

title: THE MADNESS OF KRILL
subtitle: A Novelette of Dark Gods & Their Duplicity
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draft: v1 start_date: 09.18.20

CHAPTER 1

PERIPHERAL VISION

I'd seen them since I was a child. Strange little creatures that disappeared into the shadows whenever you looked in their direction. Always there. But barely seen.

They hung out just inside my peripheral vision, scrawny little things with beer bellies, oversized heads, a kind of green, wet, slimy but dry skin.

And they always seemed to be fighting or arguing.

At least that was my constant impression, for, as I said, they disappeared as soon as I looked directly towards them.

Always there. But barely seen.

No one believed me, of course. Just the over-active imagination of a little boy.

But they were there. Just out of sight, in the the corner of my eye. Giggling. Beckoning. Arguing.

I suppose I either got used to them or forgot about what Mother called my "wild imaginings." She said it was something to do with the chemicals in the air from the German bombings of London during the Blitz the night I was conceived.

Then, that early mid-winter morning, just a few days after my 23rd birthday, as I cycled home from my shift as a night porter, I heard them arguing again.

And then I saw them. Just on the edge of the lamplight.

But this time, they didn't disappear when I looked directly at them. They remained in the divide between the early morning darkness and the amber light of the street lamp.

They pushed and pulled on each other, climbing on and over. Punching. Giggling. Arguing.

Then, they must have realized I was watching their antics and stopped. One, a bit more puke green than the rest, grinned at me.

His (I assumed a male; it was impossible to tell even though they were naked) ... his teeth were bright white, and pointed. Like little needles. I shivered when I imagined him sinking them into my flesh.

Instead, he winked at me. Then beckoned with his finger.

I was taken back at the gesture. And at the fact that the little buggers hadn't disappeared when I looked at them. Now, I wished they had.

I just stood, staring back at the puke green imp as he wagged that 'come hither' gesture with his finger.

When I didn't move, he shrugged his boney shoulders and swatted at another imp that nibbled on his shoulder. He turned and melted into the darkness, giggles and arguing subsiding with him.

And I was alone, straddling the top tube on my bike, staring at the pool of lamplight.

I wasn't sure what to think of my encounter with the imps. Or that they'd remained when I looked directly at them. Or that one had beckoned me to follow.

What did he want? Where was he leading me?

The gesture didn't seem threatening. More casual. An invitation I was free to accept, or not.

Off in the distance, Big Ben chimed. I started, looked up then at my watch. I was late, again. Mother would not be pleased. Forgetting my strange encounter, I stuck my foot into the toe guard of my bicycle.

Big Ben chimed again, its resonating *bong* shooting through me.

I missed my pedal, lost my balance and my foot caught the curb; I couldn't catch myself.

There I was, in a heap on an empty street in the early dawn light, my bicycle on top of me.

That's when I saw him.

I realized moments later it was a man. At first, I thought it was a bundle of trash, maybe clothes. But as my eyes adjusted to the growing light of dawn, I realized it was a man.

He lay just outside the dimming lighting of the street lamp. I assumed it was a tramp, sleeping off last night's drunk.

But why was the puke green imp beckoning me towards some bum?

I shoved my fallen bike off my leg and tried to stand up, but my pant leg was caught in the oily chain. My pants ripped when I tugged. That would upset Mother.

I brushed myself off as best as I could, sighed when I looked at my watch, and leaned the bike against the wall, then took a step towards the man. Then I took a step back.

The light was getting better and I could make out his features from where I stood.

He was dark skinned, bald. And he wore a dirty orange robe. Or cloak. I wasn't sure. But it was soiled with the filth that ran in the gutter. Wet, stained.

His breath was weak, making only small puffs of steam in the cool morning air. But he was alive. Drunk? I didn't think so. After all, he appeared to be some kind of monk. Buddhist, or one of those guys from the airport.

They don't drink alcohol ... do they?

A man in trouble. Perhaps mugged.

I looked up and down the street? *But muggers? Here? Or the imps?* Either way, the man needed help.

I hiked up my pants and stepped into the shadows where he lay. I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sir, sir? Are you okay?"

The only reply was a groan.

"Sir? Can you hear me? Do you need help?"

