

24 Hour Pass

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by [califmole](#)

Summary

John Crichton returns to Earth. (This story was originally posted elsewhere, now uploading to AO3.)

24 Hour Pass by Ann Harrington

Rating: Gen

Summary: John Crichton returns to Earth.

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Spoilers: All of Season 2, up through "A Clockwork Nebari".

International Space Station Friendship, 23:00 EST, Event Time minus 0:05

"IASA Control, this is Friendship Station, reporting that search program charlie-forty-two has been completed. Preliminary results look good, and you'll get the full package in the next data transmission. I've begun switching over the array for the next search program, and expect to complete calibrations and begin search by zero hundred hours," Mission Specialist Tony Santini said.

"Friendship Station, we copy that. Good work, Tony, you're already eight hours ahead of schedule. Keep this up and you'll get to come home early," Angela Porter said.

A friend from their days together as novice astronauts in training, Angela would be part of the team that replaced his, during the next crew rotation. But that was months away, and for now, she and the rest of her team divided their time between training exercises and taking shifts in space station control.

"Don't worry, there will still be plenty of NEOs for you to find when it's your turn up here," Tony Santini replied. "Friendship out."

He toggled off the radio, and used his right foot to kick off from the comm station, drifting lazily across the compartment. As he approached the bank of monitors, with the ease of long practice he caught the grab bar with his left hand, and brought himself to a slow stop.

His eyes swept across the display screens. All indicators were green, which meant the station's functions were within acceptable operating parameters. Touching the telescope array monitor screen with his free hand, he called up the status menu, and saw that the repositioning was nearly complete. Once finished, he would run calibration tests, and then start the next phase of the search program, as they continued the mapping of near-earth objects.

Tony Santini paused a minute, savoring the peacefulness. The low hum of the electronics and whirl of the air circulation system were as familiar to him as his own breathing. He loved this quiet time during the night watch. Everyone else on the space station was asleep, except for Alexei Kirillov, who was in the science module as he encoded the next data transmission.

This was as close to being alone as it was possible to get, and he always looked forward to those nights when he had the watch.

Not that he didn't like the rest of the crew. On the contrary, the fourteen member crew had trained for this mission for two years, forging strong bonds. But still, Friendship station was a small place, that fourteen people more than filled. No matter that the station was many times the size of its predecessors, when it came right down to it, it was still a small series of modules that required the crew to work together in very close quarters.

A high-pitched chime sounded, breaking into his reverie. His eyes went at once to the status monitor, and read the blinking message. 'Warning, object detected within 50 kilometers.'

Strange. The radar was designed to guide incoming supply ships, and would also warn of objects in their near vicinity such as communications satellites. But there were no supply ships scheduled, and their orbital path shouldn't bring them near enough to any satellites to trigger a radar alert. And any asteroid or space debris large enough to trigger the radar alert should have been detected long before it got within fifty kilometers.

Seconds later, the chime sounded again, this time louder, and began repeating. His eyes stared at the screen in disbelief. 'Warning, approaching object detected within 15 kilometers.'

Reason told him this was impossible, even as his hand slammed the crew alarm button. Given the speed at which the space station traveled, anything within fifteen kilometers was an immediate threat.

"What's happening?" Alexei Kirillov's voice came over the crew intercom.

Tony toggled open the general crew intercom. "Collision alarm," he reported. "Radar is picking up something in the fifteen kilometer range, but I haven't been able to get a fix on it."

"On my way," Colonel Sarah Blackwell, the space station commander, responded. "Everyone else, suit up and get to your emergency stations."

Tony's hands danced over the radar controls. The data he was seeing made no sense. If this was a satellite in geosynchronous orbit, they should have passed it by now. If it was a piece of space debris, or an asteroid fragment, it should have either impacted with them or disappeared behind them. But instead the object had slowed, and was now point six kilometers from the space station.

There was a crackle of static, and a male voice came over the radio. "Space Station, you copy me?"

"Not now, IASA, we've got our own problems here," Tony said tersely.

"Space Station, this is Commander John Crichton of Farscape One," the voice said. "You've probably picked me up on radar by now."

Tony blinked. He felt a touch on his shoulder, and looked back to see Colonel Sarah Blackwell and Alexei Kirillov had joined him in the command module.

He turned the switch so the radio was broadcast over the intercom, as well as through his headphones.

"Would you repeat that?" Tony asked.

"Space Station, this is Commander John Crichton of Farscape One," the voice said. "Suggest you turn on your external cameras, and since it looks like it's night down there, start waking up the folks down in Canaveral."

He felt a slow anger begin to burn inside. This was someone's idea of a sick joke. John Crichton had been killed over three years ago, when the initial Farscape test had gone horribly wrong. Tony had not known him personally, but he deserved better than to have some stranger make a mockery of his sacrifice.

He looked over to see his own anger reflected on Colonel Blackwell's face, as she said, "This is Colonel Blackwell of Friendship Station. Listen, I don't know who you are, or how you got on this frequency, but--"

"Slow down, Mustang Sally," the voice said, invoking the nickname that had followed Sarah Blackwell around since her days as the first woman to pilot a stealth fighter. "I know this is a surprise, but play along for a minute."

Tony looked down at the status board. "Colonel Blackwell, radar shows the target is now within two hundred meters of the space station, approximately nine-o'clock off the forward telescope array," he said.

Alexei Kirillov had taken his place at the communications console. "External camera activated, and on monitor four," he said.

Their eyes turned to the monitor, as the camera panned the area. A triangular white shape appeared, and was swiftly brought into focus.

Tony swallowed hard.

"I'll be damned," Colonel Blackwell breathed. "Crichton?"

"It's me, alive and kicking, so to speak," Commander John Crichton said.

Tony could hear startled exclamations from the rest of the station's crew, as a dozen voices tried to talk at once, until Colonel Blackwell ordered everyone to silence.

"But how? What happened? Where have you been?" Colonel Blackwell asked.

"Explanations later," Commander Crichton answered. "You got IASA on the line? Tell them to fire up the Farscape One monitoring protocols."

"Already done so," Alexei Kirillov reported. "They've got audio and video on line."

Tony could only imagine the frantic scramble that must be going on down in Canaveral.

Colonel Blackwell toggled off her microphone. "Can we capture it here as well?"

"Feeding the audio signal through this channel. Still working on the video," Alexei said.

"Get it," Colonel Blackwell said. Then she toggled back on her microphone. "Okay Farscape, IASA Mission Control is online."

"Mission Control, this is Farscape One, do you copy?"

"Err, uh, Farscape One, we copy." For the first time Tony could ever remember, Angela Porter sounded flustered.

"Make sure you got the recorders on, because I'm only going to say this once," Commander Crichton instructed.

The central monitor blinked, and went from displaying the image of the Farscape craft to an image of the interior of the cockpit, showing someone who looked very much like the picture of John Crichton that was hung in the main reception area of the IASA headquarters.

"I don't have a lot of time, so here's the deal. You've got six hours to round up Colonel Jack Crichton and Doctor David Kroger, put them on the X-44 space plane, and send them up to the station. And then--"

"Commander, this is Senior Duty Officer Mike Gerard-" a voice interrupted.

"Great, now keep quiet and listen up. You put my Dad and DK on the space plane, send them up, and I'll come in and tell you what happened, and where I've been."

"Crichton, be reasonable," Colonel Blackwell began.

The image of John Crichton shook his head. "Sarah, we do this my way, or not at all. I'm not landing the craft, I'm not negotiating, and in twenty-two point seven Earth hours I'm outta here, and your chance to talk is gone."

John Crichton leaned his head to the right, letting the camera see a second figure seated behind him. It was a woman, with dark hair and dark eyes.

"Erin, wave hello to the nice Earth people," he said.

"Frell jak," the woman said, with a grimace. She did not wave.

"Wasn't Farscape a single person craft?" Tony Santini asked.

No one bothered to answer him.

"IASA, time to dust off the first contact protocols. Send my Dad, DK, the flight crew, and pick two of your own, I don't care who. That's all."

The woman said something indecipherable.

"Right," Crichton said. "Anyone except Cobb, that is. No extra tourists, no weapons, no tricks. Anything looks strange, and I call the whole thing off."

"Commander, you can't expect us to launch in six hours," the duty officer Gerard complained.

"Don't try to bullshit me. The X-44 rescue craft is prepped for a two-hour launch window. Six hours is more than enough time to get my people on board, and get it launched. You send them up so I can talk with them, and I tell y'all where I've been, and give DK the plans for the hetch drive."

