

INCIDENT IN STRAPGHUL PROVINCE

AT RISE: *Curtain rises on a stark room, devoid of warmth. A dented metal desk dominates Stage Right, papers stacked in perfect order, as if neatness was the only task accomplished here. The rest of the room is far less meticulous. A high-back wooden chair rests Center Stage, under a bare hanging light bulb. The old chair is disfigured by fingernail gouges and blood. People were tortured in this chair, and it offers a silent testimony to their anguish, as do the random bloodstains on the floor. Along the UpStage wall is a single window revealing barbed wire fences beyond. Blue light indicates darkness has begun to fall. Throughout the play, the light from this window will reveal the deepening of night and the rising moon. A small metal table, Left, is covered with a torn white sheet. Under the sheet lie various implements of torture, better left hidden. A heavy door UpStage Left, provides the only access to the room. The door bursts open, as THE PRISONER is shoved into the room by two burly GUARDS in indistinguishable military uniforms.*

GUARD #1. Sit!

(They push him roughly into the chair, then lash his hands behind his back and tie his feet to the chair legs with thick leather straps. The Prisoner does not resist. Once the straps are secured, the Guards take position by the UpStage Wall.)

GUARD #2. You searched him well for weapons?

GUARD #1. He's clean.

GUARD #2. His kind is never clean.

(The Guards snap to attention, as the door is thrown open and the COMMANDANT enters. He is a precise soldier, who moves with the casual air of limitless power.)

GUARD #1. Prisoner 35726. As you requested, Commandant.

(The Commandant pointedly ignores the Prisoner tied to the chair. He crosses to his desk and examines some papers, as if the others do not even exist. After a pause, he speaks without looking up from his paperwork.)

COMMANDANT. Prisoner 35726, I presume?

PRISONER 35726. Yes, Commandant.

(The Commandant continues to review his papers, then looks up to appraise his captive.)

COMMANDANT. Do you know why I called you here, Prisoner 35726?

PRISONER 35726. No, Commandant. I do not.

COMMANDANT. You have not the slightest idea?

PRISONER 35726. No, Commandant.

COMMANDANT. Interesting. *(Rises.)* In my experience... most prisoners tremble with fear after being summoned to my office without explanation. Yet, despite your bonds, you sit there, as if you have not a care in the world.

(The Commandant crosses to the front of the desk. The Prisoner does not answer. His expression is blank but unconcerned.)

COMMANDANT. Why do you suppose that would that be?

PRISONER 35726. Perhaps I have no care in the world left to me.

COMMANDANT. Perhaps...Or perhaps you have cares you do not wish me to discover. A common ruse and always unsuccessful. I know how the minds of vermin like you work. I have studied them with great care. Peeled away the layers. There is nothing you can hide from me.

PRISONER 35726. I am sure that is true, Commandant.

COMMANDANT. *(Paces in front of his chair.)* Yet, you seem different. Dare I say...intelligent? Most prisoners here are toads. Peasants. The refuse of humanity. But you... you do not fit the mold.

(The Commandant studies him. He leans in until they are almost nose-to-nose.)

COMMANDANT. That can be a dangerous thing. Do you understand why?

PRISONER 35726. Because non-conformity leads to questioning. Questioning reveals the flaws in your country's social structure. When people see the flaws, they realize just how illusionary your power truly is. And that, of course, threatens you.

COMMANDANT. An interesting analysis. Carefully considered and well-phrased. *(To Guard #1.)* Sergeant?

(Guard #1 steps around to the front of the chair. With his back to the audience, he smashes a wicked fist across the Prisoner's jaw, almost knocking the chair over.)

COMMANDANT. You may consider that my refutation to your argument. *(To Guard.)* Thank you, Sergeant.

GUARD #1. Yes, sir.

(The Guard steps back to his position against the UpStage wall.)

COMMANDANT. You are an American.

PRISONER 35726. *(Still recovering from the blow.)* Ye...yes, Commandant.

COMMANDANT. I suppose you have a reason to be in Strapghul province in the middle of a war? *(No reply.)* I said... You have a reason to be in Strapghul province in the middle of a war?

(Still no reply. The Commandant nods to the Sergeant who steps forward. Before he can strike again, the Prisoner responds.)

PRISONER 35726. I...I had my reasons.

(The Commandant nods and the Guard returns to his position.)

COMMANDANT. You know, I could shoot you right now for the impertinence of that answer.

PRISONER 35726. Forgive me, Commandant. I do not mean to be impertinent. I am unsure how much freedom you will allow me to answer your questions.

COMMANDANT. You have all the freedom you like. That is...until you say something I disapprove of. Or if I catch you in a lie. Then you will have only the freedom of death. So why were you in the occupied Strapghul province?

PRISONER 35726. I had my reasons.

(The Commandant raises his pistol.)

PRISONER 35726. Uh...my wife wanted to visit her homeland... She was born in Bretslavka.

COMMANDANT. *(Referring to his paperwork.)* I have no record of your wife being captured.

