

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 and shoulders. 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

# Self Made

by M. Darusha Wehm

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## Chapter Three

Dex awoke to the familiar throb of a headache and he tasted a gummy film in his mouth. He reached over to the small shelf next to the bed for the large bottle of Flying Fish Tonix. He drank a large gulp, and fought the brief flash of nausea that followed. In a moment the headache was dulled and he got up. After stepping into the lavatory cubicle, he turned on the spray and showered quickly. When he was done, the bathroom's ceiling nozzle began to dry him and the room, and he brushed his teeth and used the toilet.

He pulled his uniform out of the autoclave and put it on, stuffing a nutrient bar into the pocket. He was out the door and on his way to work in less than ten minutes after the alarm went off. The sky was its usual grey, and there were only patches of it visible between the tops of the building. Dex wasn't looking at the sky, though. He had already logged into the Cubicle Men's system and was paging through the overnight news. There were the usual attacks on streeters

that the goon squad busted up, a few domestic cases among the "differently employed", and what looked like a very interesting case in Asia of a missing piece of artwork. Obviously, the client had acquired it though less than honest means originally. Dex thought he would have liked that one.

Dex scanned over the list of ongoing cases for his squad as he boarded the train, one eye on the scrolling text and the other on a local news board. He stood on the train, sardined in with the other commuters, while he got a sense of what was going on with the other Cubicle Men in the city. As a lieutenant, Dex had a part time responsibility as a mentor for the other members. Lieutenant was really the highest rank anyone achieved and still was on active duty. After lieutenant it was all administration and recruiting, something in which Dex had less than zero interest.

When he really thought about it, Dex knew that he wasn't an ambitious man, so it didn't bother him that he was never going to rise any further. The organization, although technically hierarchical in structure, didn't really place a lot of status on the various ranks. It was more focussed on finding the right niche for each member. Consider Buster Takahashi. He'd been a goon before Dex started and he was still there, cracking heads, busting ribs and putting the fear of death into people with the best of them. He'd never get off the street and he'd never get past constable, either. But he was one of the most respected guys in the squad, he was so damn good at what he did.

Dex knew he wasn't in Buster's league, but he also knew that he was good at his job. He had one of the higher solve rates in the squad, and he truly liked

his work. Although most of the other Ds in the squad wouldn't have pegged him as an introspective guy, Dex had thought a lot about what made him good at this kind of work. He had never been great at school, in fact he'd always been pretty average at everything he had tried. He was stubborn, though, and once he sunk his teeth into something he had a hell of a time letting go. But, the only real aptitude he'd ever shown was for talking to people, making friends — although that was all in the past now.

Dex shook his head slightly, as though shaking the thoughts loose. There was no point in dwelling on that; he had real work to do. The train slowed and Dex's onboard system showed a reminder superimposed over his vision that this was his stop. He pushed through the crowd to the door, and stepped out. He walked the block to the B&B offices, still reading over the local Cubicle Men cases. He logged out just before passing through the doors to the Customer Service Reps' room. He knew that B&B's system would scan him as he entered, logging his time in and ensuring that he wasn't using company time for non-work-related lollygagging.

However, once he was at his workstation, waving his hands over the B&B interface to check his messages and log in to the call system, he ran a program from his own system that allowed him to access the external parts of everywherenet without the B&B system noticing the additional traffic. This way, Dex could work on his real work while doing the job that paid the bills and kept him housed. As he answered the first complaint of the day, Dex saw that he had a text message from Ivy waiting for him. He paged over to it, and while going

through the motions with the B&B customer, he read through her message.

She claimed that she hadn't been able to come up with a lot of information about the Reuben identity, since most of it was housed in his own memory cells, which had been destroyed. She did give a timeline from her own memory, though. She said she'd created Reuben about five years previously, first as a purely textual identity for some boards she posted at, and for an online journal. The journal had been automatically deleted when Reuben had been killed, but Ivy said it was just a collection of essays about user interface issues. After she'd been using the Reuben identity for a year or so, she set about creating an avatar for him in the visual interface to everywherenet.

