

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. 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

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Seventeen

"What do you mean, 'vanished'?" Dex asked, incredulous. "People don't just disappear. Hell, even Reuben didn't disappear when he got killed. How can someone disappear?" His voice had risen about an octave from the beginning of the sentence to the end. With a great effort he tried to get himself together. "That's the thing about everywherenet — you're on all the time. It's.... fucking... everywhere. That's the point."

"Dex, calm down," Annabelle said. "People disappear off the nets all the time. They die, or they go offline. It's not that unusual."

"Then how come I've never heard of it before?"

"Well," Annabelle said, "ever had a missing persons case?"

"No."

"And have you ever looked for a dead person online."

"Uh, no."

"There you go then," she said, matter of factly. "It's perfectly normal, it just doesn't come up that often."

"Okay, fine." Dex said, "So, you're saying that Ljungberg is dead."

"Or offline."

"What do you mean, offline?"

"You know, offline," she said, starting to sound a bit frustrated. "Not online. Unconnected to the nets. Not controlled by or directly connected to a computer or external network."

"I know what the word means," Dex said, with a slight petulant whine. "I just don't see how a person would do that. How would you do anything? You can't go anywhere, buy anything — could you even get into your apartment?"

"Yeah, you could do that," Annabelle said. "Actually you'd be surprised at how much you can actually do offline. A lot more stuff is controlled by that chip in your hand than you'd think. The nets are really only for communication and banking, and most rudimentary financial transactions, like paying train fare, are actually covered by the chip."

"Huh," Dex grunted. "So, Ljungberg could be offline, and busy doing stuff out there in the physical world?"

"Could be," she agreed, "and probably is."

"Can you tell if he's alive or not?"

"It's not conclusive," she said, "but when people are online when they die, there's this really interesting data pattern they sort of expel into the network at

the moment of death. It's pretty cool, and no one seems to know what it is. But there's none of that recorded for Ljungberg."

"So if he is dead," Dex said, "he was already offline when it happened." Dex thought for a moment. "Any way we can track him, now?"

"I was waiting for you to ask that," she said, glee evident in her voice. "Deep in the everywhere net is the control program that monitors everyone's ID chips. That's what lets us use the same chip to get into work, home, the train, whatever. Now, it's covered in a lot of layers of security, but I've been looking for an excuse to drill into that system for a while now. If I can get in there, I think I'll be able to see where Ljungberg is. Or at least where he's recently been, assuming he hasn't chopped off his hand or gone off to the middle of the ocean on a rickety old raft or something."

"Good," Dex said. "Now, don't let me keep you from this exciting break and enter job of yours." He could almost hear her grin.

"I'll keep you posted," she said, and ended the call.

Dex refocused on the physical world, stood and stretched and shook his head. He visited the lav and checked the time. Even with the extra ninety minutes of sleep in the morning, it was getting late. He thought he ought to take a slug of Sleeping Juice and call it a night. He was wired, though, and even though the soporific tonic would knock him out no matter what, he just didn't feel like sleeping yet.

He pulled up the recording he'd made of his conversation with Annabelle.

He ran it back to the beginning, before the talk took its turn toward the intimate and disturbing. He listened as they talked about their work, sharing war tales and banter. Dex was surprised to hear his voice have that easy sound, like the conversation was comfortable, like it had been back with Maks.

But then he closed his eyes, listening to her voice tell some funny story about a doomed project at her day job, and he tried to picture her. All he could see was her inhuman avatar, sickeningly morphing into different images in an attempt to please him. He opened his eyes, and forced himself to picture something else. How could he explain how much that was the opposite of attractive to him, how he didn't care what she looked like, so long as she was real?

He stopped the audio, and poured another, though slightly smaller, glass of rum and ginger. He opened up his private files, and searched for just the right video. The one from when he first started recoding. When he and Maks were out riding the trains with nowhere to go, high on youth and some drug Dex couldn't even name now. Maks was making an ass of himself, making faces and trying to be funny, trying to get Dex to laugh and "ruin the shot."

There it was — a couple of hours in — the part Dex wanted to see, to remember. On a train going through an outlying part of town, no one else aboard, the two of them wrestling over the last bite of a food brick. Laughing and grabbing at each other, falling over each other from the movement of the train and drug induced lack of coordination, their faces glowing with sweat and pure animal pleasure at movement of muscle. Dex felt his throat tighten, and he

closed his eyes. He wondered which would be worse, never knowing happiness, or this. The remembering. And he wondered if he ever would have the courage to erase the memories, to start a new life, a life without the burden of the past.

