

good night, dear void

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good night, dear void

by [Ribbon](#)

Summary

One day, Harold receives an email from an anonymous sender. Surprised, he goes on a quest to find out who that person is.

Notes

Written for the "Irrelevant Gift Exchange". Pairingsuccessful on Tumblr wrote in her wishlist that she had a "particular fondness for epistolary fiction, and for secret identities. Not like superhero secret identities - more like You've Got Mail, or Cyrano de Bergerac."

Being a huge fan of "You've Got Mail", I wrote a story called "Good night, dear void" (and I guess you'll recognize more references, even if this fic is not exactly a You've Got Mail AU but close enough). I really hope you like it, pairingsuccessful, and thanks for your inspiring wishlist !

Monday morning didn't find the employees of IFT in a good mood. Winter had come to New York and with it came a harsh cold, one that made even Harold grumpy as he walked toward the doors of the building. The security guards weren't looking too happy themselves, and he couldn't blame them. One employee greeted him with a simple, "good morning." As for him, he felt like getting inside as quickly as possible.

It didn't take Harold too long to join the line of people waiting for the elevator to come down. They paid little attention to him, as usual.

Five minutes later, he arrived at his floor and took a look at his watch. There wasn't a lot of activity, which was unusual. Was he that early?

Ah, well, 7:20 a.m. Early enough.

Harold turned on his computer, put his coat on the back of his chair, and made his way to the coffee machine, the new one "management" bought for the department.

"Morning Harold," said Cynthia Kellin.

"Oh hello, Mrs. Kellin," he replied.

"Isn't it cold these days?" she asked with a smile.

He nodded, distracted. She was always in such high spirits; he wasn't surprised she was cheerful about this weather.

"They're going to light the Christmas tree soon," she kept talking excitedly. "I was thinking about ice skating. What about you?"

The idea of him ice skating in the middle of the city with a group of strangers was ridiculous, but he didn't want to put a damper on her good mood.

"That's a nice idea," he replied.

He filled his cup of coffee and didn't add sugar this time. It was one of those days.

"Have a good morning, Mrs. Kellin," he said.

If she replied, he didn't hear her.

He returned to his desk, put his cup next to his keyboard, and launched his browser. He had some work to do today but nothing major. Actually, nothing that couldn't be done by lunch.

Harold drank from his cup as he took a look at his new emails.

Two of them were from people in his department (asking inane questions with obvious answers) and one was from an anonymous source.

Harold paused.

Really, the sender's name was "Anon". His email address was anon214ny@gmail.com. The object of the email was "E. L." and it contained an attached document.

Harold looked around, to see if anyone was watching him. When he felt confident that everyone was too busy to notice, he clicked on that document.

It showed a picture of a man outside the IFT building, and another of him entering the building. The pictures looked like they were taken from a smart phone, not a regular camera.

Harold frowned. He recognized the man because he was hired only two months ago as an advisory technician. He was in his mid-thirties with a handsome enough face.

He had brown hair, blue eyes, and he was wearing a winter coat at the time the picture was taken, with a cup from Starbucks in his hand.

There was nothing else inside the email. No message from the sender, just those pictures.

E.L, Harold thought. His memory wasn't all it used to be, because it took him quite a few seconds to recall.

Enis...Enis something...ah yes, the man's name was Enis Lawson. He was hired because of his impressive resume, good manners, and smart answers during his interview. But why would anyone send him pictures of this man?

Harold sighed, knowing full well he wouldn't be able to rest until he worked out what it all meant.

He spent the day trying to stay patient, going through his everyday tasks and answering his other emails.

He felt nervous, a bit scared. He thought about leaving the building for lunch, but for some reason he knew he wouldn't come back if he left, so he stayed and stared at his computer screen, internally making a list of questions he needed answers to.

Who sent him the message? Why? What did Enis Lawson do?

As soon as the clock on his desktop showed five p.m., Harold took his coat, shut down his computer and joined his employees waiting for the elevator.

On the way to his apartment, he came across a man dressed as Santa who waved at him. Harold didn't wave back and kept walking.

In fact, he was walking so fast he was starting to feel a sharp pain coming from his leg, but he ignored it.

He felt like he was on auto pilot and that nothing could stop him, cold and wind be damned.

Ten minutes later, he was home, sitting in front of his laptop screen. He had barely taken his shoes off like he usually did and had thrown his coat on the living room's sofa in his haste.

"Let's see now," Harold said, typing and running several programs at the same time.

One program was scanning his company's data for information about Enis Lawson, the other was trying to identify the email's anonymous sender by looking at the source.

It wouldn't take long, but anxious, he got up to make himself some tea. When he came back, one program had stopped running and multiple windows appeared on Harold's screen. He took a quick look: official information about Lawson, the video of his interview (to view later, Harold thought), and the work Lawson had done since he started working for the company.

Nothing major, nothing that could point out why those pictures were sent to him.

Harold sighed and started hacking into several databases. What he discovered was that Enis Lawson was a model citizen. No problems with the police or the law, just a respectable man, one of those hard workers of Manhattan.

"What are you hiding, Mr. Lawson?" Harold asked out loud, his curiosity increasing by the minute.

He was about to make even more tea when he heard a ping, alerting him that his other program was done with his research.

Harold scanned the page of results. No name for the email's sender, but the email was sent from...

"IFT?"

His company's building?

He checked again to be sure he wasn't misreading it. It was definitely from the building, but which computer?

It didn't say. Harold entered a new search, this time with different parameters and requests.

Hopefully, he would get an answer soon.

Turns out, he almost fell asleep in front of his computer. In the end, he let his programs run all night long, hoping he would get an answer the next morning.

Of course, by the time he went to sleep, the next morning was five hours away, and Harold knew it would take the computer longer than that to uncover all the information he needed.

Truthfully, it had been a while since he used his programs to hack anything and he realized they needed to be updated...quickly.

But after Nathan's death he had promised himself he would stay away from his hacking programs or anything that would remind him of his creation, the Machine.

Harold already knew he had the capacity to create monstrous things; he had no desire to create even more.

No, he wouldn't update his programs. He would just wait for an answer, that's all.

He was replying to emails at work when he realized he completely forgot the simplest way of obtaining answers: asking.

Once again, he looked around to see if anyone was paying attention to him, and after feeling reassured that it wasn't the case, he opened the email he received the day before.

He thought about what he would write, before deciding to type as quickly as he could:

"Dear anonymous sender,

I received your email but I cannot understand your reason for sending it. Would you care to elaborate?

Regards,

Harold Wren".

He stared at his screen before hitting the button "send". He then sighed and went back to work, all the while assuming the sender wouldn't reply or give him any inclination that he was willing to answer the question.

However, Harold was wrong. Ten minutes later he got a reply.

Particular reason? Yes. Suspicious activity. Look closer, Harold.

Harold perched on his chair and wondered if he was dreaming. Look closer? Suspicious activity? How helpful. He couldn't help himself; he had to answer, again.

"Dear anonymous sender," he typed, this time with a manic expression on his face. *"Define suspicious activity. Out of habit and as a principle, I am always looking closer. Regards, Harold Wren".*

The reply came after lunch, right when Harold was about to go into a meeting with the head of his Department. He read it while he was walking and almost knocked someone over.

"Harold," it started, *"Aren't you supposed to be smart? How can you not know what 'suspicious activity' means? E.L is trouble. Find out why."*

It wasn't so much the words that prevented him from paying attention to his meeting afterwards, but rather the tone used by the sender.

He was talking to Harold as if he was a schoolboy who hadn't done his homework. Who was he? Did the sender know his true identity? Did he know Harold owned the company? Was he in danger? What could he do to protect himself?

He realized that by asking himself all those questions, he was already preparing his next move and forgetting his earlier promises.

He would need to find out who the sender was, even if he had to update his programs. He had no choice at this point.

Later that day, he came home and put all his groceries on top of the table in his living room.

He had brought home more tea, and something to put in the oven so he wouldn't have to cook.

Coffee was the latest item in his bag. Unsure at first, he ended up brewing some. He was a man on a mission.

First, he set about updating the program he needed right now. Should be easy, Harold thought, and yet once in front of his keyboard, he hesitated. His hands were barely touching the keys, almost frozen above them, as if paralyzed.

"Stop it," he whispered.

He said it again, trying to sound firm: "Stop it."

Of course, he knew what he had to do.

He knew the lines of codes, he knew the work, he knew what he could do, and that was the problem. Knowing had always made things difficult for him. He couldn't get those feelings out, fear and shame so strong it was like they were crawling inside of him.

