

A black and white photograph showing the back and head of a person from behind. The person's head is bald, and their shoulders are visible. The background is dark and textured. The text "M. Darusha Wehm" is overlaid in white at the top, and "Self Made" is overlaid in white at the bottom.

M. Darusha Wehm

Self Made

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Fifteen

Uri Farone suggested that they retire to the "back room." Dex agreed, and they linked into a small but impressively decorated office with a few expensive-looking chairs and fully functional liquor cabinet. Dex quickly excused himself and went offline to refill his glass and empty his bladder, then rejoined Farone in his office. Farone was clearly still in sales mode, and he couldn't blame the man. Bish had obviously mentioned Dex to him in passing, and guys like Farone could smell a mark a mile away. Still, Dex had to give the man credit for being willing to have a conversation. Though at his prices, a single sale would be well worth a chat and a few glasses of virtual single malt.

"These days people think of Stella as just a project manager," Farone said, "but what she does is a lot more complicated than that. Sure, she's the middle layer in a lot of fairly simple transactions — I want a widget, you make widgets,

Stella gets us together and takes ten percent. It's a time honoured model and pretty much everyone is happy with it."

"But what about the widget makers she doesn't play with?" Dex asked.

"Well, there is that," Farone said, sipping his scotch. He seemed to savour the moment, then tipped the glass toward Dex. "You sure you don't want effects?"

"I'm sure," Dex said.

"Okay." He paused, Dex guessed that he was running the conversation back to remind himself of where they left off. "It's surprisingly competitive in here," he continued, "and everyone knows that Stella's people are the best. Not to mention that it's just easier to deal with one known quantity rather than try and dig up someone yourself to do the work for you."

"You seem to be doing all right," Dex said, "and it certainly doesn't look like you need Stella Bish to get work."

"No, I don't," Farone said, "not anymore. But I wasn't always in the memory enhancement biz. I used to be a code monkey just like a million other schmucks out there. But I was lucky. I got on with Stella, and was successful enough that I was able to quit my day job. Then I had the time to develop my pet project, and eventually quit Stella's gigs, too."

"And that was okay with her?"

"There was a line up of guys banging down the door looking for work behind me," Farone said. "Stella isn't exactly hard up for people. Besides, she gets a kickback every time I get a referral from her, so she's still in the loop."

Dex smiled. "So she's really the lynchpin of the underground economy here, isn't she?" he asked.

"There isn't a whole hell of a lot that goes on without her," Farone agreed, "and a place in her stable is almost a guarantee to get out of the work a day world out there. After a couple of years most people have made enough money and contacts that they are free to live almost exclusively online. There's even a rumour that she's building a giant apartment complex in Europa for the staff."

"Just how many people does she have on the payroll?" Dex asked.

"It's not a payroll," Farone corrected. "They're all independent contractors."

"Right, whatever," Dex said. "How many?"

"Let me see. Give me a second." Farone's avatar stopped animating, and stared disconcertingly just past Dex's right ear. In a moment, he flickered back to life and said, "Looks like it's about 143, give or take."

"Oh," Dex said. "You, ah, happen to have a staff list there?"

"Yeah," Farone said, "you want it?"

Dex was in two minds about whether Farone was toying with him. Not that it mattered if he actually could get a list, so he simply said, "Yes."

"Okay, then," Farone said, and pinged Dex's system. He accepted the download and felt the brief weight in his head. "There's a list of people waiting to get on, too. I'll send you a link." Dex wondered how he managed not to find any of this information until now. That was the trouble with instantly accessible information — you still needed to know what you wanted before you could find it.

Dex took a pull on his impotent virtual drink. "So, I have to say that everything you've told me makes me wonder how working for her is any different from working for a firm," he said.

Farone was silent for a moment, then said, "It's the hope, I guess. The hope that one day you get to call your own shots, that you can live the way you want. Maybe it's just a change of pace. But it seems different when you're living it. And a few of us do get out, get to do our own thing."

Maybe, Dex thought. Back in the privacy of his room, he shook his head, clearing the thoughts from his mind. He spent a few more moments talking with Farone, and took the custom price sheet the man prepared for him. Linking out of Marionette City he wondered what kind of freedom it was that leaves a person bound to a different master.

