

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 Seven

Dex paged over to the file Udo had sent him. It was a good hour's worth of recording, but Dex figured he'd just skip through the dancers. Extra dangly bits didn't do it for him and when you'd seen one naked freak you'd pretty much seen them all. He scanned ahead past the floor show to the break where the dancers were just walking around the bar looking for extra cash. This would be the first time Dex would get to see Reuben alive, as it were, so he set the playback to regular speed.

He was tall, and thin, with a wiry frame that would have probably held a decent amount of strength in a physical body. Dex had known more than a few goons built like that, and they'd been the meanest, most bloodthirsty fighters. He'd always figured it for skinny guy syndrome. Reuben didn't carry himself like a fighter, though. Unsurprisingly, he was beautifully dressed, in slim black pants

and a snug shirt that glinted, ever so slightly, in the club's lights. He wore a long coat that reached the floor and billowed out behind him, made of an almost transparent material that glinted only a slight bit more than the shirt. It was sort of like a visible aura or halo. Not a look Dex could ever carry off, but it suited Reuben.

The hair was the only thing Dex came close to envying. Short, not quite as short as his own, but very short still, and silver, with an amazing luminescence. On another man it would have been overkill, or just plain silly looking, but it took Reuben out of the ordinary and made him stand out, even in this room full of avatars built to be stared at. Dex had to admit, Ivy had some talent.

The recording was from Udo's personal system, so it saw what he saw. Udo was clearly most heavily focussed on the dancers, but in the break he spent more time looking at and talking with Reuben. The conversation started with comments on the various dancers' bizarre body shapes, Udo asking Reuben how certain improbable forms could be made. It was beyond boring to Dex, but he was more interested in Reuben's mannerisms. According to Udo, he had become more skittish by the time of this recording, and the man's attention certainly seemed to be elsewhere. At one point in a lacklustre debate about the definition of reality, Dex noticed Reuben's face change, the eyes narrowing and lips pursing together tightly. Dex recalled Ivy's avatar, how it seemed to react the way a physical person did, and wondered if she used a similar interface when she was online as Reuben.

As he watched the recording Dex could see Reuben's focus change from

Udo to something over his shoulder. Udo obviously hadn't noticed whatever his friend had, since he continued to look ahead and prattle on about his point. Eventually, though, whatever had caught Reuben's attention must have approached the pair, because Udo stopped talking mid-sentence and turned around.

She was beautiful, tall, buxom, with impossible curves. All in all, she looked just like eighty percent of the female avatars in Marionette City, though in this place her commonness caused her to stand out. She smiled at Udo, and then looked past him. "Reuben Cobalt," she said, cocking her head slightly. "How nice to see you again."

Reuben's face was still. So still, that Dex guessed that Ivy had purposefully disconnected any interface that would have allowed Reuben's face to automatically display whatever expression Ivy was making. "Hey, Stella," the avatar finally replied.

"Introduce me to your friend," she asked Reuben, with a sly smile on her face.

"Uh, sure." Reuben said, face still stoic. "This is Stella Bish. Stella, this is Mickey Udo." They made the appropriate getting to know you noises and made small talk about the dancers. Finally, Stella stepped back.

"A little birdie told me I might find you here," she said, looking at Reuben with that smile still on her face. "You can be a tough man to find. I was hoping that we could have a little chat, but I see you're busy." She turned to Udo, and favoured him with the icy but seductive smile. "I have to be going now, fellas,"

she said, turning to Udo, "but it was nice meeting you." She turned to Reuben and leaned in to kiss his cheek, "Now that I've found you, we'll have to talk soon, okay?"

"Sure," he said, and she linked out of the lounge.

"How do you know her?" Udo asked, refocussing on the dancers as a tiny creature with wings and cat's head took the stage.

"I, uh," Reuben said, "met her through work."

"Cool," Udo said. "She seems pretty hot if you like that sort of thing," he said absently, then stopped paying attention to his friend.

Dex scanned through the rest of the vid, but there was nothing left to interest him. He ran the recording back, and froze on the woman. He logged into the Cubicle Men's system and ran a search on her. The name was common and so was the avatar's appearance, so it might be tough to track her down. He let the search run and set it to send him the results. He refocussed on his room, and stretched. He had stayed up later than he should have, so downed the last drops of his drink then undressed, stuffing his uniform into the autoclave.

