

ESKANDAR

by

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ESKANDAR

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ESKANDAR/ALEXANDER	18 Afghan boy
JOE/SOLDIER	32 Afghan/American
MORGAN/CONSULTANT	38 American
NADIR KHAN/POET	40 Afghan warlord
FORTUNE TELLER/ GUARD/VILLAGER/AFGHAN TRIBESMAN	
GUARD /AFGHAN TRIBESMAN	
AFGHAN TRIBESMEN	Non-speaking roles.

ESKANDARACT ONEScene One

SETTING *A market in a remote area of Afghanistan.*

AT RISE *The stage is in darkness. An image of the Angel Soroush, from the Shahnameh, gradually appears and brightens in projection over the stage, until it is quite brilliant. It fades and is replaced by a pattern of Islamic calligraphy over the entire stage. After a moment, the lights go down and the pattern fades. From the darkness, the lights then come up slightly to dim over all, with the figures at front stage left lighted more noticeably. There is the sound of traditional Afghan music in the background; tablas, sarangi, tanpura, harmonium, sitar. At front stage left there is a low table, with candles and a vase with some flowers. The FORTUNE TELLER is seated on the stage with her back to the audience, wearing a black burkha-like garment. Across the table, facing the audience, ESKANDAR is seated. He's wearing the white, traditional baggy pants and a very colorful, open collarless tunic and long vest. His eyes are outlined in kohl and he's wearing silver and gold bracelets and anklets. A gold coin on a chain is around his neck and spills out of his tunic. The FORTUNE TELLER shakes a small bag and then scatters a number of small colored stones across the table and they both peer intently at the pattern. She draws back, then hisses as she points to one stone. She leans forward and mumbles to ESKANDAR. He stares intently for a moment.*

ESKANDAR

Taking a coin from his pocket and placing it on the table.
Again.

JOE enters from rear stage right and stops to watch the scene. He's in civilian clothes, wearing khakis and a button-down collared short sleeve sport shirt, but he has a belt with a pistol strapped to his waist.

Sweeping the stones into the bag, the FORTUNE TELLER sings an incantation in a low monotone as she shakes the bag once, then twice, then three times and spills the stones across the cloth-covered table top. They both lean forward expectantly and examine the pattern of

the stones. She hisses and makes a low grunt. ESKANDAR examines the pattern for a long moment. Then he throws his head back and laughs as he sweeps the stones from the table. The FORTUNE TELLER howls in an inhuman voice and scurries to recover the stones. ESKANDAR stands and turns to run off stage right but runs directly into JOE. JOE's hand goes to his sidearm but he does not unholster it. ESKANDAR steps back and examines JOE carefully for a long moment. He smiles and begins to hum and to sway, barely perceptibly. Gradually the swaying becomes more pronounced, then he begins the steps of a traditional Afghan dance...a slow, then quickening series of twists and turns and spinning. The music becomes more prominent and more frenzied. In the shadow at front stage left, the FORTUNE TELLER watches the scene and, from time to time, shakes the bag of stones threateningly. After a moment, ESKANDAR begins to circle the motionless JOE with the dance, always keeping his eyes on JOE. The dance becomes more frenzied, then ESKANDAR stops suddenly, facing JOE. There is a long moment as they look at each other. Then ESKANDAR grabs a flower from the vase on the table and flings it into JOE's chest, laughs and runs off, stage right. After a moment, JOE picks up the flower and examines it.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music continues, muted.*

Scene Two

SETTING *The same remote area of Afghanistan, at a base of some kind.*

TIME *Several days later.*

AT RISE *JOE and MORGAN are seated opposite each other at a long table, spread with maps and papers, books and a laptop. Both are dressed in desert boots, vaguely military camouflage pants, military-style t shirts and are wearing side arms. JOE is typing on the laptop. MORGAN is leaning back in his chair, boots propped on the table.*

MORGAN
(Grinning) Is he a good fuck?

JOE

(Without looking up.) Yes.

MORGAN

Awww! Better than me, you think?

JOE

I don't know. I haven't fucked you yet.

MORGAN

(Laughing) You had your chance, sir. Our night hiding in that hole, outside Ghazni.

JOE

My cock's too big. You'd 'a screamed. And those pissed off Talib woulda found us.

MORGAN

Still...admit you got a hard on.

JOE

I gotta hard on.

MORGAN

Fucker!

JOE

Say when.

MORGAN

Get me drunk.

JOE

Easy enough. Want me to email your wife before or after?

MORGAN

After *(pause)* no...before! Maybe during? Hell, I don't know! Surprise me...

JOE

..and her, I assume.

MORGAN

(Indicating the email JOE is writing.) Want to marry him?

JOE

My parents would freak. Gay's been hard enough for them to take. Anyway, I'm not sure I'd be too good at marriage. He would, though.

MORGAN

He's a good man, then. Me...not so much. Shelley's pretty forgiving, though, so we make it work. *(Pause)* How're the parents doing with...this? *(indicating with a sweep of his arm)*

JOE

Still wanna know what the fuck I'm doing back here. After all the money they paid to get us out.

MORGAN

You haven't told them about...

JOE

Fuck, no. They'd be pissed off in so many different ways that gay wouldn't matter anymore. My father hated the Afghan game and was glad to be out of it. If he knew his son was...

MORGAN

It's a different country...

JOE

Not so different. A thousand years might make a difference in this place. Not thirty. *(Pause, then smiling, sweeping his arm as MORGAN had done)* But still...

MORGAN

(Smiling)...yeah. Still...

MORGAN cups his hand to a small earpiece clipped over one ear.

They're here.

JOE finishes up his email, sends and closes the laptop.

JOE

So, bed without dinner?

MORGAN

For fuckin' up three month's work? More like no video games for a week. Then a couple of months of donkey-back courier shitwork in the 'stans.

JOE

It's like I always say, the most important part of good intelligence work is...

MORGAN

(Interrupting) ...intelligence.

The two GUARDS enter from stage left and JOE and MORGAN turn toward them. They are wearing desert camouflage with no markings. They have been in a fight and are bloodied and clothes are torn. The GUARDS are on each side of ESKANDAR and are holding him by his upper arms. His wrists are bound behind him with plastic cuffs. He is shirtless and barefoot and wearing white traditional pants. He is hooded. His upper body, arms and pants are blood-smeared. The GUARDS haul ESKANDAR roughly into center stage. MORGAN raises his hand and they stop.

What's this?

FIRST GUARD

Our only viable, sir. Like I told, our guys blew the approach and the hajis and unfriendlies got into one hell of a firefight and...

SECOND GUARD

We couldn't stop 'em. No, sir. They were goin' for blood and be fucked if they'd worry about value targets. It went on for...

MORGAN

(Interrupting) Ghul?

FIRST GUARD

In his hut, he was the last standing, until our hajis cut him down. He wasn't going to be taken alive...no, sir, he wasn't! We couldn't get 'em to...

MORGAN

Those stupid shits! There wasn't supposed to be a fight! It was set up! Ghul's guards...

FIRST GUARD

...fired first. Maybe they didn't know...

MORGAN

Fuck, they knew! Our guys in Kabul...

JOE

...might have wanted Ghul dead. And a weekend in Dubai, of course. Which would explain...

MORGAN

...the lack of inquiries about our noisy fuck-up out here in the boonies.

JOE
(Indicating ESKANDAR) And just what the fuck's this?

JOE stands and approaches ESKANDAR.

SECOND GUARD
 We didn't see him. He was under the bodies in Ghul's hut. We thought there wasn't...

FIRST GUARD
 Jes' jumps right up, buck naked, with a knife and goes for one of our hajis like some wild thing. Cut two of 'em real good, before they corralled him. And they were...the hajis were laughin'...fuckin' laughin' the whole time!

JOE stands in front of ESKANDAR, begins to remove the hood.

...saying...

SECOND GUARD
 ...*halekon*...

FIRST GUARD
 Yeah...*halekon*...pointin' and laughing. Then kicking him around the hut.

SECOND GUARD
 What does it mean...*halekon*?

JOE
(Smiling, removing the hood.) It means...*(Recognizes ESKANDAR. Pauses.)* It means...*cousin.* *(Pause)* Yeah, *cousin.* *(Pause)* This must be Ghul's cousin.

ESKANDAR is disoriented when the hood is removed and takes in his surroundings, then JOE.

Note on language. Hereafter the audience will hear English when ESKANDAR and JOE talk to each other, though they will be speaking in Pashto. JOE's tone in these interchanges will be much more "cultured", for the most part and will change when he speaks to MORGAN or the GUARDS. Later, when JOE speaks to other Afghans, he will also be speaking in Pashto and this difference in tone will also be evident.

What is your name?

ESKANDAR

Choke on your Dari, American! It's the language of goats and Persians!

JOE

Pashto, then. That makes so much better sense. *Halekon*...the whispered, quiet secret of the south. (*chuckles*) You are quite a long way from the lush and fragrant gardens of Kandahar, *halekon*.

ESKANDAR

As are you, poet...and son of a poet? Who taught you to speak such Pashto?

JOE

A doctor. He left a long time ago, when the Russians came and not long after I did.

ESKANDAR

He was a coward then, and a liar. There are no gardens in Kandahar.

JOE

Oh, but there were, boy...there were. And my father is a brave and learned man...and the old king's cousin. (*Pauses, steps back.*) So you were Ghul's bedtoy?

ESKANDAR does not respond. He stares defiantly at JOE.

How long did he keep you? Did he buy you from your family?

There is still no response from ESKANDAR.

Herders? Farmers? Does your family...

ESKANDAR

(*Interrupting*) He killed *four* of your Hazara dogs...the last with only his hands! He was dying but the dog went before him! (*pause*) You know *nothing*, poet.

JOE

(*Stepping closer.*) I will know your name.

ESKANDAR

(*Long pause, then defiantly.*) Eskandar.

JOE

(*Long pause.*) Alexander. From Kandahar...Alexander's city. And *halekon*...a Greek boy...

ESKANDAR

Now I will know *your* name, American.

JOE

Taj al-Durrani Ibrahim ibn Khidr Ahmadi, boy. But “Joe” has always been so much easier to remember.

ESKANDAR

No one forgets “Eskandar”.

MORGAN

So, have we got a resource? Ghul was gold and maybe he’s Ghul’s cousin, but what can he know? He’s a boy. And what’s this about Kandahar? We’re not about Kandahar or the south on this one. You know that.

JOE

We’ve gotta get something out of this fuck-up. The tribes are strong here and family’s stronger. He may have connections. We need to...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) He stinks. And he’s weak. Does he fuck you?

