

Mortal Fears



The only light on the street came from a sparse smattering of stars that managed to penetrate the thick inner-city smog. Darker than any night he could remember, Elias was keenly aware of the blackness that seemed to swallow the road and obscure even the distant edges of the buildings they passed. He shut his eyes tightly, binding down so hard that little splashes of color erupted against his eyelids, and then flexed them wide open, hoping that the contrast would force his pupils to drink in the light his mind desperately wanted to be there. Instead he only managed to give himself a headache and unbalance himself enough that he periodically stumbled as they marched nearly blind through the night.

The blackness didn't seem to phase Adanna, jogging ahead silently on point, and Elias couldn't help but wonder if her eyes were just that much better than his or if there was yet another nuance of the still mysterious and painfully foreign magics that guided her steps. Periodically she would come to a sudden stop, letting the rest of the group catch up, and her head would whip suddenly from side to side. Equally as mystifying as her ability to intuit their direction was what, exactly, she was looking or listening for. The first few times it happened Elias whipped his rifle on line and scanned desperately into the night for the cause of her consternation. Invariably, though, he would fail to have even the slightest idea what had caught her attention, and before he could even think to ask she would give a little shake of her head, streaming black dreadlocks bouncing from side to side, and then continue her trot forward. So instead he spent each pause trying to stare at the line of her back, partially hidden beneath a thick leather biker's jacket, and the hilt of the saber at her hip, idly hoping that movement in one or the other would be his best indicator of impending danger.

They had deliberately chosen a night of the new moon in hopes of better concealing their advance, but as Elias spied block after block of shattered light bulbs and demolished streetlights, he couldn't help but wonder if the darkness was less to their advantage than they had anticipated. He also wondered if the almost palpable quality of this pitch-blackness was natural or some psychotic demon's machination. But then, he had found himself constantly wondering about the naturalness of the world around him during the last few days. It seemed, despite his best efforts for rationalization, that some great weight had perched itself on his shoulders, and now he couldn't help calling every little thing that seemed even remotely out of place into question. From their inability to start the van the first couple of times they tried to their luck (or lack thereof) with the traffic lights on the way here. From the occasional shifts of summer wind that whipped around their bodies to the smog that blocked

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the stars. From the inhuman amount of sweat that seemed to be pouring from his body to the frightening way his hands shook. He couldn't seem to convince himself that the new world of magic and monsters he had been thrust into wasn't responsible for all of it. Worse, he even wondered if his wondering was of his own device or if someone else was playing a part in that too, and it was slowly driving him mad. He did his best to swallow the paranoia, along with every other thought running through his head that had nothing to do with keeping aware and staying alive, but they constantly forced their way back to the surface of his mind — and he wondered if that, too, was natural or yet another kind of thaumaturgy.

But if anyone else within the Flynn, the six-man team of which he now was a part, thought the same they did an admirable job of hiding it. They had climbed from their dilapidated van some 2 miles back and, with barely a word, had begun a slow trot down the abandoned streets of south Seattle, eyes scanning what could be seen of the deserted industrial complexes, weapons held low and ready.

The area was once a bustling manufacturing district, so much so that Elias could remember when it had to be rezoned to allow for more warehouses and office space. But now it was long since abandoned and there was no such thing as legitimate business between here and the SeaTac airport another 10 miles south. The upside to the desolation —there was little need to worry about civilians being in the line of fire — was starkly contrasted with the fact that the monsters had their run of the area; every building, dumpster, manhole and stormdrain was another potential ambush. Every yard had been tense and stressful, with six pairs of eyes desperately scanning against the night for any signs of trouble, and the worst was still to come.

Six blocks from the target, a four-story brick storage building that still remained beyond their view, the group came to a halt behind a series of dumpsters and caught their breath. Angel, her red hair and pale white skin a stark contrast to the dreary night, looked up and down the street one last time before signaling for a quick equipment check. Suddenly the night was filled with the soft tapping of hands on the bottom of magazine plates, packs and straps being adjusted, and swords loosening in scabbards. Absently, she twirled a lock of hair around her finger and whispered to no one in particular, “Strange we haven't seen or heard anything yet. They must know we're coming.”

