

DEVLIN'S DESCENT



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Chapter Eight: “Afterglow”

“Two words,” The Little Man said. “Stem cells.”

Caroline looked at him. The man’s face swam in a sea of movement. She thought that she might fall over at any second, pass out. But, she managed to stay on her feet. She did, however, stagger backwards, and Joseph caught her in his arms.

The Little Man walked up to the boy. “Meet Daniel?” he said.

If Joseph hadn’t still been holding her steady, she would have collapsed then. Daniel, she thought. It was the name she and Devlin had chosen for their firstborn way back in the days before she’d betrayed her love for her husband. How could The Little Man have possibly known *that* was the name they had chosen?

“Well,” The Little Man said with a smile that threatened to touch his earlobes, “It wasn’t just stem cells, really. There’s a whole lot more involved in the process than just your aborted little boy’s stem cells.”

Caroline’s gaze fell on the child. He was staring at her, his eyes accusing her as he lay there. *You couldn’t kill me*, those eyes said. *Try as you might, I’m here to remind you that you wanted to kill me, but couldn’t.*

A hand touched hers, and she jumped. She turned and looked into the face of The Little Man. “It’s all right,” he said, “very few people in this life get a chance to correct a mistake they made in the past. You should be thanking me.”

Woozy, Caroline looked at her child again. The boy looked so much like Devlin that she felt a double pang of guilt — one for betraying Devlin’s love, the other for aborting a child she

had thought was Joseph's, but had been Devlin's, instead. Or, was that a misconception on her part? Had The Little Man simply cloned Devlin? And, if so, for what reason?

"It's really quite remarkable, what we do down here," The Little Man told her. "We're funded by the military and like-minded entities that want to be on the cutting edge of technology and genetic research." He strolled over to Daniel as he spoke. "This child is the first, we hope, in a long line of clones that can be used for whatever purposes we see fit."

He stroked Daniel's hair. "Daniel is a prototype, an experiment, if you will. We managed to harvest stem cells from his aborted fetus. Add in some of Devlin's DNA, and your own, for good measure, and we were able to recreate your offspring. The Green Pus, introduced into the undeveloped mind of the child, opened him up to things we had never really imagined."

"But why?" Caroline asked. She heard herself speak, but her voice seemed to echo through the catacomb of clones and reverberate back at her.

"Why?" The Little Man asked. "Well, that's easy. Devlin was, by far, the greatest success we've had with undiluted Green Pus. And you, my dear, surprised us with your ability to handle the substance as well. We haven't given you a full-strength dosage yet; but, I am confident, you'll excel in areas that others have failed in. It stands to reason that your offspring would be the perfect test subject to take our experiments to the next level."

The Little Man stroked Daniel's hair again. "It's amazing, but the Green Pus managed to open up what we call "genetic memory". Along with some artificially induced learning while he was in the womb tank, and he is able to think and articulate like a ten-year-old boy. And, the boy knows he is your son. He'll know he's Devlin's son, too. He'll be of great benefit in the future, I'm sure. For now, Daniel is just a boy who needs the same thing every little boy needs — the love of a parent."

He pointed at Caroline. "You."

Caroline felt wobbly on her legs and she slumped back into Joseph's arms again.

"I see this reunion is a little stressful on you," The Little Man said. "That's to be expected, I guess. We can continue later. There is a timetable, but we can wait a while to put our plan into action.

"Joseph, will you take her back to her room so she can get some rest?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. We'll continue the reunion later." He turned and looked at Daniel a moment. "We need to get Daniel ready."

Joseph lifted Caroline in his arms. She wanted to fight, to push him away, but could not. Either the Green Pus or the weirdness of the situation had extracted whatever energy she had. So, she fell back into Joseph's arms and let him carry the weight of her body as he carried her, her feet stumbling drunkenly as she tried to walk, out of the room.

Behind her, she heard the bastardized clone of her abort son scream out in pain.

"Mommy!"

The doorway loomed ahead of them and, beyond it, Caroline could see the brilliant light.

She prayed she was dead and walking into the light.

But, she knew better.

This was more like Hell.

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Devlin scored some Green Pus from a pusher on Diversity. He hadn't paid for it; he didn't need to. All he had to do was use his increasingly proficient abilities to manipulate the man's mind. He made the man think that he had cash in his hand, and that he was exchanging it for Pus. Later, when the pusher counted his money, he would be surprised to find himself a few bills short. Devlin supposed he would accuse one of his whores of stealing the money and slap her around, but that wasn't something Devlin felt concerned or

guilty about. If anything, the Green Pus had taken some of his sympathy away.

He felt less human and, to be honest, more like a deity with each passing day. He could read the minds of the weaker people he passed on the streets now, their petty little thoughts locked on their pursuit of love and money and power and very little else. He supposed that mankind was still just a few steps away from the Neanderthals that they had once been. They still had the same passions; regardless of how domesticated they had become, they were wild animals. Devlin knew that with immense certainty now.

