

# SMOKE AND MIRRORS

An Original Screenplay by

Lee Batchler

and

Janet Scott Batchler

Longbow Productions  
4181 Sunswapt Drive  
Suite 100  
Studio City, CA 91604  
(818) 762-6600

Producers:  
Ronnie D. Clemmer  
Bill Pace

January 5, 1993

Based on a true story

FADE IN

Darkness. A black night sky.

Suddenly a blast of FIRE shoots across the screen.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

EXT. KABYLE CAMPSITE, SAHARA DESERT, NIGHT

A crazed FIRE-EATER swallowing a blazing torch. Again he BLOWS THE FLAME out of his mouth.

CONTINUE PULLBACK

We're on a stony hillside. Hundreds of KABYLE TRIBESPEOPLE are in a hypnotic frenzy all around us. They dance and stagger in clusters before a 20-foot high bonfire, tearing their robes and wailing in their worship to the god of destruction. Angry DRUMS and exotic, dissonant FLUTES whip them into a fever.

Each cluster of Tribespeople surrounds a half-naked, glassy-eyed DERVISH. We PAN past the first Dervish -- the FIRE-EATER -- to further weirdness...

A SECOND DERVISH, who stabs three sharp spikes through his forearm without showing any pain...

As a THIRD DERVISH walks across a bed of hot coals.

Suddenly a HOWLING OF JACKALS. The Kabyles join in, rising to their feet in fear and awe, looking towards the bonfire. The drums and music pound faster and louder.

SLOW ZOOM TO

the interior of the flames, where a DARK ROBED FIGURE appears.

ZOOM CLOSER

as the dark figure lifts his head and raises his arms into the air. He steps out of the fire, unsinged, and throws back his hood. We stare directly into the burning, evil eyes of the Marabout, ZORAS AL KHATIM, the chief sorcerer of the tribe.

The mob hushes instantly at a single wave of Zoras' hand. Zoras thunders his demonic message.

ZORAS

(in Berber)

I have been to the heavenly place! I  
have passed through the fire! I have  
seen your victory - victory to the  
Kabyle nation!

Ecstatic war cries from the crowd. Zoras quiets them again.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ZORAS

(in Berber)

The white-skinned devils who occupy our land will die! How horribly they die, you must choose! Show no mercy!

War DRUMS pound. The Warriors rise to their feet with bloodthirsty chanting and screaming. Many whirl convulsively out of control, as if possessed by demons. Zoras surveys the chaos with a wicked, satisfied smile.

As the people yowl in response, Zoras steps back toward the fire and VANISHES in an EXPLOSION of flame and smoke!

MATCH CUT TO:

A cloud of dust.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

EXT. - THE EDGE OF THE SAHARA DESERT, DAY

The dust is being kicked up by a HORSE ridden by...

CAPTAIN TREY DARCY, an intense young expatriate American, an officer of the French Foreign Legion.

Even after an arduous journey across a hellish wasteland, Darcy sits tall and alert in the saddle. He wears a single WHITE GLOVE on his left hand, which holds the reins of his horse.

SUPER TITLE: 'Algeria - August, 1856'

A troop of 17 Legionnaires follows Darcy in ragged, spread-out formation. Each soldier is an unshaven mess, parched and listless in the North African heat.

Far ahead lie forbidding mountains. Behind them, endless desert.

An oversized stallion lumbers up alongside the Captain. The rider is a hulking bull of a Spaniard -- CORPORAL AUGUSTINO BARTOLOTE.

BARTOLOTE

How much longer to Biskra, Captain?

DARCY

I thought you wanted a life of adventure, Bartolote.

Suddenly the sound of GUNSHOTS in the distance. The Legionnaires instantly come alert, all eyes on Darcy for orders.

DARCY

Fall in! Check your weapons!

An amazing transformation occurs. Seconds ago, the soldiers looked like death warmed over. Yet at Darcy's command, their fatigue miraculously vanishes and they fall into a tight battle formation.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY  
Legionnaires! After me!

Darcy gallops ahead towards the still continuing gunfire, his troops following.

EXT. - OASIS AT BISKRA, DAY

Thundering HOOFBEATS. A Kabyle Warrior on horseback charges directly toward us, scimitar raised, a scream of death on his lips! The scimitar sweeps down --

and DECAPITATES an overdressed French gentleman, still aiming a wavering pistol at his killer. As his severed head rolls across the sand, the dead man's body collapses.

All around, a small caravan of French civilians tries to hide behind overturned wagons and a handful of nearby palm trees as...

...100 Kabyle Warriors on horseback attack savagely. Thirty or so French gentlemen and a few ladies lie dead on the banks of the oasis.

The remaining men, ill-equipped for warfare, fire pistols at their attackers with little success.

The women and children huddle in the wagons, some trying to shoot, others praying and crying as the Kabyles turn for another attack.

Then a BUGLE CALL!

It's the Foreign Legion troop, Darcy leading, vastly outnumbered. But they gallop over the crest of the dune without hesitation, rifles out, bayonets fixed.

Half the Kabyles whirl to attack the Legionnaires -- and begin to fall as a RIFLE BARRAGE hits them. The Legionnaires shoot and slash with a near-suicidal fervor.

Darcy draws his sword and rides into the thick of combat. In an unstoppable frenzy, he slashes his way through the Kabyle ranks to reach the civilians.

By the overturned wagons, a young French mother, her arms around her two children -- a boy and girl -- pleads with her attacker.

FRENCH MOTHER  
They're only children. Three years old, six years old. Please -- you must have children of your own...

But the attacker only aims his rifle at the woman, a wicked grin on his face. He shoots.

The Mother looks down in disbelief as blood billows out across her midsection. A second later, she falls dead. Her children scream.

As the Attacker raises his scimitar to dispatch the children, a PISTOL SHOT rings out.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Attacker seizes up in a convulsion, his arms outstretched towards the sky. The scimitar falls from his hand.

ANGLE PAST ATTACKER

to Darcy, pistol in hand, galloping up to the spot as the Attacker dies.

Behind him in the distance, the last of the Kabyles ride away. Some of the Legionnaires pursue, still shooting.

Darcy dismounts and looks around in horror. All around him, slaughtered women and children lie in pools of blood, surrounded by overturned wagons and dead horses.

Bartolote and other Legionnaires approach, but stop short as they see the extent of the massacre. The surviving children run to grab Bartolote's legs -- something solid to hold on to.

BARTOLOTE

(sickened)

Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus.

FOLLOW DARCY

stepping over corpses to the edge of the field of slaughter. He watches the dust of the fleeing Kabyles with wrathful eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. - PARIS SUBURB, HOUDIN'S ESTATE, DAY

A horse-drawn carriage clatters down a gravel lane past rows of gated estates.

SUPER TITLE: "Paris - One month later"

The driver -- a French Army private -- pulls the horse up at a set of wrought iron gates and jumps down to open the carriage door for COLONEL JULES GASTINOT, a French Army functionary.

Gastinot tries the gates. They're locked. He rattles the bars in frustration, then looks for the bell. No bell.

But affixed to the left gatepost is a brass plate with a grotesque knocker in the shape of a demon's head. The brass plate is engraved with the word "Frappez."

Gastinot obeys the sign and raps the knocker.

GASTINOT'S POV

The word "Frappez" vanishes. In its place magically appears the inscription "Entrez."

The locks click loudly. To the Colonel's surprise, the heavy gates creepily swing open by themselves.

Gastinot looks suspiciously at the knocker, runs his finger gingerly over the brass plate -- then enters.

EXT. - HOUDIN'S ESTATE, DAY

Gastinot walks up the long carriage driveway toward an elegant 17th century mansion.

INT. - HOUDIN'S ENTRYWAY, DAY

HIGH SHOT

looking down three stories to an elegant foyer as Gastinot steps inside. An aged Manservant closes the door and takes the Colonel's hat and coat.

The lady of the house glides in to greet Gastinot.

COLETTE ROBERT-HOUDIN, in her 30s, is radiantly pretty. Though she looks every inch the rich man's spoiled wife, she is matter-of-fact, sharply intelligent, and kind.

Gastinot bows over Colette's hand. We hear Gastinot and Colette speak faintly, as if from several rooms away.

GASTINOT

Madame Robert-Houdin? May I present myself -- Colonel Jules Gastinot, attaché to Foreign Minister Béjart.

COLETTE

We received your letter, sir.

GASTINOT

Is Monsieur Robert-Houdin available?

COLETTE

He is here. Whether he is available is another matter.

INT. - STAIRWAY, DAY

Colette leads Gastinot up a grand marble staircase. Hanging on the wall are many framed theatrical posters and playbills advertising performances by the legendary magician Robert-Houdin.

COLETTE

I must warn you. My husband is a bit distracted these days.

GASTINOT

The eccentricities of genius. I quite understand.

COLETTE

I doubt that you do.

INT. - HALLWAY, DAY

Colette and Gastinot arrive at the end of a long corridor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLETTE

Please pardon any mess. He won't let  
the maids set foot inside this room.

Colette raps at the workshop door.

COLETTE

Husband? Colonel Gastinot is here.  
From the Foreign Office.

VOICE BEHIND DOOR

(grouchy)

I'm busy! Ask him to wait!

COLETTE

For how long?

VOICE BEHIND DOOR

(a beat) A week!

Gastinot is startled. Colette shakes the doorknob. It's locked.

COLETTE

Jean-Pierre. If you don't unlock this  
door, I'll just go get the other key.

Silence. Seconds later, the lock clicks loudly. She turns the  
knob and pushes the door open. A cacophony of odd CLICKING and  
WHIRRING sounds begins.

INT. - WORKSHOP, DAY

The CLICKING and WHIRRING grow louder as Colette leads Gastinot  
in. Gastinot stares at the chaos around him, aghast.

GASTINOT'S POV

The workshop is a lunatic inventor's playpen.

PAN, STILL GASTINOT'S POV

To Gastinot's right, a small MECHANICAL FIGURE -- a servant holding a  
tray with liqueur glasses -- steps forward, bows, then steps back...

A pair of near-life-sized mechanical AUTOMATONS sit playing chess...

A tiny MECHANICAL MAN holds up a chair, on which another mechanical  
man performs acrobatic tricks...

Elsewhere, myriads of CLOCKS click away, while other partially  
completed mechanical figures move at random, ELECTRICAL ARCS  
sparking between their unconnected parts.

Completing the mess is a litter of books, papers, loose mechanical  
parts, wiring and clunky 50-pound batteries.

But there's no sign of anyone in the room. Whoever the "voice"  
was, he's vanished!

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

GASTINOT

Where did he go? I distinctly heard-

COLETTE

I'm sorry, Colonel. He does this all the time when he doesn't want to be sociable.

Colette walks over to a standing full-length mirror, only three inches deep, in the middle of the room. She sternly lectures the mirror.

COLETTE

Jean-Pierre. Come out of there.

Do we hear a faint grumble? Maybe. Colette stamps her foot.

COLETTE

Now!

The mirror turns pitch black and JEAN-PIERRE ROBERT-HOUDIN steps through the darkened mirror into the room, wiping his hands with a rag. The mirror instantly becomes just a mirror again.

HOUDIN

How do you do, Colonel?

Houdin is a handsome, polished gentleman in his 50s. He radiates lightning intelligence, plus the impatient cockiness that comes from being used to success.

Gastinot, doubting his sanity, circles the entire mirror frame, taps the mirror with his fingertips.

GASTINOT

Impossible! How in the world...?

HOUDIN

A private joke. I grew tired of ignorant critics theorizing all my tricks were done with mirrors. So I decided to design one that was.

Houdin curtly turns to his work table. Gastinot, still amazed by the trick mirror, forces his attention back on the business at hand.

GASTINOT

Monsieur, permit me to describe the gravity of the Algerian situation. The thought is that if you were to do some of the feats of magic for which you are so justly renowned, then explain that they are all just (glancing doubtfully at the mirror) illusions, the people following these self-styled "magicians" would realize they are being fooled--

HOUDIN

(interrupting)

Yes, yes, I read your letter. No.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GASTINOT  
(startled)

Perhaps I didn't make myself clear.  
The Foreign Minister himself requests --

HOUDIN

And I respectfully decline. I will not  
be used as an instrument of political  
propaganda. I regret you've made a trip  
for no purpose. Madame Robert-Houdin  
will see you out. Good day.

Gastinot dogs after him, unable to comprehend the rebuff.

GASTINOT

Perhaps if you understood the evil  
these sorcerers are fomenting among  
the tribes, the sheer barbarity their  
black magic incites against your brother  
countrymen, even women and children...  
Surely as a concerned Christian --

HOUDIN

Colonel. Are you hard of hearing?

GASTINOT

I cannot believe a gentleman would  
turn his back on his fellow citizens!

Houdin thwacks his palm on the desk and explodes out of his chair.

HOUDIN

Why in God's name do you think I can  
manage what the French Army and  
Foreign Legion cannot?

GASTINOT

(a true believer)

Because you are the great Robert-Houdin.  
You can do anything.

HOUDIN

Colette, tell this man what a washed-up  
fraud I am!

COLETTE

I'm afraid he's right, Colonel. Why anyone  
would admire my husband is beyond me.

GASTINOT

No! Sir, you are a living legend!  
The greatest magician of all time--!

HOUDIN

Stop! This... (with distaste) "legend"  
you speak of. I created it. I sustained  
it. Like everything else, it was an  
illusion. A lie. That's what magic is.  
Deceit raised to its highest levels!

(CONTII

CONTINUED:

GASTINOT

You cannot deny your accomplishments.

HOUDIN

I do deny them! Manipulating the laws of physics on one hand, twisting people's minds on the other -- It's not a fit way to make a living.

GASTINOT

Sir, you are wrong. What you do is true art.

Houdin tries again to drive his point into this numbskull's brain.

HOUDIN

You're not listening. My life now is devoted to science. That's real. That's worth pursuing. (gesturing around) Here in this room I discover truth.

He gestures expansively around the room.

HOUDIN

Electricity. Chemistry. Optics. Whatever days I have left, I'm not going to waste doing card tricks for Barbarian primitives in the God-forsaken desert, just to prove that my brand of lying is superior to their brand of lying! No, Colonel. I'm not the man you seek.

The debate is ended. Houdin goes back to work. Gastinot, shaken and attempting to maintain his dignity, bows formally. Houdin ignores him.

GASTINOT

I'll carry your sentiments to the Foreign Minister.

HOUDIN

(without looking up)

Please do.

GASTINOT

In the meantime, the butchery in Algeria goes on. I had hoped to have appealed to your conscience. Please pardon my intrusion on your important work. Good day.

Gastinot bows and exits. Colette scowls at her husband. He feels her disapproval.

HOUDIN

I have my reasons.

Colette turns on her heel and coldly exits.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Now alone, Houdin gazes down at the mechanical figure he's working on: a cavorting harlequin.

The absurdity of the figure -- not exactly a stunning example of pure science -- seems to strike home to Houdin. Something in his eyes hardens for a second... then softens again. He sets the harlequin down gently.

INT. - HOUDIN ENTRYWAY, DAY

The Manservant hands Gastinot his hat and coat, then opens the door. Colette escorts the Colonel to the threshold.

GASTINOT

I heard he'd become foul-tempered. I had no idea.

COLETTE

Ever since he gave up the stage, he has become... I wish we could help you.

Houdin's strong voice barks out commandingly from above.

HOUDIN

Colonel Gastinot!

Startled, Gastinot and Colette look up to see Houdin calling down from the second floor railing.

HOUDIN

If I were to go to North Africa as you request, would I have the complete support of the Republic?

GASTINOT

Monsieur Houdin? I thought you said--

HOUDIN

I will not undertake any task that is doomed to failure from the start because of asinine bureaucracy and lack of nerve! Is that clear?

Gastinot falls all over himself to agree, surprised and delighted.

GASTINOT

On behalf of the Foreign Minister, I can personally promise you a free hand.

HOUDIN

To do the job as I see fit? With no outside interference?

GASTINOT

You have my word on it. Anything you need. Tell me, Monsieur, why the change of heart?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Houdin trots vigorously down the stairs.

HOUDIN

That is my business. When does this ship of yours set sail?

GASTINOT

The 23rd of September. The steamer...

EXT. - MEDITERRANEAN SEA, DAY

GASTINOT (V.O., cont.)

... "Alexander" out of Marseilles.  
I'll book you a first class stateroom.

COLETTE (V.O.)

For both of us.

The steamship Alexander's big paddlewheels, amidships each side, plow through choppy seas.

INT. - STATEROOM, THE "ALEXANDER," DAY

Houdin rehearses sleight-of-hand drills as the ship pitches and rolls beneath him. The cabin is plush and spacious, all mahogany and brass.

Colette stands still, wearing a man's suit with tiny bells sewn on all over. Houdin walks past and, quick as a blink, darts his hand into one of her pockets to filch a gold coin.

The bells jingle. Colette slaps his hand.

HOUDIN

Blast it!

COLETTE

Losing our touch, are we?

She holds out her palm for the coin.

HOUDIN

It's not my fault. The damn floor keeps moving!

He flips the coin back. Colette drops it deep in her pocket.

COLETTE

I hear the natives cut off the hands of pickpockets. By my count, you've lost that hand 18 times.

HOUDIN

I don't need the lecture. Again.

He stomps past her back to his starting position. He turns around and smugly holds up the coin.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Is this better?

Colette dives her hand into her pocket, jangling the bells. The pocket is empty. She smiles broadly. Just then, a KNOCK at the door.

SHIP'S CAPTAIN (O.S.)

Monsieur? Madame?

INT. - SHIP'S CORRIDOR, DAY

The SHIP CAPTAIN knocks again.

SHIP CAPTAIN

Africa! We're in sight of port if you'd like to see.

EXT. - THE BOW OF THE "ALEXANDER," DAY

SHIP CAPTAIN

There she is, folks. Algiers. Land of the Mohammedans, God help us all.

Colette, properly dressed again with Houdin and Gastinot behind her, takes a spyglass from the Captain and adjusts it to her eye.

COLETTE

Oh my!

SPYGLASS POV

Still far off, the Algiers of 1856 glistens under the bright African sun: Palm trees against clear azure skies. Recent French architecture mingles with whitewashed native buildings centuries old.

ZOOM THROUGH THE SPYGLASS TO:

EXT. - ALGIERS HARBOR, DOCKSIDE, DAY

The pier's a beehive of activity. Black stevedores unload cargo from docked boats. Arabs and French mill around in the confusion. A babble of conflicting languages everywhere.

A longboat ferrying Houdin, Colette and Gastinot docks at the pier. In the b.g., the Alexander is anchored far out in the bay.

EXT. - DOWNTOWN ALGIERS, DAY

A caravan of 4 horse-drawn carriages, loaded with trunks and crates, threads through a hot, crowded, noisy bazaar.

As Houdin, Colette, and Gastinot ride past in the lead carriage, Arab merchants wave exotic goods -- silks, flutes, hookahs, carpets, even a live snake. Strains of discordant Middle-Eastern MUSIC and DRUMS add to the exoticism and confusion.

EXT. - DOWNTOWN ALGIERS, ANOTHER STREET, DAY

Beggars and peddlers run alongside the lead carriage, clamoring for attention. Houdin follows Gastinot's example in ignoring them. Wilting in the heat, Colette fans her perspiring face.

HOUDIN

What's being done about publicity?  
(gesturing back at the carriages)  
I've brought handbills, posters--

GASTINOT

Have no fear, the theatre will be packed.  
The Marshal-Governor will see to that.

HOUDIN

(to Colette, wryly)  
Where was he in Vienna?

COLETTE

Colonel? Is there a bath in my future  
any time soon?

GASTINOT

I'm sure you will find everything you  
could wish for at the Hotel D'Orient.

HOUDIN

In his letter, the Foreign Minister  
singled out one particular native  
sorcerer as the chief cause of trouble.

GASTINOT

Ah yes. That would be Zoras al Khatim.  
If you were to prove him a charlatan,  
the political impact would be enormous.  
We cannot compel him to attend your  
magic show. But I'm very sure he knows  
you are here. His spies are everywhere.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT LOBBY, DAY

A grand attempt to bring Paris direct to Africa: Lush carpets,  
velvet divans, gaslight chandeliers.

Houdin and Gastinot chat while Colette, melting in the heat, keeps a  
watchful eye on Porters hauling trunks up a curving staircase.

The hum of activity in the lobby keeps us from hearing the men's  
conversation. Suddenly Colette whirls around at something Gastinot  
says, responding loudly enough to be heard by all.

COLETTE

Seven?!

INT. - HOUDINS' HOTEL SUITE, DAY

The sumptuous French-style suite contrasts drastically with the  
white Moorish architecture seen just outside the balcony window.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Colette flurries around the suite, distraught, directing the unpacking as two uniformed Arab SERVANTS do her bidding. Houdin emerges from the bathroom, freshening his face with a wet towel.

COLETTE

Monsieur's luggage can wait. Start with that one. (to Houdin) How could you possibly agree to dinner at seven?! I have to bathe, my gown has to be aired out and pressed, I need to curl my hair--

She grimaces at her bedraggled reflection in the dressing-table mirror.

COLETTE (cont.)

--if it will curl in this heat at all! (to the servants) Does the hotel have a trained lady's maid?

SERVANT

Yes, Madame--

COLETTE

Well, that's something. Where are my hatboxes?

She begins pulling hairpins and curling papers out of her trunk, while Houdin hands a Servant his wet towel.

COLETTE

You men have no idea.

Houdin gives her a curt peck on the cheek on his way to the door.

HOUDIN

I'm sure you'll be lovely. I'll be back in plenty of time.

COLETTE

Where are you going?

HOUDIN

The theatre. I need to see what kind of fleatrap Gastinot has saddled me with.

COLETTE

Husband! We just--

HOUDIN

I'll send up the maid.

And he's gone before she can throw a handful of hairpins at him.

EXT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT, DAY

Houdin steps outside to a row of taxi carriages at the curb. Instantly he's surrounded by a babble of Arab cabbies, all vehemently pitching themselves as the best in town. Houdin grabs the wrist of a 14-year-old BOY CABBIE.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

You.

The Boy Cabbie pulls Houdin to his taxi.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE, DAY

The carriage pulls to a stop before an ornate Parisian-style opera house. Houdin jumps out of the taxi and pays the Cabbie to wait.

INT. - OPERA HOUSE, DAY

Deserted and quiet, the only light coming from exit doors propped open to the outside.

Houdin walks onstage and looks around. To him, the theatre -- any theatre -- is holy ground.

In his mind's eye, he sees the house packed, hears growing APPLAUSE. He makes a few grand stage gestures as he's mentally transported to scenes of his former stage triumphs.

WIPE -- A SWEEP OF HOUDIN'S ARM

across the audience reveals a THUNDEROUS AUDIENCE filling the opera house.

