

We Don't Just Fade Away

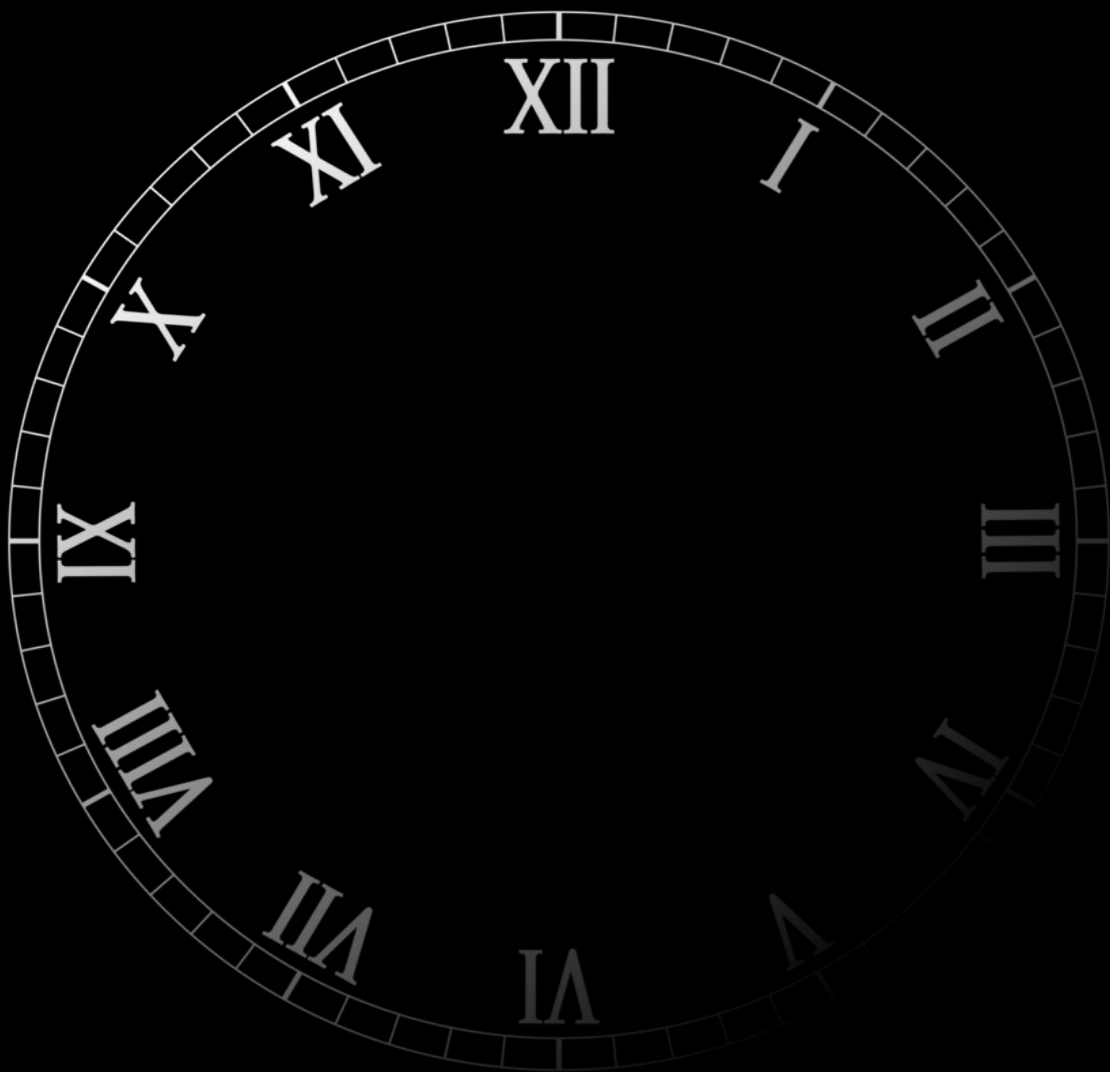


Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	12
Chapter 3.....	33
Chapter 4.....	49
Chapter 5.....	64
Chapter 6.....	79
Chapter 7.....	99
Chapter 8.....	116

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 8

We had to get off at Third Ave and walk the rest of the way. The bus may go to Mott Haven, but there was a limit to just how deep into squalor they would take it.

It had been a long night, I practically had to carry Alice. Ophois, the bloody mutt, pranced by my side as if he'd just gotten back from a weekend in the country. I was starting to hate him again.

The foot traffic out here at five in the morning was light. Frankly, I was surprised.

This was a rough neighbourhood. There should be thugs and footpads out plying their trade. I didn't even see a single drug dealer, and that was truly strange.

I had to shift Alice's weight to reach back down into my pocket and pull the newspaper out. It still read 'New York Crime down 66%'. I guess it really was true.

The night was cool on my face as we threaded between the cracks of the sidewalk. There were a few people out and about in front of the apartment block even now. One man looked like he was ready to head back to Brooklyn, but I ignored him. I had better things to do.

The walk had been easy enough, but I didn't feel like trying to carry Alice up three flights of stairs.