"It was harder than I thought it would be," she wrote. "M City piggybacks on the identity system for the everywherenet itself, rather than having its own user management system like the boards do. I had to create a complete identity within a shell inside my own system. It was tough, but after a few months of solid work, I had it working.

"Reuben was, in a very real sense, a complete individual. He had access to the everywherenet as if he were entirely separate from Ivy — it got to the point where I could switch back and forth between the two identities very easily. Technically speaking, that is. It's funny — the easier it became to master the technology, the harder it was to actually switch personalities myself."

After she described her technological achievement, Ivy explained that she had originally created the Reuben identity because she was involved in a community that was devoted to discussion issues of privacy and anonymity on

the nets. She posted occasionally to their boards and developed an alternate identity, as most of the posters there did. Once she created an avatar for the Marionette City interface, though, the Reuben identity became more fully formed, and she began to use it more often in the virtual world. She made reference to using Reuben for some freelance work, and Dex made a note to find out more about that.

Dex had finished with his first call of the work day at B&B and was now helping another customer install a new disk node. He figured that he could take care of that call in his sleep, so he continued to mull over the information in Ivy's note. It was a start, but there were several questions he'd asked her that were notable in the absence of answers.

He had asked her if anyone knew she had a multi, and she'd completely ignored that rather important question. Since the avatar was attacked with code, Dex was starting with the premise that Reuben's killer had known that Reuben was a multi, but was it a deliberate act against Reuben/Ivy, or was it simply a statement against multis in general? Without more information from Ivy, Dex wouldn't even know where to start. He sent her a message asking her to meet him in the bar again later that day to address some questions. He had to focus on the unhappy B&B customers for much longer than he would have preferred before he got a reply agreeing to his time.

Dex arrived first. It was his habit to link in to the bar a good half hour before his client was due to meet him. He liked to be able to see the client arrive — you

could tell a lot about the way the meeting was going to go from those first few moments. But Dex also happened to like this place; it was dark, with a blue and green light show over the main area. The tables at the sides, where Dex liked to sit, were in barely enough light to see across the table. No one would be peeking in on a conversation there. The bar streamed music, and Dex enjoyed the stuff they played. It wasn't the garbage that was currently popular, and it set a nice atmosphere. Of course, you could always change to your own soundtrack or turn the sound off entirely, but Dex liked the effort they put in to the music and the ambience of the place. It felt comfortable. As comfortable as an online gin joint ever could feel to him.

Dex watched the other patrons while his avatar worked on a drink. If he had wanted to, he could have had his system replicate the effects on his physical body, but he'd rather taste his drugs as they went in. He just liked the look of his avatar with a drink in its hand. He changed his perspective to be able to look at his avatar from a cinematic view. He had designed it to look more or less like his physical body did, without all the metal nodes dotting his face. It wore a dark suit of a somewhat anachronistic style, which fit with the compact but wide body. The head was shaved almost bald, but a close observer could just make out the line of dark grey stubble at the base of his skull under his old fashioned hat. The avatar's dark eyes closed briefly as it brought the drink to its thin lips and took a long swallow.

Dex knew he could have built an avatar that would have been more attractive or fanciful, and many people's avatars were of that ilk. But he never

thought to embellish; it just seemed unnecessary. Secretly, he thought the suit and hat were a bit of an indulgence, but no one had ever commented. He reset his view back to first person and waited for Ivy to show up.

This time she linked directly in to the bar, her avatar materializing in an empty area of the open space in the middle of the room. The light show played on her rendering form, first cutting through her image, then bouncing off the dress and skin. She took a moment to get her bearings, then scanned the faces, looking for Dex. He sent her a private audio message, indicating where he was, and she walked over to the table. She sat without waiting for an invitation, and this time ordered a drink from the bartender software.

