

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

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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ebook ISBN 978-0-9737467-4-7

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Chapter Twenty One

It seemed as if all the blood drained from Ljungberg's face. Dex thought it was possible the man was about to faint, and wondered what he would do about it if he did pass out. Annabelle's voice sounded loudly in his ears, saying, "God damn it Dex, how about some subtlety?"

"Just let me play it my way, okay," he subvocalized back. Unaware of their conversation, Ljungberg opened his mouth as if to say something, but the only sound that came out was a strangled, high pitched moan. Dex waited for Ljungberg to regain his composure, keeping his eyes on the man. He'd thought there was a chance that Ljungberg would try to make a break for it, so he'd positioned himself between the other man and the door. Running seemed to be the last thing on Ljungberg's mind, though — he was more focussed on appearing indignant and foaming at the mouth.

Finally, he appeared to get control of himself, and in a shocked tone of voice said, "I cannot believe you would accuse me of that." Dex continued with the silent treatment, and Ljungberg rose to the bait. "I mean, Reuben was my friend. He was kind and harmless, and so what if he was a multi? It's no crime."

"Should it be?" Dex asked.

"What?" Ljungberg said, his voice rising, as he fell back in his chair like he were somehow deflated. "No, of course not. That's ridiculous. I don't particularly think it's a healthy life choice, but it's not for me to say. I don't even understand what you're talking about."

"Would you still have been friends with Reuben if you had known he was a multi?" Dex asked, trying to draw the other man out.

"Sure," Ljungberg said, shrugging his shoulders and sounding anything but sure. "I don't see why not. I mean, we were friends because we liked to talk to each other, we shared ideas — that doesn't change just because you use one name or another. It's just a name, it doesn't mean anything."

"But it's not the same, is it?" Dex asked. "I mean, Reuben is dead, but the mind who thought those ideas is still alive. After all, it's just a name, right? It doesn't mean anything."

"That is not what I meant," Ljungberg's voice was rising in pitch, and he leaned in across the table. Dex could smell the sour tang of sweat coming off the smaller man's body. "You're twisting what I say; trying to put words in my mouth. I don't think those things — I didn't do it."

"Do what?"

"You know," Ljungberg's voice rose higher. "What you're accusing me of. Of... ending... Reuben's..."

"Of killing Reuben Cobalt."

"Yeah, that."

Dex smacked his hand hard on the table between them, and all other conversations in the café abruptly stopped. Annabelle gasped and Ljungberg looked like he was going to wet his pants. "For christ's sakes, you can't even say it. 'Killed.' 'Dead'. Reuben Cobalt — your friend — is dead, and you can't even say it."

"He's not dead!" Ljungberg shouted, almost in tears. "He can't be. He was never alive."

That was when Ljungberg broke down. He started blubbering, tears like water raining down his face, bubbles of snot appearing at his nose. Dex had to look away, while the other people in the room now openly stared at the two men. Ljungberg's co-worker, Marta, stormed over to the table and began accusing Dex of harassment and assault and anything else she could come up with. Dex wished he'd been packing some of his old goon squad equipment — a short blast of Seda-spray would have shut her up pretty quick.

As Marta tried to decide whether to continue berating Dex or comfort Ljungberg, another figure appeared at the table. "Mr. Dexter, I presume," she said, a slight smile playing at her lips. Dex heard Annabelle say, "Well, look who decided to wade in to the fray."

Stella Bish, unlike Ljungberg, looked more or less like her avatar in Marionette City. She was wearing ordinary clothes, but the face and hair were a pretty close match. She stood at the phalanx of a group of people, though she appeared to be amused where the rest were variously angry or perplexed.

"Stella Bish," Dex said, ignoring Ljungberg to stand and face her. "The undisputed reigning monarch of independent contractors on the nets. How is it, I have to ask myself, that someone so intrinsically tied to the nets would be found here," he gestured at the group within the small bar, "with these... meat lovers." Dex had hoped to get a reaction by using such a vulgar term, and by the sound of the crowd he could tell that many of the other people in the room were offended. Bish, however, merely smiled her maddeningly serene smile.

"That's business," she said, simply. "One of the few things the nets are good for. I work to live, Mr. Dexter, not the other way around. And this," she aped his previous gesture, "is living."

"Don't make me puke," Annabelle said.

"Shut up," Dex subvocalized, but aloud asked, "And how do your friends here feel about your work," nodding toward the other people in the room. "Are they as comfortable with your involvement in the nets?"

She laughed. "I would imagine so. Many of them work for me. Not to mention that I invented the Offline Cleanse. It's a little hard to question my commitment to my own ideals."

