

# DEVLIN'S DESCENT



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**Chapter Eighteen:  
“Welcome to the Machine”**

The Little Man sat at the edge of the precipice and peered into the void. Fog rolled out of the depths, but he could hear the sound of a billion voices, all of them calling out for salvation.

He listened.

Something resembling a bird flew out of the mist and came toward him. He wasn't afraid; he'd seen the bird, or one like it, on his previous excursions into the Netherworld. He'd seen other birds, too, but none quite as strange and majestic as this creature.

He watched as it soared into the silver-blue sky, then dove back into the thicket of fog. Another bird appeared after a moment, and first bird followed it out of the mist. Both birds circled one another, doing an aerial dance that The Little Man had always found fascinating. But, unlike earthly birds, these creatures were not confined by the linear restraints of his time. These were creatures from many, many centuries past. From the age of the dinosaurs. They were huge birds with wingspans that probably stretched ten feet across. Their heads were pointed like a Pterodactyl, but they were further down the food chain than those beautiful creatures.

The Little Man wondered if Pterodactyls lived within the soupy fog that cover the Netherworld. He had heard many strange sounds coming from the mist, but could not attest to ever having seen one.

*They're there, he thought. They're there and they know that I'm watching for them. Some things aren't meant to be seen, I guess.*

Still, he wanted to see one. He wanted desperately for the fog to lift off the land below and give him a glimpse of what lay beneath. But, even as he thought it, he knew that madness would ensue if he saw it.

*Some things aren't meant to be seen, he thought again.*

But, what he did see foretold of amazing things. In the distance, he could see the top of a temple peeking through the fog. It looked like a Mayan temple to him, although he'd only been to the ruins once. Still, his research had brought him to the conclusion that it was, in fact, a Mayan temple buried beneath that shroud of mist. Perhaps, he reckoned, the spirits of the Mayans still walked through the hallowed halls of the temple, along with many others from many different time periods.

The thought that people from the distant past and the distant future could be living within the mist below was still something he couldn't quite put his mind around. But, he knew that it was true. His grandfather, Malcolm Carlsrud, had told him that much, at least. He would, in time, tell him much more.

"Heart rate's elevating," he heard a voice say. The voice, thick and tinny, seemed to be coming from everywhere, and nowhere, at the same time.

"He'll survive," The Little Man said. He wasn't absolutely certain that was true, but it didn't really matter, anyway. There were dozens of other clones in the nursery and, if this one died, it would be a mere inconvenience for him to plug into the mind of another and continue his observation of the Netherworld.

For, The Little Man had discovered the secret to entering this wondrous land. Carlsrud had been the one to show him the way there, too. All he had to do was feed the mind of one of the clones an undiluted dosage of Green Pus, and it opened up the clone's mind to the Netherworld. *Sort of like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel when death is near*, The Little Man thought. From there, he just needed to tap into the clone's mind and enjoy the ride.

*And what a ride it was!*

He watched the two ancient birds as they danced in the sky. As he watched, he wondered about the people — spirits, really — below him. Did they even know that they were dead? Was this their Heaven? He thought that, perhaps, it

was. He was never a big believer in God, the Almighty, but what he was seeing was pretty confirming evidence that there was an afterlife. And, he wondered if the spirits below were living in their perfect moment in time when everything was right in their world?

He supposed they were.

He felt a small tingling in his mind. Although he, himself, had not taken Green Pus, the clone had been administered a healthy dosage. The tingle was only a fraction of what the clone's mind was feeling and, for that, The Little Man was grateful. He had been told by the few survivors of undiluted Green Pus — Devlin, in particular — that the sensation was like having your mind on fire. You could do nothing to extinguish the sensation, nor did you want to. There was a comfort in the burning sensation, and The Little Man knew full well that was true, also. The tingle in his mind was something he could easily get used to.

The Little Man looked down into the mist below him and concentrated. As he did, he noticed that the mist was dissipating around the area where he concentrated. A familiar cabin appeared below him.