Dex stood and stretched his legs. He finished his drink and refilled the glass with water. He stood and brought up the staff list in his viewer. The price sheet for Farone's memory upgrade was still open and the list partially covered it. Dex scanned the names, stopping at Reuben Cobalt. Out of curiosity, he skipped down to the end. Velarian, Ventner, Vespa... no Velasquez. No news there. As far as Bish was concerned, Ivy was a non-entity.

Dex refocussed on his physical surroundings, and stood. Not having any other outlet for the strange feeling in his body, he began pacing. He didn't stalk around his apartment often, but he was getting restless. He could feel very old, very well hidden patterns trying to reassert themselves. Dex grabbed a jacket

and fled the apartment. He stepped on the down lift platform, and as it lowered him to the ground floor, the desire to pour another rum and fire up the video viewer strongly imposed itself onto his mind. He pushed it aside and stepped into the dark twilight.

Dex walked down the street, aimlessly moving forward, feet pounding the sidewalk. There were few people on the street, mostly city folks moving from work to home as quickly as possible with hardly any stops in between. Looking closer, Dex saw the usual street dwellers, people like the old woman he encountered the other night, huddling in groups in the corners and potholes of the city. He walked down the street, looking for any public place, somewhere where people might gather together. He knew there were others like him, people who just couldn't get everything in a virtual wrapper, people who needed the funk of real flesh. There were bars where they met, in every town. He knew there were some right there, in his city.

He walked for a half hour, headed for Green Sector. He had tried to forget the goon squad's report a few weeks previously of a gin joint in that neighbourhood that served the real stuff — booze, food and drugs. It was not the kind of place a good guy would usually be found, but its description had reminded Dex of his old hangouts. He nearly missed the door, but he could smell the heady fragrance of smoke, cooking and human armpits. He pushed open the door, and the sound of the place froze him in his tracks. People. Live and in the flesh. People talking, arguing, singing, crying. The whole human

gamut of it all. And it took Dex's breath away.

He must have been standing in the doorway for some time, because he didn't move until a large man with a dirty beard shouldered his way past him. The big man roughly pushed his way out the door, knocking into Dex as they passed. He scowled at Dex and mumbled something about getting out of the way, but Dex didn't notice any of that. His attention was focussed on the part of his shoulder the man had grazed on his way out the door. The man was long gone, but Dex could still feel his touch as if his flesh had been singed. He couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him. His vision blurred.

It was too much. He turned around, and blindly banged out the door and into the night. It had started raining again, and Dex turned his face up to the sky to let the cold drops wash over him. He walked back to his apartment in a daze, wondering if there was anywhere in any world that would ever feel like home to him again. The only time he ever felt even close to comfortable was when he was working a case or lost in his memories. He got back to his apartment, and dried off in the lav, thinking about his life. Every time he craved companionship, he just opened up the bottle and one of those files. And, why should this day be any different? Once he was dry, Dex poured his drink, sat in the chair, and watched.

The next day, Dex awoke, got himself off to work, and pinged Stella Bish. He'd had enough of asking questions behind her back; it was time to get to the source. He asked for a meeting in Marionette City and she eventually agreed,

after several attempts to avoid it. She seemed willing enough to talk to him — she'd offered to have a voice or text conversation, but oddly enough Dex wanted the full 3D deal. She finally acquiesced and they'd agreed to meet that evening at the open marketplace.

Dex spent the workday alternately handling irate B&B customers and poking around the boards for independent programmers. He posed as a client looking for some custom work in Marionette City and tried to see whose name floated to the top. The first few boards he came to were more focussed on M City society, so the posters there just pointed Dex to pre-existing businesses operating in Marionette City. He hinted that he was looking for something special, but no one there had any information for him — at least nothing they were willing to share.

From there, he found some links to another board that dealt with the programming behind Marionette City. Here the talk was well beyond Dex's limited knowledge, but he suspected that he might be on the right track. The trouble was that they had a strict non-commercial rule about the posts, so he couldn't just barge in and start soliciting programmers. He decided to take a chance. He sent a message to the moderator of the board explaining that he knew the board was non-commercial, but he was looking to engage the services of someone competent and was hoping that he could get a link to somewhere that would allow him to post his request.

