

CARAVAN

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Black. A lonely WIND howls.

Slowly, VOICES begin to join the wind. Women WAIL in ritualistic mourning.

The faint sound RISES and RISES, washing over us like we're standing amid crashing ocean waves, a dozen voices SCREAMING in performed agony, until we...

SMASH IN ON:

THE DEVIL.

Or at least a devil. One with many heads, painted in shades of black and blue on a cracked, faded fresco.

If we notice, the devotions at this shrine come from DOZENS OF RELIGIONS.

As we PULL BACK, we see that the shrine is one of many in a jumbled complex, all of them set along the inner wall of the sandblasted town of DUNHUANG.

EXT. DUNHUANG - NIGHT - ESTABLISHING

The small FRONTIER TOWN sits alone on the edge of a great black nothingness. All that surrounds it is barren ground.

LANTERNS burn among the buildings, not enough to fend off the night. Like striking a single match in a darkened house.

SUPERIMPOSE: Western China, 625 C.E.

A FUNERAL PROCESSION winds through the narrow streets. This is the source of the WAILING. WOMEN beat their breasts and TEAR their hair in public shows of grief as they stagger after four PALL BEARERS and a coffin. TOWNSPEOPLE poke their heads out of upstairs windows to look down, lanterns in hand.

The entire town is focused on the loud, eerie spectacle of the funeral, while elsewhere...

EXT. ROOFTOPS - NIGHT

A SHADOW darts across steep rooftops.

The wailing is quiet here, and the only light is a faint silver sheen from the moon.

The shadow makes its way quickly across terra cotta shingles, walking with hands and feet, and stops on the edge of an OPEN-AIR COURTYARD at the center of a large house. The INN.

EXT. COURTYARD - INN - NIGHT

The shadow lowers itself carefully from the edge of the roof, swinging onto the upper walkway which lines the courtyard.

It steps over the railing and climbs down a rain gutter, coming at last to the ground floor.

As it steps into a square of bright MOONLIGHT, we see it better. It's a small figure, slender and slight. It yanks a dark hood from its head, unfurling a tumble of black hair.

This is NASREEN (25).

She looks around the courtyard and decides quickly on a direction. Flitting through a narrow doorway.

INT. INNKEEPER'S ROOM - INN - NIGHT

Dark, stuffy. Wood boards creak in the wind. A fat man--the INNKEEPER--snores on a low cot.

Nasreen sneaks past him, her feet barely touching the floor. Eases open the door at the back of the room.

INT. STORE ROOM - INN - NIGHT

A dusty room piled from floor to ceiling with items lost and confiscated from boarders.

Nasreen leaves the door cracked behind her as she searches the room. Sharp eyes looking for something specific.

There. Her things. She digs through the bundle and comes up with an OCARINA, a small ceramic flute on a leather strap. She slips the strap over her head and tucks the flute in her clothes.

Unseen behind her, faint FIRELIGHT glows in the other room.

INT. INNKEEPER'S ROOM - INN - NIGHT

Nasreen slips back out of the store room. Notices the firelight a moment too late, and freezes in her tracks.

Turns slowly to see the INNKEEPER'S WIFE, holding a candle and staring at her with wide eyes.

For a moment they're locked in a standoff. Both paralyzed. Then a shout EXPLODES FROM THE WIFE'S MOUTH:

INNKEEPER'S WIFE

You! The western whore who owes ten months' rent!

The innkeeper startles awake and falls off the cot. Nasreen uses the distraction to SHOVE past the wife into the hallway.

INT. HALLWAY - INN - NIGHT

The wife SHAKES THE CANDLE after her.

INNKEEPER'S WIFE

*Dirty thief! Your ancestors will
spit on you while you sleep--*

Her husband jostles her aside, lumbering after Nasreen. Nasreen throws herself up a switchback staircase into:

INT. KITCHEN - INN - NIGHT

A small earthenware kitchen. Four enormous pots are propped over an open fire pit at the center of the room.

Just as Nasreen comes through one door, someone else comes in the other. Blocking her escape.

The INNKEEPER'S SON. He's holding a long wooden pole that may once have been a spear, the metal long since rusted away.

He lunges around the pots. Nasreen hops up onto them, dancing over the edges as they WOBBLE under her feet. She jumps down on the far side and RUNS for the door.

WHAM. The pole catches her in the chest, sending her flat on her back. She lands hard, winded.

The innkeeper's son drops the pole and goes to pick up a large MEAT CLEAVER. Looks like he's enjoying himself.

Nasreen struggles onto her stomach, crawling away. Makes it to her feet and trips again, wheezing on her hands and knees.

Watching the son's legs as he stalks towards her...

He steps over the pole.

She uses her feet to twist it between his legs, KNOCKING THEM OUT FROM UNDER HIM. Sending *him* flat on his back.

But he still has the cleaver. And he's getting up. She thinks fast. Kicks the PROPS out from under one of the enormous clay pots. It tilts ominously...

And CRASHES down on the son. Doesn't break. Instead, crushes the son's arm and some of his body, for good measure.

He SCREAMS in agony.

Nasreen scrambles to her feet and dives out the open door.

EXT. COURTYARD - INN - NIGHT

She skirts the exposed courtyard, hauls herself onto the rain gutter and heads for the upper walkway.

Below her, the innkeeper and his wife BURST into the courtyard. The wife hears her son's PAINED MOANS and yells, running for the kitchen. The innkeeper runs for a small GONG. He STRIKES IT, raising the alarm.

EXT. ROOFTOPS - NIGHT

Nasreen makes the rooftops as the GONG rings out behind her.

She trips on the apex of the roof and SKIDS down the slope to the very edge, catching herself at the last moment.

There's a COMMOTION in the street below. A SEARCH PARTY gathering, MEN pouring out of the surrounding buildings with torches and spears. The innkeeper marches out to join them.

Nasreen doesn't wait around. She TAKES OFF again, as fast as her feet will carry her.

Someone SPOTS THE MOTION. Yells, pointing to her. The search party streams after her, pursuing from below.

Nasreen comes to a GAP between two buildings.

The search party hot on her heels.

She doesn't stop, doesn't slow--she reaches the edge of one roof and LEAPS. Over the dark abyss.

Her fingertips *just* catch the next rooftop. Her body SLAMS into the wall. Feet scrabbling over the sandstone.

Knuckles whitening with the effort of holding herself up.

The search party thunders into the alley below, torches throwing her struggle in stark relief.

The men try to impale her with spears, but she's two stories up, just *barely* out of reach.

Her grip starts to slip, fingers giving in...

A spear tip NICKS the bottom of her foot. Death menacing mere inches below. Waiting for her to fall.

Nasreen GRITS HER TEETH. Giving this everything she's got.

Finally, she hauls herself onto the roof.

She sits on her ass for a long moment, catching her breath. Eyes wide. Adrenaline fading.

Then she picks herself up and flees into the night.

CUT TO:

EXT. DUNHUANG - DAWN - ESTABLISHING

In the faint light of dawn, we see more of the landscape surrounding Dunhuang. To the east, a single windswept road stretches back towards the population hubs of ancient China.

To the west a section of the GREAT WALL (JADE GATE) separates this last outpost from a vast expanse of DESERT. Even at this distance, the dunes of the Kumtag loom like mountains.

A CARAVAN--a camel train moving slowly--traverses the dirt road between the town and Jade Gate. Heading toward the west.

This is the westernmost reach of the Chinese SILK ROAD.

EXT. INNER TOWN WALL - DAWN

Nasreen climbs a narrow stairway carved into the inner wall of the town. Settles in as the sun rises.

She watches the caravan lumber towards Jade Gate. The sight plunges her into memory.

INSERT CUT: EXT. ROAD OUTSIDE JADE GATE - FLASHBACK - DAY

A younger Nasreen (17) hurries down the crowded road to Jade Gate. Racing to see someone off.

HER FATHER, ARYA (40s) breaks away from his caravan when he sees her coming. He catches her in a hug, spinning her.

ARYA
*I will be back soon, little fox.
Sooner than ever. Before you even
miss me.*

He presses something into her hand. THE OCARINA.

ARYA (CONT'D)
Play to the wind. I will hear you.

As he turns away, she lunges out to catch his sleeve.

NASREEN

*I'll come here at dawn. Every dawn
until you return.*

Smiling, Arya kisses her forehead in a final goodbye.

*He goes to join the rest of his caravan, leaving his daughter
standing alone on the road.*

Nothing but the ocarina in her hands...

Nasreen runs her fingers over the same ocarina now, speared
by memory. Sun climbing higher in the sky.

Another dawn passed.

She turns away, descending from the wall.

EXT. BUILDING ROOFTOP - DAY

Nasreen now crawls over the roofs in a different capacity.
She's part of a ROOFING CREW, laying shingles on a building
still under construction.

Dust is thick in the air. MEN shout to each other. Nasreen
wipes grimy sweat from her forehead as she spackles down mud.

One of the other men waves for her attention. She puts down
her tools and picks her way over to join him. He points down
at the worksite.

EXT. WORKSITE - DAY

Amidst the hubbub of men doing heavy work, the INNKEEPER
talks to the CONSTRUCTION FOREMAN, exaggerating his woes.

INNKEEPER

I have a right to see her
quartered. My son is nearly dead.
His arm is crushed, it will be
months before he can work again.

The foreman doesn't hesitate. He's got work to finish and
this man is holding him up. He points to the roof.

EXT. BUILDING ROOFTOP - DAY

As the innkeeper looks to the roof, Nasreen flinches back,
out of sight. Without thinking, she hurries over the apex,
ignoring her fellow roofers swearing at her for trampling
through their mud.

Then she drops into the alley and takes off running.

EXT. DUNHUANG TOWN SQUARE - DAY

This is the center of activity for the town. Loud, hectic, but it has a strange order to it. A routine.

On a platform at the center of the square, a man is being EXECUTED. Blood pours from the wood table in quantities that are more like water.

The EXECUTIONER works with an enormous AXE, cleaving him limb from limb. There's no ceremony to it. He works like a butcher, bones crunching.

His victim twitches, MOANING, somehow still alive.

No one in the crowd pays the execution any attention--except NASREEN. She watches through a gap in the human flow, eyes wide. PETRIFIED. This is what could happen to her.

She snatches her hood up over her face.

EXT. CARAVANSERAI COURTYARD - LATER

The town *caravanserai*--an inn with a large inner courtyard, intended to house caravans and their camels. Fabric strung up overhead blocks out the sun.

CAMEL TRAINS get ready to head out through the arched door, MERCHANTS loading crates and sacks, queues of MEN jostling to sign on to outgoing caravans. Not all of them are Chinese--many are Turkic, Persian, North African.

Nasreen reaches the front of a WORK QUEUE and finds herself before a scowling BASH (foreman/caravan manager).

BASH

No women.

NASREEN

My father taught me to pull camels.

The bash waves her away, looking back to his scroll.

BASH

No women.

NASREEN

Please. I need to get out of town.

The men in line behind her jostle her out of the way, forcing their way to the front.

She turns to the next queue, face hard. Determined.

INT. CANTINA - DAY

A dim basement room crowded with men. Someone plucks at a zither (Chinese string instrument). Breakfast is beer and rice wine and "cold food powder," a psychoactive drug (acid meets cocaine).

At secluded table, MICHAEL and SIMON watch in distaste as GURAK, a man with more hair than skin, snorts traces of cold-food powder from his dirty fingers.

MICHAEL is dressed in the long robes of a Byzantine monk, his hands clasped primly in his lap. Very out of place.

His companion SIMON is better suited to their surroundings. Marco Polo minus the funny hat. An oasis of calm in a sea of frantic action. He holds a BAMBOO CANE. He doesn't need it to walk, but it will never leave his side.

SIMON

I was told you'd crossed the desert before.

He's not talking to the drug-addled Gurak--he's talking to Gurak's boss KADIR. They're both SOGDIANS--they come from an entire people who specialize in transporting goods.

But KADIR, unlike Gurak, is the 7th-century equivalent of a cowboy. A man who can get the job done, whatever the job is.

KADIR

Once. But I was only a boy. It was chance that kept me alive, not skill.

SIMON

Even so. You're the only bash in town who hasn't turned us away yet.

KADIR

For good reason. If you're looking to die, there are faster ways.

SIMON

We're looking to avoid the main road. The customs checkpoints.

KADIR

Then let me give you some advice. It's much cheaper to pay the Tang than to pay the desert.

Michael leans over to mutter something in Simon's ear. Simon nods, turning back to Kadir.

SIMON

We're prepared to pay ten times
your usual passenger fee.

Michael shoots him a glare. That's not what he said. Simon ignores him. He knows how to read the room.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Ten times.

A beat. Kadir hesitates. The offer is tempting, except...

KADIR

In the whole of my life, I can
count on one hand the number of men
I've seen make the crossing. Much
sand has been made from the bones
of my friends.

He drains his rice wine, sets the empty cup on the table, and stands to leave.

KADIR (CONT'D)

My wife is with child. And even if
I had no wife, I would not do this.

He walks away. Gurak is left at the table with Simon and Michael. He gives them an awkward smile.

GURAK

Wait here.

He gets up and goes after his boss. Simon and Michael turn to watch. When he's out of earshot:

MICHAEL

Ten times his fee is twice what the
Emperor gave us.

SIMON

I thought your God always provided.

MICHAEL

My God can't fashion gold from thin
air.

SIMON

Perhaps you ought to be in the
market for a new god, then.

MICHAEL

Simon.

SIMON

The Emperor will pay whatever we like, when we get to Byzantium.

GURAK AND KADIR

stand just inside the door that leads to the stairs, heads bowed in low consultation.

*Note: All dialogue in **bold** is in Sogdian, subtitled.*

GURAK

We do this, and we won't have to work for two seasons. You can see your child grow.

Kadir shakes his head. Frowning, deep in thought.

KADIR

We do this, and we won't return. The crossing is a type of madness. One I lost my brother to.

GURAK

There's a navigator who can take us. He usually travels north of here, but he's taken caravans from Dunhuang before.

KADIR

He's a liar, and you're a fool if you believe him.

GURAK

I've seen him walk into the desert with my own eyes. And I've seen him walk out again.

Kadir considers him for a long moment. Gurak might be a mess, but they've been through a lot together. He trusts him.

The question is whether he trusts him *enough*.

Off Kadir's conflicted expression--

CUT TO:

EXT. DUNHUANG TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Simon and Michael watch Kadir and Gurak walk away. Clear from their faces they've been turned down.

MICHAEL

Perhaps we've chosen the wrong
course. Perhaps the main road.

Simon nods to the executioner's platform.

SIMON

Only if you'd like to end up there.

Michael blanches at the reminder. But sticks to his guns.

MICHAEL

Simon.

SIMON

Michael.

MICHAEL

We can't afford to linger. This
town is crawling with Tang.

Simon takes him by the shoulders. Looks him in the eye.

SIMON

In the five years since we set out
from Byzantium, have I ever steered
you wrong?

MICHAEL

Yes. That night in Chang'an, with
the fireworks.

SIMON

Apart from that.

Michael thinks for a moment. Can't come up with anything.

MICHAEL

I suppose you haven't.

SIMON

*I haven't. And I won't now. We're
going to cross that desert, and by
this time next year we'll be home.
I swear it.*

They meet eyes. Michael relaxes, just a bit. Trusting him.

MICHAEL

Home.

INT. KADIR'S HOUSE - EVENING

A humble abode, two rooms, most of the space cluttered with the spoils of Kadir's trade. Tapestries, dusty glass lamps, CHIMES that sing in the breeze through the window.

Kadir enters. Lingers inside the door, watching the scene in the kitchen-pit.

His wife SHAYN slaves over dinner. Kneading dough. Sweaty, difficult work--especially for a woman as pregnant as she is.

She looks up, notices her husband. Smiles.

SHAYN

About time, wanderer.

Kadir's answering smile is tired. He crosses the room to kiss her hello. She hums, enjoying it for a beat, then pushes him off.

SHAYN (CONT'D)

**Go. Wash up. I won't have you
smelling of camel at our table.**

KADIR

You married me smelling of camel.

She snorts and pushes him again.

INT. BEDROOM - KADIR'S HOUSE - LATER

Kadir settles into bed with Shayn pillowed against his chest. She catches his hands, pulls them to the swell of her belly.

SHAYN

Tell her a story.

KADIR

We don't know that it's a girl.

SHAYN

**Maybe you don't know. I know. I can
sense it.**

KADIR

You can't sense it.

Shayn nudges him, impatient.

SHAYN

**At this rate when our daughter
enters the world all she'll know is
the sound of your bickering--**

KADIR
(chuckles)
Alright, alright.

He runs his hands over her belly. Voice gentle, he begins the story:

KADIR (CONT'D)
Brave Rustam, in his tiger skin, on his valiant red horse, rode out to meet one hundred demons riding one hundred elephants--and leading them was the king of all devils, who men call *Druj*--

SHAYN
***Druj*? You'll scare her.**

Kadir gives her a fond, amused look.

KADIR
It's only a story, my heart.

SHAYN
It's not *only* a story.

KADIR
Peace. Rustam wins at the end.

SHAYN
Now you've ruined it, too. You've told her how it ends.