Santino looked up from checking the hoses and igniter of his M2, his good eye squinting around a cleft-jawed grin, nudged The Priest's shoulder and pointed at Thorften. “They probably heard the Viking's knees knocking together the whole way here.”

That brought a sudden rush of hushed laughter and an obscene gesture in reply from the giant Dane, and rather suddenly Elias found himself drawing strength from the confidence and casualness of his brethren. *I might be scared out of my wits*, he thought, *but if they're even remotely concerned they don't show it.*

But then the moment was done and they were back on the move. The last few hundred yards were the hardest, each person distinctly aware of the imminent threat, and they slowly crept from the single file marching order they had kept initially into a fan-like wave. Instinctively, with habits honed through thousands of hours of training, The Priest with his shotgun, Angel with her twin .45s and Santino with his M2 moved to the center of the formation, scanning the distant street corners and building tops. Thorften, greatsword resting on his shoulder, and Adanna, saber held low and menacing, moved to the outside corners and watched the buildings for ground level attackers. Elias, clumsy by contrast, hovered in the middle of the wedge, his P-90 clutched overly tight in white-knuckled fists.

Tense but uneventful, the lack of the expected ambush actually became more nerve-racking than any attack itself could have been. The Flynn stayed tightly together, creeping shoulder-to-shoulder and exchanging uncomfortable glances, before the alleyway finally gaped before them like a giant maw in the darkness.

Mere feet from the entrance Angel called a halt. After a dozen minutes crawled by, she signaled for Adanna to break rank and scout. Under the watchful eyes of the Flynn she moved deftly forward, sneaking from shadow to shadow, periodically stooping to examine some trace or take note of some sign, each time signaling to the group with an affirming thumbs up. Everything she saw said this was the place, but the lack of activity was confounding.

As Adanna returned to her place on the flank, meeting the group's questioning stares with a large piece of fresh dung as irrefutable evidence in her hand, Angel fell back to stand beside Elias. Though tall in her own day, by modern standards her 5-foot-4 frame cut a deceptively demure line in the darkness, and she had to crane her neck to get a good view of Elias' face. She tucked the Colt in her right hand beneath her left armpit and flexed

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her fingers before speaking. “This is the spot, right?”

Elias, shoulders hunched hard over his submachine gun and fingers turning ever more white around the grips, did his best not to shake as he nodded, but the sweat on his brow and look of terror on his face spoke the volumes that his words could not.

Angel pursed her lips in frustration and brushed a scarlet lock from her eyes. “I would have expected them to come at us by now. Bugged. I hate it when they get smart.” She paused to crack her neck and take up her second pistol. “Alright, we try and draw them out. Elias, you’re with me. Stay close and give me cover if I need it. Santino, Priest, I want fire lines on the high sides. Anything comes off the roofs or down the walls, send it back to hell. Adanna, keep an eye on our flank. Thorften ... get their attention.”

As Adanna faded rearward across the street and the two riflemen swung into position on either corner of the alley’s entrance, Thorften simply sauntered straight up the center of the opening like a man on a Sunday stroll. When he reached the opening he paused for a moment, greatsword still barely held single-handedly and lounging lazily across his shoulder, and shouted, “Hello!” then “Come and get it!” and finally “Hey you arse faces!” But when that had little effect he turned back towards the Flynn and shrugged, massive shoulders held comically in a dramatically over-exaggerated pose, before a sinister grin filled his whole face with mirth. Suddenly he spun, with a flourish more suited to an effeminate Victorian courtesan than a 6-foot-6 bearded blond giant, dropped his trousers and began urinating into the alley.

This solicited a hoot from Santino, a catcall from Angel, and an equally melodramatic eye-roll from The Priest, but surprisingly garnered no response from the darkness before them. This time when Thorften turned, despite the fact that his pants remained momentarily around his ankles, the look of confusion on his face was sincere, as were the nervous glances that slowly began to spread among the Flynn. This was uncharacteristic of everything they had ever known of the beasts they hunted. Large and feral, the raptor-like reptilians they expected to encounter should have had a pack-hunting ambush ready or charged them the minute they encroached on the monster’s territory. Their absence was even more disconcerting than their anticipated presence had been.

