

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 Thirteen

When Dex awoke, the world seemed brighter and generally less horrible than it had for some time. It was amazing what not being critically hung over can do for a man. While he didn't exactly leap from the bed, there was no doubt that he would be out of the apartment and en route to his work station at B&B in the usual amount of time. He might even be a little early, which would hopefully offset the lateness of the previous day.

However, when he arrived at the CSR's room, his messenger immediately went off with an urgent notice to see his manager, Marian. "Aw, fuck," Dex thought. This is going to be annoying and unpleasant. He wasn't sure if he would have to do some serious groveling or if he was just going to get shit-canned right off the bat. It wouldn't be the first time, and thanks to some connections within the Cubicle Men, he knew he could get another job without

too much hassle. Still, he'd have to change apartments and he'd just gotten used to his current one. He really wasn't excited about the inevitable months of banging into doors in the dark.

Dex dropped his overcoat off at his work station before heading down the hall to the management suite. Why they made him actually physically go to their offices, he'd never understand. It was bad enough that people had to physically be on the premises to do work that only ever occurred over the nets anyway. But, that was part of the fun of having a low end job — you got to perform menial tasks and, as a bonus, be used a prop for massaging your boss's ego.

He got to the antechamber of the managers' suite, and pinged his boss. The automatic response popped up and told him to wait. As usual. There were no chairs, and Dex was left cooling his heels for a good five minutes. If he was going to catch hell for being five minutes late, you'd think they would be less inclined to waste even more of his time. But you'd think a lot of things that only occurred in a fantasy world. Finally, his messenger went off and Dex was summoned into the office.

It wasn't really a suite, as such. Sure, the managers had offices with walls and doors, and they had their own private break room and lav. But the offices themselves were tiny. They had room for a couple of chairs facing each other over a small table. And there was, inexplicably, a coat rack. The managers each had their own tiny rooms, so why would they need space for more than one coat? It was one of those mysteries of life in a firm that Dex expected he would never solve.

Marian signaled for Dex to sit, and he followed the order. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and Dex studied his boss. He hadn't had much interaction with Marian, really; most of their communication had been one way — top down — and in the form of the firm's internal feed. Dex didn't really know what to expect, so he figured the best tactic was to shut the hell up and wait for his supervisor to make the first move. Eventually, Marian did just that.

"Andersson," his boss began, trying for an air of parental disappointment, "some troubling blips have shown up on my radar lately from your area."

"Oh," Dex said noncommittally, trying to keep things in his boss's court.

"First, there was the cancellation call the other day." Marian's voice was starting to take on that tone that Dex thought of as 'have you tried turning it off and on' — the one you use when you thoroughly believe that the person you're talking to is as bright as a food brick, but you're trying really hard to hide it. "I know you're aware of the policy — no cancellations unless the call is over ten minutes long and no cancellations without a call. That call was three minutes and forty-two seconds long, and the recording shows you didn't even try to retain the customer."

Marian paused, and Dex knew that he was expected to make some excuse here. He stayed mum and waited. Marian looked at him and shifted slightly while waiting for an answer, then, finally, after the silence had gone on too long, continued. "Yes, well, that was definitely not acceptable and then the very next morning, six minutes late for your shift." Marian shifted closer to the table between them, leaning in toward Dex. "Six minutes! You know that those are

both serious infractions. I don't understand. Up until now your work has always been in compliance with the standards — you've been one of my better employees. Do you have any explanation for this?"

Dex looked his supervisor straight in the eyes and said, "No. No excuses, no explanations. I did cancel the customer's account before the required call time and I was late yesterday. I accept responsibility."

Marian looked even more confused than when Dex was giving the silent treatment. Obviously, most people who got called on the carpet tried to weasel their way out of the consequences. Dex couldn't be bothered; this was all a waste of his time and he just wanted it over with.

"Well," Marian said, trying to gain control back, "the regulations are fairly clear that a combination of errors like these should result in dismissal."

