

"What Price Immortality?"
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What price immortality? Melody Tam has given the world her harsh answer.

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It was in the third decade of the twenty-first century a group of Chinese scientists and engineers discovered a process through which tuned microwaves could touch off a chain reaction within living tissue whereby cells would release all their energies at once and disintegrate entirely into simple molecules. The process has curious properties which are still not adequately explained: it does not work on non-living matter or even on formerly-living tissue and was thus useless as a means of disposing of trash or as an alternative to cremation of the dead. The process did, however, work on living non-human animals. It was quick, efficient, and clean and to the best of human observers' ability to determine, did not cause suffering to animal subjects. Showing some entrepreneurial spirit, the scientists and engineers set up 兰州的解体室公司 (*lánzhōu de jiětǐ shì gōngsī*, or the Lanzhou Disintegration Chamber Company) to make veterinary disintegration chambers for both the domestic and export markets, thereby earning comfortable livings for themselves, and even more comfortable

livings for various officials in Gansu Province responsible for industrial permitting and trade relations.

The Chinese state, ever alert to interesting developments within its own borders, quickly realized that the process could be used as a quick and hygienic means of conducting judicial executions. Disintegration left no body to dispose of or bodily fluids to clean up and, unlike most of the other means human ingenuity has devised over the centuries for the termination of lives deemed undesirable to continue, could not be botched even under the control of the most novice executioner. This method of putting persons to death also had the advantage of being particularly feared and, as a consequence, particularly powerful as a deterrent to the ordinary kind of criminal. To the common mind, being consigned to nothingness seemed unusually horrible, even compared with being hanged or shot. The technique of using the chamber for executions began to spread to other jurisdictions where capital punishment was in use, first in Asia and then beyond. The new penal practice drew sharp criticism from various human rights groups as unusual and inhumane. These moral campaigners were, as they generally are, ignored until various unsavory people around the world began to figure out that the chambers were even more useful for extra-judicial killings than lawful executions. The chambers were not only quick and efficient, but they also disposed of the evidence of their own operation. They must have seemed like a prayer answered for would-be ethnic cleansers and aspiring *génocidaires*, for not only did they dispose of people one wanted not to exist, but they left behind no mass graves for the investigators sent by future war crimes tribunals to open and investigate. Eventually, and with considerable reluctance on the part of Chinese officialdom, export restrictions for the chambers were adopted.

Unsurprisingly then, the disintegration chamber had something of a sinister reputation and thus would find its way as a device for use by screenwriters.

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The entertainment industry seldom innovates but often recycles. (As one east coast wag whose name is otherwise unmentionable once put it, "In New York we throw out our garbage. In Hollywood you make it into TV shows.") What innovation there is normally takes the form of technical refinements rather than fundamentally new stories: movies were once silent and then sound was added. Movies were once black and white and then color was added. Home video was just a movie on a cassette, and then you got a video disc with extra features. Definition was low and then was high and then was so high you could see things in old movies people never saw even on the projected film.

By the time of our story, the movie industry was making a transition to Multiversion Release. They were reacting to preserve their markets against the ever-deeper and ever-more-bitter cultural divides in home and global market by making movies into mix-and-match home-video experiences. To be sure, there had often been multiple versions of movies released before -- director's cuts, alternative endings, and so on, and there had also be various ad hoc edits of movies either created for television or self-edited by third parties to create things like "family friendly" versions of major releases. Multiversion Release simply moved this process back further in production. Multiple versions were now explicitly planned for as far back as the treatment-writing phase of the creative process. For any given film so much footage would be shot and assembled that if you were to actually watch a movie on a disc you bought end-to-end it would be six hours long. But of course, no one ever watched movies end-to-end anymore. Every disc would come with a menu that would allow the viewer to make for themselves a bespoke version of the movie effectively edited so as not to offend against their sensibilities. Don't want to see sex scenes? There's a setting for that. Offended by violence and gore? A setting will cut those in the movie for you. Alternatively, if you want hotter sex scenes or more gore there are settings for those as well. As this menu technology progressed the experience could be

refined still further. Offended at hearing foreign languages spoken? Your disc contains a "real American" setting that replaces all scenes containing such with alternates dubbed into English. Hate seeing women in positions of authority? There's an "alpha male" setting that will show alternative footage in which only dudes are in charge of things. Thus did Hollywood keep the money flowing in and the general level of cultural hatred directed at itself at a manageable level. You can't say they're not ingenious.

