

SLEEP STATE INTERRUPT

T.C. Weber

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For more information contact

See Sharp Press
P.O. Box 1731
Tucson, AZ 85705

www.seesharppress.com

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*For my wife Karen,
my brother Dan, and my parents*

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Baltimore, Maryland

Waylee

“Protesters have gathered since early this morning,” Waylee told her Comnet audience as she exited the *Baltimore Herald’s* downtown building. “They won’t go quietly.”

Above the white rectangle delineating the camera view of her data glasses, the cloud metrics read “Live Reach 139.” Even her house parties had bigger audiences. But beside the current count, the thumbs up clicker steadily increased. If she got enough upvotes, she might make the print edition and priority digital feed. Maybe impress her bosses enough to keep her on when the re-org jackals arrived.

The bone conduction transducers on the glasses’ arms blasted poly-thrash from her playlist, rattling her skull with battleship guns and tortured jet engines. Her pink-calloused, black-nailed fingertips played imaginary chords on imaginary guitar strings. Her scalp pulsed with harmonics as new song lyrics and pieces of story assembled themselves, moving too fast to consciously organize.

Waylee passed from the building’s shadow into midday sun, which washed out the data overlays. *The paper should have sprung for a fancier model.* The data glasses weren’t just cheap, they were ugly, with thick obsidian frames and an obvious, intimidating camera lens. The nightlife section lived on scraps, though, and even at twenty-seven she was one of the youngest people on staff. She yanked up her hands and adjusted the brim of her stretch hat until she could see.

The Independent News Center, the region's biggest nonprofit for investigative journalism, was a few blocks south. They launched on the old Internet. After the transformation into the much faster Comnet, the new gatekeeper—Media Corporation—imposed access fees that indie media couldn't afford. INC went into debt, then made the mistake of attacking MediaCorp.

Guitar riffs broiling her inner ears, Waylee marched down a cracked sidewalk along a deserted street. Sticky heat radiated from the asphalt, autumn yet to provide any relief. Just beyond, the expressway rose on columns above the city, an apartheid scar to get suburbanites to and from downtown offices without having to interact with scary locals like her neighbors and friends.

Ahead, Baltimore police cars lined the curbs, blue-striped white sedans bristling with antennae and lights. Three slate-grey armored vehicles sat beyond. Two bore SWAT insignia. Glossy black tubes—*what are those for?*—rose behind the roof flashers. The third was unmarked, with a big vertical plate mounted on top.

"So far," she told her audience, "I see... ten squad cars, two SWAT carriers, and a mystery vehicle. I'll get a full count when I'm closer."

The Live Reach jumped to 180, and upvotes—minus downvotes—reached 66.

"DG," she told her data glasses, "audio transmit off. DG, top trending stories, Baltimore."

Hottest local submission at the moment: Ravens game predictions, with a net score of 3803.

Aliens could bombard the city with carnivorous Pikachu and even that wouldn't tear people away from their sports fixations. None of the other submissions were insurmountable, though. With a little post-event coaxing, maybe some organized downvoting of the competition, the *Herald* would have to publish her story, and let her do more.

She passed a corner, then spotted the three-story red brick building that housed the INC's offices and studios, plus classrooms, a library, and a dozen community groups—the heart of progressive Baltimore. People were gathered outside, several holding signs, and someone had torn down the big *Future Home of Charm City Condominiums* banner that was hanging from the roof last week. Impatient to drive INC out of business, MediaCorp had bought their building and tripled the rent, then evicted them when they couldn't pay.

Police blocked the streets on at least two sides of the building, hemming it in. Waylee saw Baltimore Sheriff's deputies, city cops in flexible body armor, and three people in suits standing off to the side. Another mystery vehicle with a metal sail perched up the road. Both, she now saw, were manned by men in grey combat gear with no insignia.

"DG, stop music." Silence echoed through her skull. Then she heard cars racing oblivious on the overhead expressway and a din of voices up ahead.

"DG, audio transmit on." She stared at the weird vehicle and swiped a finger along one glasses arm to zoom in.

The camera had pretty decent pickup—not high-def, but good enough for vlogging. Beneath the view frame, numbers indicated exposure, focal length, and other stuff she couldn't be bothered with. "DG, identify."

A black and white circle spun in the upper right corner, then "No matches." Either she had a bad angle or the vehicle wasn't in the public databases.

She looked around and spotted two INC journalists, both twenty-somethings like her, speaking to police. Judging from the way they moved from one cop to another, they weren't getting many comments. As far as she could tell, she was the only other journalist here.

Big surprise. This story should be huge, standing up to the biggest bully in America, but MediaCorp owned every news outlet in Maryland—including, as of last month, the *Herald* and its subsidiaries.

The highest ranking officer was a thin, dark skinned woman with lieutenant's bars. Waylee whispered to her glasses. "DG, search Baltimore Police Department, identify."

A short bio of Lt. Janette Rixson appeared. She commanded a Special Weapons and Tactics unit. She was conferring with the second ranking BPD officer on scene, a sergeant from Central District.

Some of the police turned to look at her. The Comnet icons disappeared from her overlay, replaced by a flashing "Connection lost."

I'm press, they can't jam me! She'd have to work offline now.

Waylee approached the lieutenant and sergeant. The sergeant, a beefy man sprouting long tufts of nostril hair, scanned her with motel room eyes. Waylee wasn't a model like her sister, but had high cheekbones, full lips, and other conventions of pretty. Further down, faux-leather pants clung to athletic legs.

Waylee wasn't desperate enough to flirt with Sgt. Nosehair. She flashed her laminated press badge. "Waylee Freid, *Baltimore Herald*. Can you tell me what's going on here?"

The lieutenant frowned. “I’m sorry, you’re going to have to talk to Media Relations.”

A press badge wasn’t the access key she’d fantasized about in journalism school. “And is there someone here from Media Relations?”

“No.” Lt. Rixson snapped fingers in the sergeant’s face and they proceeded to ignore her.

Waylee considered inserting herself between the two officers. She raised her voice instead. “Why are you jamming the wireless? The public has a right to know what’s going on in their city.”

The officers turned and narrowed their eyes. “This is a crime scene,” the lieutenant said, “and there’s potential for confrontation. The safety of my officers comes first.”

“What does that have to do with the wireless signal?”

The lieutenant thrust a finger at the people surrounding the building. “It’s procedure, in case they’re calling reinforcements. Now if you’ll excuse me.” She turned away again.

If these glasses had a bullshit detector, the meter would be off the scale. Waylee strode over to the ranking Sheriff’s deputy, hoping for less intransigence.

The deputy, a balding black man, glanced around as she spoke.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’m not authorized to speak to the media.”

She tried the armored vehicles next, but couldn’t even get close before being shooed away by men with guns. That left the woman and two men in suits, whom she couldn’t ID without Comnet access.

“Excuse me,” she asked them, “are you with the city?”

One of the men, ginger-haired with big eyebrows, eyed her up and down. He stank of aftershave or one of those body sprays that were supposed to make women tear off their panties.

“And you are?”

“Waylee Freid, *Herald*.”

“We’re with Charm City Realty.”

A subsidiary of Media Corporation. “In what capacity?”

“This building is our property. It’s being unlawfully occupied.” He pointed at the big windows. Angry faces stared back. “They’ve had thirty days to vacate, and as you can see, it looks like they have no intention to do so.”

“Why did you decide to buy this building? And isn’t a 200% rent increase unusually harsh?”

The man—realtor, lawyer, what?—stepped closer, his love spray making

her nose twitch. “We’re on the same side, you know?”

“I’m sorry?”

“We both work for Media Corporation.”

Not by choice. “I’m a journalist. I’m not supposed to take sides.” She almost believed it.