JOE

(To ESKANDAR) He could break your neck in a heartbeat...and would for the fun of it... *(To MORGAN)*...see what he knows. *(To ESKANDAR)*...as would I, pretty boy. *(Moving closer)* Shall I? *(To MORGAN)* Like what’s Saayed Ghul doing out here? *(To ESKANDAR)* But he does not understand us and kills without respect. *(To MORGAN)* It’s quite a puzzlement. *(To ESKANDAR)* Ghul agha is dead. Who will honor you, now? And you? Who? *(Pause)* Consider. *(To MORGAN)* He’s not much, but we may want to hold onto him for a bit.

MORGAN

How long was he with Ghul?

JOE

(To ESKANDAR) How long were you with Ghul? Was he your first? And what is your family?

ESKANDAR

My family is dead. My first is dead. Ghul is dead. But I, poet, *live!* Now is the only time I count! Ever!

JOE

(To MORGAN) For four months. *(To ESKANDAR)* Oh, but you may want to start counting your days now. They could be unendurably long and painful,

(CONT'D)

boy. You may soon begin to dream of being back in the south, herding your stinking goats and...

ESKANDAR suddenly twists his right arm out of the grip of the GUARD on his right, then leans into the grip of the GUARD to his left and launches a hard kick toward JOE. JOE jumps back but the kick lands with some force in the center of JOE's chest. With great strength ESKANDAR wrestles against the grip of the GUARDS, but they push him to the floor. MORGAN moves in to grab ESKANDAR's feet as the GUARDS succeed in immobilizing him on his back, with his upper body arching slightly off the ground. During the struggle the GUARDS and MORGAN will be shouting to each other...expletives and warnings to "hold him!", etc. JOE, who has regained his breath, straddles him, then goes to his knees, with one knee on either side of ESKANDAR's midriff. JOE slaps ESKANDAR hard, twice in quick succession, then, after a pause, once again.

Nice move. Something from your dancing master?

ESKANDAR

(Straining upward) I have no master...of any kind! And we don't need poets, or kings or the cowardly family of kings. This is a land of warriors! What are you, American?

JOE grasps ESKANDAR's neck, just under the jaw.

JOE

More warrior than you'll ever meet, pretty boy.

JOE holds the grip, release it, then stands and looks at ESKANDAR for a moment, then to the GUARDS.

Get him up.

MORGAN

(To the GUARDS) This one goes to our friends at Bagram. They'll deal with him.

JOE

No. *(Pause)* No. They don't have a fuckin' clue how to work these people and never will. They're worse than useless. This one's interesting. Let's keep him here for a while and see what a more subtle approach might bring. He's all we got and we can't start over on this thing. There's too much invested.

JOE picks up the hood and approaches ESKANDAR, who maintains unflinching eye contact. JOE puts the hood on ESKANDAR's head

(CONT'D)

slowly and tightens the drawstring around his neck slowly, almost sensually, then, quickly, very tight. He pauses. He then sweeps his hands down ESKANDAR's bare chest and up his arms and across his back and buttocks, prodding and poking, apparently searching for wounds.

(To the GUARDS) If any of this blood is actually *his*, get him fixed up.
(Stepping back.) Now get him out of here.

The GUARDS leave with ESKANDAR.

(Wincing, hand to his chest.) Most definitely. Those guys are off videogames for the next week.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music.*

Scene Three

SETTING Same

TIME A day later

AT RISE JOE is sitting at the table, typing on his laptop.

GUARDS enter with ESKANDAR, hooded, between them. His wrists are bound in front of him with plastic cuffs. He's wearing white long pants and a white tunic and sneakers. They seat him in a chair across the table from JOE and several feet away from it, remove the hood, then step back from the chair.

JOE

(To the GUARDS) You can go.

FIRST GUARD

But sir...

JOE

(Indicating an unholstered pistol on the table.) I'm faster with this than he is with those damn feet. Go. Wait outside.

JOE continues typing for several moments, then stops and closes the laptop. He looks at ESKANDAR for a long moment.

I apologize for the meagerness of our hospitality, but I hope you have, at least, slept well.

ESKANDAR

(After a long moment) I slept alone, poet. Did you?

JOE

Here I sleep alone.

ESKANDAR

Always? That is not good for a man. You will not be at ease in your day.

JOE

My days are never easy, here...nor should they be.

ESKANDAR

The helicopter I heard last night. Was that yours?

JOE

Yes.

ESKANDAR

Do you fly it?

JOE

Yes.

ESKANDAR

And the high flyers that circle and hunt. Do you fly those?

JOE

The predators? Yes, I do. In a way. Have you seen many of them where you were?

ESKANDAR

(Long pause) On horseback I have outrun falcons! On my great horse...a gift from Ghul...I have swept down from the high ridge faster than his stooping falcon and snared the scampering hare before his...predator...reached it.
(Pause) So I, too, fly...poet. We are alike, then.

JOE

Where is your horse?

ESKANDAR

I sent it into the mountains away from your Hazara dogs. They would eat it.

JOE

Ghul was fond of horses, then? He seemed to be able to move around quickly. That has been most annoying.

ESKANDAR

Our horses move as the river in spring flood! Unstoppable. Mine is the fastest! Your...predators...were left hunting the dust many times.

JOE

Except for night-vision...

ESKANDAR

What?

JOE

English...it means, "that is true".

ESKANDAR

Why, if you have such predators, do you hunt with the Hazara? Why do *you*, Pashtu?

JOE

They are useful...usually. Why do *you*, Pashtu, wander so far from Kandahar?

ESKANDAR

It is my right and this my land without limit. From before the Persians and all time! They and all others are...intruders. As are you, American.

JOE

But you are named for an intruder.

ESKANDAR

(Laughing) No, poet! He crushed empires to regain these high mountains. He was ours! He was coming home!

JOE

Legend, not history, boy. No one believes...

JOE shakes his head and stares at ESKANDAR in silence for a long moment. Then he unfolds two documents and smooths them on the

(CONT'D)

table. These are a map and a document in what appears to be Arabic. He pushes them across the table toward ESKANDAR.

We recovered these from Ghul's satchel. Have you seen them before? Do you know what they are?

ESKANDAR

(Barely looking at the documents) Ghul sometimes used such things. I do not. He honored me for that.

JOE

It's a map and...

ESKANDAR

Poet! Poet! You sleep alone too much! Do you now grab yourself at night and dream that it's another's hand that's touching you?

JOE

What...

ESKANDAR

Why would I need scratchings on paper? I know the mountains, plains and valleys and I have language and memory.

JOE

Illiterate...

ESKANDAR

What?

JOE

English. It means, "inshallah"...God willing...

ESKANDAR

And you've lied again, poet.

JOE

I did not...

ESKANDAR

You've stepped away from the world, poet. And you lie in bed at night, alone, and hear only your breath and feel only your skin and tell yourself that's the way it *is*. You've *lost* the holy fire that cascades down from heaven over the mountains and shows you that you are *alive*. But you are a warrior and you *fly*! So, how can that be? Look inside! You *know* how it is! *Our* blood ran

(CONT'D)

even in the old king's family. Why be a servant? You must claim what is your right!

JOE

Now, who's being the poet? Did Ghul enjoy such performances?

ESKANDAR

Yes. And my dancing. And... (*smiles seductively*) "Performance", though? What does it mean? Does it mean "less than true"?

JOE

"Less than true." Sometimes. Not always.

ESKANDAR

Yes. Not always. You are wise, poet.

JOE takes something from his pocket. It's a gold Greek coin, with the engraved face of Alexander, on a chain. ESKANDAR was wearing it in the first scene. He shows it to ESKANDAR.

JOE

We recovered this from one of our Hazara. It's yours, I think.. With the profile of another Eskandar. A gift from Ghul?

ESKANDAR

Yes.

JOE

He had a good eye for rare and beautiful things. He also had most excellent sources. This is very old. And important. Did he have many such things?

ESKANDAR

The treasures of our land are many. They open themselves to its strongest sons. Ghul agha was most strong.

JOE

Ghul agha is dead.

JOE stands and walks around the table to stand over ESKANDAR.

Perhaps now others may claim his treasures?

JOE moves to put the chain around ESKANDAR's neck, who lowers his head slightly as JOE slides it on.

ESKANDAR

Thank you. You are gracious, poet.

JOE

You know the Shahnameh?

ESKANDAR

By heart.

JOE

Then you know that such is the obligation of the warrior and true Afghan. He can be nothing less.

ESKANDAR

Yes.

JOE looks at ESKANDAR for a long moment, then goes to the edge of the stage and motions. The GUARDS enter and go to ESKANDAR. He rises before they touch him. One GUARD takes the hood from the table and starts to put it on ESKANDAR.

JOE

No. (Pause) No.

JOE extends his hand and the GUARD gives him the hood. Then the GUARDS leave with ESKANDAR.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: Between scenes, traditional Afghan music, which continues through the next scene and in the BLACKOUT between scenes Four and Five.

Scene Four

SETTING *ESKANDAR's cell in the camp.*

TIME *Evening. Hours later.*

AT RISE *ESKANDAR is asleep at center stage on a pile of blankets on the floor. He is naked but lightly covered by another blanket.*

JOE enters silently from stage right and stands, watching ESKANDAR. He is dressed as in the previous scene. He moves toward the pile of blankets and ESKANDAR wakes immediately, looks around and sees JOE. They stare at each other for a long moment, then ESKANDAR slowly stands to face JOE and the blanket falls away. As the MUSIC becomes louder and more intense, JOE moves to ESKANDAR as he strips off the t-shirt. ESKANDAR quickly reaches for the buttons of JOE's pants, as JOE, now shirtless, moves to help him.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

Scene Five

SETTING *JOE and MORGAN's office at the camp.*

TIME *A week later.*

AT RISE *MORGAN is seated, working at a laptop on the table and JOE is seated at the table and studying a large document in Arabic scrip. The calligraphy should be beautiful.*

JOE

(Tracing the lettering with a finger) Beautiful. Arabic calligraphy is the most brilliant artistic achievement of one of history's greatest cultures. *(Pause)* You know, Morgan...I sometimes think that if the fuckin' Hubble looks long and deep enough into the universe, one day an astounded astronomer will look and see *this* shining up at him from one of his photographic plates *(holding up the document)*...the very hand of God.

MORGAN

(Intent on his laptop.) Are you getting desert weird on me? This is no time to lose focus. *(Looking up)* And why would God mangle a few hundred million galaxies just to inscribe a shopping list of weapons across the universe?

JOE

Fuck you.

MORGAN

(Smiles) Oh, *please* stop teasing me.

JOE

(Smiles) I sometimes think Islam and the Quar'an conquered the world from Spain to India in virtue of Arabic script. No one could *imagine* that something so beautiful was not the word of God.

MORGAN

No one can fuckin' read in this country.

JOE

That's what imams are for. And story-tellers. Every Afghan is a story-teller. Since forever. But when the Arabs came...with *this (indicating the calligraphy)*...hmm. Magic. Power. I once...*(pause)*.

MORGAN

(Waiting, then) Once...?

