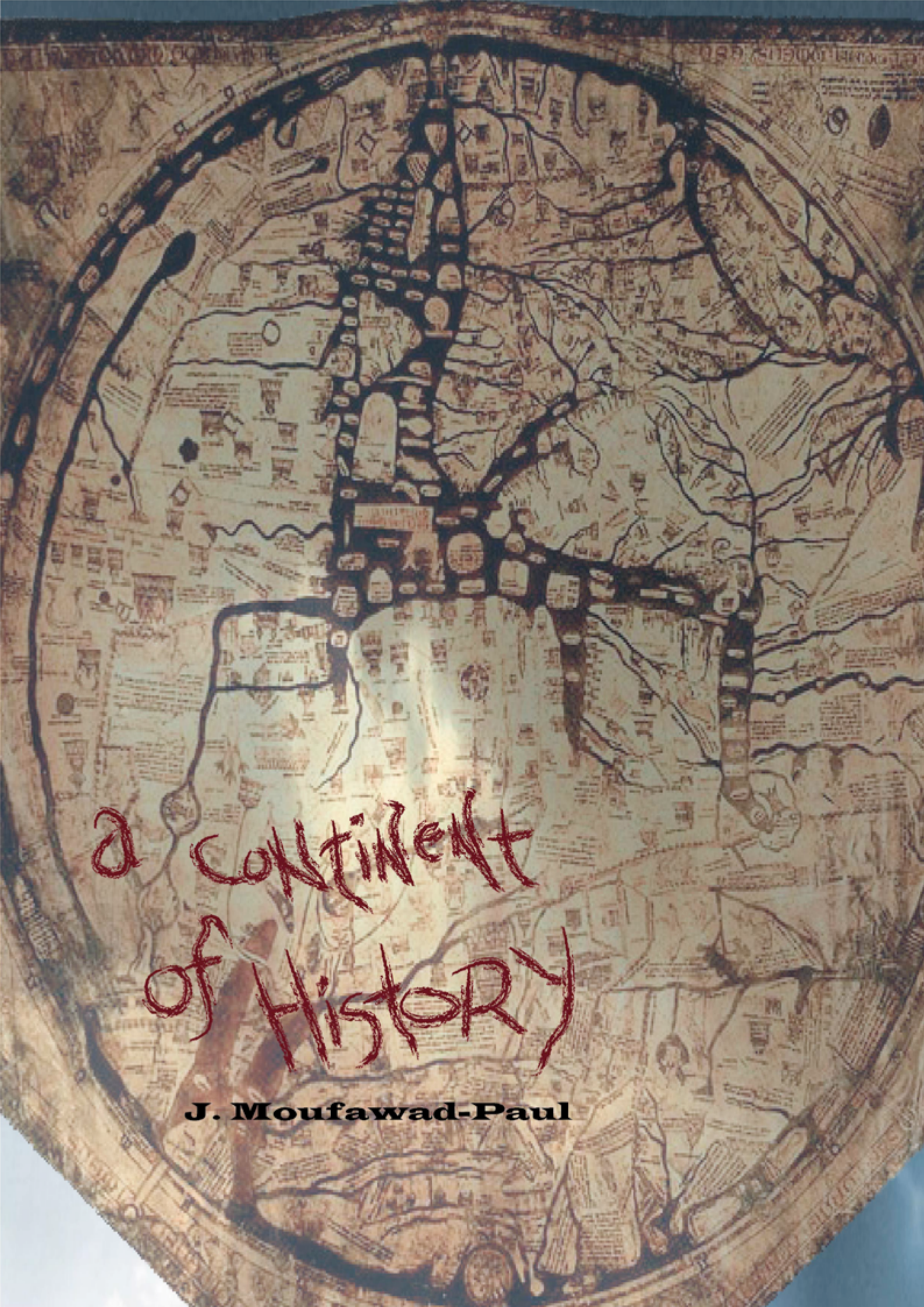

a continent of History

J. Moufawad-Paul

a continent of history: a novel

by J. Moufawad-Paul

The opening epigrams on page 5 are from Louis Althusser *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1997) and Samir Amin *Class and Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980).

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for Victoria

"…how could there be a history of dissipated phantasms, of shadows traversed? The only history possible is that of reality, which may dimly arouse in the sleeper incoherent dreams, but these dreams, whose only continuity is derived from their anchorage in these depths, can never make up a continent of history in their own right."
Louis Althusser

"History is a weapon…"
Samir Amin

ONE

In his dream the library was a vast and dusty labyrinth. Books were crammed into rickety shelves that disappeared in the shadows of the high ceilings. The titles were unfamiliar; the bindings and pages delicate. Innumerable rooms stretched out into candle-lit darkness, flickering with forgotten knowledge. Although he had long since discounted the possibility that the lost library consisted of actual books—although he was quite certain that, if it indeed existed, it would be archived in some electronic medium—he still dreamed of the confusing labyrinth, that abandoned and mythic continent of history.

He hated work-related dreams; he was on the job even when he was asleep. He blamed Adaelrose.

On the day before the dreams began, he had been contacted by Ren Adaelrose and asked to find the library. At first he had laughed, telling the sour-faced man what everyone was supposed to know: the library was a myth and there was no secret trove of forgotten knowledge dating from before the Mad Tyrant's purge. It was an urban legend, just like the legends collected in Hiley Paterson stories about the wasteland beyond the City.

"But if it does exist, imagine what it holds?"

"You're a scholar, right? You should know better than to hire people to chase myths."

"Maybe I think it's more than a myth. Maybe I can prove it and just need

the help of a good shifter."

Although now he no longer found it amusing, back then Canter had laughed. "There's better shifters. There's even the Demidead."

"I don't think I can afford her."

He decided that there was no use explaining to the highborn scholar that Shin Airys, the so-called Demidead or Halfshade, was not a private shifter like himself. Although her abilities were superior to his own (and every other shifter's for that matter), she had chosen to waste her talents for shite pay in the City's Shifter Division rather than selling them to the highest bidder. But Adaelrose was from the upper districts and, like most who lived in those zones of wealth and privilege where the Parallel City held less influence, he was quite ignorant of these things. Having never met a shifter before, and having never encountered them in his own pristine neighbourhood, he was probably unaware that there was a public Division. And if he was aware he probably assumed that someone like Shin Airys would be working in the private sector at an exorbitant rate.

*

Adaelrose continued, "Besides even if I could afford her, I'm not sure if I would want her in my employment…" He trailed off, leaving Maer Canter to guess at his meaning.

Perhaps Airys' unexplained connection to the Shinugami made her suspect. Or perhaps Adaelrose found her, as so many others did, too weird and unpredictable. Canter had only met her once, before she took over the Aylmer Haunting, and had found her unnerving. He understood, he supposed, why people like his client preferred hiring shifters who were more… well, human.

"There are others," Canter persisted, not excited at the prospect of an impossible job. "Ameer Benton, for one."

"Is he as good as you?" Adaelrose asked rhetorically.

Probably better—but Canter was too proud to make this concession aloud. Instead he said, "Outside of Airys, I'm the best there is."

"There you go."

He still felt that he needed to say, "But not good enough to find an imaginary library."

"If it's imaginary, Master Canter, then you just have to prove it's imaginary."

He scoffed. "I could say that there's a place outside the City that exists because you can't prove it doesn't. Doesn't mean I'm right—that's a shite argument."

"Is it? What if I was to tell you that I have information that would suggest the library exists?"

"I'd say someone conned you."

Adaelrose chuckled. "All you have to do is verify my information, Master Canter. And if it turns out false—if you discover that I have indeed been conned—then you still get paid."

He paused as he mulled over the offer. Finally he leaned forward on his desk, steepled his fingers, and asked his visitor, "But why me? Why do you need a shifter?"

"Because the information I need verified is in the Parallel City."

Of course. "Do you know what district and parallel?"

Adaelrose reached into the inner pocket of his expensive jacket and removed a datachip no bigger than his thumbnail. "I know the name of the district on this side; I'm a little fuzzy when it comes to the geography of Sheol."

Canter tentatively accepted the chip, realizing that he had just committed himself to this contract as surely as signing a piece of paper. "So what's the name of the district?"

"Thirteenth Floor, I believe."

He had to reflect for several seconds on his murky knowledge of parallels before guessing aloud, "On the other side it's called Gehenland."

"How droll."

Rotating the black chip between his thumb and forefinger, Canter wondered

how the name of this Sheol borough was precisely droll. "And what's on this?"

"Information." He stood, smoothly adjusted his lapels and ascot, and stretched out a thin hand clad in an expensive leather glove. "Does this mean you'll take the job?"

*

One of the benefits of working as a private shifter was that he could continue to live in an upper district. Once a shifter entered public service he or she would be relocated to the lower and poverty-stricken neighbourhoods where hauntings were part of the everyday. In the wealthy neighbourhoods the line between the City and its Parallel was reinforced by the most expensive and most advanced ecto-technology; poltergeists and other visitors from Sheol were extremely rare, happening only when some mystery cult or cabal compromised the integrity of the division. And since cultics and witches would be caught quicker and punished more harshly in the upper districts, they usually confined their activities to the overpopulated, polluted, and chaotic boroughs.

Since Maer Canter was highborn he was not at all interested in leaving the privilege and security of the upper districts and accepting a job in the squalid neighbourhoods where hauntings were commonplace. The only reason he had chosen to work as a shifter was because he possessed the sight (his third eye had opened when he was nine, giving him all manner of nightmares before his parents realized what was happening and had him trained) and felt that he should find a line of work that would allow him to profit from his talent.

Many shifters working as independents did so for reasons that were either political, criminal, or both. There was no policy for private shifting work. Dodgy clients who wanted relics retrieved or stolen from Sheol were common; their contracts were lucrative. And since Canter wanted to maintain a highborn lifestyle, he was more than happy to sell his services to the well-paying highborn clients.

But now a client had walked into his office and presented him with a ludicrous

task that required an encounter with the dirty lower districts. Only the fact that he would be well compensated had kept him from laughing in Adaelrose's face.

The fabled library from before the Mad Tyrant's purge, before Year Zero, before the City had forgotten its history, before the meaning of the deadly world outside the dome was lost: Canter knew from his schooling that no reputable scholars believed that such a library existed. It was an urban myth, wishful thinking for a history that would give roots to a rootless world. During the Year Zero purges, where all knowledge except the most instrumental and technological was destroyed, and where all scholars and experts were annihilated, no cabal of renegade scholars had succeeded in building a library to preserve ancient knowledge. They had not existed, the historians of today maintained, and since they had not existed they had not created this fabled library.

There was no library; there was no link to the past. Or, as one expert on the history of the Mad Tyrant and the Year Zero purges put it: "The City has become time itself. Beyond its walls and its current history, nothing can be known."

As for the City's parallel, the world of ghosts and powers that called itself Sheol, even less was known. Conspiracy theorists obsessed with the myth of the library claimed that the history of both cities was hidden in the library and that, if the library was ever found, scholars would finally be able to understand not only the Parallel City's existence but its connection to the City of the living.

It was also theorized that the terrible Shinugami, the gods who squabbled over the dead, knew the truth behind both cities. But if they did, they weren't telling anyone on this side of the veil—least of all a shifter like Maer Canter who, like anyone who wanted to stay alive and free for as long as possible, worked hard to avoid their attention.

*

He closed his fist around the chip with one hand and accepted the handshake with the other. "If it's a dead end I still get paid?"

"Just as long as you work in good faith."

The deal was made and the job began.

That night Canter began to dream of the library.

TWO

The information on the chip was, as Canter had suspected, not very impressive even if it was interesting. It consisted mainly of disjointed texts, video, and audio files concerning Hearst Yundilf, once a wealthy business tycoon, who had been obsessed with the lost library. Believing, like Adaelrose, that the library was somewhere in Sheol, he had squandered much of his immense fortune chasing his obsession. In the end, his family had disowned him. He had ended up in the lower district of Thirteenth Floor, a raving lunatic and ghetto pauper. The fragments of Yundilf's diary, clearly written by someone who was not entirely sane, were filled with claims about a map that led to the library.

Aside from the story of Yundilf, the chip was filled with information regarding Yundilf's Thirteenth Floor apartment where he had died poor and lonely. If Canter was to convince Adaelrose that he was doing his best to find the non-existent library, then this was where he needed to begin.

The moment he stepped out of the tube and into the squalor of Thirteenth Floor his nostrils were assaulted by the stench. He knew that he would acclimatize after a few hours, the scent growing more and more bearable, but the thought did not help.

The lower districts were always stench-ridden boroughs of filth. Overpopulated districts filled with crumbling structures. Poor ventilation, faulty sewage, alleys glutted with rotting garbage, excrement, and vermin that spilled

unto the broader streets. Loud and uncouth low-caste occupants, the backbone of the City's economy. And while he could travel to and from the the upper districts without effort, the people who were born and lived here did not, as a whole, possess the same privilege; they would be rejected by the tube and field security, the identities of their eyes, identification cards, and thumbprints denying them access. Unless they were day labourers for some wealthy aristocrat who thought that human servants were more mannered (meaning a sign of wealth) than automated drones.

There were stories of lower casters who, through strength of will and intellectual fortitude, were able to ascend to upper caste status and, within a generation, produce high-born children. Canter had never met one of these success stories, however, and was nearly certain they were more mythic than Adaelrose's library. It was far more common for an upper caste citizen to lose his fortune, fall from grace, and, no longer able to afford the cost of privileged life, end up in the lower districts. The unlucky high born, because of his caste status, would retain his privileged autonomy. But any child born in the lower districts, by definition, would be low born.

Hearst Yundilf was an example of this unlucky group.

"Staying long, sir?" a securicor officer assigned to tube duty asked as Canter crossed the platform.

"Hopefully not long," he grunted.

"Careful, then. Once you're out of the station you're under public jurisdiction. And the Control Division is stretched thin in this district."

"I know what I'm doing," he responded flatly.

"Used to slumming, huh?"

He shot the officer an evil glare. "Business. Not that it's any of yours."

*

Open markets, open chaos. The well ordered and quiet life common to the upper districts was unknown in these parts. Mobs controlled the streets,

rude and unfashionable. This was one of the darker districts, at a lower altitude than some of its counterparts. The days were shorter here, sunlight disappearing behind the tips of the higher and sunnier levels far earlier in the day. Shadows were already lengthening, giving the environment an altogether sinister context.

Canter waved down a cab and gave the driver the address from Adaelrose's datachip. He slammed the door before another possible customer could clamour in after him, hand dropping to the sidearm clipped to his belt.

The cabbie pulled away from the curb, nearly running over a woman in the process, and said, "That's in the bottom reaches, you know. Underground."

Canter cursed inwardly: your address just had to be the worse possible address, didn't it Adaelrose? "Well take me as far as you can."

"En't real safe down there, not for a fancy high-born like yourself."

"I'll be fine."

The cabbie continued as if Canter hadn't replied: "Solidarists run cells down there and Control can't police 'em. There's also more hauntings."

He shrugged. "Thanks for the warning."

*

When he was younger, and just starting classes at his district university, Canter had switched political allegiances on a nearly weekly basis. Like all students he was drawn to some brand of radicalism. The content of the politics didn't matter; students just liked to appear radical.

Originally, because of his upbringing, he had joined a group of proud high-borns who referred to themselves as Casters. Proclaiming that the caste division was a law of nature, they believed that it needed to be defended violently. Desperate for signs that proved the sacrosanct nature of the castes, they had argued that the lower castes deserved to remain in the lower districts because they were intrinsically morally inferior. Hauntings were used as evidence: since they happened with more frequency in the lower districts, was this not a sign that the lower castes were more sinful?

It only took Canter a few months to realize that the Caster thesis was undefensible. Life in the lower districts was shorter and brutal because it was a worse life. Being a shifter he had already learned that hauntings were the result of great violence and so it was not difficult to understand that the hauntings in the low-born neighbourhoods had nothing to do with moral failure.

After leaving the Casters, and in an effort to shock his parents further, he had become a Solidarist. Even though he was high-born, he read the semi-legal tracts and manifestoes and became convinced, with college student fervour, that the low-born should overthrow the high-born and that a new and equitable City could be built. He declaimed his privilege openly, nearly convinced that a revolution was at hand.

Eventually he had realized the inherent hypocricy of his beliefs. At no point had he ever demonstrated interest in real solidarity with the low-born. Completely horrified by the lower districts he could not imagine abandoning his privilege to work for some nebulous revolutionary future.

He finished college as a pragmatist and, without any guilt, started his private shifter practice. He did not want to live in the lower districts, he did not care about Solidarist revolutions, he just wanted to make enough money to defend his privileged birth. He could agree that he was only privileged because of luck and inequality, but he really didn't care. He was lucky, the world was unequal, but he wanted to stay lucky and happy.

The fact that he was now heading to the nadir of a lower district, Canter reasoned, was his Solidarist past taking revenge.

*

"This as far as I can take you," the cabbie said as he screeched to a halt beside a disintegrating and moss covered building. "There's a lift in there that'll take you below ground."

"Do you know how I can find this address?"

"Can't rightly say. I never been below ground myself. Don't know how

addresses work down there."

"Great," he muttered as he kicked open the door and stepped into the filthy streets.

"Gotta be someone below who can help you out," the man offered hopefully, angling for a handsome tip.

Canter removed a wad of hard cash he had withdrawn for his foray to this district and counted off a generous amount. He wondered if it was the residue of Solidarist politics that convinced him to pay the cabbie so well. The man thanked him profusely, happy to receive more than a day's wages.

"You sure you're going to be okay, sir?"

He shrugged. "I'll be fine."

The cabbie tried and failed to hide his disbelief, shrugged, and drove away.

While Maer Canter preferred to avoid the lower districts he was not entirely worried. Even though he sold his services to the highest bidder he was still a shifter. Once you spent any amount of time in the Parallel City—that dead world filled with angry shades, poltergeists, Shinugami and their creatures—the lower districts could seem rather tame in comparison. The only difference was the stench.

Sheol was devoid of smell.

THREE

The rickety lift descended and the world grew darker. Bad lighting, the electricity less stable in this part of the City, flickered off and on. The men sharing the lift grinned, maybe thinking that he was some sort of high-born slummer.

He regretted his decision to leave for Thirteenth Floor so quickly. In his haste to finish Adaelrose's job, he had neglected to think about appearance. It would have only taken a few more hours to buy unfashionable and cheap clothing and disguise himself as lower caste.

"Here we are, cov," one of the men intoned as the lift shuddered to a stop and he drew back the brass grill, "At the bottom of the world."

He was not impressed by the ominous declaration; he knew it was designed to be frightening. He also knew that Sheol went far deeper, that the Parallel City had more mysterious and terrible depths. And though he had never descended very deep on that side of the veil, he had spoken to enough shades to know of the *antique dark*. He had heard rumours of an infinite ocean leagues and leagues beneath Sheol. He doubted it was the same in the City of the living.

Withdrawing the scrap of paper on which he had written the address, he showed it to the men and asked for directions. "I'd be willing to pay."

They shared a grin and one of them said, "What if we just want to take your money, cov? Control en't working these parts."

He casually fanned back his jacket to reveal the expensive pistol. "You could try."

"Fancy gun," the other remarked, not at all impressed, "I could use a fancy gun."

The first added, "Your gun won't help you with hauntings."

Knowing that superstition often worked where other threats failed, Canter retorted, "I'm a shifter; I'm here because of hauntings."

Which was technically a lie, but he didn't care. Anything to make them back down quickly.

It worked: they shared a glance, followed by a nod, and the first asked in a more respectful tone, "You planning on exorcizing something?"

"Maybe."

"I can show you that address—it's about an hour from here. It haunted?"

"Maybe."

*

When they reached the address Canter had almost become accustomed to the smell of sewage. It was much sharper below ground, in these subterranean catacombs, and he knew that when he returned to the open streets of Thirteenth Floor he wouldn't be able to smell anything.

He was a little surprised by the catacombs. There was a part of him that had expected them to be empty of inhabitants, or at least sparsely occupied, but he had quickly discovered that they were almost as overpopulated.

"It's where you come when you don't got anything," one of his guides proclaimed, guessing at Canter's surprise. "Some places here cost next to nothing."

Canter experienced a brief moment of near reconversion to Solidarism: he was disgusted that the City would permit such vermin-like existence. He was horrified by the squalor; he tried very hard not to stare at the beggars. At the junkies strung out on this week's popular narcotic in an effort to escape their

horrible existence.

"This is it," one of the men pronounced, pointing at the door bearing the address from the datachip. "Looks like you en't the first one to come by."

Canter narrowed his eyes with interest. It appeared as if the door had been recently boarded up, the small subterranean apartment sealed off. But someone had torn the boards away from the door; the dust was disturbed.

"Could have been anyone," the other man suggested. "If no one's charging rent, you could have squatters."