CLOSE-UP ON

Houdin, drinking in the adulation, metamorphizing before our eyes into a larger-than-life star presence.

The APPLAUSE STOPS suddenly, jarringly. Houdin is alone with his memories in the silent, empty theatre.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE, DAY

The Cabbie, half asleep, jumps to his feet as Houdin trots back down the opera house steps.

CABBIE

Back to the hotel, Monsieur?

Houdin pulls out his pocketwatch and checks the time.

HOUDIN

No hurry. I don't suppose you know where a Frenchman can get a drink?

The Cabbie points up the block. Houdin pays the boy two more francs.

HOUDIN

Good boy. Wait here. If I'm not back in one hour, come and get me.

INT. - GENTLEMAN'S CLUB, DAY

Houdin steps into a surprisingly elegant dining and gaming salon. Arab waiters in white tunics and gloves attend the whims of RICH CIVILIANS and SPOILED OFFICERS from the French Army and Navy. Beyond the main salon area are several gaming rooms.

Houdin pauses at the untended Maitre D' station. He skims through the guest register, signs it. Then he strolls over to the bar.

BARTENDER

Your pleasure, Monsieur?

HOUDIN

Brandy. The best you have.

He looks around the room, absorbing all the details. The Bartender hands him his drink.

Sipping his brandy, Houdin curiously saunters across the room toward the gaming salons, catching the notice of...

...an ARAB WAITER, who angles himself to keep a surreptitious eye on Houdin while clearing a table.

INT. - CARD SALON, CONTINUOUS

Houdin lingers in the doorway to observe a poker game among two French Navy LIEUTENANTS and three French Army officers -- a MAJOR and two CAPTAINS.

The Major (MAJOR GUILLAUME) and one Captain (CAPTAIN MERLE) wear distinctive RED SHOULDER BRAIDS. Major Guillaume smokes a cigarillo as he leans superciliously back in his chair.

Houdin's eyes widen ever so slightly as he strolls behind the players, glancing sidelong at their cards.

HOUDIN'S POV -- MOVING

The two Navy Lieutenants hold incredibly good hands -- a full house and four jacks respectively. The Lieutenant with four jacks slides a thick pile of bills into the pot.

LIEUTENANT

One hundred.

The braidless Army Captain (CAPTAIN DUNOIS) matches the bet. Captain Merle counts out 200 francs, then scowls at Houdin's nosiness. But before Merle can hide his cards, we see...

HOUDIN'S POV

Captain Merle only holds a pitiful pair of fours.

MERLE

One hundred. And one hundred again.

Meanwhile, Major Guillaume regards Houdin suspiciously, gripping his cards to his chest as Houdin walks behind him. The Lieutenant with four jacks considers a moment, then meets the bet.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LIEUTENANT

Your bet. And fifty more.

As everyone else bets, Captain Merle folds quietly.

MAJOR

Call.

All cards are laid out: The Lieutenant's four-of-a-kind, the other Lieutenant's full house, Captain Dunois' three deuces... and lastly, the Major's straight flush.

A whistle of admiration and groans from the others. The Major grins and rakes in the enormous pot.

HOUDIN

Is this a closed game? Or may anyone play?

GUILLAUME

I'll take your money, if you have it to lose -- Monsieur.....?

Houdin pointedly ignores the question. He pulls up a chair and drops a hefty wad of cash on the table.

Houdin boldly takes the deck. While continuing to talk, he rapidly FLIPS THROUGH the cards one by one, front and back.

HOUDIN

I can't help but notice Major Guillaume seems to be having the lion's share of luck today.

GUILLAUME

(seemingly unruffled)

The cards have been kind to me. How is it you know my name?

HOUDIN

Let's just say the spirits told me.

His examination complete, Houdin hands the deck across the table to one of the Lieutenants.

HOUDIN

Would you be so kind as to shuffle these? I wouldn't want to be accused of cheating -- like your friend Major Guillaume.

Guillaume is instantly livid, as is Merle. The others are shocked.

GUILLAUME

Sir -- I consented to your joining our game. I did not grant you permission to disparage my honor.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Since there is no honor in cheating at cards, I have not disparaged yours in any way. I've merely stated a fact. (to the others) Wouldn't you gentlemen like to know how the Major is cheating you?

OTHER PLAYERS

Yes. / Indeed. / Absolutely.

Club patrons and staff begin to gather round. Among them, leaning casually against the doorway, is a Foreign Legion officer. We don't quite see his face, but we see he's wearing one WHITE GLOVE.

GUILLAUME

Do you know who I am?

HOUDIN

Should I care?

MERLE

Major Guillaume is deputy adjutant to the Marshal-Governor himself.

HOUDIN

Would you do me the honor of dealing the cards, Lieutenant? I don't even wish to touch them. Five apiece. No draw.

The Lieutenant deals out the cards.

MERLE

He could have you jailed for your insolence!

HOUDIN

I doubt that. I have diplomatic protection from the Foreign Minister himself. You can't bully me like you can these other fellows, Major. One hand to prove who's telling the truth. Your antes, gentlemen.

Intimidated, everyone antes.

HOUDIN

Now for the betting. I venture... (looking at the backs of the Lieutenants' cards).....you have a pair of... fives... and you have... nothing. I'd sit this one out. But you do as you please.

The two Lieutenants eye other, then quickly lay their cards face down.

HOUDIN

Of course that might've been a fortuitous guess on my part. Captain Dunois? Your bet, sir.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Dunois hesitates, then takes the plunge.

DUNOIS

Twenty francs.

HOUDIN

A cautious gentleman. Excellent.  
Captain Merle? Care to put your  
money on the table?

But Merle refuses to cooperate.

MERLE

Fold.

HOUDIN

With two pairs, queens and jacks?  
Now why would an honest player like  
yourself fold with cards like that?  
Could it be you can read Captain  
Dunois' hand and see that he holds  
three eights?

Dunois glances again at his own cards.

DUNOIS' POV

A deuce, a five and, sure enough, three eights.

One Lieutenant makes a grab for Merle's cards.

LIEUTENANT

Let me see those.

Merle angrily slaps his palm down to keep his cards from being  
exposed.

MERLE

I said fold!

HOUDIN

Testy, aren't we. That leaves Major  
Guillaume, Captain Dunois here, and  
myself.

MERLE

How does he know everybody's name?  
Who let this man in here?

HOUDIN

I raise... two thousand francs.

Shock among the spectators at the size of the bet.

Dunois tosses down his cards, face up for all to see. Things are  
suddenly too weird for him.

DUNOIS

I think I'm in the wrong game.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The spectators crane and stretch to see if Dunois' cards match Houdin's prediction. Houdin leans back in his chair, projecting total command.

HOUDIN

So it's the Major and myself. (to Guillaume) Are you willing to match my bet? Or are you as great a coward as you are a cheat?

Guillaume's eyes lock murderously on Houdin. He forces himself to check his cards again.

GUILLAUME'S POV

The seven of clubs... and four kings.

A sneer dances around the edges of Guillaume's mouth. He pushes over half his entire pile of winnings, seeing Houdin's bet -- then, deliberately, the rest of his winnings as well. By now, everyone in the room is breathless.

GUILLAUME

Is that brave enough for you?

HOUDIN

Let's make it even more interesting.

Houdin materializes out of thin air a 20-CARAT RUBY! Gasps throughout the room.

Among the shocked spectators is the Arab Waiter who was watching Houdin earlier. He follows Houdin's every move, without even the pretense of working.

HOUDIN

From India. The Maharajah of Amritsar gave it to me on my 43rd birthday.

Houdin tosses the ruby into the pot.

HOUDIN

This ruby, Major -- against your bet, your sword and your pistol. You lay your cards face down on the table and don't touch them again until it's time to show your hand. Do we have a wager?

Guillaume hesitates.

HOUDIN

What do you have to lose? Since you marked the deck, you know perfectly well which cards I hold. It's not as though you'd be gambling.

Houdin fans his hand around the table, showing everyone but Merle and Guillaume that his hand is garbage: nothing, not even a pair.

Guillaume's eyes burn at Houdin. He rechecks his own cards.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GUILLAUME'S POV

Same as before. Four kings and the seven of clubs.

Guillaume resentfully lays his cards face down on the table, one at a time.

HOUDIN

Bravo. So what do we have here?

He reaches over and delicately spreads out Guillaume's cards, tapping each one just once with his middle finger.

HOUDIN

King of hearts, king of diamonds, king of spades, and king and seven of clubs.

GUILLAUME

(with menace)

I call.

HOUDIN

First place your wager on the table.

Guillaume angrily removes his saber and pistol, dumps them all on the table.

GUILLAUME

For the last time. Show your cards!

Houdin dramatically lays down his hand: FOUR KINGS and the seven of clubs!

Enraged and disbelieving, Guillaume turns over his cards -- He has Houdin's garbage hand. Everyone is flabbergasted!

HOUDIN

It would appear the winning cards prefer my company. Still, a bet is a bet. Especially in front of all these witnesses.

GUILLAUME

You-- you cheated!

HOUDIN

Did anyone here see me cheat?

The spectators murmur 'no'. Houdin rakes in his winnings.

HOUDIN

There you have it.

Guillaume, seething, pushes back his chair and stands. Merle does likewise.

GUILLAUME

You will regret this, Monsieur Whoever-you-are.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

The dogs bark, but the caravan passes on.

Guillaume and Merle roughly shove their way out the door.

The gallery immediately starts buzzing. Spectators jostle forward to congratulate Houdin, shake his hand, offer to buy him a drink.

Houdin coolly hands off a generous share of the money to one of the Navy Lieutenants.

HOUDIN

For you and your friend who were rooked.

Houdin works his way through the throng of admirers. Paying no special notice, he plunks his empty brandy snifter on the tray of the Arab Waiter... the same waiter who's been watching him with such keen interest.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE / STREET, DAY

Houdin crosses the street from the bar, clutching Guillaume's weapons as souvenirs. However, his taxi is nowhere to be seen. He calls up and down the street.

HOUDIN

Taxi!... Taxi! (no answer) Blast it!

Now he must walk back to the hotel. He starts down the street. But he doesn't get far.

Major Guillaume, Captain Merle, and four other JUNIOR ARMY OFFICERS -- also wearing red shoulder braids -- step out from an alley and block Houdin's path. Houdin, not taking the threat seriously, tries to maneuver around them.

HOUDIN

How melodramatic. I thought we settled this matter inside.

Guillaume's men surround Houdin, forcing him towards the alley.

HOUDIN

Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. I am a diplomatic representative of the--

One of the Red Braids slams his fist into Houdin's stomach, knocking all the air out of him.

HOUDIN

(wheezing)

...Repub...lic.

The Red Braids strongarm Houdin into the alley, out of public view.



EXT. - ALLEY, DAY

Two Red Braids pin Houdin's arms while two others administer half a dozen punches to his gut. Guillaume steps forward and sadistically grabs Houdin's jaw, pressing his skull against the wall.

GUILLAUME

I don't know who you are, but you have made a fatal mistake. No one shames Henri Guillaume and lives to brag about it. (to Merle) Take his money. And the ruby.

The Red Braids jam Houdin hard against the wall as Guillaume lets go to rearm himself. Merle robs Houdin as ordered.

MERLE

You thought you were so clever.

Merle himself hits Houdin: a vicious punch to the kidneys, then a hard right cross to the jaw.

HOUDIN

(in pain, gasping for breath)  
I stand corrected.

Guillaume draws a dagger and twists the blade back and forth before Houdin's eyes, relishing his victory.

GUILLAUME

As far as anyone will know, you were just another rich gentleman who was accosted by bandits unknown -- undoubtedly Arab lowlifes -- who robbed you of your valuables and slit your throat. It happens all the time.

VOICE (O.S.)

Not today, Guillaume! Let him go!

All the Red Braids turn and look.

ANGLE ON

A bare right hand poised to draw a sword.

FOLLOW the sword up as it's drawn TO REVEAL...

Captain TREY DARCY of the Foreign Legion: WHITE GLOVE on one hand, sword in the other. He advances steadily down the alley.

MERLE

Darcy!

DARCY

(conversationally)

I can never decide which is more repulsive. Maggot-infested meat vomited up by a one-eyed, three-legged dog with leprosy...or an officer in the French Army.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GUILLAUME

Stay out of this, Legionnaire. This isn't your fight.

DARCY

I think the dog has just a slight edge. What do you think?

Darcy advances to within a few feet of Guillaume. The Red Braids fearfully unhand Houdin, who slumps to the ground.

GUILLAUME

You completely misunderstand the situation. I merely meant to give our friend here a scare.

DARCY

(to Houdin)

Did he scare you?

HOUDIN

(gasping)

Well enough.

DARCY

(to Guillaume)

Give the man back his valuables, and maybe I won't have to bloody my sword.

Guillaume steps back. Merle sullenly tosses the stolen money and ruby back at Houdin's feet.

Darcy sheathes his sword. He contemptuously bats Guillaume aside in order to reach Houdin and help him to his feet.

DARCY

You all right?

Behind Darcy, Guillaume angrily cocks his pistol and presses the barrel to the back of Darcy's skull.

GUILLAUME

You know, Darcy, someone really should teach you Legionnaires some manners.

Darcy freezes, but doesn't lose his composure or bravado.

DARCY

I can't argue with that. My mother taught me the importance of etiquette.

With lightning speed, Darcy spins around in place and knocks away Guillaume's gun arm. The pistol DISCHARGES wildly, shooting Merle in the hip. In the same move, Darcy breaks Guillaume's nose and decks him with a single smashing blow.

Merle and Guillaume both fall, screaming in agony.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

Rule of etiquette number one. Never draw your gun unless you mean to use it.

JUNIOR RED BRAID

(reacting to Merle's wounding)  
You filthy bastard!

All the Red Braids draw swords and attack Darcy -- four to one.

Darcy becomes a twisting whirlwind of slashing steel with his right hand, delivering punishing smashes with his left arm, ducking and dodging one lethal blow after another.

The first Red Braid is down, mangled. Now the Second Red Braid falls. Guillaume struggles to his feet and rejoins the fight.

Darcy suffers a few good blows, but fights his way back. His uniform is ripped open. Another sword gashes him in the arm-- But Darcy gives back tenfold what he gets.

Darcy slashes down each remaining Red Braid...until only Guillaume is left.

He hurls away his own sword, disarms Guillaume with a bone-breaking kick to the elbow, and picks him up like a rag doll, throwing him against the wall.

Darcy mercilessly pummels him at will, over and over again, pounding Guillaume's face into a grotesque pulp. Horrified, Houdin grabs his arm to stop the mauling.

HOUDIN

Stop it! You'll kill him! Stop it!

Darcy lands several more blows before responding to Houdin's pleas.

With a final groan, Guillaume collapses in a bloody, unconscious heap.

As his violent madness subsides, Darcy looks around in bewilderment, as if wondering where his other foes went.

Guillaume and his cohorts lie all over the alley, battered, moaning in agony. One Red Braid starts to rise, thinks better of it. Panting hard, Darcy bends over the unconscious Guillaume.

DARCY

Rule of etiquette number two. Never cross a Legionnaire.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE / STREET, DAY

Houdin, still a bit wobbly, emerges from the alley with Darcy.

HOUDIN

Tell me, when do you think I lost control of the situation?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

When you wandered into a tiger's den  
and expected it to purr.

HOUDIN

I'll remember that. (grateful handshake)  
Jean-Pierre Robert-Houdin. Of Paris  
and Saint-Gervais. At your service.

DARCY

Trey Darcy, of the Foreign Legion.  
At yours.

HOUDIN

Without which I'm fairly sure I'd be  
a dead man.

DARCY

More than likely.

Corporal Bartolote rides up, leading a second horse. He dismounts  
at the sight of his bloodied captain and immediately unpacks a  
whiskey bottle for Darcy.

BARTOLOTE

With all due respect, sir, you look  
like hell.

DARCY

And you need to improve your timing,  
Corporal. (to Houdin) Augustino  
Bartolote. The toughest soldier  
you'll ever want to meet in battle.

HOUDIN

Coming from you, that's commendation  
indeed.

BARTOLOTE

Any friend of the Captain's...

Bartolote extends a friendly bone-crusher handshake. Houdin  
flexes his throbbing hand after the Corporal's "light" squeeze.  
Darcy, meanwhile, pours whiskey over his gashed forearm.

HOUDIN

You've done this before.

DARCY

Once or twice.

HOUDIN

You saved my life. I think I owe you  
a drink.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT DINING ROOM, NIGHT

CLOSE-UP ON

Three champagne glasses clinking.

HOUDIN (O.S.)  
To the Legion.

DARCY / COLETTE (O.S.)  
The Legion.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

Houdin, Darcy and Colette drinking their toast.

The two men are all spiffed up in formal wear -- white tie for Houdin, dress uniform for Darcy. Colette is ravishing, her hair pinned high, her neckline low.

They're seated at an elegant dinner table, having a wonderful time. Uniformed Arab waiters whisk away soup plates. In the adjoining ballroom, the hotel orchestra plays Strauss waltzes.

COLETTE  
What then, Captain?

DARCY  
He produced a ruby. Out of thin air!

COLETTE  
Not from the Majarajah?! No!  
(rapping Houdin's arm with her fan)  
I can't believe you had the nerve --

HOUDIN  
I was shameless. I admit it.

COLETTE  
That "ruby" is a paste imitation. Horrible.

DARCY  
It was still most amazing. Your husband is quite a remarkable man, Madame Houdin.

COLETTE  
As are you. Yet your life is devoted to war and killing. Why?

HOUDIN  
(\*Don't be rude\*)  
Colette--

COLETTE  
I'm just curious. Why would a man with your breeding and education choose a military career?

DARCY  
Perhaps it chose me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Just then, Colonel Gastinot arrives at the door, thoroughly discomposed at being late. Darcy's back is turned to Gastinot as the Colonel, in his haste, bows to Colette.

GASTINOT  
(blathering)

Madame Houdin. Monsieur Houdin. My deepest apologies. The Marshal-Governor's office summoned me at the last minute -- Good, I see you've already ordered dinner and-and...

He stops short as he sees Darcy. He's not pleased at the sight.

GASTINOT  
Captain Darcy. How very odd to find you here in Algiers. On leave? Or have you finally deserted?

DARCY  
Good evening, Colonel. Shuffled any good papers lately?

GASTINOT  
Uh... Monsieur Houdin. May I speak with you privately?

HOUDIN  
(to the others)  
Please excuse me.

Houdin rises. The hotel orchestra begins another inviting waltz. In the background, we can see the ballroom filling up.

DARCY  
Perhaps you'd permit me to ask your lovely wife to dance?

HOUDIN  
You may ask. The lady has a mind of her own.

Gastinot drags Houdin away from the table.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT LOBBY, NIGHT

GASTINOT  
What on earth are you doing associating with Trey Darcy?

HOUDIN  
You disapprove?

GASTINOT  
He's not fit company for a gentleman! And I would never let him come near, let alone touch, my wife!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Madame Houdin can handle herself.  
What is this about?

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT BALLROOM, NIGHT

Darcy and Colette make a striking couple as they step onto the dance floor. The instant she lays her gloved right hand into the palm of his white glove, she stops dancing and becomes flustered.

COLETTE

Your hand... It's...

DARCY

Unique?

COLETTE

...uh... yes.

FOLLOW THEM -- MOVING

Darcy takes Colette in his arms again. They resume their waltz.

DARCY

It was in the Crimea. A Russian  
artillery shell landed in our trench.  
I picked it up to throw it back.

COLETTE

I'm so sorry.

DARCY

So am I. I was left-handed.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT LOBBY, NIGHT

GASTINOT

He should be out in the desert with  
the other wild animals! These  
Legionnaires are nothing but criminals!

HOUDIN

Then why is France depending on them  
to hold off the Kabyle rebels?

GASTINOT

The man has already corrupted your  
thinking! I'm sorry, but I cannot have  
you associating with such riff-raff--

HOUDIN

Then my wife and I shall return to  
Marseilles on the next ship. No one  
dictates to me--

GASTINOT

--You can't do that!

EXT. - VERANDA OUTSIDE BALLROOM, NIGHT

The music and light from the ballroom stream outside to the veranda, where Darcy and Colette are alone together. Darcy removes his white glove for Colette.

CLOSE-UP ON

the glove coming off, revealing a WOODEN HAND. Finely crafted of polished teak, the prosthesis is strapped firmly onto his forearm above the wrist. It even has articulated fingers and joints.

Colette pulls off her own glove and strokes the wooden hand gingerly -- a strangely sensual moment.

COLETTE

Does it ever... need repair?

She was going to say "hurt"... and Darcy realizes this.

DARCY

Occasionally. Mostly it helps with the simple things. The reins of a horse. Or the important things. Dancing with a beautiful woman.

He takes Colette's bare hand with his hand, the real one... the first time they've actually touched. To her own surprise, Colette doesn't pull back. She can't take her eyes from Darcy's face.

Emboldened, Darcy leans in to kiss Colette softly on the lips.

But now Colette forces herself to move. She snaps her fan open, blocking Darcy a few inches from her lips -- though her eyes remain fixed on his.

DARCY

I've offended you.

COLETTE

Very little offends me, Captain.

DARCY

Don't tell me. You love your husband.

COLETTE

Unfashionably so.

DARCY

Just now, Gastinot's telling him you're in the company of a depraved, swinish beast, not to be trusted.

COLETTE

And is he right?

DARCY

Almost. But I can be trusted. I shall make no more advances. I give you my word.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

COLETTE

I don't object to your advances as long as you don't mind my rejection.

DARCY

At any rate, I would have nothing to offer you but grief. I shall die before I am 40. That's what Legionnaires do. We fight and we die.

COLETTE

(strangely moved)

Then you have chosen for yourself the most tragic life possible, Captain. And I count myself fortunate never to have fallen in love with you.

Darcy abruptly steps back and gently kisses her hand farewell.

DARCY

Please give my regards to your husband. I consider him the luckiest of men.

COLETTE

Where are you going?

INT. - HOUDINS' HOTEL SUITE, NIGHT

Houdin is in bed, watching Colette brush her hair.

HOUDIN

And you're positive he said nothing else?

COLETTE

He had to hurry back to his post. How many times must I repeat it?

HOUDIN

How strange. Not even saying goodbye.

COLETTE

Perhaps it's for the best. He's gone. We shall not see him again.

She looks at herself one last time in the mirror, strangely perturbed. She sets down her brush and climbs into bed.

Houdin shakes his head. He reaches out to turn out the gas lamp. Blackness.

HOUDIN

Very odd.

EXT. - SAHARA DESERT NEAR SIDI BEL-ABBES, SUNRISE

Darcy, on horseback, pauses atop a ridge. His face lights up at the sight ahead. A second later, Bartolote rides up beside him.

