

## Mind Block

*Mahntik—moments later on Varok*

Two varoks walked in silence, away from the ancient ruins that clung to the southern cliffs of the island Leahnyahorkah, overlooking Varok's Misted Ocean. Mahntik felt sleek and beautiful in her walking tights and tunic, ravenous as a panther on the hunt, eager to consume the varok beside her—Gitahl, with a mind dark and strong, a dangerous but vital thorn on her varokian tree of life.

Words roiled up in the hidden chambers of Mahntik's mind as she tested her companion's ability to read her thoughts: *I can create a shadow world whenever I like, Gitahl, plan my business to grow anything I like, wield economic power to control whatever I choose. No one will ever know. Even Orram will not be able to see into my mind to prove what I have done—if that is what I choose.*

Between the varoks, a questioning mood hovered dense and cold, like the ocean's pale mist far below in the rocks. Mahntik slid open the door to her mind and watched with her patch organs to see if Gitahl noticed any difference. He did not.

*Thought-sensing defines all of Varokian society, she thought, setting her mind-block back in place, but it no longer defines me, does it?*

She laughed and glanced at Gitahl. The laugh startled him, but he

said nothing. *He keeps well to himself, and he looks acceptable enough to run a mining project, though I wish he wouldn't wear such a vivid sash around his tunic. I rather like leather on a man.* She saw that he had no idea what she was thinking. Her mind-block must have given her complete protection from his thought-probes, even his mood reading.

The moons Io and Europa shone dimly above Varok's shifting banks of vapor, then disappeared beneath Jupiter's curtain of orange in the lightning-stitched sky. As Mahntik read Gitahl deeply, shamelessly, she saw he was concentrated on her feminine preseaznce. *Good.*

At last they came to the shops and dwellings near the genetics laboratory. They climbed steadily up a steep hill, past a row of stately rock dwellings that stood in geometric patterns amidst peach-colored bushes.

Mahntik wondered how far she should bring Gitahl into her global web business. Probably not far, but she would soon have him trapped. It would not matter what he knew.

On the slope's summit they turned into the stone archway leading to Mahntik's lodge. Its two stories stood high on a rocky shelf overlooking Lorkah's small transport station. An airshuttle from the continent of Vior could be seen making a rare landing.

As they passed through the hand-hewn air lock into the great room, Mahntik read Gitahl's mind. Strange. He was looking at the bare mortared walls, looking for family heirlooms. She read the perception in his mind: *Nothing in this room links Mahntik to the life of Varok or to her past, but what a structure. As old as these hills and built from their bones, as efficient as any varokian structure I've ever seen.*

"This home uses the wind off the ocean," Mahntik said, encouraging his train of thought. "It gathers light from the widest skies in high windows. It's really very well built—vented for deep dark cooling, covered with fireproof roofing, and designed for recycling every element of living. Nothing becomes waste." She focused on Gitahl's thoughts.

*She didn't even tear down the old buiding when she moved in here—respected the fact that it was built for permanence. Mahntik knows how to sustain a varok's lifestyle, I'll say that.*

Mahntik saw Gitahl shrug away the observation and busy himself with the electronic files at the communications center.

"Satisfy your curiosity, Gitahl, while I pour web juice."

"Do you suppose a juice-dulled mind will be more accepting of your wild schemes, Mahntik?"

“We’ll see.”

Soon she returned with a tray of cold moth delicacies and steaming cups of an intoxicating drink made from the berries of her genetically enhanced web bush.

They drank in silence. Mahntik captured Gitahl’s attempt to read her mood. When he dared to enter her mind beyond mood, he saw her invitation. Mahntik smiled. What he read in her mind both frightened and pleased him.

“So,” he said, “You have secured the ahlorks’ promise to keep Free-minds at the old power plant and to mine the ruins with the energy they produce. How industrious of you, Mahntik. I will keep a watch on that operation if you like—as long as you have a firm hand on these markets of yours.”

“Can you imagine a market run by flocks of ahlork, Gitahl? Even I am not mad enough to allow that.”

“Nidok is no fool. He’ll stop hauling your web products as soon as the authorities discover what his flock is doing.”

“I don’t think so. Ahlork already eat too many of the new berries. They couldn’t give up their new diet if they tried.”

“You are a cruel one, Mahntik.” Gitahl’s iron-cast expression gleamed with harsh planes as he stared into the fire.

