

*Tony Hale,
Space Detective*

By Hugh Walters

A Chris Godfrey of U.N.E.X.A. Adventure

Book 15th in the Series

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by the same author

BLAST OFF AT WOOMERA
MOON BASE ONE
EXPEDITION VENIS
DESTINATION MARS
JOURNEY TO JUPITER
SPACESHIP TO SAUTRN
THE MOJOLE MYSTERY
FIRST CONTACT?
PASSAGE TO PLUTO

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1

Tony Hale's destination was a huge, red brick building in Theobalds Road. At one time this had been the headquarters of the British Air Ministry. Now it was the European home of the United Nations Exploration Agency, the nerve centre in which all the European contribution to the exploration of space was co-ordinated. It was here, in his London office, that Tony had been summoned to meet Chris's boss, the Director of U.N.E.X.A.—Sir W. H. R. G. Gillanders.

One would have been justified in expecting the young astronaut to be a little overawed at being requested to visit the great man himself. But Tony was looking forward to the meeting with as much pleasure as curiosity. For Sir Billy, though he occupied such an exalted position, was an old friend. Yes, it would be good to see him once more. Tony had been on extended leave since his last space exploit, and had seen nothing of the Director for many weeks.

Of course Tony was also curious as to why Sir Billy had sent for him. The telegram had said nothing except to ask him to call on the Director without delay. Perhaps another space trip was planned, though he hadn't heard even the rumour of one. Anyhow—it would be good to see the boss no matter what the reason was.

The taxi screeched to a halt outside the U.N.E.X.A. building and Tony fumbled in his pocket for the fare. The driver had certainly beaten all records, so Tony gave him slightly more

than the usual tip. This he acknowledged with a grin and within a few seconds he was away, doing a hair-raising U-turn in thick traffic. Another taxi came to a more sedate halt before Tony could pass through the swing doors. He paused, curious to see whom it had brought.

Chris! by all that was wonderful! The Deputy Director paid his fare and came to join his friend.

“That driver of yours must have ambitions for the Monte Carlo rally,” Chris laughed.

They shook hands warmly and passed through the swing doors together.

“I’m glad to see you,” said Chris. “I got here as quickly as possible so that I could.”

“You knew I was coming?” Tony asked.

“I knew Sir Billy had sent for you,” Chris told him. “He’s also sent for Morrey and Serge.”

These were the other two astronauts who, with Chris, used to complete the four-man crew. Morrison Kant was a cheerful American, with shoulders a yard wide. Serge Smyslov was a Russian, dark and slim. With Chris and Tony they had formed the most experienced crew that U.N.E.X.A. had at its command. All were sad when Chris was “kicked upstairs”, as Tony put it.

“What’s brewing?” Tony asked, as they strode towards one of the lifts. “Another flight?”

Chris was strangely reticent.

“I’d rather Sir Billy himself told you,” he said, and Tony had to be content with that.

“Anyhow, how are you keeping?” Tony asked, as the lift began its journey. It was unusual for Chris to be so tight-lipped.

“Fine, but under pressure of course,” Chris smiled back. “There’s no need to ask how you are. You look the picture of health.”

“True enough,” agreed Tony, “but all the same, what I need

is another space flight to tone me up.”

The smile went from Chris’s face.

“You may get that sooner than you expect,” he said.

Before Tony could ask what his friend meant, the lift had come to a halt and the doors slid open. Chris strode on ahead without giving Tony a chance to put his question. They walked along the corridor and eventually stopped outside a door marked “Director’s Secretary”. Chris entered without knocking. He was the only person allowed to do this.

“Hello, Miss Treanor,” he said, with a smile at the girl who was typing at a desk. “Is anyone with him?”

“No. The others haven’t arrived yet,” Sir Billy’s secretary replied. “The Director said to send you in as soon as you came. How are you, Mr. Hale?”

For a second Tony didn’t realize that it was he who was being addressed so politely.

“Oh—er—fine,” he replied hurriedly. “No need to ask how you are, Miss Treanor. You look as pretty as ever.”

“You’d better go in,” the girl replied with a smile. That Tony Hale would want watching, she told herself delightedly.

Chris and Tony strode across the office to an inner door bearing the inscription “Director”. Chris gave a slight tap and then opened the door.

Sir Billy Gillanders hailed originally from Australia, and it showed occasionally in his speech. This big, bronzed man—he was over six feet three inches tall—looked more like a rugby player than a top scientist, and in fact he had been one in his youth.

He stood up and extended two huge hands in welcome towards the two young men. His face had lit up in a warm smile. Chris he saw frequently, but it had been some little time since he’d met Tony. So it was to the younger man that the Director paid most attention.

“Hope you didn’t mind being called,” he laughed, as he finished pumping his visitor’s hand.

Tony worked his fingers to get the circulation flowing again.

“Not at all. I was beginning to get bored and was thinking of getting myself a job in a garage,” he grinned back.

“That would be a come-down,” Sir Billy smiled. “From a spaceship engineer to a motor mechanic.”

“Well, it would have been something to do. But I suppose you’ve got another space trip planned,” the young astronaut said hopefully.

The smile went from Sir Billy’s face as if wiped off with a sponge.

“Not exactly,” he said. “But I’d prefer to wait for Serge and Morrey before I say any more. You agree, Chris?”

“Certainly,” his Deputy said at once. So Chris knew all about this space trip that wasn’t a space trip, Tony thought to himself. Ah well, he supposed he’d learn in good time.

“When do you expect them?” he asked.

“Any time now—that is if they decide to come,” Sir Billy replied, smiling again.

There was much that the three could talk about without touching on the subject of the gathering. Tony asked about Lord Benson, U.N.E.X.A.’s first Director, and was pleased to hear from Chris that the old scientist, though confined to his wheel chair, was as lively as a cricket. It wasn’t very often that he came to London, for obvious reasons, so there was a constant stream of visitors to his country home just outside Chatteris on the border of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire.

Then there was “Whiskers” to inquire about. Tony himself was able to give the latest news about the ex-R.A.F. officer with the fearsome moustache. “Whiskers” Greatrex had been the astronauts’ friend during many long years. He’d helped them during the difficult periods of pre-flight training, and had often

acted as communicator during their missions. More than once his wisecracks had kept up their morale in a particularly sticky situation. Yes—Whiskers was well, had a lovely garden, and was still as keen as ever to be involved with his young friends on any future space adventure.

The telephone on Sir Billy's desk buzzed and he picked it up. He listened for a moment.

“Send them up,” he said, and replaced the phone.

“They're here,” he told Chris and Tony, and a minute later Morrey burst into the room, followed more sedately by Serge. Of course there was a noisy ten minutes during which the astronauts chatted loudly to each other and to their chief. At last, when the hubbub had died down, Morrey turned to the Director and posed the question they all wanted to ask.

“Well—where are we going? Alpha Centauri? Betelgeuse? Sirius?” he asked.

“None of them,” Sir Billy said, motioning them to sit down. “You're going to the Moon.”

“The Moon?” exploded Tony, Morrey and Serge in unison. It was the last place they had expected. After all, they had each been to Lunar City many times. There was now a fair-sized and well-ordered base on Earth's natural satellite. A regular ferry took personnel backwards and forwards. So why did Sir Billy want his most experienced crew to make a hop to a place that was virtually next door?

“I thought that would surprise you,” the Director observed with a faint smile. But in the next instant he was deadly serious.

“Perhaps you were expecting to go on a journey to the edge of the solar system. Or even beyond. Well, I'm afraid this trip isn't like anything you've been on before. On the mission you won't be astronauts exploring some unknown corner of the universe. Instead you—will be detectives. I want you to solve some very strange events.”

To say that the three astronauts were surprised would be an understatement. All their experience and training had been for

the exploration of space. Now Sir Billy was saying that he wanted them to turn detectives. But why?

Before either Tony, Serge or Morrey could ask the all important question, Chris took up the story.

“Something very strange and worrying is happening in Lunar City. Three of the staff have vanished without trace. I suggested to the Director that he should send you up to investigate.”

“How do you mean? How could anyone vanish without trace?” Morrey demanded.

“We don’t know—but it’s certainly happened,” Sir Billy resumed. “Within the last few weeks three of the men working in Lunar City have disappeared. We haven’t a clue what’s happened.”

“But I don’t see how anyone could disappear on the Moon,” Tony protested. “Unless they wandered off outside the City and got lost.”

“We thought that at first,” the Director admitted. “When it was reported that the first one hadn’t returned to his quarters, the whole of Lunar City was searched thoroughly in case he’d been taken ill. He wasn’t found. Then the second man vanished and again he wasn’t found. We sent out teams to see if they had taken unauthorized walks outside the base, but nothing was discovered. Now the third man has gone we’re really worried.”

“They must be there somewhere,” Serge declared, “unless they have stowed away on a ferry and come back home.”

“Impossible,” Chris said. “As you know, after each trip ferries are thoroughly inspected. Even if anyone could survive blast-off and re-entry when not on a contour couch, he would be easily found. No. Those three chaps haven’t come home.”

“Then, of course, they must still be on the Moon,” Tony snorted, “only you haven’t looked for them well enough.”

For the first time Sir Billy showed signs of annoyance.

“You can take it from me,” he snapped, “those three are not on the Moon. Go and find out what’s happened.”

So that was it! This was certainly going to be a space trip with a difference.

But why had these particular astronauts been chosen to investigate the mystery? Surely there were professional detectives who could do the job better. This should be a task for America's F.B.I. or Britain's C.I.D. Morrey posed the question to Sir Billy and Chris.

"First of all there are few, if any, professional investigators who are also trained for lunar conditions," Sir Billy explained. "Secondly, we don't know that a crime has been committed. Thirdly, the presence of detectives in Lunar City would seem strange to the people up there."

"Don't they know about these disappearances then?" asked Serge.

"No. We've kept them secret so far. If some member of the staff is responsible, obviously we don't want to warn him. Neither do we want to raise any unnecessary alarm by public investigation."

"We think that you three, who are well known in Lunar City, could at least have a preliminary look at the problem on the spot without any questions being asked," added Chris.

"Gosh! So we've got to be secret agents," grinned Tony, not at all displeased with the idea.

"That's it," agreed the Director with a smile. He'd now recovered from the annoyance he'd felt when the astronauts had doubted the importance of the problem.

"Who does know about this?" Morrey asked.

"Commander Cooper and about a dozen others," replied Chris. "They are all sworn to the utmost secrecy."

"Won't people guess there's something wrong when they see us queuing about?" Morrey asked.

"You're going to Lunar City to inspect and report on the latest installations," Sir Billy replied with a twinkle. "You know—the 279 atomic generator, the Foxall oxygen plant, and the

new field of algae tanks.”

“Oh yes, of course. How silly of me to have forgotten,” Morrey laughed. “That should give us scope for probing nearly everywhere.”

“When do we go?” Tony wanted to know.

“I’ve fixed up couches on the ferry that leaves in two days,” Chris told his friends. “You can be ready by then?”

“I’m ready now,” Tony assured him, but Chris laughed and said that there was no lunar ferry for another fortyeight hours. So it was arranged that the little party should fly to Cape Kennedy, the Earth terminal of the ferry, next day, and leave for the Moon twenty-four hours later.

When Morrey asked for details about the three disappearances, Sir Billy suggested that they should reserve their questions until they reached Lunar City. Commander Cooper, the commandant for the first extra-terrestrial colony, knew all the details and also knew the men. U.N.E.X.A. had only the Commander’s reports.

“I want you to be very careful how you go about this job,” Sir Billy concluded. “Don’t give the slightest hint of the real purpose of your visit. Your progress reports can be sent to me over the Commander’s scrambler radio link. Of course you will also send some reports covering your supposed activities over the ordinary radio. I hope you solve the mystery.”

There seemed little else to say. Sir Billy could give them no suggestions about the lines on which they should work. They must decide this for themselves after they had made their first assessment on the spot.

2

The three astronauts and Chris hadn't been together for some time, so they took the opportunity to have a night out. After their interview with Sir Billy Gillanders, the four young men returned to Chris's nearby flat, where they spent a cheerful hour chatting and exchanging news. But one thing that they didn't talk about was the unusual task that Morrey, Tony and Serge had been asked to undertake.

True to their usual custom they visited a famous restaurant and ate a hearty meal. Then they went to a show. It was the famous long-running detective play *The Mousetrap*. So on they too would be involved in a mysterious and sinister situation.

Twelve hours later they met in the passenger hall of London Airport. The special plane that was to take them to the sun-baked shores of Florida was parked at the end of a little-used runway some distance away. A small coach was ready to take them out, but they must wait for the Director before they could leave. Sir Billy and Chris were going as far as the Cape. Then the three astronauts would go on alone.

As soon as the Director arrived—he'd been delayed by some last-minute messages—the coach scuttled off across the tarmac. The jet, with U.N.E.X.A.'s marking on the side, was waiting, and the crew saluted smartly as Sir Billy led his four companions up the gangway. Within less than a minute the gangway had been removed, the door closed, and the jet engines started. There was a jerk and the plane moved to take

up its position at the end of the runway. It turned, stopped and waited for a signal from traffic control. The sign that this had been received came as the engines suddenly increased the pitch of their whine and the plane shuddered under the restraining influence of its brakes.

There were no other passengers on the plane, which could have carried twenty people in roomy comfort. Two smart stewardesses appeared and invited orders for refreshments.

“You do yourselves proud,” Morrey grinned.

“When you’re on important business you’re entitled to a little comfort,” replied Chris loftily.

“Perhaps it’s as well that there aren’t any more passengers,” Sir Billy said, as the stewardesses disappeared into the galley. “Now we’re alone I can tell you what delayed me. It was a message from Lunar City to say that a fourth man has disappeared!”

The light-hearted banter of a moment before vanished in a flash, as Sir Billy’s audience realized the seriousness of the news. If four men had now disappeared without trace from the lunar community it wouldn’t be long before the secret was out. And with this unknown menace hanging over them, the morale of the staff would be bound to suffer.

If indeed the four had wandered out of Lunar City and marched away, they would all be dead, for no life-pack could carry more oxygen than would last twenty-four hours. Sir Billy explained that everyone in Lunar City had to have a pass before they could leave the great plastic domes and their connecting corridors. Sometimes members of the staff did wander out for short periods as a relief from the confines of the City. But their names were carefully recorded when they went out through, and returned to, any of the airlocks. If anyone remained outside beyond his allotted time, there was a general alert, and search parties scoured the area.

The four men who had vanished had gone out of Lunar City, and when they had exceeded their time search parties had gone to look for them. Such a procedure wasn’t uncommon, for

sometimes a scientist on an outside task might have a fall or twist an ankle on the litter of loose boulders. The search party would always find him long before the last reserves of oxygen had been consumed. But in these four cases no sign of the missing men had been found.

“What did the search parties think?” asked Morrey. “Wouldn’t they know that something unusual had happened? Wouldn’t they tell other people?”

“No,” Sir Billy replied. “When the first man vanished Commander Cooper realized the strangeness of the event and swore his men to secrecy. In any case the search parties are specially trained squads under strict discipline. As it happens, the same squad has been sent out on each occasion, so a minimum number of people know.”

“That’s funny,” Tony mused. “I suppose there’s more than one search party? Why was it that the same squad always failed to find their man?”

“Yes, there are three rescue squads,” Chris explained, “but after the first disappearance the Commander called out the same party whenever there was an alert, so as to minimize the number of people who were aware that something was amiss.”

“Bit rough on the poor blighters to be always on duty,” Morrey pointed out.

“They thought so at first,” Chris agreed, “but now they all know what is at stake, they’re anxious to do their best.”

“Of course there have been a few alerts in which the other two teams have been used,” Sir Billy interposed, “but I’m afraid these were contrived ones—designed to allay any suspicion. The Commander has sent one or two men out with secret instructions that they were to ‘get lost’. Apparently the ruse has succeeded.”

Before they realized it, their plane was descending through thin clouds and below they could see the Florida coastline leading to the Kennedy Space Port. In the distance they saw a ship lift off, but it was probably a routine flight to one of the

orbiting observatories.

They had talked incessantly of the mystery during their flight from London. Now they were at Cape Kennedy, they fell strangely silent. Sir Billy and Chris were certainly worried about what had happened, and what might still happen, on Earth's satellite. Tony, Serge and Morrey were wondering furiously how they would set about their extraordinary task. Each admitted to himself that he'd no idea.

Next morning the Director said farewell to the astronauts at the spaceport hotel, but Chris went with them to the launching pad. There flight 279 was waiting.

"Come on—if you're coming," one of the ship's officers called from the hatch. Chris' shook hands with his three friends and watched them enter the lift that carried them up to the hatch. One by one they stepped through, Tony being the last, and he gave a cheery wave of the hand before disappearing into the ferry. Chris turned to a waiting jeep and was driven away to the spaceport buildings, from which he could watch the ship's blast-off.

Sir Billy joined his Deputy in front of the long narrow window of specially strong glass.

"I wonder if they'll find anything?" he murmured, as he and Chris stood watching the ship some two miles away.

"If they don't, it won't be for the want of trying," Chris replied in a low voice. "What will you do if they fail?"

"They mustn't fail," the Director said grimly. "If they do, and if these disappearances continue, it could mean the closing of the lunar base."

Inside the ferry the three astronauts were waiting for the thrust to die away. At last it ceased and the ferry was now accelerating towards the Moon at 1 G. Because everything was very much the same as on Earth, the passengers were able to partake of meals just as they did in the aircraft. It was far better, Tony reflected, than the spacemeals they had had to contend with when sailing weightlessly on some long voyage.

The good old knife and fork were better every time than the squeeze pack and tubes of the early days.

“Lunar City coming up! Position your seats.”

The voice of the ship’s captain announced the approaching end of the journey. Obediently they all pressed buttons on the arms of their seats, which slid down until they were almost lying in them.

In a few minutes the pressure had gone and an audible sigh of relief went round the cabin. It wouldn’t be long now before flight 279 touched down on the landing pad two miles from Lunar City.

The Captain set the ship down in a highly professional manner. There was scarcely a bump as the ferry’s landing legs touched the concrete. Everyone could relax and move about as they waited for the compulsory thirty minutes to elapse to allow the landing pad to cool. The passengers, including Tony, Serge and Morrey, were assembling their hand baggage ready for their transfer to the landing truck.

“The truck is on its way,” the Captain’s voice announced at last, and a slight noise heralded the arrival of the landing truck as it backed up to the cabin hatch.

Two members of the ferry’s crew began the task of clamping the truck to the ferry by tightening eight wheels spaced around the hatch. When all these were fully screwed, the truck and the ferry would be sealed hermetically together. Then the two crewmen would open the ferry’s hatch whilst the attendant in the truck would open a similar hatch into the cabin of the vehicle.

Only half of the ferry’s passengers could be accommodated at a time in the landing truck, but the three astronauts were in the first batch. As the crewmen swung back the hatch Tony could see the inner door belonging to the truck. A few seconds later, this too was swung back, revealing a smiling attendant, waiting to greet the latest arrivals to Lunar City.

The air pressure in the ferry and the landing truck were the

same, so the passengers just had to step through the hatches taking their hand baggage with them. How easy this was compared with the early days, when everyone had to put on a cumbersome spacesuit and walk over the rough ground to the airlock leading to the City! Tony, Serge and Morrey sat on one of the benches running along each side of the truck's cabin while they waited for the other passengers to come aboard. When the first load was complete the attendant carefully closed the airtight hatch and the huge truck drew away from the ferry.

The truck began to rumble forward on caterpillar tracks. A smooth road had been constructed between the landing pad and Lunar City, so that they were able to move at a fair pace. Within ten minutes they were slowing down as the hidden driver guided the huge vehicle towards the airlock. It stopped, started again, and finally came to rest accurately in position.

There was a stir among the passengers as they again gathered their cases together. The attendant moved to the hatch and unlatched the fastenings one by one. The hatch swung outwards and Tony caught a glimpse of the chamber beyond. One after another the passengers filed through the hatch and waited inside the airlock chamber. When all were inside the attendant inside the truck closed his door and two uniformed men did the same with the airlock door. Tony knew that the truck would be drawing away to collect the second half of the ferry's passengers. He was now well and truly inside Lunar City.

There was excited chatter between the new arrivals as they waited to be passed, one by one, through the reception office.

"Didn't expect to see you back here," one of the waiting scientists said to Morrey. "This is small beer to you."

"Oh, I don't know, Bill," Morrey smiled back. "It's nice to visit the friends next door sometimes."

"On a special job?" Bill asked.

"Just a few reports that the Director wants," Morrey explained, and the scientists seemed satisfied.

In the waiting-room was a large diagram of the lunar base,

and those people who hadn't been on the Moon before were studying it eagerly.

Basically Lunar City consisted of a series of large plastic domes, one in the centre, and eight others around it in the form of a circle. The Central Dome, which housed the administration, was connected to each of the others by long plastic tubes or corridors, much in the form of the spokes of a wheel. The eight outer domes had a connecting corridor running between them, forming the rim of the great wheel.

The domes themselves were of immensely strong material that was almost opaque. Actually each dome and corridor consisted of an inner and outer shell. This was to minimize the possibility of damage by meteorite. If a small meteorite succeeded in puncturing the outer shell the gas which filled the space in between immediately sealed the hole. Only if a fairly large object struck a dome would both shells be penetrated. Then the damaged dome or corridor would be automatically sealed off from the rest of Lunar City, and great pumps would force in air to replace that sucked out through the puncture. There were always technicians in each part of the City who were highly efficient in putting emergency patches on the hole.

Tony wandered up to the diagram and refreshed his memory of the geography of this vast, artificial complex. Two of the perimeter domes were permanently blacked out. These were the dormitories in which all the staff slept. The human body still required its ration of sleep in darkness during the long lunar days. In two of the domes were huge shallow tanks in which green plants were growing. When harvested and processed, these provided a welcome addition to the City's fresh food supply. It also reduced the amount of food that the ferries had to bring in to maintain the lunar base.

Though each of the domes and connecting corridors had air-recycling plants, which removed carbon dioxide and returned the oxygen, one of the domes was devoted to manufacturing oxygen. This was done by reducing certain lunar rocks which had a high content of the gas. Thus fresh supplies were always available and the base was self-supporting.

From the chart Tony could see that of the remaining three domes one was devoted to recreational purposes for the staff, and the others housed masses of scientific apparatus for the many studies that were being pursued. But the large central dome, the hub of this great man-made wheel, was the most important part of the whole base.

It was in the central hub that the huge telescope was housed, a telescope that was able to penetrate into far greater depths of the Universe than any terrestrial one could do. This was the telescope that had revealed vast numbers of new stars and galaxies, and it would be fully employed for a century in exploring the new stretches of the Universe that it had exposed. The Central Dome, too, was the nerve centre of the whole base. It housed the administrative offices and the communication facilities.

3

Commander Cooper himself came to collect the astronauts from the waiting-room—which rather surprised them and the several other people who were also there.

“Glad you’ve come to iron out the bugs in some of our equipment,” the Commander said heartily as he shook hands. He was a thick-set man with greying hair brushed straight back. An old injury to his left eyelid made his eyes seem half-closed, but Morrey knew from previous experience that very little escaped his piercing gaze.

Bugs in their equipment? Tony wondered what on earth the man was on about. Then it came to him in a flash. The Commander had said this for the benefit of the other people in the waiting-room.

A broad grin spread over Tony’s face.

“We’ll do our best to straighten you out, sir,” he said, as it came to his turn to shake hands.

The Commander led them out of the waiting-room, which, with the airlock, was naturally on the outer edge of the dome. They went along a passage, with closed doors on each side, into a large central hall. Tony was able to look up to the top of the dome some two hundred feet above. Because the dome was shielded from the intense solar glare, artificial lights high up helped with the illumination.

Commander Cooper led his followers along another office-lined passage and through a door into the corridor leading to the Central Dome. This door, Tony knew, would close automatically if there were a loss of air pressure in either the dome or the corridor. It was tested periodically, as were all other doors; air was pumped out to simulate damage to the outer wall. The corridor, twenty feet in diameter, was lined with lockers, storage bins, and all kinds of equipment. At the far end was a second door which was also open. The Commander led his visitors through it.