"Hetch?" Mike Gerard asked.

"FTL," Commander Crichton said.

Faster than light. It was the holy grail of astrophysics, an impossible dream to some, and a quest pursued with fervent devotion by others. If Crichton had indeed discovered an FTL drive....

"Crichton," Colonel Blackwell said, making his name into a question.

"That's all," Crichton answered. "Got questions play back the tape. I'm not talking again until you tell me you've got my Dad on his way to Canaveral. In the meantime, I always promised myself that one day I'd walk on the moon, and now is as good as time as any."

"But---" the duty officer protested.

The radio went silent, as Crichton shut off his microphone. Alexei Kirillov switched the monitor over to the external camera, just in time to capture the image of the Farscape module disappearing at an unbelievable rate of acceleration.

"Did you see that?" Tony Santini asked. "Nothing can move that fast."

Colonel Blackwell nodded. "Nothing from Earth, that is."

Bayview City, near Homestead, Florida, Event Time +02:45

Jack Crichton awoke to the sound of a helicopter passing overhead. Even before he was fully awake, his mind cataloged the details. A heavy chopper, flying very low. It sounded like military engines, but no sane controller would authorize such a low flight over a residential area. Most likely it was a medical rescue chopper, flying to or from a nearby accident site.

He opened his eyes, and turned to glance at the clock. Glowing green numbers revealed that it was ten of two in the morning. He rolled over and tried to convince himself to go back to sleep. Sleep came harder to him these days than it once had. And this was the second time he had been awakened. There had been that strange phone call just after midnight, when someone had asked his name. Jack Crichton had identified himself, and then the caller had thanked him and hung up. A wrong number, no doubt, but at least the caller had been courteous.

The doorbell rang.

He rolled out of bed, and grabbed his robe. He was halfway down the stairs, as the doorbell rang again.

He flicked on the porch light, and opened the door.

Two Air Force officers, a male major and a female lieutenant, stood on his porch, and behind them in the driveway was a police cruiser.

Jack Crichton swallowed hard. There was only one reason the military sent personal messengers, rather than simply making a telephone call. And yet, that made no sense. His son John had been dead for over three years.

He opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch, and into the warm Florida night.

"Are you Colonel Crichton? Colonel John Crichton?" asked the major, who was the senior of the two.

"I'm Colonel Jack Crichton. Retired."

The major, whose name tag read Adams, pulled a photo out of his pocket, and compared the picture to the man standing in front of him. Then he nodded.

"Colonel, I need you to get dressed and come with us. Immediately," Major Adams said.

The lieutenant pulled out a small radio, and spoke into it. "We've got him," she said.

"What is this about?" he asked. It felt surreal, and he was tempted to pinch himself to see if he was still asleep and dreaming. It had been over a decade since he'd retired from the Air Force, more than two years since he'd resigned from IASA. What could they possibly want with him?

"I haven't been briefed on that," Major Adams said. "All I can tell you is that we've got a chopper waiting for you. The chopper will take you to the airport, and from there you're going to Canaveral."

"Canaveral?"

"Sir, we don't have much time," the lieutenant said.

"Of course," he answered. He'd spent enough time in the military to understand that there was a time to ask questions, and a time when all a man could do was salute and follow orders. He may have been retired, but he was still an American.

"Come in," he said, holding the door open.

He went up the stairs, taking them two at a time. As he dressed, his mind turned over a dozen possibilities, each more incredible than the last. But the more he thought, the less sense the situation made. He was an Apollo-era astronaut, who'd joined IASA as a mission consultant,

mostly as a way to stay close to John. He was still a hell of a pilot, but it had been nearly twenty years since his last shuttle ride, and he had no special skills or expertise that they'd need in any kind of emergency.

And if something had happened with DK, it would be his family they summoned, not Jack Crichton. Besides, the next test of Farscape Two wasn't for another four months.

He hoped it wouldn't be too long before someone decided to tell him what the heck was going on.

Grabbing his watch and wallet from the dresser, he stuffed the wallet in his back pocket, then slipped the watch on. Moving to the closet he grabbed a small travel case, a ready bag kept always packed, a habit left over from his days in the Air Force.

Less than five minutes after he had climbed them, he came back down the stairs.

"Let's go," he said.

He and Major Adams climbed into the back of the police cruiser, while the lieutenant rode up front. As they left, she spoke into the small radio again, telling someone that their ETA was two minutes.

They drove through the streets of the subdivision. His eyebrows raised in surprise, as they headed towards a small neighborhood park, and then he saw the flashing lights of two police cruisers.

In the center of the soccer field was a black army attack chopper, rotors slowly turning, while police officers kept away the small crowd of curious bystanders.

Jack Crichton took a deep breath, feeling a sudden surge of adrenaline. Whatever was happening, the military was absolutely serious about not wasting any time.

The cruiser drove onto the grass, past the police officers, and drew to a stop a short distance from the chopper. Jack Crichton followed Major Adams over to the chopper.

"This is as far as I go," Major Adams said. He held out his hand. "Good luck to you, sir."

Jack Crichton shook his hand. "Thanks. I may need it."

A sergeant wearing the uniform of the National Guard hopped out of the chopper, as they approached. "I'll take that, sir," he said, grabbing the travel case. "Climb in."

Jack Crichton climbed into the chopper, and took the vacant right seat. The sergeant tossed in the bag, and then climbed in, closing the door behind him.

"Go, go," the sergeant said into his headset, banging his free hand on the door that separated them from the cockpit.

As the helicopter lifted off at a steep angle, Jack Crichton buckled himself in, and the sergeant did the same. The noise of the rotors made it impossible to talk. He was surprised

they had sent an attack helicopter, but then again, perhaps they had sent the first chopper they could find with fuel and a flight crew.

Fifteen minutes later they landed at Homestead airfield, next to a Learjet that bore no obvious government markings. The helicopter had barely touched down, when the door was opened, this time by an Air Force staff sergeant.

"Colonel, we're your ride," the staff sergeant said.

Jack Crichton walked over towards the aircraft. A man was standing by the stairway. He wore a dark shirt and denim jeans, but his bearing proclaimed his military background.

"Colonel Crichton, I'm Commander Endicott, IASA," he said.

"Commander, what's all this about?"

"As soon as we're airborne, I can fill you in," Commander Endicott said.

Jack nodded, and began climbing the stairs. Commander Endicott followed, and then the staff sergeant who had greeted him, carrying the travel case.

The plane started moving before the staff sergeant had fully closed the door. The tower must have been holding the runway for them, for they taxied directly to it and took off. It was an impressive display of logistics, or of the clout of whomever was behind this.

Jack Crichton watched the runway disappear beneath them.

He turned to Commander Endicott. "You mind telling me what this is all about? What on Earth does IASA need with an old war-horse like myself, and why the rush?"

Commander Endicott reached under his seat and pulled out a small metal briefcase. Opening up the briefcase, he took out something that looked like a slightly larger version of a cell phone.

"Satellite phone," he explained. Then he pressed a key, and held it to his ear. "Commander Endicott. Yes, we're on our way."

He listened for a moment. "Roger," he said.

Then he held out the satellite phone. "If he asks, you can tell him that our ETA in Canaveral is just under one hour. Liftoff will be on schedule."

Jack Crichton took the phone. Then the last word penetrated his consciousness. "Liftoff?"

"Sir," Commander Endicott said, gesturing to the phone.

Jack Crichton raised the phone to his ear. "Colonel Jack Crichton," he said.

"Dad? Dad, it's John."

His mind reeled. It could not be. And yet that voice was so familiar....

"Dad, are you there?"

"I'm here," he said. He squeezed the phone so hard he thought it might break.

"Dad, I know it's hard to understand, but it's really me," John said.

He felt numb. Disbelief warred with a sudden impossible hope. His chest felt tight, and it hurt to breathe.

"Where? How?" he managed to croak out.

"Where is easy. I'm in Farscape, in Earth orbit. How is a long story."

"When are you landing?" No wonder he was being rushed to Canaveral. Suddenly the frantic haste made perfect sense.

"I'm not."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad, this is a visit. Nothing more. If you want to see me, IASA will send you and DK up on the X-44 space plane that's launching in just under three hours. If you don't, I'll understand. But either way, I've got less than twenty hours before I've got to leave."

Leave? What was he talking about? "Son, this is crazy," he said.

John laughed. "My life is crazy. But you've got to trust me. I know what I'm doing."

There was a long moment of silence, as Jack Crichton tried to come to grips with the knowledge that the son he had mourned for so long, had returned to him. Alive.

