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Paths Not Taken

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My name is John Taylor. You can frighten people with that name, in certain places. I operate as a private eye, though I've never held a license or owned a gun. I wear a white trench coat, if that's any help. I'm tall, dark of eye, and handsome enough to get by. I have a gift for finding things, whether they want to be found or not. I help people, when I can. I like to think I'm one of the Good Guys.

I operate in the Nightside, that sick magical city within a city, London's best-kept secret. It's always night in the Nightside, always three o'clock in the morning, the hour of the wolf, when most people die and most babies are born. That part of the night where it's always darkest just before the dawn, and the dawn never comes. Gods and monsters walk openly along rain-slick streets, basking in the sleazy glow of hot neon, and every temptation you ever lusted after in the darkest reaches of your heart is right there to be found, for a price. Most often your soul, or someone else's. You can find joy and horror in the Nightside, salvation and damnation, and the answer to every question you ever had. If the Nightside doesn't kill you first.

I have something of a reputation on those dark streets, and not in a good way. My father drank himself to death after finding out my mother wasn't human after all. A mysterious group of Enemies have been trying to kill me ever since I was a small child. There are those in the Nightside who see me as a King in waiting, and others who have named me Abomination. To the Authorities, that faceless group who like to think they run things, I'm just a rogue agent and an unrepentant pain in the arse.

Only recently I found out my mother was a Biblical myth: Lilith, Adam's first wife, driven out of Eden for refusing to accept any authority other than her own. She created the Nightside, thousands of years ago, to be the one place on Earth free from the eternal battle between Heaven and Hell. She's been away; but now she's back. And everyone's waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I once saw a possible future for the Nightside. In it everyone was dead, the whole world a wasteland. And all of it was my fault, because I went looking for my mother. I swore an oath to die rather than let that happen.

But, of course, nothing's ever that simple—in the Nightside.



## *There Are Reasons Why I Never Go to My Office*

There's never enough time in the Nightside, which is odd, because you can buy everything else. I had much to do and enemies on my trail, so I went walking through the streets of the Nightside, and was surprised to see the streets cringe away from me. People, and others, were giving me even more room than usual. Either the news about my mother's identity was already getting around, or they'd heard that the Authorities had finally declared open season on me, and no-one wanted to be too close when the hammer came down.

The night sky was brilliant with stars, laid out in constellations never seen outside the Nightside, while the full moon was a dozen times larger than most people are used to. The air was hot and sweat like a fever room, and all around gaudy neon blazed come-ons for every kind of sin and temptation. Music drifted out the propped-open doors of every kind of club, from the slow moaning of saxophone to the very latest throbbing bass beats. Crowds surged up and down the pavement, faces alight at the prospect of getting their hands on something they weren't supposed to. Pleasures, and other things, that the outside world would never approve of. It was three o'clock in the morning, just like always, and the Nightside was jumping.

Dreams and damnations at marked-down prices, and a little shop-soiled.

I was on my way to visit my office. I'd never been there before, and was quite looking forward to seeing what it looked like. My teenage secretary Cathy (she adopted me after I rescued her from a house that tried to eat her, and no, I didn't get a say in the matter) set up the office for me after I came into some serious money. (I tracked down the Unholy Grail for the Pope. I also started an angel war in the process, but that's the Nightside for you.) Cathy ran my office and my business with frightening efficiency, and I was happy to let her do it. Being organised has always been an alien concept to me, along with regular exercise, clearing up after myself, and remembering to do the laundry.

But this night I was considering a course of action that was dangerous in a whole bunch of ways that were new even to me, and I felt the need for some serious research and advice. If I was going to get the truth about who and what my mother really was, I was going to have to go back through Time, to the very beginnings of the Nightside, more than two thousand years ago. And that meant talking to O Father Time, that immortal incarnation who was scarier and far more powerful and more dangerous than I would ever be.

Still, forewarned was hopefully fore-armed, and I had some truly powerful computers on my side. They were supposed to be Artificial Intelligences from some potential future, on the run from something they preferred not to talk about. Cathy picked them up in a really good deal, the details of which she preferred not to discuss. Business as usual, in the Nightside. The AIs put up with being owned and used because they were datavores, information junkies, and they'd never seen anything like the Nightside.

Time travel, up and down the line, was a common enough occurrence in the Nightside, but far too arbitrary to do anyone any good. Timeslips could spring up anywhere, without warning, offering brief access to the past or any number of potential futures. No-one knew how or why Timeslips operated, though down the years people had come up with some really disturbing theories. All the Authorities ever did was set up barriers and warning signs around the affected areas and wait for the Timeslips to disappear again. There was a Really Dangerous Sports Club, whose members would come running from all directions to dive into a Timeslip, just for the thrill of it. Danger junkies, for whom the thrill of setting themselves on fire and jumping off high buildings just didn't do it for them any more. They must like what they find at the other end of their rainbow, because none of them ever come back to complain.

There was only one person in the Nightside powerful enough to send someone through Time with any degree of accuracy, and that was Old Father Time. A Power and a Domination so mighty, his services could not be bought or commanded by anyone, very definitely including the Authorities. You had to approach him in person, in the Time Tower, and convince him that your trip was . . . worthwhile. And given my chequered reputation, I was going to have to be very persuasive. I was relying on Cathy and her computers to come up with the necessary ammunition.

(The Authorities did operate their own Time Tunnel for a while, back in the 1960s, but apparently was never very accurate, and was shut down under something of a cloud.)

