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Opening extract from
**Return to King
Solomon's Mines**

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1 EXERCISE

Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, United Kingdom

December 1934

The Bedford three-ton truck bounced, wallowed and slid over the rutted, snow-covered track. A particularly severe jolt brought Luke Challenger's head into sharp contact with one of the stanchions that supported the canvas roof. He swore violently and rubbed at his thatch of straw-coloured hair.

His cousin Nick Malone, who had been lifted out of his seat and slammed back into it, gave a low moan. "My backside just shook hands with my brainbox."

“I thought,” Luke shot back, “you kept your brains *in* your backside.”

“Oh, har-har.”

“Quiet there!” The voice, like its owner, was thin and spiteful. Luke glowered across the back of the truck at Cadet Sergeant Warren. He was fed up with the way Warren (who was only a year older than him and Nick) threw his weight about. His fists clenched, not for the first time, with the desire to flatten the Cadet Sergeant’s sharp nose across his weaselly face. “No talking in the ranks! Do you hear me there, Challenger? Malone?”

The question was completely unnecessary, and Nick’s response was sarcastic. “Faith, Sarjint, I hear youse loud and clear, so I do!” he bellowed. Warren had once made the mistake of making a snide comment about Nick’s Irish father. Since then, Nick had needled the Cadet Sergeant by speaking to him in an outrageous “faith and begorra” accent. Ignoring Warren’s glare, Nick continued, “Only, strictly speaking, aren’t we only in the ranks when we’re on parade, at all, at all?”

“That will do, Malone.” Warren knew he was being made to look foolish, but when he had complained that Nick kept talking to him in an Irish voice, their instructor Lieutenant McNeil, who didn’t like Warren either, had merely said, “I expect that’s because he’s Irish, Cadet Sergeant,” and Warren hadn’t dared bring the matter up

again. So Nick (who was, in fact, only half Irish) continued to bait Warren with impunity.

The truck jerked again and Luke let go his handhold on the vehicle's side to grab at his rifle as it slipped from his lap. He cursed again, but silently this time. He and Nick had only joined his school's army cadet force in a fit of boredom, and because the alternative was extra Latin homework. The school's aim in running the cadet force was that pupils would use it to prepare for a career in the regular army. Luke and Nick had no intention of doing this, and they had not foreseen the amount of spit and polish – not to mention the endless, repetitive drill – that being a cadet would involve; nor that they would find themselves being shaken to bits in the back of this rattletrap truck, on their way to an exercise on a fog-bound Salisbury Plain in the dead of winter.

Warren, having realized that in trying to victimize Nick he was on a hiding to nothing, turned his attention to another target. He directed a savage grin at a huddled figure sitting near the tailboard of the truck, where the icy draughts from the flapping canvas sides were at their worst. "How are you getting on, *Sally*? Is it cold enough for you?" One or two of his cronies in the squad sniggered.

The cadet Warren had addressed looked up. His sharp nose and prominent cheekbones might have

appeared forbidding but for the warmth of his dark eyes; and his voice, though unexpectedly deep, was pleasant. “In the highlands of my country, we often have temperatures similar to this, Sergeant, but thank you for your concern. And my name is Salim – Salim Menelik. I believe I have mentioned this?”

Warren exchanged grins with his cronies. “I’d stick with ‘Sally’ if I were you. What sort of a name is ‘Menelik’? It sounds like some sort of lollipop.”

“It is pronounced Men-err-lick, not Many-lick, Sergeant, and it is a very interesting name. Very ancient. My family can trace its roots back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Their son Menelik was the first Emperor of Ethiopia, and one of our more recent Emperors was Menelik II. Of course, Haile Selassie is Emperor now, my father is a relatively junior member of the royal family...”

Warren’s temper had been rising during this recital. “I’m not interested in your stupid family!”

“Are you not?” said Salim mildly. “Personally, I find the study of family history very interesting. For example, your own ancestors rose to power by constantly changing sides to suit their own interests. One was a Royalist until Charles I was beheaded, and became a Roundhead while Cromwell was Lord Protector, but when Charles II came to the throne – hey presto – suddenly he was a

Royalist again! And your own father—”

“You leave my father out of this!” Warren surged out of his seat, fists balled.

But Luke and Nick, having watched the flush of rage flood across Warren’s ratlike features, were instantly on their feet between their Cadet Sergeant and his intended victim. Warren’s cronies eyed each other uncertainly; both Luke and Nick had a well-earned reputation for being handy in a fight, while the cronies were more at home persecuting small fry than standing up to anyone who could take care of themselves.

Warren gave Luke a savage glare. “Lay a finger on me, Challenger, and I’ll have you on a charge.”

The prominent jaw Luke had inherited from his grandfather jutted menacingly forward. “Try bullying anyone in this squad, *Sergeant*, and I’ll knock your ruddy block off.”

“Ah, now, oi’m sure the Sarjint wouldn’t be after assaulting a man under his command.” Nick’s mouth was creased in an easy-going smile, and his voice was jovial, but there was no hint of friendliness in his eyes. “Him bein’ sich a fine upstanding gentleman and all.”