Having run out of superhero movies to make Hollywood saw a revival of the long deprecated genre of the Eurospy thriller. Not only was a new run of James Bond-style movies made and marketed, but a new espionage hero emerged in the form of Hunter Steele, the property of a rising new studio called Pentode Productions. Steele was a ruggedly handsome former Navy Seal and Yale University humanities graduate, a warrior Renaissance man. Played by veteran Cornish actor Perran Pasco, Steele could cook a perfect consommé, speak nine languages fluently (but only demonstrated this skill on certain settings for his movies) and kill a man at twenty meters (sixty-five feet on certain settings) using only a standard playing card as a weapon. In the course of his exploits he used his skills, his wits and his well-formed musculature to defend the United States and good God-fearing people everywhere against a variety of extravagant and wicked villains of ambiguous (or, in some cases, completely fictional) ethnicity. He was an American James Bond for the twenty-first century, minus the cultural insensitivities and misogyny of his inspiration (on certain settings).

We might note in passing that as early as *Professor Yes*, the second entry in the Hunter Steele franchise a memorandum was circulated around Pentode Productions proposing a film customization setting that could toggle between "Traditional" and "Progressive," with one of the principle differences between the two being that minor forms of CGI and other movie magic would be used to subtly alter the appearances of actors playing the bad guys, such that the audiences that preferred "Traditional" movies would see villain characters they could code as either Jewish or Asian, while other audiences

that went "Progressive" would see actors that looked like Northern Europeans. This proposal was ahead of its time and rejected as too socially provocative to consider.

To be true to the conventions of his genre a superspy needs a string of beautiful women to bed (on some versions) and it is here that Melody Tam came in. She had emerged at the age of seventeen in Hong Kong as a model, a striking combination of being a curvy yet fit girl with a heart-shaped face and eyes like great black opals. She had begun appearing on covers of international fashion magazines in her late teens but what she really wanted to do was appear in movies. Luckily for her the same gods who favored her with beauty also did so with talent in front of the camera. Even without much formal training her line-reads had conviction. She could cry on cue and do anger in a way that made grown men stop and think that perhaps a retreat to the nearest cocktail bar might be the better part of valor.

Melody soon came under the influence of an acting teacher named Olga Tainina. Madam Tainina was strange figure, one who put many people ill at ease. Tall, thin almost to the point of gauntness, she had raven hair with a touch of gray and eyes even darker than her pupil's. No one seemed to know exactly where she had come from. Attempts by enterprising journalists to trace her origins generally tracked eastward in space – from New York to Paris to Berlin and on from there – and backwards in time until they petered out unsuccessfully somewhere behind the Iron Curtain. A common rumor was that Tainina was a defector from the old Soviet Union, possibly a researcher in one of its psychic warfare programs, brought in during Cold War days by the CIA and subsequently forgotten about after the fall of the Soviet system. But no one could really either verify or falsify that rumor. One strange thing about Madam Tainina was that no one who had met her, no one even who had known her for years, was prepared to venture a guess as to her age. At moments she seemed young and at others immensely old. She would talk about many figures the world of occultism and art, Helena Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Vsevolod Meyerhold, with a kind of casual familiarity, as if they had all had tea together earlier in the week. That they should have done

so is, of course, absurd and impossible, as the most recently-living of these figures has been dead for over seventy years.

Madam Tainina was a proponent of what she called the Radical Psychophysics, a belief that the strength of performances would be enhanced the more the actors could bring themselves to endure on camera or on stage the suffering the characters were undergoing inside the story. Tainina was fond of an aphorism: *Страдание — это путь к истине*. "Suffering is the road to truth." At times she would hint that the suffering of the performer was not just psychologically effective, but would invoke occult powers on the side of the performance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, at least before the remarkable events of this story, Tainina did not keep too many students for too long.

