

The Story

T. C. Weber

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Table of Contents

[*The Story*](#)

[*Sleep State Interrupt \(excerpt\)*](#)

Baltimore, Maryland

The near future

This story will save democracy. Waylee banged down the Enter key, sending her text and supporting data to the *Baltimore Herald* news editor. Instead of the standard mat with virtual keys, and incongruous with the big wraparound touch screen, her desk terminal had a bank of old-fashioned circular keys that moved levers, mimicking H. L. Mencken's Corona.

Neo-grindcore jackhammered her brain through the ear buds. Her colleagues thought she was crazy, but the keyboard was only a contributing factor. Someone - she didn't know who - had noticed her mood swings weren't quite normal, and consulted one of the Comnet's virtual psychiatrists. The findings spread. Can't keep secrets in a newsroom.

She was fine this month, better than fine, riding a crest. And why not? Once people read how Congress and the president sold them out, they'd evict the bastards next election. Their replacements would end MediaCorp's monopoly over the 'Net.

Tremolo sixteenth notes and machine gun drumming transitioned to shredding arpeggios and sampled animal screeches. Growled lyrics followed. "Mindless sons, blinded daughters, march in step toward the slaughter..."

Like everyone in the sprawling *Herald* newsroom, Waylee had her own office. Of course the walls were only four feet high and slapped together from fabric-covered panels dotted with thumbtacks. Hers dropped after seven to ten days and disappeared into some sort of interdimensional crevice.

She didn't usually come in during the day. The newsroom had a different vibe in prime time. Crowded, chaotic, full of energy. Phones and comlinks clamoring like mockingbirds in spring, each with their own jingle. The stench of scorched leftover coffee and clashing deodorants.

One of her old songs streamed next, from the long-defunct Ten Dead Hipsters. 'Plague of Rats,' not one of their better efforts. "MusicGenie, skip."

Waylee cleared a space on her L-shaped formica desk and stretched her flexible, glossy black comlink as wide as it would go, well beyond wrist or pocket size. The handheld computer/videophone tied her into the global net, where most people spent half their waking hours. And unlike the office equipment, her comlink wasn't infested with corporate spyware.

"Submitted biggest story of the decade," she messaged her followers. "Publication soon I hope." She ran black-nailed fingers through her long mulberry hair and added a selfie. The camera autocorrected for the fluorescent overheads, displaying a sun-averse face with brown eyes, high cheekbones and cherry red lips. Rings adorned her ears, eyebrows, and nose. She was smiling.

'Owned.' The story title was a little too hacker-centric, and she wouldn't insist on keeping it. She dictated a teaser to her followers, trying to speak quietly. Busy with their own work, her cube neighbors ignored her.

"I can't give you a link until the story's edited and I've done some follow-up. But quick summary, it reveals Media Corporation's secret deals with the government and how they gained control of everything we see and hear online. They spread money to the right people during the big Internet upgrade. Yes, the new system is a million times faster. It's more efficient and secure. But MediaCorp was allowed sole ownership of the backbone and switches, a power

which they immediately abused. All thanks to a free-market political system which will get even worse now.”

New thrashcore, Green Wrench. “Directed for someone’s sadistic design, I put on a red shirt and know that I’ll die...”

Her boyfriend had been a big help. Pel was in the inner circle of the Collective, a loose association of anonymous hackers able to pass a gauntlet of cryptic puzzles. His comrades wrote a custom rootkit, hid it in an app, and tricked a staffer of the House Communications and Technology chairman into installing it on his comlink. Once the staffer synced to his office computer, they owned the whole network. Waylee took over and copied the chairman’s emails and secret texts of the government’s agreements with MediaCorp. Illegal as hell, so she posted them on a password-protected darknet site from an “anonymous leaker.”

Among the insiders, there was no distinction between the government’s interest and MediaCorp’s. No regulations considered that might inconvenience what was now the world’s biggest corporation.

What to do now? She had too much energy to sit around and wait for feedback.

A nooner would be nice. But Pel was working his IT day job at the Independent News Center and took it seriously. He took everything seriously.

Her fingers drummed thrashcore beats on the desk. She had a lot more work to do. Her analyses could use confirmation, for starters. On the record quotes from officials, especially the culprits. She’d had no luck with phone calls or emails, but DC and New York were short train rides away, and the paper should cover her expenses.

And people needed to know what was coming next. MediaCorp’s CEO, Bob Luxmore, was good buddies with President Rand, but they kept their conversations private. She had to learn what they were plotting.

She slid the keyboard aside and pulled the wraparound touch screen close.

Waylee had been working a while when a message box popped to the front of the screen.

