

*The Legend of the Crystal  
Dragon*

*by  
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The greatest impediment to progress is the illusion of knowledge.

Jessica sat in the now quiet office of StarQuake Engineers, Inc. The sign on the building said, "Union Certified Starship Engineers. Redesigns, Upgrades, Repairs: No Job too big. No job too small." Mornings here were chaos. Jack and his Uncle Henry, who everyone called Hank, organized work crews for the various projects on starships in orbit. Well, they called it organizing. Jessica only saw the chaos, but what did she know? This was her first job since returning home to Benara-3 from college on Etron. She busied herself with the next pile of estimates that Hank left for her to do. Jessica much preferred it when young Jack was around. While she took a break to get some java she 'wandered' through Jack's office. His degrees were on the walls in nice black frames. That is where his sense of organization seemed to crash and burn. His desk was awash in papers and drawings. A picture of Jack's parents barely peered over the stack of papers in front of them. They had been killed in the Jag wars. Hank told her that it was still heavy on Jack's soul and a subject to avoid.

Uncle Henry's desk, on the other hand was much more organized. It wasn't exactly clean, but everything certainly had its place. There were books in strange alien languages on his bookshelf next to some equipment catalogs. And then there was that small crystal dragon. It sat out of the way where most people would not even notice, but it reminded Jessica of why her father had warned her that old Henry Morgan "did not have both oars in the water." She had to admit that he was certainly a very odd person, but he was very nice to her and never said anything at all to make her feel uncomfortable. He was incredibly intelligent. All of the starship engineers trusted his technical advice absolutely. In fact, she had answered calls from some very exotic places for Hank's expert advice. Even so, there was that crystal dragon... and that workshop door with the padlock on it. Hank didn't even trust the office computer for its security. Now that was odd.

"Jess?" she heard the call come in from Jack.

"Yes," she replied across the room to the videophone on her desk.

"I ran into a problem here. I need you to get me these supplies." The list was already printing out.

"Can you do that?" His dimples deepened when he smiled at her. She blushed.

"Of course, I can. I have an Engineering degree, remember?" She recovered.

"Of course, you do. OK, I need it on a shuttle up here as soon as possible." The screen went black.

What was going to be Jessica's quiet morning turned back into chaos as she now pressed suppliers for equipment and fast deliveries. None of them were used to taking the orders from her. They wanted word from Jack or Hank, but she stood her ground and got her supplies.

It was late afternoon before she knew what time it was again. Crews were beginning to come in. That was a bit odd too. The work crews were made up of humans, not androids. Why were humans doing heavy labor in this day and age? It certainly wasn't necessary. And they all

seemed to call each other by some very odd nick-names. She was sure that she had heard them refer to Jack as 'One-Eyed-Jack' despite the fact that he obviously had two perfectly fine eyes, at least by Jessica's observation. There were a few women amongst the contractors, but it was mostly men. Except for the reprogramming jobs, work aboard the starships was mostly hot, heavy, dirty, dangerous work. The contractors were all milling about, talking and laughing and filing their job reports and time sheets. Chaos began all over.

In the midst of this chaos, a woman in dirty green millwright coveralls and grease on her face made her way through standing groups of men to Jess's desk.

"Hi Calamity!" Jess greeted her when she looked up. Her real name was Laura Jane, but everyone called her 'Calamity.' Calamity leaned down so that only Jessica could hear her.

"He's up to something," she whispered to Jessica. "He has been all smiles all day... and he was busy making all these private phone calls. He's asking you out. It's just gotta be."

Jess smiled. "That would be nice."

"Yeah, look at her get all blushy-faced. 'That would be nice',' OK. See you later." And with that she left.

Hank came in and went right to his office. Jack arrived about an hour later. Jess was getting the routine down now. When there were ships in orbit it was going to be a long day.

"Thanks for staying late," Jack said to her when things had once more quieted down. "Would you let me take you out for some dinner? It's the least we can do for keeping you so late."

"Sure. I would like that." She smiled at him. He smiled at her. Then they left for dinner.

Hank watched them leave.

When they were gone, Hank unlocked the door to the private workshop and closed it quietly behind him. Consoles and equipment led the way to a flat panel display in the corner. Hank looked at the display very carefully for some time. He referred to an alien book for some time before turning out the lights, locking up and heading for home.

