



Crystal Soldier

Sharon Lee , Steve Miller

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Centuries in the past, mankind fought a seemingly unbeatable adversary from sector to sector across the Spiral Arm until the war ground to a standstill and the Enemy withdrew. Believing that they had won, the citizens of the galaxy rebuilt. The Inner Worlds, which had escaped the worst of the war's ravages, became even more insular, while the Rim worlds adopted a free and easy way with law and order. Now, hundreds of years after their withdrawal, the Enemy is back - and this time they'll be satisfied with nothing less than the extinction of the galaxy.

Crystal Soldier Details

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From Reader Review *Crystal Soldier* for online ebook

Tori says

While it had its moments, the pacing was uneven, and a lot was left unexplained. The beginning dragged, though the main character is likable. Part two, when his female counterpart is introduced, picks up, especially when things blow up and our characters are running through a firefight carrying a tree. Yep, that's right! Wouldn't want to leave your tree behind when you're running for your life! Basically, that's what kept me reading. You've got to like the tree. Ends inconclusively, priming you for the next book.

Carolyn F. says

Super slow start, at least to me, then about a 1/3 of the way in, everything started getting exciting. I'm planning on reading the rest of the series, which appears to be huge.

Jela crash lands on a planet that's been stripped and comes across a tree that's barely alive. He's on his last leg and somehow the tree not only communicates to him with images it helps to save him. Jela promises he'll take the tree with him to help it survive. He's rescued with the tree, given a super secret assignment, meets Cantra at a restaurant where she's lumped together with him and almost captured and then they and a "batcher" with the tree escape. The ending was a little bit of a surprise and also I'm not understanding how the "good" people turned "bad". But maybe that'll be explained in the next book. Interesting series.

Kathleen says

I was looking for something like Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosigan Series*, which I came to love. (See Barrayar, for one example.) The *Liaden Universe series* fit the bill well enough. This is a fun space-opera series. It's interesting, and occasionally profound. Discrepancies do crop up occasionally, where facts differ from book to book, and even within a book or short story.

Crystal Soldier is set at the chronological beginning of the Liaden Universe series, but written long after the series began. I recommend the series for its mix of characterization, romance, cultural and linguistic insights, humor, battle action, and suspense. The characters are varied, including humans, engineered soldiers, engineered aelantaza assassins, artificial intelligences, wizards, clones, cats, gods, and Tree — a sentient Ssussdriad. It's more fantasy than science fiction.

It took a while for *The Liaden Universe Series* to capture my imagination, but eventually I became engrossed. Be aware, the authors are fond of abrupt scene transitions, and tend to dump the reader into the action. Invented terms are confusing. Eventually, things make sense, especially after rereading the entire series. Too many problems are solved by wizards or gods.

Kindle format: There are some typos in the collection titled *The Crystal Variation*, containing the first three Liaden stories, in chronological order (not publication order): *Crystal Soldier*, *Crystal Dragon*, *Balance of Trade*. To my mind, there were too many ellipses, and too many m-dashes improperly formatted like

hyphens. There is no table of contents showing where each book begins. Even worse, no link to the **dictionary** of invented words at the end. I didn't know it was there. Oh, Publisher?? The dictionary would have made a huge difference to my understanding of *Crystal Soldier and Crystal Dragon* — collectively titled "The Great Migration Duology".

Start the series here?? Yes, why not — it's a fun read, along with Plan B, I Dare, and Necessity's Child but don't start there. My advice is to start here, at the beginning, where you'll meet a sentient Ssussdriad (Tree) and Jela the "Crystal Soldier" (crystal indicates life, not obliterated or decrystallized). Do utilize the dictionary at the end of the *Crystal Variation* anthology). Or, for an easier transition into the series, start with Local Custom. It's lightweight space opera / regency-style romance, with Clan Korval's master trader falling in love with a Terran scholar.

