

CRYSTALIS MU PART 1



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

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Ripple

Some thirty years ago, five individuals joined as one to stop the greatest threat known to humanity up to that point. Princess Serena of Gonaga and her friends Jake, Jas, Dash & Ken defended Gonaga and the world against Empress Oni of Jarad following her third attack on Gonaga. Empress Oni's unwarranted strike against Gonaga succeeded "The Great Ocean Cry" war nearly fifty years; resulting in the near death of King Goga III of Gonaga. Empress Oni obtained an item containing great power passed down the Gonagan royal bloodline since the land's original king gained possession of this magnificent item – the Gonagan Crystal.

Retrieving the crystal, Empress Oni's powers increased tenfold; and Jarad's sole ruler seemed unstoppable. Empress Oni used her newfound powers to warp Gonaga's National Armory, creating a small world where she could defeat and "kill" Gonaga's five defenders – four of whom trained under her until they broke free of her mental hold upon leaving Jarad – by taking their spirits. Defeating the five in this fabricated realm, Empress Oni planned a public destruction of her adversaries' lifeless bodies without losing their energies she devoured. The execution would see Princess Serena's royal blood stain the armory's consecrated ground; thus unlocking the Gonagan Crystal's fabled unlimited energy. With the crystal's full power, the empress could completely change the world to her liking and kill all who opposed her.

One by one, the Empress of Jarad cut down her former subjects – the four boys who pressed through all odds to not only save Gonaga, but also protect Princess Serena. According to Dash, and witnessed by Jake and Jas, an incredible power lay dormant in Gonaga's first princess unlike anything they'd ever seen. Though Dash claimed Princess Serena was stronger than their enemy, Empress Oni thoroughly dominated her enemies in battle. Barely able to stand with the help of Jake's golden sword that contained four different colored orbs, Princess Serena gazed at the fireball of energy the ruler

formed above her final foe. With the power hidden deep inside of her coming forth, and a fraction of her friends' spirits attached to the orbs in Jake's sword, Princess Serena pushed the fireball back at its creator.

Empress Oni was unable to stop her own fiery creation being propelled toward her thanks to the force of the princess' flowing energy. Charred and gravely injured after being engulfed by her fireball, Empress Oni attempted to make one last stand. The effort was for naught as Princess Serena cut her enemy in two and regained the Gonagan Crystal from Empress Oni's possession.

After the Empress of Jarad's death and drifting into unconsciousness, Princess Serena unknowingly released the Gonagan Crystal's remaining energy to restore Gonaga to its former glory before Empress Oni's most recent assault. The many people who lost their lives & spirits at Empress Oni's hands also returned including Dash, Ken, Jas & Jake. Princess Serena and Jake – who shared a unique connection upon meeting – married a short time following her defeating Empress Oni. A few years later, Jas wedded a woman from Tyrong that moved to Gonaga. It didn't take long before the marriages welcomed children. Ken – who was a clone of Dash created by his former leader – disappeared the day prior to Jake's marriage proposal, leaving Dash in a state of depression without his other half; the man he considered a little brother. Rather than stay in shape by training like Jas and Jake, Dash drank his days away. His friends worried for him, but Dash insisted he could take care of himself.

Then there was Serena's little sister, Princess Athena. Meeting Jas when he & Jake arrived in Gonaga from Jarad, then-little Athena became infatuated by this blond-haired boy. As the years passed, Princess Athena became less and less interested in Jas & his four friends, and more focused on her future duties. Barely ten years following Empress Oni's final day, Princess Athena's parents – King Goga III and Queen Helena – stepped down to allow their daughter to become the first unmarried Queen of Gonaga. Serena and Athena's parents didn't live long after relinquishing their thrones, but Queen Athena's kind words and decree to reasonably help any struggling Gonagan citizen soothed

many a restless soul in the land. The next decade flew by with nothing but peace in the world.

And as soon as everything settled in the world's most powerful land, a ripple in Gonaga's stability occurred. Arriving on a passenger ship like most, a man barely in his thirties entered Gonaga's grand port. For various reasons, this individual's presence alerted several Gonagans. Rumors spread throughout the land about this unknown man. A mercenary is what many Gonagans thought. Others assumed he was a lost Jaradian soldier. With clean white clothes and a face that had seemingly never been touched by an angry fist, he walked past the gossipers toward Gonaga Castle.

