

Contains Spoilers

THE LOST THEORY

EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL BY
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. . . After killing Dylan and finding his phone, Dick used the dead man's thumb to keep the digital man alive. He went to the maid in the hallway, leaving the door cracked behind him, and said, "It's very important for your life and the lives of your family that you not say a word of this to anyone—ever. I know your name, Maria. I can find you and your family." And then to ensure her silence, he took a selfie with her using his phone, knowing the creepy act would weigh on her mind for the rest of her life. Horrified, when told to, she gave him her number so he could send her the picture.

He then drenched a towel from Maria's cart in her cleaning fluid. He gave her another hundred. She was scared and cute in her way, so he thought about demanding a kiss to seal the deal but instead licked his index finger like a lollipop and put it to her quivering lips. "Hush."



The Guru sat back in the government's comfortable Suburban with the privacy screen down. He used the intercom for the driver. "Jack, we're picking someone up at the corner of 125th and First Avenue and will drop them at JFK before heading to my lab" Dick had a 10 a.m. flight on July 3 to Kathmandu. Dick would be armed, packed and ready to go on short notice. All Dick wanted was the Guru's acceptance and love, and he would kill to get it.

The Guru's nickname may have been a joke behind his back but was only used with fear in his presence. After all those years at the

Agency, no one other than the director knew the Guru's real name, and he was afraid to use it.

The Guru felt responsible for Dick not realizing his full potential. Dick was never quite right after they'd secretly experimented with LSD on inmates, blacks and themselves. Guru saw to Dick's soft landing when he had to leave the Agency in his early forties due to "temperament issues," meaning a lack of self-control. Dick, trained in secret dark-site torture, had openly and notoriously beaten a man brutally to death in a barroom brawl in Istanbul, an event that only escaped international attention through a bit of diplomatic coin.

After his fall, the Guru gave Dick a new identity and fed him lucrative contract work for dirty jobs off the books. This gave the Guru and the Agency plausible deniability if ever any of Dick's nasty business came to light.

On Comrade's second day in camp, as he was returning to his tent for a break from the tormenting light of the good-natured refugees and his lowly position, he noticed a young boy look furtively around and then dart into his tent. Comrade saw not only an intrusion into his private lair but an opportunity that failed to knock.

The twelve-year-old boy was playing hide-and-seek with the other camp children, and the tents were fair game for the communal Nepali; the dark tent set apart was the perfect hiding spot. Perfect until the boy went in and breathed the stinking dark sinister air of that tent. He turned to run out, but too late, as Comrade had come in and was now blocking his escape.

Comrade felt all powerful and believed catching the street urchin in his tent gave him license to do whatever he wanted to the little Nepali boy. He felt his father's encouragement. Comrade was a man of swift discipline and reward, and he started to unfasten his belt. As he did, the boy's silent scream grew in the core of his being and then burst from his lungs into his mouth, letting loose a noise from holy hell. A high-decibel-level scream that only the innocent could muster in the face

of the abyss. A scream so piercing that it froze the dark predator for a moment and long enough for the boy to brush by him and out of the tent. The boy never looked back.

Comrade cursed the missed opportunity to assert his power. He detested his work on behalf of the refugees at the direction of a woman with no man and only one name. He blamed the latrine, and his duty there and people that used it, for his stink and the stench of his tent. He was a miserable man with no way out, but he would have his revenge on Juno and that little boy.

THE GENERAL

The door was locked and the curtains drawn in his hotel room. The General was even angrier than when he'd left the Deeksha that afternoon after his meeting with Juno. Anger that stewed, marinated and grew in his thoughts until the monster arose—the pain body that twisted and tormented within. It was obvious to his men when the monster was awake and they knew to keep a safe distance. Even on his best days, while the monster slept, the General was quick to violence in response to the slightest infraction.

He was a man of anger and revenge fueled by ambition and hate. Juno was fresh fuel, and his tank was now near full. Still in uniform, he lay on the oversoft bed in his room at the Hotel Yak and Yeti. He had also been able to commandeer rooms for his small army and a conference room from which to manage the People's relief efforts. The hotel owner had a Chinese wife and was intimidated by the General, thus the General was able to get all that the Hotel Yak and Yeti offered. It wouldn't be enough. It never was.

People were just tools in his toolbox. At the foot of the General's bed lay his scared teenage assistant, Lien, a tight little screw. She would suffer his turns of anger. He was never out of uniform, even when he did battle with the opposite sex—a blitz he always won in a violent game of first to come.

Later that evening, before he'd won, Lien accidentally knocked off his cap and received a violent slap across her face, knocking her off the bed for her insubordination. When done, she was sent to sleep with the rest of the men. He knew none of them would dare touch his property, and that knowledge made him her protector.

His lead doctor, a one-man pharmaceutical dispensary, had immediately been discharged to work with local Chinese black-market contractors to sell the People's medicine in Kathmandu. Opioids were a hot commodity among the injured. They had the foresight to pack a suitcase full of pills.

And then there was his mixed-blood lug nut of a comrade who would do whatever he was told to do. Each day after delivering supplies to the Deeksha before lunch, Comrade An reported to the general on the Deeksha and the refugees Juno worshiped there. With each report, the General grew increasingly jealous and angry.

