

THE GROMMER

Screenplay by
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FADE IN:

EXT. SYRIAN DESERT - DAY

A ROARING SANDSTORM obliterates desert and sky. A shape becomes visible -- a creature lurching forward through the fury of the storm.

It's a human, in billowing black robes. A woman's piercing green eyes stare out a slit in the cowl.

Shielding her eyes from the stinging sand, she makes out the dark mouth of a cave, where a boy in Arabic robes anxiously waves her over. She struggles on, swallowed up by the storm.

INT. CAVE - DAY

Reaching the sanctuary of the cave, she feels her way along the murky tunnel. A lantern flares on. The boy, ABAR, lifts it off its hook.

The woman loosens her cowl. The lantern illuminates DR. JULIE MOORE, 30s, English, cover-girl beauty with a PhD.

The boy leads her down the passage, their macabre shadows dancing on the stone wall.

INT. LARGE CAVE - DAY

Entering a lantern-lit cavern, Abar points across to the weathered man brushing dirt from a large clay jar -- RALSTON.

Julie makes her way through the grid of ankle-high twine that criss-crosses the partially-excavated earth floor. Spotting her, Ralston raises the jar victoriously.

RALSTON

The seal is intact!

Julie's hopes soar.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - DAY

The storm BUFFETS the tent. Julie eagerly watches Ralston pry up the wax seal, then ease the lid off the jar.

His hand trembles with excitement as he pulls out a long, cylindrical silver casing. He passes it to her, then extracts a second silver casing.

Etched in the silver, tiny glyphs of animals gleam in the light. Hundreds upon hundreds of different animals.

Unable to contain her excitement, Julie starts to twist open the cap on her cylinder.

RALSTON

Wait, wait -- the camera!

Ralston hurries from the tent. Julie can't wait. She twists off the top and gingerly slides out a leather scroll.

WIND HOWLS as she unrolls it on the table, revealing rows of ancient characters. She scans the writing. Her enthusiasm is replaced by bitter disappointment.

Ralston returns with a camera and a bottle of champagne. At Julie's discouraging look, the smile freezes on his face.

JULIE

Aramaic.

He's crushed.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - NIGHT

By lantern light, Julie slowly transcribes the two leather scrolls stretched across the table. The champagne bottle sits unopened beside the two silver scroll casings.

Ralston meticulously photographs the collection of minor artifacts laid out on the cot, but his heart isn't in it.

RALSTON

Two months, and all I've come up with is a handful of insignificant artifacts and a boring chronology of life in a small Armenian community in...?

JULIE

First century AD.

RALSTON

Yes, won't the Directors be thrilled.

JULIE

Relax, John. They worship the ground you dig up.

RALSTON

Oh? Then why did they send you to check up on me?

JULIE

Is that what you thought?

RALSTON
 Why else would they send a
 behavioral biologist to a dig site?

JULIE
 I told you, I'm on holidays.

RALSTON
 Really? And who paid the airfare?

Evasive, she concentrates on one of the casings. Something catches her attention. She moves it closer to the light.

A line of ancient cuneiform characters runs the length of the casing, just above the seam. The small characters are badly worn, almost invisible.

RALSTON
 That looks different from the rest.

JULIE
 It's Sumerian.

RALSTON
 (hopeful)
 Sumerian? Then we're talking BC.

JULIE
 Well, the oldest known specimen is
 from 3000 BC. But we should assume
 this is from the same period as the
 scroll -- first century AD.

RALSTON
 Unless...

He stares at her until the penny drops.

JULIE
 ... Unless these aren't the
 original scrolls for the casings.
 In which case...

RALSTON
 ... The casings could be much, much
 older.

Jubilant, Ralston POPS the champagne and pours two glasses.

RALSTON
 Now, how's your Sumerian?

She shakes her head.

RALSTON
Well, you must know someone?

She thinks a moment... then a look of recollection.

RALSTON
You do! Wonderful!

He downs his champagne, but Julie suddenly doesn't feel like drinking.

EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

The sandstorm abated, a radiant moon shines down on a cluster of dark tents. Rakes and shovels poke out from newly-formed sand dunes. A jeep and a battered van are half-buried.

A small, shadowy figure steals through the camp and slips inside Ralston's tent.

INT. RALSTON'S TENT - NIGHT

Ralston is asleep on his cot. The little thief silently fills his bag with artifacts from the table beside the cot.

He reaches for the solitary silver scroll casing -- Ralston grabs his wrist. He spins the boy around.

In the dim light, Ralston recognizes Abar. He's shocked by the boy's betrayal. Abar sees something behind Ralston and draws back. As Ralston turns, a shovel swings down and THUDS into his head. Blood spatters across Abar's face.

EXT. CAMP - DAY

The sun rises over the camp.

INT. RALSTON'S TENT - DAY

Ralston is sprawled on his cot, a pillow over his head. Flies BUZZ. Julie wanders in, bright and chipper.

JULIE
Come along, sleepy-head. Time to go play in the sandbox.

No response. She pulls away the pillow. Ralston's hair is matted with blood. Eyes glazed over.

Julie can't breathe. She struggles to hold herself together. The BUZZING OF FLIES grows unbearably loud.

EXT. CAMP - DAY

Numb, Julie watches men load Ralston's body into a truck. She's barely aware of HAFEZ, an indifferent Syrian official in a sweat-stained suit, scanning photos on Ralston's camera.

HAFEZ

... Sadly, the black market trade in such artifacts is quite lucrative. They may already be in the hands of our local antiquities dealers. A most unscrupulous lot, to be sure. But to commit murder? Surely there is nothing here of such great value? Or... possibly the silver tube you mentioned?

JULIE

Possibly...

HAFEZ

Perhaps if you were to offer a reward? To encourage its return.

