

# THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

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**D** **O NOT GO**, the text read.

Sasha regarded the refrigerator's message display with a familiar bewilderment. It was like a dotty neighbour, the refrigerator. She never knew quite what it was saying or why. She had tried to program it to tell her which foods she could leave outdoors at which temperatures, but the interface was too complicated. What was this warning about? The avocado pudding? The half-bottle of gin in the freezer? It was just past eight in the morning. Why wasn't it warning her about the bacon she'd let go grey and funky in the back of the deli drawer?

**I MEAN IT, MOTHER. DO NOT GO IN.**

Ah. Lotte. How thoughtful.

**JUST A STORM. THEY CAN MANAGE.**

Sasha heaved the sigh she reserved only for her daughter, and wrenched open the refrigerator door. Moments later she had a huge breakfast — including the last of the viable bacon — in a frying pan. She also had a built-in deadline for ending the conversation she was about to start.

"It's not just a storm," she said, instead of a hello.

"They'll be fine, Mother," Lotte said.

Lotte did this, sometimes. Reminded Sasha she was the adult in the relationship. Her daughter was many things — pretty, well-organized, punctual — but a master of conversational judo she was not. She was a mid-level accountant for a food manufacturer. Her daughter liked chardonnay and matched her ballet flats with her cardigans. She was the most boring person Sasha had ever met. Occasionally Sasha wondered if the doctors had switched her with another baby, and that somewhere out there was another girl, just as spiky and dissatisfied as Sasha herself was, with actual taste in things.

"There's ice on everything," Sasha said. "Look outside."

It was a shockingly beautiful morning. A sky as blue as the Aegean and just as clear. Thick snow on the patio. Six inches or so, left

over from an overnight fall earlier in the week. And ice. Ice on the bare maples, thick as glass. Ice hanging white and tentacular from the eaves over the kitchen window. Ice encasing each individual needle of rosemary in the planter outside.

“I know, Mother.”

“Most everyone in the city is without power, this morning,” Sasha said. “Because of the ice. On the powerlines. And on the trees, overhanging the powerlines. How did you know I had power, when you texted?”

“I..” She didn’t. Hadn’t thought of it. Obviously. “You always have power.”

“Why, thank you.”

A very cute, very juvenile little growl in her daughter’s throat. “You know what I mean. You have the generator, and the panels. You have off-grid power. And a meshnet. You’re always prepared. The storms are even worse now than they were when I was growing up. So even if you didn’t have grid power, it wouldn’t matter. I’d still be able to reach you.”

Lotte had a point. Sasha’s practise of preparedness was a bone of contention between them while Lotte was growing up. In kindergarten, Lotte carried a travel pack of tampons in her backpack, because Sasha told her they were water filters. The teacher called them in for a conference one day when the tampons spilled out and the other kids started playing with them.

“You’re right, the storms are worse now. And that’s why the shelters are overrun. So they need extra volunteers.”

“You’re retired,” Lotte whined. “You don’t work there, any more. Remember? You don’t have to do all this.”

It was -23C. By nightfall, it would be -40 with the windchill. Three people who couldn’t make it to shelters had died on the street last night. A child who had wandered from home in the early hours of the morning was in intensive care. Now, there was concern that the very young and the very old might be in for the same fate, if the power didn’t come back within 24 hours. That was the one useful



thing the refrigerator had told her, before Lotte interrupted.

“No, I don’t,” Sasha said. “But I want to. And I’m going to. I’ve already pinged Bernard.”

“I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you,” Lotte snipped. Sasha was about to ask her what she meant by that, but Lotte continued: “Call me from the road. It’ll take you hours just to get in, you know. You might get ticketed just for driving. The transit authority was very specific.”

“I still have my emergency responder sticker,” Sasha reminded her. “I’ll be fine.”

And just then, the smoke alarm went off.

Breakfast was burning.

