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By Andrew Dymond



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An already perilous situation escalates to open warfare when Rygel XVI, deposed ruler of a vast interstellar empire, discovers that his long-lost love is being held captive by the pirates. Will Rygel let his own pride and passion place Crichton, Aeryn, and the others in mortal jeopardy?

Of course he will...

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Editorial Review

Review

"A weekly jolt of imagination overload."--*The New York Times*

"An adventurous, whimsical and spectacular space series...more satisfying than the new Star Wars film."--*The Washington Post*

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Chapter 1

Moya lay quietly in space, listening to the stars—the regular beat of the pulsars, the strange whispers of ancient giants, and the awful silence of black holes.

She had tried to ignore the problem, hoping that it would just go away. But it hadn't. For some time now, she'd been aware that something wasn't right inside, but now great waves of pain were rolling through her—convulsing her; confusing her. She shuddered and gave in. She was seriously ill.

Moya cut her main drive and simply drifted, the light of distant suns reflecting from her skinsteel hull in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of color. She didn't know what was wrong and she was frightened. She had lived a very long time—never established Moya's age—and in all that time nothing had hurt her this badly. She cut even the weak thrust of her station-keeping fields; she couldn't sustain it. Moya hoped that if she just stayed still for a while, everything would settle down and she'd be able to continue.

Then pain lanced through her flank, rolled along her nerve endings, and exploded in her brain. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

* * *

Inside Moya, John Crichton hummed tunelessly as he flossed. The dentics Zhaan had given him felt and tasted disgusting as they crawled over his palate, but he couldn't deny that they did their job. The toothache he had been suffering from recently was at last beginning to calm down as the little creatures ingested the infected flesh.

Inside his mouth the dentic shuddered and ceased moving. Crichton stopped humming, reached into his mouth and peeled the dentic from his lower palate. It was a shame that the dentics had to die. But consuming infection was what they were bred for.

He deposited this, his ninth dead dentic this week, into the biomatter recycler in his quarters, took a long gulp of water and gargled. He would have preferred a shot of decent malt whisky, but anything would do. Anything to take away the taste of dead dentic.

It was now nearly seven months since Crichton had first set foot aboard Moya. And he found it difficult to believe that it was indeed barely half a year since the wormhole had opened in high Earth orbit and blasted him across time and space to who-knew-what part of the universe.

He missed his family and friends. But now he had new friends and, in place of his father, he had Moya. And he liked his new friends, liked them much more than he had once thought possible. Of course, he'd never admit it—after all, that would blow his cool completely—but there were times when he found himself actually having fun on this madcap ride through the galaxy. And he was learning, too. He was a scientist, an astronaut, and he had been presented with a tremendous adventure and a great opportunity. He had left the world of his birth and he had encountered new life. And he was the first human to do it.

Crichton closed the zipper on his jumpsuit and pulled on his boots. They were handmade, crafted for durability and guaranteed for a lifetime, but the tread was already half gone. The boots were made for space flight, not walking. And certainly not for adventuring on the number of planets that he had visited over the

past months.

He knew that if he told his story back home on Earth, he would be ranked alongside Marco Polo and Robert Falcon Scott. Though they were separated by centuries, he felt a deep affinity with such men. For the journeys and perils faced by those great explorers—along the silk road and across the ice of the Antarctic—though bold adventures in their own time, were merely the first nervous steps on the journey he'd undertaken. Polo and Scott had gone to the ends of the Earth. Crichton had stepped beyond it. If he was honest, Crichton had no problem with the image of himself as an adventurer. But the truth was that, as an adventurer, he was more Robinson Crusoe than Christopher Columbus. And it was a very strange beach indeed that he had been washed up on. There may have been no Man Friday, but there was a strange and enigmatic priest, a fearsome warrior who had been framed for murder, an opportunistic, thrill-seeking thief, a deposed ruler of billions, and an undeniably attractive Peacekeeper who had been exiled by her own people.