He felt like a child. He closed his eyes and whispered, once again: "Stop it."

When he opened his eyes, he realized his hands were now clenched into fists.

Was that better? Maybe.

He concentrated on trying to breathe normally, on ignoring the terrible images stuck in his head.

Slowly, he felt it happen. His shaking stopped, his breathing became even. He was no longer panicking.

His hands felt relaxed.

A minute later, he started writing lines of codes. He was slow at first but quickly went back to his usual rhythm.

An hour later, his program was updated and running again.

The worst part was he found joy in that activity.

For the first time in months, he wanted to smile, and only Nathan's memory stopped him from doing so. It was always on the back of his mind.

He sighed and went into the kitchen to get his cup of coffee. He stayed there for a while, just drinking and looking outside. From the living room, he heard a familiar ping. He took his cup with him and put it on his desk, his eyes already looking at the screen.

According to his program, the email was sent from inside IFT's building alright, but more importantly, it was from the room the security guards used to monitor coming and goings.

It made sense: a security guard was in a position to see Enis Lawson every day and he could have easily taken those pictures, with a smart phone or even an iPod.

He was also in a position to watch Harold.

Okay, no need to panic, he thought. He had to be logical about this.

It was sent at 8 a.m. A detail like this helped the program determine who could have sent it.

There were four men working there that day. Inside the room were three computers, and all computers were used at the same time, possibly by different persons. Harold knew the pool of suspects was bigger than that, because security guards were to alternate between sitting in that room and standing guard in front of the building. During a break, those guards outside could easily enter the building and send a quick email when no one was looking.

Nevertheless, he clicked to see who those four men were.

Gerald Crawford, Anthony Marcus, Tony Allen, and John Reese.

"Okay, which one are you?" he asked out loud.

He remembered the four men because they had the morning shift three times a week so they were always there, standing guard in front of the building.

He thought about the last time he had really focused on them. Was it last Wednesday? Yes. Harold had put his hands in his coat pockets and had walked toward the building.

Gerald Crawford had been looking at the Starbucks on the opposite side of the street, Anthony Marcus had been looking at a pretty lady walking in front of him, Tony Allen had been looking at him, and John Reese had been scanning the crowd moving in the street.

There hadn't been anything particular in Allen's stare, but it made Harold wonder if he wasn't the sender.

Allen was sixty years old, and he had been a security guard at IFT for three years now. He was a hardworking man, married with three children. Somehow, Harold doubted it was him,

but he couldn't exactly rule him out.

He also needed to think about the guards outside, which raised the number of suspects to eight. More if guards let other employees inside (it was forbidden but Harold wasn't stupid, he knew guards could let anyone inside if they chose to).

He checked to see the complaints or the files coming from the security guards.

As he suspected, there was nothing against Enis Lawson. It was as if the anonymous sender had decided to take matters into his own hands, or rather to put it into Harold's...or maybe he had tried to file a complaint, but it was dismissed?

The head security guard would know, of course. Maybe Harold could send him an email from "management" asking about Lawson?

"Oh," he said suddenly.

He forgot there were cameras inside that room, the one used by the security guards.

He could try and find the tape from two days ago. Security tapes were kept in an archive room on the same floor as the security office (known as R-12), and only guards had the codes to access either. Each day a guard would check the archives, and Harold knew from watching that none of them ever bothered to look in the room for more than a minute or so. They were only tapes, after all. All this informed him that he would have all the time he needed to go inside the other room and find the tape he wanted. Not a problem, then.

Of course he couldn't afford to linger too long, and he would need to pick a timeframe.

Harold felt immediately relieved now that he had a plan.

He then spent the rest of the evening virtually introducing a spyware in the network of IFT, so Lawson's virtual activity would be monitored, allowing him to see everything Lawson was working on.

The next idea would be to see what he was up to outside work, but that would require him following Lawson around and he wasn't ready for that yet.

He had to take a closer look at each of the guards he suspected. Harold felt satisfied and almost giddy at the idea that the poor sender didn't know how much he would take his advice to heart.

See, he thought, I am doing my homework.

It was almost 1 a.m. when Harold decided to turn in for the night. He was yawning too much and couldn't keep his eyes open.

He had found out all sorts of information about the security guards.

Most of them had families, but there were one or two who didn't have a spouse or kids. The problem was nothing in his research really indicated that one of them was his mysterious sender. Motive was lacking in almost all the suspects.

There was also the fact that the messages the sender had sent him implied he knew Harold's real identity. Otherwise, why send the pictures to him?

It meant Harold had been watched for a while now, and he hadn't realized it, at all.

One thing was worth noting: nothing had changed for him at work.

People either tried to be nice to him (like Mrs. Kellin) or they ignored him completely, judging him uninteresting or irrelevant.

Irrelevant—now that wasn't a word he wanted to agonize about right now. That was for later.

The point was the anonymous sender hadn't told anyone what he knew. He had only told Harold, which was a good thing of course, but it helped to put things into perspective.

That night, Harold slept like a baby. The next morning, he was ready. First, he walked slowly till he reached the building's entrance. None of the guards outside were his main suspects, meaning they were inside the room with the computers, R-12.

Harold took a look at his watch.

7:03. Perfect. He saw one guard leave the room containing the tapes and recognized Tony Allen.

Harold tried to walk more quickly, looking confident, as if he was about to get into the elevator. At the last minute, he switched to his right and walked even faster.

He knew Allen was already getting inside the other room with the guards, so he quickly typed the security code and the door opened.

Harold looked at all the dates on the CDs containing the surveillance footage. He found the most recent one and put it inside his pocket.

He quickly made his exit and closed the door as silently as he could.

Relieved it was over, Harold turned around. From the corner of his eyes, he saw that the door of R-12 was being opened.

He panicked and walked so fast this time he almost tripped before he managed to reach the main entrance, which was empty; everybody already working upstairs.

Harold frantically pushed the button to make the elevator come down.

A security guard walked toward his direction, looking nonchalant. Harold recognized him as John Reese. He was one of the guards who didn't have a family, but that was almost all Harold could get from his file.

"Is there a problem, Sir?" the man asked him.

He was rather drawling his words, and he had a smirk on his face.

Harold felt like he was about to bust an organ from sheer panic. He needed to calm down; he needed to play it cool.

"No problem at all, Mr...?"

He made a show of trying to read the name on the man's vest. "Mr. Reese," he finished.

"You look out of breath," Reese told him. "Did you try to run? Not good for your leg, I believe."

Harold gave him a sharp look. If there was one thing he absolutely hated, it was some stranger giving him advice about his health or his leg.

"I know how to take care of myself," Harold replied.

His tone was cutting, but the man either didn't notice or chose to simply ignore it, because he merely smiled at him.

"Well, then. I guess you should be on your way to your floor, then."

He then lowered his head and stared at Harold, as if to say his words weren't a mere suggestion.

"Right," Harold said. "Right."

The elevator's door opened and Harold went inside, eager to leave. He tried not to take one last look at the security guard, but failed.

John Reese was still looking at him. There was something strange in his eyes, something which troubled Harold.

"Good day," Harold said, right before the doors closed.

The whole day his patience was tried. Harold was in such a state, he kept looking at his coat pocket containing the CD. He refused to leave for lunch or even to get up for a drink, so focused was he on keeping an eye on his CD.

Every time he heard the elevator's door coming up to his floor, he pictured three security guards making a beeline for him, ready to escort him out of the building.

His building.

Harold replayed the whole morning inside his head and came to the conclusion that there was no way that man Reese could have seen him leaving the room.

But seeing Harold coming up from that part of the building, that could have raised his suspicions.

Never mind, it was worth it, wasn't it? Because tonight Harold would know who the sender was.

That thought kept him from exploding, and finally, when 5 p.m. arrived, Harold put on his coat and left.

An hour later, he was looking at all the tapes from the CD. His arms crossed, he stared at the screen.

The three guards were in the room.

Allen was using the computer at first but then he got up and left, leaving his place vacant.

Harold held his breath as the screen showed what happened inside the room at the exact time the email was sent to him. John Reese sat in front of the computer, and after glancing around (not a single guard was looking at him), Reese sent the email.

John Reese was using the computer.

John Reese was his anonymous sender.

Harold suddenly remembered the look the man gave him that very morning. It was a strange one, as if Reese had been expecting something.

"What are you playing at, Mr. Reese?"

Harold froze, his fingers once again hovering above the keyboard. He was slowly coming to realize that his work wasn't finished, not at all.

First, he couldn't let Reese know that he knew. Harold worked best in secrecy.

