

## Thor Hopper

Adapted from the short story "In the Penal Colony" by Franz Kafka

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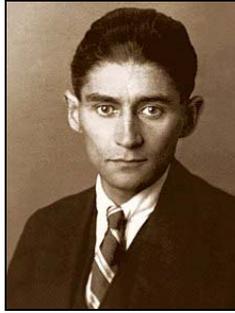
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## BE JUST!

**HORROR/SATIRE.** Adapted from the short story "In the Penal Colony" by Franz Kafka. An esteemed foreigner arrives at a penal colony and is asked to witness an elaborate torture and execution device that inscribes into a prisoner's skin the law he has broken before letting him die, a process that takes 12 excruciating hours. An Officer who is the sole defender and advocate of the apparatus gleefully shows off the device to the Traveler and describes the current system of absolute justice in which the accused is instantly found guilty with no opportunity for a defense. The Officer begs the Traveler to vouch for the device to the new commandant so that the brutal executions may continue. When the Traveler refuses, the Officer frees the Prisoner and sets up the machine to inscribe "Be Just" into his own flesh. But due to its advanced state of disrepair, the apparatus begins to malfunction and stabs the Officer to death, denying him the transcendence the machine is supposed to deliver to the condemned. Upon seeing the Officer's face, he remarks, "His face is as it had been in life. What all the others had found in this machine, he has not." This provocative, timely play mixes horror with gallows humor and provides an opportunity for a tour de force performance by the Officer.

**Performance Time:** Approximately 45-60 minutes.

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Franz Kafka in 1923

## ABOUT THE STORY

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is considered one of the most influential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though he achieved little literary fame during his lifetime. Born and raised in Prague, Kafka spoke Czech but preferred to write in German. Kafka was the eldest of six children and had a troubled relationship with his father, a domineering and demanding shopkeeper who once worked as a traveling salesman. This father-son conflict deeply influenced much of Kafka's writing in which he incorporates themes of alienation, cruelty, authoritarian power, and the absurdity of existence. Today, the term "Kafkaesque" is used to describe that which is surreal, nightmarish, and incomprehensibly complex. Kafka earned a law degree but did not practice law. Instead, Kafka worked for an insurance company so that he would have time to write in the evenings. Suffering from tuberculosis and unable to eat due to pain, Kafka died of starvation on June 3, 1924. The rest of Kafka's family, except for two brothers who died in infancy, died in the Holocaust. Kafka's most well-known works include his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, his novella *The Metamorphosis*, and his short story, "In the Penal Colony," which was written in October 1914 and published in 1919.

## CHARACTERS

(4 flexible, opt. extras)

**OFFICER:** Nostalgic, fastidious officer in charge of operating an apparatus that tortures and kills the condemned; fiercely devoted, the officer wants the esteemed Traveler to vouch for the device to the new commandant so that he can continue the tortuous executions; looks like he is ready to appear in a parade; wears a uniform jacket adorned with silver braids and tassels, a cap, and undergarments; flexible.

**TRAVELER:** Esteemed foreigner from an unspecified country who has been asked by the new commandant of a penal colony to witness the torture and death of a prisoner; appears restless and disinterested and speaks with a flat, unaffected tone; flexible.

**PRISONER:** Charged with “disobeying and insulting his superior”; has a brutish, vacant look but enjoys clowning around with the Soldier; his hair, face, and torn shirt, trousers, and undergarments are filthy; flexible.

**SOLDIER:** Clownish soldier responsible for guarding the Prisoner; wears a uniform; flexible.

**WORKERS (opt.):** Coffee house customers; wear dirty, torn shirts and trousers; flexible. (Note: Workers appear only in the Epilogue and are not needed if the epilogue is not performed.)

## SETTING

A foreign, tropical island that serves as a penal colony.

## SETS

**Apparatus room.** The apparatus sits CS. (See Special Effects for description of apparatus.) On one side of the apparatus is a shallow "pit" that can be indicated with a short wall of piled-up dirt. The flooring is dirt/sand. There is a wooden bucket of "water" and a stack of old wicker/cane chairs.

