

A black and white photograph showing the back and head of a person from behind. The person is bald, and the lighting highlights the contours of their neck, shoulders, and back. The background is dark and out of focus.

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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## Chapter One

The moment she walked into the joint, Dex had known that she was there for him. It wasn't just the hard look about her, the one that says, "I've never been in a dive like this before but I'll be damned if I'm going to let the creeps and low lifes scare me". It wasn't even the fact that she stuck out like a naked face. Really, he knew because she walked in. Everyone else would have ported in from a link, but she didn't have a link. And that meant she'd been looking for this place on the QT, and that meant she'd been looking for him.

That was the previous day. The memory of the meeting was fresh but imperfect, so Dex paged over to his viewer. His hands tripped across the space in front of him, moving files and links out of his view. The space he was sitting in was close, but there was enough room for him to easily wave his arms around — he could have expanded his viewer's size to maybe even double without

having to worry about whacking his neighbour. He found the file he wanted and the video image of his meeting the previous day imposed itself over his vision.

Dex, like most people, used one eye for one task, the other eye for another one, with the whole mess at about 80% opacity so he could still just see the physical world in front of him. At work he didn't really need to see at all, but you never can be too careful. Just because he kept his own screen at a reasonable size didn't mean that someone nearby, playing with the resolution, wouldn't inadvertently punch him in the head while just trying to delete some mail.

He flicked a finger to start running the file, but then a chime sounded. Fuck. A call. He'd have to answer it, since that was how he kept his job and got paid. He quickly flicked his fingers in front of him, simultaneously hiding the file, opening a program on the company's system and answering the call. "Barrett and Brar Upgrades, how may I help you make a better you?"

Dex gave the required greeting, then listened as the customer explained how his new neural sensation enhancer was malfunctioning. Dex had to suppress a chuckle as the guy at the other end of the call's voice quivered as he spoke. Dex ran through the troubleshooting procedures with the caller, but early on down the litany of questions about configuration and whether the customer actually had turned the unit on, his mind wandered back to the meeting with the new client. And his real job.

Andersson Dexter had been working for Barrett and Brar for going on ten

years now, but he'd been working for The Cubicle Men most of his life. He'd taken a series of fairly dull jobs over the course of his adult life, usually as a Customer Service Rep, just like most of the other Cubicle Men did. Being a Cubicle Man wasn't a job; it was a vocation.

He had been working for a low end laser keyboard manufacturer, back before the touch screens everyone used now had become common, when he first learned of the organization. He'd been walking home one night after an extra long long shift, when he heard a sound from around a corner. In the previous few months, the local boards had been reporting that there had been a rash of street violence, and Dex figured he'd stumbled upon some local hoods trying to stake their claim to this patch of concrete. Dex's eyes flicked to the corner, where the sounds of scuffling and a few loud bangs and whimpers drew his attention. He tried to ignore the sounds, and kept walking toward his apartment.

He got closer, and the sounds got worse. Dex thought he heard something breaking, and crossed the street. He could see down the alley, and saw a couple of young guys beating on a pair of streeters. The victims weren't even fighting back; they almost looked like inert piles of rags, as the young toughs kicked, punched at spat at them. Dex slunk back against the wall of the building behind him, trying to disappear into the shadows, when he saw a couple of other people arrive on the scene and break up the fight. At first he assumed it was younger or stronger streeters coming to the aid of their compatriots, but then he saw they were all dressed in what looked like Security uniforms. But they

weren't Security from any firm Dex could identify, and he was familiar with all the local outfits.

Dex kept to the shadows, half hidden behind a light standard, and watched. The men pulled the attackers away, and restrained them. Then one of their number methodically socked each one of the attackers in the gut. He must have had some kind of weapon, a stunner or knuckledusters, because each one of the attackers he hit fell like a stone. By the time the muscle man got to the last guy, he didn't even really need to hit him, the guy was so scared. But hit him he did, and the young would-be tough joined his pals face down in the gutter, clutching his gut. Dex waited until these new guys split, and when he was sure he wouldn't be seen, Dex hurried back to his room. Once he was safe inside, and munching on a nutrient bar, he pulled up the recording he'd made of the incident.

