

FADE IN:

EXT. THE VALLEY - DAY

The outline of snow-capped mountains shimmers against a lapis blue sky.

In the distance, on a ridge overlooking a valley, a MAN sits on a boulder, looking at the opposite side of the gorge.

He watches a WOMAN walk swiftly up a path on the side of the cliff. A light veil covers her head and shoulders. Her silhouette looks nimble and girlish.

Her profile shows for a second as she pulls back a lock of hair. She's beautiful. This is ZAPHIRA.

The man - ABDUR - is barely seventeen, with light, bright eyes, dark curly hair, and a handsome face. He wraps his prayer beads around his fingers as he gazes at Zaphira.

Zaphira approaches a cluster of mud houses rising from the soil. A village perched on top of the ridge. Below the houses, a pebbledash cliff. She enters a narrow passage carved into the side of the mountain.

Abdur has made up his mind. He stands up and begins to scramble down.

INT. THE CAVE - DAY

The cave is semi-dark. It's large, more than a single chamber. Walls are stacked with boxes, sacks of grains, provisions. In the distance, a number of rifles stand propped against a wall.

ZAPHIRA pants from the climb. A film of sweat covers her skin. She removes her veil, dips it in a jug of water, and pats her arms, neck and chest. Her skin glistens.

Behind her, silhouetted against the entrance, a figure slides in. Zaphira senses his presence and turns round. Abdur moves into a shaft of light. Still, he watches her.

Zaphira rapidly covers her shoulders, the veil adhering to her skin. For a moment the two of them look at each other. Silent but for their breathing.

Abdur moves closer. He too is covered in sweat. Zaphira hesitates, then slowly hands him the pitcher. Their fingers brush for a second.

A SUDDEN NOISE startles them. A trapdoor on the roof of the next chamber is being opened. MEN'S VOICES. A ladder is lowered. They look alarmed.

ABDUR

Go!

Zaphira quickly wraps herself in the veil. Abdur motions her out. She points at a pile of empty burlap sacks behind him.

ZAPHIRA

I need those!

Abdur grabs a bundle of sacks and hands them to Zaphira.

ABDUR

Quick!

She runs off towards the exit. Voices get closer in the next chamber as MEN descend the ladder.

Abdur grabs a second ladder resting against the wall and climbs up it. He reaches another wooden trapdoor in the ceiling, opens it, and exits the cave without being seen.

INT. COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

He emerges from the trapdoor into the empty room of an abandoned house. A couple of chickens peck on the mud floor. He walks out into the yard.

EXT. COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

He heads briskly out of the gate of the compound into an alley. Turning a corner, he stumbles into his friend, MANSUR. Same age, fuller face, stronger build. A flash of guilt crosses Abdur's face.

MANSUR

Where have you been?... I've been
looking all over for you!

He doesn't wait an answer. He grabs Abdur's arm.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

Hurry! They're about to go!

The two boys run along the narrow alley, skirting a loaded donkey pushed by an old man.

INT. THE HUIJIRA - DAY

The room is smoky, packed with turbanned men sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor. They work quickly in silence.

Hands open boxes, pull out bullets. Fingers move nimbly along the barrels, cleaning, adjusting.

Boxes are passed around and stowed, satchels are tightly packed. Final preparations for a military operation, perhaps a terrorist attack.

Abdur and Mansur stoop under the low archway and enter. They sit down awkwardly in a corner, looking around, eager for a task. Nobody pays them attention.

MALIK AZAM, the village Chief, is a tall, handsome man. He stands and takes in the room with a glance.

MALIK

Brothers, let's pray to Allah for his guidance during our mission. May we come back victorious in his glorious name.

Everyone kneels, touches their forehead to the ground repeatedly, invoking Allah. The two boys join in.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Should any of us lose his life in the jihad, he will have fulfilled his duty and enter Paradise. From that day he will enjoy eternal bliss and hundreds of virgins will satisfy his every desire.

The men are absorbed in prayer. Faces tense, eyes shut, as they consider losing their lives.

Abdur digs Mansur in the ribs at Malik's words. Mansur knocks a gun standing against a wall. It falls. A big man in a large turban, BASHIR - turns around and sees the boys. He makes an angry gesture, motioning them to be still.

Malik has heard the commotion and notices Bashir's gesture.

MALIK (CONT'D)

What is it, Bashir?

BASHIR

Nothing. My son Mansur and his cousin Abdur are here.....

Abdur straightens up, serious-faced.

ABDUR

Malik Azam, we want to come along and fight the infidels.

Malik looks at the boys with a mischievous smile.

MALIK

That's good: the two of you are ready to become mujahaddins! Come closer, let me take a good look at you.

The two boys timidly step forward under his gaze. The men are smiling as well.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Razak and Bashir, you must be proud of your sons. Look at them... They can't wait to become muhaj and serve Allah...

RAZAQ, Abdur's elderly father, and Bashir look at each other uneasily.

Malik strokes his beard, amused. He prods Mansur's skinny legs with the tip of a rifle.

MALIK (CONT'D)

.... Although I must say these chicken legs look too thin for two day's march over the pass...

The rest of the men chuckle. Mansur straightens up and tries to look as fierce as possible.

MANSUR

Please, Malik Azam. We're strong and know how to fight. We're ready for jihad.

Malik shakes his head.

MALIK

You two stay and look after the village. Fetch the women from the orchards. They'd better stay out of the fields. Go on now. And don't come back in here again.

The men resume their preparations. Abdur and Mansur struggle to contain their disappointment.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - DAY

Abdur and Mansur run along the alleys, skirting off donkeys, people, children running behind a ball...

The place has a timeless quality.

In the distance one can see young boys herding cows and sheep up the slope where the pasture is greener.

Small children come up the steep path, bent in two under the weight of the firewood they carry on their back.

A couple of elderly men dusted in flour pour grain into a funnel. The flour sprinkles out from two prehistoric millstones along a hand hewn wooded channel that guides the grain into burlap sacks.

Mansur, burning with humiliation, walks ahead, head low, fuming. Abdur catches up, mimicking a pleading voice.

ABDUR

Pleeeaaaaze Maaalik... We're ready
for jihaaad!!!

MANSUR

It was your idea to go in there!

ABDUR

(laughing)
I didn't think you'd whine like a
girl!

Mansur grabs a stone and feigns throwing it at his friend. Abdur laughs and runs off.

They career down the track, past the last mud houses, screeching like children.

Below them, along a green slope that descends into the river course, close to a watermill, a group of WOMEN is visible in the distance. The women pick fruit from the walnut, apricot and apple trees and gather them into large baskets.

EXT. THE ORCHARD - MOMENTS LATER

The women climb the track leading up to the village. They carry heavy baskets on their backs, filled with apples and apricots. They wear colourful peasant clothes with bright scarves on their heads.

Among them is Zaphira, Malik's daughter.

EXT. ON THE TRACK - DAY

Mansur and Abdur spot her. Mansur grins.

MANSUR

There she is!

He hurtles down the slope. Abdur looks anxious and then launches down after him.

CUT TO:

Mansur, leading, careers onto the path in front of Zaphira. She's come up from the orchard and is unloading her basket into a sack strapped across a donkey. Abdur stops behind Mansur, uncomfortable.

The girl keeps her eyes to the ground, struggling with the heavy basket. Mansur steps forward.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

Let me help.

She shakes her head, keeping hold of the basket. She avoids Abdur's eyes but there's a palpable tension between them.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

Don't be stubborn.

He struggles to get the basket from her, hands intentionally touching hers. Abdur instinctively steps forward.

ABDUR

Let her go, she doesn't want your help.

Zaphira turns towards Abdur on an impulse and their eyes meet for a fleeting moment. She blushes. The basket falls and the apples roll on the ground.

ZAPHIRA

(to Mansur)

Look what you've done! Go away.

SHIRIN, Zaphira's mother, comes up the path with her heavy basket. More women follow. Shirin's face is weathered but she has her daughter's green eyes, the same fine features.

SHIRIN

What's going on here?

Mansur and Zaphira kneel, picking up apples.

ABDUR

Nothing. Mansur was trying to help.

SHIRIN looks at the apples, the boys. She doesn't like these two being so close to her daughter. She wipes the sweat from her face and unloads her basket into the burlap sack.

She and the other women get on their knees and start picking up the apples.

SHIRIN

(sternly to Zaphira)

Get off home.

Zaphira covers her head with the scarf and moves off. Shirin shakes her head.

SHIRIN (CONT'D)

(to Mansur)

She can carry a basket without your help.

MANSUR

I was only...

SHIRIN

I warn you, if I catch you around my daughter once more, I'll tell Malik Azam. Then you and your Dad's hopes will be pickled, won't they?

Abdur watches Shirin load her basket and hit the donkey with a stick. She starts up the path. The rest of the women follow, ignoring the boys.

EXT. ALONG THE MOUNTAIN - LATER

The two boys run and leap along the ridge, hopping from rock to rock like mountain goats. Below them a stream the colour of jade snakes along the mountain folds, shimmering in the light.

CUT TO:

Abdur rests on a rock. Mansur catches up with him. He's excited and giggly.

MANSUR

Hey... I got close to her, I could smell her skin!

Abdur tries to smile, uneasy.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

(mischievously)

I could make out her breasts under her dress. Isn't she beautiful?

Abdur shrugs.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

(teasing)

Hey, Abdur. I won't have to wait to go to heaven to have the most beautiful virgin take care of me!

ABDUR

Has your father paid a visit to Malik already?

MANSUR

Yes, he went the other day. He put
down his offer.

Abdur snorts, shaking his head.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

What is it?

ABDUR

It's not clever to rush when you
ask for a girl's hand. It raises
the price of the bride.

MANSUR

(worried)

What do you mean?

ABDUR

If you're too much in hurry, Malik
will think there's something wrong
with you. He might think you lack
something.

MANSUR

I don't lack anything.

ABDUR

(teasing)

How do you know? You haven't spent a
night with a woman yet! You still
have to find out whether everything
you need is in the right place!

Abdur pokes his friend between his legs, laughing hard. He
begins to scramble down the path towards the stream. Mansur
bounds after him.

INT. MALIK AZAM'S HOUSE - DAY

Zaphira crouches in the kitchen flattening naan bread with her
hands. Her YOUNGER SISTER puts the bread inside the tandoori
oven, seeing that there's enough wood burning inside. Shirin
appears from behind a curtain

SHIRIN

Quick, bring the bread. Your father's
ready to go.

Zaphira fills a plate with rice and meat, takes out a few naan
breads from the oven, and goes into the next room.

Malik and a couple of his OLDER SONS are packing their weapons
in neat bundles. Zaphira places the food on the oil cloth.

Malik smiles at her. He has a soft spot for his beautiful daughter.

MALIK

Sit down with me a moment.

The girl sits on a cushion next to Malik. He brushes her head with his hand.

MALIK (CONT'D)

How beautiful you look: fresh as the first snow on the mountains. Lucky is the man who gets you as his bride.

Zaphira frowns and turns away.

MALIK (CONT'D)

(laughing)

What now?

ZAPHIRA

I don't want to be anybody's bride yet. You know I don't want to leave home, father.

MALIK

Soon you'll have to. But I'm not going to give you away for just a few sacks of grains! If Bashir wants you for Mansur, he'll have to pay more than he offered. Besides, your mother tells me that boy behaves impudently.

ZAPHIRA

(shrugs)

He acts like he owns me already. I don't like him near me.

MALIK

(amused)

That's good, that's good, my pretty one. A modest girl shouldn't let any man come close to her.

ZAPHIRA

Besides, he smells like a goat.

Malik roars with laughter, her brothers chuckle. They all find this very funny. Shirin peeks from behind a curtain. Malik pats his belly, laughing hard.

MALIK

(to Shirin)

See?

(MORE)

MALIK (CONT'D)

Your daughter has taken after her father. She's fearless. Her tongue burns like hot coal! Good for you, Zaphira...

She takes her leave and scuttles away to the next room. Shirin grabs her arm.

SHIRIN

(whispering)

Don't think I don't know your game.

ZAPHIRA

What game?

SHIRIN

Don't try and be clever with me. It'll be your father's decision who you marry, not yours.

EXT. ALONG THE MOUNTAIN - LATER

The two boys are still walking briskly along the ridge. The stream flows right beneath them, shadowed by silver poplars.

ABDUR

What about Malik Azam? Am I his herd boy? Looking after his sheep...

MANSUR

(mocking)

We can't manage the march!

ABDUR

I'm ten times stronger than him!

Suddenly a SPLASHING sound, like a body wading into water.

They stop in their tracks and look below. Towards the stream flowing at their feet.

EXT. THE STREAM - CONTINUOUS

A group of EUROPEAN MEN crouch on the sandy bank.

The faces: hard and dirty, exhausted yet alert. Unruly hair, filthy faces, three days' stubble. They're haunted, at the end of their tether.

They've swept off their shirts. Now they splash down into the cold water, wincing at their blistered feet.

EXT. ALONG THE MOUNTAINSIDE - CONTINUOUS

The boys watch the men intently from behind a boulder. Abdur points at:

EXT. THE STREAM - CONTINUOUS

A stack of rifles propped against a tree. Shiny, long, glinting in the sun.

One of the men stands up: CAPTAIN STEWART, late twenties, well muscled, fair-haired.

He looks up at the mountain ridge anxiously, shielding his eyes from the sun. Not a sound, save for the flap of an eagle circling above his head. A decorated lapis pendant hanging onto his chest glints in the sun.

CUT TO:

Two of the men, TROLLOPE and HIGGINS, watch Stewart and exchange a glance.

HIGGINS

He hasn't got a clue.

TROLLOPE

He'll march us over the Hindu Kush before he admits it.

Another stocky man, BARNES, eyes Stewart dismissively.

BARNES

Smug bastard.

Stewart picks up his jacket and motions his men to move.

STEWART

Let's pitch here. We're not that far from the rest of the army. I recognize this place.

The men reluctantly get up, discontent on their faces.

Only now, when Stewart and his men pick up their red uniforms from the river bank along with their rifles do we realise that they are Redcoats of the British Army. This is the 1840's, during the first Anglo-Afghan war.

Stewart and his men are part of the troops leaving Afghanistan after the uprising in Kabul.

EXT. ALONG THE MOUNTAINSIDE - CONTINUOUS

The boys whisper to each other, buzzing with excitement.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

They race along a track, through outskirts, into the village square. It's deserted.

An OLDER WOMAN sweeps the mud floor around her house. Hens and turkeys pick in the dirt, CHILDREN play their games. Not a man in sight.

The boys dart up the path that leads out of the village, climbing the mountainside.

EXT. ON THE PATH TO THE MOUNTAIN - MOMENTS LATER

Just outside the village, the fighters march up in a single line, holding on to their rifles, swords at their waists. Malik leads the way.

Mansur and Abdur run up, panting, excited.

ABDUR

Malik Azam! Stop! We've seen kaffirs!!

MANSUR

Below the round rocks. By the river!

ABDUR

They've guns!

MANSUR

New, big ones!

Malik stops. The rest of the men gather.

MALIK

Kaffirs? How many?

ABDUR

Just a few. Washing in the river.

MANSUR

There may be more behind.

Malik and the men exchange worried looks.

MALIK

(to his men)

What are they doing here?

The boys rush to offer explanations.

ABDUR
I think they're lost.

MANSUR
They look tired. Like they've been
marching a long time.

Malik reflects, then turns to his men.

MALIK
Omar, go and tell Sadar about this.
He has enough men to attack without
us. We must head back. Get the women
and children down in the caves. They
mustn't find us.

He looks at the boys who are waiting for his reaction.

MALIK (CONT'D)
Good work.

The boys grin.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - LATER

Everybody moving around quickly, in a frenzy.

Just above the houses, young boys herd cows and sheep out of the
stone pen. In a cloud of dust, they push the cattle down the
slope, forcefully beating their backs.

CUT TO:

Men hurry down a path that runs below the village along the
mountainside, pushing their horses with them.

CUT TO:

The cattle come tumbling down among the cries of the herders
into the square of the village. Then down the same path that
the men and the horses have taken.

CUT TO:

Women carry the baskets filled with fruit and sacks of flour
inside the houses.

CUT TO:

Men, women and animals crowd the narrow entrances of the various
passages carved into the pebbledash cliff that connects the
village to a warren of caves.

They move quickly, push the animals inside, and soon they all disappear. The village is left empty. A ghost town

INT. COMPOUND - LATER

The empty room where Abdur had re-emerged earlier. The trapdoor open in the middle of the floor.

