

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

Copyright © 2013 James Bullock

Copyright Registration #: TXU001847418

Cover art and design: Vickie Bullock ([vickiesart.com](http://vickiesart.com))

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

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

## 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 208<sup>th</sup> 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 & fellowshipping. 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."

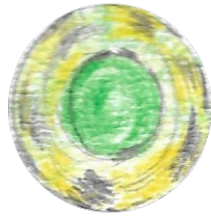
Octavius squatted, offering his right hand to assist Dash in standing up. Dash immediately swatted Octavius' helping hand away.

“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.”

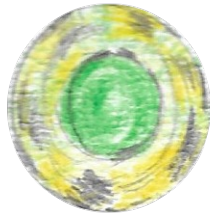
“Have you ever seen a picture of her?”

“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."

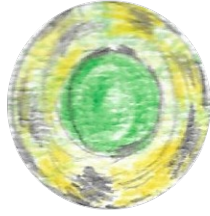
Approaching Russell, Rini stood on her tiptoes so she could almost reach eye level with her brother.

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

## Rebirth

Several years had passed since the birth of King Octavius and Queen Athena's daughter, Onita. With her fair skin, small eyes and thin nose, Princess Onita didn't look much like her mother. And the princess' resemblance to Octavius was minimal at best. Octavius suggested "Onita" as homage to his grandmother of the same name; stating in conversations that his daughter looked just like her. Princess Onita was very smart for her age, knowing facts centuries old without being taught or told. Awkwardly quiet Princess Onita was. Gonaga's third princess also didn't play with other children age, only members of her family.

The people of Gonaga went on with their lives, never paying attention to their princess' unique ways. Serena and Jake watched their niece turn from a barely mobile infant into a relatively independent young lady in their backyard. Several nights a week Onita would eat dinner and stay the night in her uncle and aunt's home. Russell and Rini grew up alongside their cousin, teaching her everything they knew. Jake trained his son while Russell worked with him in his shop after school. Rini started showing her physical strength was only matched by her mental aptitude when she completed her secondary education a year and a half early.

Before and following their graduation, Rini teased her big brother about his lack of scholastic accomplishments compared to hers. And just like when they were as children, an argument ensued that their father would stoke and Serena had to break up while scolding Jake for trying to turn their kids against each other.

"You can't keep getting them mad at each other like that," Serena told her husband after sending Rini and Russell to their respective rooms.

Jake smiled at his wife, stating, “A little siblin’ rivalry never hurt anyone. Besides, Russell could stand to learn somethin’ from Rini in havin’ a little more drive. For goodness’ sakes, the girl barely uses a sword and she’s got better technique than Russell; and that boy trains everyday.”

“You’re going to drive him away if you keep talking like that.”

The sound of Russell walking down the hall toward the kitchen where his parents talked stopped whatever response Jake had in mind. Jake peered behind him to find Russell leaving the house with his sword in hand.

When Russell exited the house, Jake said to his wife, “As you can see I’m drivin’ him to be a better man than he could ever imagine.”

“Like Oni did for you?” hastily Serena retorted.

“Way to twist my intentions.”

The next night during dinner, Rini started another argument with her brother by stating he had no intentions of cementing his future by working under the king and queen like she planned to do in the near future.

Russell explained to his sister, “For your information, Ms. Gonaga, I’m all about improving’ myself. Just last night I spent hours after dinner trainin’ on strengthenin’ the connection of my mental and physical resolve.”

“Yeah, we all heard you grunting like you were constipated.”

A slight twinge on Serena’s forehead was a precursor to their mother ordering her children, “Okay, that’s enough about that.”

Russell and Rini immediately stopped talking.

Still chewing his food, Jake said, “See, Serena, they don’t need me to make things worse.”

Finishing her meal, Rini figured this was the perfect time to ask her parents a question that had been bothering her for a while, “Mother, Father, what was Oni like?”

The stunned looks on Jake and Serena’s faces made Rini explain herself, “I mean, I know she’s pretty much a dirty word around here, but there’s always two sides to every story. And I know the people who write the history books we used at school didn’t know her like you did. Was she really that evil?”

To his daughter’s shock, Jake admitted, “Rini, at her heart, Oni was just like any of us.”

Similar to Rini following her startling question was Jake explaining himself, “Between the time she was born and the time she came to power, somethin’ took hold of her – somethin’ evil. That force caused her to do the things she did and made her hungry for power. But deep down there was an individual who wanted people to trust her, believe in her, and most importantly, believe in her action that would help the world; though her idea of changing the world wouldn’t be helpful for the rest of us.”

Rini turning her attention to her rising mother made Serena say, “I just know that she almost killed my father, abducted both Mother and Athena, and tried to kill me so she could destroy the world to rebuild it in her own image with the stolen Gonagan Crystal. I don’t know how much more evil you can get.”

Moving from her table to the sink behind her, Serena had to know, “Rini, why did you have to bring that up?”

Rini leaned back in her chair, looking at the ceiling.

Still staring upwards, Rini answered her mother, “Today I was helping Onita prepare for her quiz on the Great Ocean Cry when she started talking about how she sympathized with Oni. She said, and I quote, ‘Is it so wrong that Oni felt the need to return the world to its original form so the atrocities of things like war would never happen?’ I really thought about her words, and thought about Oni’s want to do something good for the world was just corrupted following her defeat by our great-great grandfather and the land she thought could help complete her goal. Father said it himself, Oni wasn’t completely evil.”

Russell had some feelings on the matter, stating, “But it wasn’t her place to play God and shape the world like she wanted. When you really think about it, her intent wasn’t to help the people, but to change the world to suit her own needs. Maybe she had all the good intent in the world, but what she did was pure evil. There’s no way someone could sympathize with that.”

Jake started smiling when all eyes returned to him.

“I guess that workout did help Russell last night,” Jake remarked. “The thing is Oni had some goodness in her, even if it was a sliver. But the fact is Oni accepted the darkness inside of her, and that darkness corrupted anything she did. Like Russell said, there’s nothin’ to sympathize about that.”

Feeling satisfied with the conversation, Rini moved on to her next topic, “Okay, now that we’ve got the philosophical stuff out of the way, there’s something else I’ve noticed. For years I’ve tried to figure out whom Onita looks like, and helping Onita with her studying yesterday made me remember she has a lot of similar features of Oni. Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, but they look oddly alike.”

Russell agreeing with his sister noticeably angered their mother. When Serena scolded her children for supposedly insulting their cousin, Jake admitted he observed the same thing.

From Serena came the words, “I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” following Jake’s confession.

Jake tried to calm his wife by saying, “It’s nothin’ to get upset about. There’s a lotta people in the world that look alike in certain ways but have no real bloodline connection. Onita just might be one of those people. It doesn’t mean she’s going to grow up, kill Athena and Octavius, and take over the world.”

This startling conversation ended immediately after Jake’s statement, though Serena’s mind wasn’t at rest. Serena tossed and turned all night until sunrise. Shaking Jake from his deep sleep, Serena demanded they pay her sister a visit. Becoming aware of her family’s presence upon their arrival at Gonaga Castle excited the queen.

Queen Athena hurried to the foyer Serena and Jake only entered a minute earlier to greet them, “Hi, you guys! What brings you here today? Oh, you want to know what Onita wants for her birthday?”

Unusually bold in tone with someone other than his children, Jake approached his sister-in-law with some words, “Actually, we had a weird conversation over dinner last night about the birthday girl.”

Athena didn’t understand what Jake meant by, “Weird?”

With Serena standing beside him, staring off in the distance, Jake informed his questioner, “Seemingly, Onita’s an Oni sympathizer.”

“What? Is this true, Serena?”

Rather than speak, Serena nodded her head in agreement with Jake's revelation. Athena stood before her family members, dumbfounded.

Jake decided he better explain himself a little more, "Rini was helpin' her study about the Great Ocean Cry when Onita expressed her belief that what Oni had in mind for the world was actually good."

"Is that all?" Athena asked. "You're telling me you were worried about Onita having a different view of events than you or your children?"

Serena quietly admitted, "Rini somewhat agreed with her at first."

Jake wasn't done talking, "But then there's that other thing Rini brought up. I don't know if we're the only ones who noticed it, but as Onita ages her facial features are starting to resemble Oni. Not even mentioning the skin color, there's the nose, the mouth, even her eyes have that same shade of brown as Oni. It's--"

Understandably growing agitated, Queen Athena interrupted, "That's why you're here; to tell me my daughter is a sympathizer of some evil witch and how they look alike?"

Serena spoke in defense of Onita, "I told Jake that it's all just one big coincidence."

Jake couldn't believe what Serena was saying, exclaiming, "You told me?"

Ignoring Jake, Serena did have a question for her sister, "I know Octavius says Onita's the spitting image of his grandmother, but have you seen a picture of her to confirm that?"

After taking a few moments to calm herself, Athena confessed, "Well, no, I've never seen a picture of Octavius' grandmother."



Before the conversation between Queen Athena, her sister & Jake could continue, Octavius entered the castle after working in the Courtyard to help set up Onita's party.

"Hello, my beautiful in-laws," is how Octavius greeted Jake and Serena prior to asking why his guests were here.

Jake started talking over Serena so she didn't say anything out of line, "We just wanted to know what Onita wanted for her birthday. Right, Athena?"

"Yes," the queen impishly told her husband. "That's what they were doing."

With Jake's statement and Athena's confirmation satisfying him, Octavius excused himself so he could get Onita some lunch. The king made sure to offer his brother and sister-in-law something as well, but Jake graciously refused for himself and his wife. Hugging Serena, shaking Jake's hand, and kissing Athena, Octavius left the area to enter the kitchen.

Serena's voice lowered upon saying to her sister, "Athena, for the sake of settling this, see if there's any way to get a picture of Octavius' grandmother."

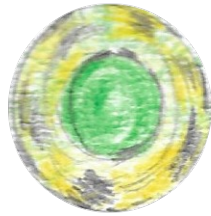
Following an embrace and a kiss, Athena agreed to do her best in finding the requested photo. The walk home for Jake and Serena was relatively quiet, almost somber.

Rini rushed her parents with a question when they returned home, "What did Aunt Athena say?"

Answering his daughter was Jake, "She has a little bit of concern as well. Aunt Athena promised to look for a picture of Octavius' grandmother. Now, if you're done with the great inquisition, can we get somethin' to eat?"

Jake left his daughter's side to tell Russell their plans for the evening. Entering Russell's bedroom, Jake discovered his son wasn't there. Calling out to Rini, Jake asked if Russell told her where he was going.

Rini told her father, "You know how that boy is. He was all like, 'I'm goin' out. And don't think you can follow me.'"



In actuality, Russell decided to take his own trip to the castle. Russell maneuvered his way into the Conference Room after entering Gonaga Castle. Searching the pale white room revealed a microphone to Russell.

Pressing a button to turn the microphone on, Russell made an announcement with some added bass in his voice to hopefully disguise himself, "Attention, staff, there is a meeting being called now. Queen Athena, King Octavius and Princess Onita should report to the Conference Room immediately."

Shocked at what they were hearing, the library-occupying king and queen looked at each other in utter shock.

Athena asked her husband, "Did you call a meeting?"

The king shook his head from left to right to motion he hadn't. Wanting to discover the meaning of this announcement, the queen approached the library's exit. King Octavius grabbed his wife's right arm.

“No,” the King of Gonaga commanded. “If anyone’s going in there, it’s me and me alone. If anything happens, you get Onita to your sister’s.”

Octavius cautiously neared the Conference Room’s only door. Removing a knife from his right boot and hiding the blade behind his back, Gonaga’s king entered this unexpected meeting place. To Octavius’ astonishment sat Russell in a chair at the large black marble table’s head; directly across from Octavius’ entrance.

“Yo, Uncle Octavius!” Russell said while revoking in his seat.

Octavius put his knife back in his footwear as Russell jumped on top of the table. Russell plopped down on his surface, motioning for his uncle to take the seat Russell previously occupied.

“What are you doing calling a meeting?” Octavius asked after slightly reclining in his new spot.

Before Russell could answer, Octavius threw out another question, “And where are your parents?”

Russell stood on the table again so he could look down on his uncle to tell him, “I’ll ask the questions here. I know my parents came up here earlier and asked you about what Onita said. Is this true?”

A slight chuckle exited King Octavius prior to his response, “Okay, I’ll humor you. Yes they did.”

“So what do you think about someone, let alone your own daughter, sympathizin’ with a beast like Oni?”

A somewhat stunned look appeared on the king's face before it slowly melted away. Rising like his nephew, Octavius began circling the table Russell was perched upon so he could collect his thoughts.

"Russell, do you really think everything you've read in those history books in school, and everything those teachers tell you is the truth?" Octavius asked.

"I guess you've been talkin' with my sister. So what's not true?"

"Some things about Oni. Onita's a bright girl who can see there are two sides to every story. And while Oni did go about her plan in an 'evil' manner, you can't help but think if she wasn't corrupted by power she wouldn't be looked upon as she is today. Russell, there are times in life where we must stand up; even when everyone else thinks we're wrong. Onita understands that. Your parents understand that. And I guarantee that one day, you'll understand it, too. Now, if we're done with this little 'meeting', I have to help your aunt prepare dinner. You are more than welcomed to stay."

Approaching his smirking uncle, Russell turned down Octavius' gracious offer, "Naw, the folks wanna go out tonight, and I'm probably holdin' them up."

Russell – who was only a couple of inches shorter than Octavius – patted the king's right shoulder before telling him, "One day I'll see the world. And when I do, I can really see different sides to one situation like you can."

Russell's statement brought a full-blown smile to Octavius' face as he watched Russell leave the room and Gonaga Castle.

Halfway home was Russell when he heard someone yell his name. Turning to his left in the sound's direction, Russell witnessed a short teenage girl running toward him. This girl's light brown eyes sparkled in the waning sunlight. In front of Russell stopped

the young lady with the thin-lipped mouth and pointy nose decided to give Russell a tight hug.

Looking down at the familiar brown hair, Russell couldn't help but think, *Of all the people I had to run into when I'm in a rush, it had to be you, Jade.*

When Jade – Jas and Raye's daughter – relinquished her grip of Russell, she immediately asked, "Why didn't you hug me back."

Nonchalantly he replied, "I'm not a hugger," before turning to continue his walk home.

Jade grabbed Russell's left arm to halt him from leaving the alley's exit where they stood.

"You're just gonna walk off?" Jade said. "We haven't seen each other since graduation. Where have you been?"

Once again, Russell responded in a lackadaisical manner, "Yeah, I've been busy. You know, helpin' the old man and whatnot."

Another voice suddenly echoed out from the alley's depths behind Russell and Jade, "You won't be helpin' your old man no more!"

Russell spun around to find a man no taller than himself with a knife in his right hand. Upon seeing the man, Russell let out a loud sigh.

The robber ordered Russell to, "Gimme everything ya got kid, or I'll take you and ya little girlfriend out!"

Russell calmly told this hopeful thief, "We don't have anything."

When their mugger repeated himself, Russell turned to Jade, saying, "Seriously, is this guy deaf or somethin'? I don't have anything. You don't have anything. And yet he

stands here with some pathetic knife tryin' to hold up two people who are probably young enough to be his kids. Mom always said I shouldn't walk through alleys around nighttime. I guess Gonaga isn't so peaceful and pure after all."

Jade couldn't help but giggle at Russell's statement; infuriating the already frustrated robber.

"I guess you two don't know what kinda situation y'all are in," the attempting thief declared – putting a stop to Jade's laughter.

Russell said to the man, "Sir, *you* don't know what kinda situation you've gotten yourself into."

With his back to Jade, Russell motioned for his friend to take a spot in front of this wannabe criminal.

Smiling, Russell said, "Now, if you may, Jade, can you show this idiot a little bit of what this situation is."

After telling Jade that she brought a beating on herself, the robber thrust forward with his knife. To the aggressor's amazement, the knife missed Jade's body completely. Somehow, Jade slipped behind the mugger; punching him in his lower back before he could realize what happened. Losing his balance, this potential crook found himself kneeling at Russell's feet.

Russell squatted in front of the hurting man to say, "Now, I believe you've learned your lesson; but I can't be too sure. Like my old man always says--"

The thief yelped, "Screw your old man!"

"Oooohhhh!" bellowed Jade when Russell's eyes focused in her direction from the source of such a terribly rude response.

Seeing Russell's attention shift off of him, the robber went for broke by lunging at Russell. The thief abruptly hit something like an invisible brick wall.

Falling towards the ground again as his nose spurted blood, the visibly injured thief audibly wondered, "What was that?"

Before the robber could completely lose his footing, Russell grabbed him by the front of his shirt to pitch their would-be assaulter across the street into a row of trashcans. Shaking his head following the collision, the thief couldn't believe his eyes when he peered up to find Russell standing in front of him once again.

The crook screamed, "How did you get over here so fast?"

Russell not answering caused the robber to attempt at punching Russell in his groin. Quickly lowering himself, Russell caught the incoming right fist and turned the mugger's arm so his elbow was facing the thief's body.

"Who are you?" the robber whimpered from his seated, pained position.

"Just the son of some old man," Russell responded. "An old man everyone calls 'Jake.'"

Jade and Russell's hopeful mugger started trembling as he asked, "You mean.... You-you're his son?"

Letting go of his target, Russell moved from spot; heading in Jade's direction while the failed thief tried to get up. Jade abruptly ran past Russell toward their downed adversary.

To the noticeably fearful man Jade said, "You know, I do have something I can give you."

Jade peered behind her & winked at Russell before stomping the thief in his right leg.

A loud crack echoed as the thief started yelling, “You broke my leg!”

The now grinning Jade enthusiastically replied, “And that was from my dad – the great and powerful Jas!”

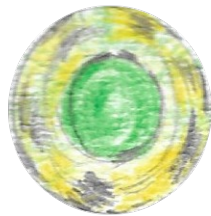
Russell grabbed Jade’s arms, pulling her away from this man struggling to stand. Russell insisted on walking Jade home to ensure that nothing like that happened to Jade again.

Jade vocalized her gratitude, “Thanks, Russell. Behind Rini, you’re my best friend in the whole world.”

“Really?” Russell said. “I would think you’d have more interestin’ friends than me and Rini. You have an annoyin’ personality, but one that lends itself to people.”

Perplexed, Jade stopped in her tracks to state, “I honestly don’t know how to take that.”

Russell patted the top of Jade’s head before telling her, “Take it as a compliment from your second best friend.”



The next two weeks flew by as the anticipation for Princess Anita’s birthday party grew more and more. Gonagans from all over dropped off presents at the castle’s front gate



daily. When the day finally arrived, Queen Athena dressed her daughter in an immaculate, jewel embroidered, emerald-colored dress.

It didn't take long for the princess to express her embarrassment, "It's bad enough that I'm wearing this extravagant thing, but even worse is the fact my friends and family have to see me dressed like some pageant contestant."

"I can't believe the future Queen of Gonaga is complaining about looking nice," her mother responded. "You just don't know how good you've got it."

As Queen Athena grabbed her daughter's shoes, Princess Onita had to know, "Do you really think I'll be a great leader?"

'Of course,' the queen said, kneeling beside Onita. "It's in your blood."

Princess Onita continued after standing in her new shoes, "I've been thinking, since Gonaga is the most powerful land in the world, and every land agrees to do whatever you and Father want, wouldn't it be more appropriate to be called an 'empress' rather than 'queen', Mother?"

A befuddled Queen Athena asked, "Like Oni?"

"Yes, but she didn't deserve the title. She didn't rule Gonaga. She ruled a rock that sank after she died. You're an empress."

"While you're right about the other lands looking at Gonaga for guidance at times, places like Majan and Tyrong have their own governments. We wouldn't dare step on their toes. That's what Oni wanted to do."

The Queen of Gonaga took a seat on her only child's bed, looking at Onita admiring herself in the mirror.

“But a great leader must also realize that actions are everything,” the queen said when Onita finished twirling. “No matter the reason, if you don’t act with the peoples’ interests in mind, you’re not truly a leader. That’s what Oni didn’t understand. And, hopefully, it’s something you’ll become more knowledgeable of in the future.”

Turning her back to her mirror, the princess told her mother, “No, I already know that.”

In the castle’s Courtyard that witnessed the wedding reception of King Octavius and Queen Athena held the princess’ seventh birthday party. Princess Onita spent her time with the people she was closest to – Rini and Russell – rather than the children of various dignitaries from Majan and Tyrong invited by Octavius that were around her age. When Jas finally made it to the party with his family in tow, Jake immediately pulled him aside to show off his son – who was busy attaining the attention of a Tyrongy girl.

Jas and Jake were only a few sentences deep in their conversation when the approaching King of Gonaga excitedly called out, “Hello, my fine friends! How are you on this glorious day?”

Before they could answer their king, Dash entered the room. King Octavius didn’t understand the abrupt change in Jake and Jas’ demeanors until he noticed someone’s shadow nearing him. Suddenly, Dash leaned against the wall beside the three. The once familiar grin that hadn’t been seen on Dash’s face in years returned as Jas tipped toward his old friend. Jas leaned over, smelling Dash for some odd reason. Dash peered at his friend, wondering why Jas was taking in so many sniffs of his body.

With awe in his voice and eyes, Jas blurted out, “Dash, you don’t smell like barley! What’s going on?”

Dash answered without losing his grin, “Well, I was lookin’ at some old photos of me and Ken, and decided to stop drinkin’. It was like an epiphany, you know?”

Patting Dash on his back was Jas while Jake verbally congratulated his friend, “Great, man. Now, if we can only find you a woman.”

Queen Athena called everyone’s attention to Princess Onita starting to open her presents following Dash’s arrival. Moving through the generous gifts from Gonaga’s townspeople, Onita finally got to the presents from her family. The mixture of books, dresses, shoes, and money pleased the princess. When it seemed Onita had opened all of her gifts, Athena stepped forward with a rectangular black box.

“To my precious daughter,” Queen Athena said with a gleam in her eyes. “In this box sits something greater than special. Rather than explain it right now, open it to see what I mean.”

Taking the item from her mother, Princess Onita opened the soft container to find an exquisite jewelry box containing a beautiful silver necklace. The present was accented by an even more gorgeous piece of emerald-colored crystal dangling from its end.

With her niece holding the necklace for everyone to see, Serena said to herself, “That’s *the* crystal.”

Athena unknowingly confirmed her sister’s suspicions seconds later, “In your hand, my Onita, is the last remaining fragment of the Gonagan Crystal.”

The stunned princess mumbled, “The Crystal of Gonaga?”

As Queen Athena’s mouth opened to say something, Onita dropped to her knees. Everyone rushed the collapsing princess, feverishly asking her if she was okay. A huge

burst of energy suddenly erupted from the princess' body, sending everyone around her – including Rini and Jade – flying until they hit a wall.

Dash horrifically looked toward Jake and Serena staring at Princess Onita's pulsating body while Jas clutched his wife to protect her from the debris of flying food and Onita's presents. Russell ran over to his hurting sister and Jade to shield them like Jas was doing for Raye.

When the quick wave of destruction finally settled, Dash distressingly asked, "Jake, do you feel that?"

Nodding in agreement, Jake and Serena prepared to leave upon wrangling their children. Before his parents could near him and his sister, Russell heard unnerving giggling exiting his cousin. Everyone's focus returned to the now cackling Princess Onita.

The confused Queen of Gonaga quickly questioned her child, "Onita, what's so funny? Are you okay?"

Though her body was unchanged, the voice emanating from Onita's frame was a familiar one to anyone who'd heard it in the past.

Princess Onita's laughter immediately halted so she could simply tell her mother, "I'm fine."

Dash immediately thought, *She sounds like Oni.*

Queen Athena turned to her husband to find him stoically gazing at his straightening daughter.

Pleading with Octavius, Athena asked, "What's wrong with her?"

“There’s nothing wrong with me, Mother,” Onita responded. “Thanks to you, I’ve finally found the vessel my spirit has searched for. Oh, it feels so good to see fear again.”

...to be continued

## Revenge

The Gonagan princess pulsated with a newfound energy after receiving the last fragment of the Gonagan Crystal from her mother as a birthday present. A necklace that held the emerald-colored jewelry Empress Oni and the first Princess of Gonaga Serena fought over many years ago sparkled when the heir to Queen Athena's throne held it above her head.

Princess Onita said to herself with the dual voices of her own and the dead Empress Oni of Jarad, "My goodness, this power is magnificent. I thought I felt strong before. I guess it's not fair to keep all of this power to myself. Like my mother believes, I must think of the people."

Princess Onita began sweating profusely, her eyes glowing like the sun. With the princess' power rising, Jake realized what his niece was planning.

Jake abruptly ordered, "Everybody get outta here!"

Just as the people started running, a dome of energy expanded from the princess' body. Princess Onita's energy moved fast enough to encompass everyone in the room before they could exit; trapping them inside this newly formed, almost translucent shell. Floating from her position in the room's middle to a spot above her half-eaten birthday cake put all eyes on Onita until the princess vanished.

Jas shouting, "Raye!" brought everyone's attention to Princess Onita hovering inside the energy dome with Jas' wife in a chokehold.

After several unnerving seconds, the Princess of Gonaga said to the struggling Raye, "I don't remember you. Were you a part of my death?"

Raye shook her head while muttering, "No, no, no."

Looking Raye up and down, Onita sniffed her.

“You are telling the truth,” Princess Onita confirmed – releasing Raye’s trembling, paralyzed-with-fear body. “I can smell the stench of purity on your breath. But your husband, he still stinks of death. His hands are stained with my original blood.”

The sudden spike in princess’ energy caused Jas to run over to his frightened wife, stepping between Raye and this possessed form of Onita.

Jas asked Onita while motioning for Raye to move directly behind him, “You’re in there, aren’t you, Oni? If I’m right about you, Oni, remember that it was me who destroyed your first form. My wife had nothing to do with your death! Leave her out of whatever you have in mind!”

“I do remember,” Onita replied. “I remember how stubborn you were. That stubbornness bore great strength. But I can tell that your strength now is nothing compared to how you were then. And even then I took your spirit.”

Jas grew tired of Onita’s statements, telling her, “Oni, if you want to fight then let these innocent people go.”

“‘Innocent’, you say?” Princess Onita asked before lifting her right index finger.

Princess Onita’s motion caused over a dozen partygoers stuck inside her energy dome to ascend.

The princess’ little left arm moved from her side with the right index finger still extended. Watching in utter horror was Queen Athena when a ray of black energy shot from her daughter’s extremity, piercing the prone bodies of every elevated person. Blood showered the area until each lifeless body collided with their new resting places.

Queen Athena screamed, “What are you doing, Onita?”

“Having fun,” Princess Onita happily answered.

Turning to Serena, Jake, Jas, Raye & Dash as they guarded the children, the person responsible for the massacre spoke to them in the same calm tone she answered her mother with, “This newfound power is almost too much. Yet, I know there’s more energy I can handle. And the only way to find that out is by pushing myself like I did when I was finally defeated. So, get your weapons. You have one hour or I will destroy Gonaga.”

Princess Onita’s energy dome dissipated as the Courtyard’s only doors opened; allowing Jake, Serena, Dash, Jas, and Raye to make haste with Russell, Rini, and Jade in tow. Arriving at Jas’ home, Jake ordered his son to escort Rini and Jade to their house.

Russell didn’t want to leave; telling his father, “You’ve been trainin’ me for years. I can help you.”

With his back to Russell, Jake explained how he understood his eldest child’s concern for his father and mother, “Son, you know that it was a long time since that day. I honestly don’t know how good our chances are. When we fought Oni the first time, we had a little bit of assurance. But now, I don’t know. I worried that maybe one day someone like Oni would come along. That’s the reason why I’ve been trainin’ you and your sister.”

