

CHILDREN OF MESOPOTAMIA

Screenplay by: Ahmed Alameen

INT. TRAINING CAMP CENTRE, GEORGIA, TBILISI - NIGHT

The sound of footsteps resonates in a corridor. DANA appears. She is a woman in her mid-thirties. Her lean, athletic appearance and toned muscles do not diminish her femininity, but the angry expression on her face does.

She seems to be lost in the corridor and is trying to find her way. A faint sound of children arguing with each other is heard. Dana stops and appears to listen to the sounds, before trying to follow them, but she is still lost. A MAN spots her.

MAN

Excuse me, are you the one looking
for the kids?

DANA

Are they here?

The man gestures to an office he is standing next to. The closer she gets, the louder and clearer the argument can be heard.

Dana enters the office, and the argument stops immediately. Dana crosses her arms. Her anger turns into fury.

CUT TO:

TITLE CARD: CHILDREN OF MESOPOTAMIA

INT. A CAFE IN BAGHDAD - DAY

It is early morning, and the streets can be seen through the window. They are almost empty.

Dana is sitting at a table, holding a full cup of coffee with both hands, and staring at it. She looks like she is trying to read her fortune, but in fact, is lost in thoughts. A political debate is playing on the TV in the cafe.

MAN

Listen to this statement from
2012.

'The Democratic society aims to
serve human beings first in the
nation, and implant good values
and stop bigotry and extremism,
and it does not prevent the
existence of other political
powers that can run the country'.

(MORE)

MAN (CONT'D)

I'm a democratic person myself, but unfortunately, what is being said here is not what is happening in this country. Since the removal of the old dictatorship that ran the country to the ground, the prejudice between the diverse ethnicities is still resonating from the old regime, and it is palpable in each province, with nationalistic cleansing against the Kurds, Yazidi, North, South...

Dana looks away from her coffee, and she calls the WAITER.

DANA

Can you please change the channel? I'm in no mood for politics today.

WAITER

Anything for you, Dana.

The waiter changes to a sports channel and goes to the kitchen. Dana is all alone. She takes a sip from her coffee, and then she hears her name mentioned on the screen.

SPORTS REPORTER

Dana Husain still holds the title of the Fastest Woman in Arabia, will that title stand? Or will she push it further? Many say that she has reached her limit after she reached her mid-thirties, but what does she have to say about that?

The screen shows Dana Husain in a track field with another reporter interviewing her. The waiter comes back from inside the kitchen and sees Dana on the screen.

WAITER

Oh look, you are in two places at the same time. You truly are the fastest woman in Arabia!

Dana sighs and smiles and then goes back to listening to the interview.

INTERVIEWER

It is well known that you, Dana, have always stood out in the Arabian scene but not so much in Asia lately, or even the world.

DANA

(on TV)

This is not really due to a flaw in me, because I have only been provided with short training camps. And it is hard to train in Baghdad, where it is close to 50 degrees. Most of my time is spent training and demanding to go to training camps, like those in Jamaica or America, which are specialised in track and field, but I do not get the local support I deserve.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your age is also the reason for your humble results in Asia?

Dana takes another sip of coffee and looks away.

DANA

(on TV)

Age is a number, I mean look at Merlene Ottey; she became a gold medallist at 35, and at 40, she won the silver medal in a relay race and the bronze in the 100-meter dash. It's not over until we say it's over

INTERVIEWER

One last question. What is your retirement plan?

Dana looks at the screen. Her fingers are clenched around the cup, a frown of irritation on her face. But on the screen, she smiles pleasantly before she answers.

DANA

(on TV)

I wish to open a special school for talented kids. Try to give them what they deserve, and most importantly, an education.

INTERVIEWER

Any regrets?

DANA

(on TV)

I only regret not finishing my education.

Dana finishes her coffee in one chug, takes her training bag, and gets up to leave, while the interview continues on the TV.