JULIE

Sure.... A thousand pounds...

HAFEZ

A thousand? It is valuable, then.

The truck tailgate SLAMS shut, jolting Julie back to the moment. Leery of Hafez's greedy look, she shakes her head.

JULIE

He was a great scientist. I will not have him die for nothing.

HAFEZ

Hafez understands. I shall circulate a photograph --

He stops short, seeing a photo of the two casings.

HAFEZ

There was a second silver tube? I ask because you mentioned only one.

JULIE

I'm sure I said a pair.

His eyes bore into her, searching for a lie. He shrugs.

HAFEZ

It is well left in Hafez's capable hands.

A quick bow and he's gone. Julie stares after him, worried.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - DAY

A local male archaeological GRAD STUDENT watches Julie tip over her cot and dig into the soft dirt with her hands.

JULIE

... No, no proof at all. Call it intuition.

She unearths an object wrapped in a towel and opens it up. It's the second scroll casing.

SYRIAN STUDENT

Eggs in one basket, yes? You English are clever.

JULIE

Except that if I'm right about Hafez, he'll be after this now.

SYRIAN STUDENT

Yes, and your most generous offer of a thousand pounds... he will know he can get five times that amount on the black market. This is a great deal of money to a man such as he.

She stares at the scroll casing, the magnitude of her blunder sinking in.

EXT. CAMP - DAY

Julie strides through camp wearing a backpack. The Student is hot on her heels, carrying her duffle bag.

SYRIAN STUDENT

Please, Dr. Moore! It is too risky!

JULIE

You should reach Halab by nightfall. Tell the authorities what happened.

She tosses the backpack and duffle bag into the battered van, and climbs in. The Student stops her from closing the door.

SYRIAN STUDENT

We should go together. With the scroll.

JULIE

And have them take it as "evidence" and sell to a private collector?

She slams the door. The Student watches her drive off, worried, then hurries to his jeep.

POV THROUGH BINOCULARS

Julie's van speeds away from camp, kicking up dust. The Student's jeep tears off in the opposite direction.

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

Watching from an old military jeep, Hafez takes the binoculars from his eyes.

HAFEZ

Which one will have it?

In the passenger seat, Abar engages in a moment of serious deliberation. Eager to please, he boldly points to the jeep.

ABAR

The man.

Hafez proudly rubs his son's head, then pulls out a rifle. The engine ROARS to life.

EXT. IMPERIAL COLLEGE, LONDON UNIVERSITY - DAY

A flock of pigeons launches into the air in front of a distinguished stone building in South Kensington.

INT. SMALL LECTURE HALL - DAY

An hall is peppered with bored students.

PROFESSOR THORPE (O.S.)

... I can sense from the cloud of despondency which hangs thick in the air that some of you are reexamining your decision to enroll in a class in archaic languages.

At a podium, in a gray flannel suit, is the self-righteous PROFESSOR THORPE. His wildly-colored vest is a vain attempt to prove he's not the stodgy old professor some would claim.

PROFESSOR THORPE

Perhaps it would help if you were to regard texts of ancient languages as intriguing puzzles. Whomever solves them first, reaps the rewards.

But he's met by a sea of indifferent faces. Disappointed his words have had no impact, he checks the clock.

PROFESSOR THORPE

Well, I see that I've droned on long enough to merit today's portion of my piteous salary. Your first papers are due Monday. Attempt to astound me.

He SNAPS his book shut. The students quickly vacate.

As Thorpe reorganizes his notes, he notices a lone figure sitting in the back of the auditorium. Thorpe peers over his glasses to see who it is, but it's too dark to tell.

PROFESSOR THORPE

Fall asleep, did we? A lesser man might feel insulted at that.

As the woman stands and walks down the aisle toward him, Thorpe realizes there's something familiar about her.

JULIE

It would be hard to bruise an ego as large as yours.

Julie enters the light, carrying her duffle bag and backpack. Thorpe is shocked to see her. There's a painful awkwardness and tension between them.

PROFESSOR THORPE

A telephone call would have sufficed had you merely wished to insult me. And I'm quite certain you didn't come to hear me speak. So I am left to assume...
(eyeing the bags)
... you're running away from home.

She struggles to ask something. He senses her discomfort. Relishes it.

PROFESSOR THORPE
 You need my help. Well, well.
 If I'm not mistaken, I believe that
 is one of the seven signs the
 Apocalypse is about to commence.

She bristles.

INT. THORPE'S OFFICE - DAY

Using a magnifying glass, Thorpe examines the cuneiform characters on the scroll casing. Julie peruses his thick volumes on linguistics, anthropology and archaeology.

PROFESSOR THORPE
 I'm quite sure I don't need to
 lecture you on stealing a culture's
 heritage in the name of science.

JULIE
 And yet you just did. Look, I
 didn't come here to be judged.

PROFESSOR THORPE
 Quite right. I didn't mean to
 intrude on your area of expertise.

JULIE
 (stung)
 Can you translate it or not?

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

The dark bowels of a library. Light glows in a small alcove.

Lit by a stained-glass lamp depicting an angel is the stolen scroll casing. The carved desk is littered with pages of scrawled translations of the cuneiform characters.

FATHER MICHAEL, an earnest red-headed priest, is immersed in an ancient gold and silver book. He blots the sweat from his face, then puts his glasses back on. Gathering courage, he turns the page. What he sees sends shivers down his spine.

REFLECTED IN HIS GLASSES -- is a graphic painting of a goat being slaughtered. The image of the monstrous creature doing the slaying is blurred by the distortion of the glass.

For the first time since he was ordained, Father Michael feels the stabbing pangs of terror.

[Contact Keith Davidson to read the entire screenplay.]