The woman pulled out a comlink. Like her data glasses, the palm-sized handheld computers tied their users into the shared techno-haze of humanity, as long as they had an overpriced account with MediaCorp or one of their dwindling competitors. “You say-id”—her voice drawled Virginian—“your name was Waylee Free-id?” She typed something on her comlink. “How do you spell that?”

Trying to intimidate me? “Could you tell me your names and why you’re here?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Free-id,” she said, “I decline to comment.” The other two looked away.

A familiar voice projected from a bullhorn over by the building’s main entrance: “Whose streets?”

A semi-unified chorus responded: “Our streets!”

Waylee gave up questioning Authority, and turned her attention to the faces gathered outside the INC building. She recognized most of them, people who worked or volunteered for the media, community groups who’d also been evicted, and a handful of supporters. About a hundred altogether, many holding signs with their group affiliation, like “Food for All” or “Baltimore Workers Association.” And at the windows, two dozen more.

One hundred and twenty people out of a city of 650,000.

“Whose streets?”

“Our streets!”

The police lined up, helmet visors down and big plexiglass shields held in front. Restraint cables hung from their belts. Most gripped long rubber batons, but a few held shotguns and assault rifles.

Her friend Dingo, a 21-year-old self-proclaimed revolutionary with uncertain ancestry and unruly dark hair, had the bullhorn. After a couple more repetitions, they switched to another time-worn chant: “The people united, will never be defeated! El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!”

Waylee flashed her press ID again and elbowed her way through the line of cops. She pulled off her black floppy hat, folded it to pocket size, and shook her mulberry hair loose.

Dingo lowered the bullhorn and grinned. “Oh goody, the nightlife section is here.”

“Go fuck yourself, Dingo. Is Pel here?”

“Your boyfriend went home after they shut off the power. What’s an IT nerd gonna do without power?”

“He’s not a nerd. What about Shakti?” One of her housemates, a tireless organizer for the People’s Party.

“Here this morning, coming back after work.”

“Anything to say to the press?”

He whipped up a hand, blocking her view. “Get that spy shit away from me.”

“Your revolution won’t be televised, then.” She jerked a thumb toward the police. “They’re serious, you know. Do you have a plan?”

Dingo shrugged. “I’m not in charge. No one should be in charge.”

Waylee spotted Willard Ramsey, the grey-bearded INC director, just outside the front door. She hadn’t seen him since handing off her story describing Media Corporation’s secret deals with the government, which *The Herald* had refused to publish. That was months ago, but nothing positive ever came of it.

“Hi.”

His lips curled down. Not happy to see her. “Hello, Ms. Freid.”

“What’s happening here?”

“What’s happening?” Narrowed eyes transfixed her camera lens. “What’s happening is this city, this country, this whole planet, are in deep shit.”

No doubt Baltimore was sliding downhill with a banana peel on its ass. She saw it every time she took the bus home—the boarded-up row houses, the homeless crones pushing shopping carts full of junk, the mounds of trash and discarded needles against the curbs.

“All because of top-down fiscal crises and ideology-driven ‘belt tightenings,’” the director continued. “And vicious predators like MediaCorp.”

Waylee zoomed in to a head shot.

“What’s happening,” he said, “is the convergence of government and corporate power to benefit the wealthy elite and crush any dissent. Crush any independent, uncompromising voices like ours.”

“DG, pause recording.” This is a disaster. “Is this my fault? Retaliation for showing how MediaCorp co-opted Congress and the president?”

He shook his head. “We’ve always challenged the hierarchy. You just added an extra thorn. Your documents were fantastic and we were happy to run with them.”

“It didn’t propagate.”

“Not many people saw the broadcast. MediaCorp blocked our Comnet access the day before it aired, and back channels are too slow. Then they turned their lawyers on us.”

“All these organizations evicted. I’m really sorry.”

He softened. “How about you? Pel told me *The Herald* put you on probation.”

“Not exactly. I just got an unfavorable performance review. We’re quite the bureaucracy.”

Her editors were mad she ‘aided a competitor,’ but relieved it wasn’t *The Herald* under attack. She’d worked hard to try to salvage her career. She’d be the number one target, though, once MediaCorp sent hatchet men to impose ‘efficiency measures’ on their new acquisition.

“Well I’m glad they sent someone to cover this,” he said.

“Actually I sent myself. But I’m here and I’ll try to get the word out.”

More cops arrived, wearing full combat gear, including helmet visors and gas masks. “DG, record.”

The director pointed up the street. “The police are supposed to serve the public, not MediaCorp.”

“What’s your plan?” Waylee asked him.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. “Honestly?...I’m not sure.” His eyes shifted back and forth. “I didn’t think they’d be so heavy handed.”

In the building windows, faces retreated.

Lt. Rixson spoke in a wireless mike, amplified through speakers mounted on the SWAT vehicles. “You are trespassing on private property. You must disperse immediately or you will be placed under arrest.”

The building’s defenders linked hands, first a few, then almost everyone. The INC director bit his lip, grabbed the bullhorn, and cleared his throat. “We’re not leaving, but we’re not violent. Let’s keep this peaceful, please.”

Waylee zoomed in to Lt. Rixson, standing behind the line of riot police. The lieutenant tapped fingers against her temple, then put the mike to her mouth again. “This is your last warning. Disperse immediately.”

The building defenders murmured. An INC production assistant—Waylee couldn’t remember her name—started a chant. “We won’t go!”

More voices joined. “We won’t go!”

The police waited through several repetitions, then pulled back, well away from the building.

In the crowd, fingers separated and faces relaxed.

“Yeah, go back to the donut shop!” Dingo shouted. A dreadlocked girl kicked his calf. Dingo grimaced and cursed.

Diesel engines grumbled. The mystery vehicles with the looming plates shuddered, then inched forward.

Waylee’s stomach shrank into a pit of ice.

Smiles disappeared. Feet shuffled backward. Waylee swept her head around, trying to record as much as possible.

The vehicles halted well short of the crowd.

“What the hell are they doing?” a protestor behind her said.

Waylee heard a low buzz and a series of clicks. Black stripes streaked across her view, scrolling irregularly from top to bottom.

Now they’re jamming my video. She pulled off the data glasses. Her vision cleared, but the buzzing and clicks intensified. They weren’t coming from the data glasses. They were coming from the center of her skull. Her eyeballs twitched, rattling her vision like a bumpy train.

All around her, people clutched their heads and fell to their knees. Some screamed, some writhed like epileptics. Police raised thick guns and fired canisters toward the building windows. They crashed through the glass and white smoke billowed out.

The street, the building, the sky, spun in circles. Waylee fell to her knees, smacking her hands against hot asphalt. Her stomach contracted and her breakfast spewed out over the pavement, leaving the taste of bile and the stink of rancid milk. She threw up again.

Her twitching eyes started to sting. *Tear gas.* She forced them shut. The cacophony of shouts and buzzing tore at her brain.

Finally the noise inside her head faded away, leaving only external groans. She blinked and forced herself to look up.

None of the protestors were still standing. Vomit splattered the street and steamed in the sun. White plumes of tear gas wafted down from the broken windows overhead.

A school-aged girl lay nearby on her stomach, arms and legs jerking up and down. An older woman crawled over and cradled the shaking girl’s face, which streamed blood from a mashed nose.

With a chorus of shouts, the dark-armored stormtroopers charged from both ends of the street. They hit the disoriented building defenders like a tsunami, slapping instant-lock cable ties around wrists and ankles, and swinging batons at anyone who resisted.

Dingo rose with clenched fists. One of the cops raised a shotgun and

blasted a wooden dowel at him. It glanced off his forehead, leaving a bright red gash. Dingo howled and cupped a hand against streaming blood.

Still on her knees, Waylee slipped her data glasses back on. No more striping, and the camera was still recording. Comnet signal still blocked, but no matter— she'd upload the video as soon as she got back to the news-room.

A bulky cop rushed toward her, shield up, baton raised. Pale blue eyes gleamed behind a pig-snout gas mask. "Hey, you!" The voice from his helmet speaker sounded tinny, more machine than man.