Since before he'd even gotten his first real job, Dex had spent most of his disposable income on disk upgrades, both locally stored and online backups. Most people recorded their lives to some extent, at least a couple of minutes on delay so they could always save an important or special moment. But Dex wanted it all. He would never be able afford enough disk to keep it all, but as a rule he deleted only the most mundane of daily moments, so he was easily able to call up the video of these strange men.

He spent most of the night working with the video. He processed it and uploaded it to the public cross referencing engines on the nets, looking for any information about the men who beat up the local hoods. He didn't get very far

— the resolution was pretty bad since they were a good distance away and Dex's default resolution was fairly low to begin with — anything to get more on the disk. He eventually gave up, and after a few weeks even stopped looking. He hadn't forgotten, he just stopped caring. It was too much work for something that was just a passing curiosity to begin with. Then he got the message.

He was at work, asking another idiot customer if the keyboard was connected to a power source, when his messenger tinkled. Dex liked auditory notification, so under the sounds of the customer's curses he heard the sound of windchimes as the message was received. He brought up the message, which was text only. Dex scanned the message and whispered aloud, "What the fuck." The customer he was helping stopped his rambling and asked, "Did you say something?"

"No, sorry," Dex recovered, "Just some background noise here. You were saying..." The customer kept on with his tale of mismatched cabling while Dex re-read the message.

"Andersson Dexter," the message began.

"You have been looking for us. After analyzing your profile, we have determined that you do not seem to be interested in our services as a client. Therefore we must conclude that you are interested in our operations for other reasons.

"We invite you to meet a representative at the linked location at 1500 UTC tomorrow. We will meet you there."

The message was unsigned and the return address was a popular

anonymizer service. But Dex knew it was the men he had seen handing out some kind of street justice. And they wanted to meet him.

The link in the message was for a location online that Dex was unfamiliar with, but it was in one of the normal zones. He was confident that he could link into the location, and he'd be able to maneuver his avatar without having to deal with altered laws of physics or anything out of the ordinary. But he was still unsure. Dex spent the next day debating with himself about what he should do. First thing in the morning, he'd decided to ignore the message. He didn't need the hassle. By the time he was on the train on the way to work, though, Dex wasn't so sure. He couldn't stop wondering what would happen if he kept the date. Once he'd arrived at his work station he knew that there wasn't really any question any more. If he let it go, he knew that he'd spend the rest of his life wondering what might have happened, and he had enough regrets already.

When the time came, Dex followed the link in the message. He found his virtual self in a large open building that reminded him of the time he'd been in the back of an upgrade salon, only without all the stuff. There wasn't even a bench to sit his virtual self upon while he waited. Dex couldn't see any other avatar there, and after he'd wandered around and determined that he really was alone, two more avatars linked in. There was one female and one androgynous looking creature, and they walked toward him. "Andersson Dexter," the female-looking avatar said, the voice a decent machine-replicated tone.

"Yes," he said, one part of his mind prepared to back out of the simulation

at the first sign of trouble. A weapon, for example. But these people gave no sign of violence. Seeming to read his thoughts, the one who had first spoken to him said, "Don't worry. There's no need to fear. We are unarmed." After all, Dex had done nothing wrong, and as it turned out, these people were only interested in those people who were wrongdoers.

The androgynous one explained that since law enforcement, if you could even call it that, was practically left to the Security departments of the firms, they only protected their own employees, and only to the extent that it benefitted the firm. There were plenty of people who were essentially alone in the world, and some crimes that would always go unpunished because the victim was unemployed or the crime didn't actually inconvenience the employers in any way. It was a complicated problem, the avatar explained, but the solution wasn't complicated at all.

They were part vigilante, part private detective and part cop. The organization operated as a check and balance on its members, ensuring that the individual members didn't go off half cocked. They had rules, procedures, even shifts. But they operated under the radar, independent of any firm. Their members all had other jobs to ensure they had access to housing and healthcare, but they were expected to work at low level jobs — their real work was being cops where there was otherwise only anarchy.

It was a rousing speech, and Dex was impressed. He could tell that he was getting recruited, and it didn't bother him. It didn't really excite him, either, but they had let slip that there was under the table pay, and there were some clear

side benefits. The organization had access to some pretty cutting edge personal electronics and he would get to do something more interesting with his mind than ask consumer grade morons if they'd tried turning it off and on.

