

We Don't Just Fade Away

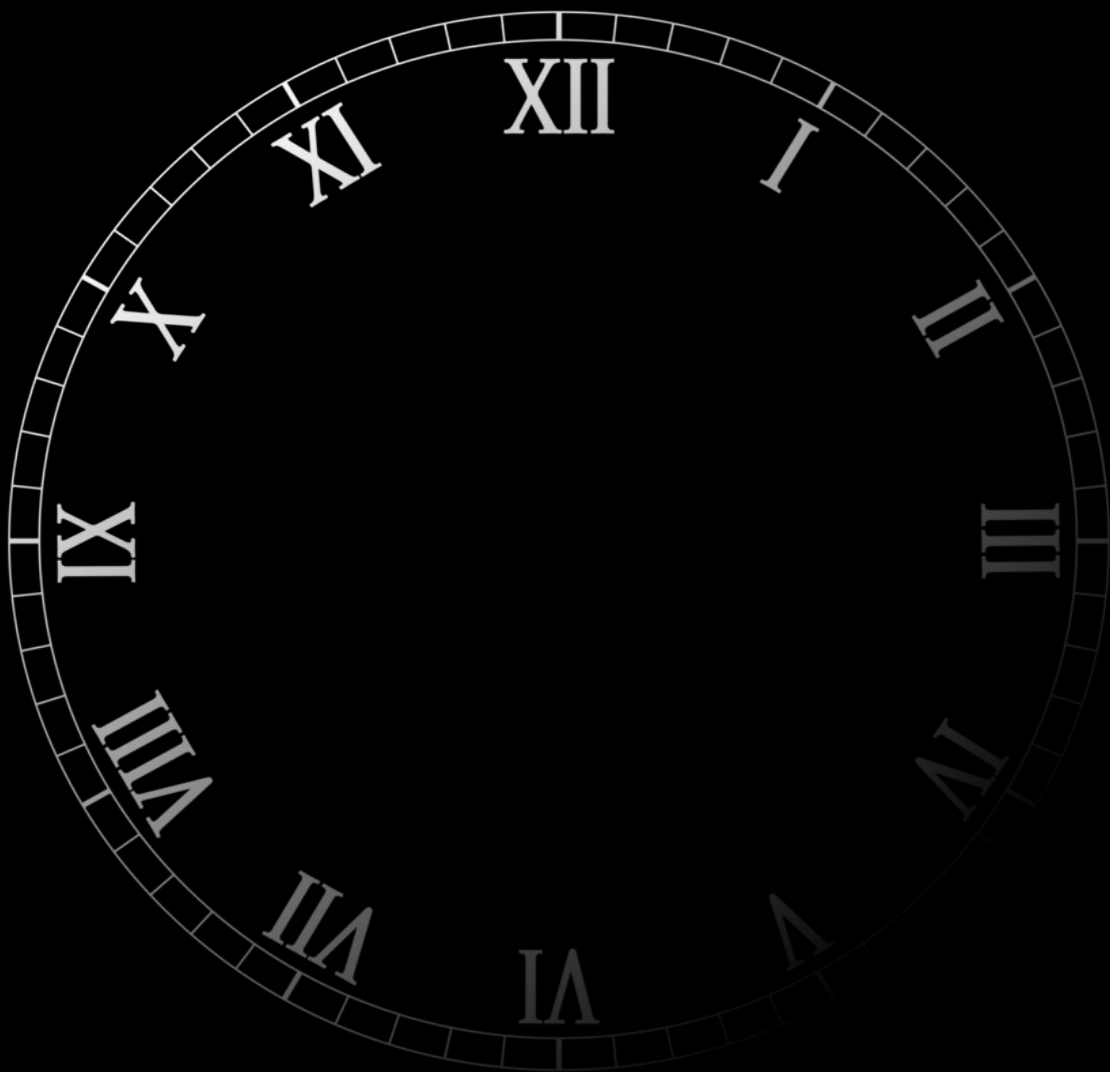


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Okay, folks. Here's a major note before we get started. This is a story that deals with religious themes. And pretty directly. If that's not your thing – or you're easily offended by such – please *do not* read. My main series will resume once this 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 2

I hadn't the slightest where I was going. All I knew was that it wasn't home. There was no way I was going straight home after an encounter like that. There were a lot of places I could run to, but I wasn't going to lead that thing back to *my* shrine.

Things got more crowded with every step as businesses let out for the day. A couple of blocks south and a jog east and we were still walking.

Looking up, I saw the walk sign blink red. Ophois had been against my leg like he'd been glued there, now he was ahead of me, dashing forward for the safety of the curb as I turned my head to see an oncoming cab.

In a heartbeat I wrenched myself out of the way, pulling forward on my toes to avoid the checkered yellow bumper by the width of a hair.

"What the hell are you doing? I'm driv'n here!" I just made out the cabbie's voice as he sped onward.

Okay... breathe, breathe. One near undeath experience and I'm thrown for the greatest loop since I'd woken up on that altar back in Ireland.

I guess that's what I get for not having to worry about death for a couple of centuries. There's nothing like a brush with darkness to make you feel mortal again.

Being a god may be a rag show, but immortality had always been its perk. I wasn't so sure about how I felt now that it was in question.

Ophois was sitting calmly, waiting and watching from the safety of the curb as I stalked the last few feet to safety before another driver tried to make street pizza out of me.

"What are you looking at?" I tried to be angry at him, but the fuzz-ball just stared back at me and panted. Bugger but did it look like he was laughing at me.

He got up and continued at my side as we moved on.

There was a big green space somewhere around here, Garvy Park I think, but I didn't head that way. Frankly, I didn't really want to have that many folks around me.

And anyway, the only park I liked was Central. All the others felt to tame, too artificial, like everything else in this city. It wasn't that Central Park was any better, really. But at least they put some effort into making it feel a little bit more real.

I turned into the little green space in the lee of an apartment complex. There wasn't much here beyond a few benches and a little grass, but it looked busy enough to lose myself in without feeling like I was being crushed to death.