And they were all at large in a galaxy none of them could call home, travelling in a self-aware, organic spacecraft big enough to flatten Manhattan if she chose to land on it.

The universe regarded them as curios.

The Peacekeepers hunted them as criminals.

Crichton now called them friends. Just.

He took an extraordinary joy in the wonders and terrors he had seen and lived through during these last seven months, but there were days when being the only human on a living starship the size of Manhattan could really suck. Today was one such day. He knew that if the queen of Spain were to pay him a bounty for the discovery of new worlds, he'd be the richest man alive. But he'd still have a toothache.

Crichton sighed as he cracked the seal on a new pod, extracted the incubating dentic and attached it carefully to the inside of his mouth. Clothing secure, beard dealt with and toothache under control, if not actually cleared up, he left his bedroom and entered the chamber that he called his lounge. He looked around.

The floor and walls were made of a rubbery skin-like material, threaded with veins and pulsing with life. Skinsteel gratings emerged from the floor and furniture grew from the walls. Moya had been bred for functionality, but not necessarily a human aesthetic. The floor pulsed, deep blue and red, the healthy colors of oxygen transportation.

Crichton moved to his mantelpiece—well, the shelf Moya had grown when trying to fulfil his specifications for the room. Having a mantelpiece in a living spaceship might have seemed a pretension on any other day...but not today. Crichton ran his fingers lightly across the shelf, picked up the framed photograph. "Hi, Dad." His voice held a hint of sadness.

The photograph came from his module, *Farscape I*, the experimental vehicle he had been piloting when he tore through a wormhole. His personal payload. Something that he was very glad he had brought along. Now he was surprised at how foreign the plastic of the frame felt to his fingers. Too other world. Too...human. And his father's face, so much like his own—the strong brow, the clear eyes and alert, inquisitive expression. It seemed unfamiliar now ... the face, almost, of a stranger.

How fast they fade, he thought to himself. *How quickly we adapt*.

Feeling that confronting his sadness was the best way to banish it, Crichton took his MiniDisc recorder from his pocket and checked the remaining recording time on the disc. Thirty seconds. He sighed. There went the last thirty seconds of ZZ Top's *Afterburner*.

Crichton finalized the disc, punched in the final chapter. His own voice filled the room. "Hey, Dad. Your favorite son here with another exciting instalment of *Starman Jones*. This week's episode is the one where our hero lands on a war-torn planet and ends up leading the downtrodden rebels in a futile but heroic fight against the oppressive state. On the way he learns about himself and comes out a better man." Crichton hit pause and sighed. How close had he come to erasing every entry he had ever made? How many times had he wondered at the futility of these silly messages to a man he would in all likelihood never see again?

Lacking an answer he elected to listen to the rest of the entry. Get it out of his system once and for all. His thumb shifted again and he heard himself say, "Dad, you know what? In many ways, space isn't that

different from home. I've been here for a few months, and guess what? Conflicts. War. Class struggles. Discrimination. There's smuggling and slavery and drugs—all patrolled by a shoot first, ask questions later intergalactic police force called Peacekeepers."

The taped voice went on. *"Anyway, I bet you can guess that I'm feeling a little down. Low, even. You know, I've been thinking about a gift ... and, well, last month we visited a planet. Uyani Prime. Horrible place. Mostly coal. Black seas. No industrialization. Coal went out of fashion here a long time ago. But Moya needed to eat. Compressed carbon is a delicacy to her, so the crew let her feed on as much coal as she could handle. And can she pack it away! Still, what do you expect from a living starship that's about the size of Manhattan? Anyway, I got to stretch my legs, explore the coast a bit."* There was a pause. Crichton's voice grew hushed with excitement. *"I found a fossil, Dad. You've got to see this thing. It's beautiful. Perfectly preserved. Something like an ammonite but with arms. I can see hints of skin. The detail is incredible. I've got it here in the ship. I had to leave it in the cargo bay. It's a bit big. Actually, it's six and a half meters wide. Took all six of us here to get it aboard. The thing must weigh a quarter of a ton. Aeryn nearly lost an arm. It must be a billion years old."* Crichton paused, then heard himself wonder aloud, *"I wonder what race it evolved into? What heights they might have climbed? What goals they might have achieved? Where they are now? It's only now, out here on the edge of the infinite, that I'm really beginning to realize what we have back home. All I had ... and all I lost."* Another pause. *"Dad, I guess we both know you may never see this beautiful example of life from another world. I just wanted you to know I was thinking of you on your—birthday. Happy birthday, Dad."*

