

Sucker Punch

A Richard Drew Adventure



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Dat's just not fair," Tank McGuire said again, flipping through volume D of the Encyclopedia Americana at the New York Public Library. "Ya hit a guy in da chin, an' he supposed t' go down!"

"Shhh!" the woman behind the counter hissed at Tank's rising tone.

"Don't 'shhh' me," Tank muttered under his breath. "I punched a demon in da chin an' it din't go down!"

* * *

The day had started simply enough. Tank McGuire had gotten up at the usual time, did his calisthenics, sparred with Katie in the gym, and cleaned up. Summerholm had his usual breakfast of bacon, sausages, eggs, vegetables and fried potatoes ready when he sat down at the breakfast table in Richard Drew's penthouse. Katie shook her head from across the table, as she did every morning over her bowl of cornflakes, today garnished with fresh blueberries, and her cup of strong, black coffee.

"How do you stay so skinny eating all that?" she asked over her newspaper. It was the same routine every day.

"Clean living, miss" Summerholm replied in his polished butler's tone before Tank could swallow. They all smiled, but said nothing more.

Richard Drew emerged from the library dressed in a gray, pin-striped suit, with a red shirt, and a bright green tie. The heir to the gummed tape fortune amassed by his mother smiled brightly as he entered and sat at his usual place.

"Are we going out, sir?" Summerholm queried, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes, Summerholm," Drew said in his deep, enthusiastic voice. "That telegram was from my old college chum, Parker Maxwell. You remember him, don't you?"

"Of course, sir," Summerholm replied in his neutral tone. "Wasn't he the young man who broke your nose Freshman year?" Katie looked up from her bowl.

"Right you are," Drew replied. "Old Parker decked me good for hitting on Matilda Stevenson at the Spring Dance. It was a good hit, too," he added, turning toward Tank to mime hitting himself downward on his nose.

"Dat it was," Tank said with alarm. "If he'd a gone up instead a down, he mighta

killed you!"

"Fortunately for me," Drew nodded, "old Parker was a foot taller than me in those days." He stared into space reminiscing.

"Where are we off to, sir?" Katie asked with her usual professional tone, though Summerholm and Tank shared her alarm at his attire.

"Parker has asked me to meet him at his hotel this afternoon at 2:00, Kate-O," Drew said, adjusting his pocket square.

"Very good, sir," Summerholm said glancing to Tank. "Perhaps you should change for your training session with Mr. McGuire after breakfast."

* * *

At exactly 1:55, Katie O'Hare entered the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel and scanned the room for threats. She wore twin .45 automatics in shoulder holsters beneath her jacket, twin .22s in ankle holsters, and sheathed knives on both forearms. Katie liked to be prepared.

The dim lighting, fading wallpaper, and battered furniture to the right of the entrance cast a forlorn and neglected atmosphere about the room. On the left side, an ancient-looking man with thick glasses sat asleep, perched precariously on a stool behind the weathered counter. There was no one else in the room.

"The room is clear, sir," she said over her shoulder. Drew and Tank entered.

"Not up to Parker's usual standards," Drew said with surprise, "but perhaps he doesn't want to attract attention."

"Did he say what he wanted to you about," Tank asked.

"No," Drew replied. "All very hush, hush."

"I don't like this, sir," Katie said warily.

"Nonsense, Kate-O," Drew said with the disarming grin that worked on everyone except her, "I'm sure there is a rational explanation for his secrecy. Probably just being dramatic."

"If you insist, sir," Katie replied. "Do you have Mr. Maxwell's room number?"

"Room 503," Drew said, leading the way toward the stairwell at the far end of the room. Katie stepped in front of him as they reached the foot of the stairs. "Of course," he said, "Ladies first."

Katie shook her head and took the lead. Sometimes she wondered if Drew knew she was supposed to be protecting him. His mother paid her wages, and for good reason. Drew had an uncanny knack for stumbling into trouble. But, to Katie's surprise, more often than not he somehow managed to stumble back out again.

Katie stopped their progress just short of the fifth floor landing, which was the top floor. They had seen no one else on the preceding floors, and there had been no sounds from behind any of the doors. In fact, there had been no sounds at all.

