

SALT AND FIRE

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INT. COLONIAL HACIENDA - DAY

This does not look good. A long moment of ominous silence. There are six or seven masked men, heavily armed, in black combat outfits, but slightly more ragtag than an organized SWAT team. All eyes are on LAURA SOMMERFELD, who has been pushed down into a chair. The first thing we notice is that she is blindfolded and handcuffed. It dawns on us that she has been taken hostage.

She is in her early forties, tall and beautiful. Even in distress, with only part of her face visible, she exudes an aura of what one would call erotic attractiveness. Her blond hair is disheveled.

She maintains her dignity, and she is clearly defiant.

Opposite her sits the leader of the gang, a tall man, also masked, although it seems odd to wear a mask in front of a blindfolded woman. He is surrounded by men carrying M16 assault rifles. We also make out an Uzi submachine gun, short and nasty, and a single Kalashnikov. The leader is flanked by a man in a wheelchair, the kind with heavy batteries, digital controls, and automatic steering. He too is clad like a warrior. The leader pushes a cup of tea in front of LAURA. He has no face, only eyes, and a commanding voice of authority.

MASKED MAN

(soft, but firm)

Please, you must drink some tea.

The MASKED MAN turns with a nod to the goon in the wheelchair who sets his vehicle into motion. With a soft electric hum of the engine he approaches her. His Uzi rests in his lap.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

(politely)

Would you please bend your head?

LAURA hesitates. What does this mean? But then, after a beat, she bends her head slightly. The MAN IN WHEELCHAIR removes the cloth covering her eyes with a flourish. He drives back to the other side of the table. LAURA's eyes follow him.

LAURA

Nice meeting you again.

We do not yet understand what she means by this. The MAN IN WHEELCHAIR laughs a strange laughter.

LAURA looks around, taking in the scene. Addressing no one in particular.

LAURA (CONT'D)

I demand to be set free. NOW.

There is only silence from the men. The MASKED MAN leans forward. She quickly understands he is the leader. He's the only one of the men who has a mouth opening in his mask. He blows demonstratively into his own teacup with a delicacy that does not suit him.

MASKED MAN

Please drink.

LAURA

No. Thank you.

Smiling at her under his cover he raises his cup to chin level and treats her to the theater of his blow-sip-blow method of tea intake.

MASKED MAN

It may taste strange, even bitter,  
but tea brewed from coca leaves  
will help you adapt to the  
altitude.

LAURA

I want my handcuffs removed.

MASKED MAN

You have scratched one of my men,  
and you have bitten...

LAURA interrupts him.

LAURA

I am proud of that.

The MASKED MAN laughs softly, and with a nod sends the MAN IN WHEELCHAIR to her again.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Please stretch out your hands.

LAURA holds her hands out to him, since apparently he cannot bend over far in his wheelchair. The man produces a small key and snaps her cuffs open. LAURA eyes the Uzi in his lap. Does she have a chance to grab it and start shooting? The MAN IN WHEELCHAIR exchanges a quick, knowing glance with her and places his hand on the weapon.

MASKED MAN

Is that better?

LAURA  
Slightly. And I demand an  
explanation.

MASKED MAN  
Everything will fall into place.

LAURA  
When will I get my passport back?

MASKED MAN  
I am not sure.

He deftly unfolds and then refolds his legs.

LAURA  
When will I be able to leave?

MASKED MAN  
Of that too, I am unsure.

LAURA looks around. We are somewhere in South America, inside a colonial hacienda. It feels almost like a museum; there are signs that the building dates back to the early days of the Spanish Conquest, but it is regularly inhabited and used on a daily basis. A few toys even indicate the presence of children.

In a corner, decorated with tropical ferns, there is a large cage with a green parrot. The parrot screeches. As if this were her wake up call, LAURA gets used to the idea that this is going to be a long haul.

LAURA  
I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since I  
was on the plane.

MASKED MAN  
Thirty hours ago?

The image fades out.

INT. AIRPLANE - NIGHT

Business class on an intercontinental flight. Not a single seat is left unoccupied. A young Scandinavian flight attendant removes the dinner trays. LAURA has barely touched her meal.

LAURA  
Thank you. And here, please take  
the tablecloth.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
You haven't eaten much.

LAURA  
I get really jet-lagged when I eat  
too much on an overnight flight.  
Just leave me the apple juice,  
please.

Next to her, a man stirs in the window seat. He has been half asleep, but he comes alive at the sight of the pretty stewardess. He is Dr. FABIO CAVANI, a scientist in his late thirties. Black hair, slicked back with gel. A tan that could only be the result of regular visits to a tanning salon. White, perfect teeth. Extremely handsome. He knows how handsome he is, and he is convinced he's irresistible.

CAVANI  
(purring)  
Sweetheart, could I have another  
glass of champagne?

The stewardess becomes slightly formal.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
Another one?

CAVANI  
Well, I just had three so far,  
maybe four, if you kept count of  
what is good for me.

He smiles his most radiant smile.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
And how about a glass for my most  
attractive companion, professor  
Sommerfeld. L-A-U-R-A Sommerfeld.

He lets her name melt on his tongue. Now, she becomes the focus of his attention.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
Righto. Let's celebrate.

LAURA  
Celebrate what?

LAURA is alarmed to find his hand on her knee.

CAVANI  
(to stewardess)  
And another one for Dr. Meier  
across the aisle.  
(MORE)

CAVANI (CONT'D)

We are all one party. We need to warm up for the journey ahead.

DR. MEIER, like LAURA, does not really want another drink, but he reluctantly nods assent. He is a short, thin man, late fifties, with a face that seems to be permanently pained. Violently beaten dogs have the same expression in their eyes. This is a man who must have been bullied and tormented by his schoolmates throughout his entire adolescence.

Softly but resolutely, LAURA removes CAVANI'S hand from her knee.

MEIER, with a meek expression on his face, surprises us with his request.

MEIER

Make mine a double bourbon.  
Straight, no ice.

In the row in front of LAURA, a strange man rises. Wild white hair, his look unsteady, his voice hoarse. He looks straight at LAURA.

STRANGER

And thus concludes MY STORY.

LAURA

Yes?

STRANGER

I have been rescued from the foothills of the Pamir mountains. There, I was stranded in a small plane that had to make an emergency landing in a dust storm. For twenty days I experienced delirium. The woman who rescued me was so beautiful, and her song touched my soul so deeply, that I lost my hearing. I am deaf now, so I am afraid I cannot answer any of your questions.

LAURA

(turning to the flight attendant)  
Who is he?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

We call him the Man with One Story. I have seen him frequently. He travels this route, always alone.

MEIER  
On what business?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
We do not know.

She returns with CAVANI's champagne and MEIER's bourbon.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT (CONT'D)  
And what is your joyful party all  
about, if I may ask?

LAURA  
We are a scientific delegation.

CAVANI  
(with insipid pride)  
Sent by the United Nations.

MEIER  
To look into an ecological  
disaster. The Diablo Blanco  
Disaster.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
I haven't heard of it.

LAURA  
It will soon be a household name.

All the lights are dimming down. Most of the passengers have stretched out to sleep. A few watch movies. LAURA starts reading. Only one or two passengers remain upright, isolated souls glowing like angels under their reading lights. LAURA turns a page.

A closer look at her book. It is full of graphs of plankton per liter, biomass, and changes in water levels. The next page shows statistics on salt distribution.

LAURA runs a computer simulation on her laptop. It shows the decrease of airborne moisture correlated to the increase in toxins.

The window shades are down. Through one that stays open, a colossal night out there stares back into the plane.

A few hours later. LAURA hangs out with the flight attendant by the kitchen compartment.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
Is there any way I could change  
seats?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
I am afraid not. The plane is full.

LAURA  
My companion in the window seat...

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
(whispering)  
Don't hesitate to call if you need me.

LAURA  
(conspiratorial)  
His tan.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
And his perfect teeth. You know what Marilyn Monroe famously said when asked what kind of man a woman has to avoid by all means?

LAURA  
No. Tell me.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
She said, beware of the men with the perfect teeth. They are the worst.

The two women share a moment of deep understanding.

One hour later. LAURA has stretched her seat into its horizontal position and covered herself with a blanket. Turning to the aisle, she notices that MEIER is awake, his eyes fixed on her. She tries to sleep, but suddenly she feels CAVANI's hand slide under her blanket and fondle her breast.

LAURA immediately gets up.

LAURA  
Dr. Cavani!

CAVANI  
Fabio. Call me Fabio.

LAURA walks to the kitchen compartment, but nobody is there. The flight attendants have disappeared.

LAURA, knowing that she has to deal with the situation on her own, resolutely walks back to her seat. To her surprise, her seat is taken.

DR. MEIER has switched seats, and now occupies her bed. CAVANI has turned his face to the wall.

His body language shows he is not embarrassed, but miffed.  
LAURA settles in the bed across the aisle.

MEIER  
(quietly)  
Dr. Sommerfeld, sleep well.

LAURA  
Call me Laura.

The image fades out.

INT. AIRPORT IMMIGRATION - MORNING

A line of passengers at immigration. Everyone is stuck. LAURA turns to MEIER and CAVANI behind her.

LAURA  
Hey, who is supposed to be meeting us here anyway?

CAVANI digs into his breast pocket.

CAVANI  
Some guy named Helmholtz, from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment and two other gentlemen. I can't seem to read this.

He frown-squints.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
Hmm, my own damn handwriting, too.

He switches on his smart phone.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
Nothing. I can't get a signal.

LAURA and MEIER try the same.

LAURA  
Mine is dead too.

MEIER  
This is what it always comes down to in countries like this. We'll have to buy a cheap phone and a local card for calls only.

CAVANI  
 However, most of my other apps are  
 still enormously helpful.

MEIER  
 Such as?

CAVANI  
 My diary.

He waves the phone at them.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
 April 14: arrival hall, in front of  
 immigration. The line is lethargic,  
 listless, torpid, moribund.

Turning to LAURA.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
 I think I put that quite well.

No reaction. LAURA simply turns inward. CAVANI continues his  
 diary.

CAVANI (CONT'D)  
 People staring at us, as if  
 everyone were competing for the  
 World Championship of Slow Looks.

LAURA looks around and notices a few men in black outfits who  
 are indeed staring at them.

LAURA  
 Dr. Meier, why are they staring at  
 us? When I stare back at them, they  
 don't look away.

