

by Mary Fall

Dark shadows came alive in a thousand horrors as Tony Verdeschi tried to fight his way back to Command Center. Grotesque monsters raked at his body with sharp claws. He had to make it back, they needed him. Maya needed him. The ceiling collapsed above him, knocking him to the floor. He was dying. He screamed, calling out one name, Maya!

He sat up in his bed, shivering, yet drenched with sweat. It was no good; no matter how hard he tried to stop them, the dreams kept returning. He buried his face in trembling hands. He couldn't hide the symptoms much longer; the trembling, the exhaustion, the fear. Someone would spot the problem, sooner or later. Maybe he was going mad, as Patrick had, first with horrifying visions then nearly destroying those he loved.

If he were going mad, he had to get away; die alone before he could take anyone else with him. Tony got up and started to dress, a plan forming in his mind.

"It is going according to plan. Soon we will have the man, Verdeschi, with us," Andra spoke roughly, her hand ending the transmission beamed from Tony's quarters.

"Yes, Andra, you have done well." The other's voice tried to match her companion's in coldness. "We will have what we need, and the human will be cured of his madness."

"You mustn't be so bitter, Kara. There is no other way for our world. The sensors show that Verdeschi is the one human who perfectly suits our needs." The older woman frowned at the signs of weakness in Kara. The deed was necessary; therefore it had to be done and done with no regrets.

Command Center was quiet on the third watch, a skeleton crew on duty. John Koenig entered, his presence acknowledged by the watchful Sandra Benes. He had just started going through the reports on his desk when an alarm sounded. "What is it?" he demanded, instantly alert.

"Someone is attempting an unauthorized liftoff." The efficient Eurasian woman worked her controls and brought up an image of an Eagle emerging onto the surface of the moon.

"Damn it, how did anyone get that far without authorization?" Koenig tried to contact the errant Eagle, as his senior command personnel filtered in in response to the alert.

"What the ..." Alan Carter glared at the screen, then jumped to his console. "It's no good trying to override, John. Whoever it is up there, has already disconnected with the base."

"Eagle pilot, respond. This is Commander Koenig. Return to base immediately." For a long moment, there was no response, then the screen flickered to life to reveal Verdeschi's white, tormented face. "TONY!"

"Listen to me, John, please, just listen." As the distraught Italian began to speak, Maya entered Command Center and froze. "There's something wrong with me. I don't know what it is, but I am a danger to Alpha, all of you, if I remain. I don't want to leave, but I must ..." Pain crossed his face when he spotted her. "I will not bring death to those I love." He ended the transmission.

"Tony! Tony, you've got to come back. We'll find a way to help you, no matter what it is ..."

"He's taken off, Commander," reported Sandra. She waited for his orders.

"What can we do? We can't just let him go off like this; we can't!" Maya fought to discipline her emotions, knowing that her mind had to be clear in order to help Tony.

"By the time we can get another Eagle ready for liftoff, it'll be almost impossible to stop him." Alan too had a battle for self-control. Tony was a good friend.

Koenig stared at the screen, torn with worry for Tony and doubt over the use of any rescue attempt. Then his eyes gleamed with a wild hope. "Maya, can you direct laser fire on Tony's Eagle that will only cripple it?"

"I can try." The Psychon had complete outward control now.

"Then do it, while Alan and I go up in Eagle One to bring him back."

"Yes, Commander." She watched the two men hurry for the travel tube. They had to hurry, in case she miscalculated. There wouldn't be much time to pull Tony out.

In a few minutes, Maya's Psychon brain had plotted the angle and force needed to bring the fleeing Eagle to a halt. She refused to think of Tony; any random thought might cause her to lose control, make an error. "Command Center to Commander Koenig ..."

"Yes, Maya?" John answered quickly from Eagle One, as he and Alan completed a cursory instrument check. Already they were rising to the moon's battered surface.

"We're ready here." Her face reflected iron control. The scientist was in control.

"Very well, fire at your discretion." Koenig's face also reflected control. He could no more afford to reveal the friend than she could the lover.

For a brief moment, she hesitated. What if she were wrong, and killed Tony, instead of crippling his ship? Her knuckles showed white as she relayed the order, "Fire lasers."

Deadly beams of light reached out from Alpha to the fleeing Eagle. "A hit," reported Sandra Benes as her sensitive instruments reacted, "The Eagle's internal systems seem to be secure, but the engines are dead."

"Thank you, Sahn." Maya buried her face in her hands for a moment, then opened communications with Eagle One. "Tony's Eagle has been disabled, Commander."

"We've got visual contact, Maya. Estimated docking time, ten minutes." Koenig broke the link, and turned to Alan. "How does it look to you?"

