

We Don't Just Fade Away

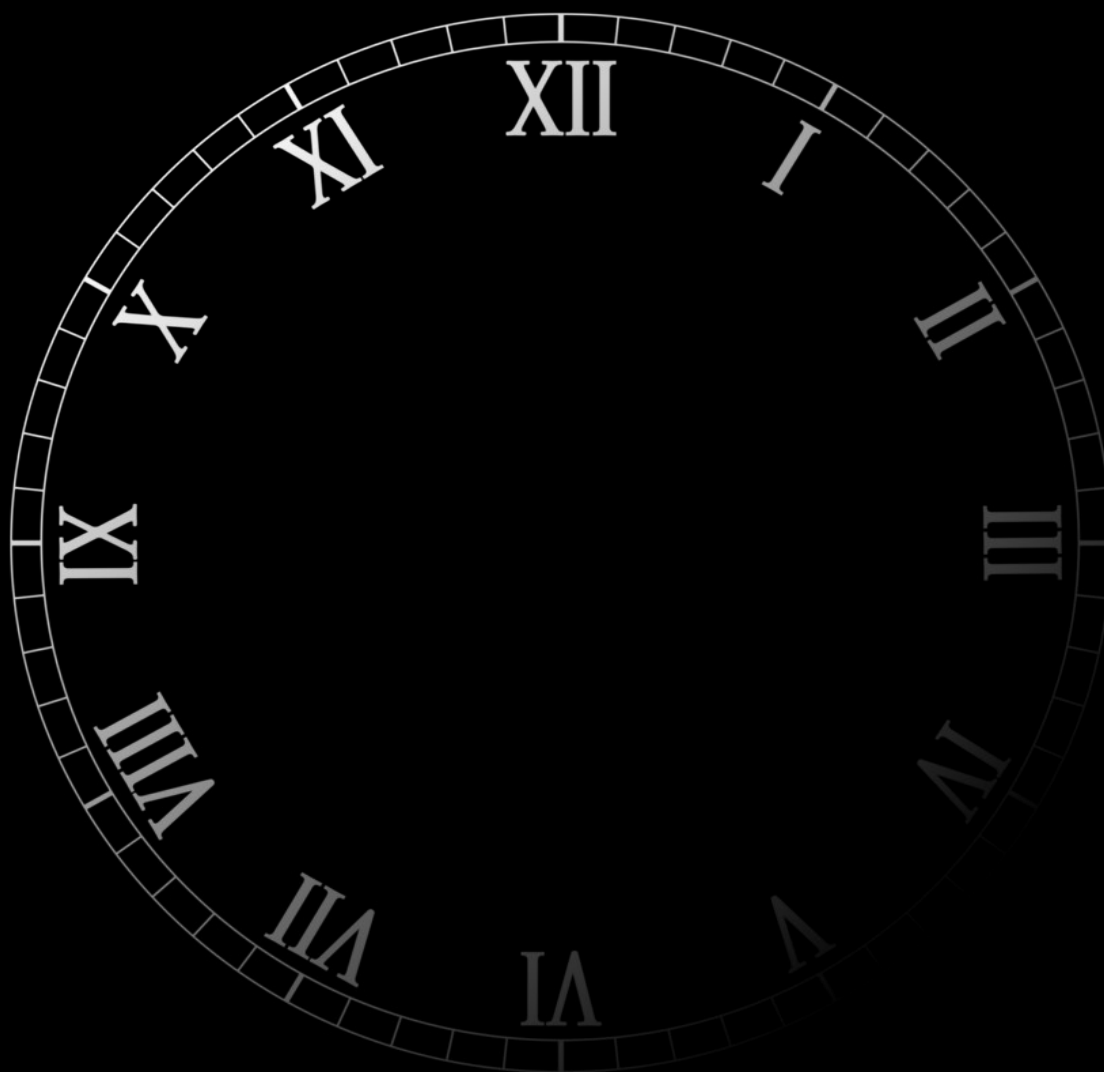


Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	12
Chapter 3.....	33
Chapter 4.....	49
Chapter 5.....	64
Chapter 6.....	79
Chapter 7.....	99
Chapter 8.....	116
Chapter 9.....	135
Chapter 10.....	152
Chapter 11.....	171
There Is No Twelfth Hour.....	191

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 11

It must have been another half hour or so before I poked my head from the kitchen. It wasn't squeaky clean, far from it, but it was likely better than anything this building had seen in a long time.

"Alice? An?" My voice echoed off the empty halls.

I wandered about for a few moments. The sound of the wind whistling outside led me to the back door that sat open to the alley.

I stepped up to the door and peered into the streetlight cut blackness of the night. There was a foot sticking out from behind a pile of garbage bags.

My heart just about beat clean free of my chest as I sprinted forward. It was An.

Both Lenpw and Ophois were sprawled at his side.

I fell to my knees beside them, turning to An first. I really wanted to start with Ophois, but I had no idea how to resuscitate a dog, likely so much as a god in dog form. At least I had some clue where to start on another human.

Slapping An's dark cheeks, I pulled him up into a sitting position. Without thinking, he drew a breath. He was a god, he didn't need to breathe, but it was a good sign none the less.

"An? An!" I smacked him harder. I'd just realized who was missing.

An's eyes sprang open as I whacked him, Lenpw yipped at his side as though I'd hit him as well.

"What?" A few words of what I assumed was Egyptian came from him. They sounded like mostly curses.

"What happened?" He tried to push me back as I spoke, but I wouldn't let go. "Where's Alice?"

It took the god a few moments for him to focus his eyes. "We were taking the garbage out... some guy in a Hawaiian shirt came around the corner and asked if I had a light... then there was darkness. Darkness and..." He trailed off and began shivering. He and Lenpw shuddered in perfect synchronization.

