At The End Of The Orbit • by Arthur C. Clarke

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By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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AT THE END OF ORBIT

I

TIBOR didn't see the thing. He was asleep, and dreaming his inevitable painful dream.

Only Joey was awake on deck, in the cool stillness before dawn, when the meteor came flaming out of the sky above New Guinea. He watched it climb up the heavens until it passed directly overhead, routing the stars and throwing swift-moving shadows across the crowded deck. The harsh light outlined the bare rigging, the coiled ropes and air-hoses, the copper diving-helmets neatly snugged down for the night—even the low, pandanus-clad island half a mile away. As it passed into the southwest, out over the emptiness of the Pacific, it began to disintegrate.

Incandescent globules broke off, burning and guttering in a trail of fire that stretched a quarter of the way across the sky. It was already dying when it raced out of sight. But Joey did not see its end. Still blazing furiously, it sank below the horizon, as if seeking to hurl itself into the face of the hidden sun.

If the sight was spectacular, the utter silence was unnerving. Joey waited and waited and waited, but no sound came from the riven heavens. When, minutes later, there was a sudden splash from the sea, close at hand he gave an involuntary start of

surprise—then cursed himself for being frightened by a manta. (A mighty big one, though, to have made so much noise when it jumped.) There was no other sound, and presently he went back to sleep.

In his narrow bunk just aft of the air-compressor, Tibor heard nothing. He slept so soundly after his day's work that he had little energy even for dreams. And when they came, they were not the dreams he wanted. In the hours of darkness, as his mind roamed back and forth across the past, it never came to rest amid memories of desire. He had women in Sydney and Brisbane and Darwin and Thursday Island—but none in his dreams. All that he ever remembered when he woke, in the fetid stillness of the cabin, was the dust and fire and blood as the Russian tanks rolled into Budapest. His dreams were not of love, but only of hate.

When Nick shook him back to consciousness, he was dodging the guards on the Austrian border. It took him a few seconds to make the ten-thousand-mile journey to the Great Barrier Reef. Then he yawned, kicked away the cockroaches that had been nibbling at his toes and heaved himself out of his bunk.

Breakfast, of course, was the same as always—rice, turtle eggs and bully-beef, washed down with strong, sweet tea. The best that could be said of Joey's cooking was that there was plenty of it. Tibor was used to the monotonous diet. He made up for it, and for other deprivations, when he was back on the mainland.

THE sun had barely cleared the horizon when the dishes were stacked in the tiny galley and the lugger got under way. Nick sounded cheerful as he took the wheel and headed out from the island. The old pearling-master had every right to be, for the patch of shell they were working was the richest that Tibor had ever seen. With any luck, they would fill their hold in another day or two, and sail back to T.I. with half a ton of shell on board. And then, with a little more luck, he could give up this stinking, dangerous job and get back to civilisation.

Not that he regretted anything. The Greek had treated him well, and he'd found some good stones when the shells were opened. But he understood now, after nine months on the Reef, why the number of white divers could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Japs and Kanakas and Islanders could take it—but damn few Europeans.

The diesel coughed into silence and the *Arafura* coasted to rest.

They were some two miles from the island, which lay low and green on the water, yet sharply divided from it by its narrow band of dazzling beach. It was no more than a nameless sand-bar that a tiny forest had managed to capture. Its only inhabitants were the myriads of stupid mutton-birds that riddled the soft ground with their burrows, and made the night hideous with their banshee cries.

There was little talk as the three divers dressed. Each man knew what to do, and wasted no time in doing it. As Tibor buttoned on his thick twill jacket, Blanco, his tender, rinsed out the face-plate with vinegar so that it would not become fogged. Then Tibor clambered down the rope ladder, while the heavy helmet and lead corselet were placed over his head.

Apart from the jacket, whose padding spread the weight evenly over his shoulders, he was wearing his ordinary clothes. In these warm waters there was no need for rubber suits. The helmet simply acted as a tiny diving-bell held in position by its weight alone. In an emergency the wearer could—if he was lucky—duck out of it and swim back to the surface unhampered. Tibor had seen this done. But he had no wish to try the experiment for himself.