Jake’s body grew more rigid & straight as he continued speaking, “If worst comes to worst, stand up; just like we did. I know if you have to, you can defeat Oni, Onita or whatever she is now. I don’t wanna say goodbye... but just in case, I want you and your sister to know that your mom and I love you more than life itself. We promise that we’ll be by your side no matter what happens.”



Grabbing his father's right hand in a failed attempt to pull him around, Russell relented with his original plan to state while still staring at his father's back, "So to make sure you get the best result let me fight with you guys."

Jake turned to Russell with a fire in his eyes unlike anything his son or daughter had ever seen. Rather than back down, Russell stood his ground.

The protective rage surging in Jake made him command Russell, "Son, this isn't the time for you to man up on the battlefield. I need you to protect your sister and Jade. And I don't wanna hear another word. Now, go!"

Russell found no support from his mother when his eyes shifted in her direction. Following a slight huff, Russell led Jade and Rini to his house. Jas and Raye had a quick conversation topped off by a kiss. Raye soon followed Russell so she too could find haven in the home Jake and Serena built.

Jas led the friends that fought alongside him so many years ago into his basement. Sitting in a corner covered with dust was the very same trunk Jas found in Jarad during their return to the land shortly before their life-changing fight with Empress Oni. Hesitantly, Jas squatted in front of the chest that once held his believed family heirlooms.

Jake enthusiastically spoke up as Jas wiped the gritty blanket from the chest, "Who would've thought we'd be doin' this again."

"Not me," Jas replied; now slightly grinning. "The fact we're even looking at this thing is baffling enough."

Standing near the steps, some ten feet away from Jake and Jas, Serena couldn't believe how her husband and friend were talking.

Dash noticed Serena's body language change; causing him to ask her, "I know I haven't been the most aware guy around lately, but is somethin' wrong?"

Serena's frame slightly shook when she replied, "It's like they're replaying their childhood triumph. Don't they realize we're about to fight a little girl possessed by Oni's spirit? Our hands will hurt the same little girl – my niece – that I've grown to love like my own if everything goes badly. This isn't some kind of game!"

Jas and Jake's attention turned to the furious Serena after her outburst.

"Whaddya mean, Serena?" Jake asked.

"I mean that we're about to fight Onita! Our niece! The daughter of my little sister! And you two are treating it like it's a friendly sparring session! Through Onita, Oni has killed people again. And the only possible way to stop that from happening anymore is by possibly destroying our niece."

For the first time since Queen Athena's wedding, tears flowed from Serena's eyes – causing Jake to hastily embrace his sobbing wife.

Jake whispered to Serena, "Don't think we're gettin' a thrill off this. We're gonna do everything in our power not to hurt that little girl and get the evil spirit outta her. I promise you that's what's gonna happen."

Jake pushed her wife away so he could look her in the eyes to make sure she understood that his words were sincere.

Moving from his spot in front of the chest, Jas told Dash loud enough for everyone to hear, "No matter what, those two are as cliché as you can get."

Dash couldn't help but laugh. Both Jas and Dash tucked their heads into their chests, trying to control their chuckling. When the two laughers looked up they found

Serena's eyes figuratively burning a hole through them. Dash and Jas turned their backs to each other, whistling as if nothing was going on.

"Ignore them," Jake told his wife before moving stepping back to his original center of attention: the chest.

Jake opened Jas' trunk, removing their respective weapons. With his sickles in hand was Jas as Jake handed Dash and Serena's blades to them.

Gazing at his golden sword with the multi-colored orbs in its handle, Jake verbalized the fact, "Guys, do you realize that the kids still haven't seen these things? The children of worldwide heroes have never seen the weapons that helped save the planet."

Dash said when Jake finished his statement, "And yet, here I stand fatherless as I said I would be even back then. Lookin' at this from a retrospective point of view, I see how selfish and dumb that decision was."

Jas patted Dash's chest prior to telling him, "Don't worry, man. After we get through today, I'll be your wingman and help you find a good woman like Raye or Serena."

Quickly, Dash retorted, "Please, no one like Serena!"

Once again, Dash and Jas' guffawing made Serena give her two friends a look that could kill if possible. With her sword in hand, Serena walked past her humored friends to exit the basement. Jake and Jas were about to follow Serena when Dash mumbled a statement.

Jake quickly asked, "You say somethin', Dash?"

Dash approached the opened chest, taking a few deep breathes before answering Jake, “Guys, there’s no question that over the last several years I’ve wasted my life. While you two found love and started families, I drank myself stupid. Even though I knew there was nothin’ drinkin’ could do to make me feel better, I still did it because it was the only solution I could find. And then I woke up two days ago. On my bedroom’s only dresser is a picture of all of us at Jake and Serena’s weddin’ reception. That’s when I remembered who I am. I’m not some drunk who can’t be trusted by his friends in public. I’m a fighter – a soldier! I’m a hero! And now it’s time to prove that by savin’ that little girl from Oni’s grip.”

Dash boldly stepped from the trunk toward Jas – who was standing at the bottom of his staircase alongside Jake.

The tone in Dash’s voice was somewhat somber when he said to his closest and only friends, “You know I still remember that day? Right before we faced Oni, Jas turned around and told us he wasn’t ready to die. Those words are still in effect... now more than ever. If I knew this day would come again, I woulda been trainin’ like y’all. You guys were around me, still helpin’ me even though I didn’t know it then. Don’t die on me, ‘cause I know I won’t; ya know?”

Before the other males in the room could respond, Serena reentered the basement to ask if her husband and friends were coming up or not. Hearing Dash’s heartfelt words made Jake a little emotional. Serena noticed Jake’s inability to look her in the eyes. Stepping down the staircase, Serena wanted to know if something was wrong with her husband.

Rather than answer Serena, Jake told his friends, “Dash and Jas, we’ll be ready in a minute.”

Jake’s eyes were also red when he turned to Serena to hold her soft hands.

Somberness enveloped Jake’s words directed at his wife, “Serena, you know since the first day I met you I knew you were different. By lettin’ me be a part of your uniqueness you gave me the chance to feel somethin’ I never felt before. But over the years I’ve found out that I don’t just love you because of what you did for us, but for what you didn’t do.”

Footsteps of Jake nearing Serena could be heard as he continued, “You never turned me in when you found out I was from Jarad. You never treated me like trash. You never truly distrusted me even when everything was tellin’ you to do so; even when your heart was tellin’ you to. Serena, you beat Oni before and I know you can do it again because your energy is as powerful and unique as the love you’ve given me. Just let your powers flow and take her down like you did back then.”

Jas yelled from the top of the stairs at Jake and Serena – who were still in the basement – that someone was here to see them, ending the husband and wife’s intimate moment.

Standing in Jas’ house were his daughter and Jake & Serena’s youngest child. Jake didn’t understand why Rini and Jade were in Jas’ home when he ordered Russell to take them to his house.

Jade yelled before Rini could explain themselves, “Father, please don’t go!”

Upon finishing her statement, Jade embraced her father as hard as she could. Jas looked down at his daughter’s head pressing against his chest.

Jas woefully told his daughter, “I have to. This is one of those times in life where I don’t have much choice in the matter. Since you’re back you might as well stay here since I’m guessing Russell wants to be alone.”

Jade huffed at her father, “I’m doing this under protest, you know?”

“I know.”

Jas kissed his daughter on her forehead prior to her kissing him back. It was something they always did upon parting. It didn’t take long for Rini to observe how emotionally distant her mother was. Approaching her, Rini glared at Serena sternly. With a simultaneous nod and no words said, mother and daughter shared a moment they knew would epitomize their relationship. In quiet admiration, Rini watched Serena move from in front of her; leading the three friends she met when she was her daughter’s age into battle again.

Nearly half an hour after leaving Jas’ home, the four heroes arrived at Gonaga Castle. There was a noticeable evil aura surrounding the building now. Without hesitation, the four entered what was to become a site of war. The entrance leading into the Courtyard were shut once again.

Knocking on the Courtyard’s door, Dash yelled out, “Open up! It’s us, Onita!”

The entrance slowly opened, revealing Princess Onita sitting on a large table placed in the Courtyard’s center; swinging her little legs. Surrounding the area lay the dead bodies of Gonagans who were alive when Serena & everyone left with only a handful of hostages wallowing in their own fear of their potential demise. Across the Courtyard stood a stoic Octavius over his terrified, rocking wife.

Grinning at the four individuals standing in front of her, Princess Onita floated from her position on the table to ask, “So, who’s first?”

Jas took it upon himself to step up for his group. Jake, Serena, and Dash concentrated on raising their energy levels while Jas neared the hovering child. Serena and Jake held each other’s hands, with the combination of their energies surrounding them.

The swelling energy behind him made Jas stop in his tracks and remark, “Man, you guys are still really strong.”

Without a second thought, Jake replied, “No doubt!”

Taking a moment to up his energy level as well, Jas decided it was best to strike while Princess Onita was paying attention to her family members. When the princess’ eyes moved from the couple to a leaping Jas, the first attacker punched her in the chest. Falling backwards, Princess Onita landed on the table she was just sitting on moments ago. The once nearly catatonic Queen of Gonaga gasped at the sight of her daughter being hurt.

Queen Athena whimpered, “Why is this happening?”

For a moment, Jas thought he knocked Princess Onita out cold with his left hand. That few seconds of satisfaction ended when his enemy vanished. Everyone able to looked around the Courtyard for Princess Onita.

Jas broke the growing silence by stating, “This is too much like the old days. If she’s around here, and Oni’s in her, she’ll try to use our false--”

Serena abruptly interrupted Jas with a verbal warning, “Behind you!”

Jas felt someone grab his back prior to that feeling disappearing. Reaching for his sickles, Jas discovered that whatever touched him stole Jas' prized weapon.

Jas' focus moved toward his friends until he suddenly heard someone say, "Looking for these?" before a fierce pain ran through Jas' chest.

Slowly looking down at the source of this agony, Jas witnessed his golden sickles shimmering with his own blood. Holding the sickles was none other than little Onita. A delighted smile formed on the princess' face as she hoisted Jas' heaving body above her head in an unbelievable display of power; allowing Jas' blood to run down the sickles' handles and her arms. With the little bit of strength he had left, Jas produced & threw a small, blue energy sphere at Princess Onita's face. The energy exploded upon impact, only to reveal it did no damage to his target.

"You call that an attack?" Princess Onita asked; whipping Jas to the ground.

Gonaga's latest princess approached Jas' contorted body, reaching down in an attempt to pull the sickles from his body. The fury growing inside Dash became too much. Unsheathing his immaculate, clear-bladed sword and charging this unexpected adversary, Dash growled. Princess Onita hearing Dash's footsteps made her look at her next attacker. Releasing her grip of the sickles' handles, Princess Onita fell backwards to avoid Dash's wild sword swing. The Princess of Gonaga bridged herself off the floor with her hands and legs, resembling a crab for a short period of time. Suddenly, Queen Athena screamed for Dash not to kill her daughter. This slight distraction caused Dash's inability to take advantage of the princess' prone position. Princess Onita pushed herself off the floor with her hands to dropkick Dash in his stomach seconds after her mother's plea.



Using his sword as a crutch to keep from falling over, Dash gasped for air following the princess' debilitating kick. Like Jas, Dash realized a desperate attack might be necessary to catch his mark off guard. Dash waited until Princess Onita was within reaching distance. Dash sprung from his bent position, shooting a powerful stream of opaque energy at Princess Onita's chest; sending her sailing across the room. The only thing that stopped the princess from continuing her flight was the Courtyard's northern wall.

Though her daughter had committed grave atrocities, Athena vocally worried about Onita's physical status when her little girl bounced off the stone, hit the floor and stopped moving.

Queen Athena watched her daughter until Dash yelled, "I know you're not done!"

The same cackling everyone heard when Onita was given the Gonagan Crystal returned. In a flash, the princess moved from her horizontal position to a spot beside Dash's right side.

Princess Onita told her somewhat stunned nearby adversary, "You have gotten weak in your age."

Before Dash could react, Princess Onita smacked him across his face. The amazing impact knocked Dash past his friends, through the stonewall behind him. Jake and Serena were attending to Jas' wounded chest when Dash fought Onita. Turning to his wife, Jake seemingly divulged his plan following Dash's collision. Only seconds after telling Serena something, Jake jumped from Jas' side; heading toward his niece turned foe. Unbeknownst to Princess Onita, Jake was nothing more than a distraction for his

wife. Her aunt grabbed Princess Onita from behind, pressing the little girl's arms to her sides.

The current Princess of Gonaga cried out, "What are you doing?" as Serena pushed her toward a wall adjacent to the one Dash went through.

With Princess Onita in her clutches and forced against the solid barrier separating the chaos happening within Gonaga Castle and the unaware public, Serena yelled for Jake to complete his plan. Jake couldn't help but look behind him at his sobbing sister-in-law.

"I'm sorry, Athena," Jake mouthed at Gonaga's queen.

Returning his attention to the Serena-holding Onita, Jake powered up until his energy level reached its peak.

Jake commanded Serena, "On the count of three, move!"

Immediately, Jake produced a beam of red energy from his palms following his order.

Serena peered back when she heard Jake shout, "Three!"

Diving from her position, an aunt left her niece in the line of fire. Princess Onita couldn't move in time, causing Jake's ray to strike her. Rather than penetrate its target's body, the beam ballooned and exploded around the Gonagan princess.

Serena covered her eyes from the dust & debris until Jake asked his "better half" if she was okay. When Serena confirmed she hadn't been injured, Jake gave his wife a huge smile. Queen Athena, King Octavius, Serena, and Jake's eyes then focused on the dissipating concrete fragments where Princess Onita was before Jake's energy hit her. A singed piece of Onita's emerald dress gently floated to the destroyed ground.

Athena loudly gasped as Serena screamed at Jake, “How much energy did you use?”

“Not enough to obliterate her!” Jake quickly responded. “It should’ve just knocked her out!”

Serena felt her legs weaken until she couldn’t stand any longer. Jake ran forward to catch his falling wife while Athena let out a deafening cry.

Queen Athena whaled, “Why? Why is this happening? Jake, how could you do this? How could you kill my daughter?”

Jake turned from his kneeling, whimpering wife to the approaching queen and sister-in-law to repeat himself, “I didn’t use that much energy! I--”

“You were fighting a little girl,” Athena interrupted, coming face to face with Jake following her statement. “A little girl who couldn’t take an attack like that. You idiot, she wasn’t Oni! She was my baby girl!”

The pain in Athena’s eyes made Jake collapse to his knees like Serena.

“She wasn’t Oni...,” Jake said to himself.

Suddenly, a female voice rang out and echoed, “Of course I’m not Oni.”

Queen Athena, Serena, and Jake’s eyes peered up, finding Princess Onita hovering above the Courtyard with the very bottom of her once gorgeous gown burned off. A slight glimmer of relief shown in the queen’s eyes while she watched her daughter descend.

When Princess Onita’s feet touched solid ground and approached her mother, the princess spoke again, “While I’m not Oni in the flesh, I feel what she felt. And it’s all because of you, Queen Athena of Gonaga; you and that little piece of crystal you gave

me. Aunt Serena, you know about the crystal all too well. You used its power against Oni to defeat her, right? And now I have the blessed Gonagan Crystal.”

Serena shouted at her niece, “What are you trying to accomplish?”

Jake watched Serena move from her genuflect position, walking in the princess’ direction. Serena looked down at her niece after reaching her. Before Princess Onita could do or say anything, Serena slapped the little aggressor’s face.

Serena screamed following her action, “Why are you doing this? If you’re not Oni, then why are you killing people indiscriminately like her? My niece, my little Onita isn’t a murder. Oni, reveal yourself!”

“Aunt Serena, Oni revealed herself a long time ago. Then *you* killed her. You speak of her as a monster, yet you showed no mercy. Is there any difference from what you did that day than what I did here?”

“Of course there is!” Serena replied. “I stopped a monster!”

“No, Aunt Serena. You killed an empress. And now that empress’ spirit beckons me to return the favor.”

Jake knew what was about to happen. Running as fast as he could, Jake jumped between Serena and Onita before the princess could strike his wife. Instead of stopping her intended attack aimed at Serena, Princess Onita’s right hand ran through her uncle’s abdomen. Jake’s body tensed up – his blood flowing from this new wound. A tearful exchange occurred between Jake and Serena when Princess Onita hoisted her uncle into the air. Abruptly, the princess removed her arm from Jake’s body, dropping him on his left side. Serena joined Jake on the ground, reaching for her gurgling husband’s flailing arms with him grabbing back seconds later.

Before the lovers' hands could touch, Serena heard the sickening sound of small bones cracking. Serena blinked upon hearing the disturbing noise. When her eyes opened and Serena looked into Jake's vacant optics she realized what was the sound's source. Serena's focus moved from her husband's motionless frame to Princess Onita standing above him. The princess' right foot was placed perfectly in a trench now formed in the right side of Jake's neck. Princess Onita stepping off of Jake's neck allowed Serena to scramble on her knees until she was seated at Jake's head. Grasping Jake's color-drained cranium, Serena lifted it so she could kiss Jake's forehead.

"For so many years you kissed my forehead to sooth my worries," Serena lowly said; her voice barely louder than a whisper. "I never did the same for you because you never worried after we beat Oni. You had more confidence in me than I had in myself. But without you, I don't think I can beat Oni again – no matter what form she's taken. If there's one thing I can do, I'll make sure that Russell and Rini survive. I'll watch over them in life and in death if I have to."

The grieving widow rose from her spot in front of Jake, clutching both her and her husband's swords. Coldly, Serena stared at Princess Onita with the weapons by her sides.

Serena finally spoke after several seconds of silence, "Oni, you've tried to destroy my family more than once. This time, I'm going to make sure it never happens again."

Looking past the princess, Serena somberly told her sister, "Athena, please forgive me. This is the only way to rid the world of Oni's evil spirit."

An enormous amount of energy suddenly poured from Serena's body. Princess Onita smiled at her aunt powering up similar to the day the first Princess of Gonaga defeated Empress Oni. Queen Athena screamed when Serena ran with her and Jake's

swords indicating her direction: forward. The princess ducked and dodged the rabid, unfocused sword swings. Serena abruptly let out a deep breath, visibly changing her game plan by lowering herself when she realized the princess was anticipating her torso-targeted strikes. Princess Onita couldn't avoid Serena's sword cutting into her right thigh. Princess Onita lost her base, kneeling before her aunt. Tears that stained Serena's face following Jake's death returned as she raised her sword over Onita's head. The queen couldn't take it anymore, moving from her spot on the ground.

“Stop, Serena!” Athena demanded, rushing toward her sister and daughter.

Crying and trembling was Queen Athena as she embraced the princess from behind while staring at her sister's intended instruments of death.

Athena pleaded, “Don't do this, Serena. What Onita has done is reprehensible, but she's just a child. She must have some kind of mental illness. We can get her help. But we won't be able to if she's dead. The people who have perished today will not die in vain if she lives.”

“You don't understand,” Serena bluntly replied. “This isn't your daughter. She looks like Onita, but her energy – her spirit – reflects Oni's. Oni's taken Onita's soul! The only help she can get is in the peaceful bosom of--”

The same burning pain that Jake's body must have felt thanks to Princess Onita's hand engulfed Serena's body. Serena's wavering frame tried its best to steady itself when Queen Athena scooted from her child. King Octavius pulled his wife to her feet, turning her away from the sight of Princess Onita's bloody right arm penetrating Serena's stomach.

Serena's grip tightened around the handle of her sword – already having dropped her husband's prized weapon. Trembling was Serena and her arms as she lifted her blade so it hovered above her niece's head like the guillotine Serena intended her sword would become. As the blade began descending, the princess slid her arm out of Serena's torso and turned her palms upward.

The sound of Serena's sword hitting the floor rang out after a thin line of Onita's energy exited the princess' right palm; cutting off Serena's hands. Watching her sister collapse, another disturbing bellow exited Athena. Princess Onita rose from her knees, glaring at Serena's quivering form. Perplexed was the princess when she noticed a painful smile forming on Serena's face.

Princess Onita had to know, "Why are you smiling, Aunt Serena?"

Instead of answering Onita, Serena proclaimed, "Russell, Rini, be good. And Jake, my love... I'll see you soon."

With a single tear running from her right eye, Serena passed from this world. Princess Onita's attention moved from her deceased aunt to Jas lying against the wall that Dash's body went through. Though Jas heard Princess Onita approaching, he never looked up.

Upon reaching Jas, Gonaga's only living princess asked, "Have you accepted your fate yet?"

Jas' response was almost inaudible, "My fate was to die before them. And here I sit; the only one alive. The man who feared death the most has seen it over and over again without experiencing it himself. I don't know what you did to that little girl, but Serena was right. You're not Onita."

“Enough of your words. If your fate is to perish, then let me assist you one last time.”

Princess Onita suddenly kicked Jas in the chest, sending Jas’ own sickles still penetrating his chest deeper into his body. Shallow in his breathing, Jas started pouring blood from his wounded chest and his gaping mouth.

The Princess of Gonaga bent in front of a heaving Jas to tell him, “Your child and your friends’ children will die at my feet just like their parents.”

Similar to Serena, Jas’ spirit drifted from his body only seconds after Princess Onita touched him one last time. Princess Onita lazily peered behind her to see where her parents were. Upon seeing her expressionless father and weeping mother, Princess Onita reentered Gonaga Castle.

The bright, clear sky that had shown down on the Courtyard so immaculately only a few hours earlier was beginning to set. The townspeople who believed they were privileged enough to attend Princess Onita’s birthday party hours earlier finally found the strength to move when they assumed their potential executioner wasn’t returning any time soon. A little boy waddled over to Dash after noticing Dash’s back moving. The child was about to touch this bloody carcass when Dash’s eyes opened. Dash glared at the kid – who fell off of his feet in awe. Everything about Dash ached when he stood up. No one noticed Dash was standing except for the child. Seeing the many people crying around him, Dash knew exactly what occurred during his unconscious state. Instead of grieving alongside the Gonagans, the tattered survivor grabbed his friends’ weapons; limping out of the Courtyard toward the streets.



...to be continued

## Recondite

A few months had passed since the slaughtering of the first Princess of Gonaga Serena, her husband Jake, and their longtime friend Jas at the hands of Princess Onita – the daughter of Serena’s sister, Queen Athena of Gonaga – after she attained the Gonagan Crystal as a birthday present from her mother. This immaculate stone was the same one Empress Oni of Jarad stole and Serena used to restore Gonaga to the state it was in before Oni’s attack decades earlier.

Upon gaining possession of the crystal, Princess Onita seemingly became possessed by Oni’s spirit – a spirit believed to have gained some type of residency in the famed emerald stone. The combination of her natural born strength and Oni’s essence allowed the little seven-year-old girl to defeat four people who saved the world when they were barely ten years older than her. During the fight, Dash was knocked unconscious and presumed dead when his breathing slowed to a point where it was barely noticeable. Following his friends’ demise and the leaving of Princess Onita & her parents from the area, Dash awoke. Dash took his deceased companions’ weapons, returning home.

Princess Onita’s victory saw Gonaga cutting itself off from the rest of the world when rumors of the heroes’ death spread. Days turned into weeks that the governing officials from the lands of Majan and Tyrong gained no answer from Gonaga’s rulers. During this time, the Gonagan kingdom started a campaign through constant written and audible propaganda distributed by the Gonagan military to convince its people that their heroes passed from this world due to a freak accident during the princess’ birthday party at Gonaga Castle. It became a scary time for the few of those who remembered what their

princess did, but couldn't let the truth be known as some who were bold enough to voice the truth vanished without a trace.

Serena & Jake's children Rini and Russell spent the months following their parents' deaths in hiding with fellow orphan Jade – Jas' daughter – though it seemed they were currently of no concern of Princess Onita. Sadly, Jade's mother Raye passed away from grief not long after Jas' demise. In Dash's home the three orphans eventually stationed themselves after constantly moving into any house that would allow them or even lived in the nearby forest east of Gonaga Castle. Though they saw themselves as fugitives fearful of what was to come for them, Jade, Russell & Rini were determined to avenge their families.

To the shock and somewhat annoyance of everyone living underneath Dash's roof, Princess Onita hadn't hunted them down yet. Understanding it was inevitable for Princess Onita to come after the four sooner than later, Dash prepared his three students for that dreaded moment by training from sun up to sundown everyday. In that time, Dash's pupils grew leaps & bounds both physically and emotionally. Unbeknownst to the four, Princess Onita was working on something else.

King Octavius – who, for some odd reason, accepted his daughter's murderous actions as self-defense – entered the castle's Situation Room to find the princess scanning an old map of the world. While it was naturally unreal, the king never questioned his daughter's rapid growth. The seven-year-old Onita aged greatly during the months following her birthday, appearing three times her actual age. Coincidentally, Princess Onita's features resembled both her mother and Oni more and more every week. When Octavius inquired about his child's research, Princess Onita revealed that after many

months of work she discovered a way to complete her greatest plan: the full resurrection of Jarad.

Princess Onita told her father with the dual voices of herself and what sounded like Oni, “By using the other key: another Gonagan Crystal.”

Seeing the awe in King Octavius’ eyes, the princess explained herself, “This map is confirmation of something I assumed for years. Identified here [pointing at where the castle stood now] is smaller marker noticeably made after this map was created. I remember mother speaking of more than one Gonagan Crystal existing, and I believe whoever had possession of the crystal last marked this map for their own secret knowledge. Underneath this castle lies an even greater power than the original crystal. If my belief is correct, I’ll be able to resurrect Jarad and have enough power left to complete my transformation.”

The king had to know, “If I may ask, why would you want to resurrect Jarad?”

“Because on that land lies Oni’s most trusted soldiers. If the second Gonagan Crystal possesses the power that I believe it does, then we’ll finally have real soldiers. Soldiers without thought. Soldiers without a conscience. Soldiers with the sole purpose of serving their master. But before we get that far, I need to consult a great mind. On a remote island some two hundred miles west of Jarad is a doctor I need you to find. Bring Doctor Otto Vanski to Gonaga.”

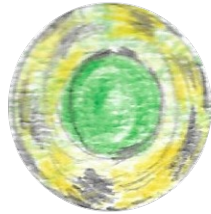
King Octavius bowed in honor of his daughter’s wishes.

As the king turned to leave, Princess Onita asked, “How is mother?”

Her father slowly turned around to answer, “She’s... she’s not doing well. She hasn’t eaten in days. She barely drinks anything. I don’t understand how she hasn’t gotten over what happened.”

The anguish in her father’s eyes made Princess Onita ask, “You truly love her, don’t you?”

When Octavius nodded his head in a “yes” fashion, the princess said with great enthusiasm in her voice, “Amazing. Maybe I would’ve felt the same thing if I didn’t choose the path I’m on. But I love power. And just like human love, power can wreck you as much as it can build you. Stay strong, father. I’ll finally make Gonaga the land it is supposed to be.”



Following an exhaustive day of training, Dash sat down on the edge of his bed after turning on his radio.

It didn’t take long for Dash’s ears to perk with interest as the news reported, “Now, to our top story of the day. Dr. Otto Vanski – a scientist long thought to dead – has been invited to Gonaga Castle by the royal family. The purpose of Vanski’s visit is unknown at this time.”

*I can't believe he really exists, Dash thought. Serena used to talk about her grandfather banishin' a mad scientist from Gonaga before her father was born. How in the world is he still alive?*

Rather than sit inside and ponder questions he didn't have answers to, Dash reentered his backyard to watch his protégés. The first person catching Dash's eyes was Russell working on his sword techniques without a weapon. In front of Russell sat his little sister with her legs crossed in deep meditation.

Dash yelled, "Russell, give it a rest! You've been workin' since five this mornin'!"

Russell didn't respond and continued swinging his arms as if he had a sword in hand. Knowing Rini wouldn't answer him by talking to her, Dash approached Rini.

Lightly tapping the top of Rini's head, Dash said, "Knock, knock. Are you okay?"

