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Edwin: High King of Britain

Written by Edoardo Albert

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EDWIN

High King of Britain

The Northumbrian Thrones 1

Edoardo Albert



LION FICTION

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Chapter 1

“The king is going to kill you.”

Edwin, senses trained by years of wandering exile, had heard the quiet approach to his room, but when he saw Forthred push open the door he laid his sword down.

“I take it you are not referring to my brother-in-law?” Edwin saw the expression on Forthred’s face. “I thought not. You would not have crept to my room to announce that Æthelfrith wants me dead. So, which king wants to kill me now? It is a long list he joins.”

Forthred pushed the door shut. “Rædwald. Our host,” he said.

Edwin nodded slowly. “I thought it must be. How did you hear?”

Forthred smiled. “You know what they call me – Forthred Falls Over? These people think I have no head for drink, falling from the bench after one or two horns have gone round the hall and sleeping until morning. But the things I have heard whispered after the scopas have lain down their lyres have kept us alive through these years of exile – and saved me many a thick head in the morning!”

“Would that I could do the same, but Rædwald would have no truck with a man who could not match him in the cups. Now, tell me what you heard.”

Dropping his voice even though his master, by reason of his royal status, had a room to himself, Forthred whispered the news.

“Think on the new man we saw tonight at feast. He is a thegn and he took King Rædwald’s time through the daylight hours with only the king’s counsellors for company.”

Edwin nodded. “I saw him arrive with a wagon lain with gifts, but I heard him speak – he is no Northumbrian. Are you sure Æthelfrith sends him?”

“I thought the same, lord. A Mercian by sound and look, bringing gifts from Cearl to lay at the feet of the High King. Surely

there would be no danger there for us. But in our time here, I have become... close to one of the queen's women, and she told me that though the visitor be Mercian, he comes from Æthelfrith."

"But Æthelfrith has sent twice before asking Rædwald for my head. Why should this third occasion be different?"

"Gold – gold most finely wrought from the emperor's court in Byzantium – in chests full. Jewels, garnets, rubies to make a king's eyes weep. Is that reason enough?"

"For what you describe, I would be tempted to hand myself over to Æthelfrith if I could claim my own blood money." Edwin smiled grimly. "Kingship comes dear bought and is more dearly kept; no wonder Rædwald is tempted by such a treasure. But Æthelfrith has offered him treasure before. Is this so much more?"

"This evening, after I took my second drink from the horn and fell to the floor, as is expected of me, I made sure to stagger closer to where Æthelfrith's man sat, at the high table with the king." Forthred shook his head. "I could not hear clearly what they said, but I looked, lord, and to my eyes Rædwald seemed wary of this man. He comes, I thought, with hard words as well as rich gifts."

"Æthelfrith wants dominion over all the kingdoms of this land," said Edwin. "To that end he needs allies, and he must secure his own claim on the kingship of Northumbria. What better way than to suborn Rædwald with threats and sweeten him with blandishments? I am in Rædwald's power, to give over to Æthelfrith or not as he sees fit. But Forthred, what proof have you that Rædwald this time has taken the bait and bowed to the bit?"

"My lady brought me the news. The queen, Ymma, heard it from the king's own mouth this night, and her women are astir with the tidings, for the queen is angry that so mighty and powerful a king as Rædwald should act thus, bowing to the threats of another Angle. The queen says that her husband is the proper king of the Angles of this land. Ymma fears too what will befall should he act against the laws of the hearth and give over a guest to an enemy. But the king will not be gainsaid. He will have his treasure and hand you over."

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Edwin nodded. "Thank you, friend. May the gods favour you with long life and a place at their table."

Forthred grimaced. "I have already lived longer than I expected. Come, lord, we know the worst; there is no time to wait. Rædwald will send for you in the morning. I have horses waiting, the moon is nearly full and there is light to ride; we will be far away by the time the sun rises." Forthred slid one of the heavy gold torcs from his arm. "This will buy us passage on a boat to the land of the Scyldings, and there we will be beyond the reach of Æthelfrith or Rædwald."

But Edwin did not stand. "Old friend, I thank you for your vigilance and the news you bring. But I cannot leave. King Rædwald and I have pledged allegiance and friendship to each other. If I leave tonight, without word or farewell, then it is I that break oath." Edwin laughed bitterly. "I have little enough treasure left to me after these many years of exile; I will not squander what is most valuable to me: my word."

