

No Gods Need Apply

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It happened a lot more often than John Koenig would have preferred. One minute Command Center was quiet, and the next, some cosmic disturbance would come along and appear in their midst or on the main screen, and they would waste a lot of time battling a new menace; time that he considered would be better spent in a nice quiet game of backgammon or two. But, he sighed, this was Space, and since it was Space, one had to learn to expect odd occurrences as part of everyday life, even if they were getting a little boring.

Command Center was quiet. Therefore, Koenig knew something was going to happen. And, therefore, he was the only one who remained seated when the burst of dazzling light appeared in their midst. And so, therefore, he was the only one not reeling and rubbing his eyes long after the light had faded. The only one (besides Maya, who seemed immune to light blindness, which only figured, as she seemed immune to most human weaknesses) who saw clearly the figure which now stood in place of the mysterious light, and was now regarding the Alphans with a distinctly uncertain expression on her face.

Her? Koenig sat up straighter. This was getting more interesting by the moment.

"Excuse me..." the mysterious intruder was saying, turning to Sahn, who was sitting closest to her. "Have I interrupted something? I'll come back later if I have," she turned vaguely to go.

"Don't move," Tony ordered brusquely, whipping out his laser gun. His sight hadn't cleared yet, and his aim wavered dangerously between Alan and Sandra as he attempted to locate the alien by the sound of her voice.

"If you're that upset about it, I will leave," she protested indignantly.

In all of this, Maya had been ignored, as she had said nothing. If Koenig had bothered to take his eyes off this newest apparition (not likely), he would have seen Maya's jaw drop at her first sight of the alien, and not for the same reason that Koenig's jaw dropped. "Papaya!" she screamed suddenly, launching herself at the stranger, and embracing her about the neck.

Tony, his sight almost normal now, and Koenig exchanged puzzled glances. In unison, their comment on this strange turn of events was "Huh?"

"Wait, wait," the alien was saying breathlessly, disentangling herself from Maya. "Let me check this out, I have my book here somewhere ..." Maya was saying at the same time, "How did you get here? We thought you'd left us years ago ..."

"I did, I did, my dear ... ah, here it is ..." From an unseen pocket she had produced a small book and was referring to it. "What did you say your name was, dear? Maya, that's right. Maya, Maya ... where you born during the fourth phase of the conjunction between the planets Wxtrim and Yglor or Yglor and Cntrx?"

"Cntrx? I've never heard of that planet."

"I suppose that would have been before your time. Cntrx was a wonderful place before that fool Ardeton
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started experimenting with those long range missiles of his. Well, I suppose it made a marvelous asteroid belt as well. Where was I? Oh yes, ... here you are, my dear. Daughter of Mentor and Mystra -- excellent lineage! I must congratulate you. Did you know that you are related on your mother's side to Tempor the First?"

"That's supposed to be good?" Maya said, grimacing.

"Well, he was an amusing chap before he started with that business ... well, never mind fond memories now, you must tell me, dear, how are you? How's your family? Well, I hope ..."

"Eh ..." Maya said uncertainly. "I'll tell you about that later."

Koenig chose this moment to clear his throat very loudly. "Maya, would you like to introduce us to your friend?"

"Oh, please forgive me, I got carried away," Maya said, her hands fluttering like a little girl on Christmas morning. "Commander, this is Papaya, the greatest of Psychon's gods."

"Well, maybe not the greatest ..." Papaya demurred. "Andos would probably give you an argument on that ..."

"Papaya?" Tony blurted out unthinkingly. "That's the name of an Earth fruit!"

Papaya fixed him with a scathing stare. "Really? I thought your name was Tony."

Behind them, Alan Carter slipped unnoticed beneath his console, where thereafter strange chortling noises could be heard.

"Perhaps it would interest you to know that on Psychon, 'Tony' was the name given to Psychon garbagemen," Papaya continued wittingly.

Sandra collapsed in a fit of giggles, drawing Tony's scowl.

Maya continued, "This is Commander Koenig, and this is ..."

"My dear, don't bother with the introductions," Papaya said. "I know everyone here. I am a goddess, after all." She peered over the side of the console. "That's Alan down there, isn't it?" she asked, pointing.

Maya nodded numbly, suppressing a giggle.

Papaya waved her hand in the general direction of Sahn, who had regained her seat and her composure with a valiant effort. "Sandra, isn't it? Or is it Helena?" she added quickly, her brow furrowing in puzzlement.