As Dash assumed she would, Rini didn't verbally respond. Instead, Rini lifted her right hand before shooting an energy beam to Dash's left. The beam zoomed past Dash, toward Russell. Dash quickly turned to witness Russell obliterate his sister's energy with a backhanded slap. Dash reentered his home, searching for the one person he believed would say something to him.

Thinking as he headed down the hall toward Jade's room was the home's owner, *Only one person left. Hopefully she's in a better mood than her counterparts. She usually is.*

Peeking in after plucking on her door, Dash found Jade uncharacteristically lying on her bed.

“What’s wrong?” Dash asked his youngest student. “Normally you’d be jumping around, planning what you’d want me to cook.”

Dash taking a seat beside Jade’s bed caused Jade to sit up so she could look at him and say, “Uncle Dash, don’t you know what day it is? Many years ago today, you joined Father, Uncle Jake and Aunt Serena to destroy Oni and save Gonaga.”

Dash smacked his forehead in disbelief that he’d forgotten such an important anniversary.

“And now they’re gone,” Jade continued. “We’ve been left behind with the spirit of that same monster you killed controlling our cousin. I just wish....”

With Jade’s words trailing off, Dash looked to comfort his niece by saying, “I know it hurts. And in reality, I can’t relate to what you guys feel. I never had parents. Well, I did, but I don’t remember them at all. But I had friends – the best friends any loser like me coulda have. You three have each other just like we did and I know y’all will do your parents proud when this is all said & done. I’ll let y’all be alone while I go make dinner.”

Dash fixed the evening’s meal of meatballs and corn prior to calling everyone to the table an hour after Dash and Jade’s conversation. Russell quietly ate while Rini gazed into the distance, smacking one of her meatballs around with her fork.

Tired of watching Rini play with her food, Dash somewhat angrily asked, “Aren’t you hungry?”

“No,” Rini retorted. “Can I be excused?”

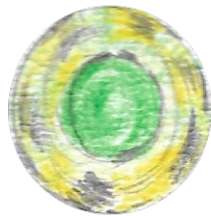
As Rini stood up, Dash did the same to verbally stop her, “Look, Jade explained to me why you guys are all depressed. Like I told Jade, I can’t sympathize with how you

guys are feelin' 'cause I never had the privilege of havin' parents. But those were my friends, too. And I'm hurtin', too. That's why I need you guys to stay focused on what's here and now. And now, we have a mission to complete: Defeat Onita and remove whatever's possessin' her."

Russell sternly asked Dash, "And you really believe that we can at least disable her? I mean, our parents could barely touch her from what you saw and overheard."

There was little pondering in Dash's mind before his response, "Russell, I know what Jake told you, and it's true. Russell, you've probably gotten stronger than your dad was in his prime, and that's amazing. Without even thinkin', I've seen you and Rini produce energy that your mother had the hardest time makin'. And Jade, your passion and enthusiasm is just like your father's; and that fire Jas had in his heart helped us win. You guys have been trainin' for years, and it's payin' off big time now. But the problem is that you haven't reached your pinnacle. If y'all will allow me, I'll train you to reach your maximum so you can defeat Onita sooner than later. Whaddya say?"

Russell stopped eating to look Dash in the eyes so he could say, "Old Man, you got a deal."



Not far from Dash's home, under the hazy, setting sun, Dr. Otto Vanski arrived at Gonaga Castle. King Octavius greeted him at the door with a warm smile.



The two conversed as they entered the castle, but Dr. Vanski felt his time was of great essence, “Yes, but let’s catch up on old times later. So what’s this emergency?”

“This,” someone said from atop the staircase King Octavius and Dr. Vanski stood in front of with the dual voices of a young woman and someone from the doctor’s past.

The person before Vanski was a woman who somewhat looked like Oni at a young age.

“Is this her?” Vanski said in shock as he approached his answerer. “Is this Princess Onita of Gonaga? I can’t believe she’s.... She’s absolutely gorgeous.”

Prior to responding, the princess slightly smiled because of Vanski’s words, “Flattery will only get you so far, Doctor. You want to know why you’re here? It’s because you’re the only one who has the ability to sustain & restore the deceased.”

Princess Onita descended the staircase, walking past her guest to stand beside the king.

Grinning once again, Princess Onita told the doctor, “Out of everything you’ve done, nothing is more successful than this man I stand with: my vessel’s father. But what I have planned is even greater than King Octavius. Below this castle lies a crystal containing magnificent power; and with it I can resurrect the land this world wants to forget.”

The confused look etched on Dr. Vanski’s face caused the princess to explain herself, “Jarad. The soldiers that I trained and made my own were unmercifully killed and buried on Jarad by the Gonagan government after my demise.”

“Yes,” Dr. Vanski spoke up. “Then they sank it. For some reason, every land in the world thought it was a good idea to sink Jarad. So you want to return Jarad to its former glory?”

“No. I want the bodies that sleep on that rock. And that’s why I need you. You have Oni’s DNA; her essence. You have everything that could maintain those bodies if I found a way to bring them from the dead.”

The doctor’s eyes widened alongside the princess’ proclamation; responding excitedly, “My word. Princess Onita of Gonaga, it would be an honor to assist you in any task you need of me.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Doctor. And yet, I have something else to ask of you? It regards my namesake...”

Unbeknownst to Princess Onita, the king, and a now intrigued doctor, Queen Athena was listening from the library to the right of their position. When the conversationalists moved away from Queen Athena toward the Situation Room, the queen knew she had to do something. Queen Athena hastily plotted her escape after changing into some dark, baggy clothes, using her sister’s old bedroom window to jump eight feet into a row of shrubs. Creeping around the castle’s exterior, the Queen of Gonaga made her way to the front gate. Athena glanced at the palace she’d known as her home since birth with regret before leaving its grounds.

After an hour of sneaking and running to avoid identification, Queen Athena arrived at Dash’s home to find no one inside. Athena searched through the house until she looked through Jade’s bedroom window. The queen’s family & friends were in the backyard digging a hole. Leaving the house was Queen Athena with an intent to inform

the four about a new dire situation. Rini was happily surprised to see her aunt; displaying her joy by tightly embracing Athena. The Queen of Gonaga was just as emotional after not speaking with her family for so many months. Dash had to physically pull niece and aunt apart so he could find out why the queen would risk harm to escape the castle for a family reunion.

Athena collected her herself, telling everyone what was occurring in her home, “Onita’s working on--”

“Gettin’ that other Gonagan Crystal,” a continuously digging Dash interrupted his queen when he realized what Athena was about to say.

“So what are you going to do?” Gonaga’s royalty inquired.

“Nothin’.”

The queen couldn’t understand why Dash would allow something like Princess Onita attaining another Gonagan Crystal to occur.

Taking a deep breath, Dash explained himself, “I can’t do much to stop Onita. But these three can.”

Queen Athena peered at Russell staring stoically into the hole Dash was working on. Blinking, Athena saw something that nearly floored her.

*Serena?* Gonaga’s queen thought before shutting her eyes tightly.

When Athena’s eyes opened, a clear, wavering image similar to that of Serena’s form stood in Russell’s place. The queen blinked her eyes again to make sure she wasn’t going crazy. Focusing on Russell’s position, Athena noticed his posture being exactly like the ghostly figure.

The apparent apparition eventually dissipated, giving a refocused queen the chance to ask Dash, “Do you plan to kill my child this time?”

“No. Our goal is the same as before. But this time, we might have to be a little more aggressive. And with these, Russell, Rini & Jade have a much better chance than we did. Jackpot.”

Dash dropped to his knees, dusting off the wooden box his shovel hit upon finishing his previous sentence. Leaning back after grabbing a handle on the container, Dash pulled out a large chest. Jade jumped in front of Russell to open the box, revealing the chest’s contents.

Before his pupils could do anything with what they saw, Dash explained the history behind this trunk, “You see, this is the chest that Jas found in Jarad that held his family history; your family history, Jade. To properly add to his and our history, we put our weapons in this chest after we beat Oni. Losin’ to Onita scared me a lot, so I buried the chest. This way, if anything really happened to me, you guys would still be able to fight like your parents.”

Dash grabbed each item prior to saying, “Now, just like we would’ve done, I pass these items of hope down to you. Jade, these are the golden sickles that Jas used to destroy Oni’s first form. Rini, this sword was originally your father’s. After his other sword was given to him, Jake gave this one to your mother. Serena carried this sword into battle with pride. And to this day it’s a symbol of what one person can do. And this sword, Russell, was handled by your dad.”

For some reason, Russell was a little hesitant about accepting the weapon.

When Russell started looking at the sword's design, Dash audibly educated his students, "Jake got it from a woman he bumped into on the streets of Gonaga before our battle. As you can see, it holds four orbs in its handle. But those orbs except the last one turned into stone after your parents died. Each orb symbolized our life energies. If you notice, one is half black and half white. The amazin' thing is the orb seemingly started all black, but the white came forth and settled outside; similar to Ken's creation thanks to Vanski's handiwork."

Turning to Queen Athena, Dash told her, "And you might be the wielder of the greatest weapon of them all."

After the queen asked what Dash meant, he explained, "Through your love, the vessel Oni's spirit is usin' – your daughter – is fightin' the embodiment of evil Oni was; and, I guess, still is. If there's a chance Onita can overcome Oni's control it's through your unconditional love."

Dash excused himself following his comments. The darkening sky alerted Queen Athena that her time away from the castle was almost over.

Hugging everyone before leaving Dash's home, the Queen of Gonaga couldn't help but think, *My love can overcome Oni's evil spirit? Not even my sister could completely rid the world of Oni, and she was the strongest person I've ever known.*

The queen reentered the castle as easy as she exited it hours earlier.

Several weeks passed with little progress in the search for the "Unknown Crystal of Gonaga"; as dubbed by King Octavius. Dash spent the majority of his days training himself, Russell, Jade, and Rini. A large part of Dash's tutoring involved energy attacks. Dash explained to his students that the ability to turn their energy into physical

manifestations would release their deepest strengths. On their first tries, Rini and Jade handled the tangible production of their energy with great ease. Russell, on the other hand, had a difficult time controlling his energy once it formed.

Slamming his right hand against the ground, Russell groaned, “I’m tired of this.”

While Russell stomped toward the house, Dash belligerently asked, “How are you gonna avenge your parents if you quit now?”

Russell snorted like a raging bull when he turned around. Dash motioned for Jade and Rini to return to the house so he and Russell could have a one-on-one conversation.

The teacher and his only male protégé met eyes as Russell inquired, “Who says I can’t beat her now?”

“I do!” Dash retorted. “You guys may be more powerful than your parents were at your age, but you’re still not half as powerful as Onita with Oni’s energy running through her.”

“I don’t believe that, Old Man. I’m gonna stop her.”

Starting to tremble with anger after his statement, Russell’s body noticeably stiffened as his muscles started bulging before he loudly stated, “I will!”

Immediately following Russell’s declaration, his energy level surpassed anything Dash ever felt from Russell. The son of Jake and Serena almost turned invisible as brown colored energy enveloped him. Russell’s eyes glowed a golden light. Dash had to step back from the force of Russell’s power.

“Sweet serenity,” Dash said to himself. “There’s no way someone his age could produce energy like that.”

Staring at the pulsating, brown energy dome, Dash moved forward to ask, “Russell, are you still in there?”

Russell’s intense focus suddenly broke when Dash repeated his question. Dash’s query ran through Russell’s head, finally sinking in.

Before Russell could answer Dash’s original question, Dash had another request, “Can you lower your energy?”

Russell acknowledged Dash by reducing his energy level to normal – disintegrating the energy dome and regaining his original eye color in the process. Amazed was Dash after Russell’s impromptu display of power.

When Dash questioned if Russell could raise his energy level to that point again, Russell cockily replied, “Yeah, I bet I can.”

Russell bracing himself for what he was about to do caused Dash to call for Rini and Jade. The gleam in Dash’s eyes intrigued the two girls who naturally assumed that the explosion of energy they felt from inside the house came from their caretaker.

Jade asked while she stepped into the backyard, “You really don’t think you can beat Onita by yourself, Uncle Dash?”

The same energy Rini and Jade felt moments ago poured from Russell’s body following Jade’s question. The girls’ eyes widened upon seeing the brown dome cover Russell. Jade and Rini could see Russell smirking at them from inside his creation. To Dash’s bewilderment, Rini and Jade were almost motionless while watching Russell.

Abruptly, Rini and Jade looked at each other before simultaneously asking Dash, “What’s so special about that?”

“‘What’s so special?’ Are you outta ya minds? Russell is producin’ more energy than I’ve ever felt from him. So I know it’s more than you’ve ever felt.”

Sucking her teeth and rolling her eyes, Rini explained her lack of excitement because, “We can do that, too.”

The two females decided to show Dash and Russell that Rini’s big brother wasn’t the only one who could unleash a great amount of energy with seemingly little effort. Shock ran through Dash’s body when Russell’s energy level hit a new maximum alongside Jade and Rini doing their best to match their friend and brother respectively. Instead of asking the girls questions like he did Russell, Dash stared at his students to see how long they could maintain their heightened energy levels.

Russell said at his little sister, “Pretty impressive,” when he felt Rini’s energy level reach his.

Matching the grin on Russell’s face, Rini replied, “I know, right? We could’ve shown off a long time ago, but we didn’t wanna make you look sadder than you already do.”

“I’ll show you who looks sad!”

Breaking through the dome, Russell rushed his sister. Dash couldn’t let a fight breakout featuring two people with energy levels so high that it could destroy everything around them including their home. Russell’s first attack was a simple right punch that Rini blocked with her crossed forearms placed slightly above her chest. A row of uprooted grass & soil flew in every direction thanks to the force of this brother and sister collision. Rather than wait for another strike, Rini sidestepped her older sibling to begin a race. Dash chased behind Russell as Rini egged on her brother while she ran backwards.



Once Dash got a hold of his target, he demanded Russell to calm himself. Rini returned to her spot beside Jade after Russell's energy level normalized again.

Happier than he had been for years, Dash congratulated his students on their actions, "That was absolutely phenomenal. And a display like that deserves a great meal. Lets eat."

Rini entered the house first, immediately hearing a radio playing.

"Russell!" shouted Rini while sounding similarly to her deceased mother. "How many times do I have to tell you to turn off the radio when you're done with it?"

Rini continued into the living room to turn off the buzzing radio.

Just as her hand touched the knob, Rini's ears were grabbed by a news reporter saying, "This just in! After weeks of searching for the second mysterious Gonagan Crystal, Dr. Otto Vanski has uncovered a wall full of ancient writings similar to the old documents that mapped out the whereabouts of the crystal directly under the castle's Throne Room. Not only that, but Dr. Vanski has also found a passageway through the wall! Our crews are at the scene where this is happening. We're hearing word that Dr. Vanski is coming out!"

Rini urgently called everyone into the living room. As Dash, Russell & Jade confronted Rini about her outcry, Rini simply pointed at the radio. The four listened intently to a news reporter screaming for a word from Dr. Otto Vanski. Several people could be heard saying the doctor turned archeologist was holding something in a rag when he approached the hopeful questioner.

Exhaling deeply, Dr. Vanski said into the reporter's microphone, "Ladies and gentlemen, King Octavius, Queen Athena and, of course, Princess Onita... I present to you the lost Gonagan Crystal."

...to be continued

## Redemption

Dash, Jade, Russell & Rini stood in their living room, stunned at what they were hearing. Echoing throughout the room were the sounds of gasps from news reporters witnessing a historic moment: the discovery of a second Gonagan Crystal thanks to the research of Dr. Otto Vanski underneath Gonaga Castle. A news reporter so eager to get a word from Vanski commented on what was happening before him. According to the enthusiastic reporter, Dr. Vanski graciously bowed prior to standing side by side with King Octavius and Princess Onita. As the norm over the past several months, Queen Athena was absent during this historic moment.

Through the noise, the doctor could be overheard saying, “King Octavius, Princess Onita, I present you with the missing Gonagan Crystal.”

Rather than accept the crystal still wrapped in a protective cloth, the king motioned for Dr. Vanski to hand this prized item to his daughter.

With the dual voices of her natural self & what could only be described as Empress Oni of Jarad in tone – a physical trait Princess Onita had since attaining the remaining piece of the original Gonagan Crystal from her mother – the Gonagan princess said to herself, “It’s finally mine.”

The news reporter commented on what was happening, including Princess Onita raising the covered crystal above her head. Suddenly, the cloth caught ablaze; engulfing Princess Onita in the process. King Octavius screamed for his daughter as the powerful consumed her until she collapsed. When the fire abruptly died out, Octavius approached his twitching, smoldering child. Princess Onita’s left arm shot from underneath her, motioning for him to stop moving. Not only was the princess starting to rise after being

burned alive, but Princess Onita seemed unfazed by the unnatural occurrence. Though Princess Onita's clothes barely covered her form, her body was unmarked from the flames that devoured King Octavius & Queen Athena's offspring.

"I can't believe what I'm witnessing!" the primary news correspondent said to everyone listening.

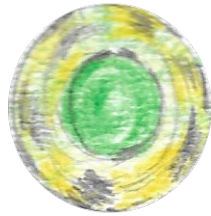
Princess Onita approached the admiring reporter to tell him and the people hearing her words, "Hello, Mr. Corbin. Hello, world. For those who do not know, I am Princess Onita of Gonaga – daughter of King Octavius and Queen Athena. I stand with the lost Gonagan Crystal; feeling its exquisite power. Very soon this power will shake the world and its waters will birth a land once ruled by the spirit that resides in me. If you have the ability, I suggest all the lands send a plane or ship to the area where Jarad once stood. You'll be in for an unexpected surprise if you do so."

There was audible confusion coming from everyone around the princess. Nearly two hours passed when Princess Onita's earlier statement came true. Each nation felt a tremendous rumble shake its foundation. As suggested by Princess Onita, the lands of Majan, Tyrong, and Sonfa sent a single plane respectively to observe the waters where Jarad used to be. A third aircraft floated directly across from the two military planes. In the other airplane sat Corbin – the same newscaster who interviewed Princess Onita.

Dash and his students still had the radio on as they ate. Rini's ear was the first to hear the yelping reporter. Leaving the table, Rini reentered the living room; listening closely to what Corbin was saying.

The news reporter abruptly stopped his ramblings to state, "The ocean looks like it's bubbling."

According to Corbin, the commotion below intensified until the sea split in half. In this growing water crevice sat a large rock. This rock floated from its watery holding, revealing its true size. The landmass continued moving upward until it hovered above the waters that released it. When this giant piece of the planet reached the apex of its flight, the ocean crashed into itself.



Like a majority of the world, General Hase of the Gonaga's military forces had his radio on.

Becoming frustrated with the king and queen's lack of concern about what was happening, Hase grew tired of just listening and demanded a nearby soldier to, "Prep the plane for that slab."

General Hase hopped into his vessel, leading a group of three jets toward the location of this unusual situation. As each Gonagan aircraft neared the area, a noticeable light started emanating from the land's edges. The news commentator continued narrating everything he saw, including General Hase's jet descending toward the glowing landmass. It didn't take long for Corbin to follow General Hase and his men. Before anyone could touch down, the lights spread throughout the visible area. The ocean gleamed as waves crashed against the recently unveiled surface. Unexpectedly, the illuminated waters transformed into solid ground, connecting to the landmass as the sea

collapsed into its original form. Rather than stop his descent, General Hase and the other Gonagan soldiers landed on this newly formed rock when it stopped shaking and the sea calmed.

Unbeknownst to Hase was the fact he had an admirer on his trail: the news reporter Corbin. Cold ocean winds whipped Corbin while he pressed forward in the direction of General Hase. With a powered on walkie-talkie in hand, the news correspondent yelled to his listeners about his trek. Calling Hase's name finally alerted Gonaga's military members of the reporter's presence.

"General Hase!" Corbin shouted one last time when he caught up to the three Gonagan soldiers. "May I ask why you decided to come here when everything's so unstable?"

Turning to his follower, Hase calmly asked, "Is this being broadcast?"

When Corbin explained that the second walkie-talkie was being used to relay these unbelievable occurrences, General Hase said, "I told my men to get ready, and that's what they did. I heard Princess Onita and I saw how uncaring the king was about what his daughter said. Then the world started shaking. I am the head of the world's most powerful military force; I refuse to sit idly by and witness the planet change and potentially threaten our way of life without understanding what's going on."

While General Hase and the reporter continued talking, one of the Gonagan soldiers saw something protruding from the ground not far from them. Hastily, the pilots alerted Hase; leading him toward whatever this new point of interest. General Hase finally recognized what was before him and his men.

"That's an arm," Hase said out loud.

Corbin assumed the arm belonged to a deceased Jaradian soldier buried at sea following Empress Oni's death. Looking past the arm revealed more gray colored limbs littering the ground. The general's attempt at taking another step was halted by one of the hands suddenly latching onto his right ankle. Grunting was General Hase as he demanded his men help him. Hase kicked the hand away without assistance following several seconds of struggling. The general wasn't done, stomping the appendage until it stopped moving. Turning to find out why no one aided him showed Hase nothing but Corbin's walkie-talkie on the ground. Hase picked up the communication device, mumbling something when the sounds of screaming echoed.

Someone running could be heard while General Hase's demanded, "Stay still!"

From the familiar voice of Corbin came a statement, "Thank you. I thought I was done for."

Hase asked after handing Corbin his lost communication device & recounting the general's recent harrowing moment, "Where are my pilots?"

"I don't know. One minute I was standing. The next, those arms were dragging me away from you all."

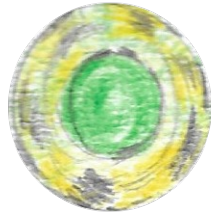
General Hase returned his attention to the walkie-talkie, telling everyone listening, "I don't know what's going on here, but it's extremely dangerous. I've lost my pilots, and the other planes are just hovering above us. We need help. If the Gonagan military is listening, send a plane or something as fast as possible to help.... What is that?"

The voice of General Hase pleading for help changed into screams and something like carnivorous animals eating freshly caught prey. Gurgling from the site of this commotion reached the airwaves.

General Hase abruptly cried, “Get away from me, you monster!” before unnerving, cracking sounds similar to thick sticks being broken.

Picking up the two-way receiver again, Hase informed the people listening around the world, “They’re alive! It’s not just body parts. It’s the bodies. Someone help me now! Som--”

A loud thump sounded out, seemingly interrupting Hase’s words. But the general never said another word. The earlier chewing noise returned until the signal went dead.



Russell, Rini & Jade blankly stared at Dash as the radio replayed a message stating the broadcast had concluded.

Following several moments of silence in Dash’s home, Rini exhaustingly asked, “What just happened?”

A few seconds of thinking passed prior to Dash’s reply, “I can’t believe I’m sayin’ this, but maybe the dead has come back to life. If Oni can possess a little girl by using a piece of the Gonagan Crystal, it’s not out of the realm of possibility that she could use another crystal to resurrect the dead.”



Moving from his spot beside his little sister, Russell confronted Dash with a question, “So you’re tellin’ me that the dead Jaradians they buried at sea around there have come back to eat people?”

“Do you think it doesn’t sound crazy to me, too? But what other answer is there outside of General Hase losin’ his mind?”

The replaying radio message suddenly stopped during Dash’s response to Russell. King Octavius’ voice abruptly urged everyone listening to remain calm.

Gonaga’s king stepped away; allowing his daughter to speak once again to her audience, “People of Gonaga, please welcome back Jarad. In a few short hours, my father and I will arrive on the rock that floated out of the sea and has already taken the lives of those not worthy to step onto its soil. As my father, King Octavius of Gonaga, said... remain calm. I can guarantee you no harm will come to us.”

As Rini and Jade talked about the possibility of the walking dead – ignoring the princess’ message in the process – Dash pulled Russell aside to ask, “Russ, do you think you can beat Onita right now?”

“Maybe,” Russell responded as his surprised expression turned into one of unbridled cockiness. “But only as long as (Rini and Jade) hold their end of the fight and don’t get in my way.”

Behind Russell’s arrogant answer was a true faith in his ability – a vocalized confirmation of the vengeance burning through his soul. Staring into Russell’s brown eyes made Dash realize that this could be the last time they talked in such a calm manner.

Dash turned off the radio, causing Jade to cry out, “Hey!”

“Jade, I think we’ve heard enough for one day,” was Dash’s response to Jade’s complaining. “Onita’s headed to Jarad right now probably to resurrect all of the dead Jaradians.”

Rini wanted to know how Princess Onita hadn’t completely drained the crystal of its power by restoring Jarad.

Dash assumed that the amount of energy varied between the crystals, “And if that’s the case, there’s no tellin’ how much more she can do. Do me a favor and take a seat. I wanna tell you guys a story.”

After his pupils found their spots on the living room’s only couch, Dash verbally reflected on a time still freshly engrained in his memory, “When your parents and I fought Oni that day, a lot of lives were lost on both sides. Even though Oni was dead, the people were worried about Jarad. Next thing you know, Jarad started sinkin’. The story was a seismic shift destroyed Jarad’s foundation and the whole land collapsed into the sea. The day the news hit that Jarad was goin’ down, I was with Serena and Jas when Russell and Rini’s grandmother decreed that the Jaradians, though enemies of Gonaga, would get a proper burial on the land they called home – the land they died to defend under false pretense.”

Dash took a few seconds to collect his thoughts, looking at the floor until he started speaking again, “I always thought after the queen said that... would I want the same thing? If I really died that day would I want to be buried on Jarad as it fell into the ocean? I drank those questions away for years. And now, with a sober mind, I’m thinkin’ again. If the Gonagan Crystal had... has the power to restore, more than likely it can destroy just as effectively. It’s obvious that we’re not just fightin’ for revenge anymore.

Just like all those years ago, we're fightin' for Gonaga's survival. If Oni's spirit is really possessin' Onita, then she wants nothin' more than to destroy Gonaga and make Jarad the real super power of the world."

Russell angrily declared, "Forget that!"

Almost humorously, Rini and Jade gasped simultaneously following Russell's statement.

Rather than react, Dash listened intently to Russell continue his thoughts, "Okay, maybe *you're* fightin' for Gonaga, but I'm fightin' for my family. I'm trainin' for retribution, not to save some stinkin' rock."

Dash couldn't understand Russell's priorities; saying to his eldest student, "Gonaga is all that mattered to your mother and your father. That's why they fought. That's why I fought."

"And that was then. This is now, Old Man. The fact of the matter is that all you guys had to fight for was Gonaga. I have somethin' more important."

When Russell finished, Jade verbally admitted, "Honestly, I feel the same way. I love Gonaga, but I don't care if I lived here or in Majan, I'd fight the same way to avenge Mother and Father."

Dash slapped his forehead; muttering, "Kids these days. Well, I guess as long as you're motivated, it doesn't matter what you're fightin' for."

Rini changed the subject by asking how they would get to Jarad without attracting too much attention.

"Well, that's easy," Dash explained. "We'll sneak into the castle and use the plane that your parents and Jas flew to Jarad."

Russell blurted out, “Is that really necessary? You could just fly me over there and leave the women here to do whatever.”

Like earlier, the ladies Russell was referring to responded in unison, “Really?”

Dash sighed upon saying, “Russell, don’t let your newfound power cloud your judgment. You might be powerful, but not enough to do this on your own.”

“Who says?”

Dash ignored Russell’s ignorance, ordering Rini and Jade to ready themselves for their leaving.

Still insisting he could do everything on his own, Russell grabbed his sword and headed for the front door.

Jade ran behind her best friend’s brother to grab his right arm and ask, “Russell, will you protect me if I get injured?”

Without hesitation, Russell whispered, “No,” before pushing Jade away.

The hurt look on Jade’s face as she whimpered, “Really?” slightly rattled Russell.

“Because you’re not goin’,” became Russell’s follow up statement to his previous declaration.

