

Star Wars

Star Wars Gamer

N 5

The Crystal

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Applause rolled through the Great Temple, reverberating from the vaulting ceiling and ancient stone. To Jaina Solo, the thunderous ovation held echoes of other days and other deeds - - and not all of them from times past. The song of the future, her future, was there as well.

Or so Jaina assumed.

The question Uncle Luke has asked her before the ceremony played over and over in her mind like a malfunctioning hologram: "What are your plans for the future?"

A reasonable question, given that she was about to leave the Jedi academy, but nothing that came to mind felt quite right. She liked to fly fast ships. She liked to build things, to fix and improve what had already been built. But such skills seemed dwarfed by the grandeur of this place, this moment.

Much was expected of the niece of Luke Skywalker, the oldest child of Leia Organa and Han Solo. Jaina had always known and accepted this. Responsibility was her birthright, the inevitable result of her Jedi heritage.

Never had Jaina been more conscious of this heritage. She stood upon the dais of the Grand Audience Chamber, keenly aware of the nearby Force-presence of her two brothers and the friends who'd shared their years at the Jedi academy. They radiated exhilaration and pride, only slightly shadowed by the uneasiness that came from being the focus of so much applause, and so many eyes. Off to one side stood Uncle Luke, her parents, and several other heroes of their generation. All this Jaina sensed, though her eyes could perceive nothing but the dazzle of Jedi lightsabers.

The older Jedi Knights gathered in the first row had ignited their lightsabers, lofting them in blazing tribute to the graduating students. The multicolored weapons spoke of hope and power - - a rainbow refracted from a hidden sun.

Then the ovation faded, the lightsabers dimmed. A lithe, silver-haired woman moved quietly toward a bench at the front of the dais. She settled down, raised her long-necked double viol, and began to play. Delicate music filled the hall like moonlight. Tionne had taught the young Jedi through tales of former glories; now her song celebrated their adventures and challenged them to create new legends.

Jaina's lips quirked in a faint, ironic smile. "The Ballad of the Jedi Mechanic." She'd bet the Millennium Falcon that Tionne wouldn't get many requests for that tune!

When song faded into silence, the new Jedi Knights filed from the dais and processed down the long hall. Their solemn mien dissolved the moment they left the Great Temple.

Whoops of celebration mingled with the bright green music of Yavin 4's jungles.

Lowbacca let out an exuberant howl and swept Jaina into a hug. She wrapped her arms around the Wookiee's waist and buried her face in his ginger-colored fur. She was then spun away into a strong, one-armed embrace, and the unexpected scent of exotic perfume.

Jaina pushed Tenel Ka out to arm's length and regarded her with a grin. For once the Dathomiri girl had exchanged her usual warrior garb - - a bright, brief costume fashioned from supple reptile leather - - for traditional Jedi robes, and her abundant red-gold hair had been tamed into an elegant crown of coils and braids.

"Except for the hair color, you look just like my mother," Jaina teased.

The girl's gray eyes brightened at what she clearly perceived as a compliment.

"My grandmother will be pleased. She often admonishes me to look and act like a princess," she said, slanting a glance toward the royal vessel. The former Queen Mother of Hapes traveled in a starfaring castle, a whimsical structure that towered high above the more conventional ships.

The lines of Tenel Ka's face hardened as she studied this symbol of her heritage and her family's expectations. A similar, subdued expression fell over the other young Jedi. It occurred to Jaina that she was not the only one perplexed over next steps.

To her surprise, Jacen was the first to give voice to their shared concerns. "Anakin and I will be traveling with Master Luke," he said, brushing aside the lock of brown hair that was forever creeping over his eyes. "And not just to Mon Calamari. After the vacation, we're going to become his apprentices. "

Zekk's green eyes widened in surprise. "Both of you? Won't two apprentices be too much to handle?"

Jacen flushed, and Jaina got the impression the two of them had had this conversation before. "It feels like the right step to take." He flashed his crooked grin. "Seems to me I've got plenty left to learn."

"No argument there," Zekk agreed.

