

Prologue.

Tsawwassen, 18 Jul 2076

Manuel falls in line at the arrivals queue and assumes the bored scowl of a frequent flyer. His rapid heartrate is undetected as he nears the security station. He enters the scanner arch while his carry-on tote braves the parallel sensor.

An “all clear” chirps as he and baggage go unremarked. His lungs expel air. He exits and grins inwardly to stay hidden from **public eyes**.¹

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

Until this moment, Manuel has been skeptical about the electronic shield. **SOAR**² 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

¹ **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.

² **SOAR** (acronym) Solar Omnifarious and Aspiring Republic. Spacer colonists belong to this economic confederation of member co-ops.

to complete my assignment.

The elevator takes him down 85 floors. Then he follows the crowd along a corridor which opens to a wider space between skyscrapers. Few locals wear **AR**³ glasses, and fewer yak on smartphones. His AR glasses are almost lifeless since no adverts appear, just an odd map display. He could be seeing through clear lenses. At last, he sees a hotel banner across a courtyard of street-vendor kiosks and shoppers.

Positively archaic!

Tsawwassen is the white
elephant everyone says it is.

Well, no need to get choosy
inside a peon's bargain byre.

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

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Inside his hotel suite Manuel doesn't relax. Public camcorders are everywhere in **Tsawwassen**⁴, even in the washrooms. So his

³ **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.

⁴ **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).

special ID and weapon stay sequestered for now. He does what a law-abiding tourist might do after coming to a foreign city. He stows his 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 knows newcomers are scrutinized more carefully than longterm residents, so he keeps body language casual and discreet. Manuel can't afford to do anything that might arouse suspicions. Even the weeklong stay at the hotel is a deception, for he must adhere to a tight schedule. It's important to take care of business ASAP and to leave by 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. The concourse level is reserved for bicyclists and pedestrians, 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 injury-causing mishaps. More amazing is the absence of motor vehicles which are shunted to the subbasement, whispering like 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 distance himself from the hotel. In the flea market he buys a toothbrush, Chap Stick and a box of mints. He strolls through two more nexuses before dumping the toothbrush, Chap Stick, unchewed mints and smartcard in a recycle bin. It's crucial to dump the smartcard since it might be sending a GPS beacon through which police could track his movements.

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 hides at the small of his back.

The **Brotherhood**⁵ has done thorough research and furnished a shortlist of **pets**⁶ that may offer sex on the side.

It's blasphemy to let whores

⁵ **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.

⁶ **pet** (SOAR acronym) PsignoEmotional Therapist. Pets are professionals who render personal and psychoanalytical healing. Some pets apply mental techniques; others apply sensual therapy.

practice openly and legally.
Spacers are totally decadent.
Never mind, I'll assess their
online photos then choose
the one I attack tonight.

From previous online browses, a Jew bitch with thick brows and jet-black hair has 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 presents his doctored smartcard, it'll indicate a longtime resident with no criminal record. That fact ought to put a pet's fears to rest.

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

1. Hacker Foray

Saturday, Two weeks earlier

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

Marija⁷ pokes her nose around the corner. Her eyes bulge as the scene grips her with shock and awe. On the floor are a score of young women trussed and gagged. Then she connects the dots.

A human-trafficking op
of soon-to-be sex slaves
ready to ship offshore.
From the fair tresses that
top many of the prisoners,
they must be going to Asia
where libidos simmer hot
over Nordic-blond 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**⁸ from this comm vortex.

⁷ **Marija (Marj) Combik**: Born 2046. Height: 181 centimeters; weight 75 kilograms; brown eyes; black hair. Joins Dog Breakfast in 2067. Earns brownbelt in 2074.

⁸ **fibe** is the short form for fiberoptic channel.

The bugs are planted.
And I gotta get outta
here before I'm spotted.

She rotates her head so that the **CCD**⁹ 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**¹⁰ 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**¹¹ cartel.

She takes one last pan, ducks behind the corner and jogs toward the exit. Eyes and ears are on full alert to spot any guards or cronies. It's fortunate that today is a national holiday, which means the normal staff of techies and caretakers have left the servers unattended, which is probably why traffickers have used the building as a temporary drop. She's lucky no one has made her, for the perps are sure to be armed and she isn't wearing body armor.

Marija breathes a sigh of relief as she steps outside the building

⁹ **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.

¹⁰ See Appendix A

¹¹ **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.

and walks toward her motorcycle. She sends **Kavita**¹² a message to cease control of the surveillance cams. But there's four blocks to go before she reaches the bike. Marija perks her ears for sounds of pursuers and checks show-window reflections for possible tails.

At this early hour she doesn't expect a lot of pedestrians. Two dog walkers seem normal for an 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 something out of place. Across the street halfway down the block, a person sits behind the wheel of a parked Viper. 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**¹³ vortex.

Her infrared sensor indicates the car's hood is no hotter than

¹² **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.

¹³ **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.

others in the early morning sun, which means he's been parked for half an-hour or more. She aims the magnifier patch at the front bumper and memorizes his license plate. Kavita, her mission compadre, should be able to coax more info from the Viper's ID. So Marija won't mistake it for another of the same make & model.

Maybe I was noticed
during last week's raid.
Oughta cadge 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. Now 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**¹⁴ be a GPS
beacon fixed somewhere.

Which means I must stretch
my lead to **gimmie**¹⁵ 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

¹⁴ **gotta** (vocal slang) got to. A bare infinitive verb.

¹⁵ **gimmie** (vocal slang) give me.

courtyard.

Marija dismounts, squats down and looks for GPS locators on the insides of fenders. She finds the offensive bug above the front wheel. Tossing it away, she checks under the seat and back fender.

Now the bike is tracker clean
as a pure mountain stream.

The tower has been built on a slight decline which forces her to 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 he follows.