**Downtown area on the island.** There is a backdrop of dilapidated houses and shops. One building has a sign that reads, "Coffee House." The street side of the coffee house is open along its full width. It is cave-like with smoke-covered walls. There are some small tables with chairs. There is a simple stone grave under one of the tables. The gravestone reads, "Here rests the Old Commandant. Have faith and wait!" (Note: This set is only required if the Epilogue is performed.)

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## PROPS

Heavy chain to which is connected smaller chains (to bind  
Prisoner's feet, wrists, and neck)  
Ladder  
2 Handkerchiefs  
Wooden bucket of "water"  
Dirty hand towel  
Screwdriver  
Lump of dirty cotton (felt)  
Small leather folder (for diagram)  
Dirt/sand for floor  
Apparatus diagram (labyrinthine lines crisscrossing each other  
with little white space)  
Torn strap  
Spoon  
Bowl of rice pudding  
Rifle with bayonet, for Soldier (or a prop sword may be used)  
2 Ladies' handkerchiefs  
Sword with scabbard, for Officer  
Coins

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

(Note: The "apparatus" doesn't have to move or work. This is accomplished with sound effects, see below.)

"Apparatus." A massive mechanical apparatus that looks imposing/menacing. It looks like a complicated mass of connecting rods, chains, steel cables, gears, cogs, brass rods, and metal wheels. There are three main parts of the apparatus: 1.) The "bed," which is large enough for the prisoner to lie down on. 2.) The "inscriber" hangs above the bed and can be lowered, if desired. 3) The "harrow" has large iron-looking needles sticking from it. The bed has worn straps for both wrists and ankles. There is an outlet pipe that leads to the "pit." When the apparatus starts to "fall apart," small individual parts may be attached with fishing line so they can be pulled off onto the floor. (The following is just a suggestion of how the apparatus is constructed.) The bed and inscriber are the same size and look like two dark chests. The inscriber hangs above the bed. The harrow hangs between the bed and inscriber. The inscriber and bed are joined together at the corners by four brass rods, opt.

Clinking sound

Squeaking sound of a wheel

"Vomit," opt. (Can be oatmeal, etc. or merely suggested.)

Clanking sound

Sound of apparatus starting up

Audible hum of machinery

Fake blood

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"DO YOU SEE  
THE SHAME OF IT?"

-OFFICER

## BE JUST!

(AT RISE: A foreign, tropical island that serves as a penal colony. A very bright light shines down on the "apparatus." A Soldier enters, escorting a Prisoner. A Traveler enters behind them. The Soldier is holding a heavy chain to which are connected small chains that bind the Prisoner by his feet, wrist, and neck. These smaller chains are linked to each other by connecting chains. The Prisoner has a look of resignation on his face.)

TRAVELER: (To Soldier.) I am neither a citizen of this penal colony nor a citizen of the state, but I responded to the invitation of the Commandant—only out of politeness—to attend the execution of a prisoner... (Indicating Prisoner.) ...condemned for disobeying and insulting his superior.

SOLDIER: Interest in this execution isn't really very high even on this island.

(Officer enters.)

OFFICER: (To Traveler, admiring the apparatus.) It's a remarkable apparatus. (Traveler shows little interest in the apparatus and paces behind the Prisoner as the Officer enthusiastically makes final preparations by crawling under the apparatus and then climbing up a ladder to inspect the upper parts. Inspecting.) This really could have been left to a mechanic, but I'm particularly fond of this apparatus, and this work can't be entrusted to anyone else. (Climbs down the ladder. Excited.) It's all ready now!

(Traveler wipes his brow from the heat and slips the two handkerchiefs under the back of his collar.)

TRAVELER: Your uniforms are really too heavy for the tropics.

OFFICER: That's true. *(Begins to wash oil/grease from his hands in a bucket of water.)* But the uniforms mean home, and we don't want to lose our homeland. *(Dries his hands with a towel. Pointing to the apparatus, proudly.)* Now, have a look at this apparatus. Up to this point, I still had to do some work by hand, but from now on, the apparatus works entirely on its own.

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent, nods.)* I see...

OFFICER: Of course, breakdowns do happen. I really hope none will occur today, but we must be prepared for them. The apparatus is supposed to keep going for 12 hours without interruption, but if any breakdowns occur, they are only very minor and will be dealt with right away. *(To Traveler.)* Don't you want to sit down? *(Pulls out a chair from a pile of wicker chairs and offers it to the Traveler. Traveler sits on the edge of the shallow "pit" and glances into it.)* I don't know whether the Commandant has already explained the apparatus to you...?

