

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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THE FINAL ANSWER

BY M. C. PEASE

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The City was a place of walking shadows. It was the final answer—but that answer was death. And outside, waiting for the exiled Sorin, lay the jungle men had made of Earth. That, too, was a final answer.



SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

The three judges of the High Court of the City were black and grim. Their faces were closed and silent as they stared down from the bench at the girl who stood before them. Looking up at them, Sorin shuddered slightly, her eyes showing a hidden fear. But she said nothing and held her back straight and her head high. And she stared back at the Chief Justice. She stared at him until, with an abrupt gesture, he turned his head aside and nodded at the clerk. The Clerk, at the signal, rose from his chair at the desk below and to the side of the bench, pounding with his gavel as he did so to silence the people that crowded the spectator benches. "Silence in the Court," he intoned. "The High Court of the City is now in session. It has been summoned to consider the case of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin. It has been convened to render judgment."

"Is said citizen present?"

"The citizen is present."

"Has the evidence of fact been abstracted? If so, let the abstract be read." The words were automatic for this was the ritual of the High Court.

The Clerk picked up a paper and read from it. "The abstract of the evidence of fact of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin.

Said citizen was born under certificate of authorization number 267 31 80 in accordance with due process of law. Her birth was recorded in maternity center number 843 on the 312th day of 13685. During the succeeding nineteen years she was assigned first to nursery number 7041, and then to development institution number 8307. She was trained as a historical ecologist with special reference to the era of catastrophic expansion in the pre-City age."

The Judge interrupted. "What is this ecology?" he asked, his voice rasping. "An abstract of fact is supposed to be meaningful. If you load it with words that make sense only to a librarian, you are failing in your duty as Clerk of the Court." He glared.

The Clerk quailed under the blast. "If—if your Honor pleases," he said, "an ecologist is one who studies the relationship between different life forms, studies each plant and animal as it fits into its environment. A historical ecologist studies the records of the ecology that used to exist. This—this girl was an ecologist who specialized in the records of the . . ."

"Enough," the Judge roared. "It is not necessary to drag the thing out indefinitely. In the Clerk's function as an abstracter,

he is expected to be concise." His lips curled.

"Y-Yes, your Honor," the Clerk said. He hesitated. "This, then, was the training of the girl. However, at the recommendation of the Board of Monitors, Sub-Board 48, she was assigned to a Grade 2 job. Specifically, she was designated as a 'router' on the forty-third level, zone 93, position 707. In this position, she was to view the color of packages arriving on one conveyor belt. By moving a lever into the appropriate slot, she caused these packages to move out on various other conveyors. Her job was to so manipulate the lever that the packages would be segregated on the outgoing conveyors according to color. This it will be noted was a strictly menial job whose level is far below the level of her training. This was done to inculcate in her a sense of discipline and of submission to the Principle of the City. For the Board of Monitors, sub-Board 48, after reviewing her record and particularly the accumulated reports of her monitors during her formative period, which reports are on file, concluded that she was a potentially aberrant individual. Specifically, they found that she had exhibited an unbecoming persistence in asking questions. They suspected that she might

develop an unwillingness to accept the established truths. And it was to prevent such a possible development that they recommended that she be disciplined with this job.

"As is customary with such cases, the girl was kept under surveillance in her assigned job. It quickly came to the attention of the City that she was failing to perform it properly. When the fact had become definitely established, she was interviewed—interviewer number 33406. The transcript of that interview is on record. In it, it is recorded that she admitted that she did in fact fail to do the job according to instruction. And, further, that failure was deliberate. It was her assertion that the job was meaningless, that the City could have done the sorting itself. She said, in fact, that this was proven by the lack of effect of her aberrant behavior. These comments, although they seem to have little bearing on the matter, are the only defense she has recorded for her actions.

"If it please the Court, such is the evidence of fact in the case of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin, as abstracted by myself, in my capacity as Clerk of the High Court of the City." He sat down.

The Chief Justice leaned over the edge of the bench to peer at

the girl. His eyes were narrow and bright, and his mouth was thin and cruel. On the bench at his side a cat lay stretched out looking with sleepily cruel eyes at the girl. The Chief Justice's hand stroked the cat as he asked the girl, "You have heard the abstract of evidence of fact. Do you wish the clerk to elaborate on any point?"

The girl cringed slightly, and looked down. With a jerky motion, she shook her head. "No," she blurted.

"Very well," the Chief Justice said. His voice grated slightly and he smiled as he said it. "It is clear then that we have here a case of intrinsic mis-orientation. The girl is quite obviously in a non-emphatic relationship with the society of the City. This is shown, not only by her early record, but, in a more positive way and one less susceptible to alternate interpretation, by her recent action. And it becomes even more clear if we look beyond the immediate action itself. Conceivably the citizen might have misinterpreted the directions given her. Possibly, she could have become—colorblind, or something of the sort. But the situation becomes unequivocal with her own explanation of her action. But perhaps the citizen would care to amplify for the Court the reasons for her ac-

tion?" Once again he peered down at Sorin, looking like a predatory bird gauging its prey.

Sorin looked back up at him, and her eyes were wide. "But—but—it didn't mean anything. I mean—whether the boxes went here or there—why should I be put to work doing something like that?—I've been trained as an ecologist. To study the relation of plants and animals to their environment. Can't I ask questions about that? Can't I try to make some sense out of what the City does to us?"

The Justice looked grim. "And perhaps the citizen will explain to us why it should be expected to make sense to her. She will observe that the function of the City is to preserve the society of the City. We do not find it astonishing that the actions of the City should fail to be completely intelligible to the citizen of the City. Does the citizen disagree?"

Sorin sighed. "Yes, I disagree," she said. She sounded very tired. "I think I have the right to know. I think if I have got the intelligence to ask the question, I have got the right to an answer. But this is my own opinion." She fell silent.

"Is there anything more the citizen wishes to say?" the Chief

Justice asked after a bit, "before the Court renders judgment?"

She raised her head, her eyes closed as if to hold out the reality. With a conscious effort she opened them. "Yes," she said. "There are many things I want to say. But I don't suppose they're worth saying. You wouldn't understand anyway. So go ahead and render your judgment."

The Chief Justice leaned first to the one side, and then to the other, to gather the brief opinions of his colleagues. There was little discussion for the Chief Justice was the only one of the three with force of will. But he had a sense of timing and was aware of the rows of curious watchers. And always he carefully consulted them while the watchers waited. Finally he straightened up and stared, first over the rows of faces, then at Sorin. "Now hear this," he said, "it is the unanimous opinion of this court that you have demonstrated yourself to be incompatible with the Purpose of the City. You have exhibited a will to independent action without regard for the basic welfare of the City and of the society contained within the City. We therefore find it necessary to deprive you of your rights as a citizen." There was a sensual pleasure in his voice as he rolled the words

out. "In accordance with the established precedents in similar cases, and acting by virtue of the authority granted this Court by the Laws of the City, and so that you may have no further opportunity to interfere with the operation of the City, we hereby direct that you be excluded from the City." A whispering wind went through the audience, a sigh of pleased morbidity. The Chief Justice gave no hint that he heard, except that he paused until it was finished.

"It is recognized by this Court," he continued in a lower voice when the room was once more quiet, "that the judgment placed upon you by this Court is in effect a sentence of death. It is an acknowledged fact that none can live in the jungle outside the City. By excluding you, we are, in fact, forcing you into the jungle—and, therefore into death. The Court desires to be merciful, however. The Court has no wish to deprive you of life as well as of citizenship. The Court does, therefore, grant you the opportunity to remain within the City." He leaned back, a vulturine look on his face as he waited for her response. He waited for her to take the bait.

Sorin looked at him. She knew it was a trap, but she could not help asking: "What do I have to do?"

The Chief Justice briefly licked his lips. He leaned forward. "The Court calls your attention to the fact that it has excluded you from the City for the sole purpose of preventing your further interference with the proper operation of the City." His voice was smooth. "So long as that purpose is fulfilled—if we can be assured that you will not prejudice the Purpose of the City—then we will have no wish to send you to the death that must await you."

"Oh, I promise, I promise!" Sorin cried.

The Chief Justice's eyes lit up. "Promises are insufficient," he said. "No, we must be sure that you will not cause further damage. And we can be sure only if you will allow yourself to be desensitized." He smiled, his lips thin and cruel.

Sorin sagged. She had known it. Deep within her she had known that this was what he meant. Desensitization! An innocent euphuism for the killing of a mind. She had seen desensitized people. Eyes vacant. Unmoving until ordered to move. Unthinking. Unalive. This was what he offered her. Death in the body in the jungle, or death in the mind in the City. What was the choice? What difference did it make? She felt weak with a

profound discouragement, and nearly fell.

"What is your choice?" the Chief Justice asked. "Life, or death? For the choice is yours. The law prohibits our making the decision for you. We confess that we do not understand ourselves the reason why. But we acknowledge the fact that we cannot extend to you this mercy of the Court without your own express consent. We cannot order you to live. We can only offer you the opportunity." His eyes watched her intently. His mouth was curled in an expression of sadistic amusement. His voice was smooth and bland.

