

We Don't Just Fade Away

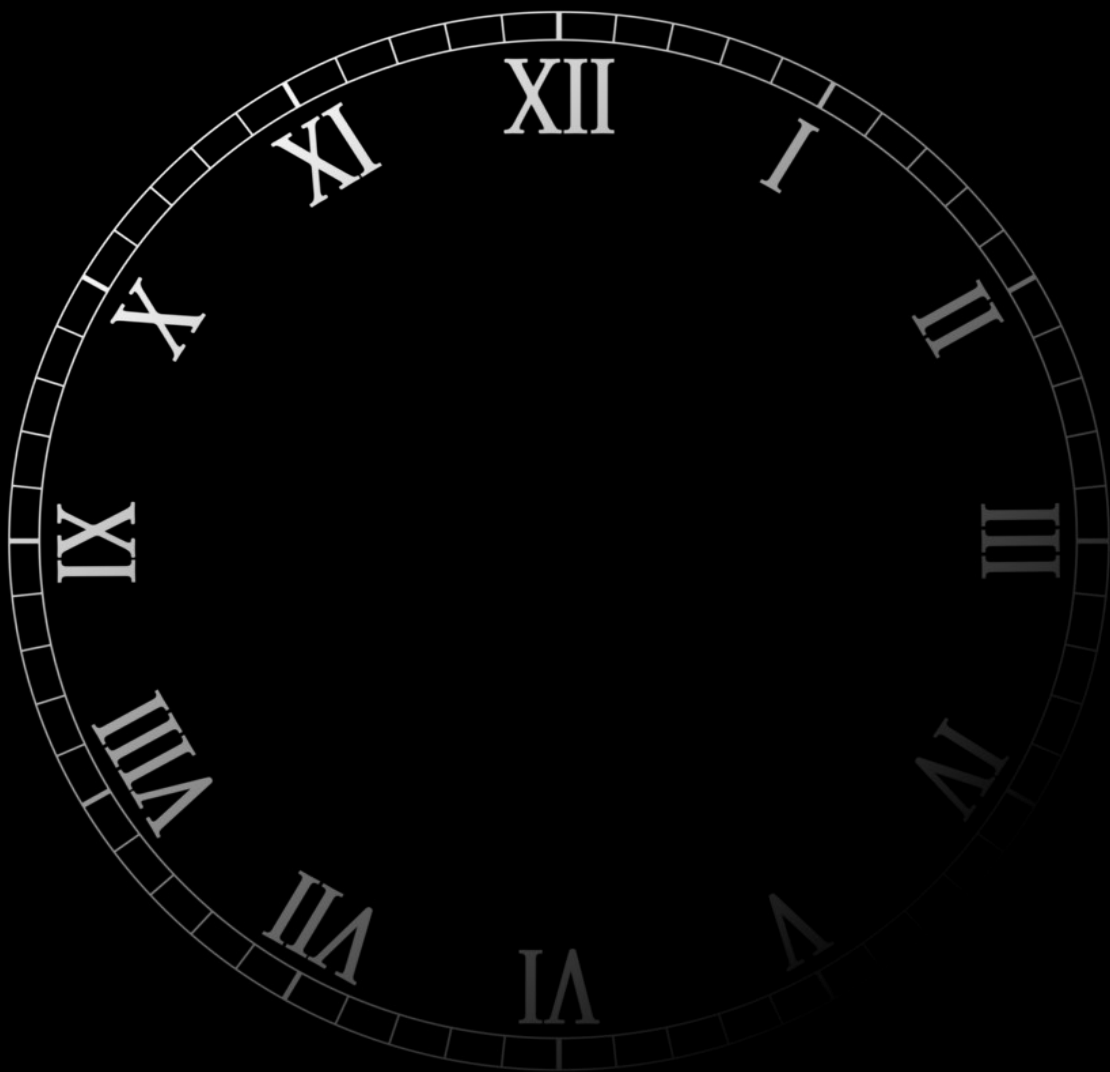


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Okay, folks. Here's a major note before we get started. This is a story that deals with religious themes. And pretty directly. If that's not your thing – or you're easily offended by such – please *do not* read. My main series will resume once this 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 6

I leaned back against the tree, rubbing the bridge of my nose and nursing one hell of a migraine.

"Please tell me it wasn't you I was running from."

He grinned. Unlike his roughed up appearance, his teeth were a perfect white. Of all the archangels, Gabe was the only one I actually liked. He was the most laid back, the most – if you'll pardon the pun – down to earth of the trio. It might be because he operated as James' errand boy, he tended to spend less time cooped up in that house. And he was all the better for it.

"Nice to see you too, sunshine." He huffed out a breath and sat down beside me, shoving me over so he could share the tree. "What was all that about?"

I rolled my eyes. "I haven't exactly been having a good day. Didn't James tell you?"

He grunted. "James tells me a lot of things, so do Mike and Raph. They don't get out much. They always tell the truth, but they can only tell it as they see it." He eyed me critically, "I've gotten a report from Mike that you'd gone loco, seeing ancient demons and jumping at shadows. Then again," he shifted his massive weight, "James told me that you've got credible evidence that there's a game changer in play." His smile widened, "That we might just have the first true sign of Judgement Day."

My blood ran cold. I'd never thought of *that*.

"No." I put all the conviction I had into my voice. It wasn't much. "This can't be Judgement Day. It's all wrong. I've got something that eats gods, not worlds."

He shrugged. "Whatever you say. You know as well as I do that there are no too few of us that would be just as happy to see it all come to an end," He grimaced, "If the big guy would ever get off his ever-so-perfect rear end and put us out of our misery."

Everything I'd said about liking Gabe? Well, it was true, most of the time. This angel was missing more than a few of his feathers. That might be why they tended to keep him further from James.