The stand-off might have gone on indefinitely but for another jerk from the truck that sent the three would-be combatants staggering back to their seats. The rest of the journey passed in sullen silence.

Luke gave Salim Menelik an appraising look. The young Ethiopian had only arrived at the school the previous September. At fifteen years of age, he was a year below Luke and Nick. If they had any impression of him at all, it was of a small, slightly roly-poly figure sitting under a tree and reading a book while most of the other boys were playing rugby. But the way he had stood up to Warren had taken courage, and the ease with which he had got the better of his older opponent showed quickness of wit.

Luke frowned. It had also almost certainly guaranteed young Menelik a bed in the school sickbay. Visibility out on the plain was down to a few yards. Once the exercise had started, what was to stop Warren and his thuggish friends cornering Salim and taking their revenge? Luke resolved to keep a close eye on his Ethiopian schoolmate for the rest of the day.

At length, the Bedford clattered to a halt and the tailboard dropped down. Luke and the other members of his squad clambered stiffly out of the truck, shouldering their rifles and packs. Nick struggled to force his unruly black curls into place beneath his forage cap.

Several other trucks were parked nearby, their tyre-tracks tracing dark, muddy curves against the snow. The winter-withered grass and scrub of the plain lay under a covering of snow which, at no great distance, merged

indistinguishably into fog. Salisbury Plain, the traditional training ground for the army, spread out unseen for miles in all directions: a ragged landscape of sick-looking vegetation, tank tracks and shell holes. Luke shivered. What a place for a walk!

Lieutenant McNeil was speaking to one of the other squad leaders from Luke's school, Ashleigh House. Spotting the new arrivals, he came over, casually returning Warren's crashing salute. "There you are, Sergeant," he observed without enthusiasm. "For the purposes of this exercise, you and your squad are on the blue team." Luke fingered his blue armband as McNeil held out a folded slip of paper. "In there, you'll find a map reference. You do have a map with you, I take it?"

Warren saluted again. "Yes, sir!"

"Well done. At that reference point, you'll find a hut with a red flag flying from the roof. Your objective is to take possession of the flag. The red team from Saint Gilbert's school will be defending the position." Despite his loathing for Ashleigh House, Luke scowled at the mention of his school's hereditary enemies. "Now, obviously, this is not a live-fire exercise. You are carrying rifles for authenticity, not to use them – in any case, they aren't loaded, so nobody is going to be shot today. If a member of the defending team catches you unawares, he will say, 'Halt, you are my prisoner.' And if one of

your opponents thinks he has a clear shot at you before you can take one at him, he will say..." Lieutenant McNeil took a scrap of paper from his breast pocket and read it. "Bang-bang, you are dead," he said tonelessly.

The boys of Luke's squad grinned and nudged each other. Luke and Nick, who, alone among all their schoolmates, had actually been under fire on a number of occasions from enemies determined to kill them, remained poker-faced.

McNeil held up a smoke grenade. "You've all been issued with these. They will be used in the same way as explosive grenades – so if, for example, you manage to land one near a gun position manned by your opponents, that position will be marked down as destroyed. Once you've pulled the pin, for goodness' sake don't forget to throw the thing or you could get a nasty burn. To make the whole thing more realistic there'll also be a few whizz-bangs going off. There will be marshals stationed across the battlefield to ensure fair play. Oh, and by the way, the regular army is doing a tank exercise in another part of the range."

One of Warren's cronies looked alarmed. "Tanks, sir?"

"Yes, Hobbs, but don't worry. You may hear them, but they shouldn't be coming over here."

Hobbs gulped. "What if they do, sir?"

McNeil looked amused. “Well, I wouldn’t try to attack one single-handed if I were you. It’s a lot harder than you are. Give it a wide berth, is my advice.” Hobbs looked relieved. “The trucks will pick you up from the hut at 4.30 pip emma.” Catching Hobbs’s blank look, he added with a sigh, “That’s p.m. to you, Hobbs. Any questions? Very good – carry on, Cadet Sergeant.”

“Sir!” Warren threw another salute. As McNeil turned away, Warren opened the paper and took a map from his pack.

“Eastings first,” Nick reminded him helpfully. “You read the numbers off the bottom of the map—”

“Shut up, Malone, I know that!” Warren hardly seemed to glance at the reference. He merely jabbed a finger at the map. “There. That’s where the flag is.” He considered briefly. “All right, we’ll divide into four teams of three. Challenger, Malone and—”

“Menelik,” Luke put in smoothly. “He’s coming with us.”

Warren gave Luke a hard stare. “I decide who goes with whom.”

“Fine. Then do yourself a favour and decide Menelik is going with me and Nick, because that’s what’s going to happen.”

Warren gave the Ethiopian boy a sideways look. “Well, if you really want to play nursemaid to a—”

Luke glowered at him. "To a what?"

