

# SOUL, LIGHT, AND WINGS

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## SAMPLE

Snow splattered against the windshield at an alarming speed, pushed back by the thin, black wipers only to be immediately replaced. The brief moments of visibility revealed—surprise—even more snow, the flakes charging towards the truck like a swarm of angry, fluffy insects. The headlights revealed only a dancing wall of white, and the truck's treads grumbled as the whole vehicle lurched, heaving over the wintry build-up on the ground. The plow cleared the path ahead, but it was risky to go too fast, as the road had been buried for weeks now. It wasn't the worst blizzard Eric had seen; he'd experienced his fair share over the years, but it hadn't been this bad for at least a decade. He couldn't see a thing and he was tempted to turn off the wipers and try navigating by gut-feeling alone. At least that way he could pretend they were getting somewhere.

Winter blizzards were always the worst. The snows gathered strength throughout the autumn, temperatures dropping swiftly day by day, as if to make up for the declining storms in spring or the mild flurries of summer. You couldn't escape the snow or the cold these days, not after the Freeze, but there were always rises and falls as the seasons went by, always reaching its most

unbearable in winter, when straying too far out of town was a death sentence. Still, a storm this severe was exceptional, as if winter had decided to peak early this year.

Eric rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the early-morning blur from his vision. The last time he'd had to get up this early was back when he was a kid, with a dog that his parents had insisted he walk before sunrise every morning. The dog was his responsibility, they'd said, and he supposed that he had some responsibility for this before-dawn outing as well; that is, he was responsible for answering Irene's phone call and listening to her anxiously gibber about what had got her out of bed. He was also the one with the truck, which he supposed gave him something of a moral responsibility as well.

Irene sat in the passenger seat with a pair of binoculars glued to her eyes, as if they allowed her to see through the impenetrable veil of snow. She had a dull grey scarf wrapped tightly around her face and a blue toque pulled down over her ears, with a few locks of dark hair escaping from the back. Her expression was almost completely hidden, but Eric had seen Irene at work enough times to know that she was biting her lip.

She did that when she needed to focus and detect abnormalities. Her sixth sense, the thing in her head that went off when magic was around, was the reason they were out in the cold. From her bedroom, she'd felt something appear, well outside the city limits—considerably further than the usual mile or so of what he called her 'magic-radar'. She hadn't said so, but Eric could tell this one had shaken her; whatever she'd felt was either something completely unique to her experience, or very big. Both were worth investigating, for the sake of city safety and curiosity.

"Are we close, rookie?" he asked.

Irene pulled down her scarf to speak. "Yes—wait, no!" She dropped the binoculars in her lap and leaned on the dashboard, eyes closed. "It's definitely nearby. I think."

He sighed and focused on keeping the truck from skidding on the icy ground and flipping over, gripping the wheel tightly with two hands that had no business being so wrinkled at his age. He'd never really understood Irene's uncanny ability to sense magic or the beings that could use it, yet he often thought it was wasted on the stupid job they'd both been handed. Nominally, they were cops,

but Snowvault's police force was closer to an old-fashioned city guard, not just apprehending criminals, but ensuring the safety of the city from outside threats as well. The vast wilderness that stretched between one settlement and the next was home to the nastiest creatures known to humankind, beasts that could pose a serious danger if they chose the vicinity around Snowvault as their territory. So certain officers, meaning Eric and Irene, were assigned to patrol the few miles around Snowvault, not for the horrible predators but the smaller creatures they fed on. Snow-rabbits and cryoraptors made their nests in the shadow of the city walls, sneaking through the cracks to rifle through garbage cans, and it was the job of Eric and his partner to run them off or kill them before they attracted bigger problems. It was a gruelling and glamourless job, and because they did it well, no one inside the city saw the threats that would make them appreciate the hard work the two of them did. They weren't on the lowest rung of law enforcement; they were stuck on a different ladder. They weren't required to wear uniforms, so they didn't, and the higher-ups only asked them to follow protocol when they remembered their existence. Chances for Irene to use her sense to their benefit, such as when tracking a fugitive wizard fleeing the city for example, never came up. There were better uses for an officer with her talents inside Snowvault, but she insisted that outside the safety of the city's walls was the place for her.

