

DEVLIN'S DESCENT



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Chapter Nineteen:
“In the Light”

Devlin awoke to the smell of bacon cooking. It was a familiar smell, of course, albeit from a better, vanished time. He lay on the couch in Rosetta's living room and drew in the scent of the bacon frying and remembered a time, now over a year ago, when he had awoke to a similar aroma.

He tried to picture Caroline — his Caroline, not the thing that she became afterwards— standing at the stove, preparing breakfast for the man she loved. But, hard as he tried, he couldn't shake the memory of her betrayal from his mind.

Pus, he thought. *I need Green Pus.*

Only Pus could make his memories of her go away.

He reached down and touched his pant pocket and felt the lumps there. The vials were still there, waiting on him to open one and drink it down, wash away the pain he felt. He stuck his hand into the pocket and wrapped his fingers around one of the vials and was about to bring it out and do just that when Rosetta walked into the room.

"Oh, good," she said, "you're up."

He smiled at her and released the vial, letting it fall back into his pocket.

He sat up. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Eleven-thirty," she replied. "I know, I know.... it's a bit late for breakfast, but I thought you might enjoy some bacon and eggs?"

"Yes, I would," Devlin said as he sat up. His realized as he sat up that his head felt much, much better today. Maybe he didn't have a concussion after all?

"I don't recall falling asleep last night," he told her.

Rosetta smiled. "You were pretty tired. You fell asleep on the couch there and I threw a blanket on you. I would have taken your shoes off, but I was afraid I'd wake you."

Devlin looked down at the things he called his shoes. He'd dug them out of a dumpster behind a thrift store. They were so badly worn that even the thrift store couldn't sell them.

Same went for the clothing he wore.

One man's trash is another man's treasure, he thought with a grin. I must be rich.

Devlin had thought often about his descent from grace. His life before hadn't been perfect, of course, but it had been his and he had loved Caroline with all his heart. He found it sad and strangely humorous that her betrayal could have destroyed him so completely. *You let it destroy you, Devlin thought as he sat there. You could have pulled yourself together, moved on, but you didn't. You let what she did destroy you.*

But, what else was I supposed to do? He thought.

He had worshipped the ground Caroline walked upon.

He looked at Rosetta and saw the concern on her face. But, when she spoke, she did not ask him what he was thinking. Instead, she said: "You ready to eat?"

"Yeah," was all Devlin could muster.

Devlin started to stand, but Rosetta motioned for him to sit. "I'll bring your breakfast to you," she said. She smiled as she turned and walked back toward the kitchen.

When she reappeared. She carried a large platter. She sat it on the coffee table in front of him and, like Pavlov's Dog, Devlin's mouth watered. Not only had Rosetta prepared bacon, she had also cooked sausage, two eggs over easy (and, obviously, cooked in the grease from the bacon), an English muffin with strawberry jam and even a small helping of hash browns.

Devlin looked at her. "I haven't eaten this well in a long, long time," he told her.

Rosetta gave him a compassionate nod. "I know. I know what it is like." Then, she raised her finger. "Hold on, I forgot something." She ran back into the kitchen and, a moment later, reappeared with a glass of orange juice.

Devlin smiled, and, for the first time in a long, long time, he realized he wasn't craving Pus at that second. He knew

that the vials were in his pocket but he didn't want it.

Why? He wondered.

"Eat up," Rosetta said, "before it gets cold."

Devlin didn't need to be told twice. He picked up a piece of the bacon and shoved it in his mouth, savoring the flavor. He knew that he could eat anything anywhere he wanted to — all he had to do was use his powers to procure it — but bacon was something he hadn't had in over a year. *Why?* He didn't know. He supposed it was something too familiar; something that he associated with Caroline, and that was a thing he couldn't stand the thought of.

Still, as he ate, he realized that Caroline, like Pus, was an afterthought. There had been a time when she was the central hub of his existence, but that time was now past. He knew it, *now*... but it had been a long, arduous voyage to that realization.

And, he had, quite literally, paid for his fare on that voyage with his soul.

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"You can take a shower, if you like?" Rosetta told Devlin after breakfast was over. "There's a spare toothbrush in the medicine cabinet." The tone of her voice implied what Devlin already knew: he smelled. It had been several days since he'd bathed in the gas station restroom where he'd met Daniel, and he desperately needed to clean himself.

He nodded. "Okay."

"Towels are in the linen closet across the hall," she told him.

He went to the closet, got a towel, and walked into the bathroom. He closed the door and looked at himself in the mirror. The reflection was something he wasn't prepared for. He looked like he felt — old, used-up and exhausted. He ran his hand along the thick stubble on his face and looked in the medicine cabinet. He was surprised to find a disposable razor and some shaving cream in the cabinet. He wondered whose

it was, but would have the decency not to ask. Rosetta was a grown woman; she could have a man over if she wanted to.

