

We Don't Just Fade Away

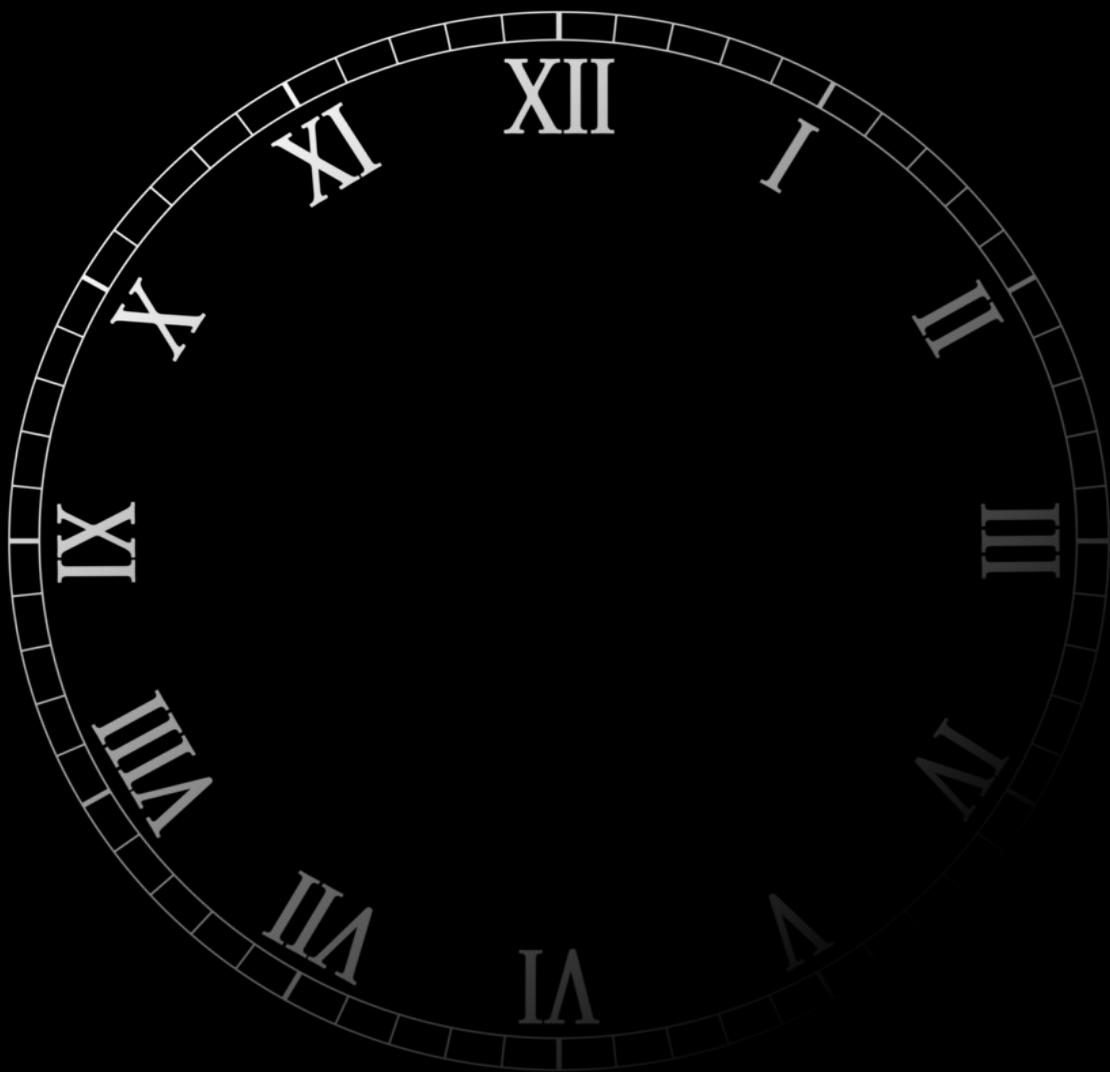


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Okay, folks. Here's a major note before we get started. This is a story that deals with religious themes. And pretty directly. If that's not your thing – or you're easily offended by such – please *do not* read. My main series will resume once this 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 9

Neither the god nor his dog spared me even so much as a word as they forced themselves into the room, shouldering me aside in the process like I was nothing more than living furniture.

Ophois was on his feet now as Lenpw approached. The two dogs went nose to nose. Neither of their tails were wagging.

"Out." An's word was final. There was a crackle of power beneath it.

"But this is my--"

"Out." His expression was calm, but I could feel the press of his power against me, waiting for an excuse to take hold.

"Fine." I gritted the words out between clenched teeth. An had been pointedly looking towards the hallway, but I marched into my bedroom. I did not enjoy being ordered around like a peon in my own home.

Pushing the door closed behind me I fumbled with the latch to make it hold. Ophois had done a good number on it when he'd barged in here last night, he'd practically ripped the catch free of the frame.