Second, he had to discover the mystery behind Enis Lawson, not only because his company might be in danger, but because Reese already knew what the man was up to, and apparently, had faith that Harold would find out on his own.

Truthfully, Harold liked challenges.

The next morning, he spotted John Reese as he was working outside. The weather was getting worse. All guards were now wearing winter coats and gloves, Reese included. Harold

decided he wouldn't even glance in the man's direction, and he successfully maintained that resolve as he walked past him.

Afterwards, he sat in front of his computer, thinking about his tasks for the day.

The previous evening, he had watched Lawson's interview. He was confident, nice, and obviously smart. A good candidate.

His work at IFT? He was working on developing a new software with other employees. It was apparently Lawson's idea. But the more Harold looked at the pictures sent by Reese, the more he was starting to think Lawson wasn't exactly working for IFT, but for someone else. Corporate spying wasn't new, after all.

E.L. is trouble, Reese had written. Could he trust that information? It might lead to a wild goose chase, Harold thought. Yes it might, but what if Reese was right and Lawson could really cause trouble for him and his company?

He figured, was it really paranoia if they were coming after you?

And how best to spy on IFT than to get hired there?

Harold decided he was going to operate as if the sender could be trusted. And, if it turns out he can't, well, then he'll know that Reese is the real problem he will need to address. He also made a decision he didn't think he would make last night. He was going to contact his "anonymous" sender again.

Harold opened his email and wrote:

"Dear anonymous sender,

You asked me to look closer and I did.

*I am beginning to think that our dear Mr. Lawson is possibly working for someone else.
Did I reach the right conclusion?*

Regards,

Harold Wren"

The answer came during lunch, which didn't surprise Harold, knowing Mr. Reese was working outside the whole day.

"Not bad, Harold. Not bad," was his reply.

Harold sighed. What a pain this man was. Couldn't he write a proper email?

"Dear anonymous sender," Harold wrote.

"I am beginning to think you are not familiar with proper email etiquette, but I am glad to see my efforts deserved a "not bad."

Regards,

Harold Wren".

This time, the reply came almost immediately.

"Dear Harold Wren,

I am familiar with proper email etiquette, but in case you didn't know, some of us are quite busy during the day.

A "not bad" from me means you're getting closer. I'm sure you'll find out before the holidays start what he's doing at your company.

I'm sending you a virtual cookie.

Regards, Sincerely, Best wishes, Respectfully yours,

Your Anonymous Sender."

Attached was a picture of a cookie. Harold would have rolled his eyes, both at the picture and the email's ending, but he was too intrigued by the words Reese had used.

What he's doing at *your company*.

So he was right, Reese had managed to discover his true identity.

As a security guard, it was his job to pay attention to people working at IFT. Could Harold really fault the man his commitment?

He also didn't tell anyone, which in Harold's opinion meant something, but what exactly?

He thought about asking Reese how he found out about him, but decided otherwise. He didn't want to spook him.

"Dear anonymous sender,

Thank you for the virtual cookie", he wrote.

"I know that people are busy during the day. I am quite busy myself, and yet you don't see me forgetting my manners," he typed.

He stared at his screen, then erased his last sentence on account of it being a bit too aggressive.

At that point, he had no idea what to answer.

He could only ask questions and he was certain Reese wouldn't give him the answers so easily. Harold thought about it, then wrote:

"Why did you decide on that email address? anon214ny@gmail.com? Anon and ny, I can understand. But why 214? Is that a random number or does it mean something?"

Regards,

Harold Wren".

Reese didn't reply that afternoon, which put Harold in a bad mood. Of all the things to be annoyed about, this shouldn't even been in the top ten.

By the end of the day, he was part of a crowd exiting the building. Reese was outside, talking to Tony Allen.

Harold ignored him, but it was harder to do so this time.

It was 9 p.m. when he sat down at his kitchen table, his laptop in front of him. He was reading the lines of codes written by Lawson and mentally reviewing them in his head when he saw he had a new email.

It came from Reese, which made Harold's heart beat faster.

"Harold,

What do you think it means? You should try to guess. :)"

Harold frowned. Were they going to start using emoticons now? And what did he mean, try to guess? Like come up with a list?

He could do that, sure, but what was the point?

But as soon as he started thinking it was a complete waste of time, he was already writing down possible explanations for the number.

The possibilities were endless, of course, but Reese wanted him to guess, almost like he was inviting him to have fun and play with him.

Harold wasn't used to this, at all, but he was interested.

He knew the number had nothing to do with Reese's address in New York, having his file right in front of him. So...what could it be?

Ten minutes later, he sent the following email:

"Dear anonymous sender,

Here are my propositions:

- It was 02:14 in the afternoon when you decided to create your email account,*
- 214 is the number of pages you filled in your journal,*
- 214 is the number of books you've read,*
- 214 is the number of hearts you've broken,*
- You have 214 favorite songs?*
- You've had 214 jobs in your life?*
- You have 214 reasons to suspect Enis Lawson of being a corporate spy.*

As you can see, guessing isn't my forte.

Regards,

Harold Wren".

He then went to the kitchen to make tea. He was adding sugar into his cup when he heard an unfamiliar sound coming from his computer.

Harold frowned. What was that? He raced to his laptop and saw that the sound meant someone was sending him a message using Gchat.

A window had just opened, and it read:

Anon: You have quite an imagination for someone who says guessing isn't their forte. 214 hearts I've broken? Really, Harold?

Harold stared at the message, completely dumbstruck.

What was he supposed to do? He didn't think, not even once, that Reese would try to message him, that he would try to chat with him!

Dear lord, *chat*.

As he was powerless to react, he received another message.

Anon: And I have a lot of reasons to suspect Enis Lawson, but 214 might be taking it too far.

Harold sat down in front of his laptop, incredibly nervous. He felt like a camera had been put in front of him, and he was naked. A nightmare, that was what the whole situation was.

"Pull yourself together," he said out loud.

He typed his answer and sent it. It was too late to go back now.

Harold Wren: I think it would be easier for you to tell me exactly what he did to arouse your suspicion instead of making me play silly games.

Anon: Patience, Harold.

Harold Wren: I am patient! But as you know, he could do severe damage to the company. He could give information to another company, or worse, someone dangerous. I need to know who he serves or if he's working alone.

Anon: He's not working alone. I followed him once or twice. He left the building and went into a cafe, where he gave someone a USB flash drive.

Harold Wren: Someone? Do you know who that person is?

Anon: An employee of Saturn.

Harold knew Saturn Inc., of course. As a company, their goal was essentially the same as IFT's. They were competitors in an already competitive market, and the CEO was a big man who was known for being a complete brute.

He imagined Lawson was giving him all the recent technological developments IFT had in store in exchange for money, or later a managing position.

Annoying, but less alarming than he thought. It could have been the government.

Anon: Still there? Are you in shock? I wouldn't be too surprised if I were you.

"Oh for God's sake," Harold exclaimed.

Harold Wren: Don't be ridiculous, I am not in shock. I'm merely thinking about how to proceed.

Anon: Look, whatever you do, don't put yourself in a dangerous situation. If you need me to do something, just ask.

That made Harold pause. This wasn't a laughing matter, but a part of him wanted to chuckle.

Honestly.

Harold Wren: And what do you think I will do?

Anon: I don't know. What will you do?

Harold Wren: Right now, I'm going to bed. Good night, Anon.

The reply came two minutes later.

The chat window indicated that Reese had been typing the whole time so Harold expected a long answer. Instead he received a simple, "Good night, Harold."

How to proceed was something which completely eluded him. Time was of the essence of course, with the holidays coming soon and the obnoxious daily leak of information. He knew he couldn't just ask Lawson to be fired unless he had proof of what the man was doing. Public humiliation for Lawson and Saturn Inc., now that was a nice Christmas gift he could look forward to.

Harold was thinking it over on his way to IFT when he ran into someone. It was John Reese.

He was wearing his work clothes and was looking a bit tired. Still, Harold thought it was nearly impossible for this man not to appear composed and handsome.

"Alright?" Reese asked.

Harold nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I'm very sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"It's okay," the man replied, with a shrug this time.

Harold had known many liars in his life, but there was something in Reese's demeanor that indicated one of two things. Either Reese knew Harold was aware of his true identity or else he remained blissfully unaware.

Now, not knowing, that drove Harold mad.

"That's the second time I've run into you," he said in a manner which lacked complete subtlety.

"I know," Reese replied with a smirk. "It's funny, knowing we both work at the same place or live in the same city."

"Ah," Harold said. "Quite right, Mr. Reese. So, are you also on your way to work, or are you going in the opposite direction?"

