

The Woman Without Air

A large metal table sits center stage, surrounded by metal walls. In the stage left wall, there is a shining metal door, and to the left of this door, a panel with multi-colored buttons flashes silently. On the right side of the door, a glass case contains chrome fabric hoods. At the top of the right wall, there is a small vent. Upstage center, between the chairs at either end of the table, a bay window shows purple lighting flashing against an indigo sky, white snow and ice stretching into the hazy horizon.

The stranger sits in the stage right chair. Her face is gaunt, and, when the angle is right, her eyes flash with red light.

The stage right door slides open. A muscular woman with a tight bun of hair, Warden Leah Kubarev, walks in, dressed in a green United States military uniform inlaid with chrome fabric. She looks through some papers on her clipboard indifferently. Kubarev sits down heavily. She drops the clipboard onto the table and speaks with a Russian accent.

KUBAREV

Alright, what are you?

The stranger laughs.

You could go back on the Boreum. What are you?

THE STRANGER

You want me to stay, Leah.

Kubarev leans back in her chair, only mildly surprised.

KUBAREV

Do you read minds or something?

The stranger laughs again.

THE STRANGER

Oh no, Leah. I'm not alien. There's nothing alien about me. In fact, I might be more human than you.

KUBAREV

A human would not wander around on Mars with a quarter tank of air. How did you get here? Do you remember?

The stranger takes a cigarette from her pocket.
Kubarev raises an eyebrow.

THE STRANGER

Got a light?

Kubarev shakes her head.

KUBAREV

Enriched oxygen. One spark, everything explodes. How did you—?

THE STRANGER

Very well. I was hoping not to startle you.

The stranger sticks the cigarette in her mouth. She lifts her fingers to it and snaps. A small flame or spark, as if from a lighter, starts at the end of her fingers. Kubarev whips around and presses a green button on the panel beside the door. A whirring noise starts from the vent. The stranger lights her cigarette. The fire on her fingers disappears. She takes a long drag.

KUBAREV

What are you? The Devil?

The stranger laughs.

THE STRANGER

Do you really think the world is so clearly divided between good and evil? Come on, Leah, you're better than that.

KUBAREV

I do not know you. You are a complete stranger.

THE STRANGER

Ah, but I know you, Leah.

She sticks the cigarette between her lips.
You were born in Arkhangelsk, but you always hated how Americans called it Archangel. You immigrated to America when you were thirty after a five-year stint in the Siberian Nuclear Waste prisons because you met Jackson, the news reporter from Los Angeles. He convinced you to move. You hated the idea though, and why would you ever

want to trust the Americans? They're the reason for the wastes and the submergence of St. Petersburg.

She taps her cigarette ash onto the floor.

But Jackson convinced you and you moved, only for the American government to send you out to Mars three months later. Who else but a Russian from the Nuclear Wastes to run the Olympus Mons Raider Prison? You've been up here for a decade, and now they're renewing you. Five more years at Olympus Mons. That nightmare hellhole of blood and shanks and violence. You're exhausted, Leah. You're at the end of your rope.

A long pause. Kubarev grips the back of her chair so tightly, her knuckles are pale white. The stranger breaks eye contact and laughs.

KUBAREV

What are you? Death? God? Something else?

THE STRANGER

An essence, Leah. One of many. We've been here ever since humankind started controlling bits and pieces of the world, but we don't age. We walk around like mortals, but we have our fingers on the very strands of fate and time. One wave of our hand and empires fall, eras end, and millions of lives collapse. I'm the essence of fire. Call me Eva.

KUBAREV

So what? Why are you here? What is so important that you came wandering up to the Planum Boreum with an empty air tank?

THE STRANGER

You, Leah. I'm here to take you home.

KUBAREV

What?

THE STRANGER

You want to see Jackson again, yes? You want to be with little Stephanie and Alexander. They're ten years older, Leah.

KUBAREV

Nothing...guarantees that Jackson is still there.

THE STRANGER

He is, Leah. Believe me.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

I can see him. Staring up at the sky. Wondering if you're looking at the same stars as him.

The room steadily fills with smoke despite the whirring vent. The smoke keeps building to the end of the scene.

