

THE MIND SPIDER

Fritz Leiber

Hour and minute hand of the odd little grey clock stood almost at midnight, Horn Tune, and now the second hand, driven by the same tiny, invariable radioactive pulses, was hurrying to overtake them. Morton Horn took note. He switched off his book, puffed a brown cigarette alight, and slumped back gratefully against the saddle-shaped forcefield which combined the sensations of swansdown and laced rawhide.

When all three hands stood together, he flicked the switch of a small black cubical box in his smock pocket. A look of expectancy came into his pleasant, swarthy face, as if he were about to receive a caller, although the door had not spoken.

With the flicking of the switch a curtain of ^brainwave

static surrounding his mind vanished. Unnoticed white present, because it was a meaningless thought-tone—a kind of mental grey—the vanishing static left behind a great inward silence and emptiness. To Morton it was as if his mind were crouched on a mountain-peak in infinity.

"Hello, Mort. Are we first?"

A stranger in the room could not have heard those words, yet to Mort they were the cheeriest and friendliest greeting imaginable—words dear as crystal without any of the air-noise or bone-noise that blurs, ordinary speech, and they sounded like chocolate tastes.

"Guess so, Sis," his every thought responded, ^"unless the others have started a shaded contact at their end."

His mind swiftly absorbed a vision of his sister Grayl's studio upstairs, just as it appeared to her. A corner of the work table, littered with air-brushes and cans of dye and acid. The easel, with one half-completed film for the multi-level picture she was spraying, now clouded by cigarette smoke. In the foreground, the shimmery grey curve of her skirt and the slim, competent beauty of her hands, so close—especially when she raised the cigarette to puff it—that they seemed his own. The feathery touch

of her clothes on her skin. The sharp cool tingly tone of her muscles. In the background, only floor and cloudy sky, for the glastic walls of her studio did not refract.

The vision seemed a ghostly thing at first, a shadowy projection against the solid walls of his own study. But as the contact between their minds deepened, it grew more real. For a moment, the two visual images swung apart and stood side by side, equally real, as if he were trying to focus one with each eye. Then for another moment his room became the ghost room and Grayl's the real one—as if he had become Grayl. He raised the cigarette in her hand to her lips and inhaled the pleasant fumes, milder than those of his own *rompe-pecho*. Then he savored the two at once and enjoyed the mental blend-fag of her Virginia cigarette with his own Mexican "chestbreaker."

From the depths of her ... his ... their mind Grayl laughed at him amiably.

"Here now, don't go sliding into all of me!" she told him. "A girl ought to be allowed some privacy."

"Should she?" he' asked teasingly

"Well, at least leave me my fillers and toes! What if Fred had been visiting me?"

"I knew he wasn't," Morion replied. "You know, Sis, I'd never invade your body while you were with your non-telepathic sweetheart."

"Nonsense, you'd love to, you old hedonist!—and I don't think I'd grudge you the experience—especially if at the same time you let me be with your lovely Helen! But now please get out of me. Please, Morton."

He retreated obediently until their thoughts met only at the edges. But he had noticed something strangely skittish in her first reaction. There had been a touch of hysteria in even the laughter and banter and certainly in the final plea. And there had been a knot of something like fear under her breastbone. He questioned her about it swiftly as the thoughts of one person, the mental dialogue spun itself out.

"Really afraid of me taking control of you, Grayl?"

"Of course not, Mort! I'm as keen for control-exchange experiments as any of us, especially when I exchange with a man. But . . . we're so exposed, Mort—it some-

times bugs me."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"You know, Mort. Ordinary people are protected. Their minds are walled in from birth, and behind the walls it may be stuffy but it's very safe. So safe that they don't even realize that there are walls . . . that there are frontiers of mind as well as frontiers of matter . . . and that things can get at you across those frontiers."

