



THE EHRICH WEISZ

CHRONICLES

METAMORPHOSIS



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MARTY CHAN



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From June 23, 1892 *New York World*

THE VERDICT

New York, June 23 - The *Oriental Clipper* trial concluded yesterday when a jury found 54 people guilty of murder.

The accused stood cheek to jowl on the stage of Madison Square Garden's theatre. The defendants and courtroom spectators awaited the verdict in the makeshift courtroom. When Judge Marcus Thorton read the judgment, the packed theatre of victims' family members erupted in cheers. One grieving mother collapsed in tears. The convicted remained stoic.

The *Oriental Clipper* crashed in the Hudson River on August 13, 1891. Sailors from nearby merchant vessels pulled the survivors from the choppy water, only to discover they were not the airship's passengers or crew but illegal Dimensionals who had skyjacked the craft. The bodies of the crew and passengers—their throats slashed—were found among the wreckage.

Judge Thorton imposed the harshest sentence

allowed under New York law: the death penalty. He concluded the trial with a warning: “This heinous attack is an act of war, and we must send a message that we will not stand idly by while Dimensionals threaten the very safety of our naturalized citizens.”

Demon Watch Commissioner Thomas Edison will oversee the execution. The date will be announced shortly.

cowards, but he did not want to draw any attention to himself. Instead, he gritted his teeth and seethed in silence whenever he heard New Yorkers spew venom about the immigrants.

Right now, he had a mission: find Ole Lukoje, the hook-nosed traveller who had been the bane of Ehrich's existence. Ehrich had first encountered the traveller when he was working for the Demon Watch, and had caught the raggedy man in the act of plucking out a young mother's eyes for his dinner.

Later, Ole Lukoje teamed up with the warlord Ba Tian to help plot the invasion of this world, but Ehrich and his allies were able to thwart the plan. Ba Tian had been trapped in another dimension, but Ole Lukoje had gone into hiding.

The newspaper clipping in Ehrich's hand gave him hope that the raggedy man was still in New York. Ole Lukoje possessed the nano-dust, particles that enabled the man to jump between dimensions. This was the means Ehrich needed to return to his world. He skimmed the paper again, rereading the article about a grisly murder in the neighbourhood. His gaze lingered on one sentence: "The victim had both eyes removed."

Ehrich searched the block near the crime scene, hoping to find some clue that would confirm Ole Lukoje was at large. He needed to find the raggedy man, because he was the only one who could transport Ehrich and his brother Dash home.

Ehrich shifted from one foot to the other, eyeing the crowds in the street. No sign of Ole Lukoje. Ehrich adjusted his fake beard and sidled up to a street vendor hawking oysters. The gap-toothed woman grinned at him and motioned to the half-shells displayed on the top of her wagon.

"Hungry, young man?"

He shook his head. "You work this street a lot?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What's it to you?"

"Thought you might have your ear to the ground about the murder last week."

She shifted back on her heels and sucked in her bottom lip. "You a hunter or someone who likes cheap thrills?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out some coins. "I'm a fan of your oysters."

She took his money and handed him a plump oyster on a half-shell, then looked both ways before leaning toward Ehrich. "What I've heard is that it was one of them demons that did it."

Ehrich nodded. "I guessed that much. Is the paper correct? Did the killer take her eyes?"

"Heard rumours that she wasn't the first. There have been others, but the police were trying to keep it quiet so as not to panic us. Not much good now. Everyone's on edge."

Ehrich pursed his lips. This had to be the work of Ole Lukoje. He wanted to ask more, but he noticed a pair of Demon Watch hunters strolling toward him.

"Thanks for the oysters," he mumbled and moved on.

"You get hungry again, you be sure to drop by," she called after him.

He waved without looking back and hurried down the street. He stopped in front of a dry goods store and pulled his cap over his eyes. He pretended to peer through the window as he glanced back at the hunters. He had been a fugitive ever since he had abandoned his duties on Demon Watch and sided with Amina and Mr. Serenity, the travellers who fought against the warlord. The hunters continued toward him. Ehrich slipped into the shop.

