

Ghost's
WAR

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**GHOSTS
of
WAR**

A Tale of the Ghost



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Once more, for Lou.
Thank you for your patience.

TERROR FROM THE SKIES

As the rate of disappearances increases to epidemic proportions, New Yorkers look to the skies in fear

“Stay indoors” is the advice from the police department, as the recent spate of missing persons reaches an all-time high. There are now over fifty reported disappearances on Manhattan Island, spanning the entire festive season, and this reporter has been told that the police department is in a state of panic and has already run out of leads.

It is understood that each of the missing people disappeared in what’s thought to be identical circumstances—whilst walking the streets of the city—and eyewitness accounts refer to “terrible flying creatures” that pluck their victims indiscriminately from the sidewalk, dragging them away into the sky, never to be seen or heard from again.

These creatures are said to resemble human skeletons with “bat-like” wings and glowing red eyes. They swoop silently out from the shadows to abduct the good people of New York and carry them away for nefarious purposes that are not yet clear.

Commissioner Montague, in his statement yesterday, assured people that the police were doing everything they could to discover who was behind the abductions and warned citizens to “stay indoors unless absolutely necessary” until the matter was resolved.

This, however, offers little comfort to the families of the fifty missing people, of whom nothing whatsoever has been heard since their abductions. There have been no ransom notes, no demands, and no bodies. Mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives all over the city are holding constant vigil in the hope that news will come soon and that their loved ones will be returned to them safely.

Profilers report that there are no obvious connections between the

victims—they appear to have been selected entirely at random, plucked from obscurity, representing all different walks of life. Neither is there an obvious pattern to the locations of the abductions, which have taken place at points all over the city, from Central Park to Hell’s Kitchen, from the Battery to Union Square.

The people of New York are therefore advised to take the commissioner’s advice and remain in the safety of their homes, especially after nightfall.

It seems that in Manhattan this winter, nowhere, and nobody, is safe.

—*Manhattan Globe*, January 6, 1927

CHAPTER ONE

He was falling.

Tumbling out of the sky, his arms wheeling as the air rushed past him, his black trench coat billowing open around him like a single black wing.

He gasped for breath, but his lungs failed to respond: the blow that had sent him careening over the lip of the building had knocked the wind out of him, causing his stomach muscles to spasm and leaving him struggling to breathe. His heart was thrumming like a beating drum, pounding in his ears, drowning out the sound of everything else: the roar of the biplanes that soared through the sky on spikes of yellow flame, the coal-powered cars that hissed and sighed as they barreled down the avenues, the chattering of the bizarre mechanical things that had sent him spiraling toward his death. It was as if he had been cocooned inside a bubble, as if the rest of the world had been shut out and all that was left was him and the rush of the sidewalk that was coming up to meet him. Falling had become everything. There was nothing else.

He blinked. Raindrops sparkled in bright flashes of neon light, glimpsed in flickering snapshots as he tumbled over and over. He felt unconsciousness tugging at him, threatening to overwhelm him. Blackness swam at the edges of his vision. If he allowed himself to give in to it, to welcome its embrace, then everything would be over. It would only take a second.

For a moment, the Ghost thought that might not be such a bad idea. These days, he didn't have much to live for, save for the anger—that constant, burning fire in the pit of his stomach—and he wondered whether it might not be better to allow that fire to burn itself out. Better for everyone. Better for him. To surrender to it would be easy.

The Ghost felt the needles of rain lashing his face, felt it sting his

eyes, wished it could somehow cleanse him of the things he had seen and done. He wanted it to be over. He wanted peace.

Then, suddenly, his lungs were working again and he was sucking at the air, dragging at it in grateful gulps. The sounds of the city permeated his bubble. He had only seconds left in which to act. He moved almost mechanically, his instincts taking over. There were people up there who needed him. He had that much to live for, at least.

The Ghost, still tumbling and spinning as he fell, reached inside the lapel of his trench coat and fought to disentangle a thin cord from among the buckles and straps of his black jacket. He yanked it hard and felt his entire body jerk as the twin canisters strapped to his calves ignited with plumes of bright orange flame and he was propelled sideways into the building.

He slammed against the wall, striking his right elbow hard while cushioning his face in the crook of his arm. He called out in pain—a short, sharp wail—and then forced himself to ignore it, to bury it until later. He rebounded, continuing his plummet toward the ground, arcing away from the building on a streak of flame as his rocket boosters propelled him through the air at a tremendous speed. He was only twenty feet from the ground. If he got the next move wrong, all he'd have succeeded in doing was hastening his own demise.

