

KUKERI

Written by

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Logline:

An American professor travels to a remote corner of Eastern Europe to search for his missing mentor. What he encounters draws him into an ancient mystery -- and a web of political intrigue.

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FADE IN:

EXT. BULGARIA - MOUNTAIN VILLAGE - DAY

White-grey smoke rises from every chimney in the picturesque mountain village. The town square is sunny, but dark snow clouds loom.

The crowd is mostly locals, but the foreigners are easily recognized by their expensive clothes and cameras. All mill about animatedly to keep warm.

SUPER: Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria - March

A cluster of Japanese tourists takes snapshots of everything. Tall, rugged Nordic-American JAN LARSON, early 50s, stands out. He handholds an expensive DSLR, slowly pans the crowd.

An ANNOUNCER behind a mike on a makeshift wooden scaffold turns the pages of a script, rehearsing. Except for the soft MURMUR of the expectant crowd, the village is quiet.

Suddenly, everyone turns toward a rising CACOPHONY of COW BELLS in the distance. The clanging builds to almost deafening. Children cover their ears.

JAN'S CAMERA'S POV

The view rapidly shifts focus from the announcer to the source of the loud noise: monstrous heads with enormous horns, snarling teeth, wild eyes. Faces made of bear and goat skins, some decorated with antlers and bright feathers, come into view from down the road.

The camera moves quickly and nervously, then stops and zooms in: a line of fantastic mythological beasts, large humans in ritual costumes rises into view. The bells get LOUDER.

The lens zooms out, revealing half-human chimeras wearing shreds of clothing. Around their waists, each wears a string of large, almost obscenely placed, brass cow bells.

The animal-men are all visible; they cluster together. The camera zooms in even tighter to capture surface detail.

In unison, the beasts start to jump up and down wildly. The NOISE of the BELLS and HORNS becomes overwhelming, frightening. Children CRYING and SCREAM.

The lens zooms tight on the face of one beast in particular, one noticeably smaller than the others, but with a more vicious visage. Gnarled horns for teeth, giant red eyes. This one jumps with greater animation.

As the monster's face comes into focus, it suddenly turns toward the camera, stares for a second, then the creature breaks out of the pack and heads directly toward the camera, raising animal-skin arms with vicious claws.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOME OF JEFFREY TODD - OFFICE - NIGHT

A tablet computer held up by a man's hand replays the final scene of the video.

JEFFREY TODD, late 30s, private-college professorial, sits at his home office desk, cluttered with scholarly books and papers. He lays the tablet screen-up on the desk.

His slightly younger, Native American fiancée, CATHERINE BROWN, stands behind him. Clearly, the footage has shaken her.

CATHERINE

Last month?

JEFFREY

First Monday in March. He goes to that festival every year. Like clockwork.

CATHERINE

So why are we just getting this now?

JEFFREY

A better question...who sent it?

CATHERINE

It wasn't Jan?

Jeffrey points to the return address on the email containing the video attachment. Catherine leans in to see, can't, gives up.

JEFFREY

See that? Dot-R.U. Russia. Not Bulgaria.

CATHERINE

So maybe he went back to Petersburg.

(MORE)

CATHERINE (cont'd)
He loves it there.

JEFFREY
Loved. You remember what the Russian Academy thought of his ideas last time he was there.

CATHERINE
And their ideas are what? Sane? You've said many times how off the wall that astro-archaeology or archaeo-astronomy or whatever is.

Jeffrey laughs: she's right!

JEFFREY
Yeah, all that Neo-Paganism. Still, this doesn't make sense. The video is from the festival. *Pes ponedelnik*. There's something odd about it.

CATHERINE
Gee...men dressing up in animal skin costumes with cowbells on, jumping up and down. What's odd about that?

JEFFREY
You know what I mean.

CATHERINE
Look, Jeff. I know how paranoid you can get, but there's no point in getting worked up.

Catherine closer to him, strokes his hair. Jeffrey turns to look up at her.

JEFFREY
(smiles)
Yet.

Jeffrey stands, clicks off the tablet and wraps his arm around Catherine. He deftly pulls her long black hair to one side, leans over and kisses her on a very specific spot on the back of her neck.

She swoons and pulls Jeffrey out of his office by one hand. He hits the light switch with his other one.

JEFFREY (cont'd)
(audible whisper)
But we're not married yet!

INT. HOME OF JEFFREY TODD - KITCHEN - DAY

Jeffrey stands at an espresso machine in boxers and T-shirt. Catherine enters, dressed for work in black skinny pants and a silk button-up blouse.

CATHERINE

Just a double shot. I'm running a little late. Some of us don't have plum academic sinecures.