Of course, he signed up.

That had been twenty years previously, and Dex had risen through the ranks fairly quickly. He discovered early on that he truly liked the work and demonstrated a definite aptitude for it. He first expected that he'd make a pretty good goon, but as it happened he was actually more inclined to sort out puzzles than sap guys on the head, so now found himself as a Lieutenant in the detective squad. The organization took its structure from historical police departments, though functionally once people advanced out of the goon squad, they operated more or less independently.

The organization was really a loose group of individuals who pooled resources and shared information. It didn't even have an official name. One of the detectives who had worked in Dex's division years before was a fan of old superhero comics, though, and for laughs started calling the squad the Cubicle Men — nondescript people who work at faceless jobs in cubicles by day and fight crime by night, that sort of thing. The name stuck and soon spread throughout the Namerican branch of the organization, and by the time Dex joined everyone in his zone referred to themselves by the lighthearted name.

The captains of each detective squad often assigned cases, though each member of the team was free to refuse a case or ask to work on a particular file.

Or a particular detective would get a reputation, and clients would just show up. Dex's meeting the previous day was one of those, but he would have asked to work on this one anyway, if it had come up for grabs. The case was fairly unusual, after all, and Dex did enjoy the strange and unusual. He looked at the still image of his client while explaining to the customer on the call how to calibrate the new neural enhancers. Her avatar was pleasing to his eye, he had to admit, but that wasn't why Dex was staring. It just wasn't every day that you got to investigate the murder of your client.

## Chapter Two

Dex finally finished his service call, and after completing the millions of required forms for B&B, he opened the video record of his conversation with the client. They had met online in the seedy bar that Dex was known to frequent. Three Card Monte's Bar, a common spot for Cubicle Men to get together and talk shop, was off the map. Literally. There was a public map of Marionette City, much like a directory or an index. Of course, the vast majority of places an avatar could go were not on the map — you could search for them if you knew what you were looking for, but mostly it was word of mouth. A friend of a friend gave you a link, or someone on a board posted directions.

It was obviously by following directions that she had found the place. Her avatar was wary as she entered the bar, but she showed no sign of turning back. He hadn't seen it at the time, but watching the video Dex figured she was one of those people who was fully aware of the reality that the interface was a

simulation. The realistic feel of the three-dimensional virtual reality interface to the everywherenet, popularly known as Marionette City, was both the reason for its popularity and also its major flaw. People often forgot that the rules were a little different there.

But she seemed to be holding her own. She walked into the place, and after scanning the crowd, made a bee-line for Dex. Her avatar was probably patterned after her physical world looks, since it was a popular female body shape that season, with green hair falling just past the bottom of her ears. Since it was almost as easy to change the shape of physical bodies as it was to change an avatar, many people matched their real world and online looks. The avatar's face was pretty, in the pale shade that was currently fashionable, and had a number of silver studs dotting its surface. On a physical face they would be the implants conferring some kind of upgrade to the built in computer system everyone wore inside their heads. Dex's own face was covered, almost all of them disk upgrades.

But she looked fairly average, as she walked toward Dex, green hair sparkling in the false light. She stopped at his table, opened her mouth to start to say something then stopped. "You lost?" Dex asked.

"I don't think so, Mr. Dexter," she answered.

He smiled without warmth, and asked, "You're in trouble, then?"

The female avatar frowned slightly, then said, "I have a... situation. I was told that I could get it solved here."

"You got a job?" Dex asked, bluntly, his avatar sipping a short rum and

ginger beer from a cut glass tumbler while his physical body was slurping dishwater coffee from a B&B mug.

"Yes," she said, "but this doesn't have to do with that."

"Still," Dex said, putting the drink on the table, "cops are usually one of the benefits of employment. You can't just go to your Security for this... situation?"

She sighed, and her avatar started to look a little angry. Watching the video Dex could see the signs of a user who was quite familiar with the technology at work in rendering an avatar in Marionette City. Her avatar had complex facial expressions that were not part of the default package. Maybe she was a programmer or a UI designer. He didn't ask, because she made it clear that talking about her job was something she wasn't planning to do a lot of, and it didn't matter to Dex anyway.