He turned on the shower and disrobed. The water felt good on his flesh. So good, in fact, that he did not hear the door open. The shower curtain drew back and he saw Rosetta standing there, naked. She had a beautiful body and Devlin couldn't help but look at her.

"Can I join you?" she asked.

Devlin fumbled for the words. "Yeah."

She stepped into the shower and closed the curtain, then reached out and picked up a washcloth. "Turn around," she told him.

Devlin turned and Rosetta took a bar of soap from the tray and soaped the washcloth. Then, she began to clean his back. That done, she turned him around and washed his chest.

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"I...I don't understand," Devlin said, bewildered by this turn of events.

Rosetta smiled. "You'll understand shortly," she told him.

Just enjoy it, he thought.

Except, the thought was not his own.

It was Rosetta's.

He looked down at her as she stood. "That's right," she said. Then, she kissed him passionately. Devlin returned the kiss. He ran his hand along the contour of her back, then moved around to her stomach. She was smooth and lean and his first impression of her beauty had been wrong. Rosetta had an inner beauty that very few women possessed. Savoir-

faire, he realized. Elegance.

That feels good, he heard her think. He also received the sensory information that confirmed her thoughts. It wasn't like the encounter with Emily; he wasn't entering her mind; he was just communicating with it. There was no switching places, but each of them knew the pleasure the other felt.

"He didn't tell me to do that," she told Devlin. "It was all my idea."

Devlin couldn't help but come back with a snappy reply. "I like the way you think," he said. Then, he kissed her.

They showered together after that, Devlin washing her back and Rosetta washing his. It had been a very long time indeed since Devlin had made love in the shower and he liked it. To be honest about it, he wanted more.

They dried off and dressed. Rosetta brought Devlin some clothes and said: "These are probably too big for you, but they'll suffice until I can wash your other clothes." And, when she saw the confused expression on Devlin's face, she said: "Relax. They're my ex-husband's. They were buried out in the garage. I found them and washed them while you were sleeping."

"Oh," Devlin said. He felt somewhat compromised in the fact that Rosetta could read his mind.

"Not everything," she told him. "But enough. Now, get dressed. We've got some things to discuss."

"All right," Devlin said.

Rosetta picked up the rags he had been wearing and disappeared into her bedroom as Devlin dressed. The clothing she had brought him was, indeed, too large. Devlin had once had a pot-gut, but many months on the streets had slimmed him down. Once again, that was not from Devlin's lack of ability to procure food. He had, on occasion, gotten sirloin steaks for dinner from an unknowing restaurateur, but that was a rare thing. Devlin had a conscious when it came to decent, hard-working people, and he found it difficult to steal

from them. Drug pushers and hookers? Sure. But not someone who was minding his or her own business, earning a living. He had eaten their food and felt guilt about it. On more than one occasion, he had taken money from drug dealers to purchase food. In that sense, he considered himself a bastardized version of Robin Hood, stealing from those who didn't deserve it and giving it to those who did.

The clothes might have been a tad oversized, but they were clean and fresh smelling. He took the razor and shaving cream out of the medicine cabinet and shaved. He saw a hairbrush on the counter and combed his hair, too. When he looked at himself in the mirror afterward, he thought he saw a hint of the man he had been before his world had gone in the toilet.

A knock came at the door. "You all right in there?" Rosetta asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

Guess she can't read all my thoughts.

"I'm fine," Devlin said. "I'll be right out."

He took a moment and stared at himself in the mirror again. He had lost so much over the past year. He had suffered immeasurably. And, yet, he was still alive. He had been beaten, but not defeated.

He opened the door and Rosetta's eyes grew wide. A few seconds later, a smile that warmed his heart crossed her face. "There was a handsome man under all that hair, after all," she said in a joking tone. "Feel better?"

"Yes." Devlin had to admit it; he did feel better. He felt better than he had in a long, long time.... and he had Rosetta to thank for it.

Rosetta reached out and took his hand. "Come on," she said. "I need to tell you everything."

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They walked into the living room and sat on the couch Devlin had slept upon. Rosetta had prepared both of them drinks, herself a diet soda and Devlin a glass of lemonade.

She motioned for him to sit, and he did.

"I guess by now you figured out that I've had a dose of undiluted Pus?" she asked him.

"Yes," Devlin said. "But how?"