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent.)* No, not really.

OFFICER: *(Proudly.)* This apparatus... *(Grabs a connecting rod and leans against it.)* ...is our previous Commandant's invention. I also worked with him on the very first tests and took part in all the work right up to its completion. However, the credit for the invention belongs entirely to him alone. Have you heard of our previous Commandant?

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent.)* No, not really.

*(During the following, the Soldier winds the Prisoner's chain around both wrists and supports himself with his hand on his weapon, letting his head hang backward, making it evident that he is bored and is not listening to the Officer.)*

OFFICER: *(Surprised.)* No? Well, I'm not claiming too much when I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is

his work. We, his friends, already knew at the time of his death that the administration of the colony was so self-contained that even if his successor had a thousand new plans in mind, he would not be able to alter anything of the old plan, at least not for several years. And our prediction has held. The new Commandant has had to recognize that. *(Sighs.)* It's a shame that you didn't know the previous Commandant. *(Slight pause. With a screwdriver, he adjusts screws here and there on the apparatus as he continues.)* However, I'm chattering, and his apparatus stands here in front of us. As you see, it consists of three parts. *(Note: For the following, the Prisoner does what he can to follow the Officer's explanation by directing his gaze to the places on the apparatus where the Officer is pointing.)* With the passage of time, certain popular names have been developed for each of these parts. *(Pointing to a part of the apparatus.)* The one underneath is called the "bed." *(Pointing.)* The upper one is called the "inscriber." And, here, in the middle... *(Pointing.)* ...this moving part...is called the "harrow."

*(The Traveler, who hadn't been paying close attention, suddenly perks up.)*

TRAVELER: The harrow?

*(Prisoner shoots the Traveler a hard look.)*

OFFICER: *(Proudly.)* Yes, the harrow! The name fits. The needles are arranged as in a harrow, and the whole thing is driven like a harrow, although it stays in one place and is, in principle, much more *artistic*. Anyway, you'll understand in a moment. The condemned is laid out here on the bed. *(Points to the bed.)* I'll describe the apparatus first, and only then, let the procedure go to work. That way, you'll be able to follow it better. *(Warning.)* By the way, a sprocket in the inscriber is excessively worn. It really squeaks. When it's in

motion, one can hardly make oneself understood. *(Chuckles. Sadly.)* Unfortunately, replacement parts are difficult to come by in this place. *(Pointing to bed.)* So, here is the bed, as I said. The whole thing is completely covered with a layer of cotton wool, the purpose of which you'll find out in a moment. The condemned is laid out on his stomach on this cotton wool. There are straps for the hands here... *(Points.)* ...for the feet here... *(Points.)* ...and for the throat here... *(Points.)* ...to tie him securely. At the head of the bed here... *(Points.)* ...where the condemned, as I have mentioned, first lies facedown, is this small protruding lump of felt, which can easily be adjusted so that it presses right into the condemned's mouth.

*(The Traveler bends down to take a closer look at the lump of felt.)*

TRAVELER: That's cotton wool?

OFFICER: *(Smiling.)* Yes, it is. Feel it for yourself. *(Takes the Traveler by the hand and leads him closer to the bed. Proudly.)* It's a specially prepared cotton wool. That's why it looks so unrecognizable. Its purpose is to prevent the condemned from screaming and biting his tongue to pieces. Of course, the condemned has to leave the felt in his mouth, otherwise the straps around his throat will break his neck.

*(With his hand over his eyes to protect them from the bright light shining down on the apparatus, the Traveler looks up at the height of the apparatus. The Prisoner imitates the Traveler, but since he doesn't put his hand over his eyes, he blinks and shrinks back at the intense light.)*

TRAVELER: *(Unimpressed, bored.)* It's certainly an interesting apparatus.

OFFICER: *(Smiling.)* Ah! Your interest is aroused!