The proprietor and the old woman at his counter glanced

up. The upright man sported a moustache as stiff as his posture while the woman wore a bustle as wide as the store aisle.

“Afternoon, sir.”

“Good day,” Ehrich replied.

“Haven’t seen you before,” the shop owner said, pulling at the suspenders under his apron.

“I moved into the neighbourhood last week,” he said. “I came here from the Bowery.”

The proprietor raised an eyebrow. “Why were you living there of all places?”

Many Dimensionals had moved into the Bowery’s ramshacked tenements—the only places they could afford. Often several families huddled in the same cramped apartments, sharing the same beds, outhouses, and rank air. This was one of the few areas in New York where humans tolerated Dimensionals. To claim residency in the Bowery was to admit you were either a foreigner or sympathetic to the Dimensionals.

Ehrich swept the flat cap off his head to reveal his matted brown hair. “I don’t have horns if that’s what you’re worried about.”

The woman snorted. “Filthy creatures. All of them.”

“What do you need?” the proprietor asked.

Ehrich glanced out the window. The hunters strolled past, not even glancing inside. He relaxed his stance and smiled. “Spoons and forks. I’m tired of eating with my hands.”

“Two aisles down.”

Ehrich waved thanks. He pretended to scan the goods on the shelves, eyeing the window to make sure the pair hadn’t backtracked. His gaze lingered at a section of kids toys. A box of clay marbles stared back at him. He picked up three of them and cradled them in his palm. They reminded him of the marbles

his kid brother Dash owned before they crossed over to this dimension. Ehrich rolled the clay balls around, letting them clack together, remembering how skilled Dash was at knocking other kids' marbles out of the circle.

He was about to put the marbles back when he heard a snort. A young boy with a runny nose stared at a glass jar of sweets. He reminded Ehrich of Dash. His hands in his pockets, the boy never took his eyes off of the hard candy. Ehrich walked over and plucked the lid off. He reached inside, pulled out a red stick, and placed the hard candy in his hand. The boy raised his eyebrows and leaned in as Ehrich closed his fist and blew on it. He opened his hand—empty. The boy's eyes widened and his mouth dropped.

“How did you do that?”

Ehrich plucked the red stick from behind the boy's ear. “You must be made of this stuff.”

The boy beamed. Ehrich missed performing for an audience. He offered the sweet and the boy pulled his hands out of his pockets. Each hand had seven fingers. The boy spotted Ehrich staring, grabbed the candy, and jammed his hands back into hiding.

“Hey!” the proprietor yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing!” the young boy squealed, his eyes burning with shame.

“Pull your hands out of your pocket.”

“Why?”

“Pull them out.”

Ehrich tried to explain. “I was showing him a magic trick.”

The boy slowly pulled his hands out of his pocket with the red candy in one deformed hand.

“Oh, mercy! He’s one of them,” gasped the old woman.

The shop owner stormed over, grabbed the boy by the wrist, and hauled him to the counter. The boy struggled and kicked, but the angry owner refused to release him. Other customers gathered to witness the confrontation.

Ehrich drew closer to the boy.

“He’s not even human,” the shop owner said. “Look at his deformed hand. Can’t have their kind here.”

“Will I catch a disease from that thing?” the old woman asked. “I brushed against it.”

The boy stammered, “Um, ah, I didn’t mean to put this in my pocket. It’s just that—”

“Save your lies for Demon Watch, you little monster. Someone get the authorities.”

“I saw a pair down the street,” a beefy man bellowed. He headed toward the door.

Ehrich stiffened. He couldn’t be caught in the store. “Be careful of the kid’s hand,” he warned.

The man hesitated. “Why?”

“Didn’t you read the paper about the murder? What if that kid is the killer? That hand is probably a powerful weapon. Might be poisoned stingers in the fingertips. Show him your hands, kid.”

