

Excerpt Hot Wheels

Cool Assassins 2

J. O. Quantaman

Bold typeface signifies hyperlinks.

Prologue

Kuala Lumpur: 12 May 2076, 4:55 p.m.

Tuesday, 12 May 2076, 08:55 UTC

Jenna Marov can't fault her partner's road sense. Even so, the store fronts, the madcap traffic and street signs are zooming by too quickly. Once she grasps the reason for a sudden maneuver, the crisis has become history. It's hard to sit back and do nothing while Jo, her erstwhile driver, makes all the spilt-second calls.

Now her getaway specialist has decided to stop for lunch, which will delay their escape. The cartel has already condemned them as terrorists after her attack on Petronas Tower 2. Before long, the Malaysian Special Branch will dub them public enemy's number one and two. Why give their pursuers an extra chance to catch up?

Jen watches her partner snooping around the parking lot, looking for a spot where the Humvee might fit. "Healthy fast food?" she grumps. "I doubt it."

"Grub will be good," says Jo, as she backs into an empty corner. Too big for a normal slot, the Humvee sits diagonally and encroaches on spaces left & right, but it doesn't poke out and hinder traffic.

"Good for what?" Jen retorts. "I'd rather be heading to Singapore."

"Too early for the highway."

"Even Rathbone wouldn't shoot rockets at innocent roadsters."

Jo makes a face that brooks no arguments. "Out!"

The familiar logo flashes on top the artless glass box. The box looks the same as the **McJoys** in Moscow, London or Mexico City. She's in no rush to see the interior, an eyesore of plastic dishware and disposable utensils for work-a-day urbanites, plus foolproof fixtures for jobless orangutans.

Halfway through the door, Jen makes a face at her erstwhile driver who's holding back info. "Miz Hell on Wheels, if we end up eating **sclup...**"

"We won't. I promise." Jo flashes a wicked grin. "And hey! Don't trash my driving, or I'll dump you in the gutter."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jo makes a face. "The food's s'pozed to be a surprise, but since you're so damn skeptical..."

"Just being realistic."

"Whatever. My friend upstairs contacted his cousin who franchises this McJoys. Njoek-Fa is a die-hard fan of your aerobatic exploits."

"Imperial Circus was ages ago. I'm surprised anyone remembers."

"Njoek-Fa does. And he'll serve us buckwheat noodles with veggie-wonton soup."

"Buckwheat? Holy fuxgate!" Jen shows bewilderment. "He ain't s'pozed to know I'm alive."

"It's OK. He knows Cook from way-back."

"Sounds fishy. But I won't begrudge a banquet." She pauses. "Hold on while I use the Ladies."

"Go ahead. I'll tell the kitchen we're here."

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Jo hasn't come out of the kitchen, so Jen chooses a table and sits in the stiff-backed chair. The air-conditioned breeze is pleasant, even if the overhead lights bedazzle like tropical sunlight.

McJoys is the ultimate pig out, featuring a motley array of square tables, the sides flanked by molded-plastic chairs. The tabletops would be cramped if they held full meals of four dinners.

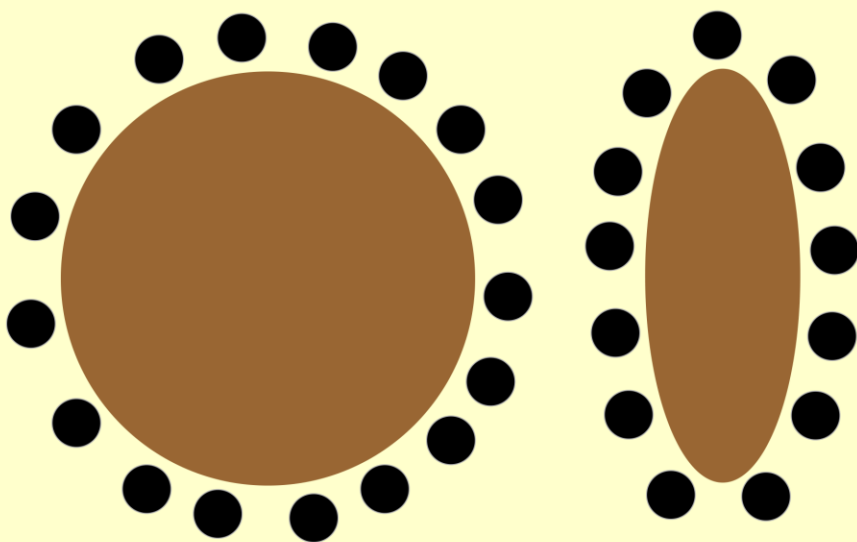
- _Not a problem since most
- _tables have but one diner.
- _None has more than two.

A teenager is making food selections and then slotting his smartcard to juice the transaction. Less than five seconds pass before his dinner appears on the conveyor belt.

