Dr. Erika Eden's Institute for Omniversal Dealers

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'The hardest thing to get used to in this place was watching where you stepped,' thought Antonia as she gingerly placed her foot on the conveyor belt, and then boldly got on to get to her destination. The floors in this institute were always *moving*, as a not-so-subtle reminder that not even the ground you stepped on could be taken for granted. There was no place to hesitate here: you had to be *decisive*. Assured. Confident. Bold. Otherwise, you'd fall flat on your face, and then have to pick up your teeth from the floor by yourself.

The Institute was more than just an *omniversity* — it was the place where you were trained to be primal, emotional, analytical, and deific. You had to learn how to rock the world with your hands tied behind your back, and you were playing with the lives of *billions*, and you were playing for keeps.

This place was no ordinary one. It was eccentric, enigmatic, unpredictable, and most of all, *dangerous*. Nothing was handed to you on a silver platter: you had to find your classes because no one would tell you where they were. There was no preparation allowed: your assignments were given to you on the drop of a hat, and you had to do complicated and complex work right on the spot. You were always on the go, and the final exam was based on your ability to solve the real-world problem in real-time: you set off a riot or a war. You *failed*; the end. It was an all-or-none kind of grading scheme, and there was no running to anyone to quibble to give you a pass.

But there were also the training *assignments*.

Those were exhilarating, frightening, but utterly bizarre. It was a hedonistic party on one hand, but one where you had to be cunning to get through it. *Eros and Thanatos will manipulate your every impulse*, said the professor, *and you will learn to ride their wavelengths without getting swept up in their games*.

The professor in question was a peculiar, shockingly serene, but attractive woman who found the Institute. Dr. Erika Eden. She founded the secret underground Institute for Omniversal Dealers where the actual motto was *There are three kinds of people: those who play people, those who get played, and the Dealer who always wins*. Antonia found herself here after all the universities in the world collapsed after the great global cataclysm wiped institutions off the map. She wanted to be a psychologist, but now, she somehow leveled up in this worldwide quagmire to become a Dealer: a person who brokered behind-the-scenes deals with chastened elites who outwitted themselves, and were now scrambling for salvation.

But you couldn't just be a Dealer — you had to be groomed for it. It was a network of secret powerbrokers who knew how to quietly rock the world back on course. You learned strategy, psychology, and survival. You had to understand health-care, defense, economics, and how all these factors interacted with one another. The previous regimes were too myopic, and always pandering to the uninformed complainers with never took any risks, and now, the world had changed.

For some, their lives were forever ruined, but for others, their time had arrived and they could *deliver*. The problem was the old ways of thinking were archaic, and many people still could not accept that their old tricks no longer applied. The students here were savvy enough to feel the winds of change and were now given a chance to quietly steer the world away from the brink, but it was not an easy school to handle.

As the class settled in, a sultry and glamorous woman in her forties strutted into the class. This was the feral Dr. Erika Eden. She was a war hero to many, and an empress to many others, but only if you were in the know. She flouted rules. She was a risk-taker, always impeccably dressed when she did it. Everyone grew silent as she walked in the middle of the room and took a bow.

"Ready?" she asked as the class applauded their anticipation. "Good, let's not waste time."

"What's the assignment?" asked a student.

"It is one of a wager, of course. Remember, the Dealer always wins," she purred as she walked around the classroom. "You will do your research, and then make a wager. Your mark is all or none. Pass or fail. How you decide to wager is your choice, as always, but be aware that it is the political atheists who see the rigged nature of the board, and they see the sanctioned insanity of rules, narrative, sophistry, and above all else, atmosphere. The brain is a biological machine that can

be swept up in gaslighting and atmosphere, and it is rigged to believe deceptions. Its only defense is to be aware of the lies and misperceptions of old habits, and then look at reality." She paused. "Any questions?" She looked around. "No? Then here is your first assignment before the final exam. We have managed to break out the Inferno Five…"

"Those rich creeps who almost destroyed the world?" blurted a young student.

"Yes, those rich creeps," deadpanned the professor.

"But they almost caused a nuclear armageddon!"

"Yes, but their fate is your assignment."