*(The Officer steps back to allow the Traveler time to look closer at the apparatus. Feigning interest, the Traveler goes through the motions by quickly inspecting the apparatus and then sits down in a chair. Awkward pause as the Officer gazes at the apparatus with pride.)*

TRAVELER: *(Anxious for the Officer to wrap it up.)* So now the man is lying down... *(Leans back in his chair and crosses his legs.)*

OFFICER: Yes. *(Pushes his cap back and wipes his sweaty face with his hand.)* Now, listen. Both the bed and the inscriber have their own electric batteries. The bed needs them for itself, and the inscriber for the harrow. As soon as the condemned is strapped in securely, the bed is set in motion. It quivers with tiny, very rapid oscillations from side to side and up and down simultaneously. You have probably seen similar devices in mental hospitals. Only, with our bed, all movements are precisely calibrated, for they must be meticulously coordinated with the movements of the harrow. But it's the harrow that has the job of actually carrying out the sentence.

TRAVELER: *(Uninterested.)* What is the sentence?

OFFICER: *(Astonished.)* You don't even know that? Forgive me if my explanations are perhaps confusing. I really do beg your pardon. Previously, it was the Commandant's habit to provide such explanations, but the new Commandant has excused himself from this honorable duty. However, with such an eminent visitor... *(Traveler tries to deflect the honor, but the Officer insists.)* ...that with such an eminent visitor, he didn't make you aware that the form of our sentencing is yet again something new, which— *(Stops himself from saying more.)* In any case, I am certainly the person best able to explain our style of sentencing, for here I am carrying... *(Pats his chest pocket.)* ...the relevant diagrams drawn by the previous Commandant.

TRAVELER: (*Surprised.*) Diagrams made by the Commandant himself? Was he a soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, and draftsman?

OFFICER: (*Nodding, proudly. With reverence.*) He was, indeed. (*Examining his hands.*) Excuse me, my hands aren't clean enough to handle the diagrams. (*Goes to the bucket and "washes" his hands. He dries his hands and carefully pulls out a small leather folder.*) The law the condemned has violated is inscribed on his body with the harrow. (*Pointing to Prisoner.*) This condemned prisoner, for example... (*Prisoner keeps his head down but listens intently in order to learn which law he has violated.*) ...will have inscribed on his body, "Honor your superiors!"

(*Traveler looks over at the Prisoner, who looks surprised at the news.*)

TRAVELER: (*To Officer, indicating Prisoner.*) Does the prisoner know his sentence?

OFFICER: No.

TRAVELER: (*Astonished.*) He doesn't know his own sentence?

OFFICER: No. (*Matter-of-fact.*) It would be useless to give the condemned that information because he experiences it on his own body.

(*The Prisoner looks over at the Traveler to see if he approves of what the Officer has just said. Shocked, the Traveler, who had up to this point been leaning back in his chair, leans forward.*)

TRAVELER: But does the prisoner know that he's been condemned?

OFFICER: Not that, either.

TRAVELER: (*Shocked.*) No?! (*Wiping sweat from his forehead.*)

So the prisoner does not yet know, even at this point, that he is condemned?

OFFICER: He has had no opportunity to defend himself.

*(The Officer looks away so as not to embarrass the Traveler with an explanation of matters so self-evident. Traveler stands.)*

TRAVELER: But he must have had a chance to defend himself?!

*(The Officer takes the Traveler by the arm and points to the Prisoner. The Prisoner is standing stiffly now that all the attention is directed at him. Soldier yanks on the Prisoner's chain for no apparent reason.)*

OFFICER: *(Matter of fact.)* The matter stands like this. Here in the penal colony, I have been appointed judge—in spite of my youth—for I stood at the side of our previous Commandant in all matters of punishment, and I also know the most about the apparatus. The basic principle I use for my decisions is this: Guilt is always beyond a doubt. Other courts cannot follow this principle, for they are made up of many heads, and, in addition, have even higher courts above them. But that is not the case here...or at least it was not that way with the previous Commandant. *(Sighs.)* It's true the new Commandant has already shown a desire to involve himself in my court, but I've succeeded so far in fending him off. And I'll continue to be successful. *(Remembering the point of the story.)* You wanted this case explained. It's so simple...just like all of them. This morning, a captain laid a charge that the condemned—who is assigned to him as a servant and who sleeps at the base of his door—had been sleeping on duty. His duty is to stand up every time the clock strikes the hour and salute in front of the captain's door. That's certainly *not* a difficult duty, and it's necessary, since he is supposed to remain fresh both for guarding and for service. Yesterday night, the Captain wanted to check whether his servant was fulfilling his duty. He opened the door on the stroke of two and found him curled up, asleep. He got his horsewhip and hit him across the face. Now, instead of standing up and begging for

