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Loose Threads

by J. O. Quantaman

All fiction is metaphor.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Loose Threads



Cool Assassins: Book 1
J. O. Quantaman

Prologue

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The smallest kid in her class, Jen Marov was known as “Monkey Girl” among her friends. She liked *Monkey Girl* way more than *Flores Hobbit*, a spiteful tag that some classmates whispered behind her back.

She may’ve been compact and petite, but she was no freak. Jen had clear brown eyes, high cheekbones, full lips and periwinkle chin that topped a fine physique. “Monkey Girl” described her perfectly when she scrambled across gabled roofs, scaled vertical cliffs or rescued skittish kittens from tree-branch redoubts.

She drove her parents to anxious worry, for they didn’t appreciate how careful and cautious she was. Jen weighed all possible slipups before leaping from one rooftop to another. While flirting with peril, she learned from mistakes and swaggered after close calls like a skateboarder flaunting scabs on her knees. Yet she ducked out before emergency-response crews could arrest her for public mischief.

Jen kept her climbing feats in low profile. She hated to hobnob with adults, especially teachers who seemed forever stuck in authority-figure mode. Few adults understood her need to push the envelope. Nor did they allow for her exceptional muscular control. Nor did they credit her uncanny instincts when it came to taking risks.

During phys-ed classes, Jen held her best stuff back. The last thing she wanted was to get singled out. “Special” kids were often hustled to secluded camps that molded them for Olympic-style tournaments. Playtime after school was another matter. The class superjock once challenged her to a contest of chin-ups. He was broad-shouldered and muscle bound, yet his arms gave out after 126 chins, whereas Jen continued at pace as if performing aerobic two steps.

After that showdown the guys welcomed her to cross-gender games of ice-pond hockey and pickup basketball. Chumming around with

athletic hunks upset the clique of regnant gals, even though Jen didn't flirt or offer come-ons. To keep the peace, she hung out with outsiders like herself. An eclectic bunch of gamers, hackers, shoplifters and wannabe cat burglars. They idolized Jen as the ultimate daredevil.

However tempting the offers from gang leaders, she avoided using her skills for criminal deeds. If the exploits had appealed to her sense of fairness, she might've followed the crooked path that led to prison cells. She was saved from that fate when her parents won an expense-paid vacation to Paris.

The contest rules stipulated two hours a-day to record the lucky family using the sponsor's products. In practice the vidcam quorums stretched to four then six hours. The vid crew was apologetic but firm, citing the need for facial poses that were carefree and candid. Jen knew what they really wanted were consumer-happy smiles.

Mama and **Ottets** accepted the meddling with stoic goodwill, but Jen snickered when the vid crew caught her chatting on the loaner vidcom. She bristled as everyone piled in & out of the sponsor's hybrid sedan for the umpteenth time. She rolled her eyes when the handlers interrupted museum tours for canned poses in front of antediluvian artworks. Ivan, her kid brother, strutted around like a pop celeb or prize ham. He played his role so well the crew gave him a brand-new prompter.

The day they toured the Eiffel Tower, Jen almost jumped for glee. She fell in love with its awesome height and splendor, its ancient elegance and grace. Some buildings in her hometown of Yakutsk posed tougher challenges for climbers, but they had nowhere near the **phat**. The tower's diagonal spars promised awkward staging for short limbs. Not that it mattered. It was a climb she couldn't refuse. One-way or another, she vowed to reach the pinnacle.

Later at night she climbed a tree near the tower and spied with opera glasses that Ivan had scrounged from a curio shop. She learned a watchman would cover the perimeter grounds every two hours and sweep his searchlight at the four arched legs upholding the 1st-floor. If she approached after the walk-around she'd have enough time to climb

above the search beams.

While she maintained her vigil, Ivan went online with his hacker buddies. They managed to swipe the sobriquet of a watchman who was ogling a porno site. With ID in hand, they extracted the Eiffel Tower's security codes and then loaded them in a mobile transponder that would fool the site sensors to "see" her as valid personnel.

Jen stalked her prize through islands of shadows, thanks to a burned-out streetlight which Ivan had managed to snuff with a pellet gun. She prowled across manicured grass as softly as a panther. Then came the ritual 1st-touch, her fingers greeting cold iron like a lover's caress. She sprang into motion, 3-point, 4-point, 3-point, her free limb reaching for the next purchase. She kept a dogged pace, 3-point, 4-point, 3-point.

Her packsack held a large orange brassiere, which would be affixed to the pinnacle. She didn't like this chore at all, but it was the price she paid to get the services of Ivan and his buddies. She knew how they'd laugh when they saw the orange flag on [WHV](#). Her own breasts looked flatter than roadkill, magnifying her tomboy image and giving the creeps another reason to rhubarb her gender.

The balustrade of the 1st-floor gave pause to a 15-year-old who was short for her age. A sturdy rope and grappling hook might've come in handy, but extra weight would've bogged her down.

Mountaineers who deployed safety lines were worthless cheaters in Jen's universe. She relied on fingers and wrists, both of which had grown strong from squeezing a solid rubber ball 20 minutes a-day, ten minutes for each hand.

Once she got a grip on the top lip, she raised her leg, planted a foot and brought thigh muscles to bear. With a grunt and thrust from her abs, she was up and over the flatiron porch.

Jen scrambled up the next stage and mounted the 2nd-balustrade with equal aplomb. She paused and sipped from her water bottle while the summer breeze cooled her brow. At 120 meters above ground, the view was spectacular. The city boasted a broad array of building blocks and crisscrossed avenues. Cleaning beetles trundled across the near-

deserted **ruex** where they gobbled food wrappers, paper cups and dog do. The Parisian streetwalkers were nowhere around.

Already gone to soft beds,
cashing in on dress rehearsals,
bringing the puppies home.

She'd always got along with boys, their physical strengths, their dogged desires to compete. Guys were such blatant liars it was easy to gauge their intentions which were seldom romantic or laced with sexual innuendos. No surprise, for Jen squashed those come-ons in the bud. She was Monkey Girl, a self-reliant no-nonsense virgin. Popular media drove other gals to splurge over fads and frills, to fuss over makeovers and boyfriends, to hock their dreams for a Trekkie vidcom or a closetful of **superfly** clothes. None of that suited Jen.

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At 250 meters she yawned and rued the lack of sleep. The climb had spent her early enthusiasm, exposing raw toil and fatigue.

She glanced up at the 3rd-floor observation bubble, the last obstacle before the pinnacle spire. Her fingers and palms were sore inside her gloves. Too many pauses to drink from the water bottle, and now there wasn't time to plant the orange brassiere and climb down before sunrise. She could descend and concede defeat. But setbacks were nowhere on her agenda. She gritted her teeth and resolved to reach the pinnacle, no matter what.

Wrought-iron spars crisscrossed the bubble. The cagelike framework was there for visitor safety and to deny suicidal swans and reckless stunt girls like herself. The underside grid-work entailed a three-meter traverse. It offered no easy handholds and no useful footholds. Jen surveyed the overhang and how to surmount it.

No need to rush or force
a dumb move that could
send me crashing far below.

She tightened the wristbands of her mountaineer gloves. They eased

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the soreness of contact but couldn't prevent blistered calluses. She vowed to find or make better gloves as she tightened the laces of her gripfast boots.

A chill in the air triggered sudden dizziness. Synapses ricocheted like broiled popcorn. Her heart thundered inside its cage. A sidelong glance showed palsied fingers shaking.

To hell with my alter ego

and my curse of vertigo.

I'm the best climber there is.

Minutes passed before her heartbeats slowed and calm returned. She reached for the 1st-handhold and then the second. Arms glistened with sweat. Two arms bore the weight while footholds held her torso still. As she fished for another handhold, triceps, biceps and rhomboids strained to keep her aloft. Just then a foothold slipped loose. She dangled from one arm before her free hand grasped the next perch and clamped down hard.

She grunted joyously as she gained the outer facing. It was vertical and ladderlike with sharply canted rungs. Her leg muscles could share the load.

Jen surmounted the bubble's slanted roof, then paused and surveyed the pinnacle. The spire had plenty of indents for wedging hands and feet. It was scalable until it narrowed to the lightening rod. The wind had picked up, causing more vibrations in the structure. The longer she waited, the more risk of getting caught up in a gale.

Just do it and be done.

She climbed to the lightening rod and attached the brassiere. Fatigue overwhelmed a brief flush of triumph. Her descent bogged down with frequent pauses and involuntary yawns. By the time her boots reclaimed the slanted roof, she was dead on her feet.

No choice but anchor down and fall asleep.

