

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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Self Made

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Five

To hear her tell it, she was the only person Dex had ever met who didn't have an enemy in the world. Of course, there were all those people who believed that multies were a threat to commerce and society and needed to be banished from the nets. But other than them, Ivy was loved and admired by all.

Dex was getting tired of it; hell, he was just plain getting tired. He finally told her to send him a list of everyone she talked with socially, and he promised to be discreet if he had to talk to them. For once she went one better and gave him the list right then and there. It was short, though. Just three names — Bill Christo, Renna Bellinger and Julie Abrentz.

"Please don't tell them," Ivy asked. "You don't even need to talk to them. They don't know anything about it. We've never even talked about multies before."

"How do you all know each other?"

"I met Bill and Julie through Renna."

"And what about her?" Dex asked.

"She works in another branch of my firm," Ivy said, "She's a UI designer, like me."

"So you work together?"

"No," Ivy said, "we met through work, but we don't work together. We're," she paused, as if looking for the right word. "We're friends. That's all. I don't want her mixed up in this, it's just not fair to her."

"I told you I'd be discreet," Dex said, "but if I have to talk to these people, I will. You just have to trust me." Ivy reluctantly agreed, and ended the conversation. Dex added the new information to his notes, and poured another drink. It had been a long night, and he had another long shift at B&B the next day. But he figured he had enough time to watch a quick video.

Maksym was lying on the couch, a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. There was music playing, loud enough that they had to speak up in order to talk. Maks had his eyes closed, his head slightly bobbing in time to the music as he sang along. This was Dex's favourite part. The part where they sang along, the way a person might in the lav, loud and off key and perfectly happy. He saw Maks take a drag of the contraband cigarette, and the smoke curled up over his head as he sang. Dex remembered that he had sung too, and he could sometimes make out the sound of his own voice on the video.

He stilled the image, searched his archive for the song they had been listening to and played it. He sat, sipping his rum and ginger, and looked at Maksym's still face, frozen in song. The song ended, but Dex just sat there for a moment. Then, he took the bottle of SleepingJuice, drank a six hour dose, and fell into bed.

Dex awoke still dressed and feeling as bad as he usually did first thing in the morning. After taking a hit of Flying Fish, ditching his sweaty, wrinkled clothes in the autoclave and spending five minutes in the lav, he felt almost human again. He rode the train into B&B while eating a nutrient bar and checking in on the previous night's news.

At his work station, he logged into the backdoor and checked his personal messages. Amazingly, a few of the people he'd contacted the precious day from Ivy's list had answered. They all expressed the same shock and horror at Reuben's death, and offered any help they could. Good. Dex could finally get some kind of a clue about what Reuben was like. He didn't trust Ivy's assessment one bit, she was just too close. And by her own admission, she wasn't exactly a social butterfly — her perceptions of people easily could be skewed.

He started with the first response, from someone called Sterling Ljungberg. Dex's assigned shift at B&B that day was answering text inquiries, so he was able to send a voice request to Ljungberg. He set his system to process subvocal input, so the conversation would be silent at his end, but translated to

audio at the receiving end. Ljungberg answered, and Dex introduced himself.

"Oh, yes, Mister Dexter," the voice at the other end said, somewhat obsequiously, "if that's the correct way to address you..."

"Just Dex is fine," he answered. "I wanted to talk to some of the people who knew Reuben, to get a sense of the man. I'm particularly interested in finding out if you have any idea who might have had a grudge..." Dex let the end of the sentence linger, waiting for Ljungberg to fill the empty space.

"It's just so shocking," the other man finally said. "I mean, Reuben was such a nice guy. I know that sounds rather, well, lame, I suppose. But in this case it's just the best way to describe him. He was genuinely nice. He wasn't like the trolls you get on the boards, he wasn't even one of those people who get all excited if someone challenges their opinion. He was just a plain old good guy. I can't believe that someone would murder him. That's just insane."

Some people would argue that murder was always insane, Dex thought, but aloud he said, "So, you can't think of anyone who had it in for Reuben, anyone who specifically didn't get along with him?"

"No," Ljungberg said. "He's not — I mean he wasn't the kind of person who made enemies. He never got into fights, hardly even got into heated debates. Though I can't imagine that anyone on the boards people like us frequented would kill anyone, even if they hated each other. We're, well, we're intellectuals. We use words, not..." His voice trailed off. "Say, how was Reuben killed?"

Dex knew this would come eventually, and he'd already decided to just go with the truth. "Well, it's a little complicated," he said. "You see, Reuben Cobalt

was an alternate identity." Dex heard Ljungberg draw his breath in sharply. "He was killed by code."

