

DEVLIN'S DESCENT



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**Chapter Twenty-Five:
“Burn”**

Devlin wasted no time; he drank down both vials of undiluted Green Pus. Part of him hoped the overdose would kill him and he could join Caroline in the realm of the dead. Perhaps, then he would find some solace. But, as the Pus ran through him, he knew he would not die. He had a mission to complete and Death would not take him until it was all over. His eyes watered, and he wasn't sure if it was from the Green Pus or remorse for the woman that lay on a surgical gurney in this Godforsaken place. He supposed it was a little of both.

Still, as he ran through the corridors of the underground complex, he knew that this was his destiny. Perhaps, it always had been. Caroline had been something of a student of Philosophy in her day, and she did not believe in such things as destiny or fate. Devlin wondered if, on her deathbed, she had changed her mind about that? She had left him an extra vial of Green Pus to help him defeat The Little Man. Certainly, she could have consumed it herself and saved herself some pain. But, she had saved it for him.

Fate, he thought. It's a bitch.

He crossed an intersection and looked down it. The Egyptian tomb god had a group of souls cornered and was laughing its evil little cackle at them. The thing took a perverse pleasure in consuming the souls of the dead, and Devlin wondered if that was part of God's grand scheme as well. He supposed that God had given up on The Little Man's realm a long, long time ago.

At least, he hoped he had.

He watched as the Egyptian tomb god flung himself on the crowd. Screams filled the air.

Then, Devlin was beyond the scene. His body burned with

an inner fire he had never experienced before. He looked down at Daniel and saw that the boy was glowing a brilliant red. *Like a boy-sized Christmas light*, Devlin thought. He'd never seen the boy so bright before.

A jolt of electricity ran through him and he stopped and weaved drunkenly in the hallway. He stumbled, almost fell, then found his footing.

"Are you all right?" Daniel asked.

Devlin shook his head. "I'm not sure," he told the boy. It was an honest answer. He wasn't sure. He hadn't felt *all right* in a long time. He staggered against the wall and let it brace him as his mind raced. He looked down the hallway behind him and saw the Egyptian tomb god standing there, watching him.

"Go now," it said. "Time is short."

Devlin nodded and staggered away from the wall. He spread his feet wide, balancing himself. He was drunk, all right. Drunk on Green Pus. And, while there was a similarity between that and drunkenness on alcohol, you didn't see the souls of the dead while drunk on booze.

He drew in a deep breath and found that he could control the wave of electricity cycling through him better now. His entire body felt like one giant raw nerve.... and all the synapses were firing like an engine gone mad.

It felt wonderful.

Devlin glanced down at Daniel again, and the boy smiled. "Yes," he said. "It does."

He reached out and took the boy's hand and was surprised that he could actually *hold* Daniel's hand. Something had changed within him; he had moved sideways on the mortal coil. He was no longer exactly in the realm of the living, nor was he in the realm of the dead.

This was a place in between.

"This is where I live," Daniel told him. He looked at the boy and realized that the red glow had gone. But, when he looked around him, he saw nothing but red. He had ventured into the realm where Daniel lived, become like him in a way. He

saw the world the way Daniel saw it; it now had a hellish red tinge because Daniel was feeding off Devlin's energy.... and Devlin's energy was higher than it had ever been before. He reached down and clutched his chest. His heart was racing; he wasn't dead.

"How is this possible?" he asked the boy.

"There are planes of existence that most people know nothing about," Daniel said. "Some call this realm 'the spirit world', others think of it as purgatory. It's not really either."

"Then what is it?" Devlin asked.

"I don't know," replied Daniel.

Devlin glanced around him again. The redness had gone; he was back on the normal plane of existence.

"You can shift between planes," Daniel told him. "The Green Pus has opened your mind. Lord only knows what you can do if you only think it."

Devlin felt different now. He didn't feel quite as drunk; he had some control over things. Maybe, in time, he could navigate the planes of existence like someone might open a door. He could step into the Netherworld; he could enter Daniel's realm. He could explore things that no other man before him had.