Once again, Angel turned to Elias. But this time the sternness of her face seemed to hold little understanding for the terror in his eyes. “Sorry, Elias. But this is exactly why we needed to have you along. We’re going to have to go into that alley, and you’re the only one who’s laid eyes on it before.”

He tried to say something, anything, in response but the minute he unclenched his teeth they began to chatter. Scared almost witless, he waited until The Priest had left his post on the corner and come to rest a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, my son.” he began, “We will take it slow, together. Leave the fighting to Santino, Thorften, Angel and Adanna. All you need do is tell me what you remember.”

They had already gone over it a dozen times, and for the life of him Elias still didn’t understand what they expected to gain by having him along, but Angel had been obstinate. The Jarl, the chieftain-like officer who had sent them on this mission, had been even more obdurate. Having eyes that had already seen the alley would be invaluable in this unusual circumstance, they insisted, and even though he was green and terrified, they had demanded he come along.

As the Flynn began to move into the alley, they flowed around each other in a graceful, dangerous wave. Thorften and Adanna hugged the outside edges of the alley, shoulders nearly brushing brick as they watched for activity before or beside them. Santino and Angel, on the other hand, hovered near the middle, firearms raised to their shoulders and eyes probing the rooftops and fire escapes. The casualness and frivolity of the advance had left them, all of them, and even Thorften now carried his blade in an aggressive combative stance. The deviation from form had alarmed them, even if none would admit it, and seeing the shift in their mood did nothing to lighten Elias’ spirit.

The alley was almost totally empty and deathly quiet. There was no wind to rustle the small scattering of refuse that speckled the ground, no rain to echo off the lone dumpster at the alley’s far end and, most notably, no rats or raccoons chattering about. Rats in this part of town should have been thick on the ground and scrounging for even the faintest possibility of food being among the garbage.

As they moved inward, The Priest kept Elias talking. Asking pointed questions based on the myriad of tellings and retellings Elias had done in the past, he gathered information and dispensed it to the rest of the team on their slow advance. “Where exactly did you see the first one?” “What angle did he come from?” “Is that the dumpster you saw one perched on?” Mostly Elias just nodded or shook his head, but periodically he used the

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laser on his P-90 to point and gesture. But even as he did so, and the Flynn continued to advance, confusion ever tightened around them.

The whole reason for this particular hunt, and more specifically for Elias' involvement in it, was that nothing about it made sense. The monsters they hunted were feral, only semi-intelligent creatures called Jormun. On average only as smart as a dog or a pig, these vicious little terrors could easily rend a man limb from limb or swarm a heavily outnumbered foe, but against a prepared and well armed opponent were typically fairly ineffective.

Then again, there wasn't much "typical" about what they seemed to be dealing with here.

These particular Jormun weren't acting like normal Jormun do at all. Not only was it remarkably uncommon to find a pack of them running wild in an inner-city area like this, but reports said they had laid incredibly elaborate ambushes, shown remarkable discretion when engaging targets, and generally were making much more of a menace of themselves than anyone liked to hear about.

So the Flynn had been tasked with going in, determining if in fact they were behaving atypically, and then wiping them out. The assignment had been met with an uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm from the Flynn as a whole. While slaughtering Jormun was typically the type of cushy, straightforward engagements this particular crew excelled at, the unusual elements of these monsters had put everyone on edge. So when word had come down that there was a witness, someone who had actually been in the proverbial dragon's den, the Flynn immediately jumped at the opportunity to bring him on board.

It hadn't mattered to them that the guy was so green he hadn't even finished with his training or that he was setting a new record for shortest time spent being processed, they had seen Elias as an asset they would be idiotic to ignore. Most frighteningly of all, though, the powers that he had agreed with them.

So here he sat, taking footstep after sanity-rending footstep down a service road which he would rather have endured Hell than even see again, and there was nothing he could do about it. So onward he plodded, watery legged and ready to foul himself at a moment's notice, answering asinine questions asked by a pot-bellied priest armed with a fully automatic shotgun.