Katie advanced to the landing. The stairway had wound up the back end of the building. There were two doors on either side, and a dirty window facing front at the opposite end of the hallway. As with the other floors, there was no one present. But she heard a faint rustling sound from the nearest room on the right. Room 503.

Katie drew one of her .45s, but dropped it as Drew tapped her shoulder. She glared at him silently as she retrieved her pistol.

"You should be more careful with those Kate-O," Drew said, and nodded to Tank, who knocked on the door. There was a crash from inside. Katie pushed Drew to one side, but the door did not open, so Tank kicked it in.

He was immediately set upon by a leering man with a large, curved knife. Tank expertly bobbed to one side and hit the man hard in the solar plexus. As a champion bare-knuckle boxer, Tank knew how to disable an opponent, but his blow struck something solid that absorbed the force of his punch, though whatever it was cracked and the man fell backward into the room.

Katie fired point blank into the face of another man, also armed with the large, machete-like weapon. Her .45 slug easily pierced what turned out to be a wooden mask, and her target fell to his knees and then face down to the floor.

Tank pursued his opponent into the room, reaching the masked man as he recovered from the first blow. As the assailant raised his weapon two-handed over his head, Tank threw an uppercut that hit his jaw from beneath. There was a loud crunch, and the blade fell from masked man's hands and stuck into the hardwood floor before the body dropped.

Drew followed Katie into the room. It had been ransacked, but the most prominent feature was a bloodied corpse carelessly draped over the far side of the bed. The chest had been ripped open, and several internal organs were arranged on the floor. The face bore a horrified expression and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

"I don't think he's gonna to get his deposit back," Tank said.

"Poor Parker's seen better days," Drew replied, kneeling over his former classmate.

Katie searched the closets and under the bed, but there was no one else in the room. She noticed that the sole window on the opposite wall was open, but there was a sheer drop to the alley below. Then she noticed something sticking out of a crack in the brick. She pried it loose with her fingers and examined it. It was a claw from some large predator, about one inch long, slightly curved, and black.

Tank examined the man he had taken out. He wore a bright red, wooden mask. The eyes looked malevolent, it had a large, pickle-shaped nose, and a leering grin carved into it. The weapon he had been wielding had a rectangular blade that was bent inward at an angle on the sharpened side. Only that side had an edge.

Katie checked the hands of the attacker. They wore arm guards into which the claws of an animal had been sewn. Metal rods ran up the length of the leather gauntlets to reinforce the claws, which were mounted on the end of the rods and could be slashed with by balling one's fists. And the man she had shot was missing a claw from his left hand.

"They climbed up the wall and came in through the window," she concluded. "It looks like some kind of ritual killing."

"Dese masks are pretty heavy," Tank said after removing it from the man. It had cracked nearly in half when Tank hit him.

"Rather shoddy work," Drew said holding the other man's weapon to his face for closer examination. "It looks like the edge dented on impact." He turned the blade over. "And see here, the blade is bent!"

"You shouldn't touch anything, sir," Katie said, slapping the weapon from his hands

with her arm. It landed with a clatter and she kicked it under the bed. "We should leave the scene for the police." She heard sirens approaching. "We need to go now, sir!"

Tank placed the mask back on the dead man's face. As he did so, he noticed a pocket notebook that had been pushed out from under the bed by the machete. He picked up the notebook and followed as Katie pushed Drew out of the room.

"Kate-O, we need to tell the police what we found," Drew protested as the bodyguard strained to push him out of the room. Drew was almost a foot taller than Katie, and perhaps one hundred pounds heavier. "The front desk man..."

"He was asleep, sir," Katie replied with exertion in her voice. "He didn't see us, and we didn't see anyone else on the way up here."

"I wunda who called da cops," Tank mused, shouldering Katie aside to usher Drew across the hallway.

They could hear rapid footsteps coming up the stairs. Katie stepped around Drew, whose mouth Tank had covered with a meaty hand, and quickly picked the lock on the room across the hall. Without looking, she opened the door and entered, closing it behind the others.

"I don't think they saw us," she whispered, "but we need to keep quiet. OK, sir?" Drew nodded, and Tank removed his hand and deposited him on the bed. Fortunately, the room had been unoccupied.