**W**hat Sasha had not told Lotte about was the other text she’d received, the night before, from the Building Strategist at Triskelion Developments, Inc. Or rather, the series of texts. And the email. And the voice messages (the surest sign of a true psychotic, in Sasha’s opinion). His name was Bill Littleton, and he wanted to know exactly “what exactly the City plans to do about this storm,” as though the municipality could simply enclose the city with some sort of giant weather dome and shield it from the onslaught.

He mentioned city bylaws about cleaning up snow. He mentioned how many properties Triskelion owned — and who lived there, and how much they had donated to the current mayor’s campaign. He mentioned that Triskelion buildings had the highest tech, the smartest infrastructure, and he wasn’t about to have them knocked out by an aging power grid that simply couldn’t keep up with user demand.

This told Sasha two things:

- 1) Her information was still freely available from City databases, despite her retirement.
- 2) Bill Littleton was going to be a real problem for her former employees.

She did not call him back.

Sasha left a tiny amount of water running in the house before leaving. She checked the wraps on all the pipes, looked for heaves against the foundation, and touched a dry mop to the corners of the ceiling to see if any moisture had leaked in. None had. The house could have told her these things, of course, but she still trusted the old ways best. In the car, she went over the checklist: brushes, de-icer, extra fuel, shovel, cat litter, space blanket, case of clean water, case of high-fat bars and MREs, first-aid kit. To this she added some clothes and toiletries in lightweight luggage and a folding bike, as well as a cardboard box of canned food and two garbage bags full of old clothes. The shelters needed them more than she did. She rarely saw people, these days. It was nice.

**CONDITIONS ARE DANGEROUS**, the windshield told her.  
**THE TRANSIT AUTHORITY ENCOURAGES MOTORISTS TO AVOID DRIVING IF AT ALL POSSIBLE.**

She waved away the warning. She was driving the formidable weight of a kit-bashed 1982 Volvo 240DL. This far north, every asshole had a truck and thought it was a tank. She had a tank that thought it was a sedan. Both the fan-models had grown more popular, the dealer told her, as the weather grew less predictable.

The road lay empty and gleaming. A small map on the passenger

side of the windshield warned her of the location of snowploughs and salt trucks as she approached them. The fine was double for cutting them off or tailgating them; their cameras could pick out a licence plate even in whiteout conditions. She wondered if the same vehicles had deployed themselves within the city limits, yet. Somehow she doubted it. The city had sub-contracted road cleanup to a private firm during the last mayor's term. Their vehicles were driverless, and at least one of them was always down for the count during a storm. The missing team member tended to screw up the Euler paths that took them through the city. Its lo-jack kept pinging, even when it wasn't in use, and so whatever area it was parked in was serviced last.

For the first hour, she experienced no problems. But as the sun climbed higher in the sky, more drivers ignored the advisory. Trucks whipped past her on the left. Some honked. She kept a steady pace. By the second hour, the same trucks that had passed her on the side of the road started appearing at the side of the road. One was in a ditch. Another was dealing with a highway patrol car.

**ICE CLEATS RECOMMENDED**, the windshield said.

Maybe Lotte was onto something, after all. At the next rest stop, Sasha pulled in at the printer bay and car wash. The man inside the kiosk unwrapped a single twist of his thick, stained scarf to speak. "Cleats?" he asked. "Or spray?"

"How long to print the cleats?"

He peered at the Volvo from over the edge of his filthy scarf. Then he swiped at something on his display. A group of lights in the rafters strobed over the car. A moment later, something chimed. "Half hour, maybe? Network says you need the heavy-gauge, and that takes a while to set. Machine's hot, though. Ready to squirt."

Sasha checked the time. Reasonably, she would have needed coffee at some point anyway. In the city, they might not have any, what with the outage. "Fine."

