

PORT SAID  
by  
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FADE IN:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

CAPTION: NORTH AFRICA, 1942

An endlessly undulating desert, underneath a relentless cobalt sky. This is the North Africa of Rommel, Montgomery, and El Alamein.

A single man emerges from behind a dune, walking unsteadily, his legs rubbery. This is JAMES, a middle aged American with blonde hair, a square jaw and squinting blue eyes, who could be ALAN LADD or SIR JOHN MILLS.

He has been walking for several days now. His US fighter pilot's uniform is coated with a fine layer of sand, the right shoulder and sleeve dark with dried blood from a severe head wound. A set of goggles and a leather helmet are round his neck.

Seemingly unaware of the small fragment of metal embedded in the side of his head, he continues to walk, his eyes screwed up against the midday sun.

As he reaches the crest of the dune, he stops to take the drinking flask from his belt. He puts it to his mouth. It is empty. He gives it one last desultory shake before throwing it away.

He surveys the scene in front of him. The desert stretches out before him, a rumpled golden blanket.

As he tries to take another step forward, his knees BUCKLE. He loses his footing and stumbles, tumbling down the side of the dune.

Coming to a sprawling rest at the foot of the dune, he lies face down in the burning hot sand, his breath barely stirring the grains in front of his parched, chapped lips.

He fumbles in the pocket of his uniform and brings out a PHOTOGRAPH. He lifts it to his face.

It is a photograph of his wife, his baby son and his young daughter.

A smile passes across his face as he closes his eyes, his hand clenching into a fist, the photograph crumpling. All of the tension leaves his body as he sinks into a deep and dreamless sleep.

SUDDENLY, a desert boot steps in front of his face.

MEDIC

Sir, can you hear me?

(CONTINUED)

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The man crouches down next to the unconscious James, his hand gingerly touching the head wound. He turns to look OFF SCREEN

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MEDIC (CONT'D)

(shouting)

I'm gonna need some help here!

INT. GRANDE ALBERGO MIRAMARE, PORT SAID - EVENING

A small and dingy hotel room. The windows are masked by venetian blinds. A single ceiling fan spins languidly on the ceiling.

JAMES lies on the bed, looking up at the ceiling fan's slow rotation.

He smokes a cheap Turkish cigarette, the thick smoke curling and rising from his mouth and nostrils.

On the bedside table we see a stack of US Dollar bills - around a thousand dollars in total.

INT. MOHAMMED'S - NIGHT

In this dingy, ornate bar in a tiny back alley in Port Said, a dozen or so of the highest high rollers and the lowest lowlifes of the town have gathered to watch a game.

The air is thick with smoke from the hookahs stationed round the room. Dinner jacketed waiters glide back and forth with silver trays of mint juleps and martinis.

A small, dark man of interminable ancestry, dressed like a croupier, holds the pistol present for all to see, in immaculate white-gloved hands.

The pistol is a beautiful snub-nosed .357, nickel plated with an engraved ivory handle.

The music, a repetition of three descending notes, echoes through the room.

INT. FIELD HOSPITAL - DAY

A field hospital near Morocco. A row of empty beds. JAMES is sitting on the edge of the bed nearest the window, the only patient left. The DOCTOR stands at the end of the bed, marking off the clipboard.

DOCTOR

You missed all the fun.

JAMES

War's over, huh?

(CONTINUED)

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DOCTOR  
In North Africa, anyway. Rommel's  
been sent packing.

The Doctor puts the clipboard on the edge of the bed and moves round to the side of the bed.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)  
Lie back. I need to check your  
bandages.

JAMES  
Sure thing, Doc.

James swings his legs onto the end of the bed, leaning back gingerly until his head rests on the pillow.

The doctor leans in to inspect the large bandage on James's head.

CU on James's bandaging: A growing, darkening spot of blood.

James sees the doctor's face fall, and he knows the worst.

INT. GRANDE ALBERGO MIRAMARE, PORT SAID - EVENING

POV JAMES: The ceiling fan begins to morph, first resembling the spinning handle of a roulette wheel, then the catch of a gun cylinder.

James stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray by the bed. Swinging his legs off the bed to a sitting position, he runs his hands through his lank, greasy hair. He has three days of beard growth on his chin, and dark circles under his eyes.

Standing up, James puts on a beaten leather jacket, stuffing the thousand dollars into an inside pocket.

We see the back of his jacket. It is a USAF pilot's jacket.

