



Farscape: House of Cards

By Keith R. A. DeCandido

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Imagine his shock, then, when he loses their starship, *Moya*, in a game of chance!

To discharge the debt, and liberate their ship from the planetary authorities, Crichton, Aeryn, and the others must take on a number of challenging assignments. But all is not what it seems, for treachery and deadly intrigue hides within this...*House of Cards*.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

With its slip of a plot and screwball ensemble, this slim spinoff of the hit Sci-Fi Channel series of the same name reads like a high-energy episode. The Moya, a sentient Leviathan starship, is home to a crew of good-natured outlaws, renegades and misfits led by Comdr. John Crichton. Relaxing for a spell in the Uncharted Territories, Crichton and his cronies are duped into visiting Liantac, a casino planet, where Rygel, their irresponsible insectoid sidekick, promptly loses the Moya in a card game rigged by Netoros, a woman with considerable power and ambitions for her planet. Paying off Rygel's debt requires Crichton and his crew to perform a series of services for Netoros that seem benign on the surface, but are really part of a ploy between Netoros and the interstellar authorities to boost Liantac's free-falling economy. DeCandido (*Star Trek: The Next Generation: Diplomatic Implausibility*) orchestrates events so that complications can be resolved as easily as they are in an episode's one-hour time frame, but he keeps the action brisk and the ongoing arguments between the characters sparkling with humor. No adjectives can faithfully re-create the show's trademark costume and make-up effects, but *Farscape* fans will find this frothy flight a tide-me-over to fill the between-season downtime.

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About the Author

Keith R.A. DeCandido has written four novels, one comic-book miniseries, a short story, and half-a-dozen eBooks based on *Star Trek®*. He has also written several *Farscape* novels and short stories, best-selling books based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and other fiction based on *Doctor Who*, *Xena*, *Spider-Man*, and the *X-Men*. DeCandido lives in New York City.

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CHAPTER 1

Rygel flipped his cards over. "Four priestesses. I win again."

John Crichton snarled, threw his cards on the table, and got up out of his chair. "Enough. I'm gonna owe you my module at this rate."

The Hynerian's tiny form quivered with laughter. "Only if you put it in the pot. Though don't think I don't appreciate all the food cubes you've lost to me." Rotating his flying ThroneSled ninety degrees, he popped one of those cubes into his oversized mouth.

Shaking his head, Crichton sighed. "Yeah, I'm sure they'll last you at least a few minutes."

Rygel started shuffling the twenty-eight-card deck. "Care for another chance at winning your cubes back?" "Remind me, Sparky," Crichton said as he sat back down, "why did I let you talk me into learning this game?"

"Because Haunan doesn't work with only one player, and no one else on this ship has even come close to comprehending it. Zhaan refuses to gamble, D'Argo couldn't seem to wrap his poor Luxan brain around the rules, and Aeryn wouldn't even sit down with me to learn it."

"What about Chiana?"

The wisps of white hair that jutted from Rygel's cheeks twitched as he shuffled, but he said nothing.

Crichton smiled. "Wait, let me guess--she beat the pants off you? Or she would have, if you wore pants."

"I prefer an opponent who stimulates me," Rygel retorted, with a haughty sniff. "And while Chiana has many virtues--"

"You're only 'stimulated' by winning, right?" Crichton tossed a food cube into the middle of the table as an ante. "Fine, Maverick, one more hand. Deal."

The deposed dominar of the Hynerian Empire dealt a card face down to both Crichton and himself. Crichton peeked at the card, and saw that it was a paladin, which meant it was all but useless.

Haunan was an odd game. Rygel had been after Crichton to learn it for some months, and Crichton had finally broken down earlier in the day, out of boredom as much as anything. It was just similar enough to poker for Crichton to be able to follow the basics. You get six cards, of which you can use four; you're dealt two cards, one up, one down, and then you bet; repeat that process until you have six cards, three showing that everyone can see, three down that only you can see; and the highest hand wins. It was just different enough from anything Crichton had ever seen to confuse the hell out of him and give him the mother of all headaches.