Wonderful. I had nowhere to go. Anubis was out in the main room and Alice was cleaning up in the bath. I was stuck in my tiny little bedroom twiddling my thumbs.

With a start, I stepped over to the window and took a long look out towards the street. There was no one there. I let go the breath I hadn't even realized I'd been holding.

I paced back and forth in the small space. Two steps to one wall, turn, two steps back. I could hear the sound of running water from behind one door, from the other... nothing.

Pausing for a moment I put my ear to the main room. There was nothing. Not even the hint of a whisper.

I'd just begun to return to pacing when it struck me. The robes that Anubis had been wearing, they were his formal garments.

And Anubis was the Egyptian guide to the underworld.

It was more complex than that, but I'd never really bothered to learn more. Anubis was roughly the equivalent of the Greek's Charon, the river man who ferries the dead across the river Styx.

Oh Lord.

Anubis hadn't realized that Wep was gone when he'd disappeared. The Egyptian god of *death* hadn't realized that one of his own was dead.

And he'd come here expecting to find someone to the afterlife.

This did not bode well.

Alice was done her shower long before Anubis opened the door.

She started slightly when she stepped out into the bedroom. I could only pray that she didn't interpret me laying across the bed as any form of invitation.

I fumbled quickly to my feet, almost as quickly as she clutched the towel around herself.

Other than that towel she was naked.

"Do you have anything I could wear for a while?" she asked. "I really need to get my stuff to the laundry." She looked down, "Who knows when the next chance I'll get is."

I turned to look out the window, studiously avoiding her almost naked form.

"Sorry," I waved a hand in her direction, "The washing machines are all in the basement. Communal. I, uh, I don't know if I have anything that would fit you."

I heard her shifting her weight behind me. There was just the faintest reflection of her in the window.

"Do I look like someone who cares if they'll fit?" She turned her head slightly and noticed the closed door. "What's going on?"

"Anubis arrived."

"Who?"

"An. One of the gods I called. He was a good friend of Wep's." I paused for a moment, "And Ophois' too."

"A good friend? I thought most of you super-powered weirdos kept far away from each other."

I scratched my head and looked out into the cloudless blue sky. "Yeah, most of us. You know that whole 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' thing? Imagine knowing someone for four thousand years. That's An and Wep. They're like brothers. They've known each other since before... well, a really, really long time. I wouldn't mind some time apart too if I were them."

"Fine." She sat down on the bed beside me. "So what do we do now? They've what, got us locked in here?"

I snorted. "Not quite. Though I wouldn't advise barging in on them. I'm just letting them have a few moments alone to catch up."

"With Ophois? He's a dog! What do they have to catch up on?"

"Who knows. They asked me to leave and I did." I decided not to mention the implicit threat in An's voice at the time. "Are you ready to tell me anything more about last night?" I fought to change the direction of the conversation.

"No." The word was final.

I finally turned to her, careful to keep my eyes above where the towel wrapped around her middle. "You're going to have to tell me sometime. This is kinda important. Just a little."

She pulled the towel tighter and looked away. "I don't remember." I doubt even she expected her words to convince me.

"Just one thing, Alice," I turned back to the window, "Do not touch Anubis. He's already jumpy enough to set off a fireball and I don't need anything else to scare him."

She shrugged. "Sure, got it. No feeling up the gods. Who do you think I am, a highschooler looking to get hopped?"

And that's where we sat. And sat, and sat. For about two hours. It was hard to tell, I didn't have a clock.

I didn't have the slightest what was going on out there. Other than the flutter of breathing and the occasional footfall on the floor there was nothing.

At long last, and I do mean long, An came to open the door.

His face was grim, but the anger didn't seem to be directed at me. He didn't even start when he saw Alice. Ophois must have told him somehow.

"I'm sorry, Robert." His voice was a deep baritone. "The situation is now clear," He screwed up his face, "Or as clear as it can currently be. I should not have doubted your innocence." I noticed he avoided looking at Alice as he spoke.

"Great, great. *The situation is now clear*," I mocked his dead serious tone. "You want to spread some of that clarification over this way? I haven't a damn clue what's going on."

"No."

Okay, this was getting annoying. People seemed to have a thing for stonewalling me today.

There was a yip from Ophois in the corner of the room where he sat next to Lenpw.

"That is not wise." Anubis had turned, and I swear he was talking to the dog.

Ophois held An's gaze for a moment as the two of them squared off.

And Anubis lost.

Ophois stood up and casually walked over to lean on me, his tongue was lolling out as he panted.

"It seems, Robert, that you have made quite an impression on Wepawet."

"Huh?" I reached down to give Ophois a scratch between the ears. "Sure, Wep and I were friends. But what—"

"The two of you are still friends. Apparently." The elder god dropped himself down on my sofa, grimacing as he had to shift around to get comfortable. "Wep's form may be gone, but he has yet to completely pass over."

I leaned against the wall across from Anubis. Ophois followed along side me. I glanced down at the dog. He was the exact mirror of Anubis' Lenpw, the only differences being that Ophois was in white and blue where Lenpw was black and gold. They could have been twins.

