

Technical Support

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/770581) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/770581>.

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| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | Person of Interest (TV) |
| Relationship: | Harold Finch/John Reese |
| Characters: | Harold Finch , John Reese , Joss Carter |
| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe , IT Guy , First Time , Office Romance , Meme of Interest |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 23 of POI works |
| Collections: | Meme_of_Interest - Person of Interest Kink Meme Community , Fics to Remember |
| Stats: | Published: 2013-04-22 Words: 13,651 Chapters: 1/1 |

Technical Support

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Summary

The IFT Plaza security team wasn't what John would have called the brightest stars in the firmament. (Written for the tech support AU prompt.)

Notes

Written for the [tech support AU prompt](#) on the kinkmeme. With many many thanks to lim and Cesperanza! <3

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [技术支持](#) by [sylvansue](#)

"You need some help?" the cop said, and it grated. By then John had gotten sober enough to feel something other than numb, and having her talk to him gently about Iraq, about being a soldier, as though that had anything to do with what he'd become — it scraped at something that hadn't been dulled into senselessness yet. There wasn't any help, and she wasn't really offering; what she meant was did he want to get shoved into a system that was about keeping him out of other people's way.

"What kind of help do you think I could use?" he said, smiling a little, cruel, making her face it. But she leaned back against the desk and crossed her arms, eyes narrowing.

"That depends," she said. "I've got a friend handles building security for a few dozen companies in the city. He always has some openings going. You ready to come out of that bottle? Because I'll speak to him for you, as long as you'll look me in the face and say you'll show up in the morning."

He stared at her, blank with surprise. The cop — Carter — jerked her head towards the hallway, towards the huddled knot of the stupid kids who'd jumped him. "You could've done a lot worse to them," she said. "Frankly, you probably should have. Six to one odds, and no offense, but you are not looking like you're at your best. But you did just enough to scare them into staying down without doing real damage." She leaned towards him. "Whatever you did over there, however bad things got, you're not out of control, and you're not vicious."

You're not vicious. It almost made him want to laugh. He drained his cup and set it deliberately on the table in front of her. "You're sure about that."

She looked at the cup and picked it up. "I run your prints, am I going to find something I don't like?"

"Just one thing?" John said.

She looked at him steadily, and then she leaned over and dropped it in the trash. She took out her wallet and handed him three twenties, and a post-it note she scribbled on: a name and an address. "Go get a room at the Y, get yourself cleaned up," she said. "Be there nine am tomorrow. Leave the bottle," she added, dryly, and swung herself off the table and went out of the room.

#

He didn't know why he went along with it. Maybe because he didn't care enough one way or another, and she seemed to, at least enough to spend sixty bucks and fifteen minutes on him, which was more than he was worth to himself. Or maybe just because he was tired, and a shower and a shave and a bed sounded good; either way, the next day when he walked into the office, in a cheap t-shirt and pants from the army-navy surplus, Carter's friend didn't even side-eye him before sending him out on a job.

The IFT Plaza security team wasn't what John would have called the brightest stars in the firmament. The equipment was good, cameras in the right places, motion detectors, keycard

access to anywhere secure, but the guys were rent-a-cops from companies like the one Carter's friend ran. They didn't take the job seriously, even John's supervisor Walter, a cop who'd done his twenty and now spent his days comfortably in the back room with his feet up and his hands laced over a substantial gut. The most they did was hassle the poor nerds when they forgot their keycards, mostly for fun; they all recognized the people they dinged.

But John kept coming in anyway. It was almost better than the bottle for deadening, the endless wash of tiny constant stupid tasks, and he didn't have to be a real person, just a uniform. He got a space in a reasonably clean flophouse in Washington Heights, bought two suits and seven shirts at Housing Works, started eating enough to get back some muscle, and gave the rest of his paychecks to whichever street people he came across.

He didn't really know what he was doing. He suspected Carter had fished his cup out of the trash after he'd gone; if she ever ran the prints, Snow would turn up one day and put a bullet in the back of his head. John was half waiting for it, to be shoved through the door instead of stepping through. In the meantime, he went to work in a black suit and grey tie and a blank face, and politely said good morning, good morning, as everyone came in. He didn't have anything better to do.

It turned out he'd been hired because they were about to upgrade their systems: they were moving to biometric data instead of the keycards. There were two weeks of extra guys on duty while all the door systems were replaced, and then the glitches started: people rejected when they shouldn't have been — cue more pointless hassling of the nerds, even though the guards let the management types go by — and worse than that, people approved or misidentified as other employees. John was the only one who caught those, even though there were seventeen in the first day. Walter mostly looked annoyed at him for making work.

Harold Cygnet showed up the next morning to poke at the systems. John recognized him by face and limp, though not by name: he'd never forgotten his keycard.

"I figure it just needs a little burn-in," Walter said, full of jovial unease, with Cygnet standing in the doorway of the back office unblinking at him from behind his thick-rimmed glasses. There were chip bag wrappers on the desk and one beer bottle visible in a corner; John saw Walter's eyes darting to it, guiltily. "Everything's got a few bugs, right? Just gotta live with these things. And hey, that's what we're for," with an expansive gesture towards John. "Trust a man more than a machine, right?"

"Not particularly," Cygnet said. He had a closed-up face, large eyes and small formal mouth primly shut, turned down at the corners. "I'll need the desk and the terminal."

"Right, yeah, sure, help yourself," Walter said. "John here can tell you about the incidents. I've got to go check in with the guys on the doors." By which he meant he had to go chat them all up, distract them from their jobs, then take a long coffee break, and come back in time to go to lunch.

Cygnet didn't look at John while he limped over — spinal injury, damaged hip, John's brain said, assessing, automatic — sat down at the desk and fiddled with the terminal; the monitor screens filled with code and logfiles. "What times did the misidentification incidents occur?" Cygnet said, without looking up.

John took him through them, watching his hands. Cygnet was a steady typer, fast but not hectic, and there was something weird about how he did it. After a couple of minutes John finally picked it out: Cygnet never seemed to hit the backspace key. It turned out there was some kind of amazing autocorrect running that fixed Cygnet's words as he typed; sometimes it didn't kick in until he was five, six, once even ten lines of code further on.

"That doesn't seem like it would work out all that well," John said. Cygnet didn't look around, though an eyebrow lifted. "Your autocorrect's a little aggressive, isn't it?"

"It's tailored to my requirements," Cygnet said, after a sharp look at him. "Now, the times of the false positives."

After John had given him the set, Cygnet worked on the logfiles in silence for another five minutes; then the security camera photographs of the people went up on one of the screens, he paused for a moment, and then he started really working, code rolling across the screen. The photographs started to drop out one after another; three at once, then four, then one, then one more. That left eight on the screen, and Cygnet paused and sat back to look at them.

John looked idly, too. There wasn't any pattern: a mix of men and women, races and clothes. Then something about it pinged him; abruptly he said, "All those were false positives?"

Cygnet turned his chair towards John and looked at him, eyes narrowing. "Yes. What is it?"

John looked at them again, trying to pin it down. "Can you run the video?" he said. Cygnet turned, the keys went. The pictures spread out across two screens, enlarged, started running, thirty seconds. "Stop each one when I say," John said, and leaning in said, "Now — " touching the first one. It froze. "Now — "

After three of them, Cygnet stopped and said, "I see." All three of them were paused on a frame with the head turned slightly, eyes darting upwards, to look directly into the camera. "They're all aware of the camera. But these people seem random — "

"They are random," John said. "They're actors. Someone hired them for a day job, told them they were going to be part of testing a new system, promised them a bonus if they made it through security and reported back."

"Ah," Cygnet said. "Testing for weaknesses."

"Why did *you* put them up?" John demanded.

"There were a handful of small bugs in the identification system, now fixed," Cygnet said. "The other incidents were all directly traceable to those; these remained unexplained. Of course, if they're the product of an effort at a deliberate break-in, the fault will be in the security of the biometrics database, instead: someone got in, got at the data of actual employees, altered it to match that of their intruders." He looked at the photographs. "Really the question is why anyone would bother."