Abdur and Mansur help pass the last burlap bags of flour and rice to the men below. Then they slide inside the trapdoor and close the lid.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The village is completely deserted and totally silent save for the gloom cries of crows. It has an eerie atmosphere, as if nobody has ever lived here.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Abdur and Mansur climb down the wooden ladder that connects the house to one of the caves. It's very dark. They can barely make out what's around them.

The boys head deeper into the cave. It's crowded with animals: cows, sheep, horses.

A dim light reveals silhouettes around them.

The women huddle together, attending a small fire, preparing food. Among them, Zaphira and Shirin.

Zaphira doesn't turn her head but meets the look of her friend, MUSARRAT, as the boys pass them. The girls exchange a glance.

The boys move further on into the cave. They come upon Malik, seated in a circle with his men. A fire projects eerie shadows on the walls. Men sharpen their swords as they listen to the Khan's words.

Mansur and Abdur, the youngest here, sit down next to their fathers, close to Malik. Their newly-earned position.

MALIK

... They must have got separated from the main army up the pass. Or maybe they're going a different route and there are more behind. It doesn't matter. We'll wait for nightfall and then take them by surprise.

A murmur of approval runs through the audience. Razak, a village elder and Abdur's ageing but proud father, raises his hand to speak.

RAZAQ

I'm not afraid of fighting the infidels, Malik Azam. But I do have a question.

MALIK

Speak, Razaq. You give wise advice.

RAZAQ

We've heard our King gave them his word they can leave in peace. What good is another battle then, when we'll lose many lives? Can't we let them go?

Malik nods slowly, pondering a moment.

MALIK

The King can agree to what he likes. You know they stopped paying us the tribute to pass through our land. If we let them go, they'll think we're cowards. Too weak or too simple. They'll return and use our land and our women as if they belong to them.

Men shake their heads, grunting in agreement. Mansur's father, Bashir, shouts angrily.

BASHIR

Razaq, you heard what they got up to with our women in Kabul. Do you want them bringing their filthy ways to our village?

MALIK

Well said, Bashir!
(mockingly to Razaq)
What got into you, Razaq? How come you're feeling so merciful these days?

Everyone laughs. Razaq shakes his head and tries to accept the joke as gracefully as he can.

A child places a teapot and glasses on the oilcloth. He goes round with a kettle, gently pouring warm water on the men's hands. Another one lays bowls of rice, bread and yoghurt on the floor. The men help themselves with their hands.

ABDUR

Malik Azam, Mansur and I can go out and keep watch on them. We can find out if more have turned up.

Malik looks round, surprised. He had forgotten about Abdur and Mansur.

MALIK

Good. Be careful, though. They
mustn't know we're here.

CUT TO:

Zaphira hands another plate of rice to the boy serving the men. As she does so, she glimpses into the men's cave, sees Abdur in the middle of the circle, the men nodding and smiling at him. A smile curls her lips.

She catches Shirin's severe gaze and quickly resumes her work.

EXT. THE VALLEY - MOMENTS LATER

From the other side of the valley: Abdur and Mansur scramble along the path again. The sun is beginning to set. The mountain is bathed in an orange glow.

CUT TO:

They reach a viewing spot above the English camp. They crouch behind a boulder and look down.

EXT. THE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

Stewart's camp consists of only five or six tents. A handful of men, a few horses. Uniforms are dirty, tents are ripped. A few AFGHAN HANDS help to pitch the last of the tents.

CUT TO:

The disgruntled troops huddle around a fire, breath condensing in the cold.

CUT TO:

Stewart rummages through large wooden boxes holding the troop's supplies by the mess tent. He throws out their contents in a fit of rage.

STEWART

There must be rice!

He kicks an empty box on the ground and repeats in Pashtu to HASSANI, the Afghan cook.

HASSANI

Everything gone, sir. You give orders
to pack enough for five days.

(MORE)

HASSANI (CONT'D)

You say we must travel light so we catch up with the army.

Hassani picks up the mess that Stewart has created.

STEWART

You're bloody thieves, that's what you are. That's why there's nothing left!

CUT TO:

The soldiers exchange a knowing look. They seem to be used to Stewart's fits of temper. Barnes and Higgins watch him darkly.

BARNES

I tried to get him to leave with the others. Oh, no. Him and his ruddy bridges.

HIGGINS

Right. On and on about them.

BARNES

The niggers will burn them now we've gone.

Trollope looks at Stewart who paces up and down shouting in Pashtu to Hassani and his men.

TROLLOPE

And we have to take orders from him.

HIGGINS

(sniggers)

Watch him. He shouts and screams at the dishonest scum like the rest of us. But give him the chance and he'll spend the evenings talking to them rather than us officers.

TROLLOPE

He's gone native alright. When he caught Barnes and me with those girls in our quarters, you should have heard him. "No respect for the locals", he says, "a disgrace to the uniform!"

Everyone laughs.

BARNES

If two years without a woman is his idea of respect, give me disgrace.

Everyone roars with laughter. Barnes shakes his head with contempt.

HIGGINS

Bloody savages. First they cut General Macnaughten to pieces, then behead poor Burns. And I heard there were plans for the rest of us if we hasn't get out. And all he can go on about is the "honour" of the niggers.

The men murmur in disapproval. Barnes gives Stewart an hostile look, full of contempt.

BARNES

A man should look after his own.

A young Afghan KITCHEN-AID brings over a pot of soup. He pours a scanty portion into each of the men's cups.

BARNES (CONT'D)

Where's the meat? Is this all we get?

The Afghan boy shrugs, not understanding English. Higgins sniggers.

HIGGINS

You could shoot your horse, Barnes. Walk over the mountains.

BARNES

Very funny.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

The sun dips. Abdur and Mansur look down at the camp. They keep their eyes fixed on the men and their rifles, propped in a standing pyramid by the fire.

ABDUR

Look.

He points at Stewart loading his gun by the mess tent, talking to the Afghan aids.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

That man. He's speaking Pashtu.

Mansur tries to listen. The faint sound of Stewart's voice gets lost in the wind.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

Can you hear what he's saying?

Mansur shakes his head.

ABDUR (CONT'D)
Let's get closer.

MANSUR
Careful.

The two boys move silently behind the rocks and scuttle further down.

CUT TO:

They peer out from behind a thorny bush, close to one another, tense with excitement, breathing hard.

EXT. THE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

From the boys' POV: Stewart, back to the boys, scans the opposite ridge-line, hand shading his eyes from the setting sun. An older Afghan, SAYEED, by his side.

STEWART
(in Pashtu)
Is it safe here, Sayeed?

Sayeed shrugs.

SAYEED
Why not sir?

STEWART
(aggravated)
Don't answer me with another question!
Yes or no, for God's sake!

SAYEED
I think so, sir.

Stewart keeps scanning the landscape, unconvinced.

STEWART
If this is where I think we are, then there should be a village somewhere past that ridge. Which clan controls the pass?

Sayeed shakes his head with an impenetrable expression.

SAYEED
I'm not from here. I don't know about this tribal area.

STEWART

(exasperated)

You're such a filthy liar! Five years of service with me and I still can't get a straight answer from you! Get my gun before I lose my patience!

Stewart turns to the men, forcing an upbeat tone, shouting in English.

STEWART (CONT'D)

There should be wild goats on the ridges. Maybe even deer, if we're lucky. Who'll join me?

Barnes elbows Trollope.

BARNES

You go. You know he's a lousy shot on top of everything else.

Trollope reluctantly gets up and grabs his rifle.

Stewart continues to scan the ridge-line. He turns around with a swift movement. Looks up in the opposite direction, towards the boys.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

The boys duck down. Rocks fall.

MANSUR

Damn it!

EXT. THE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

Stewart, startled, peers up.

Hassani, rinsing a pot in the river, lifts his head. He catches a fleeting movement through the leafy bushes. A speckle of white. The boys' clothes.

HASSANI

Hey!

EXT. ON THE PATH - MOMENTS LATER

Abdur and Mansur run for their lives on the path.

MANSUR

Quick! This way!

Abdur stops his friend with a hand.

ABDUR
Not back to the village!

But Mansur pulls away again and runs on. Abdur races after him. He's nearly abreast with him when something CRASHES through the bushes next to them. Two horses coming from opposite sides.

Trembling legs, necks hovering, veins running across the animals' flanks. Flaring nostrils, the wild pupils of the horses. Then the barrel of a gun pointing at them. Two men shouting.

It's Stewart and Trollope who have trapped the boys between them.

STEWART
(addressing them in
Pashtu)
Don't move! Where are you from?

Mansur and Abdur have no way out. They don't respond.

STEWART (CONT'D)
Speak. Where's your village? I have
no time to waste. Speak up or I'll
lose my patience!

EXT. NEAR THE VILLAGE - DUSK

Abdur and Mansur walk slowly towards the village, heads down. The camera pulls back to reveal they're strapped with long leashes around their necks. They follow the English officers' horses.

As they pass in front of the cliff that hides the caves, they exchange a glance. Abdur grimaces. Burning in humiliation.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The village looks deserted. A ghost town. The wind blows through the deserted square, wooden doors slamming.

Trollope ties the two boys next to the well to keep an eye on them.

INT. INSIDE THE HOUSES - CONTINUOUS

Stewart barges in and out of different compounds.

He strides across the courtyards, turns baskets upside down, looks under the charpoys (string cots) and inside the wooden chests. Nothing.

Exasperated, he walks back into the square.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

He reaches Trollope and the boys.

STEWART

Nothing. Not a goat. Not even a bowl
of rice, damn it.

He turns to the boys, in Pashtu. He's furious.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Where is everybody? Speak up, you
dumb fools!

Abdur and Mansur refuse to answer.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I want meat. Tell me where I can get
meat.

(to Trollope)

They must have some food, even if they
have been left behind.

He pushes the boys around, raising his voice.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I said speak.

He raises his gun.

MANSUR

Everyone leaves, sir. They hear the
English are coming through the pass.
Our people have a great fear of your
army, sir.

STEWART

What are you two doing here then?

Mansur hesitates. He looks at Abdur who comes to his aid, with
sudden inspiration.

ABDUR

They leave us behind to look after the
village, sir. We have nothing, just
some apples from the trees. We are as
hungry as you, sir.

He hits his stomach with a hand, mimicking a beggar feigning
hunger. It's a good act and for a split-second Stewart buys it.

TROLLOPE
 Captain, look!

Trollope points to a faint wisp of smoke coming from a chimney. Stewart touches the side of a round clay oven.

STEWART
 Warm.

He looks at the muddy ground around the well. Fresh cattle tracks.

STEWART (CONT'D)
 What's this? You're lying scum!

He grabs Mansur and points the gun at his head. He turns to Abdur.

STEWART (CONT'D)
 I'm going to shoot your friend. Blow his head off, understand? Tell me where everyone is? Where are the animals, the food? I'll shoot him now.

Abdur is in a panic. He exchanges a glance with Mansur. But, for all his terror, Mansur motions Abdur not to speak.

Abdur is about to say something, though - when a LONG, DEEP SOUND from behind a house startles the English.

It's the LOWING of a cow. The animal, left behind in the rush into the cave, trots innocently from behind a wall and across the path.

Now Stewart's found meat for an army, he doesn't care about the boys. He and Trollope look at each other and explode in laughter.

EXT. THE CAMP. MESS TENT - NIGHT

The sky is a starry dome. The camp-fire is the only light in the whole valley.

CUT TO:

Abdur and Mansur, tied back to back, sit outside the mess tent next to the horses. They watch the English soldiers who have gathered around the camp-fire where the meat is roasting.

The flames illuminate the soldiers' faces: their contented expressions as they bite into the meat, juices dribbling down their hands.

The boys avidly check every detail of the soldiers' appearances: their bright redcoats, heavy boots, golden buttons, the fairness of their hair and complexions.

The soldiers, restored and buoyant now. A fiercer, more confident group than the one the boys watched at the stream.

EXT. HILLSIDE - CONTINUOUS

Stewart scans the landscape from the top of a boulder. Trollope reaches him, short of breath.

STEWART

Trollope, I want two sentries posted up there.

TROLLOPE

Everything all right, sir?

STEWART

Yes, of course. Just using the necessary precautions.

TROLLOPE

(nodding)

Food's ready if you'd like some, sir.

Stewart waves dismissively. He lights a clay pipe and offers a puff to Trollope. Then gestures towards the valley.

STEWART

Look. Makes one feel humble, doesn't it? Will you miss it?

TROLLOPE

To be honest, sir, I can't wait to get home.

STEWART

Got a wife?

TROLLOPE

And four little ones.

STEWART

Well done, Trollope! You didn't waste time.

TROLLOPE

No children yourself, sir?

Stewart shrugs, evading the question. A beat. The two men smoke, watching the sky.

STEWART

No place for a family if you want adventure. In my book anyhow. The South Downs are too tame for my taste. And those bleak grey skies.

Trollope looks at him, puzzled.

TROLLOPE

They are bleak, yes. Still, a pint by the fire with the wind howling outside sounds good to me, sir.

Another beat. Stewart keeps smoking, lost in his thoughts, taking in the vastness of the vista below him. Trollope stands next to him, shifting uneasily on his feet.

STEWART

Did you ever really talk to any Afghans? Did you get down to the bazaar?

TROLLOPE

Out of bounds to us, sir. You know that.

STEWART

That's why you missed it. The magic of this place. See this?

He takes off the lapis pendant from around his neck.

STEWART (CONT'D)

A thousand years old, they said. From when Alexander was here.

TROLLOPE

Here, was he?

STEWART

Yes, Trollope. Alexander the Great. Don't think it's true, of course. You can't believe a bloody word they say. But just maybe it is. They said they dug it up from some ancient battlefield in the mountains. Beautiful, eh?

TROLLOPE

Very fine, sir.

A silence. Trollope notices how anxiously Stewart keeps scanning the landscape.

STEWART

Just a precaution. I may admire them but I don't trust them. There's an old Afghan saying. "You can never buy an Afghan, you can only rent one".

TROLLOPE

I'll see to it, sir.

Trollope nods and turns back to camp. Stewart takes a moment to look at the sky. Something still doesn't feel right.

EXT. THE CAMP. MESS TENT - CONTINUOUS

The boys look nervously at the guns propped by the men's camp-fire.

MANSUR

Will they kill us?

ABDUR

(hiding fear)
Maybe.

MANSUR

Whatever happens, we mustn't say where the men -

ABDUR

(seeing Stewart)
Shhh! He understands.

Stewart approaches. He has brought some meat on a plate. He sits next to the boys and bows his head, touching his chest.

STEWART

(in Pashtu)
Salaam alekum. May the blessings of Allah be upon you. Here, have some of this food. You must be hungry by now. Please be my guests. You don't need to be afraid.

He slides the plate over the boys, then cuts the rope tying their hands. They're both surprised by such manners but still look scared.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I just didn't want you to run away before we'd had a talk. Please forgive me for being rough earlier.

He smiles as he watches the boys grab the meat and eat ravenously.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Tell me. What's your village called?

The boys look at one another. They don't know whether to answer or not.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Which clan do you belong to? Who's your chief?

(laughs)

Come on, my belly's full, I'm not going to eat you.

Mansur still looks suspicious of the Englishman but Abdur seems eager to engage in conversation with the stranger.

ABDUR

Our Chief is Malik Azam and we belong to the Gilzai clan

STEWART

Malik Azam! I heard of him in Kabul. He has a reputation as a great fighter - and an honest man.

Mansur tries to nudge Abdur to stop talking. But Abdur can't help smiling.

ABDUR

Yes. He's a great leader. All this land, from here to Jugdaluk, belongs to the Gilzai people.

Stewart nods and offers water from his flask. He clearly knows how to charm the locals.

STEWART

Listen, I'll let you go back to your village and send my respects to your Chief. But first I need your help.

He pauses to light his pipe, taking his time. The boys watch him with a mix of fear and fascination.

STEWART (CONT'D)

You know we English have been made to leave your country after the uprising in Kabul.

Abdur nods but now silent.

STEWART (CONT'D)

My men and I were left behind. We need to join the rest of the army. I think they must be near Gandamak. Do you know Gandamak and the road to Jalalabad?

Abdur nods again.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Good. Where is it?

Mansur doesn't flinch. Abdur hesitates, then points at the mountain.

ABDUR

Over there. Across the pass.

STEWART

How far?

ABDUR

Two days.

Stewart looks worried. He doesn't think his men can face that.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

One day, if you take the shortcut.

STEWART

(lighting up)

The shortcut? Do you know it?

The two boys look at one another. Abdur hesitantly nods.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Excellent. In the morning you can show us the way. I'll pay you and then you can get home.

Mansur glares at Stewart with open hostility. Stewart continues, now addressing Abdur who looks more sympathetic.

STEWART (CONT'D)

So you know your king promised us safe passage to the border to make sure we leave peacefully?