JOE

Once...went through my "observant" period. Just before high school. Maybe a year. Did the whole praying all day thing, spending time in the mosque thing...in Berkeley. We had a really...wise imam. Wanted to go to a...*school*. Spent a lot of time *(traces the calligraphy)* ...reading. *This...*I thought...

MORGAN

You're kidding...

JOE

My parents freaked. They were about as Muslim as you are Christian...but totally Afghan. And this was...Arab. We had long talks. They bought me a very beautiful, very expensive copy of the Shahnameh.

MORGAN

What?

JOE

The Epic of Kings. Written in Ghazni, actually. 9th century. History of the Persian kings from the invention of fire to the coming of...the Arabs. Where our stories come from. The ones we all know. Every story illustrated and every illustration a work of art. The calligraphy was...magnificent. They wanted to show me how lovely *our* language looked in Arabic script. They wanted me back...from *(indicates the calligraphy)*...the magic.

MORGAN

Wow.

JOE

Yeah. (*Lifting the document again*) But this is just a shopping list. From a master calligrapher, though.

MORGAN

What about our boy? Where does he fit in all of this?

JOE

(*Smiling, shaking his head*) He *doesn't*. He was here before the Arabs, before the Persian empire. Maybe he came with the Aryan migration that swept out of central Asia on the way to India and Persia. Our boy's the *true* Afghan. The one on the high mountain...untouched by history. The "fire from heaven". Untamable by culture, force or faith. Beyond history. A veritable wonder!

MORGAN

You're kidding.

JOE

Serious as fuck, my dear. Like opening that beautiful book and having one of the characters come alive and jump out into your...(stops).

MORGAN

(*Not noticing the hesitation*) Come on, this is fucking *Afghanistan*, Joe! It's dirty and crude and corrupt as shit. There are more games being played here than in Las Vegas on a good night and it's quickly going to perfect hell. Don't go poetic on me. He's another goat herder.

JOE

(*Ironically?*) You think?

MORGAN

And it's been a week. Bagram...

JOE

(*Interrupting*)...would be a mistake. He could be a very valuable asset. Just trust me.

At that moment the GUARDS enter with ESKANDAR. He is dressed as before, but without a hood. His hands are cuffed in front of him.

MORGAN

Speaking of which...

JOE motions to the GUARDS, who remove the cuffs and seat ESKANDAR in the chair across the table from JOE. MORGAN stands and goes to a stack of wooden crates and pulls out a traditional Afghan turban and quickly wraps it. He checks the magazine of his pistol and holsters it, then picks up a rifle during the following lines.

JOE

Did you sleep well?

ESKANDAR

I slept well. And you?

JOE

(Smiling) Of course...

ESKANDAR

He is amusing in his headscarf. Does he always sweat so much?

JOE

Regretfully, so...

MORGAN

OK, we're off. Our Talib buddy should be sitting down to tea just about now. I'll check in when we're at the site and you let me know if you hear any noise from the Marines or those fuckin' Brits. *(Smiling)* You take care of our boy here.

JOE

Yes, dear. Have a good day at the office. And...good luck.

MORGAN waves and leaves with the GUARDS. Once they are gone, JOE stands and crosses to remove the cuffs from ESKANDAR. He does not go back to his chair, but sits on the edge of the table, near ESKANDAR.

I told Morgan you were a wonder...and you are.

ESKANDAR

(Stands, almost dancing back a few steps.) I am, indeed! *(Animated)* But I have seen a true wonder, poet. I have seen the *simurgh!* How wondrous is that?

JOE

(Laughing) The *simurgh!* The great, compassionate and wise phoenix! Who lives seventeen hundred years and healed a mortally wounded Rostam with its touch! Where, oh wonder, my Eskandar, have you *seen* this great bird?

ESKANDAR

In the high mountains! A year ago! It flew above and called to me! And a feather floated down (he imitates the floating of the feather with a movement of his hand...it's almost a dance move).

JOE

And the magic feather cured you of...

ESKANDAR

Of nothing...but I kept it.

JOE

And where...oh wonder...is the feather?

ESKANDAR

(Somber) I don't know. *(Pause)* It was with me in Ghul's hut, the night your Hazara came...*(uncertain)*. It's...it's...*(visibly upset)*.

JOE

(Pulls ESKANDAR close and hugs him.) It's in the Shahnameh. With the simurgh. And Rostam...and Sohrab. It's only real there. Not here.

ESKANDAR

(Pulling back) Sometimes you are less than wise. Does being in the Shahnameh make something "less than true"? The poet's world is no less true than the goatherds.

JOE

I'm not...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) Come with me! We'll go to the high mountains and I'll find the feather and I'll show you the simurgh! We'll call it together! And it will stay with us!

JOE

You are the wildest, most incredible...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) You are Pashtu and Durrani...our greatest tribe...with the blood of kings...a warrior...and a poet. You have come home to the land that has always known you. Let me show it to you. I would be with no one else but you.

JOE

If this were an epic, I'd be with no one else...but it's not...

ESKANDAR

I *know* the mountains and the valleys and all their trails. You'd need no maps with me to guide you. I've been everywhere...with Ghul...and before, with my first. I've cousins in every clan and friends in the most powerful tribes.

JOE

I'm sure, but...

ESKANDAR

I'm welcomed everywhere. At home everywhere. As you would be...finally home. Finally, Joe. Where you must be.

JOE

I...I have chosen another home. Or, it was chosen for me. There are other duties. There would...

ESKANDAR

(*Interrupting*) The warrior can chose and chose again! And he cannot deny his land, his history and his fate! (*Pulling JOE close and hugging him.*) You'd never sleep alone, again. (*Pulling back, to smile up at JOE*) Though you'd *never* get to sleep! I would see to that!

JOE embraces ESKANDAR with passion and kisses him.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music.*

Scene Six

SETTING *ESKANDAR's cell.*

TIME *A few days later.*

AT RISE *ESKANDAR is asleep on his pile of blankets. He is naked.*

JOE enters in a rush. He's wearing a turban and an Afghan tunic over his camouflage and carrying a rifle. He has a large bag. As

ESKANDAR wakes, JOE throws off the blanket and begins pulling clothes out of the bag.

JOE

Here. Put these on. We're in shit and you have to get out of here tonight. You're supposed to be transferred to Bagram tomorrow. You'd never come back from that place.

ESKANDAR

(Beginning to dress quickly.) What...?

JOE

It's not a good place.

ESKANDAR

We are leaving together?

JOE

No. I've got to go help Morgan. His group's in trouble. I'm taking everyone but three of the Hazara and those three are in the process of getting drunk right now. You won't have a problem slipping out of here.

ESKANDAR

They drink? The Hazara are damned in so very many ways.

JOE

(JOE continues to unpack the bag.) They are fighters... useful and tough. But these three are stupid. You'll do fine. *(Indicating the bag's contents.)* Look, you've got clothes, food, water, blankets. I'm leaving the door loosely latched. Bust it open. It'll be easy. Just to the back there's a path. Follow the path down the hill for about two kilometers and you'll find a small hut. The Hazara sold one of Ghul's horses to the herder who lives there. Steal it and head north...*no other direction...*I don't care how well you know the land. It's the only safe way out of here.

ESKANDAR

(Pulling on shoes) If it's Ghul's horse, it will come when I call. No need to steal it! *(Grabs JOE)* But you must come with me! We'll go together into the mountains!

JOE

No. I can't. This is my job. It's what I do.

ESKANDAR

Then come to me when you're done! *(Grabbing JOE again.)* Do you know Targhra mountain? Near Ghul's camp? It has a double peak, like horns.

JOE

Yes.

ESKANDAR

On the southeast slope there is a small ravine that curves around the mountain to the west. Follow the ravine to the west. You will see a huge blue rock part way up the ravine, on your right. There is a small cave there. In five days I will begin waiting for you there every night until you come for me. I will have everything we need. Come, poet...then I will show you *our* country.

JOE removes an automatic pistol that had been hidden at the rear of his trousers, pulls a magazine from the bag and loads it.

JOE

Here. Take this. (*Handing it to ESKANDAR*) This was...

ESKANDAR

...Ghul's pistol! (*Taking it from JOE*) Yes!

JOE

You'll find it more effective than the knives you use so well.

ESKANDAR

He never missed with this! (*Turns the pistol in his hand, admiring it.*)

JOE

(*Stands*) I must go.

JOE turns, turns back, kneels again and hugs ESKANDAR.

Be safe, my Alexander.

JOE stands and goes to the door.

ESKANDAR

Remember. The blue rock. In five days I will be there and will wait until you come.

JOE leaves. ESKANDAR continues dressing, then stows his supplies in the bag. After a long moment, he picks up the pistol, stands and goes to the door.

BLACKOUT

There is the sound of the door being broken open, then a few moments later, three shots ring out in the darkness.

END OF SCENE

SOUND: Between scenes, traditional Afghan music. After some moments, a projection of the simurgh covers the stage as there is a single, loud and long shriek of a great bird. The projection fades and the stage is completely black, in silence.

Scene Seven

SETTING *The cave on Targhra mountain.*

TIME *Late afternoon, a week later.*

AT RISE *ESKANDAR is reclining slightly, fully dressed but asleep on a pile of blankets and several bags.*

JOE enters. His dress is a combination of his earlier camouflage and Afghan dress. He carries a rifle, is wearing a pistol and wears a backpack. His clothing is torn and dirty and it appears he has been in combat. He has several poorly bandaged wounds and appears to be seriously wounded. ESKANDAR awakens quickly, sits up and points the pistol at JOE in a quick, reflexive movement. He appears to recognize JOE, but does not lower the pistol.

JOE

Either shoot me or offer me the hospitality of your camp. I'm too tired to care which.

JOE drops the rifle and shrugs off his backpack and drops to his knees, removing his headgear.

ESKANDAR

(Lowering the pistol and putting it away.) The hospitality of my camp is very meager, but it is yours, poet. *(Pause. Examines JOE.)* Your journey was difficult.

Most difficult.

JOE

The others?

ESKANDAR

Things went badly (*pause*) very badly.

JOE

You did not walk here.

ESKANDAR

A horse. Its rider no longer had need of it.

JOE

Ah...

ESKANDAR

You killed the Hazara! They were my men! I did not get them drunk so you could kill them!

JOE

(*Laughs*) Of course I killed them! Two were in Ghul's hut when he died. They killed him and dishonored me that day. So I killed them.

ESKANDAR

And the third?

JOE

Unlucky.

ESKANDAR

In killing them you dishonored me!

JOE

How? Your choice was yours. You know who I am. You gave me a pistol. What did you think I would do? They were not your tribe or clan or family. They were Mongol. You paid them. You owe them no loyalty or concern.

ESKANDAR

I...

JOE

(*Interrupting*) I may call you a poet, but you are Pashtu and a warrior. You understand honor.

