

Algis Budrys

The edge of the sea

The Overseas Highway, two narrow white lanes on yellowed concrete piers, lay close to the shallow water, passed over the key, and went on.

All afternoon the sea had been rising. Long, greasy-faced green swells came in from the Atlantic Ocean and broke on the rocks with a sudden upsurge of surf. At midday, the water had been far down among the coral heads. Now it was in the tumbled limestone blocks and concrete prisms that had been dumped there to build up the key. In a little while it would be washing its spume over the highway itself, and it might well go farther, with the increasing wind.

It was dark with twilight, and darker with clouds thick as oil smoke covering the sun over the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf was stirring, too, and bayous were flooding in Louisiana. But it was over the Atlantic that the hurricane was spinning. It was the broad, deep, deadly ocean that the tide and wind were pushing down through the gloom on to the side of the key where Dan Henry was struggling grimly, his massive back and shoulders naked and running with spray.

His eyes were red-rimmed with salt and his hide was slashed shallowly in a dozen places where he had lost his balance on the stones and fallen. He had been lurching through the surf all afternoon, working to save what he had seen, leaden and encrusted, rolling ponderously at the edge of the water. His shirt, the seat covers from his car - the fan-belt, too - and what few scraps of rope and wire had been in the trunk, all had gone for him to twist into an incredible rag of a hawser.

The men who built the Overseas Highway on the old railroad right-of-way had built up the little key, but it was still no more than a hundred feet in diameter. If the thing trapped on the rocks had chosen any other islet to wash against, there would have been a reasonable chance of saving it. But there was no one living here, and nothing to use for tools or anchors. The thing was rolling and grinding against the rocks, too heavy to float but too bulky to resist the push of storm-driven water. There were bright silver gouges on its metal flanks, and in a little while it would break up or break free, and be lost either way. The rope - the stubborn, futile rope passed around the two struts at its nose and wrapped around the great concrete block it was now butting at with brute persistence - was as much use as though Dan Henry had been a spider and tried to hold this thing in a hurriedly created web. But he had had to try, and he was trying now in another way. He jammed the soles of his feet against one concrete block and pushed his shoulders against another. With his belly ridged and his thighs bulging, his face contorted and his hands clenched, he was trying to push another massive piece of stone into place behind the plunging metal thing,

though his blood might erupt from his veins and the muscles tear open his flesh.

The thing was as thick through as a hogshead, and as long as two men. There was a thick-lipped, scarred opening a foot across at one end, where the body rounded sharply in a hemispherical compound curve. There were three stumpy fins rooted in the curve, their tips not extending beyond the bulge of the body, and two struts at the blunt nose like horns on a snail but bent forward so that the entire thing might have been fired out of a monstrous cannon or launched from the tubes of some unimaginable submarine. There were no visible openings, no boltheads, no seams. The entire thing might have been cast of a piece - might have been solid, except for the tube in the stern - and though barnacles clung to it and moss stained it, though the rocks gouged it and other blows had left their older scars on its pitted surface, still the thing was not visibly damaged.

Dan Henry strained at the rock, and sand grated minutely at its base. But the world turned red behind his eyes, and his muscles writhed into knots, and his breath burned his chest with the fury of fire. The sea broke against him and ran into his nose and mouth. The wind moaned, and the water hissed through the rocks, crashing as it came and gurgling as it drew back. The thing groaned and grated with each sluggish move. The day grew steadily darker.

Dan Henry had stopped his car on the key at noon, pulling off the highway on to the one narrow space of shoulder. He had opened the glove compartment and taken out the waxed container of milk and the now stale sandwich he had bought in Hallandale, above Miami, at ten that morning. He lit a cigarette and unwrapped the sandwich, and began to eat. The milk had turned warm in the glove compartment and acquired an unpleasant taste, but Dan Henry had never cared how his food tasted. He paid no attention to it as he chewed the sandwich and drank the milk between drags on the cigarette. He had bought the food when he stopped for gas, and when he finished it he planned to go on immediately, driving until he reached Key West.

There was nothing specific waiting for him there. Nothing in his life had ever been waiting for him anywhere. But, everywhere he went, he went as directly and as efficiently as possible because that was his nature. He was a powerful, reasonably intelligent, ugly man who drew his strength from a knowledge that nothing could quite overcome him. He asked no more of the world. He was thirty years old, and had been a construction foreman, a police officer, an M.P. sergeant in Germany and a long-haul trailer-truck driver. In addition to these things he had been born into a derrick rigger's family in Oklahoma and raised in his father's nomadic, self-sufficient tradition.