Stunned was Jade after she thought Russell’s disagreement with Dash destroyed any notion Russell had of fighting alone.

Once again, Jade’s subsequent actions made Russell speak again, “Could you see it from my perspective for once? I don’t need you or Rini ‘helping’ me by gettin’ killed.”

“But we’re the only ones that’s gonna save you,” Jade rebutted.

Before Russell could end the argument and leave, Dash walked out of the house while facing the direction of Gonaga Castle. Russell stomped & huffed when his sister

passed him, following Dash and Jade. Arriving at their destination and sneaking around the castle proved much easier than expected thanks to the usual patrolling guards watching over the evacuation site until King Octavius and Princess Onita returned. On the south end of Gonaga Castle's famous garden lay a door covered with fake grass that led underground.

Dash's hands ran across the wall in search of something after walking down a staircase behind the door. That "something" was a switch to turn on a row of lights dangling from the ceiling.

After Russell's eyes adjusted to the rush of light, Russell verbalized his disbelief about what was in front him, "Old Man, how is this hunk of junk gonna get us to Jarad?"

Dash thought to himself, *I guess Jas would be mad about someone makin' fun of his first baby. Him bein' able to fly this thing one more time would be a thrill to see. He probably woulda killed someone if they tried to fly it without him knowin'. He took such good care of it... until he had Jade. She took his heart; just like this plane. Man, how many times did Jas pull me outta a bar when I was drunk outta my mind? I promised we would go together, but I'm still here. I'll be seein' you soon, though.*

Once again, Jade and Rini pushed past Russell to jump into the plane first. Dash was right behind the girls.

Turning around, Dash stared at Russell; who was looking away.

When Russell refused to move, Dash jokingly said, "Don't tell me big, bad Russ is scared of flyin'."

“I just thought when you were talkin’ about a plane, you’d have somethin’ a little more nice and stealthy in mind. But that thing probably won’t make it off the ground. I guess that’s what I get for tryin’ to reserve my energy for the big battle.”

Jade spoke from behind Dash to agree with Russell, “I know, right. It’s fun, but it wears me out if I do it for too long.”

Dash had to know, “What are you two blabberin’ about?”

Taking his sister’s place by simultaneously speaking with Jade, Russell said alongside his friend, “Flying.”

Jade gently shoved Dash out of her way to show him what they meant. Standing steadily, Jade and Russell used their respective energies to propel themselves upward. The showcase turned into a race as the two fliers circled Jas’ plane. Seeing her brother and best friend playing around made Rini want to join the fun.

Watching his three students gliding in the hanger astonished Dash.

“Well I’ll be,” Dash said to himself. “So I guess you learned how to fly on your own, too. It took us months to perfect the art of flyin’. But you guys just do it without thinkin’? Well, thanks for wastin’ our time sneakin’ in here.”

Dash’s mind shifted back to Jake and Dash’s inability to fly the plane his friend once cherished, *I guess Jas is the only one worthy of flyin’ you.*

When Dash called an end to Rini, Jade, and Russell’s race, he ordered everyone to return groundside. Taking his first step on the staircase, Dash took one last look at the plane prior to turning off the lights and ascending.

Russell exclaimed before leaping into the sky when everyone made it topside, “To Jarad!”

“That boy will never learn,” Dash said as Rini and Jade followed Russell. “If he doesn’t shape up and fly right, Oni’s gonna kill him thanks to that little girl.”

...to be continued

## Revelation

Alongside his protégés Russell, Jade & Rini, Dash flew toward the recently resurfaced Jarad. Still astonished was Dash at the revelation that his three students had taught themselves how to fly with their energy in an unbelievable short amount of time – something Dash and his friends didn't fully master until months after defeating Empress Oni of Jarad. Rini inched closer and closer to her brother until she glided beside him.

With the wind blowing in both of their faces, Rini had to shout her statement aimed at Russell in regards to her brother wanting Jade and her to stay in Gonaga, “Who do you think you are? You better let us help you or you'll be the one that needs a casket!”

Russell attempted to fly past his sister rather than respond. Jade refused to be left out of this one-sided conversation, catching up with her friends.

Thinking Rini was bothering Russell with unnecessary questions, Jade said to Rini, “Leave Russ alone. He's just trying to help us.”

“Wow, Russell!” Rini yelled. “I can't believe you've got Jade believing your made up hype!”

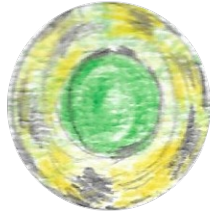
Russell smirked, telling his sister, “It's not hype; it's the truth! Anyone with half my strength would know that!”

“How's this for 'half' strength?” Rini responded prior to punching Russell's right arm.

Slightly hearing the continuous argument made Dash chuckle and say to himself, “Look at 'em. They're just like we were. We thought we were special, but these kids are like prodigies. I just hope that they can use it to their advantage.”

Seeing Dash lagging so far behind made Russell shout, “Speed it up, Old Man!”





As Dash followed his students, King Octavius, Princess Onita, and a slew of Gonagan Royal Guards had already graced Jarad's desolate ground. Gonaga's princess led everyone toward the rusted, seaweed-covered ruins that was once Empress Oni's fortress & home. Princess Onita stopped in front of the empress' old residency, gazing into the cold darkness with her arms rising from her sides. Several deceased Jaradian soldiers embedded in the grit below rose from their tombs following Princess Onita's action. A small grin formed on the princess' face – completely opposite of her guards. The reanimated bodies circled everyone as the living soldiers prepared to strike them down if they touched their king or princess. Snapping her fingers, Princess Onita caused the corpses to halt their movement.

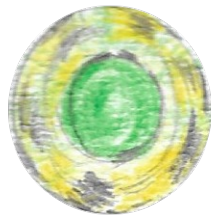
“Do you all want revenge, too?” Princess Onita asked these soulless beings.

The Jaradians giving Princess Onita no answer made her continue speaking, “Well, this is your chance to make the dream you've lived and died for a reality. When I received the Gonagan Crystal, I was given a divine power of resurrection. Sadly, the best I could do in bringing Jarad's greatest warriors back to life was the walking dead after using so much of the crystal's power raising Jarad from its watery grave.”

Princess Onita moved past one of her Gonagan protectors, coming face to decaying face with the nearest Jaradian to stare in its soulless eyes.

The Princess of Gonaga waited to see if the undead creature would strike; feeling safe to continue speaking as her point of attention remained docile, “But even so, you are still Jarad’s elite no matter what you look like. Mix that power with the spirit that runs through me and you all now have the chance to destroy those who destroyed you. It’s time for you to take Gonaga once and for all!”

Princess Onita lifted her arms once again, causing the mysterious light that rose Jarad out of the sea to spread throughout the ocean.



Before he and his friends could see Jarad, the immaculate flash of light below them stunned Russell’s eyes.

“What was that, Old Man?” Russell immediately asked when the illumination died.

Dash hastily responded, “I don’t know, but it seemed to be comin’ from our destination.”

Russell picked up speed with Rini and Jade in tow. Landing on Jarad, Dash quickly noticed the lack of supposed walking dead that attacked the news reporter Corbin and Gonagan military personnel nearly a day earlier.

Jade wondered aloud exactly what Dash was thinking, “What happened to all the dead people?”

Before Dash could come up with an explanation for Jade, Russell grunted, “This stinks.”

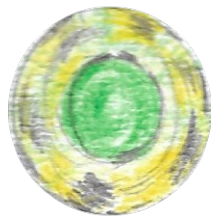
Though no one paid attention to him, Russell couldn’t help but voice his frustration, “I came here to fight and defend my parents’ honor. And instead I’m sittin’ on a rock, kickin’ dirt. Forget this, I’m outta here.”

Russell jumping into the sky made Rini shout, “Russ, you come back here! Russell!”

Ignoring his sister’s command, Russell continued back home.

Dash calmed Rini by telling her, “Unfortunately, your brother’s got the right idea. I don’t feel Onita’s energy, or Octavius’ for that matter. There’s a good chance that they got what they needed and left. The only thing I don’t understand is why I didn’t sense Onita passin’ us.”

“We can worry about that later,” Rini replied. “We need to get back to Gonaga and make sure Russell doesn’t do something stupid.”



Some forty-five minutes after leaving Jarad, Russell returned to Gonaga to the sounds of screaming and explosions. As Russell hovered above the chaos, he saw someone familiar trying to maintain order as best he could.

Realizing whom this person was, Russell landed near him to ask, “Zack, what’s going on?”

Zack informed Russell, “I don’t know, man. One minute the bell starts ringing at the castle. The next minute, some dead guys are walking through the streets; picking fights with anything moving. We’re heading for the docks to get a ride outta here. You can come with us if you want.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got some business to take care of at Gonaga Castle.”

It wasn’t long into his trek north did Russell encounter one of the conscious corpses Zack alluded to marching aimlessly in searching for its next victim. The deceased Jaradian dripped gray saliva with each step; its decaying arms reached for its target. Russell stood still until the Jaradian was in touching distance. The dead individual lunged at his awaiting goal, only for Russell to sidestep him. But Russell’s action wasn’t a simple avoidance. Extending his right arm out as he moved, Russell drove his right fist through the deteriorated creature’s chest.

Russell whispered, “So this is the army of Jarad? I can see why you guys lost.”

With the slightly moving dead soldier still on his arm, Russell turned to find two more Jaradians coming his way.

“You want this?” Russell mockingly asked his new enemies.

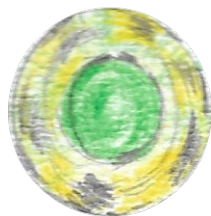
Once again, Russell waited until his aggressors neared him before attacking. Russell slung his original attacker into the other Jaradians, knocking them down. While his opponents struggled to rise, Russell positioned himself for something.

Russell's energy level increase when he told the Jaradians, "I've been workin' on this for a while. Here's a little move I like to call 'The Rusting.'"

Russell created a brown ball of energy that eventually opened and turned into the shape of a dome on its side. Pushing the brown structure forward caused Russell's energy to tip over and encase the living dead. The energy dome never budged, buckled or disintegrated as the Jaradians banged and slammed themselves against the construction.

Russell moved from his position, floating until he stood atop his energy structure and the things inside. Russell's right arm punched through the middle of the dome's ceiling to produce an implosion that sent decaying limbs everywhere and the person responsible returning skyward. After Russell returned to solid ground, two more Jaradians grabbed him from behind. The creatures had Russell in a death grip that made freedom feel like a false hope. Russell glanced from the four arms clinching his body to discover three more Jaradians approaching him.

Though Russell's predicament seemed dire his mind remained calm. As the Jaradians tried to pull him down, Russell realized what he needed to do to survive. Like earlier, Russell's energy level ticked upward; his eyes and hair radiantly glowing. Russell began emitting so much energy that it rattled the streets. Gonagans still in the area yelled at Russell to stop for risk of destroying more than the Jaradians shaking loose from Russell's body, but he couldn't hear their demands.



In Gonaga Castle sat Queen Athena feeling an immense power radiating from somewhere nearby. Though this energy poured from someone familiar, the queen didn't exactly know who was its source.

Fear overtook Athena when she started thinking, *Please don't let that be Onita.*

Concentrating for a few seconds, Queen Athena figured out, *That's not Onita.*

Princess Onita, unlike her mother, knew immediately where the energy was coming from and its source. Gonaga's princess left the castle grounds to find and make this power her own. Princess Onita ran through the streets & back alleys until she saw Russell rushing past her location.

Watching Russell walk toward Gonaga Castle, the princess tried to process her cousin's strength while talking to herself, "I can't believe this. How can someone produce so much power without something else like the Gonagan Crystal?"

Princess Onita's mind suddenly focused on the day she slaughtered her family & friends; remarking, "Or hatred? That's it, isn't it? The same hatred that made me is what empowers you. You hate that I've joined with your cousin's willing spirit. You hate that I've isolated your precious aunt. You hate me because I killed your parents. But there's something deeper to your hate, isn't it? You hate yourself. You hate that you let your parents die and you couldn't do anything about it."

Russell exclaimed when the princess stopped talking, "You know it's not an inner monologue if everyone can hear you!"

The princess peered up to find Russell leaning against a nearby alley entrance. Rather than verbally respond, Princess Onita focused on the hatred encompassing

Russell's body. Russell yelled for Onita to fight, but his little cousin kept quiet and motionless. Suddenly, Russell felt something creep into his mind.

*What's goin' on?* Russell thought.

Princess Onita's voice echoed in Russell's mind, telling him, "That's right, let the hatred consume you. And let me control that feeling through you."

The quaking Gonaga felt courtesy of Russell's energy returned as he Russell released an exponential amount of his power. Unlike minutes before, Russell couldn't fully restrain himself, destroying almost everything in a twenty-foot radius. Russell slowly gazed at the rubble around him before turning his attention to the energy emanating above him. There floated the Princess of Gonaga directly over her gazing cousin. With a wicked smile on his face, Russell joined Princess Onita in the now dusty sky.

The princess led Russell into Gonaga Castle, heading in the direction of Queen Athena's old room. Russell knocked the door down before entering. The rude action of Russell entering the room without acknowledgment made Queen Athena cower behind the bed. With each approaching step, the queen's heart raced a little faster. It wasn't until the movement stopped did Queen Athena open her eyes to find out who now stood in front of her. A sigh of relief exited Athena's body when she saw the familiar face of her nephew. As Gonaga's queen stood to hug Russell, Princess Onita stepped into the forefront.

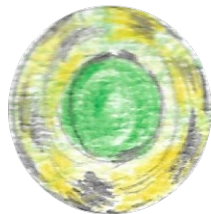
Without even glancing at her daughter, Queen Athena questioned Russell about this potentially dangerous situation by simply asking, "What's going on?"

The queen stepped back to examine Russell's eyes. A cold emptiness reverberated from Russell, startling Athena. Before Queen Athena could do anything, Russell clutched his aunt's wrists. Russell spun Athena around by her arms so she now faced her daughter.

Princess Onita's lips parted to say, "We're going on a little trip, Mother."

Instead of responding to the princess, Queen Athena begged Russell to help her. Princess Onita grew tired of her mother's pleading hindering their movement; utilizing a quick blast of energy from her right hand to put the queen into an unconscious state. The prior cries of his wife alerted King Octavius. When Octavius entered the bedroom, he found Athena lifelessly lying across the bed.

The agonized look in the king's eyes made Russell inform his uncle, "She's not dead."



Dash, Rini, and Jade witnessed the same chaos Russell experienced when they arrived in Gonaga, but with less people in the area. Jade held Rini by her right arm when they descended to the ground and walked through the city.

Wondering aloud was Rini as a slight wind blew dust against her faded black boots, "What happened in the last few hours?"

Dash's attention turned from his students to four Jaradian corpses now following them. Stubbornness ran through Rini and Jade – who had become insistent on testing



themselves in battle. Dash shrugged his shoulders as a signal that he didn't mind Jade & Rini having an impromptu fight; giving his pupils an opportunity to confront their targets. Jade and Rini were back to back, ducking and dodging every sloppy strike thrown by three of their attackers. The girls didn't notice the fourth walking dead was inching toward Dash; though Dash was aware. Dash unsheathed his sword, using the weapon as a shield to prevent the dead enemy's uncoordinated punches from connecting.

Dash sidestepped his attacking Jaradian's surprisingly quick front kick, chopping off the corpse's outstretched limb. Unable to balance on a single leg, the hobbling Jaradian started falling. As this one-legged adversary lost his footing, Dash used a quick sword swipe to decapitate the once-living soldier. Rini was mortified over the sight of Dash beheading the creature – her eyes widened and fixed as her body became rigid. This momentary focal shift left Rini open to have the back of her neck grabbed by a Jaradian. Rini yelped for Jade, but her best friend was chopping away at the two remaining aggressors with her father's sickles. The soldier's grip took away any thought Rini had of freeing herself. For a brief moment, Rini closed her eyes due to the pain. Rini's few seconds of agony while she stared into the darkness felt like an eternity.

When Rini's eyes opened, a gray energy beam shot past her flushed face. The living dead clutching Rini abruptly dropped to the ground, kneeling beside her now motionless, headless threat. Rini's eyes peered at the right hand extended in her direction seconds later. The appendage belonged to Jade.

Jade reminded Rini, "Don't worry, I got ya covered."

Dash laughed at Jade being so Jas-esque with her statement. But Dash's happy moment ended quickly thanks to the feeling of an approaching, evil energy. Rini and

Jade's faces also expressed concern as their heads tilted upwards. A plane shot across the sky. Like Rini and Jade, Dash immediately recognized this fast moving line above housing Princess Onita.

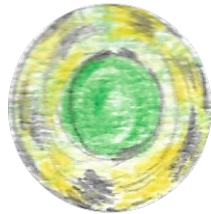
Jade was the first to question the princess objective, "She can't be returning to Jarad. She's not even going in the right direction."

"She wasn't by herself, though." Rini spoke up.

Dash smiled upon realizing Rini was right in her assessment that not one, but several people were with the princess in Gonaga in flight.

Not wanting to worry his students, Dash only thought about the greatest question disturbing him, *Russell, what are you up to?*

Unbeknownst to Dash, Rini recognized her brother's energy and feared for his safety just like Dash.



High in the darkening sky was Russell sitting beside his uncle while King Octavius woefully watched the unconscious Queen of Gonaga. Princess Onita told her fellow occupants that an island now coming into sight – a landmass some ninety miles north of Gonaga and east of Majan – was their destination.

Princess Onita looked at Octavius when they landed to say, "Welcome home."

It didn't take long for Octavius to vocalize his remembrance of this place, "He called it, 'The Island of Vanski.' An island all to the great doctor to create the empress' wishes."

A familiar masculine, yet weak voice said in the distance, "And her wishes were my greatest accomplishments."

Dr. Otto Vanski revealed himself by exiting the wooded area to their left.

Dr. Vanski started speaking again after shaking the right hands of King Octavius and Princess Onita, "But I've done so much more alongside the Princess of Gonaga. Oooh, doesn't that sound incredible. I've assisted Gonagan royalty again; and made history at that."

"While that's all well and good, Doctor," the princess responded, "Oni had something immaculate she wanted to do after she conquered Gonaga. Unfortunately, she never had her opportunity."

"Oh, I know, Princess Onita. I see you've brought Queen Athena for our next phase."

The Princess of Gonaga happily nodded before asking Dr. Vanski, "And are my parents ready?"

As the island's owner positively answered Princess Onita's question, the king posed a query of his own, "What do you mean her parents are ready? We're her parents."

The doctor slightly laughed prior to leading his guests through the damp woods.

When King Octavius repeated himself, Dr. Vanski finally responded, "I believe she means Oni's parents."

Gonaga's king immediately asked, "Aren't Oni's parents dead?"

“Almost,” the doctor replied. “The history books state that Oni killed her parents when she actually wounded them greatly thanks to an outburst of power – energy that she once didn’t understand how to handle. Oni contacted me after what happened that day and I was able to put them in a drug-induced coma. As the years passed, traditional methods of revival failed me. It was shortly before Oni planned her last attack on Gonaga that she discovered an alternative method – a method that would involve a human sacrifice and the exchange of energies & life forces. That’s why we need Queen Athena.”

Horrifically, a halting Octavius shouted, “You’re going to sacrifice Athena?”

Princess Onita refused to stop moving or answer her father due to them arriving at their journey’s end. An uneasy air of heaviness surrounded Dr. Otto Vanski’s home & laboratory.

Entering the facility, King Octavius spoke up again, “I don’t think we need to do this.”

With glee in his voice was Dr. Vanski when he informed the King of Gonaga, “Of course we do. If we don’t then Princess Onita will never rule to her fullest potential. Oni’s plan wasn’t just to revive her parents. Oni wanted to finish what she started. Oni wanted her parents to witness the magnificence of her new powers after attaining the Gonagan Crystal and taking Gonaga as her own. Once they realized what a powerful person she’d become, she would kill them and take their essence so they could live on within her and see the world molded in Oni’s image through Oni’s very eyes.”

“So why are we doing this now?” King Octavius replied. “Oni’s dead. There’s no point of this.”

Dr. Vanski opening his laboratory doors revealed to everyone the scarred and cold bodies of Oni's parents using oxygen tanks and breathing tubes to continue living. Oni's father was a small individual who had the facial features resembling a bird. Thankfully, Oni attained her looks from her mother. The thin, pale skin, pointy nose, small eyes & lips, and flowing black hair that made up Oni's mother's cranium left no question who she birthed.

After Dr. Vanski ordered Russell to lay & strap Queen Athena onto the empty table to the left of Oni's mother's resting spot, the doctor finally responded to Octavius' earlier statement, "There is a point, my good patriarch, for Oni stands among us."

King Octavius slightly gasped while thinking, *Does he mean Onita?*

The moment Russell began harnessing her down Queen Athena regained consciousness. Dr. Vanski welcomed the Queen of Gonaga to his lab, explaining her current situation.

Queen Athena screamed at her messenger, "You're a mad man!"

Turning her attention to her nephew, Gonaga's queen asked, "And Russell, why are you helping them?"

"I can answer that one," Athena's daughter replied. "I own his mind through his hatred of me. And through this hatred I've found the ability to control him. Now, if we can hurry this up."

Dr. Otto Vanski attached a device that connected the queen's head to Oni's parents' craniums.

Before the doctor could pull a switch and start the process, King Octavius demanded, "Stop this now! I will not let you sacrifice my wife."

Behind her pained expression, Athena smiled listening to Octavius' declaration.

"It's taken my eyes far too long to see the truth," the king confessed. "But now that I see, I must rid the world of these abominations. Through true love for Queen Athena of Gonaga I do this!"

Palming a lone hammer nearest him, Octavius started swinging the instrument to destroy equipment and control panels surrounding the king.

Dr. Vanski screamed as the king shattered vials & test tubes, "Stop this! You're destroying my life's work!"

The doctor's commands made Russell grab the King of Gonaga in a chokehold from behind.

Shock moved through Octavius not because of Russell's action, but the words Russell whispered into the king's right ear, "Listen, I'm not really under Onita's control. Just play along and we'll get Aunt Athena outta here."

Russell instructed Octavius to break free by biting Russell's right wrist after pushing themselves directly in front of Oni's father. Upon losing his grip of the king, Russell threw a kick that never touched Octavius' abdomen, but his uncle pretended Russell's "attack" had enough force to knock him atop Oni's father's body. Russell produced a small, brown energy ball that he threw at Gonaga's king. Controlling his energy perfectly, Russell gave Octavius enough time to move.

Russell's sphere hit Oni's father, obliterating his body – forcing Dr. Vanski to cry in horror. Princess Onita confronted Octavius to stop him from freeing Athena. Before Onita could complete her task, a searing pain halted the princess' action. This agonizing

feeling came from Russell shooting his cousin's back with three successive energy beams. These energized rays immediately singed the princess' body.

Smiling, Russell asked the physically stunned Gonagan princess, "Hey, what can I say? I always thought I'd be a great actor."

While Russell distracted Onita, Octavius helped Queen Athena free herself. Dr. Vanski tried to stop him, but King Octavius slapped the doctor down with ease. Once Athena's feet touched the ground, Octavius led her out of the laboratory into the island's dense woods. The escaping of her parents was unknown to Princess Onita due to Russell's jumping & flipping as a distraction held her undivided attention.

Princess Onita's continuous orders of, "Stand still!" at Russell fell on deaf ears.

Spinning around the room to keep track of Russell finally revealed the lack of people in Dr. Vanski's lab. Onita's focus shifted again – this time to the rising body of Vanski.

Princess Onita kicked the doctor, shouting, "What happened to the queen? Get up!"

When the doctor made it to his feet, he discovered his laboratory containing only himself, Princess Onita and Oni's mother's body.

The Princess of Gonaga repeating her question about Queen Athena's escape finally snapped the doctor into reality.

Dr. Vanski asked, "What are we going to do about the sacrifice?"

Glaring at the sore scientist, Princess Onita mumbled, "I think we can find a replacement."

Abruptly, the princess punched Dr. Vanski in his stomach; pushing him onto the operating table Queen Athena once occupied.

The doctor pleaded as Princess Onita placed the draining device on his head like Dr. Vanski did to Athena minutes ago, “My princess, please don’t do this! I can’t die like this! My life’s work will fade away if you don’t stop! Please, Onita!”

With tears streaming down his cheeks, thousands of volts ran through Dr. Vanski’s body after Princess Onita ignored his begging and pulled the switch. The color drained from Vanski’s face as his body slowly stopped twitching. Oni’s mother’s lifeless form began moving not long after. The ding that sounded to signal the process’ conclusion gave Princess Onita every reason to approach Oni’s mother and gaze at this revival.

The person responsible for Oni’s birth quickly sat up; asking, “Where am I?”

Staring back at the inquirer was this slim woman with piercing black eyes.

“Who are you?” Oni’s mother questioned after locking eyes with this unknown individual.

“Who I am isn’t important right now. It’s who you are that intrigues me. Thanks to your favorite scientist over there – the man who gave his life to restore you – you’ve been given a chance to witness the world as you should’ve.”

It took a few seconds, but Oni’s mother remembered Dr. Otto Vanski, “He was my best friend when...--”

“When everything went wrong for you in Gonaga. When you were banished from the land you called home.”



The other woman in the room audibly recounted how Dr. Vanski escorted her to Jarad only to find out he couldn't come back to Gonaga either. Oni's mother and Vanski fell in love, but she later left him for a prominent raider whom she married and built Jarad into what it once was. Though she betrayed the doctor's trust, Vanski stayed loyal to her and Jarad.

Oni's only living parent finishing her story allowed her listener to finally introduce herself, "Don't you recognize your descendant. I am Princess Onita of Gonaga, your great-great-granddaughter. And you are a widower. You've widowed two husbands, but never the original. With your blood coursing through me, I know the truth. You are the original Queen of Gonaga."

...to be continued

## Ravage

Using Princess Onita's confidence against her by making his cousin believe she had control of his mind, Russell valiantly saved his aunt Queen Athena of Gonaga from being sacrificed to revive Oni's parents. Prior to Russell's escaping with Queen Athena and her husband – after King Octavius finally realized the error of his daughter's ways – Russell obliterated Oni's father with an energy sphere. Not long after he returned to Gonaga with its king and queen in his grip did Russell hear Dash's voice directing a few Gonagans to safety.

When the three landed beside Dash, Russell asked his mentor, "What happened to everyone, Old Man?"

"We've contacted Tyrong about what's goin' on," Dash informed his three returning friends. "Thankfully they're lettin' anyone who wants to come to Tyrong for haven to do so. Rini and Jade are on the ship waitin' for me to tell them to go."

King Octavius stayed silent for a few seconds before revealing his internal decision, "Athena will go with them."

The Queen of Gonaga didn't understand why Octavius would want to send her away until her husband said, "Those people... your people need someone who can sooth their worried souls. They need a true representative – no disrespect to Rini and Jade."

Russell remarked with a smirk, "None taken. I wouldn't want them talkin' to the Tyrongy government like they're runnin' somethin' 'round here."

"Don't doubt your sister," replied Dash. "Her gift of gab is most impressive. And Octavius is right, Athena. The people need to see your face. They haven't seen its beauty for far too long."

The whistling coming from Russell following Dash's statement about Athena's appearance was topped by his words, "You hear that, Unc? It took him awhile, but Dash is finally makin' a play for Aunt Athena. Whaddya gonna do 'bout that?"

Rather than answer Russell's query, King Octavius thanked him for saving Athena from Dr. Vanski and Princess Onita before leaving alongside his wife. Worry shown in Athena's eyes as she walked with the king.

After Octavius asked his love about her mental state, Athena meekly said, "I don't know, but I think my nephew might need me sooner than later."

