

ESCAPEGOAT

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FADE IN:

INT. OLD WORLD THEATER - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Colossal prick FELIX FLEMING (early 30s) welcomes his faithful AUDIENCE with warmth and distinction. The wide smile plastered across his spotlit face reflects too much success seen too early in life while hiding unsavory manipulations that drove and produced it.

Classically handsome. A shock of unruly black hair semi-tamed with pomade. Not dissimilar in appearance to Harry Houdini -- with whom he's often compared -- he's one of the world's highest-rated illusionists, a stellar performer at the top of his game. But for now, he's merely a talking head.

SUPER: New York City

FELIX

Always trust the magic of new beginnings, ladies and gentlemen. It's why we're here tonight -- the high honor of the Old World Theater's farewell performance has been entrusted unto us. Not me alone. Nor you. All of us together.

INT. OLD WORLD THEATER - BACKSTAGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Felix. Enraged. Rails at his CREW as they scramble around him, frantic to complete tasks for which they have no time.

FELIX

Why can't I trust you fucking people to get one thing right? Just one. Fucking. Thing?

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

FELIX

(addressing audience)
America's longest-operating theatre-in-the-round venue, the Old World's rich and storied lifetime is a march through history: stagecraft defined, refined, then redefined again.

Through many countless plays,
musicals, events, and shows, the
Old World has hosted every talent
from the struggling to the
celebrated.

INT. OFFSTAGE CORRIDOR - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Felix berates his stage manager, KATHARINE HENSTOE (late 20s)
-- humiliating her in front of coworkers passing by.

Katharine's defeated posture within formless clothes. She's
in full retreat behind her big glasses and long hair.

FELIX

(furious)

Why is this such a struggle for
you, Katharine? I know there's five
hundred ways to get it wrong -- not
that you'd try every single one.
Beg me to keep your job. Beg.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

FELIX

(beaming)

Sadly, time has taken its toll on
our beloved friend's epic journey.
The theater can no longer be kept
up to code, placing its very
survival on the line. That means
facilitating an emergence from Old
World to New World. But tearing it
all down and starting over demands
courage. Specifically, the courage
of those willing to usher in a new
era, to take the first step in the
journey's next leg. That's why
everyone here knows tonight is not
just about making waves -- this is
about who you are as a person.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Felix circles the crew seated around the table like a
predator.

FELIX

Who do you all think you are?
Everyone in this room is
replaceable. Every. Single. One.

Did you know I get a thousand resumes a week to hop on this train? You'd think that might instill a sense of personal responsibility. But no! Thanks to one of you motherfuckers, I had to have a conversation with the fire marshal that was un-fucking-pleasant!

QUICK FLASH - THE PAYOFF

-- Felix hands the FIRE MARSHAL an envelope thick with cash.

BACK TO CONFERENCE ROOM

FELIX

Anyone wanna own it? Anyone? I didn't think so. Your cowardice sickens me.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM (PRESENT)

FELIX

This is about bravery. Signing a waiver to be served the hottest wings in the country is an afterthought to someone like you. You're the type who believes life not lived on the edge is no life at all, who craves the most sinister escape rooms, who gleefully signs a release at Halloween's most notorious haunted houses -- the kind that turn Marines into little pussycats and sends them home to mommy.

INT. BOX OFFICE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Felix is too busy leveling two INTERNS (early 20s) to notice Katharine nearby.

FELIX

Katharine's incompetence is not my fucking problem! Explain to her that contract issues have to be addressed with the promoter. In person. Then, point her tits toward midtown and send her packing. Now get the fuck outta here before you piss me off.

PRE-LAP: Audience laughter.

INT. AUDITORIUM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Felix waits -- almost too long -- for the laughs and applause to die down.

FELIX

(grave)

Tonight, however, there is a difference. There's nothing gimmicky, false, or phony about the peril involved. And because the danger here is real danger, you need someone who makes your safety his number one priority, okay? Someone sensible. Someone grounded.

As Felix speaks, pulling back slowly reveals he's wearing a straitjacket.

INT. CONTROL ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Felix leans on the seatback of a swivel chair during a complete meltdown with his technical director, MORT HAMBLIN (mid-50s), a favorite punching bag.

CREWMEMBERS loiter near the doorway as sparks fly.

MORT

Yes, but these presets weren't from the original specs, they're changes to the finale you wanted me to include with --

FELIX

I'm sorry, but are you suggesting this is my fault?

Felix suddenly hefts the chair. Slams it down on the sound board and lighting controls as Mort ducks out of the way.

Though it's hardly the first time, everyone scatters in fear as Felix storms out.

FELIX

No more excuses! The doors open in three hours. Fix it!

INT. AUDITORIUM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Fog-like cataracts of smoke machine vapor linger in the theater wings and entrances. Random flashes and recording phones fleck the darkened crowd like a moonlit sea.

Mounds of fine sand cover the small stage. Two obviously fake palms and an oversized glass bottle planted in the dunes have transformed it into a desert island.

Perched on the rim of the giant, slanted bottle nearly full of water, Felix's legs dangle inside the neck.

A holographic marquee scrolls above stage: "FELIX - EMERGENCE"

FELIX

My father found it both deeply challenging and profoundly rewarding to perform here: the central staging leaves no room for secrets, much less error. And with such an important night hanging in the balance, I decided to fully automate everything from lighting and effects to video and sound -- then let my entire crew leave early, giving them a little time off for a job well done.

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Onstage, Felix conducts the final mic check as his crew grouses about his violent temper from the first few rows.

FELIX

(miked)

Test one-two? One-two? Oh, good -- it works. Well, everyone's fired, so you can all get out.

(brief confusion)

What is this, Retard Day at Disney on Ice? Out!

Half the workers immediately leave, the rest scream up at him.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

A packed house surrounds the island stage.

FELIX
 So it's just you and I. Alone
 together in a landmark performance
 exclusively for my top-tier fans.

He takes a deep warm-up breath -- inhale and hold.

FELIX (V.O.)
 Tonight, I'll honor your dedication
 with compassion...

QUICK FLASHES - ANGRY FELIX THROWING THINGS

-- Katharine's clipboard of invoices strewn across the room.

-- A sheaf of incorrectly printed playbills: half straight up
 in the air, the other half at a recoiling PRODUCTION
 ASSISTANT'S (mid-20s) face.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

Full exhale. Inhale. Hold.

FELIX (V.O.)
 Reward your courage with wonder...

QUICK FLASHES - FELIX'S BACKSTAGE RAMPAGES

-- Trashing his dressing room.

-- Stomping and smashing unhung stage lights.

FELIX (V.O.)
 For it is your loyalty that has
 brought you here, to this
 invitation-only, once-in-a-lifetime
 event -- the ultimate audience
 participation experience:
 EMERGENCE.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

FELIX
 (exhale)
 And when the smoke clears, our
 message in a bottle will have
 escaped the Old World to emerge in
 the New, establishing a cutting-
 edge performing arts forum for many
 generations to come.
 (boisterous applause)

And now, ladies and gentlemen, it's
the moment you've all been waiting
for. Surf's up!

Maximum capacity inhale.

Each person in the cheering audience holds up their individual cardboard cut-out of an ocean wave. Rows of campy-looking blue waves with white crests surround the stage, completing the island scene.

Displaced water shoots out from the neck as Felix slips into the bottle-tank, only his legs unrestrained in the aqua-hued liquid. Even free of the straitjacket it would be impossible to get out the way he's come in.

The speakers explode with electronic dance music synchronized with lights, strobes, lasers, and above all, pyrotechnics.

Minutes fall off the clock, but Felix's efforts make seemingly little progress toward freeing himself from the straitjacket.

The five-minute mark. Two minutes shy of Felix's longest hold.

Bars mounted with spark generators just outside the surrounding footlights randomly pitch outward, so the next time they activate, fountains of sparks spray the crowd, igniting the cardboard wave cut-outs.

Few immediately panic. Is this all part of the act?

But when the house sprinklers and drenchers fail to activate, wildfire spreads throughout the ancient theater in seconds.

Suddenly, everything from their seats and clothes to the rafters is on fire or catching.

The screams are real. In seconds everyone will be trying to escape through the auditorium exits at the same time.

And there is Felix. Master escape artist. Still restrained and helpless to stop the terror as the arena seating becomes completely engulfed.

The shock expels his last two cheekfuls of oxygen. His Oxford shoes kick the tank from inside. Darkness encroaches his field of vision while his lungs convulse.

A moment later, he blacks out hearing his most devoted fans perish in the flames.

BLACK.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - US ARMY TRANSPORT CONVOY - DAY

A six-vehicle column crosses an extremely remote desert road in the Niger and Chad region of the Sahara.

SUPER: Ténéré Desert

A lead Humvee, supply truck, and two personnel trucks trail a missile truck and medical support vehicle.

INT. US ARMY PERSONNEL TRUCK - DAY

Two center-facing rows. SOLDIERS in desert camo ride uncomfortably close over unpaved road -- sweating, swaying, banging against one another in the rugged vehicle.

Opposite Felix is SPECIALIST EMMETT JONES (mid-20s), an unwitting source of racial hypocrisy who believes his comedic aspirations will rescue him from the projects back home.

SPC JONES

Seriously. When I find out who took that fiddy bucks out my wallet I'm putting this boot up they ass.

He notices Felix with his unremoved helmet and elbows typically dismissive PRIVATE FIRST CLASS KIRK RENFRO (early 20s) in the rib cage.

SPC JONES

Yo, who's the crash test dummy?

PFC RENFRO

I dunno. Some new guy.

SPC JONES

(reads name badge)

Hey, new guy! Fleming! What's your first name?

FELIX

Felix.

The chatter incurs the misplaced enthusiasm of PRIVATE FIRST CLASS LANCE COLLINS (19) and southern insight of CORPORAL RYAN BOSWELL (late 20s) seated on either side of Felix.

SPC JONES

Felix?

(mocking)

Felix Fleming. That's your name?

(laughs)

Yo, that shit sound like the symptom and the treatment. "Baby, hand me a Felix -- my sinuses are full of Fleming."

PFC COLLINS
If that's part of your new stand-up act, Jones, it sucks.

SPC JONES
Fuck your Irish ass, Collins.

FELIX
I like my name.

PFC RENFRO
Who cares?

CPL BOSWELL
You sure 'bout that, man? Not no more though, eh?

CPL BOSWELL
(to the others)
Y'all seriously don't know who this is?

(no response)
This here's the Felix. A-K-A, the world's fastest escape artist. A-K-A, the famous magician and illusionist.

SPC JONES
Get the fuck outta here.

PFC COLLINS
Holy shit! No, it is him! I didn't recognize -- dude, I saw you on a giant billboard in Vegas with those two bomb-ass girlfriends of yours.

FELIX
They're assistants.

CPL BOSWELL
Yeah, right. That ain't what he told G-Q.
(vacant stares)
What? There's a whole other side to me y'all don't know about.

PFC RENFRO
Hold up, hold up. Are you guys talking about the same Felix who set his audience on fire in New York last year?

FELIX
It was an accident.

SPC JONES
(ignoring Felix)
No way! What all happened?

PFC RENFRO
Private event. Packed house.
Motherfucker drops himself into a
water tank wearing a straitjacket
when all a sudden the pyrotechnics
malfunction and the whole place
goes up. No one can escape in the
panic so they're trapped in a
literal firebox. Meanwhile, Felix
passes out in the tank.

PFC COLLINS
Why?

PFC RENFRO
I think he fainted or something.
But that night, two hundred eighty-
four of his biggest fans bought the
farm in one shot.

FELIX
You guys know I'm sitting right
here, yes?

SPC JONES
(still ignoring Felix)
Wait -- so how did he get out?

INT. OLD WORLD THEATER - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Waves of fire in dreamy slo-mo surround the desert island.

A lone FIGURE emerges from the flames hefting an axe.

PFC RENFRO (V.O.)
So there he was, right? Dangerously
unconscious yet ironically safe in
the tank. But if the fire marshal
he bribed hadn't shown back up with
a guilty conscience and busted him
out with an axe, he'd have been
dead as a doornail, too.

Still jacketed and out cold, Felix flops out of the tank on a
tide of rushing water.

BACK TO PERSONNEL TRUCK

PFC RENFRO

Only the two of them made it out.

(then)

But once it became known as the biggest disaster in theater history, Felix did a disappearing act. For real.

FELIX

Still right here.

CPL BOSWELL

(finally acknowledging)

Yeah, but why are you here?

FELIX

Renfro just --

CPL BOSWELL

No, why you here, man? Two hundred eighty-four counts of manslaughter but you ain't traded that straitjacket for prison stripes?

FELIX

The judge ruled in favor of military service at a remote foreign outpost because the inordinate expenses associated with the incarceration of an individual such as myself presents an unreasonable public burden.

PFC COLLINS

Huh?

CPL BOSWELL

He means it costs too much to keep his ass locked up because he can escape from anything anywhere.

SPC JONES

(scoffs)

'Cept a straitjacket or fish tank.

FELIX

Or out from under your sister. Fuck you, Jones.

SPC JONES

'Scuse me?

CPL BOSWELL

Whoa! Take it down a peg, partner.
All y'all.

(leans back)

If I gotta be stuck in here with
y'all chowderheads till we get to
West Bumfuck Egypt, I'm gonna need
a little peace and quiet.

Felix snaps his fingers and a wallet-sized photo appears
tweezed between them. He turns it toward Boswell.

FELIX

Got my little piece right here.

PFC COLLINS

(snatches it from Felix)

I'll take that! Let's have a
looksee...

(cringing)

Yikes! Looks like someone took a
few steps down from that Vegas
billboard.

SPC JONES

What? Give it here.

(takes it)

A few steps? More like he fell off
the top -- oh, shit! This is
Renfro's wife!

Raucous laughter amid empty apologies.

Only Felix abstains. Wears a sly grin watching the hurt and
shame on --

Renfro's face as he steals his photo back and scrambles to
return it to his wallet.

