

SILENT BROTHER

Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

THE FIRST STARSHIP was home.

At first, the sight of the *Endeavor's* massive bulk on his TV screen held Cable's eager attention. At his first glimpse of the starship's drift to its mooring, alongside a berthing satellite, he'd felt the intended impression of human grandeur; more than most viewers, for he had a precise idea of the scale of size.

But the first twitch of ambiguity came as he watched the crew come out and cross to the Albuquerque shuttle on their suit jets. He knew those men: Dugan, who'd be impatient to land, as he'd been impatient to depart; Frawley, whose white hair would be sparsely tousled over his tight pink scalp; Snell, who'd have run to fat on the voyage unless he'd exercised like the very devil and fasted like a hermit; young Tommy Penn, who'd be unable to restrain his self-conscious glances into the cameras.

It was exactly those thoughts which dulled his vicarious satisfaction. He stayed in front of the set, watching through the afternoon, while the four men took off their suits and grouped themselves briefly for the still photographers, while they got past the advance guard of reporters into the shuttle's after compartment, and refused to speak for the video coverage.

It made no essential difference that Snell was lean and graceful, or that all four of them, Frawley and Penn included, were perfectly poised and unruffled. Perhaps it was a little more irritating that they were.

Endeavor's crew was stepping gracefully into history.

The cameras and Cable followed the four men out of the shuttle and across the sun-drenched field at Albuquerque. Together they watched every trivial motion; Dugan's first cigarette in six months; Frawley's untied shoelace, which he repaired by casually stopping in the middle of the gangway and putting a leg up on the railing; Tommy Penn giving a letter to a guard to mail.

Together with a billion other inhabitants of what was no longer Man's only planet, Cable looked into the faces of the President of the United States, of the United Nations Secretary General, of Premier Sobieski, and Marshal Siemens. Less than others, because he had a professional's residual contempt for eulogies, he heard what they had to say.

By nine or nine-thirty that night he had gathered the essential facts about the solar system of Alpha Centaurus. There were five planets, two of them temperate and easily habitable, one of them showing strong hints of extensive heavy metal ores. The trip had been uneventful, the stay unmarked by extraordinary incident. There was no mention of inhabitants.

There was also no mention of anything going wrong with the braking system, and that,

perhaps, intensified the crook that had begun to bend one corner of Cable's thin mouth.

"You're welcome," he couldn't help grunting as Frawley described the smoothness of the trip and the simplicity of landing. That decelerating an object of almost infinite mass within a definitely finite distance was at all complicated didn't seem to be worthy of mention.

More than anything, it was the four men's unshakable poise that began to grate against him.

"Happens every day," he grunted at them, simultaneously telling himself he'd turned into a crabby old man at thirty-four, muttering spitefully at his friends for doing what he no longer could.

But that flash of insight failed to reappear when his part in *Endeavor's* development was lumped in with the "hardworking, dedicated men whose courage and brilliance made our flight possible." Applied to an individual, phrases like that were meaningful. Used like this, they covered everyone from the mess hall attendants to the man in charge of keeping the armadillos from burrowing under the barrack footings.

He snapped the set off with a peevish gesture. Perhaps, if he stayed up, the program directors, running out of fresh material at last, might have their commentators fill in with feature stuff like "amazing stride forward in electronics," "unified field theory," "five years of arduous testing on practical application to spaceship propulsion," and the like. Eventually, if they didn't cut back to the regular network shows first, they might mention his name. Somebody might even think it important that *Endeavor* had cost the total destruction of one prototype and the near-fatal crash of another.

But suddenly he simply wanted to go to bed. He spun his chair away from the set, rolled into the bedroom, levered himself up and pulled his way onto the bed. Taking his legs in his callused hands, he put them under the blankets, turned off the lights, and lay staring up at the dark.

Which showed and told him nothing.