"My god," Ljungberg said. "A multi? But, I... we... he never said anything; I never knew." There was silence for a while. "Is that really, I mean, do you still call this a murder? Or is Reuben's... creator dead, too?"

"No," Dex said, "though I can't say anything else about that."

"No, I would think not. A multi. That explains a few things." Ljungberg seemed almost to have forgotten that he was speaking to another person.

"Such as?" Dex prompted.

"Oh. Well, how do I put it? He was private, I guess. Though, no more than many of us, I suppose."

"How do you mean, 'private'?" Dex asked. "What made you think that?"

"Well," Ljungberg said, "From what I can remember, he never mentioned where he lived. There was a discussion about where we were all from one day, and he was notable in his absence from that conversation. I remember wondering if he was still on the board, but then he showed up again in a different conversation. And he never talked about his past. Of course, he never posted any images of himself either, but like I said, none of this is terribly strange, really. But it makes sense now, I guess a different kind of sense. We're all presenting a particular face to one another here, I suppose. I wonder how many of us really have separate identities when we're online, practically speaking, whether we know it or not?"

Dex figured the conversation wasn't going to get anywhere useful at this

stage; it must just be a hazard of talking to amateur philosophers. He made the usual noises asking Ljungberg to let him know if he thought of anything that might be helpful. Dex then said that he was sorry to be the bearer of bad news, and gave Ljungberg his typical end of interview speech. He made a few notes, and moved on to the next name on the list.

Ginette De Moranville had the same non-story to tell, though at least she had a charming accent to tell it in. Dex was surprised to hear an accent — he thought they were all but extinct and only found in historical entertainment vids. De Moranville explained that her parents had been eccentric history buffs, and had brought her up speaking French. She'd apparently had a horrible time in school, although it had enabled lucrative careers in voice work and interpretation and translation for historians. Like Ljungberg, De Moranville was shocked at Reuben's death, and also professed ignorance at his being an alternate identity. She seemed nonplussed by the revelation, though, and in between possibly false sobs, she kept repeating, "Mon dieu, pauvre Reuben."

Aside from the language lesson, Dex's conversation with her was just as fruitless as his talk with Ljungberg. While he felt it would likely be a continued waste of time, Dex was nothing if not thorough, so he called the last name on his list. Mickey Udo was unavailable, but his messenger told Dex what time Udo would be in Marionette City. The program even provided a link, which Dex noted. He ought to be able to look up Udo after the squad meeting that evening.

Meanwhile, Dex decided it was time to talk to some of the people who were involved more intimately with Reuben Cobalt. His business associates. Dex

pulled up the contact information for Alvaro Zuccarelli, and pinged him using the independent investigator identity. He figured Zuccarelli would know exactly who Dex worked with, if not why he was calling. As he expected, Zuccarelli answered almost immediately.

"Andersson Dexter," a smooth voice said. "Lieutenant, I believe. What can I do for you today?"

Dex was surprised that the man knew enough about the Cubicle Men to identify his rank, but he decided to just go with it. "Correct, Mr. Zuccarelli. But, you have the advantage of me, I'm afraid."

"How so?"

"You seem to know a great deal about me, but all I know about you is that you've done some business with someone I want to know a little more about."

"And who might that be?"

"Reuben Cobalt."

"Hmm," the silky voice said. "The name doesn't ring a bell. In what context would I have encountered Mr. Cobalt?"

"Well, that's more or less what I was hoping to find out from you, Mr. Zuccarelli." Dex was being a trifle disingenuous, since Ivy had explained that Zuccarelli had essentially been Reuben's banker. A multi that was functioning independently needed a way to pay for things, and as it turned out, Reuben had an income as well. But all financial transactions were tied to a person's everywhere net authentication, as well as an individual bank account. Ivy's system could fake the authentication, but it didn't come with a built in bank

account. Enter Alavaro Zuccarelli.

"I'm sorry that I can't be of more assistance, Lieutenant. Perhaps if you allow me to check my records, I may be able to find some information my inferior brain has forgotten." Zuccarelli was going out of his way to be an ass now, Dex figured, since he highly doubted that there were any records the man couldn't have accessed while they talked. Still, he'd go on playing it nice. For now.

