni, but kicked her butt as well?”

The soldiers never understood what Jas meant, but assumed he and their new fellow servicemen had a hand in Empress Oni’s reported death due to a “Gonagan military air strike.” Nine days following the empress’ defeat and Jake’s disappearance, Princess Serena’s change in attitude since Jake’s leaving continuously perturbed the royal family. So when the princess started planning a vacation, King Goga and Queen Helena gained hope that their first daughter had accepted a life without the missing hero. The princess’ intended destination of Majan – an oceanic resort built on its peoples’ immaculate fishing techniques and even greater tasting marine life – would prove the perfect place to forget her troubles.

Princess Athena verbally pestered her sister during Serena’s packing for the trip, “Why do you have to leave again? Why can’t you just stay here and forget about the big boy?”

The eldest princess retorted to her sister’s questioning as Athena helped Serena shut her final suitcase, “And why do you, and everyone else for that matter, think I’m leaving because of Jake? A week ago I almost died. And the sad part is hardly anyone remembers or even knows it.”

“I know it!” Princess Athena shouted, jumping off her sister’s suitcase when it clicked shut.

“Thank you, Athena. But I need to go for myself. Clear my mind while I can. Next thing you’ll know, I’ll be assisting you run Gonaga.”

Before noon, Princess Serena found herself approaching Gonaga’s famous harbor. A small ship with the royal family’s crest embroidered on its sails neared the heavily guarded dock. Behind the first Princess of Gonaga stood her family and closest friends – her father and mother, her sister, Dash, Jas,

and Ken. Princess Serena hugged everyone before making her way toward the awaiting vessel.

Stepping onto her ship, the princess abruptly turned around.

Princess Serena's intention was to wave at her whimpering mother and sister, but something caught her eye before completing her planned action: someone running through the gathering people in the dock's direction. This charging individual's face blurred in Serena's eyes during his or her haste. King Goga moved from his position, wanting to see the source of this commotion when a fast-moving person jumped above the crowd blocking his way. Princess Serena's face blushed as she recognized the leaping young man happily yelling her name.

"Jake," Princess Serena whispered to herself while he zoomed past their gleaming friends.

At the ramp's bottom connecting the dock to the ship, Princess Serena and Jake met with a strong embrace. As hard as Princess Serena tried she couldn't stop a few tears from leaving her eyes. Jake ended the hug to wipe the now-flowing tears from Serena's cheeks.

Nonchalantly, Jake asked his fellow warrior, "Why so emotional?"

Grabbing onto Jas' waist, Princess Athena started crying like her sister.

Princess Serena had to know from Jake, "Where have you been? Father said you went looking for Jas and everyone, and you return long after them."

"There were things I needed answers to. I returned to Jarad, searched the destroyed village, and explored Oni's fortress. Then I felt somethin'. The ground burst forth an energy unlike anything I've ever seen. And in that eruption, I saw your face. I knew then where I needed to be."

Grabbing her left arm, Jake bowed, kissing the princess' hand. Jas – with Athena still attached to his waist – looked at Dash, motioning that the actions between his two comrades turned his stomach.

Ken verbally reprimanded Jas, "Just because it's cliché doesn't make it any less meaningful. I'm happy for them."

Jake rose from his kneeling position to bid farewell to the princess, "I hope you have a wonderful trip."

“I’m not going anywhere!” Serena immediately told him. “I can’t leave not knowing if I’ll see you again!”

“Don’t stop your life on account of me. Take your vacation with this promise in mind: I’ll be in Gonaga when you return. And you know I’m pretty good at keepin’ my promises. Now, go. Enjoy the sights and return home to people who await you... and love you.”

Beyond the princess’ tearful eyes vibrated bright elation. Once she boarded the ship, Serena refused to look back because the princess knew she’d never leave Gonaga as planned. Princess Serena cut her vacation short by three days, returning home on the fourth night.

After dropping her bags in her room, Serena confronted King Goga about her fellow heroes’ statuses, “Did they...?”