He smiled, feeling quite confident he had backed Reese into a corner by this line of questioning, but instead, Reese looked like he couldn't care less about this conversation.

"I thought I had forgotten something at home. Turns out, I have it with me," he answered.

Harold knew it was a complete lie, but he wasn't going to outright accuse him. Not this time, anyway.

They both started walking again. IFT's building was two streets over, enough time to interrogate him, Harold thought.

"Do you like working at IFT?" he asked Reese.

"Being a security guard has his ups and downs. What about you, do you like it?"

"I'm not a security guard," Harold replied, earning him a smile from Reese.

"I know you're not. You're one of those executives working on the upper floors," Reese told him.

Harold realized suddenly that Reese was walking at a slower pace, as if to accommodate Harold's own pace.

"Don't do that," he snapped. "You can walk as fast as you want, I can keep up."

"Alright."

Harold gave him an irritated look as he added, "And yes, I'm one of those executives, although I'm not exactly one of those decision-making people."

Reese scoffed at him.

"Right."

They were almost to the building when something happened that couldn't have been timed better: Enis Lawson brushed past them and raced to reach the doors of IFT. Harold paused, watching him.

"Someone's in a hurry," Reese commented.

They looked at each other.

"Well, Mr. Reese, here we are," Harold said. "Have a nice day."

"You too," Reese replied. "You too."

He didn't say his name the way he did when acting as Harold's anonymous sender, but Harold heard it all the same.

Mrs. Kellin handed him a cup of coffee when he arrived at his desk.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kellin," he replied, taking off his coat and putting it on top of his chair.

"You look tired, Harold. Thank God it's Friday."

"Is it?" Harold replied, frowning. "I didn't know."

"Oh Harold." She put one hand on his shoulder. "Try to slow down a bit. Nobody is going to yell at you if you do, you know."

"Right," he replied.

He smiled at her, but he was nevertheless anxious for her to leave. She did, but only after asking him again to take care of himself, looking at him with what might be a mix of worry and pity.

Harold rarely thought about his looks. He wasn't a vain man, he cared about his appearance because he wanted to be presentable. That's all. He had shaven that morning and yes, he had noticed he looked a little tired, but surely not to the point Mrs. Kellin had to be worried about him?

Anyway, it was impossible for him to slow down. He always managed to finish a day's work in one morning, maybe less.

What was everyone doing, that it would take them an entire day? How ridiculous.

And on top of that, he was focused on making sure his company wasn't going to be spied on by some Robert Fortune-wannabe.

He looked at his smartphone. He had managed to place a little coding inside that would alert him almost every hour regarding which programs Lawson opened on his work computer. Who knew, maybe Lawson would make a mistake. Harold could only hope.

He shook his head and logged into his Gmail account.

He took a sip of his coffee and reminded himself that this time Reese wasn't working outside, but inside the room with the screens.

He probably ought to write him, he thought. After all, the man had offered to help Harold, and Harold needed all the help he could get.

Last night's conversation had been interesting, but quite stressful. This morning's conversation, though, left him puzzled.

The more he thought about the whole situation, the more it appeared quite surreal.

Corporate spy? Secret identity?

Reese himself was an enigma that Harold was determined to solve, despite how annoying the man was.

The problem was, he couldn't tell his anonymous sender that he knew who he was...so that meant playing a sort of game with him...but how long could he play?

Harold was beginning to think that he had gotten himself into quite a conundrum.

Nevertheless, he opened a new window, added Reese's email address as the recipient, and typed his message.

"Dear Anonymous Sender,

I hope you are well today. You said last night that you were willing to help me. If your offer still stands, I'm inclined to take it.

The question is: how do I know I can trust you? I'm very curious as to how you found out about me or Mr. Lawson.

I hope those questions don't seem rude to you. Unfortunately, I have to ask.

Regards,

Harold Wren"

He read his message again, just to be sure he wasn't revealing too much, then he sent it.

As he predicted, he received a message not too long after that.

Anon: I come in peace.

Harold Wren: That is very good to know.

Anon: How do you know you can trust me? Hmm. You must have done some research, Harold.

Harold knew at this point he had two options: telling the man he knew who he was or play the innocent.

The mischievous part of him (also the most prudent) won.

Harold Wren: Yes, but it turns out it's not that easy to discover who an anonymous person is, especially in a city like New York. All I know is that you work at IFT.

There. Admitting a bit of truth should do.

Anon: Alright.

As he read that one word reply, Harold pictured Mr. Reese's usual smirk. He felt like smiling himself.

Harold Wren: Is it safe to talk now?

Anon: No one can see what I'm doing right now or read these messages.

Ah, Harold thought. How naive, but he wasn't going to spill all his secrets or talk about the Machine. They had more urgent matters to discuss.

He looked around and saw his colleagues busy working on their computers.

He leaned towards his screen and typed.

Harold Wren: I have a plan for Mr. Lawson, but first I need proof. Very publishable proof of his criminal activities. Do you understand?

Anon: I see. A bit of scandal goes a long way, is that it?

Harold Wren: What else do you suggest?

Anon: Nothing. I'm just surprised. I thought you would rather handle it discreetly.

Harold Wren: I want that man out of the company, but I also want him unable to spy on my company or others again.

Anon: And accusing your competition of corporate spying is also good for IFT.

Harold Wren: Is that a problem for you?

Harold waited for a reply, feeling quite perturbed at the idea that Reese might object to his plan. Was he taking things too far? He didn't feel like he was, but here Reese sounded almost disappointed in him. Should he add something?

But what was there to be added? Harold wondered. Either Reese accepted his proposition and helped him, or he didn't and Harold would have to do something about that, too.

When Reese finally replied, Harold felt so relieved he let out a sigh.

Anon: No. Not a problem.

He typed his reply immediately.

Harold Wren: Alright. Can you tell me when he gave a Saturn's employee that flash drive?

Anon: About a week ago. He seemed suspicious before, but he really caught my eyes that day, because he looked like he was in a hurry. Honestly, he just seemed off. He's also one of those who arrive early and leave later than most.

As Reese gave away details of Lawson's spying, Harold realized he was also giving away crucial information about himself. Anyone reading him would figure out the anonymous

sender wasn't a regular employee of IFT. To see who comes in early and checks out later, one has to be a security guard.

It was quite possible Reese knew Harold knew who he was, but decided to play the game along with him.

Anon: I think you should do something that would force our little spy to have another meeting. You'll be ready then. You can take pictures, maybe find a way to copy what's inside the flash drive, and then give all your proof to the appropriate authorities.

Harold frowned. He wasn't perturbed this time but rather impressed. Reese's idea was a good one, and it might be done before the holidays.

Harold Wren: This is very good.

The reply came quickly.

Anon: Thank you, Harold. Your excitement is contagious.

Harold raised one eyebrow. Was he imagining things or was Reese mocking him there?

Harold Wren: I was merely congratulating you on a well-thought plan.

Anon: Yes, Harold, I saw that. And I was merely thanking you for the good words you have to say to me.

Puzzled and a bit irritated, Harold didn't reply for a while. He knew, thanks to Mrs. Kellin, that it was Friday. IFT's building was guarded during the weekend, but according to the timetable he managed to find, Reese wouldn't be working at the time. Could everything be prepared for next Monday?

Anon: Am I bothering you, Harold?

Harold Wren: Not at all. I was thinking about the details of the plan. Ideally, it could be completed well before next Wednesday.

Anon: Sure. It can be done.

Harold Wren: I'll get back to you in an hour. I need to think about this.

Anon: Alright. Later, Harold.

Harold shook his head but true to his words started to come up with different ideas to catch Lawson in the act and prevent more spying activities at IFT.

First, as owner of the company, Harold could always give some sort of order to be carried out.

He could also start rumors, which was almost as good as real events, knowing how addicted the whole industry was to news. What about an email forwarded to Lawson?

Lawson would then grow curious, try to find out more about it, and discover that IFT is on the verge of presenting a real and important technological invention at a future conference.

He knew he was on to something and kept thinking. The problem was, once Lawson was ready to find an employee from Saturn, how could they find proof that he was giving them data from IFT? They needed to find a way to switch the flash drive that time. Harold also considered the fact that maybe he wouldn't actually use a flash drive this time, so it was of the utmost importance that he had actual data to exchange for this plan to work.

He sighed. Assuming they found a way to exchange the flash drive, how could they involve the police at this stage?

Harold told Reese he would be back in an hour so he took his time. Unfortunately, as he was about to reengage the conversation, he was called into an urgent meeting.

Later, Harold's boss came by to introduce him to a new trainee, a young woman named Nathalie.