Dex didn't stand on ceremony. "I got your message," he said. "And there's some information missing. If you want me to find out what happened to him, I'm going to need to know everything about Reuben. Why you created him, who knew him, who knew about his connection with you, all of it." He paused, but Ivy just sipped her drink and held his gaze. "I know this is difficult, but you have to help me before I can help you. And if you don't want my help, there's a hundred other people who do. So, don't waste my fucking time."

Ivy didn't say anything for a moment, and Dex wondered if she was just going to link out of the bar and that would be the end of the case. He hoped she would stay, because the case intrigued him, but he had nothing to go on unless she could give him more information. His avatar kept its stoic expression, but Dex's physical face smiled when Ivy started to talk.

"No one knew about Reuben and me," she said, quietly. "There was nothing

to link us. I never told anyone about Reuben until yesterday, when I told you." She looked at Dex defiantly, as if daring him to question her. He softened the look on his avatar's face, and she dropped her eyes. "This is very hard for me," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "I got so used to keeping it a secret, that even saying my-" she caught herself. "Even saying his name out loud seems, terrifying."

"It's okay," Dex said, his avatar's expression kindly while in the physical world he rolled his eyes and sighed. "But we need to talk about Reuben if you want me to help you. What were you doing when you were using that identity? Who were you talking to, what communities were you in, and what were those freelance projects all about?" He swallowed the last of his drink, and refilled the glass. Ivy lifted her own glass, and followed suit.

"Fine," she said, lifting her eyes to meet his gaze. "I hope you have some time."

## Chapter Four

"It started out of pure scientific curiosity. In case it isn't obvious," she said, "I design user interfaces for a living. I work for..." She paused. "I work for one of the bigger firms, and I do pretty well. Dealing with the interaction between people and machines, you tend to end up thinking of it in one of two ways — either it's all just a programming problem, with inputs and outputs and your job is to try and make it all fit together. Or you become obsessed with the psychology of it all. And that was me.

"I started reading all these boards about human/machine interaction, and not just the ones about making it work. The ones about how it makes us feel. About how it makes us more than human, less than human, something other than human. How it makes us different, how it changes our lives. Now, obviously, I didn't want to post using my real identity. I'm somewhat well known in the field, and even if no one would have recognized me, I wouldn't have wanted the firm's routine scans to turn up activity at some of the boards that are

hostile to our work. And so Reuben was born.

"I first used that identity on those boards, but when I started keeping a journal about my observations, it seemed obvious to use Reuben as the author. My... Reuben's pages never had a huge audience, but there were a few avid readers. The Reuben identity began to make connections within the community — he developed his own personality, his own friends. By the time I made an avatar for him, he was more popular socially than I was."

Dex wondered if he heard a trace of envy in her voice, and added the thought to his running log of notes from the conversation. Aloud, he said, "Can you give me some names, people or groups I can talk to who associated with Reuben?"

Ivy swirled the liquid in her glass, and seemed to be staring at it as if it, rather than she herself held the answers to Dex's questions. "Sure," she said, finally. "The only trouble is that none of them know me as Ivy. And no one knows that Reuben is... gone."

"Just get me the names," Dex said. "I can handle the rest. I've done it before."

"What will you tell them?" Ivy asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"The truth," Dex said, "that Reuben was murdered and that I'm investigating." He finished his drink and set the empty glass on the table. "Don't worry," he said, "I won't mention you. I don't even think I'll need to mention that he was a multi, at least not yet. Just let me take care of it." He could hear Ivy sigh deeply, as if she had been holding her breath the whole time and was only

letting it out now.

"I'll send you contact information for everyone I can remember," Ivy said. "A lot of it was lost in Reuben's memory, but I should be able to dig up some addresses and links."

"Good," Dex said. "We'll meet again once I've had a chance to go over the list." He linked out of the bar, and refocused on the physical world.