The General's news films on his legitimate relief efforts barely got any media coverage back home after the first day. The state-sponsored media demand was for Juno and the Deeksha, not his quasi-military effort delivering supplies to the downtrodden and managing a fleet of shit boxes for refugees.

The success and popularity of his news footage featuring Juno that first day only proved how his plan for coming to Kathmandu would have worked so well.

It was his mission to meet the beautiful Juno and work side by side with her at the Deeksha while the media blanketed their every move in a film of his direction—saving the refugees and making China proud with the dashing general commanding the spotlight while the shy, divine diva at his side reflected his magnificence. Together they would minister to the ignorant savages in the stage lights while the doctor made him real money backstage creating junkies of the monkeys. The General was a master of jiggery-pokery and would not be outplayed by a little woman.

In one of his morning meetings with An, the General issued orders outlining his next move. "Since you tell me the American man is often on his computer, see what he's reporting there. Here's a list of likely passwords he might use and a thumb drive. Can you do this?"

"Dear General, it will be easy to get to the computer as there are no locks at the Deeksha. I should be able to do it during tomorrow's morning yoga session. If one of the passwords works."

The next morning Comrade An was eager to report to the General after his success in getting onto James's computer. He was proud to provide to the General the file he had downloaded, the one the American had been working on. The first password on the list—Hope—had worked.

The General read James's files, his rough drafts, literally, and was now deep into conspiracy theories regarding the CIA, Guru, Dick, Dylan's death and the ToE. He was more than pissed about how James reported the scene where he met Juno and his filming at the Deeksha.

"Good work, Comrade. We may now be one step ahead of the Americans. The Guru mentioned in the file is well-known to me and our secret service. I don't see the value of this theory the Guru had a man killed for and then sent a killer here to search for. It's not at the Deeksha, yet I don't think the CIA knows that much. We'll soon have what we need to assume control of the Deeksha. First, I want to see what we can find out about the American agent, Dick, and neutralize him. I wonder who this James and his lady are working for?"

The General laughed, saying, "James loves his Brigitte passionately and makes love so tenderly that they are like two girls 'seeking the other's pleasure like a hidden treasure.'" He jerked at his groin. "I'd show her how a real man fucks a girl."

"I'd like to taste her hot pot," replied Comrade An.

The General was annoyed by the locker-room offering by the subordinate who was now feeling emboldened following his success in obtaining the purloined file. "I've seen her, and it will be cold before you get a whiff. She's his accomplice but of no consequence to us other than as leverage over him."

The General wrote a note and sealed it into an envelope that he then addressed simply to James. He handed the letter to An, saying, "Put this where only the American will find it."

As soon as An left, the General started to look for angles to play with his newfound information. He reached out to his Russian contact to see what they might pay. He then took a calculated risk and through encrypted channels managed to reach the Guru without detection or

digital fingerprints. He was pleased—the Guru spoke his language and would pay handsomely for the dead man's theory.

He assigned one of his armed men to the post office. The operative was to take charge of the theory should Dick or James find it there. The General would personally lead a team to search the yogi's compound for the document the Americans were looking for. The CIA didn't know, and he didn't mention, that James believed the yogi probably was holding the theory in remote Nepal. It amused him to be working with a guru and going to torture a yogi.

THE GENERAL MEETS JUNO
FOR A SECOND TIME

Nine days later, after he penned his love letter to James, the General ordered An to bring Juno to him at once. The interview with Juno was to be conducted in the conference room of the Yak and Yeti. Juno knew the room very well. The General had considered having the meeting in his hotel room but knew Juno would decline to go there. He didn't want to pick another battle he would lose to such a slight adversary.

Before the earthquake, the conference room at the Yak and Yeti hosted weekly nondenominational spiritual events where Juno would play the guzheng and sing. On those Friday evenings, the room was always full of good fellowship and warmth, but now as Juno entered the space, it looked like a small YMCA gymnasium set up as a campaign headquarters. A vacuum had sucked out all the air and energy. Gone were the kindly portraits of Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh. All those criminals, except one, were now facing the wall in the back of the conference room. The Dalai Lama's portrait bore ragged slices down the center as if it had been hit several times with an axe. This defaced portrait was facing out, the greatest hate saved for the still-living rebel.

The portraits had been replaced by square portraits of Mao, President Xi, and the General. The frames suited their features. Juno thought it odd that a relief effort would go to such lengths to redecorate for their short stay and transport such large portraits. And she marveled at the ego that traveled with a portrait of itself.

The General officially thanked the escorting An and commanded him and the others to leave the conference room so that he could speak

to Juno alone. Juno noticed the General's assistant's furtive looks and the demeanor that said she was only too eager to leave. Juno's instincts as a mother had her bristling.

Comrade An wanted to stay and hear what he imagined would be Juno's rough interrogation. He had imagined standing by menacingly while the General made her cry. Yet An left the room once again castigated. Every time he dropped a pair, someone in authority sheared them off. He wanted revenge for his life.

Once the conference room was cleared and Juno was seated, the General noticed her peering at the portraits and said, "We have done well in our modest redecorating?"

Juno didn't reply.

He added, "Sometimes things get damaged when upgrades occur. Or perhaps it was the earthquake."

Again, she offered no reply. He had Juno seated at his desk, which for this meeting just happened to display his military pageant parade sword in all its shining and tasseled glory.