Carter frowned. "I think he's beginning to lose oxygen, John. The hull must have been breached on contact. We'd better hurry."

"Right." With the ease of long practice, Koenig docked the Eagle. Alan slipped out to the door to speed up the operation. "Set your laser on stun. If he's still conscious, he won't come easily."

"I'm ready, John." Two sets of double doors slid open. Tony hadn't jammed them. The crippled Eagle was a mess, equipment strewn everywhere. The atmosphere loss wasn't lethal yet, but it would be soon. Cautiously, he headed for the pilot module.

"Stay back, Alan!" Tony crouched in a corner, his own laser ready. "Please don't make me do this!"

"Hey, Tony, take it easy. We're here to help you." Alan was shocked by his friend's appearance. The usually dapper Italian was unshaven and wild-eyed. His uniform was torn from the tossing the lasers had given his ship.

Koenig appeared from behind Alan. "Put the laser down, Tony," he coaxed, but had to duck as Tony fired.

"Stay away, John, I don't want to hurt anyone. That's why I've got to get away...." Desperation tinged his voice.

"Why do you think you're going to hurt anyone?" Koenig softened his voice, trying to calm his friend. "Tell me, Tony. Explain so I can understand."

"The dreams, they keep coming; everyone dies, and I can't help it. Maya, everyone dead, and it's my fault!" Tony's eyes met Koenig's, "Please, John, kill me, before it's too late!"

"I can't do that. You know I can't." Koenig still spoke softly.

"I'll make you!" Tony attacked violently, knocking Alan sharply to the deck, stunned.

"Oh God, why couldn't you have killed me? Don't you see what I've done?" Tony froze, assuming in his distraught state, that he had killed Carter.

As Koenig knelt by Alan, Tony tried to stagger away, only to topple to the deck. The warring emotions had become too much.

Alan stirred, and Koenig moved toward Verdeschi. "Tony? Can you hear me?"

"He's not ...?" Alan sat up, rubbing his head.

"No. He froze after you fell, then collapsed." Koenig grew aware of a constant beeping. "Yes, Helena?"

Helena Russell's face appeared in the comlock. "How's Tony?"

"Not good. We're bringing him back now, unconscious. Have Maya send a repair Eagle to pick up his ship."

"Right, John." Helena closed the contact and turned to Maya, trying to comfort the distressed woman. "He'll be all right."

"Will he?" Bitterness filled the Psychon's voice, but she quickly became all business again as she ordered out the repair Eagle. Still, when Eagle One landed, she was right there with Helena and Ben Vincent.

The Commander emerged, Tony's limp form in his arms. "He still hasn't regained consciousness."

"We'll check him out," Helena assured as Koenig lay Tony on the gurney. "Ben, take him and set up for tests. I'll be right along." She wanted to make sure Alan was all right.

"Yes, Dr. Russell." The young black doctor left with his patient, concern in his dark eyes. Tony looked bad.

"Are you all right, Alan?" Helena turned to the Australian pilot.

Rubbing his head, Alan put her off. "There's nothing wrong with me a couple of aspirins won't fix."

"We have failed." Kara's voice betrayed her hope that they were finished by this initial failure.

"Not yet." Andra refused to accept defeat so easily. "We must have the man Verdeschi and we will get him before we leave this place."

"How? They will be beyond our reach in a few days, and will keep a close watch on him. You saw how much they were willing to risk for him." Admiration tinged the woman's voice.

Permission to include this illustration is pending.

"We will simply have to use a direct approach." Andra sounded almost as though she relished the thought of a confrontation with the Alphans.

"Not the weapons, Andra!" Kara's face paled, "We mustn't use force."

"We need the man, don't we?" Andra's voice was harsh as she faced the younger woman.

"Yes," Kara yielded to the inevitable. If their race was to survive, they needed the genes carried in the sperm of Tony Verdeschi. In long-distance scanning, the Security Chief had proved to be most compatible. "We must attack."

The atmosphere in Medical Center was tense as Tony regained consciousness. He tried to move, and found he was restrained. Helena was taking no chances on his escaping. He had failed.

Quiet voices attracted his attention. Helena was speaking, "The way that his brain patterns have been disrupted seems to indicate an outside force tampering with Tony's mind; trying to induce madness and despair."

"But why? And by whom?" John Koenig's voice was puzzled and angry. "Surely no one on Alpha ..."

"No, we don't have the capability here on Alpha. It has to be coming from outside," Helena said positively.

The questions still echoed in their minds, who and why? The mental attack on Tony made no sense. "Will he recover?" Maya's voice trembled, full of fear for the man she loved.