The boy raised his hands and showed the back of them to the shop owner. The fingernails on the two extra fingers blinked at the beefy man, who now retreated. The extra appendages were stems with eyes.

Ehrich yelled at the boy. “Run!”

The beefy man blocked the door. Ehrich grabbed the boy by the collar, hauling him out of the man’s reach. He veered to

the left as he snatched an iron skillet from a shelf and hurled it at the shop window. The glass shattered and cascaded to the ground. Brisk air blew into the store.

Ehrich hoisted the boy by the armpits and launched him through the opening. He followed. Glass crunched under his boots and he nearly slipped on the shards when he landed on the cobblestone street. Bystanders gaped at the scene.

“Demons!” Ehrich shouted as he pointed back into the store. “They tried to kill our brother. Run!”

The stunned bystanders didn’t react at first. The man appeared at the broken window. Ehrich yelled. “That’s one of them!”

This spurred the bystanders to action. They rushed to grab the man climbing out of the shop. A melee erupted. Fists flew along with a few loose teeth.

Ehrich glanced down the street at the hunters, who were now rushing to the shop, and bolted away with the boy in tow. He ran past the row of dry goods stores and restaurants through a phalanx of peddlers selling vegetables. When the crowd thinned, Ehrich slowed and released the boy’s arm.

“You okay, kid?”

The boy smiled. “Why did you help me?”

“I know I don’t look it, but we’re the same. You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes.” The boy rubbed his reddened wrist. “Well, thanks.”

“What’s your name?”

“Gur-Rahim,” the boy answered.

“I’m Ehrich. You’ve got to be careful about those hands. Stick around the Bowery and blend in.”

“I can’t. We need food.”

“What about your parents?”

“My mother can’t find a new job. Not since they shut down the Hudson River tunnel project.”

“Well, your best bet is to hang around the street vendors at the end of the day. You can get their food for cheap or free if you know how to ask.”

Gur-Rahim cocked his head to one side. “How do you know?”

“I’ve spent some time out here.”

The boy scurried away, hustling past a corn vendor who barked about her fresh hot corn. Other peddlers hawked their wares from wooden pushcarts to busy New Yorkers haggling for a bargain. The briny odour of raw oysters mingled with the smell of bodies. Ehrich glanced back. No sign of pursuers. But after talking to the oyster vendor, he was sure Ole Lukoje was still in New York.



The travellers from other dimensions huddled in ragtag groups along the Hudson River. Yellow-faced women leaned against the walls of warehouses, trying to catch a few winks of sleep. Cyclops men paced the street. A group of squid-like travellers played cards on top of a table made of crates. They glared at the fence separating them from the Hudson River tunnel project and the human guards that patrolled the barrier.

Amina paced along the length of the fence. As she surveyed the travellers, she couldn’t help but think of the refugee camps she’d spent time in after the warlord Ba Tian had destroyed her world. The raven-skinned girl had fled the ruins of her home and lived hand to mouth along with survivors in makeshift settlements. The grind of the hopeless routine had worn her down until she and her fellow refugees stared glassy-eyed at one another. They

no longer saw the world in front of them—only the fog of a bleak future and wisps of their past lives. She recognized the same futile looks in the travellers camped along the street.

Before the New Yorkers turned on them, the travellers earned their keep by digging a tunnel under the Hudson River to connect a subway train to Manhattan. The company had suspended the work after the attack on the *Oriental Clipper*. With no other promises of employment, all the workers could do was wait for the tunnel project to re-open.

What they did not know was that under the tunnel was a secret base that Ba Tian's operatives had built in preparation for the invasion. Buried deep under the rock was an arsenal of exoskeleton war machines that could wipe out the entire city. She knew Ba Tian had been trapped in another dimension and his generals had been thrown into prison after the *Oriental Clipper* attack, but she feared that one of the generals might have slipped away. For all she knew, that general was now under the tunnel with a faction of Ba Tian's army, preparing the exoskeletons for an invasion.