EXT. CAFE IN BAGHDAD - DAY

Dana is exiting the cafe; her training bag is hanging on her shoulder. Her phone rings. She looks at the screen and then she touches her Bluetooth earphones to answer the call.

DANA

Yes, I know mom, I didn't eat breakfast. Yes... mom... but mom I don't have time! Mom... mom... listen, I'm eating well. I'll come to you first and then I need to go for my training. I'll eat later. What? What do you mean you found a potential husband for me at Basma's wedding? Can you stay on one topic, please?

A MAN and a WOMAN recognise Dana and approach her.

WOMAN

Excuse me, are you Dana Husain?
The athlete?

Dana nods with a smile.

WOMAN

Would you mind if we took a picture with you?

DANA

(over the phone)
Mom, just a moment. I'm going to take some pictures.

Dana stands next to the woman to have her picture taken.

WOMAN

I'm your biggest fan.

The man takes the picture.

MAN

The first time I saw you was during the London Olympics. I didn't know you then, but when I saw you pass all the other girls and win, I jumped with joy. It felt like my spirit lifted me up, and not my legs.

DANA

That race only got me to the second round. I didn't win a medal there.

MAN

But you cheered us up, and we felt hope. You also brought in a lot of medals in other competitions - you won in Arabia, you also got gold medals in Turkey and Iran's 60-meter dash. I just hope to see more from you in the future.

DANA'S MOM

(over the phone)

Marry him. He seems like a nice guy.

Dana smiles shyly and looks down. A car backfires in the distance. Dana, the woman, and the man see a child, NAZAR, a twelve-year-old, running away with a horrified expression on his face that masked his handsome features.

A MAN and a TEENAGER run behind Nazar, trying to stop him, but they cannot keep up with him. Dana looks amazed at how fast Nazar is running.

DANA

(to the woman)

Would you mind holding my bag for a minute? Don't worry, it only has my training gear.

Dana hands the bag over. She takes her wrist band and uses it to tie her hair back.

WOMAN

What will you do?

DANA

(looking back at the woman)

Run.

Dana runs after the kid.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Dana chases after Nazar. She passes the man and the teenager following him and gets closer.

Dana sees a car coming in at an intersection. Looking worried, she runs faster.

Just before Nazar arrives at the intersection, Dana jumps and catches him, saving his life. They both fall to the ground. Dana is holding Nazar, who is shaking from fear in her arms.

DANA

Don't worry... don't be afraid.

Nazar looks at her.

DANA

You are safe now... I won't let them hurt you.

Nazar nods. The two people running after Nazar approach Dana. They are gasping for air. They are NAZAR'S UNCLE and NAZAR'S COUSIN.

NAZAR'S UNCLE

Thank you, miss.

DANA

Why are you running after him?
What did that kid do to you?

NAZAR'S UNCLE

You misunderstood, miss. I am his uncle

NAZAR'S COUSIN

He didn't do anything. He is a coward, when he hears a loud noise he runs away.

Nazar looks down at the ground, embarrassed.

NAZAR'S UNCLE

Don't say that about your cousin.

NAZAR'S COUSIN

Sorry, dad.

NAZAR'S UNCLE

(to Nazar)

Let's go, son.

Nazar hesitates before he goes to his uncle. He climbs into the backseat of a taxi cab with his cousin. Before Nazar's uncle gets in the front seat, Dana approaches him.

DANA

Excuse me, sir. Can I... can I speak with his parents?

NAZAR'S UNCLE

You can speak to his mother if you'd like.

DANA

And what about his father?

NAZAR'S UNCLE

You can if you know how to perform a séance.

Nazar's uncle writes an address on a piece of paper and gives it to Dana. He then gets inside the taxi cab. The car pulls away while Dana and Nazar look at each other.

DANA'S MOTHER

(over the phone)

Are you finished taking photos with your fans?