He used the lav, and took a hit of SleepingJuice. He dropped into bed and it was as if the world ceased to exist for a few hours.

Back at B&B the next day, Dex checked his messages. There were three potential matches to the Stella Bish in Udo's video, and he checked them all out. The machines were pretty good at this sort of thing, but there were still some things that people did best. He'd need better computing power than the

Cubicle Men could get him if he wanted a machine to accurately pick his quarry out of the line up, but Dex could tell which one he wanted just by giving the avatars the once over twice. He pinged her with the same generic message he'd sent everyone else, and got on with the morning's litany of incompetent consumer complaints.

As he was handling the usual barrage of people trying to use things for purposes for which they were clearly not built, or simply not knowing where the on switch is, Dex sent a couple of messages out. One to Ivy, asking for a meeting, and the other to Tequila Kate. The last was a long shot — he didn't really expect her to know all the posters at her boards — but he figured she'd be a good contact in the multi community. It was becoming more evident that not only was Ivy living two different lives, even her alter ego had things to hide from his own friends and associates.

Over the course of the day he got answers to all his enquiries and set up appointments with Ivy, Bish and even Tequila Kate. Dex was surprised when Kate answered his message so quickly and with a genuine recognition of Reuben.

"I am deeply shocked and saddened by your news of the death of such a valued member of the multi community," she wrote. "Perhaps I am being overly presumptuous, but I assume that since you are an independent and you are investigating this case, that you are aware that Reuben Cobalt was an alternate identity. If this information is news to you, I trust that it will be useful in your investigation of this heinous crime. While I do not believe that I have any

information that is directly related to this incident, I am aware that seemingly innocent facts can often help lead to a successful resolution. Therefore, I welcome to opportunity to meet with you to share my remembrances of Reuben."

He spent the rest of his workday at B&B actually working on B&B work, then hightailed it home at the end of the shift. He quickly grabbed an Econoline nutrient brick and stuffed it into his mouth. While he chewed on the sticky mass, he planned ahead and just put the whole bottle of Jamaica's Best on the table before him next to his tumbler. He logged in to Marionette City just in time for his meeting with Ivy.

When Dex linked in, he saw that this time she was waiting for him, sitting at the usual table in the back of Monte's. He walked over, somewhat annoyed by the fact that he wouldn't be able to have his back to the wall. He liked to be able to see what was coming without changing out of first person view. He thought about changing his perspective to omniscient, but he wanted to be able to see Ivy's face. He could have gone with a split screen, but he found the unnaturalness of it uncomfortable, so he sucked it up and after placing his hat on the table, sat facing the wall.

"Do you have any news?" she asked, almost breathlessly.

"Not really," Dex answered, "no." Her face fell. "I've been talking with some of Reuben's associates, getting to know him, trying to find out if anyone has any information. So far, it's slow going." He checked his notes briefly, then continued. "Alvaro Zuccarelli didn't even admit to knowing Reuben."

She sighed. "I suppose I should be grateful that the anonymity he promises really exists," she said. "He knows I was behind Reuben."

"What?" Dex said, anger just about rising to the surface. "You told me no one knew Reuben was a multi."

"That's true," Ivy protested. "Zuccarelli didn't know that Reuben was a multi. Just that I was, I don't know, acting on his behalf, I guess. It was my account, just in Reuben's name."

"Right," Dex said, sighing. "Well, if Zuccarelli is as stupid as he is circumspect, I'm sure he had no idea that Reuben was your multi."

"I didn't have a choice," Ivy said, her voice getting hard. "I'm sure you don't understand. And as you saw yourself, it's not like Zuccarelli was running his mouth off, whatever he might have guessed." She was quiet for a moment, almost pouting. Dex waited. Eventually she said, "I'll tell him to talk to you." Ivy's avatar froze, and Dex guessed that she was sending Zuccarelli the authorization to talk to him right then.

"Is there anyone else," he asked, "anyone else who knows the connection between you?"

"No," Ivy said, "no one. I knew Zuccarelli from... before, so it was just logical that I'd use him for Reuben. And, he's trustworthy, or more accurately, he's discreet. That's been proven."

"What do you mean, 'from before'?" Dex asked.