She knew the war wasn't over and she had the scars across her body to remind her what would happen if Ba Tian's soldiers regained control of the exoskeletons. She wanted to make certain no enemies would ever use the machines under her feet, and the only way to do that was to secure the exoskeletons first.

Amina slowed when she reached a warehouse at the far end of the encampment. Fewer travellers gathered here because of the open exposure to the wind blowing off of the Hudson River. She nodded to her companion, a lanky man with a moustache and a copy of the *New York World*. Nikola Tesla folded the newspaper, tucked it under his arm, and smiled at her.

“Anything new?”

She shook her head. “No sign of activity. At least as far as I can tell from out here. If we could get behind the fence ...”

“Not even worth considering. The last thing we want is to draw attention to ourselves. A battle with the guards would do just that.”

“I know, but I could slip past them when night falls. I’m sure I could find a weak spot in their security.”

“You’ve probed the fence at least ten times already.” She shrugged. “There has to be another way in.”

“Amina, if we can’t get past those guards, I’m positive Ba Tian’s soldiers won’t be able to. The guards are both a blessing and a curse.”

“We have to get below before the enemy does.”

“We can’t do this alone. How do you expect us to storm the fence?”

“Not an attack, Mr. Tesla. One or two of us might be able to slip past the guards.”

“And what if you get captured?”

“Better than to sit here and wait!”

Silence.

“I’m sorry I snapped, sir.”

He nodded. “I understand your frustration, Amina, but we need more bodies before we do anything. Perhaps some of the soldiers in Purgatory.”

She shook her head. “We need them to continue training the civilians. Prepare them for battle.”

“Is all this preparation necessary? Ba Tian is trapped in another dimension. His generals and soldiers are in prison. What more do we have to fear?”

“We cannot be sure that all of his generals were captured and the rest of his army is spread across other dimensions. Who knows how many have made their way here? If we had the exoskeletons, we would even the odds.”

“Or you could get captured and we’d have to find a way to rescue you.”

She eyed the guards along the fence. “I won’t get caught.”

“Caught doing what?” Ehrich asked as he jogged toward the pair.

“You’re late,” Amina said.

“I think I have a lead on Ole Lukoje. There was a murder last week. The victim’s eyes were taken.”

“Intriguing,” Tesla said, plucking the newspaper from under his arm. “I was just reading about a break-in at Thomas Edison’s Orange County facility. Apparently, a guard was killed. His eyes were taken.”

Ehrich stiffened. “Ole Lukoje.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Amina said.

Tesla cocked his head to one side. “It would appear to be more than a coincidence. Once the man has retrieved his nanodust, who knows what he will do. Perhaps, he could summon all of Ba Tian’s army.”

Amina shook her head. “No, I think he can only transport one or two people at a time. Otherwise, all of Ba Tian’s forces would be swarming the city by now. Still, he might be bringing over a few of Ba Tian’s soldiers as we speak.”

“The only way to know for sure is to look for Ole Lukoje,” Ehrich said. “He’s my way home.”

Amina shook her head. “We have to get to those exoskeletons before Ba Tian’s people do.”

“We don’t know if there are any generals left, Amina, and as long as guards are posted here, I doubt they are going to let any Dimensionals through,” Tesla said.

“We can’t take the chance,” Amina argued. “We have to get below.”

“We don’t have enough people to do that,” he said. “We barely found enough to keep watch on the tunnel project.”

“The soldiers have their hands full with training right now. We have to prepare for war.”

“A war that might never happen. Amina, let’s put this to rest for now. At the very least, let’s bring Mr. Serenity up to speed and feed ourselves. I’m famished.”

Before she could argue, Tesla set off down the road. Ehrich cast a sideways glance at Amina and shrugged. “You coming?”

She sighed, taking one last look at the guards on the fence before joining the pair.