

Four Baltimoreans, Two Gyllenians, and a Wolf-Dog Walk into a Bar

This story takes place the day before Waylee starts her [investigation of MediaCorp](#). Waylee, Pel, Artesia, and Fuera sit down at a booth in a Charles Village (Baltimore) pub. It's happy hour so why not?

- Waylee is a musician who works as a nightlife journalist for the *Baltimore Herald*, the local newspaper. ([image](#))
 - Pel is a hacker, tinkerer, and musician who works at the Independent News Center, a non-profit center for investigative journalism. ([image](#))
 - Artesia and Fuera are recently married women who work as sociology post-docs, and are friends of Waylee's.
 - Sally is their server.
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Pitcher of Yuengling, please.

You got it, hon.

And a glass of chardonnay.

Pitcher of Yuengling and a chardonnay. Anything else?

That'll do it. Three glasses for the beer.

Coming right up.

I hate Yuengling.

You're so girly. Listen guys, just one round, okay? I've got a lot of work to do.

Hey, Vaxel and Trieste finally hooked up.

You spend way too much time on the Fantasy Continent.

Like my sister. She's an addict. How long before people forget there even is a real world?

This is from a book, set in a realm called Gyllene. It's been adapted into a VR production, but it was a book first.

I almost never read fiction. I should, it would help my songwriting.

I've got the audio version on my link. Just a sec.

As promised, Trieste returned in an hour.

"How long do you all work?"

"Forever," Nikolao said. "We need more help."

"I thought that's why you had Vaxel."

Your story's making me feel guilty about sitting here drinking instead of finishing my paper.

One hour won't make a difference.

Here you go, Yuengling and a glass of chardonnay.

Thanks.

Cheers!

Cheers!

Cheers!

So I was starting to say earlier, what if MediaCorp takes over the paper? They're taking over everything.

I guess you have a choice - work for the new corporate bosses or come work at INC.

Indy Media would be fun. They do good work and they've got professional standards. But I like having health insurance and the possibility of reaching an audience. Assuming I survive whatever layoffs would come.

What's all this about wolf dogs?

They're basically big guard dogs. Like Laelaps, only bigger and faster.

"He's just part time," Teacher Apascoli said. "But it's great having him."

The words seemed to lift Vaxel up in the air. "Thank you, Teacher." He hadn't even accomplished anything yet.

Trieste walked up to him and smiled. "Logiost tells me you're brilliant."

"He - the Primary - really said that?"

"Well, not in those words exactly, but your test scores were apparently quite impressive, and you are making rapid progress in your studies."

Heat flushed across Vaxel's face. "Oh, well... uh, thank you." *Why am I so helpless around her?* "So... you are also... how long have you been one of Logiost's students?"

"Always. Since I was a toddler." Trieste opened her hands. "I've had tutors for everything you can imagine, but Logiost teaches the Way of the Guardians."

"So he's your tutor? The Primary?"

"Maybe that's not quite the right word.

Listen, I promised to show you around. Would you like to come with me?"

Vaxel's heart stopped. This stunning girl wanted to spend time with him. And he did miss that kind of contact. He was lonely, now that he thought about it. "Yes." He turned to Teacher Apascoli. "Can I leave my stuff here? Should I file it away?"

Apascoli's eyes darted between Trieste and Vaxel. "Just stack it on the table and it will be here for you tomorrow."

"Thank you." Vaxel organized his paperwork into a single pile and followed Trieste out of the office.

A giant wolf-dog sat in the alcove just outside the office. It looked like the one he'd faced before. It stared at him and his knees threatened to shake.

"This is my Security Companion, Taiyny," Trieste said. "Would you mind holding your hand out?"

Vaxel wasn't sure he wanted to do that.

"Don't be afraid. I just want Taiyny's opinion of you. She won't hurt you. Unless it's a matter of defence, of course."

The wolf-dog's head came almost up to his chest. And had huge, powerful-looking jaws filled with sharp canines.

*Tha corner boyz, they keepin' you down,
Don't cop their shit or hide in a frown.*

Hey, they're playing #M-Power Girlz!

*Ain't got time to play them dumb games,
You got a brain and places to go.*

I hate that song.

Why?

It's inane, but it keeps getting upvotes.

*Hear the news, don't throw up your hands,
Use that energy and do something now!*

It's empowering, though.

Sure, props for that, but the music is way too bubbly. And it's all synthesized. I like guitars in my music.

That's 'cause you're a guitarist. You're just biased.

Music feed's on local, so of course they'll play #M-Power Girlz. They play our band all the time, and we get as many downvotes as upvotes.

Traitor.

What?

Just joking, I hate it when you pout.

*Keep on striving, climb to the top,
Give it everything that you've got!*

“Don't be afraid,” Trieste repeated. “You'll make her nervous.”

