

PARTHOLON



D. KRAUSS

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Good on ya, mates.

For Terry, who endures.

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PARTHOLON

BOOK ONE

D. KRAUSS



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

“And it is there that Partholon died, five thousand men and four thousand women, of a week’s plague on the kalends of May. On a Monday plague killed them all except one man...”

The Lebor Gabala Erren [Book of Invasions]

Irish Texts Society

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/irish/lebor.html>

Stutter roll, stutter roll, stutter...

John straddled the bike and gave the pedal a kick, watching the tire spin then catching it on the pavement. Let's go, let's go. Yeah, in a minute. Kick, spin, catch.

Still dark. Should take advantage of that. Be invisible, be silent, dodging the cars and wreckage, tire hum only eight, ten feet in front, so he'd be on the dogs before they knew it. They'd start, confused, trying to spot him while he saw them so clearly, lit up like day in the goggles. Raise a threatening pistol and they scatter. Instinct.

So let's go, man.

No. Don't want to.

There. The thought. He relaxed, actually smiled. Yeah. Didn't want to. He just didn't want to. Stupid to go. Gonna get killed. Gonna get shot. Gonna gonna.

Call in sick.

He laughed. That's a good one. Start shouting now. Maybe someone'll hear.

Sick. Wouldn't be a lie. He must be sick, must be crazy, going to work like this. No one goes to work. There is nothing to work for. There are no bureaux or chiefs or coordinators or patrol officers or dumbass students crying 'cause someone stole their laptops out of their rooms, which they left open while they went to eat and make phone calls and they trust everyone on their floor and this is just unbelievable and what kind of campus is this and what kind of lousy cops are you anyway?

Well, that was one advantage. He didn't have to hear that stupid crap anymore. That made for a bigger smile. And that made him push, finally, off.

The hardest part was getting started. Once done, things settled into a rhythm pretty quick and he actually enjoyed it. That was true even Pre-Event. How many times, say, he'd just sit in the living room dressed in his dobok, fingering his black belt and coming up with hundreds of reasons not to go to practice. Too old, too tired, too late, just wanna finish this movie then Theresa would say, "Are you going or not?" and he would and when he got there and got warmed up and did a couple of falls and started teaching the beginners about holds and pressure points he'd be into it and glad he came.

But see, there was benefit to that. What's the benefit here? He wasn't being paid. That was the fuck of it. It's easy to justify the dumbest of jobs if you're paid for it, even if you're not paid well. This arming up and leaving when it's still dark and using night vision and changing routes, so no established pattern, and

shooting at suspicious movement and outrunning the dogs was all effort uncompensated.

So why do it?

He stopped at the end of Harwood, where it emptied onto Old Keene Mill, and considered holing up, living furtive, sneaking out for groceries or medicine or ammunition like a scared rat. Nah. That was dying by inches. Not his style. He wasn't going to go in measure – he was going all at once, in a blaze of unknown glory. So that's one.

Two. He was tired of losing. He'd already lost too much. Vandals weren't going to pick his bones and sell him at the Gate. He was going to leave a mark here, a sign of his passing, not of his succumbing.

No three. Two were good enough.

There was panting and clattering and snuffling behind him but he didn't react. Lupus came up to the bike and nudged his hand off the handle and he reached into his pocket and threw him a Sausage. Hairbag stood off, as usual, watching and John waited. Presently the sheepdog shuffled near arm's reach and John figured that was close enough and threw him one, too. Lupus watched it sail over but wouldn't interfere. He loved his partner too much.

“You boys keep an eye out,” he ordered them, “and don't devil Snuffy.”

They looked to see if, somehow, the morning ritual would change and he would throw more. Hope springs eternal. “Get,” he said, signaling the end of that hope and they both turned and barked a couple of times, and romped off. John smiled grimly. A little taste of meat and, hopefully, they'd run down some deer today.

Damn deer. They're like big furry fleas.

He coasted to the bottom of Daventry and kicked in the electric motor to help with the steep climb into Springfield. “Good morning, Mrs. Vanderbilt,” he said, as he always did, to the fur-coat-wrapped grinning skull leaning against the Cadillac's window across from the 7-11. Not her name, he was sure, but he wasn't interested enough to dig through her rotten purse to find out.

She was the only one in a position to grin at him during the morning ride, so she deserved some kind of greeting. And if she had tried to get away while wrapped in her precious furs, well, then she should get a wealthy honorific, too.

He reached the interchange and stopped. Which way today? Probably should use 395, then parallel on Van Dorn to Beauregard when it gets a little lighter, maybe get back on at Route 7. When was the last time you did that, four days ago? Should be okay. John checked his harness, ensuring the mini-14 was tight across his back and the .357 was riding high enough on his hip. Slap the tanto and the .25, all in place. He headed up the ramp and, last minute, decided to use the HOV lanes, which meant dodging all the dead cars facing him. Disconcerting. And it was harder to get onto Van Dorn, no ramps, but it had the advantage of being a little unexpected.