For a moment I almost thought I'd stumbled across a children's birthday party. There was a crowd of kids here, all colours. They were pressed in against an entertainer of some sort, she wasn't much taller than they were and I couldn't make out anything else other than her worn and scuffed top hat.

I'd no sooner sat down than Ophois had leapt onto the seat beside me. I was about to shove him back to the ground where he belonged when he laid down, placing his front paws possessively in my lap.

One look in the mutt's eyes and I had a feeling there would be a fight on my hands if I tried to shoo him away.

"Fine. You win for now, mutt."

He wagged his tail at me.

"You still haven't answered the question about what we're going to do though," I continued. Anyone walking past might just think me mad for talking to a dog like this, but I frankly didn't care. For whatever Ophois might be, he was the only one in a ten block radius who knew what I was.

I'd learned a long time ago that exposing one's self as a god was a really bad idea. That was one of the first things you learn after getting saddled with this gig.

The job wasn't exactly what you would expect. Being a god isn't all proclamations and orders handed down to the surfs. The more folks who believe in you – real belief, not that stuff that Popovf likes to show on television – the more power you have. It's the kind of cycle that doesn't end well for us little guys.

I'd only ever had just enough believers to get myself up and walking in the first place, and it had been nothing but downhill from there.

Every time a god tries to work on their own behalf, tries to intervene in those who fuel them, it never ends well. Call it karma, but the more someone like me tries to drum up support the worse it gets.

Not that those on the top have it cushy either... let's just say that my own life is bad enough, I wouldn't trade anything in the world for the kind of trouble that folks like James have.

Frankly, I'd be just as happy if I'd never been made in the first place. Death may not be the greatest, but it's better than life everlasting.

The children on the other side of the park had been laughing since I'd gotten here, their shrieking voices were starting to grate on my nerves. I guess that'll do it to you. I'd knocked off before

I'd ever had children, and the last few hundred years had pretty much fried any paternal instincts I may have had. Yet even I could tell something wasn't going right. The sound of a happy kid and an unhappy one aren't hard to tell apart.

Looking up, I could see the man in blue. Surprising. A lot of the cops had switched to wearing black again, but this one was still in his sky blue shirt. I couldn't quite make out his words, but he was shouting them loud enough for the whole block to take notice.

The girl I'd seen before, the one entertaining the kids, was rooted to the ground before him. She stood ram rod straight, staring him in the eye as she yelled back.

"It's a free country! I can do whatever I want as long as I'm not harming anyone!"

The cop's accent was heavy, southern, "We got laws, girly. If you don't have a license for public performances, then you can't perform. Hell, you don't even look eighteen. Where are your parents?"

Even at this distance I could see her pale.

There was something about her... she looked young, sixteen perhaps, but she held herself in a way that suggested an age far greater than that. She wasn't a god, I could tell you that much, but I wasn't sure what she was.

She was, however, getting a good verbal beat down from the cop.

Ophois perked his ears and sat up on the bench beside me. Conveniently, that got him off my legs and I wasn't about to complain.

Okay, especially with what had just happened back at Wep's apartment, I had to check this out.

Quietly, I walked up behind the cop. They were both so wrapped up in their little shouting match that I could have been a two ton elephant and they wouldn't have noticed my approach.

Ophois was ahead of me. He froze stiff the moment the wind shifted into our faces.

He didn't growl, but his tail did lower to curl between his legs.

"Can I help you, officer?" I broke my silence as I stepped up between him and the girl.

He gave me a critical glance as the girl just kept on shouting.

I'll admit it, I'm not exactly an imposing figure. I only weigh something under one-hundred eighty pounds and look in my mid-thirties. I'd have a hell of a time trying to claim to be the girl's father.

"What'da you want?" He wasn't exactly discourteous, but he obviously didn't want to be talking to me. For some reason he didn't even seem to notice Ophois. "Unless you're this girl's father, I'm busy."

"How about her uncle?" I asked politely.

I was only glad the cop was looking at me and not her. The girl's jaw just about hit the ground.

"Fine." He let out a huff. "You her guardian? She's been slumming around here for the last two weeks. If she's yours, I want her out. She's even hanging around during the day when she should be at school."

I did my best to smile pleasantly. I wasn't all that good at it, but I made do.

"Sorry, officer. Her parents are... uh, not doing so well these days. I'm here to look after her for a while."

I glanced over at the girl. She'd still to pick up her jaw. The way she stared at me was starting to get a little creepy.

"Is that true, kid?" The officer turned back to her.

She didn't say a thing.

I stepped forward and threw an arm over her shoulder. I almost pulled back when I felt how skinny she was under that worn black silk jacket.

"Sure I am, kiddo. Tell the nice man here that you're with your old uncle Robert."

I gave her enough of a shove that she nodded her head. She'd still to say a word.

For a girl who wouldn't shut up ten seconds ago, she sure was quiet now.

I got a glare from the cop, but he walked away soon after. It didn't take the kids long to hem us back in. It seemed like only seconds before they'd pushed me aside, demanding 'More! More magic!' from the girl.

To her credit she dealt with the demands better than I ever would have. A quick flick of her top hat and it was off her head, spilling her mid-length brown hair down to her shoulders as she showed the contents of her hat to the children.

"Nothing inside..." Her voice was far easier to listen to when she wasn't screaming.

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd before she gave the hat another flick, twirling it around in her hands as she held the brim. It came to a stop with the opening facing to the sky.

"And..." She winked at her attentive audience, "On with the show."

There was just the slightest pause, almost as if something had gone wrong, before the inside of the hat began to glow.

In the span of a few seconds the lights had grown. They had been dim and hesitant at first, but grew with each passing second. Before long they were flashing from the hat like fireworks, streamers of colour pouring out into the sky before a shocked and smiling audience.

It didn't take long for things to grow from there. Every time the light show seemed to settle down for a moment it would change and elicit new delight from the onlookers.