JEFFREY

Your choice, as I recall.

Jeffrey pulls a shot of espresso into a small cup, places it on the kitchen island in front of her. She kisses him on the cheek appreciatively.

CATHERINE

You're too good to me.

JEFFREY

I know.

She takes a sip.

CATHERINE

Perfect...

She smiles with pleasure, then notices her husband's furrowed brow.

CATHERINE (cont'd)

You're really worried about him, aren't you?

JEFFREY

I just don't get the Russian email address. And no message?

CATHERINE

What if like the video *is* the message? You know: like there's something hidden in it that he wants you to see. He would do something like that.

JEFFREY

I'll look at it again when I get to my office.

CATHERINE
It's got to be from him Who else? He
loves those rituals.

JEFFREY
I'm missing something. Jan is always
seeking some mystical angle. Me, I
guess I'm a rationalist.

CATHERINE
Then why do you want to marry a crazy
Mohegan girl?

JEFFREY
Woman. Simple. Ph.D. In Shamanism, no
less.

CATHERINE
"Indigenous Religion," please. And
it's not like I'm using it for
anything.

JEFFREY
Well, there's always your day job...

Catherine stands up and politely puts her espresso cup in
the sink.

CATHERINE
Whither must I now go.

JEFFREY
O.K. You whither away. I'll go back
to campus post office again to see if
Jan's artifact ever came. He didn't
tell me what it was. Maybe there's a
connection to the clip.

CATHERINE
But maybe get dressed first?

Catherine hugs him tightly, then slaps him on the rump,
pulls away and heads out the kitchen door.

JEFFREY
I wish I'd thought of that.

INT. COLLEGE MAILROOM - DAY

Jeffrey stands impatiently at a mailroom counter littered
with envelopes and packages of various sizes.

A working STUDENT emerges through a swinging door, carrying an 8-inch cubical cardboard box.

The box is severely bent and torn. Packing tape is falling off. A flap is partially open.

The Student drops it on the counter in front of Jeffrey. THUMP! No apology.

STUDENT

Here ya go.

Jeffrey inspects the package closely, eager but clearly disappointed.

JEFFREY

How long has this been here? Looks like it was sent over a month ago.

STUDENT

Got me.

Jeffrey examines the CUSTOMS TAG on the package, then pokes at the rips. He glowers at the kid as if its condition was his fault.

JEFFREY

Be nice if someone had left me a note or something. You know, like maybe so I knew it was here?

STUDENT

Yeah.

(walking away)

It would.

INT. JEFFREY'S CAMPUS OFFICE - DAY

Jeffrey's office is presentable: orderly bookshelves, a few papers and folders lying about. Maps of Eastern Europe, photographs of archaeological sites hang on the wall.

One area of the wall is devoted to charts of ancient alphabetic and hieroglyphic symbols.

Jeffrey sits at his desk holding a roughly oval limestone tablet with markings carved into it in one hand, his phone in the other.

JEFFREY

...No, he could never send the original, but still...There was no note with it. Strange. It's addressed to you, too, by the way...Yeah, I'll bring it home... It's got some sort of writing, but like there's also a carved animal-man...

(chuckles)

OK, animal-woman. Maybe. Whatever. In a way, kind of like the Bulgarian kukeri except much earlier. Like a few thousand years? OK... Me too.

Jeffrey clicks off his phone. He examines the object more closely.

THE TABLET

Ancient runic characters inscribed all over the object's surface with a crudely carved image of a person-like thing with horns and giant teeth and claws. Short diagonal lines on the outline suggest fur.

JEFFREY

Holy shit, Jan!

He stares at a map of ancient Thrace, then re-wraps the tablet and places it back in the box, places it his desk drawer and locks it.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE JEFFREY'S OFFICE - DAY

Jeffrey is locking the door to his office when he hears the voice of the Department Chair, ARNOLD PAUL, mid-60s, neat white hair, slight paunch, classic horn-rimmed glasses.

ARNOLD (O.C.)

Jeffrey, hold up!

Jeffrey turns to greet him.

JEFFREY

Hello, Arnold. What's up?

ARNOLD

The Department received some good news about your funding. It's not as much as we'd hoped--

JEFFREY

That's great! Anything is better than nothing. Thank you, Arnold.

ARNOLD

Listen, have you heard from Jan, by the way? Even though he's left, his recommendation was critical.

JEFFREY

That's a good question. I think he's in Bulgaria now, but you know Jan. Always a little mysterious, right?

Paul and Jeffrey start to head in opposite directions.

ARNOLD

Right. Well, if you hear from him, give him the news. We're looking forward to your research.

