

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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Chapter Nineteen

Dex hadn't heard from Annabelle, and he was willing to believe that if she found something she'd let him know, so he just paged away from his messages. He refocussed on his physical surroundings, and discovered that he was alone in the lobby. He checked the time and was relatively unsurprised to discover that a couple of hours had gone by. The Cleanse propaganda certainly had a point — you could easily waste a lot of time on the nets.

He took a drink from the half full water bottle and stuck it, along with his second, uneaten food brick, into his bag. He pushed open the front door, and was assaulted by a heat and humidity he'd never encountered outside of a lav. It wasn't actively raining, but Dex could feel drops of water condensing on his skin and he wished he was wearing some lighter, more breathable clothes. He walked up the street looking for Free Robots. He didn't know exactly what he

was looking for, but he hoped for a sign or something obvious. He walked up three blocks, getting hotter and wetter with every step, and didn't see anything that looked like a café of any kind.

Dex crossed the street and headed back toward El Presidente, still looking for the café. As he was almost directly across the street from his hotel, he realized that while he might be looking for a Cleanser hangout, that didn't mean that he had to take a technological vacation. He paged over to his search program and ran a query for the café. In less than a second his map was glowing slightly from just behind him and to his right. He turned, and followed the directions. He stopped as soon as he had caught up to the slight glow, and focussed fully on his surroundings. He was next to a fairly short, somewhat derelict looking building. It seemed to be unmarked, and its main door opened into what appeared to be the lobby of a private housing complex.

Dex tentatively climbed the outside stairs, and pulled on the doorknob. It opened, and he found himself in a large vestibule. The locked door to the main lobby was ahead of him, but there were four other doors on either side of him, leading off to what he presumed were businesses. None were clearly marked, but he could hear the sounds of music and people talking from behind the one on his right, closest to the outside door. As he walked toward it, Dex did see a very faint image of the words "Robustezas Libres" imprinted on the metal of the door. He pulled it open, and a blast of cool air greeted him. He stepped inside, and closed the door against the heat.

It was dark and cool, and at first that was all Dex could comprehend. His

eyes adjusted to the low light and the mixture of condensation and sweat cooled on his brow, and he started to look around. There were several low tables with chairs scattered about the place, and the walls were lined with banquettes. The inside wall was taken up with a large bar, behind which were several bottles of liquor and a couple of urns of what Dex assumed by the smell of the place was coffee. He headed for the bar, and was surprised to see a handful of food options as well, all of which seemed to be made from real, grown in the ground food.

He wasn't about to experiment with the solids, but he guessed he'd be willing to try the stuff in the urn. He ordered a coffee from the touchpad at the bar, and a stiff metal arm shot down from the ceiling, hooking a cup with a thin extremity and drawing the dark brown liquid into it. The arm then swung the cup carefully around to where Dex was standing and placed it on the bar. The whole process took about ten seconds.

Dex took his cup and made his way to an empty table in a corner where he could see the room. It was about midday, and he guessed that the place was half full. The tables were mostly occupied by one or two people, most of whom were silent and staring. But a couple of the booths were full with what seemed to be one larger group of people, who were talking animatedly with each other. Dex figured they had to be the Offline Cleanse people the woman earlier had spoken about.

Dex sipped at his coffee, which was strong and bitter and made his heart feel a little funny, but he thought he rather liked it. There were about a dozen

people at the two booths across the way, and none of them were tall, thin men with long dark flowing hair and a van dyke beard. Dex realized that he couldn't even use gender as guideline, everything being malleable as it is, both online and off. He pulled up his physical control, and figured out how to magnify his sight, and was truly thankful that he'd stayed off the booze the previous night. The shift in perception was immediate and off-putting and Dex wasn't entirely sure that he wasn't going to throw up even though he was completely hangover-free.