It wasn't long before even the parents gathered around to watch. The show changed again as they joined the ranks. It had originally been simple, flashes of primary colours and swirls of smoke, an effect that almost looked a little like a finger-painting made in mid air.

Now that the adults joined it became progressively more complex. Geometric designs and even the occasional word could be seen flashing into life for just a moment before the display turned to something else.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," She raised a white gloved hand over her ear, as if she was wearing headphones, "Can you hear it? Music, my friends, can you hear the music of the lights?" Her voice was so excited, so animated with the energy of the audience that I couldn't help but grin.

I couldn't hear anything over the drone of the city around us, but it wasn't long before a child perked up, "I can hear it, Papa! Can you?"

Soon more and more children were laughing and humming along to some faint song that I couldn't pick out. I guess their young ears must be better than mine.

Sitting back, I watched as the adults slowly joined in one after another.

I could hear it now too. It came faint, as if from a distant speaker, but the volume was slowly rising.

It was much like the light show, and perfectly in time. It wasn't a song, per se, but a near random collection of notes that flowed and swayed every few seconds into something different.

It was more akin to a group of pre-schoolers banging away at a set of instruments, but it seemed to work none the less.

It grew from there. The magician got some of the kids dancing and was able to take the whole show up another notch or two. She only brought it to an end when the younger children began wandering away.

I was starting to wonder about the whole purpose of the exhibition when I noticed a tin can at her feet. No small number of the parents were throwing coins and bills in as they left with their smiling kids.

I waited for the crowd to drift away before I approached her again, Ophois at my side. The dog hadn't even cocked an eye or ear at the whole thing. I wasn't even convinced that the mutt hadn't slept through it.

"That was quite a show." I said, approaching her slowly. I still wasn't sure what she was, and I didn't want to take any chances.

I'd noticed that she'd kept an eye on me throughout the performance.

"Thanks," She paused for a moment, glancing around to check for the cop, "Uncle Robert." Her voice nearly dripped sarcasm.

"Heh. Yeah, sorry about that. It just looked like you needed a hand and..."

She snorted, warding me off. "I said thanks." She narrowed her eyes at me. "I don't like accepting favours from strangers. There tend to be too many strings attached. Who are you?"

I did my best to smile, but my heart wasn't in it.

"Robert." I made a mock bow, "Robert O'Toole. And you are?"

Her eyes narrowed even further as she backed a step away and snatched her hat from the ground.

"Alice."

"Alice..." I prompted.

"Just Alice." She turned to walk away before shaking her head, and turning back. "Don't I know you from somewhere? It's just that..." She raised a hand to her brow, looking almost lightheaded.

I stepped up to her and gently led her to the nearby bench. She flinched slightly as we touched, almost like I'd given her a zap, but she didn't pull away.

"Could be..." I'd gotten used to this a long time ago. That was the problem with living in one place for decades on end without ageing. People tended to remember you, but had trouble placing you if you didn't change like they did. "I've been around here for a long time. Anyway, I've just got one of those faces."

'One of those faces' tended to be a good excuse, it put the blame on humanity rather than me.

"No, it's not that." She turned to me again, looking me right in the eyes, "It's not that I've met you... I don't know. It's just something about you."

I didn't smile this time. "I was about to say the same about you." I took a quick glance around to make sure that there was no one in ear shot. "Are you..." I wasn't quite sure how to put this. Broaching the subject of godhood wasn't exactly the easiest thing. It was only made worse by those who were worshipped into immortality being often among the more piteous of people.

Folks like that didn't usually enjoy hearing that their whole belief system was more than a little squeaked.

"Are you new to this?" I finally got out.

"To what?" She didn't relax, but at least some small measure of the tension drained from her as she leaned back and cracked her spine, enjoying the late afternoon sun.

"Do you have a gap in your memory? Is the last thing you remember years and years ago?"

Her face screwed up in a pout that was just short of cute.

"Okay, mister, you're going to have to stop talking in riddles. I haven't a clue what you're on about." Her voice fell until she was sure that no one but I could hear it, "I can remember well enough. And I can recall further than I'll bet you've even been alive."

I laughed. "Somehow, Alice, I doubt that very much. You're older than you look? Well, so am I."

I wiggled my fingers in front of her face just long enough to get a giggle.

"Fine, Robert. Then tell me, what exactly are you? You're not normal. I can feel it."

I fell silent for a moment. It wasn't typical for humans, or anything for that matter, to detect a minor god like me. We couldn't even detect each other from a distance. It was only when you got close that you could make the guarantee. Well, that and we didn't breathe, have a heartbeat, etc.

I managed to find an excuse to tend to Ophois for a moment, bending forward to run my fingers through his thick white coat. Alice startled when I petted the dog, as if noticing him for the first time.

Straightening back up, I made sure to brush past the front of her face and feel the whisper of her breath on my cheek.

Yep, she was alive.

Okay, I'd never heard about anything but humans and gods. Sure there were a million species in the world, but nothing supernatural other than the gods...

"I'm... special." I finally said after much hesitation.

She rolled her eyes.

"Don't give me that. I may look sixteen, but I'm not a bubblegum chewing cheerleader. What are you?" She reached out to poke me square in the chest.

This time we both reacted. I could feel a spark pass between us. Not a real one, there was no flash of light, but it could just have well been by the shock.

She felt it too.

"What was that?" Her voice had fallen and she wouldn't take her eyes from me.

"You tell me." I was backed up on the bench, as far away from her as I could get. It wasn't that the shock had hurt, but it had left me somehow drained. Not badly, my strength returned before too long, but it had felt that way all the same.

I took a deep breath. I knew I was going to regret this.

"I'm a god."

She grinned like a fool. "Aren't you a little short to be God? I thought he had a long white beard. What is this, 'Touched by an angel'?"

I shook my head. Yep, I already regretted this. At least she was taking it better than some might.