"If we can end the outside interference, Tony should be fine. Providing, of course, that he has no further chance to harm himself." Feeling eyes on her, Helena turned. "Welcome back, Tony."

"Why?" his voice was bitter. He had heard enough to understand what he was facing, "I'd rather be read than be alive with my brains being scrambled by some alien force." At Maya's sorrowful look, Tony's face softened, even as he insisted, "It would have been better for all of us, Maya."

"No, Tony, we've learned what the problem is. We'll find a solution." Maya took his hand, more distressed than ever by his despair. Tony had never been one to give up in a tough situation.

"She's right, Tony. Whoever's influencing you has failed so far. They'll try again, and this time they'll make a mistake. Then it's our turn." Koenig, too, refused to give up.

Before any more could be said, Sandra paged Koenig from Command Center. "There's an alien craft approaching, Commander."

"I'll be right there, Sahn. Try to make contact. We need to find out what they're after." Koenig had a very good idea what that would turn out to be. He turned to Tony, "Don't give up yet. We'll get out of this. Maya, we'll be needed in Command Center."

For a moment, she hesitated, looking at Tony, but he refused to meet her eyes. Silently, she followed the Commander.

Helena came up to her patient, a syringe in her hand. "You need rest, Tony."

"No, Helena, no!" Tony tried to pull away. "Please, no drugs. I've got to stay awake!" He had to stay awake, in control, or the nightmares would be back.

Helena decided to take a chance. "All right, Tony, but try to rest. You're exhausted."

"Yeah," Tony closed his eyes, trying to hide his fears until the doctor went away. When he was alone, he tried to break free of the restraints. Breathing harshly, Tony admitted defeat. He couldn't get away.

The bustle in Command Center was a relief after the quiet despair of Medical Center. John threw himself into the activity. "What's happening with our visitor?"

"Nothing, yet," reported Alan from his console. "I've got Eagles ready to go when you give the word."

"Launch Eagles, but have them keep their distance until we know whether or not our visitor is hostile. Sahn, have you had any luck?"

"Not so far ..." began the petite woman, when the big screen lit up.

The cold, warrior-woman Andra filled the screen. Her contempt of the Alphans was evident in her attitude. She spoke harshly, "I demand to speak to Commander John Koenig."

"I am John Koenig. What do you want?" Koenig felt the prickling of tension at the back of his neck.

This was no friendly visit.

"I am Andra, commander of the forces of Ataran, a world your moon will never visit. You have something we need badly. You will give it to us, in the interests of peace."

Koenig never blinked, "What is it you need? If we can spare it, we will gladly give it to you. In the interest of peace, of course." Steel rang in his voice. He would not bargain from weakness.

A flicker of a smile crossed Andra's face. This was a man to respect. It was a pity he hadn't proved to be the one they needed. "We require the man, Verdeschi. You prevented his coming to us once. Release him, or face the destruction of your base."

"No!" Maya cried out involuntarily from her station, eyes flashing dangerously.

Before any more could be said, Koenig interrupted, "Give us time to consider, Andra. You're not making an easy request of us." He had to have time.

"Very well, Koenig. You may have one of your hours, but be mindful of what I've said. We are quite capable of destroying your base, and taking what we want."

"Do you really think they'll yield Verdeschi to us?" Kara spoke with faint hope. Killing was abhorrent to her.

"No, I don't think so. From our studies, these humans seem to be fiercely and foolishly loyal to each other. I think we'll have to fight." Andra didn't look at all disappointed at the thought. It had been too long. Kara watched her companion in dismay.

The communication from the aliens had reached the entire base. Ben Vincent turned from the screen to Tony's wild cries. "Tony, you've got to be quiet before you hurt yourself!"

"Let me go, Ben. For God's sake, don't let Alpha be destroyed because of me!" Tony struggled desperately, his nightmares coming true. Maya, John, everyone would die because of him.

Quickly, Ben injected a sedative. There was no reasoning with Tony now.

"Oh God, Ben, no ... I've got to stay awake ... I must ..." Tony sank back into oblivion, releasing the death grip he had on the doctor's arm.

"He heard the ultimatum?" Helena had joined Vincent and noted the finely drawn face of her patient, tortured even in sleep by the Altarans. She could understand his desire to go to the aliens, and be free of this pain, but she couldn't give up yet. "Keep him under sedation, Ben, and prepare for casualties."

"Yes, Helena," Ben's young face reflected doubt, "Do you think they're as powerful as they say?"

"I don't know, Ben, but they've been able to tamper with Tony's mind from beyond our sensor range. That demonstrates power, certainly." Helena couldn't give false hope.

