

Clash Champions
Season 2 - Episode 11 - Part 2
Burned Out

Verino Sarveti's base occupied several floors of a tall office building. The tournament was not his only business. He would send the fighters out on expeditions into other worlds to acquire valuable items to sell. Several rooms full of office workers found the buyers.

The office workers knew better than to interrupt Sarveti's tournament fighters who also performed questionably legal work for their boss on the side. They were his executors. Their part of the business was so different from the office that they would not be able to help each other, other than Jared who held a high rank in the business. So the workers would quietly accept the odd sight of an axe-wielding barbarian walking through the office from time to time.

This time it was Celestia, dressed casually in a green polo shirt and white skirt as she walked the familiar path to the office kitchen while ignoring the bruise on her right forehead. She had left her weapons and armor in her room to help her forget about her recent battlefield loss on a mission for the tournament.

The square-jawed space marine Rax Talon stood in the kitchen examining each and every unfamiliar appliance. With a clipboard and pencil, he made notes. Later he would look up the manual for each item and learn how they all worked. He was new here, and he needed to learn everything.

Celestia entered the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and looked with disappointment at an empty spot in one of the shelves in the door. "They are out of gooseberry shakes."

Looking on from the office, the intern who had taken the last gooseberry shake stopped slurping from the flexible plastic bottle and turned her chair around.

Rax spoke to Celestia. "Would that be a reward for victory, or therapy? It looks like you got it pretty bad out there."

"Both," Celestia answered as she pulled down a plastic cup from the cupboard. She then began ordering a drink from one of the dispensers. The mission was technically a success since the invaders had stopped invading once Captain Galacto talked to their leader and ended the battle through diplomacy that amounted to mutual surrender. That was after they had defeated everyone else, including her.

Rax talked while the dispenser poured Celestia's drink. "Would you like to have a seat and regale me with tales of your adventure?"

Celestia smiled. "I could do that."

A short time later the two sat at the table while Celestia relayed the story. "We were aided by two of the local heroes. I do not recall their names. They were animals who stood about as tall as myself, resembling pigs with spines on their backs who walked on two legs as people do. They fought with their fists."

Jared entered the office. Since he was going into the business side of the business, he wore a business-casual outfit by putting on a vest over his t-shirt. He looked to empty cubicles on his left and empty cubicles on his right. He looked ahead to see that everyone was standing by the kitchen listening to Celestia. He spoke to them. "Let me guess. Everyone is taking their break at the same time. That's alright. I just need to talk to Celestia for a minute."

Celestia looked up to hear what he had to say.

"When you are free..." Jared started.

"I am free right now," Celestia said.

"Nah, you're busy raising company morale." The workers chuckled at Jared's remark. "First thing is, are you alright?"

"Yes," Celestia firmly answered the question.

"Good," Jared said with relief, "'cause that looks nasty." He pointed to the bruise on her head. "I thought you'd heal it with your magic."

"I did," Celestia said. "It was worse before. The loose blood will need a day or two to reabsorb."

"All right." Jared accepted that. Celestia knew what she was doing. She also knew a lot about his upcoming opponent in the tournament. "What I came to tell you is, some time later, we need to talk about Siobhan Minh."

Jill spoke to her companion in the thousand-mile forest. "Hey, Siobhan. How about I set the trees on fire and you put them out?"

"If it would please you," Siobhan humbly said.

Jill raised her heavy rectangular black gun and smiled as a green glow emanated from its barrel. "Let's see if it does." She grinned as her gun fired superheated plasma into the nearby trees.

The stream of plasma ended, and Jill lowered her weapon to watch the flames crackle. "Awesome," Jill said under her breath. Siobhan stood by with a silent smile, pleased that her friend was happy. Jill turned and raised her gun to several more trees to her left. Siobhan stepped forward to use her magic to snuff out the fires.

"Heh heh heh." Jill laughed softly at the flames. She watched them lick the trunks of the trees until they naturally died down. She turned and fired her gun to burn some other trees while Siobhan magically cooled off the ones she had burned before.

Siobhan intended to do the job well. She aware that one burning ember could create a forest fire, but there was more to it than that. She was practicing. Dissipating heat into the air and magically removing heat from the environment were two different spells. She practiced both. Suppressing fire was another technique, as was inserting cold, as was conjuring water to suppress the flames. She used magic to strip away the most badly burned region. She tried using magic to heal the tree, but she damaged the tree

further, and that was why she did not cast healing spells. When she thought she was done with a tree, she closed her eyes and practiced using her magic senses to detect heat to see if there was still any spot that needed to be put out.

The flames in front of Jill died down. She turned her head and saw Siobhan concentrating on one of the trees, moving her hands up and down the burned area of its trunk. Jill smiled.

Jill turned her gun toward Siobhan. The barrel began to glow.