Bundys think everyone thinks like them and chooses the path of least resistance. It would give him an extra few seconds to spot them.

He coasted down the ramp and into rhythm after passing Edsall, turning off the battery to save power. Not really necessary because he was carrying a spare but it was always good to have a little more juice for the last leg. It was still dark by the time he passed Gallows and he was in good humor. Riding always did that to him, even Before. In the blackest of moods, he'd pull out the Bianchi and go tooling up the Parkway and, about a mile into it, was thrilled and smiling and wondering why he'd been so pissed off. Just love to nurture our hurts, don't we, sitting on the couch and toasting our grudges. Entropy. Takes an effort to put the drink down and shake the mood by doing something productive, mow the lawn, fix the fence, kill some Bundys, although he didn't really need a lot of push to do that.

The world was green. It was a clear night, al-though a little cold (spring, waddya want?), and the stars were firing up the goggles. If he looked up, the Milky Way would dazzle, overwhelm. You could see every faint star and nebula with the goggles, so fascinating and beautiful that he would lose control of the Zap, staring at a green universe in open-mouthed wonder.

So don't look up.

He watched the road and shoulders instead, seeking movement. The cars were clear and green and dead in the goggles, skewed, off-angle, most of them crashed into the car in front, here and there settled on top of each other. Evidence of frustration: drivers plowing into the jam that prevented escape while the cloud of death crept up behind.

A few were overturned and burnt, whole families of skeletons spilling out of the windshields and windows. Skulls grinned at him from behind steering wheels or lolled in passenger seats or, occasionally, bunched all together, as if they'd decided on one last group hug. Several had big holes in them, evidence of something other than the Al-Qaeda Flu.

But, overall, not that many bones here. Most people had just abandoned their vehicles and walked. The bone pile-ups started more towards Woodbridge, as the weakened refugees stumbled then stopped and, wheezing for air, huddled miserably under whatever shelter they could find, a truck, a tree, an overpass. The 95 rest stop was damn near impassable because of the bones. He supposed things had evened out from there with a better distribution of bones all the way to Richmond. Hell, all the way to Charlotte. Not that he was going to look.

It was kind of fun dodging in and out of the wrecks. Motocross, something he had never done but sure looked like a hoot. You had to be quick and sharp at this speed to make it through without collision. If he kicked in the battery, it would be a lot more hair-raising, but he wasn't sure he still had the reflexes for that, so no. Besides, it was too distracting. Couldn't look for ambushes while playing skull chicken.

It took about an hour from Edsall to reach the Pentagon and he was a sweatbag. Hell, he was a sweatbag before he got on 395, even with the collar undone and the tie loosened. That's why he always brought another shirt. Even with the electric motor, this was a helluva workout, considering all the weight he

carried. He was a profuse oozer under the most benign of conditions, anyway – simply watching others work out was enough to get him going. A natural for that old Mitchum commercial.

That's why no body armour. Forget it. He'd die of heatstroke before he made the Route 7 exit. The high calibers everyone's using made armour somewhat futile, anyway. That thought made him peer hard at the shoulders, looking for someone wielding a rifle. Nothing.

It was a bitch of a climb to the top of the 110 ramp but he looked forward to it because of the long descent on the other side past the Pentagon, where the jet had smashed into it. They'd almost completely repaired it. The rubble had been carted off and the breach sealed but there was still some curtaining around the wound and blackening about the edges. A lot done for the little time they had, but, given things, just as well they never finished. It was now a shrine, a monument to the first blow of the war. That it was abandoned was evidence of the second.

But not today. A Cobra suddenly swooped over the ramp and John almost upended, braking hard and ducking under the overpass. He cursed. How do you not hear a helicopter? Must be some trick of acoustics because rifle shots were heard miles away now, so the damned Cobra should have sounded like the Second Coming.

John unholstered the .357 and, cautiously, inched the Zap down the decline. At the edge of the overpass, he leaned the Zap against the wall then slowly poked his head around the corner. The Cobra was gone, although he could hear it. Sounded like it was on the other side of the Pentagon. He watched, patient.

Ah. There.

Movement along the parking lot, some more on the lawn opposite the breach. Big yellow suits and big self-contained breathing units.

CDC.

Had they seen him? John tensed but no one headed his way and the Cobra stayed off, so probably not. Didn't mean he was safe. They probably had some guys scanning the area just waiting for someone like John to do something they interpreted as threatening, like breathe, and then waste him. Or worse, take him. John gripped the pistol. No friggin' way.