Each time he stood on the last rung of the ladder, gripping his shell-bag with one hand and his safety line with the other, the same thought flashed through Tibor's mind. He was leaving the world he knew; but was it for an hour—or was it forever?

Down there on the seabed was wealth and death, and one could be sure of neither. The chances were that this would be another day of uneventful drudgery, as were most of the days in the pearl-diver's unglamorous life. But Tibor had seen one of his mates die, when his air-hose tangled in the *Arafura's* prop. And he had watched the agony of another, as his body twisted with the bends. In the sea, nothing was ever safe or certain. You took your chances with open eyes.

And if you lost there was no point in whining.

He stepped back from the ladder, and the world of sun and sky ceased to exist. Top-heavy with the weight of his helmet, he had to back-pedal furiously to keep his body upright. He could see nothing but a featureless blue mist as he sank towards the bottom. He hoped that Blanco would not play out the safety-line too quickly. Swallowing and snorting, he tried to clear his ears as the pressure mounted. The right one "popped" quickly enough, but a piercing, intolerable pain

grew rapidly in the left, which had bothered him for several days. He forced his hand up under the helmet, gripped his nose and blew with all his might. There was an abrupt, soundless explosion somewhere inside his head, and the pain vanished instantly. He'd have no more trouble on this dive.

TIBOR felt the bottom before he saw it.

Unable to bend over lest he risk flooding the open helmet, his vision in the downwards direction was very limited. He could see around, but not immediately below. What he did see was reassuring in its drab monotony—a gently undulating, muddy plain that faded out of sight about ten feet ahead. A yard to his left a tiny fish was nibbling at a piece of coral the size and shape of a lady's fan. That was all. There was no beauty, no underwater fairyland here. But there was money. That was what mattered.

The safety line gave a gentle pull as the lugger started to drift downwind, moving broadside-on across the patch, and Tibor began to walk forward with the springy, slow-motion step forced on him by weightlessness and water resistance. As Number Two diver, he was working from the bow. Amidships was Stephen, still comparatively inexperienced, while at the stern was the head diver, Billy. The three men seldom saw each other while they were working; each had his own lane to search as the *Arafura* drifted silently before the wind. Only at the extremes of their zigzags might they sometimes glimpse one another as dim shapes looming through the mist.

It needed a trained eye to spot the shells beneath their camouflage of algae and weeds, but often the molluscs betrayed themselves. When they felt the vibrations of the approaching diver, they would snap shut—and there would be a momentary, nacreous flicker in the gloom. Yet even then they sometimes escaped, for the moving ship might drag the diver past before he could collect the prize just out of reach. In the early days of his apprenticeship, Tabor had missed quite a few of the big silver-lips, any one of which might have contained some fabulous pearl. Or so he had imagined, before the glamor of the profession had worn off, and he realized that pearls were so rare that you might as well forget them.

The most valuable stone he'd ever brought up had been sold for twenty pounds, and the shell he gathered on a good morning was worth more than that. If the industry had depended on gems instead of mother-of-pearl, it would have gone broke years ago.

There was no sense of time in this world of mist. You walked beneath the invisible, drifting ship, with the throb of the air compressor pounding in your ears, the green haze moving past your eyes. At long intervals you would spot a shell, wrench it from the sea-bed and drop it in your bag. If you were lucky, you might gather a couple of dozen on a single drift across the patch. On the other hand, you might not find a single one.

You were alert for danger, but not worried by it. The real risks were simple, unspectacular things like tangled air-hoses or safety-lines—not sharks, groupers or octopi. Sharks ran when they saw your air bubbles, and in all his hours of diving Tabor had seen just one octopus, every bit of two feet across. As for groupers—well, *they* were to be taken seriously, for they could swallow a diver at one gulp if they felt hungry enough. But there was little chance of meeting them on this flat and desolate plain. There were none of the coral caves in which they could make their homes.

The shock would not have been so great, therefore, if this uniform, level grayness had not lulled him into a sense of security.

At one moment he was walking steadily towards an unreachable wall of mist, that retreated as fast as he approached. And then, without warning, his private nightmare was looming above him.

