

War Magician

by

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Based on the Book

by

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A CARD:

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, ALLIED SOLDIERS IN BERLIN DISCOVERED ADOLPH HITLER'S PERSONAL BLACKLIST. MEN WHO HAD DAMAGED NOT ONLY HIS WAR MACHINE, BUT BY THEIR BRAVADO, HIS VANITY AS WELL. MEN, WHO IF STILL ALIVE, WERE TO BE SINGLED OUT FOR 'SPECIAL RETRIBUTION' ONCE THE GERMANS WON.

ON THE LIST BETWEEN NAMES 'DOUGLAS MACARTHUR, GENERAL,' AND 'BERNARD MONTGOMERY, FIELD MARSHAL', WAS THE NAME, 'JASPER MASKELYNE, MAGICIAN'.

INT. ABDEEN PALACE THEATER - CAIRO - NIGHT - DREAM

A dream. JASPER MASKELYNE, age seven, wanders through a crowd of Egyptian men, head at hip-height. Through the crowd, he sees his father, NEVIL, on stage. This is Cairo, palace theater, Egyptian king Abbas II seated in the wings.

Women in a far corner ululate. The men around Jasper seem angry. Jasper, nervous. On stage, his father next to a robed IMAM. The Imam pulls out a scimitar, stabs himself in the chest. He pulls the sword out, seems fine.

NEVIL

Trick sword.

Nevil takes the sword, makes it collapse into the handle.

With his own sword, Nevil chops a melon, proving its blade. He offers it to the Imam, Imam stares blankly. Crowd jeers. Nevil stabs himself, no harm. Crowd, mad. King, impressed.

Young Jasper pushes backstage. The area, crowded with the Imam's devout followers. Nevil is coming off stage.

Jasper sees one of the IMAM'S ACOLYTES approaching, sinister intent. No one else sees him.

JASPER

(quiet and unheard)

Dad. . . Dad.

Jasper watches as the acolyte pulls out a pistol. Jasper, suddenly terrified, grabs the man next to him, but it is one of the Imam's men. Jasper yells. He is ignored. The acolyte yells, charges Nevil, shoots wildly, BOOM, BOOM-

INT. PICCADILLY MOVIE HOUSE - EVENING

Jasper's eyes shoot open, dark room, gunshots. Jasper, now 38, sits in the half-empty balcony of a grandiloquent cinema, black and white newsreel playing, muted gunfire sounds from soldiers on the cinema screen. Jasper gets his bearings.

Newsreel on cinema screen: images of blitzing German armies, Hitler under the Eifel Tower. Card, then NARRATOR.

ENGLAND RETREATS! HITLER STATES, 'VICTORY AT HAND'!

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Prime Minister Churchill admits defeat at the battle of Dunkirk. As the last boats carrying British soldiers flee France, the Nazi war machine claims all Allied Europe. (beat) Where will German General Rommel go next? Allied armies prepare. At home, Londoners practice civil defense procedures.

Footage of wary soldiers returning home, one SOLDIER talks.

SOLDIER

It was slaughter. Rommel has a sixth sense. He knew our plans.

On the newsreel, recovered images of GENERAL ERWIN ROMMEL, 49, tall, laser sharp, resolute. Jasper closes his eyes, head back. Suddenly, images of Jasper on screen.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

Entertainment news. At the famous Egyptian Hall Theatre, mysterious magician Jasper Maskelyne opens his new show, *Magic in War*.

Jasper opens his eyes.

I/E. EGYPTIAN HALL THEATER - EVENING

A well-dressed Sikh, AJAY, 66, stands outside the Piccadilly Square Egyptian Theater, clearly anxious. On the marquee:

JASPER THE GREAT PRESENTS 'MAGIC IN WAR'

SUBTITLE:

LONDON, ENGLAND. JANUARY, 1940.

A STAGEHAND jumps out a taxi, hurries to Ajay.

STAGEHAND

He's not at home.

AJAY

You see his wife, did you ask her?

STAGEHAND

I, uh, didn't want to. In case
Jasper was out doing. . . *you know.*

Ajay, curses, heads inside. Heckles from the auditorium.

The STAGE MANAGER meets Ajay in the lobby.

STAGE MANAGER

It's 6:30! Audience is gonna riot.
What do we do, hand out refunds?

AJAY

Is the reporter still backstage?

Stage manager nods, Ajay hurries around back.

A dozen more stagehands gather backstage, fully costumed.
Ajay heads to a REPORTER sitting in the corner, awkward.

AJAY (CONT'D)

You. Talk to me. What exactly did
you say that made Jasper leave?

REPORTER

Nothing, I asked about his family.
(beat) What do you want, the
question verbatim?

(reading a notepad)

*Myth has it, your ancestor sold his
soul so ten generations could gain
the powers of magic. You're the
last generation. Do you worry
about measuring up in the lineage?*

(Ajay steps back, thinks)

What, is family a sore spot?

Suddenly, Jasper appears in the hall. Everyone excited. But
Jasper ignores them, enters his dressing room, slams the
door. All eyes on Ajay. Ajay knocks, no response. Again.

JASPER (O.S.)

I'm sick. (beat) Send them home.

A moment.

STAGE MANAGER

Ajay, what do you want me to do?

Ajay pulls out keys, unlocks the door. Jasper scrambles up, Ajay slams the door, just the two of them.

AJAY
Are you insane?

JASPER
I'm not going up. I can't anymore.

AJAY
You say that every other week.

JASPER
I mean it, I'm ashamed of myself.
I act like this show is important,
like I'm some hero. I go home at
night to clean sheets and a butler.

A moment. Ajay pours a shot of whiskey, gives it to Jasper.

AJAY
We'll worry about this later.

Jasper pushes the drink away, serious, sits back down.

JASPER
That reporter, kept asking about my
father. (beat) I've been dreaming
about him, Ajay. Same vivid dream,
over and over, that night in Cairo.
(Ajay lowers the whiskey)
Do you remember that night?

AJAY
Why does it haunt you so much? You
did nothing wrong.

JASPER
The helplessness of it. I feel it
all the time now. Don't you? News
reports. Neighborhood kids bussing
off to boot camp. The whole
country at war. What are we doing?
(leaning in)
Count how many men are out in that
audience. We're the only two who
haven't picked up guns.

AJAY
Consider yourself lucky. (beat) The
army isn't your role. Wanting to
fight, it's your youth talking.

JASPER

It's not my youth, Ajay. Christ. What would my father do? What would my *grandfather* do? If they were here now, they'd enlist again.

AJAY

Yes, Jasper, and do what they did before, magic shows for the soldiers. The men loved your father cause he gave a moment's pleasure. He did his job, he was proud of who he was. And I know, deep down, so are you. You want to feel part of the effort, I get it. You have an audience waiting to be awed. Perform, Jasper. . . *that's your role.*

Silence.

INT. EGYPTIAN HALL THEATRE - A MOMENT LATER

Jasper, commanding presence once in front of 1,000 people. Behind Jasper, a cross-section of a Spitfire fighter-plane cockpit and a large circus cannon. Ajay and stagehands nearby. Twenty children throughout the theater have their hands up.

