

"He says you may enter." Akil, my translator and guide, a squat evil-faced indian with black eyes and an expensive suit, beckoned me through the red and yellow rag curtains.

Inside, the hallway was thick with a miasma of cheap incense that failed to cover the stink of rotting meat. The lights were harsh, fluorescent, clinical, spotlighting the filth and dilapidation of the entryway. The walls were lined with cheap laminated photocopies of Kali and Shiva, accented with gold leaf. At the end of the hallway was a large door, cracked red paint showing a turquoise layer beneath.

At the end of the hallway, Akil put his hand to my chest, stopping me. I towered over him, but he had the sharp danger of a street criminal.

"Clive, I will not ask him questions I do not like."

Akil had lost his usual jovial demeanour. The fluro-tube lighting made it obvious he was sweating. I didn't say anything. He looked into my eyes for a moment and then seemed satisfied. He took his hand from my chest and opened the red door.

The room stank of flesh-rot and incense. Dead animals were hanging from the low rafters by their tails--skinned, gutted, curing, ready to be eaten at a later date. The floor was sticky. The cold fluorescent lighting was even harsher in here, and manic shadows were cast all over by the room's clutter--old plates covered in maggots, small painted plastic statues of gods and buddhas, piles of old books, tools, and scrap wood. In the centre of the room an obese Indian stood at a large table, looming over the body of a small girl, disemboweling her. He spoke without looking up.

Akil translated: "He says her father choked her to death. Maybe it was to sell her. What are your questions?"

I was in the belly of the beast. The beast was inside the belly of a little girl. I had expected an office--a layer of mafioso professionalism. Instead I was seeing first hand what I'd only hoped to discuss.

"Ask him why he does what he does."

Akil tutted and translated.

The obese Indian sighed and spoke. His voice was monotone, flat; not weary so much as bored.

"His father taught him how to make the dolls, and so he makes the dolls. Men buy them and he makes his money. He sleeps at night and he has no philosophy, only a place in the cosmic hierarchy."

Upon hearing Akil finish, the man took one hand from inside the girl and gestured to the shrine behind him, all melted candles and tacky made-in-china statuettes of the usual Hindi deities.

"I am not a bad man..." The obese taxidermist pulled a mass of intestine from the tiny corpse and dropped it into a sack hanging from the table. He looked at me: "I am simply part of our ecosystem."

"What does he mean?" I asked Akil.

Akil asked. The man answered, again in English.

"Without me, there would be another. I do these things, but I am better than most. I do not defile the small flowers." The man went back to work. "And anyway, you are not here for me. I am a little fish. I can tell you what I do, but you know you will not get much more from me than that. And you already feel you will be dead if you dig deeper." The indian held up a pair of lungs to the spotlight above the table, examining them like massive pink jewels, spiderwebs of dark red alveoli were visible as the light rendered them translucent. The

taxidermist dropped the lungs into a plastic crate full of ice. "You are a journalist, but you are not stupid. You know you have already seen too much."

"So that's it then?" I asked.

"That is it." He responded.

"And what if I keep digging?"

"Rich whites want dead girls. Old Chinese want organs. At your hotel tonight a man will point his gun at you and tell you to stop your investigation. If you do not, he will be back to kill you. This is not a movie, reporter, you cannot fight this. My family have been doing this work for a thousand years, and men more powerful than you have died attempting to stop it."

"So that really is it?" I asked.

"That is it." The immense taxidermist pushed past me to get to some rusted filing cabinets and started rifling through them. "Write of what you have seen, reporter. Tell the world of my horrible profession. But next time you meet a man like me, ask better questions. There are things in the world far stranger than this."

That was the end of it then. As I looked around the room, I realised this was as close as I was going to get to my story. A dead girl on a table, a fat man cutting her up, and a million men above him whose names I'd never know.

A small chinese boy--no older than the dead girl on the table--walked in, grabbed the box with the lungs inside, and left. The taxidermist, still rifling through the drawers of the filing cabinet, shouted something at him in Chinese, but the boy was long gone and didn't respond. The taxidermist turned from the filing cabinet, slamming the drawer closed, and handed me a card. Lighting a cigarette and sitting on a stool far too small for him, he spoke one final time:

"You're not finished in India, Mr. Philips. You did not come here merely for dead girls and organ shops."

With this, Akil tugged at my sleeve, indicating that it was time to go, and we retraced our steps out of the building, escaping the miasma of rotting meat and joss sticks into the wide slum streets of New Delhi. The sun was already going down, but the streets were as crowded as ever--they would remain crowded all night--and for the first time in my life I was glad to smell the heady slum aromas of feces and exhaust fumes. It smelled no less foul than inside the building, but at least it smelled like life.

In the taxi back to the hotel Akil asked me what the corpse merchant had given me.

"I'm not sure," I told him, and handed him the card. It was old. It probably used to be white, but now was a tea-stained brown, the edges frayed. It had a single line of indian script at the top, and a telephone number beneath.

"This is a false word," Akil said, studying the card. "Narakshaanaveesee. This is two words as one. The first part is Narak. Narak is like Hell. But this word is inside this other part: Nakshanaveesee, meaning... to draw. But not to draw pictures. To draw places, like to draw maps."

"Drawing maps of hell?" I took the card back and looked at it, "a scam?"

"Probably. Spooky trinkets for tourists to take home." Akil seemed unimpressed.

"It could make for a fun ending to the story. I return home from my failed investigations into missing girls with a map of Hell... oh how it very much looks like a map of New Delhi."

"This is tacky, Clive." Akil resented how I wrote about India. It's not that he didn't also consider India to be seedy, grimy, and generally quite dangerous, but he resented a foreigner seeing it that way.

As the taxi took us deeper into the city, the scene outside the window gradually transitioned from slums, past the lively colourful painted apartments and old geometric Mughal forts and colonial buildings of India's golden years, and into a grotesque skyline of steel and concrete skyscrapers--prefab nowhere-architecture built in the last decade in an attempt to modernise India's image. In the centre of it all, my hotel, a huge concrete obelisk speckled with yellow lit windows; it looked like it had been airlifted in from any number of the nameless EuroAmerican cities with identical concrete hotels.

I looked up to the lit windows near the top of my building, trying to work out which room was mine.

"Do you really think there's someone waiting for me?"

Akil stretched over to look out the window at the hotel, "Probably. What will you say?"

I'd already resigned myself to abandoning my investigation in India. New Delhi's people trafficking was dangerous and a dead end.

"I'll tell them the truth." I turned to Akil, "I'm going to leave India and finish up the book in Eastern Europe. I'll interview some Indian prostitutes in Prague or Budapest, lie about them being from New Delhi, lie about them knowing the taxidermist, tie it all together somehow, and sell my product. No grand exposé, just another best-selling true crime novel about the dark underbelly of the global East."

"Do you want me to set up an interview with the Narakshaanaveesee before you go?" Akil took the card back and started copying the number into his phone.

"Do it," I said.

Akil handed me back the card as the taxi pulled up to the hotel.

The lobby was empty. So was the bar, but the murmur of conversation and chinking glasses persisted around me. I called the barman over and realised that the hotel bustle of the last few days had been almost entirely artificial, pumped in over the speaker system to give the hotel a businesslike busy energy. When the bar was empty, it only served as white noise, lending the bar a liminal atmosphere. I ordered a gin and tonic and sat at the empty bar, thinking about the man waiting in my room with a gun and a warning.

Two drinks later I was in the lift.

On the fifth floor, the orange walls of the hallways were lined with low plaster stuccos of pygmy elephants. Three between each room.

Twenty-seven elephants later, I was standing at my door. It was open a crack, but nobody looked to be inside. Cautiously I entered. All the drawers had been yanked out of the units and coathangers were all over the floor, but my clothes and belongings were nowhere to be seen. On my bed was my suitcase. Unzipping it, I found everything was inside it, neatly packed away. All my clothes folded perfectly. My toothbrush and toothpaste in a plastic sandwich bag. Even the small trinkets I'd picked up from the street vendors had found their niches.

