A Life Without Air

By Derek Sikkema

CHARACTER LIST

KUBAREV – Exhausted. He’s seen one too many fights, broken up one too many brawls. He’s hoping to hide in administration, getting a break from the violence of the world that he’s known thus far. Though, he’s the kind of man that, even when hiding in administration, he still is assigned to head of security. He speaks with a Russian accent.

THE STRANGER – Mysterious. Sinister. No villain is ever consciously aware that they are evil. Except perhaps for this villain. She relishes in it. She savors it. She doesn’t need to hide the fact that her intentions are not for Kubarev’s benefit because she has power over the entire universe.

A large metal table sits center stage, surrounded by metal walls. In the stage left wall, there is a door, and to the left of this door, there is a panel with multi-colored buttons which flash 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.

The stage right door slides open.

A large man, Liam Kubarev, walks in, dressed in a United States military uniform inlaid with chrome fabric.

He looks through some papers on his clipboard.

THE STRANGER

 Thank you.

KUBAREV

 Hm?

THE STRANGER

 Thank you for pulling me from the storm.

Kubarev nods. He keeps looking through his papers.

 Whatcha got there?

KUBAREV

 Diagnostics.

THE STRANGER

 Ah.

KUBAREV

 I wonder how you live.

THE STRANGER

 Well—

KUBAREV

 And I wonder if it is worth keeping you alive.

Kubarev tosses his clipboard on the table. He leans on the back of his chair.

 So you are raider?

THE STRANGER

 Well…yes. I figured that the appearance of a raider would be more appealing to you.

KUBAREV

 Three seconds to tell me why raider should live.

 The stranger smiles.

THE STRANGER

 You’re scary. I like it.

 The stranger chuckles.

 Anyway, you can’t kill me. I’m not a raider. I’m an essence.

 Pause.

KUBAREV

 Wow. You have such oxygen deprivation.

 Kubarev begins to leave.

 I gave three seconds. They have expired.

THE STRANGER

 How do you think I survived, Liam?

 Pause.

 Out there on the ice. No helmet. No air.

 Pause. The stranger chuckles.

You really think a human being would wander around the northern pole of Mars like that?

KUBAREV

You are raider exiled from camp not far from here. They put you out onto ice with no helmet. No air. Leave you to die.

THE STRANGER

 Do you really believe that, Liam?

KUBAREV

 How do you know my name?

THE STRANGER

 You tell me.

KUBAREV

 You have heard of me. Word travels between Martian raiders quickly.

THE STRANGER

Yes, logical. Perfectly rational. You are, after all, famous. A highly sought after commodity in the security business. Specifically prison security. What is it that is cited, Liam?

 Pause.

Unorthodox. Violent even. Unfit for civil work. But perfect for a prison.

Kubarev calmly pulls a large knife from his belt.

 The stranger chuckles.

 Ooooo, a warning. I love warnings.

 Kubarev begins to exit again.

 You excited to go back to Olympus Mons?

 Kubarev stops.

 Pause.

KUBAREV

 How do you know that?

THE STRANGER

 I know everything about you.

Kubarev approaches the Stranger quickly but calmly.

He stabs her in the stomach.

The stranger laughs.

Kubarev stands back and looks at her.

The stranger sits there, unharmed.

 That tickles.

 Kubarev tries to stab her again.

 The stranger laughs again.

Kubarev stabs her again and again and again.

 The stranger laughs.

Kubarev backs away to the other side of the room.

KUBAREV

 What are you?

THE STRANGER

 I told you. I’m an essence.

 Pause.

The stranger conjures a cigarette.

Kubarev looks at it.

Got a light?

KUBAREV

Enriched oxygen. The room will explode if you—

THE STRANGER

Very well. I was hoping not to startle you, but what else should I have expected from Liam Kubarev?

The stranger puts the cigarette in her mouth and takes a deep breath.

The cigarette lights.

She exhales a long stream of smoke.

Kubarev stands and presses a green button on the panel.

Whirring noise.

 Pause.

KUBAREV

 How did you do that?

THE STRANGER

I tried to be patient with you, Liam, but remember, you pulled the knife on me.

KUBAREV

 Are you the devil?

 The stranger laughs.

