

Oceanic
by Greg Egan

Thanks to Caroline Oakley, Anthony Cheetham, John Douglas, Peter Robinson, Kate Messenger, Philip Patterson, Tony Gardner, Russ Galen, David Pringle, Lee Montgomerie, Gardner Dozois, Sheila Williams, and Bill Congreve.

1

The swell was gently lifting and lowering the boat. My breathing grew slower, falling into step with the creaking of the hull, until I could no longer tell the difference between the faint rhythmic motion of the cabin and the sensation of filling and emptying my lungs. It was like floating in darkness: every inhalation buoyed me up, slightly; every exhalation made me sink back down again.

In the bunk above me, my brother Daniel said distinctly, "Do you believe in God?"

My head was cleared of sleep in an instant, but I didn't reply straight away. I'd never closed my eyes, but the darkness of the unlit cabin seemed to shift in front of me, grains of phantom light moving like a cloud of disturbed insects.

"Martin?"

"I'm awake."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Of course." Everyone I knew believed in God. Everyone talked about Her, everyone prayed to Her. Daniel most of all. Since he'd joined the Deep Church the previous summer, he prayed every morning for a kilotau before dawn. I'd often wake to find myself aware of him kneeling by the far wall of the cabin, muttering and pounding his chest, before I drifted gratefully back to sleep.

Our family had always been Transitional, but Daniel was fifteen, old enough to choose for himself. My mother accepted this with diplomatic silence, but my father seemed positively proud of Daniel's independence and strength of conviction. My own feelings were mixed. I'd grown used to swimming in my older brother's wake, but I'd never resented it, because he'd always let me in on the view ahead: reading me passages from the books he read himself, teaching me words and phrases from the languages he studied, sketching some of the mathematics I was yet to encounter first-hand. We used to lie awake half the night, talking about the cores of stars or the hierarchy of transfinite numbers. But Daniel had told me nothing about the reasons for his conversion, and his ever-increasing piety. I didn't know whether to feel hurt by this exclusion, or simply grateful; I could see that being Transitional was like a pale imitation of being Deep Church, but I wasn't sure that this was such a bad thing if the wages of mediocrity included sleeping until sunrise.

Daniel said, "Why?"

I stared up at the underside of his bunk, unsure whether I was really seeing it or just imagining its solidity against the cabin's ordinary darkness. "Someone must have guided the Angels here from Earth. If Earth's too far away to see from Covenant ... how could anyone find Covenant from Earth, without God's help?"

I heard Daniel shift slightly. "Maybe the Angels had better telescopes than us. Or maybe they spread out from Earth in all directions, launching thousands of expeditions without even knowing what they'd find."

I laughed. "But they had to come here, to be made flesh again!" Even a less-than-devout ten-year-old knew that much. God prepared Covenant as the place for the Angels to repent their theft of immortality. The Transitionals believed that in a million years we could earn the right to be Angels again; the Deep Church believed that we'd remain flesh until the stars fell from the sky.

Daniel said, "What makes you so sure that there were ever really Angels? Or that God really sent them Her daughter, Beatrice, to lead them back into the flesh?"

I pondered this for a while. The only answers I could think of came straight out of the Scriptures, and Daniel had taught me years ago that appeals to authority counted for nothing. Finally, I had to confess: "I don't know." I felt foolish, but I was grateful that he was willing to discuss these difficult questions with me. I wanted to believe in God for the right reasons, not just because everyone around me did.

He said, "Archaeologists have shown that we must have arrived about twenty thousand years ago. Before that, there's no evidence of humans, or any co-ecological plants and animals. That makes the Crossing older than the Scriptures say, but there are some dates that are open to interpretation, and with a bit of poetic license everything can be made to add up. And most biologists think the native microfauna could have formed by itself over millions of years, starting from simple chemicals, but that doesn't mean God didn't guide the whole process. Everything's compatible, really. Science and the Scriptures can both be true."

I thought I knew where he was headed, now. "So you've worked out a way to use science to prove that God exists?" I felt a surge of pride; my brother was a genius!

"No." Daniel was silent for a moment. "The thing is, it works both ways. Whatever's written in the Scriptures, people can always come up with different explanations for the facts. The ships might have left Earth for some other reason. The Angels might have made bodies for themselves for some other reason. There's no way to convince a non-believer that the Scriptures are the word of God. It's all a matter of faith."

"Oh."

"Faith's the most important thing," Daniel insisted. "If you don't have faith, you can be tempted into believing anything at all."

I made a noise of assent, trying not to sound too disappointed. I'd expected more from Daniel than the kind of bland assertions that sent me dozing off during sermons at the Transitional church.

"Do you know what you have to do to get faith?"

"No."

"Ask for it. That's all. Ask Beatrice to come into your heart and grant you the gift of faith."

I protested, "We do that every time we go to church!" I couldn't believe he'd forgotten the Transitional service already. After the priest placed a drop of seawater on our tongues, to symbolize the blood of Beatrice, we asked for the gifts of faith, hope and love.

"But have you received it?"

I'd never thought about that. "I'm not sure." I believed in God, didn't I? "I might have."

Daniel was amused. "If you had the gift of faith, you'd know."

I gazed up into the darkness, troubled. "Do you have to go to the Deep Church, to ask for it properly?"

"No. Even in the Deep Church, not everyone has invited Beatrice into their hearts. You have to do it the way it says in the Scriptures: 'like an unborn child again, naked and helpless.'"

"I was Immersed, wasn't I?"

"In a metal bowl, when you were thirty days old. Infant Immersion is a gesture by the parents, an affirmation of their own good intentions. But it's not enough to save the child."

I was feeling very disoriented now. My father, at least, approved of Daniel's conversion ... but now Daniel was trying to tell me that our family's transactions with God had all been grossly deficient, if not actually counterfeit.

Daniel said, "Remember what Beatrice told Her followers, the last time She appeared? 'Unless you are willing to drown in My blood, you will never look upon the face of My Mother.' So they bound each other hand and foot, and weighted themselves down with rocks."

My chest tightened. "And you've done that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Almost a year ago."

I was more confused than ever. "Did Ma and Fa go?"

Daniel laughed. "No! It's not a public ceremony. Some friends of mine from the Prayer Group helped; someone has to be on deck to haul you up, because it would be arrogant to expect Beatrice to break your bonds and raise you to the surface, like She did with Her followers. But in the water, you're alone with God."

He climbed down from his bunk and crouched by the side of my bed. "Are you ready to give your life to Beatrice, Martin?" His voice sent gray sparks flowing through the darkness.

I hesitated. "What if I just dive in? And stay under for a while?" I'd been swimming off the boat at night plenty of times, there was nothing to fear from that.

"No. You have to be weighted down." His tone made it clear that there could be no compromise on this. "How long can you hold your breath?"

"Two hundred tau." That was an exaggeration; two hundred was what I was aiming for.

"That's long enough."

I didn't reply. Daniel said, "I'll pray with you."

I climbed out of bed, and we knelt together. Daniel murmured, "Please, Holy Beatrice, grant my brother Martin the courage to accept the precious gift of Your blood." Then he started praying in what I took to be a foreign language, uttering a rapid stream of harsh syllables unlike anything I'd heard before. I listened apprehensively; I wasn't sure that I wanted Beatrice to change my mind, and I was afraid that this display of fervor might actually persuade Her.

I said, "What if I don't do it?"

"Then you'll never see the face of God."

I knew what that meant: I'd wander alone in the belly of Death, in darkness, for eternity. And even if the Scriptures weren't meant to be taken literally on this, the reality behind the metaphor could only be worse. Indescribably worse.

"But ... what about Ma and Fa?" I was more worried about them, because I knew they'd never climb weighted off the side of the boat at Daniel's behest.

"That will take time," he said softly.

My mind reeled. He was absolutely serious.

I heard him stand and walk over to the ladder. He climbed a few rungs and opened the hatch. Enough starlight came in to give shape to his arms and shoulders, but as he turned to me I still couldn't make out his face. "Come on, Martin!" he whispered. "The longer you put it off, the harder it gets." The hushed urgency of his voice was familiar: generous and conspiratorial, nothing like an adult's impatience. He might almost have been daring me to join him in a midnight raid on the pantry -- not because he really needed a collaborator, but because he honestly didn't want me to miss out on the excitement, or the spoils.

I suppose I was more afraid of damnation than drowning, and I'd always trusted Daniel to warn me of the dangers ahead. But this time I wasn't entirely convinced that he was right, so I must have been driven by something more than fear, and blind trust.

Maybe it came down to the fact that he was offering to make me his equal in this. I was ten years old, and I ached to become something more than I was; to reach, not my parents' burdensome adulthood, but the halfway point, full of freedom and secrets, that Daniel had reached. I wanted to be as strong, as fast, as quick-witted and widely-read as he was. Becoming as certain of God would not have been my first choice, but there wasn't much point hoping for divine intervention to grant me anything else.

I followed him up onto the deck.

He took cord, and a knife, and four spare weights of the kind we used on our nets from the toolbox. He threaded the weights onto the cord, then I took off my shorts and sat naked on the deck while he knotted a figure-eight around my ankles. I raised my feet experimentally; the weights didn't seem all that heavy. But in the water, I knew, they'd be more than enough to counteract my body's slight buoyancy.

"Martin? Hold out your hands."

Suddenly I was crying. With my arms free, at least I could swim against the tug of the weights. But if my hands were tied, I'd be helpless.

Daniel crouched down and met my eyes. "Ssh. It's all right."

I hated myself. I could feel my face contorted into the mask of a blubbering infant.

"Are you afraid?"

I nodded.

Daniel smiled reassuringly. "You know why? You know who's doing that? Death doesn't want Beatrice to have you. He wants you for himself. So he's here on this boat, putting fear into your heart, because he knows he's almost lost you."

I saw something move in the shadows behind the toolbox, something slithering into the darkness. If we went back down to the cabin now, would Death follow us? To wait for Daniel to fall asleep? If I'd turned my back on Beatrice, who could I ask to send Death away?

I stared at the deck, tears of shame dripping from my cheeks. I held out my arms, wrists together.

When my hands were tied -- not palm-to-palm as I'd expected, but in separate loops joined by a short bridge -- Daniel unwound a long stretch of rope from the winch at the rear of the boat, and coiled it on the deck. I didn't want to think about how long it was, but I knew I'd never dived to that depth. He took the blunt hook at the end of the rope, slipped it over my arms, then screwed it closed to form an unbroken ring. Then he checked again that the cord around my wrists was neither so tight as to burn me, nor so loose as to let me slip. As he did this, I saw something creep over his face: some kind of doubt or fear of his own. He said, "Hang onto the hook. Just in case. Don't let go, no matter what. Okay?" He whispered something to Beatrice, then looked up at me, confident again.

He helped me to stand and shuffle over to the guard rail, just to one side of the winch. Then he picked me up under the arms and lifted me over, resting my feet on the outer hull. The deck was inert, a mineralized endoskeleton, but behind the guard rails the hull was palpably alive: slick with protective secretions, glowing softly. My toes curled uselessly against the lubricated skin; I had no purchase at all. The hull was supporting some of my weight, but Daniel's arms would tire eventually. If I wanted to back out, I'd have to do it quickly.