The General, wanting a negative reaction, went right into his interrogation. He pulled pictures from a folder and laid them out on the desk while adjusting the sword to make room for the photos. "Did you know this man?"

They were pictures of the rude bearded man who had insulted the twins and whom Juno had sent away from the Deeksha the night before the earthquake. One picture stood out as grotesque and disturbing and could not be used for identification, so it must have been provided to shock her.

Looking at the other pictures, Juno said, "I've seen him, but I didn't know him. Why?"

The General didn't explain but asked, "Did anyone at the Deeksha know him?"

Juno was used to men like the General, and one of the reasons she had left China had been to avoid such verbal gamesmanship and role-playing. What he knew would be hidden and what he said would not be fettered by the truth. Such speech was worth less than zero. The

people of Nepal were so direct, simple and kind. She knew curt candor would be her best shield against his weaponized words.

“My twin daughters had one short encounter at the market with the man in the pictures, but they had no other contact. After that I denied him admission to the Deeksha.”

“Well,” the General said, “he was very interested in the Deeksha and its inhabitants, we know that much. Now I’ll have to interview those two lovely young ladies as well.”

Juno looked at him hard, saying, “Not without me present, please.”

“You don’t dictate my protocol in an investigation!”

Juno responded softly, “I was hoping to keep my uncle out of this.”

The General, now boiling, knew he had to collect himself, so he paced about the room. “Does your uncle know about all your American friends? And this American intelligence officer—ex-CIA but still of interest to our intelligence service—who was watching the Deeksha?” He pointed to the disturbing picture.

“This man was very well-known to us as a dangerous US operative and murderer, the blunt instrument of an even more dangerous and high-ranking man in the CIA. We have reason to believe that an American man staying with you, James Holmes, is also involved. And this agent’s interest in you and the Deeksha, what might that be?”

“Its beauty, maybe?”

The General realized he wasn’t getting anywhere and had to consider the threat of her uncle before continuing the questioning. He had one more angle to play.

“You are in danger, and it’s necessary to take charge and oversee the Deeksha directly so that I can assure your and the refugees’ safety. I’m not sure what the Americans are up to here, but it’s something important to the Party. The proper authorities back in Beijing have been notified already.”

Juno bowed slightly. “That’s a very kind offer but completely unnecessary, thank you. Comrade An can call you anytime you’re needed.”

The General stood frozen in rage, looking for his next move. He instinctively picked up his sword for battle. He wanted to strangle that

slim elegant neck, choking her words while puncturing her beauty and calm with his long steel blade.

At the intolerable impasse, he called An back in and said, "Please see Juno to the Deeksha and keep an eye on the Americans and keep my overconfident friend here safe and let me know immediately of any suspicious activity. And, Juno, you should know what side you are on and that you are not untouchable." He rattled the sword but kept it sheathed. If not for her uncle, her head would have been bouncing on the floor.

Juno let the hostile words pass over her like water off a duck's back, though the disturbing picture of the bearded man left a dark stain on her crimson heart.

As she was on her way out, he added, "And discuss this with no one."

That night in that suffocating hotel room and bed, Lien was beaten and violated before being sent away. Still, the General's head raged with thoughts of Juno's disrespectful mouth gagged while her proud body became his receptacle. He'd never suffered a woman in such a manner. All that defiance emanating from such an agile, slight body that his one hand could crush like a peach . . . A peach he'd like to eat after splitting its pit in two.

The stories he told were only as true as they needed to be to serve his purpose and avoid any lies being detected. He still remembered the point when he discovered the power of not being bound by the truth, and his Party rank rose quickly from then on. He wasn't first in his class at military school, but he'd come to realize that with fiction, one could alter the illusion of reality to suit any whim.

He'd considered planting evidence on James's computer that would have implicated him in Dick's dark life and the CIA. That would have served as a more than adequate pretext for the takeover of the Deeksha and control of Juno. Juno couldn't argue in the face of such a threat to the people. Yet he'd thought that additional step wouldn't be necessary and that Juno would have been scared enough by the murderous spy story and the gruesome picture without the additional fabrication.

He had miscalculated what would cause Juno to react out of fear.

Yet despite failing twice in his efforts to seize control of the Deeksha and Juno, he still was sure he'd find a way to control his ethereal adversary. He had full certitude in his own abilities to sift through scenarios to find one that would serve his lust for revenge. And that thought reminded him of a strange entry on James's computer file where the American had posed himself a question.

Question: What will the General do to meet his aim of taking over the Deeksha and dominating Juno? Perhaps the General will

have Comrade An lure the dormant spy into his tent for a top secret and extremely time-sensitive message from her uncle about the Americans staying with her at the Deeksha. A ruse.

The General has ordered Comrade An to then rape Juno so that the General himself would be called in to adjudicate and take over the Deeksha. Comrade An would be assured Juno's claim would be found to be baseless and that she acted as the lone aggressor. In reality, the General knew Juno, a trained spy, could never be overpowered by a foot soldier, and he would of course find Comrade An guilty of attempted rape and have to send him home to Beijing to his death. He would then have to nurse Juno from her trauma and manage the Deeksha under the spotlight while exposing the two Americans hiding in the refugee camp along with all their secrets.

