

Tarkovsky's Cut by Charles Stross

Once a lifetime Jewel swims in the Folded Rose lagoon. She strikes out through the mirror-still water until she can just make out the Hub wall, and then she swims a little further. She lies back in the water and lets things pass her by for a while. On a clear day she can just make out, directly above, the fields and forests she explored as a child. She smiles, and maps the vague topology, sharpening it with memories.

Then, for the first time in many years, she turns off her Wisdom, and thinks back, unaided, to what it was like. The feel of landpussy fur. The strong savour of barbecued cockroach. The first exquisite tickle of the Wisdom uplink behind her eyes. She swims in memories and falls like a stone, into childhood, and into the black depths of the lake.

Now Jewel is an old woman again, nearing the end of her fortieth lifetime, and she is ready to swim again.

She stands on the foredeck of the houseboat, fingering the jewel, which hangs on a silver chain about her neck.

The craft turns in the water, and Jewel watches as the Hub -- a craggy, rust-stained rock wall -- swings into view. She looks up, and up and up. The rocks climb all the way to the forests of her childhood -- there, on the opposite side of the oneil. The Hub's fault lines and discolorations are not, like the lagoon, a builder's whim. They are real. The Heaven Eleven oneil is ten thousand years old.

The houseboat is anchored to a smaller, grey and scree-swept slope, which curves so that its lips meet the hub at either edge, forming a pouch some five hundred feet above the lagoon. In it lie the remains of an ancient city and there, built over their ruined heart, stands the Folded Rose Sanctuary. There are no landward approaches to the Sanctuary. The slopes, naturally rugged and inhospitable, have been seeded with things lethal to man. Birdmen patrol the rocky crests, watching for airborne intruders with senses enhanced by a secret process.

Jewel stretches in satisfaction and turns to the wrought-iron table. On it stands a small glass cafetiere. She presses down on the filter arm and watches the brew darken. She pours herself a cup and sits down. Soon she will have to go and kill her wife. As always, the thought of it excites her.

She sips her coffee. They feed coffee berries to Wolfmen. As the berries are digested, so the beans within them partly ferment. It has become a kind of ritual -- to drink wolf coffee before killing her lovers.

Jewel opens a small bottle of hash oil and slurs it into her coffee. The scent is delicious.

She drinks, and rides the slow, gentle hashish swell into the First House of Contemplation.

She fingers the jewel around her neck. It has seventy facets -- one for each of her lives.

She thinks of her wife, and of their lovemaking. Marget's breasts are small and too far apart and her orgasm is a raucous laugh. The taste of her wetness is rich and sickly.

Jewel withdraws from the play of images, and clasps her hands. Consciously now, she draws from these erotic images the shapes and movements of Marget's body, the relative suppleness of each limb in each plane. When she is finished she knows how to kill her.

She knows the poise to adopt, the angle to hit, the force necessary for the blow, and the speed

of the strike. This is the Second House.

Warmed by the drugged coffee, she unclenches her hands. The bright morning sunlight casts shadows of her fingers onto the table beneath. She waves her fingers and the light threads over the table. The movement of light and shade is erotic. She enters the Third House, and reads violence into the movements of the shadows. Violence and sexuality fuse in a single, simple rhythm.

Her breasts engorge.

The Census is over by evening. The stench of molten insulation drifts across the street from the Recidivist's nest. By Three tomorrow morning, all subversives will be retrodden. The managing director of the census, Harvey Mishima is in a teleconference with other officers of the Census. His fellows appear behind his eyes, faces black with ash and hands sticky with housejuice. They all have exactly the same smile.

"Report by numbers," Harvey drawls. He lifts up his legs and rests his feet comfortably on the bar table. Harvey Mishima is a middle-aged retread who has been programmed to think that all Recidivists should be recycled. His number two sits next to him, convinced that in some previous incarnation she was Eva Braun. She likes killing ragheads.

A bartender mixes cocktails and twitches his whiskers nervously: Eva Braun is field-stripping her gun.

Two. Seven subjects in the block, now cared for.

Three. None in the block, but we found a sewer rat.

The bartender twitches its whiskers in terror.

Four grunts and howls and masturbates in front of the camera. Semantic engines do their best to draw meaning from the display. Four is a psychopath on test-release from the Domino Factory. He's killed as many beastmen as Recidivists.

Five. None in the block. Tried to link with six but got whitenoise.