The next morning, Dex found a message from Annabelle waiting for him when he was on the train. Judging from the time stamp, she'd been up almost all night cracking in to the ID chip tracker. The good news was that Ljungberg wasn't dead, unless someone had hacked off his hand and was carrying it all over Guadalajara. The bad news was that he was still offline, and there was no way to contact him, except physically tracking him down and going to talk to him embodied.

When Dex got to his station at B&B, he pinged Annabelle. He figured she'd be dodging morons at her day job, but he got back an automated reply. She'd set her system to send him a specific message if he called, which told him that she was on weekend, and was sleeping in. She asked him to message her and said that she'd call him once she woke up. He sent the message and got to work dealing with B&B customers. While he was talking people into extended warranties they didn't need and helping others find the power switch on their new toys, Dex pulled up the intercities train schedules.

The timing was reasonably good, since he'd be on weekend himself the next day. Usually Dex's weekends were either lost in a bottle and a stack of videos on loop or he threw himself bodily into whatever case he was on. This weekend would be an extreme example of the latter. It was a long train trip to

Guadalajara, but there was an overnight shuttle and he booked himself on the one leaving that night. He'd have up to three days to find Ljungberg, and he didn't know if it was enough time but there wasn't really any other option.

He pinged Ivy. "Is it okay if we just text?" she asked. "I'm out with Renna at a club and I might need to talk there."

"If this isn't a good time to talk, you could just call me back." Dex asked.

"No, it's okay," Ivy answered. "Renna's dancing right now, so we've got a few minutes at least. Any news?"

"Maybe," he answered. "I have to do some physical traveling to follow up a lead. I needed to let you know that there will be some additional expenses associated with the trip."

"That's fine," she said. "Do you need me to add funds to the escrow account?" Dex quickly brought up the figures and saw that the account was still quite healthy.

"That won't be necessary," he answered. "I just needed your authorization to accrue the expenses."

"Consider this a blanket authorization," she said, "to do whatever needs to be done. I'm not concerned about the cost, only about the result."

"Very well," Dex said. "I'll contact you if I learn anything useful."

"Thank you," she said, and signed out.

Dex booked his train fare, and made a quick list of things he'd need to pack. He pinged Annabelle again, but just got the response she'd set for him again. He hoped he'd get to talk to her before he left. Dex had never gone

looking for a missing person before and he wasn't sure if he'd need some kind of special tools or something. He felt very much out of his element, but it was a surprisingly good feeling. This case had been strongly lacking in leads up until now, and Dex could almost feel the answer coming to meet him.

This was it, the moment he had talked to Annabelle about. He had poked here and there, asking inane questions of people with no information long enough to finally get a tiny thread. A thread he could grab on to and pull until the whole fabric of this puzzle came apart in his hands. This was his favourite moment, the one that made all the rest of it worthwhile. It even made talking to moronic B&B customers seem less horrible than usual.

The rest of his workday passed by quickly, Dex spending the majority of his thought power on collecting information about Guadalajara — maps, names and contacts for inns and lodges, a schedule for the local transportation. By the time he clocked out of B&B, he was armed with enough travel information to spend a two week holiday there. He caught the train back to his apartment, knowing he had only about an hour to pack before he needed to catch the local train to the intercity station.

Just as Dex was getting off the train and starting to walk to his building, his system pinged. It was Annabelle, finally. "I'm so glad you called," Dex said, "I've got a reservation on the train to Guadalajara in a couple of hours."

"Whoa," Annabelle said, "that was fast."

"No time like the present," Dex said, walking up the front stairs to his building. "Besides, I'm on weekend now, so it's easy to take the time."

"Makes sense," she said, then explained that she had been monitoring Ljungberg, and he seemed to be more or less stationary. "I've had very little activity for the past couple of days," she said, "just a train trip here..." she sent a link to a map of the train routes with a stop and line highlighted, "and a purchase here." Another map downloaded to Dex's system, this time showing a small store just off the line about half a klick to the north. "He must be staying somewhere near there, but I don't have anything more specific for you, I'm afraid."

"No, that's fantastic," Dex said, now in his apartment, cramming a couple of changes of clothes into a small shoulder bag. "Can you keep me posted of any changes?"

"Of course," Annabelle said. "I wouldn't have it any other way. But you keep in touch, yourself, okay?"

"Will do," Dex said, and ended the call. He set his apartment for no occupancy for the next three days and as he walked past the box, grabbed a handful of food bricks to stick in his bag. He left the apartment, rode the lift down to the street, and headed out to the train.