INT. BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES LIBRARY - DAY

SUPER: Sofia, Bulgaria

In the lobby of the august Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, MARGI STOYANOVA, a researcher in her mid-40s, stands close to PROFESSOR ALEX MARAZOV, early 60s, a greying, distinguished academician. Marazov speaks loudly in English into a mobile phone. He has a faint East European accent.

MARAZOV

...I'm terribly sorry, Jeffrey, no one is telling you sooner... Yes, skiing. After the festival... But this time... There's really nothing you can do, Jeffrey. No, he hasn't been found... Oh, I see. Well, up to you. We send our con-do-len-ces -- the correct word? To Catherine, too. Margi and me...Yes, of course. Ciao.

Marazov clicks off the phone. Margi is puzzled.

MARGI

(in Bulgarian)

He wants to come early? Why?

Marazov and Margi walk out from the hushed library into the cacophony on November 15th Street.

EXT. - SOFIA STREET - DAY - CONTINUOUS

[All dialogue between Marazov and Margi is in Bulgarian with subtitles.]

MARAZOV

He didn't seem to believe me about
Jan's accident.

MARGI

Why not? Hadn't he heard?

Marazov points toward the pastry cafe on the other side of the busy street. The two scientists tempt fate by darting into a temporary break in the two-way four-lane traffic.

MARAZOV

(shouting over the
traffic)

Think about it: who would bother to
notify anyone at Barnett? And who--

One wreck of a car swerves to avoid Margi and HONKS. Its driver CURSES loudly in Turkish.

MARGI

Turks!

INT. PASTRY CAFE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Marazov and Margi step into the sumptuous cafe. Gauche, faux fin-de-siècle Vienna. Marazov heads aggressively for an open table by a large window, his favorite. Margi waves an unnecessary apology to the uninterested waiter, then follows Marazov. They sit.

MARAZOV

Are we prepared for him?

MARGI

Not really. I can see if Sabina can
take care of him until the American
University guys can arrange things.

The waiter appears, holding two enormous laminated menus. Marazov waves them away.

MARAZOV

(to waiter)

Just two coffees.

(to Margi)

Rakia?

Margi nods "no".

MARAZOV (cont'd)
Has he ever been down to Tatul?
Perpereikon?

MARGI
I don't think so. You know he'll want
to know about those inscriptions. And
he'll want to see the actual tablets.

MARAZOV
Maybe you could take care of that?
You know: steer him away from those
crazy ideas of Jan's. Otherwise,
he'll make our lives miserable.

MARGI
(smirks)
Sabina will take care of him...if she
wants me to approve her thesis.

INT. CATHERINE'S SUBARU OUTBACK - DAY - TRAVELING

Catherine leans over the wheel, trying to read the numerous
highway signs as they get closer to the airport. She sees
the exit for Bradley International.

CATHERINE
Ahh, here we are...Look, Jeffrey, I'm
going to try one last time to tell
you how I really feel about your
rushing off like this. Don't I have a
say in it?

JEFFREY
Of course you do. But you've known--

CATHERINE
That you were going, sure. But not so
soon. And what about me? About us?
Weren't we thinking about getting
married or something?

JEFFREY
I'll be back before you know it, I
swear. I have to find out what
happened to him. And, to be honest,
what happened to his research. I've
got to make sure it's safe.

CATHERINE

Of course I support you, Jeffrey.
It's just that--

JEFFREY

Cath, you know he'd do it for me.
And... something else, a little
weird. I got the feeling Marazov is
trying to keep me away. Not sure why.

CATHERINE

Maybe because I asked him to?

Jeffrey does a double-take, then realizes she's kidding.

JEFFREY

You saw that video, and the tablet.
If he really was in some sort of
skiing accident, that would have been
a few weeks ago, right? OK, the
tablet I get - Bulgarian post is
dreadfully slow. But an email?

CATHERINE

Maybe someone sent it for him?

JEFFREY

Oh, like he knew he was going to go
missing? If he really is.

Catherine frowns at the sarcasm.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

Look. I think you were right. You
said the video was the message. So is
the tablet. I just don't know how.

EXT. BRADLEY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

Catherine pulls into an open slot by the PASSENGER DROP-OFF
area and parks.

Both get out, Jeffrey walks to the back of the car and opens
the hatchback. He pulls out his well-worn suitcase and drags
it over to the walkway, leaves it there and walks back to
the car. Catherine closes the hatchback.

CATHERINE

Still time.

JEFFREY

For what?

CATHERINE

Oh, I don't know. Stay here. Elope.
Then go in the fall like we planned.

JEFFREY

Cath...

CATHERINE

I get it. Believe me.
(covers a mock yawn)
Miss me at least?

JEFFREY

We'll see.