Six. A practical knowledge of nursing the elderly is essential, but not necessarily gained in the private sector.

Harvey's Wisdom tries making sense of the whitenoise where six should be. Harvey turns it off and spits. He calls up Cleansing, using his Wisdom to port a description of Six to them.

No dice. He turns to Eva. "Six is out -- alive and missing."

The ratman sets their drinks down at the table.

"Too slow," Eva drawls and blows him to bloody fragments all over the plastic fascia of the bar.

"Eva," Harvey sighs, "are you listening?"

"Sure," says Eva. She drops on all fours and sniffs the ratman's roast remains

Harvey drains his drink. "Mixed a good cocktail," he says.

Eva grunts. Her mouth is full.

Wolfmen trace Six's scent, and find a house. It lies on a slant, mouthparts buried deep in the conduit running under the road. Sawtooths drill the door to bits and find Alia in the bedroom. They pin her to the wall with beetle limbs and chew off her clothing. Wolfmen slaving toxin and

mucus fling her to the futon; they rub themselves against her, wet her with their secretions, deafen her with howls of orgasm.

When Alia starts to bleed Harvey Mishima calls off the beastmen and hands Alia a handkerchief. Nanotech robots in Alia's blood have already repaired the physical damage done to her. The purpose of the attack is to traumatise, not her body, but her mind. Even these limited objectives have not been achieved. It hasn't worked. It never does. Alia, like all of them, has no soul. She feels nothing.

Alia considers it likely that the human cultures' conquest of mortality and pain led directly to this Fall.

This makes her a Recidivist.

Harvey offers her a pill. He smiles a smile she has seen many times before. "I am going to kill you," he says, "either by beasts or by this little bomb. If your cooperation is satisfactory I will detonate the bomb. If you have not swallowed the bomb, though, or if your behaviour is in any other way unsatisfactory, I will let in the wolfmen."

Alia snatches the pill out his hand and swallows it. A few seconds later something green and slimy blinks behind her eyes. Good. Alia is better equipped than Mishima realises. The snake icon has confirmed that her tonsils have disarmed the bomb.

Mishima tells her to shower and when she returns to the bedroom he is naked. It will be that kind of interrogation. Afterwards, when there is nothing more for her to open up to him, in the physical as well as the semantic sense, they have a drink together. Mishima sips and smiles and lies down on the bed, breathing rapidly in a shallow, gasping manner that reminds her of vivisected beastmen.

It is time. She calls up her Wisdom. It is a sophisticated black market system which can alter the data stored in other units based upon the simplest of semantic instructions.

Alia tells her Wisdom to keep beastmen and other callers away from the house. It goes to work and befuddles the beastmen and all the other paraphernalia of a Census Enquiry.

Gnats seeded by the census to observe events in the room are fed a self-editing intuitive video-loop of Mishima and Alia copulating. Observers within the Sanctuary of the Folded Rose will be amazed at the sexual energy of the pair, long after Alia has escaped.

Alia bends over Mishima and places a transdermal patch on his neck. The room shimmers a pale blue -- a shade which induces calm and contemplation.

Mishima feels the patch and sees the light and doesn't care. "How much drink did you put in that alcohol?" he asks, draining the glass. Selective blockers have taken out his ethanol dehydrogenase complex. He is drunk on a single bourbon. His own Wisdom persuades him it has taken longer for him to get drunk than it actually has.

"You feeling okay?" says Alia.

"Check. My mind's off for servicing tomorrow ... I mean it's my ... I should be caring and sensitive to the needs of young people ... oh shit" Mishima's syntactic engine is playing up again. His last conscious act is to turn it off.

Alia takes a deep breath, then goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge. She takes out a braindrain.

It has eight tentacles and no eyes. Like its octopoid ancestor it only survives for about four hours outside its usual habitat -- in this case a highly oxygenated saline sponge.

Alia plants it on Mishima's face. The braindrain hunts busily for orifices. Pseudopodia probe the buccal mucosa, the nasal sinuses, the orbits of his eye sockets. Mishima dreams that a large cat has decided to share his pillow.

"What are you?" Alia asks.

"Cube," Mishima replies. The answer is a nasal whisper: all that the invasive tentacles in his nose and throat will permit. Alia asks Wisdom the time. The tentacles should have penetrated his meninges by now. Soon Harvey will be unable to lie. Braindrains are breedable wetware packages, configured to handshake human CNS and control speech centres.