During the laughter that followed, Jaina considered her brothers' path. Apprenticeship was a great idea, and if Uncle Luke were taking on students, maybe Aunt Mara would consider one. Mara Jade was absolutely stellar - - practical, confident, a crack pilot and a fighter who could mop a cantina floor with a couple of Black Sun thugs without messing up her auburn hair.

A delighted smile spread over Jaina's face. That was it - - path selected, problem solved.

But Zekk, judging by the bemused expression on his face, was still trying to get his mind around this concept. "So you two are off to become famous Jedi warriors, like Master Skywalker."

"Those were different times," Jacen said thoughtfully. "Master Luke became a Jedi during the Rebellion, and his path was shaped by necessity. We've always known the Jedi are more than warriors, but we don't know what that 'more' might be. Maybe it's our task to relearn what was lost."

"Very philosophical, little brother," teased Jaina. "And what are the rest of us to do while you mine these gems of wisdom?"

He responded with a good-natured grin. "Save the galaxy. What else?"

"If that's our destiny, we're getting off to a slow start," Anakin said. "Mom was elected to the Imperial Senate when she was Jacen and Jaina's age."

"Our parents might say that the challenges they face today are no less than those of their youth," Tenel Ka observed, her gaze upon three people emerging from the Temple, a tall man and two veiled women in the elaborate garb of Hapan royalty.

Jaina nodded. Princess Leia had been Chief of State and remained a skilled diplomat who held together the increasingly contentious Republic. Han Solo - - Jaina's personal hero as well as her father - - was a retired general who seemed to find his way into the midst of one adventure or another. She watched with a full, fond heart as her parents emerged from the Grand Temple and rushed toward the young Jedi, their faces bright with pride.

Han slapped both boys on the back and swung Jaina off her feet as if she were still knee-high to a wookiee.

"Have some regard for your daughter's dignity," Leia admonished with a smile.

"Dignity's overrated," he rejoined. "Trust me on this." Nevertheless, he set Jaina down

and sent her an apologetic grin. "So. What's the next adventure?"

Luke stepped forward. Jaina noticed that Aunt Mara was not with him, and she sent her mother a quizzical glance. Leia shook her head, a slight, almost imperceptible gesture. Jaina caught a whiff of her mother's concern, sad and subtle as the perfume of a crushed flower. "Jacen and Anakin will be working with me," Uncle Luke said quietly. "They will be apprentices, in the Jedi tradition."

Han nodded as if he'd been expecting this, but there was a certain sadness in his eyes. He worked up a smile and ruffled Jaina's hair. "What about you, kid?"

"I'm still thinking about it," Jaina said, glancing from her mother to Uncle Luke.

"Good. You've got time." Han looked over his shoulder at Chewbacca. "Did you get Jaina's graduation present unloaded?"

The big Wookiee shot a cautious glance at Leia and moaned a rather subdued-sounding affirmative.

"Present?" Jaina glanced from her father to her mother. A familiar expression - - mingled exasperation and affection - - was dawning on her mother's face.

Leia folded her arms and cocked her head to one side. "Present?" she echoed in a challenging tone.

Han treated his wife to his best roguish grin, then draped an arm around Jaina's shoulders. "C'mon, kid. Let's have a look at her."

Jaina's heart leaped with sudden hope. Her father's tastes and talents mirrored her own, and his gifts were usually spare parts or interesting gizmos he'd picked up in odd corners of the galaxy. In Han's world, the only non-living thing worthy of the feminine pronoun was a ship. Jaina hadn't dared hope for her own ship so soon! She fell into step beside her father, in her excitement easily matching his long-legged stride.

Leia sighed and turned to Luke, who was hiding a smirk behind his hand and looking more like the boy hero he'd been than the Jedi Master he had become. "Are you coming?"

His grin broadened. "I wouldn't miss it."

Leia glanced at the cluster of young Jedi. The younger students had joined them. Oblivious to everything but each other, they huddled together in a maelstrom of animated chatter, as if determined to relive and define their time together.

"I think we can leave without causing offense," she said dryly.