That's all I want, my hand in the mouth of a nervous killing machine. Vaxel forced himself to calm down, concentrating on his breath. It—she—hadn't hurt him before. He felt the fear slowly dissipate, and extended his hand.

Taiyny peered at Vaxel carefully, and sniffed his hand. Then she licked it, twice.

Trieste looked delighted. “She likes you! That means I can trust you. Not to attack me, I mean.”

Vaxel wiped his hand on his robe. “Why would I attack you?”

“I didn't think you would. You're not that sort of person as far as I can tell. But I have to be careful. Something my father taught me.”

Trieste led Vaxel down a set of stairs and into a blue-tiled hallway, her graceful stride mesmerizing. Taiyny brought up the rear.

“Where are we going?” Vaxel asked.

“My apartment. I have music there. And we need a drink. It's a quick walk if we take the shortcut.”

“I don't drink much,” he said. “And I thought you were going to show me the city.” *Why did I say that? Be nice to her.*

She stopped and faced him. “Not in this uniform I'm not. I will show you around. But we need to go to my apartment first. It's also nice and private.”

She resumed the march, then stopped in front of a solid-looking steel door. She removed a large black key ring from her carry bag, and opened it. They traversed more corridors, unlocked more doors, and climbed two sets of stairs. The third set of stairs were carved in marble. They led to a long hallway lit by golden chandeliers. Trieste stopped at a massive oak door with a steel lock, a glass peephole, a door chime button, and a speaking tube. “Here we are! I've lived here since I turned seventeen.”

“Where are we?”

“My apartment. Like I said.” Trieste thumbed through the key ring and selected a double-sided brass key.

“I mean... are we still in the Palace?”

“You're supposed to be smart. What do you

You know what, who cares if I get laid off? I've survived worse.

What I want to know is how Bob Luxmore got so powerful. MediaCorp didn't even exist ten years ago.

He's a visionary, they say. And a great organizer. He transformed the entire Internet. Not just in the U.S., but all over the world.

But he did it with public funds. How did he manage that? The public paid for all those high-speed fiber optic lines but MediaCorp controls them all.

People like Luxmore are connected.

Connections make the world go 'round, for good or ill.

And how is it MediaCorp got to rename the Internet? Why are people going along with that?

It's their routers and servers and software.

Branding. Corporations gotta brand everything.

Paradigm shift for a brand new era, they say.

It's bullshit.

They say the 'Com' in 'Comnet' is short for communication, but really it means dot com. Commercial.

The business of the Comnet is business. Worse, monopolized business. Who can compete with a company that owns all the infrastructure and can set the bandwidth rates?

Yeah, MediaCorp's videos and games and news—

If you can call it that—

think?" Trieste turned the key in the lock until it clicked twice.

Vaxel felt a surge of irritation, mostly at himself, but it receded when Trieste opened the door and they walked in. A foyer with side closets gave way to a luxurious reception room, ornamented with sculptures and paintings. The ceiling was impressively high, almost five meters from the floor.

Trieste led him into a large living room, full of velvet-upholstered furniture and abstract sculptures. Vaxel had never seen anything like it. Thousands of preserved butterflies hung from the ceiling, spirals of color frozen in time. A silver-plated wirecom perched on an elaborately carved desk. A large radio and tall external speakers sat on a central table, along with an engraved box supporting a rack of horizontal hardened-wax cylinders and a delicately balanced needle.

"That's a wax recording player," Trieste said, noticing his interest. "Don't you have those in Ironton?"

"Sure, but I don't know anyone who owns one. Until now, anyway."

"Surely you have radios, though."

"My family has one. Can't get many stations in the mountains, though. I listened to the Conclave broadcast at night a lot." The Conclave oversaw a network of long-distance radio stations that transmitted Teachings, Interpretations, and discussions throughout the World.

"Well, that's commendable. I mostly listen to the Hestia music stations. I get enough lecturing as it is."

Tajyny darted around, tail wagging.

"If you'll excuse me," Trieste said, "I have to feed my Companion. She eats late like I do." She gestured to one of the sofas. "Please sit, and I'll be right back." She led her wolf-dog out of the room.

What am I doing here? Why does this girl have such a fancy apartment in the Palace? And a Security Companion? Does the Primary live like this? Or just nobles, like the rich families in Ironton? Trieste must be from a noble family, he concluded. As for why he was here, still a mystery.

A few minutes later, Trieste returned alone.

All MediaCorp's content is broadcast at a hundred gigabits or more, and everyone else is stuck at megabits unless they pay to play.

As we didn't have enough to worry about, the whole world going down the toilet.

And the crazy weather.

Hey, can we get another pitcher?