When he first saw the dull colour of metal down among the rocks, he got out of the car to see what it was. He was already thinking in terms of its possible usefulness when he reached the thing. Once near it, the idea of salvage rights came naturally.

Looking at it, he felt immediately that it had to be a military instrument of some kind. The Navy, he knew, was constantly firing rockets from Cape Canaveral, up in central Florida. But the longer he looked at the thing the longer he doubted that

possibility. The thing was too massive, too obviously built to take the kind of vicious punishment it was receiving at the hands of the sea, to be the light, expendable shell that was a missile prototype or a high-altitude test-rocket. There were tons of metal in it, and the barnacles were thick on it. He wondered how long it had been surging along the bottom, urged and tumbled by the great hidden forces of the ocean, drifting this way and that until this morning the first high tide had heaved it up here to lie caught and scraping on the rocks, steaming as it dried under the early sun.

He did not know what it was, he decided finally. Rocket, torpedo, shell, bomb, or something else, whatever it was, it was valuable and important. The Navy or the Army or Air Force would need it or want it for something.

There was nothing on it to mark it as anyone's property. If anything had ever been written or engraved on that hull, it was gone now. He began to think of how he might establish his rights until he could reach a Navy installation of some kind. The only reason he had for going to Key West was that he had a friend in the sponge-diving business down there. The friend did not know he was coming, so there was no reason not to delay for as long as this business might take him.

He had begun with nothing more than that to urge him on but, as the afternoon grew, the sea and the thing between them had trapped him.

The thing lay awash with half its length over the usual high-water mark, and even when he found it, at low tide, the water curled among the rocks above it. He had thought about that, too, but he had not thought that a hurricane might have taken an unexpected turn during the night, while he drove his old car without a radio to tell him so. Only when the clouds turned grey and the water swirled around his knees like a pack of hounds did he stop for a moment and look out to sea.

He had been clearing the smaller rocks away from around the thing and piling them in an open-ended square enclosing its forward sections, and had been scraping a clean patch in the barnacles with a tyre iron. It had been his intention to make it obvious someone was working on the thing, so he could then leave it and report it with a clear claim. The few cars going by on the highway had not stopped or slowed down - there was no place to stop, with his car on the bit of shoulder, and no real reason to slow down - and after a while the cars had stopped coming entirely.

It was that, telling him the storm had probably caused the highway to be blocked off at either end, together with the look of the sea, that made him go up to the car and try to make a hawser. And by then he could not have left the thing. It was too obvious that a man had begun a job of work here. If he left it now, it would be too plain that someone had let himself be backed down.

If he had gotten in his car and driven away, he would not have been Dan Henry.

The water was almost completely over the thing now. He himself was working with the waves breaking over his head, trying to dislodge him. More important, the thing was rocking and slipping out of its trap.

The next nearest key was a third of a mile away, bigger than this one, but still uninhabited. The nearest inhabited place was Greyhound Key, where the rest stop was for the buses, and that was out of sight. It would be battened down, and probably evacuated. Dan Henry was all alone, with the highway empty above him and the sea upon him.

He set his back once more, and pushed against the concrete block again. If he could wedge the thing, even a storm tide might not be able to take it away from him. He could untangle his home-made rope and put the fan-belt back on his car. Then he could drive away to some place until the storm died down.

The blood roared in Dan Henry's ears, and the encrusted concrete block opened the hide over his shoulders. A coughing grunt burst out of his mouth. The block teetered - not much, but it gave a little way. Dan Henry locked his knees and braced his back with his palms, pushing his elbows against the block, and when the next wave threw its pressure into the balance he pushed once more. The block slipped suddenly away from him, and he was thrown aside by the wave, flung into the wet rocks above. But the thing was wedged. It could roll and rear as much as it wanted to, but it could not flounder back into the sea. Dan Henry lay over a rock, and wiped the back of his hand across his bloody mouth in satisfaction.