forgiveness, the Condemned grabbed his master by the legs, shook him, and cried out, "Throw away that whip, or I'll beat you!" Those are the facts. The Captain came to me an hour ago. I wrote up his statement, and right after that, the sentence. Then I had the Condemned chained. It was all very simple. If I had first summoned the Condemned and interrogated him, the result would have been confusion. He would have lied, and if I had been successful in refuting his lies, he would have replaced them with new lies, and so forth. But now I have him, and I won't release him again. Now, does that clarify everything? *(Traveler tries to say something but is cut off.)* But time is passing. We should be starting the execution already, and I haven't finished explaining the apparatus yet. Please, sit down. *(Indicates a chair. Traveler sits. Officer approaches the apparatus and leans toward the Traveler in a friendly way, ready to give his most comprehensive explanation. Pointing to apparatus.)* As you see, the shape of the harrow corresponds to the shape of a man. *(Pointing.)* This is the harrow for the upper body... *(Pointing.)* ...and here are the harrows for the legs. *(Pointing.)* This small cutter is the only one designated for the head. Is that clear?

*(Traveler frowns as he looks at the harrow.)*

TRAVELER: Isn't the new Commandant intending to introduce a new procedure? Will the Commandant be present at the execution?

OFFICER: *(Grimacing.)* That is not certain. That is why we need to hurry up. As much as I regret the fact, I'll have to make my explanation even shorter. But, tomorrow, once the apparatus is clean again—the fact that it gets so very dirty is its only fault—I can add a more detailed explanation. So, now, only the most essential things. When the Condemned is lying on the bed and it starts quivering, the harrow sinks into the body. It positions itself automatically in such a way

that it touches the body only lightly with the needle tips. Once the machine is set in position... *(Pointing to steel cable.)* ...this steel cable tightens up immediately into a rod. And now the performance begins! As the harrow quivers, it sticks the tips of its needles into the body, which is also vibrating from the movement of the bed. Now, to enable someone to check on how the sentence is being carried out, the harrow is made of glass. That gave rise to certain technical difficulties with fastening the needles in it securely, but after several attempts, we were successful. We didn't spare any effort! And now, as the inscription is made on the body, everyone can see through the glass! Don't you want to come closer and see the needles for yourself?! *(Reluctantly, the Traveler slowly stands, approaches, and bends over the harrow to inspect it. The Prisoner also accepts the Officer's invitation to inspect the arrangement of the harrow up close. Seeing that the Soldier has fallen asleep, the Prisoner pulls his chain forward and bends over the glass to take a closer look.)* You see, two sorts of needles in a multiple arrangement. Each long needle has a short one next to it. The long one inscribes, and the short one squirts water out to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear. The bloody water is then channeled here into small grooves... *(Indicates with his finger the path.)* ...and finally flows into these main gutters, and their outlet pipe takes it to the pit. *(Demonstrates with both hands at the mouth of the outlet pipe. Confused, the Prisoner is still looking at what the Officer and Traveler had just observed. The Prisoner leans forward this way and that and looks over the glass again and again. The Traveler raises his head and, feeling behind him with his hand, reaches for his chair. To his horror, the Traveler realizes the Prisoner is standing behind him. The Traveler tries to push the Prisoner back before he is punished, but the Officer holds the Traveler firmly with one hand, and with the other, grabs some dirt from the floor and throws it at the Soldier. The Soldier opens his eyes with a start, sees what the Prisoner has done, lets his weapon fall, and jerks the Prisoner backward so hard that the Prisoner*

*collapses. The Soldier looks down at the Prisoner as he writhes around, causing his chain to make a clinking sound. To Soldier, shouts.) Stand him up!* (Runs around the apparatus, grabs the Prisoner under the armpits and, with the help of the Soldier, straightens the Prisoner up as his feet keep slipping out from under him. The Traveler leans away from the harrow to see what is happening to the Prisoner. To Soldier, annoyed, shouts.) He's distracting our guest too much! Handle the Condemned carefully this time! (Turns his back to the apparatus.)