"That's my understanding," Dex said, calmly. Dex thought it looked like Marian had stopped breathing. His boss's face had taken on a slightly purple tint, and Dex was wondering if he would have to call one of the in-house medical staff. Obviously his boss was not used to firing people who don't argue.

Marian eventually took a breath. "But, ah, under the circumstances," Dex tried not to smirk, "and given your excellent history with the firm, I think we can deal with the call only and let the six minutes go. You'll be required to make up the time, of course."

"Of course," Dex said, somehow managing to keep the building laugh out of his voice.

"Now, the call." Marian's face took on a stern look. "I can't let you get off

scot-free there. The rules are specific here; I'm sorry. My hands are tied. You'll be put on three-quarters time at three-quarters pay for six months." Marian waited for a gasp of shock or an attempt to negotiate, but all Dex could think was that this was ideal. He'd be keeping his apartment, and he just wouldn't have to go into B&B as often. He didn't care about the money, so the outcome couldn't have suited him better. He'd just have to figure out how to extend it beyond the six months. Time to bone up on the disciplinary regulations.

"Fine," Dex said, as he stood to leave. "Is that all?"

Marian stood as well, scrambling to understand Dex's reaction. "Yes, Andersson, that's all. Now, today I'll need you to make up the six minutes for yesterday, and as of tomorrow you'll have a new schedule. Make sure you check your messages before leaving tonight."

"Will do," Dex said, and deciding to throw his boss a bone, added, "thanks," as he walked out of the office.

Dex spent the remainder of the work day taking calls and chatting with Annabelle about the code that she'd taken off the bot that tried to shoot him. Dex put off contacting her, not knowing what her reaction would be after their terrible date, and frankly the thought of talking to her made his stomach knot a little. He eventually had to bite the bullet, though; he wasn't willing to have to slog through the code himself. Dex was no programmer — there was a reason why his day jobs topped out as a CSR.

He pinged Annabelle, and feeling his face flush hot when he heard her voice

said, "Hi. It's me. Er, it's Dex."

"Well, hello," Annabelle said, her voice taking on the happy tinkle Dex realized he'd come to enjoy when talking to her. "I have to admit, I'm a little surprised to hear from you."

"Yes, well," Dex said, glad that none of his near co-workers was looking his way.

"You haven't changed your mind already," Annabelle said, that tinkle getting even more playful now. Before Dex could stammer out some response, she continued, "Now, that was unfair of me, I know. I just can't help it. Old habits die hard, and all that. Now what can I do for you? It's about the multi case, right?"

Dex sighed, and admitted that it was, indeed, a business call. He reminded himself how lucky he was to have such an understanding person for an admirer. Once they started talking about the work, he found almost all traces of the awkwardness and embarrassment he'd felt disappear. Unfortunately, Annabelle hadn't really gotten anywhere terribly useful in her analysis of the code. She was now certain that there was no tracing the author of the code based on any information she had at the time. All she did have was the impression that the programmer was pretty sophisticated.

"That bot wasn't executed as elegantly as Ivy's code for the multis," she told Dex, "but the principle is the same, and that's not easy to do at all. Hell, there's a reason that Ivy was getting all the avatar work. It's a niche skill, let me tell you."

"So, I should be looking for a competitor of hers, then?" Dex asked.

"If there is one, yeah," Annabelle answered, "and you're definitely looking for someone with a similar skill set. But that's about all I've got for you. Sorry I couldn't help you out more."

"You've been great," Dex said, meaning it. "I don't know where I'd be without you."

"I'd be happier hearing that if you were actually with me," Annabelle said, then quickly said, "I'm sorry. I don't need a harassment charge laid against me. I'll knock it off."

Dex laughed. "Don't worry, kiddo," he said, "I could use a little harassment every now and again. Reminds me of what I'm missing."

"Aw jeez, Dex," Annabelle said, "now you've made me all depressed again."

"Don't be," he said, "I'm fine. You worry about finding yourself a better object of harassment than this pathetic old man, okay?"