The General had found the question most interesting and had to credit James for his clever imagination. It made some sense that Juno, with who her uncle was, was a spy, but he hadn't known that. How did James find out? Now, re-reading James's game-theory scenario, he was convinced James and his lady friend were spies too. That was what spies did—dug up secrets and played out all possible scenarios. The scheme was blunt and direct but on the right track. No one would believe Juno would want the smelly Comrade An or that she'd enter his tent alone. Even An would smell a rat.

That was the moment when it mushroomed in his mind, the fool-proof plot, completely formed and diabolically designed. An explosion of terror timed perfectly to overthrow the most peaceful of daily rituals at the Deeksha, the evening tea.

The General smirked. Easy work and rich reward. It was beautiful, tragic Shakespeare.

“ . . . a real haul on a military relief plane with a sniper rifle and a dead body that I brought just for you. Let me explain. Our Chinese friends called us about some Dick, and as your liaison, I was put in charge of the response to the newly opened case for my Crazy Eyes. The Chinese here have taken an interest in you and your Guru and the dead man you left behind in New York. We know all about this theory you seek and know where to find it. The two of us need to get there before the Chinese do.”

. . . James finds the theory nestled in one of Dylan’s books at the Yogi’s compound. He imagines Brigitte’s excitement at his return from his adventure with the ToE in hand, like Moses from the mountain or Joseph Smith from the hill; James had come down from the bookshelf.

He would be back just in time for morning yoga practice. When he passed through the garden gate, instead of the calm dawn of yoga time, frenetic energy and police filled the garden.

Two policemen approached him roughly, as if he were a murderer or terrorist, asking, “Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

Juno ran up, crying, “James, Brigitte has been shot. A sniper. She is . . .”

THE GENERAL PREPARES TO DIRECT
HIS FILM *AMERICAN POISON*
[WORKING TITLE]

The door was locked and the curtains drawn in his hotel room. A couple of days following his interview of Juno in the Yak and Yeti conference room, the General again lay in his soft hotel bed, in that room he had come to detest, with Lien curled there like a stray cat pretending to sleep. With her red dress and makeup, she didn't look half bad. She was ready for the General's orders to film their departure for Beijing that night.

The room, with Ikea furnishings and shag carpet and rich imitation Buddhist tapestries, was a constant reminder of the Xanadu Juno had denied him. He had become obsessed with Juno, and her casual and polite dismissal his first day in Kathmandu played in a loop over and over again in his mind. That and her offhand dropping of the uncle bomb in their second meeting. Juno was his South China Sea—his for the taking if only his will to assert power was strong enough.

The General's plan was part ambition, part revenge and all brilliance in its clever conception. And now the plan and film were in motion. It was foolproof, and his bags were packed. He was proud of how his Shakespearean plot was coming to life. He had his lines scripted for *American Poison: The Documentary*.

Beside him on the bed was a satchel with approximately two hundred thousand US dollars from the black-market sale of opioids, easy money in a war zone and a source of ongoing riches as he and the doctor would continue to feed the junkies they had created. The cache made so far would go entirely to the doctor for his part in the movie.

The doctor was instrumental to the plan, and it would be so simple with his assistance. Giving up his share of the cash they had extorted for pain-relieving medicine would be a small price for the General to pay for the riches to come.

He'd met with An as usual that morning and gave him his action role.

"We'll be speaking English for this plan and the filming of it. You don't have any lines, so don't worry. We don't believe the theory the Americans are looking for exists and don't see its value. Their yogi didn't have it, so there is nowhere else to look in any event. But Juno's ties to the Americans and these agents make her an unwitting accomplice who must be removed. She's a traitor to the People. It's time we take over the Deeksha.

"Have you observed teatime closely and accustomed the people to your presence there as I commanded?" he asked.

An reported, "Yes, sir. It's very dark on the far side of the fire where I watch, and I can get quite close."

"Good," the General continued. "In this blue vial is medicine that will cause Juno to lose her senses with one sip of tea. It's commonly known as the date rape drug, but don't get any ideas. Can you get it into her cup tonight, and what time would that be?"

"Yes, sir. There's always a lot of play and noise and demands for Juno's attention that distract her and the others at teatime, which usually starts around nine p.m."

An took the vial containing the date rape drugs Rohypnol and Estazolam, an especially strong dose prepared by the doctor. It was a cocktail and a caveman club the General used to convince coy courtesans. He was a general, and any girl should welcome his sex for money, and if not, he would take what he wanted however he had to do it.

"This is what you've been trained to do, and this is your big chance to serve me and your country on an important matter of national security. As soon as you put it in the tea, call me and we'll be there in ten minutes to take Juno back to Beijing and you'll be put in charge of the Deeksha. During the commotion that follows Juno's collapse, hide that blue vial and this second red vial in the American's bag. Do not mix

them up; this second one might kill her. Do you understand? Red vial bad, blue vial use.”

“Yes, General! Red vial bad, blue vial use!”

“The Nepali authorities will get a call from my office informing them that we believe it was the American who poisoned Juno and ask they conduct a search. When he’s arrested, I’ll find out all he knows about this theory the Americans want so badly.”

He handed An a pistol. “Keep this concealed until we take Juno. We’ll be armed and ready, though we expect no real trouble from the ‘family’ or the locals.”

An stuffed Chekhov’s gun into his pants like a gangster augmenting his manhood. He was actually pleased with his role and the feel of cold steel on his crotch. For his work, which was easily done, he would be lord and master of the Deeksha.