"Will you come?" John asked. In his voice was all the uncertainty of the boy he had once been.

"Of course," Jack Crichton answered.

He would go anywhere, do anything to see his son again. Anything.

Once he saw John, he knew he could convince him to stay.

IASA Mission Briefing Room, Canaveral Space Center, Event Time +05:10

Jack Crichton had been a test pilot, an astronaut and a mission consultant. He had sat through dozens, perhaps hundreds of mission briefings. But this was the strangest briefing he had ever attended.

He and the other three who would be making the trip sat in the front of the room, while Tom Kenyon had gone over the mission plan, and the information they had received so far. Behind them, a team of controllers and mission specialists took notes on their PDA's. Video screens displayed images of the support teams in Houston, Washington DC, and Kaliningrad, all intently listening.

"So to wrap it up, we have a lot of speculation, and very few hard facts," Tom Kenyon said. As the senior IASA manager in Canaveral, it had been his decision to agree to John's demands, and he had convinced the President to authorize the mission. "That may be John Crichton up there. That may be the Farscape One craft. That may even be an alien as his companion. Or this could all be some strange kind of hoax."

"There's something up there, and it didn't come from Earth," said mission specialist Angela Porter, who was the IASA pick for the team. "Rocket, shuttle or space plane, we would have detected a launch."

"So where has John Crichton been for the past three years?" asked Walter Klein, the designated State Department representative. In his late twenties, he was young for this assignment, but perhaps that was an asset. He was still young enough to be excited, whereas a more experienced diplomat would have been quick to see the myriad of things that could go wrong if this truly was a first contact situation.

"We never found any trace of debris. Not a single scrap of metal," Jack Crichton reminded them.

It was one of the reasons why he had had such a hard time accepting John's loss. A piece of scorched metal, a fragment of the module, even a radar trail of debris falling back into the Earth's atmosphere would have given him proof of John's fate. But the lack of debris had left too many questions. As the months had passed, he had tried to convince himself that the lack of debris was a good thing. It meant that the module's destruction had been so complete, that John's death must have been instantaneous. There would have been no time for him to suffer.

Only it seemed he hadn't died after all.

"The craft looks like Farscape One, but clearly it's been modified. Those aren't the engines John and I designed. Not from the images I saw, or from the way that thing moves. They're estimating it made the trip to the moon in minutes. Minutes. Do you know what that means?" DK's eyes shone with excitement, just as they had in the old days. "With that technology, we could reach Mars in days, maybe hours. And then--"

Tom Kenyon cleared his throat.

"Even if that is John Crichton, this could still be a trap. We don't know where he's been, or how he managed to survive. Someone helped him, but just because they helped him doesn't mean they are friendly towards us," Tom Kenyon said. "So I'm giving you all one last chance to back out. No one will think any the less of you, if you choose to stay behind."

"That's my son up there, and nothing is going to stop me from going," Jack Crichton said.

"Me too," DK answered.

"I was going to serve on the space station eventually. This is just a little early, sir," Angela Porter said.

Walter Klein nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes, I'm going. Just hope I don't get sick during the flight."

A space-sick civilian. That was just what they needed to make this bizarre expedition complete.

"Then that's decided. You have a plane to catch. Good luck to you all," Tom Kenyon said.

They rose to their feet, and as they left he shook each of their hands. Behind them, the IASA team members filed out the back of the room, and returned to their duty stations, or to the watchers gallery. No one wanted to miss a single minute of this mission, and Jack Crichton couldn't blame them.

So far, the audience was restricted to essential IASA personnel and a few key government officials in Washington, DC. But it would be impossible to keep the lid on this for long, no matter what story they told the media to cover the emergency scramble to launch the X-44. Sooner or later, there would be a leak, and then the whole world would be asking the same questions that ran through his mind. Was this really John who had returned to them, and if so, where had he been all this time?

Outside the briefing room, an aide waited to escort them. "The bus is waiting outside, to take you to the field," he said.

Jack Crichton caught DK's arm, and pulled him aside, letting Angela Porter and Walter Klein precede them. He waited till they were a few paces ahead, before they began to follow.

"Did you talk to him?" Jack Crichton asked. This was the first chance for him and DK to speak privately. When he had arrived at IASA, he had been taken for a rapid medical check, and then ushered into the briefing, which had already started.

"Yes, sir," DK said.

"DK, it's Jack," he told him.

"Yes, Colonel Jack," DK said. "Must have been after you spoke with him, because he told me you had agreed to make the trip."

Jack Crichton turned to look at DK. "Did he sound... himself?"

DK bit his lower lip. "He sounded like John. And we saw the videos. But---"

So he wasn't the only one who had doubts. Doubts that neither of them had wanted to voice in the conference room, in front of the others. "But since when did John start giving IASA orders? Setting nonnegotiable terms? Refusing to explain anything?"

"It's like he doesn't trust us," DK said. "He didn't tell me anything, except that he's spent the past three years in a galaxy far, far away. And he stole that quote from Star Wars."

"A lot can happen in three years," Jack Crichton said.

"If it has been three years for him," DK answered. "For all we know, his disappearance could be linked to a time dilation effect. From his perspective John may have been gone three minutes or thirty years."

DK's enthusiasm for science sometimes ran away with him.

"You saw him. He wasn't thirty years older," Jack Crichton said. But John had looked older than he appeared in the photographs taken on that last day. A few years. Maybe three. Maybe more.

"It's still John," DK said. "You know what he asked me to bring?"

"What?"

"Peanut butter and a stack of micro-cassette tapes."

Jack Crichton laughed, struck by the sudden absurdity of it all. "Peanut butter."

"Yup," DK said, as they reached the lobby and saw the crew transport bus waiting outside. "It's John up there. I know it is. Maybe he doesn't trust us, but I still trust him. It's going to be all right."

"I hope so," Jack Crichton said.

International Space Station, Event Time +14:52

Jack Crichton looked at Colonel Sarah Blackwell. "We're ready when you are," he said.

They floated in the main habitat module, along with DK, Angela Porter and Walter Klein. Colonel Blackwell had selected her medical specialist Hiro Tanaka, and the communications specialist Alexei Kirillov to join them, making a total of seven.

The rest of her team would gladly have crowded in with them, but they didn't want to overwhelm John or his mysterious companion.

"Okay folks, you know the drill. Everyone else stays at their station, unless I give a direct order otherwise. Understood?" Colonel Blackwell said.

A chorus of affirmatives drifted over the intercom.

"Let's do this. Alexei, tell our visitors that we're ready," Colonel Blackwell said.

"Farscape, this is Friendship Station," Alexei Kirillov said.

John's voice came over the speakers. "I scanned seven humans on the space plane. Dad, you one of them?"

"I made it," Jack Crichton said. "Me, DK, Mission Specialist Angela Porter from IASA, and Walter Klein from the State Department. Plus a three person flight crew."

"And you give me your word it's safe? No tricks?"

He felt his heart twist as he wondered just what could have happened that had made John so cautious. It was more than mere caution. It was as if he was afraid.

"No tricks," Jack Crichton promised his son.

"The X-44 has cleared off," Colonel Blackwell said. "You can dock Farscape as soon as you are ready."

"No docking," John said. "Expect us at the secondary airlock in two minutes."

"He's going EVA? Is he nuts?" Angela Porter asked.

It was a very good question.

The secondary airlock was just off the habitat module, meant for emergency evacuations to the rescue craft. In just under two minutes there was a metallic clank as something banged against the hull, and then the sound of the airlock cycling.

Jack Crichton drifted over, the others tactfully letting him take the lead.

The time it took for the airlock to reach station pressure seemed an eternity.

Then the airlock door opened, and a figure in black stepped out. It took him a moment to recognize John. He realized that somehow he had expected John still to be wearing the orange IASA flight suit.

Instead John wore a skintight suit of a matte black material. In one hand he held a clear glass helmet and a tether attached to a small metal case.

Following John came a second figure, the woman he had seen on the video. She wore a suit identical to John's, with her helmet clipped to a belt loop. She looked even more beautiful than she had on the video. And deadly, for unless he was very much mistaken that was a weapon she held in her hands.

John's eyes met his, and then swept the module, nodding as he recognized DK and Colonel Blackwell.

"It's okay," he said. "Put the pulse rifle away."

The woman said something that seemed all consonants and tongue-clicks.

"Please," John said.

The woman lowered the barrel of the rifle, until it was pointed down, and then attached it to a belt harness. She showed no signs of giving it up.