"Look," she said, planting her hands on the table and leaning over it toward Dex. "This is not the kind of situation I can take to Security. Not only would they not help me, I could maybe even get fired for it. So, no. I can't go to Security." She leaned back, and seemed to take a deep breath. "Can you help me," she asked, "or am I wasting both of our time here?"

Dex picked up his empty glass and watched as it filled itself. He took a sip and gestured with the glass to the other chair at the table. "Have a seat."

She said her name was Ivy Velasquez, and Dex wasn't sure whether that was her real name or a name she invented for his benefit. It didn't really matter; the funds she transferred to the organization's escrow account were real

enough. She sat at the table in silence for a moment, and Dex just let her sit. He had found over the years that getting people to talk was as easy as creating a void for them to fill. It worked for irate customers who swore at you, too. It was amazing how powerful shutting up for a moment could be.

As usual, the silence finally got to her and she started to explain. "It happened about a week ago. I was at home, it was my weekend. I went to log in to Marionette City and I couldn't. I wasn't getting errors or lag, it was as if the login process was wrong somehow. I checked everything to make sure I was using the right schematic..."

Dex stopped her. "What do you mean, the right schematic? You just log in automatically — it's the same authentication no matter how you get into the nets — hell, there shouldn't be a login sequence at all."

"Yeah," Ivy sighed. "I know. But," she looked around, even though they were talking on a private channel, "I was logging in as a multi. I have another identity. Well... had, I guess."

Dex took a sip of his drink and sat back. "Okay," he said. "That explains a lot."

Even though Dex didn't say anything else, she was already on the defensive. "There's nothing wrong with it, you know," Ivy said, her voice taking on a strident quality. "Sometimes people just change, or want to try something new, it's no big deal." Her hands made a smoothing motion over her iridescent white dress that looked like a nervous habit. Watching the video, Dex paused and reran the sequence. He wondered, not for the first time, if Ivy's avatar was

hooked directly into her physical responses. It was fairly trivial to do, and made for a much more realistic experience. It just wasn't that common, since it was an undocumented feature of the three-dimensional interface. And it made Ivy's avatar look like she was lying, like she had something to hide. Not the smartest move, Dex thought.

"Okay, it's no big deal," he said, holding her gaze. "But I know that most employers have a no multis clause in their contracts — they don't want other identities sneaking around on company property, so to speak. So, I can see why you wouldn't want to go to Security with this." Dex swirled the ice cubes in his drink then put it on the table. "What makes you think this is a problem for me," he asked. "I'm not a programmer — I can't debug your system."

Ivy's avatar's eyes closed and opened again slowly. "I don't need a programmer," she said. "It wasn't user error. When I couldn't get in, I logged in as..." She looked a bit sheepish as she gestured at her avatar body, "this, and I..." Her voice choked slightly. She regained her composure and finished, "I found the... ah... the body."

"Really?" He knew his response was not as compassionate as it could have been, but Dex was curious. "There were remains?"

"Yes," Ivy said, sounding a bit surprised that Dex would ask. "I finally figured out that reason I couldn't log in was that Reuben — that's Reuben Cobalt, my multi — was already logged in. I pinged him, and tracked him down to an empty area not far from here." The bar was in a less developed part of the topography of Marionette City, the better to avoid unnecessary walk-in traffic. "I found him

there... it was..." Her voice choked again, and Dex waited for her to get herself together. "It was horrible."

She started to describe what she found, but eventually gave up and just sent Dex an image of the scene. He paged away from the video and brought up the high res image. He had to give her credit, she'd had the presence of mind to capture the image before leaving the scene. The image showed an avatar, or what was left of one, lying prone and limp — it reminded Dex more of a deflated sex doll than a human corpse. Even so, Dex could tell that the avatar would have been striking — a tall, thin, male form, with almost silver hair short against his scalp. In this state the hair looked a bit like dull wire, but Dex guessed that it would have shone with luminescence when animated.

But it wasn't just the lack of movement or "life" that made it clear that the avatar was fundamentally broken. It was the cuts. Dex didn't know what else to call them. It wasn't just the clothes, it was the whole form of the avatar's body that looked like it had been ripped apart. Dex magnified the image, and could see lines of code at the edge of the tears, as if the very essence of the avatar had been destroyed. He paged back to the video and skipped ahead to Ivy's explanation of what she'd found after taking the remains offline.