It was nice, having a vehicle that was as interested in its own self-preservation as it was in hers. Sasha herself had lived in the city for so long that this was her first vehicle. She couldn't imagine driving

anything else. How had people managed, before their cars could tell them in plain English what they needed? It must have been like having a dog, or a baby.

She had just resumed her drive when Bernard pinged her. "I'm an hour away," she said, before he could speak.

"You don't have to come out all this way, Sasha. "

"You need volunteers. I'm volunteering."

"It's dangerous for you to be driving with all this ice."

He didn't need to know about the cleats. Or all the accidents she'd seen. "My daughter has lectured me on this once already, Bernard."

"Does that mean I can't?"

"Yes. I can only stand to be lectured once a day, and Lotte stole your chance." She smiled. "How are things over there?"

"Well, we're going to run out of beds, but we're working with the local schools to open up their gyms. It's the warming centres that are the biggest issue. They're still operating on their two-hour schedules for the hot meals. We need more food, more cots, and more spaces."

Sasha hissed. "Have you talked to the motels?"

"We have, but the rooms are filling up already. People without power are all checking in for more money than the city can pay. Surge pricing. The hospitality and tourism bureau lobbied for it, last year."

Sasha let loose one of the long streams of curse words that, three years ago, would have made her assistants shut the door and leave her alone for a good hour.

"It's not too late to turn back," he said. "You are retired, you know. You don't actually have to come back and deal with all this. You could just stay home, safe and warm, and send the Red Cross some money."

Sasha nudged the accelerator. The dashboard warned her about

pushing it any further on the ice; she felt the tires hug the road a little tighter. She thought about asking about the asshole from Triskelion. Perhaps it was better not to. Bernard's day was probably difficult enough without bringing Bill Littleton into it.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Oh, you know. Fine."

"So you're exhausted." His rueful laugh confirmed it. "Do you have your medication?"

A pause. "Yes," he said.

"You'll remember to rest every couple of hours, yes?"

"I have an alert set up."

"And you'll actually pay attention to it?" She winced at her tone. Bernard had her old job, now. And he was good at it. He was conscientious, and thoughtful, and detail-oriented. He didn't need to be nagged. Except about his own health. It would be easy for him to forget to look after himself, she told herself, on days when his routine had changed. Such as the morning after a sweeping ice storm knocked roughly three hundred thousand households out of power.

A noise on the other end of the line. Someone was asking him a question. "Yes," he said, to someone else. "And yes," he said, to her this time.

"Do you need anything?"

Sasha heard a fire truck go by city hall. Then another. The sirens sounded tinny and hollow in the chill of her car. But even their diminished roar made her feel a strange pang for the city.

"Just you," he said, when the noise had passed.

**B**EWARE FALLEN TREES, the windshield said. Her route into the city kept her out of residential neighbourhoods, but on her map they lit up red,

with spikes of caution yellow where city crews were dealing with downed power lines or live wires. She was the only one waiting for the downtown exit, when it finally came time. The traffic lights were still out. It looked as though a plague had taken the city. As though they'd been afflicted with some sort of icy Biblical punishment.

**BEWARE FALLING ICE**, the windshield added, as the Volvo crawled under condos and office buildings. The food trucks and coffee carts were in more danger than she was. The line for a ramen truck curled around a corner. Her stomach burbled. She wondered what the food situation at City Hall was. Had Bernard and the rest of the staff eaten? Probably not. Not if the cafeteria and all the surrounding coffee shops were out. She still had some contacts in the catering business; perhaps they would be willing to part with some rapidly-thawing meat for free. On the radio, she'd heard an interview with one of the coffee cart managers claiming they'd reduced prices and that all tips for the day would be donated to local shelters.

"Note," she said, to the car. "Ask coffee cart social media branches about hot drinks at shelter lines tonight. Emphasize good publicity."

**NOTED**, the windshield said.

The ads were all out. They hung huge and black and streaked with snow, their empty glare staring down hard at her as she nudged the Volvo into the one salted parking lot she could find near her destination. (It had never occurred to her that she might miss the dingy old underground lot attached to City Hall, but it was -17 and here she was.)

