

CHAPTER ONE

They figured me too young for a tree builder. I could see it in their eyes. Bunch of rich freaks, staring at me like I needed to impress them. But I did need to. That was the problem. The wagon was about out of juice and my belly was so hard I couldn't even stand to scratch it. I built the best trees in the Steel Cities, but you'd never know it from the drought I'd hit.

"You thinking evergreen?" I said, looking at Frost, him being the man wanting trees.

"We'd like to see the seasons, Mister Banyan." Frost was a big bucket of a guy with too many chins, and the hair he'd bleached white to look older left his face looking twenty years too young.

"That's the real trick, ain't it?" I said, shaking my head. Make a big deal of every request, Pop had drilled it into me. The client pays more and ends up twice as happy.

"Just get all the scrap you need," said Frost. Man practically smelled of cash. His wife all lit up with sparkles in her hair and studs on her face. Hell, even their watcher looked polished – his dreads clean and fluffy, his long beard woven with fabric. Not a mark on him, either. The sign of a bodyguard you do not want to mess with.

I took a look around the dirt lot. Acre at least. Blank and ugly, full of dust and sky. But not for long. Not if I built a forest to get lost inside. Shade from the sun and a break from the wind. Show the world you could still own something special.

A decent slope gave some perspective to play with, and I'd give them the seasons, all right. Plastic leaves wired up to turn color and shrivel on metal branches. I'd give them spring blooms and fall colors.

"Good news, Mister Frost." I made a smile, extended my hand to him. "Seasons are my specialty."

Frost returned the smile but ignored the handshake. He just stood there with his arms resting on his belly, and his mouth all twitchy at some internal joke. Then he stomped over to his wife and put his arm around her pointy shoulders and I felt bad for her just having to be so close to the guy. She was a stunner, no question. Gray eyes and dark skin.

"The question is," Frost began, his body trembling as he pawed his wife's polyester top, "can you build this?"

Then Frost tore open the front of her shirt and the woman was practically naked, right there in front of me.

I'd never seen a thing like it.

She was more pretty than I knew what to do with, no doubt about that. But it was the tree that took my breath away.

It was tattooed on her skin in a thousand different shades. The roots spread down her right hip and a thin white trunk curved across her belly, branches reaching all the way up. A fragile tree. Flexible. With golden leaves falling as the tree swayed in some imaginary breeze.