His hand closes round something in his pocket. Frowning, he pulls it out.

It is a crumpled photograph of his wife, his baby son and his daughter - the same one he had that day in the desert.

SLOW DISSOLVE  
TO:

INT. MOHAMMED'S - NIGHT

THE BEY, a fat man who could be SYDNEY GREENSTREET, nods imperceptibly to the croupier, who returns the nod.

The croupier takes a single bullet out of his waistcoat pocket, holding it up for all to see.

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Placing it in the bullet chamber, he puts the gun on the table between the two men already sitting at the table, facing one another.

One of them is ABDUL, a short, smooth, dark skinned Levantine who could be PETER LORRE. He wears a fez and a white dinner suit.

The other is James.

The three descending notes sound.

JAMES

I've met guys like you before. Even been a bit like you myself. Thought I could figure out all the odds and beat the game. Ha.

(shakes his head, looking up)

Well, good luck, Abdul. Right now you're thinking, one bullet, six chambers, a one-in-six chance. Very logical.

(beat)

But DEAD WRONG. Life's always a fifty-fifty gamble, my friend. A bullet's got your name written on it or it doesn't. FIFTY-FIFTY. Simple as that.

The whole screen is James's face, lit from below. A wisp of his blonde hair falls across his forehead.

The shadows in the window behind reach like bent fingers. Port Said is an ominous, threatening place.

The smooth-faced man, Abdul, is lit the same way. He draws on a long ivory cigarette holder clamped between his teeth. Taking the cheroot out of his mouth with a jewelled hand, he smiles continuously as he talks.

ABDUL

I respect all men with the courage to play this game...

(sarcastically)

My friend.

(looking round the room)

Compared to us, even those who venture their abundant wealth risk little in the end.

Abdul sneers at the rich, decadent speculators, paying a great deal to be entertained.

INT. FIELD HOSPITAL - DAY

The Doctor sits back on the edge of an adjacent bed. Reaching into his breast pocket, he offers James a cigarette.

James shakes his head no. The Doctor shrugs.

DOCTOR  
Suit yourself.

The Doctor lights his own cigarette with a steady hand, taking a few deep drags on it before exhaling. James watches him intently.

JAMES  
It's bad, huh?

DOCTOR  
Seen worse.  
(beat, indicating James's  
bandages)  
That could kill you any day. Maybe  
tomorrow, maybe twenty years.

JAMES  
So take it out.

DOCTOR  
Not here. It would kill you.

JAMES  
I'm stuck, then.

The Doctor reaches into his breast pocket and takes out the packet of cigarettes again. James accepts this time.

INT. MOHAMMED'S - NIGHT

Abdul turns from his disdainful look at the crowd to face James. Pointing first at James, then himself, he speaks.

ABDUL  
It is only you and I who deserve to  
be called men. Shall we draw straws  
to determine who will spin first?

JAMES  
(chuckling)  
I'm a very impatient man, Abdul. So  
let me begin the party.

James indicates to the croupier.

There's a murmur in the dimly lit bar. Tension pulsates through the room. The croupier picks up the gun in white gloved hands.

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CONTINUED:

EXTREME CLOSE UP: The croupier opens the chamber, shows it to the entire room and places a single silver bullet in the aperture. He hands it to James, who gives the well-oiled cylinder a long spin.

The extended clacking sound of the cylinder is hypnotising.

Abdul is LISTENING intently to the sound of the cylinder spinning, his eyes narrowed.

James puts the gun to his head. The camera closes up on his eyes. Smiling sadly, no trace of fear.

The three descending notes sound.

There is a loud click as he pulls the trigger, and the exhalation of everyone in the room.

James puts the gun back in the middle of the table. The pistol is cleared and reloaded by the white-gloved hands, and handed to Abdul.

When Abdul spins the cylinder, his eyes reflect his intense concentration. He's counting. As the cylinder comes to a stop, his eyes dilate.

The three descending notes sound.

He doesn't like what he's heard. He spins again and pulls the trigger quickly on an empty chamber.

The gamblers ante up for another round, low murmurs going round the room as they negotiate further bets on the final outcome.

INT. FIELD HOSPITAL - DAY

JAMES

Brazil? Sounds like a long shot.

DOCTOR

It's your only shot. This guy isn't cheap either.

JAMES

Figures.

James flicks his cigarette, tapping the ash over the side of the bed. He looks out the window for a while, deep in thought. He turns to face the Doctor, who watches him silently, his arms folded.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Do me a favour?

