

A Balance, Beastly And Bloody

By Tommy Hancock

The building loomed in front of him, the current den of his quarry. He'd been here before, stood right where he stood now in front of the first theatre that had once graced this spot. It had been called *The Grand* when it first opened, he recalled as his fingers tensed around the sharp weapon hidden in his tuxedo pocket. That name fit the original building much better than the title they gave it a few years after it was built, The Orpheum. He crossed Beale Street, ignoring the line of moviegoers that literally spread across Beale and another line probably the length of Main rounding the corner. He definitely preferred the original Victorian style building to its smaller, squatter replacement. But he had to admit this one would be kinder to him for his purposes this evening. He forced his way past spotlights and popping flashbulbs. On tour for his latest silent picture, a western, the memory of his last time here swept over him like a sepia toned wave. He'd been mobbed by adolescent boys wanting his autograph and their mothers wanting him. Blossom Seeley had been on stage, stripping while the original Orpheum burned around her.

"Those were the days," Troy Romney said aloud as he started across the street.

He was a well-built man and cut a good figure, ruggedly handsome features gracing a barely lined face. It had surprised many he'd met in the last few years when they found out he was indeed Troy Romney, famous movie star. Famous, that is, until the mid-1930s. Most people didn't believe him, accused him of being Troy's son or some stunt double. Most of the time he simply let them believe whatever they wanted to, being used to letting identities slip away from time to time. But this one, Troy

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Romney, had grown to mean more to him than just another name to hunt behind. He enjoyed being Romney and not just because of the fame an accidental rescue of a director's mother had given him back in the 1920s. And not at all due to the bright light and siren's call of Hollywood. No, he enjoyed being Troy Romney because, as Romney, he actually had a life. It'd been a life beyond the mission, beyond the chase. As he worked his way through the mob of starstruck moviegoers, some of them closer to dying for a look at their new star than they, thought Romney mused to himself, he glanced skyward. The moon was not yet visible as night was just beginning to force away its tired sibling, daylight. Clouds also jockeyed for their position in the heavens, doing their best to blot out the glistening stars. Romney was fine with that. If he had to fight, and he would have to, he preferred to do it on a moonless night. It made the hunt more interesting and the victory, if he were to gain it, all the more sweet on his soul.

He paused just behind the last line of eager fans and hopeful starlets desperate to be discovered and whisked away from Memphis in a scene worthy of film. He inhaled deeply, stood taller, squaring his shoulders. Already he could hear people around him, the older set of course, whispering as they looked at him. Usually content and focused on losing himself in any crowd, this was one time that Troy Romney intended to, needed to play on his past stardom. Faded, fallen, or otherwise, his name still opened most doors. He determined to use this to his advantage as his first strike as he stepped up to the hirsute mountain of a doorman on the other side of the velvet rope.



"But don't you recognize me?"

He stood, looking as close to incredulous as he could manage at the massive man blocking his path. Of course, the look on his face was probably closer to one of stupidity, he thought. Of all the range of emotions available to him, incredulity was one of the least practiced. But it was just another tool he'd have to use to reach his objective. At this point his mind ran the same track as

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the creature he sought. There was nothing more important than the hunt.

"Yes sir, Mr. Romney," the bushy browed, muscled gatekeeper thundered politely, "I'd know you anywhere." He smiled, immaculate white teeth splitting fight scarred lips. "I remember as a kid watchin' ya fight Nazis in the old West in that last serial you did." His hands at his side, the doorman waved thick fingers slightly, prompting two suited human gorillas to lumber from the shadows.

They forcefully split the crowd of teenage bobbysoxers and newspaper photographers lining the walkway to the front door of the Orpheum.

"Even with that," the hulking guard said, the syrupy politeness in his voice replaced suddenly with solemn granite once the twins flanked him, "you're not on the lists of guests for this premiere."

Romney chuckled haughtily, something he didn't do often, and threw his head back. "Well, I never," he spat as he ran his fingers through his long hair, the color of fading autumn leaves. "I thought this was something serious." He hated playing the part of sanctimonious celebrity, but it was a card he'd been dealt. "List or not, fellows, I'm sure Mr. Warstock won't mind."

"Mr. Warstock," the doorman boomed, "may be God's own favorite producer, Mr. Troy, but he is not directing this affair." He leaned over Troy, casting a shadow that his two partners added as they loomed with him. "Not only did Mr. Nero not want you on the list, but we were hired specifically to make sure you did not disturb the festivities."

Troy laughed again, this one more controlled, his usual knowing chuckle. "Well all right then," he said, turning to make his way back across Beale. He looked back over his shoulder at the three goons. "Let Mr. Nero know that I'm no threat to him." His green eyes drifted to the movie marquee. Flecks of gold sparkled in them as he read it.

THE GENTLEMAN VAMPIRE STARRING REMINGTON NERO.

"At least not to his movie career."

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“No, Mr. Romney,” the lead doorman reprimanded, wrapping his hamhock of a hand around Troy’s arm, “You’re not understanding me.”

As if they shared a single mind, the crowd of onlookers melted away in various directions. Some took the opportunity to slide past the doormen and into the Orpheum, others just went wherever they could get so they wouldn’t get the old actor’s blood on them. Romney didn’t take a step, but the muscles throughout his body rippled, bunching together like knotted dried leather straps. The hairy doorman holding his arm swung around in front of Romney, almost playfully, like an oversized kid on a maypole. Romney’s stance didn’t falter, not even under the weight of the thug-turned-bodyguard. Raising a thick caterpillar of an eyebrow at this, the doorman lifted his hand and wiggled two thick fingers, as if gesturing to someone.

Troy Romney waited for it, for the hairs to come to life on the back of his neck. He waited for the chill of terror and fright that started at the base of his spine and worked its way up anytime something supernatural happened. But, as three more men, all dressed like the triplet doormen, shuffled and waddled out of shadows on all sides of him, Romney let his guard down. A grin creased his face. These goons were human. Maybe Nero was slipping.

“Now,” Romney said, crouching, his arms raised, one hand curled in a fist, “Most people in this situation would ask you lads if you thought you could get away with this. If you didn’t think the police would see you beat a man to death.”