Lenpw had leapt up on the sofa to sit next to his master.

"You are not aware of our nature, are you, Robert?"

The term 'nature' meant more when one was speaking of the gods. Nature meant power, origin, birth, and history.

I shrugged. "He was Wepawet. I looked him up once in the library. He was the Egyptian god of war."

"And he was a jackal headed god, as am I."

"Yeah."

"Have you ever paused to wonder where it is our bestial features have gone?" He cocked his head, switching topic so fast it left my head spinning. "How long have you known Wepawet?"

"I don't know, fifty years perhaps."

"And how long has he had Ophois?"

"All of them." I grinned, "They were never apart."

"And when was the last time you have heard of a dog that has lived for over fifty years?"

I rolled my eyes. "Gods have strange powers. You know that as well as I do, An. I never asked."

He had to fight back a smile. "Yes, because you pride yourself on proper manners." He choked back a laugh. "Ophois is not a dog, Robert. He is one of Wepawet's aspects, just as Lenpw is of mine."

"Huh?"

Before I could get out another word Anubis reached out a hand to set atop Lenpw's head. For just the barest of moments they sat like that, motionless. Then, without even so much as a flash, Lenpw was gone. And Anubis had changed.

The man An, the god, had always looked in all ways human, just as Wep had. I'd always assumed they had lost their jackal appearance millenia ago as their worshippers evolved.

Looks like I was wrong.

I heard Alice gasp from the back of the room, but I was too preoccupied with the god who sat calmly in front of me to take note.

From the collarbone down he was completely unchanged, but it was as if a sculptor had come by and swapped his head for that of a beast.

Lenpw and An were one. I suppose this was the true Anubis.

"And now you see my original form." His voice was clear and unchanged despite his now inhuman lips. It even held onto the slight Australian twang he'd picked up over the last few years.

There was something more to that face... it was Lenpw's to be sure, but it showed a feral, undomesticated edge that no dog would ever dare.

Despite the new form, the god still lounged before me as if nothing had changed. He moved like his centre of balance was unaffected, like this was as natural as the human aspect had been.

"But Wepawet..." I could hardly get the words out.

"The form of Wepawet is gone." Anubis' voice ached, "All that remains is Ophois." He glanced down to the dog, "And it appears he has placed his trust in you."

"But can't Ophois find Wep? They're one and the same, right? Wep can't be gone if Ophois is still here."

The jackal shook his head slowly, eyes closing. "That would not seem to be the case. I cannot imagine of life without Lenpw, but Ophois has been forced to carry on without his other half."

I felt a weight against my leg and looked down to see Ophois pushing closer to me. Despite the warmth of the summer day he was shivering.

"And let me guess," I let out an exasperated sigh, "You can talk dog... or jackal or whatever it is."

"In a manner of speaking." The god's lips rose to expose row upon row of sharp white teeth. I wasn't sure if it was a human grin or a canine snarl. "Ophois informed me of the events that have transpired. It would appear my assistance is required." He cast a meaningful glance over his shoulder to where Alice stood. "You have done an astounding job of surviving so far, Robert, but it seems you need a stronger backstop."

I rolled my eyes. "Right now I'm not looking to reject anyone who might be willing to give me a hand." I let out a breath, "Could you at least tell me what happened to Wep? I only showed up after the fact."

Anubis' eyes closed for a moment before he turned to look at Ophois who still pressed at my legs. I had a feeling there was a meaningful conversation going on, but I couldn't hear it.

"I can only tell you what Ophois remembers." Anubis' voice was slow and heavy. "And it would not seem to be all that different from what you experienced last night." Ophois shivered against my leg. "He and Wepawet were awaiting your arrival when shadows began to invade their home. They were unprepared for the assault. It would appear that it was over in a matter of seconds. Whoever directed the attack was apparently unfamiliar with their dual nature. The attack was directed exclusively against Wepawet's human aspect. It came so fast that the two of them were not even able to merge to their true form and mount a defence." His sighed, looking down to the floor, "Not that it would appear that such would have been any use. A canine's senses are different from those of a human's. Ophois was able to see that the attack was an illusion, but it was real to Wep. He was gone in moments. All that can be said is that for a brief instant Ophois was able to feel Wep's true fear, a blinding and overwhelming terror. Then there was nothing." The jackal took a deep breath. "For the first time he was alone." He raised his eyes to me, "I can't tell you what that must have been like. It

would be like... like losing yourself. Wep and Ophois, Lenpw and An, we are the same creature, the same being. It would be like seeing your own death."

"And Ophois ran." I finished. "That's how I found him out back."

"Yes." Anubis took a moment to collect himself. "He was alone and frightened. You were familiar and he trusted you. You don't realize what an honour that was. You were the one he trusted in his... his death."

I took a deep breath and looked down to the dog that still huddled about my legs. This was Wepawet? The man I'd known for decades?