"This thing," Irene said, abruptly. "It exists—one-hundred-percent real."

"Good to know," he replied, smirking. He eased up on the gas so he wouldn't drive right over this thing-that-existed. The truck was basically a heavy metal box on treads, and the plow in front could cause some serious damage at the right speeds. They didn't know what exactly they were looking for yet; it would be a good idea to find out before they flattened it.

"Is it alive?" He'd asked this question before, but hadn't gotten an answer. A living creature out in this weather was either hardy enough to handle it and most likely dangerous, or freezing to death. Knowing ahead of time if they were looking for an object or, say, a shape-shifting grizzly bear, could only be an advantage.

"Yes, I think so." Irene furrowed her brow, then opened her eyes and stared intensely through the windshield. The blizzard was

thinning out a little, enough to see the mounds of snow that curved like ocean waves across the road buried somewhere beneath them.

The conversation lapsed again. Eric reached for the radio to drown out the blizzard, then stopped himself; Irene might lose her focus. The soundtrack became the howling winds roughly caressing the truck, rattling against the windows and doors to find a way inside. It was unnerving; he needed to take his mind off it.

It began the same way all his stories did: "This reminds me of my time back in Lost Vigil." Then he moved on towards the preview: "I was hired to track a band of smugglers operating out of a cabin smack-dab in the middle of the wilderness. That was during another blizzard almost as bad as this one. Did I tell you this story before?"

Irene's lips curled into a smile. "A million times. Tell me later, when we're done."

Eric nodded, a little disappointed. "I think you're exaggerating. It's a thousand at most."

Irene shook her head, then gasped. "Stop! Stopstopstop!"

Eric practically crushed the brake beneath his foot and they both lurched forward as the truck came to an abrupt halt. The seat belt dug into his chest, his stomach turned from the motion, and the usual pain just above his collarbone flared up. He groaned and rubbed the side of his neck until the ache died down.

"Damn it!" he cursed at the world in general.

"Do you see anything?" Irene was unfazed and looked through the binoculars again. "I can't see a thing, but I swear, it's right here. I can feel it."

Eric squinted. All he could see outside was a desert of white, dimly illuminated by the headlights. He couldn't pick out any definite shapes beyond the twin beams.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Positive," said Irene.

Eric leaned back and tried to think. If they went out into that storm to search, they'd get lost themselves. That wasn't even taking into account the kind of creatures that roamed the night or early morning; none were the sort of things you'd want to meet in the middle of a flurry; big hairy things with claws and teeth, most of which wouldn't trip Irene's alarm. But if what they were looking

for was alive, then maybe they wouldn't need to move at all; maybe it would come to them.

"Grab a gun," he said. "Just in case."

Irene undid her seat belt without a word and twisted around. She reached into a holster slung over the back of the seat and hauled out a shotgun.

Eric reached beneath his seat and grabbed his handgun. It was standard issue for law enforcement in Snowvault, which meant it was pretty useless for their particular job, where anything that posed a genuine threat would need something a whole lot larger and a whole lot explodier. He loaded it anyway, just to have the illusion of safety.

"Do we really need to be this careful?" asked Irene. "I know you know something dangerous when you see it, but, well, we haven't really seen anything."

Eric set the gun on the dashboard within easy reach. "How many stories have I told you where something went wrong because I was over-prepared?"

Irene nodded and hugged the shotgun to her chest. "You're the expert, I guess."

He took a deep breath and hit the horn. The truck wailed its invitation into the snow-clogged air. He waited for a response, some sign of what they might be dealing with. He compulsively checked the headlights to make sure they were working, flashed them off and on again, like a beacon.

His patience ran thin and he hit the horn again, holding it down for half a minute. If what they were looking for was human, he or she would be suicidal not to come to it. The noise was incredibly obnoxious when it was drawn out like that, but he endured it until his hand got tired.

They waited. Nothing came. They traded a glance; Irene gave him a look of cautious encouragement. He honked the horn three times in quick succession, thinking the pattern might attract attention over the monotonous roar of the blizzard.

