

We Don't Just Fade Away

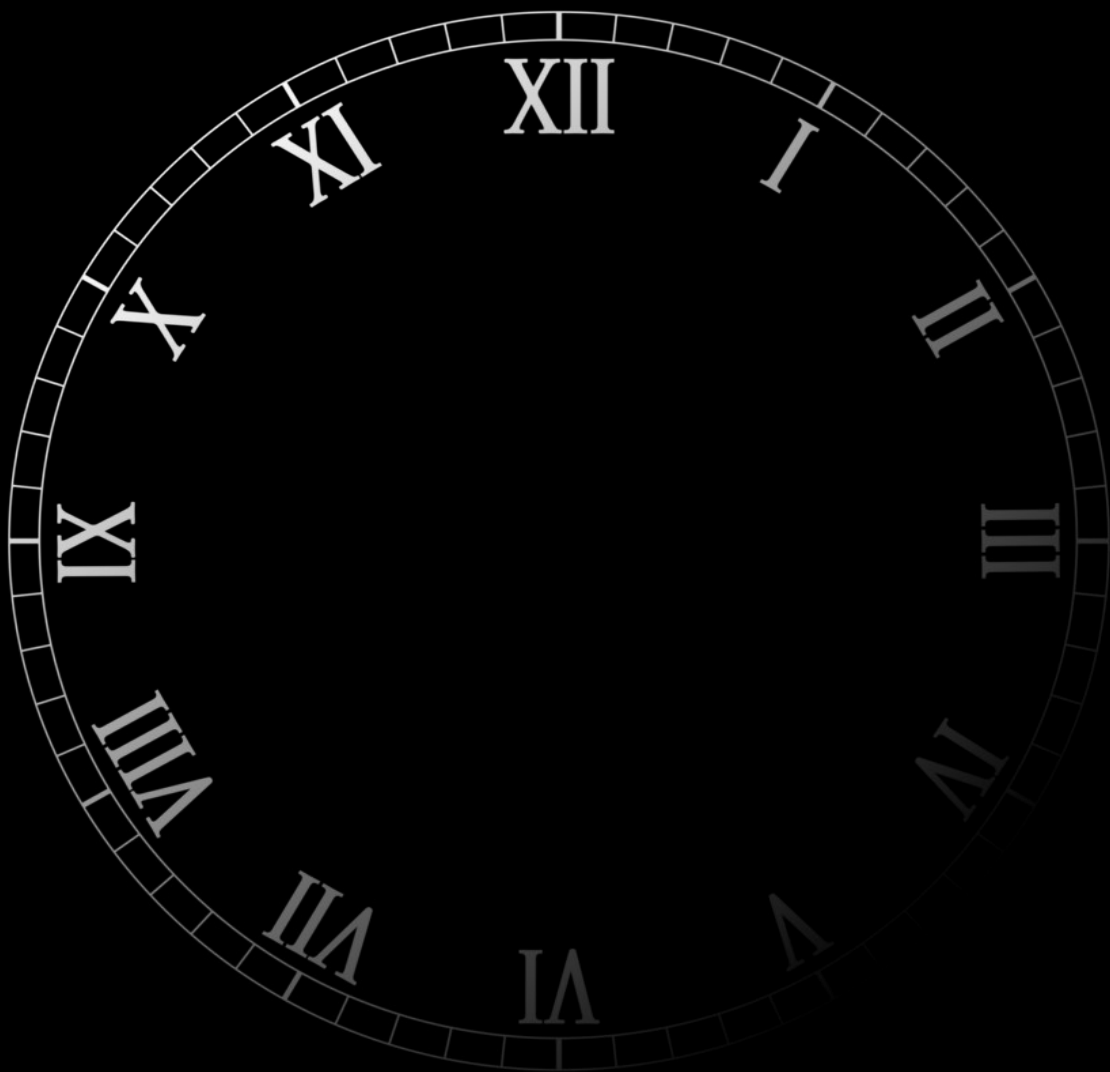


Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	12
Chapter 3.....	33
Chapter 4.....	49
Chapter 5.....	64

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 5

We made our way from James' place as quickly as we could. Glancing behind me I could see Raph stepping through the door, watch us hustle down the street.

It was well past midnight now and starting to rain.

Yep, exactly what I needed. Rain.

I didn't want to head back to my place just yet. Thinking of Marty meeting his match just a few hundred yards from my apartment still sent chills down my spine.