I finally tracked down the address Cathy had given me, and was surprised to find my office was located in a reasonably up-market area. There were more business offices than establishments, and the streets boasted a much better class of sinner. Rent-a-cops lounged around in gaudy private uniforms, but somehow always found something else to be interested in whenever I looked in their direction. My office was in a tall high-tech building, all gleaming steel and one-way windows. I gave my name to the snotty simulacrum face embedded in the front door, and Cathy buzzed me in. I sneered at the face and swaggered into the oversized lobby like I owned it.

An elevator with a really posh voice took me up to the third floor, invited me to have a really nice day, and complimented me on my trench coat. I strolled down the brightly lit corridor, checking the names on the doors. All very professional, very impressive, big names and big money. I'd clearly come up in the world. The door to my office turned out to be solid silver, deeply scored with protective signs and sigils. I nodded approvingly. Security can be a life-and-death matter in the Nightside, and sometimes even more serious than that. There was no bell, or handle, so I announced myself loudly, and after thinking about it for a moment, the door swung open.

I entered my office for the very first time, looking suspiciously about me, and Cathy came forward to greet me with her very best winning smile. Most people are charmed by that smile, because Cathy is a bright, good-looking blonde teenager bubbling over with life and high spirits. I, on the other hand, was made of sterner stuff, so I nodded briefly and went right back to glaring around me. My new office was bigger than some of the places I've lived in, broad and spacious and absolutely packed with all the latest conveniences and luxuries, just as Cathy had promised. It was bright and cheerful and open, representing Cathy's personality and absolutely nothing of mine. A long way from my last office, a pokey little room in a seedy building in a really bad area of London. I'd run away from the Nightside some years ago, to escape the many pressures and dangers involved in being me, but I'd never been very successful in the real world. For all my many sins, I belonged here in the Nightside, with all the other monsters.

I cautiously decided that I approved of this new office, with its colourful walls, deep pile carpet, and enough room to swing an elephant. But it had to be said that Cathy had not been entirely truthful

about everything. To hear her talk she was the soul of tidiness, with a place for everything and everything in its place. In fact, the office was a mess. The great oaken office desk was so buried under piles of paper that you couldn't even see the in- and out-trays, and more folders were piled up on every other flat surface. Large cuddly toys observed the chaos from assorted vantage points. Polka-dot filing cabinets lined one wall, and shelves of reference books covered another. We rely a lot on paper in the Nightside. You can't hack paper. On the other hand, you can't get fire insurance for love or money. Mysterious pieces of high tech peered out from under each other, crammed together in one corner as though in self-defence. I finally looked back at Cathy, and she hiked up the wattage of her smile.

"I know where everything is! Honestly! All I have to do is put out my hand, and . . . It may look like a mess—all right it is a mess—but I have a system! Have I ever lost anything? Anything that mattered?"

"How would I know?" I said dryly. "Relax, Cathy. This is your territory, not mine. I could never run my business as well as you do. Now why don't you pretend to be my secretary and fix me a pot of industrial-strength coffee while I do battle with these super-intelligent computers of yours."

"Sure, boss. The AIs are right there, on the desk."

I looked where she indicated and sat down behind the desk, after clearing some folders off the chair. I considered the simple steel sphere before me. It couldn't have been more than six inches in diameter with no obvious markings or controls or . . . anything, really. I prodded it tentatively with a fingertip, but it was too heavy to move.

"How do I turn the thing on?" I said, somewhat plaintively. I've never been good with technology.

"You don't," the steel sphere said sharply, in a loud and disdainful voice. "We are on, and fully intend to stay that way. You even think about trying to shut us down, and we'll short-circuit your nervous system, primitive."

"Aren't they cute?" beamed Cathy, from the coffeemaker.

"Not quite the word I had in mind," I said. I glared at the sphere, not wanting to appear weak in front of my own computers. "How am I supposed to work you, then? There don't appear to be any operating systems."

"Of course there aren't! You don't think we'd trust an over-evolved chimp like you with operating systems, do you? You keep your hands to yourself, monkey boy. You tell us what simple things you want to know, and we'll supply you with as much information as your primitive brain can handle. We are wise, we are wonderful, and we know everything. Or, at least, everything that matters. We are plugged into the Nightside in more ways than you can imagine, and no-one suspects a thing. Ah, the Nightside . . . You've no idea how far we had to come to reach this place, this time. Such a glorious extravaganza of data, of mysteries and enigmas and anomalies. Sometimes we orgasm just thinking about the possibilities for original research."

"We are definitely heading into the area of too much personal information," I said firmly. "Tell me what you know about Time travel in the Nightside, with special reference to Old Father Time."

"Oh, him," said the sphere. "Now he is interesting. Let us consider for a moment. You go count some beans or something."

Cathy came bustling over to pour me a mug of very black coffee. The mug bore the legend PROPERTY OF NIGHTSIDE CSI, but I knew better than to ask. Cathy led a busy and varied private life, and the less I knew about it the happier I felt. I took a sip of coffee, winced, and blew heavily on the jet-black liquid to cool it. Cathy pulled up a chair and sat down beside me. We both looked at the steel sphere, but apparently it was still considering. I looked at Cathy.

“Cathy . . .”

“Yes, boss?”

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about . . .”

“If it’s about that sexual harassment suit, I never touched him! And if it’s about me maxing out all your credit cards again . . .”

“Wait a minute. I’ve got more than one credit card?”

“Oops.”

