

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.

M. Darusha Wehm

Self Made

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Twenty Three

Dex left Free Robots, and as he walked down the street he messaged El Presidente and canceled his room. He settled the tab and copied the invoice to Ivy for her records. He continued down the street and stopped in at the store on the corner for another one of those extremely expensive bottles of water. While he wandered the aisles of the store, he booked his return train ticket. He would have a few hours before the overnighter ran, but he was happy to hang out at the train station. As much as he might like the physical world, he decided he'd had enough of the people here in Guadalajara.

Since he had time, Dex decided to walk to the train station. It was only a few clicks and the map he'd originally used on his way into town would show him the way. It was late in the day now, and the lower humidity and heat made for a comfortable walk. Once he found his stride, he pinged Annabelle. She

answered and opened a voice channel.

"So, what's the good news?" she asked, her voice light.

"Hrmph," Dex grunted. "I guess the good news is that I'm on my way to the train station."

"You're done with being a world traveler?"

"For now," Dex answered. "There isn't anything keeping me here and I have to go back to work day after tomorrow."

"You didn't get anywhere with Bish?" Annabelle asked, her voice hardening a little. Dex grunted again, and sent a copy of the audio track from his recording of the meeting.

"She doesn't strike me as dangerous," he said. "Crazy, maybe, but not dangerous."

"I'm not sure you're seeing the situation clearly," Annabelle said, and Dex sighed aloud.

"I know you think she's up to no good," he said, patiently, "and you may be right, but I just don't think she cares enough about any one person to be bothered with killing someone."

"Hrmph." It was Annabelle's turn to resort to sound effects as communication.

"What about Ljungberg?" Dex asked.

"I'm pretty sure he's holed up in his apartment in Guadalajara," Annabelle said. "I checked his employment records, and he has a place in town. He's trying to be sneaky, since he hasn't logged on yet and he bypassed the door

lock mechanism by using a mechanical key, but I'll give you 20 to one odds that he's there."

"Oh?" Dex indicated that she should continue.

"He's sending his little friend Marta out for provisions," Annabelle said, sounding pleased with herself. "I've tracked her ID chip at a store near there a couple of times now. You'd think they'd be smarter than that, but there it is."

"There it is," Dex said, with a little less glee than Annabelle had expressed when she uttered the words. According to the map superimposing itself over the vision on his right eye, Dex was more or less following the local train's route to the station. He was a block or two west of the tracks, and he couldn't see or hear the train, but he knew he was on the right path. Even walking he would have more time at the station than he needed, but he was sure he could catch up on some work while waiting.

As if she could read his mind, Annabelle said, "I had an idea last night, but it's going to take some time and I don't know if it will even be useful..."

"What is it?"

"Well," she said, "you mentioned that you have a list of all of Bish's staff members, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe someone ought to go through the whole thing and see if any other names pop up. You know, just in case?"

Dex rubbed his face with his hands, and found that his head was covered in a fine shimmer of sweat. "Yeah, that's not a bad idea," he said, reluctantly. "And

I've got time, too. I'll do it."

"It just seems like we ought to be covering our bases, you know?" she said, as if she still had to convince him.

"I know," he said. "I'll do it. It's a good idea. So, while I'm reading names until my eyeballs bleed, what exciting plans do you have for yourself?"

"Well," she said, "I'll have one eye watching Bish and Ljungberg's movements in the meat — I mean physical world, and I figured I'd see if I can trace their online movements for the past week or so. See if I can tie either of them to the actual spot of Reuben's murder. Or maybe to the attack on you."

"Good thinking," Dex said. "Now, I'm going to end this call before I pass out. I'm walking to the train station and this talking and walking at the same time is making my head spin."

"You're doing what?" Her voice was almost shrill. "Why can't you just take a train like a normal human being?"

"I was bored," Dex said. "And besides, I've never been to Mexico before. I ought to at least see the place before I leave."

"You are so twentieth century," she said, laughing. "Catch you later." She broke the connection and Dex panted a little, trying to get his breath back.

Dex continued the rest of the journey to the train station without focussing on anything else, just the map and the sidewalk and the scenery. He decided that Guadalajara wasn't that great after all, it was just a warmer, damper version of every other city he'd been to.

He had an hour and a half to wait before the train north would be leaving, so Dex found a spot on the cramped and uncomfortable seats in the waiting area. The station was not very busy, so he stuck his small bag at the end of one of the benches, then using it as a pillow, stretched out longwise on the bench. It was no lap of luxury, but he thought that his various body parts might not fall asleep in the ninety minutes he had to kill.

Dex paged over to the file he'd gotten from Uri Farone, and started reading.