The boys are absolutely deadpan. Neither answers.

STEWART (CONT'D)

(pressing)

I want to make sure we're going to be safe going through the gorge.

(MORE)

STEWART (CONT'D)

We're leaving as friends. Malik Azam does know that, doesn't he?

Stewart stares at Abdur waiting for reassurance. The boy doesn't know what to say. Suddenly Mansur takes over.

MANSUR

Malik Azam heard what the King said.

Stewart looks at him. Mansur nods. Stewart doesn't know whether to trust his words but has no choice.

STEWART

Good.

He holds out his hand to Mansur. Mansur takes it and shakes it firmly. Abdur stares uncomfortably at the ground.

EXT. UP THE MOUNTAIN - CONTINUOUS

The sentries on the ridge, looking out. Below them the camp-fire glows in the darkness. Not a sound, save for the crickets and the distant voices of the soldiers.

EXT. THE CAMP - LATER

The camp-fire has turned to cinders. Men doze off.

Stewart approaches his troops, wrapped in his pattu - the shawl every Afghan wears. He looks like a native. He has regained his confidence and resumed his brisk tone.

STEWART

Get some sleep. We break camp at four. It's going to be a long march across the pass but those boys say we can be in Gandamak before nightfall.

Men grunt "yes, sir", shuffling as they position themselves for the night. Barnes looks sceptically at Stewart.

BARNES

Does that mean we're in the hands of those two now?

STEWART

(glaring)

Unfortunately Barnes you're still in my hands. I'm the one who's giving orders and your job is to follow them.

BARNES

That was the impression I had, sir.

STEWART

Once we join the main army, you can
moan to your heart's content.

EXT. ROUND THE CAMP-FIRE - LATER

Abdur and Mansur lie against each other, tied up again. Their faces by the dying embers of the fire. Abdur spots a movement of something up in the dark. The animal sense of someone who knows these mountains.

He nudges Mansur. They are alert but silent. On the other side of the fire, the English soldiers lie asleep.

One of the sentries, further up, is visible in the half-light. A shadow moves quickly behind him. It's only a second. Two Afghans jump on him from behind and silently slit his throat.

We sense movement from the other side as well. Abdur looks at Stewart who has been roused. He stares at Abdur and there is a moment of contact. Too late.

As Stewart is about to scream an order, a volley of SHOTS comes out of the darkness. The men are caught unprepared in a hail of FIRE.

Abdur and Mansur, tied-up in their corner, desperately try to free their hands.

The English run around, shouting, grasping at guns. Stewart and Barnes try to get them in some order.

CUT TO:

In the chaos, Hassani and the group of Afghan aides run off, deserting camp. As they run past, the boys shout to get their attention.

MANSUR

Hey, brother, cut this rope!

Hassani looks at the two boys.

ABDUR

In the name of Allah! Don't let us be
killed by our own brothers!

Hassani pulls out his knife and cuts the rope. A desperate look in his eyes.

EXT. BEHIND ROCKS ABOVE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

The boys begin to scramble away. A HISSING bullet grazes Mansur on the shoulder. He loses his balance and falls while Abdur keeps on after Hassani in the distance.

Mansur tumbles down the ravine. He's knocked out unconscious. His shoulder now bleeding profusely, his body covered in scratches.

Abdur finds himself behind a rock, looking down on the camp.

Suddenly he feels a presence next to him - one of his fellow villagers with his sword. The man grasps Abdur's shoulder, nods darkly, reassuring.

Abdur looks down and in the distance he recognizes Mansur's body lying among the rocks. He scrambles down to reach him, amidst hissing bullets.

EXT. THE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

The villagers tumble out of the night, waving their swords with a harrowing WAR-CRY.

The English FIRE wildly - but people seem to be coming from all sides. Trollope falls, Barnes is caught by a sword.

CUT TO:

Stewart FIRES desperately, his lips mouthing a silent prayer. It's a man-to-man battle. The English fight on with bayonets and swords. Men fall to the ground.

EXT. UNDER THE ROCK - CONTINUOUS

Abdur has crept round and reached Mansur who shows no sign of life.

ABDUR
(checks his heartbeat)
Mansur! Can you hear me?

No response. Abdur looks around for help. A couple of horses are still tied up behind what is left of the British tents, just below him.

ABDUR (CONT'D)
I'll take you back to the village.
Wait here. I'll be back in a minute.
Mansur, can you hear me...?

Mansur doesn't move. Abdur sneaks down by the horses. He cuts both their tethers, holding onto one.

CUT TO

As Abdur moves off, Stewart crawls behind one of the tents behind him, making for a gully by the river.

Stewart turns back to see the warriors descend the mountain with a CRY in the last charge led by Malik Azam.

This is the final blow but, in truth, the English are already finished.

CUT TO:

In the dark and through the dust, the battle looks like a scene from hell: cries, shots, bodies on the ground, horses pounding on top of them.

CUT TO:

Abdur, half-way up the mountain with his horse. He finds a gun in the saddle.

He looks down and sees the villagers turning over bodies, looting what they can. They take guns, boots, red jackets.

CUT TO:

Abdur has reached Mansur and struggles in the attempt to load his friend's body onto the horse.

Suddenly he glimpses something moving on the other side of the camp. It's Stewart.

EXT. ALONG THE RIVER-BED - MOMENTS LATER

Stewart limps along the river-bed, panting. In the dark he makes out the shape of the runaway horse, drinking.

He gets closer. The moon shines on the horse's back. It has gone astray in the melee. Stewart whistles gently, pats the horse's muzzle. It's good to touch something warm and alive.

He mounts the animal and spurs it away.

EXT. UP THE TRACK - CONTINUOUS

Abdur watches him. He looks back at Mansur: his eyes are still closed but he's moaning faintly.

Abdur has a moment of indecision. Then once he's made sure his friend is alive, he resolves to follow Stewart. He'll prove himself to Malik and the village.

He spurs his horse to climb the path. The gun across his lap.

He's moving across the top to cut off Stewart's only line of retreat.

EXT. ABOVE THE GORGE - MOMENTS LATER

Abdur climbs a steep stony track, kicking his horse, spurring him on.

He begins to descend on the other side and stops on top of a flat rock overlooking a narrow pass. He dismounts and looks down. Waiting for his target.

Abdur's POV: Stewart desperately gallops along the stream at the bottom of the valley.

As Stewart enters the narrow pass, he's forced to slow down. The horse negotiating its way across the water, stumbling on the stream's stony bottom.

Abdur slowly points his rifle. Aiming. His hands shaking slightly. He knows he cannot miss.

A SHOT tears the silence in two. Stewart's horse collapses and crashes to the ground.

Abdur mounts up, spurs his horse, and comes tumbling down.

CUT TO:

Stewart can barely move from underneath the fallen animal. Abdur points his rifle.

ABDUR
(in Pashtu)
Don't move or I'll shoot.

Stewart looks at his captor, resigned.

EXT. UP THE TRACK - DAWN

The first birds' chatter in the trees. The murmur of the stream as dawn lights the sky.

On the mountainside, across from what once was the English camp, a lonely horseman climbs the steep track towards the village. It is Abdur, Stewart's rifle strapped across his saddle along with his own.

Stewart follows on foot. It's his turn to have a leash tied around his neck.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

The village celebrates the victory. There's a sense of great animation. Children play excitedly, women scurry around. The smoke of roasting meat fills the air along with the rhythm of drums.

INT. THE HUIJIRA. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The women, under the gaze of Shirin, cook rice, separated by a curtain from the men's room. They attend a fire built on the floor among blackened pots.

Some dance to the rhythm of the music from next door.

The women hand food to young boys who take it into the men's room. The women are not allowed to enter.

CUT TO:

Malik sits in the center, talking animatedly with his men. Some are bandaged, others still wear bloody clothes.

Mansur, his hair matted in dirt and blood, a bandage wrapped around the shoulder, sits among them, close to Malik, his future father-in-law.

CUT TO:

In the women's kitchen, Zaphira looks out of the small window that gives out onto the courtyard and sees:

Abdur, crossing the courtyard with his prisoner in tow. Zaphira watches him in awe. She motions the other women to come and look.

EXT. THE HUIJIRA COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

Abdur dismounts the horse, holding his prisoner on a leash.

Men gather around him. Women huddle and peek from the window. They're curious to see a kaffir. They've never seen one before.

Abdur walks slowly through the crowd. This is his big moment and he knows it.

He sees his father's proud smile, catches a glimpse of Zaphira and Shirin at the window. Everyone whispering, nodding towards him.

Mansur runs out of the hujira. Excited to see his friend.

MANSUR

Praise Allah you're safe! I woke up
and you were gone. I thought you'd
been hit! I was about to go down
again to search -

But Abdur ignores Mansur's attempt to greet him and walks past, wrapped up in himself. He wants to savour every moment of his grand entrance into the hujira.

Mansur watches, pained, ignored.

INT. THE HUJIRA - CONTINUOUS

Abdur brings the prisoner inside and presents the English rifle to Malik. It's a beautiful hunting rifle, the first of its kind to be seen.

Malik calls for silence and the music stops. Again, women peep from an opening of the curtain.

Stewart has been forced to kneel in front of Malik, hands tied behind his back. His jacket is soaked in blood, his face ashen with despair.

Abdur pushes him in the back, forcing him to bend over and touch his forehead to the floor. The men sneer, amused by the display of humiliation.

Malik pokes Stewart's shoulder with the muzzle of his newly acquired rifle. Stewart lifts himself up and looks him straight in the eyes.

ABDUR

He's the Chief of the Kaffirs. He
speaks some Pashtu.

MALIK

The Chief speaks Pashtu, does he?
(to Stewart)
Well then, listen to me, kaffir. Our
brothers have sent news of a great
victory. Today we have killed every
single Englishman crossing the valley
from here to Gandamak. You should
thank Allah you're alive.

Stewart holds his gaze. He doesn't flinch.

MALIK (CONT'D)

You are a lucky man indeed. Our Holy
book says a prisoner's life is spared
if he converts to Islam. Did you know
that?

Stewart shakes his head, slowly, defiantly.

STEWART

(in Pashtu)

Kill me now, if you like. You would
do me a favour.

Malik explodes in a hearty laughter. He turns to his audience with a sarcastic smile.

MALIK

Did you hear? The infidel begs me
to kill him! He wants to show us
he's not a coward like the rest of
them!

Stewart holds his gaze, impassive. Nothing matters to him after what he has witnessed.

Abdur's worried. He didn't expect this. He feels Stewart belongs to him. He isn't ready to let go of him so quickly.

But Malik laughs a deep laugh as he turns to his prisoner.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Unfortunately my arm's aching from too
much work. It doesn't have the
strength to cut off another dog's
head!

Relief on Abdur's face. The crowd cheers.

MALIK (CONT'D)

I hear you're a Chief. Good. You'll
be worth a lot of money then! You're
our prisoner now and till your people
pay us, you can work for us. And
learn our rules of honour.

But Stewart is feeling far from grateful.

STEWART

You talk of honour? You don't even
know the meaning of the word! You
attacked us as we were leaving in
peace. Your king made a deal with us
in Kabul.

He spits on the ground.

STEWART (CONT'D)

I spit on your honour!

Beat. Abdur looks at Malik, fearing he may behead the crazy Englishman right now. But Malik explodes into laughter. He finds the Englishman amusing.

MALIK

But you had no deal with me! This is my land, not the King's. Understand? You should have kept on paying me tribute if you wanted to pass through here.

Malik turns again to his audience

MALIK (CONT'D)

I wonder why they stopped? Is it maybe because they believed they had defeated us? Yes, this must be the reason. One doesn't pay for what one already owns!

His audience chuckle, enjoying the show. Malik turns to Stewart again.

MALIK (CONT'D)

You were wrong, Kaffir, because this land belongs to the Galzai people and always will. You should have chosen another route if you wanted to save money. Not to mention your men's lives. What kind of a soldier are you if you don't even know these rules?

STEWART

I'm no soldier. I never came here to fight. I'm a builder. Me and my men have been building bridges and roads. For your people. To make their lives better.

MALIK

(pondering)

I see... Bridges and roads.

Malik makes a face, shaking his head slowly. The men snigger. He turns to Stewart scornfully.

MALIK (CONT'D)

We lived in this land long before your bridges and roads. And we managed to cross rivers and climb mountains without your help.

Malik turns to the rest of the men, eyes sparkling.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Still we can make use of a builder from Inglestan. These people know how to make things.

(to Abdur)

Take him away now. In the morning we'll put him to work.

Abdur pushes Stewart away. Malik watches the Englishman leave the room. Malik sits down and resumes eating. He motions Razaq, Abdur's father, to sit next to him.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Razaq, come here. We must talk. Your son has proved a very brave fighter. A future warrior. There's something you and I should discuss.

Malik whispers in Razaq's ear. He motions first at Zaphira, peeping from a window looking onto the courtyard. Then at Abdur as he returns.

Razaq bows repeatedly to Malik's words. He's clearly thrilled. Abdur absorbs the Chief's benign expression, bows his head and touches his chest. He's caught a glimpse of Zaphira and understands what's going on.

So does Mansur. He's disappointed. Especially when he sees Malik and Razaq shake hands to seal their agreement.

Abdur is now the hero and the center of attention. Mansur seems forgotten. His marriage hopes in ruins.

CUT TO:

Zaphira and Shirin watch from the window looking onto the courtyard. Zaphira exchanges a look with her mother who nods in confirmation. A faint smile curls Zaphira's lips.

INT. THE CELL - NIGHT

A door creaks in the semi-darkness. It's Abdur. He looks around the small room. Stewart is curled up in a corner like a bundle of rags.

Abdur puts down a plate of food. Stewart slowly gets up. He's freezing, his breath condensing in the cold. Abdur hands him a pattu. Stewart nods and wraps himself in it.

Abdur pushes the food closer to him with his hand. He sits with his legs crossed next to Stewart and watches him eat.

Stewart seems unaware of his presence, his eyes haunted, fixed on the wall. He's a broken man. All he can think of is the bloodbath he caused. The men in his charge, now dead.

Abdur leans in. He inspects the blonde fuzz that covers Stewart's forearm, mystified. Touches the golden buttons on Stewart's redcoat, his belt buckle. Looks at his boots, timidly touches a strand of his hair. Stewart doesn't react.

ABDUR

(in Pashtu)

The Chief says you're my prisoner now.

Stewart turns to the boy, as if for the first time. Only now does he realise how desperate his predicament is. The burden of guilt, his only companion.

STEWART

(in Pashtu)

Are they really all dead?

Abdur nods. Stewart closes his eyes and lets his head fall between his hands.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

Another day in the village. Children play their noisy games in the early morning light. Wood smoke fills the air. The same old woman from earlier sweeps the dirt floor outside her compound.

EXT. THE RIVER - DAY

Shirin goes down the path to the bottom of the valley where the jade green stream snakes beyond the poplars.

Shielded from view by the trees, the rest of the women are washing clothes here and bathing knee-high in the water, half-dressed.

Burquas of different colours hang from a big tree, like giant flowers.

Shielded from the eyes of men, the women laugh and gossip in a more relaxed way.

TWO LITTLE GIRLS, about five or six, play with a faceless doll on the river bank. They dress her in finery and place her in a makeshift palanquin.

One of the young unmarried girls, Musarrat, comes out of the water and stops to watch their game.

MUSARRAT
What are you up to?

The girls reply very seriously.

CHILD 1
This is Abdur.

CHILD 2
And this is Zaphira. We've made her a beautiful dress.

Musarrat motions at Zaphira to come and watch. Zaphira looks radiant and beautiful, her hair loose on her back, wearing only a petticoat that leaves her shoulders bare.

MUSARRAT
(laughing)
Look. They've made you your wedding dress.

Zaphira laughs, patting both girls on the head.

ZAPHIRA
I haven't even had the engagement party yet.

The children look at one another, perplexed.

MUSARRAT
Why not play the settling of the dowry then?

CHILD 1
How ?

Musarrat pulls out some grass blades from the river bank.

MUSARRAT
Well, here, make these into the golden bracelets from the groom.

The little girls take them and wrap them around the doll's arms. Musarrat turns to Zaphira. A hint of jealousy in her voice.

MUSARRAT (CONT'D)
You must be happy now. You've ended up with the one you always wanted.

Zaphira shrugs. Musarrat's too nosy for her liking.

ZAPHIRA

It was my father's decision... Abdur is a great mujahad. I had nothing to do with it

MUSARRAT

You don't know how lucky you are. My family just accepted the offer of that mullah from Istaleph. He's three times my age and his front teeth are missing.