Jill dropped her gun on her foot. What was she doing? Jill winced and nearly began to cry. Why was she going to do that?

Jill pulled her foot out from under her gun and shook it. That should have broken it, but her nanoshield protected her. Her nanites... Jill made a fist and drew them to the surface of her hand where they formed a thin transparent silvery protective layer. She then punched the nearest tree, and kicked it again and again.

The hard 'thok' of the impact made Siobhan open her eyes to see what it was. She saw Jill punishing a tree that shook and released its thin needle-like leaves with every hit.

"Damn it," Jill muttered to herself. She was crying now. She punched the tree harder.

Siobhan watched Jill hit the tree several more times before she opened her mouth to speak. "Whatever did that one tree do to offend you?"

Jill stopped and turned her head to Siobhan, who was shocked to see that tears had been streaming down Jill's face. Jill walked over to Siobhan and opened her arms wide to give her a hug, taking care not to harm Siobhan with her super-strength. Siobhan returned the hug. She worried as Jill sobbed into her shoulder.

Jill sniffed and spoke. "You are the best friend I've ever had!"

The usually eloquent Siobhan stumbled over her words. "I... thank you."

After about ten seconds, Jill had calmed down enough to break the hug. "Come on. Let's go back to the house." She began walking away, and Siobhan followed.

Siobhan looked down and back as she passed by Jill's gun. "Do not forget your weapon," she reminded Jill.

"I'll come back for it," Jill said. She did not want to touch it right now.

Jill led Siobhan back to their shared bedroom on the second floor. She was in a hurry, and Siobhan followed with cautious concern. Jill went straight to the dresser, opened the drawer, and grabbed her bottle of pills. She read the label. Take 1 every 8 hours. She poured two into her hand and popped them into her mouth. She then turned back toward the doorway that Siobhan was standing in front of. "I am going to go find Mick. I need to talk to him."

Siobhan stood aside as Jill walked out of the room. She hoped that Mick could help Jill with whatever was ailing her.

Mick Legato had a discussion with his financier Horace Samson on the bridge of Horace's dimension ship, the Farseeker, which was parked on the landing pad at his base. "So we have to tell Eric about this," Mick said. "The questions are when do we tell him, and what do we plan to do about it?"

Horace reminded Mick that Eric may have a better perspective than they did. "Eric spent a month with Hades, so he may know more than we do about him and his Empire." Horace and Mick had used the ship's time-travel ability to skip ahead that month. It was a moment for them, so it was easy for them to forget.

"Right," Mick agreed, "but he does not know what Hades is up to. That happened after he left. He decided to go... possibly conquering but we don't know if he is conquering."

"Check your probes and see," Horace suggested.

"Right," Mick said. He was interrupted by the sound of the ship's rear door opening. Both turned their heads to see Jill entering. "Oh, a lock's not going to stop you. What's up?"

"Mick, we need to talk. In private. It's important."

Mick had never heard Jill talk to him like this. It truly had to be important. He pushed himself out of his chair and dismissed himself from Horace's company. "Well, you heard her."

For relative privacy, Jill brought Mick to the west side of his training arena, the unfortunately named Death Box.

Mick tried to guess what problem would be private and important. "Is this about you and Chris? Because the scanners haven't picked up anything."

Leaning against the wall, Jill shook her head. "No, no. It's... I'm really not doing too well. My mind is all messed up. I'm thinking things I shouldn't be thinking. I want to do things that would hurt people, like Cat Boy. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt someone else and I won't be able to stop it."

Mick spoke calmly. "Well, Jill, I don't want to be blunt, but... I knew you had problems when I picked you up. You're a strong girl and you've managed to deal with it." He patted Jill on the shoulder.

Jill raised her voice. "I'm not managing to deal with it! It's getting worse, and the pills are not helping! I don't know what I'm going to do..."

Mick could see that Jill was disturbed. More than usual, and enough that she interrupted both of their lives to drag him out to talk about it. "Alright, umm... I'd heard you were getting worse. Siobhan was worried about you."

Remembering what she had almost done to Siobhan, Jill dropped to the ground and cried into her hands.

"You are getting worse," Mick deduced.

Jill nodded.

Mick took a breath to calm his own nerves. "Oh-kay. I'm not a pharmacist. I don't know what is going to fix this, but we can talk this through and see if we can figure out how it is getting worse, which might help us figure out why it is getting worse. Is there anything you've noticed that brings it on?"

Jill shook her head.

Mick asked another question. "What were you doing when you noticed that things were bad. More bad than usual."

Jill remembered, and she sobbed.

Mick asked another question. "Jill... do you need a hug?"

Jill stopped herself from crying. She nodded, stood up, and leaned against her manager to hug him.

"Oof!" Mick took a step back and barely remained standing. He put his arms around Jill and tried to gently move her body from side to side, but he could barely nudge her.