I've upgraded this book from 3 to 4 stars because NOW it makes more sense, after having read the ENTIRE series, despite some cross-series discrepancies. We see that Jela was lucky from birth, and grew to become kind, smart, stubborn, and always dutiful. We see that Cantra was indeed an amazing pilot, and quite a dragon. We witness the conception of the first child ever born to Clan Korval, named Val Con. There are two scenes in this book that bring to mind Neliriik and Val Con's midnight discussion in Plan B, for example (when "little" Jela single-handedly defeated numerous Recon super-soldiers). We see the origins of facial tattoos on the engineered soldiers (or "trang" which means troop), the Xtrang. We see the beginning of the current day schism between humans and Yxtrang. We see how Cantra transformed from a smuggler to an honest trader, as her descendants make a living in the sequels. We also hear tales of planetary carnage reminiscent of the robotic mass-murder machines seen in I Dare.

Long meandering review (my apologies!): I have read the entire series now, except a few short stories, but I started the series here, with this book. I started here, with the ssussdriad -- a sentient tree -- and Jela, a dutiful, determined, insightful super-soldier. I started here, and the tone was engrossing, intriguing, and yet serious. I felt like I was beginning an epic science-fiction-fantasy series. How I wish the authors had not let the tone (and the tree) change to something much lighter. (view spoiler) And Trees aren't planted everywhere.

What happened? I dunno. The series was not written in chronological order, so that might explain some of the discrepancy. Across the series, some battle scenes are strong, but overall, the tone changes, more often than not becoming light sci-fi / fantasy romance. Very enjoyable and entertaining, sometimes sexy, sometimes sweet, often fairly frivolous, and frequently inconsistent. It does not feel like this Great Migration Duology fits with the rest of the series. Not quite.

In brief, here's the synopsis of the two "Crystal" books, with **GENERAL SPOILERS:** (view spoiler)

My thoughts about Crystal Soldier: The beginning is excellent — up through about 45%. The last 25% is also good. The middle section is — with some notable exceptions — filled with trade fairs, deciding what to buy — rugs, figurines, seeds, embryos, etc. I thought they would matter, so I paid attention. Nope. Occasionally the pace and plot is bogged in needless trivial details. Here, the three shipmates are talking aboard ship. Just talking. Who cares where they are standing? **"They stood in a loose triangle, Centra at the apex, Jela to her left and ahead, Dulsey to his left."** (Again, I think the details will matter, so I pay attention, but they don't.)

The enemy, the sheriekas, are powerful beyond powerful, and ruthless beyond limit. The battle -- flawed

humans versus genetically perfected sheriekas -- seemed nebulous, distant, unreal, and underwhelming. It's too much to truly process, the decrystallization of everything.

So. Where to pin my interests? On the characters? Yes, to some extent. Tree, a ssussdriad, is interesting and likable. It felt female. Her dragon images are provocative. Loved the notion of the biologically-tailored seed pods she created. Loved the strong beginning, introducing the sapling as a force to be reckoned. (Too bad this interesting creature then sat in the corner of the spaceship, silent, for the middle section. I felt disappointed. However, towards the last third of Crystal Soldier, it (she?) takes a greater part in the plot.)

Captain M. Jela Granthor's Guard is an M-class generalist, a genetically improved — and yet human— soldier, born under a lucky star, and charged with a duty to protect life. Jela is all things heroic, dutiful, intelligent, kind, etc. Likeable enough. Also, super strong, with an incredible memory. He has dark skin, dark eyes and broad shoulders (mentioned several times), which compensates for the fact that he is shorter than Cantra yos'Phelium, his eventual lover. His love and care for Tree is heartwarming.

Cantra yos'Phelium, pilot of the spaceship Spiral Dancer, is a human being genetically engineered to become an assassin. So she's super-smart, observant, smart-mouthed, ironic, and quick witted. Stronger than normal, too, and lucky, like Jela. Her inconsistently applied backwoods dialect bugs me (saying "might could") because of her "encyclopedic knowledge" and training as a "scholar assassin." It doesn't fit. However, she is no victim, and she gradually reveals both her honor (including loyalty) and her shame, so kudos to the authors for character development.

