

title: THE MADNESS OF KRILL
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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 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 born.

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 at the elegant Regent's Club, 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 waggled 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.

Just then, Big Ben chimed again, its resonating *bong* shoving me over. 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 indeed a man.

He lay just outside the dimming light 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. Hindu, 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. And I was duty-bound to help him.

I hiked up my trousers 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 yellow, 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 ...” he whispered.

“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 lighten 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 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 gas 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

Many years ago, he told me, his temple was attacked and destroyed by a British Army Colonel. The man was acting beyond his orders to bring order to India and murdered many priests, including the temple high priest.

The madman had been corrupted by a dark sect and sought the power that the sect promised. He destroyed the temple of Ku'Ranath because the priests were representatives of the true gods and opposed this dangerous sect.

Now, sixty years later, that Colonel had returned, immortal, powerful. And he sought to destroy any remaining members on the sect that opposed his rise to power.

“I am the last of my sect,” he said. “And this madman seeks me out to kill me, thus ending any resistance to his taking the form of Ku'Ranath, himself, who was an ancient warrior who battled the dark gods.

"But, if he can acquire all the elements of the Ku'Ranath idol, he can use its power to release the dark gods from their prison and allow them to re-enter the realm of man where they will enslave all humanity.

"It is my duty to stop him. But he has become powerful in the many years since he destroyed my temple and murdered my priests."

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.

"How can I help? I can't imagine what I could do but ..."

"Slowly, young man. You can indeed help me," he said, a smile twitching at the edges of his mouth. "Perhaps 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.

"In fact, my young friend, I believe you can be of great help to me. Alone, I cannot defeat this man. And he recently corrupted my young apprentice, my devadasi. With her, I could have performed a ritual that would bring back to life my priests, who would fight against the demons he has summoned. Perhaps you can help me in her place."

I realized he was still talking as I drifted.

"I ... I ... "

"It is not dangerous, nor does it require anything of you. I will only borrow your strength to aid me in summoning the dead priests from their prison in the realm of nightmares where they were cast by this evil man's magic. But first we must recover the sacred idol."

"The sacred ... "

"It will allow me to capture, borrow, your strength to perform the ritual."

"Where is it?"

"After the destruction of the temple, it was lost for many years. It recently was donated to the British Museum."

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

"You want to steal it from the British Museum?"

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

"Yes, 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 ... "

The priest stroked the beads around his neck again and seemed to be looking into my soul, searching for something buried there.

"Then he seeks something from you. He has seen the same in you that I believe I see. You must be protected from his evil magic."

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 and prevent his evil intent.”

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 seeks to destroy me and call forth the dark ones; 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 ... "

I stepped towards the door.

"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 through the door into the hallway. Then half turned.

"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!" she gasped as she pulled me inside, glanced up and down the street and slammed the door. "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 hustled 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 hustled 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!*

And my foot struck something. I stumbled. Something jarred my hand and the coin flew out of my grasp. 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 stale 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 too loud 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 high pitched voice of the kitchen manager, Curly, 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 steak and 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 steak and kidney pie, fetch their brandy or cigars, I was amongst the elite of London society. The old guard.

One never knew what state secrets one might overhear; fodder for true impartial journalism and my paper THE CITIZEN REPORTER!

It wasn't much of a newspaper. Not yet. After all, I was the only reporter. Also the editor, publisher, and newsboy. And I sold few. But I knew that one day soon, I'd break a story that would have *The Evening Standard*, *The Sunday Mirror*, *The Telegraph*, even *The Times* begging to reprint my story and make me a lead reporter.

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 liked 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 steak and 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. Middle aged, certainly. Like Sir Godfrey. But otherwise, indeterminable.

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.

"If there is nothing else, gentlemen?" I managed.

"Then skuttle along," came the command from beneath that massive mustache, as he dismissed me with a wave of his hand. "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.

His words echoed in my mind as I skidded into the kitchen.

I will need you later.

I didn't stop, but brushed passed the kitchen staff and crashed through the door the alleyway beyond, forgetting my warm coat.

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 my breath fog in great puffs. Despite the chill in the air and my thin serving jacket as my only protection, 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, as if they had never been. 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.”

I dropped my eyes and stared at my shoes. They were muddy.

“I ... I can’t help you with the ritual. I ... I’m afraid.”