He shook his head at himself. It was only twenty miles to the field from here. If he was really that much of a gloryhound, he could have gone. He was a dramatic enough sight. And, in all truth, he hadn't for a minute been jealous while the *Endeavor* was actually gone. It was just that today's panegyrics had been a little too much for his vanity to stave off.

He trembled on the brink of admitting to himself that his real trouble was the feeling that he'd lost all contact with the world. But only trembled, and only on the brink.

Eventually he fell asleep.

He'd slept unusually well, he discovered when he awoke in the morning. Looking at his watch, he saw it had only been about eight hours, but it felt like more. He decided to try going through the morning without the chair. Reaching over to the stand beside his bed, he got his braces and tugged them onto his legs. Walking clumsily, he tottered into the bathroom with his canes, washed his face, shaved, and combed his hair.

He'd forgotten to scrub his bridge last night. He took it out now and realized only after he did so that his gums, top and bottom, were sore.

"Oh, well," he told himself in the mirror, "we all have our cross to bear."

He decided to leave the bridge out for the time being. He never chewed with his front teeth anyway. Whistling "Sweet Violets" shrilly, he made his way back into the bedroom, where he carefully dressed in a suit, white shirt, and tie. He'd seen too many beat-up men who let themselves go to pot. Living alone the way he did made it even more important for him to be as neat as he could.

What's more, he told himself insidiously, the boys might drop over.

Thinking that way made him angry at himself. It was pure deception, because the bunch wouldn't untangle themselves out of the red tape and de-briefings for another week. That kind of wishful thinking could drift him into living on hungry anticipations, and leave him crabbed and querulous when they failed to materialize on his unreal schedule.

He clumped into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator with a yank of his arm.

That was something else to watch out for. Compensation was all well and good, but refrigerators didn't need all that effort to be opened. If he got into the habit of applying excessive arm-strength to everything, the day might come when he'd convince himself a man didn't need legs at all. That, too, was a trap. A man could get along without legs, just as a man could teach himself to paint pictures with his toes. But he'd paint better with finger dexterity.

The idea was to hang on to reality. It was the one crutch everybody used.

He started coffee boiling and went back out to the living room to switch on the TV.

That was another thing. He could have deliberately stopped and turned it on while on his way to the kitchen. But he'd never thought to save the steps before he'd crashed. More difficult? Of course it was more difficult now! But he needed the exercise.

Lift. Swing. Lock. Lean. Lift other leg. Swing, lock. Lean. Unlock other leg. Lift--

He cursed viciously at the perspiration going down his face.

And now the blasted set wouldn't switch on. The knob was loose. He looked more closely, leaning carefully to one side in order to get a look at the set's face.

He had no depth perception, of course, but there was something strange about the dark square behind the plastic shield over the face of the tube.

The tube was gone. He grunted incredulously, but, now that his eye was accustomed to the dimmer light in this room, he could see the inside of the cabinet through the shield.

He pushed the cabinet away from the wall with an unexpected ease that almost toppled him. The entire set was gone. The antenna line dangled loosely from the wall. Only the big speaker, mounted below the chassis compartment, was still there.

First, he checked the doors and windows.

The two doors were locked from the inside, and the house, being air-conditioned, had no

openable windows. He had only to ascertain that none of the panes had been broken or removed. Then he catalogued his valuables and found nothing gone.

The check was not quite complete. The house had a cellar. But before he was willing to go through that effort, he weighed the only other possibility in balance.

His attitude on psychiatry was blunt, and on psychology only a little less so. But he was a pragmatist; that is, he played unintuitive poker with success.

Because he was a pragmatist, he first checked the possibility that he'd had a mental lapse and forgotten he'd called to have the set taken out for repairs. Unlocking the front door, he got the paper off the step. A glance at the date and a story lead beginning "Yesterday's return of the Endeavor" exploded that hypothesis, not to his surprise. The set had been there last night. It was still too early today for any repair shop to be open.

