

## PARTHOS

*Mary, the mother of the Christ, was not the first, nor the last, to conceive without benefit of a man. Human history, noted, forgotten, rewritten, or erased, by men, is full of them. Relegated solely to religion, myth, and legend, however, no physical evidence of their actual existence can be found, which is how it always was, and forever will be, so long as Man rules the world.*

*...Queen Mother Assaggi: 97 BSF (Before the Second Fall)*

\*\*\*\*\*

The partho had allowed the three Hunters to believe they'd raped and beaten it nearly to death before slipping away, naked, while they slept. Hours later, by the glare of their headlamps, they'd tracked its unshod footprints to the icy edge of a sheer, twelve-hundred-foot-drop to the sea.

"Not good," Marcus said, peering over the ledge onto waters so black and unseasonably still the only thing distinguishing them from the blanketed night sky overhead were the scattered, iridescent chunks of broken sea ice pockmarking its surface.

"What do you mean, not good?" Apatiki huffed.

"We should've killed it right off," Marcus replied, raising a pair of night-sight binocs to his eyes.

“Well,” Apatiki said, spitting into the drop. “It sure is dead now.”

“Remember what it is,” Marcus cautioned, glassing the water below.

“I remember what it *was*.” Apatiki grunted, straightening. Turning to Abello, their leader, whose binocs, too, were trained on the waters, he asked, “What do you say, Sir?”

“I say mission’s over,” Abello said, tucking his binocs inside the collar of his snow-camo parka before adjusting the sling of his rifle and tightening the straps of his pack. With nothing along the cliff’s face to break a fall, a body the partho’s size—Norm or otherwise—would’ve hit the near-freezing water around ninety-five miles an hour. Regardless of all the partho was said to be able to do—like be impervious to cold, be immune to disease, walk on water, heal the sick, and bend men’s minds—it would’ve been killed on impact. Every bone broken. Lungs filled with blood. Guts expelled. Body cavity filled with water. And without any clothes to act as a float, it would’ve sank like a stone.

“But, sir...” Marcus protested. “Shouldn’t we wait for sunup to make sure?”

Abello pivoted about on his skis and gestured east from where they’d come with a ski pole. “Storm’s about six hours out. S-nine is five.” With that, he pushed off.

Reaching Shelter-Nine ahead of the storm, Abello reasoned, would be close, not that it mattered. For a Hunter, a mere few hours, or even a few days, pushing through an arctic storm would be nothing. Nevertheless, he’d prefer to be surrounded by a shelter’s thermaplank walls, drinking hot spice-beer, and lounging in front of a roaring hydroflame fire *before* the storm found them than after.

They would’ve made it, too, had they not fallen suddenly and inexplicably ill two hours later with bouts of vomiting, cramps, and sight-stealing migraines so incapacitating, even with stims, as to leave them with barely enough strength, after taking turns with the one-man job of securing their three-man thermaskin tent, to drag themselves inside, strip, and worm their way into their thermaskin bags before the storm hit.

“I thought we couldn’t get sick,” Apatiki groaned. The chattering of his teeth was audible even from inside the folds of his bag.

“So much for thinking,” Marcus tried to laugh, succumbed instead to a fit of coughing a near-half-minute long that ended with a muffled, “Shit!”

“Please don’t,” Apatiki made to joke, which drove both into a shared round of coughing so fierce they might have spewed their guts had there been anything left inside them to purge.

“Shut up!” Abello barked, trying vainly to sound tougher than he felt. “And get to sleep! You’re only making it worse.”

Waking in a feverish sweat (Abello didn’t know how much later) to the sound of wind-driven sleet threatening to tear away the skin of their tent, it really *was* worse. The knife-edged pain, throbbing from behind his eyes to the back of his neck earlier, had spread throughout his entire body, particularly around his chest and groin, as if he’d been stomped by a bull moose in rut, making it difficult even to breathe, let alone move. “Apatiki?” he croaked, forcing himself up to one elbow, squinting with blurry eyes through the bluish light of the hydroflame lamp at a fetal-shaped mound he supposed was Apatiki’s bag.

A grunt from the mound, followed by a series of hacking coughs, was its answer.

“Marcus?”