Jessica and Jack talked mostly about work things for the short trip to Hagar's. She had heard of the place but had never been there. It was very expensive. The view of the river gorge and waterfall from the dining room was breathtaking. Their table was right next to the window. Jack really had spent quite a bit of time and effort setting all of this up. Calamity was right on. The wine came, and they returned to light conversation.

"... After college I just felt that my heart was with my family and so I came back to Benara-3," Jess told him before she realized what had just come out of her mouth. She couldn't take it back now.

"My whole family was captured by the Jags," Jack said to her in a low voice meant only for her ears. "We were herded into a cargo container with four other families. By the time that

Hank's ship caught up with the Jags, there were only three of us left alive. I stayed with Hank and we settled here."

"Oh my God! I can't even imagine how horrible that must have been," Jessica gasped.

"What doesn't kill you makes you strong. I was pretty messed up at first. Uncle Hank helped me to find my inner strength and turn my hatred and rage into a positive force."

"Well, you sure seem to have done that with StarQuake."

"Oh yeah, I guess that too," Jack answered. "Enough about me, tell me about your family."

The food came as Jessica switched into high gear and began speed-talking about her brothers and sisters. It's what she did when she was nervous. Jack just kept smiling at her the whole time and nodding as he ate. Jessica's narrative went speeding through the wonderful qualities of her mother, Alice and then to her father, Ben.

"My Dad is a veteran. He fought in the Battle of the Benaran Nebula. He was a gunner's mate."

She stopped. "I am speed-talking. I am boring you to death."

"Oh No. No, not at all. Please go on. I can't remember the last good conversation I've had with anyone but Uncle Hank. I am enjoying this. Go on... please.

"Well OK, but you have to talk too."

"OK. I'll do my best."

"I really like Uncle Hank," Jessica began once more.

"You say that like maybe you didn't think you would."

"People did tell me that he was..." Jessica searched for the right word.

"Crazy," Jack filled in for her with a half a mouth full of steak.

"Well... yeah. They said he believed in the *Crystal Dragon*."

"And you don't?"

"My Father said that the *Crystal Dragon* was just a myth, a legend. It never really existed. It was just a story that some people told."

"And so then, I'll only be asking you this: If the *Crystal Dragon* didn't save all of those people that terrible day, then who did?" Jack asked her.

"My Dad says the nebula was so thick that the Union starships couldn't even see ten meters. He says that their sensors were useless. He says that in that blinded confusion, the Jag ships just started shooting at each other until they all were destroyed."

Jack looked her right in the eyes. There was fire in his eyes as he told her, "The way I heard it, those Jag ships knew perfectly well where their other ships were and, in all probability, knew exactly where those Union ships were too. They were closing in slowly for the kill when the *Crystal Dragon* hit them from behind. The *Dragon* just plain out flew them and out gunned them. The *Dragon* tore them to shreds."

A long moment passed. Women hear more than the words that are spoken.

“You say that like you were there... like you saw it with your own eyes.”

Jack hesitated. “So, I heard,” he said looking down and went back to his steak.

“But the *Crystal Dragon* was a Pirate ship, wasn't she?”

Jack put down his fork and thought for a second. “Now that would all be a matter of opinion.”

“Opinion? How could that be an opinion? Story has it that she was declared an outlaw ship by the Union. I would think that should be pretty clear.”

“Yes, opinion,” Jack told her. “So you discover this ‘technology’ on a planet that is well outside of Union space. It cannot possibly be subject to Union laws. There is just no way that the *Dragon* is an outlaw ship.”

“Then that would be exactly what any Union Court of law would declare.”

“Yes. I expect that it probably would, for all of the good that it would do you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Your ship and all of its ‘discovered alien technology’ would first be impounded as evidence and brought into space dock. The Feds would boot your boney butt off of your own ship for three to five years, which is how long the court battles would last. It would cost you a fortune in legal fees to get back what was rightfully yours in the first place. In the mean time they take your ship and move it from place to place to make it all but impossible for you to keep track of. They disassemble it, dissect it, and just plain steal all of your valuable intellectual property and there would be nothing you could do to stop them. In the end, you would win back a derelict dysfunctional disassembled ship.”

“Oh, I see,” Jessica considered. “I guess you are probably right”

“I know that I'm right. While you would be fighting the battles in court, the Admirals would all be getting rich doling out your valuable alien technology to their corporate cohorts and you would be left with pooka. That's just how the system works.” Jack picked his fork back up and finished his steak.