"We've gone through this before, Gabe." I closed my eyes. "It's not up to us. Only the guys on the top can flip the switch, and so far not one of them have seemed the least bit interested in doing so."

"So is it's true?" Gabe's voice had fallen, he sounded like he was praying.

"What?" I grunted as I stretched an arm to scratch my back.

"That there's a way to kill a god." He was staring out across the water, refusing to look at me. "Do you realize what this means, Robert? In the history of human existence no one has ever killed a god. We always protected James, but we never really feared that anything would ever happen to him. The worst thing anyone could do would be to kidnap him, and not many people would be able to contain him if he wanted to return home. But this..." He shivered. "The thought that someone could kill Jesus," his voice rose to a near whine, "Or God. Dear lord..." His voice broke. "The thought that someone could *kill God*." He shook his head. "No. I don't know what you saw, Robert, but it can't be true. There's no chance. No one can kill a god, no one can kill God. Judgement Day has to come. There has to be an end to this." He huffed out a breath, "We may never know if there was a beginning, but there has to be an end."

"Whatever you say, Gabe." I yawned. "I'm assuming you were sent here with a message? Or was this just a social call?" I glanced over to him, "You scared me half to death back there. This had better not be a social call."

He laughed. "Nope." Reaching down to a pouch on his belt he pulled out a golden scroll. Even in the darkness I could see it glimmer. It didn't just reflect the moonlight, it made its own. "I have a message from Lord Jesus." His voice changed as he spoke, falling into an even deeper boom that I could imagine cowering peasants and villagers in times past. He switched so quickly, so easily without a thought that it was obvious he'd not only done this thousands of times, but millions.

"The Lord hopes this message finds you healthy and well," Gabe was the only one I knew who could read things like this with a straight face, "An exhaustive search by the forces of the Lord has returned information that has been deemed useful to you. Our sources indicate that the lesser god Seth has demonstrated unbecoming behaviour this night."

"Unbecoming?" I snorted.

Gabe dropped the act as he tucked the scroll back in his belt. "Yeah, unbecoming as in yelling and screaming and attracting far more attention than would be preferred."

"Do I even want to ask why he was making such a ruckus?"

Gabe shrugged. "Don't ask me. I'm just the messenger. *Deus ex machina* and all that." He glanced to the side, as if one of the other angels might be watching, "One of our fellas got a tap into the municipal lines a few decades ago. That's how we keep tabs on the city. James doesn't like using it, he forbids it most of the time, he only opened it up because of you." Okay, that was news. I didn't know I rated that highly on his list. "One of the first things we heard was the report of Seth. Do you know you're a hard guy to track down? I've caught polar bears in a white out with less trouble than it's taken me to find you."

I laughed, but my heart wasn't in it. "And what would *you* do if someone were out to end your immortal life?"

He looked out over the waves, "Who knows? I've been around a long time."

"Right." I slowly got to my feet. My muscles still ached from the run, not to mention the fall or the previous going over by Gabe's friends. I'd have to make sure not to do that again. "You didn't happen to see where the other two people with me went?"

Gabe never moved from where he sat, still looking out over the waves. "Nope. Last I saw they broke south. They could be halfway to Wall Street by now."

"Great."

I waved to Gabe as I left, but he never looked my way.

Heading back to where we'd split up I was able to see Ophois' tracks in the still wet earth. Not that it did me much good. I was no tracker. I hadn't even hunted my own food when I'd been alive. I could tell you they'd been here, but I'd already known that.

A few minutes heading south and I was still about where I'd started. They were missing and I was alone, wet, and cold. I didn't bother yelling their names, my voice wouldn't carry far in the trees.

I was however glad that I could whistle.

It took me a few tries, I hadn't had need to do this since I was a kid – and that was a *long* time ago – but I finally managed to get out a piercing wolf whistle.

It was rough and shrill, but with any luck it would carry.

I tried a few more times. Alice wouldn't be able to hear it, but I might just luck out. Ophois seemed to be smarter than he looked, and maybe, just maybe he'd feel like coming my way.

I waited. I'd like to say the night was silent, but I wasn't about to kid myself. Even in the middle of Central Park I could still hear the traffic around me, still feel the city's cold arms on all sides.

I sat on an outcropping of rock and whistled again. The call bounced through the trees and came back to me as an echo. I felt small and alone.

I was about to give up and turn home when something whispered through the trees to my right. It was a howl. At first it could have been any flea bitten mutt, but there was something to it that just didn't fit. It was a dog, but no dog would ever display quite that edge. There was a wild, feral quality to the call that set my teeth on edge. It sounded like the wolves down in the zoo, but older. Much, much older.

Well, sounds like Ophois had heard me.

I whistled back once more and got up to walk in the direction of the reply.

I didn't get more than five steps before a white cannonball erupted from the trees, hurtling itself into me.

Gabe had knocked the breath from me during the run, but Ophois was lucky not to crack my ribs.

I could feel the wounds from Raph coming open under my shirt. Oh yes, that was going to hurt.

Ophois still wouldn't let me up. It was only one small step from this to being torn apart. The dog's huge white teeth were an inch from my face, but thankfully he was more interested in licking me to death than ripping a chunk out of me.

Not that you could tell from the zeal he went at it with. If this was the way he dealt with people he liked, I never wanted to see what he did to those he didn't care for.

Over his panting I could just hear another set of footsteps in the darkness. I was relieved to say the least when a pair of hands wrapped around Ophois' neck and pulled him away.

The dog whined as he was dragged back. I guess this meant that he saw me as his new master now that Wep was gone. Lucky me.

"Robert, are you okay?" Alice was still wrestling with Ophois. She looked a bit worse for wear now, a few more frayed patches on her jacket and some mud smeared across her knees.

"Yeah, yeah. False alarm." I was embarrassed to say the least. "It wasn't... it. Just a message from James." I brightened up now, "His guys found something."