A muffled moan from a similar mound.

*Still alive*, Abello thought before a spasm of pain, so great he couldn’t even cry out, convulsed him into a ball and drove deeper into his bag.

Then, a sudden wave of vertigo.

An overwhelming urge to vomit.

An explosive brilliance behind his eyes.

And darkness.

Instead of to storm, Abello woke to screaming. Driven by the enhanced instinct of an engineered killer, unmindful of the fact that his body was no longer in crisis, though still a bit tight and tender in chest and groin, he ripped free of his bag, grabbed his pistol, and looked wildly about for a target. His men were gone. The tent flap open.

Abello, naked, threw himself outside in a roll to come up in a shooter's crouch, waist deep in snow, ready to fire. Then did, twice, without even thinking, when he saw what his men, both naked, on their knees, and staring back at him in horror, had become.

A bullet through the foreheads of each killed them instantly. Yet it took three incredibly long seconds for their rigid bodies to catch up with their brains before going limp and slowly collapsing backward onto the snow.

It took Abello three more seconds to realize what he'd done.

*You were right, Marcus*, he thought woefully, sinking back into the snow on his heels, completely unmindful of the cold. They'd broken protocol. How or why didn't matter. What mattered was that they should've killed the partho outright instead of engaging it directly.

Parthos, *Parthenogens*, were rare, forbidden, and abhorrent non-Norm females capable of procreation without male seed. Rarer still were their queens, able to swap DNA through their salivaries, sweat glands, and genitals with other parthenogenic females to enhance their genetic diversity and accelerate their evolution. Worse, a queen's secretions were mutagenic, whereby an infected, albeit willing, Norm female could be transformed into a partho within days. The procreative threat posed to the Patriarchy was obvious, which was why parthos, including their *potentials*—Norm women possessed of non-Het (heterosexual) proclivities, confirmed or suspected—were to be killed on sight.

But that wasn't the only reason they required killing. If a queen could do to Norm men what a queen could do to Norm women...

Abello looked down.

Like Apatiki and Marcus, Abello might've screamed. Might've put pistol to temple and fired, had desire to do either remained. All Abello felt now was surrender. *But surrender to what?* Abello wondered.

"If you'd waited but a moment more..." a woman's voice, soft and saddened, whispered from behind.

Slowly, Abello, upon dropping the pistol, stood up and turned.

The queen was as she'd been when they first sighted down on her from a thousand yards distant a dozen days ago. Perfect in her nakedness, as a Venus just-made, with no sign of injury from fall or exposure, and no sign at all of what she'd let them do. And let them she had, or so they'd been made to believe. Through some uncanny combination of scent, mind, and whatever other ability she possessed, she'd lured them into her embrace and allowed their maleness full reign, their reason to flee, and the mutagens to begin their work.

The experience had been like a nightmare hours-long wherein each was compelled to watch through the eyes of the others everything each of them did, unable to turn away, unwilling to stop, until they were utterly spent.

Upon waking, they'd retained no memory of what they'd done until they'd crawled from their tent and found their captive, whom they'd left chained to a stake the evening before, gone. What they could remember from then on was too vague, disjointed, and disturbing to contemplate privately, let alone discuss with each other.

Being men, they knew there were other men capable of doing what they seemed to remember doing themselves to the woman they'd been sent to kill. But they were not those kinds of men. They were Hunters. Men selected from birth, trained, and artificially enhanced to serve a specific function. They could live as other men, of course. They could take wives. Sire children. Develop skills or pursue trades. But their primary function, in service to the Patriarchy, was to hunt, capture, or, if necessary, as when dealing with parthenogens, kill. But kill quickly, cleanly, and from a distance. Nothing else.

They'd tracked her blood trail in a brooding silence at first, until the blood was no longer visible, and her tracks, no longer dragging nor interspersed with intermittent depressions made by her stumbles and falls, grew more sure and evenly spaced. By the time they'd reached the cliff, she was leading them at a run and the bloodlust was upon them, pushing them near-breathless, despite their enhancements, deep into the night, to the very edge of the cliff. In their determination, they might even have tumbled over the cliff themselves if not for the jagged line of snow-bare rocks blocking their way at the precipice. The break had given them enough pause to cool, to gather their wits, and to reevaluate the situation.