Chapter Eighteen

Dex intended to spend the time on the train studying his maps, researching Ljungberg and maybe catching a quick nap. He managed a little of each on the four hour trip, with the exception of the nap, but ended up staring out the window most of the time. The train moved quickly on its magnetic levitation rails, but Dex seemed to be endlessly fascinated by the landscape whizzing past. Of course, the train made a few stops along the way, and Dex gawped openly at the unfamiliar cities and people.

When the train slipped into its berth at the station, Dex gathered his things, and ensured that everything was safely tucked into his bag, then he slung it over his shoulder so that it clung tightly to his chest. He walked out of the station and pulled up the overview map Annabelle had sent him. There was a local train stop a block north of the intercity train station, and he set to walking toward it. If he

took the local up a while, he could get off at the station closest to the kiosk where Ljungberg's chip had last registered.

Even though it was nearing midnight, the crowds were thick at the local train stop. It looked like a two train wait to Dex when he arrived, joining the mass of people that were more like a throng than a queue. When the train arrived and its doors melted away, he moved forward with the teeming mass. More people crammed themselves into the car than he ever would have dreamed possible, but he wasn't among them. The doors re-materialized, blocking out the unlucky and locking in the, perhaps, even more unlucky. The train sped away and Dex looked around him wondering how people lived like this every day.

He had always lived in a smaller centre, and this was the longest trip he'd ever taken. He and Maks once traveled to the next city over for a weekend party, and Dex had been as taken with train travel then as now. There was something about seeing all those other places, full of other people, whipping past at over five hundred K — it was one of the few times Dex ever felt hopeful about the world. It seemed like all those people, so close yet so distant from each other, just going about their daily lives, held the most amazing potential in the universe. The utter normalcy of it all amazed him.

Here in Guadalajara, though, that same crush of humanity, in their banal daily existence, almost suffocated him. Dex worried that he wouldn't be able to handle even the short train ride, but when the next train arrived, he was swept up in the blind human momentum and into the car. He was aboard and the doors closed before he even had a chance to think about escaping. Once the

train started moving again, he pulled up his map and set his system to notify him when his stop was approaching. He rocked back and forth as the light magrail wound its way through the city, held upright by the crush of people on either side of him.

His system pinged him, warning that his stop was approaching, and Dex slithered through the crowd toward the door. He barely squeezed out the open side of the car before the door reformed and the train zoomed away. Dex looked around him, at the street and the community he'd traveled so far to visit. There was an eerie sense of familiarity here, the street looking only a little different from a hundred streets Dex had walked before. Tall, anonymous buildings lined the road, which was narrow and clogged with people walking to or from work, the expressions on their faces vacant as they spent most of their attention on some online distraction.

This particular neighbourhood reminded Dex of the area he'd lived in when he lived with Maks, full of old and poorly maintained independent apartment buildings and discount food and booze stores. Dex suspected there would be a couple of bars or game halls nearby, since these run-down communities tended to be home to the physical world entertainment areas. Dex walked north, carefully watching the other people on the street.

On the high speed train south, he'd managed to spend a few productive minutes checking out Mr. Sterling Ljungberg. He got an image capture of the man's avatar from Marionette City, a tall, thin, dark haired man, with shoulder-length hair flowing out behind him. He wore small spectacles, an unusual

affectation, and had a van dyke beard. Of course, there was absolutely no reason why Ljungberg would necessarily look the same in the physical world, but it was all he had to go on. He'd asked Annabelle to see if she could come up with something more useful, but he hadn't heard from her yet.

Dex pulled up his list of potential accommodations, and had his system cross reference it with the local area map. Almost immediately, a spot on the map started to glow with a dull red tint. A faint dotted line appeared, drawing a walking path from his current location to the nearest place he could rent a bed. It was a cheap travelers' inn, but so long as it was clean, Dex didn't care. He was actually pleased that it was a lower class establishment — cost wasn't a factor, since his expenses were one hundred percent billable, but low rent rooms were more likely to have talkative people.

He opened the door to the inn, and his system immediately popped up a greeting message. "Welcome to El Presidente Metropol Hotel," the bright banner read. Underneath, room rates and availability were listed, and Dex chose a single room with attached lav. His system pinged, notifying him of the first night's rate being withdrawn from his account. The hotel's system gave him a password to enter at the chip writer, and Dex dutifully stuck his left hand in the machine, then sent the password to its server. After getting his room key programmed into his chip, he followed the map up the lift to his room.