Ergo, he had to check the cellar windows. He hadn't lost a day, or done anything else incredible like that. Tossing the paper on the kitchen table, he swung his way to the cellar door, opened it, and looked down, hoping against hope that he'd see the broken window from here and be able to report the burglary without the necessity of having to ease himself down the steps.

But, no such luck. Tucking the canes under his left arm, he grasped the railing and fought his body's drag.

Once down, he found it unnecessary to look at the windows. The set chassis was in the middle of his old, dust-covered workbench. It was on its side, and the wiring had been ripped out. The big tube turned its pale face toward him from a nest of other components. A soldering iron balanced on the edge of the bench, and some rewiring had been begun on the underside of the chassis.

It was only then--and this, he admitted to himself without any feeling of self-reproach, was perfectly normal for a man like himself--that he paid any notice to the superficial burns, few in number, on the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

The essence of anything he might plan, he decided, was in discarding the possibility of immediate outside help.

He sat in his chair, drinking a cup of the coffee he'd made after having to scrape the burnt remains of the first batch out of the coffee-maker, and could see where that made the best sense.

He had no burglary to report, so that took care of the police. As for calling anyone else, he didn't have the faintest idea of whom to call if he'd wanted to. There was no government agency, local, state, or federal--certainty not international, ramified though the United Nations was--offering advice and assistance to people who disassembled their own TV sets in their sleep and then proceeded to re-work them into something else.

Besides, this was one he'd solve for himself.

He chuckled. What problem wasn't? He was constitutionally incapable of accepting anyone else's opinion over his own, and he knew it.

Well, then, data thus far:

One ex-TV set in the cellar. Better: one collection of electronic parts.

Three burns on fingertips. Soldering iron?

He didn't know. He supposed that, if he ever took the trouble to bone up with a book or two on circuitry, he could throw together a fair FM receiver, and, given a false start or two, mock up some kind of jackleg video circuit. But he'd never used a soldering iron in his life. He imagined the first try might prove disgracefully clumsy.

Questions:

How did one shot-up bag of rag-doll bones and twitchless nerves named Harvey Cable accomplish all this in his sleep?

How did he pull that set out of the cabinet, hold it in both arms as he'd have to, and, even granting the chair up to this point, make it down the cellar steps?

Last question, par value, \$64.00: Where had the tools come from?

He searched the house again, but there was definitely no one else in it.

Toward noon he found his mind still uneasy on one point. He got out his rubber-stamp pad, inked his fingertips, and impressed a set of prints on a sheet of paper. With this, his shaving brush, and a can of talcum powder, he made his way into the cellar again and dusted the face of the picture tube. The results were spotty, marred by the stiffness of the brush and his lack of skill, but after he hit on the idea of letting the powder drift across the glass like a dry ripple riding the impetus of his gently blown breath, he got a clear print of several of his fingers. There were some very faint prints that were not his own, but he judged from their apparent age that they must belong to the various assemblers in the tube's parent factory. There were no prints of comparable freshness to his own, and he knew he'd never handled the tube before.

That settled that.

Next, he examined the unfamiliar tools that had been laid on the bench. Some of them were arranged in neat order, but others--the small electric soldering iron, a pair of pliers, and several screwdrivers--were scattered among the parts. He dusted those, too, and found his own prints on them. All of the tools were new, and unmarked with work scratches.

He went over to where his electric drill was hanging up beside his other woodworking tools. There were a few shavings of aluminum clinging to the burr of the chuck. Going back to the reworked chassis, he saw that several new cuts and drillings had been made in it.

Well. He looked blankly at it all.

Next question: What in the name of holy horned hell am I building?

He sat looking thoughtfully down at the paper, which he'd finally come around to reading. He wasn't the only one infested with mysteries.

The story he'd glanced at before read:

OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP SHROUDS ENDEAVOR CREW

Albuquerque, May 14-- Yesterday's return of the Endeavor brought with it a return of outmoded press policies on the part of all official government agencies concerned. In an unprecedented move, both the U. S. and U. N. Press Secretaries late last night refused to permit further interviews with the crew or examination of the starship. At the same time, the Press was restricted to the use of official mimeographed releases in its stories.