I checked the bathroom, to make sure I was alone, then shut and locked the room door. This was a far clearer warning than a ransacking would have been.

The next day I waited for Akil in the hotel lobby, listening to the grating white noise of fake activity.

After an hour, I went back up to my room to call Akil. Normally I would have gone to the bar, but I'd noticed repeating patterns in the crowd sounds and realised the audio track was only around 3 minutes long. A particularly recognisable clink followed by a man coughing began to set my teeth on edge.

I called a few times, but Akil never answered. Dreading a return to the sounds of the lobby, I decided to let him come get me from my room when he arrived. I got on the bed and began to read, but quickly dozed off.

When I awoke, 2 hours later, Akil still hadn't arrived.

Akil had abandoned me. I'd been told to leave the country, and, since I was going to take the advice, he saw his well drying up and decided to find someone or something else to bleed dry. It didn't hurt. He was a hustler. I knew this from the start. It was why he managed to get me an interview with the taxidermist, but it also made him unreliable, flighty. Once I was no longer a viable source of income, I was no longer his friend. This was normal. As a writer, you learn to accept transactional friendships.

Still, it was frustrating. I'd hoped to buy one of those maps before I left, something to wrap up the chapter, and I had no idea if the cartographer spoke English. I hoped Akil could set up that one final meeting, but he'd been paid for the week, and I was to be gone before his next payday. There was no reason for him to do anything for me once I'd decided to leave. I grabbed my jacket and hunted through the pockets for the card. Pulling it out, it immediately bled the stink of the taxidermist's incense. The odor wasn't bad without the layer of rot underneath, but it made me think of the dead girl with the hollow abdomen.

Narakshaanaveesee. Hell cartography. I punched the number into the room's phone, put it on speaker, and waited.

A professional sounding Indian woman answered on the first ring, speaking perfect English.

"Good afternoon Mr. Philips, how may I help you?"

There was none of the background noise of a call centre.

"How do you know who I am?" I asked, immediately disoriented by the mention of my name.

"You were referred to us by Mr. Goswami, I understand he gave you the card?" The question was rhetorical, she was telling me they knew everything. "He says you may be interested in our maps. Would you like to arrange a meeting with one of our representatives?"

"Wait. Hold on a minute. Who are you? What is this?"

"Everything will be explained this evening. Our representative will meet you in your hotel's bar at seven. Have a good afternoon, Mr Philips. Goodbye."

The line went dead.

I spent the day in the hotel room throwing together first drafts, emailing my editor, and buying plane tickets. Throughout the day I'd stop and try Akil's phone, but he never answered. I hoped he was out doing something fun, but, as the day wore on, and he still refused to answer, I got increasingly worried that he'd upset the wrong people by taking a white journalist into some of Delhi's more forbidden spaces.

At six-thirty I took a shower, got dressed, and went downstairs. In the bar I ordered a gin and tonic and waited for the cartographers' representative to approach me.

It was Friday evening and, for the first time since Sunday, the bar was reassuringly busy. The real crowd noise almost completely drowned out the artificial white noise, and I felt safer meeting a conman here, surrounded by European businessmen and Delhi call girls, than I would have in the bar on a deserted weeknight.

On the table in front of me, a drunk English businessman was flashing cash to impress three attractive Delhi prostitutes in cocktail dresses. The girls would undoubtedly rob him blind before the night was out.

As I watched them, an elderly Asian man in a tuxedo approached me. His skin was windswept, rugged and tanned like a farmer's.

"Mr. Philips?"

Our eyes met.

"May I sit?"

"Go ahead?" I said.

The old man sat opposite me, placing his tattered brown leather briefcase on the table between us.

He snapped the latches open and lifted the lid.

Back in my hotel room, I sat looking at the printed photographs the old man had given me. I had expected the maps to be artificially old, burned along the edges, stained, and covered in arcane symbols and detailed drawings, like a more sophisticated version of a child's pirate treasure map. Instead, the maps looked more like something someone would draw on a napkin to give you directions to a birthday party.

The maps were clean, the corners sharp, drawn in ink on brand new sheafs on bone-white paper. Mostly they consisted of straight lines indicating the outlines of buildings connected by wavy lines indicating roads. The few other landmarks were generally just blobs with text beside them. The old man had stuck labels over the script and written the names in English--The Field of Red Clovers (Do Not Enter); The Glass Pyramid Foundry (They Make Buddhas Here); Village of Benevolent Buddhas (They Wish to Leave); Place Where Dead Men Cannot Go (Do Not Try); The Black Men's Road (Do Not Speak to Them), The Tiny Sun (Underground).

Something about the mundanity of it all struck a chord. There was no hook here to grab the tourists. Sure, it was creative, but the maps were bland. The average American businessman wouldn't want one on the wall of his office. And, when I'd asked to buy one, the old man told me they weren't for sale. It all began to feel less like a scam and more like a strange art project.

I looked over the photos some more: The Place Where You Can Rest (No Clocks); The Place To Get New Skin (Old Skin Must Be Offered); The Many Coloured Sand (It Blisters Your Feet); The Old Forest (Bleeding Trees Are Safe); Womb Of the World (Ceremony Must Be In Progress).

Despite what the woman on the phone had told me, the representative had explained very little I couldn't infer from the maps themselves. These maps represented the afterlife. They were a way for the dead to escape post-mortem suffering. Those who studied them in life would be able to use that knowledge in death to avoid the very worst of hell's torments.

The old man claimed to be a representative of a Nepalese monastery practising the oldest religion in the world. A place where monks meditated themselves to the point of death in order to make these maps. He claimed he himself had seen the afterlife, and described it as a place of rusted metal towers and strange poisonous plants--more like an ironworks in the Amazon than Dante's nine circles.

As I stood staring at the photographs splayed out on my bed, my phone rang.

"Akil?"

"Good evening Mr. Philips," it was the well-spoken Indian woman, "I trust our representative gave you some samples."

"He did," I said, another pang of worry for Akil's safety. "All very interesting. What is this? An art project?"

There was a beat of pause, but just before I spoke again:

"Do you believe the taxidermist is involved in art projects, Mr. Philips?"

The stupidity of what I'd said lay naked in front of me.

"Would you like to visit the monastery Mr. Philips? We understand you are writing a book; we believe our work may be of literary interest. Your friend Akil, he is at the monastery."

My stomach dropped, I didn't want to believe her.

"Why would Akil be at the monastery?" I asked.

"Immortality, Mr. Philips. Akil is a man who understands what we can offer."

The phone clicked off.

The abrupt hangup was the final straw. I was sick of the games and vagaries. My flight would leave tomorrow morning, and I'd leave India with it. Akil could spend eternity in that monastery for all I cared. I'd barely started going down this road and the maps were already more trouble than they were worth. I dialled the number on the card and got an Indian woman who claimed she couldn't speak English. I demanded she speak to me in English and she only responded by shouting a barrage of incomprehensible Hindi obscenities. When she hung up, I dialled again. This time I got a restaurant. The man's English was perfect, but he claimed he only sold pizzas. I hung up and dialled again. Three rings. An elderly man. No English at all, not even enough to tell me he couldn't speak it. I clicked off and decided to give up. The number was redirecting me all over India. My contact with the infernal mapmakers was entirely on their terms.

It was late. I got drunk. I went to sleep.

The digital screaming of the room's phone woke me up. I clicked the speaker button.

"Yes?"

"A car for you, Mr Philips."

"I'll be down in a minute"

"Yes sir."

The receptionist hung up and I looked at the small digital clock on the nightstand. Seven forty-seven AM. Too early for my car to the airport. I grabbed the phone, pressed nine to call down to reception, and laid back on my bed with my eyes closed, blood pulsing in my ears as my body metabolised the remnants of last night's gin.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Sorry. What car is it? Who are they?"

"An old oriental man in a suit, sir. He says he is a friend of yours."