She held up her hands. "I'm press." She tried to remember where she'd put her badge.

Her attacker thrust out a black glove and snatched the data glasses off her face.

"Fuck you!" Waylee forced herself up, then grabbed the edge of the cop's shield. She shoved it aside and reached for her glasses, hoping to pry them out of his fingers.

Behind his mask windows, the cop's eyes widened. His baton swung down.

Her temple exploded in pain, and the world went dark.

* * *

"That bald patch looks awful." Waylee's teenaged half-sister, Kiyoko, averted her almond eyes and twiddled one of the silk bows in her long rainbow-hued hair.

Waylee's boyfriend, Pelopidas, patted her hand. "You're still the hottest scenester in Baltimore."

"Whatever." She felt a little relief, though. *He must not have found someone else yet.*

Kiyoko reached into her big Sailor Moon carry bag and pulled out a shoulder-length wig with black bangs and metallic blue dreads.

Waylee didn't bother rising from her bed to reach for it. "I hate blue." The walls of her hospital room, shared with a dwarfish woman who spoke neither English nor Spanish, were pale blue. Her detergent-reeking bed sheets were also blue. Even her flimsy gown, which offered no protection against the freezing air conditioning, was blue.

Kiyoko spread the wig apart in her pink-nailed hands. Its dreads drooped like jellyfish stingers. "It's cybergoth. It'll look awesome on stage."

"I hate goth too. And anything cyber related stinks of MediaCorp."

"I'm just trying to help, Waylee. This cost me fifty bucks."

Pel, who had transformed himself for the band with a buzzcut, long sideburns, and braided Jack Sparrow beard, snatched the wig from Kiyoko's hand. "Just wear it for now. Or don't. It's the least of our problems."

Waylee wanted to rail against the police department, about how she'd sue them for cracking her skull, but tears poured down her cheeks and she couldn't talk.

Pel grimaced. "We're here to pick you up. Threw that PowerPack in the RV today, maybe we can make some money street racing it." He smirked, but didn't barrage her with details the way he normally did.

We're both unemployed now. What the fuck are we going to do? Unemployment benefits were one of the first casualties of the *laissez-faire* Congress. "The enemy won," she managed.

Pel raised a pierced eyebrow. "The enemy?"

"MediaCorp, who do you think? Their enforcers put me here. Their hatchet men fired me." She was first on their list, and they didn't even give fair notice, just an email to come pick up her shit. No one at the paper defended her.

Her young doctor waddled through the open doorway, data pad in left hand, abdomen bulging with late pregnancy. "Good morning, Ms. Freid." She spoke with a precisely enunciated Nigerian accent.

Waylee sat up and wiped her eyes and nose on a sleeve of her gown. "Hospital coin counters evicted me this morning." Even a shared room was way too expensive without insurance. "Are you sure I'm good to go?"

The doctor stared at her data pad and swiped her fingers along its screen. "Your skull will take three to six months to heal, but it can do so at your home." She didn't look up while speaking. "In the meantime, do you play sports, anything like that?"

"No."

"It is important that you protect your cranium while it heals."

Avoid bullies with badges. Got it.

Kiyoko plopped down in the visitor chair and fished her pink-framed virtual reality headset out of her carry bag.

The doctor glared at Kiyoko and Pel. "Would you mind waiting outside while we consult?"

"They can stay," Waylee said. "They're family."

She shrugged.

“Now, any changes since yesterday? Headaches, ringing in the ears, memory troubles, mood changes?”

Waylee hesitated, then answered, “No.”

The doctor swiped the data pad again. “I am sending your post-operative instructions to your Comnet account. I encourage you to visit our hospital site and you can confer with our virtual doctor with any questions you might have.”

“I prefer real people.”

The doctor looked up. “I assure you that the virtual doctor can access every unclassified medical database on Earth and is therefore much more knowledgeable than anyone on staff. We would, however, like you to come in for a follow-up examination. Say, in three weeks?”

“I lost my insurance.”

“You can buy medical insurance on the exchange. I encourage you to do so as soon as possible.”

“With what money?”

The doctor fiddled with her data pad, ignoring the question. “Now, your MRI scan showed no brain damage, that’s the good news. However, the functional analysis indicated some anomalies that we’d like to examine further.”

Pel frowned and rubbed a thumb against two of the beads securing his chin braids. Kiyoko wasn’t even listening, her smooth Asian features half engulfed by the VR headset.

Waylee’s throat snapped shut and tears blurred her vision. *Some strong female I am, crying like a baby whenever something goes wrong.* She turned away, toward the heavy curtain separating her from the other patient. *I wish that pig had killed me.* She still had life insurance then, enough to send her sister to art school.

“What sort of anomalies?” Pel asked.

Waylee swung her head back toward the doctor. “I have a pre-existing condition. Check my records from College Park.”

Cyclothymia, the doctors called it. Milder than bipolar disorder, but still a hard beast to ride. They diagnosed it when she was in journalism school and having trouble focusing. But probably her brain turned against her long before, somewhere in the darkness of Philadelphia.

Pel inched forward. “Are they related, or is this something new?”

The doctor wagged a brown finger at him. “Please sit. I will consult her records.”

Pel looked around. Still oblivious in her headset, Kiyoko occupied the only chair.

The doctor tapped a cadence on her pad and stared at it. “I see. This information is quite old, but it might be congruent with the functional data.”

“Doctor visits were a waste of time,” Waylee said.

The doctor slid fingers along the screen. “It says here that concussions could make your condition worse; amplify the depressive phase. There’s a forty percent probability, and it doesn’t always manifest right away. I will refer you to a psychiatrist on staff, and our virtual doctor has psychiatric options.”

“Is the app free?”

“It is very affordable. As for in-person visits, the hospital has a number of payment plans. If you sign up for a credit card, you get ten percent off your first visit.”

Why bother? Cyclothymia had no cure, and medicine didn’t help, not that she could afford it anyway.

The doctor left, and a smiling nurse pushed a black wheelchair into the room. Pel shook Kiyoko out of her virtual world and helped Waylee out of the bed.

The wheelchair embarrassed her. There was nothing wrong with her legs.

The nurse guided her into the chair and patted her shoulder. “Hospital rules. It’s just to get you to your car.”

“My stepfather bullied me,” Waylee said as Pel and Kiyoko packed her things into the Sailor Moon bag.

Pel turned and nodded. His eyes searched for context.

“Knocked me down day after day, year after year. And he paid the price.”

Kiyoko stared and bit her lip.

* * *

June

(9 months later)

Gunshots woke Waylee from a haze of choking tentacles.

Pop! Pop pop! Pop! Pop!

Printed pistol by the timbre, professional disagreement by the tempo. Distant—other side of U.S. 1.

Waylee glanced at the grimy window of the crowded, musty bedroom she shared with Pel. It wasn't even night yet.

Survival of the fiercest in West Baltimore. Their geriatric two-story house was in a patrolled DMZ, but she and her roomies still had to be careful. Not everyone respected the zone system, and she'd get no favors from the police after her failed lawsuit.

Two more gunshots, then silence. Mission accomplished or weapon malfunction. 3-D printed pistols weren't terribly accurate or reliable, but they were the latest weapon of choice. Cheap, no serial numbers, and acetone soluble.

She threw aside the sweat-drenched sheets and half-rolled out of bed, her trim body clad in zebra-print panties and one of her dozens of unsold band T-shirts. *Dwarf Eats Hippo—we were high as clouds when we came up with that.* She edged past piles of used books by Goldman, Foucault, and a hundred other social theorists, and snatched up a pair of tattered jeans from the floor.

Her comlink sat in the charging station on a shelf by the door, along with Pel's chrome-framed data glasses. She could do just about anything with her comlink once hooked to the Net, and the screen could stretch to six times its current size. At the moment, though, this fancy piece of technology served as a clock, with faux-analog hour and minute hands.

