

We Don't Just Fade Away

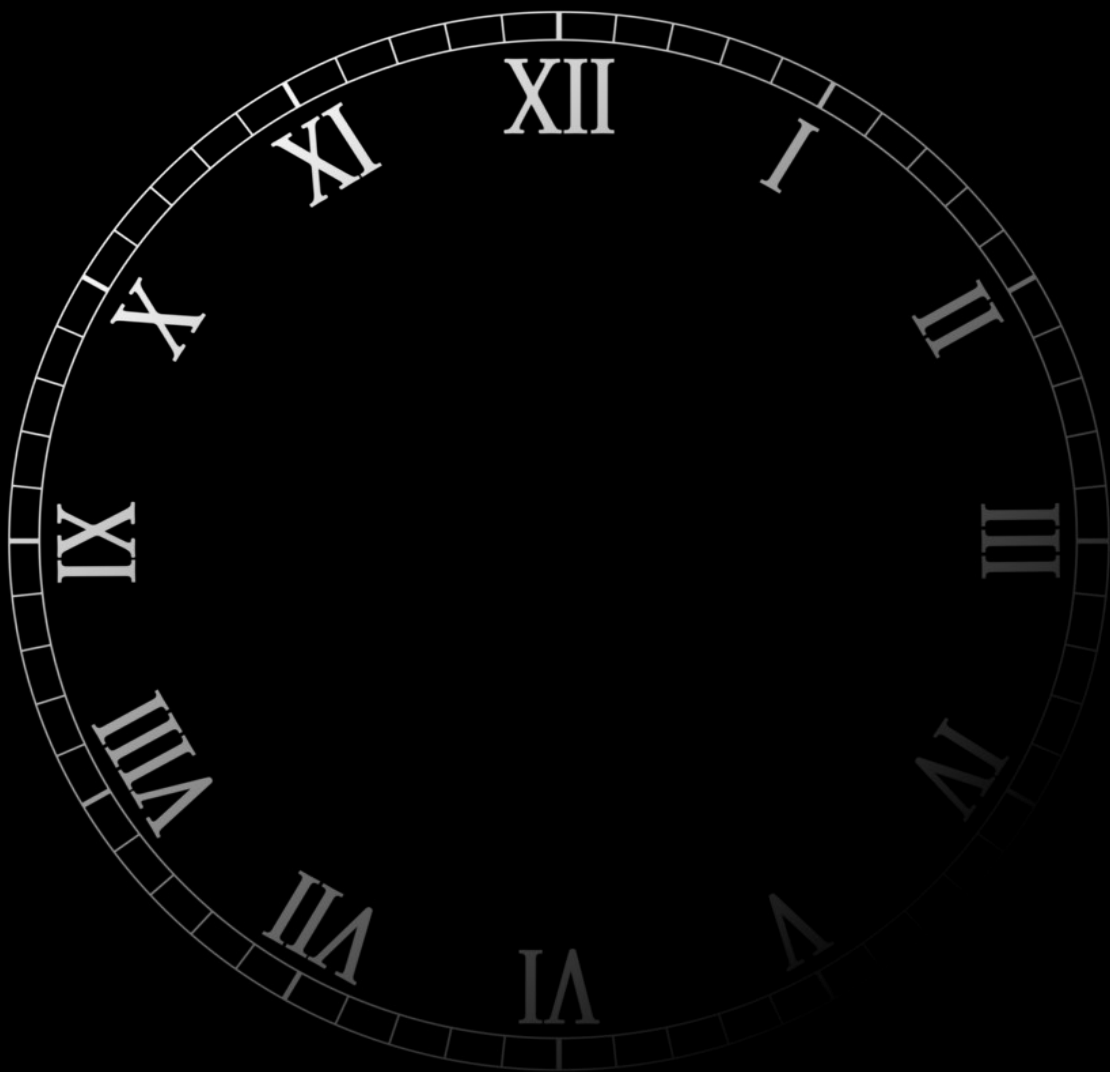


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Okay, folks. Here's a major note before we get started. This is a story that deals with religious themes. And pretty directly. If that's not your thing – or you're easily offended by such – please *do not* read. My main series will resume once this is out of the way.

“God? Yeah, I met him. Nice guy, does what he can. But I wouldn't rely on him too much though.”

Chapter 1

"Have you found Jesus?"

The man's voice grated on me like the sound of a steam engine that hadn't seen the business end of an oilier in months. He shoved a gaudy pamphlet in my face before I could back away. It was decorated with kitschy crosses and smiling cherubs.