KADIR
(teasing)
Oh *hush*, woman. Perhaps it will end differently this time.

Shayn relaxes back against him, smiling.

SHAYN
Go on, then.

CUT TO:

INT. CANTINA - NIGHT

A different atmosphere at night than during the day. Rowdy, packed to bursting with men getting drunk after a long day of work. PROSTITUTES from the local brothel sit in laps, chat up potential customers, faces painted.

NASREEN lurks among them with her hood up. Swiping unattended purses. So far her pocket is full of only copper pieces.

She spots SILVER COINS on a man's belt, strung with a thin rope through the square holes at the center of the coins.

She slips a knife into her hand.

Sidles up behind the man and slits the rope without him ever knowing she's there. The sliced rope feeds the silver pieces out into her palm.

As she turns to escape, the man GRABS HER ARM.

It's SIMON.

Nasreen stares up at him with wide, startled eyes. Afraid. He sees the vulnerability. Softens. Instantly taken with her.

SIMON

Put that knife away, and I'll buy
you some food.

Nasreen hesitates for a beat. Arm still caught in his grip.

NASREEN

Why?

Simon opens her hand and takes back the coins. Returning them to his belt.

SIMON

My traveling companion went to find
a church. I could use the company.

He leaves one silver piece in her palm. She closes her hand around it.

EXT. FOOD COUNTER - NIGHT

The 7th-century equivalent of a restaurant. An OLD MAN serves soup out of vats set into a stone counter. Simon and Nasreen sit on a wall, slurping and skewering veggies with knives.

SIMON

So. What have you got against
making money the old fashioned way?

NASREEN

What, by spreading my legs in a
brothel?

SIMON

No, I didn't mean--

Nasreen snorts, stabbing a carrot. She was kidding.

NASREEN

I know what you meant. I don't have time to find a job. I need to get out of town, no *bash* will hire me.

SIMON

Running from the law, are we?

NASREEN

Running from the butcher's block.

Simon regards her in the half-light. A kindred spirit.

SIMON

Funnily enough, I find myself in much the same position.

NASREEN

With that much silver, you can buy any *bash* you like.

SIMON

No *bash* wants to go where I want them to take me.

A beat. Nasreen's expression is wary.

NASREEN

Where is it you want to go?

SIMON

Into the desert. Across.

Nasreen half-expected that answer, but it still startles her.

NASREEN

They were right to turn you down, then. People who go into the desert don't generally come out.

SIMON

So I've heard.

NASREEN

But you still want to go. Why?

SIMON

You ask that a lot, don't you?

NASREEN

Ask what a lot?

SIMON

Why.

A beat. Nasreen pokes at her soup. Decides not to respond. She drains the rest of her bowl and hands it to Simon.

NASREEN

Thank you for the food. And for not turning me in.

She hops down off the wall, turning to leave.

SIMON

Wait.

(she waits)

You should come with me. When I find myself a *bash*. I'll hire you.

Nasreen gives him the same smile you'd give a puppy trying to climb a stair that was too high. Charmed by the futility.

NASREEN

I'm looking to leave town. Not leave this life entirely.

(beat)

Goodnight.

Simon watches her go. Gaze lingering like a touch.

INT. BEDROOM - KADIR'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The dead of night. Chimes sing softly in the window. Kadir is the only one awake. Shayn sleeps at his side.

He holds one of her hands in his. Running his fingertips over the callouses, the lime burns. The marks of a washer woman.

Shayn's eyes open. She watches him for a long moment, sleepy and comfortable. Then:

SHAYN

I don't mind it. Having to work.

Kadir brings her hand to his mouth and kisses her knuckles.

KADIR

I mind it.

Shayn sighs. This is a conversation they've had before.

SHAYN

My heart...

KADIR

In Panjikent you lived in an enormous house. You had droves of servants.

(MORE)

KADIR (CONT'D)

You never had to knead your own bread, or waste your day hunched over a trough with someone else's washing.

(beat)

In Panjikent our daughter could've seen that story on a great mural in your father's house.

SHAYN

(terse)

In Panjikent, we would have no daughter. My father would not have allowed it.

Softening, she runs her fingertips over his face. He closes his eyes under her touch.

KADIR

I want to be able to give you the things you deserve.

SHAYN

I deserve you, sleeping beside me. Can you give me that?

Kadir turns his face to kiss her palm.

KADIR

Always.

They settle back into bed, Shayn wrapped in his arms. But the conflict lingers in his eyes.

CUT TO:

EXT. INNER TOWN WALL - DAWN

Like she does every dawn, Nasreen climbs the narrow stairway.

But this dawn is different. She STILLS as she hears something above her, like a rabbit that senses a fox.

ON TOP OF THE WALL

The INNKEEPER waits with the EXECUTIONER and a few of the men who chased Nasreen in the opening scene.

We join them mid-conversation:

INNKEEPER

...not long now. I'm told she comes here every morning.

The executioner grunts in acknowledgement.

Idly, he steps to the edge of the wall, peering down at the stairs, just as...

ON THE STAIRS

Nasreen flattens herself back into a shaded alcove. Holding perfectly still. Barely breathing.

After a long beat, the executioner withdraws.

Nasreen flees on silent feet.

INT. CANTINA - MORNING

Kadir finds Simon in the back, bleary and waking himself up with a cup of tea. Simon startles to see him.

SIMON

Kadir--

KADIR

Ten times my usual fee.

Hope blooms on Simon's face. He tamps it down.

SIMON

Yes. Ten times. As we discussed.

Kadir nods once, then turns to go. Simon scrambles after him, bringing his teacup.

SIMON (CONT'D)

How long until we can leave?

KADIR

Depends.

Kadir pushes out the door, Simon hot on his heels.

SIMON

On what?

EXT. CARAVANSERAI COURTYARD - DAY

A group of 30 SOGDIAN MEN--rough, salt of the earth types--stand beside a loaded train of camels. One by one they break off from the group and walk away, until only 10 remain.

REVERSE SHOT: Kadir, Simon and Michael watch them go. Kadir gives Simon a look that says *See?*

KADIR

Depends on how many of my men quit,
when I tell them where we're going.

A second group of men arrives and begins unloading the camel train, carrying away baskets of jade, sacks of powdery red spices, crates of rattling porcelain.

Michael is bewildered.

MICHAEL

What's happening now?

KADIR

The merchants whose cargo I was
supposed to carry have all pulled
out. They don't want to risk losing
their investment.

MICHAEL

What does that mean?

Kadir goes direct the men, leaving Simon to answer for him.

SIMON

It means he'll have to find a new
client, on top of finding new men
to pull the camels.

MICHAEL

I thought we were his clients?

SIMON

We're passengers. You can't fund a
caravan on just passenger fees.

He leaves Michael and goes to join Kadir and Gurak. Catches the tail end of their muttered conversation:

KADIR

**You find the navigator. Bring him
to meet us at the--**

SIMON

How many more men do we need?

Kadir gives him a considering look. He wasn't expecting the white man to understand what's happening.

KADIR

More than we can get recruiting.

SIMON

So how are you going to get them?

Kadir looks like he has an idea. But not one he likes.

CUT TO:

INT. SILK TRADING PAVILION - DAY

Gauzy curtains rustle in the breeze. Dozens of WEAVING WOMEN work at silk looms. Their work is extremely delicate. The silk thread looks like spiderwebs.

LI-PENG lords over them from his desk. Ink brush still in his hand, but he's paused his work to give his attention to...

KADIR, who's been left standing, like a petitioner appearing before a king.

KADIR

I understand you value profit above all else. I'm here to offer it to you. More than you'll get from any other bash this season.

Li-Peng replaces his brush beside the inkwell. Listening.

KADIR (CONT'D)

No export tariffs. No bribes paid to the Turks at Kashgar. And we'll arrive at Samarkand in half the time. You'll be in Isfahan by the end of the year.

LI-PENG

You plan to cross the desert.

KADIR

I've done it before.

It's not what he told Simon and Michael--a half-truth--but Li-Peng doesn't know that. He steeples his fingers, tapping them on his lips.

LI-PENG

I must admit some...confusion. Why would you bring this to me?

KADIR

Some of my men weren't as inspired by the prospect as I'd hoped.

LI-PENG

Ah. You would like me to solve your staffing issue.

Kadir nods. Li-Peng pushes back his chair, gathering his silk sleeves close to his arms.

LI-PENG (CONT'D)
I must discuss this with my
advisor. You will wait here.

MOMENTS LATER

Kadir waits. Through the gap of a blowing curtain, he can see Li-Peng in the back room, in conference with a TANG DYNASTY OFFICIAL. Recognizable by his headgear, a strange black cap with flaps on the side (*chuijiao putou*).

The official's eyes cut to Kadir--narrowed in SUSPICION--then away. Kadir unsettled by the look.

Li-Peng comes back out. Pulling the curtain shut behind him.

LI-PENG
You have your men. We leave first
thing in the morning.

Kadir nods his thanks.

EXT. DUNHUANG TOWN SQUARE - EVENING

Sun sinking in the sky. Nasreen chews stolen bread in the shadows of a POTTER'S STALL, looking out at the crowd.

Clay churns on the wheels. A dizzy sound. Her eyes are frantic, paranoid. They snag on something in the human flow. A face we don't recognize, *but she does*.

INSERT MATCH CUT: EXT. ROAD TO JADE GATE - FLASHBACK - DAY

As Nasreen's father turns away from her, THE SAME FACE stares down from atop a camel.

Nasreen bursts back into the square.

Slaloming through people like a fish upstream. Using her small size to her advantage. She pursues her target into...

EXT. ALLEY - DUNHUANG TOWN SQUARE - EVENING

A steep alley. Uneven stairs leading down to parts unknown.

Nasreen catches up with her man, grabs his clothes and SLAMS him against the wall.

His eyes are wide in the dark. Whites shining. Terrified of a girl half his size. This is DIVASH.

DIVASH

Please, I have nothing worth stealing. I have no money. Everyone in this town has more money than me-

She clamps her hand over his mouth, shutting him up.

NASREEN

Eight years ago, you took my father's caravan into the desert. His name was Arya. *Tell me what happened to him.*

DIVASH

Do you know how many caravans I've traveled with?

Divash finds his courage and SHOVES HER OFF. She SLAMS into the far wall of the alley.

DIVASH (CONT'D)

I don't know what happened.

NASREEN

You're lying.

DIVASH

I don't remember your father!

She grabs him by the shirt again, getting in his face.

NASREEN

Stop *lying* to me! He went into the desert with you and never returned!

DIVASH

So? How do you know he didn't just *abandon you?*

On Nasreen as this lands. Her hand loosens on his shirt. All the fight knocked out of her.

NASREEN

He wouldn't...

A man appears at the end of the alley.

GURAK

HEY!

It's GURAK. Looking for his navigator. And he's found him being assaulted. He pulls a KNIFE and stalks toward them.

Before he can reach them, Nasreen flees.

EXT. ROOFTOPS - MINUTES LATER

Nasreen slips over the roofs on the edge of the town square. Spying on Divash and Gurak as they confer below.

They come to an agreement. Clasp forearms. Nasreen frowns. As they move away, she shadows them.

INT. ZOROASTRIAN TEMPLE - NIGHT

An ETERNAL FLAME burns in a fire pit beneath a stone gazebo, an offering to the god Ahura Mazda.

Kadir, Gurak, Divash and the rest of the SOGDIAN MEN stand in solemn contemplation of the flame. Faces cast in flickering orange light.

Nasreen lingers in the shadows at the outskirts of the group, watching Divash with mistrustful eyes.

KADIR

**Dawn will bring us into the desert.
Many men have walked before us.
Their bones have marked the way.**

Across the fire, SIMON and MICHAEL arrive. Simon sees Nasreen through the shroud of flame.

KADIR (CONT'D)

**Ahura Mazda will light the path. We
will carry him with us and he will
shelter us from Druj.**

Simon appears silently beside Nasreen. She doesn't startle. She noticed him coming.

SIMON (SOTTO)

Decided to leave this life
entirely, have we?

Nasreen shoots him a glare. He holds up his hands in surrender. Settles in next to her, watching the proceedings.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Do you understand what they're
saying?

Nasreen nods. As Kadir continues in Sogdian, she translates quietly for Simon:

NASREEN

They're praying for protection from
something called *Druj*.

SIMON

"Druj"?

Nasreen's eyes on Divash. Distracted from the conversation.

NASREEN

An evil that lurks in the desert. A
devil that steals men's souls.

Simon glances at the men around them.

SIMON

And they believe that? It's no more
than superstition.

Nasreen looks pointedly at Michael, who's worrying a CRUCIFIX
between his thumb and forefinger. Simon gets it.

KADIR

meets the eyes of each of his men in turn, testing their
mettle. They're nervous, but resolved. A band of brothers.
Intrepid explorers, about to go over the edge of the world.

KADIR

**Thirst will not shake us. Fear will
not divide us.**

(beat)

The desert will not swallow us.

He nods to one of his men. The man dips a TORCH in the
eternal flame, splitting it into a portable FIRE VESSEL.

NASREEN

still focused on Divash as he bows his head before the flame.
With an effort, she pulls her eyes away. Turns to Simon.

NASREEN

Your navigator...

SIMON

I'm assured he's the only man for
the job. In the last eight years
he's guided six caravans on the
crossing, and he hasn't lost a
single one. He's the only man who
knows the way.

Nasreen knows that's not true. Her eyes go back to Divash.
She knows he's up to something. She just doesn't know what.

But she will.

NASREEN
(to Simon)
Alright. When do we leave?

Simon smiles.

CUT TO:

EXT. CARAVANSERAI COURTYARD - MORNING

Our caravan prepares to head out in the pre-dawn dim.

150 BACTRIAN CAMELS are tied in ten files of a fifteen camels each. Each file is handled by a Sogdian CAMEL-PULLER.

Ten CHINESE MEN load SILK SKEINS in woven baskets onto the camels' backs, under the sharp direction of LI-PENG. The Tang Dynasty Official lingers nearby.

Many of the men rub cold-foed powder into their gums or their nostrils, waking themselves up.

Simon leans heavily on his bamboo cane as he sips a steaming cup of tea.

Nasreen slips up beside him. Hood down.

NASREEN
I hope you're bringing something
stronger than that.

Simon gives her a smile. Nods to a barrel of RICE WINE being lashed to a camel.

SIMON
I believe our Sogdian friends have
that covered.

A commotion in the camel files. One of the Sogdians drops his lead. Shaking his head and backing away from his companions. Like he's seen a ghost.

KADIR tries to talk him back to the file. The man won't go. He shoves Kadir's hands away. Stumbles, falls. Pushes Kadir away again when he tries to help him. Runs off into town.

Silence in his absence. Kadir straightens. Trying to maintain his dignity in front of his men.

His gaze falls on Nasreen.

KADIR
You. You're here to pull camels?

Nasreen nods. Kadir holds out the lead to her. She takes it.

DIVASH watches her warily. She stares back. Challenging.

EXT. ROAD TO JADE GATE - MORNING

Dozens of caravans--THOUSANDS OF CAMELS--stream out of Dunhuang, heading for the nearby Great Wall and Jade Gate. Dust kicked up around them like a cloud come to earth.

Into the air rises a discordant chorus of hoofbeats, jangling cargo, camels moaning and snorting, men shouting, singing, talking, laughing. An *astonishing* amount of noise.

NASREEN guides her file of fifteen camels calmly through the pandemonium. She's cool, calm. She's done this before.

The Great Wall emerges out of the dust before her. So large it feels more like a geologic structure than a man-made one.

TANG SOLDIERS man the watchtowers, spear tips and helmets bristling above the ramparts. Faceless at this distance. A looming specter of imperial power.

The caravans funnel through a small, dark tunnel in the Wall. JADE GATE. The one door between China and the unsettled wilds of the rest of the world.

As our caravan passes into the tunnel, Nasreen notices LI-PENG's camel, with a curtained litter on top, pulled off to the side. Li-Peng leans out, talking with the TANG OFFICIAL.

There's something strange about the interaction, but before Nasreen can put her finger on *what*...

...she plunges into the claustrophobic dark of Jade Gate.

EXT. BEYOND JADE GATE - MORNING

On the other side of the gate, there is *nothing*. No roads, no towns, no vegetation. Just barren earth and towering dunes.

Most of the caravans turn south, on the main route. Some turn north, skirting the desert in the other direction.

Only our caravan keeps STRAIGHT ON. From above they look like ants that have gotten lost from the group. Marching towards nothing but emptiness.

NASREEN

pulls her file to a halt, looking back at the Great Wall. An odd sense that this is the last time she'll see it.

She looks away. Clucks, getting her camels back in motion.
As the long train of the caravan trickles into the desert...

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 1.

CUT TO:

EXT. KUMTAG DUNE SEA - DAY

The otherworldly hum of SINGING SAND zings through the valley between the dunes.

Wind sprays sand from the crests like ocean waves. White sun glares out of a sapphire sky.

The ETERNAL FLAME swings back and forth in its bowl, mounted on a camel's back.

Li-Peng rides sequestered in his litter. He's the only one on a camel. Everyone else is on foot.