It was over. He could get out of here now, and hole up somewhere. After the storm, he would come back and make sure it was still here. Then he would make his claim, either at one of the little Navy stations along the chain of keys, or at the big base at Boca Chica. And that would be that, except for the cheque in the mail. The bruises and breaks in his skin would heal over, and become nothing more than scars.

He took his rope off the thing and took it apart far enough to pick out the fan-belt. He let the rest of it wash away, shredded. As he got out of the surging water at last, he scowled slightly because he wondered if the car's spark plugs weren't wet.

It was dark now. Not quite pitch-black, for the hurricane sky to the west was banded by a last strip of sulphur-coloured light at the horizon, but dark enough so that his car was only a looming shape as he climbed up to it. Then, suddenly, the wet finish and the rusty chrome of the front bumper were sparkling with the reflections of faraway lamps. He turned to look southward down the highway, and saw a car coming. As it came nearer, its headlights let him see the clouds of spray that billowed across the road, and the leaping white heads of breakers piling up on the piers and rebounding to the level of the highway. The storm was building up even more quickly than he'd thought. He wondered what kind of damned fool was crazy enough to drive the stretches where the highway crossed open water between keys, and had his answer when a spotlight abruptly reached out and fingered him and his car. Either the state or the county police were out looking to make sure no one was trapped away from shelter.

The police car pulled up, wet and hissing, half-blocking the highway, and the driver immediately switched on his red roof-beacon, through force of habit or training, though there was no oncoming traffic to warn. The four rotating arms of red

light tracked monotonously over the road, the key, and the water. By their light, Dan Henry realized for the first time that it was raining furiously. The spotlight was switched off, and the headlights pointed away, up the highway. It was the red beacon that lit the scene and isolated the two men inside its colour.

The officer did not get out of the car. He waited for Dan Henry to come around to his side, and only then cranked his window down halfway.

'Trouble with the car?' he asked, hidden behind the reflection on the glass. Then he must have thought better of it, seeing Dan Henry's broken skin. He threw the door open quickly, and slid out with his hand on the bone-gripped butt of his plated revolver. He was thick-bodied, with a burly man's voice and brusqueness, and he kept his eyes narrowed. 'What's the story here, Mac?'

Dan Henry shook his head. 'No trouble. I was down on the rocks. Waves threw me around some.'

The officer's uniform pants and leather jacket were already sodden. Water ran down his face and he wiped it out of his eyes. 'What were you doin' down there? No brains?' He watched carefully, his hand firm on his gun.

Dan Henry had been a policeman himself. He was not surprised at the officer's attitude. A policeman was paid to be irritated by anything that didn't have a simple answer.

'I've got something down there I was salvaging,' he said reasonably. 'Storm caught me at it and knocked me around some before I got finished.' Telling about it made him realize he was tired out. He hoped this business with the policeman would be over in a hurry, so that he could fix his car and get into its shelter. The wind was chilly, and the constant impact of water on his skin was beginning to make him numb.

The officer risked a glance down at the thrashing surf before he brought his eyes back to Dan Henry. 'I don't see nothin'. What kind of a thing was it? What're you carryin' that belt around for?'

'It's metal,' Dan Henry said. 'Big. Never seen anything just like it before. I was using the belt to hold it.'

The officer scowled. 'What's holdin' it now? What d'you mean, big? How big? And how come I can't see it?'

'I pushed a rock behind it,' Dan Henry said patiently. 'It's damn near as big as a car. And it's under water, now.'

'Buddy, that don't begin to sound like a likely story.' The policeman pulled his gun out of the holster and held it down alongside his thigh. 'What kind of a lookin' thing is it?'

'Kind of like a rocket, I guess.'

'Now, why the hell didn't you say so!' the policeman growled, relaxing just a little. 'That makes sense. It'll be one of those Navy jobs. They've got 'em droppin' in the

ocean like flies. But you ain't goin' to get anything out of it, Buddy. That's government property. You're supposed to turn it in. It's your duty.'

'I don't think so.'

'What d'you mean, you don't think so?' The policeman's gun arm was tense again.

'It doesn't look like a Navy rocket. Doesn't look like anybody's rocket that I know of. I said it was *kind* of like a rocket. Don't know what it is, for sure.' Now Dan Henry was growing angry himself. He didn't like the way things were going. He kept his attention carefully on the gun.

'Know all about rockets, do you?'

