

THE MORTAL MAZE by Ian D. Richardson
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OPENING CREDITS, AS APPROPRIATE

EXT. SHABBY STREET, ARMIBAR, CENTRAL ARABIA - DAY

The street is in a rundown area with buildings damaged by gunfire and shelling. About 100 Arab men -- mostly young -- are in a protest march, watched by armed Central Arabian security police.

The demonstrators chant anti-American, anti-British and anti-Israeli slogans in Arabic and English. Women and children stand in doorways and applaud.

TV cameraman PETE FOX, mid-20s wears a faded Crocodile Dundee T-shirt, shorts and sandals as he films a 30s-something reporter JACKSON "JACKO" DUNBAR doing a piece-to-camera.

Jackson is medium height and weight. His face is smooth and tanned. His hair is dark but showing signs of thinning. His preferred work wear is casual shoes, neat jeans and plain open-necked shirts. In summary, his appearance is very ordinary. He is a person who would rarely attract attention in the street, but he is gifted with an intuitive talent to project authority when in front of a TV camera.

JACKSON

(neutral English accent)

This is another spontaneous protest against the consequences of the conflicts that could tear apart this once-flourishing city.

A dozen young ARAB MEN emerge from a side street and silently join the demonstration.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Like previous demonstrations, this one is peaceful, though the anger of the protesters is intensifying. Whether this anger can be contained is the question on many lips today.

The piece-to-camera ends. Pete turns his camera on the crowd and they respond with renewed slogan-shouting.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

(to Pete)

Boring! Let's go.

PETE

(an Aussie accent)

I'll stay a bit, I think -- at least until the others have gone.

Pete nods to CNN and Al-JAZEERA crews filming nearby.

JACKSON
Please yourself! I've got my
expenses to fill in.

I/E. BBC CAR, BUSINESS DISTRICT, ARMIBAR - SOON AFTER, DAY

Jackson is in the front passenger seat of a BBC 4x4 as it travels along a busy upmarket shopping parade.

It's driven by YASSIN AZIZI, the staff chauffeur and an Arab with a moustache, aged about 30 and neatly dressed in casual western clothes. PRESS and BBC signs are prominently displayed on the car.

Jackson's mobile rings. He sees Pete's name on the screen.

JACKSON
Hi Pete. (LISTENS) What?! (BEAT)
Hello. Hello! Hello!!

The line goes dead. Jackson returns the phone to his shirt.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
Bloody phones!

Jackson points to a bank further along the street.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
Pull over, Yassin.

Yassin swings the car into the kerb.

EXT. BANK IN BUSINESS DISTRICT - CONTINUOUS

Yassin watches Jackson go to an ATM and insert his card.

There is a pause, then Jackson kicks the wall in anger and returns to the BBC car.

JACKSON
Bloody banks!

Yassin sighs and hands Jackson a \$50 note from his wallet.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
Thanks, Yassin. I'll give it back
as soon as I get my exes.

Yassin shrugs and they drive away.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE BBC BUREAU, ARMIBAR - SOON AFTER

SAMIRA LANG, the BBC office manager, paces anxiously near a door bearing the BBC logo. She is Anglo-Arab, late 20s and in stylish western trousers and top.

She sees the BBC 4x4 approaching and runs to it as it pulls up. Jackson winds his window down.

SAMIRA
(hint of Arab accent)
Go back! Go back!!

I/E. BBC CAR OUTSIDE BBC BUREAU - CONTINUOUS

Jackson's mobile rings. It's Pete again.

JACKSON
Pete? (LISTENS) Shit! We're on out
way back!

Yassin does a squealing u-turn and speeds away.

EXT. THE DEMO, SHABBY STREET, ARMIBAR - SOON AFTER

Jackson jumps from the 4x4 and surveys a chaotic blood bath. Injured men are loaded into ambulances and the backs of utility trucks. Bodies of dead demonstrators lie scattered, watched by the nervous security police, their automatic weapons at the ready.

Jackson sees Pete who runs over with his camera.

JACKSON
Did you get all this?

PETE
Yeah. Most of it, I think.