If you asked him again, he could never have recounted what it was exactly that The Priest had pulled from his terror-frozen mind that was so bloody valuable. As far as Elias was concerned everything he could share seemed self-evident just by looking at the alley. Still, the minutes passed like hours in his terror-addled mind, his answers being used to adjust the scope of search and the Flynn's position in the alley. Finally Angel, eyes scanning the building top, called a sharp "There!" and pointed with her pistols to a spot on the top floor of the building near one of the fire escape landings.

Elias stared at it bewildered, oblivious to the cause for the attention it had elicited, before The Priest looked up from his now aimed shotgun and whispered "Sight."

Elias winced, embarrassed even through his fear, and then focused on bringing his new talents to bear. He pulled his left hand from his submachine gun and used its fingers to draw a glyph in the air. He closed his eyes and whispered softly to himself. When his eyes opened again, his vision was still dark in the blackness of the night, but now awake with an unnatural clarity. Colors he could have sworn weren't there a mere second before now managed to poke dimly through the gloom. His Flynn-mates, scattered around him, all had an eerie glow about them, and brightly burning stones of energy imbedded in their wrists, chests and foreheads. But most importantly, the spot on the wall that Angel still pointed to with her pistols no longer appeared as solid weathered brick, but as a gaping and worn hole covered in a blue shimmering veil — and through that veil he could see a small vulture-like head peering back at him.

For a moment no one moved, as the six humans all re-calibrated their brains to what they were seeing. The creature, head bobbing absently within its hide, remained oblivious to its change of state. It apparently had not realized its camouflage had been discovered, and it watched them with intent fascination. Then Angel lowered her pistols and glanced over her shoulder. "Priest, you have the shot?"

His reply sounded strained, his mouth pushed slightly out of alignment as his chin rested against the comb of the shotgun stock held tightly to his shoulder, "I have the shot."

"Then take it."

The monster's head exploded a tenth of a second before anyone registered the crack of his shotgun. The double-ought buck struck its smooth dome-like skull in a hail, wiping away most of the beak-like mouth that

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made up the raptor's face and sprayed thick, bloody chunks of bone, scale, and brain in a cone to the rear. Its blood, a reddish-green ichor, fountained in all directions and spilled through the illusion of brick and towards the alley floor.

And then the world came alive.

Before the first drop of blood hit the street, dozens of Jormun — lean, four-legged reptilian nightmares of scaly, armored bodies and razor-beaked jaws — boiled through the hole and ran in all directions across the face of the brick wall. Some leapt straight towards Santino and Angel, plunging from the four-story height through the dark. Others juked in random patterns to try and confuse their attackers. Normally, their movements would have been more coordinated, resembling the strategies of mammalian pack hunters, but from the moment they erupted from their nest it was clear that the assassinated Jormun was the alpha, and now the beasts were moving without focus — though not without purpose.

The fire began immediately. Angel's twin 45s leapt to life, firing rounds in short, precise groups at target after target, repeatedly drilling a Jormun until it went limp or fell lifeless, then finding a new victim. The Priest's USAS roared like a lion, its slow automatic fire pounding the night like a legion of tribal drums. The spray from the shotgun tore into the hole, shredding the demons in flight and then grinding those still vacating into chum.

Then night turned to day with a bolt of white-hot lightning and a gout of bright yellow flame. The lightning jumped from Adanna's crackling hand and struck the first wall-running hellcat like the fury of the gods, instantly igniting the lightly scaled flesh of its belly, and hurling it across the alley in a slow, lazy arc. While fire, like the tongue of some ancient dragon, spewed forth from Santino's World War II relic flamethrower to lick the wall clean of any raptors in its path.

Thorften growled a defiant incantation, the words coming harsh and guttural from his mouth, while his hand flickered patterns in the air. By the time the first burning monster hit the ground, Thorften had leapt from the far side of the alley, easily clearing the width of the street, and landed like a spider on the wall. He ran straight up its sheer face to crash into a mass of Jormun on their way down. The greatsword looked feather-light and flamed a brilliant red in his hands as he cut a swath through them, tunelessly singing through smiling lips.