McJoys is automated, same as **DB's** cafeteria, but that's where the similarity ends. DB has larger tables that host a dozen or more gab-happy diners.

The ambiance is relaxed and friendly. Rundogs dine at circular tables, letting acolytes join in and ask questions. The answers flow both ways, and Jen has gained wonderful insights while plumping her stomach.

DB's Cafeteria Tables



She frowns as Jo comes out of the kitchen, lugging a large tray loaded with six plastic bowls and two glasses.

- _The dishware looks tacky.
- _Why cart half a-dozen bowls?

Jo guffaws. "Don't know about you, but I could eat a-whole alligator purse."

_How'd my stomach

_get so empty?

"Make mine rattlesnakes soaked."

"Soaked in what?"

"Horseradish."

"Suit yourself," says Jo, twitching her lips. She places the tray on the table and sits. In a quiet voice, she confides, "Sorry about the plastic bowls, but other diners would wonder if we used ceramic. No sense inviting gossip that may get back to police detectives or Rathbone's roosters."

Jen glances at the other clientele. No other diners are closer than three tables away, and none seems interested in the weird gabble of two women. She thumbs her head at the attendant who's standing in the corner. "*He* why we're talking overheard nonsense?"

"He's McJoys busboy and for-show bouncer."

"For show alright," whispers Jen. The middle-aged bouncer has the pear-shaped physique of a devoted couch potato. "He'd have trouble fending off a horsefly."

"Bouncer and clientele don't worry me," Jo whispers back. "It's the audiovisual pickups. We can't leave Njoek-Fa holding the bag."

Jen finagles a noodle around her chopsticks and feeds her mouth. "Mmm, this is good! Gimmie another truckload."

_Midget size is deceptive. My appetite

_craves more food per-kilo of body

_weight than titans like Griz or Shepp.

"Just be glad I brought three bowls apiece," says the redhead as loud as a mountain yodeler. She lifts one end of the tray and pulls out an old-fashioned poster. It shows a picture of Jen in her circus costume.

_Me posing like a bubblegum diva.

_Must've been taken two decades ago

_for the Kuala Lumpur tour stop.

Jo whispers, "Njoek-Fa requests your autograph." Handing over a

ballpoint pen.

"How's *his* name spelled?"

"Beats me." Shrugging. "Do your worst."

"Yeh. Right." Jen roofs her brows. "Sure you can handle three bowls?"

"I emptied my purse to get this hide. If I don't fuel-up I'm liable to drive through walls."

"Forget I asked," she mutters, dipping chopsticks and corralling another wonton which tastes better than advertised.

_Spicy brownrice and pasta,

_a mountain climber's banquet.

Meanwhile she scribbles her name and replaces the poster under the tray.

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"How'd my protégé ever team up with Shepp?" asks Jo.

"Your protégé..." Swallowing a mouthful. "You mean Nyssa?"

"Of course, *Nyssa*. Who got her going when no one else could?"

"Only 'cuz Nyssa thrives on your scare-'em-outta-their-wits school of teaching."

"Ha, ha, ha, " **JoAnna** chortles. "Tell me yours ain't terrified when they dangle from a 90° rock face."

"*Touché*."

"Shepp and Nyssa make unlikely partners."

"He's good for her. Uses a kind of reverse psychology. Nyssa oughta earn her blackbelt before summer."

"Good for her! Must've glued Shepp to her futon."

"No. She found another."

"Holy fuxgate! Don't tell me she got Cook outta his funk."

"No." Jen swallows a mouthful of noodles. "Outside of DB... She fell for the rooster."

"The security chief?" Jo halts loaded chopsticks in midair. "The guy she tricked into loading the **holovid** worm?"

Jen nods and shrugs.

"How'll they ever get together?"

"Cook made sure Nyssa darted the rooster, so she'll hafta face him in a duel. He'll be miffed, but he's **def** gone and besotted..."

Jo slaps her palm on the table. "Cook playing cupid?"

"In lieu of Nyssa's crush, he jumped on the rooster as the perfect stand-in."

"No doubt the rooster has useful skills for DB."

"Yeh. He tinkers with surveillance gadgets." Jen tilts her bowl, guzzles broth then eyes her partner. "Gonna finish your last bowl?"

"Keep your hands in your pockets. I take my time on account of my 'Southern' breeding. I ain't no Yakut peasant, like you."

Jen gives her head a mental shake. Jo's "Southern" breeding consists of driving a taxi through the mean streets of Miami. "Tell me about your gig upstairs?"

Jo takes a deep breath and lets out a long sigh. "Did'ja know the soupers were testing the **3-kilomrun** at 85% gravity? And the **ellipsoid chamber** at Martian gravity?"

Smothering a response, she goes on, "Oh yeh. They're s'pozed to be prepared for low-grav situations, but it ain't right to test physical fitness in low-ball gravity. I moved the track and chamber to the rim. And I threatened to demote belt colors if they couldn't hack full-earth Gee. Plus, I led the training sessions, refereed the circle matches and got 'em fighting like tigers.