Dex was forced to endure two full customer calls before he got a reply from the moderator. First, the mod had suggested that Dex contact someone who specialized in this sort of thing, and had even included a direct link.

Unfortunately, it was for Stella Bish. The mod did, however, also include a link to a board that was described as "Mostly full of crap, but you might get some joy there. Good luck, you'll need it."

Dex paged over to the board, and had to admit that the mod was right. It was more or less unmoderated and pretty close to chock full of ads for stuff few people would admit to wanting. There were the ubiquitous virtual genital enhancements, with full three dimensional imagery to go with each ad, not to mention the strippers, hookers and "full featured fantasy play vacations." Dex wondered if a link over to this board might help explain to Annabelle why he found virtual intimacy so off-putting.

He spent a long time scouring the boards for anything legitimate, but Dex was getting nowhere in a great hurry. There were only so many graphic images of the various body parts he could buy or rent that he could stand. He spent a few moments cobbling together a script that would strip out the obvious crap and just leave him with the other posts. It would take a few minutes to run, so Dex just set it and forgot it.

He went back to his cranky callers and placated, mollycoddled, argued and cajoled until his new and improved abbreviated workday was done. His script finished running during the train ride back to his neighbourhood, and he saved the results to a separate file. He wouldn't have time to work through it all before his meeting with Bish, so he set a reminder for later that evening to bring up the file and see if he could make anything of it.

Dex had a few minutes before he was scheduled to meet with Stella Bish,

and he used the time to take care of some physical world maintenance that he knew he'd let slide. He set the apartment to clean itself the next day when he was at work, and found all the nutrient bar wrappers, bottles and cans that had collected in his apartment over the last weeks. He took them all out to the hall and dumped them into the apartment building's communal recyclatron. Back in his apartment, he changed, poured a drink, went online and made his way to the market. He turned up to the meeting place early, and sat on a bench. He watched the virtual birds twittering in a false sky, saw avatars feeding them bits and bytes as they walked hand in hand with their virtual lovers. He almost felt like he was missing out on something, almost felt a little envious. Almost, but not quite.

Chapter Sixteen

Dex saw Stella Bish coming toward him from what seemed like a mile away. Almost everyone spent so much time on their avatar's appearance, they might as well all be wearing t-shirts that read "Please look at me, aren't I beautiful?" Bish had a slightly different take on that beauty than most of the other folks in the market. Her avatar wore a long, cream coloured dress of a design that aimed to emulate satin. She seemed to be going for an effortless elegance in the midst of leather underpants and bright blue feathered wings.

Fair enough, Dex thought, knowing that his own image with the old fashioned dark suit and hat was somewhat unusual as well. Bish walked through the middle of the plaza, disrupting the birds and turning them into a maelstrom of avian clouds as they squawked and rustled up into the sky. She knew how to make an entrance, Dex had to admit.

She approached the bench where he sat, and Dex played along by standing as she approached and touching his hand to the brim of his hat. She might have control over the independent contractors in Marionette City, but she surely didn't have a monopoly on anachronism. She sashayed up to him, a hint of a smile on her lips. "So, gumshoe," she said, "what did you call me up here for?"

Dex gestured for her to sit, and she gathered up her skirts, as if to avoid soiling them on some invisible dirt, and sat gingerly next to him on the bench. "Seems like you're the go to gal around here," he said, "if you want to get anything personal or interesting made." She smiled, and Dex thought he detected a kind of preening expression in the avatar. "No, really," he continued. "It seems like you're the only game in town if someone wants a little extra work." Her smile faded, and Dex pressed on. "There isn't a whole lot of independent programming that goes on around here that isn't under your umbrella, is there?"

She held his gaze and her avatar face betrayed nothing. Who knew what was happening autonomically with her physical body. If there was one thing Dex knew, it was that Marionette City was made for liars. "My people are the best," she finally answered. "The market regulates itself. What can I say — people come to a trusted name for a trusted product. There's nothing new here. I offer a kind of guarantee. Who doesn't like that?"