Luke chuckled, and they followed Han and Jaina to the docking bay. Next to the venerable Millennium Falcon was a smaller vehicle, nearly as old and disreputable.

"She's got character," Han said, patting the dented metal fondly. "What do you think?"

Jaina's "new" ship was a late model Z-95. The fixed-position double wings gave it the look of one of the more primitive X-wing models. The hull looked decidedly battered - - several panels had been replaced, not always with metal of the same color, and the canopy had been reinforced, also without regard for cosmetic value. Despite the patching, the ship still displayed an impressive collection of dents, creases, and carbon scoring.

"She's beautiful!" Jaina said, and meant it.

"I've made some modifications," her father said proudly. "Reinforced the hull, enhanced the motors, put in a hyperdrive, upgraded the maneuvering jets. She's got it where it counts."

Leia stared at her husband. "I can't believe you bought this... this thing without discussing it!"

A strange expression crossed Han's face. Leia's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You did buy it, didn't you?"

"No one's going to tell you different," Han said glibly. His cocky expression suddenly

faltered, and his gaze slid toward Luke as if he'd suddenly remembered his old friend's ability to read the truth of things.

The Jedi Master lifted both hands. "I'm keeping out of this."

Leia started circling the wreck. "Four laser cannons and a proton torpedo launcher? Isn't that a lot of fire power for a ship this size?"

"Hey, better to have it and not need it, than need it and not have it," Han countered.

"Like carrying a lightsaber on a date," Jaina observed with a straight face and dancing eyes.

Her father's eyebrows lifted approvingly, and he pointed a finger at Jaina as if to award her points for logic and ingenuity.

The cockpit creaked opened and a lithe, red-haired woman swung herself out. She landed lightly and walked with cat-like grace toward the suddenly silent group.

"It might not be pretty, but it'll fly," she announced.

Suddenly Jaina understood her mother's concern. Mara Jade had always been slim; the belt cinching her flight suit was fastened several notches tighter. The sharp, elegant bones of her face cast shadows upon the hollows below. There was an unhealthy gray cast to her pale skin, and her green eyes were fever-bright.

Jaina quickly shielded her shock and dismay. She ran forward and threw her arms - - carefully - - around her uncle's wife. "Aunt Mara! I'm so glad you came."

"Where else would I be?"

At least Mara's voice was the same: a smoky purr that always gave Jaina the impression of velvet over sheathed claws, like a Togorian warrior's offered handclasp. Her Force presence, however, was even more drastically altered than her appearance.

Perceived through the Force, Mara had always reminded Jaina of a blaster - - steel and strength, stealth and speed. But now her life force burned like a thin, fiercely determined flame.

With a sigh, Jaina put aside her newly conceived plan for apprenticeship.

She felt Mara stiffen. The older Jedi pushed Jaina off to arms' distance and fixed her with a steady gaze. "The answer to your question is yes."

"But - - "

Mara cut off Jaina's objection with a curt shake of her head and stepped back. "Let's see your lightsaber."

The girl unhooked it from her belt and handed it over. Mara thumbed it on. A brilliant blue-violet blade leaped from the polished handle. The battered metal of both ships reflected its light and color - - an intense, restless hue that seemed poised on the edge of the visible spectrum. While most lightsabers awakened with a snap-hiss and illuminated in a swift, graceful glide, Jaina's blade popped into full and instant readiness. Jacen sometimes teased Jaina that hers was the only lightsaber in the galaxy that hummed even when it was off. "Suits you," Mara said with a wry smile. "I hear you grew your own crystals."

The approval in her voice surprised Jaina. All the other students had used found crystals or gems as the foci for their lightsabers, and none of them understood why Jaina had been determined to create her own.

"I grew the crystals for my first lightsaber," Mara went on. "It connects you, gives you a different feel altogether. You are, almost literally, part of the weapon."

"A balance between mechanical and metaphysical?" Luke suggested.

"Something like that. But more to the point, it's about perception. Sometimes you need to focus, and sometimes you need to become the focus. Right?"

