

The Adventures of Edmund

The chariot raced past at a thunderous pace, shaking the ground and throwing dust into the air. This time, the iron rim of the wheel missed Edmund by just inches. But he wasn't scared. Instead he was overcome with awe; at the horses, the crack of the whip and the charioteer's bronze helmet with its bright red plume of feathers. He ached to be on that chariot so much that he would have burst into tears, had he been able to.

Gradually the dust settled on Edmund and his friends. They thought he was mad. Not only because they were terrified of being run over, but because he had no business dreaming of charioteers, horses or stadiums. No business either dreaming of flying like a bird, or falling in love, which he had once confided. Because, simply put, Edmund was a stone. Not a particularly large one, below average if the truth was to be told. His shape was nothing grand either, nor round and smooth like a beach pebble, but jagged in a lopsided way, drawing speculation from others about him being a mistake.

Edmund found stones a conservative lot. They couldn't run away from the numerous dangers they faced, such as being crushed by a chariot, placed inside a boy's slingshot, or imprisoned inside concrete. So, they had learned over thousands of years since homo sapiens came, to run away deep inside themselves, drawing their energy inward for protection. But Edmund wasn't like that. He was interested in the world. His aching for experience pulled his consciousness right to the edge of all of his odd shaped surfaces. Once, when his longing had pressed particularly hard against these walls, he felt, in fact he was sure, that he had actually moved a fraction along the ground. Just the tiniest of fractions, but movement nonetheless.

"Ridiculous," had said the elder Gareth. "It would have been a tremor in the Earth that moved you, or subterranean water unsettling the dirt underneath."

"Then why didn't it move you too?" argued Edmund.

"Because I'm bigger, and... I have gravitas."

Again, the chariot approached. Edmund sensed the stones around him retreating further inside themselves, until their beings were as tiny as pinheads. But he wanted a closer look at the charioteer's helmet, at its vibrant red feathers fluttering in the wind. As the chariot turned into the straight, Edmund realized that the two horses were charging straight at him, the barrelling rim of a wheel looming larger and larger. Edmund braced himself for the hit. As the horses leapt over him, a hoof pounded the tip of his lopsided protrusion into the dirt, catapulting him into the air with a chaotic spin. The ground and sky whizzed around him in a whirl of confusion. Eventually he stopped spinning. Not abruptly, like hitting a brick wall, but with a soft landing. Miraculously, Edmund found that he was lodged in the gap between the charioteer's breastplate strap and his tunic.

Nestled there snugly, Edmund took in his surrounds; the sweaty, determined face of the charioteer, his bronze helmet with its nose and cheek guards and further up, to Edmund's delight, the column of red feathers. Edmund stared, transfixed. They didn't seem to be just blowing aimlessly in the wind, but dancing

together exuberantly, freely, happily. So unlike stones. Edmund made up his mind there and then, that he was going to be like them.

Edmund spent a breezy, glorious afternoon with the feathers. He could feel almost a soul connection with them and he was sure that they bent down towards him a number of times in order to include him. Eventually the charioteer pulled up and handed the reins over to a servant. They went through an elaborate archway, down a maze of stone passageways and into a bedchamber. The charioteer pulled off his helmet and placed it carefully on top of an oak bedside table. Reaching for his breast plate strap, he noticed Edmund nestled there. He clasped him between his thumb and finger and pulled him out from his cosy nook. Edmund saw a pair of large, brown eyes studying him curiously, before being tossed onto the bedside table and into the side of the helmet with a clang. The charioteer pulled off his tunic, spread eagled himself across the bed and relaxed with a deep sigh.

Above him, Edmund's new friends hung limply from the helmet. Looking around, he was surprised to discover right next to him a gold ring, inset with a red garnet stone. Not the vibrant, playful red of his new friends, but a deep red, both rich and elegant. The garnet's surface was decorated with perfectly cut triangles, which reflected light at all angles, creating a symphony of red and black shapes. Edmund gazed through the middle circle of triangles. The red seemed to go on forever, as if he was looking into eternity. He had never imagined before how beautiful a stone could be.