A few quick pokes and she was awake. Good thing too. There a visitor waiting for us, camped out in front of my apartment.

"About time you showed up, O'Toole." Officer Murry.

The cop from the alley was leaning on my door. His uniform was pressed and clean, but he looked like he'd been poured into it after a thirty hour shift in the Scottish coal mines.

"Hello, Officer." I tried to edge around him to get to my door, but he would have none of it, "What can I do for you?"

"You could answer your damn door for one."

"Sorry, Officer. Busy night, you know."

He glanced at Alice who still trailed behind me. His expression softened. "Are you alright, dear? Is," I got a nasty glare, "He treating you okay?"

I wasn't sure if Alice was trying to keep a straight face or hold herself back from slapping him. Either way it made for a decent show.

"Everything's fine, Officer Murry. My uncle and I are doing just fine."

I almost thought the cop was going to break out into a lecture on staying out so late on a school night when he turned back my way. Darn. I would have liked to see Alice's reaction to that.

"I got a tip off," The cop's voice lowered as I scrambled to unlock my door, "That there was something fishy the next block over. It was an anonymous tip. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it."

I did my best to put up an innocent expression. "Who, me, gov? I wouldn't know a thing." The lock clicked behind me. Alice and Ophois rushed through before I could even take a step. Traitors.

"Then I'm sure you won't mind if I come inside to ask you a few questions." He leaned on the door frame. Murry wasn't all that large of a man, but I got the feeling they taught cops how to *loom* back at the academy.

Well, how could I ever refuse such a polite self-invitation as that?

"Come on in." I threw the door open and sighed. "How long were you waiting?"

He glanced around the threadbare room for a moment before responding. I got the distinct feeling that he didn't care for my choice of decor. Cheqe de dirt-poor must not be his style.

"About half an hour." He lowered himself to sit on one of the arms of my sofa. I'm guessing he didn't trust the cushions. "And we'll have to make this quick. I'm back on the clock in twenty minutes."

"What?" I pattered into the kitchen to see if the coffee maker was still more alive than dead, "I'm that important that you've come to see me on your own time? What's the problem, don't have a family to pester?" I tried to keep my voice light, but I was tired and it was hard to keep a smile pinned on my face.

I quite distinctly heard him growl before he spoke. "I'm here because no one at the force wants to get their hands dirty on this case. You know that a good hundred people have disappeared, so do I. The force would love to get all worked up over it, except that none of them ever seemed to have existed in the first place. People knew them, remembered them, but not a single one of them have any records of note on file. The only names I can find are those I wrote down when I talked to them. No credit cards, no social security numbers, nothing. It's like they were never even born. And now they're gone with no bodies to leave behind."

I forced myself to sound disinterested when I handed him a cup of toxic waste that masqueraded as coffee. "And this involves me how?"

I got a glare for that comment. Any mortal man would have cowered. I'd seen worse, much worse.

"This isn't my neighbourhood. Someone called the force and asked for me by name." He wasn't leaving much room to imagine who he thought 'someone' might be. "This is your territory. Tell me what happened and I won't rip your lungs out."

I snorted. "That's proper police procedure these days? I'd hate to see you during a formal interrogation."

"I'm not on the clock yet. I can say anything I like." He knocked back the whole mug of coffee in a single motion. "Got any more of this?"

I took his cup for a refill and tried to lead him away from Marty's death. "Be careful, I can't guarantee this stuff is even edible. I don't care for it myself. It's only Alice who drinks it."

Murry glanced over at her as she reclined, half asleep in front of the TV.

"Aren't you a little young to be hitting the bean so hard? This stuff is as strong as what I make."

For a moment I thought she was going to flip him off. Thankfully, she decided to tone it down a notch and settle for just sticking out her tongue. Well, at least it fit her apparent age.

He took the cup I handed back and settled me with a heavy glare. "Spill it, O'Toole. I don't have the paperwork yet, but I'm sure I can come up with some excuse to drag you down to the station and lock you away for a few days."

I rolled my eyes. "What do you want me to say? That I barged into his apartment and found a body dissolving into thin air? I could make up whatever fancy story you want, Murry, and you wouldn't believe me even if I told you. He was a friend. I was concerned for him. He fell into the group that you'd been talking about so I gave you a call. I didn't leave my name because I didn't want you pestering me."

"Now give me one good reason I shouldn't haul your ass to the station right now, O'Toole."

I grinned. "Why would I be helping you if I was guilty of being anything more than stupid?"

He made a face and pulled back the fresh cup. "Helping? Damn, all you've done is make my life more difficult. The missing person in that apartment can't help me. He's not even missing yet."

"Then how'd you get in to the apartment?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Don't ask."

I grinned. "Then we understand each other. You go back walking your beat and tell me if you find any of my friends. Do that and I'll tell you what I learn from them. All I know right now is that I need to keep a low profile."

"From what?" In a single motion he'd pulled out a notepad from his belt and flipped it open. He had his pen hovering over the paper.

I shook my head. "That would be telling. I'd like to give you a hint, I really would, but I don't know myself. All I know is that I don't much care for the idea of disappearing."