A warm breeze was blowing. I looked around, at the flat horizon, at the blaze of stars, at the faint silver light off the water. Daniel recited: "Holy Beatrice, I am ready to die to this world. Let me drown in Your blood, that I might be redeemed, and look upon the face of Your Mother."

I repeated the words, trying hard to mean them.

"Holy Beatrice, I offer You my life. All I do now, I do for You. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of faith. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of hope. Come into my heart, and grant me the gift of love."

"And grant me the gift of love."

Daniel released me. At first, my feet seemed to adhere magically to the hull, and I pivoted backward without actually falling. I clung tightly to the hook, pressing the cold metal against my belly, and willed the rope of the winch to snap taut, leaving me dangling in midair. I even braced myself for the shock. Some part of me really did believe that I could change my mind, even now.

Then my feet slipped and I plunged into the ocean and sank straight down.

It was not like a dive -- not even a dive from an untried height, when it took so long for the water to bring you to a halt that it began to grow frightening. I was falling through the water ever faster, as if it was air. The vision I'd had of the rope keeping me above the water now swung to the opposite extreme: my acceleration seemed to prove that the coil on the deck was attached to nothing, that its frayed end was already beneath the surface. That's what the followers had done, wasn't it? They'd let themselves be thrown in without a lifeline. So Daniel had cut the rope, and I was on my way to the bottom of the ocean.

Then the hook jerked my hands up over my head, jarring my wrists and shoulders, and I was motionless.

I turned my face toward the surface, but neither starlight nor the hull's faint phosphorescence reached this deep. I let a stream of bubbles escape from my mouth; I felt them slide over my upper lip, but no trace of them registered in the darkness.

I shifted my hands warily over the hook. I could still feel the cord fast around my wrists, but Daniel had warned me not to trust it. I brought my knees up to my chest, gauging the effect of the weights. If the cord broke, at least my hands would be free, but even so I wasn't sure I'd be able to ascend. The thought of trying to unpick the knots around my ankles as I tumbled deeper filled me with horror.

My shoulders ached, but I wasn't injured. It didn't take much effort to pull myself up until my chin was level with the bottom of the hook. Going further was awkward -- with my hands so close together I couldn't brace myself properly -- but on the third attempt I managed to get my arms locked, pointing straight down.

I'd done this without any real plan, but then it struck me that even with my hands and feet tied, I could try shinning up the rope. It was just a matter of getting started. I'd have to turn upside-down, grab the rope between my knees, then curl up -- dragging the hook -- and get a grip with my hands at a higher point.

And if I couldn't reach up far enough to right myself?

I'd ascend feet-first.

I couldn't even manage the first step. I thought it would be as simple as keeping my arms rigid and letting myself topple backward, but in the water even two-thirds of my body wasn't sufficient to counterbalance the weights.

I tried a different approach: I dropped down to hang at arm's length, raised my legs as high as I could, then proceeded to pull myself up again. But my grip wasn't tight enough to resist the turning force of the weights; I just pivoted around my center of gravity -- which was somewhere near my knees -- and ended up, still bent double, but almost horizontal.

I eased myself down again, and tried threading my feet through the circle of my arms. I didn't succeed on the first attempt, and then on reflection it seemed like a bad move anyway. Even if I managed to grip the rope between my bound feet -- rather than just tumbling over backward, out of control, and dislocating my shoulders -- climbing the rope upside-down with my hands behind my back would either be impossible, or so awkward and strenuous that I'd run out of oxygen before I got a tenth of the way.

I let some more air escape from my lungs. I could feel the muscles in my diaphragm reproaching me for keeping them from doing what they wanted to do; not urgently yet, but the knowledge that I had no control over when I'd be able to draw breath again made it harder to stay calm. I knew I could rely on Daniel to bring me to the surface on the count of two hundred. But I'd only ever stayed down for a hundred and sixty. Forty more tau would be an eternity.

I'd almost forgotten what the whole ordeal was meant to be about, but now I started praying. Please Holy Beatrice, don't let me die. I know You drowned like this to save me, but if I die it won't help anyone. Daniel would end up in the deepest shit ... but that's not a threat, it's just an observation. I felt a stab of anxiety; on top of everything else, had I just offended the Daughter of God? I struggled on, my confidence waning. I don't want to die. But You already know that. So I don't know what You want me to say.

I released some more stale air, wishing I'd counted the time I'd been under; you weren't supposed to empty your lungs too quickly -- when they were deflated it was even harder not to take a breath -- but holding all the carbon dioxide in too long wasn't good either.

Praying only seemed to make me more desperate, so I tried to think other kinds of holy thoughts. I couldn't remember anything from the Scriptures word for word, but the gist of the most important part started running through my mind.

After living in Her body for thirty years, and persuading all the Angels to become mortal again, Beatrice had gone back up to their deserted spaceship and flown it straight into the ocean. When Death saw Her coming, he took the form of a giant serpent, coiled in the water, waiting. And even though She was the Daughter of God, with the power to do anything, She let Death swallow Her.

That's how much She loved us.

Death thought he'd won everything. Beatrice was trapped inside him, in the darkness, alone. The Angels were flesh again, so he wouldn't even have to wait for the stars to fall before he claimed them.

But Beatrice was part of God. Death had swallowed part of God. This was a mistake. After three days, his jaws burst open and Beatrice came flying out, wreathed in fire. Death was broken, shriveled, diminished.

My limbs were numb but my chest was burning. Death was still strong enough to hold down the damned. I started thrashing about blindly, wasting whatever oxygen was left in my blood, but desperate to distract myself from the urge to inhale.

Please Holy Beatrice --

Please Daniel --

Luminous bruises blossomed behind my eyes and drifted out into the water. I watched them curling into a kind of vortex, as if something was drawing them in.

It was the mouth of the serpent, swallowing my soul. I opened my own mouth and made a wretched noise, and Death swam forward to kiss me, to breathe cold water into my lungs.

Suddenly, everything was seared with light. The serpent turned and fled, like a pale timid worm. A wave of contentment washed over me, as if I was an infant again and my mother had wrapped her arms around me tightly. It was like basking in sunlight, listening to laughter, dreaming of music too beautiful to be real. Every muscle in my body was still trying to prise my lungs open to the water, but now I found myself fighting this almost absentmindedly while I marveled at my strange euphoria.

Cold air swept over my hands and down my arms. I raised myself up to take a mouthful, then slumped down again, giddy and spluttering, grateful for every breath but still elated by something else entirely. The light that had filled my eyes was gone, but it left a violet afterimage everywhere I looked. Daniel kept winding until my head was level with the guard rail, then he clamped the winch, bent down, and threw me over his shoulder.

I'd been warm enough in the water, but now my teeth were chattering. Daniel wrapped a towel around me, then set to work cutting the cord. I beamed at him. "I'm so happy!" He gestured to me to be quieter, but then he whispered joyfully, "That's the love of Beatrice. She'll always be with you now, Martin."

I blinked with surprise, then laughed softly at my own stupidity. Until that moment, I hadn't connected what had happened with Beatrice at all. But of course it was Her. I'd asked Her to come into my heart, and She had.

And I could see it in Daniel's face: a year after his own Drowning, he still felt Her presence.

He said, "Everything you do now is for Beatrice. When you look through your telescope, you'll do it to honor Her creation. When you eat, or drink, or swim, you'll do it to give thanks for Her gifts." I nodded enthusiastically.

Daniel tidied everything away, even soaking up the puddles of water I'd left on the deck. Back in the cabin, he recited from the Scriptures, passages that I'd never really understood before, but which now all seemed to be about the Drowning, and the way I was feeling. It was as if I'd opened the book and found myself mentioned by name on every page.

When Daniel fell asleep before me, for the first time in my life I didn't feel the slightest pang of loneliness. The Daughter of God was with me: I could feel Her presence, like a flame inside my skull, radiating warmth through the darkness behind my eyes.

Giving me comfort, giving me strength.

Giving me faith.

The monastery was almost four milliradians northeast of our home grounds. Daniel and I took the launch to a rendezvous point, and met up with three other small vessels before continuing. It had been the same routine every tenth night for almost a year -- and Daniel had been going to the Prayer Group himself for a year before that -- so the launch didn't need much supervision. Feeding on nutrients in the ocean, propelling itself by pumping water through fine channels in its skin, guided by both sunlight and Covenant's magnetic field, it was a perfect example of the kind of legacy of the Angels that technology would never be able to match. Bartholomew, Rachel and Agnes were in one launch, and they traveled beside us while the others skimmed ahead.

Bartholomew and Rachel were married, though they were only seventeen, scarcely older than Daniel. Agnes, Rachel's sister, was sixteen. Because I was the youngest member of the Prayer Group, Agnes had fussed over me from the day I'd joined. She said, "It's your big night tonight, Martin, isn't it?" I nodded, but declined to pursue the conversation, leaving her free to talk to Daniel.

It was dusk by the time the monastery came into sight, a conical tower built from at least ten thousand hulls, rising up from the water in the stylized form of Beatrice's spaceship. Aimed at the sky, not down into the depths. Though some commentators on the Scriptures insisted that the spaceship itself had sunk forever, and Beatrice had risen from the water unaided, it was still the definitive symbol of Her victory over Death. For the three days of Her separation from God, all such buildings stood in darkness, but that was half a year away, and now the monastery shone from every porthole.

There was a narrow tunnel leading into the base of the tower; the launches detected its scent in the water and filed in one by one. I knew they didn't have souls, but I wondered what it would have been like for them if they'd been aware of their actions. Normally they rested in the dock of a single hull, a pouch of boatskin that secured them but still left them largely exposed. Maybe being drawn instinctively into this vast structure would have felt even safer, even more comforting, than docking with their home boat. When I said something to this effect, Rachel, in the launch behind me, sniggered. Agnes said, "Don't be horrible."

The walls of the tunnel phosphoresced pale green, but the opening ahead was filled with white lamplight, dazzlingly richer and brighter. We emerged into a canal circling a vast atrium, and continued around it until the launches found empty docks.

As we disembarked, every footstep, every splash echoed back at us. I looked up at the ceiling, a dome spliced together from hundreds of curved triangular hull sections, tattooed with scenes from the Scriptures. The original illustrations were more than a thousand years old, but the living boatskin degraded the pigments on a time scale of decades, so the monks had to constantly renew them.

"Beatrice Joining the Angels" was my favorite. Because the Angels weren't flesh, they didn't grow inside their mothers; they just appeared from nowhere in the streets of the Immaterial Cities. In the picture on the ceiling, Beatrice's immaterial body was half-formed, with cherubs still working to clothe the immaterial bones of Her legs and arms in immaterial muscles, veins and skin. A few Angels in luminous robes were glancing sideways at Her, but you could tell they weren't particularly impressed. They'd had no way of knowing, then, who She was.

A corridor with its own smaller illustrations led from the atrium to the meeting room. There were about fifty people in the Prayer Group -- including several priests and monks, though they acted just like everyone else. In church you followed the liturgy; the priest slotted-in his or her sermon, but there was no room for the worshippers to do much more than pray or sing in unison and offer rote responses. Here it was much less formal. There were two or three different speakers every night -- sometimes guests who were visiting the monastery, sometimes members of the group -- and after that anyone could ask the group to pray with them, about whatever they liked.