"No, not 'God', I'm *a* god. A minor one." I shrugged. "I've never met the real Christen God. I'm sure he's out there somewhere walking the streets, but I haven't a clue where. Frankly, I figure he's likely got it right."

I wasn't sure if she believed me or not, but she was still sitting there, watching me.

"And why should I believe you? Can you glow?" I'm sure she was joking, but she watched me so intently that I almost think she half expected me to break out in a halo.

I laughed. "No." I said it firmly. "I'm only a minor god. Other than immortality, I've only got a couple of powers, whatever my believers think I have. And trust me, they're not much."

"Immortality?" She was getting into the conversation now, becoming more active as she watched me closer. "So what, you're bullet proof?"

I flinched back at the thought. "No." Gritting my teeth, "You shoot me and I'll bleed just like anyone else, thank you very much. It'll hurt like hell, but I won't die. From what I've seen a god can bounce back from just short of anything, it just takes time." I didn't bother to hide the fear in my voice, "And a lot of pain."

I really wanted to get off this track.

"You seem to be taking this rather well," I continued, "Don't you, you know, think I'm crazy or anything?"

She shook her head slowly, as if trying to dredge up an old memory that lay long forgotten.

"No..." Her voice was slow, "I can remember my father talking about gods... I can remember something from when I was young..."

"You already know about the gods?" I couldn't keep the surprise from my voice.

"No..." If anything she spoke even slower now, like it was taking everything she had to try and remember. "I don't know, maybe I did. It's been so long that I just can't seem to, you know... God but it's been a long time."

Beside me I heard Ophois begin to growl, his eyes locked upon her.

"Hush." I gave the mutt a light kick to the side. It shut him up for a moment before he turned to glare at me.

"So I'm a god," I said, turning back to Alice, "What does that make you? You're not mortal."

She shyed away from me for a moment, but not far. "I don't know. I'm just me."

"Fine." I reached up to rub the bridge of my nose. I really just wanted to stand up and walk away from this right now, but I couldn't afford to have another unknown kicking around. For all I knew she could be the source of the darkness and not even be aware of it. "If you're so... youish what makes you special?" I paused, looking at her again.

She looked like a normal sixteen year old, but dressed like someone who had survived the great depression – in an old black silk magician's coat and top hat – and spoke and held herself like a lady.

It wasn't that there was anything specific in her motions that suggested an age beyond her appearance, but it was just that she moved like a lady, not a child.

Her speech was much the same, like mine. I didn't have a trace of the Irish accent I'd grown up with, well, not normally. I'd been completely Americanized decades ago. One's voice is something that changes over the years. Your physical voice may stay the same, but how you use it changes to match those around you.

She flicked a strand of hair over her shoulder, avoiding the question.

"How old are you, Alice?" I pressed, my voice slightly harder.

"A lady does not disclose her age." She looked up to meet my stare. "And how old are you, Mr. O'Toole?"

I laughed. "Point taken."

I was about to launch into another set of questions to pin her down when one of the children from the show darted over to tug at her pant leg.

"Please, lady, can we see more?" His voice was high and squeaky. Frankly, I'd rather be somewhere else. Having this many kids around made me painfully aware of how they would grow old and die, but I'd never change.

"Sorry, little friend," Alice worked up a smile that looked almost genuine, "I can only do a show when there's enough of a crowd." She reached down to mess the boy's hair, "I hope you liked it. With any luck I'll be back tomorrow. It's even better the second time you see it."

The kid made a slight pout, but turned to leave without complaint. It wasn't that long before he joined a group of his friends and they were off running and shouting, talking about the amazing things they'd just seen.

"Alice," I glanced back at the kids, "What do you say we find somewhere more private? I don't care for it with so many of those little ones around."

"I don't know, I like children." She glanced at me again, "And anyway, I hardly know you, Mr. O'Toole. How do I know you're not the Boston Strangler come back to life? Any man who claims to be a god has to have some issues."

I grinned. Standing up, I reached down to take her hand, gritting myself against the spark I knew I was about to feel.

"I'm many things, Alice, and I'll admit that I can be a little on the loopy side," I tapped a finger to my forehead, "But I haven't any horns. I won't hurt you, it's not in my nature."

Slowly, she took my hand. "And what would a god know of nature? You're supernatural."

Walking down the street, I made sure to keep enough space between Alice and I so that we didn't bump by accident.

It wasn't that the spark was painful, being like shocking yourself on a light switch during a dry day, but it wasn't something I wanted to repeat.

Ophois stayed with me, my new albino shadow. He was on the far side from Alice, putting me in the middle while he kept an eye on her.

Alice took an interest in him after he'd finally been noticed.

"Nice dog." She reached a hand across in front of me to try and touch Ophois' nose. He pulled back, but took the opportunity to sniff her nonetheless. "Where'd you get him? He's massive for living here in the city."

I shrugged. "He belonged to a friend. I'm not really sure why he's following me, but I'm not about to start complaining."

"This way." She gestured down a little garbage clogged alley, "I know of a diner a couple of streets over that serves a great burger."

I stopped at the edge of the alley for a moment. It wasn't that there was a big neon sign saying 'Danger', but something felt... wrong.

Ophois was at my side. He didn't seem to notice anything particular when I glanced down at him, but I doubt he felt at ease either.

Alice kept on walking out ahead of us, not a care in the world.

As alleys went, this wasn't a particularly gory example. It was cleaner than the one I'd just escaped from, but the tall buildings on either side did press it into darkness. The setting sun was starting to fall slowly towards evening and the shadows were growing.

Alice glanced back, "You coming, Robert? It's just up here."

Okay... one near oblivion experience and I couldn't start jumping at every stray cat and bug. I stepped forward and followed behind Alice like it was just another day.

I noticed that Ophois took pains to walk behind me, following in my footsteps.

And, of course, nothing happened.

We were out on the street a few moments later to track up a block and duck into the next alley.

"It's just up ahead, Robert."

I worked a smile to my lips. "Yeah, sure."

I hardly even noticed when I stepped into a small patch of blackness that shouldn't have been there.