"She's going to spend some time with us, Harold. Why don't you show her around? Actually, it's almost lunchtime; you should probably take her out to eat."

Harold was going to protest, but his boss was gone before he had time to say anything.

"Hum," said Nathalie.

Harold stood and took his coat. He saw no chance to send a quick message to Reese. He would have to do that later.

"Lunch then, Mrs....?"

"Perry. But call me Nathalie."

As they were waiting for the elevator, he asked Nathalie what kind of work she was going to do at IFT, which prompted her to start a story about her school's project and the many ideas she had for the software she was working on. Harold hummed at the right moments, but his heart wasn't in it. The elevator came, and they made their way to the main floor.

"It's so impressive," Nathalie exclaimed when they arrived.

Her excitement did make him smile a little this time. He was so used to the building and the workings of the company, he forgot how proud he first was when he started IFT. Nowadays, it was hard to feel positive about it, and not because of the spying. He was stuck there; he put himself in a position where day after day he did mindless work instead of doing what he loved best. The last time he felt it, the joy of discovering something new, of creating something unexpected with new lines of code, was when he tried to find out who Reese was.

How sad, Harold thought, and yet the more he thought about it, the less he viewed those changes in his life as panic-inducing.

He looked at Nathalie and smiled. She didn't seem to be the type to take things for granted, and he liked that in a person.

"Is it your first time in New York?" he asked her.

They were almost at the door. Harold looked around but he didn't see Reese. He barely paid attention to the security guards outside, knowing the man wouldn't be there with them.

"Oh no. I live here," Nathalie replied.

"Me too," said Harold.

They stepped outside, both of them trying to ignore the wind and the freezing air.

In the end, Harold proposed that they go to a Thai restaurant. They went. Lunch was pleasant enough. Harold paid, and half an hour later they were on their way back to IFT.

They were close to the main entrance when Nathalie thanked him for lunch.

"It's no problem at all, Miss Perry," he said.

She blushed a little, put one string of hair behind her ears and smiled at him.

"Well, thanks again," she said and walked in front of him.

He nodded and was about to follow her when something made him turn his head around.

Twenty feet away from him stood Reese, looking quite serious and almost tense.

They exchanged a glance. Harold gave him a look of complete surprise. In return, he received one of displeasure that made the hair on the back of his neck stand out.

What? He thought. What is going on?

But Nathalie was calling and someone almost pushed him. Harold had no choice but to get inside the building.

He threw one last glance in Reese's direction, but the man had returned to scanning the streets like Harold had seen him do before.

Actually, he seemed intent on not looking at Harold.

After saying goodbye to Nathalie and wishing her a great internship at IFT, Harold went back to his computer and typed an email for Reese.

"Dear anonymous sender,

I apologize for not getting back to you sooner.

I have two questions for you:

- 1. Do you know someone working in the police who we could talk to?*
- 2. I was with a young trainee who's starting now at IFT."*

He paused. That should explain what Reese saw two minutes ago.

"And it made me think of previous experiences Lawson's had at different companies. Is it reasonable to think he created trouble somewhere else before being hired at IFT?"

Regards,

Harold Wren "

He sent the email but felt vaguely uncomfortable. He kept thinking about the way Reese had stared at him, as if he had done something wrong.

Harold waited the whole day but didn't get an answer to his email. He left IFT later than he was accustomed, hoping he could see Reese once before the weekend started but no luck. The man had vanished.

The bubbles increased in number as more water was poured into the tub.

Taking a bath wasn't something he did often, rather once or twice when he was exhausted or in much need of relaxation.

The water was very warm and he felt his muscles slowly starting to relax. Harold sighed deeply.

The whole day had been a complete disaster. He had spent the afternoon checking his emails every two minutes only to find nothing new had come up.

His rampant paranoia was telling him Reese was no longer willing to help him, or that Harold had pushed his limits a bit too hard with his plan.

It's not personal, it's business, he thought. Or was it?

He hoped Reese would stay and help him. He had proven, by uncovering Lawson's spying, that he was incredibly talented.

More so, he was a man Harold could need for bigger purposes.

After all, he could no longer ignore the fact that the numbers weighted on his mind.

As it had that morning, when he was thinking about the time he was wasting, a somber attitude enveloped him throughout the evening.

He knew how ironic it was that he had totally forgotten he could accomplish extraordinary things if he put his mind to it and how one man he barely knew had managed to remind him of that.

Harold had put his phone in the bathroom with him, in case he would get a message, but he wasn't holding out much hope. Also, he felt that it was not very prudent to put such devices in a room with water in it, so when he heard his phone vibrating, he felt pleasantly surprised and excited, yet simultaneously worried about possible electrocution. The phone was sitting on a chair, as far away from the bathtub as possible.

What to do? In the end, Harold decided to get out of the water. He hung one towel around his hips, dried his hands off sufficiently, and read the message.

Anon: You probably checked, but I think this is Lawson's first time. He's not exactly a high class criminal.

Another message came as Harold finished reading the first.

Anon: I didn't know it was your job to train trainees. Did you make an exception this time?

Harold was baffled and a bit offended by what Reese was implying. He typed his answer with a disturbed expression on his face.

Harold Wren: I would never do anything inappropriate with a young trainee, or as a matter of fact, with anyone in this company! I hope you realize how rude and insulting that is to me.

Anon: Don't get your knickers in a twist, Harold. I'm not implying anything...although I love how easy it is to rile you up.

Harold Wren: Why would you want to rile me up?

Anon: Boredom.

Harold shook his head. That man was going to kill him one day.

Of course, he was still half-naked in his bathroom and the water was getting cold. Oh well, too late.

He sighed and went to his bedroom. He put his towel on the back of a chair near the bed, and then put his pajamas on. He received another message.

Anon: I know someone in the police who could help us. She's a detective, really good at her job.

Harold was surprised. He didn't think Reese would actually have friends on the police force, but perhaps it came from working in security.

Harold Wren: I hope you realize by telling me this, and the name of that detective, I will discover your true identity.

Anon: Her name is Joss Carter. I already contacted her and explained the situation to her.

Harold Wren: You already did? Well thanks for telling me!

Anon: You gave me the impression you wanted the matter to be resolved quickly. She's a professional.

Harold Wren: Friend of yours, you said.

Anon: Just a friend, Harold.

Harold Wren: I never said anything. You are, of course, entitled to do as you please.

Anon: Duly noted. Like you and that young trainee, right?

Harold rolled his eyes and didn't bother to reply. The man was impossible.

He went to his kitchen and served himself a glass of wine. He put some cheese on a plate and went to sit on one of his couches in his living room.

He stretched his legs and picked the phone back up.

Harold Wren: What does she think, then? Did you tell her about the plan? We'll need to see what's inside the USB drive and we'll also need to know who asked him to spy on IFT, assuming it wasn't done of his own volition.

Anon: The plan isn't bad. Relax. After you catch him in the act, he and his pal from Saturn will be forced to talk.

Harold Wren: Who else knows about Lawson? You didn't go straight to me, didn't you?

Anon: I tried to go through the chain of command, but I couldn't prove anything about Lawson. And you can't tell a superior that your guts are telling you someone is being naughty.

Harold took a sip of his drink. He hesitated, but in the end he needed to know.

Harold Wren: Alright. You found out about me. How?

Anon: The same way I found out about Lawson: a lot of watching and a bit of detective work.

A lot of watching.

Harold Wren: Why aren't you telling anyone?

Anon: Why would I tell anyone? It's your business, literally. I guess you have your reasons, even if the situation is a bit peculiar.

Another message came before Harold had a chance to answer.

Anon: My friend Carter might know who you are, but there are ways for you to keep your identity a secret if you wish.

Harold Wren: That would be best.

Anon: Alright.

They spent the next half hour discussing how things would go down on Tuesday, the day where everything would happen.

First, Harold would find a way to send emails during the weekend. The email would look like it was forwarded to a lot of IFT's employees but only Lawson's department would get it.

Monday morning, he would start new rumors about a future conference involving a new prototype until Lawson's department would believe the 'hype', so to speak, and Lawson would have to contact his accomplice at Saturn Inc.

Harold Wren: How can we be sure he will do that?

Anon: Because he wouldn't have a choice, he would have to inform them. Now, we will need to give him proper data to be exchanged. Can you do that?

Harold Wren: Yes. I can send a document about the conference or the prototypes. Lawson is an advisor, I could order his boss to give him the document for review. I just hope he won't get too suspicious.

Anon: I don't think so. I don't think he realizes we're on to him.

Harold Wren: Even so, I can see almost all his files on his computer at work and everything he does on it. He's careful not to do anything that could raise alarms.

