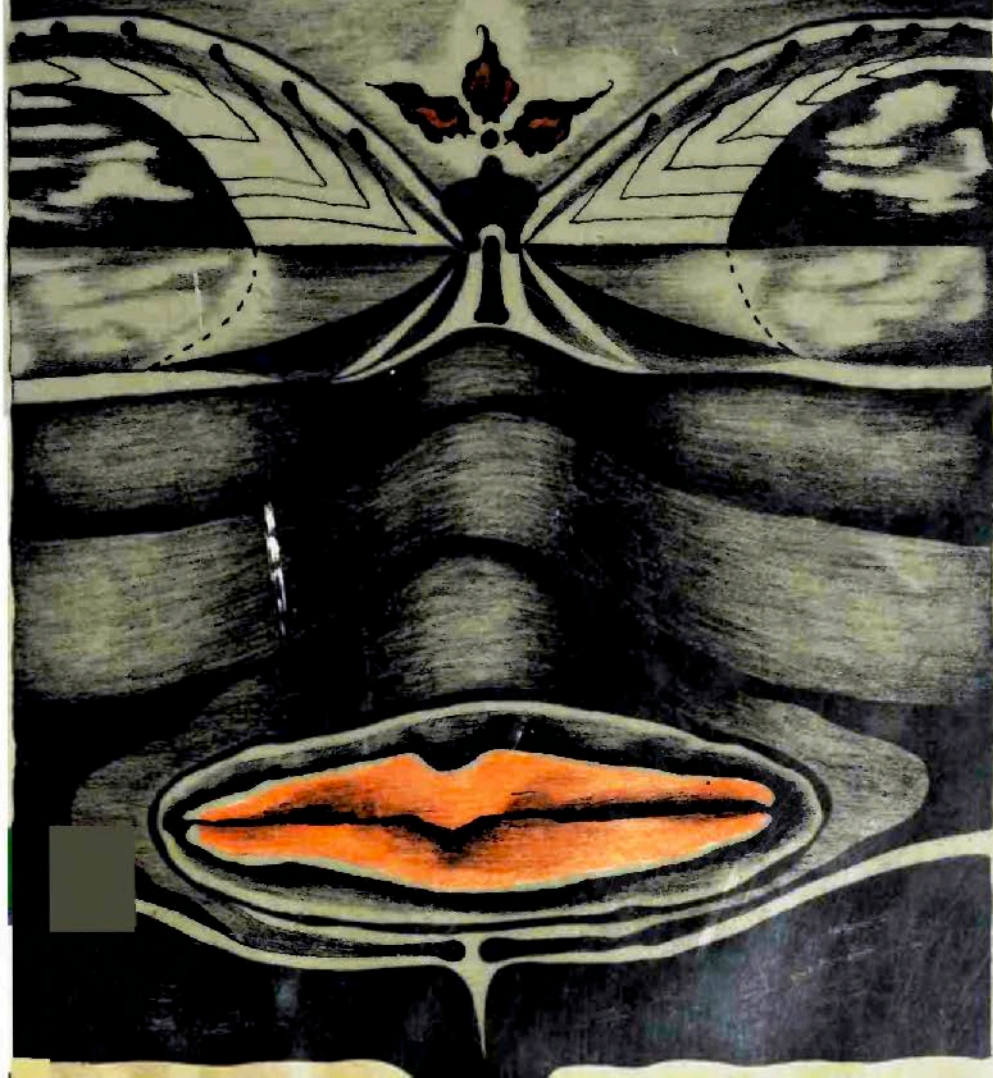


THE WATERS OF CENTAURUS

Rosel George Brown

Doubleday Science Fiction



THE WATERS OF CENTAURUS

Rosel George Brown

In the wilderness of comparatively new planets there's nothing quite as effective as a civilized front. With a bag-full of demure deceptions—green face cosmetics, rouged knees and her purple petal-textured Botticelli — Sybil Sue Blue, police sergeant, fights against the alien forces that threaten the security of our galaxy.

Sybil Sue Blue is a master at attracting difficult situations leading into tight corners that would daunt a lesser woman. Although Earth has had diplomatic relations with Centaurus for quite some time, there's still quite a bit of undiscovered territory...and some attractive unknown elements. The Krilanrians, for instance, and particularly their leader Gide Girais, the Sea King. Sybil Sue Blue, tough, beau-

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tiful, gin-slinging *femme fatale* has a ball tracking him down. Just because Gide is the enemy and a fish-like alien to boot doesn't blind her natural reaction to the fact that he's extremely attractive.

Mother, Greek scholar, police sergeant, Sybil Sue Blue is a phenomenon even in the imaginative world of science fiction.

Rosel George Brown, who was also the author of *Sybil Sue Blue*, died in 1967.

JACKET BY MARGO HERR

Printed in the U.S.A.

THE WATERS OF
CENTAURUS

Books by Rosel George Brown

THE WATERS OF CENTAURUS

SIBYL SUE BLUE

THE WATERS OF CENTAURUS

ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

1970

All of the characters in this book
are fictitious, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

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THE WATERS OF
CENTAURUS

CHAPTER 1

Sergeant Sibyl Sue Blue lay sunning her back on the Seian beach, four and a quarter light-years from home and a thousand miles from the nearest outpost of Centaurian civilization. She was wishing, in her intellectual way, that the island were spoiled by at least one bar and one civilized man. This gorgeous Madage's bathing suit . . .

Out of nowhere, something seized her under the armpits and began to pull her toward the sea. She didn't stop to wonder where it came from. With professional grace she drew her knees under her, snaked over and bit. She felt slippery flesh, clamped her teeth through to the bone, noted the ankle was bluish. There was a screech and hands released her. She rolled over, braced her knees, charged at the dark legs. They slid back, making gullies in the sand, and a long shadow fell onto Sibyl.

A hoarse male voice gargled a stream of alien words. Hands twisted in her hair, forced her face into the blazing sand. She flailed her legs and body about, while her face was scraped deep into the sand until she began convulsing for air. Finally the hands pulled her head out, and she breathed in a rasping lungful of sand, choked, opened her eyes to a red haze, grains of sand like sharp rocks, water streaming out of her eyes. In fury, she grasped at the tormenting hands, lunging backwards with all her strength. Her attacker went down, pulling her with him.

Then he let go of her hair, threw her over and was on

top of her. Sibyl brought her knee up into the slick stomach, jabbed. He moved his body quickly to one side, held her shoulders and kissed her hard on the mouth, so hard she could feel the sharpness of the teeth.

Then he was gone.

"Missy!" Sibyl called. But her daughter would be two miles off by now, gathering lantern pods for dinner. Sibyl sat still, listening. Where had the man . . . Thing . . . come from? Where had he gone? Sibyl opened her blind eyes, closed them quickly and tried to keep them still. There had been no sound of a motor, no plopping of a boat in the water, or swish of oars. No sound of walking, running, swimming, even flying. The only thing she'd really seen of him were his legs and ankles.

Sibyl spat out as much sand as she could and began to crawl into the gentle wind that blew off the Outer Sea. That direction would be water, and she could try to wash the sand out of her eyes and mouth. Any other time the twelve twins would be about, but they weren't due back from the Seian festival until tomorrow, and that was on the other side of Seia. Red pain kept jabbing through her head, from her eyes. She should have reached the sea by now. It had been only a few feet away. She must be crawling at an angle, maybe in the wrong direction. She stopped, heard the swishing of the slow waves, then a faint, plopping sound. A fish? Or her attacker again? Then the keening hum. A lunga.

"Help!" Sibyl called. "Which way is the sea?" Sometimes the lunga answered and sometimes they didn't. The Seian king—King Seia the Decorative—said they had a language of their own. Like dolphins, Sibyl thought. But what did they say?

The keening came again, closer. Sibyl turned toward the sound, crawled quickly so as not to lose her direction. She

felt damp sand; then the edge of water washed up her fingers and she crawled into the slow waves. The lunga was keening, as close as it could come now in the shallow water. They were large fish.

"Thank you," Sibyl said, and opened her eyes under the salt water, washing the sand out. Then she stood up, spewed out a mouthful of water, washed her mouth again and opened her eyes a little. She could see, painfully; fuzzy outlines in a red glare. She looked over the water. Nothing. Even the lunga was gone. She tried looking for footprints on the beach, but her eyes were too bad. She stumbled through the patch of scrub and woods beyond feeling for trees, until she made it to her and Missy's hut.

Inside, she groped for the medicine kit, felt through the gelatinous packets. She strained her eyes open, picked the yellow one, squashed half of one packet into each eye and lay down, soaking wet, feeling the wet sand that had gotten down into her bathing suit and scratched her miserably. It was a beautiful suit—a brilliant green that matched her eyes—custom sprayed at Madage's, and she was still hoping that Steer would manage somehow to get here from Llonan City, because that's what she'd bought it for.

And just how, Sibyl asked herself, did somebody who started out to be a Greek scholar end up half-blind in an itchy bathing suit on an unexplored island on the fourth planet of Alpha Centauri? Sibyl remembered reading about the discovery of Centaurus when she was an undergraduate back in the 1980s. PAGE GRANT FINDS INTELLIGENT LIFE ON ANOTHER WORLD! And she remembered thinking it was much more important to find the exact year of the treaty of friendship between Athens and Plataea in the sixth century B.C.

Then several years later, when Page Grant brought the first Centaurian to Terra to display the high level of Centaurian folk culture, Sibyl had progressed to the problem

of which cross wall delineated the original citadel of Plataea in the Late Helladic period.

It was Kenneth who had jolted Sibyl out of a six-month perusal of some likely volumes of *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, looking for possible echoes of the conjectural murals in the possible Tomb of Leitos at Plataea. It was Kenneth who suggested, "Look. There are other things in life." And Sibyl had taken a good look at him and answered, "You're right." Then the deliriously happy marriage, the birth of Missy, the part-time job with the Police Force, then Kenneth's disappearance on the disastrous trip to the poison planet Radix, the necessity of a career to support Missy. And somehow Sibyl had turned into a good policewoman and even learned Centaurian working in the Centaurian slum that grew up in Hammond Space Port when Centaurians stopped being a novelty and started being a nuisance.

Then that awful thing with Stuart Grant, Page Grant's son. But Sibyl wasn't going to think about him. Only it was at Stuart's death that the incredible Seian, Lia, mother of the twelve twins, had come somehow to Hammond Space Port with Darld, one of the twins, for proof that the boys were heirs to the Grant fortune—Grant Space Lines, Inc.—grandsons on the wrong side of the blanket of Page Grant. And her claim was good, as the genetic computer showed.

So here were Grant Lines, Inc., mainland Centaurus, and the U.N., faced with twelve copies (modified with scales and a few anomalies) of Stuart Grant, only one of which—Darld—had ever been off the uncharted island of Seia, and who would wield the greatest financial power in the civilized worlds.

Sibyl laughed, as she always did when she thought of the twins, who were indeed curious, and found she had opened her eyes without thinking and could see. She got up and made for the beach to look for footprints, thinking

still about the twins and wondering if it were some freak that Lia had been able to mate with Stuart Grant, or if all Seians, unlike mainland Centaurians, had genes like human genes. There was no denying Lia had done it. Then there would be Seian-Terran crosses from now on, particularly if the twins married Terrans. Which reminded Sibyl unpleasantly of the blond fortune hunter on the ship, who had smelled out Darld's money and pursued him relentlessly. And poor little Darld—of course he didn't *look* little . . .

The beach. The only footprints were hers. Nothing clear showed. The sand was bone dry except where the sea washed it, and there was the spot of disturbed sand where she'd thrashed about in the fight, and her diagonal trail to the sea to wash. And a few drops of dried blood. But nothing to show a man or a Thing's footprints. Sibyl looked out over the sea. Not wine-dark, like Homer's sea. More greenish-yellowish, reflecting a chartreuse-shaded sky. She thought of Odysseus, washed up on a beach like this, with no boat to account for him. But he didn't attack Nausicaa and then disappear. *He* knew how to approach a strange woman on an island.

Her bathing suit and the sand had dried thoroughly in the hot sun and the sand was itching and scrabbling down her skin like dying insects. She cursed fruitily and made for the Silver Spring behind the hut. It was cool in the woods and the spring was beautifully clear and inhabited by small, yellow fish that resisted the current so well they seemed to hang suspended. Sibyl stripped quickly and washed herself and her suit in the icy water, catching her breath for the coldness at first, and then lying back to watch the shifting patterns of the fern tree against the sky. A blue seed pod from a balloon tree floated by above her

head and caught on the roof of the hut. Sibyl soaped the salt water out of her hair.

Something was ringing the bell tree. Their Happy Hant. He swung down to the bank of the spring, pawed at the soap bubbles as they went by and began his uproarious laugh that never failed to send Sibyl into a fit of giggles. And the more he laughed, the more she laughed, until her stomach was hurting and finally she said, "Oh, all right. I'll feed you." Which was the only way to make him stop.

Sibyl hung her Madage's bathing suit on the back of one of the stick chairs King Seia had sent over, tossed Happy a pack of freeze-dried beef—she and Missy had switched to Island food—and mixed herself a Gin and 'gin. Then she lit a cigar, tied herself into her green wrap-around dress, ran a comb through her gray and black striped hair, and set a chair outside to relax in.

She shuddered happily at the first sip of her drink, looked through the trees at the sun nearing noon, and frowned. Missy really was being a long time. And usually Happy went with her, so if Happy came back, Missy shouldn't be far behind. But what could happen to Missy on Seia?

Plenty, it looked like. But whatever it was had come from the sea, and Missy was in the woods with her basket—like Little Red Ridinghood—what a horrible story that was—"Oh, hell," Sibyl said aloud, and finished her Gin and 'gin. Missy was sixteen and perfectly used to taking care of herself. She certainly wouldn't get lost and . . .

Sibyl got up, took a deep breath and called, "Missy!" at the top of her voice. The third time Missy answered. Sibyl sat back down with a sigh of relief, relighted her cigar and finished off her Gin and 'gin in one swallow.

"You were gone an awfully long time, dear," Sibyl said when Missy came through the trees, the red lantern pods

brimming out of the green rush basket on her arm. Missy looked lovely and somehow almost alien, with her long, black hair flowing down her back and her deep tan and her orange shift. Sibyl decided she ought to wear gold earrings, even if there were no one to appreciate them.

"Oh, *Mother*," Missy said, twisting her mouth. "You're not going to start that here?"

"Start what?" Sibyl asked, getting up. And then she found she was too relieved at seeing Missy all right to get mad. "No, we're not going to start that. But I do wish I could make you understand that I wasn't trying to interfere with your life and never will."

"But you did," Missy said. "You know you did."

Sibyl sighed, took the basket of lantern pods and began washing them in the spring, being careful not to punch through their papery skins. Missy brought the glazed pot from the hut, and Sibyl put the pods and a little water in it while Missy started a fire under the tripod.

"All I did was introduce myself to him," Sibyl said. "I did that all the time when I happened to join you chatting with anyone on the ship. You didn't object when I met Pugh."

"Pugh is twenty. But you started in on Gide Girais with that throaty gin and cigar voice of yours . . ."

"You know, Missy, this is the first time you've ever acted like adolescents are reputed to act. I know I'm an abominable influence but at least I've tried to help you grow up your own way and I thought I was a success because you do so well and we always had each other's confidence. And then this Gide Girais, this slimy, superannuated gigolo came along on the ship coming over and . . ."

Missy was blowing at the flame under the tripod, holding back her swath of heavy hair. "And then you got jealous because I'm sixteen and you're forty. I've read about

menopausal women doing this, but I never thought you would."

Sibyl was about to throw something, when she saw the impish grin on her daughter's face and laughed. "Not bad. All right. Only do remember that I was thoroughly occupied—when not baby-sitting Darld and elbowing off Victoria Lansing—with my very attractive Steerforth Cade. I certainly was lucky he turned out to be the navigator for our ship. Have you ever noticed how much he looks like a nice animal? I mean with that sort of furry hair and those bovine eyes and that slow way of his."

"Really, Mother, you sound like something out of Have-lock Ellis."

"It's my extreme old age," Sibyl said, piling up a bit of earth over her cigar butt, so as not to spoil the scenery. "Because of which I'll just sit here, and if you bring me that wooden bowl with the salad things in it, I'll chop them up and you make the dressing and stir the lantern pods."

"Just what I deserve," Missy said, and disappeared inside. Happy perched on a bushy bell tree opposite Sibyl, tinkling the bells and giggling softly to himself while he preened himself with his claws. Distantly, Sibyl heard the keening of a lunga from the sea. She was going to have a nice afternoon reading Strabo, since the twins were off at the festival and couldn't be herded in for their English lesson. She hadn't been as successful either at teaching them English or getting to understand them as she'd hoped. She kept having the feeling that there was something about them she was missing. Of course Darld already knew some English, and it was easier to talk to him than to the others. But still . . . anyway, it was a sure thing it wasn't one of the twins that attacked her this morning.

Missy reappeared with a bowl and a sharp stone knife

and Sibyl said, "Brace yourself. Something happened to me this morning and you'd better know about it. Frankly, I don't know what to make of it, myself."

Missy looked up startled . . . or more than startled. What? Prepared to retreat into herself again as she had on the ship. What was it she expected Sibyl to say?

"When I was lying on my stomach on the beach, something came up and attacked me."

For a moment Sibyl thought Missy looked relieved. Then shocked. "A strangler eel! But I thought they . . ."

"Definitely not," Sibyl interrupted. "Carders never come close to shore in the day because they'd dry out and die too fast. I think it was a person. Perhaps not human, but humanoid like a Centaurian or a Seian. I didn't get to see much of him because my eyes were closed when he came up, and then I was after his legs and ankles in a flash, and then he grabbed me by the hair and rubbed my face in the sand until I was blinded. So all I know is that he's big, and he speaks a gargling language that is neither Centaurian nor Seian, and that he either has bluish-black ankles or wore a bluish-black skin suit. And now he's got a bad bite on the ankle. I drew blood."

"You usually do," Missy said with some pride. "But whoever he is, where could he have come from? We're a thousand miles from mainland Centaurus and almost as far from what they usually call the Outer Islands."

"That's the first thing I wondered about, too. It isn't as though there were helicopters and ocean liners and submarines all around as there are on Terra. Centaurus doesn't have that kind of technology and if there was a Terran helicopter around we'd have heard it."

"A sailboat?" Missy suggested.

Sibyl shook her head and remembered to start cutting up the crinkly greens and tangy strips of ribbon grass that

made such good salad. "I doubt seriously if one of those flimsy Centaurian pleasure boats could get this far, even in a calm sea, and it isn't always calm. Did you find the salad oil? I spent two hours yesterday pressing it out of bluette hips."

"Yes. I'll never get used to Terran food again. Although the thought of a really good steak . . . Mother, it *couldn't* have been one of the natives. They have pale skins with those little scales and anyhow they don't eat anything but shellfish and vegetables and they're so gentle and peaceful."

"I once knew a vegetarian who beat his wife with a rusty steering rod. He was a used car dealer. But I agree with you about the natives. Anyway, they're all small except the twins, and they take after their father."

Missy lifted the bowl of lantern pods off the tripod with a folded cloth. "Why don't I get two spoons and we can eat right out of the bowls and won't have to go in and do the table."

Sibyl nodded, ate slowly and then said, "One thing, Missy. Until we find out who or what attacked me and why, I think neither of us should go off alone. You might be safe in the woods, but I don't feel certain about it."

"Aren't we going to go over and ask King Seia about this? If there's been any stranger around, he'll know about it. And the natives seem to pick up things from the lunga, I don't know how. I think the lunga all start keening when anything unusual occurs. They knew when we were coming in the helicopter."

"We can't go over to the village until the festival's over. The State Department is especially nervous about observing local customs. And really, this is an awfully delicate job I have. The only reason I got to escort Darld back to Seia, when his mother decided to stay in Hammond, was that Darld liked me. Otherwise they would have sent some high-

powered anthropologist or something, since this is the Seians' first contact with civilization. You can't count Stuart Grant twenty-five years ago, because all he did was teach Lia English and knock her up."

"King Seia ought to remember him."

Sibyl shook her head. "Lia's father was a different King Seia, not even related. There aren't any family units here, unless you count the eggings because they nest together. The kingship goes to the best-looking Seian when the old king dies or gets too ugly. But I've begun to wonder a little about this festival—it's all male, which is another reason we can't go. I believe it's something like Rites of the Sea. I couldn't make out much about it. Your Seian is better than mine—maybe you could. And how's the coffee situation?" Sibyl picked up the bowls and spoons and brought them over to the spring. She picked up a handful of golden sand and rubbed it around in the lantern pod bowl until the light grease was gone and the water ran smooth over the blue clay. Then the salad bowl.

"I used the Instaheat," Missy said, handing Sibyl a cup of hot coffee. "Dripped coffee is something I miss, too." She took the salad bowl and dipped up water to pour over the embers of the cooking fire. "As I understand it, the Rites of the Sea is some kind of puberty ceremony."

Sibyl frowned. "But the Seians seem to have almost no sexual orientation."

Missy sat down with her coffee. "I agree. It's a development of some sort they're celebrating, but I don't know what. King Seia, when I said something to him about it, either thought it was too obvious to explain, or didn't want to explain it. So of course I didn't press him. I certainly don't want to be the one to louse up Terran-Seian relations."

"Development?" Sibyl echoed.

"I don't know. Maybe they're old enough to paddle the royal pleasure boat now, or something."

Sibyl set her cup on a flat rock and got a cigar out of her pocket, lit it thoughtfully. "I doubt if it's anything that simple. Because whatever it is, Darld didn't know what was going to happen. He and the others were happy and excited about it, though of course it's almost impossible to talk to any of them except Darld. I wish we were going faster teaching them Terran. And the Centaurians are going to be mad because we aren't teaching the twins Centaurian." Sibyl blew a smoke ring and watched Happy jump off the fern tree trying to catch it. "I wish I could teach them Greek while I've got them here to myself. But can you imagine trying to explain *Oedipus Rex* to people whose only concept of parent is a bit of eggshell worn around their necks? Well, I'm going to spend the afternoon checking variant readings in Strabo."

Missy picked up the bowls and spoon and her cup. "I want to take a nap. Then maybe I'll work on the Seian dictionary. But we're going to lose a lot of work if you have to erase some of it to have room for your reports. Maybe Steer will have some tape with him when he comes."

"If he comes," Sibyl said. "He'll have to get hold of a helicopter and steal the only chart from the State Department and get by the vigilantes of the State Department and Grant Lines."

Missy grinned. "I'll put my money on Steer anytime."

Missy was already asleep when Sibyl switched off her reading flash. Alpha Centauri's brilliant companion star, Lhadi, shone tinsel light brighter than moonlight, and Sibyl lay down on the seamoss mattress to be rocked to sleep by the sea sound that came faintly through the deep silence. She dozed off, and waked up later in alarm. What

was it? Something wrong. She sat up and the sound came again. Sibyl frowned. Only the keening of a lunga above the faint sea surge. It must have reminded her sleeping mind of this morning, when the lunga had signaled her to the sea. Perhaps she shouldn't have taken the attack so casually, Sibyl thought. An attack on a dark street of Old Town in Hammond was a mere incident, and Sibyl knew how to defend herself. But here on Seia, with no police force behind her and no civilization for a thousand miles and no possible explanation . . . but how do you fortify a branch hut?

Well, tomorrow she'd see King Seia and the twins would be back, and they were at least big and strong and would be around all the time. She and Missy . . . Sibyl gasped and leaped up. Surely it was a trick of the light. There hadn't been a sound, except the lunga just now . . .

She got up and went over to Missy's bed. And breathed a sigh of relief. Her daughter was lumped under the bedclothes, with the sheet over her . . . Sibyl reached to pull it back and went cold all over. There was no one there. Missy had lumped up the bedclothes and sneaked out.

Deliberately?

Why?

CHAPTER 2

Sibyl wrapped quickly into her green dress and walked outside. Lhadi blazed low in the sky, gilding everything with its yellowish-silver light, glinting on the glimpses of sea beyond the wood. The lunga keened again and Sibyl, in fear, walked toward the sea. The beach had been rippled smooth by the night breeze. Her footprints of the morning were gone, and there were no others. No sign of Missy.

Then where? Could she have wanted to sneak out and observe the Rites of the Sea? Was something going to happen that Missy knew about and Sibyl didn't? There was a time when Missy would have told her. But things had never been the same between them since that incident on the ship with the suave, fraudulent-looking Cide Girais.

Sibyl started off through the star-misted woods, toward the Seian village. Perhaps Missy was concerned about something she thought might be going to happen to the twins. Maybe there was some sort of initiation that the Seians could endure, but which would be dangerous for the half-human Grant twins—say having their heads dunked under water for ten minutes in some kind of baptism. *This* was no time to be thinking of such a thing. But it had seemed so casual when King Seia first mentioned it, and the twins took it for granted . . .

Sibyl walked on. The little, batlike phosphorescent night birds lit up the trees here and there with their pinks and yellows and a bell tree tinkled softly in the breeze. The

smell of crushed herbs rose as she walked on the little scented plants that carpeted the woods. Finally the woods thinned and Sibyl almost stepped on a nest of Seian children, who always slept in eggling bunches wherever they happened to be when they got sleepy. Sibyl was glad they were this far in from the sea, and wished it were culturally proper for her to suggest that someone patrol the beaches in the evening and shoo in those who slept too near the sea and sometimes got eaten by the strangler eel.

Before Sibyl were the straggly Seian huts, all shut with panels of rushes and silent in the starlight. No doubt the women were inside. To the left would be the King's Beach, where the festival would be held. But it was so *silent*.

Sibyl went on through the woods that thinned into beach, jumped the cooking pit that still smelled of burned gourds and sea melons, and went on to King Seia's dark hut. Nothing. She ventured out onto the beach before the royal hut. There was something dark near the water's edge. Phosphorescent water spiders crawled over it, glowing greenly. Burned-out torches. She leaned down and smelled the rancid bluette oil they used. They were cold.

The sand was tossed up, footsteps all over from the forest to the sea. But no Seians. No twins. No Missy. The sea swirled a ruffle of foam along the beach. An arrow fish reeled through the air and fell with a light splash back into the water.

"Missy!" Sibyl called. "Darld!" And felt suddenly very cold and empty and alone in the universe. A sign, Sibyl realized immediately, that she needed a drink and a cigar. What's happened, she said to herself firmly, is that the festival has moved to some other part of the island, or even out in boats somewhere. And Missy might have watched and then gone back, or else was still roaming around the island look-

ing for the festival. And all this mystery would clear up in the morning.

She started for home with the image of a Gin and 'gin and a good cigar planted firmly in mind, and took an oblique path to join the main trail through the woods. A little way along, she stopped. She *did* hear something. Or almost heard something. She frowned, began to walk very silently and cautiously toward what she thought was a sound. Maybe it was just a distant confabulation of the bat birds. Or a Hant disturbed in his sleep and waking up to grouse, like Happy did.

Sibyl stopped beneath a lantern pod tree, with the faintly glistening lanterns hanging from the twigs almost like drops of blood. She heard the stealthy crackle of underbrush, muted as the sound of fire, and a whispering of voices. One of them was Missy's. The other—Sibyl crept forward, holding her breath. The other—she couldn't tell. An alien voice. She stepped through the slender branches of a bell flower bush, saw something turn and run through the woods—so lightly it might have been a shadow across the starlight, or a swaying bush. But its steps crackled.

Missy stood there, golden in the moonlight, her tangerine tunic glowing and a flame flower in her hair. She turned as though to run and then stopped herself. "Honestly, Mother, you frightened me. I hardly expected anybody to be wandering around in the woods at this time of night."

"Who was that you were talking to? And your hair! It's soaking wet."

"I wasn't talking to anybody. Except maybe to myself. A Hant ran by. Maybe that's what you saw. And there were some bat birds a minute ago. Anyhow, since when do I have to do all this explaining to you?"

Sibyl sighed. "Since never. Let's go on home and get your hair rinsed and dried off. Naturally I'm worried to

think of you going swimming in the sea at night—both because of strangler eels and because I was attacked by something from the sea this morning. But we'll forget it, if you want to. Only remember that if there is any danger, it involves all of us—you, me, even perhaps the twins. And our mission here is a delicate one. If you know or suspect anything . . ."

Missy was leading the way through the woods, wringing out her wet hair as she went. "I don't know anything that might be dangerous to anyone. If I have any problems, they concern only me. I think . . . I think soon you won't need to worry any more." This sadly, perhaps. Tiredly.

They were silent all the way home, Sibyl racking her brains to think of some way to get through to her daughter, and finally giving up. She wished she'd not let Missy know she was there, and had chased after whoever—or whatever—Missy had been talking to.

"I'll warm some water to rinse the salt out of your hair," Sibyl said, as she lighted her flash in the hut. "Otherwise you'll never be able to comb it in the morning."

But Missy just shook her head and went wearily to sleep as she was. Sibyl had a Gin and 'gin and didn't enjoy it. She watched Missy's slumbering form in the starlight, until Lhadi set and the room was dark. She tried to think but she was too tired. She set the rush doors across the openings so if Missy tried to go out again she'd hear, and then got out of her dress and fell instantly to sleep.

It was the sound of a helicopter that waked her up the next morning. At first Sibyl couldn't believe it, and shook her head to clear her ears. It had been so long since she'd heard any machine sound. But that *was* it. Steer! Missy still slept the deep sleep of the young. Sibyl sneaked to the door and removed the rushes so Missy wouldn't know she'd set them. Then Sibyl ran out, waved joyously at the

heli, suddenly remembered she didn't have a stitch on, and came back in.

She set the coffee water into the Instaheat, looked quickly through her clothes and decided the most effective thing to welcome Steer in was her Madage's bathing suit. It had been six weeks since she'd seen a human man, or even a Centaurian, and now it wasn't just any man, but Steerforth Cade, a lovely furry animal of a man, and a friend, too, which she badly needed now. She hauled out the mirror, realizing that she'd hardly looked in it since they'd been dropped off on Seia by that prig from the State Department. Her hair had suffered from the sea and sun. She hastily trimmed the worst of the split ends and brushed some fresh bluette oil into it until the natural gray and black stripes fell into place. Then she touched up the edges of her green eyes with just a bit of green color—not bad now—and pressed on green button earrings. Pale orange lipstick to go with her tan. She made up her large mouth full size, because Steer said he liked it. Knee rouge would look a bit studied. Native rush sandals were perfect. Sibyl decided she was even slimmer than she had been, though her weight never went over a hundred and ten. The native food was short on starches and fats.

Sibyl stirred her coffee, swallowed it fast. Was Steer circling, looking for a place to land, or did he already know what part of the island they were on? Sibyl picked up her wrap-around dress and ran out to the beach to signal with it. The heli was maybe a mile out at sea, but turned toward her.

Sibyl watched it land. Steer got out and Sibyl was about to run and hug him when Victoria Lansing appeared at his side, radiated blond glamour, hastily stepped in front of him and kissed him roundly on the mouth. "That was for a beautiful landing," she said. She glanced over to see the effect on

Sibyl and added, "and everything . . . Oh, hello, Sergeant Blue. Do you always wear earrings when you go out for an early morning swim?"

Sibyl grimaced, went up and shook Steer's hand. "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

Steer was blushing bright red—something Sibyl hadn't thought him capable of. "Swell of Victoria," he explained, "getting hold of the helicopter for me, from her father. And the map."

"Coming along, too," Sibyl added, aping Steer's abbreviated phraseology. "So helpful. Sheer act of charity. You won't mind that Darld isn't here, will you, Victoria?"

"What!" Victoria screamed. Her fashionable purple mouth was painted so thin she could make a perfect circle with it.

"Just wanted to see your reaction. Not that I thought you were a fortune hunter, darling. He'll be along later. They're having a Rites of the Sea festival on the other side of the island. You'll be interested. I think it's something pubic."

"Don't be disgusting," Victoria said.

"Hi!" said another voice, and Pugh climbed down, a big grin splitting his triangular young face. He was sporting the beginnings of an absolutely endearing blond mustache, and Sibyl gave him the hug she had prepared for Steer.

"Boy!" she said. "You're just what Missy needs. She's been broody and . . . wait. She'll kill me if I let you all come in before she has her hair combed. Let me run ahead and wake her and then I'll get us coffee and something to eat all around."

Sibyl ran to the hut, feeling wonderful and relieved at seeing people, even if they did include Victoria. Whenever two or three are gathered together, civilization is restored. Only now she'd have to worry about Darld. Except that here he had his fellow twins to play with, and even Victoria's

underhanded methods would probably avail her little . . . unless those *were* puberty ceremonies . . .

"Missy!" she cried, shaking her daughter by the shoulders. "Guess who's here!"

Missy looked up groggily. Her eyes were red and a little glassy, as though she might be coming down with a cold.

"Darld and the other twins?"

"Not yet. Steer and Pugh. And Victoria.

"Victoria!" Missy sat up. "Has she got her claws into Pugh?"