But, there wasn't time. He would have to face The Little Man shortly, and The Little Man had a wealth of technology and genetic freaks to combat him with.

"You can beat him, Dad," Daniel told him. "I know you can."

Devlin wasn't so sure.

He walked on down the hallway, oblivious to the screams of the dead as the Egyptian tomb god devoured them.

In the arena, The Little Man waited. He held the freakish thing that Caroline had brought into the world in his hands, holding it away from him as far as he could. Even with one of the helmets that blocked telepathic controls; he could feel the little bitch trying to pry into his mind, looking for a weakness. The kid was strong; stronger than anything he had ever seen

before. Devlin had been powerful, but she was incredibly so.

“Devlin is coming,” The Little Man told her. “You will kill him when he arrives. Do you understand me?”

The child, still wet with afterbirth, stared coldly into The Little Man’s eyes. Devlin was nothing to her, although they had tried to instill a hatred of the man into her while she was still in the womb. The child had explored Caroline’s mind thoroughly and found Devlin within. There was a part of her that still loved him. That outweighed the programming somewhat. Not completely, but a little. There was so much of their programming that had not taken root; they were, after all, amateurs at genetic and mental manipulation. Still, there was enough that *had* found root that she felt compelled to obey The Little Man. The explosive in her skull was a deterrent to disobedience also.

She nodded.

The Little Man felt a chill run down his back, but did not show his discomfort in his expression. He was a master at pretending to be calm when he was anything but that. His poker face had saved his arrogant ass on more than one occasion and, he hoped, it would save him now as well.

He stared into the child’s red eyes and almost — almost — allowed himself to be hypnotized by them. *Damn*, he thought, *she is powerful*.

He diverted his glare just in time.

To his right, he heard an unnatural growl. The cages that lined the walls had all been opened and the beasts within were at the gates, just waiting for The Little Man to punch the button on a remote control in his pocket and allow them into the arena.

He sat the child down on the ground. She immediately started to crawl away, but The Little Man said, “Wait!” and she stopped.

He dug in his pocket and produced the remote control. “I can blow your head off with this,” he told her. “Remember that.”

The child sneered at him, but sat in silence.

The control also provided his means of controlling the animals. Various buttons caused the creatures pain in different areas. They had been conditioned by their trainers to heed commands; the pain providing a Pavlov's dog sort of stimulus.

He looked down at the controller. He would open the gates when Devlin arrived and let the creatures kill him, if they could. If not, the abomination Caroline had borne for him would have to do the job.

Either way, Devlin would be dead. It was a waste, he thought, but Devlin had chosen this path for himself. He could have just as easily become The Little Man's tool. He would have seen to it that Devlin lived like a king, perhaps even allowing him to have his precious Caroline again. But, Devlin was headstrong. He would not bend to the man's will, regardless. He had escaped captivity and was free.

He'll be free in Hell, The Little Man thought with a grin. Even as he thought it, though, he knew that he respected Devlin's decision. It would have been much easier to stay and have all the Green Pus he would ever need; Devlin had chosen the harder path.

Such things oftentimes confused The Little Man. He had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, sure; but he understood it when people chose the path of least resistance. He had chosen such a path, himself — to follow in his father's, and grandfather's, footsteps. It had been easily, accessible and quite incredibly lucrative. He was richer than he would need to be, but the power was the main draw for him.

He liked the power he had over people.

Maybe Devlin and I have that in common, he thought. *It doesn't matter, though. He'll be dead in half an hour.*

He looked down at the child and saw its red eyes staring intently at him. He turned away again before she could latch on to his mind.

I'm going to kill your creepy little ass when this is over, he thought about the child. *You will have served your purpose and you're not that unique, anyway. I can make another just*

like you anytime I want.

Anytime I want, he thought again.

He smiled and waited for Devlin to arrive.