PRISONER 35726. She wasn't.

COMMANDANT. Can she corroborate your story?

PRISONER 35726. I doubt it.

(The Commandant raises his pistol again.)

PRISONER 35726. She is in Hurgevol cemetery.

COMMANDANT. Deceased?

PRISONER 35726. Mercifully. She would not have liked this camp. Too many ragged people. *(A wry smile.)* She could never abide ragged people.

COMMANDANT. A wise woman. If you had time to bury her, she must not have died in battle.

PRISONER 35726. She died a month ago. Twenty-seven days and nineteen hours ago, to be precise.

COMMANDANT. And yet you...an American with no ties to this country... chose to stay in a war zone after your wife had died. That seems odd, don't you think?

PRISONER 35726. The war does not concern me.

COMMANDANT. It takes a brave man not to be concerned by war. Or a stupid man. I do not believe you are stupid.

PRISONER 35726. There was no place left for me to go.

COMMANDANT. I see. Now, back to my original question. Do you know why I summoned you to my office?

PRISONER 35726. I suppose I am to be executed for one reason or other.

COMMANDANT. And that also does not concern you?

PRISONER 35726. It is not something I seem to have any control over.

COMMANDANT. Perhaps you have more control than you let on. As I understand, you have been a guest of our camp for less than a month.

PRISONER 35726. I have been a prisoner since after the cycle of the last full moon.

COMMANDANT. Your peasant astrology means nothing to me. How were you captured?

PRISONER 35726. I wasn't.

COMMANDANT. (*Surprised.*) Than how did you come to be here?

GUARD #2. He walked up to the gate, sir. Turned himself in.

COMMANDANT. On what charge?

PRISONER 35726. Your people do not need charges to enslave a man. We both know that. I walked in, looking for a place to die. This seemed as good a place as any.

COMMANDANT. You wish death?

PRISONER 35726. Wish is too soft a word. I crave death. I hunger for its release.

COMMANDANT. Why?

PRISONER 35726. You would not understand.

COMMANDANT. On the contrary. Death is a subject I have become most intimate with. I know its horrors and its exhilarations. And I respect the unquestioned finality of its judgment. But tell me...why do you seek death?

PRISONER 35726. Because I am a monster.

COMMANDANT. (*Amused.*) You? You are more maggot than monster. A maggot with aspirations of crawling up from the slime in which you were born. They are foolish wisps of dreams. No. You are no monster. (*Leans over him.*) I am the monster.

PRISONER 35726. Pardon me for disagreeing, Commandant. But you are no monster. You are merely an unruly child, who considers petulance a virtue. Your authority is based on officially sanctioned tantrums, nothing more.

(Shocked by his audacity, the Guards both move to beat the Prisoner, but the Commandant holds up his hand to stop them.)

COMMANDANT. A child, you say? Yet, we have conquered this entire region. Slaughtered tens of thousands who dared to resist us.

PRISONER 35726. (*Shrugs.*) Your weapons are effective. But the attitude is the same.

(The Commandant slaps him hard across the face.)

PRISONER 35726. The act of an impertinent child.

(The red-faced officer slaps him again, twice as hard.)

PRISONER 35726. Need I say more?

(The Commandant raises his pistol. Presses the gun to the Prisoner's temple.)

PRISONER 35726. Do it. Do it now!

(A tense moment. Slowly, the Commandant lowers the gun. He crosses to his desk, pulls out a telegram.)

COMMANDANT. I received this telegram from my superiors. It warns me to be on the lookout for a spy in my camp. (*Moves to the window.*) For three days, I have watched these slugs, these dregs of humanity shuffle and scurry around the camp like the diseased mice they are... Squabbling for their pitiful rations. Cowering with fear as my guards pass by... (*Turns to face him.*) And then I notice you. Sitting idly by, watching everything and everyone who passes. No fear. No cowering. Just observation. Detached observation.

PRISONER 35726. I was never very good at scurrying and cowering.

COMMANDANT. Perhaps I can remedy that. Now, if you were me, who would you assume the spy would be?

PRISONER 35726. Anybody but me, I imagine.

COMMANDANT. Please explain.

PRISONER 35726. Although I have never met one, I would assume a spy would be trained to blend in. To hide in plain sight. Fade into the background. As you pointed out, I am pitifully inadequate at blending in.

COMMANDANT. Unless you are so confident of your abilities, that you feel no need to blend in.

PRISONER 35726. That would be another possibility.

(The Commandant raises the pistol and fires. The bullet whizzes past the Prisoner's head. The Guards flinch at the sound. The Prisoner does not.)

COMMANDANT. Only a carefully trained soldier would not flinch when a gun is fired at his head.

PRISONER 35726. Or a man who welcomes death as a long-overdue friend.

COMMANDANT. Which are you?

PRISONER 35726. You believe the former. I say the latter. Either way, I will get my wish.

COMMANDANT. You are very good at this, you know. This verbal sparring. But make no mistake...I am better.

