

THE DECEIVER - Keith Davidson (613-722-9230)

FADE IN:

EXT. SYRIAN DESERT - DAY

A sandstorm ROARS across the barren terrain, obliterating both desert and sky.

A figure emerges from the tempest -- a brown-skinned boy in Arabic robes, struggling against the fury of the storm.

Shielding his eyes from the stinging sand, ABAR scans the rock formation ahead. He can just make out the dark, yawning mouth of a cave. He looks anxiously over his shoulder.

A second figure materializes from the squall, white robes billowing. The figure stops, bracing against the wind.

A woman's piercing green eyes stare out a slit in her cowl.

Abar tugs at her robes, imploring her to press onward. She follows, once again swallowed by the storm.

INT. CAVE - DAY

They reach the sanctuary of the cave and head down its dark throat, leaving the raging storm behind.

As the woman slowly feels her way down the murky tunnel, the darkness ahead is pierced by a lantern FLARING on. Abar blows out his match and lifts the lantern off its hook.

The woman loosens her cowl. The glow of the lantern radiates onto the captivating face of British biologist JULIE MOORE. Her air of serene confidence comes from a string of professional accomplishments which belie her young age.

They head down the passage, their macabre shadows following.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The tunnel opens into a long cavern illuminated by strings of lanterns. Abar excitedly points to the far corner.

JOHN RALSTON, a distinguished man of sixty, stands in a freshly-dug trench beside a sandstone altar, gingerly brushing centuries of dirt from a large clay jar.

Julie makes her way through the grid of ankle-high twine that crisscrosses the partially-excavated earth floor.

Ralston sees her coming and raises the jar victoriously.

RALSTON
The seal is intact!

Julie's hopes soar.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - DAY

The storm BUFFETS the tent. Julie eagerly watches Ralston carefully pry the wax seal from the jar and ease off the lid.

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

Gleaming in the light, tiny glyphs of different animals are etched into each casing. Hundreds and hundreds of animals.

They look at one another, unable to contain their excitement. Julie starts gently twisting open the cap on her cylinder.

RALSTON
Wait, wait -- the camera!

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

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

Ralston returns with a polaroid camera and a bottle of champagne. He sees Julie's discouraged look and stops dead.

JULIE
Aramaic.

He's crushed.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - NIGHT

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

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

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

JULIE
First century AD.

RALSTON
Yes, won't the Directors be
thrilled.

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

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

JULIE
Is that what you thought?

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

JULIE
I told you, I'm on holidays.

RALSTON
Really? And who paid the airfare?

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

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

RALSTON
That looks different from the rest.

JULIE
It's Sumerian.

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

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

RALSTON
Unless...

He stares at her until the penny drops.

JULIE

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

RALSTON

...The casings could be very, very old.

Jubilant, Ralston POPS the champagne and pours two glasses.

RALSTON

Now, how's your Sumerian?

Sorry.

RALSTON

Well, you must know someone?

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

RALSTON

You do. Wonderful!

He's too overjoyed to notice her troubled expression.

EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

The sandstorm abated, a radiant moon shines down on the camp. Scattered between a cluster of dark tents, an assortment of rakes and shovels poke out of the newly-formed sand dunes. A jeep and a battered van are half-buried.

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

INT. RALSTON'S TENT - NIGHT

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

He reaches for the solitary silver scroll casing... Ralston grabs his wrist, spinning the boy around.

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

EXT. CAMP - DAY

The sun rises over the camp.

INT. RALSTON'S TENT - DAY

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

JULIE

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

No response. She pulls away the pillow. Ralston's hair is matted with blood. Eyes glazed over. Julie can't breathe. She struggles to hold herself together. The BUZZING OF FLIES grows unbearably loud.

EXT. CAMP - DAY

Outside the tent, HAFEZ, an indifferent Syrian official in an ill-fitting suit, slowly leafs through Ralston's polaroids.

Emotionally numb, Julie is barely aware of his presence. Her attention is on the men loading Ralston's body into a truck.

HAFEZ

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

He waits for her response, his eyes betraying his eagerness.

JULIE

No. Possibly. A scroll casing.

Hafez skips ahead and finds the photo of the two scroll casings. He masks his surprise, but not before Julie notices.

