

The Earthstormers

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Prologue

The Egyptian Desert, June 1942

With sunburnt cheeks, their eyes squinting against the fullness of the mid-morning sun, the two men pulled broad-rimmed hats onto their heads and took stock of their surroundings.

Were it not for the blue sky overhead and the already oppressive mid-morning heat, one might have believed that the scene was on Mars.

A line of broken cliffs stretched across the landscape, their lower slopes littered with a chaos of jagged boulders. The rock surfaces were bare and lifeless. A winding valley snaked down from the level plateau above, but its floor was as arid as the parched wasteland below, where the valley opened out into a great flatland of dust and heat haze. For as far as the eye could see into the emptiness there were no houses, no trees, no sounds, no movement, no other people.

The two explorers stretched stiff limbs, ambled a few yards from their battered Land Rover with its open flatbed at the back, took thirsty gulps from water bottles, pointed in this direction or that, and finally made for the bottom of the cliff where the mouth of the dry valley faced out into the empty plain. They stopped at a point just within the valley where a freshly eroded rock face came down to the ground.

“Here’s the place”, said one of the men in an American East Coast twang, bent down and traced with his finger a horizontal band in the cliff only a foot above the soles of their desert boots. “See this layer? Boundary line just here?”

The other man removed his hat and fanned his face with it as he glanced nervously around. The direct sunlight bothered his eyes and he quickly replaced the hat on his head.

"Are you sure we're safe?", he asked in a distrustful English home counties' voice.

"C'mon, Bertie, snap out of it! We got work to do."

"I thought I heard something just now. An aircraft engine, in the distance. Hank, are you sure...?"

"The fighting's a hundred miles north of us. We'll be fine. Got your trowel ready?"

Bertie nodded, licked his lips absent-mindedly, and at last directed his attention to the geology. He made a few tentative scrapes at the rock face, then turned to his companion.

"You're right. There's something in there."

"Upper Cretaceous, right?"

"Almost coincides with the boundary. Most unusual."

His fears forgotten in anticipation of a valuable find, Bertie set to work with a will alongside his partner.

It would take them several hours to free their specimen from the tenacious clutches of the cliff. The sun crawled slowly towards the zenith, and when it reached its highest point the men had to return to their Land Rover and take shelter under its canvas roof for an hour. Bottles of water were emptied into aching throats. Pieces of chicken were swallowed and the bones tossed carelessly out of the open windows to dry out and crack in the heat.

"Wonder how the war's going?", Bertie mused.

"Auchinleck was retreating, last I heard. If he don't get his act together soon, we'll be sitting here waiting till the doughboys arrive. How's your German?"

"Do you think they really will?"

"Course. Now we're at war with Germany too. Till then, it's *Hände hoch!* and *Schiessen Sie mich nicht!*"

"Hank, stop it! I can't bear to think about it!"

"What? Don't you want to meet General Rommel personally and tell him what you think of him? After what he did to your folks in France?"

"I just wish it'd all go away."

"It will", Hank assured the fearful Brit. "Another thousand years, and Rommel and Auchinleck and Churchill and Hitler and Il Duce will just be smudges on a piece of sandstone! If the Almighty Creator doesn't have anywhere nastier to send them. Talking of which..."

He pulled his boots back on, laced them and tentatively stuck his nose out from under the shade of their vehicle's canvas roof. "Another couple of hours and we'll be done for

today.”

“I meant a bit sooner than that”, Bertie muttered under his breath, and followed his partner back out into the blistering sunshine.

They continued to work at the cliff, sometimes chipping it with their trowels, sometimes carefully dabbing at the fragile surface with paint brushes. By late afternoon, with the heat of the day now on the wane, Bertie and Hank had managed to separate a slab of sandstone whose surface bore unmistakable witness to a remote and living past.

“It’s a rib cage”, Bertie decided. He squinted at it from one angle, then from another, sometimes dabbing at the relics with his paint brush. “Spine runs down here. There’s the humerus, and a bit of shoulder blade. I’d say we’re looking at a small theropod dinosaur of the late Cretaceous. It’s amazing! I’ve never seen such a complete specimen before.”