"What sort of things? Ghosts? Martians? Angels? Evil spirits? Voices from the Beyond? Big bad black static-clouds?" His response was joshing. "You know how flatly we've failed to establish any contacts in those directions. As mediums we're a howling failure. We've never got so much as a hint of any telepathic mentalities save our own. Nothing in the whole mental universe but silence and occasional clouds of noise—static—and the sound of distant Horns, if you'll pardon the family pun."

"I know Mort, but we're such a tiny young cluster of mind, and the universe is an awfully big place and there's a chance of some awfully queer things existing in it. Just yesterday I was reading an old Russian novel from the

Years of Turmoil and one of the characters said something that my memory photographed. Now where did I tuck it away?—No, keep out of my files, Mort! I've got it anyway—here it is."

A white oblong bobbed up in her mind. Morton read the black print on it.

"We always imagine eternity (it said) as something beyond our conception, something vast, vasti But why must it be vast? Instead of all that, what if it's one little room, like a bathhouse, in the country, black and grimy and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is? I sometimes fancy it like that.'

"Brrr!" Morton thought, trying to make the shiver comic for Grayls sake. "Those old White and Red Rus-skies certainly had, black minds! Andreyev? Dostoyev-sky?"

"Or Svidrigailov, or some name like that. But it wasn't the book that bothered me. It was that about an hour ago I switched off my static box to taste the silence and for the first time in my life I got the feeling there was something nasty and alien in infinity and that it was watching me, just like those spiders in the bathhouse. It

had been asleep for centuries but now it-was waking up.

I switched on my box *fast* ?'

"Ho-ho! The power of suggestion! Are you sure that Russian wasn't named Svengali, dear self-hypnosis-susceptible sister?"

"Stop poking fun! It was real, I tell you."

"Real? How? Sounds like mood-reality to me. Here, Stop being so ticklish and let me get a dose-up."

He started mock-forcibly to explore her memories, thinking that a friendly mental roughhouse might be what she needed, but she pushed away his thought-tendrils with a panicky and deathly-serious insistence. Then, he saw her decisively stub out her cigarette and he felt a sudden secretive chilling of her feelings.

"It's all really nothing, Mort," she told him briskly.

"Just a mood, I guess, like you say. No use bothering a family conference with a mood. no matter how blade and devilish."

"Speaking of the devil and his cohorts, here we are!"

May we come in?" The texture of the interrupting thought was bluff and yet ironic, highly individual—suggesting not chocolate but black coffee. Even if Mort and Grayl had not been well acquainted with its tone and rhythms, they would have recognized it as that of a third person. It was as if a third dimension had been added to the two of their shared mind. They knew it immediately.

"Make yourself at home. Uncle Dean." was the welcome Grayl gave him. "Our minds are yours."

"Very cozy indeed," the newcomer responded with a show of gruff amusement. "I'll do as you say, my dear. Good to be in each other again." They caught a glimpse of scudding ragged clouds patching steel-blue sky above to grey-green forest below—their uncle's work as a ranger kept him up in his fly-about a good deal of the day.

"Dean Horn coming in," he announced with a touch of formality and then immediately added, "Nice tidy little mental parlour you've got, as the fly said to the spider."

"Uncle Dean!—what made you think of spiders?" Grayl's question was sharply anxious.

"Haven't the faintest notion, my dear. Maybe recalling

the time we took turns mind-sitting with Evelyn until she got over her infant fear of spiders. More likely just reflecting a thought-flicker from your own unconscious or Morton's. Why the fear-flurry?"

But just then a fourth mind joined them—resinous in flavour like Greek wine. "Hobart Horn coming in." They saw a ghostly laboratory, with chemical apparatus,

Then a fifth—sweet-sour apple-tasting. "Evelyn Horn coming in. Yes, Grayl, late as usual—thirty-seven seconds by Horn Time. I didn't miss your duck-duck thought"

The newcomer's tartness was unmalicious. They glimpsed the large office in which Evelyn worked, the microtypewriter and rolls of her correspondence tape on her desk.