I touched his face, trying to turn his head towards me, towards the light. I felt something wet.

I rolled him towards me and that's when I saw the blood on his face. It was scratched and bruised and bleeding.

The man had been beaten. Savagely.

I glanced up and down the street, but found it deserted.

The man mumbled something but his eyes stayed closed. One seemed swollen shut. His lips kept moving, as if reciting a prayer, but the sound was gone. Barely even breath.

I stood and looked up and down the street again, hoping to see a bobby. Or even a call box. Far off, through the fog, I saw one. I took a step towards it but my rear foot was held fast.

I glanced down and the two bloodshot eyes stared up at me. My leg jerked, trying to escape the grasp. My stomach clenched and I swallowed hard.

Then he spoke again, this time a deep voice, like something from the depths of the earth, itself.

"Help me, boy." The accent was Indian, but not like the couple who ran the restaurant near home. It was heavy, strange, yet I had no trouble understanding the words.

He panted like a dog in summer but shivered. His hand held onto the tear of my pantleg as if letting go would plunge him into a deep abyss. I glanced at the call box, then at the man, then back to the callbox.

"The men, his men ..."

"What men? Whose men? Who did this to you?"

I knelt as he released his grip on my pantleg and struggled to sit up. He winced and grabbed his side.

"You're injured. Let me call for help. There must be a bobby on patrol nearby. I'll ..."

"No!"

He grabbed by sleeve this time.

"No! Call no one. No one can help."

His eyes darted towards the call box and the dark skin of his face seemed to lighted several shades making the darker circles under his eyes even more distinct.

His hand on my sleeve pulled down. Or pulled him up. He struggled to move his legs beneath him, trying to stand up.

"Sir. You're hurt. You need to see a doctor. I can call ..."

"No. I must go before he returns."

"Who? Who did this to you? Why?"

He sank back to the pavement, his meager strength abandoning him. His hand still held my sleeve.

"That madman. He wishes to destroy me. To stop me from ... No. It is not for you. You are of his kind. You cannot help. I must recover the idol myself and return it ..."

His voice trailed off and his yellow eyes stared off into the fog. I watched his face, studied the lines and wondered about the three horizontal white lines that ran across his forehead, a large red circle painted on top.

"Sir? Sir?"

No response. He just stared into the fog.

For a long minute, I knelt beside him watching him stare into nothing. Then his head twitched. His eyes came alive again. He swiveled his eyes towards the call box, then in the other direction.

"He returns. I must flee."

I sat with the man in a cramped flat. It was plain, with just a small mattress on the floor and a small hot plate plugged into the wall. Dingy but immaculate.

The heater by the greasy window dripped water but produced little if any heat. The man dabbed a cloth on his lip, cleaning away the blood. He wiped his eyes and sighed.

"I thank you, young man. You are unique among the English of this great city. Most would not have stopped to help me. Fewer would have helped me ..."

He glanced around the room.

“... home.”

“It is every Englishman’s duty, sir, to help those in need,” I said feeling obligated to stand.

“Perhaps so, yet few would have helped a wog like me. Especially a priest. I ... my robes and tilaka ...”

He waved a hand towards the three white bars and red circle on his forehead.

“... my robes and tilaka seem to offend many.”

“Is that why you were mugged? Beaten up?”

“Alas, no. Not for that reason but one related. It is not of your concern, young man. You have done me a great service today and I shall not forget but there is nothing more you can do. I am hunted and soon he shall find me and destroy me.”

“Who? Who wants to destroy you? Why?”

He smiled and stroked the necklace of wooden beads that hung to his waist. He mumbled something as he did so. Then stepped towards the door.

“I thank you again, young man, for your service. But to ask more of you would not be correct.”

I didn’t move towards the door. I just looked at the man. He was tall, yet seemed small. A broken man, with nothing in the world but this broken down flat, his dirty orange robes, and a smattering of dignity. No, a great deal of dignity but that was in danger. As was his life.

“No,” I told him. “I said before, it is every proper Englishman’s duty to help others. I cannot walk away. I must help in any way I can.”

For a moment, he held the door open. Then with a short sigh, he let it close.

“Very well,” he said. “I will tell you.”