"Not yet. But I'd work fast, if I were you. I expect he comes third, whenever Darld and Steer aren't around. She likes to get in a lot of practice. And they have to be nice to her. She wrangled the heli from her father, and probably the map, too. He's with the State Department, and I expect he's got his eye on a convenient family connection with Grant Lines and the Grant millions."

"But Darld! It's so absurd." Missy was holding her head now and looking as though she were trying to remember something. "My hair," she said, trying to run her fingers through it, and finding it sticky and still damp and smelly with sea water. "I can hear them coming."

Sibyl handed her the heavy, split-toothed comb. "Do you feel sick? You don't look well."

"I'm fine. Steer! Glad to see you. Mother needs distracting."

"Left our gear in the heli," Steer said, coming in with a sloppy package in his hand. "Thought we'd set up a tent near the beach for me and Pugh. Maybe Victoria could stay here with you."

"Let's you and me go hunt grilch eggs on the beach," Sibyl said. "They're a bit briny, but better than the freeze-dried hen eggs."

"Brought you a present," Steer said and handed her the

package, which turned out to be a beautiful, authentic beefsteak, drippingly defrosted but still cold. "Have to eat it right away, though." He followed Sibyl outside and held the steak for her until she set a grill on the tripod and started a fire under it. "About Victoria," he said uncomfortably.

"Never mind," Sibyl said with a laugh. "I understand, really I do. It's just funny to see you embarrassed. Anyway, if your wife doesn't get jealous, why should I?"

"Both remarkable women," Steer said, and sat down looking happier. "Thing is, Victoria could get me in a lot of trouble with Grant Lines if they found out I came here. She'd get off with a reprimand, and not even that if she ends up as Mrs. Grant, but I'd get fired—and there isn't anywhere I could get another job as navigator. So . . . keeping Victoria happy is the price I have to pay for getting to see you."

"I'll try to be worth it," Sibyl said. "Gee, I'm glad to see you. Just because you're you, but also because I've managed to develop a set of problems even here in paradise. Yesterday . . ."

Victoria came running around the hut at that moment and stopped, breathless, her plum-colored eyes and purple mouth both absolutely round. "I was going back to the heli to get my purse," she began, and then stopped for another breath. "And I saw Darld. He came swimming up onto the beach and I said, 'Hello Darld, remember me?' and he just laughed. And then I saw another Darld. And another. And another . . . eleven. Exactly alike."

"You must have miscounted," Sibyl said calmly, and blew at the fire. "There are twelve of them, counting Darld."

"Twelve! I counted eleven, and eleven is enough." Victoria sat down in the stick chair that Steer vacated for her. She dabbed nervously at the disarray of her mist of blond

hair. "What would it be like, to be married to someone like that? You'd never be sure which of them was the right one."

"You could have him tattooed with dollar signs," Sibyl suggested, and grinned at the twins as they came roaring around the side of the hut. They were blowing enormous bubbles with seabark resin. Two of them swarmed up the fern tree and another sat down and began ringing the little bells of the baby bell tree. The others started shying pebbles at the balloon pod that had caught on the roof, and was trembling in the breeze. They certainly didn't look any the worse for their two nights of Sea Rites, whatever the ceremonies had been. Well, that was one worry out of the way.

One of the twins—probably Siln, he was usually the one who spoke up—came and shook Sibyl's shoulder and grinned expectantly. She looked up at him, and, putting aside the fact that she knew the twins were still half children, she saw for a moment what Victoria saw when she looked at them. A strapping man about twenty-five years old, six foot two, with what looked like brown curly hair but was really a sort of comb, and silvery scales that were delicate and differed little from skin. Handsome, without question. But Siln also wore the native garment, which sort of spoiled the general effect. It was a kind of pleated peplum of pinkish molefish skins which hung down straight from shoulders to knees and looked ridiculously like a baby dress. And of course there was the bit of leathery eggshell they all wore on a string around their necks.

"Lezon?" Siln boomed. "Cookie?"

"My god!" Victoria cried.

"No lesson today," Sibyl told Siln, speaking very slowly and clearly and then repeating it in the best Seian she could muster. "But I will give everyone a cookie." Later she could talk to Darld about what the Rites of the Sea involved. It bothered her that so many things had been going on at once.

The festival. Her attack on the beach. Missy's meeting with the stranger in the woods. The arrival of Steer and the others in the heli. Surely it wasn't *all* coincidence.

The fire under the tripod was burning into slumber and she laid the steak on the grill and went in to get exactly twelve of the slightly sweetish biscuits Darld liked so much, and that had taken up half her luggage allowance from Terra. It had been the best thing she could think of to bring the twins, and she'd been right about it.

She stood behind the hut, while Victoria sat with her compact out repairing her complexion and waiting to find out which twin was Darld. "Ten, eleven," Sibyl counted, and no one else came. "Darld?" she called, and began to feel uneasy. The twins always stayed together. They even still nested together at night. "Darld!" Somehow she usually knew which one was Darld, even if he didn't say anything, and she was immediately sure Darld was the one missing.

"Where's Darld?" she asked in Seian, and Siln, who had taken his cookie up the fern tree, answered in a stream of Seian that Sibyl could catch no meaning from at all. She collared the nearest passing twin, made him stand still and look at her and asked, "Where's Darld?"

"With God," was the startling answer.

"Dead!" Sibyl said in horror.

The twin laughed heartily. "No. There." He pointed toward the sea.

She wasn't getting through to him, but at least Darld seemed to be all right, wherever he was. She'd ask King Seia about it later. Sibyl turned the steak, which was sizzling gloriously and melting her insides to pure water. If there hadn't been anyone around she'd have eaten it raw. But the twins were beginning to back away from it and hold their noses. "Go play," she told them. "We'll have a lesson tomorrow."

Sibyl went in the hut and found Missy sitting on the side of her cot. She was smiling tiredly at Pugh, who sat on the floor hugging his angular legs and admiring her, but her hair was still tangled and she had a puzzled look on her face. Sibyl felt her forehead worriedly. It was cool. Almost cold.

"Missy, are you well enough to lend a hand? We need coffee all around and some salad greens and we'd better whip up some of the dried potatoes. Pugh, would you bring whatever you have in the way of eating utensils? We didn't exactly expect company to drop in."

Pugh unfolded, saluted, and was gone. Missy stood up, shook her head as though to clear it, and began hastily to comb the rest of the tangles out of her luxuriant hair.

A stream of hilarious laughter filled the air and Victoria screamed. "Get it out of here! Steer! Save me!"

Sibyl went to the back door to enjoy the idiotic look on Victoria's face and threw a pack of dried beef into her lap. "Here. Toss Happy this. It's the only thing that'll make him stop. And try to love him. He's cute."

"The twins got back all right?" Missy asked.

"All but Darld. He's disappeared. As soon as I've eaten I'm going over to tackle King Seia about it."

"Oh, no!" Missy said, and sat down on her cot with her face in her hands.

"Don't get upset yet," Sibyl said. "Maybe this is the age they start breaking up the nests. I don't know. But I also want to ask King Seia if there have been strange boats around or anything. The man that attacked me had to come from *somewhere*."

"Yeah," Missy agreed dully, and began to move around doing things. "You do the dressing and the steak and I'll do the coffee and pick us some salad and put on water for the potatoes. Company, yet!"

"Aren't you glad to see Pugh?"

Missy looked at Sibyl a moment, as though her mother were someone she'd never seen before. "Sure. This just isn't the morning I'd pick for people to drop in. That's all."

Sibyl went out, dipped up a pitcher of water for Missy and turned the steak as she went by. The twins were nowhere in sight so Victoria had her chair pulled close to Steer and was bobbing her expensive fringette eyelashes at him.

"Don't go far to pick the greens," Sibyl said, handing Missy the pitcher of water. Then, unable to resist what she knew would be a useless plea, she took Missy gently by the shoulders and said, "Please, darling. Something is wrong. Please tell me what it is and I swear I'll understand."

Missy looked for a split second like she might, as though she desperately wanted to confide in Sibyl. Then she shrugged and smiled and said, "Oh, Mother. You've just been away from civilization too long."

Perhaps she had. She kept finding herself treating Missy like an infant. She'd never done that before. But then Missy had never behaved like this before. Which of them had started it?

Pugh came in with the dishes and a cup of something and said, "Will you *look* what I've found!"

Sibyl frowned into the cup. "It looks remarkably like sea water."

"It is." Pugh grinned and Sibyl wondered how Missy could resist that absolutely adorable little mustache. "Now look again. See those little orange dots? They're chryseum thalasseum."

"How lovely. Sea gold. I suppose they're gold because there's no classical word for orange."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. After they metamorphose they're chryseum chersaium."

"Land gold. What a delightful way to express things.

You're going to make a wonderful scientist, Pugh. I'd forgotten that was your interest. You're here on an undergraduate grant in marine biology, aren't you?"

"That's why I'm on Centaurus. I was supposed to be working on the seacoast near Llonan City. But it doesn't have the same kind of biological attractions as Seia," he said, leering gleefully at Missy.

"O.K., Lancelot," Missy said, with a little of her old flair, "bring the cups over and put a spoonful of this in each of them. And make sure you don't get that sea water mixed up with it."

"Don't worry, Guinevere. These little fellows are a real find. This is the first time they've ever been seen to occur outside a Centaurian's blood stream. They're a disease."

"Bacteria?" Sibyl asked.

"No, no." Pugh held a spoon of coffee over the third cup and forgot it while he talked. "Curiously enough, they're sea animals. They're round and they have flagella. Free swimming. They live in the Centaurian pulmonary aorta as they would live in the sea. Blood is much like sea water—for the very good reason that we—and Centaurians—evolved from marine life. But chryseum thalasseum is a sea animal and ought to live in the sea. Only it was never found in a free living form—until just now when I found it."

"In the cup," Missy yelled at Pugh, who was absently putting the spoon of coffee in his mouth.

"I don't like the idea of this disease," Sibyl said. "What does it do?"

"Well," Pugh said, holding coffee over another cup, "we've never had a human with the disease. And frequently it doesn't do anything. Sometimes the eggs are found in Centaurian blood, and they never hatch out. Sometimes the larvae—like the orange dots—hatch out, swim around and die off before they get big enough to cause occlusions. But

sometimes they undergo metamorphosis. Then they affect the circulatory system, the Centaurian can't breathe, and dies. You actually see them crawling out of his mouth and ears. Then they mate and if you put them near a bowl of sea water, they crawl into it and lay their eggs and drown at the same time. But you see, the larvae ordinarily don't live long, and they're seasonal—or seem to be—so I'm awfully lucky to have found them. And that's not all that's interesting about them. They—"

"It's burning," Victoria called from outside.

Sibyl sighed and went out to the grill. "Why don't you turn it over yourself? You're going to make somebody a hell of a wife, if you can't even turn over a steak."

"At home we get all our meals through the Home Waiter Service. I could dial my own breakfast before I was three," Victoria said defensively. "And on Centaurus we have native help." She took out her purse thermos and poured herself and Steer another drink. "Sorry there isn't enough for you," she said to Sibyl with a charming apologetic smile.

"Here, let me help, Sibyl," Steer said, tossing off the thimbleful of what smelled like good bourbon. "Wife's got me used to working when I'm home."

"O.K. Missy's going to bring some salad greens in a moment. You mutilate them with this Stone Age knife and mess them around in this bowl. By the way, when did you all get here?"

Steer looked surprised. "Didn't you see us land? Standing there waving that rug."

"That was my green wrap-around dress, you idiot. But I've been sort of wondering if you might possibly have landed on some other part of the island and spent the night there and then come circling about this morning. Or something."

"We flew all night," Victoria said. "I stretched out on the gear and Pugh and Steer took turns."

Sibyl laughed nastily and Victoria turned pink. "It must be awfully coarsening, doing police work."

"It is. I wish I'd gone into something more refined, like fortune hunting."

"Something's on your mind, Sibyl," Steer said, looking a little worried. That is, the little line by his mouth deepened. "Why do you ask that? You'd have heard the heli."

"Several things are on my mind," Sibyl said. "I'll tell you about them later. Missy, Steer gets the salad greens and let's hurry. The steak's done already."

Victoria settled her plate on her lap and looked over at Missy with a malicious smile. "Well, when are you going to ask me about him?"

"Who?" Missy asked, cutting away at her meat as though it were the only thought on her mind.

"Your dark and handsome Gide Girais. He came to my father's first diplomatic party for me. And I found out interesting things."

"I couldn't care less," Missy said.

"Me, either," Pugh said, to let Missy know he wasn't holding any grudges against her. "They ought to keep those lecherous old goats locked—"

"Now, wait," Sibyl interrupted. "Some women like lecherous old goats. Victoria, I can see you're going to come unmeshed if you don't talk about him. Go ahead."

"Well," Victoria said, excitedly swallowing a mouthful of steak, "he isn't human. And he certainly isn't a lawnmower salesman from Dubuque like he was registered on the passenger list."

"Then what *is* he?" Sibyl asked. "I didn't see any scales. Of course he was mostly covered up with that swashy maroon suit."

"He used that ointment to shrink scales. They sell it in Hammond Space Port."

Sibyl nodded. "Scaley Moe sells it. But almost no one buys the stuff. Centaurians think they're handsome the way they are."

"Gide Girais is a Centaurian," said Victoria. "But from somewhere in the North. Nobody's ever finished exploring even mainland Centaurus, you know. For all their famous folk culture and what not, father says they have no native technology at all. And ours hasn't really gotten started here. Anyway, Gide had a long discussion with Father about whether Terra would like to establish diplomatic relations with another Centaurian country, and a lot of other things Father said I wouldn't understand," Victoria finished, looking at Steer with helpless charm.

"Could if you tried," Steer said with a sincere desire to help. "I don't think you're all that dumb . . . I don't want to play magnetopock right now, Darld."

"That's Siln," Sibyl said. "I only wish it were Darld." She was awkwardly translating Steer's statement into Seian for Siln when Victoria came up to Siln with a smile, took the game and indicated a grassy spot under the bell tree. "Me play magnetopock," she said.

"Dear Lord!" Sibyl roared. "Please don't teach him baby talk. And don't . . . Oh, never mind." For Siln was delightfully showing Victoria how to press the levers. Another worry.

Sibyl finished her breakfast, which seemed like dinner, and she felt as though she'd been up all day, and lit a cigar. She glanced over at Missy's pale, tired face. She hated to leave Missy looking so ill, but she had to see King Seia right away, and find out where Darld was. And who could have attacked her on the beach. And who could have been meeting Missy in the midnight woods.

Sibyl thought of little Darld. Of how lost he had felt on

Terra, and how little his mother had cared for him, and how Scaley Moe had sent him to her, and the trust he'd built up in her.

"See you all later," Sibyl said, and started through the woods.

CHAPTER 3

King Seia was trying on arm bands when Sibyl arrived. He was a large, portly Seian with the bluish comb of middle age. His thick nosebone was heavily scaled, though shedding badly, and he had the longest claws in the tribe and was quite vain of them.

"Ah!" he said in whistley Seian, and extended his claws so that she could see he had used the nail polish she had presented him with.

"Very beautiful," Sibyl said, and did a knee bend before him Seian fashion, though on her it came out rather awkwardly. The expression of ineffable vanity on his snouty face sent Sibyl into a hysterical coughing fit, though she was certainly used to it.

"And this?" he asked, pointing to his arm band, carved of ocher lantern tree wood and inlaid with luminescent shell.

"Delightful beyond words."

He removed the arm band and replaced it with one set with the flat, orange pearls of the sand mussel. "Or this?"

"Joyously handsome," Sibyl commented and then noticed with a sinking heart that he had a stack of about fifteen, all of which would have to be reviewed. It would be discourteous for her to distract his Decorative Highness with irrelevant questions at such a moment of decision. She began to marshal an array of appropriate adjectives.

After the arm band session—he ended up with the orange pearl—King Seia insisted that Sibyl share his luncheon—very

briny sea melon boiled in sea water, greens fried in well-aged bluet oil, finished off with grilch eggs rolled in a very bitter wild honey, eaten shell and all. It took some time to chew the shell, and this had to be accompanied by much eye rolling and lip smacking.

At last Sibyl could say the stock phrase, "To speak of something of greatest insignificance, having nothing to do with his Highness's decorativeness—Darld has not returned. Do you know where he is?"

King Seia carefully licked the grease off his claws, one at a time. "With God," he finally answered. "How do you think I would look with your mouth grease? On my eyelids, of course."

"Very handsome," Sibyl answered. "I will bring you some next time I come. But I don't know what you mean when you say 'with God.'"

"Perhaps," King Seia said kindly, remembering to talk slowly so that she would understand, "you are not very intelligent."

"Perhaps," Sibyl agreed. "Could your Decorative Highness explain it to me? Or is it forbidden to know?"

"Everybody knows," he answered. "The men go under the sea at season for the Rites of the Sea. The women do not go because they must stay to do the work of the village. We stay under for a period of time, and dance at the shrine of burning pearls. Sometimes the God appears. When it is time we leave the sea. This time the God took Darld. It is very simple."

"Then Darld is dead. Drowned."

"Certainly not."

"He can live under water?" Sibyl had seen the twins swim, but they didn't seem to be able to stay under water any longer than she could. Seians frequently drowned when their frail little canoes capsized.

"The God will provide for him."

Sibyl's heart sank. "Was he alive—moving and everything—when you saw him last?"

"Certainly. It was the season. Then we could no longer breathe so we returned."

"But what about Darld? If you could no longer stay under the water then he . . ."

"Stupid!" King Seia said, and began to look very bored.

"All right, then. How do you know when it is the season for going under the sea?" Sibyl was searching around in her mind for an explanation, even the wildest, but it wouldn't come.

"Oh, anyone knows," King Seia said, with a lethargic lowering of his reptilian eyelids. "Even the women. A sleepiness comes over the mind. And now, speaking of sleepiness, I was up with the Rites of the Sea last night, and I must have my sleep for beauty. A king has his responsibilities."

"Of course," Sibyl said, remembering the admonishments of the State Department and controlling herself. She accepted with writhings of delight the gift he handed her—a sturdy, practical nose ring of opalescent shell. "One more thing, your Decorative Highness. Has there been any strange person or creature around the island or the sea? Yesterday or before?"

"No. There would be a numerous keening from the lunga at a certain place. My people would know. And now . . . the king must sleep." And with that King Seia broke into a whistle snore.

Sibyl walked outside, glanced at a group of Seians and decided it would be useless to try to talk to them. For one thing, they dissolved in giggles at her mere approach, and for another they found it almost impossible to talk slowly enough for her. She walked on down to the beach to the spot where the blackened, smelly torches were still piled on

the sand. Masses of brown, roachy-looking insects crawled over them now, no doubt after the remains of the bluetie oil. Was Darld somewhere under that immensity of giggly little waves? Or was it a trick of some kind? Someone pretending to be a God perhaps had swum off with Darld to hide . . . where?

Sibyl saw something drifting up to the beach in the swell. A movement. A body? Sibyl rushed down to the water's edge. It was a Seian, swimming feebly, exhausted. Sibyl waded in and helped him out. He sprawled on the beach, gasping, and said something Sibyl didn't understand.

"Were you drowning?" Sibyl asked.

"No. Playing with lunga fish too long. Couldn't breathe more under water."

"But how did you breathe at all under water?" Sibyl looked at his ears and mouth. His neck looked wrinkled and creased—but of course he'd been in the water a long time. What should he have if he could live for a time in the water? And if he couldn't, what was the story of the Rites of the Sea about? "Is there a place to breathe down there? Some sort of . . ." Sibyl didn't know the word for cave. Besides, how could there be an under water cave with no water in it? Would it be possible that . . .

At that moment a voice hailed her in Seian and Siln came running up. "For Missy!" he called. "Come quick!"

Sibyl ran. "What's happened?"

"Sick."

Oh, God. She hadn't been well this morning and Sibyl had left her. Fortunately, Steer was here with the heli and they could get back to the mainland and get medical help. But it would take all night. If it were an emergency . . . and what about Darld?

Sibyl was covered with sweat and panting by the time she got to the clearing where the hut was. Victoria, looking

fragile and cool, was fetching water from the spring and Steer and Pugh came out when they heard Sibyl coming.

"Slow up!" Steer said, catching her in his arms. "It isn't *that* bad. It's just she's acting a little funny and I didn't want to give her anything from the medical supplies until you got here. Can't figure out what to give her, anyway."

Sibyl took the cup of coffee Pugh had ready for her. "Acting *funny*? No fever? No vomiting?"

"No. But we've got her in bed. Her eyes went funny and . . . come see for yourself."

Sibyl forced herself calm and went in. "Where?"

"Why, right . . ." Pugh began, and went over to the empty bed.

"*There!*" Victoria cried, pointing out to seaward side of the hut. "Running through the woods toward the sea. My God! She's running like something's after her."

But there was nothing after her. Nothing.

"Wait!" Sibyl called to Missy, and ran. Something about Missy's running, the way she held her tensed body, was frightening. She did look as though something were after her.

Missy reached the water and kept on running. When the water slowed her, she went over into it and began swimming. Sibyl was yards behind her still. "Get the twins!" Sibyl called to Pugh, as he came up beside her. Then Sibyl was in the shallow water, and it seemed to cling to her so that it was like trying to run in a dream, and she dove into the mild surf and began a swift Australian crawl. Missy was swimming furiously and wouldn't look back. Sibyl heard Steer calling something to Pugh, but she didn't want to take her eyes off her daughter.

The waves were low slopes, easy to swim on. But high enough so that Sibyl kept losing sight of Missy's hair, shin-

ing wet in the sunlight, trailing behind her in a swaying frond.

"Stop, Missy!" Sibyl's legs were catching badly in her gathered wrap-around, and she had to slow a moment to yank it off. Then she stroked to the top of the next wave, saw Missy far ahead, and began swimming as she had never swum before. If she lost her, in all that sea . . . Missy wasn't well. She should tire fast. But what was she *doing*? Was she delirious? Or was she purposely charging to her own death? But why? There had been things wrong lately, but surely nothing so desperate as to make her want to die. Then Sibyl remembered Missy saying, last night, "Soon I think you won't have to worry." What did that mean? That Missy had planned something?

Now Missy was slowing. And at last she looked back toward shore and saw her mother. An anguished, childlike plea twisted her face and then she said, "Don't worry. It's all right." And sank under the water.

Sibyl dove after her, feeling and looking hopelessly about in the dirty-green gloom. There was a shape ahead . . . Sibyl came up for air. She heard the whirring of a helicopter. Good for Steer! Under the water she went again, swimming toward Missy, who was surfacing now. But the dark form under the water wasn't Missy. Missy had surfaced and was screaming.

The dark form was the writhed coils of a strangler eel. Its head shot out of the water and aimed for Missy's frantic splashing. But before it could plunge, Sibyl leaped through the water toward it and seized the heavy coil where it emerged into the air. It was too big for her to fit her hands all the way around it, so she twisted her arms along the body and tried to sink her teeth into the leathery skin.

Then, as it turned its head toward her instead of Missy, Sibyl braced her feet against it and pushed off under water.

The head came down in a vicious plunge where her back had just been, and the strangler whipped its coils about in the water until he felt her. Sibyl struggled up toward the surface, her body screaming for air and life although she knew it was an almost useless struggle. It would be better to drown than to get slowly crushed, bone by bone, in the coils of the eel. Or worse, to get half-killed, and then eaten by those vicious little teeth.

Sibyl gulped a breath of air as the coils began dragging her down again. She had a glimpse of the helicopter above, and something swaying under it. Safer coming to her rescue? What could he do, except be the next victim? He didn't carry a gun, and a knife wouldn't be enough.

There was a stab of pain at the curve of her neck and shoulder, and the nauseating weight of the slimy head of the eel. She could smell its watery alienness. It was worse than the pain, the closeness of the reptilian slithering, the hungry, reasonless head. But she twisted her arms in it, digging her thumbs under the jaws where the skin was slack, tearing at the skin with her nails. It struggled harder, the coils beginning to crush slowly, and twisted its head away so that Sibyl couldn't grip it. She was under water again, could feel herself beginning to go black. She tried once more to grip her teeth and nails into the slippery flesh, but it was useless. Her agony became dark and unreal, her body became as nothing and she could feel the nothingness sliding over her whole mind, and she thought death was too easy, after all. Something so feared, so final, and it was going to be over so soon and all her life had been a prelude to this inconsequential fantasy.

Then suddenly the coils slipped free and Sibyl was still struggling, trying now only to find some meaning in her death. She breathed automatically as she floated to the surface, had a suffocating coughing fit, spewing up water,

pulling in air in horrible gasps that hurt her lungs. She went under and then felt arms around her and then there was air again and Steer said, "Can you hang on?"

"Yes," Sibyl said, not knowing if she could. She clung to Steer's back as he began the dizzying, swaying climb up the rope ladder to the hovering heli. "Missy," she said. Every time she tried to talk she started a coughing fit. She spit out water.

"The twins are on the way with a boat. As soon as I get you in the heli, Pugh's going to go down and start diving in his suit and the twins will be along to help. Now shut up."

"I'm all right now," Sibyl said, when Steer finished dressing the wound in her shoulder from the eel bite. "What did Missy say while I was with King Seia? What did she do? I can't understand what made her start running." Sibyl couldn't believe Missy was dead. It's the kind of thing that couldn't possibly be real. All that was real was an empty swaying in her stomach. Fear.

"Nothing that would help," Steer said. "Just looked funny and sleepy and wouldn't talk. I don't like that bite. It's deeper than it looks. Bleeds too much. I'll get you a drink."

Sibyl walked to the front opening of the hut. You could see glimpses of the sea and beach through the trees. You could also see Victoria with Siln cornered against a bank of creeping moss, showing him how to slide the pieces in a pocket puzzle she'd brought to seduce Darld with. Siln would do as well. Sibyl watched them worriedly. Perhaps Siln was marriageable age now—Seia had said *men* took part in the Rites of the Sea, and apparently this was the first time the twins had been allowed to.

Happy Hant was giggling in the fern tree, and Sibyl started laughing with him in spite of herself and thinking that somehow everything was going to turn out all right.

Furthermore, it was nice to think of Victoria's reaction when the creeping moss started to creep. Anyway, Sibyl decided, Victoria would improve Siln's English, if not his character.

"What is it you give that animal to make him stop?" Steer asked, handing Sibyl a drink and trying not to laugh. "Hell of a way for an animal to ask for food."

"Dried beef. I don't know what we're going to do when we run out of it. Die of hebephrenia I suppose. But you know, that laugh of his *does* something. If you notice, it touches off something in your mind that makes you a little bit happy no matter what. I believe that's why the natives call it a Happy Hant—not just because it laughs. I think it's a nice way to be fit enough to survive." Sibyl sat down on Missy's cot and sipped the Gin and 'gin and lit a cigar. Missy's alive, she thought. She *must* be. There's some answer to all this. Pugh will come back with her and then she can tell us.

Steer returned from feeding Happy, sat down on the bed next to Sibyl. "Know what?" he said. "We're alone." He held Sibyl's face in his hands and her arms slid around him. Tears slid out of her eyes as she felt his heavy lips on hers, and every emotion she'd had for the last few days turned into a desperate longing for him. She felt herself go limp, ran her hands across his back to feel the pulsing of his muscles, heard in the darkness of her mind the very rushing of his blood.

"Oh, God," she said. "Oh, dear God, how I've missed you." She watched as Steer started stripping off his shirt, remembered the awkward power of his muscles, knew the lines of his body.

There was a girlish scream from outside, and running. "God damn it!" Sibyl said, sat up quickly and retrieved her cigar. Steer arranged his shirt, reached over and drained Sibyl's drink and made a face.

"Get it off me!" Victoria cried, rushing in and shaking her arm which was shaggy with creeping moss.

Sibyl smiled. "It's just a harmless parasite," she said. "Though you will look a little unusual when it spreads to your face."

Victoria's hands flew to her face, her eyes bugged and Steer caught her as she fainted.

"Bit much," Steer said, laying Victoria down carefully and going for water. "You make that up?"

"I'm afraid so," Sibyl said. "But don't you think she's a bit much?"

Victoria came to almost immediately and Sibyl peeled the moss off her arm and tossed it outside. "If you leave it in, it crawls all over the house," she explained.

"You might have warned me!" Victoria said. "What a joke." She was pink with fury and she took the glass of water Steer brought and threw it in Sibyl's face.

Sibyl wiped it off and laughed. "I didn't know you were having hot flushes or I wouldn't have done it."

"Steer!" Victoria commanded. "You can take me home."

"And leave Siln?" Sibyl said. "Or Darld, if we find him?"

"I can come back, but I can see to it that *you* don't. I've had enough from you. The State Department should know you've let something happen to Darld and you're incompetent. And furthermore you've imported a boy friend and you sit around necking when you're supposed to be on duty--of all disgusting things. My father has a lot of influence."

"Sure. Maybe he can get you my job, and wouldn't that set things up nice for you? Sorry, Victoria, but you can't leave. I've got to have Steer and Pugh here until we find Missy and Darld. I may need them, and King Seia doesn't object to my having a boy friend, so I'm not making a cultural disturbance."

"We're not going to stay here to clean up a mess you made. First Darld, and then Missy . . ." Victoria's eyes widened with a sudden thought. "That little vamp. I'll bet . . . I'll bet she's inveigled him into some kind of elopement. That would mean . . . isn't Darld the eldest, or something?"

"He's the handsomest, which on Seia means he gets to tell the others what to do. And I wish to heaven that were the explanation. Then we could be sure they were both all right. But believe me, that's an absurd possibility. Missy thinks of him as an infant." Didn't she? But what did Sibyl know lately of what Missy thought? "And what do you think they ran off *in*? And where did they run *to*? There isn't anywhere for a thousand miles."

"Can't leave Sibyl with this," Steer said stolidly. "If I lose my job over this, O.K. Wife's got job insurance."

"I'll see what I can do with Pugh when he comes back," Victoria said. "You're not the only one who can fly a heli. And you can kiss your job goodbye. I'm going for a swim."

"Better not," Steer said. "Sibyl's just been attacked by one of those sea monsters."

"They never come into shallow water in the daytime," Sibyl said. "It's perfectly safe as long as you don't go too far out—and too far is an awfully long way. At night they come up on the beaches sometimes and eat the Seian eggs and even nests of young, which is why you almost never see a full set of twins like the Grant twins. We'll all enjoy your absence if you go and swim."

"Wouldn't you just love that!" the girl answered. "Maybe if Steer won't take me home, he'll take me swimming and if a strangler eel comes along he can save me like he saved you."

"Didn't save her," Steer said. "She'd already killed the eel and I just picked her up."

"You didn't?" Sibyl asked. "But I didn't kill it. I couldn't possibly have. I could hardly get a grip on it and I was almost dead myself. What happened was that it suddenly let me go when it was tensing to crush me. It would be too much of a coincidence if I'd given it a heart attack or something."

"Maybe some other sea creature attacked it," Steer suggested. "What's its natural enemy?"

Sibyl lifted her glass to down her drink, then remembered Steer had already emptied it. "I know the lunga are never attacked by them. But I doubt if they are attacked by the lunga either."

Steer was already pouring Sibyl another drink and he said, "O.K. You've just been through a rough time, and we're all going to stop talking and arguing and let you rest. You run out and play, Victoria."

Sibyl drank her Gin and 'gin quickly, feeling a sudden let-down, and said, "Whew! Either that drink was awfully strong or I'm going to have a fainting fit."

Steer grinned and came over to her. "Sorry," he said. "I drugged you. You've had too much for one day. You're looking pale as a ghost. Get some sleep and don't worry. I'll be looking out for things."

"Damn you," Sibyl said, feeling more groggy. "I think I hear Pugh and the twins coming up on the beach. Surely they've found Missy. I want to know. She may need something and I want to talk to her. And if they haven't found her I'm going . . ." but the rest of the sentence sort of trailed off in her mind.

"Mama!" It was the distant call of her baby. Sibyl waked instantly, groggily feeling for her green fuzz dressing gown. Thinking she was in the bedroom of the bubble cottage they had when Missy was a baby. Maybe she wanted a

bottle. No dressing gown. No Kenneth sleeping softly next to her. Sibyl waked fully, looked around the starlit room. It all came back to her. Kenneth dead in that horrible way, Missy drowned, herself drugged to sleep . . . but somebody was calling Mama. If she were deaf she'd hear it. If she were a universe away she'd hear it. It's the only inaudible sound you can hear.

Sibyl frowned. Could it be her imagination? It was *something*. She got up and went to the door. It was the usual clear, Lhadi-lit Seian night. The pale plate of the moon leaned at the horizon. Late.

"Mama!" It was Missy. Sibyl's mind began to mesh. Had Pugh then found her, and Missy been carried off, or run off again or something? Where was she calling from? The sea?

Sibyl ran toward the sea. There was the muffled beat of its slow swaying, the sound of faint breeze, the distant squeaking of the many-colored bat birds from the woods, then the keening of a lunga. Perhaps that had been it, after all. The keening of the lunga.