Downing stairways on a bike is like bronco riding a horse. She gets a firm grip on the handlebars and lifts her butt, letting legs and arms bear the thumps. 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**¹⁶ 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

¹⁶ **kilom** (short form) kilometer. Eight kilometers equal five miles approximately.

where she veers to the shoulder and 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 the 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**¹⁷, which installs and manages fiberoptic corridors, has arranged separate bundles inside transcontinental cables for the use of the cartel. Privacy is crucial; the cartel doesn't want government watchdogs to find instances of price fixing or other biz practices.

A fibe cable happens to run beside a pipeline right-of-way near the **GREENS**¹⁸ enclave east of Los Angeles. Here's where Kavita is preparing to splice into transnat cables. Her main tool is a variable **piezoelectric**¹⁹ mirror which lets 95% of the light through or reflects

¹⁷See Appendix B

¹⁸ **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.

¹⁹ **piezoelectric** (physics term) describes materials that change properties under an applied

up to 50% of the light to an offshoot. Microamps boost photon traffic for both streams, so there's no falloff of intensity downstream of the sieve.

It's crucial to insert mirrors at times that avoid quantum-integrity checks, which would alert 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 will analyze 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 and 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. They connect to a modest satellite dish and radio antenna perched near the treetop to send and receive FM signals to and from orbit or downtown LA.

electric charge.

Marija opens the tent flap and steps inside. Kavita is slouched on a stool, eyes drinking in data from the flatview, a toothpick dancing from her lips. Marija doubts she'd notice a grizzly bear rummaging inside the tent.

“Well... How'd I do?”

Kavita gives an involuntary jump then turns unfocused eyes to the vocal sounds. Belatedly, 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 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 **foxgate**²⁰! Are you OK?” Her eyes widen to beacons of concern. “Did anyone see you?”

“Doubtful. I reckon they had one guy eyeballing the security

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

cams. He couldn't see me, thanks to you and Fingar. Apparently the room with young women wasn't included in the video overlay."

Kavita looks relieved. "That's right. Today's a national holiday. Yet you can't overlook increased dangers. They call for extra precautions."

"I know. **Gonna**²¹ wear body armor next time."

The hacker nods. "Fine for starters. But armor 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**²² can work something from the satellite cams."

She nods, although both women know Dog Breakfast doesn't have resources to mend every injustice. "By the way, I picked up a tail."

"Solar Plexus, you've **b'en**²³ busy. Does it mean I gotta move?"

²¹ **gonna** (vocal slang) going to. A bare infinitive verb.

²² **Nāilah 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 later arrested. Meets Absen Ho in 2041. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2046.

²³ **b'en** (vocal slang) been.

"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."

"Whoa! My online snooping makes me an elite authority on current fashions."

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

"New hairstyle? Not nearly enough. Your follicles are cropped down to the skin. You need a wig bonanza, Marj. How about orange cornrows and braids hanging down below 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.
A 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. No fun being arrested by flatfeet. 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 an upscale **quebie**²⁴. A frilly white blouse under a snazzy biz suit with its hem above the knees. Just enough publicity to highlight your shapely legs on high heels.”

“I'm too tall for those.”

²⁴ **quebie** (slang) cubicle jockey, white-collar networker.

"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**²⁵ avoid you like the plague."

Marija shakes her head and curls 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**²⁶ number."

"Where'd you get these crazy ideas?"

"**Fing**²⁷ 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."

²⁵ **oughta** (vocal slang) ought to. A bare infinitive verb.

²⁶ **vidcom** is a full-function smart phone giving audiovisual pod casting.

²⁷ **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.

2. Manager's Inquest

Friday, Six Days Later

Tsawwassen: 10 Jul 2076, 10:00 a.m.

Yvonne Boden²⁸ marches down the hallway, her eyes ablaze like headlights in a brownout, her chin jutting forward, her mind set in grim resolve.

I won't be denied.

I will ask my questions
and get to the bottom.

She has short-cropped hair, ample shoulders and fulsome hips, whereas her trim waist goes unnoticed under the loose-fitting overalls she likes to wear. Critics and detractors often say, “Boden is a battle tank,” though not to her face. Yet the image fits, for Yvonne barrels ahead like a runaway locomotive. The odd bureaucrat in this stretch of hallway squeezes against a wall, giving Tsawwassen's manager an open runway.

I swear I'll get to the bottom

²⁸ **Yvonne Boden:** Born 2025. Adult height: 172 centimeters; weight: 72 kilograms; hazel eyes; blonde hair. Works at repairing robots in freespace 2050-2057. Migrates to Tsawwassen 2063 and joins the Urban Management co-op. Becomes Tsawwassen Manager 2073.

of the fiasco in **Haida Gwaii**.²⁹

Just then, her vidcom rings as her teeth grind involuntarily. She huffs and answers, “Boden, here.”

It's her adjutant who relates the current number of maternity leaves and how many have already given childbirth at least twice. Yvonne has asked for the data to determine if Tsawwassen's population might grow above & beyond the annual influx of immigrants.

Most of the **crèche**³⁰ yips jump to orbit as soon as they graduate. But a small minority don't, and these tend to breed and upset forecasts for population growth. Her adjutant's numbers show the city's current expansion program is in accord with demographic prognoses.

Satisfied, Yvonne thanks her adjutant and disconnects. She admits to another motive for requesting the data, which stems from her dislike of women who choose multiple pregnancies just to get the perks and financial benefits. She understands the common urge for women to undergo pregnancy once or twice, but there's no biologic imperative to get knocked-up half a-dozen times. It harkens back to patriarchal societies which charged women to

²⁹ **Haida Gwaii** is an archipelago off the westcoast of British Columbia (Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve), formerly called Queen Charlotte Islands.

³⁰ **crèches** are educational institutions devoted to the care and upbringing of children aged two through 18.

breed nonstop till their wombs closed or they died in childbirth.