Mara directed this question at Jaina. She wasn't entirely certain what her aunt meant, but she nodded sagely.

"Since you've already come this far on your own, we can skip that part of your training for now and go straight to flying."

"Flying?" Han echoed incredulously, his gaze shifting between his sister-in-law and his daughter. "I already taught her to fly."

Mara sent him a wink. "I can probably work around that."

Her family's laughter rolled off Jaina as she ran loving hands over her new ship. While her aunt explained her plans for apprenticeship to the other adults, Jaina made a mental list of repairs and improvements. Her fingers itched for the feel of a hydrospanner, but that impulse was nothing compared to the urge to get into the cockpit.

"When can I fly her?" she broke in.

Han scratched his chin. "Well, we were planning to head straight to Mon Calamari. Why don't you meet us there? It'll be an easy flight - - the coordinates are already programmed into the computer. And there's no easier landing than the docking bay at the Crystal Reef resort"

Jaina glanced at Leia, who was eyeing the battered ship with a dubious expression. "Mom? I know it's old, and that it's, um, got character, but Aunt Mara says it'll be fine. And Dad, too," she added belatedly.

"Hey, thanks," Han muttered.

Lela threw up her hands in surrender. "I'm not exactly negotiating from a position of strength. How could I possibly object to my sixteen-year-old daughter traveling across the galaxy in a flying junk heap, when I'm in the Falcon?"

"Keep it up," her husband warned, only half in jest.

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Jaina pulled steadily away from Yavin 4, her spirits soaring as she rose through the atmosphere. Her new ship rattled and shuddered a bit as it rushed upward through the heavy, humid air, but the sublight drive hummed with steady competence. It was a reassuring, almost complacent sound.

"An easy trip," Jaina said, repeating her father's words in a wistful tone. She supposed there was much to be said for that. The maiden voyage in her first ship was a grand adventure in and of itself.

So she settled in to enjoy the simple pleasures of space travel. The intense blue of the jungle moon's skies swiftly deepened to sapphire. Stars winked into life. The exhilaration of being hurtled through resisting air gave way to a floating sensation as the Z-95 left Yavin 4's atmosphere behind. Except for the information coming to her from the ship's sensors and the rapidly diminishing Yavin system, Jaina might have thought that the Z-95 was sitting still.

She pulled it into a tight turn, letting the G-force build as she got a feel for what the ship could do. The orange gas giant receded swiftly, its light fading with distance.

Jaina glanced back. Yavin was too bright to study from its moon's surface, but from this vantage she could make out its dancing atmosphere patterns. The silhouettes of a few miniscule ships crawled across the fading orange light as family and friends who'd attended the Jedi ceremony returned to their far-scattered homes.

A faint smile curved her lips. Leaving a part of her life behind was hard, but it helped to have a direction. After a few days of play and relaxation at the Crystal Reef, she'd start working with her new Jedi Master.

In a way, Jacen and Anakin had already started. Recently it seemed that they'd been practicing with their lightsabers every time she turned around. In light of their new apprenticeship, that made sense. Fencing improved physical condition, but its primary

purpose was helping Jedi attune to the Force. Uncle Luke had probably given the boys exercises devised to move them toward the next level of strength and insight.

But Mara had decided to bypass that part of Jaina's training and focus on flying. That seemed an odd course for an apprenticeship to take, but Jaina didn't mind the idea one little bit.

As she turned toward the hyperspace coordinates, she noticed several moving pinpricks of light on a steady course toward the Yavin system.

"A little late, aren't you?" murmured Jaina. Curious, she pulled closer to the approaching vessel.

The ship was a modified X-wing, late model, a beautiful sleek thing with a gleaming hull patterned in bronze and black. It inspired admiration, but absolutely no envy.

Jaina patted the console of her battered Z-95 contentedly. The X-wing was stellar, no doubt about it, but her ship suited her just fine. She was fairly small, just short of her mother's size and height, which made her considerably smaller than most human pilots. But the new seat her dad put in placed her comfortably near the controls. The sensitive pressure pads that controlled direction and pitch had been replaced with the old-fashioned stick she preferred.