Jeffrey wraps his arms around Catherine and kisses her tightly on the lips, then tries to break away. She holds him close, won't let him go.

CATHERINE

I'd hate to see you miss your plane.

She lets him go, smiles at him. Through moist eyes.

Jeffrey turns and walks toward the airport entrance. He stops, turns back, and blows her a kiss. She "catches" the kiss on an extended middle finger -- a little in-joke.

He and the suitcase disappear inside the airport.

INT. SOFIA - MARAZOV'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The walls and surfaces of Marazov's comfortable apartment are covered with examples of primitive Balkans art and jewelry, along with awards, framed clippings, photographs of archaeological digs, teams and objects.

A couple of photographs of a much younger Marazov and his wife, TEODORA, in front of banners reading, in Bulgarian, "Marazov for President - Communist Party".

Dinner is long over. Nowhere is free of the bluish haze of cigarette smoke. A small group of mostly men lounge around a dinner table littered with glasses, bottles of wine and rakia, uncleared plates, ashtrays.

Marazov holds forth, as Teodora walks softly to the guests offering dark RED grapes and hunks of Bulgarian cheeses. Jeffrey takes a small handful as she passes him.

[All conversation at the table is in English, for Jeffrey's sake.]

MARAZOV

Russians always think we Bulgarians owe them something. But who taught you how to write?

ISAK GINZBURG, early 60s, young-looking, with sharp, East European Jewish features, grins slyly but raises his voice.

GINZBURG

The Soviets called me a Jew, not a Russian. "Yevrey." And how old is Hebrew?

MARAZOV

Ah. But did they not have to leave Egypt to become a nation?

GINZBURG

So?

MARAZOV

The discoveries in Gradenishta. It now seems Egyptian hieroglyphics may have come from here.

GINZBURG

(angrily)

Nonsense. Bullshit. More Bulgarian nationalism.

(to Jeffrey)

So what do you think of this shit our Communist host puts on the table with the wonderful grapes, Professor Todd? Do you think the first writing really comes from Thrace? Oh, excuse me, I mean Bulgaria?

Teodora steps into the charged line of sight between Ginzburg and Jeffrey, **offering a plate of large BLUE grapes.**

TEODORA

Boys?

SABINA NIKOLOVA, 30, reaches over to take the plate.

Ginzburg leans forward to look at Jeffrey around Teodora, but Jeffrey chooses to lean back for the same purpose. Then they both switch, again missing each other.

The third time, Ginzburg leans forward again while Jeffrey keeps his position.

JEFFREY

Jan...Larson seems to have thought
so. But--

GINZBURG

(grins)

And look what happened to him!

Jeffrey freezes. Teodora, Margi and Sabina, Margi's graduate researcher, gasp simultaneously. The smoke in the room magically disappears. Everyone is staring at Ginzburg.

GINZBURG (cont'd)

(looking at Marazov)

OK, not funny. But Alex himself

(points at Marazov)

told that Professor Larson claimed he
could decipher those scratchings.

Then the next thing we know...

Jeffrey turns to Marazov, then back to Ginzburg.

JEFFREY

"The next thing we know" what?

GINZBURG

I don't know. Skiing accident? In
March? Pamporovo? Come on! Who gets
lost on Pamporovo? Little tit of a
mountain. So where the fuck is he?

Sabina, sitting next to the American, puts the plate of blue grapes directly in front of him, then tugs at his sleeve. He turns toward her, sees the grapes, and impolitely takes a large handful.

Sabina watches him like a cat. Jeffrey catches her gaze, then wolfs them down, almost in defiance.

Ginzburg and Marazov continue to amp up their argument, now in loud, slurred RUSSIAN, MOS.

SABINA

Do not worry about what he is
saying - Isak. Professor Larson -
Jan - went skiing at Pamporovo.

JEFFREY

Near Smolyan, right?

Sabina affirms in the Bulgarian way, shaking her head from side to side instead of nodding.

JEFFREY (cont'd)
Oh, I thought it was.

SABINA
It is...Oh, I am sorry. You know in Bulgaria, for yes we do this:

Sabina demonstrates the unique Bulgarian nod, from side to side instead of up and down.

JEFFREY
Oh yeah, forgot where I was. Go on.

SABINA
Right after the *kukeri* festival, I think. He goes every year. But then some kind of avalanche. They must wait until the snow melts.

JEFFREY
It hasn't melted yet? And wouldn't the story be on the TV news or Internet or something?

The heated ARGUMENT between Ginzburg and Marazov grows louder. Ginzburg stands up, glass clenched in hand aggressively. Sabina has to raise her voice.

SABINA
Pay no attention to them. They do this whenever Isak visits from Moscow. Too much rakia.