Dash and Russell left Gonaga's wrecked Marketplace, heading in the direction of the land's port & farmland. Their search for any remaining reanimated Jaradian soldiers that were revived by Princess Onita and the lost Gonagan Crystal was fruitless; much to the two's relief. In disbelief was Russell listening to Dash's story about Jade, Rini, and himself thwarting many living-dead attackers.

"You're tellin' me you didn't do all the work?" Russell asked.

Without hesitation, Dash confirmed, "Nope. Actually, I was tryin' hard to play catch up. Russ, you're incredibly strong, but don't underestimate your sister and Jas' jewel."

A follow up comment sat on the tip of Russell's tongue until he heard a familiar, feminine voice call his name.

Russell said to himself, "Well speak of the devil," while watching his approaching sister.

Getting within reaching distance of Russell, Rini questioned her sibling, "Where have you been?"

“Takin’ care of family business,” Russell responded. “Savin’ Aunt Athena. Helpin’ Uncle Octavius. Makin’ sure the townspeople got on your boat. Y’know, typical hero stuff?”

Dash suddenly spoke up, “Yeah, I noticed (Russell) and Octavius bein’ mighty chummy. I assume you figured out he truly does love her.”

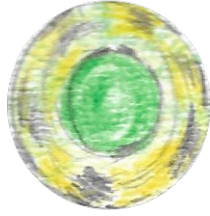
Like the king earlier in response to Russell’s inappropriate statement, Russell ignored Dash to ask his sister, “Where’s you’re shadow?”

“You mean Jade? She’s still at the port tying up some loose ends. You act like she isn’t stuck under you all of the time during training. You know she wants to be like you. I think she’s been brainwashed by your big talk.”

Straightening his body while placing his fists on the respective sides of his waist, Russell proclaimed, “Just you wait, Sis. I’ll prove that it isn’t just talk.”

Rini took a spot beside Dash to converse about Russell as if he wasn’t standing near them, “You know what, Uncle Dash? Russell might not be totally lying. Uncle Octavius told me about the great performance Russell gave to trick Onita and Dr. Vanski to save Aunt Athena. It seems if my big brother isn’t strong enough to stop Onita, he can at least trick her into believing he can beat her.”

Rini and Dash shared a loud laugh in front of a not-so-humored Russell. Without a noticeable reason, Russell’s grimace turned into a smile. Dash’s expression became the opposite of Russell’s when he realized something powerful was coming their way.



Princess Onita of Gonaga stood in front of the former Empress Oni's revived mother proclaiming herself to be this woman's great-great-granddaughter. The method performed to pull Oni's only remaining parent into consciousness was that of sacrifice. Using Dr. Otto Vanski's entire life energy, Oni's mother reentered the world. But the Princess of Gonaga didn't create this meeting of generations for a simple family reunion. Princess Onita wanted to know about Gonaga's original queen. The astonished look on Oni's mother's face couldn't hide the truth her eyes expressed.

Oni's mother not speaking made Princess Onita explain the story she read while researching the lost Gonagan Crystal's whereabouts, "The spirit inside me identified Dr. Vanski as the person who could help me complete my lineage. During my search for something powerful, Vanski revealed to me that the woman depicted in the history books as Gonaga's first queen truly isn't what history claims her to be."

The object of Princess Onita's attention listened intently as her informer continued, "Vanski, though old in body, was still sharp in mind. This woman he claimed as the first Queen of Gonaga was also the mother of the world's most destructive force, Empress Oni. But the one thing Vanski never told me before his timely death was why Gonaga's first queen had been banished and her history erased."

"So, you brought me back for that reason?" Oni's mother asked. "To complete your unearthed history lesson?"

“No, in actuality. I saved you from the brink of death to erase your very essence from this planet as Oni originally intended. You and the remnants of what used to be your second husband behind you gave Oni her first feeling of dominance. And I must admit that experiencing the same feeling taints your soul with bloodlust. With your death, I will absorb all of Gonaga’s past history.”

Knowingly confronted by death, Oni’s mother pleaded to let her live. Princess Onita felt her ancestor’s words, but liked her plan better. The fearful, quaking woman dropped to her knees; preparing to be struck down by her own family once again. Before Princess Onita’s hand could move for the deathblow, a sudden rush of energy exposed itself to her. Princess Onita quickly realized that her potential victim possessed great strength.

Oni’s mother had her eyes to the ground, waiting to take her final breath when her second intended harbinger of death demanded, “Rise.”

Upon the following of her order, Princess Onita explained to her ancestor, “Your energy is enhanced by the pure Gonagan blood coursing through your veins. You could be beneficial in my success if I must take down my ‘family’... your family. Now, I believe we’ve spent enough time on this rock. It’s time for us to go.”

To the disbelief of Oni’s mother, Princess Onita extended her right hand so they could hold hands prior to exiting Vanski’s home and his grave. With the woman responsible for Oni’s birth in her grasp, the Princess of Gonaga ignored the aircraft she arrived on; gliding toward and eventually above her homeland in the direction of her biggest threats.

Princess Onita said to the woman clutching onto her for dear life after spotting Russell below, “Watch me give them a proper welcome.”

In a flash, Princess Onita produced a fiery ball of energy almost twenty feet in diameter that she threw at one of the few places in Gonaga not completely ruined. Without saying a word, Dash, Russell & Rini ran in separate directions to avoid this incoming attack. Unbeknownst to Dash and Rini, this energy was only aimed at Russell. Princess Onita’s powerful flames engulfed Russell with the sphere exploding soon after. Rini collided against the ground after the blast sent her flying backwards. Nearby homes and buildings around the energy were either disintegrated or set on fire. As Dash helped Rini, he noticed Russell’s energy level; or lack thereof. Princess Onita neared the swirling dust where her energy cratered the land. Like Dash, the princess believed Russell was no more.

Gonaga’s princess took a step from Russell’s dusty tomb when she heard a male say, “Please don’t think so lowly of me, cousin.”

Before the princess could react, Russell flew out of his gritty cover; punching Onita’s right between her eyes. The right-handed strike sent Princess Onita careening backwards, but didn’t drop her. Gonaga’s fighting royalty couldn’t recover in time to avoid another right hand smacking her face. Russell’s second punch forced the princess sailing until she hit the front wall of a small, half-destroyed gift shop. Onita’s aggressor pressed forward, confronting the Princess of Gonaga before she could move from her position against the building. A smile formed on Russell’s face while he used a succession of left & right hooks to the princess’ body that drove blood into Onita’s throat.

Following Russell's barrage he jumped into the air. Gazing upward, Princess Onita wiped the blood streaming down the sides of her mouth. From Russell formed a brown beam of his own energy. Princess Onita had no chance to move, feeling the ray collide with her chest prior to exploding around Russell's target. Another grin graced Russell's face as the smoldering princess fell to her knees.

Not far from Gonaga's princess stood Dash in shock of what he was witnessing.

"How is this possible?" Dash said to himself. "Russ' energy level hasn't changed. Without even powerin' up, Russell just dropped a woman who was stronger than me, Jas, Jake and Serena combined when she still looked like a child. Is he really that strong?"

With Dash's focus on Russell, Dash never sensed Oni's mother creeping behind him.

Hastily grabbing Dash in a chokehold, this woman unknown to him commanded, "Don't move an inch!"

Dash coughing for air actually angered his unidentified choker made her say, "I told you not to move. Now I have to kill you."

Dash quickly fell chest first to the ground so Oni's mother slipped over his shoulders. Unable to stop the fall, Dash's attacker landed on her face. The supposed original matriarch of Gonaga rolled to her feet while blood leaked from her nose. Rather than strike, Dash asked this unidentified individual who she was.

"I am the namesake of your princess," she told Dash. "I am the mother of both Jarad and this land you defend. I am Onyda, the original Queen of Gonaga."

Onyda's words reverberated in Dash's mind. It didn't take long before Dash understood this woman was Oni's supposedly dead parent. Dash had to forget about this



bold revelation and ready himself for battle. The mother of Oni rushed her target, looking to knock him out with a single left punch. Dash closed his eyes and braced himself for the strike, but felt nothing. Opening his eyes, Dash found Russell standing between himself and Onyda.

Though he was looking at the still Onyda, Russell's message was directed at Dash, "Don't worry, Old Man. I've got your back."

Rather than immediately push Russell to the side, Onyda needed to know how Russell got around Princess Onita and interrupted Dash's incoming pain. Without losing his widening grin, Russell glanced behind Oni's mother at the destroyed gift shop that became Princess Onita's tomb.

Russell verbally confirmed what was going through Onyda's mind, "Yep, she's under there."

Onyda didn't seem overly concerned about the princess' life, but did want to prove her superiority by throwing a right-handed haymaker at Russell. Onyda's mark easily avoided the strike, but she wouldn't stop swinging punch after punch toward Russell's face. Russell grew tired of moving, standing still to give his punch-happy adversary an opportunity to actually land a strike. When the attack connected, Onyda felt her hand crumble. Onyda collapsed, screaming in agony as Russell stood over her.

Russell pulled the original Queen of Gonaga by her now broken hand, stating, "See ya later, witch."

With ease, Russell tossed his current enemy overhead. Onyda couldn't stop her descent in time to avoid a single punch from Russell against her chest that knocked the former queen into the same building Princess Onita was trapped underneath. Once Onyda

hit the shattered concrete, Russell threw a ball of fist-sized energy at the destroyed shop. Upon hitting the first piece of rubble, Russell's projectile exploded; completely decimating the structure so it crushed Onyda. Russell turned around to see an astonished Dash staring at him.

It took him a while before Dash eventually voiced what was running through his mind, "How in the world did you do that without powerin' up?"

Russell answered with an all too familiar smile accenting his face, "Told you Onita would be no sweat."

Just as Russell began dusting himself off, he heard something hiss behind him. After the disturbing sound died an energy ray collided with Russell's back. Dash's eyes moved from his falling student to a hurt Princess Onita limping toward them. Choosing to attack rather than help Russell proved futile for Dash when the princess shot a beam that struck Dash's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. With Dash keeled over thanks to the energy's force, Princess Onita removed Dash's sword holstered to his back.

Similar to Dash, Princess Onita realized she had two options, *I could kill Dash, or I could kill Russell.*

Taking a couple of seconds to weigh her options, Princess Onita turned in Russell's direction. The Princess of Gonaga kicked her cousin's prone face to keep him grounded. Fear ran through Dash when he looked to discover Princess Onita positioned above Russell with his sword dangling precariously over Russell's neck. Suddenly, something sparkling in the waning sun caught Dash's eye.

Princess Onita abruptly gurgled before she could decapitate her target. Drops of warm liquid patted Russell's head. As Russell peered up and Onita gazed down, their eyes both locked on Serena's sword protruding out of the princess' chest.

The voice behind Princess Onita's impaling told her, "If anyone's gonna kill my brother, it's gonna be me!"

That "something" catching Dash's eyes earlier was Rini running with her sword in hand. Rini held onto her sword's grip to yank the weapon out of Princess Onita. Gonaga's stabbed royalty stumbled around with blood pouring out of this newly created gaping hole for a few moments. In the distance, Jade sprinted to assist Russell.

When Jade reached him, Russell said in a serious tone, "I was just about to get up."

Jade couldn't help but laugh at her friend's comment. Princess Onita ignored her injury; attacking Rini while her wound slowly healed thanks to the Gonagan Crystal Dr. Otto Vanski & the first known one hanging from the princess' neck. Russell watched in amazement as his sister ducked and dodged every punch Onita threw. It didn't take long before Russell grew frustrated with Rini not changing her defensive strike into an offensive barrage.

"I guess it's time for *me* to finish this," Russell said to himself; unsheathing his father's prized sword.

Russell jumped into the sky directly above his quarreling relatives. A distressed Dash watched Russell floating with his energy level rising for a powerful attack. Dash's focus moved from Russell to Rini when her power started matching her brother's. But like Oni during the former empress' battle against Russell & Rini's parents, Princess

Onita was using her opponents' energy to predict the siblings' strategy. Throwing purple-colored energy at Princess Onita's face with the intent of temporarily blinding her adversary proved horrible for Rini. The princess smacked Rini's intended attack to her right, directly at Russell – who had planned to bring down his cousin with a sword slash down her back. Russell couldn't avoid Rini's energy from hitting his descending body. Rini realized the princess' attention being on Russell now allowed her to prepare another energy attack.

Due to his abrupt blindness from his sister's energy, Russell was unable to halt his falling into Princess Onita's awaiting clutches. His cousin instantly threw Russell in front of her as a shield. Before Rini could stop herself, she shot a purple energy sphere at the Princess of Gonaga and Russell. Princess Onita pushed Russell forward so he would take the brunt of Rini's attack. The energy exploded magnificently upon hitting its unintended target.

Everyone watched Russell's singed body drop to its knees. Rini immediately moved to her brother's side, trying to keep him conscious. A twisted grin formed on Princess Onita's face as she looked at her cousins. Dash pulled Jade beside him to formulate a plan.

Moving from Dash, Jade ran in her adversary's direction. The future ruler's eyes shot from Rini shaking her brother to Jade sailing through the air. Landing behind Gonaga's princess gave Jade the chance to kick Onita in her nearly healed back. When Jade went for another kick, Princess Onita spun around to catch the strike. Using Jade's own leg against her allowed Princess Onita to push Jade backwards into the dust. Jade immediately started rolling to avoid the princess' stomps.

As this was going on, Dash started focusing on bringing his energy level to its maximum. Jade successfully used her maneuvering to leg sweep Princess Onita by changing directions when the princess had one leg in the air. Quickly jumping to her feet, Jade unholstered her father's golden sickles. Sadly for Jade, Princess Onita kicked her in the stomach to prevent Jade from doing anything with her weapons. Unbeknownst to the Princess of Gonaga was Dash running behind her. Following Rini's actions, Dash used the princess' single-minded concentration on her enemy – in this case Jade – to his advantage to sneak up on Princess Onita. The wound Rini caused on the Princess of Gonaga was still visible enough for Dash to make the injury his mark.

At the last possible second, Princess Onita realized Dash's clear sword was only inches away from her back. Upon understanding her position, Princess Onita sidestepped Dash so he cut nothing but air. Dash's miss Gonaga's royalty a chance to smash her elbows against his back. Though Dash's attack failed, the distraction and Princess Onita's subsequent strike allowed Jade to regain her sickles. Rather than wait for her enemy to turn, Jade jerked the unsuspecting princess around to diagonally slash Onita's chest with both sickles.

As she ripped Princess Onita's chest open, the tears streaming down Jade's face greatly reflected the pain in her heart as much as the words that she spoke soon after, "I'm so sorry, Onita. Please, don't let her control you anymore so we can be friends again."

Princess Onita's bloody body fell backwards until Jade pierced Onita's chest with her weapons. Holding onto the sickles' handles, Jade concentrated her energy into the weapons so Jade's power could flow through the princess and cook her. When the

Princess of Gonaga started smoking, Jade let go of the sickles to prevent her old friend from dying. Princess Onita instantly collapsed after Jade relinquished her grip. Dash and Jade approached the mumbling daughter of King Octavius & Queen Athena, trying to overhear what she was saying.

“This body is too weak now,” was the statement from Princess Onita that Dash understood. “I can’t let it end like this because of someone else’s weakness. I must have her.”

Russell had regained consciousness while Jade stood over Onita’s blood-soaked body. Without warning, the princess’ right hand latched onto Jade’s left ankle. Fear for her own safety didn’t run through Jade’s mind, but concern over the desperate look in Princess Onita’s eyes.

Jade demanded Russell and Rini join her beside their adversary, “Guys, she’s not looking too well! We have to help her! We can’t let her die!”

Russell ignored Rini’s attempted assistance to stand up on his own when he finally didn’t feel like his entire body was on fire. Following behind a slightly limping Russell was his sister as they followed Jade’s order of taking a spot beside her.

Though he could see the same pained look in Princess Onita’s eyes as Jade, Russell didn’t agree with Jade’s belief that his cousin didn’t deserve death, “I loved the Onita we grew up with, but the girl we fought isn’t her. This Onita needs to die or else the world will end up just like our parents. Is that what you want, Jade?”

The princess’ gripping of Jade’s leg loosened; halting a response to Russell’s question. All eyes focused on Onita as the Princess of Gonaga stopped breathing.

Slightly frantic and grabbing the sides of his head, Dash said to himself in bewilderment, “Please, the can’t be happenin’. We were supposed save her. I was supposed to save her... and redeem myself to them.”

For several moments, silence swept the area. Starting to sob over Princess Onita’s frame, Jade noticed the recovered Gonagan Crystal shimmering underneath Onita’s tattered, bloody clothes. Jas’ daughter dropped to her knees, removing the necklace containing both Gonagan Crystals.

Rini quickly asked Jade, “What are you doing with that?”

“You of all people should know what we can do with the Gonagan Crystal,” Jade told her questioning friend. “Aunt Serena used the original crystal to return Gonaga to its state before Oni attacked it. With the second crystal we can restore Onita.”

Verbally refuting Jade’s idea was Russell, “Don’t be so selfish! I love Onita, but what about everyone else? What about Gonaga? My mother saved the entire land. You want to possibly use the crystal’s remainin’ power to save one person? You can’t think about yourself in a situation like this.”

“Think about myself?” Jade replied; moving from her crouched position to stand face-to-face with the individual causing her so much unusual anger. “As if you’re the person to give that kinda advice right now. You might not want to accept it, but we all know the only reason you don’t wanna help Onita is because you blame her for our families’ deaths. Oni killed our parents through Onita, not Onita through her own free will. I’ve always thought you were cool, Russ. But for once, please just shut up!”

Russell’s mouth opened for a rebuttal when Jade suddenly started clutching her stomach. Dash put his hands on Jade’s shoulders prior to asking his seemingly aching

protégé if she was okay. A terrible wail expelled from Jade's body topped off by a surge of energy that knocked her friends onto their backsides.

Russell screamed at Dash, "What's happenin' to her?"

Like Russell, Dash hadn't a clue why and how Jade was releasing so much energy. Almost a minute passed until Jade's powerful exertion subsided and Dash, Rini, and Russell were able to stand. Glaring at her rising friends, Jade cracked her neck and knuckles after wrapping Princess Onita's necklace around her left wrist. Dash's mind flashed back to his final battle with Empress Oni where she stood before him and his friends performing the exact same motions as Jade.

With dual voices of herself and the being that occupied Princess Onita, Jade said, "This new body feels good. This one has a better sense of her power than my granddaughter ever did."

Slowly nearing her best friend, Rini asked, "Jade, is that you?"

"Of course it is, you insolent fool. I just found out there's room for two thanks to the original Gonagan Crystal. Now, if you may, I'd like to continue our little session. I have a world to create after I destroy you like I did your weakling parents."

...to be continued



## Return

Cracking her neck & knuckles was Jade standing before her stunned friends. During an argument with Russell over the matter of using the Gonagan Crystals to revive a seemingly deceased Princess Onita, Jade became overwhelmed by an immense energy. When this power subsided, Jade had two voices & an aura of evil surrounding her – the same emanation Princess Onita produced until her fall.

Rini asked her smirking friend, “Are you really in there, Jade?”

“When does ‘yes’ mean anything else, you idiot?” Jade spat with the dual voices of herself and another being.

Sternly, Rini declared, “But Jade would never talk to me like that.”

“Is that because you’ve always thought of yourself to be better than me? Is it because you believe that since you’re the daughter of the mighty Serena of Gonaga while I’m just the child of a feeble insect that couldn’t even best his teacher that you’re greater than I?”

Rini was dumbfounded by Jade’s statements with the prior mumbling, “I would never...”

Dash realized what was going on and needed everyone else to know as well, “Rini, don’t listen to her! That’s not Jade! I think Oni’s spirit has moved, possessin’ her instead of Onita. The way she sounds is just like Onita. Just like Oni.”

Jade looked at Dash before saying, “Of course you would figure it out. This vessel became open to me during that little argument between the daughter of Jas and the son of Princess Serena about that traitorous worm you currently call a princess. This girl was too stupid to remember that I am forever attached to the original Gonagan Crystal. A heart

open to anger is where I feel at home. Russell, thank you for your stubbornness. I don't know if I would've had this opportunity otherwise."

Furious, Russell sprinted toward Jade; throwing wild punches. Like Rini during her battle against Princess Onita, Jade avoided each strike from her opponent until he grew winded. Waiting for the perfect opportunity, Jade swung her right fist against Russell's abdomen. Russell was barely able to stand after the seemingly debilitating attack weakened his legs. Claspng her hands together behind Russell's neck, Jade used her appendages to yank the Russell's head into a left knee strike that landed between his eyes. Russell dropped to his knees, leaving himself wide open for a kick from Jade to his stomach that knocked him several feet into the air. Before Russell hit the apex of his flight, Jade joined him in midair. Jade tossed seven blue energy spheres in Russell's direction so they collided and slammed Russell against the concrete road leading toward Gonaga Marketplace.

Each energy attack was more powerful than the last, wrecking Russell's already aching body. Russell could barely breath as he lay in this newly formed crater that was once a part of Gonaga's busy, seaport area. Floating until she stood beside Russell, Jade physically revealed her next plan of attack. Jade unsheathed her father's golden sickles from the holsters on her pants, wanting to cut Russell down like Jade did Princess Onita only minutes earlier.

In her mind, Rini had waited long enough for Russell to defend himself; entering the battle as Jade's arms descended toward her sibling's face. Leaping with her legs forward, Rini dropkicked Jade's back so her friend fell face first against her concrete base. Jade tried to roll to her feet, only for Rini to jump on top of her best friend and

clutch Jade's wrists. Throwing her left leg upward so the toe of her boot hit Rini's upper back allowed Jade to give her former ally a taste of her own medicine. The strike's impact caused Rini to fall toward an equally grounded Jade. Using her hands in hopes of stopping the fall didn't help Rini as Jade hastily sat up to headbutt her stunned adversary. Rini ended up on her back following the collision of skulls, giving Jade the chance to punch Rini's face several times. When it appeared Rini was incapacitated by Jade's strikes, the apparently possessed woman turned her attention to Russell – who still hadn't recovered from Jade's previous attacks. Rini slowly opened her eyes to find Jade walking toward her brother.

The struggling Rini screamed, "Leave him alone!"

Jade smiling at her demanding adversary caused Rini to repeat herself. The grin gracing Jade's face abruptly disappeared. This change in Jade's body language was due to something powerful rising in Rini. A surge of energy Rini never before experienced flowed through her body. Rini's energy poured purple in color from her form throughout the area, knocking Jade off her feet.

Russell flew into a building behind him, as did Dash. Jade regained her balance before pitching several energy spheres at this immense energy's source. These balls of Jade's energy exploded against Rini's body upon impact. To Jade's shock, Rini walked through the dust kicked up by each blast. Not paying attention to her surroundings almost cost Jade when she felt an incredible power moving through the ground in her direction. Jade jumped backwards, witnessing three purple energy balls erupt from where she once stood. The energy continued upward until it floated directly above Jade.

With the tip of her right index finger, Rini controlled her energy spheres. Smartly, Jade tried to cause a collision of Rini's energy; but Rini proved to be one step ahead of her friend at each turn. Seeing her original plan of destroying the energy with a crash didn't work out, Jade changed her strategy. Spotting Russell's prone body, Jade flew toward him with Rini's energy in hot pursuit. Dash screamed at Russell to warn him about Jade's approach. Unable to move fast enough, all Russell could do was brace for Jade's incoming attack.

Instead of hitting Russell when coming within reaching distance of her supposed target, Jade changed her trajectory by going up instead of straight. Unbeknownst to Jade was Rini predicting this planned physical shift in Jade's movement. When Jade looked down to witness Russell getting hit by Rini's attack, the energy engulfed Jade in a woefully gorgeous display of purple light. Jade's screams echoed until her tattered frame hit the ground seconds later. As her energy level normalized, Rini, with her mother's sword in hand, approached Jade.

"I'm sorry," Rini whispered when she stopped atop Jade. "I have to do this."

Rini raised her sword above Jade's neck in perpetration to decapitate her trembling best friend.

Rini's tearful hesitation gave Dash the chance to run and yell, "Stop, Rini! It's not Jade you have to destroy! It's the original Gonagan Crystal!"

The words reverberating in Rini's mind made her remember how Oni's spirit moved from person to person. To the left of Jade's body lay the necklace containing both Gonagan Crystals.

Dash informed Rini, “It’s the smaller, smoother one. That’s the piece she’s travelin’ through.”

Rini moved her sword from above Jade to the Gonagan Crystals. With all of her strength, Rini drove her sword through the original Gonagan Crystal, bisecting the blessed jewel. A weak, evil essence immediately exited its prison that only Dash could see. Rini kneeled beside Jade in an attempt to revive her. Seeing no other choice, Rini started performing CPR on her friend as the spirit once inside the original Gonagan Crystal slipped through the cracks of the destroyed gift shop Onyda was buried underneath. Rini’s actions not helping Jade forced her to call for Dash. Russell struggled out of the crater to join his friends & family in their effort to save Jade’s life.

All of a sudden, the road everyone stood on began violently shaking. A large crack formed, beginning at the gift shop’s remains. The split turned into a chasm as it moved toward the only four people remaining in the area. Dash hastily scooped Jade’s body while Rini helped her brother to a believed safe spot. With wide eyes, everyone watched the store’s rubble descend into the planet. The shimmering gold of something attracted Russell’s eyes when he turned to watch the planet’s steam rise from its depths.

As this glowing item fell off the ledge it sat upon, Russell realized what the object was; shouting, “No!”

Dash and Rini looked at Russell when he collapsed into a seated position. Watching Russell pound the ground with his fists made Dash ask why he was so upset.

“We let it fall!” Russell told Dash. “The second Gonagan Crystal just fell into the gorge! That was my only chance!”

Dash, while saddened about the Gonagan Crystal entering the planet, needed to understand how Russell lost his “chance”, “It’s messed up the crystal’s gone, but--”

With his face directed toward the tattered ground, Russell cried out, “But now we can’t bring them back!”

Tears flowed from Russell’s eyes; slamming against the road like hail.

With Jade’s head cradled in her lap, Rini made a guess at who her brother intended to restore, “Bring back Mother and Father. Mother used to tell us about how the original Gonagan Crystal returned Gonaga back to its state before Oni’s last attack. I assume Russell wanted to use the second crystal to do what she did.”

Confirming his sister’s assumption, Russell lamented, “Father, Mother, Uncle Jas, little Onita, I coulda saved ‘em all. Why is this happenin’?”

Dash sat with his bemoaning student to say, “I’m so sorry, Russ.”

Rini abruptly said, “Jade!” upon noticing her friend’s head move. “Jade, wake up!”

Sadly, Rini couldn’t coach Jade into consciousness as the planet began vibrating again. To Dash, Rini & Russell’s shock, a loud, feminine screeching came from inside the chasm. After the ungodly wailing passed, a geyser of molten lava exploded from the crevice for almost a minute. Watching intently, everyone couldn’t believe what they saw when the lava stopped spewing: a crystallized, purple hand. This appendage gripped the ground above, using the cracked concrete to reveal what was connected to this hand by pulling itself onto the surface.

Covered in purple crystal was none other than Onyda. When the original Queen of Gonaga gained a vertical base, her three enemies gazed at a fiery core visibly raging

inside the middle of her body. Russell's eyes moved from Onyda's torso to the almost half-foot-long nails protruding from Onyda's hand that appeared sharper than razors. Like those watching her, Onyda glared at the objects of her attention. Though the purple crystal encasing her body covered her mouth, Onyda's words were still audible somehow.

This was obvious as Onyda growled with the dual voices of herself and her daughter, Oni, "I heard what you said, young man."

It didn't take long before everyone realized Onyda was referring to Russell.