Indeed, the tough-looking men hold fast on LAURA's gaze. The  
 line of passengers moves a single step forward. Everyone has  
 sunk into resignation.

LAURA notices something else. The white haired MAN WITH ONE  
 STORY walks briskly past, led by a man in a formal suit. They  
 go straight to a separate exit for diplomats and crew  
 members. It looks as if they are exchanging a few words.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
 Did you see that?

MEIER  
 What?

LAURA  
The Man with One Story is talking.

MEIER  
Yes. And?

LAURA  
Isn't he supposed to be deaf?

Trying to spot him again, LAURA notices that he has already passed through immigration.

Having seen LAURA blindfolded and handcuffed before, everyone and everything acquires an aura of danger. We are searching for signs of a plot, an intrigue. Something ominous is unfolding in front of our eyes, but we do not grasp it yet.

INT. AIRPORT ARRIVALS HALL - EARLY MORNING

For an international airport, this is a fairly small arrivals hall. Written signs indicate a Latin American country. The currency exchange and the airport shops have not opened yet. The passengers disperse. LAURA and her companions are left stranded. They wait, look around. The hall empties out entirely.

Unease settles in. CAVANI appears to be still upbeat.

LAURA  
Where is our delegation?

CAVANI  
Righto, where is the delegation?

LAURA  
You confirmed our arrival plans?  
Right?

CAVANI  
Righto.

His self-confidence is barely dented.

MEIER  
Shall I check at the curb?

LAURA  
No, let's stick together. Someone  
will show up sooner or later.

Outside the city begins to awaken, faraway car horns sound.

In a far corner of the hall, there is movement, something stirs. It turns out to be a man approaching in an electric wheelchair. He steers his vehicle across the empty hall, straight towards them.

The man looks like a character out of a 1950s film noir, with short, strong features, and pockmarked skin. His voice is strong, almost booming. From a distance.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Welcome.

The stranded group is not sure if the stranger is talking to them, but since he is in a wheelchair he does not seem to pose a threat.

MEIER

(whispering)

If he tries to get us a taxi, don't take the bait. We don't even have a hotel address.

The man reaches them, expertly spinning his vehicle into position.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Professor Sommerfeld, welcome.

He extends his hand. LAURA, relieved, shakes it.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR (CONT'D)

And welcome Dr. Cavani. Welcome Dr. Meier. How was your trip?

LAURA

Good. We're just a little bit jet-lagged.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Oh, I am so sorry, I have not introduced myself: I am Aristidis, from the ministry.

His tone becomes very firm.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR (CONT'D)

Now, the minister and his group apologize. There has been a change of plans: the minister is already in Oruro, and he asks you to take his plane right from here.

He hands a letter to LAURA. It is written on official stationery. LAURA reads it.

LAURA

"Forgive us, kind gentlemen..."

CAVANI

He forgets our gorgeous woman.

LAURA

"But we are forced to meet you in Oruro later today."

She notices something odd with the letterhead.

LAURA (CONT'D)

The letterhead says Internal Security. Isn't our liaison the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment?

Aristidis, THE MAN IN WHEELCHAIR, is caught off guard for a moment.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

The minister has also become part of the security establishment. It shows his increasing importance within the government.

MEIER looks around, slightly nervous.

MEIER

But we don't have our luggage yet.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Oh, never mind that. We will take care of everything.

He waves to the corner from which he emerged. Four men in black combat outfits peel from the dark recess. They are fairly young, striding with athletic ease. Two of them are armed.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR (CONT'D)

My boys will guide you through security. No inspections, no passports. Could I ask you for your baggage tags? My boys will have your suitcases taken right to our plane.

CAVANI

That sounds like a treat.

EXT. REMOTE CORNER OF THE AIRFIELD - DAY

A few dusty hangars at the edge of the airfield, an abandoned fire truck which will never see action again, rotten gangways, a high fence with razor wire on top. A small commercial jet plane is parked there, engines running. Far in the distance, a few international airliners are docked at the main arrivals building.

A van approaches, makes a swift turn, and stops at the gangway leading to the waiting plane.

Two of the young men in black jump out, and immediately pull a metal ramp from the side door. Aristidis, THE MAN IN WHEEL CHAIR, slowly rolls down to the tarmac. LAURA, CAVANI, and MEIER follow.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

I am afraid that I must leave you here.

LAURA

And our luggage?

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Already loaded.

MEIER

How did you load it so quickly?

THE MAN IN WHEELCHAIR exudes an air of confidence.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

This is not a German airport, or New York. This is more efficient.

MEIER

It's just my instruments. I don't care if my shirts arrive a day or two late.

MAN IN WHEELCHAIR

Do not worry. Let us see to your luggage.

INT. SMALL AIRPLANE - DAY

The plane has only single seats on either side, separated by a narrow aisle. There is no flight attendant, and the door to the cockpit is closed.

LAURA, CAVANI, and MEIER have taken seats in the front section of the plane.

As the engines rev up, the plane starts to roll, and without waiting for an announcement, the passengers buckle their seat belts. In the back of the plane we notice two men in the same black paramilitary outfits. They do not talk.

LAURA  
I'm kind of hungry.

MEIER  
I still have half a cookie from our  
breakfast on board.

LAURA  
That's when I finally slept.

MEIER hands LAURA the sorry remains of his cookie across the aisle.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
Thank you.

CAVANI chimes in with a joke.

CAVANI  
For one too much, for all too  
little.

LAURA  
Ah, I have heard that before.

CAVANI  
It was Alexander the Great. When  
his army almost perished from  
thirst, a foot soldier brought him  
a helmet filled with water he had  
collected drop by drop for weeks.  
Alexander spilled it to the ground,  
and said just that.

This brightens the travelers' mood, reminding them of the hardships awaiting them in the field.

LAURA  
It's not going to be easy out  
there.

MEIER  
As long as I have my basic tools,  
everything will be fine.

CAVANI

As long as we have some pasta with white truffles, and a bounty of good, aged Barolo wine, and a buxom wench serving, and vineyards in the hills, filled with the lusty cheers of the vintners...

MEIER

Cavani, you ARE a poet.

CAVANI, pleased, needs to finish his sentence.

CAVANI

...everything will be fine.

LAURA looks out the window.

Her POV. Barren landscape, no roads, no settlements. Snow-covered peaks in the distance to the east. The sun has fully risen.

EXT. ORURO AIRFIELD - DAY

Barren mountain slopes at the far side of the runway. Cacti. Arid land. No town in sight. There is an air control tower, but it looks unmanned.

A dot appears in the sky, growing larger. The small airliner touches down. A short burst of white smoke from the rubber of the tires hitting the tarmac. Silence. A gust of wind has taken the sound of the impact with it.

The plane rolls out, turns towards the airport building, a single, large structure, newly built. But what strikes us is the fact that there is no movement at all: no vehicles, no cargo, no fire trucks, and no people. Oruro seems to be a ghost town.

INT. SMALL AIRPLANE - DAY

One of the men in the back of the plane has stepped forward, opening the door from inside. He nods to LAURA. But LAURA stands frozen in the doorway, high above the tarmac; there is no gangway.

LAURA

What is this? How are we supposed to disembark?

The man in black only stares at her. He switches on a walkie-talkie. Only garbled sounds emerge from the device. As if he had received a coherent instruction, he radios back.

WALKIE-TALKIE MAN

Affirmative. Affirmative...  
Affirmativo.

Something is not going fully according to plan. LAURA shrugs away the awkwardness of the situation.

LAURA

Even the government doesn't control  
everything. Good to know.

But then, in the distance, she notices a few men in black scrambling for a gangway. They roll it manually towards the plane. It connects to the plane, albeit not very well aligned with the door. LAURA steps out first. She immediately senses the altitude and the cold.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Wow. It's chilly here.

She wraps her arms around her shoulders.

EXT. ORURO, TARMAC - DAY

Accompanied by the team of paramilitary men, the travelers walk towards the airport terminal. It is completely new, and appears to have never been used. Everything looks empty, abandoned.

INT. ORURO AIRPORT ARRIVALS HALL - DAY

Seen from inside. The group reaches the arrival hall. Large windows offer a view onto the vast, empty airfield. The baggage carousel is already in motion. It is empty, nothing on the moving belt. No electric car with luggage carts in sight either. Nobody is working at the cargo bay of the plane.

The large arrival hall is utterly empty, as if built, but never inaugurated. But there are shops, a cafeteria, a souvenir stand, all closed. Unmanned car rental booths, everything eerily empty. A large bronze frieze boasts the bas-relief of one of the bold early aviators of the 1920s. He wears a floating shawl, his double-decker behind him.

Slowly, about ten armed men in paramilitary uniforms close in on the travelers. They are all masked.

Most alarming is the fact that the men who brought the gangway, whose faces we have already seen, also pull black masks over their heads.

Before anything has even happened, Cavani begins to panic.

CAVANI

Oh no. No, no, no.

A burly masked man steps forward.

BURLY MAN

You are my prisoners. All of you are my prisoners.

LAURA

Who are you?

BURLY MAN

I know who I am.

LAURA

(commanding)

Who sent you?

BURLY MAN

I am not...

LAURA interrupts him.

LAURA

We are under the protection of the government.

BURLY MAN

Yes? And?

MEIER steps in between LAURA and the man. The armed men inch in on them.

MEIER

And we are under the protection of the United Nations.

Ignoring him, the BURLY MAN lays his hand on LAURA. With an immediacy and anger we could not expect, MEIER lunges forward, slapping away the hand of the aggressor. A scuffle breaks out, men push MEIER with their rifle butts, separating him from LAURA.

CAVANI is manhandled as well, but he manages to flee across the empty hall, finding refuge in a ladies room. Men in black in hot pursuit. They pound their rifle butts against the closed stall.

A shot rings out, sobering in its abrupt intensity. We see CAVANI coming out, surrendering. He is thrown to the ground, handcuffed, and blindfolded.

When men take hold of LAURA, little, meek MEIER morphs into a man with the heart of a lion. He charges the first attacker with his head into his stomach. The man, winded, tumbles backwards. The next one receives a sickening kick in the groin. THE BURLY MAN grabs little, ferocious MEIER around his neck, and gets bitten hard, really hard.

LAURA, encouraged by this, struggles to get away, but is quickly overpowered. Shouting over to MEIER.