"What..." Drew began in his normal, booming voice, but stopped short when Katie glared at him. "Why the secrecy?" He whispered. "We didn't do anything illegal, and Parker was dead when we got there."

"We can speak to the police after they calm down," Katie replied. "That's a pretty grisly scene in there, and they're likely to be jumpy."

"In da meantime," Tank said quietly, "take a gander at dis." He handed the notebook to Drew. "I found it under da bed as we was leaving."

Drew flipped through the pages. "It seems that Parker was researching Indian cults in New York," he said after flipping through the pages. He stopped at one and showed to Katie and Tank. It was a drawing of one of the knives, called a Kukri. "It says here that these weapons are primarily used by the Gurkha's of Nepal and other Himalayan tribes."

"Does it say anything about Parker being threatened by these Gurkha's?" Katie asked. "Or any reason that would want to kill him?" Drew skimmed some more, but before he could respond, there was a strong knock in the door.

"Police," the voice on the other side shouted as the door was kicked open. Two officers ran in with their revolvers ready. A third carried a shotgun. "All of you," the one with the shotgun cried, "show us your hands!"

Drew, Tank, and Katie complied immediately. The officer with the shotgun turned toward Katie when the butt of the pistols in her shoulder holsters were exposed, and one of the other officers quickly disarmed her.

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* * *

Drew, Katie and Tank were reunited in the Assistant Police Commissioner's office. The preceding six hours had seen them disarmed and taken to the 23rd Precinct, where Katie, who had been handcuffed over Drew's protests until all three were shackled, was separated from the men.

They had been individually interrogated by Inspector Olsen over and over again. By the time their three stories had been reiterated and they matched for the fourth time, Olsen received a message from Assistant Commissioner Frazier summoning him and the prisoners to Police Headquarters.

"You'll understand our concern, Mr. Drew," Frazier said in a conciliatory tone. "You and your colleagues were at the scene of a heinous crime. My officers were in a heightened

state of alertness."

"Of course, Commissioner," Drew said pointedly, "but there was still no need to manhandle us and take us into custody. We would have volunteered anything we knew at the scene."

"Your associate, Miss O'Hare, was rather heavily armed," Inspector Olsen interjected, pointing to the pile of knives and pistols on the assistant commissioner's desk. "That alone was sufficient cause for their precautions."

"How so, sir?" O'Hare demanded. "I in no way threatened your officers, and we complied immediately to their commands!"

"And da cops din't even ask any questions," Tank added. "Dey just patted us down and cuffed us."

"You had evidence on your possession taken from the scene," Frazier replied firmly.

"And we were responding to reports of shots fired," Olsen said, his tone rising, "and her's were the only guns found on the scene. Nevermind that the only slug found was proven to have come from her .45."

"We told you what happened..." Drew said

"Yeah, yeah," Olsen said with frustration. "You came to see Maxwell, but he was already dead when you got there. You were attacked by the other two and killed them in self-defense taking the notebook and leaving the scene raises questions," Frazier said. "Why did you break into the room across the hall?"

"We knew your people would be hot," Katie replied, "so we backed off until they cooled off." The officials did not seem mollified. "We didn't want them shooting at us when they saw what had happened!"

"We was just laying low until the heat was off," Tank added.

"We did nothing illegal," Drew interjected, "and we have cooperated with your investigation to the fullest. If there is nothing more, my colleagues and I will be going home."

"Just one more thing," Inspector Olsen said. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," Drew replied. "But it's pretty obvious that those two with the masks and the knives killed my old friend Parker."

"It's a shame we won't be able to question them," Olsen said flatly. "You're free to go, but don't leave town."

After looking in a telephone book, Drew hailed a taxi outside Police Headquarters at 240 Centre Street and, once out of view of the police station, instructed the driver to an address off Catherine Street in Two Bridges. The driver nodded, but stopped at Madison Street as the street was blocked by crowds of people. Reluctantly, Drew paid the cabbie and the three exited the taxi.

"What are we doing here, sir?" Katie asked looking warily at the run down neighborhood. Drew had refused to say anything in the taxi.

"There was a name in that notebook, Chinmayananda Kaur," he replied "His address is 1 Ransom Court, which is somewhere around here."