5:30. She'd slept twelve hours. *I can't believe Pel didn't wake me.*

Waylee trudged into the hallway, gritty floorboards creaking beneath her bare feet. Guitars rang in her head and the day's first lyrics spilled forth.

*Aching meat bleeding for meaning,
Tattered banners 'neath a dark moon...*

Behind Kiyoko's door, marked with a rainbow and unicorns, a piccolo voice spoke, "I will never abandon my realm to the likes of Vostok."

Immersed in BetterWorld again. Even her own sister was ensnared by MediaCorp's virtual world, their number one manufactured distraction. Waylee lost the thread of her song.

Further down, explosions and screeching tires leaked past the reinforced door of the game room. Pel and Dingo, their latest housemate, practically lived in there. She knocked, but no one answered, no doubt dreaming like her sister in cyber cocoons.

All alone. Shakti, her most reliable friend, was out tonight, off at a People's Party meeting.

Waylee's chest tightened. She should be out there organizing, not sleep-

ing life away. Gravity pulled her down the stairs to the living room.

The metal-plated door of the storage closet was unlocked. She grabbed the lap-sized Genki-san Comnet interface and nested in the living room recliner, cat-lacerated sofa and chairs flanking her on either side. Her stomach grumbled, but could hold out until dinner.

She pressed a small button on the Genki-san, transforming its glassy surface into a touchscreen and virtual keyboard, then activated the huge display skin fastened to the opposite wall. She logged onto the Comnet, using her real account, planning to check the responses to her latest freelance proposal.

Working in blinding spurts, Waylee had spent the past nine months researching MediaCorp's relentless march to monopolize information, their suppression of critical analyses, and their empowerment of an international plutocracy. Her latest story, about how they warped news coverage to elect their political supporters, was nearly done. She just needed funding for undercover work, to access hidden documents, interview people, and get some choice quotes. A little money and recognition would boost her morale, too.

She'd pitched her story to every independent outlet in the U.S. and Canada that paid their contributors. There weren't many, and the number dropped each month.

Still no responses. Not one.

Waylee didn't know whether to scream or cry. Not one paying gig all year. Well, there was the band, but that barely covered equipment costs. She wouldn't even have a blog, with its handful of subscribers, if Pel hadn't arranged free space on the Collective's shadownet. She was twenty-eight years old with nothing to show for it.

The *why* homunculus stirred inside her head and activated her fingers. Why hadn't anyone written back? Waylee pulled up the list of outlets.

The first, *Platform*, was her favorite, at least after the demise of *Democracy Now* and the Independent News Center. They published 'edgy' news and analyses, but had high standards and a sizable budget.

Someone had redesigned *Platform's* Comnet site since her last visit. It had a slicker look, and the articles were all about "viral innovations" and "trend reports." The lead article heralded, "BetterWorld Passes One Billion Subscribers," followed by fawning praise of "the Comnet's crown jewel."

Waylee almost dry heaved, then tapped the search icon. "*Platform* acquisition," she told the Genki-san's hidden microphone.

The most relevant response on the screen read, “Media Corporation Buys *Platform* and Subsidiaries.”

Waylee sat motionless for a while, too exhausted to feel sad or angry. Then she continued down her list. *Stirrings* and *The Daily Read* didn’t exist at all anymore.

The rest... maybe no one but her cared that a handful of sociopaths controlled the world and used MediaCorp to tighten their grip every day. Or maybe no one would fund her research because she lacked the creds and followers. *I’m nobody, why should anyone take a chance?*

To the right of the wall screen, Pel clomped down the stairs, clad in grease-stained jeans and a *Pirates 4 People* T-shirt. “I presume by the volume you were the knocker?”

“You could have answered. Or would something awful have happened, like having to pause your game?”

“You can’t just pause online combat; you’ll get fragged. Whatever. I’m gonna work on some tracks.” Instead of asking what she wanted, Pel took the lower stairs to the basement.

The loneliness stopped circling and settled on her like a bloated carrion bird. Waylee decided to check the news before going back to sleep. Even though it barraged her with propaganda, she always kept a national news portal open in the lower right corner. ‘Know thy enemy,’ Sun Tzu advised across three millennia of dog-eat-dog history.

The talking heads were spewing their usual pablum, this time about curtailing the power of local governments to restrict development. “They are just infringing on our rights,” a man in a suit said, “the fundamental right to do with our property as we please.”

Sometimes she argued with the anchors and commentators, as if they could hear her point of view. Today, the notion seemed absurd.

“And now,” a female anchor said, “we turn to President Rand on the campaign trail.”

The whitebread jock-handsome president strolled through a crowd of homogenous Anglo-Saxon supporters, smiling and shaking hands. “With polls showing overwhelming support,” the anchor narrated, “it looks like his re-election’s in the bag.”

They cut to his speech du jour. “America has never been more prosperous than today,” the president proclaimed from a podium. “People around the world see us as the land of opportunity.”

Too bad none of that trickles down.

Waylee's lyrics homunculus dipped into her deep well of anger.

Bend over, chattel;

Pretend you like my ride.

Kneel when I say so,

And swallow my pride.

Something caught her eye, something out of place. Fingers flying across the touchpad, she expanded the news portal to fill the wall screen.

After the lottery numbers, the moving ticker on the bottom read: LEVEL 3 ZOMBIE OUTBREAK DOWNTOWN WASHINGTON D.C. AVOID CORDONED AREA. RESIDENTS IN AFFECTED AREA URGED TO STAY INDOORS.

Lights exploded in her head. She laughed so hard, the Genki-san slid off her lap and thudded onto the dusty rug.

Her nemesis, which Pel considered impregnable to hackers, had chinks in its armor.

She didn't need journals or publishers. She could reach a bigger audience without them, maybe millions of people, and tell them whatever she wanted. Why play a fixed game when she could kick the table over?

On the wall screen, President Rand had disappeared, replaced by green reboot messages as the Genki-san recovered from its fall.

Nerves humming with electric fire, Waylee pumped a fist and shouted. "Get ready, you bastards! I am gonna stick the biggest firecracker on Earth up your ass and light it with a flamethrower!"

1

December

Waylee

"Superheroes don't get stoned before they go into battle," Pel insisted from the parked van's passenger seat. He whipped out a latex-gloved hand and tried to snatch the fattie out of her fingers before she could light it.

Waylee was too fast for him, though, and jerked her prize just beyond his reach. "You're a mere mortal, my dear Pel, and can't possibly defeat the likes of Storm."

Triumphant, she ignited the joint, thrust it between the lips of her mask, and inhaled. Friendship Farm's finest—smooth as a glissando and 100% organic. Jagged edges melted off her nerves as she exhaled a thick cloud of acrid, piney smoke. *And to think, this used to be illegal here.*

Too bad she wasn't really Storm from the X-Men, the African sorceress with white hair. Or anyone with superpowers, able to right the wrongs of the world merely by existing outside the confines of science.

Shut up. I can do anything. Especially after six months of planning. With Dr. Doom, a.k.a. Charles Marvin Lee, the only person to ever hack a MediaCorp broadcast, on her side, she could reach enough people to make a difference. To loosen, maybe destroy, the grip of the plutocracy. All she had to do was break him out of jail.

"M-pat said this would be easy," she said.

Pel sputtered through the lips of his lifelike mask. "Compared to kidnapping the president, maybe." He turned away.

Waylee hit the joint again, hoping to calm her hyperactive neurons. She wouldn't smoke enough to dilate time and fog her memory, only enough to keep her hands from shaking.