"Yeah," Ben pushed his doubt to the back of his mind, and busied himself with his duties. He could only hope that luck would be with them as it had always been before.

The hour the Altarans had granted passed swiftly as the Alphans prepared for attack. All non-essential personnel were drawn from the surface installations and sent to the caverns beneath the moonbase. Weaponry was checked and the Eagles placed in battle readiness. The Altarans would not win easily if the Alphans had anything to say about it.

Andra reopened communications precisely as the hour drew to its close. "Well, Commander, do you agree to give Verdeschi to us?"

"No, we do not give up our people on demand." Koenig's voice rang with determination.

"Then we have no need for further communication." Andra broke off and turned to her companion. "Launch the attack, Kara. I will see if anything can be done with Verdeschi. I've been having difficulty reaching his mind."

"Yes, Andra," the younger Altaran spoke as she turned to their weapons board. "I only wish it were not necessary." She stifled her rebellious thoughts.

The missiles passed through Alpha's shields as if they were non-existent, striking the base with deadly accuracy. Surface installations collapsed, Command Center shook. "Are you all right, Maya?" asked Koenig.

"Yes, Commander," the Psychon replied as she regained her seat. She read the multitude of signals that were flooding her console. "Damage to the base is extensive."

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John contacted the Medical Center, "Helena, how many casualties?"

"Fifteen, two of them serious. Evacuating to the caverns has kept the injuries down so far." Helena's face spoke eloquently of her fears. "Isn't there anything we can do to stop them?"

"I don't know," admitted Koenig. He broke contact with Medical and turned to Alan. "What about the Eagles?"

"No good, John. The pads have been damaged." Carter read details from his own console, cursing his uselessness in this attack.

"Helena," Koenig reopened communications with Medical, "You'd better evacuate to the caverns. I'm sending Alan to help."

"Right, John." Helena turned to Ben. "Evacuation procedures, Ben." She stumbled as another blast rocked the base. "Start with Tony."

"Yes, Helena." Vincent motioned to the orderlies for a gurney, then turned his attention to Tony. The security chief still seemed to be under the effects of the sedative, and Ben released the restraints. Instantly, all hell broke loose as Tony exploded into action.

"I'm not going to let anyone die because of me, Ben!" Tony dodged the orderlies easily. "I'm going to the Altarans." He reached the door, only to run into Alan.

The Australian pilot was so startled that Tony was able to grab his laser. "Tony, what the devil..." Before he could react, Verdeschi shoved him into Medical Center and shorted out the door mechanism with the laser. They were trapped, unable to lift a finger to stop the raging security chief.

Helena called Command Center, "John, Tony's free. He's planning to surrender himself to the Altarans!"

Andra turned to her companion, "Verdeschi is free once again. He will come to us willingly now to save his friends."

"At what cost to ourselves? Is our survival worth the destruction we are inflicting on these aliens? It's against everything we were taught to believe."

"Yes, it is worth it. Survival is worth any price." Andra turned back to her screens.

Tony moved rapidly away from Command Center. They would look for him there, or in the Eagle hangars. A plan had sprung into his mind, dangerous, but workable. And this time, he was sure, the thoughts were his, not the Altarans'. He had to get a spacesuit and reach the Moon's surface. From there he could signal Andra and finish the whole affair. It would work, it had to ...

"He should've reached here by now," said Maya tensely, "unless ..." A new and more worrisome thought entered her mind.

"Unless he's going to try something on his own. If Tony's in his own mind, he know we'll try to stop him." Koenig called Simon Hayes, Tony's second in security, "Simon, have your people check all points where Tony could possibly escape to the surface. With the launch pads dead, it's the only way he can get to the Altarans."

"Yes, Commander." Hayes started the search immediately, praying they weren't too late.

Alan arrived back in Command Center, his pride damaged by Tony's escape. "Is there any sign of him?"

"None," began Maya, only to be interrupted by an excited cry from Sandra.

"I'm picking up a transmission from the surface!"

"Can you pick it up on the scanner?" John held onto a console as another blast rocked the base.

"I think so," Sandra made delicate adjustments. "Yes, there it is!" The picture of a lone, space-suited figure replaced the image of the Altaran ship.

Tony's voice came over the speakers, "...Altarans, if you want me, you must stop the attack on Alpha." His voice was cold and firm, no longer that of a disrupted mind.

"Your friends will not allow you to come with us, Tony Verdeschi." Andra's voice was also cold, but held a note of joy. She was enjoying the attack.