"Well," she said. "It's like any other drug dealer, I suppose. They get the stock and cut it — you know, dilute it — then put it on the market." She leaned forward and took his hand. "It was eight years ago this August that I tried Pus for the first time. Like I told you before, my husband had deserted me and I was sad and depressed. I tried to wash all that away with alcohol. That led to going out to bars and after-hours parties. One night — I was pretty drunk — someone offered me a little container of green stuff. I'd never even heard of Green Pus; I was that naïve about things. I was drunk and uninhibited enough that I took what they gave me and drank it down."

She turned away as she said, "I woke up the following afternoon in the bed of a man I didn't know. As it turned out, he worked in a lab. A lab you know all too well."

"The Little Man?" Devlin asked.

"Yes," Rosetta told him. "He was producing the undiluted Green Pus and cutting it for The Little Man. I stayed with him for two months; I don't know why."

"I do," Devlin told her. "You were addicted to Green Pus. You would have done anything to get your next fix."

"And I did," Rosetta said, diverting her eyes again.

Devlin reached out and touched her face. There was a tear rolling down her cheek, and he wiped it away with his thumb. "It's all right," Devlin said. "You survived. You're here now. You have to be proud of yourself for that."

"One night, he brought home a man. He was short and had blazing red hair." There was another long, drawn-out pause.

"Hey," Devlin said. "It's okay."

Rosetta burst into tears. "The things he...did...to...me." She looked Devlin in the eye. "I'm so ashamed."

"Don't be," Devlin told her. "He's an evil little bastard."

Trust me, I know. There was nothing you could do."

"I could have gotten out of there. Ran away."

Devlin shook his head. "But the Pus wouldn't let you, would it?"

"No."

Devlin held her in his arms until she stopped crying. "He gave me Green Pus. Told me it was stronger than anything I'd ever find on the streets, and that it would take me places I'd never gone before." She stared into Devlin's eyes. "On that account, he was right. It was like my brain was on fire. And I could see things.... strange things. Things that no human being had any right to see."

"I know," Devlin said. "I've seen them, too."

Rosetta sat back. "I died. I died right there in that house, The Little Man on top of me, smiling and grunting away as he took me. My heart stopped and I died."

Devlin stared at her. "But...you're here."

Rosetta smiled softly. "No thanks to The Little Man."

"So, what happened?"

"To this day," she told him, "I'm not certain if it was a dream or a glimpse of the afterlife. There was bright tunnel of light; no soothing feeling came over me. But, there was a man. Malcolm Carlsrud's son. Malcolm Carlsrud, Jr. The Little Man's father. He came to me and told me that, one day, I would be asked to save another man's soul from damnation. If I agreed, they would give me my life back."

"And you agreed?"

"Yes." Rosetta nodded.

Devlin shook his head. There were so many things about Green Pus that he still did not understand. So many things that he would never understand.

"How'd he save your life?" Devlin asked.

Rosetta shook her head. "I don't know. I woke up in a ditch out in the country. How I got there, I don't know. But, I suspect The Little Man had my dead body dumped in the field. He figured the police wouldn't waste much time on the death of a Pus addict."

"Yeah," Devlin said. "The little bastard's got most of the police department wrapped around his finger."

"Since my resurrection — if, indeed, it was that — I've read in newspapers and seen reports on television about half a dozen or so women found in fields and ditches around the county."

I bet I know the names of a couple of them, Devlin thought.

"The Little Man's insane," Rosetta said. "He mad with power and he's getting away with murder. He's poisoning the streets of America and doing God know what else."

"He's going places he shouldn't, too," a voice said from the doorway.

They both turned to see Daniel standing there. "Who are you?" Rosetta asked.

Devlin, bewildered, turned to her. "You see him?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was a figment of my imagination," Devlin said.

"Gee," Daniel said as he walked into the room. "Thanks for the vote of confidence." He stepped up to the couch and sat down between them. "I'm really, all right. As real as a spirit can be. And I know now how to beat The Little Man at his own game."

"How?" Devlin asked.

"I've found his weakness," Daniel told them.

"What?"

"The netherworld," replied Daniel. "He's vulnerable there."

"I don't understand?" Devlin said.

"I'll help you understand," Daniel replied. He stepped up to Devlin and slid inside him. Rosetta watched in bewilderment. She could feel what Daniel was telling him, but could not understand it.

A few moments later, Daniel slid out of Devlin. "You understand now?" he asked.

"Yes," Devlin said. "We can kill him the next time he enters the Netherworld."

“But we have to be there when he does,” Daniel told him. Devlin looked at Rosetta. “We’ll leave in the morning,” he said.

Rosetta nodded.

“And, here’s what we will need to do,” Daniel told them.

Both Devlin and Rosetta listened to him as he told them what was to come next.