ESKANDAR

JOE

I understand *duty*. When I helped you escape I betrayed that duty for...for...(hesitates).

ESKANDAR

That word..."duty"...how it twists and slips away...almost means "honor"...but it doesn't...not really. It's a slave's "honor" and one of those lying Arabic words the mullahs clothe in Pashto to trap us. You have listened too much to their gibbering.

JOE

And you not enough, boy. There are truths beyond the wind and your own heart and what feels good between your legs.

ESKANDAR

But if truth is not *there*, why would it be anywhere else? (*Laughing*) You are so strange, poet! Are you still poet? Or would you be *mullah*?

JOE

I would be a better warrior. That, I know.

JOE begins to remove his Afghan jacket and winces, then falls forward onto his side. ESKANDAR moves closer to JOE, begins to help him with the jacket. When the jacket is off, he cradles JOE.

ESKANDAR

The battle was difficult.

JOE

It was a trap. The Tajiks betrayed us. We lost resources and backup. No communication. I got out. Because I was darker and not Hazara. No one else, I think. Our unit's gone. I may be the only "viable" left in the field.

ESKANDAR

What?

ESKANDAR tries to examine the bandaged wounds, but JOE winces and pulls away. He then begins to stroke JOE's forehead and head and JOE slowly begins to relax.

JOE

It's over, here. Maybe nothing left. They can't go looking for me. I'm not supposed to...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) You can be difficult to understand sometimes, even in Pashto. This is *our* country and you have asked for my hospitality and I have extended it. It is yours without limit.

JOE

(Smiling, dreamily.) Indeed? Without limit?

ESKANDAR

(Smiling) Yes. *(Pause)* Without limit.

JOE

(A long pause) I thought I would die there, in that place, but I was afraid to...die there. Not for the dying. For the place. And being alone there. It was not...*(he looks around, then closely at ESKANDAR, then reaches to touch ESKANDAR's cheek.)* I could only think of getting here. I had to get here. To this place. Now I can...*(stops)*.

JOE leans back against ESKANDAR, who holds him. JOE breathes with difficulty. He's in very bad condition.

ESKANDAR

This is where you must be. That is truth, poet. But not to die.

JOE

(Smiling) Optimist. *(pause)* I can rest now. It's over. I'm here.

ESKANDAR

This is a good place to rest. An old, very old place...to rest.

JOE

(Very fatigued, he is beginning to drift toward unconsciousness.) The blue rock...I think I remember...I've seen it...in a picture...a story somewhere...

ESKANDAR

Yes. *(Long pause, then as JOE drifts into either sleep or unconsciousness)*
 "As evening approached, the hero Rostam found shelter in the wilderness beside a great blue rock. Wearing by his heroic battle against the demons, he at last slept.

ESKANDAR removes a long feather from beneath the pile of his supplies and begins to brush it over JOE's body as he slowly continues.

"As he slept, a tiger crept out of the woods toward the sleeping hero. Rostam's great stallion, Rakhsh, keeping watch over the hero, moved between the beast and Rostam and, rearing on his powerful hind legs, pummeled the

(CONT'D)

beast with his hooves and killed the tiger. Then the mighty Raksh stood watch through the night. When dawn broke, the next day, the hero..."

With the above lines, a projection of the image described from the Shahnameh appears. The blue rock, Rostam, his horse and the tiger. It slowly fades as the stage goes dark for JOE and ESKANDAR and lights come up on the POET in another part of the stage. He is seated at a small desk, with paper and a pen. He is wearing ancient Persian robes. His opening lines overlap ESKANDAR's.

POET

Three hundred years ago the armies of darkness swarmed out of their desert waste-land, pillaging our Persian empire and presumed, *presumed* to teach us manners! Teach us! Well, now we school them everywhere, save in their blasted Arab waste-land. They are welcome to it.

And, here in lovely Ghazna, home to the Ghaznavid Shah, whose empire stretches from barbarous Rum in the west to Chin in the east, from the infinite northern steppes and south deep into the wet and exotic Hind, I, Ferdowsi, have completed the task I set myself. In sixty-thousand verses, over three decades, I have told the history of our great empire and made beautiful the accounts handed down of our heroes, villains, gods, devils and shahs. I have preserved and guaranteed our culture! It has been long...long...the work and (*pause*) I am tired. I grow more so each day...the work has been good and I should rest... Rest... Sleep will be...

With the above lines the image of the angel Soroush, who welcomes the dying into heaven, begins to appear in projection in JOE and ESKANDAR's part of the stage as light comes up just slightly on the two. ESKANDAR, cradling JOE in one arm, raises his other, palm out, defying the angel.

ESKANDAR

No!

The projection quickly fades, ESKANDAR returns to cradle JOE and the lights go completely out on their part of the stage.

POET

(*Seeming to rouse himself*) Our shahs had grown weak, lamentably corrupt and had turned away from the God of Fire and his prophet, Zoroaster, who sleeps in the citadel of Balkh. The hordes toppled them easily and brought to us their great strength, discipline and a divine power we willingly absorbed and brought to fruition with the Ghaznavids.

(CONT'D)

And they brought a new way to see God. The Divine Fire triumphs through this new Prophet and the devils were banished. Our ecstatic dancers see this well. The Arabs, though... Well, they are Sunni and heretic now and we need think nothing more of them. With these pages (*raises his papers*), the magnificent culture of thousands of years will safely travel down many thousands more. I, Ferdowsi, the poet, have done this thing.

With the last line, the lights go down on the POET and slowly come up on the CONSULTANT. He wears a suit and tie and is making a Power Point presentation during the following...with maps, when appropriate.

CONSULTANT

Afghanistan. The play of the century. Untapped resources: Iron, \$420.9 billion; copper: \$274 billion. The Chinese have already locked in one big chunk of the copper, are setting infrastructure, made their deals with the government, the Talib and the Americans and are after the rest. Niobium. Heard of niobium? Makes steel stronger, especially in oil pipelines, but also superconducting materials, like the magnets in MRI's. Used in reactors, electronics, optics and...ta da! Jewelry! That's \$81.2 billion in the ground.

And lithium! Did I mention lithium? Afghanistan could be the Saudi Arabia of lithium! For the batteries in all the smart phones I see you guys so frantically tapping right now. Call that another \$300 billion or so. Gold and silver, of course...*boring!* \$30 billion easy. And...magic! Rare earths! Another \$7.4 billion and the Chinese monopoly is broken...unless they get to it first. And on and on and on. And, oh...relic of a past age...lapis lazuli...beautiful, beautiful blue beyond treasure and almost a billion to be mined. Molibdenum...I love that word!...moLIBdenum! \$24 billion and, black as cobalt...cobalt! \$51 billion.

Excited yet? How about the pipeline? Carrying the oil and gas of the 'stans out of Central Asia down through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the sea. Hop, skip and a jump from Mumbai.

So, you guys get your bids ready. Time's a wasting! Things turn around fast out there and you never know who's checking out the stage, lurking in the wings, ready to make their move. Come on down!

Projections of the Power Point presentation cover the stage and rotate, then lights fade and and come up on the POET at his table.

POET

(*Reading from his manuscript*) So, our Persian king Darab defeated Failakus, king of Macedon and Rum and took as tribute from Failakus his daughter. She conceived by Darab but kept this secret from him, asking to

(CONT'D)

return to Macedon for a visit. She gave birth there to her son, Eskandar. Overjoyed, her childless father announced that a son had been born in his house and gave it to be understood that it was his.

Lights come up full on ALEXANDER, dressed in a Greek tunic.

ALEXANDER

Sometimes I caught my father looking at me oddly, as did many in the palace in my youth. Later, my mother told me the secret...of the afternoon Zeus came to her in the wood and chose her and how I came to be born, son of the god. I kept the secret and when the king died, I became king and knew immediately my responsibility to claim the empire of the world.

POET

The boy was put under the instruction of the sage Aristatalis and grew up accomplished in science, the arts, diplomacy and war. Darab took another wife, by whom he had a son, who was Dara and was named his heir and, in time, became king. Dara continued the policies of his father, demanding tribute from Rum, where...

ALEXANDER

...I refused the tribute demands of the Persian and led the armies of Macedon and the Greek states to war. We swept into Asia and the multitudes of the Persians fell before us, recognizing the god in me! Their capitals fell, and their king, who was not the god he proclaimed himself to be! Then I, Alexander, son of a god, became Shahinshah! King of kings! The true god of their legends and my empire!

My armies swept through my new empire and, south of Ghazna, I built a new city, Kandahar. As true inheritor of all Persian history and power, I sought a wife among the tribes of the infinite steppes, across the River Oxus, to secure the divine dynasty of Zeus and his Fire from Heaven! There I found Roxanne and she bore me a son!

POET

...then came the conquest of Hind, where Eskandar took his army of thirty thousand Iranians, forty thousand Rumis and ten thousand Hindis. There he faced Faur, with an army of sixty thousand horsemen and two thousand elephants. To counter the elephants, which greatly frightened his men, Eskandar consulted Aristatalis, who recommended the building of a great iron horse and rider, filled with combustible matter. This great vehicle was mounted on wheels and drawn by horses. Behind it a soldier, his hands and face smeared with combustible matter followed. When pulled among the elephants of Hind, the soldier would pierce the belly of the iron horse with his spear, igniting the combustible matter and the exploding machinery spread panic among the elephants of Faur. And Eskandar's armies were...

ALEXANDER

...triumphant! My empire now stretched from the dark mountains and woods of Macedon to the jungles of Hind! From deep into Egypt through the Arabian waste and north into the vast plains from which man, on horseback, first came! The greatest empire that has even been or will be! The empire of a god on earth!

POET

He returned from Hind, stopping at Mekka with great riches and offerings.

ALEXANDER

No, I returned north to my great capital and the heart of my empire...

POET

...to Kashan, where he would become ill and soon die, thus ending the kingship of Eskandar the First. No one knows what became of his queen or his son. Many said she returned to her family with the boy, crossing again the Oxus into the infinite steppe and out of history.

ALEXANDER bows his head as lights go down on ALEXANDER and the POET and come up on the SOLDIER, who is dressed for a combat patrol.

SOLDIER

My last tour, Iraq, it was IEDs and suicide car bombers. Out here it's...snipers. And the quiet. Our OPs on this ridge, above the valley. It's fuckin' pretty. The valley...not the OP. That's shit. And if it weren't for the snipers the mountains would be pretty. Bit like the Sierra Nevada. Sorta.