LAURA

Don't fight! They'll hurt you.

But MEIER is already knocked down. A man presses his foot onto MEIER's chest to hold him down, but there is no need, since MEIER has lost consciousness.

The men turn their attention back to LAURA, forgetting about MEIER. But just as they start to blindfold her, MEIER, the lion-hearted, is back on his feet, trying to rip an assault rifle from the hands of one of the men. This enrages the aggressors and once again, MEIER is knocked down without mercy. He passes out again. His limp hands are cuffed, and a cloth tied over his eyes.

EXT. PARKING LOT OUTSIDE ORURO AIRPORT - DAY

The gang of attackers comes rushing out the empty airport. There is not a single car in the vast expanse of the parking lot, not one, except for two vans belonging to the attackers.

LAURA is unceremoniously pushed into the first van. The door slams shut. She notices CAVANI being thrown into the other van. MEIER, half dragged along on his limp feet, reaches the second van.

INT. VAN - DAY

The BURLY MAN takes the driver's seat. Several of his men jump in. As the BURLY MAN starts the engine, there is a violent crash right next to his head. The side window has been smashed in. And now, we realize it is MEIER who is pounding with the steel of his handcuffs at the window. He has managed to rip off his blindfold. Through the cracked glass we see blood on his face. The BURLY MAN produces a big handgun, and points it towards MEIER, the berserker.

But before any shots are fired, men from outside the van restrain MEIER. They are calm and methodical in their resolve. This time, they make sure he will not charge again.

Silence in the van, as the fight outside recedes. The presence of MEIER's heroism has impressed the hard men. We also need a breather to absorb the events. Music fades up.

EXT. ALTIPLANO, VAST LANDSCAPE - DAY

The two vans speed along a fairly good asphalt road. No trees, only rocks, and cacti, and drought. A chain of snow-covered mountains in the distance. Although there is endless space, both cars drive in very close contact, almost bumper to bumper.

INT. VAN - DAY

LAURA is squeezed between two men in the third row of the van. She leans her head back, trying to see something from under her blindfold. The man to her left reaches up, and forces her head back into an upright position.

LAURA  
Don't touch me.

EXT. ALTIPLANO, NARROW RAVINE - DAY

The cars wind down into a narrow ravine, moving too fast for the terrain. A river cascades on the left side of the road. The water is teeming with plastic bags, and an unhealthy foam has formed in the eddies of the water.

EXT. ALTIPLANO, WIDE VALLEY - DAY

For the first time, we see some green. There is agriculture to the left and right of the uneven and dusty road. A few eucalyptus trees here and there, and along the river, slower flowing through the pastures, we see huge willows. A wind worries their hanging branches.

Both vans remain in close contact, so close that the second van is completely immersed in the swirling dust of the leading vehicle.

EXT. HACIENDA GATE - DAY

Because of the heavy cobblestones, both cars have slowed down, bouncing along towards a colonial hacienda.

Big trees cast shadows. Stone walls. A massive stone gate appears. The vans pass it and disappear into a first of several yards.

Birdsong pervades everything, creating an almost idyllic feeling.

EXT. HACIENDA COURTYARDS - DAY

Following the vans, we pass through three different spacious courtyards. Shadow of trees, cobblestones, birds. The buildings are flat, painted white. Beautifully crafted ironwork at the windows. The doors are all old wood, carved exquisitely. To the right of the last yard, a chapel sits on a small hill. The vans stop. Nothing stirs. The doors do not open.

From the main building, a tall man with a black mask steps out. We have arrived where our story began. The image fades.

INT. COLONIAL HACIENDA - DAY

We are in the same scene that opened the film. Since LAURA's blindfold and handcuffs have been removed, the tension has slightly eased. She calmly tries to assess the situation. A beat. She takes a sip of her tea. The armed and masked men seem to be more relaxed as well.

LAURA

So, this was all a plan. From the beginning.

MASKED MAN

In a way yes.

LAURA

And what is your plan now?

MASKED MAN

Everything will fall into place. It depends on you.

LAURA

I'd like to know your name.

MASKED MAN

As long as I wear a mask, I have no name.

LAURA nods slightly. There is a logic to this. She looks at the MAN IN WHEELCHAIR.

LAURA

But I know the face of this gentleman.

MASKED MAN

Krauss, why don't you remove your mask? You are compromised, aren't you?

KRAUSS, as we know him from now on, takes his time, exchanging a glance with the MASKED MAN. Slowly, he removes his mask. Yes, this is the pockmarked man from the airport.

LAURA

Ah, Mr. Aristidis...

KRAUSS

Krauss.

LAURA

You said your name was Aristidis.

KRAUSS

In fact, if facts count here, it is not Aristidis.

LAURA

So, it is Krauss?

KRAUSS

Yes and no.

LAURA

And how were you able to get here so quickly?

KRAUSS

We have our ways.

This lingers for a moment. LAURA gathers her thoughts.

LAURA

And who is "we" I would like to know.

MASKED MAN

"We"...that is basically me.

LAURA

And why have you taken me hostage?

MASKED MAN

You may get an answer eventually, but it depends entirely on you.

LAURA

Not only on me. I am leading a delegation. I am responsible for its members.

MASKED MAN

I can assure you...

LAURA

(interrupting)

I accept no assurances from an unidentified man with no name and no face.

MASKED MAN

Hopefully, there will be a time where there are no more secrets between us.

Long silence. LAURA understands she will not be able to force any revelations under the present circumstances.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

As to Dr. Arnold Meier, and Dr. Fabio Cavani...

LAURA

Where are they? Are they all right?

MASKED MAN

They are both here at the compound. As my guests.

LAURA

Guests?

MASKED MAN

More precisely, in my custody.

LAURA

How are you so informed about their names?

MASKED MAN

I am informed.

LAURA

How is Dr. Meier? I saw your men wound him.

MASKED MAN

He is bruised, but otherwise well.

KRAUSS  
More precisely, "indisposed" at  
this time, and so is Dr. Cavani.

LAURA  
Meaning what?

KRAUSS  
As Dr. Meier proved to be so  
combative, we had to make sure to  
calm his funny heroism a little  
bit.

A beat. The MASKED MAN steps in with an explanation.

MASKED MAN  
Krauss, why don't you show  
Professor Sommerfeld the food she  
should avoid.

KRAUSS makes a little show of doing a pirouette with his  
wheelchair. He drives over to a small table with a tray of  
food on it. Up close, it looks like some kind of greasy  
dumplings.

KRAUSS  
Please do not eat this, even if  
offered with every indication of  
warm hospitality.

LAURA  
What did you do?!

KRAUSS  
We did nothing. Our guests ate  
this, and they both came down with  
a form of local, of, of..

MASKED MAN  
Say it.

KRAUSS  
Diarrhea.

MASKED MAN  
Why don't you offer Dr. Sommerfeld  
something else to eat.

LAURA  
Do you really think I would eat any  
of your food?

MASKED MAN

Krauss, why don't you take our  
guest to her quarters?

EXT. HACIENDA COURTYARD - TOWARDS EVENING

LAURA, escorted by KRAUSS in his wheelchair and by some of the armed men, walks across the last inner yard of the hacienda. Birds prepare with great excitement for the coming night, they chirp and flutter and chatter.

The cobblestones make KRAUSS's wheelchair rattle and bounce.

KRAUSS

Life in a wheelchair has its  
comforts, but not all the time.

LAURA is rather casual about this, and so is KRAUSS.

LAURA

I see.

KRAUSS

It's OK. But one day I shall walk  
again.

They leave it at that. KRAUSS guides LAURA to two adjoining rooms with wrought iron grilles.

KRAUSS (CONT'D)

Dr. Meier, Dr. Cavani, could you  
come to your windows?

LAURA

Ah, they are here?

The window to the left opens. CAVANI appears in it.

CAVANI

I'm dying.

He immediately disappears. We hear him retching somewhere back in his bathroom.

KRAUSS

No, you are not.

The window to the right opens, and MEIER appears. His face is swollen, he has a cut on the side of his head covered by a piece of gauze. He looks very pale.

MEIER

The dumplings. It must have been  
the dumplings.

LAURA

Are you hurt?

MEIER

Yes, but I am going to be fine.  
It's just the diarrhea. I've got  
the Dresden of Diarrhea.

CAVANI appears at his window again.

CAVANI

It's a horde of protozoans swirling  
through my intestinal tract. I may  
be dying.

KRAUSS

The noblest place for a man to die  
is the place he dies the deadest.

This is so odd that CAVANI stops whining. At least for a  
moment. But MEIER is in a joking mood.

MEIER

This is the Mother of all Diarrhea.

KRAUSS

Why don't you get some rest? And  
keep yourself hydrated.

MEIER

Professor Sommerfeld, I wish I  
could help you.

His voice is rather formal, but then, under his breath, he  
whispers something in German.

MEIER (CONT'D)

(in German)

Engage them in conversation, listen  
to them. I read this was the best  
strategy in a hostage situation.

KRAUSS does not like this. His voice is low, menacing.

KRAUSS

Please abstain from gossip in an  
ugly language.

LAURA makes a show of speaking English with a slight amount  
of formality.

LAURA

I am fine. I can take care of myself...of my situation. Of our situation. Let me try.

MEIER

I wish I had my microscope. I could find out exactly what is wrong with my stomach.

KRAUSS spins his wheelchair away from the windows. He becomes very polite.

KRAUSS

Madame, your quarters are in the adjacent yard.

INT. HACIENDA, LAURA'S ROOM - EVENING

A spacious room with a low door made for much shorter inhabitants who built this structure some centuries back. High ceilings, a wooden armoire, a wide bed with a local hand-woven blanket on it. A door to a bathroom in the background.

LAURA finds her carry-on bag on a chair next to the bed. She is delighted to find her laptop as well. There are also clean towels and a few bottles of mineral water. She checks the room for exits. The door is closed, the windows of both the bathroom and her room are blocked by the iron grille. There is no escape.

She sits down, and does something we did not expect. She cries.

Scrambling back from her weak moment, she opens her laptop and takes pictures of the room, as if collecting evidence of her captivity. She finally turns the dot of the lens on herself and takes a picture of her face. With the fake click of her "camera", her face freezes on the screen. LAURA studies herself.

LAURA

Laura, you look like a mess.

And that is that. The image fades.