PRISONER 35726. I have no doubt, Commandant.

COMMANDANT. I will play your little game, because it amuses me to do so. There is so little in my job that brings enjoyment these days.

PRISONER 35726. Even cold-blooded murder must lose its thrill after so many victims.

COMMANDANT. You have no idea.

PRISONER 35726. Joseph Stalin said... One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.

COMMANDANT. Ah, yes. A wonderfully ruthless man, Stalin. How sad that history never appreciates the contributions of the truly vicious. For it is only through them that nations become great. (*Sighs.*) However, let us assume for a moment that you are not the spy in my camp. That you indeed have a death wish. Will you tell me why that is?

PRISONER 35726. Probably not. A spy would concoct a hurried and overly complex lie that a man with your expertise could see right through... A man who wished to die, on the other hand, would work hard to frustrate you with silence. You would then kill him out of suspicion, or anger. It hardly matters.

COMMANDANT. And so you choose to remain silent?

PRISONER 35726. Whether I am a spy or not, this seems to be the best course of action.

COMMANDANT. You forget one important fact.

PRISONER 35726. And what is that, Commandant?

COMMANDANT. Death is a comfortable destination... but the journey can be quite long and painful...if handled correctly.

PRISONER 35726. And you are an expert at handling it correctly?

COMMANDANT. Of course. Even without resorting to the gross butchery of some of my comrades -- plucking eyes out and filing the sockets with gunpowder or gasoline...

PRISONER 35726. Sounds painful.

COMMANDANT. It requires a word beyond pain. Believe me.

(The Commandant crosses to the table, He pulls back the sheet to reveal implements of torture. He examines them for sharpness, his back to the Prisoner.)

COMMANDANT. You might also appreciate the delightfully excruciating things we can do with electricity. Especially when applied to certain areas of the body. It is a wonderful way to impose mind-wrenching pain, while postponing death for weeks at a time. Or the waterboarding that your own nation claims is not torture.

(Silence. The prisoner is sweating now. The Commandant turns back to face him.)

COMMANDANT. However, I like to think torture can be carried on in a much more civilized fashion.

PRISONER 35726. I am relieved to hear that.

COMMANDANT. *(Crosses to his desk.)* You should not be. If I choose to, I can sit right here on my desk and put a bullet through your kneecap. It would shatter with such exquisite agony, that you might feel more disposed to talk. It is not fatal in the least, although you would never again walk without teeth-wrenching pain. Plus, I would still have your other kneecap, if you require further inducement.

PRISONER 35726. I...I would hate to make a mess of your office.

COMMANDANT. Think nothing of it. I have men to clean up the blood and vomit.

PRISONER 35726. What more could you ask?

COMMANDANT. *(With enthusiasm.)* A challenge! And that is where you come in... After the kneecaps, there are the elbows, equally painful when exploded. And then the extraneous fleshy parts of the body, such as the groin.

PRISONER 35726. Extraneous to you, perhaps.

COMMANDANT. Such false bravado. It really is quite exhilarating. Sobbing and begging for mercy becomes so irritatingly dull. So where do I begin, Prisoner 35726? The left knee...or the right?

(He raises the pistol. Alternates the aim between the Prisoner's kneecaps.)

PRISONER 35726. Have you ever loved a woman, Commandant?

COMMANDANT. (*Lowers the pistol.*) Not exactly the response I expected... but to answer your question, yes. I have been with many women.

PRISONER 35726. There is a difference between loving a woman and being with her.

COMMANDANT. Ahhh. You are referring to the uniquely Western delusion that equates lust with some emotional transcendence. How delightfully naive. You overwrite basic physical urges with poetry... then consider yourself enlightened for having done so.

PRISONER 35726. Spoken like a man who has once been rejected.

COMMANDANT. No. Spoken like a man! Your childish notion of love is an archaic myth. It is no more valid than leprechauns or fairy dust.

(*The Guards snicker.*)

PRISONER 35726. I feel sorry for you, Commandant. There is so much about this world you will never understand. So much you will never allow yourself to see.

COMMANDANT. You feel sorry for me? Behold the prisoner, strapped to a chair, who pities his captors for they have not been magically transformed by the healing power of love! (Slaps his leg with laughter.) I suggest, Prisoner 35726, if love is such a freeing experience, that you convince the god Eros to transport you to a much safer place than here!

PRISONER 35726. Your sarcasm is duly noted, Commandant. And duly ignored.

(*His words are like a slap in the face. The Commandant's smile die. He leans his face dangerously close to his prisoner's.*)

COMMANDANT. Your insolence is becoming tiresome, Prisoner 35726. I suggest you use caution. You are unbroken only because it temporarily amuses me to keep you that way. And because your foolish notions are more interesting than anguished screams and tiresome pleas for mercy. Yet, all that can change in a heartbeat.

PRISONER 35726. (*Cowed by the sudden change.*) Yes, Commandant.

COMMANDANT. Now... This silly notion of love - How did that bring you here? Why does it make you so incautious with your life?