Onyda continued speaking to explain what she heard, "You believe the Gonagan Crystal is lost. But little do you know the crystal of my first husband returned to the other half of its original owners. Unlike my daughter, however, I didn't foolishly use some of the crystal's blessed powers for a power boost. I fully absorbed it. I am one with the second Gonagan Crystal, and the last remaining essence of my daughter. Now, it is time for you and your fellow peasants to die."

With his sword by his left side after gaining a solid balance, Russell prepared for a great battle. Dash stepped to Russell's right, bringing smiles to their respective faces. The still unconscious Jade was the only thing on Rini's mind.

Onyda's walking forward was halted by an unfamiliar male voice resonating from the distance, "Hold it right there!"

Following the command came a sound of horse hooves clapping against the stone. Through the wrecked buildings lazily walked a gorgeous, unusually black Clydesdale. On this horse rode a man draped in black. Rini first noticed how this unknown individual's energy resembled Dash's power. It didn't take long before Dash realized the same thing Rini recognized.

The rider spoke in Onyda's direction after his horse neared Dash, "Even though you look differently, I can feel the beast that dwells within is my mother."

Stopping his carrier and jumping off in front of Dash revealed Dash's assumption of this person's identity was correct.

This rider said to Dash, "It's great to see you again, big brother."

Russell couldn't believe his eyes as he watched Dash struggle to hold back the emotion welling inside of him.

Wiping away tears starting to down his cheeks, all Dash could say was, "Ken, I've missed you so much."

"As I you, Dash," Ken happily responded.

"But where have you been all this time?"

With a pat on Dash's right shoulder, Ken told his brother, "I appreciate the concern, but can we talk about this later? It seems like we have work to do."

Moving until he stood alongside the reuniting brothers was Russell to verbally ready them for war, "I already like this guy. We have a giant piece of crystal about to tear Gonaga apart. The last thing we need to worry about is catchin' up!"

Ken looked into Russell's eyes during his statement, astounded by what he saw,

*His eyes are just like Princess Serena's. Is this Serena her son?*

A silver, double-edged sword engraved with the names of Dash, Jas, Jake & Serena was Ken's weapon of choice.

The first Queen of Gonaga's booming laugh was a prelude to her words after seeing Ken unsheathe his sword, "While it's obvious you're stronger now than you were when you defeated my child, you still don't have enough power to stop me."



Rather than let Ken respond, Russell replied, “We’ll see about that!”

Russell planned to be the vanguard of this initial strike against the crystallized Onyda, but Ken ran past Russell before he could take his first step forward. Using her fingernails, the former ruler deflected Ken’s sword swings. It only took several seconds before Ken figured out Onyda’s pattern.

*Dodge left, swing right, Ken thought. She will dodge as I start swinging right. I must fake her out.*

Ken followed his strategy, feigning a right slash with his sword. Onyda leapt to her left to catch Ken’s incoming sword just like he predicted. Stopping in mid-swing, Ken spun 180-degrees with his sword still extended. Onyda was somehow prepared for Ken’s change in motion, kicking away the incoming weapon. Stunned by this turn of events left Ken open for a strong kick to his stomach. Ken used the strike to distance himself by rolling backwards after hitting the ground back first. When Ken’s head moved to look up, he found several fire spheres heading his way. Unfazed by this impending attack, Ken pressed forward; cutting through the six fireballs until the tip of his sword lay against Onyda’s neck.

Unlike his original plan that failed, Ken’s new strategy involved being grabbed. Onyda slapped down the sword touching her, clutching Ken’s neck immediately after. Ken’s tactic worked perfectly as Onyda’s concentration on Ken’s upper body made her vulnerable to anything Ken had planned with his legs. A simple, single kick to the original Queen of Gonaga’s left kneecap destabilized her footing. Ken’s chance to trip Onyda was taken by her attacker.

Falling atop Onyda with his sword at her throat again, Ken asked, “Any last words?”

Ken didn't expect a hole to open in Onyda's crystal face covering that allowed her to spew fire from her mouth. A flame geyser engulfed Ken, pitching him in the direction of his horse. Ken rolled to put himself out as his prized animal stamped in distress.

When the flames died out, Ken calmed his scared horse by saying, “It's okay, Buckshot, I'll be fine.”

Hearing his master's words made Buckshot step back. Ken, slightly burned and his clothes singed, rose to his feet with his sword guarding his midsection. Gonaga's first queen seeing her advantageous position enticed her to charge Ken. Waiting until Onyda was within a few inches of him, Ken seemingly disappeared before the old queen could hit her target. No one could find Ken, let alone recognize his energy.

From the corner of Dash's left eye revealed something directly above the increasingly frustrated Onyda. This spec in the sky was in actuality Ken. Dash understood if he kept looking up it would blow Ken's cover. Everyone was oblivious to Ken powering up to his maximum. Ken's energy level hitting its peak made him vanish again. Reappearing behind Onyda without concentrating to veil his energy allowed her to pinpoint Ken's whereabouts.

Onyda remarked at Ken's positioning, “You really think you could get the jump on me that easily?”

Haphazardly spinning around with a punch in mind caused Gonaga's forgotten royalty to hit Ken's energized sword. Though her strike failed, the misplaced punch didn't stun Onyda; giving her the chance to grab Ken's sword with her hands. The

struggle over Ken's weapon saw a physical manifestation of both fighters' energies crack the ground they stood upon. Without warning, Onyda snapped Ken's sword. A collective gasp moved through the watching Dash, Russell & Rini.

"You were weak in Jarad," Onyda condescendingly said to Ken, "and you're weak now."

Following her statement, Onyda head-butted her stunned enemy between his eyes. Ken fell head over heels upon impact. Ken's attempt to roll through his fall left his face open for Onyda's kick that unexpectedly connected and knocked Ken loopy. Hastily leaping into the sky after dropping her current adversary, Onyda readied another fireball. Rini laid down Jade's unconscious body in hopes of saving Ken before he could be hurt or worse by Onyda's upcoming action. Dash yelling at Rini to stop her intentions didn't halt her continuing toward Ken as Onyda tossed down a fireball some thirty feet in diameter.

"Ken!" Rini said while shaking the half-conscious hero. "Come on! You gotta get up before it's too late! Ken, don't make me do all the work here!"

Rini barely had Ken on his knees when the intense heat from Onyda's latest attack pushed Rini down alongside him. The horrifying screams echoing in the heart of this fireball brought tears to Dash's eyes. With a snapping of her fingers, Onyda made her fiery creation explode. Debris & chips of stone flew in all direction as Russell shielded Jade's body as Dash covered his face. After several tense moments after the roaring sound died down lay the immobile bodies of Ken and Rini instead another energy-made crater. On rubber legs, Dash ambled over to his injured brother and student. Seeing that Rini and Ken were still breathing slightly calmed Dash; allowing him to reassess his

current situation. Formulating a plan, Dash tried to get Russell's attention to tell him what Russell needed to do.

“Hey, Russ!” Dash said without worrying about Onyda overhearing him. “Russ, get over here so we can... Russell, are you okay? Russell, answer me!”

For some reason, a kneeling Russell rocked back and forth rather than respond to Dash. Unbeknownst to Dash were the images running through Russell's mind: his parents' deaths; his intense training; Jade's physical invasion; the attack on his sister.

Breaking Russell's concentration was a single, masculine voice entering his thoughts, telling him, “Let it go. Let it all go.”

As Russell rose to his feet, streams of green energy flowed from the mostly closed crevice where Onyda became one with the Gonagan Crystal.

The former queen peered at Russell moving with the energy oozing out of the planet, saying to herself, “Impossible. There's no way he could've regained his strength so quickly. Wait, why am I worried? I can finish him off just like I did the rest of his family with less power. This will be quick.”

Being so preoccupied with Ken and Rini, Dash never noticed Onyda descending directly behind him. Dash went to grab the sword holstered to his back upon recognizing Onyda's energy settling behind him, only for the original Queen of Gonaga to stop Dash's intended action by clutching his right wrist.

Kicking the back of Dash's left leg so he fell to his knees, Onyda started choking Dash from behind while hissing, “Your pupil sure is resilient. It will be fun to watch him squirm in front of you.”

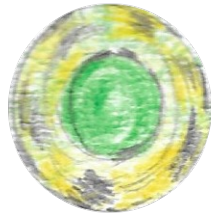
No matter how hard Dash tried he couldn't free himself from the chokehold. Onyda happily waited for Dash to pass out so she could throw him alongside Rini and Ken.

"Three down," Onyda gleefully proclaimed. "One more insect to go."

When Onyda turned in Russell's direction she discovered Russell struggling to move as the green energy enveloped him.

Onyda told her potential final adversary, "I'm quite impressed by you. Your determination to fight someone much stronger than you reminds me of your parents; and look how they ended up."

But Russell could barely hear a word Onyda said. Russell's mind had fallen into a sea of light.



In Majan, King Octavius did his best to comfort any distressed Gonagans. For some reason, Queen Athena experienced a nauseating feeling that caused her to lie down soon after leaving their ship.

Rising from her spot following a short nap, Athena heard a woman say to the Queen of Gonaga, "What are you going to do now?"

Queen Athena quickly peered around to find out who asked her the question. Seeing no one looking at her, let alone speaking to the queen, Athena turned her attention to her husband.

“Did someone just say something to me?” Athena asked Octavius.

Instead of hearing King Octavius, the same voice that entered her ears seconds earlier told Gonaga’s latest matriarch, “Please, don’t worry yourself when you return home.”

Once again, Athena looked up to find out who kept talking to her without the queen’s knowledge.

Queen Athena’s focus returning to King Octavius gave him the chance to say, “You’re just tired, my dear. You’ve.... I’ve put you through too much. Your mind is just trying to sooth you during this tumultuous time.”

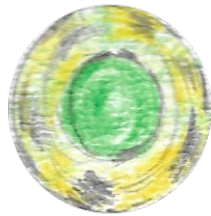
Vehemently, the Queen of Gonaga replied, “No! That sound came from someone. Actually it sounded like... Serena!”

“Your sister? Athena, please rest yourself. You’re--”

The same voice speaking to Athena suddenly told the king, “She must return to Gonaga. Her family needs her more than her people do. But we will protect her. She will save Onita when no one else can. Thank you for loving her, my brother.”

And with that, the voice died. The king gazed at the sea only several yards to his right, seeing something rising from the waters. Through the grains of sand, green beams sprouted from the ground, heading toward the current Queen of Gonaga. Before King Octavius could say anything about the green rays nearing his wife, a blinding light emitted from Athena’s body. It took almost a minute until the king could see again.

Opening his eyes revealed to Octavius that his wife had vanished. King Octavius scurried around the area, asking whomever he saw about Athena's whereabouts. Little did the fearful ruler know that his wife had returned home.



The same illumination that blinded King Octavius swept through Gonaga until it reached Onyda and Russell. Unlike the King of Gonaga, the light didn't affect Russell, but stupefied Onyda. When the unexplainable brightness finally died, Queen Athena found herself in Gonaga beside the unconscious bodies of Rini, Dash, and Ken. Athena couldn't believe her eyes upon seeing Ken lying in the hole with her niece and her only remaining childhood friend. The energy flowing toward Russell forced the ruler's eyes in his direction. Standing in front of the queen's steadfast nephew with her back to Athena was a woman covered in purple crystal.

"Who is that?" Queen Athena asked herself. "Did she hurt Rini and Dash?"

The same voice that ordered Russell to, "...let it go," spoke to Gonaga's queen, "They aren't why you're here. You need to save Onita."

"Save Onita?" Athena mumbled.

Without thinking, the queen's eyes moved from the situation before her to a lone woman several yards to Queen Athena's left. Athena was compelled to approach this person seemingly wounded during battle. Taking only a few steps the Gonagan leader to

figure out this woman's identity. Athena stumbled over her own feet trying to run toward her daughter.

As Athena fell to her knees at Princess Onita's cut and bloody body, the voice that initially spoke to Russell returned with the words, "She's lingerin' between life and death. Athena, you're the only person who can save her. Put your hands on her chest."

Wiping away the tears now streaming down her face, Queen Athena followed the command while the voice continued speaking, "Now concentrate on all of that energy you're usin' to cry in believin' Onita can only stay outta death's grip thanks to you."

Dash was starting to regain consciousness during Athena's concentration process. Focusing as hard as she could, the Queen of Gonaga believed with all of her might that doing something as simple as placing her hands on Onita's hurt body would save her only child. Suddenly, a great energy exited Athena's body. Dash watched in awe of his queen's very life energy leaving her to enter the near-deceased princess. The glowing green energy that expelled from the planet resembled the physical manifestation of Athena's energy while she transferred it into her daughter.

After several moments of intense focusing, Queen Athena heard the words, "You've done a great job, Sis."

Athena nearly passed out once she removed her hands from Onita's steadily breathing body. To the present Queen of Gonaga's astonishment was the fact Princess Onita's mortal wounds began healing themselves.

Athena, staring at her quaking hands, asked herself, "How did I do that?"

From the distance, Queen Athena heard Dash say, "You gave of yourself like none of us could."



Onyda glared at the energy enveloping Russell as she asked him, “So this is it? All you can do is produce some green fog around yourself?”

Russell not responding made Onyda shout, “That energy won’t help you now!” before charging her target.

Shockingly, Onyda’s crystalline body bounced off the energy that shielded Russell’s body.

“What the...?” was all Onyda could say as she continued punching the energy blocking her attacks.

Frustration set in due to Onyda’s repeated failures, causing her to change game plans. Onyda flew into the air, tossing down a large sphere of purple energy. Rather than avoid Onyda’s energy, Russell stood his ground so this ball of destruction landed on top of him. Seeing concrete crack and the land shake because of her energy brought laughter from Onyda.

Onyda excitedly screeched following her joyous moment, “The pain must be excruciating! Oh how I love to kill these mutants!”

Though Dash face was etched with worry, Queen Athena didn’t understand why Dash feared for Russell’s safety after discovering she had the ability to revive those at death’s door.

Dash hastily informed the obviously weakened queen, “What you performed on Onita wasn’t somethin’ you can haphazardly do. The amount of your life’s energy you gave up to save Onita will take weeks, months, maybe even years to replenish. Some won’t come back at all. If Russell doesn’t take care of himself on his own, there’s no one that can help him.”

...to be continued

## Recourse

Quaking, cracking and burning the ground was a large energy fireball thrown by the original Queen of Gonaga, Onyda, atop a motionless Russell – who became enveloped in a green energy that flowed from the planet moments before Onyda’s attack. With the help of that same mysterious, viridescent essence, Queen Athena magically reappeared at the battle site. Using her life’s energy, the ruler saved her daughter, Princess Onita, from the brink of death. Unfortunately for Gonaga’s current queen, her want to help Russell, Rini, Ken and Jade in restoring themselves & their used energy was for naught as saving Princess Onita weakened her tremendously.

Onyda, floating high above Gonaga, watched with glee as her inferno of energy enveloped Russell. By Queen Athena stood Dash with a worried look on his face. In his heart, Dash believed if one person had the strength to stop the individuals possessed by Oni’s spirit – be it Princess Onita, Jade, or Queen Onyda – it was Russell.

*But what hope do we have now?* Dash thought.

After several seconds of what seemed like an eternity to the ruling Queen of Gonaga and her friend, Onyda descended until she stood before her enormous, roaring creation. Onyda thrust her right arm inside the fiery contraption, apparently grasping for something. A momentary gasp exited Dash’s body when Onyda’s crystalline arms reached inside. To everyone’s shock, Onyda pulled Russell out of the fireball with her right hand clutching his neck. The once ferocious fireball dissipated into a smoldering ember after Russell’s removal from its inside.

Grinning at the singed body of Russell, Onyda said, “You see, even with that fog you’re no match for me. Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

Russell slowly lifted his head so he and Onyda were eye to eye. Though Onyda's face was covered in thick crystal, a great trepidation shown in her eyes. The source of Onyda's fear emanated from the sight in Russell's once hazel irises. Reflecting off Onyda's crystallized face, Russell's optics resembled the darkest night being ripped apart by lightning strikes.

Onyda released Russell from her chokehold; muttering, "I've seen those eyes before. But only those of pure blood can.... That must mean his father--"

"That's right, Onyda!" Dash yelled. "Russell is the pure mix of blessed power and royalty! He has found the long-fabled 'golden sea of pure energy', you witch!"

Following Dash's proclamation, Russell started screaming. From Russell's body rolled sonic waves of energy that knocked the original Queen of Gonaga back several yards. Onyda stopped herself in midair after moving outside of Russell's energy radius. The sudden trembling of Gonaga due to Russell's energy convinced Queen Athena and Dash that it was time to find safe haven. Thankfully, Dash had enough strength to sling Ken across his shoulders before hooking Rini and Jade underneath his arms. Inside a building that somehow withstood the shaking, Gonaga's matriarch and her only conscious ally watched Russell's body pulsate alongside sweeping winds. The green energy wrapped around Russell's frame until his hair temporarily turned the same color. When the leafy-colored essence returned to the planet, the schism that split Gonaga's port & the road leading toward the Marketplace completely closed as the air calmed. Everything became eerily still; just like Russell.

Like she did before using her fireball attack, Onyda approached the motionless Russell to tell him, "So, young man, you're a pure blood? Do you realize that I'm a pure

blood, too? I am the original Queen of Gonaga. Actually, I'm more than just a pure Gonagan. Do you know what that means? Do you know the real history behind this world? Do you know why we are here? We are not pure. We are not just. Gonaga and the people that created it, including myself, are cursed with death. That's why I will kill you. We were cursed and destined to die, yet live. That's why the world needs to be cleansed. Cleansed of the traitors who would forget their own. Cleansed of it all!"

Onyda lunged at Russell to punch him in the face. Vanishing, Russell avoided the strike.

Astonished, Dash pondered, *How can Russ move that fast? Did that green energy make him that powerful? I can't sense his energy though. Did he run?*

Queen Athena and Dash observed Onyda scanning the area for her adversary.

Onyda's search turning up nothing caused her to verbalize a decision, "I guess the boy realized he wasn't strong enough to defeat me. Very well. If that's the case, then I'll destroy that imposter queen."

Onyda flew toward Athena, only for Dash to guard his queen. With great ease, the former Queen Onyda avoided Dash's sword swings; kicking him in the stomach following his failed barrage. Onyda used her crystallized right boot to slam Dash face first against the concrete by stomping his bent body.

Turning ever-so-slightly, Onyda refocused on Athena, "So you're the Queen of Gonaga?"

Onyda stepped over the fallen Dash to say more in Queen Athena's direction, "The continuation of a bloodline containing nothing but traitors and thieves. You are scum just like my husband was. And now I obliterate the reason for my return!"

Charging forward until she was directly in front of Athena, Onyda hoisted the Queen of Gonaga by her throat; opening her left fist in front of her capture's face. Dash tried to stop Gonaga's first queen, but Onyda easily kicked him several yards away.

"Please don't," Queen Athena begged through tear-filled eyes upon feeling Onyda's energy moving her way.

As Onyda's energy left her hand, Athena shockingly disappeared. Unlike Russell, Athena's vanishing wasn't of her own will. Queen Athena was yanked from Onyda's clutches. Above Onyda floated Russell – his hair emerald in color yet again – holding his aunt underneath his right arm.

For the first time since Ken attacked Onyda, Russell spoke, "This is my battle, not Athena's or anyone else's for that matter. And that's the first and only time I'll warn you of that."

"And what if I don't adhere to your little warning?" Onyda asked.

Sincerity ran through Russell's answer, "I'll kill us both."

Queen Athena and Dash's eyes bucked upon hearing Russell's cold response.

After Onyda tried to call Russell's bluff, Russell said, "Why wouldn't I do it? For me to sacrifice myself to ensure you can't hurt someone else is somethin' I would gladly do in a second; especially if you can't come back with the Gonagan Crystal destroyed. Onyda, this is your last chance. Fight me and me alone or die now."

Onyda understood Russell meant business, slightly nodding as a sign that she agreed to a one-on-one battle. In less than a second, Russell flew from his spot in the sky, dropping Athena beside Dash prior to flying in his adversary's direction. Before the fight could commence, Russell requested that his friends and family be able to leave the area.

The original Gonagan queen was hesitant, but expressed no harm in letting them go, “They won’t factor in this. You’re more of a nuisance than they could ever be. But know this – when you die, so will they.”

Russell actually thanked Onyda for the acceptance of his request.

Turning around to look at his approaching teacher was Russell with an order, “Take them to Jarad. There’s nothin’ there now and it’ll give you guys time to recover if somethin’ happens here.”

Queen Athena vehemently disagreed with Russell’s command, “I’m staying. I can save him if I need to like I did for my daughter.”

No matter how much Dash – who was in the process of picking up Rini, Jade, Ken, and Princess Onita’s bodies – agreed with Russell, Athena stood her ground. Russell moved from his position in front of Onyda to confront Queen Athena.

“Aunt Athena, thank you,” Russell told his quivering queen. “I thank you for bein’ the person you are: a true beacon of hope for Gonaga when this is all over. Your job isn’t done just yet and I won’t allow you to quit that duty because of me. I won’t allow you to be like them.”

““Them?”” Athena asked.

“Mother and Father, you can’t be like they were. They walked into a losin’ battle. You stay here and you will help Onyda complete her goal because I’ll be too busy concentratin’ on protectin’ Gonaga’s lifeline; makin’ my fight against Onyda a failure. Please, follow my order. Live. That’s what my mother wanted.”

A smile appeared on Athena's face as she said to Russell, "You truly are whom my great-grandfather wrote about: the pure of heart & blood will stand up to fight any incarnation of evil."

Overhearing Queen Athena's latest statement, Onyda replied with a question, "So he's a savior now?"

Russell didn't give Athena an opportunity to answer by stating, "I'm not a fairy tale. I'm the one who will destroy you."

"Big words," Onyda remarked. "But that's all they are. Your eyes & hair having the ability to change doesn't mean a thing in battle. I'll prove to you that you are as much of a weakling as your parents were. Now tell those insects to leave before I change my mind and kill you all."

Dash hastily told Russell, "I guess that's our cue. I know this won't be the last time we talk, but just know that you've grown into a fine young man. Your parents would be proud of who you've become. I'll protect Rini, don't you worry about that. You take care of that witch."

As Dash turned to leave, Rini regained consciousness. Rini's heavy eyelids opened to find her green-haired brother waiting for Dash to carry everyone to Jarad. Rini slid off of Dash's shoulders, trying to gain her balance.

"What's going on here, Russell?" Rini asked. "And what happened to your hair?"

Russell giggled prior to responding, "Guess the planet didn't like my old hair. Sis, Dash is carryin' everyone to Jarad while I take on the purple rock behind me. Now you can help him."

Rini fell into her brother's chest after her legs gave out on her for a second.



Fully regaining her balance, Rini told Russell, “Help him? I should help you. I’ll be with you until we win.”

Astonishment was in Russell’s voice as he asked, “What is with you women wantin’ to stay here?”

Seeing his sister’s mouth open for a response, Russell spoke up again, “I need you to follow Dash to Jarad. If somethin’ happens to me--”

Rini abruptly blurted out, “Don’t say that!”

With her fists clinched and face pointed to the ground, Rini couldn’t bare the thought of losing another family member.

Russell understood how Rini felt, but had no time to console his sister outside of declaring, “I won’t die on you.”

Grabbing Rini’s right hand, Dash insisted they go now. Rini wiped the tears lightly streaming from her eyes, embracing Athena to begin their journey behind Dash toward Jarad.

Onyda waited for Russell’s family and friends to move out of sight before saying, “The insects are gone. Shall we begin?”

Calm in tone was Russell during his answer, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Russell sidestepping her long, razor-sharp fingernails halted Onyda’s initial rush. When she figured out that Russell couldn’t be hit this way, Onyda switched her strategy by moving so hastily it appeared she’d vanished.

Onyda’s voice echoed, “You can’t hit what you can’t see.”

A solid punch to Russell’s jaw followed Onyda’s statement. The strike rocked Russell, but he quickly composed himself. Before Russell could do anything to counter

Onyda's next attack, another punch collided with his ribs. Russell understood the need to catch his breath quickly or take a third strike without retribution. Closing his eyes and concentrating, Russell felt the air break to his left. The quick action of ducking saw Russell avoid a nearly invisible incoming punch. Russell latched onto Onyda's appendage before she could retract her arm, back kicking his opponent's crystalline abdomen.

The kick bent Onyda in line with Russell's impending uppercut that dropped Onyda onto her back after his punch connected. Russell didn't give his opposition a chance to get up, mounting her so he could pepper her hard face with fists that would hopefully crack the shield of purple crystal. With her wits still about her, Onyda threw her left leg upward, hooking Russell's elevated right arm to yank him backwards; freeing herself in the process.

Both fighters returned to a standing position, making Onyda remark, "I guess you're more skilled than I expected."

Like Onyda moments earlier, Russell took the opportunity to seemingly dematerialize.

Onyda quickly commented, "I see you're also unoriginal," while peering around for Russell.

Behind Onyda came a response from Russell only seconds after his adversary's statement, "I don't think so."

Onyda carelessly turned around, only to be knocked backwards by a simple palm strike aimed at her chest.

“How could he be so quick?” Onyda said to herself without thinking about Russell overhearing her.

Upon seeing her words were heard by Russell when he reappeared only to disappear no less than a second later, Onyda changed her tune by saying, “Nice work. I must admit that you’re more impressive than your pathetic parents.”

“And how would know?” Russell retorted, fully showing himself again. “You never fought them. You’re just gettin’ a secondhand report from your daughter – who, by the way, was whooped by my parents while you were still a frozen cadaver. Why don’t you save your energy and quit now? No matter what you do there’s no way that I can lose to you.”

“Says the fool to the executioner!” Onyda shouted before jumping into the air; preparing for another attack.

From the tip of her right index finger formed a dark energy sphere that covered at least a fifty-foot radius. Hurling the energy toward Gonaga and Russell actually caused the ball to expand. Once again, Russell stood steadfast in the face of imminent danger. As the energy approached its destination glass shattered, buildings crumbled, the ground cracked and shifted. Through all of the noise, Russell could hear the Onyda’s maniacal cackling. Unbeknownst to Onyda from her perch was Russell lifting his hands above his head when her attack was in touching distance. Noticing her sphere stopped moving before it hit the surface, the laughter exiting Onyda ceased. The original Gonagan queen flew down to find out what was going on. To Onyda’s shock stood Russell; holding her energy sphere over his head.

Russell calmly exclaimed as he locked eyes with Onyda, “I really hope you’re holdin’ back some energy for later! ‘Cause if that’s the best you got, we may as well end it now!”

Doing a squat & press, Russell pushed the sphere upward so he could use a single energy beam to destroy Onyda’s intended weapon. The sky lighting up perfectly highlighted the anger seen behind Onyda’s translucent, purple-tinted mask.

Onyda abruptly said, “I will not allow you to defeat me, you worthless peon! No child shall defeat me.”

Russell slightly laughed prior to responding, “So we’re back to name calling now, huh? Okay, this comes from a woman who was almost killed by her little daughter. Then that kid grew up to be beaten by a woman who didn’t even believe she could win, let alone understand the depths of her power. Yeah, I love my mother, but was she really that powerful; especially compared to me?”

Furious was Onyda during her retort, “How dare you? A weakling could not defeat my daughter! Your mother was the most powerful person on the planet until her death and my existence alongside my daughter.”

“You’re about half right. While an argument can be made that my mother was the most powerful person livin’ at the time, you takin’ that position is a joke. Sorry to tell you this, but you’re lookin’ at the strongest person livin’. And I know what I can do against a weaklin’ like you.”

Onyda bellowed, thrusting her left hand and nails at Russell. With ease, Russell sidestepped Onyda’s arm; grabbing his attacker’s wrist. Onyda couldn’t free herself in time to stop Russell from breaking four of Onyda’s five fingernails with his right hand.

The attack didn't necessarily hurt Onyda, but visibly worried her about what Russell was about to do next as he hadn't released her arm.