Approaching the sentinels guarding the castle's front gate, the mysterious man pulled a piece of paper from his only pants pocket. Reading what this paper said, the guards allowed their visitor access into the famed castle to meet Queen Athena. The conversation between the Queen of Gonaga and her guest lasted throughout the day, into the early evening. Queen Athena ordered that a place be prepared for him. As the days passed, Athena and the man became quite fond of each other.

Queen Athena revealed to him in one of their talks that her sister Serena fell for a stranger almost at first sight, "I guess I now understand what she went through."

The fact her newfound love interest shared the same feelings for Gonaga's queen as she did him made Athena realize she had to introduce him to her family. Serena hadn't seen her little sister in nearly a week as she holed up with an unknown individual.

The talk inside Jake and Serena's home focused on Athena's well being the night the queen arranged a huge dinner for their immediate family.

"Jake, how in the world did he even get in there?" Serena told her husband. "I know she feels lonely in that big castle, but letting some guy into the castle is just plain stupid."

From the edge of their bed, Jake watched Serena pace back and forth. When Serena looked at Jake as if to say, "Don't you agree?" Jake shrugged his shoulders.

Frustration encompassed her response, "There you go again! You don't see anything wrong with what she's doing?"

Calmly, Jake replied, "I guess we'll find out tonight when we meet him. Who knows, maybe the women in your family have a thing about love at first sight. It worked for me."

A sharp shift in Serena's energy alerted her husband that he hadn't said the most appropriate thing; sliding off the bed while stating, "I'll just start gettin' ready."

Entering the Gonaga Castle's dining room that evening gave Serena and Jake their first sight of the person who swept their sister off of her feet. Standing by Queen Athena was a statuesque man whose thin lips, small, pointy nose and big dough eyes extenuated his round face.

Extending his right hand toward Jake, this man formally introduced himself, "My name is Octavius. I'm sorry for keeping your sister-in-law away from you. She's one of the most interesting people I've ever met. There's something so genuine about her; something I've never experienced before."

Jake shook Octavius' hand while telling him, "Yeah, she's definitely one of a kind. From the day we first met, I felt the same thing. That's why everyone loves her; especially this fine lady over here. Octavius, this is the first Princess of Gonaga, Athena's sister, my wife, and most importantly, the woman who saved the world from an evil tyrant."

When Octavius moved his hand from Jake's to Serena's, she ignored the gesture to ask Octavius, "Why are you here?"

Jake, his mouth slowly opening without a sound exiting, turned to Serena in stunned confusion about what she just inquired. Queen Athena's shoulders slumped following her sister's bold inquiry. Unlike Gonaga's queen and her brother-in-law, Octavius seemed unfazed by Serena's question.

"She has every right to be cautious of me," Octavius said. "I just appear out of nowhere, come into Gonaga Castle, and steal her sister's heart. Why wouldn't she want to know what I'm about? But if I may ask, can we continue this conversation during dinner? I'd hate for our food to get cold after the finest chefs in all the world went out of their way to prepare it for us."

Queen Athena and Jake agreed with Octavius, but Serena seemed uneasy as she trailed

everyone to the table. While the night progressed and stomachs began filling, Serena stayed quiet no matter what was the topic of conversation. Serena's lack of approval worried her sister so much that the queen barely ate. When dinner concluded, the only people talking were the men. Octavius suggested the four should get together more often while Jake rubbed his full belly. Both Queen Athena and her brother-in-law loved the idea. Before Serena gave her response, Gonaga's first princess moved from the table.

Serena spoke a little louder than a whisper, "Jake, I think it's time for us to go. Athena, it was great to see you."

Nearing the dining room's only door, Serena glared back at Jake to see him still standing beside the table. Jake took this look as a cue, shaking his hosts' hands before following his wife out of Gonaga Castle.

As the weeks passed, Queen Athena and Octavius pretty much shut themselves off from the rest of the world. For them, nothing mattered more than their budding love. Almost three weeks after his dinner inside the castle, Jake took it upon himself to visit the couple. Jake almost immediately spotted Athena in the castle's foyer.

Enthusiastically, Queen Athena asked upon seeing him, "Jake, what are you doing here?"

Jake informed the queen, "To see you and Octavius. Where is he anyway?"

"I believe he's settled himself in the library. He just loves to read."

"That's nice. I hate to come here like this--"

"What?" Athena interrupted. "Something didn't happen to Serena did it?"