Half a block west and we crossed Fifth Ave, stepping into Central Park. We were right next to the zoo, but I pushed past it and into the trees. It wasn't like Central Park was real, every square foot of it had been landscaped, but it was still a nice change from the city.

That and I could see people coming from a ways off.

We headed a bit north and found a seat on the grass by the Bethesda fountain. A tree to lean back on and the waters of the lake out in front of us. I could almost block out the sounds of the city and think I was back in Ireland.

Okay, not really. But it was still relaxing.

Well, it was relaxing until I noticed the distinct lack of lesser gods.

Central Park had always been a hangout for the destitute of the gods. Those with no worshippers and little sanity tended to gravitate here. One could always count on finding a good dozen men and woman scattered about the park. There wasn't a single one in sight. It was like a great carnivore had swept down and gobbled them up one by one until not a soul remained.

And for that matter, where were the muggers and misanthropes? This was Central Park after all, one didn't come down here expecting to feel safe. I mean for gods sake, this place was crawling with muggers and pickpockets last time I took a stroll. Now it was empty save the occasional embracing couple drifting past in the night.

There were more cops walking past than there were muggers.

I pushed it from my mind. That was not something I wanted to dwell on right now.

Alice was sitting beside me and Ophois laid at our feet.

"So," I stretched for conversation, "Have any blinding flashes of insight while I was having that little chat with the goodfellas back there?" I scratched tenderly at the wounds on my chest. "Have any more breakthroughs about your past?"

"Actually, yeah." She shrugged. "I don't know how much I'm supposed to remember, so I don't know how much I really have, but just being around you, being around him, it seems to push the fog back."

I rolled my eyes. "Want to share some revelations with me? I went to bat for you big time back there. It would be appreciated if you threw me a bone."

She pursed her lips and sat still for a long time. I didn't press her. I doubted that would do me any good. She knew she owed me an answer and I'd get it eventually.

"I was born in nineteen-oh-one."

"How do you know that if you're still trawling through the memories? Wouldn't that be the last thing you'd remember, being born?"

I got a glare.

"I've got more than memories." She pulled open her coat to reveal pockets stuffed full, "I've got newspaper clippings, diary pages that I know I wrote. I was born back then. I was normal, I really was," Her voice nearly broke, like it was a plea, like the memory of being a normal person was the only thing holding her together. "I lived in Illinois. Springfield, I think." The moment she began talking about home her voice changed. Her eyes lost focus, and I was sure she was seeing something far away.

I'd seen such reactions a thousand times. That was the way gods became when they spoke about the time before they'd been made. Even if their lives had been worse than slaves, even James with his brutal murder, something about the memories of a time before immortality always made a god wax philosophic.

The fact that was happening to Alice, someone who was most certainly not a god... well, that wasn't helping matters.

"I don't remember much," she continued. I had to keep from rolling my eyes. It was still just a little bit too convenient that she could 'forget' whatever she wanted. "But I grew up in the city. I remember my mother... I remember her voice, her touch, but I couldn't tell you her name if my life depended on it."

"What about your father, your family?"

She shook, convulsing as if trying to both pull forth a memory as well as push it away.

"I... I didn't have any brothers or sisters." She was firm on that. "My father... he was a big man, a strong man. I... he hurt me. I don't remember how, but he hurt me."

Okay then. Domestic abuse was definitely beyond my area of expertise. No more questions there then.

"Anything else?" I tried to sound soothing, but I didn't have any practise at it.

"I remember getting sick." She was staring out at the lake now, avoiding me. At some point Ophois had cuddled up beside her to get a stroke on the head. He was taking this for everything it was worth. Worked for me, it seemed to calm her down and keep her talking. "I was sixteen. I caught something." The way she stressed that word suggested that it wasn't necessarily something natural. "I got real sick and that's when I can't remember anything more before waking up."

And here was the big ticket question.

"Where did you wake up, Alice? How long were you out?"

"What? I woke up in the hospital a few days later." She glanced over to me, "Why?"

"No reason." The only god I've ever heard of that had been made that fast was James, and he wasn't exactly run of the mill.

It still didn't explain how she'd stopped ageing. Not to mention that creepy spark I felt every time we touched.

"What about the illusions, Alice? Where did you learn them?"

She snapped her fingers as I spoke, lighting up a flame that danced and flickered. There was no heat, but it made me feel warmer anyway.