"Ok. And where is he now?"

"In the lobby, sir. Waiting. Would you like me to give him a message?"

"No, it's alright, I'll be right down."

"Very well, sir."

I tossed the phone across the room. My dreamless sleep had dulled my anger and let my curiosity come to the fore. I got dressed in yesterday's clothes, picked up my already packed suitcase, and went downstairs.

The old man was sitting in the lobby, patiently waiting for me. I waved at him, then walked over to the counter to check out. While doing so, I placed two cards on the desk: my agent's card and the old card the taxidermist had given me.

"When you get a minute, call the number on this card," I tapped my agent's card, "and give him a message from me: I'm going up to Nepal, to meet these people" I slid the mapmaker's card toward the receptionist "and if I don't contact him in two days, I need him to send someone out to look for me. Give him the number on the card, and the word at the top."

"Very well, Sir." The receptionist pocketed both cards. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," I said. "The old man behind me. Have you seen him before?"

"Never in my life, sir."

I looked around at the old man, he was staring at me, intently but without a trace of malice. I turned back to the receptionist.

"Ok, well get that message to my agent."

"Will do, sir."

"Thanks," I said.

"Goodbye, sir," said the receptionist.

I walked outside with the old man and followed him to his car.

"I am glad you decided to come with us, Mr. Philips. I am sure that our relationship will be of mutual benefit." The old man's voice was the broad oriental English of the yellowface villain in a film from Hollywood's Golden Age. Hissing his vowels and inverting his L's and R's, the old man felt distinctly colonial. Looking up at me and smiling he said, "we need you as much as you need a good story, Mr. Philips. My name, by the way, is Tshering, but white men call me Thomas."

Thomas' car was not at all what I had expected. The tiny man's tuxedo and sharp manner had led me to expect some kind of luxury vehicle--a limo maybe. Instead, the old man loaded my luggage into an angular orange jeep, spattered all over with splashes of dried mud.

I hopped in the passenger seat. The inside of the vehicle smelled lightly of incense. Dried mud covered the floor, and the glove compartment hung open. I tried to slam it closed but the latch was broken.

The old man put his key in the ignition and started the car.

"The drive will take fourteen hours," he said. "In eight hours, we will stop for a short rest outside the Nepalese border. Here you can eat, stretch your muscles, and use the bathroom. We will not stop before or after that."

I wasn't given the chance to protest, as Thomas pulled out of the hotel's car park and joined the hectic traffic of the busy New Delhi streets.

For the first few hours of the drive, I slept off the remainder of the previous night's drinks.

When I awoke, my back was in agony from the uncomfortable seat, and I was sweating like a pig. The jeep's pleasantly light smell of incense was now overpowering, and I realised that there were several lit joss sticks jammed into the car's cracks and crevices, pointing inward. It made me think of the mouth of a giant parasite.

I stretched like a cat and looked over to Thomas, catching the corner of his eye.

"Good morning," he said. "You were asleep for five hours. We are nearing the border now. Just a few more hours."

I looked out the window. We were on an immaculately maintained tarmac road, surrounded on all sides by expansive plains dotted with emaciated cows, lush bushes, and small huts made of cinderblocks and corrugated steel--most of them with women in saris



outside, washing or cooking. In the distance I could see mountains. I pointed them out to Thomas and asked if that was where we were headed.

"No," he said, laughing. "Those are small mountains, Mr. Philips. Indian mountains. Soon you will see the mountains of Nepal and forget all about the mountains of India."

Thomas was smiling like a child. His pride in his country's beauty was endearing. But I found it hard to believe the Nepalese mountains could be much bigger than the snow-capped behemoths that currently took up the horizon.

"So," I said, changing the topic and getting ready to needle Thomas for information on the monastery, "tell me about the maps."

"I told you everything at the hotel, Mr. Philips."

"But what about the religion you follow? What is it exactly?"

Thomas thought for a moment before responding. We passed an immense bonfire--locals were burning scrap wood and refuse.

"It is an old faith, Mr. Philips. It does not have a name. It was the first faith, and the first of a thing does not need a name because there are no others to confuse it with. Mr. Philips, the faiths that came after have names because they needed to distinguish themselves from the first faith. The first faith simply is."

"But what does the first faith entail?" I asked. "What kinds of things do you practise? What are your rites? Your tenets? Your beliefs?"

"These things are secret, Mr Philips. Protected."

"Come on, Tom. Surely you can tell me a little bit about what I'm getting myself into?"

Thomas went silent. He was no longer smiling.

"Thomas?" I asked.

"These things are not for me to discuss," he said. "It is not my place."

Thomas seemed upset.

We didn't speak again until we stopped at the Nepalese border.

We stopped outside the border at a small rest area filled with merchants, migrants, and petty criminals. Police were walking around with guns, and dark skinned beggar women with yellow eyes were wandering around with blankets over their heads--their begging was merely a distraction while their pickpocket children slashed trousers, bags, and jackets open with peasant-knives and took whatever was inside.

"Do what you must do and then come back," Thomas said.

I got out and walked up to the nearest merchant. I bought a bottle of water and a handful of scaly green fruit with white flesh--I had taken to this fruit during my travels in India, and found it to be one of the few reliably safe and delicious sources of sustenance in the country; Hindus called them 'sitaphal.'

I decided not to push my luck by using the public bathroom--this was the kind of place where a white man could easily be found with his throat cut--and, even if I could use the bathroom safely, I wasn't sure I'd want to.

I thanked the merchant and turned around to walk back to the jeep. Immediately I was faced with a wall of beggar women who had congregated behind me. They all stood in silence, looking out at me from the anonymising shadows of their blankets. Some of them were standing upright, no longer affecting the hunched posture Indian beggar women assume for sympathy's sake. I felt my pockets and looked around me, but nobody was there, my belongings were intact, my pockets weren't slashed. The children were holding their mothers' hands and watching me, just as enraptured as their mothers were.

I walked toward the women and they parted like the Red Sea.



As I walked toward the car, I looked back. The women were following, slowly, at a distance, cautiously.

Still watching the women, I opened the jeep's passenger side door. The moment I felt the resistive click of the door handle engaging the mechanism, the women dropped to the floor, screaming and convulsing. The children stood, still holding the hands of their convulsing mothers, just watching me. I stood for a moment, the door half open, just watching them.

I got in the jeep and Thomas drove away. Neither of us said anything.

At the border we were stopped by a border guard with a rifle. He tapped on the window with the barrel of his gun. Thomas rolled down the window and listened as the guard said something in Hindi, pointing at me, confused. Thomas remained silent, only handing the guard a small white business card. Upon seeing the card, the border guard said something else in Hindi--this time sounding apologetic--and then waved us through.

We were finally in Nepal.

For the first few hours, Nepal looked much the same as India. Low bushes crowded immaculate tarmac roads, and, behind them, vast paddies receded into the horizon, dotted with sickly cows and peasant huts. Gradually, though, the fields turned to hills, and the hills turned to mountains--snow capped, immense, with clusters of red painted villages ringing their bases. The leafy green bushes and shanty hovels of India also began to recede, giving way to lush, dark, dense mesozoic forest; hostile, and completely devoid of human settlement. At some point the road ended, and we ended up driving on a dirt track toward a thick forest.

"We are almost there, Mr. Philips," Thomas said, as we entered the forest. "Only an hour or so longer."

The hanging branches of ancient trees and the leaves of massive ferns scratched and slapped at the jeep as we pushed our way through the forest. There was virtually no road at this point, and Thomas wound his way through like an explorer, circumnavigating trees and fallen logs to find a path through for the vehicle.

Eventually, the forest became less dense, and, ahead, a gap in the forest provided a gateway out of prehistory.

We emerged into a huge field, with yellowing grass up to the jeep's windows. Thomas was right. Directly in front of us was a massive mountain range far bigger than anything in India. It ate the entire horizon, stretched out both left and right as far as I could see. It was a massive wall of dead, grey rock, capped at the top with perfect white snow. Some small, wispy clouds sat near, but not at, the top--even the clouds couldn't reach the top.