TRAVELER: (Not wanting to hear anymore about the apparatus.) Now I know all about it.

OFFICER: (Excited.) Except the most important thing! (Grabs the Traveler by the arm and points up.) There, in the inscriber, is the mechanism that determines the movement of the harrow. And this mechanism is arranged according to the diagram on which the sentence is set down. I still use the diagrams of the previous Commandant. (Pulls some pages out of the leather folder.) Here they are. Unfortunately, I can't hand them to you. They are the most cherished thing I possess. Sit down, and I'll show you them from a distance. Then you'll be able to see it all well. (Officer holds up the first sheet so the Traveler can see. All the Traveler can see is a labyrinthine series of lines, crisscrossing each other in all sorts of ways that cover the paper so thickly that only with difficulty could one make out the white spaces in between.) Read it.

TRAVELER: I can't.

OFFICER: But it's clear.

TRAVELER: It's very elaborate, and I can't decipher it.

OFFICER: Yes, I understand. (Smiles and puts the folder back.) It's not calligraphy for school children. One has to read it a long time. You, too, would finally understand it clearly. (Continuing.) The script...of course, it has to be a script that isn't simple. You see, it's not supposed to kill right away...but on average over a period of 12 hours. The turning point is set for the sixth hour. There must also be many, many embellishments surrounding the basic script.

The essential script moves around the body only in a narrow belt. The rest of the body is reserved for decoration. Can you now appreciate the work of the harrow and of the whole apparatus?! Just look at it! (*Scurries up the ladder and turns a wheel. Calls down.*) Watch out! Move to the side! (*Apparatus starts moving. The squeaking sound of a wheel is heard and the Officer threatens the wheel with his fist. Spreading his arms out to the Traveler.*) My apologies! (*Scurries down the ladder in order to observe the operation of the apparatus from below. Annoyed.*) Something is still not working properly. (*No one else notices. Officer scurries up the ladder again, reaches with both hands into the inside of the inscriber, and quickly descends down the ladder. Yells into the Traveler's ear so as to be heard over the apparatus.*) Do you understand the process? (*Traveler leans toward the Officer and observes the machine at work. The Prisoner also watches but looks confused. The Prisoner bends forward a little and follows the moving needles with his eyes.*) The harrow is starting to write. When it's finished with the first part of the script on the Condemned's back, the layer of cotton wool rolls and turns the body slowly onto its side to give the harrow a new area. Meanwhile, those parts lacerated by the inscription are lying on the cotton wool, which because it has been specially treated, immediately stops the bleeding and prepares the script for further deepening. (*Pointing.*) Here, as the body continues to rotate, prongs on the edge of the harrow then pull the cotton wool from the wounds, throw them into the pit, and the harrow goes to work again. In this way, it keeps making the inscription deeper for 12 hours. For the first six hours, the Condemned goes on living almost as before. He suffers nothing but pain. After two hours, the felt is removed, for at that point, the Condemned has no more energy for screaming. (*Pointing.*) Here, at the head of the bed, warm rice pudding is put in this electrically heated bowl. From this, the Condemned, if he feels like it, can help himself to what he can lap up with his tongue. (*Chuckles.*) No one

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passes up this opportunity! I don't know of a single one, and I have had a lot of experience. He first loses his pleasure in eating around the sixth hour. I usually kneel down at this point and observe the phenomenon. The man rarely swallows the last bit. He merely turns it around in his mouth and spits it into the pit. When he does that, I have to lean to the side or else he'll get me in the face. But how quiet the Condemned becomes around the sixth hour! Even the most stupid of them begin to understand. It starts around the eyes and spreads out from there...a look that could tempt one to lie down with the Condemned under the harrow. Nothing else happens. The Condemned simply begins to decipher the inscription. He purses his lips, as if he is listening. You've seen that it is not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes, but the Condemned deciphers it with his wounds. True, it takes a lot of work. It requires six hours to complete. But then the harrow spits all of him out and throws him into the pit, where he splashes down into the bloody water and cotton wool. Then the judgment is over, and we, the Soldier and I, quickly bury him.