THEIR POV

Sidi Bel-Abbes, headquarters of the French Foreign Legion -- a military island in the middle of nowhere.

Darcy and Bartolote kick their horses and canter homeward.

EXT. - SIDI BEL-ABBES, DAY

A BUGLER atop a lookout tower trumpets Darcy and Bartolote ride through the main gate, an archway with bold letters proclaiming "LEGION ETRANGERES."

Passing a platoon of new recruits in full trail pack marching out into the hot desert, Darcy and Bartolote trot across the dusty compound and right up to the Main Building.

They rein up before a distinguished Legion COLONEL standing on the steps. Darcy salutes from the saddle.

DARCY

Colonel Chabrière. Captain Darcy and Corporal Bartolote reporting for duty as ordered.

The Colonel returns the salute. Behind Darcy, a FRENCH ARMY rifle platoon marches out from behind a building in a routine-looking drill.

COLONEL

You have one more day of leave, Captain. Why back so soon?

DARCY

I wish to get back to work, sir.

COLONEL

I'm afraid that will not be possible.

He signals slightly with an index finger.

CLOSE-UP ON

Darcy, puzzled and a bit cautious.

DARCY

Why is that, Colonel?

We hear FEET RUNNING and two dozen RIFLES COCKING simultaneously. Darcy looks around and finds--

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

--he's surrounded by a sea of guns and bayonets, all aimed at him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLONEL

Captain Darcy, you are under arrest  
and are hereby relieved from duty.  
Surrender your weapons.

Darcy is indignant but trapped by troops of the French Army. The front door of the building opens and...

MAJOR GUILLAUME hobbles out and stands alongside the Colonel.

Guillaume's face is horribly bruised and battered. One arm is in a sling and several teeth are missing, but he doesn't seem to mind. His gloating smile tells Darcy all he needs to know about his future.

EXT. - SIDI BEL-ABBES, DAY

A BULLWHIP falling, cutting into Darcy's bare back.

EXT. - HOTBOX, DAY

Darcy, stripped down and shackled in leg irons, is thrown into a small wooden shed out on the desert sands under the blazing sun: a penal "hotbox." The Sidi Bel-Abbes fort is in the background.

INT. - HOTBOX, DAY

The shed is an oven. No windows. Dirt floors. A hole for a latrine.

Two GUARDS chain Darcy to a thick steel ring staked deep into the ground. Darcy falls on his face, his back still bleeding. One Guard forcibly removes Darcy's wooden left hand.

GUARD

You won't be needing this.

The guards leave, bolting the door from the outside. Darkness.

EXT. - FESTIVAL GROUNDS, DAY

A bright, lovely morning. The Algerian autumn festival is underway. The fairgrounds are studded with the colorful tents of Arab nobility.

French gentlemen with their ladies mingle amiably with upper-class Arab men sipping cool drinks, chatting and laughing.

Amid this striking inter-cultural harmony, Gastinot walks Colette towards the parade field.

COLETTE

How is it, Colonel, that the Arabs can  
live in peace with the French, but the  
Kabyles cannot?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GASTINOT

Madame, you first must know the history of this region. The Kabyles have never accepted conquest. And now these barbarians have themselves a new religious leader, what they call a "Marabout." Zoras al Khatim.

COLETTE

I've heard the name. What is he like?

GASTINOT

Zoras? He's a pure work of the devil. Pagan rituals, sorcery so black I can't even describe it.

EXT. - PARADE GROUNDS, DAY

Colette and Gastinot approach the parade field where a military "fantasia" -- an exhibition of Arab horsemanship -- is beginning.

COLETTE

You don't actually think this Zoras performs real magic, do you?

GASTINOT

I saw him once in the town square in Constantine. He bit off the head of a live cobra. (shuddering) I hope never to see such things again.

COLETTE

After my husband's performance, everyone will understand these are only clever tricks.

GASTINOT

I know real magic when I see it.

COLETTE

Do you?

Colette stops, waves her fan crisply a few times in front of Gastinot's nose. Then... POOF! The fan DISAPPEARS into thin air!

COLETTE

I think I can find my way from here. Thank you for the escort, Colonel.

Gastinot is left speechless.

But Colette's trick has attracted someone else's attention a short distance away. A pair of ARABS dressed as servants catch each other's eyes.

EXT. - PARADE GROUNDS, DAY

The equestrian fantasia is underway. Two long flanks of crack Arab riders charge at each other at full gallop. Just before they meet, they raise their seven foot long rifles and FIRE overhead at exactly the same moment. The report is as if only one gun was fired.

With uncanny precision, the flanks of horsemen then pass through each other's ranks and wheel around for the next charge.

Colette joins Houdin at the front rail. His spirits seem low.

HOUDIN

What kept you?

COLETTE

Colonel Gastinot was blathering on about some wicked sorcerer. Supposedly God's gift to the Algerian rebellion.

HOUDIN

Maybe he is.

COLETTE

What prompted this?

HOUDIN

Colette, what are we doing here?

COLETTE

We're watching a horse show. A very good one, too.

HOUDIN

This is sheer arrogance! Sailing across the sea to meddle in someone else's national affairs!? I'm not political!

COLETTE

Darling, you're being asked to put on a show. That's all. Considering how our enemy takes pride in slaughtering women and children, I should think you'd be anxious to knock their witchcraft peddling demi-gods off their pedestals.

HOUDIN

But what if I can't?

COLETTE

Ah, now we get to it.

HOUDIN

What if something goes wrong? I haven't been before an audience for five years. What if I've lost my touch?

COLETTE

You'll probably die of embarrassment. Right there on the stage, in front of 500 people. Your heart will give out.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLETTE (cont.)

Your rotting cadaver will be sent back to France in disgrace. Meanwhile, I'll get all your money, marry someone much younger and easier to get along with. I'll take several handsome lovers on the side and settle down in a gorgeous villa on a hillside in Tuscany overlooking the sea. That's what will happen if something goes wrong. Feel better, dear?

HOUDIN

Much. Thank you.

COLETTE

Anything to help.

She takes his arm as they turn back to the fantasia. The galloping horses whip up a cloud of dust. The dust dissipates to REVEAL...

EXT. - HOTBOX, DAY

...The blazing Sahara sun, blinding overhead.

PAN DOWN TO

the isolated hotbox, far outside the walls of Sidi Bel-Abbes. Empty desert beyond. Shimmering HEAT WAVES rise up from the baking sand.

INT. - HOTBOX, DAY

120° and climbing. Cracks of sunlight leak in.

Darcy has a week's growth of beard. He's weak and dehydrated. His lips are cracked. Precious sweat drips from his every pore. His breathing is shallow and he moves as little as possible.

EXT. - SIDI BEL-ABBES, RAMPARTS, DAY

It's midday, 105° in the shade. CORPORALS LE CLAIRE, WOODRUFF and SCHULTZ pitch pennies while on guard duty atop the ramparts.

Meanwhile, apart from his buddies, Bartolote leans on the wall, just staring out across the sands to the hotbox.

SCHULTZ

Thirty days. If it was me, I'd rather go before the firing squad. Get it over with quick.

WOODRUFF

Even on rations, I give him two weeks. After that he's dried bones.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LE CLAIRE

I knew a fella once died after just four days in the hotbox. 'Course he was a miserable excuse for a soldier. Couldn't march ten desert miles without cryin' for his mama.

WOODRUFF

Whadda you say, Bartolote? Does he die fast or slow?

BARTOLOTE

Shut up.

Bartolote tromps through their game and away down the rampart steps.

WOODRUFF

What's his gripe?

Schultz throws a handful of pennies at Woodruff.

SCHULTZ

You got half a brain? That's his officer out there.

EXT. - SIDI BEL-ABBES, DAY

At the front gate, two Legionnaire MAIL RIDERS mount up. Their horses' saddlebags are stuffed with outgoing letters. Just before they gallop away, Bartolote runs up, an envelope in his hand.

BARTOLOTE

One more.

FIRST RIDER

Didn't know you could write, Bartolote.

BARTOLOTE

How soon's it get delivered to Algiers?

FIRST RIDER

One day to Oran, half day up the coast.

OTHER RIDER

(reading the address)

'Hotel D'Orient'? You got a maid stowed away there, huh?

BARTOLOTE

(convincingly embarrassed)

Yeah, well, you know how it is.

FIRST RIDER

Can't let your little baguette get too lonely.

He winks at his partner and slips the envelope into his saddlebag. The riders take off into the desert.

EXT. - ALGIERS OPERA HOUSE, DAY

Establishing shot.

INT. - OPERA HOUSE, DAY

The elegant opera house holds 500 empty seats. Up on the stage, lit by gas lamps, Houdin busily unpacks all sorts of mysterious "magic" equipment.

Colette climbs down through an OPEN TRAP DOOR beneath center stage.

Meanwhile, huffing and puffing, Colonel Gastinot heaves a heavy wooden chest up onto the stage.

HOUDIN

Right there will be fine.

Gastinot leans against the stage for a second to catch his breath.

GASTINOT

What more can I do for you, Monsieur Houdin?

HOUDIN

Can't think of a thing, Colonel. Thanks for your help.

Gastinot climbs onstage and begins to nose around.

GASTINOT

You're sure?

HOUDIN

Quite sure, Colonel. You must have much more important things to do. We'll see you at dinner.

GASTINOT

What's all this for?

Gastinot wanders over to a large nest of apothecary jars of powders and chemicals spread out on a table. He picks up one large bottle filled with white powder, squints to read the label.

GASTINOT

It's so dark in here. What does that say?

HOUDIN

Put that down, Colonel! Unless you have a driving desire to blow up this theatre.

Gastinot doesn't put the jar down. Instead he uncaps the lid to sniff it. Houdin, irritated, plucks it away, restraining an impulse to slap Gastinot's hand.

GASTINOT

(duly repentant)

I'm sorry.

(CONTINU'



CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Colonel, please. Don't touch anything else without asking.

Gastinot wanders over to some electrical gizmos.

GASTINOT

What about these? What do they do?

Colette climbs out of the trap door, carrying an armful of crushed velvet. Houdin throws her a look, but she gestures helplessly.

HOUDIN

(sighs, gives up)

...Would you like me to show you how a trick is done?

Gastinot's eyes widen in delight. This is too much to hope for!

GASTINOT

You would do that? Oh, Monsieur Houdin, I would be so-so-so--

HOUDIN

One trick. One. And you must promise not to reveal the secret.

GASTINOT

I swear! As an officer of the French Army. I will tell no one! Not a soul!

COLETTE

Show him the pistol illusion.

HOUDIN

Excellent. (to Gastinot) You'll like this one.

GASTINOT

The pistol illusion. What's that?

Houdin unlocks a fancy wooden case. Inside: an antique dueling pistol, gunpowder, wadding, barrel rod, and lead balls. He hands the pistol to Gastinot.

HOUDIN

Colonel, would you be so kind as to load this weapon? A charge of powder, a lead ball of your choosing, and wadding.

GASTINOT

I know how to do it.

Gastinot loads the pistol, stuffing the wadding down the barrel with the metal rod.

HOUDIN

May I see? To make sure you did it properly.

CONTINUED:

Houdin takes back and scrutinizes the weapon, keeping it always in Gastinot's plain sight. Colette moves back a few paces.

GASTINOT

I told you, I know how to load a common pistol.

Apparently satisfied, Houdin hands the pistol back.

HOUDIN

So you do. Excellent. Now would you be so kind as to shoot my wife?

GASTINOT

I beg your pardon!

HOUDIN

She displeases me. She rarely does as she's told, she argues incessantly, and she's a terrible cook. I wish you to shoot her dead.

Gastinot thrusts the pistol back into Houdin's hand.

GASTINOT

I most certainly will not! That's not even funny!

HOUDIN

Very well. I'll do the bloody deed.

Without a moment's hesitation, Houdin aims the barrel directly at Colette's heart and fires! BLAM!

GASTINOT

My god, man!! What have you done?!!

But Colette's just standing there, unaffected by the bullet.

COLETTE

.....Am I dead yet?

Gastinot sinks down on a nearby chair, his nerves shot to hell.

GASTINOT

But I loaded that gun. I know I put in a real bullet.

HOUDIN

So you did. And had I fired the gun you loaded, something like this would have happened.

Houdin aims the gun in his hand at a huge goblet clear across the stage. He fires... BLAM!

The goblet SHATTERS.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Gastinot almost jumps out of his skin. Colette glides over and lays a calming hand on his shoulder.

COLETTE

It's all right, Colonel. It's just a trick.

Houdin sets down two identical pistols in Gastinot's lap.

GASTINOT

Two guns? But I watched you the entire time. I would have seen if you made a switch.

HOUDIN

Would you now? And would you also have noticed if all this time there was a live rabbit crawling down your back?

Houdin reaches down inside the back of Gastinot's coat collar and -- impossibly -- pulls out a huge full-grown hare!

Poor Gastinot's head is swimming. Houdin and Colette exchange mischievous grins.

EXT. - ALGIERS, NIGHT

A disturbingly large full moon haunts the night sky over the city.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT LOBBY, NIGHT

Houdin and Colette enter from the street, gaily laughing over this evening's elegant soiree. Colette is dazzling in a Paris ballgown. As they head for the stairs, the CONCIERGE runs over to intercept them, most distressed.

CONCIERGE

Monsieur Robert-Houdin! Madame. I am so very sorry. The hotel will pay for all damages! Nothing like this has happened in all my time here!

HOUDIN

What are you talking about?

CONCIERGE

(cringing)

Your room.

INT. - HOUDINS' HOTEL SUITE, NIGHT

The Concierge lets Houdin and Colette into their room. They stop short. Colette gasps.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

THEIR POV

The whole suite has been incinerated, as if torched by an industrial blast furnace. The furniture, the walls, the carpet, the ceiling... all burned and blistered to a crisp.

Yet, somehow, the Houdins' personal belongings -- clothing, papers, toiletries -- all are pristine and clean, absolutely untouched!

Frantic, heedless of damage to her gown, Colette wades through the mass of still smoking embers and throws open her jewelry case on top of the blackened dresser. Her jewelry's intact, unharmed.

COLETTE

Thank God! (looking around) What in heaven's name--?

Houdin, more fascinated than upset, surveys the damage.

HOUDIN

Amazing. Absolutely amazing. (to the Concierge) Did the fire spread to any other rooms?

CONCIERGE

No, monsieur. Only this room. One of the maids smelled the smoke. But there was no fire to put out. You see the room exactly as we found it.

Houdin fingers a shredded remnant of burnt curtain lace.

HOUDIN

A chemical burn of some sort. I doubt the flames lasted more than a few seconds.

The handle to the charred armoire falls off as Colette opens it. Nothing inside is damaged. Colette smells the clean fabric of various garments in wonder.

COLETTE

Not a thread singed. (looking around) None of our belongings were damaged. Or even touched. How?

CONCIERGE

I cannot explain it, Madame.

HOUDIN

(thinking aloud)

Fire is the most dangerous and unpredictable of the elements. Whoever did this wanted to show me he can control the uncontrollable.

COLETTE

Zoras al Khatim?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Houdin nods in agreement. The exchange is lost on the Concierge.

COLETTE

The theatre! Your equipment!

CONCIERGE

No fear, Monsieur. I sent for the police immediately, they are at the theatre now, they say everything is safe--

HOUDIN

Get me a taxi right away.

The Concierge races out.

INT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT LOBBY, NIGHT

Houdin and Colette rush downstairs. The Concierge stops them near the front door, handing over an envelope.

CONCIERGE

Monsieur. Wait. In the confusion, I almost forgot. For you.

Houdin rips it open. As he reads, grave concern creeps over his face.

HOUDIN

Anything else I should know about?

CONCIERGE

No, Monsieur. Just the letter. And your taxi is waiting to take you to the theatre.

Houdin shoves the letter at Colette.

HOUDIN

It's about Darcy. (to Concierge) The theatre can wait. Tell the driver we're going to the Marshal-Governor's palace.

CONCIERGE

At this hour, Monsieur?

Colette looks up from the letter in shock.

COLETTE

Good lord!

QUICK ZOOM IN

to the letter.

INT. - OFFICE OF THE MARSHAL-GOVERNOR, NIGHT

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

the letter in the hand of MARSHAL-GOVERNOR RANDON, the top French authority in Algeria. Randon is a slick, overfed, immaculately groomed politician of 55.

Houdin and Colette face him across His Excellency's exquisite Louis XIV desk.

HOUDIN

Captain Darcy could die!

RANDON

Could he? What a shame.

HOUDIN

He acted in self-defense!

RANDON

His victims say otherwise.

HOUDIN

I'm the victim! Captain Darcy saved my life! Your men were thugs, pure and simple!

RANDON

You're in Algiers less than a week and you incite a civil disturbance, you throw my best men in the hospital, and tonight you nearly burn the hotel to the ground. If you're victimized again, I fear for the city.

Colette shoots Houdin a critical look, turns her charm on Randon.

COLETTE

Please excuse my husband, Your Excellency. The main reason he came here this late at night was to say how deeply he regrets any embarrassment he caused you, and to appeal to your powers of clemency.

HOUDIN

(under Colette's glare)

I did not come to Algiers to get an innocent man thrown in a hotbox to die. Your Excellency, I ask you...

He takes a breath. Groveling like this is truly tough for him.

HOUDIN (cont.)

I plead with you to show mercy on Captain Darcy for the sake of justice.

Randon is lapping this up. He takes his sweet time responding.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RANDON

Thank you, Monsieur Houdin. I'm very moved by what you've said.

COLETTE

So you'll grant our request?

RANDON

No. It's a point of honor. I cannot allow the hordes I govern to think it's open season on government officials. It might become fashionable. But I do appreciate your abasing your dignity to come here and beg. Can you roll over and bark as well?

Colette drops the sweet little lady act and explodes!

COLETTE

How dare you play stupid political games when a man's life is in danger!

HOUDIN

Colette--

COLETTE

If it weren't for the Foreign Legion, you wouldn't be the Marshal-Governor of anything! The barbarians would ride into Algiers and roast you for dinner over an open fire! Lord knows they wouldn't have to baste you, you big, fat, porculent--

HOUDIN

Colette!!

RANDON

No no no no no. Let her talk. You both have diplomatic immunity. And as long as we're trading insults, let me say that Colonel Gastinot may think you walk on water, but I regard your coming to Algiers as a complete waste of time. Tell me, do you really think your "magic show" will scare these savages out of their war of rebellion?

HOUDIN

You honestly believe my being here is pointless?

RANDON

I'm quite convinced of it.

HOUDIN

Then let your disbelief be your bond.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RANDON

How do you mean?

HOUDIN

I'll make you a wager. If my performance produces no good political results, you can send me packing on the next ship. Vilify me in the newspapers, gloat all you want. But if I succeed, you give me your word of honor to release Captain Darcy immediately.

Randon ponders the offer, looking for the loophole.

RANDON

And you'll let me judge whether you've succeeded or failed?

HOUDIN

I will.

RANDON

(derisively)

Then you are not as clever as you advertise yourself to be. I accept your challenge, Monsieur. And I look forward to seeing you off on the next garbage scow!

EXT. - RANDON'S MANSION, NIGHT

Houdin and Colette climb into their waiting carriage and collapse on the cushions, exhausted.

HOUDIN

Maybe next time I retire, you'll let me stay retired!

The crack of the driver's whip and the carriage CLATTERS off down the stone street.

MATCH SOUND DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE, NIGHT

The CLATTERING becomes the RUMBLING of dozens of carriages, as Houdin's audience arrives. Hundreds of Arab Men and French Gentlemen and Ladies pour up the Opera House steps.

INT. - OPERA HOUSE, LOBBY, NIGHT

A detail of Arab Gendarmes in French uniform clears a path for a procession of 30 BERBER MARABOUTS wearing stately robes. Their glares at the Gendarmes tell us they're here against their will.



INT. - OPERA HOUSE / STAGE, NIGHT

Colette peeks through the curtain, sizing up the audience. In the background behind her, Houdin is making last minute preparations.

COLETTE'S POV, THROUGH CURTAIN CRACK

The house is filling up fast. Arab Chieftains and French VIPs have choice seats down front and in the boxes. The Marabouts are in the very first two rows.

COLETTE

Oh my! You won't believe what's sitting down front! Those must be the Berber chieftains.

HOUDIN (O.S.)

How do they look?

COLETTE

Hungry. For YOUR skin.

Up in the Royal Box, Marshal Randon and his matronly wife squash into their seats. Madame Randon is tackily bejeweled and her satin gown is hideous with an overabundance of furbelows and flourishes.

COLETTE

There's the Marshal-Governor and his wife. Someone should teach her how to dress.

HOUDIN (O.S.)

How does he look?

COLETTE'S POV

Randon looks overly pompous in a dress white field-marshal's uniform with more medals, ribbons, and braids than Napoleon himself.

COLETTE

He could be his own parade.

HOUDIN

How do I look?

Colette drops the curtain and turns to Houdin.

COLETTE

Perfect.

COLETTE'S POV

of the Robert-Houdin of legend, a man we've barely glimpsed so far. Any trace of nerves is gone. In white tie and tails, Houdin exudes power and absolute confidence.

Colette kisses Houdin on the lips proudly.

INT. - OPERA HOUSE, NIGHT

In front of the audience, an Arab Stageboy lights the last gas footlight. The audience quiets.

The curtain rises. A bare stage, except for two sawhorses set side by side. To a smattering of polite APPLAUSE, Houdin steps onstage carrying a thin leather PORTFOLIO. He bows and begins his spiel, relaxed and utterly in command.

HOUDIN

Ladies, gentlemen. Marshal-Governor Randon. Madame Randon. Honored guests. Thank you for your gracious welcome. When I was invited here from France, I had very little time to pack my personal belongings. Since I was in a hurry, I grabbed this, my magical portfolio, knowing everything I could possibly use on my journey would fit inside it.

He tosses the portfolio in the air and catches it. He sets it down on the sawhorses, opens it, and peeks in.

HOUDIN

Naturally, I couldn't leave without my pet birds.

He takes out an impossibly large CAGE containing FOUR LIVE DOVES. A few minor oohs and ahs.

HOUDIN

Then I thought, what if I'm lost at night in the Sahara with nothing to read?

Rummaging, he pulls out THICK BOOK after THICK BOOK, chucking them carelessly over his shoulder -- THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD -- until they form an absurdly huge pile. The audience titters.

HOUDIN

Of course, one needs light to read by.

The first real gasp of awe from the audience as Houdin pulls out a brass CANDELABRA on a SIX FOOT STAND with 10 FULLY LIT CANDLES. The audience is flabbergasted. Scattered applause.

HOUDIN

And one can always use a little music to lift the spirit when traveling.