CHAPTER 2

THE IDOL OF KU’RANATH

The idol, he told me, had been stolen from his temple in India over sixty years ago. It was a simple statuette but one of great significance to his sect. It had been looted from a temple and brought back to England by a British Army officer who had donated it to the British Museum. When India gained its independence from Great Britain in 1947, few of the stolen artifacts had been returned. Most, to this priest, were insignificant.

“But the idol of Ku’Ranath is sacred to my sect. It represents our most holy deity and has great power. But it is not merely important for our temple, which is being rebuilt after it

was destroyed many years ago. The idol holds the soul of Ku'Ranath, himself. A great warrior who challenged the gods and destroyed the destroyers. If it is not returned before the holy day of Ku'Ranathamansh, he will awaken and bring a great curse upon all who have touched it."

This was a story straight out of the paperback novels I loved to read, when Mother wasn't around, anyway! A man on a quest to save a precious artifact. My feet and hands tingled.

"What can I do to help?" I asked him. "Who has the idol? How can we get it back? When will this Ku ... Ku ... the great warrior guy awaken? When ... "

He held up a hand and smiled.

"Slowly, young man. You can indeed help me. It is fortuitous that you came along the road when you did and found me."

Fortuitous? I thought. Or maybe my imps were trying show me this man, so I would help him. *Maybe the great warrior whats-his-name had sent his minions to guide me.*

I realized he was still talking as I drifted.

"... to the British Museum. He donated it and it is held there in a secret collection and must be recovered."

"Stolen?"

"Recovered. You cannot steal what is already yours."

"Yes, but ..."

I didn't know what to think. Had he just said we needed to steal the idol from the British Musuem? A heist?

"But ... the museum is heavily guarded. How ... ?"

Then an idea struck me. I shivered and jabbed my finger at him.

"I have it. I have it. We — well, you — can summon those little fellas. I bet they could sneak into the museum and ... "

I stopped jabbering when I saw the look on his face. Confusion.

"You know, the little green imps. They led me to you. I wouldn't have found you, I would've just cycled past."

He face grew pale, then dark. He paced towards the window and peered out.

"Then you have seen them."

"Yes!" I almost saluted.

"That is not good."

"I beg your pardon ... ?"

"They are evil creatures. In service to that terrible man. He is a practitioner of the occult and can summon the dark ones. These ..." he turned and squinted at me, "... imps, you called them? They were not helping you find me. They were beckoning you to his side."

"But I've seen them all my life. Not like this morning, but ... "

He rummaged through a drawer in the small cabinet that sat next to the mattress and removed a small token. He handed it to me.

"Take this. It will keep them away from you and protect you. They will try to trick you into giving it away so that they can draw you into their trap and harm you. It is his wish."

"But all my life ..."

"He is a crafty one. Perhaps ..."

He stroked his chin and looked at me. His eyes seemed to see deep into my soul. I felt naked under his gaze.

"Perhaps it is fortuitous that you found me. If the evil one has sought you for so long, you must possess something he needs. It is good that you have this talisman."

He pressed the copper coin into my hand, patted it and turned back to the window.

"But, uh, sir? Wait ... I don't know what to call you?"

His voice boomed in the room as he spoke, "I am called the Mobedan Mobed. I have no other name, for I am not worthy of a name. I am the high priest of the true gods who were unfairly and unjustly banished and imprisoned. I am the Mobedan Mobed."

My legs gave out and I crashed onto the chair.

"Wow," was all I managed.

He turned and looked at me. His face was soft, gentle.

"I have prayed for a miracle and I believe I have found it in you, young man."

"Ted."

"Indeed." He smiled. It felt warm but I shivered. "We must make our plans to recover the idol so that I may return it to our temple."

In the distance, I could hear Big Ben's *bong, bong*. I glanced at my watch. I was two hours late getting home. Mother would be frantic. And upset.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mobedan Mobed. I'm late already. Mother expects me home."

"Ted, if you wish to help stop this madman who has stolen the idol, if you wish to stop him from destroying the true gods and plunging humanity into eternal darkness, you must commit."

“But Mother ... “

“Do you love your Mother, Ted?”

“Of course,” I replied, unsure of his point. “That’s why I have to go ... “

“Or are you afraid of her?”