At the head of the group are Kadir and Divash. Heads bowed beneath thick desert head wraps.

Nasreen has her face covered against the cold wind, walking tilted against it. She clucks and nudges her lead camel, visually checking on the others as she goes. This is difficult, involved work.

But she is capable of it. She's *good* at it.

EXT. KUMTAG DUNE SEA - NIGHT

The caravan has made camp for the night. The singular sign of life in a vast plain of darkness. A large CAMPFIRE burns at the center of a ring of low, sturdy TENTS.

The camels are parked a few meters outside the ring, hunkered down, lying in a close huddle.

The wind has stopped, the sand fallen silent. The only sound on earth seems to be the snapping fire...

EXT. CAMP - KUMTAG DUNE SEA - NIGHT

...and the Sogdians, SINGING a desert shanty.

They dance the *huxuan wu*, a fast, whirling dance with lots of arms and legs. GURAK is especially drunk. The Chinese watch, laughing around the mouths of wineskins, clapping along.

Nasreen and Simon are enjoying the spectacle.

SIMON
What are they singing?

Beside them, Michael looks a bit ill.

NASREEN
I think if I told you, your friend
might faint.

Simon laughs. Nasreen *almost* laughs, smiling.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Much later. The campfire is nothing but low embers, and all is quiet. Nasreen ducks into the aisle between two tents, heading back to bed.

Someone GRABS HER BY THE HAIR.

She KICKS HIS LEGS. They go down grappling in the sand. She ELBOWS his ribs and scrambles away.

Leaps to her feet. Adrenaline pumping.

The man is DIVASH. Eyes hateful in the moonlight. He staggers up as well. Clutching his ribs.

DIVASH
I don't understand why you're here.

NASREEN
If you won't tell me the truth
about what happened to my father,
then you'll show me.

He backs away from her. Slowly. Then turns and flees.

EXT. KUMTAG DUNE SEA - DAY

The caravan has halted for a break. Men walk up and down the files, checking their loads.

Nasreen bends over a camel's hoof like a farrier changing a horse's shoe, lancing a blister. The animal groans and leans all its weight on her, trying to get free. She holds on.

As the blister finally gives, squirting all over her hand...

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 2.

Nasreen swears, wiping the pus on her skirts. Mops sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

SIMON

shares a waterskin with Kadir at the front of the pack. Kadir stops him with a wordless gesture as he starts to chug.

Simon realizes his mistake. *Water is scarce.* He caps the skin and replaces it on his belt.

DIVASH

is busy examining his own shadow, and the position of the sun. Kadir walks up beside him.

DIVASH

It will be five more days to the oasis.

KADIR

This morning you said it would be three.

DIVASH

The desert had other plans. We're traveling slower than I expected. We won't reach the oasis until we pass through the dune sea.

Kadir frowns back at the caravan. The 150 camels and 20-odd men under his care. Doing the mental calculations.

KADIR

We'll have to stop watering the camels until then.

Simon joins them.

SIMON

Problem?

KADIR

No. No problem.

(to Divash)

You'll get a more exact position tonight. If we stray off-course, I want to know before it's too late.

Divash nods. He tilts his head back, squinting at the sun.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP - KUMTAG DUNE SEA - NIGHT

The night sky, alight with a billion stars. Brighter than we've ever seen them in modern day. Like holes in the cosmos.

Divash, bundled in warm clothes, scrutinizes the position of Polaris and several other constellations. He consults no instruments, no maps. It's all in his head.

He turns to Kadir, who's waiting for his verdict.

DIVASH

We're on course. Everything's fine.

Kadir stares at him for a long minute. As if realizing that all their lives rest on this man.

Finally, he nods.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP - KUMTAG DUNE SEA - MORNING

Everything is covered in a thin crust of frost.

Nasreen emerges from the Sogdian tent. Her felt boots crunch on a carpet of snow.

The dunes rising around the camp look like they're coated in powdered sugar. It might be pretty, but it's fucking cold.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 7.

Nasreen pulls her hood up and heads towards the camels.

AMONG THE CAMELS

The camels lay with their heads turned in and their backs turned out, shaggy fur stiff with snow.

Nasreen and the other camel-pullers move among them, using their hands and their breath to thaw the camels' long eyelashes. The animals huff and spit, no happier to be awake than the humans.

Someone stands over Nasreen. She looks up. SIMON.

SIMON

Can I help?

A beat. Nasreen nods.

NASREEN

Like this.

She shows him how to cup the camel's eye between his hands and blow into the funnel. He crouches by the next camel.

INT. "OASIS" WELL - DAY

Deep in a WELL, a bucket PLUNGES through a thin layer of ice and sinks into inky black water.

EXT. "OASIS" WELL - DAY

The "oasis" is not your traditional middle-of-the-desert paradise. On the edge of the dune sea, where shifting sands give way to hard, packed earth, there is a hole in the ground covered with a wooden board. A WELL, dug by travelers of old.

The men pull up bucket after bucket of water, distributing it among their waterskins. The camels drink from long wooden troughs.

Aside from the slosh of water, the complaints of the camels, and the low voices of men, the desert is EERILY QUIET.

MICHAEL pours a small amount of water into a vial around his neck. Bows his head, lips moving as he CONSECRATES it.

NASREEN watches him as she handles her camels. Simon walks up, hands her back her waterskin, filled.

NASREEN

I didn't think his kind liked to
leave their enclosures.

Simon follows her gaze to his friend.

SIMON

On the contrary. Monks are some of
the best-traveled men in the
Empire. I was sent to be his guide,
but more often than not over the
last half a decade, he's ended up
acting as mine.

NASREEN

You never said what you were doing
so far from Byzantium.

SIMON

Didn't I?

He smiles at her, then spots Li-Peng approaching Michael. His smile vanishes.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Excuse me. He may be well-traveled,
but his Chinese leaves something to
be desired.

He goes to join Michael and Li-Peng. Intercepting whatever conversation they're about to have.

Nasreen frowns, watching. Something about Simon's demeanor snags like a loose tooth in her mind.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

The scant protection the sand dunes offered from the wind is gone. It sweeps across the flat plains of the Taklamakan as a veritable gale. Tents whip like flags. A Sogdian tends the Eternal Flame nervously, packing it with dried dung.

The cooking fire burns low over its embers, flickering in and out of existence. There's no singing, no dancing.

Li-Peng finds Nasreen hunched over the remains of her food.

LI-PENG

You speak the Sogdian language?

Nasreen looks up, startled. After a beat, nods.

MOMENTS LATER

Nasreen stands beside Li-Peng as he speaks to a Sogdian with a burn scar on one half of his face (YUSI). It's not a friendly conversation.

LI-PENG

I know you have visited Chang'an.
Your friends have told me this.

Nasreen translates in Sogdian. Then, as Yusi answers, she translates his reply for Li-Peng:

NASREEN

He says that's true. He was part of
a trade delegation. He thinks two
or three seasons ago.

LI-PENG

Tell him I know what he stole.

Nasreen hesitates, then translates. Yusi frowns, but Li-Peng isn't done yet.

LI-PENG (CONT'D)

Tell him I know he did not act
alone. The Tang Dynasty is prepared
to be merciful, if he gives up his
accomplices.

Nasreen translates. Yusi's look of confusion only grows. He babbles back in Sogdian, too fast for Nasreen to catch.

NASREEN

I don't think he knows what you're talking about.

Enraged, Li-Peng GRABS Yusi. Nasreen startles away.

LI-PENG

He knows what I'm talking about.

Something gleams at Yusi's throat. A hooked blade on the end of a chain--a *kyoketsu-shoge*, a mean Japanese weapon.

LI-PENG (CONT'D)

Tell me whose idea it was to cross the desert.

Yusi is terrified. Not a hint of recognition on his face.

Li-Peng jostles him, drawing blood.

LI-PENG (CONT'D)

Tell me.

KADIR (O.S.)

Put him down.

Every man is on his feet, watching the altercation. They move out of Kadir's way.

KADIR (CONT'D)

You do whatever you like to your own men. But that's *my* man, so *put him down.*

For a tense moment, Kadir and Li-Peng lock eyes. If one of them doesn't back down it's going to come to blows.

Then Li-Peng relents. He drops Yusi. His *kyoketsu-shoge* goes back on his belt. But the tension remains.

CUT TO:

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

The caravan trundles on under the white winter sun. Eternal Flame still burning. Men buried beneath furs, exposed cheeks frost-nipped. A few of the Chinese play a call and response traveling game as they go.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 11.

Nasreen watches Divash. Like keeping an eye on a snake in the grass.

A shout goes up, alerting the caravan to something ahead.

It's an incongruous sight, almost like a mirage.

The RUINS OF A CITY cast dark shadows on the sand. They're ancient, long since crumbled, but enough walls and columns remain standing that it's clear what this was.

The caravan passes among piles of stone. Staring silently up at the remains.

This must have been a metropolis of thousands. Now it's deserted. Nothing is alive. Nothing has left a trace.

Except a MESSAGE, carved into one of the walls.

The men stop to gather around it. It's written in Sogdian--it causes a ripple in those men who can decipher it.

Simon finds Nasreen in the crowd.

SIMON

What does it say?

She shakes her head.

NASREEN

I don't know. I speak the language,
but I can't write it.

Kadir forces his way to the front of the pack, wanting to see the message for himself. He stops in front of it.

The characters are jagged, carved without skill. Punctuated with a handprint that was once crimson.

Once Kadir reads, his attention turns to his men. Wary. Watching their reactions.

He's right to be wary. They look *spooked*.

One man, MULLA, shoulders his way to the front.

MULLA

**We should not be here when the sun
goes down. This place is touched by
evil.**

There are nods at his words. People agree.

Kadir senses that to argue with Mulla would pit him against his own men. So he nods. Raises his voice to address them:

KADIR

Move out!

Nasreen catches up with Kadir as the crowd breaks up.

NASREEN

What is this place?

Kadir glances at her. About to dismiss her, but:

KADIR

A place where *druj* dwells.

NASREEN

You believe that?

KADIR

(beat)

My men do. That's enough.

He turns his back on her, returning to his men.

INT. SOGDIAN TENT - DAWN

Early gray light bleeds under the canvas of the tent. Nasreen wakes to a commotion outside.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAWN

Five Sogdians are preparing to head out with a small group of camels. Kadir argues with them in low, tense tones.

Nasreen emerges from the tent, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Across the aisle of sand, Simon and Michael emerge from their own tent, still dressed for sleep.

SIMON

What's going on?

Nasreen strains to hear to the quiet argument.

NASREEN

They're leaving.

MICHAEL

Leaving? With Kadir's camels?

NASREEN

Not all the camels are his. They want to turn back while they still have enough water to reach the last oasis.

SIMON

Why?

Nasreen shakes her head. She doesn't know.

More and more men emerge from their tents. Watching in silence. A strange sort of vigil.

One of the departing men goes to the Eternal Flame, splitting it with a torch. Lighting a second fire vessel.

As the splinter group rides away, camels lumbering towards the razor-sharp horizon...

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 12.

Kadir turns back to face his remaining men. Five Sogdians and Gurak, plus Nasreen, Simon, Michael and the Chinese.

But the vastness of the landscape makes it feel like less than that.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Half the camel files are now being led by Li-Peng's men. They tug the leads too hard, camels refusing to budge. The caravan limps on, in fits and starts.

GURAK joins Kadir at the front of the procession. Leading his own file. Rubbing cold-fool powder on his gums.

GURAK

**Those men were fools to turn back.
It means more money for the rest of
us.**

Kadir peers at the distant horizon. Unsmiling.

KADIR

I worry we might be the fools.

He breaks away, trudging ahead to walk with Divash.

CUT TO:

INT. SOGDIAN TENT - NIGHT

Nasreen sleeps fitfully. Tossing and turning. Same as the five remaining camel-pullers. No one's getting much shuteye.

Nasreen wakes with a start, and a gasp that never leaves her throat. Heart pounding.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Nasreen pushes through the tent flap and *stops*.

Hair standing up on the back of her neck. Hearing something we can't yet.

KADIR pauses in tending the Eternal Flame. Watching Nasreen as she turns toward dark, empty desert...

Cold wind rustles Nasreen's hair. She stares warily at the pitch black night. *Did she really--*

A MAN SCREAMS.

Somewhere in the dark. A horrible, guttural sound, like he's being tortured.

All the blood drains from Nasreen's face. She recognizes that voice. It's her father's voice.

ARYA (O.S.)

NASREEN!

Her eyes shine with tears. She's rooted to the spot. *How is this possible?*

ARYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Nasreen, help me!

Suddenly it doesn't matter how it's possible. Nasreen takes off running towards the sound.

KADIR

sees her vanish out of the firelight. Alarmed--

KADIR

Nasreen.

She doesn't return. Doesn't hear him.

He drops what he's doing and runs after her. Into the alien landscape of the night. Nothing to track but the sound of her pounding footsteps. Her rough breathing.

He catches up and GRABS HER, tackling her to the ground. She fights him. Kicking, sobbing.

NASREEN

My father. Please, my father--

KADIR

There's no one there.

But NASREEN can still hear her father's screams. His hopeless pleas, getting softer, as if he's losing his grip on life.

She *thrashes* in Kadir's grip.

NASREEN

I have to help him. He's dying.

Kadir holds her in a lock.

KADIR

There's no one there. It's in your mind. *Peace.*

(a beat, she calms)

Peace, Nasreen.

Slowly, Nasreen goes limp in his arms. Her father's sobs fade until they sound like the wind.

Kadir lets go. He stands. Hesitates over her.

KADIR (CONT'D)

If you run into the desert at night you may never find us again.

(beat)

Don't.

He stalks back towards camp. Leaving her alone in the dirt.

Tears dry on her face. She extracts her ocarina from beneath her clothes. Looking for solace. Without thinking, puts it to her lips, then stops.

Fingers shaking. Eyes on the dark.

The sense that something out there might hear.

She curls the ocarina in her hand. Holding on.

CUT TO:

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Half the camel files are now being led by Li-Peng's men. They tug the leads too hard, camels refusing to budge. The caravan limps on in fits and starts.

Simon braces himself on his cane as he holds his waterskin vertically above his open mouth...Shakes it...dislodging only the tiniest drip.

Nasreen, leading her file beside him, offers him a full skin. He takes it gratefully, tips it into his mouth...but it's not water. It's wine.

The water has run out.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 15.

Simon hands the wineskin back.

SIMON

Bit early in the day, isn't it?

Nasreen nods to GURAK--who's collecting his camel's urine in an earthenware jar.

NASREEN

There's your alternative.

The urine is thick and syrupy, the consistency of warm honey. Gurak doesn't seem to mind. He drinks it.

YUSI, clucking his camels past at a clip, shoots Gurak a grossed-out look.

YUSI

Do you eat their shit as well?

Gurak sticks his fingers in the urine jar and flicks some at Yusi, who flinches.

SIMON makes a face.

SIMON

I'll stick to the wine. Thank you.

KADIR AND DIVASH

walk at the front of the group. Ahead of them is only blaring sun and a few scraggly rock formations.

KADIR

We won't survive long on wine.

Divash's lips are dry and cracked. Skin pale. He holds a hand up to shield his eyes, scanning the horizon.

DIVASH
See there?

He points to one of the rock formations.

DIVASH (CONT'D)
**One day's walk in that direction.
Maybe two. There's an oasis.**

Kadir follows the line of his finger. Intensely skeptical.

KADIR
**I hope you're right. Because in
three days, we start dying.**

Divash doesn't look as worried by that as he should.

KADIR (CONT'D)
We don't stop tonight.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

The caravan walks on through the night. Eternal Flame and a string of pinpoint lanterns swinging in camel-pullers' hands the only light to walk by. Pools of orange traveling over the deep blue sands.

Michael and Simon are up on camels, unused to the grueling pace. Balanced on top of the cargo loads.

Nasreen sways against her lead camel as she walks. Using its neck to support herself.

No one talks.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Weary silence reigns over the camel train. Nasreen is dead-eyed at the front of her file. Exhausted.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 16.

Without warning, her lead camel stops and LAYS DOWN.

Like a domino effect, every other camel in her file does the same. Then the next file. Then the next.

Nasreen knows what this means. She looks toward the horizon, where a DARK RED SMUDGE obscures the sky.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Camels groan and spit--business as usual, except for their *nictitating membranes*, third, transparent eyelids that cover their eyes to protect from sand, giving them opaque, unsettling stares.

Men sit or lie down with their heads facing the way they're going, feet facing the way they came.

Battening down for something...

A CLOUD OF SAND so large it looms overhead like a mountain progresses across the plain. Heading straight for us.

It looks like it's going slow, but in seconds the sky begins to darken. The air turns yellow with dust.

Nasreen wraps her scarf over her face. Hand clutching her ocarina beneath her clothes. Across the aisle, Simon watches.

The air turns RED, so dark it's difficult to see. A window of sunlight exists for one last moment at the rear end of the caravan, in the distance.

Then the sandstorm swallows it.

It's darker than night. No stars, no moon. Only black. Wind ROARS, sand pummeling from all sides. Nasreen bends her head, eyes closed to slits.

For a moment in the dark, YELLOW EYES stare at her. Searing through the haze.

