

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 Nine

Dex ordered a drink, and for a change got it with the neural stimulator response active. It cost more than just drinking the real booze he had sitting in front of him at home, but Dex wasn't prepared to divide his attention between this conversation and his physical surroundings, and he needed a drink to go with this chat. "Goddamn it, Shiraishi, were you planning on getting around to talking to me anytime soon?" Dex was trying to keep his voice level.

"I didn't know, man," Shiraishi answered, bringing his own pint of lager to his lips. "I don't usually read the Ds files, and it didn't come up at squad. At least, no one mentioned his name. I really didn't know until TK told me."

"Shit," Dex said, sighing. "Well, you're here now. Spill it, Jay. How well did you know the vic?"

"He did my avatar for me," Shiraishi said. "The other one, I mean. I knew

him to say hello to. I've seen him around the compound — that's what they call the joint where we just were. Other than that, nothing. We weren't buddies or anything like that. Besides, he's busy with the avatars and I'm busy with Security. There wasn't a whole lot of socializing for either of us at TK's events."

"Fine." Dex tipped his glass back, and felt the unfamiliar rush of simulated drunkenness mixing with the real thing. "What can you tell me, then?"

"How much experience have you had with multitis?" Shiraishi asked, sipping his own drink. Dex refilled his glass, but had the invisible bartender hold the effects this time.

"Honestly, not a lot," he answered. "As far as I know, this is my first case. I mean, I know there are multitis out there, and I've never given a good god damn one way or another about it, but that's where it starts and ends."

"Fair enough," Shiraishi said. "It's a complicated thing. On the one hand, there's a long history of people having multiple identities. Back before the everywhere-net, most people did, whether they wanted to or not. It was so common that there were entire businesses built out of helping people consolidate all their identities into a cohesive unit. Of course, once the firms got together and made the everywhere-net happen, everyone had to pick a single identity and stick with it if they wanted access. And once online access became integrated with personal systems, that identity was pretty much chosen for you."

"But people still have separate identities for boards, games, sex, the usual stuff."

"Sure," Shiraishi agreed, "but those are really just pseudonyms. If push

comes to shove, the everywhere net knows it's you."

Dex thought for a moment. "Which means that anyone can figure out who that hot little number is," he cocked his head toward an obvious prostitute on one of the bar stools, "if they really want to bad enough."

"Exactly," Shiraishi said. "And, of course, there are the logs. We all know that logs are kept of all our activities somewhere in the bowels of everywhere net's data storage, and we all know they're erased after a couple of weeks. But they're there, so there's no way to really ever hide what you do. If you do something bad enough, and someone with money or pull cares enough, soon enough, you'll get caught. It's that simple. So a true multi, an identity like kind that Reuben helped people create, it's what everyone fears and desires. Real anonymity. The chance to hide or the chance to change yourself." He sat back in his chair, and lifted his glass in a toast. "Freedom."

"Okay, so there's more to multiple identities that meets the eye," Dex said, "I can accept that. But what's up with all the Security? Is it really that dangerous, and if it is, how come there aren't stories like Reuben's all the time?"

"Well, I'll admit there's a healthy dose of paranoia within the community," Shiraishi said, "but that's partly because there really are admins whose job it is to hunt down and eliminate mults in a firm's internal system..."

"That's different," Dex broke in, "they're protecting the integrity of their system. Not the same thing at all."

"Fine," Shiraishi said, "but what's to stop those same firms from getting those same admins to do that same job on the public everywhere net?"

"Oh for chrissakes, Shiraishi," Dex said, putting his glass down on the table hard, "you've been eating your own dog food so long you think it's filet mignon. Just because they could do that, it doesn't mean they would. I mean, hell's bells, the firms can barely get together enough to run the everywherenet, you really think they're going to donate resources to fund a manhunt for multitis? Please."

"Do you really think it's that unlikely?" Shiraishi said, sounding a little put out. "The firms made damn sure that the everywherenet knows exactly who's doing what and where. And it's not just online activity, either." He looked at Dex knowingly.

"Okay," Dex said, "we know the logs show both online and physical activity. So?"

"So they want the info, man," Shiraishi said, exasperated. "If they want it, they're going to want it for everyone. And that means no one slipping through the cracks. No multitis."

"I don't know," Dex said. "That's pretty weak."

"You don't have to believe it," Shiraishi said, "but you asked and I'm telling you. And there definitely are individuals who are hunting down multitis, whether they're on a clock or not."

"What do you mean?"

"People get harassed, and people get deleted. Usually it's not multitis who are so far into the scene that they have avatars, but yeah, people do just disappear."

"Are we talking technical erasure," Dex asked, "or old fashioned intimidation?"