“The ritual is no matter, my young friend,” putting his hand on my shoulder. “We must recover the idol first. Go back to your job. Speak to Sir Godfrey. Although he is connected 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; that the madman conjures them. 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.

Curly 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.

And serving drinks was Marion.

Perfect! She’ll know what to do. She’ll believe me and help me talk to Sir Godfrey.

I edged along the deep carpet towards her.

“Marion!” I whispered. I nodded my head, asking her to slip away so we could talk. I always felt better after talking to her.

She smiled, at the old gentleman she served. He seemed fond of her. She laughed at something he said. She glanced my way and I nodded my head again.

She turned back to the old gent, touching his arm and laughing again, her back turned to me.

Maybe she didn't see me, I thought.

I moved along the wall, avoiding the suit of armor, but I forgot about the mace hanging from its hand. My leg brushed it, sending it swinging. Then it crashed into the leg of the metal warrior and *gong*ed.

Everyone in the hallway turned and looked at me.

"S-sorry, everyone."

I darted on towards Marion but she ducked down another hall. I followed.

"Marion. Wait. I need to talk to you."

She stopped, then turned to face me. I could tell she was pleased to see me.

"God, Ted! What do you want?"

I took her arm and tried to lead her aside to find someplace we could talk in private.

"I need to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you."

"I'm in a spot of trouble. I ... "

"As usual!" She swiveled on her heel and headed towards the servant's stairs to the kitchen. I followed. The quiet staircase would be the perfect place to tell her about the Mobedan Mobed and everything that was going on.

"Marion, I ... "

She stopped, turned and looked at me. Her blue eyes sparkled.

"Ted. Leave me alone. I don't want to get caught up in whatever mess you've created this time. Shoo!"

“Marion ... you don’t understand ... “

“Ted. All I know is that Curly is about to fricassee your ass. And that weird old Colonel is looking for you. You’re in deep shit over something. I don’t want to be part of it. Shoo!”

“The mad colonel! That’s what I want to talk to you about. He’s trying to kill someone.”

“Yeah, you!”

I was taken aback.

“How ... how d’you know?”

“Haven’t you been listening to me? Everyone around here wants to kill you! You’re a menace.”

Again, she turned towards the staircase.

“But, Marion, I need your help. Please.”

“You want my help?” she said. “Follow me.”

She strode off down the side hallway and stopped beside one of the private rooms and pointed.

“What?”

“In there. You. Go.”

I understood! She knew about Sir Godfrey, too. Knew that he’d be able to help me. He was probably in the private room waiting for me. She certainly seemed to know what was going on. I knew I could count on her. What an angel!

I leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek as I passed into the private room to hide but she didn’t notice and stepped away.

I ducked into the private room, straightening my serving jacket, intent on telling Sir Godfrey everything about my lifelong encounters with the imps, and their evil intent.

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 shoved me back into the room. 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

I looked around the small, but ornately furnished room. It was designed for private meetings that required secrecy beyond what could be found in this exclusive club.

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 gestured 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! ... Wait! Did he say ‘watch over me’?

“He will try to use you against me. To stop me from doing what must be done.”

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.

“But you know this. Or perhaps part of it. My little ones tell me that he has appeared to you.”

My eyes blinked. And I realized I wasn't breathing.

"He is trying to draw you away, to corrupt your soul. It is his revenge because I rescued a young woman from him. A slave that he used in his evil rituals. He learned of your existence and will try to use you against me. Or worse."

Or worse?

I managed to find my tongue and after swallowing a few times, could speak.

"But, why would he ... I mean, he told me ... "

"Lies, Theodore. He was the leader of the cult that worships a group of demons known as 'the gods who are rejected.' They were evil, beyond imagining but were defeated and banished to a place called the realm of nightmares.

Mobedan Mobed lied? I couldn't believe it. No! This madman was lying to me now.

"Many years ago, I defiled his temple and committed a great sacrilege against his gods. My punishment is great, including the destruction of everyone I hold dear, of my entire family."

"What does that have to do with me?" I had to test him.

The man's eyes, or eye, narrowed. He sipped his brandy, then sat on the edge of the overstuffed chair across from mine. He leaned in and put a hand on my knee.

"You are the last of my line."

I didn't hear him. Not right. He hadn't said that.

How could I be the last of his line? What about Mother? Wait! His line? His family? He's trying to tell me I'm related to him?