John raised an eyebrow. "Why does this building have security?"

Cygnets leaned back in his chair and turned his body towards John to give him a mildly incredulous look. "Does the security here strike you as appropriate for a building that contained anything particularly valuable?"

It didn't, but John hadn't expected one of the guys apparently responsible for the system — Cygnets clearly knew it backwards and forwards; John had been assuming he'd *built* it — to say so. "Then why have any?"

"Oh, you have to, since 9/11," Cygnets said. "It's not a formal standard, but it might as well be. People like concrete affirmations of their security, however illusory." He spoke idly, tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair. "How were all of these caught?"

"I didn't recognize them," John said. Cygnets looked hard at him again; John shrugged. "Someone who hasn't been here over the last three weeks shouldn't have had their data in the system yet."

"You caught *all* of them?" Cygnets said. His eyes were fixed on John, fingers stilled, like he was seeing John for the first time; John looked back at him with bland innocence. "Hm. In that case, I wonder what happened while you weren't here."

"The rest of the security team were highly vigilant?" John said.

"Your colleagues appreciate the vote of confidence, I'm sure," Cygnets said.

"Also, I'm here from eight to seven," John said.

Cygnets frowned at him. "This is a union building."

John shrugged. "The security company's an outside contractor, and I'm still on probation." He didn't care; more hours in the day filled.

Cygnets frowned even more, mouth pursing, like that dissatisfied him somehow. "On the bright side, that does leave us less to cover. Are you actually comfortable perched like that, or would you prefer to get a chair? This will take some time."

John blinked. "You want to go through every hour of security footage when I wasn't here?"

"Unfortunately for you, Mr. — ?"

"Reese," John said. He hadn't bothered to switch the name. The CIA wasn't going to find him with that, and if they were going to find him, the name wouldn't make a difference. It wasn't worth the hassle of learning to respond to a new one.

"Well, Mr. Reese," Cygnets said, "sadly, the reward for good work is more of it." He turned back to the terminal. "This will take me roughly fifteen minutes to set up. You may as well go and get some coffee if you like: the company will reimburse you. If you do, I take green tea, one sugar."

"Okay," John said, and got to the Starbucks on the corner and back in ten. He wasn't tempted to loiter, even though it was almost the first nice day, sunshine pouring down over the plaza

and its fountains. Back inside, standing in the doorway looking at Cygnet's profile, beaky and intent, John finally managed to identify the odd feeling in his belly sitting next to double-vanilla-shot iced latte as *charmed*: it had been a long time since he'd felt anything like it.

"Five more minutes," Cygnet said, without turning.

"Take your time," John said, setting down the tea, and pulled up his chair.

What Cygnet built in fifteen minutes was apparently a system that ran a facial-detection algorithm on the lobby footage, tossed the data whenever John was around, and then extracted out every person who'd come in during whatever timeslots were left. When John figured it out, after the faces from his lunch break came up, he eyed Cygnet even more narrowly. "It's not that complicated, Mr. Reese," Cygnet said, without his even saying anything. "Recognition of one consistently dressed and clean-shaven individual with the same hairstyle is trivial these days; any commercial computer vision library can handle as much."

"You'd still have to work with it," John said. "But I guess this one's also 'tailored to your needs'?" Cygnet darted him an annoyed look, prissy, and refused to answer, which made John have to fight back a grin.

They spent the rest of the day going through the footage. Cygnet ordered them lunch on a company account and kept going without a pause. Somewhere around three in the afternoon, Walter looked in, hesitated, and backed out without saying anything. John had told Cygnet to speed things up by then: he was getting another brief video clip every six seconds.

He found twenty-three more, all of whom had gotten through while he'd been out, early in the morning and late in the evening; one on his afternoon coffee break, the rest this day while he'd been in the back office with Cygnet. After the coffee break one, Cygnet made a face of annoyance, and when they were done, he sat back and glared at the faces.

"None of them is a pro, by the way," John said, tipping back the last of his (third) coffee. "You haven't actually been compromised yet."

"No, but we will be," Cygnet said. "There are too many data points for them to miss the pattern."

"What pattern?"

Cygnet did something that made a chart pop up: it looked exactly like John's time card for the day, give or take fifteen minutes. "You," he said. "I can't imagine anyone who's gone to the trouble of hiring twenty-odd actors won't have already thoroughly acquainted themselves with the schedule of the security staff."

John shrugged. "Hire better people."

Cygnet turned his chair and looked at John. "Do *you* know many security guards of your own caliber, Mr. Reese?"

"They don't have to be," John said. "The ones you've got would even be fine, if they took the job seriously. But it's hard to do that once you've got a whole team who think it's lip service."

"Hm," Cygnet said. "I suppose I can't really complain, given my own dismissiveness." He looked back at the monitors. "And in fact, my first point still stands. There's nothing here that justifies this level of effort."

"Corporate espionage?" John said. "Maybe there's something higher up you don't know about."

"No, there isn't," Cygnet said, with perfect finality.

"Hacking your own employer isn't very good form," John said, and got another one of those annoyed looks; he *couldn't* help grinning back, this time.

"In any case," Cygnet said, "there certainly isn't enough cause to replace our entire security staff. I'll secure the database tonight, but if they're competent, likely there will be no way to identify all the falsified entries already planted in the system, which can still be used."

"You should purge it and start from scratch," John said.

"And if the contents of this building were more valuable than whatever's in the Apple Store down the block, much less the amount of time that would consume, we would," Cygnet said dryly. "But under the circumstances, I think we'll simply have you spend two hours of your work day reviewing the video from your absences." He did something that left an icon on the desktop. "Just double-click it when you come in, first thing in the morning."

"You're not going to spot me anymore?" John said with exaggerated mournfulness, mostly to cover the fact that he *was* a little sorry.

Cygnet levered himself up out of his chair. "I have every confidence in you, Mr. Reese. Do inform your supervisor if you note any other intrusions."

#

John finished reviewing the footage the next morning: no more attempts. Unfortunately, that meant Cygnet was right. Whoever was behind this had gotten the information they were looking for, taking advantage of the first day of glitches to cover their work, and now they were going silent. The actual attempt would come after they'd all settled back into complacency.

John spent the weekend walking the full length of Riverside Park and back, slowly, more than a hundred blocks. It was still beautiful, sunny and warm, and when he got hungry he bought three hot dogs and an ice cream bar from a vendor and ate them sitting on a bench, watching normal people go by with their kids and dogs. It felt unreal, like being inside a movie. Afterwards he went by the warehouse and found Joan counting out bottle caps from one of her bags; he handed her two thousand dollars in cash, and stayed to make sure no one gave her trouble while she doled it out and sent various people to make runs for food and liquor and cigarettes.

He didn't stay. He didn't belong anymore, in his clean suit and clean face. He went back up to his flophouse, cooked dinner in the tiny shared kitchen — he had to clean it before he could use it — and spent the last hours of the day doing pushups in his bedroom until he was tired enough to sleep.

Monday he spent three hours going through the weekend footage. There were still no more glitches. "All right, get out of here," Walter said, impatient for him to finish up and get out of his office, presumably so Walter could go back to surfing the Internet. "Like I said, the system just needed a shakedown cruise. You can skip this tomorrow."

"I'm pretty sure Cygnet wanted me to keep doing this indefinitely," John said.

Walter stared at him and snorted. "Yeah? Well, *I'm* pretty sure that I'm your boss, and not whatever geek IT sent up."

John stared at him, and spent the rest of his morning on the front desk poking through the company employee database, using the login and password that Walter had conveniently kept sitting on a post-it note tacked to his desk lamp.

Harold Cygnet had been working for IFT for seventeen years in the IT department. He'd only been promoted twice, most recently to the not-very-exalted-sounding position of *Senior Support Engineer*. Baffled, John looked up another six *Senior Support Engineers*: Cygnet had ten years on the next oldest of them, and none of them had been with the company earlier than 2009.

It didn't make any sense. The man in that employee file was either mediocre or a time-card puncher, and Cygnet wasn't either. He'd cared about the work, and the work he'd done had been good. John wasn't enough of a coder to know *how* good, but he was a hundred percent sure it wasn't mediocre.

