

## **The Crystal Keeps**

**by Luke Johnston**

General Maxawan Koro gazed down the hill at the battle raging below him. Swords and arrows flashed in the moonlight as the screams of the wounded cut through the darkness. Ahead, the obsidian outpost stood tall and ominous with its balcony jutting out from under the roof. The outpost's defenses were stronger than Max had expected. His men had come ill-prepared. Unless Max intervened, the siege would fail.

Max drew his sword and summoned its power. The Shacra crystal in the sword's hilt began to glow. When it reached its full brilliance, Max pointed his sword toward the dark clouds and shot up into the air, arcing through the night toward the outpost.

Some flyers could hover and twirl and spin, but Max was not so skilled. The best he could manage was to shoot up like a cannonball and let gravity take its course. If power remained in the crystal before he touched down, he could shoot up again, bouncing among the clouds like a feather in the wind.

Air rushed around him as he descended, his armor gleaming in the moonlight. Max smiled. He never felt more alive than when he was flying.

He cut the crystal's power as he was neared the outpost. Then he threw down bits of magic toward the ground in quick succession to slow his descent. He stopped and fell and stopped and fell, like a man descending a giant invisible staircase. The maneuver helped, but he still landed hard, crashing down onto the balcony he had spied before. A gust of wind exploded

outward from the impact, blowing back the soldiers nearby. The lucky ones hit the guardrail and broke a few ribs. The unlucky ones were blown off the wall and fell to their deaths.

The soldiers still standing drew their weapons. Most had swords. Two carried pistols. A lone soldier with an eye patch and thin moustache held a red crystal dagger. Arcronium.

“Surrender.” Max said calmly. “Drop your weapons and I will let you go.”

The men hesitated. They could all see Max’s crystal sword, pulsing with magic. Such swords were not to be trifled with.

The man with the dagger finally spoke. “I am Fidealis, commander of this station, and fit to speak in the Conqueror’s place. Who are you to attack us?”

Max lowered his sword and straightened his back. “I am Maxawan, General of the Rebel Army, fifth in line to the Supreme Commander. Drop your weapons or die.”

“Fool,” the man said flatly. “The Conqueror will not stand for this. Even if you take this outpost, your victory will be fleeting. The Conqueror will kill you all.”

“That is not your concern.” Max said.

A soldier leveled his pistol and fired.

Max moved lightning fast, shooting into the air. To the soldiers, it was as if Max had vanished, the bullet passing harmlessly where he had stood. They stared in stunned silence. Then Max landed again, blowing back several soldiers with another gust of wind. His sword slashed outward, and more soldiers went down. He didn’t stop. Nor did his sword. Some of the soldiers gave a good fight, but none of them were as skilled as Max. When the battle was over, only a few soldiers from the outpost remained.

Fidealis’s hands were shaking, his face pale.

Max realized too late that it was a trick. He lunged at Fidealis, and suddenly a host of feelings invaded Max's mind. He was sick. He was tired. He was grieving. He was starving. He was furious. The sensations and emotions kept coming, and Max could barely think.

Fidealis laughed and raised his left hand, where a black jewel sat on a ring. Racko. The crystal of the mind.

Max crumpled to the ground, holding his head. Fidealis was invading his thoughts, placing emotions and sensations in rapid succession. Max dimly remembered the class he'd taught the students at home, about how the body shuts down when the mind is invaded, possibly forever. Max had to get out of here.

Fidealis's knife stabbed Max in the gut, but Max barely noticed. His ears pounded. The world was screaming in his head.

Wait. Screaming?

*My troop*, he thought dimly. *They need me.*

The thought cleared his mind a little. He woozily pointed his sword at the dark sky and shot away, blood trailing behind him. His blood. The wind zipped around him. There was a burning pain in his side. It was hard to focus. The world was spinning. His grip loosened on his blade. He was flying. Or was he falling?

Darkness was creeping at the edge of Max's vision. *I'm dying*, he thought.

Then Max blacked out.