No. There it came again. "Mama!" Sibyl got into the flimsy canoe Pugh and the twins had left drawn up on the sands. What had they found? If only she'd had a chance to talk to them. She began to paddle with the clumsy palm stick. The boat simply didn't go fast. Which way? Sibyl could see nothing but gleaming sea. Then the lunga came up to the boat. The keening changed. It was *talking*. Sibyl could hear the changes in tone, the stops, the repetition of something. But there was no way to make any meaning of it. So when the lunga swam ahead, Sibyl followed.

Then she saw it. Missy's dark head coming out of the water, the face shadowed, the streaming hair, the voice calling out of the rounded mouth. Oh, hurry, Sibyl said to herself, pulling at the impossibly awkward oar. Missy

keeping herself afloat all this time. It didn't seem possible. And she couldn't last much longer.

"Mama! I'm trying to come back." And she ducked under and then came back up again.

"I'm here, darling." Missy was only about ten feet away. Sibyl could see her face now, silver in the moonlight. Then Missy seemed to move back, and the next moment leaped out of the water, cutting a silver swath through the darkness—screamed—and dove under.

Sibyl waited, in the eerie starlight that smelled of brine, of alien sea, feeling under the boat the mute, huge respiration of the waters. But her daughter did not come up.

Sibyl put her arms down into the water, and screamed.

Something caught her wrist and pulled her in. She didn't even have time to take a breath. She felt tentacles or ropy arms. Not the bulk of a strangler eel. She reached through the water, whipping herself around, but could not grasp what held her. It pulled her under, under, swimming before her so she could not reach it. Then she blacked out.

CHAPTER 4

When she came to she was draped over the back of a lunga and it was swimming toward shore. Points of silver sunlight danced on the water and a glare of golden sunshine shone off the beach. Water ran off her back and from her hair and spewed out of her mouth. She held onto the glittering scales of the lunga as it raced along. It was a wild, unreal ride. The lunga was keening loudly and she could feel its breath on her cheek, from the opening in its back. She could feel the moving of its muscles as it swam and its lunging through the waves. She felt a part of the sea and sun and the lunga. Then, with the beach well in view, it stopped.

"Thank you," Sibyl said, patting it, wishing she could communicate. She slipped off its back and swam painfully to shore, aware for the first time of her pain and exhaustion. She was a creature of the land again, alien in the hostile sea. She just barely made the beach. She was still sore from the encounter with the strangler eel, and her very bones felt bruised, pain throbbing dully in her brain like a slow heartbeat. Blood was oozing from the bite in her neck. It sent a stabbing pain through her chest and down her arm. Sibyl pulled herself up onto the beach, far out of the water, and collapsed. She could go no farther and the effort to scream was too much. She tried, but her voice seemed lost somewhere, and her head wouldn't lift off her arms. She gave in to a boiling blackness.

Then Steer was picking her up and she felt desiccated and burning with the sun inside her and Steer was saying, "You idiot! You went out all by yourself to look again."

"No," Sibyl said. "Yes. Steer, she's still alive. I feel terrible. I'm going to throw up. Put me down." And Sibyl was very sick. After her stomach settled a little she was aware of hurting all over, burning, stuck with pricks by the dried sea water.

"I look a mess," she said finally. "I'll have a bath in the spring and if some kindly soul will get me a cup of coffee I might live. Did Missy get found and then go back out?"

"No." Steer picked her up again and carried her to the spring. Sibyl relaxed against him, wishing she weren't too dirty and tired to be kissed. "Pugh came back with a very interesting discovery, but there was no Missy. It sounds almost hopeless. But not quite. I'm not sure you ought to go into that icy spring water."

"I'm sure. If I'm going to die, I don't want to die all sticky like this. Damn it! Happy's been at the soap again!"

"He eats it?"

"No. He soaps all up with it and plays with the lather. When nobody's looking. He knows he's not supposed to take the soap. There's some more by the pitcher in the hut." The icy water froze all Sibyl's aches and when Steer brought the soap she washed from head to toe. Victoria came out and said, "Oh, excuse *me*," and Sibyl said, "Excused. But will you and Pugh please get breakfast. And toss me that red wrap-around on the chair by my bed."

Sibyl combed her hair and pushed the curls into place with her fingers, rendering up a silent thanks for the natural curl, and put on a little lipstick and knee rouge. But she didn't like her face. It looked drawn and tired and ten years older than it had yesterday.

"Here," Steer said, offering her a cup of coffee and the medicine chest. Sibyl settled for an antibiotic, and antiviral, an antibody booster and a normalizer so the array of medication wouldn't unbalance her physiology.

"No knockout drops," she said to Steer as she drank the coffee.

"I won't. The other one backfired on me. Here's your cigars and there comes Pugh. He'll tell you what happened. And I want to know what happened to you."

"Missy called to me. Late at night—probably the third quarter. She was swimming—way out at sea. It was incredible. Dreamlike. But it was real. It was too far for me to swim, so I took the boat."

"But the boat's still gone."

"I know. I left it there. The twins can make another. I believe they already have another. I got to where Missy was and . . . put my hand into the sea to try to reach her and . . . something pulled me in. Then the next thing I knew I was riding on the back of a lunga. I know how incredible all this sounds. It felt incredible at the time. But Pugh, tell me what happened yesterday when you were looking for Missy. Did you and the twins find anything? And what was the interesting discovery Steer said you made?"

Pugh looked tired, too, and worry seemed to poke out of every bone of his slim, young body. He cared about Missy. Cared abysmally. And he kept trying to act as though everything were going to be all right. He looked down into his cup of coffee and shook the cup gently to watch the motion of the black liquid. "The twins can't dive very deep. All they found was water. But I had my diving equipment—not heavy stuff, but it's got the static inner skin, so I could go down to the sea floor. About six fathoms there, and it slopes down. At first, all I saw was sand and a couple of bushy anemone ferns. You can't see far under

water, of course. I could have wandered around for an hour and not seen a thing—except of course those wonderful yellow baby-faces that look out of their tulip houses. Lot of symbiosis here. But while I was looking for something that might mean Missy, a lunga came by. Isn't that what you call those fish?"

Sibyl nodded. "Remarkable things. The one that rescued me seemed to know exactly what he was doing. The natives are full of legends about them."

Pugh set his cup on the floor and then ran his hands through his hair until it fluffed out around his head in ridiculous wisps. "If only Missy was all right! This is a terrific thing I've found. This and the chryseum the first day. But none of it has any *meaning* for me, if you get it. I'd be looping without a ringer if I weren't so worried.

"Anyway, the lunga seemed to be friendly. He'd swim at me and then swim off and look around. It was wild, but I thought of porpoises and how they're supposed to save people, and followed the lunga. I didn't know which direction to look, anyway. And in a few moments I saw what he was leading me to. It was an immense underground forest. That's the only way I can describe it. You know those sea melons that float up and the natives eat them?"

Sibyl made a face and nodded. "Some of the native food is wonderful, but those sea melons taste like rotten fish."

"They're animals, not plants. Green from symbiotic algae. And the melons are reproductive buds. But the thing is, this looked like a *cultivated* forest of them, if you get it. You can tell when a forest is taken care of. I guess for one thing, the branches are trimmed and the trees are spaced and the same size and there isn't a lot of rival fauna or flora around. Well, the lunga swam between the trees and stopped to snap up one of the melons. I looked to see if there were other lunga around. I thought maybe even it

was them that cultivated the trees. But I didn't see any. Then suddenly something shot through the water like a rorocket. It made a terrific rush of water as it went by, though it must have been something small. The lunga swam straight up and off, with a terrific swish of his tail. They're powerful things. I swam on through the forest until it ended in a dropoff, and then I went on at about six fathoms, through a chartreuse algae that turned the light all dim and finally came to an unbelievable, fairylike plateau with its sides all fretted with hollows and tunnels. The hollows and tunnels were lined from top to bottom with luminescent shellfish, opening and closing like lights going on and off, and they furnished enough light so I could see better than in the forest. The plateau started at about five fathoms and went . . . down. I wouldn't try to guess how far."

Sibyl sat up with her back propped with pillows. She pictured the fairy sea mountain, thought of the Forsaken Merman, and lit a cigar. "What a place for the twins to play!"

"They can't begin to dive that far. I started into a hollow and it led to another—like caves—and I went lower and lower and farther into the mountain until I reached a deep recess where there were suddenly no shellfish to light up and I couldn't see at all. At this point the rock seemed to be solid—I mean there were no more rooms, and I thought I had come to the core of the plateau. I was feeling around on the rock to see if there were further caves and . . . I found a door."

Sibyl frowned. "A door? More than five fathoms under the sea? More likely it was one of those giant barnacles. You're lucky it didn't bite you. If they close on you, you can't get out."

Pugh's face took on an odd look, as though he were

testing the experience again to see what was wrong with it. "Nope," he said. "Nothing else it could be. It was a steel alloy door. It was—I'm sure, if you get it—a space ship lock."

Sibyl breathed out a taut-held mouthful of cigar smoke. "Good Lord! You think there might be a space ship down there, hidden in the rock?"

"No. The door had been fitted into the rock. What I think might be down there is a cavern with air. And that's what gives me some hope that Missy might be alive, and Darld, too. She could have been kidnapped and brought down there."

The smell of breakfast drifted in and Sibyl squashed out her cigar in the bottom of her coffee cup. This fantasy went strangely with the homely smell of eggs and bacon. Missy held captive in some fairy palace. But it was easier to believe that than to believe that Missy was dead. Only . . . "Missy wasn't kidnapped," Sibyl pointed out. "She ran out and threw herself into the water as if she wanted to drown. And *who* lives in that cavern, if there is one? And why? Why not live on this wonderful island with these gentle, hospitable natives? And how do they get their air supply? It implies a terrific technology—to find the place and then pump the water out and equip it to live in."

"Unless they evolved there," Pugh said. "But that would mean it would have to emerge somewhere for the air to get in and . . . well, maybe there *are* islands closer. After all, the Outer Seas haven't been explored. Just because no other island has been spotted doesn't mean . . ."

"Breakfast!" Steer roared from the back. "Made it myself. Open fire ought to make even this packaged stuff taste good."

Sibyl dug into the food hungrily and noticed as soon as she sat down that the temperature had suddenly changed,

for the first time since she'd arrived on Seia. The sun shone as bright and the wind blew only a little stronger, but now there was a cool edge to it. There was something uncomfortable about it. It made Sibyl suddenly long for her cozy apartment back at Hammond Space Port, and warm, smoke-drifted bars and even the grimy petty crime of Old Town.

"Gee, Steer, I was going to help you," Pugh said. "I'll do the washing up afterwards."

"Where's Victoria?" Sibyl asked, suddenly noticing her absence. "And for that matter, the twins?"

"The twins were around a minute ago. The bacon smell drove them away. They just wanted to know if you were all right, I think. They peeped through the door at you. Victoria has been off in the corner with Siln. At least, I think it's Siln."

Sibyl made a face. "Pugh, please go rescue that poor child from Victoria. I'd better get back to their English lessons today, in spite of everything. How on Earth—Centaurus—am I going to teach them enough English to explain about Victoria before she has one of them in her clutches?"

Steer was bringing his plate over to the stream to wash it. He laughed. "Aw, what can she do?" You're getting prudish, Sibyl. Won't hurt the boys to meet a worldly woman. Think Victoria's right. They're more grown up than you think. People always sound childish when they're trying to speak a language they don't know."

Sibyl handed Pugh her empty plate and took the cup of coffee and cigar he'd brought her. "She can euchre him into going back to Llonan City and marrying her, that's what she can do. The boys shouldn't be exposed to the world until they know what they're up against. After that,

they're free to do what they please, and I hope they do—and *that's* what my prudery amounts to, Steer."

"Are they legal age to marry?" Steer asked.

Sibyl shrugged. "Who's to say? You could have a hell of a lawsuit about it, I'll bet, once they'd been through the ceremony. It may depend on whether they're considered adult in their culture—which come to think of it, I suppose they are, because the Rites of the Sea seem to be for adult males only. Steer, I told you what I could glean about the ceremonies of the Rites of the Sea. Sit down and leave the washing up for Pugh—just pour a cup of water on the fire. Do you suppose there is a cavern with air down there and somebody pretending to be a God?"

"Believe me, I wish I knew. Wish Pugh had another set of diving gear. I'll go down and take a look next. If it's a space ship lock, I think I might be able to . . ."

Pugh came out of the forest looking sheepish. "I'm sorry, Sibyl," he said. "Siln doesn't want to be rescued. I felt like a damn fool. He threw a rock at me."

"Oh, Lord. What were they doing?"

"Necking," Pugh said. "Is it getting cold or is it my imagination?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" sounded gaily through the trees, and Happy came swinging down onto Sibyl's shoulder. "Hec, hee. Ho, ho."

"Please," Sibyl said, beginning to choke with laughter. "Somebody throw him something."

As Pugh went inside, a Seian came running through the forest shouting, "He is on the way! Decorate!"

"King Seia!" Sibyl cried, putting down Happy who was curling up against her as if for warmth and giggling into her shoulder. "He's never come here before. He must have important news."

But it was not King Seia who descended with languid

dignity from the woven-rush, flower-decked palanquin of King Seia. It was Gide Girais.

He looked much more impressive than he had on the ship. For one thing, he now looked the way nature had intended for him to look. His skin had reverted to translucent scales that flashed back the sunlight and were so much the color of water. Sibyl got the impression that he might be transparent if he didn't sparkle so. He was completely hairless, except for a whiskerlike stubble of black eyebrows over vivid orange eyes. He looked even thinner than Sibyl remembered in some native garb of fitted, leathery trousers of molefish skins that accentuated his tallness. Around his neck was a collar of round orange jewels that lit up like his eyes.

Sibyl tried to remember that he was a superannuated gigolo. But one look at his face and his regal walk, and it wouldn't wash. She saw Victoria come out of the woods and stand transfixed, looking at Gide. Sibyl had the sinking feeling that he was going to be fascinating.

She took Steer's hand in self-defense, felt better and said, "Sic him, Victoria." But Victoria already had her compact out.

"Good afternoon," Gide said calmly in his best Ivy League English, ignoring the natives doing respectful knee bends before him as he went. He had in his hand a long sort of staff, made of bone or ivory and intricately carved and knobbed, with a sharp point on one end. Sibyl thought it was a weapon, but Gide plunged it firmly into the ground with one push, straightened into beautiful posture and announced, "I claim this island for the kingdom of Krilanr in the name of my father, his Radiant Majesty, Emperor Preld Knivlendr of Krilanr, may he increase and multiply even in his state of advanced senility." He repeated the speech in both Centaurian and fluent Seian.

Then he turned to the Terrans, bowed with a slight mockery in his charm, and said, "King Seia and I are delighted to have had you as guests, and we fondly hope you will not be leaving before twilight, which comes rather early at this time of year. May I invite you to share a cup of Krilanrian yellow wine? To celebrate."

Sibyl kept trying to think, to sort this out, but nothing came. She moistened her lips. "To celebrate what?" she asked.

He raised his stiff eyebrows. "The friendship between the Seian and Krilanr, which now protects the island, of course. Surely you don't think we would just take it over in barbaric Terran fashion. I mean the way Terran powers took over their own islands in the antique way. Naturally, Terrans are more civilized now." He smiled elaborately. "We have signed a treaty which King Seia finds more than generous. And as I explained, Krilanr will protect Seia against barbarian greed, both Terran and Centaurian. In the unlikely event that it should be necessary."

He reached his hand out and a waiting native gave him a large leathery bottle and handed beautifully wrought cups among the Terrans. Sibyl held her cup to the sunlight, which shone chartreuse through the thin shell, showing delicate etchings of seaweeds and animals. It was more beautiful than anything she'd seen on mainland Centaurus, and certainly far beyond the primitive efforts of the Seians.

Gide walked up to Pugh, kissed him solemnly on the forehead and poured him a glass of wine. He then proceeded to Victoria, who simpered, and then to Steer, who balled up his fist but controlled himself, and finally to Sibyl, to whom he gave a graceful, sardonic smile as she glanced up from under her eyelashes at him. Close up, Gide had a fragrance of sun-warmed water that Sibyl found unexpectedly heady. She frowned, retreating from him to bury

her nose in the yellow wine and its own delicate, dry-canteloupe bouquet.

"Wine's good," Steer said, "but the treaty stinks. You can't claim Seia. And this island belongs to the Grant twins, who are grandsons of the king of Seia."

"The *former* king of Seia," Gide said, finishing the wine and then, to Sibyl's horror, taking that crystalline work of art and cracking it to pieces with his heel. "He died long ago, and for that matter lost his Decorativeness long before his death. The kingship is to the handsomest, and paternity has no meaning here. And I believe you have things backwards about the Grant twins. They—and any small possessions they may acquire—are subject to the authority of the current king of Seia. There is no private property here. Such a concept is, of course, alien to your—undeveloped—psychology. But then you *are* alien, aren't you?"

". . .," Steer said, stolidly cracking his wine cup by standing heavily on it. "You foreign fairy."

"Exactly my point," Gide said delightedly. "Mrs. Blue, unless I am mistaken, what pains you about all this is cracking up those hand-etched cups. You may keep yours. Only the emperor's son must crack his. They are five hundred years old, irreplaceable, and were meant as a guest-friend gift to each of you from my father, the emperor." He looked at the shining fragments near Steer's foot.

Sibyl held her cup carefully, wondering whether it was Steer or Gide that she was hating, and why, and then she began to realize all the implications of Gide's presence here, of what all this could mean to Grant Lines and the State Department, and for that matter to the twins. Suppose everything Gide was saying was valid? Where did all the sophistication of Krilanr come from, and how did Gide know enough to plan all this? Why had neither the State Department nor Grant Lines been prepared for this? Basically,

it was because of the limited technology of Centaurus in general. No one was expected to be able to even *get* to Seia—any more than you would have expected an ancient Greek to turn up on Cuba in the fifth century B.C. And Gide's tactic was a strictly Terran way of thinking. Gide was incredible. The whole thing was incredible.

"How," Sibyl asked him, trying not to be a little afraid of him, "how did you get here?"

"Really," he answered, "you needn't be concerned with that, Mrs. Blue. I don't question how you got here."

"Don't want to answer?" Steer asked. "Why?"

"As you didn't hear a helicopter," Gide said, "perhaps you might assume I came by boat. However, I detain you when you will probably want to be packing."

"Can't order us around," Steer said. "Murder's on your head if we leave. Missy and Darld are both missing. Can't leave until we find them."

Sibyl was watching Pugh, who had been silent all this time. He was staring curiously at the heavy, gemmed neck-piece Gide wore, and biting his little mustache thoughtfully. Suddenly he ran over to Gide, stumbled, grabbed Gide by the necklace as though to catch himself, and pulled it off with such force that it left a ruff of torn scales and a line of blood across Gide's neck. It was so obvious an attack that Sibyl felt like spanking Pugh, and wondered how he could have seemed so mature and responsible up to now. Both he and Steer were behaving very badly. Were they deliberately trying to reinforce Gide's opinions about Terrans?

"Pugh!" Victoria shouted. And then said, "You are all acting in an unforgivable manner. The State Department will hear of this. It's a matter for them, not for you bunch of tourists. Come, Gide . . ."

"Never mind," Gide said, flicking Pugh's hands from

his neck as though they were rather loathsome insects. He fixed the neck collar in place and turned to go, gesturing the natives ahead.

"Wait a moment," Victoria said. "Gide, we must seem like a bunch of savages. I certainly agree you have a point, and my father will be glad to consult with you in a civilized manner. He's an important official in the State Department, as you know." Victoria turned on her best purple smile. "Perhaps I'll walk a way with you and we can discuss this in private."

"Some other time," Gide answered with a graceful little bow, "I'd be charmed. Oh, and by the way"—he surveyed the little group with a sardonic smile—"I'm afraid King Seia is ready to defend his country by force if necessary. I realize force is a new concept here. But you'd be surprised how quickly even ignorant natives can learn." He was looking at Pugh with contained fury. He wouldn't forget that clumsy attack.

He climbed onto the palanquin, folded his arms and went swaying off through the forest, as Happy jumped back into Sibyl's lap and began shivering a little. Sibyl patted him, became aware of the chill in the air again. The wind blew stronger.

"I'm going after him," she said. "I've got to ask him about Missy. He must be mixed up in this in some way."

"No," Pugh said. "I don't think it would be safe. I'll tell you. I think—"

"We'll just ignore him," Steer interrupted. "What can he do? If you like, I'll flatten him for you, Sibyl, and we can tie him up. The natives are peaceful and you have an in with King Seia. Leave that ambulatory fish alone and we'll talk to Seia later."

"The *only* thing to do," Victoria said, "is take his advice and leave. Then Father and I can come back and try to

settle this. If you stay, Sibyl and Steer are both going to lose their jobs and be blackballed from any decent job forever. It'll be the end for you."

"If you want to flatten somebody," Sibyl said to Steer, "you can flatten Victoria. We haven't found out *anything* about Gide, and I can at least try. I've got an idea . . . No, let me go alone."

Sibyl ran into the woods and followed the palanquin stealthily until it reached the balloon tree grove in the middle of the forest. "Gide," she called, "I know you'd be more charmed some other time but could I have a few words with you now? Alone?"

She waited, holding her breath, watching a blue balloon float off the top of a tall tree and blow toward the sea. If he just went on, there wouldn't be much she could do except stand there and feel silly. But he stopped the procession, told the bearers in Seian to go on ahead, and turned back toward Sibyl, looking like a strange forest God standing among the trees, a curtain of creeping moss reaching blindly from a limb behind him, the balloon pods balancing fantastically above.

"You're not afraid to be alone in the woods with an old gigolo?" he asked with a light smile.

Sibyl tried to laugh, but there was something a little too mysterious about the forest and the man. Shadow and sunlight swirled like water, merging with Gide's body until only his eyes seemed fixed.

"How was I to know, on the ship, what you were?"

"Ah," he said, coming closer, "and what am I?"

She shook her head, trying to clear the sparkles of sunlight and shade from them, so that she could see. "I came to ask," she said, "what you know about Missy. What you have to do with it all."

"Is that why you came after me?" He stepped back

from her. "Like all Terrans, you want something. And you think you have only to take, never to give." He turned.

"No, no!" Sibyl cried desperately. "Not only that. I want to know. But also—I thought you . . . I thought you smiled at me. When you gave me the wine."

"You deserted my look for the wine."

"You were so close. Don't go. I won't ask anything of you, then. Except to know what kind of person someone like you must be."

Gide came up to her, disappearing more the closer he came. His orange irises made spots on her eyes. "A human woman," he said, taking her shoulders, burning her eyes still. "How I hate them!" He put his fingers through her hair. "If only," he said, kissing her forehead, "if only I didn't hate you. How easy it would be to love you." Then, almost convulsively, he kissed her on the mouth.

It was a strange kiss. Full of the sea, like Gide himself. Like drinking the ocean and only growing more thirsty with the salt. His body swelled over her like the tide and she longed to drown in it.

"Now," he said, his voice low, "now you will come with me."

"Yes," Sibyl said. "Oh, yes."

"Oh, *no*." It was Steer's voice, and as Sibyl whirled around, furious, Steer went past her, pulled Gide aside by the arm and there was the sound of bone on bone and Steer was standing next to Sibyl blowing at the red spot on his knuckles and Gide was on the ground, shaking his head and getting up slowly.

"So," Gide said to Sibyl. "So." And he turned and walked toward the Seian village.

"Wait!" Sibyl cried, but Steer held her when she started to run after Gide. "What's the *matter* with you, Steer? There were tears in Sibyl's eyes. "You fool!"

"Me!" Steer said. "You wanted me to let you go off with him and never come back alive?"

"What made you think he wanted to kill me?"

"Did you think he planned a pink tea? Thought an experienced policewoman like you knew better than to let herself go like that. Wait until you hear what Pugh has figured out. The man's not only not human, he's . . . Oh, wait."

"But I don't believe you," Sibyl said, frowning to herself. "You don't know . . ." How could Steer know what the kiss said? Or had the kiss just meant whatever Sibyl imagined into it? She'd been carried away.

Steer had Sibyl by the arm and was walking her back toward the hut. "Not what you ought to pick for a boy friend. Slimy gigolo. Thought you were the one warning Missy about him on the ship. Could be something in what she said your reasons were?"

"Of course not. Not then, anyway . . . It's strange how different he seems now, isn't it? Sort of in his setting?"

"Phony," Steer said. "Just as phony now as he was then. Seia isn't native to him and he didn't claim it to protect it. Don't let him take you in."

Sibyl wondered if Steer might be a little jealous. His masculine pride, because he sensed that Gide had stirred some feeling in her that hadn't been accessible to him.

"Sibyl," Steer said, stopping and looking at her as though he were trying to read her mind, "we're friends and lovers. You once said I reminded you of a good, wholesome animal. You know I'm not just an animal?"

"Certainly," Sibyl answered, laughing and putting her arm around him. "What a thing to ask! It wouldn't be any fun if I couldn't joke with you."

"Sure. Only . . . I came all this way and risked my job just to see you."

"And we've hardly had a moment alone together, have we? It's been one thing after another. Here we are with this beautiful island and all that starlight at night . . . and Victoria and the twins and Pugh and all the worry over Missy and Darld."

Steer sighed. "So you go off to smooch with our worst enemy."

"You don't understand. I . . . all right, I did find him attractive, if that's the right word. But even if I hadn't, I think I might have been able to gain his confidence if you hadn't come along like that. I don't *always* use just strong-arm methods on my criminals, you know."

"We're almost there and you can talk to Pugh about him. There was a reason why he tore Gide's necklace off like that. He's found out something that'll uncurl your hair. But the main reason I came after you was that if he decided there was something very dangerous about Gide, and I did too, that was enough."

CHAPTER 5

A flock of large birds flew by high overhead, screamed wildly and then fell into sudden silence. The sky grew a denser yellow-green, and Sibyl became aware of the sound of the sea. She shivered.

As they emerged into the clearing where the hut was, Sibyl saw Pugh with his microscope set up, a sweater draped over his shoulders, peering at a slide. From somewhere in the forest came the sound of Victoria's cultivated giggle, and then Siln's whistle, Seian snicker. They were cold, unpleasant sounds.

"Pugh," Sibyl said, "I've got to get those twins together for a lesson. I can at least make another try at finding out about the Rites of the Sea, and what happened to Darld. And I've got to find some way to warn them about Victoria and send them over to try to get King Seia to let us stay here. But first I think you'd better tell me whatever it is you suspect about Gide, and why on earth you yanked his necklace off like that." She dashed into the hut and rooted out her green sweater, and dashed out again while Pugh was still organizing his thoughts.

Pugh drew his straight, young eyebrows together earnestly. "This is crazy," he said. "It's so crazy I'm not sure I ought to say it at all. I don't really know anything, you know. I'm just a college kid that's interested in marine biology. I've read a lot of books, and especially I read everything about Centaurian marine life before I came. But it's

such a new thing there isn't much yet. Biologists still haven't sorted out the evolution or the ecology."

"Tell you what," Steer said, "you finish telling Sibyl all you don't know while I get a drink, and then tell us what you do know when I get back."

Sibyl smiled after Steer, and decided the reason she liked him so much was that he was so implacably himself. When I get old, she thought, I'm going to devote six months to analyzing just why people like that make you smile. "What have you got on that slide, Pugh?"

Pugh grinned. "Dead chryseum thalasseum larvae. Have a look."

"Those little orange dots you were all excited about right after you landed?" Sibyl looked into the microscope and pursed her lips. "Now they're white with purple dots. What kind of progress does that show?"

Pugh turned his grin into a laugh. "That's the stain. And that's what's interesting about them. You see . . . thanks, Steer. Instant beer's fine . . . the purple stain shows the chemical—actually it's an endocrine secretion—branchione. This is what kills the Centaurians when the chryseum larvae are ready to metamorphose. It affects the respiratory center in the brain."

Sibyl took the Gin and 'gin from Steer and unwrapped the Hellenic he'd brought her. In the small silence while he lit it for her, a bell flower tinkled with the chilled bumbling of a heavy insect and far off a Happy Hant laughed a chattering little laugh and stopped suddenly. "Don't go assuming I know what you're talking about," Sibyl said. "You'll have to explain each thing as you go along."

"The trouble is that I don't really know, either. But I'll give you what I've worked out and you can take it for what it's worth. If I'm right, the implications . . . But heck. I guess you can just look at me and tell what any theory of

mine's worth. Well, maybe the branchione doesn't sound so interesting to you, but to zoologists it is. It had only recently been isolated—in human embryos in very small amounts—and it works, like many other hormones, by keying off genetic changes. So when this hormone was discovered in a Centaurian life form, it meant not only that it was manufactured naturally by both species—which would not be so amazing, because after all, it's a chemical—but also that the *genetic* chemistry must have similarities."

"Yeah," Steer put in, shaking his heavy head slowly in thought. "But all the genes aren't the same. Centaurians and Terrans are mutually sterile."

"Right," Pugh said. "Exactly. That they have genetic similarities at all is amazing. That's why branchione was of interest and why I had a dye for it in my kit. Now, as we have discovered from the appearance of the Grant twins, Seians, who apparently evolved independently of mainland Centaurus, are not mutually sterile with Terrans." Pugh paused enthusiastically to take a long swallow of his beer, and Sibyl thought about what a good college professor he was going to make. Kenneth had had that—the dedication, the intense enthusiasm, the love of talking, even, for its own sake. For a moment the smell and excitement of her life with Kenneth came back to her in a rush, and she allowed herself a few moments of pretending Pugh was Kenneth and it was all twenty years ago.

"But let's leave that for the moment, although I believe it's going to explain about where Missy is. Now the thing about these chryseum larvae is that they have about fifty times as much branchione hormone secreted as they need. They've already got gills and they don't have lungs to inhibit. What they should be secreting is pneumone, because they ought to be turning into their terrestrial—that's confusing—I mean their air-breathing metamorphosis."

"You mean," Steer interrupted, "that they live part of their lives in the water and part of their lives on land? Like mosquitoes or frogs? I can't see what you're leading up to about Missy."

"I can't tell you without explaining about the chryseum first. The larvae, in the free state, hatch out in the ocean. They wiggle about for maybe forty-eight hours and then metamorphose into air-breathing creatures—chryseum chersaium. They crawl up on land to mate, and after this brief moment of glory they crawl back to a suicidal maternity—males included, just to be companionable—and lay their eggs in the sea. Then those eggs that don't get eaten hatch out the next season. Now, apparently many of the larvae die without metamorphosis, as those I scooped out of the sea. They were almost dead. That's the curious thing. They contain all this branchione instead of pneumone. Why don't they secrete the right hormone?"

"Disease, maybe," Steer suggested. "Maybe that's why they're almost extinct."

"Maybe. Do you know what I saw—as I'd thought I might—when I yanked that elaborate collar off Mr. Girais?"

Sibyl had been losing track of the science. She'd been hearing distant shrieks from Victoria and the twins and not liking it at all. She should be giving the twins their lesson. She should maybe keep them close to her. Would Gide have special plans for them? Educating them *his* way? He could talk to them as she could not, with her limited Seian. And here was Pugh, with the best intentions—always the most annoying kind—holding things up with his wordy theory . . . "What did you see?" Sibyl asked. "Pugh, I . . ."

"Gill slits." Pugh sat back triumphantly and drained the second half of his beer in one swallow.

"Gill . . ." Steer began, and then let it sink in. "You mean, you think he *swam* here?"

"What I think," Pugh said, "is that he isn't prince of any country in the far north of mainland Centaurus. I think the place he lives is under the sea."

"You mean what you're saying is that Gide metamorphoses like those chryseum, or whatever they are? Tell you, Pugh, I can't buy that."

"No. I haven't finished. What really set me thinking was all the coincidences—the swarming of the chryseum, the Rites of the Sea, Darld's disappearance, Gide's appearance. Don't you see? If recently enough in their evolution the Seians were equipped for water breathing, and they retained the genes—sort of like fossil genes—then theoretically (my theory) it is possible that at the proper season they might have the urge to enter the water—like lemmings sort of—and once in, they would release pneumone which would key the metamorphosis of chryseum, while the chryseum would release branchione, which would key the fossil Seian genes controlling gills and other water-breathing apparatus. A sort of symbiotic hormonal relationship. Not endocrines, really, but exocrines. In Centaurians it would amount to nothing but a disease. But in Seians . . ."

"But what would this have to do with Missy?" Sibyl asked, trying to understand what Pugh was saying, because it gave the impression of meaning something, but she was not sure what. "Missy is human."

"Look," Pugh said, knocking over his glass and not noticing it, "humans retain certain genes that relate to an aquatic past because we *have* an aquatic past. We all go through a gill stage in embryo. Missy once had gills. Who knows how many other genes we have, perhaps enough to develop a full water-breathing apparatus, genes which are never activated. Now if they *were*, if ontology could be reversed for the respiratory apparatus . . . and you see, humans and

Seians are genetically similar enough to breed. So there's this wild chance . . ."