Sandra affirmed her name in something that sounded like a cross between a chortle and a choke.

"Oh," Papaya shrugged an apology. "I'm terrible with names, really ..."

She stopped short when she saw Koenig's reaction to

her shrug -- the reaction of every male in Command Center, as a matter of fact. A small, knowing smile played across her face as she turned back to Maya, pretending not to notice that the Psychon Science Officer's face was darkening as she, too, noticed the attention a certain part of Papaya's anatomy was getting. "My dear, it is so good to see a Psychon again," she exulted, "I just can't tell you ..."

"Will you be staying long?" Maya asked suddenly, her voice nervous and unusually sharp. Koenig didn't fail to notice her tone, and gave her a lethal glance.

Papaya shrugged again, this time with intentions. The intentions worked. Sandra punched Alan in the arm;



the pilot jumped guiltily.

"Oh," the goddess sighed. "As long as you want me to stay. Tell me, dear -- are you in the market for a goddess here? I could do wonders for this place, liven things up a little bit, perhaps?"

"Uh ..." Maya said quickly, laughing nervously. "Papaya, I really don't think the Alphans are ready for your particular, uh ... talents ..."

"Nonsense, dear," the woman replied expansively.

"Talents?" Alan put in, with an eagerness that earned him another jolt in the arm, this one delivered with decidedly more vehemence.

"Maya probably hasn't told you," Papaya said with a gleam in her eye. "But on Psychon, I was the goddess of fertility. And that was an earned position, I might add?"

"Earned?" Koenig brightened.

All the women held their breaths as Papaya leisurely

threw back her shoulders, and all the men's eyes went wide. "Would you care to hear my qualifications?" she purred.

"Ah ..." Koenig cleared his throat. "No, really, that's not necessary. Your qualifications are more than obvious."

There had been many volunteers for the guided tour suggested for Papaya's visit, but after Helena reminded John that he hadn't heard her report yet, and dragged him off to Medical Center to hear it (Maya suspected that her report had nothing to do with the status of Moonbase Alpha); Annette had taken the opportunity to remind Bill of the tennis match he had promised her, and she wanted to play now; Bob Mathias' new bride Rita suddenly remembered a patient that had been asking for him and simply couldn't wait; and Sandra had pointedly reminded Alan that he was on monitor duty; that left only Tony and Maya free for escort duty, and Tony was already marked down on the wrong side of Papaya's book for his thoughtless crack.

With a decided lack of enthusiasm, Papaya said, "My dear, this is an absolutely ... enchanting place. Haven't we been this way before?"

"No," Maya said. "This is Corridor C, Rec Area 3. We were in Corridor M, Rec Area 7."

Papaya's lips made a soundless 'o' and she nodded. Drawing a breath that seemed to be an attempt to muster up some interest, she went on brightly. "Tell me, Maya -- that is right, isn't it? Tell me, Maya, what do you do for excitement around here?"

"Excitement?" Maya repeated, puzzled. "Well, ah ... we have the gyms, and the solariums. Intramural basketball teams, volleyball, badminton, ping-pong ..."

"Ping-pong," Papaya echoed hollowly.

"And the monthly backgammon tournaments," Maya added hastily.

"Oh, my." Papaya exhaled abruptly, looking a little dazed. "Not a very imaginative lot, are they, these Alphans?"

"They, ah ..." Maya, torn between her respect for the goddess and her loyalty to the Alphans, thought fast.

"They do the best they can?" she finished lamely.

As they stood in the corridor talking, several Alphans had passed them, and of them, Papaya had flashed a dazzling smile at all the males without a break in the conversation. The men had responded in kind; Maya winced when one technician had, blinded by Papaya's physical assets, collided painfully with the communications post. Papaya was staring after one of the men now, a thoughtful expression spreading across her face. "I could do wonders for this place ..." she murmured, more to herself than to Maya.

"Excuse me?" Maya said, a trifle nervously.

"This place is so drab ... so dull. Maybe I could come up with something to liven things up a little? Ah, it's been so long since I've been able to just ... let go!" Her hands fluttered excitedly as she spoke, a gleam coming into her eyes.

"Wha --" Maya cleared her throat. "What exactly did you, ah ... have in mind?"