"Are you trying to lift me?" Jill asked.

Mick admitted failure in that regard. "Yeah, I guess I'm not as strong as I used to be."

"It's not that," Jill said as she pulled her head back and stood straight. "It's the nanites. I probably weigh more than you do."

"All right." Mick moved his hand up and down Jill's lower back.

"Are you feeling me up?" Jill asked.

"No, I'm trying to make you feel comfortable." Mick said. "If I was feeling you up, you'd know it and you wouldn't need to ask. Now something really bad happened that has set you off more than once. What was it?"

Jill shuddered. It was awful. She did not want to admit it, but she had to. Admitting what had happened was a precursor to understanding why. "I... almost... killed... Siobhan."

Mick was shocked. "Siobhan? Why? She's your friend! What could she have done to make you angry enough to want to hurt her?"

Jill tried to recall her feelings, fighting through her own desire not to admit to them. "I... thought that... it might be fun."

"That's not like you," Mick said. Jill shook her head in agreement. "You don't hurt people for fun. You hurt people because they invaded your planet and killed everyone you know. There's a difference. Alright. What were you doing just before that?"

Jill could remember that without any problem. "I was setting the forest on fire, and Siobhan was putting out the fires so that we would not set the whole forest on fire."

Mick tried to dig a little deeper. "And was there a reason you were setting the forest on fire, or..."

"I thought it might be fun," Jill said.

"You thought it might be fun," Mick repeated. "Was it?" Jill giggled and nodded. "Looks like it was," Mick said.

"I was bored," Jill said.

"All right," Mick accepted that. "Now let's talk about... Prince Mittens of Kith. What set you off that time?"

"Cat boy," Jill used her own nickname for M'Tanz, "he... made a reference to... me and Chris."

"Oh. Then he might have deserved it," Mick said, causing Jill to snicker. "That guy was getting on my nerves too, honestly. That's one of the reasons I sent him back. Now what were you doing just before that?"

Jill remembered. "I was blowing up trees in the forest."

Mick guessed the reason. "Because... you were bored and you thought it might be fun."

Jill nodded.

"Okay," Mick continued. "Can you remember any other events or anything that we might be missing that we haven't mentioned yet?"

"I don't remember anything that I don't remember," Jill said before she regretted saying it. "I mean..."

"That kind of goes without saying," Mick said with a grin.

"Yeah." Jill smiled.

"But if you did forget anything, and you remember it now, or later, tell me. Alright?" He gave Jill another pat on the shoulder.

Jill remembered seeing Anna by her bedside. "Don't forget about me!" her sister had begged her.

Jill opened her mouth and spoke. "Anna."

"Anna?" Mick asked. "Your sister?"

Jill nodded.

"Uh, she's not real," Mick said.

"I know she's not real," Jill said. "But I used to see her and speak to her all the time."

Mick thought that he understood. "So you're not having those hallucinations any more. That's probably a good thing."

Jill shook her head.

"No?" Mick asked. "It's not a good thing?"

"No, it's..." Jill took a moment to find the words. "I traded one problem for another! And I'd rather have hallucinations of the war and my fake sister who is probably dead than hurt my friends in real life!"

Mick thoughtfully put a hand to his chin. "Yeah, that's a downgrade."

Jill explained her thoughts. "So maybe Anna has something to do with it and maybe she doesn't. I just thought it might be worth mentioning that I haven't seen her in a while."

Mick also thought it might be worth mentioning. He asked for more information. "When was the last time you seen her? I mean, saw her."

Jill remembered. "I think it was right after my nanites were fixed. I don't think I've seen her since then."

Mick thought of a possible cause. If he was right, it was bad. "Jill, could you say again why you were blowing up the forest and burning down the forest?"

"I was bored," Jill said as if it meant nothing.

It meant something to Mick. He frowned. "Horace."

"Horace?" Jill asked. "He found the people who fixed my nanites."

"He found the wrong people to fix your nanites," Mick told her. "They put a virus in you to make you one of them."

"What?" Jill asked with surprise.

"You're bored," Mick explained, "so you want to blow something up or burn something to pass the time, you think it will be fun, then you get bored again and do it to something else. That's them! That's what they do!"

That was also Jill now. "That's... what I've been doing. How do we stop it! How can I be me again and not one of them?"

Mick sighed. "This calls for extreme measures. Jill, uh, I have a possible solution but you're not going to like hearing it."

Jill frowned. "Don't tell you you're going to take me to the Lizards to heal me."

Mick paused. "All right then, I won't tell you. We can put a bag over your head--"

"Mick!" Jill shouted at him. "The Lizards are evil! They hate me! They will hurt me worse than whatever I am now!"

Mick spoke calmly. "Alright, Jill. Hear me out. Take a moment and hear me out."

"No!" Jill refused.