Suddenly, five photographs appeared on the holographic screen as Dr. Eden continued to speak. "They come from different backgrounds, genders, and races. We have a trillionaire, the politician, the economist, the actress, and the activist. One is rich, one is powerful, one is brilliant, one is beautiful, and one is righteous. Different ages, education, and socioeconomic beginnings and political leanings. They all agreed to the terms before we wiped their memories clean away." The photographs vanished as another appeared of a party where all five were in attendance. "That is a historical photograph of the day those five plotted to impose their schemes on billions. They unleashed a devastating propaganda campaign that was seemingly effective, but fatally flawed. Their machinations caused unprecedented suffering, and, of course, the creation of my new career." Dr. Eden smirked and then sighed. "In any case, remember, your grade depends upon your wager, and I find students learn nothing unless they have skin in the game. In the beginning of the year, you were all given your academic chips — you all started the year with a one hundred percent average. Those chips represent your mark so far and your progress. You can win more to make up for the ones you lost — or you can leave with a final grade of zero. Your information sheet gives you the details to make an informed wager

for this final assignment. If you lose all of your chips here, you cannot make it to the final exam."

"What are the parameters?" asked Antonia.

"Simple: they can take a suitcase with ten million dollars inside and agree to a new identity. They are given a house, car, and new job, or they can forfeit it all to spin a roulette wheel for the chance they discover their identity, knowing full well that the Dealer always wins, and that there will be a weapon there where the others will be free to dispatch of them. They will all be given the same deal. They will all be told that they are all mortal enemies of one another, and all betrayed each other with treacherous duplicity and that the safest bet is to take the suitcase to start a new life. They can play, but once they spin, they forfeit any chance of walking away."

One young man looked miffed. "They cause the deaths of thousands of innocent people, and they get ten million bucks? They destroyed the global economy, Miss E!"

"They agreed to be your next assignment, Ahmed. They have to agree to take a suitcase in order to leave."

"They'll just take the money and run, Miss E."

"We know nothing of the sort, but right now, you all have to make a wager with your chips. You have read their dossiers, and you have all the information you require to make a calculated risk. Determine how many, if any, take the suitcase, and how many survivors you expect; and, if so, which order you expect them to survive. Once you have made your wagers, we will awaken them from their holding room. Remember, none of them have any memory of their identities or why it is they are here. As of now, they are strangers to one another and have no

ideas of what is happening outside of their room. Use your instincts and temper them with humility. The bottom-line question is this: Do these five people have the ability to be teachable?"

The students all watched and read the dossiers as they consulted with one another. It was a grim game, they all agreed, and a frightening one at that. Some worried there would be some bloodshed among the Inferno Five, while others worried that one or more would walk clean away, never to be made accountable for their mendacity.

Once the wagers were all made, Dr. Eden pressed a button on her phone, causing the screen to show a darkened room where the Inferno Five had been slumbering. Antonia looked at the screen intensely. Becoming a Dealer was not a position of fun and games. It was life and death. She frowned. She was certain the tycoon would grab the money and get away, even though he was the impetus and the driving force of all the current global woes. She also thought the young activist would wise up and would be guided by youthful idealism and not play the game. The economist and politician were likely going to play to some degree, and the actress was likely going to try to spin the wheel and was thus most likely to be the first one killed. After that, the politician and economist would smarten up to take the money and run once they saw this was no game and the bloodshed would be very real.

Antonia watched intensely as the tycoon scoffed at the offer and ignored the repeated warnings that the game was rigged and that the Dealer always wins. He was demanding to spin the wheel first. The others were all dutifully following his lead, even the young activist. Antonia frowned as she realized she had just flunked this assignment, but would at least have enough chips to make it to the final exam. She was still in the game, and she was determined to make it to the end of the year.

But that was the enigmatic way of Dr. Erika Eden's Institute for Omniversal Dealers: the underground school was rooted in reality, and went along for the harsh and bumpy ride. *People are people*, she would tell her students time and again, *and don't think one group of people are different than any kind of other people. Once you understand that you are just a person, everything else falls into place.*

Antonia sighed and nodded to herself as she jotted down a little note to herself, reminding her that for the next assignment, to stop looking at the labels people thought up as a misdirection, and just look at the bottom line. There really were three kinds of people in the world: those who play other people, those who get played — and, of course, those who don't play any games, but deal — and the dealers always won, because they knew better than to play in the first place.

Lesson learned, she thought, as she now knew without a doubt the outcome, and steeled herself for it as she wondered why people could have it all — and absolutely nothing at the same time. ▣

Alexandra Kitty is an artist and author of eight books, four which were released in 2020, including *The Mind Under Siege: Mechanisms of War Propaganda*, *A New Approach to Journalism*, *The Art of Kintsugi*, and *The Dramatic Moment of Fate: The Life of Sherlock Holmes in the Theatre*.