

# the second coming

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Vicki F. Newton

"Nobody's forgiven me," Maya mourned, propping her chin against her hand. "Nobody's let me forget it for a moment. They all hold it against me."

"Huh?" Tony, distracted by Maya's unprompted comment, dropped the tool he had been using to fix the loose panel on his computer console. "What the devil are you mumbling about?" he demanded irritably as he hunted for the elusive screwdriver under his console.

"Papaya," Maya sighed.

"Ow!" Tony exclaimed, his head connecting painfully against the console as he attempted to get up. "Papaya? Do we have to bring her up?"

"Tony, everybody's acting as though it's my fault. I can't help it if Psychon had gods who were a little ... er ..."

"Weird," Tony supplied the word firmly. "I'll tell you one thing, Alan wasn't too crazy about finding out he'd been chasing John around when he thought it was you."

"The commander wasn't thrilled, either," Maya said gloomily. She gave Tony a scathing glare when the man began to chuckle. "I fail to see what you find so amusing," she declared haughtily, hurt that Tony could laugh in the face of her misery.

"Alan chasing the commander all over the base, thinking it was you," Tony chortled. "Now if that wasn't a sight ..."

Koenig, at his desk on the other side of Command Center, looked up suspiciously. "What's the big head session over there?" he demanded.

Tony waved the screwdriver. "Have it fixed in a second, John," he grinned, a smile that disappeared without a trace when he turned back to Maya. "Watch what you say, he's still touchy about that goddess of yours ..."

"She's not my goddess. Just because I happen to be from Psychon -- anyway, that was thousands of years ago, I can't exactly be held accountable for her actions, can I?"

"What was thousands of years ago?" Tony asked, momentarily confused.

"When Psychon had gods and goddesses," Maya told him with an impatient sigh. "They all left when the Psychon people developed powers of their own."

Tony nodded once, then shook his head once, blinking. "Yeah. Okay, well, just take it easy, it's bound to blow over sooner or later. It's not as if any permanent damage was done -- just a few bruised egos, that's all. Nothing serious."

Just then, Command Center was filled with a

burst of brilliant white light. Everyone started in their seats; in the sudden silence in the fraction of a second before the light cleared, they heard Koenig's sharp gasp, "God, she's back!"

"Did somebody call me?" a voice boomed out. The light had faded to reveal a figure standing in their midst. A huge figure. A humanoid male three times the bulk of any man on Alpha, with a bearded face that scoured the assemblage with a fierce eye.

"Oh, my goodness," Maya gasped, her hand flying to her throat. "It's Xenos!"

"Xenos?" Tony repeated, his heart sinking. "Where have I heard that n--?"

"Papaya's husband!" Maya announced in a low voice filled with dread.

Maya's voice brought the head of the man swiveling around to fix her with a piercing stare. "Papaya? Where is that brazen hussy? I know she's around here somewhere!"

Maya felt the commander's hand close like a vise on her shoulder, and his terse whisper near her ear. "Another one of your gods, Maya?"

Maya nodded weakly. Koenig groaned, covering his face with his hand.

"Here, now!" Xenos bellowed in a voice that shook the walls. "Where in the seven moons of Zenar am I?"

Koenig glared balefully at the intruder, past all caring. "You've got the moon part right, but there's only this one and we're from Earth."

Xenos harrumphed. "Don't you think it's a bit odd to be floating around out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Tony was about to make a remark about what he considered to be odd, but, remembering the trouble caused by his last thoughtless remark to a Psychon god, elected to keep his mouth shut this time.

"That is a long story," Koenig was saying, his voice deadly.

Xenos gestured impatiently. "Haven't got time for stories. I'm looking for my wife, Papaya, and ... hel-lo," he broke off abruptly, squinting hard at Maya. "You're a Psychon, aren't you?"

"Yes ..." Maya managed to muster up a faint smile. "I am."

"Well, it's certainly been a long time since I've been back there," Xenos said, less gruffly. "I must go back and visit someday."

"Er..." Maya began hesitantly.

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"Your wife," Tony broke in hastily. "She was here, but she already left. If you leave right now, I just bet you could catch up with her in no time at all!"

Xenos growled. "I've been chasing that woman halfway across the galaxy. I'll never understand how she keeps one step ahead of me all the time."

"Blind luck, I'd say," Tony muttered, sotto voce.

"Eh?" Xenos glanced at him sharply.

"Nothing," Tony said, composing his features to resemble the picture of innocence.