He kept his vision magnified as long as he could, just trying to get a good recording of all the people at the table. After about a minute he had to turn it off, and even then he had to keep his eyes closed for a few moments to let the nausea wear itself off. The acidic brew in his cup didn't really help, but it was there, so he sipped at it anyway. Once his stomach had calmed down some, Dex opened his eyes and pulled up his viewer. He isolated the best still images of each person in the group, pulled them out and sent them to Annabelle with a message explaining what he'd found so far — the Offline Cleanse, the café, the people there.

Dex sat at the table, thinking. In his time as an investigator, he'd never been in a situation where he didn't have an idea of the players involved. At a very minimum he had some name, even if it were a false one, and he could look up a person's history based on that. This was more like working the goon squad, where everyone was anonymous and you had to just run on instinct. As much as Dex wanted to barge over to the table, shout "Sterling Ljungberg" and see who

flinched, his gut told him to wait. His gut also told him to eat something, so he pulled out the second food brick he'd taken from the hotel's kiosk and unwrapped it.

He spent the next half hour eating his lunch, drinking his coffee and watching the Cleansers interact. He wondered if maybe they weren't so crazy. What was so bad about just turning it all off for a couple of days a month, and actually talking to people? The thought of it scared him a little, but the more he watched them — smiling, laughing, even touching — the more he liked the idea. It would be impossible for him though, really. Weekends were a gold mine for doing Cubicle Men work, and he couldn't afford to be cut off from his clients, the squad, and everything else for three whole days.

He finished his coffee, and brought the empty cup up to the bar. The metal arm dropped down, picking up the cup and depositing it into the industrial autoclave. Dex steeled himself for the inevitable temperature change, and pushed open the door to the café. He headed out the door of the building, and walked back to El Presidente. He needed to talk to Annabelle, and he figured that he'd probably be stuck here at least another night, so he ought to see about getting his room for another night.

When he walked into the lobby, the "Welcome to El Presidente Metropol Hotel" banner popped up, and Dex was able to get the same room again. He took the stairs up, his heart pounding and mind racing. He walked into his room and stripped, then stood under a trickle of water in the lav that didn't last anywhere near long enough before the blower kicked in. He figured out how to

manually dim and open the window, and stretched out naked on the bed.

Dex didn't think he could possibly have slept, even with SleepingJuice. That coffee was nothing like the swill they served at B&B, which was no surprise, but it was like nothing he'd ever even had before. He thought he could feel every cell in his body twitching, ever so slightly. It wasn't entirely unpleasant, but it made concentrating on anything else somewhat difficult. He forced himself to be productive, and pinged Annabelle. She was up, and available. He linked into Marionette City and sent her a link to Monte's.

He sat at his usual table, unable to forget his physical body like he usually did when he was in Marionette City. He could feel the slight breeze from the window over his skin, and his right leg seemed to have developed a tiny twitch. His avatar was mindlessly sipping an effects-free drink — Dex was afraid what might happen if he started adding more chemicals to the mix. He waited a few minutes, visually and aurally focussed on the lights and music at Monte's while physically focussed on his own body. It was an eerie experience.

Finally, Annabelle walked in. She was dressed more the way Dex was accustomed to seeing her, in a patterned t-shirt and dark pants, and she walked over to him grinning. "Hey, Dex," she said, sitting across from him. "It's great to see you again."

"You too," he answered honestly, a shiver trilling its way up his spine. He blinked and composed himself, then asked her if she'd gotten his message from earlier in the day.

"Of course," she answered. "I've just spent the last bunch of time looking

up this Offline Cleanse. I'm sad to report that they're a pretty boring group. All they have is a bunch of propoganda boards that say nothing new or enlightening. It's just a couple of high profile people who are into it that caught everyone's fancy. That and the three days off idea. But they don't seem even remotely dangerous."

"I wasn't too concerned about them being dangerous," Dex said, "though you can't be too careful. I didn't think that they were the reason Reuben was killed. I still like a practical, financial motivation better than any ideological one."

"Agreed," Annabelle said, "and Ljungberg definitely has one of those." She grinned, and Dex knew she'd found something.