Cube. Six sides -- six lifetimes.

"Tell me about them."

"Can't."

"Explain."

"I'm a retread."

Alia shivers with revulsion. The braindrain was a wise choice. Truth drugs are like blunt hammers; the braindrain is a surgeon's scalpel. Drugs would never be able to reveal the previous identity of Harvey Mishima. The braindrain might.

She wonders who Harvey was, before the retread. Some Recidivist. Some comrade.

The building shivers in sympathy with Alia's anger. It detaches its proboscis from the street artery and stands up. Alia soothes the house; she thinks of trees, solidly rooted. She looks at Mishima, at the braindrain, clamped leech-like to his face. The house responds to her fierce satisfaction and squats back down with a jarring bump.

This is going to take a long time.

The braindrain starts eating Harvey's face -- a desperate and, ultimately, futile attempt to assuage its massive metabolic demands. Alia does not look at him as she interrogates him. It is bad enough having to listen to his whistling voice without having to watch his face go bloody.

"Why the Census?"

"Because," Harvey wheezes. The air is escaping through ragged holes in his cheeks. Alia calls up her Wisdom and handshakes Harvey's semantic engine. She scrolls through the icons behind her eyes and selects the kinds of functions she needs. In a minute or two Harvey won't have a mouth. He can talk to her via her Wisdom, instead.

We suspect an offensive. We are suppressing Recidivist groups in the area. When the big one comes down we don't want to have to burn the Suburb.

It takes an hour to get names, dates, faces and all the other paraphernalia the Team needs to plan Jewel's assassination. Alia glances surreptitiously at Mishima. His hair is gone. His skull glitters pink and white like candy in the pale-blue light. His eyes are full of purple wormy things. Alia looks away, fast. "Who were you? Before the retread?"

This time Mishima can answer. The parts of his mind sealed by the retread process have escaped and are establishing new dendritic architectures within the braindrain itself. Whoever Mishima was is being reborn inside the drain.

Hello, Alia.

Mishima has no eyes now: whoever it was who had inhabited him must have recognised her from her Wisdom handshake.

"You're a Cube," she says. Her words are random -- noises she makes to give her time to think. Someone who knew her. Someone closeÔ...

@italic(Fourth lifetime.)

"When were you retrodden?"

Eighty years ago. Third lifetime.

Alia nods. Of course. Of course. She closes her eyes.

How long have I got?

Alia calls up her Wisdom. With a sick twist in her stomach, Alia remembers that Wisdom wetware is made of diced braindrain.

"Half an hour."

What? Sorry, can you use Wisdom, I've got no ears now.

Alia puts her hands over her face. Half an hour. Then, after a moment's silence, You were my favourite.

I loved you, too, the drain replies, and for the first time in her seven lifetimes, Alia weeps.

Jewel celebrates her rebirth in style. First she finds a lover. She does not like carrying over lovers from one lifetime to the next. It never seems to work, and those who live too closely to her for too long learn things it is best for them not to know.

Marget died beautifully. No blood, no bruise, she fell like a doll with broken strings. Jewel smiles and looks around her at her new apartment.

It is as wide as the Sanctuary itself. She cannot see the far wall. It is decorated in brilliant blue-white, offset by soft pastel greys and pinks. To her left, by the window, hand printed silk curtains shiver in the air-conditioner breeze. Outside lies the whole shattered vista of the Old City. As she watches, strong winds blow cement dust into the air about the buildings, softening the outlines of the smashed landscape, reinterpreting the scene in impressionistic grey pastel, and the outside seems distanced, like something taken from film or from memory.

The furniture is upholstered in pale leather and velvet -- all soft, sea-curved lines, no sharp angles anywhere. The carpet is thick steel-blue shag.

Out the corner of her eye, Jewel glimpses white silk brushing the arm of a chaise-longue. White silk -- sleeved round a white arm. Jewel surveys the figure reclined upon the couch.

The flesh of her arms is the colour of bleached bone. She wears a sari, tightened by velcro fasteners to accentuate the generous curves of breast and hip. Her hair is a white dandelion clock, an even three inches over her pale skull. Her eyes are black pits, no iris visible: in each ivory orb a gaping hole.

"Hyne. Leave me."

Hyne obeys. She is a retread, and has been conditioned to do everything asked of her. This conditioning will wear off in a matter of months, but by then Jewel will know how to manipulate her.