Her breath catches in her throat. She stares, frozen.

Something's in the storm with them.

Then she blinks, and the eyes are gone. She holds her ocarina tighter, like a talisman.

EXT. SAME - LATER

The sandstorm has blown through. The sun shines again.

But the vessel that carried the Eternal Flame is empty and cold. The flame has gone out. The Sogdians gather around it, mute with dread.

Nasreen makes her way between the files, checking her camels. Stops as she sees a lump in the sand ahead of her.

A BODY.

Cautious, she crouches and turns the body over. It's YUSI. He looks like he's been mauled by a wild animal. Flesh shredded. Teeth marks and claw marks. A deep CRATER in his side exposes his ribcage. His mouth gapes, tongue torn out.

Someone else notices. AN ALARMED SHOUT. Nasreen lurches back from the body as others flood in around her.

Kadir crouches over his man. Li-Peng arrives, looms behind him. For a long moment they regard the man in silence, then:

LI-PENG

What did this? An animal? A tiger?

Kadir shakes his head. Peers out at the horizon. The dunes around them. Air eerily still.

KADIR

I don't know.

His pronouncement weighs heavy.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Nasreen watches as the Sogdians wrap Yusi's body in canvas and lash him to the back of a camel. Morbid cargo. It makes her uneasy.

It makes everyone uneasy.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

A somber atmosphere around the fire. Everyone's a bit drunk from all the wine, and tonight they're edgy drunks. Tense after the day's events. Nasreen tears into a hunk of stale bread, sharing with Simon.

Her ocarina hangs on the outside of her clothes. He hesitates for a minute, then nods to it.

SIMON

That's a strange thing to carry
into the desert.

Nasreen touches the flute. Tucks it away.

NASREEN

My father gave it to me.

SIMON

When you were young?

NASREEN

Not as young as you might think.

A beat. Simon regards her, seeing more than she's saying.

SIMON
He left you. Didn't he?

Nasreen looks at him sharply.

SIMON (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. That was indelicate.

NASREEN
Delicacy isn't something I expect
from you.

SIMON
Nonetheless.

They lapse into silence for a moment. Nasreen wrestling with
whether or not to speak.

Finally:

NASREEN
He left eight years ago, in a
caravan from Dunhuang. I promised I
would wait for him. And I have.

SIMON
Eight years is a long time to wait.

A beat.

NASREEN
Do you have family?

A rueful smile flickers on Simon's face.

SIMON
I did. A son, back in Byzantium.

NASREEN
How did he die?

SIMON
Fever. So his mother tells me.

NASREEN
You weren't there?

SIMON
(beat)
No. I wasn't there. I barely knew
the boy.

NASREEN

I'm sorry.

He waves her off.

SIMON

It's my own fault. I am...forever
leaving, never returning.

NASREEN

Why?

Simon meets her eyes. A long, considering beat. He wants to
confess to her.

SIMON

The Emperor requires it.

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Simon.

Michael stands nearby, glaring at Simon. He jerks his head,
summoning him.

With an apologetic look, Simon goes. Michael pulls him away
from the fire. Out of earshot, they confer.

Nasreen frowns, watching them. She might not understand their
words, but she can read body language.

They're arguing about Simon's bamboo cane. *Strange.*

Nasreen's suspicion deepens.

CUT TO:

INT. SIMON AND MICHAEL'S TENT - NIGHT

Simon and Michael are asleep on bedrolls. Piled under thick
furs. Snoring, unawares.

Something peels back the tent flap. A shadow slips inside.

NASREEN. She dances around the sleeping men and crouches in
front of their packs. Looking for...

Simon's cane. She runs her hands over it. Working in a faint
patch of moonlight shining through a tear in the tent.

It seems like a normal shaft of bamboo. Lightweight, hollow.
Until her fingers snag on something at one end. She pulls out
a CORK.

Slips two fingers inside...and comes out with a CATERPILLAR wriggling on her knuckles.

A SILK WORM LARVA.

She pulls the cork out of the other end of the cane and aims it at the moonlight like a telescope. Peering into it.

Dozens of silk worm larvae crawl amongst a forest of leaves. Lit by silver moonlight. Like looking into another world.

A *sound* behind her. Soft. One of the men waking.

Nasreen replaces the corks, fast and silent. She slips under the wall of the tent as someone SITS UP behind her.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

MICHAEL emerges from his tent, bleary eyed.

Nasreen freezes in the shadows, mere feet away. Michael frowns, sensing something's not right. He walks towards her.

She slips away and darts between two tents. He follows, not urgent, only wandering. Reaches the edge of the tents and looks out at the moonlit desert.

It's deserted. Only CAMELS, their animal noises in the dark.

He frowns, clutching his furs tight around him.

Not seeing NASREEN, crouched behind a camel only inches away.

She all-but holds her breath. Opens her palm...realizing she still has a silk worm caterpillar wriggling around inside.

Michael shakes his head. Turns back toward his tent.

AMONG THE CAMELS

Nasreen watches the caterpillar inch along her palm...

As, out of focus behind it, something MIMICS the motion.

Nasreen notices. Her breath catches. Slow, almost paralyzed, she closes her hand. Watching in mute horror.

Camels bray softly in alarm, sensing something *not right*.

Yusi's wrapped corpse slides into the sand.

Moving of its own accord.

The package bulges and twists, as if muscle and bone have been freed from skin. Freed from structure.

It drags itself haltingly across the sand. Camels cry out at its passage. A few shoot to their feet, but they can't get far, tied to the file.

The corpse passes through the line, out of sight.

Eyes fixed on the snake-trail it left, Nasreen rises in a low crouch. Trembling in the cold. She follows it.

Staying close enough not to lose it, but far enough that she only catches glimpses. Impressions of unnatural movement in the dark.

She comes to the edge of the camel train and stops. Unwilling to follow the corpse-creature out into the open.

But she's lost sight of it.

She crouches behind a camel, breath rustling its fur. Whites of her eyes shining in the dark. Fear taking over again. *Is she breathing too loud? Can it hear her? Is it behind her? Is it watching her right now?*

A flash of movement.

GURAK runs out of a tent, clutching a lantern.

Straight towards where the corpse-creature disappeared.

He drops the lantern and squats, moaning. The lantern falls on its side but keeps burning. Casting strange shadows.

Something moves in the dark.

Gurak doesn't see. Nasreen starts to call out, then swallows her words. *If she yells, it will hear.*

She watches in silence as the CORPSE-DEMON closes on Gurak. Out of its wrappings now. As if the corpse has simply gotten back up, but vaguely wrong.

It looms behind Gurak in the eerie firelight.

Holding itself with otherworldly stillness. Not even breathing.

Then it STRIKES.

A single blow, and Gurak crumples.

Nasreen holds a hand over her mouth. Desperate not to make a sound.

The corpse-demon rips into Gurak with human fingers. Tearing out bloody chunks of flesh. EATING RAVENOUSLY.

Barely chewing before it swallows. Wet, animal sounds. Blood running over its chin, its throat.

Nasreen backs away on her hands and knees.

When she's far enough away, she gets to her feet and RUNS. Mindless with fear. Racing between the camel files.

She SMACKS into something.

LI-PENG, holding a LANTERN. The light catches something in Nasreen's hair we don't notice, but he does. His eyes *burn*.

She reaches out to grab him, frantic--

NASREEN
There's something--

Crack. He BACKHANDS her.

She staggers back, blood in her mouth.

LI-PENG
I should have known you were the thief.

Nasreen *blinks*, dazed. Possibly concussed.

NASREEN
What?

Li-Peng holds the lantern up to her face and picks something out of her hair. THE CATERPILLAR.

LI-PENG
This is Tang property.

He pockets the caterpillar and drags her back toward the ring of tents. She scans the dark behind them, terrified.

What the hell did she just see?

BACK AMONG THE TENTS

Something's happened while Nasreen was away. KADIR'S TENT blazes with light. Buzzing with middle-of-the-night activity.

Li-Peng hauls Nasreen towards the tent, grip bruising.

LI-PENG
Let's get the proper permissions
this time, shall we?

Nasreen's brain is still struggling to shift gears. Dizzy,
vision swimming.

INT. KADIR'S TENT - NIGHT

Li-Peng shoves Nasreen through the tent flap into the midst
of an INTERROGATION. But not her own.

DIVASH is tied to the central post of the tent.

Every man in camp is crammed in here, in the smoky lowlight.
Kadir stands over Divash with his arms crossed.

KADIR
Where were you going?

Divash says nothing. Kadir picks up a bundle of wineskins and
SHAKES them at him. Divash flinches.

KADIR (CONT'D)
Where were you going with these?

DIVASH
Back to the last oasis. They're
enough for one man to make it.

A ripple goes through the crowd. Kadir doesn't blink.

KADIR
Why would you want to turn back?

DIVASH
Because there's nothing ahead of us
but desert.

KADIR
There's an oasis ahead of us.

Divash shakes his head.

DIVASH
No. I don't know. I've never gone
farther than this.

Tension ratchets. Kadir keeps the reins on his composure.

KADIR
What do you mean you've never gone
farther than this?

DIVASH

I take caravans this far. Halfway.
Then I turn around. When they're
dead, I come back for their cargo.

Never has a group of men gone so silent so fast. Like they've
caught sight of their own deaths.

Divash's eyes fix on NASREEN at the back of the crowd.
Desperate for anything to get the heat off him.

DIVASH (CONT'D)

She knew. I did the same thing to
her father, eight years ago. She
knew I couldn't make the crossing.

Every eye in the tent turns to Nasreen.

She's frozen. Realizing the unspeakable truth.

Her father is dead.

And she's staring at the man who killed him. Divash.

DIVASH (CONT'D)

She let me lead you here to die.

Kadir grabs Divash's face and SMACKS his head against the
post, knocking him out. *Enough of that.*

He turns to Nasreen.

KADIR

Did you know?

NASREEN

No. No, I didn't...

She falters, staring at the tent flap--where GURAK has just
slipped inside. Alive. Not a scratch on him. *What the fuck?*

Li-Peng runs out of patience. He jostles Nasreen roughly.

LI-PENG

I caught this whore red-handed. In
the act. She must be put to death.

KADIR

In the act of what?

Li-Peng shows him his open hand. The silk worm larva crumpled
dead in his palm. Crushed.

LI-PENG

Theft. The only men authorized to possess silk worm larvae are Tang Dynasty officials.

On the other side of the tent, Michael goes pale. Simon white-knuckles his arm. Reminding him to stay silent.

KADIR

No one's getting put to death.

MULLA, the man who spoke in the ruins, loses patience.

MULLA

**We're all going to be put to death
by the desert. We must turn back.**

Kadir--frustrated but trying not to lose his temper.

KADIR

No. We go forward.

A disagreeing rumble from the Sogdians. Kadir abandons the drama with Li-Peng and Nasreen to address his men.

He brandishes the wineskins.

KADIR (CONT'D)

**These wineskins are all that's left
of our supply. If we turn back, we
die. The only chance is forward.**

MULLA

**Our navigator says there's no water
ahead of us.**

KADIR

**Our navigator is a grifter. And we
are desert men.**

He meets each of the Sogdians' eyes. Checking their mettle. Finds most of them resolved. Not Mulla. But most.

KADIR (CONT'D)

We will walk out of this place.

MULLA

**Ahura Mazda has abandoned us. We
offended him. We must make amends.
A sacrifice.**

Kadir hesitates. He doesn't like it, but their religion isn't something he can shoot down with practicality.

KADIR
 (re: Divash)
Him.
 (re: Nasreen)
Not her.

After a beat, Mulla nods. Kadir turns to Li-Peng.

KADIR (CONT'D)
 We have ten files. And only five
 men qualified to lead them. I can't
 afford to lose another. She stays.
 You can have her when we reach the
 other side.

A long, tense standoff. Finally, Li-Peng lets Nasreen go.

INT. SIMON AND MICHAEL'S TENT - LATER

Simon and Michael prepare to go back to sleep, talking in
 urgent, murmured Latin. Nasreen slips inside unannounced.

They freeze. Both staring at her.

NASREEN
 I can't sleep in a tent with men
 who want to make a sacrifice of me.

MICHAEL
 Why do you assume we won't just let
 them?

SIMON
Michael--

NASREEN
 Because I know where that silk worm
 really came from.

Simon puts a hand on Michael's shoulder. Talking through the
 touch. Quelling.

SIMON
 (to Nasreen)
 Of course you can stay here.

Nasreen meets his eyes. A moment of gratitude.

INT. SAME - DAWN

Very early morning. Gray light bleeds through the tear in the
 tent. Nasreen sits on her bedroll with her knees hugged to
 her chest. Flinching at every tiny sound.

SIMON (O.S.)
(hushed)
Did you sleep?

Her gaze snaps to Simon, startled. He sighs, rubbing his eyes. Everything is dry, but there's no remedy. He sits up.

SIMON (CONT'D)
They won't come for you. Kadir told them not to, they respect him.

NASREEN
It's not that.

A questioning look.

Nasreen hesitates. *Can she tell him? Will he think she's lost her mind?* After a minute, she relents. Keeping her voice low, so as not to wake Michael.

NASREEN (CONT'D)
Last night. I saw...

She trails off, struggling to find the words.

SIMON
You saw?

NASREEN
The man who died yesterday. I saw his body stand up and walk as if it were alive. I saw him...*kill* Gurak.

SIMON
But Gurak is fine.

NASREEN
I know. I know he's fine, I saw him in Kadir's tent. But I also saw him die.

I'm scared, she doesn't say. Simon hears it anyways. He takes her hands in his.

SIMON
I've heard that going without water for too long can make you see things. Things that aren't real.

NASREEN
(beat)
You're probably right.

He squeezes her hand. She squeezes back.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

The camp is packed up, camel train getting ready to head out. All that's left behind is DIVASH, bound hand and foot, gag in his mouth. He writhes, but it's impossible to free himself.

Nasreen lingers for a moment after the other camel files have gone, watching him. Unsettled by a vision of her own future.

Then she turns, going with the others. Abandoning him to the elements.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 17.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Kadir marches alone at the front of the herd. One man against the desert. He shields his eyes from the sun as he looks up, watching the silhouettes of BIRDS...

Following them to water.

EXT. OASIS - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Dozens of hands plunge into still water, shovel it greedily to dozens of mouths.

The relief is palpable. The caravan has reached a true oasis, a sparkling mirage in the valley between two dunes.

The plants have mostly gone brown in the cold, but the water is clear. Nasreen scoops water over her face. Dries off with her scarf. Eyes tracking GURAK.

He's the only one not drinking. He staggers away from the water to vomit. No one else pays him a second look.

EXT. SAME - LATER

A commotion among the camel files. The troughs are full, but some of the camels shy back from them, refusing to drink.

Nasreen between much taller men. Refereeing. A Chinese man with a long beard, SHI-JUN, gestures to the water.

SHI-JUN

It must be contaminated.

Nasreen translates for MULLA:

NASREEN

He thinks there's a sickness in the water.

MULLA

The sickness is not in the water,
it's in our camels. They have been
inhabited by *Druj*.

Shi-Jun scoffs, catching the word "*Druj*."

SHI-JUN

(stilted Sogdian)

Superstition.

Mulla lunges for Shi-Jun.

It's a brawl. Nasreen gets SHOVED out of the way.

A SHOUT. Kadir arrives, plunges into the fray. Others follow.
It takes a lot of men to separate Mulla and Shi-Jun.

Nasreen staggers back to watch from a safe distance, dabbing
a split lip.

EXT. SAME - LATER

The camels that refused water have been taken out of the
file. The Sogdians encircle them, led by Mulla. They perform
esoteric rituals with fire and chanting.

Simon and Michael spectate alongside Nasreen. Michael frowns.

MICHAEL

What do they think that's going to
accomplish?

NASREEN

They're trying to drive *Druj* out of
the camels. They think it's why
they're acting strangely.

Simon notices her split lip. Hands her a cloth. She takes it
with a grateful nod.

SIMON

I thought *Druj* only had a taste for
souls. Do camels have souls?

Surprisingly, it's Michael who answers.

MICHAEL

Everything has a soul.

Silence follows his words. Nasreen notices LI-PENG watching
them across the oasis. Burning with suspicion.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

As the camel train leaves the oasis behind, trickling over a dune, Simon trudges uphill to join Nasreen.

SIMON

How many days before we need to
find another oasis?

A beat. Nasreen does the mental calculations.

NASREEN

If we're careful with our
rationing, a week. If we're
not...less.

Simon watches a Chinese man walking near them guzzle his waterskin. Spilling some down his front. Less, then.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

A cold wind blows through camp. Dunes sing. Eerie.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 20.

INT. SIMON AND MICHAEL'S TENT - NIGHT

Nasreen lies wide awake on her bedroll. Trying to ignore the drone of the dunes. Trying to ignore what might be out there.

Slowly another sound forms through the wind. Not a voice, but a *low, animal moaning...*

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Nasreen slips out of the tent, robes clutched tight in the freezing air. Pauses, listening. The *moaning* again. It sounds as if something's dying.

It sounds as if it's coming from the camels. There's no moon tonight. The desert is dark as pitch.

Anything could be out there.

Another low, pitiful cry.