Unofficial actions went even farther. Reporters at the Sandia auxiliary press facilities were told "off the record" that a "serious view" might "well be taken" if attempts were made to circumvent these regulations. This was taken to mean that offending newspapers would henceforth be cut off from all official releases. Inasmuch as these releases now constitute all the available information on the Endeavor, her crew, and their discoveries, this "unofficial device" is tantamount to a threat of total censorship. The spokesman giving this "advice" declined to let his name be used.

Speculation is rife that some serious mishap, in the nature of an unsuspected disease or infection, may have been discovered among members of the Endeavor's crew. There can, of course, be no corroboration or denial of this rumor until the various agencies involved deign to give it.

Under this was a box: See Editorial, "A Free Press in a Free World," p. 23.

Cable chuckled, momentarily, at the paper's discomfiture. But his face twisted into a scowl again while he wondered whether Dugan, Frawley, Snell, and Tommy Penn were all right. The odds were good that the disease theory was a bunch of journalistic hogwash, but anything that made the government act like that was sure to be serious.

Some of his annoyance, he realized with another chuckle on a slightly different note, came from his disappointment. It looked like it might be even longer before the bunch was free to come over and visit him.

But this return to yesterday's perverse selfishness did not stay with him long. He was looking forward eagerly to tonight's experiment. Cable smiled with a certain degree of animation as he turned the pages. By tomorrow he'd have a much better idea of what was happening here. Necessarily, his own problem eclipsed the starship mystery. But that was good.

It was nice, having a problem to wrestle with again.

There was an item about a burgled hardware store--"small tools and electrical supplies were taken"--and he examined it coolly. Data on source of tools?

The possibility existed. Disregard the fact he was the world's worst raw burglar material. He hadn't been a set designer before last night, either.

He immediately discarded the recurring idea that the police should be called. They'd refuse to take him seriously; there was even a tangible risk of being cross-questioned by a

psychiatrist.

He judged as objectively as he could that it would take several days of this before he grew unreasonably worried. Until such time, he was going to tackle this by himself, as best he could.

His gums still ached, he noticed--more so than this morning, perhaps.

His eyes opened, and he looked out at morning sunshine. So, he hadn't been able to keep awake at night. He'd hardly expected to.

Working methodically, he looked at the scratch pad on which he'd been noting the time at ten-minute intervals. The last entry, in a sloppy hand, was for eleven-twenty. Somewhat later than he was usually able to keep awake, but not significantly much.

He looked at his watch. It was now 7:50 a.m. A little more than eight hours, all told, and again he felt unusually rested. Well, fine. A sound mind in a sound body, and all that. The early worm gets the bird. Many lights make hand work easier on the eyes. A nightingale in the bush is worth two birds in the hand.

He was also pretty cheerful.

Strapping on his braces and picking up his canes, he now swung himself over to the locked bedroom door. There were no new burns on his fingers.

He looked at the door critically. It was still locked, and, presumably until proven otherwise, the key was still far out of reach in the hall, where he'd skittered it under the door after turning the lock.

He turned back to the corner where he'd left the screwdriver balanced precariously on a complex arrangement of pots and pans which the tool's weight kept from toppling, and which he'd had to hold together with string while he was assembling it. After placing the screwdriver, he'd burned the string, as well as every other piece of twine or sewing thread in the house.

He was unable to lift the tool now without sending the utensils tumbling with a crash and clatter that made him wince. It seemed only reasonable that the racket would have been quite capable of waking the half-dead, even if none of his other somnambulistic activities had. But the screwdriver hadn't been touched--or else his sleeping brain was more ingenious than his waking one.

Well, we'll see. He went back to the door, found no scratches on the lock, but left quite a few in the process of taking the lock apart and letting himself out.

Data: key still far out on hall floor. He picked it up after some maneuvering with his canes and brace locks, put it in his pocket, and went to the cellar door, which was also still locked.