He'd taken four vials of Green Pus from the pusher and quickly found a quiet alleyway between buildings in which to devour one. The bitter goo slid down his throat with a warm and welcome sensation. He lay back against the wall, closed his eyes, and let the Green Pus do its work.

Within moments, he felt his nervous system sizzle from the effects of the Green Pus.

"What we got here?" a voice said.

Devlin opened his eyes to see three transients standing in front of him. They looked like the standard cliché that television programs portrayed the homeless as. All three men wore ratty clothing and they looked as if they hadn't bathed in weeks, which Devlin was quite certain was true. One man wore a Cubs ball cap that looked as if it had been dug out of a dumpster just recently. Another man had long, stringy, oil-soaked brown hair. The third man was bigger and younger than the other two. Devlin figured he hadn't been out on the street long, probably just lost his apartment or something after the economy had gone to shit. He looked like a bruiser of a man, someone who had worked out on a regular basis until life had thrown him into the cesspool.

All of them spied the vials of Green Pus Devlin held.

"You gonna share, bud?" the man in the ball cap said, revealing a mouthful of decaying teeth.

"Go away," Devlin told them.

The burly young one scoffed. "Just give us your Pus and

we'll walk away," he said. "You don't have to get hurt."

Devlin didn't flinch. "Go away before it's too late," he told them. Then, he added: "Please."

The three men didn't move away; they moved toward him.

The man with the long, oily hair lurched forward and tried to grab the vials out of Devlin's hands. Devlin rolled to the right, and the man struck the wall Devlin had been leaning against with a thud. He bounced off the wall, staggered a moment, then turned and looked at his buddies with a dazed expression on his face. There was a thin line of blood rolling down his skull.

The man with the ball cap swung at Devlin. His arm slowed until it stopped, mere inches from Devlin's face. "I told you to leave me alone," Devlin told the man. He stared into his eyes, and fear crept into the man's face.

Devlin concentrated.

Slowly, the sound of crackling bones filled the air. The man screamed as, midway between his wrist and his elbow, his arm started to bend.

The other two men stood dumfounded as their partner in crime's arm bent backwards. Bones and flesh bent in an unnatural way. They heard a snap as the bones broke and the man's arm bent backward. In less than five seconds, the man's right hand was touching his right elbow. He stared in disbelief at what Devlin had done for a second, then slumped and fell to the ground, unconscious.

The two other men looked at each other, then they turned and ran.

But, Devlin wasn't done with them. The Green Pus in his system was in control now, and any sympathy he might have for his would-be assailants had left him. They were going to pay for messing with him.

He reached out with his mind and grabbed them. They clanged heads together with a sickeningly wet smack. Pieces of brains, hair and skull went flying through the air. Blood splattered the walls of the alley as both men fell to the ground,

dead.

Devlin stepped out into the middle of the alley and stared down at the dead men. Their partner moaned in pain, and Devlin turned and looked at him.

"I told you to leave me alone," he told the man.

He thought about letting the man live, but he knew that The Little Man might find him through his victims. So, with one deep breath and thought, he stood over the man and watched as his chest caved in with a slurping sound.

"You're getting more powerful," a familiar voice said.

He turned and saw Daniel standing by the dumpster.

"I know."

Only then did Devlin feel remorse for the death he had inflicted. He looked down at the caved-in chest of the man whom he'd almost spared and wondered why he hadn't just turned the man into a mental vegetable. He knew that he possessed that power, too, now. He possessed many powers that he was afraid to explore. It was only while he was high on Pus that he attempted to use them, or when he felt the need for the substance. That was the primary goal of his life these days — stay high on Green Pus. Nothing else mattered; no one else mattered, either. Even the ache in his heart, the place that Caroline had once filled for him, meant nothing while he was on a Pus high.

"We should go," Daniel told him. "The police might come."

"To Hell with them," Devlin replied. He knew that he would do to the police what he had done to the three hoodlums. He would do it without so much as a second thought, and there would be no remorse...until later.

"You don't want to do that," Daniel said. Devlin looked to his left, and the boy stood at his side. He had traversed the ten feet or so between them while Devlin stared at the corpse of the man he had killed; a man who, like Devlin, had merely been trying to procure his next fix.

Devlin began to feel sympathy for the men he had killed. They were, after all, someone's sons. *Would they be missed?*

Would tears be shed at their funerals? Judging from their appearance, Devlin found it unlikely that they had anyone who loved them. And, with that thought, Devlin's humanity crept back in. A tear rolled down his cheek as he realized what he had done. *What sort of beast have I become?* Devlin asked himself. *Will I get worse?* The answer to that question seemed to be *yes*. He would evolve so far beyond normal men that he would look upon them as insects.

I can't allow that, he thought. *I can't become a monster. You already are.*

"Yes, you are," Daniel told him. "You're a monster. The Little Man made you this way... just as he's trying to make me a monster."

Devlin turned and looked at his son. The aura around the boy had changed. Before, it glowed with brilliant light. Now, it had faded. "What has that little bastard done?" Devlin asked.

"I'm not sure," Daniel told him. "I feel... different. Weaker."