"Dat ain't much not go on," Tank said. Looking around, he noticed that there were only a handful of white people among the predominantly Oriental crowds that massed in the streets around carts that bore all manner of unusual wares. "Dis ain't no place to wander."

The din of foreign tongues echoed from the tenements all around, and the signs on the shops all bore strange characters.

"Excuse me, my good man," Drew said to a passing man wearing a blue silk robe and short round felt cap. The man said something in a foreign tongue as he walked by. "That wasn't very helpful," Drew said with disappointment.

"Perhaps we should try someone in western dress, sir," Katie said, indicating a group of younger men in shirts and trousers.

"Capital idea, Kate-O!" Drew said with a smile and started off across the street before Tank grabbed his arm to prevent him from blindly stepping in front of a truck. The driver honked the horn as he passed. Once the vehicle went by, all three checked from oncoming traffic before crossing to the men.

The men were speaking in a foreign tongue as they approached, but as soon as one of them noticed the newcomers, they stopped talking. They eyed the three, especially Katie, looking each up and down before one said, "You want something?"

"Why yes, my goo..." Drew started to say before Katie and Tank stepped in front of him.

"We're looking for Ransom Court," Katie said evenly. "Can you tell us how to get there?"

The man smiled mischievously. "Why do you want to go there?" The group spread out around the three.

"Dat's our business," Tank replied. "Do ya know the way or not?"

"Easy big fella," the man said confidently. "I'm sure we can come to some arrangement." The tension was palpable, even on the street amidst the crowds.

Suddenly Drew stepped forward with a disarming smile and said, "Excellent! A man who knows how to bargain." He stepped in front of his colleagues and stood before the speaker. "What would it take to get directions to Ransom Court, my good man?"

Katie and Tank eyed the others warily, but they were impassive. The speaker measured Drew, rubbing his clean chin with his fingers. He looked over the three again.

"We could show you the way for, say, ten dollars," he said evenly.

"I'll give you a dollar for verbal directions," Drew countered.

"You really want an escort in this neighborhood," the man said pointedly. "You wouldn't want to get waylaid by some miscreant lurking in the crowd."

"I think we can manage just fine," Drew replied. "Kate..."

"We can take care of ourselves," Katie said, looking the speaker in the eye. Tank adopted a defiant stance as well.

The man's demeanor did not change, and the others remained motionless. He gazed from Katie to Tank and back. "Very well," he said with a smile, holding up his hands. "Two dollars."

"Done," Drew said with finality, and reached into his pocket and produced two dollar coins. The man put out his hand, but Drew closed his fist around the coins. "Directions

first." The man smiled and provided simple directions. Drew handed him the coins.

Then the man snatched a red, silk handkerchief from a nearby cart, folded it neatly, and stuffed it into Drew's jacket pocket. "As a token of my good will." The old woman selling from the cart, looked at the man, but said nothing and turned away quickly.

"Thank you," Drew said with a smile, and the circle of men parted to allow the three to proceed down the indicated street.

As soon as they were out of view of the gang, Katie snatched the handkerchief from his pocket. "That was a gift, Kate-O!" Drew said with irritation.

"He was markin' ya," Tank said.

"They've probably sent us to a blind alley to rob us and beat us senseless," Katie replied, stuffing the handkerchief into her own pocket. "We stand out well enough here, sir."

"That's racist, Kate-O!" Drew said disapprovingly.

"Maybe so," she replied, "but I'm not taking any chances." With that, she pulled Drew into a shop. It was a hardware store. A burly Asian man stood behind the counter. Katie asked for directions to Ransom Court, and to her surprise, the directions matched what they had previously received. She gave the man a nickel.

"Perhaps you should be more tolerant," Drew said with a look of reproach as they exited the shop. Katie glared and led the way in the indicated direction.

* * *

They progressed through a maze of streets and alleys compounded further by the endless cart vendors and their customers. In the end, they found themselves at a shadowed dead end capped by single storefront, whose door bore Kali's Bounty in Oriental-styled English characters. The alley was bounded on either side by the back of five story tenements. The store appeared to be in the rear of the building before them.

"This must be the place," Drew said, stepping confidently up to the door. He tried the knob, but the door was locked.