She eyed me. "What?"

"One of the gods. They think there's been another attack."

"And you're going to do what? I thought you wanted to stay as far away from this as possible."

I let out a breath. "Yeah. But I've got a sinking feeling that the only person who's going to do anything about this is me. James and his guys are just going to hold up in their apartment, and I doubt anyone else is doing better." I rolled my eyes when I realized what I was saying, "I might as well do the saintly thing and see if I can get to the bottom of this. I might just be able to save a few gods from oblivion."

"So where are we off to now?" Alice asked as I started walking west.

"He's on the other side of the Hudson." Seth had been one of the name's I'd called a few hours ago. There had been no answer.

She tugged at my arm as we crossed Eight Ave. "We'll have to catch a bus going across the tunnel." I kept on walking. "Where are you going?"

"I need to stretch my legs." I replied. Ophois stayed by my side as I walked on. He was getting real good at leaning on me by now.

"But..." I glanced back to see her roll her eyes as she hurried to catch up.

The walk was quiet as we cut through the Museum of Natural History's lot. The shadows were heavy here, almost as deep as those in the park, but I kept going, refusing to acknowledge them.

Coming out on West Seventy-Ninth, I picked up the pace. It wasn't until we passed the Baptist church just off Broadway that we had to slow down again.

There was a group of people out in front of the church, at least a few hundred strong. They were shoving and pushing to get inside.

A sign out by the street read, 'Midnight Sermons'.

I checked my watch, they must be popular, it was well after midnight and people were still fighting to get in.

I tried to keep on moving, but there were just too many people to press forward at any speed. Everyone seemed to think that we were cutting in line, we were shoved back with no few curses.

I could only just hear the preacher from within the building. To be honest, such things didn't interest me much anymore. I'd heard it all. Being around as long as I have that tended to be the case whether I wanted to or not.

The voice that echoed out was pumped up with amps and loudspeakers. It must be all but deafening in the building. I could only make out one word in three, but I still recognized the thrust.

It was an evangelical. I didn't have much to say good or bad on the pusher types, but this breed in particular rubbed me the wrong way.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big believer in everyone being able to worship as they want – hey, if they didn't I wouldn't be here – but I had a bone to pick with those who think their own beliefs to be better than others.

The way the preacher spoke sounded like another 'you're with us or you're against us' tirade. He wanted to grind all the unbelievers under his heel. All in the name of Jesus, of course.

It took everything I had not to spit.

If only they knew James. Then again, from what I'd seen if any of them met the real James they would just as likely claim he wasn't the real Jesus and go off to make their own. You'd be surprised just how many people think the world should change to conform to their beliefs rather than the other way around.

We crossed to walk on the other side of the street, but that was only slightly better. There were less people over here, but I got dirty looks from those who crowded around the church. Great, not only can I not walk past them, but they feel entitled to look down on me because I don't share their beliefs in exactly what James wants.

Someone shoot me.

Pushing onward, we were able to make it out past Riverside drive and on to the boat dock beyond. This was where the rich people kept their pleasure crafts.

I didn't care. It was where I could get down to the Hudson without anyone staring at me.

There wasn't any shoreline to speak of around the Hudson, just a concrete wall to keep the water away from the city, like they thought it was going to destroy it or something.

It seemed that Ophois already had a good idea of what was to happen next, but Alice thought I'd gone mad when I leapt atop the barrier and made ready to drop down onto the water.

"But..." She held onto my hand as I grabbed Ophois with the other. I'm sure she thought me insane and was trying to save me from a watery grave.

I grinned at her, my first real smile in a long time. It wasn't often I got to show off. "Come on, didn't you even once wonder what I'm the god of? You needn't ever fear drowning around me."

With that I braced my leg against the concrete and pulled her off the edge after me. It was all I could do to keep her from screaming all the way down.

The three of us hit the water together, we didn't even make a splash.

We fell through the surface like it was nothing more than an illusion. The moment we passed through we entered my domain.

I felt a tickle in the back of my mind. I rarely played with water, walked on it even less, and truly made us of my gifts perhaps once a decade.

We began to slow long before we touched the river bed. By the time we reached it we came to rest like feathers.

Beside me Alice was starting to turn a rather unattractive shade of white as she held her breath.

"You can breathe, you know." I laughed. "Just keep a hold of me and you haven't anything to fear." I took a deep lungful as an example. It felt like we were still above the waves.

She held on for a moment longer before at last letting go of her breath with an explosive huff. Her disbelief when she took a tentative lungful was so blunt as to be funny.

We weren't even wet. I'd done this enough times shortly after I'd been made that it was no longer of note to me.

Yeah, Alice had a bit more of a reaction.

As long as she held my hand it was like we were strolling in a light summer breeze. I could feel the current of the water on my skin, but there was no danger of it sweeping me away. The only thing to break the illusion that this was nothing more than an elaborate set piece was the sand under our feet. It was heavy and solid, pressed down with the weight of the water pushing down it was nearly as hard as clay.

Ophois stuck by my side, leaning against me so firmly that I didn't even have to hold him by the scruff anymore.

"How?" Was the only word that escaped Alice's lips as she took in the underwater world around us.

I shrugged as I started walking. "I'm a god. Even someone as weak as me has to have some powers."

She hurried to keep up. I wasn't going to let go of her hand down here, but she didn't know that.

I hadn't done this in years, and I'd forgotten just how dark it could be down below. There was nothing but the moonlight above us, and it didn't penetrate the water well. The inky darkness of the river was cloying around us, but this was my domain. No matter what may happen, I was safe here.

"Alice," I turned to her, "Any chance you could make us some light?" We weren't going to make much progress like this. The channel of the river may be relatively flat, only rolling hills and valleys, but so much junk and garbage had been thrown down here over the years that the place was just short of being a literal minefield. One wrong step could send you into a patch of broken glass or stumbling over a discarded washing machine.