"My father taught me. I think." She stared at the flame. "He had a lot of books in the house. Both he and my mother did. I remember them having more books than anyone I knew. The books were old, ancient, covering more than I was ever able to understand. They were written in dozens of languages and I doubt that they were even able to read most of them."

She never moved her eyes from the flame as she spoke. "They spun illusions from before I could even remember. It was a game, a toy. They could show me anything I wanted – as long as I already knew what it was. We could play games and see things that no other family could ever hope to. I remember my Mother... I remember her showing me things, teaching me more than any other child. They made me swear never to tell another soul what they taught me." She laughed, "But then again, you don't have a soul, you're not even alive. They taught me about people like you... in a way. They had more books and papers on the gods than you could imagine."

"They were researching the gods?" It wasn't unheard of, but most people confined themselves to theologies rather than researching us directly. And, frankly, that was the way we liked it. The gods kept strictly out of the way of our followers, one of the few exceptions was to ensure our privacy.

Sure, some people knew about us, that was unavoidable, but we just kept it quiet, made it sound more like a bad conspiracy theory than fact.

"What they had in their library, Robert, it was nothing like what you seem to be." She shrugged. "The books spoke of all powerful gods, jealous and petty, but strong beyond belief."

I laughed. "Well, they got a few parts right. It's not that some of us don't have power, Alice. Just not me. And the more power you have the more restricted you are." I thought back to James, "It's kind of like being President, everyone wants the power but no one wants the responsibility."

She cocked her head. "I'd never thought about it like that. Are gods elected?"

I laughed. "In a way. All you need is believers. Get enough and you spring into being. The more you have the more power you have to play with. The flip side is that they *are* you."

All of this talk about the gods was getting me restless. I felt vulnerable sitting here. A moment later I was up, Alice struggling to her feet behind me. Ophois looked up when he heard the movement and yawned before raising.

I headed uptown on East Drive, passing the occasional cop or late night couple. Around the boat house and past the Art Museum, I kept on going until I got to the reservoir.

Last time I was here the place had been scummy and covered with litter. It wasn't exactly pristine and perfect now, but I could make it down to the water without having to worry about stepping on any used needles. That was always a good sign.

I took a good look around for bystanders before kneeling down to the water. Dipping my finger in, a slight thrill ran down my spine. Ophois didn't seem much interested in my actions, but Alice watched from over my shoulder.

Around my finger the water stilled, becoming almost like a mirror. It was little more than a parlour trick, but the fact that I could at least control something made me feel better.

I couldn't part the water like Moses had – well, maybe I could, I'd never tried, that would be edging in on his territory – but I could at least play with the forces a little bit.

Standing up, I stepped out onto the water. The surface didn't even bend, it held me firm like a marble floor.

Useful little power, sure. Applicable in modern day society without being noticed? Not so much.

The only thing it was good for was walking over puddles without getting my shoes wet.

Glancing over my shoulder, I could see Alice behind me, stranded on shore. The mutt had disappeared. I turn my back for one minute and he's gone.

"I'll be back in a bit." I waved as I walked off.

I needed to clear my head, and being around Alice wasn't doing me any favours.

It took a good few minutes to cross the reservoir, but that was fine with me. Walking on water was a simple skill, I'd discovered it shortly after I'd been made. It didn't take any effort, any attention. In fact I would do it just as often as not without even noticing.

I made sure to keep to the middle of the reservoir as much as possible to avoid being spotted by anyone on shore.

Stepping back onto solid ground on the other side, I could already feel the pressures of the world come back to smother me. I almost jumped out of my skin when a rustle came up from the bushes to my left.

And Ophois stepped through.

The big white dog was panting, it was obvious he'd run the whole way. That mutt had to be fast to catch up with me so soon.

He fell to the ground and rolled over as soon as he got to me, dead tired. I couldn't help but smile.

"What are you doing over here, mutt? Trying to keep me company? I took this walk to be alone."

He didn't say a word, just let his eyes roll towards me as he continued to pant.

I took a seat beside him on the soft grass covered ground. Dew was starting to form and I could feel it wetting down the seat of my pants. Staring off across the water, I couldn't see another living thing.

"Why am I even bothering with this, Ophois?" He cocked his head at me when I spoke his name, but never bothered to roll off his back. A whimper from him made it obvious that he was expecting a belly rub.