I moved on to Ophois. I couldn't get anything more out of An, he was down for the count. Not that I blamed him, I had a good idea what he'd just been through.

"Ophois?" I touched the pure white dog tentatively.

He shook like a leaf under my fingers.

"Come on, buddy," I whispered, "Wake up."

It felt like it took hours, but at long last the dog's ghostly blue eyes opened. Not that I could even tell you they were blue, his pupils were so large as to seem to block out the night sky.

He pressed himself against me as tight as his body would allow. I had the distinct feeling he would have hugged me if he could.

I glanced back at An. He was gone. Anubis sat in his place, arms wrapped around his chest.

"Somebody want to tell me what the hell is going on? Where's Alice?" I had a sinking feeling in my gut.

"He came..." Ophois could just barely force out the words, "He came for her. We were in... way."

"Was that him, Robert?" Anubis spoke slowly, weighing every word, "Was that the god killer?"

I glanced down to Ophois. He nodded.

"Yep." I slumped to the ground next to Ophois. "That was him. Maxwell. He took Alice?"

No one said a thing.

"I'm getting her back." My words seemed to fill the dark void around us.

"Why?" Anubis fixed me with his cold, inhuman eyes. "She's not a god, not even an important mortal."

I stared right back at him. "Because she's the only one who can protect us from Maxwell... and I don't want to lose her."

He snorted, an odd sound through his jackal nose. "You're in love? With that? Bugger, Robert, that would be paedophilia in most countries."

"She's not what she seems." Had Anubis not figured it out? "She's soulless, she doesn't age."

He shrugged. "Fine by me, I don't judge." He raised his lips slightly in something that I hoped was a smile. "But we're going to need more firepower to get in there. Somehow I doubt any of the other gods are going to give you a hand."

"What about you?" I narrowed my eyes, "Are you coming?"

He didn't say anything, but rather looked past me to where Ophois lay.

Ophois' rough voice came again from beside me, "I... coming."

"Than I guess that's that." Anubis' quiet words slid in to take over. "I can't stop Ophois, and he's not going anywhere without me." He eyed me critically, "But that still leaves the problem of your... punniness."

"Hey!"

He shrugged, "It's true. You're not much of one in a fight."

From behind me I heard Ophois chuckle.

I had to fight back my temper to keep my voice level when I spoke, "Yeah? Well who's the one who was able to beat back that Maxwell when he attacked?" I paused, "Wait... you're still in one piece. Didn't he try to destroy you? He had more than enough time."

A pained expression crossed his inhuman features. "I don't know... I don't think so... he took us down, I'll admit that it was... not something I want to experience again." He wrapped his hands tighter around his chest, "But I don't think he really tried to end us... only hold us."

I glanced back to Ophois. "Not... same."

And this was the first time Maxwell had ever showed any interest in Alice.

"Fine," I took a deep breath to steady myself, "We're going. Now."

"No." Anubis was fast, faster than anything I'd ever seen as he sprung to his feet and pushed me back against Ophois. "We need to find a way to protect you, and Ophois."

"What, you're going to find me some illusion-proof armour? I don't think they sell that at the local Seven-Eleven."

"No." He glanced back to Ophois who still stood behind me, leaning on my leg. They batted back and forth a few words in their own private language. When Anubis looked at me again his eyes were hard. "Do not fight this, Robert. You are being given a greater privilege than any mortal or god in over a millennium."

"Wait... what?"

I didn't get another word out before he pulled back from me. At the same time I could feel Ophois pressing tighter against the back of my legs. In less than a heartbeat the force of him against me became all but unbearable.

What was going on? I trusted them. Well, okay, perhaps I didn't trust Anubis all that much, but I knew Ophois, I trusted him.

Time slowed to a stop around us, I could still feel Ophois pressing into me.

And then we changed.

As if my body had become clay, I felt Ophois continue to press into me, break down the barriers between us.

I tried to scream, but there was no air in my lungs.

With a blinding flash of light, I could suddenly see from two sets of eyes, feel from both our bodies, but most importantly, he was with me in my own mind.

Or perhaps I was in his.

I didn't even have the fraction of a second it took to panic. Ophois' will clamped around mine like the jaws of some huge predator. I couldn't move.

Like he'd done this a million times before, he led our combined body in a metamorphoses that would have left me gagging if I could have so much as winced.

The mass of his body flowed into mine.

Looking at An and Lenpw's transformation into Anubis, you might think at first glance that the only thing that changed was his head. That wasn't the case. The whole mass of his companion, Lenpw, had to go somewhere. It flowed into him, buttressing and strengthening every inch of his body.

And that's what Ophois did to me.

He violated every dark corner of my being. He pressed and stretched me in ways that I could never have dreamed of before, likely so much as attempted.

Another flash behind my eyes and the world dropped away.

There was nothing but blackness all about me. Then, with a snap, two forms, joined together, leapt to life.

They weren't far away, no more than a few feet, but their images were distorted and wavering like I was viewing them through the thick heat and smoke of a fire.

Wep and Ophois.

"What?" I could hardly get the word out.

"Hey, Rob." It was Wep who spoke. His voice was old and cracked, but not nearly as rough as Ophois'. "It's been a while, hasn't it, old buddy." Ophois stood my his side, silent. Wep never removed his hand from the dog's back.

"You're alive?"

He shrugged. "In a manner of speaking." A shiver passed through him, "I fled as much as I was able into good old Ophois here when I was attacked. The killer didn't seem to much care for him. It all happened so fast that I barely got a chance to think, so much as act. Ophois and I were one to begin with, so even just the slightest shard of my personalty was enough to live on in him." He lifted a hand to gesture at his chest, "And this is what I got. There is no me anymore, just Ophois."

"But what's happening?" I looked out at the darkness around us, like we were the only ones in the world. It reminded me a little too much of the darkness that Maxwell liked to project.