She shook her head. "All I can do is illusion. The illusion of light wouldn't do us any good. I can make you think you can see, but the illusion can't show you what you already know, or what you think you can see. I can't make real light."

"But what about back in the apartment, or against the spot?" I slowed as we stepped up to a shadow that I couldn't see through.

"That was all illusionist darkness. An illusion can cover something that's already there. It's like covering your eyes. I can make you think you can see again, but you'll still bump into things in the real world. The illusions I make can't compete against reality. I can counteract an illusionary darkness by cancelling it out, but I can't do anything against real darkness."

"Great." I rolled my eyes. "I guess we're just going to have to play this by feel."

"Can't we just go topside again and take the bus?" she grumbled. The novelty of being able to walk under the waves hadn't lasted long on her.

"No." I set out again, slowly, forcing her to follow me. "We're going to see another god. I'm going to arrive in a way that is fitting to who I am." I huffed out a breath. "I'm tired of being pushed around. I can't compete with James, but Seth is on my level."

Ophois let out a grunt from beside me and gave me a good shove to one side. We managed to avoid stepping on a rusted out fender thanks to him.

I grinned. "So you are good for something, mutt. You want to get us to the other side?"

His tail wagged. I think he made of point of hitting me in the back of the leg with it just to see if I'd complain.

The Hudson wasn't all that wide, only about three miles, but the going was slow.

People seemed happy throwing anything they felt like down here. We passed everything from garbage bags to entire rusted out cars and everything in between.

I managed to catch Alice's attention again when a school of fish flew by. There wasn't much wildlife in the Hudson, but life did tend to pop up everywhere, no matter how polluted. Don't believe me? Ask a New York cockroach.

Far above us the occasional boat coasted by. Even at this time of night the city never slept. They blocked out our wan moonlight now and again like great birds slowly migrating south to the sea.

I called a break to rest after a half hour, we were about half way across the river now and everything from here would be uphill.

The rusted out hulk of an old DeSoto made a decent bench as long as one was careful to watch for the corroded spikes of metal that popped up here and there.

"Is this where you live, Robert?" The weight of what she was seeing had finally come down on Alice.

I snorted. "Please. You've seen my apartment. That's where I live. This isn't even where I work. Not many gods, myself included, spend much time in their element anymore. It kind of loses its appeal after a few centuries. I spent years walking the sea bed off the coast back home. I didn't learn a

thing from it, but I put more footsteps in the sand than I'd care to remember." I laughed, "I never did find any sunken treasure though."

"But think of the good you could do with your powers! There're scientists who'd pay you millions to be able to do this." She ran a hand through the sand beneath us. It changed from water packed to light and dry as soon as she picked it up. "To be able to see the world like this... people must dream of it."

I stood up, forcing her to follow. I suddenly didn't feel like resting anymore. It was better when we were walking, we didn't have as much breath to talk then.

The climb back up the far side of the riverbed was slow and sweaty. I could walk on water and under water. I couldn't fly, not even in my own element. Swimming was out of the question, I didn't feel like getting wet.

"Robert," I could hear Alice gasping as she fought to keep up with me. "What are you the god of, anyway? You said you were a minor god. No god of water could be minor."

"I'm not the god of water, nor rivers or oceans." I couldn't keep the venom from my voice. "I'm not that important."

"What are you the god of?" She raced forward a few steps to come up even with me, to see my face.

"Keep walking. We're almost to the other side." I picked up the pace.

I made sure there was nobody around to see us rise from the waves on the west side of the Hudson. That would be hard to explain.

We were in the Port Imperial area now. To call this place ritzy would be an understatement. There was an old, unused pier out into the river here. It was likely kept around just for appearances. It made a good place to get out of the water.

Once I got my hands above the surface I was able to raise like I was doing a chin-up. Alice's jaw almost fell off as she watched me. It must have looked like I was floating in space from below.

The next one up was Ophois. His dead weight was difficult for Alice to lift, but we got him up in the end. He yipped a couple of times as I pulled him up by his front paws, but I don't think we damaged him too badly. He did give me a foul look though.

Alice was next to come once I'd shoved Ophois up onto the rickety pier. He watched us now with a self satisfied expression.

I'd had to stay in contact with Alice the entire time to keep her from drowning, that had been a challenge. Now all I had to do was get her above the surface.

It was, for once in my life, as easy said as done. Her slight frame weighed even less than the mutt's had. One quick pull and she was on the pier.

She wasn't quite able to get her foot out the water in time though. I let go of her hand and she squeaked as the water suddenly returned to its natural state.

I laughed.

"Hey! That wasn't funny! Now I'm going to have to walk around the rest of the night with a wet sock!"

I snorted. "Oh saints preserve us. A wet sock. And all I have to worry about is oblivion."

It wasn't until I'd let go of her that I realized just how drained I was.

I'd felt the spark from her the entire time we'd been walking hand in hand. I'd forced it from my mind, but its abstinence was jarring. It wasn't that I felt tired, but rather I felt drained. Like I'd spent the entire time studying and now I was taking a break.

Yet another oddity to file away in the back of my brain.

We had more important things to worry about right now. Like getting off this rickety piece of wood before someone happened by and wondered how we'd gotten out here.

Making our way to shore, we had to jump the short fence that had been put in place to keep joggers from falling into the river.

Seth's house was around here somewhere... I knew it. I'd never visited him, but I knew the address. Sort of.

It took me a good forty minutes walking back and forth in front of the affluent townhouses to pick his out. They really had them pressed in here. Each one of these things had to be worth more than my apartment twenty times over, but they were packed in like sardines.

And they were bloody well hard to tell apart in the darkness. Every one had the same dull brown stucco finish and I had to squint to make out their numbers.

Okay... one-thirty-two.