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Loud thumping sounds roused her to daylight. She glanced up and

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spotted a chopper with bright decals and vidcams arrayed on outstretched booms. “Trafic Surveillier” appeared on the chopper’s side. Ivan’s buddies must be glued to the news feeds. And laughing like chimpanzees at the orange bra on the tallest flagpole in town.

Shadows moved across her legs. Jen craned her neck and eyed two security dudes whose faces looked neither friendly nor kind.

“You’re trespassing, young lady,” said one of them in cryptic Français. “Get inside now. Better hope you have answers for our questions.”

Jen caught the gist as she was ushered through the maintenance hatch and surrounded by more uniforms. One of them seized her water bottle. He scanned it with a sensor wand, unscrewed the cap and sniffed. “It’s water,” he announced.

The dude with leadership insignia on his tunic cleared his throat. “Nice girls don’t poke fun at their mother’s clothing. It’s no laughing matter, young lady. Tell me how you managed to elude the sensors.”

I stashed the remote inside a nook
in the 2nd-floor balustrade.
Ivan promised to retrieve it later,
during a lull in the tour.

Jen stared the **inspecteur** in the eye. “Dunno. Maybe I’m a small target with a soft step.”

The inspecteur scowled and turned to the uniform on his right. “Take her downtown.”

Ten hours later, Jen was released from custody with a reprimand. Afterall she’d caused no serious harm, and foreign tourists were seldom charged for littering. The sponsoring corporation jumped at the publicity angle. The vid crew draped Jen in designer clothes until she resembled a splendid knight in branded armor. They walked her through the press conference and 15 minutes of fame.

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Baileg Barnov came to **Yakutsk** two weeks after the family returned

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from Paris. He had a charismatic smile and 10,000 reasons why Jen should join the Imperial Circus, which he described as one happy family that toured cities on six continents. Barnov was certain Jen had the right stuff to perform spectacular aerial feats. He praised her chutzpah and cunning.

Barnov spent the mornings discussing buckwheat recipes with Mama until he charmed her cheeks pink. In the afternoons he worked on Jen, spinning tall tales and homey anecdotes. He described dozens of high-wire challenges that wet her appetite. He promised good pay for doing something she loved. In the evenings he sat with Ottets and extolled the advantages of circus life, especially the educational benefits, for the circus brought tutors wherever it traveled.

Ottets worried about money sharks who'd sink their teeth in his daughter's newfound wealth. Barnov agreed to set up a trust fund that paid weekly allowances but kept the bulk of her earnings in reserve till her 18th-birthday. As well, Jen would get psychological counseling if needed and health supplements amended by topnotch immunologists.

Baileg Barnov proved a man of his word. The circus was indeed one happy family. Even the headliners pitched in when the carnies folded the "bigtop" and moved on. Jen got along with the children of headliners and carnies, and later she formed more tentative bonds among the headliners and carnies themselves.

Sometimes her old nemesis vertigo would reawake before she launched somersaults from the high trapeze or when she walked the tightrope unfurling ribbons of colorful silks. Her remedy was to focus on immediate tasks, such as fingers on the trapeze bar or soft soles on the tightrope. She blotted the ground below till her qualms withdrew like vampires to coffins at sunrise.

She grew stronger and wiser, learned to work the crowd and make her stunts seem more spectacular than they were. She found pleasant ways to brush off guys who tried every sort of lusty come-on. Only once did the lion tamer step out of line. Drunk as a skunk, he tried to exploit Jen's petite size, but he got a sprained wrist and bruised testicles for his

trouble.

On her 16th-birthday she earned top billing. [Jenna Marov](#), Aerial Acrobat. Two years later, she transferred her trust fund to a Swiss bank account that grew rapidly from interest and surplus wages. Jen was no spendthrift. She bought clothes from the bargain bins and took special care of the glittery costumes she wore for marquee stunts. She avoided parties and shenanigans, for drugs and alcohol didn't mesh with her daily exercise routine.

At 22 years old, circus life had become all too predictable. Her breathtaking feats had been done so many times they'd become routine. There were no challenges on the horizon unless she volunteered to get shot out of a cannon or sawed in three pieces by Merlin the Magnificent. She wiled her spare moments online, visiting travel destinations. The circus had given her firsthand views of the world's largest cities, but she longed to explore the rural hideaways and quaint villages at the foothills of mountain ranges, and then to climb the snow-capped summits.

The Andes intrigued her most of all. Its majestic peaks offered another way to challenge her vertiginous nemesis. The Andes stretched from the equator to the southern latitudes, so there would be worthy

climbs all the year round. She began to assemble the equipment needed for solo assaults. She took a Spanish immersion course via **HOAM** and so added her 4th-language. All that remained was a facedown with the boss.

Baileg sat at his traveler's desk, a makeshift card table cluttered with vidcoms and gadgets. He looked up from his prompter. "Our ads feature Jenna Marov for the next six months," he growled, his brows converging like storm clouds.

"No prob. I'll go on, same as always till the Beijing stopover."

He glanced at the performance schedule. "Till July," he murmured and sighed. "You're breaking my heart, y'know."

"Gotta recharge my batteries. Be back before winter sets in," she fibbed.

He stood up, reached out and grasped her hands. "If you must, you must. Remember, Jen, the circus is truly your home."

Jen smiled and felt like a rat jumping ship. But other challenges beckoned, and she dared not delay her escape.

No more glamorous posturing.

No more headliner pettiness.

No more jitters of celebrity.

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17 years later in Kuala Lumpur.

Thursday, 12 May 2076, 12:15 a.m.

Brakes squeal. The undercarriage groans as the van clamors to a halt.

Jen cheers the stillness. For the last half-hour she has gotten jerked around like a medicine ball, where she hides under bundles of clean linens whose pungent odors are twitching her nostrils. A long stoppage means the van has arrived at the subbasement of Petronas tower 2.

She hears a whistled tune and footfalls beside the van.

Please, no guards, not now...

If they spot me under the laundry
the mission will end before it starts.

Footfalls stop at the back door. Hinges scream as the door opens.

“**Kawan**, must go now,” says the driver's familiar voice.

Jen breathes a sigh of relief and pops her head above the bundles. “Is the lift open?”

“Yah.”

She crawls out of the van and marches to the elevator where she glances back. “Thanks, Yen.”

“No problem.” He matches her smile and waves farewell.

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Jen reaches up and wedges gloved fingers inside a horizontal crease. She fits toes between another crease and hoists herself off the footstall until she's astride the slab like a dogged spider on the wall.

When the elevator doors close, she's blinded in pitch-blackness. Moments pass before her nightvision adapts. Faint glows from the status LEDs highlight the dark trenches that border slabs of ferroconcrete. LEDs shed enough light to mark the next hand- & footholds. She climbs to the 2nd-floor then third and fourth, her matte-gray attire blending with the shaft's dim features.

Nonslip gloves are banded beyond her elbows to minimize slippage. Simple tabi boots cover her feet. The low-rise boots have concentric rubber vees on the soles whose bottoms and sidebars are budded with suction cups for better traction. Extra length laces are wrapped in helix fashion along her calves and then secured to a nonslip band below her knees. Gloves and boots react to her refined sense of touch, while other senses are tensed at fever pitch. Jen can't afford stray thoughts, the bane of careless climbers.

If events go as planned the elevator car will stay at the 41st- & 42nd-floors where Po Ling is doing the biannual overhaul and fumigation. Even so, Jen doesn't relish the thought of several tonnes descending like an avalanche. She has primed her senses for early-warning sounds of a

moving car. She plans to scramble for the nearest maintenance nook. There should be enough leeway if she presses flat against the nook. Her backpack, which holds the tools of her trade, fits snugly in the small of her back. Hopefully it won't inflate her girth, and she'll avoid contact by a hair's breadth.

Jen is aware of how vulnerable she would be if discovered by security guards who can use overrides to open the elevator doors. She ascends the wall that hosts the doors, a strategy that may foil slipshod guards. They'll lean inside and make a cursory check of the shaft. They won't crimp their necks and likely miss a lone climber on the fringes of their peripheral vision.

As she reaches the 20th-floor, a sudden downdraft stops her cold. Chills run down her spine. She glances up, her muscles tensed to dodge a plunging elevator car. The black square remains unchanged, neither growing nor moving against the dim collage of LEDs. A temp-control gauge must've triggered the draft. There are no infrared sensors in the #3 shaft, unless her recon data is out of date. If body heat has triggered the airflow, security monitors could be flashing alerts.

Nothing I can do about that.

Just climb and hope for the best.

The ascent in the elevator shaft marks the easier part of tonight's work, but she places each hand- & foothold as if it's her last act on earth. Deep breaths maintain her aerobic balance. Few athletes could equal this level of fitness. Fewer still could match her pace without wilting or cramping. She grasps another handhold and hoists her center of mass, an action so smooth it mimics a virtuoso cellist strumming bold arpeggios.