But the real issue was Cygnet didn't have the right attitude. Someone in that position, with that history, should have been cowed at least a little. Not like the man he'd spent the day with, coolly certain of himself. Unless he just couldn't be bothered to take a higher position? But that didn't jibe either; Cygnet had acted like someone *with* a higher position. John had pegged him unconsciously as something like the technical lead for the entire company's security.

In the end, though, it was a small puzzle, one that didn't matter enough. By the time John finished his shift, his questions had faded back into the general dullness. He stayed out of Walter's office the next morning and went back to saying *good morning, good morning*, as the staff streamed in.

Walter showed up for work at five after nine. At ten after nine, he came out of the back office, scowling, and snapped, "Reese, get in here." When the door closed behind John, Walter poked him in the chest and said, "The next time you have a problem, you had better discuss it with me *first*, you understand? Watch your fucking video." He stalked out of the room.

"Well, that's interesting," John said aloud. He watched the video — nothing unusual — and then looked up the location of Cygnet's office, a cubicle on the seventeenth floor. When his

lunch break came, John went up and wandered the cubicle aisles until he found a woman who looked at him with mild appreciation, and he turned on a smile and asked her to point him in the right direction. "He's not in this morning, though," she said. "Do you want to give me your number and have him call you?" She smiled at him.

"No, thanks," John said. He stopped by the cubicle and looked it over. There was a *Software Engineer of the Month* plaque and a dingy mixed-up Rubik's Cube with peeling stickers. It looked like exactly the cubicle that the Harold Cygnet from the employee database should have had.

John poked at the keyboard. The computer was locked; a few casual attempts at passwords failed. Footsteps were coming: halting ones, and then they stopped. "Can I help you, Mr. Reese?"

He turned the chair around: Cygnet was standing in the cubicle mouth. He was carrying a cheap leather briefcase and wearing a drab raincoat at least six years old. He set the first down on his desk and hung the coat up on a small hook, then sat down at his desk after pointedly eyeing John out of his chair.

John sat down in the spare chair. "Funny thing happened this morning," he said. "Yesterday Walter called me off the video. Then today he put me back on."

Cygnet's hands hesitated briefly over his keyboard, then descended; the password he typed was long and random, wandering all over the keyboard. His screens lit up. "I'm glad to hear there are limits to your supervisor's laxity."

"There aren't," John said. "How'd you even know I hadn't looked at the video this morning?"

Cygnet didn't look at him, frowning slightly. John waited for the denial, the lie; lies could be as good as truth. But then Cygnet quirked his mouth and said, "You were on the front desk."

John blinked; he hadn't expected truth. "But you weren't even here."

Cygnet said, "Did you find anything of concern in the video, Mr. Reese?"

"No," John said, fascinated.

"Then perhaps you should get back to work, and permit me to do the same," Cygnet said, with finality.

"I'm on my lunch break," John said. "Have you eaten?"

He was fishing for a reaction, but Cygnet didn't even blink. "In case it's escaped your notice, I only just arrived."

"So then you're not in the middle of anything," John said.

"I'm not going to have lunch with you, Mr. Reese," Cygnet said.

"Not very friendly of you, Mr. Cygnet," John said, standing up. He tossed the cube, solved, back onto Cygnet's desk. "Nice touch, the peeling stickers," he added. "To suggest you solved it once by moving the stickers around?"

That got him the annoyed look again at last. John hummed to himself jauntily as he went back to the elevators.

He was interested by now, despite himself. Cygnet was playing dumb on purpose, that much was obvious; John just couldn't figure out why. He didn't think Cygnet was an ex-CIA assassin hiding out from his previous employers — at least, John hoped not; he didn't think he was up for seventeen years of being a security guard, if that was what it took to stay under the radar. He hadn't come up with any better theories by the end of his shift, though, so when he got done he parked himself in the far corner of the plaza behind a planter, and waited. Cygnet hadn't left yet.

Cygnet came out at last around nine pm with the last dribblets of the staff. There wasn't a lot of foot traffic on Park Avenue by then, so John left room between them as he drifted in pursuit. Cygnet was walking north in the direction of Grand Central; his file said his home address was in Bronxville. John followed him around the corner of 42nd Street and stopped short. It wasn't too crowded, rush hour over by now; he could see everyone moving towards the train station doors, and there hadn't been enough time for Cygnet to get inside. But he was gone.

John's face felt odd. He was — he was grinning with delight.

The next morning, he watched fifteen minutes of security camera footage and stopped it and called Walter in. The timestamp was seven-thirty pm. "There," John said, pointing to the man: white, six-one, standard dark grey suit, tie, slightly thinning hair, round face, at seven-thirty pm, entering against the tide of people leaving. He didn't look at the camera at all.

"Are you kidding me?" Walter said, snorting. "You're imagining things, Reese. Forget it."

"That guy's not an employee, and he made it past security last night," John said. "He's also ex-military, and he's got a gun."

"Which you can see with your x-ray vision and mental telepathy," Walter said. "Listen to me, Reese, okay, I've worked here since 2009, I still don't know everybody here. You don't know a guy, it don't mean he don't work here."

"Does *he*?" John said.

"Sure," Walter said. "He's in the goddamn database, okay? He works here." He shook his head. "Quit trying to make this job something it ain't. You're not in goddamn Iraq anymore."

John didn't bother waiting for his lunch break; he went straight upstairs to Cygnet's cubicle. "No," Cygnet said, without even looking around. "I will not have lunch with you."

"We had a break-in last night," John said.

Cygnet's hands paused over the keyboard. "Did we," he said.

"One guy," John said. "He came in at seven-thirty."

"And was this one professional?"

"Highly," John said. "Also, armed."

Cygnnet swiveled his whole chair to turn an incredulous look on him, like that was a surprise. "What, with a *gun*?"

"Well, it wasn't a screwdriver, and he didn't really look all that happy to be here," John said. "I was hoping you might have some idea what he did while he was around."

Cygnnet turned back to the computer with his mouth compressed, a frown beetling in his eyebrows. "But that's — what if someone had challenged him? Would he have simply *shot* them?"

"That's usually what you use a gun for," John said. "Shooting people."

"Yes, thank you," Cygnnet said, with a bite that was angry, not annoyed. He started typing rapidly. "Whatever he *thinks* he's after, that's intolerable. What was the log timestamp?"

Cygnnet extracted out the scrap of video, a few seconds of grainy footage of the man's face. "I'll have to run the facial recognition routine against all our security camera footage for that time period," he said, typing as he spoke. "Unfortunately, that's an hour of video for each of thirty cameras per floor, for fifty-eight floors."

"How long is that going to take?" John said.

"At least three hours," Cygnnet said, hitting return on his keyboard.

"So there's no reason we couldn't get a bite," John said.

Cygnnet paused, and then abruptly said, "All right. Where?"

John stared, taken aback by victory. "I — what's — around here?"

"I'm partial to the Grand," Cygnnet said, and stood up and got his coat.

The prices at the Grand were astronomical, and they required reservations for lunch. Somehow — John suspected it had something to do with whatever Cygnnet had been doing on his cellphone during the walk to the restaurant — they mysteriously had a table for Harold Cygnnet. "I hope that means you're paying," John said, looking at the menu. "I don't get another paycheck until next Friday."

"Oh, I think the company owes you at least a lunch," Cygnnet said. "Shall I order?" He turned to the waitress approaching their table and smiled.

Cygnnet ordered a hundred-fifty dollar bottle of red wine, two Porterhouse steaks medium rare, half a dozen sides, and the chocolate souffle for dessert. John had been eating better lately, getting enough calories, but when the steak was put down in front of him — charred

outside, pink juices pooling around it when he cut in, a smell like heaven — his brain abruptly went offline. He didn't even come up for a drink of water until he was halfway through.

After John had finished his, Cygnet without a word traded their plates: he'd eaten his filet and left the strip. John devoured that, too, and polished off the spinach and the mashed potatoes. His whole mouth felt alive, remembering what it was like to *taste* and not just chew, and when he finally leaned back in his seat, his belly under his hand, he felt sated, not just full.