"Dad?" John asked.

Jack Crichton pushed off, until he crossed the meters that separated them. He grabbed John in a hug, a nearly impossible feat in zero gravity. Only when he touched him, did he finally accept that this was indeed his son, come home.

John returned the embrace, with his free arm. But then, a moment later, he was the first to break free.

"Dad, this is Officer Aeryn Sun, formerly of the Sebacean Peacekeepers."

"Pleased to meet you," Jack Crichton said, puzzled as how to greet her.

Aeryn Sun stuck out her right hand awkwardly, and he took it, as she gave a surprisingly firm handshake.

Aeryn said a phrase, of which he recognized only the word Crichton.

"Aeryn says she's honored to finally meet you," John explained.

"Brother John, you're looking great for a guy who's supposed to be dead," DK said, coming forward and tapping John's shoulder with his fist. DK, at least, had no doubts, for he was grinning ear to ear.

"Still the same sense of humor," John said, with a wry smile. "Aeryn, this is DK, the other half of the Farscape team."

Aeryn Sun nodded, acknowledging the introduction.

"And that's Colonel Blackwell," John said, pointing her out. "She's the space station commander, and the person who taught me how to fly stealth fighters."

"Commander Crichton, welcome back," Colonel Blackwell said. "Aeryn Sun, on behalf of IASA, it is an honor to welcome you aboard."

As Colonel Blackwell introduced the rest of those present, Jack Crichton kept his eyes on his son. John acknowledged each introduction, but he stayed very close to Aeryn Sun, and his expression remained wary. Watchful.

Jack Crichton had had a dozen hours to get used to the idea that his son was still alive. But this was not how he had imagined the reunion would be. John was too quiet. Cautious. Reserved. Something was wrong.

John waited till the introductions were finished. "Colonel, I know you have eleven other persons on this station, plus the three crew out there on the X-44. Tell them for their own safety to stay away from my module. They can take all the pictures you want, but if anyone

gets within twenty meters, the module's defenses will take them out. No exceptions, no apologies."

"Understood," Colonel Blackwell said, her voice hardening.

John gave a half-smile, and for a moment he looked the way Jack Crichton remembered him. "I know I'm being difficult, but I do appreciate your letting us borrow your space station for this meeting. And I promise that we'll be out of your hair in a few hours."

Suddenly the pieces came together. John's insistence that this was only a short visit. His excessive caution. His alien companion, and the weapon she carried.

"Son, are you her prisoner?"

Aeryn Sun grinned.

John laughed. "No. Aeryn's a friend. My friends on Moya wouldn't let me do this alone. They claim I have a bad habit of walking into traps."

He wondered just how many times John had walked into a trap, that his friends now called it a habit? And what exactly those traps had consisted of?

Aeryn Sun said something to John.

"That wasn't my fault on the Commerce Planet. It was Rygel's. And I was the one who got us out of that. Eventually," John argued.

"She understands English," Alexei Kirillov observed.

"English, Russian and any other language you can think of," John explained.

"And the rifle?" Jack Crichton asked. "I thought you said no weapons."

"There are six billion of you, and only two of us," John said. "A pulse rifle and a couple of pistols just evens the odds out a little."

For the first time he noticed the object strapped to the outside of John's right thigh, something that could well be a pistol. Aeryn Sun wore a similar weapon on her left leg.

And he didn't like at all the way John had referred to humanity as "you" and not as "us".

He could not comprehend John wearing a sidearm, to what should have been a joyful homecoming. "John, you ever used that thing?"

"I'm a decent shot. Not in Aeryn's league, but I can take care of myself. But if you want to know how many people I've killed, you're going to have to ask," John said flatly.

Suddenly the air was thick with tension. No one said anything, no doubt because they were nearly as shocked as he was. He couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't seem like an accusation.

DK came to his rescue. "Aeryn Sun understands us, and you understand her language. How is this possible? Universal translator, like Star Trek?" he asked, neatly changing the subject.

"Sort of. In their galaxy they have genetically engineered microbes that are injected at birth, and colonize the base of the brain. They act as a translator," John said.

"Microbes? And you had this done?" Hiro Tanaka asked, with the intense curiosity of a medical specialist.

"First thing they did when I got onboard Moya," John said.

Jack Crichton looked at Aeryn Sun. "She looks human," he said.

John shrugged. "Out there they tell me I look like a Sebacean. Small differences, but close enough to pass most visual inspections."

John looked at his father. "You've already earned yourself a stay in quarantine by coming up here," he said. "If you want, I can fix it so you can understand her. But once the microbes are injected, you've got them for the rest of your life. That's going to make the quarantine boys mighty unhappy."

The thought of alien bugs crawling around his brain made him feel queasy. But he could see that this was important to John. And he wanted to know more of the alien woman that John called friend. "I've come this far, no sense stopping now," he said.

In the end, six of them chose to take the injections John offered. Only Hiro Tanaka abstained, explaining that he would remain a neutral control subject.

They drifted into the central area of the main habitat module, spreading out around the circular room. Aeryn Sun took a position near the airlock, across the room from where John floated. John tied the tether of the metal box to a convenient handhold, and then opened it up. Reaching within, he withdrew a narrow silver cylinder, a little longer than his hand. He tossed the cylinder over, and Jack Crichton caught it with one hand.

"Pointy end goes against your skin. Doesn't matter where," he said. "Push the red button once."

Jack Crichton hoped that none of his nervousness showed on his face. He placed the injector against his wrist, and pressed the red button.

He felt a light prick, like a mosquito sting. When he pulled the injector away, a single drop of blood welled up.

"That's it?" he asked.

"That's it," John said.

"How long does it take to work?" he asked.

"Sterkarm click javel click click zhashtl and he looks different than I remembered," Aeryn Sun said.

"What you saw was based on my memories. It's been three cycles here on Earth. He's older," John explained.

"She's speaking English," Jack Crichton said with wonder.

"You understood that?" Alexei Kirillov asked.

"Yes," Jack Crichton said, turning to face Aeryn Sun. "You are my son's friend?"

"Comrades. Friends. Yes," she said.

"I'm next," DK declared, drifting over to take the injector out of Jack Crichton's hand.

International Space Station, Event Time +17:30

"And that's it," John said. "The Ancients had managed to reclaim one of their old energy sources, so they offered me the chance to come back home. They constructed the wormhole, but it will remain open for just over twenty-three hours. Then we have to get back, or we're stuck."

Wormholes. A galaxy so far away that their own Milky Way was unknown. A place populated by alien races, full of strange creatures including the living ship Moya that John inhabited. It was a fantastic tale. If he had heard it from anyone else, he would have dismissed it as science fiction or the ravings of a deranged mind.

And yet he was compelled to believe, for here was his son, returned to him after all this time, floating so close he could reach over and touch him.

"What do you mean stuck?" Jack Crichton asked. "Why not come home to stay? You and Aeryn Sun would be welcome."

John shook his head. "No, I know better than that."

"I don't understand," he said, hearing the frustration in his voice. He had only just found his son. How could John speak so calmly of walking out of his life again, in just a few short hours?

"Can I have my life back? Will they give me my old cubicle at IASA? Let me go watch Monday night football with the guys? Golfing with you at dawn? Drive my T-bird down to the air base and borrow an F-16 to get my flight hours in? Is any of that possible?"

"Son--"

"Dad, don't lie to me. Don't lie to yourself. I go down to Earth, and everyone is going to want a piece of me. Whether it's Area 51, or somewhere else, they're going to lock me up and throw away the key. And if Aeryn stayed, she'd be in even more danger."

"It won't be like that," Walter Klein said. "On behalf of the State Department, I can assure you--"

"Don't make promises you can't keep," John said angrily, pushing himself away from the wall, and drifting across the compartment, seemingly at random, although when he checked his spin, he was beside Aeryn Sun.

John tapped his forehead with his index finger. "I've seen things you couldn't imagine. I know the answers to questions our scientists haven't even thought to ask. I've had enough experience being hunted for what's in my brain. I'm not going to let it happen here."

Jack Crichton opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it firmly, as he realized he had no idea what to say.

Hunted for what was in his brain. He didn't think John had meant to let that phrase slip out.

John's stories had described a conflict between the Peacekeepers and his friends on Moya, but he had only touched lightly on any dangers he had encountered.

Yet his friends sent an armed soldier to protect him, and John had developed a sense of caution that bordered on paranoia. And at some point, judging from his earlier outburst, he had learned what it was to kill.