#

Max awoke on a cot in a small tent full of various jars. Waman, the troop healer, crouched beside him, holding a cup and looking nervous. Waman's grey eyes brightened when Max began to move. "Oh, thank the birthstone. You're awake"

Waman opened a jar and poured a little Acronium dust into the cup. Then he pulled up the sleeve of his healer's robe and stirred the liquid with his finger. "Here. Drink this."

Max downed the cup, and instantly he felt better. At least, he felt a little bit better than being dead.

"Waman. . ." Max coughed, "How did I get here? What happened? The outpost, the battle. . ." Max coughed again.

Waman grimaced. "You fell out of the sky. Reinforcements from the Conqueror had engaged us, but everyone stopped fighting and watched you fall, your sword glowing in the night. You fell so fast no one could do anything. You hit the ground and . . ." He hesitated.

Max's blood went cold. "And?"

Waman looked down. "Your sword broke."

Max gagged. "What?" The room seemed to be tilting.

Waman nodded, frowning. "You landed on the enemy side and vaporized almost their entire army. The survivors freaked out and ran. You know what the common people think about crystals."

Max could barely hear him. "How did I survive?"

Waman shrugged. "I'm not sure why the explosion didn't kill you, but I think some leaking magic protected you. You were still pretty burned up when we found you. Gave your daughter a heart attack."

A lump formed in Max's throat. "Does she know I'm alright?"

"She's been in and out since she got here. But come now, you look tired. I'll prepare more juice."

"No, I'm good." Max insisted. He sat up, but immediately wished he hadn't. "On second thought, I'll have the juice."

He drank and felt better.

"Can you stand now?" Waman asked.

"Now I can." Max said, rising to his feet. "Thanks for the help."

"Call if you need more help."

Max exited the tent and breathed deeply. He was standing by a row of tents on either side of each other. Rebels milled around, doing daily business. The sun was setting, casting an orange glow. A cool breeze blew through. Another day at the rebel camp.

"Maxawan Alexander Koro!"

Shuwia Cassandra Koro was marching toward Max. She was wearing a blue magic T-shirt and ripped jeans. Her black Racko knife hung at her side, a respectable weapon for someone thirteen years old. Her long chocolate brown hair was in a ponytail with a golden band. She had blue eyes, and would have looked beautiful if not for the look of murder on her face.

Max cringed. "Hello, Shu."

Max's daughter punched him in the arm. "If you ever, EVER, do some crazy stunt like that again I swear, I will have the doctors heal you so I can personally kill you!" She glared at Max.

"I've been waiting all day, and I was so sure that you were dead! Then I'd be an orphan, alone and a fugitive, all because you're an idiot!" She trembled. Her furious face broke, and a tear fell down to the ground. "If. . . If you had died. . . not after mom. . ." a sob escaped her, and she buried her face into her hands.

Another lump appeared in Max's throat. He embraced his daughter. She hugged him back. Both of them stood there for a few minutes, refusing to let go of each other.

Finally, Shuwia pulled away and looked up at her father, her face red and wet with tears. "Dad, the council wanted to know if you were awake. They're having another meeting and they sent me to check if you could come."

Max nodded numbly and took a shaky breath. "I'll come."

#

When they entered the council tent, the meeting had already started. The tent was the size of a house with about forty people inside. Fourteen generals sat at the head, clothed in white robes. A general spoke to the audience, telling of the invasion of the East Keep. Shuwia sat with the audience. Max joined the Generals but felt embarrassed with his tattered clothes.

The speaker noticed Max's arrival. He turned, and Max saw his face. It was Acros, one of the lesser generals who wanted Max's position. He had thin black greasy hair and brooding gray eyes. His nose was broken from battle, and his face was contorted into a sneer.

"Ah, our savior has decided to show up." He said dryly, his voice dripping with sarcasm. A few snickers ran through the audience.

Anger smoldered in Max's gut. He gritted his teeth.

"I am sorry to say that you missed the debriefing," Acros said triumphantly. "The council was just about to find a solution to the problem."

Max frowned. "Problem? What problem?"

"They didn't tell you?" Acros said with delight. "I thought an oh-so-important member of the council like you would know everything."

More snickers. Max clenched his fists.

One of the other generals coughed. "General Koro has just recovered from his, ah, injury. None of us has had the chance to debrief."