Still, it wasn't like he had anything better to do. Moya, their sentient, bio-mechanoid Leviathan ship, was resting between StarBursts in this uninhabited star system. Crichton had done as much maintenance on the *Farscape I* module as he could with the materials at hand. The rest of Moya's crew were busy with other occupations or duties.

That left Crichton in the unusual position of hanging out with Rygel.

When John Crichton found himself on the Leviathan after his space shuttle, *Farscape I*, had torn through a worm-hole and zipped him halfway across the galaxy, he'd become a member of a very strange crew.

Though Pa'u Zotoh Zhaan and Ka D'Argo were both convicted murderers, Rygel XVI, a "mere" political exile, was the hardest to warm to. Whatever crimes they may or may not have committed, they had all been incarcerated by the Peacekeepers--who were sort of a combination of the Mafia, the Green Berets, and Genghis Khan's army. Even Moya, the Leviathan, had been enslaved by the Peacekeepers as a prisoner transport ship.

Rygel had been the one who broke all three of them out of their cells. Soon thereafter they had removed the control collar that the Peacekeepers had placed on Moya and freed her as well. They'd been on the run ever since, hiding in the Uncharted Territories, theoretically out of the Peacekeepers' jurisdiction. However, they'd learned the hard way over the two cycles since then that the Peacekeepers had a very fluid idea of what constituted their jurisdiction.

Crichton often suspected that the only reason why the arrogant, obnoxious Hynerian--who rarely had anything practical to contribute--hadn't met with the business end of an airlock early on was out of gratitude. Still, Rygel had had his uses. His political and gambling skills had saved their bacon on more than one occasion. Even his size had proven useful. Once when only his small hands could reach a Peacekeeper device that needed to be removed. And another time when his rear end plugged a hole in Moya's inner hull, saving Crichton and Chiana from explosive decompression.

And, truth be known, Crichton did feel sorry for the little guy. A firefight with an alien ship had led to Crichton's mind briefly inhabiting Rygel's body, and it had not been a pleasurable experience. Everything burbled or gurgled or emitted a noxious odor, and those tiny Hynerian arms and legs were even more impractical than they looked--which Crichton hadn't thought possible until that moment. The whole experience had been a lot like walking around in a sewer. *After six hundred cycles trapped in that body*, Crichton had thought at the time, *I'd be a whiny bastard, too.*

As Rygel dealt Crichton a queen, D'Argo's deep, resonant voice sounded over the comm. "John, can you come to the Command?"

"What's up, D'Argo?"

"It looks like we have a visitor. Pilot's picked up a trading ship heading right for us."

"We're in the ass end of nowhere," Crichton replied. "It's the Uncharted Territories' equivalent of South Dakota. What the hell's a trading ship doing here?"

"That's why we want you up here," D'Argo said patiently. "Zhaan and Aeryn are on their way up as well."

"Rygel and I'll be right there."

There was a pause. "Fine."

Crichton couldn't help but chuckle. D'Argo probably hadn't realized that Rygel was with Crichton, and the Luxan obviously wasn't thrilled with the Hynerian being present. But then, D'Argo was never happy when Rygel was around.

In fact, it was rare that Q'Argo was happy, period.

Crichton hurried from the cargo bay, where he and Rygel had been playing Haunan, to the Command, Rygel's ThroneSled right behind him. All the corridors on Moya essentially looked the same--it had taken Crichton months just to nail down the routes to and from his quarters. And even after all this time, there were still parts of the ship he wasn't completely familiar with. However, the parts he knew, he could navigate in his sleep.

Zhaan and Aeryn entered the Command from the corridor opposite Crichton and Rygel. D'Argo and Chiana were already present. A small holographic image of Pilot was visible in one corner, piped in from his den. On the big viewscreen in front was a small ship. It didn't look like much of anything, but ships rarely did from the outside.

Pilot's gentle voice sounded over the speakers. *"They identify themselves as a free trader. They have minimal weaponry, which is not presently armed."*

Minimal weaponry was still more than Moya had. The sum total of the Leviathan's tactical systems was a balky defense screen salvaged from a Peacekeeper hulk. "Have you answered them yet, Pilot?" Crichton asked.

