

Excerpt from Cool Assassins 3

Loose Threads: Cool Assassins 1.

Spin off: Cool Assassins 1 & 2.

1. Hacker Foray

Los Angeles: 4 Jul 2076, 5:30 a.m.

Marija pokes her nose around the corner. Her eyes grow large, and her mind goes numb. Across the floor are two-dozen young women trussed and gagged. She connects the dots.

_A human-trafficking op
_of soon-to-be hookers
_being shipped elsewhere.
_From the blonde hair that
_graces many of the prisoners,
_I'm guessing they're headed
_for Asia where johns get
_hot over golden locks.

A chill travels down her spine as Marija realizes she has stepped off the deep end, way beyond mission parameters. Her main job has been to put traffic monitors on the out-traffic **fibes** from this comm vortex.

_The bugs are planted.
_I **hafta** get outta here
_before I'm spotted.

She rotates her head so that the **CCD** at the crown of her baseball cap records the whole array of women. The video is being transmitted to a "radio" antenna above the rear wheel of her motorcycle. **Dog Breakfast** co-op ought to jump on the news since this comm vortex is a subsidiary of either SonyKong or Yuhan, both of which are members of the hated **transnat** cartel.

She takes one last pan, ducks behind the corner and jogs toward the exit. Eyes and ears work overtime to detect guards or employees, any

possible eavesdroppers. It's fortunate that today is a national holiday, which means the usual techs and caretakers have left the servers to relay data unattended. Also why traffickers are using the building as a temporary drop. More crucial, she's double lucky the traffickers haven't made her. They're sure to be armed, and she isn't wearing body armor.

Marija breathes a sigh of relief as she steps outside the building. Walking casually and confidently, she sends **Kavita** a message to cease control of the building's surveillance cams. But there's still four blocks to go before she reaches the motorcycle, and Marija keeps her senses alive for pursuers. Whenever possible she uses reflections in show windows to spot tails among the pedestrians.

At this early hour two dog walkers are par for the course. They're yakking on vidphones and minding their leashes, while neither passes close to her motorcycle. So far, so good.

Marija stops aside the bike, retrieves helmet & gloves and takes her sweet time putting them on. Enough time to sneak glances for someone out of place. A person sits behind the wheel of a parked Viper across the street, half-way down the block. The magnifier patch on her visor pegs the driver for a male. He appears intent at gazing everywhere but face-on.

_A suspicious giveaway,
_but I doubt he's connected
_to the **HyperNet** vortex.

Her infrared sensor indicates the car's hood is no hotter than others in the early morning sun, which means he's been parked for half an-hour or more. She points the magnifier patch on the front bumper and memorizes his license plate. Kavita, her mission compadre, might glean more info from the Viper's ID. Leastwise, Marija won't mistake it for another of the same make & model.

_Maybe I was noticed
_during last week's raid.
_Oughta get me a better
_disguise for sowing bugs.

_For now I **gotta** lose
_this creep before I get
_anywhere near Kavita.

She mounts the bike, kickstarts the engine and moves sedately down the street, checking rearview mirrors from time to time. Before she has motored three blocks, the Viper pulls out and follows in her wake.

Marija turns left at the next cross street, ups the engine then swerves right into the alley. She tops 70 kph before braking and swinging left onto the street. Then she makes right turns at the next two intersections, so that she's traveling in the opposite direction two blocks over from where she made the first left turn.

After Marija has gone four blocks along her new heading, the Viper appears three blocks in the rear.

_Solar plexus! How'd he stick
_to my tail? Gotta be a GPS
_beacon fixed somewhere.
_It means I gotta stretch
_my lead to **gimmie** enough
_time to find & toss the bug.

Her mind spins as she ups the road speed.

_Could be more trackers,
_so I've no time to waste.
_Half a-dozen cars boxing
_a known point leaves
_no avenues of escape.
_Lucky for me, motorbikes
_go where sedans cannot.

Marija bears right on red lights, swings left on green lights and powers through junctures without semaphores. Within minutes she has upped her lead on the Viper.

Then she spots what she's looking for.

_A tower inset from the road,
_sporting a big wide courtyard.

She hangs a sharp left, hopping the curb, then speeds around shrubs and park benches until her bike gains the rear of the courtyard.

As she'd hoped the tower has been built on a slight decline so that pedestrian steps lead to the backside street. The stairway may or may not be wide enough for the Viper. Whatever the case the pursuer will ruin his muffler if not worse.

Downing stairways on a bike is like bronco riding a horse. She gets a firm grip on the handlebars and lifts butt off the seat, letting her legs and arms absorb the bumps. Past the steps and over the curb, Marija gains the street and turns right.

The next major cross street is a one-way arterial. She hangs a left as the light turns yellow. One-way streets tend to feature synchronized lights, and this one proves the rule. Marija cruises at a good clip for two-dozen blocks until her lead on the Viper has doubled.

Now there's time to hunt down the GPS beacon. She turns off the one-way and finds a back alley, where she parks ahead of a dumpster and retrieves her bug scanner. She heads first to the fenders on the passenger side. That's where most beacons are planted. Bending down, she finds the offensive bug under the front-wheel fender and tosses it atop the dumpster. To make sure, she checks under the seat and back fenders. Other nooks prove as clear and clean as fresh mountain streams.