Dex ran his tongue around his mouth, and grimaced at the taste. Sometimes he was able to pay attention to his physical surroundings when he was in Marionette City, but this wasn't one of those times. He went offline, blinked a few times to readjust his vision to his apartment, and drew a glass of water. He swirled the liquid around his mouth, and spat onto the floor of the lav. He poured a liberal dose of rum into the glass and topped it off with ginger ale.

By the time he was back at the table and logged back into the 'nets, he had a message waiting from Ivy. It was a list of names — mostly links to boards Reuben had frequented, but a few individual names as well. Dex decided to start on the boards, since Ivy had provided little contact information for the individuals. He logged into the Cubicle Men's system and was reminded of the weekly squad meeting the next day. He sent the names Ivy had given him to the organization's database with a request to have the results sent directly to him. Then he paged over to the first board Ivy had sent him.

It was one of the communities Ivy had described. Dex scanned the board and decided that the denizens seemed to be mostly a bunch of pseudo-

intellectuals pontificating about things they don't really know a lot about. Dex read a few of the most recent posts, then looked up Reuben's posts. The items tagged to Reuben seemed to Dex to be on the less controversial side, mostly asking questions, or looking for insight. It didn't seem to be a terribly personal board; the interactions more on topic and pretending to be academic. Dex found boards like that to be unbelievably boring, so he moved on.

Most of the links Ivy had given him were to similar areas, though Dex found a couple of boards where the conversation was more like a group of friends than a philosophy conference. Boring, pedantic friends, but friends none the less. Dex spent more time reading the posts on these boards, learning a bit about Reuben's relationships with these people, and noting who seemed to be closest to him. Reuben didn't seem to be involved in any great arguments here either, but Dex knew that the relationships formed on a board could easily spill over to socializing in Marionette City or even, in extreme cases, the physical world.

He poured another drink, and pulled up his credentials file. Inside, he had what appeared to be certified keys for a couple of false identities — mostly as a member of Security for the larger firms. They wouldn't stand up to any kind of rigorous scrutiny, but they usually got him in the door. This time, though, he thought it might be better to make it clear that he was an independent. The Cubicle Men didn't exist officially, but everyone had heard of them one way or another. It was just a question of making it clear who he was without having to answer too many questions. Dex chose the signature file that was closest to the truth — Andersson Dexter, independent investigator of private claims and

concerns.

Dex spent the next hour sending messages to Reuben's friends from the boards, informing them of Reuben's unfortunate death and explaining that he was investigating and would like to talk to them. He attached the signature file, and hoped that at least a few people would respond. With the messages sent, he checked to see if the database had come up with any information about the names Ivy had given him. He got a few leads, and saw that for a couple of the names there were surprisingly long dossiers in the database. He decided to learn a bit more about these individuals before tipping them off quite yet.

The two most interesting reads belonged to two files — people calling themselves Alvaro Zuccarelli and Tequila Kate. Zuccarelli was well known to the Cubicle Men, his file indicating that he was one of the gainfully unemployed — someone who made a living without working for one of the firms. He had previously employed the Cubicle Men to resolve a business dispute — a client had skived off without paying the bill. Dex scrolled through the document, and saw that while Zuccarelli was certainly living a life off the grid, he seemed to be legitimate. There was no indication that he had ever been investigated for anything, and his account with the organization had been paid in full and on time.

Tequila Kate, on the other hand, didn't ring any bells for Dex except the obvious one that she must be a corker at parties. It turned out that the name was not exactly a terrible pseudonym, as Dex had assumed, but rather that Kate