She flicked her cabin lights in a friendly hail and then veered away from the approaching X-wing. In no hurry, she settled in to enjoy the flight, looping and soaring as joyfully as a bird on the first spring day.

The first attack took her by surprise. Suddenly the sky blazed with livid pink light. A thin bolt, like a lethal sunset cloud, flared toward her.

The Z-95 shields took the hit, but the ship yawed sharply. Jaina wrestled it back into control, overcompensating and sending it into a spiraling dive.

Just as well - - two more bolts streaked past in rapid succession, each missing by meters.

"That famous Solo luck," she muttered as she pulled the Z-95 out of its spin. She eased the stick gingerly to one side, and her ship shot off at a sharp angle away from its attacker.

With her free hand, Jaina fumbled for the comm system and switched to hailing frequency. "X-wing, acknowledge."

Her ancient system crackled. "This is Bail Jumper, acknowledging enemy fighter."

The voice was male, probably human, and melodic and resonant enough for Coruscant opera. It was an unlikely voice for a pilot whose ship sported such a roguish name.

"Bail Jumper, I'm not your enemy," Jaina said as calmly as she could manage. She glanced at her sensors. The X-wing was giving pursuit, steadily closing in on her much-older ship. "My name is Jaina Solo, and I'm a student pilot on my way to a family vacation. It doesn't get much less threatening than that."

"Negative. My scanners identify you as Onyx Star, a ship stolen from my employer by agents of Icaris Tool and Drive."

Jaina slumped back into her seat and groaned. "Better start running, Dad. Mom is going to kill you when she hears about this!"

"A pathetic bluff. My sensors indicate no other ships within hailing frequency, much less lethal firing range," observed the disembodied voice.

"That's not what I meant, but never mind," Jaina said. "Listen, my only connection with Icaris is that I used to get parts from them. They went out of business about three years back."

"Negative. Icaris Corporation supplies parts and industrial intelligence to Subpro Corporation, which intends to replicate the Onyx Star in quantity."

"Sure, fifty years ago!" Jaina exploded. "Subpro hasn't been building the Z-95 Headhunter

for years. There's lots of old Z-95's around. I don't have a copy of my ship's providence handy, but chances are, you've got the wrong ship."

"Negative. Onyx Star is unique, a prototype developed by Bahalian Shipyards."

Two things simultaneously occurred to Jaina, hitting her with a speed and force that reminded her of her last fencing match against Jacen and Tenel Ka. First, the pilot was not just misinformed, he was insane. According to him, the first Z-95 ship had yet to be built. Second, she'd heard her father mention Bahalian - a small, well-regarded shipyard that was known to smugglers as a front company for the Tenloss Syndicate.

"This isn't the Bajic sector," Jaina pointed out, naming the base for the powerful criminal organization. "You're a long way from home, Bail Jumper. Isn't it possible that you're confused about other things, too?"

"No confusion. My mission is clear: Destroy the prototype before it gets to Subpro. Bail Jumper out."

Silence replaced static. Blue flame exploded into the endless night. Jaina's warning sensors blinked and buzzed, confirming that the proton torpedo had a lock.

Instinctively Jaina reached out through the Force, sensing and then measuring the angle of approach. She clenched both hands around the stick and pulled back, hard.

As the Z-95 traced a tight upward circle, the hum of the sublight drive rose in pitch to a scream of protest. Pressure built in the cockpit from the rising G's until stars began to dance and explode at the periphery of Jaina's vision. More lights began to blink on the console, warning of possible system failure. The proton torpedo scorched past, a near miss.

Jaina eased up as much as she dared. Stars spun, and the orange gas giant whirled past. She abruptly pulled out of the loop and twisted to one side.

She glanced at the navigation computer. A glowing screen marked the coordinates for the hyperspace jump, as well as her current position. And directly between the two points was a tiny glowing icon, moving steadily toward her position. The X-wing was between her and the safety of hyperspace. She had to go around it... or through it.