He shook it off with an effort and leaned over to get the bottle of wine. He topped up Cygnet's glass and his own, and raised it, smiling: he was pretty sure Cygnet hadn't spent most of the last several months building a massive tolerance for alcohol. "So," he said, about to start fishing, but Cygnet only gave him a gentle, malicious smile.

"I hope you've left room," he said, as the giant souffle was put down in front of them, fragrant chocolate smell rising, with a bowl heaped with vanilla-bean-flecked whipped cream.

"That's not playing fair," John said, reproachfully, but Cygnet only smiled more widely as the waiter put half a souffle on his plate.

All in all, the meal lasted two hours. John didn't manage to extract a single piece of information out of Cygnet that was a lot more valuable than his preference for broccoli over string beans, and even then, it might just have been that the serving dish had been closer. John had also gotten such sterling intelligence as the news that Cygnet liked to read books, any and all kinds, since he'd talked about seventeen different ones over the course of the meal. The conversation had been extremely fun and completely impersonal.

"Thanks for lunch, Harold," John said afterwards, half-petulantly, while they walked back to the building. But he couldn't get up the steam to really be annoyed either with Cygnet or himself; he turned up his face briefly to the sunlight.

When they got back to the office, one of the other guys, Tim, was on the desk; he gave John an incredulous look and said, "Walter wants to see you *now*."

"I don't know what the hell you think you're doing," Walter started, when John stepped into the office, then transferred it over as Cygnet came in behind him. "And as for you, let me tell you, I am one second away from calling your boss — " He stopped again and gawked, leaning; Cygnet had just gone straight towards him and was leaning over to the desk, logging into the terminal.

"I don't think that would be particularly wise, Mr. Groban," Cygnet said absently, "as you would then have to explain precisely why it took a contractor and a support engineer to actually do your job. Ah; the search has some results already. Please move now," he added to Walter, crisp, commanding. Walter looked at John uncertainly, then slowly got up and moved. Cygnet took his chair: in a minute a video was up on the screen, the man John had spotted coming out of the elevator on to the twentieth floor. "Yeah, so this guy busted into the building cafeteria," Walter said, sarcastically. "I guess he's after the free cereal?"

"It *is* an interesting question," Cygnet said, half to himself. The video feed followed the man through the cafeteria, staticky clips going in hopscotch bursts. The man walked steadily, confidently, without a pause; down a hallway and past the bathrooms, around a corner, and then he stopped in a dark spot right next to an emergency stairwell door: there was an electrical closet mounted on the wall.

The man reached into an inside pocket. His jacket swung wide: the gun was briefly visible in the hollow of his armpit. He brought out a folding knife; in a moment he had pried open the closet. "Yes," Cygnet said. "A very interesting question."

Walter was staring. "Holy shit. We gotta call the police — "

"*You* will do exactly nothing," Cygnet said. "You've mishandled this security breach from start to finish, Mr. Groban. I suggest you permit us to conclude the investigation and hopefully obtain some answers *before* you draw any more attention to your incompetence and get yourself fired. You can leave us now."

Walter opened and shut his mouth, darted one furious, helpless look at John, and then his shoulders slumped a little: he was up against a wall and he knew it. He slunk out.

"Alone at last, Harold," John said.

"If you could refrain from pulling my pigtails for a moment," Cygnet said, and sped up the video: the intruder was still working on the closet. He'd attached a black box onto the wires and was punching buttons on it. He kept going for a long time, even at high speed: John watched the timestamps click through three stuttery hours before at last the man closed the box, shut the closet on it, and walked away. "What *is* that, exactly?"

"Let's go take a look," John said.

#

"I do have to agree with Mr. Groban on one point: this is absurd," Cygnet said as he opened the electrical closet, sounding like he resented it that the bad guy had done such a bad job. "Unless these people are imagining that we're keeping some revolutionary new software concealed in the *pantry*, what could the possible point of breaking in here be? And what even is this box?"

John had already been pretty sure, upstairs, but one look at the box was enough to confirm it. "This is just a standard eavesdropper," he said, tapping it. "Clamp it onto the phone wires, you can intercept the signals."

Cygnet frowned at him. "But that wouldn't require anywhere near three hours of configuration — oh, I see your point: a distraction? But the video wasn't looped; I did check for that possibility, of course. Do you think it was computer-generated? The processing power to execute something of the sort in real-time, even if it were a composite — "

"No need to complicate things," John said. "I'm guessing the actors were given particular targets in the building if they did make it in — electrical closets, wiring — and told to take a

photo to prove they got there."

"And then these people mocked up an electrical closet to match and filmed their man poking buttons for three hours?" Cygnet said, half incredulous.

"Why not?" John nodded to the closet. "Then he hacked the pre-filmed video into the feed as soon as he got to the closet, and went after his actual target. Any other cameras along the way, he just looped back to the time he got into the building." He tapped the box. "This thing probably isn't even sending signal anywhere. It's just cover for whatever he really did."

Cygnet's eyes narrowed. "Hold this for me, please."

He'd brought his laptop along; John held it braced against his chest and watched Cygnet type, frowning intently at the screen, lips folded. "We may not be able to see *what* he did," Cygnet muttered as he worked, "but we can certainly find out *where* he did it. All of the building's security cameras have a backup drive intended to store as much video as possible in case of a loss of connection to the central server. When he looped the cameras back, he'll have caused them to overwrite earlier video — meaning that they *won't* have had to overwrite quite as much of the video on the drive from earlier in the week. Once I've put together a routine to extract the earliest video timestamp on each camera, we'll be able to follow his trail — "

John found he was grinning again. "So why *are* you a Senior Support Engineer?"

Cygnet darted a look up at him, sharp, and back to his screen. "Why are *you* a security guard, Mr. Reese?"

"Better retirement plan than my last job."

Cygnet snorted. "I thought you weren't unionized." He hit a few more keys, looked at his cellphone, and then closed the laptop lid. "All right. Let's see where our intruder was going." He held up the cellphone: it was displaying a compass screen full of glowing dots. Most of them were red; one off to the side was glowing green. "The stairwell."

John plucked the phone out of Cygnet's hand and reached ahead of him to get his hand on the stairwell door. "We haven't actually seen him leave the building," he said cheerfully, to Cygnet's indignant stare. "Why don't you let me take the lead."

The glowing dots led up and up the stairs; Cygnet had to stop on the landings to pant for his breath. "Why on earth couldn't he have taken the elevator?" he said peevishly.

"You really should do more cardio, Harold."

"It's not as though there's anything stopping me," Cygnet panted out, laden with sarcasm.

"You could try swimming, or maybe cycling," John said. "How long have you had the bad hip?"

"Longer than I would like," Cygnet said, with a narrow, suspicious look. John shrugged philosophically. It had been worth a try.

The green lights veered off finally onto the thirty-fifth floor. "Looks like this is it," John said, glancing back, and stiffened. Cygnet was hanging on the railing one step below the landing, very still, a frown between his eyes, staring at the door. "Are you *sure* there's nothing valuable in this building?" John said, a little silkily.

Cygnet only waved at the door. "See for yourself, Mr. Reese."

John pushed it open and stepped through, cautiously, and stopped. The floor was cavernously wide, stretching unbroken by offices or cubicle walls the full span of the building, all the way to the full-length windows looking out on the city all around. The space held nothing but rows of server cabinets, laced together with networking cables and power cords; at the far end there was a single large desk with some monitors and a keyboard, a couple of fancy office chairs.

John walked down the aisle, looking into the cabinets. There wasn't even a single server in the racks; they were all empty. Cygnet limped after him. The trail ended: the last green light was the camera in the corner above the desk. The keyboard and the monitors weren't connected to anything. He turned. Cygnet was standing next to the desk, looking out the windows, but John was pretty sure he wasn't seeing the spectacular view outside, the towers glittering in the sun. His face looked drawn.

"What did he want here?" John said.