Ivy's eyes dropped to the table. "I'd done a little freelancing before I created Reuben. It was risky — I would have lost my job if it had become known that I

was moonlighting. I met him through one of those jobs, and when I realized that I needed someone to handle the finances, he seemed the obvious choice. I'd heard he was good for that." She looked up at Dex again, her face hardened. "And he was."

"Fine," Dex said. "What about Reuben's business? Client lists, that sort of thing. You must remember something."

"I've been thinking," she said, dropping her eyes again, "but I always relied on my system to remember names and contracts and so on. Well, Reuben's system. I just don't know. I've given you all the names I remember. I'm sorry."

Dex wanted to believe her, but she'd held out information from him before, and he wasn't a naturally trusting fellow to begin with. However, accusing her of something wasn't going to be useful, and whether she gave up all the goods or not, his bill was being paid. "Okay," he said, "I've got a few meetings lined up for today, so hopefully something there will pan out." He didn't mention Stella Bish — Ivy wasn't the only one who could hold information back.

"Oh," Ivy said, "do you have to go right away?"

Dex checked the time at the bottom right of his vision. "I've got a few minutes, why?"

"Well," Ivy said, somehow looking shy and smug at the same time. It suited her. "I asked Renna, Bill and Julie to join us. They don't know anything, but I thought this might be a better way for you to meet. If you still want to talk to them, that is."

Ivy must be paranoid about her friends finding out about Reuben if she felt

compelled to orchestrate a meeting herself.

"Will they be here soon?" Dex asked.

"Any minute now," Ivy said, and Dex nodded. They sat in silence for a while, when Ivy's face focussed on a space behind Dex. He turned and saw a fairly ordinary-looking female avatar link in. She had short red hair and wore a matching red pantsuit. Nothing about her glinted off of anything.

"Renna, hey, over here." Ivy stood, smiling, and the other woman walked toward the table. Dex stood, and dipping his head in a polite nod, said hello. As they were about to sit, two more people walked in — a tall, well built man with gold skin and an equally tall, thin woman with an almost transparent pair of wings growing out of her back.

"Hey, Ivy," the woman said, "hi, Renna." She looked at Dex, a quizzical expression on her face.

"I didn't know we were having company," the man said, a smile on his face. He turned to face Dex. "I'm Bill and this," he put his hand on the thin woman's shoulder, "is Julie." They sat, and Ivy introduced Dex. "This is Andersson Dexter, an investigator." She imbued the word with a campy feel, as if he were a cowboy or a vid actor.

"And what are you investigating, Mr. Dexter?" Renna had a soft, inquisitive voice.

Ivy opened her mouth as if to answer for him, but he said, "There's always something to figure out around here. Right now I'm working on the case of a multiple identity which as erased without its creator's consent." He looked

evenly at Renna. Her face displayed nothing that Dex could read, but Ivy's eyes got big, and she quickly forced a smile.

"Mr. Dexter was inquiring at work about some technical details, and he was referred to me. While we were talking he mentioned this place." Ivy gestured at the bar and turned to her friends. "The way he described it, I thought you all would like it, and look who's here? Isn't that funny?"

Dex rolled his eyes, glad that his avatar didn't mimic his bodily reactions. The coincidence was believable enough, but the delivery of the line was something else. The three of them seemed to buy it well enough, though.

"Well, it was his recommendation, now, wasn't it?" Julie said, chiding Ivy slightly in the way old friends do. "It's not that odd that he's here." She smiled at him warmly.

"And it's a good thing, too," Bill said, "so we can thank him. This place is great." He smiled broadly and looked around the bar. Dex flinched inwardly, hoping the four of them weren't about to become regulars at what he thought of as his real office.

"It suits me," he said, simply.

"It certainly does," Renna said, her smile wide. "You don't see too many real gentlemen these days."

Dex took it as a cue, and stood up. He picked his hat up off the table, and holding it lightly in his hand, said, "And a shame that is. Now, ladies," he nodded at Ivy, Renna and Julie, then turned to face the man. "Bill, I'm afraid that it's time for me to be moving on. Things to investigate and all that." He smiled, doffed his

hat, and linked out of Monte's.