KUBAREV

You cannot be...I would know. People would know. You are a raider who has wandered around for too long and the enriched oxygen is making you say these things.

THE STRANGER

I assure you not, Leah. I have power that you wouldn't believe.

She takes a drag on her cigarette.

I've been smoking for some time now. Why do you suppose this room hasn't exploded like you thought it would?

KUBAREV

Sometimes the reaction is slow. It needs the right spark. Random chance.

THE STRANGER

Exactly, Leah. And who controls that random chance, giving the air just the right spark it needs to explode? I do. I have complete control over matter and time as it relates to humans. The room doesn't explode because I don't wish it to.

KUBAREV

Oxygen deprivation.

Kubarev makes a fast, jarring note on her clipboard.

Deliriousness. Solitary confinement. You will be thinking straight again soon.

She moves for the door. The stranger speaks with utter calm.

THE STRANGER

Stephanie was born on a Tuesday.

Kubarev stops.

It was rainy, but you didn't mind because after she came out, her smile was all the sunshine you needed. She is currently thirteen years, two months, and twelve days old. You know because you've been counting. And Alexander is twelve years, one month, and four days old. Every night you hold the crucifix that Jackson gave you when you left and you pray. You don't believe in a God but you pray because you have to believe that one day you'll live in a world where you don't have to be impenetrable.

KUBAREV

How do you know that?

THE STRANGER

I know everything I want about whoever I want.

KUBAREV

You cannot know that.

THE STRANGER

When you were twelve, your parents took you out onto the nuclear wastes. They pointed to the enormous, black craters in the ground, pointing through your yellow suits—the fabric felt awful funny on your skin—and they said that this is where weakness to the Americans leads. “Never roll over and show your belly, Leah,” that what your mother told you. And yet, here you are, working for the American Hydro-Corp, running an American prison in an American water mine in American-Martin territory supporting American terraforming efforts to bring more Americans to Mars.

KUBAREV

You cannot—this is—

THE STRANGER

The first day that you ever moved to the United States and went through immigration, the security guard who pulled you out of line was thin like a stick and had a nose that jabbed at you like you’d done something wrong. You hated that nose because you hadn’t done anything wrong. You didn’t have anything to hide. But they pulled you over. You’ve been called a filthy traitor and a communist. Communism died in Russia one hundred years ago.

KUBAREV

That is—you could have—

THE STRANGER

But Jackson makes everything worth it. The way his dimples curve into his cheeks when he smiles. The way his hair waves in the wine country breeze. The way that he can say, “I understand” without ever adding anything else. The way that he can name stars that don’t have names and give happy endings to tragedies. You love him, and you would do anything for him.

KUBAREV

STOP!

Kubarev is crying. She closes her eyes and quietly pounds her chest as though willing the tears back into her body. The stranger chuckles.

THE STRANGER

I know, Leah.

KUBAREV

Why are you here?

THE STRANGER

To take you home.

Kubarev takes a deep breath.

I know you want to, Leah.

KUBAREV

I have duty. Honor.

THE STRANGER

To who? The Americans? To them you were only ever muscle to throw at prisoners on a far off planet.

KUBAREV

They are finally starting to trust—

THE STRANGER

They never will, Leah. You know that.

KUBAREV

You cannot—this is not...please, God...

THE STRANGER

He isn't listening, Leah. I am. And I can send you home.

Kubarev thinks. Her tears dry.

KUBAREV

Just like that?

She snaps her fingers.

For nothing in return? Why me? What is so important...?

THE STRANGER

Don't worry about that, Leah.

KUBAREV

You would not do this for nothing.

THE STRANGER

You can go home, Leah. You can have it all again. Feel Jackson's hand at your side. Hear Stephanie laughing. Play with Alexander. He has a Lego set now, you know.

KUBAREV

Legos?

She smiles.

I knew that he...

The smile disappears.

What do you want?

THE STRANGER

Worry about that when you're dead. You have a life to live, Leah. Go live it.

KUBAREV

What do you want?

THE STRANGER

I don't have to tell you.

KUBAREV

But you want to.

She faces the stranger.

You told me you were human. You think that you are all-powerful. Maybe you are. But if you are as human as you said, you can feel things.

A blue lightning bolt flashes through the storm
outside. The stranger's eyes flash red.