Jasper rushes down to a young BLONDE BOY in the audience, escorts him on stage. The audience applauds. Boy seems nervous. Jasper, engaging, crouches to the boy's height.

JASPER

What's your name?

BLONDE BOY

Liam.

JASPER

You're very brave, Liam. Your father is a pilot in the air force?
(tear falls from the boy)
Oh, no. Are you crying?

BLONDE BOY

I'm afraid. I just wanna see him.

JASPER

Let's make that happen. Will you trust me? Will you let me take you on a great journey, Liam?

The boy nods, 'yes'.

AS EACH STEP OF THE ILLUSION PROGRESSES, IT APPEARS IN A CUBIST COLLAGE ON SCREEN. Jasper is aware of every movement. A hyper-reality that Jasper controls like a chess board.

Jasper faces the audience. While he orates, Jasper's hyper-reality continues, many images, parts of the illusion: a RUBBER GASKET hidden in the boy's pants, a FILM PROJECTOR above the stage, a HYDRAULIC LIFT behind the curtains. JASPER TALKS TO THE AUDIENCE AND IN HIS MIND SIMULTANEOUSLY.

JASPER (CONT'D)
We face Fascist armies, dark forces unleashed on our world. What do we here in this theater have to fight them? This. The love of a child for his father.

JASPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Boy attaches false bottom, exits cannon, climbs hydraulic arm, ready on squibs, ready on projector. (beat) My God that woman has astounding breasts.

Front row, a BRUNETTE with enormous breasts. Jasper focuses.

JASPER (CONT'D)
I cannot bring this child's father back, that is a power too great. Instead, I'll launch this boy high into the heavens, offer them a chance to be together.
(to Liam)
This is perfectly safe. I am going to help you into this cannon.

The boy, stoic. Jasper helps him climb into the cannon. The boy pulls out his hidden gasket, puts it above him, creates a FALSE BOTTOM. A smoke charge ignites, looks like the cannon fired. Cannon angles towards the audience, empty.

Suddenly spotlights aim at the cockpit, Jasper points his hands, it rises up. JASPER SEES ITS HIDDEN HYDRAULIC ARM.

JASPER (CONT'D)
Right now, this boy's father is in a cockpit just like this one.

The cannon is wheeled to the edge of the stage. No one notices that the boy is climbing out a trapdoor in back.

Jasper visualizes the boy running from the stage side, to the hydraulic lift, climbing high behind the curtain. Small charges hanging on fishing wire begin to explode.

JASPER (CONT'D)
Anti-aircraft fire! Liam, if you can hear me, you're almost there. Think of Dad. Keep going.

JASPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

All eyes on me.

Spotlights on Jasper, he grabs his head, as though in pain. In the dark above, BOY CLIMBS UNSEEN INTO THE COCKPIT. Lights aim back at the cockpit, boy sitting inside. Gasps.

BLONDE BOY

I'm okay. But I didn't see Pa.

The audience moans, disappointed. Jasper seems dispirited. More explosive flashes, the cockpit suddenly drops, Jasper has to concentrate to hold it in place.

Explosions stop, stage filled with smoke. Jasper lowers the cockpit, fuselage wall facing the audience. Jasper, sapped. He runs to the cockpit, turns it so the open side faces the audience. Jasper steps out of the way to reveal. . .

The BOY'S FATHER in the pilot's seat, translucent, ghost-like. The father stands, walks onto stage, confused.

BOY'S FATHER

Where am I?

BLONDE BOY

Papa, it's me.

The father turns, sees his son. He runs, they embrace. Only we see that the father is being PROJECTED ON THE SMOKE by the film projector above. Audience, ecstatic, emotional cheers.

JASPER

A child has his father! In this titanic struggle between nations, victory lies in the strength of our belief.

JASPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Jasper the Great. Jasper the illusionist. The liar.
(a moment)
Save me.

Theater rumbles, distant explosions, the audience applauds it as part of the trick. Jasper, confused, knows it is not.

Air raid sirens come alive outside. Audience, scared, begins to stand, scramble. The stage manager hurries on stage.

STAGE MANAGER

Please, let's all exit calmly!
Take shelter in the tube station!

Explosion, theater shakes. But Jasper's response is odd, at first curious then almost pleased. The projected father continues with the trick as the theater quickly empties.

BOY'S FATHER

You let me see my boy, thank you-

Rumble, projector quits. Ajay appears on stage, urges Liam away, gathers the stagehands, points to the props.

AJAY

The plane, cannon, all the set
practicals, into the basement.

JASPER

Stop. . . don't. Leave.

Ajay, despite Jasper, pushes the group towards the props, but Jasper stands in their way. Group, confused.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Go. Get to the shelter.

Obvious tension between Jasper and Ajay. Bombs, dust falls, one of the stagehands hurries away. Jasper urges the group to go. . . survival-instinct, the others run. Theater empty.

JASPER (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, Ajay. I'm done.

AJAY

(arguing a lost battle)
You can't just walk away.
(Jasper, convinced)
What else is there for us? I've
been with your family in this
theater forever. It's all I know.

JASPER

I understand, believe me. But that
can't be our only reason to stay.

Silence. Bombs fall, chandeliers swing.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Sky's falling. Go to the shelter.

Ajay, nothing more to say, steps off stage. Jasper, taking in the theater one last time. Ajay leaves.

Jasper heads off stage, freezes. One person left behind, the attractive brunette with *astounding breasts*, just off stage.

BRUNETTE

I waited for you.

The brunette steps out of her high heels, pulls off her stockings, supple flesh. She approaches. Bombs thump.

JASPER

Did you notice the air raid?

BRUNETTE

So take me backstage.

She touches Jasper's lips, kisses him. Jasper pulls back. Jasper cannot resist, kisses, but then pulls back again.

JASPER

You don't want this. I'm trouble.

BRUNETTE

So am I.

A bomb strikes too close, plaster falls throughout the theater, point made for Jasper. Brunette, now worried. Jasper pulls her backstage. The Brunette, confused, reaches for her shoes but Jasper does not give her a chance.

Loud explosion outside. They descend to a basement. Direct hit, boom. A torrent of masonry and sparks. Blackout.

INT. ABDEEN PALACE THEATER - CAIRO - NIGHT - DREAM

Same moment again from Jasper's childhood, backstage in Cairo. Jasper sees his father, the assassin, the gun.

JASPER

(quiet and unheard)

Dad. . . Dad.

Jasper struggles, but is blocked by the crowd. The acolyte yells, charges Nevil, shoots wildly, BOOM, BOOM, nine rounds. Suddenly, a disembodied VOICE that only Jasper hears.

VOICE (V.O.)

You can't do it.

Young Jasper hears the voice, but willfully ignores it. He reaches out, both hands, *as if trying to will the assassin away*. . . time seems to slow.

Nevil is still standing, assassin a foot away. Nevil looks at his chest, not a single wound, every bullet missed. Full motion. Crowd throbs, Nevil whisked away, acolyte tackled.