Sorin closed her eyes. She swayed as if about to fall. Her mouth was open and she gasped for air. With a quick panic, she looked around but there was no escape. And then, she straightened up. Her eyes became steady and she tossed her hair back with a gesture of defiance. "I decline the mercy of the Court," she said, her voice clear and steady. And she turned and walked with a sure step to the Bailiff of the Court.

The Chief Justice looked as if he had been hit. His mouth was half open and he stared after her. "But out there is the jungle," he cried. "No one can live in the jungle." The very thought shocked him. But Sorin

gave no hint she heard, and his shock turned into rage. His face grew red and his lips drew back. "You refuse the mercy of the Court?" he thundered. Sorin made no move but stood watching the Bailiff. "You will listen to me," he shouted. "You will show some respect for the Court and answer when we speak."

Sorin turned slowly, her eyes veiled, her head proud. "I will show no respect for the court," she said, her voice slow and measured. "By the Court's order I am no longer a citizen of the City. The Court no longer has the right to demand my respect. And neither does it have it." She turned away again.

The Chief Justice was dumb-founded. There was a long silence as he stared at the girl. His eyes shifted and he looked down. "The Court has spoken," he mumbled. "Take her away." His voice rose in sudden panic and he half lifted from his seat. "Take her away." And as the Bailiff led her off, Sorin heard him lapse once more into incoherent muttering.

The Keeper of the Gate had an unpleasant job. In effect, he was the public executioner of the City. But even more, he was the member of the City who was closest of them all to the jungle. Others could live inside the

walls, knowing the jungle only as the ultimate 'nightmare. But he kept the Gate, the doorway to the jungle. And the City's people feared him almost as they feared the jungle itself.

He dwelt in a small room, part of the Gate itself. There was a door at its far end. A massive door with huge, bolt-studded hinges. Nowhere on it was there any handle, and by this fact as much as by any other, Sorin knew it to be the Gate itself, knew that on its other side lay her exile and, by all accounts, her death. She shuddered.

At its near end, there was another door in the wall, the small one through which the Bailiff had pushed her. It, too, had no visible handle on it, and she knew that those who came in here were doomed. The big and massive door was the Gate itself, but the little door was equally as effective. He who came through it had no choice left but to stay in the Gate or to go outside.

On the two long sides of the room, up near the tops of the walls, were windows through which the people of the City could watch and see that the orders of the Court were obeyed. As Sorin entered, shoved in with little ceremony by the Bailiff of the Court, faces crowded these windows. Inhuman faces, they

seemed to her. Faces empty of all sympathy, not recognizing any bond of kinship with her. Less friendly even than the small dog that one carried in his arms. She stared back at them. These were her real executioners, she briefly thought. Not the Keeper of the Gate or the Bailiff who did but do what they were told. Not even the Justice of the Court for all his sadistic glee at finding a new victim. But the people. The citizenry of the City. The sum total of all the humans in it who dared not see the City questioned lest they themselves become devoid of meaning. Which was the most nearly dead, she wondered. She herself who stood at the Gateway to the jungle, exiled from the only place where humans could live? She who stood face to face with death because she had asserted her own individuality even at the expense of the City? Or these? These so-called humans who dared not see their City, their way of life, called into question? Whose only claim to life was as a single unidentifiable speck, submerged in the City, acknowledging that their only significance was as a part of the City? Which, she wondered, were the most nearly dead?

When the girl was thrown inside, the old man who was the Keeper looked up with interest

from the table where he sat writing in a book. With courtesy he got to his feet, closing the book and shoving it aside. He smiled at her and bowed. "How do you do?" he said. His words were slightly slurred as if he was somewhat out of practice talking. He motioned to a chair on the far side of the table. "Will you sit and have a glass of wine?" he asked. "I would be delighted if you would." He looked as if he meant it. It occurred to Sorin that he must be a very lonely man. And so she smiled and did as he invited. "To you," he said, after he had served her and himself, and raised his glass in toast. "So they're throwing you out?" he asked when he had finished. "What happened? Did you start thinking?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

"Oh, that's bad, that's bad," he said, shaking his head. "Only way to live in here is not ever to think. Because even if you do start thinking, what have you got to think about?"

"What do you mean?" Sorin came alert. If he was dissatisfied, maybe he would help her, she thought.

"What do I mean?" he said, vaguely but bitterly. "Look at it." He waved at the bleak walls of the room. "What is it? I'll tell you what it is. It's the place

of the walking shadows; that's what it is. A place for men to exist until the day comes when they have forgotten they ever had a soul. And that day is not far ahead."

"You don't think the City is the final answer?" Sorin asked, probing for his views.

"Yes, it is," he asserted. "But the final answer is death. We're through. The human race is through. Outside there, there's something brewing, I don't know what. But it's what is going to take man's place on this fair earth. Because mankind's finished. He has walled himself up in here hoping at least to be able to die in peace. And probably he will. But that's all he will do. This is a tomb, the graveyard of man's hopes."

"What can be done about it?" she asked, her eyes alert and watchful.

"Nothing." He chopped the word off short. "Outside there the fire beam sweeps past every five minutes. When it comes by, it sears all life out of the very ground for a strip a quarter of a mile wide. That's what it takes to keep the jungle out of the City. Out beyond that quarter mile lies hell itself. That is what our honored ancestors left us. They thought that they could build the world over, adjusting evolution to their own demands.

But it got away from them. It got out of control. And it destroyed them. The only thing that they could salvage was the City. The few square miles of its extent is all that's left of their proud dominion. And, mind you, they knew what they were doing. They had their mighty engines. They were the masters of all sorts of subtle energies. And *they* were beaten. Beaten back behind the walls of the City. What hope is there for us? We who only live here, and are not even masters of the City?"

"Don't you think we should be masters of the City?" she suggested.

"Why? What good would it do?" he answered.

"What good does it do to do nothing?" she countered. "If we were masters at least we would be fighting. Maybe we could do something."

"No," he said. "All we could do is make ourselves uncomfortable. The human race is dying here, but there are a lot worse ways that it could die. No, if you want to do something, you're the one that's got the chance to do it. The problem's out there, not in here. Master the jungle and the City doesn't matter. But just mastering the City, that wouldn't do anything. No, you've got to go out and beat it first. Then come back if you

want, and batter down the gates of the City." He chuckled in a twisted way that had no humor in it.

She leaned toward him. "But don't you see . . . ?"

"No," he snarled. "I know what you want. But I wouldn't be here if the City didn't trust me to do its dirty work. It trusts me, and I am the executioner of its victims and my only consolation is that I am also the recorder of its death." He pounded on the book in which he had been writing.

He got up, picking up his book, and walked to the back of the room. There he reached up to a small cabinet in the wall. With a deliberateness that she barely noticed as she sat thinking, he opened it. With a sudden shock she saw a switch within it and, in a moment of blind clarity, she knew the time had come and that there was nothing she could do. "When I pull this," he said, his voice calm and almost conversational, "a force field will be set up between us. When the fire beam next sweeps by outside, the outer Gate will open. You will then have the full five minutes until the beam comes round again. Just before it does come by again, the Gate will close. Please do not still be here. Because after it is closed, the space will be flooded with a radiation

much the same as that of the beam, and I do not like to have to dispose of half-charred bodies. If you must die, at least, I beg you die outside. Are you ready?"

She gazed at him in horror. There was something implacable about him that killed all hope. He was not sane, she knew, and there was no chance at all that she could dodge the sentence that lay upon her—the sentence of exile and of death. And so she nodded and watched him pull the switch.

When the Gate swung open, she stood up slowly. Outside, there was a strip of utter and complete desolation, burned bare until the soil itself was dead. Beyond, there was a wall of solid greenness that towered into the sky with opaque lushness. The jungle! Symbol of the ancient error of those who once had been masters of the Earth. The torrent of savage life that they, in their blindness had once let loose, and that had driven them back behind the walls of their own City, entombing them there between these walls of greenness.

Sorin got up and walked out the Gate. The Earth was hard beneath her feet, quite different from the padded floors of the City. And the sun beat down upon her with unaccustomed

warmth. The air smelled sharp and almost painful, for she knew neither the smell of the jungle nor the twang of the ozone left behind by the fire beam that twinkled far to her left. She was alone, and she did not understand the world. And when she was about half-way across the strip, the full force of it hit her. Suddenly her face crumpled into panic. She gave a formless gasp and her hands twisted into balls. Crouching, she turned from the green unknown before her. Her foot lifted and she poised in an attitude of running.

But she did not run. With a visible effort of will power, she stopped. Her foot went down and she straightened up. Her face lost its look of fear and became something else again. And slowly, she raised her fist and shook it at the City. And shaking back her hair in final defiance, she turned once more towards the jungle and, with a calm deliberation that masked a tension shown only by her face, she moved once more towards it.

Knowing no way to pick one spot rather than another, she chose a tree at random and walked to it. She started to push her way into the wild profusion that grew there, when suddenly she stopped. Why she stopped, she did not know. It was just that this was not the place. Not

the place at all. There was danger here. Danger far beyond the normal of the jungle. She knew it and she drew back from it.