Storm wouldn't shake. She would call down lightning or tornadoes to smite her foes, the plutocrats and their yes men who couldn't bear to share with others, for whom the world was a personal grab bag. Her weaselly bosses at the newspaper—*zap!* The utility companies and their collection thugs – *zap!* MediaCorp, the great crushing beast—*ZAP!*

Waylee emptied her lungs toward the windshield. The cone of smoke broke against the invisible barrier and recoiled into a confusion of eddies. When it dissipated, she scanned the dilapidated section of Eager Street ahead of them. No police cars. Baltimore's finest rarely patrolled anymore, relying on the cheaper option of streetlight cameras and remote-controlled quadcopters. And this stretch of boarded-up businesses, vacant lots, and dead trees contained nothing worth watching.

Beneath the mask, her skin oozed clammy sweat. She looked over at Pel. He was lost in his data glasses, monitoring his microcameras and probably the traffic. A wire-thin microphone boom snaked down from the dorkishly wide frame arms and terminated just short of his lips.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"Nothing yet."

Behind the glasses appeared a stranger. Kiyoko had artist friends who owned a large-format, high-precision 3-D printer, and created photo-real-

istic masks—right down to the hair and skin pores—for a living. Pel could have been anyone, but asked for a thirty-something ginger with day-old stubble.

“You should have been a Greek god,” Waylee said. You couldn’t get more Greek in Baltimore than the Demopoulos family. “Apollo, maybe. You look like Prince Harry with a five o’clock shadow.”

Pel faced her and sighed. His brown eyes glared at her through translucent overlays of buildings and maps. Beneath his right eye, a tiny clock, mirror-imaged, approached the point of no return. “The idea behind disguise, Waylee, is to blend in with your surroundings. Someone’s gonna see you and say, ‘Hey, isn’t that Storm from the X-Men?’ ‘Yeah,’ their companion will say, ‘only the X-Men are an invention of Marvel Comics and don’t actually exist in present-day Baltimore. Therefore, that must be someone hiding behind a mask.’”

“Well played, Dr. Snark. But you’re assuming anyone will notice or care. Besides, I don’t look anything like Storm in real life.”

“That’s not the point,” he said.

“Whatever. Just give me the satisfaction of burning your mask when we’re done.”

“After I’ve taken it off, I hope.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want it to melt to your skin and have to lock your frightful ass in the attic.”

He smirked. Their masks were thin, flexible, and internally contoured to their real faces, and weren’t bad at showing expressions. “The attic doesn’t have any locks.”

She didn’t bother responding. The trouble with Pel’s type was that they took everything literally.

His smirk evaporated. “You know, it’s not too late to back out. If anything goes wrong, if we get caught...”

Anxiety surged through her veins. Pel had never been enthusiastic about her plan. “Even without money, we’ve got a decent life here,” he said when she’d first proposed it six months ago. “Why risk prison just ‘cause the president’s an ass and MediaCorp ruined journalism?” A strange comment from someone who broke computer laws every day.

“Nothing will go wrong,” Waylee told Unshaven Prince Harry/Pel. “We planned every detail. Besides, Charles expects us. No way am I breaking my word.” *Or going back to pointless complaining on a blog with no readers.* “We’re committed.”

Pel stared at her through a still image of a red brick facade with reinforced glass doors and windows shadowed by an overhang. It took her a second to decipher the mirror-imaged lettering on the front of the overhang: *Baltimore City Juvenile Correctional Facility*. Two blocks to the east and half a block to the south, less than a quarter mile away. “We’re not committed,” he said, “until M-pat flips that switch.”

“We’ve already been through this, Pel. What happened to your love of challenges? Fortune favors the bold—”

“So does a pair of cuffs.”

She nudged the joint toward him. “Want some?” He never did, but it might help.

He frowned. “You’re our getaway driver. Focus, would you?”

She withdrew her offer.

“Besides,” he said, “I thought you didn’t like that stuff.”

“Well, depends. If I’m charged, pot dilutes the energy. And the bad times, I don’t need the added introspection. But Shakti thought I’d need it today.”

Pel said nothing, his artificial face blank. Beyond, the sun peeked over the tired skyline and breathed fire into the dust on the dashboard.

“And in case you’re wondering, I’m not being crazy, and I’m not gonna fuck things up. I’m more alert now than I’ve ever been in my life.” Even faint wisps of engine grime and stale plastic stood out.

His shoulders drooped. “Waylee...”

“We’re doing this, that’s all there is to it.” Drums pounded in her head, only slightly muffled by the pot. “We all agreed, there’s only so much we can do in the neighborhood. We’re constrained by the system, by global economics and culture, and more and more that’s controlled by a self-serving elite.”

“Duh.”

“The political system’s rigged,” she continued. “MediaCorp decides what people see and hear. The whole game needs changing if we want to control our destinies. And that’s not gonna happen without direct action.” Dingo, of course, was all for it. The others had taken longer to convince.

“Okay, let’s just focus.” He turned away and peered into the side mirror.

She patted his arm, then took a third drag. This would be her last, so she let the smoke chill in her lungs, get comfortable, hang out with the alveoli a while.

A city bus, sides plastered with lottery and fast food ads, passed their parked van and stopped at the institutional-looking public tenements a

couple of blocks up the street. Pel tapped the arm of his data glasses. “Anything?” he said into his microphone.

He paused, presumably listening to his bone conduction transducers. Dingo and M-pat—who had the tough job—waited in the other white cargo van they had rescued and refurbished.

“Just say when,” Pel said in the mike.

He turned back to her. “It’s almost time.”

Waylee coughed out her last cloud and gripped the steering wheel. She peered ahead, then in the side view mirrors. Almost no cars now, their drivers shackled for the day in some human warehouse. She pressed the power button.

A ragged man clutching a brown paper bag shuffled toward them along the cracked sidewalk. On the other side of the street, rats foraged through trash in front of a shuttered bail bond office, whiskers twitching as they fought for scraps.

“I see them,” Pel said, gazing through his remote eyes. “They’re coming out.” His voice was tense as a ready-to-snap guitar string.

Waylee pulled the van onto Eager Street and sped toward the jailed hacker who would help her change the world.

2

M’patanishi

“Go now,” Dick Clark said from the cargo van’s passenger seat, his eyes half-hidden by a mirror image of the Baltimore Juvenile Correctional Facility. It wasn’t really Dick Clark, of course, but Dingo’s mask pretty much passed for real. That is, if Dick Clark wore thick-framed glasses with a voice tube.

“You sure? They ain’t crossed yet.” M’patanishi, masked as a fiftyish Little Italy type and wearing a brown suit from Goodwill, couldn’t see anyone at the crosswalk almost half a block up Greenmount Avenue. They’d be a lot closer if someone hadn’t taken their damn traffic cones. Despite the morning chill, his hands sweated inside the double layer of surgical gloves.

“Yeah, kicks!” Dingo said, moving the lips of his mask. “Step it up!”

Their main microcamera, hidden in a shrub just past the front doors, gave a perfect view. So as much as it pained him, M'patanishi—M-pat to most—decided to trust Dingo. They were crew, after all.

He waited for a dented red Toyota to pass, then pulled out behind it.

This is crazy. This wasn't like slinging product or beating some thief's ass, neither of which worried the po-boys these days. This, he'd do hard time if they got caught. And he had a family now.

It was his fault they were here. He told the others it would be easy. That PrisonCorp, who managed the state's correctional facilities, was a joke. Waylee had it right, PrisonCorp and all the big corporations thought only about their bottom line and neither knew nor cared much about the real world. About people like him, who could be pretty damn lethal if they put their minds to it.

Dingo swiped a gloved finger along one chrome-colored arm of the data glasses Pel bought him for the mission. "They're counting them all up now. I see the target."

The timing had to be perfect. M-pat eased off the gas a little. He passed the red brick pre-release unit on the right, fenced parking lots on the left. Empty cars lined the street on both sides. No one on the sidewalks, only the Toyota ahead, no one behind.

He reached the fortress-like Juvie compound on the left side of the street. Up on the right, he saw the Occupational Skills and Training Center—institutional red brick like everything else. That's where guards escorted Charles and a couple dozen others every morning to make furniture and fix cars for the state. Still no sign of them.