Devlin entered the corridor that led to the arena. His skin burned, and he thought it might set off the gas lines that ran the length of the hallways. *All the better*, he thought. *He and The Little Man could burn together.* He smiled at the thought of the little bastard's skin burning away from his smug little face, his perpetual smile turned into a cinder in the blink of an eye. But, alas, his heat did not set off the gas lines that had so efficiently roasted the flesh of the people the Egyptian tomb god was now hunting down and consuming.

The hallway glowed red as he stepped up to the once-locked entrance that led into the arena. The lock was gone now, however, and Devlin knew that meant The Little Man was inside waiting.

He paused long enough to reflect upon what had brought him to this point. The woman he had loved was now dead several hallways back, her lover's body roasted to a crispy crunch outside his home across the city. Only The Little Man remained. The man, who had promised him salvation from his pain, but gave him addiction and agony instead.

He looked down at Daniel, the ghost of what would have been his son. The child was an innocent victim in what had happened — if there was such a thing as an innocent victim in the world. He thought about the Egyptian tomb god's promise that he would be gentle on the boy when the time came to consume his soul. Of all the people Devlin knew, he hoped Daniel would be happy in the Netherworld.

The rest of them could go to Hell.

He stood before the gate a moment longer, bracing himself for the conflict that was to come. The Little Man had the thing that Caroline had borne unto the world with him and he knew that it had powers that, most likely, surpassed his own.

Question was: *would it obey The Little Man?*

“Let’s find out,” Devlin said. Then, he opened the door and entered the arena.

The Little Man tensed when he saw Devlin. The man wasn’t quite as haggard looking as he had been the last time he’d seen him — but there was something else different about him as well. He couldn’t quite place his finger on it a moment. Then, he realized what it was:

Devlin was glowing.

A red aura surrounded him, just as it did the little ghost boy, Daniel. They both glowed brilliantly, and it was hard for him to look at them directly.

“Welcome,” he said. “Come on in. I’ve been waiting for you.”

And, with that, the battle began.

Devlin stepped forward a few steps, trying not to sway. He still felt a bit overwhelmed by the overdose of Green Pus, but things were starting to make more sense to him.

He peered at the abomination of a child that crawled on the dirt floor. Its red eyes regarded him like a tiger might regard its prey, and Devlin could feel it reaching into his mind as he stood there.

He glanced at The Little Man. “She’s a prototype?” The Little Man said. “What do you think?”

“I think she’s a freak of nature that shouldn’t be allowed to live,” Devlin replied defiantly. “Like you.”

The Little Man chuckled. “Oh, Devlin, you’re just too defiant for your own good, aren’t you?” He paused as if he were waiting on an answer. Then, he pointed at the child. “She’s a mere infant and she has more power than you do. She could kill you with a thought if I told her to.”

Devlin walked forward and Daniel followed. “Then tell her to,” Devlin said. “Let’s get this charade of yours over with.”

The Little Man nodded. “As you wish,” He looked down at

the child. "Kill him."

The child turned back toward Devlin and he saw her mouth open. A string of jagged teeth sneered at him...and Devlin felt her enter his mind.

For a moment, it was a minor intrusion. Just a thought, nothing more. Then, she scanned his memory and found Caroline there. The past year of Devlin's life downloaded into the child's mind in a fraction of a second. The child told him she was sorry for Caroline. She told him that, then told him she was sorry for what she had to do.

She snarled.

Daggers of pain filled Devlin's skull. He dropped to his feet, screaming as he clutched his skull. "Get out of my fucking head!" he shouted at the child. But, she didn't listen. She *couldn't* obey. The Little Man would destroy her if she did.

She dug deeper and the pain became intolerable.

Then, Devlin opened his eyes. He reached out with his mind and touched the remote control that The Little Man had. He could feel it clutched in the little bastard's hand, but could not make him push the button.

Daniel ran at the child. "Let him go!" he shouted, but the infant would not. Instead, she pushed Daniel away from her. His spirit went sailing across the arena, like a feather caught in the wind. He landed just short of the entryway.

Devlin tried again. This time, he reached out for the child who was assaulting him and tried to push her thoughts away. At first, he had no success. The pain had him reeling and he felt a warm trickle of blood flow from his nose onto his chin. The child had made him hemorrhage; he had no idea how badly.