"Of course, of course." Acros turned to Max. "The problem I was referring to is that the Conqueror has shipped a large supply of Shacra crystals to the East Keep. Such a risky action is unlike him."

"How much did he ship?" Max asked.

Acros hesitated. Evidently he hadn't told the audience. "Five pounds."

The tent exploded with questions and exclamations, but Max barely heard them. Five pounds of Shacra crystal? That was more than enough to make a sword.

"ENOUGH!" shouted a councilman. The talking stopped. The man took a deep breath.

“We are aware of the unusual quantity of the shipment. Obviously the Conqueror has learned of our plan to take all four of the border keeps. Since we have now captured two of them, the Conqueror wants defenses made. The problem is how to bypass the defenses and obtain the crystals before soldiers retreat with them.

“A quest.” proclaimed Max.

Everyone looked at him.

“If a few men entered East Keep stealthily, then we could steal the crystal and shut down the defenses. Then the army could come in and capture the keep.”

The audience started whispering. The council looked thoughtful.

“It could work,” said a councilman. “but who would do such a thing? It will be extremely difficult to succeed.”

“I will go,” said Max. He stepped forward. “Who will join me on the quest?”

Silence. Everyone hesitated.

“NO WAY.” Shuwia stood up fiercely. “My father has almost died, and you want to send him on another mission? He hasn’t recovered yet!”

“You’re right,” said Acros slyly. “It’s too dangerous for our savior.”

“I will go,” Max said firmly. “Who will join me?”

“Fine,” Shuwia said. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“Shu, no,” Max said. “It’s far too dangerous for—”

“Save it.” She interrupted. “I am not letting you out of my sight again.” She silenced Max with a look.



“Fine,” Max said. He knew there was no arguing with his daughter. He looked around.

“Anyone else?”

“I will go,” Waman strode forward. He raised out a hand to Max. “I may not be a fighter, but it sounds like you won’t need much fighting.”

Max grinned and shook Wamans hand. “You got it.”

“I will go as well.” A man walked forward. He was a thin man with brown ragged hair. He had green eyes, with jet black clothes. He carried a long bow, and a quiver of arrows hung across his back. His mouth was a slash of determination.

He raised out his hand to Max. “I am David, chief archer of the rebellion. I want a chance to prove my worth, and this seems like the way to do it.”

Max nodded to the man. He then looked to the council. “All in favor of the quest?”

Fifteen hands rose.

“We have the majority.” Acros growled. He was one of the people that had voted against Max. “Tomorrow these men will travel to the east keep and either receive great rewards. . .”

He grimaced. Then, after a second he smiled.

“ . . .or die alone, as a failure to the rebellion.”

#

Shuwia hated quests.

She had woken up at dawn to hike to the nearest train station three hours away. The bog was full of bugs and mud, stinging her arms and sucking in her boots. Her travel pack weighed

her down, cutting into her skin. She was caked in mud and soaking wet, and she didn't dare check her hair. Her father and the other men talked to each other about the war and troops and whatnot, but Shuwia didn't speak. She didn't have anything to say. She didn't know anything about the war or strategy.

When Shuwia had signed up for this quest, it hadn't been because she wanted to go on an adventure, or because she wanted to do her part. It was really because Shuwia couldn't stand it if her father went on another mission. She had to make sure that this time her father didn't get himself killed.

She checked her watch. It was ten, and dad had predicted that the hike would last until noon. Two more hours to go.

*It's ok, thought Shuwia. It could be worse.*

She hiked for another thirteen minutes. Then it started to rain.

The rain got in her eyes and soaked into her boots, making her miserable.

*Ok then, she thought, it's worse.*

She continued on, trying to ignore the water running down her neck.

Another fifteen minutes passed until Shuwia finally gave in. "Can't we make a shelter or something and wait out the rain?" she demanded.

Her father turned and shook his head. "Sorry, Shu. There's nothing dry to build a shelter with. There's an inn up by the train station. We can rest there. You'll just have to wait."

"You know you can die from hyperthermia from this weather?" Shuwia complained.

"Oh come on," sighed Max. "It's not that bad."