"That?" He laughed, "Ophois here wants to get to know you really well."

For the first time since appearing in this vision, Ophois spoke. He had the same voice as Wep, not the slightest shade of the pained roughness that had plagued him in reality.

"We are not strong enough alone to take on the man named Maxwell. We will have to become as Anubis is. We will become Wepawet..." He paused, smiling. I wasn't sure how I could tell he was smiling... I just could. "Though it shall not be Wepawet that we become. We shall have to decide upon our name." He laughed, "But that can wait until there is time."

They stepped towards me. The smokey wavering that afflicted their forms died away with each step. I tried to back away but found I couldn't move. It was an effort to even hold the thought of escape in my mind.

With each step they came closer they pressed deeper into my thoughts.

Wep extended his hand to me and I couldn't stop myself from taking it.

The flash that came behind my eyes this time was brighter and more vivid than anything I could ever remember feeling. No... no, it was just like every other time I'd merged.

Wait... what?

My eyes sprung open to release the floodgates of the world around me.

Everything was wrong. The colours were off. This was not the way it was meant to be!

"So, you have returned." Anubis' voice boomed from my left. He spoke both deeper and higher than anything I'd ever heard before. Like he was singing with himself in three part harmony.

"I am..." I paused for a moment, feeling a squirming in the back of my mind, as if something was trying to escape, "We are here?"

"We?" The other god spoke the word like a curse.

It was only the two of us standing in the dark alley behind the kitchen.

I reached up to brush my forehead and felt fur.

Oh dear Lord.

Turning from Anubis, I stumbled forward a few steps until I found a puddle, half dried out in the crook of the building.

I didn't even bother to lean over to peer into it. My balance was too far off. Instead I willed the water to me, to raise its self from the ground and come to me in a perfect, faultless mirror.

It didn't want to come.

I had to push far harder than I had any right to. The simple, tepid puddle fought me until I gritted my teeth. My sharp, inhuman teeth.

When at last I had the liquid mirror before me I almost wished I hadn't bothered.

I was no longer me.

I didn't even have the words to scream.

I looked like Anubis, somewhat. It was still my body, but the white head of Ophois had fused upon my shoulders.

Not bad, I always was a bit of a looker.

Gah, no, no, no! I pushed the alien thought back. This was not me.

I tried to open my mouth to scream, but my jaw wasn't right. I could speak before when I hadn't known about it... but not now.

Throughout my body I could feel Ophois' essence pressing in, smothering me.

I wanted out.

All about me I could feel my own essence pushing back against Ophois, pressing him out like a tumour.

Part of my mind was screaming. No, no! We need this! We need the power to get Alice back!

If this is what it took to save her, I wanted to die in the attempt.

I pushed harder. Pain sprung up throughout my body like I was tearing off my very skin.

"Robert!" I felt Anubis' hand on my shoulder, slowly lowering me to the ground before I fell.
"Don't fight it."

I didn't bother to respond. I was only too happy when I blacked out.

The first thing I did upon waking was to feel my face. It was mine again.

The memories were still there... I knew Ophois at a deeper level than was possible. I could almost but not quite pull forth images of pyramids and pharaohs.

"Are you alright, Robert?"

"Yeah, I'll make it."

It took me a moment to realize who was speaking. It was Ophois.

I turned to him. He sat before me, head down and tail limp. When he spoke it was smooth and clear, and not English.

"I'm sorry, my friend." A whimper escaped his black lips, "I should never have forced such a thing upon you. It has been a very, very long time since I had my first merging. I'd forgotten just how terrifying such a thought can be." He shivered. Somehow I knew he was remembering it through my eyes... or were they his? "You were right to reject me."

I forced my way slowly to my feet. When I set my hand upon his head I could feel something. There was still a scrap of me woven into the fabric of the other god.

"I... thanks for trying."

I glanced off into the shadows. Anubis sat atop a dumpster. He was still in his combined form. "I never want to see that again." His voice was low, "The merge is supposed to be beautiful, an act of creation. What you two did was... unnatural." He shuddered.

"Then we're all in agreement." I forced myself to straighten. "How long was I out?"

Anubis shrugged. "The whole attempt took no more than five minutes."

"Fine." I tugged at my jacket. "Let's get going. With any luck we'll be able to track them down and get this over with before the sun comes up."

"Nice plan." Anubis scraped something from the bottom of his shoe and tossed it across the alley with a splat. "But where'd they go? We were out of commission when he made off with the girl."

"I was hoping you knew." I glanced over to Ophois. "You're a dog. Track them."

"What? Me?" The surprise was clear in his voice.

I reached down to grab his mussel. From behind me I heard Anubis growl.

"You can't tell me you've had that form for over two thousand years and you've never used your nose!"

"I've..."

"You've done it before," I pushed through the dim memories in the back of my mind that weren't my own. "You can't lie to me anymore. Either you do this or I'll go alone."

I let go of his face. He stood there for a moment, watching me, then lowered his nose to the ground.

Ophois didn't really have any experience tracking. He'd lived as a human, I knew that much, the canine form was from his worship, not his real life.

We made our way down the alley and out onto the street. We nearly lost the trail then and there. The look on Ophois' face almost pulled my heart out.

He sorted through the hundreds – no, thousands – of people who had walked this way in the last twenty-four hours to find the single trail we were looking for.

I wasn't sure how far we were going to get. This was a last ditch effort. I had no idea where Maxwell might have taken her.

It was a flicker of light that took up the slack. At first I thought I was seeing things – I suppose I was.

Every so often the gold of an unnatural glitter would run across my vision. It wasn't something I should be able to see.

It wasn't cast by Maxwell, that much I could tell... but neither was it from Alice.

It was from a god... I knew that. The power was of someone I'd never met... It was almost as if there was no power to it at all, like a perfect neutral signature.