“My cloth is already in production, and my feed-producing strains of web bushes will eventually undercut every other web stalk, berry, cloth and grain market on Varok.” Mahntik’s voice soared. “Also, I have designed new diseases for ahlork should they prove testy.”

“That is more than I care to hear.” Gitahl rose to his feet as if determined to leave.

Mahntik pressed on, waving him down. “I have Varok in my hands. My new species of web bush will make me master of Varok within the year. Local distribution indeed. Infinitesimal depletion rates. Selective technology that limits us to a menial existence! Taxes that are graduated so steeply that we innovators are all held in a state of poverty! Orram’s Earth people will think us simpletons. We are more advanced than anything within radio contact. I will re-build our technological society in spite of Orram or any other Govenor of Living Resources. We will again live like the forebears! It is time to use what we know. Earth knows we exist—finally. Now they will know what we truly are.”

“And what if Earth is not as crippled as we think?” Gitahl was

cautious. “They know where we are now. Elll-Varok Science—your friend Orram—is in constant radio contact with them. And there are rumors of an Earth launch—more humans coming to Varok.”

“Rumors? Orram and Conn can continue blathering to Earth about water conservation. That doesn’t mean anything to us. But if humans do manage to get here, we must be ready to snuff them out before Conn can raise a fin.”

“Snuff them out? How?” Gitahl’s patches strained to find Mahntik’s true mind. “Let me be clear. Surely you wouldn’t use the diseases you’ve engineered on humans.”

“Why not? I’d use them to keep ahlork in line—even varoks.”

“You could never use such a weapon.” *What is her full vision?* Gitahl read only bland unconcern, a flat landscape of stark logic. “You can’t release germs selectively. Or is it blackmail you are planning?”

“Only if it becomes necessary. You don’t understand, do you, Gitahl? The germs are nothing more than a tool to guarantee the control that may be necessary to enable change, to buy compliance long enough for something . . . inventive.” Mahntik laughed inwardly, enjoying Gitahl’s struggle to stay calm.

He sat down on the hearth’s edge, and Mahntik read his direct thought. *How could she propose such things with a mind so placid, so . . . clear?*

“You are mad, Mahntik. How would you target anyone? How would you contain your threat? How would you keep suspicion away from yourself as a geneticist? If new forms of infectious life are found, the genetics lab will be suspect, and a simple mind-scan will reveal all your plans.”

“But I am innocent of any plans, Gitahl.” Mahntik said, edging closer to him. “The ahlork do it all, and they are not above stealing germs. Nidok and his flock make deliveries of web seed whenever they feel like it, not when I tell them. I never see the distributors that take my strains of web plants and stalk products. And I have dutifully put all my lovely new germs into the sterilizing pans at the lab.”

Slowly, sensing the emotional edge of Gitahl’s thoughts, she placed her forearm on his. “Besides,” she murmured, “it is all quite academic, Gitahl. I do not fear the deepest mind-probe.”

Gitahl moved away so the sensation of touch would not intrude too quickly on his nerves, but his open arms gave him away.

“Come to me now, Gitahl. I have trusted you completely. Perhaps we

may yet join our minds.” She let the longing in her voice show as she entered Gitahl’s thoughts.

Mahntik sensed Gitahl beginning to search deeper through her mind. He saw that she had been reading him, and he began to enjoy the pungent touch of her arm. With growing physical desire, they joined, hoping to trigger the deeper search for identity that could lead to mental union, the consummation varoks desired even more than the physical act.

They lay together as they traced the torturous path of Mahntik’s awareness until it led back to her very early life. Her father rose his whip to her as she reached for a second piece of web stalk candy. “Go to the fields and hoe away the climbers if you would have handfuls of candy,” the looming presence cried. “But don’t you dare rub blisters on your beautiful hands, or get gray mud in your hair.”

Her father seemed always to be on the edge of irrationality. “No. Of course you may not have more cloth for another dress. Weave your own cloth. And do it well. I won’t have you looking like an artist’s waif.” His breath stank of fermented juice, his hands stained with paint from the murals he painted for the local architect.

Mahntik was forced to study with few books and no computer, to learn the arts without paint or clay, to perfect her language without tutors, to enhance her beauty with broken combs. Gitahl saw the contradictions—the impossible, double-edged demands and the distorted scars they left in her memory.