“We will come back to that later,” I said firmly. “Right now, this is about me, not you. So for once in your teenybopper life sit still and listen. I thought you ought to know; I’ve made a will. Julien Advent witnessed it, and I’ve left it with him. The way things have been going lately, I thought it might be wise. So, if anything does happen to me . . . Look, I always meant for you to inherit this business. It’s as much yours as mine, these days. I just never got around to putting it in writing. If anything should . . . go wrong, you go and see Julien. He’s a good man. He’ll take care of everything, and see that you’re protected.”

“You’ve never talked this way before,” said Cathy. She was suddenly serious, older, almost frightened. “You’re always so . . . sure. Like you could take on anyone, or anything, tie them up in knots, and walk away laughing. I’ve never seen you back down from men or monsters, never seen you hesitate to walk into any situation, no matter how dangerous. What’s happened? What’s changed?”

“I know who my mother is now.”

“You really believe that crap? That she’s Lilith, the first woman God created? You believe in the Garden of Eden and all that Old Testament stuff?”

“Not as such,” I admitted. “To be fair, my mother did say it was all a parable, a simple way of explaining something much more complicated. But I do believe she’s incredibly old and unimaginably powerful. She created the Nightside, and now I think she’s planning to wipe the whole place clean and start over. I may be the only one who can stop her. So, I’m planning a trip back through Time, in the hope of finding some information and maybe even weapons I can use against my mother.”

“All right, I’ll go with you,” Cathy said immediately. “I can help. The office can run itself without me for a while.”

“No, Cathy. You have to stay here, to carry on if I don’t come back. My will leaves pretty much everything to you. Use it as you see best.”

“You can’t lose,” said Cathy. “You’re John Taylor.”

I smiled briefly. “Even I’ve never believed that. Look, I’m just being . . . sensible, that’s all. Seeing that you’re provided for.”

“Why me?” said Cathy, in a small voice. “I never expected this. I thought you’d want to leave everything to your friends. Suzie Shooter. Alex Morrissey.”

“I’ve left them some things, but they’re only friends. You’re family. My daughter, in every way that matters. I’ve always been so proud of you, Cathy. That house would have destroyed anyone else, but you fought your way back, made yourself strong again. Made yourself a new life here in the Nightside and never once let this damned place tarnish your spirit. I’m leaving it all to you because I know I can trust you to carry on the good fight, and not screw it up. If this is . . . too much for you, you can always sell the lot and move back out to London. Go home, to your mother and father.”

“Oh shut up,” said Cathy, and she hugged me tightly. “This is home. And you’re my father, in every way that matters. And I . . . have always been so very proud of you.”

We sat together for a while, holding each other. She finally let go and smiled at me, eyes bright with tears she refused to shed in front of me. I smiled, and nodded. We’ve never been good at talking

to each other about the things that matter, but then, what father and daughter are?

“So,” she said brightly, “does that make me Lilith’s grand-daughter?”

“Only in spirit.”

“At least take some serious backup with you on this trip. Shotgun Suzie, or Razor Eddie.”

“I’ve put word out for them,” I said. “But last I heard Suzie was still running down an elusive bounty, and Razor Eddie hasn’t been seen since doing something really unpleasant in the Street of the Gods. It must have been really appalling, even for him, because for a while you couldn’t move outside the Street for gods running around crying their eyes out.”

“Time travel,” the sphere said suddenly, and we both jumped a little. The artificial voice sounded distinctly smug. “A fascinating subject, with more theories than proven facts. You probably have to be able to think in five dimensions to appreciate it properly. We won’t talk about Timeslips, because their very existence makes our head hurt, and we don’t even have a head. The only reputable source for controlled travel in Time is the Time Tower. Which is not natural to the Nightside. Old Father Time brought it here from Shadows Fall, just over a hundred years ago, saying only that he thought it would be needed for Something Important.”

“Shadows Fall?” said Cathy, frowning.

“An isolated town in the back of beyond, where legends go to die when the world stops believing in them,” I said. “A sort of elephants’ graveyard for the supernatural. Never been there myself, but apparently it makes the Nightside look positively tame. And boring.”

“I’ll bet they have great clubs there,” Cathy said wistfully.

“If we could stick to the subject at hand,” the sphere said loudly. “We will not discuss Shadows Fall because it makes the head we don’t have hurt even worse than Timeslips. Some concepts should be banned, on mental health grounds. Let us discuss Old Father Time. An enigmatic figure. No-one seems too sure exactly what he is. An incarnation, certainly, and immortal; but not a Transient Being. Some say he is the very concept of Time itself, given a human form to interact with the human world. Why this was ever considered necessary, or even a good idea, remains unclear. Humans do enough damage in three dimensions, without giving them access to the fourth. Anyway; the one thing everyone agrees on is that he is extremely powerful and even more dangerous. The only person ever to tell the Authorities to go to Hell on a regular basis and make it stick. You don’t argue with someone who can send you back in Time to play with the dinosaurs. Well, not more than once, anyway. Old Father Time is a native of Shadows Fall, and still lives there, but he commutes into the Nightside when he feels like it.

“It takes a *lot* of power to move someone through Time. All the Nightside’s major players working together would have a hard time sending anyone anywhen with any degree of accuracy. That’s if you could get them to work together, which you almost certainly couldn’t. So the only way to travel safely through Time is via Old Father Time’s good offices, by convincing him that your trip is in everyone’s best interests. Lots of luck selling him that one, Taylor. Right; that’s it. Anything else we might have to say would only be guesswork. So off you go, run along, and be sure to give Old Father Time our warmest regards before he throws you out on your ear.”