Anon: Doesn't actually scream genius. That's basic spying.

Harold Wren: Basic spying?

Anon: Yes, Harold. Basic spying.

Harold Wren: Were you a spy before you got engaged at IFT?

Anon: I just know a thing or two, that's all.

Harold Wren: I see.

After sending data and starting rumors, Harold would have to wait and see.

If Lawson tried to have a meeting before Tuesday, Harold would send more information, even some involving Saturn Inc., until Lawson wouldn't have a choice but to have a meeting that day. Harold wasn't above hacking the other side to make that possible.

That Tuesday, Carter and her team would be there to listen in on the meeting and move when the time was right.

Reese told him Carter would try to get the FBI involved, considering the size of Saturn Inc. as a company. They might even send an agent if they're really interested.

Harold Wren: Who is going to swipe the USB drive and copy the data?

Anon: Someone in Carter's team, I guess.

Harold Wren: Oh. I thought you would do it.

Anon: I'm afraid I've done all I can. If you want this to be resolved publicly, it's better if we step aside.

Harold Wren: But you don't like it?

Anon: I prefer to do things myself. I have a feeling you don't like it either.

Harold Wren: I think you and I are both reluctant to rely on others.

Harold got up to get himself a second glass of wine. He was almost done with his cheese. He had traded his phone for his laptop, which was more comfortable for talking, especially now that they were having such a long conversation.

Harold Wren: I have a feeling you really want to be a part of this operation but your friend, Carter, begged you to stay out of it.

Anon: You're starting to know me a bit too well. Should I be worried?

Harold thought it over. He didn't tell Reese, but he was already looking for information about Carter (she seemed perfect for the job), and in another window he was still hacking into different databases trying to find more information about one John Reese.

Harold had been doing that for a while. He had no problem multi-tasking.

Harold Wren: I think everyone should be cautious when sharing information, but you already know I feel that way.

Anon: Yes, I do. I understand the need for privacy.

Harold Wren: Of course you do. You're still anonymous.

Anon: Am I, really?

Harold licked his lips, wondering what to reply.

In the end, he decided to lie.

Harold Wren: Certainly.

Anon: If you say so. After they hear the conversation between Lawson and the employee from Saturn, Carter and her team will move on to arrest them. They'll need proof during the conversation, though. They'll be questioned later, and we'll see how far that spying goes.

Harold Wren: You think IFT is not the only company they're watching?

Anon: Carter thinks so, yes. I agree with her but we'll see. Of course, by Tuesday's night or Wednesday, the story will be out, just like you wanted.

Harold Wren: It's too early to assume everything will go according to plan.

Anon: Well, it's in the right hands I can tell you that.

Harold Wren: I have no doubt Detective Carter is as amazing as you say she is.

Harold looked at the clock on his computer. It was almost midnight. He hadn't realized how the time was passing.

He thought, surprised but almost pleased, that he was completely relaxed. His eyes were slowly closing. He could easily fall asleep on the couch.

Time to send Reese a final message before going to sleep.

Harold Wren: I'm afraid it's becoming difficult for me to stay awake. Goodnight, Anon. Have a good weekend.

Anon: You too, Harold. Goodnight.

The next day, Harold woke up in a very good mood. He found himself almost whistling as he prepared his breakfast of cereal with slices of bananas. As he was leaving the kitchen, he finally raised his head and took one look at the landscape outside.

His eyes widened as he realized the city was covered in white.

Could it be...?

Harold looked out the window and yes, there it was, snow everywhere: covering the roofs, the pavements, the cars.

The weather had been so cold lately, it was expected, but he still felt he was seeing something quite magical.

Harold smiled. He heard his phone vibrating. Another message from Reese.

Anon: Have you seen it?

Harold Wren: Yes.

Anon: It's beautiful. Impractical to go out and walk but beautiful.

Harold Wren: I don't intend to go out now, or lord help me, go ice skating.

Anon: You would look funny ice skating.

Harold Wren: I know.

The rest of the weekend provided him with little quiet times.

He spent most of it preparing emails to send, hacking into various databases and contacting Detective Carter. On the phone, she sounded quick to get to the point. No fussing occurred, no nonsense. She was doing him a favor, he realized, because it wasn't the sort of operation she was used to carrying out, and yet she sounded like she knew what she was doing.

After she assured him that she would do her best to catch his spy, Harold hung up feeling reassured and impressed.

She never once called Reese by his name; she instead called him "their mutual friend", which satisfied him.

If Detective Carter could keep Reese's identity quiet even though the man probably didn't ask her to do it, Harold felt confident she would take extra precautions to keep his own identity a secret. It was unusual, but it worked.

After his call ended, he said as much to Reese. The conversation, curiously, didn't stop there.

When Sunday night arrived and Harold closed his laptop to go to sleep, he realized he spent the entire weekend talking to Reese.

Between hacking, writing new emails, and the general tasks that arise when you're trapping a corporate spy, he found himself arguing with Reese about which Agatha Christie's book most resembled their situation, which type of New Yorker would hate this weather the most, and what silent movie was the best.

They even had a very long conversation about the ending of Citizen Kane and the meaning of rosebud.

Harold could admit to himself that he was enjoying those simple talks.

Monday morning, he finally left his apartment. Thankfully, the snow was slowly fading away, but the ground was still slippery.

He was close to the IFT's building when Reese showed up. It was as if he had been waiting for Harold the whole time.

"Mister Wren," he said. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Mister Reese," Harold replied, as if he was expecting him.

Was it strange to see the man like this after only talking to him via messages? Sure. Harold felt nervous and his heart started to beat a bit faster. He told himself he needed to stay calm, to appear collected.

They walked slowly. This time, he didn't comment on their slower pace because he knew they were going to fall if they didn't tread carefully.

Around them, all the busy workers getting out of the subway at this hour appeared annoyed and moved slowly, which wasn't a typical habit of New Yorkers.

"I hope we won't see an old lady falling," Reese told him.

"That would be unfortunate," Harold replied.

"Did you have a nice weekend?"

Harold was about to reply when he felt himself starting to slip on the ice. He experienced a moment of panic when an arm wrapped around his, holding him firmly in place.

"Thank you," he said. He tried not to blush but failed.

"No problem," Reese replied.

After Harold regained his composure, he tried to answer the man's question.

"I was busy, had a lot of things to do. How was your weekend?"

Reese smirked. "Busy, you said? My weekend was very nice."

And that was all, apparently. They were about to enter the building. Reese wished him a good day, and Harold did the same.

He was there earlier than usual for a reason: Harold had to sync his phone with Lawson's, meaning he had to stand close to him and let his program do its magic. Something he prepared this weekend.

He waited almost five minutes, hanging around the elevator, when Lawson came.

The whole thing lasted a minute, no less, but it stressed him deeply, especially with the look on Lawson's face, like he couldn't wait to leave. And that damn elevator, almost there too soon. Thankfully, it was done and they both left the main floor.

In the elevator, Harold sighed, relieved.

He sent a message to Reese.

Harold Wren: Phone is synched. We should know soon if he's going to call his friend at Saturn.

Anon: Good job, Harold.

Harold Wren: Thank you.

"And now we wait," he thought, as Lawson was getting off at the second floor.

He arrived at his floor, waved at Nathalie, listened to Mrs. Kellin talk about her weekend, then went to his desk. He sat with his back as straight as possible and tried to be patient.

Someone dropped by to give him a report, but he found himself unable to concentrate.

He was almost chanting in his head. *Come on, call. Call.*

He considered sending another email, one more item that should convince their spy he needed to call.

He was about to click "send" when Lawson finally called a number. Harold was quick to follow the trace through his phone.

Using a discreet ear piece to avoid the attention of his coworkers, he listened.

"Hullo?" Harold heard.

"Yeah, it's me," Lawson replied. "Look, we need to meet"

"Yeah? Why? Something came up?"

"Yeah. Something big. Can we see each other today?"

No, no, no, Harold thought. That's too early. He quickly sent an email he had written in case something like this would happen. He then rearranged Lawson's calendar so he wouldn't have a choice but to have the meeting tomorrow. The man could always try to meet his friend at night, of course, but Harold didn't think that was likely.

Lawson suddenly cursed, and Harold imagined he was reading the notice regarding the last minute meetings his entire department was required to attend. "Sorry, today's not good. How about tomorrow?"

"Fine," came the voice at the other end. "When?"

"During lunch. I won't have a lot of time but this is important."

"Okay. Tomorrow then."