Nasreen pins her courage to the sticking place, and heads for the camels.

Behind her, someone is watching through a tent flap. Shining eyes in the shadows. Hateful.

AMONG THE CAMELS

Nasreen picks her way through the camels. Felt boots silent on the sand. None of the animals are asleep. Something has them spooked. They watch her pass with huge, watery eyes.

The further into the files she gets, the more unsettled the camels are. Braying, tossing their heads. Trying to stand.

Trying to get away from something.

A camel shoots to its feet right in front of her, nearly knocking her down. She startles. Makes herself keep going.

Her breath stutters. Her heartbeat pounds in her ears. *Her foot comes down on something wet.*

She freezes. Looks down. In the dark it looks black, but it's blood. She knows it's blood.

A camel MOANS right in front of her.

Fear roots Nasreen to the spot.

She can't see anything except faint shapes. Writhing, moving. She digs in her robes for a MATCH. Staggers back, looking for something to strike it on.

She grabs a camel's bridle, stilling him long enough that she can rake the match over the crate on his back.

Fire fizzles at her fingertips.

Casting flickering light on a NIGHTMARE.

Something wearing Gurak's face--the GURAK-DEMON--crouches over a dying camel, DEVOURING IT. Mouth hanging wider than a human jaw can possibly open.

The camel has not yet met the mercy of death. Two of its legs are torn off. Its neck is a mess of blood and hair. The Gurak-demon scoops handfuls of viscera from its abdomen.

Nasreen makes an involuntary sound.

The Gurak-demon's eyes snap to her. Yellow and *unnatural*. Its tongue lolling past its bloody chin...

Nasreen drops the match.

She turns and *SPRINTS*.

SMACK into Li-Peng. Again. He followed her here.

Before he can say anything, the camels around them start to SCREAM. A savage amount of noise.

They tug at the leads, terrified, bringing the whole herd to its feet in a wave.

LI-PENG

What on earth...

One of the camels snaps free and STAMPEDES past them.

Nasreen, frantic, finds another match and STRIKES IT on Li-Peng's brocade vest.

THE SHADOW OF THE CREATURE

flickering in firelight, twisting and GROWING. Bristling with limbs and heads, a nonsensical mess of anatomy...

BACK AMONG THE TENTS

The noise from the camels reaches a fever pitch. Men emerge from their tents, bleary-eyed. Kadir steps out of his just as the stampeding camel BARRELS past him in the dark.

Simon spots him.

SIMON

(re: the noise)

What the hell is that?

Kadir shakes his head. He doesn't know. He ducks back into his tent and comes out with a DAGGER.

AMONG THE CAMELS

Nasreen and Li-Peng back away from the CAMEL-DEMON, their eyes wide. It MOANS and BRAYS, like the camels it's composed of are still alive.

Li-Peng takes his *kyoketsu-shoge* from his belt.

CRACK! Whips the creature.

It SHRIEKS, an eruption of blood and spittle. Angry, not in pain. It lurches toward them.

Li-Peng stands his ground. HEAVES at the hilt of his *kyoketsu-shoge*, chain creaking.

Nasreen runs for it.

The camel-demon BOWLS into Li-Peng. Teeth and hands from a dozen different creatures tearing him limb from limb.

He doesn't have time to scream. Just GURGLES, choking on his own blood.

Lantern light. Nasreen reaches the rest of the men, running the other way, arriving from camp--armed to the teeth.

KADIR
What is it?

NASREEN
I don't know--

The camel-demon SCREECHES. Writhing as it consumes Li-Peng. Its anatomy makes no more sense in the light.

Nasreen startles back from it, into Simon.

Kadir stares at the demon, wide-eyed, frozen for a moment as he confronts something he thought was only a story.

Then he pushes down his fear.

KADIR
Cut the camels loose! Get them away
from that thing!

Men snap to action, slicing the leads that connect the camels to the abomination.

Kadir leads the charge on the creature, STABBING IT with his dagger. Sogdians follow, YELLING.

Shi-Jun loads a crossbow and--*ffffffft!*--fires a direct shot to the demon's eye. One of its many eyes.

Mulla slops LANTERN OIL on the creature. Strikes a match and tosses it, SETTING THE DEMON ON FIRE.

It screeches. Animal sounds turn to HUMAN VOICES. An unholy chorus. Begging, pleading, *dying*.

The men back away. Looking on in numb terror.

The camel-demon writhes and lurches in the fire, NOT DYING.

Finally, Kadir speaks. Voice low.

KADIR (CONT'D)
Strike camp. We're leaving.

The men file away, leaving the camel-demon burning. Not quite alive, not quite dead.

Nasreen pushes out of Simon's hold and crouches by LI-PENG'S SEVERED ARM. Hand still clutching the *kyoketsu-shoge*.

She pries his hand off it. His grip is strong even in death. She wipes the bloody blade on his sleeve and loops the chain on her own belt. The weapon is hers now.

Simon pulls her up and away. They follow the others.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

The blazing camel-demon lights the sands around it bright as day. Silhouette still writhing in the flames.

Camp has been struck. Everything is packed. The caravan moves out under heavy silence.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - LATER

Nasreen walks with Kadir. She's passed through fear into a steely calm. Watching his face. Reading it.

NASREEN

You know something.

Kadir shakes his head. Then relents.

KADIR

Back in those ruins. The city. The carving on the wall.

NASREEN

What did it say?

A long beat.

KADIR

It said, He devours the world.

He trudges on, but Nasreen's steps falter. She looks back, at the tiny pinprick of the demon--still burning behind them.

CUT TO:

EXT. SAME - DAWN

The caravan has stopped to rest. No one talks to each other. Everyone sits on their own, drinking water. Chewing hardtack. Breath freezing. Dead eyes staring out of hollow faces.

Michael clutches his crucifix, but he's too deep in shock to say any prayers. Simon leans heavily on his cane.

Nasreen's the only one with sharp eyes. They're not watching the desert around them, they're turned *inward*. Watching her companions.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Still stopped. Nasreen crouches before Kadir. Lowered voices. The sense that they're the only two people who know what's going on.

NASREEN

That thing. I saw it eat Gurak.
Afterwards it wore his face. It pretended to be sick.

A long beat. Kadir's face says he knows. He and Nasreen are thinking at the same speed.

KADIR

They say *druj* can hide behind the faces of those it's devoured.

NASREEN

Then how do you know it's not still with us? Hiding behind one of our faces?

KADIR

I don't.

Nasreen knew that already, too. They share a weighty look.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 21.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

The sun sizzles high overhead. Empty desert stretches away to the unattainable horizon.

Simon, straggling at the rear of the pack. Feeling his age. He glances back and sees a camel file halted behind him.

Calls forward:

SIMON

Man out of line!

The call goes up the line. In stages, the camel train ahead of him lumbers to a halt.

KADIR

crosses the empty sand between the main caravan and the splinter group.

Simon is already there, talking to two irate CHINESE MEN. He turns to Kadir as he arrives.

SIMON (CONT'D)
They think the camels that refused water are beset with some sort of sickness.

KADIR
There's no sickness that causes what we saw.

SIMON
They say these camels are the same as the thing that killed Li-Peng. They won't pull them.

Kadir frowns at the Chinese men, who stare back, obstinate. He has no rapport with them. No power here.

One of the men says something in an incomprehensible Chinese dialect. Simon understands.

SIMON (CONT'D)
He says we should leave the sick camels behind.

KADIR
We need all the camels to haul our cargo. No.

Simon starts to translate. Hesitates. He pulls Kadir aside.

SIMON
Maybe we shouldn't be thinking of the job anymore. Maybe we should be thinking of our lives, now.

A flash of anger on Kadir's face. Simon's struck a nerve.

KADIR
Easy for you to say. When you have only your own life to account for.

He's struck a nerve right back. Simon breathes, regroups.

SIMON
That thing isn't finished with us. It's still here. Can't you feel it?

KADIR
And what would you have us do?

SIMON

Turn back now. If we go forward,
we'll all be killed.

KADIR

We have two days' water left. No
wine. If we turn back, we die of
thirst. Ahead is the only way out.

SIMON

Do you even know where we're going?

It's plain to see on Kadir's face: he doesn't.

KADIR

Ahead is the only way.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

FIRES BLAZE in a dozen spots around camp, lighting the sands
bright as day.

Supplies burn to sustain the fires, tent poles and canvas. Li-
Peng's litter churns out acrid smoke.

KADIR (V.O.)

Druj is a shameful creature. It
hides. It skulks.

Men raise a single tent, built from an amalgamation of parts.
Nasreen helps. Feeling their eyes on her. On edge.

KADIR (V.O.)

It lives in the places where Ahura
Mazda cannot see. Where there is no
fire, no light. Where men close
their eyes.

Hands hang a SHOFAR (ram's horn instrument) from a post in
front of the communal tent.

KADIR (V.O.)

We will keep our eyes open. If it
knows we're watching, *Druj* will not
come.

EXT. SAME - EARLIER

Kadir stands at the center of the assembled men. Firelight
morphs haggard faces into skulls. Heat sears frosted beards,
eyelashes. Night presses in on all sides.

KADIR

We all sleep in one tent. Dog
watch, two men each shift. From
here on out, no one is ever alone.

The men break up. Nasreen shoulders through to the center, to
Kadir. Voices low.

NASREEN

Whatever that thing is, it's
already here. Keeping our eyes open
won't be good enough.

Kadir, annoyed.

KADIR

It will have to be.

He starts to go. Nasreen catches his arm.

NASREEN

Those camels. The ones that didn't
drink. Gurak didn't drink either.

That gets his attention. Guarded, but still.

KADIR

So it doesn't need water.

Nasreen's not sure. Neither of them are. But it's the best
they've got. Kadir takes his waterskin from his belt.

KADIR (CONT'D)

We can at least be sure of each
other, then.

He swills. Hands her the skin. She drinks a small amount and
hands it back.

NASREEN

The others.

KADIR

We'll watch. See who doesn't drink.
(beat, teasing)
Keeping our eyes open will be good
enough after all.

UNNOTICED BY THEM,

Mulla is watching them. It looks like they're telling
secrets. Suspicion burns in his eyes.

UNNOTICED BY HIM,

Simon sees him pull the other Sogdians aside. Tense, quiet conference. Distrustful stares aimed at Nasreen. At Kadir.

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - NIGHT

A sea of foul bodies lying close together in the light of a few lanterns. Nasreen twitches in her sleep. Dreaming.

INSERT CUT: EXT. ROAD TO JADE GATE - DREAM - DAY

ARYA presses the ocarina into the younger Nasreen's hand. His lips form the words we heard before, but only WIND comes out.

He turns his back. Nasreen darts after him, FURY on her face.

This is NOT the memory we saw before.

Nasreen DRAGS her father back, rough, tearing at his clothes. He shoves her off, indignant. They shout. All we hear is WIND. Rising, RISING, HOWLING...

Nasreen wakes with a start. Simon's hand on her shoulder. He crouches over her in the lowlight.

SIMON

We're up.

Nasreen nods. Shaken, waking up.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Fires still blazing. Eerily quiet. They sit outside the tent. On watch. Very exposed.

Simon shivers under furs. Nasreen flips an HOURGLASS. Settles down, breathing into cupped hands.

SIMON

I never knew the desert could get so cold.

NASREEN

One winter in Isfahan, the canals froze solid. You could walk on the water.

SIMON

Do you dream of it? Isfahan.

NASREEN

No. Do you dream of Byzantium?

A ruminative beat.

SIMON

I dream of my son. How he was when
I knew him. A tiny thing. Still
warm from his mother's womb, barely
larger than my hand.

Nasreen listens. Accepting the weight of his words. He gives
her a wry little smile.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Tonight he was crying for me. And I
tried to speak to him, to comfort
him. But he couldn't understand me.

NASREEN

What did you want to say to him?

Simon starts to shake his head. Then stops.

A beat. He reconsiders. Takes the olive branch.

SIMON

I wanted to tell him that I didn't
expect him. That I thought because
I didn't plan for him, I didn't
want him. But I was wrong. All
miracles are unexpected. That's
what makes them miracles.

They lapse into silence. Simon watches Nasreen, gaze astute.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Do you dream of your father?

Nasreen's silence is answer enough.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Are they happy dreams?

NASREEN

I can twist the memories when I'm
awake. I can remember them better
than they are. But when I'm asleep
the truth comes out.

SIMON

What would you say to him, if you
could? Your father.

Nasreen doesn't answer. She stares out at the night. Flames
belly-dancing like heatwaves. Hiding whatever's beyond.

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - LATER

Their watch is over. Nasreen is back on her bedroll. Quiet sounds of men around her. Snoring, shifting. She stares up at the draped ceiling of the tent. Wind sucks it up and down, up and down. A rhythm. Almost hypnotic.

A new sound in the chorus. A thin rasp, almost a whisper...

ARYA (O.S.)

Nasreen.

As if he's speaking right in her ear.

Every muscle in her body goes taut. She screws her eyes shut.

ARYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Nasreen, help me. Please.

She presses her hands over her face, trying to block it out.

NASREEN

(whispers to herself)

It's not real.

ARYA (O.S.)

Little fox. Did you not love me?

INSERT CUT: EXT. ROAD TO JADE GATE - DAY

A quick flash--Nasreen, face twisted in anger as she SNAPS at her father.

ARYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Did you want me to die?

Tears leak silently from Nasreen's eyes. But there's nothing to do. She lies there and takes it.

SMASH TO:

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Blinding sun. Dry, cracked lips. Dead eyes. No one slept much last night. It's a grueling, savage trudge.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 22.

Sand whispers around the footsteps of camels and men, stirred up by the wind. And VOICES WHISPER in their ears.

ARYA (O.S.)

Never enough. You were never enough.

NASREEN barely flinches as she hears it. She's numbed herself enough to put one foot in front of the other.

ARYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You made me want to leave.

A CHINESE MAN walking near Nasreen SWATS at his ears, as if beset by flies. Muttering to himself in that incomprehensible dialect.

She glances at him. She can't hear what he's hearing, but she's plagued by her own ghosts. She knows.

The man's distress becomes more and more urgent, until he grabs a KNIFE off his belt and abruptly SAWS HIS EAR OFF.

Blood spurts, drenching his hand. He SCREAMS.

Nasreen runs to him in mute alarm. Unwinds her scarf to press it against his wound.

The man BABBLES. Totally out of it. Mind like scrambled egg.

NASREEN
 You're alright. It's not real. It's not real.

But if he even hears her, he doesn't understand.

Mulla and others arrive, taking over from her. She backs away. Blood on her hands, on her clothes.

One-Ear bucks and struggles, knife hand straining towards his other ear. The men wrestle him down.

Mulla glares at Nasreen.

MULLA
What did you do to him?

Nasreen, wide eyed. Doesn't answer. There's nothing she can say to mitigate his anger.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Walking again. The wind sounds like tongues.

Nasreen's eyes track every drop of water. Razor focused. Wet sheen on a man's lips. Upturned waterskin. Piss darkening the leg of a man's pants.

She scans the caravan. Roiling sea of dust and camel humps.

Her eyes snag on Simon and hold. A flicker of doubt. *Has she seen him drink?*

As she watches, he takes his waterskin from his belt. Tips it back, tongue out, getting only drips...

SIMON lowers the waterskin, his own focus on MICHAEL, walking alongside Shi-Jun ahead of him.

MICHAEL

The Lord God forgives all. He welcomes all who are penitent into His kingdom. Even the heathens.

SIMON (O.S.)

Michael.

Simon carts him roughly away by his frock.

SIMON (CONT'D)

What do you think you're doing?

Michael, irritated. Shoves him off.

MICHAEL

Saving us all.

SIMON

By proselytizing?

Michael gestures to Simon's cane. Like he wants to smack it out of his hands.

MICHAEL

We're being *punished* for what we've done. That's clear to me. If the barbarians accept Christ perhaps we can balance the scales.

Simon stops him, holding the cane across his stomach.

SIMON

These men are terrified. Fearful souls do not look for salvation. They look for someone to blame.

(beat)

This is the *last* time that we should wish to draw attention to our difference.

Their eyes hold. Michael getting it, but not liking it. Simon not giving a shit whether he likes it or not.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Wind plucks at everything that's not nailed down. The tent, the flames. Kadir's hood, as he returns to his watch partner, backlit by blazing light.

The hourglass has run out. Nasreen nods to THREE WATERSKINS, hanging from the same post as the shofar.

NASREEN

That's all that's left.

Kadir nods. He pauses outside the tent flap. Staring out. The shadowy lumps of camels sleeping just visible past the fires.

Nasreen follows his gaze. Knows what he's not saying.

It's somewhere out there.

NASREEN (CONT'D)

Come on. Our watch is over.

Kadir lingers another moment. Then ducks inside the tent.

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - NIGHT

Nasreen settles down on her bedroll as Kadir shakes MULLA awake. As he gets up, Mulla's eyes pin her briefly and slide away.

Unsettling. But nothing actionable.

Nasreen crosses her arms over her chest, not putting her back to anyone. Closes her eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. SAME - LATER

Somehow feels like we're deeper into the night. Nasreen's twitchy doze has become a still, steady sleep.