“Will you want to see your quarters first, or would you prefer to come to my office?” he asked them.

The three glanced at each other for a moment and Morrey spoke for all of them.

“We’d like to go to your office at once, sir, if you don’t mind. We can go to our quarters later.”

“Very well. I’ll lay on something to eat while we talk.”

Commander Cooper led the way to a door which bore his name, drew a key from his pocket and let them all in. It wasn’t a large room, and what space there was seemed mainly occupied by television sets, tape recorders and filing cabinets.

There were only three chairs, including the Commander’s, in the room, so as the others all seated themselves, Tony squatted on the floor and waited for Commander Cooper to begin.

“How much do you know?” the Commander asked. Morrey repeated all that Sir Billy and Chris had told them. When the recital was over the Commander was silent for a moment. Then he said abruptly:

“There was another disappearance twelve hours ago.”

“Five!” Morrey exclaimed, and the Commander nodded without speaking.

The astronauts digested this piece of information. They could see how serious the situation was. The disappearance of no less than five persons would be far harder to conceal than

that of one or two. Surely their friends were asking what had happened to them. As if in confirmation of their thoughts the Commander spoke.

“I can’t keep it a secret any longer,” he said.

“Not for, say, forty-eight hours?” Morrey asked.

“Maybe,” the Commander conceded, “but no longer.”

“Then let’s get down to business,” Morrey suggested. “Will you fill us in with the details of what’s happened.”

In answer Commander Cooper turned to a strong metal box, took a key from his pocket and unlocked it. He removed a file of papers and placed it on the desk before him. The astronauts could see that they were in manuscript, not typed. Evidently the Commander had kept his report even from his secretary.

“The first disappearance took place five weeks ago,” he began. “Mr. Rimmer, chief radio astronomer, informed me that one of his men, named Andrew Barnett, hadn’t reported for duty. This was unusual, for Barnett was a keen worker, an enthusiastic astronomer, and one who had been earmarked for early promotion. ‘Was he in sick bay?’ Rimmer asked.

“I took a quick look through the medic’s daily report, which I get at 0.900 hours, expecting to find that Barnett was under their care. But his name wasn’t mentioned. I told Rimmer I would make inquiries and let him know. In spite of his good record, Barnett would be subject to severe disciplinary action unless he had a first-class excuse. For the next hour I was busy. Then I decided to go myself to Barnett’s quarters and give him a wiggling. I liked the fellow, and was sorry I had to take such action.

“Before going to his dormitory, which is in Number Two, I passed through the recreation rooms—not that I expected to see him, for he was far too conscientious to skip duty. He wasn’t there, of course. Neither was he in his cabin in Number Two.

“Now I was getting both annoyed and worried. Lunar City isn’t a place where anyone can hide. Nor are there many places where someone can be taken ill and not be discovered. Had the

fellow gone outside and failed to return? I sent for the logs of each of the airlocks, and sure enough Barnett had passed out through the north-east lock, but hadn't returned."

"Did you send out to look for him?" Tony inquired.

"Of course," the Commander snapped. "I had to take immediate action. According to the log-book of the northeast airlock, Barnett had passed through twenty-two hours before. That meant that, at best, he could only have sufficient oxygen for a further two hours. Now, we have three parties of six men each, who are specially trained to make quick searches of the surrounding area. Occasionally one of our fellows on outside work gets stranded, and we have to fetch him in quickly. I alerted the team on duty and they went out, hot foot, to try and find the missing man.

"Four hours later they returned without discovering Barnett, his body, or any of his equipment. Because the search parties are equipped with lunar jeeps, they had covered a far wider area than anyone on foot could have done. Barnett had truly disappeared!"

"What happened then?" Tony asked.

"Normally I would have alerted a second search party," Cooper replied, "but the disappearance was so disturbing that I decided, there and then, to keep the knowledge to the bare minimum of people. After a rest the first party went out again, but with the same result. I bound them all to secrecy."

"So you're quite confident Barnett isn't lying up in some crater or behind some ridge?" asked Serge.

"Absolutely. Our rescue teams are trained to search quickly and thoroughly. I am quite certain that poor Barnett isn't out there."

"And the others?" Morrey wanted to know.

"More or less the same pattern. The second man to vanish was Charles Dean. He was a geologist and frequently made outside excursions to collect samples of rock and soil. He'd gone on one of his trips and didn't come back. I sent out the

same search party that failed to find Barnett. They failed again.”

“I suppose that by this time you thought something unusual was happening,” Tony observed.

“You can say that again,” agreed the Commander. “Apart from the loss of these two very fine young men, the whole thing was rather frightening. How, I asked myself a hundred times, can two people vanish without trace? It’s the greatest mystery I’ve ever come across—and I don’t like mysteries.”

“Didn’t you stop other people from going out alone?” asked Morrey.

“Not at that time,” replied Commander Cooper. “It would have advertised the fact that something strange was happening. Men have always gone outside the City alone if they wished to. A veto would have looked very odd.”

“But you have now?”

“I’ve been compelled to do so. I’ve had to find all sorts of excuses which I can’t keep up for much longer.”

“What about the other three?” inquired Serge.

“The same pattern,” sighed the Commander. “Ed Fisher and John Harrap had gone on recreational walks and never returned. Ian Jacks, a seismologist, went to visit one of his instruments and never got there.”

“How do you know that?” Tony asked quickly.

“Because he’d gone to fetch in a paper roll from the recorder. The search party found the roll still in the instrument.”

“You’ve used the same search party each time?”

“Yes. They understand the situation and are doing all they can to help me.”

“And how many people know about these happenings?” Morrey asked.

“Including myself—twelve,” Commander Cooper answered. “That includes the six members of the rescue team. I’m certain no one else knows.”

“But are not people suspecting something?” Serge inquired. “Surely the disappearance of five men hasn’t gone unnoticed? How have you covered up for that?”

“I’ve gone about as far as I can to preserve the secret. When Barnett and Dean vanished I gave it out that both had been transferred to another section. As for the other three, it’s assumed that they are in sick bay.”

“But even so, aren’t their friends wondering what’s happened to them? Surely they’ve been missed from their dormitories even if they were supposed to be working elsewhere in Lunar City? And haven’t the friends of Fisher, Harrap and Jacks asked to see them in sick bay?” Tony asked.

“Now you’ve really put your finger on my dilemma,” the Commander admitted. “Though almost all of the two thousand or so people in Lunar City do sleep in the official dormitories, there are one or two—including myself—who sleep elsewhere. Sometimes a man has to sleep near his job. Barnett and Dean are assumed to have been moved to such a task.”

“But their personal belongings—haven’t they given the show away?” Tony wanted to know.

“My deputy removed them secretly,” Commander Cooper replied. “They’re all locked up in one of the storerooms. As for visiting the sick bay, I’ve had to ban that on the pretext that there’s a suspected infectious case inside. The Medical Officer has had to be told the secret and he’s co-operating fully. But this can’t go on much longer.”

“Don’t you really think that it would have been better to have been perfectly frank right from the start?” Morrey asked. “Couldn’t you tell everyone what was happening?”

“In any community down on Earth I would agree with you,” Commander Cooper replied firmly. “But with a community of two thousand living under the artificial conditions we have here, a different judgement is required. Our psychologists tell us—and I can confirm this from my own experience—that even trivial events here can be magnified and distorted. Few days pass but what I have to sort out a problem that would never

have arisen on Earth. No. I am convinced that if news of these disappearances became generally known in Lunar City, we should have to close down the base completely within a few days.”

“As bad as that?” Morrey breathed. “Then we are in trouble.”

“I’ve issued an order that no one is to leave the City alone. It hasn’t been questioned yet, and I haven’t had to give a reason for it. But it won’t be long before some of our bright boys will want to know if I think there are bogeymen outside.”

“It’s a frightful thing to ask, I know,” Tony brought out suddenly, “but do you really trust your search squad? I mean, if they were criminals they could murder their victims and report to you that they hadn’t found anything, couldn’t they?”

For a moment he thought the Commander was going to lose his temper at this question. But he managed to restrain himself and merely barked out, “I trust all my men, here, completely.”

“I’m sure you do,” Tony persisted, “and I’m only putting my question for the sake of argument. Suppose—only suppose—this search squad were responsible. They could have killed all five men, couldn’t they?”

“I refuse to discuss the possibility,” Commander Cooper snapped. “I’m quite sure that your suggestion is fantastic.”

“The whole situation is fantastic,” Morrey cut in. “We propose investigating ALL possibilities.”

4

There was a strained silence for a few seconds. At last the Commander seemed to accept the situation. He squared his shoulders and his chin came forward noticeably.

“Very well,” he snapped. “You’d better start on me.”

“I was hoping you would say that,” Morrey said quickly. “It will be a formality, of course, but it had better be done. The sooner we eliminate you, sir, the sooner we can start working our way down.”

“Might I suggest you go to the canteen and get something to eat. I’ll be ready to answer your questions in an hour’s time. Don’t worry, I won’t run away,” the Commander said with a heavy attempt at humour.

It was true that the three young men would welcome a meal. Besides, a visit to the canteen would give them the opportunity of seeing more of Lunar City and observing its inhabitants.

The canteen was situated inside the dome devoted to recreational purposes. It was well sign-posted for the benefit of the constant stream of newcomers to the lunar base. On their way Morrey and his two companions passed, and were greeted by, some score or so of the base staff.

Serge was the most silent of the little party. Not that he was unsociable, but he was listening to, and looking at, the base staff very keenly. He wanted to discover whether any of them

suspected why he and his friends had come to Lunar City—or if they knew anything about the disappearances. In the end he formed the opinion that Commander Cooper had so far been successful in concealing the alarming happenings at the lunar base.

At last the meal was over, and Morrey excused his companions and himself.

“We’ve got to have another briefing session with the Old Man about the trouble with the atomic generator,” he explained. “Hope to see you all later on.”

So it was that the three astronauts found themselves seated once more in the base commander’s office. They were about to start the job for which they had really been sent to Earth’s satellite.

Commander Cooper seemed to have regained complete possession of himself. Though nothing could wipe away the signs of strain he’d undergone during the last few weeks, he seemed more relaxed and cheerful. Perhaps this was because he felt some of the responsibility had fallen on to the shoulders of these three young men. Or was it an act put on to impress them? Tony wondered.

“I’ll answer any questions and show you any documents you wish,” the Commander said lightly as he settled into his own chair. Another chair had been produced, so all the astronauts were seated facing him. Morrey was in the centre.

“Under the U.N.E.X.A. code, everyone is innocent until proved guilty,” Morrey began. “However, as far as you’re concerned, sir, would you mind if we reversed this? May we assume that you are guilty of causing these five men to disappear, and throw the onus on you to prove that you had nothing to do with it?”

“Why do you want to do it like that?” the Commander asked, puzzled.

“We want to make it harder for you, sir, so that once we are satisfied, we can work more easily, not having to look over our

shoulders every time that you are around,” Morrey replied.

“I see,” the Commander replied thoughtfully. “Well, I think I can prove my innocence very quickly. Would I have reported the matter to Control, otherwise?”

“You might have done. You might have done it to cover yourself. You might also be putting on an act about being upset,” said Morrey evenly.

It was obvious that these suggestions had startled the Commander. His mouth fell open, but he quickly controlled himself.

“Very well,” he snapped. “I can prove that when each of those men vanished outside the City, I was inside.”

“That would certainly be a help,” Morrey conceded. “But how will you do that?”

“Here are the confidential records of the disappearances,” the Commander replied, pushing forward the file they had seen before. “This will tell you the precise moment when each man went through an airlock, and the last messages that came over their helmet radios. If you examine the logs of all the airlocks, you’ll see that on none of these occasions was I outside.”

“We’ll do that,” said Morrey. “Will you send for them.”

The Commander picked up a phone and gave a crisp order.

“My Deputy will bring them in,” he announced. “Meanwhile, are there any questions you would like me to answer?”

“When are you due to complete your tour of duty, Commander?” asked Serge.

“In another thirty-one days,” came the reply. “But I may have to stay on if this job isn’t cleared up.”

“Do you want to stay on?”

“I do not! I have a wife and young family whom I’m longing to see.”

“When did you last have a medical check-up, a thorough one, I mean?” Morrey inquired.

“Well, everyone has a routine check every week,” the Commander told them. “If there is anything wrong, a more detailed examination is carried out at once. Otherwise a really big examination is made once every four weeks. I’m due for mine next week.”

“Can we see your last report? Just routine of course we’ll want to see many others as well,” Morrey said.

“I’ve been ordered to show you everything,” Commander Cooper said, “so that includes medical records. I don’t think you’ll find I’ve cracked up and gone mad under the strain,” he concluded, with an attempt at a smile.

Before any other questions could be asked there was a knock on the door. A slim, pretty girl of medium height entered carrying a sheaf of papers.

“Gentlemen, may I introduce my Deputy, Vice-Commandant Danielle Larue,” Commander Cooper said formally.

Though women were some ten per cent of the staff in Lunar City, the astronauts had never expected that the Vice-Commandant would be a girl. They rose from their chairs in momentary confusion, which gave Commander Cooper some inward satisfaction.

“Delighted to meet you,” said the Vice-Commandant, with the faintest of French accents. “I know your names already. You are Mr. Kant, you are Mr. Smyslov, and you are Mr. Hale,” she said, naming the three astronauts correctly.

“We’re very happy to meet you, too,” Morrey said on behalf of all three.

“Here are the reports from all the airlocks,” the Vice-Commandant said with a faint smile as she recalled the astronauts to their task.

“Er—thank you, Mademoiselle,” a slightly pink Morrey stammered. “If you’ll leave them, we’ll look through them later.”

“You will want to see me later? No?” Danielle asked.

“Oh, we’ll want to see you, certainly,” Tony said with enthusiasm, and with a smile the girl withdrew.

“If you’re ready, we’ll have a look at the log sheets,” Commander Cooper said as soon as they were alone. He thumbed through them and drew several out. “These are the sheets that record the exits of the five men. I’ll put them in order—Barnett, Dean, Fisher, Harrap and Jacks.”

The Commander remained silent while the three young men read through every one of the log sheets. It was plain that he had made very few excursions—two only, in fact, since the mystery had started. Both these journeys outside the City were well documented, and his exact times of exits and return were recorded. Neither journey was closer than twenty-four hours to those of the unfortunate young men.

“Does that let me out?” the Commander asked, when the last of the sheets had been read.

“Almost—but not quite,” Morrey smiled. “We’ll still have to satisfy ourselves that you couldn’t have manipulated those entries on the log sheets.”

“You don’t take chances, do you?” the Commander sighed. “Perhaps you’ll let me know when I’m an honest man again.”

“We’ll do that. Meanwhile we’ll keep these log sheets if we may,” Morrey said. “Can you fix us up with a room of some sort?”

“I wonder if you’d care to make use of an empty cabin in your dormitory?” the Commander said. “It’s next to your own, so it would be convenient for you.”

“That seems fine. Can we go there?”

“Of course. I’ll get someone to show you to your quarters. It wouldn’t do for me to be running about too much with you.”

“We had better start looking at your algae tanks and your new atomic generator. That’s what we are supposed to be here for,” Serge pointed out.

“That’s true. The new algae tanks are in Number Two Dome.

The generator is outside, half a mile beyond Number Four.”

“That’s where the oxygen plant is, in Number Four Dome, isn’t it?” asked Tony.

“Quite right. And it consumes as much power as all the other domes put together. That’s why we’ve put the generator fairly close to it.”

“That will be useful,” observed Morrey. “It will give us an excuse for wandering about outside whenever we wish.”

“But only in that area,” the Commander reminded them.

“Oh, but we must explore possible sites for other generators,” Morrey smiled. “You know how your demands for power are constantly increasing?”

“I—er—must insist on your conforming to my general orders,” Commander Cooper declared. “At least two of you together. No more single excursions—not even for you.”

“Do you think we are in any special danger?” Serge asked.

“How can I tell? I don’t know what’s happening, I don’t know who, or what, is responsible. I don’t know why. Until I know the answers to those questions, how can I say whether you are in any more danger, or less, than the rest of us?”

There was a knock on the Commander’s office door. An orderly appeared, and the Commander told him to show the astronauts to their quarters.

“Very good, sir. In Number Two Dormitory they are. Will they be requiring the spare cabin?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Kant wants somewhere to compile and store their reports. U.N.E.X.A. doesn’t send three such well known astronauts to Lunar City on an inspection job without expecting masses of paper in return,” the Commander said as lightly as he could. So the orderly wasn’t in the secret.

“See you later,” Commander Cooper said as the astronauts left his office in the wake of the orderly.

In contrast with the corridors and other domes, the

dormitory area was one of comparative quiet. Heavily shielded from the light outside, it depended on artificial illumination.

Rows of cabins, each allotted to a single member of the staff, formed concentric circles. Each was simply furnished with a bed, table, chairs and lockers. It was towards a block of four, with no names on the doors, that their guide led them.

“Hope they’ll suit,” he smiled. “Not quite the Hilton Hotel.”

Tony sat on a bed and looked around.

“Where do we ring for room service?” he inquired innocently. “Do we put our shoes outside for cleaning?”

“You’ll be lucky,” their guide grinned back. “If you want anything, or the boss wants you, there’s this telephone beside the bed. Now would you like to see your ‘office’?”

“Lead on,” Morrey said. “I presume all three of our cabins are the same?”

“That’s it. We’ll put your names on the doors when you’ve settled who sleeps where,” the guide replied. “Your office will be different.”

When they went to it they found that the bed had already been moved out, and there were extra chairs and lockers.

“When you’ve had a look round, let us know what else you want,” the man said.

When he had gone they decided between themselves which cabin each would occupy, and even as they made their decisions, two more orderlies came in carrying their personal baggage. For the next thirty minutes they were busy stowing away their gear, and it was arranged that they should gather in the “office” when each had completed his task.

Serge was the last to arrive, for he arranged his belongings more meticulously than his companions.

“Wondered if you wanted any help,” Tony grumbled.

“No, thank you,” the Russian smiled. “At least I shall know where to find everything.”

Before Tony could snort a reply, Morrey chipped in. The door was closed and they were quite alone.

“Well, what do you make of things so far?” he asked.

Tony suddenly held up his hand for silence and, to the astonishment of the other two, he began to examine the walls, ceiling, telephone, furniture, and everything inside the office. At last he was satisfied.

“Just a precaution,” he grinned. “We’re not bugged.”

“Did you expect it?” asked Serge.

“Well, let’s suppose that the Commander is the villain, it would be useful for him to eavesdrop, wouldn’t it?” Tony pointed out. “Or anyone else for that matter.”

“So there are no listening devices? We can talk in absolute privacy?” Morrey asked.

“There are none as far as I can see,” Tony replied. “I’m pretty sure I would have spotted it if there had been one.”

“Very well. I’ll repeat my question perhaps more directly. Do you think Commander Cooper is responsible?” Morrey asked bluntly.

“Not on the evidence so far,” Serge said cautiously.

“So you’re not a hundred per cent sure?”

“Almost. But I would suggest we don’t take him into our complete confidence—at least for the moment,” Serge replied thoughtfully. “As soon as we get a lead as to who or what is the cause, then we can discuss it with him.”

“What about our real reports to Sir Billy and Chris?” Tony asked. “Remember we have to use his scrambler.”

“Well, we don’t have anything to report yet, do we?” Morrey replied. “So there is no need to use the scrambler at this stage.”

“What’s the next step?” asked Tony.

“Let’s interview everyone who is in the secret—particularly the search party,” Morrey answered. “But we shall have to be

cautious if other people are not to wonder what's going on."

"Let's begin with the Vice-Commandant," Tony suggested enthusiastically. "She seems quite nice."

"Never be deceived by outward appearances," Serge advised severely.

"You don't mean Mademoiselle Larue might be guilty, do you?" gasped Tony.

"There—you see what I mean," laughed Serge. "Just because she's nice-looking doesn't mean that she's less likely to be responsible than the Commander."

"But a woman!" Tony said, with a shake of his head. Still, he supposed they must go through with the routine.

5

Tony and Serge went to sleep very quickly, for it had been a tiring day and they had been under some strain. But Morrey found himself unable to sleep, and he always refused—on principle—to seek any assistance. So he tossed and turned as the slow hours dragged by. Inevitably he turned over in his mind all that he knew about the mystery that had brought him and his companions to the Moon. Was there anything that had escaped him, any line he should pursue? In the privacy and darkness of his own bedroom Morrey had to admit to himself that he honestly hadn't a clue what to do. Oh, they would go on making discreet inquiries, of course, and they would explore the vicinity of Lunar City for themselves. But unless something unexpected was revealed, he would be at a complete loss to know how to proceed after that.

Surely, though, five able-bodied men cannot vanish into thin air! Morrey smiled to himself as he used an Earthly expression. More correctly he should be expressing doubt—here on the Moon—that they could vanish in a vacuum.

Commander Cooper had assured him that after each event the whole area had been searched with the utmost care. All possible crevices and craters had been searched, all boulders and rocks had been examined, but not the slightest trace of any of the five had ever been found. From the information that he had, Morrey believed that none of the missing men could have walked very far from Lunar City. None had been using a lunar

jeep, which was permitted only to people on official expeditions. And the lack of radio communication, too, was puzzling. Why had none of them been able to give some warning of disaster? Surely someone must have picked up an exclamation, a gasp of surprise, even a cry. But none had been heard.

What about Commander Cooper himself? In a way Morrey regretted having to subject the Commander to the same questioning as everyone else. He was quite certain in his own mind that the man knew as little about the events as Morrey did himself. The suggestion that the Commander could have been responsible, and could have put on an act, was purely hypothetical. It was a good job that he had reacted calmly. Morrey trusted that Tony and Serge were as convinced of the Commander's innocence as he was.

As he wrestled and fought in torment over the question, Morrey woke up!

For a few seconds he struggled to sort out reality. Then he knew that he was here, in Lunar City, with his problem still unsolved. The dreams and fantasies of his restless night had vanished. He lay in the dimly lit cabin, fully conscious, and painfully aware that the mystery seemed quite insoluble.

A knock on the door prompted him to call out, and Tony, fully dressed, came in and sat on the bed.

"I've had a rotten night," he confessed. "I think this thing has given me nightmares. I was glad to wake up and find that I hadn't vanished. How about you?"

"Me the same," Morrey smiled. "I think this mystery has made a great impression on all of us. Still—we mustn't let it get us down or we'll never find the solution."

"What's the programme for today?" Tony asked.

"Well, we've got to devote the first part of the day to the task we are supposed to be here for. If we go outside to have a look at the generator, we can perhaps keep our eyes open for any clues."

After they had eaten, the three astronauts went to the Commander's office. However, the Commander was away in one of the outer domes on a routine inspection and one of his girl clerks invited them to await his return. It was while they were sitting as patiently as they could that someone else came into the Commander's office. It was the Vice-Commandant, Mademoiselle Larue. The three young men rose from their chairs and smiled their pleasure.

"Greetings, gentlemen," the Vice-Commandant called. "You see we in Lunar City no longer say 'good morning' or 'good evening'. Because lunar days and nights have no relation to earthly ones, we can hardly use the same terms. Also because we all work on a shift system it might be evening for a man going OH duty, but morning for someone just about to start. It saves complications if we just say 'greetings'."

"Greetings!" chorused the three astronauts. This was certainly a new custom since they had last been on the Moon. But whatever was the latest fashion in Lunar City, it would be a pleasure to chat with the good-looking Vice-Commandant.

"What is your programme?" Mlle Larue asked.

"Well—er—we're going outside to look at the generator," Morrey replied a trifle uncomfortably.

"Ah—yes. That's why you're here, isn't it?" the young lady smiled pleasantly. "But what about your other task?"

"Not much progress yet, I'm afraid," Morrey admitted ruefully. "Perhaps we can have a talk with you when we return."

"It will be a pleasure," the Vice-Commandant said, with a smile so dazzling that Tony felt it was artificial. "But now you are going to the new generator?"