You're not evil. You said so yourself.

THE STRANGER

I could also kill you now, Leah. I don't have to take you home.

KUBAREV

Good. Free me.

THE STRANGER

You want to go home for real, Leah.

KUBAREV

Of course I do. I would hate to die.

THE STRANGER

What are you trying to do?

KUBAREV

What do you want?

THE STRANGER

You can't deny me, Leah. I'm not the Devil. I can't be outplayed or outrun or outthought. This isn't a child's parable with a fanciful little moral about how being good can change your life. Your fate is your fate.

KUBAREV

What do you want?

THE STRANGER

You can't fight—

KUBAREV

What do you want, Eva?

Pause. The stranger glares at Kubarev, who is now smiling slightly.

If you are not evil, you will value my choice.

The stranger takes a drag on her cigarette.

THE STRANGER

There are prisons where those who defy the Essences live in turmoil for eternity. People who knew about the Essences and tried to tell others. People who tried to deny us. Outsmart us. This prison needs a warden. You can be the warden or the prisoner, Leah. Your choice.

Kubarev stares at the stranger for a moment.

KUBAREV

I wish you had never come.

THE STRANGER

That's not up to you, Leah.

KUBAREV

How can you do this? How can you force me into this?

THE STRANGER

You have a choice. Bliss or suffering.

KUBAREV

You want me to be a warden for Hell!

THE STRANGER

Human beings are slaves to their fate. They will always choose the way of pleasure, the path of least resistance, because that's all life is.

KUBAREV

I can't be a warden forever!

THE STRANGER

You have a purpose, Leah, and you don't get to change it.

KUBAREV

I hate it! Always I must be on my toes. Always I must be firm and strong and yelling and screaming at people. Always I must be at risk of getting attacked or stabbed or jumped on and I already have thirteen scars from knives and bullets and even bite marks.

THE STRANGER

What's your point, Leah?

KUBAREV

How many more to I have to get before this is over?

THE STRANGER

You have your choice. But I know what you're going to choose.

KUBAREV

I can't do this forever.

THE STRANGER

Eternal suffering and fire waits for you, Leah, if you go that way. There's no way out and no fighting back from that pit.

KUBAREV

Then why do you need a warden?

THE STRANGER

This is pointless.

KUBAREV

There's a way out, isn't there?

THE STRANGER

Accept my offer. You will choose the less painful path.

KUBAREV

I chose to come up here.

THE STRANGER

For Jackson.

KUBAREV

But it was my choice.

THE STRANGER

If you hadn't come here, you would've been deported immediately. Forever. You had a chance for pleasure at the end of this stint on this hellhole of a planet and I'm giving it to you. Accept my offer. For Jackson.

KUBAREV

I made my choice. For me! For myself! Not you or Jackson or Stephanie or Alexander can stop me from making my choice. This is my life!

THE STRANGER

Try as you might, I cannot be denied, Leah. I know you too well.

Pause. The stranger blows a final gust of smoke into the air. Kubarev looks to the hoods in the glass case beside the door.

KUBAREV

No.

Kubarev approaches the hoods, takes a metal bar, and smashes the case open.

THE STRANGER

Be careful, Leah.

Kubarev dons a chrome hood. She presses a button on it. It seals to her neck, emitting a gust of air. She picks up the metal bar again and approaches the glass window.

You could have your life again if you just—

Kubarev smashes the window. An alarm blares. Air surges from the room out the window. Kubarev approaches the stranger.

Last chance, Leah!

Kubarev grasps the stranger by the collar, drags her to the window, and pushes her through it. The stranger collapses to the ground.

Kubarev walks back to the panel of buttons and presses a bright red one. Metal plates slide over the broken window, sealing the room. The vent beeps and then begins pumping oxygen into the room. Kubarev takes her hood off and sits.

KUBAREV

See you in Hell.

The stranger's lit cigarette glows on the floor. It catches Kubarev's eye. She looks from it to the vent.

Enriched oxygen...

She looks at the floor and shakes her head.

This was my choice. This was my choice. This was my—

Simultaneously, an explosion roars, the stage goes dark, and Kubarev collapses to the ground. The stranger's laugh echoes through the darkness.

END OF PLAY