And whoever was casting it wiggled it before my eyes alone.

Ophois got us as far as a parking spot on the street, my trail took us from there.

"Where are we going?" Anubis was still in his full form behind me. "I haven't had to walk like this in decades. Don't you New Yorkers believe in driving?"

As if our trailblazer could hear us, the thread led down into the next subway station. Conveniently, a car waited for us.

We weren't alone in it. The everyday mortals of New York were clustered about us. Not a single one of them batted an eye at Anubis' form.

"Are you hiding yourself from them?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "Not really." A laugh escaped his lips as he pointed to the other end of the car, "I don't need to." Sitting across from us was a gang of perfectly mortal teenagers. They were so dolled up with hair-dye and makeup that they looked more inhuman than the jackal-headed god of Egyptian myth.

Well, I guess 'normal' was how you looked at it. Perhaps that was why we'd all come to this city in the first place.

I was starting to think that whoever was laying down my little golden trail was playing with me. It picked up to lead us off the train in the Financial District.

If you thought Mott Haven was dead at this time of night, the money capital of the world was stiller than a crypt on the winter solstice.

Now the trail led almost perfectly south. Well, as perfectly as anything went in this maze of concrete and steel.

We were in Battery Park.

Across the grass we trudged. The dew that had collected on the lawn rubbed off onto the cuffs of my pants. I didn't even bother to brush it away.

The trail ended on the concrete railing that overlooked the sea. In the distance I could see Ellis Island.

"Damn it." I could hear Anubis behind me. "Now we'll have to back track and get into Jersey." Ophois laughed. "What's so damn funny?" He muttered, turning to the dog.

I reached out to grab the scruff of Ophois' neck with one hand and Anubis' with the other. Then I dragged them over the edge of the barrier and to the waves below.

I didn't care about people seeing us this time, nor did I need to show off. We stood atop the waves as if they were a perfectly smooth table.

"You never told me you could do that." Anubis sounded like he was actually impressed.

I didn't bother responding. Without thinking, I willed us forward. The three of us began to move, slowly at first but picking up speed until we shot across the waves.

Ellis Island grew in the distance.

"I'm coming for you, Maxwell."

My words were whipped away in the wind.

The trip took only moments.

The waves grew under our feet at my command, lifting us up level to the concrete reinforcements that shored the island. We stepped from them and I let go of the two gods.

There wasn't a single light in any of the buildings that spread out before us.

A flag rustled behind us in the slight breeze. It wasn't the standard of my homeland.

I stepped forward, followed in lockstep by Ophois and Anubis.

I glanced to Ophois, wordlessly questioning if he could pick up a scent. He shook his head.

The trail of light was gone now. Replacing it were heavy, concealing shadows. Only a small number of them were natural.

"Maxwell! Maxwell, where are you?" I shouted at the top of my lungs. There was no answer other than my own echo. It sounded like it was mocking me.

"Have it your way." I gritted my teeth and started walking towards the nearest building. The great hall.

The door was locked, of course, but for once that proved no obstacle. Anubis took one look at it and ripped it free from the door with a single pull.

Pale moonlight slanted through the windows in the top of the great hall.

High vaulted brick arches above us, the room was huge. I stepped out into the middle of the glazed red brick floor. There were displays and signs posted here and there. This entire island had been made into a museum years ago.

Every step I took echoed back to me. It felt like I was walking towards the pearly gates.

"Hello?" My voice was weak and muffled as I called out. No one answered.

"They're not here." Anubis muttered from behind me.

"We need to search. They could be hiding." I kept walking.

He huffed and split off to my right. Ophois to my left.

The place wasn't big enough that I was concerned about us being picked off horror movie style. I could hear each and every step they took.

Ellis Island. I don't think I've ever been here.

I came across the pond long after the biggest wave of immigrants. I came straight to New York, but I'd been processed in a smaller station on the mainland.

I was looking for Alice, but I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering over the signs and displays.

Every mortal looked at the items on display and saw them as artifacts of a time long last. I could remember when most of this stuff had been in style. I'd even worn some of the types of jackets they had in the glass boxes on the end.

Much of what they had to show were the keepsakes that people had brought over with them, memories of the old world.

My fingers brushed the cold glass of the display case as I gazed within. There was a doll in there. I could... I could remember girls playing with dolls just like that when...

I felt old. Really, really old.

Beside the doll sat a bible. The sign said it was from the late nineteenth century. I doubt there were many who could read the Gaelic that was scribbled on the lower corner of the cover, but it read 'God, just please let my daughter make the journey and I'll worship you forever'.

I didn't want to think back to the doll.

I pushed away from the display cases and walked on. Other than the three of us, the building was empty. Only the ghosts of those who had passed through these halls remained.

They were here. I'd seen them come.

Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

I held Alice's sleeping form closer to my chest. I'd come all the way out here hoping to escape any pursuit. It seems I keep underestimating that god.

If he'd tracked me this far there was no way I'd be able to escape him now.

I sat back down and waited.

I would not let them kill me.

I had done nothing wrong. I've only made the world a better place.

We left the Great Hall and moved west to the connecting bar that brought the north and south parts of the island together.

"Anubis," I turned to the god, "When we find them, I need you to stay back. This is my fight."

He met me with an icy glare. "No. Look what that monster did to Wepawet. This is my fight too."

"You don't understand," I stretched for words, "We can't fight him. His illusions are too strong. Alice was the only one who was able to fend him off, and she couldn't do it alone. If Maxwell gets the drop on us he'll have us under his thumb before we even know it. That's how illusions work, he takes you from the real world and runs you like a rat in a maze without you even knowing."

He stopped dead. "How do we know we're not in an illusion right now?"

I shrugged. "We don't. I don't feel like I'm in an illusion, so we'll just have to hope for the best."