"They shaped up none too soon. A saboteur had to be taken care of. He would've caused major damage to Tesla-2. Timekeeper helped me track down his accomplices, and I uncovered a few skeletons in the closets, which opened a putrid can of worms... I hate dealing with sapsucker politicos. Upstairs has had it too easy for too long."

"SOAR has done away with politicians."

"True. We appoint observers to keep an eye on the bureaucrats. But there's no stopping the busybodies who slant popular opinion and start urban legends. They've pegged me a holy terror 'cuz I accused a few slipshod officials."

"You get tunnel vision at times, Jo."

"Tunnel my ass," she growls. "I had plenty evidence to back me up.

Trouble is soupers have lost interest in the earth's problems. They've become insulated from transnat threats. They take security for granted, counting themselves safe without paying the costs."

"I hear you. Now tell me about your recreational pursuits."

Jo raises her brows and grins like a fiend. "I've grown too old to troll for cougar delights. So I hooked up with a research physicist who's on the cutting edge. I got him believing the secret to zero-point energy lies between my legs. How about you?"

Once again, Jen feels outdone and inadequate.

_Nothing I've done in the past
_year can match such bravado
_and flamboyance. My life is
_stuck in the rut of routine.
_How do I compete with a gal
_whose sweet spot holds the
_secret of zero-point energy?

"Come on, Pix. Don't be shy."

"Just the same old..."

Jo bursts into laughter. "As if Griz and Shepp aren't fighting like mad dogs to share your futon."

"They're competing across the chessboard ever since I told them I'd bed the one with the worst injuries."

"Gals in the co-op wet their panties just thinking of your beauhunks."

"I don't hold 'em on a leash."

"No need. Once they've dipped in your horseradish, they're hooked."

"Solar plexus! Forget about Shepp and Griz. Did'ja know this raid is on DB's nickel?"

"I see. Worried about extra costs?"

"Well..."

"I knew it! You should've refused when Cook asked you to keep DB's books. How're you gonna enjoy R&R when you hafta dicker with ledgers? Bookkeeping's a thankless job, a total energy drain on top of your mountain climber's class and tutoring us wannabe acrobats."

"It's not that bad. Our finances are in good shape unless a surprise

expense is lurking around the corner."

"Hogwash! You can't sit still for a quick feed without fretting over your spreadsheets."

Jen rolls her eyes. "Does your physicist really buy the claims of unlimited energy?"

"Def sure! He's convinced I'm the mother of all energizer bunnies. He's gotta rut around long enough to get a full charge going. Then we try new positional hookups to unblock geothermal channels and ride the geysers."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Not at all," say Jo. But her eyes and mind are elsewhere. She lays chopsticks across the soup bowl. "I don't like the look of the SUV that just arrived. Hold the fort, Pix. I gotta visit the Ladies before those guys come in and order dinner."

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A dark cloud has gobbled the sun, and the interior of McJoys shines like a beacon. Jen peers longingly at her partner's half-empty bowl with its slew of noodles and at least one juicy wonton.

_Would she notice if I

_took some noodles?

_Would she mind?

_She's gone to the can

_to give us a quick exit.

_If we hafta run we'd

_leave the soup behind.

She reaches out and slides the uneaten soup bowl within easy reach.

_I won't let delicious

_food go to waste.

In the window's reflection, Jen watches a man getting out the SUV. He stretches limbs before approaching the restaurant. He's big-boned and muscle bound. A made-to-order thug.

She works the chopsticks and brings a squiggle of noodles to her mouth. She chews the noodles then forks the last wonton to her mouth. In her peripheral vision she watches him saunter through the doorway.

She hears his footfalls as she tilts the soup bowl to drink the residue broth.

_The hulk ain't looking for dinner

_unless he wants me to feed him.

From the window reflection she spots his partner getting out of the SUV where he leans on the front fender as if to watch.

Jen sets the bowl on the table and finds the hulk standing across the table. Tall as Griz and as big around, he's more than twice her weight. He sports a grin that shows more menace than good will.

"Mind if I join you?" he asks.

"Three's a crowd. My partner should be back shortly."

"I won't be long," he says as he sits. "Hafta ask some questions is all." Seeing daggers in her eyes, he feigns an apologetic tone. "I won't touch your, ah, dinners."

Jen takes two slow breaths before she speaks. "You've hijacked my partner's chair."

He points outside, oblivious to her hint. "That your Hummer there in the corner?" He continues before she can answer and correct *Hummer* to *Humvee*. "A fine vehicle. Tell me where you're off to next, and I'm outta here."

"Best you leave before my partner gets back," she warns.

He appears amused, but his eyes are stone cold. "I ain't leaving till you answer my questions."

"Suit yourself," says Jen as she rises up, walks away and squats in an empty chair three tables distant.