He glared at me for another moment before flipping the book closed again and holstering it like a gun.

"Fine." He glanced back to his cup again gave me a pitiable look. "But if you hear anything you will tell me right away."

I rolled my eyes. "Sure. Scout's honour." I raised my left hand in mock salute.

He turned to Alice next. She did her best to ignore him and focus on the TV.

"You just be careful, dear." He handed her a card. I noticed how I didn't get one. "You give me a call at the station if you need out of here."

"Yeah, thanks." It was taking everything she had not to rip the card in half.

I finally got him out of the apartment a few minutes later, but not before he drank every last drop of coffee in the pot.

"Okay, that was weird." I closed the door behind Officer Murry. The man still looked like warmed over death – and I'd *met* death – but at least the coffee did seem to keep him awake, if doing nothing for his disposition.

"You're the one who gave him the tip off." Alice didn't even look my way. She'd tuned into a news channel. I settled onto the couch and watched over her shoulder as she lounged on the floor.

I didn't even get a chance to settle myself before Ophois bounded up on the cushions beside me and sprawled out across my lap. His weight practically knocked the breath out of me. He wouldn't move until I gave him a belly scratch.

The talking heads on the idiot box couldn't seem to get enough of their own voices. I wouldn't have minded it quite so much if they'd had something meaningful to say, but they just kept going around in circles.

First it was a news story about a new hospital going up, then something about – I kid you not – a cat getting rescued from a tree.

Damn it all! This is New York for God's sake. One of the biggest cities in the world and they have time for a story about a cat stuck in a tree?

There was something very, very wrong here. The city that never sleeps seemed to be off on spring break.

I reached forward, shoving Alice aside and getting a squeak of protest for my efforts.

The old spin dial clicked in place as I rolled the channels forward. Every single news broadcast was just as whitewashed as the first. Every single one.

I finally ended up on a station that had switched to its international segment.

"...and with the upcoming winter games in France, the eyes of the world fall to Albertville. In other news, new peace talks have been announced in the mid-east. It appears that for the first time we may be able to achieve a lasting peace in the holy land. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have agreed to meet in Jerusalem in an attempt to reconcile their differences and forge a brighter future."

"Thanks, Dan." The other anchor took over, an older black woman. "I don't know about you, but my thoughts and prayers are with the diplomats. I think we can all agree that the world is ready for peace."

I snorted and flicked the set off.

"Hey! I was watching that." Alice sat up. "Just 'cause you don't like TV doesn't mean I have to live in the stone age."

"Doesn't this seem a little strange to you?" I sat back and returned to scratching the appreciative Ophois.

"What? That the world's taking a turn for the better?"

"Well, that too." I sat back and let out a breath, "But the fact that no one seems to be noticing. Everyone is taking it in stride, like peace is normal."

"Isn't it?" She struggled into a sitting position and turned towards me.

I snorted again. "You've been around long enough, you tell me. Can you think of a single time in human history that we haven't been trying to bash each others brains out?" I sighed. "Some days it seems that it just keeps getting worse. Now this."

"What crawled up your ass?" She was watching me now. "You're a god. Aren't you supposed to be looking out for our best interests or something? Shouldn't you be happy that people finally started learning to get along." She laughed, "Maybe they started broadcasting Sesame Street internationally."

I closed my eyes and sat back, the body of Ophois bearing down on me like a lead weight. There was still the ragged edge to losing Wep.

"This isn't right. People don't just start acting rationally. It's not the way we are. We weren't like this when I was alive and we have no reason to start acting like grown-ups now."

"Unless it has something to do with the gods." She rolled her eyes.

I let out a breath. "Fine, but how? Gods start disappearing and people begin to kiss and make up? It's not even the major gods. I could see the world changing if James were to disappear, and things going insane if God were to blip out, but no one even remembers the gods who've kicked the bucket."

Alice stretched and fought to hold back a yawn. "Why are you asking me? You're the god here. Aren't you the guy with all the answers."

I growled. Ophois, still sprawled across me, opened one eye. "Do I look like I have all the answers? I can barely tie my shoes some days and you expect me to figure out a change in the workings of the cosmic machinery?"

She laughed. "Yeah, I guess. What time is it, five? I don't know about you, but I need some sleep. Where's the bed?"

"Oh no you don't." I gave Ophois a shove and he rolled off me with a grumble. "You invited yourself in, that doesn't mean you get my bed."

"But I'm a lady." She pitched her voice with a whine that only a prepubescent teenage girl could pull off. It wasn't nearly as enduring as it might be when I knew the mind behind that face.

"And I'm tired." I replied. "You and the mutt can share the sofa. This is *my* apartment and *my* bed. You can go back to the street if you rather take your chances out there."

She scowled but eventually gave in.

I got up to take the three steps to enter the bedroom and, for possibly the first time, closed the door.

I heard the scramble of claws on the floor behind me for a moment before Alice shrieked, "Down! Down, Ophois! The sofa is mine, you mangy wolf wannabe."

I couldn't help but smile. It had been a long day, the longest in over a century, but I was grinning like a fool.