Thunder boomed. It started to rain even harder.

The next two hours were the the worst time in Shuwia's life. Several times she fantasized running away and seeking shelter, but Shuwia knew her father was right. He was always right.

The rain sobered everyone, and they slogged ahead in silent misery. Shuwia could feel every single painful step she took. Her only thought was:

*I'm dying. I'm dying. I'm dying.*

When they finally made it out of the bog, everyone was drenched and tired and cold. They must have looked strange when they entered the inn, soaked to the bone, with weapons on their backs. Shuwia didn't care. She could've kissed the sweet, beautiful, DRY floor of the inn.

Max called out, "We're looking for a room for the night."

"We don't serve militia," growled the barkeeper. "Shove off, and have the good sense never to come back."

"We're not militia," said Max calmly. "We're peaceful travelers who missed the last inn."

The innkeeper glared at Max. "Don't try to lie, soldier scum. No traveler would dare carry a weapon here. Go away."

Max looked around the inn for help, but the rest of the country men seemed to agree with the innkeeper.

"Please sir, just until the rain let's out? I'll pay double," pleaded Max.

"No," the innkeeper said.

Max turned around gestured to the others. "Come on, we'll have to walk to the train station."

“No way!” cried Shu. It would at least take an hour to walk to the train station and the weather wasn’t letting up. Shu never wanted to go out there again.

“Shu, there’s nothing we can do,” said Max. “Now come on!”

Then Shu had an idea. She drew her knife.

“Sorry dad, there is something we can do.”

She pointed her knife at the innkeeper. Power flooded through her, and the room became buzzing with energy. The hair on the back of Shuwia’s neck stood up. Everyone was looking at her, their faces blank and eyes glazed.

“You,” she intoned, her voice layered and hypnotic. She pointed at the Innkeeper.

The innkeeper went rigid, his eyes wide.

I’m getting better at this, Shuwia thought. She straightened her back. “You want to give us a room, first class.”

The innkeeper nodded. His eyes were rolling to the back of his head.

Shu sheathed her knife.

Instantly, the room snapped back to normal. The innkeeper went back to his business. He appeared to be startled when he saw Shuwia and the others standing there.

“What are you doing here, dripping wet? You know my rules. I’ll have you thrown out if you don’t go back to your room now.”

Shuwia turned to grin at Max but discovered that she was swaying. When had she gotten so tired? Her father was calling to her from a long tunnel. She shouldn’t have done that trick. It was too hard; she wasn’t ready for it. She was so tired.

She passed out before she hit the ground.

#

Shuwia woke up dry and refreshed. The sun was shining, birds chirped, and Shuwia's mind was buzzing with energy. She was sitting in a train — and not just any train, but a bullet train, a machine for royals, far too expensive for someone like Shu.

“I'm dreaming,” she said.

“Nope. Not a dream.”

Shuwia turned to find Max sitting on a stool, smiling at her. Waman and the archer were snoring on their bunks.

“You managed to trick that innkeeper into thinking we were royalty,” Max said.

He looked better, with dry clothes and freshly cut hair. Shuwia discovered that she had been treated well also. Her hair was braided, and her clothes were new: a black jacket and polished combat boots.

“The innkeeper hired a coach to drive us to the nearest station. He paid for our train then, under the promise for us to pay him back. I think the resistance will handle that.” Max was beaming with pride. “You did amazing, Shu. That was a highly advanced mental attack, and you did it perfectly. I didn't know you knew how to do that.”

“How long was I out?” Shuwia asked.

Her father's smile faded a little. “Three days.” Max hurried on when he saw Shuwia's face. “We knew you'd be okay. It was just a matter of your body restoring the energy you used up.”

Shuwia's head was spinning. Three days! She had never slept longer than eight hours, let alone three days! She'd heard about this happening, but she had never thought that it would happen to her. What she did at the inn, that was luck! She was desperate! She had just relied on her instincts! She shivered. Despite what her father had said, the trick was dangerous. She could've died. She'd seen it, kids overextending and burning themselves up. What if that had happened to her?

Max must've known what she was thinking, because he changed the subject. "At any rate, we should reach the East Keep by noon. This will be the easiest mission I've ever done."