They hang up. Harold smiled. He had tracked down the number Lawson had called. It was someone from Saturn Inc., confirming what he already knew, but at least he could send that information to Detective Carter.

Harold Wren: Success. The meeting's going to happen tomorrow during lunch.

Anon: That was easy.

Harold Wren: Sure, I only had to work the entire weekend to make this work.

Anon: I meant congratulations on this well-earned victory. Do you want me to call you King of Technology, Harold?

Harold rolled his eyes, but on the inside, he felt more like laughing. He loved a well executed plan, when all that thinking gave place to the perfect chain of events.

Harold Wren: I would prefer if you didn't.

Anon: So now that the meeting is set up like you planned, what are you going to do?

Harold Wren: Wait.

Anon: You're just going to wait the whole day?

Harold Wren: What else do you propose?

Anon: ...you're going to drive yourself crazy if you don't do something. Wanna play a game?

Harold Wren: I can be very patient.

Anon: Only trying to help.

Harold Wren: Fine. Fine. What do you have in mind?

Anon: It's just a game, Harold. Let's play chess.

Harold Wren: I guess chess is acceptable.

No doubt, Reese was smirking by then.

Harold played the game on his phone.

He didn't want his computer screen to show a game while he was at work. He won twice; Reese won the second game they played. Reese also took his time to reply, no doubt busy watching security tapes.

Lunchtime came around and Harold preferred not to go out, even if some part of him wanted to see Reese (or maybe he wanted Reese to see him but he didn't want to examine those feelings too closely).

The afternoon was playing games, replying to emails, and obsessively checking Lawson's activity.

At 5 p.m. Harold shut down his computer. Outside, he looked at the security guards but didn't see Reese.

He went home. He saw that Carter had replied to acknowledge that she had received his message, and they would proceed as planned next morning.

Harold felt so excited; he knew it would be hard for him to go to sleep. He prepared himself a cup of soup, sat in front of his computer, and drank it while reviewing all the information he had at hand. He was finished with his dinner and was bringing a cup of tea back from the kitchen when Reese sent him a new message.

Anon: Nervous?

Harold Wren: Yes.

Anon: You shouldn't be. This sort of operation is nothing.

Harold Wren: Operation?

He hadn't looked at the new data his hacking had brought him regarding Reese. Before talking to the man, he would have felt it absolutely necessary to look at it. He would have reviewed it, analyzed it, word by word.

Now, he more or less respected Reese and didn't want to invade his privacy...too much.

But the mention of "operations" confirmed to Harold that he'd been part of an agency, once. He was much too qualified as a security guard.

Anon: Yes. Operations. Missions. I've seen worse than this one, trust me.

He stared at the words appearing on his screen. *Trust me*. He didn't need to think too much about it, and how surprising was that?

Harold Wren: I do. I do trust you.

Anon: I'm glad.

Reese changed the topic of conversation after that.

On the very day of what Harold had come to called "Operation Catch-A-Spy", he woke up without needing his alarm clock. At six a.m. he was awake and brushing his teeth. He dressed quickly and looked at himself in the mirror, wondering if Reese was doing the same.

"Come on," he then told himself.

Half an hour later, he hadn't seen anyone at all and was the only person in the office from his department.

Harold sat at his desk and waited.

He waited and waited, trying to breathe deeply, without panicking, without storming off. A number of employees came inside and started working.

Harold didn't pay attention to them. His heart was beating way too fast as lunchtime inched closer. Reese was silent too. Did that meant there was something wrong with their operation?

All the calm he felt the previous evening was gone.

"Snap out of it," he whispered.

He decided to send a message to Reese.

Harold Wren: Is everything ready?

Anon: Lawson's going out now. Carter is there with her team. Don't panic, Harold.

Harold Wren: That is very easy for you to say!

Anon: Considering I'm benched too, no, it's not easy. Remember?

A message came a minute later.

Anon: You said you trusted me last night.

Harold Wren: Did I say that?

Anon: Harold.

Harold Wren: Fine, yes. What does that have to do with what's happening now?

Anon: What's happening now is you trusting me that everything is going to be fine. It's almost over. You've done everything you can. Lawson's going down, period.

Once again, Harold took a deep breath.

"Alright," he said and tried to ignore his sudden need to go see what was happening outside the building.

A million thoughts were invading his mind and it was all he could do to grab the edge of his desk and stay focused on calming himself.

Nathalie came by to give him a report.

"Are you alright?" she asked him after she took a quick look at him.

Harold nodded.

"I'm fine, Miss Perry."

She let it go but it was clear she didn't believe him, and how could she? He looked like he was on the brink of a heart attack.

Finally, he received a call.

Harold stared at his phone and slowly, pushed a button to reply.

"Harold Wren," he said.

"Mr. Wren?"

He recognized the voice of Detective Carter.

"Yes, yes. What is...the news, Detective Carter?"

He hoped his voice sounded even but in reality he was sure he let out only a shrieking sound.

"Well...your little spy was arrested. Someone from the white collar division came down at the last minute. Lawson's going into FBI's custody."

Harold closed his eyes.

Relief washed over him. He could have yelled "victory" at that point, so nervous had he been waiting.

"Thank you, Detective," he told Carter, after it felt like his heart was beating normally again.

"So you have the proof then? You know everything he told..." He stopped, peered around him, then whispered, "our competitor?"

On the other line of the phone, Detective Carter started laughing.

Harold blinked.

"What?" he said. "What did I say?"

"Nothing," Carter replied. "You're exactly like J—"

She gasped.

"I mean, exactly how our mutual friend described you," she quickly added.

At first, he didn't understand why she was reacting like this but then it hit him.

She was about to say his name. *John*.

"Don't fret, Detective," he replied. "I've known who he is for a very long time."

"Oh," she said.

"I thought you knew. Or he knew."

She seemed to consider his words before replying, carefully, "I think you should probably talk to him. Anyway, I gotta go. Murder to solve and all that. The glamorous life."

"Yes, of course."

He thanked her again for the favor she'd done him and hung up.

It hit him then. It was over.

Over.

He looked around. Inside the IFT building, on his floor to be precise, nothing had really changed.

He could see Mrs. Kellin talking on the phone and Nathalie absorbed in a new report. His own "boss" had left to get lunch.

Harold felt suddenly overwhelmed.

The possibilities. They were so many.

For once, he felt like taking a chance. First, he sent an email.

"Dear Anonymous sender,

Detective Carter just told me the operation was a success.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all your help and companionship.

It was very much appreciated.

We'll talk soon.

Harold F. "

He signed it like this deliberately and felt giddy all of a sudden, like he had been waiting for a moment like this all his life and suddenly he was free.

Free to leave, free to become whoever he wanted to be.

He closed his window. Erased all his life on that computer, all the history. He left no trace at all and then shut the computer down. He brought Mrs. Kellin a mug of coffee as she was still talking to someone on the phone. She sent him a grateful look, and he nodded.

He then dropped by Nathalie's desk and wished her a good day. She smiled at him, not knowing that he had actually dropped a flash drive on her desk, one containing a very long manual that would help her create her software. And if all else failed, he had included some lines of codes she would need.

Harold then waited for the elevator and got inside two minutes later. He looked one last time at everyone working on that floor, all those people who were familiar to him.

Then, the doors closed.

That day, Harold Wren didn't come back after lunch. He didn't come back to IFT at all.

Coincidentally, the same day saw rumors floating around the office that an employee had been arrested by the FBI.

The very next day, the New York Times's headline read: *Corporate Spy arrested at IFT, Saturn CEO under investigation.*

Harold was in his pajamas, sitting at his dining table when he read the news. He instinctually knew without checking that IFT's shares were now valued far above Saturn's.

He smiled. However, his good mood didn't last long.

After he had left the building, he hadn't seen Reese, nor had he talked to him since that morning.

Harold had walked home, thinking about all the events of the last few days and what he (and Reese) had managed to accomplish. He understood that was nothing compared to what he still had to do.

The numbers, they were his responsibility and he had neglected them for far too long.

Convincing Reese to join him, that was his goal now.

Harold was ready to send him a message but once again, his fingers started shaking, all his confidence slowly leaving him. He felt so awkward. The worst part was, Harold knew what he wanted to write. A million little messages.

Dear anonymous sender,

There are days I feel so crushed by the events of the past, I forget how to live in the present.

Am I the only one?

Regards,

Harold Wren.

or

Dear anonymous sender,

All my todays were like any other day until I met you.

I'm at a loss at what to do.

Regards,

Harold Wren.

or

Dear anonymous sender,

I like taking long walks in the park. I don't do that often anymore, but I should do it again, as soon as it gets less cold outside.

Perhaps you could join me.