“So why do the guys all call you ‘One-Eyed-Jack’?” Jessica changed the subject.

Jack laughed. “Well, there was this card game. I was just a punk kid. I took that game so life-and-death serious. I won it by drawing a One-Eyed-Jack. I was so excited. The guys all had such a good laugh over it that they have called me ‘One-Eyed-Jack’ ever since. I kind of like it.” Conversation turned to lighter topics after that. Jack flew her home after dinner and kissed her goodnight.

Jack and Jessica grew closer every day. He gave her a beautiful crystal necklace that she wore all the time. Things were going so well between them that Jessica quickly forgot how intense their conversation had been that night...

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Jack was asleep when the crystal charm that he wore as a necklace began beeping and flashing red. At first it was on the fringes of his consciousness, but he awoke with a start when he realized what it was – Jags! Uncle Hank burst into his room.

“Jack! Jack!”

“I’m up!”

Ten-thousand kilometers away, Jessica was awakened by an incessant beeping and the sound of Jack’s voice, “Jess! Jess! Wake up!”

“OK. OK. I’m awake. I’m awake but how...”

“The crystal necklace, but no time for that. Don’t you hear the Jag Alarms? Why aren’t you all scrambling? Didn’t anyone come to wake you?”

Come to think of it, she could hear something in the distance.

“No one pays any attention to those old alarms any more. There haven’t been any Jags for the last fifteen years. What are you talking about?” She was confused and not really awake.

“Jess, you listen to me and you listen good. I am not crazy, and I am certainly not I delusional. There are four Jag Cruisers in orbit right now and three more on approach. Listen to me. Listen and live. You have to do what I tell you or you and your family will surely die...”

“Mom! Dad! Wake up! Everybody up!” Jessica shouted in the hall and kept it up until they all were. Finally, her father came out of his bedroom.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” He had a pulse rifle in his hands.

“Jags! The Jags are back. They’re coming now! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Oh, my Dear God! What nonsense is this? That damned Henry Morgan has made my daughter crazy!”

“I am not crazy. Jack called...”

“Jack Morgan? Henry Morgan? It’s all the same. They have you believing all of this ridiculous Jag nonsense!” That’s when Ben heard the old Jag Alarm sounding in the distance.

Jessica’s Dad could see the action from a second story window. The Jags were like a nightmare from mankind’s distant past. They came in many shapes and colors and could only be adequately described as gargoyles or demons. The Union had named them the ‘Jatarian Alien Group’, which everyone quickly shortened to Jags. Had their ancestors visited our ancestors ours on Earth sometime in the distant past? No one really knows. All they knew was that they were still our worst nightmare. They were smart, and they were ruthless, and the Jags only had one use for humans – to kill them. Was it an ancient vendetta? But there was no negotiating anything with the Jags. Jags don’t negotiate, and they only take prisoners to kill them slowly later... just for pleasure.

Their house was high up on a hill and well hidden in the woods, but it would not take the Jags long to find it. Everyone dressed quickly in the dark. There were three pulse rifles that came out of Ben's closet. Her Dad and two brothers would protect the women. Jessica's mother, Alice was crying softly.

"Don't scare the kids," Ben told her.

"What will we do?" she sobbed.

"Well, if we stay here we will surely die," Jessica told them. "Jack told me that we have to get to Shelter 47. He said that he would come for us as soon as he could, but we have to get there now."

Ben considered his options. "Gather behind me. We are going to Shelter 47."

"Do they still exist after all these years?" Alice asked Ben softly as they left the house.

"I sure hope so," he whispered back to only her.

They did well. Benjamin Talbot moved his family quickly away from the danger by moving them from cover to cover. They moved silently out toward where Ben knew the old shelters once were, in the foothills a few kilometers outside of town. He could hear firing in the distance behind them but so far, they moved freely. He stepped up the pace.

"We need to get to the shelter before dawn. We need to keep together but we just have to go faster," he told his family in a loud whisper. Pulse rifle fire in the distance behind them kept them jogging along at a good pace now. Morning twilight was just setting in when Ben came to Shelter 47's door. You wouldn't know what it was unless you were human. It just looked like a rock face unless you knew how to find the keypad. Benjamin Talbot looked deep into old memories to recall the code that his family was given to no avail.