Jack Crichton searched his son's face, finally acknowledging that this was not the same man who had left Earth on that fateful day. There was no trace of boyishness left in John's face. Instead he had new lines of determination, and his blue gaze had a hard-edge to it.

At this moment John reminded him very much of the combat pilots he had known in his Air Force days.

"That's quite a story, Commander Crichton. You've given us all much to think about," Colonel Blackwell said, in an oblique reference to the Earthbound audience who were surely hanging on every word. "Perhaps you and your father would like some time alone?"

"I'd be grateful," John said.

Jack Crichton watched as the others made their way out of the habitat module, until only himself, DK, Aeryn Sun and John remained. No doubt Colonel Blackwell wanted to confer with Mission Control down on Earth, to see their reactions to what they had heard so far, and to find out if they had new instructions for her.

Whatever her motives, he was grateful for this opportunity, even if it was only the illusion of privacy. Alexei Kirillov had taken the portable video camera with him, but there were still the fixed cameras, and the microphones would record their every word. But even an illusion was better than nothing, and without the others present he might finally be able to get through to his son, who now seemed infinitely distant, though he floated only a few feet away.

"What did you mean when you said you were hunted for what was in your mind?" Jack Crichton asked. "Was that the Captain Crais you mentioned?"

"No, Crais wanted revenge because he blamed me for the accident that killed his brother. It took a while, but eventually he changed his mind."

"I don't trust him," Aeryn Sun said.

"I don't trust him either," John said patiently. "But he's too busy running from his own problems to be any threat to us."

"Then who?" Jack Crichton asked.

"The first time I met the Ancients, they put me through hell. Made me think I'd come back home, only to discover they were just playing with my mind," John said with a grimace. "Afterwards they felt sorry for me, so they tried to give me a gift. They knew I needed a wormhole to find my way back here. They weren't willing to give me the answers outright, but they implanted equations in my mind that would serve as a subconscious guide."

"Wormholes? You know how to generate them?" DK asked.

"Not yet," John said. "But I'm close. Closer than any other scientist, in this galaxy or theirs. It makes me special. Unique."

"Hunted," Aeryn Sun added.

"Hunted," John agreed. "Didn't even know I had the equations inside me, till that bastard Scorpius felled with my mind."

"Scorpius?" Jack Crichton asked. It was not a name John had mentioned earlier.

"Peacekeeper scientist. Brilliant guy, with unfortunate hobbies, like torture and performing brain surgery with an ice pick," John said, attempting a wry smile. As if unconsciously he raised his right hand, and began to rub the back of his neck.

Aeryn Sun reached over and caressed the back of John's head, before capturing his hand in hers. John gave her a grateful smile, and some of the tension left his body.

Jack Crichton realized there was much more to the relationship between the two of them than was covered in the simple word friend.

For his own part, he felt sick and angry at the same time. "Tortured?" he demanded.

"No big deal," John said, dismissing the incident. "It was only a few days before Aeryn brought the cavalry and they broke me out. But Scorpius put me on the Peacekeepers' most wanted list, which drew way too much attention from the Peacekeepers, and from their enemies. For a while there, it seemed like everyone wanted a piece of me."

"So why go back? Why not stay here?" DK asked.

"There I know what I'm up against, and I have my friends to help. The Uncharted Territories is a big place. The odds that they'll find us again are small."

"You have friends here, too. And your family," Jack Crichton pointed out.

"There's another reason. Scorpius has all the wormhole knowledge he picked from my brain, plus his own research. Eventually he's going to figure it out. And when he does, I don't want to give him any reason to come looking for me here," John said.

"Once he has the answer, he has no reason to look for you," Aeryn Sun said.

John turned towards her. "You don't know him the way I do. It's not finished between us. Wormhole equations or not, he'll come looking for me. And I'm not going to give him any excuse to park a Peacekeeper command carrier in Earth orbit. I can't take that chance. You'd do the same if it was your homeworld."

Aeryn Sun looked around the module. "If this is the best of your technology, then I can see why you are afraid. This station doesn't even have a decent gravity field. Your planet is hopelessly primitive. They wouldn't last an arm against a command carrier."

"We're not exactly primitives," DK argued.

"By their standards you are," John said. "But we can work on that. Dad, would you open up that case?"

Jack Crichton swam over to the metal box, which was still tethered to one wall. He opened the case. There were several objects inside.

"There's a silver globe, and a black datacore. That's the thing that looks like a laptop. Pull them out, please," John said, drifting to the middle of the compartment.

Jack Crichton picked up the globe, a silver sphere a little larger than an orange, and the thin black rectangle that did indeed look very much like a laptop computer. As he lifted the datacore, he saw underneath stack of micro-cassettes.

"There's also a bunch of cassette tapes in here," he said.

John nodded. "Yup. Those are for you and DK. Recordings I made back on Moya. I used the data tapes I had on the module, then found a techshop that manufactured duplicates."

He didn't count, but he could see at least two dozen tapes, perhaps more.

"IASA will insist on making copies, but the originals are for you. And, uh," John paused, rubbing his hand along his jaw. "Um, some of those tapes were made on bad days. Days when I just needed to talk to you guys, even if it was only on a tape I didn't think you would ever have a chance to hear. I thought about editing the tapes, but was afraid once I started I'd wind up erasing everything until all you had was a bunch of blank tapes."

He knew he had been given a glimpse into how lonely John must have been, when he had no one to confide his fears to except a tape recorder, and the memory of his friends back home.

"If you made them, I can hear them," Jack Crichton said.

"Toss me the imager, that's the silver ball thing," John said.

Jack tossed it over, and John caught it with one hand, then placed it carefully in the middle of the compartment.

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so here are a few million words," John said. He gave the ball a squeeze with one hand, and released it.

Directly over the ball, an image appeared, of a burnished copper object against a starfield. It was so real that Jack Crichton drifted over and tried to touch it, only to see the image waver as his hand passed through it.

"Cool," DK observed, drifting closer to get a better view.

"That's Moya. Our ship," John said. "And there's her son Talyn, back when he was a baby."

The image flickered, and this time it showed a creature that looked like a multi-armed, wrinkled turtle, whose head widened into an enormous flat disk.

"That's Pilot, our navigator. And that's Zhaan," John said, as the image of a blue alien came up. "She's a plant."

"A what?" Jack Crichton asked.

"You know, animal, mineral, plant. Zhaan's a plant," John said offhandedly, as if blue people that were actually plants was a common everyday occurrence. "And that's Rygel, and D'Argo, and his son Jothee, and there's Chiana. And that's Stark."

The images flashed by. Some of the creatures, like Chiana and Zhaan looked human, or at least humanoid, while others such as Rygel were clearly alien, and might well have walked off the casting lot of any Hollywood science fiction feature.

Except this wasn't a film, Jack Crichton reminded himself. These beings were real. His son's friends and companions.

The image changed, to show John bent over the engines of the Farscape module, holding something that looked like a welding torch.

"Hey, how did that get on there?" John asked.

"Zhaan's idea," Aeryn Sun replied. "She thought your friends would like images of you as well. Pilot did the programming."

An image appeared of John in his orange flight suit, looking around him in wonder, and Jack guessed it had been taken soon after his arrival on Moya. Other images showed John playing chess with the small frog-like creature called Rygel, and doing something incomprehensible with the blue alien Zhaan, the one he had described as a priest. A religious ceremony? Meditating? It was impossible to tell.

Aeryn Sun appeared as well, standing opposite John in a large empty room. They bowed to each other and then began slowly circling. Aeryn sprang, and they grappled in a seemingly deadly flurry of strikes and blocks, neither having clear advantage. And then, John must have made a mistake, for Aeryn grabbed John by the arm and flipped him over, pinning him to the ground with one foot placed across his throat.

"Hey, why couldn't you show one of the matches I've won?" John complained.

Aeryn smiled. "As soon as you win a match, we can do so."

John turned to DK. "Trust me, I don't always get beaten up by girls. Sometimes I even win."

Martial arts was something John had never had an interest in, or time for, in his former life. It was just another sign how much he had changed.

The final image showed John and his shipmates seated around a large table, which was covered with plates and bowls containing a variety of oddly colored substances. John laughed, appearing happy as he stood up and raised his goblet in a toast.

"Remember that, after our visit to Niskayuna? That was a great party," John said to Aeryn Sun.

"Indeed," Aeryn said. "You out-ate and out-drunk everyone, including Rygel."

John grinned.

The final image lingered in the air, and then disappeared.