EXT./INT. US ARMY PERSONNEL TRUCK - DAY

The rolling tire narrowly misses a roadside bomb protruding
from the coarse sand before running over a large rock.

The bump knocks Renfro's wallet loose.

Hitting the floor between their boots exposes a few bills
from the fold, one of them a fifty.

SPC JONES

The fuck...? Ain't that my
grandmama fifty?

PFC RENFRO

What?

SPC JONES

That's the fifty dollar bill my
grandmama sent me. Take it out and
tell me that shit don't say, "Happy
birthday, Poogie Bear!" on back.

Renfro hesitates. But the others are watching...

He gives in. Indeed, "Happy birthday, Poogie Bear!" is
scribbled in thin-tipped marker.

The raucous laughter returns. Louder.

SPC JONES

Gimme that, you thieving
peckerwood!

PFC RENFRO

I didn't take it!

SPC JONES

It just came out your wallet!

PFC RENFRO

Wasn't me -- it musta been him!
(points at Felix)
Obvi, right? He messed with our
wallets or something.

SPC JONES

Yeah, when?
(turns to Felix)
How 'bout it, Magic Man? That how
it work?

FELIX

Let him have it, Renfro. Don't you
know how bad he needs that money?
His family's poor. Like, really
poor. Even by black standards.

SPC JONES

You racist motherf --

PFC COLLINS

Hey, maybe this is the real reason
he's sixteen million miles from
nowhere instead of locked up: they
wanted his ass as far away as
possible.

EXT. US ARMY TRANSPORT CONVOY - DAY

The lead vehicle's tire hits an old anti-tank landmine.

The subsequent IED blast disables the Humvee.

INT. US ARMY PERSONNEL TRUCK - DAY

They come to an abrupt halt behind the supply truck.

CPL BOSWELL

Now what?

PFC RENFRO

Why'd we stop?

PFC COLLINS

You guys hear that?

EXT. REBEL TECHNICAL TRUCK - DAY

From the right flank, an open bed truck loaded with Nigerien Tuareg SMUGGLERS races toward the stalled convoy.

A RENEGADE (20s) leans over the side. Excess fabric from his dark red tagelmust flaps around his neck.

RPG-7 launcher. Pointed at the first personnel truck in the convoy, Felix's. Cohorts steady his aim.

The rocket hisses through the air. Strikes the personnel truck's passenger side chassis, pitching it sideways.

INT. US ARMY PERSONNEL TRUCK - DAY

SOLDIERS tossed about like ball bearings in the rollover.

EXT. STALLED US ARMY CONVOY - DAY

The technical truck swings around to stop behind the second personnel truck.

The GUNNER (30s) pivots its mounted Browning heavy machine gun at the back gate.

Armed rebels dismount to secure the rest of the convoy.

INT./EXT. US ARMY PERSONNEL TRUCK - DAY

Troops clamber over one another to get out.

Outside the wreck, orders are shouted in Tuareg and Arabic.

After the FIRST SOLDIER (20s) exiting the back is immediately shot and killed, the --

SECOND SOLDIER (20s) surrenders. Emerges empty hands first.

Holding an assault rifle on troops crawling out from the collapsed canvas, the renegade starts them marching toward the back of the second personnel truck.

All are carefully watched -- under heavy guard.

Felix. Last to find his way out, his helmet askew.

A hard shove sends him on his way alongside the next truck.

EXT. STALLED US ARMY CONVOY - DAY

At the rear gate, a REBEL (30s) with a handful of zip ties secures the hostages' hands behind their backs before making them kneel in a line of their comrades.

When his turn comes up, Felix suddenly grabs an unsecured camo net from a truck crate and spins in place while draping it over his own head.

The rebel throws his arms around the veiled captive. Wrestles with him. Only when Felix's pack and helmet fall from the netting does he realize the soldier has vanished and his own hands are bound with a zip tie.

Felix. Already crawling out from under the supply truck grille.

REBEL
(in Tuareg, subtitled)
We must chase him down!

The COMMANDER (40s) cuts the rebel free with a Bowie knife.

COMMANDER
Let the desert claim him.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY

Felix. Over a hundred yards away now. Sleeves rolled up. Furiously pumping his gloved fists as he runs for his life.

No one on his heels. His broad smile. An exhilarating escape.
He stops at a large, protective outcropping of rock.
Simultaneous gunshots crack out. A firing squad.
The relief drops from Felix's face.
He starts back toward the attack site.

EXT. US AIR FORCE UAV - 25,000 FEET - DAY

The Multispectral Targeting System (MTS) ball swivels under the fuselage of a Predator drone.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY

Felix. Running now. Reality fully setting in.

EXT. US AIR FORCE UAV - 25,000 FEET - DAY

In flight radio exchange between the PILOT (20s), OPERATOR (20s), and their humorless commanding officer, LIEUTENANT COLONEL WILLIAM STAFFORD (50s).

STAFFORD (V.O.)
We're too late. How many we got
left down there?

PILOT (V.O.)
Of our guys? Zero, sir.

QUICK FLASH - ATTACK SITE

ON UAV MONITOR FEED - Renegades commandeer the missile truck.

BACK TO PREDATOR

STAFFORD (V.O.)
They cannot gain control of that
ordinance, Airman. Paint the
target.

OPERATOR (V.O.)
Target lasered.

STAFFORD (V.O.)
Rifle when ready.

PILOT (V.O.)
 Master arm on, weapon's hot. Three,
 two, one. Rifle! Missiles off the
 rail. Time of flight, twelve
 seconds.

EXT. STALLED US ARMY CONVOY - DAY

Felix runs toward the site as two Hellfire missiles strike the convoy. The concussive one-two punch of explosions knock him onto his back.

Trying to sit up, he shields his face against heat from the burning wreckage.

Felix collects himself. Roams through the devastation in search of survivors.

All he finds around the crater are charred remains -- in particular, one whose hands are still bound by a zip tie.

A measure of survivor's guilt and his knowledge of their final moments hold Felix there, hypnotized to the sight.

EXT. US AIR FORCE BOMBING SITE - NIGHT

When rescue fails to arrive by dark -- the UAV bugged out after its initial damage assessment -- Felix sets out on foot with a few MREs and the only two intact canteens he can find.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

Felix salvages a black and white houndstooth shemagh from the ground near the site, wraps it around his face and neck.

He doesn't get far. Wind-swept sand conceals the road in both directions.

Broken comms. Useless cell phones. With no idea where he came from or was headed, Felix wanders.

Directionless. Exiled. Ashamed.

FLASHBACK MONTAGE - FELIX'S MEMORIES - VARIOUS

A) INT. OLD WORLD THEATER - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Felix onstage. Reeling back through his career in magic.

FELIX
 Every. Breathtaking. Moment.

B) A RUSH OF IMAGES - Encyclopedic maelstrom of escapes, tricks, and flourishes. Spiraling stopwatches, combinations, mirrors, trapdoors, techniques, and secrets.

FELIX (V.O.)
...my father died chasing a
dream...

-- Incessant study, practice, repetition, and rehearsal.

-- Back through the venues. From sold-out stadiums to packed theaters to simple street magic. Every moment a fight. Every show an enemy to be conquered and destroyed.

C) EXT. SEARS TOWER - NIGHT

Felix. Free solo downclimbing the building exterior during "Escape from Sears Tower" from mind-bending height.

D) INT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT

TEENAGE FELIX (17). Standing up on horseback, arms out.

Center ring. The HORSE canters around a four-sided curtain.

The curtain drops, revealing a materialized ELEPHANT to gasps, cheers, and applause from the AUDIENCE.

END MONTAGE

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY

Learning not to travel by day.

Vast, sweeping vistas. The punishing sun. Extreme thirst and dehydration. Hints of civilization become rock formations or fiendish mirages.

Hiding from the heat in the smallest dune shadows.

Walking again. Wearing down. Rationing water.

In his isolation, unintelligible whispers of old traumas echo from his youth, grow louder -- almost outside his head.

YOUNG FELIX (V.O.)
It's all her fault it was so
terrible. Maybe if Mom was more
supportive...

FELIX

No, those are his words. It was that bad because she always fought back.

A sandstorm blows in. Finding only partial shelter beside a boulder, Felix wraps and shields his face.

INT. THE BRONX - FLEMING HOUSEHOLD - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Kitchen dining table. On one side, MORRIS FLEMING (early 40s). Irritable. Ever-weary. A decade at war with his professional failures.

On the other, his wife, PETRA (late 30s). Hungarian. A handsome woman with a plain, hardened face. Zero smile lines.

YOUNG FELIX (12) sits in the crossfire staring at his plate.

MORRIS

I'm not under enough pressure with the theater? I have to come home to it, too?

PETRA

I don't care of this. You should have more reliable job, better job. Always.

MORRIS

Cute. Well, that's just the way it is. They won't give me an advance on the show unless I do a private one for the donors first.

PETRA

Then this is just what you'll do.

MORRIS

(slams fist on table)
No, goddammit!

Dishes and silverware jump. Young Felix flinches. Not Petra.

MORRIS

How many times do I have to tell you? I don't have all the problems worked out yet.

PETRA

What you are talking about? You sold tickets for show you can't perform?

Morris. White-knuckled fists over his place setting.

MORRIS

Not me, them!

PETRA

(rises)

What difference is this?

(grabs bills from counter)

Look, here. Look this. Second notice. Fourth notice. Final notice, final notice, final notice!

MORRIS

I'll get the money in time. But not before the escape is ready. Not before it's safe.

PETRA

You are fool. We have never money. Is amazing we have heat still, lights on. Next month, we are sleeping in a street.

MORRIS

I said I'll get it. One show will fix everything.

PETRA

(shaking bills)

Like magic? You can't make these disappear!

Morris flings his entire place setting away, sends it crashing against the wall.

Young Felix tries to leave.

MORRIS

(rising)

Sit down, boy!

(to Petra)

Clean that up.

PETRA

Or what? You beat me? More?

Morris backhand slaps her. Hard. Pins her against the wall with his hand around her throat. Blood in her mouth.

PETRA

(smirking)

Hit me all you want. We are still poor. And you are still fool.

He does.

She breaks an empty bottle against his temple.

He staggers briefly away then goes back for more.

Smashing dishes. Breaking glass.

Young Felix protects his face.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY (PRESENT)

The sand-whipping winds subside. Felix lowers his arms.

He shakes sand from the shemagh, rewraps it, and finally presses on -- searching for any protection from the elements.

EXT. ROCKY OVERHANG - NIGHT

Sparse kindling and bits of trash in a small pile.

Felix sets it alight with a reflexive magical flourish.

Providing only menial relief from the frigid air, the firelight dances in his exhausted eyes.

Another memory burns there...

EXT. MANHATTAN - CONSTRUCTION SITE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

An ASSISTANT (20s) lights a rope connected to a crane.

Already attempting to escape the straitjacket, his father is quickly raised to a height of forty-two feet, wriggling upside-down in the spotlight, like bait.

A crowd of SPECTATORS surround the wealthy DONORS.

Young Felix and his mother stand among them. They appear unfazed seeing the fire engulf Morris the Magnificent's fuel-soaked legs while spectators gasp in fear.

When a full minute drops off the clock, however, Young Felix looks to his mother.

The rope suddenly breaks before Morris can free his arms to grab the fire extinguisher or safety rope dangling beside him.

The fall nearly kills Morris. Flames, high from the rapid downward rush, dwindle and reduce.

EXT. TÉNÉRE DESERT - NIGHT (PRESENT)

A cold night wind finally snuffs out his dying fire.

INT. MANHATTAN - HOSPITAL LOBBY - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Her callous exterior shattered, a hysterical Petra pleads with the DOCTOR delivering their tragic news while angry Young Felix pulls her away.

EXT. TÉNÉRE DESERT - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Another night. Another fire willed into existence with flash paper and the covert thumb tip igniter he's never without.

EXT. THE BRONX - VAULT HILL CEMETERY - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A coffin lowers for burial. No one in attendance but Young Felix and his mother because there will be no escape.

EXT. TÉNÉRE DESERT - NIGHT (PRESENT)

A fireball from his playful hands meets the modest tinder.

INT. THE BRONX - HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Felix takes a full tray to the lady CASHIER (70). Gives his name for the free lunch program in lieu of cash or card.

Eating alone at a large table, Young Felix sneaks food into his pockets and backpack when he believes no one is watching.

STUDENTS notice and snicker.

EXT. MANHATTAN - ALLEYWAY - DAY

Garbage everywhere. He hands the items -- an apple, a sandwich half, extra packs of saltines -- to his hungry mother, who devours them as Young Felix, distraught, sits down beside her.

EXT. TÉNÉRE DESERT - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Endless wandering. No more flash paper fires courtesy of his thumb tip igniter. Felix unravels some plastic from his fatigues. Only a couple bites of the last MRE remain.

EXT. THE BRONX - CLASON POINT PARK - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Petra Fleming, starkly malnourished, waits for her son down by the water.

Young Felix arrives with a sack lunch. He pulls it back when she reaches for it.

YOUNG FELIX

Pay attention. Cuz you're never gonna hear me say this after today: I hate you. And I'm not just saying that. I really, really mean it. I hate you and I wish you weren't my mother.

PETRA

Felix, baby --

YOUNG FELIX

Shut up! Two years, Mom? Two fucking years we've been out here? I've had it with this shit. I'm out. And I never wanna see you again.

PETRA

You are leaving me? But -- we are all we have. Where will you go? What will you do?

YOUNG FELIX

Easy. I'm gonna be the magician Dad never was. The best in the world, mark my words. In fact, I've already been practicing. Watch this.

(brandishes paper bag)

Now you see it...

(throws bag into East River)

Now you don't!

He turns his back, walks off, and keeps his promise.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY (PRESENT)

Desperate now. Back to daytime travel. Removing his shirt, Felix encounters the name badge stitched onto it: FLEMING

Felix rips the tag off and discards it, then ties the shirt around his waist and presses on under the blazing sun.