But, you don't want the quiet. On patrol. No. You don't. You wanna hear goats and chickens and kids laughing and some fucker cussin' a donkey and... But not the quiet. Then it's step...don't breathe...listen...step...listen...no sound. Nothing. Ever fucker behind you listenin', waitin' for it to...come. And it does. Rips through the trees and pings in the rocks and kicks up the dirt. And you hear the screams behind you, tellin' you to get down, take cover and the guys returning fire ever whichever way seems right. And the other screams. *(pause)* That stop. *(pause)* The cryin'. Then the quiet again. The sergeant's voice...softly...softly into his radio. And you wait. For it. *(Long pause)* I'm scared. I'm so fuckin' scared.

Lights go down on the soldier and come up on the VILLAGER

VILLAGER

They are useless. An annoyance. A dangerous annoyance. "You need a road", their chief says, uncomfortable in all the stuff he wears, squatting in the

(CONT'D)

council. *You're* going to give us a road? From your pile of junk up there on the ridge? You're only going to give us trouble for a while and will soon disappear. We have a road. It is fine. Always has been. Will be after you leave us in quiet and stop being annoying. You are here to give us a road? That's stupid. A stupid story.

You're like a dead dog in the yard. You draw flies. And they are annoying, too. The crazies who come over the mountains and make our sons weird. *They* are weird. And talk of stupid things and of no faith I or my fathers or grandfathers have ever heard of. Stupid Arab. Heretic Sunni. Go away. Both of you go away.

And you both, curse your mothers, bring the craziest disaster! Your "boom! boom! boom!" and a perfectly fine day now has my cousin's wife crying for her dead son and a daughter so scarred she will never marry and five lost goats! Why was that? Why? You don't like fine days? Suddenly you have to attack the trees? Well, the other crazies weren't there. Will you attack *all* the trees where they aren't?

And the trees where they *are*...now I won't tell you. You've pissed me off. So, be smart. As smart as you clearly and rudely think you are. Go away. It was quiet before. I will be quiet here again. When you're gone.

You are here for a *road*?!

Lights come up on the POET.

POET

I, Firdowsi, am here to tell of...

Lights come up on the CONSULTANT.

CONSULTANT

...the wealth of opportunities our future will hold and...

Lights come up on ALEXANDER.

ALEXANDER

...an empire that stretches unto every horizon and...

POET

...how weakness, corruption and the coming of the armies of darkness made...

Lights come up on the VILLAGER

VILLAGER

...a perfectly fine day into...

Lights go out on all and come up on the SOLDIER, alone.

SOLDIER

...a fuckin' hell. (*sobs*) Just a fuckin', fuckin' hell.

BLACKOUT

END OF SCENE

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWOScene One

SETTING *Near a small village in a remote area.*

TIME *Late afternoon, a few weeks later.*

AT RISE *JOE and ESKANDAR are in traditional Afghan dress. They are reclining against a rock, looking offstage, into the distance. Their rifles are nearby.*

ESKANDAR

You sleep better, poet. And are stronger. The pain is less?

JOE

Yes. Thank you, my magic healer. And thanks to your cousin's doctor. Your family has been most generous. They care for us well, here. This is not an area I would have expected to be so...hospitable. Or well-armed.

ESKANDAR

Further east we are stronger, closer to the mountains of the Pamir. We have been...re-claiming our heritage in this place. It goes well.

JOE

I see that it does.

ESKANDAR

And you have most amply repaid the hospitality of my tribe! Yesterday. Everyone praised your courage and ability in the attack on the Turkmen dogs. Your plan for them was quite clever.

JOE

And you are an amazing sniper, Eskandar. It seems your talent with weapons goes well beyond knives. But, it was an easy trap to set. The Turkmen were where they did not want to be, knew they should not be and were lead by fools. I took out their chief fool.

ESKANDAR

...and I the second!

JOE

Problem solved. Your cousin's men happily chased the rest away and back to the river.

ESKANDAR

Our men would learn more of your skills.

JOE

I would be honored to share them with men so brave. *(After a long pause)* Balkh *(indicating in the distance)*...the "Mother of Cities", according to the Persians. Door to Central Asia, through which poured the Aryan migration four thousand years ago. Birthplace of Zoroaster, prophet of the true god of Persia. Where your namesake took his bride, before crossing the Oxus River to the north to test the limits of his men and gods on the steppes. That is one of the most important pivot points of civilization and more important today than most would ever suspect.

ESKANDAR

(Laughing) You are funny, poet! It's a few streets, a broken mosque and some ruins. Not much bigger than our village there in the valley *(indicating)*. You would not like Balkh.

JOE

Perhaps not. You know, Marco Polo passed through Balkh on his journey to the court of Kublai Khan.

ESKANDAR

Who?

JOE

Marco Polo? Kublai Khan?

ESKANDAR

Either. Those are funny names.

There is a long pause. JOE seems to come to a decision.

JOE

This is not where I ever thought I would be. Not... *(pause)*. Would you ever leave here?

ESKANDAR

Yes! The Hindu Kush! We could ride into the Vakhan valley! The land the mullahs forgot! It runs all the way to China! We could...

JOE

(Interrupting) I know the Vakhan well and it is...*interesting*. *(Pause)* But, no, I meant... *(Pauses, serious.)* Eskandar. It's been weeks. There are some that may or may not be looking for me, still. I can't be sure. Your tribe has been most hospitable but...there's only a little gold. A survival cache. It wasn't meant to last...

ESKANDAR

(Jumping up, enthusiastic) There is no problem! I know a merchant with more money than he needs! He will share it with us or die! And in three days a truck will come from Jalalabad with cash for the poppy! I can ask my cousins to help us! We will have much more than we can spend, even after we share it with them and their families.

JOE

You are incredible.

ESKANDAR

In Mazar e Sharrif there's an old mullah who has always wanted me. We will go there and I will go with him and find out where he hides the money he has stolen. You come in the night and we'll kill him and take everything he has!

JOE

My Alexander...you are...*wild!* Have you always just taken anything you wanted?

ESKANDAR

Yes. That's what the strong *do*. They take what they want.

JOE reaches out for ESKANDAR's hand, takes it, pulls him down into his arms.

JOE

I want *you*.

ESKANDAR

(Playfully trying to wrestle away.) Are you strong enough, poet?

JOE

Yes. I am.

They struggle playfully, then ESKANDAR ends up in JOE's arms, with his back to JOE.

But...*(long pause)*. Do you...ever... Ever feel...that there is...something...(trailing off).

ESKANDAR

(*Waits, then...*) A poet without words is a true miracle!

JOE

Have you ever felt the...*presence*...of something that is...stronger...and stands behind...and *watches*...and..is disappointed with something you've done? That watches your...*dreaming*...and sees that the dream is...wrong? That wishes you could see through the dreaming to...*truth*?

ESKANDAR

No. Never.

JOE

It's a strange thing. A childhood thing, perhaps. But I sometimes feel that...if you look beyond this...this *world*...there is something that is...bright...and quiet and (*pause*) *clean*.

ESKANDAR

Your words make no sense, poet. Shouldn't they make sense? You sound like the imams of the crazy school mosque.

JOE

I detest them. They are old women in glasses and beards, cackling from their pulpits. But...

ESKANDAR

Yes!

JOE

They are not...*clean*. And are part of the dream...and are judged, too. By...(stops)

ESKANDAR

(*Beginning to remove his clothes.*) There is no world but this one. *This* is no dream. *I* am not a dream. *You* are not a dream.

JOE stops him after a moment, then pulls ESKANDAR close and hugs him.

JOE

There are dreams and there are nightmares. This world will be a nightmare. We must leave it.

ESKANDAR

Why...

JOE

(Interrupting) If we head north out of Balkh for about a week there is a *place* in Tajikistan where there are friends who would help me. Help us. I could reestablish a few *(pause) connections*. It would be complicated, but with time and a bit of luck...I could get you to the United States. My family is there. They would take care of you until I could rejoin you there. We could live there. Together. It wouldn't be a dream. And you could be...*better* there. We could both be...*better* there. Than in this place.

ESKANDAR

There is no place but this! Why would I leave? This is the place blessed by an eternity of heroes and great warriors! The mountains...

JOE

You would love Berkeley, where my parents live. In the morning you can look up into the moist, tree-covered hills...blessed by the fog coming in from the Bay. You would...

ESKANDAR

Hills for children! *This* is my home! These mountains are made for the sky! Not the land!

JOE

Eskandar...

ESKANDAR

Poet! This is your land! You have come back to reclaim it! To bring the blood of kings and a warrior's courage...home! I have given you a life, here, now...and none around us know or care what you were before. I have given myself to you and honored you for what you *are*. In this place you can be what you *are*...what you *know* you are...what I know you are...a great warrior!

JOE

The warriors of the Shahnameh have deserted this land. Now we have only...thugs and zealots and cynical men of little real power. Real power...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting. Thumping JOE's chest) ...is here! *Only* here!

JOE

You don't understand what's going to happen in this place. Soon. It will be...

ESKANDAR

(Forcefully) Do you *want* me?

JOE

That is the thing. The terrible thing. I want you so very much. *(Pause)* Too much.

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting and over JOE's last line.) Then forget what's beyond Balkh. Leave the Tajiks to fuck their goats. Leave your "connections" and "resources" to haggle over shabby wares in their cheap roadside markets. Your life is now *here...now.*

JOE

You are...

ESKANDAR

Yes, I *am.* But I am *your* wonder...if you, indeed, are *mine.*

JOE

I *would* be...

They embrace with passion and begin to remove each other's clothes. After a few moments, there is the distant sound of shouting and gunfire. JOE pulls quickly away from ESKANDAR and lunges for his rifle.

ESKANDAR

(Grasping JOE's arm.) No! They are shooting into the air. It's celebration!

ESKANDAR stands and looks off into the distance.

Someone is coming! *(Pause)* Someone important.

JOE stands and looks.

JOE

Five Range Rovers. *New* Range Rovers. Must be someone very important.

ESKANDAR

Let's go see who it is! It must be a great man! Perhaps a sheik!

JOE

One very far from home, I'd guess.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music.*

Scene Two

SETTING *A large open area, perhaps a pavilion in the village. There are a number of carpets spread around and large cushions, suitable to recline against and very low armless chairs or stools. Brass teapots on trays and small tea glasses are visible, as well as small plates or bowls of almonds, dates and pastries.*

TIME *A few hours later.*

AT RISE *JOE, ESKANDAR and several Afghan tribesmen are standing, chatting, stage left. NADIR is seated and ending a conversation with two tribesmen, who leave him and move toward the other group. As they do, NADIR motions with his hand to JOE, inviting JOE to join him. During the following, ESKANDAR and most, or perhaps all of the tribesmen will filter off the stage.*

NADIR

(Indicating an adjacent cushion.) Please join me.

JOE

(Sitting) Thank you, Nadir agha.

NADIR

He calls you “poet” *(indicating the direction of ESKANDAR)*...the beautiful boy does. Are you a poet?

JOE

No, I am not. It is Eskandar’s joke for me.

NADIR

Ahh...”Eskandar”. The name suits him. Is he yours?