But Melody she did keep, and the results of her training turned out to be remarkably effective. In Melody's first major role in *Captive Heart*, a made-for-television drama about a young woman who eventually turns on her abusive boyfriend, she was able to persuade the director (after signing a very carefully-drafted legal release) to have actual injuries inflicted on her during the course of shooting -- a black eye, a split lip, and some facial bruises. This was done, albeit by an expert martial-artist stand-in and not by the actor playing her boyfriend. No chances could be taken permanently damaging that pretty face! The resulting performance electrified critics and audiences alike. "Miss Tam's performance left me feeling shaken to my very core," wrote Boris Markup, the television critic of the *Los Angeles Explainer*. "It was a huge shot of energy in the otherwise tired and dreary field of television for middle-aged women."

The next year Melody starred in *Refugee*, a harrowing story of a young woman who flees with three younger siblings from an unnamed Asian tyranny. For performance Melody had her arm deliberately broken and spent an entire day shooting on location in what must have been excruciating pain. Audiences were overwhelmed. Unfortunately they were also rather small. *Refugee* was the work of a small, independent studio. It had no multiversion, it had its premiere at a relatively minor festival,

and distribution was done to a small number of independent cinemas in large cities follows by release on physical media and streaming on an obscure platform. There was speculation in Hollywood that had *Refugee* been the work of a major studio Melody Tam would have had a Oscar statuette to hold in her right hand, opposite the cast that held her still-healing left arm. As matters stood, she and the movie won some minor awards.

Through both of these cinematic ordeals Madam Tainina had been present on set, as Melody had insisted she be allowed to be. She was forbidding presence, rebuffing conversational approaches by most, barely civil to the main directors, but all the while whispering advice and encouragement to her protégée.

Melody's achievements did not go unnoticed in the moviemaking world, and in the moviemaking world to not go unnoticed is an important step toward not going unrewarded. Bert Schaft, a senior executive at Pentode Productions, had seen *Refugee* a number of times and became firmly convinced that Melody would make an appealing and winsome love interest for Hunter Steele in the next entry in his franchise ...*And This Is My Gun*. In particular, he saw Melody cast in the role of the Doomed Girl, a temporary love interest for Steele who would suffer and die at the hands of the villain of the movie (or, more usually, his henchmen). The Doomed Girl's ordeal would serve a dual purpose: First, it would do what so many movies have done since it occurred to someone that squealing maidens could be tied to railroad tracks: gratify the sexual sadism that is a significant reason for much of the audience to show up. Second, it would establish the villain's character and allow the audience to walk away from an ending in which the villain has been trounced (and likely killed) by Hunter Steele with a satisfying sense that justice had been served. Not the biggest or best part in the movie, to be sure. But the Hunter Steele franchise was huge: each movie would (in various versions depending on location) debut on tens of thousands of screens worldwide and sell tens of millions of streaming and physical media copies. Even a modest part in an Hunter Steele movie would be a huge boost to a

performer's career. And so when Melody's agent phone her with the exciting news that Bert Schaft and director Brian Teakins wanted Melody to screen-test for ...*And This Is My Gun* it is hardly surprisingly that she accepted with great enthusiasm.

The role in ...*And This Is My Gun* picked for Melody was Aura Lai, a gorgeous and world-famous concert violinist known to be a girlfriend of Hans Blohard, a centi-billionaire industrialist who is secretly running a scheme to subvert the world's information infrastructure. A key to Blohard's plans is a piece of prototype technology called the Omega Circuit, which Steele has managed to steal from Blohard and secrete somewhere in Prague. Steele's employer, a division of U.S. intelligence called the Anon Section, has meanwhile given Steele orders to "neutralize" Blohard. He might not have the Omega Circuit now, but there is a danger he might recover it or recreate it. Steele encounters Aura in Vienna after she gives a performance there and seduces her, hoping to get close to Blohard. After a night of sex, someone knocks Steele out. When he recovers, he discovers that he has been captured and placed in a cell by Blohard. Blohard's mooks bring Aura in, where she announces that Blohard is going to have her disintegrated unless Steele reveals the location of the Omega Circuit. Steele refuses. There is a sequence where a heavily shackled Steele is brought to a secret laboratory under Blohard's mansion that contains a disintegration chamber. Blohard makes a certain threat to Aura, Steele refuses to be cowed, and so it's bye-bye poor Aura.