I'd fallen behind the others, but they'd saved me an aisle seat. Agnes was to my left, then Daniel, Bartholomew and Rachel. Agnes said, "Are you nervous?"

"No."

Daniel laughed, as if this claim was ridiculous.

I said, "I'm not." I'd meant to sound loftily unperturbed, but the words came out sullen and childish.

The first two speakers were both lay theologians, Firmlanders who were visiting the monastery. One gave a talk about people who belonged to false religions, and how they were all -- in effect -- worshipping Beatrice, but just didn't know it. He said they wouldn't be damned, because they'd had no choice about the cultures they were born into. Beatrice would know they'd meant well, and forgive them.

I wanted this to be true, but it made no sense to me. Either Beatrice was the Daughter of God, and everyone who thought otherwise had turned away from Her into the darkness, or ... there was no "or." I only had to close my eyes and feel Her presence to know that. Still, everyone applauded when the man finished, and all the questions people asked seemed sympathetic to his views, so perhaps his arguments had simply been too subtle for me to follow.

The second speaker referred to Beatrice as "the Holy Jester", and rebuked us severely for not paying enough attention to Her sense of humor. She cited events in the Scriptures which she said were practical jokes, and then went on at some length about "the healing power of laughter." It was all about as gripping as a lecture on nutrition and hygiene; I struggled to keep my eyes open. At the end, no one could think of any questions.

Then Carol, who was running the meeting, said, "Now Martin is going to give witness to the power of Beatrice in his life."

Everyone applauded encouragingly. As I rose to my feet and stepped into the aisle, Daniel leaned toward Agnes and whispered sarcastically, "This should be good."

I stood at the lectern and gave the talk I'd been rehearsing for days. Beatrice, I said, was beside me now whatever I did: whether I studied or worked, ate or swam, or just sat and watched the stars. When I woke in the morning and looked into my heart, She was there without fail, offering me strength and guidance. When I lay in bed at night, I feared nothing, because I knew She was watching over me. Before my Drowning, I'd been unsure of my faith, but now I'd never again be able to doubt that the Daughter of God had become flesh, and died, and conquered Death, because of Her great love for us.

It was all true, but even as I said these things I couldn't get Daniel's sarcastic words out of my mind. I glanced over at the row where I'd been sitting, at the people I'd traveled with. What did I have in common with them, really? Rachel and Bartholomew were married. Bartholomew and Daniel had studied together, and still played in the same dive-ball team. Daniel and Agnes were probably in love. And Daniel was my brother ... but the only difference that seemed to make was the fact that he could belittle me far more efficiently than any stranger.

In the open prayer that followed, I paid no attention to the problems and blessings people were sharing with the group. I tried silently calling on Beatrice to dissolve the knot of anger in my heart. But I couldn't do it; I'd turned too far away from Her.

When the meeting was over, and people started moving into the adjoining room to talk for a while, I hung back. When the others were out of sight I ducked into the corridor, and headed straight for the launch.

Daniel could get a ride home with his friends; it wasn't far out of their way. I'd wait a short distance from the boat until he caught up; if my parents saw me arrive on my own I'd be in trouble. Daniel would be angry, of course, but he wouldn't betray me.

Once I'd freed the launch from its dock, it knew exactly where to go: around the canal, back to the tunnel, out into the open sea. As I sped across the calm, dark water, I felt the presence of Beatrice returning, which seemed like a sign that She understood that I'd had to get away.

I leaned over and dipped my hand in the water, feeling the current the launch was generating by shuffling ions in and out of the cells of its skin. The outer hull glowed a phosphorescent blue, more to warn other vessels than to light the way. In the time of Beatrice, one of her followers had sat in the Immaterial City and designed this creature from scratch. It gave me a kind of vertigo, just imagining the things the Angels had known. I wasn't sure why so much of it had been lost, but I wanted to rediscover it all. Even the Deep Church taught that there was nothing wrong with that, so long as we didn't use it to try to become immortal again.

The monastery shrank to a blur of light on the horizon, and there was no other beacon visible on the water, but I could read the stars, and sense the field lines, so I knew the launch was heading in the right direction.

When I noticed a blue speck in the distance, it was clear that it wasn't Daniel and the others chasing after me; it was coming from the wrong direction. As I watched the launch drawing nearer I grew anxious; if this was someone I knew, and I couldn't come up with a good reason to be traveling alone, word would get back to my parents.

Before I could make out anyone on board, a voice shouted, "Can you help me? I'm lost!"

I thought for a while before replying. The voice sounded almost matter-of-fact, making light of this blunt admission of helplessness, but it was no joke. If you were sick, your diurnal sense and your field sense could both become scrambled, making the stars much harder to read. It had happened to me a couple of times, and it had been a horrible experience -- even standing safely on the deck of our boat. This late at night, a launch with only its field sense to guide it could lose track of its position, especially if you were trying to take it somewhere it hadn't been before.

I shouted back our coordinates, and the time. I was fairly confident that I had them down to the nearest hundred microradians, and few hundred tau.

"That can't be right! Can I approach? Let our launches talk?"

I hesitated. It had been drummed into me for as long as I could remember that if I ever found myself alone on the water, I should give other vessels a wide berth unless I knew the people on board. But Beatrice was with me, and if someone needed help it was wrong to refuse them.

"All right!" I stopped dead, and waited for the stranger to close the gap. As the launch drew up beside me, I was surprised to see that the passenger was a young man. He looked about Bartholomew's age, but he'd sounded much older.

We didn't need to tell the launches what to do; proximity was enough to trigger a chemical exchange of information. The man said, "Out on your own?"

"I'm traveling with my brother and his friends. I just went ahead a bit."

That made him smile. "Sent you on your way, did they? What do you think they're getting up to, back there?" I didn't reply; that was no way to talk about people you didn't even know. The man scanned the horizon, then spread his arms in a gesture of sympathy. "You must be feeling left out."

I shook my head. There was a pair of binoculars on the floor behind him; even before he'd called out for help, he could have seen that I was alone.

He jumped deftly between the launches, landing on the stern bench. I said, "There's nothing to steal." My skin was crawling, more with disbelief than fear. He was standing on the bench in the starlight, pulling a knife from his belt. The details -- the pattern carved into the handle, the serrated edge of the blade -- only made it seem more like a dream.

He coughed, suddenly nervous. "Just do what I tell you, and you won't get hurt."

I filled my lungs and shouted for help with all the strength I had; I knew there was no one in earshot, but I thought it might still frighten him off. He looked around, more startled than angry, as if he couldn't quite believe I'd waste so much effort. I jumped backward, into the water. A moment later I heard him follow me.

I found the blue glow of the launches above me, then swam hard, down and away from them, without wasting time searching for his shadow. Blood was pounding in my ears, but I knew I was moving almost silently; however fast he was, in the darkness he could swim right past me without knowing it. If he didn't catch me soon he'd probably return to the launch and wait to spot me when I came up for air. I had to surface far enough away to be invisible -- even with the binoculars.

I was terrified that I'd feel a hand close around my ankle at any moment, but Beatrice was with me. As I swam, I thought back to my Drowning, and Her presence grew stronger than ever. When my lungs were almost bursting, She helped me to keep going, my limbs moving mechanically, blotches of light floating in front of my eyes. When I finally knew I had to surface, I turned face-up and ascended slowly, then lay on my back with only my mouth and nose above the water, refusing the temptation to stick my head up and look around.

I filled and emptied my lungs a few times, then dived again.

The fifth time I surfaced, I dared to look back. I couldn't see either launch. I raised myself higher, then turned a full circle in case I'd grown disoriented, but nothing came into sight.

I checked the stars, and my field sense. The launches should not have been over the horizon. I trod water, riding the swell, and tried not to think about how tired I was. It was at least two milliradians to the nearest boat. Good swimmers -- some younger than I was -- competed in marathons over distances like that, but I'd never even aspired to such feats of endurance. Unprepared, in the middle of the night, I knew I wouldn't make it.

If the man had given up on me, would he have taken our launch? When they cost so little, and the markings were so hard to change? That would be nothing but an admission of guilt. So why couldn't I see it? Either he'd sent it on its way, or it had decided to return home itself.

I knew the path it would have taken; I would have seen it go by, if I'd been looking for it when I'd surfaced before. But I had no hope of catching it now.

I began to pray. I knew I'd been wrong to leave the others, but I asked for forgiveness, and felt it being granted. I watched the horizon almost calmly -- smiling at the blue flashes of meteors burning up high above the ocean -- certain that Beatrice would not abandon me.

I was still praying -- treading water, shivering from the cool of the air -- when a blue light appeared in the distance. It disappeared as the swell took me down again, but there was no mistaking it for a shooting star. Was this Daniel and the others -- or the stranger? I didn't have long to decide; if I wanted to get within earshot as they passed, I'd have to swim hard.

I closed my eyes and prayed for guidance. Please Holy Beatrice, let me know. Joy flooded through my mind, instantly: it was them, I was certain of it. I set off as fast as I could.

I started yelling before I could see how many passengers there were, but I knew Beatrice would never allow me to be mistaken. A flare shot up from the launch, revealing four figures standing side by side, scanning the water. I shouted with jubilation, and waved my arms. Someone finally spotted me, and they brought the launch around toward me. By the time I was on board I was so charged up on adrenaline and relief that I almost believed I could have dived back into the water and raced them home.

I thought Daniel would be angry, but when I described what had happened all he said was, "We'd better get moving."

Agnes embraced me. Bartholomew gave me an almost respectful look, but Rachel muttered sourly,

"You're an idiot, Martin. You don't know how lucky you are."

I said, "I know."

Our parents were standing on deck. The empty launch had arrived some time ago; they'd been about to set out to look for us. When the others had departed I began recounting everything again, this time trying to play down any element of danger.

Before I'd finished, my mother grabbed Daniel by the front of his shirt and started slapping him. "I trusted you with him! You maniac! I trusted you!" Daniel half raised his arm to block her, but then let it drop and just turned his face to the deck.

I burst into tears. "It was my fault!" Our parents never struck us; I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

My father said soothingly, "Look ... he's home now. He's safe. No one touched him." He put an arm around my shoulders and asked warily, "That's right, Martin, isn't it?"

I nodded tearfully. This was worse than anything that had happened on the launch, or in the water; I felt a thousand times more helpless, a thousand times more like a child.

I said, "Beatrice was watching over me."

My mother rolled her eyes and laughed wildly, letting go of Daniel's shirt. "Beatrice? Beatrice? Don't you know what could have happened to you? You're too young to have given him what he wanted. He would have had to use the knife."

The chill of my wet clothes seemed to penetrate deeper. I swayed unsteadily, but fought to stay upright. Then I whispered stubbornly, "Beatrice was there."

My father said, "Go and get changed, or you're going to freeze to death."

I lay in bed listening to them shout at Daniel. When he finally came down the ladder I was so sick with shame that I wished I'd drowned.

He said, "Are you all right?"

There was nothing I could say. I couldn't ask him to forgive me.