Dave Wilson: Please come into my office.

The executive editor and senior vice president. Great Is Caesar. She’d sent her story to Frank Morris, assistant managing editor for news. He must have bumped it up the chain. Meaning he thought it was important.

Waylee pulled out her ear buds and straightened her skirt. Management was almost all white males, and they had yet to take her seriously. Her outfit wouldn’t help. Surplus Dwarf Eats Hippo band T-shirt, short skirt over sheer leggings, metal-studded boots. It would take her forever to go home and change, though. Wait for the 35 bus, half an hour ride southwest to her neighborhood, five minute walk, half an hour to find something upscale and clean to wear, then reverse the process back.

She yanked the black leather jacket off the back of her swivel chair and zipped it shut to hide the T-shirt. As for the rest, she’d compensate by acting professional.

Waylee smiled at the better-dressed fashion reporter in the next cubicle and headed for the bathroom, where she brushed her colorful hair. It was easily tamed, but repeating the brush strokes calmed her, helped her focus.

I’m not just amped. I’m nervous - why? She never felt nervous fronting the band. Nothing energized her more than screaming lyrics to a room full of sweaty kids.

Obviously this was different - the stakes couldn't be higher. And Caesar had never granted her an audience before.

But he was human. Onward.

Dave Wilson's office was all the way at the other end of the floor. Exit the maze of Entertainment & Life cubicles. Turn right at the Business section. Pass the News desks. There were plenty of empty cubicles there. She didn't care which one they assigned her, they were all the same size. Waylee Freid, Investigative Reporter, her laminated sign would read.

Mr. Wilson's door was closed. She hadn't been in his office since the orientation tour five years ago. She turned the knob and entered. *Should I have knocked?*

The executive editor, receding gray hair, bags under eyes, periwinkle button-down shirt with maroon striped tie, sat unsmiling behind a great wooden L-desk piled with papers. Behind him, plaques and framed stories covered the walls. A big computer screen perched on the perpendicular section of the desk, facing the left wall.

He wasn't alone. Frank Morris, balding and weary-eyed, slouched in a red stuffed chair to the side. And the E & L editor, Jessica Collins, vanilla-haired and full-bodied, peered through her glasses from a plastic-padded table chair in front of the desk. An empty matching chair sat a few feet away.

Caesar - Mr. Wilson - gestured toward the empty chair. "Ms. Freid. Have a seat."

Her story - she recognized the network diagram - was on his computer screen. But nobody looked happy. "Did you read the whole thing?"

Caesar raised a bushy gray eyebrow. "Owned?"

"Temporary title. Editors write the headlines anyway, I just focused on the content."

He gestured again. "You can sit, you know."

She did, scooting the chair forward until her knees touched the desk. "So what did you think?"

"You wrote that MediaCorp bought off politicians?"

"Well, yeah. The text links to the data. MediaCorp, their board members, and their foundations and PACs handed over a billion dollars to political candidates last cycle, mostly to the president and commerce committee members. Did you see how much the Communications and Technology chair got? You can see how I tracked the money—"

He waved his hand. "I'm not disputing that. But that doesn't prove any kind of quid pro quo."

Shit. Wilson had been in news since before Waylee was born. He couldn't be that naïve. "Come on."

"That's just one example of many where you leap beyond the facts."

"Well it's an awful big coincidence then that these same politicians leaned on the FCC, exempted MediaCorp from antitrust laws, and rubber-stamped every one of their requests, including a prohibition on public competition. In fact, the document chain shows MediaCorp lobbyists drafted the regulations and enabling legislation almost word for word."

"Like you said, could be a coincidence. We print facts or we drown in libel suits."

Could she tweak the wording? Or was he too afraid of blowback to even consider her story?

Frank straightened in his chair. "Correlation doesn't equal causation."

"Oh please, that's so tired. Why do you think the government kept all the negotiations secret? It's because the public would tar and feather them for giving so much control to one company. But it's not secret anymore. We've got agreements, memos, emails..."

"Ms. Freid," Wilson said, "where did you get these documents?"

Another attack. She had to regain the initiative. This story was too important. “Did you read them?”

“Frank looked at some of them.”

Don’t they care MediaCorp owns the world, but we can reverse it? She gripped his desk. “Our so-called democratically elected leaders think, or pretend to think, that MediaCorp knows best, and the public would just get in the way of techno-utopia. As if letting a few wealthy insiders control all the world’s information is a utopia. It’s like the Gilded Age, only a million times worse.”

Frank opened his mouth but she hadn’t finished. “MediaCorp,” she continued, “launched parallel campaigns all over the world—”

Frank spoke over her. “Just answer the question. How’d you get the documents?”