He slowed even more. The Toyota disappeared ahead.

"My grandma drives faster than you," Dingo said. "And she's dead."

M-pat ignored him. In the mirror, a pickup closed from behind. A big metal top covered the bed. *So much for no traffic.*

There they were. Teenagers caught in the system, wearing bright orange coveralls, filed out of the juvie entrance overhang and past the white columns holding it up. No chains, no handcuffs—this was a minimum security facility. One of the guards walked in front, a skinny white boy wearing a PrisonCorp uniform. And a holster with a .38. *Where's the other guard?*

M-pat glanced down at his metallic Faraday bag. Still strapped on, still closed to protect the stun gun and handheld comlink inside. *I'd feel better with a Glock.* The stun gun only had two charges, and only put them down a few minutes.

“Gonna stash my glasses,” Dingo said. He opened his Faraday bag, threw his data glasses inside, and refastened it.

The van drew close enough to make out faces. *There!* Charles Marvin Lee, a.k.a. Dr. Doom, the now seventeen-year-old hacker who’d added a zombie invasion to MediaCorp’s news ticker and got a two year sentence for his trouble. No mistaking that puffy cocoa face. “Ready?”

“You know it, chief.”

Breathing deliberately, M-pat pulled up just past the thick glass doors of the Juvie entrance, and blocked the vehicle tunnel they used to transfer prisoners.

A few paces up the sidewalk, the second guard, a middle-aged black man, hurried stragglers toward the crosswalk. More guards would be inside. One at the reception desk, one at the monitors, the others probably sipping their morning coffee.

Dingo flipped a switch Pel had installed on the dashboard.

The capacitors in the windowless back of the van made no noise whatsoever as they discharged their energy into a modified power transformer and released a massive electromagnetic pulse. M-pat felt nothing. *Pel said it’d be safe.* But the van died. So did the truck behind them. And so, hopefully, did every security camera, comlink, radio, and other unprotected bit of electronics within sixty feet. The guards would have to pry the entrance doors open, and wouldn’t be able to call for help.

The prisoners and their guards kept walking, oblivious.

M-pat pulled his blocky-looking stun gun out of its Faraday bag. The standby light glowed green. *Still working.* “I got the black guard. You get the cracker. Don’t miss.”

Dingo checked his gun and nodded. He slipped out the passenger door.

M-pat opened his door at the same time. Gun in hand but down at his side, he strode toward the black guard. The man turned, fear in his eyes.

Just a little closer. He broke into a sprint and raised his weapon. The guard fumbled at his holster, hand shaking. Some of the prisoners turned to stare.

M-pat pulled the trigger. The stun gun clicked, barely audible, and the guard crumpled to the ground. Temporarily paralyzed. He shot him again for good measure, then ran over and took his pistol.

He looked over at Dingo. The white guard was also down. *Rent-a-cops. One day a year of training.*

Charles ambled toward them. He waved the boy closer. “Hurry up.”

Dingo addressed the rest of the prisoners, who all looked confused. “You’re free! Go forth and—ah, just get the fuck out of here!”

* * *

Waylee

Waylee turned the getaway van onto Greenmount Avenue, the heart of the city’s correctional industry. Teenage boys in orange coveralls ran down the street. None looked like Charles.

“We should be up there already,” Pel said from the passenger seat, swiping the left temple arm of his data glasses to magnify the image.

“Seconds away.” Waylee gunned the engine. She swerved to avoid a bike messenger, bounced over a pothole, and passed ugly brick buildings with blue plastic covering the windows.

She saw their first van parked ahead to the left, blocking the Corrections Center driveway. Orange-clad teens fought with a pickup driver stopped in the road. Two guards lay motionless on the ground.

There! Two fiftyish men in cheap suits stood on the sidewalk and looked her way, feet tapping the concrete. One was brawny with Italian features, the other, Dick Clark.

A short, pudgy kid with coffee-hued skin paced back and forth behind them. *Charles!* A dozen other prisoners waited nearby, apparently too cowed to run. “What the hell is their problem?”

Pel glanced at her.

“Ignore that.” Waylee screeched her van to a halt, but kept it in drive.

M-pat and Dingo ran for the back, Charles following. A pair of oranges sprinted toward the passenger door. Pel locked it just as they got there. They banged on the door and window. “Lemme in, yo!”

Pel squinted at Waylee. “Should have brought more stun guns.”

More banging. “Yo, bitch, lemme in!”

“Sorry,” she shouted at them. “Get your own ride.”

M-pat’s muscular frame appeared behind the two juvies. He reached out big hands and smacked their heads together. They dropped.

Dingo stuck his Dick Clark face in a rear door window. He opened the doors and jumped in, followed by Charles, then M-pat. “Let’s go,” M-pat said. “Don’t run over those bitches I put down.”

Dingo sniffed the air. “Someone’s been tokin’ in here.”

"I'll pass it soon as I get a chance." Waylee took her foot off the brake and accelerated, trying not to hit any prone or running figures.

"Woo kiddies!" Dingo shouted from the back. "That was too easy! B'more's first mass jailbreak."

"Welcome to freedom, Charles," Waylee said, keeping her eyes on the road. "Or do you prefer Dr. Doom?"

"Charles is a'ight," came the faint response behind her.

She passed the crosswalk. Staring out the passenger window, Pel shouted, "Guards coming out of the Training Center door! Two."

"Step on it, they goin' for their guns!" M-pat said, probably looking out the back.

Damn it. She pushed the gas pedal down, but the van responded reluctantly. *Come on.* They passed a parking garage and approached the ten-story New Inmates Center.

"Down!" M-pat shouted.

They wouldn't shoot, would they? Ahead, the light at Madison, the first intersection, was red. *Run it or turn right?* The plan was to go straight, then head northeast. Madison went one-way west.

A gun blasted behind them and echoed off the buildings, a lot louder than the *pops* she heard at home now and then. Waylee gripped the steering wheel, not in terror, but knowing that she should feel terror.

A guard ran out of the New Inmates Center as they passed, eyes wide.

Another gun blast. Something tore through the rear of the van and smacked through the windshield between her and Pel. He yelped. The bullet left a circular hole amid a web of cracks.

Another shot. The passenger side mirror shattered. Pel hunched down, trapped by the seatbelt from moving any further.

Waylee slowed at the intersection, and spun the wheel to the right. The tires squealed as the van hopped over the curb, smacked a garbage can, and sent it barreling off toward the building. She scraped a lightpost and skidded onto Madison.

"Yeah!"

Brakes screeched somewhere behind her. Someone honked and kept honking. *Asshole.* Up the street a bus stopped, blocking half the road.

She didn't want to be on Madison. They'd pass more prison complexes and more guards. And like half the streets downtown, it was under perpetual construction. The expressway, where all the cars were probably headed, was only a few blocks ahead.

But would they make it? And wouldn't the cops expect them to take the interstate?

Fuck Madison. Waylee spun the wheel to the left toward Forrest Street. Someone clipped the rear fender and they veered off course, facing oncoming traffic. She yanked the wheel to the right, trying to correct. "Get us out of here," she yelled at Pel. "Where does Forrest go?"

More horns blew. She entered Forrest, which was empty except for parked cars, and accelerated over cratered pavement. "No sirens," she said to Pel. "Your EMP bomb must have worked."

Pel didn't respond. From the back, M-pat shouted, "Yeah, it worked. But them guards that shot at us was past sixty feet. Better believe they squawkin' now."

"DG, directions," Pel said at the same time. Staring forward, his voice trembled. "Follow Forrest one block and turn left on Monument. Then we can take Ensor to Harford and we're out of here."

Waylee reached Monument seconds later. One way east, a better choice than Madison. The light here was red too. *Naturally.* She decided not to run it, and checked the mirror, the one that hadn't been shot out. No pursuit yet.