He pulls out a bulky FRENCH HORN and blasts a few sour notes.

Houdin again closes the portfolio and twirls it in the air. Light as a feather. He places it back down on the sawhorses.

HOUDIN

Then, in case of marauders --

Straining a bit, Houdin pulls out two 40-POUND CANNONBALLS. They THUMP to the floor and roll off the end of the stage toward the Marabouts, who are already suspicious and frightened.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

And of course, one should never cross the desert without a knowledgeable trail guide.

Houdin reaches in his magical portfolio one last time and lifts out a CHIMPANZEE! It gives Houdin a kiss on the cheek. The audience bursts into HUGE APPLAUSE!

FLIP WIPE TO:

A massively-built MARABOUT stands before Houdin, dripping with contempt. His Berber accent is very strong.

HOUDIN

So you are the strongest of your people?

MARABOUT

I am stronger than you.

HOUDIN

No longer. By my magic, I will take away your strength.

MARABOUT

You have no power over me.

HOUDIN

No? Then I challenge you to lift this little box.

Houdin sets a small iron box on the stage floor. The Marabout snatches it and waves it overhead, laughing. His fellow Marabouts hoot derisively. Houdin grabs back the box.

HOUDIN

Wait, I am not finished! By the Powers of Mystery, I command all your strength to leave you. You are weaker than the weakest woman. A tiny baby has more strength than you. Now lift the box.

The Marabout tries again -- but the box won't budge.

DISSOLVE THROUGH THE STAGE TRAP DOOR

to Colette, who operates a switch connected by cables to a two foot round ELECTROMAGNET mounted to the underside of the stage.

HOUDIN (O.S.)

Perhaps you are not trying hard enough. Let me show you.

Colette flips the switch off.

ONSTAGE

Houdin reaches down and lifts the box ever so easily. He waves it around, spins it on his finger. The Marabout fumes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MARABOUT

Let me try again.

BENEATH THE STAGE

Colette flips the switch back on. SPARKS crackle.

ONSTAGE

The poor Marabout strains for all he's worth. Sweat pours from his forehead... but the box won't move. He pulls and claws at the box savagely, slipping and falling, even crawling around on the floor to wrest it free. All to no avail. Total humiliation.

The French and Arabs applaud and laugh heartily.

But the Berber Marabouts aren't laughing. Two of them lean together to WHISPER frenziedly, not taking their eyes off Houdin.

FLIP WIPE TO:

A SURLY MARABOUT, desirous of killing a Frenchman, stands center stage and aims an antique PISTOL point blank at Houdin's heart.

An APPLE sits on a table behind the Surly Marabout. Houdin faces his would-be executioner without fear.

The Surly Marabout pulls the trigger! As the pistol FIRES, Houdin simultaneously points to the apple. One side of the apple EXPLODES!

Houdin walks back, picks up the apple, slices it open.

CLOSE-UP ON

the apple, as Houdin extracts a LEAD BALL and holds it up for all to see. The Marabout backs off, afraid.

Thunderous APPLAUSE and CHEERS!

FLIP WIPE TO:

Our final trick. Houdin welcomes a MOORISH CHIEFTAIN onstage. His rich robes and headdress bespeak great wealth and rank.

Gastinot, hamming shamelessly to his friends, helps Houdin lay a wide wooden plank across the sawhorses used earlier. The two Frenchmen guide the Chieftain up onto the plank.

Houdin brings over a four foot high PAPIER-MACHE CONE.

ONE CONTINUOUS SHOT

As instructed, the Moorish Chieftain squats down on the plank. Houdin places the cone over him.

Houdin and Gastinot each grab one end of the plank and lift. Hobbling under the weight, they carry the plank and cone downstage to the footlights, and...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SLOW-MOTION

...they HEAVE the plank towards the audience. The Cone flies out toward the Marabouts, REVEALING...

The plank is bare! The Moor has vanished into thin air!

STILL SLOW-MOTION

Houdin and Gastinot let the plank drop heavily to the hardwood floor. The SLOWED CRASH SOUND echoes surreally.

BACK TO REAL TIME

Amazed silence. Then a Marabout in the audience leaps to his feet and screams.

MARABOUT

Shaitan! Shaitan!

More horrified Berbers pick up the same cry. Within seconds, all the Berber Marabouts and most of the Arabs panic out of their seats. Pointing accusingly at Houdin and caterwauling, they scramble over each other to escape the devil onstage!

BERBERS/ARABS

Shaitan!/Aieeee!/Djenoum!/Aissaoua!

INT. - OPERA HOUSE LOBBY, CONTINUOUS

Screaming pandemonium as the Berbers and Arabs burst out the doors.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE, CONTINUOUS

Those leading the stampede stop in shock.

THEIR POV

of the "vanished" Chieftain standing at the front of the steps, looking around dazed ("How did I get here?!")

As the mob crowds around him, all asking questions at once, the Moor simply shakes his head -- he has no answers to offer.

The two Whispering Marabouts, still suspicious, stand back from the throng. They confer, then one slips off down the street.

INT. - OPERA HOUSE, NIGHT

Houdin stands alone onstage, facing his decimated audience. A smattering of nervous APPLAUSE begins, then swells into a thundering standing ovation with shouts of "Bravo! Bravo!"

But Houdin doesn't even acknowledge the adulation of his audience. He just folds his arms across his chest and stares defiantly up at Randon in the royal box. ("Well?")

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Even Madame Randon is on her feet applauding. But Randon just stares back at Houdin, not budging from his chair, not moving a muscle.

Then, finally, Randon nods slowly in agreement. The magician has proved his boast.

Houdin half-bows in acknowledgement, then turns back to accept the cheers of his adoring audience.

EXT. - SIDI BEL-ABBES, HOTBOX, DAY

Blazing sun overhead as two Legion Guards drag Darcy's unconscious, emaciated body out of the hotbox.

ANGLE ON

Bartolote, high on the ramparts, watching worriedly.

EXT. - GRAND COURTYARD, RANDON'S MANSION, DAY

From 20 seated Arab dignitaries, THREE CHIEFTAINS step forward to present Houdin with an ornate scroll and treasures of gold and silver. Houdin bows and accepts the gifts with a few words in Arabic.

INT. - COURTYARD PORTICO, RANDON'S MANSION, DAY

Houdin's weary, but remains gracious to the very end of a tedious receiving line. Randon, ever the gushing politician, basks in Houdin's reflected glory, all smiles and small talk as the lavishly robed Arab Chieftains file by.

As the very last VIP approaches, Randon's political grin broadens. He steps forward to introduce a handsome young Sheik.

RANDON

Houdin, my good friend. May I introduce Sheik Rachid Mohammed al-Bakhar. The son of the Bash-Aga of the D'Jendel, Bou-Allem.

HOUDIN

I am honored.

RACHID

I bring blessings from my father. He has heard of the many wondrous things you have done.

RANDON

Many consider Bou-Allem to be the single most powerful Arab in North Africa.

HOUDIN

(genuinely intrigued)  
Is that so?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

5

RACHID

Marshal Randon exaggerates. It is true my father has great wealth, but whatever power he has proceeds from his wisdom, which is respected by rich and poor alike.

RANDON

Sheik Rachid here has a proposition I'd like you to consider.

INT. - RANDON'S OFFICE, DAY

Houdin and Rachid converse while Randon hovers, ready to goose the discussion along. Gastinot stands apart with Colette.

RACHID

Thus my father could discern with his own eyes the power of French magic.

HOUDIN

As I've taken pains to explain to the other chieftains, my "magic" is no more than human cleverness. Neither I nor the Kabyles are gods. Can Bou-Allem be made to understand this point?

RACHID

My father seeks only the truth.

HOUDIN

Do I conclude from your invitation there will be Kabyle sorcerers present as well?

RACHID

Only one. The great marabout Zoras al Khatim.

A conversation stopper. Houdin glances over Rachid's head at Colette. Alarmed, she shakes her head ever so slightly in warning.

HOUDIN

And just where is this winter palace of Bou-Allem?

RACHID

At Tiffelfel.

GASTINOT

A charming spot. Just over the Aures Mountains. Along a lovely river. Date palms, olive groves, clean desert air sweeping up off the Sahara... It will be like going on holiday.

HOUDIN

I'm sure it's bliss itself. But if I studied my maps correctly, wouldn't we have to pass through Berber territory?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He crosses to the wall to examine a huge framed map of Algeria.

RANDON

(laughing it off)

I assure you, there's not the slightest danger. Sheik al-Bakhar and five of his cousins will ride with you to guarantee safe conduct. No rebels would dare attack Arab nobility of their rank.

GASTINOT

Naturally, a small Legion detachment will be provided as escort. A symbolic presence, really.

HOUDIN

If there's no danger, why a military escort at all? And why the Legion rather than the French Army?

GASTINOT

Um, yes, this is, you see, this sort of task really is more the Legion's domain. We wouldn't want to infringe on their mission. Protocol and all that.

None of this fools Houdin.

HOUDIN

I'll go to Tiffelfel. On one condition.

RANDON

Which is?

HOUDIN

(to Rachid)

No disrespect to you and your cousins, but -- (to Randon) I want a full company of Legion cavalry with me.

RANDON

Jean-Pierre, my friend. You really are making too much of this. This is a quiet diplomatic peace mission. I assure you--

HOUDIN

I don't want your assurances. I want adequate military protection, or else I don't go. And I choose the commanding officer.

Randon squirms. Houdin unflinchingly waits for his answer.

EXT. - ALGIERS STREETS, DAY

A company of 25 LEGIONNAIRES rides in formation through the streets. DARCY rides in front, still a bit thin from his ordeal, but otherwise recovered and fit. Just behind him, in ranks, rides Bartolote.



EXT. - HOTEL D'ORIENT, DAY

Darcy rides up to the hotel by himself, pushing his way through the beggars and cabbies to dismount. Suddenly Houdin bursts out of the hotel. The two men embrace joyfully.

EXT. - ARAB COFFEE HOUSE, DAY

Houdin and Darcy are the only Europeans in the dark, men-only establishment. They confer over friendly cups of steaming coffee. Houdin is revitalized, brimming with zeal for his mission.

DARCY

You realize if you fail to impress Bou-Allem, you only make Zoras stronger than he already is.

HOUDIN

I know what I can do. I doubted myself before, but no longer. This is why I came to North Africa. It finally makes sense to me.

DARCY

At the very least, you shouldn't drag Madame Houdin along. It's very foolish to bring her.

HOUDIN

She insists. Besides, if you were married to her, you'd do foolish things, too.

Darcy knows this is true. Uncomfortable, he nods and sips his coffee.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE CARRIAGE YARD, DAY

Behind the opera house. Arab SERVANTS load Houdin's equipment into a wagon under Houdin's supervision. There's no way all the crates and boxes are going to fit. Darcy leans against a post, offering free advice.

DARCY

You know Randon's just using you to curry favor with Bou-Allem. If something goes wrong, he'll be the first to disown any part in this.

HOUDIN

The man's a snake. I know. (to the servants loading the wagon) Wait. That one stays -- take it off.

The servants comply.

DARCY

As for the barbarians, they define treachery and deceit. We'll probably fight off an ambush at every turn.

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

If you'd rather stay home...

DARCY

("Are you kidding?")

This is what I live for.

EXT. - OPERA HOUSE, DAY

Finally loaded, Houdin's wagon rolls past the opera house, pulled by a team of four horses with Bartolote at the reins.

CLOSE-UP ON

The wagon's WHEEL, spinning through the streets of Algiers.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

EXT. - DESOLATE FOOTHILLS, DAY

The wagon, loaded with equipment and supplies, is rolling along a bone-dry riverbed. Jagged cave-riddled cliffs loom on either side. Six royal Arab ESCORTS, including Rachid, ride Camels and Horses at the front of the wagon. The Legion Calvary brings up the rear.

Bartolote drives the wagon. Next to him, Colette shades herself with a parasol.

Houdin and Darcy ride alongside the wagon. Darcy's sharp eyes constantly scour the terrain for signs of danger.

HOUDIN

Who could exist out here in this Godforsaken wilderness?

DARCY

You'd be surprised. See those caves? (pointing) This whole area was once a killing ground for the hashashim. They regularly preyed on travelers who thought as you.

COLETTE

The who?

DARCY

An order of fanatics devoted to the art of political murder. That's where our word 'assassin' comes from. Assassin -- hashashim.

HOUDIN

Shouldn't we be moving a bit faster then?

COLETTE

You're not afraid, are you, husband? (looking at Darcy) I'm not afraid.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

I wouldn't worry. The Assassins died out four centuries ago. (gesturing) Their ancient fortress is about a day's journey east of here. Built into the side of a mountain. The Kabyles won't even go near it.

HOUDIN

Why not?

DARCY

Ghosts.

Houdin snorts in scorn.

COLETTE

I'd like to see it. Would you take me there?

DARCY

Do you believe in ghosts?

COLETTE

I will if you want me to.

Houdin raises an eyebrow at Colette's flirting. Having gotten her husband's attention, Colette smiles with a trace of smugness.

EXT. - HIGH DESERT, SUNSET

Tired and sweaty, the party is stopped at a stone well. Several soldiers haul up goatskins of water for the horses.

Darcy brings a ladle of water over to Colette, alone in the wagon.

COLETTE

You're so thoughtful, Captain -- Trey. Thank you.

She drinks deeply. Darcy can't take his eyes off her. Their hands touch as she hands back the ladle -- and they're both aware of it.

COLETTE

(flirtatiously)

You must have broken some hearts when you left America.

DARCY

Not a one. I never learned how.

COLETTE

That's hard to believe.

She stands in the wagon, holds out her hand to be helped down. Instead, Darcy takes her firmly by the waist and lifts her down inches in front of him. She doesn't step away.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLETTE

You've never told me why you joined  
the Legion.

DARCY

You're right. I never did.

He strides away, carrying the ladle back to the soldiers.

COLETTE

(taking it as an affront)  
Well.

EXT. - HIGH DESERT CAMPSITE, NIGHT

The caravan has formed camp in the high desert country. Most of the party has bedded down. A few Legionnaires guard the camp perimeter.

Colette brings a plate of stew to Bartolote, who sits by a fire cleaning his pistol.

COLETTE

Would you care to finish mine,  
Corporal? I've had all I can eat.

Bartolote hesitates, then takes the plate and starts wolfing the food down. Colette perches next to him, leaning on a rock.

COLETTE

I'm curious. What made Captain Darcy  
enlist in the Legion?

BARTOLOTE

(mouth full)  
I have no idea.

COLETTE

Well, what made you join?

BARTOLOTE

The desire not to answer questions.

COLETTE

One hears such intriguing, even  
romantic stories about men who run  
away and join the Legion. Affairs of  
love gone wrong... broken hearts left  
behind... painful memories...

BARTOLOTE

If you must know, I killed a man.

Colette is struck speechless. It takes her a second to recover.

COLETTE

You...This- this man you killed. Was he  
a bad man? He must have deserved it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Bartolote plunks his fork down. He looks hard at Colette as he punishes her with the facts.

BARTOLOTE

It was a priest. (pausing to let the shock register) In Seville. He caught me robbing his church and I killed him. I was sentenced to the gallows, but I escaped. That's when I joined the Legion.

Colette's fascination has turned to revulsion, as she struggles to square her experience with Bartolote with this sordid picture.

BARTOLOTE

Not so romantic, is it?

COLETTE

But you don't seem to be the type of man to... I mean, who would...

BARTOLOTE

There's a bit of killer in all of us. I was blind drunk one night and it came out in me.

COLETTE

There you are! You weren't yourself when you committed the crime.

BARTOLOTE

I knew what I was doing. I just didn't have the courage to face my punishment. That's the way it is with all of us. And don't think Captain Darcy over there is any different.

COLETTE

He's not a murderer!

BARTOLOTE

How do you know? He could be.

Colette doesn't know. In doubt, she gazes across the camp at Darcy.

BARTOLOTE

Whatever he's done, it doesn't matter. Because that's what the Legion is. Home when nobody else on earth will take you.

Bartolote's eyes deaden as he stares into the campfire. We sense torturous images, impossible to erase, tumbling through his mind.

SLOW ZOOM TO

Bartolote through the smoke and flickering of the fire.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARTOLOTE

You start over. New name, no questions asked. The Legion -- they don't care what you've done. All's they demand is that you obey orders and fight. If you're lucky, you get something decent to fight for. But even so we don't much care one way or the other. And if you do take a bullet in the gut or in the chest, you don't complain because you knew all along you had it coming. So you keep fighting and hope another bullet comes along to finish the job so's you don't suffer long.

HOLD ON

Colette absorbing this bleak scenario, pity and horror on her face.

EXT. - CLIFFS OVER TIFFELFEL, DAY

The wagon rolls forward uphill, then stops at the crest of the cliff. Gasps from all of the party.

THEIR POV OF TIFFELFEL - WIDE ANGLE

A spectacular view down 2000 feet to the end of a river canyon opening out to the desert beyond. A tiny farming village lies alongside a winding river. Date palms and orange groves stop abruptly at the edge of the barren sand dunes of the Sahara.

Dominating the settlement is a magnificent 100-room palace straight out of an Arabian fairy tale, replete with domes and minarets.

EXT. - BOU-ALLEM'S PALACE, DAY

The caravan's dwarfed by the fortified gates of the palace. Behind them, the valley and white cliffs thousands of feet high. The gates swing open, revealing an exotic paradise of palm trees and fountains.

INT. - BOU-ALLEM'S PALACE, DAY

BOU-ALLEM leads Houdin, Colette and Darcy through his opulent palace, in and out of courtyards and rooms, all of which drip with extravagance and luxury, with myriads of servants everywhere.

Bou-Allem, 60ish, is strong and handsome -- a devout lion of Islam who obviously enjoys his wealth, but also embodies graciousness, wisdom, and honor.

CONSTANTLY MOVING

BOU-ALLEM

Tell me, my friend. What do you think of Arab culture. Do you consider us uncivilized savages?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

I hardly think the culture that invented the astrolabe and the geomantic calculator qualifies as uncivilized.

BOU-ALLEM

(pleased)

You do not speak like other Europeans. What else do you admire about us?

HOUDIN

Simple things. I know the numbers I write are Arabic numbers. The star charts which take ships across great oceans are Arabic star charts. I know that in the year of my Lord 825, an Arab wrote the first book on algebra for the common man while the French aristocracy was trying to keep the peasants from learning how to read. I respect your elevation of knowledge over superstition, design over chaos. In short, Your Eminence, I admire so much of your culture that, for the betterment of my countrymen, I hope to take some home with me when I depart.

BOU-ALLEM

You have studied our ways. That is good. I too respect many things the Europeans have brought to our land. It would be a shame if we could not continue to live together in peace.

Bou-Allem leads them up an open stairway to an equally opulent guest wing. Their voices echo off the exquisite tilework of the palace walls.

STILL MOVING

HOUDIN

I quite agree. Now it is my turn to ask you a question, Bou-Allem. I understand my opponent, Zoras al Khatim, claims to speak for God. Do you believe this to be true?

BOU-ALLEM

(answering with care)

Truth is hard to discern. I do not want to believe what he says, but I cannot argue with divine miracles.

HOUDIN

Neither can I. But if I show you the falseness of his miracles, will you accept the falseness of his character?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BOU-ALLEM

As a man of honor, yes. But I must warn you. If you do not prevail, and should Zoras persuade me you are indeed the enemy of Allah, it will be my duty to kill you. Please do not take it personally.

Houdin swallows his unease. Nothing like a polite death threat. At the top of the stairs, Bou-Allem leads them around a final corner.

BOU-ALLEM

And here are your suites. The concubines are just down the hall...

INT. - PALACE DINING HALL, NIGHT

EXTREME CLOSE-UP ON

the undulating naked belly of Bou-Allem's best BELLY DANCER. Throbbing drums and frenzied music help make her performance irresistably erotic.

WIDEN TO REVEAL

The veiled Belly Dancer performing before Bou-Allem, Rachid, and the guests of honor -- Houdin, Colette and Darcy. All recline on pillows before the remains of an elaborate feast.

Bartolote and the other Legionnaires sit in spots of lesser honor, but they can still see enough to make them drool.

Colette's so embarrassed at the dancer's skimpy silk-and-sequins attire, she doesn't know where to rest her eyes. Houdin and Darcy don't seem to have the same problem.

HOUDIN

She is absolutely lovely, Bou-Allem.

BOU-ALLEM

She is too thin. One would think I did not feed her.

COLETTE

Your Eminence. May I ask a question?

BOU-ALLEM

Of course.

COLETTE

Why do you require your women to veil their faces?

The Dancer flaunts her attributes inches away from Houdin's nose.

BOU-ALLEM

(\*Isn't it obvious?\*)

Modesty.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

ZOOM IN

to the Belly Dancer's shimmying midriff...and

ZOOM OUT TO REVEAL

it's a few minutes later and a different Belly Dancer. Several dancing girls now perform at a more discreet distance.

HOUDIN

Tell me, Your Eminence, how many children do you have?

BOU-ALLEM

(proudly)

I have 63 sons and 147 grandsons.

COLETTE

And how many daughters and granddaughters?

Bou-Allem has never been asked this question before.

BOU-ALLEM

I have no idea.

COLETTE

What?! You don't even bother to count your female children?

HOUDIN

Colette--!

COLETTE

Do you even know how many wives you have?

BOU-ALLEM

Thirty-five. No-- Thirty-six.

HOUDIN

Please forgive my wife. She talks more than she should.

BOU-ALLEM

True. But I like her spirit. In fact, my friend, I will offer you a trade. Your wife for any two of my concubines.

COLETTE

(to Houdin, threatening)

Don't entertain even the thought.

BOU-ALLEM

And I will throw in three black racing camels.

All Bou-Allem's servants nearby react with loud expressions of awe.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Hmmm.

COLETTE

Jean-Pierre!

DARCY

(to Houdin)

It's a very generous offer.

HOUDIN

Three black camels, you say?

COLETTE

(to both men)

This is not funny.

HOUDIN

Let me think it over.

BOU-ALLEM

Don't think too long, my friend.  
 Very few women are worth three black  
 camels. Very few are even worth two.

COLETTE

(to Houdin)

The second we get home!...

Just then, a Servant enters and whispers in Bou-Allem's ear.  
 Bou-Allem claps his hands twice. The dancers stop at once, bow  
 to their master and run off. The music continues, softer.

BOU-ALLEM

Zoras al Khatim's holy disciples  
 have arrived.

HOUDIN

Only his disciples?

BOU-ALLEM

Zoras is to arrive later. By magic.

COLETTE

By magic in a pig's eye!

BOU-ALLEM

(to Houdin)

She will be so fun to tame.