"Oh ... I'm not sure," Papaya said with an impish smile, watching a security man out of the corner of her

eye. "My dear, this tour has been absolutely fascinating, we must do it again sometime. I think I'd best be leaving for while, take a little nap, perhaps ..."

"Gods sleep?" Maya said, genuinely surprised.

"Well, it's more like... recharging batteries, if you know what I mean. Corporeal form is rather wearing, we simply must relax every so often. I suppose you'd call it molecular dispersion, or some such nonsense. You should try it sometime, it does wonders for the nerves. But, of course, you can't, can you -- you're not a god!" Papaya tittered. "How silly of me. I'll be back in a while, dear." She turned, hesitated, and then snapped her fingers once, a playful smile edging her lips. "Have fun, dear. Ta-ta!" And with a brilliant flash of light, Maya found herself alone in the corridor.

The Psychon sighed and let her arms flop to her sides. Gods -- who could figure them out.

The travel tube was a faster way to return to Command Center, but she would have had to back-track through several corridors for the nearest station, so she decided to walk. The corridors were nearly deserted and the occasional Alphan she passed exchanged amicable greetings with her.

"Hello, Mikel," she greeted a technician casually upon turning a corridor.

"Hel-lo!" the technician said, and let go a piercing wolf whistle.

Maya stopped dead in her tracks, delivering an astonished stare over her shoulder. Mikel, the consummate bookworm, had never behaved so obviously before in his life. "Mike, are you all right?" she inquired with a nervous laugh.

"I've never been better, beautiful." The young man swaggered up to her. "Hey, how's about you and me taking it over to my quarters, hm?" he said, leaning in close, leering suggestively.

"Mike!" Maya jumped back, baffled and frightened. "Has Alan been giving you macho lessons? If he has, you've been robbed ..."

"Has anyone ever told you you have beautiful eyes?" Mikel crooned, trying to put his arms around her.

"You want eyes?" Maya said, her voice rising. "Keep your hands to yourself, or you're going to get eyes ...!"

"Is that a promise?" Mikel said eagerly.

"Anyway you want it!" Maya said, her patience at an end. In a blink of an eye, Maya had disappeared, and Mikel found himself with an armful of hairy muscle, nose to nose with a hideous face that had at its center one huge black eye.

Mikel gave out a choking scream, and made a three foot jump backwards. He stared blankly at the creature for a moment; then suddenly, his shock was replaced by a sly smile. "You fox," he said, "I know it's you, you can't get away from me like that ..."

Maya, transformed back into her human form for an instant, held up her hand warningly as Mikel approached her again. "No? How about this way, then?" She disappeared again, and a tiny blue bird fluttered away down the corridor.

"I'll find you, you saucy vixen, you!" Mikel shouted after the bird. "I'll find you! You can't hide from me

forever! I'll -- well, hel-lo, Jennie! Has anyone ever told you you have beautiful eyes...?"

"All right, Maya ..." Alan Carter peered under the computer console, "I know you're around here somewhere. You can't hide from me. I'll find you. Here, Maya. Here, Maya!"

"Bill, you stay away from me!" Sandra warned, keeping the monitor console between her and the Eagle pilot. "You just keep your hands to yourself!"

"Oh, you're so beautiful when you're angry!" Bill Fraser said blissfully. "Come to papa ...!"

"Annette, will you please come and get your husband?" Sandra cried desperately.

"Hell, I've got my own problems!" Annette shouted back, fending off the unwanted attentions of Lowell from Security as he backed her into a corner.

Tony, who had long ago ceased trying to make sense of the madness, was off in one corner shaking his head. "Bunch of dafts," he muttered. "All gone off their bird. I don't believe this, I really don't believe this. They think they're a bunch of bloody Cassanovas ..."

Koenig poked his head into the open door of Command Center. "Has anybody here seen Anya from Life Support?"

"Tall girl, red hair?" one of the security men said.

"Short girl, brown hair," Koenig corrected him.

"I'll help you look," the man offered eagerly.

"Aha!" Alan Carter shouted triumphantly. "I knew you couldn't hide! Come here, Maya ..."

Koenig stared in astonishment as Carter approached, arms ready to grab him up. An instinct brought out his laser. "Alan, you try to hug me, and you're dead," he warned.

"You can't fool me," Carter said, wagging a finger. "I know you're Maya ..."

"And you're crazy," Koenig said. "Carter ...!"

He barely dodged as Carter lunged at him, and the two disappeared down the corridor, Alan in hot pursuit.