Aadams, Adelman, Ariane, Avalon, Barnett, Basri, Bellinger, Bischoff, Bosun, Buttle, Cameron... Dex scanned the names, but by the time he got to the Gs his eyes were already starting to glaze over. He focussed harder, and slowed down, checking the list more closely, but nothing jumped out at him. The list wasn't up to date — his eyes had stumbled over Cobalt — but even so there wasn't anything that struck him.

He found the link Farone had given him to the list of people who were next in line for work. There were fewer names there, but only Ljungberg's name rang any bells for Dex. He was starting to think that he was looking in all the wrong places. Maybe it was just a coincidence that Ljungberg was a pal of Reuben's and was going after the former multi's job. Maybe it had nothing to do with Reuben's work. The trouble was that Reuben didn't seem to have any enemies and there was no doubt that this was no random act. The code that caused Reuben to destroy himself was coded specifically to fulfill that very particular job and then destroy itself along with its victim. If this had been about "cleansing Marionette City of multis," the code would have been, at least potentially, self-

replicating. As it was, the code was carefully written to destroy itself.

So, Dex figured, this had to be someone who cared about not unleashing a multi killing virus on Marionette City. He thought, and came to the conclusion that this one fact made it even less likely that Stella Bish was involved. Dex doubted that she had any interest in actively destroying mults, but she certainly didn't seem to care enough about anyone to specifically try to avoid any kind of collateral damage. That seemed more to be Ljungberg's style. He was emotional, and this was an emotional crime. It was personal in both senses — the act was meaningful to the killer and it was about Reuben specifically. If only Dex could have gotten through to Ljungberg.

Dex spent the rest of the time at the station thinking about the case, wondering if he had taken on an unsolvable crime. Only two days earlier he had been so sure that he was on to it. He had been certain that could feel the unravelling starting, and now he felt as tied up in the threads of the mystery as he had when he had first begun. He was wasting Annabelle's time on this case and he worried that if they never got a result that she would hold it against him. He wondered why that thought mattered to him. Until recently, Dex had always been perfectly happy to use other members of the Cubicle Men — that was what they were for. More like Stella Bish than he'd like to admit, Dex had seen his colleagues as resources to be used, no more and no less. But now, it seemed like something had changed. Dex wasn't sure that it was a positive change.

The chime in the station sounded and Dex rolled off the bench. He grabbed his bag and boarded the train. He found his seat and settled in. After the hard station bench, the train's seat felt like it was made of pillows. Dex debated about killing the trip with Sleeping Juice's perfect oblivion, but he wasn't tired yet. His brain couldn't take thinking about the case any more, and although he found that he wanted to talk to her, he didn't know what to say to Annabelle. He paged over to his video collection, and opened up his viewer.

He picked a recording of a night from what he thought of as the end days — after Maks decided to move but before he actually did. They were lying on the floor of the apartment, listening to music like usual. The song was fast, with a strong and steady beat. The track was maybe ten or fifteen minutes long, the notes jumbling together but still distinct, with a rhythm that somehow drove into Dex's body, lifting and carrying him along the crests and troughs of the song. Even hearing it now, sober and with the gulf of time between himself and the moment, he felt the hypnotic effects of the music on his body.

There wasn't a lot to see in the video record. They didn't talk during the song, each lying on their separate patch of floor, eyes closed, a private journey fueled by the music. Those were the moments that were the hardest to explain, and the ones that he missed the most — the memories that cut into him with a terrible burning pleasure. It was the times they didn't talk, the times they were alone but together. It was the one thing that virtuality could never even pretend to emulate. Dex knew there was a kind of intimacy in that silent, solitary experience that was shared and yet entirely personal at the same time.

He watched as the song ended and they each slowly stirred back to life. Dex saw Maks sit up, rolling his shoulders to work out the kinks they'd developed lying on the hard floor. He saw his younger self roll over and sit up, eyes blinking to get accustomed to the dim light. He saw his eyes meet Maksym's gaze, and saw the other man smile. Maks had always been a pretty happy go lucky guy, but Dex thought he saw a hint of sadness on the other man's lips. They had looked at each other in silence for a moment, then Maks had nodded and his smile broadened. "Nice," he had said, the word drawn out and imbued with meaning.

Dex saw himself nod, acknowledging the shared experience of the song and its effects. He ended the video, closed his eyes, and put the song on loop. It must have repeated twenty times before he shut it off as he got off the train.

Chapter Twenty Four

Dex rode the local train from the station to his apartment building, shivering from a newfound aversion to the cold. He was amazed at how just a couple of days in a warm climate could change his comfort level at home. He tucked his arms in to his sides as he clung to the vertical rail on the train, trying to conserve as much warmth as possible. He went online and had his system instruct his apartment to turn on the heat and double up the water quota. He figured that he had a couple of days worth of water rations saved, and he could use an extra long shower.

