

THE CRYSTAL RUN

SHIELD OF LIVES

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A note from Sheila . . .

Writing for younger readers has been a wonderful experience. But even more wonderful has been hearing from so many of you. Thank you to everyone who got in touch with me saying how much you enjoyed *The Crystal Run*. I really hope you'll enjoy following Joe and Kaia's story in *The Shield of Lies*.

1

Joe Hunter was beginning to sweat.

A few minutes earlier, he'd felt very cold, so either the dimly lit room had started to heat up, or his temperature was rising because he was worried. And Joe had a good reason to be worried. He was on another world and he'd just attacked a man who was now lying unconscious on the stone floor. But it wasn't really the thin man with the severe face that concerned him. It was the girl sitting on the doctor's table in the centre of the room. The girl the man had come to see. Her name was Kaia Kukura and Joe needed her to trust him. He needed to rescue her before anyone knew he was here.

'Come on, Kaia,' he urged. 'We've got to get out of this place before that guy regains consciousness.'

She said nothing. Her wide eyes were almost black. That frightened him. Kaia's eyes adapted to the light. In the sun, they were usually a vivid blue. In a dim room like this they turned green. He'd never seen them so dark and expressionless before.

'Trust me,' he said. 'We need to find a way to get you back

to Carcassia. We have to save you and your country. Trying to save Carcassia is what got you here in the first place, remember?’

She frowned.

‘You must remember, Kaia,’ he said. ‘You were training for the Crystal Run when I suddenly turned up. Everyone thought I was a spy or a terrorist but I was sent through the Shield with you.’

She kept staring straight ahead as Joe continued talking, desperately trying to get through to her.

‘You were supposed to put Kerala crystals in sites called Loran to keep the Shield powered up,’ he said. ‘But the Loran were destroyed and we discovered the bodies of the other Runners there. It was horrible. Then we were captured and—’

‘You lie,’ said Kaia in a voice that still didn’t sound like her own. ‘No one can pass through the Carcassian Shield. You are trying to trick me.’

‘I would never trick you,’ he told her. ‘I care about you.’

Her eyes seemed to lighten for a moment and then she gritted her teeth. ‘I do not need anyone to care about me,’ she said. ‘I am a warrior.’

‘Even warriors need other people,’ said Joe. ‘We were strong together before, Kaia. We can be again.’

She said nothing.

‘We need to get out of here,’ he said. ‘We should head for the Carcassian border. From there we can try to communicate with your Leaders. That is if I can modify our

Links to use as transmitters. We have to tell them that everything they've taught you about the Run is wrong. They have to try powering down the Shield long enough for you to return.'

'The Loran,' she said slowly. 'We are betrayed.'

She was echoing the words that had been carved into the walls of the ruined sites deep in the enemy territory of Kanabia. When they'd seen them, they'd both known that the Crystal Run wasn't working out the way it was meant to.

'We are betrayed,' she repeated. 'And the Runners must die.'

Joe looked at her and shivered. Once again, her eyes were pools of black in her pale face. Her Kanabian markings, the ones she'd painted on herself as a disguise, stood out more clearly too. He noticed his own wrist for the first time. His markings had been almost invisible back on Earth but now they were stronger and brighter in the faint light of the small crystals set into the floor of the room.

'You're a Runner and I don't want you to die,' he said.

'The Carcassian Runner died when the Muqi poison entered her bloodstream. I am reborn. I am Kanabi.'

'Oh, Kaia . . .' He was close to tears. 'You seemed to remember earlier. You called to me to save you. You want to help Carcassia. I know you do. You're not a Kanabian. You never will be.'

'Get away from me, traitor!' She suddenly leaped from the table and stood in front of him, a fierce expression on her face. Then she took a few steps back before running at him

and kicking him in the stomach. Joe stumbled backwards and fell over the thin man who was still unconscious on the ground.

‘Kaia!’ he gasped. ‘Stop!’

She was close to him now and put her hands around his neck. For the first time since they’d met, Joe was truly afraid of her. He grabbed her wrists and tried to break her hold on him, but she was stronger than she looked. He kicked out as they rolled across the floor. Once or twice he connected with her body, but she didn’t seem to notice.

She was going to kill him. After everything they’d gone through together he was going to die in a Kanabian prison because of Kaia Kukura.

‘Please.’ His voice was a croak.

And then, just as he’d expected her to tighten her grip still further, she let him go and doubled over in pain.

Joe looked at her warily as she staggered across the room and knelt down beside the unconscious jailer. With trembling fingers, she opened a concealed section of the silver case. It was lined with red velvet. Small glass vials shaped like teardrops were set into individual spaces. Kaia took out a vial of orange liquid, broke the top and then swallowed the contents. Almost at once she started to groan.