The desert exposure has deteriorated his extensive physical and mental training considerably.

He continues dropping any dead weight: wallet, excess gear, the long-empty canteen, etc. as --

Spiraling out reinforces the true gravity of his situation.

EXT. DESERT BASIN - DAY

Still marching. A zombie's walk. His ragged lips. Soaked t-shirt clinging to sun-scorched skin.

Dizzy. Starving. Extreme dehydration. Beyond heat exhaustion, approaching heat stroke. Collapse is imminent. Then --

A lone figure on the horizon. Closer. A WOMAN. Impossible.

A long, white garment flows around her, from her, fluttering in a gentle breeze. Is she beckoning to him?

Felix barely has the capacity to process the enigma.

He passes out before he hits the ground.

BLACK.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - DAY

On his feet again. Walking again. But not on his own -- the woman assists him with his arm over her shoulders.

They're somewhere else now. A blue ripple wavers on the horizon.

Felix tries to speak despite an apparent mouthful of marbles.

The angelic woman silences him. CHANTELLE (late 20s).
Stunningly beautiful. Wildly out of place. A sophisticated, multi-lingual American tongue.

Under her direction, they suddenly drop to the ground.

Chantelle. Over him. Looks away. Then back.

FELIX
You're...fired...

CHANTELLE
You're delirious. Let's go.

Before she can raise him up, rapid gunfire strikes all around them. Sand rising in tiny geysers. She's gone, scared off.

Felix lies transfixed on the blue ripple.

Two voices approach. They belong to brash Beltway transplant TOR (mid-20s) and easygoing Aussie drifter CLEGG (mid-20s) -- juvenile guards patrolling the area.

Discounting their desert attire, they're out of place as well.

TOR

Told you it wasn't a mirage.

CLEGG

I really didn't think she'd still be out here.

TOR

Doesn't matter now -- shit! Where'd she go?

CLEGG

Musta ran off.

TOR

Then let's go get her!

CLEGG

(indifferent)

Meh.

TOR

(over Felix)

What about him?

CLEGG

He's cactus fuctus, mate.

TOR

Cactus fuctus?

CLEGG

He's dead.

The cadaver groans.

TOR

Nope -- he's alive. All thanks to your crack marksmanship, no doubt. God, you even shoot lazy.

CLEGG

I did my bloody best.

TOR

You said it was a mirage. Keep that gun on him.

CLEGG

He's not from the mines anyway. He looks like U-S military.

TOR

All the way out here? Not possible. Is he armed?

CLEGG

(kicks him over)

No. How long you think he's been on walkabout?

TOR

Good grief. A week, at least. Maybe two.

CLEGG

The bloke might as well have been roasting on a spit.

TOR

Any ID?

CLEGG

(searches him)

No dog tags, no wallet.

TOR

Check his shirt. It usually says.

CLEGG

It's ripped out.

(to Felix)

Oi, mate! You got a name?

FELIX

(barely coherent)

I -- don't remem-ahh...

CLEGG

Amnesia?

TOR

Who the hell knows. Let's get him on his feet.

CLEGG

Whatever for?

TOR
To bring him back, dumbass.

CLEGG
But the sultan's instructions --

TOR
These are his instructions. The woman's gone and this guy's not from the mines, so we have to bring him back with us.

CLEGG
Let's just shoot him, yeah?

TOR
And what, drag his dead ass the whole way?

CLEGG
No, we shoot him and piss off like it never happened.

TOR
You'll find a way to miss. Grab his other arm.

CLEGG
(begrudgingly)
This is bullshit. Pure bullshit.

They haul him up -- supporting him like a drunken friend.

TOR
What'll we call him?

CLEGG
How about Ishmael?

TOR
(chuckles)
Yeah! Ishmael, the desert wanderer. That's too perfect. From the Bible or the Quran?

CLEGG
From Moby Dick, mate.

TOR
Your mom likes Moby Dick.

CLEGG
Get stuffed.

TOR
Lead the way.

The blue ripple doesn't vanish like the other mirages, only stabilizes as they draw near.

Newly dubbed Ishmael loses consciousness once more.

BLACK.

INT. ZERZURA OASIS - INFIRMARY - DAY

Ishmael jolts awake. A heart monitor beeps rapidly.
Intravenous lines in his arms. A feeding tube in his nose.

Pillows prop his head, but secure restraints on his wrists and ankles prevent him from sitting up.

He easily, expertly slips one cuff, then is out of everything else and on his feet in a flash.

His surroundings don't quite match those of a hospital.
Hospice or an exclusive rehab, perhaps.

Either way, no one is around to ask.

No cameras. Two doorways. One is heavy, no handle on his side. The other is a sliding glass door leading outside.

Ishmael opts for the latter. Grabs a doctor's rolling stool.

He almost sends it crashing through the glass but stops himself at the last moment and sets it down.

The door slides open easily.

EXT. PATIO - DAY

It's early morning glorious. Clean lines. Sun-gilded terraces.

The patio is one of many multi-tiered, ultra-modern verandas tastefully and seamlessly built out from the original cliff dwellings and mud-brick hamlets on its massif-protected side.

Pristine white fabric awnings. Date palms, olive and acacia trees. The carefully manicured vegetation and elaborate landscaping are interwoven with tiny bistro tables in unoccupied seating areas.

Throughout the seemingly deserted oasis, splashy waterfalls feed infinity pools stepping down to a lake at the base of the settlement.

Beyond its lush little islands and collar of green grasses the water ultimately fans out into the delta he saw prior to becoming target practice.

From this vantage point, he sees why the oasis is easy to miss -- shielded by high cliffs on its basin side and a dune sea on the other.

Two sparrows playing chase dart past.

After nearly a fortnight of ambling through Hell, Ishmael wastes no time. He strips down to his boxers and dives into the nearest pool -- a baptismal for his new identity.

Immersion. Salvation. Paradise.

QUICK FLASH - OLD WORLD THEATER

-- Felix underwater. Eyes squeezed shut. Trapped inside the giant bottle.

BACK TO ZERZURA

He floats on his back, oblivious as a band of ARMED GUARDS storm the veranda and line up along the water's edge.

They're clearly not Tuareg -- their uniforms and assault rifles pointed at Ishmael suggest soldier status. Or worse, formerly soldiers. Or worse, mercenaries.

All men are Arabs except Tor and Clegg. Ishmael recognizes them and waves.

They gesture for him to get out of the water immediately.

Ishmael complies but has to pull on his laundered clothes as they hustle him along, headed for ground level.

ISHMAEL (FELIX)

I'm glad you boys found me, by the way. How long have I been here?

TOR

Three days.

ISHMAEL

Also, where exactly is here?

CLEGG

Keep her moving, mate.

Discovering the oasis inhabited only magnifies the strangeness of its ghost town appearance -- like a tour of a luxurious resort hotel during a fire drill.

EXT. WATERFRONT TERRACE - DAY

Ishmael stoops to peer under the cloth awning above the attached dining chamber.

He's transfixed by a large table bedecked with an extravagant breakfast feast surrounding vibrant floral centerpieces.

Several more men emerge from the chamber, two of them lead BODYGUARDS in the detail and one LARGE GUARD.

All eyes on the man in the middle. Blinding teeth and matching ankle-length thawb. Metrosexual grooming as detailed as the grounds. A game show host's disposition. Oasis ruler SULTAN EMIR GHALIB (early 40s) is arrogant and spiteful, cocky and vain -- he's Ishmael amplified and dangerously untethered.

ISHMAEL
(regarding table)
Nice spread.

SULTAN
(dazzling smile on approach)
You like, eh? Don't worry, my friend, you weren't interrupting.
(claps his shoulder)
You must be Ishmael! Welcome to Zerzura.
(to guard)
Don't be rude -- welcome the American.

A bodyguard slugs Ishmael in the gut, but Ishmael is trained to take a punch.

ISHMAEL
Whoa, partner! That all ya got?

A translucent spit hood goes over Ishmael's head.

ISHMAEL
What the -- ?

Large Guard drives the butt-end of his assault rifle into Ishmael's solar plexus, putting him on his knees.

SULTAN
(false grace)
Tell me something, my brother: have you found your accommodations satisfactory?

ISHMAEL

(coughing)

Very much, thank you. Between this hood, the restraints, and these guys, I feel incredibly welcome.

Tor and Clegg grab his armpits, hoist him up.

They follow the sultan inside, past the dining chamber.

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

They proceed to a staircase and follow it down.

SULTAN

That is fantastic, my friend. It is the least I could do. You see, everywhere else in the outside world it is crawling with disease. This oasis is completely cut off from it, like a tiny island in the middle of the ocean. So when a stranger shows up out of nowhere, breaks quarantine, and goes for a swim in our drinking water, it becomes vital he is given the treatment he deserves.

ISHMAEL

Yeah well, you should have put up a sign. What about the woman who saved me. Where is she now?

SULTAN

(glares at Tor and Clegg)

I was not made aware of any woman, buddy.

(back to Ishmael)

But I do have questions yet unasked. For example, where precisely did you come from?

ISHMAEL

I'm afraid that's classified, buddy. Now about that spread upstairs...

INT. DUNGEON - DAY

They proceed down a row of primitive, empty cells.

SULTAN

(laughs)

Ishmael! You are -- how do you call it -- a "piece of work." You bathe in our water supply. You insult my superior hospitality. And now the cuisine is not to your liking? But you have not yet tried the formula we make with plantains.

ISHMAEL

I'm heartbroken.

SULTAN

It is no problem, amigo. It is all good. We will forget your feeding tube and bring you a nice cold bowl of plantain slop to enjoy.

The sultan opens the cell door opposite the dungeon's only other prisoner, AZAZEL (ăz-uh-zel), (early 60s). A burly Middle Eastern man with a wise, grandfatherly disposition. He lies still, silent, hidden under tattered black robes.

SULTAN

Azazel! We have brought you some company, a neighbor.

(to Ishmael)

You will like Azazel. He has been here since the beginning. Just do not rush your friendship -- there will be more than enough years to become sick of him. If you don't make him sick first, of course.

They strip off his hood, shove him inside, and slam the iron bar door closed -- a slab and bucket his new accommodations.

ISHMAEL

Hey, I don't buy that quarantine bullshit for one second -- I was in the U-S during coronavirus, okay? You're not even protecting yourself from the guys who found me.

SULTAN

Let me worry about that, my homie. In the meantime, perhaps you'll reconsider what I have asked you.

The sultan and his cohorts leave the same way they arrived.

Guards push Tor and Clegg to the front of the procession.

INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Once out of earshot from the dungeon, the sultan's formerly jovial demeanor vanishes.

SULTAN

Why did you say nothing of Chantelle?

CLEGG

It wasn't like that, chief -- we only thought we saw the lady from a distance.

TOR

Yeah, until he said something, we weren't even sure she was really there.

SULTAN

My recommendation is that you go back out and find her immediately. Find her, find her, find her!

TOR

It's a big desert, sir.

SULTAN

(menace)

If you cannot guarantee her fate as sacrifice you should think carefully on whether returning to Zerzura is most wise.

INT. WATERFRONT DINING CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

The sultan and his contingent file inside but stop abruptly.

Unbelievably, Ishmael is in the sultan's seat at the head of the table, heartily chowing down.

SULTAN

Mr. Ishmael? How -- why are you not in your cell?

ISHMAEL

(winks)

It wasn't a part of this complete breakfast.

SULTAN

I dislike your aversion to staying put: first your bed, then your new quarters.

ISHMAEL

Also, you didn't answer my question with the truth.

A guard hands the sultan a scimitar.

SULTAN

And you didn't answer mine at all! Where. In fuck. Did you come from?

ISHMAEL

(between bites)

Downstairs.

The sultan slams the blade into the table and leaves it stuck there, white tablecloth caught in the shallow gash.

SULTAN

Filthy infidel! Do not test my patience.

ISHMAEL

Aww. And here I thought we were friends.

SULTAN

Yet you shame me in my own home!

ISHMAEL

So...no plantain slop then?

SULTAN

You are trespassing, Mr. Ishmael. And your insolence blinds you from your current good fortune. Perhaps a more creative way to obtain my answer must be found.

ISHMAEL

Or we could make a deal: tell me how to find the woman and I'll tell you what you want to know.

SULTAN

You think you are in a position to bargain with me?

ISHMAEL

Between my exceptional negotiating skills and that used car salesman smile of yours? Definitely.

SULTAN

Unfortunately, homeboy, I drive a much harder bargain than you may know.

The bodyguard draws his pistol.

The act doesn't interrupt Ishmael's consumption -- below the table, a fist-sized rock is ready in his free hand.

ISHMAEL

Look, why can't you just tell me where she is?

SULTAN

Because she isn't here any longer.

ISHMAEL

And why would that be?

SULTAN

Because she was trespassing.

ISHMAEL

And now?

SULTAN

Now she is banished.

ISHMAEL

Not a plantain slop connoisseur, I'm guessing.

SULTAN

(restrained)

Allow me to set your mind at ease, pal. Even if you went looking for her out in the desert, she is undoubtedly dead. And if not, I have sent men to make certain of it.

ISHMAEL

Then I better not waste any more time.

Faster than the guard can squeeze the trigger, Ishmael rises and whips the rock at his face -- splitting his sunglasses in half and fracturing his skull.

Just as the sultan goes for the scimitar, Ishmael yanks the white tablecloth, pulling the sword free.

Dishes, chalices, and food crash to the floor as Ishmael pulls handfuls of cloth toward him, dragging the sword within reach while everyone reacts.

He grabs it as guards rush him from the other side of the table and terrace, then dashes toward the courtyard side of the chamber.

Without breaking stride, he severs a rope anchored to a wall cleat securing the awning in place.

The entire awning collapses on the sultan and his guards, distracting them long enough to escape into the oasis.

EXT. ZERZURA OASIS - DAY

Bounding down balconies, patios, and pony walls parkour style leads him to a ground level stable where several HORSES and CAMELS enjoy a peaceful brunch.