I opened and closed my mouth several times. I wanted to respond to his odd comment but had no words. No thoughts even.

Finally, I managed, “Afraid?”

He smiled again, leaving me cold. It was a warm smile but ... it was his eyes. The smile beckoned but the eyes were yellow and hard.

“No,” I said, throwing back my shoulders. “Afraid? Hah! Of Mother? Utter nonsense. She is a good woman; why, she raised me on her own. Without support. Now it is my turn, my responsibility to provide for her. I ... I must go.”

I stepped to the door.

“Perhaps I can return a bit later. This evening, before I go to work. I want to help. I really do. But, now. I have to ... please understand.”

The dark skinned priest stood by the greasy window and stared out into the morning. The bright light, filtered through the fog, was like a light from heaven bathing him in its holiness.

“It is your choice, Ted. Only you can choose your path.”

Big Ben’s *bong* sounded as I closed the door behind me.

CHAPTER 3

THE WRATH

I slipped my key into the lock and turned it but the door jerked open. There stood Mother in her morning frock and curlers.

“Theodore Pyne! Where have you been? I have been waiting. You are two hours late. Where have you been?”

Then, grabbing me into her arms and hugging me to her, “You know how I worry.”

“Yes, Mother,” I breathed into her bosom as I was nearly smothered by her hug. “I’m sorry, Mother, but I saw a man get mugged and had to help him.”

“Mugged? Oh, my child. You should have run away. What if the muggers had come after you? A strapping young man. They could have stolen your bicycle. Those terrible ruffians! Won’t the police ever do anything about them!?”

She bustled me into the dinette and plunked me down at my usual place.

"Just sit there, Theodore, and let mommy make you a proper breakfast. You must be simply famished after your terrible ordeal."

"I'm not hungry, Mother."

"Nonsense. I'll make you a lovely breakfast. Eggs, blood sausage, stewed tomatoes. It will set you right. Then I'll tuck you into bed."

I just sighed. It was useless trying to argue with her, so I just sat and watched as she bustled about the kitchen making my breakfast.

A while later, I sat in the bath Mother had drawn for me and wondered about that man, the Mobedan Mobed he called himself.

"... I am unworthy of a name."

How odd! I thought to myself, and scrubbed behind my ears.

"Theodore. Time to get out. You don't want to prune up."

"Yes, Mother," I called as I sank beneath the tepid water, then got out and dressed for bed.

I ran.

It was dark. I couldn't see where I was, or where I was going. I only knew I had to get away.

From what?

I couldn't answer.

My breath burned in my throat. My lungs heaved. I ran on.

Behind me, a rumble of clicks, like a thousand dogs, their claws clicking on a hard floor as they ran. I could feel their breath, like a hot wind.

And snickering. Strange, guttural giggling.

The imps!

I glanced over my shoulder but found only darkness. But they were there. Just behind me, at my heel. If I stopped running, they would devour me.

Those sharp, shiny white teeth ... teeth like needles, would pierce my flesh and tear me apart.

I ran.

Wait. I remembered something. 'Take this,' came a voice. In my hand, a copper coin. The talisman. 'It will protect you from the evil ones,' said the voice. 'It will protect you.'

I fumbled in my pocket. *Where was the coin?* I couldn't find it. Not in that pocket. Neither in the other. *Where was the talisman?*

Without it, the madman's creatures, dark demonesque terrors would rip me to shreds like dogs pouncing on a wounded rat.

And I was the wounded rat.

Then, I felt something. Deep in the folds of my pocket. *The coin!*

I pulled it out and grinned. *Safe!*

I stumbled. Something jarred my hand and the coin flew out of my hand. It tumbled down a flight of stairs; I tumbled after it.

My fingers touched it. But it bounced away. I reached out, desperate to catch the coin. Again, I touched it with my fingertips but it floated away. I crashed into the floor and slammed into a wall.

Behind me, the skittering of claws on a wood floor. The giggling.

I drew myself up into a ball. *Hide my face. Protect my face.*

Hot breath. The stench of ... of cigarettes. *They smoke?* A cold, damp hand caressing my cheek. I shivered and tried to bury my face deeper into my arms.

If only I had the talisman ... but now ...

Then the voice. It rasped and called my name.