"That's the idea," Morrey agreed. "Can you get us fixed up?"

The girl didn't reply directly, but picked up a phone and gave some orders. Then she cupped her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Which exit will you use? One that some of the unfortunate men left by?" she asked, turning to the little group.

“No, we’ll leave by the one nearest the generator,” Morrey replied. “It will look strange if we don’t.”

“Very well. Number Four,” Mlle Larue said crisply, and repeated the number into the phone.

She’d scarcely put it down when an orderly came to conduct the astronauts to one of the dressing-rooms. With a word of thanks to the Vice-Commandant, Morrey led his companions after the orderly.

They marched through the vast central dome where the astronomers held sway, Several of the men perched on one of the great instruments called down a cheery greeting and the astronauts waved back. Then they went along the corridor to the outer dome, where they followed the orderly to one of the dressing-rooms.

“I expect they will be ready for you,” the orderly smiled as he stepped aside for Morrey and his friends to enter.

They were. The Vice-Commandant had seen to that. Two dressers were awaiting each of the astronauts, and even their spacesuits had been placed out ready. Soon they were going through the familiar routine of dressing in the heavy suits. At least, on Earth they would have been heavy, but under the light lunar gravity they weighed only one-sixth of their weight on Earth. In less than ten minutes, with the expert assistance of the dressers, and complete with oxygen packs on their backs, the three were ready to make for the airlock.

“Will you want transport?” another orderly asked, as they stood outside the airlock chamber.

“How far away is the generator?” Serge asked.

“About half a mile in a direct line, but you have to go half as far again to avoid craters and rocks,” the man told them. “Would you like a buggy?”

“Yes,” Tony said.

“No,” Morrey said flatly. “The exercise will do us good.”

“Who wants exercise?” Tony grumbled, but a sharp look

from his leader silenced any further protest.

They moved into the chamber and secured their helmets. Then they tested their oxygen supply and helmet radio. All was working well, and Morrey gave the sign for the procedure to begin. The door back into Number Four Dome was sealed tightly, and a pump began to evacuate the air in the chamber. This was both to conserve the precious oxygen, and also to facilitate the opening of the outer door, which would be much easier when the pressure each side of it was more nearly equal. A red light flashed on. The outer door was about to open.

The three astronauts walked away from the airlock. With the peculiar and deliberate gait that everyone used for walking on the Moon, they began to move towards the generator they were supposed to inspect. Because they knew that their helmet radios would also be received in Lunar City, they had decided to avoid any reference to the real purpose of their visit. Instead they chatted on as if they had no sinister mystery to solve.

“I remember when Chris and I came here first,” Tony reminisced. “I’m afraid I misbehaved myself.”

“You came here for a cure, didn’t you?” Morrey asked.

“That’s right,” Tony agreed. “I had something the matter with my blood, and the medics said they couldn’t do anything about it. They had given me up, when one of them suggested I should have an extra special dose of radiation. So Chris brought me here as a passenger. What did you two think of me then?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Morrey grinned. “He was a perfect pest, wasn’t he, Serge?”

“But I’ve made up for it since, haven’t I?” Tony protested, and his two companions freely agreed.

“Anyway, I was cured,” Tony went on, mollified. “But I’ll never forget how scared I was on that first trip.”

“I understand that U.N.E.X.A. is going to set up a Medical Centre as the next development of Lunar City,” Serge observed. “So that other people will be able to benefit from the peculiar conditions here.”

Even as Serge spoke, the same thought flashed through all their minds. Unless they could find out why five men had vanished, there would soon be no Lunar City. Once the news became known, if there was no explanation, U.N.E.X.A. would be forced to close down the base. The chilling thought kept them silent for a few seconds. Then they hurriedly resumed their chatter.

“What are these?” Tony asked later, indicating a line of red posts. They were set at intervals of about ten yards, and seemed to run between Lunar City and the generator to which they were now drawing near. There was another parallel line of posts a hundred yards away.

“We mustn’t go past these,” Serge said quickly. “These two lines of posts mark the path of the energy beam between the generator and the City.”

“Power is transmitted from the generator along a laser beam and not by the old-fashioned and wasteful method of a cable,” Morrey added. “The only trouble is you have to keep out of the path of the beam.”

“What would happen if anyone strayed into it?” Tony asked.

“It could be dangerous,” Morrey replied, “but I advise you not to try.”

Tony nearly stumbled as the thought entered his head in a blinding flash. Of course! These men had wandered into the path of the beam and had been obliterated! Yes, that was it. He had the hardest work in the world to stop from bursting out with his idea.

As the trio made their way towards their objective—well outside the danger zone—Tony was confident that he’d hit upon the solution of their problem. Somehow each of the five men had unfortunately strayed into the danger area. They had stepped into the path of the power beam and had been obliterated.

Why had no one thought of it before? Surely the fact that all the disappearances had taken place since the 279 had begun

operating was significant? Yet neither the Commander nor Serge or Morrey, had seen the obvious. Tony wanted to turn round, return to Lunar City and go at once to their quarters so that he could share his inspiration with his friends. He wanted to blurt out that he, Tony, had solved the mystery that had brought them all the way from Earth.

It wouldn't be necessary to close down Lunar City. All that they would have to do would be to put up wire fences each side of the power beam to stop anyone else from straying into it. Then there wouldn't be any more vanishings. Simple!

The 279 generator had a smooth exterior, except for the projector which sent out the intense beam of energy back to Lunar City. It was almost twelve feet high and twenty in diameter. It could be entered by a sliding door which was marked. Morrey pushed the handle which slid the door aside. Interior light let them see the fairly simple apparatus that generated such vast quantities of power, and they examined it with interest.

Tony was particularly fascinated, for he hadn't seen one of this particular type before. Indeed, the 279 had been specially developed for providing electricity wherever Man set up a base in the solar system. If it was successful, it would considerably assist the future colonization of the other parts of the Moon, and perhaps of Mars, too.

"Another five minutes and we'll be on our way," Morrey announced. He was surprised when he found how long they had been examining the generator. So they all had a last quick look round before stepping out into the glare of the lunar evening.

"Are you all right?" Serge asked Tony.

He could see that the young astronaut was acting a little strangely—apparently urging his companions to get back to Lunar City as quickly as possible.

"Yes, I'm all right," Tony replied over his radio. "A trifle thirsty, that's all."

He couldn't very well reveal to anyone who might be

listening to them that he'd solved the great lunar mystery, that he'd discovered what had happened to the five men who had vanished. He must tell his friends in the privacy of their "office".

"You sound cheerful, Tony," Morrey called over their radios as they were approaching the airlock into Lunar City.

"He does," agreed the voice of Serge. "He's been singing all the way from the generator."

"I wouldn't exactly call it singing," Morrey said. "To me it seemed like the creak of a rusty hinge."

"Jealousy will get you nowhere," Tony protested with mock indignation. "I'm happy because I can't see your two faces."

6

They reached the airlock, and the outer door opened, for their approach had been observed. Soon they were stepping out into the dome, where orderlies were waiting to remove their equipment. Commander Cooper was also there.

“Sorry I missed you before,” the Commander said, as soon as the astronauts’ helmets were removed. “What did you think of our generator?”

Tony was about to burst out that the generator was all right, but safety precautions were definitely not, but he held back.

“It’s a new type to me,” Morrey replied. “I’d like to have some figures about it. Is it running to capacity?”

“Almost. We can increase it another ten per cent, but we think it better to let it run at less than maximum. It’s giving us all the power we need.”

“I’m sure it’s going to be a great asset for future communities,” Morrey declared. “I’ll be able to give a favourable report to U.N.E.X.A., I haven’t a doubt.”

“When will you be sending a report off?” the Commander asked, giving Morrey a meaningful look.

“Oh, there’s no hurry,” the leader of the astronauts replied cheerfully. He hoped that would tell the Commander he hadn’t anything to pass on about their real mission.

“You’ll want to get back to your quarters,” Commander

Cooper observed. "Can you find your way?"

"We won't get lost," Serge assured him.

"Come on then," Tony said eagerly, and Morrey gave him a quizzical look.

They made their way through corridors and the Central Dome to the dormitories and office that had been assigned to them. By common consent they went first to the office.

"I've solved it!" Tony burst out as soon as the door was shut. "It was the laser beam."

The other two looked at him in astonishment, and then, to Tony's surprise and anger, they began to smile.

"I don't see anything to grin at," he said hotly. "Remember five men have Vanished and more might go. I reckon they wandered into the path of the laser beam. Those red posts are a menace!"

Morrey and Serge were no longer smiling, but Tony could see they were not taking him seriously, and this made him even more angry.

"Don't you see, fatheads, that those chaps couldn't have noticed the warning posts. They walked into the beam and were vaporized," Tony shouted.

"Steady, Tony," Serge urged. "We can understand how you arrived at your theory, but it just isn't possible, is it, Morrey?"

The American shook his head in agreement.

"But why?" Tony burst out. "To me it seems the obvious answer."

"It does," agreed Serge, "but for one thing. The laser beam wouldn't vaporize anyone."

"What! Not with all that power packed into it? I don't believe it," Tony snorted. "There's enough energy in that beam to heat a hundred electric furnaces."

"Agreed," Morrey said, "but you've forgotten two things. The beam is roughly five feet from the ground. If what you say could

happen, then it would be the men's heads and shoulders only that would be chopped off. So what happened to the rest of them? Then again, the beam would vaporize the receiving dish if it had the power you say. I expect it would have bored a nice clean hole right through Lunar City."

Tony was aghast at his own stupidity. Of course what Morrey and Serge had said was true. It was obvious. He could kick himself for being so obtuse. And he'd thought he'd solved the whole problem! What must his friends be thinking of him now? Tony felt himself blushing scarlet with shame.

"But—but those warning posts—" he stuttered. "Don't they mean that it's dangerous to walk into the beam?"

"Oh, it's dangerous all right," Morrey admitted. "It might even be fatal. But it certainly couldn't account for the total disappearance of those five. Even if what you suggest has happened, their bodies would have been discovered. As we saw when we were out there, there isn't anywhere where they could still be concealed."

Glumly, Tony had to agree. He must accept what his two friends had said. The beam couldn't be responsible for the total elimination of five people. Then what was? They were back to square one. Indeed, it now seemed that they had never left it.

While Tony was brooding over the difficulties of their task, and his own silly mistake, Morrey was drawing up his official report on the generator. He couldn't complete it yet, but to send in an interim one would, at least, confirm what they were supposed to be in Lunar City for.

"What will we do next?" Tony steeled himself to ask Serge as Morrey scribbled away.

"I shall suggest we talk to the crew who have looked for these men," the Russian replied. "We shall want to question them very closely."

Tony was about to say that if the rescue crew were in league, they could give false reports that they had found nothing. But, in view of his previous effort, he held back his words. From now

on he'd be very careful what he said. He didn't want to make himself look a fool for a second time.

"That will do to be getting on with," Morrey said, as he put down his pen. "After we've eaten I'll get the Commander to send it in on the official channel."

"Are you quite satisfied about the Commander himself?" Serge asked.

"Oh, I think so," Morrey answered. "I cannot imagine what possible motive he would have for wiping out five colleagues. He holds a unique position here, and if U.N.E.X.A. had to close down Lunar City, there's no other similar appointment Commander Cooper could have. Besides—the record shows that he was inside Lunar City at the times when the men vanished outside."

"And Miss Larue?" Serge queried.

"I can't see Danielle being responsible either," Morrey replied a shade too warmly.

Tony could see that Morrey was getting a little uncomfortable.

"Let's eat," he suggested, as much to rescue the American as to satisfy his everlasting appetite.

"Good idea," Morrey agreed quickly. "Then I can despatch my report afterwards."

As they went to the dining hall, where there seemed to be meals available at any time, quite a number of men called out to them, for these three astronauts were known wherever Man had penetrated into Space. They chatted with several of the staff.

"I still find it hard to believe that this stuff is the scum off the algae tanks," Tony observed as he ate heartily. Ways had been found of processing the algae so that it could be made to look and taste like any kind of terrestrial food.

"Nearly as good as real steak," he added, as he munched away.

When they had finished eating the astronauts took leave of their acquaintances and made their way to the Central Dome and to the Commander's office.

"I'd like to send in the report about your generator," Morrey said. The Commander nodded.

"I'll get it off right away," he promised. "I'll instruct the operator to give it priority."

"Oh, it's not all that important," Morrey laughed. "I'll let you know when I have a top priority message."

The Commander understood perfectly.

"This is my own private transmitter we use on special occasions," he said, sliding back a panel in the wall of his office and revealing the instrument. "If you have to use it, don't forget to switch on this one." He was indicating a part of the transmitter that was labelled "Scrambler".

"Thank you. I won't," Morrey assured him. He sincerely hoped that he would need the facilities offered him by the Commander.

"We'd like to have a talk with your Number One team. Those are the chaps who have done all the searches, aren't they?" he asked.

"Yes. As I've told you, I've confined it to them. They are the only ones who have been involved and who know what's happened. I'll get them rounded up for you," Commander Cooper promised. "Will one hour's time do?"

"Fine," Morrey agreed. "We'll be back here then. Meanwhile we're going to wander about at random."

So the three astronauts spent the next fifty minutes wandering about, opening doors, asking questions.

Tony would have liked to explore the section around the receiver more fully, but several rooms were sealed off. He must remember to ask Commander Cooper what was inside.

After an hour, the three astronauts met in the Commander's

office. While they waited the Commander showed them the record cards of each member of the team. These cards gave the personal history and service record of each man, with photographs and notes on physical details. The astronauts studied these with interest.

The team included members of several nationalities, though this wasn't unusual owing to the international character of U.N.E.X.A.

"I see you've got a Chinese among them, observed.

"Yes. He's the only one in Lunar City. A good chap, as you'll see."

There was a knock at the door and the Commander looked at Morrey. Morrey nodded and the Commander called, "Come in."

It was the Number One team, the men who had looked unsuccessfully for each of the five victims. Except for a handful of officers, they were the only people in Lunar City to know what had happened. How had the knowledge affected them? The astronauts looked at them curiously.

The six men of the Number One team were waiting expectantly. They almost filled the Commander's office, which hadn't been designed for such gatherings. When the Commander wanted to call any of his men together he used one of the recreation rooms. But this was a special kind of meeting and because of its nature there was only one place in which it could be held.

"I've called you because our three friends would like to talk to you," Commander Cooper began. "They are here, on the special instructions of the Director, to investigate the disappearances. Because the situation is so critical and confidential, it has been given out that they are reporting on the Foxall oxygen plant, the 279, and the new algae tanks. However, their real task is to try and discover what is happening, and why. I want you to answer their questions fully and frankly. We've just got to clear this thing up."

"We will do our best, sir," the Chinese member of the team

said in a slightly high-pitched voice.

“Thank you, Mr. Ho. I’m sure you will. Now I’m going to hand you over to Mr. Kant.”

It seemed, Morrey thought, that Mr. Ho Lung was the team leader. He wondered if it would have been better to question each member separately. Well, they were all here now, and he’d think about separate interviews later on.

“Thank you, Commander,” Morrey said. “Well now, gentlemen, I’m sure you know how important it is that we should get to the bottom of this thing as quickly as possible. You are all under an oath of secrecy, and you’ve had to do extra duties. So I’m quite sure you will be keen to see an end to this extraordinary situation.

“I have here a detailed account of all these disappearances, but I’d like to hear about your part in them. Will you tell me just what happened in the case of the first one, Andrew Barnett?”

It seemed that Mr. Ho was going to be the team’s spokesman, for it was he who complied with Morrey’s request.

“We happened to be on duty when the alarm was raised about Barnett,” he said. “It was a routine call—or so we thought, for we had helped six people during the last three months. Well, we knew which airlock he had left by, and we also knew that by that time he would have oxygen left for only two hours.”

“I know about that,” Morrey cut in. “What did you do?”

“We took two vehicles and began to circle from the airlock. We found no sign of him.”

“Did you look in all the craters?” Tony asked. “There are a good many.”

“True,” the Chinese answered, “but we know them all. Yes, we looked into every crater that is large enough to hide a man, for sometimes we have found a man stranded in one of them.”

“There must be hundreds of craters around Lunar City,” Serge suggested. “How could you look in all of them?”

“There are fifty-seven craters within a radius of three miles,” Mr. Ho replied calmly. “That is the normal search area. One vehicle went one way and the other in the opposite direction. We looked into every one of those craters, also behind all boulders, and we found nothing.”

“But how did you know Barnett didn’t go beyond the three miles?” Morrey asked.

“We don’t, but it would be very unusual to go farther than that on foot. However, we could only cover the three miles’ radius in the two hours left.”

“But you went out again?”

“Yes,” the Chinese agreed. “After we had reported to the Commander, we set off on a wider-ranging search. Barnett is nowhere within ten miles of this base.”

“What is the greatest distance he could have gone from the City?” Serge asked.

One of the other men, Roberts, replied.

“Eight miles, I should say, and that’s in a straight line. It’s too exhausting to go farther without a vehicle. Andrew would have to walk round so many craters and boulders that I doubt whether he could have possibly walked more than six miles away.”

“Four miles is the greatest distance from which anyone has been rescued,” Mr. Ho added. “So we are quite sure we covered everywhere that Barnett could have been.”

“And you reported then to the Commander?”

“Yes, and it was then that the Commander requested us to keep the affair secret.”

“What about the others? The search for missing personnel has been confined to your team, hasn’t it?” Morrey asked.

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Ho. “The Commander thought it would be best if neither of the other two teams were involved. We agreed, even though it meant extra duties. When Dean failed to return

we went through the same procedure—and with the same result. And with each of the others. So you see, Mr. Kant, we have scoured the area not once, but five times.”

“But didn’t you see anything?” Morrey persisted. “Didn’t you find a single item of equipment from any of the missing men?”

“We found nothing,” Mr. Ho said doggedly, and in spite of further questioning, no more information was gathered.”

“All right,” Morrey said at last. “That will do for now. But thanks, anyway, for all the extra work this situation has caused you.”

“When can we tell our friends?” Mr. Ho asked, with a disarming grin.

“Not till I give you permission,” the Commander snapped. “And remember, you are all still bound to secrecy.”

“Ex-excuse me, Commander, but does Mr. Kant think this should still remain confidential?” the Chinese asked.

For some reason Morrey was irritated by the question.

“I certainly do,” he answered coldly. “If there is a leak, it won’t be very hard to trace its source.”

Mr. Ho made a little bow and led his team from the office.

7

“I don’t like that man,” Tony burst out as soon as the door closed.

“But he’s a good man, I assure you,” the Commander smiled. “I think his question was due to the considerable strain those fellows feel through having to keep the whole wretched thing secret.”

There was a discreet tap on the door, and the smiling face of the Vice-Commandant peered round it.

“Is there any room for me now?” she asked.

Even if there hadn’t been, the three astronauts would soon have made it.

“Come in, Mademoiselle,” the Commander called, and the girl entered and closed the door behind her.

“Have you discovered anything?” she asked, turning to Morrey.

“No,” Morrey replied, “except that Mr. Ho and his team are getting restive.”

“I was afraid of that,” the Vice-Commandant admitted. “I hope we can do something before they reach breaking point.”

“Oh, I know what I was going to ask,” Tony cut in. “Before we came in I was wandering about Number Four Dome near the power receiver. There were some rooms I couldn’t get into.

Any reason?

The Commander looked at his assistant.

“What rooms would those be, Danielle?” he asked.

“Oh, they are the baggage rooms,” the girl answered quickly. “We keep under lock and key any personal possessions that our people do not need. When new arrivals come we ask if there is anything they want stored away, and we lock them up safely till they ask for them or until their tour of duty ends.”

This answer seemed to satisfy Tony, but he resolved to have a closer look at this part of Lunar City.

“I think perhaps I’ll use your scrambler,” Morrey said to Commander Cooper. “Not that I’ve anything to report, but Sir Billy will be wanting to hear from us even if we’ve no progress to report.”

The Commander hesitated, wondering whether he should remain or leave the three young men in privacy. Morrey didn’t suggest that he stayed, so, flushing a little, he suggested to his Vice-Commandant that they left the astronauts to themselves.

As soon as the door was closed, Morrey turned to Tony.

“Can you work the transmitter?” he asked.

“I haven’t met one yet that I couldn’t,” Tony replied confidently.

He went over to the panel which had been shown to them by the Commander. He slid it back and spent some time examining the apparatus.

“In trouble?” asked Serge.

“No,” Tony replied. “I was just making sure that it wasn’t bugged. It could have been, you know. However, I’m certain that this one isn’t.”

He switched on and waited for the transmitter to warm up. He also threw the switch for the scrambler. Then he put on a pair of earphones and made a slight adjustment to the tuning.

“Ready,” he called, and handed Morrey a small hand

microphone. Morrey was just collecting his thoughts and planning his message when there was a knock on the door.

Before they could call out or move, the door had opened and a tall, heavily-built man stood there.

“Is the Commander in?” he demanded.

“No,” Morrey snapped. “Aren't you supposed to wait to be asked inside?”

The man’s face flushed.

“Come off it,” he growled. “Just because you’re here on a special mission doesn’t mean you’re running the show. Well, where is he?”

The man’s dark eyes had covered all the Commander’s office. He’d seen the open panel and the private transmitter ready for operation.

“I’ve no idea,” Morrey replied, striving hard to keep his temper. “Now, will you look for him somewhere else.”

With a final glare at the astronauts the man stalked out, slamming the door behind him. There was but a second’s silence.

“Who the blazes is he?” Morrey thundered. “He looks a nasty character.”

“He saw the transmitter all right,” Tony said thoughtfully. “We’d better ask the Commander all about him.”

“Do you think he knows what we are really here for?” wondered Serge. “He referred to our being here on a special mission.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think so,” Morrey ventured. “Remember we’re reporting on the generator, the oxygen plants and the algae tanks.”

“But we wouldn’t have to use the scrambler to report on those, would we?” Tony pointed out quietly.

“True. We shall certainly have to know a great deal more about our rude friend. Now I’ll send my report.”

Morrey related the events up to the moment, making it plain that, as yet, they had nothing to go on. He was just about to end the transmission when Tony interrupted.

“Ask them to let us know the background of Mr. Ho. Also the chap who’s just seen the scrambler,” he said.

“But we don’t know the fellow’s name. Still, we’ll soon find out and I’ll ask next time,” Morrey said. But he did request information about Mr. Ho Lung and the rest of the Number One team. Then Tony switched off and they closed the panel.

“How will they call us back?” he asked.

“They won’t. We shall have to call them. Our message has been recorded and will be passed on to Sir Billy and Chris. In the same way Control will have a recorded answer ready to broadcast to us when we are next in communication.”

“Shall we find the Commander?” Serge suggested.

“We can ask him about that big fellow,” Tony said. “I didn’t like him.”

When they found Commander Cooper a few moments later, near the telescope, Morrey told him how they had been interrupted, described the man, and asked who he was.

“Sounds like Lane from what you say,” the Commander said uncomfortably. “He’s a bit of a problem. Some time ago he was in charge of his own research establishment, and a good job he made of it, too. Then something happened—I don’t know what—and he was demoted. I think he’s had a chip on his shoulder ever since.”

“What is his line?” asked Serge.

“Lasers. He was largely responsible for designing the means of transmitting the power from the new generator along a laser beam. The receiving disc at this end was entirely his own work, and he now devotes himself to its maintenance.”

“Does he know about the disappearances?” asked

Morrey. “He referred to our special mission here.”

“No I’m sure he doesn’t,” the Commander said emphatically. “He believes, like all the rest, that you have been sent here by U.N.E.X.A. to report on the new installations.”

“He saw we were going to use the scrambler,” Tony pointed out.

“I shouldn’t let that worry you,” Commander Cooper reassured them. “Lane often goes about like a bear with a sore head. But I’m convinced he’s loyal and doesn’t realize what a trial he is sometimes.”

“Isn’t he a bit old to be in Lunar City?” Tony asked.