"That is where we are going, Mr. Philips," Thomas pointed to a massive black monastery about a half way up. From it a huge orange stain was smeared down the face of the mountain toward the village at its base.

"What is that?" I asked,

"It is rust, Mr. Philips," Thomas responded.

The answer only gave me more questions. Why would a river of rust be running from a monastery down the side of a nepalese mountain? What could they possibly be doing? What, if anything, did this have to do with the maps? Though I was burning with curiosity, Thomas had only just begun speaking to me again, and I didn't want to risk offending him a

second time. I bit my tongue, and realised that whatever I'd gotten myself into was far, far stranger than I had anticipated.

We passed through the village without stopping. The ground was flooded with the monastery's rusty water.

Nepalese children stood ankle deep and threw rocks at the Jeep before their parents grabbed them and took them inside. Thomas laughed.

"The village does not like our religion, Mr Philips. And they do not like me. The peasants are buddhists. I was a buddhist. Now I am of the first faith, and they consider me to be a kind of heretic."

I looked out of the window as the parents slammed doors and shut windows. They seemed scared more than angry. For the rest of our drive, the ornate little village--coloured flags strung between houses, windows and doors painted bright red, blue and yellow--was dead.

After we left the village, we drove for an hour along narrow mountain passages until we finally reached the monastery. Up close it was more impressive than it had seemed from afar.

From the base of the mountain the monastery had seemed jet black. Up close it was now speckled with patches of gunmetal silver and deep rust-orange. Traditionally shaped, but built entirely from iron, the monastery was bolted to the mountain's stone face with thousands of man-sized bolts. At its edges were a cluster of immense iron watchtowers, connected by thin iron bridges. Small platforms jutted out from the towers, and monks sat on them, meditating. The whole iron face of the monastery was covered in huge bas-relief murals hammered into the metal--these murals depicted warped mutations of traditional buddhist imagery: bodhisattvas sat in nirvana, surrounded by hulking, daemonic beasts; the golden fish and white parasol, traditional to buddhism, were sharp, skeletal versions of themselves, and pierced and weaved themselves through the representations of meditating acolytes; many of the images were violent and grotesque, many more were completely indecipherable.

Thomas parked the jeep in front of the huge rusted black archway which provided entry into the monastery.

"I am glad you came, Mr. Philips," Thomas had reverted fully to the charming, friendly demeanor he had before I had offended him. "I am going inside to get my superior. If you would, wait outside please."

I agreed and got out of the jeep, taking the chance to get a closer look at the strange metalwork murals.

Up close, the murals were impressive in their intricacy. Tiny details had been stamped into the metal, and even the skin of the bodhisattvas had been delicately textured.

I touched the skeletal fish, to feel the thin lines used to give texture to the bony surface. It was warm. I placed both hands on the mural. It was cold at the top of the mountain, I could see my breath, but the mural was warm. I walked along the wall of the monastery, keeping my hand on the wall. It was warm all the way along. I touched a pillar by the entrance. Warm. The whole monastery gave off a delicate, comforting warmth, as if it was alive.

As I stood by the entrance to the monastery, Thomas came back holding the arm of an elderly man in loose red robes. The old man clattered with every step he took, as if, beneath his robe, he was wrapped in chains.

I took my hand from the pillar and approached my hosts.

Thomas introduced the old man: "Mr. Philips, this is my master. He is the Falama. This is what you will call him: Falama."

Thomas nodded at me, indicating I should bow. I did so. The old man returned the bow, jangling as he did.

"Come." The old man's voice was weak, gravelly. He turned and walked into the monastery. Thomas and I followed him.

Inside the monastery, it was hot. The heat radiated inward from the iron surfaces--walls, floor, ceiling. The lighting inside the monastery was just as warm; strings of old incandescent lightbulbs hung from the ceilings like fairy lights. The doors closed behind us. Falama took off his cloak, and dropped it. He was naked. All over his body, hundreds of iron piercings stretched his aged flesh toward the floor. A young boy--no older than 10, and just as naked--emerged from a small hole in the wall, grabbed the old man's cloak, and scurried back into his den. Neither the old man nor Thomas acknowledged him.

"Come," the old man said again, and we began our slow, clattering walk into the of the monastery.

"Your room," the old man said.

We were standing at an iron door stamped with the image of a large crowned buddha on a throne, surrounded by thousands of tiny buddhas in a lattice radiating outwards.

"Your things are already here, Mr. Philips," Thomas said as he opened the door. "Get some rest, we will come back for you."

I bowed to Falama and went inside. Thomas closed the door behind me. A moment later I heard a barrage of clicking, clunking and metallic scraping coming from the door. I rushed toward it, but there was no handle, only the inverse relief of the buddha on the other side. I pushed the door and it didn't even move--it wouldn't even rattle--It felt like it was just another part of the iron wall. I was locked in.

I sat on the small bed and looked around the room. It was sparse, but functional: a window, an iron bucket placed beneath it, and a table with two glass bottles--one contained a milky, slightly sweet alcohol of some sort; the other contained a slightly metallic tasting water.

Not having relieved myself since Delhi, I urinated in the bucket and stared out the window. Outside I had a view of the monastery's interior courtyard. A small, spartan square of open-air space, with a small garden in the centre. Two naked monks were on their knees, wearing what looked to be iron gloves, tending to a small patch of red clovers.

That night, I dreamt of the girl at the taxidermist's workshop. I was standing on the table naked with my feet inside her hollowed out torso. I could feel her spine with my toes. She was warm, but dead. Red clovers were growing everywhere around us, like mould. In the distance I could hear a man wailing.

When I awoke from my nightmare, the wailing persisted.

The room was hot, and almost pitch black--the only light in the room came through my window second-hand from the strings of incandescent orange bulbs stretched across the

courtyard outside. I put my hand to the warm iron wall and laid there in bed for a moment, listening to the distant crying.

As I listened, the wailing began to sound more and more like a recording. It was distorted, warped at the edges; there was a constant quiet hissing beneath it, and the sobs themselves were peppered with tiny pops like a dusty record.

I wondered if the wailing was some kind of ritualistic music played over an old speaker setup for some strange, dark meditation. The monastery had lightbulbs all over, so there were likely other rudimentary technologies hidden away in its tunnels and antechambers. Cracked mantras over old temple tannoy would make perfect sense in this strangely industrial monastery.

I got up from my bed and walked toward the window to see if I could work out where the sound was coming from. Placing my hands on my warm windowsill, I leant out into the cool spring air of the Nepalese mountain and listened for the sound. It was clearer now, and louder; the hissing sharper, the popping more defined, I became certain I was listening to anguish being played back on some kind of vintage stereo system rather than the pained wailing of a man being tortured or tormented.

The sound was coming from somewhere deep inside the monastery. It had a distance to it. I realised it must have been amazingly loud, especially reverberating around inside whichever small iron room it was being played in.

Below my window, a half dozen naked monks rushed out of the monastery beneath me, walked across the courtyard, and disappeared into the monastery in the direction of the noise.

Still looking down at the courtyard, I unzipped my trousers and urinated in the bucket at my feet. I wondered if the bottle of milky alcohol had dulled my senses. Locked in an iron cell in an impossible iron structure, a recorded lament blasting out from somewhere nearby, I should have been terrified. But mostly I was curious. I didn't feel threatened by the naked monks of the first faith, and the more I saw the more I wanted to understand. Even as the sound got louder, drawing closer, I still couldn't bring myself to be scared.

I zipped up my trousers and watched as a small swarm of a dozen naked monks came from the direction of the noise, crossed the courtyard, and disappeared into the hallways beneath my feet. They were followed by a swarm of naked children, twice the number of the adults, many of them running. The children were followed by another swarm of monks. With each man who passed into the monastery beneath me, the wailing got louder. One final swarm of monks passed through the courtyard, into my building, and the wailing grew louder still, until it was deafening.