A couple of CeeDees had paused in front of the breach and were staring at it. Tribute, John supposed, although it was highly unlikely either of the moonsuits had been anywhere near the Pentagon when it happened. Doubtful they were even military. Just because they had emergency authority and widely expanded powers and weapons systems and patrols and itchy trigger fingers didn't make them club members and didn't give the two moonsuits the right to render honors to people they wrongly considered brethren. The CDC was as far away from the principles those Pentagon people died for as their doctors were from compassion. So they were just tourists. He set his jaw. He should shoot them.

So what was the CDC doing here? He took a risk and craned his neck to see more but couldn't really tell. Odd place to do air sampling and you weren't going to find a lot of test subjects running around the place. Most Survivors avoided the

Pentagon because they believed there were arcane security devices, like mines and lasers, scattered all around it. Same reason they avoided Langley. John knew those stories were crap, probably sowed by the military to keep Raiders from breaking in and selling their dirty little secrets at the Gate. More likely, the military kept a security team in place with orders to kill all trespassers, although he'd seen no evidence. Didn't mean they weren't there. Maybe he was now seeing that evidence, a relief unit.

A transport helicopter, a Chinook, roared over the side of the Pentagon and hovered above the roof. John watched as a large cable dropped down with what looked like a pallet attached to it. He couldn't see much from this angle, so he waited and, about ten minutes later, the pallet went back up loaded with hundreds of boxes.

Well. They finally decided to collect their dirty little secrets, did they? 'Bout damn time. Shoulda done it when they first emptied out DC, but, better late than never.

Which meant they weren't CDC, but military. So maybe he should drop the bike and run across the lawn and say, "Hey! Hey, I'm one of you! I'm a retired captain, take me, take me!" How many rounds to the chest would he get for that – twenty, thirty? Forty, if he acted as if he were going to tear their suits. He chuckled grimly. Yeah, they'd take him, all right. Straight to the Atlanta labs.

He grabbed the Zap, moved to the opposite side of the overpass and checked the area. He watched the Chinook as it spun off and then looked at the CeeDees but they weren't paying attention. And no Cobra, so go. He whipped the Zap past the wall and hauled it over the railing, sliding down the steep decline and almost killing himself at the bottom, which had such a sharp angle he was afraid, for a moment, he'd bent the tire rim. All this while clutching the .357. Pretty good. He held his breath but no shots rang out, so he'd given them the slip. Or they weren't going to reveal their position for somebody obviously running away.

He pulled the Zap up the next incline and over the set of railings, puffing and panting and resetting himself and yes, wiping away the sweat with a pocket-handkerchief. Okay, have to travel the outbound lanes of 110 now to avoid the CeeDees, which meant a long haul past Ft. Myer. He would definitely be late.

The trumpet blew and Collier groaned deep in his blankets. Gawd, who did they get this time, some 12-year-old slick sleeve? No one, even in their most drunken state, could confuse that caterwauling with anything approaching Reveille. Maybe that was the point, make it so bad everyone would leap out of their bunks and charge the Quad intent on murder.

“Rise and shine, rise and shine, another beautiful day in the Provos,” Davis griped from the top bunk and Collier smiled. Same thing, every morning. So he knew Davis was all right.

Collier kicked the bottom of Davis’s mattress and heard a satisfying “*Oof!*” and Davis rolled off and pounced on him and they were wrestling in the middle of the floor, Davis more technically proficient but Collier with the weight and leverage. Collier got him in a headlock and held him until Davis tapped out, saying “Dammit!”

“That’s three this week,” Collier noted.

“Yeah, yeah, jerkwad, you ain’t gonna win. There’s still tomorrow.”

Collier smiled and let him up and started making his bed. He would win. He wanted Sunday off, no KPing the room. He’d make it up to Davis next week, losing four of the five matches, but not this week. Ah, Sunday, sleep late, spend time on the lacrosse field shooting goals, maybe barbecue on the parade field, if they could find meat. Grab some guns, grab Davis when he was done with the room, head into town and look for pussy. Or trouble. Plenty of both in Waynesboro.

They KPd, grabbing clothes and books, squaring chairs and desks and folding laundry from last night and then Davis took the bathroom first. One of the privileges of company rank: your own bathroom. Suffer, peasants, he sent the uncharitable thought out to the Quad.

“There, by the grace of God,” leaped into his head in Dad’s voice and he felt a momentary shame. You’re right, Dad, you’re right. He sent an apology out to the Quad, too.

He lit a candle to dispel the murk and opened his copy of the Federalist Papers. If he didn’t pass American Government, then he wouldn’t graduate, although they’d let him walk, and he’d have to do summer school. Not a bad idea; it would hold off his draft for at least three more months, give him time to finish his negotiations with the air force.

But Dad would be peeved and the army might just say enough is enough and send a Draft Gang to collect him. The last time they tried that, they got their asses

handed to them, so, this time, they'd come heavier. He had no doubt Fishburne would repel them, but at a much higher cost than the twelve they lost last time. And they might end up getting him, anyway. Pass the course. Do Dad proud. Besides, should have an answer from the air force by the end of May. Or June.