With puzzlement, Sorin looked up and down the wall of greenness. Why was one place better than another? Now that she was back away from it, it made no sense. She knew it made no sense. And yet she remembered feeling was so strong that there was no point in trying again at that same spot. She backed away.

Down, far to her right, there was a twinkling on the ground. It was the fire beam and it was sweeping around to scorch the earth around the City. It was the fire beam and it would force her to decision. With a rapid stride Sorin started to walk to her left along the edge of the jungle. Where should she turn into it? Why was one place better than another? What was the clue that she should find? Panic took her with sudden fury as, shudderingly, she looked over her shoulder at the approaching flame, and she began to run. Her breath began to come in short gasps and she felt weak. And then, without knowing why or being conscious of decision, she stumbled in behind a tree and lay gasping on the ground. The blue flame of the fire beam swept past the spot where she lay pant-

ing. She heard it pass as it went by with a sigh of menace and of death. She felt it with the sudden tension of the air and the prickling of her skin. She saw it as the leaves of the jungle around her curled back in pain, as death swept across the face of the jungle.

When it was gone, she got up and looked around her. The towering trees, the interlaced tendrils, the birds that screamed across the spaces, all were unfamiliar to her. This was the deadly jungle, the fearful thing of nightmares, the live destroyer of man's ancient civilization. This was the green flood that the builders of the City at the full height of their powers had been unable to stem except in the isolated area of the City itself. What was there here, Sorin wondered, that was so overpowering? It was like the gardens of the City. More crowded, more varied, without the discipline of care, but basically not different to her eye. She did not understand. She knew, for she had been told, that this was the jungle. This was the creation of man. Wanting a more plastic nature, and an environment more responsive to his touch, man had let loose the full power of adaptation. With the playful unthinkingness of a child with a toy, he had let loose on the earth

energies that made each plant and animal completely responsive to environment. Only later did he wake to find the measure of his disaster. For the plants grew without control. They soon adapted to the means that he devised to control them. Chemicals? The plants learned to use the most violent of man's chemicals as fertilizer. Fire? The trees drew warmth and energy from the flames. Only the energies of the fire beam proved irresistible, and that only if it kept hammering in and in on a steady beat. And, though Sorin could only sense it, even that seemed to be failing. Where once the strip around the City had been a mile wide, it now was but a quarter of that. And under the surface of the ground, streamers had long since reached the City's walls. Already they had explored the cradle of metal on which the City rested. Already they had learned that there was energy to be had, energy to sustain their drive for life. Energy that could be used to grow with. Over the years they had learned that that energy could be gained quite simply with the use of a small amount of acid. And there were spots in the subterranean walls of the City that were hardly more than a tenth of their original thickness. The might of the jungle was such that even

the City was doomed. This was the jungle, but Sorin could not see the worst of it.

The jungle was strange to the girl. It was something beyond her experience. But there was nothing visibly hostile about it, nothing to measure to the childhood nightmare that it had always been. In sudden release from that nightmare, she laughed and, reaching out, she broke off a branch from a nearby bush in token defiance. It was with somewhat amused interest that she saw the remaining branches of the bush curl back away from her. And, with a careless toss of her head, she moved on into the jungle.

She was perhaps twenty feet into the shadows of the jungle when she heard a rustle alongside her. She stopped and peered into the shade. Her eyes could not penetrate the gloom, especially since she did not know what she looked for. But there was a pair of gleaming eyes there, she saw. The animal did not look large, and she felt only curiosity about it. She began to circle around it, trying to get a better view. And as she circled, she quite unconsciously moved closer.

The animal moved out to meet her. It was not large. A foot high, perhaps at the shoulders. It was long, with a sleek, smooth

tail and a pointed nose. An anti-quarian might have recognized it as the overgrown and probably highly dangerous descendant of the weasel, but Sorin thought it was cute and reached out her hand to pat it.

As she did, there was a sudden streak of blackness from the left. The weasel snapped to meet it and, for just a moment, the tableau froze. For the blackness was a cat, a huge cat, a cat three feet high with claws that stretched out and whose teeth were bared and vicious looking. And then the picture dissolved in twisting fury. The battle was silent and blinding fast. And in the moment it was over as the black panther snapped the body of his lifeless enemy through the air and looked about him with a snarl.

Sorin stood frozen, shocked into complete passivity. At the very moment when the jungle had seemed most friendly to her, it had exploded into battle. The change left her stunned and she stood frozen, staring at the cat. And the panther stared back at her.

Then, once again, panic swept over her. With a sob she whirled and started running. Stumbling blindly over roots and vines, she could almost feel the claws upon her back. And when she finally tripped, falling flat upon the

ground, she lay there waiting for the final agony. It was about five minutes before it finally penetrated to Sorin that she was still alive. The thought came as a shock to her and she lay still, trying to puzzle it out. But there was no sense to it that she could see. And it was this lack of sense more than anything that had happened that brought in on her the fact that she had no knowledge at all of this new life. She was as a baby here. All her training, all the rules of reference of her life meant nothing here. The learning that she had, the training in ecology, meant nothing, for it taught the bookish facts. It did not even tell her when she was in danger and when not. The odds she faced were overwhelming. Physically untrained, emotionally unprepared, mentally in total ignorance, she was helpless before the jungle. The blackness of despair swept over her.

When finally she struggled to a sitting position, it was still to hold her head in her hands, trying to keep herself oblivious to all the strangeness about her. And it was some minutes before she found in herself the courage once more to face the jungle. When finally she did raise her head and start to look around, she suddenly tensed. There, not more than thirty feet away, sat

the black panther, calmly licking his paws, stopping every few moments to look around with his yellow slit eyes. He looked at her with them, and she felt the panic rise up within her. It was only with the greatest of efforts that her will power prevailed and was able to keep her instincts from sending her once more in headlong flight. She balled her fists and shrank into herself, closing her eyes and fighting for control. And when she thought she had it in at least some slight measure, she got to her feet, carefully keeping her eyes away from the big cat. And she began to walk, slowly, into the jungle, while the sweat poured off her face and her hands twisted by her sides.

When she had gone a little distance, she stopped and leaned against a tree. She hung her head and her breath shuddered out. She had to look and yet she could not bear to see. But, as if it were not truly part of herself, her head came up and turned to her right, looking to see where was the cat. And some part of her was not really surprised to see him, about twenty feet away, stretched out and licking his paws, making more perfect his black and shining coat.

She pushed herself away from the tree with trembling hands, and, with hesitant step, once

more began to walk. This time she watched the panther. She saw him get up, lazily stretching his shoulder muscles as he did so. And she watched him as, without a single glance at her, he paralleled her route. It was only because he gave no overt sign of interest in her that she was able to keep down the panic in her. She knew that if he just once should glance her way, then she could not help but run. Run blindly, unseeing, in an agony of fear, until she dropped from pure exhaustion. But he did not glance her way. Except that he did not change his position from her by more than a foot or a few degrees, there was no sign at all that the cat was aware of Sorin.

She could not have said how long it was that she walked through the jungle. Time ceased to have meaning for her. In her state of arrested panic, she knew no time. Each moment was the present and that was all. Each moment was a unit filled by the step before her and the sleek black killer thirty feet to her right. Time passed and the trees of the jungle were each like each other.

Before her stretched a tangled barrier of bushes. Dark and gloomy, it twisted to either side. There was no obvious way

around the barricade, so she prepared to try to push her way through. Why she should, she could not say. It was simply that her mind had set a course. Having no other frame of reference but that course, she accepted it as purpose. There was no thought that she should not continue on.

She peered into the bushes looking for the least difficult approach. As she did, she suddenly heard the big cat spit beside her. Her eyes wide with fright she twisted towards him, half crouched to run. But he was not spitting at her. His eyes were on the bushes. His lips were curled back. And one paw at a time, he moved forward, slowly.

Suddenly, he exploded into action. Like a streak, he moved in front of her, intercepting a small furry thing that had come darting out of the bushes. With a high squeal, the monkey thing died beneath one paw of the cat. But where the one had been, there were now five, then ten, then twenty, swarming out of the bushes. They died beneath the claws of the cat and they died, ripped by his teeth. They twisted brokenly through the air as he batted them. But one got on his back and its claws reached for his eyes while others tried to get around him. He rolled with savagely snapping

jaws and the one on his back was gone, but there were others reaching for him, and he leaped to escape them.

There was a pause, a moment while the monkey things regrouped, staring at the cat with bloodshot eyes. The panther stood quietly, watching them, his black tail swaying gently back and forth. The panther looked up at the girl where she stood, rooted to the ground. And suddenly he snarled and twitched his shoulders at her. She jumped, the spell broken, and began to run. Behind her she heard once more the shrieks of the monkey things as they again took up the fight.

She had gone perhaps fifty yards away from the scene of battle, when suddenly she was pitched forward as one of the monkey things jumped on her back. She felt its clawlike hands dig into her shoulders, and she could sense that he was shifting around even as she fell, seeking to free one arm and hand for the kill. She remembered the way another had reached for the panther's eyes and she closed hers tight in a feeble instinct of protection. As she hit the ground, she reached around behind her neck to try to get the thing. She felt a hairy arm reach under her, through, and around her throat. She brought

her arm back, but in some remote segment of her mind, she knew it was too late.