Mustering all of the strength that he had left, the Ghost angled his body, twisting in midair, forcing his legs down and around so that he was upright once again. He bucked and flailed as the upward momentum of the rocket canisters fought against the momentum of the fall. He slowed in midair, almost lost his balance, and then he was streaming upward again, riding on twin spikes of flames as he shot through the sky toward the two raptors who had forced him off the roof.

He looked up and saw nothing but scintillating raindrops and the top of the building, silhouetted against the moonlit sky. In the distance, the searchlights of numerous police dirigibles played back and forth across the rooftops, monitoring the streets, vigilant for any sign of the brass monsters. As usual, they were too slow and ponderous, and had failed to spot the twin raptors that had descended on Fifth Avenue to pluck two unwary citizens from the street.

The Ghost had been there, however, watching from his favorite vantage point atop his own apartment building, and had opened fire on the mechanical creatures as soon as he'd been able to get a clear shot—the result of which meant he had ended up being knocked over the side of the building during the ensuing tussle as the creatures descended on him, their talons bared.

He only hoped he wasn't too late. He'd been trying to follow one of the things back to its lair for weeks, but they were simply too fast, and he had yet to discern any obvious weakness. Not only that, but there were also the abductees to consider. If he could prevent the raptors from getting away with two more innocent people, he had no choice but to stand his ground.

The Ghost had lost his hat in the fall, and the rain plastered his sand-colored hair across his face. His goggles were pushed up on his forehead, and he reached up and pulled them down sharply over his eyes, welcoming the protection they offered from the rain and the definition provided by their night vision.

As he came up over the lip of the building he caught sight of one of the civilians, squirming in the grip of a raptor's talons as it lifted her off the roof once again and pitched forward into the air. The other was nowhere to be seen.

The Ghost leaned into the gusting rain and shot across the rooftop, slewing around a pyramidal skylight to careen bodily into the back of the raptor.

The mechanical creature screeched in fury as it was bowled forward, nearly dropping the woman as it freed one of its talons and twisted around, trying to rake at the Ghost furiously as he grabbed hold of two of its brass ribs and held on with all his might, trying to force the thing back down onto the rooftop. The woman screamed and held on to the raptor's other talon with both hands, dangling over a hundred-foot drop to the street below.

The raptor beat its batlike wings, trying to shake off the vigilante, who held on despite the claws that raked at his face or scabbled at his forearms, trying desperately to pry him free.

This was the closest he had come to one of the things, and he was at once appalled and amazed by the artifice on display. It was about the

size of a large man, vaguely humanoid in appearance, but with a skeleton constructed out of gleaming brass components. Two large cylinders sprouted from its shoulders, housing spinning propellers—the engines that enabled it to fly. The wings were like those of an enormous bat—taut, pink flesh stretched over elegant fingers of brass; there, he supposed, to guide its flight. Its head was a brass skull, reminiscent of that of a large cat, with long, jagged fangs and an absent lower jaw. Somewhere in its belly the power unit hummed and crackled with a powerful electric charge.

Most disturbing of all, however, were the pentagrams and weird occult symbols daubed on its chest plate, which appeared to house a small cavity hidden behind an ornate brass door, and the fragments of what looked like human bone incorporated into its skeletal frame. Its eyes burned a demonic red, as if signifying a fierce intelligence.

The Ghost had no idea where the things had come from, but they had been terrorizing the city for weeks, if not longer. For the last two months people had been reporting dead birds found all over the city, pigeons and gulls shredded midflight, dropping to the pavement like gruesome, feathery bombs. The raptors, the Ghost had discovered, were the cause of it. The birds were being chewed up by the raptor's propellers, sucked in by the back draft and spat out again as the brass monsters soared through the sky above the city streets. As yet he had no idea of the creatures' purpose, their numbers, or their origin, nor the reasons why they continued to abduct seemingly random members of the populace, but he intended to find out.

The raptor's talon flashed as it struck out at the Ghost, catching him fully in the chest and forcing him back, straining against his hold. Grimacing as the sharp brass claws punctured the fabric of his jacket, burying themselves in his breast, the Ghost released his grasp on the ribs and clutched for the talon instead, swinging his legs up and round so that the angle of his booster jets was countering the pull of the raptor's engines.

The three figures drifted almost lazily across the rooftop, twisting and turning as the Ghost and the raptor fought for dominance. The creature emitted a chattering howl as it battered at the Ghost's head and arms, scratching and pulling, trying frantically to get away. Below,

dangling from the raptor's other leg, the woman continued to scream in terror.