Xenos, after a moment's consideration, decided to let it drop. "A fine bit of business it is when a man can't even find his own wife!" he boomed. He sighed heavily. "I need a drink."

"Uh..." Maya forced herself to think clearly. "Would you like me to get some water?"

"Don't encourage him!" Koenig whispered sharply.

Xenos made a face. "Come, my dear. You, a Psychon, should know better than that. Something a bit more ... interesting?"

It took a moment. Then, slowly, all eyes in Command Center turned to Tony. It took a bit longer for the light to dawn on the Italian. "You mean my beer?" he questioned of no one in particular.

"Beer?" Xenos perked up, interested. "What's beer?"

"Uh ..." Tony gestured helplessly, searching for the right words. "About 30 proof?"

Xenos grimaced again. "Is that all? Nothing more lethal than that?"

"Well, I haven't perfected it yet," Tony hastened to add.

"My dear boy," Xenos said, brightening, "I'll have you know on Psychon I was the acknowledged expert on the subject of alcoholic beverages. Perhaps with my assistance, we shall see what can be done with this beer of yours?"

That did it. Tony had been hit right where he lived. His eyes lit up like twin Christmas bulbs. "Really? Well, then, what are we standing around here for?"

"What did you say your name was?" Xenos said, his arm around Tony as though they had known each other for years.

"Tony, Tony Verdeschi."

Xenos started slightly, staring at him. "You're a garbageman?"

The others in Command Center watched in stunned silence as the two exited the room, talking excitedly. After a moment, Koenig said carefully, "Maya -- what was Xenos the Psychon god of, anyway?"

Maya, on the verge of tears, sighed, "The god of drunken revelry," she said.

"Now, you see, if I had the right equipment, it would be simple," Tony was saying. "As it is, I've had to make do with what I could scavenge and as a result, the quality of the finished product suffers. Here, try that." He watched anxiously as the huge deity raised the beaker to his lips and tasted tentatively. Xenos considered a moment, rolling the liquid around on his tongue. "A decided lack of flair," he pronounced a moment later. "You need more flair."

"Nothing more constructive?" Tony said, disappointed. "I already knew that."

"It is far from hopeless," Xenos readily assured him. "It will, however, take some thought. Is it supposed to be this color?"

Tony peered doubtfully at the muddy liquid. "Maybe a touch more to the golden side," he suggested.

Xenos waved a hand over the glass; immediately, the muddiness dissipated. "Like so?"

"Perfect!" Tony exulted. "That would have taken me weeks! Do you think you could do something with the texture?"

"Uh ... excuse me?" Maya said hesitantly, having failed to attract their attention the last two times she had tried. "May I come in?"

"Sure, sure," Tony waved at her distractedly, watching Xenos as he prepared to pass his hand over the glass again.

"The commander asked me to make sure everything was all right," Maya lied gamely. What the commander had told her was not exactly repeatable, especially in the presence of a god.

"Everything's perfect," Tony beamed as Xenos handed him the beaker. "Just perfect." He

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swirled the liquid in the glass, then tasted it. "Now, uh ... about the taste, that's the really tough part."

"He wanted to know how long you'll be staying ..."

"What is it supposed to taste like?" Xenos wanted to know.

"Will you be staying for dinner?"

"Well, that's little hard to describe ... actually this stuff's not too far off, it just needs a little something ..."

"Will you be staying for the night?"

"It is a little difficult to know," Xenos said doubtfully. "Is the taste to be sweet or bitter?"

"The week?" Maya was getting desperate.

"Bitter," Tony said. "I've been trying for a light middle European flavor, but I think you might like a good, stout English ale instead. Now ..."

"Tony, if you don't get Xenos out of here in the next five minutes, the commander is going to concentrate a full laser barrage on your quarters!" Maya fairly shrieked.

"That's nice," Tony told her distractedly. "Then, of course, there are the Danish beers, and not to be outdone, the American concoctions, but frankly, I've never had much of a taste for those. With this stuff we have here, I really think we could go for the ale. Just a touch more ... did you say something, Maya?" He looked around, but the Psychon woman was nowhere to be seen. Tony looked back at Xenos. "Did she say something before she left?"

Xenos shrugged. "It sounded rather like a piercing scream, but then, I wasn't paying too much attention."

Tony nodded. "It couldn't have been important then. Now, of course, with an ale, the concentration of alcohol is much higher ..."

"I think I would like to go for the ale," Xenos said eagerly.