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By law and custom, no **TCP**³¹ woman is obliged to bear children, but newcomers need time to free themselves from traditional gender roles. Many still follow their husbands' wishes, even though they needn't depend on them for the welfare of their families. Women earn identical wages as men, and **SOAR**³² pays full expenses for the three-year maternity leaves. Once wives get partners to wear condoms, husbands become redundant except for companionship, which happens to be the best of reasons.

Childbearing women can resume careers in former co-ops without penalties. Likewise they must work for six months before they can go on another maternity leave. Women who follow norms will spend 85% of childbearing years on sabbaticals in-between pregnancies, which isn't enough time to hone skills and gain experience.

Women who've had multiple childbirths often end up in the crèche-Guide co-op. That goes double for immigrant mothers who bemoan the separation from children at age two. Their consciences

³¹ **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.

³² **SOAR** (acronym) Solar Omnifarious and Aspiring Republic. Spacer colonists belong to this economic confederation of member co-ops.

push them to childcare roles where they handle kids between age two and seven. By spending most of their careers in maternity leave, they never gain the skills to teach older youngsters.

So there's a surplus of women who handle the diapers-to-potty-training phase, and not enough qualified **Guides**³³ to educate youngsters when it really counts, between seven and 18. She's had to enlist men and women down from the soup cans to fill these crucial roles. All this because some women drop babies like torrential rain. These same women end up filling menial jobs after menopause all the way until they declare August age.

It irks me to watch so
many wasted opportunities.
Tsawwassen women enjoy
freedoms that females
have sought for millennia.
Mothers earn more voting
clout on social issues than
men or childless women,
yet polls show mothers

³³ **Guides** are members of Guide co-ops. They supply crucial guidance for youngsters between age two and age 18. Those who educate the next generation are revered in SOAR communities. Their responsibilities toward youngsters are taken very seriously. All their actions are monitored so that any hint of abuse will be uncovered and prosecuted.

are the least appreciative
of female rights or causes.

Yvonne knows the crèches are located here in Tsawwassen because souper women who've been exposed to microgravity or solar radiation give birth to children with weaker bones or unhealthy mutations. By choice and custom, women in the soups take maternity leaves on earth.

To compensate future mothers for the downsides of displacement, SOAR lets them earn double wages for three years of maternity leave and entitles them to resume careers after enrolling their kids in the crèches. SOAR covers the travel costs to and from maternity dorms, whereas souper mothers who visit youngsters in the crèches must pay their own way inbound and out.

To be fair, SOAR extends the same benefits to TCP immigrants as they do to women down from the soups. That includes the option to redeem shares that have been earned during maternity leave at the value they're worth in the soup cans. Basic earnings and co-op shares are valued according to the local costs of living, which counts five times more in the **soupcans**³⁴ than in TCP.

³⁴ **soupcan** is the nickname for a cylindrical habitat in cislunar space. In plural reference, soup cans are often shortened to soups. These orbiting habitats have six-kilometer diameters and rotate to simulate earthlike gravity. Soup cans were 1st-envisioned by the Russian futurist Tsiolkovski, and later in the 20th-century by Gerard K. O'Neill.

Immigrant mothers who declare **August Age**³⁵ in the soups may convert 12.5 times their basic equity for three years of maternity leave. The soups offer residents the option to spend their elder years in partial-earth gravity, which extends lifespans for most folks. Thus immigrant **mothers**³⁶ have monetary incentives to choose pregnancies as often as possible.

Yvonne approves of the financial rewards for childbirths. She knows, as all women do, that such labor can be a traumatic experience both physically and psychologically. Society should award women for the suffering they've undergone to perpetuate the human race. Women should enjoy bonus funds to alleviate the August years of their lives.

Yvonne is less sanguine about the added voting clout awarded

³⁵ **august age** marks the changeover from fulltime co-op service to semiretirement. Metics may declare themselves "august aged" anywhere between the ages of 55 and 75. When the august interlude is declared, a metic's co-op shares become nonvoting, the equivalent of solar bonds. The retirement hoard must be converted to spendable cash in annual installments.

³⁶ **mothers** exercise the votes of their newborn children for the 1st-two years of the child's life, after which the proxy vote is shared between the mother and the Guide co-op. A mother who has accumulated 56 shares in her co-op will see them doubled (for the purposes of voting on social issues) to 112 for two years then reduced to 84 for the time that her child resides in the crèches.

In the case of a mother who holds 56 votes in her co-op, let's suppose she has given birth to six children of which one she keeps during maternity leave and five are progressing in the crèches. This mother would raise her voting clout to $252 = (5 \times 28 + 2 \times 56)$.

Once the child graduates from the crèches at age 18, the right to vote reverts to the new adult.

to refugee mothers, especially those who opt for multiple pregnancies. They spend too little time with their co-ops and never gain a sober appreciation for SOAR's equal-gender policies. Worse, many stay married and goaded by their husbands whose attitudes are based on the beliefs and biases of the social havoc from which they fled.

Unprotected sex knocks the entire house of cards flat. Unprotected sex turns a sensible policy that ensures societal fairness and mothers' health into madcap greed.

Three-year maternity sabbaticals oblige mothers to care firsthand for newborns until age two. The sojourn of intimate bonding is crucial for infants' future growth to healthy adults. It's common for mothers to get antsy during the drudgework of early childcare. Too much baby talk becomes monotonous, so mothers are allowed short leaves from the maternity dorms where they can interact with other adults. They may enroll in rehab-exercise or attend classes to acquire new skills. They may shop at "outdoor" markets, take in holoflix or dine at restaurants.

Yet mothers who engage in unprotected sex ruin the whole program. Not only do they shorten the periods between pregnancies; they rob youngsters of the full care and attention they deserve. It's hard to lavish love on young ones when mothers have new biscuits in the oven. Worse, natural conception ups the odds

of giving birth to disabled children.

She has urged refugee mothers to take charge of their sex lives until her voice grows hoarse. Females are supposed to get male partners to wear condoms. For many refugee women, unprotected sex is a matter of willful negligence. She suspects the real instigators are the husbands. Mothers who accumulate enough convertible **shares**³⁷ can afford to bring their male partners along to the soups.