"Martin?" Daniel turned on the lamp. His face was streaked with tears; he laughed softly, wiping them away. "Fuck, you had me worried. Don't ever do anything like that again."

"I won't."

"Okay." That was it; no shouting, no recriminations. "Do you want to pray with me?"

We knelt side by side, praying for our parents to be at peace, praying for the man who'd tried to hurt me. I started trembling; everything was catching up with me. Suddenly, words began gushing from my mouth -- words I neither recognized nor understood, though I knew I was praying for everything to be all right with Daniel, praying that our parents would stop blaming him for my stupidity.

The strange words kept flowing out of me, an incomprehensible torrent somehow imbued with everything I was feeling. I knew what was happening: Beatrice had given me the Angels' tongue. We'd had to surrender all knowledge of it when we became flesh, but sometimes She granted people the ability to pray this way, because the language of the Angels could express things we could no longer put into words. Daniel had been able to do it ever since his Drowning, but it wasn't something you could teach, or even something you could ask for.

When I finally stopped, my mind was racing. "Maybe Beatrice planned everything that happened tonight? Maybe She arranged it all, to lead up to this moment!"

Daniel shook his head, wincing slightly. "Don't get carried away. You have the gift; just accept it." He nudged me with his shoulder. "Now get into bed, before we're both in more trouble."

I lay awake almost until dawn, overwhelmed with happiness. Daniel had forgiven me. Beatrice had protected and blessed me. I felt no more shame, just humility and amazement. I knew I'd done nothing to deserve it, but my life was wrapped in the love of God.

According to the Scriptures, the oceans of Earth were storm-tossed, and filled with dangerous creatures. But on Covenant, the oceans were calm, and the Angels created nothing in the ecopoiesis that would harm their own mortal incarnations. The four continents and the four oceans were rendered equally hospitable, and just as women and men were made indistinguishable in the sight of God, so were Freelanders and Firmlanders. (Some commentators insisted that this was literally true: God chose to blind Herself to where we lived, and whether or not we'd been born with a penis. I thought that was a beautiful idea, even if I couldn't quite grasp the logistics of it.)

I'd heard that certain obscure sects taught that half the Angels had actually become embodied as a separate people who could live in the water and breathe beneath the surface, but then God destroyed them because they were a mockery of Beatrice's death. No legitimate church took this notion seriously, though, and archaeologists had found no trace of these mythical doomed cousins. Humans were humans, there was only one kind. Freelanders and Firmlanders could even intermarry -- if they could agree where to live.

When I was fifteen, Daniel became engaged to Agnes from the Prayer Group. That made sense: they'd be spared the explanations and arguments about the Drowning that they might have faced with partners who weren't so blessed. Agnes was a Freelanders, of course, but a large branch of her family, and a smaller branch of ours, were Firmlanders, so after long negotiations it was decided that the wedding would be held in Ferez, a coastal town.

I went with my father to pick a hull to be fitted out as Daniel and Agnes's boat. The breeder, Diana, had a string of six mature hulls in tow, and my father insisted on walking out onto their backs and personally examining each one for imperfections.

By the time we reached the fourth I was losing patience. I muttered, "It's the skin underneath that matters." In fact, you could tell a lot about a hull's general condition from up here, but there wasn't much point worrying about a few tiny flaws high above the waterline.

My father nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. You'd better get in the water and check their undersides."

"I'm not doing that." We couldn't simply trust this woman to sell us a healthy hull for a decent price; that wouldn't have been sufficiently embarrassing.

"Martin! This is for the safety of your brother and sister-in-law."

I glanced at Diana to show her where my sympathies lay, then slipped off my shirt and dived in. I swam down to the last hull in the row, then ducked beneath it. I began the job with perverse thoroughness, running my fingers over every square nanoradian of skin. I was determined to annoy my father by taking even longer than he wanted -- and determined to impress Diana by examining all six hulls without coming up for air.

An unfitted hull rode higher in the water than a boat full of furniture and junk, but I was surprised to discover that even in the creature's shadow there was enough light for me to see the skin clearly. After a while I realized that, paradoxically, this was because the water was slightly cloudier than usual, and whatever the fine particles were, they were scattering sunlight into the shadows.

Moving through the warm, bright water, feeling the love of Beatrice more strongly than I had for a long time, it was impossible to remain angry with my father. He wanted the best hull for Daniel and Agnes, and so did I. As for impressing Diana ... who was I kidding? She was a grown woman, at least as old as Agnes, and highly unlikely to view me as anything more than a child. By the time I'd finished with the third hull I was feeling short of breath, so I surfaced and reported cheerfully, "No blemishes so far!"

Diana smiled down at me. "You've got strong lungs."

All six hulls were in perfect condition. We ended up taking the one at the end of the row, because it was easiest to detach.

* * * *

Ferez was built on the mouth of a river, but the docks were some distance upstream. That helped to prepare us; the gradual deadening of the waves was less of a shock than an instant transition from sea to land would have been. When I jumped from the deck to the pier, though, it was like colliding with something massive and unyielding, the rock of the planet itself. I'd been on land twice before, for less than a day on both occasions. The wedding celebrations would last ten days, but at least we'd still be able to sleep on the boat.

As the four of us walked along the crowded streets, heading for the ceremonial hall where everything but the wedding sacrament itself would take place, I stared uncouthly at everyone in sight. Almost no one was barefoot like us, and after a few hundred tau on the paving stones -- much rougher than any deck -- I could understand why. Our clothes were different, our skin was darker, our accent was unmistakably foreign ... but no one stared back. Freelanders were hardly a novelty here. That made me even more selfconscious; the curiosity I felt wasn't mutual.

In the hall, I joined in with the preparations, mainly just lugging furniture around under the directions of one of Agnes's tyrannical uncles. It was a new kind of shock to see so many Freelanders together in this alien environment, and stranger still when I realized that I couldn't necessarily spot the Firmlanders among us; there was no sharp dividing line in physical appearance, or even clothing. I began to feel slightly guilty; if God couldn't tell the difference, what was I doing hunting for the signs?

At noon we all ate outside, in a garden behind the hall. The grass was soft, but it made my feet itch. Daniel had gone off to be fitted for wedding clothes, and my parents were performing some vital task of their own; I only recognized a handful of the people around me. I sat in the shade of a tree, pretending to be oblivious to the plant's enormous size and bizarre anatomy. I wondered if we'd take a siesta; I couldn't imagine falling asleep on the grass.

Someone sat down beside me, and I turned.

"I'm Lena. Agnes's second cousin."

"I'm Daniel's brother, Martin." I hesitated, then offered her my hand; she took it, smiling slightly. I'd awkwardly kissed a dozen strangers that morning, all distant prospective relatives, but this time I didn't dare.

"Brother of the groom, doing grunt work with the rest of us." She shook her head in mocking admiration.

I desperately wanted to say something witty in reply, but an attempt that failed would be even worse than merely being dull. "Do you live in Ferez?"

"No, Mitar. Inland from here. We're staying with my uncle." She pulled a face. "Along with ten other people. No privacy. It's awful."

I said, "It was easy for us. We just brought our home with us." You idiot. As if she didn't know that.

Lena smiled. "I haven't been on a boat in years. You'll have to give me a tour sometime."

"Of course. I'd be happy to." I knew she was only making small talk; she'd never take me up on the offer.

She said, "Is it just you and Daniel?"

"Yes."

"You must be close."

I shrugged. "What about you?"

"Two brothers. Both younger. Eight and nine. They're all right, I suppose." She rested her chin on one hand and gazed at me coolly.

I looked away, disconcerted by more than my wishful thinking about what lay behind that gaze. Unless her parents had been awfully young when she was born, it didn't seem likely that more children were planned. So did an odd number in the family mean that one had died, or that the custom of equal numbers carried by each parent wasn't followed where she lived? I'd studied the region less than a year ago, but I had a terrible memory for things like that.

Lena said, "You looked so lonely, off here on your own."

I turned back to her, surprised. "I'm never lonely."

"No?"

She seemed genuinely curious. I opened my mouth to tell her about Beatrice, but then changed my mind. The few times I'd said anything to friends -- ordinary friends, not Drowned ones -- I'd regretted it. Not everyone had laughed, but they'd all been acutely embarrassed by the revelation.

I said, "Mitar has a million people, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"An area of ocean the same size would have a population of ten."

Lena frowned. "That's a bit too deep for me, I'm afraid." She rose to her feet. "But maybe you'll think of a way of putting it that even a Firmlander can understand." She raised a hand goodbye and started walking away.

I said, "Maybe I will."

* * * *

The wedding took place in Ferez's Deep Church, a spaceship built of stone, glass, and wood. It looked almost like a parody of the churches I was used to, though it probably bore a closer resemblance to the Angels' real ship than anything made of living hulls.

Daniel and Agnes stood before the priest, beneath the apex of the building. Their closest relatives stood behind them in two angled lines on either side. My father -- Daniel's mother -- was first in our line, followed by my own mother, then me. That put me level with Rachel, who kept shooting disdainful glances my way. After my misadventure, Daniel and I had eventually been allowed to travel to the Prayer Group meetings again, but less than a year later I'd lost interest, and soon after I'd also stopped going to church. Beatrice was with me, constantly, and no gatherings or ceremonies could bring me any closer to Her. I knew Daniel disapproved of this attitude, but he didn't lecture me about it, and my parents had accepted my decision without any fuss. If Rachel thought I was some kind of apostate, that was her problem.

The priest said, "Which of you brings a bridge to this marriage?"

Daniel said, "I do." In the Transitional ceremony they no longer asked this; it was really no one else's business -- and in a way the question was almost sacrilegious. Still, Deep Church theologians had explained away greater doctrinal inconsistencies than this, so who was I to argue?

"Do you, Daniel and Agnes, solemnly declare that this bridge will be the bond of your union until death, to be shared with no other person?"

They replied together, "We solemnly declare."

"Do you solemnly declare that as you share this bridge, so shall you share every joy and

every burden of marriage -- equally?"

"We solemnly declare."

My mind wandered; I thought of Lena's parents. Maybe one of the family's children was adopted. Lena and I had managed to sneak away to the boat three times so far, early in the evenings while my parents were still out. We'd done things I'd never done with anyone else, but I still hadn't had the courage to ask her anything so personal.

Suddenly the priest was saying, "In the eyes of God, you are one now." My father started weeping softly. As Daniel and Agnes kissed, I felt a surge of contradictory emotions. I'd miss Daniel, but I was glad that I'd finally have a chance to live apart from him. And I wanted him to be happy -- I was jealous of his happiness already -- but at the same time, the thought of marrying someone like Agnes filled me with claustrophobia. She was kind, devout, and generous. She and Daniel would treat each other, and their children, well. But neither of them would present the slightest challenge to the other's most cherished beliefs.

This recipe for harmony terrified me. Not least because I was afraid that Beatrice approved, and wanted me to follow it myself.

* * * *

Lena put her hand over mine and pushed my fingers deeper into her, gasping. We were sitting on my bunk, face to face, my legs stretched out flat, hers arching over them.

She slid the palm of her other hand over my penis. I bent forward and kissed her, moving my thumb over the place she'd shown me, and her shudder ran through both of us.

"Martin?"

"What?"