ZAPHIRA

I would kill myself if I had to marry a man that old. Abdur is -

She stops as her mother approaches behind them. Shirin has overheard Abdur's name and Zaphira's independent tone.

SHIRIN

Zaphira, Musarrat! Stop gossiping. Come and help over here.

The young women reluctantly obey. Shirin pulls Zaphira to the side, more affectionate than before.

SHIRIN (CONT'D)

I don't want to hear you talk like that again! Why can't you learn to be more modest and reserved?

Zaphira nods in apology. Shirin manages a smile. Zaphira smiles back.

EXT. THE WATERMILL - MOMENTS LATER

Abdur walks briskly on the path that winds down towards the stream. In the distance, at the bottom of the canyon, the women wash their clothes by the river like tiny colored dots.

He passes some young girls carrying heavy loads on their head. They modestly turn their faces the other way and pull their chadors just enough to hide their profiles.

Down by the stream, under the shade of poplars, a tall man is visible, wrapped in a pattu. He's working by the old watermill, strengthening the walls of the water course.

Abdur approaches as the regular clatter of the grinding stones grows louder and louder. The watermill is partly being rebuilt with new stones and looks solid. The man, Stewart, is surrounded by children who help carry stones.

Sitting on a rock, clearly relaxed, is a YOUNG MAN with a gun. A guard for the prisoner.

STEWART

(in Pashtu)

Ahmed, over here! I told you already!
Am I talking to the wind? Lay the
stones the other way, I said!

Stewart turns to greet Abdur. Stewart's transformed. Tanned as an Afghan, his hair and beard have grown. He wears a turban to protect himself from the sun and a salwar kameez.

ABDUR

Salam Alekum.

STEWART

Alekum salam.

Stewart sits down wearily under a tree. He shakes his head, indicating the children.

STEWART (CONT'D)

No discipline...

Abdur shrugs and crouches down next to him. Abdur takes out flat bread from his pattu, absorbing Stewart's tired face.

STEWART (CONT'D)

It was a mess. The stones weren't
packed tight enough.

Abdur offers bread. Stewart softens, accepts it with a light touch of his hand to his chest.

STEWART (CONT'D)

(to one of the children)

Bring us tea. Quick!

Stewart and Abdur eat the bread together. Stewart feeds hungrily, savouring the taste.

STEWART (CONT'D)

Look. Here's your friend, Mansur.

Mansur emerges from behind the trees along with two YOUNG MEN. They carry their rifles and several partridges strung together. Mansur looks more mature. A light beard shadows his chin. He instinctively stiffens as he sees Abdur.

ABDUR

Salaam Alekum.

MANSUR
Aleikum Salaam.

Their greeting feels formal and uneasy. Abdur tries to smile encouragingly. He points at the birds.

ABDUR
Looks like you had good hunting. I'd like to come along with you one of these days.

Mansur shrugs. He doesn't respond.

ABDUR (CONT'D)
It would be like old times.

Mansur exchanges a glance with the other two. He turns to Abdur with a sneer.

MANSUR
I thought you were too busy hanging out with your new friend here. And then there's preparations for your wedding. You can't have time for us?

Abdur doesn't reply. Mansur's sarcasm hurts him. Stewart watches the young men disappear.

STEWART
You won his girl, did you?

ABDUR
He's been jealous since you turned up. I've just been lucky.

Abdur leads off, Stewart following. They begin to walk up the hill, back to the village. The guard is with them. Stewart nods at the beginnings of a stone wall on a slope above them.

STEWART
We need to work on those terraces before the snows come. But I've told Malik Azam I need stronger lads than those to build them properly.

ABDUR
I'll help you. We can do it together.

Stewart is gratified by Abdur's enthusiasm for building. He nods gratefully. Abdur smiles.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

After I'm married, of course.

Stewart laughs. They share the moment together.

Halfway up the hill, something suddenly catches Stewart's attention. It's a faint THROB in the air. Before he can figure it out, the MUEZZIN CALL resonates across the valley, covering up the sound.

Abdur stands to go.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

Abdur watches the guard shut Stewart in a hut. Abdur crosses the square and joins the men performing ritual ablutions. They splash hands and feet before entering the mosque. The call of the muezzin covers the vibration from the distance.

INT. MOSQUE - DAY

The men are gathered in the mosque, kneeling and touching their foreheads to the ground.

The humming sound becomes more distinct, draws closer. It turns into an unmistakable DRONE, a noise filling the sky and covering the men's invocations.

Everyone in the mosque scrambles up and rushes out.

INT. CELL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Stewart eagerly scans the sky from the tiny window of the room where he's confined. The DRONE ever louder.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The men race out of the mosque as:

A first HELICOPTER rears over the ridge-line in an EXPLOSION OF NOISE, its roaring blades circling ominously over the village. ANOTHER HELICOPTER follows.

INT. CELL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The Captain watches the helicopters. Zoom-out to reveal the torn army fatigues he's wearing. Only at this point do we realize that the former Captain Stewart (same actor) is now a Russian prisoner.

The same lapis pendant that Stewart wore before hangs round his neck.

His name is CAPTAIN KORNIKOV. This is 1980. Afghanistan is under Soviet occupation.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Everyone's running around. There's a great confusion, shouting orders, dust flying.

Malik turns to Abdur.

MALIK

Quick! Gather everyone into the cave!
Go get the women!

Abdur sprints towards the river. Mansur materializes next to Malik. He's eager to be given a task.

MANSUR

What about the Russian?

MALIK

Get him below. Tie him up.

CUT TO:

Men barely have time to rush down the pebbledash cliff that leads to the hidden entrance to the cave. Everyone crowds into the caved passage.

EXT. THE RIVER - CONTINUOUS

Down by the stream, the women are terrified to see the helicopters. They rush to the tree and grab their burquas to cover themselves and take shelter.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - MOMENTS LATER

The first chopper rocks down in a clearing next to the village, whipping up dust clouds.

SPETNAZ TROOPS - Soviet special forces - jump out with rifles, sprinting off as the second chopper comes in to land.

They race around, shouting in Russian, ready to fire at anything that moves.

EXT. THE VALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Abdur is with the women at the bottom of the valley. They're cut off from the village by the helicopters. Abdur doesn't know where to hide.

Suddenly Zaphira appears next to him. She hands him a burqua just before Russian soldiers appear on the ridge above them. They look into each other's eyes.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

The Spetnaz troops sweep through the village. We see how the place has changed during these years of war.

Houses are shattered, their mud walls strewn like grain from broken sacks. Timbers twisted and snapped. Lush orchards, now barren land.

No sign of livestock in the pen, just a couple of skinny cows grazing on rocky terrain which were previously green pastures. The millstones and the watermill look abandoned.

The Russians are as frightened and disturbed as the English were. They shout and kick open the doors of the empty houses.

EXT. THE VALLEY - CONTINUOUS

The sound of a SHORT BREATH, amplified by the fabric. The BEAT of Abdur's pounding heart.

POV: from inside the tight grille of a burqua. The image is blurred. We can only see details framed by the tight grid.

The Spetnaz troops come tumbling down the steep track. They're wired. They shout, herd the women together.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DAY

From POV of the burqua's grille: the rest of the troops are now gathered in the square by the well.

The Commander, KOZLOV, a striking broad-shouldered man, forties, paces up and down, shouting orders.

One of the younger soldiers, IVONIN, a kid of nineteen, drags a sleepy-eyed Razaq out of a mud house. Razaq acts up the old man, waving his hands in surrender.

IVONIN

He's the only man in there. Looks like the rest buggered off.

KOZLOV

How the hell did they know we were coming?

Kozlov grabs SIDDIQ, one of the Afghan officers who speaks Pashtu.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

(to Razaq)

Tell him we're looking for Malik Azam and his men. Tell him we know they have Captain Kornikov with them.

Siddiq shouts to Razaq in Pashtu. Razaq shakes his head.

SIDDIQ

He says there's only him and the women. The men are in the mountains.

Kozlov grabs Razaq by the tattered shirt.

KOZLOV

Bullshit.

(shouting)

Captain Kornikov? He's here. We know he's been in this village!

One of the soldiers drags a sack of rice out of a house.

SOLDIER

Commander, there's enough rice to feed a regiment...

Kozlov hits Razaq with the butt of his rifle.

KOZLOV

(to SIDDIQ)

Tell him I'll shoot him if he doesn't talk.

Razaq keeps shaking his head and denying anybody is there like a litany.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

Oh yeah? And what about that fucking rice...? Who's that for, then, grandpa?

Razaq shakes his head, begging. Kozlov kicks him hard in the belly. Razaq falls to the ground.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

We're wasting our time. The bastards will be up there by now. Took Kornikov with them, I bet.

(to Ivonin)

Line up the women.

CUT TO:

The panting from inside the burqua is faster now. Kozlov paces up and down next to the women huddled together against the wall. A wild look in his eyes.

He and his men pass a flask of vodka to one another. Their frenzied energy is a mix of booze and adrenaline.

The children who played with the doll now cry, grasping their mother's burquas, frightened by the strangers.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

It's like talking to fucking ghosts.
Let's see them.

The soldiers begin to rip off the burquas. it's a terrible violation and we should feel this. They uncover Shirin, then Musarrat who keeps her head low, tears streaming down her face.

The women scuttle to cover themselves as the Russians snigger. Kozlov pulls off another burqua. It's Zaphira.

She is so beautiful that the soldiers stop and stare. The girl bows her head, trying desperately to avoid the men's eyes, to conceal her face as much as she can.

Kozlov is struck dumb. He looks as if he's about to seize her to take her away. But then he turns away.

He stops in front of the grille of the burqua that Abdur's wearing. Kozlov's face a few inches away.

Kozlov looks down at the ground. He smiles. A pair of male shoes poke out from the robes.

Kozlov turns away, then swings back and punches Abdur's stomach. He rips the burqua off him in triumph.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Abdur is led into one of the village compounds by the Russians. They open a gate and throw him into an empty courtyard.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The cave is now an armoury.

On the floor, reels of detonating cord, blasting caps, time pencils for delayed explosions. On one side, stacks of boxes filled with grenades and ammunition. English and Chinese lettering on the sides: American weaponry.

Men hold their breath, listening to every sound from above. Kozlov's SHOUTING, soldiers ECHOING him.

Malik exchanges a glance with his men. They know Abdur must have been caught by now.

Among them sits Kornikov, gagged, resigned. Mansur has just tied Kornikov's hands behind his back.

Malik signals to the men and they silently begin to unpack the boxes.

EXT. INSIDE THE COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

Kozlov sits on a stool and lights a cigarette, as if about to enjoy a show. He calls Siddiq to his side.

 KOZLOV
 (indicating Abdur)
 Tell this bastard we know ways to make
 people talk.
 (laughs)
 Tell him we Russians have a special
 talent for that.

Everyone laughs. Siddiq translates and pokes Abdur with his rifle. Abdur listens, then replies firmly.

 ABDUR
 The men left days ago.

Thwack! Abdur reels as Kozlov butts him with his rifle in the back, then slams him around. Abdur, breath knocked out of him, Kozlov breathing rage.

 KOZLOV
 You know who we're looking for!
 Another scumbag like you told us
 you've had Kornikov in this village...
 It's funny, the minute we put
 electrodes to his balls, he remembered
 everything!

He gives Abdur a couple of powerful blows but Abdur holds his gaze.

 KOZLOV (CONT'D)
 Where are Malik Azam and the other
 men?

ABDUR doesn't flinch.

 KOZLOV (CONT'D)
 As you like.
 (to a soldier)
 (MORE)

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

We need some help here. Bring that girl. The beauty.

CUT TO:

Zaphira is dragged into the compound. The officer strips her of her burqua and looks at her, checking her body and face.

The men begin to laugh, pacing round her. Abdur feels things could get out of hand any minute. He addresses Siddiq under his breath.

ABDUR

Tell them to leave her. She's my wife. She doesn't know anything.

Siddiq translates into Russian. As an Afghan, he's unhappy with what's happening with the girl. Kozlov laughs.

KOZLOV

Your wife, is she? Lucky boy. Even better. She can do some housework for us. Let's see...

He looks around, kicks a charpoy and a sack of rice that bursts open. A couple of chickens run off.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

(to Siddiq)

Tell her to get some rope and a bucket of water.

EXT. THE COMPOUND - MOMENTS LATER

Zaphira enters the gate of the compound. She has a bucket of water balanced on her head. She puts it down and sees Abdur tied like a goat, hands and feet bound together.

Kozlov shouts in Russian for the bucket. He points with a finger at his feet.

Zaphira complies. She meets Abdur's steady gaze. She can hardly hold her tears back.

From behind, a soldier grabs her.

Abdur is about to react, but in that instant Kozlov pushes Abdur's head in the bucket and keeps it under.

His men hit Abdur hard with their rifles. They pass the vodka around. Drunken laughter.

Abdur's body writhes desperately in their grip.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Down in the cave, the men hear the Russians SHOUTING and LAUGHING. They all kneel and recite verses of the Quran, bowing their head to the ground.

Behind them, an unpacked American Stinger missile.

Malik gives the signal to move out, one by one. He calls Mansur over, indicating Kornikov.

MALIK

It's too dangerous to take him. Stay here and guard him.

MANSUR

Why not just cut his throat?

MALIK

He's too valuable. We can still trade him for our prisoners.

(off Mansur's look)

They'll never find you down here.

(to the men)

Let's go.

The men begin to leave silently.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE CAVE - MOMENTS LATER

The men quietly scuttle out the cave, one by one, and take a path up between the boulders.

They climb up the mountain in a single line, unseen by the Russians.

EXT. THE COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

Lieutenant LOGINOV and Ivonin press Abdur's head underwater. Abdur struggles to free himself. He kicks as hard as he can. He comes up, gasping, breathless.

KOZLOV

Where's Kornikov? Where've they got him?!

Abdur doesn't answer. They shove him underwater again. Kozlov nods at ANTONENKO, a wiry dark-haired man with a cruel stare. Antonenko strides over to Zaphira.

Abdur bursts up out of the water, catches a glimpse of Zaphira, on her back.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

Just going to let us have your wife
then? My men could use a little bit
of fun...

Antonenko uses his knees to pin Zaphira's arms on the ground
above her head. He presses his hands on her shoulders. Zaphira
moves her head from right to left, crying, fighting hard.

Abdur struggles, agonised. His head is pushed underwater again.
This time they hold him for a long time. He fights desperately.

Suddenly his body goes limp. The soldiers exchange a glance and
let him go.

Loginov pulls him out of the water. Abdur's body falls on the
floor. He opens his eyes, heaving, still alive.

Sees Antonenko, sitting astride Zaphira's legs. He runs his
hand underneath her garment and clutches her breasts. Even
Siddiq can't help but turn his head away from this sight.

SIDDIQ

Anton Antonovich, don't go too far!

Antonenko sneers at Siddiq and attacks the waistband of
Zaphira's trousers with new zeal.

ABDUR

Stop! Let her go!

KOZLOV

So you'll show us where he is?

Abdur stares at Antonenko's hands, transfixed. He nods.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

(to Antonenko)

Enough, Sergeant! Let her go!

Antonenko stops, frustrated. He leaves Zaphira on the floor,
her legs exposed underneath her long shirt, still pinned to
the floor by another soldier. He strides over to Abdur,
buttoning up his flies, ill-tempered.

ANTONENKO

I was enjoying that.

The soldiers laugh. Kozlov nods an order and Loginov drags
Abdur out of the compound at Kozlov's side.

The soldier holding Zaphira to the ground keeps his grip on her
and looks at his comrades. The men exchange a glance.

Antonenko takes a puff of a colleague's cigarette, stomps the butt under his boot and moves towards Zaphira.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - MOMENTS LATER

The women huddle together, terrorized. The little girls, crying. Their mothers, trying to calm them.

The women watch Abdur, escorted by the Russians, lead them towards one of the houses. Razak, sitting in shock outside his house, looks up as Abdur passes. Razaq's eyes search his son's face. Abdur is pushed on, crushed, head bowed.

A soldier gestures with his rifle at the women, dismissing them. The women race to their houses for shelter, Shirin looking back in anxiety at the compound.

The women slam doors shut, Shirin last of all. The soldier cocks his ear, turns round to the compound. He hears the muffled cries of Zaphira, then a man's prolonged guttural moan. Muffled laughter from other soldiers.

INT. VILLAGE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Inside an empty house, Abdur shows the officers the trapdoor hidden under sacks of grains.

He's a broken man. He has lost everything.

INT. THE CAVE - MOMENTS LATER

The cave is empty except for Mansur. He has moved away from the gagged Kornikov to check the exit. He is about to leave when...

... there's a huge EXPLOSION. A smoke grenade, thrown from above. Mayhem. Smoke, rubble, men yelling, wild rounds of SHOTS raking the floor.