The lead man, the only one apparently with a voice, laughed and said, “Is that how’d they write in the movies, Mr. Romney?”

Romney chuckled. “Something like that. But, see, I’m not most people. I know that Nero has made sure no one will interfere with you lot.” His eyes drifted beyond his attackers only briefly to verify his words. Some sort of indescribable, intangible weight hung in the air, a strangling presence. The street filled with a living mass of hundreds of people a few minutes ago, had barely any visitors beyond Romney and his new playmates.

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“Don’t matter,” one of the goons behind Romney said, his voice heavy with a Tennessee drawl, “This is Memphis. Nobody sees nothin’ anyhow.”

“Good,” Troy said, his grin becoming a sneer. “Then nobody will see you cry.”

As the word ‘see’ left his lips, Troy Romney leaped from the ground. By the time ‘cry’ filled the air, his left foot crashed into the Tennessean’s broad face, crushing his nose and left cheek. Rolling his entire body in midair, Romney rammed his right foot into the glass jaw of one of the other hired men, toppling him like a freshly cut pine tree.

Romney lighted on the asphalt of the street, his fingers steeped on the ground, his legs behind him, like a savage animal ready to pounce. The shock sweeping over his remaining opponents gave him all the time he needed to take a breath and strike again. As they moved on him like some sort of well dressed football squad, Romney sliced into them. He swept past the lead man, the heavily browed speaker, and settled on the three others. One of them, he didn’t pay attention as to which, threw a boulder of a fist at him, glancing off his shoulder and shoving him into one of the others. Before his cushion could respond, Romney fired his left elbow up and at an angle, mangling yet another face. He spun and, with a solid bone crunching punch to the already bleeding nose, he laid yet another down. The mug lucky enough to land skin on Romney growled like an injured bear and tried to tackle him. As if he had wings, Romney jumped and flipped over the runner. Before the man could turn around, Romney delivered two blows, one to his back, another to his neck.

As he watched that one fall, Troy Romney assessed the situation. Of the two still standing, one had decided to use his legs and fled the scene. The final one, though, the one who had done all the talking, stood just beyond his most recently fallen comrade. His eyes glared at Romney as his hands shook, barely able to hold the pistol in them steady.

“Get the hell away from me!” His once thunderous voice quivered. Romney read the fear in his face as he approached the

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gun. It was a special kind of fear and it always gave Romney a little thrill when people felt it. It was stark raving fright, the sort that made people's hair turn white overnight and kept little children tangled in their sheets in the dark. But it was even more than that. This man, wetting himself, Romney noted as he got closer had no idea why he was so damned scared.

"If you were going to shoot," Romney said, his voice a whisper, a blade being drawn, "you would have. Besides, I'm nothing to kill. I'm just an old washed up--"

"Shuttup!" the big man shrieked, sweat beading on his forehead. "I don't...I don't know what is going on, but I didn't sign on for...for this!"

"No," Romney said sympathetically, "you didn't. But," he said, reaching his hand out for the quaking gun, "you can't leave, can you? He made the deal with you, Nero did. Not your pals, but with you. Right?"

He nodded as Romney worked the gun from his grip. His fingers still held their place as if the gun were still there as he said, "Right...I...hired them after Mr. Nero...paid me..."

"I know." Romney tossed the gun away. He'd have no use of it the rest of the night. "Which means you're locked into this."

The terror grew an octave in the man's voice. "What..what are you talkin' about?"

"You'll stand here," Troy Romney said solemnly, "until Hell freezes over and pigs fly because Nero told you to. He looked in your eyes and locked up your mind. Locked it up in his own little keepsake box. But you're weak, friend. Realization and fear have freed you up some, but not enough that you can just leave. But," Romney lowered his head, "you'll be fine after."

Tears rolled from the doorman's eyes. "After...what?"

Romney answered by punching the bushy browed goon squarely between his brows with a hard jab. The man collapsed like a bed sheet in a storm wind. "You'll have a ringer of a headache," Troy Romney said, noticing the stifling atmosphere had lifted and people were milling about on Beale again, "but at least that monster is out of your head."

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Romney knew that walking in the front door would have been too easy. Remington was smarter than that. Someone who lived the shadow existence as he had for so long had to be. He'd played it that way, though, because he wanted Nero to know that he knew. That once again the game was afoot, a phrase Romney'd been prone to use several lives ago. It was all an elaborate tease.

As the fight ended and people began getting curious, Romney had vanished into the darkness. Now he crossed Beale again after walking a few blocks from the theatre. Back on the same side of the street as the Orpheum, he darted from alley to alley, making his way down behind the buildings. The last minute change to Memphis from Hollywood for the debut had been Nero's idea. All the papers reported that. The impulsive young rising star showed his first eccentric tendencies by demanding literally the day before the premiere that the entire kit and kaboodle be done in the city the film was based in, Memphis. As Troy turned back toward Beale Street three avenues over and bolted in a straight line for the Orpheum, he swore at himself for being foolish. He'd trusted too many people, asked too many questions, and stirred enough of a wind that rumor got to Nero. Someone was after the actor. That was the latest whisper in the breezes made by gossip columnists. But Nero knew it wasn't just anyone, that it was the only one who'd ever pursued him. The only one who knew the true Nero, his darker self.

Romney had no sooner hidden himself in the bowels of the theatre in Hollywood than he overheard two janitors say that Remington Nero and company were off to the South. Of course, Romney thought as the dimly lit backstage door of the Orpheum came into view, Nero hadn't bet on Troy flying his own plane, faster than any commercial buggy, from point A to point B. The glories of a Hollywood career and a lifelong quest, Romney thought.

Crouched behind a line of trash cans about a hundred yards from the Orpheum's back door, Troy took a breath and leaped into the air ready for a mad run. He slammed harshly into what he

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thought had to be a reinforced brick wall. Air screaming out of his lungs, Romney crashed to the ground, his arms flailing. Almost instinctively, he sprung to his feet, sliding his hand into his pocket. What he needed was still there. As he verified that, he searched the night for the barrier he'd hit. It, or rather they, were not hard to see. Three men lined up shoulder to shoulder, all wearing poorly fitting tuxedos and with eyebrows thick as storm clouds. The three men were almost the spitting image of the stooges at the front door of the theatre.