Frankly, all I wanted to do right now was eat my take-out in peace.

"Yeah," I forced a smile to my thin lips, "He's living in a cushy apartment uptown, probably watching the football game as we speak."

"Blasphemer!" The old evangelical's watery grey eyes grew wide.

Okay, I know I really shouldn't bait people like this, but his kind are among the few who can really push my buttons. Well, him and anyone else trying to convert me. I've got my own beliefs, thanks, and I'd be just as happy if the world would leave me be.

"You'll never find salvation without Jesus' love in your heart." The man was just short of spitting on me as he pushed himself in my face.

I'd just as well prefer he kept his distance. This was no clean-shaven and respectable preacher. The man had the untrimmed beard and mismatched clothing of one who lived on the street, or close to it. And the less said about his breath the better.

Heh. Not that I was one to talk. My thin leather jacket was older than half the people who voted in the last election, and I was just short of wearing holes through my jeans and tennis shoes.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry, friend." I discreetly placed a hand between us to urge him back a step as I spoke. "Didn't mean to say anything nasty about James... I mean Jesus. I'm just," I held back a laugh, "I'm just not much into all that religious stuff anymore."

He narrowed his eyes, as if seeing me for the first time. "What is your name, lost one?" His voice was rough and gravelly. I was starting to think I'd have to reassess my opinion of him. Perhaps

he was a retired priest. There was something about the way he spoke, tried to step into my confidence, that suggested he'd been doing this for a long time.

"Robert," I grinned as I slipped my leg of chicken take-out back into its box, "Robert O'Toole, at your service."

He didn't smile in return, but at least he took the hint and backed another step away. I appreciated that. His stench was almost enough to make me lose my appetite. And that was saying something. New York was not exactly known as the cleanest place on this earth, and the Mott Haven district even less so.

"You are lost, my son," he continued as I tried to shoo him away, "Tell Father Humbald what ills you."

"Somehow, Father," I struggled to hold back a laugh, "I doubt you'd be up to it."

Yeah, like hell I was going to tell this half crazed street preacher that I was a god.

He'd just as likely threaten to burn me at the stake for blasphemy – for all the good it would do.

He sighed, a long, heavy note that really did make me think he'd been at this for longer than I gave him credit for.

"If you change your mind, my son, you can always find me down at the Sister Margret soup kitchen."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, Father. I'll remember that."

It would be a cold day in hell before you'd find me accepting charity from the saint of another god.

Eventually, with a little bit of coaxing, I got him on his way again. He staggered happily down the street, shouting blessings at anyone he came across. This was New York, so, of course, everyone ignored him, even the cops.

I dug back into my take-out as soon as he was out of range. I was a god, I didn't technically *need* to eat, but it was the little things like food that made immortality bearable.

My little wax paper wrapped snack wasn't from any of the big chains, I didn't have the cash for that, but from one of the hundreds of unlicensed vendors that dotted every crowded street corner.

The stuff was, not to put too fine a point on it, crap. At least I didn't have to worry about food poisoning.

People flowed around me, up and down the street in the late afternoon breeze as I leaned against the restaurant wall. I caught a glimpse of a newspaper as a man walked by, his head buried in it – I was surprised he could see where he was going. The paper read, 'Ross Perot as independent in the upcoming election'.

Heh. I'd have to make sure to vote. I always tend to cheer for the underdog.

The streets were getting crowded, it was four o'clock now. The schools were out, and some of the business folk too. I'd best be on my way to Wep's, otherwise it'll take me forever to make the last few blocks with all this traffic.

New York was covered in grime; it's been that way ever since I got here. I hadn't cared much where I ended up when I worked my way across the Atlantic, this just happened to be where I stopped wandering. I'd been hoping for someplace further from the sea. Nebraska would have been nice, or Saskatchewan, but this was where I'd ended up.

I tossed my wrapper towards a nearby bin, it just bounced off the top of the overflowing heap.

Wep was a little better off than I. He lived in a brick walk-up across the bridge on third ave. It was above a drug store owned by some Chinese family. I had to be careful when I visited here. The store owners lit incense on special occasions. The smell always wafted up into his apartment and drove my sinuses crazy.

I was in luck this time. It must not be a holiday.

A quick stop off in the store and I picked up a bag of month old pretzels. Even if you were friends with a fellow god, it was always a good idea to bring an offering when you showed up. Wep and I had been doing this for decades and we'd racked up one hell of a junk food bill over time.