"But—bright truth!—someone always has to be last," she continued. "And I'm working overtime. Always make a family conference, though; Afterwards will you take control of me, Grayl, and spell me at -this typing for a while? I'm really fagged—and I don't want to leave my body on automatic too long. It gets hostile on automatic and hurts to squeeze back into. How about it, Grayl?"

"I will," Grayl promised, "but don't make it a habit.

I don't know what your administrator would say if ha

knew you kept sneaking off two thousand miles to my studio to smoke cigarettes—and get my throat raw for mel"

"All present and accounted for," Mort remarked. "Evelyn, Grayl, Uncle Dean, Hobart, and myself—the whole damn family. Would you care to share my day's experiences first? Pretty dull armchair stuff, I warn you. Or shall we make it a five-dimensional free-for-all? A Quintet for Horns? Hey, Evelyn, quit directing four-letter thoughts at the chair!"

With that the conference got underway. Five minds that were in a sense one mind, because they were wide open to each other, and in another sense twenty-five minds, because there were five sensory-memory set-ups available for each individual. Five separate individuals, some of them thousands of miles apart, each viewing a different sector of the world of the First Global Democracy. Five separate visual landscapes—study, studio, laboratory, office, and the cloud-studded openness of the upper air—all of them existing in one mental space, now superimposed on each other, now replacing each other. now jostling each other as two ideas may jostle in a single non-telepathic mind. Five varying auditory landscapes—the deep throb of the vanes of Dean's fly-about making

the dominant tone, around which the other noises wove counterpoint. In short, five complete sensory pictures, open to mutual inspection.

Five different ideational set-ups too. Five concepts of truth and beauty and honour, of good and bad, of wise and foolish, and of all the other so-called abstractions with which men and women direct their lives—all different, yet all vastly more similar than such concepts are among the non-telepathic, who can never really share them. Five different ideas of life, jumbled together like dice in a box.

And yet there was no confusion. The dice were educated. The five minds slipped into and out of each other with the practiced grace and courtesy of diplomats at a tea. For these daily conferences had been going on ever since Grandfather Horn first discovered that he could communicate mentally with his children. Until then he had not known that he was a telepathic mutant, for before Us children were born there had been no other minds with which he could communicate—and the strange mental silence, disturbed from time to time by clouds of mental static, had even made him fear that he was psychotic. Now Grandfather Horn was dead, but the conferences went on between the members of the slowly

widening circle of his lineal descendants—at present only five in number, although the mutation appeared to be a partial dominant. The conferences of the Horns were still as secret as the earliest ones had been. The First Global Democracy was still ignorant that telepathy was a long-established fact—among the Horns. For the Horns believed that jealousy and suspicion and savage hate would be what they would get from the world if it ever became generally known that, by the chance of mutated heredity, they possessed a power which other men could never hope for. Or else they would be exploited as all-weather and interplanetary "radios." So to the outside world, including even their non-telepathic husbands and wives, sweethearts and friends, they were just an ordinary group of blood relations—no more "psychic" certainly than any group of close-knit brothers and sisters and cousins. They had something of a reputation of being a family of "day-dreamers"—that was about all. Beyond enriching their personalities and experience, the Horns' telepathy was no great advantage to them. They could not read the minds of animals and other humans and they seemed to have no powers whatever of clairvoyance, clairaudience, telekinesis, or foreseeing the future or past. Their telepathic power was, in short, simply like having a private, all-senses^ family telephone.

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The conference—it was much more a hyper-intimate gabfest—proceeded.

"My static box bugged out for a few ticks this morning," Evelyn remarked in the course of talking over the trivia of the past twenty-four hours.

