

DEVLIN'S DESCENT



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**Chapter Twenty-Three:
“The Nature of the Beast”**

Devlin stood outside the complex gate. There was a chill wind coming off the lake, but he hardly noticed. Instead, he peered into the darkness of the early morning and saw everything. There were two armed guards sunk back into the shadows of the building. He could feel their eyes staring at him. He had no doubt The Little Man had given them orders to shoot to kill, but that wasn't happening tonight. Devlin could reach out and crush them with a mere thought if he wanted. The Little Man had not given them headsets; he wanted Devlin to journey down into the labyrinth of the complex and do battle with him.

Soon enough, Devlin thought. Soon enough.

He turned and looked behind him. Rosetta sat on the hood of the car. They had driven there in relative silence. There was nothing to say, really. Devlin had killed Joseph and, before the night was out, he would kill The Little Man if he were powerful enough to do so.

He looked down into his hand. The one remaining vial of Green Pus sat squarely in his palm, just begging him to consume it. The second vial had gone down his throat on the way to the complex. Devlin had needed it to calm his nerves.

Devlin rolled the vial around in his hand contemplatively.

"You can take it, Daddy," Daniel said. "You know you need it."

Devlin turned and looked at the boy. He glowed a soft shade of red. Devlin had not been surprised at Daniel's bloodlust for Joseph; the man was, after all, responsible for his death. Without his involvement, Daniel would have been an actual living, breathing child.

Even the dead want revenge, Devlin thought.

He thumbed open the vial.

"Take it," Daniel said. "It'll make what's coming next easier to take."

Devlin looked at the boy. "What *is* coming?" he asked.

"You know exactly what's coming," replied Daniel.

Devlin shook his head. He did, indeed, know what awaited him in the depths of The Little Man's lair. Pain. Sorrow. Heartache. And, if he wasn't careful, Death. He had seen so much of all of that over the course of the last year; Part of him wanted nothing more than to turn and walk away.

But, even as he considered it, he knew that he would not walk away. The Little Man had stolen everything from him. Devlin had, in his weakness, allowed the theft; but that didn't forgive The Little Man his trespasses. He would have to pay for what he had done to Devlin and so many others like him.

Devlin would be his executioner and their redeemer.

If he could.

Devlin wasn't completely certain.

He drank down the last vial of Green Pus in a massive gulp. Unlike most times, he felt nothing as the bitter liquid slid down his throat. He welcomed the numbness as it slid over him, however. It was like a glove of numbness that had slid over his entire body.

He turned and looked at Rosetta. "How do we get in?" he asked.

Malcolm Carlsrud had told Rosetta about the ventilation shaft. It was located a hundred yards or better from the main entrance — the underground complex was that huge. The shaft itself was almost four feet in diameter with a massive metal grating covering it. A large fan helped to pump the air out and, Devlin assumed, another ventilation shaft on the other side of the complex drew the air in.

"How do we stop the fan?" Rosetta said.

"Easy," Devlin replied. He took the tire iron he had brought with him and jammed it through the bars into the

fan motor. Sparks flew. Devlin did not immediately let the tire iron go, however. He let the electricity sizzle through his body a second, and his mind traveled through the wires at the speed of the electricity. In that moment, he was a part of the wiring and was in all places within the complex at once.

He saw everything in the brilliant lights and he knew how to turn the lights out for good.

He let go of the tire iron as the motor screamed its death.

He removed the tire iron and pried the grating off. He didn't care if it made a sound or not. He had spared the men at the main entrance. He knew that he could have easily overpowered them and entered the facility through there, but The Little Man would have that avenue covered. That, plus Devlin did not desire to hurt innocent by-standers. His battle was with The Little Man and no one else. It was not the guards' fault that they had chosen to serve a murderous little man; Devlin would not cause them harm if he didn't have to.

He started to step into the ventilation shaft.

"Wait!" Rosetta said. She walked up to Devlin. "I want to go with you."

Devlin shook his head. "It's not your fight," he told her. "It's between me and him."

Rosetta started to cry and Devlin took her hand. She looked in his eyes. "Listen," he said. "I want to thank you... just in case."

"No," she replied. "There's no 'just in case'. You're going to come out of there alive."

