

Winter

It was cold—so bitterly cold. He lay on his back in the dirt, arms and legs spread at odd angles as if he was about to make snow angels without any snow.

“What was that?!” he said.

“I’m not sure,” a voice answered.

The fading sun painted the ruined landscape in ruddy hues. Twisted piles of metal glowed bronze as they reached for the sky and sprawling mounds glittered like gold. He lay among them and fumed.

“How rude!” he exclaimed. “Damned North Wind tearing through here and knocking me on my backside! It’s not even October yet!”

“Are you alright?” the voice asked.

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled. “Just took me by surprise.” He lay still, feeling out the forming bumps and bruises. A headache was taking shape somewhere in the back of his skull. “I’ll feel it tomorrow,” he said. “It’s too early for this kind of wind, don’t you think?”

The North Wind howled in protest.

He shivered and looked at the sky. Heavy grey clouds squeezed the sunset into little blushing pockets. His breath steamed in the chilly air—tiny clouds adding to the big ones above.

He swiveled his head from left to right so far that his ears touched the ground on each side. To his left, he could see a road between piles of rubble and the cloudy sky above. To his right, the ground ran flat but for some mounded trash and the gouges made by bulldozers. In the distance he picked out lines of scrawny pine trees.

“They call this Kendal Yards?” he asked. “Not sure who Kendal is, but their yard is full of junk.”

“Yes,” the voice agreed. “That’s the official name. Most people still call it the green rail yard.”

He rolled his eyes and looked around. Twisted railroad tracks poked out of every dirt pile like rusty weeds. “God only knows how it got that name,” he snorted derisively. “No trains here for a hundred years. Fools using a name they don’t understand. It’s a tribute to construction...or destruction...or both. Why am I here again?” he asked.

“The seasons,” the voice said patiently. “You’re here for the change, the leaves.”

“Ah,” he said. “Now I remember. The business of Autumn.” He looked into the distance and focused on the dump truck ruts that led from one junk pile to the next. “Still, I should’ve picked a better place to start. This one is unforgivably ugly.”

He picked his head up off the ground and looked down over his feet. Broken earth sloped away, between heaps of rock and metal. A gurgling melody drifted to him from a river beyond.

“Can’t figure rivers,” he continued. “Year in and year out they’re on with the same babble and trill, louder and softer. Old Man Winter freezes them. Spring thaws them. But they don’t stop. No, they babble and sing like there’s no tomorrow. You’d think they’d get sick of it.”

“Do you get tired of the leaves?” the voice asked. “The colors of fall?”

“Point taken,” he said.

Across the valley, beyond his feet, he could see a city of a million lights. They glittered gold and white like the sun on the sea. Above the city, the sky was still a brilliant canvas of reds and oranges between the clouds.

“How long do you think, before they notice?” he asked. “How long before they realize he’s almost here?”

“It’s hard to tell,” the voice said.

“Yeah, seasons don’t matter in the city,” he added. “I suppose it won’t be long now, not with this icy wind around.” The North Wind tugged at him coyly. “Do you think they remember?”

“Remember what?” the voice asked.

“How he rides the wind south. How he drags his icy claws over everything. How he steals the warmth. Do you think they remember him?”

“No, I doubt it.”

“You’re probably right,” he said, then sighed. “They’re too insulated now. Not like the old days.”

“Those were hard days,” the voice countered.

“But they had more heart. You disagree?” he asked.

“No.”

“I thought as much.”

He stretched his arms and legs out as far as they would go, then took a deep breath and blew it out as hard as he could.

He listened to the wind. It whispered promises of ice and snow as it headed for the city.

“He’s early. Too early. The damn North Wind always so damned early?” he asked, annoyed.

“The seasons don’t always work on a schedule,” the voice offered.

“I bet the old goat has an icicle in his cap for some fool reason. Not even Halloween and he’s set to freeze me out. No regard, none at all.”

“Indeed,” the voice lamented, “Old Man Winter will have the countryside whitewashed before Thanksgiving.”

He sighed. “And Thanksgiving is my favorite. The color, the contrast. You can’t have a proper Thanksgiving when it looks like Christmas. Did he even think about that?”

“I don’t know,” said the voice. “You could ask.”

“There’s no asking the Old Man. No consideration for anyone. He arched his back and pointed his chin to the sky so he could see above his head. Darkening clouds stretched as far as he could see. They promised snow, lots and lots of snow. “Well, look at that. It’ll look like January by breakfast if this keeps up.”

“Such is life,” the voice said.

“Maybe *this* life. Maybe so. But I don’t have to like it.”

“You could ask for better weather. Something warm.”

“Yeah, I’ll ask. Warmer, but not too warm. Summer is gone after all. Like a too-early wind. Either way, the leaves will be ruined—it’ll rain. They’ll be a soggy, matted mess,” he complained.

“Better a soggy mess than nothing. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“You’re right. Better wet leaves than no leaves. Thanksgiving isn’t Thanksgiving without leaves. And there’s always next year.”

“That’s the spirit,” the voice said. “Are you going to get started now?”

“No, not now.”

“But, the snow—”

“Not now,” he interrupted. “This is my time and I won’t be rushed. Old Man Winter can have his turn when it’s his turn.”

He relaxed and looked up again. The clouds had finally choked all the color out of the sky. Days and nights came and went. The temperature dropped slowly but surely.

Eventually, tiny ice crystals began to fill the evenings. They billowed and swirled around the piles of junk, gathering up in groups, growing from a dusting to a veil, then to a blanket that covered the ground until morning.

He sighed again.

“Impatient old man, that winter,” he said. Then he closed his eyes and thought warm thoughts.