Jaina rebelled against that idea even as her hand reached for the targeting device. The X-wing pilot had a madman's delusions. He wasn't about to be deterred by a couple of warning shots. If Jaina fired, she'd have to aim to kill.

Reluctantly she circled around to face the attacking X-wing. She pulled the targeting screen closer and activated her weapon systems. Blinking red arrows appeared on the screen, surrounding and then stalking the image representing the X-wing. They flared triumphantly to announce a target lock.

Still Jaina hesitated. "Bail Jumper, we don't have to do this. Turn aside and let me pass."

In response, a barrage of ruby fire exploded from behind the transparisteel canopy, coming from a place where no weapon should have existed.

Jaina instinctively jinked, moving away from the incoming missiles. She took a solid hit. The cabin lights winked off, then blinked uncertainly back.

"No astromech droid," she muttered. For some reason, the pilot had filled the compartment designed to hold a droid with another laser canon.

But that should have been impossible! The X-wing was designed for a single pilot, but its systems were too complicated for one person to manage. An R2 unit handled astronavigation functions, plotted hyperspace jumps, and rerouted systems in response to damage. Maybe a droid pilot could manage to do all of that, but it would be hard pressed.

On the other hand, this possibility made her decision easier. Jaina had fewer problems with the idea of vaporizing a droid than reducing a living pilot to stardust.

Just to make sure, she reached out with the Force. There was a presence, faint but definitely alive, in the X-wing. The truth came to her suddenly.

"Cyborg," she murmured in a voice tinged with dread.

That would explain the lack of an R2 unit - - a cyborg pilot would have neural implants, interface ports that hooked directly into the ship's computers.

This might also explain the pilot's confusion. Cybernetics vastly enhanced intelligence, but in time, the human mind receded under the constant assault of information. Some cyborgs became little more than flesh-and-blood droids, but the minds of a few protested this loss of humanity with a vehemence that drove the host insane. Occasionally, cybernetic psychosis set in, and the cyborg could no longer function as either a human or a computer peripheral.

This pilot was obviously suffering a few glitches in his interface. "Guess that rules out negotiation," Jaina said. Reluctantly she reached for her targeting controls. She took a long, calming breath and opened herself up to the Force. Trusting her instincts, she fired.

Her first attack was a simultaneous burst from a pair of laser cannons, which the X-wing neatly dodged. Jaina caught her breath in mingled admiration and concern.

There was no way she could match that. She was a decent pilot, but the cyborg was quite literally an extension of his ship. His data banks might have been jumbled, but judging from the way he was flying, he still had perfect control over most functions. Even with the Force, she was definitely outclassed.

Jaina fired again, then juked sharply to evade the counterattack. The two ships fell into a deadly dance, dipping and swooping like a pair of vahitian bats vying for territory. Streaks of laser fire illuminated the blackness of the void, so many that a tangled web of fading lines etched the sky.

The Z-95 took a hit to the port maneuvering jet. Sensors whined and flared in warning as the system began to sputter out. Before Jaina could react, her ship jolted again as another beam battered her shields.

Realization set in, knowledge as bleak and cold as space itself: Sometimes, the Force wasn't enough.

Then an image flooded Jaina's mind, one bright enough to counter this darkness - - the memory of Mara Jade admiring the blue-violet blade of Jaina's lightsaber, and the crystals within.

"Sometimes," she'd said, "you have to find a focus, and some-times you have to become the focus."

Suddenly Jaina understood what Mara had been trying to tell her. She reached out, not in an attempt to sense and focus the greater Force, but into every corner of her battered Z-95.

A new and yet familiar awareness filled her, like awakening to find herself in a remembered dream. She knew her way around the inside of a ship and was confident that, given time and parts, she could fix any damage to the Z-95. But now she saw and felt the ship in ways she had never thought possible.

Every bolt and rivet was as apparent to her as the lights on her control panel, as detailed as a zoom-in on a holographic systems report, as much a part of her as the color of her eyes, or the calluses on her small hands. The hum of the drives, the tensed readiness of armed weapons, the sputtering death of the port maneuvering jet all spoke to her in a language of sounds and sensations that she could understand.