was essentially an activist for the cause of people with multiple identities. She was a self-identified multi, though no one knew who her creator was, and she had a popular and controversial journal about the benefits of multiple identities and the struggle to have their rights identified. The dossier provided links to a couple of boards that were unavailable through regular searches of the nets, and Dex paged over to check them out. They all required separate authentication, then a moderator had to approve the application for access. Obviously, they wanted to avoid the anti-multi trolls on the boards. Dex figured he could bluff his way past the mod, but he wasn't interested in waiting so he pinged Annabelle Lewis, the squad's resident cracker. The word around the squad was that there wasn't anywhere on the nets Annabelle couldn't find her way into. After a brief conversation, she promised to get him in to the boards, but it wouldn't last long. Dex told her he wouldn't need long, and thanked her for the help. Only five minutes later she pinged him with the login details. Once he'd gained access, he set a script to download a complete archive of each board to his personal system. He guessed that their security wouldn't be expecting anyone to try that, since it would eat a lot of disk. Dex, of course, had plenty, and he planned to delete anything that wasn't interesting anyway.

While the download was starting to come down, and his head was only beginning to throb, Dex paged over to Tequila Kate's journal. He searched for any reference to Reuben Cobalt, but came up blank. It seemed that while Kate was outspoken in her opinion that mults should be treated no differently than "real" identities, she was sensitive to the fact that most mults were trying to

pass as first identities. Her journal rarely named other mults, preferring to refer to "a friend" or "some folks."

Dex found her posts to be surprisingly sane, but there were the telltale elements of a zealot in there. There were the obvious comparisons between the plight of mults to the historical struggles of race and gender equality, but she also advocated that everyone take up a separate identity. It was obvious that she not only believed that her choices were as good as any other, but that they were, in fact, superior.

Dex was scanning one of Kate's many articles about the merits of separate identities to correspond with different aspects of one's personality, when he felt the familiar wave of nausea. He closed his eyes as the final weight of the download came upon him, then it was over. He paged over to the files he'd just received from the private boards and ran a scan for Reuben Cobalt. There were hits. Rather a lot of hits, in fact. Dex had his system aggregate just those posts and display them. Reuben had been a regular poster at both boards, at the support board first, then more frequently and more recently at the other board.

It was devoted to services for mults — tools to create realistic logins, information on how to hide your multi from friends and family, the usual underground stuff. Reuben's posts were easy to find. It looked like his services were in quite a heavy demand. Reuben was selling the code to build multiple avatars for use in Marionette City.

"You have withheld key information from me." Dex was using his goon voice, though he wasn't anywhere near as angry as he sounded. "How do you expect me to help you if you won't tell me anything?" He left the words just hanging there, waiting for Ivy to answer. He wished he could have seen her face, but she wasn't logged in to Marionette City when he checked and he wasn't willing to wait for her.

"Do you have any idea what would happen to me if it came out that I was selling a way to essentially hack M City?" Ivy's voice was small and timid, and Dex could tell that this conversation was hard for her.

"Of course," he answered, shortly. "At best you would be fired and never get work at another firm again. You'd probably be sued out of any savings you've got. You'd almost certainly end up on the streets and I honestly don't fancy your chances of making it a year out there. At worst..." He paused, as if thinking.

"Well, who cares about how much worse it could get? But how could you think I wouldn't find this out? Did you really think you could hide this from me and actually get a successful investigation? Are you insane as well as stupid?"

Ivy was silent, and Dex wondered if he had gone too far. Eventually, he heard an intake of breath, and her voice came back, surprisingly clear. "No," she said. "Just stupid. It's a habit to hide these things; I've been doing it for a while, you know."

"Well you've got to stop," Dex said, bluntly. "At least with me. You've already trusted me with enough information to utterly ruin your life, and you have to just keep on trusting me. This won't work otherwise." He softened his voice,

trying to sound sympathetic. If they had been meeting in Marionette City he would have reached out to touch her hand or arm, something to make it seem like he cared about her as a person, not just the puzzle of the case. "So talk to me. Tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything," she said, her voice quivering. "I just don't understand why. Why would someone do this? Who could hate me this much?" She finally broke down, and Dex could hear her sobs.

He let her cry, and when he could barely hear her ragged breath, he said, "That's exactly what I'm trying to find out. And that's what I need you to tell me."