As soon as the light changed, she floored the van onto Monument. Not a whole lot of traffic. After a couple of blocks, she turned left on Ensor Street, three lanes in each direction, and headed out of the city. To the rendezvous point.

3

Waylee

As Waylee drove the getaway van north on Ensor, row after row of red-brick public housing on either side, Charles's voice sounded behind her. "Which one of you is Aunt Emma?"

That would be me. Waylee focused on the road. But at the first red light, she unhooked her seatbelt. "Pel, you drive."

His eyes widened. "What? We're in traffic..."

Waylee made her way into the back of the van and Pel scooted over to the driver's seat.

The back had no seats, just a black plastic mat. Charles huddled against the metal siding.

Sitting next to a ‘Green Baltimore’ reusable bag, Dingo grinned and thrust up a fist. M-pat stared out the rear window without the bullet hole.

She pointed at Dingo and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “You’re shotgun now.”

“I’m down. You could have brought cushions, you know.” He didn’t look scared at all.

Waylee shrugged and handed him the rest of her joint.

“Aight then.” He headed to the passenger seat.

“Watch for cops.” *And keep Pel from freaking out.*

The van jolted forward. Waylee tried not to fall as it bounced over fractured asphalt. She sat next to Charles, the floor mat hard against her ass. She pulled off her gloves, but kept the mask on, and reached out a fist for him to bump. Citywide gesture for solidarity and respect. “I’m the one who messaged you.”

Charles hesitated, then tapped a fist against hers. “And now you want my help,” he said. “Bad, to scheme up so much trouble.”

He looked so young. And flabby—he must not exercise much. And why the hesitation? “We made an agreement. Freedom for yourself, freedom for everyone.” *An awakening, anyway, then others can do the rest.*

He shrank away. “What if they catch me? They could try me as an adult, then I’d never get out.”

She closed the distance and touched his arm. “They won’t catch you. They catch you, that means they catch me, and I got enough problems as it is. Trust me, we planned this out. No way is BPD or PrisonCorp going to find any leads. These are the best masks made.”

Normally only movie studios could afford Baltimore Transformations, who didn’t even have to advertise their services, but her sister, a legend in the local cosplay scene, fabricated a batch of anime costumes in return.

His eyes roved across her face. “You do look real.”

“Plus, no fingerprints, no DNA, and both vans were hulks we found and fixed up.”

Charles still looked scared. “They got me from a snitch, someone from school.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have bragged about your hacking there.”

He nodded.

“I know my friends,” she said. “They all hate authority, they all have principles, and we’re tight like family. No snitchers.”

Music blared from the front. A neo-grindcore cover of Son Volt's "Medicine Hat." *Dingo*.

"Knock it down a bit," Waylee shouted. "We're trying to talk."

"C'mon, this shit is apropos," Dingo said.

The volume dropped. "Thanks, Pel."

M-pat stared at her.

Shit, I gave Pel's name away. Charles would have to commit, no other option. She turned back to him. "You're the only one who's ever gotten through MediaCorp's defenses."

"Still?"

"Yeah. The Collective considers Dr. Doom quite an elite." Like Pel, he was in their inner circle, the closest they had to any kind of structure.

Charles beamed.

"You're local," she said. "And you passed our test."

"What test?"

"Getting back to me."

Once Pel discovered Dr. Doom—Charles Marvin Lee in the real world—was behind the MediaCorp hack, and was sent to Baltimore Juvenile for being dumb enough to brag about it in school, Waylee had mailed an old-fashioned letter from his fictitious Aunt Emma. She wrote that he had always been clever, and she held him in the highest regard. She advised him to learn a trade like car repair, and closed with, 'Hope to hear from you soon. Auntie_Emma.'

It took a while, but Charles acquired an Occupational Training slot, accessed the Comnet through a car wireless and an unencrypted hotspot, and posted a private waypoint at the intersection of Charles and Eager Streets, tagging @Auntie_Emma. They exchanged coded texts from there, the best medium they could manage via the China Autotronics All-in-One Control System.

"Gave me something to do," he said. "Deleted the evidence afterward."

"We were impressed. And the guards never noticed?"

He smirked. "Them minimum wage monkeys? Only thing they know 'bout computers is how to find porn."

The van shook, jolting down and up. Her arms clutched Charles as she fought to stay upright. "Geez, be careful!"

"Not my fault the roads are shit," Pel responded in staccato tones.

Charles's face flushed.

She let go of him. "Sorry." She searched for the overlay of stillness from

the pot and embraced it. *Focus*. “Before we go any further, I need to know for sure, are you with us?”

He looked her in the eyes. “I told you in my texts, yeah, I’m down with you, you got my word. And get back at MediaCorp and the cops for jackin’ me primetime and takin’ all my shit?” His nostrils flared. “Yeah, sign me up.”

He looked sincere. She might have jumped up and danced if not for the pot. “You, sir, are the best. We’ll go over the plan when we get to the house.”

“And you’ll show your real self?”

Why not now? Waylee peeled off her mask. The air—even Baltimore air—felt good against her face. “I’m Waylee.”

At his sentinel post by the rear window, M-pat shook his head a few degrees to either side. She decided not to introduce anyone else.

Charles’s eyes drifted, then fixated on her hair.

Oh yeah. She’d dyed her long cornrows red, white, and blue for that gig at Le Chat Noir in DC. She felt a little naked without her piercings, which had to come out to get the mask on.

He finally responded. “Charles. Can’t use Dr. Doom anymore.” He fidgeted. “You know it ain’t gonna be easy, taking over the MediaCorp feed. Why you wanna hit ‘em so bad?”

She fought a surge of impatience, knowing there was no cause for it. “It’s been a long fight. I got this job at the *Herald* after graduation. This was like six years ago. They always gave the noobs the lamest assignments. In my case, nightlife.” *Never should have bragged about my bands.*

“I’d pitch meaningful stories,” she continued, “but the editors wouldn’t give me a shot. So I met... uh, my current boyfriend, and he got me interested in the Comnet and how it’s destroying free expression and democracy. MediaCorp cut these secret deals with the government during the national upgrade to highspeed fiber optics. Not just to speed up the old Internet, but to make it more efficient and secure.”

Charles smirked. “Ain’t as secure as they think.”

I love this kid. “That’s why I need you. Anyway, because of these deals, everything’s integrated. MediaCorp took over the backbone and switches, and they’re using that to control the content. No regulations except to prohibit public competition.

“I got some specifics, like who they spread money to and how their lobbyists called the shots. Pel recruited some Collective hackers to help me get emails and documents.”

Even though he wasn't involved, Charles held up a fist in solidarity or appreciation.

"Did the paper run it?" she continued. "No. MediaCorp was planning to buy the paper and my bosses were scared for their jobs. In fact, the VP yelled at me for billing hours to something outside my beat. We had some words and they put me on probation. Then—did you hear about the police attack on the Independent News Center?"

Charles squinted.

Of course not. "INC was the last independent voice in Maryland. MediaCorp tried to buy them, but they wouldn't sell. So the bastards hiked their Comnet fees, then bought their building, raised the rent, and evicted them when they couldn't pay.

"Well, they decided to stay, and MediaCorp brought in the cops. I went to cover it. They used military crowd-control weapons—pulsed microwaves and classified stuff. I heard we were a testing ground."

He leaned toward her. "What happened?"

"Dozens of people hospitalized, some of them just kids, everyone else arrested. This BPD thug stole my recordings and fractured my skull, took months to heal." She still had a scar beneath her hair. "The paper fired me while I was in the hospital."

"Why?"

"Corporate cost savings." Her fists clenched. "So that's the end of independent journalism. MediaCorp sold everything in the building or trucked it to a landfill. It's all condos now. What they did should be a huge scandal, but corporate news spun it as a victory of law over 'militant radicals.'