"I'd be very grateful for any help you could provide, Mr. Zuccarelli," Dex said, his voice almost betraying the contempt he felt. He ended the call, and went on a break. He visited the toilet and then headed to B&B's break room for a coffee. When he got back to his work station, he addressed a few more complaints, and scanned over the agenda for the weekly squad meeting that evening. He wondered what Zuccarelli was hiding. Being Reuben's banker was no big deal, and Dex was sure that Zuccarelli's personal experience with the Cubicle Men would have made it crystal clear that Dex wouldn't care about that. Maybe it was pure professionalism — Dex imagined that part of the package was anonymity, and though he figured that usually would end when the client died, maybe it didn't for Zuccarelli's operation. More out of habit than for any real reason, he played the recording of the conversation back to himself at double speed, while he answered a few enquiries for B&B customers. He was in the middle of copying and pasting a section of the instruction manual for one hapless customer when it dawned on him that he'd never gotten around to telling Zuccarelli that his client was, indeed, dead.

On the upside, Dex figured that having that bit of data still in hand might make the bad cop version of the conversation go a little smoother — at his end, anyway. He finished up his last few bits and pieces for B&B, and logged out of all systems before heading out the door. The reader in the doorway logged him out, as well as thoroughly but ineffectually scanning him for any extracurricular system activity. Once he was through the door, he linked into Marionette City and while his body was headed home, his avatar headed off to the office.

Chapter Six

Dex walked into the squad room, and nodded at the familiar faces. Dex thought that the weekly squad meetings were unnecessary in many ways, but he had to admit that once in a while he needed skills he just didn't have, and it helped to have an informal relationship with the people you were asking for help. Thinking about his deficiencies in the realm of programming, he found a chair next to Annabelle, who asked him if the boards she cracked for him had given him what he needed. "Dunno," he said, and she got a worried look on her face. "No, your part worked fine," he said, "I just don't know how useful it's going to be. This case is a bit of a stumper."

"How so?" Annabelle asked, and Dex explained that there wasn't a lot of information about the victim since he was really just a bunch of code and it was all scrambled now. "Another one of those multits," she said, disgust in her voice. Dex raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She looked up at Dex, and her voice changed back to its usual, light, helpful tone. "I can take a look at what's left for

you," she offered. Dex thanked her, saying that he would keep it in mind. Her voice lowered. "I'm always available for you," she said, and Dex ignored the significant look she was giving him.

Everyone in the squad knew that Annabelle had a serious thing for Dex, but if he noticed he was good at hiding it. Captain Zahara Zhang, known to the squad as Zizou, took her spot in front of the group, and the informal chatter quieted. She had recently been promoted from the detectives' ranks, and the switch to admin was a natural one for her. The squad all liked and respected her, and so far she had done a good job of keeping the gears oiled.

"Okay gang," she said, "let's keep it brief. There's not a lot to report from my end; we've had a few new cases for the Ds, mostly extortion and some kind of murder-like thing. Ask Dex about that one if you're interested." He got a handful of pings immediately, and just pointed them all back to his public case file. They could read his preliminary report just as well as they could ask him about the case, and it didn't cost him hours of telling the same story over and over again.

"The street guys have seen a slight increase in activity in green and brown sectors this week." The captain used the squad's terminology for a couple of the more down and out neighbourhoods in the city. She continued, "So we're adding an extra unit for those areas. Anyone have any info on why there's more trouble?" The captain scanned the crowd, and a hand in the back went up. It was Melissa Vonruden, one of the new goons. "Go ahead," Zizou said.

Vonruden stood up, and in a strong voice said, "Sir, I think it might be

because of a new joint in that area offering neural stimulants. Just on this side of legal, I think."

"You working green or brown, officer?" the captain asked.

"No, sir," Vonruden flushed. "My day job is at the stim joint's front counter."

The squad laughed at her embarrassment and the captain smiled.

"Good work, officer. Check in with Malone and let him know what you know." The captain paused, likely checking notes, then continued. "Anyone have anything else they need to share?" There were a few murmurs but no one stood to take the floor. "Okay then. Street, you'll get the week's assignments from Malone. Ds, if anyone is bored, let me know and we'll find something to put you on. Otherwise, dismissed."

The group broke up, a few people chatting, and the goon squad crowding around Pat Malone to work out the week's schedule. As he was leaving, Dex nodded at Jay Shiraishi, a guy he'd worked with when he was still on the goon squad, who was talking with Annabelle. As he passed them, Annabelle said, "A few of us are heading over to Monte's for a pint or several before calling it a day. Want to come with?"

"No can do," Dex said. "This meeting took up enough of my time already. I've got a date with one of my vic's old buddies. Hopefully he'll be more useful than the others have been. I'll catch you later." He walked out of the squad room, leaving Annabelle to link over to the bar by herself. Instead of linking over to his own destination, Dex walked through Marionette City toward the point where Mickey Udo had said he'd be.