She stroked me with one fingertip; somehow it was far better than having her whole hand wrapped around me.

"Do you want to come inside me?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

She kept moving her finger, tracing the same line; I could barely think. Why not? "You might get pregnant."

She laughed. "Don't be stupid. I can control that. You'll learn, too. It's just a matter of experience."

I said, "I'll use my tongue. You liked that."

"I did. But I want something more now. And you do, too. I can tell." She smiled imploringly. "It'll be nice for both of us, I promise. Nicer than anything you've done in your life."

"Don't bet on it."

Lena made a sound of disbelief, and ran her thumb around the base of my penis. "I can tell you haven't put this inside anyone before. But that's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Who said I was ashamed?"

She nodded gravely. "All right. Frightened."

I pulled my hand free, and banged my head on the bunk above us. Daniel's old bunk.

Lena reached up and put her hand on my cheek.

I said, "I can't. We're not married."

She frowned. "I heard you'd given up on all that."

"All what?"

"Religion."

"Then you were misinformed."

Lena said, "This is what the Angels made our bodies to do. How can there be anything sinful in that?" She ran her hand down my neck, over my chest.

"But the bridge is meant to..." What? All the Scriptures said was that it was meant to unite men and women, equally. And the Scriptures said God couldn't tell women and men apart, but in the Deep Church, in the sight of God, the priest had just made Daniel claim priority. So why should I care what any priest thought?

I said, "All right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I took her face in my hands and started kissing her. After a while, she reached down and guided me in. The shock of pleasure almost made me come, but I stopped myself somehow. When the risk of that had lessened, we wrapped our arms around each other and rocked slowly back and forth.

It wasn't better than my Drowning, but it was so much like it that it had to be blessed by Beatrice. And as we moved in each other's arms, I grew determined to ask Lena to marry me. She was intelligent and strong. She questioned everything. It didn't matter that she was a Firmlander; we could meet halfway, we could live in Ferez.

I felt myself ejaculate. "I'm sorry."

Lena whispered, "That's all right, that's all right. Just keep moving."

I was still hard; that had never happened before. I could feel her muscles clenching and releasing rhythmically, in time with our motion, and her slow exhalations. Then she cried out, and dug her fingers into my back. I tried to slide partly out of her again, but it was impossible, she was holding me too tightly. This was it. There was no going back.

Now I was afraid. "I've never --" Tears were welling up in my eyes; I tried to shake them away.

"I know. And I know it's frightening." She embraced me more tightly. "Just feel it, though. Isn't it wonderful?"

I was hardly aware of my motionless penis anymore, but there was liquid fire flowing through my groin, waves of pleasure spreading deeper. I said, "Yes. Is it like that for you?"

"It's different. But it's just as good. You'll find out for yourself, soon enough."

"I hadn't been thinking that far ahead," I confessed.

Lena giggled. "You've got a whole new life in front of you, Martin. You don't know what you've been missing."

She kissed me, then started pulling away. I cried out in pain, and she stopped. "I'm sorry. I'll take it slowly." I reached down to touch the place where we were joined; there was a trickle of blood escaping from the base of my penis.

Lena said, "You're not going to faint on me, are you?"

"Don't be stupid." I did feel queasy, though. "What if I'm not ready? What if I can't do it?"

"Then I'll lose my hold in a few hundred tau. The Angels weren't completely stupid."

I ignored this blasphemy, though it wasn't just any Angel who'd designed our bodies -- it was Beatrice Herself. I said, "Just promise you won't use a knife."

"That's not funny. That really happens to people."

"I know." I kissed her shoulder. "I think --"

Lena straightened her legs slightly, and I felt the core break free inside me. Blood flowed warmly from my groin, but the pain had changed from a threat of damage to mere tenderness; my nervous system no longer spanned the lesion. I asked Lena, "Do you feel it? Is it part of you?"

"Not yet. It takes a while for the connections to form." She ran her fingers over my lips. "Can I stay inside you, until they have?"

I nodded happily. I hardly cared about the sensations anymore; it was just contemplating the miracle of being able to give a part of my body to Lena that was wonderful. I'd studied the physiological details long ago, everything from the exchange of nutrients to the organ's independent immune system -- and I knew that Beatrice had used many of the same techniques for the bridge as She'd used with gestating embryos -- but to witness Her ingenuity so dramatically at work in my own flesh was both shocking and intensely moving. Only giving birth could bring me closer to Her than this.

When we finally separated, though, I wasn't entirely prepared for the sight of what emerged. "Oh, that is disgusting!"

Lena shook her head, laughing. "New ones always look a bit ... encrusted. Most of that stuff will wash away, and the rest will fall off in a few kilotau."

I bunched up the sheet to find a clean spot, then dabbed at my -- her -- penis. My newly formed vagina had stopped bleeding, but it was finally dawning on me just how much mess we'd made. "I'm going to have to wash this before my parents get back. I can put it out to dry in the morning, after they're gone, but if I don't wash it now they'll smell it."

We cleaned ourselves enough to put on shorts, then Lena helped me carry the sheet up onto the deck and drape it in the water from the laundry hooks. The fibers in the sheet would use nutrients in the water to power the self-cleaning process.

The docks appeared deserted; most of the boats nearby belonged to people who'd come for the wedding. I'd told my parents I was too tired to stay on at the celebrations; tonight they'd continue until dawn, though Daniel and Agnes would probably leave by midnight. To do what Lena and I had just done.

"Martin? Are you shivering?"

There was nothing to be gained by putting it off. Before whatever courage I had could desert me, I said, "Will you marry me?"

"Very funny. Oh --" Lena took my hand. "I'm sorry, I never know when you're joking."

I said, "We've exchanged the bridge. It doesn't matter that we weren't married first, but it would make things easier if we went along with convention."

"Martin --"

"Or we could just live together, if that's what you want. I don't care. We're already married in the eyes of Beatrice."

Lena bit her lip. "I don't want to live with you."

"I could move to Mitar. I could get a job."

Lena shook her head, still holding my hand. She said firmly, "No. You knew, before we did anything, what it would and wouldn't mean. You don't want to marry me, and I don't want to marry you. So snap out of it."

I pulled my hand free, and sat down on the deck. What had I done? I'd thought I'd had Beatrice's blessing, I'd thought this was all in Her plan ... but I'd just been fooling myself.

Lena sat beside me. "What are you worried about? Your parents finding out?"

"Yes." That was the least of it, but it seemed pointless trying to explain the truth. I turned to her. "When could we -- ?"

"Not for about ten days. And sometimes it's longer after the first time."

I'd known as much, but I'd hoped her experience might contradict my theoretical knowledge. Ten days. We'd both be gone by then.

Lena said, "What do you think, you can never get married now? How many marriages do you imagine involve the bridge one of the partners was born with?"

"Nine out of ten. Unless they're both women."

Lena gave me a look that hovered between tenderness and incredulity. "My estimate is about one in five."

I shook my head. "I don't care. We've exchanged the bridge, we have to be together." Lena's expression hardened, then so did my resolve. "Or I have to get it back."

"Martin, that's ridiculous. You'll find another lover soon enough, and then you won't even know what you were worried about. Or maybe you'll fall in love with a nice Deep Church boy, and then you'll both be glad you've been spared the trouble of getting rid of the extra bridge."

"Yeah? Or maybe he'll just be disgusted that I couldn't wait until I really was doing it for him!"

Lena groaned, and stared up at the sky. "Did I say something before about the Angels getting things right? Ten thousand years without bodies, and they thought they were qualified --"

I cut her off angrily. "Don't be so fucking blasphemous! Beatrice knew exactly what She was doing. If we mess it up, that's our fault!"

Lena said, matter-of-factly, "In ten years' time, there'll be a pill you'll be able to take to keep the bridge from being passed, and another pill to make it pass when it otherwise wouldn't. We'll win control of our bodies back from the Angels, and start doing exactly what we like with them."

"That's sick. That really is sick."

I stared at the deck, suffocating in misery. This was what I'd wanted, wasn't it? A lover who was the very opposite of Daniel's sweet, pious Agnes? Except that in my fantasies, we'd always had a lifetime to debate our philosophical differences. Not one night to be torn apart by them.

I had nothing to lose, now. I told Lena about my Drowning. She didn't laugh; she listened in silence.

I said, "Do you believe me?"

"Of course." She hesitated. "But have you ever wondered if there might be another explanation for the way you felt, in the water that night? You were starved of oxygen --"

"People are starved of oxygen all the time. Freelanders kids spend half their lives trying to stay underwater longer than the last time."

Lena nodded. "Sure. But that's not quite the same, is it? You were pushed beyond the time you could have stayed under by sheer willpower. And ... you were cued, you were told what to expect."

"That's not true. Daniel never told me what it would be like. I was surprised when it happened." I gazed back at her calmly, ready to counter any ingenious hypothesis she came up with. I felt chastened, but almost at peace now. This was what Beatrice had expected of me, before we'd exchanged the bride: not a dead ceremony in a dead building, but the honesty to tell Lena exactly who she'd be making love with.

We argued almost until sunrise; neither of us convinced the other of anything. Lena helped me drag the clean sheet out of the water and hide it below deck. Before she left, she wrote down the address of a friend's house in Mitar, and a place and time we could meet.

Keeping that appointment was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. I spent three solid days ingratiating myself with my Mitar-based cousins, to the point where they would have had to be openly hostile to get out of inviting me to stay with them after the wedding. Once I was there, I had to scheme and lie relentlessly to ensure that I was free of them on the predetermined day.

In a stranger's house, in the middle of the afternoon, Lena and I joylessly reversed everything that had happened between us. I'd been afraid that the act itself might rekindle all my stupid illusions, but when we parted on the street outside, I felt as if I hardly knew her.

I ached even more than I had on the boat, and my groin was palpably swollen, but in a couple of days, I knew, nothing less than a lover's touch or a medical examination would reveal what I'd done.

In the train back to the coast, I replayed the entire sequence of events in my mind, again and again. How could I have been so wrong? People always talked about the power of sex to confuse and deceive you, but I'd always believed that was just cheap cynicism. Besides, I hadn't blindly surrendered to sex; I'd thought I'd been guided by Beatrice.

If I could be wrong about that --

I'd have to be more careful. Beatrice always spoke clearly, but I'd have to listen to Her with much more patience and humility.

That was it. That was what She'd wanted me to learn. I finally relaxed and looked out the window, at the blur of forest passing by, another triumph of the ecopoiesis. If I needed proof that there was always another chance, it was all around me now. The Angels had traveled as far from God as anyone could travel, and yet God had turned around and given them Covenant.

I was nineteen when I returned to Mitar, to study at the city's university. Originally, I'd planned to specialize in the ecopoiesis -- and to study much closer to home -- but in the end I'd had to accept the nearest thing on offer, geographically and intellectually: working with Barat, a Firmlander biologist whose real interest was native microfauna. "Angelic technology is a fascinating subject in its own right," he told me. "But we can't hope to work backward and decipher terrestrial evolution from anything the Angels created. The best we can do is try to understand what Covenant's own biosphere was like, before we arrived and disrupted it."