"I have no idea," Cygnet said, softly; he sounded far away and vague. "This floor has been empty for — years. It didn't really make sense to reconfigure it for office space; we'll need the server space again within a year, given the company's growth projections..." His voice was trailing off down a slope, going quieter and slower until he finally just stopped. "It's been empty for years," he repeated. "I don't know what he thought he would find."

#

They took the elevator down together. John waited until Cygnet got out on the seventeenth floor and the doors had closed behind him; then he hit the button for the sixteenth floor and got out there. There was a team meeting going on in a conference room and a block of corresponding cubicles and offices standing mostly empty. John picked up a few sheets of blank paper and a package of black toner from the copy room, and stole a scotch tape dispenser off someone's desk.

He pushed into the stairwell: he could have told Cygnet why you took stairs to your target instead of taking an elevator: because if you were six-plus feet of trained assassin, when you got in an elevator, sometimes people got uneasy and noticed you, no matter how good you were at deflecting attention most of the time.

He jogged up all nineteen flights and pushed back onto the thirty-fifth floor. He went to the desk again. He could also have told Cygnet what the operative had come here to get. The cleanup job had been pretty good, but there was still a bit of black fingerprinting dust in the crevices on the edge of the table and between the keys of the keyboard.

Most of the fingerprints had been wiped away with the dust. John had to go for more unusual spots: the monitor on button, the Escape key on the keyboard, the arms of the desk chair. He got a few dozen partial prints, several of them looking close enough to be duplicates even at a casual squint. He folded up his pages and went back to the front desk.

That night after his shift, he took a cab to the 8th Precinct. Carter was still at her desk, frowning at paperwork; she looked up at him with a raised eyebrow, without recognition.

"Came to give you this back," John said, and handed her three folded twenties. She stared down at them and then her head came back up and she did a double-take at him. A slow smile spread over her face and she sat back in her chair.

"You're looking better," she said. She took her wallet out of her pocket and tucked the bills away. "And I haven't heard anything from Danny, which I would have. Job's going okay?"

"No complaints," John said. "It's pretty quiet most of the time."

"Not as much excitement as you're used to?"

"It has its moments," John said. The precinct was mostly empty; there wasn't anyone close enough to eavesdrop without a noticeable effort. "We had a break-in yesterday."

She raised eyebrows. "What, a robbery?"

"A little more complicated than that," John said. "The only thing that got taken was this." He handed her the sheet with the fingerprints on it. She stared at it, frowning, and looked a question up at him.

John let curiosity have a second to work on her; he pulled up a chair and sat down. "It's a professional operation," he said. "They hired a smokescreen of thirty patsies and they've got at least one highly trained ex-military operative. They've got a secure location and expensive video equipment. They've invested at least a month of prior planning. And as far as I can tell, the one thing they got, the one thing they *wanted* to get, were these fingerprints."

Carter had transferred the stare from the paper to him; now she turned it back for another look. "These are all partials," she said.

"I'm pretty sure he got better ones," John said. "He wiped down after himself, so these are just sloppy seconds."

She put the sheet of paper down on her desk and looked at him steadily. "And you want me to run these prints for you."

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble," John said, with his best winning look.

"There an actual *crime* here?" she said. "Why isn't the company calling us?"

"The building security can't handle anything even close to this," John said. "He didn't take anything obviously valuable, so they want to pretend it didn't even happen. And the one person at the company who's helped me get this far — " John didn't mean to pause, but

somehow he did; only for a moment, then he went on. "I think he might be involved somehow. It's a tricky situation."

Carter tapped her pen on the desk, back and forth. "Okay, now tell me why *you* think I should care."

John hesitated. "I don't know yet," he said finally. "But right now, the pieces on the table don't make sense. These guys are too good and spending too much money to get something that doesn't seem valuable enough. And to me, that means there's a big chunk of the puzzle missing." He tapped the sheet. "This might be the missing piece."

"You could also have mentioned that they're breaking the law and getting away with it," Carter said dryly, "but I'm guessing that's not the part that really caught your attention." John didn't try to sell her otherwise; just offered her half a smile. She snorted and looked at the prints. "Okay," she said finally. "Give me your number. It's going to take a couple of days, I'm not going to push this to high priority. We do actually have some *homicide* cases here at the *Homicide* Task Force."

"No problem," John said, writing down his number on a post-it for her. "Thanks."

He stood up and turned to go. "By the way," she said, and he looked back. "The next service exam is in four weeks. If you decided that maybe security guard work wasn't enough excitement after all."

His throat felt oddly tight. "Thanks," he said, softly. "Not really — my style, though." The CIA had paid for his degree; somehow he didn't think they'd be willing to forward on his transcript if he called in to the office.

She was silent and nodded. "Well, something else might turn up," she said. "Don't let Danny forget about you."

He almost smiled, turned away, and then something made him stop and ask. "Carter," he said, abruptly. "*Did* you run my prints?"

She looked up from the computer and met his eyes. "No, I didn't."

"But the cup's in a bag somewhere," he said, and her mouth turned up at the corner. She drew open one of her drawers and lifted out the paper cup with two careful fingers and showed it to him. "If I hadn't shown up for work the next day — "

"Hell, yeah, I'd have run them," she said. "I'm a cop, John." But then her face softened; she smiled at him again. "Glad I didn't have to."

"Me, too," John said, and it didn't come out quite as flippant as he thought he'd meant it.

#

He stayed on his best behavior at the desk the next day and gave back a blank, unchallenging face when Walter scowled at him. There was plenty of downtime to do some more poking in

the employee database, anyway, and he made good use of his lunch break. Good enough that the day after, he strolled up to Cygnet's cubicle again.

Cygnet didn't turn to say hello; his hands were flying over the keys, rapidly. "Have we had another intrusion, Mr. Reese?"

John settled himself comfortably into the extra chair and crossed one leg over the other at the knee. "Everything on the door has been quiet. I have found out a few interesting things, though. Did you know that up until 2009, this building used more power than all five city blocks around it put together?"

Cygnet stopped typing and swiveled all the way around to give John a completely sincere stare; John returned it in equal surprise: he would have bet almost anything on Cygnet knowing *exactly* what the power usage of the building had been. Then Cygnet said, incredulous, "You hacked into the power company?"

John blinked, then slowly grinned. "Know that team working on the new power lines on the other side of the street?"

Cygnet paused, his face frowning in. "I suppose."

"The supervisor served two tours in Iraq. We had a nice chat yesterday; he's been working on this part of the grid for eight years."

"Oh, I see," Cygnet said, sounding disgruntled, like it offended him that someone had gotten at the data *without* having to hack into Con Edison.

"The interesting thing though is that in 2009, everything just stopped," John said, watching his mouth, his eyes, looking for any sign of a tell. "One day to the next, the power draw fell — and it went *so* low that it wouldn't even be enough to keep the lights on in a building this size. It started going up again fast the next month, and by now it's back up to average levels, but it's never gotten near that high again."

He leaned in. "So, Harold, what I'm guessing is that there *was* something on the thirty-fifth floor. Something that used a *lot* of power."

"Yes, Mr. Reese," Cygnet said, in the tone of someone speaking to a small child. "There are approximately four hundred 42U server cabinets on that floor. At full capacity, each held twenty-one extremely power-intensive servers, all of which further required extensive cooling."

"But what was *on* those servers?" John said.

"I don't see how it matters, since they aren't here anymore," Cygnet said.

"Unless our intruder is trying to find out where they went," John said. "Which is where, by the way?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Cygnet said, so dismissive John couldn't help but believe it. Anyway Cygnet didn't seem to *lie*; he just didn't *tell*. "In any case, I'm reasonably certain that

information would be of no use to anyone."

John sat back, frowning and dissatisfied. He'd felt so clearly he was *close*, something just in reach; but he'd missed it — he'd asked the wrong question somewhere.

Cygnnet looked at him. "I don't dispute your conclusion that the intruder was after what was on that floor, Mr. Reese," he said. "But fortunately, that means his quest has ended in a very thorough dead end. If he makes another attempt, we might have to revise our understanding, but at the moment, so far as I can tell, he's done."

He went back to his computer. John watched the back of his neck, his shoulders, narrowly. "There is one other thing I noticed."