There was an above ground hallway that connected the buildings. We ignored it in favour of walking out under the moon. That was fine for me. It put us closer to the sea.

I saw something on the ground before us. It was a top hat like a magician might wear. It was Alice's.

I reached down for it, but it flipped over before I could touch it.

"Get back!" I pulled away.

Unlike last time, there was no light coming forth. Instead darkness vomited out of the hat like a geyser. It sprayed up into the air and never came down.

It was congealing into something.

I'd seen more things in my long time than I could ever recall, but I'd never seen something like this.

It was a titan made of shadow.

A good twenty feet tall, it towered over us like we were nothing more than children.

"It's an illusion, it has to be!" I called. The fact I knew it wasn't real didn't do much to make me feel better as it began marching towards us.

It's just an illusion, it can't hurt us. It's just an illusion, it can't hurt us...

I thought it over and over as I held my ground. I wouldn't give in. I wouldn't.

It was almost on top of us when Anubis leapt.

"No!" My cry was drowned out by the god's snarl. He was airborne and lunging at the creature before I even had time to blink.

I reached down and grabbed hold of Ophois before he could follow.

The illusion melted away from me as I watched. Now there was only Anubis, snapping at the empty night.

The battle was short lived. I don't know what it was that Anubis thought he saw, thought he felt, but he was losing.

In only seconds the god had been reduced to whimpering on the wet grass. It seemed that Maxwell didn't care nearly so much about me. The colossus was gone.

"Anubis?" I was on my knees at the god's side. He was still here, but his pulse raced so quickly that I would have feared a heart attack if he were mortal.

Ophois reached out a paw to set on the god's chest. "He'll live. He's too powerful for the human's magic."

"What?"

The dog looked up to me, "He has too many believers. They won't let him die. Even if he should fade away they'll bring him back. You and I don't have that luxury."

I felt horrible leaving Anubis there, laying exposed on the wet grass, but there was nothing else we could do.

Now it was just the two of us.

We made it to the south side of the island. Unlike the north side that had the processing centre, this half had the dormitories that the immigrants had been housed in during their wait.

The north had consisted of a single huge building, the south was a collection of smaller structures.

I sprinted into the maze like patchwork of buildings and grass, hoping to lose myself from Maxwell within their twists and turns. Ophois was at my heels, matching me step for step.

The shadows were thick here, but they moved only with the moon, natural and concealing.

I turned to Ophois, "Can you track them now? They have to be around here somewhere. Maxwell can't throw an illusion to someone he can't find."

The dog lowered his nose to the ground and took a tentative sniff. Walking a quick circle, he headed off in a direction, seemingly at random. He crisscrossed back and forth over our small patch of ground, each time expanding his search slightly.

Stopping mid stride, his tail stiffened. A moment later his lips rose to expose gleaming white teeth to the night.

He didn't have to say a word.

Ophois stalked forward, low to the ground and ready to spring. He didn't move like a dog, his motions were more bestial, more aggressive than any domesticated creature.

Dipping into a shadow, I lost sight of him for a moment. When he reemerged into the moonlight he'd changed.

Ophois had been a large dog to begin with, now he had all but doubled in size. His fur was longer, teeth sharper.

He didn't look like a jackal. He looked like an avenging god.

He led us to a nearby door. I laid a hand on his back before he could batter it in.

The feeling of the huge canine jumping under my fingers left us both startled. It almost felt like he'd forgotten I was here.

I set my ear to the door in hopes of hearing motion on the other side. Nothing.

Slowly, I tried the latch. It was unlocked.

Looking closer, I could see the marks of the door having been forced. And they were fresh.

The room within was dark and silent. Not even the whisper of the wind penetrated.

We stepped in and I closed the door behind us. The darkness was complete.

If not for the hand I kept on Ophois' back I would have been immediately lost.

The other god moved like it was a sunlit day. He never even slowed down as he weaved between display cases and velvet ropes.

We began ascending a staircase in the back of the building. There was a window on the landing, it let in a faint glimmer of moonlight.

A form began to emerge from that light.

That of a man in a bright, playful Hawaiian tee-shirt.

"Go away, O'Toole." His voice was strong, but I could see the fear in his eyes. "I don't want you anymore."

"Give me back Alice." It took everything I had not to yell.

Beside me I could feel a growl begin to grow in Ophois' deep chest.

"She's not yours, O'Toole. She's my daughter. She belongs with me."

"She belongs wherever she wants to be, Maxwell. She's not your plaything." I narrowed my eyes, "You did it. You're the one who robbed her of her soul."

His face turned bright red. The image before us was an illusion, but he couldn't seem to control it.

"How dare you accuse me!" His hands shot up, pouring out streamers of darkness.

I turned, looking about me to try and find the real Maxwell. He had to be here, somewhere in the darkness.

There!

He was on the stairs above us, hidden in the shadows. I could only just make out the glint of his eyes.

And that was all I needed.

The engulfing streams of his illusion poured towards us like a dark ocean, but I had powers of my own to combat him.

I was a god of water.

Lifting my hand, I made a grasping motion, pulling my fist towards me, commanding my will be done.

The human body was eighty percent water.

He was eighty percent under my control.

He jerked forward a step as I yanked on his very blood. The look of fear on his face was greater than that I had seen on any god, even the ones he'd killed.

"No!" The word only just escaped his lips.

An instant later the dark folds of his illusion surrounded me, cutting us off.

I knew he was out there, I could feel him, but I couldn't see him.

A moment later the tides wafted away into nothing. Maxwell was gone.

I looked down to Ophois. The god was still by my side. He looked a little shaken, but still alright.

"Let's go." We pressed on up the stairs.

I followed Ophois again as we climbed. The tracking was faster now. There was a fresh trail.

Maxwell couldn't escape us.

