

There are many stories about me, most of which are wrong or exaggerated, though I suppose that is inevitable when a figure becomes more myth than presence, and those who do end up in my presence are no longer of the mortal plane. People imagine that my arrival demands attention and drama, storms gathering at my command or shadows stretching unnaturally across the ground before I step forward.

The truth, though, is far quieter than that.

I do not arrive with thunder.

I arrive the way night arrives, slowly, inevitably, and without announcement, and by the time you notice me, it is already too late to ask why I have come.

I do not rush. I do not hunt.

I arrive.

I have walked through battlefields where the earth was stained with the blood of fallen soldiers and the sky itself seemed to recoil from the violence below. I have stood in silent hospital corridors where machines hummed tirelessly beside fragile bodies while loved ones whispered promises that neither of us truly believed. I have crossed deserts where travellers staggered beneath merciless suns until they collapsed beside empty waterskins, the wind erasing their final footsteps. I have drifted across oceans where storms swallowed ships whole, leaving broken timber and unanswered prayers behind.

Death wears many faces, and I have seen them all.

But winter is different.

Winter does not rush toward its victims with fury or spectacle. Instead, it settles slowly across the land like a quiet decision, soft at first and deceptively gentle, until the world forgets that beneath its beauty lies something patient and merciless.

Winter does not kill quickly.

It teaches people they are safe, right up until they are not.

More importantly, winter has a voice.

And I hear it better than anyone.

The dead cling to winter strangely. Their final thoughts remain caught within storms the way frost clings to glass long after night has passed. Every snowfall carries remnants of someone unfinished. Every gust of wind through a doorway or crack in a window carries warnings from those who once believed they still had time.

The living hear these things sometimes.

Not properly.

Never properly.

But they feel them.

A hesitation before sleep.

A sudden unease in an empty room.

The instinct to check a fire twice.

The unbearable certainty that something is wrong despite having no reason to believe it.

Then they silence the feeling.

People spend most of their lives teaching themselves not to listen.

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The first soul I gathered that winter lived at the edge of the village where the forest began, and the wind always arrived first.

His house leaned beneath the weight of snow and years alike. Frost crept across the windows in pale silver veins while the weak fire in the hearth struggled to hold the cold at bay. Outside, the forest stood motionless beneath heavy snowfall, the dark pines rising as silent figures gathered around the house, waiting for something inevitable to unfold.

The world around the cottage felt abandoned.

Not empty.

Abandoned.

There is a difference.

Empty places feel untouched.

Abandoned places still remember the people who once filled them.

Inside, the air smelled faintly of smoke, old wool, and cold iron. A kettle rested forgotten atop the stove while a small stack of split wood sat beside the hearth, smaller than it should have been this early into the season.

The old man sat wrapped in a blanket worn soft with age, staring into the dying fire as though willing it to survive until morning. His hands trembled faintly as he held them toward the flames.

Photographs rested above the mantle.

A woman with tired but kind eyes.

A younger version of himself beside her.

A child sitting proudly on his shoulders beneath summer sunlight that no longer seemed possible in a place like this.

People leave pieces of themselves behind everywhere without realising it. In half-read books. In worn chairs. In quiet rooms shaped around routines that continue long after they are gone.

Outside, the wind carried the voices.

*“More wood...”*

*“Please...”*

*“Do not wait...”*

The dead understand winter better than the living ever will.

Because they know how small the beginning of death truly is.

Not pain.

Not terror.

A room slightly colder than before.

Heavy eyelids.

Slowed breathing.

Small things.

Winter kills through accumulation.

The old man coughed softly into the silence.

“I’ll gather more tomorrow,” he murmured.

Tomorrow.

Few words have carried more souls to me than that one.

The fire weakened slowly while the cold settled deeper into the room. Exhaustion wrapped itself around him so completely that it almost resembled comfort.

That is how winter deceives them.

Not with suffering.

With relief.

The voices became urgent.

*“Stay awake...”*

*“Move...”*

*“Please...”*

But to him, it was only another winter night. He had survived countless others before this one.

That belief comforts people far longer than it should.

Eventually, he tried to stand, one trembling hand reaching toward the woodpile beside the hearth.

So close.

People are often close.

That is another cruelty winter favours.

He managed only two steps before weakness folded through him completely. When he collapsed beside the fire, the sound was painfully small.