"Right," Tony grimed. "Let's get started!"

"Commander, I've tried everything," Maya said, wringing her hands. "I couldn't even get their attention. They're so wrapped up with making a success of Tony's beer ..." She covered her face and groaned in pain. "And knowing Xenos," she continued greyly, "he's not going to leave until he gets it right."

Carter grimaced and spread his hands. "Considering the stage he had that floor cleaner at before Xenos got here, maybe we should start thinking about assigning him permanent quarters."

"No, gods don't sleep," Maya said, tiredly. "They ..." she waggled her fingers, "...disperse."

Carter imitated her gesture, his eyebrows raised in amusement. "Disperse?"

"Disperse." She glared at him in irritation. "You know -- disappear?"

Carter had collapsed in a fit of laughter by this time, prompting Maya to send a cushion sailing at his head. When that didn't work, she motioned to Sandra. "Hit him," she told the woman.

As Sandra complied, Maya turned to Koenig. "Commander, I just can't think of what else to do."

"Aha!" Tony's voice boomed cheerily from the doorway of the recreation room. He leaned in and made a quick count of heads. "Good, you're all here. Come on," he gestured behind him.

Xenos swept into the room grandly behind Tony; and behind the Psychon floated a tray laden with glasses half full of a golden brown liquid. The tray swerved, coming to a halt just in front of Koenig. Koenig, a distinctly disgruntled look on his face, looked up briefly. He started violently when he realized the tray was hanging in mid-air.

"Wh --?" he managed to stutter, passing his hand tentatively over and under the tray.

"Neat trick, eh?" Tony fairly bubbled. "I tell you, this guy's full of them. And just wait until you taste his beer. It's -- it's out of this world!"

"How original," Helena muttered under her breath. "Where have I heard that one before?"

"Hey, hey, wait!" Tony protested when he noticed several Alphans edging toward the doorway. "I'm serious, the stuff is really good!"

"Is it?" Koenig said warily, trying to nudge the platter away.

"Here, you tell 'em," Tony urged the Psychon god.

Xenos laughed and hefted a glass in his hand. "Truly an elixir for the gods, my alien friends. Come, drink! We must celebrate!"

"Celebrate what?" Alan wanted to know, suspicious.

"The end of the search for perfection!" Tony told them. "Come on, everybody, take a taste, at least. I tell you, it's fantastic!"

No one made a move. Xenos surveyed the dubious expressions around him, and sighed impatiently. A wave of his hand sent glasses flying from the tray into the hands of the startled Alphans. "Celebrate!" he exulted them.

Alan was sniffing apprehensively at his, and looked up to see Tony staring at him, expectantly. "Is this going to be a celebration or a wake?" he demanded suspiciously.

"If you don't taste it, it won't be choice, pal," Tony growled.

"Some choice," Carter muttered under his breath. "Well, I don't need a fancy funeral -- a nice eulogy, maybe a few flowers, that would be nice ..."

"We can do this the easy way," Tony said, his

voice dangerous, "Or intravenously."

Taking a deep steeling breath, Alan closed his eyes and sipped tentatively.

Every Alphan in the room leaned in, breath bated, as Alan swallowed. A few seconds later, his eyes opened, and his face took on a peculiar expression as he stared down at the glass. He sipped at it again, and the bewilderment tripled.

"What's the matter?" Tony demanded anxiously.

Alan found himself unable to speak for a moment. He gestured frantically at the glass, and finally gasped, "This isn't beer."

"What?" Tony was incredulous. "Of course it's beer -- I tasted it myself. It's the best lager money can buy."

"Save your money, pal." Carter was shaking his head vigorously as all around him people were setting aside their glasses surreptitiously. "This isn't beer. But I will tell you what it is ..."

"Please," Helena begged him. "Not in polite company."

Alan lifted the glass up again. "It's about the best straight bourbon I've ever tasted."

"Straight bourbon?" Tony echoed. "Straight bourbon?" He snatched the glass from Alan's hand before the pilot had a chance to drink again and sipped experimentally. "You're crazy. Do you know that you're crazy?" he told Alan. "You've been out in space too long -- do you really expect me to believe that lager tastes like straight bourbon?"

At that point, Sahn emitted a squeal of delight. She clapped her hand over her mouth and nose and as a result was having trouble breathing.

"What's her problem?" Tony asked despairingly of no one in particular.

"I'm sorry," Sahn managed to gasp between giggles. "Champagne always tickles my nose."