"All right," Annabelle said, "you call me if you need me, yeah?"

"Sure thing."

Dex made up his six minutes and ensured he checked his updated schedule for the next day. They had him starting an hour and a half later, which couldn't have been more ideal if he'd made the change himself. He updated his personal system then and there — personal alarm, apartment temperature control and window shades all got moved ahead by ninety minutes. Dex started to wonder if his day could possibly get any better. He headed out of the CSRs room, and out of the B&B building.

The rain had stopped in the night and so far it had stayed away. He walked to the train stop and caught the first nearly empty car that came by. As he was en route back to his apartment, the sky began to darken and his stomach began to growl. It might be a two brick night he thought, mentally planning his evening. He wanted to talk to Stella Bish again, feel her out about some of the other people she knew in the underground marketplace. Maybe she had a line on another programmer in Ivy's league. Dex pinged her as he stepped off the train and headed to his building. He was just about to open the main door, when he heard the sounds of shouting around the corner. He pulled up the Cubicle Men's street squad schedule, and saw that he was the closest to the scene. Nothing wrong with a bit of off duty action, he thought, and began walking toward the sound.

He rounded the corner of his building, and heard the shouts again. He picked up the pace and came upon a small streeter cowering behind a dumpster. A pair of larger men were throwing rotting garbage on the whimpering creature, and occasionally kicking the prone form. Dex fell back on old lessons learned in the goon squad, and made directly for the larger of the two assailants. He kicked the man squarely between the legs, then brought his clasped hands up on the man's nose as he doubled over.

He sidestepped to avoid the man's inevitable fall into a crumpled heap, and threw his full weight into a roundhouse punch at the other man. This time the connection was less solid, but seeing his compadre retching in the gutter as blood and snot bubbled from his broken nose seemed to be enough to convince

the other guy to take off, which he did. Dex walked over to the stinking, beaten person behind the dumpster, offering his hand. The figure looked up at him, and Dex saw that it was an older looking woman. Most people never looked over thirty-five, regardless of their chronological age, so her lined face stood out.

She was sobbing, and muttering softly to herself. Dex had to lean in close to hear what she said, and the smell of her was enough to wake the dead. "They called me old meat," she said, between her tears, "old meat that belongs in the trash."

"It's okay," Dex said, helping her clean off the garbage from her filthy clothes. "You'll be okay now. Do you have a gang, anyone you stay with out here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, sniffing, "but we got separated. I think I can find them again." She wiped her eyes with the backs of her grimy sleeves, and allowed Dex to help her to her feet.

"I'll have some people come walk with you," Dex said, having already pinged the local goon squad. "They'll be here soon and they'll help you find your people."

"Thank you," she said, a new set of tears forming in her one clear eye.

"No problem, ma'am," he said, as a couple of the local squad arrived in the alley. Dex gave them a brief rundown of the situation, and the man lying in the alley began to moan. "They'll take care of you," he said, as the woman began walking out of the alley with her escort. Dex walked back to his apartment building, and as he spiraled his way up to his room, wondered if that's what his

problem was. That he was just old meat.

Chapter Fourteen

The shine had worn off the day, somehow. Dex hadn't thought that putting the beat down on a couple of public assholes would destroy his good feeling, and it probably wasn't actually that which had done it. It was the assholes themselves and what they had done to that poor woman that made Dex feel like shit. He never would understand what it was about some people that made them think that a good way of dealing with people who were different from them was to assault them.

Back in his apartment, Dex changed out of his now very dirty uniform, and poured a drink. His messenger was bleeping away, and he saw that it was Stella Bish responding to his question from earlier in the day. Dex went back and forth in his mind, finally shutting off the notification and going offline. He grabbed the bottle from the counter and gave it a long hard look. After a few moments, he

shook his head, then drained his drink and refilled the glass. He took the glass and bottle to his chair, and pulled up an old video.