The Russians barge in from the trapdoor. They SHOUT, a mad look in their eyes.

Mansur falls to the ground, SCREAMING in pain. He's been hit on the shoulder. The Russians immobilize him.

Dust and smoke fill the air, everyone's COUGHING.

Kornikov wriggles, gagged, and tries to attract their attention from the corner.

IVONIN

Don't shoot! Kornikov's here!

Everyone gathers. As dust and smoke settle, the soldiers release Kornikov. He hugs his comrades, on the verge of tears.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - MOMENTS LATER

A soldier drags Mansur out of the cave. He pushes him down next to Abdur who has been tied up in a corner.

They look at each other. Abdur's abject look tells Mansur everything. The soldier ties them up together, back to back. Their hands touch.

Abdur squeezes his friend's hand. Mansur stiffens and pulls his hand away.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Everyone's high from the attack, soldiers running around the cave, carefully opening boxes, prodding them, looking out for booby traps.

Kozlov checks the ammo and make of the guns.

KOZLOV

(shouting)

Load all the weapons! You've got twenty minutes and then we get the choppers out. We'll hunt the buggers from the air before it gets dark!

Men hauls weapons up.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

(to Kornikov)

Was Malik Azam here as well?

KORNIKOV

Yes. They only left ten minutes ago.

KOZLOV

This time we're going to get the bastards. Come on, get moving!

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - DUSK

The sun begins to descend towards the cliffs.

Mansur and Abdur, tied back to back together, watch from the edge of the cave as the first chopper is loaded, prior to take-off.

Men load the weapons, running back and forth from the cave's entrance.

Abdur spots Kornikov. He's drinking from a flask, propped against a stone wall.

He's dishevelled, two day's stubble on his chin, his pattu filthy with dirt and dust. No trace of the Westerner in him now.

For one second his gaze meets Abdur's. The two men stare at each other, then Kornikov lowers his eyes.

MANSUR

(to Abdur)

.... All our weapons gone because of you. The big hero! Look at your friend now.

Abdur doesn't respond. His eyes are on Kornikov.

CUT TO:

Kozlov approaches Kornikov. He hands him a pack of cigarettes. Kornikov avidly lights one.

KOZLOV

Tell me about Malik. Did you get to know him?

KORNIKOV

He interrogated me at the beginning but after that I didn't see much of him. But he's bright - and brave. They say we trained him. He certainly knows our tactics.

KOZLOV

Did they ever take you to their camp up there?

KORNIKOV

Only once. They mainly kept me in the caves. They hardly ever come down here. Only for supplies.

Kozlov nods, absorbed in his thoughts. He looks at his men loading the helicopter and checks the time.

KOZLOV

We'll get them this time.

KORNIKOV

Careful. I think they took one of those new American missiles with them.

KOZLOV

(shrugging, then to his men, shouting)

Out in ten, boys!

(MORE)

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

I want everything loaded and then get
the fuck out! Hear me?

Kornikov drinks more. Hands the flask to Kozlov. He's had
enough.

KORNIKOV

Haven't touched it in months.

KOZLOV

Right. Look at you.

Takes in Kornikov's poor state.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

(sarcastic)

You stink like a goat. If you didn't
speak Russian, I'd take you for one of
them. But I've seen worse.

KORNIKOV

Actually they fed me okay. In a
way.... they looked after me. That
boy over there, Abdur...

(motions at him)

... He's the one who -

KOZLOV

(interrupting him)

You're the lucky one. Remember
Captain Movchan?

KORNIKOV

Of course. We were in Kandahar
together. Why?

KOZLOV

Three months ago he and his men were
ambushed not far from here. We saw
photos of them. Heads and limbs cut
off. They'd gouged out their eyes
with screwdrivers.

Kornikov closes his eyes.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

We think it was probably Malik and his
men. They're just beasts.

Loginov runs over, short of breath.

LOGINOV

First chopper ready, sir.

Kozlov stands up and walks over to the helicopter. He watches his troops carrying boxes. Looks up at the mountains.

KOZLOV

Kornikov, you've got one minute to pick up anything you want to take. Imagine, you lucky bastard, this is the last you'll see of this godforsaken country. Next week, you'll be downing vodka in Rostov, feeling like a real Russian again!

Kornikov nods, spaced out, uncertain.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

Come off it. A couple of tashas and a bottle...

KORNIKOV

No, it's just that... Nothing feels real yet. Not you, not the choppers.... Not Moscow.

He heads off briskly towards one of the compounds. Kozlov looks after him in disbelief.

INT. CELL ROOM - DAY

Kornikov is in the small room where he has spent the past months. Just a mattress on the packed dirt floor and a shelf on the wall.

He wraps his belongings into his pattu - a few clothes, a couple of black and white photos - one with Abdur and the kids, laughing and posing for the camera. Stewart slides it inside a notebook.

From outside, he hears a moan. He looks out the narrow window. All he can see is a shape, wrapped in a burqua, lying on the ground.

CUT TO:

Kornikov walks outside and approaches the woman. Her burqua and legs are stained in blood. She's wrapped in a foetal position, whimpering. It's Zaphira.

Kornikov pulls out a shirt from his bundle. He looks around, sees a water jug sitting on a window sill. He dips the cloth in it, wrings it out and hands it to the girl.

KORNIKOV

(in Pashtu)

Here. You can wash yourself with this. Don't move. I'll be right back.

Zaphira grabs the cloth without turning her head, unable to look at him, face streaked by tears.

Kornikov strides along the narrow alley glancing right and left. At last he sees what he's been looking for: a woman's salwar kameez and a head scarf drying on a line inside a mud wall.

He grabs them, then runs round the corner, back to Zaphira. The girl has cleaned herself. She can barely stand up. Kornikov points at her bloodstained burqua.

KORNIKOV (CONT'D)

(in Pashtu)

Give that to me. Quick.

A moment of hesitation. Kornikov turns his head away as a mark of respect, and only then Zaphira takes the burqua off. She looks like a little girl in her ripped muslin dress, her arms bare, breasts showing beneath the torn cloth.

Kornikov, head still turned the other way, hands her the salwar kameez and scarf. He rolls the stained burqua in a ball and stuffs it in his bundle.

KORNIKOV (CONT'D)

(in Pashtu)

I haven't seen anything. No one will know.

Zaphira quickly slips the shirt on top of what she's wearing, puts on the cotton trousers, and covers her head with the scarf. Without looking at Kornikov, she whispers.

ZAPHIRA

(in Pashtu)

Thank you.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The sun descends behind the cliffs.

Abdur is still tied, back to back, with Mansur. He watches the troops frantically trying to load what's left of the weapons into the second chopper.

The first one readies for take-off. Its engine starts to MURMUR, the rotors turning, gaining revolutions.

Engines are REVVING, everyone shouting as dust begins to spray all around. Kozlov shouts orders to his troops. It's a scene of chaos, RADIO-TALK all round.

Abdur notices a figure appearing and disappearing in the distance, moving quickly alongside the village's stone walls. It's Kornikov. Zaphira follows him, head low. Kornikov stops in front of Malik Azam's house and knocks at the door.

The girl stops for a moment and looks over in Abdur's direction. Her gaze meets his. Mansur notices nothing. Kornikov motions her to move and also catches Abdur's eyes.

A moment of suspension as the three of them look at one another, bound by their shared knowledge.

Abdur makes to get up but is attached to Mansur. He falls back on him.

MANSUR

Hey, what's up?!

Mansur tries to turn but Abdur stops him, all the time looking at Zaphira.

ABDUR

Nothing. Sorry.

Shirin half-opens the door. She stares out in horror at Zaphira and Kornikov. She wraps Zaphira in her arms and bundles her inside.

Kornikov stares back at Abdur. An imperceptible nod, just the blink of an eye, to confirm Abdur's suspicion. Mansur hasn't seen a thing.

CUT TO:

Kornikov storms up to Kozlov, pulling him by the sleeve. Abdur watches them. They seem to be arguing.

The increasing ROAR of the engine reaching working speed forces them to yell at each other. Mansur's watching them as well.

MANSUR

Your friend and the Commander are deciding how to finish us off.

Abdur doesn't respond. He looks away. His honour and Zaphira's have both been lost, to no avail.

CUT TO:

Kornikov and Kozlov argue, Kornikov indicating the soldiers loading the second chopper over Kozlov's shoulder.

KORNIKOV

They didn't have to rape her. Who did you say were the beasts round here?

KOZLOV

What is your problem, Captain?

KORNIKOV

They've ruined her for life.

KOZLOV

Oh, fuck this, I've no time for it...

KORNIKOV

You're wrong, Kozlov. If you want to win this war, you don't do that. Don't create yourselves enemies for ever...

For a second, Kozlov is chastened. Then:

KOZLOV

I've got to get my men outta here fast. Spare me your sermons, Kornikov. And get out my way.

CUT TO:

The soldiers, boxes loaded, wait for orders from Kozlov. Drinking, passing a joint, their faces red with excitement and exertion.

Kozlov walks over. Takes a puff from the joint.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

Good work, guys. Now let's get them.

Motions at Kornikov, pacing up and down further back in his Afghan clothes, alone.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)

We come all this way to save his arse and all he can say is:
(falsetto)
"Don't touch them, they were nice to me!" What the fuck!

He takes another gulp of vodka. Everyone's drunk and high. Suddenly, a wild look in his eyes, Kozlov grabs a hand grenade from one of the boxes.

He runs to the center of the square and, mimicking a baseball throw, hurls it into the well. A MUTED EXPLOSION. Then sizzling acidic fumes and CHEERS from his men.

CUT TO:

A group of women look out from behind the window of one of the houses where they've taken shelter. They stare, aghast, at the water-hole. It's completely destroyed.

Kozlov seems possessed, high on destruction.

He's by the two prisoners, untying Abdur's hands. He pulls him up.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)
 Captain! Come here. Tell your friend
 I'm going to let him go.

Kornikov translates.

KOZLOV (CONT'D)
 I'll spare him but first you
 (Kornikov) have to dispose of this
 little piece of shit for me.

Kozlov points the gun at Mansur's temple. Kornikov gives him a cold stare. Mansur's eyes suddenly horrified.

Something seems to have broken in Abdur, as if someone had cut the strings holding him together. He looks at Mansur, at the terror in his eyes. Then recovers and speaks steadily to Kornikov.

ABDUR
 Tell that man you'll shoot me instead
 of Mansur. My life for his. I've
 destroyed everything - I don't deserve
 to live.

Kornikov nods. He tries to convey sympathy in his expression. He translates to Kozlov.

KOZLOV
 So that's what he wants? Great. Then
 you can finish them both off in memory
 of Captain Movchan and his men. It'll
 be the perfect farewell to this shit
 hole...

Kozlov hands him the gun. Kornikov holds his gaze. He doesn't move to take it.

KORNIKOV

You're an asshole, Commander.

But his words are interrupted by a DEAFENING EXPLOSION.

The helicopter that has taken off in the background is blown out of the sky by the Stinger missile.

For an instant everyone is still, paralyzed.

The helicopter in the sky turns into a ball of fire.

Panic breaks out. Soldiers - including a terrified Kornikov - spray the place with MACHINE-GUN FIRE.

Abdur and Mansur dive for cover.

Kozlov shouts to his men.

KOZLOV

Move it, move it, move it!!! Let's
get out of here.

The gunner pilot starts the second chopper's engine. Blades begin to ROAR.

The first helicopter drops fast, CRASHES to the bottom of the valley. Fire, smoke, another DEAFENING SOUND.

The DOOR-GUNNER signals for the men to hurry, laying out fire at random. Everyone jumps on board.

Kornikov is last to board, looking back at what's he's leaving for good.

The chopper rises swiftly.

Abdur and Mansur are left on the ground, in shock, their hair swept by the chopper's blades. They scramble away, scurrying for shelter.

CUT TO:

A WHISTLING SOUND comes from the guns mounted on the chopper's sides. A pair of rockets spiral and then SLAM into the hillside, well above Abdur and Mansur.

CUT TO:

A THUNDEROUS ROAR. Then a rain of slag and dust.

Abdur squeezes his eyes shut, his mouth full of grit.

CUT TO:

A WHOOSH from further up.

The bright trail of shells tracing towards the aircraft accompanied by glowing streaks of automatic weapons' FIRE. Malik's men are striking back but missing.

CUT TO:

The chopper swings in a wider arc, then with a burst of speed, it rises and tears across the ridge-line, vanishing from sight.

CUT TO:

The sound of the helicopter fades in the distance. All is quiet save for the CHATTERING of birds and the slow CRACKLING of flames engulfing the crashed helicopter at the bottom of the valley.

CUT TO:

Silence is broken by distant GUN SHOTS and CRIES from further up the mountain. It's the rest of the mujaheddins. Tumbling down, FIRING in the sky to celebrate the gunning down of the first helicopter.

EXT. THE VALLEY - DUSK

It's almost dark. The mujaheddins, followed by the children and elders, have gathered at the bottom of the valley to inspect the helicopter wreckage.

There's lots of smoke and flames still burning. The men pick through the fragments for any useful remains of weapons.

CUT TO:

Abdur's perched on a rock, hugging his knees, some way off. He keeps his eyes on Malik, surrounded by a few of the older mujaheddins. Malik is grilling Mansur in front of him.

Abdur watches Mansur nod, keeping his head low.

Malik looks over at Abdur, summons him with an imperious gesture.

Abdur crosses hesitantly to Malik, surrounded by his men. They look at him with hostility and suspicion.

MALIK

None of my men has ever informed.
They burn their arms with red-hot
coals to practice silence under
torture.

Malik shakes his head with contempt. As hard as stone.

MALIK (CONT'D)
Have you nothing to say?

ABDUR
But the honour of your daughter, Malik
Azam, I tried -

Malik Azam spits at his feet.

MALIK
Everyone in the district knows there
are no mujahaddins as brave as mine.
Your cowardice has dishonoured us all.

Abdur looks at Malik, then nods. There's nothing he can say to defend himself.

MALIK (CONT'D)
Your weak blood is not worthy of
mixing with mine. Go away. We have
no use for you here now.

Malik turns his back to him.

MALIK (CONT'D)
(to his men)
We must move fast. They may be back.

Everyone quickly collects whatever they've salvaged from the wreckage. Abdur and Mansur exchange a glance. Mansur manages to get close to Abdur without Malik seeing.

MANSUR
I won't forget what you offered to do.
God willing, I'll see you again some
day.

Abdur nods, unable to reply. He's on the verge of tears. Mansur turns his back to him and follows the rest of the men.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - NIGHT

The oil lamps lighting the interiors of the houses flicker on the adobe walls. Women shut the windows. The village has retired and is going to sleep.

From the shadows, Zaphira, supported by her mother, creeps through the darkness to the compound gate. Her face is drawn, haunted. She takes a last look at...

... Abdur, sitting alone on the mound of rubble which was once the well.

He's smoking a cigarette, a small duffle bag at his feet. He senses something and looks round. But there is nothing but the blank gate of the compound now.

The square is deserted and silent, save for a dog BARKING to the moon.

Abdur's gaze now fixes on the shadows of the mujaheddins, climbing the path up the mountainside in a single line. Malik leading, Mansur further back.

RAZAQ (O.S.)

Son.

Razaq looks distraught. Abdur has shamed him as well in the village's eyes. He hands his son a bundle.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

Here. The golden bracelets. You may need to sell them.

Abdur ignores them.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

Take them. You think it'll be easy in Kabul?

Abdur takes the bundle. He places a hand on his chest and bows slightly.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

When the time is right, I will speak again with Malik Azam. With time, he may allow you home.

Abdur laughs bitterly. He sees his father's pained reaction, tempers his anger.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

Send me news. Through uncle Nazim.

His tone becomes urgent. This may be the last time he'll see Abdur.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

I need to hear from you.

Abdur nods, suddenly desperate to give back something.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

May Allah protect you.

Abdur bows his head again and his father touches it with his palm. Abdur scoops up his bag and goes.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - NIGHT

Abdur reaches the top of the ridge on the opposite side of the valley.

He looks across at his village lit by the oil lamps in the distance. The river shimmering in the moonlight at the bottom of the gorge.

He looks at the mountain across the valley, just in time to see the last of the mujahaddins walk up in a line, Kalashnikovs over their shoulders.

He turns his back. And begins to descend the other side. A lonely figure, head bowed.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - DAY

Traditional Afghan MUSIC is coming from one of the houses at the back of the village.

The two little girls from the river sit by the remains of the well, playing with their favourite doll. One paints the doll's feet with red mud, imitating the ceremonial henna patterns women wear at weddings.