I walked into the attached bathroom off my bedroom, it was the only one in the apartment.

I didn't exactly feel the need for a shower, but I needed to wash some of the grit of the day from me before I could even think of sleep.

The pipes grunted and howled like a wounded wilderbeast when I turned the hot water on in the sink. It took at least two minutes before the stream even thought about being anything but ice cold.

I splashed some of the water in my face and was more than slightly disgusted to see just how much of it turned black as it rained back into the basin.

Steam coated every corner of the small room by the time I'd scrubbed my face clean enough to start feeling like myself again. The sound of running water was enough to cover the ever present rumble of the city around me. I could almost imagine that I was alone in my small world, that there was nothing outside these four tight walls.

I reached up to wipe the condensation from the mirror that hung tacked to the wall. I had to be careful not to upset it and send the fragile sheet plummeting to the ground.

The face that looked back at me from the glass looked even more tired and haggard than I felt.

I may be immortal, but I still looked like shit.

My hair was dirty and tangled, eyes bloodshot. I could have auditioned for a part in the next zombie flick.

But then again, on some level, I felt more alive than I had in a very, very long time.

This was the first time in centuries that I'd truly had something to worry about. It'd taken me years to wrap my head around it after I'd been made, but being immortal means that, well, nothing truly matters anymore.

Sure I liked having a full belly and avoiding broken limbs, but I knew deep down that it really didn't matter. I could survive anything. No matter what happened to me I'd still wake up the next morning and have another day to take on the world.

The idea of something finally being able to kill me was exhilarating.

Really, really scary, but exhilarating.

I gave up trying to wash my face and just stuck my whole head under the stream from the tap.

Unlike the Hudson, I let this water touch me. I could feel its warmth soak into me. I sat there and let the water run past as I stared down at the drain. I didn't need to come up for air.

The water eventually ran cold.

Pulling up, a snap of my fingers and the water that dripped from my hair fell away neatly into the drain, leaving me as dry as I'd been before.

I breathed once of the heavy steam that still wafted about the small space before I opened the door and stepped back out into my bedroom.

A small single bed and a nightstand that had seen it's best days back in the sixties were all that stood here. Even then they managed to crowd me in the small room.

I laid back on the bed and stared up at the whitewashed ceiling for a moment as I debated if I wanted to doff my clothing before I drifted off, or even my shoes for that matter.

I was just about to decide on the lazier option when a dark spot of shadow crept into view on the ceiling, edging in from the corners where the light couldn't reach.

I'd found him. That damn god, Robert O'Toole was in the apartment just over there. I could see the window to his room from where I'd parked my car.

I would have sworn I'd checked that hallway a half dozen times and no one was there, but so be it.

Trying to project an illusion from this distance was taxing, and I was in no shape for this right now, but I just couldn't pass up the opportunity.

Peering through my binoculars, I could just make him out as he laid back. Good. He'd be more susceptible as he slept.

Uhh... what was that? It skittered and scuttled across the ceiling like a small black spider. I couldn't make it out, like its edges were foggy and undefined.

From the room beyond me I heard the TV, still tuned to a news station, fall to static.

I tried to focus my eyes on the black dot that danced back and forth. It was hard to tell if it was edging closer to me or just growing larger.

The warmth that I'd pulled from the water just moments ago was gone. In its place a creeping coldness stiffened my bones, making it hard to move, to think.

It was another attack. It had to be.

The click of claws on linoleum came from the other room. Ophois began scratching on the closed door. Quietly at first, but he quickly progressed to all but trying to tare the flimsy wooden thing down.

"Robert?" Alice knocked. "What's going on? I can feel something."

I couldn't even open my mouth. It took everything I had to keep my mind from falling into the black void of darkness that continued to boil above me. The shadow had grown so now that it was dripping down the walls like paint, coating everything it touched in perfect blackness, making it disappear into the soft, uniform void.

Ophois rammed himself against the door again, it popped open with only a token protest.

It was Alice who stepped in first though. I kid you not, her eyes were closed.

"Robert..." Her voice was low, "What's going on?"

Having her in the room, anyone, gave me the strength to speak. Without her the world might just have well been nothing but darkness.

"Help?"

Ophois was at my side a moment later, eyeing the darkness skittishly. Illusion or not, he must be able to see it.

"Come on." Eyes still closed, Alice was by my side. A moment later she was tugging my arm. It didn't exactly knock me out of the stupor that fought to drag me down, but it did give me enough strength to stand and walk unsteadily out to the main room.

"Run?" My voice was rough. The terror rolling in my gut was nearly enough to send me fleeing down the hallway screaming.... but this was my home.

It wasn't much, but it was mine.

Alice was sweating now. Her hands weaved about before her, flicking back and forth in elaborate patterns that I couldn't make out.

"There's so much power here... I've haven't... I've never fought off this much before." Around her the darkness pulled back slightly. It left a pool of light encircling her as if she were a candle. I could hear her cursing the darkness.

I couldn't stand any longer. The darkness that had flowed within the bedroom was following us out through the open door. It spread like paint, like mold growing across the wall.