Sabina points toward the empty bottle and a second, half-full one at the other end of the table.

Ginzburg rudely shouts toward Jeffrey from the other end of the table.

GINZBURG
American! You did not answer my question. And do not tell me you do not know! Why else are you coming here?

MARAZOV
(muffled)
Yes...why?

TEODORA
Isak, calm down. He has only just found out. He may not realize how clever and amusing your rudeness is.
(MORE)

TEODORA (cont'd)
(to her husband)
Alex, let us get Professor Todd home safely.

MARAZOV
(to Teodora)
Good idea. It's late.
(to Jeffrey)
Jeffrey, Teodora will call you an Uber.

Teodora scrambles to find a phone. Ginzburg walks unsteadily toward Jeffrey as he puts on his jacket. Sabina sidles closer to the newcomer as if to protect him.

GINZBURG
Zhefrii Frankovich, da? Your...
colleague Professor Larson speaks highly of your Balkans research. We must continue our discussion. Please forgive this bit of... theater. Alex and I have long history.

Jeffrey smiles and nods. Ginzburg extends a wobbly hand, Jeffrey shakes it. No harm, no foul.

SABINA
I'll take him downstairs to wait.

MARGI
Good-night, Jeffrey. Please remember to come by the institute tomorrow.

Jeffrey nods, then waves good-bye to everyone in general.

JEFFREY
(in Bulgarian)
Of course. Good-night, everyone. And thank you.

He turns and lets Sabina escort him out into the hall. An old metal door CREAKS and CLANGS as the elevator cab arrives to pick them up.

INT. CAR (SOFIA) - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Jeffrey relaxes in the plush back seat of an Uber Black BMW. He stares out the window at the upmarket neighborhood of high-rise apartment buildings. The DRIVER, a grizzled man in his late 50s, checks his passenger in the rear view mirror.

DRIVER
(in passable English)
Your first time?

Jeffrey continues to look out the window.

DRIVER (cont'd)
In Sofia, I mean?

Jeffrey returns from his reverie.

JEFFREY
Wha--? Oh, no. I lived here once.
Briefly, and a long time ago.

DRIVER
During Zhivkov? You are so young.

JEFFREY
Oh, no, not that long ago.

DRIVER
Do you know where you are?

JEFFREY
Not really.

DRIVER
It is called Red Poppy district.
Cherven mak. Red because old
Communist bosses are living here.
(laughs too loudly)
Not like Red Light district, eh?
(laughs again)
So they are not Communist now, since
the changes.

Jeffrey sits up.

JEFFREY
Oh, really? What are they now?

DRIVER
You American?

No answer.

DRIVER (cont'd)
They're worse. Capitalist.

The car passes a lavish, gaudy hotel, where several thick Bulgarian mafia types with eye-candy at their sides are smoking and hanging around a row of black luxury cars.

JEFFREY
I see your point.

Jeffrey turns back to looking out his side window.

INT. SOFIA - JEFFREY'S APARTMENT - DAY

Midday sun pours in through a window in the living room of a small, nondescript Bulgarian apartment. A small television blares an oppressive BALKANS EUROTRASH MUSIC VIDEO.

Jeffrey wakes up on the couch, wearing only a T-shirt and boxer briefs. His pants and shirt are crumpled on the floor a few feet away.

He shields his eyes from the bright sun, then rubs them. He sits up and looks around: where am I?

He tries to stand up, but his legs are listless.

Jeffrey's face starts to look worried. This is not just a hangover. He looks down at his toes and wiggles them: they can move. But he has no strength, no power.

The music video abruptly changes into the loud CLANGING of COW BELLS. A split-screen view of a TALKING HEAD opposite a montage of shots from some Bulgarian folk festival. A title on the bottom of the screen reads "Shiroka Laka"

The cow bells fade away. Several men in animal skin costumes - *kukeri* - like those in the emailed video link are speaking in Bulgarian with an INTERVIEWER holding a microphone. They each hold their large, elaborate costume heads in their arms.

Jeffrey stops trying to stand up, strains to look at the TV. Behind the *kukeri*, out of sharp focus, stands a tall blond man with a camera, tracking the interview. Jan?

Frustrated and immobile, Jeffrey reaches for his phone on the table, but in doing so, the table becomes unbalanced, causing a glass of water to spill.

He releases his hand, but the abrupt change in motion causes the glass to fall off. It SHATTERS. His phone lands several feet away. Jeffrey falls off the couch.

JEFFREY
Fuck!

Jeffrey drags himself on the floor to get to his phone. The program on the television switches to an oppressively LOUD COMMERCIAL for a Bulgarian laundry detergent.