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So much for the screenplay. Things began to get strange within hours of the delivery of the shooting script to Melody's hands. Melody's agent promptly called for a meeting involving herself, Melody, Madam Tainina, director Teakins and producer Schaft. The meeting was duly called and held at 10 a.m. the next morning. Everyone came dressed professionally save Madam Tainina, who came in

a long black gown that reminded Teakins of something that might have worn by Morticia Addams, though he was far too professional to say so in front of his producer.

Teakins was approaching this meeting with a combination of boredom and dread. He was a man now in his mid-40s. He had won a Student Academy Award for an experimental film while still an undergraduate at NYU and his rise in Hollywood was swift. He had directed a number of entries in the Hunter Steele franchise. He lived in a house in the Hollywood Hills that cost a multiple more than most American workers would earn over their entire careers and could on any night he chose have a different stunning woman on his arm – or in his bed. But mostly these days after a long day at work he would drive back alone to that costly house, put on a Criterion Collection disc, and watch it, nursing a sense that he had somehow failed in life.

"We're fine with the script as written," began the agent. "However Melody would like a commitment to certain...interpretations of the performance before signing."

Teakins remained too professional to sigh audibly, but felt quietly justified in his feelings of boredom and dread. "What did you have in mind?" asked Schaft.

"To begin with, the sex scene between Aura and Steele, here on p. 37 of the script," began the agent.

Here it comes, thought Teakins. They always want a commitment to no nudity and a bunch of intimacy rules for shooting sex scenes, all afraid that that if they give up too much early in their careers. As if they would have careers worth mentioning if they were unwilling to appear in movies like ...*And This Is My Gun*. Teakins steeled himself inwardly for what might prove to be an uncomfortable negotiation.

"Go on," said Schaft.

"I want to shoot the scene unsimulated," said Melody.

For a moment it seemed like even the air conditioning in the conference room paused and held its breath.

"Could you say that again, please?" said Teakins.

"I don't want to just mime the act. I want to have sex for real on camera."

"Miss Tam, we're not making a porn film here," said Teakins.

"Hold on a second there, Brian," said Schaft, his cinematic mind, honed by decades in the industry, going into overdrive. "You're really asking to do an unsimulated sex scene in a *Hunter Steele* movie?"

"It is her training." This was an interjection brought by Madam Tainina, the first time she had spoken in the meeting. "The more reality we can import into Melody's mind the more compelling a performance she can deliver. Unsimulated sex is just a pantomime, a puppet show. But powerful energies swirl into and around real sex that will make for what we believe will be an unparalleled performance. It will be a compelling demonstration of Radical Psychophysics."

"Hmm," said Schaft. While a few small arty studios had produced movies with hard-core Multivariants, no major studio had attempted to do so in a core franchise before. Not that no one had thought of the possibility -- it had been whispered about from time to time in executive washrooms. And now here was a chance to actually break through. Schaft saw his name rising in the annals of the movie industry the more he turned the proposition over in his mind. Perhaps he would be remembered as something more than a hack executive at an artistically undistinguished studio. Maybe he would instead be remembered as one of the great innovators in movie history. "What do you think, Brian? Would you be willing to shoot some real penetration?"

"I...I guess I would." The possibility of such a scene had been in the back of Teakins's mind for some time as well of course, but needless to say he never imagined its being contemplated by the studio he worked for, and at the unsolicited demand of a 23 year-old actress at that.

"We would, of course, have to talk Perran into doing it." The director and the producer exchanged meaningful glances. As all Hollywood knew, no one had to try to convince Perran Pasco very hard of the virtues of screwing anything on two legs, least of all a smokeshow like Melody Tam.

"We'll try to work something out," said Schaft reassuringly to Melody and her agent.

"That's good enough for us for now," said the agent. "There is something else, though, and it might be harder."

"Go on," said Schaft.

"The disintegration scene on p. 42..." began the agent.

"Really, if Ms. Tam is willing to do an unsimulated sex scene a few pages earlier in the script I'm not sure what the problem would be with just ordinary nudity in the disintegration scene, even if in some versions of the film it would be full-frontal."

"This isn't about the nudity, gentlemen. It's about the disintegration process itself."

Teakins looked genuinely puzzled. "I don't understand. That would just be some comparatively simple CGI."

"I don't want CGI," said Melody.