II

TIBOR hated spiders, and there was a certain creature in the sea that seemed deliberately contrived to take advantage of that phobia. He had never met one, and his mind had always shied away from the thought of such an encounter, but Tibor knew that the Japanese spider crab can span twelve feet across its spindly legs. That it was harmless mattered not in the least. A spider as big as a man simply had no right to exist.

As soon as he saw that cage of slender, jointed limbs emerge from the all-encompassing grayness, Tibor began to scream with uncontrollable terror. He never remembered jerking his safety line, but Blanco reacted with the instantaneous perception of the ideal tender. His helmet still echoing to his screams, Tibor felt himself snatched from the sea-bed, lifted towards light and air—and sanity. As he swept upwards, he saw both the strangeness and the absurdity of his mistake, and regained a measure of control. But he was still trembling so violently when Blanco lifted off his helmet that it was some time before he could speak.

"What the hell's going on here?" demanded Nick. "Everyone knocking off work early?"

It was then that Tibor realized that he was not the first to come up. Stephen was sitting amidships, smoking a cigarette and looking completely unconcerned. The stern diver, doubtless wondering what had happened, was being hauled up willy-nilly by his tender, since the *Arafura* had come to rest and all operations had been suspended until the trouble was resolved.

"There's some kind of wreck down there," said Tibor. "I ran right into it. All I could see were a lot of wires and rods."

To his annoyance and self-contempt, the memory set him trembling again.

"Don't see why *that* should give you the shakes," grumbled Nick. Nor could Tibor—here on this sun-drenched deck. It was impossible to explain how a harmless shape glimpsed through the mist could set one's whole mind jangling with terror.

"I nearly got hung up on it," he lied. "Blanco pulled me clear just in time."

"Hmm," said Nick, obviously not convinced. "Anyway, it ain't a ship." He gestured towards the midships diver. "Steve ran into a mess of ropes and cloth—like thick nylon, he says. Sounds like some kind of parachute." The old Greek stared in disgust at the soggy stump of his cigar, then flicked it overboard. "Soon as Billy's up, we'll go back and take a look. Might be worth something—remember what happened to Jo Chambers."

TIBOR remembered; the story was famous the length of the Great Barrier Reef. Jo had been a lone-wolf fisherman who, in the last months of the War, had spotted a DC-3 lying in shallow water a few miles off the Queensland coast. After prodigies of single-handed salvage, he had broken into the fuselage and started unloading boxes of taps and dies, perfectly protected by their greased wrappings. For a while he had run a flourishing import business, but when the police caught up with him he reluctantly revealed his source of supply. Australian cops can be very persuasive.

And it was then, after weeks and weeks of backbreaking underwater work, that Jo discovered what his DC-3 had been carrying besides the miserable few thousand dollars' worth of tools he had been flogging to garages and workshops on the mainland.

The big wooden crates he'd never got round to opening held a week's payroll for the U.S. Pacific Forces.

No such luck here, thought Tibor as he sank over the side

again. But the aircraft—or whatever it was—might contain valuable instruments, and there could be a reward for its discovery. Besides, he owed it to himself. He wanted to see exactly what it was that had given him such a fright.

Ten minutes later, he knew it was no aircraft. It was the wrong shape, and it was much too small—only about twenty feet long and half that in width. Here and there on the gently-tapering body were access hatches and tiny ports through which unknown instruments peered at the world. It seemed unharmed, though one end had been fused as if by terrific heat. From the other sprouted a tangle of antennae, all of them broken or bent by the impact with the water. Even now, they bore an incredible resemblance to the legs of a giant insect.

Tibor was no fool. He guessed at once what the thing was.

Only one problem remained, and he solved that with little difficulty. Though they had been partly charred away by heat, stenciled words could still be read on some of the hatch-covers. The letters were Cyrillic, and Tibor knew enough Russian to pick out references to electrical supplies and pressurizing systems.

"So they've lost a sputnik," he told himself with satisfaction.