You won't win, Devlin thought. *I can't let you win!* With that, he found the answer. Daniel was at his side again. Devlin could see that the room had taken on a red aura again, and he knew that he had slipped into Daniel's realm. He could still see the infant, still feel the pain, but it had faded a little.

Devlin wasted no time. He grabbed Daniel by the hand and, together, they ran toward The Little Man.

The Little Man, being the coward he was, backed away.

It was exactly what Devlin expected...and wanted.

The infant turned as Devlin ran past her. He tried to keep the thought of what he intended to do from his mind but, at the last second, the child saw what he was doing. It was too late. Devlin threw Daniel at her and Daniel slid inside her effortlessly. The child fell to the ground and rolled on its back, physically in pain and struggling to get Daniel out.

But, Daniel was in.

Devlin continued running toward The Little Man. The Little Man turned to run, but Devlin was on him before he made it three steps. He tackled The Little Man and brought him to the ground. The helmet he wore went flying. Devlin could have used his thoughts to control the man, but beating the daylights out of him was what he really wanted to do. He punched The Little Man in the face, shattering his nose and sending blood flying onto the dirt.

“You’re not so badass now, are you?” Devlin shouted as he brought another punch down onto his face. The Little Man’s right eye opened up just above the eyebrow, spilling more blood onto the dirt.

Devlin punched again and again. The anger that coursed through him was not only for himself or Caroline or Daniel — it was for all the people The Little Man had used, manipulated or killed. It was for the lost spirits he had trapped in an underground tomb, denying them peace in death.

And, it was for all the addicts of Green Pus out there whose lives The Little Man had helped destroy.

He punched until he could punch no longer.

He looked down at The Little Man. He was unconscious. His face looked like bloody ground hamburger.

Devlin sat on the man’s chest a moment, then stood. He was exhausted, and the exertion had sent the dosages of Green Pus within his system into overdrive. He wobbled on his feet, then fell back onto the ground and lay there.

He heard a gagging sound and turned.

Behind him, the child spat Daniel out of her like a loogie.

She opened her mouth and Daniel was projectile vomited into the air above her. Daniel rolled in midair, then shot back down at the child.

Once again, he entered her.

Once again, she expelled him.

Devlin stood and staggered toward the child. In a moment, he stood over her. "Stop," he said.

The child regarded him, her sinister eyes wide.

"Why?" she asked in a voice that came straight from a nightmare. It was the voice of a little girl, but unlike any voice he had ever heard. There was a wisdom, a darkness, in her voice, and Devlin felt a chill pass through him.

"The Little Man is the true enemy here," Devlin told her. "If you want revenge, take it out on him, not us."

The child glanced over at The Little Man. Now awake, his battered eyes were open and he was looked toward them. She watched as he took the remote control out of his pocket. Devlin saw it, too, and reached out for The Little Man's mind.... but he was too late. The Little Man touched a button on the remote and the gates that encompassed the arena all flung open.

"I win," The Little Man said.

At the entry way to the arena, two armed men stood. Both wore the helmets that prevented Devlin from attacking their minds. One of them rushed forward and picked up The Little Man's helmet.

They strolled toward The Little Man, helped him to his feet. "You're no match for me, Devlin," The Little Man said boastfully. "I'll always win." He grimaced in pain as the helmet slid onto his skull.

A roar filled the air.

Devlin turned and looked at the gates. Seven creatures, all of them genetic nightmares, came rushing out. There were combinations of animals; bears with lions, pythons with alligators, pit bulls with tigers, several other combinations that Devlin could not decipher. They walked, slithered, or crawled toward them.

The Little Man and his men hurried toward the gate.... but they didn't make it. As they passed her, the child jumped and tore a chunk out of The Little Man's shoulder. The Little Man screamed in pain as he reached up and grabbed the baby by the skull and flung her to the ground.

She rolled and attacked again. This time, she tore a chunk out of The Little Man's leg with her teeth.