In a panic, he scrolls through his address book and dials a number.

INT. ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM - MARGI'S OFFICE - SAME

Margi and Sabina sit next to each other at a round table with books and stacks of old dusty packets of field notes. An analogue wall clock reads 1:05.

MARGI
(in Bulgarian)
I can't wait any longer. Perhaps he
misunderstood.

Margi stands and starts to put on her jacket. A mobile phone RINGS, she fishes in her pocket, pulls it out, checks the Caller ID, answers.

INTERCUT BETWEEN MARGI AND JEFFREY

MARGI (cont'd)
(in English now)
Jeffrey! Hi. Where are you?

Margi looks at Sabina, redundantly mouths the name "Jeffrey". Sabina nods Bulgarian-style.

JEFFREY
(slowly)
Hi Margi. I'm sorry. Something... I
just woke up, I can't stand up for
some reason. I...don't know what's
happening.

Margi puts the phone speaker on.

MARGI
Oh God! What do you mean, you can't
stand up? Are you sick?

JEFFREY
I don't know. I don't think so. But I
can't control my legs. I don't know
how to describe it.

MARGI
Do you think it's just jet lag?

JEFFREY

No, I'm not tired or anything. And I felt fine last night.

MARGI

You didn't drink very much. And we all ate the same thing.

Jeffrey ponders this for a second.

QUICK FLASH

SABINA'S eyes focus on JEFFREY'S hand, full of BLUE grapes.

BACK TO SCENE

JEFFREY

I guess I'll just--

The TV screen returns to the interviews with the kukeri players, only this time, the monster's costume head is still on. It is the same visage as the one at the end of the video clip sent to Jeffrey.

He looks up, sees it, and suddenly his arms go limp. He can no longer hold his phone - it drops from his hand.

END INTERCUT

Jeffrey lies on the floor next to the overturned coffee table. His phone lies on the rug next to him. Margi's muted voice comes out of the phone.

MARGI

Jeffrey? What just happened? Are you alright?

JEFFREY

(weakly; panicked)

I don't know. I can barely move, I dropped my phone.

MARGI

This is terrible. We must get you to the doctor. Sabina is already on her way to help you. You are in the same apartment as last time?

JEFFREY

No hospital! I just need help.

MARGI

Do you think you can get to the door
to open it for Sabina?

Jeffrey tries to move his legs, they barely budge.

JEFFREY

I don't know.

Jeffrey looks up at the TV. He does not notice that Margi has hung up. The interviewer is still talking to the same creature, who is now ham-acting vicious for the camera.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

(to his phone)

Kukeri!

Jeffrey's right leg suddenly shoots straight out, surprising him. Then his left one also straightens, almost causing him to become unstable. Both arms then stick out rigidly, like some awkward sci-fi robot. He is not in control.

Then just as quickly, the spasms stop. His extremities relax to normal tension. Jeffrey looks at his arms and legs as if to see if they are really his. He takes his pulse.

He reaches for his phone, picks it up, then tries to stand up. Not yet steady. He takes only one step before he cuts his foot on the broken glass and it starts to bleed.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

OW! Shit!

He hobbles down the hall to the bathroom, cursing.

INT. JEFFREY'S APARTMENT - LATER

The DOORBELL BUZZES. Jeffrey is still dressed only in his underwear. The TV is off. Wobbly but on his feet, he shuffles slowly toward the door, favoring his foot, clumsily bandaged with a washcloth and a shoelace.

Jeffrey arrives at the door, slowly unlocks and opens it. Sabina steps in, looks at him, unkempt and undressed.

SABINA

(relieved)

Oh Jeffrey! I see you can walk. Are
you feeling better? What happened?

JEFFREY

The strangest thing. One minute, it's like I've been totally drained by a vampire, then poof! It goes away.

Sabina inspects his neck.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

What are you doing?

SABINA

Looking for bite marks. What else?

Jeffrey attempts to laugh.

SABINA (cont'd)

Are you sure you're O.K.? I can go with you to the clinic. It's just around--

JEFFREY

No, I will never forget that Sofia clinic. I think I'm alright now.

Jeffrey shakes his feet to prove his point.

SABINA

Maybe a better bandage?

JEFFREY

I think it stopped bleeding.

Sabina eyes his injured foot suspiciously, then shrugs.

SABINA

Listen, Margi said if you're feeling better tomorrow--

JEFFREY

Maybe for now I just need to shower and get dressed. My strength is starting to come back. But this was weird.

SABINA

I'm sure it was. I'll wait here. Just to make sure you're OK.

JEFFREY

(grins)

I'll be fine. But if you want. Thanks for coming over, by the way.

SABINA

We Bulgarians take care of our guests.