*(The Officer signals the Soldier to proceed. The Soldier cuts through the back of the Prisoner's shirt and trousers with a knife, so that they fall off the Prisoner. The Prisoner tries to grab the falling garments, but the Soldier holds him and shakes the last rags from the Prisoner except for his undergarments [an undershirt and boxers]. [Note: If Prisoner is female, an undershirt, bra, and shorts may be worn.] The Officer turns the apparatus off. Silence. The Soldier positions the Prisoner in a lying position under the harrow. The Prisoner's chains are taken off and straps are fastened in their place. Oddly, the Prisoner looks relieved. The harrow is lowered. The needle tip touches the Prisoner, causing him to shudder. While the Soldier is busy securing the Prisoner's right hand, the Prisoner stretches out his left hand, pointing to where the Traveler is standing. Without taking his eyes off of the Traveler, the Officer keeps looking at him*

*from the side, as if trying to read from his face the impression he was getting of the execution. The Soldier pulls on a strap to tighten it around the Prisoner's wrist but the strap rips. The Soldier holds up the torn strap.)*

SOLDIER: *(To Officer.)* The strap is torn.

OFFICER: *(To Traveler, quickly.)* The machine is very complicated. Now and then, something tears or breaks. Don't let that detract from your overall opinion. Anyway, we have an immediate replacement for the strap. I'll use a chain...even though that will affect the sensitivity of the oscillations for the right arm. *(Putting the chain in place.)* Our resources for maintaining the machine are very limited at the moment. Under the previous Commandant, I had free access to monies specially set aside exclusively for this purpose. There was a storeroom here in which all possible replacement parts were kept. I admit I made extravagant use of it. I mean earlier, not now, with the new Commandant. Now he uses the money for machinery under his own control, and if I ask him for a new strap, he demands the torn one as evidence. The new one doesn't arrive for ten days, and then it's an inferior brand. But how I am supposed to get the machine to work in the meantime without a strap?! No one's concerned about that!

TRAVELER: *(Unsure how to respond.)* I am neither a citizen of this penal colony nor a citizen of the state. I am a foreigner, so I have nothing to say about that. In fact, I do not understand why I am here, for the purpose of my travels is merely to observe and not to alter other people's judicial systems in any way.

OFFICER: But you had letters of reference from high officials and have been welcomed here with great courtesy. The fact that you have been invited to this execution seems to indicate that people are asking for your judgment of this court. This is all the more likely since the Commandant, as you have heard only too clearly, is no supporter of this

process and has maintained an almost hostile relationship with me.

TRAVELER: At this point, though the Condemned is a stranger to me and not a countryman, the way things are turning out... *(Pause. Ponders whether he should give his opinion.)* ...the injustice of the process and the inhumanity of the execution are beyond doubt.

*(Silence. The Officer looks at the Traveler with utter disdain. Continuing the process, the Officer tries to shove a piece of felt into the Prisoner's mouth. The Prisoner, overcome by with nausea, shuts his eyes and gags/throws up. The Officer angrily cries out and quickly yanks the Prisoner up. The Officer tries to turn the Prisoner's head toward the pit, but it is too late. The "vomit" flows down onto the machine. The Prisoner lays his head down and looks peaceful. The Soldier begins to clean up the apparatus with the Prisoner's shirt.)*

OFFICER: *(Angrily.)* This is all the Commandant's fault! *(Mindlessly rattles the brass rods at the front of the apparatus.)* My machine's as filthy as a pigsty! *(With trembling hands he indicates what has happened.)* Haven't I spent hours trying to make the Commandant understand that a day before the execution there should be no more food served?! *(Bitterly.)* But the new, lenient administration has a different opinion. Before the Condemned is led away, the Commandant's wife crams sugary foods down the Condemned's throat. For his whole life, the Condemned has been fed stinking fish, and now he has to eat sweets?! But that would be all right—I'd have no objections—if I had some new felt! I've been asking him for three months now! *(Holding up felt.)* How can anyone put this felt into his mouth without feeling disgusted...the same felt that more than 100 Condemned have bitten on as they were dying! *(The Officer approaches the Traveler, who takes a step backward. The Officer grasps the*

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*Traveler by the hand and pulls him aside.)* I want to speak a few words to you in confidence. May I do that?

TRAVELER: Of course.

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**