"Yes?"

"There's almost no one in this building who worked here earlier than 2009," John said. "Less than fifteen people — including *you*."

"There are a considerable number of people in this building who've worked for IFT longer than seventeen years," Cygnnet said.

"Sure," John said. "Nearly all of them transferred here from the San Francisco office. After 2009."

"It's possible that information would be of interest to the HR department, Mr. Reese," Cygnnet said. "They're often working on strategies for improved employee retention. Is there some reason that you're sharing it with me?"

John drummed his fingers again. That was a good question: letting Cygnnet know John had information about him was only worthwhile if it rattled him into giving up more, but John already knew Cygnnet didn't rattle. The only reason he'd said it was — was — John frowned.

Cygnnet snorted without turning around. "If you'd like me to take you out to lunch again, Mr. Reese, you could simply ask."

"Okay," John said. "Take me out to lunch again."

"Uh, excuse me?" There was a man standing in the cubicle entry, frowning: dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, tie knotted just a bit lopsided, hair a little greasy. John placed him: an IT manager, came in at five minutes to nine every morning, and had forgotten his keycard twice in the three weeks before the system changeover. "Harold, is there something going on here that I should know about?"

The voice that answered was soft and unfamiliar. "I beg your pardon, Dave?" John double-taked at Cygnnet: he was curled in almost, shoulders stooped; he wasn't meeting Dave's eyes.

"You've got someone from Security in your cubicle, chatting, in the middle of the work day, I just *assumed* that there was some kind of problem," Dave said, and looked John up and down like he was a few steps up from an unexpected cockroach, but not all that many.

"No problem, Dave," Cygnet said, still meekly. "John is just an acquaintance."

"Oh. I see." Dave smiled with his lips together, insincere. "In *that* case, maybe this could be saved for — personal time, instead of company time? If that's not too much trouble. I'm sure *John's* supervisor would feel the same way. Shouldn't you be downstairs on the front desk, John?"

"I'm on my lunch break," John said, mildly. He couldn't help but badly want to punch Dave in the face.

"Ah. Well. I do realize that, uh, you guys have less to do now that you don't have to check keycards all day," Dave smiled even more insincerely again; a couple of the guys had given him a hard time, and apparently he wasn't capable of distinguishing between people in security guard uniforms, "but Harold does have quite a lot of work to do. Some of it just a *little* overdue, as it happens."

The urge to punch him went up.

"So I *do* think it would be better if you headed back downstairs," Dave finished, and stood there expectantly, still wearing the smile.

John considered the options. Punching Dave really was the most appealing one, but it probably would get him fired, and oddly, he didn't want to be. He could go and catch Cygnet later, which was probably what Cygnet would have approved, seeing how it would do the least damage to what had to be one of the most committed deep covers John had ever seen, but really, John thought a little bit of annoyance had to be good for him. Not to mention John didn't really feel like carrying his own annoyance with Dave around the rest of the day.

So instead John just stayed put and said, "I'll keep that in mind."

Dave blinked and then flushed, and Cygnet did shoot over a sideways, deeply irritated look from behind his protective camouflage. John smiled.

"Maybe I need to make myself more clear," Dave said.

"You're clear," John said. "I just don't care." Cygnet glared at him outright this time, then quickly dropped his eyes again as Dave looked at him.

"You know, Harold," Dave said, "maybe that new database would be done by now if you weren't spending so much time hanging out with Security staff and fiddling with the biometrics? I mean, you do get that the actual work of this company is a lot more important than saving time for a bunch of guys who couldn't hack the police or the army and have nothing better to do — "

John raised an eyebrow. "I served nine years."

"You should've stayed longer if you wanted a workplace where what really matters is being able to grunt loudly and bench-press two hundred pounds," Dave shot back.

Punching him was abruptly the only acceptable option; John was about to stand up, and then he looked down: Cygnet had reached out and put his fingers on the back of John's hand, lightly.

Somehow they held him in place while Cygnet said, still quietly, "Dave, if you're concerned about my time, I'll take my lunch break now, retroactive to the quarter-hour. I'll be back in time for the team meeting."

Dave had taken half a step back already; probably something of John's intense willingness to inflict bodily harm on him had communicated itself. He darted eyes to Cygnet and back. "All right, Harold, that's just fine," he said, attempting coolness. "Let's try and keep it to an hour this time?"

He didn't wait for an answer, just made that last shot and fled; John watched him go, his jaw still tight. Cygnet swiveled back to his computer and typed a few keystrokes; it went dark. He stood up and looked down at John, unstooped, himself again. "Let's go," he said. John stood and walked out to the elevators with him, not really seeing anything around him; rage and violence coiled together in his gut.

Cygnet took him to a pub on the next block, with a small dark table in the back corner away from the noise of the bar. He ordered John a beer and a shot along with a burger, and the whiskey loosened up the knot in John's belly a little; although that was really mostly because of the incongruity of watching Cygnet drink some beer himself, and then make a small prissy face over it.

"You don't need to keep me company," John said, finding he could be amused again.

"It's always a good idea to expand one's horizons," Cygnet said, glumly. "Maybe I'll try one of the bottled beers instead. Are you all right? As pleasurable as it would have been to watch you flatten Dave, the consequences struck me as undesirable."

John flicked a finger out. "Probably for the best," he said. "Why *are* you working for that guy?"

Cygnet raised an eyebrow. "It's the nature of incompetent people to fail to recognize competence in others."

That somehow finished undoing the knot: even though John had already known that it was a cover, Harold's open admission still felt like a gift. John pushed away the rest of the whiskey — he'd never really liked the taste, although you couldn't beat it for efficiency — and picked up the beer instead. There was a baseball game going on the television in the corner. "So, Harold," John said, nodding towards it. "How do you feel about the Mets?"

#

He tried to follow Harold again that night. Lunch had produced the data that Harold didn't particularly like either beer or the Mets, and had read at least fourteen more books, including *Team of Rivals*, which John had read half of in Morocco, what felt like a lifetime ago. They'd talked about it for almost half an hour before John realized he was running out of time and

had made an admittedly pathetic attempt to segue to talking about Illinois and DC, trying to figure out how much Harold knew about either. Harold had just given him a disdainful look and called for the check.

This time he paced Harold from the opposite side of the street, so he could make the turn onto 42nd Street at the same time as Harold crossed it, and position himself across from the Grand Central entrance to see what Harold did. But Harold never made it there; he turned right on 41st Street instead. John realized too late, about-faced and made a dash for the corner trying to catch up — no luck. Harold was gone again, this time from a block that was almost completely empty: no one but two women walking together, and not even an empty parking spot.

John sighed and went to Grand Central to catch the subway himself. Walking past the bookstore, he halted: *Team of Rivals* was crammed in with seven other Lincoln biographies in a corner of the window, lingering effects of the Oscar nomination. He stared at it through the glass, and then he went inside and bought it.

He started over from the beginning, read all the way home on the subway and stayed up, lying on his air mattress, reading until his eyes started to drift shut. He dog-eared a corner before he put it down and slept.

#

There still hadn't been another attempt at getting in when John checked in the morning. His phone buzzed at 10am with a phone call that wasn't from the office, and when he called the number back on his coffee break, he got the 8th Precinct.

"The lab says there's only two sets of prints," Carter said, "and one of them was on file, because he had a security clearance."

"Had?" John said.

"Yeah," she said. "He's dead. Nathan Ingram."

John looked at the bust standing by the doors, cast in bronze. The guy who'd owned the company? "And the other set?"

"Most of the prints were from someone else," Carter said. "No idea who, they're not on file anywhere. Never been found at a crime scene, either, far as we can tell."

She emailed him a copy of the report, and on his lunch break he went upstairs and found an unattended desk with an unlocked computer on the fourteenth floor, and printed out a clean copy. The lab had composited the unknown partials into a set of ten, missing patches but mostly complete.

Then John headed to the seventeenth floor. Harold wasn't there again. John tried a handful more passwords, no luck, until Harold appeared. "I use cryptographically secure passwords, Mr. Reese, and I change them on a daily basis," he said. "Has there been another attempt?"

