

Chapter 5: My Mortal Enemy

I'd never liked snow. One of the small advantages of living in Houston had been that I'd rarely seen the stuff. The one time it had fallen while I'd lived there, people had been in their yards all day, building muddy snowmen and trying to sled down nearly non-existent slopes. Kids' screeching laughter had filled my neighborhood with groups of them disappearing beneath their friends' thrown snowballs.

Having prepared from the moment 'snow' had been mentioned on the news, I'd locked my door, turned up the heater, and refused to leave my home. I'd proceeded to indulge in a grumpy day, only venturing outside to let Beau do his business.

He hadn't found snow amusing either.

You see, yes. Snow's quite lovely as it falls from the sky. The tiny flakes seem to resist gravity as they drift toward tongues or grass or hair. The problem with snow doesn't come as it flutters like a leaf through the air. It comes once it's finished its descent.

Precipitations of all types have their own unique disadvantages. Hail causes property damage. Rain's hell to drive through. Sleet's just... no. But for these three, the annoyance is fleeting. Hail and sleet quickly melt since they only appear in warmer temperature, and rain soaks into the earth.

Unless it floods. Which Houston does *a lot of*. But this isn't a rant about flooding.

This is about snow. Once the goddamn stuff hits the ground, it sticks. around. *forever*. Within a day, the fun of it passes, but it always overstays its welcome. Until it melts, it's there to make footing treacherous, soak shoes until one's feet are freezing, and generally, act like a prank-enthused asshole.

What I'm getting at here is that I. *hate*. snow.

And now, it surrounded me. Having stuffed the demon box into my purse, I retrieved my sunglasses and chap stick. Hopefully, the first would protect my eyes from sun glare. Even if this place's star shone dimmer than what was found around my home, the reflection of its light was blinding. The second item, I stashed in a pocket, knowing I'd need it before long. If possible, I'd rather keep my lips from bleeding.

"Ok," I said. "Ok, ok. What the hell do I do?"

I'd spun in place more times than I could count, hoping another pass would reveal some sign of civilization or barring that, shelter. I'd need something to shield me from the cold and wind found here. Soon. My fingers were already blazing a bright red from digging the demon box free, but as

far as I could see, this place seemed made of endless snow.

“It would be just my luck to get transported to a deserted waste-land.”

Great. My teeth were already chattering.

I should pick a direction and walk. At least that way, I'd generate warmth. It would be much better than standing here, complaining and waiting for that nearby roiling storm to finish its approach.

With no other reference point to guide me, I put those black-tinged clouds behind me and forged through the drifts with my hands shoved under my arms. The effort of dragging my legs through knee-high snow soon had me sweating, which was an improvement from freezing while standing still, but it wasn't a long-term plan. Not that I had a 'long-term' to anticipate.

“Shu-shut up,” I gasped.

Did I have anything to start a fire with? The receipts in my purse and my clothes might make decent kindling if I'd been willing to sacrifice my thermal wear, but I had nothing on me that would create a spark or keep a blaze going once it had begun. Maybe if I could get the demon box to malfunction again...

Why was I letting a potential ticket home sit in my purse?

Wincing at my hands' exposure to the cold, I withdrew the cube that had brought me here. Compared to before, it looked dead with no glow seeping from the dots in its buttons. They were just black indentations now.

“Ser-serves you right,” I said. “This is you-your fault, you know. Dumped into a landscape from my wor-worst nightmare, freezing to death? Your fault.”

Turning the demon box, I played with its buttons and... its O-ring had vanished. Shit!

With my heart in my throat, I dug through my purse until I found the tiny piece. Pressing my hand to my chest, I caught my breath before retrieving the demon box from where I'd dropped it in the snow. Only then did I resume my struggle.

“It's not really your fault,” I said after a moment. “A mysterious, ob-obviously unwell stranger gives you to me? That's how *at least* thir-thirty percent of fantasy stories begin. I should have known better.”

While I tried different button combinations, hoping to breathe life into what I was holding, I wracked my brain for ways to survive a day here. Wherever here was. While I had plenty of supplies to help if I cut or bruised myself, I had nothing to counter exposure. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with a way to use my things that would resist the cold.

After... I don't know. An hour or two? It was hard to measure time here, so...

When despair kicked in, I turned my focus solely on the demon cube. It had brought me here. Perhaps if I ignited its lights, it could take me home.

“Come on, you magnificent cu-cube,” I said. “Turn on. It’s the least you can do after dro-dropping me in this hellhole.”

I scanned said hellhole for what must be the thousandth time, landing on an impossible sky. Every time I saw that shattered moon overhead, hanging so close that it seemed like I could touch it, my breath caught.

“What do you suppose happened there?” I asked. “Did a meteor fly too close to the pla-planet and hit its moon instead, accepting the sacrifice of a child for its parent? Or do you think people once lived here? God, how advanced would their technology have to have been to unleash such devastation? And if they were so ad-advanced, what killed-”

A cloud drifted into view, making my stomach drop.

“Shit.”

Hurrying to the top of the closest mound of snow, I glanced around me, searching for...

Yes!

Snow flew around me as I ran for the smudge I’d spotted, and when I came upon it, I nearly cried. I advanced on the sad looking tree with something approaching reverence before throwing my arms around it. Or as far around it as they’d reach.

“How are you alive?” I asked its branches.

It didn’t respond, but I didn’t need it to. Not really. I’d found a form of shelter! It was the most pathetic, minimal degree of shelter I could have stumbled on, but it was better than nothing.

“As good a place as any,” I said.

Glancing back toward the storm with its line of precipitation visible now, I swallowed the lump in my throat. While I waited for its arrival, I paced beside the tree, messing with the demon box, but before long, darkness crept over my surroundings while snowflakes began to fall. Collapsing at the base of the tree, I huddled into as tight of a ball as I could.

For I didn’t know how long, I poked and prodded the demon box while the wind howled and snow flurried from the sky. My fingers steadily went from burning to numb to minimal sensation once more, but I never gave them a break. Suffering a bad case of frostbite would be worth it if I could make it home.

Before long, however, this place’s weak star gave up on piercing through the clouds. A black that was almost as deep as what I’d found in the caves enveloped me, and unable to differentiate between the cube’s buttons anymore, I lowered it into my lap, pressing a hand to my eyes.

I couldn't tell if I cried. If I did, my tears turned to ice on my cheeks, joining the frost that was already crusting my face. I was so tired, more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life, but I forced myself to return the demon box to my purse so I could retrieve my e-reader. If I was dying here, I'd do it rocked in the arms of my favorite stories.

I couldn't say how long I read tales of swords and heroes, characters living in the gray with their morally ambiguous choices, but as I did, I marveled that I was still alive. I hadn't moved for what felt like hours. I should have frozen over by now, but perhaps I had. Perhaps this sensation of getting lost in yet another world was one long dream before my brain shut down.

If it was, why was I still tired? My eyelids drooped while my head was dragged forward as if by a stone. I just wanted to sleep. That was ok, right? I could close my eyes for a moment. I knew that was what everyone who was freezing to death said, but it would only be for a moment. A single second. It was ok. I'd be ok. I'd-

An unexpected sheet of snow crashed over me, and as my eyes slid closed, I caught a glimpse of a black, brown, and white something.

No... Beau! Go... home.

"Cò th 'annad?"

What a... strange thing... for a dog...

Revision #1

Created 27 July 2025 20:15:03 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:52:26 by FatalisticFable