Yvonne recalls her ten years in the **soups**³⁸ where she performed dangerous jobs in **freespace**³⁹ before a max dose of radiation exposure forced her to emigrate to Tsawwassen. She's proud of those forays in the star-sprinkled void where she repaired robotic foul-ups. Her bonus shares have been earned the hard way. Indeed even the decision to jump to the soups from her native Norway took courage.

Traumas of childbirth deserve bonus shares. But mothers who engage in constant childbirths are endangering their health and reducing their quality of life, while supplying marginal social benefits.

³⁷ See Appendix A.

³⁸ **soups** (short-form slang) soup cans which are cylindrical habitats in cislunar orbit (L5).

³⁹ **freespace** (SOAR slang) is vacuous space beyond planetary atmospheres where humans are weightless due to freefall.

Women who get pregnant outside the **reprofactuary**⁴⁰ are getting more bonus shares than they should. This is a loophole she wants to amend, though she has no idea how.

+==+==+

Yvonne turns a corner and sees the final stretch of hallway before the inquest room. Her train of thought returns with a vengeance.

I want answers for all
those drowned villagers.

She knows the facts are too sketchy and the excuses too pat. There's more to the shipwreck than meets the eye. She aims to demand more evidence from the Public Observers Elect. Then she'll grill the Dog Breakfast rep six ways to Sunday.

As manager of a city of six million, she's obliged to corroborate justice as much as possible. SOAR is a confederation of independent co-ops which pursue goals that further the aims of its members.

Even critics of SOAR concede that greed for material wealth is absent since everyone earns the same spendable wages, regardless of co-op and regardless of the importance of an individual's tasks.

⁴⁰ **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.

All **metics**⁴¹ perform jobs vital to the well being of their co-ops and to society as a whole. Metics may accrue bonus shares based on achievement and merit. This equity stays unspent until they declare August age.

The **TM**⁴² co-op elected me
to make calls which affect
everyone in Tsawwassen.

I can't make good decisions
unless I receive useful stats
from members who collate
the current facts & figures.

Hence my co-op is a team
which needs every member
to pitch in, else all of us fail.

She enters the inquest room, ready to contend with the thorniest conundrum that civic leaders ever face. She must judge security issues without sufficient data. Dog Breakfast co-op is seldom forthcoming about its actions, and **POE**,⁴³ its ordained supervisor, is almost as stingy with the facts.

⁴¹ **metic** signifies a person who has SOAR citizenship. Metics are entitled to a vote on social policy as soon as they've joined a co-op. Inmates of debtors' college may express their opinions, but their votes have no effect. August-age metics who have retired outside SOAR communities are likewise ineligible to vote.

⁴² **TM** (acronym) Tsawwassen Manager co-op.

⁴³ See Appendix C.

Nestor Kosmas, the designated spokesperson for POE, is present as expected. But she's astonished to see **Ahab Ho**,⁴⁴ the nefarious leader of Dog Breakfast. Normally the co-op sends a token rep. Ho's appearance proves that he recognizes the serious nature of the shipwreck.

The participants have yet to take seats, including the coroner and **blackbear**⁴⁵ rep. Yvonne regards the coroner and constable as mere formalities, for neither has firsthand info about the tragic incident or the resultant corpses. All the hard facts have come from sworn statements of Dog Breakfast co-op. Such a lack of reinforcing data is suspicious in itself.

Yvonne marches to the elevated desk and chair. She gestures for everyone to sit and finds her own seat.

"Fellow metics, please be comfortable." Taking a deep breath, she adds, "The inquest to the shipwreck near Haida Gwaii on 12 May 2076 will now begin."

Yvonne pauses and studies the prompter on the desk.

"Coroner Rockford and Constable Haroon is there any last-minute evidence besides these reports here on my flatview?" she asks.

⁴⁴ **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.

⁴⁵ **blackbear** is a police constable in spacer communities.

"No, ma'am," they answer almost simultaneously, for the question is expected.

"The reports cite 28 dead bodies, yet none have b'en verified with DNA tests." She frowns. "This smells like a coverup."

"There are no DNA records for folks who live in traditional villages," says Nestor Kosmas. "They're exempted until they join a co-op on Big Island or in Tsawwassen, so DNA tests on the remains would've proven nothing."

"Fine." Yvonne huffs. "But there are other means to identify bodies. Dog Breakfast burned the corpses before survivors could ID their loved ones. That's irregular and unacceptable."

"During the shipwreck, the bodies were chopped to pieces," replies Ahab Ho. "Many skulls, hands and feet sank before we reached them. The skulls that we managed to retrieve were fragments. Likewise we found no recognizable faces, no intact ribcages. We couldn't tell if two limbs belonged to the same person."

"So you claim." Yvonne scowls. "Then you cremated the remains, instead of waiting for proper authorities to arrive and assess the situation."

"Yes, ma'am. That's true."

"You don't sound repentant, Mr. Ho."

"Maybe not, ma'am, though I tried my best."

“Harrumph! D'you realize that Haidas bury their dead. They don't cremate them.”

“I apologize as I did when I brought the urns to **Kung**.⁴⁶ There wasn't enough recovered flesh to fill 28 bentwood boxes, so I came with urns which gave survivors a sense they'd gotten all their loved ones.”

“Though you knew otherwise,” she pounces.

Ho shrugs. “When you're the bearer of bad news, it's better to leave some truths unsaid.”

Yvonne shakes her head. “How you got villagers to accept handfuls of ash is beyond me. But let's move to the survivors. Why so few?”

She waits while both participants remain silent. At length, **Nestor Kosmas**⁴⁷ turns to the Dog Breakfast leader who clears his throat.

“As I've said,” answers Ho, “the canoe and occupants were chopped to pieces in Bluefin's screws before our crew could react.”