In the front door of the walk-up, the small stairwell was dark and cramped. Half the lights were long burnt out and the shadows fell at odd angles, like a black spiderweb that moved about me with every step. There was trash strewn here and there, but no one sleeping in the corners. That was a pleasant improvement over just a few months ago.

It was cold in here, far colder than I remembered. No breath fogged up in front of my face, but it felt chilly enough to do so. Odd. It's the start of July, it shouldn't be this cold.

Trudging up the narrow steps, each and every one creaked under my weight. It was a familiar sound, but it seemed to echo in an empty way that I'd never noticed before. This building was getting old. I'd have to talk to Wep about finding a new place... not that I was one to talk, living in the Projects like I was.

Wep's apartment was the first on the left, room 202. If I looked close enough I could just make out the faint scratches that sketched out a hunter's arrow on his door. Wep's real name was Wepwawet, or at least that was the closest my English speaking tongue could make out. The symbol was a mark of his presence, a sign of his home, his shrine.

Wep had fallen even further than I had. He'd once, long ago, had followers, entire cities devoted to him. Now his devotion was as barren as mine. He likely had a couple dozen followers throughout the entire world. Only scholars knew his name now.

A quick knock on the door and I expected to see his long, pinched face a moment later.

There was no sound from the other side.

Okay... that was odd. Wep wasn't one to often go out, and I always dropped by at this time.

Even odder, I didn't hear his dog Ophois pawing at the door.

I didn't have a key to Wep's apartment, most of us gods tend to get a little jealous regarding our privacy, but I'd known him long enough to know how he thought.

Wep was a traditionalist, but he wasn't stupid enough to do the key-under-the-doormat routine. That would just be asking to get robbed around here.

Back down the hallway, I scrounged around through a small pile of dog supplies that had been shoved in a corner. Leashes, scoopers, and a half full bag of dog food. I had to press the pretzels under one arm as I dug my hand into the kibble. It took a few minutes, but I eventually felt my fingers tighten around a key.

Heh, trust Wep to leave the key to his home with Ophois' food. Wep loved that mutt like it was his own.

I knocked once more on the door before reaching down to unlock it. Knowing my luck the old codger was just fast asleep.

"Wep?" I poked my head into the apartment, "Anyone here?" I took a few steps in. The place was pitch black, not a single light broke the darkness, nor did any sun reach in from the street. "Ophois?" I whistled, "Here, boy!"

Nothing.

I hadn't been kidding when I said this place was dark. I couldn't even close the door behind me for fear of stumbling over a footstool or some priceless object d'art that Wep had brought with him from Egypt.

Groping for the light switch, I cursed a blue streak that would have made a Scottish ditch-digger blush. Of course, the lights were burnt out.

Stumbling about, I searched for another light. All I managed to do was fall head over heels in the darkness and lose my junk food in the process. I only found it again after stepping on the bag, causing it to pop like a gunshot and send pretzels skittering across the floor.

Bugger. Wep was going to kill me. He was a bit of a neat freak.

And, of course, all the other lights were out too. Bloody hell, I'd only just been here yesterday and everything had been working. Had there been a power surge? That might explain why Wep and Ophois were gone.

I was just about to begin feeling the fool when I found a lantern and matches sitting on the counter. Count on ol' Wep to keep something archaic like that around.

It's been a long time since I'd had to light a lantern, and these modern camping store contraptions were far removed from what I'd grown up with.

A bit more cursing, some singed fingers, and five matchsticks later and I could see again.

Yep, the place was empty. There wasn't a single living thing in the cramped studio apartment.

Two paces to the front windows and I tried to pull the blinds. One problem, they were already up.

The windows, every single one of them, were covered from top to bottom with what looked like soot. I scratched at it with a fingernail but it wouldn't budge. It couldn't be soot. I knew what soot smelt like and this stuff, whatever it was, was scentless.

What was Wep up to this time? I'd known him to do more than the occasional odd thing, follow that old useless black magic and such. He was about as powerful as me, that was to say not at all, but he occasionally made efforts to get himself back in the game.

"Wep?" I shouted out his name one more time as I turned, looking about the small room for any signs of magic. Preparation of spells, and I use that term loosely, tended to be messy. It's hard to hide the sacrifice of a dozen chickens and the burning of a goat liver. That tended to be the type of theatrics Wep preferred.

There wasn't a single thing to be seen. No blood, no gore, not even a single pentagram for whatever they were worth. There was nothing under the lantern's flickering yellow light but the normal bric-a-brac of yet another unremarkable New York apartment.