JOE

(A bit hesitantly)...uhmm...he’s...

NADIR

(Interrupting) But of course he is. Or...*(chuckling)*...as much yours as he would be anyone’s. Which is, perhaps...not... *(Stops, pauses, looking*

(CONT'D)

carefully at JOE) Now, *you...*"poet"...uhmm. You were born in this country but did not grow up here, I think. Our host, there...*(indicating)* ...says you are strong and resourceful. A well-trained warrior. What has brought you back here from...? Are you with...?

JOE

(Quickly) A family matter. Having to do with some *property* that was left behind and...perhaps...*misplaced*. Other *property* that has to be sorted out, you might say.

NADIR

(Smiling) Of course. The sons of many of our great families have come back to us in these times to do such "sorting out", it would seem. But, you are far from Kabul...?

JOE

As are you, Nadir Khan.

NADIR

Ah. My interests have always been wide-ranging...more so in these times of..."difficulty".

JOE

And those times soon to come?

NADIR

(Pauses, studying JOE.) These mountains and their hidden valleys have been a source of strength and refuge for my tribe and its allies since before the time of the Persians. And they will always be. I pay my due respect. But what of you, poet? Are you here to pay respect, as well? Your "tribe"...the new one...those who, obviously, trained you... is far from here...and they are...?

JOE

Diverse. And demanding. This is a good place to rest from such demands for a while.

NADIR

Ah. Some loyalties are relentless. There is much to be said for withdrawing a bit from them...taking time to examine the opportunities offered up by a country that is old, but in so many ways new. There's the "luck" that may be found in "difficult" times. My guess is that your unique talents and the knowledge you have acquired from your "diverse" tribe will acquit you well here. Soon. *(Pause)* Once you have rested.

JOE

These mountains have always been a place of opportunity, resource and strength. Your gracious attention attests to that, Nadir agha. God willing, my family's interests may be served by my small efforts on their behalf in this place. Family exacts a more relentless loyalty than that of any tribe...especially a tribe that has become so "diverse"...and recently quite, uh, undependable.

NADIR

Ah. Yes. Indeed. Family. In Rumi lands, even Kayanid princes were unrecognized and alone. It must be hard there for your family.

JOE

Very hard. It is a long way from the royal Argh in Kabul to the Wal-Mart in Hayward. I have lived with that sadness and the regret of what was lost all my life.

NADIR

But their choice was...?

JOE

Me. My life away from my country. And that sadness. I choose to reclaim my country, my life and what has been theirs since the time of our Kayanid princes.

NADIR

And so, with no Rostam to train the Kayanid prince in exile you had...

JOE

My rather diverse "tribe". They taught me very well.

NADIR

Ah. *(Pause)* The story...it ended rather badly for prince Esfandiyar.

JOE

Indeed. In loyalty to the king, he turned against Rostam and was killed by his teacher and protector. But I shall rewrite the Shahnameh.

NADIR

(Laughing) I think you would, poet!

JOE

I would not alter Esfandiyar's loyalty to the king, however. *(He bows his head slightly to NADIR.)*

NADIR

Ah. *(Pause, then appraisingly.)* Well, then. Hmm... *(Pauses, thoughtful.)* Our host and I will be discussing several “projects” this evening. Your talents and resources just might increase the value of these pursuits...value that we would, of course, share most generously. To the benefit of you and your family. Ancient property that has gone “missing”...well, such may often be “located”, in time. *(Pause)* Perhaps you would join us for tea before I leave tomorrow?

JOE

I would be honored, Nadir agha.

ESKANDAR and several tribesmen re-enter, chatting.

NADIR

(Watching the new arrivals.) In the Shahnameh, as Rostam tries to dissuade the noble Esfandiyar from a fight he knows the prince will lose, the hero offers him “a thousand sweet-lipped boys to serve you day and night”. *(Indicating ESKANDAR)* He need only have offered this *one*, I think. How different the story then?

NADIR waves his hand to summon ESKANDAR. ESKANDAR approaches NADIR and JOE, kneels before NADIR, then sits back on his heels.

You are Eskandar. He was a great general at your age.

ESKANDAR

His spirit breathes again in me, Nadir agha! I would have his armies as well!

NADIR

(Laughing) Indeed! And where would you find them after these millennia?

ESKANDAR

In the high mountains! As always. They may be summoned by a great warrior. As always.

NADIR

And you are a great warrior?

ESKANDAR

I would be so!

NADIR

(Laughs with genuine delight.) Such ambition! The mullahs must not have strapped you enough with their canes!

ESKANDAR

One lived to regret the attempt. One did not.

NADIR

(Laughs) None of mine, I hope. They are an annoying expense to replace.

ESKANDAR

Then Nadir agha should save himself the expense. They are worthless.

NADIR

Many in our country would not agree, my young warrior.

ESKANDAR

Many in our country live in herds, yet are not goats.

NADIR

(Laughing) You are wonderful, Eskandar! *(Turning to JOE)* Treasure your wonder, poet.

JOE

I do.

JOE reaches out and ESKANDAR comes to his side. It is almost an embrace.

Herds may serve their purpose, Eskandar. Here and in other places. *(Turning back to NADIR.)* Then you are generous in support of the faith, Nadir agha?

NADIR

As we must all be, of course...especially those on whom God has smiled. Especially those whose interests are extensive and of a longer term. God has smiled on me and my interests, so I am extensively generous. And I seek the longer term.

JOE

Yet faith can be so...complicating.

NADIR

Not the true faith. *(Smiles)*

JOE

Would that not be the faith of the Prophet?

NADIR

Uhhh. *(Pause)* Consider. From these mountains one looks north to the steppes, our primal homeland. In every other direction the armies of empire after empire...*(a dismissive movement of his hand)*...waves. They surge at the

(CONT'D)

base of these mountains and recede over their thousands of years. (*Shrugs.*) From this place one sees how little things change. From out there (*indicating all directions but north*)...the changes always seem large...profound. From (*takes some trouble to get the direction right, then indicates with his hand, bows his head slightly*) there the changes appeared...appear monumental and eternal. But from here...(*shrugs*) just another wave...though darker...and more (*pause*) *austere*.

JOE

From outside...

NADIR

We bow. (*Inclines his head slightly in the same direction as before.*) They see that. They do not see the twinkle in my eye. Or those sweet eyes. (*Indicating ESKANDAR, then chuckles.*)

JOE

And the Five Pillars of the faith?

NADIR

(*Spreading his hands, smiling slyly*) As the mullahs preach, of course.

JOE

But, in truth?

NADIR

As the mullahs...

JOE

(*Interrupting*) In truth. (*Pause*) *Here*. In these mountains.

NADIR

(*Long pause, then slowly*) As always. Honor. Family. Clan. Tribe. Power!

JOE

The true faith. (*Pause*) Our very most ancient.

ESKANDAR

What is this? What have you said? Is this some mystery? You sound like Sufi!

JOE

(*Almost to himself.*) Of the sacred fire...

NADIR

(*Laughing*) No, Eskandar. Or maybe yes. Maybe we *play*. Maybe dance with words. The Sufi will dance, won't they?

ESKANDAR

Yes! And *I* dance! Would you see me dance?

NADIR

Yes! Of course! You must dance for us! (*Calling to the others.*) Come! Our young Eskandar will dance!

JOE does not seem happy at this, but does not object. The others assemble and seat themselves around the stage. ESKANDAR stands and moves to center stage. He removes his jacket, shoes and shirt. He is wearing the gold coin on a chain around his neck. The others begin to clap, rhythmically, slowly at first. ESKANDAR begins to sway, begins to clap himself for a while. His movements transform into the swaying, turning, swirling dance that opened the play. The tempo of the clapping quickens and someone brings in a tabla and begins to beat a counterpoint to the rhythm of the clapping. ESKANDAR's dance becomes more intense and faster. In the background the music of traditional Afghan instruments is added and the lights dim onstage except on the dancing figure. At the end, ESKANDAR is spinning in what is actually a Sufic movement, then drops to his knees, facing the audience, eyes closed, his arms in the air...sweating, exultant.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music.*

Scene Three

SETTING *NADIR's compound in a mountain valley. Carpets cover the floor and cushions and low tables will be scattered around.*

TIME *Several weeks later.*

AT RISE *The stage is empty, then JOE, and ESKANDAR enter, led by two of NADIR's men. The two men carry rifles, but JOE and ESKANDAR are unarmed. All are in traditional Afghan dress. One of the men motions to some cushions, then bows slightly and leaves, followed by the other. JOE and ESKANDAR remain standing.*

ESKANDAR

This is done. We have served Nadir Khan well in these weeks. Now I would show you my tribe's lands to the south! Ask him to let us choose from among the horses we saw near the melon fields at the end of the valley. They were strong and fast! I know! We could be there in less than a week!

JOE

I'm more interested in one of the Rovers down by the warehouse, actually. One of the up-armored ones, I think.

ESKANDAR

I tire of the roads. And the villages and markets and "safe" houses and haggling like merchants and, like merchants, carting Nadir's mysterious boxes from place to place and carrying his messages from tribe to tribe. We must leave this, Joe. There is nothing of the warrior in what we do.

JOE

At Dostum. Was there nothing for the warrior in that?

ESKANDAR

They were stupid Arabs too far from the soft life of their country. Their imams taught them verses but not how to fight. There was no honor in killing them.

JOE

But you enjoyed it. And then I enjoyed you. For a very long night.

JOE tries to embrace ESKANDAR, who pulls away.

ESKANDAR

(Annoyed) Take care, poet. Understand who you are. And who I am.

JOE

You are Eskandar. The fire from heaven and my love. And I am...whoever you want me to be.

ESKANDAR

(Long pause. Puzzled.) You are strange.

JOE

(Looking around him.) This is certainly a most beautiful place. Who would have expected such a lush valley so well hidden in these mountains? There was nothing on the maps and satellite...*(stops, suddenly.)*

ESKANDAR

What?

JOE

Nadir has done well. Quite well. He is a man of surprising importance. He commands the loyalties of so many in so...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) You?

JOE

We work together. What we do has value, for each of us.

ESKANDAR

But does he *command* your loyalty?

JOE

(Smiles, then moves toward ESKANDAR) Ah, only *you* may command me, Eskandar.

ESKANDAR

(Raises hand in dismissal) If you mean that, you are foolish. If you don't, then I... *(pauses, turns his head away from JOE.)*

JOE puts his arm across ESKANDAR's shoulders, pulling him close.

JOE

I would be foolish not to love the wonder that you are, Eskandar.

After a moment, ESKANDAR pulls away and turns to face JOE.

ESKANDAR

We must go south! Your tribe needs such a warrior as you've become! There is much opportunity now in the land south of Kabul. And it is beautiful! Even if the gardens have not been well kept in the years of your absence! We have done with Nadir and his mysteries.