"No," John said. "I just figured it was my turn to treat. It's going to have to be the diner, though."

Harold ordered grilled cheese and an egg cream, then complained about the inauthenticity; John grinned and stole some of his french fries and casually asked Harold questions about the company, why he'd come to work for IFT, whether he'd ever met Nathan Ingram.

"Mr. Ingram personally delivered the Employee of the Month awards," Harold said. "He said he considered it an opportunity to keep in touch with the staff. We had an interesting conversation about the company's move towards cloud computing."

"What did you think of him?" John said.

Harold paused. "That he was a good man," he said finally.

John watched his face, but Harold was giving nothing away: John couldn't tell if he felt anything beyond mild disappointment. "Who's running the company now?"

"Mark Aldredge, the former COO," Harold said. "He's quite competent, but — " He shrugged. "Some people can't be replaced." He looked at his watch: it was time to head back.

"Going to the bathroom," John said, as the busboy cleared the table, and followed him towards the kitchen. The bin got put down in a row after six more; John went into the bathroom and got a few paper towels. He came out and waited until the dishwasher was looking the other way, then picked Harold's egg cream glass out of the bin and wrapped it up. It fit into the inside pocket of his coat without too much of a bulge.

He went back to the table and put down a twenty and a ten. "Ready?" he said.

Harold stiffly got himself out and they strolled back to the building together. "You know, there's a free yoga class in Bryant Park tonight at seven," John said. Harold gave him a sideways look. "We could go."

"We could *not*," Harold said.

"It's good for flexibility," John said, mildly reproofing, and tapped the back of his hand against Harold's hip. "You're making that worse sitting at a desk all day."

"I am not going to a yoga class with you!" Harold said.

"Just a suggestion, Harold," John said. "No need to ruffle up at me."

Harold looked irritated the rest of the way back, which was a bonus, and more importantly didn't seem to have noticed the small bug John had tucked into his jacket pocket. "See you tomorrow," John said cheerfully, as they parted at the lobby. "Thai, maybe?"

"The only Thai restaurant nearby is terrible," Harold said. "Vietnamese." He limped on towards the elevators as John went back to the desk. Tim was on again; he looked after Harold with raised eyebrows and said, "Seriously, dude? You know just because he's one of

the tech guys doesn't mean he's making huge bank or anything, right? He's IT, not one of the coders."

John blinked at him and then grinned. "Don't judge a book by the cover," he said in sanctimonious tones.

"Uh huh," Tim said. "What, does he have a ten inch dick or something?"

"Something," John said, cheerfully.

He lifted the prints from the glass on his afternoon break, in an empty office on the twelfth floor, and felt a fierce glow of satisfaction as he lined up the matches: thumb, index finger, pinky; by then he was sure. He folded the printout and the page of Harold's prints together into a small square and tucked them into his inside pocket, then took the glass to the small office kitchen and washed it and his hands thoroughly. He left the glass in a cabinet with a dozen other mismatched cups and glasses, and he went back to work humming.

That evening, he sat down in the plaza to read *Team of Rivals* until Harold left, but he'd barely gotten off shift when the bug tracker app alerted him: Harold had started moving. John slipped the book into a pocket and stood behind the fountain, waiting.

Today Harold stopped on the corner in front of the building and stood there for a moment, looking irresolute, and then he headed west down 40th Street, not even paying lip service to going to the train station. John followed him two blocks, and then the New York Public Library loomed up. John found himself grinning helplessly as he followed Harold around the corner and onto the Bryant Park lawn.

He caught Harold up on the gravel path just before the class, an instructor already leading a dozen people through warm-ups. "Glad you made it," John said. "Hang on, I'll get a couple of mats."

Harold threw him the annoyed look, then looked back at the class and deflated. "I doubt you should bother; I'm afraid this is going to be beyond me."

John shook his head. "Don't worry about the forms; I'll simplify them for you. The main thing is to get moving. Take off your jacket and vest and your socks and shoes."

He spotted Harold through the class, careful of the neck and the hip, ruthless with the shoulders and back and legs. Harold panted and sweated under his hands and occasionally clenched his jaw, but didn't make a peep of complaint and worked hard; twice he said briefly, "Too far," and three times, "More than that." Afterwards he sank down on a bench and John got them both bottles of water.

Harold drank all of his, not guzzling but fast, and then sighed out heavily and said, "Thank you. I think." He plucked at the front of his sweat-soaked shirt with distaste.

John stretched his legs out. "You're welcome." He polished off his own water. He felt good, too; it had been a while since he'd done yoga. Not since — China. A morning outside Ordos, loosening up, Kara going through the same routine opposite him, his mirror. He looked away,

out at the avenue with its flowing taxis. The muscles around his neck were trying to tighten back up.

"I used to run," Harold said, taking his socks out of his shoes and pulling his knees up to put them back on, small grunt of effort. "I miss the ability to mentally disengage; you can't do that when you're thinking very hard about how to avoid falling over."

John heard it without listening, then twitched and looked over, realizing Harold had just as much as told him the injury was fairly recent.

Harold was heaving a sigh; he pushed himself up from the bench, bending down for his jacket and his tie; he folded them over his arm. He was about to say goodnight, to walk away; John found himself saying, "Have dinner with me."

He knew it was wrong as soon as he'd said it. It just didn't make sense: Harold visibly wanted a shower and a change of clothes, and he needed one himself. It was late; they both had a long way to go. Harold was blinking at him, and about to say no, probably in a puzzled voice —

"Fortunately, there's a Thomas Pink store down the block," Harold said. "I imagine they'll forgive our appearance for long enough to buy clean shirts."

John trailed him to the store, where Harold bought him the single most expensive plain white shirt John had ever owned, and got himself one in purple with black stripes, a plum-colored tie to match, and threw in a black waistcoat apparently on a whim. John took the bag and raised an eyebrow at the total. Not really in the price range of a Senior Support Engineer. He smirked to himself privately.

To top it off, Harold led him down the block to a hotel, slid a plain black credit card over, and got a suite. He took the shower first; John took off his shoes and socks and unbuttoned his sticky, sweat-stained shirt and walked over the thick plush rug to stand by the air conditioner, looking out at the Times Square glitter outside.

Harold didn't take long; fifteen minutes, and then he came out in a bathrobe, damp, on a cloud of steam, his face naked; he was wiping his glasses. John turned around and looked at him. Harold looked back, and abruptly John was weirdly, vividly conscious that he was standing barefoot, shirt hanging open and loose, sleeves rolled up; was even more vividly conscious of Harold naked under his robe, his hair wet, clinging to the nape of his neck —

Oh, John realized, *oh*.

He saw Harold realize it at the same time, his eyes widening. They stared at each other. Harold came over and put his glasses down on the nightstand and sat down on the bed heavily. "I suppose it's rather absurd that it hadn't even occurred to me," he said, blankly.

"If it makes you feel any better, someone *told* me," John said, sitting down next to him. He swallowed. It hadn't occurred to him either, but now that it had, he felt — well, he felt almost exactly like a waiter had just set down a perfect medium-rare Porterhouse in front of him.

"Not really," Harold said. He frowned. "I'm not entirely sure this is an ethical situation — "

John reached over and grabbed the edges of Harold's bathrobe and hauled him down flat.

"It's only," Harold said, hands on John's chest moving almost involuntarily to push the shirt off his shoulders, eyes fixed on him with startled hunger, "I can't help feeling that you aren't fully — " John pulled open the belt and shoved the bathrobe off Harold's shoulders. "The problem is I haven't told you — " Harold started again. John reached down and unbuttoned his own pants, unzipped, shoved them and his briefs down, kicked them off the rest of the way, and rolled Harold onto his back. "Oh, God — John, you see, I'm your *employer* — " Harold's voice rose, desperately.

John paused long enough to feel smug at how unsurprised he was. "It's okay, Harold," he said. "You don't pay me enough to sleep with you."

"There is that, I suppose," Harold said, half to himself, and then he caught John's face between his hands and kissed him.