You wouldn't even think that the washed up ancient Egyptian god of war lived here.

Wep's easy chair was pressed up into its usual corner of the room. There was a set of clothing spread out on it, as if he'd been getting ready to get dressed.

A simple button up shirt lay across the back, trousers on the seat, and socks and shoes on the ground. I could even see underwear peeking out from within.

Okay... that was getting a little odd, even for him.

There was no sign of a scuffle, no sign of much of anything. It was like Wep had simply stood up and walked out, and forgotten to take his clothes with him.

Yeah, I'm out of here. I hadn't the slightest what Wep's game was, but it looked like our evening of sitting in front of the TV and crunching pretzels was gone.

Now that I looked at it, the television, an ancient little black and white model, was burnt out too.

I was just turning to leave when the flickering flame of the lantern shifted ever so slightly.

There was a silhouette on the chair.

I had to line myself up perfectly before I could make it out, stand right before the chair, duck down slightly. It was the outline of a thin man sitting back, relaxed.

It was Wep.

Yeah. I'm out of here.

Two steps back and I turned to make a dash for the door.

I almost wished I hadn't.

There was something on the ground before me, and the walls, and the ceiling.

The apartment had been dark before, but I was no stranger to darkness. The blackness that clung in front of me now was more than just shadow. The wan light of the lantern did nothing against it.

I could almost hear it laughing at my meagre attempt to banish it with something so mundane as light.

I took one step back and it advanced two.

It slid across the ground, moving silently, oozing into the cracks and depressions of the floor. It twined and twisted as it advanced, creeping forward on a thousand hair thin tendrils that spread and grew. Those hairs raised towards me, solid shadow lifting from the ground, watching me. Gauging, judging.

I was a god. I was immortal. I couldn't die. Hell, I couldn't even be hurt in any meaningful way.

Then why was I so frightened?

The darkness pressed forward again, not stopping until it was no more than a hand-span from me. My toes had gone numb, stiff and cold.

I could walk barefoot in the January snow without so much as frostbite. For the first time in more centuries than I could count I felt deathly cold.

"Who are you?" My voice sounded hollow and weak, like it was itself being consumed by the darkness, "What is this?"

I'd encountered many a mythical creature in my tenure, but never something like this. All gods were human, had a face. I hadn't the slightest idea what this was.

I edged my unresponsive toes forward an inch, hoping that the mass would flinch back from me. Rather it gathered around itself, holding firm and buttressing for my assault.

I'd never had a thing for bugs... and the way this thing jumped and skittered I could almost see lumps and pulps moving in the very shadow itself, squirming hungrily towards me.

Nearly out of ideas, I tossed my lantern into the mass. It crashed, cracking on the floor and spilling its kerosene fuel across the linoleum.

I wasn't even lucky enough for that to work. The shadows pulled back just enough to keep from where the lantern fell, opening a hole in itself to expose the cracked and discoloured floor, but the flames that leapt from the lantern weren't even enough to spread. What little fuel there was exhausted itself in seconds before it could even catch the cheep linoleum on fire. All I got for my troubles was the smell of melted plastic.

And I was once again in enveloping darkness.

I could feel it nearby. The blackness that had oozed towards me was enveloped in the dark of the room.

I couldn't hear it, couldn't see it, but the numbness in my toes had retreated as soon as the last of the lamp's fire burnt itself out.

I could hardly move.

There was only a single thing visible, the illuminated outline of the still open doorway to the hall. The lights out there had seemed so weak before, but now they shown like a beacon.

And in between was the blackness.

I couldn't see it, I couldn't even prove it was there. I ran forward before I could reconsider what I was doing. My foot came down on the floor with a solid thunk. No trace of the oozing creature that had been there only moments ago.

Three more steps to the doorway and I was out into the light again. I paused for a breath, leaning gasping and sweaty against the far wall.

I hardly had a single heartbeat to steady myself before tendrils of black began weaving between my feet. Turning, I was frozen for a split second as the thing leaked from the apartment, following me out of the darkness and into the light of the hallway. It was slow and gentle, unhurried and unafraid, like the sunset.

I'm not ashamed to say that I turned and ran.

It had already cut off my escape back the way I'd first come. I ran headlong down the hallway, dry rasp of my breath growing in my throat.

There was a back way out of here... somewhere. I'd only used it once, years ago. Wep had led me out that way when construction had blocked the front entrance.