"Oh, hell," Tony muttered, shaking his head. "Is he in for a big surprise ..." He opened his pocket slightly. "You okay in there, honey?"

A little quivering nose poked over the top of Tony's jacket pocket; two small eyes looked up at him questioningly.

Tony looked up at the chronometer. "Only ten more minutes before you have to change back, you know."

The mouse disappeared back into the depths of his pocket, drooping in despair.

"This is all your flaky goddess' fault, you know," Tony growled. "She put some kind of whammy on these fruitcakes. Not even a halfway decent one, either. I haven't heard some of the lines these guys are using since grade school. 'Has anyone ever told you you have beautiful eyes?'" he mimicked sarcastically. "That line sank with the Titanic." He pulled his pocket open to see the small rodent better. "Maya, will you please have a talk with that goddess of yours? You want to stay a mouse forever? I certainly don't want to sit here in

the corner watching these people make complete fools of themselves ... Maya, are you listening to me?"

"Maya?" Alan Carter's familiar voice intruded. He had reappeared in the doorway of Command Center, and was peering around anxiously. "Did I hear someone say 'Maya'?"

"Oh, God," Tony breathed, shutting his pocket quickly.

Slipping unnoticed from Command Center was easy enough for Tony; nobody was paying the slightest bit of attention, anyway. The men were after the women with dogged determination, and the women were just as determined to keep them at a respectable distance. Tony locked an empty room, and locked the doors behind him before easing the mouse out of his pocket. "Here you go ..." he said, setting the animal on the floor. "All safe."

Maya got to her feet and dusted off her skirt. "Oh, Tony," she said, near tears. "I can't believe all this is happening."

"You and me both, sister," Tony said. "Now, look, do you think you can talk to whatshername, get her to take everything back? You've got to try ..."

"I don't know, Tony -- no one's ever asked a goddess to take back a ... a spell. I don't know how to go about it."

"Well, you've got a lot more practice with goddesses than us poor deprived Earth people have. How did you ever get so lucky, anyway?" he asked sarcastically.

"All the gods left Psychon thousands of years ago. I've never seen one before until now. I recognized Papaya from the statues and all the stories they told about her ..."

"Yeah? What kind of stories?"

"Well ..." Maya thought. "As a matter of fact, if we were telling the story of what was happening right now to our grandchildren, it would sound a lot like the stories I've heard about Papaya."

"Terrific," Tony groaned. "Why didn't you remember that earlier? We might have saved ourselves a lot of trouble and pitched her out on her ear long ago!"

"Tony, sh! She might hear you," Maya warned.

"So what if she does? She already hates me for opening my big mouth about the fruit -- come to think about it, her hating me could be a blessing in disguise, at least I'm not lusting after anything in a skirt like the rest of these morons ..."

"Tony, I'll try to talk to her, I really will. But, please, try to remember, she was only trying to help ..."

"You just try telling that to the Commander while Alan's chasing him through the corridors," Tony said, opening the door. "I'm going back to Command Center and referee. You pow-wow with Papaya. Let me know if we go another inning."

"Huh?" Maya said, not comprehending the obscure reference. But Tony had already closed the door after him. She put the door on computer lock and replaced the comlock on her belt. Now, how did one go about getting back a goddess in the latter stages of molecular dispersal?



"Papaya?" she called tentatively. "Oh-ho, Papaya! I've got to talk to you." She was beginning to feel foolish. "Hel-lo, Papaya. Yo! Hey! Come on, I'm serious. We've got to talk about this." Definitely beginning to become embarrassed. "Come on, already. Papaya! Oh ..." She covered her face with her hand, not knowing whether to cry or laugh hysterically. "Papaya ..." she said into her hand. "If you're not here by the time I count to three, I'll ... I'll ... I'll marry Tony Verdeschi!"

"Yes, dear," Papaya's calm voice came from behind her. Whirling, Maya saw that the goddess had reappeared, seated on the couch, engaged in the careful inspection of her manicure. "Were you calling me?"

"Papaya," Maya began hesitantly, but with urgency written in every line of her face. "Papaya, I hvae to talk to you ..."

"Yes, dear," Papaya said distractedly, taking the hem of her dress in hand, and studying it carefully, inch by inch. "This gown is getting terribly worn," she murmured. "I don't suppose that Alphan outfit of yours would become me, do you?"