The only way I was sure it was his place was the front door that hung open to expose the darkness within. Yeah, that didn't bode well.

There was only one way to act when one was waltzing about in a posh neighbourhood like this – walk in like you owned the place.

I straightened my back and lengthened my stride as I made a beeline for the door. With any luck the neighbours wouldn't call the cops.

I'll admit that I was sweating as I took the final steps to the house. The shadows lay heavy within, and I wasn't convinced that they were all natural.

Two more paces and I was across the threshold. Alice and Ophois in formation behind me.

Wow, this place was nice.

Okay, I know I should be worried about more important things, but really. Seth had to be doing alright for himself.

I could only see the front room and peer through a couple of doors, but everything was panled in dark wood with obsidian sculptures scattered about.

The fact it made the entire place even darker was just an afterthought in my mind.

Walking deeper, my footsteps were muffled in the thick carpeting.

I could see the signs of many people having pushed through here.

I took a look at the door behind me. It wasn't kicked in, but something heavy had knocked against it not long ago, there were still chips in the molding.

Through the first door to my right was a dining room. The large mahogany table was surrounded by a half dozen high backed chairs. The whole thing looked like it would be more at home in an imperial castle than a modern condo.

In the hall now, I flicked on the light beside me. It didn't make much difference.

The bulb in the ceiling looked more like a stage prop. It brightened a bit, but that was all. The dim yellow glow didn't do much but highlight just how dark it was in here.

I found a couple more light switches, they were little better.

I glanced back at Alice.

She'd stayed step for step with me, almost huddling to my back as I explored.

"No," she whispered, "It's not an illusion, the darkness is real. There's nothing I can do for it."

I shrugged and kept going deeper. The house wasn't big, but it was decked out. It wasn't until we got to a sitting room near the back that we found evidence of life.

There was no one here, but someone had been recently.

An oversized easy chair was pressed up in one corner opposite a fireplace. There had been a fire not too long ago, I could still smell the sweet smoke, but it had been doused in a hurry.

Blankets and pillows had been thrown from the chair to lay across the floor. None of them were ripped, but I would guess there had been some panic.

The oddest part was the discarded medical supplies.

I didn't even notice the empty bags until I stepped on one in the darkness. The plastic made a soft crunch under my foot.

I reached down to grab it. The writing on the clear bag was hard to make out in the darkness, I had to go back out into the main hallway to see anything at all.

Emergency medical supplies. Property of Med-Aid Corporation. Weren't they one of the larger HMOs in New York?

The bag itself had contained an oxygen mask. It was ripped open and its contents missing, but looked recently used.

I glanced over to Alice. She just shrugged.

A huff came from the next room. Sounded like Ophois was trying to get our attention.

The mutt was standing at the head of the staircase to the basement. He waited just long enough for us to see him before making his way sedately down.

Wonderful. Now I was counting on a dog to do my detective work.

The basement was as plush as the main floor. Ophois led us down the hall without even bothering to glance into any of the other rooms. He didn't stop until he came to a closed wooden door.

There didn't seem to be anything remarkable about it at first, but a closer inspection left me rubbing my eyes.

The edges of the door frame were blurry, like a bad photograph.

I'd never seen it before, but I knew it by description. A shroud.

"There's something here..." Alice whispered from behind me.

I choked back a laugh. "Yeah, I know." Reaching forward, I rested one hand on the door. The fog that had seemed to surround it disappeared as soon as I made contact.

Alice gasped.

"I've never seen an illusion like that." Her voice was weak.

"It wasn't an illusion, not in a normal sense." I tried the handle. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. "It was a shroud, a trick tied into a god. I was able to see it – kinda – because I'm about as powerful as he is. He must have some kind of power over light or perception to be able to do something like that."

I'd been impressed with the house so far, now I was downright envious.

The room behind the shroud wasn't large, only perhaps twenty feet square, but it was lined from wall to wall with shelves piled high with gold.

And this was the good stuff, even in the darkness I could see it glint.

They weren't ingots and bars either. This was no Fort Knox, it was more like a museum.

Everywhere I looked there were rings and chains. Hell, I think there was even a full suit of gold armour in the corner – not that I'd ever want to try wearing it!

"Well, now we know where Seth gets all his money."

I knelt down and grabbed the nearest trinket. It was a ring. The thing felt like it weighed a ton. Bugger, who needed to lift weights if you could just wear this all day?

The entire thing was pure gold. I could see a setting where there had more than likely been a stone, but it was empty now. The whole thing was so soft in my hand I almost felt like I was going to leave fingerprints.

I put it back on its reinforced shelf. I'd love to take it home with me, even just the one piece, but I somehow doubted it would be a good idea to get in a fight with another god. Especially one that was so much better off than I was.

The shroud didn't come back up as we stepped out. It had been weak to begin with and it looked like Seth didn't have enough power to bring it back up.

The fact it was a shroud also meant that Seth knew we'd broken through it. He would have felt me pushing through like a slap to the back of the wrist.

It also meant that Seth had to still be alive.

"Can you hide this, Alice?" I turned to her in the darkness.

"Sure," She shrugged, "But don't you want to... you know, inspect a little more of it first?"

I pushed her back from the door.

"No." My voice was firm. "Don't piss off a god. It's a good rule to live by."

She sighed. "Goodbye, fortune."

A wave of her hand and the door disappeared.

I took a moment to get a better look before heading back to the staircase. The only sign that there was an illusion at all being the space over the door was a perfect copy of the walls on either side, all the way down to the chips and scuffs in the paint.

I gave Ophois a scratch behind the ear as we headed back to the main floor. It wasn't that the gold was of all that much use, but it did tell me something I hadn't known.

Seth was old. Really, really old.

Were talking ten thousand years at least. Some of the stuff in that room had to be from the dawn of civilization. There were artifacts there spanning every era of human history. It wasn't that I was much of a historian, but I'd picked up a few tips here and there through my acquaintances. Not to mention Wep. One tended to learn a lot of history when your friend's best days were a few millenia ago.