"Fine." I steeled myself and looked back to Anubis. With each moment that passed his jackal head was becoming less and less alien. He almost looked more human than the people I dealt with every day. "What do we do to bring Wepawet back?"

"Wepawet is gone." His tone was final. "All that remains is Ophois."

"But you said they were one and the same!"

He looked like he was about to break out in tears. Could jackals cry?

"They are two aspects of the same creature. Someone has cut away one, leaving only the other. He will never be whole again. You don't understand, Robert. Wep is not just simply dead, he's gone. We could circumvent mere death. That was what I came here to do." He tugged at his ceremonial robes. "I can cross the boundary into death. It is not to be done lightly, but I can bring people back if I so choose." A tear did escape him now. "But he's not there. Ophois would be able to feel him if he had somehow gotten himself trapped in the underworld. But. He's. Not. There."

I never thought I'd ever do this in my long existence, but I sat down next to Anubis, the jackal headed god of death, and put my arm over his shoulders. The force of his power tried to push me back, but I ignored it.

I hadn't the slightest what to say. It must be like losing a brother for him, a brother he'd known since the dawn of man.

"We'll solve this, An. We'll find that man." I glanced over to Alice, "We'll find him and make him pay."

The jackal pulled in a breath when Ophois popped up in front of us and set one of his front paws on our legs. The white dog was watching closely, as if to say 'It's alright'.

Well, then again, considering this was Wepawet, he likely was saying just that. That, and the Ancient Egyptian god of war was also likely asking me to kick his killer's ass.

I reached out and ruffled the dog's fur.

We spent a few more minutes catching up. Ophois had already filled in most of the details, but I gave Anubis a view of the illusions through my human eyes.

"Well, I'd best be off to do my rounds." The elder god stood, and before I could even realize it he had split back into An and Lenpw. It was like there had never been a merger.

"You sure that's a good idea, An? You really want to be walking the streets with him out there?"

He may be back in human form now, but the grin An gave me was no less feral. "I'm looking forward to it. We have a score to settle. And in any event, I need to check in with the top gods about. It wouldn't go over well if I were to be wandering around the city without checking in with them. They might think I was invading their territory."

"Heh. Yeah, right." Gods used to be freakishly territorial in the old days, it wasn't like that so much anymore, but old habits die hard.

I'd been able to keep his attention off Alice while he was here, but it was obvious that Anubis, in all his aspects, didn't trust her.

It wasn't until the two of them, An and Lenpw, walked out the door that I noticed they moved in lockstep, turning to watch the same things, like a pair of twins. Huh. I'd never clued into that before. Made me wonder what other powers they were hiding.

I glanced over to Alice once the door clicked closed. She'd never moved from the bedroom doorway the whole time. And she was still clad in a bath towel.

"That," she paused for breath, "Was the freakiest thing I've ever seen."

I nearly doubled over laughing. "Seriously? We just about got eaten by shadows last night, that you turned into a serene ocean, and that was the freakiest thing you've ever seen. A jackal headed god? Don't they teach mythology these days? Just be glad you haven't met any of the Greek gods!"

A half hour later the three of us were down in the basement laundromat of the building. All the machines down here were coin operated and it was taking the last of my cash – the very last – to get Alice suitable for high society again.

I'd managed to find a shirt and pair of pants to fit her, but it left her looking like a fugitive from the salvation army.

I'd wanted to lock Ophois up in the apartment when we went down here to talk about him, but he wouldn't be left behind. The dog had become my shadow, I couldn't get more than ten steps away before he was at my side once again.

It was scary to think the mind of my old friend had to be in there somewhere. I couldn't help but wonder just how much of him there was as opposed to Ophois the dog.

"What happens now?" Alice was sitting on the small foldout table next to the dryer as it hummed away.

I glanced up. "What do you mean?"

"What's going to happen to the god-hunter now that Anubis is here? He didn't look like he was going to sit around."

I shrugged. "I don't know him well enough to tell. But let's just say that if they meet in a dark alley only one of them is going to be walking out."

She shivered.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh," She pulled the tee-shirt closer around her, "It's nothing. It's just cold down here."

Ophois snorted and pulled a step closer to me where I leaned against the unfinished concrete wall.

"I think the better question is," I continued, "What are we going to do next? We beat the guy off last night but I'm not willing to bet my existence on him not trying again."

She sighed. "Your probably right. He does tend to keep showing up."

I pounced on her words. "Keep showing up? You remember him from before you met me?"

She pulled back, almost seeming to shrink as she clutched her clothing tighter. "I..." She sighed. "Yeah. I remember him. I was in Boston before I came down here a few months ago. He was there too."

"Boston? What the hell is in Boston?"

She shrugged. "Gods."

"What?" I felt Ophois perk up when I spoke.

She looked away. "I never thought of coming to New York to find gods. I heard rumours long ago about folks up in Boston. There were gods up there."

"*Were?*" I stressed the word.

She still didn't look up. "Were. There aren't anymore. Just like there aren't nearly as many gods in New York."