"By Canus' teeth!" Troy snarled, bewildered. "Just how many more does Mother have at home like you boys?"

He readied himself, his hands out in front, one open palm out, the other clenched into a fist. Mixing fighting styles was something he'd had plenty of practice at and, as Jack Dempsey used to say, 'Born with two hands, why should they fight the same way all the time?' Troy started to cut them with another remark, something about not being very talkative, when a hint of something filled his nostrils. Barely, faint, but a sickeningly sweet scent in one way, but metallic, coppery as well. He narrowed his eyes as his three attackers lumbered forward. Each one had what looked like five o'clock shadow in the middle of the night. But it wasn't hair. Blood dripped from their mouths and chins.

"Oh," Troy said curtly, "You boys are members of the real Remington Nero Fan Club." They marched onward, almost trancelike, and he countered them, his body still coiled for a fight. As they partnered in this odd little dance, Troy inhaled deeply. "You chums must be beginners, right?" No response. "Yeah," Troy answered himself, "you have to be. You don't have a hint of the stench your boss or whatever you types call the lead dog carries on him. First feeding tonight, boys? Did Nero throw you the sloppy seconds?"

The one on the far left showed signs of life at Troy's last taunt. More like signs of rage and fury as he broke ranks, his tank-like body barreling straight at Romney. Troy welcomed this, bouncing back on the balls of his feet, letting the locomotive of suit and muscles charge just in front of him. Troy jumped

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forward, his body now nothing but a missile, and, arms out wide, sideswiped his opponent. If this strongarm had been in his normal state of mind, Troy knew, this would have been a much harder fight. But if Romney was right, and Nero had just introduced his three stooges to his style of living, then all three of them were just in the throes of changing. Their minds were slower and their bodies were not nearly as monstrous as they would soon be. Troy swerved around, on his feet again, and saw the prone form of the massive man on the ground, unconscious from one blow.

“Small favors,” Troy whispered as he turned attention to the other two.

They remained joined at the shoulders, unearthly noises rising from their throats. One swiped at Troy with an arm the size of a railroad timber. As the hand passed just inches in front of his face, Troy saw the changes were moving faster than he thought. Wasting no time, he kicked at both men, catching them almost equally in their guts they stood so close together. Both of them groaned and stumbled away from each other. Spiraling between them like a whirling dervish, Troy brought the flat edge of his hand hard down on the base of one’s neck, sending him to the ground like a sack of flour. As he spun to repeat the action on the last member of the trio, Troy changed his mind abruptly. As two arms snaked around his waist, gripping him like bent steel, Troy Romney decided he might ought to escape instead of fight.

“Gotta...” the gigantic brute forced words through animalistic groans, “Gotta...eat...hungry...gotta...” He lifted Troy hard and fast, shifting him in his grasp, trying to grab hold with his hands.

“Not on the menu, pal!” Troy grunted as he took advantage of the shift in the hold and rolled free. In the seconds between rolling and hitting the ground, Troy saw light glisten off of fangs in the open, drooling mouth of the monster who’d held him. They were just starting, baby teeth for what the poor fool was becoming. As he came up on one knee, Troy considered the item in his pocket, the one he’d brought for Nero. It would surely work on this latest member of Nero’ clan, Troy knew, but there was something else. If he was right and these three men- and Lord only knew how many others in that theatre- had only been

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turned in the last few hours, then their humanity was not fully lost. They could be restored. Troy held onto this thought as he rocketed up from his knee, his two hands tangled into one fist. The full force of the blow landed on the humongous man's chin, snapping his head back viciously. He moaned, staggered, his blood stained lips working, but nothing escaped other than a ragged breath. Troy spun around, delivering a flat handed punch to his chest, sending him over like a felled tree.

Troy looked back and forth between the three behemoths scattered prone on the ground, each of them breathing heavily. He watched their forms start to shift, not all at once, but slowly. They were all still large men of their own account, but as the fever that gripped them passed, they changed, their muscles less pronounced, their features more human and less feral.

"I'll see if I can keep your natural ugly looks for you, boys," Troy said as he walked warily, but determined toward the Orpheum's back stage door.

He heard the stampeding echoes of footfalls before he ever touched the stage door handle. Stepping to the left and leaning against the wall, Troy waited and started counting. On 4, the door exploded open and the doorman from the fight out in front of the theatre erupted from it. His hefty foot never touched dirt as he caught Troy's full fist in the face. Before he could fall backward, Troy tangled his fingers in the goon's oily black hair and yanked him violently, slinging him to the ground.

Troy shouted, "Son, you should've run the other way!"

He stepped full in the doorway and delivered another stunning punch to a second man blindly running for him. Again, he caught his target, this time behind the shoulder, and flung him out of the theater. Spinning expectantly for yet another one, Troy moved quickly back through the door. The beast in a black tuxedo saw him too late and couldn't stop. Instead of a blow to the head, however, he received a chop to the neck. The goon lurched forward, gasping for air, allowing Troy to grab his head and push him face down in the dirt.

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“The only reason, Nod,” Troy said between heavy breaths, “that you’re not sleeping like your brothers Winken and Blinken here is because you’re going to tell me something!”

Troy raised the mug’s head just enough that he could spit out bloody dirt and yell, “Not..tellin’...ya, nothing, dead man!”

With no time for repartee, Troy shoved his captive’s face hard against the packed dirt once more. As the manly cursings became childlike whimpers, Troy asked, “Where is Remington Nero?”

Muddy tears streaked the tough guy’s face when Troy raised his head again. “In...the..lead dressing room. Back stage,” he whined, “Through...the door, down...the hall, last on left.” Defiance filtered back into his voice as he sneered, “But he...he’s ready. He knows you’re here.”

“Good,” Troy replied, hammering the man’s head once more against the ground, leaving him unconscious this time. Taking a minute as he stood to look at the three of them, he noted they seemed to still be as human as they ever were. Sliding his hand into his coat, wrapping it around the one thing that would solve all of this, he said, “A man can get his affairs in order when he knows death is coming.”