My ears were in agony. The noise was so loud now that the distortion and crackling was all I could hear, the sobbing was so loud that it became unintelligible, only providing the nightmare cacophony a high pitched undertone. It was difficult to keep my eyes open. I had to open my mouth because the sound was making my teeth vibrate against each other. It sounded like a storm and a jet engine and a steel mill and a slaughterhouse. It was so loud it made me dizzy. I held onto the warm iron windowsill for balance and my pulse in my palms made it feel like the monastery was alive. Determined to see the source of the sound, I resisted the all-consuming urge to retreat to my bed, tear open my suitcase, and bury my head in my clothes.

Outside, two monks were holding the massive hands of something much larger than themselves, slowly guiding it across the courtyard. Step by slow, agonised step the monks and their quarry walked toward the doorway beneath my cell, and step by slow, agonised

step the sound got ever louder. Under the incandescent light, the monks' skins seemed to be red.

As the monks and the colossus drew nearer, a searing pain split across my face. A deep, intense burning, starting at my eardrums and radiating out through my sinuses. My whole face was on fire. Straining against the pain, I gripped the windowsill tight and looked down at the hulking black behemoth below. It towered over its two chaperones, and had a massive upper body, three times the width of the skinny monks. Parts of its body were distorted and angular--sharp, almost mechanical--but below the chest it was more naturalistic; almost human, but far too big. The more jagged parts of its upper-body caught the warm light from the old bulbs and shone like dull metal. As it passed beneath the window, into the monastery, I smelled the warzone tang of metal and hot blood.

With the creature inside, the iron walls of the monastery acted like a gigantic tuning fork. The hellish racket reverberated around the structure, making the walls warp and pulsate. The noise was trapped in my room, the iron box bouncing it around, amplifying it. Pressure was building up all around me. My nose was bleeding. I couldn't breathe. I screamed and screamed but couldn't hear myself over the creature's thunderous wailing.

I awoke the next morning on the floor of my cell, the sun on my face and a ringing in my ears. My mouth tasted of blood.

I sat up and touched my face. My eyes, the bridge of my nose, my cheekbones... all felt bruised, tender. Rubbing my mouth, crusty brown flakes came off in my hand--the dried remnants of the previous night's nosebleed.

Behind me, the mechanisms in the iron door clicked and scraped.

Thomas walked in, a smile on his face. He was completely naked

"I trust you slept well, Mr. Philips?" He crossed the room, and placed two new bottles on the iron table. "We are sorry, Mr. Philips, if we woke you last night."

"I saw it," I said. "What was it?" Speaking hurt.

Thomas clicked his fingers and a small boy ran in with a new bucket. He took the old, half-full one, and the two mostly-empty bottles, and ran away.

"He is a Gautama, Mr. Philips, but we were not anticipating the arrival of this Gautama for many nights. We hoped we could show you more before his arrival. Falama thought it would be best to ease you in. Unfortunately, that is now no longer possible"

I was surprised by Thomas' honesty. I decided it was safe to press for more information.

"What does this have to do with the maps? I came to see--"

"This is what we will be showing you today, Mr. Philips. We will be explaining everything. Please, take off your clothes and follow me."

Naked, Thomas guided me through the endless, identical iron hallways of the great mechanical monastery. Deeper and deeper into the iron bowels, barefoot on the warm, gently humming floors for what seemed like hours. As we went deeper, the air got hotter and the barely perceptible humming became a rhythmic throb that felt like blood pulsing beneath the surface of the metal.

As we walked, Thomas explained the history of the monastery to me.

The first structure of its kind, the monastery is nameless, known to the faith's followers only as The Temple. The Temple's construction allegedly began around 3500 years



ago--though, at that time it was merely a single large box made of pig iron for followers of the first faith to meditate within; a secret, secluded place for communing with the gods.

Surrounded by iron--holy to those of the first faith--and away from prying eyes of the growing ranks of disbelievers, the worshippers summoned the first Gautama. A living god.

The birth of this first Gautama was an accident, and it died shortly after its summoning. Its body decayed and dissolved in a matter of days, but, after the first Gautama's flesh had dissolved completely, its iron bones were left behind as a gift for the worshippers who had summoned it. The worshippers melted down the bones and made rings which they pierced through the skins of all who were present for the summoning--a constant hanging weight--a reminder of the physical truth of their faith.

Not long after the summoning of the first Gautama, there was a schism between the followers of the first faith and the growing sects of tribal cultists whose spiritual beliefs had begun to differ from those of the oldest religion. Most notably, a superstitious cult belief in karmic justice had begun to spread itself throughout much of early India, and the tribal cult leaders embraced it fully. It was optimistic and comforting, not to mention in the tribal leaders' interests. What better way to control your people than promising them rewards in death in return for good earthly obedience? The tribal leaders synthesised the idea of Karma with the first faith's core tenet of earthly reincarnation, and this new idea of karmic reincarnation became the core tenet of what would eventually become the unified spiritual tenets which would come to dominate much of early Eastern civilisation.

With the tribal invention of Karma, the first faith's fate was sealed. As per the tenets of the oldest religion, Earthly actions were irrelevant on the plane of death. Reincarnation was possible, but it was considered rare, holy. Rather than a simple karmic equation of coming back as a slug if you've been evil or a great man if you've been virtuous, the first faith taught that the afterlife was a place which could only be escaped through trickery, cunning, and violence. Reincarnation was only possible for the strongest, most intelligent, and most fearless, and even those great men would have to exchange a thousand years of intense suffering for another chance at Earthly life. For most men, death was merely the end. An afterlife of agonising immortality within a world of perpetual night. A googolplex millennia of constant hiding or running from the torture obsessed creatures of the afterlife--creatures who value the immortal astral bodies of dead humans as the ultimate plaything. Nobody wanted to believe that, and so they chose not to.

Shortly after the schism, the tribal cultists began writing their beliefs down, creating new mythologies, constructing a new spiritual framework deliberately antagonistic to the first faith. As the new faith gained more followers, it became more centralised. The tribal cultists and leaders met and shared their written beliefs with one another, synthesising them. These writings resulted in the Vedic texts that would become Hinduism, and it spread like wildfire.

With the rapid spread of this new vedic faith, the followers of the first faith gradually became a feared and despised minority, both for the nightmarish nature of their beliefs, and their newfound ability to demonstrate the legitimacy of the faith through the infrequent manifestation of Gautamas.

In response, these Gautamas were written into the vedic texts as the anti-gods, or Asuras, of Hindu mythology--lords of a hellish plane, at constant war with the Hindu Devas for control over the Earthly realm of man. The term Gautama itself was stolen, rewritten, and given new meaning.

Eventually, followers of the first faith were forced to flee their homes. As the world became more hostile, the ones who refused to convert made their way toward the spiritual centre of the faith. With more followers arriving, more boxes were needed for meditation.

New iron boxes were added, and then these were connected via iron hallways. As the world grew more hostile to the followers of the first faith, the monastery ceased being a place of pilgrimage and became a place of refuge for the exiled followers of the oldest religion.

Now a home, the structure needed heat and habitation. More boxes, more hallways, and at the centre of it all: a great iron furnace. This iron furnace still heats the monastery today, though it is no longer alone. As the monastery grew, as it still grows, occasionally new furnaces are needed, and this original mother-oven now has several children who aid it. The dozen ovens have no pipes with which to carry their heat around the temple, no traditional heat conducting plumbing, instead they rely only on the natural conductivity of the structure's iron construction to transmit their heat to the upper levels and stave off the frigid winters of the Nepalese sierra.

As Thomas led me deeper into the guts of the monastery, the heat became almost unbearable. Dry, hot air burned my lungs with every breath. The floor was no longer pleasantly warm, instead the soles of my feet were beginning to burn and each step felt like walking on a fresh bruise. The monastery's iron smell was now also a taste.

"Thomas."

The old man looked back at me but kept walking.