“No, they’re in the city,” the king informed his daughter. “I found a few homes unoccupied that I felt would accommodate their needs. Not far from the Marketplace sits a row of houses. You should find him there.”

“Which one?”

King Goga smiled at his first child prior to answering, “The one you returned for.”

Serena immediately left her home, making her way through Gonaga’s famed Marketplace. Princess Serena could only hear one voice in her mind – the first voice that echoed through her ears and heart during the princess’ fight with Empress Oni – even among the sounds of welcoming shopkeepers and customers. Surrounded by small, cozy homes, Serena stopped walking. Peering at the various faces entering, exiting, and working around their houses, Gonaga’s wandering princess didn’t see her target.

“Hey!” someone said loud enough for Princess Serena to hear.

The princess’ attention turned toward a home two down from where she stood. Once again, an individual yelled to garner attention. Nearing the building, Serena found a man playing with his dog.

*I could’ve sworn...* ran through her mind.

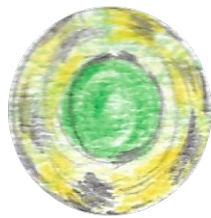
With her head drooping, a single tear strolled down the princess' right cheek when she couldn't hold back her emotions any longer. Suddenly, someone touched her face.

A masculine-sounding person said as he wiped Serena's cheek, "That's no way for a princess to act."

Upon looking at this man, the Princess of Gonaga was compelled to hug him before whispering, "I'm so glad you didn't leave, Jake."

"I told you I'm good at keepin' promises."

The gathering crowd watching this long embrace between their princess and a hero of Gonaga actually embarrassed Jake. Jake trying to push Princess Serena away only tightened the princess' grip. When he realized the princess wouldn't let go until she felt ready, Jake joyously accepted Serena's happiness in warm silence.



I, Princess Serena of Gonaga, have written an account of the happenings during my father's reign when Empress Oni betrayed the treaty agreed upon between herself and my grandfather, King Goga II. These writings will be physically reprinted and verbally recorded before being stored in Gonaga's Royal Library. My father insisted that the truth be revealed about Empress Oni's death on the third anniversary of the events you've read; thus making my friends and I worldwide heroes.

Jas has taken to his newfound celebrity like a fish to water. He's really the life of Gonaga everywhere he goes. I think Jas might be in love, too. Over the past few weeks, he can't stop talking about this woman named Raye. Maybe he'll settle down and give the world some little Jases.



Shortly after I collected all of the information for this writing, Ken left Gonaga. No one knows where he went, but Dash told us Ken planned his leaving not long after we defeated the empress. Since Ken's disappearance, Dash's focus in grooming Gonaga's soldiers has waned. And when he does train our troopers, Dash pushes them like Empress Oni used to do him. I don't think I'm the only one who feels Dash's methods are becoming counter productive. Hopefully Jas and Jake can talk some sense into him before it's too late.

Speaking of Jake – he's doing his best to keep Gonaga's people in tip-top shape. My father financially approved Jake's idea for a general store with food and light weaponry. Jake also offers self-defense classes during the week; so he stays pretty busy.

The combination of Empress Oni's attack and age have worn my parents. When Athena comes of age in a few years, Father and Mother announced they will step down from the throne to allow the first single queen in Gonaga's history to rule (if someone hasn't captured her heart by then). That's right, my little sister will make history not long after the completion of this writing.

I know you're probably wondering why I didn't choose to become the new queen. If you've paid attention to anything you've read, you'd know I've never been into this whole "royalty" thing. I'd rather live on the city's outskirts with Jake and have a peaceful life together. So far, the image that was once a dream is now my reality; and I couldn't be happier. For the first time in life, I really know; y'know?

THE END

## The Epilogue

*Discovered thirty-eight years after the events of “Crystalis Alpha”.*

Entry #7048,

Though Empress Oni hasn't visited my home in many moons, I still continue to do her bidding in creating a vessel to replace her when her inevitable death occurs. Experiment #216 is the only vessel that has responded successfully to the empress' energy. He is growing at an exponential rate as well. I will be proud to showcase my greatest work to Empress Oni when that day comes.