THE STRANGER

 The devil? Really, Liam? The devil?

KUBAREV

 Then who are you?

THE STRANGER

 You’ve known me your entire life.

KUBAREV

No, I haven’t, and if you do not tell me who you are now, I will throw you back out on Boreum.

 The stranger chuckles.

THE STRANGER

You sure you don’t know me?

 She sticks the cigarette between her lips.

You were born in Arkhangelsk, but you always hated how Americans called it Archangel. In fact, you’ve always hated everything about the Americans. And yet you eventually found yourself immigrating to America when you were thirty for one reason. Petra. Ahhhh yes, Petra, that beautiful news reporter from Los Angeles. Never met anyone like Petra. Kind. Gentle. Loving. Everything you needed in life. And somehow she loved you. What a gift.

She taps her cigarette ash onto the floor.

But three months after you immigrated, what do the Americans do? Ship you out to Mars to be a prison warden for the Olympus Mons Raider prison. You got out of that about a year ago though. Negotiated with Hydro-Corp to be head of security out on the North Pole. Raider attacks moving north and all that. But now they’re renewing you, aren’t they? Five more years at Olympus Mons. And, frankly, I don’t think you’re very interested in that, are you Liam?

A long pause.

Eye contact.

The stranger laughs.

I’m an essence, Liam. See, when humanity was born, so were we. Concentrations of fundamental energies in the human psyche that make humans…well…human. We walk around like mortals, but we have our fingers on the strands of fate and time. One wave of our hand and empires fall, eras end, millions perish. I’m the essence of punishment. Call me Eva.

She takes a drag on her cigarette.

I’ve been smoking for some time now. Why hasn’t this room exploded, as you said it would?

KUBAREV

 Sometimes reaction is slow. It needs right spark.

THE STRANGER

Exactly, Liam. And who controls that random chance? I do. The room doesn’t explode because I don’t wish it to.

KUBAREV

Do you think your story is believable?

THE STRANGER

 The atheists are always the hardest to convince.

KUBAREV

 You have padded vest, no?

THE STRANGER

 You inspected me upon entry, Liam. My air suit is hardly even sound.

 Pause.

 The stranger takes a drag.

I have a job for you, Liam. If you want it. And if you accept it, I’ll send you home. Earth. Petra. The kids and Alexander.

 Pause. Kubarev is stunned.

 The stranger chuckles.

Predictable. So predictable. Everyone always reacts the same. Regardless, I know the choice that you’ll make, Liam. Just say the words. “Take me home, Eva.” That’ll be our dotted line, so to speak, and I’ll leave, and you can forget all about me.

 Kubarev makes a note on his clipboard.

KUBAREV

Back out on Boreum you go.

He moves for the door.

The stranger chuckles.

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’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, of course, 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.

 Pause.

When you were twelve, your parents took you out onto the nuclear wastes. They pointed to the craters in the ground, and they said that this is where weakness leads. “Never roll over and show your belly, Liam, especially to the Americans.” That’s what your mother told you. And yet, here you are, working for the American Hydro-Corp, running American security for an American water mine in American-Martian 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, you were pulled out of line by a security officer. You hated him because you looked in his eyes and you knew that he hated you. Many people look at you that way. Americans. Russians after you immigrated. American Martians.

KUBAREV

 That is—

THE STRANGER

But Petra makes everything worth it. The way her dimples curve into her cheeks when she smiles. The way her hair waves in the wine country breeze. The way that she says, “I know.” The way that she can name stars that don’t have names and give happy endings to tragedies. You love her, and you would do anything for her.

KUBAREV

 STOP!

Kubarev is crying. He takes a deep breath and straightens his back.

The stranger chuckles.

THE STRANGER

 Told you I knew you.

KUBAREV

 Stop. Please.

 Pause.

 You say…I will go home?

 The stranger nods.

 This position. What is it?

THE STRANGER

 Don’t worry about that, Liam.

KUBAREV

 I would begin…when I die?

THE STRANGER

 Yes. Many happy years with Stephanie, Alexander, and Petra.

 Pause.

KUBAREV

 I…

 Pause.

 Kubarev swallows.

 I…

 Pause.

 Eva, send me…

THE STRANGER

 Home, Liam. Just say the word. Say the word and it will be done.

