

# THE DARKEST WINTER



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*A day can really slip by when you're deliberately avoiding what  
you're supposed to do.*

—Bill Watterson





*December 3*

**DESHI'S WELL-WORN SHOES** clapped against the cracked asphalt in quick succession. He navigated what a foreigner would deem a labyrinth of steel and concrete. China's Jingjinji Metropolitan Region neighbored the capital city of Beijing and contained a growing mass of humanity. It paid to know where you were going. Brushing past the shoulders and bicycle wheels of his fellow countrymen, Deshi avoided eye contact and hugged the bag he carried close to his chest.

He accidentally bumped into a young woman walking by while mulling over the idea that he should have brought a warmer coat. If the temperature of the last week was any indicator, this winter was going to be a bone chilling one. The woman, so focused on her cellphone, barely registered the collision. Deshi continued without a word, and the longer he walked, the thinner the population on the street became. After a few minutes of left and right turns, this tired man found himself at the entrance to an old apartment complex. The front entrance sat snugly behind a locked iron security grill, so he pushed one of the call buttons just to the left of the door with his gloved hand.

"I'm back with lunch," he said in Mandarin Chinese

into the tiny microphone.

While he waited, Deshi glanced down the narrow road that stretched a few hundred feet behind him. It was marked by identical apartment structures on either side, uncomfortably resembling a prison block. Looking up for a sign of life in any of the apartment windows, he noted the absence of a blue sky. Thick and toxic grayish brown smog had again settled on the city which made it impossible to tell if natural clouds floated above. He'd be happy to leave the city soon for his real home, and then—

A loud buzz and a thud gave the signal that he could enter.

Deshi crossed the building's threshold, and the clang of the door closing and locking echoed in the hallway. After adjusting his grip on the bag, he began his climb up the stairs. On the third-floor landing, he headed to a door on his right and kicked it twice with his foot. It clicked open, allowing him into his temporary home.

Dust and stale air mingled together in the one-room apartment. A small washroom and a closet marked the only features that could be called amenities. Deshi placed the bag on the floor, next to a tired-looking young man who stared at a laptop on a small rickety table. Deshi threw his gloves off, opened the bag, and pulled food out along with a blue folder.

"Here's the last bit of information for us, too."

Zhang Tao glanced over and smiled sheepishly.

"Thank you."

Zhang Tao took two food containers and moved from the chair to a mattress in the corner of the room. He rubbed his eyes before looking at Deshi again, who was now taking off his coat.

"I'm starving," he said. "I haven't eaten anything since early this morning."

Deshi pulled out two bottles of water. Then he crumpled up the bag and threw it on a pile of garbage that had long since overflowed from the can. He handed one bottle to Zhang Tao, then pulled over a chair and sat down.

“How much longer until you’re done?” he asked.  
“We have four days until deadline.”

“I’ll make it with plenty of time. The code will be done by tonight. That leaves compiling and debugging. I should have it ready to go tomorrow.” Zhang Tao pushed a wad of noodles into his mouth with chop sticks and pointed to a folder next to him. “Hopefully this is all accurate information.”

“What, you don’t think it’s right?” asked Deshi.

“No way for me to know. I’m writing the code based on what I’m given. If it’s screwy, it’s not my fault.”

“And then—?”

“And then my program won’t give the hacking teams full access to the Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition systems. The hardware and firmware need to be exactly as they’re telling me. We’re hijacking a lot of locations and they all have different configurations.”

“There’s no need to doubt the information we’ve been given. The Noxious Virus is working perfectly and remains undetected in every targeted power plant.”

“I took a look at the Noxious code. The Iranians came up with some brilliant stuff. Elegant, actually.” Zhang Tao looked up from his food. “How long has it been in place?”

“Six months.” Deshi opened the blue folder, pulled out the pages, and handed them over. He tapped the top one, “Found a file on an executive’s computer. Apparently, he has a terrible memory.”

Zhang Tao laughed. “It’s all his passwords for years! He barely changes them, too—the same numerical progression at the end. We don’t need the key logger running on this idiot.”

“Not too surprising,” said Deshi. “Nothing has happened to any of these power plants, so much of their security is lazy. Look at the next page.”

“The Mount Weather Emergency Operations Center. Is this for their Emergency Alert System?”

“Yes. It looks like it’s going to be the hardest part to

stop. A lot of redundant systems to get around.”