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The Flynn moved like the many heads of some mythical hydra, each lashing out independently but flowing as one. They slid from target to target, instinctively covering each other's backs and swiftly closing holes that opened in their defenses, and the Jormun were nearly helpless to stop them. Those who stayed on the high wall and rooftops were cut down by scalding lightning or hails of buckshot. The monsters that clung to the building or hovered around the fire escape came face to face with the unlikely rush of a wall-walking Viking or fell under a hail of bullets from Angel's pistols. While those who tried to charge the Flynn or reached the ground were kissed by the cone from Santino's flamethrower.

But animals, especially feral ones, become more vicious when cornered. A sudden rush of scale and claw leaping into the air as a single mass enveloped Santino as they landed, ripping large chunks of flesh from his arms and burrowing piercing talons through the rings of his chainmail. When the other monsters smelled the blood and sensed the opening, they swarmed. Those clamped to his flesh were overrun by their siblings, each vying for a calf, shoulder, or thigh to sink beak into, or a soft bit of exposed flesh to rend. Amazingly, Santino did not scream or even cry out as the swarm ripped the skin from his body and the muscle from his bones, but he did crumple before the onslaught.

The Priest caught eye of the carnage and turned the shotgun to the mass, at first trying to keep the creatures from overwhelming the poor bastard, and then simply to put him out of his misery. He succeeded mere moments before the mass separated Santino's head from his body, as one of his buckshot volleys managed to strike the flamethrower's fuel tank on Santino's back and turned the entire area into a miniature nova. The fire erupting in a ball of death to engulf not only the fallen warrior but the numerous Jormun that swarmed him as well.

So it was, during the chaos and confusion of the battle, with one warrior fallen and ammunition running frighteningly low, that no one was able to keep watch on their youngest member. No one saw him freeze at the trigger of his submachine gun and wet himself as the raptors boiled from their hole. No one saw him watch a lone Jormun run up toward the building top rather than down towards the Flynn, and jump across the top of the alley to come down the opposite side. No one saw it spring at him viciously and roll with him across the ground, beak and talon lashing out while terrified hands finally sprang to life in self-defense.

But they did find him still astride it, completely unaware of how he had managed to roll on top, with his dagger in his hand, plunging the drop point blade into its ribcage over and over and over again. He struck with such a fury and vengeance that it finally took The Priest and Adanna both to pull him, bodily, from the mutilated carcass of the monster and wrench the knife from his hand.

Gathered there, with Elias still held between The Priest and Adanna, they all took note of the Jormun body splayed out across the concrete, and the irony of it partially covering the lines of a chalk drawn image. The drawing, miraculously preserved by a summer of record drought and the partial shelter of the building walls, showed a man's broken body doubled over backwards in a crushed, unnatural position. And as Elias finally rose again on shaky legs to stand on his own, tears streaming down his face, they all shared in a moment of empowerment unlike anything a mortal could ever know.

It was eight months before, in the middle of an early January night, when dispatch called with a disturbance report. The call itself was odd; the area, already dilapidated and rundown, was mostly empty warehouses, with the closest residential building being better than 5 miles away. Granted, that had made the area ripe for squatters and drinking teens, but there shouldn't have been anyone around to get disturbed, much less to have called in a complaint. That, combined with the anonymity of the calls, meant that the first two, starting around midnight, had been effectively ignored and bumped down the queue for more pressing issues. But when the third call came in sounding increasingly desperate, and there were no more little old ladies with noise complaints or kids shoplifting at the Gulp n' Go to occupy them, they didn't have much choice but to answer it. So Elias Spyrodakis, South Precinct; Seattle Police Department sergeant on duty, checked his roster to confirm everyone else was at least twice as far away as he and Alicia were, then decided to take it himself. They set down their chopsticks, left their beloved all-night Korean restaurant, and headed south of downtown.

They slowed and started panning with the spotlight about a block and a half from the disturbance itself. The area was the definition of dead quiet — not a drunk teen, hobo, or even rat to be found, though it didn't occur to either of them to be concerned about it at the time. Quiet is one of those unusual things that you only tend to notice when it's gone, not when you're immersed in it. So it wasn't until Alicia stopped the car and pointed to

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the severed head lying in the middle of the road that Elias' got the idea that something was really, really wrong.