"Well," he said, leaning closer to her, a smile forming on his avatar's lips, "give up the goods. I know you've got something for me. Did you manage to identify Ljungberg out of those images? Do you know what he looks like?"

"Slow down, tiger," Annabelle said, laughing. "No and yes."

"What?"

"I didn't identify Ljungberg in those images you sent," she said, "but I do have an image for you." She pinged Dex's system and an image download came across for him. "Ljungberg wasn't there this morning. I'm sure of it."

"So, why are you grinning like an idiot, then?" Dex asked.

"Because I identified someone else in those images of yours," she said, sending another image to his system. "The short blonde woman in the corner." Dex pulled up the second file she'd sent, and recognized one of the more active participants in the group.

"What about her?" he asked.

"I'd guess that she's probably going to be Ljungberg's boss pretty soon, if she isn't already," Annabelle said, leaning back in her chair with a smug smile on her face. "That's Stella Bish."

Chapter Twenty

Dex didn't know what to say. He was so flummoxed that he even forgot about the caffeine coursing through his body, and sat stock still for the first time in hours. "How can that be Bish?" he finally got out. "Keeping time with an anti-tech group?"

"It's her, all right," Annabelle said, the grin still plastered on her face. "I pulled off the highly improbable task of breaking into the central records in everywherenet."

"Central records?" Dex asked.

"That's the database that matches biometrics to accounts to ID chips. It's the big box that keeps us all tagged and identified and watched. And I got in." Her voice was almost breathless, and although Dex didn't really understand what she was talking about, he could tell it meant a lot to her.

"Good job," he said, smiling. "If anyone could do it, it's you."

"Thanks," she said, her face flushing slightly. "Anyhow, I now have access to the matched set of online identities to physical world images. The first file I sent you is Sterling Ljungberg's most recent facial image. You should have no trouble identifying him. And I ran all the images you sent through a facial recognition program, and she came up as Stella Bish."

"It can't be..."

"That's what I thought, too," Annabelle said, interrupting him. "So I looked for her online. Not there. I poked through the history, and she disappeared last night. I double checked the biometrics of this Stella Bish against she who rules Marionette City and it was a perfect match. It's her, Dex, there's no doubting it."

"Shit," he said, and started thinking aloud. "So if Ljungberg is doing this Offline Cleanse thing, which I guess we don't even know for sure at this stage, he's probably got a connection with Bish other than just business. I mean, they're both here in the same city and it looks likely that they spend time at the same java joint. Which makes me wonder why he isn't already on staff..."

"Good question," Annabelle said, her avatar's face wrinkling into a frown. "And if he's already pals with the boss, why would he need to get rid of Reuben in order to be next in line?"

"Damn it," Dex said, "this fucking case. Every time I think I'm getting somewhere, the whole thing turns thirty degrees and I'm tossed around and confused. It's bloody annoying."

Annabelle smiled. "But it's what you love."

"Since when do you know everything about me," Dex asked, scowling.

Annabelle looked a little taken aback, then Dex broke out in a grin. "Fine, I love it, okay. Happy now? So let's get to solving this bloody great puzzle, shall we?"

"Okay," Annabelle said, smiling again. "So, what's the plan?"

When Dex had finished talking to Annabelle, he refocussed on his hotel room to discover that the coffee buzz had worn off and he had gotten unpleasantly cold. He sat up on the bed, stretching his sore muscles. He stood, running his tongue over his gummy and sour mouth. He picked up the clothes he'd earlier thrown on the floor and put them back on. He rummaged through his bag to find the bottle of water from the morning, and he downed what was left of it in one go. He vigorously rubbed his hands over his face in an attempt to imbue some energy into his body.

He headed out the door of the hotel room, and checked the time. It was early evening, which seemed like the kind of time he figured the Cleansers to gather. Of course, it was all just guesswork, but with no way to contact Ljungberg or Bish, Dex had to rely on his gut. He took the stairs down to the ground floor, and saw that the brightness of the afternoon sunlight had dimmed somewhat. The ambient light from outdoors was now more like what he was used to. He hoped that the temperature had moderated some as well.