“It’s all networked though. That means there are many entrances and more than a few ways to disrupt it.” Zhang Tao continued to read and flipped to the next page. “Plus, it all runs on the same grid as everything else....”

“That’s good to hear.” Deshi leaned back in his chair and took a drink of water.

“This is a huge network,” Zhang Tao said as he continued to the next page. “Television, radio, and satellite systems. Glad they didn’t put me on it. I’ve been wrestling with my part more than I’d like to admit.”

“Amazing what you can start with a spear phishing email.”

“Do you know how many people are working alongside us?”

“By my rough estimate, close to a hundred. At least two dozen teams will be active on the final day for execution.”

“I heard North Korea got in on this,” Zhang Tao said.

“You heard wrong,” Deshi scoffed. “No one wants to work with North Korea.”

“Something else I’ve been wondering about. Do you know who’s organizing and funding all of this?”

Deshi took another bite of food. “From what I can tell, I’m far removed from them in the communication chain. I don’t know where they are from, but I’ve been told they’re well connected. They’re doing their best to be anonymous.”

“They must be rich to get this all together.”

“I’d imagine they’re paying everyone as well as us for all of this work. That’s some bill.”

“They must have a big payoff in mind,” Zhang Tao said, then turned his attention back to his laptop.

“Considering how successful Noxious has been for access and observation, my program is poised to be legendary.” He paused and rubbed his tired eyes. “I do wonder how this is really going to affect people. Is it going to change things for the better?”

“I think it will. I wouldn’t be here otherwise. Have you named your destroyer yet?”

“Marici.”

Deshi nodded his approval. “The deity of light. Very fitting.”







*December 6*

ZHANG TAO'S ESTIMATED time frame to finish his work was optimistic at best. What was supposed to be one more day of coding in the hideaway apartment turned into three.

His normally calm disposition turned to one of loud bouts of cursing and rage when the computer had finished compiling the code...and it didn't work. And after more than a full day of failure to debug the code, he got so worked up that he punched a wall. Deshi thought for sure he had broken his hand, and their chances of making their deadline. But Zhang Tao managed to soldier on, determined to get it right and prove his skill.

In the morning, an exhausted Zhang Tao woke up Deshi, handed his work over on a flash drive, and promptly announced that he was going to sleep for as long as he possibly could. He was out within moments of lying down. This left Deshi to finish their part in the plan.

He got ready to leave with the flash drive zipped up safely in his left jacket pocket. Upon closing the apartment door, he felt his phone vibrate. A text message he had been waiting for read '012.' Satisfied, he descended the stairs and walked out of the building onto the narrow street. Turning right, he officially started his journey.

Just below freezing for the fourth consecutive day. Despite that, it felt good to get out of that hole-in-a-wall of an apartment. Neither of them left the apartment much to ensure their presence was kept to a minimum. Blend in, just another soul in the sea of China's humanity. Deshi's employers stressed that every time they talked. And lying low wasn't difficult around here. The people living in this area kept to themselves and Zhang Tao rarely made noise louder than fingers hitting a keyboard.

Turns out you don't need to build anything physically imposing to make an impact today; some clever coding would do it. Characters displayed on a screen that, when put in just the right order and in just the right place, would make an entire population hurtle 150 years into the past. The code in Deshi's possession was created for power grid networks located in the United States. Its existence a secret, kept offline to leave no cyber trail.

It was an odd feeling for Deshi. While this part of his job had been planned months ago, he never really saw the day coming. All of that power, or at least some of it, he reminded himself, waiting on a flash drive that weighed maybe an ounce. It amounted to nothing more than a piece of plastic, in its docile state. It did make each step he took feel heavier. Is this what it feels like to be dangerous or powerful? He was as middle of the road as you could get. He had never done anything that remarkable in his nearly fifty years of life. He hated confrontation and would move out of the way long before getting caught in the middle of something. But here he was, right in the middle of a nefarious design.

He laughed at himself. Was he trying to pump his own ego up?

*Like I've really done anything. I'm just walking down the street like I do every day. I'm part of a much bigger machine with a common goal.*

The odds were that his involvement in this scheme would never be known, never be written down in a history book.

Rounding a corner, he approached a train station where he could see the drop-off-and-pick-up point for the local taxi service. A train had just come in; a sea of commuters descended the stairs towards the street. A few cabs idled for passengers, the last one in the lineup had the number 012 affixed to the marquee on the roof. Deshi swooped into the cab before anyone else got there.