His whole awareness now attuned to the garnet, Edmund sensed that there was a presence inside. A 'she'. Looking closer, he saw a tiny spark of light, one moment in one part of the garnet, the next moment in another. Finally, the spark came close to the surface, noticed him and retreated inside. Edmund felt a tingling through the whole of his stone. Earnestly he examined every part of the garnet, including the corner of every triangle, but couldn't find the spark anywhere. At least for now, she was gone.

Edmund had nothing else to do, but to wait and watch. Inexplicably, the charioteer raised his hands in the air, brought them together in a single, loud clap and rolled on to his stomach. Edmund focused back on the garnet. Deep inside, he thought he saw the faintest of sparks. Then again, but this time a little closer. The third time it was inside a triangle on the far left of the stone and then, getting closer now, on the right side. He had the feeling that the spark was checking him out from different angles. He waited in anticipation for another showing, but it didn't come. Eventually he concluded she must have lost interest, perhaps finding his protrusion off-putting.

Edmund was so focussed on the garnet, that he got a shock when a ceramic bowl was placed on the other side of him. With one smooth, flowing movement, a small, delicate hand entered the bowl and re-emerged, fingers dripping with oil. A woman with flowing, jet-black hair and skimpy, exotic attire, straddled the charioteer. She began gliding her hands up and down his back.

"Aaah," sighed the charioteer.

The woman chuckled playfully in response. Edmund didn't know what to make of this and turned his attention back to the garnet.

To his surprise, 'she' was now a pinpoint of light observing him right at the surface of the garnet. No longer a momentary spark, but a constant presence. Edmund knew he should say something but couldn't think what.

"I got a ride here on the chariot," he blurted out, realizing straight away how stupid it sounded.

The light at first didn't seem to respond, then transformed into a shape, reminiscent of a smile. Edmund's confidence grew.

Laughter and giggling came from the direction of the bed. The light changed back into a circle. They looked at each other awkwardly.

"What's it like being made into a ring?"

Edmund could tell it was the wrong question when the light tried changing into a number of shapes without settling on any, before giving up the attempt.

The laughter behind Edmund was turning into all sorts of grunts and gasps. He tried to ignore them, fearing that the light might lose interest and disappear again inside her garnet. He realized that he needed to be bold.

"I love your triangles," he said, as smoothly as he could.

Edmund watched anxiously as the light went through various contortions, making him wonder if he had blown it. Finally, she morphed into a shape of a heart. He was so happy, he wanted to break into a dance, like one of his feather friends would have done.

"I'm Edmund, by the way."

She morphed into a star, then somehow made it pulsate.

"Stella? Your name is Stella!"

Again, she morphed into a smile, then changed back into her heart shape. From the bed came the sound of snoring. It didn't bother Edmund, he was content just gazing at Stella.

The delicate hand appeared at the bowl again, picked it up, held it in the air for a moment, then put it back down. Instead, the hand hovered over the ring. All of a sudden, it swooped and snatched it up with finger and thumb.

"Stella!" shouted Edmund.

He just managed to catch a flicker of her as she sparked around inside the garnet in a panic, before disappearing down the crevice of the woman's blouse.

"Stella!"

The woman tiptoed out the room.

"Don't worry, I'll rescue you!" cried out Edmund.

But he had no idea how he would do this. Devastated and powerless to do anything, he retreated inside himself. On the bed, the charioteer snored.

.....

It felt cold, deep inside the stone. Not so much the temperature, Edmund was used to that. But cold in a lifeless, staid, sort of way. He tried to imagine hiding in there forever. There were benefits, he began to realize. Even if there was an earthquake or tsunami outside, he could still remain untroubled, sober, dignified.

Only a 'hot rocks sauna' type scenario could unduly affect him. But what about Stella and seeing her dancing spark again? "No," said Edmund to himself. "The chance of that is about as poor as seeing old Gareth cheery." Time to get serious and mind his own business like the rest of the stones.

There was a sudden jolt and shaking of the table, making Edmund move a fraction along its surface. For a moment he wondered what it was. "Ha! I don't need to worry about things like that anymore," he told himself.

He went back to practising his new, stuffy disposition. He heard snoring and only then realised that the charioteer must have stirred in his sleep.

Again, the table jolted and the snoring stopped. Could it be something to do with Stella? He couldn't resist taking a look and began the journey through his many layers of grey until he reached the surface. Looking down, he could see that the cause of the disturbance was the charioteer bumping his leg against the side-table in his sleep. With eyes still closed, the charioteer yawned, as if about to wake up. Edmund became hopeful. Maybe if he noticed his ring was missing, there would still be time for him to catch the masseuse before she got too far away. But to Edmund's dismay, he started snoring again.