'I read the papers. This thing isn't just a piece. It isn't the bottom stage or the top stage. It's one thing, and it never was part of anything bigger. And it's been in the water maybe a couple of years without getting broken up. You show me the Navy rocket that's like that.'

The policeman looked at him. 'Maybe you're right,' he said slowly. 'Tell you what - suppose you just step over here and put my spotlight on it. Reach through the window.' He stepped back casually.

Dan Henry reached around and switched the spot on. He swept it down across the water, a little startled *to* see how far up the breakers had come. Under the light, the water was a venomous green, full of foam, rain-splotched and furiously alive. A gust of wind rocked the car sharply, and the light with it. The pale beam shot over the sea before it fell back, reaching beyond the swinging cross of red from the roof beacon, and out there the waves disappeared in a mist of rain.

He found the thing, finally, after having to hunt for it. For an instant he thought it had been swept away after all, and felt a stab of anger. But it was still there, heaving under the waves, with only the dim, broad mottling of its back near enough to the surface to be seen at all, that and a constant stirring in the water, rolling it like an animal. 'There it is.' He was surprised how relieved he felt. 'See it?'

'Yeah. Yeah, I seen enough of it,' the officer said. 'You got somethin' down there, all right.' There was a sudden hardness in his voice that had been waiting all along for him to make the decision that would bring it completely out. 'I got my gun on you, buddy. Just step back from that car easy. Anybody foolin' around out here in a hurricane must want somethin' awful bad. If that somethin's a Navy rocket, I guess I know what kind of a son of a bitch that would be.'

'Jesus Christ,' Dan Henry whispered to himself. He was angry with the kind of rage that is almost a pleasure. And not because the cop thought he was a Commie, either, Dan Henry suddenly realized, but because he persisted in not understanding about the rocket. Or whatever it was.

He turned around with a jump. The fan-belt in his hand whipped out with all the strength in his arm and all the snap in his wrist, and snatched the cop's gun out of his hand. It skittered across the wet concrete of the highway, and Dan Henry pounced after it. He scooped it up and crouched with the muzzle pointed dead at the cop's

belly.

'Back off,' he said. 'Back off. You're not takin' that thing away from me. I sweated blood to hang on to it, and you're not goin' to come along and throw me in jail to get it away.'

The cop retreated, his hands up without his being told, and waited for his chance. Dan Henry backed him up the highway until the cop was past the cars, and opened the door of his own car. He threw the gun inside, together with the belt. He slammed the door and said, 'You can get that back later. Or you can try and take it away from me now, barehanded.' He was shaking with the tension in his bunched shoulders, and his arms were open wide. He was crouched, his chest deep as his lungs hunted for more and more oxygen to wash the rush of blood his heart was driving through his veins. The red flood of beacon on the police car swept over him in regular flashes.

'I'll wait,' the cop said.

'Now,' Dan Henry said, 'I want to use your radio. I want you to call in and report this. Only I want you to report it to the Navy before you call your headquarters.'

The cop looked at him with a puzzled scowl. 'You on the level?' he asked, and Dan Henry could see him wondering if he hadn't made a mistake, somewhere, in his thinking about what was going on here. But Dan Henry had no more time for him. The wind was a steady pressure that made him brace his left leg hard against it.

The water flying across the highway was coming in solid chunks, instead of spray, and the two cars were rocking on their springs. The rain was streaming over them, leaving the officer's jacket a baggy, clinging mess. The sea was smashing violently into the highway piers, thundering to the wind's howl, and even here on solid ground the shock of the impacts was coming up through Dan Henry's bones.

His throat was raw. Bit by bit, he and the officer had had to raise their voices until they had been shouting at each other without realizing it. 'Get in the car and do it!' he yelled, and the officer came forward as he backed away to give him room.

The policeman got into his car, with Dan Henry standing watchfully a little behind the open door-frame, and switched on his radio. 'Tell them where we are,' Dan Henry said. 'Tell them my name - Daniel Morris Henry - tell them what I said about it's not being one of their rockets - and tell them I'm claiming salvage rights. Then you tell them the rest any way you see it.'

The officer turned the dials away from their usual settings. After a minute, he picked his microphone out of the dashboard hanger and began calling Boca Chica in a stubborn voice. At intervals, he said, 'Over,' and threw the Receive switch. They heard the peculiar, grating crackle of radiotelephone static, trapped in the speaker. And only that.