Jake quickly assured his concerned sister, "No, nothin' like that! It's just everyone is worryin' about you. You used to walk the streets, greetin' townspeople along the way. You were unlike any queen before you. You were the queen of the people through and through. That's why Serena was so adamant that you become the Queen of Gonaga instead of her. The people are concerned about their queen."

“Is that it?”

Athena suddenly hugged Jake prior to telling him, “I know everyone’s worried about me. I know Serena doesn’t really like Octavius because of how he just came here and shut me off from her. But Octavius didn’t force me to stay in here. I chose to live in this castle for the rest of my life. That’s why I need someone to be here with me.”

Her brother-in-law’s shifted toward the white marble floor they stood upon during his response, “So you just want a king? Are you usin’ Octavius to feel loved?”

“I guess a part of me is desperate to experience the same thing you and Serena have. Of course I was attracted to him, but I knew I couldn’t just fall for someone without him doing the same.”

Athena’s position shifted so her back was now facing the castle’s main entrance as she gazed upward; replaying her recent, idyllic days as she explained to Jake, “Slowly but surely we’ve moved beyond just an immediate attraction. I truly care for him. And if and when he’s ready, I hope he can accept that I want him to be the new King of Gonaga.”

Athena and Jake heard someone approaching them. When they turned in the sound’s direction, Jake was face to face with Octavius. Nearly spinning into Octavius startled Jake, almost knocking down both men.

“Man!” Jake said. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

Octavius apologized for interrupting the queen and her brother’s conversation, explaining himself, “I just overheard some interesting words from Athena and wanted to ask if we could be alone for just a little while. Jake, if I may take your sister-in-law away from you until we settle things.”

Jake hugged Queen Athena and shook Octavius’ right hand before heading to his exit.

When Jake opened the large doors to leave, the Queen of Gonaga shouted at him, “Please tell everyone I’m okay!”

Jake nodded his head to confirm he would. Once again, Queen Athena and Octavius spent the next twenty-four hours inside the castle, taking no visitors. Word spread that the following day Queen

Athena would make an announcement. Confirming the rumors true, a letter was sent out that day asking everyone who could to come to the Public Hall of Gonaga. The large building that held upwards of 10,000 people was packed. Several hundred Gonagans were turned away, waiting outside to hear the news firsthand.

Standing in front of her people – the same people who had become so concerned about their ruler’s well being for the past month – Queen Athena looked at the various faces before focusing on her sister sitting impatiently.

After Jake motioned for his sister-in-law to start, the queen finally spoke, “Men, women, children, friends, and family, thank you for coming here this evening. The reason I’ve called this meeting is to announce... I am to be wed.”

The light chattering turned into loud questioning.

“How did this happen?”

“When is it happening?”

“Who is he?”

Those were just some of the questions Gonaga’s queen heard through all of the talking. Queen Athena decided it was time to introduce her future husband.

“Octavius, will you come in?” the queen beckoned.

A majority of attendants gasped at seeing the man who stepped off a boat, entered Gonaga Castle after his arrival, and lived in Gonaga Castle for a month walking onto the stage alongside their sole royal ruler.

Queen Athena began speaking again, “People of Gonaga, this is my husband to be. His name is Octavius.”

The townspeople wanted to ask Octavius some questions, but the Queen of Gonaga insisted that everyone go back home and enjoy the rest of their evening, “We don’t want to take your night away. I will say that in the next coming weeks I will take it upon myself to answer any questions and interact

with you all just like before. The only difference is I'll have someone by my side to answer those questions with me. Thank you all for your time."

Following the announcement's conclusion and the leaving of mostly everyone from the Public Hall, Serena and Jake confronted the exuberant queen.

Serena told her little sister, "I'm not trying to get in your business, but seriously? You wanna get married to a man you've known for a month. Octavius seems like a nice guy and all, but this is just so haphazard."

Athena turned to Jake in hopes that he didn't agree with his wife. Unfortunately for the queen, Jake and Serena were on the same page.

Staring at her closest family members, Athena verbally stood her ground, "Octavius is the greatest man I've ever met. All he's done is treat me like I should be treated. Just like Jake, Octavius is a wonderful man. I understand your concern, but I *will* marry Octavius. And all I could hope for is that you and Jake are there when it happens."