"If it's haunted," the other added, making a pseudo-religious gesture belonging to some mystery cult or other, "Then maybe they met a bad end."

The first mumbled, "Worth the risk if you got no place to stay."

Canter paid them. Superstitious enough to be happy with the money, they scurried away without another word. He waited until they were gone and, sparing little attention for the nearby group of junkies lounging against the catacomb wall and blowing bubbles in their drool, pushed through the door.

*

It was a single wood-panelled room—thin and barely insulated wood from some cheap factory. In the corner there was a hole in the floor that was probably used for bodily waste. In the opposite corner there was a sad little kitchenette. Directly beside the kitchenette was a disintegrating mattress. In the centre of the room, drawing his attention like a cultic altar, was a well built table and chair.

As he approached the table he realized that the dust was recently disturbed. His flashlight told him that the place was cob-web ridden and probably undisturbed for decades. But his flashlight also revealed the dust's disturbance: ghosts of footprints, bare spots that did not make logical sense.

Someone was here first; Adaelrose wasn't the only one with information.

But what did this mean? That the library was real? Or did it only mean that there were more library obsessives out there who had latched onto the Yundilf story?

Upon reaching the table his flashlight revealed yet another inconsistency: there was a bare spot on the surface, a small and perfect rectangle. And when he wiped away the dust, Canter discovered the rectangular shape was even more perfect—discolouration in the wood that told him something had been sitting here for years. Someone, the same someone responsible for the dust disturbance, had removed whatever object had once graced the table.

Canter glared at the discolouration and considered his options. He could use his camera to take badly lit photographs of the environment, show them to Adaelrose, and claim that he had discovered nothing. He could even lie and say that he had visited the parallel and proved that Adaelrose's hopes were a myth. Or he could be a proper detective and fulfill the terms of his contract.

He might be a high-born shifter but, regardless of his pragmatism, he had always considered his honesty a point of pride. It was why he had good references in the first place.

"Fuck it," he muttered aloud after he shined his light around the entire small room to make sure that he was alone, "I guess it's time to shift."

At the very least he would be able to prove that the search was fruitless. He decided that, if he found nothing interesting in the parallel, he wouldn't tell Adaelrose that someone had arrived in the room first and his conscience would be clean. After all, he lacked the resources to track some unknown thief who could be anywhere in the City.

He placed the flashlight on the dusty floor and dead-bolted the room's door. He quickly second-guessed his security measures: the junkies might not be a threat, but there was a chance that someone else might be further down the tunnel outside. So he dragged the chair over to the door and angled it under the door knob.

Feeling a little better about his patchwork security measures, he sat down in the dust beside his flashlight. He folded his legs under himself and rotated his shoulders several times to clear out the kinks. He traced a ritual circle in the

dust around him with a finger—it was a personal ritual lacking any universal applicability but it was important for his focus. Then he turned off the flashlight, plunging the room into darkness, dropped his hands to his knees and chin to his chest, and shifted.

FOUR

As usual, the first thing he noticed was the lack of scent. It was always the most obvious, this obliteration of an entire sense. It came before the sensation of rotating, of the angles of his previous existence being utterly reversed. Before the realization that the world had become greyer somehow, leached of its colour. For though it was less dark in the room's parallel, it also lacked the depth of colour.

He rose unsteadily on his astral legs. He had abandoned his physical body on the other side of the veil. He was just as solid here—he could beat on his chest to prove it—but he knew that he was also still in that dank room, plunged in darkness, sitting cross-legged and senseless.

There were rumours that Shin Airys, the so-called Halfshade, could enter Sheol corporeally—that she didn't leave a body behind. But like every other shifter minus Airys, Canter did not possess a Shinugami mother or father. He was forced to leave a part of himself in the City of the living.

Taking a deep breath (more of a habit because he really didn't need to breath in this realm and in this state), he looked around. The room was a copy of the one he had abandoned. This was often the case: the Parallel City mimicked the City of the living. There were times, however, when things were different. When the shades, under the sway of the nearest and most powerful death god, had made things different. Or maybe building ventures in the City of the living

had changed things first, altering the symmetry.

Whatever the case, this grey room was a dismal copy of the one in which his corporeal body was still sitting. Lit by the ever present grey light this room possessed the same dimensions and the same furniture. Only here, unlike the room that he had just abandoned, the chair was still at the table. There was also no toilet hole.

Most importantly, however, Canter was not alone.

A man was leaning on the kitchenette counter and staring at him. "A shifter. It's about time one of you showed up."

Canter immediately recognized the man. It took him a few seconds to put his thoughts in order to grasp the recognition: the stocky and joweled figure in the kitchenette was a greyer, slightly older and altogether deader version of the face on Adaelrose's datachip.

"Hearst Yundilf," he pronounced.

The shade shrugged. "You found the map, I presume."

"Map?"

Yundilf's ghost frowned. "You didn't check my computer?"

He frowned at the unfamiliar word; it took him several seconds to realize that the ghost was referring to an outdated term for electronic notebooks. A term that referred to a bulkier and less convenient medium.

"There was no computer."

"I left it on the table," the ghost insisted. "It's been sitting there for years."

Canter winced when he recalled the discoloured rectangle. "I think someone took it first."

The shade frowned. "That complicates things."

Tentatively approaching the other man, hoping that he was not some half-insane poltergeist, Canter echoed, "Complicates things?"

"I've been holed up in here for a long time, hiding from Gehenland's Shinugami. I don't want him to know about it."

"Know about what?"

"The map."

"The map to what?"

Yundilf rolled his dead eyes. "You can't be that dense. You wouldn't have shown up in my old apartment without having some clue."

He didn't want to say it but he still muttered, "The library."

"Was it that hard?"

"It's a myth," Canter insisted.

"Then why are you here?" the shade shot back.

He admitted, "A lucrative contract."

"Ah. One of those *private* shifters."

Refusing to recognize the insult, Canter persisted, "So you claim that you have a map to the library. *The* library?"

"Do you know of any other library, son?"

"Really?"

Yundilf glanced at the door with worry. "I've got djinn sniffing around for me. If some idiot took it already, he might have alerted them. You can't remove that sort of thing without setting off alarms on this side of existence…"

Djinn? Canter glanced at the door as well, his pseudo-pulse skipping a beat. If Yundilf's ghost was telling the truth, he did not want to stick around to face a dread. The soul-collecting and favoured servants of the Shinugami were usually bad news for a shifter.

"…If it wasn't on the table, then you're too late."

He felt the need to repeat, "So you actually believe that you have a map to the library?"

Yundilf rolled his dead eyes. "I didn't waste my fortune and life for nothing, did I? Died before I could do anything with it, obviously, but it's been waiting on your side of existence. And I've been waiting here, afraid that some Shinugami will take it first."

"You've been here all this time?" he asked, unable to think of anything else to say. He wasn't about to contradict the shade—if he had believed in his obsession before dying he would believe it now in death and there was no point in arguing with him about the reality of the library.

And yet, even if Yundilf was a delusional obsessive, Canter had to admit that the fact his computer was missing was intriguing. The ghost claimed he had found a map to the library; someone else must have thought this belief was true otherwise the ancient computer would not be missing.

"Of course I've been here all this time!" the ghost spat. "Do you think I want to be collected and questioned by a fucking Shinugami? Do you think I want a death god to know about the library?"

"Why not?"

Yundilf rounded the counter and thrust a grey finger at Canter's chest. "Can you imagine what a Shinugami would do with all that history? Can you imagine the City of the living under the complete control of Sheol, weighted down by generations of the dead? There are things in there from the days before the Catastrophe that could help us, Master Shifter, but the gods of the dead want things to remain the same."

"The *Catastrophe*?"

"The Nakbah, the Catastrophe… whatever happened to make the City what it is today and the world outside unliveable. The purge erased the memory of all of that. We don't remember any of it, except in the incoherent dreams of bad history, because of the Tyrant's purge. But the library remembers."

Canter decided that Yundilf's shade was utterly insane. Still, there was his contract to consider: "Any idea of who took your map?"

The ghost shook his head quickly and frowned at the door. "A dread's on its way; I can feel it."

Canter winced, jerking his head towards the door. He wanted to dismiss the statement as yet another example of the shade's insanity but it was never

wise to dismiss a ghost's feelings about a djinn.

Yundilf continued, "Someone must have said something to a cultic. A word spoken to the wrong person goes a long way—finds its way to the ear of a Shinugami. Someone stupid takes the computer and, no matter how hard you try to keep a low profile, the djinn are sniffing you out. Find the map, Master Shifter. Get it out of this district."

"But—"

"I don't care if you believe whether I'm telling the truth!" the ghost roared. "This is bigger than you!"

Canter heard footsteps on the other side of the door, felt the tone of the room shift. Yundilf turned an even paler shade of grey and cringed. Realizing that the shade was right about one thing—that a dread was in the vicinity—Canter decided that it was wise to withdraw.

Without sparing another glance in the direction of the ghost he shifted back through the veil, escaping before the Shinugami agent manifested.

FIVE

"Hey," he rasped down at the junky directly across from the door, kicking him out of his stupour, "Wake the fuck up."

The filthy man moaned, drooled, and stared grumpily through heavy lids. "Wha… wha… who're you?"

He kicked the junky again for good measure, shining his flashlight directly into the squinting eyes. "How long have you been squatting here?"

"Whazzit to you?"

Knowing that bribery didn't work with junkies—they would say anything if they thought you would give them enough money for their next fix—Canter threatened, "I'll put a hole in your head if you don't pay attention and answer my Sheol-damned questions."

He drew his gun to prove his point.

The junky's stupour evaporated immediately. His hands shot up defensively. "Ask, man! Ask anything!"

Canter repeated, "How long have you been squatting here?"

"I… I can't remember," the terrified man admitted.

"Did you see anyone enter that room aside from me?"

"I don't know—I don't remember *you*. Were you with the ones who pulled of the boards?"

Canter crouched and pushed his pistol directly into the junky's face. "You

saw who removed the boards?"

Desperate to stay alive, the frightened man soiled his breaches for perhaps the third or fourth time that day and provided Canter with a rather detailed description of two men. More importantly, he gave Canter a name. He had overheard one man call the other man *Daniel Karrow*.

Canter rose, dropped several bills into the terrified junky's lap, and thanked him for his time. It was a small sacrifice for him but significant for the underground dweller.

He left the catacomb tunnel, hurrying away from the room and its parallel—he did not want a djinn shifting into this dimension and following. He still did not believe in the library but it was clear that, aside from his employer, there were other believers. And one of these believers might even be a Shinugami.

*

Exhausted both physically and psychically, Canter checked into the nearest motel once he reached ground level. He really didn't care that his room was roach-infested and bedbug-ridden; he just wanted a place to crash.

Before going to sleep he called Adaelrose's personal number. He wanted to inform his current employer of Daniel Karrow's name and description. Wealthy obsessives like Adaelrose were generally used to bribing the Control Division of any given district to get whatever they wanted. And if this Karrow was still in Thirteenth Floor, and wasn't hiding out under an alias, then Adaelrose could probably get the local authorities to find out where he was staying.

Unfortunately Adaelrose was not awake to answer the call, so Canter was forced to leave a message. Which suited him just fine: he really wasn't in the mood to speak with his employer. So he left the name and description, asked if Adaelrose could use his resources to find out the man's whereabouts, and made sure the man knew it was important.

If he's so rich, he wondered before he collapsed on the mattress, then why did he need me to investigate that room?

The answer, he decided before falling unconscious, was pretty obvious. Because Adaelrose was rich he had paid who he took to be the best shifter to do the investigating for him. Canter was here because of Adaelrose's wealth, one of the obsessive man's resources.

With these thoughts he fell asleep.

Again he dreamed of the library. This time he chased multiple Yundilf's through the thin corridors of book laden shelves, yelling at the ghosts to stop and promising that he was not a dread. But Yundilf disappeared into the depths of the labyrinthian library, swallowed by the dusty gloom.

*

He was woken up by his bleating phone. Rolling over on the infested mattress, he scratched his back and answered by rasping a half-awake "hello" into the receiver. His itchy back reminded him that he was in the lower districts.

Adaelrose's tinny voice reminded him of the job: "Canter? Are you awake?"

He coughed to clear his throat and replied, "Did you get my message about Karrow?"

"That's why I'm calling. Is he a lead?"

Since he didn't want to promise too much he answered, "Maybe. He took something from that room before I got there."

Adaelrose's curse caused the phone to buzz—reception was terrible in the lower districts. "Well you better hurry."

"Hurry and what?" he grumbled.

"Get to Karrow and take back whatever he stole."

Canter decided that there was no point in arguing with Adaelrose about the concept of *theft*. It was not as if Yundilf's computer belonged to Adaelrose. If anything, this Daniel Karrow had just stolen it first. But Canter's employer was acting as if Karrow had stolen from him—as if the contents of the room were already his property.

Instead of making these arguments he grumbled, "If you were able to find

out where he was staying, why don't you pay someone to deal with him and call me when you're finished."

Adaelrose's voice growled, "I'm paying you, Canter, to do that. I can't afford to trust more than one person with sensitive information."

"I'm not a hired gun."

"You're better than a hired gun: you're a hired shifter. So unless you want me to consider this a breach of contract, get out of bed, grab a pen and take down this address."

Already regretting the contract, Canter obeyed. He was only half-surprised to learn that Daniel Karrow was still in Thirteenth Floor.

When Adaelrose finished relaying the address he asked, "What does he have?"

"A map I think."

"A map to the library?"

Since he did not want to admit the library existed, Canter permitted, "Maybe."

"Then get it back immediately."

"I'm not securicor, Adaelrose. I'm just—"

"I know you have some combat training. And I also know that Karrow is nothing more than a sniveling datathief. Just wave a gun in his face. Break his teeth. I don't care. I want that map!"

Canter stared with annoyance at his phone for several seconds after his employer ended the call. He was a private shifter, not a hired thug. He did not possess the necessary genofixing and enhancements to make him a combat ready securicor operative. His training and experience made him only moderately equipped for violent encounters on this side of existence. For a moment he considered calling the man back and terminating the contract.

When he thought of what Adaelrose was willing to pay, however, he reconsidered.

So instead of ending his job, he left his bed, splashed water in his face, and pocketed the piece of paper upon which he had scribbled Karrow's address. If the man was only a datathief maybe he could surprise him, beat him into submission, and take whatever he had stolen from the subterranean room.

He tried not to remember Yundilf's warnings as he left the motel. He tried to forget the fact that a djinn had come to collect the man's shade.

SIX

Karrow was staying in another squalid motel on the other side of Thirteenth Floor, probably in a room similar to the one Canter had rented. Since security in these places was pretty much non-existent, nobody paid much attention when Canter entered the lobby. The clerk seemed far more interested in a beaten copy of a Hiley Paterson novel than someone who might or might not be a guest.

Instead of crossing to the elevator and proceeding to Karrow's room, however, Canter decided to remain in the lobby. He unfolded a copy of the local paper newsmedia and tried to look as if he belonged in the dingy little motel—as if he was here just to wait for someone and was not at all suspicious.

He was used to waiting, he was just not used to waiting for someone he was supposed to assault and rob. He nearly considered giving up the charade and trying to find a way into Karrow's room when, nearly twenty minutes after he had parked himself in the smelly sofa, the elevator door dinged and a man matching the description provided by the junky exited.

Canter waited until Karrow had passed before folding up his newspaper and following him outside. Again, the motel clerk showed no sign of interest. If this was a hotel in any upper district, securicor would have been alerted the moment he unfolded his newspaper; they would be all over him when he showed any indication of following a guest.

Karrow was in the midst of waving down a cab when Canter approached him, shoved a gun into the small of his back, and growled into his ear, "Master Karrow?"

The man immediately straightened, dropped his waving arm and proved that Canter had guessed correctly by retorting anxiously, "Wh-what do you want?"

"Let's go back to your room," he suggested. "I'm going to take my gun from your back, but I'll still have it trained on you. Understand?"

Karrow nodded and Canter breathed a private sigh of relief. He was half-afraid that this man would turn out to be a securicor operative and not, as Adaelrose had promised, just a datathief.

Hiding the pistol in the newspaper, but keeping his finger on the trigger, Canter turned Karrow back toward the motel. Soon they were returning to the lobby and he was following his mark unto the elevator.

*

Once he was within Karrow's room, and the door was locked and bolted, Canter dropped the newspaper so the other man could see the gun, aimed it carefully at his head, and said, "You took something from an underground room in this district."

A pale and frightened Karrow held up his hands defensively. "I-I don't know what—"

"An old-fashioned computer, I believe."

He stretched his arms higher. "Mickah found that—it had nothing to do with me! He just brought me there to hack the fucking thing."

"Do you have the computer?"

The datathief jerked his head at the bed and Canter saw an ugly looking, metallic, and rectangular object that could only be Yundilf's computer. He gestured with his gun at the nearby chair and ordered Karrow to sit, put his hands on his head, and not move.

He asked, "Did you hack it yet?"

"Just the encryption! I didn't really look at it, I swear."

Trying to hide the fact that he was glad for the hack, Canter sneered, "You didn't look at it, Master Karrow? Really?"

There was a brief pause before the datathief admitted, "Okay, I saw that its only file was some sort of map, but—"

Confirmation enough: "Shut-up and keep your hands on your head."

Keeping his gun trained on the datathief, Canter carefully made his way to the bed, tucked the computer under his arm, and backed away. Karrow kept his hands on his head, lips worming a silent prayer to the deity of whatever mystery cult he followed.

Just as Canter reached the door, however, his forehead began to itch furiously. His third eye was threatening to open—something was forcing it awake. Karrow also sensed something was wrong: he might not have had any significant psychic capabilities, but you didn't need to be a shifter to recognize a haunting.

And this felt like a serious haunting.

The fact that Canter had not sensed anything awry in this motel room before meant that whatever was making it feel wrong was happening now. Something was manifesting from the other side of existence.

"Bloody Sheol," he murmured appropriately as one of the windows shattered outward and Karrow jumped to his feet, no longer fixated on Canter's gun.

The datathief yelled, "Wh-what's happening?"

"Fucked if I know," Canter retorted and, deciding that it was better to run than open his third eye and wait to catch a glimpse of whatever was manifesting, fled the room, slamming the door behind him.

*

Upon reaching the street, old computer still tucked under his arm and pistol

holstered, Canter waved down a cab. He yelled at the cabbie to drive to the nearest tube station before he even closed the door. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and Karrow's room as possible. He wanted to get back to the upper districts and behind the expensive ecto-barriers immediately.

He tried to tell himself that the haunting was a fluke, that whatever had manifested in Karrow's room had nothing to do with his contract. That he had no reason to panic because what poltergeist or Sheol native would care about an old computer and a mythic library.

But he couldn't get Yundilf's obsessive claims out of his mind. Nor could he forget that a djinn was coming for the shade around the time he had decided to shift back to the City of the living. And maybe it was the same djinn who was manifesting in Karrow's room. Maybe a Shinugami had sent his agent after Yundilf's paranoid map.

I don't have to believe in the library to accept that, he told himself: I only have to believe that a Shinugami believes in the library—that some death god is as obsessed with this business as Adaelrose. The library could still be false but that did not mean that everyone and everything believed it was false.

When the taxi stopped in front of the nearest station, Canter threw a handful of cash at the surprised cabbie, leapt out of the car, and fled the streets. A securicor officer, probably thinking he was a fugitive, stepped into his path.

"Identification?"

He fumbled for his wallet and pulled out the requisite ID, annoyed that the operative had wasted his time rather than asking for a thumbprint or retinal scan. Instead he had to wait for the belligerent woman to verify his ID, carefully making sure it wasn't a fake, before waving him past.

Thankfully, there was no sign of psychic disturbance behind him.

"Are you okay, sir?" she asked as she returned the verified identification.

"Ran into a problem out there," he mumbled, feeling like an idiot.

She chuckled. "Happens a lot when you're out slumming, I guess."

He glared. "I was not slumming."

"Whatever you say, sir."

Shooting her one last glare, he walked into the tube and, as soon as he was safely behind the ecto-barriers, breathed a sigh of relief. Not that these barriers would stop a dread or Shinugami, however, but they still made him feel a little better.

SEVEN

This time when he dreamed of the library he was shorter than the books that were slotted into cyclopean shelves. He was walking along one of these shelves, trying to read the titles on the seven foot spines. The letters were unfamiliar, perhaps belonging to a language or languages that had disappeared during the Mad Tyrant's purges.

When he climbed to a higher shelf, however, he found a book titled with familiar letters: *The Nakbah*. The strange word used by Yundilf's shade to reference an obscure event: the Nakbah, the Catastrophe. An event preceding the Mad Tyrant's attempt to control and eradicate history? Here in the dream library Canter was willing to believe that Hearst Yundilf was not a paranoid obsessive.