They moved on less cautiously, into Mahntik’s early years as a student growing up in Vior Leghye. There an intense pocket of anger drew Gitahl like a magnet, and Mahntik urged him on. He saw Mahntik’s sister. A neighbor had given the sister new cloth in exchange for her work. *I should have it. It would set off more beautifully the silver strands of my hair. I will have it.* The anger rose to a fury, mindless—

Suddenly, as if he had been struck, Gitahl recoiled from Mahntik.

She laughed. “What is wrong, Gitahl?”

“I’m not sure. I feel as if something has fallen between us. As if it something would crush my mind.”

“There is nothing between us now. Try again. You were entering my childhood memories, a quarrel with my sister.”

Gitahl focused on his patches, as if to steady them. “I’ll start again by reading your mood, while you think of the incident that made you

angry. Then I'll see if I can follow your memory to its source. I think we have found a way to begin our consummation, Mahntik."

She thought of the quarrel with her sister, the cruel things that were said so many cycles ago. When she felt Gitahl enter her memory again it was pleasant. She could feel his sympathy like a gentle caress, far more soothing than touch. Perhaps she could become one with him. He was clever. He would know when to leave her alone and when to be by her side.

As she relaxed the portals of her mind, she felt him sink past specific memory to the raw edge of feeling where motivation found roots. He touched jealousy and was groping toward the murderous hate that had sent Mahntik flying with a laser knife at her sister's eyes—when, once again, she slammed shut the window of her mind.

"Aee-e-e-e! Mahntik! You will destroy me." Gitahl rolled away from her, writhing in mental agony.

She laughed again, a terrible laugh. "You see my talent, Gitahl? You see? I am no simple varok."

He sat up, breathing hard, staring at her, trying to read her. She knew he could sense nothing in her mind—no memory, no thoughts of sisters, no recent pleasure—nothing but a blank screen. Gitahl stared in disbelief.

"If you had more pride and less ambition, you would leave me now or murder me," Mahntik said.

"You are telling me that you can do this at will?" he said carefully. "You can block your mind from the probing of anyone, at any level. Is this true, Mahntik?" He probed again, deeply, and saw only the image of his own shocked face, surrounded by emptiness. His mind recoiled.

"You have learned to block your mind?"

"My poor Gitahl. Did it hurt?" She stifled a small smile, then the cold sapphire of her eyes darkened. "But why have I told you? Perhaps no one should know."

"No one will know it from me, Mahntik, will they? You are a cruel one, indeed. You have forced my retirement from varokian society."

"But we are near consummation, Gitahl." Mahntik showed her longing for him in her face but did not reach to touch him. He did not try to read her thoughts.

"It is no matter to me, as long as we are of one mind," he said. "No one will suspect—unless you indulge your pride again with someone

else. I wouldn't if I were you. Unless you give it away, no one will believe that you can block your mind. Every child tries it, and fails."

"It did take some practice."

"Do you realize what this means?" Gitahl reached tentatively for her with his patch organs. "There are no provisions in Varokian law for concealment of fact; and . . . yes. The minds of normal varoks are helplessly open to you. Hopelessly open. Mahntik! My beautiful Mahntik, do you realize—?"

Raw elation overcame them. A thousand scenarios played through their shared minds, a thousand fertile possibilities for the satisfying of any greedy whim, a thousand chances to manipulate Varokian society.

"A guiltless mind has no need to fear intrusion," Mahntik quoted a famous varokian judge. "Without the mind probe, life on Varok would be like Earth, a nightmare of suspicion and litigation." They laughed so long they lost control.

When reason returned, Gitahl spoke as if to himself, aware of the treason they planned. "You are right, Mahntik. Yes. Perfect the art of blocking your mind. It should not be wasted. You are beyond the reach of Varok's law. When your mind proves free of guilt, the authorities must conclude you are innocent. Until it is too late."

"Exactly," Mahntik agreed. "And they will see your guilt."

"Yes, as you planned. I am yours. I will stay hidden, while they write you off as a suspect, until varok has evolved too far to go back. You can manufacture whatever you like, sell whatever you like, distribute it wherever you like. Rebuild the ancient ruins! When varoks have experienced the unrestrained lifestyle of the forebears, they will never retreat to the deprivations of the steady state. Varok is yours, Mahntik!"