"And are you going to tell me why?"

She looked panicked for a moment before, with noticeable effort, she pulled herself back under control. "It wasn't me, honest. I was looking for someone, anyone, to help me remember. I found the gods... or I almost did. They were all gone by the time I got there."

"And when you say gone..."

"Like they'd never existed. No one even seemed to remember they were ever there."

The sound of her clothing going round and round in the dryer was loud in the small space. I was about ready to kick the bloody machine.

"And then you came right down here, following your gods. And you didn't even tell me." It took everything I had not to shout.

"I couldn't remember." Her voice was tiny, "All I knew was what I had written on my sleeve."

I looked at the dryer as it droned on.

"The sleeve that we just washed clean."

She nodded. I couldn't tell if she was hiding a smile. "I don't need it now that I can remember for myself. As long as I'm with you."

"But I... you..." I set my head back against the hard concrete with a quiet thud. "You can't stay with me forever, Alice."

She shrugged. "It looks like you need me until the hunter goes away. I'll write it all back down then."

I glanced in the front of the dryer. Her black jacket and pants whirled around with the white shirt so fast that everything started looking grey.

"Fine." I turned and walked away, Ophois at my heels. "You know where the apartment is. Come up after you've gotten dressed."

I didn't look back.

The apartment seemed empty without Alice. Bugger it all, I'd spent how many years here alone and she makes it feel empty after one day?

I flopped down on the sofa only to have Ophois take a seat beside me. I nearly shoved him off before remembering he was more than he seemed.

Taking a deep breath, I addressed the dog.

"Can you understand me, Ophois? Are you really Wep in there?"

He turned towards me, cocking his head.

I sighed. "Come on, Wep. Give me a sign that everything Anubis said wasn't just a line."

He barked once and leapt to the ground, walking into the kitchen where he nosed open one of my cupboards and began rummaging about.

"Hey, get out of there!" I walked up behind him, but he pushed me back with one well timed kick of a hindpaw.

A few moments later he pulled out a half finished bag of pretzels. The same brand that I'd been bringing to Wep's when all this started. I didn't even get a chance to say a word before he'd ripped the bag open and spilt half of them across the floor.

He didn't seem to care how dirty my place was, he began eating them the moment they touched the ground.

"Fine." I lowered myself to the floor and took a seat beside him, leaning back against the cupboards. Grabbing a few pretzels from the unspilt portion of the bag, I ate along side him.

I watched Ophois as he ate. I would swear to anyone who'd listen that he was a dog and nothing more. I guess I'd be wrong.

After eating his fill he sat down beside me with a belch. All we needed was a TV and a card table and it would be almost as if nothing had ever changed.

I stared at the wall across from us, trying not to look at him. As long as I didn't look at his face I could almost convince myself that I was with my old friend again and not his dog.

"What's it like... being a dog I mean?" My eyes drifted upwards to the window. It was a perfect blue sky out, not a single cloud.

He made a noncommittal grunt. I didn't even know dogs could do that.

"What about after this?" My voice caught, "Are you going to be okay surviving without Wep... I mean, uh, your human part?"

He whined. It was a primal and vulnerable sound. He was scared.

"Yeah, I know." I reached out and put an arm over his narrow canine shoulders. It was odd... but I could feel Wep under there. "So I guess we just go about our lives now and hope for the best."

Damn it all but did I have a headache.

That number O'Toole and Alice had plied on me last night left one hell of a mark. It was like the world's worst hangover without any of the fun beforehand.

The joy of being the world's greatest illusionist, however, is that I can make people believe anything they want. Even myself.

The illusion of well-being kept the worst of the pain at bay, only slight streamers pushed in at the edges of my consciousness to remind me what a foolish mistake I'd made.

Alice had grown too strong. That must be it. She'd grown since I last saw her. Now that she was protecting that wayward god...

I was not going to let him escape me. I'd gone back and claimed that deplorable Seth and I'd take O'Toole as well. It would do me no good to work my way up to the stronger gods if I couldn't even take out the weaker ones.

I ripped open a package of alka-seltzers and dropped them into my cup of coffee. They hissed and fizzled and churned in the dark brew. The concoction tasted nasty as sin but I didn't have time to drink each alone.

If I wanted to try this again I'd best get back over there before they'd regained too much of their strength. Alice was stronger than I'd ever seen her, but I doubt she was as disciplined. I could likely take her out in a battle if we were both drained.

Alice didn't even bother to knock when she entered the apartment.

"Robert, you in here?"

I hoisted myself off the kitchen floor and walked out. "Yeah." And got hit square in the face with a bundle of clothes. They were, thankfully, clean.

"I'm ready whenever you are."

She was dressed again in her threadbare, but now clean, black magician's outfit complete with top hat. The bundle I now held were the clothes I'd lent her. I tossed them aside.

Eyeing her, she still looked like an out of work performer who'd raided the costume trunk before being fired.

"If you're so good at illusions," I asked, "Why don't you make yourself look better? Why do you even need a costume if you can make people see anything you want?"