This felt like a police interrogation. She had to be careful. “Confidential source tipped me to an anonymous leak.”

“Obtained legally?”

She hesitated.

Frank stared, like he was reading her mind. “Can you get this source to speak on record?”

“I’ll find someone else to.”

Wilson glanced at the others, then leaned toward her. “Did you ask permission to cover this story?”

What? They were in the middle of a serious discussion, and now this?

Frank smirked. Petty functionary clinging to Caesar’s cape. He probably prefaced her story before forwarding it, ‘She didn’t ask me for permission...’ Small-minded assholes, both of them.

“I’ve never had to before,” she told Wilson.

“That’s because you’re not in news,” he said. “In news, the editor decides what stories to cover. Time is money, and we don’t have much of it. How many hours did you spend on this?”

She had to steer them back on the road. “I don’t know exactly. Look, can we get back to discussing the story?”

Jessica spoke for the first time. “I hope this doesn’t mean you’ve been slacking on what you’re paid to do.”

Waylee’s toes clenched the insoles of her boots. “I’ve been in nightlife for five fucking years now!” *Oops*. “Excuse the language. There are more important things to write about.”

Jessica’s eyes widened. “Look, Waylee. Don’t sell your job short. We have to be relevant to young people, and they want to know what’s happening. They want to know what music to buy, what bands to go see. You’re perfect for that.”

“My sister could work nightlife and she’s barely out of high school.”

“Jesus Christ Almighty. I’m trying to defend you.”

“Young people care about a lot more than music. I should know.” Waylee met Frank’s eyes, then Wilson’s. There must be some journalistic soul beneath the layers of *mauvaise foi*. “Look, about the story. You have to publish it. Everyone will notice. It’ll top trend until people take action.”

Frank let out a huff. “Angling for a Pulitzer already?”

Wilson lowered his eyebrows in attack mode. “Do you know what can happen to this paper’s reputation if we publish something controversial but wrong? Have you heard of the Dark Alliance fiasco?”

Gary Webb’s series about CIA ties to the crack epidemic back in the 1980’s. She knew American history as well as anyone. “Fiasco? Is that what you call courageous journalism?”

“It ruined Webb and it would have ruined the *Mercury News* if they hadn’t backed away.”
“He wasn’t wrong that the CIA knowingly worked with drug dealers. They even admitted it.”

Wilson stabbed a finger at the computer screen. “Where are the corroborating sources for your story, Ms. Freid? Who spoke out on record?”

“Couldn’t get any officials to talk. Didn’t you see the ‘declined to comment’ references?”

“You didn’t identify yourself as a *Herald* reporter, did you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Wilson and Frank bonded eyes.

She knew they’d want on the record corroboration. She’d do whatever it took to get it. “I have a lot of follow-up planned. Phone calls and emails are too easy to duck. I need to talk to people in person. I’ll get you whatever confirmation you need.”

“Not out of my budget,” Frank said. “And don’t harass people as a *Herald* representative.”

“Harass? What the fuck?”

Wilson glanced at his computer screen. “And you told your social media followers about this story?”

He’s not one of my followers. None of these blowtards are. “Who told you that?”

He didn’t answer.

How could I be so stupid? MediaCorp must have bots that scour the Comnet for anything that might affect them. “Let me guess,” she said. “MediaCorp snooped me, then their lawyers called our lawyers and they told you to kill the story.”

Wilson gritted his teeth. “Yes, corporate legal called from Chicago. They want to look over your story, but I’d rather handle it here.”

“Why can’t you just stick to a blog?” Frank said.

Waylee leapt to her feet. “Fucking hell! Our government gave the plutocrats the power to tell us what to think and suppress any criticism. They’re doing it now. How can you not stand up to that and still call yourself a journalist?”

Her persecutors stared. The words continued to pour. “What happened to the idea of a free press? And a free and open Internet, where everyone has a voice and everyone can be heard? Instead of just another control mechanism?”

Wilson pointed at the empty chair. “Sit down, Ms. Freid.”

She paced instead, trying not to kick the chair across the room. “Do you think journalism will even exist once MediaCorp takes over every outlet? It’ll be nothing but propagandists. And we can kiss the remnants of democracy goodbye.”

Wilson pressed his lips together and averted his eyes.

No! She stopped pacing. “MediaCorp is buying the paper, aren’t they? Buying our parent company. That’s why the lawyers moved so quick.”

He returned her stare but didn’t answer. Jessica and Frank looked at him. Not in the loop?