Katie peered through the plate glass window next to the door. The window display consisted of numerous figurines, ornately painted boxes, vases, and the like. Inside the shop, she saw shelves of small bottles, as well as display cases whose contents she could not see. The walls were decorated with masks similar to those worn by the Palmer Maxwell's attackers.

At the sound of Drew's knocking, she saw a man wearing a turban rise from behind the display cases and glance at the door. He quickly stepped around the counter and approached. A moment later, the door opened.

"I am sorry, sahib," the man said with a bow of his head, his prominent Indian accent coloring each word, "but Kali's Bounty is closed for today. Please return tomorrow." Drew glanced at his watch and noticed that it was nearly eight o'clock in the evening.

"Please excuse the lateness of the hour," Drew said with a smile, "but are you Chinmayananda Kaur?" The man was taken aback.

"I am Chinmayananda Kaur," he said.

"My friend, Parker Maxwell, mentioned you to me," Drew continued with a pleasant tone. At the mention of the name, Kaur made furtive looks behind Drew, noted his

companions, glanced down the alley, and quickly motioned for them to enter.

"If Mr. Maxwell sent you," the shopkeeper said anxiously, "then it is proven that the Thuggee's are imposters, yes?"

"I'm afraid you have us at a disadvantage," Drew said. "Parker and I went to school together. He told me that you were a purveyor of," he looked around the shop, "of fine treasures of the Orient."

"And when did Mr. Parker tell you this?" Kaur said with a slight grin.

"A few weeks ago," Drew replied.

The man's facade dropped. "I only met Mr. Maxwell two days ago," Kaur said with irritation, "and he was most unpleasant."

"Why did he come here?" Katie asked officiously. She put her hands on her hips, exposing the butt of one of her pistols.

"I don't want any trouble," Kaur said anxiously.

Drew looked at Katie disapprovingly. She closed her jacket. Then he turned to Kaur and smiled again. "We're not here to trouble you sir. Parker was indeed an old friend of mine, and he asked me to meet him this afternoon. But when we got to his hotel, he was dead."

Kaur blanched and muttered something under his breath.

"We found your name in his notebook," Katie added, "which the police now have. You'll probably be hearing from them soon."

"Perhaps you might tell us what Parker came to see you about?" Drew said. Kaur was uncertain. "I'm sure I could make it worth your while," he added, rubbing two fingers together. Kaur was unconvinced.

"Dese masks is nice," Tank said from the back of the shop, pointing to one identical to the one he had hit. Kaur looked back to see and gulped.

"Yes," Katie added. "What can you tell us about that mask?"

Kaur glanced from Tank, to Katie, to Drew and back to Katie. "They are not Thuggee," he said anxiously.

"The Indian assassin cult?" Drew asked. "Why do you say that?"

"Parker came to me to ask about Thuggee masks," Kaur said. "He looked at that very mask, saying that the one like it had been associated with a murder he was writing an article about."

"Did he say who?" Katie probed.

"No, he did not," Kaur responded, flustered. "He said that the dead man had been hacked to death by men wearing those masks." He looked about nervously. "I told him that the Thuggee cult neither wore masks nor used weapons. They were known for the bloodless strangulation of their victims."

"They could have adopted new methods," Drew conjectured.

"No," Kaur responded firmly. "They killed in service to the goddess Kali, who had defeated the demon Raktabija by consuming his blood, because wherever Raktabija's blood hit the ground, another Raktabija was born. Only by consuming all his blood could Kali defeat him. That is why the Thuggee never drew blood."

"What kind of mask is that?" Drew asked.

"Pah!" Kaur spat, but something in his demeanor stuck out to Katie. "That is a cheap

facsimile for gullible tourists. My nephew makes them from scrap wood he finds."

"So dis is da only place where ya can find dese?" Tank asked, having taken the mask from the wall and joined the others at the front of the shop.

"It is a familiar design to those who know Punjabi art," Kaur replied. "But I do not know of anyone else who sells these masks."

"Have you sold any recently?" Drew asked.

"As a matter of fact," Kaur said, "I sold four masks to some white man a few weeks ago. They had prominent accents." He thought for a moment. "I think they were Irish." Katie noticed a furtive glance to the right, a clear sign of deception.