INT. HACIENDA, MAIN BUILDING - DAY

A series of adjoining rooms. A library with some tomes bound in parchment, a bedroom with a bed that has not been used for a century, a working room with large windows looking onto another small maintenance yard, a ceremonial dining room, and the room with the easy chairs that we already know. The MASKED MAN shows her around. As they walk, their conversation is rather casual, it has none of the suspense of the previous day.

Only one or two armed men loiter about.

MASKED MAN

We have documents from the mid-fifteen hundreds here.

He points to the bed placed in the middle of the room. It exudes a solemn formality.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

I would have given this for your comfort, but I can't.

LAURA

Why is that?

MASKED MAN

A hundred years ago, the President of the Republic died in this bed. It has to be kept like this for all times.

LAURA

Ah.

They reach the cage with the green parrot.

MASKED MAN

And this is Mister McMurphy.

LAURA

What I would like to know— May I be straightforward?

The MASKED MAN does not feel comfortable with what he senses to be coming.

MASKED MAN

This magnificent specimen speaks.

LAURA

Why are you holding me hostage? Is it for money? Can we contact some officials to negotiate?

MASKED MAN

No.

LAURA

What do you want?

MASKED MAN

I kind of like you.

He says this devoid of all emotion.

LAURA

Me, as a person, as a woman?

MASKED MAN

No.

LAURA

No?

MASKED MAN

I find you very attractive, but there is something beyond that.

He changes subject again.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

You know what Nostradamus said about talking birds?

LAURA

Tell me.

MASKED MAN

He foretold what sounds like science fiction today. He said: "Home pets finally communicate with man. Life then possible outside the planet. A new tyrant sows terror. Events to come."

LAURA

Do you care about predictions?

MASKED MAN

It is not that I care so much about predictions, I'm just fascinated about where these predictions come from. Are they true?

(MORE)

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

Is there something all pervading around us which we are incapable of seeing, which only the prophets and birds can express?

LAURA

Back to us.

MASKED MAN

Back to the birds. My parrot says, and he says it at the oddest moments, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth."

LAURA

Can we speak about you? Or about me?

MASKED MAN

Of course. I tried for a long time to teach Mr. McMurphy the whole passage from Ecclesiastes:

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them."

LAURA

This sounds like a long text for a bird.

He motions her to move on to the living room. KRAUSS is just arriving in his wheelchair.

INT. HACIENDA, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Having overheard the conversation in the adjoining room, KRAUSS chimes in.

KRAUSS

Sometimes this parrot says the wildest things, like "I'll sue you"

MASKED MAN

And "take you to court."

KRAUSS looks around, takes a deep breath.

KRAUSS

This house has seen a lot.

LAURA grows impatient. She wants to come to the point, now.

LAURA  
Can we finally talk business?

The MASKED MAN takes a seat, and offers LAURA the same seat as the afternoon before. But defiantly, LAURA remains standing. At this point, KRAUSS gets up and pushes LAURA'S shoulder gently down with his Uzi. Did we SEE RIGHT? KRAUSS got up from his wheelchair and walked?

This does not sink in immediately, and LAURA needs a moment to process what happened.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
Mr. Krauss, did I see you walking?

KRAUSS  
Yes, you did.

LAURA  
But you were just in a wheelchair,  
is this a miracle?

KRAUSS  
No. I only use the wheelchair when  
I am tired of life.

LAURA  
Is this finally the moment of  
truth?

MASKED MAN  
Not the entire truth. If that  
moment is ever coming, it will  
depend on you. And on time.

LAURA  
Time?

MASKED MAN  
Truth is the only Daughter of Time.

The image fades. Music fades up.

INT. HACIENDA DINING ROOM - DAY

Some time later. A masked man serves breakfast from a tray. KRAUSS leaves with him through a door to what we assume to be the kitchen. The door remains slightly ajar. For a moment, we spot a bunch of armed men in readiness.

Now, they are alone. The MASKED MAN cuts a croissant ostentatiously in half, and offers it to LAURA.

MASKED MAN

Half for you, and half for me. Make your choice.

LAURA

Understood. No poison.

He pours himself a glass of orange juice, and LAURA does the same. He serves himself tea and sugar, everything first for himself, his protocol for the situation. LAURA is really hungry, and starts eating.

MASKED MAN

I am glad to see you eating, after all.

LAURA

After all? What is going on, and when is this over?

No answer from the MASKED MAN.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Let me take a guess.

A nod from the MASKED MAN.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Looking at the size of your actions, our abduction, a private plane, the amount of weapons and men...

She takes a sip of her juice.

LAURA (CONT'D)

...you must be Secret Service, or you are enjoying the massive support of the government.

MASKED MAN

I am no Secret Service, no government, no plot of the CIA, or anything of the sort.

LAURA

Who are you then?

Instead of an answer, the MASKED MAN takes off his mask. His face is manly and strong, with intense eyes and an air of calm authority.

MASKED MAN

My name is Riley. Matt Riley.

He leans back. From now on he is RILEY.

LAURA  
Riley? That rings a bell.

RILEY  
Think hard.

LAURA  
Riley. Of the Consortium?

RILEY  
Correct.

LAURA  
The CEO of the Consortium.

RILEY  
The Consortium exists only as a legal entity today. As you may know, since the Swiss majority stock holders moved out - the Swiss are always opportunistic - the Chinese, the Americans, the South Koreans have ducked into the trenches, have become invisible. But they are still there.

LAURA  
They are all responsible for Diablo Blanco.

RILEY  
I personally feel responsible, although when I stepped in, the Disaster had already taken place. It was not a singular event.

LAURA  
I know, it evolved over decades. We have measurements and statistics since the seventies.

RILEY  
Statistics...statistics. I see another side to it.

LAURA  
Yes?

RILEY  
I am not prepared to speak about it now.

LAURA

Because, let me say it bluntly, YOU are heading something big, a big conspiracy.

RILEY

Let's be serious. I find this silly. There is no reality, only views of reality. Only perceptions. All collective anxieties condense into conspiracy theories.

LAURA

My anxieties are real. There is a disaster, and it is spreading.

RILEY

And there are three million Americans who claim they had encounters with aliens. Among them are three hundred thousand women who firmly maintain they have been abducted and gang raped by aliens. This leads me to two questions.

A beat. He is unsure whether to continue. LAURA encourages him.

LAURA

Which are?

RILEY

One: why do all of these women weigh over 350 pounds?—And two: why have we never heard of a single abducted women in Ethiopia?

He leans forward. Low voice, very intense.

RILEY (CONT'D)

And now back to Diablo Blanco. Yes, of course, it does exist.

LAURA

And I have been sent to file a report on its status.

RILEY

It's not static, it is spreading.

LAURA

We know that. And our task is to verify it.

(MORE)

LAURA (CONT'D)

What prevents me from doing so is the fact that you have taken me prisoner.

RILEY

Can we speak about you for a moment?

LAURA

If it is really necessary.

RILEY pushes another croissant in her direction. This time he does not perform the ritual of cutting it in two halves.

RILEY

You have done research at the Institute for Developmental Biology in Tübingen.

LAURA

(slightly warming up)

I worked with model organisms, such as the zebra fish, fruit flies, and a form of cress from the cabbage family.

RILEY

Interesting.

LAURA

It has been shown that genes which influence development work in a similar way in different organisms, be they flies, or people, or cress.

RILEY

You currently do research at the Max Planck Institute of Biochemistry in Munich...

LAURA

Technically yes.

RILEY

Technically?

LAURA

I have moved on to Evolutionary Biology. Systems of long-term changes.

RILEY

And in particular?

LAURA

You may find this strange, but I have started to attribute certain patterns to other phenomena.

RILEY

Such as?

LAURA

The automobile industry. The evolution of the VW Beetle for example. The same laws exist there as in nature.

RILEY

I want to hear this.

Carried away, she is oblivious that she is a hostage.

LAURA

When the VW Beetle was introduced, it looked like a Beetle, and later on, it branched out into evolutionary side events.

RILEY

Ah.

LAURA

The carmakers made an attempt to create a sports car version of it, the Karmann Ghia, but it never found enough buyers, so this branch died out. And the beetle itself underwent massive changes. What you see today is completely different inside, not recognizable any longer, but the shape of the Beetle remains the same. We speak here of the "Elvis taxa."

RILEY

What the hell is that?

LAURA

Or "Elvis taxonomy". There is Elvis, and then there are all the Elvis impersonators. On Sundays in Tokyo, hundreds of kids assemble in a park, all dressed like Elvis, competing with his songs. They look like Elvis, but they are not Elvis.

RILEY

Wonderful. But here you are thrown back into biochemistry.

LAURA

Sometimes, you do step back in your life.

RILEY

Why would you step back?

LAURA

Oh, there are private reasons.

RILEY

But your life seems to be a happy one for you.

LAURA

How would you know?

RILEY

Are you not blessed with a wonderful daughter? Eight years old?

LAURA

It's a nightmare.

She leans back, turning into herself. She is not prepared to go any further.

RILEY

I am sorry. What a clumsy fool I am.

LAURA

I find your treatment of my colleagues and me clumsy.

RILEY

Accepted. But for this, I shall not apologize. I am prepared to accept the consequences, or even go to jail for what I am doing.

The scene fades out. Everything has fallen quiet. The birds outside have stopped chirping.

INT. COLONIAL HACIENDA, LIBRARY - DAY

A hand carefully turns a page in a parchment codex. It is RILEY's. He and LAURA are bent over the historical document in Latin.

RILEY

We have a lot of documentation on animals.

LAURA

Animals?

RILEY

To be more precise, court proceedings against animals. Here, what you see is about a sow sentenced to death for killing and eating a toddler. The pig was burnt at the stake.

LAURA

And here, the salamander?

CU. We see a depiction of a salamander in the middle of flames.

RILEY

The salamander was believed to originate from fire, being a companion of the devil. Here it says: this salamander was exorcised with a bucket of holy water.

LAURA

How quickly our world views change.

They look at each other. A deeper understanding between the two is emerging.

RILEY

I see it differently, since I have a parrot that wants to sue me.

They laugh. A long beat. Finally, LAURA looks her captor straight in the eyes.

LAURA

Are you acting on behalf of the Consortium?

RILEY

No. By the way, you met the former head of the Consortium on your flight.

LAURA

Who?

RILEY

O'Connor.

LAURA

He was on the plane?

RILEY

Yes. He had the seat in front of you.