Good, thought Shuwia. She was done with quests.

She opened her mouth to speak when an explosion rocked the train. Everyone jumped up.

"I had to say that," cursed Max. He grabbed his sword. "Everyone off the train! Grab all the provisions you can and get out!"

Another explosion rocked the train off the tracks. Shuwia shouted as the train landed on its side and she was thrown to the wall.

Searing pain appeared at her side. She must've broken a few ribs. Fire raged all around her. The roof was collapsing in several places. Smoke choked her. Where was everybody?

She fell to her knees and crawled away, trying to find the exit. She coughed. She was going to die. Her father and the others were probably already dead. She should just lay down and sleep. Just sleep forever.

Those thoughts weren't hers. Why was she thinking that?

She turned around and screamed.

A monster stood behind her. It was at least ten feet tall and had the body of an ordinary man, but it was solid black head to toe. The blackness seemed to be pulling at her, sucking her into the monster. It was reaching out to touch her.

She scooted away, as more thoughts and images came to her.

She saw her father and Waman, standing over her own twisted dead body. Regret showed on Max's face.

“She wasn't ready for it. I really thought she'd be ready for it.” Max said sadly. He turned and walked away. “I guess she just didn't have what it takes.”

She tried to shake the thoughts, but they were snaking into her brain, paralyzing her. Shuwia found herself helpless when the thing reached out to touch her.

#

Shuwia was surprised to find out that she wasn't dead. She was lying on the ground in a forest. Night had fallen. Max and David sat at a campfire, roasting some meat. They greeted her warmly when they saw that she was awake.

“Hey, Shu. Good to see you awake,” said Max.

Shuwia sat up, rubbing her head. “How long was I out this time?”

“About eight hours,” said David. He patted for Shuwia to sit next to him. She did, grabbing some meat as she did so.

“What happened?” asked Shu as she wolfed down the food. She hadn't eaten in three days.

Max grimaced. “We were ambushed. The Conqueror wanted us dead. The train exploded because of some Mutate and everyone was panicking.

“Everyone managed to escape except for you and Waman. I waited for a few minutes, then went back in and found Waman dead. He’d been crushed by a falling board and long gone when I saw him.”

Horror crept through Shuwia. Waman was dead? No, no. Impossible. He couldn’t be dead.

“When I found you,” continued Max. “you were unconscious and a Mutate was about to touch you. I fought it off and dragged you here. Fortune is with us, we’re only a few miles from the East Keep. I managed to get some healing dust from Waman’s body. I was able to heal your ribs. We’ve been waiting for you to wake up ever since.”

“What’s a Mutate?” Shuwia asked. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

The air seemed to get colder. Max grimaced.

“About a thousand years ago, in the time of 2343, a man named Herbert Jones discovered the birthstone, a huge crystal with tremendous power. It could energize towns without electricity, revolutionize technology, and when joined together with ordinary weapons make amazing things happen.”

“Yeah, yeah, the people split the birthstone to make the first lightstones,” Shuwia interrupted. “Dad, we know that already. But I’m asking about those Mutate things.”

“I’m getting to that!” Max snapped. He took a deep breath.



“At first, when everyone heard about the lightstones, they were thrilled,” Max continued. “Nations joined together. Wars ceased. And everyone became known as the People of Earth. For awhile, everything was paradise.”

Shuwia shivered. She knew what happened next. The Great War, or World War Three, as the Ancients called it, became known as the bloodiest war in history within the first month. Whole continents were wiped out, including Europe and Australia. Shuwia scooted closer to the fire as Max continued.

“In the end it was Russia, which became known as the Dominance, against Canada, which became known as the Anarchist. They had both claimed hundreds of countries, and at the place which was once Ukraine they attacked head on.

“Each side wanted more power. They tried to get the upper hand, but it was a very bloody stalemate. Then the Dominance had a revelation. They thought that if joining crystals with weapons makes tremendous power, wouldn’t joining the crystals with humans work even better?”

Shuwia had never heard about this before. She leaned in.