As the sultan's guards close in, Ishmael steals a horse and races away through a region dedicated to farming.

Cranking his neck to confirm the guards are safely behind, he becomes enthralled by the view of Zerzura from this side -- a hidden rain oasis between two dizzying, mountainous spires.

From the almost futuristic architecture built into the north spire to the undeveloped southern spire protecting it from a dune sea, Zerzura is vast and magnificent beyond imagination -- a veritable city in the desert. But where is everyone?

Past the greenhouses, compact fields, and rows upon rows of solar panels, the oasis becomes wild with growth. Green leaves and fronds slap his face as the horse slows to navigate the overgrown path.

EXT. ZERZURA JUNGLE - DAY

A gold tag on the saddle reads: "DOROTHY"

ISHMAEL

That's your name? Dorothy? Thanks for the quick out, girl. By the way, this is definitely not Kansas and the Wizard is a Category Five asshole.

Ishmael dismounts. Guides her through the dense vegetation using the scimitar like a machete.

ISHMAEL

At least we lost the flying
monkeys.

(listening)

I think.

(Dorothy chuffs)

You hear it, too?

An insectile buzz drones closer. Grows louder. Until it drowns out the bird calls.

A four-wheel ATV suddenly bursts through the cover, mowing down the underbrush.

The RIDER (20s), masked, levels a submachine gun at Ishmael, who throws his leg over the saddle and gets in a monkey crouch behind Dorothy's neck and withers as she forges ahead.

Moments later, they rocket from the treeline as if ejected.

EXT. TÉNÉRE DESERT - DAY

Two ATVs hot on his tail now -- a third and fourth close in from the left and right flanks, practically in formation.

In the b.g., the spires stand like gargantuan sentinels resisting the harsh desert.

Just as the southern spire leaves his periphery, Ishmael notices a small, white flash high in the cliff-face.

He tucks the scimitar into Dorothy's saddle.

Unprotected now, gunfire steers them further from the oasis.

The flanking ATVs pull alongside Dorothy and Ishmael.

His eyes dart right: a canyon of unknown depth yawns wide -- unpredictable. To the left: open desert -- a sitting duck.

When the left-flanking ATV takes aim, Ishmael opts for a steep path descending into the canyon by jerking the reins back and to the right -- causing the gunman to shoot the guard riding the right-flanking ATV instead of the horse.

The trailing ATVs slow to avoid collision, then stop at the trailhead, fear-stricken by the deadly descent.

A third ATV joins, pressuring them into the --

EXT. DESERT CANYON - DAY

Although Dorothy can't maintain the same pace on the downward grade, she fares better than the ATVs.

Too wide for the narrow trail, the first trailing ATV skids off -- takes its rider with it, plummeting into the depths.

The second and third riders adjust, shifting their weight left so the tires maintain contact while the right tires spin free over the chasm until the trail widens enough again.

Once stabilized, they fire on the horse and rider.

Bullets drone past, but rough terrain and Dorothy's dust clouds screen their shots despite their masks and goggles.

The original left-flanking ATV tracking them from the rim finds an alternate trail and arrives ahead of the horse.

Attempting to box them in or force Dorothy over the side, the rider hits the brakes.

Spooked, she leaps but cannot remotely clear the ATV or its rider and instead demolishes them under her trampling hooves.

ISHMAEL
(pleasantly surprised)
Atta girl.

EXT. CANYON RIVERBED - DAY

They reach the dry, ancient riverbed unable to shake the last two ATVs, who now have clear shots. Bullets strike the sheer cliff-face -- peppering them with rock dust and shrapnel.

Ishmael and Dorothy disappear around a turn -- a hard left into a confluence -- for a split second.

But when the ATVs take the same turn, they find Dorothy, riderless, trotting to stop and drink from a small pool fed by a thin waterfall cascading down a solid rock wall.

The ATVs roll in, blocking the only way in or out of the inlet without climbing straight up.

The riders inspect the area. No one submerged in the pool, no passage behind the trickling water.

Ishmael has instantaneously and inconceivably vanished.

RIDER #1
 (in Arabic, subtitled)
*He must never have left the main
 channel. We'll search for him
 there.*

RIDER #2
And her?

RIDER #1
*She knows the way. She will return
 on her own for supper.*

RIDER #2
I meant the woman.

RIDER #1
*If we fail, we'll join the others
 already hunting her. Hurry!*

They leave unaware that Ishmael lies within inches of their tires -- having jumped off backwards and buried himself in a blind spot created by the confluence.

Once the ATVs sound far enough away, Ishmael rises from the sand and dusts off.

He strokes Dorothy's muzzle in gratitude but peeks back at the main channel before mounting up.

The gathering search party blocks his only way out.

Roughly forty feet up the cliff-face, a darker patch of rock behind the waterfall veil catches his eye.

The expert free solo climber ascends for a closer look.

Despite slippery handholds, Ishmael moves under the water. Discovers the dark patch is actually an opening.

Ishmael hauls himself up and inside.

INT. ACCESS TUNNEL - DAY

He drops down into a corridor from the opening -- obviously cut for ventilation. But from where?

A short distance one way leads to a dead end and a large number of wooden crates stacked outside of a room accessed by a thumbprint scanner.

He opens a crate. It's full of surplus dynamite for rock blasting and a pre-rigged spool of detonating cord.

Ishmael turns to the door. Absently placing his trick thumb on the scanner, he accidentally triggers the igniter.

The scanner melts, sparks, shorts out -- disengages the lock.

ISHMAEL
(amused)
Abra Cadabra.

INT. ARMORY - DAY

Motion-activated lights flicker on. Racks of assault rifles, submachine guns, pistols, and high-caliber firearms -- enough munitions to supply a small army surround him.

ISHMAEL
Holy smokes. Well, at least he
won't be showing off his mighty
penis.

Ishmael examines a loaded handgun with bored disinterest until -- what's that?

Distant voices. Man-made noise. He abandons the gun, leaves.

INT. ACCESS TUNNEL - DAY

Ishmael follows the din through several corridors to the main cavern opening at the top of a staircase.

Instead of taking it to the lower level, however, he steps onto the highest platform of a nearby scaffolding.

INT. MAIN CAVERN - DAY

From here he discovers the missing CITIZENRY -- hundreds of destitute people enslaved to a crude mining operation.

Below, a MINE GUARD (30s) oversees a dozen WORKERS lined up for a head count.

Ishmael scans the entire semi-coordinated workforce. There's only one guard?

A couple of workers are missing or out of line. One visibly trembles on his knees -- ENZO AMANTE (55).

Ishmael leaps across several lighting maintenance catwalks for a better bat's-eye view.

ENZO

(heavy Italian accent)

Please-a, signore, I beg of you. My wife -- she is a-sick. She cannot get up.

(blubbering)

Signore, it's not her fault -- don't blame her. Please help, please.

The guard steps into the mineworkers' sleeping quarters with a gracious Enzo in tow.

Two gunshots ring out. No one stops working. The guard returns alone, points his gun at the back of the next worker's head.

ISHMAEL

DON'T!

Startled, the guard looks up. Discovers Ishmael. Fires at him.

Ishmael races back. Jumps onto the scaffolding as booming shots ricochet and strike nearby -- too close.

The guard radios Ishmael's location.

INT. ACCESS TUNNELS - DAY

Ishmael, running. Lost in the corridors. GUARDS close in and tackle him before he can locate the ventilation opening.

GUARD

(in Arabic, subtitled)

Hold him down so he can't escape!

They rough him up securing him, then drag him back to the --

INT. DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

And lock him in his cell as the sultan returns.

SULTAN

Ishmael! Welcome back, dawg! Tell me, has our tourist been enjoying the sights?

ISHMAEL

Such as the hundreds of underground slaves who face execution if they don't work?

SULTAN

Or perhaps those who lost their
lives in the canyon thanks to you.

ISHMAEL

Maybe if they weren't trying to
kill me...

SULTAN

Indeed, your only care is for
yourself, Ishmael. I envy your
detachment from responsibility.

ISHMAEL

(measured)

You don't know a damn thing about
me or what I'm responsible for.

SULTAN

Precisely, mon frere.

(exploding)

Because you won't tell me where you
fucking came from!

(calmer)

You are U-S military -- the Army,
no? This is like finding a
cockroach, you see. It means
infestation. Or that infestation is
coming. And therefore precautions
must be taken.

Fifteen feet above him, guards seal off Ishmael's window from
outside.

ISHMAEL

First contamination, now
infestation -- I'm turning this
place into a real shithole. Good
thing you deduced my escape route.

QUICK FLASHES - DUNGEON ESCAPE

-- Ishmael executes a four-step corner wall run to reach a
minute flaw in the surface, then pulls himself up to the
window ledge and squeezes through the two bars.

-- He scales the exterior back to the terrace, returning to
the waterfront dining chamber ahead of the sultan's detail.

BACK TO DUNGEON

SULTAN

Don't be ridiculous, cousin. Azazel wouldn't tell us so we beat it out of him.

Azazel. On the floor. Cowers in a corner.

SULTAN

Much less impressive once you know the secret, is it not?

ISHMAEL

It's not the only trick I have up my sleeve.

SULTAN

You should save them for your own interrogation, toughguy.

ISHMAEL

Like Azazel's?

SULTAN

No, no. Far worse.

ISHMAEL

Well, what are we waiting for?

SULTAN

Unfortunately, there are more pressing matters to which I must attend. But here is some good news, partner: every man who lost a friend today will have a chance to question you upon my return.

ISHMAEL

I'll be long gone by then.

SULTAN

Yes -- because if you break out of your cell, the guard posted at the only exit will shoot you dead. Either way, I am happy. See you soon, Ishmael. In the meantime, hang ten, dude.

ISHMAEL

(grabs own crotch)

Oh, don't worry. I do.

As soon as the sultan and his contingent depart, Ishmael removes an altered dog tag from inside his boot.

He bends a metal edge back from the tag then uses it to let himself out.

The blocked off window leaves the only two prisoners in near darkness. Azazel lies still.

ISHMAEL
(approaches his cell)
Hey. Hey, fella. You okay? Speak
any English?

The black heap of robes stirs. He's alive.

ISHMAEL
Look. I -- I didn't mean for them
to, uh, y'know, do what they did to
you. It's like, it was wrong, so,
and, that it happened because of
me, I regret that. Or -- what I
mean is -- I'm...I'm sorry.

The prisoner drags himself onto his slab.

AZAZEL
(pained)
You sound like a man offering the
first apology of his life.

ISHMAEL
Perhaps it is.

AZAZEL
Then I am most honored to accept.

ISHMAEL
(grins)
So what are you in for?

AZAZEL
I had the audacity to step forward
when my community needed a leader.

ISHMAEL
That doesn't sound like a crime.

Azazel steps into the low light -- his face terribly battered.

AZAZEL
Then you, dear boy, have not been
here long enough.

ISHMAEL
How long have you been here?

AZAZEL

I first arrived in Zerzura as a child, when it was much different than it is today. But it was not my birthplace.

EXT. ALGERIAN VILLAGE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

VILLAGERS struggle to escape RAIDERS decimating the area.

AZAZEL (V.O.)

The oasis became our sanctuary after a warlord torched our village.

(pause)

My father died trying to save us.

A BOY'S (5) FATHER (30s) braces the door raiders attempt to kick in as a Molotov cocktail explodes in the window frame.

FATHER

(in Arabic, subtitled)

Run away! As fast as you can! Go!

His FAMILY retreats through the back of the home without him.

EXT. TÉNÉRÉ DESERT - NIGHT

A partially motorized caravan looks back at a distant orange glow on the horizon.

AZAZEL (V.O.)

My mother and I were among a group of refugees who fled across the Ténéré. Many did not survive. And were it not for the chance discovery of this beautiful hidden oasis, we would have undoubtedly shared their fate.

EXT. UNDEVELOPED OASIS - DAY

The blue and green desert gem becomes their new home.

AZAZEL (V.O.)

Decades later, our peaceful farming community endured a similar incursion by Sultan Ghalib.

ISHMAEL (V.O.)

Sultan?

AZAZEL (V.O.)
 Our gracious host and captor. Until
 his country's military was
 disbanded by occupying forces, he
 led a small battalion of loyal
 soldiers who became his guards.

EXT. ZERZURA GARDENS - DAY

Startled birds take flight. YOUNGER AZAZEL (mid-40s), looks
 up from his planting, alarmed.

Angry, roaring truck engines grind ever closer.

They crash through the Gates of Zerzura and take prisoners.

AZAZEL (V.O.)
 The sultan demanded to know who was
 in charge. Of course, there was no
 such person. Everyone looked to me
 because I was the oldest, had lived
 here the longest.

Younger Azazel raises his hand.

AZAZEL (V.O.)
 I offered to cooperate. But Ghalib
 was not interested in cooperation.
 He was interested in --

ISHMAEL (V.O.)
 Mining?

AZAZEL (V.O.)
 -- gold mining.

EXT. CAVE ENTRANCE - DAY

Zerzurans march toward the caves under construction.

AZAZEL (V.O.)
 We always knew it was beneath the
 mountains -- that the vein
 possessed vast fortunes. And once
 Ghalib found out, he sent everyone
 enslaved in the oasis to build the
 mines.

A fleet of helicopters hover between the spires.

AZAZEL (V.O.)

Soon after, he hired a developer to modernize Zerzura, having the building materials air-lifted in. Once complete, he destroyed every truck and helicopter, isolating us from the world.

Congregated vehicles explode in the desert basin.

INT. DUNGEON - DAY (PRESENT)

Ishmael drops his head.

ISHMAEL

So I guess walking back to civilization is out of the question...

AZAZEL

As is walking here. How --?

ISHMAEL

I had some help for part of the journey.

AZAZEL

This help -- can you count on it now?

ISHMAEL

(crestfallen)

Unfortunately, I cannot. Is there no other way?

Azazel shakes his head.

ISHMAEL

What if I steal a camel?