It was the home his father had inherited from his father, Malcolm Carlsrud. The cabin sat on a hillside, with stilts holding the north end of the building level. The cabin had been built directly into the hillside, and The Little Man knew from past experience that his childhood bedroom lay deep within the rocks.

*I wanted to come here?* He asked himself. *Why?*

The answer, of course, was simple. This was the place where he'd felt safest. Of all the places he had been in his life, this place was the one he held most dear. It was a sad testament to The Little Man's existence that a place that had caused him so much pain could also house his fondest childhood memories. But, it did, and The Little Man was happy to see the house.

He willed himself to float down.

As he sank into the mist, he could feel thousands of prob-

ing eyes watching him descend. They watched until they lost interest, then turned back to their own little slice of Heaven.

The Little Man realized that, to them, this was reality. They had died — some of them long ago, some of them not yet — and traveled to the place they had felt most comfortable in life.

*Heaven, indeed!* The Little Man thought.

He feet touched to deck of the home. He could smell the fresh mountain air; he could hear the sounds of nature coming from the mist.

He stood there a moment and savored the experience.

Then, he walked into the house. The sliding glass door that opened onto the deck whooshed open and, although the house was dark, he had no trouble seeing.

Everything in the cabin was as he remembered it. The kitchen, small but efficient, lay to his right; the living room was to his left. The far wall was the stone face of the hillside and a hallway went off into the darkness. He stood there and enjoyed to solemn quiet of the home, knowing full well that life had never been as simple and peaceful as it had when he had called this place home.

He walked slowly through the living room and entered the hallway. It forked off into a T about three meters into the rock, and he hung a left. The hallway opened up into a spacious room that he recalled all too well. This had been his play area as a boy. His father had set up a train set in the room and they had spent many hours running the train along its tracks. The landscape they had built around the train was impressive; his father's hobby had been building dioramas. There had been a mountain range complete with a waterfall.

It was the one thing he and his father had in common. Nothing else seemed to matter to the man— just his job and the train. His father was a cold man, rarely showing love to his son, and it had affected The Little Man in ways that still ruled him today. He, too, had become a cold, heartless hulk of a man.

This room was the only thing that made him think his fa-

ther loved him at all.

*But, he only really loved the train,* The Little Man thought. *You know that.*

Now, however, the room was empty. The Little Man found this odd, seeing as this was supposed to be his little slice of Heaven.

"It's not your Heaven," a voice behind him said. "It's mine."

The Little Man recognized the voice and it sent a shiver down his spine. He turned.

There, as bold as life, stood his father. He was not the feeble, waste of a man who had died ten years ago from cancer; this was the father The Little Man remembered from his childhood, healthy and full of energy and life.

"Dad," he said.

"Hello son," his father said as he stepped toward him. "I've been waiting for you."

"Waiting?"

His father nodded. "Yes."

"You knew I was coming?"

Once again, his father nodded. "Yes."

"How?"

His father walked up to him and touched his shoulder. "Your grandfather told me."

"You can communicate with him?" The Little Man asked.

"Not so much 'communicate', as receive thoughts, if that makes sense?"

And, it did make sense to The Little Man. He knew that there was still a great deal that he did not understand about what he was doing, or about the Netherworld. He doubted he would ever fully understand, but that wouldn't stop him from trying to acquire the knowledge.

"You should let your grandfather go, son," his Dad said.

The Little Man stared at his father. "No," he said.

His father took his hand from The Little Man's shoulder. "It won't be pretty for you if you don't comply," he told him. "Spirits are supposed to be free here."

"But he's not here, is he?" The Little Man said. "He's in the complex. His soul has been captured there since the accident, remember?"

His father shook his head. "It was trapped there, that's true.... but you're holding him hostage now. Him and everyone else who died there. Why?"

"You know why," The Little Man said. "You trapped him there."

His father backed away a few steps. "That was a mistake," he told The Little Man. "If I'd known then what I know now...."