"Theodore."

Oh, god! It knows my name. If a demon spawn calls your name, I knew, it meant that it had captured your soul.

"Theodore." This time the voice didn't grate. It wasn't hard. It lilted.

"Theodore, you'll be late for work, honey. Time to get up. I have your dinner on the table. Hurry and get up before it's cold and you're late for work.

I opened my eyes.

I was in my bedroom. On the floor. Mother sat on the edge of my bed and stroked my cheek.

"Really, Theodore. You haven't fallen out of bed since you were a little boy. I hope you didn't have an accident." She kissed her fingertip then booped my nose. "Come along. Your food is ready."

I blinked and looked around my bedroom. The sheets were twisted and pulled from the bed. The back of my neck was hot, sweaty. I glanced at my pajama bottoms. Dry. *Thank goodness!*

Then it all rushed back to me.

The little green imps, teasing me, beckoning me, chasing me. The man. That strange man in the orange robes. His quest to steal ... no, recover the idol so important to his faith. His urgent need to recover it before the curse could be unleashed. Before that madman, what was his name? Krill. Yes, that was it. Colonel Krill. A madman determined to destroy the Mobedan Mobed. An occultist. An evil man. The man who sent the imps to ... *to do what?*

I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

But what I did know was that he wouldn't stop. Nor would the imps. They would keep coming after me. The Mobedan Mobed said as much.

The talisman!

I rolled over, grabbed my pants off of the chair and dug into the pocket.

Empty!

The other ... also empty.

Oh, god! I thought, *It wasn't just a dream. They did chase me. And I lost the talisman!*

I dropped my pants on the floor and slumped on the bed, my head in my hands. Then I saw it. The small copper coin. It was sitting under the chair.

I reached down, picked it up, and looked at it. I realized I hadn't examined it before.

It was about the size of a Crown coin, slightly larger. But made of copper or brass. It was almost solid blackish green, except for the raised engraving, which was golden and contrasted with the deep, dark green. Centuries of patina and wear that polished the raised portions.

The symbol on the coin was unfamiliar to me. It appeared to be a swirl design at the center, some kind of religious symbol, I supposed. Around the edge of the coin, strange letters.

I held the coin under the lamplight beside my bed and tried to make out the letters. I'd never seen anything like them. They were similar to the ornate writing on the Indian restaurant's menu but much, much older.

The back of the coin had an image of what could have been an elephant. But it seemed to be looking forward, to the right, and to the left ... all at the same time.

And it was ice cold in my hand.

"Definitely a talisman," I said out loud, my voice booming in the empty bedroom.

From below, Mother called to me. I stuffed my legs into my pants, slipped into my shirt, snugged up the tie and shrugged on my coat.

CHAPTER 4

AN OVERWHELMING DARKNESS

I decided to walk to work this evening. It was pleasant out, without a hint of winter in the air.

As I strolled along, I fingered the copper coin in my pocket. It was still ice cold but somehow made me feel strong. Invincible. I might even dare to take the shortcut through the old churchyard.

I was humming a tune when I heard the rustling of the leaves in the trees above me. A warm wind. A sound behind me.

I turned but saw nothing. Then, movement. In the darkness near the far street corner. And a figure. Hidden in the darkness but just illuminated enough for me to see it.

The Mobedan Mobed? I wondered.

Then something darted across the light. Something small. Something quick.

My stomach tightened and I reached into my pocket. The coin was gone.

Wrong pocket!

The coin was in my other pocket. Safe. And so was I, as long as I carried it. I turned and continued on my way, but I skirted the old churchyard and breathed easier when I saw the light of the Club ahead.

I darted down the side alley and into the Employee's Entrance.

"Pyne?!" The stern voice of the kitchen manager reverberated over the din and clang of the busy kitchen. "Pyne?! Where the bloody 'ell are you, boy?"

He shoved a tray into my hands.

"To the conservatory. Sir Godfrey's kidney pie."

I rushed up the narrow stairs that ran at the back of the Regent's Club. I enjoyed my job, hobnobbing with the gentry of London. Even though I was just a servant, there to serve their kidney pie, fetch their brandy or cigars, I was amongst the elite of London society. The old guard.