"So these four Irishmen came to your store," She said warily, "bought four of these red masks with the long noses," she pointed to the mask in Tank's hand, "and four of these Gurkha knives," directing Kaur' gaze to a display case, "a few weeks ago. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Kaur said flatly, "that is correct." He took the mask from Tank and ushered the three toward the door. "Now if you will excuse me, the store is now closed."

Katie stopped short, stalling their progress, and turned back to stare at Kaur. "What makes you think that they were Irish?" The question caught the shopkeeper off guard.

"Um," he stammered, "they wore plaid vests and bowler hats," he added quickly. "And they had Irish accents?"

"So dey talked like me," Tank said, following Katie's line of thought. Drew was totally confused.

"Yes," Kaur sputtered, "I mean no." He bolstered his resolve and pointing to the door. "That is enough. I have answered your questions. Now please leave!" He ignored their further protests and closed the door and shutting the blinds behind them.

As they turned from the shuttered door, the alley was dark and empty save for lights shining down from some of the tenement windows. In the distance, they could vaguely hear the sounds of the city. But nearby, all was quiet.

They were met in the courtyard outside the shop by four assailants wearing the masks and armed with kukri. Tank could tell from their clothes that these were some of the youths they had negotiated with earlier. Two of the men leapt like gymnasts and landed before Tank. The other two ran toward Katie.

Tank met the attacker and combined his own momentum with that of the assailant. To his surprise, his fist punched straight through his target below the ribs, emerging covered with blood and gore. The other attacker was startled by the sight, but was committed to his overhand chop. Tank turned the limp body in the second assailant's path and caught the blade with its skull.

Katie drew both of her automatics with practiced ease and fired off several shots in rapid succession and hit both attackers in the knee. They dropped to the ground screaming.

In the meantime, Drew turned to go back into the store, but the door was locked. He took a deep breath and kicked at the glass with the bottom of his shoe. It bounced off harmlessly leaving a footprint on the glass. Drew pulled out his pocket knife and jimmied the simple lock until the door opened. "Come on!" he shouted as he entered the shop. But four more of the youths, these without masks, emerged from the shadows. Tank leapt

forward to engage them.

* * *

Katie tried to get a shot at one of Tank's opponents, but was reluctant to shoot into the scuffle. Suddenly there was a gunshot, and she was knocked through the open door of the shop by the impact. A searing pain shot through her torso. She looked down to see blood soaking through her blouse. Ignoring the pain, she drew the red handkerchief from her jacket pocket, wadded it up, and pressed it to the wound.

"Dat looks bad," Tank said as he crouched over Katie. "You're gonna need a doctor."

"Don't worry about me," Katie said through clenched teeth. "Protect Mr. Drew!"

"Not before I takes a look at dat leak." Katie attempted to stop Tank, but the boxer took hold of her wrist and pulled it aside. Katie did not struggle. He carefully pulled away the blood-soaked handkerchief, and then started unbuttoning her blouse.

"You're not going any further without a ring," she said with a grimace.

"I ain't getting stuck in no handcuffs," Tank replied as he pulled the shirt clear. Katie winced as he poked at the area around the wound with a finger. "You'll be OK," he said when finished. "Da bullet is near the surface and din't hit nothing. A doc'll be able to get it out easy."

"Fine," Katie said tersely. "Find Drew!" Then as an afterthought, "what happened to the others?"

"They was palookas," Tank said with a grin. "No sweat. Dey ain't gettin' up any time soon."

* * *

There was no activity inside the shop, and no sign of Kaur. Drew walked quickly to the rear of the shop and through the door behind the counter. There was a small store room, but no signs of activity. As he was leaving, he noticed a pile of crates had been moved hastily, revealing a section of wood embedded in the concrete floor. He leaned into the crates to put his weight against them, but the stack slid easily, revealing a trap door.

Drew lifted the trapdoor up using a metal ring bolted to it. Beneath it was a ladder set into a circular pit in the concrete floor. He could not see the bottom, even by the light of his Zippo. Seeing a nail lying on the floor nearby, Drew picked it up and dropped it down the hole. There was a quiet ting a moment later, and Drew could see the nail on the floor below. Carefully, he climbed down the ladder.

At the bottom of the shaft was a tall but narrow tunnel, all made of concrete. At the far end there was a flickering light coming from an opening on the right that illuminated a large vase at the end of the hall. He could hear strange chanting from the room beyond.