Davis burst out of the bathroom yelling, "Next!" like, who else would it be? Steam followed him out and raised the temperature in the room about four degrees, which was nice. The staff turned on the boilers at 0400, which usually gave enough hot water to shower the Corp and raise the classroom temps to at least the point where you couldn't see your breath before they shut them off again at 0800. Thank God it was spring; soon, the problem would be cooling the rooms and, since the four-hours-a-day of electricity wouldn't do the job, everyone would end up sleeping on the Quad or under the overhangs, if it was raining.

He closed the book and slipped past Davis, who was air-guitaring the bass line from "Smooth Criminal," Alien Ant Farm version, "DododododoDO, doDO, Do," and getting it wrong, of course. Man had no sense of rhythm and Collier picked it up in his mind as he closed the door. Yeah. Music from 2001, Before the World Ended.

Shit, shower, shave, not necessarily in that order but with the special urgency three years at Fishburne had instilled and he was out in seven minutes, all three tasks accomplished to his satisfaction. He kissed the (illegal) poster tacked to the back of the door – Brooke Burke standing in water with a come hither look over her shoulder. "Brooke, Brooke," he muttered, "come away with me."

"Your dreams," Davis commented, eating an illegal corn muffin. The man ate continuously but managed to lose weight. Tapeworm.

"Cadet or Provo today?" Collier asked.

"Cadet."

Good. Collier reached for the grays, the day uniform because there was no parade scheduled, just drill, so he could be a little more informal. He dressed quickly and tying his shoes when the first bell sounded.

"Here we go," Davis said and they squared each other and eyed each other and Collier punched Davis in the shoulder and he ball-slapped Collier in return, causing him to gasp and hunch over. "Bastard!" he said, with his remaining breath.

Davis grinned and placed the loaded .45 in his holster. "You betcha."

Collier grabbed his own pistol and they both strode onto the landing. Cadets scurrying by dodged them while saluting, some, at this late moment, running from the shower. Collier shook his head. Never make it, so they'll end up braced later this afternoon.

They both looked down in the Quad, still dark because sunrise had not yet climbed past the mountains surrounding Waynesboro. Captain Bock was a silhouette there, clipboard in hand, legs apart, the sleeve over his missing arm dangling, a statue, a rock. Davis and Collier squared each other one more time and waited.

Bong! Officer of the Day rang the ship's bell, "First call!"

Doors slammed and the sudden uptick in mutter and scuffle and motion meant the Corp was moving, most of it, anyway. In the early morning, it was a gray mass on black, defined only by the two field torches that threw just enough light to make out figures. The gray tide flowed around the Quad, the companies finding position.

“See ya later,” Davis said and hit him on the shoulder as he walked away. Davis, as adjutant, would stand with the command staff. Collier watched his own corner and saw that most of Alpha Company was there. Good. God help, though, anyone who was late.

Briskly he turned and walked to the cement landing, smoothed and grooved down the middle by thousands of boots over the past 120 years, and march-walked his way down to the first floor. Cadets saluted him, saying, “Sir” and he saluted back. He reached the grass and made his way to the front of the company. Farley, his first sergeant, was already there.

“Sir,” Farley saluted.

“Everyone here?” Collier asked.

“Paulie and Jones and Stick aren’t.”

Collier snorted, “What a surprise,” and they both grinned. Collier walked back to the milling group, slapping shoulders, straightening uniforms, adjusting equipment. The boys were respectful and saluted and thanked him. “Morning, sir,” Hendricks, one of the privates said, “Did you hear from your Dad?”

“Yep. Last night. I’ll tell y’all about it later.”

“Thank you, sir.” Genuine gratitude, from him and others who leaned in to listen. Hearing from a dad was gold.

“Assemble!” the officer called out and the gong sounded and Collier straightened and stiffened and marched to the head of the now formed company. Farley marched up and saluted and just grimaced, confirming those three idiots were late. Out of the corner of his eye, Collier saw Stick stumbling off the landing and falling into place. Other movement told him the last two were racing down the stairs.

You boys just bought yourselves an afternoon of tours. “Put ’em on report,” he told Farley.

“Ten... HUT!” Davis called out from the arch and they all hit it. The battalion commander and his staff marched to position and the sun broke the horizon somewhere beyond the brick walls, the sky turning fiery with the early morning clouds. Collier glanced up. Maybe it would be a warm day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D. Krauss is a former USAF officer residing in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. He has been, at various times: a cotton picker, a sodbuster, a librarian, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a door-kickin' shove-gun-in-face lawman, a hunter of terrorists, and a school-bus driver. He has been married for 38 years to the same woman, and has a wildman bass guitarist for a son.

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