"Fine." I reached down to give him a scratch. He stretched contentedly under my fingers. "It's not like anyone else seems to be overly worried about this. All the angels want to do is protect James, like always, and everyone else doesn't seem to care. I'd almost swear that they don't really believe me. It's not like we're a tight knit group, but you'd think that folks would care a bit more about their companions. We've only been in this together for a few centuries."

I got a huff out of Ophois as he finally tired of my scratching and rolled onto his belly. He looked out across the water with me, as if wondering what I was seeing.

"Then again, I'm not so sure that I really want to stop this either. I've been around for a long time, Ophois." The dog gave me a snort as if to say, 'Yeah, right'. "What did I do to deserve this? I know what I did to cause this, but what did I do to deserve it? I can't die. I've seen more friends, more people than I could ever count grow old. I've watched generations live and die and I can't have that same simple satisfaction."

Ophois stood up and began wandering off. Great, just what I needed. I rolled my eyes and followed him. He cocked his head every so often, following a sound that I couldn't catch. It was a good five minutes before I could hear it too.

The sound of a child crying.

My blood ran cold. Sure Central Park was looking cleaner these days, but it was still no place for a child to be alone. Especially after midnight.

Ophois disappeared around a bend in the path ahead of me. The child's crying changed instantly. First there was a gasp of fear, but it was soon replaced by a giggle.

Following, I saw a young girl sitting on the side of the path, Ophois at her feet demanding a belly rub. The big puff ball of a dog looked so soft and fuzzy that he couldn't hurt a fly.

"Hello, little one." I kept my distance as I spoke.

Her head jerked up. I could see the blind terror in her eyes for just a moment.

I was an unknown to her, in a dark scary place, and that made me dangerous.

I knelt down, trying to lower myself to her level as I kept my voice soft. "I'm Robert. Are you lost?" I never really got along all that well with kids, but I couldn't find her here and not at least care a little bit.

She bit her lip but didn't say anything in return. She did however continue petting Ophois, backing behind his white bulk as if he were a shield.

I smiled, making sure to keep my lips tight and my teeth covered, "I see you've met Ophois."

Her eyes lit up when I said his name. She giggled.

"Aff-oy? Off-boy? That's a silly name."

I couldn't help but laugh. This wasn't the place to tell her it was Egyptian. "You're right. He's a silly dog. The name fits him. He seems to like you."

Ophois glanced up at me, as if annoyed that I was interrupting his attention.

"Now you know our names," I continued, "What's yours?"

She bit her lip. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

I shrugged. "That's good advice. But I'm guessing you're not supposed to be out here all alone either."

She shuddered.

"Mommy and Daddy won't care. They're too busy fighting. They don't care about anything anymore."

I sat in the middle of the path, careful not to edge any closer to her.

"I'm sure that's not true, little one. Your parents must care about you." By the look of her they likely cared a fair bit. She was dressed in the latest high end pajamas, the type you'd see in the storefronts of boutique shops along fifth avenue. The jacket she had over her shoulders was likely silk, and dyed a rich pink with flowers embroidered on it.

"They're fighting about me. They don't want to be my Mommy and Daddy any more. They don't like each other. They both want to take me away so I'll never see the other again."

Yeah, a breakup. It was typical enough, but it still sent chills down my spine.

"I'm sure there must be a good reason for it, little one." I noticed that Ophois had yet to move while we spoke. The girl edged closer to him, likely using him to stay warm.

"Momma found Jesus." She said the words in such a flat voice that it was obvious she didn't understand them. "Daddy doesn't want to find Jesus. Momma won't let me be with him as long as Jesus is still lost." She didn't even bother to wonder at the oddity of her words.

Ophois turned and licked her face. She giggled despite herself.

"I'm sure it's not that bad, little one. All people disagree about things, both important things and silly things."

"Momma's moving out tomorrow... and she's taking me with her. I don't want to go."

The words 'I don't want to go' were so simple, so emotionless that they sent my blood running cold.

It was like the man who dropped the A-Bomb on Hiroshima saying 'I hope I didn't hurt anyone'. The words were true, but the feeling behind them was like the water held back by the Hoover Dam.

"How did your mother find Jesus, little one?"

"She was walking on the street down from our apartment, I was with her..." The little girl's voice almost cracked, she was crying now and fighting to hold back a dripping nose, "We were walking down the street when she saw something. In was in a high window. I didn't see it, but she did."

This did not bode well.