HAFEZ

Then perhaps you should offer a reward? Five hundred pounds might encourage its return.

The truck gate SLAMS SHUT with a finality that reverberates through Julie's heart.

JULIE

Then five thousand should have it back by noon tomorrow. He was a great man. I will not have him die for nothing.

HAFEZ

It is well left in Hafez's capable hands.

His face oozing greed, Hafez gives a quick bow and hurries away. Julie continues to stare at the truck. Then a sudden look of concern comes over her. Looking at the retreating Hafez, her eyes narrow with suspicion.

INT. JULIE'S TENT - DAY

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

JULIE

... No, no proof at all.
Intuition.

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

SYRIAN STUDENT

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

JULIE

Except that if I'm right about Hafez, he now knows we have a second scroll.

SYRIAN STUDENT

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

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

EXT. CAMP - DAY

Julie strides through camp with the scroll and a backpack. The Student is hot on her heels, carrying a duffle bag.

SYRIAN STUDENT

Please, Miss Moore! It is too risky!

JULIE

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

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

SYRIAN STUDENT

We'll go together. With the other scroll.

JULIE

And have them take it as "evidence" and sell to a private collector? No thanks.

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

VIEWED THROUGH BINOCULARS

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

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

Watching from a military jeep atop a nearby hill, Hafez takes the binoculars from his eyes.

HAFEZ

Which one will have it?

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

ABAR

The man.

Hafez proudly rubs his son's head, then reaches into the back seat and pulls out his rifle. He turns the ignition key, and the engine ROARS to life.

EXT. IMPERIAL COLLEGE, LONDON UNIVERSITY - DAY

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

INT. SMALL LECTURE HALL - DAY

An amphitheater-style lecture hall is peppered with bored students struggling to stay awake as their class winds down.

PROFESSOR THORPE (O.S.)

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

Standing at a podium is PROFESSOR THORPE, an articulate, distinguished man in a grey flannel suit. His wildly-colored vest is a vain attempt to prove to his students, and himself, that he's not the stodgy old professor some would claim.

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

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

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

He SNAPS his book shut. The students quickly evacuate.

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

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

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

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

Julie enters the light, carrying her duffle bag and backpack. Thorpe is stunned to see her... and not altogether happy. There's a painful awkwardness and tension between them.

PROFESSOR THORPE
 A telephone call would have
 sufficed had you merely wished to
 insult me. And I'm quite certain
 you didn't come to hear me speak.
 So I am left to assume...
 (eyeing the bags)
 ... that you're either running away
 from home, or you're here to inform
 me of a death in the family.

JULIE
 No, the only casualty is my pride.
 I need your help.

The plea leaves a bitter aftertaste. Keenly aware of this, Thorpe enjoys her discomfort.

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

She bristles at the comment.

JULIE
 Can we go somewhere and talk?

He looks at her, wary.

INT. THORPE'S OFFICE - DAY

Julie looks in awe at the tightly-packed bookshelves which cover all four walls of Thorpe's office.

JULIE
 The Book-of-the-Month Club sure saw you coming.

Julie peruses the shelves, finding thick volumes on linguistics, anthropology and archaeology.

At his desk, Thorpe uses a magnifying glass to examine the line of Sumerian writing on the scroll casing.

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

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

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

She can't mask the hurt in time. But instead of triumph, he feels remorse. Before he can apologize --

JULIE
 Can you translate it or not?

He gives a little nod.

INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

In the dark bowels of a musty library, light from a solitary lamp shines from a small alcove.

Under a stained-glass lamp depicting an angel blowing a trumpet, the gnarled desk is littered with pages of scrawled translations. A long rectangular magnifying glass is set atop a line of Sumerian cuneiform etched into silver.

Sitting at the end of the table, FATHER MICHAEL, an earnest red-headed priest, is immersed in a massive, ancient book. Whatever he's reading, it's distressing.

He blots the sweat from his face and gathers himself, then puts his glasses back on. He's afraid to turn the page. But he does. What he sees sends shivers down his spine.

REFLECTED IN HIS GLASSES

is a distorted image of a goat being slaughtered by some other creature. Something monstrous. And evil.

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