His tactics here had been somewhat different. The key was on the kitchen table, on a dark tablecloth, with flour scattered over it in a random pattern he'd subsequently memorized with no hope of being able to duplicate it.

The flour was undisturbed. Nevertheless, there was a possibility he might have shaken out the cloth, turned it over to hide the traces of flour remaining, replaced the key, and somehow duplicated the flour pattern--or, at any rate, come close enough to fool himself, provided he was interested in fooling himself.

This checked out negative. He'd done no such thing. He defied anyone to get all the traces of flour out of the cloth without laundering it, in which case he'd been wonderfully ingenious at counterfeiting several leftover food stains.

Ergo, he hadn't touched the key. *Ipsa facto. Reductio ad absurdum. Non lessi illegitimis te carborundum.*

Next move.

He unlocked the cellar door and lowered himself down the steps.

Which gave him much food for thought. He stood cursing softly at the sight of the chassis with more work done on it.

For the first time he felt a certain degree of apprehension. No bewilderment, as yet; too many practical examples in his lifetime had taught him that today's inexplicable mystery was tomorrow's dry fact. Nevertheless, he clumped forward with irritated impatience and stood looking down at the workbench.

All the tools were scattered about now. The tube had been wiped clean of his amateur fingerprintings yesterday, and the tools, apparently, had come clean in handling. The chassis was tipped up again, and some parts, one of which looked as though it had been revamped, had been bolted to its upper surface and wired into the growing circuit. The soldering was much cleaner; apparently he was learning.

He was also learning to walk through locked doors, damn it!

He'd left a note for himself: "What am I doing?" blockprinted in heavy letters on a shirt cardboard he'd propped against the chassis. It had been moved to one side, laid down on the far end of the bench.

There was no answer.

He glowered down at the day's paper, his eye scanning the lines, but not reading. It wasn't even in focus.

His entire jaw was aching, but he grimly concentrated past that, grinding at the situation with the sharp teeth of his mind.

The new fingerprints on the set were his, again. He was still doing a solo--or was it a duet with himself?

He'd rechecked the locks, examined the doors, tried to move the immovable hinge pins, and even tested the bedroom and cellar windows to make sure against the absurd possibility that he'd gotten them open and clambered in and out that way.

The answer was no.

But the thing in the cellar had more work done on it.

The answer was yes

That led nowhere. Time out to let the subconscious mull it over. He concentrated on the paper, focusing his blurred vision on the newspaper by main force, wondering how the starship base was doing with its mystery.

Not very well. The entire base had been quarantined, and the official press releases cut to an obfuscatory trickle.

For a moment, his anxiety about the boys made him forget his preoccupation. Reading as rapidly as he could with his foggy eye, he discovered that the base was entirely off limits to anyone now; apparently that applied to government personnel, too. The base had been cordoned off by National Guard units at a distance of two miles. The paper was beating the disease drum for all it was worth, and reporting a great deal of international anxiety on the subject.

It seemed possible now that the paper was correct in its guess. At any rate, it carried a front-page story describing the sudden journeys of several top-flight biologists and biochemists en route to the base, or at least this general area.

Cable clamped his lips into a worried frown.

He'd been in on a number of the preliminary briefings on the trip, before he'd disqualified himself. The theory had been that alien bugs wouldn't be any happier on a human being than, say, a rock lichen would be. But even the people quoting the theory had admitted that the odds were not altogether prohibitive against it, and it was Cable's experience that theories were only good about twenty-five per cent of the time in the first place.

It was at this point that the idea of a correlation between the starship's mystery and his own first struck him.

He fumed over it for several hours.

The idea looked silly. Even at second or third glance, it resembled the kind of brainstorm a desperate man might get in a jam like this.

That knowledge alone was enough to prejudice him strongly against the possibility. But he couldn't quite persuade himself to let go of it.

Item: The crew of the starship might be down with something.

Item: The base was only twenty miles away. Air-borne infection?