When she gains the 40th-floor rendezvous, she forces a plastic strip between the doors. The thin wafer is colored bright red, a signal for Po Ling to let her out. Moments pass like glacial epochs. If she pushes the strip too far, a roving security dude may spot it instead.

What's keeping Po Ling?

There's no time to spare.

Jen bristles and readjusts her 4-point. She has climbed mountains and achieved acrobatic stardom, but the scourge of vertigo remains in the shadows like a mugger ready to pounce. The fear of falling is lodged like radium ore in the flesh of her soul.

Stay calm, girl.

Breathe deep; hang tough.

Keep muscles from cramping.

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The next 15 minutes seem to last hours before the doors rumble open. The red strip slips free and down the shaft. She curses herself for daydreaming. Fortunately the strip lacks her fingerprints or DNA.

"Sorry for coming late." Po Ling looks shaken. "Special guards ask questions. I joke, say nothing. They go away."

Roosters aren't supposed to be checking this far down. She prays Po Ling hasn't let the cat out of the bag.

She draws a deep breath. "Do they know?"

"Not them."

Relieved, she drains her lungs. "Is the portal open?"

"You come. I open."

She follows him down the hall to a storage room. Bolts and wall panels are strewn across the floor. Metal lats of the window frame have already been removed. Only a plastic cowl holds the glass in place.

"Has anyone seen this?"

"No. I was alerted." He grins and pulls out a palmslate. "This tells me when guards coming down stairway. They see me buffing floor."

"Smart move, Po Ling. Once your shift is over, take the train to [Singapore](#). Ask for Aseem at the southeast pier. He'll find you work at the spaceport."

"Good idea."

"Can we remove the cowl without leaving marks?"

"Should be," says Po Ling. "Tools in tin box. We pry out."

Jen opens the lid and spots two long-handled chisels. Together they

dislodge the cowl, leaving no visible scratches. Po Ling sets window and cowl on the floor while Jen rummages through her backpack. She pulls out two armguards. The “hand” portions are “fingered” with elastic loops to keep digits from slipping.

“Very brave climbing **KLCC** with no ropes,” says Po Ling.

“I’m not the first. Alain Robert did it way back in ‘09.”

Jen snugs fingers inside the loops then tightens the straps. The armguards cover the soft sides of forearms and bulge like pillows at her elbows.

After snugging the footgear, she pushes out. 200 meters above the ground, her legs dangle free in open space. She twists and wriggles her torso until boot soles touch the rounded ledge.

“Go ahead and replace the window, Po Ling. And thanks again. When your shift ends, head straight for Singapore. See you on the other side.”

1. Hotfeet

Nine days Earlier

Osaka: Sunday, 3 May 2076, 2:30 a.m.

Alone in the mess room Yamazaki Kazuo flexes muscles which are limber from the workout, his skin aglow after a hot shower. Endorphins have focused his thoughts.

Like a bear from winter's sleep,
my empty stomach growls
and hankers after fish dinner.

He scans the menu then presses three buttons to signal his food choices. He clenches fists and hopes the autocook won't mold a tray with three pouches, one for each food item.

Inside the oven window he spots a fresh-molded food tray. It must be his lucky day, for the autocook has made a platter with two pouches: one for rice balls and the other for pollack tossed amid adzuki beans. He nods with contentment.

Two-pouch trays hold their shape, whereas three-pouch trays tend to warp and deform in the microwave. Twice they've cracked open, spilled food and forced him to clean the oven by hand. A loathsome task for a security chief. Though better than waiting for support techs to respond to voicemail.

The three-pouch glitch has plagued him like a sore tooth. He has no patience for wonky equipment, so he has searched online and learned the trays are biodegradable. The most reliable facts come from [ZEST's](#) public forum where Nozokuroba crosses swords with GREENS, an off-earth co-op. Spacer colonists have denounced throwaway trays, whereas Nozokuroba accuses [GREENS](#) of nitpicking. Spacers claim the trays consume too much energy and contain possible toxins. They've uploaded photos from the slums of Mumbai and São Paulo where [gomi-yoki](#) shanties have been cobbled together with castoff trays. Nozokuroba argues its trays are molded from benign bioplastics that

will biodegrade naturally within five years. The maker has refused to disclose in-house specs, unwilling to risk its competitive advantage.

Neither party solves his pouch-happy glitch, but Kazuo feels less sympathy for off-worlders who operate outside environmental scrutiny. Their orbital factories belch smoke in the sterile vacuums of space. Their **beamersats** feed the world's electric grid with cheaper kilowatts, the lifeblood of devices like the autocook. To top it off, spacers don't have longterm evidence to back their claims.

He assumes the rump in the **Diet** will pressure the ZEST tribunal to rubberstamp Nozokuroba's wunderkind. He and his crew need the autocook's convenience, to say nothing of its 576 dinner combos. But there's still the problem of three-pouch trays.

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The microwave chimes. He pulls dinner from the oven and savors hot spicy aromas. He opens a fresh packet of chopsticks, digs in and forks a rice ball to mouth.

Soft vibrations draw his eyes to the wristcom. "HOTFEET AT ZONE 4-03SB" appears in the display window.

Heat-source in the tunnel?

No one can get past the outer
sensors without being detected.

A sensor wall cordons the site from adjacent properties, whereas sonar detectors track invaders off the water. Optical and infrared sensors cover every travel route in the compound. Software workarounds ignore the false alarms caused by rodents, seagulls or salarymen. The alarm doesn't make sense unless his perimeter has grown holes or the heat sensors have gone berserk.

Vlad is on the comm desk and may've misread the diagnostic cues. But it's not like him to daydream or screw-up.

Kazuo grinds teeth as he gazes at fish and beans. The roosters won't have trouble with a drunken baka. But if hotfeet proves a genuine threat, Akihito and Goro will need firsthand supervision.

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“**Shimatta!**” he scowls, then bolts from the table. Quick strides carry him down the hall toward the armory. He switches the wristcom to vocal. “Vlad?” he barks.

“Hotfeet romping through the underground.”

“Checked for errors?”

“All systems copacetic, *okina yatsu-san*.”

Kazuo trods on red-lacquered tiles, past glaring overheads and whitewashed walls. He dismisses Vlad's glib appraisal. “The network must be futzing over a ventilation leak.”

“No. Three sensors have gone off, one after another. Hotfeet's going for the whorehouse.”

Warehouse, Kazuo translates; the tunnel leads there. He gnashes the rice ball, swallows the gruel and stretches legs. His appetite flees like water down the drain. “Wha'd'you see?”

“Nothing, *okina yatsu-san*.”

“How about errors in the vid feeds?”

“Nope. Everything's cool like a diamond jewel.”

Kazuo hates it when Vlad despoils Japanese with rap-along idioms. But that nitpick can wait, for there are questions begging for answers.

“Any telltales at the heat source?”

“Like nobody's there.”

“Go to manual, Vlad. Check from side-to-side.”

“Already did. At all three locations. No pics of hotfeet, **okina yatsu-san**. I see nothing but empty tunnel and rusted fallopian tubes.”

The tunnel's old service pipes, Kazuo translates as he breaks into a trot and firms his voice to hide his growing concern. “Keep on checking. Have Akihito join me at the armory. And wake up Goro's team.”

“Yadda, yadda, *okina yatsu-san*.”

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Kazuo knows there's only one logical explanation. The intruder is hiding behind invisible camouflage, a rare technique used by bigtime pros with military connections. It also marks a commando assault of

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unknown strength. Dozens more could be swarming across the wharf.

He takes a deep breath and rides the adrenaline rush. He has felt the same rush years ago, inside the kickboxer ring amid howls of the crowd. He recalls frantic scuffles where he tamped his sphincter reflexes, rode his instincts and then hacked away till he wrested victory or crumbled in defeat. His championship of **Kumiai no Tsuyoi Otoko** has endowed him with low cunning and high courage for violent frays.

Hiroshi, his boss, has always scorned the need for **RF** scanners. Last year Kazuo went around his boss and requested a top-level meeting where he extolled the merits of wide-swath heterodyne scanners. He explained how RF arrays could triangulate wireless bursts and pinpoint foes wherever they signaled from. Much to his surprise, the owners approved, and RF scanners have been installed.

“Vlad, check the RF history over the last half hour.”

No response from the jive jockey.

He's overlooked the RF profile,
calling up graphs and readouts.

“Not a trace,” Vlad reports, minus his streetwise bravado.