“This is his last tour of duty,” the Commander agreed. “I think that is upsetting him, too. He isn’t looking forward to being Earthbound.”

No. The astronauts could well understand this. Though much younger than Lane, Chris had been compelled to give up spaceflights and they knew only too well how this had upset him. When the time came for each of them to abandon the highways to the heavens they knew how they would feel. It didn’t bear thinking about.

The astronauts continued to discuss the situation in the privacy of their own quarters.

“We’ve got to find something soon,” Morrey said desperately. “I can feel the whole thing is going to blow up before much longer. Serge, let’s take a walk outside and have a look for ourselves. I still can’t believe that five men and their equipment can vanish without trace.”

“I’ll come, too,” Tony said, but Morrey asked him to remain behind.

“People will think it strange if all three of us wander about outside,” he said. “But if you stay inside and go and have a look at the oxygen plant, they won’t be suspicious.”

And Tony had to agree. Conquering his disappointment, he went with his friends to Number Six Dome. It housed laboratories and two of the men had left from here on their

fateful walk. Morrey and Serge were determined to see for themselves if any traces at all had been left behind.

“How long will you be outside?” asked Tony, as his friends were climbing into their spacesuits.

“Four hours at the maximum,” Morrey decided. “That should give us time to have a look round the immediate locality pretty thoroughly. And it will give you time to inspect the new oxygen plant,” he concluded with a grin.

“Next time you go out, I’m coming,” Tony grumbled. “We’ll borrow a vehicle and I’ll drive.”

Serge and Morrey fixed their helmets, tested their radios and stepped towards the airlock. Tony took a small hand microphone that was standing near by.

“Don’t be late, you two,” he called over it to his friends, “or I shall be out after you.”

Morrey and Serge assured him that he could rely on them. With a wave they stepped through the airlock door and Tony was left to his own devices.

By now he knew the geography of Lunar City fairly well, and he had no difficulty in finding his way along the corridor to Number Five Dome, which they had entered on landing, and then on to Number Four in which the oxygen plant was situated. He wandered round the processing plant with interest.

It was here that all oxygen was processed to remove carbon dioxide and water before returning it for circulation. But the most important function of this small factory was to treat lunar rocks and release the fresh supplies of oxygen that they contained. This removed the need for the gas to be supplied from Earth, an expensive and laborious exercise.

Power for the factory all came from the 279 generator along the laser beam that Tony had thought was the cause of all their troubles. He still felt a little sore about the fool he’d made of himself. He hadn’t needed the others’ scientific background to realize the silly mistake he’d made. Yet it had all seemed so simple when the idea had burst upon him.

He wandered on. Ah! there were the baggage rooms that were kept locked. Strange that they should be placed in this particular dome. Perhaps none of the others had room to spare. They were certainly out of the way here and no one bothered about them. No doubt the doors were opened only when people wanted to deposit or take away baggage.

Tony looked at his watch. Two hours had gone by since Morrey and Serge had begun their venture outside. If he knew anything about them they would stay out as long as possible—just as he himself would have done. That is, unless they found something. Then they would reenter Lunar City as quickly as possible. Not that he expected they would discover any clues when the Number One team had failed so many times.

Tony had another look round the section. He still had plenty of time before he could possibly expect Morrey and Serge to return, and there was much to interest him.

“Having a ‘nosey’ round?” a voice said. “You won’t find anything here.”

The astronaut spun on his heel to find there the man he’d been thinking about a moment before—Lane.

“I’m certainly looking round this plant,” Tony said evenly. “We have to send a report on several of your installations to U.N.E.X.A.”

What had Lane meant when he’d said, “You won’t find anything here?” For the second time in a very short spell Tony had a suspicion that the man knew the real purpose of their visit. But he couldn’t be sure. Tony knew one thing. He’d Watch Mr. Lane as carefully as a cat watches a mouse! Of course the man was entitled to be in that area. As a laser expert he would be very much concerned with the beam that brought in the power from the generator. Tony moved on thoughtfully.

Should he go» to look at the algae tanks or should he wait for the others to return? He glanced at his watch again. If his friends remained outside Lunar City for their full span, they would be out for another forty-five minutes. There was hardly time to see much of the tanks in that period. Besides Morrey

and Serge might well return before the four hours had elapsed. He would want to be on the spot when they got back.

He made his way to Number Six Dome, to which it had been arranged that the two explorers would return. He resisted the temptation to look around the laboratories, for though he would have been interested in them, they would mean much more to Serge and Morrey.

Tony waited for the signal that his friends were outside. The warning lights would tell the technicians on duty that they were to open the outer door to let them enter. After that it wouldn't be long before they were in Lunar City itself and able to remove their helmets. He would suggest that they all went at once to eat a meal, for the two who had been walking on the Moon would feel even hungrier than he.

Well, the time was up and they should be signalling to enter the airlock at any moment. He hoped they hadn't forgotten their arrangement to stay out no longer than four hours. Knowing Serge and Morrey he doubted whether they could forget such an undertaking. He himself might have been too absorbed to remember. But not his two friends.

Tony looked at his watch impatiently. Ten minutes had gone by since the allotted time had expired. Then a thought struck him. Suppose they had really found something. Maybe, after all, they had stumbled on a clue that the Number One team had missed. Then, of course, they wouldn't wish to return to Lunar City while they were pursuing their investigation. Perhaps this delay meant good news. He couldn't think of any other reason why his friends should have overshot their deadline.

It took quite an effort for Tony to appear unconcerned. He wandered round the airlock compartment, apparently examining all the equipment and facilities. In reality his eyes were rarely off the light that would signal that someone was seeking admission.

Ah! Thank goodness—the light had flashed on! Tony gave up all pretence of looking around and waited eagerly for his friends' appearance. He could scarcely wait for the door to open

and let them in from the outer compartment. Then after an age, the inner door did open, and through it stepped—two men.

8

With a few swift movements, and with the help of the technicians, the helmets came off to reveal the heads of two young men, both with copper—coloured curly hair. As they were helped out of the rest of their suits they chatted with the technicians. These were the Driscoll twins, Tony knew. But where were his two friends?

He wanted to confront the men and ask if they'd seen anything of Morrey and Serge. But at this stage he was reluctant to show his increasing anxiety. The Driscolls' entry seemed to be a routine exercise. There was no reason why they should know anything about Tony's friends. When they gave him a cheery greeting without mentioning the others, Tony guessed that his question would have been wasted.

No one yet seemed concerned about the continued absence of Morrey and Serge. After all, they hadn't told anyone else that they proposed to limit their stay outside to four hours. So only Tony himself was getting worried.

He resolved to wait till five hours was up, and then seek an interview with the base Commander.

How he passed the intervening time Tony would never know. He watched in vain for the signal light to flash. He tried hard to conceal his growing anxiety from the technicians, who were beginning to look at him curiously. For a long time he'd found nothing more difficult than this effort to keep up an apparently

idle conversation with the men on duty.

When the five hours had passed, he still felt reluctant to report to Commander Cooper. It was his fear of being thought a fool that made him hesitate just a minute longer. Then, taking a deep breath, he made his way to the Commander's office in the Central Dome. He gave an urgent knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was the voice of Mademoiselle Larue. For a moment Tony paused. Where was the Commander? He felt he could speak more freely with him. Still—the Vice-Commandant had invited him in and he must reveal his fears to her.

"Greetings, Tony," the girl said, with a flashing smile as he went into the office.

"Greetings, Mademoiselle," Tony replied. He was too worried to notice the use of his first name.

"You look troubled," the Vice-Commandant went on rapidly. "Have you made some progress?"

"No," Tony admitted, "but I'm afraid Morrey and Serge have disappeared."

"Disappeared? You don't mean like the others? Tell me about it."

"They went out through the airlock in Number Six Dome," Tony explained. "Morrey thought it would be useful for them to have a look round for themselves. They arranged to return after four hours. That was seventy-five minutes ago and there's no sign of them."

"Were they together?"

Tony nodded. He wished Commander Cooper had been on duty, for he felt that Mademoiselle Larue resented the situation. She was no longer the smiling, charming person that she'd been a few moments before.

"Very well," the Vice-Commandant snapped. "I'll inform the Commander and alert the Number One team."

“I’d like to go with them,” Tony burst out. “They are my friends.”

“Absolutely out of the question,” Mademoiselle Larue said firmly. “We allow only experienced searchers, and Mr. Ho would resent the implication of your being with them.”

She picked up a phone, speaking first to Commander Cooper, and then to Mr. Ho. Though he’d been annoyed that she had refused his request to join the search party, Tony couldn’t but admire the brisk and efficient way she handled the situation. While she was awaiting the Commandant and the Number One team, she called in the records of each of the other airlocks just to make sure that Morrey and Serge hadn’t returned by one of them. As Tony had known, they hadn’t.

The Commandant, a trifle dishevelled, was with them in less than three minutes, and Tony barely had time to inform him of the situation before Ho Lung and his team arrived. It was Commander Cooper himself who gave the searchers their instructions. Tony looked at the Chinese leader intently. It was hard to read anything from his impassive face, but was that a fleeting expression of resentment at this extra duty, or was it something very different?

“This settles things,” Commander Cooper said tonelessly. “If your friends have vanished, I am informing U.N.E.X.A. immediately.”

But what about Chris? Tony’s heart leapt at the thought. He would call Chris on the scrambler and ask what he should do.

His decision taken, Tony faced the Commander and Mademoiselle Larue. They were the only ones left in the room.

“Before you send in an official report, I’d like to use the scrambler,” he said firmly. “I feel it is up to me to speak to Sir Billy and his deputy at once.”

“Very well,” Commander Cooper said, after a momentary hesitation. “Would you like to be left alone?”

“Please,” Tony replied, and reluctantly the man and the woman left.

Then Tony gasped. He'd opened the secret panel that concealed the scrambler. It had been destroyed!

At least, that was his first impression. He could see that someone had cut away vital parts of the transmitter and had left it completely useless. He couldn't contact Earth to make his confidential report. He flew to the door and went after the Commander and his deputy. They were not far away 'and he beckoned them urgently to return. As soon as they were inside, obviously puzzled by his actions, Tony opened the panel and displayed the devastation behind.

"My God!" Commander Cooper gasped, his face going grey. "Sabotage!"

"But who could have done this thing?" an equally shocked Mademoiselle Larue demanded. "It is bad?"

"It is bad," her Chief snapped. "It means that someone not only knew about this, but has made it unusable. I have a criminal in Lunar City!"

But Tony seemed to have recovered his spirits. He'd been examining the transmitter more closely, and as he did so he began to whistle tunelessly.

"I can repair this," he said suddenly. "Where can I get tools and supplies?"

"You can repair it?" the Commander said in surprise.

"Someone seems to have made a pretty thorough job of it."

"That's how it looks," Tony agreed, "but whoever did this job was an expert. He's been very selective in the damage he's done. It looks more serious than it is. But it would want another expert to put it right."

"And you are an expert?" asked Mademoiselle Larue.

"A bit of one," Tony admitted modestly.

How could the Vice-Commandant know that Tony was really an expert, and that during the rare periods when he was at home with his parents he spent most of them building

sophisticated pieces of radio equipment? This scrambler radio was different from anything he'd repaired before, but he knew he could do it.

"Where can I get tools and supplies?" Tony repeated. The sooner he got started the sooner he could speak to Chris and Sir Billy. It would be an infinite relief to share his distress with his friends.

"Come with me," the Commander replied. "We mustn't let anyone know the radio can be repaired. Danielle, please try and find out who could possibly have entered my office during the last few hours."

Tony followed the Commander. They both tried to conceal their concern from the men and women they met as they crossed the Central Dome to one of the store corridors. Was it Tony's imagination, or had he seen Lane somewhere in the background?

The radio stores were well equipped, and Tony helped himself to all the tools and materials he thought he might need. These he placed in one of the bags provided. At least no one would see what he was carrying back to the Commander's office.

"There have been two periods when your office has been empty," Danielle reported on their return. "Just after you went off duty four hours ago I had to leave for ten minutes to give the astronomers their new programme. Then I was out for fifteen minutes when I went to the canteen about ninety minutes ago."

"Was anyone seen to enter?" Commander Cooper asked.

"I've made inquiries, and no one was seen coming in while I was away," the girl declared.

"Who was working near by? Who had the opportunity to slip inside?" Tony inquired.

"Quite a number of people, I should imagine," the Commander told him.

"Well, if I can have a list of them, and also details of their

special skills, I might be able to find one who had the opportunity to get into your office. Even more important, I could see if one of them knows enough about radio to have done this very neat job of sabotage,” said Tony.

While the Commander and his assistant busied themselves in getting the information Tony had requested, the astronaut turned to the scrambler radio and began his task of repairing it. As he worked Tony couldn't help thinking of the new situation that had arisen. There was definitely someone with evil intent in Lunar City. Damage to any transmitter was a serious offense, but the saboteur had known of the secret scrambler transmitter and had damaged that one. Whoever it was, he had prevented Tony from reporting the loss of his comrades—for the time being.

Was this the reason for the damage? Was there any connection between the havoc wrought to the transmitter and the disappearance of Morrey and Serge? Instinctively Tony felt that there was, for it was too much of a coincidence for the transmitter to have been deliberately damaged just at the time when the two astronauts had vanished.

Tony worked on grimly. If his theory was right, he told himself, he knew at least that there was a human agency at work. It wasn't spooks or creatures from outer space that were responsible for all these disappearances. It was someone here in Lunar City. Tony gritted his teeth as he soldered that last connection. He would find out just who this person was and just what had happened to his friends and all the others, even if he died in the process.

That should do it. He put his tools down and threw the necessary switches. In less than a minute he had the satisfaction of knowing that he'd succeeded. He spoke urgently into the small microphone.

“Tony Hale calling. Tony Hale calling. I must speak urgently with Chris Godfrey or the Director. Are you receiving me?”

He knew someone would be receiving him, for it had been arranged that the receiver should be manned all round the

clock. In a very few seconds he had proof of this.

“We’re receiving you, Hale,” an unknown voice said. “Hold on. I’ll have the Director for you in a couple of minutes.”

“Thanks,” Tony replied. “Make it snappy.”

He wished it had been Chris, but perhaps his friend was off duty. Or perhaps he was away from Control on other business.

The wait seemed interminable, but it was actually less than five minutes before Tony heard the voice of Sir Billy.

“Control calling Lunar City. Director speaking. Have you found anything, Tony? It’s good to hear from you,” he said.

Tony swallowed hard. It was going to be terribly difficult to tell the awful news.

“It’s—well, Morrey and Serge have disappeared!” he gasped. “They went outside and they haven’t returned. There’s a search party looking for them now.”

Even over nearly a quarter of a million miles he could hear the anguish in Sir Billy’s voice.

“Oh! Great heavens! Are you sure? What’s happened?”

Haltingly, Tony reported all he knew. Though the Number One team hadn’t returned yet, he had little hope that they would come back with his friends. Then he went on to give an account of the damage to the scrambler radio which he’d managed to repair.

“Maybe whoever has done this knows something about Morrey and Serge,” he said, and there was now a cold fury in his voice. “But I’ll get him if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

“Be careful,” the shocked voice of the Director said. “I—we—don’t want you to get hurt.”

Hurt! Tony just managed to conceal his snarl. It was with his tongue in his cheek that he promised Sir Billy that he would be cautious.

Just then Commander Cooper and Mademoiselle Larue came in. “The Commander’s here,” Tony said. “I’ll put him on.”

He handed the microphone over to the Commander and then went over to the Vice-Commandant. The time for politeness had gone.

“Well? Have you got those lists?” he snapped.

“Yes, they are here,” the girl replied coldly. “I hope you find them useful.”

“I hope I do,” Tony replied sharply.

Meanwhile the Commander and the Director were having a long and earnest discussion over the radio. Then the Commander turned to Tony.

“The Director wants a word with you,” he said.

Tony took the microphone and spoke. The voice of Sir Billy came back.

“Chris is off duty for a few days with flu and a temperature,” he said. “As soon as he’s back, I’m sending him up to you. Do what you can in the meantime, but be careful.”

Tony said good-bye to Sir Billy after acknowledging his instructions, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Even as he switched off the transmitter and closed the panel, his mind was racing.

It would be good to have Chris with him in Lunar City. A pity he was ill, but Sir Billy seemed to think it wasn’t serious. No doubt Chris would be coming along on a ferry within a week. Yet—eager as he was to have his friend by his side—Tony felt that the very necessity was a sad reflection on himself. The three of them had failed to clear up the mystery of the Moon, and now Serge and Morrey had gone the way of the five others. He alone was left, and Sir Billy didn’t believe that he could be successful. Well, perhaps Chris would succeed where the others had failed. And if he did, no one would be more delighted than Tony himself. But what a tremendous thing it would be if he could crack the thing open by the time Chris arrived!

“Will you look through these lists here?” asked the Commander. “Can we be of any help?”

Tony was in a dilemma. Morrey hadn't said that the Commander was 100 per cent in the clear. And what about Mademoiselle Larue? Tony would be very reluctant to be suspicious of the girl, but he had to put his task first.

However, on reflection, he was certain that neither of these two had the special skill which had been shown in the damage to the scrambler. If his theory was right—that this was somehow linked with the disappearances—then it was hardly likely that the Commander or his Vice-Commandant could be in any way responsible. Besides—he was alone, and would have to work alone. He decided to accept the help of the other two. But he would keep his eyes very wide open just the same.

“Perhaps you can help me to compare these two lists,” he said at last. “What we are looking for is someone who is working very close to this office, and who has the necessary skills to put the scrambler out of action.”

“I still don't understand how this can help you with your main inquiry,” the Commander said heavily. “We could call in the police to clear this up.”

“Maybe, but I'd still like to put my hand on the man—or woman—who did this damage,” Tony replied firmly.

“You see,” he went on, “it happened after Morrey and Serge had gone through the airlock, and before the alarm was raised after their time had expired. Of course it might have been a coincidence, but then again it might not. I can't afford to leave any stone unturned.”

9

They set to work on the two lists and, as Tony had half expected, the name of Lane was on both. But then so were the names of three other men, Birch, Clapham and Law.

“I’ll bet my next month’s pay that one of these was responsible for the damage to the scrambler,” Tony declared.

“But that doesn’t make them responsible for the disappearances,” Cooper pointed out.

“Nor does it explain how it is that seven men have vanished without trace,” Danielle added.

“We don’t know yet about Serge and Morrey,” Tony insisted. “There’s just a chance—”

As if to clear up his doubts there was a knock on the door and the Vice-Commandant went to see who it was.

“Number One team,” she announced a moment later. The Commander nodded and Mr. Ho led his men through the door.

“Well?” barked Commander Cooper.

“Like the others, not a trace,” the imperturbable Chinese answered.

“Very well,” the Commander sighed. “Have you anything to ask them?” he inquired of Tony.

Tony shook his head without speaking, for he couldn’t trust himself just at that moment to open his mouth. And so the

Number One team, led by Mr. Ho, left the Commander's office without showing—to Tony's mind—the slightest regret at their failure.

Tony felt almost crushed beneath the weight of responsibility that had suddenly fallen on him. If Chris couldn't come to Lunar City for a week, it meant that he must face up to things himself. For the moment all he wanted was to return to his own room and to think and think—and think.

When Tony flung himself on to his bunk he was as near despair as he had ever been in his life. Everything seemed hopeless. He'd lost his two very dear friends, and he felt almost powerless to combat the evil force which, he was now confident, existed in Lunar City. He shuddered and, in spite of himself, uttered a little moan when he thought that his two friends were already dead—murdered perhaps by Mr. Ho and his team, or Lane, or who?

If Morrey and Serge had been attacked by the six members of the Number One Team, they would have put up a terrific fight before being overcome. It wasn't even certain that Mr. Ho and his men would manage to subdue them. Serge was strong and wiry, but Morrey was tougher and stronger than anyone else Tony knew. The American had been an expert at all kinds of sport during his college days, and had boxed with considerable success. How then, if Mr. Ho and company had set upon Morrey and Serge, had they themselves remained unscathed? For there was no sign of any struggle on any member of the Number One team.

There was only one thing for it, Tony decided. He must go outside Lunar City and look for himself for signs of his friends!

The decision having been taken, Tony paced up and down his small room with the strange gait that everyone used under the low lunar gravity. One thing he was very determined about. He would go out alone. He would defy the Commander's edict that a minimum of two people, useless though it seemed to have been, could leave Lunar City on walks outside. Only if he went alone would he feel safe. Only if there was no one with

him could he feel really free to look for clues.

And that brought him to the crucial question. How was he going to leave Lunar City without anyone knowing? He must keep it secret, not only to evade the restriction laid down by Commander Cooper but because he was convinced that it was safer. Someone had known of Morrey and Serge's trip outside and could have harmed them. All the other excursions, too, had been known before the unfortunate men had disappeared. If there was an evil force abroad in Lunar City, he would be safer if he kept his intention to himself.

Tony turned the problem over in his mind for a long time. It wasn't just a matter of passing through a door unnoticed. Conditions made that virtually impossible. The exits were not simple doors, but airlocks. You couldn't leave Lunar City as you could a town on Earth, for here you would have to put on a spacesuit to survive. A careful record was now kept of everyone leaving and entering every airlock. Since the disappearances this procedure had been tightened up tremendously. It wasn't going to be easy to carry out his plan.

Then Tony had an idea. It might just work. He hurried to the Central Dome and to the Commander's office. As he thought, on a board outside the office were the special "Orders of the Day", which included routine exercises and emergency drill. It had been too much to hope for that Number Six Dome would be the one selected for the drill that day. Instead, the notice said that Number Five Dome was the one to be used. Ah, well, he would soon remedy that, Tony thought.

He glanced round. No one seemed to be looking in his direction, so with a quick movement he snatched the order sheet from the board and hid it in his tunic. Then he went into the Commander's office.

Both Commander Cooper and his assistant were there, bending over some reports that had come in from the oxygen factory in Number Four Dome. It seemed that the power from the 279 generator was entirely satisfactory except for occasional breaks that were unimportant. Certainly this new source of

power was proving its worth. Commander Cooper looked up.

“Can I do a spot of typing?” Tony asked. ,

“Certainly,” the Commander agreed. “What do you want?”

“Oh, just a few notes I want to make,” the young astronaut answered innocently.

“Let me do them for you,” Mademoiselle Larue volunteered.

“No, thanks,” Tony said hastily. “I’d better do them myself.”

“Oh—confidential, eh?” the Commander said, with the ghost of a smile. “There’s a typewriter in the outer office and plenty of paper.”

With a word of thanks and a disarming grin, Tony went out, shutting the door behind him.

The outer office, or rather the one alongside, was sometimes used by members of the base who wanted to type out notes or reports. On a table was a typewriter and stationery rack. Tony sorted through the sheets of paper and picked out one similar to the one he’d taken. Rather laboriously—for he was no typist—he tapped out the order sheet, but substituted Number Six Dome for Number Five Dome.

“That should do it,” Tony muttered, surveying his work with some satisfaction. “Now, I wonder when they’ll do the test.”

Once the part of the base had been selected, it was up to anyone in that section to give the alarm, so that no one knew exactly when the simulated damage would take place. He must hang about Number Six Dome and wait his chance.

Now the task was to place his substitute sheet back on the board in the hope that no one had noticed its temporary absence. Tony rolled up his efforts and, thanking the Commander as he passed through his office, slipped out into the main hall. With a quick look round he saw that everyone in sight seemed fully occupied, so with a quick movement he pinned the new sheet to the notice-board. Whistling tunelessly, he ambled away.

“I see you are due for a test,” Tony observed to the two technicians on duty at the Number Six airlock.

“No, not today,” the first one grinned back. “I think you’ll find it’s Number Five.”

“Maybe you’re right, but I thought it said Number Six on the notice-board just now,” the astronaut replied.

The technicians looked at each other a little uncertainly.

“I’ll go and check,” one of them said.

“I’d like to hang around to see how it works out,” Tony said. “Any idea what time you’ll have the test?”

“If it’s us—well, Jim will please himself,” the technician replied, referring to his companion who had gone to check the notice-board. “You know where the suits are?”