AZAZEL

Do you have any idea how far we are from the nearest trade route? The sahara would roast you both alive before you were remotely close.

ISHMAEL

You're telling me there's no way out? There's always a way out.

AZAZEL

My friend, you have found the one place you can never escape.

ISHMAEL
 (unlocking Azazel's cell)
 The woman. We'll find her and
 figure something out together.

The prisoner grabs the bars, pulls his door shut.

He turns and lowers his robe, revealing asymmetrical scars
 across his back.

AZAZEL
 This is where I belong. Once a
 year, he beats me in front of
 everyone to remind them he will
 abide no champions of the people.
 (returns)
 Besides, they will shoot me on
 sight if I am seen in the oasis.

ISHMAEL
 I'm putting a serious end to this
 clown, mark my words. And when I
 do, I'll be back to set you free.

Ishmael reaches his arm through the bars to shake.

ISHMAEL
 That's a promise. From someone who
 also lost his father at a young age.

Azazel's hand passes his, grabs the gun hand of the DUNGEON
 GUARD (20s) standing behind Ishmael, and pulls -- smacking his
 head against the iron hard enough to knock him unconscious.

ISHMAEL
 (exhales, relieved)
 My word. That could have been
 problematic. Thank you.

Azazel checks the safety and hands the weapon to Ishmael, who
 slips it back into the guard's holster.

AZAZEL
 You are not taking that?

ISHMAEL
 Nah. He might want to use it on
 himself when he wakes up and
 realizes he has to tell the sultan
 I broke out.

AZAZEL

Young man. You have been out of
your cell more today than I have in
the past fifteen years.

Azazel extends his hand through the bars.

AZAZEL

For our fathers.

ISHMAEL

(arm-wrestle handshake)

For our fathers.

Ishmael gets the guard standing. Assists him toward the exit
muttering low, unintelligible tones in his ear.

There, he returns the guard to his chair looking stupid, dazed.

Ishmael snaps his fingers before his face and vanishes.

The guard is suddenly alert, vigilant, as though nothing more
than his mysterious screaming headache has developed.

EXT. ZERZURA OASIS - DAY

At ground level he passes the gargantuan Gates of Zerzura --
as rebuilt by the sultan -- to the stables once more.

The camels are gone, but Dorothy has returned to her trough.

ISHMAEL

Hey, girl!

She recognizes him and shies away -- won't let him near.

ISHMAEL

Okay, okay. Yes, the canyon was a
bit much, I know. Maybe next time
then.

Instead, he fires up an ATV and rides through the botanical
gardens and orchards until he reaches the oasis wilds.

EXT. ZERZURA JUNGLE - DAY

Halfway in, Ishmael encounters an ebullient Japanese man in a
three-piece suit checking his cell phone near a stream --
HOSHI YAMAMOTO (late 40s).

HOSHI

Hello! Hi, hello! Can you please help me?

ISHMAEL

Man, are you ever lost...

HOSHI

Hai -- yes! Lost! My phone -- no service.

(consults translation software)

Can you please tell me where I am supposed to go?

ISHMAEL

See the direction I just came from? Don't go that way.

Ishmael speeds off without looking back.

ISHMAEL

(to self)

What's with this place?

Nearing the sheer cliffs of the southern spire, the jungle canopy thins to reveal a sky dotted with dozens of white parachutes, each with a fat red stripe like a bullseye.

ISHMAEL

Also, what in the name of holy fuckin' fuckity-fuck's with this place?

EXT. SOUTH SPIRE - DAY

Ishmael dismounts the ATV, rubs his hands together rapidly and ascends the wall toward the fleck of white he saw earlier -- five times higher than his canyon waterfall climb.

Too high to notice him, the parachuters drift toward Zerzura.

Nearly two hundred feet up, he reaches for a handhold when a SNAKE sunning itself on a ledge strikes at him.

He reflexively jumps back into heart-stopping freefall. An instant later, his hands find purchase and halt his descent.

Cutting the viper a wide berth, he finds an upper ledge. Pulls himself up and sits down.

Suddenly, a nylon rope around his throat drags him backwards into a small cave.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The ligature loosens. Slightly.

CHANTELLE

Oh, it's you. Glad I didn't just
kick you over the edge.

ISHMAEL

(despite chokehold)
As am I.

CHANTELLE

And no rope? Are you crazy?

ISHMAEL

(struggling)
I'm...Ishmael. I came to thank you.

She removes the climbing rope ligature. They sit up.

ISHMAEL

(coughs)
For saving me in the desert. So
thank you --

CHANTELLE

Chantelle.

ISHMAEL

-- Chantelle. I owe you big time.

CHANTELLE

Don't thank me. I had my own
reasons.

ISHMAEL

Such as?

CHANTELLE

What happened when they took you to
the oasis? What were you told?

ISHMAEL

The sultan put me in quarantine to
protect them from outside infection.

CHANTELLE

That's just what he wanted you to
think. They were never in danger
from you.

ISHMAEL

For the most part. Wait, how would you know?

CHANTELLE

Because I used to work for him -- finding people to send here from around the world. People seeking an escape.

ISHMAEL

Then why does he want you dead?

CHANTELLE

Everyone wants me dead. How did you get away? Were you followed?

Suddenly alarmed, she checks the wall Ishmael climbed. No one.

Then the passage at the rear of the cave -- voices.

CHANTELLE

You were followed.

ISHMAEL

Nonsense -- they've been out looking for you. Can we get down through there?

CHANTELLE

Yes, but it's too late. We're already boxed in.

ISHMAEL

(gestures toward ledge)
We'll take the express route then.

CHANTELLE

I'm not great with heights.

ISHMAEL

How not great?

CHANTELLE

I'd rather face their guns.

ISHMAEL

Great.

INT. INTERSECTING TUNNELS - DAY

When the GUARDS split up only one takes the direct route.

He finds the cave entrance. Assault rifle aimed and ready.

INT. CAVE - DAY

The woman stands alone at the ledge.

The guard approaches, barking orders in Arabic.

Supported between two stalactites, Ishmael drops down on him.

The gun goes off as it's knocked loose.

EXT. SOUTH SPIRE - DAY

The frantic struggle quickly reaches the ledge and the guard falls away screaming, his foot ensnared in the rope.

Chantelle pulls unbalanced Ishmael back by his shirt, saving him once more.

Ishmael tightens the knots in the makeshift harness he tied around his hips before hiding from the guard.

The heap of rope on the cave floor rapidly diminishes.

ISHMAEL

Ready?

CHANTELLE

Not at all. Nope. I changed my mind.

ISHMAEL

Oh, okay. So we'll just give up then.

CHANTELLE

That's not a --

He grabs her and jumps!

CHANTELLE

-- bad idea!

She locks onto him, eyes squeezed shut as they fall.

The screaming guard, acting as a counterweight, burns past them on his way back up.

They stop ten feet from the ground when he smacks the ledge.

The guard pulls himself up, but their combined weight drags him across the cave floor toward the stalagmite pivot while they're let down the rest of the way.

INT. CAVE - DAY

Alerted to the gunfire, other guards find the room.

While their comrade rejoices in his spared life, they fire down from the ledge at the escapees.

EXT. ZERZURA JUNGLE - DAY

Gunshots thud nearby. Shredded vegetation rains down on them.

Ishmael. Ties the rope to the ATV's cargo rack and hops on.

A step ahead, Chantelle drops it in gear and takes off.

EXT. SOUTH SPIRE - DAY

The slack rope pulls taut. Yanks the would-be assassin back over the ledge, taking out his fellow attackers on the way.

Most fall from the potentially lethal height.

EXT. ZERZURA JUNGLE - DAY

Chantelle slows the ATV. Maneuvers through dense underbrush.

ISHMAEL

That's two I owe ya.

CHANTELLE

Just don't ever make me do that again.

Ishmael. Nursing his arm.

ISHMAEL

I'm not the one who climbed all the way up there in the first place. Thanks to you, I checked my shoulder pretty good against the rock-face on that first drop.

CHANTELLE

Poor baby. Perhaps your little wing would hurt less if only you'd stop blaming others.

ISHMAEL

Hey, where are you taking us,
anyway?

CHANTELLE

Back to Zerzura.

ISHMAEL

Why?

CHANTELLE

To undo what I've done.

ISHMAEL

I just got done telling someone not
to go there.

CHANTELLE

Yeah, well, the world doesn't
revolve around you.

She eschews an established path for more dangerous terrain
but navigates it easily.

Nearly bouncing off, Ishmael turns around -- hangs on to her.

ISHMAEL

(shouting over engine)

What's with all these skydivers?

She seems not to hear.

ISHMAEL

Why does the sultan keep sending
his men after you? And why are we
going back?

She abruptly stops the ATV. Turns and sits on the handlebars.

CHANTELLE

We don't have time for this. Where
are your friends?

ISHMAEL

My what?

CHANTELLE

Your friends. Don't you have any
friends?

ISHMAEL

Not following you.

CHANTELLE

You don't usually see just one soldier. I expected someone would've shown up looking for you by now.

ISHMAEL

They -- I...

CHANTELLE

Nevermind.

(points up)

Those parachutes? They're the new class of arrivals.

(points beyond treeline)

Now see that first level above the garden? The terrace? In one hour, the sultan will host a welcome reception for them.

ISHMAEL

Nice.

CHANTELLE

No, not nice -- appalling. He'll say their transit and new home must first be paid off by working in the mines. But that's just so they won't freak out about becoming his slaves. Any other questions?

ISHMAEL

A million.

CHANTELLE

Too bad. You'll figure it out as we go.

She spins back around, but the ATV won't start.

Ishmael jumps off, hauls in the old climbing rope.

CHANTELLE

Where's the key?

ISHMAEL

(winding rope)

Hm? Hang on -- I'm figuring it out as I go.

CHANTELLE

The key!

ISHMAEL
(hesitates)
Okay, what? Oh, right -- the key.
Check your ankle.

She finds the keyring threaded through a charm on her anklet.

CHANTELLE
(unhooks it)
How did you...ugh! Let's go!

Ishmael climbs on with an armload of rope.

ISHMAEL
It's not my fault -- I had to make
sure there wasn't a dead guy at the
end of this. Plus, it gave me an
idea.

EXT. NORTH SPIRE - DAY

Approaching the cliff-dwellings at the base of the northern
spire, Ishmael sees the mine entrance not far off -- an
ominous black hole drawing in the deepening twilight.

Beyond the mines, Chantelle pulls up to a walkway.

They dismount and access an entrance in the cliff-dwellings.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Chantelle leads Ishmael past multiple doors resembling those
of a high-end hotel.

CHANTELLE
There's an overflow suite they only
use for V-I-Ps. We can clean up and
change for the reception there.

ISHMAEL
We're going to the reception? What
happened to "everyone wants me dead"?

CHANTELLE
The new arrivals don't. At least
not until they find out why they're
really here.

INT. ZERZURA SUITE - DAY

They enter the posh guest room. Automated curtains draw open.

ISHMAEL

I say we take out the sultan and his detail before he moves them to the mines.

CHANTELLE

The sultan, perhaps, but you won't be able to handle all of the guards on your own.

ISHMAEL

Nonsense -- I've been dunking on these guys all day. Hell, we might even get lucky.

CHANTELLE

Get lucky?

ISHMAEL

Yeah. I hypnotized the dungeon guard and planted a suggestion. Next time he sees the sultan he'll turn his gun on him.

(musing)

He looked kind of stupid, though.

CHANTELLE

Even if that works, another of his men will only take his place.

ISHMAEL

So we tell the arrivals the truth and rally every mineworker to rise against him.

CHANTELLE

Trust me, they're in no condition for rebellion.

ISHMAEL

In case you haven't noticed, we're a tad low on options.

CHANTELLE

You'll only lead them to slaughter.

ISHMAEL

Then what do we do?

CHANTELLE

There's a satellite phone. Just one. The sultan keeps it on him at all times.

ISHMAEL

And...?

CHANTELLE

It's the only connection between this oasis and the outside world. I'm thinking we sneak in and steal it so you can call in the cavalry.

ISHMAEL

Wait. No, that, I don't think that's --

CHANTELLE

Now go and get ready. We don't have much time.

ISHMAEL

I know, you keep saying. Personally, I don't see the rush.

CHANTELLE

(exasperated)

Personally, your arrogance is a problem. It's keeping you from seeing the truth: this man works his slaves until they can work no longer -- people I'm responsible for bringing here. And once their replacements arrive, they'll be taken out in the desert and discarded in a mass grave. That's the rush.

(awaiting response)

Anything else? Preferably of major importance?

ISHMAEL

What if nothing fits?

CHANTELLE

You must be joking.

ISHMAEL

Joking around isn't my style.

CHANTELLE

Then go see what is. Guests are prohibited from bringing personal possessions, so the closet will have something in every...

(noticing his stare)

What?

ISHMAEL

Okay why are you dressed like that.
What're you, a virgin sacrifice?

CHANTELLE

That's not far off, actually.

ISHMAEL

The virgin part or the sacrifice?

CHANTELLE

Are you trying to get slapped?

ISHMAEL

(uncharacteristically
abashed)

Not on purpose. Sometimes I feel
too at home in hotel rooms.

CHANTELLE

That's not what this place is. Not
even close. Now go. Hurry.

Chantelle pushes him into the adjoining room.

She washes up and slips into evening attire, then raids a
welcome gift basket for a pair of discreet earbud radios.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Ishmael showers and dresses quickly, but is caught off guard
shaving when he meets his reflection's judgmental stare.

QUICK FLASHES - ISHMAEL'S MEMORIES

-- His fellow serviceman's charred, bound hands.

SULTAN (V.O.)

Indeed, your only care is for
yourself, Ishmael.

-- The incessantly laboring mineworkers and executions.

AZAZEL (V.O.)

I had the audacity to step forward
when my community needed a leader.

-- The handshake and his promise to Azazel.

BACK TO BATHROOM

Now his image reflects dark, rising power. Turbulent malice.