Jela likes dancing women and lithesome pilots. The one smexy love scene between Jela and Cantra is not romantic, and totally fade to dark. Blink, you miss it. Lol.

There is another character, Dusley, a clone, born in a batch. I didn't like her; she seemed self-centered and disloyal.

Rool Tiazon is an interesting wizard (he's the dramliz ancestor of Clan Erob, the Tiazans in Plan B and I Dare. Miri Robertson Tiazon is Rool's descendant, but she manifests only a few aspects of his wizardly gifts. Which is fine with me. After 1000+ years of intermarriage, that makes sense. In Plan B, Lady Erob demonstrated absolutely no similarity to Rool. She was just a rude old lady.

Series-wide discrepancies I have now read the entire series, except for a few short stories. The series is good. I enjoyed it. However, the authors obviously did not carefully sketch out the series in advance, and they write in random order, not sequentially, not chronologically. Events conflict sometimes. That becomes mildly frustrating, but not a big deal. Also, be aware that some important plot threads occur in the short stories.

Quibbles with the book and series: Far too much head-hopping and scene-jumping, with abrupt POV switches. All too often, emergency life-death problems are solved by dramliza (wizard), goddess magic, a miraculous autodoc chamber, and/or Tree magic. One Liaden exception is Necessity's Child -- loved that fierce young dragon, Syl Vor.

Some threads were either dropped or pushed back in the series. Some examples: (view spoiler)

Ps. Eventually, I also listened to the **Audible version of *Crystal Soldier*, narrated splendidly by Kevin T. Collins.** I could listen to his mellow voice forever. Very clear and easy to follow, and he doesn't foist overly-affected voices upon me. At least, not in these two crystal migration books. In later books, he adopts an unacceptably pompous tone of voice for Val Con and Pat Rin.

G33z3r says

First, although Goodreads has this listed as the first book of the Liaden Universe series, it probably wasn't a good choice for my first read in the series. Although this book apparently takes place earlier than other books, it's not the first book written in the series. I had the feeling throughout that I was missing information which I assume I would have gathered from reading in publication order. I get the impression this is trying to establish how the entire universe of the series began.

A soldier in an ongoing war against some mysterious power inimical to humanity is on a special mission when chance throws him into an ad hoc partnership with a roguish smuggler (but with the requisite heart of gold beneath the callous exterior.) They end up traveling across the spiral arm of the galaxy, having small adventures on different planets, together with the soldiers potted plant (a semi-sentient life form he picked up on a dying planet) and a runaway slave. It was never really clear what the soldier's mission was that drove this perambulation, other than the mission falls apart when his command structure is eliminated.

The story in this book isn't self-contained. It ends with the soldier concocting his own follow-on mission and finding some new allies (?) who then promptly disappear again.

Perhaps because I hadn't read any other books in this series, I found the events here only mildly interesting. Not sure if I'll bother trying to conclude the story.

Sherwood Smith says

Fans of the Liaden books will have bought this sight unseen. New readers, especially who like space opera, could begin with this one because at last we have the ur-story.

It begins with a sure, deceptively gentle pace. M. Jela Granthor's Guard (there is a reason for the odd name) is alone on a planet after a crash landing, with enough supplies to survive a short time.

As he follows a line of dead trees down toward what once was an ocean, he reviews his situation: shot down in the on-going war against the sherieka, who were once human, but who redesigned themselves so radically that they now consider themselves perfect, and in order to make the universe sublime enough for them to live in, must eradicate all traces of their human past. Oh, and the human worlds as well.

A battle the humans are losing.