Jasper walks to where his father just stood. On the ground, nine bullet slugs in a pile, as if they had hit an invisible wall. A British aide grabs Jasper, yanks him to safety-

I/E. EGYPTIAN HALL THEATER - NIGHT

Jasper comes to, yanked by two British BOBBIES out from under brick onto the debris field of Jasper's FALLEN THEATER. Fires burn across Piccadilly square, rescuers frenetic.

BOBBY

You two got some serious bloody luck, you know that?

Jasper sees rescuers helping the brunette to an ambulance.

I/E. JASPER'S LONDON MEWS HOME - MORNING

A black Bentley pulls up to Jasper's London mews home, wife MARY, 34, drives, black hair, tight corset, no lipstick. Jasper in the passenger seat, left side bandaged.

They park, Jasper, bruised body, exits the car slowly. Mary hands him a crutch, Jasper refuses. Mary shoves it at him, marches into their home, angry.

Jasper pauses to pick up the morning paper at the door, sees his name on the back, headline:

MASKELYNE AND LOVER RESCUED. . .

Jasper frowns, enters (does not use the crutch). Beautiful interior, he nods at a BUTLER, glances back with guilt as he passes. He finds his wife in the kitchen.

JASPER

Mary, come here, talk to me.

She gives a dirty look, heads upstairs. Jasper, peeved.

Jasper organizes in the kitchen. On a counter, a framed picture of him, mid-20s, and father Nevil at their now ruined theater. Jasper, suddenly upset, hunches over the counter.

JASPER (CONT'D)

(yelling into the ether)

Mary! I didn't know the girl!

Jasper waits for a response, nothing. Jasper curses quietly.

Jasper glances at the newspaper, front page photo of General Rommel in an army tent, something interesting in the photo's background. . . Jasper takes the paper, heads down the hall, uses a key to enter his OFFICE.

Dark inside, Jasper carefully cuts out the picture of Rommel-

Someone turns on the lights, the office walls are lacquered with military schematics, floor to ceiling, shocking, almost mad. Tanks, battleships, soldiers, a central life-size picture of Rommel. At the door, Mary. She seems horrified.

MARY

My God, no wonder you don't want me in here. (beat) So this is the inside of your head.

A moment. Mary looks at a design, schematics of a tank.

MARY (CONT'D)

What is all this? You're working with the army?

JASPER

They're just ideas.

She looks at Jasper, she sees his desk covered with images of Rommel. Jasper notices she is carrying luggage, she nods.

MARY

I'm going to my cousin Sheila's in Edinburgh. Ellie left London. The Readi's too. All the women and children are getting out.

JASPER

Mary, don't. I swear to God, I didn't know the girl.

MARY

Christ, it's not just *the girl*.
(re: the room)
It's everything. Don't you get it? The only thing that's gotten better in all these years is your excuse.

A moment.

JASPER

We'll go together. To New York, get as far away as we can.

MARY

You can't do it.

JASPER

I will, I promise. The theater is gone. What more do I have here?

MARY

You'll find something. Always do.

Mary's notices, on Jasper's desk, a magazine cover beneath a plate of glass. Headline, '10 GREATEST MAGICIANS EVER', and Jasper's picture under, 'HONORABLE MENTIONS'.

MARY (CONT'D)

Never enough. (beat) Are you joining the army?

(no response)

Why is it so hard to answer? (beat)
I've known what love feels like,
what it feels like when it's meant
to last. You shouldn't have to
keep so many secrets.

JASPER

(quiet)

I'd do anything for you.

MARY

Thank you. Then say goodbye.

(silence)

You're a beautiful man, but this
isn't your life. We've said this
so many times. Me and you, it's
great for what it was. But say
goodbye. Please.

(silence)

Are you joining the army?

JASPER

I've been thinking about it.

Mary looks at the insanity of the walls, faint smile. Jasper pulls her in, puts her head on his shoulder, utters quietly.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Goodbye, Mary.

Mary, in Jasper's arms, wants to respond, but nothing to say. Jasper lets go, Mary backs out of the room. . . done.

Jasper stands alone, giant picture of Rommel staring.

EXT. IMPERIAL MILITARY COMMAND - DAY

Umbrellas do little to thwart the stagnant mist outside Military Command, a fortified central-London structure.

Jasper exits his limo, stares up at the sand-bagged entrance, summoning courage. Uniformed generals glance twice.

INT. IMPERIAL MILITARY COMMAND - A MOMENT LATER

Inside, the doors to the Prime Minister's office open, WINSTON CHURCHILL, 67, mammoth presence, already up for twenty hours, exits with staff. Jasper, waiting with a folder.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Your father was my favorite entertainer in the world, do you know that? I wish we had more time. Walk with me, Jasper, tell me what I can do for you.

Churchill heads into the hallway, staff sweeps up behind him. Jasper follows through palatial halls and then downstairs into increasingly utilitarian spaces.

JASPER

It's a personal favor.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Go on. I'll do what I can.

A staffer catches up with Churchill, shows him a document, Churchill now distracted. Staffer leaves, another staffer about to step in, Jasper seizes the opportunity.

JASPER

I want to join the army.

Churchill, slows, surprised. Churchill walks, Jasper too.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

That's a favor? Of course. It's yours. Doing shows for the troops, it'd be a great morale boost, especially for the women, you know.

Another staffer interrupts, whispers into Churchill's ear. They now enter the bunker section. Armed soldiers salute as the PM passes. The group has to duck beneath beams.

JASPER

Sir, not to do shows. I want to build you a magic army.

Churchill stops, whole group stops. Jasper pull a photo from his folder (newspaper shot of Rommel), shows it to Churchill.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Look in the background, the bottle. Recognize it? Epinephrine. Stuck to a nebulizer.

(MORE)

JASPER (CONT'D)

The great general has asthma, and I bet you never knew that, he keeps his mortality hidden. It takes a magician to see through tricks. Sir, remember, Hitler is an occultist, your enemy is already fighting with illusion, I've been watching them for years. Let's match Rommel at his own game.

Staff looks at each other, *what did they just hear?* Jasper hands the PM his whole folder.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Designs, plans. Germans have us outgunned, outmanned. We're short on resources, yes? So let's build armies out of cardboard.

Jasper waits. . . Churchill pushes the folder away.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Rommel has been a soldier since he was 16. Jasper, you're a performer.

(Jasper takes pause)

I'm going to tell you what I know. Your magic show *here* is important. It helps people believe in things they can't see, it builds faith.

Churchill faces a giant table-map, position of every army. Aside from England, all of Europe is bathed in swastika red.

WINSTON CHURCHILL (CONT'D)

The people need faith right now. You're doing your service as is.

JASPER

With all due respect, Sir, a higher power alone is not going to sweep that red-flag back. (beat) Do you know where Rommel is going next?

(Churchill obviously does)

Africa? (beat) They want the Suez Canal. Control Suez, control the oil. Control the oil, win the war.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

You've done your homework.

JASPER

I'm not a soldier, not a tactician. Half my ideas might fail, I admit it. But understand how it feels, to be good at something when that skill seems useless. And then to discover, the Germans are using that skill not to entertain, but to kill. Like I finally found purpose. (beat) A few men, the barest of resources, do me this favor. I'll ask nothing else.

Churchill, judging Jasper. Staffers waiting.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Sorry. I've known you too long. You don't want this. (beat) Shows for troops, that's all I can offer.