"That Missy turned into a mermaid!" Sibyl screamed, and sprang up. She began to laugh hysterically, to lose control. Looking at Pugh's eager face and over at the hut where Missy had lived, and thinking of what wild hopes she might have been harboring that maybe Missy was being held in a submarine or something . . . all impossible . . . and then *this*. "A mermaid!" Sibyl choked out, and then sat down heavily because Steer slapped her, and it almost snapped her head off.

"Sorry," Steer said, mopping her face with his handkerchief dripping with icy water from the spring. "Can't have that sort of thing. May be something to what Pugh here is saying. Need a cool head."

Sibyl sputtered, recovered and repressed the urge to kick Steer hard. "That's more likely to give me a head cold. But I deserved it. Let's go inside. It's getting too chilly, especially if you're all wet."

Pugh was standing inside now, looking very red-faced and embarrassed, and smoothing down his fluffs of hair to restore his dignity. "Mrs. Blue," he said icily, "I did not say Missy had turned into a mermaid. I merely suggested the possibility that this hormone, secreted into the sea water by the chryseum, had altered her breathing apparatus so that she could exist under water without drowning. And the idea is not as farfetched as it sounds. There is a lung fish that can breathe either air or water, on earth."

"Forgive me," Sibyl said, pulling out the Gin and 'gin. "Of course that's what you said. But you can imagine what I've been through, worrying about Missy. Hoping beyond reason. And what you've got is the first real hope. I ought to be ashamed of myself for collapsing like that. I *am* ashamed. But the idea, Pugh! Just think . . . it reminds me of Shake-

speare. You know—full fathom five my father lies, his bones of coral made—Missy suffering a sea change, into something rich and strange. Strange." The way she glittered in the moonlight, coming out of the water. And the water running off her like jewels. Dripping jewels.

"I see what you meant, Pugh," said Steer slowly, stirring water into instant beer for himself and Pugh, "but the chryseum weren't swarming when Missy disappeared. It was *after* the Rites of the Sea. I think it's more likely what Gide's got down there is an underground cave—maybe immense—that gets supplied with air and light in some way. Maybe he's got plants that supply oxygen, and luminescent creatures for light. Or maybe he got nuclear-powered equipment from Terra. Maybe he's got Missy and Darld held prisoner down there. Sure thing is, he couldn't have got here from the mainland without something that runs by machine. And we'd have heard it."

"I'm not saying I'm right," Pugh said. "I'm only saying what could be. If Gide had an undersea colony of some sort, they naturally couldn't depend on the chryseum, who only swarm seasonally. They'd either synthesize the hormone, so they could use it whenever they wanted to, or—if they don't have that kind of technology—all they'd have to do is mash up the bodies of a few million chryseum when they do swarm. That's all they'd have to do. If somebody gave Missy some of that stuff to eat the night before we landed, it would account for her behavior the next day. She'd have felt the physical changes occurring in her, known the need for water, and it would work out to about the right interval of time. If we'd kept her from the sea, she would have drowned in air, like fish do when you leave them up on land."

Sibyl remembered how desperately she'd chased Missy, and how desperately Missy had been making for the water.

Struggling to free herself from the air, to breathe. Had that been it?

"I can't imagine actually breathing water," Sibyl said. "It makes me smother just to think of it." She lit a good, wholesome cigar. Something you couldn't do under water, she thought irrelevantly.

"Actually," Pugh said, starting to drink his beer and then forgetting about it, "fish breathe oxygen just as we do. Only the oxygen is dissolved in water. They metabolize oxygen, as we do. Don't forget, we evolved from water-breathing creatures. There have been people born with gill slits."

"Could they breathe in water?"

Pugh laughed. "Of course not. It takes a lot more than just the gill slits. For one thing, the gills need a lot of area to absorb enough oxygen. Perhaps with Gide, the lungs could collapse and the gill tissue take up the space. Of course, his gill slits would close up, without the branchione hormone, after a few days, and you wouldn't know he'd ever had them."

Sibyl frowned at her cigar in thought. "Then he can't just plunge into the water any time. He'd have to plan ahead for, say, a day. And be near enough to the sea to go in at just the right time. So if he plans to go back, he must have the stuff with him."

"Good point," Steer said. "If we wanted to trap him here—can't see why, though—we could just steal his hormone."

"That isn't what I was thinking of," Sibyl said. "What I was thinking of—" She broke off. There was a high, feminine scream, the sound of running. "Victoria!" Sibyl cried, got up and kicked over her drink getting to the door. "I thought she was right near. I don't know what I thought. I . . ."

They all started toward the scream, and then Victoria emerged by the fern tree, red-faced and clutching at her cerise dress which had come unmeshed down the front.

"You all right?" Steer asked, staring to see if she were,

and then continuing to stare and finally lapsing into the pensive expression of a dedicated skin fancier at a Living Art show.

Sibyl stepped forward to block the view. "I'll mesh it for you," she said helpfully, and pinched Victoria while she did it. At which Victoria, who had paused a moment to be admired by Steer, screamed again.

"What happened?" Pugh asked. "Wait, I'll get you a drink."

"My bourbon," Victoria instructed firmly, and then began to sob. "He . . . he *raped* me."

"Gide?" Sibyl asked, wishing she'd pinched harder. Gide . . .

"No." Several more sobs. "I'm not sure which one it was."

"The twins?" Steer suggested.

"Not all of them. I think it must have been Siln. Sibyl, how can you giggle at a moment like this?"

"Sorry. I was just picturing Siln in his pleated baby dress. But perhaps he took it off."

"Fine-looking young man," Steer said to cheer Victoria. "Doesn't matter about his shirt."

"None of you seems to understand," Victoria said shrilly. "I've been *raped*. I don't know how it happened. We were sitting there talking . . . naturally I trusted him as your friend . . ."

"Talking in what language?" Sibyl asked.

"Well, I've been trying to teach them English. English, we were talking, with gestures, of course."

"Ah," Sibyl said. "It was the gestures that did it. Well, anyway, now we know they're pubic. The Rites of the Sea are at least in part puberty rites. Maybe you have to be pubic for these hormones—"

"Yes," Victoria interrupted. "It shows he's of age and

therefore responsible for his actions. When I think of what Father will say! Having to marry an alien."

"Don't worry," Sibyl said, watching the annoying wiggle of Victoria's wrist as she took the tiny cup of bourbon from Pugh, "we'll cover up for you. Particularly since just being pubic doesn't make one of age. You, if you'll pardon me for saying so, are of age. And if you pursue this, there just might be some question about who raped whom. I mean, when you think of him in that baby dress, and the cute, little way he tries to form words . . ."

"If you think for one moment . . ." Victoria began, and then screamed, but this time it was a real one.

A Seian walked out of the woods, and he looked as no Seian had ever looked before. His skin was splashed with blood-red dye, he wore on his head the carcass of a large sea bird that still bled and his lips were drawn back over his teeth in an expression of sheer fury. In his hand was a long, wooden spear with a razor-sharp metal tip. "Go!" he said in English.

There was something about the Seian—not his threat or his spear—that froze Sibyl's blood. The dead bird . . . Seians never killed anything but fish and shellfish, and that only for food.

"You see!" Victoria said. "We waited too long. I'm going." She turned and ran toward the beach where the helicopter was.

"Thought you told me they were gentle, peaceful natives," Steer said.

"They are," Sibyl said, looking away from the native to restore her natural picture of them. "I really don't think they'd hurt anybody. Gide's said something to them." She stepped forward and said in Seian, "We are friends and stay in happiness."

The Seian raised his spear, drew back his arm to throw

it. Sibyl stood her ground, smiling into the metal tip. He said something in Seian, and from behind him in the woods at least fifty Seians, all armed and painted, stepped out. Then the Seian cast his spear straight into the heart of little Happy, who had followed unnoticed at Sibyl's feet. "Go!" he repeated in English.

Sibyl leaned down and picked up Happy, who died then and there, with eyes full of pain and a sad, last giggle. She walked back to Steer and Pugh, the spear trailing along from Happy's body. Steer pulled the spear from Happy's body, cursing quietly.

Steer said, "We're outnumbered but I can get that . . ."

"No," Sibyl said. "We can't hurt anybody, even in self-defense. Poor, little Happy. A lot's going to depend on Terra's good will on this island and Gide already has a head start on us. Pugh!"

Sibyl tossed aside Happy's corpse and leaped through the air and tackled Pugh, who had not noticed the silent spear winging through the air at him. The silence of the Seians was frightening. They who were eternally chattering and laughing. They were beginning a slow, sort of shuffly dance, their faces tight and lips drawn back.

"I can't understand how Gide could have argued King Seia and the natives into all this so soon," Sibyl said, whispering, though there was no need to.

Pugh was standing now, helping her up, keeping his eyes swinging around the circle of moving natives. "I can. Let's at least start walking toward the helicopter. The reason is that Gide is the God. Don't you see? He's the one that appeared at that altar under the sea. He's the one that took Darld. And naturally, King Seia and the natives will believe anything he tells them."

The wind got colder as they approached the beach. The natives followed them, silent, menacing. The brief tropical

twilight was beginning. Sibyl shivered, cold outside and inside.

"No people are naturally peaceful," Steer said. "No living thing. Evolution's against it. Feel threatened, you fight back. Probably their savagery's all the wilder because it's aroused for the first time. Must be a frightening feeling for them, too. Damned savages," he added.

Sibyl watched Victoria waving frantically at them from the window of the helicopter. The viridian rim of Alpha Centauri, setting beyond the sea, flashed aquamarine and gold in low clouds. Sibyl licked the salt wind from her lips and listened a moment to the slow breathing of the sea. Full fathom five . . .

A spear zinged near them, sticking up in the sand. Pugh climbed into the heli quickly. "Go!" shouted the Seian.

"Steer, I can't go," Sibyl said. "Fly Victoria and Pugh back to the mainland and then . . . some day come back and look for me. But not until you have diplomatic permission. Don't let anyone come yet."

"But I can't . . ."

"Yes, you can. This is my job and Victoria and Pugh can't be caught up in it, now that this is happening. It's too dangerous and they're too young. And you can't stay, either. I can disappear easier by myself."

"How?"

"It'll be pitch dark in less than half an hour. You do something to attract their attention. I'll slip under the heli, wriggle across the beach and go into the sea. I'll swim out and tread water. They'd never see me even if they thought to look."

"You won't swim out too far?"

"Don't be silly. I'm about as helpless as a barracuda and you know it. And unlikely as it sounds, I've got a plan

about what to do next." Another spear landed closer. Soon they'd throw to kill.

"What's the plan?"

"I don't have time to tell you. Keep them attracted a couple of minutes, and then spend as long as you can warming up the motor and everything, so they are concentrating on the heli. That'll give me plenty of time."

Steer looked down at her. The wind blew a fringe of furry hair over his wide forehead. He opened his mouth as though there were a throatful of things he wanted to say, but didn't know how. Then he leaned down and kissed her and she clung to him, learning the contours of his strength all over again, so that his imprint would stay with her.

"We never did get our time alone, did we?" Sibyl said. "Now!"

Steer held up his arms in a gesture of peace and began walking toward the natives diagonally, away from the heli. Sibyl watched their eyes, and their movement toward Steer. She slipped between the struts of the heli and listened a moment to the loud gibberish Steer was spouting in tones of passionate plea. Mostly it was verses of "Spaceport Sally Under Stress" alternating with the Space Academy Code.

When Steer dodged the first spear, Sibyl got on her stomach and wriggled herself across the beach. She remembered her shoes too late, but perhaps if she took them off far enough out in the water they would get eaten by the fish before they drifted to shore. Or break up and look like seaweed. The coldness of the surf hit her and took her breath away. She went on, trying to ignore the pain of the intense cold, until she warmed with exercise without even noticing it. When she was deep enough to swim, she worked her shoes off and then tore the raffia as much as she could. Then she stopped and floated on her back.

The sound of the heli motor flashed up with the last

light of the sky, and Lhadi shone bright, gilding the edge of a billowing cloud. It was strange, seeing clouds in the clear, Seian sky. The season, indeed, was changing. Even that was going to be different.

Far off like a tiny bug, Sibyl saw the heli fly by. She listened until the last, faint comfort of its song was silent. And then floated in the darkening loneliness of sea and sky.

CHAPTER 6

The Scians stood silently watching the sky as the heli disappeared. Then they drew together and in a moment turned and cast their spears into the sea. One started toward the forest, toward the path home, and the others followed single file, one dark form after another merging into the forest, leaving a dark and empty stage.

Sibyl began to swim a little, to warm herself. Better wait a few moments before going back. Night would be safe. The natives never went out at night, except for special festivals. They thought the Carder wandered about the island at night. Strangler eels! Sibyl swam closer toward shore. She'd never be so lucky again with another encounter. She still didn't know how the strangler eel that got her had died. She looked into the water. Phosphorescent sea creatures had risen to the surface. She reached her arm through them and came up glowing.

Something nudged her. Her heart stood still, but it was only a lunga, who began to keen something in short bursts. Sibyl put an arm around it, hung on while the lunga swam slowly parallel to the beach. This was lucky. Strangler eels never attacked a lunga. She tried to make something of the staccato sort of wail the lunga was making now. Plainly, it was talking. But just as plainly it wasn't saying something urgent. It wasn't trying to show what it was saying. How could it? It wasn't as though it could point, or draw pictures in the dirt.

Finally Sibyl said, "I am Sibyl. Sibyl. Sibyl." Could the lungu hear? Where were its ears? The lungu glowed golden, he and Sibyl making a molten path through the phosphorescent water. The lungu was quiet. Perhaps he was listening.

Finally he began his keening again. Two syllables now. Sibyl held her breath listening. A sibilant and a stop. "Sh . . . p . . ." He was trying to repeat her name. She was sure of it. She hugged him delightedly. He was taking her closer to shore now. Had he thought she was drowning? Or just being helpful and friendly? He was sort of purring now. Why didn't he try to tell her his name? Perhaps the lungu did not reach that stage of intelligence, or self-consciousness. Did any creatures besides humans have a name for themselves, or anything resembling a name? A symbol? Sibyl couldn't imagine.

But she had to get on with her night's work. "Bye-bye," she called, and swam for shore. "P . . . p," the lungu said after her. If only all this weren't happening! Sibyl thought. If only I could spend long, lazy days learning to communicate with the lungu, finding out what animals would say if they could talk. The wind felt bitter cold when she came out of the water. A cluster of gleaming water spiders crawled over some bit of trash where the helicopter had been. She ran past it, shaking all over with cold, feeling the sand riming her feet and ankles like frost. Starlight iced the tips of the forest and she passed a cluster of huddled bat birds. The hut was all dark, silent.

Sibyl closed her eyes and plunged into the spring to wash the salt and sand off her, not pausing to give herself time to think. She came out too cold to breathe and ran to the hut for a towel. Thank God there hadn't been time to pack. All her things would be there still. She dried quickly, roughly, and suddenly she was warm and she realized the temperature was probably not below about sixty-five, but

after weeks of Seian heat, and then maybe forty-five minutes having her blood cooled in the sea, it had seemed arctic.

She decided not to chance a light. It was very unlikely that any of the natives would be wandering around at night, but there was no use taking a chance. Lhadi was rising and she could feel for what she couldn't see. What to wear? Well, it wasn't exactly like dressing for cocktails at Fauve's, but Sibyl had great faith in her purple petal-textured Botticelli. Fortunately, it was a dark purple, almost black, so it wouldn't do too badly with her tan. Sibyl pulled out her luggage from under the bed, rolled back the top, picked out the Botticelli by touch. Nothing else was that sensuously soft. It *felt* deep purple. Matching lingerie and makeup were folded inside it. And the cling bag that still contained, she recalled, the lavender-hilted, needle-thin proscidium stiletto that had come in so handy with the J.D. spy on the opening night of *Norma*. Sibyl didn't like to kill people, but this was one it was impossible to regret. It was children he'd used . . . well, that was in another world, and besides the fink was dead.

Sibyl combed her hair with a little bluette oil, pushing the black and white striped curls into place with a practiced hand. Fortunately, she'd already trimmed the ends when Steer came. Then she sprayed on the barest touch of lavender powder, made up her mouth to its natural fullness with blackish-purple lipstick, rouged her knees with lavender, and pressed on her brilliant garnet earrings. They were real antiques, and so clear they looked drinkable. Sibyl decided she really couldn't do the eye makeup in the dark. Green eye paint did things for her eyes, but she'd never be able to pick out the green.

She pressed the evening bag onto her right hip, sprayed with the Purple Dusk scent, rolled the top into place on her luggage and shoved it back under the bed. Better get a quick

bite to eat. She felt for pelleted Allfood, ate it neat and drank eight ounces of water. The best you could say for this way of eating was that in about twenty minutes she'd feel as though she'd had a three-course dinner. Now if she could find her cigars and a quick Gin and . . .

There was someone coming. Sibyl tensed, listened. The little noises of the forest. The slightly hysterical calls of a disturbed confabulation of bat birds. A chilly, grumbling Happy Hant. Tinkling bell trees. The scent of crushed herbs, brought now on a breeze unfamiliarly cold. Stale bluetie oil burning. Sibyl looked out of the door toward the forest. Clouds scudded across Lhadi, making it almost seem to blink. Then the light of a torch began to show in and out of the crooked path that led to the Seian village.

Who would be coming here and why? Did they suspect her? Had she been spotted, swimming out from the island? Or had a lunga perhaps informed on her? Could a lunga report something so specific as the presence of a particular person? The breeze began to smell strongly of rancid bluetie oil.

It was one of the little Seian natives carrying the torch. He wore the slain sea bird on his head still and the torchlight made jagged shadows across his face. Sibyl caught her breath. Behind him strode the long, lean figure of Gide Girais, appearing in and out among the tree trunks as though he were a spirit of the forest detaching itself from tree to tree. Sibyl imagined for a moment he might be about to play on pipes, or leap goat-footed ahead of the torch-bearing Silenus. And imagined herself running toward him in panic madness and tangling in vine leaves . . .

But of course nothing of the sort happened. Sibyl slipped quickly out of the hut and hid a few yards away on the seaward side, draping a patch of creeping moss over the lower limb of a tree. When the Seian came closer she saw

that his face looked lost and frightened. The recent violence and the night were too much for him. Gide took the torch from him and went into the hut. He came out with Sibyl's reading flash, handed the Seian back the torch and told him to go home. The Seian ran headlong toward the village, tossing off his headgear as he went.

Gide went directly back into the hut without looking around for an intruder. Why should he? He turned up the flash until the hut was flooded with light. Sibyl waited a moment, then crept quietly to the window. This was luck. She wouldn't have to drag her Botticelli through the forest. Furthermore she could even offer Gide a drink. Her whole approach would be more civilized than trying to sneak in on him in his sleep in the village. He wouldn't be tempted to strangle her before he even found out who she was. Too bad there couldn't be music and just a *little* central heat. But a good detective, she reminded herself, should be able to work in adverse circumstances.

First, however, she had to see what Gide was after. He was looking methodically through the hut. The food and drink didn't interest him. The mirror stopped him for a moment, and he stood and looked at himself a moment, expressionless, and adjusted the heavy, orange-jeweled neck-piece he wore. He looked alabaster in the cold, white light and his brilliant orange eyes seemed painted on. He made the whole little scene in the room look to Sibyl like the negative of a photograph, with one white figure moving dreamily in one dimension. Gide moved on to the tape recorder, picked it up and put it down, shuffled through the spools of tape disinterestedly. He pulled out Sibyl's luggage, went through it and shoved it back under the bed.

Then he found what he was looking for—Missy's things. He put her travel case on the bed, added a handful of assorted makeup from the shelf under the mirror. He took

out Missy's red cocktail dress, held it up, put it back. At the sight of Missy's things Sibyl dissolved in rage, and for a moment all she could think of was how easy it would be to sneak in on Gide and kill him with her lavender-handled stiletto. Or better, maim him, make him suffer. The long, white, hairless slug. Filthy . . .

But Sibyl's next reaction was one of an immense relief that washed over her so quickly she felt faint. This meant—must mean—that Missy was alive. That Gide had her hidden away somewhere. And she had asked for her clothes and things. If he'd just wanted women's clothes for something, he'd have taken Sibyl's, too. So whatever this alien man was, he wasn't her daughter's murderer. And the stupidest thing she could do would be to kill him. No, that hadn't been her plan at all. She straightened up. Now . . . but Gide was doing something else. He'd pressed the top of Missy's travel case carefully—to be sure it was waterproof?—and then he began carefully dislodging one of the orange jewels from his neckpiece.

Sibyl wondered for a moment whether it was going to burst into flame in his hand, or whether a genie would rise from it when it warmed in his palm. But what actually happened was that he . . . he *ate* it! Sibyl frowned to herself a moment, and then it came to her. That was the branchione. That was the gill-growing hormone. Gide had done what he came to do—got rid of the Terrans, made his pact with King Seia, and picked up Missy's luggage. Now he was preparing to go home. One thing—Missy was breathing air, not water now. Because those clothes weren't what you'd wear under water.

Knowing where the drug was—that would simplify things immensely. Sibyl took a deep breath, fixed a nice smile on her face and walked in the front door.

"Sorry I wasn't in when you knocked," she said. "You *did* knock? I was out buying an evening . . ."

"You!" Gide shouted, whirling around, his smooth, mobile face changing thoughts in ripples like wind over water. He tensed, as though to spring at her, his orange eyes glowing with a jungle fury. And then his poise came back to him, and his eyes flicked over her Botticelli and down her legs. "You came back," he said, "because you realized you'd forgotten to put on your shoes."

So she had. "Actually," she said, "I was hoping you'd drop by. I wanted to clear up any little misunderstanding there might have been about that scene in the woods this afternoon. Oh, Gide, let's stop talking silly. Let me get you a drink and explain."

Gide sat down on Missy's bed, still not taking his eyes off Sibyl. "All right," he said. "Only because I hate you. Otherwise I'd be afraid of anyone who looked so much like a flower."

"It's the dress," Sibyl said. "It cost a thousand dollars. But as the makers say, a Botticelli pays for itself."

"How interesting. I suppose it manufactures dollar bills, and they come sliding off the skirt."

Sibyl laughed. She mixed Gin and 'gin in a clay pitcher. "Not exactly. But I work with people, and people tend to have more confidence in good-looking women than they have in drab-looking women. A reprehensible human trait, no doubt. I guess the assumption is that drab-looking people hate the world. What they forget is that a drab person can be well disguised in a Botticelli, but that doesn't keep them from being drab. Why do you hate me, Gide?"

"Because you're a human woman. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you were drab. Then you wouldn't be dangerous."

"Drab people are very dangerous. They follow anybody who rings a loud bell." Sibyl poured the Gin and 'gins into

the two etched wine cups Gide had left with her and Missy. "Why do you hate human women?"

Gide took the cup Sibyl handed him and sniffed it appreciatively. "Well, for one thing, human women think they can solve all their problems by handing somebody a drink. Late-twentieth-century human women, that is. In the nineteenth century it was a nice cup of tea. I don't know what you've got in mind for the twenty-first century."

Sibyl sipped her Gin and 'gin and began to enjoy herself. If there was anything she enjoyed it was a cool drink and a warm man. And despite what he said about human women, she remembered the kiss in the forest, and she knew from his eyes that he was responding to her. "Gide," she said, "if that's all the depth I thought you had I wouldn't bother getting my feet wet in you. What's really behind this?"

Gide stretched a little and leaned his drinking elbow on Missy's travel case as though it were just anything. "It's not because they're women. It's because they're human. Tell me, what does Terra want from Centaurus?"

"Frankly, I've never thought about it," Sibyl said. She took a moment and thought. "Money? Some Earth people make money out of the trade with Centaurus. Some Centaurians do, too. If I'd come here on my own hook, it would be for fun and adventure. Is it gross materialism you're worried about?"

"Not at all. You really don't know what it is you're doing, do you? Think! What's the big problem shaping up for Terra?"

"At the moment," Sibyl said, "there's an interesting trend away from materialism on Earth, and at the same time money is losing its symbolic as well as its real value. This cultural change is—"

"Blah!" Gide said. "Blah in a peeled latrine. Earth's big

problem is overpopulation. So what does Earth want with Centaurus? Come on. I expect even the Greeks did it."

Sibyl sipped her drink. "They did a bit of colonizing. I don't recall that any harm was done by it."

"Try leaping a few centuries. Think of America, the land of hope and opportunity. Europeans carving their way through the wilderness, hacking their way through the Indians with beautiful, naïve idealism. Really, quite a beautiful thought, don't you think?" Gide sipped his drink with leisurely enjoyment.

"Oh, Gide, Gide. Nobody's talking about sending colonies to Centaurus. Did you meet any Terrans whom you could in your wildest dreams picture hacking up Centaurians?"

"Sure. Your friend Steer, for one. And take Victoria. She'd flap her expensive eyelashes and eat them if her Centaurian maid prepared them properly."

Sibyl sighed. "You're naïve," she said. "If that's what you think, I won't bother to argue with you. I can only tell you I *know* Steer, and even if he didn't make a good impression on you, he'd hack up anybody that tried to hack up Centaurians. There isn't any vast conspiracy of Terrans to take over Centaurus. Haven't you learned that vast conspiracies are almost always in the mind of the beholder? I really thought you were a cut above that kind of thinking. Have a cigar." Sibyl got two cigars off her shelf, lit Gide's and then hers, and leaned back on her inflated pillow, adjusting the Botticelli so that her curves were properly suggested. The Gin and 'gin spread a pool of warmth through her. She could feel her garnet earrings swinging merrily as she moved her head. Somehow, this was normalcy. She was a different creature from the woman swimming through cold alien seas, talking to a fish in the silver light of Lhadi.

"It isn't a vast conspiracy of people," Gide said, smoking remotely as a reaction to Sibyl's remark. "It's a vast con-

spiracy of circumstance. I don't really think anybody's going to hack their way through Centaurians. They won't have to. There'll be one infestation of Terrans after another on Centaurus, and they'll infiltrate and metastasize like cancer until they simply squeeze out the Centaurian organism. Too bad they found a cure for Terran cancers. There wouldn't be so many Terrans if they hadn't."

Sibyl thought about it unhappily as Gide spoke, and it dawned on her that he might well be right. It would just sort of happen. Terran culture was already spreading on Centaurus. There were a couple of Terran factories. And since interbreeding with mainland Centaurians was impossible, there was no question of simple absorption.

Still . . . "No," Sibyl said slowly, "I don't think it could happen now. Not since the Pax Mundi. The U.N. has too many well-organized safeguards. And already there's a Centaurian representative at the U.N. I'm not waving any flags, believe me, but I think Centaurus is safe. If you've got a gripe, why don't you take it up with the U.N. on Terra? They don't even know of the existence of your kingdom."

Gide finished his drink and made a face. "I've got a better idea. A safer one."

Sibyl got up and fetched the Gin, sprayed on the 'gin and handed Gide back his cup. It was time to sit casually down beside him. But she couldn't feel casual. Her blood ran too fast with his nearness. She'd forgotten he smelled like sunlight on the sea. For a moment she stood watching him, admiring the sure, sinuous way he smoked the cigar, the utter carelessness with which he flicked ashes on the floor. He was self-absorbed, unself-conscious. Kenneth had been that way--moving with sure grace through his world, accepting her into it without thought. Sibyl would have hung up his shirts for him forever, just to keep him that way.

But this was no time to start thinking about Kenneth.

She pushed Missy's travel case out of the way and sank down into the springy seamoss mattress. Gide moved away from her a little. Because he couldn't stand her? Or because he was afraid his hate might turn inside out, as it had in the forest?

"Do you tell people what your safer idea is?" Sibyl asked. "Or is it a secret?"

"It's a secret," Gide said.

"Then is it a secret what some human woman did to you once that shouldn't still be bothering you as it does?"

Gide looked at her in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Because you don't just find them reprehensible. You don't *hate* people unless one of them killed your mother or laughed at your clubfoot or something. Maybe if you told me about it, it would clear your thinking."

"I like my thinking the way it is. But come to think of it, I never *have* told anybody. It really isn't anything to tell. Sound foolish, I expect." Gide laughed a little. A very cultivated laugh with the Marinist accent that the Great Universities democratically try not to perpetuate. "When I first came to Terra I was privately tutored for several months and then I started college as a freshman. I was . . . disguised . . . as a Terran, as you saw me on the ship. I became interested in human girls and, indeed, for a time was hardly aware most of the time that I wasn't human. I began to concentrate on one girl in particular—a brown-haired girl with big blue eyes—and we were soon deeply in love. You know, the young kind of thing where you confuse endocrine secretions with eternal disembodiments."

"It isn't *only* a young kind of thing," Sibyl said, "and it isn't very funny, either. I did it not very long ago."

Gide ground out his cigar with his bare heel. "It's generally considered funny. You can guess the rest. Since we told each other everything, I naturally thought I should

tell her I wasn't human. Actually, I thought she'd be delighted, because we'd already agreed that conventional human values were meaningless and that most people were usual and very boring. Did you also do *that* recently?"

Sibyl smiled. "No. That part is funny. Although I do sometimes wonder if maturity isn't just a matter of not having the energy to really care about things. But go on."

"I have the energy to care about things," Gide said. And certainly for all his sophistication, he was always like a dancer poised for leap. "So one weekend when I met her at Rolling Rock—you know, in the Deer Mountains—I left off my scale-shrinking lotion and the rest of my paraphernalia and when she came in—our relationship was *not* platonic, you understand—I was lying in bed reading and she took one look and screamed. I had to hold my hand over her mouth to make her stop and I might have strangled her, except that at that moment I remembered that I was truly a Krilanrian and had a reason for my education on Terra and that mattered much more than one little Terran girl. So I explained to her that I was from another planet and finally she calmed down enough so I could take my hand off her mouth and she said, 'You're a goddam fish!' and that was the end of it." Gide's face twisted, remembering it, and he went back to his drink and then smiled a little.

Sibyl smiled back. "Only that wasn't the end of it. You've hated Terran women ever since, even though you've probably forgotten the girl's name and you know the romance wasn't anything. I don't suppose it would do any good," Sibyl went on in a smaller voice, "if I told you I don't think you're any goddam fish, and that I've had my mind full of the moment I had with you there in the forest."

"Before you set your wolfhound on me." Gide finished his Gin and 'gin, looked at Sibyl and made a strangled noise of complete disgust. "The reason I turned tail was

that I thought you weren't worth fighting for. And now, my fine—"

"Please, Gide. I had no idea Steer was going to follow me. Or that he'd behave like that. Don't you *know* it? Don't you remember how it was when you kissed me?"

Gide looked at her, smashed his empty cup against the wall and took her in his arms. It was the same deep, swelling kiss they had had before and it left Sibyl weak and trembling. Gide pushed her back roughly, then, and looked at her with his tiger eyes.

"Don't push me away," Sibyl whispered. "Strangle me, break my Terran bones, but don't keep yourself from me."

"Terran woman," Gide breathed, hurting her shoulders with his hands.

Sibyl reached around and unmeshed her dress. "If you want me," she said, "what can it hurt to take me? What will it matter?"

Sibyl lay in Gide's arms, stroking the place where the light glinted off his shoulder. The necklace glittered as he turned a little, and only then did she remember that she had meant to catch the moment when Gide's mind could hold no thoughts, only emotions. But the moment had gone in a wild lashing as of a full sea against the rocks, and Sibyl had been not Sibyl but the fury of the sea and the monumental upthrust of the rocks.

"But now I have lost something," Gide murmured. "Terran woman, I've lost something of myself in you. And you. What did it mean to you?"

Dear God, Sibyl thought. I've got to do it anyhow. She thought of Missy. For Missy. And so she couldn't answer Gide, because in a moment he'd never believe anything she'd ever said to him, or say to him later, if there ever should be a later. She only held him closer a moment,

tensed her mind while carefully keeping her body relaxed, reached her mouth down to his neck and bit off one of the orange jewels. She had to pull at the necklace, feeling the metal in which the pellet was set scraping at her teeth edges, in a split second feeling Gide rear back, grab for her again as she vaulted from the bed to the window.

He screamed a curse in his native language and got his powerful hands around one of her ankles. Sibyl said, through her teeth, "You won't believe it, but I love you," and kicked Gide straight between the eyes with her free foot. He went back and in his brief second of surprise she got her foot free and was out of the window, running into the forest.

In a moment Gide was after her, stumbling through low vines, crashing against tree branches, setting up a tinkling in the bell bushes and trees. But quick as he was, he didn't know the forest as she did, and he couldn't walk as silently through it. Sibyl stopped briefly to pick up a handful of rocks from the source of the Silver Spring, about in the middle of the forest, and then slowed her pace, stopping to throw the rocks carefully along the path to the Seian village, making a noise with them and finally disturbing a band of bat birds far down the path. Then she ran lightly through the woods to a huge, old balloon tree, scrambled up the gnarled trunk to the lowest branch, feeling a long scratch come on her stomach from a sharp twig, and climbed to a crotch in the upper branches. From here she could see the Seian Sea, lightly glittering chartreuse in the starlight.

