

Winter

It was cold, so bitter 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 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 turned 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 bumps and bruising that were forming. Somewhere in the back of his skull a headache was taking shape.

“I’ll feel it tomorrow,” he mused, “Too early for this kind of wind, don’t you think?”

The wind howled in protest.

He shivered and looked at the sky. Colorless clouds were squeezing the sunset into little blushing pockets. His breath steamed in the chilly air—tiny clouds to add to the big ones.

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

“They call this Kendal Yards?” he said, “not much of a ‘Kendal’ , more a ‘junk’ yard.”

“Yes,” the voice agreed, “But that’s just the official name. Most people call it the ‘rail yard.’ ”

“God only knows how it got that name,” he snorted, as he looked at the nearest pile of dirt. Twisted railroad tracks poked out at odd angles, as if the hill had a nasty case of bed-head.

“I’d call it 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 flopped his head from right to left this time, focusing on a dump truck ruts that led from junk pile to junk pile.

“Still, I ought to have 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.

“Nothing dampens her spirits, does it?” he snorted.

“No, I don’t suppose it does.” The voice replied.

“Can’t figure rivers,” he continued, “Year in and year out they’re on with the same babble and trill, sometimes louder, sometimes softer. Spring thaws quicken them. Old Man Winter freezes 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.

“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.

“Harder, since the cities,” he added, “I suppose it won’t be long now, not with this demon wind around.”

The wind tugged at him coyly.

“Do you think they remember?”

“Remember what?” the voice asked.

“How he rides it 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 sighed, “Too insulated now. Not like the old days.”

“Those were hard days,” the voice countered.

“Yes, 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.

“Think I could be the wind?” he asked.

“Do you want to?”

“Maybe. Nobody seems to care for Autumn anymore.”

“That’s not true,” the voice said, “you care.”

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

“He’s early. Too early. Why is he so damned early?”

“The seasons don’t quite work to 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 regard for anyone, that one. I’d just as soon go get the river to stop singing.”

He arched his back and pointed his chin to the sky so he could see behind him. Dark 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 on up.”

“Such is life,” the voice chided.

“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. It’s not natural. Like a too early wind. Either way, the leaves are ruined—it’ll rain. They’ll be a soggy, matted mess.”

“Better a soggy mess than out of sight and 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’ll be rushed. Winter or no Winter.”

He relaxed and looked up again. The clouds had finally choked all the color out of the sky. Night was falling. The temperature was dropping.

Tiny ice crystals began to fall. They billowed and swirled around the piles of junk, gathering up in groups, growing from a dust to a veil, a veil to a blanket.

He sighed.

“Tell that crusty miser that I’ll not be rushed,” he said to the wind, “Autumn comes and goes as it pleases.”

Then he closed his eyes and thought warm thoughts.