

THANATOS – Carpathian Interlude – Part III

Mesopotamia, 6000 B.C.

The blood moon was high and full above the dry desert plains, north of the land of two rivers. Its light, like the leaching of sacrifice, poured over sand, and rock, and life, to swallow up and fill every crack and crevice.

It was the night of the great slaughter, the time before the Light.

The sacred cattle herds of the Yazads roamed unknowingly beneath the choked stars, their lowing calm and ignorant of what was about to happen.

Behind a boulder crouched an Usij, one of the false priests who served the Daevas, those wicked and uncaring gods whom Usiji were bound to serve, to feed, and to cower to in the darkness of the long nights.

This priest, however, had never cowered, and he spat upon his brethren of the blackened cloth. Instead, he watched the silhouette of his offering in the middle of the plain, an unthinkable mound of chopped limbs and offal, of faeces and decay.

The Daevas would never be able to resist it, the Usij knew. They would gather and gorge themselves until the rising of the Sun, escaping before the Yazad came upon them with fire and the crush of his god-made weapon.

The Usij smiled as he turned his own weapons over in his hand, those sacred relics stolen from the temple at the top of the world. He had almost perished in getting them, his very soul burnt to the fringes.

But I survived, he thought, gazing at the ancient blade carved from a stone out of the stars themselves. In his other hand, he held the unbreakable chains, forged at the creation of the world. They were heavy, but the Dark gave him strength and speed. *After tonight, I shall live to torment them eternally*. He smiled a moment, imagining what it would be like to devour their essence. He had stolen the incantations that would allow him to do so.

There was a murmur in the earth beneath him, a throbbing, hungry chant in the bowels of the Underworld.

The Usij crouched, and watched the gory feast he had laid out.

They had come.

The nervous cattle bellowed loudly, the earth shook, and a sound of cracking rock rent the air, leaving enormous gaps to be flooded with the blood moon's light.

The Daevas came down from the mountains, and from out of the rocks. They climbed out of the ground itself, their enormous, clawed hands digging in to pull themselves up.

At first, the curving horns of their heads appeared, then the pointed features. The Daevas' forked tongues licked at the air and the stench that drew them away from the cattle. Their green, black, and brown skins were red in the moonlight. They groaned and slavered, taking great strides toward the offering, making horrible sniffing sounds.

The Usij watched the Daevas of both sexes come forth, their fangs glistening as they ate.

A great crunching of bones could be heard as they devoured the bait. Blood spattered their legs and arms, chests and breasts until they were dripping with gore.

Some of the Daevas coupled on the slick ground, roaring and groaning as they entered each other. At their centre, a female with horns like an ox, and a quick strong body sucked on a long

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piece of intestine, savaging any others who dared to approach her. Her own bloody hands rubbed between her legs, and her enormous eyes gazed up at the moon.

She's the one... the Usij told himself. He crouched low and held his hands over the pitch-soaked torch, leaning against the rocks, and saying the word, *Tanunapat*, it burst into flame. He picked it up, and stood.

I am death.

With three long strides, the Usij hurled the firebrand at the gathered Daevas. It landed on the great circle of pitch he had surrounded the offering with.

Immediately, a wall of fire exploded in a great circle to trap the Daevas who screamed, and raged, and shook the earth with their fear of fire. Voices that sounded like coarse stone grinding on stone cried out. Some of the Daevas peered through the flames, searching for the culprit.

The Usij stepped out from his hiding place and laughed.

The female Daeva at the centre looked at him amid the panic, and pointed a long, clawed finger at the false priest.

“Usij!” she said, her red eyes fixed on him.

The Usij spat. “I am no longer your Usij,” he said as a growing wind whipped his long black hair about his handsome face. “I am Death!”

The Daevas roared rage, and a moment later, two of them were hurled out of the ring of fire by their fellows to land with a rumble on the rock and sand.

They charged.

And the Usij ran at them.

When the three clashed, a cry of divine pain rushed over the land like a sandstorm.

As the dust settled, the larger group of Daevas looked to see the Usij standing above the bodies of the slain Daevas, their blood pooling like liquid fire about his feet, dripping from the ancient weapon he held in his right hand, and the heavy chain in his left.

The big female Daeva cried out, but the Usij smiled and knelt down to cup a handful of the blood.

“Anazvara...Panipatra...Rakta...” he chanted before drinking.

The Usij closed his eyes and felt the divine fire flow through his veins.

It should have killed him, but he had discovered the words. He had unearthed the ancient spells that would allow him to take their essence.