Tony nodded. The door of the compartment in which the spacesuits were stored was plainly marked. He knew that as soon as the alarm was given he would have less than two minutes in which to get dressed. By that time the pumps would have exhausted so much oxygen from the dome that anyone who hadn’t got into a suit would be in serious trouble. However, unlike the situation if the dome had actually been punctured by a meteorite, the position could be quickly restored so that no permanent harm would befall the slow dressers.

“It’s right,” the first technician said on his return. “I don’t know how I made that mistake. I could have sworn it was the turn of Number Five.”

“Never mind,” grinned Tony, “you’re going to have me as an appreciative spectator. I suppose when the oxygen has been pumped out of the dome you could open both doors of the airlocks?”

“Sure,” the technician named Jim replied. “We don’t fetch the internal pressure down to zero, of course, but it’s low enough to make opening the doors easy.”

“Just the same as in our early ships,” Tony said. “We had to pump out our cabins before we could open the hatches for our

space walks. I don't suppose you get your pressure down as low as we did."

"It depends," Jim answered. "If there's no one in trouble through dressing slowly or from faulty equipment, we may take the pressure down fairly low. That makes the doors quite easy to open."

"But not so easy as ours," Tony persisted. "I'll bet one man couldn't do it."

"Let's wait and see," grinned Jim. "I'm sure we can show you astronaut chaps a thing or two."

Tony shrugged his shoulders unbelievably. Secretly he was delighted at the way the two men had swallowed the bait.

The activity in the laboratories that were housed in Number Six continued as usual. Fresh samples of lunar rocks were being constantly brought in from new places. Ever deeper boreholes probed the satellite's crust. Always there was an air of excitement in the labs, for who knew when some new discovery might not be made? Concealing his impatience as best he could Tony hovered within striking distance of the airlock.

Ah! The hooter was sounding the alarm. All around him the scientists had stopped work instantly, and with swift, practised movements, were taking spacesuits out of lockers and putting them on. Tony hurried towards the airlock and took out a suit from a nearby locker. Already his breath was coming in painful gasps, for the air pressure was sinking rapidly. By the time he had the helmet on and the oxygen supply flowing, his senses had begun to reel and singing had started in his ears. But after a few breaths of the life-giving gas, he was fit for the daring action he had planned.

He looked around. The two technicians who were on duty in the airlock had joined a squad which was going through the motions of seeking out and repairing the supposed meteoric penetration. Tony made his way to the airlock. Even if Jim and his companion noticed, they would think that Tony was going to test the handle with which the door could be opened. Hadn't he been saying that it was much easier to open a spaceship

hatch than their own airlock door?

With his heart beating a little more quickly, Tony seized the handle and released the catches. Then he pulled at the door to swing it open. It resisted his pull, for the internal air pressure was still much higher than the vacuum outside. He could, of course, have released the valve which would have equalized the pressure between the inner and outer doors. This would have made the inner door easy to open, but the outer one would still be difficult to operate. So he preferred to wait a little longer. When he opened the door, he wanted to pass through the outer one, too, as quickly as possible.

He looked around again. Fortunately everyone was suited up, and no one seemed in distress. Had one of the staff been showing signs of difficulty, the test would have been abandoned and the air pressure quickly restored. And that would have effectively stopped Tony's plan of escape. He tried the inner door once more. Would the pressure be low enough for him to open it?

The door moved. With a quick movement Tony slipped through and pulled the door closed behind him. Now he stood alone in the airlock, only the outer door separating him from the airless waste outside.

Not for a moment did he think of any possible danger to himself. His mind was completely concentrated on the task ahead. He was going out to see—never mind what Mr. Ho said—if he could find any trace of his friends. With a tug he turned the handle and swung the outer door open. Then he took two quick steps outside, turned, and closed the door behind him. Turning once more he began to survey the scene with which he was so familiar.

In the pitiless light of the sinking Sun the prospect looked stark indeed. Behind each boulder and crater rim black shadows grew so that the landscape appeared speckled. It was a constant reminder that his time was short, for in a few more hours the Sun would sink below the lunar horizon, and all would be blackness for fourteen earthly days.

Tony paused uncertainly. Now that he'd succeeded in getting out of Lunar City alone and unobserved, how could he best use his opportunity? Which way would Morrey and Serge have gone? Instinctively Tony turned to his left and began to walk towards Number Five Dome. At least he had a fifty per cent chance that he was going in the right direction.

It wasn't many minutes before he realized how impossible his task was. How could he possibly examine every crater and rock to see if it concealed a sign of his friends? How could he follow their trail if there were no signs to guide him? Even though the craters were shallow and the rocks not large, the intense, black shadows that they cast could have concealed clues from the most observant.

But what else could he do but plod on? He knew that it was a forlorn hope that his actions now could help either his friends or the other men who had Vanished. Yet he couldn't face inactivity. Even though the chance that he could find a clue was impossibly small, he mustn't neglect it. With the peculiar, loping gait of moon-walkers he pressed on. And while he moved his eyes sought restlessly for anything unusual.

His course zigzagged from crater to crater, and from boulder to boulder. All the time he was moving towards Number Five, and soon he was close to it. He paused as he recalled that only a day or two before he and his two companions had travelled along the road from the ferry landing pad, and had entered Lunar City at this very point. From the outside he saw the airlock through which they had entered the vehicle that had brought them from the rocket.

Instinctively he turned to gaze across the moonscape towards the landing pad which was their main connection with Earth. He saw the movable gantry that was used for servicing the ferries during their stay on the Moon. How he wished he could see the ship that would bring Chris. If only Chris were beside him, he wouldn't feel so bad.

With a sigh, Tony pressed on. Now he was going beyond the dome and along the outside of the connecting corridor to

Number Four. Once he thought he saw some piece of equipment lying behind a small rock, but when he got nearer he could see that it was only a smaller rock. Growing despair was fighting grim determination for possession of Tony's mind.

How could he possibly hope to find a clue in this vast wilderness? Perhaps Mr. Ho and his team were right when they said they hadn't found a single trace of any of the missing men. Or perhaps, if they had been responsible in some way for the disappearances, they had cleared up the scene without leaving any sign of what had happened.

Tony plodded on. It was exhausting work, this going from one object to another without finding anything. Several times he thought he was on the point of making a discovery, only to be disappointed when he reached it. There came a time when he felt it was of little use investigating any more of these possible clues. Yet one of them might just possibly be what he was seeking.

Now the Number Four Dome was looming large. Already he could see the dish which received the laser beam carrying power from the 279 generator. Half a mile away he could see the generator itself, and he knew that between generator and dish was the invisible beam carrying a vast amount of energy. The red warning posts marked its path.

He approached the line of red posts with caution. A few yards away was the parallel line marking the other side of the danger area. It was hard to believe that in between sufficient electric power was passing to light a small city. Deliberately he stepped past the posts.

Moving with the utmost caution, he began to move towards the generator about half a mile away. If his friends had wandered into the generator beam's path he would surely see some signs of them. But no, he didn't see a thing which might suggest that Morrey and Serge had been anywhere near the laser path. He was within just a hundred yards of the generator and was about to turn back when the accident happened.

10

The greatest hazard to moon-walkers is, perhaps, the loose rocks that are sometimes lying on the surface. Usually these are partly buried in lunar dust and are not easily moved, but occasionally a rock is near, or on, the surface, and then it can easily roll over under the low gravity. Because he was peering anxiously about for a sign of his friends, Tony didn't notice this particular piece of rock as he completed one of his moon hops. Instead of landing squarely on the ground one foot took his weight on to the rock, which immediately rolled away and threw him to the ground.

Because of the weak gravity his fall wasn't dangerous, but in losing his balance he pitched forward and his helmet just touched the extreme edge of the laser beam.

Was it hours or seconds that had passed? Tony opened his eyes and for a moment his mind was a blank. Slowly it began to function and ask questions. What was he doing lying in this awkward position? Why was he in a spacesuit? Through his vizor he could see the yellow-brown dust and rocks that told him where he was. He was just about to struggle to his feet when memory came flooding back. With a racing heart he lay still.

The laser beam! That was it! He remembered falling on the loose rock, but the fall wouldn't have knocked him out. He must have hit the beam in the fall. It was that which had struck him senseless. Though he couldn't see it the beam must be right

above him. He'd have to be extremely careful, or he'd get the full force of it again.

Tony lay still for a while. Then he turned his head and looked around. The first thing he saw was the wretched piece of rock that had caused his fall. He grinned ruefully to himself. It could have been worse, but it was bad enough. Gently, taking care not to raise himself too much, he began to wriggle along the ground. Not until he reached one of the red posts on the other side did he feel safe enough to stand on his feet.

Well, he'd had a taste of the power beam, he told himself as he shook the lunar dust from his spacesuit. It certainly had the power to knock a man out cold. What a simple explanation it would have been if all the missing men had also blundered into the beam and got knocked out. But then they would have been found very quickly by the searchers.

If only he could have found something, anything that had been left behind by his friends or any of the others. It would have proved beyond doubt that there was nothing supernatural about their disappearances. But this utter lack of clues was unsurmountable. Unless—

Unless the lack of clues itself was a clue.

Feeling a little weak after his ordeal, Tony decided to follow the warning posts back to Number Four Dome. Now that he was on the other side of the beam he had fresh territory to explore. Anyone else desiring to travel in this area had to move beyond the generator and round it. Trust Tony to get to the far side in this unusual fashion.

Slowly the astronaut loped his way along, but this time he kept outside the markers. Still there was no sign that he could connect with any of the missing persons. Footprints abounded in the lunar dust, as they did for quite a distance all round the base. But whether Morrey and Serge had been this way it was impossible to tell.

At last, now feeling very tired, he neared the dome. He could see the dish that received the power beam and collected the energy for transmission into the base. He looked with interest

at it, and at the mechanism behind it which enabled it to swivel. Looking closely, he could also see a sealed entrance to the dome behind which, presumably, the switchgear was installed.

Well, that was it. As his fatigue increased so did his despondency. He'd slipped out of the lunar base, fallen into the beam and got knocked out, looked everywhere he possibly could, and still found nothing to help him in his search. He must get back to the airlock and face the wrath of Commander Cooper, for he had little doubt that by now his exit would have been reported.

Then another problem faced Tony. To get back to his original position he would have to walk back round the far side of the 279 generator—a journey which would add at least a mile to his way back. Or he would have to crawl under the power beam once more. Should he risk the exhaustion of the long road, or should he take a chance of the short cut and possible contact with the beam? As his weariness increased moment by moment, Tony decided on the latter. He felt by now that he would never make the long exhausting journey on foot around the generator.

He decided that the safest place to crawl under the beam was as near to the receiving dish as possible. At least he could see how much room he had to spare if he took the bottom of the dish as the lower extremity of the power beam. Gently, he lowered himself to the ground and began to wriggle his way along, keeping very low with his face scarcely above the lunar dust.

Suddenly he stopped, for he'd noticed something strange. He would have expected the dust in this particular spot to be undisturbed. Not many people before him could have adopted this unorthodox method of getting to the other side of the beam. It was far too dangerous for it to be a popular practice. Yet the dust all around was very disturbed, and footprints and peculiar trails abounded.

What astonished Tony were the footprints. They could only have been made by someone standing upright—that is in the

path of the beam! But that was impossible unless the person wore some sort of protection which he didn't know about. Or—and here Tony struggled to remember something he'd heard—the beam was switched off.

Well, the beam wasn't off now, as he knew to his cost, so he resumed his undignified progress beneath it. Yes, it was strange about those footprints and other marks. It looked as if someone had walked right up to the dish and to the dome behind it. Then the explanation struck him. The prints were undoubtedly left by the men who carried out the maintenance of the aerial. Of course the beam would be switched off while this was done, and the men would have to work just where he'd seen their traces.

Tony breathed a sigh of relief as he saw he was almost up to the line of warning markers on the other side. He could now get to his feet without risk, and very glad he was to do so. He shook the dust from his suit. Because it was so dry, it didn't cling, and a brisk pat here and there made it fall away.

A few minutes later he crossed the roadway which led into Number Five Dome from the landing pad. For a moment he contemplated trying to get back into the City through the airlock used by people arriving on the ferry. A pity there wasn't someone coming now, for then he might have slipped in with them unnoticed. Now there was nothing for it but to try his luck at the Number Six airlock through which he had slipped out.

Number Six Dome loomed up. Tony was mainly preoccupied with what might happen during the next halfhour, but at the back of his mind there was still the puzzle of the footprints, and the elusive memory of something else. But all that could wait for later. He must get inside Lunar City as soon as possible.

He pressed the button which would warn the attendants that he wanted to enter, and tried to picture their astonishment at this unexpected request for entry. Within a few minutes the door slid open and Tony stepped inside. The outer door closed again and he waited for the pressure to build up. At last a green light came on and he faced the inner door.

It opened and he stepped through. Even through his vizor he

could see the surprise of Jim and his friend, so with a quick movement he loosened the last of the fastenings and removed his helmet.

“You,” gasped the two technicians in unison. “How did you get out there?”

“Well, you remember that we were talking about your airlocks compared with those on our ships. I tried out your lock when you had the test. I still say it isn’t as good as ours.”

“But you shouldn’t have gone outside,” spluttered Jim. “It’s against the latest orders to go out alone. I don’t know why, but there it is. And you’ve been out there over three hours.”

“I know,” Tony admitted ruefully. “You see, I trod on a loose stone, fell, and knocked myself out. Sorry about it all.”

Jim looked at Tony’s face closely.

“Yes, you have got a bump,” he said. “I’m sure the Doc will give you something to put on it. You see what a silly thing it is to go out without telling anyone.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” Tony replied with false contrition, “Er—must you report this?”

Jim and his colleague looked at each other. Strictly they ought to report this disobedience to the Commander’s order. But they themselves wouldn’t come out of it very well, since they had let someone go outside unrecorded.

“Well, as you’re back safely, perhaps we can forget it,” Jim said at last. “Though I hope that bump has taught you a lesson.”

“I certainly think I’ve learned something from it,” Tony replied with double meaning. “Thanks a lot, chaps. I’m grateful. Now can I get out of this thing?”

The two men helped him out of his spacesuit. Though he’d knocked off almost all the lunar dust, there was still enough clinging to it to confirm the account of his fall.

“You might have punctured your suit,” Jim pointed out severely. “Then that would have been the end of you.”

With another word of thanks to the two men, Tony, utterly weary, staggered away and walked as best he could to his own quarters. If anyone greeted him on the journey, he never knew, for his mind was half asleep already. He threw himself on to his bed just as he was, expecting to sink instantly into a deep sleep. But it didn't happen.

Sometimes when the body is overtired, and the brain is weary too, a little part of the mind keeps active. If some deep problem has seized upon it, that part of the mind will work on it obstinately and prevent the whole being from relaxing into unconsciousness. So it was with Tony. It was this wretched problem of the footprints under the beam that was gnawing at him, and the effort to remember something that he felt was connected to it. Why he should be so concerned about this puzzle, when he had on his mind the infinitely greater problem of the disappearances, he couldn't tell. At last, of course, he did fall asleep, but only after his mental conflict had been somewhat resolved by the thought that perhaps the footprints were meaningful, and connected in some way with his main preoccupation.

“Are you all right?”

Someone was shaking his shoulder. Why wouldn't they go away? He'd only just—

With a start Tony sat up on his bed to find Jim bending over him in some concern.

“Yes, I'm all right,” he replied, struggling to collect his thoughts.

“Good—I was a bit worried about you and came along to have a look-see. When I saw you flat out still dressed, I wondered What had happened.”

“Thanks a lot, Jim,” Tony said as he swung his legs off the bed. “Also for not making me look a fool in front of the Commander.”

“Oh, that's O.K.,” the technician grinned. “We've cleaned the suit and stowed it away. As far as we are concerned, it never

happened.”

In that moment of time, Tony took one of the most fateful decisions of his life. He would tell Jim the real purpose for his presence on the Moon. Instinctively Tony felt he could trust the man. Indeed, if Jim and his colleague had insisted on reporting his lone excursion to Commander Cooper, he might well have told them both something in order to silence them.

“Got a few minutes to spare, Jim?” Tony asked.

“Sure, Mr. Hale. I’m off duty, so my time is yours,” Jim replied, wondering what was coming.

For the next twenty minutes he listened to Tony with growing amazement. He hardly interrupted the astronaut as he described the purpose of their mission and told his listener that Morrey and Serge had now vanished too. Tony ended by describing what he had found near the dish and his curiosity about the footprints.

“Gosh, Mr. Hale! I don’t know what to say,” Jim burst out as Tony ended. “We didn’t know a thing, although, now you mention it, I remember one or two people have been asking about those chaps who have disappeared.”

“I’m not surprised,” Tony declared. “And now that my two colleagues have gone as well, I don’t see how we can keep it secret much longer.”

“It’s spooky!” Jim gasped. “What’s happened to them all? Who’s going to vanish next?”

“Cut that out, Jim,” Tony said sharply. “I’ve told you a secret which only a dozen other people know. The reason this affair has been kept quiet is because the chiefs don’t want to cause panic. If that happened U.N.E.X.A. would have no choice but to close down this base. And you know what that would mean.”

Jim nodded silently. Evidently he was still unable to sort out his thoughts.

“Anyway, thanks for trusting me, Mr. Hale,” he said at last. “I won’t let you down.”

“I didn’t think you would, Jim, or I’d never have told you,” Tony replied. “Now don’t you think you’d better drop the handle to my name?”

“O.K., Tony,” the technician, still stunned, managed to smile.

There was a silence between the two men for quite a time. Then Jim spoke his thoughts.

“What are you going to do, Tony? Can I do anything?” he asked.

“You can keep your eyes and ears open and let me know if you learn anything. And you can fill me in with some bits of information.”

There followed a session in which Tony asked Jim all about the people in Lunar City from the Commander downwards. It was refreshing to hear about them from a new angle. Tony questioned Jim particularly closely about Lane, and Mr. Ho and his team.

“I don’t like them,” Jim answered decisively. “The Number One team is very stand-offish, not a bit like the other two. I’ve never seen any of them mixing much with the other men and women in the City. They seem to eat together and spend all their spare time together.”

“Perhaps that’s because they have to keep their work confidential,” Tony suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Jim said thoughtfully. “Now I come to think about it, the team have been the same ever since they arrived in Lunar City, and that would be before Andrew Barnett went.”

“But did the team arrive as a body?” asked Tony. “Surely they wouldn’t come here without previous experience and some training.”

“Oh, I expect they had all had a spell in the City before as individuals, but then the team was formed and finally trained back at home. As far as I remember they did arrive here as a unit, and we were told that it was a new idea.”

“Might be worth looking into,” Tony mused. “Now what about Lane?”

“In a way, I feel sorry for the chap,” Jim confessed. “It must have been an awful blow to him when he was reduced in rank. I don’t know much about what happened, but he must have taken it very hard.”

“He knows his stuff?”

“He’s a first-class electronics engineer,” Jim replied. “They don’t come any better. He’s almost in sole charge of the power receiver in Number Four Dome. I remember him installing the dish and the switchgear, for I believe he designed the lot. He works all hours and he’s very jealous of his charge. He shuns all offers of help.”

“Does he know much about radio?”

“I should say he knows all there is,” the technician replied with grudging admiration.

“What about the Commander and Mademoiselle Larue? What’s your opinion about them?” asked Tony.

The technician hesitated.

“I’d better be careful,” he replied, “or I might land myself in trouble.”

“You can speak freely to me,” Tony said at once. “Remember, I’ve taken you into my complete confidence.”

“So you have, Tony, and I’m sorry if I seemed to jibe a bit,” Jim replied. “Oh, it isn’t the Chief. Commander Cooper is as straight as a die. Doesn’t stand any nonsense, of course, but if you do your job well, you can get on with him. Heaven help the slackers.”

“And the Vice-Commandant?”

Jim seemed embarrassed, but spoke up nevertheless.

“I’m not sure I like her,” he said. “Oh she’s a good-looker, I’ll grant you that. She knows her job, too. But underneath she’s as hard as nails. She can be really vicious if anyone upsets her. I

wouldn't like to fall foul of her. But then—I'm not one of her favourites.”

“Has she some favourites?” inquired Tony.

“One or two—not many. She's about the only one who seems to get on with Lane. He carries out her orders without question, yet I've seen him scowl when the Commander has given him instructions.”

“How do Mr. Ho and company get on with her?” Tony asked.

“She treats them like dirt,” Jim told him. “I've no time for the Chinese and his crew, but she goes too far. I'm surprised they haven't lodged an official complaint with the Commander.”

11

Jim had given Tony a lot to think about. Had any of it a bearing on the disappearances? He didn't think so on the face of it, but he couldn't afford to ignore what he had been told. However, time was not on his side, and he couldn't waste it pondering. What he wanted to do more than anything was to go and have another look at those footprints near Number Four Dome.

"Jim, is there any chance of my slipping outside to have another look behind the dish?" he asked.

"Sure," the technician grinned, "and to make it legal I'll come with you. I'm not on duty for another twenty-four hours."

"Thanks, Jim, I can certainly do with some help. By the way, do you happen to know if the power beam has been shut off recently? Has the dish been serviced lately?"

"Not to my knowledge. You're thinking about those footprints? There does seem something a bit queer about them."

"I think I'll get a quick snack and then we'll go and have another look."

"Right. I'll meet you in Number Six Dome in, say, fifteen minutes."

They met as arranged. The two men now on duty at the airlock noted down the time when Tony and Jim went through.

Because there were two of them, no questions were asked, and for this Tony was thankful. As soon as they were outside he pointed the way forward, for they had arranged to communicate by signs rather than with their helmet radios in case anyone was eavesdropping.

Tony and Jim loped forward in slow leaps, and before very long they reached the roadway out to the landing strip. They pressed on and at last they could see the line of red posts and the big dish. With some caution they edged their way forward until they were standing but a few yards from the dish. With a gesture Tony pointed to the footprints.

Jim went forward another couple of paces, almost to the edge of the dish itself. Another yard and he would have been in the beam. But the technician was determined to get a good view of the prints that had so puzzled his friend. He could see nothing!

Jim beckoned Tony forward and pointed to the ground, and with utter astonishment the astronaut saw that the footprints which he'd discovered but a few hours before, were not there. It took all Tony's self-control to avoid bursting out "But I saw them." However, he maintained the agreed silence and gestured back helplessly.

There was no doubt about it. Someone had removed all trace of the footprints whilst Tony had been asleep. But why? If they were prints left by men who had been at work on the aerial, then there was no call to go to the trouble of scrubbing them out. Tony's heart beat a little more rapidly as he thought of the alternative explanation. Could the marks in the age-old lunar dust have been his first clue to the mystery of Lunar City?

Deliberately Tony knelt down and peered closely at the ground. He wondered whether Jim believed him or thought that he had been suffering from an hallucination. For a moment he wondered himself. Then his heart leapt with joy. He hadn't been mistaken. There, quite plainly, was a small portion of a heel print which hadn't been completely wiped out. He pointed it out to Jim, and the technician bent down to examine it. Jim

nodded his head. He was convinced now that Tony had really seen the prints in the dust, and that someone had since almost—but not quite—obliterated them.

Backing carefully from under the dish and the beam, the two men stood up. Tony was more than ever convinced that he'd stumbled across something very strange. It might, or might not, have anything to do with the fate of Morrey and Serge. But there was a good chance that it had, and he intended to pursue the lead vigorously.

Both of them went as close as they could to the part of the dome behind the aerial. Always they had to be wary of the stunning power of the invisible beam. But Tony felt it was essential that he should examine this part of Number Four Dome as minutely as possible. His efforts were rewarded.

It was the mechanism behind the dish receiver that caught his attention. There seemed an unnecessary amount of mobility in its mounting. Surely once the laser beam carrying power from the generator had been directed on to it, there was no need for any further movement of the dish. The generator was unlikely to be moved, so the facility to swivel the dish seemed superfluous. From what Tony could see it would be possible to swing the aerial through an angle of forty-five degrees on each side of the present path of the power beam. Why?