I slipped into the conservatory where Sir Godfrey sat at his usual table. He was a dapper old gent, in his late 60s. Once, he had been a great explorer, an archaeologist, but now he was

chief curator at the British Museum, in charge of all the exhibits from the Near East. Years inside had turned his once golden complexion pale and pasty.

Sometimes, he would regale me with stories of ancient empires, dark cults that practiced human sacrifice and dark rituals.

Other members scoffed at his stories of demons and dark gods rising. Of ancient battles between good and evil.

"Folklore. Myth."

But Sir Godfrey told the stories as if they were gospel truth. I was never sure if he truly believed the stories he told or if he was just having fun with me.

Either way, I like the old man.

I slid the silver platter in front of him but he didn't seem to notice as the steam fogged his half-moon spectacles. He was deep in conversation with another man.

I glanced up to see who he was regaling this evening. And I nearly fell into Sir Godfrey's kidney pie.

Across the ornately set table, complete with silverware that weighed a pound each, silver candlesticks, and goblets of wine sat a man of uncertain age. Older. Like Sir Godfrey.

The man glared at the old archaeologist and huffed. His massive walrus mustache that covered his mouth wiggled. His one good eye ... the other was covered with a large eye patch ... squinted.

Sir Godfrey continued, "What you're saying is utterly proposetorous, Krill. You cannot believe such, such utter rot!"

Sir Godfrey's dinner companion was none other than Colonel Aloysius Krill, himself.

"I don't give a ruddy damn what you think, Godfrey. I must have that relic back. I've discovered something and that piece is of paramount importance."

"I cannot return it, Krill!" Sir Godfrey retorted. "It goes on display on Monday, along with the rest of the Scythian artifacts. It is central to the display."

"It is central to my work. I must have that idol to ..."

"To what?" interrupted Sir Godfrey, "to complete your ritual ..."

This time Col. Krill interrupted him. He held up his hand to stop the old archaeologist but looked at me. His one good eye wide and terrible.

"Eavesdropping, Mr. Pyne? Be careful what you hear."

Oh, god! He knows my name. Then, "No, sir. I, uh, I ..."

"Spit it out, Mr. Pyne."

My mouth was dry. My tongue stuck to my lips.

"Will there be anything else, gentlemen?" I managed.

"Then skuttle along," came the command from beneath that massive mustache. "But mind you stay close. I will need you later."

I nodded, a half bow to the terrible man seated across from the man I liked to much. Then I fled the conservatory.

Back in the kitchen, I grabbed my overcoat and rushed out.

"I will need you later."

His words echoed in my ears. Again and again.

"I will need you later. I will need you later. I will need you later."

And I ran, trying to escape his command. But I knew it was no use.

When I finally stopped running, I found myself in the old churchyard. The bright morning has surrendered to the cold, dreariness of an early winter day. Rain hung in the air but refused to fall.

I leaned against a large crypt and watched the breath fog in great puffs. Despite the chill in the air, I was sweating.

"You have met him," came a deep voice, booming yet soft.

Out of the alcove at the front of the crypt stepped the Mobedan Mobed. He was dressed in clean robes and the wounds of this morning's beating were gone. His face was placid, empty.

"You have met him," he said again.

"Yes. He was meeting with Sir Godfrey, curator of the British Museum. They were discussing some artifact Col. Krill wanted back."

"Then you see what I am up against. What evil I must confront. And why I must recover the idol before this madman can use it."

"Use it?"

"He spoke of a ritual, yes?"

How did he know?

"Yes," I stammered, "but ... "

"I have seen it. In my dreams, I saw this evil man conjuring the dark ones. He will use the idol in his ritual to tear open the barrier between our realms and destroy the true gods. Only with your help, can I stop him."

"My help? How?"

"Go back to your job. Speak to Sir Godfrey. Although he is in league with this madman, he does not share in the quest to destroy the true gods. He may yet help us."

"Steal, I mean, recover the idol?"

"Indeed. Now, return to your job. Speak to Sir Godfrey."

"And say what? That I need the artifact? He said it's going on display on Monday. He won't just give it to me."

"You must convince him. Tell him of the creatures who stalk you. He will believe you. He has seen them, as well. He knows their origins in the darkness. He will help you. Go. Before they return."