At his stop, he stepped off the train and a cool breeze hit him, making his body shiver. He hurried toward his building, hands tucked deep into his pockets. He opened the door and stepped onto the up lift. When he got into his apartment, he immediately shucked off his clothes and dumped the contents of

his bag out. He stuffed all his dirty clothes into the autoclave and stepped into the lav, turning on the water. He stood under the weak spray and when the blower came on, he stayed under the warm air longer than he needed to. Eventually, he stepped out of the small room and put on some clean clothes.

It was late, getting close to the middle of the night, but Dex just wasn't tired. His usually well ordered routine had been broken in the last few days and now time was becoming even less relevant than it had been before. He knew he could just grab the SleepingJuice and let it work its magic, but it wasn't just that he wasn't tired. He didn't want to sleep. He pulled out the bottle of Jamaica's Best, now getting dangerously close to empty, and poured a generous shot into a tumbler. He topped it off with a splash of ginger ale, and sat in his comfortable chair.

The apartment had warmed nicely up by then, and Dex set the controls back to normal. He dimmed the lights a little, creating a softer atmosphere that he hoped would be conducive to thinking. He logged in to the Cubicle Men's system and pulled up the case file he'd been keeping. He scanned through his notes, thinking that there must be something he had missed. He had that feeling, like a tiny itch at the base of his neck, that made him think he was missing something important. He read over his notes from the beginning of the case, and noticed that Annabelle had started adding her observations as well. She really was great — Dex was sure he would never have even gotten this far without her help. It would be strange not talking to her all the time once the case was over.

When he got to the end of the file, Dex noticed that Annabelle had added some information just recently, while he was on the train from Guadalajara, in fact. Her note was somewhat cryptic, stating that her search for subjects SL and SB over the previous week was inconclusive and that online trails for both parties appeared to be unavailable. Dex had no idea what this meant, so pinged Annabelle. Of course, since it was the middle of the night, there was no response.

Dex sighed, and took a slug of his drink. He was relying on Annabelle too much, wanting to talk to her about the case, wanting to talk to her period. He'd always worked alone — most of the Cubicle Men did — and that was the way he wanted it. No discussions, no meetings, no disagreements. So why did he feel completely and utterly lost because he couldn't talk to her?

He leaned back in the chair, and started paging through the Cubicle Men's system, checking out the other cases. It was all just the usual stuff, and none of it was taking Dex's mind off his own work. Instead, he found a message from Jay Shiraishi asking if Dex had any new information. It seemed the multi community were hoping for a conclusion to the case as well.

Dex sent his old pal a quick note saying little that the other man couldn't have read in the case file. Then, Dex paged out of the organization's system and over to the boards where Reuben had spent time. He ran a search for any recent mentions of Reuben Cobalt, and was surprised to find a number of long and well populated threads. They all began with the announcement of Reuben's death, and were full of nice thoughts about him from people who had and had not

interacted with him.

It was interesting, Dex thought, how people said the nicest things about someone only once they were gone. It was as if people were usually too afraid to tell each other how they feel, but once someone is no longer there, everyone feels the need to say those things, the things they usually never even articulate to themselves, but that eat away at you when the opportunity is gone.

He read the tributes, the memories of Reuben and the words of people who wished they had known him or known him better. He wondered if Ivy had seen these threads, if she read them and what it meant to her. He finished his drink, and even though he still wasn't tired, he didn't have the energy to stay awake either. He took a shot of Sleeping Juice and decided to defer his problems for a few hours.

His system alarm went off in the morning, and Dex awoke with a queasy feeling. It wasn't just the result of a couple of days of strong coffee, a strange bed and not enough food or sleep. It was the sick feeling of defeat, that he was never going to solve this case. Dex wasn't really an optimist, but he was ordinarily a confident man. However, this morning the sense that he was missing the key to this problem was overwhelming. He took a drink of Flying Fish, and it sorted out the physical symptoms, but his mind was still unable to focus.

He was dejectedly drinking his coffee — now weak and tasteless in comparison to the brew he'd had at Free Robots — when Annabelle pinged him. Dex felt his heart rate increase and he silently chided himself for the reaction. He

swallowed, cleared his throat, and answered Annabelle's call.

"Hey, what's up?" he said.

"You called me, right?" she said, her voice light. "That should be my question."

"Oh, yeah," Dex said, now remembering his research from the night before. "I was reading the case notes, and you added something yesterday. What was that all about?"