She frowned, "I can only make people see what they think they see, what they want to see. And anyway," She grimaced, "I don't like the idea of relying on it completely. You always need something to fall back to when your power runs out."

I snorted. "Not a bad plan to live by." I pushed past her to the door, "Come one, we're going for a walk."

"Huh?" She kept with me step for step as I marched down the hall, "Where are we going?"

I shrugged. "Nowhere. I just need to get away from those four walls." I didn't bother to mention that a moving target would likely be harder for our hunter to find.

We headed a few blocks east, towards the ocean. This was a rougher part of town. There were businesses here though, working hard. I don't think I've ever seen it so busy. Everyone was out in the sunlight, labouring away.

Every face we saw was all smiles, every workman happy. It was almost getting to the level of being creepy.

I expected to be approached by at least one homeless person on the walk – a real one, not a god – but the only ones we saw were sitting back, smiling as broadly as anyone else.

Passing under the expressway, I headed south, hugging the east side of the Kennedy bridge.

There was a small stream here, a tributary that lead to the ocean.

It was no more than a few dozen feet wide, but it would serve as a barrier for anyone who didn't want to get up to their knees in water.

Both Ophois and Alice were used to the theatrics by now. I took a quick glance around to make sure that no one was watching, then took firm hold of each of them and stepped out onto the ocean.

It felt slightly spongy under me. Odd. I guess my battery must still be low from last night.

We crossed the narrow, fast running stream without a look back.

Rendall Island was across the way. The government had just decided to turn the place into a big park. They were still tearing down the old warehouses that stood here.

I had a spot in my heart for Rendall Island. Unlike the shore at Mott Haven, you could get right up to the water here. There was just enough green space between the development and the waves to stretch out and watch the swell.

And that's what I did. We were no more than a twenty minute's walk from the apartment and I was laying next to the waves.

Hunkering down, I laid there, soaking up the dim New York sun and listening to the sound of demolition equipment as it tore down the buildings behind me. It was about as peaceful as anything else I'd had in a long time.

Ophois was more than happy to flop down beside me, and Alice eventually followed suit on the other side.

This was a fairly quiet stretch of seaside – passersby speaking – so I'm not ashamed to admit that I was a little more than surprised when we had a visitor.

I didn't open my eyes as the footsteps approached. It was more than likely a foreman or safety inspector coming to tell me I couldn't be here while the tare down was going on.

The footsteps stopped beside me, on Alice's side. I heard a slight gasp from her.

The voice that came from our visitor didn't sound like that of a foreman. It was rough and gravelly, like a man who'd spent too many years smoking cheap cigarettes, then followed it up with expensive bourbon.

"Mind if I join you?"

I opened my eyes and glanced over. I wasn't sure what to expect, but an old washed out hippie wasn't high on the list.

The guy was about forty pounds overweight and dressed in a tie-dye shirt that looked like it really had been made in the days of free love. The only thing missing was a pair of rose coloured glasses to perch atop his brown-going-grey goatee.

I almost thought I remembered him from somewhere.

I wasn't exactly looking for company, but it was a little odd we'd encounter anyone out here.

"Yeah, sure," I waved a hand, "It's a free country."

He smirked and took a seat next to Alice. She almost looked like she was ready to scream.

Why did everything have to be so difficult?

I'd been almost ready to relaunch my assault on O'Toole in his apartment and he just gets up and damn well leaves!

Tracking him down the street hadn't been that hard, but I was in no shape for this. The icing on the cake was when he took off gliding across the water.

I had to walk all the way back to where I'd parked and take the toll bridge across to the island. All that to track down a creature that I would have had if he'd just sat still.

Alice was still going to be the problem here. O'Toole had no clue who I was but Alice would more than likely give me away.

Well, when fighting difficult odds a good offence always takes the wind out of their sails.

"Do you know who I am?" I kept my voice neutral as I wiggled for a more comfortable spot on the hard ground. Couldn't this creature have decided on a better place to take a nap?

Alice was still staring at me wide eyed, but O'Toole looked just about ready to fall asleep.

"No. Should I?"

I grinned slightly.

"My name is Maxwell McKinley." The man said. He was watching me a bit too closely for comfort. I was beginning to itch.

"Yeah?" I replied. "Have we met?"

He shrugged, "Not in person, but you've been a great thorn in my side for these last few days. You've managed to shred your way through no small amount of my handiwork."

"What?" I sat up now. My heart was starting to race and it took everything I had to try and keep it under control.

He smiled, softly, almost looking like an indulgent father. "I've retired a thousand gods and you're the first one to ever give me such trouble. I wasn't planning on this, but I suppose I should at least ask you why."

My throat locked up. From beside me I heard Ophois begin to growl. I didn't blame him.

I glanced over to the dog. He wasn't a dog anymore. Ophois was a large creature to start with, but he seemed to have doubled in size. The face that snarled at Maxwell now was in no way domesticated.

Anubis had said Ophois was a jackal. Now I believed him.

