

Free Sample: Afterlife

Cool Assassins 3

Manuel falls in line at the arrivals queue and assumes the bored scowl of a frequent flier. His rapid heartrate goes unseen as he nears the security station. He steps under a detector arch while his carry-on tote braves the parallel scanner.

An “all clear” chirps as he and baggage have gone undetected. His lungs expel air. He exits and grins secretly to stay unremarked by the **public eyes**.

For better or worse,
I'm past the 1st-hurdle.

Until this moment, Manuel has been skeptical about the electronic shield. **SOAR** has the best scanners on earth. Its sensors are reputed to appraise the number of carats in a wedding ring.

My fake ID and composite blade
have eluded SOAR's state-of-art
scanners. I'm inside and free
to make mischief.

He descends via elevator then follows the crowd along a corridor which opens to a wider space between skyscrapers. No locals are wearing **AR** glasses, and very few are using smartphones. His own glasses show zilch since no adverts appear, just an odd map display. He could be eyeballing through clear lenses. At last, he sees a hotel banner sitting across a courtyard of street-vendor kiosks and mulling shoppers.

Positively archaic!
This megadome is the white
elephant everyone says it is.
Well, no cause to get choosy
inside a peon's bargain byre.

He navigates the flea market, locates the hotel lobby and books himself a weeklong sojourn.

Once inside his hotel suite, Manuel doesn't relax. Audiovisual recorders are everywhere in **Tsawwassen**, even in the washrooms. So his special ID and weapon stay hidden for now. He does what any journalist might do upon arrival in a foreign city. He stows minimal luggage in the closet and refreshes himself in the shower stall. After which he grabs his camera and accessory pack then heads out for a looksee.

He keeps his actions and body language as casual as possible. For newcomers are scrutinized more carefully than longterm residents. He can't afford to do anything that might arouse suspicions. Even the weeklong stay at the hotel is a deception. In truth, Manuel must adhere to a tight schedule. He aims to take care of business this evening and to leave the megadome before midnight.

Tsawwassen doesn't have rectangular blocks like other cities. It has a grid of hexagons called nexuses, which occupy 15 times more area than regular city blocks. More astounding is the lack of motor vehicles. The concourse level is reserved for pedestrians and bicyclists, each having separate paths, while rollerbladers, skateboarders and electric chairs roam as they please.

They add chaos to the mix, but he doesn't see mishaps causing injuries. Motor vehicles can be heard from the subbasement, their sounds like whispers between tomb raiders.

He walks, refusing to wear AR glasses.

They're useless, for they
show very few adverts.
Might as well browse
with naked eyes like
the local bumpkins.

He takes purposeful strides, aiming to get away from the hotel as quickly as possible. Along the way, he buys Chap Stick, toothbrush and a box of mints to freshen breath. Then he strolls through two more nexuses before he dumps the Chap Stick, unused mints, toothbrush and

used smartcard in a recycle bin. Getting rid of the smartcard is crucial since the spacers are probably tracking it with a micro-GPS beacon.

He enters a less-traveled nature park. He knows the main paths have mounted audiovisual recorders, but off-path woodlands have only the odd aerodrone to monitor human mischief. Amid the underbrush is the safest place to dig out his unique smartcard and assassin's dagger, which he keeps hidden at the small of his back.

The **Brotherhood** has done thorough research and furnished a shortlist of **pets** that may offer sex on the side.

It's blasphemy to let whores
practice openly and legally.
Spacers are totally decadent.
Never mind, I'll assess their
online photos then choose
which ones are worth calling
and who'll be carved tonight.

From the preliminary report, a Jew bitch with thick brows and jet-black hair has already caught his eye. If she isn't available he'll try an Asian gook or Polynesian. He'd love to torture a nigger or mulatto, but he doesn't trust himself to remain kind and considerate long enough to win her trust.

When he slots his unique smartcard, it'll show a longtime resident with no criminal record. That fact alone ought to put their fears to rest.