And not just understand, but control. What a crystal was to a lightsaber, Jaina became to her Z-95.

A new attack cut short this epiphany. Jaina sensed the incoming proton torpedo an instant before the warning systems flared. She didn't need to look at the console to know it had a dead lock on her port engine.

Jaina poured power to her starboard maneuvering jets. The sudden, unbalanced surge spun the Z-95 on its horizontal axis like an empty bottle. The torpedo missed its target and grazed the faltering port jet instead.

The result was similar to what Han often achieved with an open-handed smack to various

uncooperative systems in the Falcon. The sputtering jet flared as if in sudden temper, then settled down into a steady stream of available power.

Jaina made a slight adjustment that brought the ship out of its spin and sent it hurtling directly toward the X-wing. She fired two of her laser cannons. Both hit the target, but the sturdy X-wing merely shrugged off the blows.

The cyborg pilot countered with a barrage of incoming fire. Jaina put her ship into a complex evasive dance, as instinctively as she might have blinked, and with as little conscious thought.

When the lethal fireworks faded, she veered away, keeping enough distance to give her time to take stock of the situation. Her ship described a wide arc, beyond the practical range of the X-wing's laser cannons.

The cyborg fired anyway.

Beam after beam followed Jaina along her sweeping path, like spokes in an elliptical wheel. At this distance, evasion required no more than a subtle undulation, as a small boat might rise and fall over gentle waves. Some of the bolts streamed past, some dissipated just short of their target.

A new solution occurred to Jaina. She had four laser cannons and very little weapon power remaining while the Z-95's modified engine tried to keep their recharge rate up. Most likely, the X-wing's firepower was similarly depleted.

She continued to dance and circle, teasing laser blasts from the cyborg pilot. Again and again, her sensors warned that the X-wing was arming its weapon systems. Finally, the warning flashed, but the cyborg's lasers did not. Jaina sank back with a sigh of relief.

Her ship was less optimistic.

Warnings pulsed and flared as the cyborg pilot repeatedly fired his depleted weapons.

"It's finished," she said with exasperation. "Get over it!"

But the single-minded pilot came on, setting a direct path for her Z-95. After a startled moment, Jaina realized his intent: He was going to stop the "prototype" ship even if that meant using his own ship as a missile.

Swiftly but reluctantly, Jaina shifted power to her forward shields and reached for the weapon controls. She splayed her fingers wide and tapped them in a sharp, rapid pattern over all four of her laser cannon triggers.

Ruby lights streamed forward, so rapidly that they seemed to converge into a single devastating blast. Jaina leaned the ship sharply aside.

A brief, brilliant explosion lit the void. Jaina flinched instinctively as debris clattered into her ship. She continued her wide arc away from the potentially lethal shrapnel that was the cyborg's last remaining weapon.

Her heart thudded like Ewok battle drums as she circled back, carefully dodging the floating remnants of the ship. An entire wing formation spun by, and a chunk of twisted metal that appeared to comprise most of the cockpit.

Jaina sighed with relief. She'd aimed for the underside of the ship, trying to graze the ship and take out the cargo compartment. A breach of that magnitude would trigger immediate evacuation, whether the pilot liked it or not. She'd heard about the dangers of going EV - - extra-vehicular - - but the way she saw it, anything was better than getting vaped.

Her eye caught a small black shape that cut a void against the background of stars. She powered down and drifted closer. Tumbling lazily through space, clearly visible through the translucent material of his sealed suit and helmet, was the cyborg pilot. Once he had been a human male of exotic appearance and impressive condition. A fitted black flight suit emphasized muscles in fine trim. His clean-shaved face had sharply defined bones, and his skin was a coppery hue - - so metallic in appearance that for a moment Jaina didn't notice the cybernetic parts. External ports of the same copper color had been placed over each ear, and a metallic collar ringed his neck. His eyes were open and staring, as black

as space itself and every bit as cold. Whatever warmth and emotion they might once have known was forgotten by the weird, solid-black photoreceptors that replaced the original orbs. Little remained of his humanity, but there was a good chance he was still alive.