In a flash she's back on the bike and speeding away from the beacon. She moves quickly and efficiently, never exceeding ten **kiloms** above the speed limit. During the next 15 minutes, her route resembles a rat's maze search. Anything to confuse possible pursuers.

At last she deems it safe to head for the enclave where Kavita has set up shop.

Half an-hour later Marija drives 500 meters past the rendezvous where she hides in the underbrush of the off-road forest. There she watches for 15 minutes until it's almost certain she has lost all tails.

The HyperNet is notoriously vulnerable to eavesdroppers, so the cartel uses inhouse cables to stream info among corporate headquarters and between head offices and major subsidiaries. **Yuhan**, which installs and manages fiberoptic corridors, has arranged separate bundles inside transcontinental cables for the use of transnats. The privacy is needed because the cartel can't let the general public learn about the iron grip it holds over prices and public policies.

A fibe cable happens to run beside a pipeline right of way near a **GREENS** enclave east of Los Angeles. Here's where Kavita is preparing to splice into transnat info streams. Her main tool is a variable **piezoelectric** mirror which lets 95% of the light through or reflects up to 50% of the light to an offshoot. Photon amplifiers boost the light intensity of both streams, so there's no falloff in the stream intensity after encountering the sieve.

It's crucial to insert the mirrors at times that avoid the quantum integrity signals, which alert the traffic managers to intrusions of any kind. Thus the need for Marija's traffic monitors. The quantum streams are sent at quasi-random intervals, causing momentary drops in signal volume, which can be detected with traffic monitors. Over a few weeks, Kavita analyzes the traffic patterns to find the best times to insert her mirrors.

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Marija parks her bike near the geodesic dome of the enclave and takes an earthen footpath that snakes around alders, junipers and cypresses. Their canopies filter the midmorning sunlight so that only small patches reach the forest floor. She breathes fresh air, its odors of still-moist foliage from predawn dew.

After a ten-minute hike she comes to a small dell on which lies a large tent. Two cables run from the tent to a nearby alder where they spiral around its boll to the upper branches. One of them connects to a modest satellite dish; the other spires above the treetop to stand tall enough to receive FM signals from LA proper.

Marija walks to the tent and steps inside. Her partner sits on a stool, eyes focused on columns of data in the flatview. A toothpick dances out between her lips. Marija wonders if Kavita would notice a runaway lion poking its snout through the tent flap.

“Well... How'd I do?”

Kavita gives an involuntary jump then turns unfocused eyes to the vocal sounds. Moments pass before a grin appears.

“Wonderful, Marj. Just wonderful. Gimmie another 25 minutes, and I'll have the transnat bundle isolated from the others. Then it's just a matter of recording the data streams for statistical analysis.”

She nods, expecting the like. Then she hesitates...

_Loath to pour cold

_water on the fire.

_But needs must.

“The HyperNet vortex is being used as a waystation for human traffickers. I got evidence on my cam. Two-dozen young women gagged and bound.”

“Holy **fluxgate**! Are you OK?” Brows up, eyes big as muskmelons.
“Did anyone see you?”

“Doubtful. I reckon they had one guy eyeballing the security cams. He couldn't see me, thanks to you and Fingar. And apparently the room with the young women wasn't included in the video overlay.”

Kavita looks relieved. “That's right. National holiday today, isn't it? Regardless, your bug planting has become lots more dangerous than we counted on.”

“I know. **Gonna** wear body armor next time.”

“I s'poze there's no way to track and rescue the women.”

Marija shrugs. “We know about it now. That's a start.”

“Maybe **Timekeeper** can work something from the satellite cams.”

She nods. “By the way, I picked up a tail.”

“Solar Plexus, Marj, you've **b'en** busy. Does it mean I gotta move?”

“Nah. Dead certain I lost him.”

Kavita sighs. “Thank Mo, for small favors.”

“The tail had nothing to do with the HyperNet vortex.”

“Oh?”

“He was parked across the street from my bike. Might've parked there shortly after I walked to the vortex.”

“So he recognized you from before.”

“Yup. What I figured.”

“You'll need a makeover, a better disguise.”

“I guess.”

“Here's the perfect outfit...”

Marija stiffens, wary of her compadre's impish face, twinkling eyes and hyperactive toothpick.

_My Muslim heritage approves

_of modest attire worn in DB.

_I'm less confident wearing

_the female fashions of LA,

_so I favor unisexual styles

_which happen to coincide

_with motorcycle duds.

“How about a bright-orange wig with cornrows on top and braids lapping your shoulders?”

Marija frowns.

_Such a wig would make me

_look like a walking billboard

_for soft-core porn.

“Solar plexus, Kavita! *That* wig will be featured in dozens vidcom captures. I gotta stay unremarked, remember?”

“Sure, they'll notice. For the *wrong* reasons. And besides, the wig is just the start of your makeover.”

Marija rolls her eyes.