“It was too much,” said Max. “The power of the crystals was uncontrollable, and all who used it had a choice. Live forever, but have your mind twisted and become a monster, or have the power for a few minutes, and burn to ashes. The good ones died.”

Max paused to eat a piece of his meat. He swallowed and went on.

“The monsters were finally controlled, but the whole world was exhausted from endless war. It was the perfect time for the Conqueror to begin taking over the world.”

The archer, David, spoke next. "I was always taught that the Conqueror just took everybody by surprise."

"Lies," Max said. He took another bite of his meat. "The Mutate we saw was infused with Racko, which is how it was projecting feelings everywhere." He shivered. "That's how it found you, Shu. Because of your knife. "The only question now is, where'd the Mutate come from? They've been dead for five hundred years."

"Wait," said Shuwia. Panic was flooding through her. "You're saying the Mutate can sense Racko daggers?"

Her answer came a moment later when soldiers stepped out of the shadows, the dark Mutate standing among them, nearly invisible in the night.

Shuwia drew her knife. The archer drew his bow, an arrow already notched. Max unsheathed his sword.

"You're surrounded." A man stepped out of the shadows. He had a thin mustache and an eye patch. He held a red dagger. He was smiling coldly at Max.

"Fidealis," Max said.

Fidealis sneered. "Maxawan. I thought you were dead."

"Lots of people tell me that," Max said. "What do you want?"

"You'll have to come with us," Fidealis grinned. "The party's just starting."

#

Shuwia and the others stood in a circle surrounded by soldiers. The East Keep loomed over them. Fidealis was gloating over his victory.

“Soon your precious resistance will arrive, expecting an easy victory that will never come. The defenses will be charged at full power. The resistance will be crippled, and then the Conqueror will send his armies and wipe out everything. All because of this.” He gestured to a box some soldiers were carrying. The soldiers opened the box, and inside was a heap of glowing green crystals.

“The resistance will still win!” David shouted.

Fidealis laughed. “Let them try.”

Max lunged at a guard and grabbed the man’s sword, striking the men senseless with the hilt. Then he leaped and grabbed a handful of crystals.

The soldiers froze, a look of terror on their faces.

Fidealis laughed. “It’s too late, Maxawan. You can’t do anything with the crystal. If you try to infuse it into that sword, we’ll kill you all.”

Max didn’t hesitate. He ripped open his shirt and pressed the crystals against his chest.

“No!” Shuwia yelled. But it was too late. The crystal melted into Max’s chest. An instant later her father’s body began to glow with a green aura as it lifted off the ground.

One brave soldier charged.

Max raised a hand, and a green beam of energy shot from his palm. The man fell backward.

The other soldiers ran, but Max was quicker. Shuwia watched as her father destroyed all the Conqueror's forces. The Resistance arrived too, and a war raged around her. Shuwia saw men dying left and right. She didn't kill anyone, only knocked them out or wounded them. It seemed to last for eternity.

Suddenly, the battle was over. It ended as quickly as it had started. The Resistance had won, and a flag was put at the top of the keep.

Then she saw her father.

He was lying on the ground and smoking. The green light was gone and Max's breathing was erratic.

"Dad!" Shuwia cried, horrified.

Max's voice was barely a whisper. "Shu."

She reached for him but pulled back. He was hot to the touch.

"It's okay, dad," said Shuwia, trying not to panic. "The healers are coming. You'll be fine."

"So much power," he said. Was he getting hotter?

"Hang on, Dad. Please."

A tear rolled down Max's face and Shuwia found her own vision blurring as well.

"It's too late," Max whispered. "I have to die. It's either this or be a monster."

"No," Shuwia begged. "Please."

"I love you Shu." He started to melt.

"NO!" screamed Shu. She sobbed as her father melted to dust.

"Goodbye, Dad." Shuwia whispered. Tears rolled down her face.

What would happen now? She was an orphan. Alone.

She saw the healers tending the wounded, men who had fought for what they believed.

Like her father.

She was alone.

No.

“Shu. . .” said David carefully. “It’s time to go.”

Shuwia stood up. She sheathed her knife. Max had died for what he believed in. He would want Shuwia to continue that belief.

“I’m coming,” she said. “Let’s go home.”