There was an unspoken agreement made between Queen Athena, Serena, and Jake that day. Gonaga was abuzz as the planning for Octavius and Athena's royal wedding neared its final stages. Like the weeks leading up to the proclamation, Queen Athena found herself shut off from the rest of Gonaga. Jake and Serena randomly stopped by the castle when they had the chance, but the conversations were usually quick and almost off-putting. Though concerned about her wedding, Athena made sure to ask her sister and brother-in-law if they were coming before each conversation's end.

Jake and Serena reassured the queen every time, "Yes, we're coming."

On the 208th day of the year, the largest wedding in Gonaga's history occurred. Everything and everyone was prepared for the horse drawn carriage that would transport Queen Athena and her future king from their arriving ship after following the Gonagan royal tradition of traveling to the three other governing lands that made up the world to introduce themselves as the King and Queen of Gonaga.

It was shortly after noon when Gonagans began enthusiastically shouting at the docks regarding

arriving Queen Athena and Octavius. Exiting their ship and entering the carriage, the impending newlyweds slowly made their way toward the castle that would become their home. Some ninety minutes upon returning to Gonaga, the couple approached Gonaga Castle. Octavius assisted his future wife out of their relatively humble mode of transportation before they walked through the castle; into the magnificently designed garden. There sat only fifty or so people – some of Queen Athena’s only family, best friends, and dignitaries from the other lands.

Serena and Jake were seated in the front row left of the aisle. For the first time since the birth of her second child, Serena started crying. Serena tried to shield her face from Jake so he didn’t make fun of her for getting emotional, but he understood what his love was going through. Using his right arm, Jake pulled Serena closer to him.

“Don’t miss it,” Jake whispered to his wife. “She didn’t cry through our weddin’.”

Using the handkerchief from his coat pocket, Jake wiped the tears flowing down Serena’s cheeks before motioning for her to sit up and watch their sister.

Jas, who was sitting on Jake’s other side alongside his family, poked his old friend to tell him, “You never change.”

The ceremony went off without a hitch.

With a mutual, “I do,” and a passionate kiss, Octavius and Athena not only became husband and wife, but also the King and Queen of Gonaga.

A small reception occurred in Gonaga Castle’s Courtyard following the wedding. As Serena, Jake, and Jas’ kids laughed and played, Jake stood by a wall behind the children with a drink in his hand; Dash stumbled around the room aimlessly; Serena conversed with her little sister.

Jas joked with Octavius, “I have to give you credit.”

“For what?” Octavius asked.

““For what?” For marrying into royalty! You think I don’t know what you’re pulling? I’m onto you. Have been since the day I saw you. I got my eye on you, boy.”

Octavius was practically speechless after Jas' statement. Glancing at a now grinning Jake, Jas let out a slight laugh before walking away. The odd joke didn't ruin what was a historic day in the eyes of Gonaga's new co-ruler.

The progressing weeks saw Gonagans physically interacting with their king and queen on a weekly basis. Walking the streets, answering questions, solving problems for Gonagans who only trusted those of regal mind. In the eyes of many, King Octavius and Queen Athena were everything they hoped for in leaders.

Some two months after the wedding, Athena requested that her sister, brother-in-law, Jas, Jas' wife Raye, and Dash feast at the castle. Athena's closest friends and family sat around the large dining room table that night. While everyone else ate, Serena nibbled at her food with her eyes focused on Octavius. Eventually, the queen rose to her feet.

Looking at the people she held dearest staring back at her, Queen Athena gleefully announced, "We're going to have a baby!"

Serena stormed out of the room as Jas and Raye congratulated the soon-to-be parents.

Trailing Serena, Jake had to know, "Whaddya think you're doin'? Your sister just told us she's finally havin' a kid. Remember how jealous she was when we had our boy? She's always been second to you until she became queen."

Serena turned to her husband with her head hung, saying, "Jake, I know she wanted a child, and I'm happy that she's having it--"

"It sure didn't seem like it when she said it," interrupted Jake.

Jas exited the dining room to see what was going on.

"What's up with you?" Jas immediately asked Serena.

Observing Serena's speechlessness, Jake answered for her, "She's mad 'cause Athena's havin' a baby."

Pained frustration was in her voice when Serena responded, "It's not that. Athena married this

guy only a few months ago without even knowing who he was. Now... now they're having a baby. Who knows, Jas might be right about him marrying into royalty. So they have a kid, and something happens to Athena, and then Octavius takes over without any argument."

Looking to each other with utter confusion on their faces were Jas and Jake. The two friends suddenly started laughing hysterically over Serena's theory. It didn't take long for Serena to realize her husband and their friend weren't giving her idea a second thought.