"Momma nearly fell over, right there on the sidewalk. She was on her knees then, praying. I'd never heard Momma pray before. She pulled me down too and told me I should give thanks to 'our saviour'." Again the words were nothing more than syllables, she didn't know what they meant. "Momma said she saw him, saw Jesus and felt his power upon her. After she was done praying she pulled me to the building across the street."

Yeah, I really didn't like where this was going.

"Momma tried to get in. A man stopped us at the door, he wouldn't let us through. She screamed and swore at the man." The girl stopped petting Ophois for a moment, the dog turned to watch her. "It was scary. I'd never seen Momma like that before. We went home afterwards and Momma told Daddy what she'd seen." She took a deep breath. "Daddy didn't believe her. That was the first time they yelled at each other."

And this, ladies and gentlemen, was one of the many reasons gods don't interact with their followers. We tend to do strange things to people if we aren't careful. James always had to fight to keep a lid on his power. This was the type of thing that happened if he let it out of control.

"Momma started going to church after that," the girl continued, "She took me with her sometimes. The man there is nice, but she spends so much time praying that it gets boring." I could see the conflict in her face, "It's not that I don't like going, I just don't like going so much. Momma wants to spend all her time there. We hardly see her anymore. Daddy won't go at all now. Sometime I ask to stay home with him, but that just makes Momma mad. I don't like it when Momma gets mad." She reached down to hug Ophois, "I don't want people to be mad. Isn't Jesus supposed to help people? Could I ask him to help make Momma happy again?"

I scooted towards the girl until I could reach out and touch her hand, "I'm sorry, little one. You could try and pray to Jesus..." The words hurt to say, "But I don't know how much he can do. I'm sure he's sad for what's happened, but I think the only people who can solve this are your Momma, Papa, and you. I'm sure your parents are just as scared and confused as you are. They need you. They need you to help keep them together. Your Momma will find her way. She... she's just a little overwhelmed right now. She's doing what she thinks is right, she just needs time."

The girl didn't shy away at my touch.

"Thanks, mister. Do you go to church?"

I grinned. "I did once, little one, long ago. I used to pray to Jesus like your Momma does. It took me a long time, but I learned more. I don't go to church much these days, but that's just my decision. I'm sure that your Momma will decide what's best eventually."

The words came smoothly from my lips, but I had no faith in them. Those touched directly by James' power rarely if ever returned to themselves again.

Maybe the angels had it right keeping him cooped up in that apartment. Or maybe they should ship him off to Antarctica.

"Where are you from, mister? Your voice sounds funny." The girl shifted gears so fast as to all but leave my head spinning. She was still afraid for her parents, but she'd moved onto more interesting things.

"I'm from Ireland, little one, a long, long time ago." I was surprised. I'd been here in America so long that I didn't think I had any of my accent left.

She screwed up her face. "Eye-R-Land? Where's that?"

I laughed. Well, she didn't know her geography yet. "Do you know where England is, Great Britain? The queen?"

She looked puzzled for a moment but eventually nodded. "Ireland is next to that." I pointed east, "Across the ocean. Keep going that way until you meet your first big island. That's where I'm from."

She laughed. "You grew up on an island?"

"A big one, a really big one." I nodded.

"That's silly. Why would you live on an island? You should live in a country like I do, America."

I rolled my eyes. "You live on an island too, little one. Manhattan is an island."

She screwed up her face again. "No it isn't. We can drive anywhere we want. An island is surrounded by water. We can cross a bridge to go places. That means it's not an island if there's land connecting it."

I laughed. "That's one way to think about it, little one. Now," I tried to give her a stern look but she just giggled, "Don't you think you should be going home. I'm sure your parents are worried about you. Both your mother and your father."

She pouted, but I could see her holding back tears. "I don't remember which of the buildings is home. They all look so different in the dark."

Of course.

"You just wait here with Ophois, little one. I'll go find someone to help."

I stood up as Ophois snuggled closer to the girl. I'd swear the dog nodded to me as if to say, 'I've got this'. That was one strange dog. Someday I'd have to find out where Wep had gotten him.

I hadn't any real idea where I was going. An hour ago I'd seen a half dozen cops wandering through the park, not that I'd needed one then.

It took me a good ten minutes to hunt one down. He was wandering up around the conservancy.

Wohoo, karma wasn't coming back to bite me, it wasn't Officer Murry. Running into him would have just taken the cake. And then it likely would have thrown said cake right in my face.