I felt a scream in my throat. It burned, rising up from my stomach and filled my mouth with an acrid taste. I belched.

"You're insane ... he was right. You're insane and want to destroy me." I scooted back into the chair, up the back until I was perched on the back. He leaned towards me.

"Theodore ... "

"I can't be related to you. Mother ... "

"Isn't your mother."

The room swirled. The fire in the fireplace exploded. I was falling into Hell itself. Then everything went dark.

I opened my eyes and saw his great mustache, and that weepy eye. I shuddered and clenched my eyes closed again.

This isn't real!

"Theodore." His voice was soft. "Theodore. You must know the truth."

I tried to close my ears. I didn't want to listen, to hear the lies he was trying to tell me.

"Your real mother died in the Blitz just after you were born. The shelter she found herself in when you arrived didn't have the medical supplies to help her. She died giving birth."

I rolled to my side and wretched. Dry, but more acrid taste in my mouth.

"Another woman, who you believe to be your mother, took you as her own. No one else from the shelter made it out."

"Your real mother is my distant descendant. As are you. The last of my line. The Mobedan Mobed wants to corrupt you, to destroy you as part of my punishment for what I did."

The room swirled. I kept my eyes closed and lay on my side. My entire body ached. He went on. Telling me some story of a mission in India to quell a possible religious rebellion. Of a dark cult. Of the destruction of their temple and the death of the priests. Of the dead men rising, terrible undead creatures. Of souls ripped from the soldier's bodies and plunged into Hell.

He went on but the sound of his voice drifted. It echoed as if he were talking to me from the far end of a tunnel. Then it was just a faint noise, replaced by echoes in my mind of his earlier words.

She isn't your real mother. Your mother died in childbirth.

Again and again, his words sounded in my mind. I tried to shut it out but it grew louder, more persistent.

You are my distant descendant. You belong to me.

Something warm touched my lips. Wet. Sweet.

My eyes fluttered open. Colonel Krill was kneeling in front of me, holding the snifter of brandy to my lips.

“Drink this,” he said. “It will revive you. Then we have work to do, my boy.”

I sputtered and coughed, the liquor burning my throat.

I pushed him away. I pushed myself back, away from the madman in front of me. Away from his lies.

Then, the door opened. A tall, gaunt man dressed in the dark suit of a butler entered. He stood just inside the door and surveyed the room without word or expression.

Then he spoke.

“The motorcar awaits, Colonel.”

Colonel Krill stood, turned and nodded to the butler.

“Excellent, Boxley. I believe our young friend is coming back to his senses.”

His back was to me. The door was open. I bolted.

Before the madman or the ancient butler could react, I burst through the door into the hallway, nearly colliding with another gent. But I didn’t stop. I ran towards the staff stairway, towards the exit, towards anywhere but here.

CHAPTER 6

TOWER BRIDGE

I was lost.

I’d grown up in the streets of London but now, in the fog and the rain, I had no idea where I was. But I didn’t care. I was away from that madman and his lies. I was out of his grasp.

And the fog that settled around me might just keep those terrible little imps from finding me. The fog was as much protection as the talisman I had in my pocket. Maybe more.

But even the fog couldn’t protect me from the thoughts that screamed in my mind. The rain pounded, but was no match for his words.

She is not your real mother.

How could that be? How could she not be my Mother? She had raised me. Taken care of me. Protected me.

"He's lying," I said aloud, hoping it would stick and quiet the voices in my head.

But the voices kept up.

The time when she forgot me at the museum. Simply forgot to retrieve me. Or how we moved every few months, as if running from something. Or someone. How we never visited relatives.

Why? Why would she hide the truth from me?

"She wouldn't," I told myself, but the sound of my voice was swept away by the rain.

Or would she? asked a voice.

In the darkness, I didn't see the steps and nearly fell but instead crashed into a short wall with a iron railing. I dangled over it and looked into the dark water of the Thames.

That's when I noticed the rain had stopped. I was soaked, shivering. I had to find shelter. Find a way to sort out the truth from the lies.

I stumbled on, along the path that ran beside the river. I still had little idea where I was or where I was going.

I only knew I had to keep moving. Find shelter. Find answers.

Then, through the fog, I could see a dim light. It grew brighter as I approached. A street lamp.

