

## In the Bleak Midwinter

By Sarah Lueck

Midwinter spun in shades of white and gray, small cuts of ice and spirals of cold wind. A once-familiar landscape turned alien and strange and utterly unforgiving. The ground had frozen long ago, the streams and ponds before it. Day and night had ceased to be different; both seemed to pass in a state of perpetual gray.

Hudson ducked his head and attempted to wipe the ice crystals off his eyelashes. The frozen tears, prodded to life by the fierce cold, refused to move. As if it had been waiting for its cue, the wind gusted harder and, beneath the howls, he heard his father's voice, a nettling, taunting noise that never seemed to stop. Half-angry, half-ashamed, he covered his ears in a weak effort to drown out the sound. It was too late already, he knew, for that voice had always had a way of getting inside of him, no matter how many years had passed.

*It's just the wind,* he promised himself. *And the winter, trying to drive me crazy.*

He hated this patrol. He had never understood why they insisted on sending people out here alone. If the weather was calm enough, it was fine, but if a blizzard came on, it was far more likely that you would simply get lost and wander in circles until you inevitably froze to death or otherwise died.

*"Your fault... your fault... your fault... You're nothing... nothing... nothing..."* hissed the voice in the wind. *"If only you weren't so stupid."*

"Shut up!" Hudson ordered. The wind, of course, declined to reply.

It didn't stop, though. Just like the previous times, the voices continued to murmur on, so faint that he was no longer certain that they weren't coming from his own brain.

He pulled his jacket tighter and struggled forward once more.

The ridgeline was close, he thought. *At least, it's supposed to be.* It would be somewhere over on his right and once he reached it, he could turn around and follow it home. Or at least to the pines. Beneath their branches, he would be all right. He'd make himself a fire and a shelter, wait out the night. In the morning, they would come looking for him, and he'd be rescued. *Or if the snow clears, I can rescue myself.*

It was hard to believe in rescuing himself right now, though. He really wished his GPS hadn't gone missing earlier in the week. Without it, he had no way to tell if he was going the right way when the conditions approached a whiteout.

"*Stupid, stupid,*" jeered the wind. "*If you weren't so stupid you wouldn't have lost it. Tell me how to find 'X' again.*" There was an odd sort of airy cackle that couldn't be just the wind, because the wind most certainly did not laugh.

"Algebra has nothing to do with this," Hudson muttered, tucking his chin in an attempt to bury his face in his collar. "It doesn't matter if I can't solve for 'X' right now."

"*Better school, better job,*" the wind pointed out. "*Then you wouldn't be stuck working for the only people who will hire a degenerate.*"

"I am not!" Hudson protested, before he could stop himself. The voice in the wind only laughed before fading back into its more maddening quality. *Why won't he just shut up? It wasn't my fault, and he knows it. I was only trying to protect myself. It's his fault, not mine.*

Still, it was hard to believe that with the memory of smoke still drifting in his nostrils. He supposed that was better than the feeling of burst blood vessels that he would inevitably be stuck with. It was getting cold enough to freeze the ones in his nose. He wished he'd waited another day to put his scarf in the laundry. He wished he had a thicker coat. Thicker skin.

*"You are insignificant,"* whispered the wind, as though it could sense him faltering. *"Weak. You will die here. But not before I'm finished with you."* A sharp gust blew half a snowdrift of stinging crystals into his face. He staggered back with a cry, throwing up an arm to shield his eyes, though it didn't do much good. The ice still stung, he was still momentarily blinded, and the wind still whipped around him, sneering insults in his father's voice.

When he was finally able to open his eyes again, he was pretty sure the wall of white had gotten thicker. In a sudden moment of blind panic, he realized that he wouldn't be able to see the way, much less the ridgeline or the edge of a ravine. *I need to get back. I need to go home.* He turned to find his tracks, thinking he could follow the footprints, but there were only a few of them behind him; the whirling snow had already settled into the others, filling them as though they had never existed. Maybe they never should have. He needed shelter. Now.

*The pines are behind me,* Hudson thought, trying to push down hot panic. *I just have to turn around and walk in a straight line and I'll find them.*

He turned and started to follow what was left of his tracks. Within eight steps, they were gone, and he was forging a trail alone without even the ghost of his past self to help him. The squirming panic was the only warm thing inside him, and he clung to its heat as much as he tried to push away its writhing essence. The result was a constant internal war where he struggled against the fear and also tried to draw it close. It didn't seem to help much, though; the last bit of

feeling was bleeding out of his fingers, even though he had shoved his fists into his pockets a long time ago.