"It's a bit of both," Shiraishi said, "usually intimidation. There are a few renegade admin types who troll the boards looking for multis, crack the authentication and delete the accounts. Nothing we can even do about that, except help people revive the identity. Also, they usually have to go board by board to do that — it's more of a nuisance than anything. To be fair, working Security for the compound the major concern is anonymity for the firsts, and keeping the looky-lous out."

"Ever investigated a murder?" Dex asked, flat out.

"No," Shiraishi answered, meeting his old comrade's gaze. "Though we'd likely never have known about it anyway. When people disappear, that's the point. They're gone."

Dex paused. He pulled up the image of Reuben that Ivy had sent him and sent it to Shiraishi. "This one didn't disappear." Dex watched as Shiraishi's avatar's face stopped changing. He wondered what the man's true reaction was to the image.

When he finally spoke, Shiraishi's voice was soft. "Fuck, Dex, what did they do to him?"

"Reprogrammed him into a loop. His, whatever you call it, first, didn't even know it was happening."

"Whoa," Shiraishi said, "this is some heavy shit. If we've got a multi-hating programmer on the loose with these kind of skills... I'd better warn TK." Shiraishi

made to get up, but Dex put out a hand to stop the man.

"Slow down, big fella," Dex said. "As far as we know, this is a one-off. There's no indication that this is an anti-multi crime. Odds are it's a personal thing; murder usually is. Don't go off all half-cocked and scare the crap out of your little community." Shiraishi sat back down, and rubbed his face with his hands.

"But what if there is some sick fuck out there with a hard-on for mults and a bag of evil code? What if this happens to someone else?" It was a good question, one Dex couldn't really answer.

"I don't know," Dex conceded, "but what good is scaring everyone going to do? We don't know who it is, or how the reprogramming happened. We don't even have any leads to tell people to watch out for this or for that. All we have is something to fear, just problems without solutions. And what's the point of that?"

The men were quiet, the sounds of the bar's music playing over each one's thoughts. Shiraishi stood and broke the silence. "I'll give you two days. If you can't give me a reason not to by then, I'm posting this to the community. Image and all." He linked out of the bar without another word, and Dex shook his head.

The last thing he needed was Shiraishi running around giving all the mults on the nets nightmares. Even if there were a serial multi killer out there, which Dex had no reason to believe, all a full scale panic would do is tip that person off to who the mults were. It was a dumb, rookie move, but Dex understood. They were his people. He was one of them, they were his community and he wanted

to protect them. Dex understood, but he didn't share those feelings. After all, he had no one to protect.

He linked out of Marionette City and looked around his tiny apartment. The kind of real world jobs he took, this was the best sort of thing he could expect. Of course, with his Cubicle Men salary, he could have afforded a private place, but why bother. He didn't need any more space; he didn't have any things to put in it. He spent his extra money on disk upgrades, music files, and once in a while on something with a little more class than Jamaica's Best.

He hit the lav and drank some water, trying to get the non-taste of virtual booze out of his mouth. He doused the lights with a thought and took a swig of SleepingJuice. His last thought was extinguished before it could even be fully formed.

Chapter Ten

After his typical gulp of Flying Fish, five minutes in the lav, dressed and out the door routine, Dex fired up his system on the train ride in to B&B and sent off a message to Alvaro Zuccarelli. No more Mr. Nice Guy, it was time to start getting answers. By the time he was getting his first mug of coffee flavoured sludge, he had a meeting set up in Marionette City with Zuccarelli. The banker held offices there, and Dex had been forced to make an appointment. Fine, they could play it Zuccarelli's way; Dex didn't mind so long as he got what he wanted out of the man.

He was part way through the third call of the morning when his internal system interrupted with an emergency message. He put the B&B customer on hold and checked it out. Someone was calling him on the emergency channel, sending nothing but a link to Marionette City. The Cubicle Men's emergency

system had access to that channel, as well as the automated everywhere net channel for disaster warnings or public health scares, but that was it. He had never had this happen before, so he just went straight in to see what was going on. As the linked area was materializing around him, he could see a humanoid form already there, waiting.

It took a couple of seconds to fully log into Marionette City, which was good news for Dex. He was just beginning to make out the form in the blocky world forming in his vision, when he saw what appeared to be a small explosion emanating from the middle of the shape in front of him. His instincts from his years in the goon squad kicked in and he had aborted the login. As he was killing the process, he sent an urgent message to Annabelle. She responded immediately by voice.

"What's up Dex?" she said, a hint of surprise in her voice. "Is this business or pleasure?"

Dex couldn't be bothered with the niceties. "I think someone is trying to kill me," he said, "in Marionette City."

"What?" she asked incredulously, and Dex briefly explained what he'd seen in the second or so before he killed the login procedure.