They just pressed against each other, kissed and humped and touched. John buried his nose in Harold's neck, licked him, sorry that Harold had showered: he wanted the taste of his skin, his sweat. He nuzzled everywhere, elbow, armpit, belly, the crease of Harold's thigh, shuddered at his gasp and the clutch of Harold's hands in his hair. John licked Harold's cock and kissed it, mouthed over the length of him, rubbed his cheeks over Harold's thighs, indiscriminate. "Good God," Harold said, panting, his voice wobbly and astonished, and John groaned and sucked his cock into his mouth.

Harold shuddered and came quickly, spilling hot and bitter in John's mouth, and lay gasping; John crawled up the bed and sprawled all over him, blanketing his body with his own, nosing at Harold's jaw and cheek. Harold wrapped his arms around him, pressed his face to John's temple, breathing hard, and then reached down. He closed a firm warm hand around John's cock and stroked him, with a pause so he could lick his own thumb, make it wet, so he could slide it over the head of John's cock more easily.

John pushed into his grip, thrusting. He'd forgotten how *good* the sheer pleasure of touch could be: almost two years, since the last time anyone had touched him intimately, had pressed a palm to the bare skin of his chest, had kissed him. And even then it hadn't felt like this: Harold stroked him almost wonderingly, as if he wanted to take care with him.

"I feel as though I don't quite know what to do with myself," Harold muttered. "Will you lie down on your back, please? — Thank you, that's easier," and John closed his eyes and groaned softly: Harold had found a perfect angle and was gently and irresistibly jerking his cock.

Harold bent his head to place kisses all along John's breastbone. "I had *meant* to say something," he added, sounding defensive, and brushed his mouth along John's shoulder. He nipped experimentally at the collarbone and moved lower. " — and also to — oh, really? And how is — this?"

"Nngh," John said, and came all over Harold's hand. Harold sat back, looking pleased with himself, and then frowned down at his messy hand: *what do I do with this?* John caught him by the wrist and pulled him down, pushing his hips up into Harold's, their bodies sliding against each other, shivers of sensation as John's still half-hard cock dragged against Harold's hip. It was almost too much; it was perfect. They kissed and kissed.

Finally they ran out of steam and fell away from each other and lay side by side panting. Harold had the sheet clutched up almost defensively to his chest and was staring at the ceiling. John felt like he'd just been allowed to come up for air after years underwater and choking. He could see the giant Toshiba billboard on 1 Times Square out the window upside down, images of sleek servers turning around like Broadway dancers, colors flashing.

"Can you reach the room service menu from there?" Harold said after a moment. "I don't think we'll be going out after all."

John craned up his head and looked: but it was the binder on the desk across the room. He let his head fall back. "No."

"Hm," Harold said, and snagged the phone from the end table on his side of the bed. "Yes, room service? We can't decide. Could you please send up one of everything the kitchen does well? Appetizer, entree, dessert. Yes, one of everything. Oh, and a good bottle of champagne. Thank you." He hung up.

"So that's going to be at least half an hour," John said.

"Most likely somewhat longer," Harold said.

"Okay," John said. He rolled over and kissed Harold again.

He was catching his breath for another round when the food came; Harold was limp beneath him, gasping. "*You're* getting that," he said.

John bit him at the waist, enjoying his yip, and climbed out of bed, snagging the robe on the way. The two waiters rolled in a huge cart, threw a tablecloth over the dining table, set out a vase of flowers and lit candles, covered the entire surface with plates, set up a bucket for the champagne, and then half nervously handed him a bill for two thousand dollars. John tilted his head, thought about how much IFT was worth and how much Harold had probably charged for whatever he'd built on the thirty-fifth floor, and added a thousand dollar tip. "Thanks," he said, and handed it back.

"We charged the government a dollar for the Machine," Harold said, a bit pissily, over the prime rib, "and extravagant tips draw attention, Mr. Reese."

"You mean, like ordering half the menu?" John said, licking barbecue sauce off his fingers. Harold looked mildly sulky, but had no comeback. "What *was* it, anyway? And if you sold it to the government, who is looking for you now? I was about eighty percent sure this was a Company op."

"No, I don't think your former employers," Harold met John's look with a cool, raised eyebrow of his own, *you're not the only one who can investigate people*, "are involved in this. I suspect it's someone seriously inconvenienced by the Machine, instead."

"And that would be?" John said.

"A well-funded and complex terrorist organization," Harold said. "Precisely the kind of group whose efforts the Machine would systematically undermine." He was silent, poking at his plate, frowning.

John leaned over and snagged his jacket from over the back of a chair and pulled out the sheet with Harold's prints on it. "Were these in the employee database?"

"Hardly," Harold said. "There's an override on the chip level in the hardware of the fingerprint scanner; they're produced by another company I own. The fingerprints in the database for Harold Cygnet are computer-generated and match those on file for a small misdemeanor prank theft that supposedly occurred at an electronics store in 1981 near his supposed college. Are *yours*?"

"No," John said. "I'm still a contractor, remember?"

"That's just as well," Harold said. He leaned over to his own briefcase and dug out a small solid metal dangle with a single LED on the end shining green; he handed it to Reese. "Have that in your pocket on the side of the scanner as you go through, and let me know when your prints are being taken. I'll ensure they don't end up in the system."

John took it and turned it over in his fingers. "Am I getting hired full-time?"

"Certainly," Harold said. "We're going to have to find you another position, though. Watching the front door is excessively inflexible."

John nodded as he touched the corner of the page with the prints to the candle flame. It caught, bright heat hurrying across the surface, and together they watched while the fire consumed it down to embers.

#

Epilogue

John strolled past the front desk, humming to himself; his thumb swiped over the entry scanner and the transmitter in his pocket got him a go-ahead for *John Reese, Executive Security*. He rode the elevator up to the thirty-sixth floor and nodded a greeting to the two men on the desk today: both of them watchful, checking him against the day's list of authorized personnel. He made the usual cursory patrol around the floor, getting in face time: Mark Aldredge's secretary and personal assistant, and Mark himself, who glanced up and nodded as John went past his office.

Then John took the stairs back down a flight and onto the thirty-fifth floor, glancing up at the security camera in the corner with a smile before pushing inside. The ten or so server racks

nearest the door were full now, with humming servers that covered the sound of his footsteps; but past them a new wall had gone up, with one door set in it marked Authorized Personnel Only, and a palmprint scanner that was actually just a front; the real lock was the micro-dot camera above it, and the door didn't open until John looked at it and let it recognize him.

Harold was already at his desk working, only three of the seven screens lit up, which meant he hadn't gotten another number from the Machine yet. He'd already taken down Judge Gates' picture from the rolling whiteboard John had sneaked out of Dave's office. John perched on the desk and put down the cup of tea he'd picked up on the way and stole a kiss while he was at it: Harold's mouth was curved in a tiny involuntary smile when they parted, even though he cleared his throat, slightly pink in the cheeks, and kept his eyes resolutely on the screen.

"Did you learn anything?" he said.

"Our pal met a friend at the W Hotel." John dropped a stack of photos next to the keyboard: the intruder meeting with another man, an older white-haired man with a dignified nose and a suit almost as nice as the ones Harold had bought him. "I couldn't bluejack either one of them, but I did get a directional mike on their conversation: they're definitely not the government, and they're definitely worried about your Machine."

Harold was already leafing through the photos, frowning. "Did they say anything about their plans for the Machine?"

"Only that they're at a dead end for now," John said. "They're still trying to trace your prints, but they've written off IFT and the building itself. You were right; this is the last place they'll look for you."

Harold's mouth pursed in satisfaction. "That should give us a little breathing room." He studied the best picture, clear shots of both men's faces. "Hm. I would be interested to know if either of these gentlemen turned up in law enforcement facial recognition databases. I'll start with hacking Interpol — "

John sighed theatrically. "You know, Harold, hacking Interpol isn't *always* the answer." Harold paused and looked at him, eyebrows raised. John took out his phone and flipped through the growing contacts file to the number for Detective Jocelyn Carter, Eighth Precinct, and smiled at Harold. "Sometimes you just need to ask for a little help."

End

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