"That's yours," John said. "You can freeze an image if you touch the globe while it appears. Batteries should be good for a hundred Earth years. Just don't let any of the techs try to open it up."

"Thanks," Jack Crichton said, knowing that simple word was inadequate to describe how he felt. It was interesting to see the pictures of John's companions, but it was the images of his son that he would treasure. He would be eternally grateful to the alien Zhaan for having the forethought to include them.

"The datacore is for DK," John said, swimming over to take the black object from his father, and then handing it to his friend.

"Open it up. All the way, so it's flat," John directed.

DK did so.

"Here is the payoff I promised, for bringing you guys up here," John said.

"FTL?" DK asked, his voice reverent.

"Plans for the hetch drive, yes," John said. "But just having the plans won't be enough. The design is all in there, but the fuel source depends on a couple exotic isotopes. I couldn't

remember how common they were on Earth. You may have to do some prospecting out in the asteroid belt to find them."

DK nodded.

"There are a couple of other toys in here," John said. "How to build a gravity manipulation field, for a start. Let you control gravity on this space station, or use it to geometrically reduce the power required to liftoff from Earth."

"Unified field theory? Quantum mechanics?" DK asked. At least someone knew what John was talking about.

"A little of both," John said. "And there's a fusion power source design."

"Cold fusion?"

"No, more like lukewarm. But it's safe and cheap, and will provide plenty of power for the next generation spaceships, until you can get the hetch drive up and running. Here, let me show you how to access the data models," John said, pressing a button on the side of the alien laptop.

An image appeared over the laptop, something that looked to his untrained eye like sentences in an alien alphabet or perhaps equations, followed by a set of three dimensional graphs. Within minutes the boys had their heads bent over the laptop, with DK firing off questions and John doing his best to answer them.

Watching them, he felt for a moment that the past three years had just been a bad dream. What could be more normal than watching DK and John wrangle over ideas, creating scientific breakthroughs as they crafted theories that Jack Crichton knew he would never understand?

John had inherited his love of space from his father, but his gift for science had come from his mother. John had been thrilled when IASA accepted him into the program, for it gave him a chance to satisfy both of his passions. But it was these passions that were his downfall, for they had led to the Farscape project, which had ultimately taken him far from Earth.

For the past three years Jack Crichton had blamed himself for his son's loss. If only he hadn't encouraged John to enter the space program. But merely being an astronaut wasn't enough for John, instead John had to prove himself by designing and testing an entirely new type of spacecraft. He'd been so proud of his son, who had great dreams and the talents to make them come true.

And then it had seemed that John's dreams had cost him his life. And perhaps they had. Not literally, for John was still alive. But there was truth in what John had said, that his old life was gone forever, and could never be reclaimed.

He felt a touch on his shoulder, and looked over to see Aeryn Sun had joined him.

"Your son admires you very much," she said softly.

Jack Crichton glanced across the compartment. John and DK were deep in some technical discussion, and paying no attention to their companions.

"I am proud of him," Jack Crichton said. He could not help wondering at the nature of Aeryn and John's relationship. Were they friends? Lovers? Something in-between? A part of him said that if John wanted him to know he would have told him. But another part wanted to ask, even knowing that any answer would be recorded and replayed a thousand times by the Earthbound analysts.

"He has become a fine warrior," Aeryn Sun commented.

John Crichton frowned.

"This does not please you?"

"My son John was a dreamer. A scientist," he said. "Not a warrior."

He wanted his son back. The John Crichton who had talked of travel to the stars with wonder in his voice. Who had dreamed of great explorations and new discoveries. Who had once said that the thrill of seeing his theories proven right was the greatest feeling in the world.

"I understand. But he had to change to survive. The Uncharted Territories are neither easy nor forgiving," Aeryn Sun said.

And they had cost his son his innocence. He could see it, in John's eyes and in the new lines in his face. Somewhere along the way, John had been hurt, and he had learned what it was to kill. It was a knowledge that Jack would have given anything to have protected his son from.

"He got hurt pretty badly out there, didn't he?" Jack Crichton asked.

Dark eyes regarded him gravely. "Yes," Aeryn Sun said, confirming his worst fears. "As Zhaan would say, there was a time when he lost his center, his sense of who he was. But he found his way back to himself."

Aeryn did not elaborate on what had driven John to that state, and Jack Crichton did not ask. He did not think he could bear to know. Not now.

"Do not worry," Aeryn said, reaching out and touching his arm hesitantly, as if she was unused to making such gestures. "He is still Crichton. Still kind. Still stubborn. Still cares for others far more than is good for him, and tries to help whether they ask for it or not."

"Like yourself?"

"Like me," Aeryn agreed. "I was a Peacekeeper. A warrior. Then my own people condemned me, for having been contaminated by contact with an unclassified alien lifeform. John could have left me to die, but he didn't. He insisted I come with him, and brought me onboard Moya. At first I resented his interference, but eventually I discovered that there was more to life than I had ever believed."

As she offered one of her rare smiles, Jack could see why his son would find her fascinating.

"You care for him," Jack said.

"Of course. As do all of us on Moya. He is our friend," Aeryn said.

It was less of an answer than he had hoped for, leaving John and Aeryn's precise relationship still murky. But he tried to take comfort in her words, and in the knowledge that John would not be alive today, if it were not for these strange creatures whom he had befriended.

Aeryn tilted her head, and looked at him. "I will tell you the same thing I told the alien who took your form on that false Earth. Do not worry. I will protect John. I will keep him safe," Aeryn Sun promised.

International Space Station, Event Time +18:56

"If I had time I would have programmed more of the theories, rather than just the applications. But you should be okay. You know how I think, you'll be able to figure it out," John said.

DK felt like a kid in a toy shop, or the way Sir Isaac Newton would have felt if someone had handed him a textbook on quantum physics. It would take months, perhaps years to explore all the knowledge that John had placed in this alien laptop. The possibilities were fascinating.

"And don't let yourself be intimidated. The Sebaceans have a head start on us, but they don't know all the answers. They never figured out the Farscape effect, so there's one for our side. Trust your instincts. You'll be fine," John assured him.

"I'd feel better if I had my old science partner," DK said.

"You don't know how often I wished I had you there, to help me figure this stuff out," John said. "But then again I was grateful that I knew you were safe, back home."

Safe. That word again. It was clear that however exciting John's life may have been since he had arrived in that strange galaxy, the word safe was no longer part of his vocabulary.

DK wondered if Jack Crichton realized just how much his son was concealing in his stories of the Uncharted Territories. Hiding the truth, glossing over the bad parts, trying to protect them.

John could fool his father. He had done so in the past. To this day, Jack Crichton still hadn't guessed that the fender-bender that John had been in during college had actually been a fairly serious accident, when the car he had been riding in had been struck head-on by a drunk driver, landing John in the hospital with bruised ribs and a nasty concussion. John hadn't wanted to worry his father, and had downplayed the incident. DK had known better, and had wormed the truth out of him.

After John's mother had died, John and his father had drawn even closer, as they tried to take care of each other. John had never wanted his father to worry, saying that his father had enough to worry about in raising the twins.

Even on that fateful day, it had been DK that John confided his last minute doubts to, doubts that would later seem an eerie premonition. When Colonel Jack had arrived, John had quickly buried his misgivings, and put on a confident face for his father.

John was more than a friend, he was the brother DK had never had. And for over three years now, DK had lived with the thought that he had helped kill him.

"All this time I kept thinking it was my fault," DK confessed. "If only we had known what the meteorological data was trying to tell us. If we'd recognized the radiation wave sooner, and I'd been able to warn you when there was still time to abort. If--"

"Hey," John said, grabbing his shoulder. "It wasn't your fault. It was no one's fault."

"But if we'd delayed the test for an hour, just long enough to confirm the data, then none of this would have happened."

"You have to stop thinking like that. When I first got to the Uncharted Territories, that's all I could think of. If only I had done this, or if only we hadn't done that. Took me a long time to realize there is no point in second-guessing the past. What's done is done. I was in the right place at the wrong time. A billion to one chance, but there I was."

DK lifted his gaze and looked into John's eyes. There was no trace of the condemnation he had feared to find. "It's not your fault," John repeated.

DK felt the knot inside him begin to loosen.

"It's pretty rough out there, isn't it?" he asked, unwilling to be let off that easily.

John nodded. "It can be. But it can also be wonderful, the way we dreamed of when we were kids. I've watched the double suns rise over Ionna Three, and gone mineral hunting in the rings of a gas giant. I've seen floating cities, and space colonies. I've met aliens of every kind you can imagine, including beings that exist as pure energy, held together by their own consciousness. I've even been close enough to a quantum singularity that I could touch it with my hand."