Our steps were slow and plodding. We were both tiered, and the thought of another ambush left us both jumping at the slightest noises.

But nothing more reached for us from the darkness.

The path was long and winding, but it in the end led us to the far edge of the complex, to a small employee break room. The only place we'd seen since stepping on to the island that had light.

We stood outside the door. Neither of us so much as blinked an eye.

From within I could hear heavy breathing.

Well, this was it.

I cradled Alice's head in my lap. She hadn't changed one bit since I'd lost her. She was still my little girl. A hundred years had passed and she was still my little girl.

Should I have let her die?

It would have stopped this all from beginning so long ago.

The gods were here, I knew they were. I couldn't hear them but I knew they stalked me like wolves.

I just wanted to make the world a better place.

My heart was still aching from whatever it was O'Toole had done to me. It felt like he'd tried to rip the very soul from my bones.

I heard a growl from the other side of the door.

"Ophois!" I smacked him on the side of the head to force him quiet.

I nearly pulled back when he barred his teeth at me.

"This isn't your hunt alone, Robert. He's mine as much as he is yours. And I plan to take my share."

"Come in, O'Toole. And bring your beast with you." The voice that came from the other side of the door was weak and frail. There was no fight left to him.

I took a deep breath and pushed the door open, expecting a dozen psychedelic illusions to spring at me.

There was nothing but the two of them sitting at a cheap plywood table.

Alice was slumped forward, asleep.

"What did you do to her?" My throat were raw.

He glanced over to her softly snoring form, shrugging.

"Sent her the image of a peaceful dream and she made it real." He looked up to me, eyes hard. "She's my daughter. I'm protecting her from things like you."

"Like me?" I took a step closer, Ophois at my side. The god had quieted down now, but his lips were still pulled to reveal a fearsome set of fangs.

The man's face was hard.

"You're the ones who made this happen! You did this to her, your kind! What was I supposed to do, let her die?"

"Wait... what?"

He continued on, like he'd practised the words a thousand times, waiting for the perfect moment to let them loose.

"She was sick, she was dying. My only daughter. I prayed to you damn gods for days and you wouldn't do a thing! What good are gods who won't even do what they were created for, that won't help man?"

"No medicine could do a thing for her. She was dying, wasting away in my arms and all I could do was watch." He reached out a hand to gently stroke her hair. "And then I did the only thing I could as a father. I set out to save her myself."

"You what?" I stepped forward, lowering myself in a seat. I hadn't forgotten what I was here for, but I needed to get him away from Alice.

"I saved her." His voice dripped with venom. "Where you gods wouldn't so much as lift a finger, I saved her." He glanced down to her slumbering form. "But there was a cost. I'm no god. I wasn't even a magician back then. The power to heal her had to come from somewhere. I saved her body, but burnt away her soul in the process."

I saw a single tear wind its way down his face.

"You? But mortals can't control the power of a soul, they can't focus it."

"You got it half right, god. I couldn't focus it. For one of you it would have been little more than a parlour trick to save her. But for me it took her whole soul. Her whole soul."

For a moment I thought he was going to break down right then and there.

He glanced up at Ophois and I, realizing where he was. It took him a moment to compose himself.

I looked down at my companion. He was seated on the floor beside me, calm, but with a growl still boiling in the back of his throat.

"I saved her, you bastards," Maxwell continued. His voice was level now, but his face still stained. "But just look at the cost!" He stroked back her hair again.

"But what does this have to do with all the minor gods?"

He smiled grimly.

"You're useless, the lot of you. The world is a better place without you draining us. It took me decades to figure out how to do it, but a god only exists because he chooses to."

"Wait... your illusions only--"

"All I need to do is convince them that they could die." His eyes lit up as he spoke, "Provide them a way out. Once a god chooses to die they cease to exist." He scowled, "At least those of you with too few believers to bring you back it seems."

Ophois growled from beside me.

"And once you're gone," he continued, "The soul that made you is released back to the world. The few of you gods who do something are worth the resources. Those of you who don't," He shrugged, "Are just dead weight. I release your essence back into the world to be shared among us mortals."

"But you," I stared at him, "If you're Alice's father, that would make you even older. You have to be almost a hundred and fifty years old."

He snorted. "Please, you don't think I've spent so much time around you damn gods without picking up a few tricks. I may not be as truly immortal as you are, but I stopped my own clock long

ago." He smiled. For just a moment I saw a flash of an old, old man behind a near infinite number of illusionary shrouds. "You're only as old as you feel. Right?"

"But..."

"And that brings us back to why you're here, doesn't it? My clock has finally caught up with me."

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not here in the name of the other gods. I'm here because I choose to be. Give me Alice."

He looked down the form beside him. "No. She's mine. You can't ask me to give up my daughter. Not again."

"You kidnapped her! Wake her up right now and ask her if she wants to go with you. Let her decide!"

"She's too young," he growled.

"She's over a hundred years old. She's not your little girl anymore."

"I won't lose her again." He put an arm over her shoulders. "I made a mistake when I cured her, then I made another to drive her from me. I won't lose her again."

"She won't even remember you in a few days if there's no god to replenish her soul." I tried to soften my voice. "She needs more in her life than you. She needs a god. She needs a soul."

"And what kind of life is that?" The venom was gone from his voice. Now he just sounded... tired. "You know the curse that immortality is. She'll never grow old, never truly live a life. How is an eternity tied to one of your kind any better than walking the mists?"

"What... what if she could have a soul again?" I couldn't believe I was saying this.

Ophois pressed up against my leg. He didn't say a word, but I could swear he knew what I was thinking.

"No one can return her soul." Maxwell's voice was cracked, "It was burnt off decades ago to save her life. It's gone."

"But what about a replacement? Her soul is gone, but what about another one? Could you reverse the procedure and return a soul to her body?"