“Could be human. Don’t you think that bit there looks like Churchill?”

“Very funny.”

“No, seriously. How do you know this isn’t a human being?”

Bertie turned and stared at his partner. “Because it’s sixty-five million years old.”

“So you say. That’s not what the Bible says.”

“Oh don’t start all that again!”

“How do you know it’s not human? Seriously.”

“Because the shoulder’s a different shape, the ribs are all out of proportion. Granted, it’s about the same size as a human, but that’s as far as it goes. Could be a species of Troodon. Yes... that would be an amazing find! Now I wonder where the head... we need the jaw to match up the teeth...”

He turned back to the cliff face and gingerly prodded it with his trowel, looking for another piece of rock that he could pry loose.

“So what are these?”

Bertie didn’t reply, and it was only when Hank tugged at his shoulder that he turned back to their specimen.

“What?”

Hank pointed to a series of small marks that were lined up in a row on a discoloured stripe running across the rock surface under the fossil bones.

“Maybe veins of a leaf? A long, straight leaf that our little friend here fell on just before he died?”

Hank shook his head. “Too regular.”

Bertie looked more closely, then pulled out a magnifying glass and studied the traces. "Yes, they don't look very much like veins, but why are they arranged in such a straight line? And isn't that a different rock type? I do believe it's a thin piece of granite or slate that's somehow been buried in the sandstone."

The two men looked at each other.

Hank nodded to himself. "As you said. All on a line... It's an inscription!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're looking at writing. These are characters from an alphabet."

"Don't be ridiculous! Dinosaurs didn't have writing!"

"It's not a dinosaur. Early human." Seeing the look on his partner's face, Hank quickly added, "Okay, sure, let's say it's a dinosaur. But the writing was made by a human. Probably one of the sons of Esau. As described in the book of Genesis."

"This is absurd! You might just as well say it was left by a time traveller."

"He probably kept the dinosaur as a pet, or used it for food... Just look at it, will you! Turn around, look at it the other way up. What do you see?"

"I see... I don't know what it is. Is time travel even possible...? We need to get it back to the department, give it a proper clean-up."

"It's Hebrew!"

Bertie stared at him open-mouthed, before shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "It doesn't look like Hebrew in the slightest."

"No, look. Really! Here's an *aleph*... that could be a *shin*... Gimme the glass, will you?"

Bertie stood up and glanced around at the Land Rover. "Let's get it on board. We'll work out what it means later."

Hank's eye hovered an inch over the rock and the magnifying lens trembled in his hand. "*Yod... shin... resh... aleph...* the beginnings of a *lamed*... Could it be... *Israel*?"

"Stop it, Hank! You're beginning to hallucinate in the heat. We need dinner, and a bath, and a long iced beer, and then we'll be able to think clearly."

Hank gave him a long critical gaze, but at last nodded and pocketed the magnifying glass. With one of them gripping it on each side, the partners manhandled the heavy slab of sandstone up off the ground and over the lip of the flatbed at the back of the vehicle.

While Hank wrapped a dirty sheet around it for protection, Bertie turned back to the cliff face, fanning his face with his hat. "Phew, I'm pooped! Just wish I could find the skull... might still be here somewhere..."

He jerked upright suddenly. "What was that?"

Hank looked up from the Land Rover. "Our little friend's all ready to roll."

"Listen!"

They both listened. With sinking hearts they realised they were hearing the unmistakable rumble of vehicle engines approaching them from a mile or two away. The accompanying clatter of steel caterpillar tracks on the stony ground told them that it was unlikely to be a bus for visiting tourists.

Hank stepped a few yards out into the open plain from where he could get a good view along the line of cliffs. There was a dust cloud in the distance.

"Time to get outta here!", he shouted. "Grab your things and let's go!"

"Who is it?", Bertie asked as they tumbled into their seats.

"Coming from the west!"

Bertie nodded. That told him all he needed to know. "Wait, I've forgotten my hat!"

"Too late!" Hank put the Land Rover into gear and reversed out onto the plain.

"Wait a minute. If we try to escape, they'll see us. Can't we hide further up the valley?"