Movement around her in the dark. We STAY ON HER FACE. Getting only the blurry impression of something happening...

Until hands SHOVE A GAG in her mouth.

She wakes with a start.

Has a split second to see a ROPE looped around her foot, trailing under the wall of the tent.

Then it YANKS her over the sand.

UNDER the wall of the tent, out into--

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - CONTINUOUS

--a ring of the FIVE REMAINING SOGDIANS. Two of whom are supposed to be on watch. One of them holding a torch.

Nasreen bolts to her feet, but they tackle her back down as soon as she does. Tie her hands, her ankles.

Their ringleader, Mulla, kneels before her.

MULLA

We know what you are. You are Druj.

She tries to yell through her gag.

He SMACKS her. Opening a bloody gash on her cheek. He smiles. Yellow teeth.

MULLA (CONT'D)

**When Ahura Mazda had his first
sacrifice, he gave us water. Now he
will have another and give us life.**

Nasreen manages to spit her gag out.

NASREEN

Please--

He JAMS the gag back in, rough. Choking her. Grabs her by the hair and DRAGS her away from the tent...

AWAY FROM CAMP...

INTO THE EMPTY BLUE DESERT.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Nasreen twists, RAKING her nails over his arms, trying to free herself. With her hands tied she can't do much.

The TORCH-BEARER walks beside them, face impassive. Nasreen stares at him, imploring, but he doesn't even look at her.

Mulla SHOVES her ahead of him. This is far enough.

She gets to her hands and knees in the sand.

He KICKS her in the ribs. She buckles. Rolls on her back. He KICKS her in the face.

BLOOD IN HER EYES. Obscuring her vision.

She blinks rapidly, trying to see what's going on.

Mulla kneels in front of her, face twisted with contempt, blocking out the light.

It's getting strangely dark...

Not just the blood in Nasreen's eyes. The TORCH IS FAILING.

Because it's lying sideways in the sand. DISCARDED. The last embers of its light licking the edges of a NIGHTMARE...

Mulla doesn't notice. Too busy holding a KNIFE to Nasreen's throat.

As the Torch-Bearer LURCHES and CONTORTS, becoming impossibly larger. Head snaking on his neck at an extreme angle.

Nasreen, blood in her eyes. Tries to speak through her gag.

The blade bites into her skin, forcing her chin up.

CRRRRNNNNCH.

The Torch-Bearer-DEMON takes Mulla's head clean off his shoulders with one sickening twist.

Mulla's eyes widen even in death. His mouth moves.

Nasreen doesn't waste time. Blood flowing from her face and neck, she grabs the dropped knife and SLICES the rope around her ankles. Rips out her gag.

Lurches to her feet and PELTS back towards camp.

No more than a tiny glowing light in the distance.

WET, EATING NOISES behind her. But she doesn't look back. She wouldn't see anything even if she did.

She can barely see the ground under her feet.

Her foot snags a rock.

She goes down hard, tangled in her own skirts. Palms scraped raw. She squirms around to see the FAINT SHINE OF YELLOW EYES in the dark. Like a lion, a tiger.

A predator.

The demon is hunting her.

Back to her feet.

She RUNS, heart ready to explode in her chest, heavy breathing the only noise in the freezing air.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

Nasreen reaches the edge of camp. The firelight.

The last three Sogdians rise from their post outside the tent. Anger, disbelief--*How did their sacrifice escape?*

Nasreen doesn't give a shit. There are more important things happening now--i.e. scary fucking monster.

NASREEN

It's coming!

She barely gets the words out before one of the fires suddenly GOES DARK.

They turn to look. SHADOWY FIGURES--A DOZEN OF THEM--shovel sand onto the next fire.

It GOES DARK.

Nasreen and the Sogdians stare in shock. *Where did these guys come from? Who the fuck are they?*

Only one fire left. It flickers...waned...

NASREEN (CONT'D)

We have to--

...AND GOES OUT.

A SCREAM from right next to her.

Abruptly truncated.

She whips around just in time to see one of the Sogdians DRAGGED away from the tent.

Something WAILS.

Off in the dark, the Sogdian tries to strike a MATCH.

Brief fizz of light. A CAMEL-DEMON, grotesque human hands and a mouth that's almost smiling, jaw hanging, DRIPPING BLOOD.

Nasreen BOLTS.

She SNATCHES the SHOFAR from its post.

Something SNAGS HER FOOT, dragging her through the sand.

As she slides, she BLOWS THE HORN.

A low, mournful sound. Chops right through the night.

INT. COMMUNAL TENT - SAME

The sound of the shofar WAKES EVERYONE AT ONCE.

A moment of disorientation. Kadir's the first one to get his wits about him. Starts BARKING ORDERS.

SIMON grabs a lantern and plunges out through the flap...

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - CONTINUOUS

...just in time to see NASREEN dragged away by something that was once SHI-JUN. Crawling FAST on all fours.

Simon TAKES OFF after them.

Men streaming out of the tent behind him, lanterns and knives bristling in their hands.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - CONTINUOUS

Without any other weapons, Simon HURLS his lantern at the Shi-Jun-demon. Flames lick its back.

It YELLS. Like a man with a thousand echoes.

Nasreen yanks her leg out of its grip.

It SEIZES her again. *Not so fast.*

Simon PLUNGES into the fray. Fighting it with his bare hands. Grappling in the dust. Trying to pull Nasreen away from it.

The demon's blunt human fingers DIG into Nasreen's calf, hard enough to PUNCTURE. Sinking up to the knuckles.

She SCREAMS.

Water kisses the demon's ruined face.

It RECOILS in genuine pain.

MICHAEL stands over them, crucifix raised, empty vial of holy water in his hand.

The demon RAKES at its own skin, trying to get the water off. It falls to the ground, WRITHING, shifting form like it can no longer control its own shape, a disgusting mess of camel, man, snake, bird, feathers twitching in bloody sockets, snout SCREAMING where an arm should be.

Nasreen sits in front of it, transfixed.

Simon grabs her arm, HAULING her urgently to her feet.

SIMON

Nasreen.

She gets with the program. They run back towards the camp...

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

...where a MASSACRE is in progress.

Abject chaos. Lanterns flickering and going out. DYING MEN SCREAM. LIVING MEN SHOUT, calling to each other. Beset on all sides by SHADOWY FORMS. A CAMEL-DEMON crashes through the tent, canvas going up in FLAMES behind it. Its hands PLUNGE through the torso of One-Ear, ripping him in two wet halves. The camels have been set loose--they RAMPAGE through camp in a terror, pelting at forty miles an hour, LETHAL.

NASREEN

gets her bearings in the middle of it all. Looking for....

THERE. The WATERSKINS.

She weaves through the carnage, ignoring Simon when he calls out behind her. Makes it to open ground.

A BODY lands in front of her. Missing the bottom half. Intestines trailing from the torso like tentacles...

The man REACHES for her, somehow still alive. *Moaning.*

She stops short. Paralyzed by the sight.

Dying fingers brush her skirts...and GRAB. Too strong for someone who's been vivisected.

The eyes staring up at her are YELLOW.

It's a trick.

Nasreen twists free just as the torso-demon BREAKS SHAPE and tries to pull her down. Skirts tearing. Darting clear.

She reaches the post where the shofar hung. Snags the leather band tying the three remaining waterskins together.

KADIR

tussles with a demon nearby. The thing has him pinned. It's a matter of seconds until death.

He SCREAMS, straining against its monstrous bulk.

NASREEN

uncorks one of the waterskins and DUMPS water on Kadir's demon. Emptying it.

If we weren't quite sure what we were seeing before, now it's impossible to misinterpret.

THE WATER BURNS THE DEMON.

Kadir scrambles out from under the thing as it WRITHES and SCREECHES, dying in agony. Gets to his feet. Meets Nasreen's eyes. Silent understanding.

He holds his hand out for a waterskin.

She gives him one.

A MAN-DEMON lunges at them. Kadir TOSSES water on it, forcing it back. It WRITHES on the ground, bloody flesh STEAMING.

Nasreen dumps water on the torso-demon. It SCREAMS, viscera contorting in unrecognizable shapes, nauseating death throes.

Kadir snatches up a dropped lantern.

He and Nasreen end up back to back, in a small ring of light, wielding waterskins like weapons.

Another demon LUNGES. Nasreen gets it with water.

Another, driven back by Kadir.

A brief, HELLISH ONSLAUGHT, demons SCREAMING from all sides. They meet them all. Flesh BURNING. Anatomy scrambled. Shapes breaking down.

Then, abruptly, SILENCE. They catch their breaths. It's too calm. Makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

NASREEN

Where did they all go?

An uneasy beat.

KADIR

Back into hiding.

Kadir and Nasreen meet eyes. Realizing at the same time. She tips her waterskin upside-down. Empty. He does the same.

Empty. They're out.

Someone staggers into the light. Bloodied, eyes blown wide in shock. A SOGDIAN. One of their men.

Or is it?

Kadir steps back from him. The man doesn't notice, too out of it. Nasreen does. She shifts away from the man too.

ANOTHER MAN staggers into the light. Then another. Their men on the surface. But no way to tell what's really underneath.

SIMON (O.S.)

Michael!

SIMON

staggers with a lantern through the carnage, searching for his friend. Sees a shadow moving. Approaches slowly...

It's a CAMEL, eviscerated but still somehow alive. It stares at him with doleful eyes. Breathing wet, labored. Jarring some repressed terror loose in Simon's chest.

SIMON (CONT'D)

MICHAEL!

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Simon?

Simon turns. Finds Michael on his hands and knees, trying to stand. Winded, but otherwise unhurt.

SIMON

Oh, thank God.

He helps his friend to his feet. Michael smiles weakly.

MICHAEL

See? He always provides.

Simon laughs. Relieved.

They limp towards the BURNING TENT, where...

NASREEN AND KADIR

are surrounded on all sides by shocked, injured men. Starting to feel like an attack. Paranoia has their hackles up.

KADIR

We need to know who's who.

NASREEN

There's no more water.

A beat. Kadir noticing the HEAT from the tent fire. The SWEAT rolling down his face.

KADIR

We'll smoke it out. If it doesn't
drink, it doesn't sweat.

Simon and Michael stumble into the light. Nasreen, bloody and determined, holding Kadir's gaze as we...

CUT TO:

INT. NEWLY PITCHED TENT - NIGHT

A makeshift sweat lodge. A FIRE churns smoke at the center of the tent. No ventilation. The heat is oppressive. Like being inside a furnace.

Men COUGH and PANT in the smoke. Eyes water. Lungs wheeze.

Kadir goes from man to man, swiping his thumb over foreheads. Checking for sweat. He comes to Nasreen. Plenty sweaty. He moves on.

Comes to Simon. Meets his eyes for a beat, holding. Tense.

Kadir swipes his thumb over Simon's forehead. Smearing GRIMY SWEAT. He's not *Druj*.

Kadir moves on.

NASREEN

struggles to see through the HAZE of smoke, the blood in her eyes now mixing with sweat.

It hurts. Everything is a dark blur.

A streak of YELLOW sears through the haze...

Nasreen rubs her eyes, trying to see. By the time she clears them, the glow has vanished.

KADIR

runs his thumb over Michael's forehead. Stops. Frozen.

The man under his hand is NOT MICHAEL. It's a ghost from his past. A Sogdian we don't recognize, who Kadir clearly does.

KADIR

Brother...

His thumb comes away DRY. But he doesn't notice. POLEAXED by the sight of his dead brother.

KADIR (CONT'D)

How...

SIMON

sees a blur of glowing yellow eyes past Kadir. Realizes who Kadir is supposed to be checking.

All the blood drains out of his face. He goes to his feet...

SIMON

Oh God, no.

Kadir is still TRANSFIXED. Frozen.

Giving the MICHAEL-DEMON the opening it needs to STRIKE.

Kadir GOES DOWN under the demon.

The men around him surge to their feet.

CHAOS ERUPTS in an instant. The Michael-demon is lost in the haze. Someone SLASHES the ceiling, trying to let the smoke out. A man SCREAMS as he's yanked abruptly to the side. Blood soaks the sand underfoot.

A man CALLS OUT in Chinese.

Smoke beginning to clear, letting us see that Kadir and the Caller have the Michael-demon pinned under them, bucking, its flesh roiling.

KADIR

Give us a hand, men!

The men converge on them and RESTRAIN the demon.

Simon is frozen behind them. Face blown open in horror.

INT. SAME - DAWN

The smoke has cleared. Pale sunlight leaks through the tear in the tent ceiling, shining on faces that look like they've been through absolute hell.

The Michael-demon is lashed to the central post, restrained. It took a lot of rope. He's subdued now, eerily still. Eyes tracking movement like a snake in a cage.

SIMON

It's not possible.

The men stand around. Simon wrestling with this new reality. Kadir letting him, but running out of patience.

SIMON (CONT'D)

It can only wear the faces of those it's consumed. Michael...

KADIR

You got separated. You went looking for him. He was alone.

SIMON

He was himself. He made a jape only my friend would have known to make.

NASREEN cuts in.

NASREEN

It's a mimic. It pretended to be sick, when it was Gurak. It's been hiding in our camels. Walking miles every day without incident. It tried sacrificing me tonight, because it's what the man it was wearing would have done. Whatever Michael knew, it knows now too.

A chilling pronouncement. But no one argues.

KADIR

We'll burn him. Like we burned the one that got Li-Peng.

Simon, heart breaking for his friend, stands still as the men around him step to action. Holds out a hand to stop them.

SIMON

Wait. Let me try something first.

A beat. Kadir looks at him. His red, wet eyes.

Finally, he nods.

MOMENTS LATER

Nasreen lingers at the back of the group as Simon crouches before Michael. Kadir holds Michael's head steady by the hair and Simon YANKS his crucifix off. Crusted with blood.

Simon, an unsteady glance at Kadir. No help there. Kadir has no experience in this area.

The crucifix swings on its chain. Simon holds it in front of Michael's face. The empty eyes.

SIMON
In Thy name, O Lord, I command
Satan release this man.

The eyes stare back. Simon holds the crucifix against the demon's face.

SIMON (CONT'D)
*In Thy name, O Lord--in the name of
Jesus Christ and God the Father--I
command the Devil release this man!*

Nothing. No hint of Michael behind yellow eyes. Only hollow, mindless HUNGER.

SIMON (CONT'D)
Release him, DAMN IT!

He STRIKES the Michael-demon in anger. It's like punching a wall. No reaction.

Kadir wrestles Simon away.

KADIR
Are you finished?

Simon wrests his arm free of Kadir.

Breathing hard. Cooling down.

SIMON
No. I'm not.

He goes back to the Michael-demon. Kneels before it.

He puts his hands on the demon's shoulders. Like he once did with Michael.

SIMON (CONT'D)
My friend. Please.

His fingers dig in. He forces himself to loosen his grip.

SIMON (CONT'D)
Do you remember Chang'an? That
night with the fireworks...

He musters a smile, through tears.

SIMON (CONT'D)
I've never seen a man look so
panicked and so delighted at the
same time. Certainly not a man of
the cloth.

(MORE)

SIMON (CONT'D)
You are exceptional in that regard.
(beat)
In many regards.

Desperately, he searches the demon's face. Looking for any trace of recognition.

SIMON (CONT'D)
Michael. *Brother*.

There's nothing. No sign of the man Michael was.

A hand lands gently on Simon's shoulder. Nasreen. She pulls him away. He fights her. Not willing to give up just yet.

NASREEN
Simon.

Simon gives in. He gets shakily to his feet. Nasreen hovering close at his side.

His gaze flicks to Kadir.

SIMON
Now I'm finished.

He pushes out of the tent. Nasreen follows.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - MORNING

Simon empties his stomach, on his hands and knees. Nasreen swears under her breath. Kneels to rub his back, jostling.

NASREEN
Stop that. You can't spare the water.

Simon nods, out of breath. Struggling to keep his vomit down.

Out of focus in the B.G., the men strike the tent.

EXT. SAME - LATER

The shocked quiet after a storm.

Embers smolder. Chinese men work to re-catch what camels remain. CARNAGE is strewn through the ruined camp.

Bloody lumps of flesh and viscera. Difficult to tell what's what. Nasreen stands over the tortured remains of one of the demons. Knobby camel knees. Matted hair. Slick red muscle.

And a human face in a rictus of agony.

Simon joins her. A bit absent. Struggling to remain with it. He considers the face.

SIMON

Do you recognize him?

A beat. Nasreen shakes her head.

Over by the post where the Michael-demon is tied up, KADIR is talking to the two remaining Sogdians. Looks serious.

They keep darting glances at Nasreen. She clocks it. Not sure what to think of it.

Kadir breaks away and comes over to her. Face drawn. Dark.

KADIR

I'm sorry. It's becoming too costly to keep you.

Nasreen pales. Simon's not following.

KADIR (CONT'D)

I can't afford to lose the trust of what men I have left.

SIMON

What are you talking about?

Nasreen, nauseated.

NASREEN

Ahura Mazda demands a sacrifice.

Kadir meets her eyes. Something intimate in his gaze. Even as he sentences her to death.

Nasreen's frozen by indecision. Then *decides*. She's not going to stick around and make it easy.

