

Part 2

"Why didn't I die when Mikhail's Crystal was destroyed?" Shawn asked. "It was the only Crystal I've ever used."

Jango turned to Shawn. "You've never bonded with another Crystal?"

"No, Mikhail's Crystal is the only one," Shawn said. "Manie took the Red Crystal out of Sarratania, so it never linked with me."

Jango searched Manie's eyes. He reached out, grabbing a lock of her red hair, rubbing it between his fingers. "What of your hair? And your eyes? Why do they share the Red Crystal's color?"

"It happened when I found it," Manie said.

"It changed your hair and eye color?" Jango asked.

"Yes, it was painful. Not like other Crystals," Manie replied. "I thought it was going to kill me."

"It isn't entirely surprising, you being Shaleah's daughter. But I wonder why it never did the same to her? What type of power did this Crystal grant you?"

"I can draw fire. I could never do that."

"Nothing else?" Jango asked.

"No, those are the only things I've noticed."

"That's strange... Fire Crystal's aren't rare." Jango cradled his chin against his fist. "Perhaps there is more than we can yet understand." He put his attention back on Shawn. "How did you destroy Mikhail's Crystal?"

"I channeled my power through the Crystal and it erupted into a blue beam. It burned the stone down to nothing, like it was being used as fuel. Before she died, Milly kept telling me that if I focused my power I could use the Blue Crystal like a weapon. She said Mikhail could have done the same to save those people at Sarratania, but he didn't because he was afraid to lose his power. But I couldn't watch Manie die." Shawn looked at Manie, a flame rising in his heart.

"Who were you saving Manie from?" Jango asked.

"Duncan and Goro. They were going to burn down the last forest."

"Goro, no," Jango said. "That can't be so. I destroyed that creature myself."

"Milly recognized him," Manie said. "She was there when Mikhail refused to go inside the city."

"Are you suggesting Goro was resurrected?" Jango asked.

Shawn turned to Manie, afraid of the answer.

"I guess we are," Manie said.

"If King Dukemot has the means to resurrect a creature as impressive as Goroeth, then why hasn't he used the same ability to reverse the effects of the Gray Death?" Jango asked.

Manie's eyes became dark. "It doesn't mean my father has the ability to raise the dead. It could have been Duncan who brought Goroeth back to life... Or maybe Milly was wrong, maybe it wasn't Goroeth."

"I wonder," Jango said. "Shawn, when you used Mikhail's Crystal to destroy that Renjin, it should have killed you. Each and every Crystal on this island can be used as a weapon. The problem is that doing so consumes your Crystal down to nothing, and if it's the only Crystal your body has ever bonded with, it means death."

"Maybe no one really knows how the Crystals work," Shawn said. "Mikhail's Crystal brought Manie back to life when I fell from the cliff where she died."

"It's possible... I have no idea why the Crystal was able to bring her back from death, or why it didn't kill you when it was destroyed. To my mind that means there's something special about both you *and* the Crystals."

Shawn showed Jango the scar on his palm. "Could it have something to do with this? This is how I activated my link with the Crystal."

Jango squinted. "That's a sight I haven't seen in many years. Who did this to you?"

"I did," Manie said. "My mother was trying to activate Shawn's powers. I was afraid she was trying to trick him into becoming her slave, so I used the method you wrote about in your books. I knew it would limit his powers. My plan worked."

"That was clever of you," Jango said. "Had you not done that, Shawn likely would be with Shaleah now, wherever she is, drunk on power and wanting more."

Shawn agreed, but he'd never liked the fact that he'd escaped being twisted by one person only to be lied to by another, even if it had been done to protect him.

"Your mother carries the Red Crystal," Jango said to Manie. "And you've bonded with that Crystal."

"Yes," Manie said, a disaster to admit.

"Then my life is not the only one she carries in her stones. She has that same power over you."

"No, she doesn't," Manie said. "I have another. A Purple Crystal of lightning. I lost it when I was still locked in my tower. It's somewhere back in Denengear."

"That is certainly good news. But I'd advise you to do whatever you can to find that stone before someone finds it for you."

"I don't know if that's possible," Manie said. "I'd have to go home. But I'll try."

"Good." Jango let his eyes dip to the floor. "Now I'd like to ask you both a question: what do we do?" Jango's voice carried the doom of uncertainty.