"Can you see a way up?" The two men bounced in their seats as their vehicle skidded to a halt.

Bertie still gazed anxiously up the valley. But Hank was right: the litter of boulders made it totally impassable for any vehicle. Their only chance was to drive east as fast as possible. The option of abandoning the Land Rover in an attempt to hide would be suicide.

The gear lever grated, the engine revved and now they were bouncing forward, the cliff to their right, the empty desert plain to their left. Bertie turned and looked over his shoulder.

"I think we'll make it", he said. "They're still a mile or two away. With any luck they haven't seen us yet."

A higher-pitched rattle emerged from the low rumble of the motorised column behind them. Bertie looked around again, and his expression turned from anxiety to despair.

"Go faster!", he cried.

"I am!", Hank replied, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel. His accelerator foot was flat on the floor.

It was hopeless. A pair of motorcycles materialised out of the whirling dust behind them and easily overtook the labouring Land Rover. Swinging around and skidding to a halt

a hundred yards ahead, the riders unshipped their rifles and menaced the geologists. Hank slammed on the brakes, and as the Land Rover came to rest the two men carefully opened their doors and emerged with hands held high.

"Schiessen Sie mich nicht!", Bertie was whispering to himself over and over again. "Please don't shoot me!"

"We surrender!", Hank shouted. "Not armed! Civilians!"

Within seconds the outriders of the main column had caught up with them and they found themselves surrounded by German soldiers of the Afrika Korps. Distrustful eyes glinted at them from under the rims of steel helmets. As the tanks arrived, the one in the lead swung towards them and halted while the rest of the column continued past.

An officer climbed down from the stopped tank, marched over to where they were standing and critically examined the two geologists. Bertie found himself fascinated by the goggles perched on the man's peaked cap, giving him the appearance of a four-eyed monster.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?", the officer asked them in accented English.

Hank cleared his throat. "University of Cairo, Department of Geology. We're on a field trip. I'm Professor Newman, and this is Dr Gosling."

"You are American?"

"I'm American. Dr Gosling's English. – We're civilians. We study the rocks!"

The German officer smiled at them. "Gentlemen, I am sure you know this is a war zone. Regrettably it will be necessary for me to detain you as suspected spies. Any information about us would be very valuable to your Eighth Army."

"But we don't have any connection with the army! We wouldn't know how to..."

"I believe you completely. You are both clearly men of the highest honour. But you will understand that I must take every precaution to protect my men and my mission for the Fatherland. Please excuse the inconvenience."

Bertie took a half step towards the officer. "Civilians... please... we didn't mean any harm."

The officer gave him a skeptical glance and turned away. At an order in German from him, two soldiers went to search the Land Rover. The tank column continued to rumble past.

"They're looking to see if we've got a radio", Hank whispered.

"But I don't understand", Bertie whispered back.

"Rommel's favourite tactic? Outflanking the enemy? We thought the Qattara

Depression was impassable. But he's sent a tank division round the southern edge. It's just this strip of land along the cliff base that's firm enough. They'll turn north and catch the Eighth Army in the flank."

"But that's impossible! The distance..."

"Bastards must have found somewhere to refuel. Probably the Siwa Oasis. If he can take your folks by surprise, it's worth it for him."

There was no time to say more. The soldiers were motioning them at rifle point towards a waiting half-track.

Bertie looked around wildly and gestured back at their Land Rover. "But the..."

"We got no choice", Hank hissed in his ear. "Gotta do what they say."

They were about to step inside the German armoured vehicle when they heard shouts. The words "*Fliegeralarm!*" and "*Luftangriff!*" were clearly distinguishable.

They stopped, turned and, together with the soldiers around them, looked up at the sky.

A new droning sound was approaching them from above. Bertie recognised the throaty grumble of Rolls-Royce Merlin engines. "Hurricanes!", he shouted in exultation.

Out of the heat haze, swooping low over the ground, a fighter aeroplane appeared, then two more at its wingtips, then two more again. The soldiers forgot about their captives and scattered. Rifles were pointed to the sky, anti-aircraft guns on the backs of the half-tracks swivelled towards the invaders, and gunfire broke out all around them.