He could imagine what had happened. The thing had come down too fast, and in the wrong place. Around one end were the tattered remnants of flotation bags; they had burst under the impact, and the vehicle had sunk like a stone.

The *Arafura's* crew would have to apologize to Joey. He hadn't been drinking grog. What he'd s e e n burning across the stars must have been the rocket carrier, separated from its payload and falling back unchecked into the Earth's atmosphere.

FOR a long time Tibor hovered on the sea-bed, knees bent in the diver's crouch, as he regarded this space creature now trapped in an alien element. His mind was full of half-formed plans, but none had yet come clearly into focus.

He no longer cared about salvage money. Much more important were the prospects of revenge.

Here was one of the proudest creations of Soviet technology—and Szabo Tibor, late of Budapest, was the only man on earth who knew.

There must be some way of exploiting the situation—of doing harm to the country and the cause he now hated with such smoldering intensity. In his waking hours, he was sel-

dom conscious of that hate. Still less did he ever stop to analyze its real cause. Here in this lonely world of sea and sky, of steaming mangrove swamps and dazzling coral strands, there was nothing to recall the past. Yet he could never escape it. And sometimes the demons in his mind would awake, lashing him into a fury of rage or vicious, wanton destructiveness. So far he had been lucky; he had not killed anyone. But some day...

An anxious jerk from Blanco interrupted his reveries of vengeance.

He gave a reassuring signal to his tender, and started a closer examination of the capsule. What did it weigh? Could it be hoisted easily? There were many things he had to discover, before he could settle on any definite plans.

He braced himself against the corrugated metal wall and pushed cautiously. There was a definite movement as the capsule rocked on the sea-bed. Maybe it could be lifted, even with the few pieces of tackle that the *Arafura* could muster. It was probably lighter than it looked.

Tibor pressed his helmet against a flat section of the hull, and listened intently.

He had half expected to hear some mechanical noise, such as the whirring of electric motors. Instead, there was utter silence. With the hilt of his knife, he rapped sharply on the metal, trying to gauge its thickness and to locate any weak spots. On the third try, he got results: but they were not what he had anticipated.

In a furious, desperate tattoo, the capsule rapped back at him.

Until this moment, Tibor had never dreamed that there might be someone inside. The capsule had seemed far too small.

Then he realized that he had been thinking in terms of conventional aircraft. There was plenty of room here for a little pressure cabin in which a dedicated astronaut could spend a few cramped hours.

As a kaleidoscope can change its pattern completely in a single moment, so the half-formed plans in Tibor's mind dissolved and then crystallized into a new shape. Behind the thick glass of his helmet, he ran his tongue lightly across his lips. If Nick could have seen him now, he would have wondered—as he had sometimes done before—whether his Number Two diver was wholly sane. Gone were all thoughts of a remote and impersonal vengeance against something as abstract as a nation or a machine.

Now it would be man to man.

III

"TOOK your time, didn't you?" said Nick. "What did you find?"

"It's Russian," said Tibor. "Some kind of sputnik. If we can get a rope around it, I think we can lift it off the bottom. But it's too heavy to get aboard."

Nick chewed thoughtfully on his eternal cigar.

The pearling master was worried about a point that had not occurred to Tibor. If there were any salvage operations round here, everyone would know where the *Arafura* had been drifting. When the news got back to Thursday Island, his private patch of shell would be cleaned out in no time.

They'd have to keep quiet about the whole affair, or else haul the damn thing up themselves and not say where they'd found it. Whatever happened, it looked like being more of a nuisance than it was worth. Nick, who shared most Australians' profound suspicion of authority, had already decided that all he'd get for his trouble would be a nice letter of thanks.

"The boys won't go down," he said. "They think it's a bomb. Want to leave it alone."

"Tell 'em not to worry," replied Tibor. "I'll handle it."

He tried to keep his voice normal and unemotional, but this was too good to be true. If the other divers heard the tapping from the capsule, his plans would have been frustrated.

He gestured to the island, green and lovely on the skyline.

"Only one thing we can do. If we can heave it a couple of feet off the bottom, we can run for the shore. Once we're in shallow water, it won't be too hard to haul it up on the beach. We can use the boats, and maybe get a block and tackle on one of those trees."