A snowdrift a short distance away shifted. For a moment, Eric thought it might have just been a strong wind, but then the snow heaved up and a figure emerged from it. It was definitely a person, with blond hair, but from this distance he couldn't tell sex, age, or even what it was wearing. It staggered towards the headlights,

raising a hand to shield its eyes.

Irene pushed open the door and was out of the truck before Eric could say a word. Her sixth sense must've been getting to her if she was just throwing caution to the wind like that; it wasn't like her at all. He grabbed his gun and followed, leaving the engine running to keep the truck warm.

The chill hit him immediately, flowing through the layers of clothing as if they weren't there. He hugged himself to keep warm and trudged through the knee-deep snow.

Irene was already halfway to the figure. "Hey, what are you doing out here?" She waved. "Are you hurt?"

The figure stopped in its tracks and stared at her. The headlights reflected in the ice crystals tangled in its hair, making it shimmer. Coming closer, Eric still couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman; its features were soft and youthful. It looked to be a young adult, maybe a teenager or maybe it was even younger than that; it was thin and feeble-looking, making its age hard to assess. The only clothing it wore was a feathery white cloak that curved over the shoulders, covered most of the chest, and stopped in two points just below the crotch. The rest was exposed to the elements and it trembled pathetically against the cold that should have already made it into a popsicle.

Irene stepped carefully through the snow, displaying a smart degree of caution towards the half-naked creature, more than when she'd leapt out of the truck. "You can't stay out here," she said, a little roughly. "Come with us—we'll get you food, clothes, whatever you want. If you want to tell us why you're out here, we'd appreciate that as well. We'll take you somewhere warm."

A pair of large, unnaturally bright blue eyes watched her. Something glistened down its cheek and suddenly it was sobbing.

"It's alright, you can trust us. We're police." Irene held out her hand and reached for the person's arm.

The creature let out a squeak and leapt backwards. At the same time, the cloak split and flew upwards, shaking off a cloud of snow.

Eric's chest tightened. What he had thought was a cloak was actually a pair of wings, as white as the snow around them. The thought came into Eric's head unbidden: an avial, a divine being, the stuff of legends. He suppressed the thought; it—he, now that it was completely exposed—was probably just a shape-shifter. But he

couldn't quite shake the feeling. You didn't expect to find even a shape-shifter in the middle of a snowstorm.

He noticed that Irene was standing as still as a statue, shotgun trained on their winged target. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Keep calm, rookie, I don't think we're in any trouble," he said.

The gun barrel swung towards the ground. "What is he? A shape-shifter?" she whispered.

"Probably," he said, too embarrassed to mention his other theory. "Doesn't matter, we have to get him in the truck before he freezes to death."

He turned to face the thin boy. The kid was watching them, chest heaving, wings flared.

Eric gave him the kindest smile he could muster, not easy to do with a face like his. "Hi, I'm Officer Homens. You can call me Eric, if you want. What's your name?" He pointed to himself and said his name again, then pointed to the boy.

The boy's lips quivered, then curved into a nervous imitation of Eric's expression. "S-Syfael?"

That certainly sounded like an avial name. "Nice to meet you, Syfael." He pointed to Irene. "This is Officer Kelnotch. We're here to help you."

The boy tilted his head to one side. "He-help?" He said the word like he didn't understand what it meant. He had an accent that couldn't be placed, and his voice was as soft as a whisper, barely audible through the gusting wind.

As if in contrast, a loud, thundering bellow in the distance grabbed their attention.

*Foghorn*, was Eric's first thought, a recollection from his old life by a riverside, but they were nowhere near any body of water. And that meant they were in trouble.

Irene's eyes went wide. "Oh shit! Balagon!"

Eric couldn't see anything through the gusts of snow that concealed most of their surroundings. It was a little late for the nocturnal predator to be prowling; something must have woken it up.

"It must have heard the horn," he said, thinking aloud. "The roar can carry for miles—we'll probably be fine."

Another roar, much louder and closer, assaulted their ears. The air itself seemed to tremble and Eric made out the slow thud of

enormous feet nearby. The boy clapped his hands over his ears and stared up at the sky.