"That's fine," Dex said, "but it seems like there might be people who are so keen to get into your inner circle of contractors that they'd be willing to kill for the job."

She looked taken aback, and Dex wondered how many of her expressions

were calculated and how many were genuine. "You can't mean that Reuben Cobalt was killed for his contracts? That's..." She paused, as if choosing her next words carefully. "That's both appalling and stupid."

"Only if you don't think about it," Dex said. "You know that Reuben was a multi, right?"

She looked down, then said, quietly, "I had guessed that it was the case." She raised her head and looked Dex straight in the eyes. "I'm not one of those bigots, Mr. Dexter. All I care about in here is my business, and I really don't give a damn what people do outside of their working lives. Heaven knows people would be surprised to see my private life. But I don't know anything about Reuben's... uh 'author' doesn't sound quite right. What's the correct term?"

"They usually say 'creator' or 'first'," Dex said.

"Okay," she continued, "his creator. I have no idea who that is. And I couldn't care less. He did fine work, Mr. Dexter. Like you will never know. We lost an artist." She looked away, and Dex paused a moment.

"Fine," he said. "Assuming that the killer also knew that Reuben was a multi, maybe it was easier to rationalize. You're not really killing a person, you're just ruining some code. It's not murder, it's vandalism. And if it means the difference between complete obscurity and a solid slate of contract jobs, it might be a reasonable career move."

"Hmm," Bish said, thinking.

"Not so stupid after all," Dex said.

"I'd disagree," she said, "but my perspective is different. At first glance it

might appear that programmers are a dime a dozen, but the truly great ones are hard to come by. Sure there are tons of people offering services, but there are only a few who can really make things happen. It takes more than a perfunctory understanding of language — only a few people have the skills to make something new here. I choose my people carefully, Mr. Dexter. That's why my positions are so sought after."

"I understand that," Dex said. "So I have to ask, have you filled the void? Have you replaced Reuben's position?"

Bish looked uncomfortable, but said, "I do have a long list of people waiting for work. Vacancies don't last very long."

"So you have someone in mind for a replacement," he said.

"I do," she answered. "But I do think you're going in the wrong direction."

"That may very well be," Dex conceded, "but I'd still like to see your short list of replacements."

Bish was silent for a moment. "I don't want you harassing my people," she said. "It's bad for business."

"I realize that," Dex said, "but having your staff eliminated can't be good for morale, either."

"Very well," she said, ping his system for a download. He accepted and a small file transferred over to him. "I trust you will be discreet."

"I'll certainly try," he said, as she rose from the bench. She turned to him and he stood.

"Have you visited Mr. Farone, yet?" she asked.

Dex was taken aback. "I'm sure you know I have," he said.

She turned to walk away, and said, over her shoulder, "I hope you find what you're looking for." She linked out of Marionette City without waiting for a response.

Dex opened the file she had sent him and looked at the names. His memory wasn't perfect, but it didn't take long before one name jumped out at him as a familiar one. Sterling Ljungberg, number two on the list. Dex ran through his notes and was reminded that Ljungberg was one of Reuben's buddies from the philosophy boards. And there he was, a contender for Reuben's newly vacated job with Stella Bish. Dex didn't like coincidences much, and this one was too great to ignore. Time to talk to Ljungberg again.

Dex pulled up the contact information he had for Ljungberg, but he got the "not online" message. Fine, it was getting late, and not everyone showed themselves online all the time anyway. He paged over to his notes and found a link to the board where he'd first encountered Ljungberg. He ran a search for the man's name, and saw that Ljungberg hadn't posted there in some time. In fact, he hadn't posted there since before Dex had spoken to him days earlier. That wasn't entirely unusual; looking at the man's posting pattern, he'd been a sporadic participant for the last few months.

Dex was pretty sure he ought to be able to find out more about Ljungberg, but he didn't have the skills to even figure out where to start. He felt like he was abusing whatever bizarre relationship they had, but he pinged Annabelle

anyway, explaining that he wanted any information on Sterling Ljungberg's activities online in the last week. He provided all the contact information he had, and sent the message. He figured she'd get it in the morning and get back to him later on, but she answered back right away via voice chat.