At that moment, even as she recognized her own death, she felt the hairy arm jerked off her neck. She felt claws scrape across her back, and then the weight was gone. She was free. She rolled over wondering what had happened.

She found herself staring up at a blood-stained mouth filled with teeth that were long and sharply pointed teeth. And she heard a growl, deep and menacing. Over her there stood a wolf-like animal, snarling his menace at the monkey things crawling around them. Wolf or dog, he was a savage-looking beast and she was glad that his attention at the moment was on the monkey things that threatened to surround them. The half hysterical thought occurred to her that there was some advantage in having so many different things fighting over her. Perhaps, by the time that they had the possession of her all settled between them, she would be so worn down as not to be worth eating.

As she lay there, watching, wondering what the dog-wolf would do when the monkey things had them surrounded, there was a sudden explosion of fury. The panther had returned,

a black shadow of vengeance. With motions too quick for the eye, he slashed through the circle of monkey animals. With a cacophony of squeals, they scattered. Returning to the bushes from which they had come, they turned to hurl their defiance at the cat, daring him to follow them into their own habitat. But with a disdainful air, he turned and doped to one side. Lying down without a look at the bushes, at her, or even at the dog-wolf, he began to groom his fur, smoothing down the signs of combat.

Sorin looked at the cat. She was astonished. Why, she wondered, was he willing to fight the monkey things but paid no attention to the wolf-like animal? Did he just like to fight them? With a start, she wondered where the wolf-thing was. Looking around, she saw that he had moved over under a bush a short distance away with the carcass of one of the monkey things and was calmly gorging himself. Between gulps, his head would come up, glancing at her and around at the jungle. But this, apparently, was a reflex of caution. It was obvious that he had no immediate interest in anything beyond his meal.

Sorin pushed herself up sitting. She sat there, slowly and painfully trying to piece the

thing together, knowing that all her old rules and knowledge of life had no meaning here. For the panther should be her enemy, seeking in her only a possible dinner. And yet the cat had acted in her defense. Whether it had actually been the cat's purpose to protect her or not, she did not know, but at least this had been the effect.

And the dog-like animal, by all her rules, should have been a hunter, too. A ruthless killer of the jungle. But he had made no threat at her. In fact, he too, had, with purpose or without, acted in her defense. This did not fit with what she would have expected.

But most of all, there was the fact that the dog and cat paid no attention to each other. Down through all the ages, there had been antipathy between the dogs and cats. Wherever they had met, there had been, at most, an armed truce. But here, in the jungle, they had, for purpose or not, worked together to protect her. And, that purpose, if it was a purpose, accomplished, they showed no signs of hostility towards or even interest in each other.

This was the jungle. Created by man as he let loose the unrestrained forces of adaptation. Had the dog and cat adapted to each other, she wondered? Ap-

parently they had. But why should they? It was said that the adaptation of the jungle was towards viciousness, towards more efficient killing and for cunning, not for friendliness. Why should the dog and cat have adapted to at least a tolerance of each other? What did they have in common?

Suddenly, she knew the answer. She could not have proven it logically, but she knew it by intuition, and there was no doubt in her that she was right. It all fitted. It was a pattern that she must accept.

She did not stop to fully analyze the pattern. She simply got to her feet. A moment of doubt swept over her, and she hesitated. But then, with the thought that she had little to lose anyway, she walked over to the black panther. Kneeling, she put her hand on his head, a last minute trembling as she did. "You are my friend, aren't you?" she said in a quiet voice.

The panther raised his head and looked at her with his unreadable slit eyes. And in her head, she heard him answer her question: "Not particularly."

"Oh?" she asked, verbally, somewhat taken aback by what his method had been, although not by the fact of an answer. "But then, why . . . ?"

"I am the friend of Kin," she

heard within her mind. "And Kin would be a friend of yours." There was a feeling of finality as if the subject had been exhausted. And the big cat resumed licking his fur.

"Kaylee is efficient," another voice said in her mind—a much more friendly voice, but one that spoke of power and courage and strength. She turned to look at the wolf, knowing that it was he who spoke. The dog had stopped eating and was looking at her. "In fact, he is very efficient. But he is not polite. In fact, he has no desire at all to be polite. But don't let it bother you. He isn't polite to me either. Or to Kin, for that matter."

"I see," Sorin said, wondering what it was she saw. "But who, or what, is Kin?"

"Kin?" the mental voice answered. "Why Kin is one of us. A hunter. Together with Mortrey, we four are a team and we are strong. As to what he is, why he is a man, of course. A man like you. Except for certain minor differences." The voice chuckled.

Sorin was startled. And yet, she knew that this must be so. This was the pattern she had seen intuitively. A dog and a cat have in common only their association with man. And therefore the adaptation of these animals to the jungle must have been of

a form to strengthen that association if it left them together at all. And therefore there must be a man in it. And that this association was telepathic in its nature she had known, too, because she had felt it. She had felt it without knowing what she felt. For one of these, probably the cat, had warned her off from where she first had started to enter the jungle. He had told her that the place was dangerous, and she had heard. She had heard and backed away and called it just blind hunch. But in her subconscious mind, she had known the message for what it was, and accepted it as such. This was the pattern that she had seen if only partly and without explicit analysis. And yet she was startled.

"Why should you be? Mind-talk is not strange," the dog's voice said in her mind. "You'll find stranger things than this in the jungle." And as she thought about it in some segment of her mind that was free from shock, that still functioned as a trained ecologist, she knew that it was so. Telepathy, in the ordinary course of evolution, would have no chance. In the beginning, it would not be a helpful thing. Even if two animals are not hunting each other, they are at least competing for the same food. Anything one can

read from the other's mind, he can use to his own advantage. It is only when telepathy gets to the point where the subjects feel so close that they are not competitors that it starts becoming an advantage. And in ordinary evolution, if an evolutionary line develops something that is a disadvantage until it is highly developed, the whole line gets chopped off short before it gets beyond the critical point. The Law of the Survival of the Fittest will not give it time to develop. It was only in this jungle where adaptation was too fast, where change occurred too rapidly for the selection of the fittest, that telepathy could have a chance. It was not strange, therefore, that telepathy had developed in this jungle.

She looked at the dog-wolf, and a strange thing happened. Where before it had been the face of an animal—a possibly friendly one, but still an animal—she suddenly found that in her mind it had become a face of intelligence. She felt a sudden bond of kinship, and although she knew it derived from the telepathic link, yet it found expression in the way her eyes interpreted what they saw. She looked at the cat, Kaylee, and saw that it was true there, too. On Kaylee's face she read a bored and almost disdainful

aloofness, but with a keen awareness and a subtle understanding that was, to her, a wholly human characteristic. She laughed, amused at herself.

"And this Kin," she said a moment later, "where is he?"

"He is coming," the dog-wolf said. "In your panic you ran the wrong way. Also, he got tangled up with a . . ." The final word was unintelligible to her. With no previous knowledge on her part, it had no verbalization to her. She had a fleeting image of a long white worm of huge proportion, and an awareness of an odor that raised the hair on her neck. She did not ask for more. "He is, as a matter of fact, here now," the voice went on.

With a start she was suddenly aware of a presence behind her. She turned. There stood a man. He was young and finely muscled. His eyes were dark and piercing, and she knew they had, with one quick glance, absorbed the whole of her. She tried to find what he was like. The thing she chiefly sensed was that he belonged. He was in tune with the jungle. He knew the ways of the jungle and knew how to survive in it. He was a part of it. There was an air of competence about him that was undeniable. An air of fitness and of justifiable self-confidence. Here was a man, wholly unafraid of the jungle, not defying

it, making no attempt to master it, taking what he wanted from it, and above all, adapting to it. He was alive. Vitaly alive. Alive in a way and to an extent not known at all to those of the City. For he had adapted, and by adapting, he had conquered. She was afraid of him.

With impassive eyes, the man stepped forward into the clearing. On his left shoulder was a bird of brilliant plumage who watched her with bright eyes. As they came forward, the man's mind reached out for her, and spoke to her: "I am Kin. Kaylee and Torg you have met. This, on my shoulder, is Mortrey. We four are hunters. I would be pleased if you would travel with us until the Tolath decides what should be done with you."

Sorin looked at him. There was a sense of unreality in her. This man, or boy, was something that was alien to her, beyond her knowledge and experience. And yet, in her feeling toward him, there was also a sense of overwhelming relief. After the terror of her first experience in the jungle, after the strangeness of finding allies in a panther and a wolf, he at least was human. There was something alien about him. Something that to her was not human, but he had a human form. "Thank you," she said to him. "This—this jungle—I have

no way at all of knowing even what it is. The more I see of it, the more I know that. Those that I expect to find my enemies, turn out to be my friends." She indicated Torg and Kaylee. "And the things that look innocent and friendly in it, I find are deadly. Without your help, there is nothing I can do."

"So?" Kin's thought cut in. "You have our help. You will come with us." He seemed slightly embarrassed by her thoughts.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But I do want you to know how grateful I am for your help. Why you are doing it, I do not know. All I know is that you are, and that by doing it, you are giving me a chance to live. A chance to survive until I can get back to the City."