Teakins raised an eyebrow. "You would prefer some sort of practical effect? I mean, we could probably figure something out. I understand that some people do prefer practical effects and I respect their position that somehow they do show more artistic integrity. It would be more expensive, to be sure."

"Though given how...*accommodating* Ms. Tam has been about the sex scene issue, we might be willing to make a concession here," said Schaft. "Of course, I'll have to take it up with some of my colleagues, but..."

"I don't want a practical effect either," said Melody.

Now both Teakins and Schaft looked puzzled. After a few seconds, Teakins asked, "Well, what *do* you want? There are only so many ways of shooting the scene as written."

"I want you to acquire a real disintegration chamber and disintegrate me for real," was Melody's reply.

Stunned expressions on Teakins and Schaft. Melody was calm composure. The agent looked vaguely uncomfortable. On the face of Madam Tainina, for the first time that anyone could ever remember seeing, there was the faintest hint of a smile.

"Could you repeat that?" asked Schaft.

"I want you to get a real disintegration chamber and shoot the scene by disintegrating me for real on camera," said Melody.

"That's...sort of..." Teakins didn't need to add the word "crazy."

"On the contrary," interjected Madam Tainina in her Slavic rumble. "It is reflective of the deepest possible commitment of an actor, Radical Psychophysics at its most radical. In confronting the thing that she most fears, that any normal human being most fears, Miss Tam will become capable of generating a performance like no other, one that will live forever not just in annals of cinema, but in the annals of all literature and drama as well."

"You are talking here about human sacrifice, Madam Tainina," said Schaft.

"Yes, exactly," said Madam Tainina, fixing Schaft with a stare. "You should recall Nietzsche. *'Wer wirklich Opfer gebracht hat, weiss, dass er etwas dafür wollte und bekam.'*"

"Sorry?" said Schaft.

"Americans," Madam Tainina muttered sourly. "Anyone who gave sacrifice knows he wanted something and got it."

Teakins looked at Melody. "She would get dead."

"And thereby I would become immortal," replied Melody.

"We would be eaten alive by public opinion," said Schaft.

"Not true," replied Madam Tainina. "Of course there would be outrage. But the sacrifice of a glorious young woman at the height of her appeal invokes the most powerful magics that there can be. You perhaps do not remember Nietzsche, but you will surely remember Poe: the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world. Your security will be able to handle the angry demonstrators outside your offices. Meanwhile, throughout the world, the disintegration of Miss Tam will be the one thing everyone will want to see. It will outsell everything, in tickets, in physical media, in streams. It will haunt the imaginations of those now living and generations yet unborn."

Schaft leaned back in his chair and reflected. The financials at Pentode hadn't been terribly good for the past few years. The Hunter Steele franchise had had a good run, but it was beginning to flag in popularity, and it was unclear whether the studio would have anything to take its place. Schaft had been in endless meetings where senior studio executives debated the possibilities for new genre revivals. Neo-Westerns? Neo-neo-noir? Pirate movies? Musicals? Perhaps here was a way forward. A genuinely *novel* way.

Teakins leaned forward, just a little outraged himself. "You surely don't expect me to shoot this, do you?"

"Don't you care for a challenge, Mr. Teakins?" said Melody. "Think about it. You get one take, no more, in which to get it right. If you do, it's a supreme directorial accomplishment."

"I..." began Teakins, but Schaft raised his hand and made the executive gesture that meant that the meeting was now coming to an end.

"We'll have to get back to you," were Schaft's closing words.

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Another meeting, this time with Teakins, Schaft, and Cameron Sharp, one of the entertainment industry's most brilliant lawyers.

Sharp was an unusual attorney, perhaps motivated as much by ego as by the desire for money. Inside Pentode Studios he was cool, capable, and absolutely efficient. Outside of it he was known for brilliant *pro bono* work, such as convincing a skeptical U.S. Supreme Court that certain obscure practices of the Reformed Church of Satan, illegal in most states, were protected under the free exercise clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. He did not disdain the financial rewards of his profession, but it was the intellectual challenge of intractable-seeming legal problems that really seemed like is principal source of joy in life.

"Could we actually do any of this?" asked Schaft of Sharp.