Churchill pats Jasper's side, disappointed, turns away. . . Jasper reaches into his jacket, pulls out a pistol.

VARIOUS CALLS (O.S.)

Gun! The Minister! Get down!

Guards lunge. Churchill looks back, Jasper puts his hands up, a guard grabs the gun, it crushes. The GUARD, confused, crumples the gun like ashes. Quiet.

GUARD

It's paper.

JASPER

All illusion is the same principle. Germans see a gun, they'll react to it like a gun. See an overpowering army, even a fake one, they'll flee. I *do* want this, let me help.

No one speaks, everyone at battle stations. Churchill steams towards Jasper, takes him by the arm into the corner.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Sir, I'm sorry. That was stupid-

WINSTON CHURCHILL

(interrupting)

Listen to me. I see exactly what's going on in your head. Last of 10 magicians. Your father to measure up to. You think I don't know the weight of responsibility? But what you're asking for is outlandish.

(MORE)

WINSTON CHURCHILL (CONT'D)
 Jasper, what good are paper guns
 when the Germans start shooting?

A moment. A hint of emotion from Jasper.

JASPER
 My theater and marriage are gone.
 Maybe my motivations aren't all
 noble, but I need out of here. I
 can't wait out this war hiding in
 London. From the bottom of my
 heart, please, let me go.

Jasper, unwavering. Churchill, not sure what to do.

INT. BRITISH MILITARY PORT - MORNING

Cranes lift crated Vickers tanks onto the *HMS Sumeria*, a luxury-liner gutted for war use. Troops climb gangplanks.

Amidst the maelstrom, Jasper in uniform. Soldiers stare, a celebrity in their midst. In the distance, other side of a fence, REPORTERS yell his name.

INT. HMS SUMERIA - BRIDGE - MORNING

The Sumeria's crew preps the ship's bridge for departure. A sailor hands the CAPTAIN a newspaper, he grows upset.

INT. HMS SUMERIA - ADMIRAL'S QUARTERS - MORNING

The Captain enters the ADMIRAL'S stateroom, an aide pours tea. The Captain shows the Admiral the newspaper headline:

MASKELYNE THE GREAT JOINS 'SECRET SHIP' FROM DOVER

CAPTAIN
 Admiral, those papers go straight
 to German Command. U-Boats will be
 on us the moment we cross
 Gibraltar. We have to reroute, we
 have no choice.

The aide drops the tea, upset, Admiral and Captain look over.

INT. HMS SUMERIA - TROOPS QUARTERS - EVENING

Two-hundred soldiers unpack duffels in one of the quarters, endless rows of stacked hammocks. In rough seas, everyone rolls and moans in unison. Jasper senses disgruntled stares.

I/E. HMS SUMERIA - DAWN

Klaxons wail. Jasper jumps up in his bunk, hears yelling.

VOICES (O.S.)

Wake up! Go, get up, go!

The soldiers chased out of bed by officers. Morning drills.

On deck, a thousand soldiers clog the circumferential gangway, jogging as a mass, sweating, rolling seas. Jasper, an anonymous face, being pushed and banged.

On the top-level deck, the horde of soldiers do push-ups. Jasper, eyes close, baring it. He glances at the soldiers next to him, half his age, push-ups twice as fast.

Sun above the horizon now, soldiers are in a dozen single-file lines facing aft. Target practice. The 12 SOLDIERS at the front of the line, aim their rifles, fire at a clay discs shot off the stern over the sea. Shooters finish, next up.

In front of Jasper, a portly Lieutenant, unimpressive, FRANK KNOX, 42. His turn, takes the rifle, misses his shot, seems embarrassed. Misses his second shot as well. Line cycles, but Frank does not notice, still waiting for the next shot.

Soldiers behind Jasper grunt, Jasper taps Frank, 'my turn'. Frank, realizing, awkward, hands off the gun.

FRANK

Need more practice, I guess.

Jasper takes the gun, barely has time to aim before the first disc fires. Jasper shoots, misses.

Jasper focuses. Other shooters recognize Jasper, wink at one another. Discs launch, Jasper fires, but no one else, Jasper lets out his whole magazine alone. . . complete air ball.

A few chuckles. Jasper looks back, realizes the entire crowd is watching in condescending silence. A distant soldier.

SOLDIER (O.S.)

The magician can't shoot straight.

OFFICER

Move it up! Let's go!

The line cycles, the next soldier has to take the gun out of Jasper's hands. Jasper, heads to the rear of the line.

SOLDIER 2 (O.S.)

You don't belong here.

Jasper looks over, *who said that?* Larger soldiers surround him, menacing. Jasper stoic, marches on.

INT. HMS SUMERIA - MESS HALL - NIGHT

Dinner. Jasper sits alone amongst hundreds of soldiers. He sketches in his notebook, rolls a coin between his fingers, not paying attention, but making it disappear and reappear.

A few tables over, the portly Frank Knox, also alone. He watches Jasper from afar. SOLDIERS at Frank's table whisper.

SOLDIER

Just wants his face in the papers.
Why else does a celebrity sign up?
It was supposed to be a two week
trip before he came on board.

SOLDIER 2

My wife likes his shows.

SOLDIER

Cause he's probably porked her.

The soldiers snicker. A moment. Soldier 2 punches the joker. Frank grabs his tray, stands back, fight breaks up.

Jasper, unconsciously doing his magic trick with the coin, drawing a schematic of a rifle. Someone over him, Jasper looks up, Frank puts his tray down across the table.

A moment. Frank shows his hands, palms up, odd pose. He flips his hands over for a moment and back again, he has two coins in his open palms. Frank smiles.

A moment. Jasper holds up his one coin, the coin disappears. He hands Frank a fork, points at Frank's mashed potatoes. Frank, confused, digs in, immediately finds the coin buried.

A SOLDIER at the end of the table notices, watches them.

Frank engaging the duel, wipes the coin, makes it disappear, points under Jasper's tray. Jasper lifts it up, four coins.

SOLDIER AT TABLE (O.S.)

How much money can you print?

Frank and Jasper glance over. Jasper feels something at his foot, notices a RAT, sniffing. JASPER SLIPS INTO HYPER-REALITY, the illusionist. He faces Frank.

JASPER

You an amateur magician?

FRANK

Sort of, I'm a professor of
zoology, animal camouflage. I
study illusions that animals do.

A moment. Jasper removes his shoe, THOUGH UNSEEN, JASPER
KNOWS THE RAT IS INSIDE. A group of surrounding soldiers
watch now. Jasper drops the four coins in the shoe, puts a
saucer over the top, shakes, hands the sealed shoe to Frank.

Frank takes the shoe, takes off the saucer, rat jumps out,
Frank yelps, drops the shoe. Nearby soldiers laugh.

SOLDIERS

(various calls)

Again. (beat) Do another one!

Jasper, realizing the size of his audience, now seems
reluctant. Frank, excited. Soldiers cheer. . .

Jasper reaches into his satchel, fishes around, pulls out a
grenade. Crowd silences. Jasper climbs on top of the table,
whole mess hall now watching.