An believed he was being groomed as the General’s apprentice. He said, “Sir, it’s a brilliant plan. I will execute it without fail. Thank you, sir.”

The General wished he had a sharper instrument for his film, but An was perfect for his part in the plot. “Look sharp tonight while we’re filming; be sure to heel click to my orders.”

“Yes, sir!” An stood to attention with a salute and an awkward attempt to actually click his heels with the gun butt crushing his nuts.

On his way back to the Deeksha with the poisons, the pistol, and bruised balls, An thought, *The revered bitch will fall and the family will learn to hate one another. All those miserable refugees will be beholden to me and they better be grateful. And that screaming boy who had latched onto the American for protection will pay too after the American is arrested and sent to China for execution.* An hadn’t noticed the boy had left days before to return home.

After An left, the General called in the doctor to review one more time his part of the plan.

“Doctor, for the record and the film, we will speak English tonight. And today you’ll make a lot of money. Have the ambulance and four armed orderlies ready this evening by eight; I expect to give the order

to leave around nine. The pilots and plane will be ready for departure. Do you have what you need?"

"Yes, sir, as soon as we take off for Beijing, I'll administer more drugs that will put her into a barb coma, and I'll report her condition back to Beijing as terminal."

"Red vial, right?"

"Yes," the doctor confirmed. "The drugs in the red vial can be quite lethal. Make sure to give her only a drop or two of the blue."

"Good. Doctor, dress the part, as our heroic rescue will be filmed and be big news. You will also see to it that I can set up vigil in Juno's private hospital room in Beijing. I want to be there as public sympathy for the dying Queen of Kathmandu grows. And when we decide it's time for Sleeping Beauty to wake, you will credit her remarkable recovery on my unwavering faith and care."

Next, the General summoned Lien. "I want you in my room dressed and packed by eight tonight. Have the camera and crew ready to leave and prepared for filming. We'll be filming around nine. I have prepared a list of questions in English for you to ask me with the camera rolling at the Deeksha and more as we take off for Beijing. And don't ask any questions now or tell anyone anything. Just be ready and look your best. Wear a dress and look less like a wet, malnourished kitten. Be grateful. You're a general's aide-de-camp, assisting him in the creation of his masterpiece."

The General saw life as a chessboard, viewing it from four sides and imagining that thinking three moves ahead would always lead to him winning the games he played. His good fortune was on track that day—Juno's uncle wouldn't be in Beijing as he had joined the Chinese president and entourage in Singapore for a major summit on North Korea. Her uncle, if in Beijing, might have complicated things.

The General was quite pleased with his plan and good fortune and enjoyed imagining how the Party, media and public would love the story of the grave illness of a poisoned expat celebrity icon. He imagined the dramatic film footage of his heroic rescue of the critically ill Queen of Kathmandu and her return to Beijing. Upon arrival there, the doctor would be forced to report that Juno was dying while the

General, on the other hand, would be all hopes and prayers for her recovery and set himself up in a vigil in her hospital room. He wondered what he might do while the doctors and nurses were away from the room at night. Beauty would be his, a sweet peach sleeping in his powerful hands. Perhaps he'd be merciful in administering his lessons in respect.

Along with the crescendo of the public's outpouring of grief, there would be outrage that an American guest of Juno's at the Deeksha, with ties to the CIA, had been the evil poisoner who planned to rape and/or kill the queen. The American who was reporting the General as a fool for saying cunt would not live to see the final cut of his own villain role in *American Poison*.

At the exact right time, Juno would miraculously recover because of the power of his faith. The General would modestly praise the Party and the People for saving her.

And all this to be documented in an excellent film, his brilliant plan in motion. He was director, star actor and writer of the politically minded thriller-documentary born of his wicked imagination. *American Poison* would serve better as international propaganda in English, and being in English would also broaden its popular appeal. There would be subtitles for the masses back home. The Party would be pleased with his foresight.

At 9 p.m. that evening, with Lien cowering on his bed in her red dress, the General paced around his room waiting for Comrade An's call.

Lien looked ten years older, almost thirty, after her tour of duty with the General. The General liked the dress but couldn't even be bothered to have her take it off as he had another target to hold his anger for that evening. He would set this barely adequate kitten free after his documentary was complete. She would be someone else's military secretary—well trained by him. He would be in possession of the sleeping belle of Beijing.

The General wondered how grateful Juno would be when she woke up. Surely the public would demand a romance and a marriage. What an ending to his *American Poison* that would be.

However, even if Juno proved less than fully grateful, he would have the patronage of her powerful uncle and would become an instant celebrity, a rising Party star and a most dashing bachelor. The hero that saved the damsel with the dulcimer from the evil American spy.

He was getting ahead of himself, yet his puffing pride came with a tender moment. He said, "Lien, you actually look real good in that red dress with your face made up. Tonight you will become a star."

His cell phone rang: his call from Comrade An. Tea had been served.

Juno knew how those things were handled in China. In a letter to her uncle, she matter-of-factly relayed the story of the attempted poisoning and the plan to capitalize on the manufactured tragedy and publicity. And An's firing his pistol point-blank at James.

She asked that the General's assistant be taken care of and provided a safe post. She concluded by thanking her uncle for the cash support of nearly two hundred thousand US dollars. The refugees and the injured at the hospital were surprised and grateful at this novel form of disaster relief and the generosity of the Chinese people.