"But lord, it is Rædwald that betrays honour and friendship in agreeing to kill you for Æthelfrith."

"I would rather Rædwald killed me than Æthelfrith, the betrayer, the liar." Edwin stood up and faced Forthred, the exiled king standing half a hand taller than his retainer. "How many years have we spent together, far from our homes and our land?"

"Too many, my lord."

Edwin took up the pouch that hung from his belt. "Hold out your hand." He poured into Forthred's palm a number of smooth, round stones. Each stone was different, in either colour or texture.

Forthred looked at his lord. "Most kings carry jewels in their belt. Why do you carry stones?"

"Count them," said Edwin.

"One, two... twelve." Forthred held up his hand. "There are twelve stones."

"One for each year of my exile. A stone collected in each kingdom we have fetched up in." Edwin held out his hand and Forthred returned the stones.

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“This one,” Edwin held up a rough grey stone, “is from the kingdom of Mercia, where I had friendship with King Cearl and he gave me his daughter to marry. My sons are with me still, but Cwenburg has gone to her fathers. This stone,” a pebble of mottled greys and browns, “is from the kingdom of Wessex, where I had little welcome and less goodwill – we had to flee from there lest Cwichelm turn me over to Æthelfrith. And this stone,” a glittering black oval, “is from Gwynedd, the kingdom of the Britons, where Cadfan treated me as a son and I was happy to stay there as a son, until the man I thought my brother in blood, Cadwallon, betrayed me to Æthelfrith.” Finally, Edwin showed Forthred a dull, rusty red stone. “And this stone is from here, the kingdom of the East Angles.” Edwin held the stone up between two fingers, but even in the torchlight it remained a dull, ominous red. “A bloodstone.” Edwin looked at Forthred. “I will not run. My *wyrd* is written in these stones. My exile ends here, in blood, and I care not now whether it be my own or another’s.”

“Lord, maybe you do not care if you live or die, but I do. I gave my oath to your father to protect you, with arm and sword and heart’s blood, and that is what I have done through our years of exile. I will not let you die through the guile of a betrayer.”

Edwin shook his head. “But is Rædwald a betrayer?” He held up his hand as Forthred made to protest. “I know what you heard and what you have been told, but Rædwald has treated me well through our time here. Twice before Æthelfrith sent embassies asking for my head, and Rædwald sent them away. I owe him thanks and honour for that. Until I hear from his own mouth that he has left the path of honour and agreed to turn me over to Æthelfrith, I cannot flee – not in the night, like a slave absconding from his master! Then I would be the one dishonoured and that I will not endure.”

Forthred stared at his king. “Do you think Æthelfrith cares for honour or the laws of hospitality? This is the man who stole your crown, who killed your brother at the feast where he married your sister. You know what the Britons call him in their tongue? Flesaur – the Twister. He twists everything he touches, bending all to his

will. Already he has put the Irish to the sword, he has destroyed the armies of the Britons. The Mercians have sworn fealty to him, and the West Saxons too. Only this people, the Angles of King Rædwald, and in the south the Jutes of Æthelbert of Kent do not bend the knee to him. Æthelfrith is like a dog with a flea – he will not stop scratching for it, even if he tears open his own flesh. You are that flea, lord. Æthelfrith cannot stop scratching until he finds you. When will you learn that?”

Edwin looked up at Forthred, but instead of anger there was only tiredness in his eyes. “Æthelfrith would kill you for such an insult,” he said. “My father and brother would have done the same. But I have need of time and space to think. Go.”

“I will go, lord, but... but I have one more thing to say.” Forthred looked questioningly at Edwin, knowing that he was pushing at the edges of what Edwin would accept, but he went on. “You may be ready to die, but your sons are not, and neither am I. We want to live.”

Edwin gave no answer, but watched as Forthred made the courtesy, striking his forearm to his chest, and left, his footsteps receding over the rustling carpet of rushes Rædwald’s slaves laid each morning. The taper spat and burned smokily. Edwin stared at it, remembering, with a freshness that always startled him, his wife Cwenburg dousing the taper as she looked to him to join her in their bed. Cwenburg had died seven years ago of the shaking fever, but still the memory of her would strike him keenly when his mind was distracted and uncertain. As far as he knew, the gods had no place in their halls for women who had died of sickness, not even if they were queens in exile. But so keen was the strike of her memory that it was hard not to believe that she was watching over him from the shadows.