JOE

His "mysteries" will serve my family well. My adopted "tribe"...they did not. When we've exhausted his generosity, along with his mysteries, we'll have done with Nadir. Then we can take the horses into the high mountains and see what's left of the country of Rostam and the legends. Perhaps north across the Oxus then on into the steppe of Central Asia! There I can show you more mysteries than Nadir could ever imagine! There will be the future! A world's future!

ESKANDAR

(Shaking his head, somewhat sadly) You are drunk without drinking, and you live too much in the future, poet, where there is always more time. For now you must live in the present, which is always too short. We must be done with Nadir and his...*trade*.

JOE

Nadir's trade is power. I would know what his profits are. You must be patient with me in this.

ESKANDAR

Do not ask the wind for patience. It has none. I would...

JOE raises his hand to silence ESKANDAR and indicates stage left. A moment later, NADIR enters.

NADIR

Welcome to Bahram farm, my friends. After your trouble and travels on my behalf, I place my humble retreat at your complete disposal.

JOE and ESKANDAR bow slightly.

JOE

You honor us, Nadir agha. Your farm is a small paradise in this rugged region. Unexpected. And well-defended. I will enjoy exploring its many pleasures.

NADIR

And you, young Eskandar? Do you like Bahram?

ESKANDAR

Your horses are magnificent. May I chose one to ride today?

NADIR

(Laughs) Of course! But chose wisely. Find one to match your courage and spirit. Never chose below you.

ESKANDAR

I have never done so.

NADIR

Ah. Indeed.

NADIR indicates the cushions and they all sit. He waves and two tribesmen enter with trays of small cups and a container of tea and place them on one of the tables. One tribesman pours tea into the cups

(CONT'D)

and serves JOE and ESKANDAR and then NADIR and both tribesmen leave.

Please. (*They sip.*) You have done well in your travels. The number of my friends has increased...and of my enemies...there has been a small but important...*decrease.* (*Smiling, he opens his hand, to indicate the number five.*) Everything went well.

JOE

Except at Dostum.

NADIR

Ah. Disaffection is so...disappointing. Especially from a cousin. But my men tell me you and our young warrior were able to deal with it quite effectively.

JOE

I was surprised to find your cousin hosting so many foreign guests.

NADIR

Yes...yes...(waves his hand dismissively.) Our country's hospitality is widely known and sometimes abused. God permitting, it will soon be less so. Much less. (*Long pause.*) But, now, having made some quiet inquiries I have heard such a wonderful story! It has to do with the rich and ancient heritage with which this land has been blessed. And its survival.

JOE

I would be most interested to hear your story, Nadir agha.

NADIR

Well, as you know, the wealth and great art of kingdoms beyond number found home in this country. Over centuries, much of that found its way...elsewhere. But not all. Our Durrani shahs (*bows slightly to JOE*) were able to assemble a great treasure for Kabul's museum. As times became more...troubled...some of that also went...elsewhere for safekeeping. The best, though, stayed in Kabul. In our moment of great crisis that treasure was secreted in a hidden vault deep below the palace, its existence known only to a few. Through the times of the usurpers and their Russian masters...through the unpleasantness after and the false peace of the Talib...the treasure remained in darkness. At last when, perhaps unwisely, it was thought danger had passed, the vault was opened and the treasure of our land saw the light of our day again. It was glorious! (*Pause*) But... But there was something odd.

JOE

And what was that, Nadir agha?

NADIR

More came out than had gone in. At least according to the careful inventory of the museum's faithful and honest director. There was one extra box.

JOE

That is most surprising, Nadir agha.

NADIR

Perhaps it was a *private* treasure? One that found sanctuary in a moment of urgency, along with that of the museum? Who can know? In crisis...

JOE

Many things are possible. How does the story end, Nadir agha?

NADIR

The...private treasure...was so...unexpected. Some...small portion...may have become...unrecoverable. But most...

JOE

Most?

NADIR

Awaits return to its custodians of ancient standing...and their heir.

ESKANDAR

What mystery is this? I do not understand.

JOE seems conflicted. There is a long moment. Then he decides.

JOE

The ancient heritage of my family. I was concerned that it not be lost as so much else has been. It is a matter of honor...an extreme matter of honor.

ESKANDAR

What is this treasure?

JOE

Many gold coins from the time of your namesake...and his signet ring. Daggers that are far, far older. Some jeweled cups from our kings of legend. Several gold horses, no bigger than your hand, from before time itself. Small things.

NADIR

But they are...

JOE

Beyond price.

NADIR

(Smiles, a pause) Nothing is...

JOE

...beyond price. *(Long pause)* What is it?

NADIR

I know you, poet. You have demonstrated your remarkable skills, experience and...rather lethal determination. I need all of that just at this time. With my men in the tribal lands of Pakistan. Difficult, difficult work. Quiet work. Complicated. But ever so important to me at this time. Ever so...valuable.

JOE

And for this work you need...

NADIR

...someone of unusual talent...background...and connections.

JOE

...and in return?

NADIR

If *you* return, your agreed retainer and...something else. Your matter of honor. A box with your name on it that you may claim...right there. *(Indicating the table)*. My men will forfeit their lives and those of their families if it is so much as touched before you claim it.

JOE

And if I do not return to claim it?

NADIR

I'll trade it for AK47's. A great many AK47's. Perhaps some stingers. Humvees. *(Laughs)* But you *will* return! After which there will further opportunities as...certain forces...re-arrange themselves. Your family...in that *other* place...will have much to celebrate...much to enjoy in their more...comfortable future.

JOE

You are persuasive, Nadir agha. When do I leave?

NADIR stands, then JOE and ESKANDAR.

NADIR

There is no rush. Rest here for a few days. When you are rested, I will introduce you to your "team" and we can go over the details. My needs in the east are not entirely urgent, as yet.

NADIR extends his hand to JOE, who kisses it.

JOE

I am at your service, Nadir agha.

NADIR turns to leave, then turns back.

NADIR

I will order a feast tonight! There will be music. There may even be wine!
Perhaps young Eskandar will dance for us again!

NADIR leaves.

ESKANDAR

(After a pause) This box is something you want?

JOE

It is something I want very badly.

ESKANDAR

Then we will take it! It should not be difficult. Nadir's men are cowards. We have seen that.

JOE

They are only...

ESKANDAR

We will take his chief into the mountains and cut away small parts until he tells us where this treasure is to be found! There is no need for us to travel to the tribal lands on more of Nadir's trade. We will find it and then leave here and head to the south!

JOE

Nadir's "trade" is most interesting. I'm curious about it and his interest in that blighted area. So, I will go and satisfy my curiosity and take my family's treasure and Nadir's money. *(Pause)* You, my love, will not go with me, however.

ESKANDAR

(Shocked) I will! You would not go without me!

JOE

I must...I'm sorry...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) You have no reason to doubt my strength...my ability...my courage! For months I have shown you that! At Dostum...

JOE

(Interrupting)...you were brave and fought like the warrior you are and will always...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting)...then I will be at your side in that place! As I was at Dostum and those times before!

JOE

Not this time...

ESKANDAR

We are together! We will be together! From the night by the blue stone below Targhra we have been together! You would not go...

JOE

(Interrupting) I must. I'm sorry.

ESKANDAR

(Long pause. ESKANDAR is almost shaking with emotion.) To be left behind...there...*(pause, then almost choking)*...there is no honor in that! If I cannot go where you go and you go where there is danger...there is only shame for me!

JOE

Never would I dishonor you. Never. But...it is... *(pause)* They are Pashto, there...but it is not Kandahar. They follow the faith more...rigorously. They would not understand you...or our relationship. In Kandahar and in so many places in this country you are I am...tolerated, indulged, even enjoyed. Not there. You would not be safe.

ESKANDAR is silent. JOE is uncomfortable.

The danger will be great in any case. With you there, it would be far greater. I would not have anything happen to you.

ESKANDAR remains silent.

You are silent? That is so unlike my Eskandar. You must understand...

ESKANDAR

(Coldly) Do you know me, Joe?

JOE

You are...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) No. You do not know me. In all this time. You have not learned who I am. Nadir is a warlord of great power to command you so well. Even you. He has chosen a most competent tradesman for the tribal lands.
(Pause) Go on your way.

JOE

Eskandar...*(reaches out. ESKANDAR pulls away.)*

ESKANDAR

There will be a feast! There is still time for me to *choose (pause)*... I will choose Nadir Khan's fastest horse and ride down the wind before sunset! I shall do that! And Nadir's swift falcons will tremble with their envy of me!

ESKANDAR exits quickly and leaves JOE alone.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

SOUND: *Between scenes, traditional Afghan music.*

Scene Four

SETTING *A small room in a large government compound in Kabul. There are a few chairs and a table that show a faded elegance.*

TIME *Two months later.*

AT RISE *ESKANDAR is sitting in one of the chairs, facing stage left. He is wearing traditional Afghan clothing...long white pants, sandals, a colored tunic and a long vest of rather elegant material. He is wearing the coin on a chain around his neck. He wears several rings and bracelets.*

SOUND *The very muted sound of someone speaking from offstage, but no words are distinguishable and the language is, in fact, Pashto. From time to time there is muted applause or shouts of approval.*

JOE enters. He is wearing traditional Afghan dress, without a sidearm but with a large combat knife in his belt. His clothes are clearly travel-worn. He watches ESKANDAR for a long moment.

JOE

So, Nadir's boy may not share the stage with the great man at the moment of his triumph?

ESKANDAR

(Without turning.) It is the great council and I am too young. *(Turning to face JOE.)* But he would never deny me a place at his side in time of battle. Never. *(Pause)* You are daring. And lucky. The security is quite strict at this place. *(Watches JOE for a moment.)* You look tired, Joe. Your journey was difficult?

JOE

Most difficult. As always. And you are beautiful...as always.

ESKANDAR

And the language of the poet...as always. *(Pause)* You have been away for two months. Far longer than was expected.

JOE

My work was difficult. But most successful.

ESKANDAR

As Nadir agha has said. He was very pleased.

JOE

As well he should be.

ESKANDAR

Yet after claiming your...wages at the farm, you disappeared. That was unexpected.

JOE

That's what a tradesman does...his work, is paid and then leaves. Alone. Did Nadir...or you...expect anything else?

ESKANDAR

I expected a warrior.

JOE

I expected you at the farm.

ESKANDAR

You chose. I chose. That is the way of it. You expected too little. And I too much.

JOE

I am sorry. This is who I am. Neither I, nor the world is as simple you believe.

ESKANDAR

Nor I as simple as you believe.

JOE

Eskandar! If I could be the hero you want me to be, I would. In a moment. To have you, I tried. But it's not so simple to live the Shahnameh in order to have the beautiful, sweet-lipped boy of legend. The world...the real world...is so much more complicated than any legend. With so many...aspects. I am not simple and I am not a hero. But I am real. As is my love for you. I know that, now.