Dex liked to walk through Marionette City — it reminded him of a time in his life when he used to go for walks in the physical world. Much of Marionette City had been modeled after the physical world as it once was, long before Dex's time. However, when Dex was young there were still a few throwbacks — bars with more than a half dozen kinds of booze, take out joints that cooked food made with real ingredients, stores that sold physical things that were more than just add ons for a person's system.

The squad meetings were held in a part of Marionette City called Chandlers. It usually rained and it was always twilight and the designer had put these funky shadows everywhere that didn't actually relate to any of the objects. Dex liked it there. According to the link Udo had given him, he was going to be in a location that was directly adjacent to Chandlers. Dex had time to kill, so he pulled his hat down over his heavy eyebrows and set to walking.

Chandlers was overstocked with bars, whorehouses, numbers rackets and backalley bankers. A man could hock his next paycheque for a loan and spend the lot on random number generators, teledildonic hookers and virtual hooch. These were common enough pastimes, and there were plenty of punters in each doorway. Places like this kept the Cubicle Men busy, and Dex felt at home here. He was tempted to stop in at one of the ginmills along the way, but he didn't want to miss Udo so he kept up the pace.

He was out of Chandlers soon enough and into a more typical part of Marionette City. It was animated in a lighter style that originated in Asia, Annabelle had told him once. Dex didn't know anything about that and was

neither a historian nor a designer. All he knew was that he looked and felt out of place here. He found his way through the winding streets, bubble-shaped buildings and avatars with exaggerated features and fantastic extremities like wings or tentacles. Dex entered the lounge where Udo said he'd be, and pinged the man. Udo answered and Dex saw a figure waving from the back of the room.

Udo's avatar was at a table near the far wall, with a bowl of some steaming thing in front of him. Dex couldn't tell if it was supposed to be food or a drug, and hoped that whatever it was wouldn't affect the interview. He sat across from Udo, and introduced himself.

"You're here about Reuben, right?" Udo asked, shifting the steaming bowl to one side.

Dex cut to the chase. "Can you tell me anything about him, anything that might help me figure out who killed him?"

"I don't know," Udo said, looking sad. "It's such a shock. I saw him only last week..." His voice trailed off, and Dex wondered if he was hiding something or just lost in memory.

"You saw him..." Dex prompted.

"Yes," Udo answered, "We used to go to this bar near here." He cocked his head, indicating a direction to his right. "One of the local strip places — all amateur hour, you know. Lots of wings and feathers."

"Sure," Dex said. "Any trouble there?"

Udo laughed. "Like, Reuben took a shine to a particular dancer and it ended badly? Hardly. Reuben liked to watch, sure, but it was never like that. I think he

liked the sense of freedom they had up there, looking however they wanted to and showing it off."

"He said this to you?" Dex asked.

"Not in so many words," Udo said. "But I knew Reuben wasn't turned on by them. Or at least not by any individual one of them." He leaned toward Dex, his eyes clamped on to Dex's. "I think he got off on by the whole idea. That they can have wings, or blue skin or whatever they want. He was turned on by the possibility." He looked at Dex for a moment longer, then turned back to the stage.

Dex was silent for a while. "Did you know Reuben was a multi?" he eventually asked.

Udo closed his eyes and bowed his head. "He never said anything, if that's what you mean. But, yeah, I figured as much."

"How?" Dex asked, leaning forward.

"I've known a few of them," Udo said, uncharacteristically circumspect. "He fit the type. And one night, I kinda brought it up."

"You asked him if he was a multi?" Dex said.

"Not straight out like that," Udo said, as if Dex were an idiot for thinking that. "Just started talking about the concept, you know, let him know that I'm friends with a few and that it's all cool. He didn't rise to the bait, and pretty soon after that he got busy all of a sudden. We used to hang out a couple of times a week, and we were usually on the same boards the rest of the time. Then, he started making excuses to skip out on me, and he was hardly ever on the

boards. At first I thought he was just taking a break or getting into something else," Udo shrugged. "The same old stuff can get dull after awhile; we all need new things every one and again. But when we did hang out, he seemed distracted and, I don't know, kind of upset. I asked what was up a few times, but he just gave me the brush off. I figured he just wasn't ready to talk about it."

Udo looked off into space for a while, and said, "Hang on, though. I think I remember something from around then that might be useful. Let me check." Udo's avatar was stock still for a moment, then it shook back to life. "Got it!" Udo said. "We were at the Lucky Eleven — that's the bar — and we ran into this girl that Reuben knew. He seemed to be kind of weird about seeing her there, at the time I wondered if they were fucking or something. I've got vid of it, if you want it."