"I'm going in," Annabelle said, "send me a link." Dex did as she asked, then asked her to send him real time visuals of what she saw. She agreed, and linked in to his last position.

She logged in and Dex saw the same images he'd seen just seconds before, only without the other form nearby. Annabelle turned on her heads up

display, looking for nearby activity — there were a few avatars hanging out in that location, but nothing stood out as strange. "Damn it!" Dex said, "He's gone."

"Not so fast, mister," Annabelle said, bringing up an unfamiliar screen on her display. "I've got a few tricks up my sleeve, you know." She entered some commands, and the world around her seemed to shimmer. "And they say time travel is impossible," she said, as Dex saw the space around him change.

"What the hell?"

"I've got a backdoor patch into the master log," Annabelle said. "We can't change anything, but we can see what happened. So, let's go back, say, two minutes?"

"Sounds about right," Dex said, amazed. His viewer looked like it was showing a vid running in reverse, avatars coming and going, and at one point he saw the flash. "There it is," he said.

"Let's go back a bit further and see what we get," Annabelle said as the images continued to run back. The shape Dex saw when the explosion happened left the area and Annabelle stopped the rewind. Dex saw an avatar enter the area, dressed in the most basic outfit available, the default avatar when someone first activates an account in Marionette City. It was blank looking in every way, performing no gestures of any kind, the face and body entirely neutral. The only thing about it that differentiated it from a completely newborn avatar was that it was holding something. Something that looked like a handgun.

Dex saw himself beginning to materialize, and the avatar lifted the weapon, aiming it at a badly pixellated version of Dex's avatar. He saw the gun fire, and saw his own avatar link out of Marionette City at the same time. The gunman stood still for a moment, continuing to aim the weapon, then disappeared.

"Any idea who that was?" Dex asked. "Or what he was trying to do?"

Annabelle was quiet for a while, as text and images scrolled over her display. "I think I'm getting something," she said. "Hang on, I have to link out. I'll call you back in a sec."

The images in front of Dex's vision disappeared, and he noticed the blinking light in his peripheral vision, indicating that he had a B&B client still on hold. He quickly reviewed the recorded client call, refreshing his memory. The poor sap was trying to cancel his support account, and Dex was following the company line of trying to keep the customer on the books as long as possible. Fuck it, he didn't have time for this. Dex picked up the call and before the customer could start screaming at him, he nicely said, "There we go, your account is canceled and a refund for the last month is on its way. Thank you for choosing Barrett and Brar," and he ended the call. A few finger waves and everything he had said became true. He'd catch hell for it at the monthly meeting, but he had bigger fish to fry.

Annabelle had been pinging him as he was finishing the B&B call, and he answered her as soon as he could. "Bad news, Dex," she said. "It was a bot."

"A bot?"

"Yeah," she sighed, "a script someone wrote up to create a throwaway

avatar who was trying to infect your account with a virus."

"What?" Dex asked, perplexed. "What the hell is that supposed to do? Everlock would just kill it before it even got in. Who cares?"

Everlock was the pervasive anti-malware program that filled everywherenet and made it safe to plug the implanted human/silicon hybrid computer system everyone used straight into the public nets. Annabelle explained. "Everlock will kill the virus, sure, and you'd be just fine. But as a consequence of it finding the virus, you'd be locked out of Marionette City for a while. Maybe even a day or more, while Everlock pulled out the destructive code."

"So the bot wasn't actually trying to kill me," Dex said, "just slow me down."

"Looks that way," Annabelle said. "Though there's a few interesting things in here. You didn't actually get a full hit of the virus, so you're good to go. I did manage to get it all copied to my own system, and I'm reading the source now. It looks like your friendly neighbourhood killbot is lazy."

"What do you mean?"

"It looks like he just recycled the code he'd used before," she said, "I'm pretty sure this is the code that did the number on your vic."

"What the fuck?" Dex said, his jaw open.

"Well, I've been thinking about this one," Annabelle said, "I, ah, took the liberty of downloading your case file and reading it over. Hope you don't mind."

"That's fine," Dex said, impatiently, "that's what it's for. What do you think?"

"Well, your vic was a lot like this bot — just a virtual construction within Marionette City, built to emulate an individual login, but separate. It's

complicated to do, certainly more complicated for your vic than the bot, but it's just code in the end. What makes Everlock work is that we're not just code.

There are built in protections in the interface between the wetware and the silicon, hardware protections. You'd never notice it, but there's a very slight lag between anything passing the barrier between the hardware and wetware, and that's where Everlock does its magic. But for a construct that's pure code, that barrier doesn't exist. They're still vulnerable to malware, and that's what this is."

"So you're saying that Reuben was killed by a virus?"

"Well, technically, no," Annabelle said. "There's no indication here that the code is designed to self-replicate. But it was foreign malware introduced into the system." She added, coldly, "And, of course, you can't kill something that's not real."