ESKANDAR

Love? (Pause) That's a child's word and so weak. You are not a child. I did not think you were weak. It does not apply, here.

JOE

But what we had...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting, he stands and faces JOE.) What did we have? There is a great...*thing*. I do not know the word for it...I do not think there is a word for it... but I have heard of it and seen it...and *felt* it. 'Honor' or 'courage' or 'strength'...I don't know...the words feel close but are not quite *there* or are only one of your "aspects". Most of all...what it feels like...is like a great *fire* inside that calls to its twin and then twines about it...as each with the other and there is only *one* fire! And then...*magic*! Great mysteries! The fall of empires and their rebirth! Don't name that...*wonder* with your simpering "love". That is a word invented by the weak, who peck around in the droppings of the heroes of legend like birds in the shit of great stallions. You were wrong to think what we had...or might have had...was "love".

JOE

It is an inadequate word. If I were truly a poet I would find a better one. But it is all I have. I do love you, Eskandar.

ESKANDAR

Oh, but you *are* a poet, Joe. That you have not found the word means that you did not feel it. And I would have you feel nothing less to stay with you.

JOE

If we had more *time*, I know I could find the word! But this moment, in this place (*pause*) time is very short!

ESKANDAR

I told you...you live too much in the future. There is only *this* time.

JOE

(*Quickly*) OK, you need to come with me, *now*. This is a dangerous place and will become more so...very quickly.

ESKANDAR

I would not...

JOE

(*Interrupting*) Look, I have a Land Rover just outside the compound. I've got money, supplies, the right papers and weapons. We drive north to Balkh and in two days we're across the Oxus and out of this fucked country.

ESKANDAR

Joe?

JOE

And we're into the great steppe! I'll fuckin' show you Samarkand! All those far places from the Shahnameh you've just heard about. Horses? You want fast horses? The fastest horses ever there was and that's where the mother of all fast horses was bred! We'll ride them into the winds and I'll show you the Great Wall from the Mongol side!

ESKANDAR

Joe...

JOE

I've got everything set up. It cost me more than you'll ever know. And in a month we'll be safely in the US and thanks to my friends *you* will be magically *legal* there. We'll go to Berkeley and I'll introduce you to my family. What you want we can have *there*, Eskandar! It *will* be! I want to be your poet, again. (*pause*) I want to find the word. I do.

ESKANDAR

(*Long pause*) And what would my life be like there? Do you think I could live there as you did, a refugee, away from the high mountains? When you came to me there in those mountains, did you not feel more alive? More powerful?

JOE

In my country...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) And what would I be there, Joe? One of your wives?

JOE

What?

ESKANDAR

You have been in that country far too long and you have become...different. Do you *really* understand who I am? Have you ever understood?

JOE

In my country there are many people like us and we would be accepted. There are no mullahs with power to impose their concepts of right and wrong...there is no sharia law. To be gay there is...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) Do you think there has ever been, for me...*sharia*? For *me*? It is nothing to me!

JOE

I *know* and...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) You have been blind. I am *not* like you. I'm not like the people in your country who have need of such "acceptance".

JOE

What?

ESKANDAR

You do not *know* me. *(Long pause.)* To honor a great warrior who has honored me, I will take pleasure with him...and he with me. As has always been done. He will guide me in the ways of courage, strength, honor...and I will accept his guidance. Between us there may even be that for which you do not have the word. If so, then that is a blessing and a greater treasure than will ever be found in secret boxes at the palace here in Kabul.

JOE

Different cultures express...

ESKANDAR

(Interrupting) But, Joe! I will *grow*! And *become* the warrior! I will take wives and have sons and my sons and allies will gather round and celebrate our victories and extend our wealth and power. My family will be regarded with respect and increase the honor of my clan and tribe. We will fight great battles! At night we will celebrate with feasting and mullahs-be-damned

(CONT'D)

wine! There will be music and dancing and one night a young, sweet-lipped boy will catch *my* eye and, if he has courage and honor along with his beauty, he will become my *halekon*. And we will pleasure each other for all those endless nights. Nights such as you and I had. (Pause) *That* is my future. Where, in that ageless story, do you find me living the rest of my life as one of your *wives*? Or, even worse, we as two wives together? What honor would there be in that? What life?

JOE is speechless. From offstage there is the sound of applause and shouting. The sound grows in strength.

Joe, you knew, but never *understood* your Eskandar. (Long pause) This is not your country. (Pause) Go home.

The sound of applause and shouts increase briefly, and then mute, as if a door were opened and closed. NADIR enters. He is wearing traditional Afghan dress for formal occasions. He smiles at ESKANDAR, who goes to him. NADIR notices JOE.

NADIR

(Smiling) My warrior has returned! I was quite concerned. In a dangerous, blighted land you returned much advantage to me, but did not return yourself. (JOE does not respond and there is a long pause.) Ah, but I see you wished to come to congratulate me on today's success...even if a bit secretly, I might say.

JOE

(Comes to himself, then perfunctorily) I congratulate you, Nadir agha, on today's honor and great good fortune for you.

NADIR

(Bows his head slightly) It is as God wills and I give thanks to Him and his Prophet.

JOE

All will be as He wills it, Nadir agha. (Pause) That is (emphasizing each word) most very certain.

NADIR

Yes. (Pause, a bit awkward.) Yes, of course. And you have recovered your family's treasure! Well! That is good and as it should be.

JOE

Yes. It is. (Long pause) But so many treasures may *not* be recovered and are forever lost, it seems. Therein is much grief, Nadir agha.

NADIR

Hmm. Yes. Indeed there is.

There is an uncomfortable silence. NADIR raises his hand and moves a bit toward JOE, as if wants to comfort him. Then stops.

Grief passes and we go back to our work and remember what was important to us. What is lost is lost. The good we may do is left to us to do.

JOE

Thank you, Nadir agha. I will keep your wisdom in mind. Of that, you may be very sure.

NADIR

Ah. *(pause)* Well, we must go. The Americans...*you* Americans...have been generous to provide one of your helicopters and a crew to take us to Bagram and then a plane for our flight to Amman, to meet your President! This is a wonderful day for our country!

JOE

Indeed, Nadir agha...it will be. Soon. *(He bows his head slightly.)*

NADIR puts his arm around ESKANDAR and they turn to leave, stage left. At the edge of the stage ESKANDAR turns around to face JOE.

ESKANDAR

Poet! Today I fly!

NADIR and ESKANDAR exit.

JOE

(Long pause, then quietly) May golden-winged Soroush welcome you, my Eskandar.

JOE sits in one of the chairs, facing the audience. After a moment, he removes a small military radio and headset from his trouser pocket. Putting on the headset, he keys the transmitter.

Wake up, Morgan.

Lights come up on MORGAN on a darkened part of the stage or offstage. He's seated at a small table with a laptop open in front of him. He's wearing a headset with microphone. He stares intently at the laptop.

Stop napping. This isn't Landstuhl.

MORGAN

Not napping. And you're mistaken, sir. I was *never* at Landstuhl. That would be so *very* unauthorized. (*Moving his hand on the track pad.*) How's security? Any problems?

JOE

Security's a joke here. Our competition sucks. No problem at all.

MORGAN

Good to hear. About the competition.

JOE

OK, so where's our jihadi and his truck bomb?

MORGAN

(*Checking the computer screen, moving his hand over the track pad.*) He's about there...a quarter klick from Nadir's farm.

JOE

That stupid fucker better step on it. All those virgins are getting antsy. Let me know when we lose signal and check the visual. How about our predators?

MORGAN

(*Checking the computer again.*) They're good. Been in range of the targets for five minutes. Good signals. Visual clear. And in Nevada right now a bunch of video-game flyboys are having some pretty fuckin' serious software problems.

JOE

OK. Hit the targets *now*.

MORGAN

(*Moves his hand on the track pad.*) Whoosh! Six birds away. (*Pauses, watching his screen.*) And those boys in Nevada just fuckin' shit their pants!

From offstage there is the sound of a helicopter's rotors starting up. The rotation speeds rapidly and the sound increases.

JOE

And our burkha boys? In place with their stingers?

MORGAN

(*Checks his computer. Taps the keyboard, then hand to his earpiece.*) Check. In range and target in view. They've seeded the site and will leave the burkhas behind when they get the fuck outta there.

JOE

Tell those fuckin' newbies they'll never play video games again if they fuck this one up. *(pause)* That Russian shit better fly straight this time or I'm callin' customer service at the Kremlin.

Under the previous lines, MORGAN is saying something unintelligible into his mike. From offstage we hear the sound of the helicopter rotors and engines at take-off speed.

(After a long pause.) OK. Hit the chopper as soon as it clears the compound.

MORGAN says something unintelligible into his headset mike. Listens. Taps the track pad to check the computer.

MORGAN

I've got visual of a mosque. The chopper would probably go down into...

JOE

(Interrupting.) Fuck the goddamn mosque! Crashing a mosque is just a fuckin' dividend on this one!

MORGAN says something unintelligible into the headset mike.

MORGAN

They'll launch the stingers when target's at fifty meters. *(Pause. Hand to track pad. Checks the computer.)* OK, we've got six missile hits. Confirmed. Damn! The Pakistanis are gonna be so very pissed! 'Spect they'll be calling the Pentagon any minute now. *(Pause)* And our jihadi is now with his virgins.

From offstage there is the sound of the helicopter taking off. A few moments later there are several loud explosions, then the sound of the helicopter crashing and more explosions, followed by shouting from a distance. In a few moments, there are the sounds of sirens. JOE sits quietly, head down for a long moment. MORGAN puts his hand to the headset, checks the computer screen, says something unintelligible into the mike.

The chopper's down. Totaled. The mosque's wasted. *(Long pause.)* Joe?

JOE

(Sitting up.) I'm here.

MORGAN

You're clear the way you came in. Leave now. You've got thirty-six hours to make it through Mazar e Shariff and across the river. You are expected and cleared from there into the 'stans and on east to Dushanbe, where there'll be...

JOE

(Interrupting) No. Morgan. Tell our friends I will not be visiting. Thank them and our client for their trouble on my behalf, but it will not be needed. *(Pause)* Not now.

MORGAN

But you were...? *(Stiffening)* Oh. *(Pause)* Ouch. *(Long pause)* I'm...so sorry, Joe.

JOE

Yeah, well... *(pause)*. What the fuck... *(pause)* It worked, didn't it?

MORGAN

But you...

JOE

Yeah. *(Pause)* Yeah, I know. *(Long pause.)* I'm coming in.

JOE bows his head again. The lights dim and the projection of the angel Soroush overlays the stage, then dims and is replaced by the pattern of Arabic calligraphy from the opening scene. The pattern brightens markedly, then dims.

BLACKOUT
END OF SCENE

END OF PLAY