Item: The disease, if it was a disease, had attacked the world's first astronauts. By virtue of his jouncings-about in the prototype models, he also qualified as such.

A selective disease attacking people by occupational specialty?

Bushwah!

Air-borne infection in an air-conditioned house?

All right, his jaw ached and his vision was blurred.

He pawed angrily at his eye.

When he had conceived of interfering with the progress of the work, he'd intended it as one more cool check on what the response would be. But now it had become something of a personal spite against whatever it was he was doing in the cellar.

By ten o'clock that night, he'd worked himself into a fuming state of temper. He clumped downstairs, stood glaring at the set, and was unable to deduce anything new from it. Finally he followed the second part of his experimental program by ripping all the re-done wiring loose, adding a scrawled "Answer me!" under yesterday's note, and went to bed seething. Let's see what he did about *that*.

His mouth ached like fury in the morning, overbalancing his sense of general well-being. He distracted himself with the thought that he was getting a lot of sound rest, for a man on a twenty-four day, while he lurched quickly into the bathroom and peeled his lips back in front of the mirror.

He stared at the front of his mouth in complete amazement. Then he began to laugh, clutching the washbasin and continuing to look incredulously at the sight in the mirror.

He was teething!

With the look of a middle-aged man discovering himself with chicken pox, he put his thumb and forefinger up to his gums and felt the hard ridges of outthrusting enamel.

He calmed down with difficulty, unable to resist the occasional fresh temptation to run his tongue over the sprouting teeth. Third sets of teeth occasionally happened, he knew, but he'd dismissed that possibility quite early in the game. Now, despite his self-assurances at the time the bridge was fitted, he could admit that manufactured dentures were never as satisfying as the ones a man grew for himself. He grinned down at the pronged monstrosity he'd been fitting into his mouth each morning for the past year, picked it up delicately, and dropped it into the waste basket with a satisfying sound.

Whistling again for the first time in two days, he went out to the cellar door and opened it, bent, and peered down. He grunted and reached for the rail as he swung his right foot forward.

He opened his mouth in a strangled noise of surprise. He'd seen depth down those stairs. His other eye was working again--the retina had re-attached itself!

The stairs tumbled down with a crash as their supports, sawed through, collapsed under his weight. The railing came limply loose in his clutch, and he smashed down into the welter of splintered boards ten feet below.

I shouldn't, he thought to himself in one flicker of consciousness, have ripped up that set. Then he pitched into blackness again.

He rolled over groggily, wiped his hand over his face, and opened his eyes. There didn't seem to be any pain.

He was facing the stairs, which had been restored. The braces had been splinted with scrap lumber, and two of the treads were new wood. The old ones were stacked in a corner, and he half-growled at the sight of brown smears on their splintered ends.

There was still no pain. He had no idea of how long he'd been lying there on the cellar floor. His watch was smashed.

He looked over at the workbench, and saw that whatever he'd been building was finished. The chassis sat right side up on the bench, the power cord trailing up to the socket.

It looked like no piece of equipment he'd ever seen. The tube was lying on the bench beside the chassis, wired in but unmounted. Apparently it didn't matter whether it was rigidly positioned or not. He saw two control knobs rising directly out of the top of the chassis, as well as two or three holes in the chassis where components had been in the TV circuit but were not required for this new use. The smaller tubes glowed. The set was turned on.

Apparently, too, he hadn't cared what condition his body was in while he worked on it.

He'd been fighting to keep his attention away from his body. The teeth and the eye had given him a hint he didn't dare confirm at first.

But it was true. He could feel the grittiness of the floor against the skin of his thighs and calves. His toes responded when he tried to move them, and his legs flexed.

His vision was perfect, and his teeth were full-grown, strong and hard as he clamped them to keep his breathing from frightening him.

Something brushed against his leg, and he looked down. His leg motions had snapped a hair-thin copper wire looped around one ankle and leading off toward the bench. He looked up, and the triggered picture tube blinked a light in his eyes.