"I will come to you voluntarily, but only if the attack is ended at once." He hesitated before continuing, then added, "If the attack isn't ended, I will open my spacesuit and you will still lose, even if you destroy Alpha."

"You really don't like me, do you, Verdeschi?" Tony asked. "You will not commit suicide. It is against all your

beliefs." Andra turned to Kara, fierce joy in her eyes. "We can devastate the base now that he is safely away from it."

"I think he means what he says," Kara's voice was hesitant.

"Continue the attack!" Andra snapped, then turned back to Tony's image. She had to regain control before it was too late.

In Command Center, silence built for a moment in tribute to the sacrifice Tony had offered to make. However, Koenig had no intention of allowing his friend to be taken, or die. "Alan, Maya, get suited up and bring Tony back." The two left immediately, hoping to reach Tony in time. The blasts continued unabated. Evidently, the Altarans weren't taking Tony's threat seriously. Koenig tried to open communications, "Tony, come in Tony ..."

On the surface, Tony watched the continued blasting of Alpha. He had shut off his radio after his call to Andra. He couldn't stand to hear Maya's voice again. Her love might weaken his resolve and he couldn't falter now. He couldn't give the aliens another chance to control his mind.

Slowly, he reached up and shut off his oxygen flow. The familiar hissing ceased, and Tony lay down on the Moon's surface to await death.

"He's turned off his life support!" Sandra looked up in horror from her console. "Tony is dying!"

Koenig didn't hesitate. "Helena, get to Airlock 10. That's where Maya and Alan will come in with Tony."

"Right, John," Helena grabbed an emergency kit and ran out. "Ben, finish the evacuation."

On the Altaran ship, Kara left off the attack as she faced her commander, "He is dying, Andra, and we no longer have any control over him. We must accept our defeat and go home."

"No! If we are to be denied a future, so shall the Alphans. We will destroy them all!" Andra turned to renew the attack.

"No, Andra, this is not our way! Have you forgotten that we came to preserve life, not to take it? We would not even have killed Verdeschi!"

"Kara, those are the words of a weakling. We must fight, we must ..." Andra froze at the sight of the blaster in the other's hand.

"We must die, Andra." Kara fired, not at her friend, but at their ship's power source.

The Alphans turned from the glaring white light that filled their screens as the Altaran ship disintegrated. Koenig, first to recover, asked, "Status, Sandra?"

"The enemy ship has been totally destroyed, Commander." Her face showed relief, then distraction as damage control reports began to come in.

But the Commander had already turned to another console. "Have you reached him yet?"

"We're bringing him in now, John," reported Alan.

"How is he?"

"Don't know for sure. He's unconscious, but we started his oxygen again." Beside the Eagle pilot, Koenig caught a glimpse of a strange alien form. Maya had transformed herself to carry her lover home, but

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was it in time?

When they re-entered Alpha, Koenig was waiting with Helena. Gently, Maya lowered her burden to the gurney. Even as they undid his bulky spacesuit, the Psychon returned to her normal form. "Is he ..."

For a moment Helena was silent, working patiently, then she looked up. "He's breathing." At their relieved looks, she had to caution them. "There may be brain damage. We don't know how long he was totally without oxygen."

"When will you know for sure?" John wondered if he would still have to face the loss of another friend.

"When he regains consciousness," was all Helena could say.

An anxious group gathered in Medical Center as Tony began to climb back to consciousness. Maya stood close; so did Helena. The doctor spoke softly, "Tony, Tony, can you hear me?" She held a hypo ready. If Tony's mind were destroyed, she would end his life and the devil take the consequences. "Tony?"

Tony's eyes opened, and stared blankly at the blurred faces around him. Then, as his vision cleared, memories came flooding back. "Helena, I'm not dead?" Questioning wonder filled his voice.

Helena smiled reassuringly. "No, Tony, you're safe now."

"The Altarans?"

"Their ship blew up, Tony. Your gamble won the day for us." John spoke up, "But next time, don't take such risks. Damn it, it's hard to train a second-in-command!" He spoke sternly to cover his relief. Helena wouldn't have to use the drug he had hidden from Maya.

"All right, John!" Tony turned his head as a gentle hand touched his arm. "Maya." All his feeling for her shone in his dark eyes.

"Don't ever scare me like that again, Tony." Her voice was soft and tender. "I couldn't bear life without you."

He reached up and touched her cheek. "I promise to try not to take any more risks like that." Then Tony turned to John, "Back to normal?"

Alan answered for the commander, "Right, no more crazy stunts, cobber." They left Tony and Maya to continue their reunion, alone.



The moon raced further into the galaxy, still carrying its stubborn speck of humanity. The Alphans would make it yet. What else could they do?