He staggered onward for what seemed like a long time, but no pines, not even a shadow against the white snow, appeared. He thought he understood now why white was the color of insanity. His own was beginning to feel less than real now. The cold had sunk through his jacket and shirt and wrapped itself around his core. Vaguely, he was aware that he was shivering, a feeble effort to keep some ounce of warmth in his frozen body. The wind was still laughing at him, at his weakness.

Suddenly, he stumbled and fell hard on his knees with a cry. The snow beneath him gave out, and he was rolling, falling, downward, his speed always increasing. Something slender lashed his arm, something pointed found his ribs, something blunt and hard cracked against the spot on his spine that had never quite healed, and he screamed in pain.

Slowly, he became aware that he was no longer moving, that he lay limp curled on his side. His body was battered and aching. His arm bled, spilling red over the blue of his jacket and into the white of the snow. His side protested at every movement; the shivering hurt, but he couldn't seem to stop it. Nor could he help the sobs that swelled from inside of him, breaking like waves against a cliff. They *hurt*, digging into his sides and squeezing themselves out of his throat. His tears froze on his cheeks, the ice painful in its own way as it clung to his skin. He was aware of a warm, thick liquid running from his nose; evidently, the blood vessels had frozen and burst or perhaps it was broken from his fall. He wiped at his eyes with his bleeding arm, smearing blood across his face and into his hair. The feeling of helplessness crushed him into the cold, unyielding ground, and he buried his head under his arms and prepared to die.

“Shh,” a voice whispered—or was it two voices woven into one? One low and female, the other high and male. “Don’t wake him up.”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” said a second voice, this one decidedly one voice and decidedly male. “I’m just sitting here.”

“Sure.” The first voice was distinctly sarcastic. “Fidgeting is not ‘just sitting here’.”

“Like you can talk.” A snort followed the words.

Hudson opened his eyes and lifted his head to face the voices.

“Look what you did,” the first voice said. Its owner sat directly in front of him. She was the strangest creature he had ever seen, weird yet beautiful in an otherworldly way. She was somewhere between a wolf and a dragon with her canine head and long elegant neck. Her legs were slender and wiry, her body covered in sleek shining fur. Four feathered wings were folded behind her, three peacock-like tails curled against the snow. The vibrant royal blue and forest green and brilliant purple stood out against the white and gray around her. Her wings were molten gold captured in between frames of red, the color of rubies on fire, and dappled here and there with amber eyes. Golden flames rose from her spine, flickering and dancing and shedding a faint light. She watched him with eyes the color of the sky on fire, two on either side of her snout, a third blazing in the center of her forehead.

Beside her was another peculiar creature with a body in dark shades of golden-green. Its canine head sported two curling horns, like a ram, one of which was broken as if it had been battered in a fight. Furry-muscular legs were folded beneath it, four feathery wings unfolded from its back. Its forelegs were covered in hair until past the elbow where the hair became scales that covered its eagle-like talons. Its silver eyes watched him with sympathy.

The other four who surrounded him were more or less human except that they all carried wings-- large feathery wings that shifted and rippled as though they were truly attached to their bodies. The shortest of them had dark eyes, the color of night, and dark hair, but strangely bright wings that seemed to cast a glow on the snow. Beside him was a tall stocky man, green-eyed, with long blonde hair and pale golden wings touched with gray. At his other side was the only woman—tall, blonde, with blue-green eyes. There was a touch of pale blue to her wings and a touch of dark gray at the edges. It was the last one, who sat in the snow beside Hudson's head, as though he had been holding it, who really caught his eye.

His hair was black, soft and shining and falling in waves just above his eyes. And his eyes... they glowed with a magenta light, soft and serious. His wings drifted behind him, shifting with each breath he drew, a warm purple color edged in a brilliant black. There was something in his face—a sort of soft wonder.

Hudson blinked at him, wondering vaguely as if he was just groggy. The young man drew a little closer and gently reached out, placing a hand on Hudson's shoulder. He appeared ready to offer comfort or say something, but before he could the blue-coated creature lifted her head and shook out her fur, and Hudson turned toward her.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice weak and shaking. “What are you?”

“We are like you,” the green-eyed man replied from behind him. “We're lost people, seeking meaning or some other thing that we can't reach.”

“Well, except for me,” the blue-furred creature said with a snort. “I'm a queen. And I hate it.” She shook her head, the fur along her neck rippling with her movement.

Hudson blinked at her. “You do?”

“Yup. Who wouldn’t? People complaining all day. Eeh.” She shook herself again, more violently this time.