Nick considered the idea without much enthusiasm. He doubted if they could get the sputnik through the reef, even on the leeward side of the island. But he was all in favor of lugging it away from this patch of shell. They could always dump it somewhere else, buoy the place and still get whatever credit was going.

"Okay," he said. "Down you go. That two-inch rope's the strongest we've got—better take that. Don't be all bloody day; we've lost enough time already."

Tibor had no intention of being all day. Six hours would be quite long enough. That was one of the first things he had learned, from the signals through the wall.

It was a pity that he could not hear the Russian's voice; but the Russian could hear him, and that was what really mattered. When he pressed

his helmet against the metal and shouted, most of his words got through. So far, it had been a friendly conversation; Tibor had no intention of showing his hand until the right psychological moment.

THE first move had been to establish a code—one knock for "Yes," two for "No." After that, it was merely a matter of framing suitable questions. Given time, there was no fact or idea that could not be communicated by means of these two signals.

It would have been a much tougher job if Tibor had been forced to use his indifferent Russian. He had been pleased, but not surprised, to find that the trapped pilot understood English perfectly.

There was air in the capsule for another five hours; the occupant was uninjured; yes, the Russians knew where it had come down.

That last reply gave Tibor pause. Perhaps the pilot was lying, but it might very well be true. Although something had obviously gone wrong with the planned return to Earth, the tracking ships out in the Pacific must have located the impact point—with what accuracy, he could not guess. Still, did that matter? It might take them days to get here, even if they came racing straight into Australian territorial waters without bothering to get permission from Canberra. He was master of the situation. The entire might of the U.S.S.R. could do nothing to interfere with his plans—until it was much too late.

The heavy rope fell in coils on the sea-bed, stirring up a cloud of silt that drifted like smoke down the slow current. Now that the sun was higher in the sky, the underwater world was no longer wrapped in a gray, twilight gloom. The sea-bed was colorless but bright, and the boundary of vision was now almost fifteen feet away.

For the first time, Tibor could see the space-capsule in its entirety. It was such a peculiar-looking object, being designed for conditions beyond all normal experience, that there was an eye-teasing wrongness about it. One searched in vain for a front or a rear. There was no way of telling in what direction it pointed as it sped along its orbit.

Tibor pressed his helmet against the metal and shouted.

"I'm back," he called. "Can you hear me?"

Tap.

"I've got a rope, and I'm going to tie it on to the parachute cables. We're about three kilometers from an island. As soon as we've made you fast we'll head towards

it. We can't lift you out of the water with the gear on the lugger, so we'll try to get you up on the beach. You understand?"

Tap.

IT took only a few moments to secure the rope; now he had better get clear before the *Arafura* started to lift.

But there was something he had to do first.

"Hello!" he shouted. "I've fixed the rope. We'll lift in a minute. D'you hear me?"

Tap.

"Then you can hear this too. You'll never get there alive. I've fixed *that* as well."

Tap, tap.

"You've got five hours to die. My brother took longer than that, when he ran into your mine field. You understand? I'm from Budapest! I hate you and your country and everything it stands for. You've taken my home, my family, made my people slaves. I wish I could see your face now! I wish I could watch you die, as I had to watch Theo. When you're halfway to the island, this rope is going to break where I cut it. I'll go down and fix another—and that'll break, too. You can sit in there and wait for the bumps."

Tibor stopped abruptly, shaken and exhausted by the violence of his emotion.

There was no room for logic or reason in this orgasm of hate. He did not pause to think, for he dared not. Yet somewhere far down inside his mind the real truth was burning its way up towards the light of consciousness.

It was not the Russians he hated, for all that they had done. It was himself, for he had done more.

The blood of Theo, and of ten thousand countrymen, was upon his own hands. No one could have been a better communist than he was, or have more supinely believed the propaganda from Moscow. At school and college, he had been the first to hunt out and denounce "traitors" (how many had he sent to the labor camps or the AVO torture chambers?) When he had seen the truth, it was far, far too late. And even then he had not fought. He had run.