"Hey, Dex," she said. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were just making excuses to talk to me."

"I don't need an excuse," Dex lied, "but I do need help. I'm starting to think you should have taken this case off my hands a long time ago."

"Bullshit," she said, "you love this stuff. Besides, I'm no investigator; I'm just a code monkey. This is just one of those times when it takes two to tango, you know?"

"Sure," he said. "I really do appreciate your help, though. I want you to know that."

"I do," she said, softly. "Look, here's the thing. I've written up a search script to see if I can track Ljungberg through my secret back door to the everywhere.net. But it's going to take a while to run." She paused a moment. "If you have some free time, you wanna just talk for a bit? No strings, we're just pals — you know, a conversation. If you have the time, of course."

Dex really didn't have anything else to do, and with his new work schedule he had more than enough time to hang out with Annabelle if he wanted. What the hell, he thought. He figured he owed her something for all the crap he'd been getting her to do for him, not to mention for being such an asshole the other night. He could probably suck it up and make small talk for a few minutes.

"Sure, kiddo." he said. "I'd love to."

Dex surprised himself. They talked for a good three hours and it wasn't really that bad. Annabelle told him about some of the sneaky ways she tapped into the security sectors of the everywhere net to get information she wasn't really supposed to have. A lot of what she said went over his head, but she was so into it that some of her excitement rubbed off on him and he found himself asking her to explain things he'd never even remotely cared about before. She asked him about investigating and what that was like, and he talked about that feeling you get being all wrapped up in a puzzle and having to just poke it at its edges until a little piece comes free, then following it until you get out and can see it for what it is.

Partway through the first hour, Dex refilled his glass and he heard Annabelle do the same. They talked for a while about their day jobs, which was an easy source of bonding. Annabelle was a low level grunt programmer for a major train firm in Europa, and she had all the same bullshit in her job that Dex had in his.

"Europa," Dex said, confused. "But you're on my local squad."

"Yeah," she said. "I used to live there, but my firm got acquired by a big Euro outfit and I was transferred. I moved physically, but since I'm not Street I never bothered to switch squads. It's worked out fine, since I'm still more or less on a Namerican time schedule. Everything's virtual anyway, so I've hardly even noticed the change."

They continued to talk shop, comparing strategies for getting annoying

people to stop bothering them, and coming up with clever ways to tell managers that their ideas were stupid without losing their jobs. Dex shared his recent discovery that if you fucked up just enough, they'd reduce your hours without cutting your benefits, and suggested that Annabelle should try it.

"Somehow I doubt I could get away with that," she said, her speech having gotten a little looser as they got further into the night. "You know there's something about you that just makes people want to help you, right?"

"Um," Dex said, laughing, "I actually think it only works on you."

Annabelle snorted, and that made Dex laugh even harder. "You totally don't see it, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, trying to get the laughter under control.

"You have this, I don't know, vulnerability combined with menace," she said. "It's a very potent combination. I think it's what makes you such a great investigator. People feel compelled to help you, no matter whether they're motivated by fear or compassion. It's weird."

"No," Dex said, "you're weird."

"Well, I knew that," Annabelle said. "That's why I like you. Dangerous, needy guys turn me on. I never know if they're going to hang me from a meathook and ravish me or curl up in my lap and let me stroke their hair. It's the not knowing what's coming next that's so hot."

Dex didn't know what to say to that, and an awkward pause hung between them for a while. He polished off his drink, and finally said, earnestly, "I'm sorry

I'm not the man you think I am."

Annabelle laughed lightly. "Don't be sorry, you're perfectly wonderful. I just need to remember that I can't make everything I want happen just by wishing it were so. I guess it's an occupational hazard."

Dex laughed again, wondering how she could be so easy with this. He knew how much it hurt to have something you want so badly to be close enough to taste, but only to watch it walk away from you. Quietly, he said, "I wish I could be what you want," but Annabelle wasn't listening anymore.

Instead, she interrupted, excitedly saying, "The script is done! And you're not going to believe this. Unless I somehow fucked this up beyond all recognition, our guy has completely vanished."