"No. We were waiting to hear from all of you. Moya is concerned, but she cannot StarBurst for another half an arn, and that ship is faster than we are."

Zhaan looked at the others with her trademark serene gaze. Crichton always wondered how much of that was the Delvian's many centuries as a priest and how much was simply the overwhelming blue of her eyes against her equally blue skin. "I believe we should listen to what they have to say," she said.

"Me, too," Crichton chimed in quickly, grateful that at least one other person would take his side. Especially as he expected either Aeryn or D'Argo to disagree.

"Absolutely not," the two of them stated, in perfect unison. Crichton sighed.

Like Crichton, Aeryn Sun had been brought on board Moya during the prisoners' escape from the Peacekeepers. The irony was, Aeryn had been one of the officers assigned to stop them. Her contact with Crichton, D'Argo, Zhaan and Rygel had led to her being declared contaminated by alien influence--a capital crime among the Peacekeepers. Rather than face a death sentence, she had remained on Moya, and had become a valued part of the team in general.

And a very important person to John Crichton in particular.

Chiana spoke up. "Well, we don't have anything to lose by talking to them." She was leaning on one of the consoles, her slate-grey skin and matching outfit standing out against the dull browns and golds of the console. She wasn't quite standing up straight. Then again, Chiana always seemed to stand at about a twenty-degree angle to the rest of the universe--both literally and morally.

"They're hailing us again," Pilot said. *"They say that they have been searching for a Leviathan for some time."*

"Look, they're a trading ship," Rygel said. "If they need a Leviathan specifically, it's probably for something that they'd be willing to pay us for."

D'Argo snarled. "Money *would* be the first thing *you* think of,"

"Pip's right," Crichton said, agreeing with Chiana. "We don't have anything to lose by talking to them."

"Fine," Aeryn conceded, "I'm willing to *talk*."

Crichton looked at D'Argo, who simply snarled again.

"I'll take that as a yes. Pilot, open a channel."

Times like this, Crichton thought, *I wish I could make like Captain Picard and say that we come in peace.*

Sadly, reality didn't work like that. They met precious few people out here who had peaceful intentions. *And*

the ones who do usually want to screw us over some other way, he reflected.

The face that appeared on the viewscreen belonged to a Luxan. Crichton blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected to encounter another member, of D'Argo's race--certainly not running a trade ship. This man had less facial hair than D'Argo--just a small moustache that reminded Crichton of one of his high-school math teachers--and of course, he did not have the tattoo on his chin that D'Argo wore as a result of the latter's one-time impersonation of a general. Otherwise, though, he had the characteristic flat nose, articulated eyeridges, bald head, and weird back-of-the-head tentacles of the Luxan race.

"I am Bu G'Ranto of the trading ship Qualik. I have a passenger on board who's been looking for a biological ship. Your Leviathan seems to qualify."

"I'm Commander John Crichton. What is it your passenger wants?"

G'Ranto looked at D'Argo. *"This Sebacean speaks for your ship, General?"*

D'Argo hesitated. He had never been comfortable with the fact that he had once impersonated his commanding officer in order to save him from torture, nor with the fact that the mark of a general was now permanently displayed on his chin. For that matter, Crichton himself wasn't always comfortable with the fact that people assumed he was a Sebacean. But what else would they assume? Sebaceans--the race that formed the Peacekeepers--outwardly looked just like humans.

"We all speak for the ship," D'Argo said. "Crichton's words are mine."

"If you say so. In any case, what he wants is safe passage to a world called Liantac."

Rygel floated up next to Crichton and laughed. "No one has gotten 'safe' passage to Liantac for thirty cycles."

"That is no longer the case, Hynerian," G'Ranto responded, looking at Rygel as if he were a fly in his soup.

I guess D'Argo isn't the only Luxan whose butt Rygel gets up, Crichton thought with a smile.