JASPER

You all want to know why I'm here?
The righteous celebrity? Not a day
in boot camp, but they made me a
lieutenant. Where the hell do I
get off pretending to be one of you
boys, right? Right?!

('yeeses' shouted back)

Because they realized, Jasper the
Great is so delusional, so full of
himself, he thinks he's invincible.
They can order me anywhere, and the
idiot bloke that I am, I'll do it!

Jasper waves Frank up onto the table. Frank, hesitant at
first, climbs up. Both men share a look, an understanding.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Let's see if I got the guts to be a
soldier.

(to Frank)

Examine the grenade. Is it real?

Frank looks the grenade over, nods, 'yes'.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Pull the pin, hand it back.

JASPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Work with me.

The audience, compelled, quiet. Front row scoots back.

Frank pulls the pin, MOMENTARILY BLOCKS THE AUDIENCE as he hands the live grenade back. Crowd does not see that Frank never gives it up, it is IN FRANK'S HAT. Jasper lifts a napkin in front of his EMPTY HAND, where the grenade should be. Frank puts the hat on his head.

JASPER (CONT'D)

One two three.

Napkin down, grenade gone. The crowd, compelled.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Where did it go? Ask the officer here. Ask him to take off his hat.

The crowd calls out. Frank plays along, plays confused, takes off his hat, grenade rolls into his hand.

JASPER (CONT'D)

It's live.

Before Frank can respond, grenade explodes. Trick grenade, a cloud of colored dust paints Frank cartoon purple.

Crowd cheers. Frank, big smile, but Jasper seems uneasy. Crowd calls out, they want more. Frank flashes his eyebrows at Jasper, *more?* Jasper sees the Captain and Admiral entering the back of the mess hall, judgemental looks.

Jasper climbs off the table, grabs his satchel. Crowd, confused. Jasper exits. Crowd boos.

Jasper heads down the gangway outside, Frank chases him.

FRANK

Hey, wait up! That was great.
Why'd you stop?

JASPER

(keeps walking)
I'm not here to perform.

FRANK

Not here to perform? You're lugging trick grenades in your bag.
(Jasper glances back)
They're having a good time. What's wrong with getting these guys on your side? I don't quite fit in either, if you hadn't noticed.
(Jasper stops)
I don't mean to say that you don't fit in. . . shit, that was rude.

JASPER
What's your name?

FRANK
Frank. (beat) I'm really a big fan.

JASPER
Everyone in that room thinks I'm a liability. As long as I act like the magician, I feed that. (beat) You're a professor. Did you come here to study?

FRANK
Of course not. Came to do whatever they tell me to. To fight.

JASPER
And how do you make people believe you're capable of something you've never even tried?

Silence. He shakes Frank's hand, backs away.

JASPER (CONT'D)
The four coins beneath the tray, nice transformation.

FRANK
Thanks.
(Jasper turns)
You *do* it. That's how you convince them. But it's also true what I said, it'd be nice to fit in.

JASPER
Well. . . now we know *each other*.

INT. SUEZ PORT - DAY

The Sumeria pulls into port at Suez beside towering British gunships. Amongst the steel, Egyptian fishing boats, hollering natives. The Sumeria's troops disembark. Card:

OUTSIDE CAIRO, EGYPT. APRIL, 1941

INT. CAIRO TRAIN DEPOT - DAY

Outskirts of Cairo, British troops wait in snaking lines to board trains. Hurricane fighters swoop overhead. Jasper, in line, lugs a duffle. STAFFER arrives, hands Jasper a memo.

STAFFER

Lieutenant, you're not on this train. Orders direct from Colonel Mort. City transport is out front.

The staffer heads off. Jasper looks at the memo:

REPORT TO CAIRO BASE. FIRST MAGIC SHOW, TOMORROW.

Jasper, bothered, pulls out his notebook, checks for 'MORT' in a list of officers.

INFANTRY COMMANDER; 4TH IN COMMAND

The line onto the trains moves along. Jasper steps out.

Jasper heads to the bus lines out in front of the depot. He hears his name, sees Frank waiting in a line.

FRANK

Are they keeping you in Cairo too?!

A moment. Jasper heads over. Frank notices Jasper's orders memo. Jasper offers it as he arrives, Frank reads.

FRANK (CONT'D)

(realizing)

Let the magician do magic shows, huh? (beat) It's hard to convince people. They gave *me* a desk job.

Jasper, empathetic. He notices OFFICERS passing newspapers, worried looks. Checks with Frank, neither man sure what the concern is. Jasper nudges an officer, sees the headline:

ROMMEL'S ARMY IN AFRICA!

OFFICER

Welcome to the Goddamn war, huh?

Bus lines moves. Another OFFICER suddenly recognizes Jasper.

OFFICER 2

Hey, you're him. Maskelyne, right? You know, you're in the paper too.

Officer 2 flips pages, shows a POLITICAL COMIC, Jasper and Rommel, caption in German. Jasper cannot read it, Frank can.

FRANK

(translating the caption)

England's magician can make rabbits disappear. . . Rommel will make the English disappear.

OFFICER 2

Good luck, buddy. Guess the
Germans got their eye on you.

The officer takes the paper back. Frank looks at Jasper.
The bus line divides between multiple buses. Frank chases
Jasper, gets on the same bus. He sit across from Jasper.

The bus convoy rolls out of the station. Jasper looks out
the windows, chaos of third-world Cairo streets.

FRANK

Mid-life crisis.

JASPER

Excuse me?

FRANK

My reason for signing up too.
Probably a bunch like us here.

JASPER

I didn't sign up because of a mid-
life crisis.

FRANK

Sure, rejecting your profession,
wanting to serve a greater good.
What else do you call it? I'm not
playing it down, don't get me
wrong. Hell, the Germans are
taking you seriously. (beat) I got
two beautiful teenage daughters,
Rose and Blanche. Wife not around,
so it's just us. Hardest thing
ever, leaving them with my brother,
but it became a matter of self-
worth. Believe me, I know what
you're going through.

A moment.

JASPER

Men don't leave home, give up their
entire life over a mid-life crisis.

FRANK

Well. . . the crazy ones do.

Frank, convinced. Jasper looks back out the window.

From high above, we see the convoy of British buses travel to
the highly fortified UK staging base, far side of the city.

EXT. MITEIRYA RIDGE - EGYPTIAN DESERT - DAY - DREAM

Blinding desert. Jasper, seemingly alone, army uniform torn, hair matted with sweat, disoriented.

He sees a five-man platoon, watching him, waiting. They are on the edge of a towering sand dune. Another group of soldiers just pulling up in three trucks, fresh from battle.

Jasper pushes through to the arriving soldiers. A PRIVATE in command, young, horrified, someone else's blood on his face.

PRIVATE

You're Jasper Maskelyne. Oh my God. Thank you, God.

Jasper, uneasy, sees the remains of the Private's platoon, 20 doughboys, all men unarmed. In one truck, an injured soldier still in shock, holding his own severed leg.

PRIVATE (CONT'D)

A column of German tanks, just over the ridge, just behind us. Our platoon is gone, dead.

JASPER

Where are your weapons?