However, ghosts withered if they were not tied to a place. Edwin had moved so much over the years since Cwenburg’s death that he feared eventually she would not be able to find him any more. Then she would be left to wander into the twilight and be lost. So the occasions when he saw her again each became more precious than the last.

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As quickly as it came, the memory left him, and Edwin could not stay in the smoky room any longer. He stepped out into the king's hall and stood listening. The meagre light of the few tapers that still burned flickered on the walls, and shadows moved over the hangings dangling from the ceiling. A breath of air made its way between the high pillars that supported the roof, and touched Edwin's cheek. He looked around for movement, but there was none. The benches and tables for the evening's meal had been pushed back against the walls. The king's men, those who were unmarried, mostly lay upon the benches, their breath a melding of snores and whispers that formed the constant night noise in any king's hall throughout the land. A restless dog whimpered in its sleep, kicking in a dream, then settled. The lingering smell of wood smoke mingled with the last scent of charred pork and the sour-sweet tang of spilled mead and the malt undertow of beer.

It was all so familiar to Edwin – he had seen and smelled and heard the same in every hall he had stayed in over his years of exile. Even when he had gone among the Britons, staying with Cadfan the King of Gwynedd, the sights and sounds and smells of the king's hall had been much the same, although there was one difference: the smoke the king's priests sent up as part of their rituals and prayers. That had been thick in Cadfan's hall, a cloying, lingering taste in the back of his throat and upon his clothes. The priests of the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes used no such incense in the halls of their kings, but they prayed to different gods.

The air in the hall was too rank, too suffused with the smell of men and food and dogs. Edwin headed towards the hall's great door and the clean night air.

The door was barred. Edwin poked the man slumped against it with his foot and he jolted awake, hand dropping to his sword belt, but then pausing when his eyes focused on Edwin.

“Warden, open the door. I have need of air.”

The warden clambered to his feet and levered the bar back, its weight made as nothing by pivots upon the back of the door.

“Your man, he needs air after a single horn.” The warden pushed

the door open enough for a man to slide through the gap. Edwin did not move. The warden sighed and pushed the door open further. Still Edwin did not move. The warden shrugged, grabbed the heavy wood and walked it all the way round so that it stood fully open, in a manner appropriate for a king's exit.

Edwin walked through the door. He might be a king in exile, but he was still a king, and honour was his due.

The warden took up his station by the open door. "Will you be long, lord?"

Edwin looked at him. The warden straightened. Alone among the men in the hall he wore a sword at his belt, as befitted his station as door warden. Torchlight, guttering weakly from the hall, glittered on his belt and buckles – gold inlaid with garnets, Edwin noted, of the finest workmanship. Rædwald was an open-handed king, giving great gifts to those who served him.

"The night is not old, warden. You have scarce begun your duties. See that the door is open for me when I return."

The warden appeared to sigh, but he had the wit to ensure that he made no sound. Edwin walked out into the night.

He continued walking down the gentle hill towards the foreshore. Rædwald's hall lay in sight of the sea, on one of the mounds that rose from the sea marshes and swamps that made the land of the East Angles a liminal place, neither land nor water, but shifting and solid beneath the feet and under the eye. Edwin followed the sound of the waves lapping on the beach, and soon he saw lines of white, lit by moonlight, as the waves drew in and curled onto the sand. The wind carried the salt tang of the sea, and for a while he retreated into memory, recalling how his father had taught him to rig a boat and sail it across the breeze. But he shook himself back into the present with a shiver. A cold finger from the frost giants of the north came over the water and ran across his face, a first hint of the winter to come. Edwin heard and felt the scrape of sand against his feet and stopped. The king's hall was but a promise of light, a glow beyond the hilltop behind him. His head rocked back and Edwin looked up at the stars.

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He wondered, and wandered, among them. There was the Bear, stalking north, and the Bear Cub, creeping away in fear from the terrible still point in the sky. Edwin remembered his fear as a child when he heard a scop singing of the day when the Bear finally caught the North Star after its long, patient stalk. Then the Bear ate the star, and the sky fell, as a tent falls when its pole is removed. But the Bear had not moved in Edwin's life, and his years had provided more urgent fears than the sky falling in.

The Milky Way, the long cape that Woden had thrown across the sky as he tried to climb the World Tree to reach the North Star, glowed from horizon to horizon. The scops said that wyrd toppled Woden as he reached up to grasp the star, bringing him down, down, down through the air, and his fall was so great that he had made the hole into which the sea flowed around the island of Britain. Edwin sometimes wondered why Woden had used a cape for climbing and not a rope, when everyone knew that wool, though generally strong, could sometimes tear through. But the gods were silent on the reasons for their actions.