Then she crawled to a corner of the room, where she sat, doubled over, occasionally crying out in pain. Joe wanted to comfort her, but every time he approached her, she moved away from him. So he waited. After what seemed like forever, she pulled herself to her knees and began to retch

violently. Steaming black liquid poured from her mouth and nose and pooled around her. Joe watched her anxiously but did nothing.

Finally, the retching stopped. She edged backwards until she was leaning against the wall. Her face was paler than ever and covered in sweat. This time Joe went to her.

‘Kaia?’

‘Sho.’ Her voice was faint. ‘Sho Hun-ter. You came.’

Joe felt a flicker of hope. She’d always called him Sho.

‘Of course I came,’ he said. ‘I came for you.’

He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently. They sat side by side for a moment and then Kaia spoke again. Her voice was a little more like her own now.

‘I am sorry I attacked you,’ she said. ‘When I am . . . when I am Kanabi I can see what I am doing. I can hear what I am saying. But I cannot stop myself.’

Although he would have liked to hold her tight to comfort her, Joe knew that Carcassians didn’t like being hugged, so instead he put his arm very gently around her shoulders. She rested her head against him.

‘I thought I had killed you,’ she said, after a moment. ‘When I threw the Kerala at the wall of power and when it exploded in a wave of light and noise I thought I had killed us all.’

‘You remember now?’ he asked. ‘All of it?’

‘I do not know exactly what I remember,’ she said. ‘But I remember that I thought you were dead.’

‘I was sent back to Earth,’ he told her. ‘The explosion

created another portal.'

'But you are here.'

'There was a machine in the hospital,' he said. 'It seemed to connect to the Link and sent me back.' He glanced at the bracelet with its decorative stones that was around his wrist. One glowed yellow, showing he was close to Kaia who'd been linked to him before they set out on the Crystal Run.

She pulled herself upright and looked at him. Her eyes were no longer entirely black. They were now a warmer shade of brown.

'Is it you again?' he asked. 'Are you all right?'

She shivered. 'I do not know. They have poisoned me with their Kanabian drugs. Everything is unclear to me.'

'Oh, Kaia. Is there anything I can do to help?'

'You helped by fighting me,' she said. 'You made me want to fight too. Fighting cleared the fog in my head and helped me recall the antidote. The Shebba uses it to bring me back. It makes me sick and I am Carcassian once more.'

Joe glanced at the unconscious man. He didn't think anyone who was supposed to be a doctor, which was what the Carcassian word meant, should be experimenting on someone the way he'd clearly been doing on Kaia.

'So . . . are you yourself again?' he asked. 'Are you better?'

Her smile was weak. 'I am not perfect, Sho Hunter. But now that you are here to help me, perhaps things will improve. At least the Shebba can give me no more of his vile concoctions. And I will not have to hear . . .' She stopped.

'Hear what?'

She shook her head. ‘The scattered thoughts of a Kanabian,’ she said. ‘It is like there is someone talking inside my head, but the words are random and I cannot properly understand what I am hearing.’

‘I’m sure that feeling will go.’

‘I hope you are right. So many things have happened recently I cannot remember what is real and what is not.’

‘Can you remember what happened to you after the explosion?’ asked Joe.

‘Thaxo Mabai and his troops brought me here.’ She shuddered at the name of the sadistic Kanabian military leader. ‘They told me that I would die like all Carcassians. But that before I did they wanted to . . .’ She closed her eyes and said nothing for a moment.

‘What, Kaia?’ asked Joe. ‘What did they want?’

‘I was the only Carcassian Runner ever to have reached the final Loran,’ she said. ‘All of the others died at either the first or second. Mabai wanted to know how I survived. The air at Zwemat and Domote is poisoned. I should not have lived. Neither should you. They need to know why I am different.’

‘Poison!’ Joe was shocked. ‘Maybe that’s why you were so tired at Zwemat, remember? And perhaps the poison helped that spider at Domote to grow the way it did. But it might only affect people from your planet. From Charra. Maybe I was immune because I’m from Earth.’

‘You may be right but I still do not know why I survived. However, it is certain that we are betrayed. The bodies of the

dead Runners at the Loran prove it. The question is, Sho Hun-ter, who has betrayed us?’

‘We’ll find out when we get out of here,’ he promised. ‘Can you walk?’

‘It will be difficult.’ She tried to stand but her legs gave way beneath her. ‘I am sorry,’ she said, as Joe caught her. ‘I used all of my strength to fight you, Sho Hun-ter, and if I had not suddenly remembered who I was, you would surely have defeated me. The drugs they used to try to find out more about my body and my mind have left me weak. But I will recover.’ She crawled towards the silver case again and looked at the remaining vials. She selected a rose pink one and broke the top. The room was filled with a soft, floral scent, which was very soothing.

Kaia swallowed that too.