Sure thing, hon.

Another? I've got a lot to do. I'm not spending my whole day in this bar.

So this Trieste chick, is she a princess?

Sort of. They're not royalty, more like a first family that inherits their power.

Sounds like this country.

No, it's more of a caste system but all the castes are meritocracies except the nobility, and they claim to be a meritocracy because they're trained from birth how to run things.

My sister plays a princess in BetterWorld. She'd love this.

She told me it was too steampunky, and no magic.

Seems like you talk to her more than I do.

We chat in VR now and then. She doesn't just play a princess, she is a princess, at least as far as BetterWorld goes.

She'll grow out of it. I hope. Charles Stross said it best: 'A princess is the larval reproductive host in the life cycle of a parasitic hereditary dictatorship.'

Good one.

She pulled aside a slatted wooden door, revealing a small closet full of horizontal bottles and various types of glasses. "What do you drink?"

"I don't drink," Vaxel said. "Almost never, anyway."

"How about some wine, then? Just a glass or two." Trieste poured them each a glass of amber-hued wine, then sat next to him on the sofa and held her glass to his. "To moving on, and finding happiness."

"May the Eternal bless us." The wine tasted sweet, almost like dry mead, but with a fruitier flavor. "These rooms... all just for you, or does someone else live here?"

"Just me. It's not that big, really, compared to the size of the Palace, but it's nicely furnished."

"Are you related to the Ithegos, or do your parents work for them?"

Her face tightened. "I live on my own, can't you see? Can't you judge me on my own merits? Or lack of them, if that's what you think?" She looked away, as if her self-confidence had disappeared.

I really am bad at this. "I haven't noticed any faults, although to be honest, your remark when I asked if we were still in the Palace was a little rude."

"Thank you for telling me that." She had another sip of wine. "I try not to be rude, but I have a bit of a temper sometimes. Comes from a lifetime of frustrations and humiliations." She drank more.

"You don't seem like the type to be frustrated or humiliated," he said, feeling awkward.

Her green-brown eyes fixed on him. "Why do you think that? Good advice of course. I'm trying to make my life pleasant."

"You seem generally sure of yourself, and aren't afraid to show initiative."

She smiled. "Part of my training. Thank you for your observation." She finished her glass of wine. "Pardon my manners. Have you eaten anything?"

"Not since lunch." He hadn't been eating much at all, actually.

"I had my afternoon meal at the Advisory Building cafeteria for the first time in years. Have you been there?"

"No, I didn't know there was anyplace to eat

Vaxel, what's his story?

Army vet turned student. Kind of like a monk but not really. Just listen.

*Run then strut
To Power Plant Live
You're the coolest
In the hive.
Baltimore's Green Zone
Swarm and be seen
Safe from danger
In your corporate scene.*

See, they're playing our band now.

It's so weird to hear myself on a playlist.

*Skin stretched
Over empty skull,
Painted for the carnival.*

You sure got a knack for screeching, girl.

There's a lot to screech about in this city.

Your pitcher. Can I get you anything else?

We're good for now, thanks.

Really, this is the last one. I'm not spending all day in this bar.

in the Palace.”

“It’s not as bad as you’d think,” she said. “We can go back, or I can have something brought here.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

She sighed. “I can’t have you passing out on me for lack of food.” She poured herself another glass of wine, then rummaged through another set of cabinets. “I have all sorts of emergency food here.”

Trieste piled tin boxes and glass jars and utensils on a big ceramic tray. “We need music too.”

She balanced the tray on Vaxel’s lap, then switched around the cylinders in the wax recording player. She flipped a switch and the rack advanced into position, the needle arm swung into place, and the hand danced up and down the grooves of the rotating cylinder. Syncopated, multilayered music erupted from the speakers, surprisingly realistic compared to the radio back home.

“Flower of the Redemption,” Trieste said. “One of my favorites.”

She returned to the sofa, sat so close that their hips touched, and edged the tray over so it rested on both their laps. Jasmine wafted from her long, dark hair. She opened the boxes and jars, which were packed with biscuits, fruit spreads, cheeses, marinated olives and vegetables, dried fish, almonds, chocolates, and more. “Eat whatever you want.”

They ate and drank wine and she asked him about Ironton and Ovdalar province and life in the Army, then what it was like living at the School of Gyllene. As he talked, she swayed and bobbed her head to the music, but listened to him at the same time.

He finally asked a question of his own. “What are you doing when your service ends? You said you don’t want to be a logistician?”

She emptied half her glass. They had already finished a liter-sized bottle and had started a second. “I can’t think of anything more dreary. I’d like to be a yacht racer if I could. Or a musician. Do you know how lucky you are, being able to do what you want?” Even though she drank twice as much as him, her voice didn’t slur.