It was almost like Russell read Onyda's mind when he said, "I'll chop you down limb by limb."

Hooking Onyda's left arm, Russell tripped her and kneeled atop Onyda immediately after the fall. Russell's powerful yanking on her limb removed the original Queen of Gonaga's left arm from her body. On her back lay a writhing Onyda as Russell tossed her arm into the sky to destroy it with one energy beam. When Russell's focus returned to his target, Onyda started laughing. From Onyda's left shoulder suddenly sprouted an arm made of pure crystal to replace her original.

Rather than be upset, Russell enthusiastically said, "I guess you've got a few more tricks."

"That's right," Onyda gloated as she sat up. "You may be more powerful, but I'm more durable. When my daughter fought your parents she had to change forms to gain enough energy to regenerate her body. But with the full power of the Gonagan Crystal and my daughter's knowledge flowing through me, you can do whatever you want and it won't stop me."

"That's an interesting belief, but can your regenerate your head?"

Immediately after his question, Russell shot an energy beam that obliterated Onyda's head. As the former ruler's body collapsed backwards, the particles of purple dust that was once her cranium shimmered in the sky. Russell turned his back to Onyda's lifeless, decapitated body; walking away from this potentially successful battle. Three

steps forward were all Russell could make before he felt another person's life energy rising.

"I thought you said you wanted to fight, boy?" Onyda's voice cried out.

Russell quickly spun around to discover Onyda standing before him with her entire body in tact.

Russell couldn't help but laugh until he said, "I guess you can regenerate everything. This should be interestin'."

Jumping into the air, Russell signaled for Onyda to follow. Onyda obliged while Russell flew higher. When Onyda almost grabbed Russell, her target disappeared. Instead of playing tricks and waiting, Russell reappeared behind his aggressor almost instantly after his vanishing.

Onyda said, "You need to learn some new tricks," before throwing her right arm backwards.

Once again, Russell avoided Onyda's strike, gripping her wrist. Russell trying to take advantage of the situation ended with him being punched on the jaw. The attack caused Russell to descend with Onyda in hot pursuit. Onyda's next attack saw her stomp the airborne Russell's abdomen with both of her spiked feet so she could drive him against the ground.

"Let's see him avoid these," Onyda commented; back flipping from Russell's body to shoot off several energy beams.

Russell looked up to witness multiple rays coming at him. Unfortunately, Russell had no time to move as Onyda's energy collided against Russell and the concrete; sending slabs of rock skyward. The dust settling was Onyda's signal to check out the

outcome of her work. Like Onyda apparently predicted, Russell lay in the crater her energy caused; bleeding from the mouth and cut all over.

“Get up,” Onyda demanded. “That was nothing. If that’s the best you can take, then--”

Before Onyda could finish her statement, Russell’s eyes opened. Though she ordered Russell to rise only seconds ago, Onyda stepped away; startled that Russell moved so quickly.

Without so much as a limp, Russell returned to his feet with a question in his mouth, “So, shall we continue?”

Taking a page out of Russell’s book, Onyda flew into the air so Russell would trail her. Onyda didn’t fly at a consistent pace; picking up speed the further she went.

Russell thought to himself during his flight, *So, make me lose you, then come at me from behind. Smart, but elementary at this stage of the game.*

Stopping, Russell hovered in midair awaiting Onyda’s impending attack.

“This is weird,” Russell eventually said to himself after an unusually long amount of time passed for Onyda not to recognize Russell wasn’t chasing her any longer. “I can’t believe she still hasn’t attacked me. The angle of her body was almost like she.... No! That witch is headin’ to Jarad!”

By the time Russell made it halfway between Gonaga and Jarad, the first Queen of Gonaga landed on the rock she once called home. It didn’t take long for Onyda to find her targets. While Dash first recognized Onyda’s approaching energy, it was Queen Athena who initially spotted their enemy. Gonaga’s current queen alerted a now awake

Ken about their situation, but himself, Jade and Rini – who lost consciousness shortly after arriving due to exhaustion – were still too hurt to fight something like Onyda.

Struggling to his feet, Ken told his brother, “Dash, please get Rini and Jade away from here.”

“There is no way you can fight her in your condition,” Dash responded while watching Ken labor to keep his balance. “There is only one way we can fight her: together.”

From a hovering Onyda came the statement, “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that,” prior to her shooting a fire-encased energy beam in Ken’s direction.

Without hesitation, Dash dove; shoving Ken out of the way. The fiery beam ripped through Dash’s right forearm. The pain Dash experienced was excruciating as he clutched the burning, inch-round hole in his arm. Beside an injured Dash sat a stunned Ken. Mentally shaking himself out of the stupor paralyzing him, Ken went to move. Sadly for Ken, Onyda drove her spiked left foot through Ken’s right hand. Onyda smacked Ken so she could pin his left hand to the ground by stomping the appendage as well.

Standing above Ken, Onyda told her crucified foe, “My daughter says that she created you from (Dash). What a failed experiment you are. Why don’t I just save you the humiliation of being made from trash by destroying you?”

A female abruptly shouted as Onyda squatted atop Ken with her right palm positioned at his face, “Leave him alone!”



Ken's intended murder's attention turned to the source of this command. Standing with Rini's sword was none other than Princess Onita. Athena gazed at her daughter's once wrecked body now fully healed thanks to Queen Athena's actions on Gonaga.

Princess Onita continued speaking when Onyda removed her spikes from Ken's grunting body, "I am the vessel your daughter used to return. I have retained the knowledge of what my power can do. And I will use it to destroy you!"

Instead of being fearful of this new opponent, Onyda began laughing.

"You?" Onyda said at the end of her amused moment. "You believe you can defeat me? You couldn't even stop that rodent with the sickles. There's a reason why my daughter's spirit left you: it's because you're weak. Just like your dead aunt, uncles, soon to be parents--"

Princess Onita rushing Onyda interrupted the first Queen of Gonaga's spiel. Using her left hand to easily deflect the wild sword swing from Princess Onita, Onyda unleashed a vicious headbutt to the princess' forehead; sending the Princess of Gonaga sailing backwards. Queen Athena ran to her daughter's side after she hit the damp ground to find Onita unconscious again.

Feverishly shaking, Athena told her child, "Why would you do something so stupid? Please don't leave me, too."

Onyda's incredible speed allowed her to grab the unaware Queen of Gonaga before Dash or Ken could stop her.

Clutching Athena by her throat again, Onyda gleefully said, "Goodbye, you worthless excuse for a great-grandchild."

The sound of something soaring caught Onyda's ear. That object Onyda heard turned out to be a brown energy beam eventually hitting Onyda's back and forcing her to drop Athena. Looking down at her transparent body revealed to Onyda that the beam opened a hole in her lower back.

The person responsible for the attack spoke with a voice familiar to everyone, "I told you in Gonaga this is between you and me, Onyda."

As the wound healed on her back, Onyda turned to discover Russell standing in front of Rini and Jade's sleeping bodies.

"Gonaga is the battle ground," Russell said. "The place you want to destroy, not here."

Onyda vocalized her reason for returning to Jarad, "This is the place I feel connected to the only thing I created that I'm proud of. And she knew... knows that this planet needs cleansing for it to gain absolution. That's what my idiot husband thought he would gain in creating Gonaga. Yet, the creation of that land you fight for wasn't made because of salvation, but greed; the lust for power. I attain power only to use it to wipe away that gormandizing desire. You attain power for security. Just like your ancestors, you are petty in mind."

Russell cracked his knuckles while walking toward Onyda.

"You know what, Onyda?" Russell said when he and his adversary were face to face. "I've never been one for big speeches, soliloquies and such, but I have to correct you. I don't fight for Gonaga or security. I'm fightin' for the people who made me who I am. The same people who had and have nothin' to do with your banishment. You want to cleanse the world of greed and evil? Well that's funny because I want to do the same

thing... startin' with you. Onyda, great-great-grandmother, the time for talkin' and  
runnin' is done. Lets find out who decides the fate of the world right here, right now!"

...to be continued

## Resolution

Russell braced himself for battle as a cold wind cut through Jarad's humid air. Across from Russell stood Onyda concentrating to repair the hole he put in her back with an energy beam that saved his aunt and Queen of Gonaga, Athena. Prior to Russell's attack, Princess Onita awoke; only to be knocked out by a powerful headbutt from her ancestor. Athena kneeled over her daughter, pleading with her to wake up.

Suddenly, a woman saying, "Tell him to attack the core," ran through Athena's ears.

When Athena looked around to see no one physically talking to her, the queen realized this order originated in her mind.

Hearing the voice repeat itself made Queen Athena ask, "The core? You mean the fiery thing in her chest?"

Athena hastily followed the bodiless command and told Russell, "Go for the core!"

Unlike his aunt, Russell knew exactly what the phrase meant. Onyda took exception to Athena's words of wisdom, deciding it was time to rid the world of Gonaga's current matriarch. Before anyone could stop her, Onyda effortlessly glided over Jarad's barren land to backhand her successor in the mouth. The strike whipped Queen Athena into the air toward a pair of jagged rocks jutting out of the ground almost ten feet behind her. Russell tried to jump behind his aunt, but Onyda stopped him in his tracks with a right hand against his face, too. As Russell caught himself from falling, he yelled for Ken or Dash to save their friend.

“I got this!” someone said as they hooked Athena by her waist from behind to save the queen only milliseconds before a certain death.

Landing beside Athena was her savior, Rini. During Russell’s speech to Onyda about their fight deciding the planet’s fate, Rini regained consciousness. Queen Athena’s impending danger forced Rini to act even though it took a lot out of her still injured body to exert such a great amount of energy by moving so quickly. Onyda wasn’t upset over the queen’s survival, concentrating on her original target after sweeping an unfocused Russell onto his back. Russell rolled from left to right to avoid Onyda’s stomping, crystallized spike feet.

While Russell did his best to get up without being stabbed by his attacker’s piercing extremities, Ken wrapped Dash’s injured right forearm after a fiery energy beam from Onyda ripped through Dash’s limb moments before Russell’s return to Jarad.

“I don’t think I can stop the bleeding,” Ken unfortunately said upon using his left pant leg to cover Dash’s wounded area.

Dash physically and verbally shrugged off Ken’s statement, “Don’t worry about it. Instead of wastin’ your time helpin’ me with this little thing, help Russell.”

Ken heeded Dash’s words, struggling to his feet and shouting, “Hey, Onyda! If you want someone, come get me!”

Onyda ignoring Ken’s comment caused Ken to react by shooting a light gray energy ray at her back.

The energy buckling Onyda’s legs when it made impact forced Onyda to inform Ken, “Just for that, I will kill you first.”

Onyda flew horizontally toward Ken at lightning-fast speed. Ken tried shooting energy projectiles at her, but Onyda easily swatted each beam away. Like a torpedo, Onyda rammed Ken headfirst. Onyda's crystalline head collided with Ken's sternum; contorting her mark's body inward while creating a sickening, cracking sound. The forceful blow dropped Ken, bringing forth blood from his mouth.

Copying Onyda, Russell entered the sky with his head pointed in the direction of his target. Sadly for Russell, his attempt at ramming Onyda like she did to Ken proved futile due to her crystalline body. Russell hit the ground following his poorly planned attack; his head streaming blood. When Russell looked up after rubbing his throbbing skull, Onyda kicked her adversary on his chin. The kick lifted Russell off of his butt, knocking him in position for Onyda's elbows to pound the top of Russell's bloody cranium.

Gonaga's original queen mounted Russell, punching at his face.

Russell did a great job blocking Onyda's strikes while bucking like a wild horse. Losing her balance saw Onyda give up her position and return to a vertical stance near the area Rini saved Athena. Russell rolled until he was standing as well, unsheathing his sword. Ducking Russell's wild sword swing only left Onyda open for a spin kick against her abdomen. Russell holstered his sword to unleash a barrage of punches and kicks he hoped would drive Onyda through the same jagged rocks she slapped Queen Athena toward moments earlier. Sensing what Russell was up to, Onyda vanished.

A furious Russell shouted, "Come on! This is gettin' really old!"

Russell quickly realized that Onyda reappeared behind him. Instinctively, Russell swung his right arm backwards. Onyda caught Russell's moving appendage before he

could connect. Thinking he could spin toward Onyda's grip to punch her with his left hand proved ineffective for Russell when she ducked. Onyda slipped behind Russell, pushing him face first against the ground.

Russell grumbled, "Okay, so you don't wanna play nice," prior to bending his free left arm backwards to shoot an energy blast.

Onyda quickly clasped Russell's left arm with her left underarm. Holding both of Russell's extended arms behind him, Onyda stepped onto Russell's back so they looked like an upside-down "T". For the first time since their fight began, Russell's anguish was visible as Onyda yanked his arms. When Onyda let go of Russell's limbs, her opponent's arms fell beside him with a lifeless response.

Understanding that Onyda had pulled his arms out of his shoulder sockets, Russell shouted out, "Ken, can you do anything?"

Ken unfortunately lacked the energy necessary to take on Onyda.

Turning his attention to a seated Dash, Russell asked, "What about you, Old Man?"

Dash's sudden inability to reply was due to Onyda punching him in the stomach following a quick flight from one target to another. As Dash slowly dropped, Onyda threw her left knee upward so it collided against Dash's right arm. Though in great pain, Dash started his crawl toward Russell's horizontal body. Onyda watched Dash, not preventing his mission to help Russell.

After Dash crawled atop his student, Russell had to know, "What are you doin', Old Man?"

Dash whispered into Russell's right ear, "I'll protect you from anything she dishes out."

"Don't be crazy! I can take her with no arms!"

"No you can't. Just stay still and I can get you back to normal."

Onyda approached the bickering duo, placing her right foot over them. Before Russell could warn Dash about what was hovering above them, Onyda slammed her spiked foot against Dash's exposed back. Dash refused to lose his position no matter how hard Onyda stomped him.

Gleefully Onyda said to Dash, "I'll crush you like the insect you are if you don't move."

Following her words came a pounding from Onyda's left leg that pierced Dash's back. Blood oozed from Dash's mouth.

Spitting out the hot liquid, Dash informed Russell, "This will only hurt for a minute," while clutching Russell's right arm.

A loud pop echoed after Dash reset Russell's arm. Onyda was still stomping Dash as he pushed Russell's right arm back into its socket.

"That's good work, Old Man," Russell said after the feeling the numbness in his right arm fade away. "Now you can get off me!"

Dash refused to move, wanting to fix Russell's left arm, too.

The knowledge of Dash's current situation made Russell say, "There's no time. If you lie on me much longer she'll kill you."

Unbeknownst to Russell, Dash had already processed the possibility Russell posed, but wasn't going to stop helping his pupil.



Onyda suddenly stepped back to watch Dash and Russell's argument prior to commenting, "Isn't this touching? My daughter's former pet taking care of his own pet. Which one to destroy first? Catch a tiger by the toe... I... choose... you."

Onyda's right index finger ended up pointing at Russell's forehead.

From the distance, a woman cried out, "Russell! Punch her in the leg!"

Onyda looked behind her to find Jade had finally regained consciousness.

Nonchalantly, Onyda shot a fireball at Jade after the distraction. Russell, using his only working arm, pushed Dash away. The timing of Russell's jump allowed him to intercept the fireball by shielding Jade with his own body. Russell's descending, fire-engulfed frame suddenly reflected in Jade's eyes. Upon hitting the ground Russell immediately started rolling until the fire died. The fear etched on Jade's face disappeared when seeing Russell's clothes suffered the most from Onyda's attack.

Russell rose from his horizontal position to tell his nearly crying friend, "Don't worry, pipsqueak. I'll protect you."

Russell refocused on Onyda, motioning that he was ready for another round. An airborne chase commenced with Onyda pursuing Russell. Every time Russell and Onyda clashed in the air, a bolt of their colliding energies struck Jarad. Several minutes of the opponents landing strike after strike ended with a huge spark ripping throughout the dark sky. Following the illumination, Onyda and Russell's bodies fell and hit Jarad like meteorites.

With a crooked smile accenting his face, Russell rose first on weakened legs.

Not far from the landing site sat Ken, remarking, "Lets see you get up from that."

To Russell's left lay Onyda, motionless.

Russell decided to ask the seemingly lifeless being, “You okay? Can you still fight? Or are you gonna rest for the whole day?”

Onyda mumbled, “I’ll kill you,” before springing into the air.

Russell went after her, but Onyda was too far ahead to catch.

With the air getting thinner by trailing Onyda made Russell think, *I can’t go any higher. If I do, I’ll suffocate. Why is she goin’ so high?*

Onyda continued flying until she was out of sight.

“I guess she quit,” Dash spoke up; now seated beside his little brother. “Maybe she knew Russell was too powerful.”

Ken had to know, “Dash, when did you become so optimistic?”

“When you disappeared.”

Ken, who lied down in his attempt to breathe to the best of his abilities, turned his head so he could look at Dash and say, “I’m sorry about that. Hopefully we’ll get that chance to talk after this is over.”

Approaching Dash and Ken was Jade to check on them.

“Thank you, miss,” Ken said when Jade squatted beside them. “I must say your eyes look so familiar.”

Dash answered Ken before Jade could respond, “They should. Jas had them, too.”

With Jade’s assistance, Ken sat up to verbally acknowledge Jade’s unique softness compared to Jas, “But your actions say otherwise. You yelling like that was totally Jas.”

Ken’s words struck a chord with Jade, making her blush. While Jade took a seat to Dash’s left, Russell floated to the ground beside the three.

Clutching at his left arm, Russell woefully said, “That was kinda anticlimactic. I thought she was really gonna do somethin’.”

Though Dash was happy about what happened, he reminded Russell, “You did a good job, but our work isn’t done. Onyda’s still out there, so we have to be prepared for anything.”

“Whatever, Old Man. Let’s just get you and Ken stitched up.”

“And your arm. It’s just danglin’ there. Let me--”

Russell screamed, “No!” when Dash reached for his hanging limb.

Everyone looked at Russell following his loud rebuttal.

Replaying his answer to himself, Russell hastily said, “I mean... I’m just tryin’ to let it work itself out.”

When Russell turned his back to everyone, Jade jumped up to hug him from behind.

Jade told Russell during this embrace, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Russell appreciated Jade’s affection, but hated the fact she was squeezing his left arm like a vice. Assuming it wouldn’t hurt Jade’s feelings anymore than telling her to stop, Russell started shaking as his signal for Jade to release him.

“I’m not letting go until I feel like it,” Jade whispered to her capture when she realized what he was doing.

Several feet left of the four were Queen Athena and her niece Rini doing their best to revive Princess Onita. Followed by Rini, Queen Athena noticed something glimmering in the opaque sky.

Rini smiled at her aunt upon saying, “A lone star?”

“Too close,” Athena lackadaisically replied.

Thunder started roaring around Jarad. Thanks to the winds picking up, a sudden drop in temperature had Jade clutching Russell even tighter for warmth. Russell insisted Jade let him go he could ready himself for whatever was occurring. Something suddenly crashed into Jarad with enough force to knock everyone standing off their feet. Rini was the first to set sights on what hit Jarad – a purple, ten-foot-tall, crystal spike penetrating the ground no more than five feet away from her.

Jade wanted to see the large object up close, only for Russell to pull her around by her shoulders with another command, “Listen, get everyone away from here as quickly as possible.”

“What?” Jade responded. “What about you? I can’t leave you here fighting falling crystals.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just help everyone else.”

Rini abruptly yelled, “Incoming!” as another crystal spike came down, piercing \* shaking the land.

The second potential skewer plummeting made Russell reiterate his order for Jade. This time, Jade gave no response but a kiss on Russell’s left cheek. Dash noticed Russell shaking his head as Jade approached Athena to tell the queen what they needed to do. Clutching Queen Athena and Princess Onita respectively, Rini and Jade took flight in Gonaga’s direction. Still on Jarad stood Russell, Dash and, with Dash’s assistance, Ken.

The look of slight despair in Russell’s eyes caused Dash to ask, “Can you take care of this by yourself?”

Though he still seemed worried, Russell reminded his teacher without hesitation, “I have so far.”

Ken piggybacked on Dash so they could follow the four ladies already gone. Once he reached his desired height in the air, Dash looked down at his steadfast pupil. Russell felt Dash watching him.

Instead of shouting what he wanted to tell Dash, Russell said to himself, “Take care of Jade just in case I can’t.”

Standing all alone, Russell continued watching crystal spikes descend from the heavens.

“Onyda!” Russell shouted while looking up. “I’m not here for a show! I’m here for a fight!”

A bright light flashed through the sky before another crystal fell. It didn’t take long after the quick glow that Russell realized the crystal was heading his way. Reacting hastily, Russell obliterated the incoming force with an energy beam. Russell had to do this four more times when other crystals followed the original one Russell destroyed seconds earlier. Unfortunately for Russell, he wasn’t prepared for three more crystal spikes to appear. Each ray Russell shot missed the falling objects. Realizing he couldn’t hit the spikes, Russell decided it was time to run.

Russell’s attempt at avoiding these large crystals ended when the first spike landed in front of Russell, knocking him backwards. Before Russell could lose his balance, another crystal pierced the ground behind him. These purple pillars held Russell in place for the third spike.

Russell waited until the cause of his impending demise almost touched his skull, rolling out of the way. Unknown to Russell was the fact another piece of crystal – barely half a foot long and an inch in diameter – was right above him. The small spike pierced Russell’s right hand as he pushed off the ground. Due to Russell’s dislocated left arm, Russell couldn’t grip the unwanted implant and pull it out of his appendage.

Onyda’s voice echoed, “So, it looks like you’re stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Russell forgot about the item pinning him down to glare at Onyda standing over him.

Starting to speak again, Onyda circled Russell, “You have a gift, boy. And that gift could kill me if I don’t kill it first. My daughter says your mother had a gift, too. But she subconsciously knew to never go as far as you have. She knew what the original doctrines said. Your mother understood how much of a curse this blessing is.”

Onyda watched as Russell’s mouth tried to form a question, but the pain wouldn’t allow him to do so.

“You don’t like the truth?” Onyda said, squatting beside her foe. “Let me explain further. According to my daughter, legend says that once you dive into that supposed ‘sea of pure energy’ there is no going back. You are stuck like this forever with your body constantly trying to replenish the lost energy it can never find. Simply put, your body destroys itself in the search for restoration. Isn’t it incredible that the reason you believe you can stop me is the same thing that will kill you... unless I destroy you first, of course.”

“I don’t care, Onyda,” Russell retorted.

The original Queen of Gonaga couldn't believe what she heard, asking Russell to repeat his sentiments.

Instantly, Russell reiterated himself, "You heard me. I don't care!"

Following Russell's words rose from the cracked ground like smoke the same green energy that enveloped him in Gonaga. Onyda watched in awe as the crystal pillars spikes, including the one in Russell's hand, dissolved when surrounded by the green energy. The hole in Russell's hand slowly closed also due to the green energy coming into contact with his body. With Onyda hesitating in her next attack, Russell finally had the chance to realign his dislocated left arm.

Russell bellowed after fixing his once useless limb, "Onyda, this is it!"

A darkness shown in Russell's eyes seemingly scared Onyda enough for her to immediately go on the offense by shooting a row of six fireballs. The green energy formed a shield in front of Russell that the fireballs couldn't penetrate. Seeing what was going on, Onyda took a leap to gain some distance. Onyda's body wasn't a good three feet off the ground when Russell grabbed her ankles. Russell yanked his enemy out of midair, slamming her against Jarad like a wet blanket. Several purple crystal chips broke from Onyda's body upon impact.

When Russell bent over to pick up Onyda again, she shot a fiery energy beam from her left hand. Russell crossed his arms in front of his chest to block the attack, but the force from Onyda's energy pushed him backwards and had him falling heels over head. The first Gonagan queen started concentrating after she got up. Two foot-long horns sprouted on the sides of Onyda's head during this mental & physical focusing.

Russell braced himself when he regained a vertical stance as Onyda charged like a raging bull in an attempt to gore her enemy.

Impeccable footwork gave Russell the chance to duck & dodge Onyda's waving horns. Taking a quick second to process his next move, Russell leapt over Onyda; lifting his arms to catch the horns underneath his armpits when she rushed him again. With all of his might, Russell held onto Onyda as she tried to shake him off of her. Russell started powering up during this rodeo until he had enough strength to break the right horn at its base.

While Russell threw the right horn down, Onyda swung her head to clothesline Russell's unprotected chest with the other horn. Surprisingly, Onyda pulled the left horn from her head as Russell hit the ground once again. Clutching her left horn, Onyda prepared to drive the sharp object through Russell's head. Once again it was his quick reflexes that allowed Russell to move from a precarious position. Behind her crystal mask, Onyda's eyes gleamed when she watched Russell remove his father's golden sword from its hostler attached to his back.

With the horned appendage in hand, Onyda asked her opponent, "So you want some swordplay?"

In the same way this latest round started with Onyda on offense, Russell found himself doing his best to avoid the horn swings. Russell's strategy lasted for nearly a minute until he lunged forward in hopes of piercing Onyda's chest. Like Russell, Onyda's ability to react at a moment's notice and dodge what her attacker had in mind gave the former queen an opportunity to utilize Russell's previous strategy by catching the sword in her left underarm. Russell assumed Onyda wanted to break his prized



weapon like he did to her horn. Still holding onto his sword's grip, Russell threw his legs backwards. Russell swung forward, kicking Onyda's protected face.

The kick made Onyda lose her footing and her grasp of Russell's sword. Russell immediately went airborne in an effort to bisect Onyda upon his descent. To Russell's astonishment was Onyda avoiding his attack by disappearing just as the sword's tip touched the top of her head. Russell continued his fall until he landed on the ground in a kneeling position.

*And just when I think she can't get anymore predictable,* Russell thought; assuming Onyda would return to the battlefield facing Russell's "unsuspecting" back.

Instead of spinning around to cut Onyda down, Russell tossed his sword into the sky. Onyda reappeared behind Russell just as he predicted, stepping on Russell's calves to pin him down.

"It's been fun, boy," Onyda said while preparing to energy blast Russell's cranium into oblivion. "But I'm done playing."

Russell's body shaking with laughter made Onyda scream, "What's so funny?"

Rather than answer, Russell waited for the inevitable. A sound of something gliding through the air entered their ears, but Onyda ignored the noise; repeating her question from seconds ago. Halfway through Onyda's query was a sudden interruption by Russell's sword impaling Onyda's crystalline skull. Russell no longer felt the pain his opposition's feet caused seconds ago; forcing him to stand up and look to see the product of his actions. The sight of Onyda stumbling around with his father's sword sticking out of her head actually brought audible laughter from Russell. Grabbing the sword's grip after performing a slight jump, Russell snatched his weapon from Onyda's wobbly head.

For the first time in their battle, blood squirted out of Onyda's body. Though Onyda appeared gravely injured, Russell knew from experience that killing her would take more than a sword through the head.

Russell thought, *What did Athena say go for? Jade wanted me to hit her in her legs. Athena wanted me to focus on the... core!*

Raising his sword above a horizontal Onyda after shoving her down with one hand, Russell steadied himself to deliver the deathblow. The power behind Russell's stabbing easily cracked the crystal surrounding Onyda's body to penetrate the orange, glowing, now vulnerable core. When Russell pierced Onyda's crux, a fire erupted from this opening. The blaze quickly worked its way up Russell's blade. Russell held on as long as he could, but the fire became too intense. As Russell stepped back, shaking his slightly burned hands, Onyda sat up with the sword sticking out of her chest.

"I can't beat her like this," Russell said to himself while watching Onyda's wobbling body doing its best to stand up and remove Russell's weapon. "What should I do?"

A voice feminine in nature suddenly whispered to the contemplative Russell, "The Rusting."

"Who said that?" Russell asked out loud.