Popping the trunk, she brought out her bike and unfolded it. It would be safer and faster than walking, especially with the apocalyptically-empty streets. She slung the loops of her duffel over her shoulders to make it a backpack. Then she stuffed the panniers of her cycle with water and canned food.

On my way, she texted Bernard.

Come around the back, he texted back, a moment later.

He stood waiting for her when she threaded her bike up the narrow human-trampled track through the snow at the rear entrance. His eyes widened at the load she'd brought, and she grinned. "Someday," he said, "you'll learn this isn't the old country. You don't need to bring everything with you."

She snorted. "Old country. Please. You're a newer immigrant than I am."

"And a better assimilated one," he said, and helped her pull the bike in and lean it against a wall. They were on emergency power — cool violet tube lights flickered uncertainly above them. But the exit lights still glowed powerfully green, as though tempting them to change their minds about staying.

"So," he said.

"So."

He opened his arms first. It was awkward. She had not counted on having to go through this again. Not his little self-deprecating chuckle when he hugged her hard. Not the smell of him — dead coffee and cedar mothballs and fennel seed candy — and not the way he said, "You're thinner," as though he were a little disappointed.

"They don't deliver kimchi fries at all hours, in suburbia," she said. "I eat bags of salad, now. Bags of salad and little frozen trout fillets. My doctor says it's good for me."

"Your doctor is the last surviving member of the Spanish Inquisition."

She beamed. "Let's get to work."

**T**he command centre looked disappointingly similar to the way she'd left it. Same stained coffee maker, same asthmatic scanner/printer device, now mercifully quiet thanks to the building's limited power. Even the chairs were the same. There had been no upgrades with the new administration.

"Sasha!"

Sasha had scarcely any time to notice Alison's huge belly before the other woman had enveloped her in a hug. "You're pregnant!"

"Yeah..." Alison shrugged sheepishly. A smile lit her face.

Sasha stared at Alison's changed figure. She looked quite far along. Seven months, perhaps. Was this her first? Why didn't Sasha know? Why hadn't anybody told her anything? "Why didn't you tell me?"

Again, Alison shrugged. "You'd already moved, and things have been so crazy here..."

"Crazy how?" She turned to Bernard.

Bernard heaved a heavy sigh. "It's this new proposed development," he said. "Three towers, eighty-three floors each, right on the waterfront. Where the old stadium used to be."

Sasha frowned. "But that's silt," she said. "You can't build eighty-three floors of anything on it. The geologists wrote that report for us eleven years ago. They said even one seismic event—"

"—would liquefy the whole thing, yes. We know that. They know that. The City knows that. But the public doesn't. And they want more condos on the waterfront. And Triskelion has a bigger PR budget than we do." Bernard dropped into a chair. It creaked under him. "They've been fighting us on everything. Even things we agree on. Every council meeting, every committee we consult on, every appearance we make or report we write. They're everywhere. Needling us. Making us look like we're opposed to growth, like we don't want to attract new development or new residents. And when I asked Littleton about it—"

"Littleton? Bill Littleton?"

Bernard scowled. "The very same. Do you know him?"

"He called me. Yesterday. To bitch about the storm."

Alison paused her shuffling of papers. "He didn't."

"He did. Speaking of which, you need to take my name out of the



public database.”

“This is why you came,” Bernard said. “You figured out he was making trouble for us.”

“I figured that out when I realized his company was raising the rents on the properties in the Turkish and Caribbean neighbourhoods in this town, and replacing them with little rabbit hutch condos when those people left.” Her grin was more of a grimace. “If he gets in touch, pass him over to me. I relish the opportunity to tell him he’s working for one of the companies that makes this city unaffordable for retired civil servants like me.”

“Sasha—”

“Bill Littleton isn’t our focus, today, Bernard. What’s the latest on the power outage?”