Desperate to discover the meaning of Yundilf's Nakbah, Canter struggled to pull the book from the shelf, not caring that if he succeeded both he and the book would fall to the floor. And yet the book refused to budge, no matter how hard he strained.

*

He discovered that he was staring down at the black metal of the old-fashioned computer when he was awakened by the train entering the station of his home district. He yawned, glanced around at the other passengers, stretched, and prepared to disembark.

On his way out of the station, past lazy securicor operatives who did not have to be as diligent as their counterparts in the lower district stations, he decided that he should probably turn on the computer and check its contents before calling Adaelrose. Earlier, in his desperation to get out of Karrow's apartment, he had not thought of performing this obvious task.

A block away from the station, in a beautiful park, he sat on a bench and opened the computer. Staring at his blank screen, as grey as Sheol, he pressed the switch. Nothing happened. He tried again: still nothing.

The old machine was out of power, its batteries drained long before it was discovered.

His first reaction was to blame the datathief: that lying shit tricked me! Then he remembered that Karrow had only promised that the computer's contents were decrypted; he had said nothing about the machine's power source. Being a datathief, Karrow had probably used his own equipment and ingenuity to read the computer's databanks and examine its contents.

Which meant that Canter needed to hire his own datathief if he wanted to retrieve the stolen files. Grumbling to himself, he opened his phone and dialed a familiar number.

*

"I don't see one of these very often," Maha Kiernan pronounced when Canter put the computer on her work table. "Old design, a discontinued line within its first year."

Kiernan was a datathief he had worked with on multiple occasions. Often his clients were eccentric collectors (though not as eccentric as Adaelrose) who wanted files retrieved from Sheol. In many of these instances the files were encrypted, forcing Canter to hire Kiernan.

He had known the datathief since his university days. They had been lovers and they had both flirted with Solidarism. Like him, she had outgrown the ideology. Unfortunately, she had also outgrown him, breaking his heart the

day after graduation by choosing to marry, without any warning, the heir of a notebook industry.

Since all she wanted to do was play with data and build electronic machines, the marriage made sense. Her husband's fortune paid for her office and workshop; she could devote most of her time to her hobby without worrying too much about clients. She could even entertain the occasional extra-marital lover and, on more than one occasion, Canter had ended up back in her bed—which was always a mistake because it only reminded him that he was still in love.

Most of the time, though, his relationship with Kiernan was limited to business. She would take his jobs without asking questions; she cared more about the job itself than the information she was cracking.

"So can you mine it?"

"I can easily rig it to my notebook," she retorted dismissively: "This is too easy."

He shrugged. "I just need it done, Maha."

She cleaned her greasy hands on her leather apron and leaned back in her swivel chair. When he had entered her workshop she was in the midst of building some sort of electronic monstrosity, the nature of which eluded him. Now she pushed it aside and grabbed her closest notebook. Opened its cover and ran her fingers across its electronic pages, rotating and manipulating holograms.

"How long will it take?"

"A few minutes. Five at most."

"Glad I came to the best datathief in the City."

The comment was designed primarily to irk his former lover. It couldn't be proved empirically, nor would he even have the expertise to know who was the best. But Kiernan hated the word because of its criminal connotations.

"I am not a datathief."

"Oh come on," he prodded, "You mean to tell me that you don't help your husband out with the odd bit of industrial espionage? I heard that his closest

competitor was squeezed out of the market two weeks back because some piece of data was stolen."

She spared him a glare before tethering the machines together. "At least I don't steal from the dead," she grumbled, not bothering to deny the accusation. "Where'd you find this relic, Maer? In the crib of a dead baby?"

"Why would a dead baby have an old-fashioned computer?"

His phone bleated, interrupting the argument. Adaelrose was calling. He left Kiernan to finish retrieving the data, stepping out of her shop to answer the phone.

*

After Canter had explained what had happened with Karrow, and what was happening at that moment with Kiernan, Adaelrose demanded, "You're letting the wife of a notebook multicivic look at my data?"

"Calm down. Maha and I go back a ways—I trust her."

"You better. If I find that she's copied the data and given it to her husband, Master Canter, I'll be very displeased."

"We'd have to use some sort of data expert. I'd rather go with one I trust."

"Very well: I'll cover the cost…"

Of course you will, Canter thought grumpily: it's an expense and you pay expenses.

"…When she's finished meet me at your office. Immediately."

Sensing something in his employer's voice, Canter asked, "Is everything okay?"

There was a brief pause. Then: "Daniel Karrow's dead. The Shifter Division of Thirteenth Floor has already confirmed that it was a haunting."

Canter tensed, ghost fingers of a chill seizing his spine. "Dead?"

"Heart ripped out of his ribcage and thrown on the bed. According to the local experts, he didn't leave a ghost."

Which could mean any number of things: ghosts only lingered to haunt the

City of the living in a few circumstances. Usually they were sucked into Sheol within seconds of their death. Sometimes no ghost was even left behind, in either City.

In this case, though, if the presence he had sensed emerging from the Parallel City was in fact a dread, then it made sense that Karrow's shade was absent. Djinn collected errant souls for their Shinugami masters.

"I don't like this," Canter muttered.

Adaelrose's voice sneered through the phone, "I'm not hiring you to *like this*. And I thought I'd hired the best shifter outside of Shin Airys. What sort of shifter is scared of a haunting? Isn't it your job to deal with that kind of thing?"

"Just be at my office," he growled and ended the call.

There was no point in trying to explain to Adaelrose the nature of shifting work. Canter was not afraid of poltergeists or low-level Sheol denizens—like harpies or gargoyles—but no shifter was unafraid of death gods and their dread agents. The first rule in shifting was to avoid the Shinugami whenever possible. The second was to deal with djinn only when it was necessary.

*

"It's finished," Kiernan announced when Canter returned to her laboratory. "I dumped the entire contents of this relic on a chip that can be read by any notebook."

"How much do I owe you?"

They haggled for a couple minutes over the price. When Canter paid up, Kiernan dropped the datachip into his hand. He stared at it for several seconds, wondering what was on this chip that was so important. A map to the library? He still refused to believe in urban myths.

"What do you want me to do with the old computer?" she asked.

"Destroy it."

"But it's an antique!" she protested. "And some of the parts are really worth cannibalizing for—"

"Wipe its drive, then, and keep it."

"Already wiped," she assured him. "You know me: I'm thorough."

"I hope so," he muttered, "For your sake."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He shook his head. "Nothing—I trust you."

"Don't be a stranger, Maer. Just because I'm married to someone else doesn't mean you only have to visit me for business reasons."

He paused at the door and qualified his previous statement, "But I only trust you with business, Maha."

EIGHT

Upon entering his office Canter was grabbed from behind, spun around, and punched in the face by a mallet-sized fist. He had a moment to glimpse a broad face written with a stoic expression before his vision clouded with spots of red and black. A moment to reach for his gun and have it jarred instantly from his fingers. A moment when, as the gun hit the floor of his office and spun across the wood, he realized that the speed of his attacker meant dexplants and genofixing—a securicor or former securicor operative.

The next punch took him in the gut and threw him over his desk, probably breaking a rib or two. He landed on his hands and knees, coughing up blood and a broken tooth. He fought against the nauseau and desire to pass out, yanked open the bottom drawer, and fumbled in the darkness for his spare gun.

But his assailant was too fast and professional.

Canter decided that it was something of an accomplishment to succeed in drawing the spare gun, aiming, and squeezing of a single shot at the blurring shape. Not very much of an accomplishment, though, considering that the bullet struck the wall instead of his target.

Again the gun was knocked from his hand. Then he was grabbed by the throat, yanked from the floor, and slammed down on the top of his desk. The mallet fist descended again; this time he was knocked unconscious.

*

A slap on his cheek brought Canter to his senses. He coughed out blood, gasping against the sharp pain in his chest, and tried to make his eyes work. It did not take him long to realize that his wrists were cuffed behind the back of his chair, his ankles behind the front legs.

When he succeeded in blinking through the red and black haze, lifting his head painfully from his chest, he noticed that he was still in his office. The light was on, though at its dimmest setting, and he was staring at two men sitting on opposite chairs. One was the large and bullish assailant who had beaten him unconscious. The other was slighter, handsome in a distinguished way. They were both wearing non-descript suits and ties, clothing that was neither fashionable nor unfashionable.

"He's awake," the big one grunted.

The smaller one gingerly crossed his legs and smiled humourlessly. "Where's the computer, Master Canter?"

He played dumb, trying to buy enough time to put things together. "What computer?"

These men were obviously after the coveted files—maybe they were even working for the Shinugami who had sent the djinn in Thirteenth Floor. He should have realized that he wouldn't have to worry about a dread following him back to his home district. Unless this parallel was controlled by the same deity who ruled Gehenland, a djinn wouldn't follow. Sending it into another territory would be tantamount to declaring war on whatever dead god ruled this parallel. Which meant that the Shinugami from Thirteenth Floor would have to use human agents, hired guns or mystery cultists dedicated to the god.

There was also a good chance that these men represented another party entirely. Was Karrow working for someone like Adaelrose? Were these men here at the behest of the person or persons who had sent people to Yundilf's room first?

"Please," the slighter man said, "We'd prefer to not have to beat the

information out of you. Where's the computer?"

The fact that his captors were unaware of his visit to Kiernan—and thus the fact that the computer's information was now in a chip in his coat pocket and the computer itself rendered useless—could work in his favour. He was slightly surprised by their stupidity.

"Where's Adaelrose?" he rasped back.

"Master Adaelrose was granted a quick trip the Parallel City," the big man grunted, pointing a large finger at a spot behind Canter's shoulder.

He immediately jerked his head in the direction of the point, briefly regretting the impulse when his vision again clouded and a wave of nauseau washed over him. When his vision cleared, however, the big man's statement was verified.

Adaelrose's body was crumpled in the corner, its forehead decorated with a large hole. Mouth gaped in slack shock; eyes stared dully at the ceiling. Canter's employer was dead.

"Guess you're not getting paid," the big man snickered.

"And that should mean," added the slighter man, "You would have no reason to remain loyal. Why get your face punched in for a contract that no longer matters?"

Although his first impulse was to relent, give the men the datachip, and forget the contract, he decided it was wiser to think through the situation. He was tied to a chair, his captors were murderers, and there was a good chance that they would kill him once they got what they wanted. Especially if they belonged to some Shinugami mystery cult: cultists did not like to share their secrets with the uninitiated.

"Really, Canter, what's any of this to you?"

He shot back, "What's it to you?"

"I don't see why you have to be difficult. According to your former employer, you don't even believe in the library."

But he believed in staying alive and, at that moment, the only thing keeping him alive was the piece of information they wanted. They wouldn't kill him until they got what they wanted; he needed to use this to his advantage.

"Can you at least tell me why you want the library?" he asked, again trying to make the conversation delay the inevitable torture and give him time to come up with a plan.

"Have you heard of the Nakbah, Master Canter? No reason you should have. The Great Catastrophe, the End of Days, the Reality Flood—it went by a number of names, back before people forgot about it, but the most popular, the one used by the Shinugami themselves, was *Nakbah*…"

Canter tried not to look interested, not to appear intrigued by the explanation. He didn't want them to use it against him. The fact that he was being told these things, however, confirmed one of his earlier suspicions: they were planning to kill him once they got what they wanted—to either wipe him out of existence or send him to the brutal world of Sheol where he would no longer be a threat to their plans. No point in being secretive around a dead man.

"Everyone has forgotten the Catastrophe—everyone except ancient shades and the Shinugami."

"Then how do you know?" Canter demanded.

"How do you think we know, shifter? Who do you think we work for?"

"I don't know: you tell me."

"Daniel Karrow took the computer from a room that borders one of our principal's territories and you took it from Karrow. We're here simply to reclaim stolen property."

Again he was struck by the absurdity of the claim. Perhaps a Shinugami had more of a right to claim the contents of the computer than Adaelrose, but it still seemed a little inaccurate for them to speak of theft. It was Hearst Yundilf's research and, from what Canter could remember, the shade had not wanted to give it up to the Shinugami in the first place.

In any case, another of his suspicions was confirmed: these men were mystery cultists, agents of a death god. If Adaelrose wasn't already dead—if his death hadn't landed the shifter in this situation—Canter would have quit.

"I don't see what any of this has to do with your Nakbah," he persisted.

"Things have been left incomplete since the time of the Catastrophe and the exile to the City and its Parallel. There are records in the library that will help end this business once and for all."

"How?" he pushed, not really caring about the answer.

"What do you mean how?"

He chuckled and guessed, "You don't know much about your Nakbah, do you? Just what your god told you. You're just repeating Shinugami propaganda."

Neither man was amused.

The big one stood, one hand clenching into a fist. "No more games, Master Canter. Where is the computer?"

"Get fucked," he snarled.

As the fist descended he came up with a plan, the adrenaline spike giving him a moment of brilliant clarity. Before the blow connected he opened his third eye, ignored his personal rituals, and shifted.

NINE

He stepped into the parallel of his office, telling his astral self to ignore the memory of pain. Whatever was happening to his body on the other side of the veil wouldn't affect him here—unless he was killed. He had a moment of theological confusion: if he died in his astral form would this form become his ghost, or would a duplicate ghost emerge as his astral self faded away, watching another version of its own identity waiting to usurp its existence? Since he really had no time, Canter quickly pushed these thoughts from his mind and hurried out the front door of the Sheol version of his office.

The ecto-barriers he had installed around his parallel office were enough to keep the poltergeists out. Since being a shifter required that he make shifting more permeable in his place of work, however, he had also been forced to cut through the official barriers installed by the city and bind the two offices together. So as long as he granted something access to his Sheol office, they could easily manifest in the City of the living through the straight-gate he had arranged.

Upon entering the grey streets, he looked up to the rafters of the opposite building. There, watching his front door, was a small flock of harpies. The vicious creatures had first assembled on those rafters the day he had claimed his office parallel. The Sheol equivalent of surveillance drones, they were sent by their master to keep an eye on the shifting intruder.

He had become used to their presence and, since he never did anything to

offend the god of this territory, had eventually stopped worrying. Sometimes, when he had nothing better to do, he would sit on the office doorstep and speak with them. He knew a poltergeist merchant in another zone of Sheol whose business partner was a harpy. He figured that if that man could befriend one of these creatures then he had a chance of doing the same. He was never sure if his overtures really worked.

Today he was going to find out.

"Hey girls," he yelled up at the flock, causing them to glare at him with their baleful eyes, "I've got a bit of a problem."

They did not appear very concerned. He had never heard a harpy speak, even the one who worked with that poltergeist merchant never communicated openly.

He continued, "There's two mystery cultists in my office dedicated to a god who doesn't rule this zone beating me senseless." He appealed to their loyalty: "So even if you don't care what happens to me, I think your master will care that another Shinugami's agents are operating in this territory."

Now he was certain that he had claimed their interest. He could see them rising from their haunches. Some of them stretched their wings. They were staring past him, through the open door of his office.

"I'm going to drop the barriers," he announced, stepping back through the threshold, "Before shifting back."

They watched him leave the doorstep, continued watching as he removed his carefully placed defenses, and were still watching when he shifted.

*

"…idiot, you've knocked him unconscious," a dim voice was saying, "How in Sheol are we going to get him to speak if he's in a coma?"

Pain followed the voice. He gasped as memory caught up with the trauma his body had sustained while his astral self was absent. Now he almost did pass out, puking into his lap and jerking against his restraints.

"Nope," the big man said, "He's still with us."

Taking deep breaths, focusing on the adrenaline rather than the nauseau, Canter opened a puffy eye and glared at the men. "Stop," he protested slowly, his tongue fat and uncooperative, "Stop… hitting."

"See? He's fine: he's ready to talk. Aren't you, Canter?"

He opened his third eye again but stayed on this side of the veil. The auras of his captors exploded around them, patterns and colours signifying their emotional state. He grinned stupidly, drooling out the side of his split lips, and stared around the office for any sign of the harpies. They were really his only chance. As good as the plan had seemed at the time, he was beginning to think it wasn't a very good plan.

The slighter man approached, lowered himself, and glared into Canter's eyes. "Tell me where the computer is and we're finished."

Desperate to buy more time, he rasped, "You're not…"

"Not what?"

He glanced at the mens' auras for confirmation before concluding, "Not shifters."

"Cute, Canter, real cute. The answer to *where is the computer* isn't *you're not shifters*. Maybe my friend hit your head too hard? Maybe you…"

But he had tuned out his tormentor's words, suddenly distracted by movement in the surrounding shadows. He almost wept with relief: the harpies were manifesting. An entire flock of vicious Sheol denizens, the kind of things that ate ghosts, had arrived. A flock that would only be visible to another shifter or psychic.

"What're you looking at, Canter?"

He giggled. "You're in another god's territory—you know that, right?"

"So what?" the man sneered. "What the fuck should we care about another Shinugami? We only serve—"

The admission encouraged the harpies and whatever the man was going to

say next was interrupted by the shrieks of his associate.

Canter watched with grim fascination, giggling drunkenly, as the harpies ate the two men alive. To anyone without the third eye it would look as if the men were disintegrating, falling apart as they flailed at their invisible attackers and screamed themselves ragged. But he could see what was happening.

He passed out just before the flock finished with the men, devouring even their screaming shades, and turned their attention upon the shifter who had invited them into the office. He wondered, as his chin hit his chest, whether they would choose to eat him as well.

*

When he regained consciousness again, Canter discovered that he was lying on his belly beside a half-skeletal corpse, the remains of one of his captors. It took him several minutes to focus through the pain and remind himself of what had happened. Several more were spent trying to make sense of why he was free from the chair.

He managed to raise one of his wrists and, to his surprise, discovered that the manacle still remained but the chain had been broken. Chewed through, most likely—the harpies, instead of eating him, had eaten his restraints.

"Maybe they do like me," he mumbled, half out of his mind with pain.

Rummaging in the bloody shreds of clothing adorning the skeleton, Canter finally succeeded in finding the key. After using it to remove the remains of the manacles, he tried to stand. At the moment, however, all he could do was crawl. So he crawled over to where one of his guns had fallen and shoved it back in his holster.

Then he rested, gasping through the pain, against the wall.

He passed out one more time trying to get to his feet, but not for long. The second attempt proved successful. Soon he was staggering into the street, waving down a hover, and ignoring the shocked expressions of the nearest passersby.

He briefly considered ordering the hover drone to take him to the nearest

hospital. No longer sure if he was still being followed, if he was being watched by whatever forces wanted the datachip still safe in his pocket, he decided against the idea.

Knowing he would regret the decision later, he gave the drone the address of Kiernan's workshop.

TEN

"When I said don't be a stranger," Kiernan grunted as she helped him limp into the back room of her laboratory, "I didn't mean bleed all over my workshop."

There was a bed in this room, since Kiernan spent many nights working on her projects. A bed that Canter had shared with her on several guilt-ridden occasions. A bed that she was now helping him into.

"What happened?" she demanded anxiously. "Who did this to you?"

He giggled. "Doesn't matter: they're dead now."

"Dead? What the fuck have you got yourself into, Maer?"

He did not have the energy to explain. Adaelrose was dead. A Shinugami was after Yundilf's data. There were three corpses in his office. He was severely injured.

She persisted, "You need to be at a hospital. You can't—"

"N-no hospitals," he gasped. "Not safe."

"Not safe from what?"

From death gods and their nightmare servants. From cultists who could be anywhere, hiding in any profession. From the people who had hired Karrow in the first place. From whoever wanted the datachip in his coat pocket.

She cursed and opened her phone. "Fine, no hospitals. I'm going to call our private doctor, though." Before he could protest she hissed, "I have to. You

need medical attention, Maer."

"No questions," he murmured, overwhelmed and unbalanced, "No more interrogations."

He was exhausted psychically as well. The last shift, brutally quick and unplanned, had taken its toll. So had watching a flock of harpies eat two men alive, turning their ghosts into dessert.

"She won't ask any questions if I tell her not to," Kiernan said as she keyed in the number, "Just as long as you pay."

*

There was a woman waiting for him in this dream of the library. She sat at a librarian's desk, errantly perusing several texts, and looked up when he walked down the narrow shelving alleys to where she was sitting.

She was beautiful but in a strange and alien way. Her skin possessed a faint purplish tint. Her body and skull were slightly elongated. "Interesting dream," she pronounced as he sat down across from her. "Now why would you dream of a library?"

"Who are you?"

She leaned forward to tap a finger against his forehead, causing his third eye to burn, and replied, "You called on my harpies to help you with two mystery cultists, Master Shifter, and I want to know why."

Realizing that this was the Shinugami who ruled the zone parallel to his district, he fought the urge to bolt from his chair and run. He already had one death god interested in him; he didn't need another.

Knowing that he couldn't escape a dream, and that maybe he was safe since this was just a dream, he remained in the chair and answered her question with a question, "What is the Nakbah?"