"Do it anyway," Mick said. "There are a couple of Lizard scientists that I brought to Alex for her research project. We also got a can of spare nanites that I picked up in case this happened." He pointed at her.

Jill breathed heavily, on the verge of a panic.

"Alex will be there," Mick reassured her. "and if the Lizards do anything you don't want them to do, she will tear them apart and so will I."

In the research station's bar, Zandria looked at her sent mail folder on a tablet computer.

From: Z. Smith
To: Mick
Subject: Re: Meeting

PLEASE CONFIRM that you told them they would be meeting Zandria.

There had been no response. Zandria drummed her fingers on the table impatiently, then drank the last of her drink.

The response walked into the bar wearing a purple softsuit and helmet with a black viewpane that concealed her face. She looked toward Zandria. Zandria looked back and sighed. She smiled, since she recognized that suit. "You must be Siobhan Minh. I am Zandria." She said that firmly, then gestured toward another chair at the table. "Have a seat."

The purple-suited guest sat in the offered chair.

"You can take your helmet off here," Zandria said. "It's more friendly."

Siobhan removed her helmet and placed it on the table. She was beaming a joyous smile. "I am quite pleased to see you again, Zandria."

"Thank you." Zandria smiled back. "I am glad to see you too, even if we just went drinking last week."

There was an open question that Siobhan could not help but ask. "... For how long have you been Zandria?"

"I was Zandria a long time ago," Zandria explained, "and I am Zandria again." She said this loudly to Jill and Mick who had just entered. Horace followed behind them.

Jill stood by another open chair and put her hands on the back. "So you are Zandria," she said nervously.

Zandria smiled and nodded, pleased that Jill had gotten the message or had overheard her if she hadn't.

Jill sat down and leaned across the table. "Is it short for Alexandria?" she asked quietly.

Zandria gritted her teeth for a moment. "They haven't figured it out yet," she whispered back.

Jill smiled and sat straight.

Mick and Horace each presented an open hand to greet Alex, or, Zandria. In Horace's case, the hand was artificial. "I'll stay quiet and not say anything," Mick offered.

"Good," Zandria said. She turned to Jill. "So while you're here," Zandria suggested, "why don't we put you under the table before we put you on a table and put you under."

"I don't really drink alcohol," Jill said.

The bartender used a retractable metal arm to deliver Zandria a fresh drink from several meters away. Zandria offered it to Jill. "If you want to start..."

Jill hesitated. Horace offered her an escape. "You do not need to if you do not want to."

"I guess I could try it." Jill lifted the beer to her lips and took a sip. It was awful. She winced and set the cup back on the table, and slid it toward Zandria. "You can finish it."

Zandria smiled and stifled a laugh as she took the glass. "Fine. I will do that." She began drinking.

Horace greeted Zandria again and then excused himself. "It is good to see you again. If you do not mind, I will go exploring."

"Have fun." Zandria excused him.

Jill remained seated at the table. "And I guess I'll just wait here until they come for me."

After the pleasant reunion, it was time for the unpleasant trip to the operating room. Jill lay on the table there. Her body was covered by a sheet and her eyes were covered by a sleeper's mask so that she would not see the space lizards who would be her doctors. The triangle-shaped box of spare nanites was on a wheeled side table.

"Let's get this over with," Jill said.

Mick waited in the bar. He waited and waited. It was taking a long time, long enough that Horace had rejoined him, had a drink, and left to go explore the station again while Mick waited.

Siobhan's helmet was on the table with him. She had left it there. Not that she had forgotten it. She had left it with Mick since he was staying behind and could watch over it.

Siobhan returned to the bar. Mick pressed her for an answer. "So how's it going in there? It is taking a while!"

Siobhan answered as well as she could. "They have difficulty persuading the new nanites to replace the old. I cannot say when they will succeed. They could say either. As for now, I am hungry. Might I ask you to acquire a meal with this world's currency?"

Mick laughed. "I could acquire the whole station with this world's currency. Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

Siobhan was halfway through her meal when Zandria returned. Zandria sat at the table and sighed. "I have bad news. They're not able to fix her."

"They're not?" Mick exclaimed in disbelief. "I got her fresh nanites for exactly this reason! In case they die again or go crazy or something, we can just give her a refill."

"It's not that simple," said Zandria. "Her nanites have a virus."

"I know," Mick said. "That's why we're replacing them."

Zandria explained why that did not work. "The virus takes over the new nanites as soon as we add them. They have to develop a countermeasure to program the new nanites to resist the attack, or find a way to disable the old ones."

Siobhan looked up from her meal to speak. "Then the solution is obvious."

"It is?" asked Mick. It certainly was not obvious to him.

Siobhan nodded. "We shall return Jill to the World of the Rainbow Sky."

"Which world is that?" Mick asked. He looked at Zandria, who shrugged.