Bernard sighed and stood. He waved at the space hanging above their desks. A projected display flickered to life at dim half-opacity. It depicted the city’s power grid on a map. Sasha felt the muscles in her neck and shoulders tighten up just looking at it again. Finally, after years of tension, she remembered to roll her neck.

“May I have the thimbles, please?”

Bernard shook his head. “The haptics don’t remember your biometrics any longer. We deleted your profile. You wouldn’t get to look at anything deeper than the layers

every resident can see.” He shrugged, and the map fluttered. “I can be your hands.”

Sasha folded her arms. “Let’s start with the overview.”

Bernard gestured, and the map swam into greater focus. Almost the entire map was out. Hardest hit were the residential areas, where fallen trees and power lines meant that even when power returned to the grid, manual repair would still be necessary. Those people would be out of power for at least a few days. Alerts to power company customers had already gone out that this was the case, along with a plea for photos and data. Residents had begun embedding data about blocked roads and tree damage into the City’s open map. The map updated every seven minutes, projecting new travel times for road crews out looking for fallen trees and lines. Of the residential neighbourhoods, the worst off were the worst off: the poorer areas were also the furthest from the downtown core, and they had no hope of seeing city trucks for the next two days.

“Are any of the tool libraries up and running?”

Bernard pointed out two, on opposite ends of the city. “They should be open by now. Reduced hours, though.”

“Do they have maps of tools by neighbourhood?”

Bernard grinned. “You’re thinking about chainsaws?”

Sasha nodded. “And hatchets. And hacksaws. And generators and

snowblowers. Whatever people can use to safely deal with this themselves. The crews are dealing with power lines, now, not trees. But those people still need ambulances and fire trucks to be able to get through.”

Bernard glanced over at Alison. “Alison, get on the horn to the tool libraries? And see what they can do for us?”

“On it.”

They resumed their perusal of the city. Another layer of the map depicted rescue crews in high-rise buildings, getting trapped passengers out of elevators. Many of the newer buildings had automatically brought their elevators to ground when the building management systems received the storm alert, leaving only one or two online. Doing so greatly reduced the number of stalled elevators, which was a victory, but it didn’t stop frustrated and frightened residents from sharing their feelings with the rest of the city via social media.

“And the generation stations?”

“That’s where it gets really ugly,” Bernard said. He flipped the map and highlighted the major power generation stations in the city. Four out of the five were dead. The remaining station had stepped down production.

“I don’t understand,” Sasha said. “That last time we had multiple stations down was...” She tried to remember. Had it even happened during her tenure with the city?

“It’s the energy control centre.” Bernard

moved the map northward and expanded it. The main power control centre, the one that routed hydroelectric and coal power from the entire region and fed it to the substations that re-balanced its voltage and current across the city, was down. Sasha felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. “We’re not sure what took it out. They think it might have been a frostquake; sensors in foundations sometimes treat those like explosions, and that sets off a whole terror response process. The whole thing enters lockdown.”

“So it gets cold, and then...”

“And then the Independent Systems Manager’s pricing algorithm goes to hell.”

Bernard flipped to the ISM’s price graph. It charted the price of energy every six seconds. It helped the city’s power companies purchase available energy at the right price, depending on usage and time of day. The price had skyrocketed. And it was still climbing, like one of those leaderboards that showed the world’s population, the numbers blinking up and up and up. Even years later, the sight of that price moving outside its baseline range instilled in Sasha a kind of awe and terror.

“So...”

“Yeah,” Alison said.

“Even if the power comes back...people will be overcharged for it?”

“By an order of magnitude.”

Sasha turned to Bernard. “Have we talked to ISM about this?”

“They’re as mystified as we are. But they’re going to tell us more soon. They’re supposed to be hosting a conference call with the mayor and the reps from the power companies...” Bernard squinted at the corner of the display with the time. “Soon. Reminds me, I need some water. I have to-”

“What you have to do is return my fucking calls!”