He turned and disappeared into the fog. I slumped against the crypt wall and tried to breathe.

The kitchen manager was once again bellowing my name but I slipped past when someone dropped a tray of dishes on the other end of the kitchen, drawing his attention.

I took the servant's stairs two at a time and skidded into the door that led to the great hallway in the Regent's Club. I paused, opened the door a crack and peered out.

Various gentlemen passed, chatting, smoking. None noticed me as I emerged from the servant's domain and passed amongst them towards the conservatory. I was invisible, a mere fixture like the chandelier or the carpet on which they strolled, discussing matters of state or high finance.

I ducked into the conservatory, straightening my serving jacket. I stepped towards Sir Godfrey's table, intent on pulling him aside and telling him about my lifelong encounters with the imps, and their evil intent.

But his table was empty.

I stopped halfway across the room and gawked at the table. His kidney pie was untouched, and cold. My eyes shot around the room, searching the other tables.

He's gone off to chat with someone else.

But no, he was nowhere in the room. I spun around and collided with a stone pillar. Great hands grabbed my arms and pushed me back. It wasn't a stone pillar; it was Col. Krill.

His great hands dug into my arms and held me fast.

“Where did you get off to, Mr. Pyne? I told you to stay close because I needed you. I cannot have you running off when I need you most.”

I shook. My legs quivered and I felt a surge of nausea. I wanted to vomit.

“There isn’t much time, Mr. Pyne. And you have ignored my invitations. If I had not seen your destiny myself, I would have written you off as weak. But the omens do not lie.”

I swallowed a brick and stared at the man’s face. It was red, blotchy. The great scar that ran from his forehead to his cheek, across the missing eye that was covered with a black patch, was bright white. His great mustache seemed alive, the whiskers like tentacles that threatened to reach out and pull me into his maw ... a meal for a madman.

“I, I have an important message for Sir Godfrey.”

“Sir Godfrey has returned to the museum. He cannot help you now.”

With that, he turned and dragged me from the conservatory. All I could do was grip the icy cold coin in my pocket and hope its magic would protect me from this madman’s intent.

CHAPTER 5

A MAD REQUEST

Col. Krill shoved me through the doorway of one of the smaller rooms of the Regent’s Club, one reserved for private meetings, ones more private than the hallowed halls that heard secret deals hammered out. This room was for deals behind the deal. Deals that were secret beyond secret.

And so, the room was soundproof. Inside, he could torture me or consort with all manner of unholy beings to get what he wanted. And no one outside could hear my screams.

I squeezed the copper coin in my pocket until my fingers ached.

“Sit down, Mr. Pyne. Care for a brandy? I think you shall need one.”

He pointed to one of the lush, overstuffed leather library chairs that flanked the fireplace. I stared at the flames and imagined the entrance to Hell.

When I didn’t move, he shoved me and I collapsed into the soft, kid leather. It reminded me of Mother’s embrace. Only warm.

“I know this comes as a bit of a shock,” he boomed as he poured two snifters of brandy at the small side bar, his back to me. I glanced at the door, gauging my chances of escape. But he turned and smiled as he offered one of the crystal glasses.

“But,” he continued, “it cannot be a complete shock. You have seen them all of your life.”

Them? Them?

“They are called the ‘cacodaimous.’” He chuckled. “A bit of a misnomer, but fitting, I suppose. You’d called them ‘imps’ or ‘hobgoblins’. Mischievous, misbehaving little buggers, but useful.”

Oh, god!

“They have watched over you since you were born.”

Watched? And waited for the command from their master to kill me?

“They protect you. Keep you from dark forces that seek to corrupt your soul.”

Protect me?! But they’re your ... your ... ‘caco-things’

“I sent them ...”

To kill me!

“... to watch over you, Theodore.”

Theodore? Only Mother calls me that!

“He will try to use you against me. To distract me from my work.”

Who will?

“He is called the Mobedan Mobed, the high priest of a dangerous cult.”

Oh, crap!

“He searches for an artifact, an idol I took from his temple many years ago. With it, he can complete his ritual and open the doorway between realms and allow his evil gods to enter.”

His evil gods?

“Once they have gained purchase here, they will plunge our world into darkness and enslave humanity.”