'Look, buddy,' the policeman said at last, 'we're not goin' to get any answer. Not

if we ain't got one by now. Boca Chica radio may be knocked out. Or maybe my transmitter's shorted, with all this wet. Could be anything.' He jerked his head toward the water. 'How much longer you want us to stay out here?' Probably because he had seen many hurricanes, he was beginning to grow nervous.

'Try it again,' Dan Henry said. He watched the officer closely, and couldn't see him doing anything wrong. Dan Henry didn't know the Boca Chica frequency; that was where the trouble might be. But he'd used a police radio often enough so that any other trick wouldn't have gotten by him.

The officer called Boca Chica for another five minutes. Then he stopped again. 'No dice. Look, buddy, you've had it. Maybe you're just a guy looking for some salvage money, like you say you are. Maybe not. But there's goin' to be waves coming across this road in a little while. Why don't we get out of here and straighten things out when this blows over?'

Dan Henry set his jaw. 'Get the vibrator out of that radio. Do it.' Now he had no choice. If he went with the cop, that was that. They'd throw him in some jail for resisting arrest and assaulting an officer, and keep him there until they were good and ready to let him out. By then, whatever happened to the thing down here, somebody would have figured out some way to get that Navy cheque instead of him. The only thing to do was to cripple the cop's radio and send him down the highway until he reached a phone. There was no guarantee that the radio wouldn't work on the police frequency.

Maybe the cop would call the Navy right after he called his headquarters. Or maybe, even if he didn't, some higher brass at the headquarters would report to the Navy. Either way - if you believed it was a Navy rocket or if you didn't - it was government business. Then, maybe, the Navy would get here before the cops did. Or soon enough afterward so he'd still be here to talk to them. Once he got taken away from here, that chance was gone.

On that decision, he was ready to cling to a hundred-foot key in the middle of an Atlantic hurricane. 'Let's have that vibrator. Right now.'

The officer looked at him, and reached under the dash. He fumbled in the narrow space where the radio hung, and pulled the sealed aluminium cylinder out of its socket. But he was getting ready to grab for Dan Henry if he could reach him quickly enough.

'Okay,' Dan Henry said, 'drop it on the road and clear out of here. You can get it back along with your gun. And just in case you have some brains in your head, when you get to a phone, call the Na—'

The policeman had dropped the vibrator, and the wind had rolled it under Dan Henry's Chevrolet. Dan Henry had been in the act of letting the police car door close, when a thread of brilliant violet fire punched up from the water, through the red light, up through the rain, up through the black clouds, and out to the stars beyond.

'There's something *in* that thing!' the officer blurted.

Dan Henry threw the door shut. 'Get out of here, man!'

Down in the drowned rocks, an arc hissed between the two struts in the thing's nose. The water leaped and bubbled around it but, for all the breakers could do, the blaze of light still illuminated the thing and the rocks it ground against, turning the sea transparent; and from the crown of the arc the thin violet column pointed without wavering, without dispersing, straight as a line drawn from hell to heaven.

The police car's tyres smoked and spun on the pavement. 'I'll get help,' the officer shouted over the squeal and the roar of his engine. Then he had traction and the car shot away, headlights slashing, glimmering in the rain and the spray, lurching from side to side under the wind's hammer, roof beacon turning at its unvarying pace, the siren's howl lost in the boom of the water. And Dan Henry was left in the violet-lanced darkness.

Without the windbreak of the police car in front of him, he was pushed violently backward until his own car's fender stopped him. Water struck his eyes, and the night blurred. He bent forward and rubbed his face until the ache of the salt was dulled to a steady throbbing, and then he staggered across the highway to the guard rail on the Atlantic side. The tops of the incoming waves washed over his shoes, just as the surf at noon had lapped at him, twelve feet below.

The rain and the spray streamed over him. He cupped one hand over his nose, to breathe, and hung on the rail.

There was nothing more to see. The pillar of light still shot up from the arc, and the bulk of the thing loomed, gross and black, down there in the water. It was feet below the surface now, cushioned from the smash of the waves, and it stirred with a regular motion like a whale shark in a tank.