Ishmael pounds his knuckles on the sink and departs, resolute. However, he stops himself at their shared door, cracks it. Chantelle's voice -- engaged in a heated argument with a man. She's seated in the lounge area. Tor's gun pointed at her.

TOR

Believe it or not, I didn't come out here to wander around patrolling the fucking desert. And I sure as shit didn't come here to dig money out of the ground for some rich asshole.

CHANTELLE

I know that. Please, I never --

TOR

You told me it was a sustainable community!

CHANTELLE

(distraught)

The sultan lied to me. He lied to all of us.

TOR

Bullshit! He said you worked for him. He said you were one of his people.

CHANTELLE

I swear. Tor. I swear, I didn't know until I arrived here myself.

TOR

That's not good enough!

INT. ZERZURA SUITE - NIGHT

Ishmael enters. But defusing the situation is not in his skill set.

ISHMAEL

Hey, fella. Put the gun down before you hurt somebody with that thing.

Clegg gets the drop on him. The stock of his assault rifle smashes Ishmael's spine between the shoulder blades.

He crumples to the floor but doesn't lose consciousness.

CLEGG
 (aiming down)
 No, don't get up, mate -- you're
 brilliant just there.

ISHMAEL
 (in pain)
 Can someone please tell me what the
 hell's going on?

TOR
 I can -- it's simple. This bitch
 went around the world selling lies
 and fake dreams.

QUICK FLASHES - RECRUITING TOR & CLEGG

-- Chantelle meets Tor at a D.C. coffee shop.

TOR (V.O.)
 I was looking into living off-grid
 and found this obscure ad online.
 It was recruiting members for some
 exclusive, secret oasis.

-- Chantelle meets Clegg at a pub in Sydney.

CLEGG (V.O.)
 Yeah, but come to find out we were
 to live and work only in the filthy
 mines. We had to beg the sultan to
 patrol instead.

BACK TO SUITE

CHANTELLE
 Tell him what happened to me when
 we got here. Or did you forget?
 Tell him!

QUICK FLASHES - CHANTELLE'S SCAPEGOATING

-- Chantelle. In her pristine white gown, adorned with floral
 garlands and bouquets. Paces through an angry, jeering CROWD
 toward the Gates of Zerzura -- shoved, garbage thrown at her.

VARIOUS CROWD MEMBERS
 Liar!/Fraud!/Guilty whore!

TOR (V.O.)
 The sultan offered to exile "one of
 his own" as a sign of good faith, a
 guarantee we could return to the
 surface after a year.

But in the mines, we found out that
was a lie, too.

-- Finally, her death sentence: The Gates of Zerzura thunder
closed, stranding her in the desert.

BACK TO SUITE

CHANTELLE

And you think I would choose that?
I nearly died out there.

ISHMAEL

Listen. We're all on the same side.
I'm dismantling the sultan and his
mining operation. Tonight. But I
need the mines evacuated when the
reception starts. Can you guys
handle that?

CLEGG

Evacuated? I guess so, yeah, but
where --

ISHMAEL

I don't care where you take them,
just get them out of there. The
reception starts in -- what?

CHANTELLE

Ten minutes.

ISHMAEL

Better get going. We'll meet you
outside the mines when the smoke
clears.

Tor and Clegg exchange looks.

TOR

Fuck the sultan. Cleggy?

CLEGG

Whatever. Let's go.

The door closes after them.

Ishmael straightens up. He looks sharp -- almost ready to go
onstage: dark denim, dress shirt, black dinner jacket.

At the window, he gazes out at the stables beyond the garden.

ISHMAEL

Can you ride a horse?

CHANTELLE
(donning earrings)
What kind of question is that?

ISHMAEL
Can you ride a horse or not?

CHANTELLE
Like the wind.
(offers earbud radio)
Here, take this. In case we get
separated.

ISHMAEL
Perfect. Thanks. I think we should
separate.

CHANTELLE
I'm sorry?

ISHMAEL
Every show requires some prep work.
I'll find a way into the reception
and join you just before it starts.

They sync and test the radios. Ishmael stops at the door.

ISHMAEL
Oh and, um, you look...
(searches for word)
Magical.

CHANTELLE
That's a step up from virgin
sacrifice, so...thank you?

ISHMAEL
Yeah, well, let's not make a thing
out of it.

He abruptly walks out.

EXT. ZERZURA GARDENS - NIGHT

Ishmael drives off, positions the ATV behind the main garden.

The familiar wave of twin searchlights heralding the gala
reception guide the short walk back.

INT. VERANDA BALLROOM - NIGHT

A DJ (20s) spins party music.

Chantelle mingles with the merry new ARRIVALS.

They smile and nod upon recognizing her.

An animated woman, FAYE GILLESPIE (50s), and her husband, WARREN (50s), pull her in.

FAYE

Chantelle? It is you! Faye and Warren Gillespie, remember? From Vancouver?

CHANTELLE

(substitutes nerves with warmth)
Of course.

FAYE

We made it!
(laughs)
Goodness me, I skydove. I mean, I skydived. I mean, it was an absolute hoot. Anyway, the oasis is so incredibly beautiful -- ooh, Patrice! Patrice, look who I found! It's Chantelle!

Chantelle uses Faye's distraction to slip away before drawing further attention.

EXT. ZERZURA STABLES - NIGHT

Ishmael struggles to mount a stubborn Dorothy.

He finally succeeds then races through the torchlit gardens toward the jungle.

INT. VERANDA BALLROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Chantelle lets her hair fall around her face, keeps a low profile near the back of the crowded room.

CHANTELLE

(touches ear, whispers)
Where are you? The sultan's about to go on --

ISHMAEL

Any second?

She nearly walks into him.

Ishmael casually sips champagne.

CHANTELLE

-- and we don't even have a coherent plan yet.

ISHMAEL

We most certainly do. You know Dorothy?

CHANTELLE

Dorothy...the horse?

ISHMAEL

Yep. She's tied up at the far end of the main garden where you pointed out the terrace. Mount up and wait there. When you hear me say, "Presto!" ride into the mines as fast as you can, okay? I'll meet you there.

CHANTELLE

I don't get it.

ISHMAEL

Are you unclear on what you're supposed to do?

CHANTELLE

No.

ISHMAEL

Then you get it.

She appears leery.

ISHMAEL

Do you trust me?

CHANTELLE

Not at all.

ISHMAEL

Go -- I'll meet you there.

CHANTELLE

You're not the best communicator, are you.

The house lights dim.

ISHMAEL

I'll meet you there. Go.

CHANTELLE

One last thing. I know every guest
in this room personally. Promise me
nothing's going to happen to them.

Her words petrify Ishmael. Drain the blood from his face.

His ringing ears. Uneven breaths. Rising heartrate.

CHANTELLE

Hello?

ISHMAEL

(snaps out of it)
They're in great hands, trust me.

Ishmael ushers her out, sizes up the room.

The guard presence has grown significantly since his arrival
-- enough to undercut his assurances to Chantelle.

DJ'S VOICE

(through speakers)
What's up, Zerzura!

Fervent crowd response.

DJ'S VOICE

(through speakers)
It's the moment y'all been waiting
for! Our gracious host and founder
needs no introduction -- let's give
it up for our beloved sultaannn!

The guests, music, and lights go wild.

EXT. GARDEN TERRACE - NIGHT

The sultan strides past the VIP tables flanking the center of
the terrace where he can be seen by all, energetically
acknowledging the guests like a big tech CEO.

Clad in formalwear now, Ishmael spies the satellite phone
clipped to his belt.

SULTAN

(miked)
Welcome one and all to Zerzura!
You've come a long way...

EXT. VERANDA BALLROOM - NIGHT

As he speaks, even more guards filter in.

ISHMAEL

(to self)

How exactly am I going to do this?

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

I can still hear you, of course.

ISHMAEL

I know, that was a joke.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

I thought joking around wasn't your style.

ISHMAEL

Yeah, but that time I really was joking. Really.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

Mm-hm. I'm in position, by the way.

ISHMAEL

Copy that.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

Are you sure you were in the military? That wasn't just a costume or something?

ISHMAEL

All right. Let's just try to maintain a little radio silence here. Standby.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

Roger wilco, good buddy. Dorothy and Chantelle out.

Ishmael rolls his eyes, places his glass on a passing tray.

More guards than Ishmael has seen surround the room.

SULTAN'S VOICE

(through speakers)

And now, for a most special surprise. We have a celebrity guest among us this evening. It is my privilege and high honor to introduce this world-class illusionist and escape artist.

Felix Fleming? Will you come up
here, please?

Once more, Ishmael suddenly looks like he's seen a ghost.

Everyone applauds -- looks around for the magician.

Ishmael reflexively puts one foot in front of the other until
he reaches the veranda extending from the ballroom.

EXT. GARDEN TERRACE - NIGHT

He takes a handheld mic from the DJ and joins the sultan.

Before addressing the audience, Ishmael removes the wireless
lavalier mic from the sultan's lapel.

ISHMAEL
(off-mic)
Let's switch.

SULTAN
(off-mic)
Homeboy, I had no idea of your
talents.

ISHMAEL
(grave)
How do you know who I am?

SULTAN
Here is my offer: Put on a little
show for them tonight and I will
let you be my -- what is the term?
Court jester? To entertain me here
in the oasis.

ISHMAEL
And if I decline?

SULTAN
I will cast you down to the bottom
of the deepest mine shaft and quite
literally work you to death, my man.

ISHMAEL
Wow. They both sound amazing --
it's really tough to pick my
favorite.

SULTAN
There is another word for court
jester, I think -- ah, yes! Fool.

I will let you be my personal fool.
Only so long as you don't make one
out of me. Deal?

Ishmael thrusts the mic into his waiting hand, clips the lavalier mic to his own lapel, and approaches a nearby table.

ISHMAEL

(miked)

Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Felix Fleming and it is a profound pleasure to be here tonight.

(addressing table)

May I?

Ishmael takes their lack of protest for permission and lights the tissue paper in the centerpiece simply by passing his hand over it. Then he yanks the white tablecloth from their table without disturbing the dishes, glassware, or fire.

Gasps and light applause. He returns to the sultan with the tablecloth, shaking it free from sand or crumbs.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

Felix? Like the escape artist?

ISHMAEL

(addressing audience)

You know, when I first arrived here, I was much like you. Overwhelmed by the stunning beauty of the oasis and relieved to have escaped my troubles. Unfortunately, this place is not what it seems. It's an illusion. And you can never truly escape because wherever you go, there you are -- with all your other illusions along for the ride.

Ishmael gives the sultan a look like, is this okay?

A SUSPICIOUS GUARD (30s) close by takes a step toward them.

The sultan gives consent by waving off the guard.

ISHMAEL

But I've learned that losing an illusion instantly makes you wiser than finding a truth. All at once.

(drapes tablecloth over sultan's head)

Presto! Ala --

The cloth loses its form as Ishmael pulls it down and away, like a matador's cape.

ISHMAEL

-- kazam!

The sultan has completely and impossibly vanished.

Ishmael takes a bow.

The room erupts in cheers and applause. The music comes up.

Suspicious Guard approaches. Aiming his assault rifle.

Ishmael walks directly at him and, in a dance that occurs in a split second, relieves him of the weapon and disappears over the side of the terrace.

Suspicious Guard finds himself alone on the veranda holding a non-existent firearm.

EXT. ZERZURA GARDENS - NIGHT

Ishmael slings the gun strap across his chest, mounts the ATV, and heads to the mine entrance at top speed.

INT. ZERZURA MINES - NIGHT

The active alarm system spews angry, intermittent blasts.

MINEWORKERS exit the cavern in a slow flood.

ISHMAEL

Chantelle, what are they still
doing here?

(silence)

Come in? Can you hear me?

Unable to go against the migration, Ishmael finds an open lane across the mine cart tracks.

He notices a cart full of gold ore, then the endless procession of similarly brimming idle carts spaced along the tracks where workers abandoned the many dozens of them.

ISHMAEL

(in awe)

Dayum.

Bullets ricocheting off the cart nearly blind him with sparks.

Ishmael guns the throttle. Keeps his head down.

INT. MAIN CAVERN - NIGHT

The open lane is the same Chantelle took. He finds her with Dorothy near the scaffolding he occupied earlier.

CHANTELLE
(touching earbud)
There you are. The mine must be
interfering with the signal.

ISHMAEL
(urgently)
They were all supposed to be
evacuated by now.

CHANTELLE
It's going to take longer. There
are too many of them.

ISHMAEL
The guards are right on my ass. We
have to switch to the hurry-up
offense.

He helps Chantelle down from the horse and hands her the satphone.

CHANTELLE
(impressed)
You got it.

ISHMAEL
Walk in the park.

CHANTELLE
What about the sultan?

With uncanny speed and precision Ishmael unties the rope from Dorothy's saddle, flings it over the catwalk, and reties it.

He turns Dorothy around by her bridle. Draws the scimitar.

ISHMAEL
He's on his way, too.
(slaps Dorothy's hind
quarters)
Ha!

She bolts toward the exit. The rope whirs over the catwalk.

Her momentum pulls the sultan -- ravaged from being dragged through the jungle -- along the cart tracks by his bound hands until he hangs alongside the scaffolding.

Chantelle catches the notice of several passing MINERS (30s).

MINER #1
(aggrieved)
Chantelle? That is you. Lying
fuckin' bitch -- you ain't supposed
to be here.

MINER #2
Oh hey, look who it fucking is.
Princess Slavetrader.

She's absorbed into the flood and harassed while Ishmael
chucks the scimitar on top of the scaffolding and ascends.

CHANTELLE
Ishmael!

ISHMAEL
Help get everyone out while I deal
with the sultan!

CHANTELLE
Wait, Ishmael! Stop!

But she's carried away by her accusers.

Ishmael. Atop the scaffolding. Sprays bullets across the
ceiling, fracturing rock.

ISHMAEL
Everyone move!

Screams. Panic. The act doubles their pace -- dangerously so.

Guards find the open lane and mobilize toward the scaffolding.