The other thing that intrigued him was the small door into the dome. It was in the wall immediately behind the aerial and was about five feet high and two feet wide. At a short distance away it was impossible to see it, so well and closely did it fit into the contour, and so well was it concealed by the dish itself. It was around this door that he'd seen the footprints.

Tony would have dearly loved to question Jim there and then about the purpose of the door and of the swivelling mechanism of the dish. But he'd decided to maintain radio silence at all costs, so he had to content himself with simply pointing out these two strange features to his companion. After a few more minutes, they crawled cautiously out of the danger area, and at a signal from Tony they set off towards Number Six

Dome.

How did it come about that there were footprints right in front of and behind, the aerial dish? How could anyone stand upright in the path of the power beam, as some of the prints had indicated? Why had someone taken the trouble of wiping out—almost—those same prints? What was the purpose of the swivel mechanism of the aerial? And what was that small door used for?

They passed through the airlock without question, though Tony noticed that their excursion had been recorded. As soon as they had stowed away their spacesuits he suggested that they went to the canteen for some refreshments.

“Come along to my cabin afterwards if you have time,” he said.

By now Jim was as intrigued as Tony about their discoveries outside Number Four Dome. There was still some time to go before he was back on duty. What he had learned about the disappearances of no fewer than seven men had shocked him. He could see, when Tony pointed it out to him, that it was essential to solve this mystery if the exploration of other worlds was to continue.

Even as he ate Tony could sense a change of atmosphere. People were looking at him uneasily and he saw several whisper to each other. When he exchanged greetings with some whom he knew, the usual light-hearted reply was missing. Not one person inquired where Morrey and Serge were, and to Tony this seemed to confirm that the rumours had already started. One could detect the unease in the quiet, almost furtive conversations that were going on around.

“Come on, Jim,” Tony said, as soon as they had finished. He was anxious to get to the privacy of his own cabin. It wasn’t long before he was closing the door behind them.

“What did you—” Jim began, but Tony silenced him with an imperious gesture.

He was looking at the telephone on the little ledge beside his

bed. Slowly he went towards the instrument and bent over it. For a long minute he looked at it carefully. Yes, he was convinced it had been tampered with during his absence. The hand receiver had been placed the wrong way round!

Deftly Tony unscrewed the mouthpiece and then the earpiece. Producing from his locker a pair of very slim pliers, he fished about inside the receiver and then withdrew them holding a small rectangular object no larger than a postage stamp and only about an eighth of an inch thick. He examined his discovery with interest, turning it round and round with the pliers.

“Very neat,” he commented at last. “I haven’t seen one like this before.”

“What is it?” Jim burst out.

“A bugging device,” Tony answered coolly. “I’ve put it out of action now, so we can speak freely. It would have picked up every word we said and transmitted them to whoever had planted it here.”

“But who could have done that? And why?”

“I don’t know for certain who was responsible for this pretty little device, though perhaps I can make a good guess. Why? Because someone thinks I’m getting to know something and wants to discover how much. Jim, this is another confirmation that I’m on the trail. Now, there are some questions I want you to answer for me. First of all, has the dish aerial been serviced lately? Or has the power been off recently? Who services it, and how often?”

“I can tell you that right away,” Jim answered. “Lane services it, and it’s done after each lunar night. It’s just a check-up to see that the cold hasn’t affected it in any way.”

“So it hasn’t had an official look-over for—well, two fifty hours?”

“About that.”

“Oh, about that door,” Tony went on. “Just an ordinary

airlock, I suppose?”

“I didn’t know it existed,” confessed Jim. “All domes have airlocks except Numbers Four and Eight. I’m sure it isn’t an airlock. Maybe it’s to move equipment in and out.”

“Could be,” agreed Tony, “but even equipment has to pass through a lock.”

Which was true, for any other type of entrance would allow the air in the dome to be sucked out in seconds.

“I’m going to have a talk to the Commander,” Tony said suddenly. There were many questions he wanted to ask.

“Want me to come along?” Jim inquired.

“No, I don’t want anyone to know you’re in the secret. But I’d be grateful if you’d do something for me, Jim. Will you find out exactly when the power beam was last shut off, and also details of previous shut-downs. Go back six months if you can.”

“Will do,” Jim said promptly. “I can get all the gen from the record sheets. We have to keep records of everything in the City, you know. I can get access to most of them.”

“Fine—I’ll see you back here in—two hours’ time?”

“That will do,” the technician answered. “It will give us time to have another get-together before I go on duty.”

“Gosh, Jim, I’m sorry,” Tony burst out, suddenly contrite. “I’ve been taking up all your rest period. You must be very tired.”

“I’m fine,” protested Jim. “If we’re going to crack this thing wide open we’ve got to be prepared to rough it. No, I’ll be all right.”

“See you then,” Tony said, as they left his cabin. He felt a warm glow of gratitude to his helper.

The Commander was off duty and Tony failed to conceal his disappointment from Mademoiselle Larue.

“Can I help you?” the French girl asked. “I can give you any information that the Commander can.”

“Yes, I’m sure you can,” Tony replied, and he believed this to be true. Yet he felt a strange reluctance to talk openly with the attractive Vice-Commandant.

“Well?” she said, as Tony stood hesitantly. Was there something a little hard behind her smile?

“I’m getting nowhere at all,” Tony said rapidly, “and I can’t do much till Chris comes. Meanwhile I had better get a report off about something I’m supposed to be here for. Let’s take the generator. Someone told me, I seem to remember, that you’ve had one or two interruptions to the supply. Can you tell me anything about them?”

Was it fancy or did the Vice-Commandant give him a swift, hard look?

“We haven’t had much trouble,” she replied. “It’s true that the generator has been shut down once or twice for adjustments to the receiver. We are very happy about how the 279 has functioned.”

“I’m sure you are,” Tony smiled, but added ruefully, “all the same I’d better send in a report about it. I won’t get my salary cheque if I don’t.”

“Very well,” the Vice-Commandant answered. She picked up a telephone and dialled some numbers.

“Vice-Commandant speaking,” she said, as soon as she got an answer. “Bring along the record sheet of the 279 for Mr. Hale. He has to report on the interruptions in supply. Please be as quick as you can.”

She put down the phone and Tony thanked her.

“Haven’t you found anything at all?” Danielle asked. “No clue about your friends?”

“Nothing,” Tony answered. It wasn’t very difficult for him to look extremely worried, for though he felt he had made some little progress, he still hadn’t any idea about what had happened to Morrey and Serge.

“What will you do now?”

“There’s little I can do,” Tony sighed, “until Chris comes. I suppose I’ll just potter around and see if there is anything I can pick up.”

“Do let me know if you find anything,” the girl said with a flashing smile. Tony swallowed hard and promised that he would. But at the same time he made a mental reservation.

There was a knock on the door and the Vice-Commandant invited the caller to enter. It was a girl whom Tony had seen somewhere before, probably in the Commander’s office. She carried a sheet of paper which she handed to Mademoiselle Larue. The Vice-Commandant scanned it quickly and then passed it to Tony as the other girl withdrew.

“As I thought,” Danielle said. “We’ve had very little trouble with the 279. Only three breaks as you see.”

There were certainly only three breaks listed on the sheet she handed to the astronaut. He looked over it rapidly, and as he did so his eyes nearly started from his head. The last break was listed as happening more than two earthly weeks before! Not a mention of any recent interruption of the power beam!

“Anything wrong?” the Vice-Commandant asked, looking at Tony curiously.

“Er—no,” he replied, pulling himself together quickly. “Can I keep this?”

“Of course,” Danielle replied sweetly. “Is there anything else you wish for?”

“No, thanks. I think I can concoct some form of report from this sheet,” Tony assured her. He was desperately anxious to get back to his cabin to meet Jim.

Jim wasn’t in the cabin, for Tony hadn’t expected to return so soon. He’d anticipated along and searching talk with Commander Cooper, for there was a lot of information he badly needed. Somehow he didn’t feel like questioning Mademoiselle Larue, though she should have been able to furnish all the answers as well as the Commander himself. He had to possess himself with what patience he could muster until the technician

returned.

Fortunately Jim, too, was back sooner than anticipated. As soon as he saw him Tony noticed his troubled looks.

“Tony,” he burst out, “I can’t understand this. I could swear the beam has been off more than—”

“More than three times?” the astronaut interrupted. “Yes, I know. I’ve had a copy of the same sheet that I see you’ve got. There’s no mention of any recent cut-off. Yet you and I know that there must have been, or how could those footprints have been made?”

“There’s something strange here,” Jim declared. “This record is phoney. Teddy Lane hasn’t been keeping it correctly.”

“Lane? Is he responsible?”

“He’s in charge of the receiver and the switching equipment, so he’s responsible for the records.”

“How can we check how often the beam has really been turned off?” Tony asked.

Jim thought for a minute.

“We might get it from the oxygen plant,” he said. “As you know, most of the power is used for cracking lunar rocks and producing O₂. If the power goes off, production stops. We could have a look round the records, though I guess they would alter those as well.”

“That’s true,” Tony conceded, “but we’ll have a look all the same.”

A man named Jackson was on duty at the plant controls in Number Six Dome. Tony hadn’t met him before, but he seemed to know all about the astronaut and his ostensible mission to Lunar City.

“Hello, Mr. Hale,” Jackson greeted them. “I’ve been expecting you. I was going to ask if you’d come alone, but I see you’ve got one of our chaps with you. Your friends busy?”

“Yes, they’re elsewhere,” Tony answered, with his fingers

crossed. “Jim here is off duty and acting as my guide. Can you show us round?”

“Sure,” Jackson agreed. “I’ll have to switch this little lot to automatic. Then I can leave it and come with you.”

Tony looked at the console, with its dials, its switches, its winking lights, and its recorders. Would this give him a further clue, he wondered.

12

The oxygen plant was remarkably quiet. Except for the fresh charging of one of the furnaces, or the occasional removal of ash, the process of extracting the oxygen went on silently. Jackson showed Tony and Jim around with manifest pride. He was even inclined to speak with a hushed voice in the cloistered quiet.

“How long could the City carry on without your factory?” asked Tony, as they watched a measured quantity of lunar rock being tipped automatically into one of the big spheres.

“Several weeks, or even months, I should imagine,” Jackson replied. “We keep big stocks of bottled gas ready for any emergency. Of course it would depend on whether we got many meteoric penetrations.”

“What used to happen before the factory was in operation?”

“Most of the atmosphere was re-cycled. It was kept topped up with supplies from Earth. But this was a very exacting—not to say costly—process. It’s much cheaper and better to use home-produced oxygen. We can afford to use quite a large percentage of new gas in the atmosphere. Our people prefer it to the constantly re-cycled stuff they used to breathe before.”

“You lose a certain amount of oxygen each time the airlocks are opened, don’t you?”

“Yes, and with six of them in use quite a fair amount of gas is

let out,” Jackson admitted. “Then again, when we do get a puncture more oxygen escapes. We have to keep these tanks full because they can supply any part of the City instantly. If the pressure drops in any of the domes or corridors, a supply from here is switched on automatically.”

“So your set-up here also acts as a warning system for meteor damage?”

“That is so, though we don’t depend on it. There is an alarm system from everywhere to central control. We would only get an indication here some fifteen seconds after a puncture takes place.”

“You probably know that my colleagues and I—” Tony felt a sharp pang as he referred to Morrey and Serge, but appearances must be kept up— “are here to report on, among other things, the reliability of the 279 generator. I take it that from your point of view everything is satisfactory. No major interruptions of supply?”

“Very few interruptions at all,” Jackson replied cheerfully. “Of course there have been some half dozen or so breaks for minor adjustments, but no major cut in power since the generator started operating.”

“So it’s much more satisfactory than the previous model,” Tony observed. “I understand that the older ones often broke down and had to be shut off periodically for re-fuelling.”

“That is so,” Jackson replied. “I remember it was touch and go when we had an extra long breakdown of one of the old generators. Our tanks were nearly empty and we were almost down to emergency conditions. Fortunately we had no meteor damage during that period. Otherwise we would all have had to jump into our pressure suits pretty quickly.”

“So you’ve had nothing like that with the 279? I take it that these minor interruptions you mentioned are Very short, and that you get due warning when they are coming?”

“We don’t get any warning,” Jackson replied surprisingly. “Not that it matters, for it keeps us on our toes. But all the

breaks have been short—generally about fifteen minutes or so.”

“Do you keep a record of the breaks?” Tony asked. He held his breath for the reply.

“They are recorded automatically. We don’t take any special action unless the break is long enough to cause concern. We haven’t had that happen with the 279.”

“When did you have the last break? Are you likely to get one at any time?”

“As I said, they do come unexpectedly,” Jackson replied. “I suppose we could get one within the next hour. Or we might go weeks without an interruption. I suppose the maintenance chaps could give us warning, but we pride ourselves in the plant on always being ready, so we haven’t asked for them. I think the last break we had was thirty hours or so ago, but we’ll check with the recorder.”

They made their way over to a bank of instruments. Tony felt a mounting excitement. Jackson had said that the power had been off as recently as thirty hours ago, but the official record had shown that there had been no break for 350 hours. He glanced across quickly at Jim, and he could see that the technician, too, realized the significance of the record they were about to see.

Jackson bent over the apparatus. The needles on its several dials were quite steady, indicating a consistent flow of current along the beam. At one side a strip of paper came from the machine and was being slowly rolled on to a drum. Drawn on the paper was a straight line showing that the current hadn’t fluctuated noticeably. Jackson began to unroll the drum to look at the record for the past week. He stopped in surprise. “They must have collected this for the Commander,” he said, indicating the almost empty drum. The roll of paper had been cut away, leaving a record of only the last few hours.

“They might have told me,” Jackson grumbled.

Tony felt terribly frustrated. He’d been hoping that on that paper roll he would find confirmation of his suspicion that the

official records had been falsified. Now he had nothing to go on—except that the record itself had been removed.

“When could they have fetched it?” he managed to ask.

“It must have been when I was off duty,” Jackson replied. “I’ll check with my relief, Wright, what time they were collected during his spell.”

Jackson went to a phone and dialled a number. It was ringing for some time and there was no reply.

“He must be very fast asleep,” Jackson said to Tony and Jim. Then he turned back to the phone.

“Bill, sorry to wake you up, but what time did they fetch the power record? Mr. Hale is anxious to include all the information we can give him in his report. Oh—and who fetched it?” Jackson asked.

He listened for a moment and then a look of astonishment came over his face.

“Are you sure?” he asked. Then he replaced the phone and turned to the waiting Tony and Jim.

“Bill says no one fetched that paper roll. As far as he knows there were at least two hundred hours on the drum. He’s coming over.”

“Have you been out of the plant?” Tony asked bluntly.

“Never for more than a few minutes,” Jackson assured him. “Just for the needs of nature. The plant runs on its own, you know.”

“Is there any other way of finding out when the power was last cut?” Tony asked.

Jackson was thoughtful for a moment. Then his face brightened.

“We record the volume of oxygen produced every twenty-five hours,” he said. “Normally when the plant is fully on, the amount doesn’t vary much between one twenty-five-hour period and another. There are just slight variations due to

fluctuations in the oxygen content of the ore. A cut in the power supply would have much more noticeable results, depending of course on the duration.”

“Where are the figures?”

Jackson went to a cabinet, opened it and withdrew a file. He extracted several sheets covered with figures and studied them.

“Here you are!” he exclaimed. “I knew it! The O₂ production in the last period but one was two per cent down.”

Tony did a quick calculation. If the current had been cut in the last but one twenty-five-hour period, it would be about the time he expected. And a two per cent reduction in production would mean a half-hour cut on the power supply. However, he still couldn't be sure that it had occurred about the time that Morrey and Serge had disappeared.

“How far back do your O₂ production records go?” Tony snapped. Under such a tremendous strain he wasn't aware of his discourtesy. Jim, understanding, gave a quick sign to Jackson, who nodded slightly.

“We have records from the time the plant came into operation,” Jackson replied calmly.

“I want a list of all the periods in which you've lost production,” Tony said sharply. “Can you get it quickly?”

“Give me half an hour and it's yours,” Jackson grinned.

“Good! Jim, will you stay here and bring the sheet to me as soon as Mr. Jackson has finished? I'll be in my cabin.”

“O.K. I'll be along,” the technician replied. He wished he could tell Jackson all he knew. It would explain Tony's brusqueness. But he'd promised to tell absolutely no one.

Tony went to his cabin because he wanted to think. Gosh! how he wanted to think! He was absolutely confident now that he was on the track of something sinister. It could be to do with the disappearance of his friends and the others.

There was a tap on the door and Jim came in carrying a

sheet of paper.

“I’ve been through the production records for the last few months and I’ve made a note of the periods in which there was a significant fall of production,” he said.

Tony took the paper and scanned it eagerly. Then he took another sheet from his cabinet and compared the two. “I knew it!” he burst out triumphantly. “Look at this, Jim.”

The technician bent over the second sheet that Tony had produced. It was the list of disappearances with their times and dates. In every case it seemed there had been a power cut to coincide with a disappearance.

So the power cuts and the disappearances must definitely be connected. One or two might possibly have come together by chance. But not six. If the victims hadn’t caused the cuts, the cuts must, in some way, have caused the disappearances, or at least be closely connected with them. If that was so, then someone inside Lunar City must be responsible. The six power cuts, which tallied so closely with the six disappearances—of the five men and then Morrey and Serge—could not have happened by themselves. An unknown person, or persons, within Lunar City itself must be responsible. But who?

It would be another forty-eight hours or so before Chris would arrive. Meanwhile the long lunar night was almost upon them. If he was to make yet another excursion it would have to be soon. But wasn’t there something he could do in Lunar City itself? What about investigating a little more closely the switching compartment, next to the dish aerial? Then there were the baggage rooms; he’d like to peep inside them, even though Danielle had said that they were just stacked with the personal kit of the Lunar City dwellers.

Suddenly Tony was aware that Jim was waiting patiently. How long he’d been turning over these problems in his mind he’d no idea. Seconds? Minutes? An hour?

“Sorry, Jim,” he apologized. “This thing is getting even more complicated. You agree that there’s something strange going on?”

“Something sinister, I’d say. What can we do, Tony?”

“I’m sure all these queer happenings and all these irregularities concerning the records are something to do with the disappearances. Someone knows I’m pretty hot on the trail —perhaps hotter than I know.”

“Then you could be in danger, Tony.”

“I know, and I’m going to grow a pair of eyes in the back of my head. However, if anything should happen to me, if I get whisked away, I want you to tell Chris Godfrey all you know when he comes.”

Tony was silent again for some minutes. Then he spoke up.

“Jim. I’m going to bring things to a head. I’m going to have another look behind the dish. And I’m going to let whoever Mr. X is know that I’m going.”

“But, Tony, you’ll be asking for it. You’ll vanish like the rest,” Jim protested.

“That’s a risk I’m prepared to take. However, I don’t think I shall. Remember that I know what I’m up against and none of the others did.”

“When do we go?”

“Not you and me, but me alone,” Tony said firmly. “If I am conjured away, you must be left behind to pass the message on to Chris. You will do that, won’t you, Jim?”

The technician looked uncomfortable.

“I’d far rather come with you, Tony,” he said. “But if I’d be more help staying behind, I’ll do it. How are you going to get out alone?”

“I’ll manage it all right. I’ve got a scheme in my mind already.”

For the next few minutes Jim watched with the deepest interest, as Tony took up the small transmitter that he’d previously removed from his telephone and began to replace it.

“I’m going to let Mr. X into the secret of all I know,” Tony

grinned. "At least, almost all. Now, when I give the signal you remain quiet. Up till then, we can talk."

"But won't they know that you've discovered the transmitter? It will have been silent for some time."

"They can't be sure. They could think there's been a technical hitch, or just simply that I haven't been in my room. Now, I don't want you to get involved, Jim. Your part is to tell everything to Chris Godfrey if—if I'm not able to. So I'm going to pretend that I'm recording my report on tape, and not speaking to someone else."

With deft fingers Tony replaced the tiny piece of apparatus in the place from which he'd removed it. Before he made the last connection he signalled to Jim for silence. As far as he knew they were "on the air", and someone, somewhere, might be listening.

"Better get all this stuff down on the recorder," Tony said, as if muttering to himself. "Hope the wretched thing works."

There was a pause, during which the astronaut gave a heavy wink to his companion.

"I think that's got it," Tony said between his teeth. "I'd better let it warm up."

Another pause, and then he pretended to record.

"This is an urgent message to Sir Billy and Chris," he began, "which I'm making in case anything happens to me just as it has to Morrey and Serge."

Then he went on to describe how he'd managed to slip out of Lunar City alone and had discovered the footprints around the dish aerial. These had puzzled him, for the people who had made them must have been standing in the direct path of the beam. He did not mention that anyone was with him during his second excursion, but concentrated on the disappearance of the footprints. He also expressed curiosity about the peculiar manner in which the aerial was mounted, and referred to his discovery of some sort of door into Lunar City at this point. Finally he mentioned that he was going out once more before

the light faded so that he could have a closer look at the door.

He made no mention of his discovery of the relationship between the power cuts and the disappearances. Nor did he say anything about the discrepancy in the records and the attempt to conceal them from him. But he did pretend to place on record his distrust of Lane and Mr. Ho.

“I’m signing off now,” he concluded, “and I’m concealing this tape where Chris will know where to find it. See you soon, I hope, Chris. Cheerio.”

He winked at Jim as he ushered his friend outside. Closing the door behind him Tony turned to his companion.

“If they got that,” he said, “two things are likely to happen. They’ll search my cabin for the supposed tape, and they’ll have a go for me when I’m outside.”

13

Jim looked at Tony. He could see that the astronaut was determined to carry out his plan regardless of the danger to himself, so he could only agree to fulfil his part. He promised to listen-in constantly once Tony was through the airlock.

“To remove any suspicion that you are in any way involved with me, I’m going to get the Commander to give me special permission to go outside alone,” Tony said. “Then, when you let me through, you’ll only be obeying orders.”

“But suppose the Commander won’t let you?”

“He won’t stop me. I’ll tell him some of my reasons for wanting to go out alone, and if they are not sufficient I’ll get on the radio to U.N.E.X.A. Sir Billy will jolly soon overrule our Mr. Cooper.”

“I’ve got to go back on duty now,” Jim said regretfully. “I wish I were coming with you. Do be careful, Tony. I’d rather you gave Mr. Godfrey your message yourself.”

“So would I,” Tony grinned, “but now I must get moving. The day is nearly over.”

The two parted—Jim to his spell on duty at the airlock in Number Six Dome, and Tony to seek out the Commander. This time he was more fortunate, for the chief himself was on duty. He asked the astronaut to sit down and inquired what he had to report. Tony launched into an account similar to the supposed

tape record, for some sixth sense warned him against revealing all he knew.

Commander Cooper looked very troubled at the end of Tony's account. He had no explanation to offer and had to concede that he was completely mystified. He could look up the records which should show details of the aerial mounting, and also whether there had been a temporary door at this point, presumably to help the construction. Certainly there was no airlock operating there now.

At first the Commander refused to allow Tony to go outside alone. He pointed out that it was contrary to his orders and he could make no exception. But when the young man asked if he could use the radio to speak to Sir Billy Gillanders, Commander Cooper wilted.

"You're sure it is essential to your investigations?" he asked. "If you do go out alone I accept no responsibility for your safety."

"That's all right, Commander. I can look after myself. Yes—I'm convinced that I'm on to something, and that these footprints, this aerial mounting, and this old entrance all have a bearing on the problem."

"But if anything happens to you?"

"Just get on to Sir Billy and Chris Godfrey right away and tell them how stubborn I was."

"Very well," the Commander sighed. "But of course what you are hinting is that someone here under my command is responsible for the disappearances. Is there anyone you suspect?"

"It's too early for that, sir. However, I am quite sure that these seven haven't been whisked away by aliens from another solar system."

"Then how have they been disposed of? Remember not a single trace of them has been found."

Tony almost said, "Ah—but that's what Mr. Ho says," but he

bit it back. He didn't want to reveal even to the Commander how far his suspicions had gone.