She could be impish but always polite.

Juno knew the letter would silently be the end of the General's career, but she couldn't allow him to go free with impunity to attack others again. Now the General and Comrade An would be dealt with harshly by the system that had created them, a system that had become so foreign and anachronistic to Juno. She felt sad her letter would land them both in a box—a prison cell or more likely a casket. For the General, a square peg in a square hole, and for An, a smelly cell.

She reopened the letter and wrote a postscript imploring her uncle to be merciful and suggesting prison, with the hope of redemption for "the two wickedly ignorant men." She resealed the letter with a prayer of forgiveness.

The Guru didn't believe Sean but would soon learn the truth. Bill and Bob were working with the night magistrate to get the Bitcoin-related warrant and would be waking Sean up well before dawn and before any damage could be done. The Guru wanted to think Sean had found the ToE and would suffer the consequences of his lie. He owned Dean Roland Sitwell and soon would own Sean and the ToE too.

Dean Sitwell had told him that Professor McQueen would do nothing to jeopardize his career and tenure with the university. The dean was perhaps wrong in that assessment. It was really the best-case scenario; Sean had the ToE and lied and loses his professional life as punishment. Discredited and without position, he wouldn't continue his crusade and risk his and his girlfriend's lives further. Sean would have no doubt of the Guru's conviction. The Guru knew the measure of men and could see the fear in Sean eyes every time the lovely Professor Edens's name was mentioned.

He'd also soon have Sean's phone and computers with all his secrets and any new secret the Guru might want to make up.



The Guru lived alone with his work and his big ideas. His subordinates knew to text him if McQueen made any unexpected moves.

He enjoyed disconnecting the unpatriotic professor from his devices and would make good on his threats in their game of chess. McQueen had already lost his position on the board and soon would lose his queen.

He poured himself a large, very cold vodka martini with lemon peel. He wanted a good vodka buzz before he read the theory of everything for the first time. He took his first big sip and did a little old man bone dance, rattling his skeleton, swishing the liquid down and into his wrinkled belly, feeding the fire that still burned there.

Professor Edens was worthy of respect. She was also fully committed to the ToE, though her love of it was limited to its scientific value or truth, where he desired its power and glory. She was not only striking but a great intellect. She would make a commendable partner in transitioning the theory into his all-knowing and all-powerful AI. Their

shared mission and shared appreciation of the ultimate value of the theory made Professor Edens the sexy embodiment of his dream. He smiled, imagining the tantric brain fuck of two scientific gurus on the bed of an all-knowing computer cloud.

Assets in Athens had already been dispatched and were moving to intercept the exceptional Edens, and they would put the fear of God into her too, seizing her electronics and paperwork.

The Guru was fully wired, lying back on his easy-boy chair in his apartment's study, his mission control in the heart of the Meatpacking District. For seventy-five years old, he was still in good shape and his mind sharp, but he was planning for the future and could already handle almost all operations from his comfortable leather chair, a refined recliner with a footrest, where he would often sleep. He believed in the ability of artificial intelligence to keep up with his body and mind over his declining years. AI empowered by the source of constant creation would make him immortal.

Ting. "He ran to his NYU office. He's fast."

The Guru clicked on a computer screen, activating the camera, to watch the frantic professor in the privacy of his office.

The Guru replied to the text. "Good. We can monitor him and his communications from there."

The Guru called his assets in Athens, confirming they were prepared to move on Professor Edens and demanding a picture of her when they were in her hotel room. Damn Greeks were living in the Middle Ages and couldn't engage the equipment necessary to have a hidden camera in her hotel bedroom on such short notice. He was eager to see the woman Dick had called a peach vulnerable and under his thumb like a new smart phone. He liked his power and remembered his youth. But at his age, it was her mind he really coveted.

There was nothing much to do now as Sean was writing something—longhand—at his desk. He tried to zoom but couldn't read the writing. He reclined his seat to reboot in his cloud with all his computer screens

still lit, eager to test the upgrade of his neural-computer interface. The chip in his head would alert him to new developments in New York or Athens.

Cat's-eye watched from under the dresser. His Siamese was always underfed, which made her an excellent hunter. She was always watching him.

The Guru woke to a ringing alarm. Sean was making a call. He watched and listened to the lovebirds chat like children whispering in conspiracy, as if that would protect them from being overheard. He studied his computer screen, where he could zoom in on almost any person or point of interest. He enjoyed watching Sean in his office, frantic with obvious subterfuge in speaking to his "M." She had a lovely voice.

Big love . . . free love . . . getting high on a mountaintop. They were just two latter-day hippies. He didn't have eyes on the flower child and quantum cosmologist in Athens yet, and that was his one regret.

He decided it had been premature and impractical to use Veritas on Sean at the airport. Veritas required a well-wired room and the subject's consent or force in its application. The FBI would have objected to force. He hadn't expected a literary professor to put up such a fight. More of a man than he expected. And less of a patriot. Nine out of ten men would have bowed to patriotism and done as commanded. But what could one expect from a liberal professor with Jewish blood? The Guru hadn't thought Sean would have the nerve to lie but had expected him to act out of self-preservation. Now he would learn his hard lesson and be shut down.