The drinking started before they had even finished packing Maksym's stuff in the crate. Dex started watching at the point when he'd opened the bottle. He saw his younger self pour a couple of large glasses and top them off with splashes of real ginger beer. It was an expensive luxury he'd indulged in as a celebration. He saw his hand tremble slightly as it recapped the bottle.

He handed a glass to Maks, who took it with a wide smile. Dex could see three tiny wrinkles around each eye when he smiled. He wondered now if Maks ever had them removed. He watched them work together packing the crate with Maksym's stuff. "I guess I won't need much of this stuff," Maks said, putting his few clothes into the crate. "They give you a uniform, and they're actually not that bad looking." Dex hadn't answered. Maks sat on his bed, looking up at Dex, who was holding a jacket. "It will be fine, Andy," he said, "you'll see. The work is interesting enough, and they'll give you your own apartment. No more waiting for the lav, no more labeling your food bricks, no more scrounging for funds."

"I guess," Dex had mumbled, turning away from Maks. Now, in the viewer, he saw the wall of Maksym's room, the wall that had divided their small apartment. His own bed had been on the other side of the thin metal partition. Maks had painted a mural on his side, an abstract of reds and yellows, all circles and triangles. "You should take this," Dex had said, pointing at the divider. "Put it in your new place."

"Yeah," Maks agreed. "It would look nice." Dex saw his own chest heave on

the video as he had breathed in deep. He saw himself turn and put the jacket softly in the crate. He focussed on Maks, raised his glass and said, "Let's put on some tunes." Maks smiled, and stood. They walked the few paces into the shared area, and Maks poked at the interface for the speakers. Music came thundering out, and Dex closed his eyes, just as he had at the time. He let the song wash over him; with it came the feelings he'd had then, the feelings he'd never lost.

They were going to be different. Together they had thought they could avoid the mundane life everyone else ended up with. They had made out okay on part time or under the radar jobs. They found someone who would rent them a place for cash money, they had enough for food and cheap booze, and they had music. When they had first met on one of the boards where people talked tunes, they'd hit it off immediately. And when they discovered that they actually lived in the same city, it was like fireworks. For a year they lived together, making and playing music, staying up all night talking and listening, as if it were hundreds of years ago when art mattered. They could have lived that way forever. At least, Dex thought they could.

But Maks started to get restless, started talking about getting a real job, with a firm, with benefits. It didn't happen overnight, and by the time he actually moved out he had even convinced Dex that it was the right thing to do; that things didn't have to really change just because they'd have more money and separate apartments. But that night, the night he left, Dex knew it was the end. He'd been recording some of their times together — just an hour at a time, but

that day got his first disk upgrade and that night he set up his first full time recording.

He stopped the vid, and drained his drink. He sat in silence for a few minutes, then got up, used the lav, poured another drink and sat back in the chair.

Dex sat at his work station at B&B, fingers dancing in front of him as he negotiated the various labyrinths within the B&B system. His own system, though, was going through Stella Bish's message of the previous night. She hadn't been entirely forthcoming — there were no names or links to be found in the message. She had, however, agreed that there were a few people she could recommend for work that was comparable to Reuben's. She was having to scramble to get some of the contracts she'd lined up for Reuben fulfilled elsewhere, but there were a few comparable programmers in her stable, so it was just a matter of time. It wasn't gold, but her information was better than nothing.

Dex decided to do some poking around on his own. He wanted to know just how plugged in to the underground economy Bish was. He started where Ivy had also begun, with Alvaro Zuccarelli. He linked into Marionette City and headed straight for Zuccarelli's offices. No appointment this time. When he walked into the inner office, Zuccarelli looked up as if he were expecting Dex. The guy seemed to be unflappable, but it could just be the avatar's programming.

"I need your advice," Dex said, not waiting for an invitation to sit.

"Of course," Zuccarelli said, gesturing for Dex to continue.

"If I needed some work done," he said, "you know, on the QT, where should I start looking?"

"Well, now, that depends on exactly what kind of work you'd want done, doesn't it."

"Let's start with the kind of work Reuben did."