EXT. - PALACE COURTYARD, NIGHT

A blazing bonfire, licking higher than the courtyard walls.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

Nine KABYLE DERVISHES dancing wildly around the fire, chanting and  
 wailing to madly pounding DRUMS.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Houdin reclines next to Bou-Allem, with Colette and Darcy just behind them. Bou-Allem's entire household is there, watching.

Suddenly the drums stop. The Dervishes all bow low toward the fire. All eyes are on the flames.

LOOKING INTO THE FIRE

First nothing. Then a vague outline appears at the bottom. A HOODED SHADOW rises to man height. The Shadow walks forward.

Colette's eyes widen in fear. She glances at Houdin.

Houdin is impassive. His eyes narrow as he studies the apparition moving inside the flames.

HOUDIN'S POV

as ZORAS AL KHATIM steps out of the bonfire, his eyes closed, as if in a trance. He swivels slowly to face Bou-Allem, then his eyes pop open wide, as if he's returning to the living. Zoras kneels loyally before Bou-Allem.

ZORAS

(in Arabic)

Your Eminence. I have come.

Bou-Allem gestures Zoras to rise, then leads him to Houdin. Zoras addresses Houdin respectfully in Arabic. Bou-Allem translates.

BOU-ALLEM

The great marabout Zoras al Khatim is honored to meet the celebrated French marabout Robert-Houdin. He looks forward to teaching you the power of Allah.

HOUDIN

Please ask him how he wishes to be addressed, that I may pay him the proper respect?

Bou-Allem starts to translate. Zoras lifts his hand to interrupt.

ZORAS

You may call me simply Zoras. It means "The Learned One."

Greatly startled, Bou-Allem mutters fearfully to himself in Arabic.

HOUDIN

I had been told on good authority you did not speak any European tongue.

ZORAS

It is true. I did not until this very moment when my God revealed to me by a powerful miracle your entire language in all its dimension. Is it not an amazement?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Amazement seems too light a word.

ANGLE BEHIND HOUDIN

to Colette and Darcy.

COLETTE

How about the word 'lie'?!

DARCY

Shhhh.

ZORAS

Would it not be a fair test to now ask your Christian god to reveal to you the Berber language in a similar manner? This way we shall know whose God is the more powerful.

HOUDIN

If the Almighty wishes me to speak Berber, I presume He'll put me in touch with a good language teacher.

ZORAS

As I expected. He runs from my challenge.

BOU-ALLEM

Come, my new friend Robert-Houdin. It is time for Zoras and his disciples to astound you with their wonders. Then you must prove to me if these are not indeed genuine signs and miracles.

HOUDIN

I can't wait.

EXT. - PALACE COURTYARD, NIGHT

ANGLE PAST

sizzling coals, red-hot and glowing...to a pair of BARE FEET stepping forward onto the coals. We hear the HISS as the flesh hits the embers.

WIDEN TO REVEAL

Zoras walking slowly across the bed of coals.

DISSOLVE TO:

Zoras pulls a red-hot iron from the coals. He ceremoniously places it on his tongue, then runs it down the front of his body.

Houdin studiously takes in every detail.

DISSOLVE TO:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Zoras shows Bou-Allem a screened wooden box. He opens it. The box is full of live SCORPIONS!

Zoras reaches into the box and pulls out a handful of the poisonous creatures. Slowly, he places the scorpions in his mouth!

Several of Bou-Allem's wives and concubines flee. Colette looks away, sick. Darcy, riveted with disgust, wrenches his eyes away.

COLETTE  
(shaky)

I thought I was prepared for anything.  
What is he?

DARCY  
(trying to convince himself)

Houdin says he's just a man.

Suddenly Colette and Darcy look down and realize they're holding hands, squeezing tightly, in fact. Embarrassed, they let go. Colette quickly glances at Houdin. He hasn't noticed.

Smugly sure he's already won, Zoras begins his grisly finale. He ritualistically draws a sword.

One of his disciples kneels, head to the floor, and presents his arms. Zoras slashes at the man's arm with the blade, leaving several bloody gashes.

Zoras steps hautilly before Bou-Allem. His eyes roll upward into the whites...

...as he slowly STABS the sword from right to left through his stomach! Blood drips from both the entry and exit wounds.

Darcy can't look anymore. Even Houdin winces a bit.

Zoras exhibits neither pain nor concern. Just as slowly, he withdraws the sword and proudly waves the blade high in the air.

Colette's face is buried in her hands. She leans forward to Houdin.

COLETTE  
Am I missing anything? Please say yes.

HOUDIN  
It's over. It's my turn.

BOU-ALLEM  
My friend, you must admit, these are truly signs of great wonder.

HOUDIN  
They are tricks. Every one of them.

BOU-ALLEM  
Tricks? The sword, the scorpions -- these are tricks?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Bring me the scorpions.

Bou-Allem snaps his fingers. A Servant fetches Zoras's box.

Houdin rolls up his right sleeve. He opens the box lid and sticks his right hand inside. He lifts out several scorpions, lets them run over his bare arm. Bou-Allem shudders.

Houdin shakes the scorpions back into the box, then rummages in a small leather pouch. He lifts out a small glass box containing a single live scorpion.

HOUDIN

This is a real scorpion. One whose poison sac has not been surgically removed.

Houdin opens the lid dumps his scorpion into Zoras's collection.

HOUDIN

Zoras. I defy you to put your hand in the box once more. Show me a miracle.

Zoras doesn't move. In Arabic, Bou-Allem questions the Marabout's hesitation. Zoras consults two disciples, then quickly announces...

ZORAS

This scorpion has not been blessed by Allah. To touch it would defile me.

HOUDIN

How convenient.

BOU-ALLEM

What about walking through the fire? On the hot coals?

ZORAS

Can you do the same?

HOUDIN

Let's find out. Bring me the hottest coal in the fire.

Zoras barks out an order in Berber. A Disciple uses tongs to pluck out a fiery coal and bring it to Houdin.

Houdin fearlessly takes the smoking coal between his fingers. He rolls it around in his palm without harm. Bou-Allem is confused.

HOUDIN

There is no magic here. It is all fakery. A lie. As is Zoras's claim to be a holy man.

BOU-ALLEM

Strong words. Then show me how this 'fakery' is done.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

As you wish. Will you permit my wife to touch her fingers to your royal hands?

BOU-ALLEM

I have no objections.

Colette, who has been pouring out lotion from a glass bottle, scoots forward and rubs her hands all over Bou-Allem's.

HOUDIN

A simple paste of common ingredients. Invisible on the skin, it forms a shield that protects against heat.

Houdin picks up the hot coal.

HOUDIN

Hold out your hand. This will not hurt you.

Bou-Allem reluctantly holds out a clenched fist.

BOU-ALLEM

You realize what happens if I am burned.

HOUDIN

The offer of two concubines and three black camels is off. Trust me. Open your fist.

Colette gently strokes Bou-Allem's fist to coax it open. Bou-Allem cringes in anticipation of pain as Houdin drops the coal into his hand. But amazingly...

BOU-ALLEM

I feel nothing. Perhaps the coal is no longer hot.

HOUDIN

One way to test that.

Houdin wads up a piece of paper and places it on top of the coal in Bou-Allem's hand. The paper bursts into a harmless ball of flame.

BOU-ALLEM

You speak the truth!

HOUDIN

Congratulations, Your Eminence, on your promotion to the rank of marabout.

Bou-Allem delights in his new toy like a child, bouncing the burning paper from hand to hand. He stands up and shows off to all his attending servants who applaud him.

Zoras can stand this no longer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ZORAS

He deceives you! I prayed that Your Eminence would not be harmed by the fire! The Frenchman claims the glory for my magic! Let him do something of himself!

Houdin abruptly stands. His commanding voice echoes off the walls.

HOUDIN

Enough of your lies, Zoras! You want magic, you say? True magic?

Houdin thrusts up both arms. The air above the courtyard EXPLODES with a boom into STREAKS OF PHOSPHORESCENT LIGHT.

Zoras' disciples panic, babbling, looking for a place to hide. Zoras screeches at them to shut up.

Houdin gives Colette his hand and she rises. He waves to some of Bou-Allem's servants, who slide a small wooden platform before Bou-Allem and Zoras.

On the platform, a plank is held up at the corners by four tall poles, 5' high. Colette steps up onto the platform. With Houdin's assistance, she climbs onto the plank and lies flat on her back.

HOUDIN

Zoras shows you illusions of fire, poison, wickedness. I, instead, wish to bring you peace, relaxation, a feeling of being lighter than air itself.

With grand style, Houdin removes the first pole. Colette remains horizontal.

Houdin holds that pole aloft for effect, then hurls it into the bonfire. With similar pomp, he removes the next pole. Colette still floats in mid-air.

Bou-Allem's mouth hangs wide open. Zoras, worried for the first time, begins watching Bou-Allem's reactions instead of the illusion.

Houdin removes the final two poles. He slides the plank itself out from under Colette, and throws them all into the fire.

Colette hangs in the air, completely unsupported!

Suddenly Zoras springs forward towards the stage, lunging at Colette. Just as he's about to bound on to the platform...

Darcy blocks his path, waving his sword point at Zoras' chest, forcing him back from the platform.

Bou-Allem rebukes Zoras in Arabic. Zoras slinks back to his place, rage steaming from every pore.

Houdin snaps his fingers toward Darcy's sword.

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Captain, may I?

Darcy lobs his sword by the hilt. Houdin catches it with panache.

Houdin circles the levitated Colette, passing the sword blade above, beneath, around, in front of, behind, and alongside her at every possible angle. No strings. No supports.

Bou-Allem begins chuckling with sheer delight. He's very impressed.

At last, Houdin takes Colette's hand and guides her down to the platform. She curtseys to Bou-Allem, then proudly returns to her seat.

BOU-ALLEM

Zoras. Can you match this magic?

ZORAS

French-man. I have heard that by magic you can make yourself invulnerable to a bullet.

BOU-ALLEM

Can this be true?

HOUDIN

I have done this in the past. Yes.

On cue, a Dervish hands Zoras two dueling pistols.

ZORAS

Then I challenge you to a duel. Let me shoot at you now with one of these pistols. If you do not die, then I give you permission to shoot at me. (to Bou-Allem) By this you shall know whom Allah will favor.

Naked fear on Colette's face. Bou-Allem, noting Colette's reaction, turns sympathetically to Houdin.

BOU-ALLEM

My friend. I do not think this is an honorable test. You have my permission to refuse it.

Houdin just stares at Zoras, thinking intently. A moment of tension.

HOUDIN

On the contrary. I accept the challenge.

COLETTE

(a whispered gulp)

No!!

HOUDIN

However, for such strong magic, defying the very hand of death itself, I require six hours at prayers.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BOU-ALLEM

Is this acceptable to Zoras?

ZORAS

Six hours should be long enough for you to prepare to die.

INT. - PALACE STAIRCASE, NIGHT

Bou-Allem tarries at the foot of the stairs with Houdin and Colette. He places his hand on Houdin's shoulder.

BOU-ALLEM

(genuinely concerned)

My friend. Is there anything you require for your meditations? You have only to ask.

HOUDIN

A secure room with no windows and complete privacy?

BOU-ALLEM

Granted. I shall post my best guards. No one shall disturb your prayers until the sun rises.

INT. - HOUDINS' BEDROOM SUITE, NIGHT

The moment they enter, Houdin starts rummaging intently through his trunks, digging out supplies. He doesn't stop while they talk. Colette trails around the room, desperately hopeful.

COLETTE

So how will you manage it?

HOUDIN

I don't know yet.

This is not what Colette wants to hear.

COLETTE

You mean you haven't chosen which method you're going to use to--

HOUDIN

I mean I don't know yet! (sarcastic)  
I don't think Zoras will let me tamper with his pistols. God but the man's clever. I never saw that coming.

COLETTE

Then what possessed you to say yes?! Your pride again? Is that what this is about?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Colette, this is not helping. If you have any ideas, I'm happy to hear them. Otherwise, leave me alone and let me think.

Houdin keeps working. He dumps candles, chemical bottles, matches -- anything else that's useful -- into a satchel. Colette tries to grab him, slow him down.

COLETTE

Will you stop for one minute?!

Angry, Houdin hurls a deck of cards across the room. It lands on the bed and fans out.

HOUDIN

Colette, I've got six hours to invent a new way to stop a bullet. Maybe we'll talk about this tomorrow.

He opens the door to leave.

COLETTE

(shouting after him)

I hope Zoras has good aim!

He slams the door closed behind him, leaving Colette alone and furious.

INT. - STAIRWAY, BOU-ALLEM'S PALACE, NIGHT

Houdin storms down the stairs.

INT. - HOUDIN'S' BEDROOM SUITE, NIGHT

Colette, still fuming, yanks off her jewelry piece by piece and flings it on the bed.

She kicks off her shoes and begins ripping off her clothes, all the way down to her corset and pantalettes. She unpins her hair and shakes it free.

Standing before a full-length mirror, she calms down a bit and curiously considers her reflection.

MIRROR SHOT -- COLETTE

She pushes her hands up through her hair and slowly swivels her torso erotically like a bellydancer.

Faint bellydancing MUSIC begins to play inside her head. Colette starts humming the dissonant tune.

LOW SHOT, THROUGH A BASKETWEAVE PATTERN

Across the room, Colette shimmies and hums before the mirror.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ANGLE WIDENS AND RISES

As Colette gets lost in her dance, the lid of a tall basket across the room jiggles and falls off. A huge COBRA rises up out of the basket and slithers out onto the floor towards Colette.

Colette is totally unaware of the threat behind her. She continues to shimmy in front of the mirror.

The Cobra stops six feet behind Colette and rears its spectacular hooded head, as if readying to strike...

...But no. Instead, mesmerized by her movements, the snake starts imitating Colette, swaying from side to side.

COLETTE'S POV

As she moves around dancing, she catches a glimpse in the mirror of the swaying Cobra behind her. She freezes! The Cobra hisses.

DARCY (O.S.)

Keep dancing. A slow steady rhythm.

REVEAL

Darcy perched on the windowsill, slowly climbing into the room. Colette is nearly as surprised by him as by the snake.

DARCY

Make him keep his eyes on you.

Colette, terrified, nervously resumes her sinewy dance -- this time for the snake. The Cobra responds by swaying its head from side to side, utterly fascinated.

Colette also resumes humming, as loudly as she can. Darcy draws his sword and creeps around behind the Cobra.

DARCY

Don't waste your breath. Snakes are stone deaf.

Colette stops humming. She keeps dancing.

COLETTE

H-How long've you been spying on me?

DARCY

(still creeping)

I wasn't spying... HAHHH!

Darcy leaps forward! With the quickness of a cobra himself, he swings his sword and severs the Cobra's neck! Colette squeals!

Darcy goes after the Cobra's head, snapping away on the floor.

DARCY

I knocked and you didn't answer. I thought something might be wrong.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He spears the head with the tip of his sword. Though decapitated, the fangs keep biting. Darcy dumps the snake head in the basket. Colette, meanwhile, grabs at some clothing to shield herself.

COLETTE

Are you sure that's the reason? I've heard of men who like to peek at women in their underclothing.

Darcy dumps the snake's long, still-twisting corpse in the basket as well and closes the lid.

DARCY

Madame, I just saved your life. If you weren't so busy auditioning for Bou-Allem's harem, maybe you would have heard me knocking.

COLETTE

I was not auditioning for anyone's harem! The very idea repulses me.

DARCY

Right.

Darcy quickly searches the room, making a mess, looking through luggage, pulling apart bedclothes, poking behind wall hangings with his sword.

COLETTE

What are you doing?! Stop it!

DARCY

I'm not leaving until I know this room is secure.

COLETTE

Get away from there! Those are my private things!

Darcy stabs his knife into a drawer of Colette's dressing table, extracts a hairbrush. He holds it out on the point of his knife.

DARCY

This your private hairbrush?

She angrily seizes the brush. He stabs his knife into the drawer once again. This time he extracts a small deadly viper and holds it out to her dangling on his knife point.

DARCY

This your private asp?

Colette recoils. Darcy cuts up the asp and throws the pieces in the basket as well. He wipes his sword and knife clean on a piece of bed canopy silk before sheathing them.

DARCY

I have to report this to Bou-Allem. You can have your room back now.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He turns towards the door abruptly. Colette blocks his way.

COLETTE  
I'm sorry. I apologize.

DARCY  
Don't bother.

He tries to push past, but Colette grabs his sleeve.

COLETTE  
I said I'm sorry.

She doesn't even realize how hard she is clutching Darcy's arm.

Darcy reaches over and squeezes her wrist, forcefully removing her grip. But having touched her, now he won't let go.

DARCY  
I have to go.

Defiantly, she yanks her wrist free.

COLETTE  
Then go. I'm not stopping you.

He doesn't budge an inch.

COLETTE  
What are you waiting for?

Suddenly, Darcy grabs her around the waist and kisses her hard. Instead of pushing him away, she kisses back with startling ferocity.

Colette starts to pull Darcy's shirt off. Clutching and tearing at each other in feverish passion, they sink to the bed.

They roll frenziedly across the bed, still kissing. Darcy's eyes dart past Colette and abruptly lock onto...

...Houdin's playing cards strewn across the pillow, inches away -- practically slapping him in the face.

Darcy stops cold. He wrenches himself away from Colette and stands up. Colette pushes herself up on her elbows.

COLETTE  
What is it? What's wrong?

Darcy, panting, shakes his head. Summoning all his willpower, he backs away from the bed and rebuttons his shirt.

DARCY  
There are enough people trying to kill your husband tonight already.

Darcy snatches up his sword and exits. Colette starts to sweep the cards off the bed in anger -- then stops as she's overwhelmed by a flood of remorse. Fighting back tears, she clutches a wad of cards to her heart and collapses onto the pillows.

7

INT. - HOUDIN'S PRIVATE ROOM, NIGHT

Houdin works feverishly, his equipment and gadgets spread all over. His powerful ELECTROMAGNET, plugged into its battery, hums faintly.

Houdin fingers Darcy's military pistol and struggles to hold it steady two feet from the Electromagnet. He lets go and the Magnet SNAPS the iron pistol to itself.

He fingers a few lead balls, then tosses them on the Electromagnet with irritation. He catches them as they roll off, not held by the magnetism.

Utterly exhausted, Houdin checks his pocketwatch: 4:38. His time -- maybe his life -- is running short.

Houdin rubs his eyes, runs his hands over his sweaty face. He's gotten nowhere and he's out of ideas.

He forces himself to sit up straight and takes a deep breath. Functioning on sheer will, he opens his chemistry kit.

EXT. - PALACE COURTYARD, SUNRISE

Pink sunlight paints the western end of the courtyard. A peaceful place, with only a tinkling fountain to break the stillness.

People begin gathering in little groups: Bou-Allem and his household. Zoras and his Disciples in the shadows. Darcy, Bartolote and the other Legionnaires.

Colette is conspicuously absent.

Houdin enters the courtyard alone, somewhat tense. He strides over to Bou-Allem.

BOU-ALLEM

My friend. Are you ready?

HOUDIN

Momentarily, Your Eminence.

Houdin crosses to Darcy who seems oddly withdrawn this morning.

HOUDIN

Where's Colette? She should be here.

DARCY

(a beat)

You haven't seen her.

HOUDIN

Last night... we had harsh words.

DARCY

I'm sure that's not it. Perhaps the strain --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

(grabbing the excuse)

--Of course. You're right. The strain.  
(forcing a wry smile) What is it you  
Legionnaires say? "Today is a good day  
to die"?

He starts to turn away, but Darcy grips his arm firmly.

DARCY

Not today.

Houdin turns back to Bou-Allem, but stops as he sees...

HOUDIN'S POV

...Colette. She has come after all. Pale and solemn, she stops  
at the courtyard's edge, alone.

The sight of Colette lifts Houdin's spirits. Suddenly energized,  
he approaches Zoras and Bou-Allem.

ZORAS

Is the lying Frenchman ready to prove  
that he is a god?

HOUDIN

You grow tiresome, Zoras. Produce  
your weapons.

Zoras lays his two pistols on a small table, next to a horn of  
gunpowder, a handful of lead bullets, wadding, and a smooth stick.

HOUDIN

Load the pistols and give them to  
Bou-Allem to test.

ZORAS

(as he loads the guns)  
You waste time, Frenchman. These  
guns have not left my side.

Zoras hands the loaded pistols to Bou-Allem.

BOU-ALLEM

And what do you wish me to do?

HOUDIN

Shoot them. Prove the vents are clear  
and the pistols are in working order.

Bou-Allem fires the weapons into the dirt. An ear-splitting CRACK!  
Then another CRACK! Both shots raise puffs of dust.

BOU-ALLEM

I am satisfied. They are real.

He sets the pistols on the table.

(CONTINUED)



(CONTINUED)

HOUDIN

Again, Zoras. This time may I suggest  
a double charge of powder?

Zoras glowers and pours gunpowder into each chamber.

HOUDIN

Now select two bullets and carve your  
mark into the lead.

Zoras chooses his bullets carefully, then draws a fearsome knife.

CLOSE-UP ON

each lead ball as Zoras carves a distinctive evil-looking mark.

HOUDIN

Give me the bullets.

Houdin holds out his hand. Zoras is reluctant.

BOU-ALLEM

Do as he says.

Zoras hands them over suspiciously. Houdin delicately pinches each  
bullet between thumb and index finger, so they're visible to everyone.

HOUDIN

See the marks Zoras has made, so  
that you may recognize his bullets.

He carries the bullets around in a circle to show the carved marks  
to all the important witnesses, starting with Bou-Allem. Then he  
returns to the table.

With everyone's eyes glued to his movements, Houdin openly slides a  
bullet into the chamber of each pistol. There appear to be no tricks.

HOUDIN

Would 'The Learned One' like to  
complete the loading?

Zoras eagerly takes over.

ZORAS

Infidel. You will soon burn in  
the deepest pits of hell.

HOUDIN

I'll say hello to your father.

Zoras sets down one gun, keeps the other.

HOUDIN

I remind you all of our agreement.  
First he fires at me with a weapon  
of his choice. If I live, I have  
the privilege of firing at him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BOU-ALLEM

That is the bargain.

ZORAS

You shall not fire the second shot,  
French-man.

HOUDIN

You shall stand there. I shall stand  
there, ten paces away. Do you think  
you can hit me from that distance?

Zoras laughs wickedly with his disciples. As far as they're  
concerned, they've won.

Houdin strips bare to the waist, handing his garments to a  
servant. He is in remarkably fit shape.

Zoras and Houdin walk to their spots. Houdin stands at rigid  
attention, steeling himself for the test. Zoras, milking his  
moment of triumph for all it's worth, slowly aims the pistol.

ZORAS

Bou-Allem! Behold the power of  
Allah, who destroys all those who  
mock his name!

Colette closes her eyes.