G'Ranto continued: *"The atmospheric catastrophe that prevents ships from entering Liantac's orbit only prevents inorganic propulsion systems from functioning. Apparently, biological ones work just fine. According to my passenger--whose name is Rari, incidentally--the locals have constructed techno-organic vessels that ferry people to and from the planet. Unfortunately, none of them come out this far, and I can't afford to divert my vessel all the way to where the ferries go. But your ship can go right to the planet. Apparently it's his home, and he hasn't been there for over a cycle. He's willing to pay a considerable sum for passage."*

"Define 'considerable,'" Rygel said.

"We'll get back to you within the am," Aeryn interrupted. "Screen off, Pilot."

G'Ranto's face faded, leaving only the view of his ship.

"I don't think we should go," Aeryn said.

"I very much think we should," Rygel said with a faraway look in his eyes that Crichton hadn't seen since the last time Rygel had had a gourmet meal. "I've been dreaming of going to Liantac for ages!"

"It's a dren-pit, and we shouldn't go anywhere near it," Aeryn said.

Rolling his eyes, Crichton said, "Will someone please provide some closed-captioning for the Uncharted Territories-impaired?"

Rygel took up the challenge. "Liantac is the home of the most glorious place in all the known galaxy: the Casino."

Crichton blinked. "Casino?"

D'Argo nodded his head. "A gambling planet."

"Not just 'a gambling planet,'" Rygel said with all the haughtiness he could muster--which was a considerable amount. *"The gambling planet. I had thought that it was off-limits after what happened thirty cycles ago, but if bio-logical ships can approach...."*

Aeryn shook her head. "It's also, on the fringes of the Uncharted Territories--dangerously close to Peacekeeper-controlled space. We shouldn't risk getting that close without good reason."

"I think restocking supplies is a good reason," Rygel argued. "Liantac was always a good supply port, from all accounts. And we're being *paid*."

"Sparky's got a point," Crichton conceded. "The pantry's gettin' kinda bare. We could use a shopping spree,

and something to spend on it. Hell, Aeryn, you're the one who's been bitching about needing spare parts for your Prowler."

"I am also running low on some of my medicinal herbs and other drugs," Zhaan announced. "I think we should take this Rari up on his offer,"

"So do I," Crichton said.

"Me, too," added Chiana.

"I believe I've made my position clear," Rygel said.

D'Argo sighed. "Much as I hate to say it--I can't think of a good reason why we shouldn't."

"I can," Aeryn said. "Every time we've come near Peacekeeper space, something's gone badly wrong. For that matter, every time we've taken on passengers, something's gone badly wrong."

Chiana actually straightened up at that. "Hang on, you took me on as a passenger."

Aeryn smiled a nasty smile. "My point exactly."

"Look," Crichton said, "the guy just wants to go home. We can get him there. Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but I think that it would be the right thing to do to help him out."

"John is right," Zhaan said. "We have all been taken from our homes. It would be...fitting if we could facilitate someone else being able to return to his."

"Especially since they're paying us," Rygel added.

Pilot spoke up. *"I've received another communiqué from the trading ship. They can provide specific course and StarBurst information that will allow us to get within a few light years of Liantac. And--Moya agrees with those that say we should do this. She feels that the potential benefits outweigh Officer Sun's concerns."*

Aeryn fixed Crichton with a look. "I'm not going to convince any of you, am I?"

Grinning, Crichton replied, "Not without firearms."

"Fine. Let's do it, then."

Crichton turned to the screen. "Bring G'Ranto back up, Pilot."

The Luxan's face reappeared, and he looked straight at D'Argo. "Have you decided, General?"

Crichton frowned. And frell you, too, Chuckles, he thought.

D'Argo replied, "Yes. We will take Rari aboard and off your hands."

"Assuming," Rygel said quickly, "that the price is right."

Still looking at D'Argo, G'Ranto said, *"Will five hundred retris be sufficient for the purposes, General?"*

"It will be--" D'Argo started, but Rygel interrupted.

"That will not be even remotely sufficient. We must receive at least a thousand for going so far out of our way."

Now G'Ranto did acknowledge Rygel. *"You have a Leviathan, Hynerian. You can StarBurst. No place is 'out of your way'."*

"Then I'm sure you can find someone who will act as a ferry for such a paltry sum. Good luck in that endeavour." Rygel moved forward as if to cut the connection.