He calls the Jewess, and his nerves begin to sing...

1. Hacker Foray

Two weeks earlier

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

Marija pokes her nose around the corner. Her eyes bulge as the view floods her mind with shock and awe. Across the floor are two-dozen young women trussed and gagged. Marija connects the dots.

A human-trafficking op
of soon-to-be sex slaves
being shipped offshore.
From the fair tresses that
top many of the prisoners,
they're likely going to Asia
where libidos simmer hot
over Nordic-blonde locks.

A chill scoots 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 "relay" antenna above the rear wheel of her motorcycle. **Dog Breakfast** co-op will relish the news since this comm vortex is likely 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 techies 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 surveillance cams. But there's still four blocks to go before she reaches the motorcycle, and Marija perks her ears for sounds of pursuers. She makes use of show-window reflections to spot possible tails.

At this early hour there a few pedestrians. Two dog walkers are normal for early Saturday morning. They're yakking on vidphones and minding their leashes. Neither passes close to her motorcycle. So far, so good.

Marija stops aside the bike, retrieves the helmet and takes her sweet time putting it on. Enough time to sneak glances for someone out of place. A person sits behind the wheel of a parked Viper across the street, halfway 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, should be able to coax more info from the Viper's ID. And 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 and guns the motor before she brakes and swerves right into an alley. Topping 70 kph around the dumpsters, she slows down and turns 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 can't dillydally and
let my bike get boxed in.

Lucky for me, motorcycles
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.

Marija dismounts and looks for GPS beacons under the fenders. She

squats and finds the offensive bug under the front-wheel fender. Tossing it away, she checks under the seat and back fenders. The bike is clean as fresh mountain streams.

The tower has been built on a slight decline so that she must exit down pedestrian steps. 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.

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

At last she deems it safe to take the highway out of town. She heads for the enclave where Kavita has set up shop.

Half an-hour later Marija drives 200 meters past the rendezvous where she veers to the shoulder then into the underbrush. There she watches for 15 minutes until it's almost certain she has lost all tails.

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A swarm of comsats relay a bulk of long-distance messages, but most comsats are positioned and maintained by spacer co-ops. The transnat cartel deems these comm links vulnerable to eavesdroppers, so it uses inhouse cables to stream proprietary info among corporate nexuses 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 the cartel. Privacy is crucial, for the cartel doesn't need government watchdogs to know about price fixing or other scams that reward the powers that be.

A fiibe 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 mirrors at times that avoid 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. Within a few days 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 and wiggles in her lips. Marija doubts Kavita would notice a grown bear foraging for food inside the tent.

“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.”

Marija nods then hesitates...

Loath to pour cold water
on Kavita's hearth 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?” Her eyes widen to beacons of concern. “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? But it throws new light on our mission. You need to take precautions.”

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

The hacker nods. “OK, for starters. But it sure won't help if they blow your head off. I'm worried, Marj.”

“Forget it. I'm a big girl now.”

“I won't forget. You're my guardian and best friend.” Her face sobers. “I s'poze there's no way to track and rescue the women.”

Marija shrugs. “We know about them. That's square one.”

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

She nods, although both women know DB doesn't have resources to fix every injustice. “By the way, I picked up a tail.”

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

“Nah. Dead certain I lost him.”

Kavita sighs. “Thank the matrix for small favors.”

“My 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 and better disguise.”

“Maybe. But no suggestions from you.”

“Wha'd'ya mean? My online snooping makes me an authority on current fashions.”

“Let's not go overboard. I'll just wear sunglasses and maybe a new hairstyle.”

“New hairstyle? No way. Your follicles are cropped almost to the skin. You need a wig bonanza, Marj. How about orange cornrows and braids lapping your shoulders?”

Marija frowns, wary of her compadre's impish face and twinkling eyes.

My Muslim heritage approves
of the co-op's modest attire.

I'm less confident wearing
the female fashions of LA,
so I favor unisex styles
which happen to coincide
with motorcycle duds.