The fog continued to thin and I made out more lights. They ran across the river to my right. A bridge.

Tower Bridge!

I had walked miles from the Regent's Club and had somehow crossed the river in the fog and rain. But I was less than a mile from home. From Mother.

I started to run. But a few steps across the bridge, I stopped.

A noise. A giggle.

Oh, god! The imps!

I spun around to find them. I searched the darkness between the weak lamplight, still shaded by the fleeing fog.

I couldn't see them. But I could hear them. The sound of their giggling grew louder. Closer.

They were coming for me. To drag me back to that madman.

I turned again to flee across the bridge, to home and safety. But in front of me, through the darkness that swallowed up the far end of Tower Bridge, a howl.

Not like a dog. High pitched. A screech of some great bird.

The fog swirled and I felt the wind rush over me, air beaten by great wings of some terrible flying creature.

It screeched again and a dark shadow, as wide as the bridge, itself, glided towards me. Behind me, the giggling stopped, replaced by snarls and the *huff-huff* like a pack of dogs sniffing the air in search of a fox.

In front of me, somewhere overhead, some gigantic bird circled. Behind me, a frenzy of imps. I grabbed the railing and looked over. The river swirled far below, lost in the darkness.

I would have run, but I had no where to go. I turned back, took half a step. Maybe I could get far enough to leap over the railing to the path below.

Out of the fog on that end of the bridge, movement. A small body, running but bent over, its knuckles bracing against the ground. Running on all fours, like a sickly ape.

Then another. And more.

Above me, more imps climbed the lines and cables towards the top of the bridge. More and more galloped out of the darkness towards me. Their mischievous grins turned down, angry. Shiny white, needle-like teeth like beacons in the darkness.

They swarmed the bridge behind me. There was no escape that way.

I turned and ran for the south side of Tower Bridge. Towards the screeching bird that circled overhead.

Out of the darkness ahead of me, the faint shape of wings. And a beak. It was jagged, sharp, and black. The head, itself, was the size of a VW Beetle. Its body must've been as massive as a

double-decker.

The bird swooped towards me, its beak snapping, grabbing for me.

I tried to dodge beneath it but tripped. Or was tripped. I rolled and caught a glimpse of the puke green imp. He'd grabbed my leg with his outstretched hand. I hit the pavement and rolled.

The great bird's talons ripped the fog but missed my head by inches. The little imp had knocked me clear.

But the talons of the huge bird reached out. Its beak had missed me, but it could still snag me with the fearsome talons. I rolled left and dropped off the small curb onto the main street.

As I lay on my back, I saw the bird rise and several imps leap off the cables onto its back. The puke green imp lept and sunk its teeth into the bird's foot, his claws ripping the hardened flesh of its legs.

The bird screeched and rolled its body, tucking its wings. I saw one imp lose its grip and fall. He hit a cable and fell into the dark water below.

More imps broke through the fog and rushed me. All I could do was curl into a ball and wait for their teeth to sink into my flesh.

Whether the huge bird, or a thousand tiny imps, I was about to die a horrible death.

I waited. I shivered, not because of the cold.

I waiting. And cringed.

The sound of their clawed feet on the pavement grew louder. They were almost upon me.

I felt a foot on the back of my head. Then it was gone. More feet pounded, tiny claws pricking the back of my neck.

I was being overrun.

I dared peak and the legion of imps were pouring over me like I was nothing more than a speedbump.

Their shrill screams and barks pummed me but their teeth and claws didn't. Instead, they poured over me, running headlong towards the south side of the bridge.

Then, they were gone. Swallowed up by the fog.

Above me, the giant bird circled. It screeched and beat its wings. I could hear the raging cries of the imps and they hung onto the bird with claws and teeth, tearing it apart in midair.

Above me, a battle. Past me, what sounded like a swarm of ants devouring a carcass.

But I was left alone. Utterly alone. I stood and look around the bridge. The fog hung, giving perhaps fifteen or twenty feet of visibility. Beyond that, only sounds.

Terrible screams. Ripping. The sound of wings beating the air. Angry grunts and cries. The crushing of bones, like that of crushing a cockroach but a thousand times louder.

I found myself walking back towards the north side of the bridge. I didn't know where I was going or what I was trying to do. I just walked.

Then something hit the ground behind me. I turned and saw an imp laying there, a few feet away. It was mangled. Dead.