Crichton clicked off the recorder. Pulling a small wallet from another pocket he riffled through the stack of discs contained within. Rock. Jazz. Garage. Hardhouse. His last link with Earth. Music he might never hear again. Erasing these recordings was a sacrifice.

Talking to Dad was worth it.

Selecting Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.*, Crichton loaded the disc and hit *format*, then *record*.

"Hey, Dad, your ever-lovin' blue-eyed son here. And this week our hero's got a toothache. That'll teach me to floss, right? They do it here with worms. Little skinny ones that stre-e-e-tch. And dentics eat the bacteria around your teeth and gums. Neat, huh? Remind me to tell you how they deal with constipation here someday." Crichton paused. Pink goo oozed from a fleshy tube onto a thin plate. *"Hey, Dad, gotta dash. That knock at the door was room service. The champagne here's to die for."*

Crichton put away the recorder and scooped up the first mouthful of breakfast. The pink goo tasted right—buttered waffles and coffee—but it was annoying that the temperature of each flavor was exactly the same—something he had never gotten used to. And how he missed hash browns, crisp bacon, and scrambled eggs.

Someone tapped on the skinsteel door to his quarters.

"Yeah, Aeryn. That you?"

"The very same."

The answer was not strictly necessary. Aeryn was the only member of Moya's crew who had ever thought to play the friendly neighbor. Which was odd, considering the fact that she spent 90 percent of most days either flaming mad or putting on a real good show for the natives.

Crichton, welcoming the distraction, left his breakfast and joined Aeryn in the access artery.

"I was just planning to take a turn around the block," he said. *Keep it casual.*

"Oh?"

Was that avoidance?

"And ... I wondered if you ..."

Crichton ventured a grin. It didn't hurt too much. *"I was dressed like a million dollars and didn't care who knew it."*

Aeryn looked quizzical.

"Mickey Spillane. You need a translation?"

"Please."

Crichton chuckled. “Up, dressed and rarin’ to roll. You need a translation?”

“No, that will do.”

They set off along the spongy floor of Moya’s portprime-access artery, heading for the cargo hold. The astronaut couldn’t feel the texture of the floor beneath his feet but he knew what it was: bio-organic skinsteel threaded with veins and pulsing with the flow of blood and oxygen to Moya’s vital organs.

Aeryn strode along beside Crichton, dark eyes brooding, footprints fading from the skinsteel floor behind them. To Crichton, Aeryn was a storm front running before the wind, sidewinder emotions bursting out at every opportunity to explore her new life in exile. Passionate, intelligent, opinionated; yet somehow naive, somehow...vulnerable. A woman of extremes and opposites, at once compellingly attractive and insanely annoying. A soul in conflict with her background and life-experience, trying to make sense of a universe that, for her, since being deemed irreversibly contaminated by her Peacekeeper captain, surely must seem to have gone mad.

“Haven’t seen you around the hood for a while. Where you been hangin’?”

Aeryn tossed her thick, black hair. “Working.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re not all just passengers here.”

“Yeah, I’m gettin’ that. I just thought we might have, you know, hung for a while, that’s all.”

“Crichton, you’re a rock-hopper.” Aeryn’s voice was clipped ... hard edged.

“You weren’t born in space. You can’t possibly understand what it’s like to live out here, beyond the confines and restrictions of a single world. It gives you a different perspective.”