It didn't take long before Russell realized the order came from inside his mind. Russell refused to let this opportunity pass him by; jumping into the air so he hovered over Onyda. A small, brown sphere formed on the tip of Russell's right index finger. That minuscule piece of energy Russell produced hastily expanded and morphed until it was in the shape of a dome covering a ten-foot radius.

Russell shoved his creation toward Jarad fast enough that Onyda was unable to move out of the energy's path. The dome slammed against Jarad, cracking its already splitting ground while sending waves of dust across the area. Russell watched Onyda struggling inside of his energy dome. Mockingly, Russell squatted after landing on top of the dome, waving at the woman who was on the verge of destroying him moments earlier. The half-smile that accented Russell face slowly faded. Rearing back his sore right arm, Russell plunged his appendage into the dome. Onyda witnessed the same thing the resurrected Jaradian soldiers experienced when they were obliterated by The Rusting attack: Russell shooting a beam into the dome to make his energy structure implode.

Unlike the previous usage of his patented attack, the implosion sent Russell flying as well. Russell hit the ground, knocking the wind out of himself. Taking his time to get up, Russell waited until the dust surrounding the blast site dissipated. In the center of a crater his energy created, Russell gazed at the torso of Onyda. Onyda's arms were gone; her right leg cut off at the knee; a caved-in waist. Russell's eyes moved from Onyda's lower half to her exposed, scarred head. The anguish expressed on Onyda's face thrilled Russell. And yet with everything he had done to her Russell's job was not complete.

Kneeling to Onyda's right, Russell used his energy-covered right fist to break the remaining crystal covering Onyda's core. Russell continued punching through the purple-colored rock encasing the remnant of Onyda's body until he hit his target.

"How's this feel?" Russell said, driving his fist against Onyda's power source.

An ear-splitting wailing exited the former ruler's wrecked frame as her body convulsed.

Following Onyda's tortured moans came a request, "Please... have mercy."

Russell immediately responded, “Mercy? Is this comin’ from the same person who said she wanted to wipe the world clean – killing off everyone? You want me to give you mercy for your daughter possessin’ my cousin and havin’ her murder my parents? I have mercy, but not for you.”

A faint smile slowly appeared on Onyda’s bleeding face. The loose right eye in Onyda’s head surprisingly rotated until a single ray of fire shot from the orbital. Russell’s inability to react fast enough saw Onyda’s beam rip through his stomach. Staggering for several seconds, Russell ended up collapsing beside Onyda.

Russell astonishingly watched through his pained eyes Onyda’s wrecked torso float out of the crater. Instead of regenerating her broken body, Onyda decided to take to the sky. Gonaga’s original queen shifted her head to look at Russell writhing below. Opening her mouth and dislocating her jaw like a snake, Onyda produced a large fireball. The blood dripping out of Russell’s abdomen didn’t stop him from rising by using his sword as a crutch. Russell concentrated on flying to confront his airborne adversary. Moving upward, Russell’s focus was seemingly paying off. Suddenly recognizing his own energy wasn’t carrying him, Russell glanced down to discover the same green energy that assisted him so much in battle had formed a rising platform.

The pained look on Russell’s face melted away as he said to himself, “Even the planet wants revenge.”

Russell extended his right arm so his sword pointed at Onyda. Beyond her fireball Onyda saw Russell flying toward her; forcing her to throw the expanding sphere. Onyda’s attack continued growing while it tumbled toward Russell and Jarad. The winds from Onyda’s weapon of destruction rocked Russell’s balance, but he remained in flight.

Stabbing the fireball nearing him, Russell became engulfed by this inferno. Several seconds passed with no noise other than the crackling of Onyda's orb that had grown thirty feet in diameter by the time her attack reached its target. Without warning was her sphere decreasing in size. Onyda began descending when she saw her energy dispersing. A sudden golden glimmer twinkled underneath the fireball's topside.

Beyond the illumination came Russell's sword. The once oddly soothing sound of a roaring fire disappeared as Onyda's blazing ball exploded beneath them. Onyda couldn't do anything to stop Russell from driving his sword through her core. The green energy held Russell in the air like a pedestal as Onyda's body slowly slid down his sword's blade. Unable to post Onyda's torso with his weapon, Russell released his grip so Onyda & his sword plummeted to Jarad with a thunderous crash. The mysterious green energy gently lowered Russell to the ground so Russell ended up lying beside Onyda again.

Russell muttered, "You put up a good fight."

Another moment of silence spread throughout Jarad prior to Onyda retorting, "I don't need your pity. I'm the last of my kind – a blessed select cursed by truth."

Turning her attention to her own body, Onyda watched a lava-like substance flow from her chest.

Onyda said without looking at Russell, "You intended to use the power I once housed to follow in your parents' footsteps, didn't you? But I've nearly drained this crystal for all it's worth. There's no way you can restore Gonaga to its former glory."

Russell – still feeling the warm blood pour out of his stomach – whispered, "They will rebuild... with or without that crystal."

Onyda's voice actually grew stronger as she stated, "But they won't bring your parents back. That's what you really wanted to do with the Gonagan Crystal. You're nothing like your mother and father. They selflessly wished for restoration. You only care about what happens for you. In reality... you're just like me. You don't care who you kill to gain revenge."

A loud sigh exited Russell's body prior to him audibly admitting, "Maybe you're right."

Russell's words seemingly stunned Onita into silence. Listening closely, Russell observed Onyda's breathing becoming shallower with each passing second.

Apparently realizing her life was slipping away, Onyda quietly hissed, "My mark will forever be upon that land."

Something made Russell look at the original ruler of his homeland as she said, "And y-you... you will forever be-be in pain... un-until the day you... die."

Onyda's eyes slowly shut while her head fell backwards. Intently, Russell listened to Onyda until she stopped breathing. Russell didn't have the chance to take in what just occurred when the ground began separating. Jarad was reentering the ocean. The mixture of blood loss and overall fatigue prevented Russell's attempt to leave. The cold seawater pressed against Jarad and eventually Russell.

Comprehending his situation, Russell closed his eyes to whisper a prayer, "Please, give Rini the strength to survive. She needs you more than ever. Let Dash be there when she needs him. Let Octavius and Athena continue in their newfound happiness. Let my little cousin live a productive life. And give Jade the person she couldn't find in me."

...to be continued

## Resolve

In Gonaga, Dash, Ken, Rini & Jade helped the returning townspeople off their ships after this particular group of Gonagans shielded themselves from the Jaradian invasion via an island some fifty miles east of their homeland. During their current mission, Jade enjoyed the stories Ken told about her father Jas. But something uncomfortable sat in the pit of Jade's stomach as she continued working. That troublesome feeling in Jade slowly became an urge to return to Jarad.

Observing the change in Jade's demeanor made Dash ask her, "What's goin' on?"

No answer from Jade was given before she flew into the night. Jade's energy hit a new peak as she flew faster than ever. Approaching the area where Jarad exited the sea, Jade couldn't believe what she saw – the land of Jarad returning to its grave. The ocean waves ruptured the sea's stillness with Jarad slowly sinking. Jade's ears almost popped at the noise roaring below. To her dismay, Jade rightfully assumed Russell was still on Jarad. The thought of Russell drowning because she couldn't save him in time frightened Jade to no end.

Flying over the plummeting rock, Jade cried, "Russell!"

Unfortunately for Jade, her pleas were muted by unexplainable sounds.

Hopelessness started creeping into Jade's heart when something shimmering caught her eye. Jade changed her direction, flying toward whatever was creating this light. Just as the ocean enveloped Jarad, Jade found a small piece of crystal following Jarad into the sea's depths. Jade grabbed the clear rock without delay. Once again, Jade's attention went beyond a single point of interest.



Directly below the spot Jade discovered the crystal lifelessly drifted a human figure inside the water. Taking a deep breath, Jade dove into the raging ocean to save whomever this person was. Increasing pressure and a lack of oxygen slowed Jade's swimming, almost forcing her to turn around. In correlation with a bright illumination growing more profound underneath her target was an energy surge assisting Jade when she chose to press onward. This light revealed the unconscious person's identity.

In Jade's mind, she gasped the name, *Russell*.

Jade ignored all of the variables slowing her down to push toward Russell's submerged body. When Jade reached Russell, she threw her arms out. Jade's first swipe ended with her hands smacking Russell's chest.

*I gotta do this right, Jade thought. If I don't make it quick, we'll both drown.*

Thrusting forward, Jade grabbed Russell's waist. Under normal circumstances, Jade would've been able to carry Russell to safety. But Jade's inability to breathe and her holding onto a lifeless body caused both to sink deeper into the tumultuous ocean. Suddenly, a green aura spread throughout the sea floor; covering everything including Jade and Russell.

*I can't believe it's gonna end like this, is what ran through Jade's mind. Russell, you idiot. If you only let us stay in Jarad then we both wouldn't be dying. I guess if there's anyone I'd go down with, it's someone like you, Russ – someone who wouldn't cry even when facing death itself. I can't be like Mother. I refuse to cry just like...*

Jade's thoughts halted thanks to her body stopping its descent. Looking down, Jade discovered Russell no longer sinking as well. Jade's inability to understand what was going on slowly faded as the stilling waters lulled her to sleep.

A rush of cold air smacked Jade's body, waking her from what seemed to be a short, waterborne nap. Opening her eyes revealed to Jade her current circumstance – lying beside Russell on a rock big enough for five people. In Jade's right hand sat the crystal – now emerald in color – she retrieved from the ocean. Jade forget about everything except reviving Russell. Beating on his chest, Jade screamed Russell's name over and over again. Jade abruptly stopped when Russell started mumbling. As Russell went quiet, Jade assumed the worst.

The fearful pleas from Jade returned until she heard, “Jade, is that you?”

Jade looked beyond her tears to see Russell's eyes opening. Jade's arms tightly wrapped around Russell's shoulders and neck when he sat up.

All Russell could grunt was, “You're chokin' me,” as Jade's embrace tightened.

When Jade finally released him, Russell had to know how she found out he was in trouble.

A grinning Jade simply answered, “Women's intuition.”

“You sure my parents didn't tell you to come here?” Russell replied.

“You're parents? How would they tell me anything?”

Russell took a few moments to collect himself before answering, “I dreamt about them. Or I think I did. It just felt so real.”

Jade plopped down in front of Russell so he could tell her about his dream, “I was in a dark place when I saw a faint light in the distance. I got up and walked to it. Every step I took, the light got brighter and surrounded the area more and more. Next thing I know, I see two people standin' in the distance. Before I can reach them, I hear one of the people say, ‘It's not your time yet.’”

With intrigue gracing her face, Jade asked, “Who was it?”

“I immediately recognized him. But before I could say something else, the other person – a woman – told me, ‘We’ll all die someday. It’s what we do with these fleeting days that matter most.’”

Russell stretched his neck before continuing, “Then he started talkin’ about the first Gonagan Crystal bein’ purified by the planet’s energy and how the remanin’ piece could be used to help us somehow. I really don’t remember how he said it, but I know me killin’ Onyda and her sinkin’ with Jarad buried the second Gonagan Crystal that holds both Oni and Onyda’s spirits now.”

Russell’s eyes widened after his story abruptly stopped. In his mind, Russell wondered why his body felt so good.

After Rini asked Russell about the confused look on his face, Russell said, “I got shot through the stomach. I should be in a lotta pain right now, but I feel fine.”

“You look fine,” Rini informed her friend. “No hole in your stomach or anything. So what else happened in your dream?”

Russell peered down to see Rini wasn’t a lying. A sigh of relief exited his body before Rini repeated her question regarding the conclusion of his story.

Taking a deep breath, Russell restarted the tale, “So after they told me all of that, they turned around to enter the light. Without lookin’ back, he told me, ‘We’re all very proud of you guys for not lettin’ what happened break you. You, Rini, Jade are truly heroes. Goodbye, my son.’ When they disappeared into the light, something roared like a beast. I looked up and saw this metallic man standing in the distance, pointing at something to my left. The next thing I hear was your voice.”

Jade patted Russell's shoulders prior to saying that it was time to go home.

"What home?" Russell retorted. "Our homes were abandoned and probably aren't in the best shape after what happened before our fight in Jarad."

Jade peered at the clear, midnight sky during her response, "Well, I guess we'll have to rebuild. Now come on."

Pulling Russell by his right arm so he could stand up, Jade awaited his physical rebuttal for her assistance.

Russell's rigid, yet willing arm made Jade say, "I'm shocked you didn't say, 'I don't need help,' like you always do."

"I guess everyone needs help once in a while," Russell said after gaining his footing.

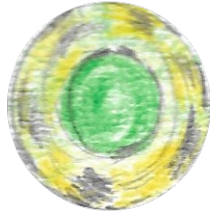
A few, quiet moments passed between the two as Russell gazed at his friend until he simply said, "It is really good to see you right now."

Though Jade's face blushed upon hearing Russell's words, she nonchalantly replied, "That's what happens when you've been through so much – you start to understand how great your friends are."

"Maybe you're right."

Motioning for Russell to fly alongside her, Russell joined Jade some twenty feet off the ground. Jade and Russell made their way toward Gonaga, listening closely to the calming ocean sounds resonating behind them. Almost reaching their destination, the noise had drastically changed from something soothing to joyously boisterous. Floating over Gonaga, Jade noticed people rejoicing near Gonaga's wrecked Marketplace.

Jade spun in the air to tell Russell, "I guess the celebration is on."

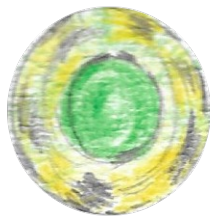


Weeks passed like the wind as the land of Gonaga slowly reconstructed. King Octavius and Queen Athena's reconciliation stabilized the kingdom. Thanks to a thorough investigation of Dr. Vanski's lab, Octavius discovered his origin and how his love for Athena destroyed the evil hold the doctor's experiments forged.

Rini's dream of going to college was put on hold due to Gonaga's destruction. Rather than let her niece lose time doing nothing, Queen Athena offered Rini a chance to learn under the Gonagan military's new commanding general. The day before starting her internship, Rini confronted her aunt to wonder if Queen Athena's putting her niece in such an important position was the right decision.

"Why not?" the Queen of Gonaga responded. "I just know that one day you will lead... just like Serena."

Rini wiped the tears streaming down Athena's cheeks without realizing she too was crying.



Dash and Ken finally had the chance to talk days after Onyda's defeat.

With a pitcher of water in hand, Dash started off their long-awaited conversation with a simple, "So, my brother's gone off and started a family."

Ken, sitting in the chair across from his older brother, grabbed a cup of tea on a table to his left.

After Ken took a sip, he gleefully told Dash, "It seems I have. We actually met not long into my trip from Gonaga to Tyrong. She was interested in traveling as well until we settled in Yafan two years ago."

"Were you ever plannin' on comin' back?" Dash had to know.

"Actually, we were in the midst of returning when I heard about what was going on. That's when I decided I should come back alone and send for her after everything settled."

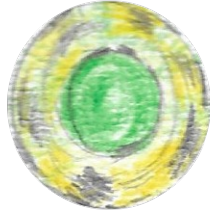
"You really believed we'd win?"

Taking another drink from his cup, Ken jokingly answered, "Well, that or I thought I would die with a sword in hand and a brother by my side."

Dash finished off his water container he nursed for a half an hour before their conversation began. Rising from his seat to refill, Dash abruptly stopped when he noticed Ken staring at a picture from Jas' wedding.

"You really missed out on a lot," Dash spoke up.

Ken's head slowly drooped as he replied, "Yeah, I know."



With the help of her friends and family, Jade renovated her original home so that it was livable once again – a house torn apart by her mother as she grieved the loss of Jas.

The day Jade planned to move out of Dash’s house was a solemn one for the two. Packing the last of her things made Jade take a seat on the small bed she spent the past several months using following training sessions, as a way to temporarily escape the horrors of her reality, and to simply sleep. Dash entered Jade’s bedroom not long after she sat down.

While standing in the doorway, Dash told Jade, “It’s great that you’re movin’ on. Doin’ it just like Jas.”

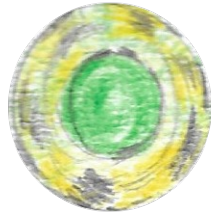
Half smiling, Jade reminded Dash, “I’m just moving down the street.”

“I know. But it’s just gonna be weird not havin’ you around. As much as I love Rini and tolerate Russell, there’s somethin’ about you that I always adored. You just have a natural innocence that I haven’t seen before. And even when everything went down, you didn’t lose that innocence like Russell and Rini did. You’re probably stronger than all of us combined.”

Dash quickly turned his back to Jade to make sure she didn’t see the tears forming in his eyes.

“But it’s you who made us strong,” Jade said; moving beside Dash before embracing him. “You could’ve rolled over and died. Instead, you trained us without even

knowing if we could win. You believed in us. Without my Uncle Dash, I wouldn't be who I am right now. And I'll never forget that.”



Princess Onita of Gonaga – whose mind slowly caught up with her early twenty-year-old body – found herself stricken with grief over the things she did while under Oni's control. In hopes of soothing Onita's soul, Russell took it upon himself to have a sit-down talk with his cousin. The awkward silence between Russell and Onita after he entered her room was broken by Russell asking how she was doing.

From her seat placed directly beside the bed Russell now sat upon, the princess admitted, “Not good at all. I just can't get the images out of my head.”

Bluntly, Russell responded, “About how you killed your family. My family. Our family. Almost destroyed the world.”

Russell's believed rudeness caused Onita to glare at her cousin. Once again, speechlessness crept through the room.

When Russell noticed the angst in Onita's eyes, he mumbled, “But it wasn't your fault.”

Princess Onita immediately verbalized her disbelief over Russell's statement, “Wasn't my fault? How wasn't it my fault? I became a tool for evil. I sympathized with Oni, and then I became her harbinger of death. I am the reason you, Rini, and Jade are



orphans. I am the reason Gonaga is wrecked and the world was paralyzed with fear. I am--”

Russell solemnly interrupted his lamenting cousin, “No, you’re not. Yes, you did all of those things in body. But you were bein’ controlled just like you said. In a lot of ways, you were created for what happened, and there’s nothin’ – no cryin’, blubberin’, or wishin’ – that can change that.”

Russell moved from his seat to hug Onita. When she recoiled to avoid the incoming action, Russell stopped his forward movement.

A long pause occurred between Russell’s attempted embrace and his subsequent statement, “Just like Octavius was a pawn thanks to how he was created, you were a pawn because of who you came from. The world will heal... but only if you let it happen.”

Princess Onita hastily asked, “What does that mean?”

“You’re the future of this land; the future Queen of Gonaga. If you aren’t able to forgive yourself you won’t be able to run Gonaga like you can and will. Onita, I forgive you. Now it’s time for you to do the same.”

Hearing Russell’s words rattled Onita’s heart like nothing else did up to that point. Russell was almost surprised when Onita left her chair, clutching her cousin tightly. But the princess’ mental status wasn’t the only thing on Russell’s mind. Since the day he killed Onyda, Russell thought about life outside of Gonaga. This nomad spirit rising in Russell made him question if staying in Gonaga was a good idea. After thinking about departing Gonaga for two days following his conversation with Princess Onita, Russell figured out one person who would understand what he was going through: Ken.

One night after a long day of work on Ken's future house, Russell joined Ken at Dash's kitchen table to ask him, "What is it like to have a home, but it's not where you think?"

Ken didn't answer without thought; looking Russell in his eyes for several seconds.

"So you want to leave?" Ken eventually said.

"It's not that I wanna leave Rini or Jade, but I wanna see the world. Comin' so close to death made me think more about what I wanna do. I never wanted to go to college, or even become a hero. I just wanted to find a place...--"

"A place where you belong."

When Russell nodded his head to confirm Ken's assumption was true, Ken explained what he believed made him leave Gonaga, "I had a dream. I remember standing on a boat with the sun beating my uncovered head. Though it was hot, I was smiling; smiling because I was finally free. That was my dream – a dream of my lifelong dream. When I woke up the next day, I left."

Ken peered at Russell almost staring a hole through him before continuing his statements, "I knew if I stayed around, I wouldn't truly be free. I survived Oni and Jarad, and I deserved to see the world. You've seen tragedy, too. Now that you have the chance to live your dreams, do it. Sail the seas. Ride the wind. Live this life like Jake and Serena would've wanted. They yearned for something simple, yet people like us... we need to find out what this world is truly worth."

Three months after saving the world, Russell packed a few things for his trip. That same day witnessed Russell returning to his parents' home. Rini discovered her brother

sitting on their original home's front stoop when she went looking for him after not seeing Russell around Dash's house all day. Russell's body language expressed he was holding something back from his sister.

Russell sensed what Rini wanted to know after she took a seat beside him; muttering to his sister, "Rini, I'm leavin' Gonaga."

Staring at the thick clouds, Rini assumed Russell's statement was some melodramatic act to get a rise out of her.

Before Rini could verbalize her thoughts, Russell spoke up again, "I gotta get outta this place. There's nothin' left for me here."

Rini continued gazing upward.

Seeing Rini wasn't paying attention, Russell shouted, "Did ya hear me? I'm leavin'!"

The sincerity in Russell's words finally made Rini believe her brother.

Looking at Russell, a bewildered Rini asked, "Oh my... you're really leaving, aren't you?"

Rini jumped from her seated position, yelling at Russell, "What about me? What about Jade?"

Monotone, Russell asked in regards to Jade, "What about her?"

"You're just gonna leave without telling her? Almost everyday for the last three months it's been you and her. You two have been practically inseparable since she saved you from dying in Jarad. And now you're just gonna jump up and leave her high and dry?"

"I don't know where I'm even goin'," Russell informed Rini.

“Then why leave if you don’t know where you’re going?”

Rather than answer Rini, Russell walked around their home until he entered their backyard. Rini trailed her brother, waiting for him to say something.

Rini’s eyes actually widened when Russell said, “There’s so much out there that we don’t even know about. This world is so much bigger than just Gonaga. Out there is a place for me to finally be me. Rini, I know you don’t understand, but just hear me out. I *will* be back one day. And on that day I’ll tell you about the world... and what it’s worth.”

Russell was right about Rini’s inability to comprehend what he meant. But with a solid hug, Rini accepted her brother’s decision.

Whispering, Rini asked Russell while they held onto each other, “You promise you’ll come back?”

“Have I ever lied to you?” Russell said. “Just please tell Jade, ‘I’ll miss her.’ And I’ll bring her the world, too.”

Rini adhered to Russell’s wish about telling Jade of his plans, but did so that night following the brother and sister’s conversation instead of waiting until after Russell left. A fury unlike anything Rini had ever seen danced in Jade’s eyes as she exited her house to find Russell. While Jade headed toward his home, Russell concluded his preparations for leaving.

Closing the last suitcase of family photos made Russell contemplate what he was doing, *Why am I takin’ this stuff? I wanna start a new life and I’m packin’ stuff that just clings to Gonaga. The clothes on my back and the money in my pocket are all I need for this.*

It was almost midnight when Russell looked around the dark, slightly dusty building that once housed his family.

“I love you guys,” Russell said to the ghosts of his past.

Opening the front door revealed a surprising sight to Russell – Jade standing in front of him, her arms tightly crossed in front of her chest.

With a snide tone, Jade asked, “And where do you think you’re going at this hour?”

“Somewhere far away from your mouth,” Russell stated.

“Oh, how funny.”

When Russell tried to sidestep the physical blockade that was Jade, she stepped alongside him.

Becoming agitated over Jade’s action, Russell yelled, “What will it take for you to move?”

“An explanation.”

“I assume Rini told you what I said, so how much more of an explanation do you need?”

Jade glared at Russell – who refused to look at her in the eyes – prior to asking, “Why couldn’t you wait and do it properly? Why didn’t you let us all know before you did this? Why are you such a jerk?”

“Because that’s what I am. I’m an insensitive jerk who doesn’t wanna be around this place for awhile and doesn’t want anyone to stop me. Now if you don’t mind...”

Russell went to gently shove Jade out of the way, only for Jade to grab him by his right wrist. Understanding conventional tactics wouldn’t work, Russell created a blinding

energy blast that staggered Jade long enough for him to fly away. Jade blinked feverishly until her sight mostly returned and she could follow Russell. After passing Gonaga Castle, Russell peered behind him for one last look at the place his mother once called home. To Russell's shock was Jade on his heels.

Russell's attempt at outmaneuvering Jade proved fruitless as well.

Realizing Jade wasn't giving up, Russell shouted at her, "You just won't quit will you?"

"Nope!" Jade responded; bringing their chase to a close as Russell floated to the ground.

After a short talk, Russell agreed to wait until morning so he could tell everyone goodbye.

The Jade-led gathering of herself, Princess Onita, King Octavius, Queen Athena, Rini, Dash, and Ken entered Gonaga Castle's Courtyard to wish Russell a safe trip. When Russell arrived, laughs, embraces, and stories were exchanged for several hours until Princess Onita confronted Russell.

"You don't have to leave," Onita told her cousin. "Everything and everyone you need is right here. You... y-you keep...--"

Russell verbally stopped the noticeably struggling princess, "No, you are the one who will keep them safe. Onita, you're stronger than you'll ever know. I believe, trust, and have faith in you. So please, keep my knucklehead sister in line."

Hearing Russell's statement forced Rini to remind her brother, "You're an idiot!"

Russell had no verbal response for his sister's comment, so he simply hugged her. Feeling her brother's embrace like never before brought tears from Rini until he let her go.

As Russell moved to his left, King Octavius spoke up, "Russell, I wish we could've gotten to know each other a little better before now."

"Yeah," Russell responded. "But what I do know about you is you were made from and for evil, but you've gained a pure heart. I now know why Aunt Athena feels for you."

For the first time since they'd known each other, Russell and Octavius hugged. Athena couldn't help but lightly cry upon seeing the action between her two of her remaining family members.

Without looking at her, and still holding onto Octavius, Russell whispered to his nearby aunt, "Thank you for helpin' Rini. She'll do you proud."

Russell's words made the tears barely flowing from Queen Athena pour out.

A smiling Dash told his pupil, "You've become quite a man. You take care of yourself."

Russell laughed a little before he told Dash, "You too, Old Man."

Following a stern handshake between Russell and Dash, Russell turned his back to everyone for his departure.

Abruptly, Russell said, "Well, lets go."

Everyone appeared confused over Russell's statement until Jade started walking toward Russell.

Rini immediately shouted, "What's going on? Jade, you're leaving, too?"

With her back to Rini and everyone other than Russell, Jade admitted, “It was the only way I’d let him go. Russell wanting to leave made me realize I’ve wanted to do the same thing. So after much prodding, he agreed. I’m sorry to do this to you, Rini, but we have to go.”

Jade quickly hugged everyone, sailing into the sky alongside Russell.

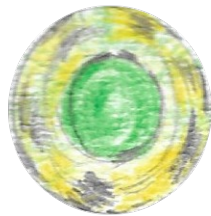
Rini shouted as Russell and Jade began moving away, “You better come back!”

Following a slight nod, Russell agreed to follow his sister’s command.

Neither Jade or Russell said a word until flying over Gonaga’s farmland when Jade asked, “What are you thinking about, Russ?”

Russell answered Jade with a question of his own, “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“I’ll go wherever you wanna go, Russ.”



I have completed this book as proof of the great heroism seen nearly four years after the moment Russell defeated Onyda. From the day of Onyda’s death until the day I left Gonaga, I gathered accounts from everyone I personally knew involved and hurt by the situation that unfolded when Oni’s spirit possessed Princess Onita. Through journals kept by my father, Jake, and Serena, I was able to record their feelings during their last days. My name is Jade – the daughter and widow of heroes, and the mother to Russell’s only



son. As I conclude this story, I must note that I'm returning to Gonaga to tell them the truth; and warn them. Dangerous people are searching for something they believe is connected to Gonagan royalty. If I don't warn my family soon, everything Russell fought for will be in vain.

The End