"The City?" He seemed surprised. "You expect to get back to the City? Why?"

"Of course." She, in her turn, seemed surprised at his questions. "The City is my life."

"But the City threw you out," he said.

"Yes." She seemed sad. "They have lost their way. No longer do they know what the purpose of the City is. They have forgotten that the City is to keep alive a kernel of the power of mankind. To keep the spark from finally going out. And in their

forgetting, they are afraid. They have come to think that the purpose of humanity is to serve the City, and that is wrong. And it is because of that wrongness that they have thrown me out. They have forgotten how to live. I must go back."

He stared at her. "Why?"

She blinked at him, not quite grasping what his question meant. "Why? But they are wrong. They are afraid. Their whole existence is based on the nightmare of the jungle. Everything they do is based on that one thought. When I go back, they will see that it is foolish. That the jungle, even though it threatens, still is not quite the overwhelming thing they think it is. They'll see that a person can live in it. I'll tell them about the help that I have had, but that won't change it. That simply means that they should learn about the jungle. That they can learn about it. And when they see me, they will know that they were wrong."

"But why bother?" he asked.

She frowned at him, trying to see what he meant. "You don't think I should? I don't know. It seems to me I have to. That not to go back would be very wrong. That I owe it to them. And maybe to myself. They're wrong, you see, and I can prove to them they're. If I don't, or if some-

body doesn't, the whole purpose of the City must fail. Because they can't continue much longer just being parts of the machine. Or soon that will be all they can be, and then the machine will fail. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't. But I am still a human being. I am still a part of the human race. And this still means something to me."

It was Kin's turn to be silent a moment while he studied her. Finally he asked with a puzzled air: "I'm not human?"

She laughed, warm-heartedly. "Of course you are," she said. "But that isn't what I mean. The point is that man was once great. He was master of this world. And now he isn't. He has been pushed back behind the walls of the City. The greatest of man's creations is now just able to hold the jungle off from a few square miles. You are out here. You have adapted. You have become a part of the jungle. I don't know how many of you there are, but you are not going to conquer the jungle. You do not want to. The jungle is part of you, and you of the jungle. So it is not going to be you people who make man great again. It has got to be the City. And so, although we shall always be grateful to you, I hope, yet man's destiny depends on the City, and not on you."

He stood there, obviously not understanding her, looking a trifle hurt and confused, but not overly bothered. "I do not understand you," he said. "All the City does is spew forth a human every now and then. Sometimes we save them. More often not. I don't see why you have to bother with it. I'd think you might as well forget it. We can make you live out here. Give you plenty to do." He brooded a moment, but then he shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the Tolath can tell me." He flexed his muscles. "Are we ready to go?"

Sorin struggled to stand up. She found herself stiff after even the brief rest. "The Tolath?" she asked. "What is that?"

Kin looked at her, obviously searching for words. "The Tolath is—It's the Tolath." He shrugged. "You'll see. Only hurry now. Long ways to go before night."

As he spoke, Kaylee stretched his long sleek muscles, and, like a smooth black shadow, moved into the jungle. Torg moved after him, his nose swinging first to the ground, and then lifting to test the air. Kin, with a hand under her elbow, got her on her feet and started after Torg. And then he dropped back to bring up the rear. Mortrey flew like a gaudy ball to a tree far ahead. There he waited, his shrill voice

belaboring the jungle until they caught up with him. And when they did, he moved on once more.

She started to say something in her mind, but then she stopped. She sensed that between them there was a tight channel of communication. They hardly bothered to tell each other things, but each was tuned to the others, ready to receive and to act on the instant of reception of any danger signal. She dared not break the net for any question that could be deferred.

They were a team, Sorin realized. Theirs was a fluid unity that made them much more than the sum of their separate identities. Linked telepathically, and by that link being able to so know each other that trust was automatic, they were a completely functional group. Watching it, she was impressed. This was like one of the machines in the City. Perhaps one of the repair units, some of which included several autonomous parts linked by radio and other means in the performance of their jobs. And as the repair units were so well adapted to the City, so was this team to the jungle. It fitted here, she saw. Armed as it was against all the things of the jungle, it was still a part of the jungle, and flowed through it with a confidence and a sureness

that could only come from such a unity. Why, she wondered, did something so wholly a part of the jungle, and something so wholly alien to herself, why did it bother with her? As she tried to keep up in her stumbling way with their easy wandering, she pondered the problem without finding an answer.

It was much later in the day that they stopped in an open glade. Kaylee had killed a small animal which he started to eat. Kin looked at Sorin with a somewhat doubtful air. "What kind of food for you?" he asked her. "No fire so meat is raw. Can find fruit." Torg wagged his tail and said that he could find her an animal if she wanted. Sorin, however, with rueful thanks for the offer, said she thought fruit would be very nice. Kin grinned and went off to find some, leaving her in Torg's care.

As she sat waiting for his return, she noticed some bushes along the edge of the clearing. From where she sat they seemed loaded with berries, so she asked Torg if they were good to eat. The dog-like animal grimaced at the thought but admitted that Kin thought they were good. "Revolted thought," he said. "How anybody can stand eating that kind of thing I don't see. But, you'll probably like them," he said. "Give a call if you run

into anything." And he stretched out comfortably.

She did find the berries delicious and worked along the bushes picking them as fast as she could. When the first edge of her hunger was gone, she began to look around. She found she had actually wandered out of sight of the clearing and had a moment of fright. But a quick check showed that she would have no trouble finding her way back.

A short distance beyond, there was a low bush that took her breath away. It was covered with the most beautiful flowers that almost seemed to glitter in the half-dusk of the jungle. She stood looking at it, a smile of pure aesthetic pleasure on her face. And as she drank it in with her eyes, she became aware that it was loaded with birds who added their bright colors to the bush. They were small, hardly larger than her thumb, but their songs throbbled through the air with a muted volume that was almost hypnotic in its beauty.

She heard a chirping at her feet and looked down to see a small bird there. It was like those in the bush and it sat not three feet away on the ground. "What are you doing here?" she asked aloud, a look of good humor on her face. For answer the bird hopped away a couple of

times, and she saw that it dragged its wing as if it were broken. "You're hurt," she said, with pity in her voice. Once more the bird hopped feebly towards the bush. He gave a chirp that seemed to plead for mercy. "You are hurt," she repeated. "And the jungle is a very poor place to be hurt in. At least by all I've seen, I wish I could help you, but I don't see that I can. I suppose I could put you in the bush with all your friends. Would you like that?" She walked over and bent down to pick him up. With what seemed like the last vestige of his strength, he hopped barely out of her reach. "Don't be scared, little bird," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm only going to help you." She followed him and bent again to pick him up. And again he just barely managed to hop out of her reach.

She was bending for about the sixth time, and beginning to feel quite exasperated, when suddenly wings banged her face. She jumped back with reflex surprise and looked around with a jerky motion. On a branch of a tree near her, she saw Mortrey. The branch still bounced up and down, and he was screaming in a raucous voice at her. And in her mind, she heard his thoughts and they also screamed at her. "What are



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you trying to do? Do you have to go looking for trouble? Can't we let you out of our sight for even a moment?" She recognized that he was frightened and that this was the reason for his abuse.

"What is it?" she asked. "What was I doing that was so dangerous?"

"Oh," he said, as he calmed down. "No, you don't know, do you? Pick up that stick over there and poke the flower-bush with it. Only don't hold onto the stick too hard. And make sure you keep your balance."

She did as he told her. Picking up the stick and holding it loosely, she gently touched the edge of the bush. When it touched, the leaves and branches of the bush snapped around it. With a jerk, the stick was snapped out of her hand and into the bush. Only apparently the bush knew that it had been fooled, because in a moment, the stick was thrown back out. There was an angry ripple went over it and the birds that had been singing so beautifully, gave rasping cries of anger. Then, almost like an old lady settling herself once more in her rocker after giving the delivery boy a piece of her mind, it once more settled its branches in place. The leaves that had acted to seize or throw the stick once more fell

back in place. And the delicate and beautiful flowers that had closed on the instant of action opened up again. The birds began to trill the songs as if their only thoughts were of the spring.

Sorin turned to Mortrey. "It is a pleasant thing, isn't it?" she asked, ruefully. "But I don't understand. If the bush is so deadly, how do the birds live in it?"

"The birds are part of it," Mortrey answered. "Like Kin and Kaylee and Torg are part of me, and I of them. The bush protects the birds, and feeds them putting some part of the food that it gets into berries the birds can eat. And, in return, the birds entice things to the bush. Acting as if their wings are broken, they hop along in front of other animals. And they look like an easy meal for some hungry beasts. But in trying to catch the bird, the beast gets drawn too close to the bush, and then it's all over, and both the bush and birds have much to eat."

Sorin shuddered at this new evidence of the ingenious forms of symbiosis that existed in this jungle. How, she wondered, would she ever learn. How could she, there was so much to be learned? A wave of discouragement swept over her.