Jackson sees the CNN and Al Jazeera cars pulling away. They toot boastfully as they go and he waves back, embarrassed.

JACKSON
What about them?

PETE
(SHRUGS) They got the lot and Omar
and Jane did pieces-to-camera
during the shooting.

JACKSON
Oh shit! Mack'll rip my nuts off.

Jackson is desperate. He points to a building with a large hole blown in the front.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
Run in with the camera rolling,
then catch me 'on the fly' as I
leap in after you.

Pete hesitates.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
Go on, for Christ's sake!

Pete runs towards the building, camera on his shoulder.

I/E. SHABBY STREET, ARMIBAR - CONTINUOUS

Pete leaps through the hole in the wall and swings the camera
around to catch Jackson following him.

Jackson appears, affecting breathlessness. He crouches down
as though taking cover. He turns to the camera.

JACKSON
What started out as a peaceful
protest has turned violent. It--

Jackson suddenly flinches and anxiously looks around, without
apparent reason.

JACKSON (CONT'D)
(resuming)
Um. It isn't quite clear why the
protest turned into such a savage
confrontation, but there are a
number of dead and wounded. This
unhappy event is sure to place
pressure on the... (FADE)

I/E. BBC CAR, BUSINESS DISTRICT - SOON AFTER

Yassin speeds through the traffic. Jackson is in the front
seat and turns to Pete who is in the back studying the piece-
to-camera on the camera monitor.

JACKSON
Just add some shooting and bullet
pings. That'll do the trick.

PETE
(shakes head)
I'm not going to fake it, Jacko.

JACKSON
Christ! We're not really faking it.
It's what I'd have said if I'd been
there a few minutes early. Anyway,
you must've done it all the time in
Australia.

PETE

But this is the BBC.

JACKSON

Don't get pompous with me, pal.

Pete fiddles with the camera, then turns back to Jackson.

PETE

I've deleted it. Debate over!

Jackson sinks back into his seat, crushed.

JACKSON

Shit!

INT. MAIN WORK AREA, BBC BUREAU, ARMIBAR - SOON AFTER

The atmosphere is tense.

TV monitors, each displaying different channels, are fixed to a wall. Editing equipment is on a bench against another wall. There are several desks with computers on them. Scruffy pin boards display assorted notes and large maps.

Samira is on the phone while FAROUK, the Arab technician, never happy in anything but black T-shirts and black trousers, checks the lights and fixed-position camera on the TV broadcast platform.

Adjacent is a glass-fronted office with *CHIEF OF BUREAU* on the door. MACK GALBRAITH can be seen getting up from his desk. He is early 50s, a blunt, seen-it-all Glaswegian. He is smoking a cigarette and his clothes need pressing.

Mack impatiently opens his door to the main work area.

SAMIRA

(to Mack)

They'll be here any moment.

INT. MACK GALBRAITH'S OFFICE, BBC BUREAU - CONTINUOUS

Mack goes to one of the monitors and watches a woman reporter doing a piece-to-camera. The strapline on the screen identifies her as JANE KUBINSKI, CNN.

Mack is furious as he turns up the sound.

JANE KUBINSKI (FROM TV)

...the gun battle started without warning, after the demonstration was infiltrated by--

Jane is interrupted by a burst of rapid gunfire. She instinctively ducks and turns to look behind her.

A soldier fires his automatic at a window and a hand appears frantically waving a white rag.

The firing stops and a TERRIFIED ARAB appears at the window, his hands up and the white rag in one hand.

He is shot dead. Jane flinches and turns to the camera.

JANE KUBINSKI (CONT'D)

As I was saying, the protest was infiltrated by gunmen who used the demonstrators as...

MACK

Oh fucking hell!

Mack flicks through other channels to Al Jazeera in Arabic.

There are dead bodies and security police pointing their guns at wounded demonstrators pleading for mercy.

The angle widens to show reporter OMAR ABBAS, who begins talking to the camera in Arabic (indistinct).

Mack is beside himself with rage as the main door flies open and Jackson and Pete rush in.

JACKSON

Sorry, Mack. I really am.

MACK

You're supposed to be a rising star. One who never misses a story.