"I wish I wasn't a stone!" cried out Edmund, as if any other object around him could hear. He looked up at the bright red feathers, but they hung as powerless as he from the helmet. Peering down over the side of the table, he saw the charioteer's knee directly below. He thought that if he could only get himself to move again and topple off the edge on to the charioteer, he may be able to wake him up. He remembered Gareth's ridiculing of him for thinking he could move. "Well Gareth. You know what you can do with your gravitas!"

Edmund knew it was going to be tough moving himself a full inch to get to the edge when last time he had only moved a fraction of that. He concentrated on evoking the same feeling that had moved him before and projected it forwards, towards the table-edge. Edmund thought of the chariot rushing past; the feathers dancing freely in the wind, their bright red colour deliciously offset by the blue sky behind them. How he longed to be like them. But when he checked, he hadn't even moved a hair width along the table.

This time Edmund imagined he was the charioteer himself, feeling the wind rushing into his face and on through the gap between cheek and helmet, looking down at the horses as he flicked the whip, seeing the ground rush by beneath their hooves. It was like he was really there. But again, no movement.

He wondered if Gareth was right after all. That it was just his imagination that made him think he had moved last time. Then he thought of Stella and realized his mistake. The reason he wasn't moving, was that it was *her* he most wanted now, not the wind, dancing feathers or chariot rides.

This time he concentrated on when he had met Stella; the deep red of her garnet, her spark appearing here and there in her triangles, then finally appearing as a spot of light in front of him.

Edmund checked the distance. Finally, he had moved a bit, but only a quarter of the way. Above him the feathers started shivering ever so slightly in a breeze too slight for him to feel. Or were they fluttering for him? Urging him on?

Edmund concentrated like he never had before. He remembered his nervousness as Stella was morphing shape and then his relief when she turned into a smile. And then his sheer joy when she broke into a shape of a heart. How he longed to see her again...

Suddenly Edmund felt himself falling. A split second later his protrusion hit the inside of the charioteer's knee.

The charioteer stopped snoring and sat up. Rubbing his knee, he saw Edmund on the floor below him and picked him up. He eyed him as he held him between thumb and finger, recognized him, then looked confused over at the bedside table. His face changed to rage. He dropped Edmund back on the floor.

"Cornelia!" he shouted as he barged out of the room.

Edmund lay on the slate floor, listening to sounds of shouting spread outside like an infectious disease.

"Idiot," said the piece of slate underneath him. "Look what you've done now!"

"Shut up!" said Edmund, irritated. "Just go back to being trodden on!"

All of the other pieces of slate started calling Edmund names in support of their colleague, but he paid them no more attention. He was too busy listening for signs of Stella being found.

Finally, Edmund heard footsteps and moments later, the charioteer entered, knelt down beside the bed and pulled out a jewellery box from underneath. To Edmund's relief he produced Stella from inside his tunic, but then promptly put her in the box and snapped the lid shut. As he adjusted his position to push the box back under the bed, he bumped his hand on Edmund.

"Umm," said the charioteer, picking Edmund up and eyeing him curiously. "Perhaps you are a lucky stone." He opened the lid again and put him inside as well.

When Edmund told Stella the whole story, including how he had managed to alert the charioteer, she turned into a shape of a tear, dropped to a splash, then magically became a heart, all in one smooth motion. From then on, they were forever bonded.

.....

Although they had many happy times together, Stella occasionally had to go away for long periods on campaigns and Edmund, left behind in the darkness, would worry that the charioteer would get killed in battle and Stella be taken off by a Gaul or Visigoth. But she always came back and there, in the dark of the box with no other light, she sparkled even brighter, playing hide and seek in her triangles, making hearts for Edmund and other shapes that are best not mentioned. Edmund enjoyed her shows and perhaps a little mischievously, the fact that the charioteer was oblivious to the goings-on inside his jewellery box. Oblivious also,

like every other human, to the simple fact that the light which can be seen in a gemstone, or in any other stone for that matter, isn't just a reflection of light from outside, but a spark from deep within its being.