Troy Romney found reasons to be thankful for most of the things in his varied life, even the memories that left scars and shadows on his heart. Like when he was a young man, when everything changed. Romney barely recalled specifics from that time, it being so long ago, but he remembered beginning his quest, wandering the world, always looking for balance, commissioned against his will to set the scales right. But he was still young and made poor decisions. He shuffled hither and yon between ne’er do wells and flimsy friends before lighting, against his own will and out of sheer hunger, with the blackest jewel set in the crown of womanhood. Decidedly devious, despicable Diluvia. Diluvia cared for little to nothing, even her own breathing disgusted her. She was quick, however, to show her

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new young ward Romney that he above all else was the bane of her existence. He was using one of a thousand made up names then, was sick when he came to her, sick because he'd fought the curse, abandoned the quest and was starving and nearly mad because of it. She fed him, throwing him scraps from what she had after she learned they were kindred spirits. But she tormented him, telling him that he needed to learn the true meaning of what he'd become, the sheer loneliness of existence. To that end, she often locked sickly Troy away in his room or some hovel on the outskirts of her village. It was times like these, crouching on a catwalk above a room full of people totally unaware of his presence that Troy thought somewhat kindly of Diluvia. For it was in her cruel, sadistic care that he learned to move with the grace of a cat and the unearthly silence of a spirit, taking on such traits to steal moments of freedom from her tyrannical care. Yes, of all the great trackers and hunters that he had encountered, trained with, and fought against, Troy's greatest lessons in stealth and downright sneakiness came from his cruel, twisted and thankfully departed nursemaid, Diluvia.

Troy also appreciated good directions, even those tumbling out along with teeth from the bloodied lips of the enemy. The thug's sputterings led him right to the primary dressing room, just back of the Orpheum's stage and movie screen. Reaching for the doorknob, Troy caught glimpse of a ladder about three feet off the floor down the wall to his right. It was that discovery that led him up above the heads of those below, clinging to the left side of the narrow walk shared by the stage and the star's dressing room. Sounds of laughter and ice sloshing in liquored glasses drifted to his ears as his eyes searched the innocents for the guilty.

Romney's emerald eyes searched each face individually, looking for signs they'd gotten to know Remington Nero too well. He didn't have to look to know Nero was near. His entire body reacted to the beast's presence. His ears perked at every word, every breath, trying to hear the inherent hiss behind Nero's words. His skin prickled so much Troy thought maybe the moon was coming out after all. His nose burned from the acrid odor of

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eternally rotting flesh and soiled blood that Nero wore like a rancid cologne, but only to those sensitive enough to note it. Not those, Troy corrected himself, there were no others. Only him.

“He’s not down there. But you soon will be.”

Romney cursed himself as he looked up and into the wide, but dead eyes of a woman. The presence of Nero was so heavy, so heady that he’d let her sneak up on him. He stood as he surveyed her, realizing that she might have gotten to him even if he’d been alert. She was absolutely gorgeous, her voluptuous body barely contained within the crimson sequined gown she wore. Her blond hair framed her pale face like a perverted halo. Her lips were blood red, Romney wasn’t sure from what. What he was sure of, however, were the two long fangs displayed prominently in her mouth as she spoke. And the gashes in her neck, blood the color of her gown congealed around the wounds.

“You, you’re Bethany Chambers,” Romney said, standing up straight. “His co-star. Bethany,” Romney extended a pleading hand. “There may still be time. Let me-“

“Not his co-star,” Bethany snapped, her shoulders expanding, arms raising, almost like wings. Her face twisted, her cheekbones rising higher, her beauty now marred by the monster Nero’d made her. “I am his bride!”

Romney looked down at the crowd in the room below. They still drank and caroused, even though they could hear every word. All of them, Troy realized, were entranced at least, maybe worse.

“It is done,” Troy Romney declared, the well known actor’s tone giving away to something more guttural, his own true voice. “The balance once more is tipped,” he said, his hand tightly gripping the tool in his coat pocket, “and blood must be shed to set it right once more.”

“We think not.” Bethany Chambers seductively slithered toward Romney as she spoke. “We like things topsy turvy, Nero and I.”

Romney sensed the movement behind him a moment too late. Something heavy and hard smashed into his skull, forcing

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him against the rail of the catwalk. As his vision blurred, he looked down at the party goers. All of them reached out to him, their eyes blank, their mouths moving without words. Welcoming him. He struggled to stand, but again the heavy hard thing slammed into him. He tipped over the railing, head over heels, into the ravenous crowd. And as he fell all he could hear was Bethany Chambers saying over and over, “Topsy turvy. Topsy turvy.”

Tendrils of consciousness slapped at him as he ran naked through his own nightmare. He knew he was probably being torn limb from limb back at the Orpheum Theater in Memphis, Tennessee, but his mind, his soul wasn't there now. It wasn't consciousness slapping him there, but limbs. Low hanging limbs scraping his skin, ripping at him like talons of unseen birds as he ran through the orchard. His heart rumbled like a new volcano ready to spew forth from his chest. Blood exploded all around him, fresh scarlet blood blossoming like grotesque flowers. Blood of innocents, his own blood, blood of those not yet born. Some of it out of his own gashes and cuts, some raining on him from this perverted storm he tried so desperately to flee from, but only ran deeper into. And even more blood dripped in rivulets from his fingers, from his hands, from his mouth, from his teeth. Not his blood, but blood of those he feasted on.

He tried to stop running when he caught a scent. A scent of velvet curtains, of young girls at first high on erotic, expectant ecstasy, but now intoxicated by fear. The heady smell of buttered popcorn tangled with the acrid odor of decomposing skin and open wounds. He wanted to ride those horrid, enticing fragrances out of his stupor, back into the fight that he knew he was losing, but he was not strong enough yet. So he continued doing what he always did when his eyes closed. He ran.