"I've been writing about this threat ever since, but no one will publish it. In a Comnet without MediaCorp—let's call it the freenet—I could support myself, my boyfriend could work a legit job, and we wouldn't have to steal oil to make it through the winter. And it's not just me we're talking about. MediaCorp is destroying journalism itself, critical inquiry, everything democracy needs to survive."

Charles slapped his right palm with the back of his left. "I feel ya. Freedom of information. I'm down, I follow the code."

The van turned right. *We must be getting close.* She reached into the 'Green Baltimore' bag and handed Charles a pair of jeans, a Jesus fish T-shirt, a faded Ravens hoodie, and generic white tennies. Goodwill's finest. She hoped they fit. "Alright, Charles. Here're your new clothes."

He grimaced.

“Better than a bright orange jumpsuit. Change. We’re gonna switch vehicles soon, then I’ll show you your new home.” She turned away to give him some privacy.

Once Charles said “done,” Waylee tested his resolve.

“This op we’re planning could take a couple of months.”

He threw on the shoes and started lacing them. “Where am I staying?”

“With us. They’ll be looking for you at home.”

He tightened the left shoelace. “Ain’t nothin’ for me there anyhow. Just overdogged grandma, drunk-ass aunt, and more kids than we got beds. And no gear, nothin’.”

She felt a strange mixture of relief and pity. “We’ll get you whatever you need.”

“Yeah? Money too?”

“What you need and what we can get.” *Another challenge.*

“We’re almost there,” Pel shouted.

Waylee scrambled up front, threw her arms around his seat for balance, and peered through the bullet-cracked windshield. Putty Hill looked like every place else on Baltimore’s periphery—wide roads, impersonal tract homes, lawns either neglected or mowed down to the roots. She wasn’t sure where Putty Hill’s boundaries were, or even if it had boundaries.

Pel followed a side street to Paulo’s corrugated metal auto garage, tucked among scraggly, vine-choked trees, and almost impossible to find if you wanted a car repaired. Someone had rolled open one of the four bay doors.

Inside, Paulo, his black hair slicked back, pointed to the lift ahead. Pel parked and switched off the ignition. Paulo slapped a red button on the wall, and the garage door descended. Three assistants, no name tags on their polyester shirts, converged on the van with rags and squeegee bottles.

Pel pocketed his data glasses, peeled off his mask, and hopped out. Waylee followed Dingo out the passenger door.

The garage smelled like oil and spray paint. Their ancient Class C Motor Home sat to the left. Kiyoko bounded toward them, wearing a long pink wig bound in bows, her almond eyes shadowed and fake-lashed into Anime Big. She wore one of her frilly silk dresses, as if Paulo’s grease-stained chop shop was just another cosplay club. *24/7 fashionista.*

Kiyoko hugged Pel, then Waylee. “You made it!” Her cartoonish eyes drifted to the bullet hole in the windshield. “Oh.” She stepped back. “What happened? Everyone okay?”

“No worries. PrisonCorp’s finest took some pot shots at us. No one got hurt.”

Dingo pulled off his Dick Clark mask, returning to a 23-year-old punk with an inch-wide semi-circular scar on his forehead. He stared at the mask's empty eye sockets. "You, sir, are getting lucky tonight."

M-pat yanked off his Mafia capo mask and rolled it into a ball. He couldn't look more different now—Waylee's age, with dark brown skin and a chin strap beard.

Charles darted his eyes from one person to the next, fingers twitching.

Kiyoko tilted her powdered face toward him. "That's him? The super hacker you're risking our lives for?"

"That's him," Waylee said. "And he is a super hacker."

She frowned. "He's just a kid."

Dingo looked over. "You're one to talk."

"I'm almost twenty, Dingdong." She strolled up to Charles and curtsied. "I am Kiyoko, Princess of West Baltimore."

Charles took a step backward, then scanned her up and down. He smiled and nodded, but didn't say anything.

Speaking to each other in Portuguese, Paulo's crew wiped down the cargo van. They would take it apart next, etch off the serial numbers, and sell the parts or have them melted down at Sparrows Point. They did this every day, who knew how many stolen vehicles each year, and moved like choreographed dancers.

Pel threw his ginger mask and gloves into an old oil drum with a flame decal on the side. He looked at Paulo.

"Yes, we take care of that right after the van cleaned."

Waylee slapped Pel on the butt. "I thought I was burning that."

"Same thing." No smirk on his face.

She clambered back in the van and retrieved Charles's orange jumpsuit and her Storm mask. With empty holes for eyes, her mask looked grotesque, like a demon. "Goodbye, Storm. You're still in my heart." She threw it in the drum along with her gloves and the jumpsuit.

"Keeping my Dick Clark mask, yo," Dingo announced.

M-pat frowned and crossed his arms. "The fuck you are. I told you and Waylee to pick anonymous faces but you had to go ahead and be some kind of celebrity. Pel and I the only ones that got sense in this crew."

Pel threw up a solidarity fist.

M-pat pointed at Dingo's mask. "I expect you to burn that goddamn thing lest you get caught with it."

Waylee glanced around. "Can I change in private?"

Paulo pointed to a wooden door marked *Sacos/Bucetas*. “Over there.”

She wasn’t sure what the words meant, but guessed they were unsavory. “There better not be any peepholes.”

She halted after a couple of steps. Charles couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off her sister, who was examining the bullet holes and dented fender. He probably hadn’t seen a girl in months, and Kiyoko had somehow hit the genetic jackpot, but she was off limits.

Pel, still unsmiling, interposed himself and shook his hand.

Good job.

“Charles,” he said, “it’s an honor. I’m Pelopidas. Pel for short. I’m the one who tracked you down.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Asking around, mostly. I’m in the Collective’s inner circle too.”

Charles’s eyes widened, and he grinned. “You got through all the puzzles?”

Pel took a second to respond. “With a little help.”

Charles smirked. “I didn’t need any help. What’s your avatar?”

“William Godwin.”

Charles squinted and didn’t respond.

Pel’s lips pressed into tight disappointment. The “inner circle” contained thousands of vetted hackers, ones who solved a series of cryptic puzzles, then proved themselves against selected targets. He was pretty touchy about his lack of status among them. “William Godwin’s an eighteenth century philosopher. An early thriller novelist too, believe it or not.”

Charles scratched his head. “Well thanks for bustin’ me out. I ain’t typed for jail.”

M-pat trudged over to Charles. “You in fo’ sho’?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

M-pat tapped fists with him. “M’patanishi.”

Dingo followed. Charles stared at the eyes tattooed on the backs of his hands, but returned his tap.

“What do you call fifty bosses at the bottom of the ocean?” Dingo said.

Having lived with him for over a year, Waylee knew all his jokes, especially the tired ones. Charles, though, shrugged.

Dingo laughed out the answer. “A good start.”

Waylee walked into the grimy bathroom and changed as fast as she could, then ushered everyone toward the motor home. “Let’s go.”

Kiyoko jumped into the driver’s seat and fiddled with her wig in the mirror.

The RV was their only transportation. They could fit all their band equipment in, but it guzzled gas, especially after Pel, ever the gearhead, threw in a big V8, a 'PowerPack,' and a turbocharger. They decal'd the band name, Dwarf Eats Hippo, on both sides and the back, but that was the limit of their agreement. Waylee got the "starboard" side, and wrote quotes from Rousseau, King, Goldman, and a dozen others. Kiyoko picked the left. She was a talented artist, but her tableau of manga elves and fairies spoiled the gestalt.

Pel had ceded the back to Dingo and Shakti. They worked at a graphics shop, and printed a giant sticker of MediaCorp's CEO morphed into Cthulhu, rising monstrosly from the sea. Waylee smiled every time she saw it.

She started to shake Paulo's hand, then hugged him. "Thanks for everything."

"*Boa sorte*. Thanks for the van."

She climbed into the back with the rest, then heard the garage door open.

Headed home. They were 100% committed now.