She turns to RUN...

WHAM. Cold-cocked by the hilt of a dagger.

She drops like a sack of potatoes.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. ABANDONED CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Nasreen wakes with a GASP to splitting pain. The sun overhead is like hot pokers in her eyes.

She rolls onto her back, *wincing*.

VULTURES circle in the sky.

SUPERIMPOSE: **Day 23.**

The camp is deserted. Like a frontier town that's been hit by highwaymen. Silk skeins flap in the breeze. Smoke rises into the sky from a BONFIRE.

In the bonfire burns the SILHOUETTE OF A MAN. The Michael-demon. Should be charred to the bone, but it seems completely unbothered.

Nasreen gets her bearings. Bound hands, ankles. Blood caked on her face, her throat--left over from last night. She spots a sharp rock.

Starts to WORM over to it.

Slow going. Very unpleasant. Dehydrated, concussed, stranded in the middle of nowhere with a literal demon.

But Nasreen doesn't give up.

She reaches the rock. Begins SAWING the rope around her hands. Has to stop to puke, then keeps going. Breathing hard.

EXT. SAME - LATER

The rope around Nasreen's hands is frayed to the last strand. It SNAPS. She unties the ropes around her ankles. Stands on painful, trembling legs.

Under the unsettling gaze of the burning Michael-demon.

Fire CRACKLNG the only sound.

She starts to walk.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT (CARAVAN) - DAY

The majesty of the camel train has been greatly reduced. A single file of a dozen camels carries just enough supplies to keep the men alive. And less than a dozen men remain.

Everyone rides now. No one has the energy to walk.

Simon rides with Kadir at the front of the file. Neither man happy with where they've ended up. A necessary partnership.

SIMON

I don't understand what it wants
from us. Why it's doing this.

KADIR

In the stories, they say *druj* does not want anything. It is all want. All hunger.

SIMON

So we didn't appease it, giving it Nasreen.

KADIR

The death of every man in the world would not appease it.

Simon loses his grip on his anger.

SIMON

Then *why*? Why leave her?

KADIR

The desert will give her a kinder death than the men would've, if she had stayed.

Simon has no response.

Face drawn, Kadir rides ahead.

Simon turns to look back at the empty desert behind them. Where they left Nasreen.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT (NASREEN) - DAY

A SERIES OF DELIRIOUS, SUN-BAKED SHOTS:

--Nasreen staggers down the steep slope of a dune, losing her footing, sliding, the abrasion of sand one more indignity.

--Nasreen clutches her head, falls to her hands and knees, VOMITING up liquid she can't afford to lose.

--Nasreen's lips, white and cracked, like desiccated land.

--Nasreen prods the OPEN WOUNDS in her calf, where the Long-Beard-demon sunk its fingers in. They're bad.

--Nasreen LIMPS, dragging her injured leg. Slow going.

--Nasreen shields her eyes, squinting up at the sky. VULTURES wheeling overhead, turned red by the brightness.

END MONTAGE.

At first the vultures seem to be signaling her inevitable death. Then she realizes they aren't circling *her*. They're circling something in the next valley over...

Nasreen stumbles down the slope of the next dune, into the neighboring valley, where a CAMEL lies on the ground. Waiting for death.

She goes to it. Its eyes are CAKED SHUT with putrid gunk. It clearly has some sort of infection.

She touches its neck. Shushes it when it startles.

NASREEN

Left you behind too, did they?

The camel makes a distressed noise, then settles. Responding to her touch.

MOMENTS LATER

The blind camel gets to its feet with an unsteady lurch. Nasreen on its back, tugging the lead, *tching* and clucking.

Much better than walking.

EXT. SAME - SUNSET

The sun sinks toward the corrugated ridges of rock formations on the horizon. Not quite mountains. Looming over salt flats.

COLD WIND HOWLS, forcing Nasreen to hunch low over the neck of her camel. Her robe whips behind her. Face completely covered except for her eyes.

The sky is DARKENING gradually. Hard to tell whether it's a result of the setting sun, or something else...

A faint YELLOW HAZE between us and the horizon. SAND pelts Nasreen's exposed eyes.

The air turns abruptly DARK ORANGE.

It's a SANDSTORM.

Hidden by the mountains and the sunset, it's managed to sneak up. Now it's right on top of us.

Nasreen pulls her camel to a halt. Slides down off its back.

It's uncooperative, braying, tugging the lead. She kicks it in the backs of its knees, forcing it to kneel.

She huddles down in the sand beside the camel as the desert turns BLACK AS NIGHT.

Gale force winds RIPPING past. Sand blasting.

Nasreen stares at the faint outline of her animal. Its face turned INTO the wind, not away. Even to the layman this seems strange. Unnatural.

And it didn't know the storm was coming.

NASREEN

You're not a camel.

The air reddens. Coming out the other end of the storm. Camel suddenly a menacing presence. Every part of it threatening.

But Nasreen has no choice. She's too weak to walk...and she's way too weak to run.

So she stays.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT (CARAVAN) - NIGHT

The remnant caravan, stopped for the night.

Camels berthed far from the fire. Their bridles tied close together. Theoretically trapping them.

The men are like stray dogs--dried out, mangy, wary of each other. Ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

They don't pitch camp. They lay out bedrolls around the fire. Hourglass and shofar hung on a post. Chillingly exposed. But no one huddles for warmth.

Kadir and Simon have first watch.

Kadir's eyes are turned inward at his men. Those of them that are left. Feeling responsibility for the state they're in.

KADIR

We should have reached the last
oasis by now.

Simon, glancing over. Not startled. Too numb to startle. Says nothing. There's nothing to say.

KADIR (CONT'D)

We should be among the hills. But
I've seen no hint of them on the
horizon.

A beat. Simon processing.

SIMON

So it's no longer a question of surviving. It's a question of what kills us first.

KADIR

It's five days to the Hotan River. Between here and there is a well.

SIMON

You've been?

KADIR

I've heard men speak of it.

Heavy pause. Not an encouraging statement.

SIMON

So tomorrow we'll start leaving bodies in the desert. And the people we've lost will have died for nothing.

KADIR

They already died for nothing.

Simon stares at him. That hot anger burning far behind his eyes. Not directed at Kadir. Directed at himself.

MOMENTS LATER

SIMON stumbles out of the firelight. Cobbled by dehydration, exhaustion. He goes to his knees, breathing hard.

Faintly, on the wind, the sound of a MAN CRYING. *MICHAEL.*

MICHAEL (O.S.)

*Simon...please...you swore you
would take me home...*

Simon puts his face in his hands. Tortured by it.

After a minute, raises his head...

To see DOZENS OF YELLOW EYES watching him from the dark.

THE CAMELS.

They're all Druj.

They don't move. Don't attack. They just STARE. And Simon is very *small* in the face of it.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT (NASREEN) - NIGHT

The storm has passed, leaving a strange dust in the air.

Nasreen crouches before the blind camel. Its eyes still shut under the gunk.

She barely blinks. Feels like if she looks away for a *second*, it will get her. Reaches her fingers towards its eye...

Stopping just short of touching it.

The camel doesn't react. She draws her hand back and makes as if to touch it again--FASTER this time.

Still nothing. The camel doesn't flinch. *It really is blind.*

NASREEN

Not just a mimic. A replica.

Brain working, thoughts flying behind her eyes...

EXT. SAME - LATER

Nasreen back on the camel. *The CAMEL-DEMON*. She gets it up, *tching*, nipping the lead. The camel-demon obeys. They set off again toward the rocky hills.

Every muscle in Nasreen's body wound tight with tension. Her breath catches with each step. Eyes dart between the ground ahead and the camel's face. Its mouth, its saliva. Its *teeth*.

At any moment, it could attack.

EXT. ROCK FORMATIONS - LATER

Craggly hills loom like great beasts in the dark around us. The camel's tread is near-silent, the only sound other than Nasreen's breathing.

Buh-bum-bum. Buh-bum-bum.

Bright moon overhead. Clouds threatening the edges. Nasreen stares up at it as if in prayer.

Don't go dark. Don't go dark.

A cloud passes in front of the moon.

For a moment, the camel's face seems to *SHIFT*. Then the cloud passes. The moon emerges. The demon retreats.

Nasreen's blood rushes in her ears. It sounds like...

RUNNING WATER.

Nasreen's eyes go to the sound, pupils dilated, sucking up every scrap of light. The rushing isn't inside her body. It's a *stream*.

Slowly, casually, she *tches* and steers the camel-demon toward the noise. Passing through a NARROW CANYON.

Tough to see in the dark. All that's on the other side of the canyon is BLACK. Like an abyss.

But the air feels thick with moisture. There's water here.

Nasreen guides her camel on. Hands shaking on the lead.

Suddenly it STOPS. Refuses to go on.

Nasreen's heart in her throat. She realizes there's a BOULDER blocking half the canyon. She steers the camel-demon around.

A beat. Like the camel's considering. Then it continues.

The end of the canyon. The sense of an OPEN SPACE ahead.

Nasreen KICKS the camel.

URGING it into a RUN, through the last few feet of the canyon and tumbling OVER THE EDGE OF A CLIFF.

EXT. RAVINE - CONTINUOUS

PLUNGING INTO DARKNESS.

Camel TWISTING under her, PANICKED.

Only a split second before--

WHAM.

Nasreen and the camel-demon SMACK into the water.

SUBMERGED.

Absolute *SCREAMING CHAOS*. The demon BREAKS SHAPE. BURNING and ROILING in the water, a mess of limbs and faces obscured by bubbles in inky black.

Nasreen SWIMS away from it, clawing at the water.

She breaks the surface with a GASP.

Searching for the shore. The walls of the ravine are sheer rock. She feels her way along them, looking for some way up.

The demon PULLS her back under.

Human nails and animal talons RAKE at her face, her clothes. She shoves back blindly, desperately, lungs burning.

Manages to separate again. Bursts into air. Feeling her way with bloody fingers along the walls.

A small, rocky beach. She hauls herself onto it. Exhausted.

Demon THRASHING in the water behind her. Dying. Awful sounds.

She lies flat on her back, staring up at a patch of starlit sky, struggling to catch her breath. Soaked through. Pitiful trembling in the cold.

ARYA (O.S.)

NASREEN!

Something about this time is different than the others we've heard his voice. It feels more real.

Nasreen sits bolt upright.

HER FATHER, ARYA, reaches for her from the water.

Flesh dripping from his bones like melted wax. Face contorted in desperation. In love.

ARYA (CONT'D)

Nasreen. Please. Help me.

Nasreen, absolutely gutted. Torn in two.

And doubting what she knows. *Could some part of her father be alive in this creature?*

She gets shakily to her feet.

ARYA (CONT'D)

It hurts. It hurts, little fox.

His voice is an agonized whisper. Nasreen takes a single step towards him.

INSERT CUT: Arya smiles at us in sunlight.

Arya stares at us in torment. In too much pain to speak. Lips forming the word "Please."

Nasreen reaches out to him.

The Arya-demon SEIZES her arm. Violent, sudden.

RIPPING her back into the water.

Still wearing her father's face as it tries to DROWN her. Its skin sloughing off in her hands.

She PUSHES her father's face, forcing the demon off her. It's too weak now to fight back.

It drifts down into dark water, dragged by its own weight.

Nasreen breaks the surface. Pulls herself back onto the shore and collapses, sobbing. Overcome. Totally spent.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Nasreen's all cried out.

No more space for emotion. Everything focused on surviving. She plunges cupped hands into the stream. Drinks.

Strikes a match. Scrutinizes the sheer wall of the ravine.

Her breath freezes in the air. Firelight dances on the rock wall. The water in her hair and clothes is starting to ice.

Muscle tremors. Hypothermia setting in. No time to waste.

She drops the match. As it flickers out, she finds her first handhold, hauling herself up onto the wall.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT (NASREEN) - DAWN

A dusty wind sweeps across the desert plain. Out of sight of the rock formations. Nasreen travels haltingly under her own power. She looks like hell warmed over. *Barely* warmed over.

Icicles spike on her eyebrows. Her lips are blue. Wounds are no longer bloody--now they're black and purple with cold.

She drags her bad leg. Falters.

Falls. Catches herself on her hands and knees. Tries to get up. But she's used all her strength. She hits the ground.

Out for the count.

She lies on her side, staring along the bumps and ridges of the plain. Sand grains HUGE in front of her eye.

Her hand closes on her ocarina. She brings it to her lips. A faint, mournful note.

In the distance, out of focus, A FIGURE.

For a moment it looks like her father. *Is it the demon coming for her, somehow? Or death?*

Then it resolves into someone else.

SIMON.

As he reaches her, Nasreen slips away.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Gentle breeze nips through camp. Only a few small tents, all with open sides. The only shade for hundreds of miles.

The surviving men sit around a small cooking fire, eating and chattering. Something restored about them. Reinvigorated.

INT. OPEN-SIDED TENT - DAY

Simon sits braced against his bamboo cane. Nasreen lies unconscious on a bedroll. Wounds dressed. Swaddled in furs, thawed out.

She doesn't wake gently. She wakes with a startled lurch, as if she's falling.

Simon's hands come to her shoulders. She struggles.

SIMON

You're alright, Nasreen.

His voice calls her eyes to his face.

She recognizes him. Calms, catching her breath through her nose, like a horse cooling down.

NASREEN

You came back.

Simon's face colors with guilt.

SIMON

I should never have left you.

Nasreen says nothing. Not about to absolve him of that. But still, she grabs onto him and doesn't let go.

EXT. CAMP - TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

Simon helps Nasreen limp out of the tent. KADIR comes to meet them at once. Distrustful look. Without preamble:

KADIR
How do I know you're not *Druj*?

NASREEN
How do I know you're not?

Kadir inclines his head. *Fair point.*

Nasreen notices the men whispering in her direction. Not threatening. Reverent. Kadir follows her eyes.

KADIR
They think you've come back to lead
us out of the desert.

Nasreen's gaze snaps to him. Alarmed.

KADIR (CONT'D)
When we are most in need, Ahura
Mazda returns our dead to guide us.

NASREEN
They think I'm dead.

Kadir nods. He doesn't believe it. But what can you do.

KADIR
They won't touch the camels. The
whole herd are faces of *Druj*.

NASREEN
Then order them to.

KADIR
I've led them too far astray. They
won't listen to me.

Nasreen looks at the men. Their skeletal maws, their cracked and peeling skin, their festering wounds.

NASREEN
We can't walk out of here. Not in
this condition.

KADIR
No. We can't.

He steps away. Whispers turn to mutters, like a train gaining speed, loud enough that we can make out words. In SOGDIAN.

SIMON
What are they saying?

NASREEN
They're calling me The girl that
God spat out.

SIMON
Well then. If they won't listen to
Kadir, perhaps they'll listen to
you.

Nasreen meets his eyes. Not wanting this responsibility. But
it's already on her shoulders.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 24.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Kadir lies in the shade of one of the tents, arms over his
head. He's lost control of his men and can't get it back. A
sense of resignation.

The canvas overhead flutters in the breeze. Making flickering
shapes with the sun. Burnished red. Hazy orange.

WIND CHIMES sing in his memory.

In the shuttering pattern a FACE appears. Not *Druj*.

SHAYN. Smiling down at him. Reaching for his face. He touches
his own lip, where she would touch. Her hand slides over her
pregnant belly. His fingers twitch in sand.

NASREEN (O.S.)
I'm not dead yet. None of us are.

Kadir, shaken out of the memory. He looks up. Nasreen backlit
by blinding sun.

NASREEN (CONT'D)
I don't know about you, but I'm not
interested in dying in this desert.

A beat. Kadir sits up. Woozy with dehydration.

KADIR
What did you have in mind?

AMONG THE CAMELS

The men are all assembled. Watching Nasreen as she walks
toward the camels, hand outstretched.

Like watching Jesus walk on water. Pretty sure he's going to drown, but hoping and believing, in spite of ourselves, that he might not...

Nasreen's hand closes in on a camel's face. Its watery eyes watching her through thick lashes.

Is it going to attack? Nasreen's fingers tremble. Not as sure of herself as she's pretending.

The whole camp seems to hold its breath.

Finally, her hand touches. Nothing happens. The camel remains docile. Placid.

Nasreen exhales. She turns back to her audience.

NASREEN

Druj wears our faces because it wants to hide. Just like it hides in the dark. As long as it knows we're watching, it won't attack. It won't change shape. Not unless we corner it.

The men listen raptly. Nasreen has become a religious figure to them. Everything out of her mouth is gospel.

NASREEN (CONT'D)

These camels will carry us out of the desert. We ride hard. We don't stop to sleep, or to eat. We don't look away for a second. We don't give *Druj* an opportunity to attack.
(then)

When we reach the Hotan, we cross.
Men will make it. *Druj* will die.

Silence. Soldiers have just been given their marching orders, sent into battle. They're scared shitless. But resolved.

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - DAY

MARCHING once more. Lumbering on camelback. Kadir leads the long, single-file train. In the sand behind them, a trail of discarded supplies. Scrolls of parchment. Broken crates. Left behind in order to travel faster.

Nasreen rides in the line. The Chinese man in front of her sways dangerously with his camel's motion. Eyes drooping. He starts to *slide* from his seat...