PRIVATE

We're the cooks!
(latching onto Jasper)
Save us. Create an illusion,
create tanks. . . use your powers.

Suddenly, a voice, same voice from Jasper's earlier dream.

VOICE (V.O.)

You can't do it.

JASPER

Who said that? (beat) Do what?!

Jasper looks at the men, no answers. Then something strange, a man in a suit beyond the soldiers. Jasper's father, Nevil.

Nevil turns, walks up the dune. Jasper, shocked, pushes the Private off, hurries after Nevil, struggles climbing the sand. Nevil crests, disappears to the other side. Suddenly, the earth shakes, a demonic growl, Jasper stops. German tanks barrel over. Cannon fire, Jasper instantly pulverized.

INT. CAIRO ARMY BARRACKS - NIGHT

Jasper rips out of bed, waking up, lands on the floor of a barracks, soldiers snoring. He catches his breath, holds his head. He pulls out his orders memo, stares at 'MAGIC SHOW'.

EXT. CAIRO THEATER - MORNING

Jasper gets out of a jeep at a mid-cairo theater. Building in disrepair. Jasper, confused. Jeep DRIVER pulling away.

JASPER

Hey, wait! (beat) This is the Cairo Theater? This can't be right.

Jasper shows driver the memo, driver nods, 'yes'.

EXT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Jasper arrives by rickshaw outside General Headquarters (GHQ), grand British architecture intruding on a foreign land. Jasper climbs the steps.

INT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - DAY

A large office sign reads, 'COLONEL WILLIAM MORT'. Inside, Jasper with a briefcase at the STAFF ASSISTANT's front desk.

STAFF ASSISTANT

No appointment, might be a bit of a wait. Sign in. I'll get you to Colonel Mort as soon as I can.

Jasper signs his name, sits. A Lieutenant comes in behind him, signs the same list, sits. They nod at each other.

A MOMENT LATER: Door to Colonel Mort's inner office opens, red-head KATHY LEWIS, 24, exits. Freckled, radiant eyes, she carries two-large poster boards, seems upset.

Kathy heads to the back of the large office area, breaks the boards in half, stuffs them in a trash can. Jasper sees her talk to another STAFFER, shakes her head, 'no'.

Jasper glances at Colonel Mort's open door. An officer is being escorted in, door shuts.

Kathy faces her desk, despondent. Desk neatly organized, except for a stack of comic books.

She sees Jasper, glances at a 'CAIRO ARMY NEWSLETTER', an advertisement with Jasper's picture, 'MASKELYNE PERFORMS IN CAIRO; DATES TBA'. Kathy and Jasper's gaze connect, she recognizes him, looks away.

A MOMENT LATER: Mort's door opens, staff assistant heads to Jasper, but grabs the lieutenant next to Jasper instead.

JASPER

Excuse me. I was here first.

STAFF ASSISTANT

It's okay. We'll get to you.

The lieutenant shrugs, heads in. Jasper looks at his watch.

A MOMENT LATER: Jasper exits a restroom down the hall, returns to Mort's office. Mort's inner-office door is open, empty. Jasper hurries in, an Indian man, MORT'S ATTACHE.

MORT'S ATTACHE

Maskelyne? Sorry, you missed him.

JASPER

What do you mean? I was out for 30 seconds. (beat) Colonel won't even talk to me? The hell did I do?

MORT'S ATTACHE

You came.

Jasper, hit by the honesty. . . steps out, sits back down in the waiting area. The attache follows him out.

JASPER

He'll be back. I'll wait.

Office staffers are all staring at Jasper, a spectacle.

INT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - MORT'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Nighttime. Jasper still in the waiting area. Staffers seem embarrassed, as they pass him, leave for the night. Mort's attache approaches, jacket on. Jasper, stoic.

JASPER

I'll wait.

Attache leaves. Jasper, seemingly alone. Sound from the rear office area, Kathy, working. She glances at him.

Jasper stands, stretches, heads towards her. He stops at a trash can, pulls out the poster boards that Kathy threw out earlier. Two large organizational charts, 'FINANCES AND ACCOUNTING; OLD & NEW'. He calls to Kathy from afar.

JASPER (CONT'D)

Big proposal? Colonel doesn't take kindly to new ideas, does he?

KATHY

(hesitant)

He's been in the system a long time. Gotta respect him for it.

JASPER

(reading the board)

Finances? Is that your speciality?

KATHY

I know who you are.

(no response)

Mind if I ask, Sir. . . why the Colonel won't see you?

JASPER

Hoping you'd tell me.

KATHY

You're not here to discuss your magic show, are you? Does he know what you got in that briefcase?

A moment. Jasper approaches, Kathy scoots back.

KATHY (CONT'D)

Sorry, none of my business.

Jasper looks over her desk, sees the comic books, sees Oxford University stationary, picks up her nameplate.

JASPER

Kathy Lewis. . . not by any chance related to Duke Allister Lewis?

(no response)

You are, aren't you? (beat) No, don't answer. You don't want to wear it on your sleeve, I get it.

KATHY

Thank you. His daughter. (beat) I'm sure you won't remember, but we actually met before. Christ, how would you remember, I was like, 14.

JASPER
Winthrop Palace, December, 1931.

Kathy, caught off guard. . . then realizing.

KATHY
No, nice try. That was like the
one time you remember meeting my
father, right? The *inveterate*
illusionist, I'm onto you.

JASPER
I remember you. Disbelieve if you
like. But like minds attract.

KATHY
(skeptical, but compelled)
Listen, you're not really going to
sleep here, are you?
(surreptitious)
The Gezira Sport's Club. Mort
hunts there every morning at seven.
But God knows how you found out.

Jasper, pleased. He reaches into his pocket, fishes around,
pulls out a stray piece of green thread, indicates for
Kathy's hand. He ties the thread around her ring finger.

JASPER
A thank you gift. I'd give you a
diamond ring if I had one.

KATHY
Just make one magically appear.

Jasper, smiles, backs away, sees the comic 'Captain Marvel',
on her desk, raises it teasingly, *what is this?* She hides
it, embarrassed. Jasper winks, leaves. Kathy, overwhelmed,
tries to sit on her desk, misses, hits the floor.

EXT. GEZIRA SPORTS CLUB - MORNING

A line of ducks fly through the morning fog. Gunshots.
Feathers everywhere. Three ducks fall, the others scatter.

A group of British OFFICERS stand on the track and field of
Cairo's Gezira Sports Club. In the center, COLONEL WILLIAM
MORT, 49, hunting hat, delicate features.

MORT
I blew its head off! Did you see
that? Blew its head right off.

OFFICER 1

These Egyptian ducks are drinking
too much Nile water.

MORT

Hell, yes! They get loopy. Like
shooting fowl on ether.

The Colonel's Indian attache arrives, takes Mort's gun. They
head to an elaborate catering table set on the track.

Jasper is at the table, but Mort does not recognize him.
Mort takes a tea, nudges Jasper for the sugar. Jasper,
surprised, gives Mort a lump of sugar. Mort wants more.

JASPER

Standard ration is one scoop.

Mort is not pleased. The attache sees Jasper, hurries over,
whispers to Mort. Mort faces Jasper, makes the connection.
He grabs the sugar, pours it in straight from the jar, turns.