Kazuo cheers the news as he jogs down the corridor. If hotfeet had company, there would be telltales of radio chatter. The intruder must be a singleton or duo, not a-whole squad of commandos.

But how the hell did hotfeet
get past my perimeter?

Then he recalls the seagulls which triggered false alarms before that glitch was finagled. The sensors could've mistaken a paraglider for a large gull. Hotfeet has slipped through the cracks like a damn rat.

Someone would've spotted a paraglider if it jumped off a skyscraper. So hotfeet must've launched offshore, maybe from a rogue airship. In either case the intruder has exposed a weakness that will need fixing.

First things first.

Contain the intrusion,
pierce the invisible cover
and bring hotfeet down.

2. Bedfast

Three Years Earlier

Tsawwassen: Winter, 2073

Nyssa is a grown woman, deaf to her plight, asleep in a bed she has never lain before.

Fresh bedclothes cover bare skin. Her mouth is dry and coated like gritty stucco. Antiseptic odors raise her nasal hairs. Eyes open to find stark white ceiling and pale green walls speckled with orange UFOs. Taking quick breaths, she recalls frantic moments before blacking out. Her thoughts coalesce.

Must be a hospital room... I don't
rate private digs unless Bossman
has me under the magnifying glass.

The door bursts open. In waltzes a woman with ultrashort hair topping an African face that bleeds health and authority. A nurse.

"Oh good. Awake at last." The nurse sports a trim athletic body under pale-gray overalls. Cheerful ivories brighten her smile. "Call me Soobie. Short for Subira. Welcome to Dog Breakfast co-op."

Nyssa tries to decipher the words. She moves her arm and finds it weak. Her skin crawls. Her noggin throbs, and bloodstream cries for more hilomorfs. "I don't feel so good."

The nurse shrugs. "You've b'en zonked for a while."

"How long?"

"Three, maybe four days."

"**Nej tack!**" Nyssa recalls the frantic moments fleeing from goons on wobbly heels before they knocked her down. She hasn't a clue how she got here instead of Bossman's villa. Maybe some bystander stepped in, and the goons fled at the sound of police sirens.

Well, don't knock it.
Better than facing the music
for my sticky-fingered deeds.

“Sorry. I missed your name.”

“Soobie.” The nurse flashes a million-dollar smile. “Doc... umm, asked me to check your progress.”

Nyssa reckons “Doc” must’ve probed her body chemistry and noted the hilomorfs. Cold turkey hits her like a truckload of bricks. Pain throbs at the back of her head. She lifts her arm and touches cool hairless scalp. Yuck!

“Doc Quark sheered your mane to expose the head wound. Don’t worry; it’ll grow back. You might wanna keep it short like mine. Less hassle y’know.”

Even if the medics let me go,
I won’t get far without hairdo,
clothes or tabs of hilomorf.
But somehow I hafta escape
before the goons show up
and drag me to face Bossman.

The nurse hums a melodic ditty as she mounts a new IV bag.

“What’re you feeding me?”

Soobie flashes another beatific smile. “Liquid food and **avitaminosis** anodynes. Doc Quark’s special brew of vitamins and herbal extracts oughta mellow your greedy receptors.”

Nyssa frowns darkly.

“Hey! It ain’t so bad. You’ve slept through the worst. By now your craving is more psycho than real.” She nods in earnest. “You’ll feel better from here on.”

Nyssa quashes an anxious groan. She fears the goons will show up and drag her to the villa. “Soobie, I’m marked,” she croaks. “They wanna smuggle me outta here.”

“Not anymore.”

She’s lost all patience with Soobie’s perky attitude. “You dunno the half of it. They’re *yakuza*. The worst.”

“Ain’t gonna happen, Sweetie. You’re deep inside **TCP** megadome. We call our hideaway ‘the kennel’.”

"TCP? North of Seattle?"

"Natch."

Nyssa opens her mouth but can't find words.

Cosmic whopper! Is that
too good to be true or what?
After three years I'm free
of that miserable creep.

She queries her labial folds but finds no muss or fuss. Whoever brought her across the Pacific has shown restraint and may want the favor returned. Nyssa reckons she better get straight with the head honcho. "When can I meet the boss?"

Soobie guffaws. "We're a co-op, Sweetie. All us dogs got bones." Her expression turns thoughtful. "I guess Cook has the most say-so. He sets our diet. It's quasi-vegetarian and abso delicious. Lots of brownrice."

"Cook?"

"He's around. Came by earlier this morning. He and his friends roughed up those *yakuza*?... and brought you in. The grubby boys won't want another lesson anytime soon."

Nyssa is shocked. Cook and his friends are heavy dudes, no doubt sanctioned by Interpol and licensed to carry weapons across borders. "You're special cops?"

Soobie laughs. "We're crazy-ass dogs. We do stuff others wouldn't dare."

Dogs?
Like as not spacer ops,
considering the locale.

Nyssa breathes easier and realizes she feels better. Maybe the IV drip is dulling her appetite for hilomorfs.

Soobie checks the palmslate hanging from the IV post. "Doc has named you Suzie-Q," she trills with infectious cheer. "Why not gimmie your real name? You'll feel more at home."

After years of counterfeit and neglect, a name is all that's left. "Nyssa Persson, with two esses."

Soobie hums a cheerful tune as she updates the palmslate. "Nyssa you'll be." She winks. "Oughta do till you get a nickname." The nurse lays cool fingers on her forehead then fusses with the bedding from chin to foot. She bends low and retrieves a white poster showing large black letters.

"How's your English? Can you read this aloud?"

Once upon a time
there was a Martian named
Valentine Michael Smith.

Nyssa nods. The letters are too large and the words too easy. She recites the lines in one breath.

"Wonderful. Wha'd'ya think it means?"

"Dunno. Martian fairy tale?" She adjusts her head on the pillow, raising sparks of pain. "Can't place the dude's name."

"Never mind." Soobie flashes another smile. "No sign of aphasia. *Do* believe you're on the mend. If it rings a bell, your script is the start of Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*."

Nyssa hears no bells, shuts her eyes and falls fast asleep. She dreams in holovision, rehashing youthful follies. She ghosts beside a teenager who hastened over Stockholm's predawn streets.

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The teenager wore hiking boots, baseball cap and packsack over a slicker poncho. She danced around rain puddles and never missed a beat. Though pressed for time, she bypassed vacant cabs because she needed to conserve Euros for the London hopper. She needed cash to spare, so customs wouldn't take her for a dole hog. She was running away via dirigible, escaping Mamma's horny swains who beggared two-for-one and slashed the last isthmus of domestic accord.

What clueless clitoral itch
beckoned gangly phallic bones
jetting graceless clamshell spit

that swelled my eyes alone?

Nyssa ad-libbed her way around droll British officials and found lodging in a raucous neighborhood of Liberian refugees. She picked up their lingo, channeled her naïve charm into friendships and ran errands for local vendors whose storefronts drew more walk-in biz around her willowy silhouette.

One afternoon, Nyssa spotted a promising ad:

ACTORS Workshop Seeks New Talent.

SEND PICS. Facials & Full-Body Nudes.

She collared a busker friend who took some photos. Then anxious weeks passed before the telex arrived, inviting her to San Francisco.

Suave-tailored suits were the standup hosts for Silkworm & Morlock Actors Academy. The suits aped cool urban chic. They cited dozens of former S&MAA students who'd become famous holo stars. They ushered Nyssa down the yellow-brick road, after which she thumbed a contract absolving S&MAA of liabilities while postponing tuition fees till six months after graduation.

"What if the studios won't grant me the roles?" she asked Ace Fannick, her mentor and confidant.

"Our students always succeed," he chortled. "Just follow advice. Put out a good show, and you'll see thumbs-up all around. Trust me, sweetheart, your flair for languages will spellbind the Asian markets."

She attended every class, worked hard and learned all she could. She was taught the maxims of style, upswings of fad and nuances of hot. Instructors warned she wouldn't succeed unless she mimed a zing-zang porosity. Nyssa swallowed the whole routine. She was coached in fab-speak, tutored in conversational Japanese, muscled-toned from hours of aerobics, sculpted by cosmetic surgeons, draped in stylish frocks and drawn to avant-garde bashes where she brooked erotic kinks.

After graduation she was awarded a cozy flat where she entertained handsome studio reps who gave hot tips for acing screen tests. One lazy afternoon she found a microcam hidden in the woodwork. She checked

around and spotted dozens more, including two in the bathroom. Mad as a hornet, she got on the [vidcom](#) and threw hard questions at Ace Fannick. “You lied to me! What point was there in ballet classes and Japanese lessons if all you wanted was my tits and ass?”

“Honey, you gotta understand,” said Ace in soothing tones, “porno flash can supercharge a young starlet's career. Besides, we won't show everything. Only your best poses for very scrupulous connoisseurs.”