Since the professors had possessed the ToE for only a day, it would be relatively easy to retrace their steps and wipe clean all tracks the ToE had left. He was determined to be the father of the ToE and reap all the benefits and honors to be bestowed.

Still reclining in his mission-control seat, he set to work and put the ToE into Apate, his AI for misinformation, with a thesis that the pompous chairman of physics at Columbia would like. He then sent the faux

ToE that Apaté created to the chairman, because his AI still had kinks when applied to scientific theory. He demanded that the chairman quickly edit it as a sophomoric thesis that declared each moment of creation fans out from the big bang. It didn't have to be good but sound somewhat logical while being totally misguided. Still, it was just an insurance policy.

He could see that the chairman had received his email and knew the academic would quickly perform his role.

The real ToE read like the refined musings of his hero, Tesla. Tesla 2.0. It was living up to its promise, though how it would animate his artificial intelligence wasn't yet clear. He believed the answer would be a super-charged neural-computer interface. He had scientists to untangle that. Perhaps he could enlist Professor Edens. She was perfect, but was she a patriot or merely a scientist? He would look for her secrets too.

Sean had correctly concluded that he was behind Dylan Byrne's death and must be convinced that he and his Emily now faced a similar fate unless they did as he said. Taking away Sean's career would be devastating but not a deadly blow. Death was a messy business and a last resort. But Sean would know better than to cross him again.

Even if Sean made public his allegations regarding Byrne's death, they would be easily silenced. He had made himself indispensable to the president, and with what he knew about the head of state, he felt immune from prosecution. He could do all that he needed or wanted to do.

It was most unfortunate that Bo, his id's son, had died in Kathmandu. That had left him deaf and blind on the ground there. He didn't believe in coincidences and concluded it must have been China's doing.

General Fang Liu's encrypted message to the Guru led to the General's agreement to look for the ToE, for a large fee, of course. The General would sell the world for a villa in the sun. From that point on, he owned the amateur general who wasn't accustomed to the world's stage. The General was in the game in any event, and it was best to have him on his side. He regretted not telling Bo he had put another dog in the hunt and believed that omission had led to Bo's death.

He didn't believe Sean was involved in Bo's death, but he still held him responsible. Only a master spy playing a buffoon or a real buffoon would have visited the embassy to inquire about the dead Bo if they had been involved in his murder. Sean was neither.

The Guru was absorbed with movement on one of his computer screens—Sean had a visitor. “Hello, Elliot. Let's step outside.” The man he'd summoned, but why? The Guru already had someone researching Elliot Pennington. Sean was acting like he knew he was being watched.

This was going to fun. He wanted to share the excitement, but the damn cat, a stealthy phantom, was hiding, and Bo was now gone too.

Bo's body had been quickly cremated by the Nepali, along with the many other dead from the earthquake. They apologized for the mistake, but to avoid disease they'd rushed to cremate en masse the unclaimed bodies of the dead soon after the quake. The Guru was the only family Bo had. He'd take the full measure of revenge for Bo and assure Sean's silence by the harshest of measures.

He'd only learned of Sean's arrival that evening from the FBI. The Chinese Bitcoin hack and Sean's visit to the embassy in Kathmandu were both true and all the FBI knew of the Guru's interest in the lit professor.

He now also possessed an embarrassing dossier of the man's indiscretions, the type of dark secrets that would be found in any man's digital history. His men were taking their time with those salacious details and pictures.

Ting. “Professor McQueen's meeting with Dean Sitwell is set for nine a.m. No time to set up surveillance. Should we postpone?”

“No. We know the outcome. And he needs to get the message loud and clear.”

Once the petty little game of cat and mouse was over and the Guru had all copies of the ToE, Sean's computers and phone would provide his blackmail. There, alongside Sean's skeletons, his men would plant ample evidence of Sean's working with the General on the Bitcoin scheme. He'd also implicate Sean as working with his Chinese friends to orchestrate Bo's death. That incriminating evidence would

buy Sean's silence regarding the ToE if his suspicion regarding Dylan's death wasn't enough to take him out of the game. The two hands of the Guru's personal deep state would slap Sean around with secrets and misinformation. Sean would always be a couple of pieces of intelligence behind in their game of chess.

Now the Guru alone would have the ToE, which would only be shared on a need-to-know basis with scientists he controlled—all men had dark secrets that they wanted to remain buried in the dark. He was proud of his 24/7 high-tech operation, every aspect controlled by him through secrets and misinformation.

He finished reading the ToE, yet he would have to read it again in the morning. He reminded himself that before the atom bomb, the implications and applications of $E=MC^2$ were far from clear. Discovering how to plug into the omnipotence of constant creation was only a matter of research and development. He imagined the sexy intellect of Professor Edens working alongside him, a fresh mind to transform his dream into reality.

The dean would soon be firing his man. He pushed the Go button on his control panel to send his assets into Professor Emily Edens's hotel room.

Ting!

"Yes, she's still there, most likely asleep," was his reply. "Use all necessary force but don't wake her if possible. She needs some sleep."

The Guru rocked back on his soft leather seat and closed his eyes, becoming lost in a cloud of dreams that, as a sorcerer of constant creation, he could manipulate at will, while Cat's-eye watched from the door.

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An hour had passed since the Guru told his assets in Athens to move on Emily Edens. He got off his recliner to eat, shower and then dress to go see the unemployed Professor McQueen, to ensure he and his lady stayed sidelined. If not, they'd have to be put to rest.