The back door doubled as the fire escape. I'd always held those 'fire escape this way' signs in contempt before. I was grateful for them now.

The building wasn't large. It couldn't be more than a couple dozen strides before I made it to the end of the hallway, but it felt far longer.

I spared a glance over my shoulder as I ran, just a few feet shy of the door, the blackness hardly seemed to care about my flight. It was moving forward at an easy pace, no more than a few strides from where it had last been.

Two more heartbeats and I had the door thrown open. Glancing back again, *it was right there*. Looking like an opening into the earth, the blackness was no more than an inch behind me, waiting patiently for me to move on.

I didn't wait to see what its next action would be. The door was heavy fire resistant metal, I slammed it closed behind me with a boom, knocking dust from the ceiling that had likely been there since the Carter administration.

It was even dimmer in the back stairwell than it had been in the hallway. I could hardly see the steps under my feet as I all but leapt headlong down. It was a good thing the handrails were sturdy enough to bear my weight. The last thing I needed was to trip and dislocate my leg. I may be immortal, but it still hurts like hell when I manage something like that.

I didn't even realize the stairs had ended until I staggered, expecting another step below me. Not to mention I slammed my face flat into the side of a solid metal door.

"Gah!" I could feel the bones in my nose crack. Well, there went my good looks for the next few days.

I didn't bother looking behind me. I wouldn't be able to see the thing in this darkness, it would all just roll together.

Come on, come on, there had to be a handle around here somewhere... This was a fire escape for heaven's sake, it couldn't lead to a dead end!

I almost cried out in triumph when my fingers wrapped around the cold nob of a handle.

And it didn't turn.

Okay, I'll admit it. Lady luck hates my guts. About the only good thing that ever happened to me was my death.

The black thing couldn't be more than steps behind me. I did the only thing I could think of, I kicked the door.

The movies like to show people battering doors down with their shoulders, but I've learned from long experience that's a good way to get a broken collarbone. Pulling back a step in the darkness, I raised a threadbare white tennis shoe and kicked about halfway up the door, right next to where the lock should be.

I heard a crunch with my first kick, I'm not sure if it was from the door or my leg.

Biting back a cry, I lashed out again. There was a light this time. It was dim and fleeting, but it was there.

The door had fallen away enough now that I could muscle my way through. Faint grey sun filtered in here, some kind of workshop.

I didn't bother looking behind me as I pressed forward. Past some workman's tools and a buzz saw, all I cared about was the door on the far side.

For once in my life something went right. The damned door was unlocked, on this side if nothing else.

The golden daylight and smog ridden air were the sweetest things I could imagine.

Turning back, I could almost swear I saw it laying in the darkness, bubbling, churning.

I wasn't about to hang around and check if the thing was photophobic.

I was in a small alley with locked doors every few feet. There was enough garbage stacked out here to make me think the bin men were on strike.

I had to climb up a minor mountain of black bags just to work my way towards the street. And, of course, there was a gate. It was locked.

"Why me? Can't something, just one thing, go..."

I broke off as a rustling came from under the bags beside me.

Backing away, I was just about ready to make a dash back the way I'd come when a familiar wet black nose poked hesitantly out at me.

"Ophois?"

A moment later the pudgy, pure white, wolf-like dog had crawled his way out from under the trash.

He hardly even gave me so much as a 'hello' glance before crouching down to lick the pretzel crumbs from my shoe.

"What are you doing out here, boy?" I asked as I stroked his soft upturned ears.

He looked up at me with his clear blue eyes as if to say, 'Same as you'.

The warmth of his body next to mine was comforting after the unearthly chill of the darkness.

He whined, pressing himself up against my leg and looked nervously back towards the door I'd sprinted from.

I couldn't see anything there, but... yeah, we weren't going back that way.

Taking another look at the gate that blocked us, it was dark wrought iron, cold and hard with shark spikes on the top. I might have been able to climb it myself – with a lot of effort – but there was no way Ophois could get over, and the ground was solid concrete.

I'd never really cared for Ophois, didn't have that thing for dogs, but I wasn't about to leave him here.

Seeing the mutt out here was the final nail in Wep's coffin. That god never went anywhere without Ophois. I wasn't sure what the deal was with the two of them, but Ophois wasn't a normal hound. If the dog was homeless, then Wep was dead. That was all there was to it.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, you can't kill a god.

Ophois at my side step for step, I edged back past the door and on to the far end of the alley. It wasn't that I was really hoping for so much as an unlocked gate, but it would be nice for a change.