Jasper calls after him, holds up a pair of binoculars.

JASPER (CONT'D)

There's two German tanks cresting
the dune due east. Want to see?

Mort stops. Attache takes the binoculars, Mort nods, attache
looks. His eyes widen, two tanks a half mile away, turrets
rotating. Attache, pulls the binoculars away, examines them.

Mort looks through the binoculars. . . hands them off, no
expression. Jasper, concerned, pulls out a document.

JASPER (CONT'D)

That's only the beginning of what
we can do. A few men and your
permission, give me that chance,
and you'll be the man who beat
Rommel. You'll be the Colonel who
turned the tide of war.

(re: the document)

My prospectus.

MORT

Those are Churchill A-22s.
(Jasper, confused)
You pasted German swastikas on the
side of *British* tanks.

Jasper, looks out at the tanks, realizing.

MORT (CONT'D)

Lieutenant, there are two things that will win this war, guns and bullets. And you don't know a thing about either.

Mort and his men leave. Jasper left behind, shell-shocked.

EXT. DUNES OUTSIDE GEZIRA SPORTS CLUB - MORNING

On the dune near the sports club, Jasper disassembles two foot-long model toy tanks. Jasper examines the bottom of one, finds text 'MODEL A-22, UK TANK'. Jasper curses, tosses the tank onto the sand, thinks.

INT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - MORT'S OFFICE - MORNING

A document, 'CLASSIFIED: MASKELYNE BRIGADE PLANS', lands in a *burn urn*. The Colonel in his decadent office with *attache* and two OFFICERS. An AIDE carries the urn out. Mort takes a platter with a single sausage, cuts it with knife and fork, takes a bite, chews enthusiastically.

MORT

Did you hear him? *Turn the tide of war?* Would I dare put my men in a foxhole with a mindset like that? He isn't Army, he's theater people, and you know how *they* are.

OFFICER

We *could* ask for demonstrations on one or two of his ideas at least.

Mort grabs the half-chewed sausage out of his mouth.

MORT

This army, this institution, has stood for centuries, has won more wars than any nation in history. And I should submit myself to a lecture by *him*? (beat) We're stretched thin as is. Expose troops to that sort of arrogance now, it will spread like a virus.

Mort hand-feeds the sausage to a leashed HAWK on a perch.

Outside the office, Kathy listens through Mort's door. She sees the aide about to ignite the *burn urn*. She stops him, grabs 'BRIGADE PLANS'. She begins to look them over.

EXT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - MORNING

Katy hurries down the steps of GHQ, waves to an army jeep about to depart, the driver shakes his head, leaves. Kathy heads to another jeep, but they leave without her again.

JASPER (O.S.)

You should try the native taxis.

Kathy glances over, Jasper, arriving, pays a rickshaw driver.

KATHY

Rickshaw drivers don't take kindly to women traveling alone.

JASPER

Nor the British boys, apparently.
(beat) Believe it or not, I was on my way to see you.

KATHY

I believe it. Didn't go well at the club, huh?

Jasper nears, Kathy pulls his soiled plans out of a satchel.

JASPER

Where'd you get that?

Kathy points at a trash can. Jasper, not pleased.

JASPER (CONT'D)

If you got a brain in your head, you'd walk away from me right now. But I need help.

KATHY

You want to get Mort on board? Challenge him, make him a bet, something you know you'll win. If he loses, he is a man of his word.

Jasper, impressed. . . wooed. A moment.

JASPER

Have dinner with me.
(no response)
Please? I already gave you a ring.

KATHY

(a smile, then serious)
I read your plans. I respect what you're trying to do. I think we can benefit each other.

(MORE)

KATHY (CONT'D)

We could have a *professional* relationship.

(no response)

I know Mort's favorite drink, I know which officers have it out for him, I could walk you through this system blindfolded.

A moment.

JASPER

Tell me where the Colonel is now?

KATHY

He's at lunch.

Jasper kisses Kathy's cheek, dangerously seductive, whispers.

JASPER

I can't start a professional relationship. . . cause I know it will never stay that way. Sorry.

Jasper pulls away, shrugs, heads into GHQ.

INT. CAIRO GENERAL HEADQUARTERS - MORT'S OFFICE - DAY

Mort steps back into his inner-office with attache and two staffers, the whole group freezes, Jasper waiting inside.

MORT

Get him out of here.

Staffers grab Jasper, drags him out. Jasper goes willingly.

JASPER

A hunt, you and I, your terms, fair and square. I bag the most hits, you give me a shot at my platoon. You win, I take the next boat back to London, no hesitation.

(Jasper being forced out,
one last effort)

Thirty years ago this army laughed at the idea of an armored car, now it saves lives daily. Isn't that what matters, protecting these boys? Take a chance.

The attache throws Jasper out, shuts the door. . .

MORT

Damn it. (beat) Get him back.

INT. CAIRO STREET CAFE - NIGHT

Jasper and Frank sit in a street cafe, open fire, Cairo natives stare. Jasper eats food that seems unpalatable.

FRANK

Jasper, you can't shoot. Is this a trick? They'll figure it out.

JASPER

My shooting will be fine.

Jasper glances at a mosque across the street, Muslim men bow on rugs inside. Frank looks over, senses Jasper's interest.

FRANK

You gonna pray for good aim?

JASPER

Am I gonna *pray*?

(watching the mosque)

Look at them. An entire civilization convinced to believe in mystical powers. Egyptians give Imams their trust and the Imams use the authority for their own greed.

FRANK

You're not a religious man, got it.

Jasper glances over. A moment.

JASPER

I was here in Cairo before, when I was young. Came with my father on tour. He said that one of these Imams was a fraud. . . and so the Imam's follower shot him.

(Frank, caught off guard)

I watched my Dad nearly killed, cause an Egyptian wanted to believe in the illusion of a religious man. That willingness to be fooled. . . same thing that started this war.

FRANK

What, religion?

JASPER

Manipulation, trickery. The Nazi propaganda machine, people got swept up.

(MORE)

JASPER (CONT'D)

(beat) I've watched the force of illusion drive men to kill, now I see it all unfolding again. Fighting that, taking a stand, you call it mid-life crisis, it's the reason I'm here. . . so my shooting better be fine.

Frank, not sure what to say. An Egyptian in the mosque looks at Jasper, nudges the man beside him. (We will learn he is KHALIL, 26.) They hurry out of the mosque together.

JASPER (CONT'D)

It's late, let's head back.

EXT. CAIRO BACK ALLEYS - NIGHT

The alleyways of Cairo are a few feet wide, unpopulated. Jasper points which turns to take. Frank follows.

JASPER

Frank, tell me, what would it take for you to give up your desk job and join a non-existent platoon?

No response. Jasper glances back, sees the two men from the mosque, one holding a knife to Frank's throat, Jasper freezes. The lead man, Khalil, waves a knife at Jasper, yells in Arabic. Jasper RESPONDS IN ARABIC. Frank, freaked.

FRANK

Jasper, what the hell is going on?

Jasper yells at the men. Khalil yells, Jasper shakes his head. Khalil grabs Jasper's wallet, Jasper grabs Khalil.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Jesus Christ, just give it to him!