Crichton shook his head. “It gives me the willies.”

Aeryn stopped in her tracks. Like her speech, her movements were often abrupt. “Why is it that whenever we have an opportunity to talk, you have to make sexual references?”

“What?” Crichton spun to face her. The heel of his space boot dug a shallow gully in the floor, which seemed to fill almost magically.

“Willies.” Aeryn said with vague distaste. “Isn’t that a reference to ... you know. Human reproductive ... you *know!*”

Crichton sighed, rubbed a hand through his hair and shook his head. “I thought these bugs could handle contextual references.”

“They can. But they’re not infallible. And they’ve never had to deal with a human before.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s so different about us? We’re just folk. We have brains don’t we? You know—that lumpy bit at the top of our central nervous systems?”

“Humans. Brains.” Aeryn weighed the thought carefully. “A matter for conjecture.”

Crichton let out an irritated breath. She always did this to him. You’d have thought he’d have learned by now.

“Aeryn, I’ll tell you what: you keep your notions of humans to yourself and I’ll go back to scratching pictures on cave walls with burnt sticks. That suit ya?”

“If we ever find a planet with caves.” Aeryn’s lips barely moved; the perfect deadpan.

“Whatever.” Crichton was wearying of the conversation.

“And sticks.”

“Yes.” *Go away!* “And sticks.”

Aeryn smiled, a sly expression that crept almost unnoticed across her face. “And an atmosphere capable of supporting combustion. And geological processes that support the production of sulphur for a catalyst. And...”

“Man! Some days you’re real hard work, you know that?”

“Really?” Aeryn affected disinterest as they moved along the corridor. She had never been one to worry what others thought of her. Direct. Straightforward. Determined. These traits had been coded into her at birth; the perfect Peacekeeper mix. How her birth fellow PKs must have puzzled when Crais deemed her irreversibly contaminated because of her contact with Crichton, an alien. Within moments, her life as she

knew it was over.

And so she had lost everything. Her ship, her status, her identity. An exile now, wandering the trackless gulf between stars she had once called home. If only they knew the truth. About Crais and his obsession with Crichton.

A curious mixture, this human, who was often so difficult to understand.

Crichton. Fascinating symbol of otherness. Aeryn studied the human closely. His face was set in angry lines ... eyes narrowed as he moved ... breath coming faster and shallower than normal. Aeryn nodded, assembling the evidence. "Tooth still troubling you?"

Crichton rubbed a finger along his lower jaw and winced. "Good guess."

"See what you get if you don't dentac regularly?"

"Jeez, Aeryn, those dentacs may feed off everything from gangrene to the common cold, but to be honest,"

Crichton punctuated his words with a heartfelt shudder, "I'd rather floss with Rygel's nasal hairs."

Aeryn frowned in disgust. "Really?"

"Hell, no. But you know what I mean."

"You mean you want a—what do you call it—a *toothbrush*? A plastic stick with abrasive hairs that can actually cause more damage than they prevent?"

Eyes closed, lost in blissful memories, Crichton replied, "Mine had nylon bristles. And a rotating head. And rechargeable batteries." His expression became dreamy. "The Formula One of oral hygiene."

Aeryn's expression of disgust deepened. "You put an electrical device in your *mouth*?"

"Oh, yes."

Aeryn sighed. "Well, it's your choice, I suppose. Not to dentac, I mean. But you should really take more care of yourself, you know that, don't you? Personal hygiene can be of paramount importance to out-worlders, and not just because of the smell. Space is full of radiation. Biological mutations happen all the time."

"And the nearest Colgate *Plaque-Defender* is several million parsecs away." Crichton surrendered to the pain long enough to whimper. "At least."

By now Crichton and Aeryn had traversed the main artery and turned into a curving side-branch. The walls here were a deeper blue, threaded with pulsing veins and well-oxygenated clumps of lumoss, which reacted to their presence by brightening as they approached and dimming as they passed.