"Hey! Hey man, wait up!" I ran to catch up to him. I only realized after the fact that it probably wasn't a good idea to run towards a man carrying a loaded firearm, especially if he's on duty in the middle of a wooded park in the dark of night.

Thankfully, the man had better nerves than I did.

"What can I do for you?" He turned to me. He was of middle height with brown hair and spoke with a western accent.

"Yeah," I paused for a moment to catch my breath, "Can you help me? I ran across a little girl back there. She said she'd ran away from home."

His eyes widened slightly. I'm sure the words 'little girl' set off his pedo alarm.

"Can you take me to her?"

"Yeah," I pointed my thumb back the way I'd come, "She's over there."

"Did you leave her alone?" His voice was cutting.

"No, my... uh, dog is with her."

He eyed me oddly. "You left your dog to protect a strange girl?"

I shrugged. "He's good with kids... I think. She was the one who wouldn't let go of him."

"Fine." He pulled the radio from his belt. "This is officer Thomas, checking out a report of a lost child." He looked up at me, "Where did you say she was?"

"Over by the reservoir."

"Report of a lost child near the reservoir in Central Park."

"Ten-four, Thomas." His radio crackled back.

Frankly, I'd never figured out how they understood those things. I could only make out one word in five most of the time.

The walk back took at least as long as it had to find the cop. I was still winded from my run and could only just huff along.

"And you don't know who this girl is?" Thomas asked.

I shook my head. "I just stumbled across her while I was out walking. All she told me is that her parents were fighting and she ran away. She got lost in the dark and doesn't know how to get home."

"What were they arguing about?" The cop asked so smoothly that I hardly even noticed.

I bristled once I realized what he'd asked. "Why do you need to know?"

He shot me a glance, "Running away from home is a big decision. Doing so at this time of night is an even greater one. Kids don't just run like that for no reason. It's standard procedure to try to find out why as to make sure we're not sending them back to an unsafe environment."

I sighed. "She said her parents were arguing about religion. Her mother found Jesus." I tried to keep the sting from my voice but didn't hide it well.

He snorted. "Damn silly argument." I nodded before he continued, "Everyone knows there's only one true belief."

Oh boy. This was about to get bad. I would have face palmed if I thought I could get away with it. No one who uses phrases like 'everybody knows' with religion was thinking rationally.

"Damn parents need to be taught a lesson in raising their kids. Then again," He laughed, "If the world was a perfect place everyone would be atheists like they should be."

"Uh, yeah, sure." I bit my tongue.

Atheism was one of those odd things for gods. There were Christian gods, Hindu gods, Shinto gods, even Native American gods, but no Atheist gods. Charles Darwin, no matter what some people might think, was *not* a god.

I should know, I'd spent more than a few years checking.

But on the other hand, pretty much every god themselves was an atheist. It's hard to believe in all powerful creatures when you yourself are a god, and you see first hand what royal screw-ups we are.

I was born and raised Christian, I'd gone to church and all that. Meeting James for the first time had cured me of that little habit. It wasn't that I didn't think he was a nice guy... just not worth bowing to.

"Let me guess," Thomas continued, "One of them decided to get into worship and the other didn't. The fact one hubby isn't following is driving them apart."

I cocked my head, "Yeah. How'd you know?"

He snorted again. "I used to be attached to social services." A shiver ran through his body. "Never again. You want to see the true underbelly of society? Try working social services for a few years. I saw things there that I never want to see again. I had to pull kids out of some of the worst homes that you could ever imagine. Religion doesn't always factor into it, but you'd be surprised the excuses I've heard for people neglecting and outright abusing their kids. 'God told me to' isn't that far down on the list."

He spat.

"Heh, yeah. That's why I'm glad I don't have kids." I fumbled for words.

"Amen, brother." I saw the glint of his teeth as he smiled. "I'm happy to work with them, but god save me if I ever had any of my own."

Ophois' eyes glinted in the darkness as we rounded the next curve in the path.

It took everything I had not to jump out of my skin when I saw the blue flash of his eyes like a demon.

I'd been ready for him and it had still set me on edge. I was just glad the cop hadn't pulled his gun.

He froze dead for a moment until he realized it was just a dog. Leaning against a nearby tree, he let out a shuddering breath.

"Woah, man, what kind of pooch do you have, a hell hound?"

I laughed, laying a hand on his shoulder, "Some days, man, I don't know. He seems to have a mind of his own."