"How much deeper are we going?" My voice was raspy from the heat. The dry air was making me thirsty.

"Not much deeper now, Mr Philips," he said, smiling. "We will be at the cartographers' chambers shortly."

"How much hotter is it going to get?" I asked.

"That is up to you, Mr Philips."

After a few more minutes we arrived at an immense set of double doors, stamped with images of large muscular devils with wide mouths and huge upward-jutting tusks. They looked less Indian than Japanese.

Thomas, sensing what I was thinking, said "we were the first, Mr Philips, and so those that came after are our deformed children."

He pushed the doors open and we went inside.

The cartographer's chambers looked scarcely different to the rest of the building. Strings of incandescent bulbs lit the room, and the walls were stamped with strange monsters, stranger buddhas, and impossibly intricate mandalas filled with fractal swastikas and thousand-petalled lotus flowers.

The room's one distinguishing feature was a series of slightly sloped plinths rising from the floor seemingly at random. In front of some of the plinths were young, anorexic-looking monks, all sitting in the lotus position, each with one hand outstretched, drawing in ink on large, bone-white sheafs of paper.

"These are our cartographers, Mr. Philips." Thomas was whispering.

"They're meditating?" I asked, also whispering.

"Yes, Mr Philips, they are meditating." Thomas led me into the room amongst the naked monks. "Walk around, Mr. Philips, look at the maps."

Walking from monk to monk, the consistency of the style was uncanny. Each used the same scratchy dashes to denote paths, and each marked landmarks with the same strange script.

"Their minds and their bodies are on earth Mr. Philips. But their souls are in Hell."



I walked from monk to monk, map to map, comparing details. The consistency became more uncanny the more I looked. I realised the script was identical, almost as if typed.

"You see it, Mr Philips?" Thomas asked, still whispering. I walked back over to him.

"They all write identically," I said.

"And yet they were never taught to write, Mr Philips. These boys are all illiterates."

"Then how?"

"We do not know, Mr Philips. We believe they are guided by some entity in the world beyond. Their hands controlled by the original mapmaker. Maybe it is a Gautama, but we cannot know for certain. Many things other than Gautamas live beyond the veil Mr. Philips. Not all of them beasts."

I looked over at the boys "Do they not remember?"

Thomas led me toward another set of doors at the back of the room.

"They are writing themselves to death, Mr Philips," Thomas said, his voice barely audible. "They do not wake up from this."

We passed into the next room.

The room at the back of the cartographer's quarters was a huge iron library. A massive warehouse with iron bookshelves fused to every floor and wall, each one filled with rolled up papers. It was the hottest place we had been to so far, the long aisles of iron bookshelves acting like massive radiators, heating up this chamber.

"This is our archive Mr. Philips." Thomas was speaking normally again, no longer whispering "Now do not be alarmed. I must call one of our brothers. He does not like to speak. Do not ask him questions. I will explain later, Mr Philips."

As he said this a monk appeared. His skin was red, like a devil's, as if he'd been burned gently all over. His head was encased in a huge iron sphere covered in mechanisms, cogs, and small metallic rods which twisted and flicked as he walked. The massive head looked almost insectoid. The mechanical twitching of the rods and cogs reminded me of antennae and mandibles. The whole contraption looked too heavy for the skinny monk to be carrying, but he seemed completely unburdened.

The monk stood in front of us, saying nothing.

Thomas spoke: "Janana, this is our new initiate. His name is Mr. Clive Philips, and he comes to us from England. I am told there are maps here for him, please retrieve them."

The mechanisms in the strange monk's iron head whirred and clicked like a dying hard-drive, and then it turned and walked away from us, deep into the library.

When the monk was out of sight, deep in the archives hunting for my map, I turned to Thomas.

"What is that?" I asked.

"A gift from a Gautama," Thomas responded.

"And his skin?"

"Exchange is important in the world beyond. Like many who die, Janana gave his skin to The Weaver in exchange for directions. His red skin is one of The Weaver's old rags."

Detailed as the answer was, it wasn't particularly satisfying. I appreciated the honesty, but the more open Thomas was, the more questions I ended up with. I was about to ask him who, or what, The Weaver was, but the monk with the clicking mechanical head was coming back, and I thought it better to remain silent.

Back in the main hallway, Thomas closed the door to the cartographers' chambers and handed me the rolled up map. Without speaking, he began leading me even deeper into the impossibly deep monastery.

Without looking at me, Thomas spoke: "You are doing well, Mr. Philips." There wasn't a hint of sarcasm or condescension in his voice. "There have been other white men before you. Americans mostly. All of them went mad upon experiencing the power of a Gautama. Something about their constitutions; they could not stand to see the world as it truly is. But you, Mr. Philips, you are doing well. You merely wanted to know what the gift was. You may be exactly who we have been looking for."

The vagueness of Thomas' praise had a sinister undertone.

"Why am I here, Thomas? Why have you showed me all this?"

"We only want you to do your job, Mr Philips. You are a writer, and we only want you to write about what you see."

"That's it?"

"That is it, Mr. Philips."

The hallway was getting hotter now. My feet were burning, and it was becoming too much. I wanted to know what The Weaver was, and I wanted to know about the monk with the iron head. Mostly, though, I just wanted to go stand by the window of my room. I wanted to feel the cool mountain breeze on my skin and watch the red monks with metal hands tend the strange red clovers.

"Thomas, I want to go back to my room. It's too hot."

"Do you not want to see your friend Akil?" Thomas was walking away, forcing me to follow him deeper in order to interrogate him. Despite the intense heat, the mention of Akil's name gave me goosebumps.

"Where is he?" I asked. I was getting irritated.

"He is nearby, Mr Philips." Thomas continued walking down the hallway. "We will see him soon, at the ceremony. He will speak with you afterwards."

Thomas led me even deeper, and the hallways got even hotter. Even this deep into the monastery, the hallway was identical to the ones we'd passed through hours before. Polished gunmetal grey walls, ornate relief sculptures of the horrific nightmares that were eventually warped into the world's mythologies; the repetition punctuated only by the occasional door--always closed.

The dry, stale heat tasted metallic and dried my mouth. Breathing was easy, but each breath burned my throat and lungs. The floor here hurt to walk on, but Thomas reassured me that my feet would not burn. The increasing heat, and its associated agonies, were the only evidence I had that we weren't just walking in circles. I now understood why the monks were naked. Though it may have been devotional, it's primary reason was practical. In clothes, even light clothing, a man would overheat and turn delirious in a matter of hours.

Eventually, we reached a dead end with a large rusted door.

"This is the hottest part of The Temple, Mr Philips." Thomas said, picking at the rust with his fingernail. "We will be passing through this door into the old temple. The original iron boxes. The walls here are connected directly to the mother oven. The old temple is hotter than you may be comfortable with, Mr Philips, but the heat here is not dangerous."

"It's rusted," I said, looking at the door. The intense heat of the hallway made it exhausting to speak more than a few words.

“Yes, Mr. Philips. In order to make the old temple cool enough to inhabit, there is a river running from the mountain down into this part of the building. It cools the metal enough to walk on and the moisture makes it so the air does not burn us. But this does cause the old temple to rust.”

I looked at the iron door, rough with tumescent orange stains.

“You may drink from the walls in the old temple, Mr. Philips. The rust makes the water orange, but it is perfectly safe.”

I tried to smile in response to this, but even that small exertion made it feel like I was going to pass out.

Thomas beamed at me in response, then turned around and opened the door. Immediately the air felt damp, and I could hear the comforting trickle of water running down the walls of the hallway.

Thomas crossed through into the old temple. I followed.

The air inside the old temple was hot, damp, and hard to breathe. It didn't burn the way the dry air of the outer temple did, but it was thicker and more oppressive. Breathing it made me salivate, and the moist air's metallic tang was even more intense than the rusty taste of the newer temple's dry heat. The combination of damp air and rusty taste made it feel like my mouth was bleeding.