He called it in and requested backup, then handed Alicia the riot gun from the lock. "Stay out of the road, keep your eyes on the alley, and don't look at the head," he said. Neither of them wanted to get out of the car.

This time, with their breath coming hard and each footstep seeming to crack like thunder down the empty street, the quiet became not only noticeable but palpable. Something was definitely not right, and Elias had the unpleasant realization that a severed head may be the least of his worries.

He had squatted down at what he hoped was a safe enough distance, trying hard not to disrupt any potential evidence, and eyed the grizzly pile with as much detachment as he could muster. It was a hideous site, with one eye missing and the other dangling from a mostly empty socket. The lower jaw had been, as was obvious by the dangling sinew, ripped off, and much of her left cheek had been scraped from her skull. She looked all of 14 and, even from this distance, still stunk of alcohol. Elias found himself whispering a silent prayer that she didn't feel much of what had happened to her.

Alicia pulled her eyes off the alley and shouted to Elias, "Is it real?"

He opened his mouth to respond but suddenly found it filled with a combination of bile and Korean food. He managed to get out an "Ayah" sound before spinning on his heels, consciously aiming in the direction most away from the head, and projectile vomiting. It was a maddening process, since every time he convulsed his eyes closed and he saw the girl's face as though it was etched into his eyelids, and he ended up vomiting all the more. How long that lasted he couldn't be sure but, by the time he'd finally wiped his mouth and turned back around, Alicia was gone.

Where she went and how long ago she'd disappeared he couldn't be sure, though in retrospect he had heard some kind of sound while on his hands and knees, and so drew his pistol and moved towards the alley mouth she'd been standing at. Again, as it had been before, the street was deathly quiet.

Though there hadn't been any kind of blast from the shotgun it was obvious a scuffle had taken place. Fresh blood was everywhere around the entrance and the shotgun lay where it had been dropped. Scuffmarks, like those from heels being dragged, led back into the alley. Elias grabbed the mic on his lapel and again called for backup, but this time added the code for an officer down. He began to move for the squad car, and the AR-15 in its trunk, but spun automatically when he heard a scratching sound and some kind of screeching howl behind and above him.

Perceived but not seen, something — something heavy, moving very fast — hit him hard in the chest. His torso collapsed faster than his knees could give way and he felt his spine snap once just below his rib cage from the impact, and again at his neck when he hit the ground. The leap carried the beast past Elias, and for a few dazed seconds he found himself alone on the ground. He stared up at the sky, quietly pondering the stars above him, before a slow rasping hiss drew him back to reality. Suddenly the shock was gone and his mind was clear, but no matter how much he willed them to, his arms and legs wouldn't respond. Panicked, he jerked his head in the direction the beast likely went, and found himself staring at the instep of his own foot. It was bent oddly, listing hard to one side, and it took Elias a moment to realize that his legs were face down on the concrete even though he was lying on his back. He tried to scream but all that left his throat was a soft, wet gurgle.

Then the beast was back and staring him squarely in the eye. It moved quickly at first, obviously ready to pounce again, but then slowed to a methodic prowling as it evidently started to understand his situation. It drew in close to Elias, making a few rapid snaps with its thick muscular beak towards his face, before finally deciding that he was helpless. It squawked out a high-pitched, raspy cry of victory. Then, suddenly, they were everywhere. Crawling down the walls, leaping from the fire escape, even perched atop the dumpster at the end of the alley. They moved like some kind of monstrous cat, lithe and smooth, bodies arched to unnatural angles, heads whipping back and forth, and long-clawed feet digging effortlessly into the brick beneath them.

The last thing Elias remembered was being jostled by a rhythmically steady pressure that bounced him up and down with slurping and tearing noises. While his body rocked, he watched with a detached fascination as two or three of the creatures next to him barked at each other, apparently arguing over the succession rankings before feeding. Suddenly, the rocking motion stopped. The monster feeding on him pulled its head out from the hole it had dug in his stomach and screeched at the others, evidently setting the order of things to come.

Then, blessedly, Elias' world went black.