He nearly fell from his chair. "I don't have the focus. Too much would be lost. It would take hundreds of souls to funnel enough into her body. No one can do that." He paused, "And no one would be willing to pay the cost. We'd just end up with another empty shell."

I took a deep breath. "What about me?"

Ophois whined from the floor. I set one of my hands on his head to try and soothe him.

"You?" Maxwell narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

I shrugged and forced a cocky grin to my face, "You said it yourself, what have I done with my godhood? I've walked this world for more years than I'd care to count and the first truly selfless act I've preformed since being made was this afternoon. It's not like I've got a heck of a lot to look forward to."

"But--"

"Can you do it?" I cut him off. I needed to get this done before I lost my nerve.

"Yes... I think I can. I only did the procedure once, and it was so long ago..."

"Fine." I stood up. "Do what you need to in order to get ready. I'll be back."

I turned and left the room.

"Are you sure about this, Robert?" Ophois' voice was low beside me as I stepped out into the night.

I needed to get out of that little room. It was too tight, too suffocating.

I shrugged. "Not really. But, hey," The smile on my face felt like it was made of glass, "It's not like I had any other plans for the rest of eternity. I must have been made to do something, and it's not every day that I get an opportunity like this."

"But..." A high pitched squeak came from the canine, "You could... you could devote your life to medicine, you could work to heal the wounded. You could save a million lives rather than just this one."

I tried to laugh, but it came out more of a snort. "You've never seen me with a scalpel. I'd be more likely to lop something off than heal them. Leave that to the gods like James. They made their myths by healing people. I didn't."

"But why Alice?"

"Why not? Maxwell wants to make the world a better place? Let's let him start with his own home. Anubis knows why the gods are being hunted. This will give the great and high deities a few years to try and turn themselves around before Maxwell gets back on the warpath. Perhaps by then they can start doing what they were created for, rather than staring at their own navels."

"Anubis?" The word came out as a strangled cough, "What about me?"

"That," I turned to him and knelt down on one knee to bring myself to his level, "Is what I must ask of you. I need you, Ophois my friend." I took a deep breath, "Maxwell doesn't know you're a god. I need you to stay with Alice, watch over her. There's no reason either of them should work against us once Alice has been restored, but I need you to be her protector."

"I'm no one's lap dog." The disdain in his voice was clear.

"That's for sure." I scratched him behind one ear. "It'll only be for a few decades, only until she dies of old age. You, one who's lived for millennia, you can do that."

"You're asking a lot of me, Robert. To safe guard those who destroyed my aspect... killed Wep..."

"And that's why I need you." I settled the rest of the way to the ground and looked up at the heavens. "Any other god might wander off after a few years. You won't. I need you, Ophois."

He was silent for a long time.

No matter how hard I stared up at the sky I couldn't make out a single star. The smog of the city was too powerful for the light to shine through.

"I'll do it." His words came at last, slow and heavy.

"Thank you, old friend." The smile on my face finally settled into something real. It wasn't exactly an easy grin, but it was real none the less.

There was one last thing I needed to do before I headed back in. My heart was pumping so hard that it was difficult to keep my hands from shaking as I rooted through my pockets for change.

Just my luck that there would be payphones out here in the public area and I'd be out of change.

I did in the end find the money to plug the phone. I was only just able to recall the number I'd called yesterday. God, was it only yesterday? It felt like the last few days had taken weeks.

"East Harlem police station. How may I direct your call? If this is an emergency please hang up and dial nine-one-one." It sounded like the same voice I'd heard last time. I swear they were reading from a script.

"Is John Murry in?" My voice was rough. My tongue felt like sandpaper.

"One moment, I'll transfer you."

There was a series of clicks, then a phone began ringing on the other end. It must have rung ten times before someone picked it up.

"What is it?" Yep, it was Murry. And he sounded pissed. "This had better be damn well important."

"Hey, Officer." I couldn't help the smile that slipped to my lips. "Long time no talk. It's me, Robert."

"O'Toole?" I heard the clattering of him clearing his desk and the pained creak as he collapsed into a chair. "What's wrong? Are you in danger?"

I'd swear to god I heard concern in his voice.

"Nah, Murry," I fought to keep my voice light, "Just calling to tell you that I got this case in the bag. I tracked down the problem and I'll be resolved soon."

"What?" His voice rose a couple of octaves as well as about twenty decibels. "Tell me where you are right now. I'll have a squad at your position in ten minutes. The rest of the force may not believe me, but you're dealing with a mass murderer."

I laughed. Deep and real.

"You're right, Murry. In a way I suppose. But don't worry. It was all in good faith. No one passed on who, at some level, didn't want to. It stops here. I just thought I should let you know."

"O'Toole, wait! You can't--"

"Murry." My voice was deep and powerful. He shut up. "This isn't something you need to worry about anymore. I just need you to promise me one thing."

"O'Toole, you know I can't..."

"Keep the records on this case, John. That's all I ask of you. Tell whoever replaces you when you retire. I have this problem under control, but it could come back in twenty years, or forty. Just tell me you'll keep the notes."

"O'Toole..." His voice was only just above whining now, "Please, just tell me what's going on." He paused for breath, "Please. Some of those people were my friends."

I glanced down at Ophois. He looked back at me and shrugged.

With a sigh, I stared up at the sky above as I spoke, "John, you know where East sixty-fifth is?"

He paused for a moment, "Yeah, sure."

"Go there. Just off the park there's a Jewish Temple. Next to it is an old brownstone. There's someone there you need to meet." I paused for a moment, "Are you a christen, John?"

He didn't answer for a long time. "Not really... well, maybe, I guess. What does that have to do with anything?"

I laughed. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Go there someday, John. But not for a long time. Maybe try it after you retire. Tell them I sent you. They might even let you in. Maybe."

I swear that Ophois was laughing.

"O'Toole, what does--"

Click.