"What are you talking about," Manie asked, confused.

"The most evil object in existence is back in the hands of your mother. So I ask again: what do we do?"

"What are you trying to say? That she's going to come back?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to say. Shaleah manipulated you and Shawn in order to reclaim her precious weapon. Now she has it. What is she going to use it for?"

"To get more power," Shawn decided. "That's all she's ever wanted."

"Exactly right," Jango agreed, sounding justified. "And who has more power than an island full of Crystals and the people chosen by blood to wield them? I need your help. It's not hard to imagine what Shaleah's planning. We must rekindle the era of Crystal Keepers. Put a Crystal in the hand of every able-bodied man, woman, and child in Talmoria and teach them how to fight. It's the only chance we have."

Manie was looking at Shawn, but he couldn't take his eyes away from Jango's. Something was coming. He didn't know what, but it was the same feeling he'd gotten that day he found the Blue Crystal at the mineshaft in Wisconsin, like he was about to be swept away into something he couldn't possibly be prepared for.

"That won't work," Manie said, shaking her head. "Our island has been torn apart by war and disease. If we try that now we'll likely turn people against each other as much as my mother."

Jango took a breath. His stare hardened like he was about to give a speech to ten-thousand battle-ready men. "Talmoria must prepare. We can't wait until fire starts raining from the clouds to decide what to do. The destruction of everything we've ever known—all our history, our homes, our land, gone—that is what we risk if Shaleah comes back wielding the power inside that Red Crystal. There will be nothing and no one that can stop her."

"With the Gray Death running loose how can we arm anyone? The disease kills thousands everyday," Manie said. "Shawn and I have been to Market-Town. We've seen bodies piled high enough to fill a town square: all burning. No one can decide if my father is the one who released the Gray Death or if he's the one who wants to save them. None of them even know my mother's name. And the people who are sick are roaming the countryside freely, spreading disease and madness to other Talmorians. How are we supposed to overcome that?"

Jango turned his eyes. He looked as if she'd asked him a question he didn't have an answer for. "You're with the Protectors?" he asked.

"Yes," Manie replied.

"Good. Then the first step belongs to you. You must convince your leader to seek out new members and begin to grow your army."

"Jarod's already doing that. More people show up at the Valley of Caves every day."

Jango nodded. "Good. The more we gather on our side the stronger we become. We must build the most powerful army Talmoria has ever seen if we are to stand a chance in the wars ahead. We need a banner to unite people under. Why not the Protectors? False as they may have once been, the code they lived by was good."

"Building an army isn't going to unite the island," Manie said.

"Not on its own, but we can train them with Crystals. Swords and spears will be no use against a storm of flames and lightning."

"Who will be in charge of this army?" Shawn asked.

Jango raised his brow. "Well it certainly won't be me. I suppose for now you'll be in charge of yourselves, until a king can rise that the people want to stand behind."

"Crystals have been outlawed for a thousand years," Manie said. "How are we going to convince people to use them?"

Jango grinned as if he'd found a way to reverse the planet's rotation in his mind. "Your mother said it best herself: tell them they'll be immune."

"Immune?" Shawn asked. "Like to the Gray Death?"

"Yes, it was Shaleah's own plan—release a simple disease and offer a cure in the form of magic Crystals. No one who can control a Crystal will ever get sick. She thought it would be a way to reverse the ban Mikhail enacted nearly a thousand years ago."

"When did that become her plan?" Manie asked. "I thought the last time you spoke to her was when she trapped you in the Sour Marshes?"

Jango let out an agonizing breath, as if he'd rather that remain forgotten. "No, that wasn't the last time I spoke to her. I sent your mother away the night she told me what she'd done. I couldn't help her wake from her long sleep, so she didn't need anything more than the sleep potion. Shaleah sealed herself in a cave and cast herself adrift in time. She left clues in journals hoping that someday someone might discover who she was. And someone did find her. Nearly a thousand years later, your father unsealed that cave and brought Shaleah back to life, and just as I became your mother's weapon, she became his: a forgotten enemy strong enough to bring Talmoria to its knees. That's how Dukemot became king, through your mother's power."

"My father never loved her?" Manie asked, sounding like she was about to faint. "It was only about the crown? He told me he rescued my mother from a ship that ran aground off Talmoria's coast?"