In came the *ting* of a text with the picture he had been waiting for,

that singularly sexy intellect in bed. The image brought back a wave of arousing memories. *Oh God, an angel in a teddy. And waiting for me.* He texted back before flashing back to the days of LSD and rock-hard sex in the seventies. He felt a twitching around his little head.

Ting.

We have her equipment and papers and are hunting for a copy of the theory. We can't find any trace of the ToE on her computer. She was searched at the police station. She doesn't have it on her and we have her. We'll continue to search the hotel.

The Guru was pleased with his picture but didn't like the possibility of a copy of the ToE being unaccounted for. He wanted no chance of challenge to his control and authorship of the genius theory.

He played back the lovers' call.

"I'm thinking we should delete all reference to and copies of the ToE on our computers and hide our hard copy and then plan to get it out into world as soon as possible."

—

Hmm . . . On the following call they went out of their way to make clear that they'd lost the ToE and their only copy had been seized at McQueen's apartment, but their admission sounded contrived. Yet it was hearing her words again that made him downhearted as he realized the lovely Edens would never turn on McQueen to collaborate with him of her own free will.

Keep looking for any thumb drive or copy and hold her until you get my further orders.

His man in Athens, heading the team, was reliable for pay and out of fear. All their texts were encrypted and set to quickly erase. He was forced to contemplate Professor Emily Edens's potential disappearance, either in a crematorium or on the rocks beneath a cliff overlooking the sea. She liked to hike, and those seawalls could be so slippery. He never let affection and admiration deter him from making the right move. All he had to do was decide and type *RUMBUS*, and it would be done and Emily Edens and those capital letters would vanish.

The Guru replied, *Let me know when he leaves and if he heads home from there. Are we sure she wasn't sent the theory? Check again. And see what we can dig up on her and her famous daughter. That will silence her. Or perhaps he's having a fling with his dead friend's wife. Not the worst place he could have gone. That's only a couple of blocks from me. He must have gone to warn her—and that's actually good.*

Emily might be interested to learn her lover couldn't wait to screw around with his dead friend's wife. Perhaps fear and unemployment had aroused him or driven him to seek comfort. Sean would scare Natalie, and the Guru wanted to meet Sean alone first, but he would visit Natalie next to put the fear of his deep state into her.

He stepped into the shower, lily white with goose bumps, thinking of that picture of Professor Edens. Cat's-eye watched as the shower door steamed up.

The Guru stood in the shower, his smart watch and the chip in his head whirring away. Even there he was wired in.

Ting.

He tried to delete the email, but he sent Dylan's wife pictures of the theory while still in Nepal. She's the only one he sent them to from Kathmandu. We've deleted those images for good now. Only you and she still have the theory. Should we head there?

The Guru replied, *Send the FBI; their warrant is broad enough to cover a search and seizure there. I'll join them soon. And tell our assets in Athens to await further word from me. Just hold our quantum girl until I decide what to do with her.*

It wasn't RUMBUS time yet, but the syllables were rattling round in his head.

Stepping out of the shower, he faced the bathroom mirror and wiped off enough of the foggy glass to put on his bespoke contact lenses. He paused to admire his intimidating reflection and his

seemingly blood-filled irises. He was proud that the intensity of mind shooting out of this fearful visage, his position of authority, his experience and his technology allowed him to control any human interaction between him and any adversary, within any scene, in a zero-sum battle for power and energy.

On important days the Guru intentionally dressed like a British double agent straight out of a John le Carré novel. With Cat's-eye intently watching her master like a feline valet, he stood in front of his study-bedroom's full-length mirror, quickly buttoning the dark blue silk vest that held his abdomen together. Then he rushed to finish applying makeup to whiten his face and slipped into his Italian loafers and out his front door into the Meatpacking District, heading south in long measured strides for his nine-block walk to the Village.



While the Guru waited for the faux ToE to be posted, he contemplated his next move. He sat back in the comfortable chair in Natalie's living room looking up at Byrne and his glamorous daughter above the mantel while Natalie was answering FBI questions in the kitchen. They were trying to turn her with patriotism and fear, echoing his story that the Chinese were now a threat to Professor Edens and Grace.

Sean would only stand down to save his Emily. While she was safe, he had shown he couldn't be trusted to act like a rational man. He was willing to lose his career and keep on in the face of all reason and threat. Even if all copies of the ToE could be destroyed, Professor Edens could recreate it at any time in her own words. He regretted that she wouldn't become part of his team, but it would be impossible because of her love for her literature professor and because of her belief that scientific truth belonged to all of humanity. He had read her last email to Sean, sent just hours ago upon her arrival in Athens.

He looked at her picture and saw the sexy body that contained the mind that held his theory—his dream—a dream he couldn't share. He didn't feel guilt or qualms about what he must do but did experience the remorse one feels looking at great book after the last page was read.

She would have to remain missing, with clues pointing to a Chinese abduction. McQueen would be an unemployed reprobate implicated in multiple deaths and his girlfriend's unaccounted-for disappearance.

The Guru chose suffocation followed by cremation for the lovely mind and body of Edens. Constant creation must be his alone.

RUMBUS time was near.

—

He typed simply *RUMBUS*. Pushed Send. Professor Emily Edens was dead.