Whump. Crashes to the ground.

Nasreen pulls her camel to a stop and leaps down to help him. The file bunches up behind her.

She turns the fallen man over. Feels his breath on her hand. Peels back his eyelids. His eyeballs twitch.

A shadow falls over them. Simon.

SIMON
Water deprivation.

Nasreen nods. Together they get the man up, lifting his dead weight, as others come to assist.

EXT. SAME - LATER

The unconscious man now lashed to his camel. Nasreen fighting to stay conscious on her own mount.

In front, Kadir rubs COLD-FOOD POWDER on his gums, looking to stay awake. Others follow suit. Nasreen included.

It's not a fun drug. Nasreen's vision VIBRATES, desert blurring alarmingly. She blinks, banishing the effect.

Behind her, another man wilts and DROPS TO THE GROUND.

EXT. SAME - LATER

HALF THE MEN now lashed to their camels. Only Nasreen, Simon, Kadir, and one LAST SOGDIAN remain upright.

Simon tches his camel out of the file to ride with Nasreen.

SIMON
Trying to find a well in the desert
is like trying to knock a sparrow
out of the sky with a rock.

Nasreen follows his gaze to Kadir, riding well ahead of them.

NASREEN
He got us to the last oasis. That
was dead reckoning too.

SIMON
Yes. But if he's been taken over by
that thing...
(then)
For all we know he could be leading
us away from the well. Away from
the river.

Nasreen looks to the sky. It's flat gray. No birds. No moving clouds. Nothing to indicate what direction they're heading.

Still. She looks back at Kadir. Has a gut instinct about him.

NASREEN
He seems like himself.

SIMON
So did Michael.

Nasreen frowns. *Good point.* Her view of Kadir shifts.

NASREEN
I'll get him alone. Turn my back.
Give him an opportunity to attack.
If he's *Druj*, he'll take it.

SIMON
And how do you propose to get him
alone?

Nasreen doesn't answer. She hasn't figured that part out yet. The desert is wide open around them. Nowhere to hide, now.

Except...

On the horizon, a faint dark smudge.

EXT. SAME - LATER

A BEHEMOTH CLOUD OF SAND closes over the plain, towards the caravan. Too big to go around. Too fast to outrun.

Rising thousands of feet in the air above them.

The air is yellow and PUMMELED with hurricane-force winds. Hard to see, hard to breathe. They kick the camels' knees to get them to lie down.

Kadir YELLS above the wind:

KADIR
*We can't take our eyes off them! We
need a tent!*

The Last Sogdian pulls out a large piece of canvas. As the other three WRESTLE with the fabric, struggling to stretch it over the huddled camels...

NASREEN slips Li-Peng's *kyoketsu-shoge* from her saddle bag onto her belt. Surreptitious. Planning something.

Meets eyes with Simon. He's in on it.

INT. SANDSTORM TENT - MOMENTS LATER

The fabric is stretched over the heads of the camels. Low to the ground. Flapping like a ship's sail.

A single LANTERN flickers, held in the Last Sogdian's hand, while he shoves cold-food powder up his nose.

WIND ROARS outside. Deafening.

Nasreen's not here. Simon makes a show of looking around. He turns to Kadir. Raises his voice:

SIMON
Where's Nasreen?

Kadir looks too. Doesn't see her.

His face says: *Shit*.

EXT. SANDSTORM - MOMENTS LATER

Kadir ducks out of the tent, head wrapped in thick layers of fabric. Only the eyes exposed. He ties the flap closed behind him. Fighting in the RAGING wind.

He turns into the storm. Visibility is zero. Finding anyone out here is an impossible task.

KADIR
NASREEN!

His voice is snatched away by the gale. He ties a rope around his waist, ties it to the tent, and plunges into the storm.

STAGGERING under the force of it.

Arm up to shield his eyes.

KADIR (CONT'D)
NASREEN!

A FIGURE in the thick red haze. Slumped on the ground.

NASREEN lies with her back to Kadir, clutching the *kyoketsu-shoge* against her chest. If this goes south, she's ready.

INT. SANDSTORM TENT - SAME

Simon and the Last Sogdian huddle together. Tense. Trying to keep their eyes on all the camels at once. Animals chuffing and moaning around them. Musty. Close.

The lantern FLICKERS alarmingly. Air moving through the walls of the tent. The Last Sogdian holds it close. Sheltering it.

Sweat beads on both their brows. They don't breathe. If this light goes out, they're dead.

A brisk puff of wind.

The light goes out.

EXT. SANDSTORM - CONTINUOUS

Kadir turns Nasreen over with a hand on her shoulder.

She stares up at him with sand-crusting eyes. Struggling to keep them open in the cutting wind.

A tense beat. *Is he Druj? Will he attack?*

His face is hidden by scarves. But he doesn't change shape. He's solid, unwavering. He's a man. He helps her to her feet.

She tucks the *kyoketsu-shoge* out of sight.

As she gets up, the ROPE AROUND KADIR'S WAIST CINCHES TIGHT.

He looks down at it. Looks up and meets her eyes.

They both know. Whatever's pulling on that rope is bigger and stronger than a human.

KADIR IS A DEAD MAN.

Nasreen lunges for him.

The rope YANKS him off his feet, *RIPPING* him out of sight in the storm.

INT. SANDSTORM TENT - SAME

That dose of cold-foam powder hits the Last Sogdian HARD as the tent descends into bloody chaos.

HALLUCINOGENIC FLASHES:

--Opaque NICTITATING MEMBRANES like alien eyes, dozens of them vibrating around us.

--The grotesquely elongated face of a camel, huge teeth, jaw unhinging like a python.

--GURAK crouching in the dark, smeared with blood and filth.

--Fingers pushing through a camel's stomach, like an infant clawing its way out of the womb.

--A pile of intestines writhes like a pile of snakes.

--A man's face turns on the end of a camel's neck, searching for us in the pitch black tent.

--Eyes LOCKING ON US, sickly yellow, *SEARING...*

EXT. SANDSTORM - CONTINUOUS

Nasreen RUNS after Kadir.

A GUST OF WIND bowls her down. She lurches back to her feet. Keeps going. Desperation turning to mania.

A FORM prostrate on the ground in front of her.

Kadir. He's mortally wounded. Clutching his exposed guts. A bloody hand REACHES for her...

She kneels to help.

NASREEN

Kadir.

She grabs his arm. *He grabs her back.*

Fingers SINK INTO HER FLESH. Punching through skin.

Kadir's eyes are *DRUJ-YELLOW*.

Nasreen SCREAMS, soundless in the wind. More grief than pain.

She shoves away from him, scrambling on her hands as his hazy form LURCHES and TWISTS. Breaking shape. GROWING.

She gets her feet under her and RUNS. Away from the tent.

INTO THE STORM.

The predator pursues.

We can't hear it coming. We can't see it coming. *But we know it's coming.*

Nasreen's feet pound on flat, packed earth.

One of her steps comes down on something different. WOOD.

She stops. There's a wood board covering something under her feet, held down with a large ROCK.

THE WELL.

Ideas CLUNK into place in Nasreen's head.

She scrambles to unwind the *kyoketsu-shoge* from her belt. Secures the chain around the rock. Hauls the rock off the wood board and uncovers the well. A dark hole in the ground.

Before she's fully-prepared, the demon finds her.

SEIZES HER. Tearing her off her feet.

The thing is now in its true form--or as close to it as we'll ever see. Monstrous, with a mouth much too big for its face. Bloody, CLAWED HANDS hanging at the end of too-long arms.

Nasreen's pinned underneath it.

Kyoketsu-shoge on the ground beside her.

As the demon SLAVERS above her, saliva hanging in thick, putrid ropes over her face, Nasreen reaches for the weapon.

She closes her hand on the HOOKED END.

SKEWERING her own palm. A blade shines behind her knuckles.

The demon RIPS her hand from her arm.

Nasreen SCREAMS.

It shovels the bloody flesh into its mouth. Swallows. Throat working grotesquely an inch from her face.

Weak from pain and blood loss, Nasreen shifts ever-so-slightly under the demon's bulk. Her foot inching toward...

THE ROCK.

Perched on the very edge of the well. Connected by a chain to the hand the demon just swallowed.

She NUDGES the rock.

It tips...

Wavering on the edge...

Then DROPS.

YANKING the demon off her.

The weight of the rock DRAGS it toward the well.

It SCRABBLES at the bare ground, shape morphing faster than the eye can track, trying to find something to help it.

Clings to the lip of the well for a long, breathless moment.

LUNGES out, SPEARING Nasreen's foot with one of its claws.

Then FALLS out of sight.

Pulling Nasreen over the edge of the well with it.

She GRABS the lip at the last second. Straining with her one remaining hand to hold up not only her own weight, but the weight of the demon and the rock below it.

All of it hung on a talon SPEARED through her foot.

It's EXCRUCIATING.

Her SCREAM of exertion is joined by the screams of the demon. Like a chorus of the damned echoing up around her.

She strains. Knuckles in her hand popping. Tendons about to snap. *Somehow*, still holding on...

But she's not going to last long.

The talon RAKES through her foot, opening the wound further. She STOMPS on the claw, forcing it to keep cutting, ripping her foot all the way open.

Until the talon slices through empty air.

The demon PLUMMETS.

It CRASHES into the water below her. Splashing, squealing in the dark. SCREAMS reaching a fever pitch.

Finally, it falls silent.

Blood soaks Nasreen's felt boot, turning it dark black. Fresh pain making her lightheaded.

Her grip slips.

She DROPS.

Just as a hand CATCHES hers.

SIMON.

He hauls her over the edge, back onto solid ground.

She sprawls flat on her back. Covered in blood and sand. Too drained to even lift her head as Simon wraps the stump of her severed hand in a scarf, binding it.

He gets her to her feet. Ignores her gritted shout as weight comes down on her destroyed foot.

With Simon mostly carrying her, braced on his cane, they flee into the red hell of the storm.

CUT TO:

EXT. TAKLAMAKAN DESERT - NIGHT

The storm has blown through. The desert is eerily silent. No wind. No life. Simon and Nasreen hobble, a four-legged beast.

Every step hurts. Simon speaks to distract them both.

SIMON

You never told me before, what you
would say to your father.

Nasreen's leaning on him so hard he's the only thing keeping her up. They're both half dead. Stripped of all the trappings of civilization.

So she doesn't refuse him, this time.

NASREEN

I wanted him to take me with him on
the crossing. When he wouldn't, I
told him I hated him. That I wished
he wouldn't come back.

A long beat. She breathes hard, struggling through the pain and the exhaustion and the old regret.

Simon waits. Finally:

NASREEN (CONT'D)

I would tell him that I didn't mean
it. That I was angry and afraid,
because the only person in the
world who ever meant anything to me
was leaving me behind.

Clumsy, Simon presses a kiss to the top of her head.

SIMON

I'm sure he knew.

Nasreen's fingers dig into his shoulder. She leans into him.

They stagger on.

EXT. SAME - LATER

Resting. They sit on the side of a cool blue dune. Nasreen in a shallow doze. Eyes still half-open.

Simon scoops SILK WORM LARVAE out of his hollow cane. Eating them from the tips of his fingers. He offers her some.

For a moment in the dark, his eyes look OPAQUE. As if covered by a nictitating membrane.

Nasreen goes tense as a cord.

SIMON

Nasreen?

He blinks, and the opacity is gone.

A beat. *Was it really there? Or is she seeing things?* Nasreen shakes her head, refusing the larvae.

But she keeps watching Simon closely.

EXT. SAME - DAY

Walking again. Nasreen leans heavily on Simon's bamboo cane. Her injured leg a dead weight on her hip.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 25.

Simon walks beside her, peering at the sky. Sun a white glow behind pale cloud cover.

SIMON

What do you think the chances are
that it snows again? Or rains?

Nasreen doesn't look at the sky. She doesn't take her eyes off him. She hasn't for a long time.

NASREEN

I think the chances are slim.

SIMON

So it would be a miracle, then.

NASREEN

Yes. I suppose it would.

Simon looks at her. Smiles weakly. She smiles back a moment too late. Lips cracked.

He ducks towards her. She flinches. Manages to hide it as he presses another kiss to her head.

Simon notices nothing amiss.

But her heart races as he walks away.

EXT. SAME - NIGHT

Simon curls up on his side, asleep.

Nasreen sits beside him. Watching him. Not daring to sleep.

Her eyes are red. Ringed with deep circles. Her eyelids start to droop...

She digs her thumb into her stump.

Using the pain to keep herself awake.

EXT. SAME - DAY

Walking. Sky white with clouds. HILLS in the distance. Not just rock formations, but actual foothills. Farther on, the hazy outlines of MOUNTAINS.

SUPERIMPOSE: Day 26.

Simon reaches the top of a dune, huffing and puffing. Pauses beside Nasreen. Taking in the vista. Oddly somber.

SIMON

The river won't be far, then.

Nasreen shakes her head. Tension in every molecule.

SIMON (CONT'D)

Kadir said five days. It's only been three.

NASREEN

Looks like we were farther along than he thought.

Simon makes an agreeing noise. Meets her eyes. Push and pull. For some reason neither of them wants to be the first to head down the dune.

After a minute he breaks the staring match. Staggers down the slope. Nasreen follows.

EXT. RIDGE ABOVE THE HOTAN RIVER - DAY

They trudge up a rocky hill. There's no sound of water. Only their ragged breathing. Pebbles sliding. Cane crunching.

They reach the top of the hill at the same time. Looking down over the river.

IT'S DRY.

Nasreen's breath snags.

Shit.

All at once, the tension snaps.

Simon LUNGES for her.

Nasreen THROWS herself down the hill, away from him.

He pursues. Suddenly only the rough sketch of a man. Everything in the right spot, but contorted. A SIMON-DEMON.

Nasreen reaches the riverbed.

EXT. RIVERBED - DAY

WHAM. The Simon-demon TACKLES her to the ground.

She braces the cane against his throat with one hand and one forearm. Holding him back.

His hands tear at her face, her clothes. Nails raking.

There's no hint of Simon in the demon's face. Once-kind eyes burned out by HUNGER.

Nasreen sobs, helpless underneath him. Despair taking over. Her arms shake, straining to hold him off her. Threatening to buckle.

It's no use. There's nothing she can do. The Simon-demon is too strong. She's going to die.

THE SKY OPENS UP.

A deluge.

Rain dumping down like a literal, actual miracle from God.

Raindrops hit the demon's skin and SIZZLE. It scrambles back away from her, under a rock overhang. Like an animal scared back into its hole.

Yellow eyes tracking her from the shadows. Unblinking.

Nasreen pushes herself to her hands and knees.

Muddy water swirls around her. It's raining so much the river is starting to refill.

She gets to her feet. Swaying dangerously. An inch of running water separating her from the demon. Rain pounding her hood. Running in rivulets in front of her face.

SIMON

Nasreen.

The Simon-demon holds something out, dangling from a string.

Nasreen's hand flies to her chest. Finding it missing.

Her ocarina. The last thing she has of her father.

Her eyes go to the demon's face. It's no longer Simon. *It's her father.* Reaching for her. His gaze tender. Imploring.

ARYA

Come here, little fox. Come to me.
All is forgiven. We can go home now
together.

Nasreen reaches out. Takes a step towards him.

Their fingers almost brush...

The demon GRABS her.

At the same moment that *she* grabs *it*.

PULLING it out into the rain.

SHOCK on its face. Disturbingly human.

It SCREAMS in agony as the rain burns its flesh. Melting like wax from its bones. Still wearing her father's face.

It tries to get back under cover.

But Nasreen WRESTLES it down into the water. A few inches now. Enough to HOLD IT UNDER.

The demon THRASHES, gurgling. Begging with her father's voice. Nasreen holds its head under, SOBBING. SCREAMING in anger, grief, pain, exhaustion. All of it fueling her.

Finally, the demon goes still.

It's dead.

She lets it float back up. Raindrops misting on the surface of the river. Her face soaked. Eyes red.

In death, the demon is stuck between her father and Simon. An amalgamation of the two.

She holds the corpse to her chest. Needs something to grieve. Something to hold onto. Even if it's this.

INSERT CUT: EXT. ROAD TO JADE GATE - FLASHBACK - DAY

The now-familiar scene. Nasreen SHOUTING at her father. Both of them pushing, shoving. Parting in anger.

She touches the demon's face. Looking for her father in it.

NASREEN

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Dead eyes stare at the sky. At rain spiraling down.

But they're not her father's. And they're not Simon's either.

She lets the corpse go. Bobbing on the shallow tide of the river. Floating away from her. Still holding the ocarina.

Then she climbs out on the other side.

EXT. OTHER SIDE OF THE HOTAN RIVER - DAY

Nasreen walks out of the desert.

Scrub bushes dot the landscape around her. She slogs through cold mud. It's still pouring rain. She tips her head back and opens her mouth, drinking from the sky.

On the inside of her hood, riding out of reach of the rain, is a wriggling spot of white.

A SILK WORM LARVA.

Is it only a caterpillar? Or a tiny piece of Druj, riding free into the world? Impossible to tell.

As Nasreen walks on, unaware...

FADE TO BLACK.

END.