Her thin eyebrows rose. "Now how did you learn *that* word?"

"From the cultists your harpies killed," he lied.

"Very interesting. What is the Nakbah? It's the reason this last continent

of history, the City of the living and Sheol, survives and persists. It's the reason why the rules of reality have broken down beyond this continent. It's the long shadow that influences us still."

"Is that what happened? What led to the founding of the City and its Parallel?"

She nodded. "The world was bigger once, filled with other cities and open land. Then mistakes were made; reality began to bleed and existence fell apart. One of my people, one of those you call *Shinugami*, became a messiah of sorts. She helped plan the escape, spear-headed a massive exodus from every shore to this place, this asylum."

He still didn't understand what this had to do with the library. "What happened then?"

"Things fell apart again. There was a war on our side of reality, before your Mad Tyrant and his Year Zero. We turned against our messiah, betrayed and destroyed her. Now we've all lost our way. The Nakbah's last threshold approaches and we've forgotten too much."

"I don't understand."

She shrugged. "Why should you? You've obliterated your own history just as we've chosen to ignore ours. All that's left is a history of phantasms; cities built on death."

He shuddered and hoped that the dream would end soon. Although he did not feel explicitly threatened by the nameless Shinugami, he was wary of her presence. He did not like the fact that she had somehow crept into his dreams.

"None of this explains," she murmured, leaning forward and cradling her pointed chin upon her clasped fingers, "Why those mystery cultists attacked you in the first place."

"It was because of a job," he admitted cautiously, doing his best to obfuscate, "And some information that I stole for my employer."

"What information?"

He lied with the truth, "I haven't had a chance to look at it. I was on my way to hand it over when I was attacked and interrogated. Now my employer's dead and the information, whatever it is, is the only thing keeping me alive."

"That and my harpies' intervention," she chuckled.

"Uh, thanks for that," he mumbled, not wanting to owe the death god a favour.

"It was their decision, not mine. They only informed me after. You should probably thank them when you can."

He nodded, trying to wake up. "I will."

Now the shelves and books began to bleed, dissipating under the onslaught of waking. The dream was ending; the Shinugami visitor growing dimmer.

"We'll speak again, Maer Canter," she told him before she faded away. "I know my way into your dreams now."

*

He jerked awake, cursing loudly at the Shinugami's last comment. Even though she wasn't demanding recompense for the help of her harpies, she had used their presence to leave a psychic parasite in his astral self. He probably caught it when his mental defenses were down and he was staring at the harpies murder of his captors with his third eye unprotected.

Now he was stuck with her waltzing in and out of his dreams whenever she pleased. It was similar to being possessed by a poltergeist except, in this case, there was no shifter who could exorcize a Shinugami. Well, maybe Shin Airys, but he was not about to go asking her for help. He had only met her once, in the aftermath of the Aylmer Haunting, and she had creeped him out almost as much as a death god. And her friend and detective partner, Prina Anderz, had scared him shitless.

"For someone who just got fixed up," a wry and unfamiliar voice pronounced, "You sure have a strange way of showing your gratitude."

He turned in the direction of the voice and met the eyes of a smirking

and striking woman, probably a decade or so older, sitting with Kiernan. Both women were drinking tea at the small table in the corner of the back room. Resting on the floor beside the unfamiliar woman was a large and leather bag.

Canter guessed, his voice raw and parched, "You're the doctor?"

"That's me."

He glanced down at himself, moved around, and was surprised by how good he felt. He had been so worried by the Shinugami that he had nearly forgotten the state in which he had been before returning to his obsessive library dreams.

"The swelling in your face will go down by tomorrow," she informed him. "I rebuilt the bones but they're still pretty delicate. Try not to bash your head against a fist any time soon."

"Sorry," he grumbled, "It was just a dream."

Kiernan asked, "What sort of dream?"

"Work-related." He nodded gratefully at the doctor. "Thanks, really. How much do I owe you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I did it as a favour for Maha." She looked at his bare chest and frowned. "I would like to know how you ended up with six broken ribs and three ruptured organs. Not to mention one broken tooth, a broken jaw, and a fractured cheekbone."

"Like you said, I was bashing my head against someone's fist."

ELEVEN

As soon as the doctor left, Kiernan pestered Canter with questions. Since Adaelrose was dead, and there was no reason to protect contractual confidence, he provided his former lover with the general details. If he was completely honest with himself he might have to admit that there was a petty and bitter part of him that was only telling her this so that she would be placed in danger—so that she would also know too much and, like him, come under the suspicion of mystery cultists.

But the real reason he shared the story with Kiernan was because he no longer possessed any real friends. It was rather sad that his only remaining friend was a married woman who, out of pity or old times sake, would occasionally let him share her bed.

Five years earlier, on his thirtieth birthday that he had celebrated alone in his office, Canter had discovered that he was like most shifters: he tended to alienate any possible friends. Some people thought that shifters were always staring at their auras and reading their emotions. Others didn't want to hear anything about the Parallel City—especially high-born citizens who rarely experienced hauntings. There were even a few who, influenced by the pretentious ravings of the pseudo-academic Ulon Faltre, thought that shifters were con-artists and Sheol didn't exist. Most people simply thought that shifters were creepy.

And since Canter, out of a desire to make more money, had chosen to avoid

the public shifting work, he wasn't on friendly terms with other shifters. The ones he usually met tended to be competitors in the private field, only interested in stealing his clients.

Maha Kiernan, however, had never seemed bothered by his abilities. Once she had admitted that she was drawn to him because he was a shifter and she found his stories fascinating.

"No shit," she eventually said, "The library. You're joking, right?"

"Even if it doesn't exist, other people don't think it's a joke. A fucking death god doesn't think it's a joke. I don't think you realize how serious this is."

"Sorry."

"Listen to me, Maha. You're not a shifter so the most you know about Shinugami comes from books and television—and most of what you know is fictional."

"So what? They're just like the rulers of little districts. Politicians of the dead."

Sometimes the medias, in an effort to prevent mass hysteria, tried to mask the reality of the Shinugami. For though the death gods were rarely interested in influencing the City of the living (why bother with life when all you had to do was wait for people to die?), there would be mass panic—especially in the upper districts—if the truth was popularized. Experts at universities knew something of the truth, and any academic book would tell you an approximation of the truth, but the majority of the population did not listen to experts or read authoritative books.

"They are not like that. Why do you think people worship them?"

"Well…"

"There are Shinugami out there who could crush you with a thought."

He remembered how he had got too close to a passing death god once and had been unable to stand. He had passed out, overwhelmed by the entity's presence, without even seeing its face. The only reason the recent dream visitation had not

bothered him was because it was in his dream. And maybe that Shinugami had muted her presence.

She paled slightly. "You're not joking, are you?"

"No. This is serious."

She was silent for a few seconds before shrugging and finishing her tea. She stood and pronounced, "Well why don't we take a look at what's on that chip everyone wants?"

"Maybe you shouldn't get involved," he cautioned.

Kiernan snorted. "I'm already involved, asshole. If these Shinugami are as powerful as you say they are, don't you think they'll track you to my place eventually?"

He winced. "You can still stay out of things."

She shook her head. "You really have no one else, Maer. And where are you going to go now? If you're telling the truth there's three dead bodies in your office—what do you think the police are going to think when they investigate?"

Overly obsessed with the death of his employer and the way his contract had suddenly become extremely dangerous, he had not bothered to think about the more mundane problems. He did this a lot—focused too much on shifting business at the expense of everything else.

"Come on," she repeated, "I want to see the map to the make-believe library."

*

The information contained on the datachip was indeed a map. A very complex and three dimensional map rendered with utter precision—the work of an obsessive who didn't want there to be any mistakes.

At first sight the hologram that sprang to life over Kiernan's notebook was a small rendering of the City and its Parallel. The City of the living was on top and, designed to resemble a grey and shadowy reflection, Sheol was beneath. It could be reversed, however, so that the City was upside down and Sheol was

rightside up.

The map could be manipulated with utter precision: you could zoom in and out of districts, cut away, focus on specific neighbourhoods. Kiernan remarked that whoever had coded the map had spent years on the design. This was a forgotten and impressive work of cartography.

But it also accorded to a map of the City that was decades out of date. It did not take Canter long to notice that, despite the scale of the City, there were districts that didn't belong on the map. Older names changed by politicians. Areas that had merged with other areas, annexed and rezoned. Even still, if you compared it with a contemporary map of the City it would be easy to figure out the renaming and plot a course through the older terrain.

Most importantly, however, was the district that was blinking red. This was a map designed with a specific function: the supposed location of the library. Kiernan immediately zoomed in on the blinking district and, as the rest of the City evaporated, the blinking light became more and more specific until it was focused on a single room in a single building.

"Very precise," she muttered. "I guess he didn't want there to be any mistakes."

"Guess not."

"It would be pretty funny if that building and room no longer exist."

"The spatial point will still exist," he argued. "If the room is gone, all we have to do is find where it was supposed to be."

"But what would it matter? If something was hidden there, and the building was torn down, wouldn't it be gone by now?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Can you rotate this point so that it connects to the Sheol parallel on the map?"

As soon as she complied, Canter realized he had guessed correctly. The blinking dot became a line that pushed through into a room in the Parallel City. "So if that room still exists in Sheol," he murmured, "Then that's where we'll

find whatever treasure's been hidden here."

"The library, you mean."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"The room doesn't look big enough to hold a library, Maer."

"That's assuming the library is a physical space. Why not an electronic archive? Why not a datatrove of some sort?"

"You're actually going to follow this map?"

Until she had asked the question he had not thought of the answer. But now he replied with complete certainty, "I am."

"Your contract's over, Maer. You should just figure out how to walk away."

"Too late now," he murmured, staring at the blinking dot. "If anything, maybe if I can find whatever's here first, I can bargain it away to save myself. Better yet, if I prove there is nothing there—that there is no library—they'll have no reason to keep chasing me."

She snorted. "You just want to follow it through until the end. You're just like a boy with a treasure map."

"So you're not interested?" he teased.

Her eyebrows rose. "Are you serious? You want me to go galavanting across the City in search of the fucking lost library?"

"Well you've already seen the map…"

"I've seen enough. I want to know how it ends—call me and keep me informed—but I'm not going to go on an adventure with you. I work with computers. I don't get chased by ghosts and creepy things from Sheol. That's always been you, not me."

There was an odd bitterness beneath her words, but Canter did not want to waste time wondering about it. As much as he was disappointed that she refused to follow the map with him, he knew that much of his disappointment was because he was still in love with her.

"Why did that doctor refuse to charge me by the way?"

She answered with a shrug. “She’s my current lover.”

He decided that it was probably best to leave immediately and spare himself any further embarrassment.

TWELVE

The district indicated by the map was in a lower caste neighbourhood and extremely distant from where Canter lived. Knowing that if he used the train system it would take him weeks to reach his destination, he splurged on a higher priced flight that would get him there in under a day. In the commercial flyer, filled with other wealthy high-borns, he flew above the highest buildings of the upper districts, close to the edge of the field that kept the strange outer world at bay.

The result of the Catastrophe, he thought as he looked through the domed field at the lightning filled clouds, strange shapes, and dizzying rainbows. He knew someone from his university days who had taken a job as an outer excavator and explorer. And though he had eventually fallen out of touch with this woman, he had still learned of her demise: she had vanished one day in the frightening and nebulous world beyond, swallowed by impossibility.

Those who did reconnaisance and scientific work outside the City were similar to shifters. People did not want to know how weird things were beyond the normal and acceptable categories of their everyday lives.

Eventually, for lack of anything better to do, he relaxed in his comfortable seat and fell asleep.

*

“Now I *have* done you a favour,” the Shinugami who had stolen into his

dream library informed him as they sat again at the librarian desk.

This time the books and shelves had chosen to manifest in impossible angles and geometries, twisting in loops and moebius strips. They floated in an ocean of black as the library's tentacles writhed around them. Sometimes an errant book would fly past, as if alive, flapping its covers like wings.

"What do you mean?"

"I dealt with the bodies left in your office. You will not have to worry about your human authorities accusing you of murder."

"I didn't ask for that," he protested.

"No, but you needed it done."

He gritted his teeth and folded his arms. He did not want to admit that he was grateful because he did not want to owe the unnamed Shinugami a favour. He was not a cultist—he was a free agent and he wanted to stay that way.

She plucked the thought out of his mind, the fact that she was occupying his psyche making it easy, and said, "No one is a *free agent*. I do not know why you humans continue to insist on this belief of isolation when you have always been pack animals. You go to great lengths, threatening your entire survival as a species, so you can enforce some invented idea of pure individuality."

Refusing to enter into an onerous philosophical debate with a death god, Canter focused on the fact that she had just read his mind. He winced when the epiphany came: if she already possessed access to his inner consciousness then she would already know about the map and where it was supposed to lead.

"Of course I do," she assured him. "I simply figured that it would be more polite to wait for you to tell me yourself."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you need my help."

"I told you—"

"Yes, I know, you're a free agent." She chuckled. "Come now! If you are such a successful free agent then why would you require all this help? My

harpies, for example. Or your friend with her doctor. Or the fact that, without me, you would probably be a wanted criminal."

Knowing that, now with her access to his interior self, she could probably kill him with a thought, he tried very hard to act respectful—to not curse her violently and order her out of his dreams.

"I won't be offended," she assured him. "I am so far above you, little human, that there's really nothing you can say that will be offensive. Would you be offended by the ungrateful attitude of a household pet?"

"What do you want," he muttered.

"I want you to give *me* the library. If it exists, that is."

He snorted. "Why would I do that?"

"You were already planning to find it and barter it away to a certain other Shinugami in exchange for your life." She shrugged. "The difference between that god and myself, however, is that I won't kill you after the fact."

"But then he, whoever *he* is, would kill me!"

"Not if you keep out of the districts parallel to his principalities. I can also offer you protection from his cultists. If you want to barter the library away for your life, then I'm a more logical option."

"How can I even know that?"

"By the fact that, unlike him, I have already shown you a certain amount of respect."

"Who is he? Who is the other Shinugami?"

"Now, now. We're not in the habit of giving away our names so easily."

He tightened his folded arms and ducked to avoid a flying book. "So you mean you're not even going to give me your name?"

"You can call me Eresh."

"That's your name? *Eresh*?"

"Part of it." She smiled. "Do we have a deal, Maer Canter?"

He sighed heavily and permitted, "I'll think about it."

"Would it make it any easier if I also fulfilled the terms of your contract with your previous employer?"

He was momentarily quiet before admitting grudgingly, "It would."

"His shade is now under my control, if you must know, and I believe there is precedent for this kind of thing in the world of the living. When one multicivic buys out another, I have heard, then it also takes over the contracts."

He snorted, not sure if the two examples were precisely comparable.

"Now do we have a deal?"

Forced to accept her logic, and happy that he would again have an employer backing the operation, he sighed and agreed.

"Excellent." Then she tapped her cheek and narrowed her blue and red eyes. For a moment they burst into flame. For a moment Canter felt the nauseating power of the death god. "If you break our contract and try to betray me, Master Canter, I will not only claim your soul—I will make sure that it spends every century of its fading existence being tortured. Are we clear?"

He winced. "We're clear. I never break contract."

Eresh was immediately smiling again. "That's why Ren Adaelrose chose to hire you, I have heard. I just thought that I should speak plainly. I don't want you to forget what I am, Maer Canter."

"Fine," he muttered, hoping that the dream would end very soon.

Now he had no escape, even in sleep, from this nightmare job. He was going to be dreaming about his Sheol-damned employer every night. That was when he decided to blame Adaelrose for this problem, secretly wishing that the dead man was having a dismal afterlife.

THIRTEEN

He checked into a motel close to his destination, exhausted from the trip. After the flyer had landed he had been forced to take a short train ride to reach this lower district. Even after sleeping away most of the day he still hadn't recovered from his confrontation with the cultists. He was not planning on going to sleep again; he wanted to avoid unnecessary meetings with his employer.

When he left his motel he decided to investigate his destination and the surrounding territory. The building in which the room was marked on Yundilf's map was still standing. Or, at the very least, it was another building occupying the same space. If the interior layout was different it would make it very difficult to find the access point but, if things became confusing, he could always shift into Sheol as close as possible to the mark and try to search out the parallel.

A grubby Solidarist tried to shove a pamphlet in his hand. He pretended interest so she would leave him alone, briefly perusing the contents of the flyer: the language and slogans were familiar. All this crap about the Workers Solidarity Party and caste revolt hadn't changed since his university days. He wondered why they even bothered—didn't they know that the majority of the low-born were illiterate? Eventually, when he was certain that the Solidarist was gone, he crumpled up the WSP pamphlet and threw it in a gutter.

This time he had thought ahead and changed into a suitably inconspicious outfit. Nothing too grubby or torn—just a suit several years out of date and a little

threadbare along with a heavy and worn overcoat. A beaten bowler to keep his features shadowed. He was even sporting the shadow of a beard; he hoped that he looked disheveled enough to pass as low-born. Or at least different enough from how he usually dressed so that he could avoid detection.

The building in question was an abandoned factory. The graffiti covered and fading sign confirmed that he had not misunderstood the map: *Yundilf Hovercars*. Back when Hearst Yundilf was a business tycoon, before he had turned into a lunatic obsessive, this was his multicivic industry. According to the initial information Adaelrose had given Canter, Yundilf had bankrupted his company in the pursuit of his obsession.

Rather than enter the abandoned factory immediately, Canter decided to wait until the sun vanished from the district. He did not want anyone to see him breaking into the place; he wasn't keen on getting arrested for trespassing.

*

He sat in the corner of a dingy little bar across the street from the factory. The beer was piss and the food was shite but it beat standing in the street. Aside from the quality of the building, furniture, and food and drink, the bar projected a similar ambience to some of Canter's favourite upper district pubs. It was not at all the rough and dangerous place that popular media shows depicted as the normative state of every lower district bar. While there probably were many dives in the low-born neighbourhoods, life was not always cut-throat. Crime was rampant because of unemployment and desperation but the lower castes were not rabid packs of animals.

It also possessed its friendly regulars, the happy drunks who would approach you after they had consumed enough alcohol, filled with benevolent interest. Like the smiling man in the engineering cap and fingerless gloves who sat down across from Canter and said, "You en't from round here are your?"

Careful to keep the precision of his upper caste accent masked, he replied, "Not this district. Just got business here."

"Migrant labour, eh? Can't say that this district has lots of that, sorry to disappoint. Where you from originally?"

He answered by naming the lower district closest to his neighbourhood.

The other man scratched his head and frowned. "That's pretty far. Never met anyone from those parts."

Which wasn't surprising. Aside from roaming groups of rootless and migrant labour, most of the low-born could not afford to travel very far from their district of birth. The vast majority of people in the City would live and die without ever leaving their neighbourhood.

Disinterested in continuing the conversation because he was afraid that he would make a mistake and reveal himself as high-born, Canter changed the subject, again careful with his syntax: "Know anything about the factory cross the way?"

"Used to be one of the biggest employers in the area, but that was before I was born. Been closed and boarded up long as I can remember." He laughed, swallowed the murky beer, and said, "You won't find work there."

"Why hasn't it been torn down?"

"No one got around to it, I suppose. Or maybe some upper-caster owns the fucking thing and is just waiting for the right seller." He frowned. "If you're looking for a place to squat, though, I wouldn't trespass."

"Why not?"

"Place is haunted."

"That a fact?"

"More rumour than fact," the man admitted.

"Your Shifter Division hasn't checked it out?"

He shook his head, his frown deepening. "See, here's the thing. Since no one knows who owns the fucking thing, and no one has really lodged a formal complaint about it being a public menace, the local shifters can't get in. Few years back some neighourhood boys were killed in their after they trespassed.

But since they were technically trespassing…" He shook his head and clicked his tongue. "Local shifters raised a stink, got in a fight with Control over the thing, and ended up losing the legal battle. If no one trespasses, them high-born lawyers argued, then no one would get hurt."

Due to his brief ideological conversion to Solidarism, Canter was not surprised. This was the sort of thing that Solidarists would use as an example of the violence of upper caste property. laws. He knew many versions of this story.

To endear himself to the other man he recalled a similar story: "Back home I know of two kids who were shot dead by a securicor guard for trespassing on the grounds of some multicivic factory. They were only playing hide and seek but the guard thought they were thieves."

But the man surprised him by arguing, "That en't the same. No one's in that factory out there but ghosts. They en't the same as living guards—damn things are dead."

His Solidarist training caused him to immediately argue, even though he really didn't care except to prove a point, "It's the same law, the same idea of property, that caused both cases."

"You a Solidarist?" He smacked Canter on the back before he could protest. "Don't worry, I en't offended. I en't a member of the WSP myself, but you folks always do good by us. Helped organize my workplace, actually. Got a lot of close friends who're Solidarist—I could introduce them to you, if you like."