It dripped from the ceiling like tar to land on the television. The old set was showing nothing but static now, black and white dots fighting on the screen.

The darkness won. It engulfed the television, slowly blocking out the light cast by the screen. It encased it, consumed the set like a living thing. I felt a chill.

Now the only light was that around Alice. The small circle was only just enough for her, Ophois, and I. We were huddled on the threadbare couch as the darkness moved about like waves crashing on the sea. Like we were inside the body of a living creature.

Slowly, the circle of light drew tighter.

Sweat ran from my chin and my hands shook. I could only just keep my eyes focused on the distant window. Somewhere within that god waited.

This was a young man's game. I'd done this far too many times. I had the finesse, the experience to make the precise strike needed to vanquish a god, but I just didn't have the raw power to put up a good fight from this distance.

Alice on the other hand... Why had I ever let her consort with that creature? I should have whisked her away the moment I realized she'd hooked up with him.

A shudder ran down my spine at the mere thought of what he might have done to her. The gods didn't care of those such as us. For all I knew he could have a taste for young ones like her.

He would pay if he'd touched her. Oh, he'd pay.

I drew an uneasy breath and redoubled my efforts. It was hard to focus, hard to envision what lay beyond that distant window, but I could come up with more than enough horrors to drive that god to oblivion.

Both Ophois and I were pulled up to Alice's ankles as the circle of light continued to shrink under our toes.

The more I watched it the more desperately I wanted to look away.

The edges of the darkness had been simple shadows before, all-encompassing velvet blackness. Now they'd grown tentacles, feelers, teeth.

The darkness didn't just want to envelop me anymore, it wanted to consume me.

A pit of rock hard fear grew in my chest. It felt like an ice cube that had been forced down my throat.

Ophois scrambled back from his perch with the sound of claws cutting into the cheep fabric of my sofa. A moment later he was pressed up against my leg.

He looked up at me, blue eyes even more frightened than I. I could imagine that he'd seen this before.

I would not die the same way as Wep.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, I forced myself to look at the edge of the darkness and all the horrors it held.

The closer I looked the more detailed they became. I could see faces now, hands clutching towards me... and more.

I could see the hungry, unforgiving waves of the sea. I had robbed them of their prize so many years ago and they had returned to claim me in Liam's place.

No.

Fear gripped my heart, my eyes fell unfocussed.

And then the terror ratcheted back a notch.

Wait... what?

The edges of the darkness had returned to their indistinct, blurry edges. Like I could see through it if I tried hard enough.

I gritted my teeth and reached down inside myself. I was a god. I would not be vanquished in such a way.

Casting out, I punched a hole in the darkness around me with my very soul.

I may be a minor god, but I was still a god. I had powers that no mortal man could ever match. I would not allow anyone, not even an illusionist of such great power as this, to claim me.

For a long moment my strike seemed to do no good. I pressed into the darkness without ever truly moving. I had no dominion over darkness or perception, but I still pitted my will against that of the man who hounded me.

The blast hit me like a midnight freight train straight from Jersey.

He was fighting! That damn god was fighting back.

I couldn't help the grim smile that crept to my lips. No one had done this in years. It was almost a pleasant change.

Fight as you will, deity, I've seen every trick in the book and more. You can overpower me, but I've used my years on this earth to learn, to improve. You haven't.

I will win.

A hole began to form in the darkness on the floor before me. It was small, no larger than a pinprick, but I could see the peeling linoleum beneath.

Ophois watched me for a moment before leaning on my side. I could feel the warmth of his body. But more than that, I could feel power. It wasn't much, no more than a trickle, but he let it flow into me like he was charging a battery. I took it.

I pressed, forcing everything I had forward, widening the tiny gap that floated so tantalizingly before me.

It worked. In a manner of speaking. The hole widened from a pinprick to about that of a looking glass, but no further.

I could have screamed. I could push back the darkness, truly I could, by raw power alone no less, but I couldn't get ahold of the strings around me that held up the illusion.

It was like using a flamethrower as a floodlight. Sure I got some illumination out of it, but I was applying the force all wrong. I could light up the darkness right in front of me, I could send it scrambling back, but I could do nothing for the rest that hemmed us in.

Everywhere I attacked the darkness pulled back, tore to shreds and retreated away like I was slicing through tissue paper with a butcher's cleaver, but it just regrouped and attacked from a different angle.

Drawing my breath for another assault, I bit down on my tongue. The pain was sharp and quick, like a dunking in ice water.

I spat out the blood that pooled in my mouth. It disappeared into the shadows before me like it had drank it up.

The beast was tiring, but so was I. My entire body was shaking now from the effort of pushing forth the illusion. If I could just keep this up for a little longer I could constrict around that god O'Toole and wipe him clean.

I hadn't had a god fight like this in so long...

Every deity I'd confronted had resisted, for sure, but this one continued to fight. Deep down each and every one of the gods had been ready to move on, ready to give up their long, drawn out existence. They should have faded out long ago and they knew it. This one fought.

Once more the darkness swelled around us like a raising tide.