Shadows grow from the west in the evening. This one was on the east, where no shadow had any right to be.

I hardly even noticed it at first, but that changed in a rush as soon as I fell flat on my face and nearly snapped my knee in half.

"Oof."

Alice paused to look behind her and Ophois stopped in his tracks, cocking his head at me while I laid on the ground.

"Just a sec," I tried to stand, but it felt like my foot was stuck in super glue. "I just gotta..."

Okay... that was weird. It wasn't just my shoe that was stuck, but my foot within it. I couldn't even flex my toes.

Trying not to twist my ankle anymore than I already had, I wrestled slowly to my feet.

My heartbeat was starting to raise now. I couldn't see anything of note other than this single spot, but it was just weird enough after the apartment to put me more than on edge.

Ophois shuffled closer to me, sniffing at the puddle of darkness that had fallen around my foot. He didn't touch it.

Sniffing and snorting, he didn't seem to notice a thing. It was like he could hardly even see it.

"What's wrong?" Alice was next to me now. I turned towards her, not willing to leave my back exposed.

"I'm stuck." I shrugged, trying to make light of it. "Any glue factories around here?"

She didn't even pause a second before kneeling down and running her hands along the concrete. She didn't stick.

Looking around, she glanced at the sun, using her own body to create shadows for comparison.

"This isn't right..." She began to work faster. "What do you see, Robert?"

I shrugged again and tried to not sound panicked. I doubt I succeeded. "I don't know, black?"

"No, no." Her hands were around my white tennis shoe now, running up and down as she tried to pry me loose with her long, thin fingers. "What does it look like, what does it look like it might do?"

"It's black, looks like tar," I swallowed down a lump in my throat, "It's like darkness, emptiness, nothing. It's like..."

One of her hands came up to clamp over my mouth even as she kept working.

"Stop." Her voice was hard and sharp, like a metal trap slamming shut. "Don't say that word. Never say that word when working with illusion."

"Illusion?" I tried to pull my foot free again. "It can't be an illusion. I'm good and truly stuck."

"Yes," She'd stopped bothering with the shadow around my foot now and begun digging through her threadbare coat. "But it looks like tar. You said it yourself, it looks sticky. That's all it needs. Once you think it's sticky it can grow from that thought like a seed. All it needs is to be noticed and it can grow into almost anything."

She pulled free an old matchbook from the inside of her coat. It held the mark of a cheap Boston hotel.

A second later and she'd struck the match, its feeble yellow light did nothing against the blackness that now seemed to slowly be crawling up my foot.

"Watch the light," She whispered, her voice hardly above the faintest breath, "Watch the flickering light and put all darkness from your mind."

I wasn't sure if it was the greatest idea or not, but I did. From beside me I could hear Ophois begin growling again.

"The light is strong," she continued, "It grows with each second and banishes any darkness near it without creating any to replace it. It fills the world with warm light, smooth and even."

Before I even knew what was happening the match's flame was growing, turning a rich yellow, a ball of flame that I couldn't believe didn't burn her fingers.

It had only been seconds since she'd lit it and now she was kneeling back down to my stuck foot, forcing her light towards the darkness that held me.

"The light is stronger," she chanted it over and over again.

I could almost feel the battle between the match and shadow. Every time it seemed the shadow pushed towards me she would chant louder, driving it back.

She waited only just long enough for the shadow to be forced from my foot before grabbing me by the ankle and wrenching me away.

I fell to the ground, careful to stay in the sunlight, Alice coming to rest atop me. I almost didn't feel the draining sparks.

Glancing back to where the shadow had been, there was nothing there – nothing at all but a single spent match laying on the ground.

Ophois was next to me a moment later, his jaws closing around the collar of my jacket and tugging me to stand up.

I couldn't agree more.

Alice and I were on our feet a moment later, hightailing it down the street.

We made sure not to step in any more misplaced shadows.

Sitting in a brightly lit diner with Alice, Ophois tucked discreetly under the table, I was finally starting to feel the fallout from, well, whatever that was.

This was not shaping up to be a good day.

"Okay," I dug into the chicken that sat in front of me with a vengeance, she didn't much touch her burger. "You mind telling me exactly what that was? I don't make a habit of trying to rip my leg off during the first date."

She glared at me. "This is not a date." I was just about ready for her to reach across the table and slap me from where she sat on her side of the booth, "And whatever that was, it's your problem, not mine."

"Right," I waved a deep-fried drumstick at her, "And all this just starts to happen around the time I meet you."

"Well you're the god, not me. Aren't you supposed to be used to this kind of stuff?"

"No." I said it flatly. "I am not used to being stalked by shadows. You seem to know about illusion. All I know is that it's not my game."

That got another scowl from her.

"I'm a magician, what do you think I do for a living, juggle? Of course I know about illusion. It's how I make it from day to day."

She finally did start on her burger, likely just to spite me. I'd been the one to pay for the meal.

I watched her for a few moments. If illusion was her breadwinner, then there had to be something wrong. God but she was thin. There was hardly anything to her but skin and bone.

The show she'd put on was way beyond anything you'd ever see on TV. All the Copperfields of the world were charlatans. They were good at it, no doubt, but their game was all just slight of hand. What she'd been doing was more.

Wep had followed his own style of magic, and there were others in the world too, but I don't think I'd ever actually met a true illusionist.

Yeah, you might think I'd be a little more sceptical about magic and all that – but hey, I'm a god. And I'd just escaped a man-eating shadow.

I was ready to believe in six impossible things before the end of supper.

I glanced out the window as we ate. Odd. There were more than a few minor gods living in this area, but I hadn't seen hide nor hair of them.

Most of the gods around here were even worse off than me. At least I had a few followers left. Most of the ancient gods didn't even have that. You'd be surprised just how many gods have been created since the beginning of civilization.

It doesn't take the faith of more than a few hundred people for us to be created. At those kinds of levels there are gods created all the time, something like a minor deity every month or two.