"Okay," he said. Then, he bent forward and kissed her. She returned the kiss with a passion that Devlin hoped would be everlasting. When the kiss broke, he turned and slid into the ventilation shaft without another word.

There was nothing left to say.

He jammed the tire tool into his belt loop and stepped inside the ventilation shaft.

His descent had begun.

The Ventilation shaft wasn't straight up and down. It had levels to it. Devlin realized as he slid down to the first perch that the shaft was similar in construction to a staircase. It dropped ten feet or so, had a little platform, then fell another ten feet. It was the strangest construction Devlin had ever experienced, albeit his knowledge of such things was limited.

Devlin could see a light, distant and faint, coming up through the shaft and wondered just how many steps he would have to venture down till he reached The Little Man.

"At least a thirty," Daniel said. He glowed a little redder in the darkness. Devlin's fresh intake of Green Pus had breathed a bit of life into him, so to speak.

Devlin slid down another shaft and landed on a platform. Then, he slid down another.

And another.

And another.

On the thirteenth slide, he landed on something soft. It was large, too, and he rolled off and laid on the little platform that gave way to the next tunnel.

For a moment, in the darkness, Devlin thought he had landed on a rug. But, the rug moved.

And growled.

Devlin turned and saw the thing that The Little Man had placed in ventilation shaft. He had known that Devlin would not take the main entrance and the elevator down into his lair, and he had placed a welcoming present in the shaft.

It was a monster he had seen before.

Shortly before Boulton's death in the swimming pool and Devlin's subsequent escape; The Little Man had come to Devlin with his usual contingency of brute force. By this time, Devlin had had two undiluted dosages of Green Pus, and The Little Man had been observing him with a keen interest. Devlin knew that he was a special case; most people died from the first dosage, let alone the second. But, Devlin had not only

survived; his mind had opened up in strange and mysterious ways. He could almost feel the aura of life surrounding him.

On this day, The Little Man had been particularly jovial. “Good morning,” he said with his evil little grin. “We have a treat in store for you today.”

“Oh,” Devlin replied, “And what might that be.... another Pus orgy?”

The Little Man snickered and shook his head. “No, I think we’ve learned enough about the effects of Green Pus on the sex drive — today we’re going to learn what happens when you’re thrust into a dangerous situation.” He paused, then added: “Or, rather, a life threatening situation.”

Devlin immediately tensed. He knew from his past experiences with The Little Man that he had no respect for life. He would — and had — killed for the mere pleasure of it. Devlin had survived the odds so far, but that only made The Little Man more intent on his demise.

“Come with me,” The Little Man said.

Devlin looked at the stern faces of the men behind The Little Man and knew that he would come with him whether he wanted to or not.

He stood and walked into the hallway. The brilliant lights shimmered off the glass windows that allowed a view into the rooms they passed, and The Little Man led Devlin in a direction he had not previous gone. The hallways seemed to stretch on forever, and Devlin thought: *just how big is this place, anyway?*

They came to a door that was bolted, and one of the thugs unlocked the lock that held the bolt in place and lifted the bolt. It was the first such security measure Devlin had seen in the underground lab, and he felt a cold chill run down his back as they slid the door open. A pungent smell hit his nose, and Devlin winced.

“You’ll get used to it,” one of the thugs told him, noticing his facial expression. They walked into something that resembled a foyer. At the end of the foyer, a tall metal gate stood locked. Past the gate, Devlin could see that the lighting

was normal and that a beaten dirt arena like those used in a rodeo lay within.

The Little Man entered a security code into the more commonly used digital lock and the gate opened.

The Little Man bade Devlin entrance.

Devlin walked out into what was, indeed, some form of arena. It was roughly the size of a football field, albeit a circular one. Above his head, rows of fluorescent lights shone. Along the walls, at intervals of perhaps fifteen feet, gated doors similar to the one they had entered through lined the circumference of the room.

The stench was much, much stronger here.

Devlin could recognize one of the smells — animal feces. He'd worked on a farm one summer as a boy, and part of his duties had been shoveling out the horse stalls. This smell was similar, but stronger.

Beneath that smell was another, darker odor. Devlin knew what that smell was now, too.

Blood.

"What happens here?" Devlin asked. He turned to The Little Man's seemingly perpetual smile.