She waited in the silence, where Gide would be looking for her up and down the path. The tree made a harsh resting place. Sharp twig ends scratched her and poked at her, and they were too firm for her to break off with her fingers. The tree bark was coarse. Now that she was still, Sibyl began to feel the cold. She didn't have a stitch on and she'd picked the windward side of the tree. She didn't want

to risk moving yet. A ripe balloon pod was blowing over the forest, dislodged by her climbing the tree. Would Gide notice it? Probably not. And he didn't know where the tree was.

Then Gide's voice came through the forest. "Terran woman, I would have killed you anyhow. The Sea Kings never drink from the same cup twice."

But you did, Sibyl thought. You had two Gin and 'gins from the same cup tonight, and Missy drank from it in between. You're half Sea King, but you're half-civilized, too. Only there was nothing civilized about the cold forest and the alien starlight and Gide's wildly melodic voice.

Then he added, "I'll get you, you thieving whore."

It made Sibyl almost physically sick, what she had done to Gide. It had been necessary to get the drug from Gide in some way. Missy came first. But not in that way. To make someone defenseless and then kick them in an old wound—"Each man kills the thing he loves," Sibyl thought. But no. That's silly. Most people don't have to do that.

Soon Sibyl found herself too cold again to speculate on what she might or might not have done. Gide seemed to have gone now, or at least couldn't be heard coming toward her, so she clambered stiffly down to where the creeping moss hung, and draped herself with it. It set her teeth on edge, creeping about on her, but the weather was getting colder as night deepened, and clouds were coming up over the horizon of the sea. The wind got gustier and Sibyl found a high nook in the lee of the wind and settled herself for a night of staying awake enough to keep from falling out of the tree and pull her mossy drapery back on every two minutes when it went creeping off, and asleep enough to get some rest.

She closed her eyes, and wondered what plans she should make for tomorrow. Plans, what an absurd thought!

With the momentary warmth and comfort of her cranny in the tree and her moss blanket and a silence of the forest, she became aware that the taste of the drug was still in her mouth. She'd bit down on it when Gide grabbed her foot, and swallowed it, metal hook and all. There were still flakes of it maddeningly stuck in her teeth. She jabbed futilely at them with her tongue and then dug them out with her fingernail. The covering tasted like fish scales, though it had looked clear as water, and the drug was bitter as gall and faintly oily.

Sibyl tried to settle the creeping moss behind her so it would cushion her back and not creep so. One plan for tomorrow was to get to the sea before dawn, because no doubt Gide would have the natives out looking for her at the first light. She'd freeze if she tried to stay in the water all night, far out enough so Gide couldn't find her. Then when would the drug start taking effect? Judging by Missy . . .

There was a flare of light as though the forest were catching on fire toward the village. Then the light scattered and Gide's voice came again.

"I'll get you," he shouted. "The sea is mine, too. Stay out of it."

The natives were weaving in and out among the trees. "Kill her on sight," Gide commanded in Seian.

CHAPTER 7

Sibyl huddled deeper in the crotch of the tree, pulling the creeping moss closer. The natives spread out quickly now, with Gide shouting them on. They wouldn't like this at all, being out at night, except that with the torches perhaps it seemed like a festival. A group of them were moving along the path toward her hut. A damp wind swirled their torches and brought the rancid smell of old bluette oil.

"Go up the trees," Gide shouted in Seian.

Sibyl started down the balloon tree. She hadn't thought they'd hunt at night when she went up it. It was the worst place to be because there was nowhere to run to. She knotted the moss around her neck and jammed her chin down in it to hold it, and began climbing down. The drizzle had dampened the tree trunk and the rough bark was hard to get a grip on. Sibyl got a long tear along the side of her arm. Not far now to the ground, but a torch was coming toward her. The creeping moss, which seemed to be developing a desperation of its own, was crawling sideways off her, clinging to the tree trunk. She yanked at it irritably and was about to slide down to the next branch . . .

The torchlight caught her helplessly sliding, pulling with one hand at the creeping moss, and a loud laugh rang out. As she landed on the lower branch, still far from the ground, she turned to see Gide, his face demonic in the blowing light, his lithe body bent to the right, coming up with a thrust behind the glittering spear in his right hand.

"You look ridiculous!" he cried, casting the spear on the accent of the word.

Sibyl stood frozen, unbelieving, screaming within herself, No. Not death. Not yet. Not . . . and slipped, so that the spear slammed against her arm, carrying her off the branch and onto a bank of blossoming bluettes. A fist of pain still ground at her and she found the spear stuck in the hanging flesh of her upper arm. All she could think of in the halves of a second was that it was like being hit with a brick, not like being stabbed. That someone had gotten things wrong and . . .

Gide was shouting for the natives, and the drizzle was getting worse and the torch he had tossed to the ground guttered out. The darkness was heavy and smelled now of blood and the breathless sweetness of crushed bluette blossoms. Gide knelt down searching with his hands. "Where are you?" he asked in a thick voice. His hands found the spear and he pulled it out.

Sibyl's flesh tore with a violence of piercing pain that turned her mind black for a moment, but it brought her back to reality. Gide's foot was on her stomach. She caught his ankle in her hands and rolled to the right as he brought the spear down. The spear plunged deep into the damp ground, where Sibyl's heart had just been, and she reared under Gide as he went off balance and butted him full in the stomach with her head. Torchlight flickered at the edges of her eyes as several Scians came up, gabbling excitedly about the rain. It was coming down harder now. Sibyl threaded her way through a prickly bush, holding her hands over her face.

Gide was behind her in a moment, but the prickles slowed him and the torches were too far and too flickering for him to see her in the rain. Finally, as she came through the bush and began running in a direction that looked dark, the spear

zoomed at her and landed somewhere far off the mark with a harmless thud. Sibyl had to slow now. The darkness was absolute and she had to feel her way. But no torch would last long now and Gide couldn't possibly follow her. She went warily, for the rain drummed out all other noises, and finally she found a spot where there was a little shelter, though she had no idea where she was and couldn't see what kept off the rain.

She crouched down, her head between her knees, waiting until her heartbeat would slow and the dizziness that suddenly possessed her would go away. She wondered how much blood she was losing, and couldn't tell if it were blood or raindrops running down her arm. Sibyl tried to remember the chart she'd learned as a rookie. It seemed to her there were no main veins or arteries in the flab of the arm. And anyhow, Sibyl thought, beginning to feel a little better, what would I do if I *were* bleeding to death? Better just to forget it and hope.

There was a sudden brilliance of lightning, and Sibyl saw she was under a sort of platform the twins had built in one of their endless games. They did all sorts of things Seian children didn't do. Thunder boomed through the air. Sibyl wondered where the twins were. Probably safely in Seian huts, warm and dry. Except for Darld. Was he wherever Missy was? Sibyl pictured her weeping into her long hair, in some pearly cavern where no storm came, and no sunlight.

The cold came creeping over Sibyl again, now that she was still. She huddled into herself. There would be no dry creeping moss to find now. Nothing for it but to endure. Would Gide, in his fury, be looking through the storm for her? Then Sibyl found herself getting a little dizzy again, feeling not bad, really, but just a little nauseated, and then a slight euphoria. Like a couple of drinks. She began to fancy she heard the sea, through all the rain, and that

the edges of it tickled her feet. She forgot she was cold, and began to feel drowsy. Warm and drowsy and wrapped in blankets of sleep. She slid down, her feet in a flowing puddle, and went to sleep with her knees drawn up, darkly rocking in the mighty motion of the sea.

It wasn't dawn that waked her. It was a nightmare of airless space. Of being outside the space ship and gasping horribly to fill her lungs and feeling her heart constrict but all her efforts were only a dry knotting of her diaphragm. And she fell endlessly through black and comfortless space and there was nothing to reach for and no hope. In the contortions of her struggles she woke herself and looked into a leafy branch greening with dawn and a sparkling, yellow raindrop rolled into her mouth.

Sibyl sat up, relieved that her dream was a dream. That smothering . . . to her horror she found she could still hardly breathe. Sibyl gasped in the thin air. How had the air gotten so thin, overnight? And she felt drunk, thick with languor. The overhanging branch shook as she lay back down, trickling raindrops over her. What was she doing here in this sparse, unprotected place? Sibyl remembered how she had come to Seia from Terra, how Missy had disappeared and how she had stolen the drug from Gide . . .

The drug. And yet it all seemed unreal. There was something wrong with her neck. Why hadn't Gide come looking for her with the first dawn? The drug. He must be in the sea already, since he had taken it first. Then it will happen to me soon, Sibyl thought. It must be happening to me now. If only it seemed more *real*. It was too cold to be real. The very liquors of her body were cold. The secret balances of her mind were frozen, numb.

She forced herself to sit up again, to figure out which way the sea would be. Her neck was itching badly, under the ears. It was the only warmth. There were ridges in it.

The gills, Sibyl thought. How strange! What will it be like, in the sea? The sea . . . it would be to her right, about a quarter of a mile, if she remembered correctly where the twins had built this platform.

She heard the natives in the forest. Gide must have left his instructions. She'd have to hurry. Dawn would be full on in a moment. Still she could hardly bring herself to get up. With the cold and the languor it seemed too much. And every breath got used up so quickly and left her exhausted.

"Here," one native said to another, and Sibyl knew she would *have* to get moving. She got up and tried to walk silently through the forest. But she found she couldn't see properly. Her eyes felt like a rain-spattered window. The trees seemed the wrong shape and in the wrong places. Her neck had stopped itching and started hurting a little. It felt stiff.

Then there was a native Seian holding each of her arms. They were giggling a little, and seemed much more like themselves. A sure sign Gide was gone. But they were pulling at her and pouring out streams of incomprehensible Seian. One of them had a spear.

"Wait," Sibyl said in Seian. "I will come. Let go." But they held on. At that moment, something like a wave washed through Sibyl and left a cold foaming in her stomach and she found she couldn't use her lungs at all. They seemed absolutely immobile and her need for water was absolutely imperative. She forgot about nonviolence with the natives. She kicked one in the stomach, grabbed the spear of the other and gave him a shove in the chest with the blunt end of it that toppled him over.

She ran blindly for the sea. She knew instinctively which way it was. She could feel it and hear it and smell it. It called to some deeps within her and the pain of being

apart from the sea was unendurable. There were natives following her but she was hardly aware of them. She was hardly aware of sheets of rain-washed air that shone off the sea when she got to it. She plunged into the waves and then under the greening water and her lungs, her whole body opened to the sea for her first breath of cold, bright water. There was a moment when she thought she was going to suffocate. A moment of her blood screaming for oxygen, and the rush of water through her and into her chest cavity that felt as though it would fill her whole body and stop the beating of her heart, flood the small, secret processes of her being, swirl into her brain until there would be no room for the windings of her living thoughts to uncoil.

Then she could feel the water rushing up her chest and out of her gills. And immediately it was better than air. It was a more substantial way to breathe. Something you could feel flowing. The first few times it tickled and almost hurt. And then she lost the awareness of it and realized she was swimming a new way. A slow, relaxed stroke against the buoyancy of the water, a breast stroke that kept her from rising to the surface. The weightlessness was exhilarating. She felt almost as though her body had been sloughed off. And she found that she could *see*. The water was not painful to her eyes, and she didn't feel like squinching them up. She saw the green sunshine filtering down the water, and the shadow of a bird that flashed low across the water. Or perhaps it was a fish higher up.

Below her grew tall, green seaweeds and pinkish, translucent somethings that looked like stacks of boxes, with the lids opening and closing slowly. She swam into a school of glittering fish and felt them nuzzling at her with curious mouths that tickled her sides. She followed the deepening slope toward the open sea. It was more curious than

going to another planet, breathing this cool, thick atmosphere and floating almost effortlessly above that waving lawn. The seaweeds turned darker, and began to thin out.

Which way to go? Sibyl followed the sloping floor to deeper water. But even without watching the bottom she knew, instinctively, which way was away from shore, the same way she knew left from right and up from down. But once she got into deep enough water, how would she know where to look, in all those miles of sea, for the submarine cliff that Pugh had found? She remembered the forest of melon trees Pugh had mentioned. But even so . . .

A current of water hit her in the face so hard it almost pushed her backward, and then she felt as though she were being sucked into a whirlpool. Then as suddenly as it had come, it stopped and she felt soft fingers at her neck and a bitter taste came into the water she was breathing. At first she thought she was caught in some maverick current of the sea and then it turned yellow and she reached up her hands to feel the sides of an enormous jellyfish which was trying unsuccessfully to swallow her. She laughed a little to herself and pulled its soft, convulsing mouth from over her head. It took off in a jet of yellow dye.

But it reminded Sibyl that everything was not as harmless as a jellyfish, and she should not swim so thoughtlessly, not knowing what dangers this strange countryside might hold. A little farther out she could come across strangler cels. Those she could watch for. But what else? Besides Gide, of course. He'd probably be expecting her. Would he be watching outside the cliff? Or have someone else watching? And how would she find that door Pugh talked about, and how get it open, if it were really a lock like those on a space ship?

She swam closer to the bottom and saw a stand of the tulip baby-faces Pugh had mentioned. The current of her

swimming made them open up, and tiny, big-eyed faces stared up at her. She smiled and swam down to them, reaching out a finger to pet one very gently. It whipped out a tiny tongue and wrapped a vicious poison around her finger. She pulled away with a red welt on her hand and swam on, a little lonelier than she had been before.

Less light filtered down, as she got farther out, and she swam higher up. The sea life thinned out, and she saw only the shadow of a fish now and then. Ahead she saw a melon forest, but it was the wrong one. The melon trees grew on long stalks and all along the stalks were collections of shellfish and some trees were half-eaten and some wound with snaky, yellow vines. There was a path of what looked like luminescent grass along the floor of the sea. Sibyl was swimming down to it when she heard someone calling.

Surely not! Then it came again, "Sh . . . p . . ." and she realized it was the lunga. She looked up and saw him coming toward her. "P . . . p," he said, as she had taught him to say, "Bye-bye." She waved toward him and he swam to her, repeating the stops. Now if only she could make him understand that she wanted him to show her the cliff where Missy was! He knew, because Pugh had followed him there. Had the lunga known Pugh was looking for Missy? Or had it been sheer chance?

Sibyl put her arm over the lunga when he came close. "Missy," she said, knowing it was futile. Her voice sounded so strange under water! The lunga tried to imitate her. "Mmmmm . . . sh . . . sh . . ." But it didn't mean anything to him. He started his purring sound and did a figure eight in the water with Sibyl clinging to him. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Sibyl searched her mind desperately for a way to let him know what she wanted. She tried, "Sibyl, girl. Missy, girl," and she thought she eventually might get this through to him, but it took so

long, especially as he insisted on doing tricks in the water while she talked to him, and expected to be patted for each one. Then he reached out and snapped up a melon and handed Sibyl one with his mouth.

Melon! If she could get him to take her to the other forest! She let go of the lunga and went through the forest snapping off melons and letting them float to the top, and ending up at the edge of the forest with three of them wedged under one arm. She held them out to the lunga but snatched them away as he went to eat them. She swam away, holding out a melon. Would he understand? First he swam back to the forest, and came out with a melon in his mouth for Sibyl. She took it, and quickly swam off again, holding out the melon. She made picking motions and he tried to lead her back, but she swam on, thinking how awful it would be if he couldn't find her when he came back. She'd have a lot of ocean to search if it had to be haphazard for the cliff.

But finally he seemed to understand that she wanted another melon forest, and as he began to swim in a different direction she hooked her arm over him and had a relaxing ride. She was beginning to be hungry and wondered what would happen if she tried to eat one of the melons. She remembered them as tasting foul, when she had to eat them with King Seia. They were animals, Pugh had said. Perhaps if she thought of them more as oysters and less as fish they'd taste better raw.

She bit into the one melon she had left. At first she thought it was going to make her retch, but then, going down with sea water, it began to taste rather nice. Definitely like oysters, very salty, but with the slightly perfumed taste of lobsters. Certainly nothing like the rotten fish taste of roasted melons with stale bluette oil, such as the natives ate. She began to fancy the aftertaste of the raw melons

was like beer, and realized she was drinking sea water. Yet it wasn't making her thirsty. No doubt something about the hormone again. She began to wonder, inconsequentially, if people who might be stranded on rafts at sea might not carry a hormone to give them a tolerance to sea water. But then how would you know you were going to be stranded on a raft at sea? Not much call for that sort of thing. Anyway, the discovery of the other things branchione did were much more exciting. Imagine being able to skin dive without oxygen. It was going to . . .

Sibyl came to with a start and realized she had started to drowse off in the cool flow of the sea around her body and the smooth swimming of the lunga. They had come to another melon forest and the lunga did another figure eight of delight, but would only go a little way into the forest. Sibyl could see right away what Pugh had meant when he said the forest gave the impression of being cultivated. All the trees were upright, for one thing, not sprawled at angles where some large sea creature had run into it, or left to disintegrate when it had died. Also no sea creatures had settled their lodgings on it, and the ocean floor was clear, except for paths of the luminescent grass, and even that seemed trimmed, not growing up the sides of the trees.

Sibyl tugged at the lunga, trying to get him to go through the forest with her, because she didn't want to lose him in case this were the wrong forest. But he wouldn't go, and in fact swam around and nudged at her with his nose to try to keep her from going in. Perhaps he remembered whatever weapon had whizzed past Pugh when he came into the forest. Perhaps the lunga were a problem to the sea cliff people who kept the forest, eating up the melons, and that's why they were shot at.

Sibyl pushed the lunga away, and he finally gave up on

her and swam off, saying, "P . . . p," rather sadly, Sibyl thought. She went along the luminous path away from the edge of the forest. The light was very dim this far down. Then she thought of Gide, or someone he might send, possibly waiting and watching for her, and switched to a route off the path, but close enough to it to follow it toward what she hoped was the cliff. Swimming this far down, and being small and slim as she was, she wouldn't be mistaken for a lunga by anyone taking pot shots.

Finally Sibyl ran into something solid which turned out to be the cliff. She began to follow it down in the rapidly dimming light. After about five minutes she came to one of the caves that Pugh had said fretted the cliff. It was startlingly beautiful, glittering with opening and closing sea creatures like blinking lights, and after the darkness of the sea they seemed to cast a brilliant light. On the floor of the cave grew the luminescent grass, bluish in the bluish light of the winking shellfish, and from it grew up spikes of airy, coral-colored fretwork from which a stream of crystal bubbles streamed up and around the cave in its small currents.

Sibyl left the cave and went farther down. There was no way to judge how far down Pugh had found the door, but Sibyl guessed it would have been a little farther than she had gone. He'd said it was dark. She felt along the cliff wall as she went. He hadn't *seen* the door. He'd felt it. The cliff wall was worn into smooth ridges, interrupted by sea growths, some rough, some slimy. There should be an indentation . . .

Suddenly a brilliant light appeared to Sibyl's left, and then went off. She made for it immediately, trying to swim on the same level, to judge how far it had been. That must have been the lock opening, and light streaming out from it. Would it have been Gide coming out? Sibyl

went slowly and carefully. If she couldn't see him, at least he couldn't see her. She wished desperately she had some kind of weapon. The beautiful, slim dagger in the purse of her Botticelli would be perfect. But she hadn't so much as a rag of cloth to try to strangle somebody with. Nothing. Even my fingernails, she thought wryly, would be soft from the water.

Then the light went on again, just next to her, and she saw it was coming from behind a door that opened outward. This was her only chance, because she'd never be able to get it open by herself. Maybe that was why Gide hadn't been out looking for her. She took a deep breath of water and threw herself around into the door opening just before it closed.

With a click and a swooshing sound of water the doors folded together behind her, and she was immediately aware that there was something wrong about the door and the blinding light, and then her eyes adjusted to it and she saw that she was being held in a sort of net that turned her this way and that while a pair of giant, triangular jaws opened hungrily just before her. Her initial thought was that this was some kind of horrible machine, and then she realized she'd been caught by a huge shellfish of some kind. Something attached to the side of the cliff, that opened like a barnacle.

The net readjusted her position and the blind, luminescent face came down with its mandibles open and Sibyl threw herself over and scrambled wildly down the netted appendage so that the creature caught her foot in its mandibles and only managed to tear the flesh of her toe before she pulled her leg up under her. The head reared back again in its crowded space, and the net began to push Sibyl up again in a series of convulsions and turnings. But Sibyl could get a good handhold on the hairs of the netlike appendage

now, and she pulled herself down to where the appendage almost met the underside of the mandible. The water inside the creature's case was beginning to foul a little, and tasted rotten. There were shells of small sea creatures caught in the lower part of the net, and Sibyl took a sharp-edged one and began cutting hard at the tough flesh of the underside of the mandible. The flesh was leathery and at first seemed impervious, but Sibyl pushed and pulled with the sharp-edged shell, and finally the creature began to writhe, trying to reach at her with the net, trying to twist its mandible away. The water Sibyl was breathing grew fouler and began to turn yellowish-green. Still she sawed away, trying not to breathe at all, fear sweating out of her at the thought of getting eaten, bit by bit, if the fouling water sent her into a faint. She'd wake up with her living flesh being . . .

But suddenly she felt a rush of clean water as the creature opened up and she was sent reeling down the thrust-out appendages. She made for the cliff side and pulled herself into a little, shell-lighted cave to breathe clean water and recover. The sea water seemed to be healing her torn skin already. At any rate, it didn't hurt or bleed.

There was something odd about the little cave. It was too . . . square. She looked around. It narrowed into the cliff and made a tunnel. She tried to look into the tunnel but it led downward and either ended or sloped. Sibyl floated in the cave, relaxing and thinking about the tunnel. It was square, and looked as though it had been deliberately cut into the cliff. Certainly, none of the other caves had had tunnels. It was wide enough to swim into but not wide enough to turn around in. Would the Krilantrians have made this? Why? Hardly for an entrance, when someone the size of Gide would barely fit into it. A window? But who could see out of it, curving way down like that?

There was one way to find out, but Sibyl had to take a few minutes to argue herself into it. There was something about being so enclosed that was frightening, and if something came at her from behind she'd be helpless. If something came along and seized her feet . . . but that was an absurd thought. Only suppose the tunnel led only to blackness. Suppose it was some large sea creature's trap, and something would close around her . . .

Sibyl plunged along the tunnel and propelled herself kicking her feet. There wasn't room to bring her arms down. There was a flow of warm water as she got farther in, and then a sudden current sucking her farther into the tunnel. Not a strong enough current to be frightening, and it freshened the water, which had begun to taste just a little stale after the pristine freshness of the open sea. The lighted shellfish began to thin out, and she saw at the curve of the tunnel a gelatinous, green blob of luminescence, like a lantern, only it was flattening itself against the top of the tunnel against the current. Sibyl brushed past it as she rounded the turn in the tunnel, felt some mild poison burning on her shoulder, and then forgot about it forever.

Ahead of her the light was brilliant. It shone in little squares and when Sibyl got close enough she saw that it was a window. No, a grill. A filter. Bits of seaweed and a dead fish were caught on it. Sibyl swam up to it and looked through. Beyond was the kingdom of Krilanr—or part of it. It was an enormous room, with openings leading out of it on all walls, and at all levels. It was lined all around with the luminous shellfish and the glowing grass Sibyl had seen on the bottom of the sea melon grove. Huge balloons of light floated here and there, and between them swam the Krilanrians, all looking much like Gide but not so tall. Neither men nor women were clothed, except for decorative

ankle bracelets and shining patches that were either jewels or parasitic ornaments.

On the farther wall from Sibyl was what looked like a television or movie screen. It was blank. Then Sibyl saw something beginning to move on it, and realized it was a piece of glass and beyond it was a figure . . . Missy! It was a cage. No, a terrarium. Missy was walking, not floating. From here Sibyl could see little of her, except the way she stood, the familiar stance as individual as a fingerprint, and her long hair. Certainly Missy and certainly alive! Then a group of Krilanrians swam in front of the glass and Missy was blotted out.

Sibyl was content for a moment to float there, knowing Missy was surely alive, and forgetting all the problems of rescuing her and getting back to Terra. She couldn't help admiring the Krilanrians as they swam by, their movements infinitely smooth and graceful, like a dance in the yellowish-green fluid of the ocean, in and out among the floating bubbles of light.

Then something grabbed her feet. Sibyl pulled away with instinctive violence, but she realized in a flash that moving in water was a very different thing from moving in air. Something held her and when she tried to twist around all she did was scrape her shoulders and back on the shellfish that lined the tunnel. These had sharp, vicious shells, unlike the luminescent ones. She hooked her fingers into the grill to get a grip and shoved back with all her strength against her attacker.

"Gide?" She said aloud, but there was no answer, and however loud she screamed it, the water took the strength from it and made it a soft bubble like a fish makes. She tried to pull one foot back to grip against the ankle of the other and found her ankles were tightly tied together. She grasped the grill harder and was about to push back again

when she saw Darld swim directly in front of her, intent on trying to balance himself on top of a moving balloon light. Frantically she tried to signal to him, to call him. But her voice didn't carry and he wasn't looking her way. Anyhow, she was in darkness and he wouldn't see her. She broke a piece of shell off the side of the tunnel and pushed it through the grill, but it was just a bit of dust floating in the huge room. She tried to rattle the grill but it didn't rattle. The dead fish dislodged and floated back into her face.

With her feet tied, Sibyl was very awkward, and every time she moved she cut herself on the sides of the tunnel. She was watching Darld's every move, and then, like a miracle, the luminous balloon careened out from under him and began floating in the current toward Sibyl. She held her breath while Darld swam straight toward her—he *must* see her. He was looking straight at her. She poked her fingers through the grill and wiggled them. But the current stopped, and the balloon moved away.

But as the current stopped, a thin necklace of shining creatures flowed through the grill toward the room. Probably larvae. They caught Darld's eye and he swam over to catch them and drape them over his arm for an ornament. Then he caught the wiggling of Sibyl's fingers and came over to poke at them curiously. Only then did he see Sibyl's face behind the grill.

"Sh!" Sibyl bubbled, holding her finger to her lips. Though surely Gide knew she was there and it was probably he who had tied up her feet. "Help me!"

"What you doing there?" Darld asked. It was the first words Sibyl had heard under water and she was surprised how clearly she could understand them, though they came through very blurred. Darld was grinning widely. He thought it was funny.

"Somebody has tied up my feet," Sibyl said. "I must get to Missy. Is she all right?"

"Yes. All right," Darld said. "But the God say she will not learn. I tell the God you here. Supposed to use the door."

"I couldn't find the—" And suddenly something shot to in front of the grill and Sibyl was closed off.

Now the darkness was absolute and Sibyl almost panicked. She found herself grazing the sharp shells again, and swallowed the primeval fear rising in her. With the grill closed off, she could see nothing, hear nothing but the beating of her own heart which began to sound so loud it seemed to be pulsating the water.

She'd have to back out. If she stayed there she really would panic, and cut herself to ribbons on the vicious shells. She began the slow, awkward task of backing herself out with her feet tied together. It was very difficult to balance herself in the water, not being able to use her legs separately, and she had to back upwards in the tunnel. She had to grasp the sharp shells carefully with her hands, so they didn't cut her, and push herself back, and remember to keep her feet up at just the right angle.

She figured she should be getting to the top of the slope, and at least there'd be light and the sharp shells would end. At that point her feet touched something. The tunnel was closed off.

CHAPTER 8

Sibyl's blood ran cold. *That's* why she hadn't been shot. A quick kill was too gentle for Gide's mood. Sibyl tried to open her eyes and found they were already open. She blinked them twice. The darkness was so complete it seemed to blind her very thoughts. A blind tunnel. She felt the panel with her feet again. There was no current at all around the edges of it. It must be water-tight. Probably the one at the other end was too. Maybe this system was used to pump all the water out of Krilanr from time to time. Or perhaps it was closed off when the grills were cleaned. This must have something to do with why the luminescent shellfish ended with the curve in the tunnel. The panel was smooth, as though it were made out of metal. There were no sea creatures growing on it.

Then a little string of lighted larvae drifted up to Sibyl, and it was such a small and lonely kind of light it made the darkness worse. Something with scrabbling claws began climbing up the small of her back, and she screamed a drowned scream and writhed at it, but there was no way to reach back and brush it off. It began crawling up her spine, dragging some soft part of its body behind it. I'll go mad, Sibyl thought. I'll go mad here alone under the sea in the little larval light with claws on my back . . . No, I won't. Not with Missy to be rescued and all my life before me and not before I find out what Gide's plan for saving Centaurus from Terra is. It might be just talk

and then again it might spell danger for Centaurus or Terra or both.

Calmer, Sibyl started doubling over until her raised spine was close to the top of the tunnel. Then she carefully mashed the clawed creature against the sharp shells. She could feel its death struggles and she was sorry, but it was the creature or her. She needed, just now, to be the one that won.

She made her way carefully down the tunnel again to the grill facing Krilanr. She could feel the squares of metal, slimy with interlaced seaweed that gave off an iodine odor when her fingers bruised it. She could touch the solid metal panel beyond it. The grill moved just a little when she shook at it. It wasn't solidly set into the stone of the cliff and, though almost hopeless, Sibyl could try to get it off and then have a bash at the panel.

First she needed something to pry with and the only possible thing was the sharp-edged shells that lined the tunnel. She began to feel carefully among them, slipping her hand around the sharp edges to find how they were attached. Each one she pulled at seemed cemented to the rock and they were so close together they were almost on top of each other. But finally, at the edge of the grill, she found one she could get her hand around, behind the vicious fluting of the flanged edge, and she began to rock it back and forth. It had perhaps been loosened the last time the grill was taken out for cleaning. It was impossible for her to get any strength behind her pulling, with her feet tied helplessly together, and tending to float up toward the razor edges of the top of the tunnel, and all her movements slowed by the constant pressure of the water. Still, Sibyl stopped to breathe, pumping the heavy water in and out of her gills, and decided she'd have to free her feet.

She anchored herself to the grill with her fingertips, raised her feet and caught the rope that bound her against the edge of a shell. Then it was a matter of flexing her knees and pushing herself back and forth against the grill for what seemed hours, until she felt the rope loosen and finally she could pull her feet apart. By now her ankles were aching and her fingertips stiff from holding onto the grill. But she could steady herself with her feet while she rocked at the loose shell.

She could feel some small creature moving in the shell, retreating from the assault on its kingdom, scrabbling and then finally quieting with fear. At length the whole shell broke loose and Sibyl breathed a watery sigh of relief and began levering the edge of the grill with it. The iodine smell of the crushed seaweed filled the tunnel now, along with some sort of fear smell from the shellfish, and Sibyl began to worry about the water being fouled before she got out.

She could feel the grill beginning to give as she worked at it. It was loosely fitted in and if she could get her fingers around the sides . . . no, underneath. She got her fingers under the grill, pushed up, and it almost floated out into her face. Then she took the edge of the grill and tried to get some leverage on the smooth panel that enclosed the darkness. But it seemed to make an almost seamless closing. It was hopeless.

Only surely Darld would be coming to her rescue. He wouldn't have forgotten. Or if he didn't think she needed rescuing, as soon as he told Missy about it, Missy would tell him what to do. Those panels must open easily from the other side. There must be *some* way . . .

Even as Sibyl thought this, the panel was raised, a stream of light poured in, and somebody spoke angrily in Krilanrian and threw a dead fish into the tunnel and let the panel

down, quicker than it takes to say it. But Sibyl recovered herself enough to shove the edge of her shellfish in as the panel went down, and this gave her a sliver of space for leverage.

Somebody had been throwing trash in the sewer.

Sibyl waited a moment—how much attention was she going to attract—and then started working at raising the panel. It moved now, but not easily. She finally got enough space with the shell so she could use the edge of the grill, and as she got it farther up it seemed to loosen and she got her hands under it. Then she positioned the thickest part of the shell under the panel to hold it up—just a couple of inches—and peered out. Just to see light again, to get out of that eternal, blind silence, restored her.

The room was crowded with Krilanrians, but as Sibyl watched, a bell rang and they began to stream out of the room through various doors at different levels. At first it seemed curious to Sibyl that they seemed to go in groups by sizes, and then she realized that she was watching a school. A school of Krilanrians, she laughed to herself. The round, plump children, the lean, leggy adolescents who swam all elbows and knees, and finally many adults. A college? Or was Gide educating the entire adult population of Krilanr? And how big was it? Was it just the few in the room, or did it extend over other cliffs, even other seas?

Gide had had some sort of "solution" to Terran occupation of Centaurus. What had he meant? Was he educating his people to contend with Terra? Did he intend to use force to keep Terrans off Centaurus?

Darld was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he had planned to try to help her later, when the room was clear. But Missy was there, gazing out at the departing Krilanrians, several of whom swam over for a last look at her before they left. And Sibyl realized what Gide had wanted Missy for. Exhibit

A, Terran Female. But at least she didn't seem to be chained, and it looked as though she had clothes on.