Her arms batted the air. “So all this talk about procedure - just excuses. You’re too chickenshit to offend your corporate masters. Fuck the truth. Job security’s all you care about.”

Wilson snarled, nostrils flared like a bull. “How dare you!”

Jessica stretched a hand toward her. “Waylee, please.”

Frank shook his head. “We’re trying to be reasonable. You’ve basically written an opinion piece backed by material that I assume was obtained illegally.”

The anger began to morph into helplessness. She hadn't budged them one inch. "Anonymously." The Collective hid her tracks pretty well, but could the government guess what happened anyway?

"We can't publish that," Frank said.

Not if MediaCorp was taking over the paper.

Wilson still looked mad. "If we did, we'd be sued for libel. MediaCorp has a hundred lawyers for everyone in this building."

"An exaggeration." But not by much. "My information is true. Check the metadata and email headers. There's plenty of precedence for using anonymous sources. If you would just stand up—"

Wilson smacked the top of his desk. A bully like her stepfather. Jessica winced and Frank edged away. "I've had enough of this! Look, I know you have this mental illness. I've tried to be patient—"

"What the hell are you talking about?" *He knows. That's why no one will take me seriously. It's not just cowardice or bootlicking. I never had a chance.*

"Forget it."

"I don't know what you heard, but I'm perfectly functional." That wasn't really true - cyclothymia was halfway to bipolar - but it was manageable. "It's none of your business anyway, and you know it."

Wilson threw up his hands and looked at Jessica. "I'm afraid we're going to have to bring H.R. in."

Waylee kicked the chair she'd abandoned, unable to resist any longer. It flew into the air and barely missed Frank's legs. "You assholes! Stupid pieces of shit!"

Wilson jumped from his chair. "That's it. I'm going to say this as clearly as I can. Stick to your assignments or work somewhere else." He pointed at the door. "Now get the hell out of my office."

Jessica got up as if to follow her out.

"Jessica, stay here," Wilson said. "We need to discuss your lax management."

Waylee slumped back into the cubicle sprawl. *I'm so stupid. I should have waited for more corroboration. Not that it would have helped.*

I have no idea what I'm doing.

Her energy sloughed away in big sheets, disappearing into the gray industrial carpet. Tears threatened to burst down her cheeks. Everyone would stare at her and think, Waylee's not so tough, she's just another helpless girl. And crazy too. She doesn't belong here, she should be in a padded cell.

Why did she bother? Nothing ever changed for the better.

* * *

Waylee's depressive episode was a lot worse than usual. There weren't any medicines for cyclothymia, but Pel convinced her to get a bupropion prescription, which lifted her from abyssal black to merely blue.

A couple of weeks later, she met with Willard Ramsey, the Independent News Center director. Pel's boss. A few blocks from the *Herald*, the INC was the region's biggest non-profit for investigative journalism. Focused on 'the people's interests,' they accepted no advertising or

government funding. No bonds to the corporate world. And they weren't afraid of controversy. In fact, they sought it.

Ramsey's office in the INC's three-story red brick building had no plaques on the wall. Waylee sat in a swivel chair while the grey-bearded director read her story on a stretch screen.

Halfway through, he turned and grinned. A good sign.

"There's a lot of links here," he said. "Mind if I check them later?"

"Yeah, all the supporting documents are on the data stick. I added videos last week, ambush interviews of Congressmen and FCC commissioners."

Her subjects didn't say much, but they didn't deny her accusations either. Best by far, one of the commissioners repented, saying in hindsight they shouldn't have allowed MediaCorp to control both data delivery and content.

Maybe they could be pressured to reverse it.

Ramsey finished the story. "And this is for us?"

"You'll have to rewrite it. The *Herald* owns my draft, even if they won't print it."

"We don't even have a print edition. We're strictly video."

She shrugged. "Who reads print anyway these days? Think of this as a starting point. Do your own follow-up. Interview everyone on my list, if you can."

"You want your name on it?"

"No, not a good idea. I just want someone to stand up to MediaCorp. Try to fix things."

He nodded and leaned back in his chair. "Still, won't your paper know we got this from you? Won't you get in trouble?"

"Fuck 'em."

Ramsey shook her hand and she headed for the door. Halfway there, she turned back. Was she dooming the last voice of independent media?

Ramsey met her eyes. "Yes?"

"Be careful. Don't underestimate them like I did."

#

An excerpt from
Sleep State Interrupt

(Full novel available soon)



“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 twitched sympathetic 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 mid-day 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.

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 peak. 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 him in the forehead with a wooden dowel. It bounced off to the right, leaving a bright red circle. 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 newsroom.

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.

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