"That's the problem, sir," he replied soberly, "and I admit that I haven't a clue. It's to try and find one that I'm taking this trip before it gets dark."

"I'll come along with you to the airlock," the Commander declared. "I'll be on tenterhooks till you get back."

"Thank you, sir. This thing has got to be cracked quickly."

When they reached the dome they went to the airlock and Tony saw that Jim was back on duty. No sign but a surreptitious wink passed between them.

"Medding, I've given Mr. Hale permission to go out alone. He has to—er—write an urgent report on the generator, and he's anxious to complete it before the light goes."

"Yes, sir," said Jim, with a completely solemn face. "I'll fit Mr. Hale up at once. How long will you be out, Mr. Hale?"

"Oh, say sixty to ninety minutes," Tony replied airily, "but don't get worried if I'm a few minutes over."

Jim had already brought out a spacesuit and he and his fellow technicians had started to help Tony get dressed. The Commander watched, and Tony wondered what the man was thinking. When his helmet was finally latched into position, his oxygen supply tested and his helmet radio tried out, he signalled his readiness to go. Commander Cooper took a microphone and told him that he would wait in his office for his return. Then he turned and went away. Jim gave Tony a "thumbs up" sign and the astronaut moved forward to the airlock.

Just before he entered it Jim's voice sounded in his helmet.

"We'll be monitoring you, Mr. Hale," he said. "Call out if you get into any kind of trouble."

Tony saw the technician looking anxiously at him through his vizor. Without speaking, but with a sign of acknowledgement, Tony stepped through the door. A moment later he was outside

with the harsh and cruel landscape all around.

With a great effort to conquer the disquiet he felt, Tony began to clump his way towards the Number Five Dome. Often his feet were hidden from him in the darkness cast by some rock or hillock. Several times he stumbled on some loose, unseen stone. It was dangerous, he knew, walking alone in such conditions. A fall could injure him and a sharp rock could damage his pressure suit.

Doggedly, heart racing, eyes darting restlessly from side to side, Tony plodded on. Far out on his right he could see a ferry standing aloofly on the launching pad. Its upper part was still in the blaze of the setting sun, and he could even read the identity number of the ship. Before long another ship from Earth would join it, and this one would bring Chris. Only as this thought entered his mind did Tony fully realize how much he yearned for his friend, how much he was looking to him for help and advice. Never before had Tony been so completely on his own. Never before had so much been at stake—perhaps the whole of the future exploration of space.

In spite of his racing thoughts and rapid pulse, Tony managed to keep some fairly idle chatter going over his radio. It didn't convey much—and he'd no intention that it should. But at least it let Jim know that nothing had yet happened.

Now Tony was crossing the concrete road that led from the airlock in Number Five Dome straight out to the ferry landing pad. It didn't seem very long since he'd travelled this road after his arrival. Only then he'd been with Morrey and Serge. Never in his worst moments had he dreamed that he would lose his friends and have to face the heaviest responsibility of his life alone.

Anyone listening carefully to his voice couldn't have failed to detect the tremor in it. Indeed Tony himself became aware of it and pulled himself together angrily. To cover up he talked even faster and more inanely. Then suddenly his chatter came to an abrupt halt.

Was it his imagination—or had he detected a movement

from the corner of his eye?

Tony stood quite still. He faced the direction from which he imagined he'd seen something move. All was still—at least all that he could see. But that wasn't to say there was nothing hiding in one of the dense black shadows.

The seconds ticked by. He was certain he'd seen something. Surely it couldn't be imagination, even though he knew himself to be tense with expectancy. Yet all seemed deadly still wherever he looked.

Then a thought struck him. Something was not quite right. What it was, Tony couldn't tell, but the feeling grew stronger. He scanned the landscape as carefully as he could, but he could see nothing that could have given rise to his unease. Until he happened to look towards the dish aerial!

He stopped dead in his tracks. All his fears and speculations were confirmed in one blinding flash. His confidence that something was wrong within Lunar City itself was proved. The dish aerial, which was designed and installed solely to receive the beam from the 279 generator, was moving!

As he watched with fascinated horror, Tony saw that the bowl was no longer facing the generator. It was moving slowly round. And it was moving towards him!

Never had his mind worked so fast and so clearly. He wasn't conscious of it, but his life, the lives of his friends and the whole future of space exploration depended on the mental processes of this one young man. His thoughts flashed across his mind with lightning speed. What had been merely suspicions became certainties. What had been theory was now confirmed.

That dish was never intended to alter its position in its function as the receiver of the power beam. The direction of the beam was constant, and the aerial's attitude should be constant also. Why, then, was it now swivelling slowly towards him?

There could be only one answer. The aerial had somehow been modified so that it was also a reflector. Whoever was operating it was probing the barren lunar landscape with an

invisible finger—the reflected beam of the 279 generator!

So this was how Serge, Morrey and the others had been knocked out! This was the means by which they had been silenced! Here was the explanation of how they had been struck down without warning! The reflected beam had sought them out like an invisible searchlight. From his own experience Tony knew what effect this would have. The victims would be struck unconscious without knowing what had hit them.

And this was what was going to happen to him. But not if he could help it.

From its angle Tony judged that the beam from the aerial was being reflected quite close to him. In a few seconds he would feel the blow of an invisible sledgehammer. After that he'd be unable to help his friends any more. He'd be just one more victim of the most fantastic attack ever conceived.

Almost without thinking he babbled into his helmet radio, describing the moving aerial and his guess at its purpose. No doubt his attackers would hear him and realize that he'd discovered their mode of offence. They wouldn't be alarmed, for it was too late for him to do anything. The power beam would effectively silence his words. Then they would deal with him as they had with the others.

All this was going through Tony's mind as he watched, with dreadful fascination, the aerial swing towards him. Even if it did betray to his enemies what he knew, perhaps Jim would hear him too. If the technician was monitoring his radio, as promised, then he would learn what had happened to the astronaut. Then if only he was able to conceal his knowledge and pass it on to Chris!

Desperately Tony looked round, and there he saw salvation at his feet. He'd never been a great admirer of lunar craters, but now, right in front of him, was one about six feet in diameter and eighteen inches deep. It was just made for the job. Without hesitation Tony flung himself into it and lay still, his heart racing madly.

Of course he couldn't tell whether the beam had yet passed

over him. From the angle of the dish it must have been very close to the crater when he had sought its protection. If he was right then the beam would have moved on and he was safe, saved from its stunning power by this fortunate crater.

What should he do now? As he lay there breathing heavily, Tony turned the situation over in his mind. His first impulse was to call out over his radio and tell Jim just what had happened. Yet he hesitated, for this would let his attackers know that he'd escaped the power of the beam. Should he get up and hurry to the protection of Lunar City? He had little doubt that they could quickly swing the laser back again. Then there would be no convenient crater and he would be struck down like the others.

If he remained still in the crater what would happen? He was fairly sure that whoever was operating the aerial would think that he'd been rendered unconscious. Then perhaps he would discover just what had happened to Morrey and Serge. Someone, surely, must come along to finish off the job. But unlike his unfortunate friends, he might get the opportunity of learning who it was. If only he could get the information to Jim, then he and the other victims would be avenged.

It was an awful decision to make. The natural reaction would be to try to save one's life, remote though the chance might be. However, now that Morrey and Serge had been eliminated, Tony felt that he must do all in his power to bring the evil ones to justice. Maybe a desire for personal revenge, even at the cost of his own life, was his main motive rather than the altruistic one of trying to preserve space exploration. Whatever was his reason—and Tony himself could not have said—he decided to lie still and feign unconsciousness. Only if he saw that his death was imminent would he break radio silence to tell Jim.

How long would he have to remain motionless within the black shadow of this small crater? He believed that the stunning effect of the power beam was limited, for he himself had recovered quite quickly. If this was typical, his attackers would not let him lie there long enough to regain consciousness.

Tony wriggled carefully along the bottom of the depression. When he judged that he was in the right place he stopped. Again, very slowly, he began to lift his head. The rocks were right alongside, and between them there was a small gap. With a further slight adjustment he moved so that he could look through.

Now was the crucial moment, for if he raised his head too much his helmet might glint in the setting sun and betray him. Holding his breath in the intensity of his concentration, Tony made another fractional movement. Now he could just see between the rocks.

In a split second he was lying flat on the crater bottom. That quick look had been enough. Not fifty yards away were the two lunar jeeps of a search party, and already six spacesuited figures were climbing out and walking purposefully towards him.

14

It took all Tony's self-control to stop crying out. If he did he could tell Jim that the search team were approaching. But he still didn't know what happened afterwards. For the sake of his lost friends and for the others, he must hang on to the last possible moment. His cry—when he gave it—must tell as much as he could. And he wanted to know much more. He opened one eye very slightly and squinted through his lashes.

A chilling sight met him. The search party had now reached his crater and the six spacesuited figures were standing in a circle looking down at him. From where he lay the searchers looked huge and menacing, but try as he would, he couldn't guess who they were.

As the seconds ticked on Tony forced himself to lie immobile. Every moment he expected to feel a blow or a cut which would be the signal for him to call out. Until that happened he'd still try to discover if these were Mr. Ho and his men.

Why were they so silent? Then Tony realized that their helmet radios must be working on a different wavelength from his own—the official one. They could be talking about him as they looked down on his recumbent figure and discussing how to finish him off. If only he could have heard their conversation he could perhaps have recognized their voices. Certainly he would be able to tell Mr. Ho's.

Suddenly things began to happen. Still resisting the instinct to cry out, Tony felt himself picked up and lifted out of the crater. Four of the masked figures had seized him while the other two looked on.

A second later he realized something very strange. He wasn't being handled at all roughly. Instead he was being transported quite gently towards one of the jeeps. Why this was he couldn't guess. He would have expected his attackers to treat their unconscious victim with scant care. Every moment he was expecting a rain of heavy blows and still they didn't come. If he had been the victim of an accident, and these men a medical team, he couldn't have been carried more carefully. Filled with curiosity as to what was going to happen, Tony kept his eyes closed, but he tried to sense everything that was going on.

He felt himself lifted into one of the jeeps, and a moment later the vehicle lurched forward. Experimentally Tony squinted through one eye, only to see the backs of two of the team as they sat in the front seat. It was impossible to raise himself to see where they were going without giving himself away. As he seemed in no immediate danger he decided to keep up his pretence.

After a little the lunar jeep stopped. They had come to the end of the journey for him also. Had his captors handled him gently only to deal the knock-out blow more effectively when they had reached the right place?

Again he felt himself carefully lifted. Again four of his captors carried him. So they were not going to kill him right away! Then what was going to happen? Where were they taking him?

He had his answer and it was one he had partly guessed. He was being carried into Lunar City! However, it couldn't be into one of the official airlocks. They hadn't travelled far enough to reach one of those. It could only be through the entrance that he'd discovered near the aerial. This was the entrance, he'd been told, that had not been used since the installation of the receiving dish had been completed. It was being used now right

enough, and he had little doubt that what was happening to him had also happened to the others.

Though he couldn't hear a thing, Tony sensed that the door behind him had been closed. A light was shining through his vizor, confirming that he was indeed inside Lunar City. Another squint and he could see his captors standing around, waiting, no doubt, for air to be pumped into the room so that they could remove their helmets. Soon he would be able to see who they were. Then he would tell everything to Jim.

Gradually Tony began to hear muffled sounds and the vacuum in the room disappeared. Faintly he heard some of his captors shuffling about as they waited for the atmospheric pressure to rise. Confirmation that they had removed their helmets came from the sound of voices, muffled by his own helmet. He strained to hear what they were saying.

It was Mr. Ho and his men all right. Tony recognized the distinctive voice of the Chinese, and he was quite sure he remembered the voices of one or two of the others as well. His effort to hear what they were saying made him forget his resolve to tell Jim who his assailants were the moment he knew. He concentrated on trying to follow their words.

"We must take off his pressure suit before we put him with the others," Mr. Ho said. "I will prepare the injection."

The others? Injection? What did it mean? Surely "the others" could only refer to Serge, Morrey, and the other five victims of this gang. As for the injection, it could be the way the Chinese killed his victims. Tony knew that there are many substances which, if injected into a vein, can cause death in a very short time.

Yet the squad had so far treated him gently! It didn't tie up with Mr. Ho's preparations to kill him. Why carry him so carefully when they believed him to be unconscious if their intention was to murder him as soon as they had got him inside Lunar City?

Tony was still wrestling with these seemingly insoluble problems when he felt several pairs of hands begin to divest

him of his spacesuit. In a few moments the squad would be removing his helmet and his only means of communication with Jim. He was in a terrible dilemma. Should he call out and reveal that he was conscious, telling the technician as much as he could before he was silenced? Or should he still feign insensibility until he had learned more of the fate of his friends?

It was this careful treatment of him that puzzled Tony most. Suppose, after all, Mr. Ho and his men meant him no harm? Then their conduct was strange indeed. That he had been deliberately “knocked out” by the reflected power beam Tony had no doubt. The attack on him and on the others must have been deliberately made and carefully planned. Why otherwise would the aerial be made to reflect and swivel, and the secret entrance used?

Then, as this bewildering jumble of thoughts and questions milled about his mind, his helmet was removed!

So—it was too late to warn Jim. Because of his desire to learn all he could before betraying himself, Tony had left it too late. His radio was gone. He was on his own.

Well—vain regrets would get him nowhere. He must make the best of things as he found them now.

Of course he had learned a great deal more by continuing his pretence of unconsciousness. He knew now for certain that Mr. Ho and his team had had a hand in the disappearance of “the others”. He knew how they had gone about their task. But what was still puzzling him most was their treatment of him. A patient in hospital couldn’t have been handled more carefully.

Methodical and efficient hands removed his spacesuit. Someone lifted an eyelid and he heard a voice say, “He’s still out.” Though he hadn’t been harmed so far, Tony couldn’t be certain but what he would be roughly treated once the squad knew he was conscious. He was relieved that they still believed he was out cold. As he was lifted he let his limbs and head hang limply. He hoped he was putting on a good act.

Even though his body seemed limp and useless, his mind

and senses were keenly alive. One thing he found out. Though the search squad had removed their helmets, they still wore their suits. Why didn't they discard those also? Tony could feel the special material of his bearers' clothing as they carried him into yet another room.

Again it took all his self-control to maintain his pretence, for an icy blast had struck him as he was carried through the door. Did an unconscious man shiver? For the life of him he couldn't remember. But what on earth was happening? Where was he? Why this freezing temperature? It couldn't be much colder outside.

He was placed on some form of bed or couch. As he lay, he tried to hear what Mr. Ho's squad was talking about, but they spoke little and in low voices.

"He'll be all right for a time," he managed to hear one of them whisper. "Let's go where it's warmer."

At that the team must have gone out of this freezing room. When he could hear them no longer, Tony ventured to open his eyes. It wasn't easy, for already his lashes were becoming frozen to his cheeks. Then he permitted himself the luxury of a shiver and a gasp in this chilly atmosphere.

He could see that the room was but dimly lit. He must get up and look around before he became too frozen to move. Somehow he must get out of this icebox, or he wouldn't live very long. Perhaps this was the way his attackers meant to kill him. But why this way?

It took quite an effort to force his freezing muscles to obey him. Painfully he raised himself and tried to turn his head to look round the room. At first he didn't think he would manage it, for he felt a growing stiffness creeping over him. Then he forgot the stiffness, forgot the freezing cold, forgot the danger he was in, for he saw the most astounding thing.

On a neat row of beds similar to his own were the bodies of seven people!

The shock must have given power to his muscles, for Tony

forced himself up from his bed to stand, swaying, on the floor. He almost stumbled as his nearly useless limbs carried him to this row of corpses. As he feared and dreaded, there lay the still bodies of Morrey and Serge next to each other. And the other five must obviously be the men who had seemed to vanish from the Moon's surface.

If only... His thoughts came to a stop and something else crashed into his brain. Now his heart was racing and pumping blood all round his body. He bent right over his two friends and looked at them intently.

How he stopped from shouting aloud with joy, Tony would never know. Morrey and Serge were not dead. They were under hypothermia!

Of course! He should have recognized it before. The divesting of the outer clothes, the careful placing on a couch, the freezing temperature, and Mr. Ho's reference to an injection. It all added up, for Tony himself had been put into this state many times before.

Hypothermia had become one of the most important aids to deep space travel. Because of the fantastic distances involved and the long, tedious journeys—some lasting many months—astronauts were put into a type of hibernation. After they had received an injection which ensured that the vital functions didn't flutter out altogether, the body temperature was reduced until they lost consciousness and life almost ceased. Then, as they neared their objective, the temperature would be slowly raised and the astronauts restored to life.

Tony thought he could see it all now. Mr. Ho, with his squad, and with the help of others, would select a victim walking outside. Then, with the most cunning of weapons, the reflected power beam, they would strike down the unfortunate man, who would never know what had hit him. Whilst he was still unconscious the search squad would bring him into this secret part of Number Four Dome and, literally, put him into cold storage. After that the search team would return in the orthodox way and blandly report that they had discovered

nothing of the missing man.

The shock of finding Morrey and Serge, the wild relief of discovering that they were not dead, and the tumult of thoughts and speculations that followed, had kept Tony unaware of the freezing cold. But now it could no longer be ignored. He found increasing difficulty in moving, and his fingers were starting to grow numb.

He turned away from the row of recumbent figures. What should he do? In a short time Mr. Ho would return to give him his pre-hypothermia injection. If he found that Tony was still conscious and had discovered the secret of the disappearing men, who could say he wouldn't resort to violence? If the Chinese and his team had so skilfully created this mystery, would they not go to great lengths to preserve it intact? They would obviously have to do something pretty drastic to detain Tony against his will.

If he remained in this icebox much longer, he realized that his chance of escaping would vanish. Even if he hadn't become frozen, Mr. Ho would return and then all hope of eluding his attackers would evaporate. He stumbled towards the door through which the others had left.

It was effectively fastened. The lever handle refused to budge in spite of Tony's utmost effort. He paused. For a moment the exertion had revived his circulation and perhaps allowed him to think a little more clearly. If he had succeeded in opening the door, it was certain that he would have blundered into someone who would alert the Chinese. His chance of escape and of helping his friends would be non-existent. In near despair he turned away.

15

As far as Tony could remember, when he'd been carried in through the unofficial airlock, they had waited in the outer room while it had filled with air. When the pressure had risen to equal that inside Lunar City, the door to the inner room had been opened and he'd been brought through. The door had been closed behind the party and no one had gone out that way since. If he was right, there should be air in the outer room and he would be able to get into it and at least escape this freezing cold. But if he was wrong and someone had passed out on to the Moon's surface again, or if for any other reason the atmospheric pressure was down, he wouldn't have sufficient strength to open the door against the pressure from his side.

Tony forced his stiffening legs to carry him over to the door. He took the handle and prepared to twist it. Soon he would know if he could escape this living death for a short time, or if he was condemned soon to be frozen like his friends.

The handle moved, the door wasn't fastened. But would it open? He gave it a tug and it didn't move. Despair flooded over him. He was, it seemed, doomed to share the fate of the others, and perhaps a worse one if Mr. Ho found him wandering about. Perhaps it would be best to crawl back to his couch and let consciousness drain away from him. Presumably he would then awake with the others at the pleasure of the Chinese.

He looked at the handle again. No wonder that the door hadn't opened. He hadn't twisted it far enough and the catch

was still holding. With renewed hope Tony applied himself to it once more, and this time the door swung open with ease. He stepped through and closed the door behind him to keep out the biting cold. At least he could get some circulation going, he thought, as he began to massage himself. The sight of his spacesuit still lying in one corner made him pause. If he could get into it, its temperature control would heat up his body faster than anything else.

It wasn't easy, unaided and still very stiff, for Tony to put on the suit, but at last he succeeded. Soon he felt the warmth coming back into his body and in spite of the unpleasant tingling in his fingers and toes, he welcomed it. Now he must give thought to what he should do next.

He could escape out into the open and get back to Jim. This would give him the opportunity to tell Jim about his discoveries. But what would happen then? As soon as Mr. Ho came back into the cold room he would see that his victim had escaped. Though the Chinese would not know that Tony had avoided the knock-out blow of the power beam, he would conclude that his victim had somehow recovered earlier than expected. He would know that there was only one way by which Tony could get out of the cold room. When he saw that the spacesuit was missing he would guess that the astronaut intended to return into Lunar City to give the alarm. What would his reaction be? There could be only one answer. He would try to kill Tony before he revealed all he knew.

Then Tony had an idea. It was desperate in the extreme and its chance of success was remote. But if it succeeded...

Quite deliberately he turned to the door back into the hypothermia room. He was going back among his friends. Cautiously he opened the door a very little and peered through the tiny crack. All appeared to be as he'd left it. Mr. Ho hadn't yet returned. With a swift movement Tony stepped inside among the frozen bodies, but as he had the protection of his spacesuit only his face felt the chill.

Quickly, but methodically, Tony searched the compartment.

Having been under hypothermia himself many times, he knew precisely what he was looking for. Ah! there it was. His objective was the apparatus controlling the temperature of the room, for it was by maintaining it below freezing point that the “patients” were kept in hibernation.

The temperature control was of a type with which Tony was quite familiar. As a mechanic he always took a close interest in any piece of equipment that caught his attention. This control was the same as those he’d examined scores of times, and he had no difficulty in making a few important adjustments. With an anxious glance at the inner door, he hurried back to the airlock room, stripped off his spacesuit and left it, as nearly as he could remember, where he had found it. Then he returned to the hypothermia room, closing the outer door behind him. He’d just settled back on to his couch when he heard Mr. Ho enter.

Tony felt all warmth flowing out of his body as he awaited the approach of Mr. Ho. This time he welcomed the freezing process. His great anxiety was that he might flinch under the prick of the hypodermic needle. All he hoped was that the Chinese didn’t discover he was still conscious, or at least that his body was not as cold as it should have been. If Mr. Ho suspected that all was not as it seemed, Tony’s plan would be useless.

Something seized his arm and at once Tony felt some relief. Mr. Ho still wore a glove on that hand at least, so he wouldn’t feel the last vestiges of warmth that remained in Tony’s body. Perhaps he’d only remove the glove from the hand that was to operate the needle. Now for the prick.

It wasn’t as bad as he’d feared, perhaps because he was already growing numb. When Mr. Ho let go of his arm he let it fall back to his side. There was silence for a few minutes while the Chinese apparently, was watching. Then Tony heard him leave through the inner door. He tried to open his eyes but all life seemed to have gone out of him, so he relaxed and awaited hypothermia.

Jim was in a state of extreme worry. Tony hadn’t returned in

the time arranged, so now he must be listed as missing. Jim picked up the phone and dialled direct to the Commander's office, which was only allowed in case of extreme urgency. He recognized Commander Cooper's voice with its slight stutter and poured out his fears for Tony.

"Right," the Commander replied after a slight pause. "I'll turn out the search team immediately. Did Mr. Hale say anything before he went through the airlock?"

"No, sir, except to inform me how long he expected to be outside. You were at the airlock at the time."

"Ah, so I was. I only wanted to be quite sure Mr. Hale hadn't dropped any hint of what he was going to do. It might have helped the search team to decide where to look for him."

When the Commander's report came through to U.N.E.X.A. on the scrambler radio, Chris demanded that the ferry should be launched at once. He declared himself to be quite—well, nearly, recovered from his illness. Tony's disappearance, following that of Morrey and Serge, seemed like the end of the world to him. He no longer cared for Sir Billy, for U.N.E.X.A., for himself or anything else. His heart was gripped in utter anguish at the loss of his very closest friend.

"Very well," Sir Billy growled. "Get off as soon as you can. Pick a reliable crew to go with you."

He could see he had no option but to let Chris have his way. Otherwise, he felt, he couldn't be responsible for his Deputy's sanity.

"I'll take Campbell, Johnson, Williams and Spier," Chris snapped, naming the astronauts he had taken with him on a memorable venture some time before. He could rely utterly on this strangely assorted quartet. This was indeed a "do or die" effort. Unless he could find out what had happened to his three friends, and unless he could avenge them, he had no wish ever to return to Earth.