Ground he could not see suddenly dropped away beneath his feet and he tumbled head over haunches even further into his delirium. Righting himself at the bottom of whatever hill he'd just plummeted down, he paused long enough to get his bearing, something nearly impossible to do. He knew where he was, what he was doing. It was all a myriad of thoughts, memories, and

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misconceptions manufactured in his psyche, but even with that, he could hear them. His ears didn't have to perk much to make out the wails and screams for his heart on a stake. He ran again, throwing his arms out in front of him, digging into the ground almost on all fours, trying to gain more speed. Something lashed across his back, maybe another limb, possibly a blade from his pursuers. He felt his skin split, his tender, white flesh rending apart as something sliced him again. These were the only moments he ever wanted his curse to take him, only in his fevered sleeps. And yet it never did, he always remained as he was now. Naked, hairless, and vulnerable.

Still, there was something different, he sensed it. He wore it now as he ran, like a thin filmy cloak all over him. Perspiration coated his skin, stinging in his wounds all over his body. He knew this wasn't like it should be, yet it was. He also realized he was slowing down, not because the landscape of horror around him was, but because he wanted to. Control. Power, even the slightest hint. This was not how this usually happened, he knew that. As he slowed almost to a walk, he observed two things. First, his pursuers, the thousands of lost lives and damned souls that always chased him, they were farther back, their screams for vengeance barely whispers now. And then there was the light, a single beam of translucent light dangling in front of him. At one moment, like a lunar hand grasping for him, but then at the next, more of a rope of moonlight, dancing in the wind of his own tormented spirit, hanging there. For him.

"Help us!"

Sounds congealed into words, a girl's frantic pleading, banging temple to temple, the tortured song of an angel trapped in his skull.

"Please," the phantom voice begged, whatever lies beyond terror echoing behind every word, "he said we were here because of you!"

Romney tried to raise his head but couldn't, his mind stranded between its own haunted meanderings and the horror of the reality he knew was all around him.

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"They...they... Oh my god!" Her scream snapped his head up, but his eyes still weighed heavy. That was, until he felt her hands on his legs, her thin, fragile nails clawing at him. "They...I don't...they're eating her!! Why are they doing this?"

"Yes, Rom." Nausea rose like flood waters in Troy Romney's stomach as the velvet male voice assaulting his ears. "Do tell this waif of a girl why we're doing this. Again."

Romney's right eye opened first, his left swollen shut for some reason. But one eye was enough to see that Armageddon had descended upon the Orpheum Theater. He looked from the stage to the theater seats filling the cavernous room in front of the massive movie screen. His legs were bound tightly to some sort of post or board. He couldn't tell which because of the hands clawing and tearing at him and the faces looking up for salvation. Teenagers, girls mostly, and the errant adult, all of them at his feet, grabbing at him, wanting to touch him. No, not touch, to climb him. To climb over him. To escape.

He flexed his left shoulder, trying to move his arm. It clung so tightly to his side, bound by whatever held him, that it was almost as if he had no limbs. Nothing worked. Nothing except his eyes. They saw the rising tide of horrified people fighting around him, begging him to come down from on high and save them. And beyond the waves of desperate humanity, Troy Romney watched the almost indefinable surreal scene unfurl before him. A pulsating sea of flesh and blood, tossing and turning, distorted and broken. And afloat upon the torn corpses lining the theater aisles, licking their lips and feeding on anything with blood on it, were the party goers from before.

Twenty of them, gorging on an obscene buffet of jugular veins and rapidly dying hearts, all pumping thick, viscous blood. Romney screamed, the roar rising from his throat unearthly and horrific. He had failed again. He saw that through the tears of fury and sadness rising in his eyes. Twenty vampires, most of them actors, crewmen, and producers from Nero's movie, feeding like undead leeches on the packed, sold out audience for the premiere, now nothing more than cattle to these soulless monsters.

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"The battle..." Romney spat, his own blood weighing down his words, a phrase he'd repeated far too many times over the centuries. "The battle-"

"Has now once more become a war."

Troy Romney turned his head as much as the restraint encircling his neck would allow him. To his left he saw his host, his captor. Standing only feet away, almost regally, a silver shield Romney recognized clutched in his hands. Looking almost as he had when this cursed struggle began between them, barely a boy of twenty. Bethany Chambers, his newly taken bride, crouched beside him, her alabaster skin now soaked thick in hues of blood. Her arms embraced his legs as she looked up at him. Not enchanted, that was only for humans, but enamored. Lost in demonic lust, her eyes burning with desire. Desire for blood, a hunger that now would never die, and desire for her lord. Her master. Her husband.

As Troy's eyes met Nero, he studied him. Even though he was largely unchanged, Romney made a point to mentally take in everything about him each time they encountered one another anew. He'd seen him on movie screens recently, but Romney oddly relished in the first face to face contact. Each reinvention, each life the man using the name Nero crafted around himself, Romney needed to know it to the last detail, to recognize him by every hair on his head. This was indeed a war, as the age old mantra they'd just repeated indicated, but for Troy Romney, it was much more. It was a hunt.

Unable to help it, Romney's mind drifted back to where it began, the first strike, the initial hint of scent. Two young men, one only a year older than the other, though all the drunken stories taken for myth over the centuries made them twins, standing on a crest of a hill. A hill where one day a great city they would be credited for founding would sprout like savage kudzu and engulf the world before finally consuming itself. A hill that overlooked an open, ungodly maw, a mouth with teeth of stone and a tongue of enticing flowers that reeked of death's own stench. And one of the men, one of the brothers, making his way

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down the petal and bone strewn path and the other too weak, too late to stop him.

Tears in Romney's eyes killed the lurid memories and brought his eyes back to the horror at hand and the beast responsible. Nero was well dressed, despite the splatters of blood now decorating his tailor made gray suit like random corsages. His hair was so blonde it was almost white, combed back from his forehead. His smile still held the charm of a man untouched by the world, even with two knifelike fangs protruding from it. His face was handsome, no relief on any urn could ever capture his true beauty. That had always been the case. Very little seemed monstrous about this man calling himself Remington Nero, even to Romney, his single most feared enemy. Very little, until one looked into his eyes. Ebony. Inky. Black like the very heart of Hell itself. Most looked into those eyes and never came out again. Troy Romney could, but only because his eyes weren't all that different.

"See, my precious Bethany," Nero said, his voice tugging Bethany Chamber's attention upward like a dog heeling to its master, "I told you I didn't strike him too hard."

He brandished the shield, almost like a boy playing Knights and Dragons would, letting the light dance off the emblazoned faces on it. The faces of two men, almost looking like brothers, with snakes tangled between them tying them together.