The sea hissed on the sand. The sound drew him. What Forthred had said was true; they could embark on a boat, take sail across the sea to the cousins of his people, the Scyldings, the Geats and the Frisians, and be assured of the welcome due an exiled king bringing a small but battle-hardened retinue of warriors with him. Any king would welcome the addition of Edwin, his sons and his retainers to his own forces, and once he had fled across the sea there would be no further reason for Æthelfrith to pursue him. And should his service go well, it would be rewarded with gold, and land, and power. Although his kingdom had been stolen from him in these islands, he could win another overseas, as his own forefathers had done when they left the land of their birth on the windswept peninsula of Angeln and taken the whale road to Britain. Edwin smiled. The land his forefathers had settled was no less windswept than the one they had left. He could allow those winds to carry him back to his ancestral home; he could return across the sea and leave these islands behind.

Edwin stared out over the incoming wave. If Rædwald handed him over to Æthelfrith, alive or as a corpse, his sons would be part of the gift. It was too dangerous to leave them alive, with an obligation to wreak blood vengeance. But if he went over the sea, his sons would live. He might live to see his grandchildren.

The wave hissed over the sand as it withdrew. Edwin shook his head. He might live to lose the strength of his arm, the wind from his lungs and the wit from his head, like those old warriors who did not stray far from the warmth of the fire, but grabbed any young man passing to regale them with tales of battles long ago fought and enemies years dead. It did not do for a king to grow old. Edwin smiled bleakly. Just as well then that kings did not grow old.

The sound came to him over the sigh of water on sand and wind through trees. A hiss, the sound of sand being displaced and sliding downwards. The sound of movement. Edwin's hand went immediately to his waist, but his sword was not there. No man might carry a sword in Rædwald's hall, save the king himself and the door warden. Edwin slid his seax from its sheath, taking care that the long knife – as much a part of a man as his tongue – made no sound as he drew it. Crouching, so that he would not be silhouetted against the white of the breaking waves behind him, Edwin listened. It made sense, if Rædwald had decided to hand him over to Æthelfrith, that the king should send one of his men to kill him now, in the silence and the dark, away from his sons and followers. There would be knives ready for Osfrith and Eadfrith, waiting upon the return of the assassin. Then their blood would flow, his line would be extinguished, and Æthelfrith could rule untrammelled.

But he was not going to die, not here, not now. Edwin slowed his breathing, bringing his suddenly racing heart back under control. With the sound of his own blood no longer blocking his ears, he concentrated all his attention into hearing. And smell.

He caught it then – a hint of the close, throat clutching smoke that had filled the halls of Cadfan of Gwynedd. For a moment Edwin wondered why a killer should smell of incense, but the thought was driven out by the rustle of marram grass. There. The killer had

moved south, to make sure he could not be seen against the fires of the king's hall. He had circled round and was approaching along the line of the dunes. Keeping watch, Edwin crouched low and felt with his hand. The ground to his right was hard-packed thick sand. He could move across it without setting off any sand slips. Holding the seax between his teeth, arms and legs wide to spread his weight, Edwin inched to his right. A glance showed a darker shadow – a valley between the sand hills that would provide cover. Edwin slid towards it, eyes scanning for any movement. He had been outside for many minutes and his eyes were night bright, seeing by starlight.

A pebble, half buried in the sand, shifted beneath his foot and then scuttled down the sand hill, its passage as loud in the silence as an oath. Edwin froze. Even in the open it was hard to see a man at night if he kept absolutely still. But it was too much to hope the assassin had not heard the sound. Noise, however, gave only an approximate location. Sight was needed for murder. Edwin knew he needed to be first to see his opponent if he was to have any chance of killing a man armed and ready.

There. A shadow, darker than the rest, between the dunes. Did it move? He watched, eyes narrowed, but his other senses spread wide lest he be taken unawares through his own concentration.

Yes, it moved. It was coming towards him. Edwin took the seax in his hand, covering it with his other arm in case it should catch the glitter of a star and throw it to the man who stalked him. His breathing was low, not even a whisper, his head as clear as the sky and his heart calm. This was the peace before killing, the peace his father had taught him.