“Halo, shh,” the dark-eyed man said, giving her a look that might been a glare. He turned his night-sky gaze on Hudson. “Some might call us angles.”

“Others would say demons from Hell,” the blue-furred one—Halo, Hudson thought—muttered, her tails swishing against the snow.

“He’s asking about our names,” the woman interjected. She blinked her sky-reflected-in-sea eyes at him. “Aren’t you?”

“I—I guess,” Hudson replied, all the while thinking, *What is happening?*

“As you might have guessed, I’m Halo,” the blue-furred creature said immediately. “I am the Guardian and the Fire. I’ve got the most power, but I don’t always make good decisions about what to do with it.” She tipped her muzzle to the gold-green creature beside her. “This is Compassion. They are the Hope and the Light. They help me to know what’s best with my power. And hope and kindness are powers all on their own.”

As if in response to her words, Compassion lifted one eagle-like talon and laid it on Hudson’s head. A warm, pleasant feeling spread through his body. The pain faded. He stared as the cut in his arm stitched itself up and sealed over without so much as a scar. He turned to Compassion with an awed expression. “Thank you.”

“I couldn’t do it without Halo,” they replied, and they turned to nuzzle her neck.

“Well, at least one of us has to use my power wisely,” she replied. She shook out her head and introduced the others. The dark-eyed one was Gabriel, the woman was Vigilance, the golden-haired man was Henry, and the one with purple eyes...

“I’m Michael,” he said, gently before Halo could speak. “Who are you?”

“I’m Hudson.” Hudson cleared his throat. He realized he was still lying on his side. Since Compassion had healed him, he felt stronger, but he wasn’t sure he could stand yet. “I... where did you come from? How did you find me?”

“We know how to find lost people,” Halo replied. “And we’re usually pretty good at helping them get found again.”

Hudson sat up slowly. “So, you can take me home?”

Halo nodded once. “Yes.” Her blue eyes flashed. “If that’s what you want.”

“Yes! Please!”

Halo rose, stretching her limbs, and turned, her tails sweeping behind her in a single arc. “Follow us.”

As if on her signal, the others rose as well, testing their limbs as though they had been sitting for a long while. Michael turned and offered Hudson his hand. Hudson took it and allowed Michael to help him to his feet; the other man’s purple eyes never left his face. They were still glowing faintly.

Halo led the way, her coat and flames glowing against the white of the snow. The storm seemed to have quieted while Hudson lay in the ravine. In that time, the wind seemed to have calmed, and the snow was no longer quite as stinging. Hudson didn’t know if it was a result of his



new companions, who had spread out to walk in a circle around him, or something else, but it no longer seemed quite as cold.

They made their way out into the open where the wind should have been more biting. Hudson found himself thinking it seemed like someone had de-fanged it. On the plain, Halo straightened herself out and began to push in a direction that felt distantly like the way home. As they walked, Hudson found himself wondering if this was really what he wanted. It was familiar, yes, but was it worth it? At home, he was lonely, mistrusted, hated even for something that no one was completely certain was true. (He knew what to make of it, but that didn't mean anyone else did.)

He stopped suddenly. "Maybe this isn't what I really want."

Michael, who was beside him, paused and turned to him. "What do you really want then?"

"To be loved," Hudson whispered. "To not be judged based on a rumor, whether or not its even true. To feel safe. To feel wanted." His voice became even quieter. "But, really, just to be loved."

"Whatever you did," Halo said, turning around to fix him with her bright blue gaze, "you're not as bad as me. Trust me."

Hudson wasn't sure what to make of that. But maybe it didn't matter. These were the first people in a long time—two years? Three? —who had shown him kindness. Would they let him... could they possibly...

"It's important to know what you really want," Henry promised him, a knowing look in his green eyes.

“And we can still get you out of the storm,” Compassion promised.

“Just follow us.” Halo turned to continue onward, but her direction was different. She was no longer heading toward the place Hudson had called home. He didn’t know where she was heading. He wasn’t sure what to do. *Maybe I should call her back, explain I made a mistake...*

But then Michael’s hand was on his wrist, a gentle touch. Hudson met the purple gaze.

“What can I give you?” he whispered. “After this... what could I ever give you in return?”

“Well...” Michael ducked his head, his dark hair falling across his eyes. His hand gently took Hudson’s own. “You could start with your heart.”

“I—I’d like that,” Hudson whispered. He leaned closer to the young man with the dark hair and the purple eyes, closer to the thing he had dreamed of over and over for untold lonely nights. In the midst of the wind and the snow and the winter, he drew closer to the kind of warmth that went deeper than the skin. And behind him he could feel the unfurling of his own shining wings.

The End