EXT./INT. ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM - DAY

Jeffrey and Margi stroll together past ancient stone columns and sculptures in the courtyard of the archaeological museum. Sabina walks a step or two behind them.

MARGI

I'm glad you're feeling O.K. But soon you may not feel quite normal again.

(grins)

I have something I want to show you.

They enter the main hall of the museum through a private door, and stroll past prehistorical exhibits. Margi stops at a new exhibit. In a glass case is an 18-inch high stone prism with strange markings carved into it.

MARGI (cont'd)

(to Jeffrey)

You haven't seen this before. It's new. From Burgas. Chalcolithic.

Jeffrey's face brightens as he recognizes it.

JEFFREY

Wow! So this is it! I remember the announcement. Fantastichno!

Jeffrey walks around the display to examine all four sides of the prism.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

So I guess you realize I'm here because of...Jan. His research...the neolithic tablet from Nova Zagora. Where's that now?

Margi and Sabina look at each other, caught off guard.

MARGI

I'm afraid Professor Kancheva... after Jan-- She decided not to display it. To keep it safe.

JEFFREY

It's not safe here? What about Jan's recent work on it? Can I see it?

Margi looks around nervously. One MAN, out of a handful of visitors, is within earshot. He gets a little too close.

MARGI
Let's go to my office.

Margi walks briskly, Jeffrey limps more slowly, and Sabina trails them up a set of marble stairs.

INT. MUSEUM - MARGI'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Safely inside her office, Margi shuts the door and tests the latch. She gestures to Jeffrey to sit down in a worn leather armchair.

MARGI
You know there is controversy.

JEFFREY
I'm shocked.

MARGI
About the meaning of the inscription.

JEFFREY
Well of co--

MARGI
Jan thought... thinks... there must
be another tablet.

Jeffrey struggles to remain poker-faced.

JEFFREY
Why would he think that?

SABINA
(smiles)
It may be a prediction of some sort.
Jan thought another piece would tell
us if they believed in prophecy.

MARGI
Could it be a warning?

JEFFREY
(to Sabina)
Is there any evidence for this? Did
he leave any notes? He hasn't
published anything. That I've seen.

MARGI

We haven't been able to find any. But he told Sabina about some things she should see. For her thesis.

JEFFREY

Who else is aware of that theory?

MARGI

Well, Alex, of course. But you know what he really thinks of Jan's theories.

JEFFREY

No, I don't. Tell me.

MARGI

Well, Jan isn't always... how do you say? Alex says he plays "fast and loose" with facts. So he thinks it's all nonsense...that there's nothing particularly unusual about it.

Jeffrey gestures to zip his mouth shut. Knowing looks from Margi and Sabina.

JEFFREY

(to Sabina)

What are you "supposed to see"?

SABINA

If you can come with me, we can leave tomorrow morning.

JEFFREY

We? Where?

INT. JEFFREY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jeffrey is stuffing clothes into a backpack when his phone rings. He picks it off the table and answers it.

JEFFREY

Hi. I'm glad you called me back. Let me explain... No, I didn't plan this... She was Jan's student... Right: American University. She might know what he was really looking for. And maybe what happened.

(MORE)

JEFFREY (cont'd)
But she's acting naive...Who knows?
Look, she's picking me up early and
it's late here. I'll call tomorrow.
Promise. I love you...Night.

EXT. TATUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE - DAY

Sabina and Jeffrey stroll around the archaeological site in southeastern Bulgaria - an entire ritual space carved into the rock at the top of a hill.

A few TOURISTS stroll around. Turkish kids from the nearby mahala are playing, oblivious of the site's cultural significance.

By himself, a MAN studies the visible artifacts, takes measurements, snaps detail photos.

After pausing to take in the incredible features of the ancient ritual site, Sabina leads her American colleague directly to an open stone box, about the size and shape of a sarcophagus for a child or small woman.

SABINA
What do you think?

Jeffrey walks around it, then suddenly stops. He bends down to inspect two holes drilled somehow at the bottom of the side that is lower on the hill.

JEFFREY
You're going to tell me Jan thought
it was sacrificial.

SABINA
Children.

JEFFREY
Ritual, sure. Human sacrifice? I
don't think so.

SABINA
Isak says the Scythians maybe.

Jeffrey walks around the stone container again, as Sabina drifts away, leaving him alone. He carefully examines the entire surface, especially the inside.

He stops, then gets down on his knees to examine the inside of the box. As he gets closer, he sees, carved into the stone, an IMAGE OF A HUMAN WITH HORNED ANIMAL FEATURES.

He pulls out his phone and snaps several close-ups of the engraving, then stands up quickly and takes a few more of the whole sepulcher.