Ophois was shivering beside me, the power he lent weakening. He wasn't the only one. I'd put so much of myself into the push that it was as if I'd run a pair of back to back marathons and tied them up with wrestling a grizzly bear.

I glanced over to Alice. She was fairing little better than I. Her face was drawn and pale and her breath came in shallow gasps. The edge of the darkness around us was flowing in and out, likely with every beat of her heart. It only served to strengthen the feeling that we were sitting in the surf of an ink ocean.

I reached out to lay a hand on her shoulder. The spark that jumped forth from me was so vivid that I pulled back with a shout.

I'd felt that one. I was already drained, and the flow had sucked me even drier of my strength. It was like she was tapping into my very essence, like I was a battery to her and she was an empty cell.

Her eyes snapped open the moment I'd made contact. I hadn't the slightest what she'd felt, but she hadn't been the one to pull away.

The circle of light around us grew ever so slightly.

"Robert..." Her voice was shallow and breathless, like she was about to pass out.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

Grabbing Ophois by the scruff of the neck with one hand, I reached out to take Alice with the other.

The spark arced through the air before we even touched. It was like I was shaking hands with a live wire, only I was the one supplying the current.

She sagged back slightly as I held her, sighing as some small measure of colour returned to her face.

Ophois went limp a moment later, passing out as he was sucked dry. I let go of him as soon as he went slack. I didn't want to hurt him.

That left only me to feed Alice's hunger.

I've never had much power to begin with, and the battle I'd already waged left me nearly seeing double, but I feed her everything I could.

And I could just have well been shunting power straight into the sun.

The entire room brightened around us, the inky blackness taking on a lighter shade, like sunbaked mud.

A moment later that mud began to crack.

No. This can't be happening.

Why did I ever let her go with him? How could I ever have been so short sighted?

Now he was using my Alice, my very own Alice against me.

Her skills were still crude and slow, like a child's stick painting compared to my masterpieces, but those simple figures were backed up with the power of a god.

I fell back, limp in my seat, still staring at the distant window.

No. No, no, no.

For a moment it almost looked like the darkness, cracked grey around us, was about to fall apart into nothing more than dust, but that was before the rains came.

As if a cloud had come to cover some illusionary sun, the dry mud around us slowly began to darken and strengthen again. It was slow at first, but built upon itself with each passing second, finding strength in its own growing power as it once again flowed towards our small island of light.

"Water." The word barely escaped my dry and cracked lips. "Water. It flows like water."

Alice glanced down to me, our eyes meeting.

There was just the slightest nod of her head before she returned her focus back to the dark pool around us.

This time it wasn't the blackness that changed, but the world around it.

We were still in the apartment, I knew that on an intellectual level, but I couldn't see a single sign of it anylonger.

The blackness that coated the ceiling began to waver, a moment later a wan point of light poked through, then another and another. Seconds later there were stars overhead.

I sucked in a breath and the first scents of the sea air hit me. I could smell the salt and the seaweed. I'd swear a clipper brushed my face, carrying with it the sound of lapping waves.

I glanced down to the edge of the darkness where it broke and lapped at our toes. No longer were there tendrils or hungry mouths. The blackness was still there, but it had been dyed the faintest onyx blue.

It crashed and retreated just as it had before, but the threat was gone. No longer was it hungry and consuming. It was *mine*.

The more I looked around us the more details I could pick out. The couch was gone, replaced with a lump of soft, warm sand.

Ophois was still at our feet, slumbering peacefully next to the surf.

Alice remained beside me through all this. Her eyes were closed, but I could hear her muttering under her breath. I couldn't make out a single word.

The current she pulled from me was almost overpowering. Every moment I spent filling her with power brought me one more closer to being completely drained.

It was as bad as it had been when we started, but somehow, with the new world around me I didn't feel it as much.

I knelt down next to Ophois and reached a finger towards the soft waters that were so close at hand. I could feel their power. This was my domain, I was water's master.

I almost gasped as the surface pulled away from me. It was hard to make it out under the scant light of the stars that poked through above us, but the water pulled away.

No. You are *mine*.

I reached for it again. I didn't want much, only to feel its smooth surface against my skin.

It flinched away again, like a live thing.

I gritted my teeth and screwed my brow. I almost removed my hand from Alice's shoulder before remembering where we truly were.

Reaching out again with what little power reserves I had left, I held the water fast with my mind.

There were only a few real things I could do with water, most of them parlour tricks, but I could do this. The lapping waves would not escape me.

I could feel it struggle in my invisible grasp.

I'd never felt such a thing before. The surf before me was alive... or at least under a direct will.

No matter. It wasn't blackness anymore. It was water, and it belonged to me.

A single index finger extended, I knelt down and reached out once more.

It pulled and thrashed in my hold, but I would not let it run. The moment I came in contact with its surface my eyes closed.

There was only truly a single power in the universe, it was shared by both humans and gods. I followed that stream of power back to the source of this illusion.

I couldn't see him, but I could feel him. My head turned as I glanced back towards my bedroom and the window beyond. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there.

Through the spiderweb like filaments of power, I traced my way back to him as he retreated before me.