Suspecting that there might be Control agents present, and that being a Solidarist in the lower districts was far less legal than being one in the upper districts, he quickly protested, "I'm not a Solidarist. I just understand some of the arguments they make, that's all."

"You sure?"

He nodded and finished his beer. "Very sure." Returning his hat to his head he stood and, suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation, prepared to leave. "Sorry, but I only stopped in for a quick beer."

"Good luck with the job hunt."

"Thanks."

He left before another overly friendly patron could take interest. It was good to talk to the locals, so he didn't look too suspicious, but he also didn't want to draw the attention of the local police. If an undercover Control agent had overheard the conversation he or she might suspect that Canter was an outside agitator sent to help the local WSP in some illegal project.

FOURTEEN

Being a shifter he was not afraid of a haunting. For the right price he had exorcised haunted properties, banishing the poltergeists back to Sheol. He had lived with ghosts his entire life; he was only afraid of Shinugami and their djinn. There was really only one haunting he had ever encountered that had scared him shitless: the infamous Aylmer Haunting that had been exorcised by the creepy Shin Airys. And even she had agreed that it was a pretty unique case.

More afraid of the local police than whatever was waiting within the factory, he quickly climbed over a fence that bordered an alley and dropped unto the abandoned campus. He could tell that the man in the bar was correct the moment he landed on the brown grass of the factory property: the place radiated psychic menace. You couldn't feel it on the other side of the fence but once you crossed the threshold it was hard to miss. You didn't even have to be a shifter to pick up on the malevolence: something unseen did not welcome trespassers.

He opened his third eye so that he would be prepared.

The environment changed immediately: now he could see the menace. The shadows of the leperous trees fell at wrong angles. The factory walls pulsed like a diseased heart. The ground moaned slightly with each step he took. The place was a sinkhole, an open wound between the Cities, a cesspit for Sheol.

It was nothing he hadn't seen before. Now he even had a Shinugami employer, which gave him more confidence though he doubt it would mean much

if his exorcism abilities were lax. The parallel to this district was controlled by a rival deity; his employer wouldn't have any influence here.

Avoiding the chained front doors, he walked around the side of the factory and approached one of the boarded windows. He hastily tore away the boards and discovered that the task was easier than he had assumed; they were half-rotten and disintegrated under his ministrations.

Soon he was climbing through a broken window and into the factory floors beyond. He turned on his flashlight and moved its beam around the cavernous interior: the place was pretty much empty. At one point in time the concrete space would have held rows upon rows of machinery, assembly lines designed for vehicle production. Now there was nothing left except for refuse, several rusty chains hanging from the distant rafters, and the odd and scattered bolt or nail.

The poltergeist or poltergeists responsible for the haunting were refusing to manifest. This wasn't entirely surprising. The types of poltergeists responsible for hauntings, driven insane by painful deaths and sometimes ritual binding, usually preferred to hang back, feed on the trespasser's fear, and take them unawares.

Rather than search for the poltergeist, Canter sat down on the floor, opened his notebook, and called up Yundilf's map. He zoomed in on the relevant point so that he could find the corresponding position in the factory.

Up the nearest stairs, across part of the mezzanine catwalk, and through a doorway to a set of concrete stairs that, according to Yundilf's map, should lead to the room. Pretty easy: as soon as he dealt with the poltergeist he would be able to retrieve whatever Yundilf had hidden without much difficulty.

The poltergeist only complicated matters because, if he left it alone before shifting, it would probably attack his physical body while he was on the other side of existence. Again, if he was the Halfshade Shin Airys this wouldn't be a problem—according to rumour she could shift corporeally from City to City

without recourse to an astral self. She could also rip shades out of existence, just like her Shinugami parent. He was not Shin Airys, however, and so he would have to deal with the haunting first.

*

The poltergeist manifested as soon as he stepped unto the catwalk. It was a former factory worker, horribly burned and disfigured. Its pinky fingers were missing and large shards of metal had apparently been welded, when it was still alive, to its index fingers.

Ritual binding. Someone had created this poltergeist by ritually murdering him. As it walked menacingly down the catwalk towards him, Canter could see that sorcerous symbols were etched in his flesh. The man had been burned and mutilated according to a twisted ceremonial logic. The metal had been fused to his index fingers so that, when he emerged as a haunting spirit, he would remember the pain of his disfigurement in the way he remembered himself.

(The cultic magician of the Aylmer Haunting who had died two years before Airys' exorcism was responsible for making two hundred poltergeists like this one by ritually hanging and castrating his subjects, male and female alike. And since not every attempt to make a poltergeist had succeeded, that man had probably mutilated and murdered twice that number.)

The term *poltergeist* was a general term referring to the sort of shade that possessed enough power to influence the City of the living. Not all poltergeists required exorcism; some were quite sane and friendly. But when most people thought of poltergeists they imagined the kind that was currently grinning dementedly at Canter and dragging his finger across the railing of the catwalk.

Focusing on the spirit's aura Canter asked casually, "Who made you?"

It paused, frowning with slight confusion. The problem with these types of poltergeists was that, regardless of how frightening they appeared, they were generally single-minded. They focused on their victims' fear and, when this fear failed to manifest, they became confused. And though they should have known

that there were such things as shifters, their insanity often caused them to forget that exorcisms were possible and normal.

"Why aren't you afraid?"

"Yundilf made you, didn't he?" he guessed.

Nice guy, Hearst Yundilf. The fact that he had ritually created this grotesquerie to protect his treasure, in Canter's opinion, made all of his moralizing about the library falling into the hands of the Shinugami pretty hypocritical.

"You're not supposed to be here," the poltergeist threatened.

Canter sighed and strengthened his aura into an astral shield. When it came to excorcisms it was all a matter of matching wills with the ghosts. And since these types of poltergeists were insanely confused, they lacked the concentration necessary to focus their will. He could even see its aura—an aura that would not be visible on the other side of existence—and it flickered manically and crazily.

The taloned fingers struck Canter's astral shield and were instantly repelled. As the poltergeist reeled back in surprise, Canter took advantage of the situation before it could disappear. He strengthened the astral shield further around his fist and drove it into the man's burned face. Since it never expected the fist to connect, the ghost was even more surprised when the astral-infused blow knocked him back.

Canter stepped forward and began the rote exorcism chant he had learned in his teens. The odd words and syllables were in a language that was no longer known in the City. The specific meanings of the words, and the gestures he was making with his hands, had been lost after the Mad Tyrant's purges. The only thing that mattered to Canter, though, was that they worked.

The exorcism chant caught the ghost, prevented it from disappearing, and immobilized it upon the catwalk. It struggled and screeched, writhing in pain, as the atmosphere opened and Sheol reached out to claim its property. The poltergeist wouldn't be destroyed by the banishing, nor would it lose its violent insanity, but it would be stripped of all the power it had accumulated on this side

of existence. It would be banished from the world of the living and turned into a semi-mindless and confused thing. A senile ghost at the mercy of the more cunning citizens of the Parallel City.

*

Once he had dealt with the poltergeist he continued towards the point indicated on Yundilf's map. As soon as he stepped through the door at the end of the catwalk he discovered that something was missing.

The concrete steps that led up from this door ended in midair. The entire floor above and beyond was missing. Someone, again probably Yundilf, had removed the floor and its room. A way to dissuade non-shifters, Canter assumed as he stopped at the foot of the stairs, from going any further. Which really didn't make sense: if Yundilf's treasure was hidden in Sheol then there was no reason to dissuade anyone who wasn't a shifter.

Shrugging to himself, and dismissing it as another example of the obsessive tycoon's eccentricity, he sat down at the base of the stairs and concentrated on shifting. He drew the circle, opened his third eye, and let his astral self bleed through the veil.

When he emerged in the Parallel City, however, Canter realized that the missing floor and room was not simply due to Yundilf's eccentricity. In Sheol's grey version of the factory the stairs terminated at a massive black wall that ran from wall to wall and ceiling to floor. And when he tried to concentrate his way through the wall he discovered that it was heavily ecto-barriered, utterly impermeable. There was no way around the wall or through the wall.

Whoever wanted to retrieve Yundilf's treasure needed to enter the room in the City of the living indicated by the map. Except that room no longer existed. Someone, most probably Yundilf, had made sure that it could not be entered.

A Shinugami could knock down the wall. Maybe even a djinn could break through into the room beyond. But Yundilf's shade had claimed that he wanted to protect the library from the death gods—so why would he create an obstacle

that could only be overcome by the very forces he wanted to keep his treasure from?

Cursing the wall, Canter shifted back through the veil and opened his eyes.

Only to discover that he was not alone: a flashlight was glaring into his face.

As he squinted, trying to focus on the silhouette behind the flashlight, a loud and authoritative voice declared, "Put your hands on your head and don't reach for your gun. You're under arrest for trespassing."

FIFTEEN

He was technically under arrest for trespassing and performing an illegal exorcism on someone else's property. The unofficial reasons for his arrest, however, were because of his big mouth and his conversation in the bar. His fears of Control surveillance were proved correct: it was an undercover agent who had followed him to the factory and, believing him to be a Solidarist agitator, had used the trespassing as an excuse to make the arrest.

"I'm not a Solidarist," he insisted in the interrogation room.

"We have a recording of your thoughts on property," his interrogator replied, "Do you want to hear it?"

"Well since I'm not officially under arrest for agitation, what does it matter?"

"You're right: you're under arrest for trespassing. A good way to show your contempt for property, I suppose."

"Give me a break! The place was haunted; I did the neighbourhood a favour."

"An illegal favour."

Canter switched tack: "Listen, I'm a private shifter and I'm working on a private contract. I don't give a shit about Solidarism."

"Then why did you argue like a Solidarist?"

"I want to call a lawyer."

The Control detective sneered, "This isn't the upper districts; we do things differently down here. How does that fit your Solidarist sentiments?"

"What?"

"You Solidarists don't like the City's system but those of you who're high-born start screeching about your fucking rights once you're arrested. You give all these fancy speeches about the castes but you don't like being treated like the castes you say you represent."

He scoffed at the other man's shoddy logic. "That doesn't make any sense. I could easily reply that it makes no sense for anyone, low or high-born, to be given this sort of treatment. How is it solidarity to accept shite treatment?"

"Typical Solidarist double-talk," the detective grunted.

His spite for the rude detective caused him to remember even more of his university days: "And you don't think there's a contradiction in generally treating high-born—except for high-born Solidarists—better than your own caste? You don't think it's a contradiction that you're spending all your energy fighting for caste double standards that fuck up your life?"

"I don't have to listen to this shit."

*

As he sat in the holding cell, glaring through the bars at the corridor beyond and trying to think his way out of this problem, Canter was interrupted by the arrival of another detective. This one was quite a bit more rumpled. He was also unshaven and clearly hopped-up on massive amounts of caffeine.

He shoved his hand through the bars at Canter and pronounced, "I'm Chris Younes, head of the Shifter Division."

Desperate for any ally, Canter stood, crossed to the bars, and met the hand with his. "Maer Canter."

"*The* Maer Canter? The one who got rid of the Ratland Haunter? The first exorcist to investigate the Aylmer Haunting?"

He winced at the second reference, still angry at Airys for stealing his

publicity. "That's me. I'm surprised you recognize the name."

"Fucking-Sheol, you're one of the big names."

"Not really," he muttered, trying his best to seem humble, "It's not like I'm the Halfshade."

"No one's the Halfshade," the other shifter agreed, "But outside of her these days there's only two other big names: yours and Ameer Benton's."

"I suppose so."

"Listen… my division is raising a stink over your arrest."

He was half-impressed. "Really?"

"We've wanted that fucking factory exorcised for years. Except fucking Control fucking keeps getting in our fucking way."

Canter assumed, due to the prolific use of *fucking*, that Younes had a problem with Control. "Don't like them very much, do we?"

"You kidding? Name me one Shifter Division that hasn't had a problem with Control in the entire City. It's a universal problem."

"Huh."

Younes shook his manic head, red-rimmed eyes bulging with annoyance. (Canter suspected that the man was overworked and hadn't slept for over a day.) "You got one thing going in your favour."

"What's that?"

"You illegally exorcised a haunting that everyone in that neighbourhood wanted exorcised. Which means that the general population of the district will be on your side and hate Control even more for arresting you."

"So what?"

"*So what*? The last time Control arrested someone that helped the public in this district for Solidarist affiliations, three Control agents were murdered in their homes. The third was set on fire by his own son."

"Really?"

"We're going to leak this to the public."

Although Canter was grateful for the help he did not want his name leaked to the public. Especially since a death god wanted him dead. He could not afford publicity; he wanted to stay inconspicious.

"Look, Master Younes, I'd prefer if you kept things quiet. I'm on a confidential job."

The other shifter frowned. "But…"

"I appreciate your assistance, and I'm glad that you're going to lodge a complaint, but I really, really don't want you to make this public."

Unfortunately the head of the district Shifter Division misinterpreted the request: "You're too humble, Master Canter."

And before he could protest, the other shifter was scurrying down the hall and out the door. Probably to start calling his allies and begin his campaign. Canter cursed and returned to his cot. He needed to get out of this cell, back to the factory, and finish the job before the Shinugami who was looking for him could send its agents to this district.

*

For the first time since her initial appearance he was thankful that his employer was occupying his dreamscape. As much as he hated that there was no escape from his employment, even after Adaelrose's death, he really needed to speak with Eresh.

He ascended a winding staircase composed of books to a sunlit parapet surrounded by shelves and sat down on the other side of the librarian desk. He realized, with only slight surprise, that the entire tower upon which the desk rested was built from pages and covers and spines.

"You look anxious," his current employer remarked.

"I've been arrested," he admitted. "Some idiot Control agent charged me with trespassing before I could finish the job."

She raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't your stupid little caste system afford you a certain measure of privilege?"

"It does, but they're holding up due process. I could be locked up for days before they let me see a lawyer. And then they could drag it out for weeks."

"That is a problem," she agreed, "And one that will alert our enemy."

He briefly wondered what rivalry he had stumbled upon. Obviously this death god had problems with the one that had tried to prevent him from taking the ancient computer from Thirteenth Floor. For all he knew, this rivalry was thousands of years old and he was just another feint in an untold number of stratagems.

She finally nodded and decided aloud, "I have a little influence in that district. As long as my agents are not obvious, I should be able to get you released without alerting the god in charge of that parallel." She shrugged. "It's all a matter of leaning on the right person to start the right chain reaction. So many chains spread throughout the City."

"Thanks."

"Get me the library and finish the contract—that is the only thanks I require."

SIXTEEN

"I don't know who the fuck you are," the Control detective who had interviewed him the night before growled, "But I'm being told to cut you loose."

He glowered through the bars at the detective, arms folded and eyes narrowed, and tried not to look surprised. He had only awoken an hour earlier; he was shocked that Eresh had fulfilled her promise so quickly. She was a more influential employer than Adaelrose.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Not so fast, Master Canter. I have to let you go but that doesn't mean I have to do it right away. How long does it take to fill out those forms, do you think? I bet you don't know 'cause you've never seen them? Who knows? Could take a whole bloody day, couldn't it?"

He felt his eyes narrow with disdain at this big-fish-small-pond cop who gloried in his limited authority. He couldn't resist retorting, "Make sure to spell your name correctly."

"Just for that, I'm going to lose the forms for another two hours."

He decided the insult was worth the delay.

As soon as the Control detective left, Younes waltzed into the holding corridor with a giant grin on his twitchy face. "I hear you're getting out!"

"Have you even slept since the last time we spoke?"

The other shifter admitted, "A mystery cult was trying to sacrifice babies to some Shinugami or other last night. There wasn't time to sleep."

"Busy district."

"Trouble comes in waves. You get these critical periods where there's too many hauntings and cultic activity. Then it's slow for months and months. Just part of the job."

"Sounds fun."

Younes grinned. "You have no idea." Then his grin became suggestive. "You should really think about quitting the private practice and joining the public service."

He tried to hide his disdain as he asked, "Why's that?"

"It probably doesn't pay as well, but we're stretched pretty thin. If you joined us your name could probably get us more City-wide funding."

"I'll think about it," he lied.

"You probably got your reasons. I heard Benton doesn't sign on because he doesn't like working side-by-side with Control and tends to break the law."

"Well the law does get in the way," Canter muttered, though this wasn't usually a problem for the jobs he took.

But unlike Benton, he usually worked for clients who had enough money to bribe the police to look the other way whenever the job became legally suspect. Ameer Benton, however, currently lived out of a lower district and worked on a sliding scale.

"Control's probably going to take as long as possible to fill out the release forms," Younes said, "That's always the way it is. You'll be here for a few more hours at least. Is there anything I can get you?"

He shook his head. "Not now. But is there anyway you can make sure they're not hanging around the old Yundilf factory after I'm released? I've got unfinished business there."

The other shifter grinned. "Sounds exciting."

"You have no idea."

Younes nodded excitedly. "I'll do my best to make sure there's no problem. I can even make sure that they don't know you're returning."

*

He was finally released. As promised, Control had stretched out the process as long as possible: by the time he was escorted out of his cell, all the proper forms filled, the sun had already abandoned the district. Since Canter did not want to return to the factory until sundown, he really didn't mind.

Younes also fulfilled his promise. Upon exiting the building, the head of the district's Shifter Division pulled him aside and quickly escorted him across a crowded street and into an unmarked car. Before Control realized that their prisoner had disappeared from sight, the car was already lost in traffic.

"Need any support inside?" the shifter asked as he spun the steering column to take a sidestreet at a brutal angle. "I can spare two or three agents."

Canter shook his head as he rifled through his returned belongings and made sure the datachip with the map was not missing. "Better that you stay out of this business."

"Big business?"

"There's already two death gods involved," he admitted.

The public shifter whistled with respect. "*Two* Shinugami? I guess that's typical for someone like you. In my experience it's better to run whenever death gods get interested."

Which was also Canter's experience until now. Unfortunately he was trapped in this job, unable to flee the interest of the Shinugami involved, until it was concluded. Happy that he possessed a reputation that approximated that of the Halfshade, however, he was not about to admit the truth.

"Well you know," he mumbled with as much bluster as he could muster, "You do what you have to."

Younes snickered, "Except when Control shows up, right?"

He shrugged. "You know how it is. Sometimes you spend all your time paying attention to hauntings and Sheol and don't give enough credit to the things that could hurt you on this side of existence."

The other shifter nodded knowingly, accelerating down an open avenue. "You start living in the Parallel City. You start thinking only about the dead. One haunting after another. One more cultic conspiracy."

Canter felt a little sorry for Younes. There was even a part of him that envied something about the other man's life: Chris Younes was actually helping people who couldn't afford to pay for the help. He was probably dealing with more treacherous hauntings than Canter but, unlike Canter, would never receive any attention because these jobs lacked prestige. The truth was probably that Younes had far more experience, and was a far more seasoned shifter, but that he lacked the social position to cash in on his experience. Maybe he wasn't stuck in a conspiracy involving Shinugami but that was just a matter of circumstance—and Canter really didn't want to be involved with death gods even if it could lead to more prestige.

Most of all he envied the possible friendship he might be able to enjoy if he entered public service. He wondered whether gaining a circle of real friends would be worth the pay cut. It was one thing to enjoy a generally easy and privileged life where he had to spend little time in the lower districts. It was quite another to enjoy this life alone—it was really, he had to admit, not all that enjoyable.

He barely knew Younes and already he felt as if he could trust and work with the man. There was something about another shifter who was not a competitor that was automatically friendly. Unless, he corrected, that shifter happened to be Shin Airys or her former securicor partner, Prina Anderz. They hadn't liked him one bit—they had even called him a shifter whore. But maybe even they would think differently if he entered public service.

Younes interrupted his thoughts by slowing down and announcing, "Here

we are: the old Yundilf factory. We'll keep a look out for Control. Sure you'll be okay?"

All thoughts of entering the public service evaporated the moment he opened the door. Why should he make a pittance of what he made as a private operative? Why would he even need to work once he finished this job? He could possibly retire on what he was going to make. He would even enjoy the favour of his district's Shinugami. He doubted that any of these things happened for the average public shifter. There was no glory in exorcizing violent hauntings for the poorest of the poor.

"I'll be fine," he said when he stepped unto the pavement, smiling at the factory and ready to conquer Yundilf's last obstacle.

SEVENTEEN

Upon approaching the broken staircase the second time, Canter took a few seconds to consider his options. Clearly he could not shift in the same way he had shifted before: he would be met with the wall and prevented from going any further.

This time he ascended to the apex of the crumbling stairs. He leaned over the edge and shined his flashlight down at the factory floor below. At first he saw nothing. Then, after several passes of his beam, he realized that there was something odd about part of the distant floor: there was a small patch that reflected his beam, throwing it back up in the air.

Since he had nothing better to do he decided to investigate.