The static boxes were an invention of Grandfather Horn. They generated a tiny cloud of meaningless brain waves. Without such individual thought-screens, there was too much danger of complete loss of individual personality—once Grandfather Horn had "become" his infant daughter as well as himself for several hours and the unfledged mind had come close to being permanently- lost in its own subconscious. The static boxes provided a mental wall behind which a mind could safely grow and function, similar to the wall by which ordinary minds are apparently always enclosed.

In spite of the boxes, the Horns shared thoughts and emotions to an amazing degree. Their mental togetherness was as real and as mysterious—and as incredible—as thought itself . . . and thought is the original angel-cloud dancing on the head of a pin. Their present conference

was as warm and intimate and tart as any actual family gathering in one actual room around one actual table. Five minds, joined together in the vast mental darkness that shrouds all minds. Five minds hugged together for comfort and safety in the infinite mental loneliness that pervades the cosmos.

Evelyn continued, "Your boxes were all working, of course, so I couldn't get your thoughts—just the blurs' of your boxes like little old dark grey stars. But this time it gave me a funny uncomfortable feeling, like a spider crawling down my—Grayl! Don't feel so wildly! What is it?"

Then . . . just as Grayl started to think her answer . . . something crept from the vast mental darkness and infinite cosmic loneliness surrounding the five minds of the Horns.

Grayl was the first to notice. Her panicky thought had that curling too-keen edge of hysteria. "There are six of us now! There should only be five, but there are six. Count! Count, I tell you! Six!"

To Mort it seemed that a gigantic spider was racing across the web of their thoughts. He felt Dean's hands

gnp convulsively at the controls of his fly-about He felt Evelyn's slave-body freeze at her desk and Hobart grope out blindly so that a piece of apparatus fell with a crystalline tinkle. As if they had been sitting together at dinner .and had suddenly realized that there was a sixth place set and a tall figure swathed in shadows sitting at it A figure that to Mort exuded an overpowering taste and odour of brass—a sour metallic stench.

And then that figure spoke. The greater portion of the intruder's thought was alien, unintelligible, frightening in .its expression of an unearthly power and an unearthly hunger.

The understandable portion of its speech seemed to be m the nature of a bitter and coldly menacing greeting, insofar as references and emotional sense could be at all determined.

"I, the Mind Spider as you name me—the deathless one, the eternally exiled, the eternally imprisoned—or so his overconfident enemies suppose—coming in."

Mort saw the danger almost too late—and he was the first to see it. He snatched toward the static box in his.

smock.

In what seemed no more than an instant he saw—the shadow of the intruder darken the four other minds, saw them caught and wrapped in the intruder's thoughts, just as a spider twirls a shroud around its victims, saw the black half-intelligible thoughts of the intruder scuttle toward him with blinding speed, felt the fanged impact of indomitable power, felt his own will fail.

There was a click. By a hairsbreadth his fingers had carried out their mission. Around his mind the neutral grey wall was up and—Thank the Lord!—it appeared that the intruder could not penetrate it.

Mort sat there gasping, shaking, staring with the dull eyes of shock. Direct mental contact with the utterly inhuman—with that sort of inhumanity—is not something that can be lightly brushed aside or ever forgotten. It makes a wound. For minutes afterwards a man cannot think at all.

And the brassy stench lingered tainting his entire consciousness—a stench of Satanic power and melancholy.

When he finally sprang up, it was not because he had

thought things out but because he heard a faint sound behind him and knew with a chilling certainty that it meant death.

It was Grayl. She was carrying an airbrush as if it were a gun. She had kicked off her shoes. Poised there in the doorway she was the incarnation of taut stealthiness, as if she had sloughed off centuries of civilization in seconds of time, leaving only the primeval core of the jungle killer.

But it was her face that was the worst, and the most revealing. Pale and immobile as a corpse's—almost. But the little more left over from the "almost" was a spiderish implacability, the source of which Mort knew only too well.

She pointed the airbrush at his eyes. His sidewise twist saved them from the narrow pencil of oily liquid that spat from the readjusted nozzle, but a little splashed against his hand and he felt the bite of acid. He lunged toward her, ducking away from the spray as she whipped it back toward him. He caught her wrist, bowled into her and carried her with him to the floor.