"He was recoded," she said, obviously fighting to keep the emotion from her voice now. "Whoever did this broke into the coding of the avatar, wiped the memory and recoded him. They put him into a loop and I..." Her voice cracked. "He tore himself apart." She put her head in her hands, and her avatar's body shook slightly. Dex put a hand on her shoulder and she jumped at his touch.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm just not ready..."

"It's fine," Dex said, pulling his hand away and reaching for his drink. He silently finished it off, and when it was done he didn't refill the glass. "We'll need to talk more about this," he finally said to her. "Here's a direct link to this place and my messenger address." He sent her the links and stood up. "I know they wiped the memory, but I'll need anything you have left from Reuben. Did you ever communicate between, ah, this identity and that one?"

"No," she said. "I was... I wanted to leave this one behind." She looked at Dex, and he thought he could see tears in the avatar's eyes. "I hardly even answer to Ivy anymore. In my heart... when I think of myself... it's Reuben."

The video ended. Dex had left her there when he linked out of the bar. There was no point in him hanging around; there wasn't anything he could do for her there. Besides, that place had seen its share of people alone, crying into their virtual drinks.

When Dex's shift at B&B ended, he left the building and walked the block or so to the train stop. He used the time to check some messages and sign in to the organization's network. His messenger popped up a text alert reminding him that his stock of nutrient bricks was getting dangerously low, so he got off the train a stop early and headed into the neighbourhood grocery. He picked up a bulk carton of Econoline, the cheapest brand on sale, and as he walked to the door, his eye fell on the booze display.

His messenger hadn't alerted him to a drop in the rum supply, but Dex had

never gotten around to recalibrating the notification to his particular specifications. He didn't want to have to worry, so he picked up a litre bottle of Jamaica's Best. It was synthesized in a factory near Shanghai and wasn't even in the top ten out of that shop, but it got the job done. As he walked out the door, an alert flashed in his vision noting the charge for the provisions and informing him that his account had been debited accordingly. He walked the couple of blocks to his apartment and shouldered his way through the beaten steel door. His room was on the 48th floor, and he stepped into the lift to let the spiral carry him up to his floor. After about half a minute he stepped off at his floor, and after a few steps down the concrete and steel hall he heard the lock of his door responding to the chip embedded under the skin of his hand.

The door shushed open and Dex stepped in. The room was small, but he didn't need a lot. He stowed the fresh box of Econoline bricks on the floor below the water tap and zapper. He shook the last few bricks out of the previous box, opening one and taking a bite of the chewy, brown mass. He stuffed the old box in the recyclatron, and left the remaining bars on top of the new box. He put the new bottle of Jamaica's Best into the cupboard, taking out the open, quarter full bottle and a tumbler. With the food brick wedged in his teeth, Dex opened the rum and poured a generous portion into the tumbler. He opened the cooler and pulled out a can of Gingapop. It wasn't as good as real ginger beer, but that was expensive and hard to come by, so Dex made do. He popped open the can and splashed a bit of the soda into the glass and stirred it with his index finger. He took a long drink, then sat at his small table.

Before he forgot, Dex paged over to the Cubicle Men's system and logged the time he'd spent reviewing the record of his meeting with Ivy. He wasn't paid by the hour, and it really didn't matter, but the organization liked to keep track of the both the time each member spent on a case, but also how much of their regular job time they were using for the organization's work. They didn't just fill a niche that the firms left blank; the Cubicle Men were philosophically opposed to the prevailing social system, so they encouraged their members to use their employer's time and resources as much as possible. Getting caught and subsequently fired would be going too far, though. It would certainly be possible to survive without a mainstream job, but it would be unnecessarily difficult.

Dex read over a few internal memos, logged his time and paged out of the system. He knew that he ought to review the information about the Ivy/Reuben case, but he just didn't feel like it. He didn't have any information other than what was on the video and the image, and he'd gone over that at B&B already. Instead, he paged over to another video. It was also a recording from his own system, only it had been made years ago, long before he had even heard of the Cubicle Men. He'd often thought that it was a good thing that video was all software now, because otherwise he'd have watched this footage until it fell apart. He spent the night slugging from his bottle of Best and watching it again. By the time he took a hit of SleepingJuice and fell into his narrow bed, he was glad that he'd picked up another bottle of rum.