"Champagne?" Tony was completely bewildered by now, and looked about helplessly as the others picked up their glasses with interest. Helena's eyes lit up at her first sip. "A bloody Mary!" she exclaimed. She held the glass up to the light, peering doubtfully at the golden brown color. "How can something that looks like that taste like a bloody Mary?" she wondered aloud.

Koenig was also registering surprise over his first taste. "Scotch and soda?"

"Hey!" Andy Johnson protested. "Why did I get a Shirley Temple?"

Xenos' laughter rose over the babble of excited voices and Tony looked at him, completely baffled. "Enjoy, my friend," Xenos boomed, nearly bowling Tony over with a huge hand clapped to his shoulder. "Celebrate! We must drink and be merry!"

Maya sat alone in her chair at the fringe of the group, chewing nervously on a fingernail. Xenos, beaming with delight at the excitement of the Alphans around him, frowned upon seeing her lone, anxious face. "My dear, come, join our celebration.



Perhaps a touch of prina juice will liven your spirits?"

"Thank you, Xenos, but no, thank you," Maya laughed nervously, jumping out of the chair and edging for the door. "I have to go and, uh ... run the base. Somebody has to do it ..."

Xenos looked disappointed, but he nodded. "Of course, of course, my dear. Mind that we don't have any nasty asteroid collisions while we're having our little party, won't you? I know I can count on you."

Xenos opened one bloodshot eye and surveyed the room bleakly. All about him were sprawled Alphans of all shapes and sizes, all in deep slumber. The original number had swelled with stragglers, and in some places they were piled three deep.

It was too quiet for Xenos' tastes. "Music!" he bellowed drunkenly. "What happened to the music?"

His voice shook several Alphans to semi-consciousness. One of them stirred, reaching under his back. He pulled forth a comb and a torn piece of tissue, and held it an inch in front of his eyes, trying to focus. "I think I broke it," the man slurred.

"Laughter!" Xenos called. "Music! Dancing!" He hiccoughed impatiently. "Come! We must celebrate! Where is my alien friend? Where is the garbageman?"

Alan nudged Tony. "Hey -- the jolly green

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giant is looking for you."

Tony started awake. "Huh -- oh," he smiled inanely as Xenos' face appeared in his blurred line of vision. "Hiya, big guy. How's things up there?"

"I feel compelled to tell you that this is the dullest orgy I have ever attended," Xenos informed him solemnly.

"Was this an orgy?" Tony squinted in puzzlement. He nudged Alan, who was drifting back to sleep. "Hey -- we missed all the fun!"

"These people -- are sleeping!" Xenos said, indignantly. "I offer them the finest refreshments I have ever offered in my existence, and they show their gratitude by falling asleep?"

"You forget, sir," Tony hiccupped, "These people here -- they haven't been so much as slightly tipsy in the last six years --" He held up his hand, fingers spread; frowning, he folded his thumb and little finger in, and grinned when he counted six fingers. "Six years! Can you imagine being dry for six whole years?"

Xenos groaned sympathetically. "What's a year?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, it's about -- it's ... well, it's a very long time," Tony assured him. "I tried desperately to ... save them from their misery. But did they ever once appreciate my efforts?"

"There, there, my friend," Xenos clucked. "At least I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I helped those less fortunate than myself. Why, I ..."

Tony's snore interrupted him, and Xenos glared at him in irritation. Drawing a deep breath, the god lumbered to his feet and staggered for the door, carefully avoiding the piled up bodies as he went.

Maya jumped when her name was spoken from a distance where she knew no one was standing a moment ago. Her hand pressed to her racing heart, she fixed Xenos with a lethal glare. "Must you sneak up on people like that?" she demanded irritably.

"I didn't sneak," Xenos protested. "I merely presented myself in the proper manner. Besides, is that the proper tone to take with a god?"

Maya's glare lost none of its venom. "I thought you came here to find Papaya," she reminded him.

"I did, but ..."

"She isn't here -- so why are you?" she asked him pointedly.

Xenos peered at her suspiciously. "Am I to understand that you'd rather I left? That I am less than welcome here?"

She nodded. "You're quick."