When he reached the ground floor and located the space in question, he discovered a small square of metal set in the concrete and painted over with the same black colour. Only the fact that the paint was ancient and cracking had allowed his flashlight to notice the incongruity. Now that he was here he could see the seams around the square.

He got down on his hands and knees and scoured his flashlight over every inch of the metallic square. Less than a minute later he discovered another set of seams: a slender and long rectangle, its top end further grooved by several inches bisected the square. And at the end opposite to the inched out groove, when he shined his light even closer, there was a cunningly disguised hinge.

Chuckling to himself, Canter reached into the groove with two fingers and yanked out the slender rectangle. As he had suspected, it whined out of the metallic square on its hinges and revealed itself as gear trigger. The moment in snapped into an upright position there was a loud groaning. The metal square beneath Canter's feet shuddered as long dormant gears rotated into position.

His grin broadened as the square began to rise.

Yundilf had built a crude lift, cunningly hiding it in the floor of his abandoned factory. Now it was rising after decades of abandonment, pushed into the air by a gear-driven column driven deep into the earth. Soon the platform had reached its highest point, clicking and locking into place fifteen feet away from the broken staircase.

"Fucking obsessive eccentric," Canter muttered aloud as he sat, crossed his legs, and prepared to shift.

Before entering Sheol, he closed his fist around the datachip so that it would be borne, by his astral self, across the veil.

*

This time when he stepped into the Parallel City the wall was on the other side. He had succeeded in crossing Yundilf's final threshold and was now in a cubicle consisting of no exits. Yundilf had built an oubliette—there were no openings on the walls, ceiling, or floor. Canter was completely surrounded by an ecto-barriered cube.

While it was true that a Shinugami would have no problem breaking into this confined space, the chance of a death god even realizing that this space existed was minimal. Unless the Shinugami possessed the map in question, there was a very strong chance that it would never notice the doorless and windowless space. Hearst Yundilf had succeeded in hiding his treasure in a place where no human or Shinugami would consider looking without his map.

There was nothing in the oubliette room except for a single table. And on this table there was a black box. Taking a deep breath, he approached the table

and box reverently. This was Yundilf's treasure, possibly the lost library, the reason for the nightmare turn Canter's life had taken recently.

After another deep breath, he placed his fingers upon the box with equal reverence and opened the lid. It swung open on well oiled hinges, perfectly preserved by Sheol, to reveal a glittering collection of tiny discs. Canter was unfamiliar with the medium but he suspected that they were some sort of ancient data storage medium.

"The library," he murmured, the sound of his voice oddly muted by the unbroken walls and ceiling.

Now he was certain that Adaelrose's obsession was correct. That Yundilf's ravings were not delusional. That the Shinugami from Thirteenth Floor and Eresh were not overly hopeful. Even though he could not read the contents of the black box, he could not imagine them being anything else but the library.

He dropped the datachip with the only map to this space on the floor, shattered it under his heel, and picked up the box. He stepped away from the table and clasped the box to his chest. Then, after sparing one last glance at the oubliette, Canter shifted back into the City of the living.

*

Now he sat on the metal platform with the black disc-filled box on his lap. Rather than pushing the lever of the platform back into its original position he flipped open his phone and dialed Kiernan's number.

After three rings his former lover answered, yawning into the receiver, "This better be good, Maer."

"I have it," he whispered.

"You have what?"

"The library."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe," he permitted as he stared down at the open box and considered its contents, "Maybe I am. Who knows?"

Another yawn. "You aren't making sense. Why are you calling me at this time?"

"I have a collection of discs, each one a few inches in diameter. Are you familiar with that electronic medium, because I'm not."

There was a slight pause. Then her voice became excited: "Are you sure? Describe them in detail."

He picked out one of the discs, submitted it to the glare of his flashlight, and provided his friend with an extremely detailed description. He even counted off the watermark bars on the inner slot of the disc.

Kiernan was still excited. "Do you know what you have?"

"I think it's the library," he repeated.

"It could be," she agreed, "Because, if you weren't lying about the watermark, you just dated that disc from right before Year Zero." She laughed dementedly. "Who knows, right, considering that he was trying to restart the calendar."

"So you can access the information?"

"Of course I can," she huffed. "They kept making that kind of storage medium for five to six decades after Year Zero. It's the watermark that matters, Maer. I've dealt with the same medium before but I've never run into one with that watermark that wasn't empty. The purges were supposed to destroy every one of that batch that was filled with data. Anything the Tyrant wanted to keep was transferred to the next generation."

"I've got probably around a hundred of these discs, Maha."

There was a slight pause. "I want to see them."

He hid his self-satisfaction when he replied, "I'll have to check with my employer."

"Your employer is dead."

He chuckled wickedly. "I have a new employer; she picked up Adaelrose's contract."

"*She*?"

Did he sense jealousy? He sincerely hoped so. He doubted she would be jealous, though, when he explained, "She's another Shinugami. The one in charge of the parallel behind our district."

A slight pause. "You're joking, right?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?"

Yet another pause. "Because you're a fucking shifter who says crazy shit, Maer! Why do you think I keep asking that question? Wouldn't you if you were in the same position?"

He sighed heavily. "Goodbye, Maha."

"Wait," she protested.

"What?"

"Do I get to see the discs?"

"Like I said," he retorted triumphantly, "I have to check with my employer."

He killed the connection before she could answer, pocketed his phone, and shoved the lever of the platform back into its original position. He slowly stood as the platform descended, clutching the box of ancient discs to his chest. Once he got these back to his home district and turned them over to his current employer he would be safe.

There was a part of him that was desperate to investigate the supposed library for himself—to take a peek at the information that had been saved from the Mad Tyrant's purges—but he was really more interested in adequately performing his job without pissing off his current employer than with satisfying his curiousity.

EIGHTEEN

Eresh was absent from the library of his dreams. Although she had only recently appeared in the labyrinth of books, and he was annoyed that she had colonized his sleep, Canter found her absence ominous.

He wandered through twisting corridors of shelves that extended into dark clouds. Past locked and dusty cabinets filled with illuminated manuscripts. Down spiral staircases into torchlit catacombs lined with rotting tomes. He called out his employer's name, the echoes of his voice splintering through innumerable passageways.

Eventually he discovered a librarian desk, similar to the one Eresh often occupied, but it was vacant. When he approached the empty desk he noticed a scrap of paper inked boldly with an eldritch symbol: a verticle line hatched with a tiny horizontal cross at its top; a stylized and looping line that started at the bottom quarter of the verticle line, rose to just below the crossed hatch, domed and dipped, curved in as it descended, opened out again, and ended below the vertical line from which it emerged. It looked like a bizarrely stylized *h* but he was quite sure that it was not meant to be the letter.

Canter wondered whether Eresh had left the symbol behind. Was it intended to be a message, a warning? Whatever the case the *h* that was not an *h* left him with a bad feeling.

*

He awoke to discover that he was still flying over the City, returning to his home district. According to his watch the flight would not land for several hours. He must have dozed off for only a few minutes, worn out from the exorcism, his incarceration, and shifting into Yundilf's oubliette.

Eresh's absence from his dream felt less sinister now that he was awake. The library dreams always made everything feel more ominous. There was no reason to be worried by the Shinugami's absence—she was probably busy running her kingdom. But even if the absence was not worrisome, it was still a problem: he needed to speak with Eresh to ask her for permission to have Kiernan translate the discs. He doubted the death god possessed the technical aptitude necessary for accessing an outdated storage medium.

He also needed to speak with Eresh to set up a meeting. The zone parallel to his home district might be her kingdom, but he did not want to go looking for the Shinugami without a proper escort.

After contemplating his options he decided to call Kiernan and agree to let her translate the discs. Afraid that his office and home might be watched by mystery cultists dedicated to the other Shinugami, he figured that it would be safer to meet with his former lover and hide out in her workshop.

"Are you sure your *employer* is okay with that?" her voice asked sarcastically.

"Just meet me at the flightport," he retorted flatly.

"I don't know, I'm supposed to be meeting Aimee in a few hours."

"Aimee?" He quickly answered his own question: "Oh yeah, the doctor."

There was a disdainful sniff. "You need to stop being so jealous, Maer. We broke up over a decade ago."

"I'm not jealous," he lied, annoyed by the conversation. "Just meet me at the port if you want to take a look at the discs. And don't bring your girlfriend."

"I knew you were jealous."

He was jealous but that was not the main reason he did not want the doctor involved any further: "You're allowed to see the library because I need you to

translate it, but my employer won't be happy if—"

"I understand," she interrupted flatly. "I'll cancel with Aimee. What time does your flight arrive?"

*

"You look like shit," Kiernan said when she met him at the flightport.

He ignored the comment as he fell into step beside her, hurrying her towards the exit. He felt like he was being watched, that any of the passersby could be a mystery cultist. And though he trusted that Eresh would have her agents watching him as well, he did not feel any safer.

"You also look paranoid."

He shot her a glare and hissed, "You should be paranoid as well, Maha."

The comment caused her amusement to evaporate. She nodded curtly, leading him into the parking lot where her hover was waiting, and held her tongue.

Before climbing into Kiernan's car, Canter took one last look around the parking lot—just to make sure that they weren't being followed. His friend was right: he was paranoid. Everyone and every vehicle appeared suspicious.

"I'm not sleeping very well," he muttered as he closed the door and Kiernan pulled out of the lot.

"Still having bad dreams?"

He shrugged, suddenly recalling his last visit to the dream library and the symbol left upon the empty desk. "More like restless dreams."

"Did you ever think about getting a job in another line of work?" she suggested.

"I'm a shifter," he growled, paranoia again taking over and causing him to stare suspiciously out the hover's back window. "Would you be happy doing work that didn't involve electronics and data?"

"There's jobs where you can still use your talent but that are less dangerous. My husband's company, for example, is looking to hire a shifter consultant. I

could put in a—"

"No," he hissed, "I'm not going to work as a consultant for your husband's company."

"After all this time you're still acting like a poor loser."

As much as he hated these conversations, he was almost grateful that she was starting up the old argument. Its familiarity, regardless of the bitterness and angst, was a welcome distraction from his current contract and paranoia.

"I can accept that you chose him over me," he growled, "But that doesn't mean I have to like him. And it definitely doesn't mean I have to work with him."

"It always had to be everything or nothing with you, Maer. You were so stuck on this marriage crap that you never realized that you could still be with me without having to win me in some idiot nuptial rivalry."

"If you weren't stuck on this *marriage crap*," he argued, "Then why did you get married in the first place?"

"For the same reason you work as a high-paid private shifter instead of taking a job as a public servant. For the same reason most people in the upper districts do anything. For the same reason we grew up and stopped being Solidarists. We stopped believing in all that romantic shite, Maer, so why should we keep believing in *love* and *romance*?"

He was silent for a moment before asking, "Do you ever miss those days?"

She nodded and smiled sadly. "Sometimes. Sometimes I wake up feeling like I betrayed my student self and she'd hate me if we ever met."

He chuckled and relaxed, feeling slightly calmer and safer. The familiar argument and the nostalgia was chasing away his anxiety.

Kiernan continued, "But then I think about how I turned on the television last month and saw that Chan Seg was one of the WSP members killed by Control grunts in an illegal strike."

He winced at the memory. Seg was one of their classmates, one of the

student Solidarists who, unlike most of the others, had refused to abandon her ideology under the onslaught of pragmatism. The last time he had seen Seg, she had accused him of being a sell-out who was less of a *realist* because he accepted a way of life that was ultimately unsustainable in its excessive violence. He had told her to grow up. She had spat in his face and called him a traitor.

Now she was dead.

Still, it was not as if the life he had chosen, as lucrative as it had proved, was any less perilous than a life of Solidarist agitation. At least Chan Seg had never been pursued by Shinugami. And, even though he was not a Solidarist, he had still been arrested by Control.

"In the end it doesn't matter," he mumbled, "We're all going to Sheol one way or another."

Kiernan paled slightly at the comment, tightened her lips, and chose not to answer.

NINETEEN

"If this is really the library," Kiernan intoned as soon as they were at her workshop, "This is probably worth more than anything in the City. Do you know how much you could get for even one of these discs?"

"I like making money," he responded as he leaned back in the chair on the other side of this work table, "But I like my health and sanity better. If I even considered selling one of these to the highest bidder, Maha, Eresh would have me tortured to death. Then she would continue to torture me for centuries after I was dead."

His former lover shook her head, glanced up from one of the glittering discs, and muttered, "It seems unfair that you're just going to hand this over to one of those things, Maer. Living *humans* saved this knowledge from the Year Zero purges. Another *human* went to a lot of effort to keep it away from the death gods. It really belongs to us."

"If I sold it to the highest bidder," he pointed out, "Then I'd also be keeping it away from us. If you're going to make this into an ethical issue, Maha, you should be arguing that knowledge should belong to everybody. That I should make it public—donate it to a library or academic foundation."

She snorted. "Is that the old Solidarist in you speaking?"

He shrugged and explained, "I'm only pointing out that I don't see any difference in handing it off to a Shinugami over some wealthy human. Yundilf

might have worked hard to hide this from the death gods, but he also tortured one of his workers to death to turn him into a poltergeist to protect the fucking thing."

"Still: it seems a shame."

Canter did not like where this conversation was going and he was beginning to regret his decision to show Kiernan the discs. If this library ended up in the hands of anyone other than his employer his life and afterlife would be ruined.

"Maha," he warned, "You better not make a copy of this."

She frowned. "I'm just pointing out—"

"My employer would come looking for you as well."

This comment ended the argument. She paled slightly, nodded, and returned her attention to the discs. After she was certain that every disc possessed the same watermark, she turned to one of her many electronic notebooks and began to open numerous screens and boxes.

"Can you access the discs?" he asked.

She nodded. "I told you I could. It will just take some time. And, since you're worried about a copy escaping into the commons, I'm going to have to work with them on a standalone. I just have to copy the relevant programs onto a clean notebook."

"How long will it take?"

"Depends on how much information is on each disc."

"How much can one of these hold?"

She grinned and raised an eyebrow. "Probably the equivalent number of books, give or take a hundred, that are in a university library."

Canter glanced down at the black box in surprise. "This isn't just *a* library—it's a hundred libraries."

"I told you that just one of these discs would be worth a fortune."

"Maha…" he warned.

She suggested, "Why don't you use the shower and take a nap in the back

room. Maybe by the time you wake up I'll be finished."

"I don't know. I think I'd prefer to watch."

Kiernan huffed, "I can't work with you staring over my shoulder, Maer. You smell like a low-born and you look like you haven't had a good sleep in over a week."

He finally relented, too exhausted to think clearly.

*

There were no dreams of the library this time. After a much needed shower, he sunk into a deep and dreamless slumber. He awoke feeling more refreshed than he had in days. He hadn't realized how much he had been affected by the stress, fear, psychic exertion, and employer infiltrated dreams.

When he approached the door, preparing to return to Kiernan's workshop, he froze: his friend was speaking with someone else. It only took him a few seconds to recognize the other voice—it belonged to the doctor, Maha's Aimee. Immediately suspicious, he stayed inside the room and eavesdropped.

"…kill me if he finds out I showed you this," Kiernan was saying, "You really shouldn't be here."

"Then why did you call me?"

"Because this is the library, Aimee, and it's not right to just let some death god take it away from the City. It belongs to humans."

There was a slight pause as Aimee lowered her voice and agreed, "You're right." Then a pause followed by a whistle. "Fucking-Sheol, I've never heard of any of these titles."

"The copy's almost finished," Kiernan intoned. "Take it, get out of here, and wait a couple of days before doing anything with it."

"And then what?"

"Give copies to every public library and every university. The knowledge should belong to everyone. It shouldn't be—"

Enraged by the betrayal, Canter had heard enough. He burst into the room,

drawing his gun and pointing it at the doctor. The shocked woman raised her hands and glanced at an equally shocked Kiernan.

He growled, "Step away from the notebook, Maha, or I blow a hole in your friend's face."

The doctor tried to hide her fear with defiance. "I saved your life—is this how you thank me? By pointing a gun in my face?"

He shot back, "If I let you take a copy of the library you'll be condemning me to centuries of torment."

She snorted and said to Kiernan, "Your friend is melodramatic."

And his former lover said, "Maer, think about what you're doing."

"Step away from the notebook!"

She obeyed and, as he carefully backed the women into a corner of the room with his raised gun, he was able to also approach the electronic notebook. A quick glance confirmed that all of the files from the discs were nearly finished copying unto a datachip. The discs themselves were back in the box. While he had showered and slept, Kiernan had succeeded in translating the relics and was now in the midst of dumping all of their contents on the smaller and far more storage effective datachip. A datachip she was about to hand off to Aimee, condeming him to eternal torture in the process.

"Think about this," she protested. "You're about to give all of this knowledge away to a fucking death god! There could be books in here that could tell us about the history of the City, or maybe how to fix what's wrong with the world outside!"

He kept the gun trained on a point between the two women so that, by only moving his arm a fraction of an inch in either direction, he would be able to shoot whichever one tried to run first. He had no problem shooting the doctor to save his life—he didn't know the woman. He was not sure if he could bring himself to shoot Maha Kiernan.

"I'm not going to be punished by a Shinugami for your ideals. I thought

we both grew up and stopped being Solidarists."

She met his angry and betrayed gaze without flinching. "Maybe some of us feel guilty for *growing up*. And maybe I think that a single person, no matter how much I care about him, isn't worth as much as the entire City."

"Fuck you, Maha," he whispered, not knowing what else to say. He had never felt so betrayed. "I trusted you!"

Aimee interjected, eyes still glued to the gun, "I don't think he'll shoot us, I think—"

He interrupted by putting a hole in the wall several inches above the woman's head. She yelped with surprise, all defiance evaporating. He smiled coldly, gun moving back to its original position and the next charge cycling into its chamber.

"When you spend most of your time dealing with ghosts," he stated flatly, "Killing people tends to lose its taboo."

Kiernan said, "Maer, can't we just—"

"Shut-up," he cut her off, glancing at the screen to confirm that the library had finished copying to the datachip.

He ejected the chip from the computer and slid it into his coat pocket. Careful to keep the gun trained on the women, he scooped up the box of discs and tucked it under his free arm. Then he knocked Maha's notebook to the floor, lowered his gun quickly, and fired three quick shots—reducing it to tiny fragments.

When he looked up from the destroyed notebook he saw that Kiernan was staring at him with disappointment. But he was alive and was about to save both his life and afterlife: he could live with her disappointment. And why should he even recognize this disappointment in the first place? She had betrayed him; she had no reason to look at him like that.

TWENTY

Although he knew it might not be safe to return to his office, Canter could not think of anywhere else to go. He needed to meet with Eresh and he did not want to risk falling asleep again to find her in his dreams—especially since he was not sure, judging by the last two times he had slept, whether he would locate her in the imaginary library. His only option was to return to his office, shift through the soft spot he had created, and try to contact her through the harpies watching at the parallel.

Thankfully there was no one waiting in his office. And, as Eresh had promised in one dream, the corpses were absent. Aside from the two holes in the walls (one from the murder of Adaelrose and one that he had fired at the securicor-modded cultist), there was no sign that anyone had even died on the premises.

Before preparing to shift, Canter reinforced the security fields surrounding the office. Maybe the fields wouldn't stop a death god or its favoured agents, but they would prevent someone like Kiernan from breaking in to steal the library.

He was still devastated by the betrayal. She was the only person he trusted, the only individual who even approximated a friend, and he was shocked that she could turn on him so easily. He was even more shocked by the fact that her betrayal was for reasons that accorded with Solidarist principles she had supposedly abandoned—that they had both abandoned. The ethics behind the

betrayal meant that, if she succeeded in making the lost library public property, she would only feel slight pity for handing him over to an angry death god. Her betrayal would be justified by history, just as Solidarists justified every act of political violence. He understood the logic because it was compelling. Once he would have even agreed.

But Canter was not going to be a martyr for some higher morality. There was a reason he was no longer a Solidarist.

"Maybe, when I'm done with this job and have enough to retire," he told the empty room, "I'll take Younes up on his offer and join the public Shifter Division."

Then he laughed at his errant promise and sat down on the floor. After closing his aura around the box and datachip, he took a deep breath, performed his personal rituals, and slipped through the veil.

*

He had half expected Eresh to be waiting for him in the parallel version of his office. The place was empty, however, looking exactly as it always looked. Even the ecto-barriers were back in place, probably restored by his Shinugami employer when she cleaned up the bodies on the other side of the veil.

Rather than exiting immediately, Canter took his time. He did not want to rush into the violent streets of Sheol and possibly attract a band of murderous poltergeists in his desperation to find Eresh. He would probably survive, but there was a good chance he could lose the library in the process—it could disappear, passing from ghost to ghost and into another district, before Eresh could track it down. Right now the ecto-barriers that annexed this office to its opposite version kept him safe from the low-level nasties outside and gave him time to think.