The room was about half the size of his own apartment, holding just a bed and a chair, with a 20 cm ledge along the wall acting as a table. The lav was tiny, but functional and clean, and overall Dex was perfectly happy with the space.

He stripped, used the lav and set his system to wake him in seven hours. He took a corresponding hit of SleepingJuice, and climbed into the narrow bed.

Dex awoke before his alarm went off, the light from the small window illuminating the room as if he'd turned on the high output LEDs. He sat up, rubbed his face, and turned off his system alarm. He padded over to his bag, rummaged around inside it and pulled out a small bottle of Flying Fish. He took a sip, just enough to get the juices flowing, and walked over to the window. It was warm in the room and he hadn't found any way to get at the room's system to change the temperature — he wondered if maybe the room wasn't even climate controlled. Dex looked out the window at the dark haze in the sky, turned a light pink by the high sun.

He absent-mindedly rubbed a hand over his flat belly, the muscles beneath firm and defined. The food bricks regulated metabolism, and the Flying Fish counterbalanced the booze. Pretty much everyone, except the most physically fashionable, looked like this — lean, muscled and young. Dex had seen a few people around following the most recent trend of having softer bodies, created by complex diets or specialized metabolism supplements, but Dex couldn't be bothered by trends. He didn't even take the Flying Fish for his looks — it was more to just get out of bed in the morning.

There wasn't a lot to see out the window — just the street he had walked up the night before and the facades of the other nearby buildings. It was the colour of the sky that really got to him. Dex wasn't sure he'd ever seen a sky that

wasn't grey before. He just stood there, looking at the colour deepen, then fade away, and after he'd been at the window about a half hour Dex finally turned and walked into the lav.

He showered, dried off and dressed, then packed up his bag and headed out of the room. He took everything with him, unsure if he'd be returning, and took the stairs the three flights down to the lobby area. There was a small kiosk set up with breakfast flavoured food bricks and water, and Dex bellied up to its bar along with a handful of fellow guests. A half dozen chairs were set up in the lobby, and Dex took a couple of the bars along with a large water bottle over to one of them. Sitting, he tore open the wrapper of one of the food bars and hungrily tore at the sticky mixture contained inside. Washing it down with a swig of water, he turned to look at the other people in the lobby.

As he'd suspected, most of them seemed to be focussed on their physical surrounding, Dex only saw one person with the thousand metre stare that being online generates. He decided to take a risk, and turned slightly toward the man sitting in the chair next to him. "Hi, there," he said and saw the other man nod in response. "I just got here last night. Is there anywhere to go hang out here, I mean physically near here?"

His neighbour merely shrugged, mumbling, "Dunno," but a hyper-fashionable, slightly pudgy woman leaning up against the wall across from them said, "There's a place just down the road. The Free Robots café. It's pretty big, they serve palatable coffee and real drinks, but it's usually full of Offline Cleanse types, so if you're not into that sort of thing, it can be kind of annoying."

"Offline Cleanse?" Dex said.

"You know," she said, rolling her eyes, "that new anti-tech fad? It's all over the boards these days." She ate the last bite of her food brick, and pitched the wrapper in the recyclatron before heading out the front door. Dex sat back in the chair and went online, searching for information about whatever it was that the woman had mentioned.

The woman had been right, the regular gossip boards were full of posts about the Offline Cleanse. It turned out that a fairly popular vid actor had become fond of the concept, and his fans and detractors had gone crazy posting about it. Pretty soon it had hit the radar of the mainstream posters and it seemed to be the topic du jour for most of the big boards.

From what Dex could gather, it was based on your standard luddite ideas — that things were better in the past and that people had lost touch with each other and their own "inner selves" because of the nets. The ideas weren't even all that radical — there was no call for people to permanently abstain from the nets or remove their implants. The main concept was for what they called "purification days." One weekend a month, adherents were expected to go offline completely. That meant no messaging, no boards, no system generated wake up alarms. It was extreme, but only in the most basic sense, and Dex thought three days a month was a pretty low commitment if you really believed that being online was "unnatural" and "dehumanizing".

However, it certainly sounded like a good explanation for Ljungberg's disappearance. He'd been "missing" for a couple of days now, and the Offline

Cleanse required complete severance from the online world. Dex paged over to his messages, looking for something from Annabelle. If he could just get a good idea of what Ljungberg looked like, he might actually be able to find him. It seemed like it was time to put in a good long shift at that café.