LAURA

The Man with One Story.

RILEY

Correct. He flies in every month and has dealings with the National Bank. He has to be there in person.

LAURA

To do money transactions?

RILEY

If the sums are too large, he will end up on an international list.

LAURA

Isn't he on a list already for having covered up the disaster?

RILEY

Yes, he lied to everyone. Me, us, the media, the courts.

LAURA

A mountain of lies, of false information?

RILEY

How do we sort through it? That is part of what your task is.

LAURA

I have experienced that quite often. Sources are unreliable, but their information is fascinating.

RILEY  
Please explain.

LAURA  
Quite often the dark glow of the  
truth surrounds false information.

RILEY  
You know what?

LAURA  
What?

RILEY  
I can take a lie more easily than  
an inaccuracy.

One thing seems to be clear: LAURA is engaging her captor in discourse to defuse the danger, and gain his confidence. But there is also more to it, a deeper mutual understanding.

INT. HACIENDA, LIVING ROOM - DAY

RILEY places a log into the small, flickering-fireplace. He pokes at the embers, rekindling the flames.

LAURA restlessly paces up and down. Two masked and armed men in the door to the dining room remind her of the danger of her situation. She must keep the conversation going.

LAURA  
There is no question that our  
embassy has been alerted to our  
disappearance.

RILEY continues to poke at the fire.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
They were informed about our  
arrival.

RILEY, without turning his attention away from the fire, his voice almost casual.

RILEY  
Your embassy is already in crisis  
mode.

LAURA  
They are in good standing with the  
government. The embassy certainly  
could be of assistance in any form  
of negotiations.

RILEY  
There will be no negotiations.

LAURA  
But then why have you abducted me?

RILEY  
(evasive)  
As much as you, I am a prisoner of  
my plans.

He finally turns from the fire, facing her. A long beat.

LAURA  
Let me be candid. This cannot be  
your plan alone. The size of this  
operation...

RILEY  
I just happened to know when you  
were coming.

LAURA  
And the delegation who was supposed  
to meet us upon arrival?

RILEY  
Don't you think they could be  
diverted, or rather distracted,  
with money?

LAURA  
You mean to say, you bribed them.

RILEY  
And it was the same procedure with  
security at the airport. I take no  
pride in this.

LAURA  
I don't approve of payoffs to  
anyone.

RILEY  
(angered)  
Do me one favor. Do not try to come  
to the rescue of a tired world.

This did not go well. Silence. LAURA settles down in one of  
the chairs.

LAURA  
Sorry. Sometimes I get carried  
away.

RILEY takes a seat across the table. He also wants to improve the relationship. He changes tone.

RILEY

(more private)

I always thought I knew everything, but allow me to ask about your daughter again. My apologies. If you do not wish to speak, I fully understand.

LAURA

I only took this assignment because of my daughter.

RILEY

In what sense?

LAURA

I had to divert my thoughts. I had to be occupied by something.

RILEY

This makes me curious.

A beat. LAURA pulls herself together, trying to be as matter of fact as possible.

LAURA

My daughter has not been with me for four years now.

RILEY

Where is she?

LAURA

She is in Morocco.

A beat. RILEY does not want to push her. He waits patiently until LAURA volunteers to continue.

LAURA (CONT'D)

She is with her biological father.

RILEY

But I know that you have never been married.

LAURA

What happened is this: her father, who had only shared custody, took her back to his country.

RILEY

Morocco?

LAURA

And he refuses to return her. I have sued ever since, but the Moroccan legal system is very slow, and favors a patriarchal culture when it comes to custody disputes.

RILEY

I am so sorry to hear that.

Silence.

RILEY (CONT'D)

(darkly)

Having children invites tragedy.

LAURA

Do you have children?

RILEY

Yes.

He sinks into himself. LAURA senses that she should not go into this any further. He looks into the fire.

We look into the flames. Time passes. Music.

LAURA

Are you afraid of something?

RILEY

Do I look like it?

LAURA

No. I apologize.

RILEY

I used to be afraid as a little boy.

LAURA

Of what?

RILEY

Of the dark. My grandmother used to tell me something, and it has stuck with me ever since. She said: Don't be afraid of the dark. The real tragedy in life is when men are afraid of the light.

INT. HACIENDA LIBRARY - DAY

Fade in. Time has passed.

A large folder of papers with a book stuck in among the mess of documents. RILEY's hands rummage through. He takes out the book and opens it. CU on the open page.

We briefly see an image we cannot decipher. It looks like irregular stripes of color in concentric circles around a small, open circle in the middle.

Inside of the hard cover binding, RILEY finds a pocket containing a thick, flexible silver foil

LAURA keeps eyeing him, slightly alarmed at the almost crazed intensity of his movements. RILEY's hands roll the foil into a cylinder, about two inches in diameter.

RILEY

Could you hand me that paper clip please?

He nods at it, and LAURA picks it up off the table. RILEY fixes it to the end of the silver cylinder so that it won't come unrolled. Then, at random, RILEY opens a page of the book.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Now, look at the silver column.

LAURA

Ah, I see, anamorphic art.

RILEY places the silver column upright onto the blind, round spot in the center of the image. And on this vertical mirror we now can clearly see Mt. Golgotha with Jesus on the cross, and the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene in mourning. What looked like a pink curved cloud in two dimensions on paper, suddenly - in three dimensions on the cylinder-shaped mirror - becomes an angel floating in the air.

On the opposite page the contortions look even more confusing, but projected onto the mirror we recognize the scene on Mt. Calvary with the Descent from the Cross.

RILEY

This is what your situation must look to you.

LAURA

Right. Unclear, contorted.

RILEY

Moving a step further, everything  
will fall into place. Everything  
will make sense.

He senses he's anticipating too much. LAURA gives him a quizzical look, and he realizes he should modify his statement.

RILEY (CONT'D)

At least, that's what I think. It's  
a question of which angle you  
choose to look from.

LAURA

This sounds like a banality, like,  
like...

RILEY

Like what? I am open to criticism.

LAURA

(hesitant)

Well, I don't want to sound  
insulting, but it sounds like a  
shallow pseudo argument, like "all  
Africans have rhythm in their  
blood."

RILEY

Accepted. I bow to you.

He really bows imperceptibly to her. No fake pose, just done with an air of nobility.

RILEY (CONT'D)

May I be more precise about  
different angles, perspectives?

LAURA

Sure.

He walks over to a shelf and fetches a rather large volume. Placing it on the table, we make out cupolas of Italian Renaissance churches, and some Leonardo da Vinci sketches concerning perspectives.

Quickly thumbing through it, he stops at the image of a cloister. There is an image of a saint in mystic ecstasy under the foliage of a large tree.

RILEY and LAURA huddle over the book.

RILEY

Now, look at this. All my life I wanted to see this in person.

LAURA

Where is this cloister?

RILEY

In Rome. In the convent of Santissima Trinità. Just look along this corridor.

CU on the picture. Seen from the end of the corridor, a perfectly normal image.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Everything seems to be in proper proportion, but the nearer one approaches...

His hand turns the page. A detail of the wall revealing a horizontally-stretched face of the saint.

RILEY (CONT'D)

...the more incomprehensible the forms become.

Next page. Foliage of the tree stretched out wondrously all the way to the end of the corridor, as if the branches had morphed into green railroad tracks.

RILEY (CONT'D)

And look at this. The folds of the saint's cowl now appear to be a vast, stretched out landscape. In fact, the folds - elongated like this - become the Strait of Messina with sailing ships in it.

Music surges, so big that we get the feeling we are in the presence of something utterly momentous.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Just imagine yourself walking along this cloister.

INT. CONVENT OF SANTISSIMA TRINITA, ROME - DAY

And now, miraculously, we are in the actual cloister. The camera, only the camera, moves along the corridor. It takes its time, moving softly, as if in awe.

At the beginning of the traveling shot we see the enraptured saint under the tree, and the closer we crawl, the more enciphered, the more incomprehensible the image gets. Finally, panning slowly to the image at a 90 degrees angle, the landscape starts to emerge. The ships in the Strait of Messina morph out of the disproportionate cloak and fill the entire screen. (See appendix)

INT. COLONIAL HACIENDA, LAURA'S ROOM - NIGHT

LAURA sitting on her bed. She is all alone with herself. Silence. Only the chirping of cicadas from outside. Then, the voice of a strange bird, woken from its sleep. This makes LAURA stir. She switches on her laptop and opens Photo Booth.

Contemplating her face for a while, she finally clears her throat, as if to say something. She clicks a photo of herself.

EXT. COLONIAL HACIENDA, INNER YARD - DAY

There is a commotion in the yard. Armed men are preparing for the departure of two four-wheel-drive cars. The second car is already loaded with passengers but we cannot make out clearly who is in it.

KRAUSS is at LAURA's door. She steps out, slightly disoriented about the rush.

KRAUSS

Your bag. Don't leave your bag.

LAURA

Are we traveling?

She disappears into her room, coming back with her hand luggage.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Where are we going? What's the hurry about?

KRAUSS

Step in.

LAURA climbs into the car. RILEY is already waiting inside, on one of the middle seats. The front is manned by a masked man and KRAUSS. Two more masked men are squeezed in behind LAURA in the rear.

LAURA

Where are my colleagues? Are they  
in the other car?

RILEY is stern, laconic. He is not in the mood to explain or  
discuss anything.

RILEY

No.

LAURA

What is happening with them?

RILEY

They are safe.

LAURA

And me?

RILEY

You are not.

With that, the car starts to move.

EXT. ARID LANDSCAPE - DAY

The two cars speed along a dusty road in the middle of  
nowhere. Cacti, rocks, dust, and silence.

INT. FOUR WHEEL DRIVE - DAY

LAURA is upset, but tries to downplay it. RILEY, looking  
straight ahead, keeps his silence. LAURA makes a cautious  
attempt to start a conversation.

LAURA

I am your prisoner, but as such, I  
would like...

RILEY

(interrupting her)

I am a prisoner myself, of my own  
plans. There is no way back for me  
now.

He leaves it at that.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - DAY

Both cars reach the height of a mountain pass. No buildings,  
no villages, just the vastness of the landscape.

The vista is enormous. Valleys, ravines, high mountains. We can see a hundred miles into the distance.

The cars have stopped with the second one at some distance from the lead car.