Blink can't think blink rhythm I think blink trick think blink sink blink wink--CAN'T THINK!

He slammed his hands up against his face, covering his eyes.

He held them there for a few choked moments. Then he opened two fingers in a thin slit, like a little boy playing peek-a-boo with his mother.

The light struck his eye again. This time there was no getting away. The trigger of the picture tube's flicker chipped at each attempt to think, interrupting each beat of his brain as it tried to bring its attention on anything but the stimulus of that blink. He had no chance of even telling his hands to cover his eyes again.

His body collapsed like a marionette, and his face dropped below the flickering beam. His head hanging, he got to his hands and knees like a young boy getting up to face the schoolyard bully again.

The blink reflected off the floor and snapped his head up like a kick. The blink reflected off

the floor and snapped his head up like a kick. The beam struck him full in the eyes.

It was even impossible for him to tell his throat to scream. He swayed on his knees, and the blink went into his brain like a sewing machine.

Eventually he fell again, and by now he was beginning to realize what the machine was doing to him. Like an Air Force cadet feeling the controls of his first trainer, he began to realize that there was a logic to this--that certain actions produced a certain response--that the machine could predict the rhythm of his thoughts and throttle each one as it tried to leave his brain and translate itself into coherent thought.

He looked up deliberately, planning to snatch his face to one side the moment he felt it grip him again.

This time he was dimly aware of his arms, flailing upward and trying to find his face in a hopelessly uncoordinated effort.

He discovered he could sidestep the blink. If he upset the machine's mechanical prediction, he could think. His mind rolled its thought processes along well-worn grooves. As simple a thought as knowing he was afraid had to search out its correlations in a welter of skin temperature data, respiration and heartbeat notations, and an army of remembered precedents.

If he could reshuffle that procedure, using data first that would ordinarily claim his attention last, he could think. The blink couldn't stop him.

Like a man flying cross-country for the first time, he learned that railroads and highways are snakes, not arrows. Like a pilot teaching his instincts to push the nose down in a stall, abrogating the falling-response that made him ache to pull back on the stick, he learned. He had to, or crash.

To do that, he had to change the way he thought.

The blink turned into a flashing light that winked on and off at pre-set intervals. He reached up and decided which knob was logically the master switch. He turned it off, feeling the muscles move, his skin stretch, and his bones roll to the motion. He felt the delicate nerves in his fingertips tell him how much pressure was on his capillaries, and the nerves under his fingernails corroborate their reading against the pressure there. His fingers told him when the switch was off, not the click of it. There was no click. The man who'd put that switch in hadn't intended it for human use.

Most of all, he felt his silent brother smile within him.

The three uniformed men stopped in the doorway and stared at him.

"Harvey Cable?" one of them finally asked. He blinked his eyes in the bright sunshine, peering through the doorway.

Cable smiled. "That's right. Come on in."

The man who'd spoken wore an Air Force major's insignia and uniform. The other two were

United Nations inspectors. They stepped in gingerly, looking around them curiously.

"I refurnished the place," Cable said pleasantly. "I've got a pretty good assortment of wood-working tools in the cellar."

The major was pale, and the inspectors were nervous. They exchanged glances. "Typical case," one of them muttered, as though it had to be put in words.

"We understood you were crippled," the major stated.

"I was, Major--?"

"Paulson. Inspector Lee, and Inspector Carveth." Paulson took a deep breath. "Well, we're exposed, now. May we sit down?"

"Sure. Help yourselves. Exposed to the disease, you mean?"

The major dropped bitterly into a chair, an expression of surprise flickering over his face as he realized how comfortable it was. "Whatever it is. Contagious psychosis, they're saying now. No cure," he added bluntly.

"No disease," Cable said, but made little impression. All three men had their mouths clamped in thin, desperate lines. Apparently the most superficial contact with the "disease" had proved sufficient for "infection."

"Well," Cable said, "what can I do for you? Would you like a drink first?"