Just bone striking wood.

One sharp breath.

Then silence.

I moved closer then.

Not because I was needed.

Because the moment had arrived.

The room had grown terribly still. Frost thickened across the windows while the final ember pulsed weakly against the dark.

His breathing slowed.

Confusion crossed his face more than fear.

People expect death to feel violent.

Most are surprised by how tired it feels instead.

Then his eyes found me.

Not startled.

Not afraid.

Only tired.

“Did the fire go out?” he asked quietly.

I looked toward the hearth where the final ember collapsed into ash.

“Yes,” I answered.

For a moment, he stared toward the darkened fire.

“I thought I had more time.” He whispered.

Most do.

His spirit rose gently from the body beside the hearth, like warmth leaving a room once the fire dies. He looked down at himself lying motionless upon the floor, one hand still stretched weakly toward the untouched woodpile.

Then his gaze drifted toward the photographs above the mantle.

“They waited a long time for me,” he said softly.

There was no fear in his voice then.

Only loneliness.

“It’s beautiful tonight.” He said in an almost state of awe.

People say things like that near the end. As though some part of them finally understands the world is about to continue without them and suddenly notices every detail they once ignored.

Then he took my hand.

Outside, the wind carried his voice into the storm where it joined the others.

Another warning.

Another echo woven into winter itself.

And still, the village slept.

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The second death came during a storm that buried the village beneath endless white.

The little girl’s house glowed warmly against the snow outside. Amber firelight flickered behind frost-clouded windows while smoke curled steadily upward into the dark sky. From outside, the house looked safe.

Winter enjoys appearances.

Inside, illness had settled heavily across the room.

The air smelled of fever, candle wax, damp cloth, and burnt wood. A basin of cooling water rested beside the bed with folded cloths draped over its edge. Medicine bottles crowded the bedside table beside candles, slowly drowning beneath melted wax.

The child lay buried beneath blankets too large for her small body. Her cheeks glowed crimson with fever while strands of damp hair clung to her forehead. Each breath rattled unevenly inside her chest, wet and fragile beneath the silence.

Her mother sat beside the bed, eyes exhausted and hands trembling.

Exhaustion has a shape to it.

Slumped shoulders.

Shaking fingers.

Eyes that no longer fully close because fear refuses to allow proper rest.

But love has a shape too.

It existed in every cloth she pressed gently against the child's forehead. In every whispered reassurance, she no longer fully believed herself. In the way she flinched at every change in breathing, listening constantly for proof her daughter remained in the world.

Earlier that afternoon, the doctor had stood where I stood now.

"Just a winter cough," he had promised.

People trust certainty because uncertainty is unbearable.

Outside, the wind pressed against the house, carrying frantic whispers only I could hear.

*"Her breathing is wrong..."*

*"Please listen..."*

*“Call him back...”*

The mother froze briefly.

Only briefly.

I saw instinct reach for her then. A terrible understanding rising somewhere beneath reassurance.

But fear makes people cling harder to hope.

“He said it would pass,” she whispered.

The child’s breathing changed slowly after that. A pause too long between breaths. A tightening in the chest. Small things most people ignore because they are desperate enough to ignore them.

The little girl opened her eyes then and looked directly at me.

Children notice me more easily than adults.

Perhaps because they have not yet learned how to ignore impossible things.

“Who are you?” she whispered weakly.

Her mother leaned closer immediately.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

But the child kept looking at me.

I said nothing.

I always say nothing at first.

Outside, the storm deepened. Snow clawed softly against the windows while the voices became frantic.

*“Wake her...”*

*“Please...”*

*“Do something...”*

The mother brushed damp hair from the child’s forehead.

“You’ll feel better in the morning,” she whispered shakily.

Morning.

Another promise winter does not always keep.

The child struggled for breath after that. Each inhale shallower than the last, while panic slowly broke apart the certainty inside her mother’s eyes.

“Breathe for me,” she whispered desperately. “Please...”

The child tried.

That is the cruellest part.

The body always tries to survive.

Even at the end.

Then came the silence.

Not dramatic.

Not violent.

Just absence.

The mother’s grief tore through the room with a sound even the storm outside could not bury beneath its howling.

I have stood upon battlefields where thousands died screaming beneath iron and fire.

Nothing sounds like a mother realising her child will never breathe again.

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The third death came quietly. Quieter than the others.