The radio, he thought. It had felt the radio in the police car. Nothing else had happened to bring it to life at that particular moment. It had waited a little - perhaps analysing what it had encountered, perhaps then noticing the flash of the car's roof beacon for the first time. And for the first time since the day, years ago, when it entered the sea it had found a reason for sending out a signal.

To where? Not to him, or the policeman. The light was not pointed toward the highway. It went up, straight up, going out of sight through the clouds as his eyes tried to follow it before the lash of water forced his head down again.

There was no one inside the thing, Dan Henry thought. There couldn't be. He had scraped on the side with regular, purposeful strokes, clearing an exactly square patch, and gained no response. And the thing had lain in the ocean a long time, sealed up, dragging its hide over the bottom as the currents pushed and pulled it, rolling, twisting, seamless, with only those two horns with which to feel the world about it.

He could be wrong, of course. Something could be alive in there, still breathing in some fantastic way from a self-contained air supply, eating tiny amounts of stored food, getting rid of its wastes somehow. But he didn't see how. It didn't seem logical

that anything would trap itself like that, not knowing if it was ever going to escape.

He could be wrong about it all. It might not have been reacting to anything that happened on the highway. It might be ignoring everything outside itself, and following some purpose that had nothing to do with this world or its people. But whether it was that, or whether he was at least partly right, Dan Henry wondered what was sending things to drop down on the Earth and make signals to the stars.

The water came higher. It came up the key too quickly to split and go around it, and spilled over the highway to plunge into the rocks on the Gulf side. It broke halfway up the side of his car. He remembered the policeman's vibrator. That would be far to the west of him now, skipping at a thrown stone's velocity over waves whose tops were being cut off by the wind. Dan Henry's mouth twisted in a numb grimace. Now he'd have to buy one. They probably wouldn't let him get away that cheaply. They could make that stick for a robbery charge. And destroying public property. While, on the other hand, if he was swept off this key they wouldn't even have to pay for his burial. He laughed drunkenly.

A wave broke over him. He had made a sling for himself by knotting the legs of his dungarees around one of the guard-rail uprights, and when the wave was past he lolled naked with the bunched tops of the dungarees cutting into his chest under his arms. The wind worked at him now, with a kind of fury, and then the next wave came. It was warm, but the wind evaporating it as soon as he was exposed again made his skin crawl and his teeth chatter. He reached behind him with a wooden arm and felt the knot in the dungaree legs to make sure it was holding. The pressure had tightened it into a small hard lump.

That was good, at any rate. That and the blessed practicality of the engineers who built the highway. When they laid the roadway where the hurricane-smashed railroad had been, they had cut the rusted rails up with torches, set the stumps deep in the concrete, and welded the guard-rails together out of T-shaped steel designed to hold a locomotive's weight.

Dan Henry grinned to himself. The rail would hold. The dungarees would hold, or the trademark was a liar. Only about Dan Henry was there any doubt. Dan Henry - hard, sure Dan Henry, with his chest being cut in half, with his torn skin being torn again as the waves beat him against the highway, with his head going silly because he was being pounded into raw meat.

Dear God, he thought, am I doing this for *money*? No, he thought, as a wave filled his nostrils, no, not any more. When that thing turned its light on and I didn't jump in the car with that cop, that's when we found out I wasn't doing it for the money. For what? God knows.

He floundered half over on his side, arched his neck, and looked at the violet arrow through the clouds. Signal, you bastard! Go ahead and signal! Do anything. As long as I know you're still there. If you can stay put, so can I.

Well, what *was* he doing this for? Dan Henry fought with the sling that held him, trying to take some of the pressure off his chest. God knew, but it was up to Dan

Henry to find out for himself.

It wasn't money. All right - that was decided. What was left -vanity? Big Dan Henry - big, strong, Dan Henry... take more than a hurricane to stop big, strong, wonderful Dan Henry - was that the way his thoughts were running?

He croaked a laugh. Big, strong Dan Henry was lying here limp as a calico doll, naked as a baby, praying his pants wouldn't rip. The storm had washed the pride out of him as surely as it had his first interest in the salvage money.

All right, *what*, then! He growled and cursed at his own stupidity. Here he was, and he didn't even know why. Here he was, being bludgeoned to death, being drowned, being torn apart by the wind. He was stuck out here now, and nobody could save him.