Paulson shook his head, and the inspectors followed suit. Cable shrugged politely.

"We came here to do a job," Paulson said doggedly. "We might as well do it." He took an envelope out of his blouse pocket. "We had quite a battle with the Postmaster General about this. But we got it. It's a letter to you from Thomas Penn."

Cable took it with a wordless tilt of one eyebrow. It had been opened. Reaching into the envelope, he pulled out a short note:

Harv--

Chances are, this is the only way we'll have time to get in touch with yaz. Even so, you may not get it. Don't worry about us, no matter what you hear. We're fine. You won't know how fine until you get acquainted with the friend we're sending you.

Good luck,

Tommy

He smiled, feeling his silent brother smile, too. For a moment they shared the warmth of feeling between them. Then he turned his attention back to the three men. "Yes?"

Paulson glared at him. "Well, what about it? What friend? Where is he?"

Cable grinned at him. Paulson would never believe him if he told him. So there was no good

in telling him. He'd have to find out for himself.

Just as everybody would. There was no logic in telling. Telling proved nothing, and who would welcome a "parasitic" alien into his body and mind, even if that "parasite" was a gentle, intelligent being who kept watch over the host, repairing his health, seeing to his well-being? Even if that "parasite" gave you sanity and rest, tranquillity and peace, because he needed it in order to fully be your brother? Who wants symbiosis until he's felt it? Not you, Major. Not Harvey Cable, either, fighting his battles on the edge of the world, proud, able--but alone.

Who wants to know any human being can go where he wants to, do what he wants to, now? Who wants to know disease is finished, age is calm, and death is always a falling asleep, now? Not the medical quacks, not the lonely hearts bureaus, not the burial insurance companies. Not the people who live on fear. Who wants a brother who doesn't hesitate to slap you down if you need it while you're growing up?

Should the *Endeavor* have brought riot and war back with it? Better a little panic now, damping itself out before it even gets out of the Southwest.

No, you don't tell people about this. You simply give it.

"Well?" Paulson demanded again.

Cable smiled at him. "Relax, Major. There's all the time in the world. My friend's where you can't ever get him unless I let you. What's going on up around the base?"

Paulson grunted his anger. "I don't know," he said harshly. "We were all in the outer quarantine circle."

"The outer circle. It's getting to one circle after another, is it?"

"Yes!"

"What's it like? The disease. What does it do?"

"You know better than I do."

"Men walking in their sleep? Doing things? Getting past guards and sentries, getting out of locked rooms? Some of them building funny kinds of electronic rigs?"

"What do you think?" Paulson was picturing himself doing it. It was plain on his face.

"I think so. Frighten you?"

Paulson didn't answer.

"It shouldn't. It's a little rough, going it alone, but with others around you, I don't imagine you'll have any trouble."

It wasn't the man who momentarily disorganized his body and passed under a door who was frightened. Not after he could do it of his own volition instead of unconsciously, at his brother's direction. It was the man who watched him do it, just as it was the men on the ground who were terrified for the Wright brothers. Paulson was remembering what he'd

seen. He had no idea of how it felt to be free.

Cable thought of the stars he'd seen glimmering as he rode *Endeavor's* prototype, and the curtains and clouds of galaxies beyond them. He'd wanted to go to them all, and stand on every one of their planets.

Well, he couldn't quite have that. There wasn't time enough in a man's life. But his brother, too, had been a member of a race chained to one planet. The two of them could see quite a bit before they grew too old.

So we were born in a Solar System with one habitable planet, and we developed the star drive. And on Alpha's planet, a race hung on, waiting for someone to come along and give it hands and bodies.

What price the final plan of the universe? Will my brother and I find the next piece of the ultimate jigsaw puzzle?

Cable looked at the three men, grinning at the thought of the first time one of them discovered a missing tooth was growing back in.

Starting with Paulson, he sent them each a part of his brother.

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TomorrowSF Vol. 12.2 December 10,1998