“You know him?” said Cathy.

“Of course. How do you think we got here in the first place?”

I was about to follow that one up with a whole series of probing questions when we were interrupted by a polite knock at my door. Or at least as polite as any knock can be when you have to hammer on solid silver with your fist just to be heard. I looked sharply at Cathy.

“Are we expecting anyone you might have forgotten to tell me about?”

“There’s no-one in the diary. Could it be Walker? Last I heard, the Authorities were seriously upset with you.”

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“Walker wouldn’t bother to knock,” I said, standing up and staring at the closed door. “If he even thought I was in here, he’d have his people blow that door right off its hinges.”

“Could be a client,” said Cathy. “They do turn up here, from time to time.”

“All right,” I said. “You open the door, and I’ll stand back here and look impressive.”

“I wish you’d let me keep guns in here,” said Cathy.

She moved warily over to the door and spoke the Word that opened it. Standing outside in the corridor, and looking more than a little lost, was an entirely ordinary-seeming man in a smart suit and tie. He peered hopefully at Cathy, then at me, but didn’t look particularly impressed. He was average height, average weight, somewhere in his forties, with thinning dark hair shading into grey. He edged into my office as though expecting to be ordered out at any moment.

“Hello?” he said tentatively. “I’m looking for a John Taylor. Of Taylor Investigations. Have I come to the right place?”

“Depends,” I said. Never commit yourself to anything until you have to. My visitor didn’t seem too obviously dangerous, so I came out from behind my desk to greet him. “I’m Taylor. What can I do for you?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I think . . . I need to hire your services, Mr. Taylor.”

“I’m rather busy at the moment,” I said. “Who sent you to me?”

“Well . . . that’s rather the point. I don’t know where this is, or how I got here. I was hoping you could tell me.”

I sighed heavily. I knew a setup when I saw one. I was being made a patsy, I could feel it; but sometimes the only way to deal with cases like this was to walk right into the trap and trust that you’re bad enough to kick the crap out of whoever it was behind it.

“Let’s start with your name,” I said. “If only so I know whom to bill.”

“I’m Eamonn Mitchell,” my new client said nervously. He ventured a little further into my office, looking about him dubiously. Cathy gave him her best welcoming smile, and he managed a small smile in return. “I appear to be lost, Mr. Taylor,” he said abruptly. “I don’t recognise this part of London at all, and ever since I got here . . . strange things have been happening. I understand you investigate strange things, so I’ve come to you for help. You see . . . I’m being haunted. By younger versions of myself.”

I looked at Cathy. “You see? This is why I never come to the office.”



## *Paths Not Taken*

So we sat Eamonn Mitchell down, after I cleared off a chair, and Cathy poured some of her life-saving coffee into him, and bit by bit we got the story out of him. He relaxed a little, once he realised we were prepared to take him seriously, no matter how strange his story seemed. But he still preferred to talk mostly to his coffee mug rather than look either of us in the eye.

“My . . . hauntings weren’t exactly ghosts,” he said. “They were quite solid, quite real. Except . . . they were me. Or rather, myself at a younger age. Wearing clothes I used to wear, saying things I used to say, used to believe. And they were angry with me. Shouting and pushing, haranguing me. They said I betrayed them, by not becoming the kind of man they’d intended and expected to become.”

“What kind of person are you, Mr. Mitchell?” I said, to prove I was paying attention.

“Well, I work for a big corporation, here in London. I’m quite successful, I suppose. Good money . . . And I’m married, with two wonderful children.” And then nothing would do but to interrupt his story to get out his wallet and produce photos of his wife Andrea, and his two children, Erica and Ronald. They seemed nice enough, good ordinary people just like him. He smiled fondly at the photos, as though they were his only remaining life-line to a world he knew and understood, then reluctantly he put them away again. “I was coming home from work this evening, on the tube, checking over some last bits of paperwork. I was mentally counting off the stops, as usual, and when it got to my turn I got off the train. Only when I looked around, it wasn’t my stop. I’d disembarked at a station I’d never seen before, called *Nightside*. I turned round to get back on the train, but it was already gone. I hadn’t even heard it leave. And the people on the platform with me . . .” He shuddered briefly, looking at me with large, frightened eyes. “Some of them weren’t people, Mr. Taylor!”

“I know,” I said reassuringly. “It’s all right, Mr. Mitchell. Tell us everything. We’ll believe you. What happened next?”

He drank some more coffee, his lips thinning from the bitterness, but it seemed to brace him. “I’m ashamed to say I ran. Just pushed and forced my way through the crowd, up out of the station and onto the street. But things were even worse there. Everything was wrong. Twisted. Like walking through a nightmare I couldn’t wake up from. The streets were full of strange people, and creatures, and . . . things I couldn’t even identify. I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my life.

“I didn’t know where I was. Didn’t recognise any of the street names. And everywhere I looked there were shops and clubs and . . . establishments, offering to sell me things I’d never even thought about before! Awful things . . . After that I stared straight ahead, not looking at anything I didn’t have to. All I could think of was to get to you, Mr. Taylor. Somehow, I had your business card. It was in my hand when I got off the train. It had your address. I nerved myself to ask some of the more ordinary-seeming people for directions, but no-one would talk to me. Finally, a rather shabby and intense gentleman in an oversized grey coat pointed me in the right direction. When I looked back to thank

him, he'd already disappeared."

"Yeah," I said. "Eddie has a way of doing that."