I managed to persuade him to accept a compromise: my thesis would involve the impact of the ecopoiesis on the native microfauna. That would give me an excuse to study the Angels' inventions, alongside the drab unicellular creatures that had inhabited Covenant for the last billion years.

"The impact of the ecopoiesis" was far too broad a subject, of course; with Barat's help, I narrowed it down to one particular unresolved question. There had long been geological evidence that the surface waters of the ocean had become both more alkaline, and less oxygenated, as new species shifted the balance of dissolved gases. Some native species must have retreated from the wave of change, and perhaps some had been wiped out completely, but there was a thriving population of zooytes in the upper layers at present. So had they been there all along, adapting in situ? Or had they migrated from somewhere else?

Mitar's distance from the coast was no real handicap in studying the ocean; the university mounted regular expeditions, and I had plenty of library and lab work to do before embarking on anything so obvious as gathering living samples in their natural habitat. What's more, river water, and even rainwater, was teeming with closely related species, and since it was possible that these were the reservoirs from which the "ravaged" ocean had been re-colonized, I had plenty of subjects worth studying close at hand.

Barat set high standards, but he was no tyrant, and his other students made me feel welcome. I was homesick, but not morbidly so, and I took a kind of giddy pleasure from the vivid dreams and underlying sense of disorientation that living on land induced in me. I wasn't exactly fulfilling my childhood ambition to uncover the secrets of the Angels -- and I had fewer opportunities than I'd hoped to get side-tracked on the ecopoiesis itself -- but once I started delving into the minutiae of Covenant's original, wholly undesigned biochemistry, it turned out to be complex and elegant enough to hold my attention.

I was only miserable when I let myself think about sex. I didn't want to end up like Daniel, so seeking out another Drowned person to marry was the last thing on my mind. But I couldn't face the prospect of repeating my mistake with Lena; I had no intention of becoming physically intimate with anyone unless we were already close enough for me to tell them about the most important thing in my life. But that wasn't the order in which things happened, here. After a few humiliating attempts to swim against the current, I gave up on the whole idea, and threw myself into my work instead.

Of course, it was possible to socialize at Mitar University without actually exchanging bridges with anyone. I joined an informal discussion group on Angelic culture, which met in a small room in the students' building every tenth night -- just like the old Prayer Group, though I was under no illusion that this one would be stacked with believers. It hardly needed to be. The Angels' legacy could be analyzed perfectly well without reference to Beatrice's divinity. The Scriptures were written long after the Crossing by people of a simpler age; there was no reason to treat them as infallible. If non-believers could shed some light on any aspect of the past, I had no grounds for rejecting their insights.

"It's obvious that only one faction came to Covenant!" That was Céline, an anthropologist, a woman so much like Lena that I had to make a conscious effort to remind myself, every time I set eyes on her, that nothing could ever happen between us. "We're not so homogeneous that we'd all choose to travel to another planet and assume a new physical form, whatever cultural forces might drive one small group to do that. So why should the Angels have been unanimous? The other factions must still be living in the Immaterial Cities, on Earth, and on other planets."

"Then why haven't they contacted us? In twenty thousand years, you'd think they'd drop in and say hello once or twice." David was a mathematician, a Freelanders from the southern ocean.

Céline replied, "The attitude of the Angels who came here wouldn't have encouraged visitors. If all we have is a story of the Crossing in which Beatrice persuades every last Angel in existence to give up immortality -- a version that simply erases everyone else from history -- that doesn't suggest much of a desire to remain in touch."

A woman I didn't know interjected, "It might not have been so clear-cut from the start, though. There's evidence of settler-level technology being deployed for more than three thousand years after the Crossing, long after it was needed for the ecopoiesis. New species continued to be created, engineering projects continued to use advanced materials and energy sources. But then in less than a century, it all stopped. The Scriptures merge three separate decisions into one: renouncing immortality, migrating to Covenant, and abandoning the technology that might have provided an escape route if anyone changed their mind. But we know it didn't happen like that. Three thousand years after the Crossing, something changed. The whole experiment suddenly became irreversible."

These speculations would have outraged the average pious Freelanders, let alone the average Drowned one, but I listened calmly, even entertaining the possibility that some of them could be true. The love of Beatrice was the only fixed point in my cosmology; everything else was open to debate.

Still, sometimes the debate was hard to take. One night, David joined us straight from a seminar of physicists. What he'd heard from the speaker was unsettling enough, but he'd already moved beyond it to an even less palatable conclusion.

"Why did the Angels choose mortality? After ten thousand years without death, why did they throw away all the glorious possibilities ahead of them, to come and die like animals on this ball of mud?" I had to bite my tongue to keep from replying to his rhetorical question: because God is the only source of eternal life, and Beatrice showed them that all they really had was a cheap parody of that divine gift.

David paused, then offered his own answer -- which was itself a kind of awful parody of Beatrice's truth. "Because they discovered that they weren't immortal, after all. They discovered that no one can be. We've always known, as they must have, that the universe is finite in space and time. It's destined to collapse eventually: 'the stars will fall from the sky.' But it's easy to imagine ways around that." He laughed. "We don't know enough physics yet, ourselves, to rule out anything. I've just heard an extraordinary woman from Tia talk about coding our minds into waves that would orbit the shrinking universe so rapidly that we could think an infinite number of thoughts before everything was crushed!" David grinned joyfully at the sheer audacity of this notion. I thought primly: what blasphemous nonsense.

Then he spread his arms and said, "Don't you see, though? If the Angels had pinned their hopes on something like that -- some ingenious trick that would keep them from sharing the fate of the universe -- but then they finally gained enough knowledge to rule out every last escape route, it would have had a profound effect on them. Some small faction could then have decided that since they were mortal after all, they might as well embrace the inevitable, and come to terms with it in the way their ancestors had. In the flesh."

Céline said thoughtfully, "And the Beatrice myth puts a religious gloss on the whole thing, but that might be nothing but a post hoc reinterpretation of a purely secular revelation."

This was too much; I couldn't remain silent. I said, "If Covenant really was founded by a pack of terminally depressed atheists, what could have changed their minds? Where did the desire to impose a 'post hoc reinterpretation' come from? If the revelation that brought the Angels here was 'secular', why isn't the whole planet still secular today?"

Someone said snidely, "Civilization collapsed. What do you expect?"

I opened my mouth to respond angrily, but Céline got in first. "No, Martin has a point. If David's right, the rise of religion needs to be explained more urgently than ever. And I don't think anyone's in a position to do that yet."

Afterward, I lay awake thinking about all the other things I should have said, all the other objections I should have raised. (And thinking about Céline.) Theology aside, the whole dynamics of the group was starting to get under my skin; maybe I'd be better off spending my time in the lab, impressing Barat with my dedication to his pointless fucking microbes.

Or maybe I'd be better off at home. I could help out on the boat; my parents weren't young anymore, and Daniel had his own family to look after.

I climbed out of bed and started packing, but halfway through I changed my mind. I didn't really want to abandon my studies. And I'd known all along what the antidote was for all the confusion and resentment I was feeling.

I put my rucksack away, switched off the lamp, lay down, closed my eyes, and asked Beatrice to grant me peace.

* * * *

I was woken by someone banging on the door of my room. It was a fellow boarder, a young man I barely knew. He looked extremely tired and irritable, but something was overriding his irritation.

"There's a message for you."

My mother was sick, with an unidentified virus. The hospital was even further away than our home grounds; the trip would take almost three days.

I spent most of the journey praying, but the longer I prayed, the harder it became. I knew that it was possible to save my mother's life with one word in the Angels' tongue to Beatrice, but the number of ways in which I could fail, corrupting the purity of the request with my own doubts, my own selfishness, my own complacency, just kept multiplying.

The Angels created nothing in the ecopoiesis that would harm their own mortal incarnations. The native life showed no interest in parasitizing us. But over the millennia, our own DNA had shed viruses. And since Beatrice Herself chose every last base pair, that must have been what She intended. Aging was not enough. Mortal injury was not enough. Death had to come without warning, silent and invisible.

That's what the Scriptures said.

The hospital was a maze of linked hulls. When I finally found the right passageway, the first person I recognized in the distance was Daniel. He was holding his daughter Sophie high in his

outstretched arms, smiling up at her. The image dispelled all my fears in an instant; I almost fell to my knees to give thanks.

Then I saw my father. He was seated outside the room, his head in his hands. I couldn't see his face, but I didn't need to. He wasn't anxious, or exhausted. He was crushed.

I approached in a haze of last-minute prayers, though I knew I was asking for the past to be rewritten. Daniel started to greet me as if nothing was wrong, asking about the trip -- probably trying to soften the blow -- then he registered my expression and put a hand on my shoulder.

He said, "She's with God now."

I brushed past him and walked into the room. My mother's body was lying on the bed, already neatly arranged: arms straightened, eyes closed. Tears ran down my cheeks, angering me. Where had my love been when it might have prevented this? When Beatrice might have heeded it?

Daniel followed me into the room, alone. I glanced back through the doorway and saw Agnes holding Sophie.

"She's with God, Martin." He was beaming at me as if something wonderful had happened.

I said numbly, "She wasn't Drowned." I was almost certain that she hadn't been a believer at all. She'd remained in the Transitional church all her life -- but that had long been the way to stay in touch with your friends when you worked on a boat nine days out of ten.

"I prayed with her, before she lost consciousness. She accepted Beatrice into her heart."

I stared at him. Nine years ago he'd been certain: you were Drowned, or you were damned. It was as simple as that. My own conviction had softened long ago; I couldn't believe that Beatrice really was so arbitrary and cruel. But I knew my mother would not only have refused the full-blown ritual; the whole philosophy would have been as nonsensical to her as the mechanics.

"Did she say that? Did she tell you that?"

Daniel shook his head. "But it was clear." Filled with the love of Beatrice, he couldn't stop smiling.

A wave of revulsion passed through me; I wanted to grind his face into the deck. He didn't care what my mother had believed. Whatever eased his own pain, whatever put his own doubts to rest, had to be the case. To accept that she was damned -- or even just dead, gone, erased -- was unbearable; everything else flowed from that. There was no truth in anything he said, anything he believed. It was all just an expression of his own needs.

I walked back into the corridor and crouched beside my father. Without looking at me, he put an arm around me and pressed me against his side. I could feel the blackness washing over him, the helplessness, the loss. When I tried to embrace him he just clutched me more tightly, forcing me to be still. I shuddered a few times, then stopped weeping. I closed my eyes and let him hold me.

I was determined to stay there beside him, facing everything he was facing. But after a while, unbidden, the old flame began to glow in the back of my skull: the old warmth, the old peace, the old certainty. Daniel was right, my mother was with God. How could I have doubted that? There was no point asking how it had come about; Beatrice's ways were beyond my comprehension. But the one thing I knew firsthand was the strength of Her love.

I didn't move, I didn't free myself from my father's desolate embrace. But I was an impostor now, merely praying for his comfort, interceding from my state of grace. Beatrice had raised me out of the darkness, and I could no longer share his pain.