Two Krilanrians stayed later than the others, collected the huge lantern creatures and swam off through doors with them. This dimmed the room a bit, particularly in the middle where the gleam from the winking shellfish didn't reach. Sibyl watched until she could see nothing moving in the water, and then she pushed with all her strength until she got the metal panel all the way up and swam through it into the enormous room.

The water was warm here, almost uncomfortably warm, and tasted of too many people. But almost immediately Sibyl swam into a cool current that bespoke a strong pumping system, a carefully handled climate control. No primitive technology, this. And yet—there was much that was primitive about it. The use of shellfish for lighting, for instance. The uneven walls that had been left as they were or carved by hand. It was a sophisticated technology set into a primitive culture.

All, perhaps, the work of Gide Girais. Or of his father, who must have learned of Terra somehow and foreseen the need for preparing his people to meet an advanced civilization. Sent his son to learn the ways of Man. And woman, Sibyl added to herself wryly.

Missy had disappeared but there was an opening visible through her glass that must lead to a chamber beyond. Sibyl hadn't seen the opening before, so that it was either closed then to force Missy into public view or Missy had come out on purpose. She swam toward the glass and wondered how she was going to get in. Then it came home to her that if she did get in, she'd smother in the air. Could she manage to talk to Missy through the glass?

As she watched, another bell rang, and she saw Darld come into the room beyond the glass and then apparently

disappear into the floor, and at the same time someone came up to her and spoke to her in Krilanrian. It was a young male Krilanrian, and his voice held curiosity and surprise. And some hostility. Sibyl spoke to him calmly in English, and then turned and swam away as quickly as possible, toward Missy, since she didn't know what else to do. But the Krilanrian boy darted in front of her like a minnow. He was incredibly swift and graceful. He was asking his question again, louder, and Sibyl thought she sensed a cold fanaticism in his alien eyes. He grasped her by the arm and began to shout.

Sibyl began talking quickly and calmly, but he had decided not to listen. She began to squirm away from him, but although he was smaller than her—about the size of a twelve-year-old human—his strength was remarkable. And Sibyl was too unused to moving in the water to be able to control her muscles to the best advantage. She tried to twist his wrist with her hands, but the smooth, scaled flesh didn't turn. Struggling with him, she was surprisingly aware of his beauty—he had the inviolate beauty of all things young, and his little scales gleamed deep blue and silver and his eyes were round and brilliant yellow, his mouth a thin scarlet bow. But the danger . . .

There was a brief shout in Krilanrian and Sibyl turned, as the boy let go, to see Darld. He said something to the boy in a hesitant Krilanrian, and the boy looked sulky and then swam off, turning at an upper door to look down at Sibyl and then over at the terrarium where Missy lived.

"Quick!" Darld said, motioning Sibyl to follow him. "The young one might tell. He is the son of a noble. Blue strain."

Sibyl followed Darld, though she couldn't move nearly as fast as he, and they went through one of the doors just as she heard groups of Krilanrians coming out of other

doors into the big room. Darld turned left into an opening, went through a dark chamber and turned right into an even darker one with water that tasted so stale Sibyl thought it must never have been ventilated.

"I going to try to help you," Darld said, when he finally stopped in this room. "Missy tell me to. But you are out anyhow. Missy say not to tell the God. But he will be angry."

"He isn't any God!" Sibyl said. "That's Gide Girais, from the ship coming over to Centaurus. Didn't you recognize him? And he tried to kill . . ."

"Sh!" Darld said, and pulled Sibyl into a niche in the wall.

Then Sibyl saw a door opening in the murk, and a tall figure came out and swam gracefully off. Gide Girais. She tried not to breathe as he went through the dim room, but he didn't stop to look around. She could feel the current he made through the water, and then he was gone.

Darld waited a moment and then beckoned for Sibyl to follow him. He did something to the door Gide had emerged from, and Sibyl followed him into what turned out to be a lock. "Take a deep breath," he said, and opened the other door. They emerged into a small, air-filled room and Sibyl, holding a breath of water, found an atmosphere of air lonely and cold and it made her feel heavy and awkward. Darld slipped immediately into a small pool in the floor and disappeared. Sibyl went after him, letting out a long breath of water and breathing again gratefully. The pool turned out to be the entrance to another tunnel, very dark with no sea life in it, and not very fresh, and it led shortly to more air.

Sibyl took a breath of water and put her head into the air.

Directly in front of her was Missy, trying on her red cocktail dress.

"Missy!" Sibyl turned to call, but all that happened was that water spewed out of her gills and she choked. Missy whirled around and cried, "Mother!" and ran over to pull her out of the water. And then stopped. "You're sea changed!" Missy said. "Go under water and breathe. I can hear you talk. I've had lots of practice."

Missy bent over the side of the pool, and Sibyl, looking up through the water, could see her daughter's face, with Kenneth's dark, smoldering eyes, with the long hair that fell forward and dripped into the water. And tears that trickled out of her eyes. "Mother, I can't go with you. I'd drown. There are tons of water above me. I lie here and think about it sometimes. All those tons of water between me and the world. The world! Now that I see you, I can doubt what Gide said. It isn't true is it? About you?"

Sibyl hadn't expected to be confronted with her relationship to Gide so soon. And this was no time . . .

"You're good. Our friends are good. All the people we've known and the world I've known. They wouldn't be planning to enslave all of Centaurus, would they? And you—you wouldn't be part of a plan like that. But he kept saying it, about having to protect his people."

"The God cannot lie," Darld said. But he didn't sound very confident.

"Oh, Darld," Missy said. "You, too. I keep trying to educate you and you keep trying to educate me, but now that Mother's here we can both think better. If it matters . . . Yes, it matters."

A feeling of relief washed through Sibyl. Thank God it didn't matter about her and Gide. Missy apparently wasn't in love with him any more. What absurdity it would have

been, if she and Missy, at a time like this, had had to quarrel through barriers of water and air about Gide Girais.

"This is no time to chat," Sibyl said. "We've got to decide what to do now. Darld, you've got to help us. You must get hold of some of that branchione drug for Missy and hide me until it takes effect—come to think of it, you'll have to refresh mine, too, or I'll drown, since I gather from the Rites of the Sea that it lasts maybe about twelve hours. And you must come with us when we leave."

"Mother, you *must* hear what Gide's planning to do. If he discovers you've escaped knowing it he'll do it sooner. You'll have to forget about me."

"The God plan to save his people," Darld said. "King Seia and the Seians, too."

"What about the rest of the Centaurians?" Missy said. "And the Terrans on Centaurus? Did he tell you what he plans to do about them?"

"He say trust the God."

"I'll bet he did," Missy said. "Do you know what he plans to do? He's going to melt the glaciers on Centaurus."

"The glaciers!" Sibyl cried, in a watery bubble. "How?"

"With a couple of fusion bombs imported piece by piece from Terra. Gide's been going back and forth a long time."

"But what does he hope to accomplish by doing that?" Warm up the climate? Sibyl wondered.

"Oh, *Mother*. Ten years ago they froze up more glaciers to lower the sea level on earth. But with conditions as they are on Centaurus, melting the glaciers—if he's successful—will raise the sea level until the continent and all the islands are drowned. He's going to drown everybody on Centaurus!"

"Drown! . . ." Sibyl echoed incredulously. Then she thought about it. Of course. Gide and his Krilanrians and anybody else he wanted to save—except mainland Centaurians who would not respond to the drug—would have

their branchione. They would have their sea world which Terra would not want and then Centaurus, according to Gide's thinking, would never tempt Terran colonists.

"Everybody will leave Centaurus first," Darld said sturdily. "The God will not harm them."

"But won't the glaciers form again?" Sibyl asked.

"Eventually," Missy answered. "By that time Terran ships will no longer be coming to Centaurus. After all, where would they land? And by then Gide will have his Krilanrians ready to shoot down Terran space ships before they get near Centaurus. And he will repopulate Centaurus with his own people."

"There don't seem to be many of them," Sibyl said. "In terms of repopulating a whole continent." She was watching the winking lights in Missy's ceiling and trying to make herself believe that surely Gide wouldn't be checking to be sure she was still closed off in her tunnel. If he went looking for her now . . .

"The God have many people in the northern continent of Centaurus," Darld said. He was swimming impatiently in circles around Sibyl. "This only for education of the Favored of the God."

"Is he planning to inundate Terra, too?" Sibyl asked.

Missy sat back, so Sibyl could no longer see her face. She sighed. "I don't believe he's gotten that far yet. But it certainly isn't beyond him. You see why I say for you to leave. Get back to the mainland in Steer's heli and get help . . ."

"Steer's gone and so has everybody else. Gide didn't tell you?"

"Gide told me he was going to save you. He wants me to . . . to train me so I can go to Terra later, maybe, and spy. All sorts of things he thinks a Terran could be useful

for. Useful. That's all he ever wanted me for, Mother. He . . ."

"Later, Missy," Sibyl said. "We'll talk about all that later. Darld, the God had no intention of saving me. He hates me. He imprisoned me in that tunnel and he was going to let me slowly smother to death. Or go mad or starve, whichever came first. He's a fanatic. We can't let him go ahead with his plan. And you're the only one. The *only* one who can help us. Remember, he isn't a God. He's a Krilanrian who's trying to take over Centaurus for Krilanr. He's been using you. Using the Seians. And he'll go on doing it."

Darld began to cry. Loud sobs and great gouts of expelled water. "Me don't know what to do. Disobey you or disobey the God."

Sibyl forced herself to be calm. Not to picture Gide swimming through the halls, about to open the lock and swim through the pool to her. "Darld, *think*. Remember Gide on the ship. Don't you *know* that's who the God is? And you know he meant to kill me. And think how he made your Seians . . . no, you weren't there. But he gave them spears and one of them almost killed Pugh—you remember your friend Pugh from the ship—and one of them did kill Happy. Poor, little Happy. That's the kind of person Gide is. And none of us had ever done anything to him."

"Maybe," Darld said reluctantly. He had his face turned to the side of the pool, his head under the ledge.

"Darld," Missy said. "Remember you're half Terran. Remember we were your friends when your mother brought you to Earth, to claim your father's inheritance. We brought you back to your eleven brothers on the beaches of Seia. And if Gide floods the planet there will be no more beaches. No more Seia."

"Mother!" Missy cried. "There's Gide. He's looking

through my glass. I can see him through the door. And the look on his face . . ."

"I am grown now," Darld said, as though he hadn't heard Missy. "But I miss the beaches of Seia, and it is true you be my friends and take care of me, and that I know the God be only Gide Girais. I see now and . . ."

"He's on the way," Sibyl cried. "Darld, you'll have to hide me! Quick!" Darld turned to lead the way out of the pool but before she rushed after him Sibyl thrust her head above the water and took one last look—in case it might be the last—at her daughter and the room. Then, through the tepid, stale-tasting water she kept the image of her long-haired child in the gleaming chamber of iridescent, inlaid shell, with a bedstead of orange pearls glistening against the white walls, a deep green carpet of moss on the floor, a strange amber light over all that seemed to come from nowhere.

Then she felt a sudden current. No, a pressure in the water. Then—"Darld!" Gide said. His voice was very different in the water, but Sibyl knew immediately who it was. "Have you seen Sibyl? What are you doing here at class time?" The voice was angry, stern.

Sibyl turned quickly and swam back to the pool in Missy's room, made herself as small as she could under the ledge. Then Gide said, "You let her out, didn't you? *Didn't you?*" And a scream from Darld and then she could see the top of Gide's head coming through the tunnel and she took a deep breath of water and lunged herself out of the pool. On land she immediately felt cold and helpless and smothered, but she glanced quickly about the room for a weapon. Missy seemed to have heard or guessed what had happened, and handed Sibyl a heavy, beautifully molded glass water carafe. The water flowed down Sibyl's arm as she turned it upside down and grasped the neck.

Sibyl stood back from the pool. Gide's head came up in a moment, looking straight at her, and in his surprise Sibyl got to him in time to crash the carafe over his head just before he got all the way under water. Then, strangling for breath, she slipped into the water and called to Missy, "Grab him under the shoulders and *pull*." She could feel Missy pulling as she shoved Gide up from his hips, and then lifted his feet out of the water.

She turned back to see to Darld as his limp body floated up to her, face down. She turned him, and saw that a strip of molefish skin had been wrapped around his gills expertly, so he couldn't exhale. She reached quickly for a bit of the broken carafe and cut the material and held Darld well under water while his tortured gills opened again.

"Mother!" Missy called. "Get out fast. The Krilanrians know something is up."

"He'll die out of water," Sibyl said. "Then you can put the body back in and—"

"But I can't. I *can't* watch him die. I loved him once. Anyhow . . . Mother, he's thrashing about and *looking* at me and those gills are opening and closing. Please!"

"The God is bad," Darld was choking out. "Oh, my poor . . ."

"Shove him back in, Missy," Sibyl said. Of course she couldn't let the girl kill a man. It had all happened so fast . . . Besides, when he was found Missy would be blamed and God knows what the Krilanrians would do to her. If they found out before Sibyl could get her out of there.

She reached up her hands and took Gide's convulsive body. She held her hands tightly over his gills and began swimming toward the other pool, that came up by the lock. Darld helped her hold him. Gide was twisting violently and got his arms locked around Sibyl's waist before she got

to the little room. He must have gulped a good breath of water before she managed to get her hands over his gills.

"Quick!" Sibyl said to Darld. "The lock. Then pull us both out." She was trying to tie the molefish skin around Gide's neck, but now he had both her wrists and was trying to pull her hands off his neck. In just a moment he'd be too weak to struggle. But Sibyl wasn't sure she had a moment.

"Inner door of the lock be now open," Darld said, coming back into the water. He got Gide's body in a clamp with his arms and legs and held him while Sibyl tied down his gills. If I thought about this, Sibyl said to herself, I wouldn't be able to do it. Not if she remembered the smooth pressure of his body on hers at the hut, and the way he had looked like a God in the forest and . . .

"Let's go," Sibyl said, and she and Darld dragged Gide, still struggling feebly, up into the cold air and as far away from the pool as possible. That way, even if he got the material off, he'd have to make it back to the water. And he was blacking out.

Sibyl was glad there wasn't time to watch him die. She wouldn't be able to stand it, either. She followed Darld into the lock, and then through the other door into the water, trying not to think, as she gratefully drew water into her lungs again, what it must be for Gide, struggling in the darkness of half-consciousness.

"How do you get the branchione?" Sibyl asked Darld. "The drug that grows your gills?"

"The orange pills?" Darld quickly led Sibyl down the hall and through a small side exit that led into another water-filter tunnel. He got the grill off easily—there was a catch on it from the outside—and swam into it and Sibyl flattened herself into the little alcove because four Krilanrians were coming, one of them the child Sibyl had seen earlier, with the

bluish scales. He was talking excitedly. The adult Krilanrians were armed with cumbersome guns of some sort, and each wore a dagger on his hip. Even in the dimness of the tunnel Sibyl could see their faces were tense with hate. Gide had taught them well. They were out for their first taste of human blood.

"Hurry!" Sibyl said when they were past. "They're going to find Gide in a moment and the general alarm will be out, and I don't know what they might do to Missy."

"When they find Gide dead," Darld said solemnly, "they show no mercy, I think. Feeling be high against her, because of the way the God tell us all humans be."

"Take me to where the drug is."

"I think it be in the kitchen. It be put in the dining room with the breakfast in the morning by the cook. But I not know which bladder it is in."

Sibyl followed Darld down very narrow tunnels. Some of them had grills which he removed and replaced. They must be going through the sewage system, though the halls were pretty much empty now. Occasionally they saw a Krilanrian or two at a distance, but Sibyl would pass muster as a Krilanrian female at a quick glance by a nonsuspicious person. The four Krilanrians would be finding Gide now, she thought. Would he be dead or alive? How long would it be before a general alarm went out for her?

"Wait!" Darld said suddenly. "We be almost there."

They were in a side tunnel and directly ahead of them a door opened. It was a space ship lock. Through it came a group of Krilanrians carrying nets of sea melons floating from straps on their shoulders. Then it was they who cultivated the sea melon forest, and that would be the lock that Pugh had found. Sibyl remembered sitting out in front of the hut on Seia, listening to Pugh tell about it, thinking how impossible it was that there should be a space ship

lock under the Seian Sea. Pugh and Steer and Gin and 'gin and dry land seemed eons away, light-years away.

Darld continued to hold Sibyl in the side tunnel with his elbow in her shoulder until the Krilanrians came out, their nets gone now. They went back out through the lock again and Sibyl wondered, Why a lock, when they were just going from one part of the sea to another. Unless—yes, considering that the water tunnels were made to be closed off, too. There must be some provision for providing the whole undersea kingdom with air, as in Missy's terrarium. Perhaps in case of emergency, if the drug ran out. Or perhaps Gide originally started this place with no thought of his people adapting to water breathing, and then found that it was easier and cheaper to change Krilanrians than it was to change the environment.

"Now," Darld said, and led her into the main tunnel, which was empty. They passed a door, closed with a large grill. "That the dining room," Darld said. "Come on."

But Sibyl took a quick look, curious as to how they ate floating in the water. The room was rapidly being filled with food through a trapdoor near floor level on the opposite wall of the room. Cut-up melons and opened shellfish and some kind of green seaweed floated haphazardly about the room. Sibyl could taste the flavor of them in the water even in the tunnel, and found she was terribly hungry.

"Get me something to eat, too, Darld," she said. "I may not have a chance to get anything to eat for a long time. And everything edible seems to be filtered out of the water here, except in the dining room."

"Stay here," Darld said, pushing her behind a large, swaying net of melons which was tied to a knob on the floor. There were several Krilanrians here in the kitchen. Two were opening shellfish and handing them to a third who pushed them through the trapdoor into the dining room.

Another was tearing up wads of seaweed with his hands and another was opening a net of melons and seemed to be telling the others what to do. That must be the "cook," Sibyl thought, because Darld went up to him and began talking in halting Krilanrian. The cook looked surprised, turned to a black bladder that was suspended from the floor, and then seemed to change his mind and turned and said something to the female opening shellfish. She put her knife into a holder in the wall and swam off quickly.

Darld stole a melon that floated out of the net when the cook wasn't looking and swam back to Sibyl. He waited a moment until the female worker was out of sight, around the corner of the tunnel, then he pulled Sibyl out into the tunnel and said, "The cook refuse to give me the drug. I say the God be ill and cannot breathe, and he send for the doctor! The cook not let me steal the drug and I not know which thing to steal anyhow. Now what?"

CHAPTER 9

Sibyl buried her face in the melon, eating her way through it shamelessly until just a bit of rind was left, which she chewed at while she peered around the knobby edge of the melon net to size up the situation in the kitchen. She knew which bladder held the drug. It would be the one the cook turned toward before he changed his mind and decided to send the doctor to Gide. It bobbed unsteadily in the current trailing off from the cook's excited arm movements, a little to the right of the cook's head. Near the cook, a worker was chopping stems off melons and farther, by the wall, workers were pushing opened shellfish through a small opening to the dining room.

"Go out in the hall and scream, 'Fire!'" Sibyl said. "Anything, just get them out of the kitchen."

"Nobody believe me," Darld said.

"Oh, not really fire. What about 'Strangler cel'?"

"Once one get in the auditorium by a loose grate," Darld said. "Almost kill a blue child and then block up a hall. But 'Stinging nettle' better. Stinging nettle come many at a time, make ugly red rash and smell and some Krilanrians even die."

"Fine. Scoot over there and do it."

Darld feinted around the doorway and Sibyl heard his voice—how did he get it so loud?—screaming frantically, "Stinging nettle!"

The reaction in the kitchen was almost instantaneous.

The cook grabbed four nets from their places on the walls, handed three of them to his helpers and charged out into the hall. Immediately, Sibyl slipped out of her hiding place on the side away from the doorway, swam over to the bladder the cook had glanced at, felt the shape of the pills inside it, detached it from the wall and hooked into place another bladder that looked exactly like it. She glanced quickly to the doorway. Darld was keeping everyone in excited conversation. Sibyl pushed over to the wall opposite where knives poked out of slots in the rock. She chose one rapidly and yanked out a piece of soft rope from a cluster of them that waved up from the floor waiting to be used for tying the nets.

She flipped back behind the net of melons as the cook backed in, still talking angrily at Darld and carrying his nets. They were on sticks, like butterfly nets. In a few moments things settled down in the kitchen, but the first worker came back with a Krilanrian whom Sibyl guessed to be a doctor. As he spoke a few words to the cook, Sibyl slipped away through the door, holding her stomach in as though that would make her smaller and less visible. She had tied the knife securely around her waist, and the flat part of the carved shell that made it up felt comforting against her hip, though she thought of the gunlike affairs she'd seen on the Krilanrians and knew a knife could be of little use.

"Quick!" Darld said. "Soon the doctor come looking for me to find out about Gide." Sibyl followed Darld straight up and then through a tunnel so narrow the sides scraped at her and she had to stop once and wriggle to unhook her knife, which had got caught on a bit of rock. At least there were no shells. After about five minutes of wriggly climbing Darld stopped and said, "Wait, there's a lock here, too. Hold your breath. It's a long run."

He disappeared, the lock closed and then opened as Sibyl pressed it, and then she went through the other door into another air-filled room. This one was dreadfully cold. The cold wrapped her in swaths of chill and the air seemed to blow about in streams. Darld signaled to her from the other side of the long, narrow room and climbed a set of rungs set into the wall. Then he had trouble getting the second lock open. There was something complicated about it, and Sibyl could see Darld sweating in all that cold air and beginning to go terribly pale. But finally it slid back as Sibyl spewed water on the floor and felt her gills working spasmodically, reaching for the thin and useless air.

She climbed the rungs, desperate for water, and it turned out to be not a lock, but a door. Darld glanced back at her, blue now, about the gills, and scrabbled along a narrow hallway and then dropped out of sight. Sibyl followed him, in agony, scraped against something hard and sharp that sent a flash of pain through her, didn't care and went on. Finally she fell through a hole, felt a searing pain in her ankle, as she hit something hard and then flopped into blessed, warm, breathable water. The thought popped into her mind that a sprained or broken ankle wasn't half as bad in water as it would be on land, and then there was no time for thoughts because at the same time Darld was struggling out of the water and something hit the rock sides of the pool, an inch from Sibyl's foot, with such violence that the edge of the pool shuddered and a piece broke off.

They were in the room next to the lock, with the pool that led to Missy's quarters. How many Krilanrians were in there, waiting for Sibyl and Darld's return? Probably not more than two, because there wasn't much room and the water was almost not fit to breathe. Sibyl wasn't stopping to think all this. She was flattened against the wall of the pool, her knife in her hand. Another shot, a metal arrow,

rammed the side of the pool, inches away from Sibyl. It wasn't possible to see, because the pool curved down and then up, and the Krilanrians were on Missy's side of the pool.

Sibyl was still, hoping that Darld could hold his breath out of water just a few moments more, that the Krilanrian would come to be sure he had hit him, that he hadn't heard Sibyl.

Darld was careful. He put his head into the water just above Sibyl and breathed as quietly as he could. Sibyl could sense him, but she didn't look up to see. She was watching the curve of the bottom of the pool.

A Krilanrian hand waved by, with a swimming motion. The other hand must hold the gun. Sibyl held her knife ready, her body tensed, her feet braced against the rock for a push off. In a moment the free hand came again, then the gun hand and in a split second Sibyl stabbed straight through the hand with all the strength of her body and grabbed the gun. There was a wild scream, but the gun was hers and the flailing body of the Krilanrian came at her, blood spurting out to stain the water and make it taste suffocatingly of death.

Then the second Krilanrian came out, shooting the arrow-like bullets as he came, and Sibyl shot him in the head. The first Krilanrian was gripping her gills, his legs knotted about her, and she couldn't reach the gun around to him, but Darld took it from her and shot him through the chest, sideways so as not to injure Sibyl. Then he came all the way into the water and they went to see what happened to Missy.

"Mother!" Missy cried when Sibyl's head came up out of the water. She burst into tears. "Why didn't you leave? There's no hope for me and now they'll get you, too."

"Gide's still alive?" Sibyl said, and all of a sudden her

gills began to close and she felt herself choking. The water. It must be too foul now, with all the people that had been in it and the blood and . . .

"Yes," Missy answered, leaning over the pool, her face distorted by the ripples in the water as Darld moved, the light around her seeming to Sibyl to grow dim and change color. "But he had a terrible headache and he's angry. So angry he could hardly talk. He left a guard to watch for you. I don't see how you . . ."

But Sibyl was coughing water out of her lungs and the water felt heavy and oppressive. The rope was scratchy about her waist. The shell knife, slewed around, pressed into her stomach. Her ankle ached miserably. She could feel it pulsing and she reached down to find it badly swollen.

"My ankle," she said.

"Mother, Gide is going to flood the terrarium. He was just waiting to find you so you could watch me die. It's his idea of . . . Mother, I *loved* him." Missy began to sob. "I really did. He seemed so suave, so sophisticated, so mysterious. As if he were full of strange and wonderful things, and he talked as though what he wanted most was to take care of me, to show me all these strange and wonderful things. And then . . . now we're all going to drown. Your drug's going to wear off soon. I don't want to die. Oh, I don't. For nothing. For being a fool."

Sibyl's ankle ran with fire and she thought how degrading pain was. How all brave thoughts, all courage, all ideals all put together, all these things were dust motes beside the size of pain. She shouldn't have to do anything. To think. She should be able to die, to be anything that was not pain.

"Take one and give me one," she said, putting her hand to the pouch on her side and then too agonized to make the effort to open it, or even to move her hand so Missy could get to it.

Missy pulled at the orange pills hastily, spilling them all over so they floated around in the water and gathered like bubbles around Sibyl. She popped one in Sibyl's mouth and in her own. "It's too late," she said. "It'll take twelve hours for it to work."

Sibyl held perfectly still, her forehead and eyes above water and the pain cleared for a moment. She moved her foot tentatively. She'd only turned her ankle a little. But she was tired and weak and she floated quiet, waiting for her second wind. Missy was looking down as though hypnotized by the rising water. Sibyl closed her eyes and either fainted or went to sleep.

She waked up on Missy's bed, with water rising just over her face. Missy was saying, "I'll have to try to stay on top of it. Mama! Are you awake? Darld says we have to make it into the other room. There's a way out."

"Way out," Sibyl echoed, her mind lighting up in spasms. A picture went through her thoughts, of rooms on rooms and corridor on corridor, all leading to blank walls, all blind in the end. Lighted corridor and dark wall, flickered her mind. Then she sat up and felt the water tickling at her as it rose slowly. She looked around. The pool had unfolded into a flood and water rose against the wall. She lay back in the water. "You can't swim in *that*," she said to Missy, who was still in her red cocktail dress.

Missy stripped it off and dove toward the pool entrance. Sibyl wadded up the dress and took it along, with some vague thought of using it to stop up a hole and keep the water out. What hole? The water was welling up from the pool. It was being flooded from somewhere underneath. Sibyl dove into the hole of the pool. Now the water was breathable again, flowing fresh through the pool, and Sibyl swam out of it on the side by the lock and saw Missy, in water from the waist down, and Darld swimming excitedly

around her. Missy was looking up at the opening in the ceiling. No water came through from that way. There must be air up there, but it was five feet above Missy's head.

"We wait and float up to hole we fell through," Darld said, obviously proud that he had thought of this.

Sibyl swallowed, looked about the room at the water half-way up the lock that led into watery Krilanr, glanced at Missy with her wet hair plastered against her cheeks, and down at Darld standing on his head with his feet sticking out of the water. "And then what?" Sibyl asked. "That leaves at best maybe eleven hours before Missy can breathe under water."

"Then you think of something," Darld said with unbounded confidence. He stuck his head up out of the water, grinned at Missy and went back down.

Something nudged Sibyl. Missy screamed. It was one of the dead Krilanrians. Sibyl pushed the stiff body away. "Don't think about it, Missy," she said. Don't think about death. Don't think about drowning. But at least the corpse wasn't Gide. Gide. Where was Gide?

The water rose and Missy was swimming, reaching for the opening to the room above. Darld swam under her and gave her a boost and she caught the sides with her fingers and hauled herself in. But her respite would be brief. The water was rising faster now, and in a few moments Sibyl floated through the hole with the rising water. In the space of a few breaths, it was deep enough so that Sibyl could swim from one end of the room to the other, trying to decide what to do next. At one end was a lock that must lead to watery Krilanr, and at the other was the oxygen equipment, which was now blowing half its air under water, streaming out in bubbles. Sibyl floated quietly a moment, tired, aware of the pain of her ankle. Somewhere in that grill there must be the controls for the oxygen, the atmosphere. She'd have

to look. But how to keep the water from . . . then she became aware that the water had stopped rising, that it no longer gushed a current . . . and suddenly she knew there was someone else in the room.

She looked around, swimming, and Gide swam languidly up to her and said, "Hi!"

"Gide!" Sibyl cried, and as he floated there close to her, gleaming in the water, a light smile on his face, suddenly she forgot everything about him except that he was a man she wanted. The small current of water his gills made brushed her face and she put her fingers softly to where his gills pulsed and said, "Gide, I might have killed you but I didn't."

"You tried. If my Krilanrians hadn't come along in time you would have."

"Yes. But don't you see, I had to leave you a possible way out, Gide. I feel even from here the currents of your body. Is that hate? Isn't there any other way?"

His body flashed like a fish's in the foamy green water, then he encircled her and kissed her quickly. "Yes, it's hate," he said, breathing the same water she did. "I came to watch you . . ."

"Mama!" Missy shouted, pulling at Sibyl from above. "Is he your lover? Is that why I never meant anything to him?" She pulled Sibyl up, out of the water, and then threw her down again. "Both of you. Both of you betrayed me." She sounded as though she were going to cry, but she didn't. "Now you can laugh at me together while I drown."

"Poor Missy," Darld said unhappily. "We should have stay on the beautiful beaches of Seia. Both we trust the God and the Mama and just see!"

Missy should trust me, Sibyl thought. And then realized how it must look to the girl. And perhaps . . . how it must *be*, in a way. Suppose there had been no Sibyl? Would

Gide have loved Missy and stopped hating Terra, or at least waited to hate it later? Or . . . but Sibyl couldn't think of all this. Not with Gide so close, and death so close, and both fearful.

"All right," Sibyl said. "You came to watch me witness my daughter's drowning and then drown myself, when the drug wears off me, and I guess there's not much more time. This is only one of the times I've known I was going to die. And meanwhile—I'm hungry."

"You're what!" Gide said, letting go of her shoulder.

"Hungry. Surely you're not so uncivilized as to let me die on an empty stomach. Here. I'll undo my knife. Now I'm helpless. Surely you're not afraid of me!" She watched the heavy knife sink to the floor and stir just a little as Darld swam by it. "One last hour with you, Gide. That's what I'm asking for."

"And a free meal?" Gide's face floated beside her, laughing.

"Oysters bring out the best in me," Sibyl said. She wanted to send a message to Missy—to look for a way out, where the oxygen equipment was. She wanted to ask Gide for absolute assurance that Missy wouldn't be drowned while she was dallying. But she'd already won more victory than she'd planned on, so she ran her tongue over her upper lip for Gide and followed him to the lock that was the way the room was supposed to be entered.

"Eltids," Gide said when they were on the other side of the lock. There was a bluish-scaled Krilanrian there, armed with one of the large guns that Sibyl had almost gotten killed with. Gide said a series of complicated things to him in Krilanrian, and for the first time Sibyl saw Gide in his natural role, as a leader of men. He was very impressive and Sibyl was almost sorry when the Krilanrian left and the little performance was over.

"Were you saying 'eltids' to me or the Krilanrian, and what does it mean?" Sibyl asked.

"What you want," Gide said, "are not oysters, but eltids. I was ordering us food and drink." He brushed a string of larvae off his forehead and glittered at her in the clear water. "Come on. I want you to see my room. But remember, after the hour is up . . ."

"I know," Sibyl said. "I know how to worry later." She followed Gide down the hall, turned into a hall which was brilliant with winking shellfish, and then double doors were folded back by two Krilanrian guardsmen. She took one look into the room and said, "This is a joke." A bevy of bejeweled Krilanrian maidens swam around the amber, luminescent throne. The water in the room was pink, and smelled of perfume—a tangy, lemonish smell. Along the floor and high walls that led to a cathedral ceiling grew exotic sea plants that swayed blue and red and yellow in the slowly circulating water that gushed fresh from a pink fountain to the right of the throne. A dark pink rush of water in the rose room.

The Krilanrian maidens were singing in quarter tone counterpoint—a lovely, bubbly song and little silver fish with incredible trailing netted tails seemed to swim to the rhythm. Huge lantern fish hung pinkly about the room.

"A joke?" Gide said. He hung coldly away from her for a moment. "I am the son of the emperor. What did you expect?" He said something sharply, and the maidens trailed out through the doors without looking around.