Back up on the main floor, I took another look at one of the lights in the ceiling.

Stretching out, I could just reach one while dangling half off the stairs. They weren't burnt out, that much I could tell, they looked brand new. They were like those specialist lights you see used in theatre. Or the kind of things they sell to goths.

Okay, I couldn't help but laugh. The image of a goth god was enough to make even me giggle.

The loss of attention was enough to result in me almost dropping off the stairs when I heard a knock on the open front door behind me.

Turning, I was ready to bolt. I'd be right and buggered if this was a cop.

Nope. For once my luck was holding. Kind of.

The man who stood peering in at us looked like a preppy stuck five years in the past, like the eighties had never ended. I swear to god he was wearing a pink shirt and had a sweater thrown over his shoulders.

"Hello?" He glanced back and forth, having difficulty seeing us in the darkness, "Are you Sean's family?"

I let out a quiet breath.

"Yeah." I slowly disentangled myself from the banister. "Yeah, we're his family. I got a call that something was wrong and came right over to get a look. The door was open."

He snorted, like it was Seth's fault he'd forgotten to lock the door.

"Of course. I'm Nigel, his neighbour." He snorted again. The sound was starting to annoy me. "It's good to hear that *someone* was contacted. I heard screaming a few hours ago and called the hospital. They showed up and carried the old kook out on a stretcher. Did the nurses call you or was it the cops?"

I gritted my teeth. I didn't even know Seth, but I still didn't care for one of the gods being called a kook. It just wasn't becoming.

"I got a call from the hospital," I lied smoothy, "It was from a nurse. She wouldn't even tell me what happened before hanging up."

I could see the man clearer now as I stepped closer. The preppy shed back as he saw I wasn't quite as refined as he.

"Just what I told you, uh... buddy. I heard screaming in the night and thought the old man was having a heart attack. The ambulance showed up a few minutes later and carted him off to the Grendo medi just up the street." He jerked a thumb north.

And that was what I needed to know.

"Yeah, thanks, man." I took another step towards him. I wasn't exactly an imposing figure, but he backed away none the less. "Listen, I just need to straighten things up here. You want to just keep this quiet? We don't want to panic anyone in the family until we know what's going on."

I left the inflection on the word family just open enough for it to mean anything he wanted. That should be good enough to get him out of my hair.

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, sure. I was just on my way to work anyway. Early shift you know."

"Sure." I grinned at him. "Early shift. Be seeing you."

He was gone a moment later.

"Any clue where the 'Grendo' is?" Alice asked from beside me.

I shrugged and turned back into the house to search for a phone book. "No clue. I just hope it's not far. My feet are killing me."

My luck was holding, it was just up the road, literally. Not a half hour later we were there.

The building was so new that I could almost smell the drying paint. Perfect white and looking more than a little like a landed spaceship, its four stories lifted into the air on the west bank of the Hudson. There were enough lights on the thing to hold back the night.

The place wasn't really made for people to walk to, we had to leap a half dozen roads of busy traffic just to make it past the parking lots and to the front door.

I'd been smart enough to shift through Seth's personal effects and find the name he was living under now.

The lady at the front desk was dressed up in a prissy little nurse uniform that I swear was chosen for its kink rather than its utility. The Grendo it seemed was one of those high end exclusive medi centres that catered to the rich. I had no doubt the receptionist was hired for her assets, not her abilities with a bone saw.

She smiled sweetly at the three of us as we walked up to the desk, conveniently ignoring Ophois.

"What can I do for you, sir?" She must be used to people of all descriptions walking in at every hour of the night. She never even batted an eyelash at us.

"I'm here to see my uncle, Sean Black. I was told he was admitted here a few hours ago."

Somehow she managed to keep smiling at me while she flipped through the cards on her desk.

"Yes, sir. I wasn't even aware that you had been called, he didn't have any emergency contact numbers."

I waved her on. "The neighbour called me.."

She smiled again. "That's no problem, sir. We're just glad you're here. We find having visitors helps our patients recover quicker." She leaned forward to pull a map from the desk before her.

I made a mental note that in the unlikely event I ever became ill I wanted to be brought here. The eye candy alone was worth it.

Pulling a pen from behind her ear, the receptionist circled a room on the small map before her. "All you need to do is follow the hallway to the left, go up to the second floor, then he's the third room on your right past the nursing station." She winked at me, "Do you need someone to guide you?"

"I..."

Alice shoved me aside. "No. Thank you. We'll be fine." She snatched the map from the woman's hand and dragged me off by the collar of my shirt.

I pulled free of her the moment we were around the corner.

"Hey! What was that about?" It wasn't often that I got to see pretty girls anymore. It wasn't that I could really do all that much, but...

"Would you keep your dick in your pants when I'm around?" she huffed and walked faster.

"What, are you my mother now?" I rolled my eyes. "Do I have to remind you just how much older I am than you? You may be long in tooth, but I'm still the elder around here."

Ophois snorted from beside me.

"And that's why you can show a little self control." She shot me a withering glare. Well, it would be withering if there was much of anything left to wither. "You're old enough to be her great-great-grandfather." She shuddered. "Yuck. Just... eww."

I laughed as I pulled the map back from her. "You might want to add a few more 'greats' in there, Alice. I was likely born before her line even existed."

She looked my way again, softening, "Fine. I'll keep back as long as you don't make my gag reflex kick in."

"Fine, fine." I had to duck aside as I stepped aside to avoid a stretcher coming down the hallway. It was flanked on either side my orderlies and led by a doctor.

I only got a moment's glimpse of the poor soul they were carrying... yeah, it wasn't pretty.