Zoras fires! CRACK!

Houdin rocks backward, as if hit -- then raises his arms above his  
head, rotating to show he's unharmed. Zoras and his disciples  
stare in disbelief. Zoras looks at his pistol as if betrayed.

Houdin grins, revealing...the BULLET caught between his teeth!

Bou-Allem's household explodes in cheers! Darcy and Bartolote  
pound each other on the back in relief. Colette, her eyes open  
again, smiles weakly.

Houdin takes the lead ball from his teeth, offers it to Bou-Allem.  
Bou-Allem examines it and joyfully proclaims...

BOU-ALLEM

It is the same mark!

Darcy joins Colette, who is now glowing with pride.

DARCY

How did he do it?

COLETTE

The question is, how could I have  
doubted him?

Incensed, Zoras runs back to the table for the other pistol. Houdin  
lunges, grabbing it out from under Zoras' hand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

No-no-no. We had an agreement.  
It's my turn.

ZORAS

It was a trick.

HOUDIN

Then let me see you perform the  
same trick.

Zoras starts backing away. Houdin follows him around the courtyard, maintaining his 10-pace distance, aiming the pistol at Zoras' face until Zoras, quaking, backs into the corner of the courtyard wall.

ZORAS

I... I cannot.

HOUDIN

Am I a true marabout? Is French  
magic greater than Kabyle magic?

ZORAS

(bitterly)

Y-you are greater. Your magic is true.

HOUDIN

Then I will show you still more of it.  
Turn your eyes to that wall.

Zoras slowly turns his head sideways.

HOUDIN

Only by French mercy do I spare your  
miserable life. Behold!

Houdin swings the pistol away from Zoras' head and aims straight at the wall instead. He fires. CRACK!

The bullet strikes the whitewashed wall... and a splattering of BLOOD runs down the wall.

A Dervish stumbles over to the wall to examine the blood. He runs his finger across it, shuddering, then touches a dab to his tongue.

Terror fills the Dervish's eyes as he tastes real blood. He cries to his comrades, who fall prostrate towards Houdin, wailing for mercy.

HOLD ON

Zoras, black with anger as he sees his followers collapsing in fear.

EXT. - PALACE GATES, DAY

Bou-Allem personally sees off Houdin and his party. Their caravan, ready to roll, waits in the background.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BOU-ALLEM

My friend, I will give you some advice. Do not waste time on your journey back to Algiers. In Zoras, you have made a death enemy.

He kisses Houdin three times on the cheeks.

EXT. - CLIFFS OVER TIFFELFEL, DAY

Moving briskly, Houdin's caravan travels the rim trail atop the white cliffs overlooking Tiffelfel.

EXT. - MOUNTAIN CAMPSITE, NIGHT

Darcy, Houdin, Rachid and a Legionnaire SERGEANT huddle over a survey map by campfire light. Darcy uses his dagger as a pointer.

DARCY

Sergeant LaMartine.

LAMARTINE

Yes sir.

DARCY

I'm placing you in command. Take a dozen men and make haste for Fort Khemis. Here.

HOUDIN

I don't like dividing the party.

RACHID

A very wise idea. Zoras will chase after the wrong enemy.

LAMARTINE

That's a three day ride.

DARCY

It'll take Zoras at least a day, even two, to gather an army of any respectable size. They'll hunt for us first along the main road. We won't be there.

HOUDIN

We were promised safe conduct the entire journey. Protection against our enemies.

DARCY

If you had shot Zoras when you had the chance, you wouldn't have any enemies left.

Stung by the criticism, Houdin nods reluctantly.

EXT. - MOUNTAIN CAMPSITE, DAWN

Two Legionnaires set fire to Houdin's wagon, still partially loaded, and push it over a ridge down into a gully.

Darcy comes over as Houdin watches his precious gear go up in smoke.

HOUDIN

Some of that equipment took years  
to construct.

DARCY

We can't take the wagon where we're  
going, and it would only slow the  
others down.

HOUDIN

You're right, of course. Still...

Sergeant LaMartine rides up to Darcy.

LAMARTINE

All present and accounted for, sir.  
Sheik Rachid asked us to take the camels.

DARCY

Do as he asks. Good luck, Sergeant.

LAMARTINE

The same to you, Captain.

Darcy returns LaMartine's salute.

EXT. - MOUNTAIN TRAIL, SUNRISE

The expedition splits up into two groups. The larger detachment of Legionnaires, including camels, canters down the wide main trail.

Remaining behind on the mountain trail are Darcy, Houdin, Colette, Bartolote, three other Legionnaires, Rachid, and his five cousins. Leading two extra pack horses, they head up a difficult path into the forbidding mountain wilderness.

One of the Legionnaires follows on foot. With a leafy branch, he wipes away tell-tale hoof tracks.

EXT. - TWISTING MOUNTAIN SWITCHBACK, DAY

High in the desolate, craggy Aures Mountains. Colette rides up alongside Darcy and Houdin and points ahead.

COLETTE

What is that up there?

COLETTE'S POV

Shimmering like a mirage in the distance is what appears to be a castle built into the side of the mountains.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

The Fortress of the Assassins.

HOUDIN

(greatly impressed)

That's it? I don't suppose we could stop and have a look around?

DARCY

Not a chance. We must cross the Chelia Gorge before nightfall. Once we burn the bridge, even Zoras can't follow us.

Houdin squints ahead to the castle, disappointed.

EXT. - TRAIL TO FORT KHEMIS, DAY

Sergeant LaMartine's detachment canters confidently down into a crater-like canyon. Suddenly the front riders rein up at the bone-chilling sight ahead.

LAMARTINE

Holy Jesus...

SERGEANT'S POV

A huge ambush force headed by Zoras appears dead ahead, cutting off the trail at the far rim of the crater.

PRIVATE

Sergeant!

LAMARTINE

Oh God! The son of a bitch already has his army! Retreat! Retreat!

The company panics and wheels around to retreat. But--

LAMARTINE'S POV

Zoras' ambush has cut off the trail behind them as well.

LAMARTINE

turns his horse in all directions, looking for a way out. The situation is hopeless.

INTERCUT WITH LAMARTINE'S POV - MOVING

Looking upward and around. Zoras' troops -- over 200 men -- completely surround their victims all around the canyon's rim.

LaMartine draws his pistol, despair written on his face. He knows his death is seconds away.

CLOSE-UP ON

Zoras. An evil smile. He drops his hand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ANGLE ON

a row of Kabyle rifles firing. We hear a FUSILLADE of 200 SHOTS.

Soldiers and horses begin to collapse as the bullets connect. SCREAMS from the dying Legionnaires.

MATCH SOUND DISSOLVE TO:

The HOWLING of a piercing WIND.

EXT. - HIGH MOUNTAIN TRAIL, DAY

Darcy leads Houdin's party around the curve of a steep mountain, fighting the wind.

DARCY

Just around this next bend.

The party rounds the bend and stops short, stunned.

THEIR POV - EDGE OF CHELIA GORGE

The 300' wooden bridge that once spanned the gorge extends about 70 feet out into nothingness -- and then ends!

The bridge has been burnt to a crisp from the far side of the gorge. Their escape route has been cut off!

Darcy is devastated. He dismounts and walks to the brink. Houdin joins Darcy at the edge of the bridge and begins inspecting the area.

HOUDIN

How could this happen?

DARCY

Zoras got here first.

HOUDIN

I thought you said it would take him days to raise his army.

DARCY

I was wrong. He was planning this from the beginning. And I played right into his hands.

HOUDIN

Is there somewhere we can camp for the night and re-strategize?

DARCY

Yes. On the other side of the gorge.

Darcy stalks away, furious, back to his horse. Colette goes to him.

COLETTE

It's not your fault.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

Just trying to be a hero, that's all  
I was doing. (slaps his saddle) Idiot!

COLETTE

Trey. You are not an idiot.

She shuts up as Houdin joins them.

HOUDIN

There's no other way across?

Darcy shakes his head. Bartolote trudges over, fighting the wind.

BARTOLOTE

Captain, we've got to get out of this  
wind. It'll be dark soon and cold as--

DARCY

I know! When I want your opinion,  
Corporal, I'll ask for it. Get back  
in ranks!

Bartolote is shocked by the rebuke, but he obeys Darcy's orders.  
Darcy stomps back in a huff toward the cliff's edge. Houdin and  
Colette follow him. Houdin's manner is cold and businesslike.

HOUDIN

How about the Fortress of the Assassins?

DARCY

We'd probably walk straight into a  
Kabyle ambush there too.

HOUDIN

(faultlessly logical)

We can't go forward: Our path has been  
burned beneath us. We can't return to  
Bou-Allem's. Our safe conduct is  
meaningless. We can't forge our way over  
the mountains -- much too dangerous. We  
can't go back to the main road: I'm sure  
you're aware Sergeant LaMartine and the  
others have certainly been killed by now.

DARCY

(bitterly)

I know.

HOUDIN

Your plan has simply failed thus far,  
that's all. Now we can--

COLETTE

You can't blame this on him! None  
of it! It's thanks to your pride we're  
here in the first place! If it weren't  
for Trey, we wouldn't even be alive  
right now. You should be grateful!

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

She whirls around and marches off. Houdin and Darcy are equally surprised at her fervor.

HOUDIN

So. What about the Fortress?

EXT. - LAND BRIDGE OUTSIDE FORTRESS, LATE AFTERNOON

Long shadows. Less than an hour of light left in the sky.

Darcy leads the party single file over a harrowingly narrow land bridge, which spans a 600-foot wide chasm.

Colette glances nervously over the edge.

COLETTE'S POV

straight down 2000 feet. No bottom in sight.

As the party rounds a small promontory, they see looming overhead...

THE FORTRESS OF THE ASSASSINS

The Fortress is built into the side of a mountain, under an overhanging cliff face. Designed for defense, it rises eight stories behind its battlements.

The architecture is part medieval castle, part Persian monastery. Bits of the facade are crumbling, but the building is still massive, oppressive.

The entrance gate is a 15-foot-high double door of iron, directly ahead. The fortress is completely isolated by the chasm the party just crossed, with the narrow land bridge providing the only access.

The party is awestruck at the sight of the forbidding Fortress.

COLETTE

Who built this? And why did they leave?

HOUDIN

More to the point, how do we get in?

EXT. - FORTRESS GATE, LATE AFTERNOON

Bartolote and another Legionnaire sling a grappling hook over the castle wall. It catches.

Bartolote pulls himself steadily up the rope, hand over hand, until he disappears over the wall.

EXT. - FORTRESS RAMPART, LATE AFTERNOON

Bartolote rolls over the wall, lands, then jumps up, drawing his sword as if expecting to be attacked. No one's there. We see little as Bartolote nervously looks around, then heads in.

EXT. - FORTRESS GATE, SUNSET

It's getting darker. The party at the gate is getting restless.

DARCY

I'm going after him.

HOUDIN

(checking his pocket watch)

Let's be patient, shall we? Wait five more minutes.

DARCY

In my profession, waiting gets you killed.

Rachid points to the door. We hear an IRON BOLT slide back.

RACHID

Look!

One of the giant iron doors slowly begins to creak inward. Darcy is the first to run over and push.

DARCY

Come on!

Everyone else rushes to help push the heavy gate open a few feet. Bartolote appears from the inside, exhausted and shaken.

As the party enters the oppressive gates...

DARCY

What took you so long?

BARTOLOTE

Sir, you won't believe it.

INT. - FORTRESS CORRIDOR, SUNSET

On foot, by lantern light, Bartolote leads Darcy, Houdin, Colette and three Arab guards down a stone passage to an open doorway. The others wrinkle their noses -- something smells incredibly bad.

INT. - FORTRESS GUARD ROOM, SUNSET

The party steps inside and chokes at the sight of...

...a dozen DEAD KABYLE WARRIORS sprawled across the stone floor.

The eyes of the corpses are wide open, grotesquely pushing from their sockets. Their tongues are black, swollen out of their mouths. Their hands are black and puffy, clenched in fists.

Darcy and Houdin both try to shield Colette from the sight, but she stubbornly stares past them at the dead bodies.

COLETTE

You want me to faint? Sorry to disappoint you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Still, she pulls out a handkerchief to block the smell. Darcy bends down to inspect the corpses.

HOUDIN  
Zoras' men?

DARCY  
I was right. They were waiting for us. Only something got to them first.

He prods at one corpse's clenched fist with his boot. Two GOLD PIECES fall out and CLINK onto the stone floor.

BARTOLOTE  
Gold!

But before he can pick the coins up...

HOUDIN  
Hold it, Corporal!

DARCY  
Don't touch that! That's an order!

BARTOLOTE  
But it's gold, Captain!

HOUDIN  
That's what killed these men.

BARTOLOTE  
I don't understand.

Houdin kicks the coin with his foot, kneels and examines the corpse, careful to touch nothing.

DARCY  
Poison?

HOUDIN  
Something on the metal that penetrates the skin.

DARCY  
(admiringly)  
They say love of money is the root of all evil.

HOUDIN  
The assassins may have died out 400 years ago, but it seems they left this place as an ongoing monument to their art form, as it were.

BARTOLOTE  
That's diabolical.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Or poetic, actually. Depending on  
your point of view.

DARCY

We'd better warn the others.

EXT. - COURTYARD, SUNSET

Darcy, Houdin, Colette, Bartolote and the three Guards rush back  
into the courtyard....too late.

They find two Legionnaires lying on the floor dead with the same  
gruesome symptoms as the dead Kabyles.

Rachid, the other two Arabs and the remaining Legionnaire, PRIVATE  
CASLAV, are huddled together in shock. A spilled pouch of gold  
coins lies on the dirt.

RACHID

They found it under the staircase.  
They were like children.

BARTOLOTE

(to Darcy)

Are we all going to die here? Just  
like that?

RACHID

Captain. We must not miss our prayers.  
Not today.

DARCY

Of course. (pointing) East is that way.

As the Arabs head for the eastern side of the courtyard, Houdin  
looks at the dead men with disdain and shakes his head.

HOUDIN

Fools. Absolute fools.

DARCY

It wasn't their fault.

HOUDIN

Anyone can spot a trap.

DARCY

You didn't spot Zoras's trap. The  
bridge, the ambush.

HOUDIN

I'm not the leader of this expedition.

DARCY

Would you like to be? Is that what  
you're saying?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

If I were in charge, I certainly  
wouldn't--

COLETTE

Excuse me, generals!

She's got their attention.

COLETTE

You're both so clever, tell me this --  
Where is Zoras now? And how long will  
it be until he finds us?

Darcy and Houdin look at each other, then gaze around the fortress.

HOUDIN

I wonder what other charming toys our  
friends have left behind.

INT. - FORTRESS BANQUET HALL, NIGHT

Darcy leads Houdin, Colette, Caslav, two Arab guards and Bartolote  
bringing up the rear into the banquet hall. The men wear military  
packs and carry oil lanterns.

The banquet hall is a huge room with an air of decay and malevolence.  
Long half-rotted wooden tables line the room, the walls of which  
are draped with the tattered remains of elaborate tapestries.

COLETTE

What are we looking for?

DARCY

If it kills us, you'll know you've  
found it.

HOUDIN

Wonder what that's for.

Houdin scrambles over a pile of rubble in a corner of the room  
toward a round hole in the floor.

DARCY

Careful!

Houdin sticks his lantern into the hole.

INT. - STONE WELL SHAFT, CONTINUOUS

...as Houdin sticks his head in.

The well goes down farther than Houdin can see with his flickering  
lantern. Running down the shaft on a rusted chain-and-pulley  
mechanism is a string of wooden buckets, many rotted out.

We hear a faint WHOOSHING sound from below.

INT. - BANQUET HALL, CONTINUOUS

DARCY

What is it?

Houdin grabs a chunk of rubble. Timing the fall with his pocketwatch, he drops the rock down the shaft. Six seconds later, a FAINT SPLASH.

HOUDIN

Running water. About 200 feet below us.

BARTOLOTE

A river?

HOUDIN

Why not? Any castle has to have a fresh water source.

He climbs back down, pleased with his discovery.

COLETTE

Maybe that's a way out.

DARCY

Don't count on it. Any stream in these parts would only carry us further underground. Our drowned corpses would probably pop up in an oasis in the middle of the Sahara somewhere.

HOUDIN

You're not an optimist, are you?

INT. - FORTRESS CORRIDOR, NIGHT

The party heads through a long low-ceilinged corridor. They turn a corner and Darcy stops as they enter...

INT. - UNDERGROUND ROTUNDA, NIGHT

A huge rotunda, of stone block construction, 80 feet across.

The party is at the top of a narrow winding staircase. Each step is a single wedge of stone jutting out a mere 12 inches from the curving rotunda wall, with a sheer drop straight down.

At various levels across from the stairs, several passageways inexplicably open into the nothingness of the rotunda.

The side of the stairway has no railing, but opens to a black abyss. The lanterns are too dim to reveal whatever lies far below.

Colette advances eagerly.

COLETTE

This must be the way.

But Darcy blocks her path.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY

Let me go first. It could be slippery.

He uncoils two lengths of rope, knots them together, and ties one end around his chest. He tosses the other end to Bartolote, gesturing also to the two Arabs.

DARCY

You three. Just in case.

Bartolote and the two Arabs anchor the rope around their waists.

Darcy lights a torch and starts cautiously down the stairs, hugging the wall. He tests each step before putting his weight on it, runs his hand along the wall checking for anything unusual.

BARTOLOTE

Captain! You still all right?

DARCY

Nothing so far.

CLOSE-UP ON

Darcy's feet, as he continues to step down.

Then, as he hits the next step, it SINKS slightly beneath his weight.

A great RUMBLING begins behind the wall. Darcy looks up, startled.

Below him, where the stairs fade into darkness, the individual steps begin to DISAPPEAR, one after another, quickly RETRACTING into the rotunda wall. The sheer drop into nothingness CASCADES UPWARD toward Darcy.

Darcy turns to run back up the stairs. But he's not fast enough! The stairs continue to retract into the wall past the step which triggered the boobytrap.

Darcy FALLS as the stairs disappear from under his feet.

FOLLOW DARCY

falling...

AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

the men gripping Darcy's rope brace themselves! The rope snaps taut, and we hear Darcy YELP!

BACK ON DARCY

The jerk of the rope wrenches Darcy's body. His TORCH SNUFFS OUT as it falls from his hand.

Meanwhile, the upwards cascade STOPS just six steps from the top.

HOUDIN

Darcy!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Darcy's voice echoes up from the blackness.

DARCY  
I'm fine! Drop me a lantern!

Houdin ties a lantern to another rope and lowers it.

INT. - PIT UNDER STAIRS, CONTINUOUS

Darcy, dangling like a hooked fish, grabs the lantern, REVEALING...

...he is swinging above a deadly pit of four-foot high stone spikes, razor sharp and jaggedly barbed at the tips. Skulls and broken skeletons litter the pit, with some jammed onto the spikes.

As Darcy catches his breath, another low RUMBLE starts -- and the trap stairs begin to reset themselves in place, from the bottom up.

DARCY  
Pull me up!

INT. - TOP OF ROTUNDA STAIRS, NIGHT

The others pull up the rope hand-over-hand. Houdin and Bartolote help Darcy back onto the landing. Darcy unties himself.

COLETTE  
Are you all right?

DARCY  
Yes. I think.

HOUDIN  
Which step triggered that reaction?

Darcy stares at him blankly.

HOUDIN  
You mean you didn't count?

Darcy sighs heavily and starts to retie the safety rope.

DARCY  
Let's try this once more.

HOUDIN  
Very nice work, by the way.

DARCY  
Thanks.

HOUDIN  
No, no. The trap. Excellent design.



INT. - FOOT OF ROTUNDA STAIRS / ENTRANCE TO CATACOMBS, NIGHT

With the skeleton-filled pit just behind them, the party stops dead in front of us, looking from side to side in confusion.

REVERSE ANGLE -- GROUP'S POV

as we PAN across a conjunction of five identical tunnel openings. Which way to go? Darcy doesn't hesitate. He picks a tunnel.

DARCY

This way.

INT. - RIVER CAVERN, NIGHT

The party emerges from the tunnel into a limestone cavern. The LOUD RUSHING WATER is very close now. Just a few more yards and...

DARCY

There's your river, my wizard friend.  
Care to jump in and see where it leads?

Everyone's hopes are dashed by the sight of the river: a swift torrent BLASTING OUT of the high side of the cavern, and shooting through a deep channel to the opposite cavern wall, where it disappears into blackness. The exit tunnel has six inches of air space, if that.

HOUDIN

After you.

COLETTE

So there's no way out.

Meanwhile one of the Arabs hoists a lantern to examine a shaft in the ceiling directly above the river. Houdin joins him, finds coiled rusty chains and decayed wooden buckets piled near the edge of the river.

HOUDIN

As I thought. The Hashashim drew their water to the top levels from here. Very nice.

BARTOLOTE

But what good does it do us?

Houdin rummages in his pack.

HOUDIN

Water is always useful.

BARTOLOTE

Great. So we won't die of thirst.

HOUDIN

Never let your imagination be hindered by the facts.

He carefully spoons out a mere sprinkling of white powder from an apothecary jar into a cigarette paper. He twists it shut, reseals the jar, and throws the paper packet into the river.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BOOM! A white hot EXPLOSION as the packet hits the water, sending spray flying everywhere! The rest of the party whirls in shock.

DARCY

What was that?!

HOUDIN

Pure sodium. Not to be confused with salt for your soup.

Darcy appreciatively watches the smoke fade. He approaches Houdin.

DARCY

Jean-Pierre, tell me, what else have you got in that bag?

INT. - CATACOMBS, MOVING, NIGHT

Down at this level, the corridors are dug out of rough rock, not the finished stonework of the higher levels.

Darcy and Houdin lead the way. Further back, Bartolote helps Colette clamber over rubble blocking their way.

BARTOLOTE

(nodding ahead)

What do you think they're talking about?

COLETTE

If I know my husband, he's working out a plan.

BARTOLOTE

A plan would be good.

ANGLE AHEAD TO

Houdin and Darcy, who keep their voices low.

HOUDIN

So what are our chances? Militarily.

DARCY

The truth? (an uncomfortable beat) Zoras knows where we are. He's only waiting for daylight. And he'll bring a small army with him. Even if we had enough weapons and ammunition -- which we don't -- we couldn't resist an all-out assault.

HOUDIN

Can't we just surrender?

DARCY

You wouldn't like what they do to captives. Trust me. (shrugging) Any way you look at it, we're dead.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A sense of fatalistic relief ripples through Houdin. A moment of complete understanding passes between the two men.

They begin to climb a claustrophobic stairway.

HOUDIN  
What do we say to the others?

DARCY  
What any commander says before battle.  
We tell them what they want to hear  
and hope we get lucky.