He throws his arms overhead in dramatic fashion. In the window reflection she watches his partner heading toward McJoys.

_Ah ha! The arms-up routine is

_a prearranged signal for backup.

His partner is taller and leaner, which puts his crotch on level with her belly button. She'd rather avoid a confrontation. But that option dies on the drawing board when the beefy dude follows her to the makeshift table and sits down face to face.

The backup has found a spot behind about three tables away. He's

likely packing and ready to act in case she draws a weapon. The thug across the table doesn't bother to hide his annoyance. "OK, Bitch," he snarls. "After I count to three, spit it out."

_That settles it.

_I'm dealing with two roosters.

"What was the question again?"

His face threatens to overheat. "I asked... Where're you going after lunch?"

"Thank you," says Jen as she gets up. "Gimmie a raincheck."

He grabs her forearm.

Wearing sure-grip footwear, Jen knows how to maximize her 44-kilo frame. She plants both feet, leans back and brings her weight to bear.

The rooster rises up and takes an involuntary step forward, knocking the corner of the table awry. She keeps pulling till he takes another step. He shifts his hips and swings his free hand wildly, hoping to grab on and take charge.

Jen switches tactics. She halts in her tracks and lets momentum reel him in. Then she unleashes a quick jab to his solar plexus.

The jab has been practiced thousands of times in bouts of martial-arts. It's her stock response when beefy foes like Griz get inside her guard.

The effect of any punch is determined by two factors. First, you gauge the amount of muscular momentum that is brought to bear. Second, you gauge the area of contact where fist meets flesh. Jen doesn't have the punching power of a steroid-enhanced male, but the knuckle surface of her fist covers less area than big men, so it strikes with champion-grade impact.

The solar plexus is a muscular slab that protects vital organs. She has never seen a slab thicker and tougher than Griz's, but the rooster comes close.

When she fisticuffs Griz, it drives air from his lungs and staunches the flow of his arteries. He gets stymied for a sec, enough to give her an easy escape. She expects a similar result from the rooster, but she's stunned when her fist digs deep, like a hammer crunching a pumpkin.

Steroid-induced muscle doesn't firm up as well as muscle grown from rigorous exercise. More important, rundogs draw on superluminal channels which have been activated while mastering **qat**. The channels trigger muscles faster than signals from the nervous system. Her foe doesn't have the luxury of superluminal reflexes.

_Never intended to hack a major artery.

_I hope he hasn't suffered a lethal break.

Yet there's no time for regrets. The backup rooster is closing fast on her backside. Having gauged the relative height of his family jewels and hearing his footfalls, she aims a backward kick, not so much blind as lacking eye contact. It connects bigtime.

His posture withers and crumples forward while she pivots on her stay-at-home foot. Two hands grip the back of his head, and she drives his face onto her raised knee. She hears cartilage crunch and sees nasal blood spurting. He's down for the ten-count.

Mere seconds have passed since the 1st-rooster grabbed her arm.

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She kneels and tends to the beefy rooster. He's breathing, and his pulse seems normal, but he's still in dreamland. He doesn't show obvious signs of internal bleeding, but she's no medical expert.

Her erstwhile driver comes out of the ladies. "Leave you alone for a minute, and look what you've done!"

"Longer than a minute. You must've dropped a two-flusher."

"Don't go there, Pix," says her partner in the silky voice of a Southern Belle. "*A lady* doesn't recount her bowel movements."

"Humph."

Jo shrugs. "Njoek-Fa won't like the loss of paying customers."

"They weren't here for the grub."

"No. I guess not." She draws out a minicrossbow from her trouser pocket and arms it with a **dart**. "Best I make sure these hens stay comatose."

"You must regret stopping for lunch, right?"

"No," says the redhead, while rubbing her tummy and then darting the beefy rooster. "We're not prime suspects... just persons of interest."

The hens found us 'cuz they spotted the Humvee which stands out like a sore thumb. Dealers haven't sold new Hummers for 25 years. Even harder to score mothballed Humvees at military auctions. Less than half a-dozen here in town, I reckon."

"No matter, Jo. We're in the bull's-eye now. 'Well-fed and dead' ain't my favorite endgame."

"Don't fret, Pix." She fires a dart in the butt of the bloody-nosed rooster. "Rathbone's gonna stay in the dark till salvagers clear the rubble."

"So you say."

"We can still vamoose, but it'll be up to you."

"I'm all ears, Jo."

"Take the signed poster to Njoek-Fa. Then ask to borrow a couple of used sheets or packaging wrap, enough to cover the hens. I'll stay here and downplay your fisticuffs for the bouncer and clientele. Need to keep our mug shots from going viral across Indochina."

1. Phantom

Three Hours Earlier

Kuala Lumpur: 12 May 2076, 1:55 p.m.