Yvonne thins her lips. “Your speeding trimaran collided with a wooden canoe traveling, I assume, much nearer the shoreline. Was

⁴⁶ **Kung** is the name of a small village on the western shore of Virago Sound, Graham Island, Haida Gwaii.

⁴⁷ **Nestor Kosmas**: Top official with Public Observers Elect co-op in TCP. Born 2032; 185 centimeters tall; 83 kilograms heavy; blue eyes; brown hair speckled with gray. Joined POE co-op in 2066.

there no one at the steering wheel?"

"The person at the helm had died. Fragments of his skull and brain matter coated the windows of the bridge. My crew and I never saw the collision."

Yvonne feigns disbelief. "You've claimed there was a foreign power involved, yet no one has reported foreign actors in the area."

"Explosives were planted in his skull and were set off remotely."

"Mr. Ho, you represent the co-op whose forsworn job is to protect our community from foreign mischief. Surely, you possess scanning devices that detect implanted explosives."

"We do, ma'am. The scans revealed a comm antenna and small nodes that we mistook for computer chips or electrical storage pods."

"So you knew this helmsman was a foreign agent?"

"Yes, ma'am. We were using him to convey disinformation."

"I suppose you don't care to elaborate?"

"To say more would jeopardize the security of TCP."

"A pat excuse." Yvonne sighs. "Spooks hiding behind the veil of security." She turns to Kosmas. "Have you anything to add?"

"Our inquiry shows that Dog Breakfast acted according to its charter. To say more would jeopardize our common security."

"No doubt," she growls, venting a full dose of irony. "Let's talk about consequences. I doubt Kung will prosper after the loss of its

fishers and chief carver.”

“Dog Breakfast has pledged food aid until Kung recovers,” says Ho. “And we’ve asked fishers from other bands to work at Kung temporarily.”

“Fine.” She nods. “That’s only fair. But what about the teenagers? You’ve enrolled the boy in the crèches where he’ll be years behind the other **yips**.”⁴⁸

“He has a grasp of spoken English, so his prospects shouldn’t be worse than immigrant kids who’ve begun at similar ages.”

“Alright. Maybe the Guides will perform miracles.” Yvonne sighs. “But please explain why you’ve abducted the girl to the soups?”

“She lost a foot in the shipwreck. Our **pogrc**⁴⁹ has pioneered a new method to regrow her foot but only under conditions of microgravity.”

“How long before she’s walking on her own?”

“Another month, give or take.”

⁴⁸ **yip** (SOAR acronym) Young Informed Person. Adolescents in SOAR communities are educated in dormitory-style crèches until they reach age 18. They are called yips until graduation.

⁴⁹ **pogrc** (SOAR acronym) PsignoOrganic Guidance-Response Counselor. A pogrc is a registered physician who tailors supplemental mixes to individual tastes, lifestyles and body chemistries. Their amends are recorded with the SOAR health authority, which manages the feedback database for specific age groups, lifestyle needs and genotypes.

“She'll be too old to join the crèches.”

“**Raven**⁵⁰ is being tutored as we speak.”

“I see. Then I assume she'll deorbit, once she's hale.”

“Too far ahead for me to speculate.”

Yvonne snorts. “No use expecting you to volunteer info.” She rolls her eyes. “Yet I recognize the efforts of Dog Breakfast to amend this tragedy. Having said that, I swear I'll pounce with all my authority if I ever learn you've withheld pertinent facts.”

She glares about the room, lips downturned. “This inquest is hereby dismissed.”

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Kosmas and Ho exit the room and stroll down the hallway, their footfalls brisk, their grins tenuous as if they've stolen a cookie jar.

Kosmas faces the leader of Dog Breakfast. “Careful, Cook. You're walking on ice so thin you'll need a snorkel.”

“I know, Nestor. I know.”

⁵⁰ **Raven (Rave) Rocksong**: aboriginal forager, ambitious dreamer. Born 2061. 168 centimeters; 65 kilograms, gray eyes, jet-black hair. Joins Dog Breakfast in 2079.

3. Tenderfoot

Wednesday, Five Days Later

Tesla4: 15 Jul 2076

Swimming, swimming and more swimming...

Raven Rocksong wriggles within the web restraint that grips her as soft fingers around a balloon. She's light as a feather, bones and guts having escaped from her bag of skin.

All her life she's enjoyed swimming until forced to do it nonstop. In water or air, weightlessness gets old in a hurry. These last ten weeks have stretched out to feel like a lifetime.

Raven gapes at the bandage on her foot.

If only I could see within.

But I gotta wait till a QMA⁵¹

comes to change the gauze,

though the itching drives me

crazy and I can't wait to see

if toes have sprouted at last.

⁵¹ **QMA** (acronym) Qualified Medical Advocate. QMAs are qualified to handle traumas in humans or animals. They deal with burns, lacerations and fractured bones. They handle emergency surgeries and harmonize the 12 meridians. QMAs yield to the guidance and supervision of a pogrc. *See also* pogrc.

Jo has told her, “When your toes first appear, it’ll mark the climax of the regrowth phase.” And her mentor says, “Enjoy the vacation, ‘cuz⁵² rehab will give you more pain than you ever thought possible.”

I can't wait. Featherlike floats
are driving me madcap crazy.
The only time I feel normal
is when I swim at a place
where air is above
and water is below.

She craves to see Jo who visits on most days. **JoAnna**⁵³ is one person that Raven halfway trusts. The QMAs are kind and helpful, but she daren't confide in them about personal stuff. Raven is younger than anyone in the soups, and Jo has hinted that some metics would send her back to earth where her foot would take years to regrow instead of weeks. Her mentor is one scary woman 'cuz she's done fantastic stuff in her life and she's **abso**⁵⁴ honest.

Jo has furnished a prompter and shown how to use it. Prompters are small computers which can be carried anywhere.

⁵² **cuz** or ‘cuz (short-form slang) because.