Even without turning around, Sasha could identify his voice.

Bill Littleton was in the office.

**D**espite his name — or perhaps to compensate for it — Littleton was actually a rather large man, broad in the shoulders, with a barrel chest that gravity was slowly pulling down into a paunch. Curiously, there was no snow on his shoes or coat. He hadn't even worn snow boots. His shoes looked freshly polished.

“I have been trying to contact this office since last night, and no one has returned my calls,” Littleton said. “Now, I have my people trapped in my elevators in my buildings all over this city, and I want to know when the power is coming back! And I shouldn't have to come all the way to City Hall to get a straight answer!”

“Mr. Littleton, we have a communications team-”

“I don't want to follow you, Bernard, I want to be made aware of what's happening. I want reports. I want-”

“Who let you in?” Sasha asked.

Littleton's mouth hung open. Apparently, he was unused to having his tirades interrupted. Sasha allowed herself a silent moment of compassion for whomever worked under him. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I'm the woman who didn't answer your phone calls last night,” she said, “because I don't work here any more. Your information is out of date, Mr. Littleton. I'm here as a volunteer, today. That's who let me in. Who let you in?”

“I don't see how that's any of your business. Or at all relevant to this conversation.” He turned to Bernard. “I want to know when-”

“City Hall emergency protocol calls for the minimum number of staff possible on days of extreme storm alerts,” Sasha continued. “Including security staff. So the building itself takes over security. That means everyone who comes in has to be let in by a member of staff, or they need to be a member of staff, with smart access. And since the lobbyist bureau — where you've signed in over fifteen

times this year alone — is closed today, I’m wondering how you got in.”

Littleton’s mouth opened, then closed. He stared at the rest of the office. “How I entered this building is unimportant. I’m here to represent developers and building managers of smart structures all over this city, who have a responsibility to their tenants and customers. We have data on all their units, and their temperatures are dropping.”

“Isn’t your brother-in-law on the mayor’s executive committee?” Alison asked.

“What are you implying?”

“That you used your brother-in-law’s ID to gain access to the City Hall parking garage, and then used the staff elevator to come up here and invade our office.” Sasha smiled. “Essentially, you spoofed the building’s security. Which, you should know, is in violation of about three different counter-terrorism measures.”

Littleton paled. “I didn’t... I didn’t think...”

“No,” Sasha said. “You didn’t.”

Bernard stepped forward. He began ushering Littleton toward the door. “Mr. Littleton, I appreciate your willingness to step up and advocate on behalf of your customers. That’s very admirable. But we’re about to join a conference call with the mayor and the ISM, and we should have more information after that. Do you think you can wait until then?” When he said nothing, Bernard added, “You’d be getting inside information before anyone else, you know.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

Bernard nodded, pushed him out the door, shut it, and drew the blinds. As they snapped shut, Sasha gave Littleton the finger.

**W**hile Bernard and the rest of the staff talked to the mayor and the ISM, Sasha busied herself in the fishbowl. That was the

affectionate term for the big traffic cam room, from which she could watch most of the city's major intersections. The drones were out of commission — one had even frozen, mid-air, and crashed into a very angry woman's Japanese maple — but she could pull open feeds off social media to check in on areas where the city's drones could no longer reach. For the first time she could recall, she actually appreciated the whole “dads with drones” trend. Too often, they were just used to watch the babysitter undress. But today, several of the drones were being used to survey damage. One man had even created an entire map of how to safely reach the nearest donut shop while avoiding fallen trees and power lines. It was one of the only places in his neighbourhood with a generator. That made it the warmest, safest place.

They would need to move people into shelters, once the roads were completely clear. There would still be enough residual heat tonight, maybe, depending on how often people opened their doors, but the weather model for the next three days said she had to get the very young and the very old out of their unheated homes to places where there was at least hot water for hand-washing. She had written a whole case study on Seattle's Inaugural Day storm, way back in the 90's, and how the lack of power played a role in that year's E. Coli outbreak. She wasn't about to let the same thing happen on her own watch.