Tuesday, 12 May 2076, 05:55 UTC

Leonid Turku eyes the flatview where every node is glowing green. The beacons signify updates from 102 sensor clusters and tactical feeds from 78 roosters that are stationed in or around Petronas tower 2. His mind churns...

- _No leaks, no loiterers,
- _no apparent threats.
- _So far, everything checks.
- _Yet my thumb itches. Why?

Leonid has two more checks to make before his postponed breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, sirloin shish kebobs, hash browns with spicy tomato paste, buttered toast and a large **UltimaPop** to wash it all down.

- _Hold fast, greedy-guts.
- _Business before pleasure.

His job is safeguarding the VIPs and ensuring there are no leaks. The public must not suspect the CEOs of the largest **transnats** are gathered here for cartel business. The building is owned by his employer, so he has the authority to expel quebies and onlookers from the upper eight floors, and he has done so as a precaution. What's left are the VIPs, in-house attendants and his roosters whom he trusts without question.

The meeting has already begun and will continue through the afternoon. The CEOs are gathered on the 81st-floor where height alone deters steeple climbers. To thwart missiles or aerial drones, steel armor has been added to reinforce windows of the summit room. Vidcams and networked sensors monitor the stairways and elevators. **Roosters** will turn back or detain the party crashers long before they reach the upper floors.

Leonid mulls over the feed from the wide-angle cam atop Petronas

tower 1, which takes in 70 hectares of the KLCC complex. Alongside its twin tower, the cam records the concert hall, adjacent office tower, conference center, hotel, hypermall and parking space for 6,600 vehicles bordering a park with flowers, shrubs, tree-lined walks and scenic lagoon. Hundreds of shoppers and tourists stroll across the complex. Any visitor could be a media snooper or saboteur.

To minimize public exposure, he has added a diversion to move the VIPs on-site with utmost discretion. VIP entourages debarked from private jets at a seldom-used annex building. Each group split in two separate parties and shuttled to KLCC. The tag-along folks showboated in luxurious limos to the conference center, whereas the CEOs and key aides rode older mud-splattered limos to the underground freight docks of Petronas tower 2.

Everything has gone down as planned, but he can't afford to relax. Paparazzi are no doubt snooping among the tourists and shoppers, their senses on alert for any detail that would give the summit away. As well, assassins could be plotting mischief. It takes mere seconds to foul a ventilation system with anthrax, sarin or black-lab bacteriophages.

His rosters have checked and rechecked for biological, chemical and radiological residues, but diligent inspections cannot guarantee safety 100% of the time. The summit's defenses are no better than those of the Maginot Line, Hadrian's Fence, Iron Curtain or Great Wall of China, all of which were overrun, despite the best efforts of their builders.

_Shit happens... But I won't let

_the stronghold fall on my watch.

Leonid opens a voice link to the ground crew. "Rashid?"

"Yo, Leo."

"How's the sweep going?"

"We've covered every square meter. Nothing here but creepy bugs and bird brains."

"Good work. Keep a lookout for phony tourists."

"Got the walkways covered, Leo."

"Puts my mind at ease, Rashid." He closes the link.

Five quartets of surveillance drones have been deployed since dawn.

They're circling Petronas 2 and other points of interest around **KLCC**.

Leonid's stomach growls as he calls on the drone maestro. "Viktor?"

"On the ball, Leo."

"Good to hear. Any of our drones squawking?"

"Not a one."

Leonid would've launched the birds earlier, but there were delays in obtaining permits. Kuala Lumpur's privacy laws are a bloody nuisance to say the least. Private security outfits need special permits to fly aerodrones at altitudes less than 400 meters from human habitats. Since the Petronas twins stand 450 meters above ground, the drones minus permits would have to fly at 850 meters, rendering them next to useless.

The bylaw for surveillance drones must've been enacted in the wake of the beauty pageant scandal. Miss Malaysia of 2074 had to step down in disgrace after nude photos were posted online and then "discovered" by a data miner at Webvine News.

Contest organizers had advised beauty contestants to remove pale-skin lines for eyes-on swimsuits. Ms. Hloh complied by working on a full-body tan. She never noticed the drone patrolling the mansion next-door whose teleoperator pointed his "eyes" over the walled compound. He got snapshots of Ms. Hloh rubbing sunblock on her privy glands.

The exposé crushed Ms. Hloh. It got her wealthy father angry as a pit bull. He was devoted to his daughter. He never let her leave home without chaperones and bodyguards. He swore the photos had been faked, and his legal hounds forced the offensive webpage offline.

The ensuing lawsuit against Webvine News failed after the court ruled the photos were genuine. Not to be outdone, Mr. Hloh hired private investigators who tracked the photos to a security drone. His lawyers pounced on the outfit, but the culprits had already decamped and left town.

At this point Mr. Hloh blew his fuses, smoke sizzling from his ears. He sent complaints to City Council, half of whom owed him their campaign funds. Shortly after, Kuala Lumpur passed a new bylaw governing aerial drones.