"Oh." Nero continued his explanation although his new betrothed was not really listening, more interested in the scarlet drops falling wastefully all over the theater. "It might have been more efficient to use something else mind you, but this is after all made of pure silver. Besides," Nero turned the heavy solid silver shield to look at the visages on it effortlessly, like it was nothing but an oversized penny, "it is a family heirloom. Probably one of the last I have." His eyes shaded a moment, something akin to regret or possibly disgust passing over them. Without a hint or hesitation, Remington Nero flung the shield out over the massacre in the aisles, skipping it through the air as if it were a flat rock atop a creek. As the shield buried itself almost fully into

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the concrete wall opposite the stage, Nero sneered, "Some family."

"Family has nothing to do...with why you're...what you are."

"Rom," Nero said giving his full attention back to his prisoner. As he did so, he ignored the words from Romney's mouth and gestured with a bloodless hand downward at the creature, once Bethany Kramer, licking at her own stained fingers, "I understand you've met my wife?"

"Rem," Romney said, his voice quiet, but stinging like a leather whip cracking the fetid air, "you should have stayed dead."

Nero flung his head back, peals of rich, boisterous laughter rolling from his lips. As he laughed, Bethany mimicked him, cackles rising from her throat. The other vampires followed suit, almost as if Nero had pulled some string to insure he had a chorus accompanying him. "That, Rom," Nero said, the throes of guffaws dying away, "is your fault."

He stepped toward Romney, shaking Bethany off his leg as if she were a troublesome house dog. She sprang back, at first offended, but then her nostrils flared at the smell of fresh blood pouring from a fat man's neck to her left. As she leapt and lapped at the open wound, Remington Nero walked as he talked. "You didn't finish the job," he chided as he now stood in front of Romney. "You entrusted my disposal to that ragtag bunch of irregulars you recruited." Nero ran his right index finger gently down Romney's cheek. "Never, ever leave boys to do a man's job, Rom. Even though," Nero licked his lips with a long, snakelike tongue, "they tasted quite good for London orphans."

Romney growled again, his body convulsing against whatever held him. Still, no escape, no give. He could not escape from anything. He knew that, not the bonds that currently held him nor the guilt of what he had become, of what his continual failure had brought on so many. Like those waifs on Baker Street. Nero was right, Romney had charged them with disposing of what he thought was finally a corpse. After all, he'd delivered the final blow, driven death square into the demon's chest. And there was other evil he had to combat, perhaps the greatest evil mind in the

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world that he'd taken as his own personal quest. He didn't know he'd not succeeded, that his final blow had been but a glancing one, that Nero's own body protected him somehow, shielding his cavernous heart. Romney didn't know about any of that until much later, after he'd recovered from his struggle at Reichenbach Falls with the other greatest evil he'd ever known. It was only upon his return to London, one last look at the life he'd built on Baker Street, that the closest thing he'd ever had to a best friend told him what had happened to the boys. And turned his back on him, like everyone else had when they found him out. That the man they'd known by whatever name he'd woven, whatever history he'd manufactured, that the truth they trusted, believed in, often invested their lives in and laid lives down for, was nothing but a lie. The weight of that burden, that continual, repetitive slap in the spirit of having to move on, suddenly fell hard on Troy Romney, his own soul too heavy to carry any longer.

But, as he collapsed in his capture once more, Romney noted something new. In his body, a feeling. A sharp tingling running like muted fire along his spine, threatening to break off wild into his veins. He closed his eyes, partially because he could no longer stand the sight of the thing before him, but also to bide his time. To wait on the clouds to break.

"Those boys," Romney whispered finally, "are just more tally marks on your judgment." He sighed, his chest straining painfully against the skins that bound him. "On our judgment."

"Judgment!" Remington Nero shouted defiantly as he slapped Romney hard across the face. "How dare you speak to me of judgment! We have been judged, dear brother, or have you not been paying attention for the last several hundred centuries! Look at where we are now," he marched downstage, stopping at the edge. He perched there, throwing his arms wide as if he meant to play director to the hellish orchestra of death and undeath being composed in the auditorium. "We stand here amongst these petty, filthy bugs and play our little game! Over and over again! We hide among them, you and I, plotting against one another, fooling them into thinking we are one of them, only so we can have them near enough to feed on."

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"They're not cattle, Rem." Romney let his head hang low, although the surge of primal, visceral hunger running rampant in his veins wanted him to throw his head back and howl. He had to bide his time, to wait, as much as he hated to. To wait until he was at full strength so, he cursed himself as he thought this, he could give all he was to those he would take. "You've always made that mistake."

Nero appeared in front of Romney, crossing the stage as if he were a mist, faster than a thought. The two men stood nearly pressed against one another, one of them heaving for breath against the bindings about him, the other inhaling death and bloodshed and exhaling rage and fury. Nero spat his next words in Romney's face. "No mistake, brother. They are less than cattle. Livestock at least know their place, their purpose. The vermin you and I are forced to wade through honestly believe they have some sort of say about what happens to them, that they can impact their destiny! Look around!!" Nero threw up his arms without turning, his fingers dramatically spread wide. "Does the performance I prepared for you today not show just how wrong they are??"

Romney leaned his head forward as much as he could. Power trickled through his muscles now, tickling his skin, twisting his bones ever so slightly. "Didn't your first mistake teach you, Remus?" Romney knew how to get the precious minutes he needed. His little brother always loved to talk. "They are not here for you or I. They are the keepers of all! We were once like them, you remember...Until you decided you wanted more."

Remington Nero snatched Romney by the chin, jerking his head up harshly. "Do not blame this on me!" He pushed his face against Romney's, his breath fetid with blood and decay. It blasted Romney in the face like a storm wind from hell as Nero screamed at him. "I was a child, Romulus! A child given a man's duty! I meant no harm!"