“Ahh!” the Usij cried out as the power engulfed his person. His muscles bulged, and he became taller and more powerful than any other mortal. Mighty horns curled out from the side of his head, and he screamed and crouched as if to pounce on prey. His red eyes, peering out from the thick locks of his streaming hair, locked onto the female Daeva who roared defiance and challenge.

The Usij smiled, and fangs erupted from his mouth in excitement.

Then, it happened. That moment the rest of the world waits for.

Far to the East, light cracked over the horizon. With it came a sound of pure song, a heavenly humming that made the Daevas cover their ears and double over.

As the first rays of sun swept over the land of the two rivers, there was a great inhalation, and then a massive exhalation of sound as something landed between the Usij and the Daevas.

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The shockwaves, as if a titanic stone had crashed out of the sky into the sandy seas, extinguished the fires and threw the Daevas and Usij back a distance. Dust choked the dawn, and the Daevas began fleeing.

“Yazad!” they cried, running, fleeing the brilliance of the god that had landed in their midst.

The Lord of Light shone among the wicked detritus, turning many away with his brilliance. He breathed calmly, his auburn hair falling over his shoulders from beneath his cap, his white tunic and doe skin boots were soft upon the land.

Mithras of the wide pastures, of the myriad eyes, the lofty and everlasting ruler of the provinces of men and gods, Mithras, the holy Lord of Light had come upon the scene, a gold and adamant spear was in his hand, and a matching dagger in his belt.

“Leave now, uncaring gods of the night!” he commanded.

Some of the Daevas laughed and hurtled toward him, but the spear of light shredded their bodies before they had gone three steps.

“Mithras!” the Usij called, emerging from the dust, fearful that all his scheming and pain would be for naught. “Leave!”

“Leave?” Mithras laughed, feeling pity for the false priest. “You should beg for my help, Usij, for you have doomed yourself for eternity.”

The female Daeva approached them, and the triad of enemies faced each other on the plain. She roared at the god and levelled her horns.

Mithras shook his head, and levelled his spear.

The Usij thrust out his hands and a chorus of tortured screams erupted from the sacred herd of cattle to the South as they all burst into flame.

“No!” Mithras cried as he watched.

The Usij ran then, the links of his mighty chain flying through the air to wrap about the female Daeva who crashed to the dirt.

“Vismarana!” the Usij said as he pounced upon her. *Oblivion...*

Mithras spun, his spear seeking their dual deaths for all they had wrought, but they had vanished from the light of day. The spear struck deep into the earth where it took root and sprouted into a tree of golden apples.

The Lord of Light stood there watching the sacred herd burn to death, and knew that their cries would haunt him, as would the cries of others in the coming ages, after that dark night.

Rome, A.D. 9

Sunlight angled into the top room of a tenement on the Aventine Hill on a cool December day. Dust motes danced in the rays of light, giving an appearance of being beneath the surface of a dirty, sun-lit sea.

The apartment was a simple one of wood and plaster, with inexpensive curtains hung carefully as room dividers. On the bed at the far end of the room, Antonius slept beside his wife, Vera, who curled up beside him, trying to stay close even as he tossed and turned.

Sweat beaded on the Roman optio’s forehead, and he shook for the nightmares that continued

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to haunt him – mountains like fangs, screaming, jaundiced eyes, and snapping jaws that tore men apart. Howls and dark laughter wrapped him in anguish as men morphed into lykoi who turned their gore-covered snouts up to bay at a full red moon.

The forest trees leaned in on him, their limbs reaching until Antonius saw three figures dangling from the dark branches, three bearded men hanging from lengths of their own intestines.

Antonius turned to vomit on the bone-strewn earth. Then he felt something brush his head and whipped to see the man in the centre.

Antonius... he said. Help... The eyes opened and the man choked on blood, his eyes wide and full of shock as he reached out.

Antonius looked closer, and fear seized him, so much that he felt like weeping.

“G...Gai... Gaius? No!!!”

Vera shrieked when her eyes opened and she saw her husband crouched in a corner before the black armour bearing an eagle and sun on the chest.

Antonius was holding out his silver-bladed gladius, but his limbs shook so much she thought he was consumed with the falling sickness.

“Antonius? Husband?” she cried. “Please, my love. You’re home... You...are...home,” she sobbed.

Antonius shook his head, and his eyes awoke to register the bed and his crying wife staring at him with horror and fear. He dropped the blade with a clang, and fell to the floor.