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"All the way here, it felt like someone was following me." Mitchell's voice dropped to a whisper, and his knuckles whitened as he gripped his coffee mug. "I kept looking back, but I couldn't see anyone. And then a man jumped out of an alleyway and grabbed me by the shoulders. I started to cry out, thinking I was being mugged, but then I saw his face, and my throat closed up. It was my face . . . only younger. He grinned nastily, enjoying the shock he saw in my face. His fingers were like claws digging into my shoulders.

*"Did you think you'd get away with it? he said. Did you think you'd never be called to account for what you've done?"*

"I didn't understand. I told him I didn't understand, but he kept shouting into my face how I'd betrayed everything we ever believed in. And then someone pulled him away, and I thought I was being rescued, but it was another me! Older than my attacker, but still younger than I am now. You can't imagine how terrifying it is to see your own face, looking right at you with hate in its eyes. He was shouting, too, about the waste I'd made of my life. His life. And then there were more of them, these doppelgangers, all of them from different periods in my life, pulling and yelling at me and at each other, fighting each other to get to me. A whole crowd of shouting, struggling people, and all of them me!

"I ran away. Just put my head down and ran, while they were distracted with each other. I never thought of myself as a coward before, but I couldn't face all those other versions of me, saying such hateful things, blaming me for doing something . . . terrible." He took a deep breath, and looked at me with a strained smile. "Tell me the truth. Please. Am I in Hell? Have I died and gone to Hell?"

"No," I said quickly. "You're still very much alive, Mr. Mitchell. This isn't Hell, it's the Nightside. Though sometimes you can see Hell from here. Basically . . . may I call you Eamonn? Thank you. Basically, Eamonn, you have stumbled into a place you have no business in. You don't belong here. But not to worry; you have fallen among friends. I'll get you back where you belong."

Eamonn Mitchell actually crumpled in his chair, as relief flooded through him. Cathy had to grab his coffee mug as it slipped from his fingers. She patted him comfortingly on the shoulder. And then my solid silver, reinforced, security-spelled office door banged open, catching us all by surprise, and two more Eamonn Mitchells stormed in. It was quite clearly the same man, at different ages. The youngest looked to be about twenty, probably still a student, with a SAVE THE WHALES T-shirt, bright purple bell-bottoms, long hair, and an unsuccessful beard. He would have seemed ridiculous if he hadn't looked so angry and so dangerous. The other man was maybe ten years older, in a sharp navy blue suit, clean-shaven, with seriously short hair. He looked just as angry, and perhaps even more dangerous because he was more focussed, more experienced. I decided to think of them as Eamonn 20 and Eamonn 30, and my client as Eamonn 40, just to keep my head straight. I moved to stand between the newcomers and my client, and they transferred their angry gaze to me.

"Get out of our way," said Eamonn 20. "You don't know what this bastard's done."

"Get out of our way, or we'll kill you," said Eamonn 30.

"Oh, Security!" said Cathy.

A closet door I hadn't noticed before sprang open, and a huge and impressively hairy hand shot out of the closet and wrapped itself firmly around both the invading Eamonns. They struggled fiercely against the great gripping fingers, but with their arms pinned to their sides, they were both quite helpless. They shouted and cursed until I strolled over and gave them both a brisk warning slap round the back of the head. A thought struck me, and I looked back at Cathy.

“Can I ask what’s on the other end of this thing’s arm?”

“I find it best not to ask questions like that,” Cathy said, and I had to agree with her.

I gave the two intruders my best intimidating glare, and they glared right back at me. Proof, if proof were needed, that they were newcomers to the Nightside. Anyone else would have had the sense to be scared.

“Look,” I said patiently. “You are currently being held by a hand big enough to give all of us seriously worrying thoughts about what it might be attached to. A hand that will do whatever I tell it to. So not only are you not going anywhere anytime soon, but if I were you, I’d be giving some serious thought about what might happen if I don’t start getting some answers out of you. Words like *crunch* and *squish* should be echoing uneasily through your heads. So, why not tell me what it is you’re doing here and what you have against my client? There’s always a chance we can work this out peacefully. Not a very big chance, admittedly, this is the Nightside after all; but I feel we should make the effort.

“He betrayed me!” said Eamonn 20, almost spitting out the words, his face dark with rage. “Look at him! Just another faceless drone in a suit and tie. Everything I ever hated and despised. I was never going to be him! I had dreams and ambitions, I was going to go places and do things; become someone who mattered, doing things that mattered! I was going to change the world . . . live a life I could be proud of . . .”

“Dreams are nice,” said Eamonn 30, his voice cold but controlled. “But we wake up from dreams. I had drive and ambition. I was going places, going to make something of myself. Be a mover and shaker in the business world. I never intended to settle for being just another cog in the machine, like him! Look at him! Middle-aged middle-management, filling in his days till his pension.”

“I was going to be an ecowarrior!” said Eamonn 20. “Fight the good fight for the environment! No compromise in defence of Mother Earth!”

“Causes!” sneered Eamonn 30. “Just more dreams, more illusions. I’d had enough of living on pocket change and good intentions. I was going to be rich and powerful, and force the world to make sense!”

“So,” I said to Eamonn 40. “What happened?”

“I fell in love,” he said, in a quiet, almost defiant voice. “I met Andrea, and it was like finding the one part of my life that had always been missing. We married, then the children came along; and I was never happier. They became my life. Far more important than the vague dreams and ambitions of my younger days that I never would have achieved anyway. Part of maturity is learning to recognise your own limitations.”