"You still planning to—what was it you said? 'Take a turn around the block'?"

"Not likely. The way I feel at the moment I'd probably wind up doing the sidewalk shuffle with an asteroid."

Aeryn shook her head. The words were familiar, but the meaning, as usual, eluded her.

"I'll probably just spring the toolbox, have me a little grease-monkey mojo. Try to take my mind off...you know." Crichton touched the tip of one finger tenderly to his jaw.

"Grease-monkey...mojo?"

"Sure, you know. Drain the sump. Polish the pistons."

The light suddenly dawned for Aeryn. "You mean...service the engine? Of your module?"

"Yeah. You got it."

The cargo hold brightened as the valve unpinched to allow them entry. Lumoweed growing from the vaulted chamber roof began to crawl towards them, attracted to their body heat, converting the energy to visible light.

The module was parked at the base of a fuelling root, battered but unbowed. Loosely based on a space shuttle design, it was sleeker and smaller, with disproportionately large engine housings. It had been these highly experimental engines that had cracked open a wormhole in Earth orbit and blasted Crichton halfway across the universe.

Crichton ran a finger along one of the many scars in the module's ceramic composite hull. The scar stopped short at one of three oval system upgrade modules grafted seamlessly onto the bow. Crichton placed his palm flat against the scar, careful to touch only the original...the part that had been built on Earth. His lips curled in a half-smile.

Dad running his good-luck wash leather across the pilot's canopy. Himself sneaking up with the pressure

hose. The grin on Dad's face. The granddaddy of all water fights, out there on the steaming concrete under a broiling sun. A way to forget. A way to wash away the pain of separation...of loss...even if only for a few moments.

“Ran every red light down Memory Lane....” Crichton's depressed whisper echoed something his father had once said. He glanced sideways at Aeryn. “Dire Straits,” he added by way of clarifying the lyric.

Aeryn followed Crichton's fingers along the scar in the hull. “You were in trouble?”

A snort of laughter pushed aside the memories. “A covers band.”

“Banned? What from? And why would it need covering?”

“Nah, a *band*. Talk about being divided by a common language. You know. Rock, baby. I want my MTV.”

Crichton mimed a passable air-guitar solo....

“MTV? Why would you want a Modular Terraforming Vehicle? There are no rocks on Moya. Air, water and accommodation are free.”

Crichton grinned, then winced and cupped his face with a hand. “Man, it hurts when I laugh.” He undogged *Farscape's* canopy and reached behind the pilot's seat to the stowage locker. The toolbox was scuffed plastic, covered with passport stickers. Rome. Paris. Tokyo. Olympus. Extracting the toolbox, he entered a code sequence into the dash-comp. The three upgrade modules unpinched with a nicely harmonized nasal wheeze.

“You're going to modify a custom-grown starflight systems upgrade module with...” Aeryn regarded the open toolbox disdainfully, “...what have you got in there, anyway?”

Crichton shrugged. “Some doodads I picked up on my travels. Never know when you might need to tweak a widget here, a grommet there.” He looked up. Aeryn was wearing her impatient face again. “You never go hot-rodding?”

Aeryn waited for an explanation.

“Guess not.” Crichton weighed up the tools then made his selection.

“So, is the pain from your tooth really bad?”

“Good segue,” Crichton deadpanned as he levered himself onto the hull and stuck his head and shoulders into the upgrade module. “And before you ask, that's a musical bridge. And since you ask, yeah, the pain's...well, it's a pain.”

“Sharp or dull?”

“Both.” His reply was muffled.

“Sensitive?”

“Mmmm. Temperature and pressure. I'm on a tepid soup diet.” Crichton emerged from the module long enough to grab a new tool from the kit. “Why so interested?”

“I'm only trying to help.”

“I think it's an abscess.” His voice became muffled again and partly obscured by banging noises. “The right side of my face feels like it's on fire. My ear feels like it's full of goo. I keep wanting to grind my teeth. And when I do...”