Most of us are little more than flavours of the month. It's sad to say, but most people change their beliefs like they change their shorts. Even the big name hitters, Christianity, Islam, and the

slightly different case of Buddhism. There were so many saints and worshipped sisters in their books that it was all but impossible to keep count. And those were only the official ones.

Anyway, it's the gods who make up a fair share of the homeless population here in New York. And I hadn't seen a single one in weeks.

"Alice," I turned back to her, forcing my eyes from the near empty street, "How much do you know about gods?"

She rolled her eyes at me over what little remained of her burger. "Other than you claim to be one? I used to... I don't know. I don't remember anything."

"Fine." I nodded my head towards the window, "What do you see?"

She glanced out, looking curiously up and down the way. "A quiet New York street. What do you see?"

I turned back to my meal.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

Drat. He'd escaped my trap.

I'd just about screamed when that little god met up with Alice. What was she doing way out here? I would have had that pest done by now if she hadn't stepped in to save him.

The god was weak, perfect as the next target, but Alice would complicate things. She never remembered much, but I couldn't take the chance that she might try to protect him. They had to be separated.

With any luck she'd realize that he was no good for her and they would go their separate ways. Gods like him had already caused far too much trouble and I didn't want to give them any more rope to hang us.

"More coffee?"

I was shocked out of my inner monolog by the waitress.

"No thank you, Miss. Just the cheque, please."

"Sure, sweetie." She smiled and walked away.

I grinned back before turning my attention to the two on the other side of the diner.

We left the restaurant. I wanted to get moving again before too long. The night was coming, and I was developing a distinct distaste for shadows.

The waitress waved to us on the way out before returning her attention to the three remaining patrons.

There was a middle aged man with a conservative business suit and briefcase, some overweight guy in a Hawaiian shirt, and an elderly grandmother-like woman in a knit sweater.

It was obvious by now that Alice didn't know anything about what was really going on. I was ready to part ways with her as we stepped from the diner. I would have gotten rid of Ophois too, but my companion was seemingly stuck a half step behind me.

"So, I'll see you later then," I turned from Alice, waving over my shoulder.

A second later I felt the familiar but still disconcerting spark on my shoulder as she laid her hand on me.

"Uh, Robert? Could I come with you for a while? I didn't make enough today to afford a room."

I huffed out a breath. "I already seem to have touchie-feely shadows following me. Are you sure I'm the one you really want to be around?"

She shrugged. "Why not? I seem to be able to help. What would you have done without me?"

I pulled back from her defensively, forcing her hand from my shoulder. "I've been able to survive alone for this long, Alice." I let a slight menace slip into my voice. "And I'd appreciate it if you kept your hands to yourself. I don't know about you, but I don't much care for our chemistry. It leaves me feeling like someone's poking me with a live wire."

A slight grin edged onto her face. "I can deal with that. Hands off is fine with me. It's better than some of the people I've had to stay with. At least I know you'll leave me alone." The grin slipped away, "But what is that feeling? I've never had it with anyone else."

I rolled my eyes and started walking. "And I doubt you've ever met a god before. I haven't the slightest what it is. And, frankly, I'm not sure I care."

She stood in front of me defiantly, back straight and chin up to look me in the eyes. All this despite the fact I was more than a head taller than her.

"I care. I can't remember my past, but being around you... it makes things clearer. I still can't remember much, but there's more than I've been able to think about in years." Her eyes clouded over for a moment. "It's like I'm walking through a fog. I remember this morning, yesterday, even last week, but the further back it goes... I don't remember my home, my parents. I don't even really know how old I am."

I worked up a grin. "Well, that would sound at least half normal. You think you're so old? How did you figure you'd be able to keep all those memories in there? We're still human after all – or at least I was. We do still need to follow some physical laws. Besides," I nodded my head for her to follow me, "Do you really think anyone remembers what they did a month ago? Memory is overrated. Take it from someone who's been around longer than most. You'll have a few important events in your life and a whole lot of boredom between them. Some folks don't ever get to the first part. You'll remember what's important. We only see excitement in our day to day lives as a way to relieve the tedium."

I couldn't help but grin as I continued, "I can remember what I need to, nothing more, nothing less. That's why I don't invest in journals or those new computers. They remember everything. That just makes it harder to keep close what's really important."

I gave Alice fair warning that I wasn't going to be heading straight home. I kept an eye on the sun as it dipped lower, but I didn't want to take even the slightest chance that it, whatever it was, might follow us back.

Hell, I was even worried about Ophois. The mutt was Wep's, not mine. I wasn't sure I wanted to become a dog owner, likely so much as the guardian of a girl who looked sixteen.

We headed north on the island, up towards the one-forty-fifth street bridge.

It was rough territory around here. Just the type of place I'd expect to see a few fallen gods roaming the streets.

To Alice's credit, she didn't flinch as I lead her up one alleyway and down the next.

There wasn't a single god to be seen.

There were homeless to be sure – though less than I was used to – but not a single fallen god. This was starting to get out and out creepy.

I'd been here not a month ago and everything had been normal. Gods weren't exactly thick on the ground, but there had been the same general number as I'd always seen.

I even knew a some of them by name, and few of them I'd even called a friend.

"Where are we going, Robert?" Alice was starting to sound a little apprehensive after I'd checked the umpteenth alley.

I sighed. "Home now, I guess. I can't find any sign of the people who should be here."

Ophois had been searching with me, as if he understood exactly what I was looking for. He started barking.

Walking up behind the mutt, I shoved him out of the way and took a look at the cardboard box he'd been pawing at.

Bugger but did this thing smell awful. Had someone both pissed and vomited on it?

Trying not to touch it anymore than I absolutely had to, I spun it around to get a better look inside.

And it was full of dirty clothes.

Okay, that was disappointing.

Ophois was pawing at it again, pressing his way past me and digging through the junk. Well, one thing you have to give to dogs, they don't worry about getting themselves dirty.

Heh, we may have domesticated the things, but I doubt we'll ever civilize them.