‘He gives it after he punishes me,’ she told Joe. ‘The effects are temporary. But it helps to numb the pain.’ Her eyes grew even lighter and she gave him a faint smile. ‘Now, Sho, we need a plan.’

He gave her a relieved smile. She was sounding more like herself again.

‘The plan was always to find a way to warn your Leaders about what has happened here, so they don’t send any more Runners,’ said Joe.

‘But things may have changed,’ she reminded him. ‘I failed to place the Kerala. The Shield may have fallen. Carcassia may already be at war with Kanabia.’

‘And yet we know that despite the fact that we couldn’t

replace the crystals, the Shield was still working when we were captured,' Joe said. 'Hopefully it's still in place - at least as far as keeping Carcassia and Kanabia from going to war is concerned. From our point of view, if it's just a bit weaker it might make it easier to communicate through it.'

'We must go,' said Kaia. 'The Shebba will be missed soon. They will come looking for him. And although you did a really good job in attacking him, Sho Hunter, I am not sure you will be able to deal with more than one person at a time. In my current condition I am no help to you. I need more time to regain my strength.'

'I'm not sure time is something we have a lot of,' said Joe.

'We will leave now.' She got unsteadily to her feet. 'But we must restrain the Shebba first.'

Joe lifted the man on to the table where Kaia had been lying. She used the leather straps hanging down each side to secure him. Then she looked into the silver case again. She ran her fingers along the inside until she found a tiny button, which she pressed. A third, smaller, compartment of the case opened. Inside was a long, slender needle and a single vial.

'We will sedate him,' she said. 'You did a good job when you hit him earlier, but he will wake up.'

'Actually, I was sort of expecting him to wake up before now,' admitted Joe. 'I didn't mean to hit him quite so hard.'

'He is Kanabian.' Kaia's words were dismissive. 'He deserves all he gets.'

'All the same . . .'

Joe winced as she expertly injected him with a green liquid from the vials.

‘He will sleep for a day,’ she told him. ‘That should give us the time we need.’

Her steps were steadier as she walked to the shelf where Joe had found his tunic earlier. Hers was there too.

‘Please turn away, Sho Hun-ter,’ she said as she took it down.

He did as she asked. When she told him it was OK to turn around again, he beamed at her. Wearing the tunic, she looked more like the Kaia he remembered. She smiled as she started to braid her hair, although it took her longer than usual.

‘My hands are still shaking,’ she explained. ‘They have given me many drugs over the last weeks.’

‘Weeks!’ exclaimed Joe. ‘I was back on Earth for a few hours. Although,’ he admitted, ‘I’m not really sure how long I was in hospital. Even so, it seems that time passes differently here than it does on Earth. A week here seems just an hour there. I’ve seen movies where that happens.’

‘It is of no consequence,’ Kaia told him. ‘We are here now and living on borrowed time. We must find a way to tell the Leaders of Carcassia what has happened. And if the Shield has fallen, we will fight with my people against the Kanabian *Chan* until we die.’ She almost spat out ‘Chan’, the swear word the Carcassians sometimes used when talking about their enemy.

Kaia was far too keen on doing things to the death, Joe

thought, as he closed the Shebba's case. But, fortunately, despite everything they'd gone through together, neither of them had managed to die so far.

'We should take this case with us,' he said. 'I've put some crystals in it and the vials could be useful.'

'I do not know what all of his potions do,' Kaia told him. 'But you are right. We will take it.'

'Maybe more crystals too,' he said. 'They help to power my mobile phone and even though I can't use it as a phone, it's a useful compass.'

Kaia nodded. They no longer had the rucksacks that had been given to them before they set off from Carcassia, but there was a type of duffle bag on one of the shelves and she began to fill it with the small crystals. She also took some coloured ribbons, like the Flagali that the Carcassians had used to tie Joe up when they'd first captured him, and a selection of small pots filled with what looked to Joe like different-coloured pastes.

'Healing balm,' she told him when he asked her what they were. 'They are not as effective as the Shebba's potions but they are helpful.'

'Anything else here that we could take?' asked Joe. 'Food, for example?'

'You are always hungry, Sho,' she said. 'But I am sorry. The Kanabians do not give much food to their prisoners.'

'They starved you?' He was horrified.

'They gave me Lukka,' she said. 'It is a kind of soup. That is all.'

‘No wonder you look so awful,’ he said.

‘I do not wish to look awful,’ she said. ‘I wish to look like I always look.’

‘You’ve only had soup to drink and nothing to eat. And they’ve been pumping you full of drugs! For someone who’s gone through what you’ve gone through, you look great,’ Joe assured her.

‘I think you are being kind.’ Kaia pulled the cord of the duffle bag tightly closed. Then she took a deep breath and stood up as straight as she could. ‘The time has come. Let us escape.’

‘At last,’ said Joe. ‘Escape it is.’