"A black hole?"

"A black hole," John said with a grin. "Nearly did touch it, and wound up slipping in and out of time for the next day."

Slipping in and out of time. Suddenly he envied John, for all that he had seen and been able to do.

"A part of me wishes I could go with you, but another part knows I'd be scared out of my mind," DK confessed.

"There's that. Sometimes I am scared. But I've learned a lot about myself out there. I've learned that I can be stronger than I ever dreamed I could be."

Indeed it was clear that John had gone through a trial by fire. DK wondered if John realized how much he had grown to resemble his father in these past three years.

"And besides, if I went with you Melissa would kill me," DK said.

"Melissa? Melissa Sullivan from JPL? You still together?"

"Married two years ago. And this spring we're expecting our first," he said, with the idiotic grin he always wore when he thought of his wife and the child to come.

"You? A baby? You lucky bastard," John said. "Congratulations."

"Strange to think of me as a father, I know," DK said. He felt odd, at the realization that his life had continued in a predictable path, while John had been living this strange adventure. "And there's you, coming back to Earth like John Carter, accompanied by the alien princess."

"Princess?" John asked incredulously.

DK nodded towards Aeryn Sun.

The frown on John's face cleared. "Oh, you mean Aeryn. Aeryn's wonderful, but if you want to stay on her good side, be sure to call her a warrior. And don't use the word Princess. That brings up bad memories, for both of us."

"You realize I have no idea what you're talking about," DK said.

"Long story," John said. "Let's just say you ought to be careful who you go around kissing."

International Space Station, Event Time +21:30

Jack Crichton watched as John dipped the spoon into the peanut butter jar, and then withdrew another generous helping. As he tasted it, his expression was one of pure bliss.

Earlier, the rest of the station's personnel had gathered, sharing an impromptu meal. It was crowded, but no one seemed to mind. Even the crew of the X-44 had been recalled, allowed to dock and to come in and meet the visitors.

Aeryn Sun had sampled the peanut butter, but declined a second taste, and had instead eaten one of the packaged meals prepared by the station crew. John had declined all offers, declaring his intention to eat nothing but peanut butter, until he had consumed the entire case that DK had brought from Earth.

The station's crew were polite, but they swarmed around John and Aeryn Sun, finding excuses to be near them, or to engage them in conversation. The six personnel who had taken the translator microbe injections were highly in demand, as translators for the others. The crew offered gifts, taken from the few personal luxuries they had been allowed to bring on

station. John refused most of them, but there were a few items he could not resist. A handheld digital media unit which held five hundred books, and thousands of hours of music. A month's supply of coffee. And digital photos of the meeting, and of DK and John's family.

Earth had sent a flurry of messages and instructions. There had been invitations to speak with the President, the Secretary General of the UN, and various other heads of state. John and Aeryn had declined them all. They had also declined IASA's offers to set up media interviews, insisting that they had no time for such things.

John did accept IASA's offer to set up video calls with his sisters Melissa and Ruth. Born a dozen years after John, the twins had been in college when the older brother that they worshipped had seemingly died. They had never had the chance to know John from the perspective of adulthood.

Jack had joined him for the calls, which were both joyous and painfully awkward. Like himself, the girls were thrilled to learn that John was alive, and then bewildered by John's insistence that this was only a visit, not a homecoming.

On behalf of the State Department, Walter Klein had repeated his offer of asylum for Aeryn Sun and assured John of his safety. When this offer was refused, it was repeated on behalf of other countries, with the same results.

Hiro Tanaka had asked for and was granted DNA samples from both John and Aeryn Sun. Soon those samples and the recordings would be the only tangible evidence that they had ever been here.

Jack Crichton watched his son with hungry eyes, feeling time slipping away from him. In less than an hour John planned to leave, and he had yet to find a way to convince him to stay.

His musings were interrupted by Alexei Kirillov, who tapped him on the shoulder.

"Colonel Blackwell would like to see you in the control center," the Russian cosmonaut said.

Jack looked over, to where John was gesturing as he tried to explain something to a fascinated audience of scientists. Aeryn Sun was nowhere to be seen, having accepted an offer to tour the X-44, and discuss flying with the pilot. They would not miss him.

Jack followed Alexei Kirillov into the control center, where he found Colonel Sarah Blackwell stripping off her headset.

"Thanks Alexei," she said. "Give us a minute, would you?"

Alexei Kirillov nodded, and disappeared back towards the main living habitat.

"What's up?" Jack asked.

"That was IASA," Colonel Blackwell said. She lifted her right hand and rubbed the back of her neck, rolling her head to relieve the stiffness.

"And did our friends down below have any useful advice?"

"They had two bits of news. First, the net media have broken the story. They've got the details wrong of course, but at least one news service is saying that an alien spaceship has taken over the space station, and that this is the forerunner to a full-blown invasion. Naturally IASA is denying everything, but it's a mess."

He'd wondered how long it would take for the story to get out. There were simply too many people involved to maintain secrecy. Not when the news was this fantastic. And it wouldn't be long before some news organization put the pieces together and came up with the right answer. After all, landing an attack chopper in a suburban neighborhood might be the fastest way for IASA to retrieve him, but it was not particularly discreet. All someone had to do was realize that Colonel Jack Crichton and Doctor David Kroger were part of the X-44 launch, and they'd connect the dots and find John's name. And then there went any hopes of keeping John's homecoming quiet.

"What else did they have to say?" he asked.

"They strongly suggested that I find some way of convincing Commander Crichton to stay with us past his deadline," Colonel Blackwell said.

"Strongly suggested," Jack Crichton said, echoing the emphasis she had put on the phrase.

Colonel Blackwell's eyes met his. A twenty-year veteran herself, they both knew what it meant when command 'strongly suggested' a course of action. There was no need for her to spell things out.

But to his surprise, she did so.

"Washington has even floated the idea that I should take any means necessary to detain John. In his best interests, of course," she said.

"Of course," he said, feeling a slow anger begin to burn inside. He did not want John to leave. But neither did he want to see John coerced.

"Naturally IASA vetoed the suggestion, and the security advisor in Washington quickly backed down. He claimed he never meant that I should try to use force to keep John here. But it's only a matter of time before the suggestions turn into orders," she said. "As it is, we're lucky the Farscape craft didn't dock with the station. Otherwise they would have ordered me to seize his ship hours ago."

Jack Crichton looked at her, wondering what she would do. He knew Sarah Blackwell only by reputation, but her reputation was good. And John had trusted her, which was a point in her favor.

"And would you?" he asked, knowing he would have to find a way to stop her, should she decide to try and hold John against his will.

"Never," she said. "And I don't care that the recorders are going to pick up that answer, and I'll find myself busted down to a ferry pilot when this whole thing is done. I don't give a

damn about what IASA and the government think, they don't own John. He deserves to make his own choices."

"How long do you think we have before they make it an order?" he asked.

"They know the deadline as well as we do," Colonel Blackwell said. "That's why I've instructed Alexei that we're going to have communications problems, beginning now. The recorders will still be on, but we won't acknowledge any transmission from Earth until this is over, one way or another."

Jack knew he was watching a talented officer destroy her career. As soon as IASA realized what she had done, Colonel Blackwell would be summoned to Earth and stripped of her rank. She might even be court-martialed or tried for treason, if she wound up defying a direct order from the President.

"It may not come to that," he said. "I'm still trying to reach him, to convince him that he should stay."

The look Colonel Blackwell gave him was one of pity. "You know the life he would have down there. Is that what you want for your son?"

"So I should just let him leave? Go out of my life, knowing he will never return?" Jack Crichton demanded.

"Try to see this as a gift," Colonel Blackwell said. "Twenty-four hours ago we didn't even know he was alive."

International Space Station, Event Time +22:15

Time was running out. He could almost hear it ticking, as John's deadline approached.

The rest of the station crew had already made their farewells, and returned to their duty stations. Even the contact team had left at Colonel Blackwell's request, joining her in the command module, leaving him, DK, John and Aeryn Sun to make their final farewells in private.

"I know it was selfish of me to come. It might have been easier for you to keep thinking of me as dead," John said. "But I just had to see you one more time, and give myself a chance to let go of my old life."

"You don't have to let go," Jack Crichton said. "There's no reason you can't stay, even if Aeryn Sun chooses to return to her galaxy."

"No," John said.

"If Aeryn wanted to stay, would you?"

"Of course," John said automatically.