Okay, the other end of this place had stunk of garbage, and no small amount of that had rubbed off onto Ophois, but it smelt like the back of a butcher's shop over here.

Ophois, to his credit, didn't seem to be interested in digging for scraps.

Yep, of course, the gate was locked tight over here too. I didn't even bother trying once I saw the big padlock that hung from the bars.

But at least I'd lucked out in some small way. Garbage day hadn't been for a while. Some poor lout had stacked a half dozen crates over here for pickup.

They were small wooden things, apple crates or the like. Even stacked atop each other they hardly reached half way up the fence, but it was enough for me to reach the top without too much trouble.

Ophois whined from behind me.

I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I haven't forgotten about you. Are you as resistant as I am?"

He cocked his head at me. You know, I would almost swear he understood every word I said. Heh, he hadn't been that smart yesterday. Last time I'd seen this mutt he'd tried to gnaw an extra hole in my shoe.

"You better hope you know how to take a fall."

Reaching down, I began pulling him up onto the boxes with me. They swayed and creaked ominously beneath us.

Well, I tried to pull him up. The mutt was heavy. He had to weigh as much as I did. Hell, I'd never realized just how much dog there was under that coat. Sure he was big, but I'd thought it had all been fuzz.

He scrambled and kicked to get himself up, almost throwing me to the ground in the process.

Well, that was the easy part. Now I had to get him over the fence. Why couldn't Wep have owned a chihuahua?

"Oof." A shove and I managed to get my shoulders under his rear end. I could hear Ophois' front paws sliding and skittering against the metal bars. I really hoped there wasn't anyone watching us from the other side. They would likely think me mad.

A few seconds later and a small fraction of Ophois' weight was lifted from me. He must have gotten his front legs over the top of the fence. Even a dog like him was smart enough to avoid the not-quite-decorative spikes up there.

"Up and over, mutt." I gave him another shove.

I almost wished I hadn't. His rear legs began kicking now, almost gouging a chunk out of my cheek with his claws.

He made it over and began down the good eight feet to the ground on the other side. To be honest, I wasn't really sure how he was going to take the hard landing. If Ophois really was the close to Wep he might just be lucky enough to have inherited some small measure of the god's innate resilience. Either that or I was going to be lugging around a pissed off hundred pound dog with four broken legs and a bad attitude.

Ophois landed it like a champ in the show ring. A second later he was grinning at me, panting with his tongue out, all but asking me, 'What's taking you?'

I was really starting to dislike that hound.

I'll admit I wasn't quite so graceful, but I did make it a minute later. Without any help mind you.

He sniffed and pressed against my legs in applause the moment I touched down.

I had no illusions that the gate would hold back whatever it was that had been coming after me, but I felt better that we'd at least gotten back on the street.

Still, nothing had come from the doorway. Could the thing really be frightened of the light? It hadn't shown any concern for the lantern. But, then again, it had blacked out the windows in Wep's apartment.

Enough thinking. I wasn't put back on this earth to think. I was better at getting the hell out of dodge.

A few steps further and Ophois and I merged into the endless flow of people that formed the blood of New York.

At first I was a little concerned that someone might squawk at us about the mutt not being on a leash, or even having a collar for that matter, but no one so much as batted an eyelash.

"Well, fleabag," I looked down at him, "What do we do now?"

He glanced up while we padded on, still pressed up against my leg. I didn't know dogs could roll their eyes.

We were rounding the front of Wep's apartment building now, anonymous in the crowd. The windows to the apartment were clear. They weren't perfect and sparkling like they'd just been cleaned, but the normal dusty dull of nothing having ever having happened.

I was suddenly glad for Ophois' weight beside me. If not for him I would have thought I'd just dreamed it all up.

Well, that was disappointing.

I could see that god, Robert, on the street beneath me. He hadn't been expected, but it would have been a pleasant bonus if he'd accepted his fate today.

Wepwawet had been an odd case, but he'd accepted well enough without many a complaint. He'd been just as expected, no surprises. He was an old god after all, and in this game age did not equal power. So few of his believers had been left that he'd been little above gibbering.

There had been little power to him, but now it was released. Every drop helped, made the system more balanced, more resilient. It was, after all, where the power should go, not locked up in these old promethean.

It was only what, four-thirty now? I truly didn't like leaving a job undone. There should still be time to make another attempt or two at that minor god Robert before I headed back.

After all, he was no more powerful than Wepwawet had been, and Wepwawet had been strangely... unsatisfying.