The new wig would make me
look like a walking billboard.

“Solar plexus, Kavita! Pics of me are liable to go viral. 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 frowns deeper. “Fashion hides lots of stuff, but you can't hide skin as dark as mine. I'm profiled in most hoods save Gramercy Park. This is the USA, remember. If their prisons don't earn double-digit profits, financial markets are liable to tank.”

“I hear you, Marj. Getting arrested by flatfeet is a no-no. But you can bet the cops will hassle black chicks wearing motorcycle duds way more than they'll accost fashionable junior execs. So you'll dress up as a highbrow yuppie. Colorful skirt suit over a white frilly blouse and hem above the knees though not quite a miniskirt. Enough publicity to

highlight your shapely legs jacked-up on high heels.”

“I’m too tall for those.”

“Nonsense, Marj. Let me finish. You’ll be carrying a briefcase with official-looking paper inside. Here’s the kicker. Only oligarchs handle paper nowadays. Anyone with a briefcase full of paper has gotta be high up the food chain. Flatfeet **oughta** avoid you like the plague.”

Marija shakes her head and pulls a crooked smile. “If they don’t peg me for a hooker and book me for soliciting.”

“Nonsense. They’ll hafta line up behind the guys angling for your **vidcom** number.”

“Where’d you get these crazy ideas?”

“**Fing** and I watch erotic romances in bed before we sleep. Don’t laugh. Best way to keep his mind on the mons pubis.”

Marija rolls her eyes. “I appreciate your eclectic advice. But I’m gonna ask Timekeeper. She mentioned something about cosmetic creams that defeat facial recognition algorithms.

“You’re breaking my heart, y’know.”

Already Published...

↓ Loose Threads ↓

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07J5GQV19>.

↓ Hot Wheels ↓

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B086HDMB2M>.

↓ Spin-off ↓

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B082Z86BN1>.

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Prologue.

Public Eye is the standard surveillance recorder in SOAR habitats.

Public eyes record 12-million pixels-per-frame in 24-qubit color at 75 frames per-second, with the visual stream synchronized to digital audio. [Back](#).

SOAR (acronym) Solar Omnifarious and Aspiring Republic. Spacer colonists belong to this economic confederation of member co-ops.

[Back](#).

AR (acronym) Augmented Reality. AR glasses display websites and infomercials. Users can't get lost since they're linked to GPS which furnishes smart maps and situational awareness. [Back](#).

Tsawwassen is a futuristic metropolis (urban plexus) suspended over the Fraser River delta in former British Columbia, Canada. The name may also refer to the quasi-province or Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve (TCP). [Back](#).

Brotherhood is a terrorist group of antiabortionists who abhor members of the LGBTQ community. They believe men are the superior gender, and women must yield to their husbands. The group regards persons without European blood to be inferior. There are suspicions the Brotherhood is connected somehow to Red Falcons, a subsidiary of the transnat Zesticon. [Back](#).

pet (SOAR acronym) PsignoEmotional Therapist. Pets are professionals who render personal and psychoanalytical healing. Some pets apply mental techniques; others apply sensual therapy. [Back](#).

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Hacker Foray.

Marija (Marj) Combik: Brownbelt, Scout. Born 2046. Adult height:

181 centimeters; weight 175 kilograms; blue eyes; brown hair. Joins Dog Breakfast in 2065. Earns brownbelt in 2074. [Back](#).

fibe is the short form for fiberoptic channel. [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 (Sis) Persson, rundog, AI consultant;
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, weapon's instructor;
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: Hāiyùn 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 noosphere. [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](#).

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

vidcom is a full-function smartphone giving audiovisual pod casting.

[Back](#).

Fingar, Habib (Fing): white belt, resident hacker, IT magician. Born in 2049. Adult height: 168 centimeters; weight: 81 kilograms; blue eyes; dark-brown hair. Develops new safety protocols for HyperNet in 2069. Joins Dog Breakfast co-op 2070. [Back](#).