Ishmael swaps the assault rifle for the scimitar. He hacks
the sultan free but leaves his hands tied and stands him up.

INT. ACCESS TUNNEL - CONTINUOUS

Hopefully remembering the route to the armory this time, he
pulls him through the tunnels -- beats his ass the whole way.

ISHMAEL
(relishing venom)
Y'know, I've given your generous
court jester offer due
consideration... But, alas, I'm
gonna have to politely burn your
house to the ground instead.

Guards. Tailing them in the tunnels now. Bullets fly.

SULTAN
(calling back in Arabic,
subtitled)
Don't shoot!

They reach the wooden crates at the dead end.

Ishmael ducks into the armory alone. The heavy automated door closes between them.

SULTAN
He's down here!

But when the sultan tries to step away, he finds the rope caught in the door has him tethered in place.

Also caught in the door: det cord from the pre-rigged spool.

INT. ARMORY - NIGHT

The interior door lock's panel stripped off, Ishmael's about to touch the detonator cord ends to the exposed electronics.

He waves goodbye to the sultan through the thick glass window.

But the wires won't reach! Short by a mere few inches.

The sultan grins at his failure.

SULTAN
Hurry!

The guards arrive -- actively work to open the armory door.

Ishmael. Jams the wires into the aperture of his trick thumb tip, holds up his hand, and --

Snap.

KA-BOOM! KA-POW!

The blast triggers a chain reaction in the surplus dynamite stockpile, obliterating the sultan and his detail.

INT. ACCESS TUNNEL - NIGHT

The subsequent cave-in collapses the access tunnel and destabilizes the main cavern as shockwaves roar through.

EXT. CANYON WALL - NIGHT

Ishmael. Squirming out through the ventilation opening at the back of the armory.

He finds a handhold and two footholds just as the wall quakes under the blasts, forcing him to hang on for dear life.

Other parts of the wall disintegrate, crushed rock bursting free close enough to knock him straight off the cliff-face.

As things quiet down, Ishmael discovers a flaw in his plan.

This portal opens over a higher part of the canyon than his waterfall and southern spire climbs put together.

Worse, there are no other handholds in the well-eroded surface. He's stranded hundreds of feet above the riverbed with nowhere to go -- up, down, or sideways.

INT. MAIN CAVERN - NIGHT

Escaping the cave-in with the last mineworkers, a roughed-up Chantelle looks back at the collapsed tunnel Ishmael took.

EXT. CANYON WALL - NIGHT

Ishmael exhausts every option for getting off the cliff-face.

ISHMAEL

Come in, Chantelle. Do you read me?
Looks like -- looks like I'm kinda
stuck here.

The connection is dead -- perhaps she never made it out.

A near-fatal slip, but Ishmael manages to turn around and stare into the abyss, his back against the wall.

QUICK FLASHES - MEA CULPA

-- His unit, executed by firing squad in the desert.

-- Azazel's savagely beaten face.

-- The mine collapsing on Zerzurans who didn't get out in time.

ISHMAEL (V.O.)

...it's not my fault...

BACK TO CANYON WALL

Ishmael takes a deep breath. Closes his eyes.

A thin, white sheet randomly falls over his head.

Nylon?

Ishmael, saved, finds the suspension lines and reins in the harness attached to the stray bullseye parachute.

Elated, he buckles it secure and leaps off, freefalling until the canopy opens for a peaceful descent over the riverbed.

EXT. DESERT CANYON - NIGHT

Chantelle's voice. Scrambled in his ear. The signal connects.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)
 --ultan. If you're alive -- can
 hear-r-r me --

ISHMAEL
 I'm here! Chantelle, we did it! All
 the miners made it out, right?
 (static)
 Tell them they can return to
 Zerzura. They're free.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)
 Ishm -- ...oblem. That man was a --
 oper.

ISHMAEL
 You're breaking up. Say again?

CHANTELLE (V.O.)
 Emir Ghalib -- the sultan. --s not
 dead.

A bullet grazes his ear before tearing through the parachute.

ISHMAEL
 The fuck?
 (blood trickles down)
 What are you talking about the
 sultan's not dead -- I just dropped
 an entire mountain on him.

Another round rips through the chute.

In the dry riverbed below a SMALL ARMY advances upstream on foot, ATVs, and horseback under the glow of a supermoon.

A SECOND GROUP marching from the other direction surrounds the lower canyon mine entrance.

They're fewer in number but more than enough to corral and contain the procession of exiting slaves.

ISHMAEL

And where did all these troops come from?

(silence)

Chantelle?

Attempts to shoot him down. More shots burn past.

Ishmael's rate of descent increases dramatically, his chute compromised.

Enough shots find the bullseye. Shred it to useless tatters.

It hurts when he lands -- not quite in the riverbed.

Just outside their reach, a trail along the intersecting confluence winds uphill. Provides a quick way out.

He starts in that direction. Hesitates. A blip in his ear.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

...help me...

EXT. CANYON TRAIL - NIGHT

An enemy scout tracking Ishmael ahead of the others sees him disappear into the shadows farther up, unaware his target is already quietly doubling back twice as fast.

As if transported, Ishmael suddenly appears and tackles the soldier to the ground, hands around his neck.

Ishmael. Over him. Delivers furious, throttling force.

ISHMAEL

The woman! TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!

When he relaxes his grip, the soldier can barely speak in a language the illusionist doesn't understand.

Ishmael views his own shaking hands.

EXT. CANYON RIVERBED - NIGHT

Finally meeting, soldiers arm up. Organize search parties.

But Ishmael suddenly appears from the shadows once again.
Smack in between the brigades' ATV headlights.

An armed team from each side closes in.

Ishmael dashes straight to the middle. Arms out. Ready.

ISHMAEL

All right. Which one of you
geniuses wants to take the first
shot?

Ishmael stutter-steps when one does, lending the appearance
he dodged the round as the soldier opposite falls dead.

ISHMAEL

Holy fuck! I didn't mean literally
shoot at me!

It takes another bad shot, fake bullet dodge, and guard
injured in the crossfire before they opt to rush him instead.

No escape route. Ishmael dives into the perforated chute on
the ground like it's a swimming hole, disappearing into it.

The guards jump on. Black-clad bodies attacking, dogpiling.

But the illusionist -- already out from under the pile --
pushes into the crowd of displaced miners with an amused
backglance.

Surrounded by hundreds of strangers, the next person he
recognizes in the torchlight is Clegg.

ISHMAEL

(shouting from a distance)
Clegg! Where's Chantelle?

CLEGG

Ishmael! This way! She's over here!

Ishmael. Fighting through to Clegg near the mine entrance.

EXT./INT. LOWER CANYON MINE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

When he arrives at the half-collapsed opening Clegg is gone.

Chantelle is face down on the ground. Tor's boot between her
shoulder blades. His assault rifle angled at her head.

ISHMAEL

Tor? What the...?

Click! The business end of Clegg's pistol presses against Ishmael's cerebellum. He raises his hands.

Ahead, a robed FIGURE slowly emerges from the darkness.

As the figure approaches, his robes fall away to reveal an unidentifiable dark green and black military uniform.

Ishmael does recognize the granite beast of a man wearing it.

ISHMAEL

Azazel?

The real sultan of Zerzura takes a beret from his shoulder strap, fixes it squarely on his head.

Azazel. Looming over him. Places Ishmael's dog tag key back in his hands.

QUICK FLASHES - AZAZEL'S RETURN

-- Azazel exits his unlocked cell, finds the tag on the floor.

-- The guard awakens outside the dungeon, draws his weapon.

ISHMAEL (V.O.)

...I hypnotized the dungeon
guard...he'll turn his gun on the
sultan...

-- Azazel strips it away and shoots him dead in his chair.

-- He catches Chantelle with Tor and Clegg ushering his slaves from the mines and sics his guards on them.

BACK TO MINE ENTRANCE

Ishmael glances down at the tag. Azazel's also placed a zip tie around his wrists.

The sultan tightens it hard enough to cut off the circulation.

ISHMAEL

Anything you try I'll escape from.

(pause)

Tighter.

Azazel obliges.

AZAZEL

My friend, as I've said: this is
the one place you can never escape.
It is why your friends turned on
you. Is that not correct, Mr. Tor?

TOR

Seriously, man. It would be like swimming from Seattle to Honolulu.

AZAZEL

(to Ishmael)

At first I could not understand your appearance here, soldier. For three days I worried, fretting about the Americans coming to invade and destroy my beloved oasis.

(enraged, accusatory)

Just as they once invaded and destroyed my entire home country!

(calmer)

So I sent my men away. Prepared them to surround Zerzura in the event of such an attack. But when you went after Ghalib on your own, I began to suspect no one was coming for you. And when I learned your true name, my suspicions were confirmed.

ISHMAEL

Fascinating.

AZAZEL

Indeed. After such devastating failures it seems your compatriots favor a world without Felix Fleming in it. I cannot say I blame them. At least you did me a favor with Ghalib. He was a brilliant architect but an insufferable ass, much like you.

ISHMAEL

And all this time I thought I was perfect.

In the b.g. Azazel's small army quietly hems them in.

AZAZEL

Felix -- shall I call you Felix? Do you know what in all the world is the most difficult to accomplish?

ISHMAEL

Is it putting this expensive loafer up your ass with my foot still in it?

AZAZEL

It is forgiving someone who does
not deserve forgiveness.

He draws the gun from his belt holster, extends it to Ishmael
by the barrel.

ISHMAEL

What do you expect me to do with
that?

AZAZEL

I want to know if there is
forgiveness in your heart for those
who have betrayed you.

ISHMAEL

I'm working up to it.

AZAZEL

I am pleased to hear you say that,
Mr. Fleming. And not at all
surprised.

Regripping the firearm, the sultan puts a bullet in Clegg's
head, empties the magazine into Tor, and replaces the boot on
Chantelle's back with his own. All without a flinch or blink.

Ishmael's trembling arms are up, amazed the bullets weren't
intended for him -- at least, not yet.

ISHMAEL

What the fuck!

AZAZEL

(holsters gun)

A study of rat behavior was
conducted in 1959. Do you know of
this? It found that rats refused to
pull a lever or run a maze for a
food reward when doing so gave the
rat in the next cage a painful
electric shock. The protest
response was so great it would
rather starve than harm another rat
by its behavior. Some believe this
shows a level of empathy otherwise
lacking in humans. I think it
rather shows an accountability for
one's actions. So I wonder, would
you rather die than know she was
harmed by your actions?

(to Large Guard)

Stand her up.

Large Guard complies. She's unsteady. Already beaten.

AZAZEL

Are you a rat, Felix Fleming?

ISHMAEL

Don't hurt her anymore. Let us go
-- we'll take our chances in the
desert.

AZAZEL

That is no answer. I ask again: are
you a rat?

ISHMAEL

No, goddammit.

AZAZEL

That is something a rat would say.

ISHMAEL

Then, yes! Fine, yes, whatever.
Just, stop!

AZAZEL

Precisely as I thought.
Unfortunately...

The sultan's dagger suddenly appears for a flash before
disappearing into Chantelle's torso.

Her body seizes then falls limp. She collapses to the sand.

AZAZEL

Rats are forbidden in Zerzura.

Ishmael. Scrabbles toward her. Large Guard holds him back.

Azazel wipes the blade on Ishmael's lapel, then breaks away.

Ishmael frees himself from Large Guard. He dashes over, drops
beside her. Removes her cloth gag with his bound hands.

ISHMAEL

Chantelle, I'm -- so sorry. I
should have stayed with you.

CHANTELLE

Ishmael...

ISHMAEL

I should have stayed and listened
and told you everything.

You remind me of someone -- someone
I never treated fairly. And now
I'll never be able to make up for
it.

AZAZEL
(deep laugh)
Listen to the blubbering rat.

ISHMAEL
(to the sultan)
I didn't do this to her! You're
responsible, NOT FUCKING ME!
(back to Chantelle,
whispering)
Do you still have it? Please,
Chantelle, do you --

CHANTELLE
(weak, faint)
Help them, Ishmael...before it's
too late.

Her lost stare. Chantelle slips away. She's gone.

Ishmael fakes tending to her injuries while searching her for
the satphone.

AZAZEL
You must be looking for this.

The sultan reveals the device. Back in his possession.

More guards than Ishmael can count pull him away.

They bend him over a low, flat rock.

AZAZEL
Are you familiar with the penalty
for theft, Felix?

ISHMAEL
I am now, you cowardly fucking
monster.

AZAZEL
(referencing Chantelle)
That? No, no, that was for
trespassing. Don't worry, my
friend, the punishment for theft is
far less severe. In fact, I will
give this to you. Here. Call
whomever you want.

The sultan holds the phone over Ishmael's hands, but he doesn't take it.

AZAZEL

No? Do you not have one single number you can call?

(utilizing device)

Perhaps we can look someone up for you, let's see... Ah! Felix Fleming, former illusionist and escape artist responsible for the deaths of two hundred and eighty-four people in a structure fire that originated during a live performance. Father: deceased. Mother: whereabouts unknown.

(puzzled)

Unknown? Did she abandon you? Of course not. I know, you abandoned her.

Ishmael seethes with rage. He breaks a guard's nose with his elbow and gets another in a chokehold before they resecure his arms over the rock.

His hands deepen from lavender to purple.

ISHMAEL

I was a rotten son, so what? That's not a crime.

AZAZEL

Ah, but theft? Stealing my satellite telephone is very much a crime, Felix Fleming. You must accept responsibility --

ISHMAEL

Fuck you.

AZAZEL

-- and beg me for clemency.

ISHMAEL

I would rather die.

AZAZEL

But you are already on your knees. Your hands together. Beg.

QUICK FLASH - TIMES SQUARE

-- Young Felix and his mother on the sidewalk, begging for handouts.

BACK TO MINE ENTRANCE

ISHMAEL
(irate)
I'D RATHER DIE!

AZAZEL
As I have said: the penalty for
theft is far less severe.