When he pushed open the hotel's main door, the climate wasn't as stifling as it had been that morning — the humidity was lower, though it was still warmer than Dex would have liked. At that moment, though, the heat was taking the chill

off of his body that had accumulated while he was in Marionette City with Annabelle, and Dex resolved to enjoy the heat for as long as possible.

Dex turned right once he got to the street, heading for the small store he'd passed the night before. He needed food, and he didn't trust the stuff on offer at Free Robots. The store sold the usual necessities — food bricks and energy drinks, cheap beer and water. Dex picked up a five pack of bricks which were reasonably inexpensive, and a small bottle of water which more than doubled the cost of his purchases. With this heat, though, Dex couldn't afford not to get the extra liquid.

He ate one of the food bricks en route to Free Robots, and he drank half the water, too. By the time he reached the nondescript building, he felt almost as good as if he actually had taken a nap instead of talking to Annabelle. He pulled open the door, and then walked into the café. He had guessed right — where there earlier had been maybe a dozen people in the large group, now there were twice or three times that number.

They had more or less taken over the café, though there were still a handful of free tables. The music was louder, perhaps to compensate for the increased din from the large group of talking, laughing people. Dex headed for the bar, and decided to splurge by ordering a double dark rum and real ginger beer from the touchpad. He figured that the amount of money he was saving Ivy by staying in a dive like El Presidente more than offset the price of an expensive drink. The robotic arm mixed his drink, and presented it to him in record time. Dex took a sip and was instantly transported back in time.

The first taste of the smooth sweetness of the rum immediately reminded him of the old days with Maks, then the spicy aftertaste of the ginger beer almost burned his tongue, and the feeling of almost literally being transported in time intensified. He hadn't tasted that sweet, spicy concoction since the night Maks left. Dex chalked up the pinpricks he felt starting in his nose and climbing up to his eyes to the heat of the drink, though that was really only part of it. He took his glass to one of the empty tables, and nursed the first half of it while watching the large group and fighting his own memories.

He pulled up the images of Ljungberg and Bish that Annabelle had sent him, and scanned the room. He found Bish easily, at the centre of the largest grouping, dominating conversation. He couldn't see Ljungberg anywhere, though. There were a few people who were behind the others, and he couldn't really make them out. He ran the magnification program, and this time was prepared for the vertigo it created. As he looked closer at the group, he became more convinced than ever that Ljungberg just wasn't there.

He reset his vision, and blinked a few times to readjust. He pinged Annabelle, asking if Ljungberg had turned up online yet. She answered almost immediately that he had not, but that his ID chip had registered again at the same store Dex had been in earlier. Dex asked when that was, and she told him it was less than a half hour earlier. Dex abruptly thanked her, and stood, getting ready to go out and look for Ljungberg. Just as he turned toward the door, it opened, and Ljungberg himself walked in.

He was shorter than Dex expected him to be; the image Annabelle had given him hadn't shown him in context, and Dex still had the memory of his avatar from Marionette City in his mind. Ljungberg was one of those people who took the opportunity of making a new image for himself seriously. He could only have been more the opposite of his avatar had he been female. He had light coloured hair that was closely cropped to his skull, no facial hair of any kind and he was fashionably soft around the middle.

He walked into the Free Robots, and paused a moment at the door to let his eyes adjust. He looked around, seeming to scan the large group, as if looking for a particular person. His eyes locked on someone, and he made a bee line over to one of the smaller groups. It wasn't Stella Bish's table, but Dex was pretty sure it was a group of Cleansers.

Dex let Ljungberg greet the group, get a seat and a drink. He watched from a distance as the man talked earnestly with the others. Dex remembered that his conversation with Ljungberg had easily devolved into armchair philosophizing, and he imagined that Ljungberg could happily talk up a storm with this group as well. He couldn't hear their conversation from his vantage point, but he guessed it would be boring and intense.