A wave roared over the highway and struck his car a blow that sent a hubcap careening off into the darkness. The car tilted on to the Gulf-side guard-rail. The rail bellied outward, and the car hung halfway over the rocks on the other side. Successive waves smashed into it, exploding in spray, and the guard-rail groaned in the lull after each strike. Dan Henry watched it dully in the violet light, with the water sluicing down over his head and shoulders for a moment before the wind found it and tore it away in horizontal strings of droplets.

The car's door panels had already been pushed in, and the windows were cracked. Now the exposed floor-boards were being hammered. The muffler was wrenched out.

With the next smash of solid water, the horizontal rail broke its weld at one end and the car heeled forward to the right, impaling its radiator on an upright. It hung there, gradually tearing the radiator out of its brackets, spilling rusty water for one instant before a wave washed it clean, scraping its front axle down the sharp edge of the roadway, breaking loose pieces of the concrete and raising its left rear wheel higher and higher. The radiator came free with a snap like a breaking tooth, and the car dropped suddenly, its front end caught by the edge of the left wheel, kept from falling only by the straining uprights still jammed against it farther back on the right side. The hood flew back suddenly and was gone with a twang in one gust of wind.

Am I going to have to buy that cop a new gun, too? Dan Henry thought, and in that moment the wind began to die. The water hesitated. Three waves rolled across the road slowly, much higher than when the wind was flattening them, but almost gentle.

The rain slackened. And then the eye of the storm had moved over him, and he had calm.

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He pushed himself to his feet at last, after he sagged out of the hold the dungarees had on his chest. He leaned against the guardrail and stared woodenly at the ocean

and the thing.

The beam went up out of sight, a clean, marvellously precise line. But down at the surface the sea was finally hiding the thing, and making a new noise that had none of a storm-sea's clean power, it filled his ears and unnerved him.

With the wind and the pressure gone, the waves were leaping upward, clashing against each other, rebounding, colliding again, peaking sharply. Dan Henry could hear the highway over the water booming faintly as the waves slammed up against its underside. But he could actually see very little. It had grown darker, and what he saw were mostly the tops of the exploding waves, glimmering pale violet.

The thing was buried deep, where it lay at the foot of the key, and the arc that had diffused most of the light was visible only as a fitful glow that shifted and danced. The violet beam seemed to spring into life of itself at the plunging surface, and it kept most of its light compressed within itself.

Dan Henry swayed on the guard-rail. It was stifling hot. The mugginess filled his lungs and choked him. He lolled his head back. The clouds were patchy overhead, and the stars shone through in places.

There was a high-pitched chime, and a circle of ice-blue flame came hurtling down the beam. It came out of the sky and shot into the water, and when it touched the glimmer of the arc there was another chime, this time from the thing, and this time the water quivered. The violet beam flickered once, and a red halo spat up with a crackle, travelling slowly. When it was a hundred feet over Dan Henry's head it split in two, leaving one thin ring moving at the old rate, and a larger one that suddenly doubled its speed until it split again, doubled its speed and split again, accelerated again, and so blazed upward along the violet beam's axis, leaving a spaced trail of slowly moving lesser rings behind it. They hung in the air, a ladder to the stars. Then they died out slowly, and before they had stopped glowing the violet beam was switched off.

The sky was empty, and the thing lay quiescent in the water once more. Dan Henry blinked at the flashes swimming across his eyes. It was pitch dark. He could barely see the white of swirling water as it dashed itself into the rocks at his feet.

Far up the highway, coming towards him, were two headlights with a swinging red beacon just above them.

The police car was plastered with wet leaves and broken palm fronds. The policeman slammed it to a halt beside him, and flung the door open. He stopped long enough to turn his head and say, 'Jesus Christ! He's still here! He ain't gone!' to someone in the front seat with him, and then he jumped out. 'What happened?' he asked Dan Henry. 'What was that business with the lights?'

Dan Henry looked at him. 'You made it,' he mumbled.

'Yeah, I made it. Got to this Navy skywatch station. Phone was out, so I couldn't call in to headquarters. Found this Navy professor up there. Brought him down with

me when the eye came over. He figures we got maybe twenty minutes more before the other side of the hurricane comes around.'

The other man had slid out of the car. He was a thin, bony-faced man with rimless glasses. He was dressed in a badly fitted tropical suit that was pleated with dampness. He looked at Dan Henry's purpled chest, and asked, 'Are you all right?'