## Chapter Eight

Dex was to meet Stella Bish in a trendy section of Marionette City, in an "open air market". He didn't really get the concept of open air in a virtual world, but he supposed it was just another place for avatars to meet or try and sell their digital crap. He linked in to the market, and set about looking for Bish. He was just on time, and didn't know his way around, so checked the map to see if she was in the area. His map overlay showed her at a bench in the northeast quadrant, and he linked over to the area. As his avatar materialized, he recognized her. Once he could move, he walked over to the bench and stood in front of her.

"I'm Andersson Dexter," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

"Yes, I see that," Bish said, referring to the setting that shows printed names hovered over each avatar. Dex had that setting turned off usually; he found it

more distracting than useful.

"May I?" He indicated the seat next to her on the bench, and she nodded.

Dex sat and waited a moment. "You knew Reuben Cobalt?"

"Yes," Bish answered, looking ahead. "He did some work for me." An avatar for Marionette City, Dex wondered. Was Bish a multi?

"If I might ask, what kind of work was that?"

She turned to face Dex, her left knee very nearly touching his right. "What kind of investigator are you, exactly?" she asked.

"The kind who asks the questions," he answered, holding her gaze, "not answers them."

"I see," she said, turning back to look out over the market. "Have you ever wished that things were different, Mr. Dexter?"

It was a strange question, out of the blue, but Dex figured he should follow her line of thinking, so answered. "Sure. My line of work, all I ever see is things that shouldn't be the way they are. Of course I've wished things were different. Why?"

"I don't mean changing history, Mr. Dexter, though there's a place for that, too, in a manner of speaking. No, I mean the little things — how you open your mail, how you get into your apartment, what noise your system makes to wake you in the morning. The little things, Mr. Dexter," she turned to face him again, "that makes life what it is."

Dex didn't know what to say, so he did what he always did in situations like that — he kept his mouth shut. She looked at him intently for a half minute, then

sat back. "I'm what you might call an arranger," she said. "I can arrange for things to be the way you want them to be. It's perfectly legal, mostly, and it just comes with a price. Of course, I need people to make the things my clients desire. That's where Reuben came in. Such a talent," she sighed, her gaze taking on a far-away look. "I almost believe that man could do anything — I think if he put his mind to it he could make an entire system mind-activated. He was genius with interfaces. Incredible."

"You brokered Reuben's avatar business?" Dex asked.

"Avatars?" Bish said, derisively. "Hardly. He was too good for that kind of gross graphics work. No, I used Reuben for the complex stuff — recreating ancient interfaces for people, making systems respond to neural cues, occasionally circumventing the artificial barriers to a full experience of the nets." She looked at Dex sidelong, as if to check if he was calling Security right now. He wasn't.

"How long had Reuben been working for you?" he asked.

"About a year," she answered. "It's not a full time gig, you know. Just contracts here and there. The money is quite competitive but to be perfectly honest I do believe that he likes — that he liked the challenge more than the compensation."

Dex wondered. Ivy had never mentioned working for Bish, and he was sure that even her swiss cheese natural memory would have retained a second employer. He thanked Bish for her time, and stood. She remained seated on the bench, looking up at him through surprisingly thick eyelashes. "Let me give you

my card," she said, her voice low and dripping with sensuality. She pinged his system, and as he accepted, her contact information flowed into his database, and the image of a small card appeared in his avatar's hand.

"If there's ever something you want," she said, standing up, her avatar nearly touching his, "something special, unique," she leaned in so that her lips were almost brushing his ear, and whispered, "you call me." She paused, and Dex felt his physical body flush. It was a most disconcerting feeling, and he was relieved when she linked away, the avatar fading to invisibility before him.

Dex unfocussed and got up from his chair. He went into the lav and splashed some water on his face. He refilled his glass from the bottle on the table, swirling the content around. He made a note to pick up another bottle on the way home from work the next day. He stretched, and sat down again. He had about an hour to kill before his appointment with Tequila Kate. Another man would have taken a three quarter hour hit of SleepingJuice, played a game or hired a hooker. Dex paged over to his video collection and loaded a file.

This time Dex picked a later video, one he'd watched more times that he wished to admit. He watched his younger self help his friend Maksym pack and watched them both drink, Maks getting drunker as the night wore on, Dex remembering how for once it was like drinking water, the numbness he felt keeping him sober. He skipped through the video, stopping at particular songs, or the looks on Maksym's face, or that one moment as he was refilling their glasses when he nearly said something, nearly asked Maks why, how had things

changed, how could he fix it. Dex finished his drink, stopping the image as Maks stood in the doorway, his face inscrutable. Some days Dex liked to imagine it was a look of regret, but this night he just closed his eyes for a moment, and ended the file.