Ophois never took his eyes from the cop as we neared him and the girl. He let us kneel down without a complaint, but didn't quite seem to trust the man.

The girl on the other hand was more than happy to trust Officer Thomas once she realized he was a cop. The outreach programs must be working these days, she didn't hesitate in the least to talk to him.

"Hello there, little Miss." Thomas touched the brim of his hat like an old time copper, "I've heard a story that you're lost." He really must have experience working with children, his motions and manner were just right to fill the stereotypical good cop from the movies. Acting like that to an adult would get you an odd look, but to a child it fulfilled their expectations.

She nodded to him before speaking, "I ran away." She looked to me, then to Ophois. "I want to go home, but I don't remember where home is."

"We'll fix that up, little lady." He extended his hand to her, "Why don't you come with me and we'll get this all figured out."

She glanced to Ophois before moving. The dog was inscrutable.

Heh, I never realized just how stupid that sounds. Of course the dog was inscrutable, he was a dog. He couldn't really understand what was going on.

For a moment it almost looked like Ophois was going to turn on the cop, but in the end he seemed to realize that the girl was more important.

All of us just wanted her to get home safely, no matter what that home might look like.

She took Thomas' hand as she rose to stand beside him.

"Come on, little lady. We'll get you down to the station and find your parents. I'm sure they're worried about you. They may have already filed a report." He smiled warmly to her, "We'll have you home in no time." His voice turned a shade darker, "And we'll get all your problems sorted out. There's no good reason that an innocent little thing like you should be forced into wandering out here alone."

They set off a moment later. I got a nod from Thomas and a shy wave from the girl.

Only just before she left did she turn and wave to me. In a voice that was little more than a whisper, she said, "Thank you, Robert."

And she told me that her name was Mary.

Well, it was time to get back to Alice, assuming that is she hadn't decided we'd abandoned her.

Stepping back out onto the lake, I turned to see Ophois making puppy dog eyes at me. I've got to hand it to him, he was versatile. Not five minutes ago he'd looked like a hell-hound out to eat our souls, now he was a living plush toy, ready to start crying. I guess he really didn't want to have to run all the way around the lake again.

"Fine," I rolled my eyes, "Hop on." I reached out a hand to grab hold of the scruff of his neck.

Holding on to him I was able to extend my powers to allow him to join me standing on the water. He seemed to clue in pretty quickly. He stepped out without fear as soon as I grabbed hold of him.

He leaned against my leg the whole way across. I didn't bother shoeing him away, I figured he'd earned it by now.

I didn't rush. It was starting to rain again. The drops against the surface of the lake caused its otherwise mirror smooth surface to erupt into a million rolling ridges under our feet.

I'd gotten used to it long ago, treating it like a soft, spongy carpet, but it slowed down Ophois a fair bit. He didn't seem to like having the ground move under him when he had four legs to worry about.

Ophois was happy enough to see the far shore that he almost broke from my grasp before realizing that he probably didn't want to swim that far.

Alice was right where we'd left her. She didn't look all that thrilled that we'd been gone for over an hour.

"Nice to see you remembered me." She met us at the shore line, "Do I even want to ask what you've been doing?"

"Probably not." To be honest, I felt good. The fact Mary had been out in the park was unfortunate, but at least I felt like I was doing something worth while again by helping her. I hadn't done anything like that in over a century.

We started walking west towards Eighth ave. I'd had just about enough of Central Park for tonight. There should be a bus over there we could catch to get back towards Mott Haven.

"So what do we do now, Robert?" Alice asked.

I shrugged. "Haven't the slightest. I think James' people are still on the case, assuming Mike hasn't pulled them off. With any luck they'll dig something up. Their resources are just a little bit further reaching than mine. We'll let them do the foot work and just stay out of the way."

This was becoming annoying. Yet another god had slipped from my grasp. First that Robert O'Toole, now this one. Don't people realize what I'm doing for them?

I slammed the door to my car and pulled away from the curb. I didn't gun the motor until I got out on the main street, no reason to call attention to myself.

I could see the ambulance carrying the god in front of me. For a moment I considered following it, I hadn't gotten this far by giving up.

It was easy enough to get a god alone when he was in his home, when he felt safe, surrounded by his things. It was a simple enough task to use that very security and turn it against him. But in a cold, bright hospital?

It could be done, but the difficulty would be in getting enough time alone with him without being interrupted. This was a delicate procedure. Hours of work could easily be lost by a doctor bumbling in to check on a patient who was well beyond their comprehension.