Jessica walked right up to the door while her father just kept on trying codes. Jack had assured her that this place was safe. What was wrong? Logic fled from her. The crystal necklace that she wore came alive. It pulsed blue. The door control responded. It pulsed blue in return and then went green. After a brief second, the door opened for them.

"We'll be OK now," Ben told his family when they were all safely inside. Jessica found a small blue card tacked up next to the monitor panel. It read, "This shelter is serviced by the volunteers from StarQuake Engineers. We sincerely hope that it never has to be used." It was signed, "Calamity Jane." She lit up the defensive force field just as Jack had instructed her to.

It was late morning before the first Jag patrol wandered by. The sight of them alone was enough to scare the weak of heart half out of their wits.

"Those things out there are flesh and blood just like us," Ben assured his boys. "They're not demons. We can kill them so whatever you do, don't you ever stop shooting."

Ben Talbot watched them on his monitor panel. The Jags were on the scent of humans but just couldn't quite fathom why the scent went cold. For not being demons, they surely acted the part. They were arguing and scrapping amongst themselves when a second group arrived. This



group had scientific instruments and began sweeping the area. They walked right up to the hidden door and pointed right at it and smiled. The group of them began howling and shrieking and dancing about. Ben turned down the audio. His family didn't need to hear this.

A blazing hot noon sun beat down on the Jags as they rolled up one of their light field cannons. Benjamin gathered his family together in the back of the shelter.

"If any survive the door coming down, I want you to keep firing at Jags as long as you are able. Do you hear me?" He asked his two teenage boys.

"Yes sir," he eldest son answered. "We'll keep firing."

Ben hadn't counted on the force field holding as long as it did. It wasn't until the fourth shot that the lights went out. The field generator and power source were spent. The next shot would blow the door.

"Hold your ground," he told his sons. "Don't stop firing no matter what happens. You must keep firing."

Jess could faintly hear Jack's voice, but was it just in her mind? Their whole world collapsed in an instant. They tumbled in light gravity. Their stomachs cramped as they scrambled for any reference to up or down when sound returned around them and echoes of their own cries in the darkness returned. Gravity returned, and they fell in a heap on the deck. Jack brought the lights up slowly.

"I am sorry to have to bring you all up here that way, but you had a force field up that I couldn't reach through." His eyes were on Jessica as Benjamin thanked him profusely for saving his family. "Just how did you get us out of there?" He asked Jack.

"You know that crystal necklace I gave Jess? It's a beacon of sorts. It let me zero your position in precisely. And then, well, it's a long technical explanation. Let's just say that I timequaked a portal."

"And just where is 'here'?"

Hank walked into the room.

"Welcome aboard the *Crystal Dragon*," he told them, "but time flees before us. Captain Henry Morgan, at your service. Benjamin, do I understand correctly that you are a gunner's mate?"

"That was many years ago."

"Well, you are again. I find myself short-handed. Jack and I can fly this thing, but I really could use a trained hand with the guns. You will find them very familiar by Union standards."

Jessica recognized the crew of this ship as they moved to the bridge. They were all of the contractors!

"Glad to have you aboard Jess," Calamity called out to her from her battle station.

On the bridge, Ben strapped himself into his gunner's stations. Jessica and the rest of her family found seats for themselves as the *Crystal Dragon* moved in jumps. Space blinked around them. Their course plotted out in 3-D on a tactical display in front of Jack and Ben. The *Crystal Dragon* moved like no other ship that Ben had ever seen. It went instantaneously from one point in space to the next.

The *Crystal Dragon* closed in on six Jag ships in battle formation. Jack ran the engineering console while Henry did the piloting. Captain Henry Morgan was maneuvering on the Jag ships. He moved the *Crystal Dragon* just like a normal starship for a bit to draw them in. They bought it.

"I am going to make two jumps," Captain Morgan told his new gunner. "When I give you the signal, shoot at everything for all you are worth, but not one shot before."

And so, the tale is told by the people of Benara-3, of how they were saved that terrible day from those demon-faced Jags, by a Pirate ship called the *Crystal Dragon*. Now many they believe and many they don't. And some will say that the *Dragon* went on to defeat an entire Jag armada that day. But then who really knows? Now let me introduce myself. My name is Jacob Morgan. My Mother is the lovely Jessica. My Father they call the One-Eyed-Jack. And I'll only be asking you this: If the *Crystal Dragon* didn't save all of those people that terrible day, then who did?