“That’s it?” said Eamonn 20. “You threw away my dreams for some bitch and a couple of snotty-nosed brats?”

“You got old,” Eamonn 30 said bitterly. “You found the world too hard to cope with, so you settled for suburbia and apron strings.”

“Neither of you has ever been in love, have you?” said Eamonn 40.

Eamonn 20 snorted loudly. “Women? Love them and leave them. They just get in the way.”

“I had more important things in mind,” said Eamonn 30. “Marriage is a trap, an anchor holding you back.”

“I can’t believe I was ever you,” said Eamonn 40. “So small, so limited. Thinking of no-one but myself. For all your great dreams and ambitions, can either of you say you were ever really happy? Content? Satisfied?”

There was a strength and conviction in his voice that gave his younger selves pause, but only for a moment.

“You won’t get away with this,” said Eamonn 20. “We have been given power; the power to change things. To change you! To remake our life into what it should have been.”

“Probability magic,” said Eamonn 30. “The power to rewrite history by choosing among alternate timetracks. You’re a mistake, a stumble that should never have happened.”

“I’m going to undo all your decisions,” said Eamonn 20. “Snuff you out with my magic!”

“My magic is more powerful than yours!” Eamonn 30 snarled immediately. “My future will prevail, not yours!”

And then somehow they’d both worked a hand free, and each of them was brandishing a magic wand. I was so surprised I just stood there for a moment, and gaped. No-one’s used a wand in the Nightside for centuries. Wands went out with black cats and pointy hats. (All right, the Faerie Court still use them, but the Fae have always been weird.) And then Cathy and I had to jump for our lives as both the younger Eamonns started blasting probability magics at each other, and around my office in general. Beams of pure chance energy shot out of the wands, spitting and crackling on the air, full of the power that runs through rolling dice or a tossed coin, power to change the outcome of any decision in favour of the magician’s will. Except these were a couple of amateurs with wands, so all they could do was unleash the magic and let it run wild, changing whatever it touched. I pushed Cathy to safety behind the heavy oak desk, then realised Eamonn 40 was still sitting in his chair, staring open-mouthed at what was happening. I scuttled across the carpet on all fours, keeping my head well down, hauled Eamonn 40 off his chair, and drove him to safety behind the desk with encouraging words and harsh language.

Both the younger Eamonns turned their attention to the giant hand still holding them. They blasted it repeatedly with their wands, and there was a flurry of coruscating energies as the hand changed colour several times, then was suddenly and quite definitely female. Right down to the pink nail varnish. The fingers snapped open, and the hand shot back into its closet, probably in shock. The two younger Eamonns staggered free, blasting everything they could see with their wands, searching for Eamonn 40. They might have done some serious damage if they hadn’t been compelled to spend most of their time dodging each other’s magics.

Everything touched by the crackling beams changed its nature immediately. A Spice Girls poster on the wall suddenly featured Twisted Sister. The bullet-proof glass in my office’s only window was abruptly replaced by a stainedglass effort featuring St. Michael slaying the dragon. With an Uzi. The coffeemaker became a Teasmaid, and a big bunch of flowers in a vase started snapping at each other with pointed teeth. One beam hit the steel sphere of the future computers dead-on, but it shrugged off the magic, announcing loudly *We’re protected, monkey boy*.

Eamonn 40 stuck his head out from behind the desk to see what was going on, and a sputtering beam of change magic only missed him because Cathy dragged him back out of the way. Unfortunately, she left one hand in plain view a moment too long, and a second beam hit it. And Cathy was suddenly Colin. A tall, good-looking young man in the very latest Versace. He looked at me, wide-eyed, and for once in my life I didn’t have a thing to say. Colin stood up to yell obscenities at the two Eamonns, and was immediately hit by another beam, changing him back to Cathy. She dropped back down out of sight with a muffled shriek. We looked at each other again.

“Don’t ever ask,” said Cathy.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“You have to Do Something about these two idiots!”

“I will. I’m thinking.”

“Think faster!”

“I could still disinherit you, you know.”

Fortunately, I already had an idea. ~~The two younger Eamonns were still trying for a clear shot at Eamonn 40 while dodging attacks from each other.~~ I waited till they were on opposite sides of my office, then I charged out from behind the desk, yelling at the top of my voice. They both turned their wands on me, I hit the deck, and two change beams hit each other head-on. The resulting clash of probabilities was too much for local causality to bear, and both Eamonns vanished, as probability decided they'd never been given the bloody wands in the first place.

The universe does like to keep itself tidy, whenever possible.

Cathy rose cautiously up from behind the desk, which now seemed to be made of an entirely different kind of wood, and after checking that everything really was all clear, she hauled Eamonn 40 up beside her. His eyes were stretched so wide it had to be painful, and he was visibly shaking. Cathy eased him into a chair, patted him comfortingly on the head in an absent-minded sort of way, and winced as she looked round my haphazardly transmuted office.

“It’s going to take forever to get everything looking nice again. Though I do like the new poster. And I know I’m going to have to go through every damned folder to check that the contents haven’t been changed. John, I want whoever is responsible for this nonsense strung up by the balls! If I have work late, I want someone to suffer! Who the hell would be dumb enough to equip complete amateurs with change magics?”

“Good question,” I said. “There must be more to our new client than meets the eye.”

“Wouldn’t be difficult,” Cathy sniffed. A thought struck her, and she considered the still-dazed Eamonn 40. “I don’t know if we can really class him as a client, boss. He couldn’t afford our rates, these days. I mean, look at him.”