JACKSON

Sorry.

MACK

Well, get your fucking stuff on air, while I think of some excuses for London.

Jackson calls to Farouk, who is setting up the lights.

JACKSON

A coupla minutes. Just let me catch my breath.

Jackson calls to Samira, who is making a phone call.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Quick! Get me the latest Reuters!

Samira is slow to react.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

C'mon, c'mon! Now, Samira!

Samira slams the phone down and gets Reuters on her computer.

INT. MACK GALBRAITH'S OFFICE, BBC BUREAU - CONTINUOUS

Mack slumps in a battered chair behind an untidy desk.

The room has a very lived-in look with a large tattered map of the Middle East stuck to a wall with sticky tape. A bookcase has books, mugs and junk randomly on the shelves.

Mack gets a cigarette and lights it from a butt left smouldering in his full ash tray.

He points his remote controls at the TV monitors, switching them to BBC World News, CNN and Al Jazeera. They are all on mute. The BBC is showing a chat show interview, while CNN and Al Jazeera run graphic film of the demo gun battle.

Mack pushes a fast dial button on his desk speaker phone. Beeping is heard as the number is dialled. The call is answered promptly by MARY.

MARY (FROM PHONE SPEAKER)
Foreign Desk.

Mack tries to sound on top of the situation.

MACK
Oh hi, Mary. It's Mack. We'll be up with our stuff very shortly. (BEAT)
It'll be worth the wait.

MARY
(annoyed)
I certainly hope so, Mack. We're already last with this story.

Mary abruptly hangs up.

Mack draws fiercely on his cigarette and turns up the sound on the CNN monitor with his remote. Jane Kubinski's piece-to-camera is being repeated.

JANE KUBINSKI
...and I counted 10 dead and about the same number injured. This is a serious escalation of the troubles that have been...

Mack angrily kills the picture with his remote, stubs out his cigarette and slumps back in his chair.

A presenter, MARGARET, appears on the BBC World News monitor. Mack turns up the sound.

MARGARET

...and for more on this breaking story we go to our correspondent Jackson Dunbar.

Jackson appears in front of a backdrop of the city.

JACKSON

This incident was as unexpected as it was nasty. (REFERS TO NOTES) According to Reuters, at least 10 died at the scene and a further six died on their way to hospital.

MARGARET

So, how did it start?

JACKSON

That's not entirely clear, but it seems the peaceful demonstration was infiltrated by gunmen. Here's what happened next...

The screen cuts to Pete's film of explosions and the security police opening fire on the demonstration.

Mack lights another cigarette as he watches.

INT. JACKSON'S FLAT - LATER, NIGHT

Jackson enters the darkened flat and turns on the lights.

His flat has a functional open plan living area and a kitchenette. There is a TV set, a stereo unit, an electronic keyboard, a sofa, comfy chairs and kitchen stools. A landline telephone and assorted gadgets are on the kitchen bench. Pop music and art posters decorate the walls.

Jackson is exhausted. He turns on BBC World News. He watches Pete's film being repeated. He takes a bottle of whisky from a cupboard and pours a large drink.

His mobile phone rings and is answered.

JACKSON

Jackson Dunbar... (LISTENS) Oh, hello, Mother. How are you?
(LISTENS) Yes, I know Dad always wore a tie, but I've told you before, it's different now.
(LISTENS) Is that the best you can say, that I looked untidy?
(LISTENS) Stop calling me Roger!

Jackson snaps shut the phone and gulps down his whisky.

INT. MACK'S OFFICE, BBC BUREAU - MORNING

The daily conference call with Mary in London. Mack, Samira, Jackson, Pete and Farouk are there, looking gloomy. Pete wears a Bondi Beach T-shirt.

MARY (FROM PHONE SPEAKER)
It wasn't our finest hour.

MACK
(Sighs) Probably not.

MARY
Pity there wasn't a piece-to-camera. CNN and--

PETE
(interrupts)
There was one Mary, but it was corrupted. I think the camera got a knock when I had to take cover.

MARY
Mmm. What with that puncture it just wasn't your day, eh!

Puncture? All but Mack look at each other, baffled.