"Where to?" asked the startled driver, tossing a newspaper aside.

"Where can you take me?" Deshi asked as he stared into the rearview mirror.

"Just about anywhere you need to go."

"Take me down two train station stops. Go through every tunnel you can from here to there," he said. The last sentence got the desired effect. The driver looked right back at him.

"You want to go through tunnels?"

"Yes, I like them."

"As you wish." The driver put the car into gear and pulled away from the curb.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deshi took the time to look at the world sliding by him. Dirty streets surrounded by the worn buildings that held the people young and old alike who inhabited this maze. The taxi cruised by a small park built years ago for the housing complexes nearby. It wasn't much to look at, but it served its purpose when the weather permitted it.

*To be young again, he mused. No responsibilities, nothing but homework to be concerned about.*

He had to crane his neck to see the park. But just like his youth, it had passed him by. Was everything really simpler then? Maybe being young meant you were ignorant about how the world worked. You got older and everything turned much darker and cynical. You realized you weren't invincible, you healed a little bit slower every year. You gained weight, perspired for no reason, had a harder time staying asleep, and grew hair in the strangest places.

The world had changed a lot since his childhood. Ruling nations had come and gone, the borders of countries changed. The advances in technology altered society. The wealth and speed of knowledge had become more powerful than ever thanks to the internet. Both a blessing and a curse, it made dumb people think they were smart because they read something on the internet and immediately took it as fact. That's one reason Deshi didn't like it—it was full of people who thought they were experts on everything. How little they actually knew. How many people really understood how the world worked? Those that made the real decisions to influence the world stood in well-protected gardens.

*Do I know some of the people who make those decisions?*

Deshi considered those he was working with. No, his accomplices were outsiders just like him. Most of them, at least. Together they were going to pull these terrible people back down to reality.

They were sick of seeing the most rotten people control others' lives. Decisions were being made that only benefitted the greedy and corrupt. Technology had made the world a much smaller place. The global economy was an unrelenting machine with currency and goods being funneled around in enormous quantities. The advances of observation technology and world politics made everyone suspicious of each other. Human interaction was on the way out, decisions done over a video connection, contracts signed electronically, money moved in the blink of an eye.

War had even taken a much different shape. Before, soldiers pointed guns at each other, used manned tanks, planes, and boats to advance on enemy lines. The advent of unmanned drones made it more like a video game. Piloted by someone miles away from any danger, military action could be called in like a food order. The danger was gone from one side, the emotional response replaced by coordinates and a grainy video feed. Collateral damage had lost all weight; it just became a phrase for the attacker. It was not only

expected but necessary.

Anger roiled in Deshi's soul at the thought of what the world was becoming.

Still, he felt the nasty edge of hypocrisy slice at his conscience. It's not like his "elected" officials were the best people in the world, making the best decisions for the public at every step. His country's growth had been exploding for years. And while the media always said money was rolling in, he never saw it. He didn't know anyone who did. Cranking out a sea of electronics for crap pay and obscene amounts of pollution was taking its toll. How about more money and cleaner air for the people? It was often downright dangerous to be outside without a mask. He felt like the time to look inside the borders was coming close. That could be next, a wake up to those at home who were taking in the worst of the West.

Deshi came back to the present with his hand rolling the flash drive around like a lucky coin in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at it. He just had to keep this on his journey to complete the job he accepted many months ago. *Then things will start to get better.*

Turning his attention forward again, he saw they were approaching his destination. The station was nestled in a commercial district with many popular shops and restaurants. They hadn't driven through a single tunnel.

As the taxi crept up to the train station, the driver switched off the on-duty light. He then tapped his finger on the digital sign that showed the fare fee and parked the car. Deshi pulled out a random amount of money from his pants pocket and palmed the flash drive along with it. Reaching forward through the small Plexiglas hole in the divider, Deshi carefully flipped the contents over and pushed the flash drive into the driver's waiting hand.

"Thanks for the ride. I hope the rest of your day is enjoyable," Deshi told him.

"I'll make sure it is," came the reply.

Deshi got out and walked away from the train station

toward a corner restaurant. He glanced back at the cab as it cruised away in the opposite direction.

*Finally, I'll be able to return home.*

\* \* \* \* \*

With the package now in his care, the driver focused on the road ahead of him. The dropoff point was just under an hour away, then that would be it. His boss promised him payment when he got there, meaning he'd finish his work day early along with some much needed extra money in his pocket.