He had run across the world, trying to escape his guilt; and the two drugs of danger and dissipation had helped him to forget the past. The only pleasure life gave him now were the loveless embraces he sought so feverishly when he was on the mainland, and his present mode of existence was proof that these were not enough.

If he now had the power to deal out death, it was only because he had come here in search of it himself.

There was no sound from the capsule. Its silence seemed contemptuous, mocking. An-

grily, Tibor banged against it with the hilt of his knife.

"Did you hear me?" he shouted. "Did you hear me?"

No answer.

"Damn you! I know you're listening! If you don't answer, I'll hole you and let the water in!"

He was sure that he could, with the sharp point of his knife. But that was the last thing he wanted to do; that would be too quick, too easy an ending.

There was still no sound; maybe the Russian had fainted. Tibor hoped not, but there was no point in waiting any longer. He gave a vicious parting bang on the capsule, and signaled to his tender.

NICK had news for him when he broke the surface.

"T.I. radio's been squawking," he said. "The Ruskis are asking everyone to look out for one of their rockets. They say it should be floating somewhere off the Queensland coast. Sounds as if they want it badly."

"Did they say anything else about it?" Tibor asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes. It's been round the Moon a couple of times."

"That all?"

"Nothing else that I remember. There was a lot of science stuff I didn't get."

That figured; it was just like the Russians to keep as quiet as they could about an experiment that had gone wrong.

"You tell T.I. that we'd found it?"

"Are you crazy? Anyway, the radio's crook; couldn't if we wanted to. Fixed that rope properly?"

"Yes—see if you can haul her off the bottom."

The end of the rope had been wound round the mainmast, and in a few seconds it had been drawn taut. Although the sea was calm, there was a slight swell and the lugger was rolling ten or fifteen degrees. With each roll, the gunwales would rise a couple of feet, then drop again. There was a lift here of several tons, but one had to be careful in using it.

The rope twanged, the woodwork groaned and creaked, and for a moment Tibor was afraid that the weakened line would part too soon. But it held, and the load lifted.

They got a further hoist on the second roll—and on the third. Then the capsule was clear of the sea-bed, and the *Arafura* was listing slightly to port.

"Let's go," said Nick, taking the wheel. "Should be able to get her half a mile before she bumps again."

The lugger began to move slowly towards the island, carrying its hidden burden beneath it.

As he leaned on the rails, letting the sun steam the moisture from his sodden clothing, Tibor felt at peace for the first time in—how many months? Even his hate had ceased to burn like fire in his brain. Perhaps, like love, it was a passion that could never be satisfied. But for the moment, at least, it was satiated.

There was no weakening of his resolve. He was implacably set upon the vengeance that had been so strangely—so miraculously—placed within his power. Blood called for blood, and now the ghosts that haunted him might rest at last.

IV

HE began to worry when they were two-thirds of the way to the island, and the rope had not parted.

There were still four hours to go. That was much too long. For the first time it occurred to him that his entire plan might miscarry, and might even recoil on his head. Suppose that, despite everything, Nick managed to get the capsule up on the beach before the deadline?

With a deep *twang* that set the whole ship vibrating, the rope came snaking out of the water, scattering spray in all directions.

"Might have guessed," muttered Nick. "She was just starting to bump. You like to go down again, or shall I send one of the boys?"

"I'll take it," Tibor hastily answered. "I can do it quicker than they can."

That was perfectly true, but it took him twenty minutes to locate the capsule. The *Arafura* had drifted well away from it before Nick could stop the engine, and there was a time when Tibor wondered if he would ever find it again.

He quartered the sea-bed in great arcs, and it was not until he had accidentally tangled in the training parachute that his search was ended. The shrouds lay pulsating slowly in the current like some weird and hideous marine monster—but there was nothing that Tibor feared now except frustration, and his pulse barely quickened as he saw the whitely looming mass ahead.

The capsule was scratched and stained with mud, but appeared undamaged. It was lying on its side now, looking rather like a giant milk-churn that had been tipped over. The passenger must have been bumped around. But if he'd fallen all the way back from the Moon he must have been well padded and was probably still in good shape. Tibor hoped so. It would be a pity if the remaining three hours were wasted.