With her chin pressed against her chest, Serena verbally conceded, "If it'll make you feel better, I'll go back in and act like I'm happy."

Jake grabbed his wife's right hand. The two shared a mutual smile, but Jake could tell Serena wasn't letting this situation go. An awkwardly smiling Serena calmly reentered the dining room alongside her husband and long-time friend. Jake bowed in a show of respect to Athena.

"Sorry about that, Athena," Jake said to his sister-in-law. "Serena was just worried about the kids. You know how much of a handful they can be."

The queen was relieved as she simply replied, "I know."

But Jake's reassuring words weren't enough to completely settle Athena's worried mind.

The queen's eyes shifted from Jake to her sister in preparation for a question, "Serena, aren't you happy? You're going to be an aunt."

All eyes were on the silent Serena as her little sister gazed at her for a response.

Following a long exhale, Serena told her sister, "Yes, Athena, I'm very proud of you. You'll make a great mother."

Serena hastily changed the subject by exclaiming, "Well, me and Jake have to get going!"

Rising from his seat in a drunken stupor was Dash.

"You can't go now," Dash said between burps. "The celebration is just gettin' started!"

Dash peered around the room until his eyes locked onto Raye. Abruptly, Dash grabbed Raye's left arm as she said something to Jas. Raye yelped in fear, but Dash meant no harm. All Dash wanted to

do was dance with Raye to some imaginary music. Jas couldn't help but laugh at his wife struggling to get away from Dash.

After a minute of Dash's forced, drunken waltz with his wife, Jas finally spoke up in defense of Raye, "Okay, that's enough. Let her go."

With Raye still in his clutches, Dash's half-closed eyes slightly bucked while he asked Jas, "What's wrong, man? You think she's gonna fall for the greatest soldier to ever come outta Jarad?"

"No!" Jas retorted, "I think she's gonna fall over from your stinkin' breath. When was the last time you brushed your teeth?"

"I think... last Monday."

Exiting the castle during Dash's showcase were Queen Athena, Serena and Jake.

A slight blowing of wind was the only sound made between the three until Athena spoke, "I'm glad you're happy for me, Serena."

Jake realized that the conversation was one better without his involvement; walking ahead rather than stand with his family.

Athena said at Jake as he left the castle grounds, "I love you, big brother!"

Instead of verbally responding, Jake threw his right arm up to wave goodbye.

"He's so odd sometimes," Athena said to her sister when Jake squatted beside the gate to seemingly wait for his wife.

But the last thing on Serena's mind was her husband.

Low in tone, Serena explained to her sister, "I'm not going to lie and say I'm completely happy about what's going on. Being a mom is the hardest thing I've ever experienced including fighting Oni. Do you know what you're having?"

Athena took a few seconds to reply, "I don't know yet."

"Honestly, no matter what you have you're in for a lot of work. And just like you did for Jake and I, don't worry about us taking some of the slack off you and Octavius.

With a hint of shock in her response, Athena said, “Me... and Octavius.”

“Of course. He is the baby’s father, and your husband. The first time is always hard even with a husband. Anything Jake and I can do for you to lighten the load is the least we can do. Athena, know that no matter what you are my little sister. I’ll protect you and your family.”

Smiling, Athena came up with a request that would really put Serena’s statement to the test, “Hey, if you could, do you mind stopping by tomorrow morning and have a sisters’ day? Maybe even pick some baby names.”

Without hesitation, Serena replied, “Of course.”

The sisters’ tight embrace became Jake’s signal that it was time to head home. Shortly after Serena and Jake moved out of Athena’s sight, the Queen of Gonaga heard a loud commotion emanate from inside Gonaga Castle.

Queen Athena followed the sounds of people yelling, arriving at the Dining Room she left only minutes ago. Behind the door was Jas and Dash standing off, preparing to fight.

Dash mumbled at Jas, “I beat you in Jarad and I can do it right here, too.”

A hasty retort exited Jas’ mouth, “The difference between then and now is you were sober then.”

The queen felt it was time to intervene, but for some odd reason Octavius stopped her.

When Athena asked her husband why he would let two friends fight, Octavius informed her, “There are times when words can’t settle a matter. Don’t worry, I won’t let it get too out of hand.”