I'd never much cared for blood when I'd been alive, but it wasn't one of those things you could escape back when I was growing up. It had only gotten worse after I'd been made. I'd seen things over my years that could turn just about anyone's stomach.

Blood? Blood didn't do anything to me now.

Even then I was a little off-put by the kid they'd been hauling past.

There hadn't been any real hospitals when I'd been growing up, the fact I'd lived out on the coast hadn't helped. Places like this only came into being long after. That didn't change the fact I didn't really like being here.

Alice had set the pace when she'd first started down the hall. I held it until she was struggling to keep up.

One thing the receptionist hadn't told us when she'd handed out the map was that our route lead straight past the emergency department.

It looked like they were having a busy night.

I was no doctor, but my guess was that there had been a car crash. A big one.

A dozen stretchers were lined up against the wall. Nurses were running to and fro, some of the most critical patients were being wheeled away, I assume to the ER.

Not all of the people here were being looked after. Even in a hospital as well stocked as this they still couldn't save everyone.

One of the stretchers was pushed up against the far wall. None of the doctors or nurses were going near it.

I pushed Alice away as I stepped forward. There were no official jobs for a god, but this was one of the few I felt I had to do when fate dropped it on me.

I was a little out of my element here, I'd only ever done this a half-dozen times.

The body that lay in the stretcher was cracked and broken. It was a young boy. His skin was ashen and his body all but still. I would have thought him dead if not for the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest as he struggled to breathe, fought to hang onto life.

I stepped up to the boy, reaching out to gently lay a hand on one of the few unbroken parts of his small body that I could see, the back of a hand.

His eyes fluttered open as I touched him. He couldn't be more than eight years old.

"Momma?" His voice was rough, hardly making it past his lips.

I shook my head. "No. I'm not your mother, just a friend."

"Jesus?"

I nearly pulled away. This wasn't the first time such a thing had happened, but it still stung.

"No, little one. I'm not Jesus. But I'll still help you in any way I can." I ever so slightly tightened my grip on his hand. I felt him squeeze back.

"I'm scared." His voice was high and raspy, breath coming in shallow pants now.

"I know. I know." I wondered, not for the first time, if the reason that I felt the need to do this was because I'd already taken the journey. "Don't worry. It will all be over soon."

"Will I go to heaven?" His voice grew to a whine, "I've tried to be good. I really have. I don't want to die!"

I soothed back his blood matted hair with a free hand. "It's not the end, little one. It's just the next step. You'll see. Wherever you'll go I'm sure you'll be happy there."

"I'm scared." His voice had begun to slur, as if he were very tired. He wasn't dropping off to sleep.

"Be brave, little one. It will all be over soon."

His hand went limp a moment later as his eyes closed. He wasn't dead yet, but he soon would be. And there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

What good is being a god when you can't even staunch the suffering of those around you?

Ophois popped up a moment later, hooking his front paws over the edge of the stretcher and leaning in. He sniffed the child. The kid was beyond us now, but his body still twitched in agony as he fought for every moment he could.

Ophois looked up at me, then back down to the child. He stood there for a moment, motionless, before closing his eyes and huffing out a breath.

The child was slipping now, soul being pulled from his grasp. Being a god, I could feel such things. I could almost see his outline blur for a moment as it came free.

The soul wasn't something one could see, but I could *feel* it.

I was soul, made of it I suppose. No one had ever explained it to me, but that's what I'd discovered over time. I could feel the soul as it drifted off because we were one and the same.

I couldn't tell you where the boy was off to. I knew he was gone, but I could tell you no more. Whether he was off to heaven or places less divine, all I knew was that he was gone.

I ruffled the fur between Ophois' ears as he dropped back down from the stretcher. We met up with Alice. She was waiting, leaning up against the wall.

"What was that all about?"

"Just seeing off someone who'd never really had a chance to live." I replied.

We began walking again, slower this time. I didn't age, but yet I still felt old.

We found Seth's room soon after. It was, as expected, under the name of Sean Black. He must have paid well, he'd gotten a room all to himself, a nice one.

I'd never met Seth before, only heard of him through the circles.

"Seth?" I knocked on the open door to his room before stepping in. All the lights within were out, leaving the space in relative darkness.

"Who is it?" He paused for a moment when he realized I'd called him by his real name. "Come in. And shut the door behind you." The man's voice was weathered and cracked, like he'd seen a hundred harsh winters and drunk from all seven seas.

I glanced to Alice before I stepped into the shadows, I didn't want to encounter something that would try to eat me. She shrugged and gestured for me to lead.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust after I'd closed the door behind us. The only light came from the moon outside the unshaded window.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His voice was harsh, with more than a hint of anger. "Are you here to finish that other man's job? I'll tell you right now that I won't go!" For all the age in his voice he was still strong. Not a hint of fear. He sounded like he could jump from that bed and take on the world.

"No, no." I raised my hands before me, "My name is Robert O'Toole. I'm here because James said something was wrong."

"James?" He settled back into the pillows. "That johnny-come-lately always has had his hands in places they don't belong. What are you, Robert, his latest errand boy?"

I held myself back from snapping at him. It took everything I had to keep my voice calm.

"No, Seth. I'm here because I'm running an investigation. James just told me there was something had happened to you." I could feel Seth's power as I stepped closer. He wasn't anything like the spotlight that was James, but I began to realize he had no small measure more strength than I did. "I was attacked by a hungry shadow this afternoon," I glanced over to Ophois, "And that shadow ate my friend, Wepawet."

He laughed, sharp and loud. "Then you're on the right track. If it's darkness you want, you're looking in the right place. As that man found out."

"What?"

"Who do you think I am, boy? I'm Seth, the god of darkness! Or at least one of them. There are so many wannabes to darkness these days it's hard to keep track."

Oh bugger. I stepped back, closer to the window and the faint light it provided.

I felt like a fly that had bumbled into the centre of a spider's web.