LAURA and RILEY step out, stretching their limbs a little bit. RILEY points to a snow-covered peak in the distance.

RILEY  
This is Uturuncu.

LAURA  
Say it again.

RILEY  
(carefully pronouncing)  
Utu-runcu, the volcano.

LAURA  
What about it?

RILEY  
There is something much bigger  
looming than the Diablo Blanco  
Disaster.

LAURA  
But if it erupted, why would it  
matter? Nobody lives here.

RILEY  
That's of no importance. There are  
three gigantic supervolcanoes  
lurking, Yosemite National Park,  
the Bay of Naples...

LAURA  
Vesuvius.

RILEY  
Much more than that. Vesuvius is  
only like a small pimple at a rim  
which extends into the waters of  
the Mediterranean. Some ten miles  
in diameter, the same with  
Yosemite. In both locations the  
crust of the earth is extremely  
thin, and one day the entire system  
might explode, maybe in 50 million  
years or so.

LAURA  
We won't be around any more.

RILEY

But Uturuncu is different. For the last few years, we have been able to take laser measurements from satellites, and this volcano appears to be extremely dangerous. You must be familiar with the "bottleneck".

LAURA

The DNA pedigree of our ancestry.

RILEY

Well, that was only 74,000 years ago, with the Toba explosion in Indonesia, but that was comparatively small. Today, the Toba crater is marked by a volcanic lake, some three miles in diameter, but the explosion hurtled so many cubic miles of ash into the atmosphere that for at least ten years the sun was obscured. The population of our planet shrank to about 600 surviving human beings.

LAURA

Some calculations speak of a few more, almost 2,000 survivors.

RILEY

It doesn't matter. But now, the entire area of Uturuncu, thousands of square miles, is lifting, and the volcano itself is rising and expanding. And all this at a speed that exceeds all previous measurements. The entire system is rising so fast that we are experiencing permanent, round-the-clock tremors.

LAURA

And what could happen?

RILEY

We should ask: how fast could it happen? It may happen in 200,000 years, maybe in 2,000, or maybe in twenty. There's no point in asking about the nearby population. If Uturuncu erupts, our entire planet will be obscured for decades.

(MORE)

RILEY (CONT'D)

It won't matter whether you live in the Arctic, or the Himalayas, or Australia. We will disappear as a species.

LAURA

I am more concerned about what we have created here. Here and now. A gigantic salt flat that is expanding rapidly.

RILEY

So am I. But what may overtake all of this is the fire lifting up from underneath. We have to face both. Salt and fire.

LAURA reaches into the car and produces her binoculars. She focuses on the volcano in the distance.

Her POV. The giant is resting: immobile, silent, and indifferent to the plight of man.

RILEY V.O.

Here lies a monster, on the verge of waking. My guess is that soon everyone will know how to pronounce Uturuncu.

The cars start their descent into a gigantic vast plain. Big music surges.

EXT. CEMETERY OF THE TRAINS - DAY

We have reached the plain, surrounded by distant mountains, so distant that they appear as if delicately veiled. The first four wheel drive, in a cloud of dust, goes around a wide curve and moves into frame. It comes to a stop in the middle of a location that looks like a deranged fantasy. It is a cemetery of locomotives.

There are at least thirty or forty rusty locomotives lined up in two parallel rows, like dinosaurs from a different age. The rails and the wheels have sunk deep into the ground. Some of the steel has been removed by looters, but the main structures - the steam boilers, the bodies, the wheels, and some technical parts - are preserved in astonishing detail. No train station in sight, no rails. The locomotives, and further down the row, quite a few wrecked wagons stretch away from us into the distance.

LAURA steps out, hesitantly, followed by RILEY, KRAUSS, and two armed men.

RILEY  
I wanted you to see this.

LAURA  
Where are we?

RILEY  
Only a short distance away from the  
very place you traveled ten  
thousand miles to see.

LAURA  
Lake Diablo Blanco.

RILEY nods. They stroll slowly between the locomotives that  
have been here for a hundred years.

RILEY  
This is pure science fiction.  
Although the trains were abandoned  
here a hundred years ago, time has  
propelled them somewhere, maybe  
even into the future.

LAURA  
Is there such a thing as science  
fiction that looks back in time  
instead of ahead?

RILEY  
Most certainly. These trains never  
had a purpose. They had nothing to  
transport, nowhere to go.

LAURA  
(laughing)  
Aliens must have left them here.

RILEY  
Sure thing.

LAURA  
Can I take a picture?

RILEY  
As long as you keep my men out of  
frame.

LAURA takes her laptop from the car and starts it. KRAUSS  
steps in, he wants the group to move on.

KRAUSS  
Please do it quickly. We should  
move on.

LAURA  
But the railroads...

KRAUSS  
(interrupting her)  
They are senseless. The railroads  
only allow us to get away from  
where we are to where we are no  
better off.

RILEY  
The hard part is waiting.

Seen from some distance. The car leaves, and the second car  
follows a few moments later.

EXT. DIABLO BLANCO SALT FLATS - DAY

The cars have reached the shores of Diablo Blanco lake. In  
fact, it is not a lake, but a gigantic expanse of gleaming  
white salt. As far as the eye can see, nothing but salt. It  
is a place straight out of science fiction. The "lake" of  
solid salt is geometrically, utterly, frighteningly flat.

Far in the distance we make out mountains, but so far away  
they resemble specters floating in the sky. We can only guess  
they are at least a hundred miles away. The air is crisp. As  
the salt absorbs all humidity out of the air, the whiteness  
is crystalline and burning.

INT. FOUR WHEEL DRIVE - DAY

The front car has stopped, still elevated at the banks of the  
salt flats. LAURA puts on her sunglasses. For a moment, she  
remains speechless.

RILEY  
This was my goal. To bring you  
here.

LAURA  
But this is exactly where my  
colleagues and I were heading.

The car moves on.

## EXT. SALT FLATS - DAY

The wheels of the first car roll out onto the salt. We immediately notice that there are lines of white crust, an inch or two in height, and all these lines form hexagonal shapes. They all are about the size of a human step. Strange mathematics seem to be the underlying principle of these hexagons. From a distance, the shapes appear to be perfectly geometrical, but upon closer view, their irregularities become apparent. But the slightly crooked lines always resolve in hexagons connecting to an endless array of adjoining hexagons, as if alien astronauts had needed the reassurance of a pattern of logic.

The wheels of the car pass straight over the lines of crust, barely leaving track impressions. The vehicles on this surface always stay steady with only the slightest vibrations from the protruding lines.

Music. The camera is flying only inches above the ground, and the fly-by of hexagons acquires a hypnotic quality. Salt, whiteness of a futuristic landscape.

## INT. FOUR WHEEL DRIVE - DAY

View through the side window in the front of the car. The hexagons are flying towards us, and in the rear mirror they flee away from us at the same speed.

LAURA looks at the landscape, utterly fascinated.

LAURA

I had only an abstract idea how vast this is. Only numbers.

RILEY

The alarming thing is the speed of its expansion. Some 800 square miles per year.

LAURA

Is it possible that the salt will cover the entire continent one day?

RILEY

Maybe. Sometimes I'm inclined to think it could cover all land mass on our planet.

LAURA

Well, this is science fiction.

RILEY

I love to think that way.

KRAUSS turns around in his front seat.

KRAUSS

This is the ideal landing site for aliens. Nothing on our planet is so totally flat and so vast. Even our own satellites use the salt flats here to calibrate their distance from the ground.

We follow the two speeding cars by flying above them, adopting the perspective of an alien spaceship.

EXT. DIABLO BLANCO SALT FLATS - DAY

Various moving shots of the salt flats. This does not look like our planet any more.

In the distance, a dark dot appears. Moving closer, it widens to the vague shape of a pyramid. And this pyramid becomes an island.

INT. FOUR WHEEL DRIVE - DAY

RILEY points out the island which is clearly visible by now. It is no higher than 250 feet, and less than half a mile in diameter. We make out the shapes of tall cacti on the rocky surface.

RILEY

Here we are, Incahuasi Island.

LAURA

I know it from maps.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND - DAY

Both cars turn into a small bay of the island which sticks out of hard salt instead of water. Nothing but rocks, cacti, and utter desolation.

The cars come to a stop. LAURA'S vehicle remains closed, its engine running idly. Only the second car comes alive. Two masked men quickly unload water containers, a tarp, ropes, mats, and an array of bags and gear. Once everything is unloaded, they open the rear doors, and two boys step out.

The boys, about eight and ten, move with caution, and quickly we realize there is something unusual about them. They just stand there, and wait.

The first car finally opens its doors. RILEY nudges LAURA out. He follows her out and walks over to the children. He puts his hands first on the backs, then on the heads of the two boys.

RILEY  
They are blind.

LAURA  
Oh Christ.

RILEY  
I thought the world would hear of  
this, if you got to know them.

A beat.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
I am going to leave you, the three  
of you, out here. I am going to  
strand you.

LAURA is surprised. She says nothing.

RILEY turns abruptly and jumps into his car. Both four wheel drives leave immediately in a cloud of swirling salt. Only now does LAURA recover from her shock and come back to life.

LAURA  
(shouting)  
What are you doing! You can't leave  
us here. Stop!

But the cars speed away, becoming tiny dots on the vast horizon.

LAURA takes a deep breath. She looks around. There is the endless expanse of the salt, the island, the two blind boys, and a pile of things left on the ground.

She knows she has to cope with the situation. Approaching the boys she notices the milkeness of their eyes, the unseeing patina coating their corneas.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
Hi, boys, I am Laura.

There is no answer from the boys. LAURA takes the older boy's hand and presses it to her body.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
 Laura...Laura.

She places the boy's hand back against his chest.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
 And what is your name?

The older boy answers back in a very foreign language which could be Quetchua or Aymara, native languages of the Altiplano. Nothing we have ever heard before.

(Note: if the boys are Spanish speakers, we might be able to make out fragments of a conversation through words which are similar in English and Spanish.)

LAURA (CONT'D)  
 (more emphasis)  
 Laura.

As LAURA moves the boy's hand back and forth between them, the boy understands. He holds her hand at his chest.

HUASCAR  
 Huascar. Laura - Huascar.

LAURA  
 And the other boy? Is he your brother?

She takes HUASCAR's hand again, but this time presses it to his brother's heart. But the younger one is quick-witted.

ATAHUALLPA  
 Atahuallpa.