The sultan draws his own scimitar -- a more broad and fearsome sword than Ghalib's -- from its scabbard.

In a swift, calculated arc, the scimitar separates Ishmael's hands from his wrists.

Ishmael, his eyes wide with sudden horror, fixates on his amputated hands -- storied with two decades of magic -- as he's hauled away.

INT. ZERZURA MINES - NIGHT

Despite the guards swarming around them, it's solely Azazel dragging him inside through the half-collapsed opening.

Ishmael. In shock. His pale face in a cold sweat. Eyeballs loll. He's not doing well.

AZAZEL
All out of tricks, Mr. Fleming?
Fear not -- you still have but one
purpose left...

Further in, several guards are busy welding steel bars to a heavy baseplate by torchlight.

Large Guard takes a blowtorch from them and cauterizes Ishmael's wrists to blackened stumps.

The magician screams until he passes out.

AZAZEL
(in Arabic, subtitled)
Start bringing them back in.

They throw Ishmael into the cage and finish building it.

AZAZEL
*Everyone works. All through the
night, all day tomorrow, and as long
as it takes to undo what this dog
has done. Make certain they know.*

Connected by a heavy-gauge chain, guards lower the top onto the bars and weld it on.

AZAZEL

Wake him up.

Large Guard kicks the sturdy cage. Ishmael comes around.

AZAZEL

I wonder, thief. How will you
escape from a cage with no door
using hands you no longer have?

(amused)

Perhaps the punishment for theft is
not less severe after all.

Brutally coerced by guards, workers file back into the mines.

The chain becomes taut, rigid. The cage is raised up.

Feeble mine slaves absorb the disoriented new class soiling their fancy party clothes as they work to clear the passage of boulders and rubble.

The sultan commands their attention from higher ground.

AZAZEL

(over slaves)

Ladies and gentlemen! With deep
regret I present Felix Fleming! A
deceiver! A dangerous trespasser
and wretched thief! He! He is the
reason you must work to repair the
mines! He caused the explosion that
brought it down! This unwelcome
intruder is responsible for the
suffering you have been brought to
bear!

The crowd jeers him. Some throw rocks. Those that don't bounce off the bars painfully connect.

CHANTELLE (V.O.)

(weak, faint)

Help them, Ishmael... Before it's
too late.

Ishmael. Delirious. Seated in the cage. Holding his arms close against his ribs.

Coupled with derision and blame, screams of the terrified, the punished, emanate from below.

QUICK FLASHES - MEA MAXIMA CULPA

- The deaths of Tor, Clegg, and Chantelle.
- His father's final moments dangling from the crane.
- Abandoning his mother in the park.
- His most dedicated fans, consumed by flames in the Old World Theater disaster.

BACK TO MINES

Ishmael speaks in a whisper, his lips almost unmoving.

ISHMAEL
It's my fault...

His loafer kicks the bars, jolting the heavy chain.

ISHMAEL
(louder)
It's my fault.

Another kick. Much harder.

ISHMAEL
(shouts)
It's my fault! It's my fault!

Kicking the cage, harder and harder.

The slaves' cries surround him, all under the belabored cackle of their tyrant master.

Years of remorse have finally caught up to Felix Fleming.

ISHMAEL
It's my fault! IT'S ALL MY FUCKING
FAULT!

He repeatedly slams his heels against the bars.

INT. OLD WORLD THEATER - AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

The loafer stomps glass.

Submerged in water yet surrounded by fire, Felix suddenly regains consciousness inside the bottle-tank.

His foot hits the glass again. On his heel, a small sensor maintains a steady red light.

A final kick. All his might. The sensor switches from red to green and the bottle-tank bursts apart.

Felix. Throwing off the straitjacket as he levitates above the island stage, higher and higher.

Beyond the fully active sprinklers and drenchers, water gushes through the theater from every direction, including the escape artist's own hands.

He's in a tailcoat tuxedo now. Spinning, soaking, extinguishing the blazing audience and theater.

Once all of the fires are out, Felix descends for a gentle landing back on the island, his chest still heaving.

The waterlogged audience is briefly stunned into silence while they find themselves miraculously unharmed.

They gaze, dumbfounded, at the illusionist on center stage.

Felix looks back with uncertainty.

Then, the entire auditorium explodes in wild celebration as the dazzling lights, lasers, and pounding EDM music return.

The "EMERGENCE" hologram above the stage now reads: "WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD"

Noticeably relieved by the audience reaction, Felix takes a victory lap, high-fiving through the crowd.

Back on the island. His face bears the welcome and triumphant joy of realizing his worst nightmare was just that, a dream.

Felix takes a final bow.

The stage lights go out for a split second.

When the house lights come up, Felix Fleming has vanished.

EXT. OLD WORLD THEATER - NIGHT

A news crew is set up on the sidewalk amidst the raving guests exiting and loitering around.

The REPORTER (mid-30s) interviews several of them, including a sodden YOUNG WOMAN (21) and, separately, a YOUNG MAN (24).

REPORTER

You seem like you just survived the world's scariest roller coaster.
Tell us what it was like.

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh. My. God. At first we thought it was this terrible accident. It's like, the whole place and everyone in it was on fire. We all thought we were gonna die. Then he saved us, like some kinda miracle.

YOUNG MAN

Wow. Just, wow. I don't know how he did it. I don't know how my clothes aren't all burnt up and my skin's not melted off. All I know is, I was literally on fire. Craziest shit I ever been a part of.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

When Felix enters, he finds someone sitting in his chair.

It appears at first to be his stage manager --

FELIX (ISHMAEL)

(giddy)

Katharine? Beautiful Katharine!

-- but as she turns from the mirror and removes her glasses, she's also clearly Chantelle.

FELIX

You have no idea how good it is to see you. What're you doing here?

She's completely flummoxed when he embraces her, uncharacteristically ebullient and still soggy.

KATHARINE (CHANTELLE)

Somehow I couldn't resist coming to see if you turned your audience into crispy critters.

FELIX

You knew?

KATHARINE

(curt)

I knew you weren't doing a simple water escape. But that's not why I'm here.

She brushes past him on her way out.

INT. OFFSTAGE CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Felix catches up to her in the hallway.

FELIX
How? How did you know?

KATHARINE
Ten years of knowing you, for starters. But I also saw you in the control booth last night.

INT. CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Felix. As if working under a car. Removes several components and circuit boards beneath the lighting and sound consoles.

KATHARINE (V.O.)
I had absolutely no idea what you were doing...

INT. CONTROL ROOM - DAY

Felix quarrels with Mort, slams the chair onto the controls.

KATHARINE (V.O.)
Especially when you had a meltdown in front of everyone.

INT. CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

During the performance. Katharine notices a connected laptop interacting with a progression of blinking lights on the console as it automatically advances to the next stage.

KATHARINE
(to crew watching show)
Nobody touch anything.

In the auditorium below, the cold spark fountain pretends to malfunction. Fire spreads across the cardboard wave cutouts.

KATHARINE (V.O.)
But when the fires started, I realized the meltdown was all for show. That you were trying to protect Mort from blame in case your ill-advised and extremely dangerous escape failed.

BACK TO CORRIDOR

FELIX
So you never left?

KATHARINE
(starts walking)
Yes. But that's not why I'm here
either.

The escape artist follows her.

FELIX
Then why are you here?

KATHARINE
We're all here. Our paychecks
bounced after you fired us this
morning. Now everyone's waiting in
the conference room to claim your
head.

FELIX
Katharine, wait -- I want to
apologize to you.

KATHARINE
An apology? From you? That's rich.

FELIX
Seriously. I'm going to apologize
to everyone but I need to start
with my indispensable stage
manager.

KATHARINE
No, thanks.

He stops her outside the conference room.

FELIX
Please. Before we go in there, I
have to tell you something just
between you and me.
(she listens impatiently)
I -- it was touch and go in that
tank for a little while. I may have
blacked out for a moment or two.

KATHARINE
(incredulous)
You fainted?

FELIX
Absolutely not!
(reconsiders)

Maybe. Look, whatever it was, it was like this whole other reality, another universe. And it wasn't just a moment -- it felt more like two weeks.

KATHARINE

You're right. This can never be repeated.

FELIX

I met a woman there. She was just like you -- but somehow she also wasn't you? Anyway, she put herself at risk to save my life and all I did was fail her.

KATHARINE

In a dream.

FELIX

Yes.

KATHARINE

You are the strangest man I have ever worked for.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - NIGHT

The instant Felix enters his former EMPLOYEES boo and hiss.

FELIX

Okay, yes, I absolutely deserve that. And much more. But before the crucifixion starts will you hear me out?

As they shout over one another, the faces now seem familiar...

INTERN #1 (CLEGG)

Why should we?

STAGEHAND #1 (SPC JONES)

Yeah, where all our money at?

FELIX

I've been using poor judgment and making serious mistakes. And for that I'm deeply, grievously sorry.

MORT (ENZO)

Sorry won't cut it this time, boss.

FELIX

I know. That's why Faye's issuing new checks in the morning with thirty-five percent bonuses. Also, I'm doubling everyone's wages starting today. Fair?

Looks are exchanged around the room.

KATHARINE

Supposedly, this is a whole new Felix we're seeing.

STAGEHAND #2 (PFC RENFRO)

(indirectly)

Looks like the same old asshole to me.

FELIX

Guys. I had a --

Katharine shoots him a look like, don't do it.

FELIX

-- vision inside the tank. I was transported to a secret, faraway place. You were there...and you...and --

STAGEHAND #3 (PFC COLLINS)

Whatever, Dorothy.

FELIX

She was there, too! But she was a horse.

Sanity-questioning looks are exchanged around the room.

FELIX

Nevermind. The most important thing is that I take a whole new approach and accept full responsibility. From now on, the buck stops with me, I promise. But going forward won't be possible without my crew. What do you say?

INTERN #2 (TOR)

We'll think about it.

FELIX

Good enough. Thank you. We start on the New World program first thing tomorrow.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT (MINEWORKER)
(ushers him out)
After paychecks.

FELIX
After paychecks. Yes, ma'am.

STAGEHAND #4 (CPL BOSWELL)
We said we'll think about it.

Katharine's beside him when the door slams shut. Hard.

INT. AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Desert island stage. The two sit cross-legged among the dunes.

FELIX
I'm not sure that went as well as I hoped.

KATHARINE
Well, you've been abusing them for years, so it's gonna take more than a few minutes. But I think they'll come around.

FELIX
The hardest thing in the world is forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it. That woman I was talking about? She was never treated fairly. I never treated her fairly. And for treating you the same way I really am truly sorry, Katharine.

KATHARINE
How am I supposed to believe you? Now after all this time?

FELIX
Sometimes you just have to trust in the magic of new beginnings.
(then)
So you'll forgive me?

KATHARINE
I'll make a deal with you. Tell me how you set your audience on fire without hurting them and I'll give it mild consideration.

His face brightens like a boy receiving a magic set on his birthday.

FELIX
(standing)
Deal.

Felix presents his false thumb tip -- only instead of an igniter it has tiny buttons on the pad. One activates the fountain. He holds his hand over the harmless sparks to show they produce no heat, then picks up a charred ocean wave.

FELIX
The sparks were just for show -- to help sell the illusion. I put small, explosive squibs inside each wave to make them think they were catching fire.

Another button. The sound of crackling fire combined with intense heat radiates down on them.

FELIX
Feel that?

KATHARINE
(wilting under heat)
My goodness!

FELIX
The speakers double as massive heaters.

He presses another thumb button.

Flames appear to engulf the ceiling.

FELIX
Then we just add a little projection...

Fire cannons shoot real flames downward, but they're not close enough to burn anything in the auditorium below.

FELIX
...my rafter blasters...

Finally, flames appear throughout the theater seating.

FELIX
...and, of course, holograms everywhere to complete the illusion.

KATHARINE

But what if someone caught on fire
from the waves? And how did you
keep them from stampeding to get
out?

FELIX

Ah! The cleverest of all: I added a
subliminal track to the house music
to minimize the panic.

KATHARINE

You hypnotized them before you came
out on stage?

QUICK FLASH - UNSUSPECTING AUDIENCE FILTERS IN

-- Excited people entering the theater pass through a fog.

FELIX (V.O.)

More or less. And as for the
possibility of actual burns, I
figured out how to mix non-toxic
fire retardant into the smoke
machines. Everyone had to walk
through clouds of it when they
entered.

BACK TO AUDITORIUM

KATHARINE

It's insane. It's brilliant. I'd
say it's insanely brilliant, but
you better pray no one else tries
something like this.

FELIX

So do you forgive me?

KATHARINE

I suppose.

FELIX

Great. Because I can't start
rehearsing the new show if I'm not
on good terms with my business
partner.

KATHARINE

You want me to be your partner?

FELIX

Yes. Fifty-fifty. Interested?

KATHARINE

If this isn't some kind of
misdirection to fool us into coming
back --

FELIX

It isn't.

KATHARINE

-- I can get everything in
writing --

FELIX

You can.

KATHARINE

-- and you promise there won't be
any more shows of questionable
legality --

FELIX

(fingers crossed)
There won't.

KATHARINE

-- I'd say yes.

FELIX

(jumps off stage)
Then it's settled. Tomorrow night
we'll celebrate the new venture,
the new show, and the new name --
Felix Fleming's long overdue for a
fresh start. It's a whole New
World, Katharine, and we have much
to discuss. But first -- a brief
disappearing act.

KATHARINE

Where are you going?

FELIX

(pauses)
To track down my mother.

Katharine nods.

Felix heads for the exit.

KATHARINE

Hey!

FELIX

Yes?

KATHARINE

Will you at least tell me the new
stage name?

FELIX

(cryptic grin)

Call me Ishmael.

FADE OUT.

THE END

INT. ZERZURA MINES - NIGHT

Sultan Azazel. Confounded by the impossibly empty cage
lightly swinging overhead.

The scapegoat now absent, oppressed mineworkers set their
malevolent gaze upon their tormentor.