She dropped the airbrush and fought—with teeth and claws like a cat, yet with this horrible difference that it was not like an animal lashing out instinctively but like an animal listening for orders and obeying them.

Suddenly she went limp. The static from his box had taken effect. He made doubly sure by switching on hers.

She was longer, than he had been in recovering from the shock, but when she began to speak it was with a rush, as if she already realized that every minute was vital.

"We've got to stop the others, Mort, before they let it out. The ... the Mind Spider, Mort! It's been imprisoned for eons, for cosmic ages. First floating in space, then in the Antarctic, where its prison spiralled to Earth. Its enemies . . . really its judges . . . *had* to imprison it, because it's something that can't be killed. I can't make you understand just why they imprisoned it—" (Her face went a shade greyer) "—you'd have to experience the creature's thoughts for that—but it had to do with the perversion and destruction of the life-envelopes of more than one planet."

Even under the stress of horror, Mort had time to realize how strange it was to be listening to Grayl's words

instead of her thoughts. They never used words exempt when ordinary people were present. It was like acting in a play. Suddenly it occurred to him that they would never be able to share thoughts again. Why, if their static boxes were to fail for a few seconds, as Evelyn's had this morning ...

"That's where it's been," Grayl continued, "locked in the heart of the Antarctic, dreaming its centuries-long dreams of escape and revenge, waking now and again to rage against its captivity and rack its mind with a thousand schemes—and searching, searching, always searching! Searching for telepathic contact with creatures capable of operating the locks of its prison. And now, waking after its last fifty year trance, finding them!"

He nodded and caught her trembling hands in his.

"Look," he said, "do you know where the creature's prison is located?"

She glanced up at him fearfully. "Oh, yes, it printed the coordinates of the place on my mind as if my brain were graph paper. You see, the creature has a kind of colourless perception that lets it see out of its prison. It

sees through rock as it sees through air and what it sees it measures. I'm sure that it knows all about Earth—because it knows exactly what it wants to do with Earth, beginning with the forced evolution of new dominant life forms from the insects and arachnids . . . and other organisms whose sensation-tone pleases it more than that of the mammals."

He nodded again. "All right," he said, "that pretty well settles what you and I have got to do. Dean and Hobart and Evelyn are under its control—we've got to suppose that. It may detach one or even two of them for the side job of finishing us off, just as it tried to use you to finish me. But it's a dead certainty that it's guiding at least one of them as fast as is humanly possible to its prison, to release it. We can't call in Interplanetary Police or look for help anywhere. Everything hinges on our telepathic, and it would take days to convince them even of that We've got to handle this all by ourselves, There's not a soul in the world can help us. We've got to hire an all-purpose fly about that can make the trip, and we've got to go down there. While you were unconscious I put through some calls. Evelyn has left the office. She hasn't gone home. Hobart should be at his laboratory, but he isn't Dean's home station can't get in touch with him. We can't hope to intercept them on the way—

I thought of getting I.P. to nab them by inventing some charges against them, but that would probably end with the police stopping us. The only place where we have a chance of finding them, and of stopping them, is down there, where it is.

"And we'll have to be ready to kill them."

For millenniums piled on millenniums, the gales of Earth's loftiest, coldest, loneliest continent had driven the powdered ice against the dull metal without scoring it, without rusting it, without even polishing it. Like some grim temple sacred to pitiless gods it rose from the Antarctic gorge, a blunt hemisphere ridged with steps, with a tilted platform at the top, as if for an altar. A temple built to outlast eternity. Unmistakably the impression came through that this structure was older than Barth, older perhaps than the low-circling sun, that it had felt colds to which this was summer warmth, that it had known the grip of forces to which these ice-fisted gales were playful breezes, that it had known loneliness to which this white wasteland was teeming with life.