"No, I don't," Maya said quickly -- too quickly. She sat down next to the goddess and leveled an earnest gaze at her. "Papaya, I'm serious. You've got to take the spell off the men."

"What spell, dear?" Papaya replied with a half-smile, still more interested in the condition of her dress than in the conversation.

"What spell?" Maya repeated, all the frustration of the past several hours coming out in her voice. "Papaya, please. I understand that you meant well, I really do, but -- it ... Papaya, please, just take the spell off. Please?"

Papaya dropped her hem and folded her hands in her laps, all with a deliberate motion and a long sigh. "Now what makes you think I put a spell on your men?" she asked in all innocence. "Come, dear, credit me with far more integrity than that ..."

"I'll credit you with all the integrity you want, but, please, Papaya, you've got to listen to me," Maya was pleading at this point. "You've got to take the spell off."

"All right, all right," Papaya waved placatingly. "So I put a little harmless whammy on your men. You have to admit that they've been much more interesting ..."

"That wouldn't be so bad," Maya said with soft desperation. "But Papaya -- it's the wrong men."

Papaya looked at her, aghast. "Wrong men? You have more? All those young men running around in those cute uniforms, those were the wrong ones?"

"No, no, no, Papaya, I mean -- you see, on Alpha, we have ... that is to say ... well ..." Maya shook her head. "Couples. We already had ... certain couples. Like -- Tony and I ...?" She left the sentence open, gesturing expansively in the hopes that Papaya would get the message.

Papaya sniffed. "My dear, take my word for it, you could do much better."

"I don't want to do much better, I want Tony!" Maya fairly wailed. "And I certainly don't want Alan Carter chasing me around all the time! The only way I could get away from him was to turn into the Commander, and I can only do it for one hour at a time so that when I turned back, there Alan was, and now Alan is chasing the Commander all over the base and I had to turn into a mouse and hide in Tony's pocket, and oh, Papaya, please take the spell off!" she finished in near hysteria.

"There, there, dear," Papaya patted the woman crying on her shoulder reassuringly. "All right, I'll take the spell off." She sighed. "But I still think this place could use some livening up. Tell me -- have you ever considered giving Alan Carter a chance?"

Maya's heartfelt groan was muffled against Papaya's shoulder.

Maya cast an apprehensive eye around Command Center, and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that all of the men were behaving themselves. More so than when they were chasing every available female in sight just a few hours ago, anyway. Alan Carter hadn't so much as looked her way since Papaya had lifted her spell. As much as having flesh-and-blood gods and goddesses had been a tremendous advantage to Psychon, Maya was beginning to wonder whether the Earth people had it much better off not having erstwhile deities deciding to look them up on their whims. She was sure that it was going to be quite a long time before she would be able to live down the experience of Papaya's visit.

Maya was almost afraid that the goddess would decide to make Alpha her permanent resting place, but Papaya had suddenly announced that she had grown bored soon after

lifting the whammy, and that she would be taking her leave almost immediately. After all, she had added languidly, being a goddess for only three hundred people -- people who didn't appreciate what she could do for them -- was definitely bound to cramp her style. She was off for much bigger game.

"How does she do it?" Alan wondered in a whisper meant to reach only Tony and Maya's ears as they waited for Papaya to appear in Commander Center for her final farewells. "Travel through space, I mean?"

Tony grunted. "She's pretty spaced out already, if you ask me."

Maya poked Tony sharply for his irreverent comment. As much as she was relieved to see Papaya take her leave, she didn't have to put up with blasphemy. "After all, Alan," she said, "she is a goddess."

"You're telling me," Alan said fervently.

"Down, boy," Tony growled. "I'll tell Kate in Hydroponics on you."

When Papaya finally appeared in Command Center -- in a blinding flash of light, per her usual style -- it too her twenty minutes to say goodbye. A quick handshake with the women, and five minutes for each man in Command Center, with the blatant exception of Tony, whom she made it a point to ignore (much to Maya's relief). As Papaya bid farewell to Koenig in her own inimitable style, Helena was squirming uncomfortably, valiantly struggling to keep a pleasant smile on her face as she hissed between clenched teeth, "I'm going to pull out every hair on her head. I'm going to break all her teeth."

Annette Fraser, watching Papaya's farewell to her husband Bill, colored red in the face in direct proportion to the whitening of her knuckles. Behind the inane smile, she hissed an aside to Helena, "Save her face for me. I'm going to rip it off."