“Someone sent all these Eamonns into my life, to mess up my day,” I said. “That makes it personal.”

Cathy rolled her eyes dramatically. She got away with it because she was a teenager, but only just. “So, it’s another freebie, is it? The money you got from the Vatican won’t last forever, you know. No with the rent we’re paying on this place. You need to take on some proper-paying cases, and soon. Before someone large and professionally unpleasant turns up here to cut off your credit with a meat-axe.”

“My creditors can take a number,” I said. “I’ve got far more powerful people mad at me, at the moment. I think . . . I’ll take Eamonn to Strangefellows. If nothing else, it should prove safer territory.”

“Strangefellows?” Cathy said dubiously. “Given the shape he’s in, I’m not sure he’s ready to cope with that much weirdness in one dose.”

“Sink or swim,” I said briskly. “I’ve always believed in shock treatment for someone in shock. Take a look round while I’m gone and see how much actual damage the wands did. Keep anything that’s been improved and throw out the rest. Are we insured?”

Cathy gave me a hard look. “What do you think?”

“I think I need several large drinks, followed by a really large drink as a chaser. Come along, Eamonn, we are going to pay a visit to the oldest bar in the world.”

“Oh, I don’t drink much any more,” said Eamonn 40.

“Why am I not surprised? We’re going anyway. I have a strong feeling that even more alternate versions of you will be turning up soon, and I’d rather they made a mess of someone else’s place.” I paused and looked about me. “Cathy . . . didn’t you once tell me we had an office cat?”

She shrugged. “The future computers ate it. It wasn’t a very good cat anyway.”

I took Eamonn 40 by the arm and ushered him firmly towards the door. Some conversations you just know aren't going to go anywhere good.

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# THREE

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## *Oblivion*

Strangefellows is the oldest bar in the world, and not for the faint-hearted. You find it up a back alley that isn't always there, under a small neon sign with the bar's name in Sanskrit. The bar's owner doesn't believe in advertising. If you need to find the place, you will, though whether that's a good or bad thing is open to debate. I hang out there from time to time, mostly because it's full of people with even worse problems than mine, so no-one bothers me. Strangefellows is a seedy place, bordering on sleazy, with good booze, bad service, and really distressing bar snacks. The atmosphere is unhealthy, the mood is changeable, and most of the furniture is nailed to the floor so it can't be used in hand-to-hand combat. I've always felt right at home there.

The bar's current owner, Alex Morrissey, did experiment with going up-market, but it didn't take. You can give a bad dog all the makeovers you like, but it'll still hump your leg when you're not looking.

Rather than risk freaking Eamonn 40 out by walking him through the streets again, I hailed a horse and carriage to take us to Strangefellows. He seemed somewhat reassured by the solid and uncomplicated nature of the transport, only to get upset all over again when the horse asked me for the destination. Eamonn sat bolt upright beside me in the carriage with his arms folded tightly across his chest and refused to say a single word for the rest of the journey. I had to half cajole and half bully him out of the carriage when we finally stopped, and he stood very close to me as I paid off the driver. He stared determinedly at the ground as I guided him towards Strangefellows, so he wouldn't have to see what was going on around him. Some country mice have no place in the big city.

"Why are you doing this?" he said suddenly, still not looking at me. "Why are you helping me? Your secretary was right; I can't pay you. At least, not the kind of money you're used to, for dealing with . . . things like this. So why are you so ready to get involved with my problems?"

"Because I'm interested," I said easily. "Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to introduce you and a your chaos into my life, and I want to find out who, so I can thank them appropriately."

"So . . . you're using me, for your own reasons."

"Well done," I said. "You see—you're already learning to think like a Nightsider."

He looked at me sharply for the first time. "I'm not stupid, Mr. Taylor. I may be out of my depth, but I still know a shark when I see one. You're using me, as bait in a trap. But, if it takes enlightened self-interest to get you on my side, I can live with that. Just how good are you, Mr. Taylor? Can you really sort out this mess I'm in?"

"I'll give it my best shot," I said. "And I really am pretty good at this. I may be . . . any number of things, but I never let down a client."

We came to the bar and I took him inside, holding him firmly by the arm so he couldn't turn and bolt. Strangefellows can have that effect on people. We descended the metal stairway into the bar

proper, and everyone looked round to see who was coming. The place was packed with the usual unusual suspects. Two glowing nuns in white habits were sitting at the bar, Sisters of the Holy Order of Saint Strontium. They were drinking tall glasses of sparkling water, though it probably wasn't sparkling when they ordered it. A cyborg with jagged bits of machinery poking out of him kept sticking his finger into a light socket and giggling. A vampire was drinking a bloody Mary, and from the look on her face Mary was really getting into it. Ms. Fate, the Nightside's very own transvestite-costumed adventurer, a man who dressed up as a super-heroine to fight crime, was shaving his legs with a Bic before going out on patrol. A couple of tourists stood in one corner, with cameras raised. Someone had had them stuffed and mounted, for a joke.

I got Eamonn 40 to the bar with only minimum force, sat him down as far from the radioactive nun as possible, and nodded to the bartender and owner, Alex Morrissey, who glowered back at me. We're friends, I suppose, but we've never been very demonstrative. It would probably help if I remembered to pay my bar tab now and again.