EXT. - RAMPART, NIGHT

Darcy and Bartolote dubiously inspect several decayed catapults.

DARCY  
Can these be repaired?

BARTOLOTE  
I can try.

EXT. - COURTYARD, NIGHT

Activity everywhere. Some of the Arabs carry wood up the rampart steps to Bartolote and Darcy, who are hammering away on the broken catapults.

Across the courtyard, Houdin sits on the floor, surrounded by tools and what looks like an old-fashioned chemistry kit: thick glass apothecary jars filled with strange substances.

Houdin carefully measures chemicals into an iron saucepan: a white powder of some sort, a clear liquid. He picks up a bottle of rum, sniffs it. Nearby, Colette warms herself at a small campfire.

COLETTE  
What's the rum for?

Houdin answers by taking a stiff swig.

COLETTE  
Can I do anything?

Houdin doesn't look up from his work. Total concentration.

HOUDIN  
Yes. Take off your clothes.

COLETTE  
Jean-Pierre! There are people around.

HOUDIN  
Not all your clothes. Just your  
petticoats. To start with.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Colette ducks behind a pillar and hikes up her skirt, amused.

COLETTE

I must say, darling, this is a side of you I haven't seen before.

HOUDIN

I need cotton. As much as you can lay your hands on.

COLETTE

Wouldn't you prefer silk? It's ever so much softer against the skin.

HOUDIN

(sharply)

Cotton! Clothes, bandages, anything.

Private Caslav starts to pass by -- but stops to gawk at Colette's bare thighs as she peels her petticoats and pantalettes off.

HOUDIN

You! Private! Eyes front!

Caslav snaps to attention. Colette resettles her skirts and drops her petticoats in front of Houdin.

Houdin pours the clear liquid over chunks of yellow sulphur in a skillet over the fire, and watches it dissolve. He mixes in a white powder and adds yet another clear liquid from a bottle. Colette holds her nose.

COLETTE

What are you cooking?!

HOUDIN

Guncotton.

The word means nothing to Colette -- but it sure does to Private Caslav who begins to back off.

CASLAV

What?!

HOUDIN

Caslav. Is that what they call you? Get me a barrel of some sort. Or a large cooking pot.

CASLAV

Yes sir!

He scurries away.

COLETTE

What is it?

HOUDIN

Bismuth solvent, oil of vitriol and...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He rips off a small strip of petticoat and, using tongs, soaks it in the solution.

HOUDIN (cont.)

...strips of cellulose.

He picks up the soaked strip of cloth with the tongs, grabs a dagger, and moves to a nearby section of wall.

At the wall, Houdin chips out old mortar and stuffs the soaked cloth deep between the stones. He then pours a liquid trail of rum out to a spot about eight feet from the wall.

HOUDIN

Stand behind that pillar.

Colette obeys, but her curiosity drives her to step back out to watch.

Houdin plucks a burning stick from the fire and torches the rum. He ducks behind a wall.

FOLLOW THE FLAME

as it streaks across the floor and up the wall.

THE WALL EXPLODES! Large pieces of stone go flying!

A chunk of rubble hits Colette square in the stomach and throws her on her butt. She shrieks.

Immediately, the Legionnaires working on the catapults jump to their feet. Darcy flies down the rampart stairs.

DARCY

Colette!

As the white smoke clears, we see a four-foot square hole in the wall. Everyone in the courtyard begins to gather round.

Darcy arrives and sweeps Colette up off the floor and into his arms.

DARCY

Are you hurt?

Houdin emerges from behind the wall and sees Darcy holding his wife.

HOUDIN

Colette. Can you stand alone?

Houdin watches suspiciously as they slowly step apart. Colette can't take her eyes off Darcy. Acutely aware of Houdin's unspoken accusation, Darcy changes the subject.

DARCY

What the hell were you doing?!

HOUDIN

Just a small experiment.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CASLAV

Guncotton, sir.

DARCY

You must be out of your mind!

HOUDIN

Insanity is a necessary part of the creative process.

DARCY

Are you trying to blow us to bits?

HOUDIN

(coldly)

I know what I'm doing. Caslav.  
Come with me.

CASLAV

Yes sir.

Houdin heads abruptly into the fort, Caslav right behind. Darcy immediately turns and heads away in the opposite direction.

Colette, left alone, looks after them both.

INT. - STABLE ROOM, NIGHT

Colette enters the room to find Danjou alone among the horses, trying to pick up a 100 lb. keg of gunpowder. His wooden hand, unable to grip, keeps slipping.

COLETTE

Let me help with that.

DARCY

No. I don't need your--

He drops the keg on the hard stone floor. Gunpowder spills out.

Colette kneels down and scoops up the spilt powder with both hands. Darcy strongarms her wrist to prevent her.

DARCY

I'll take care of it. Go back to your husband.

Colette shakes off his grasp and keeps scooping. Darcy kneels and tries to outdo her at the same task.

COLETTE

He doesn't need my help.

DARCY

Neither do I.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLETTE

We're all going to die in a few hours.  
Can't we at least leave this earth  
being honest with each other?

They both rise as Darcy hefts the powderkeg onto his shoulder.

DARCY

We're not going to die. We're going  
to send Zoras straight to perdition,  
and then you'll return safe to Algiers  
and sail home to France with your  
famous husband.

COLETTE

Even my famous husband couldn't sell  
me that lie. And he's a professional.

Darcy starts toward the door.

COLETTE

You won't say it, will you?

Darcy stops, turns to meet her challenge.

DARCY

If we do get out of this alive, are  
you getting on that ship? Or are you  
staying in Algiers?

COLETTE

I-I don't know. I can't think that  
far ahead.

DARCY

Then cheer up. This battle might do  
the choosing for you and save us all  
a pile of grief.

Carrying the powderkeg, Darcy stalks out of the room, leaving  
Colette angry and confused.

INT. - CATACOMBS, NIGHT

Houdin and Caslav examine rock fissures along a tunnel wall. Houdin  
marks a spot with a piece of chalk.

HOUDIN

Here...

Houdin carries the lantern 20 feet further down the tunnel.

HOUDIN

And here as well.

Houdin chips into the second fissure with hammer and chisel.

DISSOLVE TO:

## MONTAGE

- 1) ON THE RAMPART -- Darcy tests one of the catapults with a load of rocks. It fires across the chasm.
- 2) IN THE CATACOMBS -- Houdin wrings out a large piece of muslin from a big iron pot of liquid. He packs the cloth tight inside a rock fissure. Behind him, down the tunnel, Bartolote pours a long trail of gunpowder leading right to the fissure.
- 3) IN THE ROTUNDA -- Two Arabs standing in the doorways opening from different levels toss ropes to a third Arab standing on the trap stairway. The actual stair that trips the trap is marked clearly with chalk. The Third Arab carefully steps over it and hammers a spike into the wall three stairs down.
- 4) IN THE RIVER CAVERN -- Darcy leans precariously over the river where it sweeps into the tunnel. He hooks a saddlebag onto a rope strung taut across the river.
- 5) IN THE BANQUET HALL -- Filthy with paint and charcoal, Colette paints a mural of some sort on a large tarp spread on the stone floor. We can't decipher the design.
- 6) ON THE LOWER LEVEL OF THE COURTYARD -- In a corner, Houdin works on an intricate device fitting into an iron box. It involves gears, wires, clock parts, and many tiny gizmos. Hand tools litter the ground. Nearby is Houdin's chemistry kit, his Electromagnet and battery, and his stage rapier.

As Houdin connects two wires, a loud TICKING SOUND begins.

MATCH SOUND DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. - MOUNTAIN TRAIL, DAWN

Hundreds of HORSES' HOOVES move up steep, rocky terrain.

TILT UP TO REVEAL

Zoras, fear-inspiring in a Kabyle general's tunic of jet black with gilt embroidery. His headdress is white with a red and black headband. He carries a scimitar fit for Mohammed.

Zoras leads an army of 200 warriors, armed with scimitars, knives and long rifles. The troops are uniformed in battle robes of fire-red.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

The morning sun peeks over the ramparts. The sky is clear.

Rachid suddenly points out over the battlement. Caslav freaks at what he sees and dashes down the rampart stairs.

EXT. - LOWER COURTYARD, DAY

Caslav bounds down the lower courtyard steps to Darcy and Houdin. Houdin's still laboring over his mysterious little box.

(CONTINUED)



CASLAV  
Captain! They're here!

DARCY  
(urgently to Houdin)  
How much longer?

HOUDIN  
(peevish)  
Quality work can't be rushed.

DARCY  
How many are there?

Caslav is scared speechless.

DARCY  
How many?!

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

FOLLOW DARCY

storming up the rampart steps with Caslav trailing. As he steps onto the rampart and approaches the battlement, we see...

ZORAS' ARMY OF 200

spread out dauntingly in a long single flank along the far edge of the chasm. Zoras is at the center of the formation.

Darcy pales. It's even worse than he expected. Bartolote runs to his side, waiting for orders.

RACHID  
Now, Captain?

DARCY  
Save your bullets. Our guns don't have the range. Bartolote!

BARTOLOTE  
Sir!

DARCY  
Time to let Zoras know who's in charge here. Run up the colors.

Bartolote runs off the rampart to a stairway leading upward.

EXT. - FAR SIDE OF CHASM, DAY

Several of Zoras' troops point accusingly toward the upper part of the Fortress. Zoras looks up. He's not pleased.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Above the rampart, the French flag is raised on a makeshift flagpole. Sunlight strikes the banner gloriously as it flaps in the wind.

Zoras barks out an angry command. In perfect synch, all 200 warriors raise their longrifles and fire on the hated flag.

INT. - UPPER BATTLEMENT, DAY

Bartolote ducks and rolls down the stairs just in time, as a fusillade of 200 bullets smashes all around him.

BARTOLOTE

Good thing I didn't sing the Marseillaise!

ANGLE ON

the French flag, now in tatters. The flagpole shaft, riddled with holes, snaps and breaks apart. The flag tumbles to the courtyard.

EXT. - FAR SIDE OF THE CHASM, DAY

Zoras' men lift their longrifles and cheer.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

DARCY

These people have no respect for authority.

Darcy runs to two Arabs team operating the first of three catapults. Mounted on each catapult arm is a wooden chest.

DARCY

Ready first catapult!

RACHID

Ready!

Darcy rechecks the trajectory. He's satisfied.

DARCY

Ready catapults two and three!

Further down the rampart, the Arabs manning the other catapults reply.

ARABS

Two ready! / Three ready!

DARCY

All right. Let's thin out their ranks. Fire one!

One of the Arabs lights a fuse attached to the first chest. Rachid swings an ax down on the catapult's taut firing rope. The rope breaks. The catapult hurls the chest out from the Fortress, higher and higher over the chasm.

EXT. - CHASM, CONTINUOUS

The chest soars spectacularly over the abyss -- over 600 feet.

EXT. - FAR SIDE OF CHASM, CONTINUOUS

A small group of Kabyle troops tries to back away to avoid being hit by the flying chest.

ANGLE ON

incoming trajectory. The chest is overshooting its mark.

The Kabyles relax. But just as the chest passes 60 feet overhead...

The flying chest EXPLODES! GOLD COINS rain down onto the Kabyles!

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

DARCY

Fire two! Fire three!

As Bartolote climbs back to the rampart, the Arabs manning the other two catapults ignite their fuses and ax their firing ropes.

In quick succession, TWO MORE CHESTS of coins arc into the sky.

EXT. - FAR SIDE OF THE CHASM, CONTINUOUS

FOLLOW TRAJECTORIES

as the two chests fly across the chasm. One falls short, EXPLODES, and drops uselessly into the gorge. The other chest EXPLODES directly over the Kabyle Army's heads. Hundreds more GOLD COINS pelt down on the enemy.

The confused Kabyles are reckless at the sight of gleaming gold scattered all over the ground. They shove past each other to grab up the treasure with their bare hands.

Zoras screams orders to his men, but to little avail. Their gold lust is too strong.

Suddenly, an OFFSCREEN WAIL OF PAIN shocks the men. Some turn to see the source of the cry.

A Kabyle warrior, still clutching his precious gold coins, rakes his hands over his face in acid pain.

ANOTHER WAIL. Then another. Then another. Meanwhile, the first victim falls on the dirt, froths at the mouth, and begins convulsing.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

Kabyle warriors by the score falling prey to the same symptoms: Their tongues swelling gruesomely out of their mouths... Palms turning black... Excruciating pain... Stumbling, falling, writhing on the ground... Then dying, horribly but quickly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A dozen Kabyles stumble off the cliff and fall to their doom.

Zoras, jolted by this sudden catastrophe, calls a retreat to his surviving troops -- about 125 men. They gallop back from the chasm brink, leaving the dying to their agony.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

Darcy, Bartolote and the four Arabs jump and whoop in jubilation at the enemy's retreat. Darcy yells over the battlements.

DARCY

Take that you-demon-loving-sons-of-whores! We've got more where that came from!

BARTOLOTE

We do?

DARCY

Don't hang me on details, soldier. Man your firing position!

BARTOLOTE

Yes sir! How long till they regroup?

A bullet blasts away a piece of stone six inches away. Darcy and Bartolote hit the deck. Darcy gives him a dirty look.

DARCY

Any more questions?

Bartolote crawls down the rampart as enemy bullets whiz overhead.

EXT. - LAND BRIDGE TO FORTRESS, DAY

Half the Kabyle warriors, many carrying ropes and grappling hooks, run single file across the land bridge to storm the gates, while the remaining 60 warriors cover them from the edge of the chasm.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

The DEFENDERS -- Darcy, Bartolote, Caslav, Rachid and the 5 other Arabs -- fire on the INVADERS as they approach the Fortress gates. Their first shots connect. The dead Invaders fall into the chasm. But the rest keep charging across the land bridge while the Defenders stop to reload.

Six grappling hooks land over the walls. The Defenders rush to dislodge them, but a hail of bullets forces them back.

EXT. - FORTRESS WALL, DAY

The Invaders begin climbing the ropes. Two grappling hooks are dislodged from above. The climbers fall. The others keep climbing.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

The first Invader makes it to the top. Darcy kicks him in the teeth and sends him falling to his death.

Another Kabyle reaches the top. Rachid shoots him in the heart, then rifle butts a third climber to oblivion.

A quick thrill of success -- then five more grappling hooks take hold. Nothing stops these guys!

EXT. - FORTRESS WALL, DAY

More Kabyles callously step over dead comrades and grab the ropes.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

Darcy and Bartolote watch the next wave climbing the ropes.

DARCY

You'd think they'd get tired of this!

They tilt their pistols over the battlement to shoot two climbers off the ropes.

One Arab daringly leans out to do the same, but before he can get off his shot, he is riddled by enemy bullets. He tumbles over the battlement, knocking a climbing Kabyle off his rope.

Bartolote picks a Kabyle climber up over his head and throws him 40 feet down into the courtyard, where he breaks his neck.

The Kabyles keep coming over the wall. They stab an Arab reloading his gun.

Darcy dodges a bullet as he skewers one Kabyle. Another Kabyle attacks him with a scimitar and fences him backward down the rampart steps.

Caslav gets into a swordfight of his own. He's hopelessly overmatched. He loses his sword. Laughing in his face, his Kabyle opponent slashes broadly -- and beheads Caslav.

Caslav's head rolls off the rampart and bounces into the courtyard.

More grappling hooks. More Kabyles over the top. Bartolote takes them on hand-to-hand, heaving them and their rifles down to the courtyard.

Darcy fences his opponent all over the rampart. He finally spears his opponent's throat, then whirls to take on more oncoming Kabyles.

EXT. - FORTRESS WALL, DAY

More Kabyles scale the ropes. More are right behind.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Colette runs out from cover to retrieve the dead Kabyles' rifles. She ducks as another dead Kabyle crashes into the courtyard. She grabs his rifle, too.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

A sheer frenzy of a battle, with five men holding off 20 enemies at a time. Darcy is superhuman, all over the battlement, a one-man army. He skewers two Kabyles with one thrust.

The three Arabs, fighting for their dead brothers, are just as fierce.

EXT. - FORTRESS WALL, DAY

Three dislodged ropes fall. Ten Kabyles drop to their deaths.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

While Darcy fences another dangerous opponent, a Kabyle aims his rifle point blank at Darcy's back.

But before he can pull the trigger, the Kabyle takes a bullet through his own chest. Shock on his face, he collapses and falls to reveal...

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

...Colette dropping a smoking rifle. She's behind a pillar, with a pile of 15 rifles next to her.

She picks up another rifle and shoots another Kabyle on the rampart. BLAM! She throws that one aside, picks up another one, aims and fires. BLAM! Another Kabyle dies. She picks up the next rifle.

EXT. - LOWER COURTYARD, DAY

While Armageddon rages on the rampart, Houdin continues his mysterious work on the iron box in a state of almost trancelike concentration.

CASLAV'S ASSASSIN slides out of the shadows and creeps down the Fortress stairs behind Houdin. Houdin keeps working away. Scimitar drawn, the Kabyle steals up behind, closer and closer.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Colette glances down to the lower courtyard. She spots Houdin's attacker and instantly whips her rifle around. She pulls the trigger. CLICK! An empty chamber.

COLETTE  
Jean-Pierre! Behind you!

EXT. - LOWER COURTYARD, DAY

But her warning is too late! The Assassin is already on Houdin. He raises his scimitar and swings down to slice Houdin in two!

ANGLE ON

the scimitar swinging down -- then freezing in mid-air and SPARKING madly as it hits a nearly invisible WIRE NETTING.

ELECTRICITY flashes through the wire netting, making its mesh visible. The voltage jolts through the blade into the Kabyle's body.

Houdin turns a voltage control dial to full. The increased charge kicks the Assassin three feet backwards onto his ass. Houdin dials down the voltage and grabs his stage rapier.

Jumping to his feet, Houdin ducks under the net and quickly stabs the Assassin to death. Immediately another Kabyle -- Huge! -- rushes downstairs brandishing an even bigger scimitar.

Houdin defends himself with an almost comical, mincing, "fencing academy" style of swordplay.

With one crude swing, the Huge Kabyle slices Houdin's blade in two. The Kabyle pauses and gloats wickedly. Houdin looks heartbroken at his beloved stage prop.

HOUDIN

That was an antique!

Houdin retreats and scoops up the dead Kabyle's scimitar. He resumes his ultraformal fencing style -- but this time it works. He stabs straight through his opponent's heart. The dead Kabyle slides down the blade onto Houdin. Houdin pushes the beast away with disgust.

With no other visible danger at hand, Houdin ducks under the wire net, spins the voltage dial, and returns to his project.

EXT. - FORTRESS GATES, DAY

Zoras waits, protected by three bodyguards. The heavy iron gates begin to creak open.

EXT. - LOWER COURTYARD, DAY

Colette rushes down to Houdin, concerned.

COLETTE

Are you all right?

HOUDIN

I can't work under these conditions.

As the fighting continues to rage above on the rampart, Darcy breaks free and races down the steps to Houdin.

DARCY

Are you done yet?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Two more minutes.

DARCY

They've taken the gate. We have to go!

Bartolote and the three Arabs rush down the stairs, a half-dozen Kabyles in hot pursuit.

DARCY

Is that everyone?

BARTOLOTE

All that's left, Captain.

DARCY

(to Houdin)

Bring it with you.

Darcy shoots another oncoming Kabyle. Above, in the upper courtyard, we hear BATTLE CRIES of a horde of Kabyles.

COLETTE

Can I do anything?

HOUDIN

Put your finger on that wire.

Colette sticks her finger in the box. Houdin tightens something with a screwdriver.

COLETTE

Jean-Pierre, we have to go.

Bartolote, Darcy and the Arabs keep firing and reloading.

HOUDIN

Remove hand. (She does so) Finished.

Houdin closes the box and grabs a saddlebag.

DARCY

Let's go!

HOUDIN

My tools!

DARCY

I'll buy you more. Let's go!

Houdin nevertheless stuffs what he can into a saddlebag and grabs it and his mysterious box. The Defenders retreat into the Fortress.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

The Fortress is breached. Zoras rides through the gates. His remaining 60 men flock around, cheering and pointing in the direction the Defenders have fled. Zoras orders his men to fan out and pursue.



INT. - CORRIDOR INTERSECTION, DAY

The seven survivors are at a four-way intersection. Bits of daylight penetrate at this level. Darcy tucks Houdin's iron box under his arm.

HOUDIN

Wind the key tight and get the hell out. We'll meet you in seven minutes.

DARCY

Got it. If I don't make it back, my friend, it's been fun.

Bartolote hands Darcy a lantern and snaps an earnest salute.

BARTOLOTE

Good luck, Captain. I...uh, it was a privilege to serve under you, sir.

DARCY

Don't bury me yet, Corporal.

Back down the corridor, the sound of APPROACHING KABYLES. Darcy peels off alone down the left passage. The rest run straight ahead.

INT. - CORRIDORS, DAY

FOLLOW DEFENDERS

zigzagging through the passageways to...

INT. - A DEAD END, DAY

Nowhere to go. But a rope ladder leads up through a hole in the stone ceiling. One by one, Colette first, they scramble up the ladder to the level above.

CUT TO:

INT. - CORRIDOR INTERSECTION, DAY

Zoras and two squads of Kabyles stop to get their bearings. The men split up in three directions.

CUT TO:

INT. - LEVEL ABOVE THE DEAD END, DAY

Bartolote's the last one through the ceiling. He pulls the ladder up the hole.

Colette and Rachid jostle back through the opening a flat of muslin painted to match the stonework.

INT. - THE DEAD END, DAY

Colette pulls up the painted muslin flat into position. It's an exact fit! The hole disappears before our eyes!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

An instant later, a SQUAD OF RUNNING KABYLES races around a corner -- and stops dead. Obviously their quarry didn't come this way. They turn tail and run back.

CUT TO:

INT. - ROTUNDA, DAY

Darcy bounds onto the Rotunda main floor and hurries past the Pit of Spikes to the spot where five catacomb tunnels begin.

TWENTY KABYLES arrive at the top of the stairway. They spot Darcy below and shout with glee.

A few Kabyles shoot -- but their bullets careen wildly off the curved stone walls.

Darcy sets the Iron Box down and fishes a key from his shirt pocket. He winds the Box with the key, as if winding a clock. The Iron Box starts TICKING.

Darcy then confounds his pursuers by running back up the stairs, straight at them. The Kabyles, daggers and swords drawn, close on him, hollering and whooping.

Darcy stops a few stairs short of the chalk-marked trap stair and yanks a tethered rope loose from its spike. Gripping the rope, he STOMPS down on the step as hard as he can and...

SWINGS OUT ON THE ROPE all the way across the Rotunda.

A great RUMBLING begins behind the walls.