⁵³ **JoAnna (Jo/Kemosabe)**: rundog. Born 2035. Adult height: 178 centimeters; weight: 71 kilograms; yellow eyes; red-flaming hair. She drives taxi in Miami 2054-6. Joins Dog Breakfast Co-op in 2057.

⁵⁴ **abso** (short-form slang) absolutely.

They're perfect for sick folks who float around weightless. They don't need cords or cables except during sleep times when they're hooked to recharge.

Without a prompter Raven would've gone stark-raving mad several weeks ago. She's found hundreds of online sites that were forbidden on the village computer in Haida Gwaii.

She gets more news about the soupicans than she ever thought possible. There are vids of robots that assemble **beamersats**⁵⁵, robots that dig up asteroids, robots that process raw regolith and churn out useful stuff. She's gaped at metics playing sports, shopping in markets, dining out or wearing spacesuits where they work in **freespace**⁵⁶ and repair robots. Raven has even chatted with friendly metics, although Jo says, "they're just avatars who act as if they're real people."

One of her favorites is an aerodrone which streams live video while it roams and checks atmospheric conditions in the soupcan. She gets a bird's-eye view of the crop fields, woodland parks and six-arm towers where most of the metics live and work. People

⁵⁵ **beamersat** (coined word) beamer satellite. They're large platforms in geosynchronous orbit that transform solar photons into microwave beams (masers). The beams are sent to earthside receptor stations, which convert microwaves to electricity that feed the global grid. The satellites also function as relays for earth-to-earth communications.

⁵⁶ **freespace** (SOAR slang) is vacuous space beyond planetary atmospheres where humans are weightless due to freefall.

and plants are stuck on the surrounding edge, even if they're sideways or upside-down. And a narrow streak of light burns down the center. It's like a world that has turned inside-out.

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The weird perspective has bugged her until one day she asked Jo, "What keeps the upside-down soil from falling off?"

"Centrifugal Effect," said Jo, then laughed when she noticed the bewilderment on Raven's face. "Tomorrow I'll bring a spinner demo to show what 'centrifugal' is all about."

Jo was true to her word. The next morning she brought a disk with clear glass on top and some kind of wood on the bottom. In-between was an open space where seven balls rolled this way and that. The disk stood on a short pole with a windup handle, and Jo used a magnetic plinth to stick it to the floor.

"Normally the balls gather at the center," said Jo, "'cuz the bottom surface is a bit concave, and gravity pulls them to the middle. But here the gravity is almost nonexistent, so I'll jiggle and nudge till the balls roll to a random grouping. There, now we'll start."

Jo cranked the handle, and the disk spun around.

"See them heading to the rim? The centrifugal effect keeps loose objects in the soup can stuck to the inside skin, like artificial

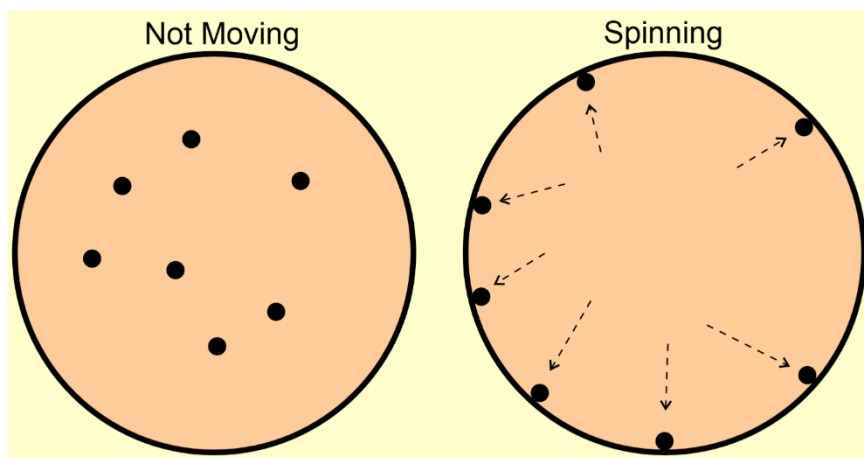
gravity.”

“But we aren't spinning, are we?” Raven asked.

“Yes, we are, though not very fast since we're near the spin axis. I'd guess you're spinning slower than you can paddle a kayak or rather a **baidarka**⁵⁷. But spinning, we are.”

“I don't get any sense of spinning.”

“That's 'cuz everything around you is spinning as well, and the time to spin once around is rather long, 110 seconds.”



She remained skeptical.

“Wait till your foot's healed, Raven. I'll take you to the soup's rim where you'll experience the same gravity as you did on earth. Then you'll be spinning about 170 meters per-second. That's 17

⁵⁷ **baidarka** looks like a one- or two-person kayak. Baidarkas are made of natural, indigenous materials, such as tanned animal hides and hollowed bolls of yellow or redcedar. The upper covering is usually fitted separately.

times faster than a **warrior canoe**⁵⁸ can skim through water.” Jo laid hands on the teenager's shoulders. “Later, I promise to teach you about Newton's Law of Inertia, which explains how this soup can remains in orbit and how it creates artificial gravity. For now, trust this demo to prove how objects stay glued to the edge.”

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Raven misses her goodma and headpa who're gone forever, drowned in the shipwreck with too many band members. Only she and Jade have survived the crash between the GREENS trimaran and **Kung**⁵⁹'s head canoe.

According to Jo, her friend and would-be partner Jade is still on earth, studying in the crèches. Once her foot is regrown and she finishes rehab, Raven fears she'll be sent back to earth.

Even before the shipwreck, she has longed to live and work in space. Yet her time here has been wasted, for she's had few human contacts and most of her experiences have been passive via the prompter.

Beyond the door of her room, she hears limbs clamping on holds which betray that someone is coming down the hallway. She

⁵⁸ **warrior canoe** is a dugout canoe powered by 16 to 24 paddlers. Long ago, warrior canoes were used to raid villages on the Pacific coastline. Nowadays they're used for fishing and village-to-village travel.