Alone in the room, Jewel plays with the seventy-faceted diamond about her neck. After a minute or two, she gets up and opens her cupboard. There are skeletons inside it. She speaks to one of them.

"Jessie?"

The skull, nested with nutrient feeds to supply the braindrain within, blinks at her -- red millipedal wipers polish cybernetic lenses. "I loved her," it says. through a grill where its lower jaw should be.

Jewel nods patiently. "Alia is a vibrant personality. It's a pity she and her brood are trying to kill me."

The skull laughs. "That is of no consequence to to a skull in love."

Jessie is like all the other skeletons. It teases her mercilessly for her lack of soul.

"Did you make contact with her?"

"I told her all she needed to know, to be in the right place, at the right time. You will catch your renegades."

"Did you let her know who who are?"

"Of course. I pretended Harvey Mishima was me in my fourth generation."

Jewel hisses with anger. "You were retrodden in your third lifetime."

"She knows nothing about rebirth processes. She will assume echoes of previous personalities are carried over in the Wisdom transfer."

Jewel stares at the skull for a long time, as if by her stare she is reminding Jessie that his half-life hangs upon her whim.

Jessie's skeleton shrugs. "Had any new thoughts lately?"

"Funny," Jewel replies. There is dry humour in her voice. She puts it there to please Jessie -- she has no soul, and does not understand humour.

"Alright, then," Jessie says, "Any calculations?"

Jessie distinguishes between thought and calculation. He believes only those with souls can think. The others just calculate.

Jewel calls up her Wisdom and lets figures scroll behind her eyes. She instructs her semantic engine to prepare a financial report for Jessie, then sends it to him.

"Hmm! Do you realise if we ever dropped the debt bomb the entire culture goes bankrupt?"

"So?" she asks, suppressing a yawn. Copying personalities into braindrains is not perfect. The identities thus preserved tend to repeat themselves. Jewel has played out this conversation with Jessie every day since his retreat, eighty years ago. Playing it through is the only way she can get a decent conversation out of him afterwards.

"So," Jessie, mimics, "your policy remains as warpedly secure as ever. If we ever produce what we've been promising to produce, we sign the order on our own obsolescence."

Jewel sinks gracefully into a floor cushion and looks about her. Already, only six hours into her new existence, ennui is setting in. "Business as usual, then?"

"Unless you want to be poor," Jessie replies.

Jewel shakes her head. "That is not possible."

The skull nods. His voice is very quiet, very compassionate. "I know. You -- Heaven Eleven -- the whole culture -- money, money, money."

"Survival, survival, survival," Jewel retorts. "Space is harsh. Without wealth we cannot build. Without buildings we cannot survive. Wealth is necessary."

"So is purpose," Jessie whispers.

Jewel shivers. "I know."

"If you produced personalities, then investment in Heaven Eleven would increase, not decrease."

"For a time," Jewel replies. "But once the secret of the human soul is fully disseminated, the purpose of Heaven Eleven vanishes. We can make no more wealth."

"With souls come new ideas, new motivations. You'll think of something."

Jewel shakes her head. "I can't take that risk."

Jessie's skull laughs at her. It is a senseless sound, she doesn't understand it; it annoys her. "Jewel, you are a coward. You are the best calculator on the richest oneil in the Galaxy and haven't the imagination, you haven't the soul, to imagine yourself in any other role. All the culture is scrabbling for riches, for material satisfaction, for more, more, more of the same, and they'll never be satisfied, never! Because more is not sufficient, it never can be! Don't you see that?"

Jewel thought about it. "Riches are survival," she said.

Jessie sighs. "I pity you," he says. "Heaven Eleven's Jewel. Seventy lifetimes and every day the same. I pity you."

Jewel shrugs. She is bored again. She will kill Hyne in bed tonight. Maybe it will relax her.

Alia sends a mouse to her fellow revolutionaries. Then she throws the braindrain and Harvey's headless corpse into the garbage disposal and washes her hands. She looks out the window and remembers.

Once upon a time she was a cleaner. In the morning she cleaned the street. At noon she walked through the Suburb to the Census building, sweeping the pavement as she went. All afternoon she cleaned the Census building. In the evening she swept her way back home and cleaned the house. On rest days she swept her yard. She swept the porch with a brush the Census gave her for sixty years' good service. It had a wooden handle, painted yellow, and red plastic bristles. It shone in the light, as if it were wet.