Xenos harrumphed. "I should have known. No woman has ever properly appreciated me, anyway. I shall leave." And with that, Xenos swept up his cape and disappeared. Just as Maya was releasing a

sigh of relief, his voice boomed again, causing her to start again. "And you can tell that garbageman of yours that his beer wouldn't rate as a chaser for prina juice!" And with that, he was gone again. Maya waited a few seconds this time before daring to sigh again. And it was a few seconds more before she realized he hadn't told her what condition he'd left the Alphans in. Heart in her throat, she left Command Center at a run, heading for the rec area.

Maya edged around the doorway cautiously. She stopped dead in astonishment at the sight that greeted her. "Oh, my," she breathed.

In the pile of seemingly lifeless bodies, someone moaned, groaning loudly. "Tony!" Maya stepped over sprawled Alphans in her rush to his side. "Tony, are you alright?"

He allowed her to haul him up to a sitting position by his arm, and looked about him fuzzily. "What are all these people doing in my room?" he wondered aloud.

"This isn't your room, and all these people are dead drunk."

Tony closed his eyes. "Oh. Yeah. I remember. That beer-bourbon-Shirley Temple ... stuff."

"Tony, these people are going to be very sick when they wake up," Maya told him firmly.

Tony groaned, clutching his head with his hand. "You don't have to tell me," he assured her.

"And just who do you think they're going to blame, eh? You're in a lot of trouble, Verdeschi."



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He peered at her between two fingers. "You're not a comfort," he told her.

"Come on," she urged him, helping him to his feet. "Let's get you sobered up and then we've got to get all these people on their feet."

"Yes, momma," Tony mumbled foggily, stumbling over Andy Johnson's prone form. He started to groan as Maya herded him from the room. "Nobody knows, how dry I am ..."

Tony, perched on the arm of the couch, watched as the last hapless victim of Xenos' mischief was helped out of the room by the emergency medical team. He was clutching a corked beaker that he had found in the room, half-full of the doctored beer. Maya entered, and one glance at her told him that the storm had not passed. He shook his head. "Pity everyone can't hold his liquor like me," he said sympathetically, swirling the contents of the beaker.

"I have a message for you," Maya told him, arms folded across her chest.

"Hm?"

"From Alan."

"Oh." Tony flinched in anticipation.

"As soon as he can lift his head up, he's going to use you for target practice."

Tony grimaced.

"And I can't repeat what the commander said," she went on, looking innocently at the ceiling. "My mother brought me up better than that."

"Those gods of yours," Tony flared, shaking a warning finger at her.

She grabbed his finger, bending it back until he yelped in pain. "It's not polite to point. And it was your beer, remember?"

He rubbed his hand, giving her a sour look. "What do Psychons have against me, anyway? They keep getting me into trouble, and I'm getting mighty sick of being expected to take out the garbage."

"Don't look at me for sympathy," she told him. "Even this Psychon isn't too pleased with you right now."

Tony looked about him uneasily. "Come to think of it, where is the big guy?"

"He's gone," Maya told him, finding it difficult to keep the relief out of her voice. "And we're well rid of him, too."

"Wait a minute ..." Tony said, his eyes widening in awful realization. "If Xenos is gone, then this --" he stared at the beaker in his hand. "This is the last of the beer!"

"You can't make more?" Maya said, less concerned for the beer than she was for Tony's obvious consternation.

"Are you kidding? It's not as if he left the recipe behind. It was his ... his ..." He waved

his fingers, searching for the right words.

"Spell?" Maya suggested.

"Yeah -- no," Tony grimaced. "Don't use that word. His -- hocus-pocus, that's what made the beer so terrific. Oh, great ..." he groaned, shaking his head. "Why couldn't he have stayed just a little longer? Maybe do a little alakazam on the still, the hops ..." he broke off with another heartfelt moan.

"There, there, Tony," Maya slid a comforting arm around his shoulder, keeping her eyes averted so that the man wouldn't detect the less than sympathetic twinkle in her eye. "Maybe it's all supposed to mean something."

"What?" Tony demanded, raising his head to fix her with a suspicious squint. "Supposed to mean what?"

"That you weren't cut out for this kind of work?"

Tony shook her arm off, assuming an air of offended dignity. "Do I take potshots at your hobbies? Huh? Do I?"

She grinned and leaned in close. "You know I have only one hobby," she said suggestively.

"Yeah, well, I think maybe you should start developing a wider range of interests," Tony snapped back. "If the commander wants me, I'll be in my quarters, sharing my sorrows with a more sympathetic friend," he said, tucking the corked beaker under his arm. "If you promise to wipe that silly grin off your face, I may even consider letting you come along." He had turned on his heel to leave; now, he paused at the door to add, "And don't forget the black coffee, okay?"