Mortrey must have sensed her feeling for he flew down onto

her shoulder and snuggled his beak under her ear. "It is hard," he said, "there is so much to learn. But do not be afraid. Soon the Tolath will help you. And until it does, we will take care of you."

The Tolath, again, Sorin thought. But as she turned to ask Mortrey about it, the bird flew off to investigate something that he saw.

When Kin returned, he dropped some fruit in her lap, telling her to eat quickly, that they must hurry on. "The jungle's no place to sleep," he said. "Only the Interzone. We have to hurry." And so, with no chance to question him, she gulped down the food and they got back under way.

It was dusk when they finally reached Kin's goal. She knew when they approached it for the jungle changed its character. The dense thickets of underbrush became less frequent. There were many fewer bushes of any sort, and those there were seemed smaller. Even the grass disappeared. Only the trees remained. But the trees grew taller, until they towered into the sky. And the branches interwove until the sun was nearly blanked out. And there was a stillness in the forest, and a sense of strength.

And as they pushed on

further, the forest changed again. The trees dropped down once more in size until they were hardly more than tall bushes. And they were twisted and gnarled, and had an air of age-old years. Almost you could see their roots, sturdy and massive, gripping the soil with iron fingers. Dwarfs, they were, small, but with an air of savage power. What, Sorin wondered, was the force against which this forest was braced?

As they came round one of these short squat trees, Sorin knew that they had reached the "interzone." She knew it because Kin and the others visibly relaxed. And she knew it because it was quite obvious they could go no further in that way. For in front of them lay a ridge of twisted and gnarled sticks. Piled perhaps thirty feet or more high, it stretched out in both directions. Each way it was lost in a twisting curve which let the forest hide it. But probably, she thought, it just went on and on. It had that feeling.

She looked at it more closely, wondering what it was. It was not simply a pile of sticks, she saw. For nowhere did she see an end to any stick. Rather it was like vines, twisting in amongst each other in strangling profusion. But unlike vines, there was nothing green to be seen. Only

the mass of twisted whitish ropes. Dead, and yet alive. Ugly, and savage. She shuddered, not knowing why.

As Kin and the others dropped onto the ground to rest, she asked him: "What is it?"

"The Interzone," he said. And then apparently realizing that that meant nothing to her, he added: "This is where the two forests meet. That mass there is where they fight."

"This is where the forests meet?" Sorin asked. He nodded. "What does that mean," she asked. "That this forest is one single thing? And that over on the other side is another one that is just as big and all one too?"

"Yes." He seemed surprised. "Sure."

"They have a common root system and physically are all joined up together?" she asked, incredulously.

"Guess so," he said. "Don't really know. I only know all the trees are one."

"Those—leafless vines," she pointed at the barrier in front of them, "where do they come from?"

"They're part of the forest," he said. He beckoned her to follow him and crawled in under the low branches of a neighboring tree. When they reached the trunk, he pointed to where there

rose up from the ground a small vine, the size of a cord. And he pointed out to her how that vine had wrapped itself around the trunk of the tree. "This thing is from the other side," he said. "It is trying to strangle out this tree. But see here," he said, and pointed to where another vine, even smaller, entered the ground alongside the first one. "This one is part of this forest. It was sent in from far away so as not to be choked off if this tree itself is. And it will follow down the other vine, way back into the Interzone. And when it has followed it far enough, then it will try to choke the other vine off. Only when it starts to do this, then the other forest will counter-attack again. And so it goes."

"Then the only purpose of these vines is to fight?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "That's enough of a job for them."

"But how do they get food?" she asked. "The vines must grow fast and use a lot of food."

"I guess so," he said, seeming uninterested. "Maybe that's why the trees are so big back a bit from the Interzone."

She looked at the tangled mass of whitish tendrils and she shuddered. To her there was something very ugly about it. Perhaps it was the thought of

the titanic struggle, spread out over miles and thousands of miles, continuing for years and centuries, marked only by the slow concentration of dead and dying fingers of the forest. Or perhaps it was just the new proof of how little she knew this jungle, even with all her education in its history.

But then she thought of the forest and the sense of horror was replaced by one of awe. For it was awe-inspiring, the thought of the millions of trees all interlocked through a common root system, forming one single entity covering hundreds of square miles. The energy spent in holding off and pushing back the other forest was built by photosynthesis back perhaps at the very walls of the City itself and carried as some complex molecule by creeping osmosis of this battle line. This was the forest and, with the slow tempo of the plant kingdom, it was the lord of the jungle. The thought was overwhelming.

It was as much to change the subject of her thoughts as anything that Sorin asked Kin: "Why did you want to reach here before night?"

"So we can sleep in peace," he answered. "This is the only place you can. The forest does not like any other plants

around here but itself. I guess it figures any plant outside itself might be really a part of the other forest pretending to be little. Anyway, it chokes out everything else. Near the Interzone the only thing we got to worry about is the animals that live in there." He waved at the twisted mass.

"We couldn't sleep any place else?" Sorin asked.

"Maybe," Kin answered. "But you can't tell. If you really fall asleep, you're apt to wake up lashed to the ground with vines. Which is not a healthy situation." He grinned at her.

With shuddering horror Sorin pictured what he meant. With a sudden wave of nausea, the beating rhythm of death and of danger broke down what little strength she had left. The constant menace of the day, the insistent knowledge that there was nothing safe in all the jungle, became too much for her. She dropped onto the ground and lay there sobbing, not knowing, not caring, without thought, without even the will to live.

As she began to get some measure of control once more, she sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. Her breath still came irregularly, its rhythm broken by the uncontrollable ghosts of her sobs, but she tried

hard to stop even that. As she looked at Kin, she saw in him the one who held the whole key to whether she lived or died. If he should reject her there was no hope for her. Then she would be left alone, without hope for mercy in the savagery of the jungle. He and only he could give her life. And she looked at him, half in gratitude, half in fear lest he should leave her. She tried to smile at him for the thought occurred to her that he might be displeased to see her tears.

Kin stood up and looked around. "You are tired," he said. "Go to sleep. We will watch over you."

"Sleep?" she repeated stupidly. Did he want her to sleep so he could steal away and leave her here alone? Her eyes went wide. She wet her lips. "I . . . I'm not tired. You must be . . . You must want . . ." She looked at him.

He cocked his head at her and frowned. "Of course you are tired," he said. "What you trying to say?"

"But . . ." She trembled. "But you rescued me. You fought for me. You . . . And now you don't want me any more. You want to get rid of me. You're sorry you bothered with me." Tears rolled down her cheeks but she made no move to brush them off. She

looked down at her hands that lay passive in her lap.

Kin was silent for a moment. "What put that thought into your head?" His voice was quiet. He walked over to her and crouched down beside her. He touched her chin and moved her head to make her look at him. "What are you thinking of?"

"But you must have changed your mind," she said. Her voice was patient and almost childlike. "You rescued me because I am a girl and you have been alone in the jungle without a woman. And now you do not want me. I am too much bother to you." She looked back down at her hands.

Kin looked at her but did not touch her. His eyes were warm with pity and there was a soft smile on his lips. "No, little Sorin," he said. "You do not understand. I am not sorry. Nor do I think I will be. Tonight you sleep. And tomorrow you will learn some more about the jungle. And tomorrow night you will sleep. And so it will go until there is the Tolath. And when we stand before the Tolath, it may be the Tolath will acknowledge that we two belong together. And if that be so, then we two shall be as one. But until the Tolath says that, then you will sleep at night and we shall watch and guard you. And we

shall keep you safe. This I swear." He patted her head as if she were a little girl to be comforted in the night. And, moving about ten feet away, he sat down to watch over her.

Sorin looked at him with eyes that were big and staring. Her lips trembled but then she smiled. "I guess I am tired," she said. She lay down and a look of peace came to her face. Almost immediately her eyes closed and her breathing became slow and deep.

Kin's eyes were soft as they watched her. But when they looked around at the jungle, they became hard with purpose and with resolve. And he was impervious to the amused glance of Kaylee as she moved into the dusk in search of his dinner. But he was aware of the sympathy of Torg as the dog stretched himself out for sleep. And idly he wondered what Mortrey thought but the bird was already asleep in a tree so he did not ask.

In the subsequent days as they worked along the interzone, Sorin learned more of the jungle. Mostly she learned about the animals in it, for few plants that were not part of the forest existed in this region. Some few did. There was one air plant draped across a branch that she

accidentally touched. When she touched it, it promptly wrapped itself around her hand. Kin rushed to tear it off, paying no attention to the bits of skin that came off with it. And then he had to tear it off himself. The wounds that it left were painful, but hardly more than superficial. But this, Kin explained, was only because of the speed with which it had been removed. For the plant could be deadly if allowed to really get established.

But the variety of plants in the interzone was small. Mostly they were local variations of the forest. For the forest did not tolerate strange plants and sent its runners to strangle any out. Only the air plants that the runners could not reach or find had any chance. And even them the forest did not like. The Plants that were there did not get to grow large.