The sleazebag teleoperator has ruined the scene for every other security outfit. If the fool ever tried a stunt like that under Leonid's command, he'd spend the next six years tracking reindeer in Siberia.

The fool could've shared the photos with his buds, and Leonid would've turned a blind eye. The boys must be boys after all. But the fool stepped out of line when he sold the pics through a 3rd-party blind to Webvine News. The news execs weren't much better. They must've smelled rotten jellyfish, but they knew a juicy scandal would up their viewer ratings, which skyrocketed for two weeks. Miz Hloh paid the price, her virtue flushed down the toilet.

The same bylaw that has delayed his drones restricts media drones and paparazzi from snooping the area. If they try the illegal route, he has the cybertools to zombie the intruders and send them crashing to the bottom of the duck pond.

Drones fly regular patterns in semiautonomous mode, so capable teleoperators can fly half a-dozen birds. Highres cams will spot any suspicious actions in the visible spectrum. Leonid has disabled infrared mode since the targeted surfaces absorb solar heat at different rates. Humanlike signatures would be lost amid a jumble of scorched surfaces.

"Viktor, I'm grabbing breakfast and handing the comm to you."

"OK. Got it."

"Ring me, anything comes up."

"Natch."

Leonid strolls to the kitchenette. His thumb is twitching.

_Something ain't right.

_But what?

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Jen Marov sits at the pinnacle of a world-class skyscraper. She's perched under the lightening rod, broadcast mast and ornamental sphere, on the top ledge of the ziggurat. She would be roasting from tropical sunlight if not for the cover of the lean-to, which absorbs sunrays and projects holographic camouflage that renders her invisible. A mild breeze through the lean-to carries only hints of the heat waves that rise off cement walkways and asphalt roadways 400 meters below.

Jen hunkers in classic lotus-style and hums a favorite melody from the Nutcracker Suite. It's the kind of cheerful tune that springs to mind and goes hand-in-hand with busy. In this case, assembling part of an aerofoil for her paraglider getaway.

Short and petite, she has worn too many "teener" outfits from clothiers who market her size for adolescent tastes.

_A pain in the neck when I wanted

_cool duds for semiformal sprees.

Nowadays she needn't worry. Dog Breakfast co-op makes clothes that cater to her elfin size, and her current cat-burglar getup fits like a surgical glove.

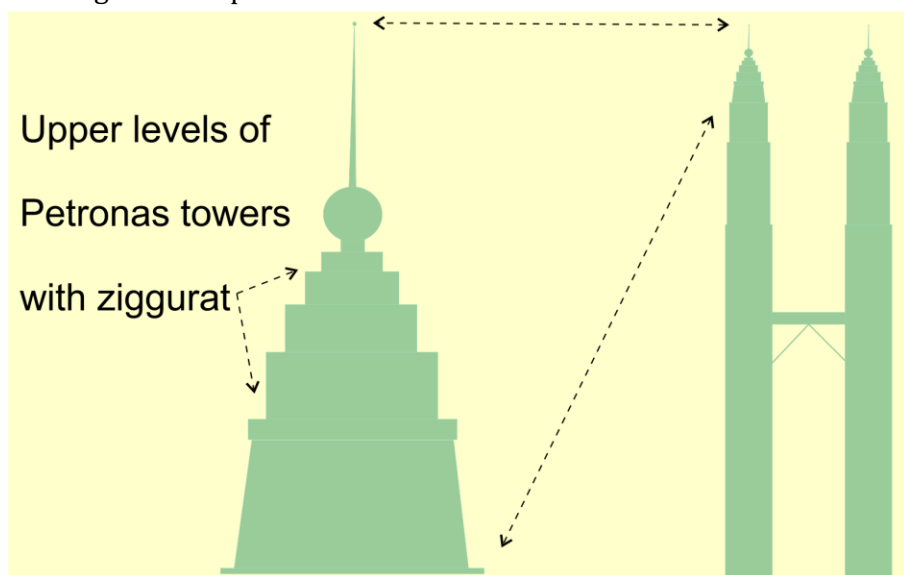
_It's well-made and functional.

_Even looks kind of fashionable.

_Although I hope to stay

_under the radar for this raid.

Her do-it-yourself skills have been less than stellar till enough pieces are joined and the framework starts to look as it should. The second half ought to be a piece of cake.



It's just busy work after all, not too demanding either physically or mentally. Perfect therapy after her marathon climb of the night before, which has left her with sore muscles, stiff joints and bone-deep pleasure

for having made the ascent in time to catch the bundles. Without those tools the mission would be a bust.

- _Last night I climbed all the way
- _without being seen by anyone.
- _Vertigo hasn't stopped me yet.
- _Few will ever match my pace.

Jen commands the highest perch in Kuala Lumpur, having slept atop Petronas tower 2 through the daylight hours. Her presence remains unknown to dozens of armed guards who are patrolling the tower and surrounding venues.