“No,” was the first word out of Grace Jarvis' mouth, when Sasha called her heating shelter.

“I haven't even asked anything,” Sasha said.

“I still recognize your number, Sasha. And your voice. And whatever you're asking, the answer is no. We don't have any more beds. We don't have any more heaters. We can't change the heating schedules. We are still doing two-hour rotations for everyone, whether they're going back to the street or heading back home.”

Well. That was comprehensive. “Is there anything you need, then?”

“More toilet paper. Socks. Toothbrushes. Hand sanitizer. Heat-wraps, like for a sore back. We and the other shelters in our network are accepting donations at local pharmacies. We have the big red bins next to the checkout counters. And if people

have unopened, smart-tagged merchandise at home, their pantry management systems might be telling them what's safe to donate. Some of our corporate partners are offering discounts to donors for participating. “

“I will put that in the next press release.” Sasha flipped a pen between her fingers. “How are your lines?”

“Bad. Police are already here. Observing.”

Sasha rubbed her eyes with the heel of one hand. “Oh. Shit. I'm sorry.”

“Gonna get worse by tonight.”

“I had an idea about that,” Sasha said. “Can I reach out to some of the coffee carts? And the food trucks? Maybe get them to donate some time and food?”

“Be my guest. But I'm not promising anybody anything over here until I see a truck roll up to my door.”

“Understood.” Sasha thanked Grace and hung up. Then she repeated the same conversation four more times at other shelters. By the time Bernard entered the fishbowl, a cup of something vaguely resembling coffee in each hand, she was pinging caterers and restaurateurs about their availability and food supplies.

When she hung up, he said: “So?”

“Ramen trucks are in. Apparently it's bad for the fresh noodles to let them freeze.” She sipped at her coffee. It tasted like hot cardboard pulp. “Why are the police showing up at the shelters?”

Bernard sighed. “It's policy, now. The overnight shelters are completely lawless, you know that. Someone was stabbed, last year, over a pair of boots. So the police send a car around every once in a while.”

“Even on days when they're needed elsewhere?”

“That's not our decision to make, Sasha.”

She put the coffee down. “And the ISM?”

“They’re having an infrastructure security consultancy come in. Apparently it takes a private security firm to convince a building that it’s not under siege, these days.”

“What about the price?”

“Smart meters should be keeping a record, even while the power’s gone. If you’ve got one, you’ll get a rebate in a couple of months.”

“Is Littleton still here?”

Bernard smiled. His eyes lit up with the glow of good gossip. “He won’t be put off. Keeps talking about the meters in his buildings. How they’re so special and different from the others. They communicate differently with the grid, or something. There’s a third-party mediator, and of course it’s down.” Bernard’s smile turned wicked. “That’s what he’s so fired up about, is the ISM price. He knows all the Triskelion residents will be hit with massive bills next month, and Triskelion’s worried about a class action suit. So he’s throwing his weight around here, hoping not to get canned when this all goes public.”

The meters? Sasha frowned. She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “Tell me more about these buildings.”

“Well, they’re almost autonomous. They’re less like a standard condo building and more like a planned community. You don’t just buy a unit, you subscribe to a lifestyle. Your keyfob is in your wrist, or in your fingertips. There’s facial recognition at all the entries and exits. Smart metering on all the water and power; solar louvers on a sunflower timer, backup generators in every building, meshnets to continue network operations even during a crash.”

Sasha blinked. “My kind of place.”

Bernard shook his head. “The preparedness? It’s great. The attitude? It’s not. And the price tag…” He made a low whistling sound.

“Right.” Sasha stretched. She peered through the arrow-slit window in the fishbowl door. Littleton was still out there, pecking at something on his wrist, and tilting his head like a bewildered dog. “So, his meters are constantly collecting data? And they’re connected to the generator?”