"This is where we test your meddle," he replied. He reached into his pocket and produced a vial of Green Pus. "Here," he said, "Take this. It'll make the experience.... more intense."

Then, he turned and nodded at his servants. One of the men walked with The Little Man to the gate they had come through and they closed the door. Devlin could hear the audible click of the door locking.

He turned to the other man and realized, for the first time, that he was wearing clothing similar to his own. He wasn't one of The Little Man's minions; he was a test subject like Devlin.

"Who are you?" Devlin asked.

"Jon," he said. "Jon Moore." He stood about five foot, six inches, medium build, brown hair. Devlin had never seen the man before. He wondered just how many people resided

within the underground complex. He supposed there were many of them he had never seen.

He was going to ask Mr. Moore why he was there but, suddenly, an unnatural growl filled the air.

They both turned in the direction of the growl.

One of the gated doors slid open.

Another growl pierced the air as they saw something stir in the shadows that lay within.

"What the Hell is that?" Moore asked.

Devlin didn't know. He did know, however, that Moore was not high on Green Pus, like he was. The man was sober as a judge, or so it appeared. The Little Man had said that this would be an experiment in fear and survival, and Devlin realized that Moore was the control case. Devlin was the wildcard.

Both of them backed away.

The thing lurched out of darkened hall and Devlin got his first glimpse at it. It was not a creature God had thought up; it was man-made. No sane God would have designed something that was as big as a horse, with legs that looked like tree trunks and a face that was a nightmarish combination of a lion and a bear. The thing was covered in thick, black fur. It stood on its hind legs and screamed in protest that they were there. The thing towered over them, an unnatural bastardization. Devlin saw a light come on to his right and looked. Above them, The Little Man and his minions watched from a booth perhaps thirty feet in the air.

A high-pitched sound filled the air, and the creature screamed. It charged at them.

There was no time to think. Devlin ran to the right while Moore ran to the left. The beast took after Moore. It was only a matter of seconds before it caught him and grabbed him. It lifted him high above its head, then opened its mouth far wider than any natural animal could. Moore's midsection slid between the opening, and the creature chomped down. Moore screamed, but it only lasted a few seconds. Then, the beast tore him in two, his spinal column still in its mouth. The

thing shook its head a vertebrate went flying.

Devlin watched Moore's body hit the ground. He saw the shock in Moore's eyes as he tried to crawl away, using his arms to move his upper torso. But, his movement stopped quickly as a massive amount of blood flowed onto the ground, reminding Devlin of an explosive diarrhetic bowel movement. The beast turned toward Devlin. Devlin tried to reach out with his newfound mental powers, but the beast was too primal to be affected. He couldn't touch its mind.

It charged.

But, it never reached Devlin. From the booth, The Little Man's minions had fired tranquilizer darts. The beat, still running, fell to the ground in front of Devlin, unconscious.

Devlin looked up at the both and saw The Little Man, smiling, his head nodding affirmation.

He had found something Devlin could not defeat with his mind, and that was exactly what he needed to know.

Devlin stared into large red eyes. He could feel the creature's breath in his face, the stench of blood bringing back to him memories of Moore. The thing had torn him apart like a rag doll. That had been in a wide-open space. Devlin wondered what the thing would do in a confined space like the tunnel? Would The Little Man find him — or what was left of him — splattered all over the tier? He could picture the man laughing, proud of the fact that he had bested him.

"Snap out of it!" Devlin turned to see Daniel standing there. "That thing's going to kill you!"

Just then, it lunged forward. Devlin moved instinctively and the beast struck the wall behind him with a thud. Its front claw jerked and caught Devlin across his right arm. A deep gouge opened up and Devlin rolled away. He fell down the ten feet or so to the next level, landing flat on his back. The air was knocked out of him and he was disoriented for a moment.

When his mind cleared, he looked up and saw the thing's red eyes looking down at him. Something wet struck his forehead; the thing was drooling on him. Then, it growled and jumped.

Devlin rolled away and almost fell to another level. That was when he saw the ladder running overhead. It ran up into the darkness through a small tunnel that was big enough for a man.

The thing landed on the level as Devlin grabbed the bottom rung of the ladder and pulled himself up. He moved up the ladder quickly. The thing snapped at him and almost caught his foot. But, Devlin managed to get into the service tunnel. The beast snapped and growled, but could not follow him.