A group of boys cross the square, screaming behind a soccer ball. They tear through a labyrinth of tiny alleys, finally reaching:

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The source of music screeching from an old transistor radio in Malik Azam's compound.

CUT TO:

Zaphira's GRANDMOTHER sits cross-legged on a low cot, in a room. With the help of two small girls, she's giving the final stitches to a richly embroidered gown covered in coins. It's Zaphira's wedding dress.

CUT TO:

The women's room next door is heaving. All available space is occupied by women's bodies, either dancing or chatting.

It's the henna ceremony, in preparation for the wedding. Zaphira sits surrounded by chatting and dancing WOMEN. She is the only one not enjoying herself. The others, left alone by the men's eyes, display a wild energy.

They dance for each other, flailing arms and moving their hips like belly dancers. They're seductive to the point of being provocative.

The sound of drums and tambourines and women singing. A procession is approaching the house. From the window we see a group of women enter the gate of the compound.

Shirin hurries in from another room. She crosses to her daughter. Zaphira looks at her fearfully.

SHIRIN

Hurry. Greet Mansur's mother in the other room.

Zaphira gets up reluctantly.

CUT TO:

The procession of women followed by tambourines and drums clap and dance the traditional song while crossing the courtyard. These are the female relatives on Mansur's side, Zaphira's new family.

WOMEN SINGING

We're taking this girl from her home and leading her to our home. Bride, do not bow your head and cry bitter tears. This is God's wish. Oh Mohammed, God's messenger, help make this difficult moment easy!

CUT TO:

On the doorstep, Shirin looks apprehensively at the approaching procession. She turns back inside to look at her daughter whom she's about to lose.

Zaphira sits in the center of the room, as if on display, head bowed.

The women from Mansur's family come through the door of the house.

They surround Zaphira, circling her, their attitude festive but proprietorial. Hands touching her, feeling her hair and skin.

Zaphira keeps her gaze steady on the wall, avoiding anyone's eye.

EXT. ON THE MOUNTAIN - CONTINUOUS

Three mujahaddins move fast along the ridge, descending towards the village, rifles strapped across their shoulders. The one leading the way is Mansur.

He looks almost imposing, wrapped in a woollen cloak and a black turban. It is as if he has aged, with the beginnings of a beard. Everything about him now exudes confidence and authority. He has become a fighter.

EXT. MANSUR'S COMPOUND - DAY

Live music plays in the groom's courtyard as well. Men drum and play traditional instruments.

All the guests (strictly male) help themselves to food piled high on the oilcloth out in the yard.

Mansur and his men make their entrance. Everyone stands to greet him. Bashir, his father, hugs him, celebrating his return. Mansur clearly hasn't been home for a while.

Formal greetings are exchanged and the men sit down on a carpet. Mansur eases from his neck a twenty foot ammunition belt. It slithers in coils on the carpet like an anaconda.

BASHIR

It's good to have you back. How are things up there?

MANSUR

Quiet. We're waiting for instructions. We could have to move back up towards the border at any moment.

BASHIR

What about Malik?

MANSUR

He will be here tomorrow morning. He's coming by night as usual.

BASHIR

Good. Best be careful. The infidels were here again about a month ago. They broke into every house, even searched the mosque in their boots.

MANSUR

We heard. Apparently they put a bounty on Malik's head

BASHIR

(laughs)

No money would be enough to sell Malik
Azam.

INT. AMERICAN BASE. CANTEEN - NIGHT

Hip-hop music in the background. A pretty risqué MTV video plays on a giant TV screen. We are in the canteen of an American military base.

SOLDIERS queue at the self-service, piling their trays with burgers, chips and cokes.

Abdur sits at a table, wrapped in his pattu. He can't help looking round at the young soldiers.

He's fascinated by the newness of everything: the colourful packaging of American junk food, the music blaring from the speakers, women in uniforms, smoking and drinking at the same tables as men.

MAN (O.S)

Cheeseburger and Coke.

Abdur looks up at the man. It's Kornikov, now CAPTAIN PEARCE (the same actor), Commander of US Special Forces.

He looks tanned, scruffy, in a sleeveless army camouflage jacket. His hair is long, his chin bearded. A couple of tattoos show on his forearm. He holds a plastic tray filled with styrofoam containers.

He sits down, pushes food and drink across the table towards Abdur. Raises his Coke in a toast.

A puzzled Abdur looks at the plastic dispensers on the table. Pearce smiles, opens his own container and shows Abdur how to squeeze mustard onto the burger. Bites into it with gusto.

PEARCE

Our national dish.

Abdur is about to imitate him when WALGREN, a sturdy woman officer in her forties, dressed in a squeaky clean uniform, approaches the table.

WALGREN

Sorry to be late, Captain. Held up in
a meeting.

Pearce pulls up a chair. Abdur shuffles, uncertain.

PEARCE

We just got here. This is my friend, Abdur Raman. Major Walgren is in charge of intelligence operations for the main army here.

Walgren shakes Abdur's hand firmly, with a warm smile.

WALGREN

Hi Mr Raman, good to meet you. Glad you decided to help us. The Captain says good things about you.

Abdur looks at her, taken aback, then puts a hand to his chest and bows his head, muttering a shy hello.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Zaphira's future sister-in-law, AMARAYN, begins the henna ceremony.

She undresses Zaphira, till she's left in her underwear, in a tunic and long trousers.

The green paste is skillfully poured on the soles of her feet and the palms of her hands.

Amarayn begins to SING the henna song as she draws intricate patterns with a thin wooden stick.

Zaphira's hands are then rolled in a soft cloth to avoid dirtying her clothes.

INT. AMERICAN BASE. CANTEEN - NIGHT

Walgren, Pearce and Abdur sit at the table, smoking. Pearce seems edgy and restless as he tries to conceal his dislike of Walgren. There isn't much empathy between Special Forces and regular Army personnel. Abdur hasn't touched his food yet.

PEARCE

Abdur got the invitation last week. He's convinced Malik Azam will attend his daughter's wedding. Whatever the risks. Other sources confirm he's heading south -

WALGREN

(abrupt)
I saw the report.

She pours coffee, turning to Abdur. She doesn't wholly trust Pearce. He's too embedded with the natives for her liking.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 Coffee? No tea, I'm afraid. Cream?
 Sugar?

Abdur nods without looking her in the eyes. Walgren fumbles with cups and sugar and hands one to Abdur. Underneath his pattu, we glimpse a colourful T-shirt. He wears American army boots. He's clearly spent time around the US forces.

Abdur tastes the coffee, screws up his face.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 How's your English, Mr Raman?

Abdur nods again, still avoiding looking at her.

WALGREN (TO PEARCE) (CONT'D)
 Does he speak any?

PEARCE
 A bit. I'll translate if need be.

Walgren studies the map. She taps her fingers on the table, thinking.

WALGREN
 You really think Malik will turn up?
 No one has seen him for months.

No answer from Abdur. Pearce translates into Pashtu.

ABDUR
 (broken English)
 He come. It's tradition. A man
 always must come to marriage of
 family. His daughter marry.

Walgren goes back to the map. Something on her mind.

WALGREN
 (to Pearce)
 Why should I trust him?

PEARCE (BLUNT)
 Because this is the only concrete
 piece of information we've had in
 months..

WALGREN
 You know how many guys show up here
 every day with concrete information?
 It's all part of their personal
 vendettas, tribal wars, whatever...
 (MORE)

WALGREN (CONT'D)

Plus, they'll invent anything for money -

PEARCE

I wouldn't be wasting my time if-

But Abdur interrupts vehemently. He has caught the nature of Walgren's misgivings and it has upset him.

ABDUR

Not for money! That man is bad man!
Now he is Talib Commander, works with
Saudi people. Very bad. Me not want
money, I help only.

He rambles on in pashtu and then stands up, motioning to leave. Pearce grabs his arm and pulls him back onto the chair.

PEARCE

Hey! hey! Wait! Sit down!
(to Walgren, under his
breath)
You keep doing this and we'll lose
him. Remember Afghans aren't used to
being told what to do by women.

Walgren doesn't like being told what to do by Pearce either, the two of them now glaring at one another.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

No point in blowing the operation,
Major. I'm only taking three men and
one vehicle. If Malik doesn't turn up
we'll have wasted a day driving and
eating dust. No big deal.

Walgren taps her fingers again, then nods reluctantly. She turns to Abdur who has missed most of their conversation.

WALGREN

Can he explain why he's so eager to
sell Malik to us?

Pearce translates, Abdur continues in Pashtu to Pearce.

PEARCE

(annoyed)
Basically he's saying he wants the
Talibans finished because they've
been destroying his country. They
haven't helped ordinary people like
they promised. He says he hates
the foreigners.

(MORE)

PEARCE (CONT'D)
 He means the Saudis and Pakistanis.
 Malik works with them now.

Abdur interrupts him, talks directly to Walgren.

ABDUR
 (in English)
 Myself good Muslim but no Talibans.
 What they preach not the Quran say.

He finishes. Walgren nods. Abdur fiddles with some difficulty with his cheeseburger.

WALGREN
 Do you want some of that? Here, let me.

She grabs his styrofoam box, squeezes condiments on the burger, onion and pickle on top, closes the bun.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 Enjoy.

Abdur looks puzzled at the concoction and tentatively bites into it.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 You'll get used to it if you 'll keep hanging around here.
 (getting up)
 I'm sorry. I have to go.
 (to Pearce)
 You'll leave early tomorrow then, Captain. We can discuss details later in my office. I want to clarify a few points with you.

She holds out her hand for Abdur to shake.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 Well, good luck, Mr Raman. It was a pleasure meeting you. We're grateful. What you're doing will be good for your country.

Abdur doesn't offer to shake her hand. Walgren seems bemused by his lack of etiquette. She pats Pearce on the shoulder, motions him to escort her to the door. They walk.

WALGREN (CONT'D)
 Is that really what it's about, Pearce?

PEARCE

Fuck knows. He probably has his own reasons. We'll never know, though. I do trust him, though.

WALGREN

Wasn't it you who told me when I arrived, "You can never buy an Afghan, you can only rent one"?

PEARCE

The trick is to make sure the lease doesn't expire, Major.

Walgren leaves. Pearce, watches her go, then shakes his head.

INT. MALIK'S COMPOUND - NIGHT

The room is darker and quiet. The women have eaten and danced till the early hours. They're beginning to fall asleep on mattresses spread around the room.

Zaphira curls up next to her mother. She has been crying. She grabs Shirin's hand and holds it tight to her chest.

SHIRIN

Sleep.

ZAPHIRA

I can't. I'm afraid of what will happen tomorrow, mother. What is Mansur going to do when he finds out?

SHIRIN

It's happened in every village during the war. You're not the first or the last. Try and sleep now.

But Zaphira doesn't relent.

ZAPHIRA

I wish I'd married Abdur and gone to Kabul with him that day. He would have kept me. Whereas Mansur... What will happen if he rejects me?

SHIRIN

He won't. We're going to make sure your sheet has blood on it. That's all it takes.

ZAPHIRA

And how will we do that without him knowing? I'm scared, mother...

SHIRIN

We'll dip a bit of sponge in chicken blood. Just before he comes to you, slide it between your legs. It'll make you tighter inside and it'll bleed. He'll never know, trust me.

There's a silence. Then Zaphira sighs.

ZAPHIRA

Abdur would have looked after me. We would have helped each other.

Shirin is immersed in her thoughts for a moment, as if remembering something in her past. Her voice, unusually soft.

SHIRIN

Stop thinking about Abdur. It'll only make things worse.

Zaphira looks at her mother. She's about to ask more but Shirin silences her, shushing her to sleep.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - DAWN

Roosters begin to wake up the sleeping village. Sparrows gather on window sills. The first children run out of the houses, ready to begin their games.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The women wake up in the room where they've spent the night together. They begin to move around, attending to the tea and fire.

Amarayn unwraps the cloth around Zaphira's hand. She scrapes off the henna. A beautiful orange pattern appears.

EXT. THE VILLAGE SQUARE - LATER

A line of mujahaddins descends the steep path leading down into the village.

It's Malik, preceded and followed by heavily armed bodyguards. All the men from the village are in the square to welcome him.

Malik's beard is longer and greyer, he's wearing mirrored shades, a grubby military smock, a pistol, and an automatic rifle slung around his neck. One of his bodyguards carries a radio handset.

The men look tired. They've been walking a long time.

The elaborate Pashtun ritual of greetings is exchanged between the villagers and Malik's group.

Then Malik's party enters the hujira.

EXT - OUTSKIRTS OF KABUL - MORNING

A sand colored Tacoma drives through the outskirts of the city, a motorcycle in the back of the pick up. The road is busy with traffic.

Overstuffed trucks laden with animals, timber, fuel, all HONKING their horns.

Pearce drives, next to him, Abdur. Three young men from the Special Forces team in the back, in full camouflage gear. GARCIA, DE LILLO and MORRISON.

Standing out against their outfits is the lapis pendant hanging round Pearce's neck - clearly a lucky charm.

The jeep takes a narrow alley, around a bazaar. Rubble and ruins everywhere. Walls peppered by bullets. Women wrapped in their blue burquas scuttle like ghosts along the walls.

The street widens as it approaches the bazaar. It's very crowded. The car has to slow down to negotiate the crowd.

MEN and CHILDREN with their legs and arms amputated - victims of land mines - wave as they see the jeep.

They gather around it. The faces of men and children, staring curiously.

Abdur watches Pearce look at the hungry faces. The desperate eyes. Stumps POUND the jeep's sides. It's a harrowing spectacle. Abdur looks tormented. He hands out some coins to the children. He hates this.

EXT. ON THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE - LATER

The jeep has left the city behind. In the pristine morning light, it drives in and out of the shadows of high ridges, leaving a plume of dust in its wake.

CUT TO:

The road seems to have disintegrated a long time ago through a combination of being bombed, driven over by tanks, and lack of maintenance. It's a wasteland.

Flanking the way on either side stretch miles and miles of ruins. Burned-out, stripped hulks of tanks litter the verges.

Winches and military bulldozers too, their axles twisted by mine blasts.

In every direction, hilltop structures of baked mud half-destroyed in previous battles scar the ground. And all around, craters, the imprint of fallen shell or mortar-round.

Inside the jeep, the soldiers in the back chew gum, listening to music on their headphones.

Abdur can't stop looking out of the window, as if in a trance. He's sinking into a black gloom.

Pearce checks him from time to time.

PEARCE

It'll be alright. You're doing the right thing.

Abdur looks at him blankly, then turns out his window. More silence as Pearce drives.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

We're here for the same reason. To help you get rid of people like Malik Azam. We'll hunt them down and destroy their network. That's the way your country will have a chance again.

Still no response. Pearce doesn't relent. He wants to ensure Abdur isn't going to pull out.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

If we don't get the Taliban out, they'll come back under another name. Understand? This is our job. To disrupt them, stop them operating.

Abdur keeps looking out the window.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Then we can begin to rebuild - clear the mines, build bridges, roads to help you. You know how many millions of dollars we - ?

ABDUR

(snaps, in Pashtu)

Build? Once you've killed them, you'll forget us. You'll go back to America. Just like you did when the Russians left. You abandoned us.

PEARCE

Not this time. We've learnt a lesson.
We're going to stay, improve the
security and help you rebuild the
country.

Abdur shrugs. He gestures at the barren landscape.

ABDUR

My father once told me this place was
green and rich. He said my village
was surrounded by orchards. Now look.
It's dry. Dead. The people have
gone. Your bridges and buildings
can't put life back in this land.

He turns away, wrapped in bitter silence.

Garcia, mid-twenties, Hispanic, senses Abdur's mood. He takes
off his head phones and leans over the passenger seat.

GARCIA

Hey, man. Ever heard of a guy
called Eminem?

He places his earphones over Abdur's ears. Abdur is suddenly
overwhelmed by THE SOUND OF RAP.

He can't help an astonished smile. He's never heard anything
like this before.

The guys in the back, De Lillo and Morrison, get a kick from his
reaction.

DE LILLO

Pretty cool, huh?

MORRISON

Hey, Abdur, listen to this.

Morrison switches earphones on Abdur. Suddenly Abdur is carried
away by the sound of ROCK MUSIC.

Morrison takes out a couple of chocolates from his M & M'S
packet and hands them to Abdur.

MORRISON (CONT'D)

Have these. The perfect combo.

The MUSIC blasting in Abdur's ears becomes the unlikely
soundtrack to the barren wasteland they're crossing.

EXT. ON THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE - DAY

The plain has closed in, the route flanked by mountain ranges on both sides. The road has narrowed into a valley carved between steep walls.

Pearce's jeep passes through a narrow gully, following a dry river course cut deep in the sandstone.