“Don't futz me! You installed cameras behind my back and made me look like a frumpy fool. Hello? Let me pay my debt some other way.”

Ace suggested a private meeting where he served a Mickey Finn to calm her nerves. After she fell unconscious, he closed the deal with Zen-The-Bossman, a *yakuza* godfather who assumed her debt at a handsome markup.

Nyssa journeyed asleep inside a modified coffin and awoke at a villa on the outskirts of Tokyo where underlings taught her shiatsu massage and branded her bottom with Nereid tattoos. Bossman twisted her worldview inside out. He demolished her quaint aspirations and demanded total allegiance. He stroked her self-esteem and vowed to protect her from physical abuse. Bossman called a spade a spade, a grim improvement from the double-talk at [S&MAA](#).

She joined his bevy of premier escorts and acquired the *àpropos* of a sexual therapist. Sleek limos brought her to the reclusive digs of Japanese tycoons. Nyssa came swaddled in designer wraps, catwalk pumps and psychedelic hose. With coy allure she peeled off fashionable threads till none remained but isinglass. After massaging sinews and caressing egos, she brought them home. Such fervent zeal should've repaid her debts, if Bossman hadn't monopolized the take.

Time dragged on. Anguish and boredom prompted forbidden moonlight trysts. She numbed herself in hilomorf fog while horny barnstormers ruffled torpid flesh before they dumped her like a spent condom.

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Child Slaves <ID:09345X2:PG#6367>

Walk ten blocks from your favorite urban attraction and chances are you will run across a squalid neighborhood. Slums or shantytowns border many of our famous tourist sites. Municipal officials lack the will or resources to handle fast-growing populations.

Local mandarins have long sought to limit childbirths among the poor, but low-income parents are slow to master the art of family planning. Many jurisdictions refuse health and educational perks beyond one or two kids per family. Childbirth restrictions have put low-income parents in a bind which has prompted abortions of female fetuses. Population control is beneficial, maybe necessary for our crowded planet, but demographic concerns have caused side effects that polite society likes to sweep under the rug.

In the world's largest cities, local and international police have failed to control the traffic of child slaves. "Adoption agency" reps collect unwanted or overquota kids from unsuspecting parents. Millions of nameless victims are then bought and sold as blackmarket commodities. Few of them reach normal adulthood.

Boys are taught to beg, steal and run errands for local gang lords. Those who avoid injury or jail become bona fide urban guerrillas. Girls are forced to work in sweatshops. After a stint of hard labor, they're fit to serve as brothel bunnies.

> Webvine News, 2069

3. Kennel

Tsawwassen: Spring, 2073

Nyssa pads spongy floors, her limbs on automatic pilot. On the walls are flatviews that show landscapes of mountain crags, boreal forests or whitewater outflows. Ever-present tunes sound like old-fogy nostalgia or labryinthian snooze. The tunes go in one ear and out the other, despite Soobie's lavish praise of acoustic jazz.

Everwhich way Nyssa treads, the hallways lead back to square-one. They link

dozens of multipurpose training rooms,
four large saunas, nine whirlpool baths,
a basketball court, Olympic-sized pool,
dataroom equipped with desktops,
150 cubbyholes for privacy and sleep,
30 washrooms for quintets of bedrooms,
cubicles for meditation or surfing online,
logistics, weapons ranges, confectionery,
automated cafeteria and many closed doors.

She has tried the closed doors and found them locked. Otherwise the kennel has few rules. It resembles a reclusive spa where the members jaunt around like hepped-up kids. They treat her as a guest or zoo specimen, sometimes like a real person.

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More than others, she's attracted to Cook, the head honcho of this sweatshop. Nyssa reckons her status will improve if she gets tight with the top dog. She discounts his facial wrinkles. Advanced age doesn't count when the life force pours out of him like a blast furnace. He stands erect as a blade of tempered steel. During the weekends when martial arts are celebrated, Cook wields swords or long poles, and

defeats every challenger.

Kennel members perk their ears to hear his voice. They cling to the aura of his presence, for his deeds speak louder than words. His laidback style evokes utmost respect, which has won Nyssa's heart.

The more she recovers from her head injury, the more she yearns for him to claim his prize. She owes him for the timely rescue. She owes him bigtime for escaping from Bossman's clutches and her disgraceful life. This fresh start shows more promise than whatever has gone before. **Cook** deserves more than just gratitude, but he hasn't responded to overtures.

Charms and come-ons have no effect. He remains elusive as distant mountains where cavernous eyes peek through epicanthic folds. He has a scar from ear to jaw, a mark of valor that cuts her woes to petty. His busy schedule, his projects and closed-door meetings stymie her efforts to claim his ear. When she casts her wiles they fall like duds off his cool sangfroid. The aftermaths give her a nightlong itch.

She recalls the lone time he visited her room. "Doc's supplements have purged hilomorfs from your system," he said. "But you still need time for your concussion to heal. Follow Doc's advice and use the gym for rehab and socializing. If you feel dizziness, quit and tell Doc."

He says I have latent talents
buried somewhere inside.
But he won't respond unless
I make myself useful by taking
classes to practice martial arts.

"Wait till Doc declares your concussion mended," he keeps saying.

He thinks I'm too soft and coddled,
that I can't hack the training,
that I'll never measure up.
Well, I'm gonna show *him*...

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Three women sit around the broad arc of an elliptic table, their backs

©J. O. Quantaman <28>

to the wall. They have a clear view of the cafeteria whose tables are half-filled with kennel acolytes on midmorning break. The acks sip from mugs or poke chopsticks at food platters. Others engage in lively banter, though distinct words are lost in the humdrum.

Nyssa can't help overhearing the gossipy innuendos of **Meg** and Soobie who sit beside her. They're speculating over two guys who stand in line at the autoserve. Nyssa gives the pair a cursory glance then regards her mug of bancha-twigg tea whose vapors are as mundane as the chatter of her pals. She wishes she had the spunk to order coffee instead.

“Whatcha sniffing, Sweetie?” Soobie is grinning like a busybody.

Soobie was there when Nyssa ordered coffee for the first and only time. The servo filled her cup with its metallic arm and then launched into a long sermon about coffee's ill effects. The idiot machine singled her out because she hadn't begun lessons in martial arts. Withered by the vocal reproach, Nyssa abandoned her cup and walked away, her eyes glued to the floor to avoid censorious stares. Soobie retrieved the forsaken cup and hurried to catch up. “The warnings are overblown. Pay 'em no mind.”

Ever since, Nyssa has chosen bancha-twigg tea, though she longs for the buzz of caffeine.

“Hot enough?” adds Soobie, grinning and knowing Nyssa can't find her tongue or meet her gaze.

Meg wallops her dataroom colleague and knocks her off-balance. “Quit teasing,” she chides.

When Meg is aroused her face gets flushed. She looks both impish and **mignon**. Her lawn of raven-black hair outlines a globular noggin that's shaped like a succulent apple above a long graceful neck. Her buzzcut is normal for women who keep their shags no longer than two cents. Men shave their scalps bare. Less hair makes sense for acolytes who sweat their way to fitness nirvana.

“Leave her be,” warns Meg, her arms raised in ready defense.

Nyssa has become a connoisseur of cranial shapes which are clear as

day without the follicle camouflage. Some noggins appear as placid pears, while others have the orthogonal planes of spicy peppers while others grin like Halloween pumpkins. The cerebral contours seem to unmask the personalities within. Which begs the question:

Is my fuzzy knob
spilling cranial beans?

Her dataroom buds have come to an uneasy truce. "Doc has given Nyssa the go-ahead for martial arts," Meg says.

Soobie eyes bulge wide. "No shit?"

"If you weren't making goo-goo eyes at Tarzan..."

"Shut up, Longnose. I'm your boss."

Meg rolls her eyes. "Who's your mama?"

Soobie jabs her fist, which is blocked deftly by her partner's quick hands.

Nyssa has watched dozens of these spats. They love to bicker and snarl like tiger cubs. When they grow weary of mock battle, one or the other will slink away and woo another lover. They egg each other on, keeping score of their bedmates, reckoning them by belt colors. 1st-rank whites merit one point; 2nd-rank yellows merit two points; 3rd-rank oranges merit four points, and so on, till 6th-rank rundogs earn 32 points.

Their partnership stands on the bedrock of tolerance. Together they thrive despite constant betrayals and grudging of each other's trysts. Wayward affairs with gals or guys have tightened their bond to novalike brilliance. Third-party intrigues keep passions aglow without depleting their erotic fusion, without yielding to the heavy hand of gravity which would crush their emotions to neutron stasis.