"You have vid?" Dex asked, surprised. As a rule, most people didn't record their lives in the kind of detail that Dex did.

"Yeah," Udo said, grinning. "Maybe Reuben didn't have the hots for the dancers, but I sure do."

Dex smiled, saying, "Fair enough. Mind if I take a copy?"

"By all means," Udo said. "I don't know if it means anything, but at the very least if they were fucking, she ought to be told that he's, you know, gone." Udo pinged Dex, and he authorized the transfer.

"Thanks," Dex said, feeling the weight in his head increase just slightly.

"No problem," Udo said. "And, if you're into that kind of thing, I'd recommend you check out the third dancer in." He whistled low and cocked an

eyebrow. "Very hot."

Dex shook his head, chuckling to himself and he linked out of the bar.

He poured a shot of Jamaica's Best and topped it off with a splash of gingapop, and checked the time. Between both jobs, he'd worked a long day today, and though he knew he should take a look at Udo's vid, Dex wanted a few minutes for himself. He sat in his comfortable chair, resting the drink on its arm. He fired up his full screen viewer and loaded a different video.

He hadn't started recording his life all the time when this video was taken, so he had missed the beginning. But even though it was a long time ago, Dex remembered walking to the bar as clearly as if it were on the video, he'd made the trip so many times. The door was nondescript, just another metal door in just another slightly dilapidated building in the wrong part of town. You had to know what to look for to see the initials J.T. scratched into the surface of the door at eye level. Dex had known.

The video started inside J.T.'s, with Dex and two of his friends at the usual table in the corner. The sound was a little off — Dex hadn't perfected his recording set up yet, but he kind of liked the off-kilter resonance of the video. The music in the bar was loud enough to create a lively atmosphere, but quiet enough for the patrons to be able to carry on conversations without having to shout. That didn't necessarily stop them, however.

Dex watched his old buddy Jennie slap her hand on the table as she made her point. She always got good-naturedly argumentative after a couple of J.T.'s

stiff drinks, and this night was no exception. She had found a sparring companion in Dex's friend and roommate Maksym, and the two were just getting started as the recording began.

"Are you crazy, Maks?" Jennie asked, her voice getting loud as it always did partway through her third gin and tonic. "You really think the firms are going to let us slip under the radar forever? We're outlaws, man! Literally. We have no job, no access to services to speak of. We've got no Security to go to bat for us when the shit hits the fan. We're on the edge out here. And you can't tell me it's not in their best interests to get rid of us."

"Come on, Jen," Maks grinned. "The firms couldn't care less about a bunch of poor artists living in the dumps out here. We don't affect them in any way. Hell, I doubt they even know we exist. Why would they care, anyway?"

"You are so naïve," Jennie said derisively, swallowing the last of her drink and setting the empty glass on the table hard. She turned her head toward the bar and grinned at the J.T., the grizzled owner and barman. "Hit me again, good sir," she said and waved a crumpled bill toward the bar. She turned back to Maksym, and narrowed her eyes. "Of course they know about us," she continued. "We're not invisible. We use the 'nets, we're walking around. We're consuming their resources, Maks. Eating into profits." She emphasized that last word with bitterness. "But what do we provide them with, huh? Not labour. Not even our business, on the most part. Of course, they want us gone. Gone or co-opted." J.T. delivered Jennie's drink silently. She picked up the cool glass and had a long swallow. "It's just a matter of time, man," she said. "It's all going to

end. Isn't that right, Andersson?"

"Oh, no," Dex said, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not getting in the middle of this."

"Come on, Andy," Maks said, slapping Dex on the back. "And miss all this fun?" Jennie snorted, but was unable to hold back a grin.

"Hey, you guys," J.T. shouted from behind the bar. "You gonna gab all night or are you gonna play already?"

"All right, all right," Jennie answered. "Keep your shorts on, man." She put her drink down, and pulled a small handheld terminal from under her chair. Dex and Maksym got their instruments from under the table. The three set up their equipment on the small stage, and in a few minutes were playing for the small crowd in the bar, as they did every Thursday night. Dex on mandolin, Maks on guitar and Jennie on beats, synth and mix, they filled the small bar with music for a couple of hours.

As always when he watched this recording, Dex felt his fingers move on the arm of his chair in time with those of his image. He let the video play until they were done the last set, then he switched it off. He got up and paced around his small room for moment. Then, with a sad smile, he poured another drink and settled back into his chair.