But for how long?

The cyborg was torn from his ship, his host computer destroyed. There wasn't much left of him other than the body that he'd apparently decided was not enough.

"Sometimes you need to focus, and sometimes you need to be the focus," Jaina murmured as she considered the other side of the lesson she'd taken from her lightsaber's crystal. She was a part of this ship, the crystal focusing its power, but she was not the ship. Once this journey was over, she would swing out of the cockpit and shift her focus outward.

The Jedi had a perspective different from most people, but Jaina suspected that they were more alike than different. Everyone's reality was shaped by his perceptions. The cyborg had learned to be part of his ship long before she had; perhaps with time and care, he could also remember a life beyond.

Jaina circled back toward Yavin and opened her comm system to hailing frequency. Once she found someone who could pick up the EV pilot, she would continue on her course.

The journey ahead, and the future to which it led, seemed bright indeed.

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Jaina eased her Z-95 into the docking bay of Crystal Reef and powered down the systems. The battered ship sighed off - - an oddly human sound that coaxed a chuckle from the young pilot. She didn't need her newfound connection with the ship to recognize relief when she heard it.

A few new dents in the cockpit made it harder to open than Jaina expected. After a few attempts she shouldered it aside and rose stiffly from the seat.

The howl of an enraged Wookiee split the air. Chewbacca loped forward and plucked Jaina from the seat, holding her aloft and punctuating his scolding with an occasional teeth-rattling shake.

"I'm sorry you were worried, but I'm fine," Jaina told him as soon as she could speak. "The ship took a few hits, though."

As she'd expected, this captured Chewbacca's attention. The Wookiee set her down and began to take stock of the damage. Jaina reached in the pocket of her flight suit for her favorite multitool and put it into Chewbacca's outstretched hand.

"I'll be back to help as soon as I can," she said, turning her gaze to the small group of people that the long-legged Wookiee had outrun.

Chewie responded with a grumble. Jaina reached up to pat his shoulder, then strode forward to meet her family.

Her father was the first one to reach her. Relief and concern battled for supremacy on his face. "What happened to you? Problems with the hyperdrive?"

"Worked great," she told him with a grin. "But I thought it was illegal to put a Class Two hyperdrive on a ship this size."

Han glanced back to see if the others had heard. "Nice try, kid, but I'm not that easily distracted. Spill it."

She linked her arm in his. "I had a little problem in sublight, but nothing your modifications couldn't handle. But like you said, the rest of the flight was easy."

Jaina glanced toward her brothers, who were marveling at the damage her ship had withstood. Her mother and uncle came up slowly, probably in deference to Mara Jade's uncharacteristically slow pace.

Her aunt's bright green eyes met hers. "I'm not surprised you're late, seeing that you took off before giving your new ship a name. Hasn't anyone ever told you that's bad luck?"

"You already named her," Jaina said.

Mara raised a quizzical brow, but the expression on her face suggested she had a good idea what was on the girl's mind.

"You told me once that most ships were named after the pilot, one way or another."

"I thought you'd see it that way," Mara said. She reached into the pocket of her flight suit for a small metal disk. "It will take time to get exterior ID plates made up, but I made this for you on the flight over."

Jaina took the disk and studied it for a long moment. A simple design had been etched into the metal: a multifaceted gem as well as the symbols for the word that defined how Jaina, as a pilot, would always think of herself: Crystal.

She thanked Mara with a nod, then turned back to her father. "Dad, you seem to know, well, everybody. I was wondering if you might know something about a certain pilot. Big guy, bald, coppery skin, gorgeous speaking voice. He probably got into trouble more than once - I'm guessing he jumped bail a time or two. Ended up working for the Tenloss Syndicate. Ever cross paths with him?"

Han Solo eyed her warily. "Maybe. Why do you ask?"

Jaina linked her other arm with her mother's, as much for the comfort of contact as for her desire to place herself as a buffer between the two. "Well, it's like this..."