"Well, the sex scene is no problem if you shoot it here in California. The Supreme Court of California has long held that arranging a sex act or even several sex acts between people is, as long as it not arranged for the gratification of any specific person, a legal act of artistic creation and not a criminal solicitation. Thanks to our state supreme court, we have the remarkable industry in San Fernando Valley which we all know and love today."

"Yes, we know that," said Teakins. "But it's really the other thing that concerns us.

"Technically it should not be difficult, aside from the nerve-wracking challenge of shooting in one take. It should be easy to acquire a working disintegration chamber. The Chinese company that manufactures them has little difficulty in acquiring export licenses to the United States. Indeed, just last month the states of Arkansas and Oklahoma bought chambers to carry out judicial executions of their own. But legally...?"

"Well, you couldn't shoot it in California, or anywhere else in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico. The rules against assisting or soliciting a suicide are just too strict. My staff hasn't researched central or South America on the grounds that the cost might be prohibitive," said Sharp.

"So we're done here. We just tell Miss Tam yes on the sex scene, no on the disintegration, and move forward," concluded Schaft.

"Not necessarily," replied Sharp. "There might be a legal solution. Have you heard of the Duchy of Honkball-Glücklichbetrunken?"

"Barely," said Teakins. In fact, he had heard of it more that barely. DHG, as it was known, was a quaint political curiosity tucked into the European Alps. In the late eighteenth century it had an unusually eccentric duke who abjured Christianity and created for himself a large harem of attractive and fertile young women while the rest of Europe was too busy fighting the Napoleonic Wars to pay much attention. As he a man of formidable concupiscence as well as eccentricity, he succeeded in fathering hundreds of children during his lifetime, so that today almost the entire population of the Duchy can claim direct descent from their former sovereign. The population appears to have inherited his eccentric individualism and has taken advantage of its collective sovereignty to vote itself unusually liberal laws on such things as drugs, sex work, and, as it happens, suicide. The Duchy consequently hosts a few unusual resorts of which wealthy movie people were frequent patrons. It is fashionable to visit, and highly unfashionable to admit publicly to having visited. Happily for foreign visitors visas were not required and consequently no stamps appeared in their passports of their arrival.

"Well, as it happens, the Duchy has decriminalized the assisting or encouraging of a suicide as long as certain certified documents are completed in advance indicating the suicide's consent to the procedure and a physician's belief that the consenter is of sound mind. Finding a cooperative physician will not be a problem. As for the legal issue, there are a number of DHG law firms with offices in the United States, including some right here in Los Angeles. I've taken the liberty of speaking to one of the managing partners of one of them and she has indicated her office would be happy to help us with the relevant paperwork. For a reasonable fee, of course," said Sharp.

"The Duchy is six thousand miles away," observed Schaff. "That would make for some expensive production."

"Again, not necessarily," said Sharp. "A DHG ship anchored in international waters -- just a few miles off Long Beach -- would be the sovereign territory of the Duchy. As it happens, there is a freighter under the right flag right now. All you would have to do is rent the ship, reconstruct your set inside its hold, and shoot your scene."

Schaff and Teakins looked at each other meaningfully. Then Schaff's expression darkened.

"Isn't the Duchy of Honkball-Glücklichbetrunken a landlocked country? How on earth are they arranging to flag ships?"

"It is a matter of law, not logic," replied Sharp.

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Of necessity, the sex scene was shot before the disintegration. It was filmed over several hours. A supply of Viagra was laid in by a studio doctor for Perran Pasco, which it turns out, he had no need for. He and Melody spent hours under the lights and cameras having the most improbable kind of sex, combining the craving intensity of a pair of honeymooning nineteen year-old newlyweds who've been saving themselves for each other since middle school with the confidence and skill normally associated the highest class of sex professionals. The experience of watching the shooting for those who were permitted on the closed set was enough to unstring even the most seasoned of Pentode's behind-the-camera crew, some of whom had begun their careers in San Fernando Valley. It was not a few crew members who had to excuse themselves for extended "restroom breaks" during the course of the filming.

"Melody was just radiating this crazy intense erotic energy, like she had turned into the goddess of sex herself for that scene," said Pasco in a subsequent interview. "I didn't have to get into character or find my focus or anything. I just showed up on set and before I knew it things were just happening."