“Constantly. And yes.”

“So...the buildings know how many people are inside of them at any given time?”

Bernard’s eyebrows lifted. “Yes...?”

Sasha could not suppress the smile unfurling across her face. “So... it knows which units are empty, and which are full? And it can route hot water to those units?”

“Theoretically.”

Sasha stood. “Let’s go talk to Mr. Littleton about those units he’s so worried about.”

“Well, we’re very proud of this development,” Bernard was saying. “We’re happy to cooperate with Triskelion on such an important issue. At times like this, a city really has to draw together, and that’s what we’ve done here.”

Bernard and Littleton stood together in front of the frozen fountain at the street entrance to one of Triskelion’s many properties. The fountain dripped white with ice. It seemed only slightly colder than the expression on Littleton’s face.

“Well, yes, you see, we have state-of-the art sensor technology in our buildings, to maximize energy efficiency,” he said. “Our residents sign an agreement when they live with us, and that includes the use of their data. Normally, the buildings use algorithmic intelligence to leverage that data and send heat and water where it needs to go. On a hot summer day, no one tells our buildings to open the shutters on the rooftop deck. They just do it on their own, to let out excess heat. Well, on a cold winter day, and a day when so much of the city’s power has been knocked out...”

The broadcast cut to lines of people receiving bracelets as they entered the building. Many of them were the same Caribbean and Turkish residents that Triskelion’s developments had gentrified out of their neighbourhoods. The building would give them a maximum two hours of electricity — enough to heat the units, get them a hot

shower, and let them charge some devices. Based on heartbeats recorded by the bracelet, the building would know when the visitors had gone to sleep, and would draw down power to the units accordingly. Further, the refrigerators in each unit generated a report about which items inside were about to spoil first, and what was safe to eat. The medicine cabinets would lock automatically in the presence of visitors outside the resident profile – the same way they did in the presence of minors. As Littleton spoke, the same process was happening in Triskelion buildings all over the city – including the far-flung areas where poorer residents lived.

Watching Bernard, and staring at the line of people and the cameras and the food trucks and the vast hulking buildings looming over the icy street, the stars made visible through the city's complete darkness, Sasha missed the city so powerfully she wondered if it wasn't a side effect of the cold. It felt the same, that breathless dizziness, that sense of the world going hard and slippery and dangerous under her feet. What had she been thinking, moving so far away? She could have burned her pension on a condo. Lots of people did. It was worth it, to live in this place where neighbours were actually neighbours.

When the press conference finished, Bernard came over and nudged Sasha with his shoulder. "So?" he asked. "How did I do? Did you think I filled your shoes?"

"You were much more patient with these things than I ever was. And you sound far more optimistic." She nudged him back. She remembered, now, why she'd left. What

she was locking the door against when she locked it in suburbia. "I always liked that about you. It's why I recommended you for the position."

He smiled. "Thanks for that."

Sasha hugged her arms tighter around her. She had to say this next part. She had avoided it all day. If she didn't say it now, she might be tempted to stay, to give into the impulse she'd had a moment earlier. "Your wife will be happy to hear your voice on the radio, won't she? She won't have heard your voice in a long while, I suspect."

"Not with everything that's been going on, no." He stared at the long line of families entering the building. "I don't think I've called her since you arrived."

Sasha had nothing to say to that.

"What about your daughter?" Bernard asked. "She must be worried."

"She didn't want me to come."

"Why not?"

Sasha wondered. Was it just the drive? They can manage, Lotte had said. They'll be fine. And what she had meant was "they'll be fine without you." Perhaps her daughter knew her better than she thought. Perhaps there really was a glimmer of perceptiveness in there, and a gentleness and tactfulness that Sasha herself could not fathom.

"Oh, you know," she said. "I'm getting too old for this."

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