“I’m sorry...” he mumbled. “I’m so sorry... Mithras forgive me...”

Vera, having regained her wits, grabbed a blanket and went to cover his shaking, scarred body. “I’m here, my husband.” She stroked his wet brow until his shaking stopped. “You’re safe.”

Later that day, Antonius and Vera sat at the small table in their apartment, two bowls of bean soup laid out.

Antonius’ was untouched. He stared into the bowl of steaming food, lost in dark thoughts.

“What was the dream about this time?” she asked, though the answer terrified her.

He clenched and unclenched his fists as they lay on the stained, wooden table, but he continued to stare at his food.

“I’m stronger than you think I am,” she said, her eyes trying to lock onto his.

He could tell she was scared, but could also see she was indeed digging deep for her courage. The truth was that he was terrified himself.

“I saw Gaius, Calgacus, and Vitorix... They were hanging from trees in a wood.”

“Were there wolves?” Vera asked. She had begged Antonius to tell her what he had seen when he returned from Germania.

Antonius had wanted to remain silent, but the need to speak to someone about the horrors he had witnessed had been too great.

“I could hear the wolves, yes. But they were not an immediate danger.” He shook his head, trying to dismiss the image of Gaius’ choked and pleading face. “Gaius needs help.”

“But...but you don’t even know where he is,” Vera said.

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“No, I don’t.”

“You can’t leave me. You promised.”

“I can’t keep that promise, Vera. It was made in terror of what I had been through. I need to help my brothers.”

“You need to stay with me, with us.” Vera stroked her flat tummy.

“You don’t even know if you’re with child yet.”

“I am. I can feel it. Don’t you want your child to have a father?” Vera’s freckled face was growing redder, sad and despairing.

“Vera... What if it was me out there beyond the frontier, in the forests of Germania? Wouldn’t you want Gaius to try and help me?”

“Yes, but-”

“And what about his family?”

Vera hung her head, a little ashamed at the answer she had almost spoken. *To Hades with anyone else!*

“Not even a thousand lykoi would keep me from returning to you, my love.”

“But what if Gaius and the others are perfectly fine and manage to get back to Rome without you?”

“I have to try. By Mithras, they’re my brothers-in-arms!”

“And I am your wife!” she said, finally catching his eyes. “I’m...I’m afraid you’ll forget me.”

Antonius’ face softened. “I could never forget you...you are my life, Vera.”

She smiled, but sadly.

“I would be a man of honour, worthy of you and our unborn children. That’s why I must go. I couldn’t live with myself otherwise.”

She nodded, fighting any tears that threatened to fall.

“Well, at least stay until Saturnalia is over. This is our first together.”

“Yes. Of course. I need to prepare anyway.”

Antonius realized he had finally made up his mind to go after Gaius and the others. It surprised him. Before, he had convinced himself he did not need to, that Gaius would have told him to stay in Rome and live his life with Vera.

“Here,” Vera said, sliding a piece of folded cloth toward Antonius. “Happy Saturnalia.” She was going to wait, but now everything had an air of urgency.

Antonius smiled, and unfolded the cloth to reveal a thick copper bracelet engraved with rough-looking suns and stars.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, sliding it over his left hand to admire. “Thank you, my love.”

“Do you really like it?”

“Yes. I love it.” Antonius smiled. It meant more to him than any armilla or torc the legions had awarded him. “Oh!” He jumped, scaring her a little. “I have something for you!” Antonius went to his armour and lifted the black cuirass to reveal a small wooden box. He took the box and rushed back to her. “Here.”

Vera admired the box and looked excitedly at him before opening it. “Oh-”

Inside, her fingers reached for a silver chain which she lifted out to reveal a red intaglio with a goddess upon it.”

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“It’s Juno,” he said. “She will keep you safe while I’m away.”

Vera’s smile faded slightly, but returned. “Can you put it on me?”

Antonius got up, took the necklace and dropped it around her neck to fasten it at the back, his fingers stroking her pale neck.

“Happy Saturnalia, Vera,” he whispered in her ear.

Vera looked up, her eyes wet with tears, pulled him down, and kissed him.

The two of them embraced tightly, their breathing desperate and worried as he carried her back to the bed.

“We’ll be late for dinner with Fulvia,” Vera muttered.

“We must live for each other, my love. There’s time,” Antonius said, as he removed the last of his clothing and fell on top of her.

Vera pulled him in and held her husband tightly, a swift prayer of protection to Juno for her family-to-be.