After my mother's death, my faith kept ceding ground, without ever really wavering. Most of the doctrinal content fell away, leaving behind a core of belief that was a great deal easier to defend. It didn't matter if the Scriptures were superstitious nonsense or the Church was full of fools and hypocrites; Beatrice was still Beatrice, the way the sky was still blue. Whenever I heard debates between atheists and believers, I found myself increasingly on the atheists' side -- not because I accepted their conclusion for a moment, but because they were so much more honest than their opponents. Maybe the priests and theologians arguing against them had the same kind of direct, personal experience of God as I did -- or maybe not, maybe they just desperately needed to believe. But they never disclosed the true source of their conviction; instead, they just made laughable attempts to "prove" God's existence from the historical record, or from biology, astronomy, or mathematics. Daniel had been right at the age of fifteen -- you couldn't prove any such thing -- and listening to these people twist logic as they tried made me squirm.

I felt guilty about leaving my father working with a hired hand, and even guiltier when he moved onto Daniel's boat a year later, but I knew how angry it would have made him if he thought I'd abandoned my career for his sake. At times that was the only thing that kept me in Mitar: even when I honestly wanted nothing more than to throw it all in and go back to hauling nets, I was afraid my decision would be misinterpreted.

It took me three years to complete my thesis on the migration of aquatic zooytes in the wake of the ecopoiesis. My original hypothesis, that freshwater species had replenished the upper ocean, turned out to be false. Zooytes had no genes as such, just families of enzymes that re-synthesized each other after cell division, but comparisons of these heritable molecules showed that, rather than rain bringing new life from above, an ocean-dwelling species from a much greater depth had moved steadily closer to the surface, as the Angels' creations drained oxygen from the water. That wouldn't have been much of a surprise, if the same techniques hadn't also shown that several species found in river water were even closer relatives of the surface-dwellers. But those freshwater species weren't anyone's ancestors; they were the newest migrants. Zooytes that had spent a billion years confined to the depths had suddenly been able to survive (and reproduce, and mutate) closer to the surface than ever before, and when they'd stumbled on a mutation that let them thrive in the presence of oxygen, they'd finally been in a position to make use of it. The ecopoiesis might have driven other native organisms into extinction, but the invasion from Earth had enabled this ancient benthic species to mount a long overdue invasion of its own. Unwittingly or not, the Angels had set in motion the sequence of events that had released it from the ocean to colonize the planet.

So I proved myself wrong, earned my degree, and became famous amongst a circle of peers so small that we were all famous to each other anyway. Vast new territories did not open up before me. Anything to do with native biology was rapidly becoming an academic cul-de-sac; I'd always suspected that was how it would be, but I hadn't fought hard enough to end up anywhere else.

For the next three years, I clung to the path of least resistance: assisting Barat with his own research, taking the teaching jobs no one else wanted. Most of Barat's other students moved on to better things, and I found myself increasingly alone in Mitar. But that didn't matter; I had Beatrice.

At the age of twenty-five, I could see my future clearly. While other people deciphered -- and built upon -- the Angels' legacy, I'd watch from a distance, still messing about with samples of seawater from which all Angelic contaminants had been scrupulously removed.

Finally, when it was almost too late, I made up my mind to jump ship. Barat had been good to me, but he'd never expected loyalty verging on martyrdom. At the end of the year a bi-ecological (native and Angelic) microbiology conference was being held in Tia, possibly the last event of its kind. I had no new results to present, but it wouldn't be hard to find a plausible excuse to attend, and it would be the ideal place to lobby for a new position. My great zooyte discovery hadn't been entirely lost on the wider community of biologists; I could try to rekindle the memory of it. I doubted there'd be much point offering to sleep with anyone; ethical qualms aside, my bridge had probably rusted into place.

Then again, maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe I'd stumble on a fellow Drowned Freelanders who'd ended up in a position of power, and all I'd have to do was promise that my work would be for the greater glory of Beatrice.

* * * *

Tia was a city of ten million people on the east coast. New towers stood side-by-side with empty structures from the time of the Angels, giant gutted machines that might have played a role in the ecopoiesis. I was too old and proud to gawk like a child, but for all my provincial sophistication I wanted to. These domes and cylinders were twenty times older than the illustrations tattooed into the ceiling of the monastery back home. They bore no images of Beatrice; nothing of the Angels did. But why would they? They predated Her death.

The university, on the outskirts of Tia, was a third the size of Mitar itself. An underground train ringed the campus; the students I rode with eyed my unstylish clothes with disbelief. I left my luggage in the dormitory and headed straight for the conference center. Barat had chosen to stay behind; maybe he hadn't wanted to witness the public burial of his field. That made things easier for me; I'd be free to hunt for a new career without rubbing his face in it.

Late additions to the conference program were listed on a screen by the main entrance. I almost walked straight past the display; I'd already decided which talks I'd be attending. But three steps away, a title I'd glimpsed in passing assembled itself in my mind's eye, and I had to back-track to be sure I hadn't imagined it.

Carla Reggia: "Euphoric Effects of Z/12/80 Excretions"

I stood there laughing with disbelief. I recognized the speaker and her co-workers by name, though I'd never had a chance to meet them. If this wasn't a hoax ... what had they done? Dried it, smoked it, and tried writing that up as research? Z/12/80 was one of "my" zooytes, one of the escapees from the ocean; the air and water of Tia were swarming with it. If its excretions were euphoric, the whole city would be in a state of bliss.

I knew, then and there, what they'd discovered. I knew it, long before I admitted it to myself. I went to the talk with my head full of jokes about neglected culture flasks full of psychotropic breakdown products, but for two whole days, I'd been steeling myself for the truth, finding ways in which it didn't have to matter.

Z/12/80, Carla explained, excreted among its waste products an amine that was able to bind to receptors in our Angel-crafted brains. Since it had been shown by other workers (no one recognized me; no one gave me so much as a glance) that Z/12/80 hadn't existed at the time of the ecopoiesis, this interaction was almost certainly undesigned, and unanticipated. "It's up to the archaeologists and neurochemists to determine what role, if any, the arrival of this substance in the environment might have played in the collapse of early settlement culture. But for the past fifteen to eighteen thousand years, we've been swimming in it. Since we still exhibit such a wide spectrum of moods, we're probably able to compensate for its presence by down-regulating the secretion of the endogenous molecule that was designed to bind to the same receptor. That's just an educated guess, though. Exactly what the effects might be from individual to individual, across the range of doses that might be experienced under a variety of conditions, is clearly going to be a matter of great interest to investigators with appropriate expertise."

I told myself that I felt no disquiet. Beatrice acted on the world through the laws of nature; I'd stopped believing in supernatural miracles long ago. The fact that someone had now identified the way in which She'd acted on me, that night in the water, changed nothing.

I pressed ahead with my attempts to get recruited. Everyone at the conference was talking about Carla's discovery, and when people finally made the connection with my own work their eyes stopped glazing over halfway through my spiel. In the next three days, I received seven offers -- all involving research into zooyte biochemistry. There was no question, now, of side-stepping the issue, of escaping into the wider world of Angelic biology. One man even came right out and said to me: "You're a Freelanders, and you know that the ancestors of Z/12/80 live in much greater numbers in the ocean. Don't you think oceanic exposure is going to be the key to understanding this?" He laughed. "I mean, you swam in the stuff as a child, didn't you? And you seem to have come through unscathed."

"Apparently."

On my last night in Tia, I couldn't sleep. I stared into the blackness of the room, watching the gray sparks dance in front of me. (Contaminants in the aqueous humor? Electrical noise in the retina? I'd heard the explanation once, but I could no longer remember it.)

I prayed to Beatrice in the Angels' tongue; I could still feel Her presence, as strongly as ever. The effect clearly wasn't just a matter of dosage, or trans-cutaneous absorption; merely swimming in the ocean at the right depth wasn't enough to make anyone feel Drowned. But in combination with the stress of oxygen starvation, and all the psychological build-up Daniel had provided, the jolt of zooyte piss must have driven certain neuroendocrine subsystems into new territory -- or old territory, by a new path. Peace, joy, contentment, the feeling of being loved weren't exactly unknown emotions. But by short-circuiting the brain's usual practice of summoning those feelings only on occasions when there was a reason for them, I'd been "blessed with the love of Beatrice." I'd found happiness on demand.

And I still possessed it. That was the eeriest part. Even as I lay there in the dark, on the verge of reasoning everything I'd been living for out of existence, my ability to work the machinery was so ingrained that I felt as loved, as blessed as ever.

Maybe Beatrice was offering me another chance, making it clear that She'd still forgive this blasphemy and welcome me back. But why did I believe that there was anyone there to "forgive me"? You couldn't reason your way to God; there was only faith. And I knew, now, that the source of my faith was a meaningless accident, an unanticipated side-effect of the ecopoiesis.

I still had a choice. I could, still, decide that the love of Beatrice was immune to all logic, a force beyond understanding, untouched by evidence of any kind.

No, I couldn't. I'd been making exceptions for Her for too long. Everyone lived with double standards -- but I'd already pushed mine as far as they'd go.

I started laughing and weeping at the same time. It was almost unimaginable: all the millions of people who'd been misled the same way. All because of the zooytes, and ... what? One Freelanders, diving for pleasure, who'd stumbled on a strange new experience? Then tens of thousands more repeating it, generation after generation -- until one vulnerable man or woman had been driven to invest the novelty with meaning. Someone who'd needed so badly to feel loved and protected that the illusion of a real presence behind the raw emotion had been impossible to resist. Or who'd desperately wanted to believe that -- in spite of the Angels' discovery that they, too, were mortal -- death could still be defeated.

I was lucky: I'd been born in an era of moderation. I hadn't killed in the name of Beatrice. I hadn't suffered for my faith. I had no doubt that I'd been far happier for the last fifteen years than I would have been if I'd told Daniel to throw his rope and weights overboard without me.

But that didn't change the fact that the heart of it all had been a lie.

* * * *

I woke at dawn, my head pounding, after just a few kilotau's sleep. I closed my eyes and searched for Her presence, as I had a thousand times before. When I woke in the morning and looked into my heart, She was there without fail, offering me strength and guidance. When I lay in bed at night, I feared nothing, because I knew She was watching over me.

There was nothing. She was gone.

I stumbled out of bed, feeling like a murderer, wondering how I'd ever live with what I'd done.

I turned down every offer I'd received at the conference, and stayed on in Mitar. It took Barat and me two years to establish our own research group to examine the effects of the zooamine, and nine more for us to elucidate the full extent of its activity in the brain. Our new recruits all had solid backgrounds in neurochemistry, and they did better work than I did, but when Barat retired I found myself the spokesperson for the group.

The initial discovery had been largely ignored outside the scientific community; for most people, it hardly mattered whether our brain chemistry matched the Angels' original design, or had been altered fifteen thousand years ago by some unexpected contaminant. But when the Mitar zooamine group began publishing detailed accounts of the biochemistry of religious experience, the public at large rediscovered the subject with a vengeance.

The university stepped up security, and despite death threats and a number of unpleasant incidents with stone-throwing protesters, no one was hurt. We were flooded with requests from broadcasters -- though most were predicated on the notion that the group was morally obliged to "face its critics", rather than the broadcasters being morally obliged to offer us a chance to explain our work, calmly and clearly, without being shouted down by enraged zealots.