Not so the two tiny figures struggling toward it from one of three fly-abouts lying crazily atilt on the drift. Their every movement betrayed frail humanity. They stumbled

and swayed, leaning into the wind. Sometimes a gust would send them staggering. Sometimes one would fall. But always they came on. Though their clothing appeared roughly adequate—the sort of polar clothing a person might snatch up in five minutes in the temperate zone—It was obvious that they could not survive long in this frigid region. But that did not seem to trouble them.

Behind them toiled two other tiny figures, coming from the second grounded fly-about. Slowly, very slowly, they gained on the first two. Then a-fifth figure came from behind a drift and confronted the second pair,

"Steady now. Steady!" Dean Horn Shouted against the wind, levelling his blaster. "Morti Gray! For your lives, don't move!"

For a moment these words resounded in Mort's ears with the inhuman and mocking finality of the Antarctic gale. Then the faintly hopeful thought came to him that Dean would hardly have spoken that way if he had been under the creature's control. He would hardly have bothered to speak at all.

The wind shrieked and tore. Mort staggered and threw an arm around Grayl's shoulders for mutual support,

Dean fought his way toward them, blaster always leveled. In his other hand he had a small black cube—his static box, Mort recognized. He held it a little in front of him (like a cross, Mort thought) and as he came close to them he thrust it toward their heads (as if he were exorcising demons, Mort thought). Only then did Dean lower the muzzle of his blaster.

Mort said, "I'm glad you didn't count lurching with the "wind as moving."

Dean smiled harshly. "I dodged the thing, too," he explained. "Just managed to nick on my static box. Like you did, I guess. Only I had no way of knowing that, so when I saw you I had to make sure I—"

The circular beam of a blaster hissed into the drift beside them, raining a great cloud of steam and making a hole wide as a bushel basket. Mort lunged at Dean, toppling him down out of range, pulling Grayl after.

"Hobart and Evelyn!" He pointed. "In the hollow ahead! Blast to keep them in it, Dean. What I've got in mind won't take long. Grayl, stay close to Dean . . . and

give me your static box!"

He crawled forward along a curve that would take him to the edge of the hollow. Behind him and at the further side of the hollow, snow puffed into clouds of steam as the blasters spat free energy. Finally he glimpsed a shoulder, cap, and upturned collar. He estimated the distance, hefted Grayl's static box, ' guessed at the wind and made a measured throw. Blaster-fire from the hollow ceased. He rushed forward, waving to Dean and Grayl.

Hobart was sitting in the snow, staring dazedly at the weapon in his hand, as if it could tell him why he'd done what he'd done. He looked up at Mort with foggy eyes. The black static box had lodged in the collar of his coat and Mort felt a surge of confidence at the freakish accuracy of his toss.

But Evelyn was nowhere in sight. Over the lip of the hollow, very close now, appeared the ridged and dully gleaming hemisphere, like the ascendant disk of some tiny and ill-boding asteroid- A coldness that was more than that of the ice-edged wind went through Mort. He snatched

Hobart's blaster and ran. The other shouted after him, but he only waved back at them once, frantically.

The metal of the steps seemed to suck warmth even from the wind that ripped at his back like a snow-tiger as he climbed. The steps were as crazily tilted as those in a nightmare, and there seemed always to be more of them, as if they were somehow growing and multiplying. He found himself wondering if material and mental steps could ever get mixed.

He reached the platform. As his head came up over the edge, he saw, hardly a dozen feet away, Evelyn's face, blue with cold but having frozen into the same spiderish expression he had once seen in Grayl's. He raised file blaster, but in the same moment the face dropped out of sight. There was a metallic clang. He scrambled up onto the platform and clawed impotently at the circular plate barring the opening into which Evelyn had vanished. He was still crouched there when the others joined him.

The demon wind had died, as if it were the Mind Spider's ally and had done its work. The hush was like a prelude to a planet's end, and Hobart's bleak words, gasped but disjointedly, were like the sentence of doom.