He screamed again and fished out the remote. "You little bitch!" he yelled. Then, he punched the button and her head exploded. Brain matter and body parts showered everyone, and the blast knocked The Little Man backwards. The remote control went sailing through the air and shattered on the arena floor.

His helpers were reaching for him when the first animal attacked.

It was the snake hybrid. It reared up and sprayed poison in their eyes. Both men screamed, but their screams were short-lived. The snake hybrid snapped its jaws shut on the first man, its razor-sharp teeth ripping him in half and sending blood and gore showering everywhere.

The second man tried to run, but bear monster lurched around the snake hybrid and grabbed him. He tried to shoot the beast, but its grasp was too tight. It held him in its arms as it ripped his head free from his body, showering more blood onto the arena's sand.

The Little Man ran to the second man's gun, which had fallen out of his hand when the monster decapitated him.

He grabbed the gun just as another hybrid charged.

He fired point blank and the thing's raccoon-like head exploded. The beast dropped to the dirt and two of the other mutants dropped on it and tore its carcass to pieces in a matter of seconds.

The Little Man turned to run, but Devlin had moved in front of him. "You're not going anywhere," Devlin told him.

The Little Man raised the weapon and fired.

Devlin felt pain dance through him a second later, but it seemed distant and dream-like. He looked down at his left

shoulder and saw a thin spray of blood exiting through his shirt. He tried to move his hand, but couldn't.

The Little Man laughed. "You think you can beat me?" he asked. "You're just a petty, worthless nothing of a man."

Devlin swayed on his feet. He was groggy, and all he really wanted to do now was lay down and sleep.

He felt warmth on his right hand and looked down. Daniel stood there, concern in his eyes. "Fight him," Daniel said. "Fight him, dammit!"

Devlin nodded and turned.

The Little Man was raising the weapon again, this time with the intent of delivering a death shot through Devlin's skull. He raised the weapon, aimed...

.... But never fired.

The snake hybrid pounced and grabbed The Little Man in a death lock. It closed its mouth over his head and upper torso. The Little Man tried to fight, even fired a luck shot into the snake's midsection as it wrangled him, but the snake had him in its grasp.

Then, everything seemed to freeze.

Devlin wondered if it was the Green Pus for a second, but he saw the Egyptian tomb god come out of the darkness of the entryway and walk into the arena. "This won't do," the tomb god said as it strolled up to Devlin.

Devlin staggered on his feet as the Egyptian tomb god touched his shoulder. "You've done well," it told him. "You've brought me something I've been waiting on for a long, long time. Something I didn't think you capable of." It smiled a toothy smile that sent a shiver through Devlin. "But this one," it pointed at The Little Man, "I can not allow his creations to destroy him. That job is mine."

It released Devlin shoulder and he crumpled to the ground. "Rest now," Death told him. "You've done well." He felt wetness on the side of his face and realized it was his own blood. It felt strange, yet reassuring, to him.

He turned his head and watched the Egyptian tomb god, aka Death, as it strolled over to The Little Man. He had fallen

free of the serpent's mouth and, as Devlin watched, Death waved his hand. Everything came back to life, but it did not move. The creatures all obeyed Death.

Devlin felt warmth on his right hand again and saw Daniel. "I'm here, Dad," he said. "I'm here."

Devlin nodded — or thought he did — then turned back to the scene before him. He saw Death release The Little Man. The Little Man tried to run, but one of the creatures slashed out with its claws and tore his stomach open. A steamy pile of intestines flowed out as he screamed, and the creature drew him back into the circle of abominations he had created.

Devlin heard Death say, "I'm going to make this last.... and I'm going to enjoy it."

The Little Man screamed again as one of the ape-bear creatures tore his arm off.

Devlin stared at the scene as weakness slowly consumed him. He heard the animals; their terrifying voices a mélange of horror, as they surrounded The Little Man. Death stood outside the congregation and said, "Make him suffer for what he has done."

The beasts obediently did as they were told.

Death laughed.

And The Little Man's screams were the last thing Devlin heard as he slid into darkness.