⁵⁹ **Kung** is the name of a small village on the western shore of Virago Sound, Graham Island, Haida Gwaii.

hopes they're Jo's or a QMA's. But the thumps grow softer and further away.

Where's Jo?

Where's my bandage changer?

They've left me to stew like

boiled fish in a pot or

cooked meat on a spit.

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Raven comes aware of the suspended web that wraps her torso. She opens eyes and regards her boxed prison: four walls, ceiling and floor. Her anger flares as she realizes she has wakened from sleep once again.

I hate losing track and

letting life pass me by.

Never have I slept so long

like a moss-coated deadfall

rotting on the forest floor.

Jo says I heal faster when

I'm asleep, but that's no fun.

A whole soupcan waits for

me to explore, but here

I lie, numb to the world.

Raven recalls her former life where she gathered herbs and wild berries, foraged all day long and never got lost. She thrived in the rainforest and led a superactive life before the shipwreck.

There's no rule that keeps her confined to the web restraints. On several occasions she has wriggled out of the coverlet and freefloated about the larger crooked space, drifting this way and that until she bumped against a wall which would fling her to the opposite side. By pushing off with her limbs, she could really boost her speed. If she avoided the web, which was strung like a hammock, she'd boomerang wall-to-wall or bounce ceiling to floor. The back & forth was great fun until fatigue set in. Then she'd feel worn-out like an elder with snow-white hair, leaving her no choice but snuggle inside the web and fall asleep.

Today I won't waste my energy
bouncing reckless wall-to-wall.

It gets old after a few rebounds.

I wanna explore my orbital
home the only way I can...

Online with my **prompter**⁶⁰.

Raven awakens the device and keys in her password. She pauses a moment to decide where to begin and how to search.

⁶⁰ **prompter** is a mobile computing device (laptop) with all the bells & whistles.

Jo has shown her the websites that have basic lessons about spacer customs. But Raven has grown tired of so many facts and methods, so many rules of thumb, which are strange and exotic from her fisher-village life.

After visiting the anatomy website, she has seen naked men and women as well as pictures exposing the guts inside them. Now she can picture the tangible hookups that caused nighttime sounds from her parent's bedroom. Her goodma always looked mighty cheerful in the mornings, but it's hard for Raven to imagine cuddling with **Jade**⁶¹. The explicit knowhow looks kind of gross.

In recent weeks she has found ways to explore online beyond the news streams and learning sites. For instance, there's a site which has lists of what are called "movie" videos. The vids come in three kinds: action, mystery and romance, and they play for as long as it takes Kung women to prepare a dinner feast. Raven has tried all three but finds romantic vids the best.

She can tell that most of the vids happen somewhere on earth, for the actors wear exotic costumes, way different from spacer overalls or useful clothes that she used to wear in **Haida Gwaii**.⁶² Most of the movies must've taken place years ago since the actors

⁶¹ **Jade Runner**: aboriginal fisher, amateur astronomer. 173 centimeters; 81 kilograms; brown eyes; black hair. Born 2060.

⁶² **Haida Gwaii** is an archipelago off the westcoast of British Columbia (Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve), formerly called Queen Charlotte Islands.

are carrying stacks of paper squeezed inside books. Nobody needs to lug that bulky stuff around nowadays when there's so much online info.

Despite the odd clothes and painted faces, Raven is impressed. Such young women have urbane jobs and say the darnedest phrases. They travel in fast cars and work hand-in-hand with men in office towers. They're strong-minded and outspoken. They cherish the freedoms that come from well-paying jobs, and their newfound skills give them more confidence.

Still, it's hard to grasp the need for so many varieties of clothes: daywear for the office, eveningwear for dates and activewear for fitness clubs. Women must spend hours changing from one costume to another, applying makeup for each situation. And why do they need fitness clubs in the 1st-place?

Couldn't they just use the stairs instead of the elevators?

Then Raven realizes it would be near impossible to climb stairs in those goofy shoes with raised heels. And the women would seldom go three steps before they'd stop to yak on vidphones.

Yet the convoluted rigmarole gets amazing results. The women have way more leverage over their boyfriends. They can drop one and pursue another without batting an eyelash. Back in Kung their suiters would be fighting tooth & nail, whereas in the "movies" the jilted guys just shrug and mope as if it happens all the time.

Two hours later, she has watched two romantic vids, which were fun until the characters became predictable with petty behaviors.

Since cultural allusions fly over her head, Raven is often clueless about the fine points of their chats. And besides, the romantic pair always kiss and make up at the end.

Searching for other novelties, she clicks on "Honolulu Pole Dance Champions." The vid begins...

Using arms alone, a young man climbs the pole then hangs upside-down from one knee. He extends his body off the pole, supported only by a hand and foot. A moment later he drops down as if pretending to fall before he catches himself. Raven is impressed with his strength and muscular control.

By contrast the woman champion performs more deliberately. Her acrobatic moves are smoother, and she often pauses to pose, showing off the flexibility of her long legs. Raven reckons she owns the muscles and mettle to do just as well after a few months of practice.

Next she watches the routines of the runners-up for either gender. So intent are her eyes on the flatview, she doesn't notice Jo's entry to the room.

"Don't tell me you're watching burlesque?" says Jo in a brash

voice.

Raven withers under her mentor's reproach, though she's quick to defend the acrobats. "These are serious contenders. The narrator claims they'll soon compete at the Olympics."

"Humph! Those losers have **b'en**⁶³ saying as much for decades."

"Whatever you think, it takes muscle control," says Raven.

Jo floats sideways to get a better look at the performer. "At least she ain't wearing elevator heels."

Raven gapes, eyes growing large. "Whyever wear those?"

"The ballerina effect." Her mentor shrugs. "Makes a gal's gams look sexier. Pole dancing has come outta strip clubs and burlesque venues. Dancers prize glitter and glamour over athletic prowess."