Mack hastily interrupts, trying to hide his embarrassment.

MACK
Yeah. We're lucky we don't get more on the roads round here.

MARY
Let's hope today goes better.
(BEAT) Oh, another thing. It's been noted that Jacko wasn't wearing his flak jacket.

There are groans and a collective rolling of eyes.

MACK
(sarcastically)
Tell Health & Safety that I'll tie Jacko to a street lamp and give him 100 lashes with a stick of wet rhubarb if it happens again.

MARY
(Laughs) I'll do that. Bye...

INT. HOTEL BAR IN ARMIBAR - DAY

Jackson is at a table near a row of poker machines. He checks his watch. He is waiting for someone.

He goes to a poker machine. He quickly wins \$100 and is excited as coins crash noisily into the tray.

As he scoops them up, he is interrupted.

THOMAS (O.C.)
(posh English accent)
So, the drinks are on you!

Jackson turns to see THOMAS FULHAM at his elbow. Thomas is the same age as Jackson and wears a smart suit and tie.

JACKSON
(grinning broadly)
Looks like it.

THOMAS
Make mine a large G&T, dear boy.

A waiter appears. Jackson drops his winnings on the tray.

JACKSON (TO WAITER)
A large gin-and-tonic for my friend
and a Coke for me. And I'll have
the change back in notes, please.

Thomas takes a seat, picks up an Arab newspaper and points to a story on the front page.

THOMAS
Government horse manure, for sure.

JACKSON
Yeah. Probably.

The waiter pours the drinks and gives Jackson his change.

Thomas nods towards the Coke.

THOMAS
What's this, dear boy?

JACKSON
Well, you know... Best not to mix
broadcasting with the hard stuff.

They both take a sip from their drinks. After a pause...

JACKSON (CONT'D)
It's been a while, Tommy.

THOMAS
Thomas. I prefer Thomas now.

Thomas hands Jackson his business card. Jackson studies it.

JACKSON

(hint of a sneer)

I see... Thomas J. Fulham,
Commercial Attache, British
Embassy... A commercial attache? I
thought you were more interested in
military matters.

THOMAS

You forget that the family fortune
came from business ventures. I'm
here to see Britain scoops up its
share of the opportunities in
Central Arabia.

JACKSON

Jeez! You haven't changed!

Thomas laughs. Jackson pockets the card.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Right, so from now on it's Thomas.
Just stop calling me 'dear boy'.
Jacko will be fine.

Thomas grins agreement.

An elegant, long-haired 30s-something blonde, appears at the
table. She is FELICITY FULHAM in a trouser-suit and carrying
a large brown paper bag.

Thomas turns to greet her.

THOMAS

Darling!

She smiles at Thomas and turns to Jackson.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

You know each other, I gather.

JACKSON

(awkwardly)

From way back. Hello, Felicity!

FELICITY

(soft Scottish accent)

Hello, Roger.

THOMAS

(interjects)

It's Jackson these days, darling.

FELICITY

Yes. So I've seen on the TV...

Felicity changes topic by taking a vase from the paper bag.

FELICITY (CONT'D)

Isn't this wonderful?

Thomas examines it appreciatively.

THOMAS

Very nice.

FELICITY

A gift from a grateful parent.

Thomas's mobile phone rings and he hands the vase back to Felicity. He checks the screen and recognises his caller.

THOMAS

Excuse me a moment.

Thomas moves away. Felicity and Jackson lean towards each other and hold an intense, semi-whispered conversation.

FELICITY

Why the change of name?

JACKSON

Roger was too confusing, what with Dad being a journo and having the same name. You've got to admit 'Jackson Dunbar' has a certain ring of authority to it. (Laughs)

FELICITY

(unconvinced)

More memorable, perhaps.

JACKSON

(BEAT) I heard you'd ended up marrying Tommy?

FELICITY

'Ended up'? That's so insulting!

Jackson shrugs an apology.

JACKSON

How much does Tommy know?

FELICITY

Just that we met during lectures and sometimes went for a drink.

JACKSON

That's all?

Felicity nods agreement.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Good. Let's keep it that way.