There are two doors. The thing told us all about them

. . . while we were under its control. The first would be open . . . we were to go inside and shut it behind us. That's what Evelyn's done . . . she's locked it from the inside . . . just the simplest sliding bolt . . . but it will keep us from getting at her . . . while she activates the locks of the second door . . . the real door. We weren't to get the instructions . . . on how to do that . . . until: we got inside."

"Stand aside," Dean said, aiming his blaster at tile trap-door, but he said it dully, as if he knew beforehand that it wasn't going to work. Waves of heat made the white hill beyond them waver. But the dull metal did not change colour and when Dean cut off his blaster and tossed down a handful of snow on the spot, it did not melt.

Mort found himself wondering if you could make a metal of frozen thought. Through his numbed mind flashed a panorama of the rich lands and seas of the Global Democracy they had flown over yesterday—the green-framed white powder stations of the Orinoco, the fabulous walking cities of the Amazon Basin, the jet-atomic launching fields of the Gran Chaco, the multi-domed Oceanographic Institute of the Falkland Islands. A dawn world, you might call it. He wondered vaguely if other dawn worlds had struggled an hour or two into the morning only

to fall prey to thinks like the Mind Spider.

"No!" The word came like a command heard in a dream.

He looked up dully and realized that it was Grayl who had spoken—realized, with stupid amazement, that her eyes were flashing with anger.

"No! There's still one way we can get at it and try to stop it. The same way it got at us. Thought! It took us by surprise. We didn't have time to prepare resistance. We were panicked and it's given us a permanent panic-psychology. We could only think of getting behind our thought-screens and about how—once there—we'd never dare come out again. Maybe this time, if we all stand firm when we open our screens ...

"I know it's a slim chance, a crazy chance . . ."

Mort knew that too. So did Dean and Hobart. But some thing in him, and in them, rejoiced at Grayl's words, rejoiced at the prospect of meeting the thing, however hopelessly, on it's own ground, mind to mind. Without hesitation they brought out their static boxes, and, at the signal of Dean's hand uplifted, switched them off.

That action plunged them from a material wilderness of snow and bleakly clouded sky into a sunless, dimensionless wilderness of thought. Like some lone fortress on an endless plain, their minds linked together, foursquare, waiting the assault. And like some monster of nightmare, the thoughts of the creature that accepted the name of the Mind Spider rushed toward them across that plain, threatening to overmaster them by the Satanic prestige that absolute selfishness and utter cruelty confer. The brassy stench of its being was like a poison cloud.

They held firm. The thoughts of the Mind Spider darted about, seeking a weak point, then seemed to settle down upon them everywhere, engulfingly, like a dry black web,

Alien against human, egocentric killer-mind against mutually loyal preserver-minds—and in the end it was the mutual loyalty and knittedness that turned the tide, giving them each a four-fold power of resistance. The thoughts of the Mind Spider retreated. Theirs pressed after. They sensed that a corner of his mind was not truly his. They pressed a pincers attack at that point, seeking to cut it off. There was a moment of desperate resistance. Then suddenly they were no longer four minds against the Spider, but five.

The trapdoor opened. It was Evelyn. They could at last switch on their thought-screens and find refuge behind the walls of neutral grey and prepare to fight back to their fly-about and save their bodies.

.But there was something that had to be said first, something that Mort said for them.

"The danger remains and we probably can't ever destroy it. They couldn't destroy it, or they wouldn't have built this prison. We can't tell anyone about it. Non-telepaths wouldn't believe all our story and would want to find out what was inside. We Horns have the job of being a monster's jailers. Maybe someday we'll be able to practice telepathy again—behind some sort of static-spheres. We will have to prepare for that time and work out many precautions, such as keying our static boxes, so that switching on one switches on all. But the Mind Spider and its prison remains our responsibility and our trust, forever."