"I thought I was going to have a very long day, trying to come up with direction for the actors," said Teakins in the same article where Pasco was interviewed. "In reality my role mostly just involved saying "Action! and then things just happened. We ended up with hours of footage and a real challenge trying to figure out what to use once we got into the editing room. We've kept the footage. Likely the studio will be releasing its own standalone movie called just *Pasco-Tam The Sex Scene* or something like that. The only downside of the whole experience was having that creepy Madam Tainina on set. I thought about excluding her from the closed set, but Melody insisted that Tainina's presence was necessary to her process, so I let her remain."

We have one comment from Melody about her experience filming the scene, make on set, probably within minutes of finishing. A camera is running, and Melody is lying, naked, in a relaxed pose upon the bed that almost exactly recalls that of Goya's *La maja desnuda*. In the background an unidentified woman's voice asks "How did you do that, Melody?" She smiles and replies "When you know you are going to vanish completely in a few days, you're going to be incredibly horny."

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And vanish completely in a few days Melody would.

There were some technical challenges in figuring out how to reconstruct a partial laboratory set inside the hold of a freighter and how to shoot footage in a way that would not betray the rocking of the waves. There were also some bureaucratic challenges in making the export license for a Disintegration Chamber valid when it was to be installed on what was, after all, the sovereign territory of the Most Serene Duchy of Honkball-Glücklichbetrunken. The Duchy had abolished capital punishment on its

territory almost a century before. But the technical crew of Pentode rose to the first and the legal department rose to the second, and so the scene was made ready to shoot. They had a pretty good Disintegration Chamber, one a bit larger than a telephone booth with a solid glass front door which would allow the audience a close view of the grim proceedings.

The initial footage of Melody's execution scene had been filmed a few days before. Hulking men in body armor extract her from a cell and frog march her down a corridor. She is wearing only a thin orange jumpsuit and paper sandals. The giant size of the goons, their fascist equipment and face-obscuring shields emphasize how human and vulnerable she looks. She is led up and down a number of stairs and then into the lab.

Only a small part of lab was constructed aboard the ship: one wall and a Disintegration Chamber. This partial set was used for close-ups on Melody only. The rest of the shots in the scene were shot on a Pentode sound stage in Burbank where complete sets had been constructed, together with a dummy Disintegration Chamber. The different clips of footage were subsequently edited together to create an illusion of a single scene in a single place.

The scene was largely filmed as called for in the screenplay.

INT. BLOHARD'S STUDY - DAY

GOON #1 and GOON #2, huge men wearing full body armor, helmets and faces obscured by shields muscle AURA across the study to the Disintegration Chamber. Aura is wearing only a thin orange prisoner's jumpsuit and paper sandals.

AURA
(struggling and screaming)
No! No! Don't!

HUNTER STEELE, also in a jumpsuit, is tightly shackled to the wall opposite the Disintegration Chamber. He struggles pointlessly against his bonds.

STEELE
Blohard, you bastard! Let her go!

BLOHARD sits behind his desk and calmly observes the scene

BLOHARD
Ah, the lovers reunited. How touching!

STEELE
You won't get away with this.

BLOHARD
Oh, but I think I shall.

Blohارد picks up a remote off his desk and points it at a high definition screen above and to the right of Steele's head.

BLOHARD (CONT'D)
Tell me, Miss Lai, do you recognize this domestic scene? It's a live feed.

Aura looks at the screen. As soon as she does, she stops struggling against the goons.

THE VIEWSCREEN

A kitchen in a working-class Taipei apartment. A middle-aged Chinese woman is serving tea to the ENFORCER, a severe-looking man in a suit. A teenage girl sits nearby, looking frightened.

BACK TO SCENE

AURA
My mother...

BLOHARD
And your little sister. And they are hosting one of the most vicious Triad enforcers in southeast China.

AURA
No...

BLOHARD
Yes, I'm afraid. But it is not all that bad. If you do as I say then the bad man will simply get up and leave. But if you do not, well...

The goons release their grip on Aura, whose arms fall by her sides. The fight has gone out of her and she does not try to resist any more.

BLOHARD (CONT'D)
(to Aura)
Good girl.
(to Steele)

Now, Mr. Steele, won't you please tell us where you have hidden the Omega Circuit?

