

JOOVLIES

About fifty steps up the bend from the halfdroid's street station, a hole in the bedrock wall marked the entrance to Rockswell Track from Teshill Slope. The opening had a molded-stone arch in a vine motif, topped by a blue-green steel sign sticking out into the Slope's lamp-glare. The sign listed the establishments on the narrow alleyway, hardly a street. Two large men would have to squeeze past each other.

The word Joovlies lay at the bottom of the list, scrawled in a distinctive lapscript. By the lettering, this place was a cloax, a barhole favored by women.

I paused at the Rockswell entrance. A trio of young and drunken militia females in blue and gray stumbled out past me. I entered and spread my arms, trailing my hands on the opposite walls of the little street. The wet stone slid past my fingers in the few patches where no vines grew.

It was pretty, and warm. The street ceiling arched to a groove dotted with yellow-green lamps along the way. Long, thin purple lizards basked in the lamp heat, with their feet latched to the ceiling rock.

The name Joovlies lay embossed in glowing purple lapscript above a vertical ovoid slit of a doorway. I edged inside past a wiry brush of dark stems that framed the slit. The thud of Tanmar Fest faded. A slower throb came from a small stage in a hemispherical room to my right. A small streetband played, their heads bowed over symbiotic instruments.

At the near edge of the stage, a standing female singer urged scattered huddles of listeners with rhythmic bursts of words, clenching her hands and her muscled body. Flashing metallic inscriptions ran in a tangle from below her ears to a narrow widow's-peak on her forehead. Most of her skull was bare. The broad vertical stripes of her body makeup resembled an interleaving of slices of a human and an andro, dark and pale, dark and pale. The makeup sheathed her, skin-tight.

As I watched, the edges of the young woman's strips of makeup faded, twisted, fought each other. The dark and light strips merged to greenish, then drew apart again as she sang, her voice pitching from harsh to breathy, from pure tone to the ultrasonic andro buzz of saw-edged anjive.

“Packaging, delivery,
Shake me up, handle me,

Chop my womb, rearrange
All my parts, scheduling
Me for yet another
Reincarnalized shaft.”

I knew these words. The music exploded in a series of off-time accents. The singer spread her arms, and the edges of her stripes rose to undulate up and down her body. A shock: the makeup was her skin, animated by neuroleader implants.

The undulations crested, sank back. Silence. A hum of approval rose and fell four times. I joined in. The singer retreated, and took a long black wrap around her shoulders from the male syntrell player. As she fastened the wrap, she squinted with pure-white, pupilless eyes into the gloom off the stage in front, and pointed directly at me. She sang alone, slowly:

“Pale children, dumb bruised girls,
My meds will heal your burning,
They slide like snakes in your veins,
Come open your mouths to mine.”

And she vanished backstage, followed by the other members of the band.