Jasper lets go. Cohort takes Frank's wallet, they run. Frank, pale white, rushes to Jasper. Jasper, holding the mugger's wallet, identity papers, address, name, 'KHALIL'.

INT. MUGGER KHALIL'S HOME - EVENING

Jasper and Frank arrive at the door of a slum tenement.

FRANK

You're Goddamn nuts, I won't go in.

JASPER

You won't be any safer out here.

Frank realizes it is true. Jasper pounds. Door opens, KHALIL'S WIFE holds a baby, Khalil behind her, one-room home.

Jasper pulls out Khalil's wallet, enters, SPEAKS ARABIC. The home is barely adorned. Two older children listen to a radio, two young men roast something on a fire. All stare.

Khalil's cohort grabs a knife, jumps up. Frank lunges for Jasper. Jasper throws his hands up.

JASPER (CONT'D)
(Arabic, subtitled)
Stop! We're all brothers here.

Khalil holds the cohort back, speaks in broken English.

KHALIL
No, these men are my brothers.

Jasper recognizes the animal the men are roasting. Rat.

JASPER
Is this how you take care of them?

KHALIL
(re: the roasting rat)
It's Egyptian delicacy. . . British
are too weak to eat it.

JASPER
Just give us our possessions back.
(no one moves)
Weak, maybe. But the British will
have no hesitation throwing a few
dirty WOGs in jail.

("WOG": British slang for Arab.) No movement. Jasper grabs Khalil violently. The brothers rush, Khalil pulls away. . . hands the wallets back, and Jasper returns Kahlil's. Jasper indicates to Frank, they head for the door.

KHALIL
You not British?

Jasper looks back, says nothing, leaves.

Jasper leads Frank back through the alley, Frank silenced.

JASPER
Bullshit, *rat is a delicacy*.
That's a family without food.

FRANK

Doesn't mean they couldn't still stab you. What were you thinking?

JASPER

They took our wallets.

EXT. SAHARA DESERT - MORNING

In the desert, a British SOLDIER brushes his teeth on the edge of a small army camp, sun rising. Another soldier, just awaking, exits the tent, spits, stretches. . . boom.

The soldier obliterates into sinewy fragments. The first soldier drops his toothbrush, other men race out of tents, a group of SIX TANKS, Nazi flags, race towards them.

There is no chance of a fight. The tanks have literally rode over the camp before any Brit can grab a gun.

EXT. GREENSPACE ON THE NILE - MORNING

Early morning, fog rolling off the Nile. Mort shakes hands with a row of Generals, including GENERAL AUCHINLECK, 54.

MORT

General Auchinleck, glad you came.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

Your office was insistent.

Mort nods, smiles. Men indulge at a large catering table. In the distance, Frank arrives by rickshaw, pays the driver.

Jasper stands alone on the field, inserting ammo into a rifle. Mort's attache arrives next to him.

MORT'S ATTACHE

Here are the rules. Five shots per man. Most hits win. A tie, you shoot again. You go first. Okay?

MORT (O.S.)

You just tell us when you're ready!

Jasper looks at Mort. Frank watches from the sidelines. Jasper cocks his gun, nods, looks up in the sky. Mort nears.

Far away, duck whistles are blown. Eyes on the sky. Jasper, gun aimed. A duck overhead, Jasper swings his gun. Nothing.

MORT (CONT'D)

You do have to fire.

Jasper waits. Suddenly, a line of ducks. Jasper fires, five times. . . no one can believe their eyes. Five hits.

The ducks fall into the river. Egyptian boys leap into the water to retrieve them. Everyone shocked. Some applause. Frank, ecstatic, hides it. Auchinleck calls out to Mort.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

Colonel, remember, your promotion depends on this. (beat) Kidding.

MORT

No, please. We can up the ante.
(jovial, to Jasper)
Looks like there'll be a round two.

Mort cocky, cocks, lifts his gun. Everyone watches. Jasper backs away. Frank, big smile. Jasper shakes his head, 'no', raises a finger, 'not yet'.

A duck quacks. Everyone looks, sees nothing. Wait. Mort, calm. Suddenly, a line of ducks, three shots. Three hits. Applause. Dogs are released, retrieve the victims.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK (O.S.)

Finish it off!

Mort nods, concentrated. Two more ducks. Two shots. One hit. The other one flies on. Mort keeps pulling the trigger, 'click', 'click', 'click'. Everyone shocked.

Attache reaches for Mort's gun, Mort pulls away. Silence.

JASPER

I won.

Mort rushes Jasper. All the officers hurry forward. Mort stops, gets a hold of himself, hands up.

MORT

No, it's okay. It's fine. That was. . . I only hit four. I made an agreement.

(to Auchinleck)

General, we could spare a few men to a new platoon, couldn't we?

Auchinleck nods, 'yes'. Mort walks to Jasper, shakes his hand, pulls Jasper to him, whispers.

MORT (CONT'D)

You get your platoon, but you still
perform my shows, understand?
You'll be my traveling jester.

Jasper pulls away. Jasper nods at the officers, heads off.

Near Frank, an EGYPTIAN BOY comes out wet from the Nile,
talks to an officer. A TRANSLATOR explains to the officer.

TRANSLATOR

He says they can't find Maskelyne's
ducks, the river carried them away.

Jasper arrives at Frank. Jasper is looking at the
ridiculously large catering display.

JASPER

If you have any interest in being
my platoon XO, you can start now.

The officer and translator are with Mort and the General.

MORT

What do you mean, *washed away*?

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

Don't get any ideas, we all saw it.
Even the WOGs on the shore.
(eyeing Jasper from afar)
And I'll tell you, that was a
trick, I give him even more credit.

Jasper and Frank collect trays of catering. The COOK stares.

COOK

Don't like the food at the mess?

Jasper ignores them. He and Frank leave with the food.

FRANK

Jasper, was it. . . real?

No response. As they head off, Frank notices: a boat on the Nile, a FILM PROJECTOR hidden on board; wires running from the river (where the birds fell) to a DETONATOR BOX; BRITISH CASH in the pockets of the wet boys on the shore. . . Jasper grabs Frank, pulls him along.

INT. MUGGER KHALIL'S HOME - DAY

Jasper, carrying a tray, arrives at the front door of mugger Khalil's home. Frank, with a tray, shocked they are back.

Jasper knocks, Khalil opens up. Without a word, Jasper enters, Frank follows, they put a feast on the table. The adults says nothing. The children run over, eat hungrily.

JASPER

British are too weak? Not all.

Still silence. Jasper pulls Frank to the door.

KHALIL

Thank you.

INT. CAIRO COMMAND BUNKER - DAY

General Auchinleck and staff enter the Cairo Command Bunker. Auchinleck looks over photos of the British camp that was attacked, before and after, nothing but cinders left behind.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

Christ, this was Rommel?

OFFICER

Desert Taxi Service is reporting six Panzer Divisions. They're aiming for Benghazi.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

How many left in our garrison?

OFFICER

One division. We won't hold it.

GENERAL AUCHINLECK

Rommel was never supposed to be on this continent.