"What are you doing here... Maxwell." I rolled the name around on my tongue. It was odd to have a name for the soulless darkness that had haunted me.

I had the creature's attention now. And his dog's.

The dog would have to go. I'd never seen a mutt that big, or that evil looking. The fleabag glared at me like he wanted to make me his lunch. He must be a familiar of the god's or something.

I worked a smile to my lips and shrugged at O'Toole's question. "I'm here for you, of course. Think of me as the only true atheist in the world. I not only don't believe in the gods, I take steps to make myself right."

"Wait... what?" He was confused. Good.

My grin widened. "I've been alive for a long time, O'Toole, though not as long as some, mind you, and I've seen a lot. I know you damn gods and your silly ways. And more importantly I know what you are."

"What?" He repeated my word like he'd never heard it before.

"Parasites." I wasn't smiling anymore. "You must know by now that you live off the soul your worshippers grant you. It's what you are. How could you ever think you could live such charmed lives without giving anything back?"

"Wait... wait..." He held his hands out in front of him now, even his dog looked confused.

Was it possible that he didn't even know?

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my voice.

"You are brought into being by your believers, are you not?" He nodded. "And your physical forms are composed of soul?" He nodded again. "Then what do you think happens to the souls of your believers?"

He stopped dead, like a deer looking down the sight of a hunter's gun.

"They're... I'm... it's not like anything changes."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Really, Mr. O'Toole? It takes the belief of hundreds, thousands to create one of you. You are soul. Your believers give to you their very essence to make your form, fuel your mind and powers. There is only so much soul to go around. For every god that persists there is that much less soul for the populace to draw from."

He closed his eyes. "You're playing with me. If that were the case we would have figured it out centuries ago. The gods can't have any negative effect on the population. Just look at the great things that have been brought about by belief, peace, science, exploration."

I could see beads of sweat growing on his brow.

"Truly, Mr. O'Toole? Is that what the gods bring us? What of intolerance, holy wars, inquisition? The gods could be a positive force, but how many of them are? What was the last thing you did for your believers, O'Toole?" My voice hardened. It took all my will not to spit. "What have you done for anyone but yourself?"

He shifted to hold my gaze. "I've fought you, haven't I?"

This man frightened me.

The fact we were soul was well and good, but I'd never met a god who really put any thought into where it came from.

"I tracked you down, Maxwell," I continued, "And I've fought to warn the community of the danger you pose."

He waved me off with one hand like he was lecturing an errant child. "Warned the community? Really, that's the best you can do? A soul leach who warns his fellow leaches in an effort not to be retired? What have you done for your believers? I doubt you even know who they are anymore."

I gagged on the lump in my throat. "I... I haven't been back to Ireland in centuries."

He grinned triumphantly. "I could have guessed as much. None of you minor gods do the world a shred of good. You take the soul of man and never return anything. We might as well be praying to the void than have you above us. You lesser deities had your chance to change the world and you failed. I'm just returning your soul to the ether to be used by man."

"Wait." I narrowed my eyes, "You said us minor gods. What about the majors? Aren't you going to go after them?"

He shrugged, unconcerned. "Perhaps someday. All the great religions are great because they worship someone worth the adoration. Jesus, God, Allah, they must be worth the prayers to have constructed such castles around them."

It took everything I had not to break out laughing. For a man who spent his days hunting gods he certainly didn't seem to know much about us. I'd love to see his reaction when he met James.

Or God for that matter. God and Allah were one as far as I knew.

"I think you're in for a surprise when you make it up to the big leagues, Maxwell. The world isn't quite as much of a meritocracy as you think it."

He paused for a moment, watching me. "So be it." He frowned. "I'll deal with inefficiency in the upper ranks when I get to them. They aren't my concern at the moment."

I grinned. "That's right. I am."

I wasn't sure if I should be pleased or annoyed that O'Toole was speaking to me so bluntly. I'd never actually gotten the chance to talk to a god, even a minor one, face to face.

It was somewhat exhilarating to finally know my target.

The fact he didn't seem to want to pass on only dampened my spirits slightly.

"And that brings us back to the question of what we're going to do now." I yawned, projecting the image of complete peace while inside I was twisted up in a knot. "You seem to be a touch more powerful than those I've retired before."

"And I'm assuming that's not going to be enough for you to leave me alone?" His tone was flippant.

"No." I didn't bother to get worked up. "I've made it my duty to eliminate all the false idols and leave only those who deserve their worship. You don't qualify."

He shifted slightly. Perhaps getting ready to run? Or could he be preparing to attack?

The thought sent a shiver down my spine. I'd never been attacked by a god before. I wasn't sure I'd be able to survive. There was no way I could ever stand up to a god physically.

Maxwell's eyes followed me so closely that I was afraid he was going to launch an assault right then and there. Would I be powerful enough in my drained state to resist him? How much power did his illusions have in the daylight?

I glanced over to Alice in an effort to make sure she'd be ready if I needed her. I almost wished I hadn't.