The dim light of the fogged in street lamps grew deeper, from a pale yellow to a deep burnt orange. Then black.

Something was falling. Something big.

I looked up but only saw the fog swirl and dance. Whatever was falling created eddies, whisking the strands of fog into tiny spirals.

Then it hit.

The huge bird, now I could see it was a kind of oversized vulture, smashed into the bridge. Tiny bodies, like fleas, rolled off, although several were squashed beneath the birds body.

One wing was broken. Its feet were raw and bleeding as it fluttered and floundered on the bridge. The massive bill, hooked and broken, snapped at the tiny green creatures that swarmed over it. They gnashed and tore at the bird, ripping feathers, tearing flesh.

It tore them off, crushing them like nuts or seeds.

I saw the more puke green imp, still somehow alive and hanging on to the birds head. He jabbed and jabbed with his claws, tearing at its eye. Then, with a snap of its head, the vulture threw him off and he smashed into a nearby bridge pillar. Crashing to the ground, he lay unmoving.

More bodies, tiny, fragile, torn and bleeding, lay around the bridge. But while this fantastic,

terrible bird had killed many of the imps, their sheer numbers had overwhelmed it. It was dying.

It staggered. One leg broken. Wings reaching to steady itself as it snapped at the continued onslaught of little green creatures.

Colonel Krill called them a menace. Mischievous creatures. Obviously they were that, and more.

The bird collapsed. More imps left on top of it, devouring it. The wounded, crushed, and dying imps pulled themselves toward it, onto it. In death, they used their teeth to rip the bird's flesh, destroying their enemy.

I realized I felt nothing. Watching this carnage, the terrible deaths of these creatures, both the enormous vulture that tried to grab me with its talons and the naked little monsters, I felt nothing.

No nausea. No fear. Not even pain.

And I backed away. Away from the imps devouring the now dead giant vulture. I wasn't afraid because if that bird couldn't stop their onslaught, what chance did I have. If they chose to come after me once they were finished devouring the bird ...

CHAPTER 7

MOTHER

The first light was beginning to shine through the clouds. The rain had stopped and the fog burned away even before the sun rose. But the dawn brought no warmth. It was cold, blue, desolate.

I had left the imps to their victory, at least those on the bridge. I didn't see where the massive herd that swarmed over me had gone. Or what they pursued. All I knew was they had disappeared into the mist.

Strangely, I was following them. Or the direction they had gone.

Not intentionally, but that was towards home.

She is not your real mother.

His words returned. In the quiet of the wee hours, before even the milkman were padding their way along their routes, there was nothing to drown out his words.

She is not your real mother. You are my distant relative.

The idea brought back the fear. It rolled in my stomach like a lead ball. I had to find out for sure. Mother would tell me the truth, if I asked. If I really asked.

The flat was dark. No surprise. I wasn't due home from the Club for another hour. Mother would be fast asleep.

As I approached the door, I heard a noise. A rattle. Then a crash.

Just a cat, rumaging in a trash can, toppling it.

I watched it run off as I ascended the steps to the front door and without looking, put my key into the lock.

Only, the lock wasn't there.

I turned and found the door open.

"Mother?"

I rushed inside, and stopped just through the tiny foyer to listen. But nothing.

"Mother?" I called out again, only met with more silence. I pushed open the door into the tiny sitting room. Empty.

On into the kitchen/dining area. Empty.

The back door to the tiny garden ... Mother always intended to plant a garden ...the back door was locked.

"Mother? Where are you?"

Still, no answer.

I tiptoed up the stairs, careful to avoid the fifth step that always creaked. I don't know why ... my calls would have alerted anyone, or anything, that I was there.

I called again. "Mother?"

A bang. And a whisper.

I rushed towards Mother's bedroom and jiggled the handle. Locked. She always kept it locked at night. That I remember from whenever I'd had a nightmare. Mother, when asleep, was off limits.

This time I banged on the door.

"Mother!" I screamed her name. "Open the door. Are you alright?"

I banged and banged. I made enough noise to wake the dead, but no one answered. No one opened the door.

I stopped banging with my fists and kicked the door once. I heard the key fall out of the keyhole and clatter on her floor.

My head resting against the locked door, I started to cry. My body shook; hot tears dripped from my chin.

The fifth stair creaked.