The water used to cool the floor was deeper than I had expected, rising halfway up my shins. It was opaque, orange, and body-heat warm. The Temple felt more alive than ever. It was easy to imagine Thomas and myself as bacteria inside the arteries of a giant iron organism, wading knee deep through strange blood, on our way to perform some vital process to keep the immense machine alive.

Thomas went toward the wall and started lapping at it, like an animal.

“Come, Mr. Philips,” Thomas spoke between laps, “it is safe to drink. The rust is harmless.”

I watched Thomas lick the opaque orange trails from the black iron walls and wondered if some genetic mutation had made the monks immune to tetanus. Cut off, as they were, from mainstream society, I doubt they'd had childhood vaccinations against lockjaw. I had, though, so I figured it was safe enough to join Thomas in licking the rusted moisture from the walls.

The iron wall was rough, and scratched my tongue. Far from the polished iron gunmetal walls of the hallways wrapped around it like a knot of mating snakes, the old temple's walls were made of lumpy, rusted pig iron, and were completely devoid of the ornate hammered reliefs of the outer temple. The old temple felt more like a massive metal cave system than a manmade structure.

The warm water trickling down the old walls, despite tasting bloody, was surprisingly refreshing. As I drank, Thomas explained that the water came from a river that ran down into the monastery from the top of the mountain; centuries ago, the monks of the first faith had carved massive channels into the rock, directing the river directly into the path of the hot metal monastery. For hundreds of years now, it had trickled down through the entire structure, cooling it to habitable levels, and eventually dribbling out the bottom, staining the mountain, and flooding the town below.

When I asked if the monks could redirect the rusted flow away from the village, I noticed that my throat was no longer sore the way it had been in the dry heat of the monastery's outer shell. Thomas shrugged.

"The water takes on life when it takes on the rust, Mr. Philips. Once the water turns orange, we no longer have any power to redirect it."

With that, he turned and began wading deeper into the old temple, leading me toward Akil and whatever ceremony it was he was participating in.

At some point, deeper still, I began to focus on the rhythmic thumping in the rough, old iron floor beneath my feet.

I stopped and stood motionless, knee-deep in the monastery's ancient blood. Thomas, ahead of me, stopped too, but didn't turn or speak.

In that featureless pig iron-vein, we both stood in silence, listening to the soft trickle of the temple's arcane waters. The thousand year old Mother Oven providing a strange womblike comfort with her powerful metronome-heartbeat.

We stood for minutes before finally continuing deeper into the old temple, each step drawing us closer to the boiling heart at the monastery's core.

We stood at an unremarkable iron door, rusted and warped, like the hundreds we'd passed on our way here.

"This is our destination, Mr. Philips!" Thomas was shouting now over the throbbing machinery of the Mother Oven and her children.

The temple's furnace was unbearably loud--no longer a comforting heartbeat but a repetitive mantra shouted endlessly by immortal machinery--despite still being far away, somewhere deeper still within the gnarled core of the impossibly labyrinthine iron monastery. It was hotter now and prickling itches split themselves across my skin like static electricity.

I stared down the hall toward a massive ornate set of double doors at the end of the hallway--the first in the old temple to be polished and free of rust--covered in detailed images of meditating monsters surrounded by mandalas of tiny meditating stick figures.

"It is too hot for you to see her, Mr Philips!" Thomas shouted. "Even I have never seen the Mother Oven and her children. Only those with old gifts and new skins may go deeper, Mr Philips. Beyond those doors, only The Returned and the Earthly Gautamas can tolerate the heat and meditate beneath the great Mother furnace."

Thomas pushed open the tiny, rusted old door in front of us. I heard the sweat on his fingers hiss as he touched the searing metal.

The circular room was cooler than the hallway had been. And quieter. The mechanical droning heartbeat of the hallway outside was nowhere to be found in this room, and the stillness and low temperature made me think of this room as something dead. Irrationally, I remembered an article I'd written once about how cold temperatures help cancers grow. Either the thought or the sudden change of temperature made me shiver. All around me, the room's single, circular wall was spotted with dozens of passageways spiking off in various directions. Some were clearly intended for children, others were bigger than the thing I had seen from my window. The room was thronging with monks mumbling to themselves. The room's atmosphere prickled with the electricity of excitement.

From one of the passageways, the Falama entered the room. With him: Akil and a young woman, both naked, both painted with a glistening white pigment like greasepaint. Each was accompanied by a monk with metal hands. Up close, I could see the iron claws were not gloves, but instead were embedded beneath the skin at their wrists, as if growing from the men's arms. Various pipes and wires from the back of the metal hands themselves pierced the arms above the wrist and spasmed erratically as if in perpetual orgasm.

Thomas grabbed me by the arm and whispered: "What will happen now may terrify you, Mr. Philips. But I implore you, this is all as is meant to be. For your safety and my own, Mr. Philips, please remain silent."

Despite his warning, Thomas' face was a vision of placidity

As the monks all quietened down and shifted to the edge of the room where Thomas and I stood, a small altar revealed itself. Roughly man length and rectangular. It had a warped, irregular surface and looked as if it had been hammered into shape from the floor below. Akil sat down in front of it in lotus. He locked eyes with me for just a moment before closing his and beginning to meditate. Behind him the two red monks with metal hands presented a small bundle of hollow iron rods. Leaning her head back, the girl accepted the rods down her throat like a sword swallower. One by one, until all six rods were lodged down her gullet. In the silent rapture of the room, I listened to the woman breathing through the iron poles. Her head was still leant back, and the two monks helped her onto the altar. Lying there, naked, her head tilted back and iron rods jutting from her mouth, her breathing—slow, deliberate; her chest rising and falling slowly with a steady, even paced rhythm—was the only thing that broke the illusion of her being the bloodless victim of some strange erotic murder.

In front of her, Akil still sat in lotus, meditating quietly, emotionlessly. From one of the smaller passageways, two naked boys appeared carrying a rusted iron box with cranks on the sides. They struggled to carry it, but when one of the iron handed monks took it, he lifted it as if it were weightless. The two monks walked in front of the altar and stood either side of Akil. The box was placed over Akil's head and Falama stepped forward.

Addressing the small crowd of monks, the old man spoke in a language that I didn't recognise. It was sharp, almost digital. The consonants were short, aggressive, P's, K's, T's, L's... there was none of the rhythm of the softer sounds; no S's or F's or TH's. The vowels were almost exclusively short, basic I's and E's, punctuated by an occasional rough, guttural O. Gradually his strange sermon became a chant. A nonsense chorus. A mechanical dirge. He got louder and louder and his old man's body began to writhe and gyrate with a bleak, sexless orgiastic reverie. The iron rings pierced through his body sounded like a pocketful of coins. At the crescendo of his performance, Falama turned toward the monks holding the box over Akil's head and screamed at them, his hands outstretched as if begging. Outstretched not toward the monks but toward the box between them. The two monks each grabbed one of the cranks and simultaneously twisted them. Akil's body dropped to the floor, headless.

I froze. My skin pricked and my blood was cold. My body was flooded with adrenaline and every single one of my base, archaic, lizard brain instincts was telling me to run, to fight, to panic. But Thomas' words echoed in my mind. I didn't dare move. Falama turned toward the crowd in which I stood and began his unintelligible sermon once again. Quieter now, less manic. As Falama chanted, a trio of small boys scurried out of a hole to retrieve the box containing Akil's head from the red monks with iron hands. Spirited away into their tiny tunnel, I would never see Akil's face again. His body leaked a pool of blood around Falama's feet. The one saving grace of the iron humidity was that the room smelled enough like blood that I couldn't smell Akil's.

Thomas grabbed my arm hard and whispered to me, "There is good. Mr Philips. Please continue to remain calm."

Falama's droning sermon receded into the background as I stood watching Akil's naked body spill itself out onto the floor. Irrationally, I began to count his fingers and toes. My subconscious mind's attempt at grounding itself, it only made Akil's corpse feel more human. Headless, naked, vulnerable, the headless body looked almost like a baby.