Her pixelike face sports up-slanted eyes and high-rounded cheeks, small classic nose, sensual lips and cute-puggish chin. Years of outdoor ventures have etched modest crow's feet and laugh lines. They add a rugged outdoorsy cast to her petite frame. Her uncanny sense of balance is legendary. She has made solo climbs to some of the tallest Andean summits which have toughened body and mind. Before her sojourn in **SOAM**, she earned top billing as an aerial acrobat with the Imperial Circus.

- _I've made solo ascents that
- _may never be duplicated.
- _Which ain't bad considering
- _I've been plagued with vertigo
- _since I first climbed trees.
- _Dizzy spells won't stop me.
- _I look my nemesis in the eye,
- _push nuisance doubts aside
- _and fall back on my skills.

Jen may be fearless, but she's not foolhardy. She does acrobatics till hand blisters and physical fatigue are stretched to the limits. She does martial arts with same dogged resolve.

- _I judge my climbing feats
- _harsher than anyone else.
- _Ditto for acrobatics and self-defense.
- _Lackluster performances and

_2nd-best aren't on my agenda.

She cares for compadres in Dog Breakfast co-op, and she's loyal to a fault, which is one reason why she's perched atop this venerable skyscraper, ready to wreak havoc on a crop of haughty CEOs. The other reason is she loves doing stuff other consider impossible.

Her family and childhood friends believe she was killed in a Chilean highway accident. It grates her sometimes that she's forbidden to tell them otherwise. Her pact with Dog Breakfast co-op doesn't allow contact with outsiders. Even so, she has kept track of the old gang. Most of her friends are working at humdrum jobs. Her parents are looking forward to retirement. Her younger brother hasn't lost his soul to the Russian Mafia. In fact, he's settled down, become IT manager for a large Russian oil company and married a local gal.

As she starts on the other half-wing, a missing tooth appears in her careless smile, for she hasn't bothered to wear the prosthetic surrogate. She's here to make a statement, not to win a beauty pageant.

Last week DB called in a favor owed by a clerk in the city's license bureau. He delayed the permits till this morning, so the aerodrones were grounded for her nighttime ascent.

The lean-to projects a holographic cover that defeats surveillance probes. Aerodrones aren't smart enough to pick out minor flaws in the holoproj. They'll keep circling the tower, clueless as blind mice. Their minders have to monitor several screens. Small quirks in parallax will go unheeded since the camera angles are changing constantly.

Once the prep is done, she'll climb down to the summit room and blow the CEOs all to hell. She has nothing against them personally. They're true to the codes of business and devoted to friends and family, but she doesn't trust bigwigs who shut down aging plants and abandon employees when they could as easily negotiate and accommodate. It's quicker, cheaper and more rewarding to close underperforming plants and open state-of-art robotic assemblers in regions with lower taxes and fewer regs. Investors cheer the closures that put loyal employees out of work and bereft of dignity. The jobless vacuums give way to family squabbles and gruesome murder-suicides.

Her mission may be as unlawful as sin, but her actions are morally right. The CEOs run conglomerates that escape public scrutiny because they're too big to fail. For decades the biz oligarchs have exploited cheap labor in poor regions to gratify well-to-do consumers. Money spent on automation ensures worker loyalty, fewer available jobs and lower wages. Economies of scale give them leverage to dominate the marketplace. In short they've tilted the game board for their own selfish aims.

Jen has no qualms about using her bomb. The chaos ought to embarrass W. A. Rathbone who's attending in teleconference mode. His roosters are charged with safeguarding the summit. He won't bear physical injuries of those present, so his peers will ask questions and lay blame. Dissension in the cartel is good for the co-op, good for TCP and good the orbital habitats.

Once the prep is done, she'll activate a personal holoshield then climb down several stories to the summit room.

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UAV-R93V2 has an apple-pie shape and diameter of one-half meter. It's unarmed and dedicated for recon and surveillance. It navigates around targets of interest and follows aerodynamic rules when responding to teleoperator commands. In automatic mode it flies search patterns until it runs low on fuel and returns to base for refueling. It can hover in place or make vertical takeoffs and touchdowns. Right now its job is to spot anomalies or suspicious actions on or around the upper stories of Petronas tower 2.

During its previous incarnation UAV-R93V2 patrolled sections of Níngjìng pipeline in northern Malaysia, for which it used a broad range of sensors to detect metal fatigue and slow leaks. Once the pipeline had been upgraded with embedded microsensors, UAV-R93V2 was no longer needed, so it was sold to Red Falcons whose techs overhauled the drone to respond in realtime to teleoperator commands.

The techs added an interactive mode without dumb-downing its aeronautical skills or sensor smarts, so the drone can countermand maneuvers if the teleoperator's requests are too dangerous or

impossible to perform. When UAV-R93V2 is asked to hover near something of interest, it will adjust its flightpath to avoid buttresses, power lines or flagpoles.