Sibyl realized what presumption it had been on her part to think Gide might care for her. With all those beautiful girls at his beck and call, with a kingdom at his command . . . Sibyl blushed at herself. But then, he *had* cared. He had even stopped the torment he had planned for her, just to

give her a last hour with him. Kindness? Hardly. Sibyl laughed bitterly to herself.

"If you plan just to sit around and laugh at me, I'll take you back," Gide said, irritated.

"I wasn't laughing at you. I was laughing at myself. Why did you notice me at all, Gide? With all those beautiful girls."

Gide looked at her, as though for the first time since they were in the room where Missy waited in water up to her waist. "You're naked," he said.

"I'm well preserved," Sibyl said. "But that isn't it."

"For me," Gide said slowly, "you're exotic. You're . . . I keep wanting to try to possess you so that I won't want you any more. You're Terra, for me, and I hate you and fear you and in a way I wish I *were* you. But only in a way." He swam up to his throne and sat on it, and immediately he had the face of an emperor. "All of this is very unimportant," he said. "I'm not accustomed to being asked to explain myself."

Sibyl swam up and sat on the arm of his throne. "I didn't mean to ask for all that. You don't have to be an emperor to enjoy a good meal and a roll in the hay. Only do get off that throne. I feel like the beggar maid and King Cophetua."

"You don't *look* like either one. Here are the eluids. And over there is the dining area. The currents are arranged so the water is motionless, and you don't have to follow your dinner all over the room."

A Krilanrian swam in with a basket of something, and uncovered it and left. It did stay still, swaying just a little in the local currents Sibyl and Gide made. Sibyl looked into the basket, and saw things wiggling.

"No," she said firmly. "Absolutely not. I can work up a

certain fortitude about drowning, but *not* about eating live worms."

Gide was laughing at her. "Close your eyes," he said, and held her to him with one arm, and put the other hand over her eyes. "Open your mouth and don't think."

Sibyl opened her mouth to protest and immediately found something about the consistency of a clam in it. Gide forced her mouth closed and she bit down. The wiggle stopped. And Sibyl's mouth was filled with an incredible taste. The flesh of the creature disappeared almost immediately, and left only the taste—faintly reminiscent of lemon and radish but with a delicious base effect a little like hot lobster. And hunger. It made Sibyl delightfully hungry. She could feel the smell of hunger all the way down her esophagus and into her stomach.

She reached for another one. "You win," she said, and ate eltids until the basket was empty, and was still as hungry as when she started eating. The next course was melons soaked in wine, and Sibyl found the water flavored with Krilanrian yellow wine as she ate.

After that was a hot dish—a heavy fish steak of some sort, and a different wine to breathe. They ate with their fingers and the sea washed them clean. Gide brushed the remains aside, where they drifted off to be caught in the filters. It was an utterly carefree way to eat and Sibyl thought she could go on eating forever. But finally it was over, and there was a bubbly rush of warm, pink water that washed her thoroughly clean and carried off the last bits of food in the atmosphere, and then a rush of cool water that took away the bit of loggy feeling that comes after eating, and then Sibyl was aware that Gide had been looking at her for a long time.

In the pink light he looked spotless and ageless, newborn and untouched. And yet in his orange eyes glowed an an-

cient and alien knowingness. He had been pulling up the green anemonelike flowers from the floor, and he floated over to Sibyl, stringing the flowers together. "These are for your decoration," he said, and put them around her upper arm, where they clung like live things. "They match your eyes."

It took only the touch of his hand to turn Sibyl toward him, and the flowers clinging with kissing mouths to her arm were like a grip of love. As though they themselves were an extension of Gide. But here was Gide; and a wild current, an undersea wave, bounded up and swirled them high up under the cathedral roof where the shellfish winked and the pink water drove at them and the more the sea tried to separate them, the more they clung together.

The little colored flowers, the fleeing schools of silver fish, the winking shellfish, all dissolved into trails of light and led to the dark tides of the deep sea, and finally Sibyl stirred in Gide's arms and said, "Gide, I can't breathe."

Wordlessly, he took her arm and swam with her back along the halls of Krilanr and finally thrust her into the bright, hot room where Missy stood up to her waist in water and Darld swam impatiently around, keeping one foot in the air like a shark fin. Missy looked away. Sibyl stood breathing the warm, stale air as though it were a mountain breeze.

"Well, that got us a couple of hours," Sibyl said cheerfully, as soon as she had enough air in her lungs to talk.

"I'd rather not have had them," Missy said. She turned around. "Did you have fun?"

"Yes," Sibyl said. "And you have to stop acting like a child. You can do the Electra complex bit later. Right now we've got to think our way into some oxygen. As you see, I've got my lungs back. Look! The water's rising already."

Missy sighed. Then as she stood a moment and watched

the water creep up to her ribs, she began to turn pale. "You think he really would?"

"Of course he really would. Haven't you and Darld thought of anything? What about the oxygen machine? Is that a way out?"

"The oxygen's turned off," Missy said. "Didn't you notice? The water's up over the outlet. It's over there in the wall, by the floor. I took your knife—that you took off to show Gide how harmless you are—and unscrewed the plates around it. It turns on—but so what?"

"Maybe the cubby it's in could be closed off," Sibyl said. "Any chance?"

Missy shook her head. "There's room in there for a couple of roaches. That's all."

Sibyl could feel the tickle of the water as it crawled up toward her shoulder blades. "Things aren't so bad for you, Missy. You didn't stand around and brood while I was gone."

Missy smiled reluctantly. "I tried to brood, but it really isn't in my blood. The oxygen unit's back in place now, but the whole thing comes out, and Darld swam through. There was a plate on the other side to hold the sea water out, and at first he thought there was solid rock beyond, but it turned out to be a big boulder and I held my breath and swam in and helped him until we got it pushed out of the way. Then I had to come back here to breathe but Darld went exploring and he found a huge cave in an unused part of Krilanr. I don't think they even know about it. It's lighted with the blinking shells and Darld says it has all sorts of unusual plants and things growing there and the floor of it has a furry growth like a carpet but all that doesn't do us any good. What we need is a small, airtight room where we can bring the oxygen machine."

The water was under Sibyl's armpits now, and she was

cold from her armpits down, standing there tensely as though that would make her think of something, but sweat dripped down from her forehead. "Your red cocktail dress is water-proof," she said without much conviction. "Maybe if we wrapped it around ourselves and the oxygen machine—it's got a full skirt. But even so, we'd never keep out thousands of tons of sea water. Darld, let's don't waste time. Take the knife and get the oxygen machine out. Then you go look in that cave again and see if there's any chance we could find a small spot to dry out and . . . Oh, I don't know how you pump out the ocean. But I'm not going to just stand here, and die."

"You know," Missy said slowly, "I think you *can* breathe highly oxygenated water. Pugh said they'd been experimenting with this in the submarine vacation spots on Earth. But I'm not . . ."

"The big cave be very dangerous," Darld said. "There be many giant barnacles there and I can't be swim close to the edges."

"Barnacles!" Sibyl echoed, taking the heavy, metal plate Darld dislodged and then letting it drift to the floor. She recalled her frightening experience in the giant barnacle on the outer wall of Krilanr. "Barnacles . . . Come on, both of you. Bring the knife. And give it to me and grab yourself a sharp shell. Missy, you bring the cocktail dress."

Missy just stood still a moment, and Sibyl could see her heart beating in her eyes. Once they went under water, there wasn't going to be anywhere for them to come up. "O.K.," she said finally, and as soon as she went under, Sibyl dove down and followed Darld through the tunnel left by the oxygen machine. They swam quickly, through a dark opening, and another, and then suddenly into what seemed a blaze of light and an exotic blooming of the sea.

But Sibyl had no time for the sea. She swam over to a giant barnacle, with Missy and Darld right behind her, and took the cocktail dress and waved it over the shell, until the huge, sharp points opened and they stared into the monstrous, blind face of the barnacle. It was white, brown-furred in spots, and shone with its own light. It whirled a current and then, as Sibyl shoved Darld and Missy in with the oxygen machine, growing fuzzyheaded from lack of oxygen and seeing the horrible face reel before her, the tentacles touched her, and then let go and the thing snapped closed, leaving her outside, and Missy and Darld inside without a knife.

CHAPTER 10

Sibyl, hoping the knife was as strong as it looked, swam up to the triangular point of the barnacle and found she could slip the knife through a small slit where the plates of the shell met. She prised at the shell, wadded in the cocktail dress, and then saw Darld's face looking out at her from within the barnacle. She could also hear Missy screaming, a choking scream. Was she breathing the watery oxygen that streamed from the machine? Sibyl couldn't hold her breath much longer. She could feel a blob of darkness going up from her lungs into her brain.

But Darld was pushing from within, and at the same time tugging on one of the feathery fronds of the barnacle, until finally the creature opened with a spasmodic jerk, and Sibyl careened in with its whirl of incoming water, and Darld grabbed the knife from her and went at the blind teeth that came down toward her. Sibyl felt Missy grab at her and thrust her face into a stream of bubbles that came spewing out of the oxygen machine. Sibyl breathed because she had to. She could hold her breath no longer, and the water came into her lungs and at first she thought she would choke. She coughed and gasped and then miraculously the water came and went in her lungs and she found she was breathing.

Missy hugged her. "Mother," she began, but a feathered frond swept her up, and Sibyl, clinging to the fat, slippery side of the oxygen machine, felt the deadly white muscles

of the barnacle contracting and expanding to push her out into the sea again. Somewhere in the rush of moving fronds and working muscles she passed Darld, hacking with the knife at the toothed part of the barnacle. Somehow she'd have to make the barnacle stay closed, and hacking at it with a knife wasn't going to do it. A piece of broken tooth passed by her.

She grabbed Missy by the foot before the frond could sweep her out, and climbed down the frond, as she had in the first barnacle, pulling Missy after her to the bubbling outlet of the oxygen machine with one hand and scrabbling down the frond with her free hand and her feet. If they killed the barnacle creature, it would stay open. At least that's the way it worked with oysters. The way to make it stay closed was to stimulate the muscle and make it stay contracted. There were lots of chemicals that would do that, Sibyl was sure, but she didn't have lots of chemicals, and she wouldn't know which ones, anyhow. But the oxygen was worth a try, if she could find the muscle. She could at least tickle it with a stream of air. If that didn't work . . .

"Darld!" she shouted. "When you feel him stiffen, stop cutting at him." But with the noise of the whirling water and the chugging of the oxygen machine, she didn't know if Darld heard her. Where would the muscle be? Somewhere at the point where the barnacle creature was attached to the shell. Sibyl was working her way down the stalk of the frond. The creature was still convulsing, trying to throw them out of its home. She found the smooth flesh, a quiet, powerfully fleshed muscle, that seemed almost to grow right into the bottom of the shell. She ran her fingers across it and immediately the creature stiffened, was quiet, and the shell closed.

"Leave it alone!" she called to Darld. If it died they'd

never be able to keep the shell closed. She turned the stream of oxygen onto the lumped muscle and kept her face into the bubbles of air that bounced back. The creature stayed frozen. Whether it was surprise, shock, or some reaction to the stimulation of its muscle, Sibyl didn't know. This wasn't the time to care.

"Mother," Missy said, staying close so as to breathe, "do you think we're going to live? Do you think we could ever *possibly* get out of a situation like this?"

"Would you ever have thought," Sibyl answered, and even smiled to herself, "we could get *into* a situation like this?" She looked into her daughter's pale face. "I don't make any guarantees," she added.

Darld swam down, between barnacle fronds and flesh. "Stay back," Sibyl said. "The air may be too aerated here for you. But I think if you stay up near the point of the barnacle, it'll be just about right. We'll have to stay here until . . . I wonder how long we have left?"

Missy had wedged herself comfortably into a niche where the frond stem met the body of the barnacle. "I'd guess we have maybe seven or eight hours to wait," she said. "And it's funny, but suddenly I don't care. I mean suddenly I'm tired and relaxed and I'm happy just sitting here and I don't care what happens five minutes from now."

"Spiritual second wind," Sibyl said. "You look like some sort of primitive Earth goddess with the air bubbles blowing your hair up like a stiff crown and your arms back like that. The Hera on the Boeotian pithos relief at Athens, maybe."

"Maybe," Missy answered. "What I feel like isn't anything that easy to describe. Do you realize that if I hadn't let Gide make a fool of me, and run off with him, none of this would have happened? We might have spent a nice summer on Scia and—"

"Wait a minute," Sibyl interrupted. "Gide was out to get us off that island one way or another. We were too close to his machinations. And if you hadn't gone with him, you wouldn't have found out he was going to flood Centaurus. This way we may be able to stop him, if we ever get out of here."

"But I was such a *fool*," Missy said through her exotic aura of bubbles, her voice coming sepulchrally through the water. "It's just coming really home to me now. I can feel myself blushing on the inside of my very bones. Mama, he didn't even say he loved me. He didn't ever come right out and promise me anything. He didn't even bother with that."

"The only thing to do about Gide is forget him," Sibyl said. "If he didn't appreciate you, that's his loss, not yours. Now I think you ought to get some rest because I don't know what's going to happen when we get out of here, or how long it's going to be before you can stop. Try to sleep, and if you float out of your niche I'll catch you."

Then Sibyl devoted herself to seeing that the oxygen streamed against the contracted muscle of the barnacle, and into Missy's face, and sang a little lullaby and for a moment remembered exactly how it had been when Missy was a baby, and she'd hummed her little daughter to sleep and rocked the old-fashioned cradle and the moment of being a mother had seemed something that would be eternal. Only it had turned out that it wasn't.

Something rammed against the side of the barnacle and Sibyl looked up in fury, as though someone had deliberately waked her baby, but Missy slept on and Darld called, "That's a spear bullet. They be hunting us."

"They must have seen we were gone," Sibyl said. "But this is one place they won't look."

"I bet they be very puzzled," Darld said, laughing. "No, they be not look inside a giant barnacle."

Darld, too, was tired and he went to sleep and Sibyl watched and half-dozed and held the oxygen machine, until Missy stirred and coughed and said, "Am I asleep now or was I asleep before?"

"I'd never take it upon myself," Sibyl answered, "to guarantee which is a dream and which is reality, but we don't just sit here in either case. How's your breathing?"

"Funny," Missy answered. "It must be just about time. I wonder if Gide's got his men waiting outside this barnacle."

"I doubt it," Sibyl said. "They have no way of knowing we're here. They're probably searching all over Krilanr. Looking for cubbyholes where we might be holed up with the oxygen machine. Where's Darld, anyhow?"

Missy looked around. "Up there, asleep. He's drifting near the point of the barnacle. I expect a little fresh sea water seeps in from up there, and by this time the oxygenated water in here must be getting hard to breathe . . . I'm dizzy."

Sibyl waited a moment, gauging her own reaction, and then turned the oxygen bubbles so they wooshed on the knotted muscle of the barnacle, but didn't go into her and Missy's mouth. "Go wake up Darld," she said. "When this barnacle unfreezes he's going to be mad. The safest thing to do is kill him. That way the shell will open and stay open. Otherwise he may succeed in eating us."

"Which reminds me, I'm starved," Missy said.

"The sea's full of food," Sibyl said. "It's just a matter of getting into it. The knife. Darld must have the knife. Get it for me. I wonder what a barnacle's weak spot is."

"Probably behind his eyes," Missy said. "I'll do it. If he doesn't have any eyes, I'll try above and behind his teeth.

That's where it was in all the animals I ever cut up in biology."

She swam off and Sibyl kept the stream of oxygen on the barnacle's thick muscle. In a few moments a whirlwind of movement broke loose as the barnacle went into spasm, and Sibyl grabbed onto the muscle with both hands, in the hope that this would at least distract the animal a little from Missy. At least Darld had already gotten some of the teeth.

A sudden violent rolling of the white tissue of the barnacle and a tide of rushing water loosened Sibyl's hold, and a frond swept her up toward the mutilated, gnashing mouth of the creature, and she heard Missy scream and saw the spread of Missy's long, black hair washing into the convulsing mouth, and then the creature died and the shells parted and Sibyl and Missy and Darld swam out.

The huge cave seemed deserted and Darld swiftly motioned to the others to follow and swam through a cleft in the rocks that led to what looked like a dead end, with a furry sort of brown growth opposite the cleft. Sibyl looked down and got for the first time in the sea a dizzy sensation of height. For the hole in the cliff fell away in crystal clear water thousands of feet, and glistened on the sides and bottom with a sort of luminescent lichen that looked like plates of gold. Above, the roof was solid rock.

"Me find this before," Darld said. "Only the fleece beed in front of the other hole. The fleeces bees strainers and they be by holes straining their little food out of the sea water. We peel him back and see maybe a way through. They be hard to peel."

Sibyl and Missy and Darld all dug their fingers under the edges of the fleece and it was, indeed, hard to peel. The back of it was covered with suckers, and finally Sibyl slit it down the middle with her knife, and found the

knife went all the way through and there was a passageway beyond. They swam through into utter darkness and kept to the wall for what seemed like hours, until it turned and then they explored up and down the wall by touch and finally Darld found a rock they could loosen and they went on into another cave and suddenly Sibyl said, "Wait!"

"We could go on forever like this," Missy said. "It seems to me to be an endless maze of caves and tunnels and eventually we'll need air again. I'm not even sure whether we're going farther into the cliff or not."

"Listen!" Sibyl said. "I'm sure I heard it." They stopped swimming and drifted, tensed. Then the sound came again. The keening of a lunga. Sibyl tried to tell which direction. Then she called, "Where are you?"

"The lunga be not speak English," Darld said, a little disgustedly. Then he keened back at the lunga.

"Are you saying something to him?" Sibyl asked.

"Me giving a distress call," Darld said. He listened a moment. "The lunga has beed looking for us. That's what he be saying. Wait. He come."

"I'm starving," Missy said. "I'm sorry to think about my stomach at a time like this, but I don't even remember when I ate last."

"Couldn't you try some of the sea grass?" Sibyl suggested, and Missy was about to do it when the lunga appeared. He greeted Darld with a glooping sound, and then swam up to Sibyl sort of purring and saying, "S . . . p . . ." But he turned quickly to lead them out of the cliff, and it seemed to Sibyl that they swam for hours through caves and tunnels until finally they came into the light of the open sea, and even so the lunga swam on, going ahead now, in his eagerness, and then coming back for them.

At last Sibyl could see ahead of them the melon grove where the lunga had brought her first. The uncultivated

melon grove with a line of trees in the middle knocked over and viny sea animals growing up the trunks of the others. She snapped off a melon and gave it to Missy and said, "Go on. You'd be surprised how good it is."

"I don't *care* how good it is," Missy said, and ate voraciously. Sibyl ate, too, and then was aware that a whole school of lunga had swum up, and were regarding the humans with what Sibyl could only interpret as amused curiosity. Then Darld started a game of tag with them, eating as he swam, and Missy joined in. Sibyl relaxed, watching the young fun, and drifted off to sleep. She dreamed of orange pearls and deep green sea and rocked further and further into darkening comfort, until finally she waked with Missy tugging at her and saying, "It's almost time. You've slept forever."

Sibyl did, indeed, feel as though she'd slept forever, and struggled out of the deep mother sleep to gather up the threads of her complicated life again.

"They be looking for us," Darld said. "The lunga see them. They wait for us to try to come to the island. To Seia."

Of course they did. They'd have the island ringed, knowing when Darld and the humans would have to come in to breathe. But how to swim through them . . . Sibyl thought immediately of Odysseus in the cave of Polyphemus.

"What we do," she said, "is hang on to the undersides of four lunga. They'll be used to having the lunga swimming all about them, since the lunga always investigate what's going on in the sea. Then, when we're as close to shore as the lunga can go, we swim on as fast as we can. They can't follow us onto land."

"Then the Seian natives impale us on their spears," Missy said. "What do you plan to do about that?"

"We face that when we get to it," Sibyl said. "The Seians won't be attacking us again unless Gide's been there. It was all his doing, and they forget fast. I think he had them very scared and unhappy, with his bloody bird hats and his spears. Anyhow, who has a better suggestion?"

"S . . . p . . ." purred a lunga, coming up and nudging Sibyl affectionately. "P . . . p." Sibyl patted him and hung comfortably onto his back.

"Steer may be back with the heli," Missy said. "I'll bet he deposited Pugh and Victoria in Llonan City and headed straight back to see what he could do while the State Department goes through their ponderous job of making up their minds. How long has it been since they left?"

Sibyl reached out her free hand for a melon for her lunga, and then snapped off one for herself. "If we're about to change again, that would make altogether about thirty-six hours. Two nights and a day. It'll be morning now. Too bad. But that's time for Steer to get back. Only I told him not to."

"Depend on Steer," Missy said. "Don't you feel a kind of bubbling feeling in your blood?"

"Yes," Sibyl said.

"Me too," Darld added.

"Everybody grab a lunga," Sibyl said. "Darld, can you tell them to swim low in the water?"

"Me think so," Darld said. "After we start."

Sibyl got a good grip on the lower fins of her lunga, and it made him swim a bit lumberingly, but from above she'd be completely invisible. Even from below, in the shadow of the huge fish, she'd be hard to make out. Darld said something and the lungas began making for shore, keening delightedly among themselves. They passed several clumps of Krilanrians, but no one made a suspicious move. The whole school of lunga were following, swimming

ahead and behind and playing tag. The most notice taken was when a Krilanrian shouted something that sounded like irritated curses at them. Finally Sibyl's lunga stopped, and then began swimming back and forth, purring and saying, "P . . . p." Beneath her a few feet Sibyl could see the deep green seaweed that grew close to shore.

"Goodbye," she said to the lunga, and let go and twined her fingers in the seaweed to make sure her head didn't drift above water and waited for the air change to happen. In a few moments she felt the familiar brief terror of thinking she was going to smother, and then she swam quickly along the rising sea bottom until she reached sand and she stood up and coughed out salt water and breathed in the crystal clear air of Seia. She glanced around to see Missy and Darld nearby, and then heard something like the sound of a large fish hitting the water behind her. As she looked toward the sound, she saw what it was. A long, wickedly pointed arrow bullet hit several yards behind them. The Krilanrians had spotted them, but too late.

They ran for shore and toward the hut that it seemed to Sibyl they had built in some bygone century, and there on the beach was Steer's helicopter.

"Good for Steer!" Missy shouted. "I *knew* it." She raced ahead to the heli and climbed aboard but was down again before Sibyl got there. "There's nobody in it."

"Maybe in the hut," Sibyl said, and as they stood there a moment they both began to shiver. "It's *cold*," Sibyl said. The sunshine sparkled bright all around them, but the wind that blew off the sea was icy. "Anyhow we can get some clothes in the hut."

They made for the hut and it was deserted, except for Darld who had beat them there. It smelled a little of Gin and 'gin and the beautiful yellow wine cup lay on its side on the floor where Gide must have kicked it sometime when

he went after Sibyl as she leaped out of the window. Had that really been only two nights ago? Sibyl stood a moment looking at it, shivering, thinking of how it had been in Gide's arms in the green sea, in the current that carried them. Then she picked up the wine cup and placed it safely on the shelf, and took the towel Missy handed her to dry off with.

They found a shift for each of them and sweaters in Sibyl's suitcase—all rumpled where Gide had gone through her things—and Missy said, "I don't see any sign of Steer's having been here. No one seems to have eaten. Was that wine cup on the floor?"

"Yes," Sibyl said, and looked around. No, Steer had not been to the hut. When had he come? Would he be in the sea in a diving suit, looking for them? If so, the Krilanrians would have him already.

"I smell smoke," Missy said.

Sibyl sniffed. "And rancid bluette oil and rotten sea melons. That's too much smell for just the king's dinner. Is there a festival, Darld?"

"Me don't think so. Unless they welcome Steer with a feast."

Missy frowned. "My God! You don't suppose they're burning him at the stake!"

Darld lifted his head. "Me don't smell meat," he said in all innocence. "But me go look."

He was out of the door in a flash, and Sibyl called after him, "We'll meet you on the path." She started down the path with Missy, combing her hair as she went. She wasn't really worried about Steer yet and she was warm now, and she had Missy safe, and for a moment she just enjoyed the pungent smell of crushed herbs that their footfalls made, and the unexpected way the island seemed like home, after the huge strangeness of the sea. Somewhere a Happy

Hant laughed, a little quietly, for the cold, and a bell bush tinkled. An island like this could be a paradise. Then Sibyl thought how Gide meant to make it part of his pervasive ocean, and her moment of peace was gone. She finished doing her hair quickly and handed the comb to Missy.

"If you don't comb it while it's wet you'll never be able to comb it at all," she said.

"I wonder," Missy said, and made an impatient noise as the comb caught in the tangles of her hair, "maybe I ought to cut it all off. I wonder if we ought to let Steer go, whatever he's doing, and go straight on back to Llonan City in his heli. I mean, all of Centaurus is at stake, and we oughtn't to wait for one person."

"Thank God, we don't have to make that decision," Sibyl answered. "Steer's the only one who can run a heli. I don't know how."

Darld came bounding back along the path in a moment, followed by his eleven siblings, all shouting delightedly. "It bees the festival of the end of the world," Darld said. "The God have left the drug with King Seia, and they bees going to take it with the feast tonight."

"Then we have until tomorrow," Sibyl said. "Where's Steer?"

Darld shook his head sadly. "He bees part of the feast. King Seia bees too kind to kill him, so they bury him under the cook pit."

"Come on," Sibyl said, running. "It may not be too late. Tell your brothers to douse the fire right away, and tell King Seia you found out the God isn't really a God and convince him that he wants to keep his island and point out that he won't be a king any more under the sea." Surely it couldn't be that Steer was dead. That he died burned to death under a cooking pit. Sibyl ran to the King's Beach and saw the smoking pit and choked on the

rotten smell of the smoke, thinking of Steer. She grabbed a large clay jewel box from the king's hut, dumped out a huge pile of arm bracelets and ran to the sea and began pouring water on the cook pit, which was at the edge of the woods, six or eight yards from the sea.

Darld was talking earnestly to King Seia and a ring of natives, and they were all beginning to argue vigorously and finally a few giggled, a good sign. The twins had cook pots from somewhere—neolithic-looking, badly fired things—and they were energetically throwing water. But Missy had a better idea, and she took a boat paddle and began digging out the fire. Sibyl went looking for a paddle and when she came back Missy was shouting for her, and as Sibyl ran up she heard a thumping noise from under the ground.

King Seia and the Seians were running around giggling and arguing and dancing in an agony of indecision while Darld talked at them earnestly. He was assuring them that they were all going to die, and that the drug wasn't going to work. He also pointed out that the God had been a friend of Sibyl's before, and therefore couldn't possibly be the real God.

But Sibyl was concentrating on the thumping from the ground. They managed to heave most of the smoking dirt off something solid under it, and as they did there was the sound of breaking wood and the woven branches of Steer's coffin gave way and he poked his shoulder and then the rest of him through and emitted a chain of furious blasphemy which Sibyl hoped the Almighty would interpret as a prayer of thanks for deliverance. His face was red and sweat poured off him, but there was no doubt that he was alive. There hadn't been enough oxygen that far down for the wood to burn, and there had been a layer of dirt between the

coffin and the fire, but it must have been pretty uncomfortable.

Sibyl and Missy helped Steer up and he stood groggily for a moment getting his bearings. At that moment King Seia came up and made a complex ceremonial speech thanking Steer for coming to help save Seia from the end of the world, which he had just decided would be a bad thing, and ended with permission for Steer to go on with his work of deliverance.

Sibyl translated as best she could what she could make out of the speech, and Steer turned to King Seia with blood in his eye and said, "You're a dirty, stinking, vulturous, carrion-eating alien and I *hate* aliens."

"Steer would like to thank you for your gracious offer," Sibyl translated sweetly. "We are going back to the mainland for help and assure you we will let no one harm or sink your island in the sea."

"You got there just in time," Steer told Sibyl. "I would have either roasted or suffocated. I came back to Seia and got into a diving suit and I was about to get into that boat the twins had by the hut when the Seians came at me from behind and before I knew it they had me tied up. And since I can't speak a word of Seian there was no way to reason with them. Whew! They got me in that box and after that I could only guess what they were doing."

"Poor Steer," Sibyl said. "But we have to hurry. I'll do your arm as soon as you're settled piloting the heli. A lot has happened and I'll tell you about it on the way. Thank God, you decided to come back. Gide is planning to melt the glaciers and flood the world."

"What!"

"Just that. Come on. I'll give you the details on the way."

Darld and the twins followed them to the heli, but Sibyl said, "Darld, tell the twins to stay here and keep the

Seians from changing their minds. Also if Gide appears, tell him we've gone off never to return. Tell him we're scared and we're going back to Terra tonight."

"We get googies?" one of the twins asked.

"Oh, yes," Sibyl said. "Get the cookies out of my hut and you can eat them all. Not all at once, of course."

"Me go find Victoria," Darld said, climbing into the heli, "and more cookies."

"We'll see," Sibyl said. Victoria would be the last person to stick her head into any possible danger. Once she found out about it, she'd stay away. The only good thing about all this was that it had gotten Victoria away from Darld.

Sibyl got the medical kit out while Steer maneuvered the heli into the air and pointed it in the right direction. She cut off the rest of his torn sleeve, washing the wound with alcohol and sprayed on a disinfectant and a bandage. The branch had given him a bad gouge but at least he wasn't bleeding now. But he kept getting mad at what happened to him. Every once in a while he sort of snorted, like a bull, and finally he said, "Came to rescue you, and what happens. Get rescued myself. Thought the natives were too stupid to jump me from behind."

Sibyl laughed and said, "Steer, darling, you *must* learn that people aren't stupid just because they don't speak English. And we didn't really rescue you. You got that gouge in your arm rescuing yourself. Anyhow, if you hadn't come back, all of Centaurus might be flooded by tomorrow night." Sibyl stopped a moment. "It still may be. What on Earth are we going to do?"

"Tell 'em," Steer said. "Bring back men to fight them. Blow up Krilanr before they blow up the glaciers."

Missy was crunching dried rations noisily, and handed Sibyl a wafer of beef and a cup of water. Sibyl fed Steer

while he piloted. "It might turn out that nobody will believe us," Missy pointed out.

"We've got Victoria," Steer said, glancing a little guiltily at Sibyl. "Victoria'll tell 'em. Pugh, too."

"It won't be that easy," Sibyl said, "to dive down to Krilanr and set bombs around in it. Gide will have it heavily guarded. He's not going to believe we're going off to Terra, even if the twins get a chance to tell him that."

"Problem to get enough diving equipment for enough men," Steer said. "Not a lot of that kind of thing on Centaurus. All they've got is imported, and it's for a few tourists and scientists. But Victoria can dig us up what there is."

"Victoria's nothing but a vain bit of inconsequential fluff," Missy said. "She's caused enough trouble. Let's just leave her out of this. I don't like to think of Pugh back there with her and no one to protect him."

Steer laughed. "You and Sibyl always talk about Victoria as though she were a cold virus. She's not so dumb."

"Nobody said she was dumb. I just don't like her or her methods," Missy said. "But look, I've got another idea. If it turns out we can't stop Gide from flooding the continents, maybe we can manage to get enough of that drug so everybody on Centaurus can breathe under water until some way is found to freeze the glaciers back up."

"Possible to freeze the glaciers back up," Steer said. "You put something in the atmosphere to shade the sun—like volcanic ash on Earth—but the drug. Pugh said it works for Darldians and humans, but not for mainland Centaurians. With them it causes a disease."

"Well, maybe under certain circumstances . . ." Sibyl began, but she didn't like that line of thinking. "All their cities would be ruined and, besides, do you realize we'd never be able to get back to Earth and it would be the end

of Terran-Centaurian trade, which is why Gide wants to do this. You can't land a space ship on water."

Steer set the heli on automatic and turned to Sibyl. She settled into his good shoulder and then pulled up for a kiss. "I've missed you, Steer," she said, and thought of what a good, safe kind of kiss Steer had. Not like the wild, alien rage of Gide. She hugged Steer to her. "*Some* time this will all be over and we can just have fun. Do you realize you came to Seia to spend a delightful weekend with me?"

Steer let her go to get back to the heli controls, because a breeze had come up. "Pugh may have something," he said. "He had some funny scheme he tried to explain to me when I let him off. But I wanted to get right back to you. He planned to come along later."

"What kind of 'something'?" Missy asked.

"Dunno," Steer answered. "Wait and ask him."

CHAPTER 11

Mr. Lansing was out on the landing square to meet them. That was the embassy behind the square, managing to look angular and Terran in spite of the fact that it was a generally tholos type of construction like the rest of Llonan City. And Mr. Lansing was looking distressed as only an American can.

"That's Victoria's old man," Steer said. "He's not bad."

"He looks *exactly* like Victoria's father should," Sibyl said, disliking him on sight. "Who else would have on a black patent leather suit and look as though he had never experienced perspiration?" She took the comb Missy handed her, and the purse with a little mirror and makeup. This was the first time Sibyl had looked at herself in a mirror for two days and she let out a howl. She looked awful. Her skin was peeling—from water or sun or both—and her hair wouldn't do at all—it was still briny. Sibyl looked down at her clothes, which were all wrong and rumpled besides, and felt utterly depressed.