She'd gone so pale as to almost be ashen. Eyes wide and jaw clenched bone crushingly tight, she looked one step away from a corpse.

Whoever this Maxwell was, he frightened her. Truly, deeply frightened her.

Beside me Ophois growled long and deep. I may be frightened but he had a score to settle. I had to tighten my grip on him to make sure he didn't attack.

"I guess that leaves us at an impasse, Maxwell," I was stalling for time now, hoping that I could come up with a way out of here before he sprung. "You don't seem to want to skip me over and I don't much care for the thought of... nothingness. What would releasing my soul do anyway? It's not like souls are a real thing. They're just a concept, an idea."

He laughed, a high and nervous sound.

Could O'Toole really be that uninformed? Did the gods know that little about themselves? It would be like humans not even knowing of the blood that coursed through their veins.

"Look at me, O'Toole," I swept a hand towards the city behind us, "What do you think I've done? In under a year I've retired hundreds of gods. I've freed their captive souls and made the world a better place. With every measure of soul I release I return a little humanity to the world at large. Do you truly believe the world is becoming a softer place because of the gods? What have you done while I've saved countless lives and prevented untold misery? I've made a difference in the world and no one knows my name! I'm not worshipped by a single man, woman, or child. You've had all that power given to you without any contract. You didn't have to fight for it, you didn't have to earn it. I've fought for every scrap of knowledge and strength I have. What have you done? What have you done, oh mighty god?"

The venom in his words stung so hard that I instinctively recoiled. He was beet red, hands balled into fists as he shouted. I was almost wondering if he was going to die of a heart attack.

I held my hands up, palms out. "I didn't do anything for this, Maxwell." I kept my voice calm as I fought down my own emotion. "I never asked to become a god. This wasn't my choice, my decision. I saved a single child from the embrace of the ocean. I did once what most lifeguard do a dozen times a year. I just had the damn luck to save the one child who would grow up to found a monastery."

I took a deep breath before continuing, forcing the words out as the man's complexion faded from devil red to ghost white. "Do you think I want this, Maxwell? Do you think I want to be held at the whims of others, the plaything of those who made me? I've seen more men than I can count grow old and die while I stay seemingly unchanged. I can't be part of the world any longer. I'm not of it, I'm on it. The world moves about me and I can do nothing but watch. That's all we gods do. Every time we influence events it inevitably ends up for the worse. Do you know why God has yet to bring down Judgement Day? I do, Maxwell. Do you? He knows it will be the end of the world forever and irrevocably. Could you make a decision like that?"

I looked up towards the sky. The other man had still yet to say a word. "Could you imagine a decision like that, Maxwell. The power? I've never met God, but I know what must go through his mind. I can't imagine him being much different from me, than you. He's just a mortal elevated to a position that has no precedent. We all just want to do the best for the world, but can you say how we should use the powers that no man has any right to command?"

He found his voice at last, words sputtering out. "But you're the gods. You're not just placed by chance. Even those of you that fail were chosen, not selected at random!"

I rolled my eyes. "Right. And it was destiny that caused that one sperm out of a million of your father's to fertilize your mother's egg. We're not set to some grand design, Maxwell. We're chosen by humans. Frail, fickle, foolish humans. We're here because those around us wanted us here, not always by our own choice. I'd be lying if I said some of the gods didn't strive their whole mortal lives for their

positions, but most of us didn't. We're here because people need something to look up to. We do a hell of a bad job of it, but that's why we're here."

"But I'm still helping the world by removing those among you who have failed," he said, more to himself now than me.

I shrugged. "Perhaps you are. You're asking the wrong man. Perhaps God could answer, I hear he's a lot smarter than me. That is if you can get him to talk to you."

His lips set to a rule edged line. "The gods don't talk to me."

I snorted. "And what am I, protoplasm? Did you ever bother to ask?"

He turned to me in a flash. "I begged on my knees for the gods to help. I prayed and searched. No one would ever respond!"

I didn't even bother to roll my eyes. "Despite what people may tell you, prayers don't do shit. They're a murmurer in the back of our heads. The chance of ever being noticed, likely so much listened to, is about the same as finding a particular grain of sand in the Gobi."

"But... the Bible... almost every religion in the world is based on prayer..."

"Much to our annoyance. Praying makes the mortal feel better. That's about it. They figured out long ago that we gods don't tend to do much. As I've heard it, that's why they began praying. At first it was an honest effort to communicate. These days I can tell you for a fact that the number of prayers to win the lotto outnumber those to save a life by about a thousand to one." I couldn't help but grin, "And don't even get me started about the number to get laid! Even I get those, though I haven't the slightest why."

He slouched back against the earth. For a moment all there was to hear was the crashing of the surf before us. Even Alice seemed to calm a measure.

"I may need to do some research before we speak again, Mr. O'Toole."

I perked up. "Is this like a 'get out of jail free' card?"

He managed to work up a smile. Maybe even a real one. "Think of it as more of a stay on your sentence."