'Sure.'

The man twitched an eyebrow. 'I'm assigned to the satellite-tracking station north of here. What is this thing?'

Dan Henry nodded toward it. 'Down there. It got an answer to its signal, acknowledged and switched off. That's what I think, anyhow.'

'You do, eh? Well, you could be right. In any case, we don't have much time. I'll notify the naval district commandant's office as soon as the telephones are working again, but I want a quick look at it now, in case we lose it.'

'We're not going to lose it,' Dan Henry growled.

The professor looked at him sharply. 'What makes you sure?'

'I wedged it,' Dan Henry said with a tight note in his voice. 'I almost ruined myself and I almost drowned, but I wedged it. I took a gun away from a cop to keep it from getting left here without anybody to watch it. And I stayed here and got almost drowned, and almost cut in half, and almost beat to death against this highway here, and *we're not going to lose it now.*'

'I... see,' the professor said. He turned to the policeman. 'If you happen to have some sedatives, in your first-aid kit, they might be useful now,' he murmured.

'Might have something. I'll look,' the policeman said.

'And put your spotlight on the thing, please,' the professor added, peering over the guard-rail. 'Though I don't suppose we'll see much.'

The yellow beam of the spotlight slid over the top of the water. If it penetrated at all, it still did not reach any part of the thing. The policeman hunted for it, sweeping back and forth until Dan Henry made an impatient sound, went over to him, and pointed it straight. 'Now, leave it there. That's where it is.'

'Yeah? I don't see anythin' but water.'

'That's where it is,' Dan Henry said. 'Haven't been here all this time for nothin'.' He went back to the railing, but there was still nothing to see.

'You're sure that's where it is?' the professor asked.

'Yes. It's about ten feet down.'

'All right,' the professor sighed. 'Tell me as much as you can about its activities.'

'I think it's a sounding rocket,' Dan Henry said. 'I think somebody from some place sent that thing down here a while ago to find out things. I don't know what those things are. I don't know who that somebody is. But I'm pretty sure he lost it somehow, and didn't know where it was until it signalled him just now. I don't know

why it worked out that way. I don't know why the rocket couldn't get its signal through before this, or why it didn't go home.'

'You think it's of extraterrestrial origin, then?'

Dan Henry looked at the professor. 'You don't think so?'

'If I did, I would be on my way to district headquarters at this moment, hurricane or no hurricane,' the professor said testily.

'You don't believe it?' Dan Henry persisted.

The professor grew uneasy. 'No.'

'Wouldn't you *like* to believe it?'

The professor looked quickly out to sea.

'Here,' the policeman said, handing Dan Henry a flat brown half-pint bottle. 'Sedative.' He winked.

Dan Henry knocked the bottle out of the cop's hand. It broke on the pavement.

'Look up!' the professor whispered.

They turned their heads. Something huge, flat, and multi-winged was shadowed faintly on the stars.

'Oh, Lord,' the officer said.

There was a burst of chiming from the thing down in the water, and violet pulses of light came up through the water and burst on the underside of the thing up in the sky.

Answering darts of tawny gold came raining down. The thing in the water stirred, and they could see the rocks move. 'Tractor rays,' the professor said in a husky voice. 'Theoretically impossible.'

'What's it going to do?' the policeman asked.

'Pick it up,' the professor answered. 'And take it back to wherever it comes from.'

Dan Henry began to curse.

The thing in the sky slipped down, and they could feel the air throb. After a moment, the sound came to them - a distant, rumbling purr, and a high metallic shrieking.

The thing in the water heaved itself upward. It struggled against the rocks.

'We'd better get back,' the professor said.

The distant sound grew stronger and beat upon their ears. The professor and the policeman retreated to the car.

But Dan Henry did not. He straightened his back and gathered his muscles. As the tawny fire came down, he leaped over the guard-rail into the water.

He swam with grim fury, thrown and sucked by the water, sputtering for breath, his feet pounding. Even so, he would not have reached the thing. But the water

humped in the grip of the force that clutched at the thing, and the waves collapsed. Dan Henry's arms bit through the water with desperate precision, and just before the thing broke free, he was upon it.

'No, sir,' he grunted, closing his hand on one of the struts. 'Not without me. We've been through too much together.' He grinned coldly at the hovering ship as they rose to meet it.

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