 Pause.

KUBAREV

 This you would not do for nothing.

THE STRANGER

I suppose not, but that’s where the job comes in, does it not? You work for me, I work for you.

KUBAREV

 What do you want?

THE STRANGER

That’s not—

KUBAREV

 What is it that you want from me?

THE STRANGER

 Don’t worry—

KUBAREV

 The less you tell me, the more I worry.

THE STRANGER

 I don’t have to tell you.

KUBAREV

 But you will. You must. I don’t have to say yes, no?

THE STRANGER

 Well, yes, I suppose, but I have known since the beginning what it is you will choose.

KUBAREV

 How can you know? There is no knowing, what I may or may not do.

THE STRANGER

 Stop getting frantic, Liam, you’re not helping your case.

KUBAREV

 I will NOT sign your DAMN line until you tell me what you want!

 Pause.

 The stranger takes a drag.

 Tell me.

 Pause.

 Tell me, please.

 Pause.

THE STRANGER

I am not the only essence, Liam. There are many more powerful than I. We all have wills, as people have wills. And then there are people who try to defy our wills. Who try to outsmart us. Outrun us. Try to pretend that the same human instinct does not breathe for them the same way that it breathes for others. And for these rebels…there is a prison. It just so happens that, as the essence of punishment, I manage this prison. But I cannot always be there. So it needs a warden.

 Pause.

You must understand that those in this prison are rebels against human nature itself. Which is why I need you. Immoral. Brutal. Unforgiving. The greatest prison warden that has ever lived.

 Pause.

I suppose this is a good a time as any to tell you that I could just kill you now, Liam. You could rot in that prison yourself, forever. Because I have a will. And as a man, you are tied to that will. You will support it…or be punished.

KUBAREV

 I wish you had never come.

THE STRANGER

 That’s not up to you, Liam.

KUBAREV

 Get out of here. Get out.

THE STRANGER

And leave you to suffer here while a life with Petra and your children awaits? Come now, Liam, I can’t do that.

KUBAREV

You don’t get to force me into this. You want me to be warden for Hell! I can’t be warden forever!

THE STRANGER

You don’t get to change your purpose, Liam.

KUBAREV

Am I at least allowed to hate this life? Am I permitted to hate this life where I am stabbed and beaten and hated by everyone around me?

 Pause.

No one loves the warden. There is no love for me.

THE STRANGER

 Petra loves you. Your children do too.

KUBAREV

 I know.

THE STRANGER

 You feel that she gives you a reason to have morals.

 Pause.

 Reason to have a conscience.

 Pause.

 Kubarev nods.

 Then I guess you’d better pack your things.

KUBAREV

 No.

THE STRANGER

 You can’t abandon her, Liam.

KUBAREV

 I cannot be warden forever either.

THE STRANGER

 You have no choice in that matter.

KUBAREV

 Yes I do.

THE STRANGER

Don’t you deserve to live surrounded by those who love you, Liam? Aren’t you tired of hatred? Go. Love. Be loved.

KUBAREV

I will NOT be hated forever! No one can love the warden. NO ONE CAN LOVE THE WARDEN!

THE STRANGER

There’s no way out of that prison, Liam.

KUBAREV

If there were no way out, you would not need a warden.

 Pause.

THE STRANGER

 I’m not leaving until you sign on my line.

Pause.

The stranger blows smoke into the air.

Kubarev looks to the hoods in the glass case.

KUBAREV

 Very well.

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

THE STRANGER

 Liam…

Kubarev dons a chrome hood.

 I am destiny, Liam.

Kubarev presses a button on the hood, which seals to his neck, emitting a gust of air.

 You need only say the word!

Kubarev picks up the metal bar again and approaches the glass window.

You will have love if you choose it!

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

 Last chance, Liam!

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

Kubarev walks back to the panel of buttons and presses a bright red one. Metal plates slide over the broken window, sealing the room.

Whirring noise.

Kubarev takes his hood off and sits.

He looks at the stranger’s lit cigarette on the floor, still glowing with flame.

KUBAREV

 Enriched oxygen…

 He looks at the floor.

 Petra, I’ve loved you with everything I—

Explosion.

Blackout.

END OF PLAY