"Oh, that," Annabelle's voice turned serious and she sounded less than thrilled. "I have news. Or more accurately, no news."

"No news isn't good news, is it?" Dex asked.

"Not for us, it isn't," Annabelle said. "It turns out that both Sterling Ljungberg and Stella Bish were off on their little offline retreats when Reuben got killed."

"Shit."

"Shit, indeed," Annabelle said. "It doesn't prove anything — the nasty payload that killed Reuben could have been delivered by a bot, just like what happened to you. Hell, it probably was, considering that it was a bot that tried to attack you. But there's nothing in the logs that ties either of them to the event."

"Fuck," Dex said, his hands involuntarily clenched into fists. "This case is killing me. I can tell there's something I'm missing; I can just feel it. It's like I'm looking at the world around me and I can see that there's a file open on my viewer, but I just can't focus on it. It's maddening."

"I know it feels like we aren't getting anywhere," Annabelle said, her voice

softening, "but I believe you'll get it. It's just a matter of time. You've got the knack, Dex. You just have to let it come."

"Thanks," Dex said, unconvinced. "I hope you're right."

"Me, too," Annabelle said, and laughed. "I'm going to go and let your do your thing. I'll let you know if I find anything, okay?"

"Yeah," Dex said. "Talk to you later." He broke the connection, and poured another cup of coffee. That nauseous feeling had passed into the tingly, itchy feeling again. Dex was convinced that he had seen, read or heard something that just wasn't sinking in.

He pulled up the case file, and started poking through his notes again. He was hoping that he could see the information with a fresh view, but instead it was like the words were swimming before his eyes. He decided to try a different approach, and put together a cross reference script. Because Dex kept recordings of every meeting or conversation, his case file was naturally divided into discrete sections of information based on when he'd recorded it. He'd made some manual links already, but there might be something else that went together. He knew that even with the script he'd have to go through the results carefully. But at least it was a different way of looking at it all.

He knew he'd have at least half an hour to kill while the script was running. Dex glared at his half full coffee cup, wondering if it would be a waste of perfectly good rum to top off the foul brown sludge with the last of the liquor. He decided it would be, and dumped the coffee down the drain. There wasn't enough room in his small apartment to properly pace, and he couldn't face a

video, or even music now. Without even realizing what he was doing, Dex paged over to Uri Farone's storefront. He found himself looking at the options available, although he had already come close to memorizing Farone's price sheet. He wished he'd never heard of Farone's service; knowing that he could do something about his memories was, in many ways, worse than the memories themselves. As it was, he'd known for some time that he was unhealthily obsessed with his past, but he could live with that. Knowing that there was something he could do about it, that he could choose to remove the memories and therefore change his life, that meant he had to decide. He had to choose what to do.

If he removed the memories, Dex felt that it would be like he was denying his past, that part of his life that he felt was more important than anything else he'd experienced. Yet, if he chose to leave things the way they were, that meant choosing to live with the pain, choosing to be a slave to his memories. There seemed to be no way to win.

A chime sounded and Dex was saved from this debate as he saw that his script was finished. He paged over to the report that it had generated, and he began to read. Mostly, the script had found connections that Dex already knew about — Ljungberg and Bish, Jay Shiraishi and Reuben, Marta and Ljungberg's day job. There were others, though, and Dex spent some time checking up on each of the items.

Even though he was specifically looking for items that had previously fallen through the cracks of his logic, he almost missed it. A name that was only ever

at the periphery of the case, a person he'd only ever spoken to once and even then it was as an aside. A name that popped up so unexpectedly that he hadn't even recognized it. A name so unfamiliar that even when his script pointed it out to him he nearly let it pass by.

Renna Bellinger. Ivy's friend, who never knew about Reuben and who had nothing to do with the case. Renna Bellinger, who was also on Stella Bish's staff list. Renna Bellinger, who was a top rated programmer with the same firm as Ivy and who worked as a contractor for Stella Bish.

Dex found his contact information for Bellinger and sent her a vague yet forceful invitation to meet with him online later that day. He pinged Annabelle and briefly told her what he'd found.

"I'm coming," Annabelle said, her voice brooking no argument.

"Not in person, you aren't," Dex said, equally forcefully.

"She doesn't need to see me," Annabelle said, "but I want to be there. You owe me that much, Dex."

Dex knew it was true. He did owe Annabelle, a lot. She had become as much a part of this investigation as he was, and it was only fair that she be part of this conversation. But he didn't think he could do his job with Annabelle's voice in his ear. After much wheedling, Annabelle agreed to keep her voice connection off, and to just patch into Dex's recording feed of the meeting. They spoke briefly about the plan, then Dex prepared to meet Bellinger over drinks in Marionette City.