So back to MediaCorp. Why haven't they been sued for violating anti-trust laws?

I don't know. They've been given an awful lot of exemptions. Upgrading the Internet and making it more secure is in the national interest, everyone says.

They say that because MediaCorp controls the message.

Not everywhere, but yeah in the mainstream.

They must have paid people off. Or they have so much influence, politicians want to be their friend and not their enemy.

Maybe.

What's to stop them from taking over every news outlet in existence? Replacing journalism with pure propaganda that benefits their bottom line? Telling everyone who to vote for and what to think? It was bad enough before. MediaCorp is an existential threat to democracy.

Yeah. They've been talking about this on the darknet boards. More about the open code and internet freedom angles, but they're related.

Hey, less talking, more drinking. I'm not spending my whole day in this bar.

*Tha corner boyz, they keepin' you down,
Don't cop their shit or hide in a frown.*

Why are they playing that again? We just heard it!

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"No one applies to the School of Gyllene unless they're passionate about becoming a Teacher. It's hard to get in and hard to succeed, from what I've heard."

He shrugged. "Yes, I've wanted to become a Teacher for a long time. But now..." He decided not to burden her with what he'd learned about the Drift and the crisis. He needed a break from that, lest he succumb to despair or madness.

"Tell me more about your girlfriend," she asked then.

The music seemed to disappear. So much for pleasantness. It was like falling off a cliff or being buried by an avalanche. "I, uh, told you I thought we were finished. I've known her most of my life."

"Like my paramour."

"I got a letter. She joined the Army and she's given up on me. 'I'm moving forward,' she wrote."

Trieste wrapped fingers over his left hand. "I'm sorry. I know it's painful." Her hand was warm. She wore no rings or bracelets. Her fingernails were unpainted, but trimmed and polished.

"I hope we don't go to war," he said. "If anyone could survive, it would be Heddi, but I'm still worried about her. And everyone else I know in the First Legion."

Trieste squeezed his hand. "We're not going to war, at least any time soon. If we were going to war, I would know about it."

"How?"

"I see all the logistics paperwork at the Army Station. It would be obvious, troops and materials being mobilized and moved to the border."

She was right. He almost asked her to let him know if she spotted something, but then she'd think he was a spy. From what he'd heard while serving, spies were tortured and usually executed.

The recording player advanced to the last cylinder. Trieste released his hand and finished her glass of wine. "It must be getting late. I have a clock in my room, but..." Her head dropped and she smiled. "My friends are probably wondering where I am. Or maybe they aren't." She looked at him. "I enjoyed this, Vaxel of Ironton. I like talking to you. But I assume you

I'll turn up the volume on the story. Are you even listening to it?

I'm listening. My brain multitasks a million things at once.

Whether I want it to or not.

*Hear the news, don't throw up your hands,
Use that energy and do something now!*

Someone needs to shine a light on MediaCorp, and wake people up before it's too late. They broke up AT&T way back when, and Standard Oil. And Microsoft only escaped by curbing their practices. MediaCorp's more a danger than all those companies put together.

You're a reporter, why don't you do it?

*Keep on striving, climb to the top,
Give it everything that you've got!*

I'm sick of working nightlife too. So yeah, I'll do it. I'll need your help, boy wonder.

For what?

Help with research. Getting documents. You're a kick-ass hacker. You're connected.

Let's talk about it later. This isn't exactly private.

Good time to adjourn. I really need to finish that paper.

I'm chugging.

Check, please!

need to get home, back to the School.”

Too bad this had to end. But working for the Primary was putting him behind in his studies. “At some point, yes.”

“I can walk you to the streetcar stop - I have to show you out - or, if you want, you could stay here tonight, and leave in the morning. If you do that, we'll have a lot more time together.”

“Stay here?”

“I have a shower and food, and I get up early.”

He looked in her green-brown eyes. She gazed back and smiled. “You are really attractive, Vaxel of Ironton. Surely you've been told that.”

His heart pounded. He'd heard that before, but not from someone like her. The music grew louder. *Kiss her!*

Trieste put her glass aside and looked expectantly at Vaxel.

She likes you, stupid! Can't you tell? Kiss her!

Vaxel put his glass down and kissed Trieste. She kissed him back, tasting of sweet wine. Their lips, then their tongues, explored and lingered. She held him close, breasts pressing against him, boiling the blood in his veins. The world contracted into the electric touch of lips, the movement of hands, the rose and jasmine fragrance of her hair.

Trieste gazed into his eyes. Percussion rhythms coursed from the speakers. “Do you want to stay, then?”

“I'm so glad I met you,” was all he could manage. He'd felt drawn to her the moment he first saw her, then thought her lost forever, and now... now they were kissing! Where did this fall in the probability curve?