No storm battered the walls that night. No coughing broke the silence. The village slept beneath soft snowfall while pale moonlight turned rooftops and frozen roads to silver.

The house was newer, though that meant little. New wood still learns to bend. New walls still learn to whisper.

There had been laughter here once, hope too. The kind that lingers in rooms long after voices fade. The baby's room faced east so morning light would reach the crib first. They had chosen that carefully, standing together in the unfinished nursery while sunlight spilled across bare floorboards.

People build futures in rooms like that.

Paint safety into walls.

Fold love into blankets.

Stack promises into tiny clothes in drawers.

But winter has never cared for promises.

A flaw in the window frame went unnoticed, too small to matter. A narrow weakness where the seal failed.

That is all winter ever needs. Not an open door. Only something willing to give way.

At first, the cold entered gently. A draft beneath the curtains. Frost thickening in one corner of the glass. Easily ignored.

But winter is patient.

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Night by night, the nursery deepened in cold until no fire downstairs could reach it. And with the cold came the echoes.

*“Too cold...”*

*“Please...”*

*“Wake...”*

They moved through the room like breath without a body.

The mother stirred beside her husband. Even in sleep, the body knows when something is wrong. She woke briefly, listening, then pulled the blankets closer and drifted again.

The baby slept in the crib; hands curled against the blanket. The mobile above turned slowly in the draft.

Infant breath is fragile, too small to trust the world with.

I was already there.

I do not always arrive at the end. Sometimes I come earlier, because endings begin long before the final breath. I watch them take shape.

The room grew colder.

The baby’s breathing shifted first, a longer pause, a weaker inhale.

The echoes sharpened.

*“Wake...”*

*“Please...”*

*“Something is wrong...”*

The mother stirred again. For a moment, instinct almost overcame exhaustion. She rose, crossed to the crib, and touched the child’s cheek.

Still warm. Still breathing.

Enough.

“Shh,” she whispered, pulling the blanket higher, then returned to bed.

The echoes faltered.

There is always a moment where the world hesitates, where survival feels possible.

But it passes.

The nursery lost its warmth. Frost spread across the glass. Moonlight settled over the crib.

The baby’s breaths thinned.

Smaller.

Further apart.

Until silence.

Not dramatic. Not violent. Just absence.

I moved closer.

There is no cruelty in what I do. No hunger. Only completion.

When I lifted the child, it felt like holding a question the world could not answer.

So small it barely seemed real.

The child did not fear me. Only watched, as infants do, with quiet curiosity.

Behind us, the parents slept while frost sealed the window.

Outside, snow continued falling.

The echoes went quiet.

Not gone. Only mourning.

Morning arrived slowly.

Light spilled into the nursery. Dust drifted through the cold air. The mobile still turned.

The mother woke first.

At first, nothing was wrong.

Then she reached the doorway.

And stopped.

Stillness hit before grief did.

She stared into the crib as if the world had changed shape.

Then she broke.

“No—no—no—” her voice rose with every stumble.

She collapsed, pulling the child close, trying to force warmth into what no longer had it.

The father woke to her sobbing and understood too late.

I turned away.

Not from grief itself. I have endured enough of it.

But some moments belong only to the living.

Outside, the wind moved softly against the house.

And within it, the echoes returned once more.

Another warning.

Another voice added to winter.

Another soul carried into the storm.

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I am not their enemy.

This is what they misunderstand.

I do not choose.

I do not decide.

I do not take in the way they believe I do.

I arrive.

I witness.

I carry.

The echoes are the ones who try to change things. The ones who press themselves into the edges of the world, desperate to be heard. They rattle windows. They whisper through storms. They slip warnings beneath doors and into uneasy dreams.

Sometimes, they almost succeed.

A hesitation.

A second thought.

A fleeting moment where someone pauses beside a dying fire or wakes suddenly in the night, unable to explain the fear in their chest.

But almost is not enough.

Winter returns again and again, layering new voices atop old ones until the wind itself grows heavy with memory.

And still, the living call it nothing.

Just the house settling.

Just the storm.

Just the cold beneath the door.

But the wind remembers.

Every final breath.

Every unfinished plea.

Every voice that begged to be heard one moment too late.

And I remain where I have always been.

Quiet as falling snow.

Waiting at the edge of every final breath.

Listening, as the wind remembers everything the dead tried to say.