Nyssa has an outsider's take on lesbian relationships. Her lone experience was with Amber, a fellow escort. Their couplings were stolen moments in dark cubbyholes since Bossman forbade sex between escorts. She recalls soft touches, pungent odors, urgent whispers and muffled gasps. The risks of exposure made for intense orgasms, but such pleasure doesn't compare to the strong bond that

Meg and Soobie share.

Their oddball sodality is beyond Nyssa's ken. She doesn't dare a cameo appearance. A twosome or threesome would expose her secrets. The last thing she needs is to have her sordid history rehashed in the gossip mill. So far, she has kept mum about her past, and Cook hasn't uttered a word. If she keeps her doors closed, maybe he'll notice and pry the locks himself.

Soobie arrests her eyes. "When'd you start?"

"Umm..."

"Wake up, girl."

"Martial arts, y'mean?"

"What else?"

She vows to pay better attention. Mental lapses invite foul-ups and injuries. "Next week, afternoon sessions," she replies. "I left the mornings open for the dataroom. That is if you want me."

"Why the **foxgate** wouldn't we?"

Nyssa has expected otherwise.

Good intelligence focuses
the co-op's eyes and ears.

I lack the digital skills,
so why let me handle
such important data?

Soobie knits her brows. "Ain't swords and darts scheduled for mornings?"

"Shepp's teaching me Wednesday afternoons."

"Shepp?" Her eyes balloon. "Rundog Shepp?"

"Yawh."

"That lovely hunk." Her face glosses over. "Did'ja mention my name?"

"He knows I'm part of your dataroom crew."

Meg slaps her friend's thigh. "Easy, Monkey Face."

Soobie brushes the hand away. "Nyssa, tell him he's always in my..."

"Zip your tush," snarls Meg.

"What's your problem? You ain't spoiling for Shepp."

Meg ups her chin. "He admires my eyebrows."

"Two brows gonna raise his prow?" Soobie squints dramatically.

"My dear Longnose, you're baiting chimeras."

"Am I?" Meg plants a finger on Soobie's nose. "You won't catch Tarzan unless you swing on vines."

"I can swing," vows Soobie as she removes the errant digit and ruffles Meg's buzzcut.

"Humph."

Nyssa debates whether to take another sip of twig tea. Like most staples in the cafeteria, the tea is wholesome, healthful and bland. There's no sense bitching when the grub's free and nourishing. Whole grains and veggies have fueled many hours of exercise, and the expended energy ups her appetite even more. Yet she hankers for a taste treat to gratify her taste buds.

Daily supplements fortify the kennel diet. Doc Quark amends vitamins, minerals and proteomic stimulants for co-op members. Doc is a gracious man from the Indian subcontinent, but his medical approach is simple-Simon. Instead of relying on high-tech tools, he just checks one's fingernails and eyes. At first she thought he'd fudged his niche in the co-op. But Cook has assured her that Doc is the best mender around. Given the keen health of ever'one in the co-op, she has come to agree.

"I hafta admit," says Meg, "you look good and ready for lessons."

Nyssa feigns a brave face of courage, which is easy to do before the carnage begins. When push comes to shove she's frightened out of her wits. Failure at martial lessons could get her booted from the co-op. If she manages to succeed Cook may ask her on dangerous raids where bullets pummel her flesh to Swiss cheese.

Meg and Soobie have spoken of martial arts with nostalgic pride. They claim the challenges are worth all the bruises and strains. Both have earned orangebelts before taking maternity leave. Afterward they struggled to regain their former skills but could advance no further, so

they've opted to plateau at "orange" and devote their energies to the dataroom.

"Lessons are serious business," says Meg. "The training sessions will get you superhealthy and horny as a rabbit on Vigor, so you better gear up. This afternoon I'm taking you to logistics where you'll open a reprofactuary account and take out a fresh cooler."

Nyssa appreciates their concern, but she isn't buying Cupid's arrow. "Is it really necessary?"

"Fuxgates happen," avows Soobie. "A cooler puts you out on the mating field. What's more, the **reprofactuary** account lets you deposit eggs. Your fertility insurance against an overdose of radiation."

Nyssa is in no rush for carnal hookups. She has enjoyed whole weeks without sexual obligations. She needs more time and distance from the sex trade. "I'll hang a 'no vacancy' sign."

"Solar plexus, Nyssa! Quit playing the dainty nun, or you'll parch brown as November corn."

Nyssa bites her tongue to keep from grinning. Soobie doesn't know the half of it. The sex trade has given her thick skin and callused emotions. Worse, her coy innuendos often surface at the wrong times and cause unintended mix-ups. Besides, sex is way too casual in the co-op.

Ever'one humps with ever'one else.

Women act like gracious bonobos

while men just come and go.

"Know it, girl. You'll be going toe-to-toe with the finest delts, pects and abs in TCP," adds Soobie. "Sooner or later, you'll get a noseful of sweaty armpits. Your hormones will boil over and tickle your guppies. A nitrocooler saves the splurge."

Soobie is good at laying down feminist advice, but Nyssa isn't buying. She has always taken **NoEmbryo** which tames unruly hormones and muzzles bloody monthlies. There's no need for a repro account if she plans to stay aloof.

"I'm not a regular co-op member."

“Humph.” Soobie rolls her eyes. “Cook brought you in, though he’s busier than a dog with fleas. It’s a gross oversight. You log regular hours in the dataroom. You’re ready to start martial arts, for mutt’s sake. In my books, you’re legit.” Her face says, “case closed.”

“No more arguments,” Meg chimes in. “I’m taking you to logistics for your nitrocooler. Once there I’ll show you how and when to replace the coolant.”

Nyssa tries one-last dodge. “Children are off my radar screen. So why bother?”

Meg puts her foot down. “It’s bad form to discard a lover’s condom. Men hate to see their genotypes dumped in the recycler. You needn’t bank everyone’s sperm, just stow their discharges in your nitrocooler.”

Nyssa shrugs. “I guess you’re right.”

“You bet I’m right.”

She gazes at lukewarm tea and wonders what she’s gotten herself into. One thing’s for sure. After the lessons start, she’ll order coffee and thumb her nose at the digital tyrant if it sasses back.

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Soft underfoot, the mat stretches from wall-to-wall. A beltless novice is about to square off against gazoonies and [stallions](#). Nyssa can’t stop her butterflies from raising a raucous. She’d rather flee than fight. But the walls leave nowhere to run. More butterflies join the riot and tie her stomach in knots.

She firms her posture and puts on a brave face. At floor center looms Makoto, a gaunt Japanese, grim-faced and wearing the coveted blackbelt. She has witnessed his skills at the weekend demos. Today he looks fearsome. Under his loose garb she pictures corded muscles, hard as marble slabs.

“Greetings, Nyssa.” He outs a grin that might be a grimace. “You’ve chosen the path of spiritual harmony, which is called aikido in the samurai tradition. You’ll learn skills that come from many schools of martial arts.”

His stern eyes frazzle her nerves. “Today you'll start on quantum assassination theory, as practiced by the twin founders of our school. From now on, I'll refer to quantum assassination theory by its shorter form... qat.”

“Cat?”

“Yes, Nyssa, but it's spelled Q-A-T. Don't confuse qat with the house pet.”

Makoto springs from his statuesque pose. He blurs through an acrobatic routine that outdoes all the fitness drills she's ever seen. There's no way it can be duplicated.

“This exercise is the 'warm-up for applied qat' or **wufaq**, as we call it.” He regards her with dour eyes. “Wufaq activates, loosens and stretches every muscle group in the human body.”

Makoto demonstrates the routine at a slower pace, then beckons her to follow along. She prays it won't break her neck.

The next instant she's reconfiguring in fast-forward like a tortured pretzel, almost keeping pace until the end when her muscles cry uncle. She gasps for air and doubles over, thankful for the gymnastics classes in school. Makoto stands before her, breathing calmly as if he never tensed a muscle.

Over the next hour he breaks the routine into wended isometric twists. He explains how wufaq endows faster switches between defense and attack. The movements facilitate phase changes between anchored poses. He shows how good form achieves more with less effort.

Makoto pauses. His cool eyes parse her soul. “Once formal lessons begin, you'll become acquainted with 469 methods of self-defense. These are the basic tools of qat. Absorb them, and you'll succeed against any foe, however strong or well-armed. You must practice till they infuse your mind and body. Understand?”

Nyssa nods dubiously.

“You'll know you've succeeded when you react faster than thought. At first however, you must learn the methods through mental faculties. It helps if you tag them with personal names. I regard them as aikido

equivalents. Jen uses mountain-climber lingo. Griz prefers the heroic names of Nordic legend, and Cook favors Tibetan lore. So too, you must apply nametags, both familiar and recognizable. Understand?"