Dana sighs.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Dana is standing outside a moderate house that has a well-maintained garden.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Nazar's uncle opens the door for Dana and welcomes her in. Nazar's mother, LATIFA, stands behind him. She shows signs of ageing, and her forehead is creased with lines and wrinkles. It seems that worry has added years to her countenance.

Latifa hugs Dana and tries to kiss her forehead to express her gratitude. Dana politely backs away with a smile.

NAZAR'S UNCLE

Okay, I will leave you ladies together.

LATIFA

Thank you, my dear, for what you did for my son. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there.

DANA

You're welcome. Actually, I-I need to confess something to you. I didn't know what was happening. I was just curious about your son

LATIFA

Curious? About my son? Why?

DANA

I have run and competed in many races since I was a child, and I have supervised and trained other athletes, too. But I have never seen a kid his age run quite as fast as he does. What is your son's name?

LATIFA

His name is Nazar.

DANA

Does Nazar run at school? Or has he ever competed in races?

LATIFA

(hesitantly)

No... he... he has a... We used to live in Mosul, and praise Allah, we survived. But now Nazar has a phobia of very loud sounds. When he hears something that sounds like a gun shot, or an explosion he runs away. We can't catch up with him. Once, we had to use a car to chase him, and another time he ran till he fainted. That's why he is mostly here at home and doesn't go outside. His uncle sometimes convinces him to go out, to let him get used to stepping out of the house. We didn't expect a car to backfire.

DANA

Does he go to school?

LATIFA

We took him there, but he has problems concentrating. and he doesn't get along well with other kids. They sometimes bully him by making loud sounds. So now we are trying home-schooling. We want to help him go back there, but I don't know what to do.

DANA

I see... What if I told you I might have a solution that could help?

INT. NAZAR'S ROOM - DAY

Nazar is on his computer, reading an article about Dana featuring a picture of her. A knock on the door steals his attention away from the screen.

LATIFA (O.S.)

Nazar, honey... Someone is here to see you.

Nazar turns off his computer screen and goes to open the door. His mouth falls open in surprise when he sees Dana. Latifa and Dana enter the room. Nazar sits on his bed, while Dana sits on the chair next to his computer. The computer screen is behind Dana.

LATIFA

I'll leave you two together... Oh, Nazar, why don't you clean your computer screen?

Latifa uses a cloth to wipe some dust off the screen, and then she leaves, closing the door behind her. The computer screen turns on, showing Dana's picture. Dana doesn't realise it because her back is towards the screen. Nazar struggles to mask his embarrassment.

DANA

Hi! First of all, do you know who I am?

NAZAR

Aaaa, no... I don't know you. I know you... but... I remember you from yesterday... but I haven't seen you before today. I mean... before that time-

DANA

Nazar, there's nothing to worry about. Nothing here should make you nervous.

Nazar looks at Dana's picture on the screen wide-eyed for a second before he nods.

DANA

Think of me as your big sister, and because I'm your big sister, I don't accept people calling my little brother a coward.

Nazar looks down.

DANA

I'm actually a track and field runner, and I went to the Olympics, twice. Did you know that?

Nazar nods at first, but then he shakes his head, pretending not to know.

DANA

Let me ask you something. Do you think a lion is a coward? Answer me, I want to hear your voice.

NAZAR

No, I don't think so.

DANA

Why do you think that?

Nazar shrugs.

DANA

Because of his hair? They see that crazy, big, bushy hair and they run away, right?

Nazar looks down and smiles slightly.

DANA

Yeah, I'm not that funny, I know. But do you want to know why? Claws, teeth, strength... technique. He has something that others don't. That others wish they had. When I saw you run yesterday, and when I noticed your uncle and cousin not able to get close to you, I thought that I'd never seen someone your age run that fast. You have something that others don't!

NAZAR

What's that?

DANA

Talent. And I want to help you to hone it. Running gave me confidence and courage, and I believe this is something you can get, too, by becoming a runner like me. Because I promise you, when other runners stand next to you in the race, they will be too scared to lose to you.