"What you meant," Romney replied, struggling to hide any hint of his growing strength in his voice, "doesn't matter. It never did. We were charged with building a civilization, Remus. Nothing meant more than that." As he talked, his awareness of

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everything around him became more acute. The blood smelled sweeter, yet rank. "Not our lives, not our happiness." The stagelights, though only half of them were on, burned his eyes. "Not those desires that teased you, taunted you, to walk down that hill." His skin felt every breeze, every brush, and knew what was tied against it. "You stepped into that cursed abyss, Remus. By your own choice." Not leather, but hide. "And I let you. And for that I will always be sorry." Not animal hide. Were- hide.

"You pompous-" Nero slapped Romney's face, his jagged finger nails brandished like claws, scraping wounds deep in his right cheek. Romney bit his lip in defiance, not letting a yelp escape, noting the growing sharpness of his own teeth. Remington spun away, a dervish of depravity. "You could have stopped me, Romulus!" He continued turning and whirling, an almost obscene graveyard dance amongst the vampires and the bodies. "You were, after all, the older brother! I followed that nymph, strayed from our Father-given mission, I did indeed!" He paused briefly, bending over to lap at a spiral of blood shooting forth from the open neck of a teenage boy. Standing up again, almost on his toes, he began his twisted pirouettes once more. "I left where Rome was to be built and descended into the very pit we were building a city to defend against! Led all the way by a tree spirit, no less!" The wild procession about the stage stopped suddenly and Nero pivoted on one heel to face his older brother. Romney let himself look at his younger sibling for what would likely be the last time this evening with human eyes. And there, in that moment, he saw in Remington...in Remus...not an undead bloodlusted savage...but a little boy scared to death. And feeling alone in the worst mistake any mortal could ever make. Remus affirmed this, shrieking finally, "And where were you, brother??"

It wouldn't matter, Troy Romney...Romulus knew, it wouldn't matter what he said next. But, as hairs begin prickling all over his body and claws erupted at the ends of his toes, tearing the leather shoes covering his feet, he had to try. He had to say it one last time.

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"Remus," his voice was gruff, the beast to come hidden in a whisper, "I only saw the mission. We thought we were of the Gods, I thought we were chosen. When...when we were led to that hill in Italy, to the very mouth of Pluto's cursed Tertius, there was only one thought on my mind. To take that misfit bunch of humans that had followed us for months and turn them into the protectors of the world, the guardians against the evil below the hill." Romulus inhaled heavily, fighting back and almost losing the battle to hold off his other self. He continued, "I...I should have known being so close to that damnable pit that temptation would come for one of us. But...when I looked and found you...Gods, Remus, you were in the mouth, surrounded and tangled up in blood, bodies, bile...so much horror. I couldn't even move."

"No," Remus said spitefully. "You just stood there as I was corrupted, violated before your very eyes. And these things," he kicked at the severed head of an old man at his feet, the head dully rolling ear over ear across the stage, "these creatures you want so much to protect, they gathered around behind you, didn't they, brother? Chanting their little mantras, waving their little sticks, scattering their herbs and spices? And cooking us up both right for eternity!"

"I tried..." Romulus said, his muscles ripping at the hide of dead people he very likely turned himself, "I tried to stop them when I realized what they were doing. Their magic...changing you...making you...what you are...I struck out at them. But Cyldede...she stopped me...with a curse of her own....She called me your...'your balance,' Remus. Their defense against Tertius...was that one would become what they truly were. But she was afraid of you, of the depth of evil she said was in you. You needed balance and Cyldede declared you were my responsibility. You needed balance and I became...what I truly was to be that...We'd be...at each other...forevermore..."

Remus laughed, the shrieking scream of a mind unhinged and a soul unforgivable. "Balance? My balance, brother?? How can you be anything against me when you cling so hard to the humanity that you lost? You hate the monster in you, Romulus!

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You always have! From that clouded afternoon on the hill when hair first covered you like a blanket, when you felt blood on your fangs, you've hated what this curse has given!" Again, with barely a hint of movement, Remus stood in front of his brother, so caught up in his own rant that his senses were dulled to what happened right before him. He screamed, "You are no balance, no equal, to me, Romulus! You are less than the cattle you crow about being so special! Less than that!"

"Yes, brother," Romulus agreed, giving in at long last, "Less than human..." Saliva dangled from his lips as he raised his head to look at Remus dead on, his eyes burning with feral onyx fire. Finishing his words as he lunged forward, Romulus howled, "But more than enough to gut the walking corpse you've become!"

Remus fell hard against the stage, a ribbon of curses flying from his fanged mouth as Romulus erupted from capture. In the seconds that Romulus leaped from the post holding him, eyes, both terrified human and mystified vampire, watched as reality shifted for them forever.

Romulus's eyes narrowed, skin on his face pulling back tight as his nose and mouth contorted, words getting lost in barks and howls, a snout dominating his once handsome face. Hair rippled across his body like fire feeding on gasoline, thick, coarse fur springing up through his skin. His muscles and limbs throbbed with savage power, the already large form almost doubling in size in midair. As he struck the stage where his brother lay, nothing remained of what had been Troy Romney, except a remnant of the slacks he wore still about his waist. A massive beast, its sienna-colored fur sleek and thick, ears laid back on its monstrous yet noble head. No man remained. Only legend. Myth. Only Romulus, the Wolf King.

Romulus opened his mouth wide, his teeth ready to tear at his brother's rotted flesh. As he swiped at Remus's neck, he choked, tasting nothing but acrid black smoke. Romulus sat back on his haunches, growling angrily at being denied due to his brother's cowardice. He looked around furtively, his nostrils flaring. So much blood, sweat, fear, death and his entire body cursed to be

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attuned to it all, Romulus was drowning, awash in sensations both pleasurable and deplorable. And Remus was toying with him. Immaterial, vanishing as a gray fog. Nothing left except ridiculing laughter and words to match.

"Ah, yes," Remus taunted from wherever disembodied vampires heckle from, "There's the brother I so dearly detest and despise! Come now, Romulus." Light vanished as the stage filled with swirling darkness, thicker than smoke, viscous and palpable. "Did you really think you would go all Lon Chaney and take me so easily? That was simply the next hand to be played, brother, you should know that by now." The wall of ebony marched at Romulus, forcing him across the stage. He watched as it passed over dead bodies, consuming everything. Still Remus went on, "This, actually, is the part I enjoy. The part where balance really comes into play. Don't you feel it, brother? You really come into the game now."