Darcy lands safely at the mouth of a tunnel some 50 feet above the Rotunda floor. He ties off the rope to a stake.

Back on the stairs, the Kabyles look down in sudden fear!

KABYLES' POV

as the narrow stairs retract one by one in their upward cascade!

The Kabyles panic and try to run back up the stairs. Too late! The Cascade Effect overtakes them. The stones slide out from under their feet and the entire squad falls screaming into the Pit of Spikes.

Darcy, satisfied, turns and runs down his escape tunnel.

INT. - A MAZE OF TUNNELS, DAY -- FOLLOWING DARCY

Darcy hears the sound of MORE KABYLES APPROACHING. He changes course quickly down a series of side tunnels to an escape ladder. He climbs out of sight.

INT. - LADDER PATHWAY, CONTINUOUS -- FOLLOWING DARCY

Bad luck on this level. MORE KABYLES RUNNING towards him. He keeps climbing.

INT. - CORRIDOR, CONTINUOUS -- STILL FOLLOWING DARCY

Darcy pulls up the ladder, tosses it aside. He runs on down the tunnel, around a corner, and right into...

ZORAS, backed by three tough BODYGUARDS.

Darcy doesn't hesitate. He pulls his pistol on Zoras and aims point blank. But before he can pull the trigger, one of the Bodyguards CRACKS A BULLWHIP and yanks the gun right out of his hand.

Darcy draws his saber -- then freezes as all three Bodyguards step forward with raised scimitars.

Zoras waves his protectors back. He slowly unsheathes his own gleaming sword. He bows courteously to Darcy.

Darcy attacks at once with animal fury, taking Zoras by surprise. Zoras blocks the blows and fights back. He's far better than Darcy expected. Suddenly Darcy is on the defensive!

CUT TO:

INT. - UPPER CORRIDORS, DAY -- MOVING

The SOUND OF RUNNING KABYLES everywhere. The Fortress is swarming with them!

Houdin and the others run for their lives. A GUNSHOT from behind. Rachid is hit in the backs and falls. Bartolote stops for him. The Kabyles gain.

RACHID

Leave me. I am prepared to die.

BARTOLOTE

Sorry. You have to clear that with the Captain.

Bartolote slings Rachid over his shoulder.

The Defenders reach another four-way intersection. Colette pulls a tiny SMOKE BOMB from her decolletage. She lights it off a lantern and drops it just as the Kabyles appear behind them.

KABYLES' POV

The bomb EXPLODES in their faces! White smoke everywhere.

When the smoke clears, seconds later, the Kabyles look down all four tunnels, mystified. No sign of the Defenders.

CUT TO:

INT. - CORRIDOR ONE LEVEL ABOVE, DAY

Darcy and Zoras duel fiercely back and forth down intricate curved passageways. Superb a swordsman as Darcy is, Zoras is better. He cuts a deep gash across Darcy's thigh -- first blood.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Zoras smirks, enjoying the sport of killing. Darcy smashes back, gets lucky, and cuts Zoras across the face. One Bodyguard immediately moves in and shields Zoras from further attack.

The smile drains from Zoras' face: This duel is no longer amusing. He steps back, gestures to another Bodyguard.

ZORAS  
(in Berber)

Kill him.

The BULLWHIP cracks, yanking the sword out of Darcy's right hand. The Bodyguard lunges forward, stabbing at Darcy's throat. But instead of dodging the blow, Darcy blocks it with his left hand.

To the Bodyguard's astonishment, his sword stabs into Darcy's gloved palm!

Zoras is shocked, but impressed. Blocking a sword with a bare hand? This is something he's never seen before!

DARCY  
(in the glee of battle)  
You like that, Zoras? Legion magic!

Darcy yanks his wooden hand sideways and jerks the sword from his opponent's grasp.

A Kabyle dives straight for Darcy, grabs the sword and Darcy's hand -- and is left holding just the wooden hand as Darcy wriggles free and runs down the corridor. Zoras and his men give chase.

CUT TO:

INT. - FORTRESS STOREROOM, DAY

One of the few rooms in the Fortress with a thick, secure door. No other doors. No windows. All the Defenders' horses are resaddled and ready to ride.

Houdin and company burst in and slam and bolt the door behind them. POUNDING at the door! The horses buck around and whinny.

HOUDIN  
Where the hell's Darcy? He should be here already.

BARTOLOTE  
He gave his orders. We can't wait.

COLETTE  
We can't leave him!

HOUDIN  
No choice.

COLETTE  
What if he needs help?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN

Get on the horse!

COLETTE

No! Not without Trey!

Houdin grabs Colette and slings her onto the horse.

CUT TO:

INT. - BANQUET HALL, DAY

Darcy bursts into the Banquet Hall to find Zoras' men converging on him from all directions. GUNSHOTS whizz past his head!

Darcy scrambles over rubble to the top of the well shaft. He grabs the chain at the top of the well's pulley and JUMPS down the well!

INT. - WELL SHAFT, CONTINUOUS

Darcy bounces unevenly down the well as the rusty chain jerks over the pulley. But suddenly he stops! Darcy looks up.

DARCY'S POV

Three burly Kabyles have grabbed the moving chain, stopping Darcy's descent cold. They hoist the chain back up.

INT. - BANQUET HALL, CONTINUOUS

The Kabyles pull the chain out of the well... minus Darcy!

INT. - CORRIDOR OUTSIDE FORTRESS STOREHOUSE, DAY

Twenty Kabyles try to pound their way in with their rifle butts.

INT. - FORTRESS STOREHOUSE, DAY

A HAIL OF BULLETS blasts through the door from the corridor, ripping the bolt to shreds. MORE POUNDING. This time the door caves in. The Kabyles storm the room and find...

THEIR POV

An empty room! The Defenders and all their horses have vanished!

The Kabyles pound the walls, looking for a secret way out. Nothing.

CUT TO:

INT. - BANQUET HALL, DAY

Zoras pushes his way over to the well.

INT. - WELL SHAFT, CONTINUOUS

116

Darcy squeezes his body hard against the sides of the shaft, his arms and legs outstretched to keep from falling. He's sweating, getting weaker.

DARCY'S POV 20 FEET UP

as Zoras' grinning face appears at the top of the shaft.

ZORAS

French-man! What are you doing down there? Come up and we will have more sport.

Darcy tries scooting down inch by inch as he talks.

DARCY

I'm happy right here, thank you, Zoras. Why don't you come down and join me? We'll have a party.

Zoras leans over the well. He's enjoying this mightily.

ZORAS

I must decline. But thank you for the fine challenge you have provided. It saddens me to quench your fighting spirit. But so it must be.

DARCY'S POV

Zoras steps out of view and five Kabyles with LIT TORCHES appear in his place.

INT. - BANQUET HALL, CONTINUOUS

Zoras claps his hands and moves on to other business. The Five Kabyles drop their torches down the well.

INT. - WELL, CONTINUOUS

DARCY'S POV

Five balls of fire drop down the shaft directly towards him!

Darcy tries to dodge, but three TORCHES land on him and SET HIM ABLAZE. He loses his grip and FALLS, screaming!

FOLLOW DARCY'S DESCENT

headfirst, uniform ablaze, 200 feet straight down into...

INT. - RIVER CAVERN, DAY

Flames streaking behind him, Darcy crashes out of the bottom of the shaft into the rushing river. The body surfaces for a brief instant, then in seconds is swept further underground into the mountain.

EXT. - RAMPART AND COURTYARD, DAY

Just the sound of soothing wind. A lingering still life of peace and quiet... if it weren't for the 40 or 50 dead bodies strewn all over.

Suddenly -- BOOM! A section of wall BLASTS OUTWARD! Through the opening onto the ramparts ride the remaining Six Defenders. Houdin leads, Bartolote brings up the rear, leading the other horses.

INT. - CORRIDOR, DAY

Zoras hears the BLAST! He whirls toward the courtyard, shouting orders at his men!

INT. - BOTTOM OF ROTUNDA, DAY

The Iron Box is tick-tick-ticking away.

EXT. - RAMPART AND COURTYARD, DAY

The Six Defenders ride down the rampart steps into the unguarded courtyard. They gallop toward the gate!

EXT. - FORTRESS GATE, DAY

The Six Defenders ride out of the Fortress and rein up. Houdin grabs his saddlebags and slips back inside the gate on foot as Bartolote and two Arabs team up to pull the heavy gates closed.

BARTOLOTE

Hurry!

INT. - GATE, DAY

The gates are shut. Straining, Houdin pulls the heavy iron bolt closed. He spreads a GEL along the interface between gate and bolt. Then he strikes a match and lights the gel.

A BLUE FLAME streaks down the line of gel, then becomes orange hot.

As the flame dies, Houdin yanks at the bolt. It's welded securely shut -- 100 men couldn't pull it open now! He runs for the stairs.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

Houdin runs along the battlements, dislodging every grappling hook, except one, which he coils up and hides out of sight.

EXT. - FORTRESS GATES, DAY

Houdin leans over the rampart wall. Bartolote and the others have remounted and are ready to ride across the land bridge.

BARTOLOTE

What are you doing?! Get down here!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOUDIN  
I'm going back for Darcy!

BARTOLOTE  
Are you crazy?! He's dead!

HOUDIN  
Maybe! (glancing at his watch) Eight  
minutes. Get Colette across.

COLETTE  
Jean-Pierre! I'm sorry! Please!  
Don't do it!

But Houdin disappears from view.

COLETTE  
NOOOOO!!

Bartolote grabs Colette's reins and leads her and the others onto  
the land bridge. Colette looks back, tears streaming down her face.

EXT. - RAMPARTS, DAY

Houdin springs through the opening blasted in the Fortress wall.

INT. - CORRIDORS, DAY

Running. Houdin checks his watch. Still running. Then he stops short.

On the ground -- Darcy's sword. Even worse, a few yards away,  
Darcy's wooden hand.

Houdin kneels mournfully, guiltily, as he picks up the hand.

HOUDIN  
(to Darcy in spirit)  
I'm sorry, my friend.

ENEMY FOOTSTEPS behind! Houdin stuffs the wooden hand inside his  
shirt and runs back the way he came.

EXT. - ANOTHER CORRIDOR, DAY

HOUDIN'S POV -- RUNNING

The blasted hole onto the rampart is straight ahead. Daylight!

EXT. - RAMPART, CONTINUOUS

Houdin bursts through the opening and -- is blindsided by a NET  
thrown over him. A bunch of Kabyles haul in the net, pulling Houdin  
off his feet like a captured animal. He struggles inside the net.



EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Houdin stands against a wall, his hands shackled in medieval iron cuffs.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

Zoras and a firing squad of 25 Kabyles aiming straight at Houdin. Zoras speaks contemptuously.

ZORAS

You have caused me trouble for the last time, French-man. After I kill you, I will hunt your friends down and kill them, too.

HOUDIN

(laughing)

You and your men will never leave those gates. You're standing on your grave, Zoras.

Zoras is getting angrier with Houdin's every word.

HOUDIN

Soon the story will spread over all of North Africa of how you and your weak warriors were vanquished by a mere ten men -- and a woman!

ZORAS

You will say no more!

HOUDIN

They will laugh at the name of Zoras al Khatim!

ZORAS

You, French-man, cannot dictate history. You are neither a true magician nor a prophet!

HOUDIN

Wrong! I am a true magician -- and a prophet! By my magic, this very ground will shake like thunder beneath your feet! I prophesy that the unholy walls of this fortress will tumble down and crush you like an insect!

Enraged, Zoras shoves his sword blade up under Houdin's chin, pinning him helpless up against the wall.

ZORAS

And when shall this 'prophecy' be fulfilled?

Suddenly Zoras' eyes open wide in shock as his sword wrist LEVITATES. He fights to pull it down, but the sword hilt RIPS ITSELF FREE from his grip. The sword FLIES UP into the air -- as if by magic!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DARCY (O.S.)  
Now, Zoras! It begins now!

TILT UP TO REVEAL

DARCY, on a balcony one floor above. His uniform's in tatters, his shirt is burned half away, and his wooden hand is missing -- but he's alive!

Dangling from the balcony on an electrical cable is Houdin's ELECTROMAGNET, to which Zoras' sword is now fused.

INT. - BOTTOM OF ROTUNDA, DAY

The Iron Box stops ticking. The lid pops open. A wheel of nozzles rises and starts rotating. They spin faster and faster, shooting out SPARKS, outward and ever higher, in a spiral pattern.

The flying SPARKS ignite fuse trails of GUNPOWDER leading into each of the five tunnels. The gunpowder BURSTS INTO FLAME!

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Zoras screams in Berber. Before his soldiers can shoot, Darcy throws down three SMOKE GRENADES that instantly EXPLODE.

T. - CATACOMB TUNNELS, DAY

INTERCUT AND FOLLOW

the FLAME PATHS of the five fuse trails of gunpowder down the crazy, zigzagging paths of the five tunnels -- over obstacles, around corners. One fuse trail FORKS into two trails, which in turn FORK off into more trails, like an elaborate game of flammable dominoes.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Houdin bursts through the smoke and WALLOPS Zoras with his heavy handcuffs. Zoras drops to the ground like a brick.

INT. - CATACOMBS, DAY

One gunpowder fuse trail burns to its end: A wad of fabric jammed into a natural crevice in the wall. The guncotton EXPLODES! A structural pillar collapses. The tunnel walls start to cave in.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

As the Kabyles cough their way out of the smoke, they're frightened by the sound of UNDERGROUND EXPLOSIONS.

LOW POWERFUL RUMBLING begins, grows louder. The ground itself starts SHAKING.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A half-ton section of STONE BLOCKS crashes down right by the Kabyles. The soldiers drop their weapons and stampede toward the gates.

On the balcony, Darcy rips the cable from the battery and Zoras' sword drops free of the Electromagnet. Houdin catches it.

Darcy vaults over the balcony, breaking his fall on a hapless Kabyle.

Houdin raises the sword high to strike Zoras, but Darcy grabs his arm and pulls him toward the rampart.

DARCY

Leave him! Let's get out of here!

Darcy and Houdin spring for the stairs.

INT. - CATACOMBS, DAY

More underground EXPLOSIONS. More pillars and walls CRUMBLE!

INT. - RIVER CAVERN, DAY

The saddlebag is still hanging precariously over the river. An ALARM CLOCK on a ledge over the river RINGS, triggering a mechanism which turns over a vial of acid, which eats through the rope.

The rope breaks. The saddlebag falls and is swept underground.

Suddenly the RIVER EXPLODES back out the exit tunnel! The side wall of the cavern begins to split! Pieces of the roof crumble!

INT. - FORTRESS GATE, DAY

The Kabyles climb all over each other, straining to unbolt the gates. Some abandon the effort and head for the rampart.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

While Houdin sets up the grappling hook and tosses over the rope, a scimitar-rattling Kabyle rushes up the steps. Three others follow.

Darcy snatches Zoras' sword from Houdin and slays the first Kabyle. Houdin scoops up that dead Kabyle's scimitar. He and Darcy fight back-to-back brilliantly, a magnificent team!

HOUDIN

I think I'm getting a knack for this!

Darcy sends the last Kabyle falling to the courtyard.

DARCY

Go! I'm right behind you!

Houdin climbs over the top and slides down the rope. Darcy tosses Zoras' sword over the wall and slides down right behind him.

EXT. - FORTRESS WALL, CONTINUOUS

Darcy lands and tucks Zoras' sword into his belt. Houdin strikes a match and torches the dry rope. The FLAMES zoom upwards to the Kabyles at the battlement, their path of escape now cut off.

The GROUND SHAKES even more violently. Darcy and Houdin run for the land bridge.

EXT. - LAND BRIDGE, CONTINUOUS

Darcy and Houdin run the race of their lives. A HUGE FISSURE opens up across the land bridge. They both JUMP, but the FISSURE OPENS WIDER, nearly swallowing Houdin. Darcy grabs his arm in time, pulls him back up. They keep going.

INT. - CATACOMBS, DAY

A tunnel wall splits open and the RIVER pours into the catacombs.

EXT. - COURTYARD, DAY

Zoras, alone in the middle of the courtyard, stumbles backward and looks around at the quaking Fortress.

EXT. - LAND BRIDGE, DAY

FOLLOW Darcy and Houdin, racing neck and neck across the bridge, hearts pounding, lungs aching.

A second FISSURE forms behind them. A quarter of the land bridge between them and Fortress COLLAPSES and drops away into the chasm.

As they run, more chunks of land keep dropping away just behind them.

EXT. - FOOT OF LAND BRIDGE, CONTINUOUS

The five others on the far rim holler at the top of their lungs, frantically urging Darcy and Houdin on. The ROAR of the cataclysm drowns them out.

BARTOLOTE'S POV

The earth at the very foot of the land bridge begins to split!

Bartolote realizes they aren't going to make it! He reins his stallion around and races back across the land bridge to the rescue. Colette shrieks.

EXT. - LAND BRIDGE -- THE LAST 100 YARDS, CONTINUOUS

Bartolote streaks 60 yards down the land bridge. He reaches Darcy and Houdin, rears his huge horse around the other way. He slips his feet out of the stirrups.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BARTOLOTE

Get up here! Hold on!

Darcy jumps into the left stirrup with his right foot. Houdin takes the right side. They grab hold of the saddle straps.

BARTOLOTE

Hee-yahhh!

Bartolote whips the horse to a gallop, full speed along the narrow trail. Clutching on for dear life, Darcy and Houdin hang out over the chasm on either side.

AT THE FOOT OF THE LAND BRIDGE

The crack widens and starts to give way.

ON THE LAND BRIDGE

Galloping! Just a few seconds more to safety!

BARTOLOTE'S POV

peering over his horse's crest: 20 more feet to go! 15! 10!

The bridge section BREAKS OFF! The ground sinks behind Bartolote!

Still charging ahead, Bartolote's horse makes a spectacular LEAP UPWARD over seven feet of sky and... LANDS with his hind legs just scraping the edge of the cliff!

Bartolote slows up and halts clear of the edge. Darcy and Houdin let go the stirrups and drop to blessedly safe ground. Colette rushes to her husband and smothers him with kisses.

EXT. - RAMPART, DAY

Zoras gazes bitterly over the battlement, shaking his fist at the heavens. More TREMORS rock the rampart. Zoras totters and slowly twirls in terror as stonework CRACKS and CRASHES all around him.

EXT. - FORTRESS, CONTINUOUS

The heavy Fortress walls themselves start to break apart at the base and separate from the foundation.

WIDE ANGLE

The entire Fortress of the Assassins, still in one unit, SHEARS AWAY FROM THE MOUNTAIN and FALLS DOWN INTO THE CHASM!

EXT. - RAMPART, CONTINUOUS

FOLLOWING DOWNWARD

Zoras, screaming in terror... Falling-falling-falling... with the Fortress plummeting around him!

EXT. - BOTTOM OF THE CHASM, CONTINUOUS

The final CRASH of the Fortress of the Assassins. An entire castle free-falling 2000 feet! The shock wave of a 3 MEGATON IMPACT as the Fortress is pulverized.

EXT. - FOOT OF (EX-) LAND BRIDGE, DAY

PAN ACROSS

the survivors: Bartolote... Darcy... Rachid with his two remaining cousins... and Colette, hanging on Houdin's neck gratefully. All of them stare dumbfounded at what remains.

THEIR POV

A sheer cliff face and several spectacular waterfalls are left where the Fortress of the Assassins used to be. Down below, a huge WHITE CLOUD OF DUST rises from the bottom of the chasm.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

A column of WHITE STEAM.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL...

The steam rising from the smokestack of the "Alexander."

EXT. - ALGIERS PIER, DAY

The "Alexander" lies at anchor in the background. A ferryboat and crew waits alongside the pier.

Saying bon voyage to Houdin and Colette on the pier are Gastinot, Rachid, his two cousins, Darcy, and Bartolote.

Gastinot is effusively pumping Houdin's hand. He just won't let go.

GASTINOT

I'll be in Paris next spring. Perhaps we can have dinner at my club. I could introduce you to some of my friends--

As he blathers away,

ANGLE ON

Colette, bidding farewell to Rachid. She gives him a big hug. He is a bit embarrassed by this show of affection from a Western woman.

COLETTE

I know. It may not be your custom, but it's mine. I shall never forget you.

RACHID

May Allah smile his divine radiance on you the rest of your days.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COLETTE

And may Christ my Savior and Lord bless  
and protect you always.

Rachid warmly clasps her hand, then moves on to bid farewell to  
Bartolote.

Next in line: Darcy. Colette freezes up, just looks at him. In the  
background, Houdin still can't manage to break free of Gastinot.

GASTINOT

My son Charles would be so thrilled to  
meet you. Tell me, do you hunt pheasant?

ANGLE ON

Colette and Darcy. Colette finally breaks the silence.

COLETTE

Captain.

DARCY

Madame.

More silence. Darcy bows awkwardly and turns away.

HOUDIN

Oh, for heaven's sake, Trey, kiss her  
good-bye.

DARCY

(surprised)

You don't mind?

HOUDIN

I can afford to be magnanimous. The  
lady is mine. You, on the other hand,  
get to go home with a very nice horse.

Darcy returns to Colette. She looks up hopefully. He leans in to  
kiss her, ever so gently, on the lips.

DARCY

If I had only met you first, no army on  
earth could have kept me from your side.

Colette smiles. She was right after all. A flirtatious glint sparks  
in her eyes.

COLETTE

Thank you, Captain. I enjoyed the  
pleasure of your company as well. Do  
visit us if you're ever in France.

She extends her hand. He grasps it tight for a moment, then kisses  
it as if she were royalty.

DARCY

If duty allows.

EXT. - THE "ALEXANDER" AT SEA, DAY

The "Alexander" steams away from shore. Houdin and Colette stand on the fantail of the ship watching Algiers shrink in the distance.

EXT. - COASTAL BLUFF OVER ALGIERS, DAY

Darcy stands alone on a cliff, watching the "Alexander" head out to sea. The stiff sea wind blows through his hair. Bartolote joins him.

BARTOLOTE

So, Captain. Do you think there really is such a thing as magic? Or is it all just tricks and conjury?

Darcy turns back toward the horses grazing a few yards away.

DARCY

I don't have an answer to that, soldier. All I know is that (pointing) the real world is that way.

Both men mount up.

SWEEPING AERIAL LONG SHOT

Darcy and Bartolote canter up to the top of a plateau and quicken to a gallop. They race together across a beautiful plain of long, waving grass towards the beckoning mountain wilderness.

PULL BACK EVEN WIDER

Off to the side, way out to sea, we can see the "Alexander" steaming towards France. Behind them, the always bustling port of Algiers. Ahead in the distance, as Darcy and Bartolote ride onward, are rolling dark STORM CLOUDS and a breathtaking RAINBOW.

THE END