The girl on the altar began to writhe. The sudden movement snapped my attention away from Akil's body, dragging me back into the reality of the terrible moment. She was obviously in pain. She gripped the edges of the altar and twisted her body as if possessed. She coughed through the poles and they distorted the sound into a echoed, metallic honking.

She began to cry or choke—it was hard to tell which with the poles down her throat. I looked at Thomas, hoping for some kind of explanation or a reassuring smile, but he stared fixedly at the girl, revelling in her anguished squirming. I realised then that Falama had stopped chanting. The girl arched her back further, so much the poles jutting from her mouth scraped on the altar.

The crowd of monks around me backed away toward the wall behind Thomas and I. we followed them. None of us took our eyes from the girl for a second.

The girl's choked weeping became a full-throated screaming and she arched herself up so far I thought her spine was about to snap.

At the apex of her arching, her stomach began to distort and deform as if being pushed from the inside. She dropped flat—her naked body slapped the metal surface of the altar as she did. Gripping the edges of the strange altar, the girl screamed as the skin of her torso warped and contorted. Something was trying to push itself out from within her.

Finally, the thing pushed hard enough and the girl's skin split apart to reveal two iron hands, slender and feminine. Intestines tangled between their fingers, the bloody metal hands took hold of the edges of the wound from the inside and gripped tight. The girl once again began to choke, spitting blood from the metal tubes jammed down her throat. The hands from within her began pushing at the edges of the wound, pushing her apart from the inside, tearing her open. Another iron hand joined the first two and started pushing. Another hand crawled up, found a spot on the inner ring of the wound, and pushed. More and more iron hands appeared, pushing the girl apart from the inside, splitting her open, tearing her wider and wider.

The girl's torso, broken and torn by the dozen hands, was no longer recognisable as anything human. She was a bloody ring, her limbs and head dangling from the altar, dozens of strange black hands gripping the rim of her body from the inside, forcing it open. From its centre a black iron pole rose slowly up out of the girl toward the roof. It rose up as the hands around it continued pushing the girl even wider apart like some hellish speculum, making space for something massive to emerge from within. When the pole reached the roof, hundreds of tiny hooks and pistons burst from it. Screaming, these tiny appendages split apart, fractalling into thousands of tiny needles and wires that pierced themselves through the metal ceiling, securing the pole in place.

At some point during this, the girl had died. Unlike Akil's corpse, which felt more human in death than he ever had in life, the dead girl seemed completely inhuman. She had been transformed into some arcane object. Her body was merely a doorway now. A bloody portal with a pole rising up out of it. She looked like a piece of strange machinery. I wondered, if I jumped inside her, would I go to the place where the Gautamas lived?

The hands pushed harder still and the girl looked as if she was about to split in two. From her core, a black metal dome rose up, the pole through its centre. Immediately more mechanical than the gautama I had seen or even the strange, corrupted librarian monk. This piece of infernal hardware had no flesh or bone. It was a great demonic robot.

As it left the girl's body, this iron orb revealed the dozen metal claws to have been its own. And once it no longer needed to hold the girl open, it let go of her and started grabbing maniacally all around it. It made no specific attempts at grabbing anything in particular, and I

believe it may have been blind. Its range of motion was entirely restricted to the vertical pole piercing its core and going down through the dead girl into the depths of Hell, and, when it couldn't reach anything, the ball of iron eventually seemed to give up, letting its arms fall to its sides, falling dormant.

Thomas took hold of my arm and led me outside.

"We apologise. This is not what we brought you to see, Mr. Philips."

Back in the hot corridors of the immense iron structure, my mind was rapidly trying to block out what I had just seen. I tried to ignore the hot, damp air and wet iron beneath my feet—blocking out the sensory distractions, I was forcing myself to remember every detail about what I had just seen.

"An acolyte was to be waiting at the gate, Mr Philips. Your friend was to meet the acolyte, and be granted safe passage back to Earth. We wanted to show you that to return is possible, Mr Philips, we wanted to show you that you could do this. Now I fear your friend is lost, but I trust you now understand that death is not finality?"

I didn't say anything. I had just seen my guide beheaded in front of my eyes, and then watched as something impossible rose up from the shredded body of a twenty-something Nepalese girl. My mind was racing. I had questions, but they hadn't yet solidified into words. I followed Thomas through the hallways, retracing our steps away from the core of the structure. I kept my eyes down and focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

"What was it?" I asked. It was the only question I could formulate.

"That was a parasite, Mr. Philips." Thomas slowed his pace so I could catch up. "The world beyond is an ecosystem much like our own, and every ecosystem has its parasites. That thing you saw was almost like a flea."

I looked up at Thomas. His face was expressionless.

"The world of the dead is an infinite plane, Mr Philips, size and time are not bound by our rules. There are things in Hell much larger than things could ever possibly be in our world. The gautamas are our allies, and here, Mr. Philips, they are infinitely more powerful than any man or animal could ever be. In Hell, they are mere scavengers."

I got the impression that Thomas was being as forthright as possible, but he still sounded as cryptic as he had when he was telling me nothing at all.

As we walked back through the throbbing veins and buzzing digestive system of the old iron temple, I began to wonder if the Gautamas were in fact allies of the monks, or if this whole construction was instead a thousand year long trick they were playing on the far too trusting monks. I wondered if the whole temple wasn't just the dormant, unfinished form of some impossibly large mechanical god. How could the monks be sure that the Gautamas weren't just the backstabbing messengers of some old evil too impossibly large to be birthed through a portal in the bowels of a dead girl. I began to think of the temple itself as an empty demon, waiting for its Day of Creation.

Eventually we reached the door to my room.

"Mr. Philips."

Thomas reached out to wipe a bead of sweat or condensation from my brow and I recoiled. It was a strange and grotesque show of physical affection from the old man—I suddenly became aware of quite how naked we both were.



I remembered suddenly that I was holding the map from the library and gripped it tight, crumpling it.

"I must leave you now Mr. Philips. There are some books for you in your room. I translated them myself. Read them. I will bring you food and drink this evening."

I didn't move. I stood staring at him, looking at the spider's web of wrinkles in the old man's face, trying to decipher them for answers as if they were some ancient script.

"Your room, Mr. Philips." As Thomas said this, a young, skinny boy with a curved knife crawled from one of the wall's tiny holes and stood behind him. His eyes were wild with bloodlust.

I turned, placed my hand on the warm belly of the crowned buddha stamped into the centre of the door's surface and pushed.

A series of mechanical noises, the disengaging of the door's thousand locks, and the door swung open--heavy but not stiff. I entered my room without turning to look back at Thomas or his juvenile threat.

I sat on the bed and sipped at the milky alcohol. From where I sat, all that could be seen through the room's window was the vast, cloudless sky. A flat plane of blue that reminded me of a broken computer. Birds occasionally flew across the screen, breaking the illusion. I fantasised about shooting them down, making them fall to earth, crumpled like tiny fighter jets, the bullets ripping their guts out, making them burst from their backs like a pilot ejecting in an emergency.

Eventually, half-drunk and bored of imaginary violence, I stumbled over to the table and looked at the books Thomas had left me. Their covers were skin, probably human, tanned and tattooed with the same warped buddhist imagery that covered so much of the temple. It would have shocked me this morning, but now it just seemed quaint.

I opened the first book. Rather than the old, handwritten manuscripts I had expected, the pages bound within the tanned flesh were crisp and clean, and looked to have been typed out on a typewriter. Every few pages there were sharp, glossy photographs of various pages from the library's ancient grimoires, featuring sketches of hundred headed demons and long, wet, wormlike creatures.

The second book was equally modern, but substituted the photographs for maps of strange landscapes and diagrams explaining how to prepare bodies to act as portals.

The remaining books were modern updates of old goetias, bestiaries and afterlife cartographies, all in plain english, all specifically for me.

At the bottom of the stack, was a blank notepad and a handful of cheap ballpoint pens.

That night I dreamt of Akil's headless body.