After about half an hour of watching and waiting, and the last half of his drink, Dex decided it was time. He had pinged Annabelle and was streaming the video feed that he was recording so she could follow the action. They also opened a voice channel so she could talk to him if she came up with something. Dex subvocalized, "Here goes nothing," and walked over to the table where

Ljungberg was sitting.

"Excuse me," Dex said, addressing the group, "I'm looking for Sterling Ljungberg." Ljungberg turned to him, looking surprised, but answering immediately.

"Yes," he said, "that's me. Do I know you?"

"We've spoken," Dex said. "Andersson Dexter." Ljungberg's expression was blank for a moment, then he frowned slightly, trying to remember if and where he'd heard the name before.

"Mr. Dexter..." Ljungberg murmured the name, then his eyes popped open and he said, "The investigator. About Reuben, yes, I remember, now." His expression went from being pleased at remembering to worried in an instant.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Dexter?"

"Looking for you, Mr. Ljungberg."

"Looking for me?" the man repeated, sounding confused. One of the other people at the table, a plain looking woman, spoke up at this point.

"Sterling," she said, her voice nasal and slightly whiny-sounding. "What's going on? Who is this man?"

Dex heard Annabelle's voice in his ear say, "And who are you honey?"

Ljungberg turned to the woman, and said, "Don't worry, Marta, it's nothing." Turning back to Dex, he said, "Maybe we should talk privately?" He stood and indicated a table in the corner. Dex nodded, as Annabelle said she'd start looking up the woman and the two men walked away from the now silent group. Dex stopped at the bar.

"Drink?" he asked Ljungberg as he entered an order for a regular rum and gingapop. The other man shook his head, and Dex picked up his cool glass, then gestured for Ljungberg to lead the way. He followed the man to a table in a quiet corner. They sat, and Dex noticed that the other man's hands were shaking slightly. Even though the café was nicely climate controlled, small beads of perspiration were appearing at Ljungberg's hairline.

"You're a tough fellow to find, Mr. Ljungberg," Dex said.

"And you just happened to be in the neighbourhood, Mr. Dexter?"

Ljungberg's hands were now hidden under the table, but his voice betrayed the shaking they were certainly still doing.

"I can't say that I was," Dex answered, "though this place is almost worth the train ride." Dex took a sip of his drink, and slowly moved the glass across the table, making patterns with the condensation. Annabelle told him that she got an ID on Marta — she was a clerk at the same firm as Ljungberg. There was nothing particularly interesting about her other than that she'd last been online the same time as Ljungberg.

"I'm guessing lovers," Annabelle said. Dex subvocalized his thanks, and he waited for Ljungberg to fill the uncomfortable silence. He didn't wait long.

"I don't understand," Ljungberg said. "Why are you here? I don't know anything about what happened to Reuben and you didn't need to come all the way here to hear me tell you that again. Besides, I'll be online again in a couple of days."

"I didn't know that," Dex said. "All I knew is that you were missing, and your

name popped up again in my investigations. It all seemed rather... implausible."

"I don't understand," Ljungberg repeated. "My name... what do you mean?"

Dex wasn't ready to lay his cards on the table quite yet, so he decided to try a different approach. "This thing you all are doing," he gestured at the other patrons in the café. "The Offline Cleanse, is that right?" Ljungberg nodded.

"What's it all about? Are you a bunch of weirdo tech haters who want to destroy the nets or what?"

Ljungberg laughed nervously, seeming to be more comfortable now that he had a question to answer. "Not at all, Mr. Dexter. We think technology is good and important, and we use the nets just the same as everyone else. We're not trying to undo the gains we've made through technology. We just think that the nets aren't a substitute for the real world."

"Hmm," Dex said, looking thoughtful. "So what then, I wonder, must you make of people who exist only online? Are they not real people, to you? Or even worse — abominations to be destroyed?" Dex paused for a beat. "Is that why you killed Reuben Cobalt?"