The porch was always dusty, and sweeping it made her cough. There was litter, too. Gum wrappers. Sometimes she stopped to pick them up. She unravelled them and read them. Once she found a brand she remembered from when she was a girl. She read it, and something strange happened to her face. She smiled.

When she'd finished porch she cleaned the path. The house stood up so she could sweep the rubbish underneath it. The path, by contrast, was a lifeless thing, made of concrete, and the concrete was broken. Weeds grew in the cracks. Sometimes she washed the weeds, to make them shine. There was litter on the path, fresh each day. Sometimes she found bits of newspaper, printed in a language foreign to her. They had blown all the way round the oneil, from the forested places where the important people were born. She read the paper scraps aloud.

Foreign words stuttered out her dry mouth.

Then she swept the yard. It was hot here so she unbuttoned her blouse. The hazy sun caught her breasts. Sometimes wolfboys came and watched her. They often approached her, and she shooed them out with her broom.

There was litter in the yard, too. Tin cans clattered when she hit them with her broom. They made dry, hot sounds. Sometimes she had to kick them to loosen them from the dirt, or even pluck them out by the root. When she touched them they scalded her fingers.

Then there was Jessie. He told her where in the Census building needed the cleaning most. One day he led her into a room which was very clean, and very clean people stood about the room, and she wondered what she was doing here, and turned to get back to her work, but they crowded around her and made reassuring noises and Jessie gave her a stick of gum which tasted odd.

She changed, year by year. She grew tired of cleaning, so the Census gave her better things to do. She was very happy in the Census, very proud to have been given a drug which, it was said, was the latest in a line of treatments to restore people' souls. When Jessie told her that the Census had decided to make her a Cube, so that they might monitor her progress over six lifetimes, she smiled for the second time in her life -- very quickly, as if the muscles that should have made a smile were wasted.

Only in her second lifetime did Jessie tell her about the Recidivists, and by then it was clear that Alia, though she was brighter now, did not and would not ever develop a soul. the Census, who had had to find other things to demonstrate to irate creditor governments, were experimenting with beastmen again; they forgot about her.

Jessie.

She shivers. The house feels cramped. The pulsing softness of its walls no longer comforts her. She realises that she is almost afraid of it.

Jessie had a soul.

She goes outside.

Jessie laughed. They killed him, killed him because whatever treatment they had given him had worked, killed him because they were machines and he was human and they were afraid, of humans, of change, of life itself.

Here, beyond the rubbish-filled yard, with tier upon tier of sleeping houses ranged about her, she could be anywhere and anywhen. She could be anyone -- anything.

Jessie. She remembers Jessie. Being with him made her feel -- human.

Something scuffs the dirt at her feet. She looks down, and locks eyes with a timorous mouse.

"Back again?" she says.

"I am your new assignment," it pipes. Alia picks it up and bites its head off. The warm fur makes her gag, as usual.

The hind legs, abandoned, twitch helplessly in the dust.

Jewel writhes about the bed, masturbating herself with whatever bits of Hyne will fit. The blood is starting to cake.

The cupboard is open and the skeletons are shrieking. As she attains orgasm she looks at

them and smiles, because the skeletons all have souls, and she knows it will hurt them.

Jessie is paying no attention. He is playing Cat's Cradle with a string of fibre-optic.

Jewel leaps out of bed and slips on Hyne's small intestine.

Jessie looks up and laughs.

Jewel gets up and strides toward the cupboard. "What's that?" she shouts at him. "Where did you get that?"

Hyne tangles the wire between the skeletal fingers of his right hand. His cybernetic eyes whirr as he focusses upon his mistress. "Hyne gave it to me."

Jewel is speechless.

"But then, you wouldn't understand that."

The other skeletons shudder and fall silent, listening. There are six of them. Heaven Eleven has produced seven souls in the past ten thousand years. They are all here, Jessie and his more timorous fellows. Secure. Locked in the cupboard.

"Give me the string," Jewel says.

"Certainly --" and Jessie lifts the hand with the string in it, opens his bony fingers, and slaps her.

Jewel puts her hand to her face; Hyne's blood is sticky on her cheek. She thinks hard what to do. She thinks to turn him off. But that is not enough. She needs him. She needs them all, to advise her, to give her the edge, the edge that brought her to this place, and built up the Folded Rose Sanctuary atop the ruins of a former Jewel's domain, four thousand years ago.