After a brief chat with her people, including a short but firm conversation

with Marta, Bish managed to get a table for herself, Dex and Ljungberg where the rest of the room wasn't eavesdropping on every word. "Now I don't know anything about this situation that I haven't already told you," Bish started out with a disclaimer, "but I can be fairly sure that no one I'm involved with here killed Reuben Cobalt for ideological reasons. We do not advocate hate, we're not even opposed to the idea of multiple identities, unlike many other groups out there. We are a positive force," she said, sounding less like a marketing shill than Dex would have thought. "We aim to encourage increased interaction in this, the real world."

"You can vouch for all the members of your little flock?" Dex asked, not bothering to conceal his patronizing attitude. "You can be sure of what they did or did not do in the name of these beliefs?"

Bish smiled that smile that drove Dex crazy, the one that made him think she was playing a game with him. "Of course not, Mr. Dexter," she said. "I don't know anyone else's mind. I do know that I've heard no one talk about such things, and we don't condone violence or harassment of any kind. We are in favour of creating positive change; we're not destructive."

"So you keep saying," Dex said, "and yet here I am. Sitting before the two of you, whose names keep coming up in a murder investigation. It seems strangely coincidental that a friend of the deceased is a part of a group that was started by the deceased's former employer and now is in line for the deceased's very lucrative former position with said employer. If it smells like shit, I have to wonder why everyone says it's perfume."

"Jesus, Dex," Annabelle's voice said, "could you be more bizarre?"

"Shut up, already," he repeated silently, hoping that an equal mixture of frustration and fraternity was in the translated voice. "I have a plan." At this stage, Ljungberg finally seemed to pay attention again. Until then, he had sat, almost motionless, tears, spit and snot slowly drying on his face.

"You think I..." he made a show of emphasizing the word, "killed... Reuben for his job?" He made a face that seemed to Dex to genuinely indicate revulsion at the idea. "A fucking job? That's... that's... pathetic," he finally got the last word out. "How pitiful do you think I am?"

To what Dex imagined was her horror, Annabelle said, "You don't want to know, pal" at the exact same moment that Bish smiled and turned to Ljungberg saying, "You probably don't really want Mr. Dexter to answer that question, Sterling." Dex wasn't sure, but he thought he heard Annabelle whisper, "Bitch."

"Reuben was well respected online," Dex said to Ljungberg, softly, sounding almost like a friend. "His opinion was valued on the boards, and his economic value was undeniable. Isn't that right?" He turned toward Bish, who nodded her agreement. "I can see how living in his shadow might have been hard. He had all those things you wanted — the prestige, the money — and he wasn't even a real person. It just doesn't seem fair, does it?"

"Nice one," Annabelle said, but Ljungberg said nothing. He simply started at Dex with fury in his face. This time it seemed like Ljungberg was using Dex's silent tactic, as he slowly stood without speaking. He looked down at Dex, his nose curling in distaste, then spat directly into Dex's face, a sticky sour blob

hitting his left cheek and trickling down to his chin.

"Fuck you," Ljungberg said, and turned away from the table. He walked to the door and out of the café. His strident friend Marta, who had been watching the proceedings with great interest, stood and fixed Dex with what he presumed was intended to be a withering look, before following Ljungberg out the door.

By now, Dex was probably the most unpopular guy the Free Robots had ever seen, and once Ljungberg had stormed off, he couldn't think of any good reason to stay. He made arrangements with Stella Bish to talk to her again the next day and Annabelle agreed to track her movements as well as Ljungberg's over the course of the night.

Dex had wiped his face off with the sleeve of his shirt, and as he walked back to his hotel the wet spot rubbed against his skin. It was disturbing, though Dex had certainly dealt with worse when he was on the streets with the goon squad. Not to mention that there were some parties he'd gone to in the Maks days where things not too dissimilar were done for enjoyment.

Stella Bish's talk about the people who followed the Offline Cleanse was mostly propaganda bullshit, just as Annabelle had said. But Dex had to admit that it was the kind of bullshit that appealed to him. He'd never felt comfortable socializing online, and as his non-relationship with Annabelle proved, in some ways he was even more of a freak than these people with their weekends off. He knew he had no right to judge them, and he actually didn't. It was what it was, and if Ljungberg or any of the others killed Reuben for some fucked up ideology,

that was madness, but the rest of it was all pretty much fine by him. Maybe even a little more than fine, if he was honest with himself.

Back at the hotel, he stripped and stood under the brief spray in the lav. After he was dried off, he lay on the bed, wishing he had brought another change of clothes. One set was starting to become crusty with sweat and the other was covered in Ljungberg's loogies. Not an ideal situation.

It was getting late, and the excitement of the night had worn him out. He drank some of his water and ate another food brick. As Dex lay on the bed, his thoughts drifted to Ljungberg's reaction. It was so extreme, so visceral, so physical. It reminded Dex of himself as a younger man — not the reactions themselves, but the emotions they betrayed. Disbelief, fear, hurt, betrayal — all those feelings that lay dormant in him all the time, that he only let out at night, with the booze and the videos.