Warren's only reply was a leer so full of derision that Luke stepped forward, but his fist had hardly begun to move before Nick caught it. "Leave it. Too many people around – and McNeil."

Luke fought back the impulse to wipe the smirk from Warren's face. "One of these days..."

"But not today, Challenger." Warren pointed at the map. "Take the sunken road, here."

Luke glanced at the map. "But that takes us miles from the objective."

"It should be safe, then. No chance of you blundering into red team patrols and getting caught. Don't worry, when we've captured the flag we'll save you a cup of tea. As you've so far to go, you'd better get moving."

Luke turned without a word and set off into the fog. Nick gave Salim Menelik a nod. The Ethiopian set off in Luke's footsteps, with Nick bringing up the rear.

As the voices of the attacking party faded behind them, Salim fell into step beside Luke. "Don't think me ungrateful," he said, "but I can look after myself, you know. I'd prefer to fight my own battles."

Luke gave a non-committal grunt. He could believe that Menelik would stand a chance against Warren by himself, but Warren and two of his bully-boys? He doubted it. He walked on, snow crunching beneath his boots.

Nick patted their new companion on the shoulder. “Don’t mind him. He’s just sulking because he couldn’t bust Warren on the snoot. Speaking of Warren, what were you going to say about his da?”

“My father suspects that during the Great War, Warren Senior supplied arms to people in North Africa who weren’t exactly on Britain’s side.”

Nick whistled. “Warren’s old man is something in the War Office, isn’t he? No wonder he didn’t want you bringing that up.” He gave Salim a sidelong look. “Is your father really a prince?”

“Yes, a very minor one. 147th in line for the throne, I believe, which makes me 148th.”

Luke turned. “Do you think you two could pipe down while we’re trying to make our way silently through enemy lines?”

Nick gave him a grin. “You’ll be wanting to get your hands on that flag, then?”

“Yes, before Warren gets hold of it – and if I do, I’ll damn well make him eat it!”

From time to time they heard muffled explosions – Lieutenant McNeil’s promised “whizz-bangs” – as they tramped through the snow and wavering tendrils of mist. Luke was slightly surprised at the ease with which their new companion kept up with the pace he set; Salim Menelik might look a trifle on the podgy side, but

he was light on his feet and seemed to have plenty of stamina.

After half an hour of wading through snow and between frost-laced clumps of gorse and heather, they came across a deeply rutted track running between banks of earth. Luke checked his copy of the map and took a compass from his pack to sight along it. “This is the sunken road, all right,” he whispered. “We follow it for a mile; then we head north towards this strip of woodland—” He broke off as the roar of a diesel engine broke out, somewhere in the mist.

“What’s that?” asked Salim.

Luke listened intently. “A tank – a Brigadier Mark III, or I’ve never heard one. It’s a Challenger Industries model – one of my dad’s.”

Salim looked surprised. “Challenger Industries?”

Nick nodded. “Luke’s da is head of one of the biggest armaments companies in Britain. Did you not know?” Salim shook his head. Nick turned to Luke. “That’s all right then – it’s one of ours.”

“We’d better keep out of its way, all the same,” replied Luke as the engine settled down to a steady roar. “According to McNeil, it shouldn’t be over here anyway.”

Nick shrugged. “It’s probably lost. Not really surprising in all this murk.”

“Where’s it coming from, do you think?” Nick and Salim pointed in different directions and Luke shook his head. “Hard to tell in the fog.” Out in the mist, the tank’s engine revved and they heard distant squeals and rattles as it began to move on its caterpillar treads. “Oh well, it shouldn’t bother us if we don’t bother it. Come on.” Luke set off down the road.

As they walked, the snow became deeper, the banks of earth to either side of the road rose higher and the noise of the tank grew louder. Luke and his companions had hardly covered a hundred yards before the ugly, squat vehicle loomed out of the mist, also occupying the sunken road and coming directly towards them.

“We’d better climb up the bank a way and let it through...” Luke got no further. He watched with stunned disbelief as the tank ground to a halt and its turret swivelled until the gun barrel was pointing directly at the three cadets. There was a roar like the end of the world, and Luke threw himself to the ground as a fountain of mud and earth erupted a few yards behind him.

Luke stared wildly around. To his relief, Salim Menelik was struggling to his feet, seemingly none the worse for wear; and Nick was spitting out the mouthful of snow he had inadvertently taken in his frantic dive.

The tank creaked back into motion. With one accord, Luke, Nick and Salim scrambled up the bank to their

left. Their feet slipped on the snow and stalks of the grass beneath slithered through their clutching hands. Another explosion close behind them spurred them on, and a split second later they were over the bank and tumbling down the other side to lie, gasping, in a patch of snow-powdered broom.

Nick swore violently. "I don't believe this!" He turned to Luke, his usually good-natured face twisted in fury. "We're being shot at – again!"

Salim stared at him. "Again? What do you mean, again?"

"No time to explain." Luke's voice rose above the roar of the tank's engine as it set off in pursuit. "Run!"