I tried to stop my tears and between gulps of air, I heard soft footsteps on the landing. Someone, I knew it was a person, was behind me. I had no strength left to fight. Whoever it was, whatever they were going to ask of me or do, I couldn't stop them.

Then I heard a soft voice.

"He will stop at nothing to destroy you, my young friend."

It was the Mobedan Mobed. I turned, my forehead still pressed against Mother's bedroom door. Through my tear-blurred vision, I saw his orange robes first.

"Why? What did I do to him?"

"It is not what you did; it is what you are. I told you before how he stole my devadasi. He knows you are protected by the talisman and he cannot corrupt you as he has with her.

"That is why he tried to get you to go with him. If you go willingly, he can take your talisman. But you escaped. He sent his creatures after you but when he could not get you, he took your mother. He believes that if he holds her captive, he will prevent you from helping me complete the ritual.

"Do you see now why it is so important that you help me, Ted?"

I slid down the door and slumped on the floor.

"But, Mother ..."

"If you help me complete the ritual, we can save her. But we must hurry. Every hour he gains strength. We must stop him before he becomes too strong."

"How? You said you need the idol. How are we supposed to get it?"

"I gave you that piece already, but you failed to complete it." He knelt and wiped away the tears from my cheek. "But I understand your weakness."

I stared at him. *What piece?*

"The talisman?"

"No, boy. Your friend at the museum. He is there. He can get us inside, to where the idol is kept. There, I can complete the ritual to stop him."

"Sir Godfrey?"

"Yes, young man. He is a good man at heart. He knows you, and he knows the evil that lurks in the heart of that man. He will believe you. Come, we have not much time."

He stood, this time appearing nine feet tall, and thrust out a hand.

I reached up and took it.

I leaned on the bell again and waited.

Dressed in my work uniform, complete with a delivery bag bearing the Regent Club's blazon, and straddling my bicycle, I looked the part.

The door opened and a guard peered out, shading his eyes from the bright sun over my shoulder.

"What do you want? It's 'alf six."

"Special breakfast delivery for Sir Godfrey from the Regent's Club. Seems he's worked all night and is in desperate need of a good breakfast."

I held up the delivery bag but the guard seemed dubious.

"I ain't got no order to let anyone in."

"No problem," I chimed, giving him my best grin. "I don't have time to trapse up to his office anyway. Off home after a night shift. Here, take the bag. In fact, I bet there's enough for you to grab a knosh."

He smiled and I held it out to him.

As he stepped out the door to reach for it, I dropped it. His gaze followed the bag to the ground and he never saw the heavy stick in my other hand.

"I still don't understand why you didn't cast a spell on him, or something," I said to the Mobedan Mobed as we stepped over the unconscious guard. But he ignored my question and I had to run to catch up with him.

He didn't speak as we moved down the hallways. He seemed to know exactly where he was going. He passed, without a glance, a hallway that opened upon a group of offices.

"Isn't," I said, looking over my shoulder towards the office, "isn't that where Sir Godfrey's office would be?"

Again, no reply. The Mobedan Mobed moved along, his long legs carrying him faster than I could walk. I jogged to keep up.

We rounded a corner and I found myself in the main hall of the museum. Fantastic exhibits, from dinosaurs to ancient cultures, littered the floor. I paused and gawked at all the historical treasures. *What amazing stories they must hold!*

The Mobedan Mobed was halfway up the grand staircase before I realized and this time I had to sprint to catch him. By the time I did, he was already slipping past the barrier into the exhibit hall marked SCYTHIANS.

Just inside, even he had to pause and let his eyes take in the sights.

"Foolish English," he said, not talking to me. "Scythian, indeed."

Then he mumbled something in a strange tongue, raising his arms towards the ceiling, or heaven, I suppose. Instinctively, I removed my cap.

His prayer complete, he moved deeper into the exhibit hall, casting his eyes over display cases, searching.

After passing through several aisles of display cases, he stopped. And smiled.

"Angra Mainyu. Saba kesh!"

His words were meaningless to me but their intent was clear. A thanksgiving for answered prayer.

"How do we get it out?" I asked, peering around him at the small seated idol locked away beneath glass.

From beneath his robe, he drew a dagger and turned it blade up. He smashed the hilt into the glass, shattering it. And then he reached in and picked up the small statuette.