"Way to go, genius," Daniel said. Devlin looked up the ladder and saw the boy, his red aura glowing at him. "You're trapped."

The thing snarled and jumped. Its head reached into the tunnel, but it was too large to get at him. That didn't stop it from trying, however. When it fell to the ground, it jumped back up again. This time, it managed to grab the heel of Devlin's shoe in its mouth. It sank its teeth into the heel, missing Devlin's foot by a fraction of an inch. Devlin kicked out and caught the beast across the face and it released its grasp on him as it fell to the floor once again.

Devlin moved up a couple of rungs in the ladder as the beast jumped again.

He looked up at Daniel. The boy was smiling.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You're a real champion of the world, Dad," he told him. "A savior for the masses."

The beast jumped again. This time, it jumped so hard that it almost got itself lodged in the tunnel. It hung there a moment, blocking out the light (except for Daniel's red glow), then fell back to the floor.

Devlin looked above him. In Daniel's glow, he could see a hatch there. It was maybe fifteen feet above. It was then

that he remembered the tire tool in his belt loop. He reached down, surprised to find it still there, took it out and ran his hand along the pointed edge.

Could it pry the hatch open?

“Nuh-uh,” Daniel said. “You know The Little Man better than that. Little son of a bitch probably has an explosive charge hooked to the latch. You open the door, then kaboom!” Devlin looked back down as the beast jumped again. He knew that there was little chance it would tire of its attack. It was more likely that the thing would sit there, at the bottom of the ladder, and wait for him to come down. Then, it would kill him.

He looked back up at the hatch. Daniel was right; The Little Man probably had all the hatches in the complex wired with explosive. There was little chance he could escape his current predicament that way.

The beast jumped again. This time, it lodged itself in the tunnel for a second or two, and it managed to get one of its arms or legs or whatever they were into the tunnel as well. It grabbed the bottom rung of the ladder and held on.

Devlin scurried down and stomped its fingers.

The beast howled in pain and fell to the ground again. It jumped again almost immediately and Devlin was ready for it. He braced himself against the ladder and drove the tire tool into its nose with as much force as he could muster. The beast’s snout caved in from the impact and blood went flying everywhere. Devlin heard the sound of cartilage cracking and the beast fell to the floor beneath them.

It did not move.

“I’ll be damned,” Daniel said, “you killed it.”

Devlin shook his head. “No,” he said. Even from where he sat, he could hear the beast’s labored breathing. He had broken its snout and caused damage, but it was still alive. The fall had knocked it out and it lay there, unconscious.

“It’s just hurt,” he said.

The beast stirred, tried to stand, and staggered. Devlin thought it reminded him of the drunks that walked the city

in the wee hours of the morning, their daily panhandled beverages consumed. He watched as the disoriented creature walked off the edge of platform and fell the dozen or so feet to the next level. It hit with a sickeningly wet thud.

Then, there was silence.

Devlin stayed in the safety of the ladder tunnel a full two minutes before carefully sliding out. He stayed close to the tunnel for another minute, just in case the beast was playing possum on him.

Then, he walked to the edge of the tunnel and looked down.

Daniel was standing beside him. "Go down and check it out," Devlin told him.

Daniel floated down the tunnel. In the warmth of his glow, Devlin saw the mangled torso of the beast. Its head had struck first, driving the tire tool deep into its brain, and that had been the deathblow. Its neck was broken and hanging at an unnatural angle.

It would not attack again.

It was dead.

Devlin almost felt sorry for the creature. It had been created by The Little Man, just like he had been, and The Little Man had used it as a tool. Devlin slid down the tunnel and stood beside the beast; its torso already cooling. Part of him wanted to cry for the thing, but didn't. Crying would do no good. Devlin had shed enough tears to last him a lifetime, anyway. He doubted he could cry if he wanted to.

Instead, he reached out and ran his hand through the creature's rich pelt. "I'll avenge you, too," he told it. "You should never have existed."

He turned, looked at Daniel, and thought: neither should you.

If Daniel heard that thought, he did not acknowledge it. Instead, he stood there and watched Devlin pry the tire tool from the dead beast's skull.

When Devlin looked up, he waved the bloody tool at him and said: "Let's go."

Daniel nodded and, together, they continued their descent.