Jela discovers as he reaches the shoreline that the trees are getting smaller, and at last he realizes that the line of trees was deliberate, that is, accomplished by the trees themselves, dropping pods that rolled a ways downhill to grow on the banks of the diminishing water, a desperate tactic to survive. Just before he's picked up he finds one remaining tree, still barely alive, and he decides to take it with him.

His superiors send him for further training, despite the fact that his series of genetic warriors, the M. series, has been superceded; they appreciate a survivor. Along with his training comes advanced mathematics, theories about the crystallization—and decrystalization—of the universe. Don't lose sight of any of these threads—genetic development of people bred to a specific purpose, mathematical theories, or the tree—because everything begins to add up about the time Jela meets another Pilot, named Cantra, who walks into a restaurant randomly seeking companionship of another pilot over a meal.

The two share a pleasant meal, begin to depart, and their lives are wrenched from personal choice into resistance to the will of rapidly multiplying forces. The pacing becomes the headlong run that is a signature of a Lee/Miller adventure. Cantra is more than she seems. Jela is more than he seems. The Batcher serving woman they rescue is more than she seems, and again, do not forget the tree.

The novel does end on a cliff-hanger—we are told on the cover that this book is part one of the Great Migration Duology--but there is a small arc of resolution that renders the cliff-hanger anticipatory instead of exasperating. Pay attention to everything: names, places, even phrases. I was delighted by the buried references that functioned like memory hypertext, evoking the grand tapestry of the Liaden series.

Joy says

Billed as deep background to the other Liaden books, this is full of aha! moments for the Liaden fan. Bioengineered soldier M Jela Granthor's Guard crash-lands on an alien planet where the last sentient tree has withstood Enemy attack. When Jela and his Commander realize that the mysterious Enemy is now completely obliterating entire star systems without warning, he is catapulted into a web of intrigue in which his destiny becomes entwined with the tree he rescues, bioengineered slaves and their mysterious Uncle, soldiers, gamblers, wizards, villains, and rogue Trader and agent-of-sorts Cantra yos'Phelium. This book also reveals the origins of the Yxstrang and dramliz, and, of course, ends on something of a cliffhanger. Awesome.

Cindy says

Excellent read. I love the Liaden Universe books. The Liaden Universe is strongly drawn and the details are consistently well thought-out. The books have action, suspense, romance and characters you really care about. The hero and heroine of Crystal Dragon and Crystal Soldier are Cantra and Jela, both people you would like to know and definitely people you would want on YOUR side in any disagreement. In my opinion, though, neither is really the best place to start the series even though chronologically they fall before the Conflict of Honors/Agent of Change/etc. books. I would recommend reading them in the following order:

Current generation Korval:
Conflict of Honors
Agent of Change
Carpe Diem
Plan B

I Dare
Fledgling
Saltation

Previous generation Korval:
Local Custom
Scout's Progress

Earlier in Liaden and Terran contact:
Balance of Trade

Founding of Liad and Clan Korval:
Crystal Soldier
Crystal Dragon

David says

I want to say either I liked this book or I disliked it, but really, it was just pretty bland, and had neither any Big Ideas nor characters memorable enough to leave an impression. Filled the time but left me with no desire to read the rest of the 11+ book series. Evidently, this book introduces plots and characters who recur throughout the series and is something of a prequel.

The Shereika want to wipe out all life in the universe, and humanity is fighting a losing war against them. Humankind has bred people to be soldiers, slaves, and assassins, creating a fairly traditional aliens-light space opera universe. Even the Shereika are actually genetically engineered humans. Humans are losing the war and falling back from the spiral arm. The Shereika are mostly an off-stage threat in this book, intergalactic bogeymen who have listening devices and agents everywhere, but don't show up in their planet-killing ships... yet.