Mostly the interzone was populated with animals. There the animals found sanctuary from the vicious plants. And in the morain of intertwined vines and runners they found sanctuary from each other. And through that mass they hunted each other, seeking food and safety. Snakes there were in vast profusion. Twice the man, the dog, and the cat had to battle snakes that came out in packs to chal-

lence them. And small furry things with vicious teeth and claws with which to run straight up a tree were there. They, too, swarmed in packs. Mostly, they hunted the snakes but they were willing to tackle the humans and their helpers. Kin and his companions did not try to fight these animals. Instead they depended on speed and distance to get away. At the cost of some bites and scratches, this was proven a successful tactic.

There were larger animals, too. There were things somewhat similar to the monkey-thing that Sorin remembered from the first day. There was one who sat, ugly and squat atop the morain of sticks. And even sitting, he must have been a full seven feet high. His eyes were red as he watched them go by, but he made no move. As they passed by, the travelers watched him with deadly caution, and she knew that they were afraid of him.

As they moved along the face of the morain, and as the days went by, Sorin began to accept the jungle. There was no longer the overpowering strangeness to it that she had felt at first. New things there were. Each day brought its own quota. But there was not the terrifying alienness that there had been.

She was learning to accept the jungle.

Occasionally, when an accident of the topography opened a view through the forest, she could see in the far distance the steel gray cube of the City. When this happened she was startled to realize how far she had come since the day that they had pushed her out the gate. Far, not only in distance, although that too, for she was not used to distances greater than those seen in the City itself. But far in the more particular sense of herself. There was a whole new part of her that was not of the City, that had nothing to do with the City, and that cared nothing about the City. This was the part that was the product of her experience in the jungle. And though that experience covered only a very few days, yet it had had much effect on her. And that part of her that was of the City was becoming submerged, pushed underneath, almost forgotten.

These glimpses of the City stirred up her thoughts once more. They made her think again of the City. And each time she renewed once more her resolve to return some day to the City. They made her think again of the necessity for her return, that she might show the people of the City the error of their ways,

awaken them from their sleep, their willful self-extinguishment in the City. Awaken them to teach them that man's destiny was greater than the City. That the City was a tool, the tool for immediate survival, but was not the ultimate answer. And she felt within her the hard core of resolve to do this thing.

Once or twice she tried to explain this to Kin but she met in him a complete lack of understanding. To him, the City was nothing. It was an aberration, something outside of the jungle, and which, because it was outside, was of no importance. When she spoke of man's destiny, he simply looked puzzled. The phrase, the concept, seemed to have no meaning for him. It left him confused and faintly irritated. It occurred to her that, in the sense of the phrase, he was not a man. He belonged to the jungle, and, to that extent, and within that meaning, he did not belong to mankind. He was an animal. A thinking, feeling animal. One with a full sense of his belonging, and of his relation to others around him. One able to enter into the best and highest emotional experiences. But, nevertheless, an animal in at least the sense of one who is aware only of the present. One who neither cares for the past nor

worries about the future. With such a person, talk of the destiny of mankind was useless. The concept held no meaning for him. Sorin soon gave up the struggle.

As they moved along, Sorin became aware from what they said, that they would soon be at the Tolath. At least this was how she put it, but she did not really know how best to say it. For what the Tolath was she still had no idea. Whether it was a thing, a place, a time, or whatever, she had not been able to decide. And all her efforts to pin down the others as to just exactly what was the Tolath were completely fruitless. They seemed to be completely stymied by the effort to describe it. "The Tolath? Why, the Tolath is . . . well . . . it's the Tolath." And this was all they could say. Or would say. Was it really so unexplainable, she wondered. Or did they just not want to explain it? Was there some reason why they did not want her to know what was the Tolath?

In the deep recesses of her mind, she worried about the Tolath. Deliberately she kept her thoughts un verbalized. For if there was some reason why they did not want her to know the truth, then she did not want them reading in her mind her thoughts about it. But down

where they could not reach her thoughts, the suspicion grew that the Tolath might not be a healthy thing for her. In her studies she had come across some stories of cultures that had existed long and long ago. Primitive cultures living in the jungles of that ancient time. And these stories had told of tribal gods before whom sacrifices had been made. And the stories had even described how these tribes had sought outsiders, those not of the immediate tribe, and sacrificed them before their gods. In some places, she remembered, the preferred sacrifice was a young girl, so that the anthropomorphic god might take his pleasure with her spirit. In such cases, it was usually important, if she remembered correctly, that the girl be a virgin, at least in so far as the tribe itself was concerned. Was it possible, she wondered, that that was why Kin left her quite alone? The thought made her cringe inside but she did not let it show, either in her action or, so far as she could help it, in the forward part of her mind.

It was in the quiet reaches of the night that her worry reached its peak. For often she awoke in the early hours before the dawn and lay there, thinking. The night sounds of the jungle

were all around her lending an impressive mystery to the darkness. In these hours she awoke with the certainty on her that she was marked for sacrifice, and she was afraid. Then she would lie there, her mind in a turmoil, twisting, turning, seeking a way out. She would think of escape. Once she even got to her feet to steal out into the darkness. But at that moment, off in the distance, she heard the wild shriek of some animal, she did not know what, and she knew that that course was hopeless. There was no chance that she could live by herself in the jungle. There was no slightest chance, and she knew it. And so she lay back down again and softly cried herself to sleep. In that moment, she was without hope.

In the morning, and through the days, she was a different girl. As she watched Kin move with easy caution through the forest, as she felt the warm friendliness of his mind, then the nightmare thought of sacrifice was remote. When she saw the muscles ripple in his shoulders and watched his cat-footed steps she felt a confidence in him that somehow went beyond a simple faith in his ability as a hunter and as her protector. Somehow then she knew that she need fear nothing from him

and that, as time went on, she could continue to depend on him for her life itself. Then it was she knew that she could easily learn to love him. In fact, she wondered if she had not already started.

It was on such a morning that they came to where the morain of twisted vines petered out on a large basalt outcropping that rose abruptly through the jungle floor. The group worked their way around the edge until they came to a break in the rock where they could climb up to its top. This took until the middle of the afternoon.

There was nothing at all on top, Sorin saw. When she looked closely at the rock, she did see some fine tendrils that interlaced across it, but they were hairthin and barely visible. "The forest keeps watch up here," Kin said when he saw her examining the rock. "Those hairlike things I figure are feelers. Just to make sure the other forest doesn't try to cross the rock."

"I see," Sorin said. "It would be rather difficult for either forest to cross the rock, I guess." She looked around. Off in the distance she saw the City, rising like a stubborn rock out of the jungle. A wave of homesickness swept over her, and she hungered for its remembered order.

It was partly to push this feeling off that she turned to Kin and asked: "What are we doing here?"

"The Tolath," Kin answered simply. And he lay down and appeared to go to sleep.

"The Tolath?" Sorin asked. "But there is nothing here."

But Kin made no move to answer her. Torg, instead, asked her gruffly: "Should there be?" And then he too stretched out to rest. Mortrey was hunched down on the rock a short distance away, and he too looked asleep.

Only Kaylee looked his usual self. He was stretched out licking his claws. He looked up at her. "You do not understand," he said. "The Tolath is in the mind, and is not any of the things that you have imagined. There is no single place. But it happens that during the Tolath, we are unwatchful. This place is safe. That is why we are here. They sleep to prepare themselves. The Tolath is tiring."

Sorin seized on this first concrete statement of what the Tolath was. "It is in the minds? What do you mean?" Kaylee said nothing. "What is it?" she cried. "I've been beating my brains out trying to find out. Why the mystery?"

Kaylee grinned in his mind. "Kin and Torg and Mortrey cannot understand that you do not

know or cannot read it in their under-thoughts about it," he said. "Besides, they do not know themselves how to describe it."

"But you know that I do not understand it?" Sorin said.

"Yes," the cat answered. "I have watched you in the night when I have guarded camp. I have seen the nightmares you have conjured." There was some feeling of contempt in what he said.

"You have known my thoughts!" Sorin was puzzled. "You have seen me tremble before my imaginings. And you have said nothing. Why? Do you hate me? Do you like to see me tremble?"

Kaylee chuckled. "Perhaps," he said. "But why should I stop you? You are not one of us."

"I did not ask you to help me," she said. "I am grateful for it, but I did not demand it. And how can I help but be an outsider?"

"True," he said but with a mental shrug. "But that is not the point. The point is that you *are* an outsider. And until the Tolath says differently, you will continue to be an outsider." There was something cold and uninterested in the voice she heard in her mind. Something unanswerable, and she did not try to answer it.

"So be it," she said. "And

will you then tell me what is the Tolath?"

"The Tolath is the Tolath," he said and he sounded amused. "It is too hard to describe to be worth the bother. You will soon see." He stretched himself out.

"Then why do you bother to tell me anything?" she asked in sudden exasperation.

He raised his head. "Soon perhaps, you will be one of us. It would be a nuisance if you panicked now. The Tolath would not like it. And now I sleep." There was finality in his voice and it was with finality that he put his head down on his paws and closed his eyes, leaving Sorin to sit there, thinking, wondering.