Dex followed the link Tequila Kate had sent him, and found himself stuck in between worlds for a moment. The link was not to a bar, café or market as he'd assumed. Rather it was to a privately owned location, and his identity was being checked against a guest list of sorts. The process didn't take a long time, but it was still an uncomfortable experience. Dex successfully linked in, and found himself in a small open space with some couches, chairs, even a lecture area. There were a half dozen other avatars there, chatting amongst themselves, and Dex could see some video and text screens which were set up as well to accommodate people who were not accessing the area by avatar.

He looked for Tequila Kate, and soon discovered that she was the flamboyantly attired avatar with a literally flaming hairdo that swirled above, around and behind her as she moved. He pinged her, and she stood to greet him. She moved toward him and they found a pair of seats out of the way of the other people.

"So, you're an independent investigator," she said, looking Dex up and down.

"And you're a multi rights activist," he countered.

"Well, I'm glad to see we know who we are," she said, grinning and settled

in to the seat. "You're investigating Reuben Cobalt's murder."

"Yes."

"And you're calling it a murder?" She arched an eyebrow as she asked the question.

Dex didn't rise to her bait. "Yes." He didn't see any reason to get into a political discussion this early on in the conversation, and he figured it was his turn for questions anyway. "How long have you known Reuben?"

"A few years," she answered. "He became active in the community a few years ago. His first — that's what we call the person who creates an alternate identity — his first was worried about being outed, which is a real concern for us. There are plenty of people out there who would never refer to the death of a multi as murder. They'd think of it as cleaning up."

"I'm aware of the, ah, various opinions," Dex said. "But I'm mostly interested in Reuben. Had he received any threats specifically? Was there anyone who had it in for him personally?"

Kate shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "He never mentioned anything like that. When I first got to know him, it was through our support boards. That's how most of the new people come in — looking for a safe place to talk about their experiences. But Reuben soon grew to be more of a resource. And of course, there was his great gift to the community." She gestured around her.

"Avatars," Dex said, and Kate nodded.

"When I started, I spent an obscene amount on mine," she said, "and it was

a much more complex process for me to log in than it is now, thanks to Reuben. His program was gold to us."

"It was a business for him, though, wasn't it?"

"Sure," Kate said, "but he didn't gouge anyone. It was entirely reasonable. In fact, there are plenty of designers out there who ask more than he did, and that's just for the body. What Reuben offered was a chance at a normal life, for the price of a nice outfit." She fixed Dex with a steely gaze. "He was a champion in this community."

"Anyone disagree with that assessment?" Dex asked.

"Well," she said, "you'd have to assume that those people who are trying to root us out of society weren't going to be in love with anyone who was making it easier for mults to fit in."

"How would they know?" Dex asked. "Your community is closed and moderated."

"You got in," she said, "didn't you?" Dex smiled ruefully. "We have security measures," she continued, "but nothing is foolproof. We get our share of griefers and worse. Let me introduce you to someone." She stood, and walked over to the main group. She came back with a nondescript fellow, who introduced himself as Jacob Sherman.

"Jacob is our security guy," Kate said, with a grin. "His first is, ah, in your line of work, I think." She smiled at the two men, then turned. "I'll let you two talk shop for awhile. Later." She walked back to the main group, and Dex turned to face Sherman.

"This is kind of weird for me," Sherman said, refusing to meet Dex's gaze. "Would you be okay with linking over to Monte's?" Dex was taken aback at the suggestion, but agreed. He linked over, and as the bar materialized around him, he wondered what was up with the change of scenery. He made a bee line for his usual table to wait for Sherman, when he caught sight of Jay Shiraishi materializing. Shiraishi had been on the goon squad with Dex when he'd started, and was looking to be a lifer on the squad. He was in line to lead the team after Takahashi moved on.

Dex waved, and was about to let his old buddy know that he was on the job when Shiraishi pinged him, saying, "Thanks for coming. I figured it would be easier to talk, here," he gestured at the bar, then at his own avatar, "like this."