"We'll take blasters with us," Chris said grittily. He was referring to the deadly laser guns that were carried so rarely.

They could be used to emit either a pencil—thin beam which could slice through men or materials, or a diffused wide-angled beam that would stun whoever was in its path.

Preparations for the departure of the ferry went on at breakneck speed. The four astronauts who were to accompany Chris were briefed and ready. A code message was sent out to Commander Cooper that the special ferry was on its way and that he was to place himself at the complete disposal of Mr. Godfrey.

Had Mr. Ho really gone? Was it his imagination that he had heard a click as the inner door closed? Tony lay for quite five minutes waiting for the hypothermia to begin. Instead he felt himself getting warmer. The chill was going from his body. Then he knew that his hibernation was over.

Cautiously, Tony slightly opened an eye. There didn't seem to be anyone in the chamber, so he opened both fully. With infinite care he turned his head. No, the room was empty, except for the seven still forms lying on the couches, still in frozen sleep.

Because he'd been frozen very lightly, Tony guessed that he would recover much more quickly than any of the others. It might still be some time before Morrey, Serge and the other five were thawed out. There was nothing he could do to speed up the process, which had to take place gradually so as not to cause injury to the subject.

Whilst he was waiting Tony thoroughly explored the room. It was about twenty feet square and must have been one of the rooms where he'd been told baggage was kept.

Obviously the door came in for a close scrutiny. It was locked and there was no means of opening it. The door to the outer room was still unfastened and full of air. When he peeped inside he saw his spacesuit where he'd left it, which made him wonder what had happened to the others' suits and how much longer his own would be allowed to lie around. That thought led him to ponder on the possibility of someone returning to check

on the victims and to put his suit away. He guessed that the inspection wasn't made very often, as the subjects would remain frozen for as long as the room remained below freezing point.

For a moment he thought about putting on his suit and again trying to get out and round to Number Six Dome. But he doubted whether Jim would still be on duty, and he very much wanted to be on hand when Morrey and Serge revived. With his ears straining for the slightest sound of someone returning to the chamber he went over to look at his friends.

His heart pounded with relief. Both Serge and Morrey were showing signs of recovery, and it wouldn't be long before both were conscious once more. A quick look at the other five showed that they, too, were well on the way to recovery, but some would take longer than others. Back with his friends Tony watched and listened. At last Morrey's eyelids began to flutter and the colour returned more strongly to his face. His chest was now rising and falling gently as respiration recommenced. Serge was only slightly behind in his progress.

Tony could have shouted for joy when at last Morrey's eyes opened. He placed a hand quickly over his friend's mouth in case he should call out in surprise, for Morrey looked astounded to see Tony bending over him.

"Don't make any noise," Tony whispered urgently, "and I'll tell you all that has happened."

A whole range of expressions passed over Morrey's face as he listened to Tony's recital. There were obviously a thousand questions he would have liked to ask, but this wasn't the time to do it. Even as Tony concluded his account of their position a slight movement from Serge attracted their attention, and within a few minutes the Russian was awake and Tony's tale had to be repeated.

An examination of the others showed that each was in an advanced stage of thawing, and within the next thirty minutes all five had returned to consciousness. Low whispers acquainted them all with the situation.

“What do we do now?” asked Andrew Barnett, the first man to “vanish”.

“Get out of this room,” suggested Tony. “There are eight of us here. I’m sure we could break down the door.”

“And warn Mr. Ho that we’ve recovered? No, I don’t think we had better do that,” Morrey replied. “Though they haven’t shown us any physical violence as yet, we don’t know what weapons they may have. We have none—except surprise.”

“There’s someone coming,” Barnett said, in an urgent whisper.

Everyone froze—except Morrey. He tiptoed over to stand right behind the door. The eight almost held their breaths as they waited for the next move.

Quite plainly they heard the door catches being released. Then the door swung open and a man stepped inside. There was hardly time to note that he was wearing a spacesuit as protection against the cold he expected to find inside. However, his head was bare, and even while he stood rooted to the ground at seeing the eight, Morrey brought his clasped hands down on his head with the force of a sledge-hammer. With a gasp the man sank to the floor unconscious.

“The door’s open,” someone said unnecessarily.

“Wait a bit. Keep inside,” Morrey said sharply. “We’d better think out a plan of campaign.”

“I think we should march out of here, see the Commander and demand the arrest of Mr. Ho and his gang,” Tony said hotly.

“And who else? There must be other people involved in this. Someone has to swivel the aerial. Someone had to monitor your fake message. Then again that aerial, these hypothermia facilities, that secret entrance—they didn’t all happen by chance. There are more in this plot than we know. To have constructed or modified all these things must have involved a number of people. And another question I shall want answering is—how could these things be done without the Commander

knowing?”

Tony could see the force of Morrey’s argument. Surely Commander Cooper must have been aware of the modification to the aerial, the installation of the hypothermia apparatus, and the continued use of the secret entrance.

The materials required and the technicians to do the job must have been ordered by someone in authority. And this could only be Commander Cooper or his Vice-Commandant, Mademoiselle Larue.

“So we don’t know whom we can trust,” Tony said bitterly. “We don’t know how many people are involved in this plot.”

“If only we knew why,” Serge sighed, “we could perhaps guess who might be concerned.”

“Couldn’t you take charge of Lunar City? Have you the authority to take over from the Commander?” one of the men asked.

“No,” Morrey replied, “I haven’t. Only Chris Godfrey will be able to do that.”

“I wonder when he’ll get here,” Tony mused. “If I know anything about it, if he’s not already on his way, he jolly soon will be.”

“Particularly if the Commander reports your disappearance,” Serge observed.

“He’ll have to do that,” Morrey ventured, “because U.N.E.X.A. will be expecting reports from us. Although our disappearance has been reported, they would still expect to hear your voice, Tony.”

“Then it seems as if we must lie low till Chris comes,” Tony sighed. “But what about this chap here? How long will it be before someone comes to see what’s keeping him?”

“We’ll knock out the next one as well,” one of the men suggested cheerfully.

“But what are we going to do?” another man asked. “This

fellow will be waking up soon.”

It was true. The man whom Morrey had stunned wouldn't remain unconscious much longer. How would they restrain him after he revived? Tie him up? They hadn't any rope. Knock him out again? Morrey disliked the thought. Then he had an idea. He consulted Tony urgently.

With a few brisk orders all were galvanized into activity. The plan was to transfer the hypothermia process from that room to the outer one. This would enable Morrey and his supporters to turn the tables on any of Mr. Ho's team who paid them a visit. It would keep the unconscious man, and anyone who joined him, quiet without the use of further violence.

As the technical man Tony was in charge of the operation, which was accomplished with surprising speed. Basically what had to be done was to transfer the couches and the temperature control apparatus from the inner room to the outer one. The task was finished without any interruption from outside, and before the unconscious man had fully recovered. As soon as he'd finished the last connections Tony had their prisoner placed on one of the couches and started up the machine. They had found a supply of the injection fluid, so they gave him a shot in the arm to prevent any serious effect. Soon he was in a state of hypothermia and unlikely to cause any trouble until he was defrosted. The last thing that Tony did was to seal the secret entrance so that it couldn't be opened from the outside.

“What are we going to do now?” one of the men asked after their tasks had been completed. “We can't stop here for ever.”

“No, but every hour we can stay inside will bring Chris Godfrey's arrival nearer,” Serge pointed out.

There was a quick movement as Morrey darted behind the door, for the catches were being released and someone was about to enter. This time it was two of Mr. Ho's team, complete with insulated spacesuits, who stepped into the room. A quick blow from Morrey felled one of them, and after a brief struggle the second man was also subdued.

“That's three we've accounted for,” Tony declared, a trifle

breathless after his efforts. “Let’s get these into the fridge.”

The job done, they gathered together again for a council of war.

“That Chinese will know there’s something up when these two don’t return,” one of the men pointed out.

“That’s why I ought to go outside and see what’s happening,” Tony declared.

“But why you?” Serge asked.

“Because I’ve only been ‘missing’ for a few hours,” Tony answered, “and people are still used to seeing me knocking about. I could contact Jim for the latest news.”

“What about the Commander? Will you try and see him?” asked Serge.

“No,” answered Tony after a moment’s thought. “Not if I can get the information I want without. He thinks I’ve vanished like the rest of you. He’d have a shock if I just walked into his office.”

“Er—try and get a few snacks if you can,” Barnett suggested self-consciously. “We’re all getting ravenous.”

It was true. When people were revived from hypothermia their bodies cried out for food to replace the energy lost while they were frozen. Even Tony, who’d been frozen least, was feeling the pangs of hunger.

“Be careful,” Morrey warned, after giving his approval to Tony’s plan. “If you’re not back soon we’ll have to break out from here and chance our luck.”

Tony promised he’d try to be back within the hour and said he hoped they’d be able to “welcome” any more “visitors”, satisfactorily. They arranged a code knock for his return.

“I don’t want to go into the fridge again,” Tony grinned as he slipped through the door and closed it behind him. Then he paused. How could he contact Jim? He’d no idea where the technician’s cabin was.

16

“We’re going on double drive,” Chris snapped to the ferry’s captain, and the man shrugged his shoulders. It would be a very uncomfortable experience for passengers and crew, but it would get the ferry to the Moon in less than twelve hours.

It certainly was an uncomfortable ride, but Campbell, Johnson, Williams and Spier were a tough quartet. They didn’t let out a single groan in the twelve long hours of agony. As for Chris, the first few minutes of the journey proved to him that he wasn’t as fit as he’d thought, but though he found every minute almost unendurable, he bore it for the sake of his friends.

Where would Jim be? Tony remembered that the technician had said that he was going to keep his—Tony’s—cabin under observation to see who came to try to find the fake tape record. Jim might be somewhere there.

As he’d stepped outside Tony saw that he had, indeed, come from one of the so-called baggage rooms, one that he’d been curious about before. But there wasn’t time to hang about. He set off towards his own quarters.

To get there, Tony had decided he must avoid the Central Dome, for he was sure that there he would encounter either Lane or someone who was in the plot with Mr. Ho. He stood a far better chance of avoiding one of the plotters if he kept to the outer corridors. Though this meant a longer journey, for he

would have to travel halfway round the circumference of the great wheel that was Lunar City, he was sure it was the sensible thing to do. Every time he met someone Tony watched very carefully to see if his presence caused any surprise. It didn't, and many of the men and women exchanged words with him. However, Tony was in no mood to linger. He wanted to get to Jim as quickly as possible. At last he reached Number Eight Dome, where his cabin was situated.

He redoubled his caution. Fortunately, because it was a dormitory area, there were not too many people about. When he got within sight of his own cabin he paused to look around. From the corner of his eye he was sure he'd seen someone move quickly into a doorway. Tony stiffened. Was someone following him or about to ransack his cabin? He must find out. He must discover who it was. With a quick movement he stepped into his cabin and closed the door behind him.

Putting his ear to the door he listened intently for any sound of the man he thought he'd seen. He heard nothing. Perhaps he'd been mistaken. Maybe he hadn't seen someone slip into a doorway. Or if he had, then there could have been a perfectly reasonable explanation. He turned to look round his quarters. The plotters hadn't been here yet. Everything was just as he'd left it. Well, he'd wait to see if the mystery man was going to pay him a call.

Then he heard a sound. There was someone outside. He tiptoed to the side of the door. Could he feel an intruder as effectively as Morrey had? It seemed that he would soon be put to the test.

The door began to open, but it only opened a fraction of an inch—and then stopped. So the man outside wasn't coming in. He was only taking a peep. Tony must find out who his enemy was. With a swift heave he wrenched the door wide open.

“Jim!”

It was indeed the technician, who looked as if he was seeing a ghost.

“T-Tony,” he gasped. “How—how did you get back inside?”

Tony pulled his friend into the cabin and closed the door quietly. Then he proceeded to amaze him even more by relating all that had happened. He ended by asking Jim if he could get some food and perhaps a weapon, and try to discover when Chris was expected.

“I can tell you that now,” Jim replied. “The landing crew have been warned that a special ferry is on the way under double drive.”

“Double drive! Then that must be Chris. What time is it expected?”

“In another six hours, I believe. Will you wait here while I see what I can scrounge?”

“I’d better. I don’t want to risk being seen any more than I can help. Besides—someone might still decide to come and look for that tape. I’d hate not to be on hand to welcome him!”

Jim slipped away on his foraging expedition, while Tony spent the time looking around his cabin. Strange that the enemy hadn’t yet searched it for the supposed tape. But had they? He examined everything as carefully as he could and, as far as he could remember, everything was exactly as he had left it. He even had a look at the small transmitter that someone had placed in his telephone. As he did so he snorted with disgust.

Jim couldn’t have been absent for more than forty minutes, though it seemed much longer to Tony. When he returned he was carrying some packs of food cubes—and a gun.

“Sorry I couldn’t scrounge anything more appetizing,” he said apologetically, “but at least they will keep your friends going.”

Tony knew this to be true. Even if the cubes weren’t so palatable as a nice juicy steak, they each contained the same amount of nourishment and were much more compact. As for the gun, it was of the standard laser type with a narrow or a broad beam.

“I’m going back to the others,” Tony said.

“O.K. I’ll keep watch here,” Jim replied.

“I—er—don’t think there’s any need to,” Tony said, to the astonishment of his friend. Before Jim could inquire why, Tony had set off to rejoin Morrey and Serge. It was then that he had a stroke of bad luck. Round the curving corridor which formed the rim of the giant wheel of Lunar City a man was coming towards him. It was Lane!

Tony’s first reaction was to avoid the man, but Lane had seen him, and if Tony had previously had any doubt about his involvement, it was dispelled now. Lane almost staggered with surprise at seeing him. Then he let out a bellow and came rushing towards the astronaut.

Glancing at his gun, Tony could see it was set for the narrow beam. If he used it thus, it would slice the man into two. He had no wish to injure Lane seriously, so with a quick twist he set the nozzle to the wide beam. A slight pressure of his forefinger and his assailant staggered and fell. Tony went up to him and could see that his gun had done its work. Lane was stunned but otherwise uninjured. Tony managed to conceal him in one of the large lockers that lined the corridor walls.

Passing through Number Five Dome without incident, he continued through the corridor that would lead him to the next dome and the baggage rooms where his friends were hiding. What had happened during his absence?

Had Mr. Ho and the rest of his team, alarmed by the failure of three of their fellows to return, taken arms along to overpower Morrey and the others? It was difficult to proceed with caution and at the same time avoid attracting attention, but he succeeded in getting into Number Four Dome without incident.

Now he had to approach the baggage rooms where his friends were entrenched. Making full use of the cover afforded by masses of plant and equipment for extracting oxygen, Tony zigzagged his way until he’d nearly reached his objective. It was then that he became aware of a commotion ahead.

He flattened himself against a wall and then inched forward

carefully. Then he saw what was causing the noise. Three men, one of whom he recognized as Mr. Ho, were trying to smash the door into the baggage room! In the hand of the Chinese Tony saw a laser gun. At a command the other two attackers stepped back and Mr. Ho pointed his weapon at the door. Immediately a part near the lock began to smoke. Tony guessed that he was going to burn out the lock with the narrow laser beam. He prayed that neither of his friends nor any of the trapped men were in its path, for it would burn a hole in them, too.

Instant action was called for. In a very short time the lock would be off and the trapped men would be at Mr. Ho's mercy. With his deadly weapon he could kill all of them with a single sweep of the narrow beam.

Tony glanced at his own gun to confirm that the nozzle was set to send out the wide beam. Then, giving as loud a yell as he could, he stepped out into the open. A startled Mr. Ho was just about to switch his aim on to the astronaut when Tony pulled the trigger. The three attackers fell to the ground in a heap. Striding over them, Tony beat on the door.

"It's me, Morrey," he called. "I've knocked them out. You can open up."

After but a second's delay he heard efforts to open the door. But Mr. Ho's work had fused the lock and muffled shouts informed him that they were stuck fast.

"Stand back, then," Tony called back. "I'm going to burn the lock out."

It didn't take long to twist the gun nozzle to the narrow beam to complete Mr. Ho's work. A hefty kick sent the door smashing open.

Under double drive the special ferry landed a full fifteen minutes earlier than expected, and Chris, Campbell, Johnson, Williams and Spier crowded into the airlock. They asked no questions of the technician who let them through. As Chris waited for the inner door to open, his thoughts were grim

indeed. No man loses three such friends as his without its having a profound effect. He felt just about ready to tear Lunar City apart.

The inner door slid open. And there, ready to greet him with wide grins on their faces, were Tony, Morrey and Serge!

Chris's face became grim once more when, an hour later, he was seated at a table in one of the recreation rooms. The Commander's office was not large enough for the purpose he had in mind. Weapons in hand, Campbell and Johnson were guarding one door, and Spier and Williams the other. Morrey, Tony and Serge were seated alongside Chris, and Commander Cooper at the end of the table. Looking covertly at the Commander, Morrey wondered what he must be thinking. No wonder he looked troubled and serious. That such events could take place under his nose was a grave reflection on his command.

"Bring in the prisoners," Chris barked. Johnson and Campbell opened their door and motioned inside a file of men—and a woman! It was, of course, Lane together with Mr. Ho and his team, and Mademoiselle Larue.

As they stood in silence before him, Chris eyed them sternly.

"You will all face trial back on Earth," he snapped, "but I intend to hold a preliminary inquiry myself. You first, Mademoiselle Larue. Do you admit that you are involved in the disappearances?"

The girl tossed her head proudly.

"I have nothing to say," she replied.

"May I remind you of the seriousness of your position," Chris said deliberately. "You were Second in Command here in Lunar City. Next to Commander Cooper, you were responsible to U.N.E.X.A. for the running of this base. Do you deny that you have betrayed the trust that was placed in you?"

“I have nothing to say,” Mademoiselle Larue repeated stubbornly.

“Mademoiselle, as Vice-Commandant was it not your duty to initial all requisitions for stores and equipment?”

“It was.”

“Then you must have known about the requisitions for the hypothermia apparatus, the couches and the components to make the dish receiver swivel?”

“I knew,” the girl said, after a slight hesitation.

“So it was you who made this whole thing possible,” Chris said sharply. “Were you responsible for it?”

“I have nothing to say,” the former Vice-Commandant replied calmly.

“Perhaps you will be more talkative at your trial,” Chris said. “Now you, Lane. I know all about your record. Why are you involved in this plot? To get your own back for your demotion?”

The man flushed angrily.

“You can think that if you want,” he snarled. “I’m not saying anything.”

“But you did sabotage the scrambler radio? You were responsible for the construction and operation of the aerial? You installed the hypothermia apparatus?”

“Think what you like,” said Lane, now fully in control of himself.

“All right. Stand back. Now what about you, Mr. Ho? You and your thugs attacked these men. What have you got to say for yourself?” Chris demanded.

“Nothing,” said the Chinese with an inscrutable smile, “except to point out that we harmed no one.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Chris snapped back. “Does anyone else wish to speak?”

He looked steadily at the rest of Mr. Ho’s team, but no one

moved. Tony couldn't help thinking that, somehow, these men had no regrets for what they had done.

"Very well. You will all return to Earth at once, where you will be charged under Section Ten of the United Nations Space Code. Take them away," Chris said, motioning to Campbell and Johnson.

"I don't know what to make of it," he confessed after the prisoners had been escorted away. "Why did they do it? They used no real violence. They don't appear to be criminal types. What was their objective? Who was their leader?"

So this was the end of their assignment, Tony was thinking to himself as he half listened to Chris's words. There were still so many questions left unanswered. He wondered if Sir Billy would be any more successful in penetrating the reserve of the prisoners. It seemed that Mademoiselle Larue, Lane, Mr. Ho and his team—a strange assortment—were still clinging on to something. Though their efforts, for whatever reason they had been made, had been frustrated, Tony couldn't help getting the impression that they were not entirely defeated. It was as if they knew that, even if they themselves had failed, someone would be left to carry on. Why else would they decide to remain so stubbornly silent?

To conceal someone! That was it! Tony slapped his side in excitement as the explanation struck him. His thoughts raced like wildfire, and a stunning conclusion entered his mind.

"What's the matter with you?" Chris asked curiously, and Tony suddenly realized he'd been dancing about in his excitement.

"Don't you see?" he almost squeaked. "They're keeping silent because we haven't discovered their leader. We haven't found the one really responsible for the plot!"

Everyone in the room was staring at Tony with astonishment.

"You mean they were all working under someone else's orders?" asked Morrey incredulously.

“They were—and I can tell you whose,” Tony declared triumphantly.

“Whose?” The question came from everyone in the room. Tony pulled himself up sharply and appeared to take a deep breath.

“Commander Cooper’s,” he spat out.

For five seconds, though it seemed much longer, everyone froze at this astounding statement. Then, his face flushed, the Commander sprang to his feet.

“This is rid-ridiculous,” he exploded, his slight stammer becoming more noticeable in his excitement. “He-he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

Chris waved him back to his seat.

“Explain yourself, Tony,” he ordered sternly.

All eyes upon him, the young man faced the Deputy Director. Was he going to make of himself the greatest fool of all time? Or had he really solved the mystery? The next few minutes would decide.

“After I found a listening device inside the telephone in my cabin, I realized someone was interested in what was said. Later on I replaced the listening device and pretended to record on tape. I revealed some of my discoveries and my plans for another trip outside, sufficient to let whoever might be listening know that I was on to something. Of course I had to repeat my story to the Commander to get his permission to go out alone.

“Well, I firmly expected that my cabin would be almost torn apart to find the tape which I was supposed to have recorded for you, Chris. When I got back to my cabin after my—er—brush with Mr. Ho, I was astounded to see it hadn’t been touched. It was only as I was looking round that I realized the reason.”

“What was that?” Chris demanded.

Tony looked very self-conscious as he replied.

“I happened to look at the bugging device I’d replaced in my

phone,” he explained. “I—er—found I’d connected it up wrongly. It wasn’t working!”

Without giving anyone time to comment on this professional mistake, Tony rushed on.

“So you see, the only person who could have alerted Mr. Ho is Commander Cooper. He was the only one I’d told that I was hot on the trail.”

From Tony all eyes switched to the Commander of Lunar City. He sat silent, his mouth working in an effort to form words. His florid face had paled and beads of perspiration were on his forehead. Then suddenly a complete change came over the man. His face regained its normal colour and composure. He became completely calm, then, perhaps, proudly defiant.

“It is true. I am the Leader,” he declared standing up and facing Chris. “And for this I make no apologies. I accept full responsibility for the planning and execution of the events of the last few weeks.”

A flood of relief flowed over Tony. So he hadn’t made a fool of himself. He had revealed the man at the centre of the plot? But why? He must have spoken his query aloud, for Commander Cooper looked at him as he went on.

“There is on Earth,” the Commander said, “a body of people who believe that it is wrong for Man to intrude any further into the Universe. We believe that the Supreme Being has placed a limit beyond which we must not go. If Man persists in probing beyond this limit, a terrible disaster will follow. Our actions here in Lunar City were designed, not to injure anyone, but to create a situation where a halt would have to be called to further space exploration.”

“And you jolly nearly succeeded,” Tony breathed to himself.

“My only regret,” the Commander went on, “is that I have failed to achieve the objective to which my colleagues and I are dedicated. Nevertheless there are others who think as we do, who will follow us. I pray that they will succeed where I have failed.”

Sir Billy Gillanders had joined the four friends in the traditional celebration they held after each adventure. They had just finished a fabulous meal in a famous Florida restaurant called Trader Vic's, and were at the coffee stage.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Sir Billy said suddenly. "I have a present for you, Tony."

He fished into his pocket and pulled out a small flat box.

"This is yours," he said, passing it over to the young astronaut.

Wonderingly Tony opened it as his friends crowded round. Inside the box was a silver star such as marshals always used to wear in old Western films. But this one bore the engraved words "SPACE DETECTIVE".

Half humorously, half proudly, Tony pinned it on. Perhaps after all he was!