STEELE

Go to hell.

BLOHARD

In time I shall, no doubt. But for right now I think you need some convincing. Miss Lai, would you explain to Mr. Steele what we intend to do with you if he isn't cooperative?

AURA

Hunter, please, they're going to disintegrate me.

STEELE

I'm sorry, Aura. I can't help you.

AURA

Please...

BLOHARD

Perhaps Mr. Steele needs to be reminded what he'll be missing should he not give us what we need. Guards!

What follows is the first set of shots done on the ship. They wouldn't strictly have to be done there save for the insistence of Madam Tainina that for these Melody should be "within as few seconds as possible of her ultimate sacrifice." It is remarkable footage to watch. The jumpsuit zipper and then the jumpsuit itself come down ever so slowly in extreme close-up, revealing inch by inch Melody's glorious body from her bare shoulders when the suit begins to come off down to her bare feet as she steps out of her paper sandals. Melody's performance as this happens is extraordinary. She is clearly trembling as her jumpsuit comes off yet at the same time seems somehow aroused.

Goon #1 takes the zipper tab of Aura's jumpsuit and pulls it down, slowly to reveal her bare chest.

Goon #2 then pulls the jumpsuit off her shoulders, bearing them. Then he slowly pulls it down, revealing her breasts, then her belly, then pubis, then thighs, then lower legs, until it is a heap on the floor.

Aura, now naked, steps out of her sandals.

The boy who was to become the great scholar and critic of mid twenty-first century film Hans Ardlop saw this scene when he twelve years old. Looking back from his lifetime of criticism when he was in his late eighties "It was at this moment that I decided to devote my life to movies just as a priest devotes himself to God. I have seen many women beautiful stripped naked on film in all my years as a viewer but this is the one scene that has always stayed with me, the one that reappears in my dreams down to this very day."

The scene continues.

BLOHARD (CONT'D)
Put her in the chamber.

AURA
(screams)
No!

Aura tries to flee but is immediately seized by the two thugs, with who she struggles.

STEELE
Blohard, you son of a bitch!

BLOHARD
I remind you...

Blohard glances up at the screen, on which the Enforcer is calmly sipping his tea. Aura looks at the screen, then breaks off her struggles. The thugs let her go.

The viewer whipsaws emotionally as raw fear radiates out of the screen, followed by dejected resignation.

Aura steps into the chamber. The thugs close its door behind her. Steele struggles and SNARLS in his bonds. Blohard ignores him and flips a switch on his desk.

Inside the chamber, Aura, who is standing hands at her side on a turntable, rotates like a plate of food in a microwave. She WHIMPERS and MOANS in an almost-erotic way.

Obviously we can never know whether Melody had an orgasm in her final seconds, but most viewers of this scene feel sure that she did.

Within a few seconds Aura is covered in a sheen of sweat. Sparks of green energy begin to appear on her skin.

With a CRACKLE of energy Aura's midsection vanishes, showing her exposed spine. The disintegration spreads, and her body collapses into a heap of a few identifiable bones, which in turn disintegrate, leaving nothing of her behind.

Brian Teakins and his crew had one take to get this one right, and they got it. Word is that once Melody's disintegration was complete no one on the crew could move or even speak. Teakins could not even bring himself to say "cut!"

The silence was only broken at last by Madam Tainina, who was on set, kneeling as if at prayer, her own face looking for all the world like she was in the afterglow of copulation. The words she finally spoke were "Now Melody Tam belongs to the ages."

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There was of course immense outrage when it got out what sort of film-making Pentode had engaged in to make *...And This Is My Gun*. There were threats of boycotts, demonstrations, legal actions, Congressional committee investigations, and so forth. But even as the outrage was at its highest level, the movie was crushingly successful. Thought few wished to admit it, something on screen like what Pentode had was something everyone wanted to see. *...And This Is My Gun* completely outgrossed everything else that year, everything else that had come in any year. Perhaps Madam Tainina was right that human sacrifice channels an immense and powerful magic. Certainly the course of moviemaking

history was changed, arguably in a way more powerful than even Alfred Hitchcock had achieved with his famous shower scene in *Psycho*.

And Melody Tam? She certainly did achieve immortality, of a sort.