LAURA takes ATAHUALLPA'S hand and holds it first to HUASCAR'S chest and then back to his own.

LAURA  
 Atahuallpa...Huascar. The royal Inca brothers. Brothers?

They seem to understand, putting their arms around each other's shoulders. Yes, they are brothers.

LAURA takes them by their hands and leads them to the heap of gear. The brothers squat down and feel around until they find their walking canes.

Slumped down on a folded tarp, LAURA looks around.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
 And now what do we do?

The burning horizon. Silence. Nothing stirs. Music.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND SHORE - DAY

The sun is already mercilessly burning in the west, but the chill of the evening is setting in. LAURA sits on a rock. She marvels at the boys' dexterity. They have brought the equipment which was strewn about on the bay of salt to a fairly flat spot on shore, right next to a boulder. This looks like the right place for a camp.

Checking out the items, LAURA gets up and walks along an orderly line of water bottles, ten of them, with a gallon of water each. Straw mats, tarp, ropes, a few poles, kitchen utensils, food.

HUASCAR, with his ear pressed against the boulder, listens to the song of the wind reverberating in the body of stone. He cautiously gropes the protrusions of the boulder, and discovers a place to anchor a rope.

Some time later, seen from a distance. Led by the boys, LAURA takes a supporting role in setting up a tarp roof, which they stretch at a slight angle from the rock down to two poles which are held upright by taut ropes. It looks quite professional, as if the boys have done this before.

LAURA is relieved. She has completely accepted the fact that she is stranded, and that she has to make the best of it.

LAURA  
Hey boys, come here.

But the boys, obviously, do not understand what she is saying.

LAURA takes both of them into her arms and gives them a first, fleeting hug. HUASCAR says something in his language we do not understand, but it sounds soothing, reassuring.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - TOWARDS EVENING

LAURA struggles with a small camp stove. For a while, ATAHUALLPA listens to her travails. Finally he takes it from her, and very quickly and expertly assembles it. HUASCAR ignites the flame with matches, and puts an aluminum cooking pot on top of it. He spreads a few plastic bags of food out in front of LAURA.

LAURA

Ah, noodles, rice, onions, salt.  
How about rice? And some of the  
dried fish?

She passes her choice to the brothers. They nod and giggle. ATAHUALLPA, the younger one, feels bold enough to approach LAURA, touching her hair ever so softly. He then proceeds to touch her face. His hands move with utmost respect and sensitivity. He takes her features in. Encouraging his older brother to do the same, ATAHUALLPA nudges the more timid of the pair. As if his hands were made of eiderdown, he touches her face, eyes, nose, lips. Then her arm.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Arm. This is my arm.

Taking HUASCAR'S hand back to her arm, she starts to teach the boy a few basic words.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Arm.

Touching his arm.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Arm. Your arm.

HUASCAR

Arm.

Both, LAURA and HUASCAR understand the magnitude of this moment. She takes his hand to her hair, to her ear.

LAURA

Hair.

HUASCAR

Air.

LAURA

No. Hair. Hair.

HUASCAR

Hair.

LAURA

Ear.

HUASCAR

Hair.

LAURA

Ear. E a r.

HUASCAR

E a r. Ear.

The sun is setting. Water boils on the stove. LAURA puts a few handfuls of rice into the pot. ATAHUALLPA chimes along with the lesson.

ATAHUALLPA

Hair.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Night has fallen, but it is not completely dark. A full moon has risen, and a kerosene lamp is lit. Out there, the salt sparkles crystalline white.

LAURA and the boys are stretched out on mats, covered with blankets of dark Alpaca wool. All three are awake, and the boys are clearly frightened of the night. They crawl up on LAURA who pulls them close to her body. There is something primordial about the scene, deep, and warm, and motherly.

In a very soft voice, LAURA sings the boys a lullaby. It does not matter that they are past the age for this. With their bodies huddled together, the three face the solitude of the night.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - DAY

The morning sun shines on the camp. It looks like a well-made shelter, in fact the only place of shade anywhere around. LAURA dips her fingers into a cup of water, and "washes" the boys' faces.

LAURA

We better save the water for drinking.

Looking around and taking in the immensity of the salt flats, she knows there is no way to reach the "shore" of Lake Diablo Blanco on foot.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND - DAY

With the boys in tow, LAURA makes a slow ascent to the summit of the island. They explore the rocks and the cacti. Some of them are 20 feet tall. The boys softly touch and scrutinize the shape of the almost humanlike cacti. They stand there like an battalion of soldiers keeping watch over nothing.

The boys, closer up. They seem to be enjoying themselves. This is a real adventure for them. They chatter—in their strange language.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, SUMMIT - DAY

The solitary inhabitants of Incahuasi Island have reached the summit, about 250 feet above "sea" level. LAURA has a gallon of water with her, and offers the boys a drink.

We turn 360 degrees with her. There is nothing on the island but arid slopes, rocks, and cacti. No shade, no water, no sign of the presence of any living being. And here we realize that the island rests above the salt right in the middle of the gigantic fields of salt. Only very far in the distance can we see ethereal mountains. It looks like an alien planet.

LAURA scans the horizon with her binoculars.

Her POV. There is another island very, very far off, and behind it, like a spiderweb, yet another one. Glistening salt, veils of mountains across an ocean of white. LAURA focuses on the island to the north.

LAURA

Hey, boys, that is La Isla de los Pescadores, Fishermen's Island. I know it from my maps.

The boys laugh. LAURA realizes that she was so absorbed by what she was seeing that she forgot they cannot understand English. And besides that, they have no clue of what it means to gaze into the distance. She chimes in with their laughter.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - DAY

HUASCAR is cooking in the shade under the tarp. He is totally confident in his activity. Once in a while he briefly touches the pot, to check the temperature.

ATAHUALLPA, the younger one, engages LAURA in a strange game which she does not immediately understand. The boy places a round piece of metal in her palm. It is the size of a very large coin, but is about half an inch thick.

LAURA

Ah, I am supposed to hold my hand like this?

He touches his hand to hers.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Hand.

ATAHUALLPA

Chand.

LAURA

No. Hand. H-a-n-d.

ATAHUALLPA

C-h-a-n-d.

Apparently, it is difficult for him to pronounce an "h". He laughs. Turning her hand upwards, the coin now rests in her palm, fully visible to her. The boy surreptitiously positions something else under her hand, and suddenly, mysteriously, the round metal leaps up, and flips over.

LAURA wants to find out what is going on. She grabs his hand, but the blind boy playfully withdraws his fist. LAURA tickles him under his armpit, he laughs loudly, but does not give up his secret. He makes her hold the coin again in her stretched out hand, and once more it flips in her palm.

LAURA

Wow. This is magic.

And all of a sudden, ATAHUALLPA says a word we understand.

ATAHUALLPA

Magnet.

LAURA

A magnet. How wonderful.

This is the moment the boy gives up his secret. He shows her an identical round piece of metal, this time with the poles reversed. The magnet in her open hand jumps up, and with a click attaches itself to its counterpart.

While HUASCAR is tasting his soup, LAURA and ATAHUALLPA are trying to push the magnets together with their opposing end, but the force is too strong to attach them to each other.

For a moment, LAURA and the boys have settled in as a family of the stranded. This happens in a completely unsentimental way. Soon the boys move next to each other, and with stoic patience wait for the meal to be ready.

The image fades slowly.

EXT. SALT FLATS - DAY

A few hundred yards out in the open expanse of salt. The island of Incahuasi in the background. We recognize the campsite in the small bay. LAURA has wrapped her head in a piece of cloth against the relentless sun.

The boys are stretched out on their stomachs. HUASCAR takes a water container, and fills a glass almost to the rim. With the index finger of his left hand he keeps track of the water level. He places the glass onto the hard surface of the salt and places his ear to the ground to listen. Next to him, ATAHUALLPA is also motionless with his ear against the salt.

LAURA

Do you hear anything? It is all so still.

As if he understands her, HUASCAR pulls LAURA down beside him.

Close shot on LAURA. She listens, but does not have such a delicate sensory organ as the boys.

LAURA (CONT'D)

I can hear something. Very distant, like a faint rumbling.

She sits up.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Or is it the pulsing blood in my ear?

But now, sensitized by the blind boys, we do hear a faint rumbling.

LAURA (CONT'D)

I can hear it in my mind, here, nowhere, there, and everywhere at once.

HUASCAR takes her hand gently and moves it to the filled glass. He holds his index finger just at the surface of the water without dipping it in.

CU on the glass. Nothing. But then there are the finest of ripples on its surface, forming concentric rings. Then it ebbs away, and after a few seconds, the water trembles again.

HUASCAR points into the vague distance to the south.

HUASCAR

Uturuncu.

LAURA

I cannot believe this. Are we sitting on a fire that is moving beneath us?

She thinks for a moment.

LAURA (CONT'D)

This salt plain obviously behaves like a gigantic membrane. Wow.

The image fades. The faint rumbling morphs into a somber music.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - TOWARDS EVENING

LAURA and the boys have settled down for the coming night. Wrapped in their blankets, they do nothing. Silence. But there is also a serenity that has taken hold of them.

ATAHUALLPA, the younger boy, rummages in LAURA's handbag, and spreads her things out on the ground, very cautiously, with great respect for each item. He comes across her hairbrush. Almost ritualistically, he puts everything back into the bag, only the hairbrush remains outside.

Some time later. The sun goes down in a strange cosmic spectacle. ATAHUALLPA, sitting on a bale of camping gear, has taken position behind LAURA. He combs her hair with the brush. He does this with incredible tenderness. LAURA holds her breath. Something sublime is happening to her.

Big music swells up.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - NIGHT

LAURA and the boys huddle together under their blankets. They give each other shelter and warmth. The music continues.

LAURA is awake. The boys sleep. HUASCAR stirs slightly, and LAURA re-arranges the blanket which has slipped off his shoulders. She looks out over the moonlit vastness of the salt. She lifts her gaze to the sky, which is filled with myriads of stars. Since the air is devoid of all humidity, the stars proliferate in numbers we have never imagined. They are like a dome of light, more present than anything we have ever seen.

LAURA

(whispering)

Boys, I wish you could see what I see. If I stretch out my hands, I can harvest the stars.

The sky, the stars, the salt in the night. The music fades slowly until silence sets in.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - MORNING

Morning activity at the campsite. The boys prepare tea, and arrange glasses, sugar, and cookies. LAURA is folding their blankets.