I hung up on him and walked away.

Maxwell jumped when we stepped back into the room. He looked older now, his illusions failing as he rushed about, trying to get everything just right.

"The dog can wait outside." He didn't look up from his preparations.

"Ophois stays." My voice brooked no argument. "He's going with the two of you after I'm gone."

"What?" He met my eyes. "No. You can send the mutt to the SPCA."

"Don't call him a mutt. He's my best friend." I sat down across the table from Maxwell. "Either he goes with Alice or the deal is off."

"Fine." He waved a hand. "Anything to have my daughter back." He sucked in a deep breath. "We're ready."

I glanced around. There really wasn't much of note in here. Maxwell sat on a folding chair across the table from me. Alice was next to him, still slumbering away. The only real thing that had changed was a small, simple candle sitting between us. It wasn't even fancy, just the basic emergency candle you could pick up at any gas station for a buck.

"So, what do we do now?" I couldn't quite keep the tremor from my voice.

"I... don't really know." His hands were shaking as he rested them on the table. "I've only ever done this once, and it was in reverse."

"Fine." I looked down at the dancing flame, then over to Alice. "Just keep out of my way and support me as best you can." I took a deep breath, "And know when to strike. I doubt I can do this by myself."

I glanced down to Ophois and ruffled the fur on his head one last time. "I guess this is goodbye, buddy." He didn't say anything, but his wide blue eyes were enough to make my heart break.

I closed my eyes and stopped breathing.

There was nothing but darkness... then the flicker of a flame unfolded in the empty space. A moment later Maxwell stood before me.

At least I think it was Maxwell. The aged and wrinkled form that faced me in the black void looked akin to a mummy that Anubis would be more familiar with.

"Don't panic, O'Toole." His voice was as old as his face. I could barely make it out as it creaked from his decrepit jaw. "You're in my illusion." A moment later Alice's still form materialized.

I reached out to touch her. Her skin was warm, breathing steady.

I wanted to end this. Give her a soul right here and now... but I was scared.

No. Scared is when you're watching a horror movie... I was terrified.

I'd been alive for longer than anyone had any right to be. To give that up willingly... I wasn't sure if I could.

"What do we do now, Maxwell?" I never took my eyes from her.

There was no answer.

Looking up, there was no one.

Alice and I were alone in an endless black void.

I brushed back her long black hair. She looked so much like... like Maria, my wife.

We'd never had a child. Lord knows we'd tried, but it had never come true. Who knows how different things might have turned out if I'd become a father.

I pulled her towards me until I could feel the beat of her heart against my chest.

She stirred ever so slightly in her sleep, a faint mumble coming to her lips.

"Shhh." I soothed her hair back. "Everything will be alright soon."

We floated there in the empty darkness, nothing but the two of us. There was no time... nothing.

I held her for what seemed to be forever.

And then there was only one.

There Is No Twelfth Hour

Okay, before we get going I think it only appropriate we get in the right mood, so I offer [this](#). (Music, but it's work safe).

Well folks, here we are again. But this time it was with a bit of a twist.

We Don't Just Fade Away was written immediately after *The Diplomats* in a bit of an attempt on my part to get out of the whole 'furry' thing. Now don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against the fandom, but I'd get to receive so much as a nibble on any of my previous books when I sent them the way of the mainline publishers and agents, and thought this might help me a bit.

I was right. Well, kind of.

WDJFA was my first book to get even the slightest bit of attention from agents, rewarding me with two requests for to full submissions. Sadly it was all for naught in the end, but it was a marked improvement from anything I'd achieved up to that point.

Anyway, back to the story itself. As mentioned previously you've likely noticed three big things about this story:

1. There's swearing. Yeah. It's not really my thing, but I made a concentrated effort in this book to try to break away from some of the patterns I got into while writing *The Hunters*. I'm not sure it really improves the quality of the story, but it does give it a noticeably different feel.
2. No furries. Well, not really. There were two characters in the whole story who could be called furry, and neither in the traditional sense. Hopefully this didn't disappoint too many people. Again, this was a conscious decision to try to write something more suitable to the mass market.
3. Now here's the elephant in the room. It may not be too obvious from the first chapter alone, but the story went going to go pretty heavy into modern day religious themes. I expect I'll likely offend at least one person. In advance, all I can say is:
Sorry.
There is no intent to go after anyone or any particular religion, just an exercise in what the

world would look like if gods were made flesh. For any of you reading this that hold strong religious views I'd love to hear what you think. For any of you who want to start a battle over this... please don't.

There's a bit of an interesting history behind the genesis of this book. As I mentioned before, I was trying to break away from some of my more familiar and comfortable ruts. My first step in this was to chew my way through a textbook in medieval philosophy.

I used to be the goto guy amongst my friends when I was younger for any questions on science, philosophy, or generally obscure and archaic topics. I'd hardly call myself a philosopher, but I do like to play about with the occasional thought experiment – hence my writing.

Anyway, my best friend had just finished a university course in philosophy and offered my his textbooks. I leapt at the chance to read though them.

Yeah... that initial exuberance faded pretty quick. As you've likely picked up, I'm not exactly a religious person, and reading the unpinning of religious philosophy developed back in the middle-ages didn't exactly warm me to the ideas.

It'd originally been hoping to write a book to act as a sort of illustrated primer to fundamental philosophical concepts. That died on the vine when I realized how *illogical* many of them are. Instead I began to play with the more basic ideas of gods, and who and *what* they were. That's there *WDJFA* came from.

Anyway, enough rambling from me. This story didn't exactly blow the doors off my FA account, but then again I never expected it to – not really the right audience. That, will a little luck, will change rather quickly.

So, to the few of you who've read this far (I can likely count you on one hand!) here's a little bonus. *Something big is coming...*

Thanks for reading!

wwwolf