He was great, I knew that, but he was no match for even me, the most minor of gods, when it came to the realms of pure power.

He fell back as quickly as he could, burning the web behind him, I followed in hot pursuit, edging ever closer.

I'd almost reached him when he collapsed the final bridge to his mind. He was so close that I could taste him.

If I had my normal power I could rebuild that bridge, find him, trace him back to his source and... well, make him regret it. But as it was I had hardly enough power to even remain where I stood in the empty void.

I could see him standing across the tiny expanse that separated the two of us. He looked small and frightened.

Somewhere in the distance of the physical world I heard the sound of a car engine start up.

My hands were shaking so hard that I almost took out a pair of trashcans as I pulled away from the curb.

How had that happened? I'd wiped away hundreds of gods, perhaps thousands, and that had never occurred before.

The chill in my heart almost stopped me dead when I thought about his long, ice like fingers of power reaching for me. I'd been only an instant away from having him in my very mind, my imagination.

He'd followed back my illusion, followed it like a string to find me and nearly caught me.

I raised one hand to my face to wipe away the sweat. It came back smeared with red. My nose was bleeding.

I opened my eyes and lifted my hand from Alice's shoulder. She promptly collapsed to the sofa beside me. The gallant thing would have been to reach out and break her fall. I didn't have the energy to do anything but slide to the floor and look at the dirty walls around me.

The world was in focus again. The apartment had returned in all its grungy and dirt encrusted mundane glory.

I let a groan escape my lips. I'd never done anything like that before.

I felt so empty that I might just echo if someone came by and tapped on my chest. But yet even then I could feel just the slightest flicker of power remaining. It was so small that I could feel it grow, doubling and redoubling every few seconds.

Even then it was going to take a good night's sleep before I was ready to do anything more than simply breathe.

We would have been sitting ducks if our attacker had come back to finish us off. I don't think any of us could have lifted a finger, even if a SWAT team had burst through the door complete with flash-bangs.

I was the first to rouse in the end. I guess that gods were quicker to recover, even from something like this.

A long, hot shower managed to straighten some of the kinks from my back, but I still felt like I'd been run over by a bulldozer.

And that wasn't a feeling I was accustomed to. I'd been wounded before, it was hard to avoid when you've been around as long as I have, but just about all my wounds disappeared in record time.

The pain and stiffness that locked me up was more than just that of stretched muscles, it was like I'd pulled on every fibre of my being.

And right now it was getting rather annoying that I could barely bend down to tie my shoes. I was starting to feel like an old man again. And this time I didn't have Kevin to help me.

In due course I finally managed to make myself somewhat presentable. Stepping out into the main room again, Alice was still sound asleep. Ophois, however, stirred.

The pure white dog looked as stiff as I felt. He glanced up before yawning wide enough for me to think I might just be able to fit the moon between his jaws.

Licking his lips, he slowly got to his feet and stretched. I could hear each and every one of the vertebrae in his spine crack as he pushed his rump in the air and pulled his head down. After that it was a quick shake and he looked ready for the world.

I rolled my eyes.

"Figures, you can throw this off and I'm stuck hobbling around town for the morning."

He walked over to lean on my leg and demand a scratch behind the ear.

I glanced over at Alice. She'd yet to move.

"You hang here, Ophois. I'm going to see if I can get us some breakfast."

He looked up at me, concerned.

"Don't give me that." I gave him a shove towards Alice, "I'll be fine. Anyone else wanting to attack me would have by now."

The dog didn't look convinced. Despite his misgivings he still ambled over to the sofa and leapt up to snuggle down next to Alice. He glanced at me one more time before yawning again and closing his eyes.

You know, if I'd had a choice I'd rather have been brought back as a dog.

It was something like ten o'clock now and the rush hour was long gone.

Stepping from the apartment block, I crossed into the sunlight and made for a couple of streets over.

It was amazing just how many people they could fit in the projects like this, but as a result it wasn't so surprising how many stores sprang up around it.

There was a small, likely illegal, open air market here. It sold everything from food and clothing to bootlegged tapes.

The sound of a dozen boomboxes wafted through the air as I joined the mass of humanity milling about. I didn't come here often as I rarely bought food.

But right now I really needed the feeling of a full belly, even if it was nothing but a placebo.

They used to segregate the housing projects back in the day, not anymore. There were a dozen different shades of people within spitting distance. Worked for me. I was in the mode for something a bit spicier than another Irish potato.

Chinese food it was. I'd had enough of the real stuff to know the junk they were selling me was Chinese in name only, but I didn't care. It smelt good and that was all I needed.

On my way back to the apartment I saw a bunch of kids, thirty at least, playing in a lot next to the market. There were children of every run, kicking a soccer ball back and forth with enough energy that it made my muscles ache.

And there wasn't a single racial slur to be heard.

Alice was still asleep when I made it back to the apartment, but Ophois was up and demanding his share of breakfast before I even got through the door.

I had to all but kick him back as he tried to nose his way into the cardboard boxes in my hands. Frankly, I was starting to think his plan was to trip me up and claim everything that touched the floor as his own.