She mimes a bobblehead. Makoto hasn't mentioned rundog Shepp, her weapons instructor. Nor has he mentioned rundog JoAnna who's rumored to be the co-op's loose cannon.

"Listen up. I'll demo five methods while you watch. Afterward you'll practice the motions and give each a suitable name. It's best to choose the 1st-tag that springs to mind."

He backs four paces away. "Observe how I deflect arm thrusts, using what many call a backhand block." He demonstrates the backhand block and asks her to repeat his motions. "In Japan this maneuver is called *haishu*. Often used as a feint, *haishu* blocks arm or leg thrusts, best if your forearms are protected."

He demonstrates once more and asks Nyssa to follow with one hand then the other. "Does it remind you of anything?"

"Throwing a frisbee?" she hedges.

"Good," he mutters as if chewing on a toothpick. "From now on, we'll call it throw frisbee." He fetches a [palmslate](#) and infowand and records the name.

Next Makoto introduces the palm-heel block which Nyssa coins *open door press*. She can tell Makoto is much happier with her 2nd-choice. She feels more confident naming

the pressing block as *punch snout*,

the downward-hooking block as *knee tickler*,

and the inward block as *feeding pigeons*.

Makoto twitches and glowers as he records the last two. "Practice these five methods. In four months, we'll see."

"Four months?"

"You're the lone novice at this time. I'm busy teaching five whitebelts and three yellows. They're seasoned acks, and you'll be overmatched if you join at midstream."

She has worked out in the weight room with rundog Griz ever since

Doc gave her the go-ahead for rehab exercises. Her newfound strength ought to make martial arts easier, and she needs to impress Cook. "I'm anxious to start."

"Attend classes as an observer. After four months, we'll see."

"Won't I learn more if I practice as I watch?"

"That's a brave request." He shrugs. "However, **Mistress Nailah** has given you good marks."

"Who's Mistress Nailah?"

"She's the Timekeeper," he murmurs, then shakes his head. "OK. You may join my class, so long as you don't whimper when the going gets tough."

"I'll try my best."

He glowers. "Make sure you arrive early in the afternoons. I'll demo five methods before class begins. To get you up to speed."

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"Thrust left arm forward," growls Makoto.

Five whites, three yellows and Nyssa do so in unison. She has already fought several matches over four grueling hours. Her arm and leg muscles are cramping. This end-of-lesson wufaq has pushed her endurance to the limits.

"Make sure you twist elbows," Makoto enjoins. "Thrust right arm forward."

Nine acolytes comply.

"Again," he barks, "left arm forward."

Nine acks punch arms hard enough to crack wood.

"Right arm forward." His eyes fall on Nyssa whose muscles scream for mercy. "Good," he says. "Cartwheel left."

Nyssa whirls upside-down, then right side up, while fatigue demons threaten to hijack her balance. Somehow she keeps pace with Cham and Tara, the spry yellowbelts on either side.

Makoto barks, "Left leg sidekick."

She thrusts her left leg out and above her shoulder.

“Return,” he growls. “Right leg kickback.”

Nyssa mimics the other acks while her abs and lats convulse in painful knots.

“Higher,” he barks, calling her out, then surveys the whole class. “OK, as you were. Now, jump and backflip.”

She gulps air, then skies and tumbles full-around, one leg groping for solid ground before the other. She wobble-hops but manages to keep aright.

“Enough for today,” says Makoto, scanning his charges. “Head for the showers. The mon-fat-jongs are active and available for those who need extra practice.” He pauses, his eyes glowering like spotlights. “If you show weakness, Nyssa, your foes will take advantage. You must work harder at keeping balance throughout the wufaq exercise. OK?”

She answers with a full bow, conceding her shoddy performance. She's capable of doing better, even at his hectic pace. To make matters worse, Makoto varies the order of moves, and she gets mixed up while performing on the fly. Regardless, she can and *will* do better. Then she hears a derisive hoot from her nemesis...

Rod.

She doesn't need his gibes after Makoto has chiseled her to size. Who made Rod her judge and tormentor? She itches to get back at him but doesn't know how. She's still limping from his most recent victory in the combat circle. After six weeks of qat training, she doesn't have much to show for her efforts save bruised toes and sprained fingers.

Thuy and Afi draw near, their faces full of concern. “Don't let it bother you,” Afi says. “Rod likes blowing his horn is all.”

Nyssa isn't consoled.

“You're doing better this week,” adds Thuy. “Not many kickups learn so fast.”

“Right,” Afi puts in. “It takes guts for a no-belt to go against whites and yellows.”

“Makoto asked me to step up,” she fibs as if to reassure herself.

“But it was your choice.”

Thuy palms her upper arm. His friendly gesture brings on a vaginal flush, a holdover reflex from the sex trade.

Get mind **doobed** and groin lubed,
or suffer the pepper grind.

She blanks her face and counts ten, before facing him. "You're right." She pats his hand. "Thanks."

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Most days she runs three laps around the track, which has a firm gritty surface that yields to footfalls like the hallway floors. Makoto has given her a stopwatch and recommended the three-kilom run for breath control and endurance. It's the best advice he's ever handed out. If she wakes early she may run before her stint in the dataroom. More often, she runs in the evenings after pickup games of basketball or volleyball. The solitary romps have upped her self-esteem, especially after dramatic improvements in the 1st-week. Since then, faster runtimes have called for lots more effort.

Tonight she feels energized. She rounds the long curve, lengthens strides and holds nothing back. She urges legs faster, trying to make the last lap count. Her muscles strain at full gallop. She pushes fatigue aside, gulps air and runs flat-out for the end marker, where she kills the stopwatch and yelps for joy.

Nyssa jogs several meters before she corrals her momentum. Exhausted and accomplished, she plants hands on hips and drinks heaps of air. She checks the watch: 0:07:58.4.

Cosmic whopper!

"Good run."

She turns and sees Cook standing a few meters away.

How long has he been watching?

"Nice form, Nyssa. Your feet land true, neither bowlegged nor pigeon-toed. It shows you have the right stuff for achieving rundog speed."

She puffs on his words, ignoring sore calves, rampant heart and

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billowing lungs. She's walking on air. "I just cracked eight minutes."

"Good. A fine start."

"Am I getting close?"

"Close enough. Before long, you'll run three kiloms in seven minutes."

She can't believe her ears. "Seven minutes?"

"Don't worry. You're ahead of the curve for a novice."

Does he think I'm an Olympic
runner in the hunt for gold?

"Seven minutes flat?"

"You needn't run top-speed next week. Run as best you can. Later you'll learn breathing rhythms and such."

"Dunno about seven minutes."

"You'll find the spirit, Nyssa. Every rundog does."

"That's awful fast."

"The more you practice, the easier it gets."

He walks off and leaves her slack-jawed. Cook always manages to flatten her ego and wet her appetite. He's never far from her mind, like a guilty conscience. She longs for his tacit approval and often daydreams about chance meetings. When one occurs she feels so inadequate.

Why did he mention my footfalls?

Of course! It's my large feet.

She frowns at her callused trotters that seem to bulge from tabi boots like warbling bullfrogs. It galls her more when Makoto recites his maxim, "Big feet make better weapons."

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Nyssa closes the door to her humble abode. It won't lock, but that's no problem. Friends or foes will knock first and ask permission. She's back "home" after another long day. The Spartan décor greets her with silent approval: futon, exercise mat, open closet and wall mirror. She flops down on the muslin blanket that covers the futon. Relieved of

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weight, her leg muscles slump like deadwood.

She regards her sweat-stained overall. It's gross and way gone. But who cares?

Slovenly clothes are like stealing forbidden fruit after years of escort preening when she fussed over hairstyles, manicures, UV baths. Her geisha persona called for eyelash extensors, weekly mudpacks, monthly chemical peels, yearly protoxin injections. Nothing brought satisfaction. On her best days, she'd run a gauntlet of mirrors and rue the flaws in each facial effigy.

Here in the co-op, no one bothers with appearances. Nyssa swaggers around like a roughneck sailor, her BO reeking like a skateboarder's socks. The diet of grains and beans makes it near impossible to withhold a fart. After a period of shameful modesty, she has learned to let go just as the guys do.

She removes tabi boots from sorely bludgeoned feet. The boots have indents separating the big toe from the others. Ditto for ankle socks. Nyssa drops socks in the laundry bag. A blackened toenail has quit throbbing two days ago. She grunts with pleasure while massaging callused heels that have wailed too hard on the mon-fat-jongs. Her fingers are bruised, but none looks in danger of falling off.