"It takes skill to do what these champions do."

"For sure, Raven. They have some talent, but our **rundogs**⁶⁴ can do as much with a few weeks' practice. Martial arts require more strength, stamina and muscle control. For instance, we've got a co-op gal who has made the same twists and twirls hanging from silks. And Jen did it 60 meters above ground without safety nets. In fact..."

Jo pauses in midbreath and narrows her yellow-predator eyes.

⁶³ **b'en** (vocal slang) been.

⁶⁴ **rundog** means the same thing as blackbelt in the school of qat. Rundog signifies the 6th-level or penultimate achievement.

“Can you keep what I tell you between us?”

Raven nods.

“OK. Here's one of our trade secrets.” She fumbles with a leatherlike case slung to her waistbelt and withdraws a prompter. “Jen wouldn't've performed at all if that bigwig hadn't insulted her. Then the lamebrain compounded his error when he bet 200 **Solar\$**⁶⁵. Which reminds me, that bozo still owes us 80,000 crows.” She laughs. “Never bet against Jen.”

Jo's face turns serious. “From what I saw in your vid, the distance between poles is about 4½ meters. D'you agree?”

“Meter? How far is that”

“You're about a meter and a-half tall. Suppose three of you were lying down head to foot and again head to foot, then you'd cover the space between poles. Does that make sense?”

Raven hesitates then says, “I guess so.”

“I believe 4½ meters will be the standard they'll choose for Olympic competitions. In your vid, how many dancers used both static pole and spinning pole?”

“All of them.”

⁶⁵ **Solar\$** signify solar dollar(s). SOAR mints a limited number of coins which are highly prized, since their value appreciates against earthside currencies. The coin is five cents in diameter, composed of superhard alloy and has a green gemstone at its center. One Solar\$ equals 900 crows or 867.67 Amero\$ or 588.46 Euros or 490.17 Hong\$.

Transaction values taken from final quotes on the SOW exchange on the 1st of May 2076.

“Did they get down from one pole, do a breakdance across the floor then climb up the 2nd-pole?”

“Yeh.”

“But nobody went pole-to-pole through the air?”

“No. They came across like you said.”

Jo fingers her prompter. “Once I find the right file, I’m gonna show you Jen’s version of pole-to-pole. You won’t see her entire routine, just the crossover, but enough to show how miffed Jen was. For instance, you won’t see her gape-tooth smile. She’ll be sporting her prosthetic tooth, and she’ll be wearing a two-piece swimsuit instead of a dull overall. And she’ll don a fancy wig to counterbalance **tabi**⁶⁶ slippers.” Jo frowns. “The bugger still owes us 80,000 **crows**⁶⁷.”

She eyes her prompter. “Aha! I’ll stream it to your flatview, and we’ll watch together...”

Jen is a small woman, yet it’s clear she knows her way around a pole. As she works the upper pole she leans outside and rotates to the inside. Then launches herself and makes two somersaults in midair before she lands gracefully on the lower part of the opposite pole. It all happens so fast that Raven has trouble believing her

⁶⁶ **tabi** TAH-bee (Japanese) split-toed (socks).

⁶⁷ **crows** are the monetary unit of TCP. One Crow equals 0.0011 Solar\$, 0.964 Amero\$, 0.654 Euros, 0.545 Hong\$. *Transaction values taken from final quotes on the SOW exchange on the 1st of May 2076.*

eyes.

Jo laughs. "Believe it or not, this was a piece of cake. Jen used to do stunts like this 60 meters up with no safety nets. Now let me rerun this clip in slow-mo. And I'll point out the physical tricks she uses to create her magic."

She fingers the prompter then streams the vid, pausing when Jen leans outside the pole. "Don't forget, Raven. This demo was recorded on earth where objects drop at 9.8 meters per-second per-second. So Jen had to fly sideways at better than six meters per-second to reach the 2nd-pole. Here she prepares to build up momentum." She restarts the slow-mo. "Watch Jen accelerate over the length of her torso from outside to inside. Don't misjudge the arm strength. Her wrist grips are stronger than anyone's I've ever seen.

"By the time she's ready to separate from the pole," Jo goes on, stopping the vid, "her center of mass is moving at $2\frac{1}{2}$ meters per-second." Restarts the slow-mo. "Two powerful legs furnish added thrust. The 2nd-foot pushes at an angle to her center of mass and induces the somersaults.

"Here's the best part; watch the landing. See how Jen greets the pole like a bee on a flower petal? First she extends her right hand and grabs the pole across from her waist. Next her left hand grabs the pole across from her knee. A millisecond later her right foot

contacts the pole, followed by her left foot. All this time her torso keeps dropping till arms and legs absorb the downward pull of gravity. At which point, her right hand holds the pole above her head, and her knees are bent at angles less than 90°. Jen is poised to rebound upward with powerful arms and thigh muscles."

Jo laughs as the clip ends. "There you see a simple-Simon maneuver from a superb athlete." She lays a finger across her lips. "Remember. You promised to keep mum about this. Right?"

Raven nods.

"No sense letting our foes know how easy it is we can do 'em."

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The demo is yet another reason to worship the fiery redhead. Jo personifies the wonderful world that waits, once her foot is mended. But the process is taking too long. She needs to get off her back, to become active again, to get the heck going.

"Please, Jo. Take me swimming..."

"Sorry, Honey. No time to take you down to the low-gravity pool. Today I'm busy with security matters. Maybe tomorrow."

Raven is crestfallen.

"Soon the QMA will be around to change your bandage. You must be dying to see if your toes have sprouted."

"Can I stay in the soups after my foot's healed?"

“Ain't s'pozed to.” Jo sighs. “But you've got special genes. So there might be a workaround if you stay quiet about **DB**.”⁶⁸ She winks. “Promise?”

Raven nods eagerly.

⁶⁸ **DB** (acronym) Dog Breakfast is a covert SOAR co-op that works in conjunction with POE to ensure fair play.