I didn't even have a table to set the boxes on so I had to retreat into the kitchen with the mutt dogging my heels.

I popped open the lids and began pulling out a few of the better looking pieces as I search for a couple of clean plates.

Glancing down I almost expected Ophois to be whining and begging. Nope. He sat watching me, expecting his fair share to be given him.

I rolled my eyes and tossed a chunk of ginger beef his way. He never even seemed to move, but the meat was gone long before it ever touched ground.

I saw just the barest glint of teeth as he snapped shut on the morsel. I didn't want to think what those teeth could do to something else.

Alice was just starting to stir as I walked back into the main room with two heaping plates. I'd made Ophois a whole plate of his own, it was sitting back on the kitchen floor.

I was starting to think I could get that dog a part in a horror movie with the way he tore his food apart.

"Back in the land of the living?" I asked, sitting down beside her and pressing a plate into her hands.

She mumbled something incoherent and began shovelling. She might be small, but god could she eat. You'd think she'd spent a week on weight-watchers the way she was pulling it down.

I didn't bother with conversation while I tucked into my own. Though I didn't bolt it at quite the frantic pace she did. The food did nothing for me, but the simple mechanical act of eating after last night, the feeling of being full, was enough.

She finished in due course and looked around. I saw the panic rise in her eyes when she couldn't find Ophois.

"In the kitchen," I offered, "He's got a plate of his own."

She sighed and settled back into the lumpy couch. A moment later she began shifting back and forth to try and get comfortable.

That was a good sign. The fact she hadn't noticed any of the lumps or loose springs last night attested to just how drained she'd been.

"Did we win?" Her voice was weak.

I shrugged. "Sure. But I'll be damned if I know what our prize was. Or even our competition."

She wiggled slightly and looked away.

"Yeah. No clue."

I swallowed a few more bites and tossed my plate aside. It only touched the ground when Ophois pounced on it like it would run away. Well, no chance of getting it back now.

"Didn't you say you that recognized this power last night? And on that, what the hell did you do back there? You used Ophois and I like batteries, drained us dry."

She turned to stare at the TV. The fact it wasn't turned on didn't seem to faze her.

"I don't want to talk about it." Her voice had changed to that of a defenceless little girl.

It took everything I had not to reach out and strangle her. That was not going to work with me. She was no innocent little child.

I was able to get my voice under control before I spoke. Only just. "Alice, you saved my life last night, I owe you for that, but you owe me too."

Her nose crinkled. "For what?"

This time a growl did sneak into my voice. "Look around you! My apartment, my food, my sofa. You wanted to come with me and I let you tag along."

She turned back towards me now, her eyes alight.

"I did not ask to be pulled into this! You showed up that afternoon when I was in the plaza and just walked in on my life. I thought I was through with your kind--"

Her jaw snapped shut with an audible click.

I took a deep breath. "What do you know, Alice? You said you hardly knew of the gods."

"I..." She paused, words stuttering out, "I didn't, really. I didn't remember anything when you found me."

"What do you know now, Alice? How is it I seem to be the only one who can jog those memories loose?"

She tried to look away again but couldn't quite take her eyes from me.

"I still don't fully remember..."

"Then tell me what you do know." I was losing my patience now.

"When I'm around you, when we touch... it helps."

"How? Why? What is it that heals you?"

She raised one hand to her shoulder. It brushed the edge of the black magician's coat she still wore. She'd never once taken it off.

"I don't remember." Her words were final. She was lying.

I couldn't hold her gaze anymore, her eyes fell to the cushions between us.

I stood up with a disgusted snort.

"I told you my past, Alice." I couldn't hold back the pain in my voice, "No other mortal has ever heard that story. Few of the gods even know it. I told you, Alice. I trusted you. You won't even tell me your last name."

A slight, high pitched 'eep' escaped her lips, but she didn't say anything.

The silence hung heavy in the room for a long moment before she finally raised her head.

"Would you mind if I used your shower? It's been the better part of a week since I last got cleaned up."

I waved a hand towards the bathroom with a grunt as I began pacing. "Whatever. You know where it is."

She disappeared a moment later. The sound of running water started up behind the closed door.

I glanced down at Ophois, he was laying on the warm spot Alice had so recently vacated, looking self-satisfied with his full belly, all I got out of him was a yawn.

"Well, your no help."

I was about to take a spot beside him on the couch when a knock came at the door.

Damn it. Who was it now? No one ever came to visit me and few door to door salesmen bothered to come to the projects.

I pushed slowly to my feet. It's been a long time since I last had a full belly and it was taking its toll.

Ophois perked up the moment the knock had come. He was wide awake now and staring at the closed door to the hallway. It wasn't a reassuring image.

I mustn't have been moving fast enough. The knock came again, louder this time, more forceful. The boom reverberated in a more ominous way than I'd ever given that cheap wood credit for.

Two steps later I threw the door open with a snort.

"What the h-- Oh, it's you. You got here quick, Anubis."

The elder god stood before me dressed from head to foot in immaculate white robes that contrasted with his dark skin. Beside him his canine companion Lenpw glared at me.