The Ghost knew the ammunition from his *fléchette* gun—the projectile weapon he had strapped beneath his right arm on a ratchet—would do nothing to harm the brass creature. Even the explosive rounds he had developed to combat the lumbering moss golems of the Roman would bounce off its metal frame, finding little or no purchase. But he needed to find a way to slow it down.

The raptor beat its wings again, the barbed metal tips and fleshy membranes striking the Ghost full in the face, disorientating him as he hung upside down clutching the raptor's clawed foot. But it gave him an idea.

Straining to twist himself around, the Ghost released his right arm and flicked his wrist sharply, causing the long steel barrel of the *fléchette* gun to snap up and around on its ratchet, clicking into place along the length of his forearm. The rubber bulb that served as a pneumatic trigger dropped into his palm. He paused for a moment, took aim, and fired.

A hail of tiny metal blades scattered from the end of the barrel, showering the raptor and causing it to reel suddenly, confused by the suddenness of the attack. The blades bounced harmlessly off its metal face and chest, just as the Ghost had anticipated, but where they struck the fleshy membrane of the raptor's left wing they tore through, opening large rents and causing the mechanical beast to wail in frustration.

Together, the three figures began to spin wildly out of control as the raptor's wing flapped uselessly at the air, unable to maintain the status quo any longer. It screeched and scabbled, and then, as if realizing it needed to lose some ballast to remain airborne, casually tossed the woman away as if shedding a dead weight.

Horrified, the Ghost watched her tumble away across the rooftop like a discarded rag doll, striking the paving slabs and rolling, unable to slow herself as she bounced over the low lip of the roofline and went sliding over the edge. The Ghost heard her cry out and strained to see as the raptor spun around crazily in the air, then realized with some relief that she had managed to catch hold of a flagpole and was dangling over the side of the building. Beneath her was a hundred-foot

drop, and the rain, still lashing them in a relentless torrent, made it harder to hold on. He didn't have long before she'd be dashed on the sidewalk below, but there was still time to save her.

Cursing loudly, the Ghost released his grip on the raptor's leg and peeled away from the creature, bleeding profusely from the scores of scratches that marred his face and arms. Righting himself, he pulled the cord inside his trench coat to cut the fuel line, and the flames at his ankles guttered and died. He dropped quickly to the rooftop, hitting the slabs on his side and rolling to a stop about ten feet away from the baying raptor. The creature landed softly on its clawed feet and cocked its head, regarding him as if trying to work out his next move.

The Ghost cursed again and climbed quickly to his feet. This was his best chance. The thing was damaged, its wing a mess of brass spines and ragged flesh. That would slow it down, and if he followed it now it might lead him to its lair. If he could find out where the things were nesting, who was controlling them, and why, he could save innumerable lives. Perhaps even the lives of those already taken, if they weren't already dead.

That would mean sacrificing the woman, though, and even though the odds were against her, even though it meant other people might have to die, the Ghost couldn't simply leave her to fall. He'd never be able to live with himself if he abandoned her there, dangling from the flagpole, preparing to tumble to her death.

Refusing to take his eyes off the raptor, he backed up toward the lip of the building. He saw the creature start forward, as if it were intending to follow him, and for a moment he thought his luck might be in, that it might rush him across the rooftop, leaving him enough time to haul the woman to safety before continuing the fight. But he realized with dismay that it was trying only to get enough momentum to launch itself into the air. It staggered forward, skipped lightly over the flagstones, and then came down again. Then, on its second attempt, it got itself airborne once more and dropped over the side of the building, banking sharply as it soared away into the rain-soaked night.

Sighing, the Ghost turned to the woman, whose upturned face was stark and white and scared, gleaming in the silvery moonlight. She was clutching the flagpole with both hands, but he could see that her arms

were already growing tired with the strain, her fingers beginning to slip on the wet metal pole.

The Ghost dropped to his knees, bowing his head against the rain so that it sprayed off his upturned collar, and reached down over the side of the building, grabbing the woman by the arms. He hauled her up, slowly and carefully, without saying a word.

She was as light as a feather—thin and pretty—and he could see how absolutely terrified she was by the ordeal. He pulled her over the lip of the building and dragged her to safety.

Then, kneeling on the rooftop in the driving rain, he allowed her to wrap her arms around him and clutch him tight, sobbing on his shoulder as she trembled with fear and relief. She felt as fragile as a bird as he wrapped his arms around her to protect her from the storm.

“Who are you?” she whispered, after a few moments. She looked up at him, studying his face for any clues. Her mascara had run in the rain, streaking her face with tributaries of black ink.

He turned his head, searching the sky for any sign of the raptor. He was too late. It was gone.

“I’m no one,” he replied, his voice low. “No one but a ghost.”