I learned to avoid the zealots, but the obscurantists were harder to dodge. I'd expected opposition from the Churches -- defending the faith was their job, after all -- but some of the most intellectually bankrupt responses came from academics in other disciplines. In one televised debate, I was confronted by a Deep Church priest, a Transitional theologian, a devotee of the ocean god Marni, and an anthropologist from Tia.

"This discovery has no real bearing on any belief system," the anthropologist explained serenely. "All truth is local. Inside every Deep Church in Ferez, Beatrice is the daughter of God, and we're the mortal incarnations of the Angels, who traveled here from Earth. In a coastal village a few milliradians south, Marni is the supreme creator, and it was She who gave birth to us, right here. Going one step further and moving from the spiritual domain to the scientific might appear to 'negate' certain spiritual truths ... but equally, moving from the scientific domain to the spiritual demonstrates the same limitations. We are nothing but the stories we tell ourselves, and no one story is greater than another." He smiled beneficently, the expression of a parent only too happy to give all his squabbling children an equal share in some disputed toy.

I said, "How many cultures do you imagine share your definition of 'truth'? How many people do you think would be content to worship a God who consisted of literally nothing but the fact of their belief?" I turned to the Deep Church priest. "Is that enough for you?"

"Absolutely not!" She glowered at the anthropologist. "While I have the greatest respect for my brother here," she gestured at the devotee of Marni, "you can't draw a line around those people who've been lucky enough to be raised in the true faith, and then suggest that Beatrice's infinite power and love is confined to that group of people ... like some collection of folk songs!"

The devotee respectfully agreed. Marni had created the most distant stars, along with the oceans of Covenant. Perhaps some people called Her by another name, but if everyone on this planet was to die tomorrow, She would still be Marni: unchanged, undiminished.

The anthropologist responded soothingly, "Of course. But in context, and with a wider perspective --"

"I'm perfectly happy with a God who resides within us," offered the Transitional theologian. "It seems ... immodest to expect more. And instead of fretting uselessly over these ultimate questions, we should confine ourselves to matters of a suitably human scale."

I turned to him. "So you're actually indifferent as to whether an infinitely powerful and loving being created everything around you, and plans to welcome you into Her arms after death ... or the universe is a piece of quantum noise that will eventually vanish and erase us all?"

He sighed heavily, as if I was asking him to perform some arduous physical feat just by responding. "I can summon no enthusiasm for these issues."

Later, the Deep Church priest took me aside and whispered, "Frankly, we're all very grateful that you've debunked that awful cult of the Drowned. They're a bunch of fundamentalist hicks, and the Church will be better off without them. But you mustn't make the mistake of thinking that your work has anything to do with ordinary, civilized believers!"

* * * *

I stood at the back of the crowd that had gathered on the beach near the rock pool, to listen to the two old men who were standing ankle-deep in the milky water. It had taken me four days to get here from Mitar, but when I'd heard reports of a zooyte bloom washing up on the remote north coast, I'd had to come and see the results for myself. The zooamine group had actually recruited an anthropologist for such occasions -- one who could cope with such taxing notions as the existence of objective reality, and a biochemical substrate for human thought -- but Céline was only with us for part of the year, and right now she was away doing other research.

"This is an ancient, sacred place!" one man intoned, spreading his arms to take in the pool. "You need only observe the shape of it to understand that. It concentrates the energy of the stars, and the sun, and the ocean."

"The focus of power is there, by the inlet," the other added, gesturing at a point where the water might have come up to his calves. "Once, I wandered too close. I was almost lost in the great dream of the ocean, when my friend here came and rescued me!"

These men weren't devotees of Marni, or members of any other formal religion. As far as I'd been able to tell from old news reports, the blooms occurred every eight or ten years, and the two had set themselves up as "custodians" of the pool more than fifty years ago. Some local villagers treated the whole thing as a joke, but others revered the old men. And for a small fee, tourists and locals alike could be chanted over, then splashed with the potent brew. Evaporation would have concentrated the trapped waters of the bloom; for a few days, before the zooytes ran out of nutrients and died en masse in a cloud of hydrogen sulphide, the amine would be present in levels as high as in any of our laboratory cultures back in Mitar.

As I watched people lining up for the ritual, I found myself trying to downplay the possibility that anyone could be seriously affected by it. It was broad daylight, no one feared for their life, and the old men's pantheistic gobbledygook carried all the gravitas of the patter of streetside scam merchants. Their marginal sincerity, and the money changing hands, would be enough to undermine the whole thing. This was a tourist trap, not a life-altering experience.

When the chanting was done, the first customer knelt at the edge of the pool. One of the custodians filled a small metal cup with water and threw it in her face. After a moment, she began weeping with joy. I moved closer, my stomach tightening. It was what she'd known was expected of her, nothing more. She was playing along, not wanting to spoil the fun -- like the good sports who pretended to have their thoughts read by a carnival psychic.

Next, the custodians chanted over a young man. He began swaying giddily even before they touched him with the water; when they did, he broke into sobs of relief that racked his whole body.

I looked back along the queue. There was a young girl standing third in line now, looking around apprehensively; she could not have been more than nine or ten. Her father (I presumed) was standing behind her, with his hand against her back, as if gently propelling her forward.

I lost all interest in playing anthropologist. I forced my way through the crowd until I reached the edge of the pool, then turned to address the people in the queue. "These men are frauds! There's nothing mysterious going on here. I can tell you exactly what's in the water: it's just a drug, a natural substance given out by creatures that are trapped here when the waves retreat."

I squatted down and prepared to dip my hand in the pool. One of the custodians rushed forward and grabbed my wrist. He was an old man, I could have done what I liked, but some people were already jeering, and I didn't want to scuffle with him and start a riot. I backed away from him, then spoke again.

"I've studied this drug for more than ten years, at Mitar University. It's present in water all over the planet. We drink it, we bathe in it, we swim in it every day. But it's concentrated here, and if you don't understand what you're doing when you use it, that misunderstanding can harm you!"

The custodian who'd grabbed my wrist started laughing. "The dream of the ocean is powerful, yes, but we don't need your advice on that! For fifty years, my friend and I have studied its lore, until we were strong enough to stand in the sacred water!" He gestured at his leathery feet; I didn't doubt that his circulation had grown poor enough to limit the dose to a tolerable level.

He stretched out his sinewy arm at me. "So fuck off back to Mitar, Inlander! Fuck off back to your books and your dead machinery! What would you know about the sacred mysteries? What would you know about the ocean?" I said, "I think you're out of your depth."

I stepped into the pool. He started wailing about my unpurified body polluting the water, but

I brushed past him. The other custodian came after me, but though my feet were soft after years of wearing shoes, I ignored the sharp edges of the rocks and kept walking toward the inlet. The zooamine helped. I could feel the old joy, the old peace, the old "love"; it made a powerful anesthetic.

I looked back over my shoulder. The second man had stopped pursuing me; it seemed he honestly feared going any further. I pulled off my shirt, bunched it up, and threw it onto a rock at the side of the pool. Then I waded forward, heading straight for the "focus of power."

The water came up to my knees. I could feel my heart pounding, harder than it had since childhood. People were shouting at me from the edge of the pool -- some outraged by my sacrilege, some apparently concerned for my safety in the presence of forces beyond my control. Without turning, I called out at the top of my voice, "There is no 'power' here! There's nothing 'sacred'! There's nothing here but a drug --"

Old habits die hard; I almost prayed first. Please, Holy Beatrice, don't let me regain my faith.

I lay down in the water and let it cover my face. My vision turned white; I felt like I was leaving my body. The love of Beatrice flooded into me, and nothing had changed: Her presence was as palpable as ever, as undeniable as ever. I knew that I was loved, accepted, forgiven.

I waited, staring into the light, almost expecting a voice, a vision, detailed hallucinations. That had happened to some of the Drowned. How did anyone ever claw their way back to sanity, after that?

But for me, there was only the emotion itself, overpowering but unembellished. It didn't grow monotonous; I could have basked in it for days. But I understood, now, that it said no more about my place in the world than the warmth of sunlight on skin. I'd never mistake it for the touch of a real hand again.

I climbed to my feet and opened my eyes. Violet afterimages danced in front of me. It took a few tau for me to catch my breath, and feel steady on my feet again. Then I turned and started wading back toward the shore.

The crowd had fallen silent, though whether it was in disgust or begrudging respect I had no idea.

I said, "It's not just here. It's not just in the water. It's part of us now; it's in our blood." I was still half-blind; I couldn't see whether anyone was listening. "But as long as you know that, you're already free. As long as you're ready to face the possibility that everything that makes your spirits soar, everything that lifts you up and fills your heart with joy, everything that makes your life worth living ... is a lie, is corruption, is meaningless -- then you can never be enslaved."

They let me walk away unharmed. I turned back to watch as the line formed again; the girl wasn't in the queue.

* * * *

I woke with a start, from the same old dream.

I was lowering my mother into the water from the back of the boat. Her hands were tied, her feet weighted. She was afraid, but she'd put her trust in me. "You'll bring me up safely, won't you Martin?"

I nodded reassuringly. But once she'd vanished beneath the waves, I thought: What am I doing? I don't believe in this shit any more.

So I took out a knife and started cutting through the rope --

I brought my knees up to my chest, and crouched on the unfamiliar bed in the darkness. I was in a small town on the railway line, halfway back to Mitar. Halfway between midnight and dawn.

I dressed, and made my way out of the hostel. The center of town was deserted, and the sky was thick with stars. Just like home. In Mitar, everything vanished in a fog of light.

All three of the stars cited by various authorities as the Earth's sun were above the horizon. If they weren't all mistakes, perhaps I'd live to see a telescope's image of the planet itself. But the prospect of seeking contact with the Angels -- if there really was a faction still out there, somewhere -- left me cold. I shouted silently up at the stars: Your degenerate offspring don't need your help! Why should we rejoin you? We're going to surpass you!

I sat down on the steps at the edge of the square and covered my face. Bravado didn't help. Nothing helped. Maybe if I'd grown up facing the truth, I would have been stronger. But when I woke in the night, knowing that my mother was simply dead, that everyone I'd ever loved would follow her, that I'd vanish into the same emptiness myself, it was like being buried alive. It was like being back in the water, bound and weighted, with the certain knowledge that there was no one to haul me up.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder. I looked up, startled. It was a man about my own age. His manner wasn't threatening; if anything, he looked slightly wary of me.

He said, "Do you need a roof? I can let you into the Church if you want." There was a trolley packed with cleaning equipment a short distance behind him.

I shook my head. "It's not that cold." I was too embarrassed to explain that I had a perfectly good room nearby. "Thanks."

As he was walking away, I called after him, "Do you believe in God?"

He stopped and stared at me for a while, as if he was trying to decide if this was a trick question -- as if I might have been hired by the local parishioners to vet him for theological soundness. Or maybe he just wanted to be diplomatic with anyone desperate enough to be sitting in the town square in the middle of the night, begging a stranger for reassurance.

He shook his head. "As a child I did. Not anymore. It was a nice idea ... but it made no sense." He eyed me skeptically, still unsure of my motives.

I said, "Then isn't life unbearable?"

He laughed. "Not all the time."

He went back to his trolley, and started wheeling it toward the Church.

I stayed on the steps, waiting for dawn.