HUASCAR gets up, and counts the water containers with his cane. He can tell which ones are empty by the different sounds they make when he taps them. Six of them are still completely full. He assembles the empty containers in a straight row away from the untapped ones.

ATAHUALLPA places a small toy dinosaur, less than a foot in height, beside him on his mat. It is a plastic Tyrannosaurus Rex which stands on massive hind legs and opens its mouth to reveal a menacing array of teeth. The boy treats the toy like a pet.

ATAHUALLPA places a piece of his cookie into the dinosaur's mouth. He talks to his toy in a soft voice.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, FIELD OF CACTI - DAY

LAURA and the boys are walking halfway up the slope of the island. They are surrounded by cacti. With their delicate fingers, the boys explore the outlines of a broken cactus. LAURA perches on top of a small protruding rock. She scans the salt flats with her binoculars. Nothing but space, white glow, and desolation.

Time is at a standstill.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - DAY

The boys are building a tower of rocks. Their creation is not just a haphazard pile: they carefully select each rock and place one on top of the other in order to produce the most delicate equilibrium. It is hard to imagine how softly they must touch this structure to keep it from toppling over.

LAURA is clattering around with the cooking utensils. She cleans a pot with sand instead of water.

The boys stop their work, pricking their ears. HUASCAR moves over to LAURA, and puts his hand on hers. He lifts a finger. Listen. LAURA freezes, listening.

LAURA  
Nothing. I hear nothing.

But it is clear that both the boys hear something. LAURA reaches for her binoculars. Scanning the horizon, she discerns nothing unusual.

HUASCAR points into one direction, and LAURA trains her binoculars more precisely.

Her POV. Far in the distance, like a floating apparition, there are two pulsing dots. Coming closer, and growing in size, the dots start to resemble two vehicles.

HUASCAR and ATAHUALLPA are all excited.

And then, two cars swerve at high speed around the curvature of the little bay of the camp. The first one is the four wheel drive we have already seen, and behind it a van.

Before the first car has come to a full stop, RILEY jumps out and hurries over to the campsite. Behind him, the doors of the van swing open, and some of the paramilitary men step out, but they carry no weapons, and wear no masks.

EXT. SALT FLATS, BAY OF INCAHUASI, - DAY

The boys, knowing there is nothing to stumble over, rush to the cars. RILEY opens his arms, wide.

RILEY  
Hey. Hey-- hey-- hey!

The boys fly into his arms. He squeezes them hard, lifting them off the ground.

LAURA approaches. She is hesitant, and stops at a slight distance.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
Please come closer. You are part of our family now. So to speak.

LAURA is torn between surprise, anger, relief, and affection. She takes a step forward, then another one.

From the other car, the van, a few men emerge. They immediately start to dismantle the campsite, packing things up.

And then, something else unexpected happens. The men place a metal ramp at the center of the van's sliding door, and KRAUSS rides his wheelchair slowly to the ground. Once he reaches the salt bottom, he steps out of his seat.

KRAUSS

Good to see you again, Dr.  
Sommerfeld.

LAURA, not knowing what to say, answers with a banality.

LAURA

Nice to see you again, Krauss.

EXT. INCAHUASI ISLAND, CAMPSITE - DAY

LAURA, RILEY, KRAUSS, and the boys are sitting on folded up blankets. Around them, the campsite is being quickly dismantled. Men from the cars take everything down. Only the tarp and its shade remains.

LAURA is finally calm enough to get angry.

LAURA

I want an explanation. I deserve  
one.

RILEY

Accepted.

LAURA

And an apology.

RILEY

I will not apologize.

LAURA

I deserve an apology.

RILEY

You are here with a man who has  
accepted that he is going to  
prison.

LAURA

How are my companions you have so  
kindly kidnapped, and poisoned?

RILEY

They are in excellent shape.

LAURA

Thank god.

RILEY

Except Dr. Cavani has become slightly pale. He needs to be sent to a tanning salon.

LAURA warms up a little bit. She laughs briefly, but quickly suppresses her reaction.

LAURA

What was this all about? All this big plot.

RILEY

First of all, these two boys are my sons.

LAURA

Where is their mother?

RILEY

Their mother died. Shortly after the birth of the younger one, Atahuallpa.

KRAUSS, sensing that it is not easy for Riley to talk about this, offers his own explanation.

KRAUSS

Their mother was a local woman from Colchani. She died from cancer.

RILEY collects himself. Trying to suppress his emotions, his voice becomes slightly hoarse.

RILEY

She died because of the toxicity of the environment around the town.

KRAUSS again tries to assist.

KRAUSS

And the boys...

RILEY

Leave that to me, will you.

KRAUSS is surprised by the harshness of RILEY's voice.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Blind children have no stake in any regime...

Turning to LAURA.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
...nor in any report.

A beat. Silence. The boys move closer to their father. RILEY clears his throat.

LAURA  
You mean, our report on Diablo Blanco as well.

RILEY  
Indeed. Here is what is on my mind. This disaster is man-made.

LAURA  
It is.

RILEY  
Will you please let me speak for a moment.

LAURA nods.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
I am the head of the Consortium which is responsible for all this. The toxins, the dessication of a lake, the transformation of a whole landscape into salt. The failure of a "glorious" irrigation system which diverted two large rivers. And now, the rivers are beyond repair. And the salt here is expanding...Although I only assumed my position some ten years ago, I carry the burden of responsibility.

He gestures across the endless expanse of salt. LAURA gives him time, does not pressure him.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
...there were fish here a few decades ago. Boats. Fishermen. Hard to imagine.

LAURA  
And why did you take me hostage?

RILEY  
I wanted a report back to the United Nations which did not just contain scientific data, graphs, and lifeless statistics.

(MORE)

RILEY (CONT'D)  
I wanted a report which had  
something different in it.

He pauses for a while.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
A report about a lake so poisonous  
that two boys who grew up near its  
shores became blind.

LAURA reaches over, touching the hands of the two boys. She  
speaks their names.

LAURA  
Huascar. Atahuallpa.

Music fades in.

RILEY  
And now, please allow me to do two  
things I would like to take care of  
before I hand myself in to the  
authorities.

He gets up, clumsily.

EXT. SALT FLATS, NEAR INCAHUASI<sub>7</sub> - DAY

RILEY, all excited, takes photos with a small digital camera  
on the white, endless plain. He is on his belly, the camera  
placed in front of him on the ground. He directs LAURA and  
the boys to line up. KRAUSS helps with the precise positions.

RILEY  
You may have noticed that this  
terrain does not allow us any means  
to understand perspective or  
proportion. There is nothing we can  
attach our eyes to for comparison.

RILEY gives precise indications about positions.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
Laura, a tiny step to the left. I  
hope you don't mind that I call you  
by your first name.

LAURA  
(smiling)  
No, of course not.

LAURA inches to her left.

RILEY

And now, hold up your hands. Put  
your elbows to your hips.

LAURA's hands are lifted and opened to the sky.

RILEY (CONT'D)

And now, Krauss, the boys slightly  
further away. Yes...yes. And  
Huascar a little bit to the right.  
Good. Hold still.

KRAUSS steps out of frame. LAURA, like an Hindu goddess with  
her palms up to the sky. Some ten yards further back the boys  
have lined up left and right of the axis of the shot.

POV-of RILEY'S camera. (See appendix.)

We see LAURA in the foreground, and the boys seemingly in her  
palms left and right. These odd images express a strange  
defiance in our way of seeing the world. We hear the click of  
the camera. The image freezes.

RILEY V.O.

Sometimes, crazy tourists come here  
and posing for these kind of  
pictures.

And now, a quick series of poses and pictures. The little  
Tyrannosaurus Rex placed in the foreground, and some sixty  
feet away LAURA and the boys duck, as if in terror.

The photo shows a gigantic beast, and the human beings just  
eluding its gaping mouth.

Three pairs of shoes close to the camera. In the distance,  
KRAUSS arranges LAURA and the boys into the right positions.

The photo shows three giant pairs of shoes, the size of cars,  
and the group like tiny creatures from a Lilliputian land on  
top of them.

LAURA

I want the pictures as a souvenir.

RILEY

You will have them. Fully framed.  
You will never see the world like  
this again. Only aliens will think  
the world is like this.

He rises to his feet, brushing the particles of salt from his  
clothes.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
And there is something else I'd  
like to give you.

He steps to his car and fetches an envelope.

RILEY (CONT'D)  
This is for you.

LAURA, curious, opens the envelope. She pulls out an airline ticket.

LAURA  
What is this?

RILEY  
A ticket to Rome. First class.

LAURA  
Rome?

RILEY  
Have you forgotten Santissima  
Trinita?

LAURA  
The saint under the tree.

LAURA is stunned for a moment. Then, an idea surges within her, more from her heart than her intellect.

LAURA (CONT'D)  
Tell me one thing. Will you face  
charges for kidnapping, assault,  
fraud, and bribery...

RILEY  
Oh stop that. I know what I am  
facing.

LAURA  
But what if you do not turn  
yourself in?

RILEY  
I guess I will be caught anyway.  
And you will turn me in...

LAURA  
...and what if I do not turn you  
in?

Something in RILEY surges. An idea, an emotion that almost makes the big, solid man cry. But he manages to suppress what is heaving in his chest.

RILEY

I may remain a free man.

LAURA

What about your ticket?

RILEY

Why? I have no ticket.

LAURA

To Rome. For you.

RILEY

I don't know what to say.

Something dawns upon him. A possibility, a monumental feeling.

LAURA

Why are you standing here? Book yourself a ticket.

This is so big that KRAUSS feels inclined to step in.

KRAUSS

Guys, you know what?

LAURA

What?

KRAUSS

I had this premonition. We have to celebrate with champagne. The only thing missing are alien astronauts from a faraway galaxy landing right here on the flats. Flickering lights and a spacecraft descending in a cloud of salt.

LAURA

But they seem to be reluctant to land, no?

KRAUSS

They need to be lured. The champagne will be their bait.

He puts the champagne into the empty seat of his wheelchair and sets it in motion. With an electric purr, the vehicle sets off into the vastness of the salt flats.

No clear direction, no aim, no knowledge of anything. It just moves away.

The wheelchair loses itself into some senseless futuristic space until it is only a dot.

THE END