“You'll keep the bomber jacket so long as it stays unzipped. Ditto for your blouse, unbuttoned with lots of cleavage. That's appetizers for the knee-high boots and miniskirt. And metal cleats under your boot heels, so they hear you before they see you.”

"Heels are out. I'm too tall."

Kavita shrugs. "So what?"

"Cops will peg me for a whore and arrest me for soliciting."

"Nonsense. They'll hafta line up behind the guys wanting your **vidcom** number."

"It's way different here than **TCP**. Africans are profiled and get arrested for walking down sidewalks."

"Hmm." Kavita grows thoughtful. "Oh, I know. Carry a briefcase with a wad of phony papers inside. Folks don't use hard copy unless they're schmoozing with the oligarchs. Most cops are on the take, so they **oughta** be impressed to find your papers. And they'll let you pass."

"Where'd you get these crazy ideas?"

"Fing and I watch erotic romances before we, y'know, do it. Don't laugh. Best way to keep his mind on the mons pubis."

"I'm not so daring."

"Come on, Marj?" Grinning like a fiend. "Play the part."

"Walking around like a **Novatron** cheesecake is weird, awkward."

"Go on! You got the cutest glutes in the co-op. Wait till someone peeks under your miniskirt."

"You leave me no choice. I'll ask Timekeeper about new disguises."

"You're breaking my heart, y'know."

Hacker Foray.

Marija (Marj) Combik: Born 2046. Height: 181 centimeters; weight 75 kilograms; brown eyes; black hair. Joins Dog Breakfast in 2067. Earns brownbelt in 2074. [Back](#).

fibe is the short form for fiberoptic channel. [Back](#).

hafta (verbal slang) have to. A bare infinitive verb. [Back](#).

CCD (acronym) Charge-Coupled Device. CCDs function as electronic imaging devices originally developed for astronomical telescopes. CCDs make excellent surveillance recorders which capture digital images at multiple light intensities. [Back](#).

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, novice in training;
Meghan (Meg) Getzler, orange belt, dataroom geek;
Subira (Subie) Herren, orange belt, dataroom super;
Kavita (Kav) redbelt, Fingar's understudy;
Fingar (Fing) white belt, lead hacker;
Marija (Mar) brownbelt, scout;
Shepp, rundog, expert swordsman;
Jenna (Jen/Pix) Marov, rundog, acrobat, climber;
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. [Back](#).

transnat is the short-form for transnational corporation. By mid-21st-century, multinationals have merged into conglomerates. Seven

transnats have one billion employees on affiliated payrolls. Below are major CEOs and corporations in the order of largest cash flow.

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

Kavita: red belt, Fingar's life partner and understudy. Born in 2048. Adult height: 170 centimeters; weight: 62 kilograms; hazel eyes, light-brown hair. Joins Dog Breakfast co-op 2066. [Back](#).

HyperNet is the 21st-century acceleration of the Internet. It connects via fiberoptic channels and satlinks which facilitate commercial enterprises, wired & wireless communications, audiovisual webcasts and holoflix downloads. [Back](#).

gotta (verbal slang) got to. A bare infinitive verb. [Back](#).

gimmie (verbal slang) give me. [Back](#).

kilom (short form) kilometer. Eight kilometers equal five miles approximately. [Back](#).

Yuhan Ltd. (Zhijian Choong) China HQ. Subsidiaries include: Hǎiyùn Huòwù, the world's largest merchant-marine conglomerate; Harmonic Bunion, a franchise of exclusive health resorts; Groschen, a prominent biotech multinational; Synthgrow, a pharmaceutical conglomerate; Fiberops, a transoceanic cable provider for data transfer; Yuhan Ecolog, an environmental foundation. [Back](#).

GREENS (acronym) Graphic Reports on Ecological, Environmental and Natural Sciences. GREENS is a public co-op sponsored by SOAR off-worlders. Dedicated to planetary science, the co-op gathers and disseminates useful knowledge to maximize the noösphere. [Back](#).

piezoelectric (physics term) describes materials that change

properties under an applied electric charge. [Back](#).

fluxgate (slang) spontaneous erotic fusion. 20th-century scientists linked fluxgates to luminous phases of the moon. However, this hypothesis has been largely debunked and psychologists now believe that fluxgates are caused by a lack of gravity. [Back](#).

gonna (verbal slang) going to. A bare infinitive verb. [Back](#).

Nailah Bhullar (Nigh/Timekeeper): former rundog. Born 2019.

Adult height: 178 centimeters; weight: 66 kilograms; emerald-green eyes; brown hair. Runs off with boyfriend against parents' wishes in 2037. Abandoned by boyfriend and is subsequently arrested. Meets Absen Ho in 2041. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2046. [Back](#).

b'en (vocal slang) been. [Back](#).

vidcom is a full-function smart phone giving audiovisual pod casting. [Back](#).

TCP (SOAR acronym) Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve. TCP encompasses the Pacific coastal ecologic zone: the far western foothills and rainforests of Canada, including the outlying islands and territorial waters. [Back](#).

oughta (verbal slang) ought to. A bare infinitive verb. [Back](#).

Novatron Ltd. is a division of SonyKong Ltd. Novatron produces flatview and holographic dreamscapes. [Back](#).