Dex paged over to his viewer, scanned his files, and started up a video. He could feel the dreaded pinpricks in his eyes, but he closed his eyelids until the moment passed. He wished he had a bottle, but he watched the ending of his final night with Maks sober. He replayed it over and over again, watching for a good couple of hours before he finally fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty Two

Annabelle woke Dex early the next day. He had set his system to wake him for her call, and he was well asleep when the chiming noise in his head roused him. He gave himself five minutes for the lav and a swig of Flying Fish, then he returned Annabelle's ping. "What do you have for me?" he said, a rasp in his voice.

"Jeez, Dex," she said, "you sound like shit."

"Truth in advertising," he said, "that's all. So, why'd you wake me up?"

"Mostly I just wanted to hear your sexy voice," she said and Dex answered with a genuinely amused short laugh. He was surprised at their now easy banter, but after that awful night at the restaurant, it was as if they now shared some kind of secret. It was strange, but Dex wasn't about to argue.

"You should have told me earlier," he said. "I could have left a recording and

slept in."

Annabelle laughed and said, "Unfortunately, there's more. I think Ljungberg's on the move."

"I'm not overly surprised," Dex said. "He was pretty fucked up last night. I'm not going to get excited about it, though."

"You don't think he's going to disappear?"

"The guy has to eat, right?"

"I don't get it," Annabelle said.

"Well," Dex stretched and sniffed at his clothes. He wrinkled his nose, and continued, "You can track him by his chip, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So, he stops for food or water and we know where he is." Dex put on his less nasty clothes and made a note to check at the hotel's concierge for laundry services. "And better yet, he needs to work to pay for it. So he'll be online again soon enough, I'm sure. He's not going anywhere — there's nowhere to go."

"You seem really cool about this," Annabelle said.

"Well," Dex said, "truth be told, if Ljungberg did it, whatever his motivation, it was personal. It was about Reuben. He's no threat to anyone else, really. So, there's no rush in finding him. Besides, he seems like the kind of guy where letting him stew will make him more likely to give it up later."

"So, what's the plan now?"

"I've got a meeting with Bish," Dex said, "and I've put on my nicest outfit to wow her with."

"I'm sure she'll be all over you with that physical world bullshit of hers," Annabelle said, real venom in her voice now. "You watch it, Dex. She's a suspect, remember. Don't get sucked in by her. Her and her god damn body."

Dex was surprised by Annabelle's vitriol. "Uh, Annabelle," Dex said carefully, "I'm not going to fuck her. I know she's a suspect and I'm going to find out what she knows. Sure, we share certain... preferences, but that doesn't mean I even like her, let alone that I'm going to fall under her thrall or something. I am a pro, you know."

"I'm sorry, Dex." He could hear real sadness in her voice. "It's just... hard, you know?"

"Kind of," he said, not really understanding at all. There was silence for a moment, then Dex heard Annabelle take a deep breath.

"Look, remember that night we went out to dinner, in Marionette City?"

"With excruciating clarity," he answered.

"Exactly," she said. "You hated that. I know. I understood perfectly. Because that's exactly how I feel outside of Marionette City. In the... embodied world."

"Oh." Dex didn't know what to say.

"Yeah." Annabelle was quiet, and Dex wondered if she'd muted her input. Soon enough she continued, though. "So it's kind of hard for me, knowing... what you like, and knowing that it's what she likes... and knowing that I don't..."

"Aw, honey," Dex trailed off, not knowing how to say what he wanted to. Instead, he sent Annabelle a link to Marionette City. They met at Monte's. Dex walked toward Annabelle's avatar, and had his avatar put its arms around her.

He even felt something for a moment, though it was more like regret that this moment wasn't real than any kind of human connection, and that made him feel even more sad.

"I'm sorry things are so fucked up," he said aloud, the voice connections still live.

"Me too," she said.

Dex had his avatar pull back from Annabelle's, and he smiled. He wondered if he looked sad. "Aren't we a pair," he said, hoping his voice made up for any deficiencies his avatar projected. She smiled back at him and stepped back.

"Thank you for this," she said. "Really. You don't know how much it means."

He smiled and said nothing. Then, after a moment, he said, "I have to go," his avatar not moving.

"I know," Annabelle said. "Go get 'em." She punched him lightly on the shoulder, and linked out of Marionette City, cutting the voice connection at the same time. Dex linked out as well, but had to wait a moment before he was able to walk out his hotel room door.

Dex was meeting Stella Bish at the Free Robots, and he walked out of El Presidente then headed up the road. The weather was still hot and humid, but Dex was starting to become accustomed to it. The growing warmth over Dex's body that had previously seemed suffocating he now found comforting, like a blanket. He could see how people might want to move here — more sunlight, less rain and natural warmth. Two days seemed a bit quick to be going native,

though — maybe it was just lack of sleep.