Nyssa slips out of the overall, which she hangs in the closet beside its companion and away from the shelf of clean socks, underwear and knockwurst swimsuit. She drops the halter-top and briefs in the laundry bag.

She peers over her shoulder at the embedded wall mirror. It's full-sized and swallows her whole. It's perfect for studying her form and posture while performing wufaq. No need to worry over body bruises that are nowhere so bad as injuries to hands and feet. She examines her bottom cheeks for faded imprints of the loathsome Nereïds. Another week and the tattoos will be gone forever.

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When she asked to remove the tattoos, **Doc Quark** outed his palatial

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smile. “Easy as pie. You'll need three treatments. One week apart.”

She expected Doc's jury-rigged laser to leave blemishes as unsightly as the tattoos. But she despised the Nereïds more than she feared his methods.

Doc led her to the examination couch. “Please disrobe. Lying face down and showing your tattoos, yes?”

Nyssa waited till Doc turned aside, then peeled down like a stripper with hives. After she got prone on the flexfoam, Doc whistled.

“Knowing years ago a pimp who branded his houris with Nereïds.”

She froze. A deer in headlights.

“Needn't worry, Nyssa.” He placed metal disks on her bottom cheeks. “Spreading no gossip, good or bad.”

“Will I feel heat?”

“No, no! Is nonintrusive therapy from my plastic surgery days, before coming here and getting new purpose. Yes?” Without a pause he went on, “Disks are bathing skin in low-frequency **PEMF** that dedifferentiates your tainted dermal cells. Compresses I give. They're soaking up dyes. You apply each night before sleep. Tattoos soon fading to natural skin tones. Yes?”

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Like a miracle worker, Doc has scotched the onus of three years in Tokyo. When the tattoos vanish for good, she plans to get a high-cut swimsuit for swimming laps or relaxing in the whirlpool.

Nyssa faces the mirror and gazes on familiar contours. Her body reflects a genetic potpourri, a 2nd-generation hand-me-down from Chinese Grandmother and Nordic Grandfather.

The Nordic side has given her strong wrists, sky-blue eyes, square shoulders, sorrel-brown hair, dimpled knees, shapely calves and solid farmgirl feet.

The Asian side has given her epicanthic folds, modest stature, soft lemon skin, prominent cheekbones and a smallish bosom. Yet her breasts stand out like tracking beacons.

S&MAA insisted on breast implants that plumped her toadstools to geodesic orchids. Ever since, those brave new bulbs have drawn male eyes like moths to floodlights. Their predatory leers are a nuisance, and bra support has become necessary to quell the pendulous whiplash.

Nyssa cradles her breasts. Though blemished with punch marks, they're soft and malleable. Thank goodness qat lessons have strengthened her pectorals and anchored her corms in place. After her old bra got frazzled beyond repair, she has performed braless without slacking off.

What the heck. Might as well accept these glamorous peaches as naturalized citizens.

She applies Doc's compresses to her gluteals and crawls in bed. Since arriving at the kennel, she hasn't recalled one dream, either good or bad. Like a corpse she has slept and felt more pep in the mornings.

Warm blankets of fatigue cuddle in. Two winks and she's out.

Read on...

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Prologue.

ottets (quasi-phonetic Russian) father. [BACK](#).

phat (short-form slang) Pretty Hips And Thighs. More generally, phat means attractive, shapely, endearing. [BACK](#).

WHV (acronym) Web Holovision Viewer. WHV signifies the output medium for devices like holojamborees or 3-D flatviews. [BACK](#).

ruex (French) streets. [BACK](#).

superfly (slang) elegance, polish. [BACK](#).

inspecteur (French) inspector. [BACK](#).

Yakutsk is the capital city of the Sakha Republic in eastern Russia. It has a population of 500,000, circa 2074. [BACK](#).

Jenna (Jen) Marov: rundog. Born 2037. Adult height: 150 centimeters; weight: 44 kilograms; brown eyes, brown hair. 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. [BACK](#).

HOAM® (acronym) Hyper-Optional Appendant Marketplace. HOAM facilitates sharing and barter among linked computers. Computer owners get virtual credits by allowing 3rd-parties to use idle processors. [BACK](#).

kawan kuhwun (Malay) friend. [BACK](#).

Singapore Spaceport is located near Singapore Island at the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula. [2° 15' N, latitude; 103° 30' E, longitude] [BACK](#).

KLCC (acronym) Kuala Lumpur City Center. KLCC signifies the Petronas

towers complex, in particular the hypermall at the base of towers.

[BACK](#).

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Chapter 1. [Hotfeet](#).

ZEST (acronym) Zanzibar Environmental Standards Tribunal. ZEST represents the bureaucratic quagmire resulting from the Zanzibar Environmental Accord or ZEA, which has been in effect since 2042. ZEST has brought the entire global community on-side. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Cancún Pact or the Odessa Détente, ZEST's noncompliance penalties are enforceable across borders. However, distrust among nations has turned ZEST into a judicial circus whose rulings are often ineffective. [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](#).

gomiyoki *go-me-YO-kee* (Japanese) garbage can. [BACK](#).

beamersat (coined word) beamer satellite. They're large platforms in geosynchronous orbit that transform solar photons into microwave beams. The beams are sent to earthside receptor stations, which convert microwaves to electricity that feeds into the global grid. [Back](#).

Diet is Japan's chief-legislative body of elected parliamentarians that meet in Tokyo. [BACK](#).

shimatta *SHE-MAH-tuh* (Japanese) damn, damn it. [BACK](#).

okina yatsu-san *OH-KE-nuh YAH-tsu-sahn* (Japanese) Mr. Big Guy. [BACK](#).

kumiai no tsuyoi otoko *koo-ME-EYE no TSU-YO-eye OH-toe-ko* (Japanese) guild of strong men. [BACK](#).

RF (acronym) radio frequency. [BACK](#).

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Chapter 2. [Bedfast](#).

nej tack *nej tack* (Swedish) no thanks. [BACK](#).

avitaminosis signifies organic disorders resulting from vitamin deficiency. [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](#).

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

S&MAA (acronym) Silkworm & Morlock Actors Academy. It is a scam for female debutants. [BACK](#).

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Chapter 3. [Kennel](#).

Ahab (Cook) Ho: rundog. Born 2016. Adult height: 169 centimeters; weight: 74 kilograms; dark-brown eyes, gray hair. Begins bodyguard service in 2036. Co-founds Dog Breakfast co-op in 2045. [BACK](#).

Meghan (Meg) Getzler: orange belt, dataroom sorter. Born 2045. Adult height: 178 centimeters; weight: 71 kilograms; gray eyes; brown hair. Becomes a widow 2066. Joins Dog Breakfast co-op in 2067. [BACK](#).

mignon (French) cute. [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 fuxgates are caused by a lack of gravity. [BACK](#).

reprofactuary is a protozygote bank. Women of childbearing age are entitled to make selective sperm deposits from their partners. Their reprofactuary accounts are held in strict confidence before, during and after “in vitro” pregnancies. [BACK](#).

NoEmbryo® is a popular birth-control device widely used by females. NoEmbryo is a small ring that is laced with hormonal agents. Some women claim the rings stimulate vaginal muscles and so amplify sexual pleasure. [BACK](#).

stallion (slang) woman with a taut, statuesque body. [Back](#).

wufaq (DB acronym) Warm-Up For Applied Qat where qat signifies quantum assassination theory. Wufaq is pronounced *WOO-fahk* and sounds like the cross between a courting bullfrog and a distempered bloodhound. Wufaq may also mean “yes” or “acknowledged reception” to a compadre's directive. Rundogs use this expression as subterfuge during forced radio comm. *DB is short for Dog Breakfast co-op*. [BACK](#).

Makoto (Mack): rundog. Born 2029. Adult height: 174 centimeters; weight: 79 kilograms; gray eyes; salt & pepper hair. Becomes a champion of samurai arts in 2049. Joins Dog Breakfast co-op in 2053. [BACK](#).

palmslate is a flat multipurpose computer (tablet) that measures 16 by 20 centimeters. [BACK](#).

Nailah Bhullar (Nigh): 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](#).

doobed is the past tense of the verb “to doob” which is derived from the noun doobie. Doobed signifies the mental state induced by a

marijuana joint or another recreational substance. [BACK](#).

Doc Quark: DB's chief medical officer. Born 2025. Adult height: 170 centimeters; weight 82 kilograms; brown eyes, dark-brown hair. Joins Dog Breakfast 2049. [BACK](#).

PEMF (acronym) Pulsed ElectroMagnetic Field. [BACK](#).

S&MAA (acronym) Silkworm & Morlock Actors Academy. It is a scam for female debutants. [BACK](#).