Athena listened to her husband, standing beside the king as Jas and Dash circled each other. Raye joined Athena to watch Jas duck and dodge every punch Dash threw. Backing away, Jas found himself nearing the dining room table they were just eating at & fellowshiping. The smirk appearing on Dash’s face before he tried to kick Jas completely vanished when Jas leapt backwards, punting an unprepared Dash on the chin prior to landing on the other side of the dining table. Dash lost his balance, hitting the floor.

From Octavius abruptly came the words, “Okay, that’s enough for the night.”

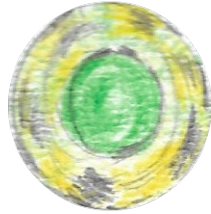
Octavius squatted, offering his right hand to assist Dash in standing up. Dash immediately swatted Octavius’ helping hand away.

“I don’t need your pity,” Dash spat. “I don’t need help from any of you!”

Rising, Dash couldn’t stop wavering.

Raye insisting her husband take Octavius’ place in assisting Dash made Jas verbally refuse, “You heard him. He doesn’t want our help, and you know I’ve never been one to force myself on someone. He’ll be all right.”

Dash left the castle that night without saying another word to his only friends.



In Jake and Serena’s home some twenty minutes north of Gonaga Castle were their children waiting for the evening’s festivities to end so they could possibly find out happened.

The couple’s nine-year-old daughter, Rini, said to her big brother, “Wonder what’s taking Mother so long. I bet they’re having fun.”

Russell – who was two years older than his sister – sat beside Rini while trying to read a book.

After Rini repeated her statement from seconds ago, Russell reminded his sister, “You know how borin’ those things are. It’s like they all go into princess mode like Dad always talks about when he tells us those old stories. I bet you they’re goin’ all like this...”

Rising from the floor with his right pinky finger extended upward, Russell started walking around the living room with his legs stiff and straight, pretending he was sipping a drink. Rini laughed

at her brother tipping around the room with his nose in the air.

Rini screamed, “Do Dash now!” after she grew tired of Russell’s snooty antics.

Her brother immediately started stumbling around before collapsing on the sofa behind them like he had passed out.

Rini’s giggling turned into hysterical laughter for several moments.

When the siblings settled, Rini verbally noted, “Mother seemed really worried when she left.”

“Probably about that Octavius guy,” responded Russell. “You know, ever since Aunt Athena married that guy she hasn’t visited us once. She would be over here like every week. Now, nothin’.”

Jake knocking on the front door only broke a silence that spread through the house following Russell’s words. Rini rushed Jake, grabbing her entering father with a hug.

“Where’s Mother?” Rini immediately asked.

Pushing his little girl away so he could look her in the eyes, Jake informed Rini, “I left her in the dust.”

Huffing, Rini demanded to know why Jake would do something like that to his wife.

“She’s got a lot on her mind,” Jake said. “I thought if she got mad with me for leavin’ her it’d take her mind off things.”

“Get her mind off what?” Russell queried.

“Stuff you kids don’t need to worry themselves about.”

Russell rebuttal was stern, “I’m not a kid. I’m just as old as you were when you started training to take over Gonaga. Why can’t I know what’s goin’ on with my family?”

Jake started grinning at his son. Rather than responding, Jake tapped Russell’s left shoulder before entering their bathroom.

Hearing the door shut behind Jake gave Rini a chance to ask Russell without worrying about their father overhearing them, “What was that all about?”

Like Rini, Russell shrugged his shoulders in confusion. Barely a minute after leaving the

bathroom and entering his bedroom to put his clothes away, Jake heard the front door slam shut. The quick footsteps of this person who just entered Jake's house moved toward his and Serena's bedroom.

Without looking behind him to see who this person was, Jake asked, "What took you so long, Serena?"

Shockingly, Serena responded calmly, "I'd appreciate the next time you want to race you give me a heads up."

As Jake went to turn from his position facing the closet, he felt the warm embrace of his wife envelope him. For the first time in quite a while, Jake remembered just how vulnerable and fearful Serena could be.

Some thirteen hours later, Serena and Athena began their day together at Gonaga Castle.

Following breakfast, Athena wanted to pick Serena's brain for baby names, "So, Auntie Serena, have you come up with anything?"

Serena hastily replied, "I'm not an aunt yet."

Queen Athena took a deep breath while trying to figure out if something was bothering Serena.

"Are you worried that you won't make a good aunt?" Athena bluntly asked.

"No! It's the fact that you're having a baby with a man we barely know."

"Serena, if this was just a plan to get me into leaving Octavius, then we can call it a day right now."