Once again he rested the verdigrised copper of his hel-

met against the no-longer-quite-so-brightly-gleaming metal of the capsule.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Can you hear me?"

Perhaps the Russian would try to balk him by remaining silent—but that surely, was asking too much of any man's self-control. Tibor was right. Almost at once there was the sharp knock of the reply.

"So glad you're there," he called back. "Things are working out just the way I said, though I guess I'll have to cut the rope a little deeper."

THE capsule did not answer it. It never answered again, though Tibor banged and banged on the next dive—and on the next.

But he hardly expected it to then, for they'd had to stop for a couple of hours to ride out a squall, and the time-limit had expired long before he made his final descent.

He was a little annoyed about that, for he had planned a farewell message. He shouted it just the same, though he knew he was wasting his breath.

By early afternoon, the *Arafura* had come in as close as she dared. There were only a few feet of water beneath her, and the tide was falling. The capsule broke surface at the bottom of each wave trough, and was now firmly stranded on a sandbank. There was no hope of moving it any further. It was stuck until a high sea dislodged it.

Nick regarded the situation with an expert eye.

"There's a six-foot tide tonight," he said. "The way she's lying now, she'll be in only a couple of feet of water at low. We'll be able to get at her with the boats."

They waited off the sandbank while the sun and the tide went down and the radio broadcast intermittent reports of a search that was coming closer but was still far away. Late in the afternoon the capsule was almost clear of the water. The crew rowed the small boat towards it with a reluctance which Tibor found himself sharing, to his annoyance.

"It's got a door in the side," said Nick suddenly. "Jeeze—think there's anyone in it?"

"Could be," answered Tibor, his voice not as steady as he thought.

Nick glanced at him curiously. His diver had been acting strangely all day, but he knew better than to ask him what was wrong. In this part of the world, you soon learned to mind your own business.

The boat, rocking slightly in the choppy sea, had now come alongside the capsule. Nick reached out and grabbed one of the twisted antenna stubs. Then, with catlike agility, he clambered up the curved metal surface. Tibor made no attempt to follow

him, but watched silently from the boat as he examined the entrance hatch.

"Unless it's jammed," Nick muttered, "there must be some way of opening it from outside. Just our luck if it needs special tools."

His fears were groundless. The word "Open" had been stencilled in ten languages round the recessed door-catch, and it took only seconds to deduce its mode of operation. As the air hissed out Nick said "Phew!" and turned suddenly pale. He looked at Tibor as if seeking support, but Tibor avoided his eye.

Then, reluctantly, Nick lowered himself into the capsule.

He was gone for a long time. At first, they could hear muffled bangings and bumpings from the inside, followed by a string of bi-lingual profanity.

And then there was a silence that went on and on and on.

When at last Nick's head appeared above the hatchway, his leathery, wind-tanned face was gray and streaked with tears. As Tibor saw this incredible sight, he felt a sudden ghastly premonition. Something had gone horribly wrong, but his mind was too numb to anticipate the truth. It came soon enough, when Nick handed down his burden, no larger than an oversized doll.

BLANCO took it, as Tibor shrank to the stern of the boat.

As he looked at the calm, waxen face, fingers of ice seemed to close not only upon his heart, but round his loins. In the same moment, both hate and desire died forever within him, as he knew the price of his revenge.

The dead astronaut was perhaps more beautiful in death than she had been in life. Tiny though she was, she must have been tough as well as highly-trained to qualify for this mission. As she lay at Tibor's feet she was neither a Russian, nor the first female human being to have seen the far side of the Moon. She was merely the girl that he had killed.

Nick was talking from a long way off.

"She was carrying this," he said, in an unsteady voice. "Had it tight in her hand. Took me a long time to get it out."

Tibor scarcely heard him, and never even glanced at the tiny spool of tape lying in Nick's palm. He could not guess, in this moment beyond all feeling, that the Furies had yet to close in upon his soul—and that soon the whole world would be listening to an accusing voice from beyond the grave, branding him more irrevocably than any man since Cain. END