DOCTOR

I'll try.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

I want you to tell my family...

James breaks off to look out of the window again, smoke curling from the cigarette between his fingers, the setting sun warming his face.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I want you to tell them I died in the desert.

(beat, turning to look at the Doctor's shocked face)

It's better that way.

INT. MOHAMMED'S - NIGHT

The crowd is still making fevered bets on the next round of Roulette. James laughs bitterly.

JAMES

Why do I have the feeling, Abdul, that your odds are always a little better than mine?

Abdul shrugs, spreading his hands wide. The croupier hands James the gun.

JAMES (CONT'D)

But never mind.

James spins the cylinder.

JAMES (CONT'D)

As I've said, in the end it's always fifty-fifty, no better or worse!

He holds the gun to his head.

The three descending notes sound.

Again, the pistol clicks at his temple. As he lowers the gun, we SEE the scar left by his war wound.

ABDUL

Mr White, you are either one of the bravest men I have ever known...

(beat)

Or one of the biggest fools.

Abdul spins the cylinder, smiling as he hears the click of a hollow chamber. He pulls the trigger without dramatic pause. Murmurs go up as the betting becomes more frenzied, feverish.

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CONTINUED:

JAMES

The best thing about this game,  
Abdul, is that there is always a  
winner and a loser. Never any ties.  
It cannot be postponed on account  
of darkness or rain.

(beat)

It's always winner takes all.  
Loser, loses all.

There is a tear at the corner of James's eye. He looks over  
Abdul's shoulder into the darkness.

Very faintly at first and then more clearly, we see his wife  
emerging. She's spooning cereal to a baby in a high chair. A  
daughter at the table is putting jam on toast.

The tear rolls down his cheek.

His wife turns to look at him, pointing him out to their baby  
son. The baby giggles excitedly.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(whispering)

So long, old girl.

The gun fires on an empty chamber. James exhales,  
disappointed. A whoosh of relief.

ABDUL

For a Westerner, you have much of  
the fatalist about you, Mr White.  
But we in the East know that what  
is fated must eventually occur. We  
call it Kismet.

Abdul spins the cylinder. But just as the spin of the chamber  
settles and slows down, a fat man - a Turkish Bey or a  
Moroccan Sheik, a man the camera has focused on each time the  
ante was raised - lets out a loud rumbling sneeze.

Abdul blinks. It has broken his concentration. He cannot be  
sure of the bullet's position. He begins to perspire. His  
eyes dart cunningly. He turns to the croupier, holding out  
the gun.

ABDUL (CONT'D)

I wish to have a new bullet placed  
in the chamber.

The croupier nods and begins to move forward. The Bey, the  
owner of this bar, halts his progress with a bamboo cane.

BEY

No. We have paid to see what Kismet  
has decreed. No one may touch the  
pistol.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

A closeup of the croupier's face. He is afraid of the Bey, afraid of what might happen, should he disobey. A single bead of sweat runs down the croupier's jawline as he stands back, his head bowed.

EXTREME CLOSE UP: Abdul's dark face.

He is sweating profusely. His narrowing eyes search for a way out.

He looks into the crowd. There is no sympathy for him there, in that sea of unsmiling faces. No way out.

He must face the situation. He spins the chamber once again to relieve his nervousness, looking down at the gun.

The three descending notes sound.

Abdul looks up at James.

ABDUL

You have said that each attempt is an even chance. Life or death. But that cannot be!

(indicating the gun)

One bullet, six chambers. One in six!

Abdul looks back up at James, his eyes pleading, beseeching him for reassurance.

ABDUL (CONT'D)

Not fifty-fifty, Mr White. Five more chances for hope than for despair. Those are promising odds, are they not?

James is impassive. Abdul will find no solace there.

Abdul's hand trembles momentarily as he raises the pistol.

The camera stays on James, as a rueful smile breaks across his face. When the expected GUNSHOT comes, a low murmur rises.

INT. GRANDE ALBERGO MIRAMARE, PORT SAID - EVENING

James returns to his hotel room. Walking to the bed, he unloads his bulging pockets. Thousands and thousands and thousands of crumpled dollar bills are heaped onto the dingy sheets.

James stands and looks at the pile of dollar bills awhile.

He turns round and sits down on the edge of the bed, taking the photograph of his family out of the jacket pocket.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He props it up on the bedside table, before swinging his legs onto the bed and lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling fan.

The ceiling fan continues to spin.

He closes his eyes.

And sleeps.