He wouldn't stop pawing away in there, and just ignored me when I called him. Wep had gotten the thing trained right, he'd always done what the other god commanded. Why not me?

Anyway, he was still at it, scrounging away when he came up with a wallet between his teeth.

He dropped it obediently at my feet and stared up at me with big blue eyes.

The last thing I need to find out is that I'm dumber than this mutt.

I wiped as much of the dog slobber as I could from the wallet and opened it up. It belonged to a fellow god named Amstys.

Okay, from what I knew Amstys had never been a particularly stable god to begin with – he'd had domain over insanity, that tends to do things to a guy – and that might have explained why he managed the loss of his worshippers without going too lemon-lime.

It was his wallet alright. Had a total of twenty bucks in it, and a photo ID from a shelter down the street.

This wasn't exactly the kind of thing that one leaves behind.

Gritting my teeth, I got down and began digging through the clothing in the box.

I was really going to need a shower when I got home.

It looked like everything Amstys owned was in here. Now that I took a better look at it I recognized his clothing.

Okay... for just a moment I had an image of a buck naked Amstys running down the street... not a pretty picture.

Yeah, that wouldn't happen. Amstys was more than a little off kilter, but he was better than that.

Everything was here, shirt, pants, shoes with sock still in them. Just like had happened with Wep.

I began glancing around for any encroaching shadows.

Thankfully the only darkness around me seemed to be of the natural variety.

"What is it?" Alice was behind me, trying to peer over my shoulder. I was grateful for the fact she didn't lean on me.

"*This* was a god." The words caught in my throat. I'd known Wep far better than I ever known Amstys, but seeing it again, out here in the light, it made it feel all the more real.

She looked uncertainly at the pile of rags.

"So... what, you guys dissolve when you die? Like enemies in video games?"

I turned to face her. I couldn't keep the growl from my voice.

"No. We don't just fade away. This isn't right, it isn't normal. The first thing they teach you when you become a god is that you can't die. This isn't possible. There has to be more to it."

She shrugged. "Okay. What?"

I swear I could have just reached out and strangled her.

"I don't know. If I knew what was wrong it'd be fixed by now." Okay, that was a lie. I hadn't done anything of use since waking up on that slab.

We made it all of ten feet before a uniformed cop walked around the corner towards us. He wasn't the same one who'd been hassling Alice before. He was bigger.

"Hey, you!" His voice wasn't a yell, but it was that professional bellow that you hear from working cops the world over.

Before I'd even had a chance to blink both Alice and Ophois had vanished like ashes in the wind.

"You!" He pointed his baton at me, "What are you doing here?"

I'd learned long ago that it was in my best interest to avoid the cops as much as possible. It was never a good thing to have a criminal record, or any record for that matter. It made the whole 'not ageing' thing a little difficult to hide.

It was obvious I wasn't going to just be walking out of this. The backup plan was to smile, nod, and hope they didn't try to throw me in the back of the squad car.

I stood where I was and waited for him to come to me. He had a pistol holstered on his hip, and I was relieved to see his hands stayed well clear of it.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated. Did I detect a slight Irish clip? He was closer now, and I could just make out his name on his shirt, Constable Murry.

"Just looking for a friend, officer." I managed to pull a smile from somewhere and kept the snark from my voice.

He looked me up and down. It was never a pleasant feeling. I knew for a fact that I didn't look much better than the people who slept in these boxes.

"A friend?" With his sunglasses on it was hard to make out his expression, but it looked neutral. I was likely the twentieth person he'd backed into a corner during his rounds today.

"Uh... yeah. Some of my friends tend to... frequent the area." I stressed the last word just enough to make sure he knew I didn't mean the apartments.

"Did you find who you were looking for?" His tone had fallen. Bloody hell. I'd somehow managed to interest him.

"No, sir. He doesn't seem to be here." I tilted my head towards the box behind me.

He pulled off his glasses now, taking a better look at me. His eyes were bright and blue-grey. Beyond middle age, he looked well past the years that I would expect for a beat cop.

"What do you know about the people around here?" His tone had softened some, and the volume had gone down. "I've been walking this beat for years and all of a sudden a good third of the hobos are gone in no more than a couple months."

A third? I felt my skin go cold. That would account for just about every god I knew on the streets.

"I... uh... I didn't know that." I was backing away now, searching for a way out. This had gone from creepy-scary to all out red alert.

How could so many gods have disappeared? It wasn't like we met for social club every week, but we did tend to at least try to keep a bit of an eye on each other.

Officer Murry was watching me more closely now.

"Where do you think you're going, buddy? I'm not done asking questions."

"I gotta go, officer. I really got to go."

It's not generally thought to be good practise to try and outrun a cop. But at this point I frankly didn't care.

A quick turn and I was off down the alleyway as fast as my old tennis shoes could carry me. The traitors Ophois and Alice were still nowhere to be seen.

A moment later I heard the cop's footfalls behind me. I was really starting to have second thoughts about this whole running thing.

I'm not exactly in the best shape either. I don't gain weight, but neither do I gain muscle. I'm just, well, me. I'm stuck with whatever fate gave me. Right now I was starting to wish I had more believers who thought I could do more than merely swim.

It wasn't exactly a good showing on my part. I got all of about fifty feet before a weight came down between my shoulder blades.

I didn't even bother trying to fight as I hit the ground. It was one thing to run, a whole 'nother to fight. I might luck out with a night in jail right now. I could expect far worse if I accidentally knocked out the cop's teeth while struggling.

I went slack on the ground, but it still didn't keep me from wincing when I heard the snap of cuffs around my wrists.

This day just keeps getting better and better.

The weight lifted from my back a moment later. I'd just about been run ragged in our little sprint, but I didn't even hear the cop breathing heavy.

"Now," his voice was light, "Are we going to have a nice little chat here, or am I going to have to drag you down to the station and do this officially? You wouldn't want to go down to the station, Son. I don't like doing paperwork, it makes me grumpy." He chuckled as he eyed me. "And you wouldn't like me when I'm grumpy."