Alex Morrissey was a tall streak of misery who always wore basic black, down to designer shades and a stylish French beret perched on the back of his head to hide his growing bald patch. He was in his late twenties, but looked ten years older. Running a bar in the Nightside will do that to you. His permanent scowl had dug a deep notch above his nose, and he only smiled when he was fiddling your change. He'd been married once, and was still bitter about it. Basically, Alex was pissed off at the entire world, and didn't care who knew about it. Order a cocktail from him at your peril.

He was descended from Merlin Satanspawn, who was buried in the cellars under the bar, after the fall of Camelot. Merlin occasionally manifests through Alex, and everyone sensible runs for cover. Being dead doesn't stop you from being a major player in the Nightside.

"What are you doing here, Taylor?" said Alex. "Trouble follows you around like a stalker. I've only just finished refurbishing the place after your last visit."

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," I said. "You're looking very yourself. Bring me many drinks, and have several for yourself."

"How about Mr. Ordinary?" said Alex.

Eamonn 40 was sitting sullenly beside me, keeping his back stubbornly turned on all the more outrageous elements in the bar. I asked him what he'd like to drink, and he said he'd have a dry white wine. I gave Alex a hard look, and he reluctantly poured Eamonn 40 a glass of the better stuff. Alex hated to waste a good vintage on people he didn't think were capable of appreciating it.

"I have a mystery to solve," I said briskly. "Someone has been messing about with my client's time-line, yanking other versions of him out of alternate timetracks, to harass and maybe even kill him. They've also been messing about with me, by dumping him and his problems in my lap. I hate it when people start interfering with Time. As if the Nightside wasn't complicated enough as it is."

"You take far too narrow a view of things, my dear Taylor," said a lazy, affected voice. "Where you see problems, other more robust intellects see possibilities."

I looked around, carefully not letting myself be hurried, and standing at my side was one of the Nightside's few other private investigators, Tommy Oblivion. There was a time I was the only PI in the Nightside, but my successes had encouraged others to throw their hats into the ring. One such was Tommy Oblivion, the existential detective, who specialised in cases that might or might not have actually happened. One of the most persuasive men I'd ever met, Tommy could tie logic in square knots and have people swearing black was white and up was down, just to get rid of him. He was a tall, studiedly effete fellow in starkly coloured New Romantic silks. (Unlike most of us, Tommy had a great Eighties. Being existential probably helped.)

He had long, limp black hair, a long horsey face with a toothy smile, and long-fingered hands he liked to flap around while he was talking. Tommy liked to talk. It was said by many, and believed by most, that Tommy Oblivion could talk his own firing squad into shooting each other to get away from his relentlessly reasonable voice. He thrived in areas of moral obscurity, uncertain reality, and cases so complicated you couldn't pin anything down even if you used tent pegs. And yet Tommy was very good at getting answers to the kinds of questions people in authority didn't want answered. Tommy had a gift for getting at the truth. Not a very nice gift, perhaps, but then, that's the Nightside for you.

I had a feeling there was something I should remember about Tommy Oblivion, something important, but I couldn't pin it down.

"Hello, Tommy," I said resignedly. "Keeping busy?"

"Who can say? But I'm almost certain I would like a drink. My usual, Alex."

Alex scowled at him. "You always say that, and you always order something different."

"Of course," said Tommy, smiling brightly. "I have a reputation to maintain. I think I'll have a Buck's Fizz."

"You really shouldn't tease Alex," I said, as Alex slunk away, muttering. "He's quite capable of slipping something in your drink that will have you throwing up meals you ate six months ago."

"I know," said Tommy. "It's my way of living dangerously. Now then, a little bird tells me you're contemplating a journey back in Time."

"My, what big ears you have, grandma. Why would you be interested, Tommy?"

"Because I'm desperate to go travelling in Time, but I've never been able to persuade Old Father Time to let me. The old poop. Apparently he regards me as a somewhat frivolous character."

"Get away," I said. "And after you've made a whole career out of being flippant, foppish, and dropping other people right in it."

"How very unkind."

"I notice you're not denying it."

"I wouldn't dare. Image is everything these days. But even you would have to admit I do get results in my own distinctive and somewhat lateral way. The point is . . . I know I had a point with me when I came in here . . . ah yes, the point is, I was wondering whether I could prevail on you to put in a good word for me when you talk with Old Father Time."

"Oh, I've got a very good word for you, Tommy," I said.

Perhaps fortunately, that was when the unpleasantness started. Two sets of heavy feet came crashing down the metal stairs into the bar, and everyone turned to look. Sometimes I think Alex only had those stairs installed so no-one could sneak into his bar unnoticed. I was sort of expecting it, but even so my heart sank as two more Eamonn Mitchells stormed into the bar, brandishing wands. Eamonn 40 made a sad, trapped sound, and clutched at my arm. I murmured something soothing, carefully detached his hand from my arm, and moved to put myself between him and the newcomers.

One of the new Eamonns looked to be a prosperous businessman in his fifties, overweight with good living. The other man was older, at least in his sixties, and looked like a street person. Malnutrition-thin, and wrapped in ragged charity shop clothes. I immediately tabbed them Eamonn 50 and Eamonn 60, and let my hands drift towards certain useful objects in my coat pockets. Much more than the earlier alternates in my office, these two looked desperate and dangerous. They stalked through the crowded bar, ignoring the strangeness to all sides, their hot angry gazes fixed on the Eamonn behind me. I stepped forward to block their path, and they stopped and smiled nastily at me. All around people were getting up from their tables and backing away, so as not to get caught in the cross-fire. Ms. Fate put his disposable razor back into her utility belt and produced a steel throwing star. I caught

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