He looks around for Sabina. She is standing near the ledge of the ritual space, looking at a clearing about 30 meters below.

Jeffrey walks over to join her, but doesn't get as close.

JEFFREY

Has anyone else seen that?

Sabina steps back and turns toward him, smiling. She points to the various signs for tourists: obviously.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

You know what I mean.

Sabina motions for Jeffrey to get closer to the ledge where she is standing. She points down at the meadow far below.

Jeffrey approaches cautiously.

SABINA

Look down there. What do you see?

Jeffrey takes one step back, then bends forward a little to view the clearing below. He shrugs.

JEFFREY

Nothing. Just a meadow.

He suddenly sees the point of her question.

JEFFREY (cont'd)

OK, why? What did Jan see?

SABINA

He imagined crowds of worshippers.
Waiting. Holding up their children
and small animals.

Jeffrey shakes his head in bemused disbelief.

INT. CAR - SOUTHEASTERN BULGARIA - DAY - TRAVELING

Sabina drives an old Russian Lada fast past the ugly and dilapidated Communist-era buildings of Momchilgrad, while Jeffrey swipes through his phone pictures of the inscribed fantastical being.

Soon, they are driving into the setting sun along a beautiful, curvy, empty country road. The sun is just above the top of the mountains. Sabina speeds up.

JEFFREY

Slow down. This countryside is so beautiful!

SABINA

The sun is going down, and we're going into the dark Rhodopes.

JEFFREY

So? I mean, we are? I thought--

SABINA

Have you driven in these mountains at night? Totally black.

The fields outside the window become a blur. The low sun shines directly into their eyes.

JEFFREY

Did you travel a lot with Jan? I mean, did he take you to--

Suddenly Jeffrey sees a row of goats jump directly onto the road in front of the car. In the middle of the pack is one pure black goat. The car is aiming right at it.

Sabina slams on the brakes and swerves.

Jeffrey places his hands on the dashboard as the car starts to slide sideways.

VISION - JEFFREY'S POV

The accident happens in slow motion. The black goat slowly morphs into the kuker at the end of the video clip. The monstrous face stares right at Jeffrey as he gets closer.

END VISION

Sabina grips the wheel tightly but the car is gliding sideways. It slides off the road into a gully, and stops.

EXT. ROADSIDE - CONTINUOUS

The left front wheel and fender of the car are visibly damaged, but otherwise the car is intact.

Slowly, Jeffrey emerges from the passenger side. The passenger door CREAKS as he opens it. The driver's door doesn't open.

Jeffrey, shaken, looks around for the goats. Nothing.

He then walks around to the driver's side. He forces the door open. Sabina's hand emerges, he takes it and helps her work her way out of the car.

JEFFREY

Are you OK?

SABINA

(checking herself out)

Ye-ess, I think so.

JEFFREY

Great job! I thought you were going to hit them.

SABINA

Hit what?

JEFFREY

The goats. That just jumped in front of us.

SABINA

What goats? I just lost control, the sun was right in my eyes. I couldn't see the road.

JEFFREY

(anxious)

The goats!

Where'd they go?

JEFFREY (cont'd)

The fucking goats! You must have seen them. Maybe eight of them. One was--

Sabina pulls away from Jeffrey to look at the front wheel. She shakes her head. Not in a good way.

SABINA

I'm so sorry, Jeffrey. You were right, I was going too fast. Now what will we do? We'll have to get help.

The SOUND OF A CAR approaching. A late model German sedan pulls off the side of the road near the damaged Lada.

The DRIVER gets out and walks toward Jeffrey and Sabina. It is the man who was walking around Tatul.

DRIVER
(in English)
Is everyone alright?

SABINA
Yes, but the car...look at it. And my
phone does not work here.

DRIVER
That is OK. I know mechanic in
Kardzhali. He will tow this and fix.
I can drive you guys into town, where
is the good hotel Perperikon.

JEFFREY
Were you just at Tatul?

DRIVER
Yes. Fascinating, it is not? The
engineering. Well, we go now, before
it gets dark.

INT. HOTEL BAR - KARDZHALI - NIGHT

Sabina and Jeffrey sit at a fancy hotel bar table with two
glasses of rakia and a bottle of water.

SABINA
We were lucky that man came along.

JEFFREY
Yes. What a coincidence. Why do you
think he was Russian?

SABINA
His accent. The clothes. Just, you
know...we know the Russian style.

Sabina takes a sip of water.

SABINA (cont'd)
You know, Jeffrey, a twin room would
have been cheaper. I could have--

JEFFREY
(grins)
Two rooms is fine. Don't worry about
it. Mr. Fulbright will pay me back.