Inside the jeep, Abdur is back in a pensive mood. He's gulping down Morrison's M & M'S.

De Lillo, a stocky Italian kid, early twenties and clearly the youngest in the group, pats Abdur on his shoulder and offers him a Marlboro. Abdur lights up and turns to Pearce with a smile.

ABDUR
(in English)
Can you get me to America after this?

Pearce starts, then laughs in surprise. Abdur looks intently at him.

PEARCE
You're serious?

ABDUR
Why not?

Pearce pretends to think about it, shakes his head.

PEARCE
You belong here.

Abdur grimaces. Something has clicked in his head. The idea of going to live in the United States.

ABDUR
I want to go. You get me a job? Make dollars?

PEARCE
It's not that simple. You'd need a passport... A visa...

Abdur shrugs. He knows Pearce could fix it.

Pearce, uncomfortable, looks in the mirror. Taking in the other men he's responsible for aside from Abdur. They're lost in thought, listening to music, tapping their thighs.

PEARCE (CONT'D)
It wouldn't be easy. American's very different, Abdur.
(MORE)

PEARCE (CONT'D)

This is your country here. It'd be difficult for you...

ABDUR

(in Pashtu)

More difficult than this?

Abdur gestures towards the wasteland they're passing through.

A barefoot child with his flock of sheep runs after the car like a maniac, waving and cheering.

A frail old man walking along the track holding himself on a stick, his head wrapped in a turban.

Rusty Soviet tanks, encrusted in the landscape like ancient dinosaurs.

Abdur and Pearce suddenly see the same thing.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

How can this be home any more? I've lost my village and my family. The rest is rubble.

He turns his eyes back to the road, looking, stony-faced, ahead. Pearce drives on, torn inside at Abdur's new plan.

EXT. ON THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE - LATER

The jeep has stopped underneath a wide overhang to avoid being seen from above. It has been covered with netting in order to camouflage it from a distance. The motorbike has been unloaded.

Pearce and his men prepare to set off up to the ridge. They are cross-checking a map on the bonnet of the jeep.

Pearce traces a trajectory with his fingers on the map.

PEARCE

We split right here. You guys and I march over this ridge all the way along here. We position ourselves here. If everything goes to plan, we reunite in Kabul the day after tomorrow. Got that, Abdur?

Abdur nods. Pearce shows Abdur a small walkie-talkie and a tiny device sitting in the palm of his hand.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Okay, let's run through this one more time.

(MORE)

PEARCE (CONT'D)

After you've seen him, confirm his presence on the radio as soon as you can.

Abdur looks at the microchip.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Here's the tracker. Remember, you can clip it on just about anything. But it's got to be something he'll take with him. And make sure it's somewhere he won't find it, okay? Otherwise you're fucked and so are we.

Abdur nods. He keeps looking at the strange black dot, perplexed.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

That's it. All we need is a signal. Then we can track him back up the mountain after the wedding. The rest is up to us. Though I suggest you don't hang around too long afterwards.

ABDUR

What will you do with him?

PEARCE

Hope he leads us into the caves up there. To the main guys. If not, we'll just pick him up.

ABDUR

And then?

PEARCE

Our people will handle it.

Abdur stares into Pearce's eyes. He doesn't trust him entirely.

ABDUR

You won't come to get him during the wedding, right?

PEARCE

No way. I said before. We're not coming anywhere near the village. No civilians involved. I give you my word.

Pearce stretches his hand out. Abdur hesitates, then takes it.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

It's my word of honour, Abdur. We
have honour too, you know.

The two men shake hands and give each other a formal Afghan hug.
Abdur turns hesitantly to Morrison.

ABDUR

(in English)

I take chocolate for present to
children in my village?

MORRISON

You want some of these? Sure, we've
got plenty.

He pulls out what he has from his multi-pocketed vests. De
Lillo rips open a couple of MRE (Meals ready to Eat) and pulls
out lots of chocolates, candy bars, chewing gum.

Abdur stuffs his pockets. He and the guys exchange quick hugs.
De Lillo gives him a five.

Abdur wraps himself tightly into his pattu and mounts his
motorbike.

The Americans watch him as he repeatedly turns the ignition key.
The engine finally starts, with much spluttering and lots of
black smoke and Abdur's off on the bumpy track.

He turns back, smiling, waves his hand. The guys wave back,
making the V-sign. Abdur responds with the same gesture. A
hopeful smile on his face.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - DAY

Zaphira's hair is rolled around wooden curlers.

Her eyebrows are plucked.

A thick layer of light foundation applied to her face.

Dark red lipstick on her lips and a thick kohl pencil around her
eyes.

INT. MANSUR'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Mansur sits on a stool in a small room while the village BARBER
tidies up his jaw and hair. His clean white clothes for the
wedding ceremony lie on a low bed, along with his sword and gun.

Malik enters.

MANSUR
Salam alekum.

MALIK
Aleikum salam, my son.

MANSUR
God be praised. You got down safely?

MALIK
God be praised, it was all quiet when we left, and we saw no one on the way. I've left Rashid and Yaqub up on the ridge to keep watch.

Mansur looks at the barber. The barber leaves, taking Mansur's hint.

MANSUR
There's something I want you to know. I've invited Abdur as my guest and he's on his way.

Malik's eyes gleam with irony.

MALIK
I was wondering how much longer you were going to wait before you'd tell me.

Mansur lowers his head.

MALIK (CONT'D)
He betrayed us.

MANSUR
I owe him my life. And he was like a brother to me.

Malik doesn't say anything, looks sceptical.

MANSUR (CONT'D)
You exiled him from home and family. Hasn't he suffered enough?

Malik shrugs. Mansur insists.

MANSUR (CONT'D)
Besides, I thought he could be useful to us.

MALIK
Useful? How?

MANSUR

He knows Kabul now. I've heard he speaks some English. He's not just a villager like us now. He could relay important information to us.

Malik ponders. He pulls out his naswar from a small bundle and offers it to Mansur.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRACK - DAY

The light is sharp as crystal. Mountain summits glow against the deep blue sky.

Abdur drives his bike along the dirt track. He looks at the mountain, its familiar profile. Everything - from the ginger coloured trees staining the valley with reds and yellows to the green of the stream and the ridge - brings back memories.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRACK - LATER

The bike slows down in the proximity of the village.

A flock of sheep driven by a turbanned white-bearded man flows around the bike like a shoal of fish.

Abdur drinks in his surroundings: the farmers burning winter stubble in fields divided by poplars, turbanned men passing on bicycles and donkeys, women washing their clothes in the river. Nothing has changed.

Abdur stops on a ridge and takes a look at the landscape stretching below him. Something in him gives, as if the hardness he's harbored for so long is thawing and melting.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce sweats heavily as he speaks on his radio.

PEARCE

Cobra one... This is Cobra two...
We're in position... Our man's on his way... Over...

The radio crackles. Walgren's voice comes up. A streak of anxiety

WALGREN (O.S.)

Cobra one. Okay, Cobra two. As soon as target is acquired, confirm. Is that clear? Suddenly I've got everyone on my back. Bagram, the Pentagon, the lot. No fuck-ups, Captain... Over...

PEARCE

Relax, Major. Nothing's going to happen for a while. Afghan weddings go on for ever... Over.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - DAY

Abdur's bike is reaching the village. He can see the mud houses in the distance, right across the valley. A smile on his face.

EXT. ABDUR'S COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

A YOUNG GIRL, Abdur's little sister, sweeps the mud floor of the yard. She hears the sound of the approaching bike. As it turns the corner she recognizes Abdur and runs inside to announce his arrival.

Children run out of the house, calling his name. They pull at his clothes, screaming with laughter.

Family and neighbours emerge and surround him. It's a commotion.

CUT TO:

Razaq has aged and has lost weight. Abdur's younger brothers and sister look thin and hungry. The youngest one has lost his leg and is on crutches.

Abdur bows his head to receive his father's blessing.

RAZAQ

May the grace of God be with you. How was your journey?

ABDUR

Praise God, it was good. I bring you Uncle Nazim Ahmed's greetings. He sends you this present.

He pulls out a bundle from his bag. It's a cheap wristwatch. Razaq opens its case and inspects it with care. He solemnly puts it around his wrist, as the children crowd around him and try to touch it.

ABDUR (CONT'D)

And here. For you lot. Presents for you as well.

He distributes the colourful candies he collected from the Americans. The children begin to fight and scream with delight.

INT. ABDUR'S COMPOUND - DAY

Abdur sits inside the house with his brothers, Razaq and Razaq's elderly, white-haired brother, Abdur's UNCLE. Abdur strokes the head of his youngest brother, the one missing a leg. Razaq shakes his head with a pained expression.

RAZAQ

They came a month ago. They searched everybody. They unveiled the women, made them lift their veils, touched them.

Abdur is momentarily distracted, recalling Zaphira's rape. He pulls himself together.

ABDUR

Americans?

RAZAQ

Yes. Everyone was screaming. They were saying they'd come to save us. But you wouldn't treat an animal like that.

ABDUR

Were they males or females soldiers?

RAZAQ

Males. They pushed everyone around, screaming. The cruelty they showed, you wouldn't treat an animal like that. Even your uncle was-

The uncle intervenes.

UNCLE

They told me to take off my clothes. They kicked my legs open with their boots and they touched me everywhere. I never felt such humiliation in my whole life.

ABDUR

What did they want?

RAZAQ

They said they had a report about foreigners being here. They kept on asking about Malik.

UNCLE

They touched us in all our private parts, they even fingered us...

Abdur looks deeply disturbed by this account.

RAZAQ

You should come back here, son. At least you could help look after the village.

ABDUR

But Malik...

RAZAQ

He has asked to see you.

Razaq smiles, taking him by the arm.

RAZAQ (CONT'D)

He told me to bring you to the hujira as soon as you got here.

INT. THE HUIJIRA - MOMENTS LATER

Abdur follows his father inside the hujira.

They stoop awkwardly through a small door into a smoky room. Abdur is greeted by an array of curious stares. Malik and his men sit on cushions, drinking tea and passing hookas.

Malik motions him to sit and join them, according to custom. Abdur and Razaq join the men. Greetings are exchanged.

Malik at first pretends to ignore Abdur and talks to his men as if he doesn't exist. Razaq moves closer to Malik and talks with him, indicating Abdur.

Malik looks at Abdur. He notices the American shoes and T-shirt. His attire sticks out amidst the villagers' traditional robes. Malik clears his voice and talks to Abdur from across the room.

MALIK

Abdur! I hardly recognize you. Look at your fancy foreign clothes! Have you forgotten us in the village now? And your religion too?

The men laugh, unsure whether they should look welcoming or hostile towards Abdur. Abdur too is uncertain how aggressive Malik is being.

ABDUR

No, Malik Azam, I could never forget my village. When I sit in the bazaar, I dream of the valley and the river.

Malik seems pleased with the answer. He hands a plate of pilau to one of the young boys to bring to Abdur. He watches Abdur eat. Hospitality is another of his means of control.

MALIK

Your father says you've been working with Nazim Ahmed. He's my cousin too, you know.

ABDUR

He sends his most heartfelt greetings to you, Malik Azam. He's in good health, praise Allah, and so is his family.

Malik nods, keeps scanning Abdur, every detail.

MALIK

They tell me you speak English now and deal with the foreigners?

Abdur hesitates. Does Malik know or suspect something?

ABDUR

Well... In the bazaar... I picked up a few words. These days the bazaar's full of foreigners

MALIK

The kaffirs come to the bazaar?
(laughs)
So you talk to them in English?

ABDUR

(reddening)
Just enough to sell them things, Malik Azam.
(laughs)
They pay stupid prices for things they think are ancient.

MALIK

That's very good. You with Kaffirs...
One day that could be useful to us.

Abdur's on edge. He can't make out whether Malik is testing him or is innocent. Malik turns to his audience who nod in agreement with their chief.

Malik offers Abdur a pinch of naswar. Abdur accepts. He and his father look at each other. Razaq smiles. Things are panning out better than he expected.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - DAY

The final preparation of the bride.

The beautifully embroidered dress is brought by Shirin and her oldest sister.

Zaphira slips into it and waits for Shirin to bring out the jewellery: ear-rings and bracelets and anklets. A golden scarf to cover her hair.

Zaphira sits like a sphinx in the middle of the room, her gaze still. With the heavy make-up and stiff curls, she looks like a painted doll.

EXT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The sun is beginning to descend behind the mountain, bathing the village in a golden glow.

Abdur has managed to go off by himself. He heads down the path that leads to the cave entrance. Making sure nobody sees him, he enters.

INT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The cave is empty. Only a few sacks of grain and flour leaning against the walls.

Abdur pulls out the walkie-talkie.

ABDUR
(whispers)
Cobra two, cobra two... Do you
receive me? Over...

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce is on the radio. Behind him, the soldiers eat rations on the ground. They leap up as Pearce speaks to Abdur.

PEARCE
Be careful now... Over...

He sees his men, violently signals them to get down. He gets out his binoculars.

PEARCE (CONT'D)
Target acquired. They've got two look-
outs on the ridges.
(spots them through
binoculars)
Got them... Okay, watch them,
Garcia...

EXT. THE CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Abdur emerges from the cave.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Abdur!

Abdur spins round. It's Mansur, in his white dress for the wedding, waiting to surprise him as of old.

MANSUR

(laughing)

So others have to tell me my cousin
has arrived?

Abdur's face lightens up. A broad smile, his eyes glinting again. He walks over and hugs his friend.

EXT. THE RIVER - DAY

Abdur and Mansur sit under one of the poplars at the spot where Captain Stewart's camp once stood. The two men share the last cigarette from Abdur's Marlboros.

In the background we make out the rusty remains of the Soviet helicopter, the reminder of another war.

Mansur inhales deeply, enjoying the taste. He nods down at Abdur's shoes.

MANSUR

You didn't send any news.

ABDUR

Seemed better that way.

Beat.

MANSUR

How's life in the city?

ABDUR

Hard. So many people have come into Kabul looking for work. No electricity, not much to eat. I work in Chicken street, selling stuff for my uncle. How's life been for you?

MANSUR

Nothing has changed. Most of the time we're in the caves. The Americans have those planes which film from the sky.

(chuckles)

(MORE)

MANSUR (CONT'D)

They haven't caught any of us yet.
But it's good to be back down here.
With mother's cooking.

He pats his stomach, laughing. Abdur smiles. They sit in silence, passing the last of the cigarette.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

The life of a mujahad still seems
better to me than being stuck in
Chicken Street.

Abdur shrugs.

ABDUR

We all do the best we can.

MANSUR

You could come back and be a mujahad
again. It's up to you.

Abdur looks out over the landscape and doesn't reply. Mansur leaves it for now and scrambles up.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

Come on, we'd better get back or we'll
miss my wedding!

He pulls Abdur up by the arm, laughing.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

Cheer up! Or are you mad I got the
beauty in the end?

Abdur smiles, trying to shrug the comment off.

MANSUR (CONT'D)

I can hardly wait for tonight!

Mansur keeps laughing as he leads the way up the hill. A sudden despair in Abdur's eyes. For the rape, for Zaphira, for the life he could have lived and cherished.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - DAY

Zaphira is still in the same position, cross legged on her cot, surrounded by her younger sisters who are giving her the last touches: adjusting her veil, fixing her curls.

She remains perfectly still under their hands, almost lifeless. Shirin enters the room. With a wave of her hand she dismisses the girls.

She kneels next to Zaphira, her face very close to her daughter's. She opens the palm of her hand and shows Zaphira a small parcel wrapped in plastic. The ingenious trick which will save her life.

The two women exchange a look. Shirin nods reassuringly.

Shirin pushes the tiny wrap into Zaphira's palm and closes her fist, pressing her hand onto hers.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - DAY

Garcia watches the village and the look-outs. A faint music travels through the air. Pearce is on the radio.

PEARCE

No, you've got to wait... Over...

WALGREN (O.S.)

If you identify him, we can send in choppers and pick him up. Over...

PEARCE

That's crazy. The village is full of women and children. No attack. That's that, Walgren. Over and out.

He rolls over next to Garcia.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Fucking nuts.

Garcia snorts.

GARCIA

Big Army people, you know what they're like.

Pearce nods. He relaxes.

PEARCE

They come out here for six months max, don't bother to learn the language or figure out how things work. They just want to do their big operation and go home with the trophy. Then it's us who have to clean up after their mess.

DE LILLO

And women are the worst!

A moment of camaraderie between the men as they lie there.

GARCIA

Anyway. Two months more and De Lillo and I are headed home.

DE LILLO

Pizza on East Fifth. Heaven.

Pearce is quiet.

GARCIA

You headed home too, Captain?