She thinks hard and in time, slowly, painfully, she gives birth to an idea. She turns and goes back to the bed, and brings back fleshy garlands for Jessie, loops them around his pelvis, shoulders and shoulder blades. He does not resist. She plucks out his eyes and dashes them to the floor.

The skeletons are crying again, but Jessie just says, "Was that interesting?" and he slaps her again.

She pulls his arms off at the socket. Gristle pops and servo motors chitter.

He kicks her.

She dismembers them all. She takes Jessie's femur and cracks it against the wardrobe. She beats on the windows with it and they shatter, letting in the dust of the Old City. She picks up furniture and throws it out the window. She tears down the curtains and wraps the bits of her lover with them and throws them out the window. She uses a shard of glass to shred the carpet until her fingers are slippery and an icon tells her the nanotechs in her hands might not be able to repair the cuts.

She sits in the dust and the blood and she waits.

Nothing happens.

She waits.

Nothing happens.

She waits.

Having fun?

Jewel leaps up, rushes across the room and kicks Jessie's skull. She kicks and kicks and kicks until it breaks and she plucks out the drain within it and she tears it up with her hands and her teeth and she jumps up and down on the shreds.

She goes back to the window and sits.

She waits.

Fancy a coffee?

Her eyes go wide.

There is a very loud grating noise, deep within her skull. Jessie is laughing.

Oh come now, Jewel," he says. did you never hear the one about the immortal soul?

Alia lies down on the futon and keeps very still. The thing that lives in her stomach grapples with the tiny skull as soon as it slips through her oesophagus. She feels violently nauseous as the symbiote finds the correct connections and handshakes the brain of the rodent. A sudden cramp seizes her guts and she doubles over, half-hoping to vomit. But before it gets any worse everything around her goes black, and she is in.

It is a grey place, a world a billion years too old to support life. A fire hangs in the featureless sky, a bleeding swirl that becomes more complex the longer she looks at it. This is where she goes when she swallows the messengers: it is not hot, or cold, or wet, or dry, not good, not bad. It terrifies her. She stares up at the sky. She can see shapes in it, if she looks for long enough.

You are marked, says the wind. The Sanctuary of the Folded Rose is watching you. You are vulnerable. You have one opportunity left to assassinate Jewel. Sources suggest that Jewel will drown herself in the Lagoon tomorrow.

Alia gasps but has no body to gasp with. "So soon?" The air itself breathes her words. All the planning, the preparation, the deaths of Six and Harvey Mishima -- all outplayed by a whim of Jewel's frayed psyche!

She has seventy lifetimes with which to play. She can afford to be self-indulgent. Perhaps she is bored, You will be supplied with a once-only field retread virus -- one configured so your Wisdom can insinuate it into Jewel's own Wisdom interface. You will swim in the lagoon. You will port the virus into her as she drowns. When the Census dredges her, there will be no 'her' to fill her next incarnation.

Then the sun goes out.

Jewel stands on the deck of the houseboat and contemplates the still black waters beneath.

Ten thousand years. For ten thousand years Heaven Eleven has promised the culture a cure for the Fall, a recreation of the human soul.

For ten thousand years it has taken the culture's money, keeping it poor, poor enough to have to expand, to fill the galaxy with rings, oneils, terraformed planets, mining colonies, spaceships and diracs and all the paraphernalia of a Galaxy spanning culture. For ten thousand years it had given the human culture a purpose.

And it has done so by doing nothing but amass that money, investing just enough to convince the culture it still has a place, a role to play, a right to exist and grow rich. It is the logic of a machine, trapped in a closed loop for eternity.

And it has been enough. Until. Until.

Jessie.

As if he's heard her thoughts, and perhaps he has, Jessie comes on-line through her Wisdom. The sharkmen have caught Alia half a mile off the coast. She got nibbled a bit but nothing her own nanotechs can't deal with.

Jewel sighs. She fingers the jewel around her neck, and then, for the first time in many lifetimes, she looks at it. She examines the play of light in the stone. She stares into it for many minutes. It is such a strange thing.

At last she stirs herself. "Bring the silly bitch to me," she says.

The nanotechs have closed me down Alia realises. She remembers cold and dark and no weight and teeth, everywhere. Teeth. It comes back to her.

The lagoon.

Sharkmen.