If he knew that the harpies were still waiting outside, or if Eresh had posted another sentinel, he wouldn't take his time. Unfortunately the window beside the front entrance did not provide him with much a view.

"This is stupid," he muttered, having reached the paranoid point where

he addressed himself aloud, "All I have to do is take one step out the door, call down the harpies, and wait for Eresh to show up."

If anything the library was safer on this side of the veil: it was now in the territory of his employer. She was probably waiting for him to show up. His growing paranoia was starting to work against him, causing him to second-guess every action.

Tightening his grip around the library, he opened the door and stepped unto the street.

The harpies were waiting in the same rafters. Their heads jerked towards him in unison, trapping him in their collective gaze. They burst from the eaves in a cloud of gold and black and descended upon him before he could retreat.

His first thought was that they were attacking. That they would pick him apart with their sharp teeth and talons, eating away his astral self so that he could not return to his body on the other side of the veil.

It only took him a few seconds to realize that they were only beating around him like a hurricane and trying to push him back inside the office. The force of their whirlwind caused him to stagger backwards, almost tripping over his feet. For some reason they did not want him to stay on the streets.

"Stop," he hissed at the flock, "I need to meet with your master!"

And then one of the harpies proved that it was capable of speech. Small lips brushed past his ear and a crisp and quiet voice whispered, "Flee."

Then the fury of the wings threw him through the door. He landed in a tangle of limbs and, before he could struggle to his feet, the door was slammed shut. The beating wings retreated, the harpies returning to their previous roost.

Although he was shocked by their reaction to his presence—and most shocked by the fact that one of them had spoken—he was not about to ignore the warning. They had told him to flee, had even pushed him back inside the ecto-barriered parallel office. He would figure out why they told him to flee later; he decided that, at this moment, it would be unwise to ignore their advice.

He shifted back through the veil…

*

…and found himself in the library of his dreams, standing in a narrow and dimly lit alley of books. He was still carrying the box that contained the real library that had inspired the dreamscape.

Canter was momentarily overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of dreaming. There was no reason he should have slipped into this dream instead of back into his body. No reason, that is, unless his body had been rendered potentially unconscious thus temporarily stranding his astral self between Sheol and its anchor in the City of the living.

Panicking, he tightened his arm around the box and picked up his pace. He had to find a way out of the book labyrinth and back into his corporeal body. He needed to wake up and find out why he had not returned to his senses upon leaving Sheol.

And then he rounded a twisting corner of shelves and found himself in an antechamber that was lit by hanging braziers filled with burning pages. In the centre of the chamber was the librarian desk that Eresh usually occupied—but it was not the desk that grabbed his attention.

Directly in front of the desk someone in a grey and hooded mantle, his back to Canter, crouched over the pinned and twitching body of Eresh. One of the grey cloaked arms held a wicked looking sickle that rose and fell in fast and brutal motions, making hideously wet sounds with each descent. Eresh's body spasmed at every chop; black blood was torn from her body and thrown into the air.

Without looking around, or slowing the rhythm of the cutting sickle, the figure in the cloak intoned, "Ereshkigal had a good run, she was older than me by over half a century, but her time is over." The sickle descended; the body jerked. "Mictlantecuhtli will follow, leaving only Nergal as the last of the great names from before the Nakbah that can possibly rival my power."

He wanted to run, to be anywhere but here, but he had lost all command of his body the moment he had stepped into the antechamber. Paralyzed by the power that emanated from the violence, he stared dumbly at the sickle. It reminded him of the odd-looking *h* he had discovered on the desk the last time he had visited the library.

Eresh (or *Ereshkigal*) jerked violently, her spasms accentuated by a particularly brutal blow from the blade. Her grey-cloaked murderer rose and turned, clasping her severed head in his other hand by the hair. He was naked under the long and flowing mantle, which was left entirely open but still clung to his frame to hide much of his nudity. From beneath the cowl glittered two orange-yellow flames, embers where there should be eyes. Most of the face was obscured by the cowl's shadow, though Canter could make out the edge of a bearded chin and the ghost of a nose.

"You have my library, little human," the man pronounced, blood dripping from sickle and severed head. Behind him, Eresh's body continued to twitch, "And if Ereshkigal had not involved herself, I might have allowed her to remain."

Overwhelmed by the terror caused by the Shinugami, Canter was unable to speak or move. All he could do was tighten his arms further around the library and wish desperately for the dream to end.

The sickle-wielding Shinugami took a step forward, a graceful leg emerging from the front of his cloak. His flesh reminded Canter of a stone sculpture. A statue leg that only mimicked human form, lacking suppleness and warmth. It was even the colour of weathered marble.

"But now the library is mine."

Desperate to save himself from the god, Canter wordlessly proferred the black box.

The Shinugami chuckled. "That's just a memory; here you're less than a ghost. When you return to your body it will be mine."

The library and the death god began to fade. The dream was ending.

TWENTY-ONE

Canter gasped awake and discovered that he was no longer in his office. He was in a cellar lit by a guttering and yellow gas lamp and propped against a cold and rotting stone wall. Ugly and rusty manacles encircled his wrists, each one linked to equally rusty chains that were connected to the wall. On his lap was the library box. In his clenched fist was the datachip.

It took him less than a second to process what must have happened. While he was in Sheol his corporeal body had been removed and transported somewhere else. When he had tried to shift back his astral self was initially confused. The trauma of confusion would have caused him to lose consciousness and, while he slipped into dreams, his astral self had been drawn to the magnet of the moved physical shell.

Now that he had returned to his living body, the objects he had taken into Sheol had returned as well. His captors were probably waiting for him to return, hoping that his return would also bring the items they sought.

His first instinct was to panic. His second was to struggle to his feet and try the chains. He jerked around, braced himself against the wall with one leg, and pulled desperately on the rusty links. The effort chafed his hands raw; the chains refused to give.

Realizing that he was thinking about things all wrong, he gave up on the chains. He calmed himself, fought against his terror and memory of the sickle-

wielding Shinugami, and folded his legs beneath him. If he succeeded in shifting back into Sheol he might be able to find a solution to this problem. At the very least he could hide the library and datachip on the other side of the veil and—

The metal-bound door on the other side of the cellar whined open, throwing a rectangle of light across Canter and disrupting his concentration. He squinted against the unexpected brightness at the perfectly black silhouette standing at the threshold.

The silhouette lit a cigarette, temporarily illuminating a rough and unshaven male face, and pronounced, "No point in shifting; we've secured the parallel. Might as well spare yourself the trouble…"

The man in the doorway inhaled, causing the ember of his cigarette to glow brighter, again partially illuminating his features. Canter was reminded of the ember eyes of the Shinugami who had destroyed Eresh. He shuddered.

"…you'll just manifest in an oubliette—completely warded, of course. Learned that one from Yundilf's little obstacle."

He guessed, "You were watching me."

"No, no: your most recent employer made that kind of difficult. Limited us to spying on your office until our boss could set things straight. We figured out the other details later." Then he added, before Canter could make sense of this confession, "We've just been waiting for you to manifest so we could take the library. It was pretty annoying that you took the fucking thing into Sheol with your astral self—you can imagine the headache that caused us."

Canter clutched the box to his chest and desperately considered his options. He did not doubt that the other side of the veil was being watched. If you wanted to trap a shifter, and prevent him from stealing away the object you were waiting for, it made logical sense to secure the parallel.

He was chained corporeally and trapped astrally. His only bargaining chip was the library: if he couldn't remove it from the cell, he could at least destroy the bloody thing.

"You come any closer," he threatened, "And I'll start smashing discs."

The cigarette paused an inch from the silhouette's shadow-blank face. "You can't smash them *all* before we get to you."

"But who's to say that what your master wants isn't on one of the ones I smash?" he shot back.

The cigarette moved to the lips and the ember glowed again. Upon exhalation the silhouette said, "That's the lost library, the only copy of books from before Year Zero in existence. You wouldn't—"

Canter interrupted the dare by dropping the datachip Kiernan had made and crushing it with one of his manacles. Even if they do get the library from me, he reasoned, no use in making it easy for them to understand.

"What was that?" the silhouette growled.

"The translated copy of the entire library. Took half a day to make." He opened the box, withdrew one of the discs, and threatened, "I wonder what's on this one?"

The silhouette remained at the threshold, smoking and considering the situation. Finally, after flicking the spent cigarette away, he said, "You can't keep this up forever. You're going to fall asleep at some point."

"I can shift into your oubliette with the library and stay awake for as long as I want," he reasoned.

"Your body will die from exhaustion. Your projection will fade."

"Or maybe I'll stay a ghost in the oubliette after my body dies and you'll still have to deal with me."

"Our master will come eventually and take the box. Or we can kill you."

"Bet I can destroy at least one of these discs first."

"Clever man. What do you want?"

"I'll give you the library if you let me live," he bargained. "That's all I wanted in the first place."

"I'll have to check on that one—I really don't have the authority."

"Then start checking."

"We could just lie, you know."

Canter sneered, "I'll see the lie in your aura."

The silhouette shrugged. "Anything in the meantime?"

"Water. Roll a bottle into the cell."

"On its way. That it for now?"

"Tell me where I am."

"Watertown."

That was a lower district. He recognized the name immediately because it was the district out of which Shin Airys worked. "Why Watertown?"

"Why *not* Watertown?"

He held up the disc again and repeated, "Why Watertown?"

"Just a moment," the shadowed man grumbled, stepping away from the door.

When he returned, a few seconds later, he rolled a cylindrical bottle of water into the cell. It stopped against Canter's knee. Grateful for the water, he hastily unscrewed the lid and emptied half of its contents down his parched throat.

"There's your water. As for Watertown, I'm afraid I don't know. I'm just following orders. But I can check on that one if you like."

Since he did not think the location of where he was being held, at least at that moment, really mattered, he thought back on the conversation to this point before inquiring about something that had bugged him: "What did you mean when you said you figured things out without spying on me?"

"When we tortured your datathief friend to death," the silhouette intoned emotionlessly. "We also killed the doctor. Don't want anyone knowing about the library."

The fact that Maha Kiernan was dead shocked Canter into silence. While he was in the midst of processing the news, his jailor withdrew. The door was

closed and bolted, the cell plunged back into darkness.

He was left alone, holding half a bottle and staring at the locked door, to contemplate his guilt. He was responsible for Kiernan's torture and death—he had brought her into this mess. It didn't matter that she had betrayed him because, when he really thought about the circumstances, he realized that her betrayal also didn't matter. When she was trying to steal the library and make its information public, Canter's employer was already on her way towards defeat. If anything, he had only prevented the library from becoming public property. And now he was only delaying his death.

He had killed his only friend.

TWENTY-TWO

Just when he finished pissing in the corner—careful to keep the library close and a disc in one hand in case they entered the cell while he was vacating his bladder—the door opened to reveal the silhouette. He sat down on a chair, crossed his black and shadow uniformed legs, and lit another cigarette.

"Still feeling guilty over your friend's death?"

"Go fuck yourself," Canter snarled as he returned to his original position.

Again the cigarette ember lit up patches of the other man's face. "I admire your defiance, you know. Takes real guts to bargain like this, right up to the end."

"You have permission to let me go?"

"Not yet. We're waiting for a reply. Unfortunately, the boss is pretty busy at the moment. What with taking over another god's territory. He's got to deal with rebellious djinn, loyal harpies, disgruntled gargoyles."

"If it makes it any easier to make a deal," he suggested, trying hard to hide his desperation, "You can tell him that I'll work for him for the rest of my life."

The ember glowed and Canter's jailor snickered. "Now why would he want you, Master Canter?"

"Outside of Shin Airys, I'm the best shifter there is."

"You're also the type of man who likes to think he belongs to himself. You don't work well with others, do you?"

"You don't know that."

A pause as the shadow man exhaled. "Outside of the one we killed, how many friends do you have, Canter?"

He glared at the silhouette, squinting at the light and trying to make sense of the features.

"You maverick types think you're so tough. Really, you're all just a bunch of sad and lonely rich kids who pretend that they haven't had to walk on the backs of others to get where they are today."

Canter snarled, "Tell me about Watertown."

"It's a lower district filled with canals. Can't you feel the dampness?"

"You know what I mean."

The silhouette puffed on his cigarette, nodded, and explained, "The boss is starting an incursion in Watertown's parallel zone. He's already taken territory from the god who rules here: she's getting weaker."

"But why not move me to a territory he controls?" Canter demanded suspiciously. "Why here?"

"That's all I've been told." Then he snapped his fingers and added, "Oh, and that he's taking over this area because he also wants to control the zone parallel to where the Halfshade works. I don't know why, though, so don't bother asking."

Canter continued to glare at the silhouette, sipping on his current bottle of water, and tried to make sense of the reasons for his imprisonment in Watertown. He had nothing to do with whatever incursion this man's god was planning: why was he chained to a cell in this district?

The other man exhaled slowly, his smoke glowing blue under the harsh lighting. "Did you know that your girlfriend wanted to make the library public? That's what she told us when she was being interrogated."

Remembering that this man was partially responsible for torturing and murdering Kiernan, his glare deepened—infected with hatred. "She wasn't my

girlfriend."

"That's right. She was the girlfriend of that doctor woman we killed."

"You didn't have to kill Maha," he growled, feeling the terrible weight of guilt.

"It's your fault she knew too much. And she wanted to make the library *public*."

Now he wished that he had not destroyed the chip and allowed Kiernan to release multiple copies. All he had succeeded in doing was preventing the City from learning of the library, probably the greatest discovery since Year Zero. If he was to die, at least the public release of the lost library could have been some sort of revenge.

"You know she begged us not to kill you?" The shadow dropped the cigarette and ground it beneath his heel. "You were responsible for us torturing her and she still begged us not to kill you. You must have been a really good friend."

"Shut-up," he muttered, hating himself even more.

"How long do you think you can keep this up, Canter? You're going to get exhausted sooner or later. Maybe we'll take the chance and wait for you to die. Maybe your ghost won't manifest in Sheol."

"You'll have to wait a long time. And maybe I'll get frustrated and start breaking discs the longer you take."

"Like you said, any one you break might be the one we need. You break one, we risk you breaking another and kill you."

"What if the second one is the one you needed?"

"What if the first one was?" the silhouette shot back. "No way to tell, is there? You'll force us to take the chance."

"Do you *want* me to start smashing the library?" Canter scoffed, trying to call the bluff.

"Face it, Master Canter. You're in a bad situation. You have to be ready to

break the discs to keep yourself alive. But you also have to keep the discs safe so that we don't kill you. Precarious, en't it?"

He sneered as he caught the other man's low-born accent. If his jailor was going to play these mind games, he could push back: "You sound like someone who's worked hard to hide his origins. Did your mystery cult friends pay for a proper education?"

"What's it to you if they did?"

"Nothing really."

"You high-borns think that we even care 'bout how we talk? All we want is a better life—what does it matter if we speak like you self-satisfied shites?"

"If it doesn't matter, then why are you trying so hard?"

"It's the job, Canter. They had me trained to speak like a high-born because I needed to know how to pass. So I could follow fuckers like you in the upper districts without being noticed. So now it's a habit that kind of got in and poisoned the way I used to speak without me even trying."

"Well I guess they'd need a low-born thug to torture and kill other people."

The silhouette was unphased. His ink-black arm shapes rested on his lap. His legs uncrossed and recrossed. He replied easily, "You high-borns kill more people, especially lower casters, every fucking day without even thinking about it. And sometimes you get low-borns to do your killing for you 'cause you don't wanna get your hands dirty." He shrugged. "Shouldn't you know that, Canter? Didn't you used to be a *Solidarist*?"

"Did you kill and torture Maha?" he growled.

"Actually, the one who did most of the cutting was high-born. She was a pretty important politician, in fact, which en't all that surprising. You have to be cold to run for government or control multicivics."

Canter was slightly shocked by the admission. Not because a high-born woman was the one mainly responsible for torturing and killing Kiernan, but because this mystery cult counted members of government amongst its ranks.

Which meant that it was a particularly influential cult—the kind that could influence public policy.

But then he remembered how Eresh had succeeded in getting him released from a prison. Maybe every mystery cult was influential in the City of the living. The idea made him shudder.

The silhouette rolled another bottle of water into the cell. "Here you go, Canter," he said as he stood and dragged his chair away from the threshold, "Maybe next time we talk I'll have the authority to cut a deal."

Again the door was shut and locked. Again the cellar was plunged into darkness.

TWENTY-THREE

Time passed and Canter had no method of counting its passage. Growing more exhausted and haggard, he spent long hours shifting into the the parallel. He quickly discovered, as he had expected, that his jailor had not lied: the cellar in Sheol was also an oubliette, lit by a single lamp that would flicker eternally, its light never dying.

When he shifted back he would temporarily leave the library in the parallel, just to make sure his captors weren't planning an ambush. Then he would quickly shift again, reclaiming the library, and take care of his corporeal self as best as he could—rehydrating, pissing and shitting, walking about on his tired legs, and rubbing the raw skin beneath his manacled wrists.

Sometimes he felt the library of his dreams pushing at the edge of his exhausted consciousness. Occasionally he hallucinated book-filled shelves, the imaginary versions of the box he was protecting.

He began to believe that he was the chosen guardian of the library, the protector of forgotten knowledge. His captors would be forced to let him go because they would have to accept his terms.

Now the silhouette only returned to roll bottles of water into the cell and spy on Canter. The man rarely exchanged words. If he did speak, it was only to admit that he still had not heard anything from his Shinugami principal.

They were waiting him out, knowing that he would have to keep the library

safe if he wanted to bargain. They did not think he would start smashing discs to speed up the process: he had reached a tenuous stalemate with his captors.

Now and then he would privately curse Ren Adaelrose, wishing that he had never accepted the contract. It had seemed like easy money at the time; he had assumed that he only needed to prove what everyone already knew—that the library didn't exist. Now that he knew the truth, he hated himself for taking the contract. He imagined myriad and monstrous tortures that could be visited upon his former employer's shade.

He grew more haggard. For the first time since his student days he was growing a beard. He wondered what Maha would think if she could see him now—when they were Solidarists she had encouraged him to grow a beard.

He also wondered whether her shade was somewhere in Sheol, cursing his name.

He began to spend longer periods of time in the parallel. In the Sheol oubliette he did not feel exhausted. Free from the chains, he could wander the confines of this cell, feeling strong and invigorated. Whenever he returned to his corporeal body, psychically exhausted, he was forced to fight against the onslaught of coma. Now he returned only to keep himself alive and check on the situation. Better to trick himself into feeling awake and alert than to spend too long dealing with his near collapse.

*

Shifting back into his body so that he could drink more water before returning to the other side of the veil, Canter discovered that the door was open again and the silhouette had returned, smoking another cigarette.

"How long can you keep this up, Canter?"

He scratched at his beard, gulped water, and rasped, "I have a strong astral projection. Like I said before, I'm ready to let myself die to keep bargaining."

"But if you die, and end up a shade in the oubliette," the silhouette retorted, "Won't the whole point of your bargain lose its meaning? You are bargaining to

stay alive, aren't you?"

"I'll change the terms," he shot back.

"To what?"

He privately admitted that he had not thought that far ahead. Out loud, however, he said, "None of your fucking business."

The cigarette ember glowed and the man laughed. "You aren't thinking clearly, Canter. We're wearing you down."

"Maybe I'll start breaking discs tomorrow. Maybe I'll break the whole box in the parallel."

"Then we *will* kill you," the silhouette warned.

"And your god will kill you." He managed a painful shrug. "Seems like a pretty fair exchange, considering that you've been planning to kill me from the beginning. If I get to take you with me, I'll be happy."

Bookshelves were manifesting in the terribly bright corridor behind the silhouette. Canter shook his head to dismantle the mirage. He was close to collapse; his corporeal body was refusing to stay awake. Even though it fell unconscious whenever he passed through the veil, because his astral projection was absent, he never dreamed. Never reprogrammed his tired mind.

He was in danger of dreaming himself into death.

*

Hours or days later, when he was again back in his corporeal body and sipping weakly at the bottle of water, the silhouette returned. Canter did his best to pretend he was not exhausted, to act as if he was still confident he could win the stand-off.

Yet another cigarette was let, this time with a match that was shaken to death and thrown into the dark cell. "Good news, Canter, I've been told that the boss has agreed to your terms. Give up the library and we'll let you go."

He was almost excited enough to believe the words without checking. The dream library was closing in upon him from all sides. It was hard to believe he

was chained to the wall of some dank Watertown cellar. Sometimes it appeared as if he was standing in the dim labyrinth of books and that the silhouette was sitting behind the desk formerly occupied by Eresh.

But he caught himself before agreeing and surrending the library. He forced his tired third eye open, disappearing into the half-trance shifter state, and focused on the other man's aura. "If I give you the library you'll let me live? You're telling the truth?"