Regards,

Harold Wren.

or

Dear anonymous sender,

A long time ago I created something so big that it consumed me. Now I need to regain control of it. In fact, let's be more honest with each other, I need to regain control of my life. I think I'm ready.

Would you like to help me?

Regards,

Harold Wren.

What he ended up writing was something else.

For the first time since he received that first email from Reese, he understood he couldn't afford to be evasive or to pretend.

He had to send a message so earnest that there would be no doubt of his sincerity.

"Dear Mr. Reese,

You probably noticed in my last mail that I didn't sign it with the name Harold Wren.

I think it's time you call me Harold Finch. It's as close to who I am as it could be.

Last time I spoke with Detective Carter, she mentioned your name on the phone. Well, I hope you understand I have known who you are almost as soon after you sent me those pictures. I wonder, how did you know who I was? I asked you, and your answer never satisfied me. I suppose even when I try to blend in I still have a hard time pretending to be someone that I'm not. You said you watched me.

It troubles me but at the same time, it doesn't feel as dangerous as it could be for me.

In any case, I am so glad you sent me those pictures. All those little talks that I had with you, well, they were just that. Little talks, but they have done more for me this past year than almost anything I can think of.

See, I understand who I am, but sometimes I am not sure I am doing what feels right. I hide as much as I can and hope trouble won't find me. It's funny, because trouble did find me, and it looked like you.

I'm sure you have no idea where this is going. I'm sorry about that. What I mean to say is: thank you.

I guess all I can say now is that, as much as I enjoyed our little adventure apprehending a criminal, there are numbers calling every day.

Here, in the city, we can do more for them. Or at least, I...I have to do more for them. If you want to go on a new adventure with me, I suggest we meet tomorrow morning at Central Park. Enclosed you will find the exact coordinates and time.

I don't know if you'll be there. I can only hope.

Until then, I wish you the best and thank you once again.

Yours truly,

Harold Finch."

It was sentimental and foolish and he still managed to be evasive while trying hard not to be. It didn't matter.

Harold sent the email.

He didn't receive a reply. It hurt, but at the same time, he expected it.

The next day, Harold woke up early and stared at his reflection in the mirror. What he found wasn't satisfying at all but he couldn't exactly wish for another face.

Central Park, then. His meeting. He had to go, obviously, even if he was in a complete state of panic.

Trust me, Reese had once written to him. *Everything is going to be fine*.

Harold heard *his* voice as he started to walk to his destination.

Would Reese be there or was his lack of a reply a way for him to tell Harold he wasn't interested? If he was there, would he accept Harold's proposition?

Would Harold even manage to arrive there?

His stomach was tied in knots. God knows what else could go wrong.

It had been so cold when he put one step outside that he had gone back to get a second scarf.

Now, he felt overdressed and ridiculous which didn't help to lower his anxiety.

Harold had been walking for ten minutes when he saw Reese. He was standing near a tree and was talking to...a dog? Harold stopped moving and stared at him.

Dog or not, Reese was there.

He was there.

Reese must have heard him coming towards him because he turned around. They stared at each other.

Harold had agonized for hours about what he was going to say to him, so of course the first words out of his mouth were, "You got a dog."

Reese nodded and proudly brought the Belgian Malinois in front of him. The dog barked, excited.

"Right," Reese replied. "I got him."

"You brought him?" Harold asked.

"Well..."

The expression on his face looked innocent, but there was something else in Reese's tone that made Harold feel suspicious.

"Mr. Reese..."

"Yes, Harold?"

"Did you steal this dog?"

"I would never dare," he replied.

"Good lord," Harold whispered. "You did. You stole that dog!"

"I can assure you he's better off with me," Reese replied. "Besides, this dog is very special. You'll see. You'll become great friends, you and him"

He had talked with confidence, but he looked shyly in Harold's direction.

At that moment, Harold realized that Reese was scared.

He was as scared as Harold was.

Talking to each other in person was different, especially now that they knew exactly who the other was.

And the words. Could they use the same words they did writing to each other? Could it be that easy, that comfortable?

Things that didn't matter when using a keyboard mattered very much right now, because they could look at each other and see everything the other was thinking or everything he was willing to reveal about himself.

Was Reese scared that Harold would run away? That he would leave him there, alone in the park with that stolen dog?

Once, a long time ago, Harold would have left. Gone in an instant and he wouldn't have looked back, too afraid to face his feelings.

Now, he slowly moved forward to pet the dog.

"What's his name?" he asked.

"Bear," Reese replied.

Harold raised one eyebrow.

"Funny name for a dog," he teased.

Reese shrugged but there was a light in his eyes, like he felt content. Yes, Harold thought. He seemed almost happy, which made him smile in return. Maybe it was contagious.

"I know. Too late to change," Reese said.

"Very well," Harold replied.

They didn't say anything for a while; they just looked at each other.

Finally, Harold told him: "So you got my message".

Reese tilted his head to send him a look. There was the same intensity in his eyes than the day they met.

"I got all your messages, Harold. Or should I call you Finch?"

"Either is fine," he replied.

"So you said something about numbers..."

"It's a long story"

"I have all the time in the world," Reese replied.

It was true.

Harold started walking forward. He didn't turn around, he just started talking. He trusted Reese to follow him and he did. So he talked, he talked until his voice felt hoarse. He talked until he started coughing, until the cold made him feel numb.

He talked about the Machine, about Nathan dying, about being worried for his safety, about hiding, about being afraid of the very thing he created. He talked about the numbers. About the irrelevants and his shame of not helping them until now.

Then he stopped and looked at Reese, who had been listening in complete silence, not interrupting him once, which Harold felt was unusual from him.

"So that's the story," Harold said.

He was scared of what Reese might reply. Scared of the judgment in his eyes.

What he got was Reese saying something in German to Bear who was trying to lick Reese's hand.

Harold was too tired, too cold to understand the meaning.

"I think we should go somewhere warm," Reese said afterwards.

He took Harold by the arm and led him to a nice path going back into the streets.

"Where's your place?" he asked him and Harold told him.

Half an hour later, they were inside Harold's apartment.

"Now Bear," Reese told the dog, "Don't be too excited okay?"

The dog yapped as if he had just been insulted. Reese smirked and joined Harold, who was sitting on his sofa, a blanket covering him. Harold could almost hear his teeth chattering.

"You know, Harold," Reese said. "Setting up a meeting so early in the morning, especially when it's the North Pole outside...maybe wasn't such a good idea"

"Do you think, Mr. Reese? I hadn't noticed," he grumbled.

Reese smiled, but that smile seemed different than the other ones. It felt more real, closer to who the man really was. It made Harold feel warmer.

"Can I ask you something?" he said to him.

Reese nodded. "Sure"

"Your email address. 214? What does it mean?"

Reese licked his lips.

"I thought you had forgotten."

"I don't forget things. Not ever... John."

Maybe it was because Harold said his first name (he looked suddenly more at ease), but Reese started to explain the number to him.

"When I created the email, 214 was the number of days since I first saw you. I was hired before that, in April? In the middle of the month, I saw you one day going to work really early. I thought you looked...special? I don't know. You seemed very different from everyone else so I was curious. I was paid to pay attention to people going inside that building, and you definitely looked like you belonged there and at the same time like you didn't. Anyway, it's just a number. It was stupid of me to use it..."

Harold's jaw dropped. He was so surprised; he had no idea how to reply.

Reese quickly added, "I promise I wasn't stalking you, Harold."

"No...you were just counting the days."

"I do that often. You see, I don't forget things either."

They didn't say anything for a while. Harold thought about what Reese had just confessed.

214 days. The number was higher now. *Always numbers*, he thought. *Always numbers*.

A minute later, Reese leaned to face him.

"By the way, I do want it," he said in a low voice.

"What?" Harold replied.

"In your email, you asked me if I wanted to go on a new adventure with you. I do."

Harold stared at him, astonishment preventing him from speaking.

"You alright, Harold?" Reese asked, cheekily, as if he hadn't told Harold that yes, he was willing to be a part of something new with him. Something possibly dangerous but

extraordinary. Something they could do together.

"You're the worst, Mr. Reese," Harold told him when he fully understood the implications of what the man said. "The absolute worst."

"Am I?" Reese replied, as he leaned closer, so much closer that their lips brushed and Harold stopped breathing for a moment.

It was so innocent, so pure, until Reese kissed him for real, slipping his tongue inside Harold's mouth. After that, it was almost like he waited for Harold to respond to the kiss.

Am I going to kiss him back? Harold wondered. *Would I really dare?*

Yes, he decided.

He would dare.

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