PEARCE

Nope. I'm staying on. Enjoying the Wild West.

Garcia nods, humouring him. Pearce peers through his binoculars. Garcia rolls his eyes to De Lillo and Morrison: Pearce is more Afghan than American sometimes.

INT. MALIK'S HOUSE - DAY

Zaphira wears her wedding dress. Someone draws the veil over her face so that she's covered.

The final moment has come.

The Imam walks into the room. He formally asks her three times whether she wants to take Mansur as her husband.

Zaphira answers with an inaudible yes.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

As seen through the binoculars:

The Imam walks outside. A crowd has gathered around the groom. Mansur, in his white dress and a turban, waits for the ritual to be repeated.

The Imam repeats his three questions and the men cheer. Mansur's face doesn't betray any emotion.

Garcia and Pearce both watch through binoculars. De Lillo and Morrison squat behind them with equipment.

GARCIA

What's with all the hugging? No women? No bride?

PEARCE

That's the way it works. The groom and the bride are kept apart through the ceremony.

Pearce's binoculars moves around, searching, sharpening focus. They frame one man, seen from the back.

The man turns around. Dark shades, black turban. Malik.

PEARCE (CONT'D)
There he is! The tall one in
fatigues, shades. See him?

GARCIA
That's him?

PEARCE
That's Malik Azam. We're on!

GARCIA
Where's Abdur?

Pearce nervously scans with his binoculars.

PEARCE
Got him!

As seen through the lens: Abdur in the midst of the crowd, keeping his eyes on Malik.

PEARCE (CONT'D)
(turns behind him)
Hey, De Lillo! Check if we've got a
signal!

De Lillo checks the receiver connected to a small portable screen.

DE LILLO
Still dead.

GARCIA
(checks his watch)
What's he waiting for?

PEARCE
It's okay. He's doing the right
thing. He doesn't need to place the
bug too early.

Garcia shrugs, slightly sceptical. He doesn't trust Abdur as much as his captain.

PEARCE (CONT'D)
He's doing fine. It's going to work.

EXT. MALIK'S COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

Abdur keeps a close watch on Malik's movements.

Malik and his sons gather around the entrance of their house. It is now time to pick up Zaphira and lead her to the groom's house.

Women gather in the doorway in preparation for Zaphira's departure from the house. Abdur cannot bear it and seizes his moment to sneak away.

Just before entering his house, Malik turns around. He frowns as he sees Abdur scuttling away from the crowd.

INT. MALIK'S COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

Zaphira, veiled, sits in her father's house, clutching a Quran in her hands.

Her male kinsmen, led by Malik, walk into the room. They lift her and put her on the dolie, the wedding palanquin.

They carry her out. Women weep their last tears.

The scene resembles a funeral. The dolie, a coffin.

EXT. VILLAGE STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Forceful warlike DRUMMING greets the dolie outside the Khan's house.

The palanquin bearing the bride is carried through the streets in a public parade to the groom's house.

The younger brothers carry Zaphira's possessions behind the palanquin: quilts, pillows, clothes and utensils. Everything that she's bringing to the marriage.

INT. THE HUIJIRA - DAY

Abdur stoops under the low door into the hujira. The room is empty. The bags of Malik's men and some of their guns are scattered around the room.

EXT. MANSUR'S COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

Bashir and his sons wait for the palanquin outside their compound. They receive the dolie from Zaphira's kinsmen and carry it inside.

Bashir and Malik exchange a glance as the girl changes hands.

The men from Mansur's family lift her out of the dolie and bring her inside the room. They place her on the cot next to her husband.

Zaphira and Mansur sit side by side, not looking at each other in any way.

INT. THE HUIJIRA - CONTINUOUS

Abdur scours the room, inspecting the men's weapons, bags, their pattus and blankets.

He finds what he he's been looking for: Malik's bag. Next to it, the Chief's embroidered pattu.

Abdur hesitates a second, then examines the shawl. He manages to slip the microchip inside behind the label.

FOOTSTEPS on the wooden staircase. Abdur drops the pattu as Malik appears.

MALIK

There you are.

Abdur manages an awkward smile.

ABDUR

I was looking for a gun. I wanted to be ready for the final blessing.

MALIK

That's what I came for. There's no hurry. It'll be a while yet. Sit down, let's talk.

Abdur sits, not knowing what to expect.

EXT. OUTSIDE MANSUR'S COMPOUND - DAY

The rest of the village has gathered outside the groom's house, around the two empty chairs where the newly-weds will sit for the final blessing.

DRUMMING is frenzied. Everyone is excited.

INT. THE HUIJIRA - CONTINUOUS

Malik and Abdur sit alone.

MALIK

I've thought about what happened and I want to give you another chance. You were young and I was maybe too harsh. You've got contact with the enemy.

ABDUR

Very rarely. Only when they come
round the bazaar.

MALIK

I know. But we may be able to get you
into their base. You could do
something for us.

Abdur's eyes are lowered. He's on the verge of cracking.

MALIK (CONT'D)

What's wrong? You look hesitant.

Abdur lifts his head, his voice steady.

ABDUR

No, Malik Azam. Just surprised.

From outside, the sound of DRUMMING and the CHEERING of the
crowd.

MALIK

They're coming out. We'll talk later.

Malik grabs his gun. Points at his bag and pattu.

MALIK (CONT'D)

Give them to me.

Abdur grabs the bag and hands it to him. Then the pattu. Malik
smoothes it out with his hands, throws it around himself.

INT. MANSUR'S COMPOUND - DAY

Zaphira and Mansur come out of the house gate, side by side.
Husband and wife. CHEERS.

They slowly proceed through the crowd and take a seat on the
chairs. The DRUMMING and the MUSIC reaches a frenzy now.

Abdur stares at Zaphira from the back of the crowd.

Mansur's oldest sister drapes a blanket over the newly-married
couple and holds a mirror in front of them.

The mullah holds the Quran over their heads and reads a
blessing.

Zaphira lifts her veil and stares into the mirror. She meets
Mansur's eyes. They look at each other through the mirror.
Zaphira is impassive but Mansur's face lights up in delight.

Abdur sees Mansur's joy.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce and Garcia watch through binoculars.

Through the lens: men are passing guns to one another. As if frantically getting ready for something.

The lens finds Abdur. Malik has summoned him forward. Abdur is now by him, holding a gun. They're talking, Malik smiling at him, Abdur nodding.

PEARCE

Hey! De Lillo, check that signal again!

The men scramble up. De Lillo opens the GPS receiver and taps on the keypads.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

He must have him now.

They crowd around the screen, crouching on their heels. Nothing.

DE LILLO

Dead, sir.

GARCIA

Could he be double-crossing us, sir?

Pearce pats his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. He doesn't answer, fearing the worst.

PEARCE

Keep checking.

He walks away again, next to the stacked equipment, picks up his binoculars again. Garcia makes a face. Pearce comes back, he looks tense. He hands a small radio to Garcia.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Garcia and Morrison, walk along that ridge all the way to that round rock and keep an eye on those sentries. Radio in if you see any movement. Be careful not to leave any trace. They mustn't know we were here, okay?

Garcia and Morrison scuttle down. De Lillo watches Pearce sceptically. Pearce puffs on a cigarette, cursing under his breath.

A faint pulse on the screen comes alive. It begins to move, its beep gaining strength.

DE LILLO
(hushed)
Yeaaahh! Captain! Awesome.

Pearce runs to the screen. Relieved, ecstatic.

PEARCE
I knew it. I knew it, see?!

De Lillo cheers silently at the screen.

EXT. MANSUR'S COMPOUND - CONTINUOUS

The same feeling of excitement and cheering among the men in the village.

They gather around the newly-weds and brandish guns, waving them in the air in readiness for Malik's signal to fire.

Abdur is preparing his gun when Malik hands him his own rifle. It's the British rifle that Abdur won from Stewart.

MALIK
This gun has been in our village for over a hundred years. Only Khans are allowed to use it.
(laughs)
Come on, don't worry, I'm giving you permission!

Abdur takes the gun. He looks into the Khan's eyes. This time Abdur's smile is sincere.

ABDUR
This is a great honour.

MALIK
We'll be leaving straight after the wedding. Go back to Kabul and wait. I'll send a message.

Mansur looks at the crowd. He notices Abdur and Malik talking together. Malik hugging and kissing Abdur.

Mansur and Abdur look at each other. A broad smile on Abdur's face. A quick gesture and nod to let Mansur know that everything has been resolved.

Malik nods at Abdur, giving him permission to shoot the first shot. Abdur fires into the air.

He continues, three, four times, increasingly exhilarated, waving his arm and SHOUTING in the name of Allah. The other men FIRE too.

As Abdur continues, he meets the gaze of his clan: Razaq, Malik, Mansur, his brothers, the rest of the men. Everyone SHOOTING, SHOUTING. Proud warriors.

Something deep inside Abdur, finally released.

He watches Mansur and Zaphira, elated for his old friend's happiness. All recrimination and regret dissolved away. They grin at each other. Even Zaphira smiles to see Abdur back at the hub of the village's life.

Abdur fires, moving in unison with the inner rhythm of the village. He knows that he's part of its indestructible weave. This is where he belongs, who he is.

A faint BEEP insinuates itself over the soundtrack.

It's the insistent signal emanating from the pattu that Malik wears around his shoulders.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

The same BEEPING sound, now a pulsating dot, moves around the screen. De Lillo and Pearce crouch in front of the receiver screen.

PEARCE
(about microchip)
The little beauty.

Faint GUNSHOTS from the distance. They listen.

DE LILLO
(alarmed)
What the fuck's that?

PEARCE
(undisturbed)
They shoot at weddings. To celebrate the happy couple. Nothing to worry about. Relax. They eat a whole flock of sheep now.
(getting up)
Which reminds me... How about some lunch?

De Lillo grins. He walks up a few steps where their rucksacks lie behind a rock. He pulls out a couple of MRE.

DE LILLO
(shouting)
Beef teryaki or pork chop?

No answer. He walks back to the screen. Pearce has gone off a little way and is taking a pee. The sun is getting warmer. De Lillo takes off his vest and rips the MRE with his teeth.

A gust of wind and the wrapping flies away.

DE LILLO (CONT'D)
Damn it!

EXT. BELOW THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

A couple of miles away, Garcia scans the opposite side of the gorge from behind a rock. Morrison lies behind him.

CUT TO:

As seen through Garcia's binoculars: two of Malik's men pace up and down on the opposite side, keeping watch.

Suddenly the sentries raise their guns and fire, joining the festive shots of the village. But from Garcia's POV, it looks as though the men are pointing their guns at him.

GARCIA
Shit! They're firing at us.

Morrison jerks up, in panic.

MORRISON
Goddamit! Get on the radio. Fast!

Garcia pulls out the radio.

GARCIA
(panicky)
Captain, Garcia here, do you read?

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Garcia's voice crackles on the radio clipped inside the pocket of De Lillo's which lies on the ground.

In the background: De Lillo scrambling down the slope, after the plastic wrap. Pearce in the distance, zipping up his pants, turning back.

GARCIA (O.S.)
They're shooting in our direction.
Captain! Do you read? Over...

EXT. BELOW THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Garcia, cursing under his breath, decides to switch channel.

GARCIA
Cobra one, Cobra three. Can you
read me? An emergency here...

Walgren's voice comes on.

WALGREN (O.S.)
(panicking)
Cobra three, Cobra two! What's
happening?

GARCIA
Cobra two, Cobra three, we're not
sure but they seem to be shooting
at us, over...

WALGREN
Are you under attack, over?

EXT. THE VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

The BEEP keeps sounding over the scene.

More shooting and cheering at the wedding party.

Smiling faces. Women throw flower petals over the heads of the newly-weds.

Zaphira looks out at the crowd. Sees Abdur for the first time. Their eyes meet for a second. Then Mansur leans in towards her, taking her attention.

Abdur looks at Malik's pattu. He absorbs the enormity of his betrayal. The burden of his treachery now odious to him.

He looks up at Pearce's ridge.

The signal gains strength on the soundtrack.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce returns over the rocks. He is relaxed, pleased with how things are going.

The village looks deserted. Only two fallen chairs outside the groom's compound, the remains of the banquet and abandoned musical instruments. A woman's thin veil flies across the dusty square.

Men slowly re-emerge from where they were seeking shelter. A false alarm.

More men come out from the cave. Timidly, women follow, clutching children to their chests.

Abdur, behind a wall, pulls out his walkie-talkie.

He peers round the wall, sees the newly-weds taking their seats once again, men gathering around them.

Slowly the celebration recomposes itself and MUSIC tentatively resumes.

Abdur switches on the walkie-talkie, just as:

The F16s SCREAM over his head, tearing the sky.

The first one comes down. One monstrous beat of DEAFENING SOUND.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce SHOUTS, appalled.

The planes bank and swoop again, glinting like deadly silver, their shining bellies hurtling low over the ridge.

Scattering clusters of magnesium flares that trail from their bellies like comets.

PEARCE

Noooo!

He and the other men, speechless, watch the incandescence of the FLASH. The village below BURSTING INTO ORANGE FLAME. It happens in a second.

The planes roar and dive beyond the village. They're gone again.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

Abdur runs towards the square, SCREAMING.

He gestures at the opposite side of the valley, towards Pearce, as if to curse him.

He slows and walks through the wreckage like a dazed visitor from another planet. It's a massacre.

Bodies on the ground, homes burning, WAILS. A child SCREAMING next to the dead body of his mother. Blood and flower petals stain the ground in crimson.

Abdur looks up at the ridge as he walks.

CUT TO:

Pearce watches Abdur through binoculars. Their eyes meeting through the lens. Abdur's eyes raging.

CUT TO:

The compound where the wedding was taking place only minutes ago is a mound of rubble. The fine dust from the ruins is settling, covering everything in a fine powder.

Malik squats on the ground, holding Zaphira's dead body in his arms. Shirin HOWLS on her knees, hands upstretched to the sky.

Razak is dead. So is Abdur's young brother. His hands still clutch the bright yellow wrapper of the M & M'S.

Abdur moves through the carnage, in disbelief.

He reaches Malik and stares down at Zaphira's body. Her wedding dress is covered in blood. Abdur takes in Mansur's corpse, face down in the dust.

Malik stares at Abdur, an infinite pain in his eyes.

MALIK

My daughter...

Her body is hugged to his chest. Malik's eyes wander, alight on Mansur's corpse.

MALIK (CONT'D)

We must bury them... Together...

Abdur nods. Malik becomes aware of the devastation around them. Dazed, he looks up at the mountains.

MALIK (CONT'D)

They knew... Knew I was here...

He looks at Abdur. Abdur nods, consumed by self-loathing, barely able to contain himself. Malik nods to himself, making his plan.

MALIK (CONT'D)
They'll return... I must leave...

He starts to lay down Zaphira's body. Abdur crouches down quickly, as if to help, but keeping a respectful distance.

Malik arranges Zaphira's body carefully, like a child on a bed. Then he stands, staggering slightly. Looks around, distracted, then back at Abdur.

MALIK (CONT'D)
Bury them, for me.

Abdur nods, stricken. Malik turns away.

ABDUR
Malik Azam...

Malik looks down at him. Abdur stretches out a hand, indicating Malik's pattu.

ABDUR (CONT'D)
Let me cover her...

Malik takes off his pattu and hands it to Abdur. Abdur feels the microchip in the palm of his hand, then drapes the pattu over Zaphira's body like a shroud. Malik nods at the rightness of the gesture.

Malik picks his way off, wandering through the carnage. Abdur watches him go, looks down in torment at Zaphira, then at the blasted village.

A gust of wind carries the yellow M & M'S wrapper like a butterfly across the scene. Miraculously intact, its bold colour and print have survived the devastation.

EXT. ON THE RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Pearce, still in shock, sits on the ground by the radar screen. The younger men, pale-faced, around him.

The intermittent BEEP pulses slowly, like a faint heartbeat. No longer moving across the screen. In one place now. Pearce hardly registers it.

EXT. THE VILLAGE - DUSK

Abdur, kneeling, has drawn back the pattu from the two bodies. He looks at their faces, first Zaphira's, then Mansur's. He covers them again and stands. Their bodies lie together, like lovers, asleep. WIND ripples the cloth.

Abdur reels away, gun in hand, slumps down on the wall of the well. His fingers absently play over his gun. It's Stewart's rifle. The camera fixes on the gun.

The camera pans down to the wall that Stewart built and begins a journey. Through the village we've come to know. Past the well, past the entrance to the caves. Past the river where the women washed before. Ending at...

The tree where they hung their burquas. Only a single burqua now hangs from the tree. It flaps in the wind.

FADE TO BLACK.