Crichton tensed. He hoped Rygel hadn't just blown the deal. He also wondered just how much a retris was worth.

"Wait," G'Ranto said. *"Seven hundred retris."*

Breaking into a wide grin, Rygel said, "Very well. I assume Rari will bring the payment when he arrives. We will, of course, expect the full amount in advance."

"Of course," the Luxan said disdainfully, then turned back to D'Argo with a more respectful look on his face. *"It was a pleasure meeting you, General--?"*

"And you as well," D'Argo said, ignoring the implied request for a name. "Let us know when you're ready to send him over. Screen off."

G'Ranto's face once again faded.

"Excellent!" Rygel said. "I haven't had a good game of Tadek in far too long. In fact, the last time I played, I had to deliberately lose to that yotz, Kcrackic."

"Well, I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to lose legitimately, Rygel," Aeryn retorted, leaving the

Command in what could only be described as a huff.

Crichton sighed.

"According to the signal I'm receiving from Bu G'Ranto," said Pilot, "a shuttle from his ship will be approaching within half an arn. By the time it arrives, docks, and provides us with the coordinates, Moya should be ready to StarBurst."

"Great," Crichton said. "Let me know when he arrives, I'll go meet him."

"I'll join you," Zhaan said.

* * *

Aeryn stood in the corridor, fuming and waiting for D'Argo to leave the Command. To her relief, he came out alone, making it that much easier to confront him. As he turned a corner out of sight of the Command, she stepped in front of him. "What the frell has gotten into you, D'Argo?"

"What do you mean?"

Imitating D'Argo's deep voice, Aeryn said, "Much as I hate to say it--I can't think of a good reason why we shouldn't.' There are dozens of reasons why we shouldn't be taking this trip, and I would've thought *you*, of all the crew, would be on my side in pointing them out!"

"Maybe," D'Argo said. "But I thought that Crichton and Zhaan's arguments were good ones. For that matter, so was Rygel's. We're getting paid for this, and we can put that to good use."

"Assuming Rygel doesn't lose it all at his frelling card games," Aeryn muttered.

Smiling a small but vicious smile, D'Argo said, "I'll make sure that won't be an issue."

Aeryn returned the smile. She sometimes wondered why they didn't just shove the Hynerian out of an airlock.

D'Argo continued: "But we're also helping someone get home, and I can't say that I don't feel for him."

Aeryn rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you've bought into Crichton's heroic nonsense?"

"No," D'Argo admitted. Then he looked right at Aeryn--and beneath his fierce Luxan exterior, Aeryn saw a look of genuine longing in his brown eyes. "But sometimes I'd like to."

"Really?" Aeryn said with more than a little dubiousness.

"Yes, really," D'Argo said defensively. "And I'm not the only one."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whether we're willing to admit it or not, Aeryn, Crichton has rubbed off on us, at least a little."

"Don't be so sure of that."

"Really? Then why haven't you turned us all in? A good Peacekeeper--" and D'Argo snarled the word "-- would do her duty regardless of the consequences. A hero does the *right thing* regardless of the consequences. What have you been doing more and more these past two cycles?"

Aeryn found herself unable to answer the question.

"You see my point," D'Argo continued after Aeryn had been silent for several microts. "We're not soldiers any-more, Aeryn--either of us. If I've learned nothing else from Crichton--and from Chiana, and, damn the little dren-sucker, even Rygel--it's that we can't be what we once were ever again. Which means we need a new way to be. Why not a better way?"

"Sounds more like you've been listening to Zhaan too much," Aeryn muttered.

D'Argo laughed. "Perhaps. But it's worth thinking about--even for people like us who don't like to think."

With that, D'Argo continued on his way down the corridor.

Aeryn sighed. The fact of the matter was, she not only knew that D'Argo was speaking the truth, but she had had this same conversation with herself more than once since first meeting John Crichton and being convinced to stay on Moya rather than face Peacekeeper "justice" for being contaminated by aliens. And she had changed, obviously. But had she changed enough? Or was she just fooling herself? She headed towards her quarters, more confused than ever.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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