Zuccarelli looked at Dex suspiciously. "I suppose that suggesting you get Ivy to do it isn't quite the answer you're looking for."

"Correct," Dex said.

"Well," Zuccarelli said, "the main clearinghouse for underground programming is a woman named Stella Bish. I'm surprised you haven't heard of her — I'm fairly certain that Mr. Cobalt had some kind of contract with her."

"You never mentioned that before," Dex said, his eyes narrowing.

"Indeed, not," Zuccarelli replied. "Like I said, I'm not sure. Mr. Cobalt and I didn't discuss his personal business, Mr. Dexter. However, very little off the books work gets done without Ms. Bish in the middle of it."

"Did she negotiate your deal with Ivy?" Dex asked, indicating the building in which they found themselves.

"No," Zuccarelli said. "That was a private arrangement. But, of course, I already knew of Ivy's work. Ms. Bish offers a guarantee to clients that is hard to pass up."

"What do you know about her?" Dex asked.

"I know that she is not one of my clients," Zuccarelli said, haughtily, "so I am much less disinclined to discuss her with you than I might have been otherwise." All of a sudden, Dex had the frightening thought that Zuccarelli was not actually trying to be difficult, that it was just the man's nature to be obstinate. "No one seems to know what her background is. She doesn't seem to have any useful skills — she's not a graphics person or a programmer. However, she appears to have been active in Marionette City from the beginning, and she's always been using it to line her pockets." Zuccarelli sniffed disdainfully.

Dex raised an eyebrow, and Zuccarelli seemed to instantly pick up his meaning. "Yes, I know," he said, voice heavy with irony, "coming from a glorified loan shark, that seems rich, right?" Dex kept quiet, and Zuccarelli continued. "First, I'm not as much a slave to lucre as you might think, and second, most of us who've been here for a while remember when there was a lot of community in M City. We used to help each other, discuss things; it was like this was an escape from the world of business, not an extension of it. She was never like that. It was always a business opportunity for her, right from day one.

"In a way, we all owe her a debt. She was the business pioneer here, and she paved the way for the rest of us. The trouble is, if you do any high end work, it's a one horse town. Either you contract with Bish, or you're scrounging for the scraps she leaves behind. And she's not proud — it has to be a really bad job for her to turn it down."

"So anyone with any skills will be working for Bish?" Dex asked.

"Yes and no," Zuccarelli answered. "She likes to play both sides against the

middle, so there are plenty of people queued up to get into her stable. She only keeps a few names on her radar at a time, and it's worth a good amount to be one of them."

Dex thought for a moment. "So, Reuben's death has left a void on her list, then. One that more than a few people might want to fill."

"My god," Zuccarelli said, "you don't think someone killed him for his job, do you?"

"I don't think anything," Dex said, "but can you tell me some other reason someone might want him dead?"

Dex linked out of Marionette City, and was pleased to discover that his B&B workday was done and he still had a good amount of day left. He resolved to commit minor infractions on the job more regularly. He caught the train back to his apartment and once he arrived he spent a good hour on the programmer's boards. The vast majority of the posts went whizzing past Dex's head with a small sonic boom, but clever use of the find function netted a handful of posts about acquiring independent employment. Stella Bish's name was abundant.

It looked like Zuccarelli had been on top of the situation — if you weren't on Team Bish, it was nigh unto impossible get work as an independent. And the wait list to get on with Bish was longer than seemed really reasonable. He could imagine how someone who was desperate might see how the strategic placement of malicious code might help them get ahead. He scraped the boards for any posts relating to independent contracting, and started a script to scan

them for names, contact numbers, anything that might be useful. In the meantime he linked back into Marionette City, and headed for Uri Farone's upgrade parlour.

Dex told himself that he was on the clock, and that his only reason for visiting Farone was that he was a connection to Bish. He intended to pose as a potential customer and try and get Farone talking. He wasn't really going to buy anything. Not today, anyway.