The POV alternates between two main characters. M. Jela Granthor's Guard is a genetically-engineered soldier who, while fighting the Shereika on a distant uninhabited planet, happened upon a group of sentient trees and deduced that they had somehow fended off the Shereika. So he carts a tree around for the rest of the book. On a special assignment from the military, he runs across Cantra yos'Phelium, a generically-engineered assassin who's now the solo captain of a "dark trader" - i.e., a smuggler. The two of them end up rescuing a genetically-engineered slave, Dulsey, and taking her to a mysterious man known as the Uncle who runs some sort of free colony for other slaves like Dulsey, out in the beyond.

Crystal Soldier has a bit of a *Firefly* vibe to it, and also reminded me of *The Phoenix in Flight* by Sherwood Smith and Dave Trowbridge, another first novel by an authorial duo in a sprawling epic space saga, and another one I found moderately entertaining but just too paint-by-numbers to really get invested in what happens next. I don't know what it says about my reading tastes that star-destroying mega-battlecruisers no longer intrigue me. I loved Niven and Saberhagen back in the day, but 11 books of this just make me think of

better or more interesting books on my TBR list.

So, this was good SF, not great SF, and if you are looking for a long series maybe it will grab you more than it grabbed me.

(I do find it very amusing that when I search Goodreads for "Crystal Soldier" the second of two results below this one is I'll Be Your Drill, Soldier. I would really like to know how that search algorithm works...)

Laura (Kyahgirl) says

4.5/5; 5 stars; A

This time I listened to the audiobook from Audible. Kevin T. Collins was the narrator and he did a fantastic job. I put off listening to this book because I had a bad experience with this narrator and, in fact, hated his narration of Trade Secret so much that I returned the book.

He did a great job on this book. I love the expansive world building and the interesting back story in this duology. As much as I loved reading about Val Con and company from later books, its so much fun to get to know Cantra and Jela and the tree and find out where it all started.

The only caveat I would state for anyone reading this book is not to start it unless you also have Crystal Dragon on hand. The two books are really one story split into two.

Thanks Kathleen for recommending I give Collins another chance!

Red says

I am a happy camper. I just picked up all of the books in the Liaden series for my Kindle from Baen Books website. Started reading in chronological order, this being the first in that fashion.

Events are always moving forward, and enough time is spent in space to keep me happy. I love (love!) seeing the origin of the Clan Korval tree. This is a fun, easy to read series.

Laura (Kyahgirl) says

Re-Read: August 2013 - with every iteration I gain an even deeper appreciation for the Liaden Universe. I loved this book. Love the characters; Jela, Jela's tree, Cantra, Rool and his lady. Awesome

Review updated: Feb. 23/12

4.5/5; 5 stars;

I enjoyed the adventuring and excitement of this tale. Having read Liaden Universe books set in the future, I found it helpful to read this book and learn some of the history of the great wars in the universe, the

'designed' humans, DNA manipulation, psychic powers, military plots, evil megalomaniacs. Great fun.

At the end of this book, M. Jela and Cantra have become firm friends and shipmates. They have rescued the sentient tree from a dead planet and discovered that there are many others fighting to, if not defeat, at least, escape, the evil sheriekas.

Original review: Nov 2009;

The Crystal Soldier/Crystal Dragon duology is an excellent set. There was a surprising amount of humour in this story. I came to really appreciate the Tree and the history of the Liaden universe.

Mike (the Paladin) says

Well, you can't win them all. I just finished a string of good reads and picked this one up based on recommendations.

It started out fair...but it had to strain apparently to remain fair and at last it just got to be too much for it. It then collapsed into poor and finally into boring.

The best way I can come up with is to describe this one is "airy-fairy". What opens as a military survival story descends into a long running weak look at a philosophical situation/problem...

It got to be more than I could take. I skimmed forward to see how it picked up. It didn't. The close is there, not great, not satisfying. Don't care for it.

Some of you will like this one greatly. For you I'm happy. Enjoy. Not for me.

Karen says

Great story.

04/14/2018: I realized that I still need to read 4 books in the Liaden Universe, so I decided to start over, and read the series in chronological order.

04/16/2018: Loved this book just as much the second time.