Irene closed the distance and grabbed the boy by the wrist. He protested wordlessly, in exclamations without form, and tried to pull away from her, plucking ineffectually at her hand. Irene ignored the kid and hauled him to the truck. As they passed, Eric caught a closer glimpse of the boy's skin; there were scratches all over him, some shallow and some that looked painfully deep. Irene opened the back door and pushed him inside, only slightly hindered by the wings, then climbed in after.

Eric struggled through the snow and hauled himself into the driver's seat. The engine was still running, but it took him a moment to get the truck turned around. He floored the pedal, keeping closely to the path they'd made getting there.

"How's he doing, rookie?" He flinched as a tremendous shape came crashing down behind them.

"Well, he freaks out if I even get close, but I've managed to get him wrapped up pretty well," said Irene. "No signs of frostbite—just a bunch of scratches."

He risked turning the mirror away from the oncoming danger to look. The boy was draped in about three blankets with only his head exposed. He was watching Irene like she might jump him at any moment. There were a couple of dark red marks on his neck; an animal bite, maybe.

"Did you get attacked by something out there, Syfael?" asked Eric.

The maybe-avial raised his head at the sound of his name, but didn't say anything. Maybe he didn't understand them; maybe he wasn't from around their parts.

*Maybe he isn't even native to this world,* Eric thought with a glimmer of hope. *Maybe he really is an avial.*

Another bellow and the sound of snow being crushed pulled him back to the situation at hand. The weather was getting bad again, and he couldn't see the Balagon at all, not that he really wanted to. Maybe its appearance was a coincidence and it had just been going in the same direction as them. Even if it had seen them, they might be alright; the colossal creatures didn't usually chase small prey; something larger might have caught its eye. Except that it was dark, and snowing heavily, and nothing else was moving.



As if in response, a huge, scaly foot slammed down in front of the truck. Eric jerked the wheel to the right and everything jumped as one of the treads rolled over a large claw. Too damn close. Even if they could keep ahead of the monster, they'd still be leading it right to the gates of Snowvault, which was exactly the kind of thing they were paid to prevent.

"Irene!" he shouted.

"What?" came the reply from the back seat.

"Is the flare gun down there?"

"Hold on." She dove out of sight and rummaged beneath the seat. "Got it!" She emerged with the gun in hand and started to load it. "Let me guess—we're not going to be using this to call for help."

"Chances are it probably won't work, but we don't have any other options."

Once he'd got some distance from the beast, Eric turned the truck back around to face the Balagon. With the thick clouds of snow hurtling through the air, it was just a silhouette behind a white curtain, and nearly on top of them. He took a moment to gawk at its size; it was at least a hundred feet tall and who knew how long.

"Roll down your window," he commanded. "I want you to aim close to it, but not at it. Shoot for near the head, if you can figure out where that is."

Every time it took a step, there was a sound like a thunder-crack. If this didn't work, they'd probably end up dead. Even worse, the unsolved mystery in the backseat would be going with them. He turned off the headlights.

The Balagon paused and growled; a sound like the earth splitting open. Deprived of the glowing bull's-eye, the creature would be disoriented for a moment; a tiny window before it adjusted its vision and continued the chase.

He heard the window roll down behind him and a gust of icy air hit the back of his neck, then a glowing orange flare shot into view a second later. It flew past the Balagon's head, revealing a multitude of eyes set in thick grey skin, then continued on its path and disappeared behind the beast.

They waited for what must have been a second at most, but felt like hours. Eric clenched his teeth and silently wished the Balagon

away. The passengers in the back seat were silent, save for the kid's quiet whimpering.

What looked like a leg suddenly lifted into the air and came down in the opposite direction from the truck. There was another foghorn noise, and the creature slowly turned around and lumbered away in search of prey it would never find. Eric waited until the hunched silhouette disappeared into the blizzard before he tried moving again.

He swung the truck back around in a gradual arc and started back to Snowvault. "Nice work, rookie."

Irene rolled up the window. "No problem. Now, what about this guy?"

Eric glanced over his shoulder. The boy was curled up on the seat and had pulled one of the blankets over his head. He felt some pity; whoever the boy was, he was obviously scared.

He pictured the scratches and bite mark in his mind; they had been practically glowing.

"Let's get him to a hospital."

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