Alice and Ophois in tow, I pushed west. We were still in Central Park, and going was slow. Alice must have caught some sleep while I was away, it was three in the morning by now and she was still wide awake.

Call me paranoid – I am – but my ears twitched the moment I heard someone behind us. Ophois reacted too, his head swinging around.

The wind was from ahead of us, so the dog couldn't scent whoever it was. That was all I needed to get moving.

I ducked off the path and slipped into the underbrush as quietly as I could, Alice in hand.

"What's going on?" She was smart enough to whisper it.

Holding onto her it felt like I was shorting a battery, but right now I didn't care. I never stopped moving as I spoke.

"Someone's behind us." I was following Ophois now, his vision was better than mine in the darkness.

Alice had to hold back a laugh. "What, you're jumping at shadows now?" She cut off as she realized what she'd said. "Sorry. But couldn't it just be a late night jogger or a cop."

"Yeah," I admitted, "But I'm not really in the mood to take a chance."

My suspicions were confirmed a moment later as I heard our pursuer crash through the same bushes we had. He made no pretence of being stealthy.

Wonderful.

I moved faster. Ophois was at a trot ahead of me and I was dragging Alice forward by the hand. She, it seemed, didn't have much experience at running in the dark.

We skirted the north side of the Great Lawn, staying at the edge of the trees while at the same time making just short of an all out dash forward. The fields and baseball diamonds were empty now, the full moon shining silver down on them and casting everything in an eerie white glow.

From the corner of my eye I could see the flit of motion behind us. I didn't slow as I glanced back.

I couldn't make out a thing in the blackness, then another glimpse of movement came through. It was too distant to make out, just a shadow moving among more of its kind, but it was there. And it was definitely coming this way.

Past the Great Lawn, we dove back into the trees. It was slower going here, but at least there was some chance we might lose our tail. I sorely wanted to jump back out onto the path and run for it, but I knew that I was no match for even a moderately fit man, and Alice likely even less so.

I heard a yell from behind us. The words were muffled in the trees, but it was a man. A large one by the sounds of it. The only positive note was that he sounded as out of breath as I was.

Out of breath yes, slow? No. Another glance back and he'd gained on us. I could almost hear his huffing breaths now.

"Split up." I gasped it out. "Mutt, go with Alice."

I shoved Alice off in to the left as I swung right. With any luck the dog would be able to protect her.

Alice and Ophois could be killed by normal means, I couldn't. Maybe we'd luck out and this was just a mundane mugger. Yeah, and I'll wake up tomorrow with a fur coat and tail.

Anyway, I had a trick up my sleeve, for all it was worth. The reservoir was still just out of sight to the right. I might be able to escape if I could make it to the waves.

That was assuming that this wasn't the shadow man. I don't think I can outrun light.

Our pursuer paused for only a heartbeat when he reached where we'd split up. And of course he followed me.

Turning north, I gave up all pretence and made straight for the water. All I needed to do was keep him focused on me long enough to let Alice and Ophois get away.

It only occurred to me then that the man might have no interest in the two of them at all and I'd just thrown away my backup.

Yep, this was turning out to be a *great* night.

I could see the waves of the reservoir ahead of me, shimmering in the moonlight. There was still a light rain and it was making everything slick. It was worse now that I'd broken from the trees.

That's when I slipped and landed face first on the turf.

I didn't even bother to spit the grass from my mouth before scrambling back to my feet. Didn't do me any good though, it felt like a lead weight hit me in the back of the head.

I couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds.

Next I opened my eyes I was propped against the trunk of a tree, looking out over the reservoir.

"Are you awake?" The voice was low and heavy, sounding like it came from the bottom of a well.

I didn't move. I knew that voice. I think.

My skull felt like it had been filled with cotton batten, it took everything I had to not just put my head back down again and sleep for a week.

"Robert!" A pair of hands came out of the darkness to grab me around the shoulders and shake until I whipped back and forth like a bobble-head.

"I'm awake, I'm awake!" It took everything I had in my half numb fingers to push him back.

A grunt came from the darkness before a face slowly materialized as he leaned forward.

It was a good thing I had an idea who he was by now, otherwise I would just of soon jumped from my skin.

Dark, long, unkempt hair and a scruffy beard, he looked like a Hell's Angel's biker. Not far from the truth.

It was Gabe, the third of James' protectors.