Yeah, coming from a guy who's got me face down on the ground with my hands cuffed behind my back, I could agree with him on that point.

There were three kinds of cops in the world, the good, the bad, and the 'I'm just here for my pay-cheque'. This guy was definitely not of the third type.

"Dude, just let me up." I tried to roll over. My nose was a little too close to the pungent asphalt for comfort.

He didn't seem to mind letting me into a sitting position, though he didn't help me into it either.

It's harder than you'd think to move with your hands behind your back. There was no way I could even think of running like this.

I heard the flip of paper as Officer Murry pulled out his note book. Heh, this one was professional. My opinion of him was starting to swing towards 'overzealous good cop'. That wasn't always a positive thing.

Bad cops didn't care for their jobs, you could as often as not bribe them off. Good cops were harder. They didn't like to leave until they really thought they knew what was going on.

My mind raced as I tried to work up an excuse. I wasn't really all that good at this. It wasn't like I'd been expecting to be grilled by a cop when I woke up this morning.

"Let's start with the basics, buddy. I need your name and ID." I blanched slightly before he continued with, "Or I could just drag you downtown and fingerprint you."

Okay, lesser of the two evils it is then.

I tilted my head towards my back pocket. "Robert O'Toole. I live over in Mott Haven."

With surprising deftness he pulled the wallet from my pocket and flipped it open to copy down my ID. I was relieved to see that he didn't take anything from it before giving it back.

"And you want to tell me what you're running from, Mr. O'Toole? It's not exactly normal for folks to turn tail and run when I start asking questions." He grinned slightly. "My breath's not that bad."

I rolled my eyes. Save me from cops with a sense of humour.

"And what would you do when you heard that your friends were getting killed off?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I never said anything about murder. We don't have a single confirmed crime, just a whole bunch of missing persons. And with the type of people we're talking about it's not that unlikely that they just dispersed." He wasn't fooling anybody with his brave talk. He may not know what was really going on, but he knew this wasn't just a case of missing persons.

"Right, sure," I rolled my eyes, "All these people without even the money for bus fare just picked up and moved to some happy, wonderful place." I let out a bitter laugh. "Maybe I'll get lucky and be invited there too."

The cop wasn't smiling now. "Listen, O'Toole, I doubt you care, but I've been on this beat for years. I knew every soul on these streets and it's my business to find out what happened to them." He glanced at the box behind me, "I assume you were here looking for Amstys?" I nodded. "Fine," He flipped to another page in his book, "What's his last name?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "He has one?"

The cop's sour expression softened some. "Damn, I was hoping you knew. That guy's been here from my first day on the beat and I still don't know his whole name. Nice enough guy though, if a bit odd."

"That's an understatement. Anyone who calls every guy 'Master' and every woman 'Mistress' has to be a little soft in the head." It was my turn to spring a question on him, "I haven't seen Amstys in a month. When was the last time you caught sight of him?"

He looked at me for a moment, as if deciding just how much to say.

"Amstys was the last to disappear. I saw him here two days ago. By then almost all the other people had run off." He reached up to scratch his chin. "After he left... well, no one else seems to have been affected. It's like they were only looking for a certain type of person."

Yeah, I guess you could say that.

"Honestly, Officer, that's all I know. I just came down here looking for my friend... and he's gone." I tried to shrug my shoulders. "Can I go now?"

He gave me a long look, "Not just yet, buddy. There's something about you... I've got a feeling there's a little more in play here. I think you'd better come down to the station with me, even if just for your own protection."

Oh hell.

"Uncle?" From the alley beside me I could hear Alice's voice. There was something different about it now. Before she'd held herself as a woman of age, maturity, now she pitched her voice higher and more child like. Like something that would come from the mouth of a true sixteen year old.

"Uncle Robert, where are you?" Her footsteps were coming this way.

For a moment I was too shocked to say anything. I could just see her as she came towards us. I got a glare when the cop wasn't looking.

"Uh... over here, Alice. I'm just having a chat with this nice policeman."

"God, Uncle Robert," As she came closer I could see her giving me the stink eye every time she used that name, "What did you do now?"

Murry looked up. "Do you know this man, Miss?"

"Of course." She walked up behind me, almost but not quite resting a hand on my shoulder. "He's my uncle. He's looked after me since my parents went away."

The cops complexion went a shade paler.

"You're under eighteen, Miss, and are in this man's care?"

"Well duh!" She pitched her voice into a perfect valley girl impression. It took everything I had not to laugh. "Of course. I'd be lost without Uncle Robert. He won't even give me a key to the apartment because I'd just lose it." She turned to look down at me, "Are we going home now? It's getting late and I'm bored."

"I just have to have a talk with Officer Murry here..." I tried to break in. Wow. She was so good at being annoying that I was being driven up the wall after only a few seconds.

"But, Uncle Robert! I'm tired, I'm cold, and I'm hungry! I want to go home!" She stamped her foot in a way that would have been adorable if she'd been six, but at sixteen it made her look like a spoiled princess.

I turned back to the cop, "Sorry, Officer, but this is the way her parents left her. She hasn't taken so well to living in this part of town."

He looked down to me with a smile on his lips. "Yeah, I've got one of those at home too." He jotted down a few more lines in his notebook. "Okay, I can't leave little princess here out on the street alone," Alice put up a scowl at that, "So I'm going to let you off. Just," He wagged a pen at me, "Don't run next time someone wants to talk to you. Not all cops are as nice guys as I am." He scowled, "Hell, I should be booking you for making me run, but I've got better things to do." Walking around behind me, I could hear him grunt as the cuffs snapped open. "Just don't leave town. I may need to talk to you again to get to the bottom of this."

"I ain't got plans to go anywhere, Officer." I began rubbing my wrists to try and get the blood moving again.

"Come on, Uncle Robert," Alice had upped the pitch of her voice to the point I feared her whine might shatter glass, "I want to go home."