He pushed open the main door of the building and stepped into the vestibule. He checked the time at the lower right corner of his display, and saw that he was a few minutes early. He hoped that he would be the first to arrive and be able to get a table and set the scene. He opened the door to Free Robots, and was disappointed to see Bish at one of the booths, surrounded by a coterie of her supporters.

Dex walked up to the bar and ordered a coffee from the touchpad. It was a little early for a drink, and he wanted to be alert for his talk with Bish. The metal arm poured his coffee and set the cup in front of him. Dex took it and walked to a small table for two on the far side of the room. He waited for Bish to come to him. It took longer than he would have liked, but she eventually walked over to his table.

She sat across from him and crossed her hands in front of her on the table, like a proper schoolgirl of years gone by. "You wanted to see me again," she said, that smile playing at the corner of her lips.

"I need to know more about this Offline Cleanse of yours," Dex said, especially conscious of the woman's charms. "And Sterling Ljungberg. What can you tell me about him?"

Bish unclasped her hands, and leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs, she began to inspect her well-groomed fingernails. Dex noticed, for the first time, that the nails were imbued with some kind of pattern. It looked like one of the holographic colours B&B's cosmetics department sold. "I met him

here," she said. "A few days ago. I don't think I'm really going to be helpful, Mr. Dexter. I didn't even know he was on my list of potentials."

"That seems unlikely," Dex said.

"I agree," Bish said, looking him in the eye, "but there it is. Besides, just because his name doesn't mean a lot to me doesn't make it a great coincidence. Plenty of the people who want to work for me are already Cleansers, or they learn about it because they want to work for me. It's not a big secret, you know."

"It's not exactly advertised on your storefront, either," Dex countered.

"True," Bish said, "but the word is out that I'm building living quarters in Europa, and it doesn't take a mathematical genius to put two and two together." She was silent, watching Dex closely. He hoped that the dawning realization didn't show on his face.

"A physical world community is a pretty big step," Dex said. "You'll have to really trust your people."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

"Well," Dex said, "housing that's not tied to employment is at a premium, and while your staff are sort of your employees, I assume places at your building won't be meted out the usual way." She nodded her agreement, and Dex continued. "So, there's a good chance people will say they agree to the idea of the Cleanse just to get a room."

"So?" she asked.

"Well, how is that building a new kind of community?"

"I think there's a wonderful and necessary thing about a community focussed around the physical world, Mr. Dexter," she said, "and I don't think it matters what people think when they first come in. So long as we are truly there — that we have activities and there is a real community, people will want to participate. We are social animals — it's what people do."

Dex thought of Annabelle. "I wouldn't be so sure," he said.

"It's a chance I'm willing to take," she answered.

Dex paused for a moment to run back the audio recording of the conversation. He caught the point where the topic had shifted, and returned to his earlier point. "So, you say you met Sterling Ljungberg just a few days ago? When exactly was that?"

Bish adjusted to the abrupt shift in topics easily. "Two days ago. A local group of Cleansers have been meeting here when we are on retreat."

"Retreat?"

"That's what we call those days off, the days spent offline and in person."

"Okay," Dex said. "So you met Ljungberg two days ago..."

"Yes," she said. "He was here, I was here, we met and we talked. I didn't even recognize his name from the staff list. He mentioned it, and I supposed he was trying to curry favour, increase his ranking or something. It happens sometimes at these events."

"Does it work?" Dex asked.

Bish smiled, and leaned slightly toward him. "Sometimes it does," she said. "I have to admit that I find meeting people in the physical world makes me feel

more comfortable with them — I tend to trust them more. So yes, meeting potential associates here can make a difference to to their chances."

"And Ljungberg?"

"Well, that's interesting," she said. "I'm not sure about him now. I was going to hire him yesterday, but today..."

"Suspicion of murder puts a pall on the trust level, does it?"

"Actually, no," Bish answered. "Well, that's not why. It was his reaction. A bit too hotheaded for me. But we'll see. My mind isn't made up yet." Dex was silent, and Bish looked him directly in the eyes. "Is yours?"

Dex shifted in his seat, and thought. Like he usually did when he didn't know how to respond to a question, he opted for honesty. "No," he said, "I don't think it is. But you never really know about a person. All you have are what they tell you and what you see for yourself."

"Exactly my point, Mr. Dexter," she said. "There is so little we can ever know about each other, and when we waste all that time interacting virtually, we miss an entire level on which we can communicate. It's such a shame, don't you think?" She looked at Dex expectantly, as if she had asked the most important question of their conversation.

Dex thought for a moment. He understood her point of view so well, and yet he found her personally to be utterly disturbing. Again, he opted for the truth.

"What I think doesn't matter." He rose from the table, and walked out the door.