The fall, they'd decided, was the end of her.

Instead, Abello knew now, it was the end of them, or, at least, the beginning of it.

"Are you angry?" asked the queen, stepping forward. In defiance of her weight, which Abello guessed to be around one-hundred-forty pounds, she left little sign in the snow behind her.

"No," Abello replied, surprised at feeling the furthest thing from.

Placing a palm against Abello's cheek, and peering deeply into Abello's eyes, she asked, "Are you afraid?"

"Not anymore."

Moving her palm to the cleft between Abello's breasts, she asked, "Do you hate?"

"Not at all."

Taking Abello's hand, the queen asked, smiling, "Are you willing to follow?"

"To the ends of the world," Abello replied, accepting the other's lead, her heart so buoyant she felt she could float, rather than skim near-trackless, in the parthenogen's wake.

Not many nights later, under a new moon, and clothed in standard winter garb to avoid possible detection—white, fur-ruffed parkas over white snow pants and boots, snow shoes, and a rifle slung over a shoulder—they arrived at the summit of a hill overlooking Savoon, a

mixed-blood Norm village specializing in the commercialized use of bioengineered reindeer, musk ox and caribou. Its combined population consisted of about nine hundred men, women, and children. The queen had been born there and reared until the age of twelve, with only her mother knowing what she was until, now thirty years past, the young queen made the mistake of reviving a friend, now the mayor of Savoorn, after an accident that should've left him dead.

He'd fallen through the ice of a lake while jigging with her for tomcod. Without even thinking what the consequences would be, she'd gone in after him. The water wasn't deep, but there was current. By the time she was able to get hold of him, tow him back to the hole, and push him up and onto the ice, he was blue, stiff, and, by all appearances, lifeless. Yet, within moments of forcing a single breath from her lungs into his, and a mere sharing of her spit, the boy's color returned, his chest rose and fell, and his eyes fluttered open.

It could've remained their secret. After all, they'd been friends forever, with feelings for each other that might've blossomed into more. But the boy was Norm, and because he was Norm, he told. So, she fled. Because she'd fled, her mother, father, and three sisters were killed. Partly for knowing but refusing to inform. In a larger part out of fear that her mother and sisters were as she.

*They'll kill us, too,* Abello thought, though not out of concern for herself. "They'll kill you," she said, placing a cautioning hand on the other's shoulder.

"Like you, they'll try," the queen replied calmly, covering Abello's hand with one of her own. "Like you, they'll fail. Like you, they'll rejoice. Are you ready?"

"I am."

Hand in hand, they descended the hill and entered the village. Normally, the sled dogs, alert to anything new or unusual, like a foraging polar bear or wolf, or an unannounced human stranger, would've started barking. But not one of them so much as twitched an ear at their passing. With no such alarm, the pair proceeded to walk through the lamplit rows of kennels,

thermaplank houses, and shops unhindered until they came to a certain door of a certain home Abello knew belonged to the mayor of Savoon.

“Will he still know you?” Abello asked.

“He’ll know me, all right,” the queen replied, smiling without malice, and reaching for the latch.

\*\*\*\*\*

*In the Beginning there was God and nothingness. Can any of us imagine what that must have been like?*

*There were experiments, before the First Fall, devised by men to determine what happens to a human mind deprived of all stimulus. Within one or two hours, subjects grow agitated and anxious. Within a few more, distraught and despairing. Within one or two days, cognition wanes. Psychosis ensues. Beyond a week, there is madness, followed, if there is no intervention, by catatonia and eventual physical death.*

*So, for God, surrounded by nothingness for eons...what might that have been like?*

*We can never know. Just be thankful She did not go mad. If She had, so, too, having been made in Her likeness, would we have been mad, with the rule of Man guaranteed to be absolute. Which it very nearly was anyway. Not by God’s doing, but by a daughter who so envied God, all those ages ago, as to believe she could do better, make better, than the One who made her.*

*Never again, must we be so bold.*

*Never again must we be so arrogant, so foolish, as to repeat what she did, and dare to make a Man.*

*...Saint Abello I: 71 ASF (After the Second Fall)*

**End**