The sun was just on the horizon when Sorin woke with a start, not even knowing when she had fallen asleep. She looked around, trying to blink the sleepiness out of her eyes. About forty feet away, she saw Kin, standing, staring with blank face into the sun. Beside him Kaylee was stretched out, for once not licking his claws, but simply lying there, his eyes fixed on some unseen point. And on the other side sat Torg, his head cocked to one side and his ears pointed up. And Mortrey sat on Kin's shoulder and made no sound.

As Sorin looked at them, her

mind reached out for them. And suddenly she felt as if she were in a huge dark hall. She could still see the setting sun, and she could still see the rock and the hunters standing there. But somehow what she saw was unreal. The reality was the warm darkness, the friendly closeness as if there were around her a host of others. What were these others? She did not know. Some were human and some were not. Hunters, she thought. All the hunters of the forest, men and animals. Many different forms. But, whatever their forms, they were now all part of a single unit. With a sudden clarity as her subconscious put together the things she knew, she was aware that that unity was the Tolath.

She was aware of Kin. She was aware of him not only in the unreal sense as he stood there on the rock, but also in the Tolath, as if he were illumined by some special light. And she heard his voice as his mind called out. "Now hear me, you who are my friends," he said. "Hear me and advise me, for I bring one to the Tolath."

And out of the darkness, there came an answering voice. It was a strange voice, giving somehow a sense of immensity, of a unity that bespoke a mighty power. It was an awe inspiring voice, but she was not afraid for there

was no arrogance in it. "Who is this one you bring?" it asked. "And is she fit to join with us?"

"No," she heard Kin answer. "She knows not the jungle nor even the ways of the Tolath. She is as the unborn babe and it is as such that I give her unto the Tolath."

"Let the one you bring speak up," the voice said. "We would judge for ourselves the nature of her fitness. We would reach into her mind and learn her nature that we may know whether or not she be acceptable. Let her speak!"

Sorin felt a touch of wry amusement as she thought of how she might have interpreted those words just a short time ago. For they sounded like the prelude to a sacrifice. And it was with something of a start that she asked herself why she did not now worry about the possibility. For Kaylee might not have spoken the truth. And, in fact, he had not actually denied the thought of sacrifice. Certainly there was not now any logical reason why she should not worry if there had actually been reason before. But the fact remained that she was not worried, though she could not answer why. She shrugged the problem off and, standing up, she answered: "I am here."

As she spoke, she felt her

mind turn in upon itself. The physical reality disappeared, she could no longer see it. Only there was blackness, and she could see nothing. There was a presence that she could feel and before it she was naked, without protection, without a place to hide. She felt the presence and she knew that it knew her. She felt it in her mind, and she felt it sink deeper, in and in.

"No!" she cried. "I am Sorin, and I demand the right to my own self!" With a surge of angry energy she threw off the presence. She tore it out of her mind and savagely hurled it from her. "Get out," she cried. "Get out and stay out!"

In the darkness, there was a chuckle. Where it was she did not know. And there was a strange quality to it that she did not recognize. But it was an approving chuckle, and there was an element of surprise to it. And the voice came, but it was different. Where, before, it had rolled as thunder through the darkness, now it was soft and quiet. And where before it had seemed impersonal and remote, now it was for her alone, and it had the feel of a single personality. "Yes, you are Sorin," it said. "But what is Sorin? Can you tell me?"

"What am I?" she asked. For some reason, perhaps some qual-

ity in the voice, she was not angry any more. "I am myself. I am a living, thinking individual. As such, I am important to myself, at least. And it is for this reason that I demand the right to be myself."

"I grant the right," the voice answered. "I do not think that right can be denied to whoever asks for it. But you are the first who has ever asked for it." There was a sense of wonder in the voice. "You are unique," it said, "and I acknowledge it. You are Sorin and I salute you."

"And who are you?" she asked.

"I am the Tolath," the voice answered quietly.

"That cannot be," she said. "For I know now that the Tolath is the gathering and the totality of the minds of the hunters. Such an entity could not be surprised at my answers. Either my answers would be known at least as a possibility, and hence would not be unique, or else they would be meaningless. Who are you?"

The voice chuckled. "It is true that I am the Tolath, but it is not true that the Tolath is just the combination of the minds of the hunters. The hunters think so. And it is to preserve their illusion that I have isolated us from them." This was so, Sorin realized with a start. This was

the meaning of the change in the quality of the voice. Now she was alone, except only for the other presence. "You are the first," the voice went on "to break through this illusion. You are the first to sense my presence here. Can we be partners, Sorin?"

"Partners?" she asked. "In what way?"

"I do not know," the voice said, with a sense of puzzlement. "Never have I had a partner. But are you an enemy or are you a friend? Do we seek a common goal, or are our aims apart? What do you seek, Sorin who is unique?"

"I seek to return to the City," she said. "The City is wrong, and I have the truth to set it right."

"Is that what you seek?" the voice asked. "I saw that in your mind before you threw me out. But I did not think that was an end. I did not see how it could be. Is it truly what you seek, or does it make sense to ask why you would like to return to the City?"

Sorin laughed. "You are right," she said. "It is not in itself the end I seek. What do I really seek? I do not know. The destiny of mankind, the future of the race, these things are part of it. Right now mankind is in chains. He is a slave

to the City and this is wrong. And while this wrong exists, there is no future, only past. This is part of what I want. It is not all. I want to live my own life. And by living I mean much more than cringing in the corners, bowing to the will of the machine. To live as I would live, there must be no fear nor any true restraint on the freedom of the spirit. And I want that same life for my children, and my children's children. I want the future to belong to me, and not to the past." Her voice was proud and final.

"Tell me, Sorin," the voice said, "this that you have said is good, but why do you confine it to the City? This hunter, Kin, that you have met, is human. May he not carry the destiny of mankind? May not the future lie in him? And as for yourself, the jungle is strange to you. You cannot now conceive of walking in it without fear. And yet Kin does. You have seen him. Do you not think that you can someday learn to do the same? If your children are hunters, will they have fear? Why should they not know how to live in this same jungle? And finally, little Sorin, who is to be the father of those children? If I read you rightly, it should be Kin. Are you afraid to acknowledge this? Or would you destroy

him, by taking him with you when you return to the City?"

"When I return?" Sorin asked.

"Yes," the voice said. "I would have you make a choice that is free. I am the Tolath. I have much power. I can return you to the City. And I will do it if you wish. I would rather you did not but I offer you that promise so that you may make your own free choice. I would rather that you stayed here and worked with me to give the human race its destiny within the jungle. For I am convinced their destiny is here. There is a pattern in this jungle. A pattern that you have seen in part. I do not think the destiny of any single race is to rule the others. But myself, with mankind, with the races of Torg and of Kaylee, and of Mortrey, and of others whom you have not seen, we can build together one single destiny. This is the pattern of the jungle. And I would have you join it."

Sorin meditated. She thought of all that she had seen within the jungle. She thought of the days that they had spent in slowly making their way through it. And she compared it with her life within the City. And she thought of Kin and what he seemed to her. Slowly a great peace grew within her and

she knew what her answer would be. For as she thought of it, it became clear that the choice was simple, and lay between the extremes of life and death. The City was dead, and all that were in it were dead. Their souls were dead and their minds had ceased to function except only as soulless computers. But here, in the jungle, was life. Vibrant, vital life. Life glorying in its powers, and certain of its strength. No, this was her choice.

"You are right," she said. "This is the future, here, with Kin."

"This is your free choice?" the voice asked.

"It is," she said. "There will be moments, I suppose when things get too rough, I shall be sorry. But I do not think I shall ever long regret it."

"Nor do I," the voice replied. "In fact, I do not even think there will be many moments. For I have the power to protect you well."

"You do?" she asked. "You seem very sure of yourself for a disembodied spirit."

"Disembodied?" The voice sounded startled. "I am very far from disembodied," it went on, sounding amused. "I have said that I am the Tolath, but I did not say what the Tolath is. Know then, Sorin, that if you

would feel my loins, you need only rub your hands on the trunk of the nearest tree. If you would hear my voice, listen to the wind through the top of the trees. For I *am* the forest. And this is what the Tolath is."

As she stood stunned before that revelation, aghast at the very magnitude of the thought, she was suddenly aware that she was back with the multitude. And she was aware also that only a moment had passed since the voice of the Tolath had demanded the right to judge her. And again she heard the voice, but now it rolled like the thunder, massive in the dignity of the gathering of the minds of the host of hunters. "We have judged the newcomer," it said, "and we find her even as Kin has said. In all the ways of the jungle and even of the Tolath, she is as the little babe. Let Kin guard her, and teach her,

that she may learn to take her place with us. But let it be said also that there are other ways of knowledge that are not of the jungle nor even of the Tolath. And in the ways of a woman, she is wise. Therefore let him not hesitate to learn from her. Such is the will of the Tolath."

And it was over. No longer was there anything but the physical reality. Gone was the darkness that had overlain the gathering dusk. Gone was the presence of others besides Kin and Kaylee and Torg and Mortrey. Only these four remained. And she saw Kin turn toward her, a warm and almost bashful smile on his face. She smiled back at him and ran to meet him. As his arms gathered around her, she saw over his shoulder the tops of the trees move against the sky as the wind stirred them, and she heard the voice of the forest.