Guessing that his aura was being read, the silhouette nodded and answered precisely, "If you give us the library, and don't break a disc, we'll let you live."

He almost wept with relief when he saw that the aura did not contort in patterns and colours that would reveal deceit. "I won't say anything," he promised, "I just want to get on with my life and forget this fucking contract."

"Of course you do," the silhouette agreed. "Do we have a deal? Can I enter the cell and take the library?"

"Just get me out of these chains."

"We want to make sure that's the library first," the silhouette responded. "If the watermark on the discs fits, and you haven't stashed the real one some place else, then we'll keep our end of the bargain. Is that fair?"

Again he scrutinized the aura for any sign of deceit. "That's fair. The watermark isn't wrong."

He knew that the watermark was correct, that he still held the real library, because he had spent hours counting the tiny stripes to keep himself sane. No one had switched libraries on him when he was sleeping. Kiernan hadn't betrayed him again.

"I'm entering the cell now," the silhouette warned, cigarette still clenched between his teeth.

"Go ahead," Canter murmured, "The library's yours now."

"About time," the man grunted as he rose from the chair and crossed the threshold, being very careful not to frighten the exhausted prisoner.

"Hope you find what you need on the discs," he muttered, glad that the cursed box was finally being taken out of his hands.

By now he knew all of its contours and flaws perfectly. If his jailor had asked, Canter could have told him that one of the inner slots was uneven, that there was a permanent smudge on one of the bottom corners, that the hinges squeeked in three distinct tones.

"I'm impressed you got the boss to agree; I'm actually glad we don't have to kill you."

"So am I," Canter murmured as he surrendered the box.

"The experts upstairs will check out the watermark," he was told, "And when they're satisfied someone will be down to set you free. Until then, enjoy your sleep."

Canter watched the box leave the cell, feeling as if he had surrendered a sacred duty.

TWENTY-FOUR

For the second time since taking Adaelrose's contract Canter did not dream of the library. His slumber was deep and restful, unjumbled with labyrinthian shelves and dusty books. And when he awoke he could not recall his dreams; he felt more awake than he had for weeks.

The metal door whined open again and the silhouette entered. As it approached his position down the corridor of extremely bright light, however, Canter realized that this was a different silhouette from the one before: shorter and broader, carrying a suitcase.

"You're awake," this other man pronounced as he stopped a foot away from Canter and crouched slowly, setting his suitcase carefully on the dirty floor beside him, just outside of the light. "Restful sleep, I hope?"

He focused on the face of this cultist, saw that it was overly sharp and nearly expressionless: very professional. "You checked the discs and know they're the library?"

The stranger nodded as he opened the latches of his briefcase. "Everything checks out. We figured it would, but it's always best to be careful."

"Then get me out of these chains," he rasped. "I held up my end of the bargain."

Nodding, the short and broad man removed a hammer from his briefcase and held it up in front of his eyes like a surgeon inspecting his tools. "Do you

want to know why we had you brought to Watertown? I heard you were asking about that before."

Canter assumed that the hammer was going to be used against his manacles. He had inspected them on numerous occasions, mainly to keep himself sane, and had discovered that they had been welded around his wrists. If he was ever to be released, tools would be required.

"If you don't want to tell me," he murmured, staring at the hammer and hoping that it would be used against his manacles soon, "You don't have to. I just want to go home."

"What would you do if you went home, Master Canter?"

"Retire," he decided, "Or maybe start work in the public service."

"A fine plan. From what I've read, you don't have any friends left. I'm sure you'd be able to make new friends if you ever were to become a public servant." Satisfied with the hammer, he placed it on the ground before his crouched knees and asked, "But do you want to hear about Watertown?"

"If you want to tell me," he muttered, annoyed that the man was wasting his time.

"Our master is planning ahead, hoping to make an incursion in this territory at some point in the next one or two years. You have to think ahead for these sort of things, use all the resources at your disposal. And sometimes you can turn a problem into a small resource."

"I really don't care," he said, trying to make his voice sound as diplomatic as possible, "And it's probably a good thing that I don't care. I want to forget everything about this job and your master."

The locksmith removed a large iron spike from the suitcase. Canter figured that it would be placed in one of the links as a wedge. That the hammer would be used to bang down the spike and break the chain. An obvious but crude solution. They were probably going to set him loose in the streets of Watertown with the manacles still around his wrist, leaving him to find someone who could finish the

job.

"I'm sure you do. But pay attention, Canter, it's only fair that we tell you this much. You drove a hard bargain; you worked hard to cut a deal."

He smiled, still exhausted despite his recent sleep, and agreed tiredly, "I guess I did."

The man held up the spike and Canter saw that every inch of the iron was engraved with cultic symbols. "You're a shifter with some experience, you should understand these things."

"What things?" he demanded testily, deciding that he did not like his self-satisfied locksmith.

"One of the ways to make an incursion, Master Canter, is to create poltergeists dedicated to the invading Shinugami. Build fetid little cesspools of poltergeist activity at the edges of an enemy Shinugami's territory. Make sure that the ground is hallowed and that every death is dedicated to the invading god. Taint the territory by making it holy to one god and unholy to another." He waved the spike in front of Canter's face. "Hence Watertown."

He was tired and confused. "Can you just break my locks?"

"Did you really think that we were going to let you go?" the supposed locksmith whispered.

The words finally made sense as Canter's fevered mind put them together. Now he saw the hammer and spike for what they were. His immediate reaction was to jerk away from the light and crawl back into the shadows, chains trailing loudly behind him.

"You promised," he moaned desperately, "You made the deal. I *saw* that you weren't lying. You can't—"

"My associate wasn't lying," the man agreed as he stood, spike in one hand and hammer in the other. "In fact, he probably still thinks that you're being set free."

No, no, no, Canter's fevered mind raved as he cringed against the corner:

this has to be a dream; I must be imagining this—I saw the aura and auras don't lie. He said he was going to set me free.

The broad and severe man stood in the corridor of light and continued, "It's not *that* hard to deceive someone who can see aura patterns—you just have to have enough people. One lies to the other, and the other repeats the lie believing it's the truth. Shifters can't see *truth* they can only see the *assumption of truth*. The solution was obvious right away but, if you were less exhausted, you might have figured it out ahead of time. You struggled well, Canter, but there's only so much one man can do by himself."

"No…"

"You also strike me as someone a little too overconfident in his abilities as a shifter." The man took a threatening step forward. "The type of man who thinks he's *special* and *unique* simply because he spends half the day talking to the dead. Maybe you even think you're better than other shifters."

Canter was horrified by the promise of the spike and the hammer. This wasn't *fair*: he had never believed in Adaelrose's claims to begin with. He had only acted in self-interest, to preserve his existence. He would never speak about the library—he was happy to live his life without even thinking about this contract ever again.

Somewhere the shade of Kiernan was laughing, damning him for having dragged her into this business. The only part of him that was not terrified by the spike—not trying to wake up from what he still hoped was a nightmare—was wishing that he had allowed Maha to copy the library unto every available server.

"But you're not better than most shifters, Canter, you just have a reputation. You're not Shin Airys. You're not Ameer Benton. You're not even two hundred shifters I could name off-hand. You're just someone who was in a position to make a name for himself. And reputation, I'm afraid, does not mean skill."

He could not back any further into the corner. He was flattened against

the point where the two walls met, his body wedged between the intersection of rotting stone. He stared at the spike and hammer with horror.

"If it makes you feel any better," his murderer suggested, "You can shift into the parallel so you don't feel the pain. It won't matter to me: this spike, and the ones I plan to use next, will nail your spirit to your shell."

"Stop it," he screeched, "I gave you the library!"

"Shifters make very good poltergeists," the cultist persisted, "And they're always bound. Did you know that there hasn't been one shifter who's escaped a ritual binding? That's the kind of *special* you are."

"Don't…"

"If you're feeling sorry for yourself," his tormenter declared, "Then I suggest you think of your friend, Maha Kiernan, who you held at gunpoint and forced into this game. Unlike you, she wasn't able to shift into Sheol to escape the pain."

He glowered at the man, hating him for killing Maha. Hating him more for what he was about to do now. But he was not beyond grovelling. He promised that he would serve the man's god forever. He wept tears of revelation. He pledged himself to service—anything that would allow him to escape this fate.

But the man with the spike and hammer was not interested in the pleading. He waited until Canter was finished before raising the spike and pronouncing, "You should probably shift into the oubliette, now. I'm going to drive this through your eye."

*

From the other side of the veil Canter felt himself die. Felt the spikes drive through both of his eyes. Then his mouth, pinning his tongue to the back of his skull. A ritual death designed to transform him into a poltergeist.

He felt the blows without the physical pain he would have experienced had he occupied his corporeal body. But with each blow his mind reeled. He felt the binding. The nailing into place. He screamed at the closed walls of his prison,

cursing his captors, as the hammer blows caused his shape to tremble. He was being nailed into that cellar room, transformed into a foothold for his murderer's god. The ground upon which he was murdered would be desecrated for one Shinugami and consecrated for another.

The final blow broke across his projection, throwing him to the floor of the oubliette. He wanted to escape, to tear himself free from the binding, but it was too late. If only he had never taken Adaelrose's contract. If only he had allowed Kiernan to release the library.

He was being nailed into place, transformed into a lunatic poltergeist dedicated to a Shinugami. A threshold spirit, a brutal haunting.

He stared up at the unforgiving ceiling, lacking the ability to weep, and watched as the library of his dreams flooded the oubliette.

TWENTY-FIVE

The dreams of the library eventually returned. Torrential, all-consuming: they dominated the sane moments of his afterlife, preventing him from accepting, or even remembering, what he had become. And if he did remember, perhaps while his dreaming self was in the midst of searching a shelf for a book he could understand, he would forget immediately upon waking.

Waking was usually forgetful. He could barely remember what he was doing or saying most of the time. It was a painful existence: he often felt he was watching himself, as if through a filthy and distorted lens, and was sometimes unsure whether it was his self he was even watching.

There were moments when he managed to gaze through his spike blinded eyes, moan through his nailed mouth. These were brief periods of revelation. Epiphany passed quickly, however, and eventually he found himself back in the library, distant from that tortured self, trying to find his way out of the labyrinth of books. Trying to remember why he was even trapped here in the first place.

One day—if it was actually a *day*—he discovered a book that was entitled *The Nakbah* on a shelf deep in the library labyrinth. It reminded him of something important, something sad, something he had never understood. But when he opened the cover he discovered that the pages were all blank. This happened often: either the pages of books were empty or they were filled with alien symbols.

When he was not in the library he was in pain, wandering an abandoned

house in Watertown. Dragging his chain through rotting rooms, manifesting and disappearing, he bled eternally through his eyes and mouth. He tried to recall where he was and why he was in pain. He took out his anger on trespassers, quickly realizing that he was powerful and that they were afraid of his presence. He began to feed on their fear.

Until one day a different type of intruder arrived.

*

"We're not supposed to be here, Shin."

There were two trespassers this time. He watched from the shadows as they stepped over the threshold of his territory, shining their rude lights down his rotting halls. The one who had spoken was a tall, lovely, and tough-looking woman. The other was a diminutive girl who looked like she couldn't be older than thirteen. There was something familiar about them; their appearance itched at the back of his skull.

The girl was saying, "I don't care if we shouldn't be here. This haunting's been left for too long—we're doing the neighbourhood a service."

"It's private property; we don't have the legal right to exorcize the place."

Now he could better see the girl. There was something strange about her, something that made him think twice about manifesting: her face was too pale, a greyish white that reminded him of the Sheol skies. Her black eyes did not belong to a thirteen year-old.

He tried to remember where he had seen her before.

"If you got a problem with it, Pri," the girl who was not a girl said, "Then you can go home. Otherwise, keep shining that light and start thinking up arguments to use when we get in trouble."

"Why do you have to cause so many problems?" the older looking woman sighed. "Sometimes you act as young as you look—you know that, right?"

The girl shrugged and removed a long bladed and wicked knife from beneath her heavy overcoat. "I'm going to ignore that."

He stared at the knife with disdain, wondering if the familiar looking pair actually believed that he could be harmed with a blade. The only thing that hurt him now were the nails he stared through, the spike he spoke through, the manacles biting into his wrists.

Deciding that he didn't care how he recognized the trespassers, he chose that moment to manifest. He would deal with them quickly, feed on their fear, and then flee this painful world for the library of his dreams.

They were not afraid when he stepped from the shadows, chains clanking around his feet. And the black-eyed girl was especially not afraid: she grinned at him with humourless interest, head cocked at a curious angle.

"You're an ugly one," she pronounced.

"Get out of my house," he snarled, angry that they were not afraid.

She snickered and said to her friend, "How many times have we heard that warning, Pri?"

"It's pretty cliched," *Pri* agreed.

He demanded, "Why aren't you afraid?"

"That's another common one," said the girl.

And there was a part of him, some tiny part that remembered who he used to be, that agreed. He even felt as if his next words were pre-ordained: "You're not supposed to be here."

"No," she retorted, "*You're* not supposed to be here. This is the City of the living and you belong in Sheol."

Then she opened her palm with the knife, stepped forward, and flicked her blood across him. To his surprise, the blood did not pass through his body. It landed on his rotting spectral clothes and phantasmal flesh.

It burned.

He screamed as the blood spattered across him. He felt each drop bite its way into his tortured consciousness. He could not disappear, he could not flee. The blood was overwhelming: it reminded him of Eresh and the god in the grey

cloak—nearly forgotten memories that popped into his head as the power of the blood forced him to his knees.

The girl was standing over him, black eyes glittering pitilessly. Blood dripped from her hand and the knife. He cowered on all fours, chains spread around him, staring up at her cold and child-like face through the nails of his eyes.

"I know you," he gasped, "Don't I?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

And her partner said, "Wouldn't be the first time. A lot of shades know about Airys."

"Shin Airys," he mumbled, groping for the memory, "The Halfshade."

"Yeah, you right," she drawled, "I've got a reputation."

"No," he persisted, "Not just by reputation. I think… I think I met you before. Before they did this to me."

"Did you?" she inquired, the terrible blood dripping near his knees, now curious. "I don't recognize you."

The other woman suggested, "Maybe you don't recognize him because of the spikes. What's your name?"

He couldn't remember. He tried hard to recall the syllables, what he used to be called. He even remembered that his name had meant something to him—that he was proud of what it signified. That he had a reputation.

"I… I had a reputation once."

"If you did," Shin replied, "It doesn't mean anything now."

"There was something… something important."

Something to do with the library, the hallucinatory labyrinth that filled his dreams. Anchored to the depths of this rotting building, however, he was always drawn back from the library. He always forgot what the dreams were supposed to represent.

He mumbled, "Bad times are coming."

She chuckled. "These are the lower districts. The bad times are already here."

He shook his head, trying desperately to remember. Trying to recall why her name was important, what he had done before his death. But there were only scattered images, senseless and painful. Dissipated and incoherent.

Now she raised her dripping hand. He was suddenly grateful; he wanted the release promised by her blood. He pressed his head forward, bowing into her bleeding palm.

*

He was back in the library, cut loose from reality. He imagined that the books were his memories, each one signifying a mysterious moment of his history. He was surrounded by memory, incapable of understanding its meaning.

Eventually his continent of lost memory began to shrink, a grey abyss eating at the edges of the shadow library. He fled deeper into the labyrinth as the edges of his world decayed. The dream was ending; there would be no waking up.

He found his way into a dark and circular antechamber, lit by burning and paper-filled braziers. In the centre of the chamber was an empty desk. In front of the desk was a blackish blood stain. He knew he had been here before, that he had witnessed something significant and brutal. But now, as the library collapsed around this chamber, he was utterly incapable of remembering anything but shadows.

There was really no point in trying to remember: soon he would forget everything, disappearing with this lost continent of history. He sat at the desk, stared at a paper etched with a strange symbol, and waited for the dream to end.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I suppose I should first acknowledge the 3 Day Novel Contest without which this novel would not exist. Both the strengths and failures of *A Continent of History* are due to the constraints of that contest because it was written, over the Labour Day weekend of 2010, with little sleep, whiskey and rum, and massive quantities of coffee. The only edits made to the original manuscript are technical (I eliminated typos, character inconsistencies, and grammatical problems) and so it is pretty much identical to what was submitted. Whatever weaknesses were produced by this writing process, I figure that it in some ways it was an experimental method that influenced the novel's form.

Secondly I want to acknowledge the music that I was playing throughout the three days of writing and that influenced the mood of the novel, especially the way in which it ended. I listened to most of the Songs:Ohia (or anything by Jason Molina) catalogue, primarily *Didn't It Rain*, along with Bonnie Prince Billy's *I See A Darkness*, during the first day. During the second day the music became decidedly grimmer when I started listening to Mt. Eerie's *Wind's Poem* and Bear In Heaven's *Beast Rest Forth Mouth*, and Fever Ray's *Fever Ray*. Throughout this period I was also listening to several soundtracks: David Julyan's scores for *The Descent* and *The Prestige*, Ike Yoshihiro's score for *Ergo Proxy*, the *Oldboy* soundtrack (by various composers), Jean-Pierre Taieb's score for *Frontier(s)*, and Seppuka Paradigm's score for *Martyrs*. The last two soundtracks I listened to primarily on the third day, alternating on repeat for the final six or seven hours of writing—which probably explains the tone of the novel's ending.

Next I need to thank those friends and comrades who read some of my work prior to this novel and whose feedback was helpful in the way I thought about this manic attempt. Those readers who have spent agonizing hours reading my fiction are: Noaman Ali, who is the only one of these friends who read the 900+ page novel that first conceptualized this novel's specific fictional universe, and of which *A Continent of History* is a prequel—Noaman is so far the friend, excluding my partner, who has read the most of my unpublished fiction; Gina Webb, who has read the second most amount of my fiction and whose suggestions, along with Noaman's, have always been both helpful and encouraging—especially her critiques concerning dialogue; Tyler Shipley, who also read this specific novel right after it was submitted to the contest on a plane as his computer died; and Ryan Toews, who, like Tyler, has made the mistake of reading some of my earlier and more embarrassing work. I also need to acknowledge Jude Welbourne who suggested the cover design and who, after reading the current version of the ebook, is now providing me with encouraging and insightful feedback for future books. Already other friends, who have read *A Continent of History*, have been providing me with new suggestions that will hopefully help me grow (and get published by a real company!) in subsequent novels.

Finally, the most thanks goes to my partner, Victoria, whose influence on both my academic and fictional work is incomparable. She has read more of my work, even the crudest and awkwardness attempts, than anyone else and, being an artist and filmmaker, has always been a creative sounding board for my ideas (just as I, hopefully, am for hers). She also put up with me for the three days in which I wrote this novel, three days in which I wasn't able to perform my required household duties, making me coffee, having her sleep disrupted when I crawled into bed at five in the morning for a couple hours of sleep, and patiently listening to my angsty descriptions of the novel's evolving plot.

Hopefully something comes of this novel and, in a future print edition, I will be able to thank more people. Thanks for reading, and thanks to all of those friends and comrades—in the flesh world and the blogosphere—who have been supportive.

BIOGRAPHY

J. Moufawad-Paul likes horror films, science fiction and fantasy literature, whiskey and caffeine, and critical marxist theory—but not necessarily in that order. A semi-employed academic, Moufawad-Paul received his PhD in Philosophy from York University in the fall of 2010. At the moment he is attempting to escape the hell of casualized labour, though he suspects it might be unavoidable, at least in his life time. Although he is an unrepentant "evil communist" he's really a nice guy. Aside from writing fiction and working on his academic career, he maintains the blog **M-L-M Mayhem!** (moufawad-paul.blogspot.com)—a somewhat well-trafficked blog that features a hodge-podge of articles and posts that emerge from a critical engagement with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory. Presently, Moufawad-Paul lives in Toronto with his partner, genius multi-media artist and curator, Victoria, waiting with her for the end of capitalism.

"The fabled library from before the Mad Tyrant's purge, before Year Zero, before the City had forgotten its history, before the meaning of the deadly world outside the dome was lost: Canter knew from his schooling that no reputable scholars believed that such a library existed. It was an urban myth, wishful thinking for a history that would give roots to a rootless world.

During the Year Zero purges, where all knowledge except the most instrumental and technological was destroyed, and where all scholars and experts were annihilated, no cabal of renegade scholars had succeeded in building a library to preserve ancient knowledge. They had not existed, the historians of today maintained, and since they had not existed they had not created this fabled library.

As for the City's parallel, the world of ghosts and powers that called itself *Sheol*, even less was known. Conspiracy theorists obsessed with the myth of the library claimed that the history of both cities was hidden in the library and that, if the library was ever found, scholars would finally be able to understand not only the Parallel City's existence but its connection to the City of the living.

It was also theorized that the terrible Shinugami, the gods who squabbled over the dead, knew the truth behind both cities. But if they did, they weren't telling anyone on this side of the veil…"

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