The boy stepped forward and hugged his father. "They've been giving her Pus, Dad. I can feel it. I've tried to reach her, but it's too bright there. It hurts my eyes."

"You don't have eyes, son," Devlin said, looking down at the boy's head half sunk into his stomach. He felt pressure around his abdomen, but nothing quite like a human hug. "You're a ghost."

"No, I'm something more than that...now."

Devlin thought about that. "Yes, but you're not human."

"But I can see. I can feel."

"I know," Devlin replied. "I can sense that."

"I try to reach out for her, but the light stops me."

"That's why they keep it so bright down there," Devlin told him. "It keeps the spirit world out." He didn't know *how* he knew that, or why it was so, but he *knew* that it was. The brilliant white light that flooded the complex was to keep spirits of the dead out.

He remembered back to the experience in the swimming

pool, when Boulton had drowned and he had seen the man's spirit exiting his body. The light in the pool room had been normal at the time, and Boulton's spirit had escaped because of that. Or, at least, Devlin hoped the man's spirit had been set free. He had been a tortured soul of a man, and The Little Man had exploited it and driven Boulton into a Pus addiction that, if he had not drowned, would have eventually driven him into madness. Devlin had seen it more than once during his stay in The Little Man's den of horrors.

"Why would you want to reach her?" Devlin asked. "She killed you."

"She didn't mean to," Daniel said as he looked up into Devlin's eyes. "She was confused and it seemed like the easy way out. She didn't want to. You know that."

Devlin nodded. He supposed, in fact, that he did know she had not wanted to abort the boy. Caroline had always been an impulsive sort of person, someone who acted without thinking sometimes, and the abortion had been poorly considered.

"He's going to kill her," Daniel said. "The Pus will eventually drive her mad. You know that."

Once again, Devlin nodded. He knew that as well. The memory of Nikki flooded back in. He remembered the sweetness as she ground herself into him, the way the Pus made them both feel. But, like everything else in life, the sweetness had not lasted. The Pus had driven Nikki insane, and she had died.

Part of him wished that on Caroline.

Part of him knew she deserved that fate.

The other part still loved her.... and it was the other part that continually managed to win out in his mind.

"We have to help her," Devlin told Daniel. "If only to stop The Little Man," he continued, trying to qualify the statement and make it less personal. He knew that The Little Man would not stop his experiments until someone stopped him. And, Devlin knew he was the only man capable of doing it. The Little Man had given him the power to stop him. He

knew that as well as Devlin did. Devlin had never known The Little Man to fear anyone; but, he feared Devlin. He could not control Devlin like he had controlled all his other test subjects. Perhaps, Devlin theorized, that was the reason he had not been driven insane by the Green Pus. Certainly, the Green Pus had changed him, but it had not driven him insane. It had made him something other than human, but Devlin was still capable of cognitive thought. He could reason...and his reasoning mind told him that The Little Man needed to be stopped before he managed to create a monster like him whom he *could* control.

Devlin looked down at the collapsed chest of the man he had killed. In the darkness, the blood pooled on the ground looked black.

This has to end, Devlin thought. And I have to end it.

He looked down into Daniel's face. The boy had gone translucent in the moment since he'd last looked at him. He was now a pale, pasty white. His aura was fading. Whatever The Little Man was doing was affecting Daniel.

Daniel was dying again.

The Little Man was trying to take Daniel away from him as well.

"Come on, son," Devlin said. He reached out to take the boy's hand. Daniel placed his hand in Devlin's, but Devlin felt nothing. Still, he closed his hand and grasped what was left of the boy and, together, they walked out of the alley.

Soon, Devlin thought. Soon, The Little Man and he would come to a reckoning. Devlin only hoped he was powerful enough by then to save them all: Daniel, Caroline, himself and the rest of the world.

He wasn't certain that he was.

But he had to try.

If The Little Man succeeded in his diabolical plan, there would be no stopping him.... and both Caroline and Daniel would be lost in the process.

That was something he could not allow. He had already lost so much. He needed to hold on to what little he had left.

They turned right as they left the alley and headed toward home. Devlin was tired. He needed rest. He needed to think. And, most of all, he needed to develop a plan.

"Keep trying to reach your mother, son," Devlin told Daniel as they walked. The boy looked so pale, so lifeless — *he's dead*, Devlin told himself, *what do you expect?*

"I will," Daniel replied in a thin, weak voice. "I will."

"I know you will," Devlin said. Stay with me, son. Stay with me. I need you.

He glanced back toward the alley with the three dead men. I need to hold on to my humanity, too, he thought. The Pus is stealing it away from me. He knew that he couldn't shake the demon that coursed through his veins now. The Green Pus was entrenched in his cells. He could no sooner stop taking Green Pus than he could hack off his own arm. It was a part of him now. Just as Daniel was. He had to make the best of it.

And he had to make The Little Man, lying bastard that he was, pay for what he had done to them all.

Soon, he thought again. *Very soon.*

They walked on toward the ratty abandoned building Devlin called home as Devlin contemplated his plan.

He did not notice the soft glow of something else following him toward home.