"A sinking ship? No... I'm afraid that isn't true. I can't say for certain whether your father loved Shaleah. I never knew Dukemot. It's possible that he fell in love. But it didn't

begin that way. He'd have never known Shaleah existed at all if he hadn't learned the secret of who she was and what she'd done."

Manie looked as if all the air had been sucked out of her body. Her existence was merely a thing of vanity, created to appease a kingdom built on blood—not a child born of love.

"When your mother returned to me as queen, nearly one thousand years later, I almost didn't recognize her," Jango said. "She looked as young as you do. That's when she told me about our future of Crystals, reborn. Mikhail never was able to smother that hope from her heart like he'd been able to do in mine. She said she needed a disease, one that would make the whole island fall ill."

Manie looked as if she'd been slapped. Her cheeks grew red and her demeanor changed, becoming more threatening. "Don't say it."

"I have to," Jango admitted, strangled by the words. "I helped your mother create the Gray Death."

Manie looked like she was about to spring on Jango and murder him. "You did this? You're the one who created this disaster?"

Jango's expression twisted into misery. "I find myself unable to deny it, though the accusation isn't wholly true. What I made for Shaleah was as harmless as the common fever. She took it back to Denengear and tweaked it, to make my disease more deadly. What I created had the ability to spread to anyone it came near. What she created had the ability to *kill* anyone it came near."

"How could you do that?" Manie demanded, the words crashing out of her lips like a tsunami. "Do you know how many people I love and care about have died because of you? How can I ever trust you? You're as bad as my mother."

"She lied to me," Jango said, looking stabbed. "You don't have to trust me, you just have to believe me when I say that when your mother returns, it's not going to be in the interests of anyone living on Talmoria. We must put our pasts aside and work together to find a future. That's the only choice we have left."

A tingle climbed Shawn's arms. It would be sweet revenge to outsmart Shaleah, after what she'd done to his father and grandfather. But the path to that victory would be padded with corpses.

"I guess we know where to start, then," Manie said. "We have to cure the Gray Death."

"Cure it?" Jango asked, as if she'd spat on his hand.

Shawn was almost as stunned as Jango. Not even Milly had known the cure. But she was right. After seeing Market-Town up close, he knew they had to do something. "Building an army of Crystal users isn't a solution to all of our problems," Shawn said.

“What about children? And old people? And people who are sick or disabled? They can’t fight, and we can’t just let them die of Gray Death.”

"I suppose that’s true," Jango said. “But if we do that, we’ll have no way to convince people to adopt the Crystals. And then we’ll be left defenseless if Shaleah returns.”

“There’s no reason we can’t do both,” Shawn said. “Me and Manie can focus on a cure while you and the Protectors build up our army.”

“But where are we going to find that many Crystals? I’ve only ever seen a handful in my entire life,” Manie said.

"I have many here, but an even larger store lies hidden beneath Denengear, locked away by Mikhail himself. Shawn should be able to unlock the seal like he did at Sarratania if we need to use them. But going down that path would require convincing your father to help us, which I doubt very much he’ll agree to do, especially when an army of Protectors begin pounding on his gates."

"We don't have time to focus on my father," Manie said, her eyes wide with panic. "Don't you understand? Every hour that passes, people are dying! The Gray Death can't be reasoned with, can't be prepared for, we can't stab it with a sword or burn it with magic. It's a breath that's going to sweep across all Talmoria if we can't find a way to stop it. There won't be anyone left to build an army with."

Now Jango was the one who looked like he'd been slapped.

"We don't have time for theories or guesses," Manie continued. "My mother is a monster. She possesses great power because I gave her the Red Crystal. She's someone we should fear. But we have no idea what she's doing out there. She left Shawn and I at the Battle for the Beacons to fend for ourselves. She may never come back. But right now we do have a clear danger to face, one we do understand: the Gray Death. And it isn't going to wait for my mother's return to continue exterminating the entire island."

Jango bent his face from cheek to cheek. "You might be right."

“I know I am,” Manie said. “Now focus, Jango! How do we find a cure?”

Jango let a deep breath escape through his nose. “Come. I’ll show you what I know.”

The story will continue in the full release of:
The Crystal Keepers: Days of the Gray Death.