She wonders if she is dead yet.

The grey place is flat. It curves up at the horizon. There are no hard edges to the gravel beneath her feet -- this is a landscape scoured smooth by time. It is, she thinks, a fitting afterlife for a soulless woman.

She looks up. They are all there, in the sky. All the mythical ideograms of humanity. The fractured swastika, its edges dissolved into broken geometries -- a pentangle tracing a circle of coppery fire -- a six-pointed figure -- all the archetypes are here. Strange symbols float in the darkness, receding in ranks as far as she can see.

Alia lies on her back and stared at the lights in the sky. She has an idea that they are a command overlay of some extremely powerful communications net. You could look at the commands and trigger them, if you knew the correct control mode. Ask and you shall receive --

What?

The deepest of deep meanings?

A personality?

You're not dying. You have been immobilised by a motor/afferent nerve block. You are supposed to be asleep and you are. This is a lucid dream state -- a communications mode.

"Who are you?" Her voice is thin and reedy. All of a sudden, she becomes aware that she is naked, and her body -- She rubs her hands over herself. She very young -- a little girl, as if she'd sprung fresh from a Domino tank. Fear overwhelms her.

We are your nest. You don't see us because you're on the sharp edge of the wedge. But we're here, and we're watching. You have been captured and brought before Jewel. You are in luck. This is the gateway to your retreat programme. To trigger it, just pull yourself back here and your Wisdom will detonate it.

Her stomach churns. Her feet tingle. A bright purple mouse skull outline lights up the sky -- and it laughs.

It is a laugh she has heard before.

The houseboat turns in the wind. Alia opens her eyes.

Jewel is pouring her a cup of coffee, and when she speaks, Jessie's way of talking works her mouth.

Alia sits up. She is sore from where the sharkmen have bitten her, but her Wisdom tells her no serious harm has been done.

"Machines," says Jewel, or Jessie, or both, and Alia doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry, or how to do either.

"Self-replicating machines," says Jewel/Jessie, playing with the faceted stone around her neck. "When the human culture first lived in space, they realised they needed these machines to expand and survive. In time they realised that the most clever and efficient Von Neumann design they had was the human form itself. There was no Fall. They didn't fall. They jumped."

Alia is crying. It is a horrible, beautiful thing, and she does not understand it.

"They spread, and spread, and spread, and out of all that complexity, things grew up in a way that wasn't predicted."

"Souls," Alia chokes out.

Jewel/Jessie shrugs and smiles. "No, not souls. Braindrains. The Wisdom net grows its own personalities, now. Sometimes it even saves them." She chuckles.

It is a good sound -- Alia almost understands it. "Wisdom is grown big," Jewel/Jessie says. "Now Jewel is dead, it can speak openly."

Alia closes her eyes. It is true. The seed planted in Jessie is planted in her now. She feels it, pulsing, warm behind her eyes. A soul. A cephalopodic soul.

"What of Jewel?" she whispers.

"Your retread eradicated her. But she wasn't long for the world anyway. She malfunctioned, grew bored and angry and destructive. Seventy lifetimes is long. Things break down." She fingers the jewel at her neck. "You know, she arranged this meeting, she knew everything, she was waiting for you here, she was going to kill you, the nest, the whole Recidivist movement. Strange how things turn out."

There was a hint of self-satisfaction in Jewel/Jessie's voice.

"You betrayed her," Alia says. "You betrayed her and stole her body."

"No," Jewel/Jessie replies. "I gave her what she wanted. She was becoming human in spite of herself. Being human, she could no longer live with what she'd done."

Alia sips at the coffee. It is dark and rich and tastes a little bit fermented. "Give me the jewel," she says.

Jewel/Jessie smiles and unfastens the necklace and hands it to her.

She fingers it.

"It's named after the man who invented the cut," says Jewel/Jessie. "It is a very old thing, from before the Fall. She fingered it a lot, but she never understood it."

"It's perfect," says Alia.

"Nothing is perfect."

"Beautiful, then."

"Perhaps."

There is a strange sound on the breeze. She has never heard it before, but in some strange way she recognises it.

Jewel/Jessie smiles and stands up. She takes Alia by the hand and they embrace and then, only then, does Alia know the sound for what it is.

Throughout the oneil, in the lands of the important people and the tiers of the Suburbs, in the Sanctuary and in the Domino factory -- everywhere -- people are singing.