Pocket knife in hand, Drew stepped stealthily toward to door. He noticed that the corridor was free of the dust and cobwebs one might expect. As he reached the threshold, a plume of smoke erupted from the vase and started to solidify into a large, skeletal creature with long, curved talons. Instinctively, Drew pulled out his handkerchief and started fanning the smoke, which dispersed a little, causing the creature to lose coherence temporarily.

* * *

Tank rushed behind the counter and noticed the exposed trapdoor in the storeroom. Then he heard Drew's cry of surprise from below. Without hesitation, he climbed down the steps to discover Drew fanning a smoky creature with large claws set to disembowel him. Tank immediately ran up, pushed Drew aside into the neighboring room, and blindly hit the now solidified creature several times in the head. When he looked up again, the creature was gone and there were fragments of a large vase scattered on the ground.

Drew fell into the room and saw a thick metal lid drawn by heavy chains lift up to reveal a great pit in the floor. Chinmayananda Kaur, now dressed in a leopard skin and holding a scepter with a tusked skull at one end, chanted indecipherable words vehemently toward the opening.

As Kaur reached a crescendo, a similar yet alien sounding approximation of it came from the pit. Then a large amoeba-like blob that spawned and absorbed numerous eyes, mouths, pseudopods, and tentacles emerged.

"Oh," Drew said in disgust. "Unsightly!"

At the sight of the creature from the pit, Kaur redirected his chanting at Drew, who suddenly moved toward the pit as in a trance. Several pseudopods reached out toward him.

Tank heard the strange chanting and the otherworldly reply. He ran into the room and pushed by Drew to disable the thing. Tank punched it, but his fist sunk into the surface, where it started tingling. He withdrew it quickly and shook away the sting.

"Dat's not fair," Tank said with irritation, and looked around for an opponent he could hurt. He spied Kaur chanting in the corner and stepped purposely toward him. Kaur diverted his attention to Tank, but the boxer threw an uppercut and effortlessly knocked Kaur out.

Drew suddenly regained his senses. He recoiled from the grasping appendages. He followed the chains to the wheel mounted on the wall and released the chock holding it in place. The heavy metal cover slammed down hard with a solid thud severing several appendages that writhed briefly on the cement floor before disintegrating.

* * *

Footsteps resounded from the corridor and Inspector Olsen and five policemen with their revolvers drawn stormed into the room.

"Nobody move!" one of the officers shouted.

"I think you'll find we have things in hand, Inspector," Drew said as he turned with his hands at his sides. Tank followed suit.

"I can see that," Olsen said flatly. "Want to tell me what's going on here? We found Miss O'Hare, six dead men and two unconscious ones outside. She says they attacked you and you defended yourselves by hiding in here."

"That fellow," Drew pointed to Kaur, "is some kind of mad voodoo priest, and those men outside are his followers." He glanced toward the now covered pit. Olsen followed his gaze. "They were performing ritual murders to..."

"Dey was killin' folks to appease dere god," Tank interrupted. Redirecting the inspector's attention.

"I think you'll find that these folks also killed Parker Maxwell," Drew added. "He discovered their secret and had to be silenced."

In the meantime, the police officers handcuffed the unconscious Kaur and were now dragging him from the room.

Olsen nodded. "I see." He surveyed the scene. "I'll need you to come downtown to make your statements. Miss O'Hare was taken to Bellevue. I'll take you there on the way to the precinct."

"That would be very kind, Inspector," Drew said with a nod.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joab Stieglitz was born and raised in Warren, New Jersey. He is an Application Consultant for a software company. He has also worked as a software trainer, a network engineer, a project manager, and a technical writer over his 30-year career. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Joab is an avid tabletop RPG player and game master of horror, espionage, fantasy, and science fiction genres, including Savage Worlds (Mars, Deadlands, Agents of Oblivion, Apocalypse Prevention Inc, Herald: Tesla and Lovecraft, Thrilling Tales, and others), Call of Cthulhu, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, Pugmire, and Pathfinder. Joab channeled his role-playing experiences in the Utgarda Series, which are pulp adventure novels with Lovecraftian influences set in the 1920's.

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