Mr. Lansing watched them descending from the heli and then came up to Sibyl. He looked her over slowly from the top of her salt-matted hair to the bottom of her rush-sandaled feet. Then he extended a reluctant hand and said, "You are the diplomatic representative to Seia, I believe?"

"It must cost you some strain to believe it," Sibyl said, shaking the hand, "but it's true. We've got to do something

immediately. Did Pugh and Victoria explain the problem to you? It's gotten much worse."

"Worse!" Mr. Lansing led the way toward the embassy, where they would at least be out of the sun. It was terribly hot in Llonan City, and the sun made Sibyl itch badly. She didn't want to seem any more uncouth than she already did, so she couldn't scratch. "Frankly, we—that is, my office—had decided not to rescue you. Nothing personal. The fact is, that the situation being so delicate with the Grant twins coming into the Grant Lines fortune, and not knowing how the Seians might take Terran interference, we felt that on the whole . . . you don't mind my speaking frankly?"

Sibyl entered the cool of the building. "I wouldn't mind people speaking frankly if it didn't always mean they were about to say something nasty," Sibyl said. "But you can stop concentrating on me. The new development is that there is a kingdom under the sea, run by the Krilanrians of which Gide Girais seems to be the leader, and Gide is going to melt the glaciers and flood the planet."

"Really, Sergeant Blue," Mr. Lansing said in his baroque upper-class accent. He turned to look at her again, and Sibyl could tell his first impression of her was holding up well. So was her first impression of him. She especially didn't like the single strand of hair brushed across his bald dome. Why couldn't he just stay bald, like most men, or use hair grower like Steer instead of that coy lock of reddish hair? She had an overwhelming urge to pull it out. Why didn't his wife tell him?

Then Mrs. Lansing came into the hall, and Sibyl could tell why. She was one of those tall, self-conscious women who think they'll shrink if they're self-effacing enough. "Oh," she said. "Perhaps you'd like to come into the sitting room." Then she glanced uneasily at her husband. "Or

perhaps not." She looked at her hands as though she might have got them on the wrong arms by mistake. He's never let her be pretty, Sibyl thought, and that's why she's let Victoria get like she is. Unconscious revenge. Oh, phooey, Sibyl thought. In a few minutes I'm going to understand Victoria and then I'll have to like her. Then it suddenly washed over Sibyl that there was no time for liking and disliking and if Mr. Lansing wasn't going to help, something else would have to be done.

"I'll give you a quick run-down on the situation," Sibyl said, going on into the sitting room and picking a chair she wouldn't get too comfortable in, "if you'll give me a quick Gin and 'gin and a Hellenic. Or any cigar, if you don't have a Hellenic."

Mrs. Lansing went to make the drinks and Sibyl sketched out Missy's imprisonment in Krilanr and her own experience and Gide's plan. By the time Sibyl got the Gin and 'gin in her hand and the cigar in her mouth, she'd gotten to the part where she could say, "We've got about twelve hours left before Gide floods the world. I think the only thing to do is get together all the diving equipment in Llonan City and go down there and try to take the whole Krilanrian cliff, and if that doesn't work all that's left is to poison the water and stop up the exits."

Mr. Lansing took the cup of coffee his wife handed him and slowly spooned out sugar and poured cream while she held the heavy tray. He bit at his lower lip a little and looked around as though someone might come in to cart Sibyl away and solve all his problems. Finally he said, "All this sounds very wild, Sergeant Blue."

"Yes, but you *know* the first part of it is true, unless you think your own daughter made it up. Missy and Darld can confirm what I tell you. You're going to drown, too."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Lansing, setting her tray down at

last and brushing back wisps of gray hair with anxious fingers. "Perhaps we could get a boat. And Victoria doesn't swim, on account of her hair." She sat down before her husband's irritated glance. "I mean," she added, "it would ruin her set. So naturally she—"

"The point is," Mr. Lansing interrupted, "that I have *firm* instructions not to interfere with the native social ecology. No question one way or the other. I am on this planet merely as a guest."

Sibyl swallowed her mouthful of Gin and 'gin and set the glass down. "Suppose you were a guest in someone's house and you found out it was about to be blown up. Would you consider it impolite to mention this? Oh, come on. We can't just sit here and drown."

Mr. Lansing bit at his lip again. "We could leave, I suppose. But it wouldn't look well."

"Perhaps I could stay," Mrs. Lansing volunteered, clasping her hands which turned out to be on the right wrists after all. "We could say you had developed a rare allergy of some sort. To Centaurian perfume, perhaps."

"Don't be absurd," her husband said, with his look.

Sibyl finished her drink quickly, the minutes ticking off in her mind. "Gide isn't a good representative of 'the native social ecology.' He's a maverick of the sort you find anywhere, anytime, who thinks the world is his neurosis. You're not going to lift a finger to save this planet?"

Mr. Lansing turned red. "Putting it that way doesn't change my instructions from the State Department. Victoria tells me you let a lot of Seian children get eaten by the strangler eel rather than tell the Seians they ought to bring the babies closer in to shore at night. Isn't that the same thing?"

"No," Sibyl said firmly, "it isn't. Gide is one man, not

a set of customs. It's a question of a whole world, not just a few individuals. Are you going to do anything or not?"

"I'm going to get in touch with the State Department of the U.N. on Terra and ask what to do."

Sibyl got up with a glance at Missy and Darld. "O.K. Just be sure to get your wife a pair of water wings."

"Don't expect me to get you off the planet," Steer said. He scraped his wrist over his three-day growth of beard. "You're stuck here with the rest of us."

"I didn't plan to run out," Mr. Lansing said, still red. "But there's no reason why you shouldn't take my wife and daughter. And maybe other Terrans as—"

"Nope," Steer said. "You won't do anything, we will."

"We save my island," Darld said. "*Me* can interfere with native ecology. Some day maybe *me* can let other Terrans blow *you* up."

Mrs. Lansing followed them to the door. "My husband is a little difficult at times," she confided in a whisper. "But he's really a very good man. You mustn't mind."

"We don't," Sibyl said to comfort her. "Do you know where we can find Pugh?"

"Probably with Victoria. They've been playing at something over at the Marine Lab—down near the edge of the sea past the Perfume slum. I *don't* like the neighborhood, but of course as long as they're at the Lab I'm sure it's all right. There are a nice class of Terrans there, and of course it isn't *in* the slum."

Sibyl went on through the little hall that led outside, reminded as always in Centaurian houses how much it was like a Helladic dromos and ought to lead to a carefully laid-out skeleton. But outside it was bright and hot and they hired a little cart and ostrich to take them to the Marine Lab. The driver—a plump, bright-scaled Centaurian with benzale-browned teeth—started his bird off with a

joyful "Foop!" and they bounced at such a rate over the stone street that Sibyl feared for her spine. But Darld enjoyed it hugely, and whooped every time they sailed through the air and came down with a resounding thump.

The Centaurian driver stopped his bird short with a loud "Braat!" in front of a particularly sleazy-looking dromos that emitted a smell of overripe apples. "Nice," he said in English. "Good Perfume Parlor for nice boy." He grinned at Darld. "Sanitary ladies."

"No!" Sibyl said in Centaurian. "We're in a big hurry. Go on to the Marine Lab."

"No hurry," said the driver. He lighted his benzale cigarette. "You nice lady. Like to dance?"

"No," Sibyl said. "Some other time. *Please.*"

"I buy wine," the driver went on cosily. "Free."

Steer yelled, "Floop!" at the bird, and off they went with a horrible lurch.

"O.K.," the driver said. "In a hurry."

They found Victoria and Pugh in a big, airy room of the Lab, overlooking the sea. Pugh was bending over a microscope and Victoria was cutting up something that squirted blood all over her hands. She looked up and Sibyl was shocked. Victoria didn't have on a sign of makeup and her hair dangled limply about her cheeks and her eyes looked haggard. She looked, for the first time, utterly unself-conscious.

"Sibyl!" she shouted, and Pugh looked up now. Victoria came around the table and touched Sibyl with her bloody hand. "I had decided you were dead. I didn't think there was a chance that Steer could . . . Steer! You did it!"

"Didn't," Steer said. "*She* rescued me. Say, you look different Victoria. New style?"

Victoria's hands went to her hair, and then she remembered the blood and brought them down. But her face went back

to its glamorous tension, which went oddly with the rest of her now. "No. I haven't had any sleep. Pugh was trying to find something to rescue Sibyl and Missy with. He's got it, now, only we need more of it in case . . . but now we don't need it, do we? Oh, hello Missy. Your hair looks worse than mine."

"You don't seem to have worried a lot about me," Missy said. "Not that I mind, but why Mama and not me?"

"Because I thought you had managed to elope with Darld, and that meant you'd be all right. But then after those natives came with their spears, and Sibyl stayed . . . I don't know. *You* look good, Darld. Let's you and me go buy a magnetopock set. Now we can forget all this."

"Gee, I'm glad," Pugh said finally, coming up and putting an arm around Missy. He couldn't take his eyes off her. "Missy, you don't how how I . . . what I've been through, thinking about you, and thinking you were dead or gone forever and . . . Gee, let's all go have a drink."

"I'm sorry," Sibyl said. "I'm tired too, but it isn't all over. Or rather, I hope it isn't. Pugh, can you find me a good, strong poison here. *I'll* be the one to steal it, in case there's trouble later."

"Sure," Pugh said. "Cyanide do? What do you want it for?"

"Gide's going to flood Centaurus," Sibyl said. "By melting the glaciers. He's only waiting for the Seians to grow their gills. That's what the whole underwater kingdom was for. It's part of Gide's plan. I suppose he's got the Krilanrians on mainland Krilanr ready, too."

"Then he *does* have a kingdom to the north of Llonan City," Victoria said. "I wonder why he didn't decide to talk to Father more instead of flooding Centaurus? I mean, if he doesn't like our diplomatic policy . . ."

"He doesn't like anything," Sibyl said. "I tried to get

your father to help me get hold of Gide and stop the whole thing. But he won't help. And the only thing I can think of to do is poison the water in undersea Krilanr so nobody can set off the controls to the fusion bomb at the north pole. Then later on we can negotiate with the mainland Centaurians and the Krilanrians and anybody else who wants to be negotiated with. But right now we've got to save the whole planet. I realize it'll cause a diplomatic mess to poison a kingdom full of Centaurian natives, but . . ."

"Wait, wait!" Pugh shouted. "You won't have to poison anybody. If we can . . . we'll *have* to. Victoria, you get back to hacking up those amphoteri. No. You're the worst surgeon I've ever seen. You take Darld down to find some more, and Steer and Sibyl can stay here and chop. How much time do we have?"

Sibyl drew a sharp breath of relief as it dawned on her that Pugh had *something* that was going to help, and it lifted her worry completely for a moment to have him take over and give directions and apparently have some sort of plan. She looked at the boy with new respect. "Not long," she said. "The button is going to be pushed or the lever lifted or the direction given within twelve hours. So before then we have to deactivate Krilanr or Gide somehow. I think it's all Gide doing this, but I wouldn't be sure it was ended just because we had Gide."

"O.K.," Pugh said. "Let's say we have maybe four hours here and five hours to get to Krilanr . . . that doesn't leave us much time, does it? Quick, here's how you take the pancreas out of an amphoteron." He seized one of the little, sluglike creatures and expertly slit it vertically. Then he looked up to see that Sibyl and Steer were watching carefully, and he took the pointed end of the knife and

scooped out a tiny, reddish bit of flesh. "Then you drop it into this test tube," he said, "and I take over from there."

Sibyl turned and watched Darld and Victoria going out of the door together. Darld was delighted to be going out to find something, and Victoria was fast becoming her usual disgusting self. She was hurrying to collect the amphoteri, but she was hurrying slinkily.

"Damn thing squashed to pieces in my hands," Steer said, holding out what looked like a stepped-on slug. "Hope they get a lot of them. This is going to take practice."

"Practice fast," Sibyl said, taking up one of the sluglike creatures and wishing it wouldn't skid about so. She ruined two of them before she got the incision right. It wasn't neat, like Pugh's, but she was able to find the pancreas and scoop it out. Steer immediately found a way to squash half the amphoteron with his thumb and cut the other half in exactly the right place.

"Now we're gyring in a creel," Steer said happily. "Tell me why I'm doing this, Pugh."

"I know one thing from the name," Sibyl said. "Whatever the amphoteron does, he does it both ways."

Pugh was watching something settle in a test tube. He looked up and smiled his nice smile, which called attention to his mustache which was looking even cuter than ever. "He does. He breathes either water or air, depending on whether he's on the rocks or in the sea. He can switch back and forth in ten seconds. That's what I like about him, and I thought of him immediately when I pictured Missy with gills. The point is, I wanted to find some way to rescue her without having to wait twelve hours for her gills to go away. Or vice versa. The amphoteron secretes just such a chemical. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to switch back and forth himself. So I ran him through the

analyzer and found the endocrine in his pancreas. Now you can see how we are going to use it against Krilanr."

Sibyl nodded, though Steer and Pugh were too busy over their jobs to see her nod. "We distill a big batch of it, explode it into their water and close up all the exits until it takes effect. It'll nullify the branchione they're taking and they'll have to come up for air. Immediately."

"Right," Pugh said. "Do you think they expect us?"

"They certainly won't expect anything like *this*," Steer said. "But they'll probably have some kind of a guard out. We'd better go armed. Too bad there aren't more of us."

"These things are awfully small," Sibyl said, tapping an amphoteron pancreas from the end of her knife into the test tube. "Do you think we'll *ever* get enough to drug all of Krilanr?"

"If we work fast," Pugh answered. "It's a very powerful drug and a little goes a long way. We won't even need to block off the water exits. It would be better to let it circulate as the water usually does. That way we'll get everyone in Krilanr, and it'll only take the least bit to set off the chemical reaction. It'll hit them before they know what's happened and then their only escape is to come up and swim to Seia. After that, we take Gide and there'll be twelve hours for the rest of the Krilanrians to think before they can get their gills again even if they take the branchione again immediately. Meanwhile Steer and I can go down with diving equipment and disconnect the communication to the bomb at the pole. Then we'll go on to the pole and see what we can do about the bomb itself. Although I don't know how."

"I do," Steer said. "Part of our training."

As they approached Seia, Sibyl searched the sea. "Darld, do *you* have any idea where it is?"

"This side of the island. Farther out past where the water changes color. But that all I can say. Lots of sea here."

Pugh was hauling out the diving gear. "I don't think the guys at the Marine Lab really believed us. But we'd be put to it if they hadn't lent us the pontoon heli and diving equipment. I left mine back at your hut, Sibyl. I sure hope it's still there. It cost a thousand dollars. Who's going down?"

"Me," said Sibyl.

"I'll go," said Victoria, and returned Sibyl's surprised look with a rude stare. "I don't know why Darld and I shouldn't go. Darld knows the way."

"We go," said Darld. "Can me have a gun?"

"No," Steer said. "Sibyl can find the way as well as Darld and I'll go with her. If anything happens to us, Pugh knows how to pilot the heli." Steer set the heli down lightly and it began to toss on the frothy waves. The motor quieted and the blades folded down. Now they could hear the wind on the water and the lonely call of a sea bird. "Your best bet, if we fail, is to go ahead and find those orange pellets. Then you'll have to live as best you can under the sea."

Victoria took in a quick breath. "It's really too late, isn't it? I mean, to get off the planet. If you don't flush out the Krilanrians now, we're doomed."

"You knew that," Sibyl said, stripping off the last of her clothes and slithering the tight diving suit over her.

"But all of a sudden I really believe it," Victoria said. She rubbed her forehead. "I wish we had left this planet while we could."

"You scared?" Darld asked. "Poor Victoria." He put his arm around her. She sat stiff a moment, and then seemed to relax against Darld's shoulder and took out her compact and rouged her knees.

"Not with *you* here, Darld," she said. She was going to be all right and Sibyl smiled.

"Work like a regular stun gun?" Steer asked, his head piece crumpled up under his neck so he looked like a turtle. He was examining the safety catch on the gun and weighing it for balance.

"Pretty much," Pugh answered. "Naturally it handles better in the water. That's why it's so heavy. You flip off the safety catch here, and squeeze this middle piece to fire it. It fires wide, because it's almost impossible to aim accurately under water. Don't shoot anything within six feet of Sibyl."

"Let's go," Sibyl said. "I've never been seasick before but I'm beginning to have a feeling like something black and horrible is coming up my stomach into my windpipe." That and a cold sweat. She thumbed back the door and stood on the pontoon, holding onto the struts with one hand and pulling up her headgear with the other. She checked the oxygen lines and edged over so Steer could stand next to her. She gave one last shudder at the thought of getting sick inside the face plate, and slid into the water. Steer followed her and soon she felt cool and well in the deep green water. Steer looked at her as they sank, watching for her to give some indication which way to go.

She could just guess, and never find it. What she was banking on was the lunga. They'd have seen the heli, and surely there'd be at least one around. Then it would (might) lead her to the sea melon grove, which might take them past the cliff of Krilanr. If only it would recognize her! But in the diving suit . . . In a moment Sibyl saw two dark shapes in the water, circling them. Steer had his stun gun up, but Sibyl held his wrist down. In a moment the lunga would come closer for a good look. If there were

only some way to talk! But no sound would go beyond her face plate.

One of the lunga came closer and Sibyl kept her face plate turned toward it. Finally it came close enough so Sibyl could put her face right up to it, and her arm over its back. Apparently it did recognize her, because it began a little dance and then the other lunga came up. Sibyl gestured to Steer and he embraced the other lunga and off they went. First the lunga took them to the uncultivated melon grove, but Sibyl swam out of it as she had before, and finally her lunga seemed to understand and they set off again and finally came to the cliff of Krilanr. Here Sibyl let go of her lunga without entering the grove before the entrance, and began swimming around the cliff to look for the secret way they had gotten out before. The lunga followed her and Steer, and finally seemed to understand, for he came up and nudged Sibyl until she put her arm over him again, and took her to an almost invisible groove in the cliff, fringed with seaweed like a curtain. This was it.

Sibyl motioned to Steer to hang onto his lunga, and in they went. Sibyl would never have been able to find her way through all those holes and pitch-black caves, and she hung on blind as they went through what seemed an endless nothingness, until finally they came to the bright, dizzy canyon, and beyond that to the cave of the giant barnacles. Here she let go of the lunga and motioned to Steer to wait, and pointed at the barnacles to warn him to stay away from them. As she pointed, the one nearest her opened and began to stir the current that could drag a man in. But her lunga swam away automatically and she followed it. As long as Steer hung on to his lunga he'd be all right. She'd have liked for Steer to go with her, because there might very well be a guard by the room she'd have to enter, but she didn't dare chance the lunga taking

it into their heads to leave for a while. Only the lunga could get them out, and this time there was no way to call for them, through her diving gear.

She swam out of the cave and then down a space in the rock and found the oxygen machine had not been replaced. Into the room that had contained air she went, and pulled out the pressure can of precious antibranchione that Pugh had made from the amphoteri with such effort. But then she thought a moment and was afraid that the water purifying system might not connect well enough to this room, since it was ordinarily used as a terrarium. So she swam over to the open hole above the room with the pool that led to what had been Missy's quarters, and down the hole (it was all flooded now) to the lock and opened the lock.

On the other side were two Krilanrians with harpoons and they stared at her in utter surprise for a moment. She took that moment to press down the top of the pressure can. It had to be held down for several minutes, and she couldn't use her stun gun at the same time. One of the Krilanrians, thinking the pressure can was a weapon of some sort, flung his harpoon at her, still looking surprised and a little frightened, as he had probably never seen a diving costume before. A strange fish, indeed, Sibyl must have looked.

She ducked fast—by now she could move more efficiently under water—and came up and flung both arms about his waist, still pressing the pressure can, and feeling her hand beginning to tire. She hadn't known she'd have to be releasing the drug while dodging harpoons or waltzing under the water with a confused Krilanrian. The other Krilanrian was circling about, trying to find a good way to harpoon her without endangering the first Krilanrian. The Krilanrian she was embracing was trying to push her off, but she had climbed up him and had a grip around him with her arms

and feet. All he had to do, really, was pull out her oxygen capsule. But they didn't know that.

Finally the can felt empty and the motions of Sibyl and the Krilanrians had gotten the drug a good start on its way through the water circulating system. The second Krilanrian had his harpoon held back now, and the one Sibyl was on was holding himself still against the wall of the cliff so Sibyl could be efficiently harpooned. But Sibyl's feet were also against the wall of the cliff, and she pushed off with a mighty lunge as the harpoon was flung.

She hit the far wall and bounced floatingly and made for her stun gun, floating a few feet from her, just as the Krilanrians were making for their harpoons. She started to stun them and end the whole thing, when she realized they wouldn't be able to get out of Krilanr if she did, and the drug ought to take effect . . . they stopped and looked at each other and began talking, though of course Sibyl couldn't hear the words. Then—they must have been yelling—a whole bunch of armed Krilanrians began coming in and an arrow whizzed by Sibyl's ear and rang against the stone and the end of it knocked Sibyl's leg so that it felt broken but she didn't wait to think about it. She swam like fury, closing the port behind her, which would give her a second or two while they opened it, then up into the room where she and Missy had waited to drown and through the place where the oxygen machine had been and then into the cave, and as she entered it a harpoon whizzed up from below and she grabbed her lunga and tugged it violently and Steer turned to shoot at the Krilanrians as his lunga led him off.

The trip out was a lot faster than the trip in had been, because the lunga had sensed danger, and when they wanted to swim fast their speed was fantastic. Sibyl could feel her lunga cutting through the water like a bullet. Through the blackness of the cave, when she could see nothing and

hear only the rush of water and her own blood, it was like a nightmare of death, like a soul rushing endlessly nowhere with such rushing there was no time for memory. Eternities of plunging nowhere in endless desperation . . .

Then they were out in bright, green sea and Sibyl let go of her lunga and tumbled over and over in the water until she slowed and she swam up and looked around at a sparkling world that hurt her eyes with its chartreuse sky and sea and its glitter of sunshine. She spotted the heli about half a mile off tossing on the waves, wished for her lunga again, and no sooner had she wished than he was there, leaping about her delightedly. Sibyl laughed and pointed to the heli and looked around for Steer, who turned up a little way off and waved at her, one arm around his lunga.

Pugh and Victoria were waiting for them on the pontoons. Victoria held onto the struts, her hair whipped into scrambled eggs by the wind, her face a little green. She helped Sibyl up as Pugh saw to Steer and said, "If you hadn't come soon I was going to drown myself. I was about to die of seasickness in there and it isn't much better out here. Darld doesn't seem to mind. But he's been out swimming with a lunga anyway."

"We'd better get on to Seia," Pugh said. "Before the Kril-anrians start coming up."

Sibyl was stripping off her diving skin while Pugh started up the heli. "I wonder," she said slowly. "I wonder what Gide is going to do."

"What *can* he do?" Missy said, "He'll just have to come up with the others."

"I don't know what he can do," Sibyl said. "But I can bet it'll be *something*."

CHAPTER 12

Steer landed the heli as close to shore as he could, by the King's Beach, and they all got out and tugged it up onto the beach. They were immediately surrounded by excited natives, giggling and garbling, and Sibyl was looking for King Seia while Darld was spewing out torrents of explanations in Seian, when suddenly, on a little knoll in the forest beyond the beach, she saw Gide, tall and glistening in the sunlight. Despite the chill of the air he was dressed only in his molefish skin trousers.

He sauntered down to Sibyl. "Where's the rest of the army?" he asked.

"There's only us," Sibyl said. He was just as she remembered him. Alien. Compelling. All power in those orange eyes. All pleasure in that silver skin.

"Why did you come back? There's no hope for you. None." And yet Sibyl could tell he wanted to see her. To stand in the same air with her and keep the moment as it was. "I thought you escaped from Krilanr to get off the planet. Or maybe to rouse an army to fight me."

"Did you think that? I was afraid you wouldn't think about me at all. And what are you doing here? I thought you'd be down blowing up the glaciers."

Gide looked at the sun. "Not quite time. I'm taking the Seians down with me. Care for a pre-mortem stroll in the woods? There are strange species of harp-lily blooming down the path. They— What's that!"

Sibyl turned. It was the Krilanrians, masses of them, coming into shore, stumbling up on the beach, half-blinded by the sunlight and awkward on land, after so long under water. The Seians were running down the beach to meet them, Darld yelling explanations in both Seian and Krilanrian, and Gide turned to Sibyl and said, "They're going to drown in the air. Did you poison the sea?"

"No," Sibyl said. "All I did was neutralize the drug that put them in the gill stage. They've got to stay in air until twenty-four hours after they get some more branchione. And they're not going to get any more. We're going to take a few of them to Llonan City and let them and the mainland Centaurians decide together whether to drown the planet. It seems unlikely, Gide, that this was anybody's idea but yours."

"But . . ."

"You can't breathe under water yet, either. So why don't we take that stroll in the woods you were mentioning."

Gide stood and looked at her a moment, fury sweeping across his silver face. Then he turned and ran toward the sea.

"No!" Sibyl cried. "You'll never make it, anyhow!" She sped after him. He was in the water in a moment, his body flashing through the waves. But suppose he *does* by some wild chance make it, Sibyl thought.

She grabbed up an arrow gun from the beach where one of the Krilanrians had dropped it, strapped it on and dove into the waves after Gide. He was far ahead of her, but she swam on. Her lunga must have been watching, for he swam up and Sibyl pointed at Gide and said, "Oh, hurry!" and they sped through the green and silver water until they were almost up with him, and Sibyl slipped off the lunga as Gide dove straight down, and he turned and looked once at her and she steadied the gun and shot. The shot kicked

her backwards through the water in a crazy somersault that ended when her lunga caught her on his snout. Far off in the water she saw the silver gleam of Gide, still swimming.

Sibyl hung onto the lunga again and away they went after Gide. In thirty seconds they were upon him and Sibyl caught him and thought, his lungs must be about to burst, because mine are. But perhaps his gill slits had opened and she wasn't sure. He pushed her away, levering with his feet, and she managed to grab one of his ankles and slid out the knife in her belt and slithered up his body through the water and forced him into her arms in a final embrace and plunged her sharp, strong knife through his back into his heart. Then she held him for fifteen seconds while he died, and hung herself across the lunga's back and that was all she remembered until Steer was holding her head up and saying, "Found this in the hut. Gin and 'gin."

Sibyl drank it fast, gasped, and sat up. "He's dead," she said. She was in King Seia's hut, looking out the door toward the sea. "It was like killing the soul of the sea." All that silver glory, leaping in the sunlight, gliding in the deep green. All gone.

"Have a cigar," Steer said, holding out a Hellenic. "Cut the dramatics. It was like killing Jack the Ripper. Too bad for him, but swell for the rest of us."

"O.K.," Sibyl said. "O.K. Just give me a minute to get my balance." Gide would be Sibyl's secret, like a pearl in an oyster. No one would ever open her up and see it there, but she'd always feel it inside of her, glistening and strange. "You're right," Sibyl said finally. "He was just another nut with a thirst for power."

"About our weekend," Steer said. "Know what tomorrow is?"

"Lord, no. What is it?"

"Lift off for Terra. We don't get any weekend. How's that for irony?"

"Hell of a note," Sibyl said. "Any Gin and 'gin left? Well, there's always Earth. How about dinner and dancing at the good old Stilton in Hammond Space Port, and if the night doesn't last long enough we can always pull down the blinds."

"Come on!" Pugh called. "Let's get the heli into the water. That ship can't lift off without a navigator."

"What about tying things up here?" Sibyl asked. "Maybe I'd better stay and—"

"Stay!" Missy screamed, coming up at that moment. "I've got to register for school and if you think for one minute I'm going to go off and leave you on this wretched island . . ."

"Darld's already done the explaining," Steer said. "He's the only one who knows both Krilanrian and Seian."

Victoria stood up. She had been behind Sibyl, and had apparently used all the excitement to take time out for a quick paint job. Her lashes were back on and her eyelids were golden and so were her lips. She'd tied a golden band around her head so you couldn't tell what a mess her hair was and she managed to look cool and enamel-cheeked. "Besides," Victoria said. "I'm staying. I think the island is rather sweet, and if you don't mind my saying so, Missy, it isn't very diplomatic to refer to it as a 'wretched' island."

"If you'd been through what I've been through you wouldn't feel very diplomatic, either," Missy said. "Anyhow, I know why you think it's so sweet."

"You'd better come back with us," Sibyl said. "Poor Darld . . ."

"Oh, why don't you give up on that," Steer said to Sibyl. "They like each other. Victoria isn't so bad. She's used to

diplomatic circles and international sets and she'd be a lot of help to Darld."

"And what other woman plays such a good game of magnetopock?" Victoria added. "Just tell Daddy I'm all right and to send a helicopter and a marriage license."

"Come on!" Pugh called. "I've got the Krilanrians in the heli and I want to take off before they change their minds."

Three weeks later Sibyl sat in Lieutenant Brandt's office, smoking one of his foul cigars. The good ones were for visitors.

"I'll make you out a full report tomorrow," she said. "I'm in a hurry. I've got a hot date tonight."

"All right," Lieutenant Brandt said, sitting back in his chair and looking sweaty, though his office was perfectly cool. "But it seems to me that after a sleeper of a job like that you'd be raring to get back to some work instead of thinking about dates. I was doing you a favor hauling you off in a police car. Anything about the Grant twins, and the reporters are out in full force. And they knew why you went to Centaurus."

"Thanks for the favor. And by the way, it wasn't exactly a relaxing vacation."

Lieutenant Brandt frowned. "Oh, you're always exaggerating. What did you do—step on a sand crab?"

"Something like that," Sibyl said. "I'll let you see it in the report. Can I go now?"

"Yes, but report in tomorrow morning. I'm putting you back on teen-agers. It isn't benzale this time. It's a series of demonstrations of violence. A lot has happened while you were gone. Nobody understands it."

"I'll start understanding it tomorrow. Tonight I've got a date with Steer, and it's to make up for stepping on a sand crab on Seia, so you can imagine how important it is."

"Women policemen!" Lieutenant Brandt snorted, and held the door for her. "Stanley'll take you home."

"Oh, boy!" Sibyl said, coming into her and Missy's apartment. "A real bath in a real bathtub with real floatfoam, like a Lord meant us to bathe. Missy, isn't it heaven just to be *home*!"

"Yep. I've mixed you a drink and ordered up roses and cigars and you can have first at the bathtub. And look," Missy said, waving the catalogue at Sibyl, "they're offering Centaurian as a freshman course this year. I wonder if it would be better to take that or French?"

"You take Latin," Sibyl said. "I'd never have gotten as far as I have without a good classical education. You can take Centaurian later. I wonder if there's any shampoo."

Missy nodded. "First thing I looked for. I was too nervous about using too much water to really rinse well on the ship."

Sibyl bathed slowly and luxuriantly in blue floatfoam—it was the color that reminded her least of Centaurus. She took a good look at herself in the mirror when she got out of the tub, decided that beginning tomorrow she'd better fade her tan, which was a little peely, and meanwhile she'd do best to wear plain white.

She got out white underwear and her silvery-white slink dress and pearl earrings that hung down an inch on invisible wires and her pearl anklet. She decided white eyeshadow would be overdoing it, so she used green, which really did the most for her eyes and added green lipstick and knee rouge—pretty daring, green knee rouge, but she was in a daring mood. She pushed her hair into its natural black and white stripes while it was wet and stuck her head in the drier for a moment, which was all it took. There was still time for her nails, so she did them in a glittering jewel-green

and when she was all done she stood in front of the mirror and decided there was life in the old girl yet.

"It's Steer!" Missy called from the living room and when Sibyl came in Steer gave her a heartening double look.

"Fairy Godmother's been here?" Steer asked. "You look swell. Let's go. Er . . . would you want to come, too, Missy?"

Missy laughed. "I'll just bet you two want me along. No, I'm going to stay home and improve my mind with the TCU catalogue. Have fun."

"I always do," Sibyl said, and took Steer's arm.

"Gide?" she said aloud, but there was no answer, and however loud she screamed it, the water took the strength from it and made it a soft bubble like a fish makes. She tried to pull one foot back to grip against the ankle of the other and found her ankles were tightly tied together. She grasped the grill harder and was about to push back again when she saw Darld swim directly in front of her, intent on trying to balance himself on top of a moving balloon light. Frantically she tried to signal to him, to call him. But her voice didn't carry and he wasn't looking her way. Anyhow, she was in darkness and he wouldn't see her. She broke a piece of shell off the side of the tunnel and pushed it through the grill, but it was just a bit of dust floating in the huge room. She tried to rattle the grill but it didn't rattle. The dead fish dislodged and floated back into her face.

THE WATERS OF CENTAURUS

Rosel George Brown