“Did you see Zhaan?”

“Sure.”

“And?”

“She gave me a bigger dentic.”

“Good. Did you use it?”

“Sure.” What Aeryn could see of Crichton's body shuddered at the memory.

“And?”

“It died.”

“It died?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it stopped, you know, wriggling around in there. Tasted foul. And it smelled.” A thought. “Are they supposed to do that?”

“I've never needed to use one.”

“Oh.”

“But I’ve heard they can grow to a great age if properly fed.”

“Reusable dentics, huh? Well, this one took one gander at my lower right six molar and kicked the bucket.”

“Kicked the bucket?”

“Gave up the ghost. Threw in the towel. You know, snuffed it. Guess my infection wasn’t up to its fussy high standards or something. Say, Aeryn, are you blocking the light?”

“No.”

Crichton popped his head out of the module. “Is it my imagination or is it getting dim in here?” He glanced around. Lumoweed clustered overhead, spreading itself across the fuelling root system main trunk, snuggling close in a useful but disconcertingly friendly way.

Aeryn followed his gaze. “Maybe it is a little…” She broke off as the lumoweed suddenly emitted a burst of brilliant white light, followed immediately by darkness.

“Ow. Jeez.” Crichton rubbed colored blobs from his stunned eyes. “More pain. Thank you, Lord.”

Aeryn’s eyes narrowed as she cast her gaze around them. The vaulted roof flickered with pulses of sickly light from the lumoweed. Aeryn tensed. Something was very wrong.

Crichton opened his mouth to speak, but without warning the floor shuddered and both Sebacean and human fought for balance. Crichton’s teeth clicked together painfully. Achingly bright blasts of light came from the previously dark lumoss. Moya heaved again, more violently. Crichton was thrown to the floor.

“What the frell…?”

He reached out to grasp the hand Aeryn extended towards him. The hand was warm, the skin dry, the pressure from her fingers strong. But Crichton only had a second to register this before he was pulled roughly back to his feet.

Aeryn looked around. She seemed almost…scared.

“Something must be wrong with Moya,” she said.

Pilot came in over their comms: “Moya is unwell. I have detected the site of primary infection.”

The hull shook again; Crichton struggled to keep his balance. “Great timing, Pilot.” Crichton began to retrieve the tools that he’d dropped when he’d fallen. “I was just looking forward to a good tinker.”

“Timing is regrettable. Moya is really *quite* unwell. And she is frightened. I have detected further sites of secondary infection.”

“Something serious?”

“I regret to inform you the danger is grave. The infection is spreading quickly.”

Crichton and Aeryn headed for the bridge.

Moya’s bridge was a wide semicircular chamber with a vaulted roof supported by bonelike growths.

Skinsteel coated all exposed surfaces, pulsing as Moya breathed air into the chamber for the crew to breathe. Veins threaded the walls and floor. Lumoss glowed in healthy clumps on the walls and ceiling, brightening the chamber further in response to each new occupant.

To Crichton, being inside the bridge was like being in an underwater cave. A coral cave. Sunlight, rain-bow-hued fish fluttering past your mask…the soft sound of air pulsing in your regulator…constant reminders of just how alive this starship they knew as Moya really was.

And now she was ill. What if she died? Who would make their air, their food and water? How would they live? How would he get back to Earth?

Crichton told himself not to overreact. After all, how serious could it be?

The access valve to the bridge pinched shut behind them with a breathy wheeze. Everyone else was already there. Zhaan. D’Argo. Chiana. Rygel.

“Ah, Crichton and Aeryn, good. We’ve been waiting.” Rygel’s voice was imperious. After all, he was, as he never let anyone forget, Rygel XVI, Dominar of six hundred billion subjects. Not quite the embodiment of ultimate leadership. Crichton shot the small Hynerian a glance. With bulgy eyes and a glum look usually etched on his leathery face he resembled a large frog with a thyroid disorder. What Rygel lacked in height, he made up for in ego. Now his leathery body quivered in his ThroneSled, which he maintained at a height

just slightly above Crichton's eye level—very important when you were only a shade over two feet tall. Crichton studied Rygel. It was hard to read the emotion on the face of such a being. But something didn't feel right.