"Don't you start that with me!" His voice cracked like a whip. "I don't know what you think is going on, but it isn't my fault." He scowled. "Some moron waltzed up to my door this morning, interrupts my reading, invites himself in, then tries to tell me just how useless I am!" The old man's frail arms were raised before him now, I could just see him imagining he was wringing someone's neck. "Imagine that! The gull! Telling me that I'm useless, that my time is up! He even tried to frighten me with some parlour tricks." He snorted. "Bringing some fake shadows forth, trying to make me think I'm dying! What's the world coming to?"

"You saw him?"

He rolled his eyes. "Of course I did, boy. He wasn't exactly being subtle about it. He likely would have tried to help himself to my good bourbon if I'd had it out."

"Who was it? What did they look like?" I leaned forward, but still refused to leave my little puddle of moonlight.

"Who cares? He was just a man, a man like any other, no threat to me."

I ground my teeth, "He is a threat. He killed Wep, Amstys and others, took a swipe at me, and got Mike and the other archangels up in such a tizzy that they're just as likely to break out the flaming swords."

He snorted again. It wasn't a pretty sound. "The angels? Oh *lord* save us. The angels are all fussed up, whatever shall we do?" He levelled me with a glare, "I don't know how old you are, boy, but in this game it's everyone for themselves. Darwin got it right, that's something we elder gods figured out long ago. You want to survive in this game? Do it by yourself. I survived this long without a single damn believer. I did it by being prepared, by wanting it more." He glared at me again. "That man tried to turn my own tricks against me and I showed him just how foolish he was. Is he coming for you? Well fine. Either you'll learn a trick or two fending him off or he'll clear up the aether a bit. It's become too cluttered with all you new dreamers in the last few millenia."

I took a step towards the thin man, my hands balling into fists. Ophois growled warningly from beside me but I ignored him.

I hadn't gotten two steps, literally, before I felt something coil around my leg.

Looking down, I could see a tenderical of pure black slowly creeping around me. It was an illusion, it had to be. I put it out of my mind and continued forward.

Lots of good that did me.

Unlike the hungry shadow from before that stuck to me like a living thing, the darkness that now coiled around my leg was a vine. Stretchy and stringy, it gave slightly as I pulled but wouldn't come free no matter how hard I tried.

"Alice." I didn't even turn to her as I spoke.

"I... I can't, Robert. It's not an illusion." The fear left a sour note in her voice.

Okay. This wasn't good.

Another shadow began to twine about my other leg.

"You need to learn some manners, boy." Seth's voice was harsh. "I don't care who you are, you don't barge in on your betters and start demanding answers." He grinned evilly, "I may not have believers anymore, but I have power."

The vine about me continued to creep upwards. They were halfway up my calves now, and tightening. I could feel them cutting into my flesh as they squirmed over me.

"Don't do this, Seth." I whispered through gritted teeth. "We have a bigger enemy here. We can't afford to fight among ourselves."

He snorted. "Can't? Don't ever tell me what I can't do. I'm a match for anyone in this world, god or mortal."

He gave his vines a twist to emphasize the point. It was all I could do not to cry out.

I didn't even know what happened next. All I heard was the scrape of claws on the tile floor of the room. Something brushed my legs and the vines were ripped free from their source.

Ophois was in front of me now, teeth barred as he growled at Seth, practically nose to nose with the man as he stood on his rear legs, braced against the man's thin chest.

The only sound for long moments was that of Ophois' growling. I took the opportunity to step back into the meagre protection of the light from the window. I noticed Alice was there with me. I searched vainly for a light switch, but they were all back next to the door.

Ophois and Seth stared each other down for what seemed like hours before the god finally relented.

I swear I saw the dog smirk.

He slumped back into the bed as Ophois fell back to the floor with the click of claws hitting the hard tiles.

"You've brought some good firepower with you, boy." He stressed the last word, as if trying to gull me into stepping forward again.

I laughed. "Yeah, sure. A dog, an illusionist, and me – one of the weakest gods the world has ever seen. Sure, big firepower here."

He gave me an odd look.

"What do you want, boy? This may not be my home, but I never asked for you to come barging in."

I leaned against the windowsill, glancing outside towards the busy roads beyond. "I told you, I just want to stop whoever's killing off all the minor gods. Gods aren't supposed to die. This isn't right."

He laughed, a long, slow, cackle that made me aware of each and every of the thousands and thousands of years this god had seen.

"You just don't get it, do you, boy. There is no such thing as what is and isn't supposed to happen. We're gods, we're just as fallible and petty as any mortals. We deserve to see oblivion as much as they do – and in some cases more."

"But..."

He waved a hand, cutting me off, "There's only so much power to go around in the world, Robert. Just as humans need food and water, the gods need power. Precious few of us can keep our minds without believers, and even those of us who do," He paused for a moment, closing his eyes, "What do we contribute to the world anymore? There are many names for such actions as these. I prefer the cosmic wheel. It's a re-balancing, Robert. It's not good, nor is it evil. The world would not have survived so long if it didn't clear its driftwood every so often."

"But..."

"But nothing. You wanted to know what's going on and I told you. James doesn't know, but his father might. The last time I saw this was just over two-thousand years ago. There have been plagues of messiahs throughout history, someone needs to clear the chaff from those who can do their job." He levelled a glare at me, "We, Robert, are that chaff, but we've survived. This round. We're better than they are. We're the survivors, Robert, the rats. Say what you will about those creatures who adapt, who live in any conditions, but we're survivors."

"Thanks, Seth," I managed to keep my tone mild this time, "But I'd rather not be compared to vermin."

He rolled his eyes. "Those vermin are worshipped in some places. If you want to last to become an old god, boy, you'll learn to draw power and knowledge from anywhere within reach. Either that or you'll end up like your friend here. Or worse." He glanced over to Ophois.