Rita Mathias didn't bother to smile as her husband Bob exchanged goodbyes with the Psychon goddess. She held her tongue with an obvious effort, and made a careful study of the ceiling.

Sandra was outwardly calm as Alan, whom Papaya had left until last, enthusiastically responded to the goddess' farewell. The other women, who had, in the past, staunchly held forth that there was more feeling between Sahn and Alan than their casual flirtations told, watched her carefully and later swore that her face had clouded much like a dark storm brewing behind the otherwise composed features.

Alan at last pulled away from Papaya, breathless, a grin of idiotic proportions on his face. Papaya was reluctant to release his arm for a moment, regarding him questioningly. "Maybe I could get to enjoy this place in time?" she offered hopefully.

Sensing that the men, Alan in particular, were about to join in a Greek chorus to persuade the Psychon to stay, and that the women were about to commit murder and mayhem, Maya stepped gamely into the breach and gently, but forcefully led Papaya away from Alan, gushing inanely, "It was absolutely wonderful to have seen you, you will give my love to Xenos when you see him?"

"Oh, my dear," Papaya said, becoming serious. "I haven't seen Xenos in over a millenium. We're separated, didn't you know?"

"I didn't!" Maya said, horrified. "I'm so sorry ..."

"Don't be," Papaya assured her. "I never knew what

that god would do from one moment to the next. Absolutely incorrigible. Why, there was one time he ..."

"Ah, goodbye, Papaya!" Helena called out, wagging her fingers. "Nice knowing you."

Obviously knowing a hing when it was shoved at her, Papaya swept imperiously to the center of the room. "Before I leave," she began solemnly, composing herself much as a diva preparing to deliver an aria, "I want to give you allsomething to remember me by."

"Oh, no," Maya said quickly. "No, really, that's necessary ..."

"I insist," Papaya said, and raising her hand, snapped her fingers. "There, you have my blessing. Incidentally -- which direction is this planet of yours, Earth?"

Koenig thought for a moment, and pointed in a vague direction. "I think," he added as an afterthought.

Papaya nodded thoughtfully. "I think I'll go that way," she said, indicating the opposite direction. "Oh, and Maya, if I should run into your brother, I'll give him your love. Ta-ta!" And in that annoying burst of light, she was gone.

The collective sigh of relief from the women as soon as the light had faded nearly took every loose paper in Command Center off the consoles. Breaking ranks, each stalked up to her man, fire in her eyes.

"John," Helena was saying, ice dripping from every syllable as she fairly dragged the commander from Command Center, "I think you're overdue for a medical examination?"

Annette crooked a finger, and Bill Fraser meekly followed his wife from the room without a word. Rita latched onto Bob and herded him out of Command Center, ignoring his protestations of innocence.

Sandra approached Alan, and regarded him a moment, her face expressionless, before delivering a sharp jab to his upper arm. "Ow!" Alan recoiled, clutching his arm. "Why are you always hitting me?"

"Well," Tony was saying, "At least that's over with."

"Oh, I don't know, Tony," Maya shook her head, troubled. "She gave us a blessing, remember?"

"Yah," Tony said, eyeing her warily. "So what?"

"A blessing from Papaya -- it's a chancy thing."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, on his guard. "You don't think she's holding a grudge, do you?"

Maya nodded reluctantly. "Tony, she's infamous for her grudges. I heard that she held a grudge against Demos the River God for over three thousand years. She almost put him out of business by drying up all the river beds on Psychon."

"River beds, huh? Well, that's not exactly something we have to worry about here," Tony said. "Hey, uh ..." His voice lowered an octave as he moved closer to Maya. "Since I didn't get a fond farewell from your goddess friend, how about making it up to me?"

Maya smiled and turned her face up. Tony leaned over to kiss her; barely had their lips touched when Maya abruptly disappeared. Where she had been standing, there was now an ugly, noisily croaking frog.

Recovering almost instantly from the initial shock, Tony made a disgusted sound, attracting Alan and Sahn's attention and subsequent amusement. "Come on, Maya, quit fooling around."

The frog croaked. The next moment, a bewildered Maya had reappeared. "What happened?" she stammered.

"What happened," Tony chided her. "You and your practical jokes ..."



"Tony, I didn't do that on purpose!" Maya protested. "I swear to you, I didn't!"

"You didn't?" Tony was dubious. "Well ... let's try it again -- no tricks, now?"