Kerry says

ORIGINAL READ: 9/10 (13 May 2005 - 20 May 2005)

A few hundred years ago humanity fought a great war against an implacable Enemy. That Enemy then withdrew and most believed they were gone. Unfortunately, this is not true; they were only biding their time

and building their strength and plans. Now they are returning.

Jela is a soldier, specifically bred and trained to fight the Enemy. As the book begins, he is forced down during a space battle and finds himself stranded on a harsh, desert planet. He follows at long line for dead trees down a dry river to an equally dead sea. At the end, almost dead himself, he finds a small, barely living bush. Sharing his last water with the plant, he vows to save it if he possibly can, and when he is rescued he insists of taking the tree with him.

He soon finds himself on a special mission, tree in tow, in an attempt to discover the turn extent of the Enemy's plans and weapons. Trying to make a contact, he instead finds himself in the company of pilot Cantra, a trader of somewhat dubious intent. They soon find themselves caught up in murder and mayhem, forced to rely on each other, despite their secrets and necessary distrust, first to survive and eventually to save the galaxy.

To both the characters in and the readers of Lee and Miller's Liaden series Jela and Cantra are figures of legend, the couple who headed the Great Migration, founded Liad and established both Clan Korval and its famous tree. In this latest edition to their growing mythology, Lee and Miller go back in time to tell the "true" story and Jela and Cantra. Both a real people, different from how myth has painted them and fascinating to met, both in their successes and their failings.

This is the first half of a single story and it reads as one. While the immediate issues are solved within its pages, more is set up and the reader is left wanting more. As with all Lee and Miller's novels that I have read, they refuse to spell things out for the reader, instead laying out all the pieces of the puzzle and trust their readers to put it together. Because of this, I always feel a little stupid after reading one of their books as I'm never sure if the picture I have created is the one they intended. All the same, I know I "got the drift".

I was both delighted and frustrated as I tried to figure out who each group of characters introduced were both in the current story and who their descendants must have morphed into in the Liaden universe I am familiar with. The Yxtrang and the Dramliza's origins (and the latter was a much bigger surprise than the former) are perhaps the easiest, but there are also hints to the ancestors of the Scouts, Traders and other groups we've met before, including Jethri's father's family in Balance of Trade.

As for the main characters, I love them all. Jela and Cantra are fascinating people and discovering their strengths, weaknesses and secrets was a most pleasant pastime. All the same, by favourite character of them all had to be Jela's Tree. It might only be a shrub in a pot at present, but already there are hints of the majestic and enigmatic specimen it will become.

All in all, this was another great Lee and Miller novel and I'm now hanging out for its other half to make it complete. I don't think I would recommend it as a place to begin. I think the story does stand well on its own, but the reader will miss the delights of fitting the pieces together to match the picture already created in the previous books.

[Copied across from Library Thing; 16 October 2012]

REREAD #1: 8/10 (17 April 2011 - 27 April 2011)

Oh but this made SO MUCH more sense on a reread. I'm enjoying my (slow) progress through the series and I think I shall continue it until I get back up to "now", even if it does mean I can't read Ghost Ship as soon as

it comes out.

Melanti says

As far as the characters and plot go, Crystal Soldier isn't as good as the rest of the series but I'm really liking the Liaden pre-history. The series has entire families known for producing pilots, or producing shopkeepers/tradesmen/merchants, etc. And it's pretty clear that they have more of a genetic specialization than we do - faster reflexes for pilots, etc - and some of that was explainable through selective breeding since generally families of one trade will only have children with other families of the same trade. But that never fully explained it for me. This book is implying (and it might be outright stated in the next book...) that the origins of the specialization was genetic engineering -- people quite literally created to be pilots, or cooks, or mechanics, or shopkeepers, etc. And founding a world with genetically engineered colonists, then maintaining that by not cross-breeding -- it answers so many questions and arguments I've had with the series.