".... But, you didn't, did you? You went down into the complex and restored it to its past glory...and then you discovered the souls of the dead had not escaped. You could have set them free, but you didn't. Why should I let them go now? You didn't when you had the chance."

"I wasn't dead then," his father told him. "I know better now."

"Well, I don't," The Little Man said sternly. "I worshipped the ground you walked on, Dad. Now, I know you were just too weak to achieve what I have. You didn't have the stomach for it."

"What you're doing is wrong, son."

"*I'll decide what's right or wrong!*" The Little Man shouted. He looked about the room. "Where's the train, Dad? Where's your precious little train? It was the only thing that ever really mattered to you."

His father took a step forward. "That's not true, son. You know it's not true."

"Like Hell I know it's not true! You spent more time with your train than you did with me."

"And that's why the train isn't here, son," his father said calmly. "I threw it away...just like I threw you away. I'm paying for my sins."

The Little Man scowled. "Throwing your precious train out doesn't make up for what you did!"

Once again, his father answered him calmly. "No, it

doesn't. Not at all. I'm sorry for not being there for you, son. I truly am." He stepped closer to his son, but The Little Man cowered away.

*"I hate your fucking guts!"* he shouted.

He stopped and looked his son in the eyes. A tear rolled down his cheek as he said, "You have every right to hate me. I don't blame you...but your grandfather had nothing to do with my neglect of you. Let him go."

"No!" The Little Man shouted.

There was a stirring in the room then, and The Little Man saw something forming to the left of his father. It was a body, smaller than his father was. As he watched, he saw Daniel appear.

The Little Man turned his attention to the boy. "What are you doing here?"

Daniel smiled coyly. "I told you it wouldn't work," Daniel said to The Little Man's father.

"He's my son," the man replied. "I had to try."

Daniel turned his attention to The Little Man. "You're in my playground now," he said. And, with that, he charged at The Little Man.

The Little Man barely had time to defend himself. Daniel ran inside him. In a matter of seconds, he could feel Daniel crawling about in his brain.... and, from there, he went to the clone.

The Little Man could feel the clone's heart seize up as the doctor yelled: "Cardiac Arrest!". The pain of the heart attack wretched through The Little Man as well, and his body bucked on the couch it lay upon.

Doctors frantically went to work trying to disconnect The Little Man from the machine that joined him with the dying clone.

And, in the Netherworld, The Little Man looked at his father in disbelief. "You did this?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, son," he told him. "But you have to be stopped."

The room slowly faded around him as his father said: "I

did love you, son. I'm sorry I never showed you how much." Then, his father was gone and The Little Man was floating rapidly back through the air. The abyss around him swirled like a hurricane as he ascended, and, now, he could see the faces of the people as they murmured. Above him, the prehistoric birds circled like vultures waiting for their prey to die.

And, the light grew brighter as he rose into the air.

In the real world, The Little Man's heart stopped. He felt himself re-enter his body as his heart took its last beat. The doctors disconnected the wires that connected him to the now-dead clone and The Little Man heard a doctor yell, "Clear!" as a bright white tunnel of light appeared above him.

Slowly, he slipped out of his body and saw the doctors, three of them, circling him. And, standing nearby, Daniel looked up at him and smiled.

"You're not so tough after all," Daniel said. "I almost got you."

Then, the doctors hit him with the paddles and The Little Man's body jumped like frog legs on a hot skillet. For an instant, he hung in the air over his body, Daniel to his right, laughing his ass off. Then, he was sucked back into his body. He opened his eyes, clutched his chest, and gasped for breath.

Three sets of hands were on him and he looked at the man to his right with a bewildered look. It was the blue-eyed doctor that had seen over Caroline's ultrasound. "Relax," he said. "You're all right."

But, he turned to his left and saw Daniel still standing there, laughing. "You ain't so tough," Daniel told him again. "And my Dad's gonna send you to that home permanently very, very soon."

Then, Daniel walked to the door. He paused, turned around, and gave The Little Man a "see-ya-later" gesture. He walked through the closed door and was gone.

The Little Man, still gasping for breath, could do nothing but watch.