Romulus shook his head, as much to push away the meaning of Remus' words as to clear it. He'd felt it, though, as quickly as the change took place. That need, that hunger, that fulfillment of Cyldede's words before he turned her. "When one tastes of man and man is no more, the other must taste as well. One for one, balance to be made." It was his part of the bargain, his bloody mission to fulfill. But, as the curtain of darkness swept him up in its onslaught, a sliver of something flickered in his paradoxical mind. It had taken centuries, but he had been able, a bit at a time, to maintain some form of human intelligence while clothed in the wolf. He remembered through his addled mind and ravenous needs that he had what could be the nail in Remus' coffin. Still in the pocket of what remained of his pants. He moved his right claw quickly to his hip, but not quickly enough.

He felt the first blow across his muzzle, a banshee's scream following it. Blindly he roared, slashing the almost physical darkness around him, trying to literally shed light into his predicament. All that his claws found was flesh, dead, bloodless flesh as a host of vampires cloaked in their master's shroud descended on him.

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What could only be twenty or so felt like thousands as Romulus's knees buckled under the weight. Bloody, jagged nails dug into his coat, teeth that could not turn him, but could harm him by ripping at his arms and legs, cackling and screeching, language lost to these vessels of Remus. Romulus's nose widened. His brother's fragrance, full and foul, was all around him, but not anywhere he could grasp. Romulus stopped fighting, settling on all fours his head flat on the stage, snout out. The pressure of the vampires atop him doubled as they realized their prey had given up. Romulus tried once more to sense his brother, but still was overwhelmed. Remus might have already left, but the pallor he was casting, this massive blast of black, was too much for even him to manage from a long distance. He would have to wait, Romulus thought. He took solace in one fact, however. That the throng of bloodsuckers crowding him were wrong. He had not given up. And he never had been the prey.

The mass of men and women made vampire trembled slightly at the first noise from beneath, almost like the groan of a house settling. The second rumble was more animal like, not the wounded cry of a dying dog, but the triumphant trumpet of an attacking beast. Some of them, especially those fortunate to be close to the top, started to peel away. But by the time the third tremor rose, it was too late.

Romulus rocketed out of the center of the twisted onslaught of vampires, his claws and paws striking all around him. He cared not what limbs he tore, what skin he rent, for these poor fools were already dead and damned. As he landed on the stage, still striking blind because of whatever Remus had cast, Romulus knew how to bring the world, blood drenched though it may be, back into view. He reached out, grabbing hold of a sniveling vampire, one screeching like a trapped bat. Romulus swiped about shoulder level with his free claw and howled out loud as he felt the head of his captive give way and fly into the inky blackness. As two more came at him, Romulus slapped another one headless and took its partner in his jaw. The vampire, a woman he could tell as her body flailed against his, fought with what strength she had, but could not stop this beast from yanking

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her head from her cursed shoulders with a twist of his neck and a raise of his jaw.

As he spat her remains from his mouth, Romulus caught hints of glimmers, pieces of light returning around him. Weakening his brother's forces weakened his brother's hold. He thought that would be the case. Still, his eyes and other senses were blind to Remus's location, but not to that of his new bride.

Bethany Chambers in life had been known for being light on her feet, almost able to outmaneuver anyone on stage or off that she wanted to. Death had dulled her responses it seemed, for she had only begun to turn around when the dripping claw wrapped itself tight about her neck. She floundered, a chicken plucked from the coop, flapping her arms, kicking with her feet, all to naught. As she was lifted into the air, Bethany Chambers, Vampire Queen, did the only thing she could.

"Remington!"

The last remains of ebony eldritch vanished as Remus came into view not ten feet from Romulus. "Indeed, brother," Remus said, actual worry etched into his tone, "you know me well."

"Please," Bethany begged, realizing suddenly that even as the matron of the undead, she in her own way was still quite mortal. "Kill him, Remington! Take me from his dead paws!"

Remus looked first at Romulus, a look, not of pleading, but of searching on his face. Romulus responded with a shake of his head, slowly, so Remus understood. A flurry of emotions danced across the vampire's visage, but he finally settled on regret. "Ah, Bethany," Remus said, his hand out to her, "your life lingers sweetly on my lips and pleased my palette to no end. But you've gotten caught up in this nasty little rivalry." Remus allowed a grin to cross his face as horror dawned on Bethany's. "Once, I would have felt remorse for that, but now all that matters is..." he raised the hand held out to her in the air above his head..."that I win. My children, flee!"

Bethany Chambers tried to scream one last time, but her head popped off like a champagne cork as Romulus flexed his arm and squeezed tight. As it rose and fell through the air, bodies bolted all around Romulus, some in human form, some changing into

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bat-like creatures. He growled, a junkyard dog unleashed, swiping, trying to bring them all down, yet his eyes never left his brother. Two fell under his attack and he immediately relieved them of their skulls. But the rest...the others...were gone.

As the last vampire left the auditorium, Remus made his way to the back stage door. "What would you say, brother?" he chastised, opening it, smiling in sadistic glee as he watched Romulus across the theater stage. "Fifteen in that lot? Fifteen little beasties flying about adding to my numbers in the streets of Memphis? And nothing you can do," Remus guffawed as the door closed, "except bring some of your own to catch them."

As the stage door closed, Romulus was overcome. Overcome with the desire to run on all fours like the animal he was and tear his brother limb from limb. Overcome with the sense of failure again, that the battle was once more the war and he on the losing end. But worst of all, Romulus was overcome with the knowledge of what would come next. Of what Cyldede decreed on that hill that would become Rome centuries before.

"Please," a trembling voice said from behind him, "we...we know you're...like them. But you're not. You helped us. Can...you help us still?"

Romulus turned slowly, licking his lips even though he did not want to. The voice belonged to an elderly woman, probably in her eighties. Romulus cursed himself for thinking that she would never make one to turn, but she could feed the first hunger of the others. He patted his pocket, making sure the only weapon that could truly kill his brother and end their curse was still there. It was and he would have a chance to use it again, he knew that. But as he studied the twelve or so survivors and felt the primal urge to feed rise in his gut, Romulus thought of only one thing. Balance.