"You two are more than friends," Jack Crichton said, stating the obvious.

John turned his head, and smiled wistfully as he caught sight of Aeryn Sun, who was talking with DK. Earlier, Aeryn had resumed her position by the secondary airlock. It could be a coincidence, but Jack had the feeling that she was guarding their exit route, leaving nothing to chance.

"I love her, and I know she loves me," John said, then he turned back to face his father. "Some days that's enough. Some days it's not."

"What do you mean?"

"Not like I can ask her to marry me, and promise her a happily ever after. How can I ask her to share my future, when I'm not even sure I've got one? We could be together for the next forty cycles or it all might be over an arm after we return."

"If it's that uncertain, why not stay here? Even if they do quarantine you at first, at least you'd be safe," Jack Crichton said.

John shook his head. "No. I'm not going to spend my life locked up in a cage. I'd rather take my chances in the Uncharted Territories. We've survived tough spots before, we can do so again. And with luck, someday we'll find a place where Aeryn and I can both be safe."

A part of him wanted to argue, to convince John to stay. But another part of him knew this for a selfish desire. Staying would ease his mind, but would John really be safe? What kind of life would John have, if he stayed on Earth? Even Colonel Blackwell believed John had a right to be wary.

He had to accept the bitter knowledge that he could not protect his son. Could not promise him safety, or bring him home. His influence at IASA, his fame, all the favors he had accumulated over the years, were all useless. Nothing Jack Crichton did or said was going to change the decisions being made on Earth. Already government officials were ready to detain John against his will. And once in custody, it was likely that John would never get out. Or if he did, he would have just exchanged one prison for another. Whenever the story finally broke, John was going to be the most famous man on Earth. The first man to bring back irrefutable proof of alien life, and the knowledge of dozens of alien civilizations. Every scientist, every journalist, every lunatic with a UFO theory was going to want a piece of John. There would be nowhere he could hide, no chance for a normal life.

Jack Crichton closed his eyes, thinking of all the things that he had wanted for his son, things John would now never have. A wife. A family. Awkward steps and teddy bears. Little league games and science projects. Braces and driving lessons. The chance to watch your children grow, until the day you realized they had surpassed you.

He mourned for these things, and he mourned for himself as well, for the grandchildren he would never know, and the son he had thought lost, whom he must now give up all over again.

"Dad, you okay?" John asked.

"I'm fine," Jack Crichton said, opening his eyes. He took his grief, and he willed it away, as he had learned to do years ago. It was not gone, just banished for the moment. But for now, he could not let his emotions rule him. There were still things he needed to do. To say. He would not ruin these last moments while he still had his son. There would be time later to grieve.

He had had three years to learn about regrets, and to remember all the things that should and should not be said.

"I know you feel you can't stay," Jack Crichton said. "And I understand."

"Truly?" John asked, his voice rising in disbelief.

"I understand," Jack Crichton said, putting all the conviction he could muster in his voice. "I'm not happy about it. I wish that we could turn back the clock, and find a way to bring you home safely. But I know that you are doing the right thing, for yourself and for Aeryn."

Sometimes a father needed to lie to his son, to reassure him that the world made sense, that everything would be all right, despite all evidence to the contrary. It was the only comfort he could offer.

"I needed to hear you say that," John said, the misery vanishing from his eyes. "And I don't want you to worry about me. I'm going to be okay. Trust me."

How could he not worry? "It's a father's prerogative to worry, at least a little," Jack Crichton said, knowing he would wonder about John every day for the rest of his life.

"Okay. But try not to worry too much. I'll be fine," John said.

It was a promise John could not possibly make. But he needed his father to believe him, or at least to pretend that he did.

"I know you will. And remember this, you have family back home that love you, and are proud of you," Jack Crichton said.

"Thanks," John said. Anchoring himself with his left hand, he reached out, and wrapped his right arm around his father.

Jack Crichton returned the embrace, wishing he could freeze this moment forever.

"I don't know if it will ever be safe for me to come back. But no matter what happens, I'm still your son," John said. "I'm doing my best to be the man you wanted me to be."

"Just be yourself, that's all I ever asked," Jack Crichton answered, finally releasing his son. "I couldn't be any more proud of you than I already am."

John swallowed hard and nodded, blinking back tears from his eyes. Jack Crichton knew his own eyes were moist as well.

A chime sounded, and both men looked over towards Aeryn Sun.

"It's time," she said.

John pushed himself off from the wall, and drifted across the module, as Jack Crichton followed.

"Brother DK," John said, as he reached the airlock. "You take good care of Melissa and your new family, you hear me?"

"I will. And you take care of yourself. Try to leave a few things for the rest of us to discover, once we reach the stars," DK said with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. He reached over and put his hand on John's shoulder. "Stay safe, you hear?"

"I will," John promised.

"Aeryn, it was wonderful to meet you. Take care of our boy and keep John in his place, okay?" DK asked.

"I will remember that John is only a human," she said, with a wicked smile.

A flash of humor, very much at odds with the serious commando persona that she projected. He realized there were unexpected depths to this woman, and wished he'd a chance to get to know her. It was another regret, that he'd add to the long list of regrets this day had brought.

Jack Crichton took her hand in his. "Aeryn Sun, it was an honor and a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm only sorry we had so little time. But I am grateful that you came here with John, and happy to know that he has such a good friend," he said. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, as if she were one of his daughters.

"The honor was mine," Aeryn Sun said. "John has spoken of you so often I feel I already know of you."

He looked at John, but there was nothing left to say. Or rather there were a thousand things to say, and no time left to say any of them.

"Wish me luck," John finally said.

"Good luck, son," Jack Crichton answered.

John took the tether for the metal box, which now contained the peanut butter DK had brought, along with the gifts from the station crew. Then he opened the airlock door, and Aeryn Sun entered the airlock, one hand on her pulse pistol.

John watched her enter, and then turned back to look at his father.

"Good-bye," he said, and then bit his lip as if to stop whatever else he had meant to say.

Then John turned, and entered the airlock.

Jack Crichton felt his heart drop into his stomach, as he watched his son walk away from him, knowing that he would never see him again. He wanted to reach out, to call him back.

Instead he watched in silence as Aeryn and John donned their helmets, and then checked the glowing telltales on their wristbands. Then he turned to DK.

"Give me a hand with this," he said, grabbing the airlock door. He swung it shut, and DK turned the lever that fastened the locking mechanism. There was a gentle hiss as the seals tightened, and then a few moments later, the sounds of the outer door being opened.

"Let's go up to command," DK suggested.

Jack Crichton shook himself out of his reverie. "Okay," he said.

He followed DK into command, and found Colonel Blackwell and the contact team gathered around the monitors. They made room for him and DK, as he watched the image of Aeryn Sun and John maneuvering over to the Farscape craft.

"No jets," DK said. "Wonder what they are using for propulsion?"

Jack Crichton stared at him, wondering how DK could think of such things at this moment.

It took mere minutes for John and Aeryn Sun to reach the Farscape craft, and to board it.

"Friendship Station this is Farscape One," John's voice crackled over the radio. "Thanks for the hospitality and give my regards to IASA."

"Will do. God speed John Crichton," Colonel Blackwell said, echoing the benediction that NASA had given John Glenn, when he became the first American in space.

It was a fitting blessing, for the first human to venture into another galaxy.

"Thanks. Enjoy the show," John said.

The Farscape craft began to move, at first slowly, and then it began to accelerate. Within seconds it had disappeared from camera range.

"Switching to radar display mapping," Alexei Kirillov said. "Radar on screen one, and Farscape video feed on screen four."

The main screen blinked and then switched to a computer generated picture showing Earth, and the Farscape craft's approximate position and speed. The secondary screen showed images taken from the camera mounted to the front of the Farscape craft.

Jack Crichton watched as the craft completed one orbital rotation in record time, continuing to accelerate throughout. Then it dove into the atmosphere.

There was a flash of blue light and then the monitoring screens went blank.

"We've lost him," Alexei Kirillov said, in an eerie echo of the first Farscape test.

"No. We didn't lose him," Jack Crichton said. This time he knew better. "He's gone, but he's not lost."

For the second time John had traveled through a wormhole, to a distant galaxy. This time by his own choosing, to return to the new life he had made for himself there. And a part of Jack Crichton would always be with his son, in that distant place.

Story notes: This story was originally posted on my now defunct AOL website, as well as on several Farscape boards. Reposting here for archiving purposes.

Winner, Best Overall Story, 2001 Farscape Fanfic awards

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