Dex ignored her last comment. "And what would it have done to me if I had been infected?" Dex asked.

"Actually, this is the interesting thing," Annabelle said, warming up to the subject again, "it actually wouldn't have done anything. It would have just failed to run. The bot really wasn't intended to hurt you, assuming its writer knew anything about the code it was deploying. All it would do is trigger the Everlock login freeze."

Dex leaned back in his chair and thought. "Can you trace the bot?" he asked. "See who wrote it, who's controlling it?"

"Dunno," Annabelle said, "I can try." She paused. "But it'll cost you."

"What," Dex said, annoyed, "what do you mean?"

"Dinner," she said. "Take me out to dinner tonight, and I'll see what I can find for you."

"I... but..." Dex sputtered.

"Good," Annabelle said. "I'll make a reservation and send you the link. Til tonight, then." She ended the call, and Dex sighed. People, he thought. Can't live with 'em.

Dex had to scramble to keep his appointment with Zuccarelli. He linked in to Marionette City directly to the building where the banker kept his offices. Dex checked the directory and found the rooms where he was to meet Zuccarelli. He walked through the construct, wondering how much effort it had taken to reproduce a historical four storey brick walk up, and why anyone would bother. He climbed the stairs for two floors, and halfway down the hall came to a door with Zuccarelli's name stencilled on the faux glass.

Dex knocked, and the door opened. Alvaro Zuccarelli was seated behind an enormous slate desk with nothing on it, not moving, seeming to stare off into space. It was a disconcerting image, but Dex simply walked up to the desk, put his palms flat on its surface and leaned in toward the other man.

"Enough bullshit," he said, looking Zuccarelli in the eyes. "I have had a very bad couple of hours, and you do not want to make me an enemy today. Reuben Cobalt. Tell me everything you know."

Zuccarelli smiled, as if he were accustomed to being threatened. "I'm sure a man in your position can appreciate the value of discretion, Mr. Dexter. My

clients do expect certain... additional benefits with their accounts here."

"Can it with the sales pitch," Dex said, sitting in the chair opposite the desk.

"I'm not in the market. Reuben Cobalt is dead."

"What?" Zuccarelli's smile disappeared. "How is that possible?"

"It appears that he was murdered," Dex answered, coldly.

"Murdered?" Zuccarelli looked genuinely shocked, but a man of his means would have an avatar that could fake anything. "Poor Ivy," he said, softly.

"Do you know what her connection to Reuben Cobalt was?" Dex asked.

Zuccarelli looked at Dex in the eye. "She never made that clear to me, and it was not my place to ask. One needs to be open minded in my business, Mr. Dexter."

"Fine," Dex said. "Then open your mind about Reuben Cobalt, and tell me everything you know."

"Very well," Zuccarelli said. "I was Reuben Cobalt's banker. That's all. It wasn't even a terribly interesting account. At first it was just small transfers in from Ivy's account, but then Reuben started to get work of his own and I was more involved. What do you want — copies of his records?"

"Yes," Dex said, "that would be a good start."

"Fine," Zuccarelli sighed, and pinged Dex's system. He accepted the download and a small spreadsheet appeared in his inbox. "What else?"

"What else have you got?" Dex asked, reminded of his old goon squad days. Sometimes it was fun to intimidate the witnesses.

"Nothing, really," Zuccarelli said. "I didn't know him well, and honestly I have

a program that handles most of the day to day affairs."

Dex was scanning through Reuben's records, and whistled under his voice when he saw the final account balance. "He had a tidy bundle in here," Dex said, "even after your usurious take." Zuccarelli sniffed. "So, what's going to happen to it?"

"Given the situation," Zuccarelli said, "I'll be transferring it to Ivy's account. Seems appropriate."

"Indeed," Dex agreed. "So," he said, switching tacks, "how do you know Ivy?"

Zuccarelli hesitated, as if deciding whether a lie would be preferable to the truth. He seemed to get a resigned look on his face, and Dex figured that he'd be getting at least some version of the truth. "She built this place for me," he gestured at the space around him.

"The room, or..."

"No, the building," Zuccarelli said. "I own the whole thing."

"I see," Dex said, "you hired her firm?"

"No," Zuccarelli said, "she was moonlighting for me. Through... my other life I became aware of her work at her firm. I think it was her first time as an independent — I paid her with cash and my services. She still has a small account with me. Now that Reuben is gone... well, I suppose I'll see more of her now."

"Guess so," Dex said. He stood, and thanked Zuccarelli for his time. "I might very well be back," he said, before leaving. "And if you think of anything

that might be useful..."

"I'll be in touch, of course," Zuccarelli said, and Dex linked out of the man's office. He had to go put on his date tie.