Farone's kiosk was in a highly industrial area of Marionette City – it was all virtual clothes and online services for as far as the eye could see. Dex found Software Memory Upgrades sandwiched between a virtual penis enhancement place and an alibi services outfit. As if that didn't tell you everything you needed to know about the world. According to the schedule posted on his board, Farone himself should be staffing the booth. Dex entered the small room and looked around.

The space was small, with just enough room for a couple of clients on the public side of the place and a single staffer on the back end. The wall space was covered with images that a client could touch and get links to audio or video files showing the heartwarming stories of satisfied customers. There was the man who was pained by memories of an error on the job that cost him a promotion. Farone's people excised the memory, and now the guy's supposedly happy and successful at work, no longer paralyzed by the fear of making the same mistake. Or the woman who changed the fifty-year old memory of her sister's last days before a fatal accident to include the words "good-bye". All

very innocuous and nice and the kind of thing you'd find on a greeting card. Dex wondered just how many upgraded memories were really this innocent.

The avatar behind the counter looked up as Dex moved around the space touching things and consuming the ads. Once Dex had exhausted the promotional material on display, the counterman smiled and opened a private chat channel between them. The name icon on the chat pane indicated that this was, indeed, Uri Farone. "Interested?" he asked.

"Could be," Dex said, wandering over to the counter. "It looks impressive," he said, jerking his head toward the nearest promo link. "How does it work, exactly?"

"Well," Farone said, "if I told you that I'd be giving you the keys to the castle, now wouldn't I?" He smiled disarmingly, and Dex returned the grin without feeling. "But what you need to know is this — we start by altering any media records you have of the event — audio, video, text. Then you come in for personal treatment, which uses a combination of hypnosis, programming and sleep therapy. We can provide references, if you'd like to hear personal experiences of the after effects."

"Sounds intriguing," Dex said, his system receiving the file of contact names that the other man offered. "What's the catch?"

The man across the counter smiled his salesman's grin again. "Well, there are some particular issues with this type of service," he said. "First, there isn't really any way to reverse it. Not because we can't do it, but because you can't, in any true sense, ask us to."

"Why not?" Dex asked.

"When you sign up for the service," Farone said, "we require a very detailed request order for what you want. We need to be clear down to the smallest detail what we are to remove and what we are to add. This is for liability concerns, obviously, but it also is in the client's best interest. It forces you to be sure about what you want, and what you expect. Clearly, if you have no memory of what you want us to restore, you can't give us clear instructions to restore it."

"Hmfph," Dex grunted. "That sounds like an overly complex way of saying you just don't want to do it."

"Maybe," the man said, "but you really don't know what you're consenting to. You say, 'I don't like this new memory, make it the way it used to be,' but you no longer even know what it was. We used to allow reversals, but too many people ended up even more unhappy, and there are only so many times you can go back and forth with the same customer and the same memory. So, now our contract requires you to trust yourself, to believe that you really want to change your past."

"Okay," Dex said, "I can buy that. What about time frames? Is this a five minute, in and out job, or would I need to book holiday time to get it done?"

"That depends. An erasure takes about a day — we can do a full replacement in a weekend, no problem. If you're just looking for some detail changes, it can range from a half hour to a half day. And there's some prep work as well, so you'd have to budget for a few shorter meetings in advance of the final treatment."

"I see," Dex said. "Well, that brings me to the big question. Cost. If I wanted, say, a removal, what would that run me?"

The proprietor quoted a price, and Dex whistled low. "But, of course, you can't put a price on your past, now can you?" Farone said. "Memories are priceless, after all."

"Apparently not," Dex said aloud in his room. To Farone he said, "So you're the man in charge here, right?"

Farone seemed a bit taken aback, but answered, "Yes. It's my shop."

"I thought so," Dex said. "Stella Bish gave me your name. And I'm kind of surprised, because I thought she just dealt with contractors." Dex indicated the kiosk with his avatar's gestures. "You seem to be pretty independent here."

"Ah," Farone said, sighing. "You must be the detective."

"Guilty," Dex said.