The killer came slowly, steadily onwards, and as he approached, Edwin saw that he was cloaked and hooded. No sign of his face could be seen under the cowl. Edwin knew the fighting styles of Rædwald's thegns well. If he could see the face, he would know how to fight him. The man was closer now, within fifty yards, but there was something strange about his approach. He walked without concealment, taking the broad path between the dunes while letting his feet crunch over the sand. This was the approach of an executioner, not an assassin.

Surely none of Rædwald's men were such fools as to approach him thus, without stealth, if they meant to kill him?

A diversion? Edwin sent his other senses questing, in the air and through the ground, but he could discern no other approach.

The man was closer now and though he still could not see his face, Edwin saw that he was not carrying a sword, nor a shield. The starlight made no glitter on the pole the man dug into the sand as he walked and, unless he had blacked out the head, that meant he carried a staff, not a spear. Edwin's brow creased. It was not unknown for an assassin to bludgeon a man to death, but a staff was as likely to break on a head as to break a head. Nor did the man have the build of someone who habitually used a cudgel, for he appeared tall but lean, rather than having the bulk of bone and muscle and blood required of a man who wielded his strength as his main weapon.

The man was near now, but set on a course that would take him across the shadows in which Edwin hid. At his closest, he would come within five feet. Edwin fingered the seax, keeping his wrist loose. A knife held in a tight wrist could too easily be jarred out of the hand if it struck armour or bone. He could slip out of the shadows and slide the seax into the man's armpit, where even if the blade missed the heart the man would die from blood loss within minutes.

Edwin waited, still, poised. The assassin closed. Ten feet. Nine. Eight.

The assassin stopped.

Beneath the cowl, the head turned.

Edwin tensed, ready to spring.

The man reached up and lifted the cowl from his head. He turned his face towards Edwin, but although it was uncovered, the night still concealed his features.

"My lord."

Edwin stood, sliding up from his crouch as smoothly as a cat. The seax glittered in the starlight.

"What do you want of me?"

"I know well why you stand outside the king's hall through the dark of the night." The man's voice was deep and strong, with the

resonance of a scop, but his words carried a strange accent, unlike any Edwin had heard before.

“Who are you?”

“I know why you stand vigil by the sea through the darkest watches of the night, alone and troubled in mind, my lord. I know the evil that threatens you, the betrayer who will hand you over to your enemies, and I ask you this: what reward would you give the man who can save you from evil? What would you do for the man who persuades King Rædwald to remain in his honour and not hand you over to your enemies?” As the man spoke, his voice grew lower, quieter, but Edwin could still hear it clearly, for all other sound had faded from the world. “What reward would you give that man?”

Edwin – a tall man – looked up into the face of his questioner. “For such a deliverance, I would give whatever was in my power to give.”

The dark man grasped his staff, planting it more firmly in the ground, but he made no move to approach closer.

“And what if that man prophesied, and prophesied in truth, that you would become king, putting down your enemies in their pride? And that you would ascend to a greater power than any of your fathers, a greater power than any king in these islands has wielded since the days of the emperors?”

Edwin could not tear his gaze from the shadowed eyes of the cloaked man. Who was he? Was he a god?

“If such things came to pass, I would give more generously than any king – gold, and jewels, and horses.”

The stranger inclined his head. “And if this man unknown to you, who spoke in truth revealing the paths of the future and the glory that awaits, also brought guidance for life and salvation, knowledge unrevealed to your fathers and forefathers, would you follow his counsel and obey his advice?”

Edwin fell silent. The stranger waited for his answer.

“If such a man exists, who by his counsel can deliver me from my enemies and raise me to the throne, then assuredly I would follow his advice and wait upon his counsel.”

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The cloaked man bowed his head. His lips moved, and Edwin heard the murmur of words in a language unknown to him. Then he raised his head and stepped towards the king. Placing his hand upon Edwin's head, he said, "Remember this. Remember well this sign I place upon your head. When you receive this sign again, remember our conversation and remember your promise."

The cloaked man stepped back and raised his cowl to cover his head.

"Who are you?" asked Edwin. "Are you a god?"

The man, his face now lost again in shadow, turned away.

"Remember the sign," he said, and walked into the shadows.

Not daring to move, Edwin watched as the stranger merged into the night. Woden, the All-Father, wore a hood when he wandered the world. Edwin shivered. It was late summer and the night was not cold, but he shivered, in awe and fear and, most dreadful of all, in hope.