"Get down!", Hank responded, pulling his partner behind the protective bulk of the armoured vehicle and crouching down.

He was not half a moment too soon. There was a violent explosion, and the spot where they had been standing a moment before dissolved into a cloud of debris.

"The Land Rover!", Bertie cried above the thunder of gunfire and exploding bombs.

"Nothing we can do!"

"Our dinosaur! After waiting for us all this time...". He jumped to his feet. "My baby!"

Bertie pulled himself away and dashed back out into the open. There was a burst of cannon fire from above, and he fell.

Hank looked anxiously around. The German troops were well disciplined. One tank after another revved its engine and rumbled past him. He realised that they were spreading out along the road at speed to try to reduce their vulnerability to the air-launched anti-tank rockets.

"Bertie!", he called. "Bertie, are you okay?" But the collapsed figure of his partner did not move. Hank was about to defy the odds and run to him when a terrific explosion knocked him off his feet. For perhaps half a minute he, too, lay senseless, but then came to with the taste of grit in his mouth. Opening his eyes again, he saw that the half-track was in flames. Its bulk had protected him from the worst of the British rocket.

Hank shook his head and waited. After several more minutes of noise, dust and confusion, the sounds of battle abated. He tested his shaking limbs and staggered to his feet. Five yards away a German soldier was watching him. Fascinated, as if it was happening to somebody else, Hank watched the enemy soldier raise his rifle, aiming it squarely at Hank's chest. Too shaken to care, he closed his eyes and whispered a prayer to his divine Saviour.

Nothing happened, and after a moment he opened his eyes again. The officer who had interrogated them was standing at the soldier's side, and had just pushed the man's rifle to one side, away from the American. Hank's eyes met the officer's for an instant; his own expression of fear and astonishment was answered by an enigmatic look from the German which seemed to contain a sense of honour and humanity, perhaps even a shared belief in a divine Being watching over their earthly tribulations and exercising both judgement and mercy.

Hank wanted to say something, but in an instant both officer and soldier had vanished into the dusty gloom. There was the sound of a tank engine revving, and a dark shape rushed away.

Hank looked around. Bertie was lying exactly as he had fallen, and a glance at his bloody face and chest was enough to prove that there was no hope for him. Hank made a grimace of disgust at the pitiful sight but then took a grip on himself, knelt down, closed his colleague's staring eyes for the last time and murmured a prayer over his body.

The Land Rover was still standing. Hank tottered towards it, fearing the worst, but the vehicle was still sound, the dinosaur fossil wrapped in its protective sheet just as he had left it.

By now the last of the tanks had rumbled past and the desert had again fallen silent. He returned to Bertie's body, put his hands under the dead man's armpits and dragged him to the Land Rover. He heaved his colleague up onto the flatbed next to the fossil and paused to admire the two of them sleeping peacefully side by side.

He nodded at Bertie as if the man could still hear him. "It's ancient Hebrew!", he whispered. When neither of his passengers replied, Hank remembered where he was. He

went to the driver's door, sat down and turned the ignition key. The engine started.

He closed his eyes briefly and offered a prayer of thanks before putting the vehicle into gear.

It took him some time to navigate the obstacle-course of shell-holes and burning tanks. The blackened body of a driver was hanging lifelessly out of the hatch of one wrecked vehicle while flames flickered around him. In another place a group of soldiers were scattered like abandoned toys where a bomb blast had left them. Hank steeled himself not to think about them.

On impulse he stopped, twisted around in his seat and looked out of the window. A single Hurricane was approaching from behind. He crouched down behind the wheel, willing the British pilot not to notice him. The engine droned briefly overhead, louder... then quieter. Only when the tail of the aircraft and the sound of its engine had vanished harmlessly into the east did he dare to breathe again.

He completed the job of working through the battlefield and eventually found the undamaged eastward road again. He drove slowly, fearing to catch up with those of Rommel's tanks which had escaped and driven on ahead, making constant checks behind, around and above for any further sign of war machines catching him unawares. But the desert was now at peace and he was alone with only his dead partner for company, together with his precious relic, testimony to the earliest days of the book of Genesis.

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