Today there are 20 drones in the air while four are refueling and preparing to relieve the quartet aloft the longest. Teleoperators have set out priorities. They want vigilance in the visible spectrum, while downplaying the infrared or ultraviolet spectrums.

UAV-R93V2 has better sensors and sharper analytic skills than its fellow drones. For this reason it has been assigned the upper stories of Petronas tower 2. Its task is to alert control if it sees any exterior movements and to pay special attention to the 81st-floor. So far, nothing suspicious has occurred.

Below the ornamental sphere at the top of the ziggurat, UAV-R93V2 has detected minor anomalies which point to hairline fractures in the structural façade. The mission schema gives low priority to structural faults, so the drone has raised no alerts. It just records the anomaly in its mission queue, while continuing its flight pattern which covers the outside façade of the tower from the 80th-floor to the broadcast spire.

Its visible-range vidcams scan for anomalies that could be threats or intruders.

Prologue.

Jenna (Jen) Marov: rundog. Born 2037 in Yakutsk, Russia. Adult height: 150 centimeters; weight: 44 kilograms. Climbs the Eiffel Tower in 2052. Joins Imperial Circus in 2052. Earns top billing as aerial acrobat 2053. Quits Imperial Circus in 2059. Climbs the Andes until falsely arrested for theft in 2061. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2061

McJoys® is a franchised fast-food chain. It has been accused of serving more sclup than normal food, although it has never been convicted in court.

sclup is a protein supplement that is brewed from desalinated glasswort and saltbush, plus ethanol derivatives, methanogenic bacteria, artificial flavors and fortifying additives. Sclup yields more protein than hybrid soybeans.

DB (acronym) Dog Breakfast is a covert SOAR co-op that works in conjunction with POE to ensure fair play. Its members include (from youngest to oldest):

Nyssa (Fu/Sis) Persson, brownbelt soon to be rundog;
Jenna (Jen/Pix) Marov, rundog, acrobat, climber;
Meghan (Meg) Getzler, orange belt, dataroom stalwart;
Subira (Subie) Herren, orange belt, dataroom super;
Fingar (Fing) white belt, lead hacker;
Shepp, rundog, expert swordsman;
Griswold (Griz) rundog, strength specialist;
JoAnna (Jo) rundog, ex-taxi driver;
Makoto (Mack) rundog, master of martial arts;
Nailah (Nigh) former rundog, Timekeeper;
Absen (Abb) Ho, rundog, Cook's partner, deceased;
Ahab (Cook) Ho, rundog, founder, top dog.

JoAnna (Jo): rundog. Born 2035. Born in 2046. Adult height: 178 centimeters; weight: 69 kilograms. Red-haired and feisty, she drives

taxi in Miami 2054-6. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2057.

holovid is a cinematic presentation in holographic format. It renders a 3D visual experience with authentic audio, which includes VR touch and smell for high-end user devices.

def (short-form slang) definite, definitely.

3-kilomrun tests endurance and stamina. To qualify for rundog, acolytes must run three kiloms in seven minutes flat.

ellipsoid chamber is the inside of an ellipsoid where acolytes practice dodging laser beams that simulate enemy shooters. To qualify for rundog, acolytes must dodge at least 50 of 100 kill shots. Acolytes have nicknamed it the "torture" chamber.

qat (SOAR acronym) Quantum Assassination Theory. Qat training gives acolytes physical excellence and sharpened senses. The sessions involve intensive practice and psignologic meditation.

dart(s) are used by rundogs to disable foes. On contact the dart acts as a hypodermic needle. Pressure on the "ball" forces the potion through the needle. The superalloy needle is capable of piercing light-weight body armor.



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Chapter 1. **Phantom.**

UltimaPop® is a popular soft drink that carries a wallop. It contains huge amounts of refined sugar and caffeine, plus carbonated water and a trace of smoked lime.

transnat is the short-form for transnational corporation. By mid-21st-century, multinationals merged to form huge transnational conglomerates. CEOs for major transnats include:

Trevor Wynestoop, CEO of Wexol Inc.;
Torero Grabb, CEO of Shrinkwrap Inc.;
Okuno Ayumi, CEO of SonyKong Ltd.;
Martin Gagnon, CEO of Goranda ADR;
Ralph Heck, CEO of Beuack AG;
W. A. Rathbone, CEO of Zesticon Plc.;
Zhijian Choong, CEO of Yuhan Ltd.

rooster (nickname) home guard or enforcer. Armed roosters are trained to safeguard compounds from intruders.

KLCC (acronym) Kuala Lumpur City Center. KLCC signifies the Petronas Towers complex, in particular the hypermall at the base of towers.

SOAM (acronym) SOutH AMerican trading alliance. SOAM represents the free-trade zone and common currency of South America including Cuba, Nicaragua and Panama, but excluding Columbia.

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