Maya nodded fervently. They tried to kiss again; again, Maya disappeared, to be replaced by an even uglier frog. "Oh, terrific," he groaned, covering his face with his hand.

"Tony," Maya said, when she had once again regained her form. "Papaya's blessing ..."

"Are you telling me that because of that flake, you're going to turn into a frog everytime I try to kiss you?" Tony's voice raised angrily.

"Here, let me try," Alan offered.

Tony regarded the pilot suspiciously, half-expecting Papaya's blessing had reinstated the spell. Seeing the look, Alan added quickly, "In the spirit of experiment, of course."

"Yeah -- of course," Tony replied weakly. Alan kissed Maya, once, hard. "Don't enjoy yourself," Tony warned in a low growl.

The Psychon woman blinked. "Nothing."

"Thanks," Alan muttered under his breath.

Tony seemed about to say something when a thought occurred to him. He grabbed a startled Sandra and kissed her. "There. She didn't turn into a frog," he said, ignoring Sahn's consternation. "You know something, Maya, I think I'll take back anything I said about liking Psychon, and I'll tell you something else -- do you know what I think about your goddess of fertility?"

"Tony, please," Maya said, "Be nice."

Tony moaned, his fists clenching in mid-air.

"Her spells don't last forever. It'll wear off in time," Maya said, not sounding very convincing.

Tony sighed and shook his head. "Faster than her gjudges, I hope," he muttered.

EPILOGUE

"You wanted to see me, Helena?" Maya said.

Dr. Russell looked up from her desk, where she had been struggling with her daily status report. "Oh, yes, Maya. I need to talk to you. I'm writing this ... experience up for the log, and I need your opinion on something ..."

"All right, Helena," Koenig burst into the Medical Center unannounced, breathing fire. "What the hell's going on here?"

"What do you mean, what the hell's going on here?" Helena returned, less than patiently.

"If I locked up everybody who's been guilty of insubordination in the last 48 hours, there'd be no one left to run this base," Koenig said, clearly irritated. "What the devil is wrong with everybody? Nobody is speaking to anyone, no one is getting any work done ..."

"If I told you, it would be a breach of medical ethics," Helena replied curtly.

"If you don't tell me, it's going to be mass homicide."

"John ..." It was clear that the doctor's patience was frayed to the breaking point as she faced the commander. "Do you remember that little problem of yours that we discussed in your quarters last night? And the night before?"

Koenig's face went gray. "Yes," he said guardedly, giving Maya an uneasy glance. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Helena held up a sheaf of papers. "Every male on this base has come in here with the same complaint."

Koenig's expression went wide with shock. "You mean --?"

Helena nodded. "Now do you understand?"

"Holy cow," Koenig sat down hard.

"Excuse me?" Maya blinked.

"Well, you wouldn't know, I suppose," Helena told her, "Seeing as how you and Tony have enough problems with the frog business, but ah, ... you see, all the men have experienced problems with their ... relationships."

"Relationships," Koenig muttered, rubbing his forehead.

"Relationships," Maya repeated blankly. Light dawned when she saw the commander's face color. "Oh ... relationships," she breathed. "Oh, my goodness. How terribly frustrating."

"Hallelujah," Helena rejoined fervently, giving Koenig a sharp look.

"Oh, my," Maya said, "That must have been what Papaya meant when she gave us her blessing."

"That's what I wanted your opinion on," Helena said, making a note in her log entry.

Koenig looked at Maya, baleful eyes peering out from behind spread fingers. "How many gods and goddesses did Psychon have, anyway?"

"Well, there was Gwin, the Fire God; Eslani, the Goddess of the Harvest; and of course, Cmtrix and Yglordx, the Moon Gods, and ..."

"Is there anyway to make sure they don't come visiting?" Koenig wanted to know. "Some old Psychon curses, hanging garlic on the laser cannon turrets, spells, incantations, crosses, silver bullets -- anything?"

"Commander, her spell can't last too much longer," Maya insisted. "As a matter of fact," she added brightly, "I don't turn into a frog as quickly anymore."

"Hooray," Koenig cheered without conviction.

"So," Helena gave a dispirited sigh, "Until Papaya's 'blessing' runs its course -- what do you suggest?"

Koenig heaved a sigh of his own, and threw up his hands in resignation. "How about a nice quiet game or two of backgammon?"

THE END
(maybe)