A movement caused Crichton to turn. Chiana had moved close, her feet silent on the skinsteel floor. White hair crowned her pixie face. Almond-shaped eyes, high cheeks, softly pouting lips. Beautiful, yes. But also a thief; a seductress; a con artist; an adrenaline junkie with bad in her blood and mischief on her mind.

Crichton was mindful of Chiana—sensuality and evil in the same perfect body; the devil's gift.

Chiana lifted a hand to Crichton's shoulder, her body orbiting his, precise, dagger-sharp movements. "So nice to see you, John." Her voice was silk, but silk could strangle. With an effort, Crichton pulled himself from her touch, and looked at the rest of the crew. Pa'u Zotoh Zhaan, her smooth, blue face decorated with exotic markings...as befitting one evolved from vegetable rather than animal stock. And Ka D'Argo, whose bearlike presence, infrequent speech, and obsession with weapons marked him as pure animal, yet whose soul was the most sensitive of them all.

And lastly former Peacekeeper, Officer Aeryn Sun—a woman who wore fury like a cloak, kept it wrapped close at all times, her own personal shield. How attractive would she be if she ever let that cloak drop, even for a second? Crichton had an inkling of the answer.

While Crichton was attempting to size up the situation, Aeryn had been speaking quietly with Zhaan. Now she turned to look at him, silent, eyes flashing with anger. The transformation came as a complete surprise to Crichton and he frowned. *What does she know that I don't?* He racked his brain for some clue. All either of them knew for sure was that Moya was ill—and yet Aeryn now seemed to know something he didn't.

"Pilot said Moya wasn't well. What's wrong with her?"

No one answered. Crichton's frown deepened. It wasn't just Aeryn. Everyone was staring at him. Crichton shook his head wearily. "You know, when I was a kid and I did something wrong, Dad would call me into his study. He wouldn't say anything...he'd just look at me for a while. Wait for me to speak first. Wait to see if I could figure out what I'd done wrong before dishing out the medicine."

The only response was accusing looks, though Chiana's smile deepened with anticipation.

"Why do I get the feeling I've been summoned here for a spanking?"

"Crichton, how could you do something so stupid?" Aeryn's voice was as hard as her expression.

"Tell you what, Aeryn. You tell me what you think I did and I'll tell you if I did it. Fair?"

"You put your dead dentics into the recyclers!" she shouted.

Crichton shrugged. "So? They died. I threw them away. We talked about this already."

"You didn't tell me you *recycled* them!"

"And there's a problem with that?"

"Yes, John," Zhaan said calmly, "we have a problem when Moya converts recycled biomass into food, yes."

Crichton's face flushed. "She eats recycled waste?"

D'Argo growled. "Moya is a living ship. You thought otherwise?"

"Well, you know, I've never been on a living starship before...I mean...I thought, I dunno, maybe she photosynthesized or something." He threw up his hands in exasperation. "I mean, how the hell was I supposed to know?"

Aeryn's voice was scornful. "He didn't *know*."

"For crying out loud, it's just a *toothache*!"

"Exactly." Zhaan was still calm. "A *human* infection."

"An infection that Moya could not detect and against which she has no defense," Aeryn added, angrily.

Pilot explained. "For Moya the disease pathology takes the form of what you would call 'necrotizing fasciitis.' Deadly, I'm afraid."

"Congratulations, Crichton," D'Argo snarled coldly. "This could prove fatal to Moya. And to all of us as well."

As if to prove his point, the floor convulsed. It wasn't hard to understand that Moya was suffering. Her pain hovered over the bridge like ancient ghosts, unable to rest.

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