It was a man, wearing a turban and sitting cross-legged. It was copper, old like the talisman coin. Worn, dirty. And appeared to be broken off another piece. The bottom edge seemed jagged.

"The first piece," he said. Then he grabbed me and dragged me towards the center of the room. "We must begin the ritual. Give me the talisman."

I barely had the coin out of my pocket before he snatched it from my hand. With his other, he gripped my shoulder and forced me onto the floor. He pressed the coin into my forehead and began to chant.

"Bah na kuth. Ranes caren."

The chant repeated, and I felt the coin start to warm. Then it got hot and started to burn. I reached for it, to tear it from my forehead before it burned through my skull but he batted away my hand.

"Be still, boy!" he commanded.

"But," I started to protest.

He once again drew the knife from his belt and held it to my throat.

"Be quiet, boy, or I'll slit your throat. I only need your body. Not your life."

My mouth opened and closed several times while my brain tried to process what he said.

Kill me? He said he'd kill me!

I looked up at the priest's face. His eyes were no longer yellow. They had turned a dirty white and his pupils were gone. He continued his chant, holding the statuette in his hands, pushing it

towards the heavens.

The idol started to shimmer. I couldn't tell if it was tears blurring my vision again or if there was some kind of magic beginning.

Then, a bolt of lightning and the glass skylights shattered, showering us with shards. Sparks danced across the display cases and they exploded. Artifacts scattered across the floor.

The Mobedan Mobed arched his back and his chants became louder until he was screaming. His entire body shook and the idol rose off of his hands. It started to spin, ejecting a bright, white light that blinded me.

I recoiled, hiding my face from the brightness and my hand brushed the coin stuck to my forehead. I stole a glance at the mad priest in the midst of his ritual. He was lost in it, ignoring me.

My chance. I tugged the coin, but it stuck fast. I dug my fingers into my flesh and pulled. Finally, the coin released and I flung it across the room. Then I gathered the rest of my strength, clambored to my feet and ran from the exhibit hall.

Behind me, a scream. I turned for a moment and saw the Mobedan Mobed burst into flames. The idol spun faster, but the light faded, then extinguished.

A final puff of smoke, and the swirling artifacts, the smoke and glass paused in mid air. Then it all came crashing down.

When the smoke and dust settled, I poked my head back into the exhibit hall. The only thing left of the Mobedan Mobed was his dagger laying on the floor next to a scorch mark.

I felt my forehead. It was burned and bleeding.

I turned when I heard a voice behind me.

"Dear God in Heaven! What's going on?"

It was Sir Godfrey. He stared passed me into the exhibit hall, surveying the near total destruction of the entire Scythian collection.

"Ted." He looked at me, the circular burn on my forehead, my tattered Regent's Club uniform.

"The madness of Krill. I should have known that he spoke the truth. God save him."

CHAPTER 8

A LITTLE TEA

Sir Godfrey took me home. Although to what, I wasn't sure. Mother wasn't there. I had no idea where she was.

The mad priest had lied to me. I supposed that meant that Colonel Krill was right.

Oh, god!

If he was right about the Mobedan Mobed wanting to use me, that the priest had lied to me and tried to use me to complete his ritual, then maybe everything else he had told me was also true.

She is not your real mother.

Maybe she wasn't my biological mother. But she was my real mother. Whatever else she may have done, she'd raised me. That meant something. I wished I could tell her.

But where was she? Who had taken her? If not Colonel Krill ... the Mobedan Mobed?

Sir Godfrey pulled over at the curb outside the flat. We sat in silence for a while. Then he spoke.

"I cannot imagine what really happened. I only know that there are things at play that I cannot possibly understand. Nor, I imagine, can you."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Colonel Krill?" He took a breath before he said, "That's a very good question. A madman, for sure. A dark soul, definitely."

"Is he ... evil?"

"Hard to say. What is evil? What is good? For half a century, I've sought an answer to those questions. I still have no idea."

Outside, the rain started again, coming in a deluge.

"Go on," he said, patting my arm. "Get some sleep. We'll speak to the police about your mother later."

I climbed out of his car and trudged up the steps but stopped at the door. It was closed. I just stared at it and let the rain soak through me.

Then, the door flew open and there was Mother, in her morning frock and curlers.

"Theodore Pyne! Why are you standing in the rain? You'll catch your death. Come in. I've made tea."

THE END