The tone in Athena's voice reminded Serena of their times as children when the future queen would run to their father to tell him how Serena wasn't letting his youngest daughter have her way.

Serena knew it was wise to back off now; verbally returning to the task at hand, "No, Athena; let's get back to the names. I was thinking about something like 'Philip' or 'Charles' if it's a boy."

With her eyebrows raising in intrigue, Athena hastily asked, "And if it's a girl?"

"'Lisa', or maybe 'Jasmine'. Or name her after mother. What do you think?"

Athena sighed before answering, "Jasmine? What kind of name is that for the future Queen of

Gonaga?”

“Well, what about Lisa?”

“Lisa’s okay, but Octavius came up with a name: ‘Onita.’”

Serena almost dropped her cup of tea after hearing the name.

“‘Onita?’” Serena asked. “How do you spell that?”

“O-N-I--”

“Oni!”

Athena was taken aback by Serena’s boisterous comment; questioning her big sister, “What do you mean?”

“Listen to yourself! You’re about to name your child after the person who tried to kill us.”

“Well, there is a ‘T-A’ on the end of it, so it’s not entirely named after Oni. Plus, it was Octavius’ grandmother’s name; and I think it’s nice.”

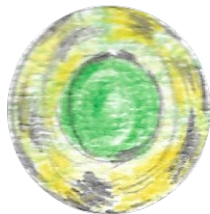
“Have you ever seen a picture of her?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“That might be true, but a child’s name is reflective of the person. But if you truly like it, then we could use it. It still just sounds too close to the real thing. Maybe you could name her ‘Ophelia’.”

“I think Onita’s fine.”

Once again, Serena could hear frustration in Athena’s voice; thus forcing Serena to audibly relent in her hope for another name, “Anything you say, Queen.”



Not far from the castle was Jake outside of his home, hitting a homemade punching bag. Behind him stood Jake's children. Rini immediately impressed her father when he asked her to use a one-two combination of jabs alternating with her hands.

Following a set of ten, Jake couldn't help but ask his daughter, "Rini, how can you hit a bag that hard with those little hands?"

With a bold smile adding greater emphasis to her statement, Rini told Jake, "My fists are strong, Father!"

"They sure are," Jake responded before noticing the stoic expression on Russell's face as he stared past everything in front of him.

Jake tapped Russell's shoulder.

"You alright, kid?" Jake said to his son when Russell's eyes focused on his questioner. "You better get over here and start hittin' that bag before your sister gets stronger than you."

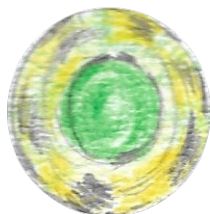
"Yeah right," Russell snickered. "She's nothin' on that bag compared to me."

Approaching Russell, Rini stood on her tiptoes so she could almost reach eye level with her brother.

Rini suddenly barked, "Let's see who's better! I bet you my allowance that I can hit that bag harder than you."

"Easy pickins," Russell replied before a beastly snort exited his body.

Laughing so hard, Jake could barely breath watching his kids argue over who punched their target the hardest after Jake told them he couldn't gain an accurate opinion.



The day Queen Athena and Serena talked about baby names seemed like a distant memory eight months later until everyone received the news that the queen had gone into labor. Entering Gonaga Grand Hospital barely thirty minutes after the notice, Jake and Serena were escorted by several Gonagan military officials to a heavily guarded room on the third floor. Between the soldiers stood an ecstatic Octavius.

Immediately, Serena asked her brother-in-law, “Is she okay?”

Octavius grinned upon saying, “See for yourself.”

Serena slowly entered the room where her sister lay. In the bed with Athena, being cradled by the queen, was the newest member of Gonaga’s royal bloodline. Jas and Raye arrived at the hospital with Dash shortly after Jake and Serena’s arrival. King Octavius, Serena, Jake, Raye, Jas, and Dash stood around the Queen of Gonaga’s bed, staring at Athena’s baby.

Whispering to Jas, Jake noted his observation, “Ya know, that baby looks really familiar.”

Jas agreed, “Yeah. But I just can’t put my finger on who.”

Leaning toward his exhausted wife, Octavius motioned for Athena to hand him the baby. As everyone congratulated Athena, the king stared through the room’s only window.

“Look,” Octavius said to his child before pointing at the marvelous Gonaga Castle in the distance. “Someday this will be all yours.”

...to be continued