Alan inspected the console panel closely, shaking his head as he did. "I'm telling you, Commander," he was saying, "That's what happens when the humidity is too high."

"Alan, that metal is supposed to be rust-proof," Koenig told him in a voice that warned of a dangerously frayed patience.

Carter shrugged. "Did anyone remember to tell the metal that?"

"Alan, this is serious."

"Hey, I know that." Carter rubbed the torn sleeve of his jacket, where he had caught it on the jagged edge of a rusted piece of metal. "This is my last green jacket, you know. I'm going to have to start wearing the red one ..."

Koenig glared at him balefully. "Forgive me if I don't sympathize with you in your hour of despair," he said.

"Well ..." Carter spread his hands. "Sahn always said that red wasn't my color ..."

"Carter," Koenig broke in, his voice rising. "Fix it."

"I can replace the panel, alright, John, but what we really need is some good, old fashioned --"

"Here it is, folks!" Tony's voice interrupted

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from the Command Center entrance. He swung down a tray loaded with filled glasses onto a nearby console and hefted one of the glasses up. "The latest batch!" he declared triumphantly.

"-- rust remover," Carter finished, becoming thoughtful.

Tony stopped, fixing him with a terrible glare. "One more crack like that about my bear, old buddy, and you're off my Christmas list. You haven't even tasted it yet. Here," he shoved the glass into Alan's hand. "You can apologize by being the first to taste it."

"Hey!" Alan protested. "I may be sorry, but I'm not crazy!"

"You want to come out into the corridor and say that, pal?"

"Tony, Alan ..." Maya stepped up quickly,

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putting a hand on each of their shoulders, a hand calculated to keep them apart if the occasion arose. "Alan was only referring to the problem we've been having with the rusting metal -- he didn't mean anything personal."

"I'll bet," Tony growled.

Koenig had picked up one of the glasses, and was regarding it suspiciously. "This wouldn't happen to be more of that scotch and soda, would it?" he winced, his hangover still a painful memory.

"Well, uh, no ..." Tony admitted reluctantly. "Unfortunately, I lack Xenos' touch for that kind of thing -- but I really think I've got it this time. Go ahead, try it."

"It doesn't look right," Koenig told him doubtfully.

"What, you mean the color?"

Koenig nodded, his distrust deepening as he continued staring down into the glass. "Looks like Mississippi mud," he told him, frowning.

"Never mind the color -- it's the taste that counts," Tony said impatiently.

"Hey!" Alan's shout of triumph from his console distracted Koenig just as he was bringing the glass to his lips. "It works! Look at this! Takes the rust off like it was butter!"

Before Tony could speak, Alan grabbed up the beaker from the tray. "I've got some Eagles that could use this stuff," he told them happily, dashing from Command Center.

Koenig put the glass down so fast that the liquid sloshed over the sides. "Not while I'm on duty," he said quickly, moving away before Tony could protest.

Tony, mouth hanging open, remained motionless for a long moment, then, abruptly, his expression became stormy. "Alan!" he shouted angrily, running from Command Center after the pilot. "Alan, you're a dead man! You hear me? Come back here, you coward! Alan!"

Sahn had collapsed in a silent fit of laughter as Tony's angry shouting disappeared down the corridor; a sharp, scathing stare from Koenig composed her features faster than any effort of will on her part could have ever done.

Maya had taken the glass cloth she used to keep her viewscreen clean, and was diligently removing the offending rust from her own console with the contents of one of the half-full glasses. She looked up warily when she sensed Koenig's presence

in front of her.

"I already know what you're going to say, commander."

"Do you?"

"Yes ..."

"I didn't know you knew that kind of language."

"Commander, I know that they've caused a little trouble ..."

"A little trouble? What do you think it's going to do to the discipline of this base to have my second-in-command chasing my Chief Eagle Pilot through the corridors, hm?"

"But you have to agree that they've done relatively little harm -- I mean, physical harm," she added hastily when Koenig's impolite snort of derision told her that he did not agree.

"Papaya doesn't happen to have a large family, does she?" he asked, his voice dangerous.

Her apprehension told him the worst. "That does it. I want a work detail assigned right away."

"What for?" Maya asked innocently.

"They're going out on the surface to paint a very large sign on the landing pads."

"What's it going to say?" she said, eyeing him warily.

He smiled, grimly. "'Dorcon Landing Field'."

THE END (THIS TIME)



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