

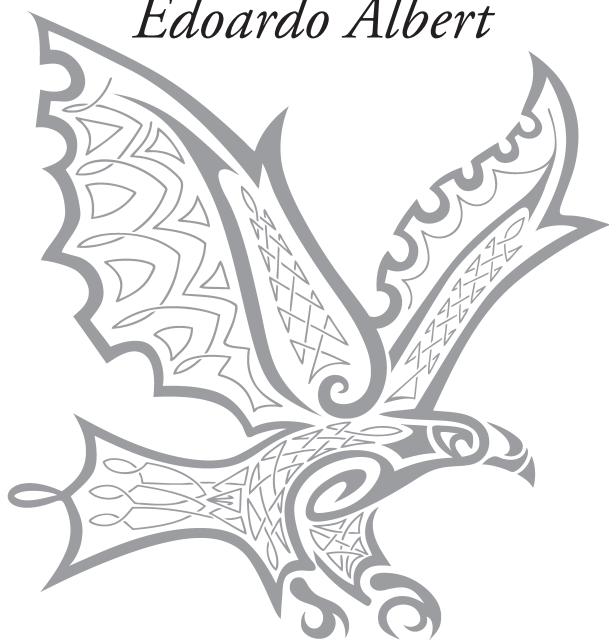
Oswald: Return of the King

OSWALD

Return of the King

The Northumbrian Thrones II

Edoardo Albert



LION FICTION

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Dramatis Personae

Names in *italics* are invented characters

House of Ida (the Idings), kingdom of Bernicia

Oswald Lamguin (the Whiteblade) King of Northumbria, the combined kingdom of Bernicia and Deira. Son of Æthelfrith and Acha.

Oswiu Younger brother of Oswald; son of Æthelfrith and Acha.

Æbbe Sister to Oswald and Oswiu.

Acha Mother to Oswald, Oswiu and Æbbe. Sister to Edwin, of the royal house of Yffi of Deira; married Æthelfrith, Oswald's father.

Eanfrith Half-brother to Oswald and Oswiu, via Æthelfrith's first wife, Bebba, after whom Bamburgh is named. Only known child of this marriage.

Æthelfrith Father to Oswald, Oswiu and Æbbe through Acha, princess of Deira, and to Eanfrith through Bebba. Became king of Bernicia in 592 and king of the joint kingdom of Bernicia and Deira, Northumbria, in 604. Killed in 616 at the Battle of the River Idle by the combined forces of Rædwald, king of the East Angles, and Edwin, exiled king of Deira, whom Æthelfrith had been pursuing for the previous decade.

Bran Oswald's raven.

Cyniburh Daughter of King Cynegils of the West Saxons. Wife to Oswald.

Æthelwald Baby son of Oswald and Cyniburh.

Rhieienmelth Daughter of King Rhoedd of Rheged. Wife to Oswiu.

Ahlfrith Baby son of Oswiu and Rhieienmelth.

Drest Warmaster to Eanfrith.

Corotic Chief of the Brigantes.

House of Yffi (the Yffings), kingdom of Deira

Edwin King of Northumbria from 616 to 633 when he was killed in battle with Cadwallon of Gwynedd and Penda of Mercia. His story is told in *Edwin: High King of Britain*.

Acha Sister to Edwin. See heading under House of Ida.

Osfrith Eldest son to Edwin through his first marriage to the daughter of the king of Mercia. Killed with his father at the Battle of Hatfield Chase in 633.

Eadfrith Younger son of Edwin's first marriage. Taken prisoner after the Battle of Hatfield Chase and held captive by Penda of Mercia.

Æthelburh Edwin's second wife. Fled with their children to Kent and then France after Edwin's death.

Osric Cousin to Edwin. Claimed the throne of Deira following Edwin's death.

Oswine Son of Osric, so *ætheling* (that is throne worthy) in Deira.

Coifi Pagan priest to Edwin. Played a large part in the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity.

Acca Scop to Edwin.

Bassus Thegn to Edwin. Became warmaster to Oswald.

James Missionary sent to Edwin. He remained in Deira after Edwin's death.

Paulinus First bishop. Fled with Æthelburh after Edwin's death. Became bishop of Rochester.

House of Icel (the Iclingas), kingdom of Mercia

Cearl King of Mercia. Grandfather to Eadfrith and Osfrith, Edwin's eldest sons, through his daughter.

Penda Warmaster to Cearl. Took throne of Mercia after Cearl's death, although he was not of the House of Icel.

Eowa Brother to Penda.

Wibtrun Pagan priest to Penda.

House of Wuffa (the Wuffingas), kingdom of the East Angles

Rædwald King of the East Angles and patron of Edwin. See *Edwin: High King of Britain* for his story.

Sigeberht Joint king of the East Angles with Ecgric. Abdicated the throne to enter monastery.

Ecgric King with Sigeberht, his kinsman, and then sole ruler.

House of Cerdic (the Cerdicings), kingdom of Wessex

Cynegils King of the West Saxons.

Cyniburh Daughter to Cynegils; wife to Oswald.

Birinus Missionary, sent by Pope Honorius to the West Saxons.

House of Cunedda, kingdom of Gwynedd

Cadwallon King of Gwynedd.

Briant Abbess, sister to Cadwallon.

Cian Bard to Cadwallon.

Hwyel Warmaster to Cadwallon.

Cadafael King of Gwynedd after Cadwallon.

House of Coel (“Old King Cole”), kingdom of Rheged

Rhoedd King of Rheged

Rhieienmelth Daughter of King Rhoedd; wife to Oswiu.

Monks and people of Iona, the Islands and Lindisfarne

Ségéne Abbot of Iona.

Aidan Monk of Iona, friend to Oswald and Oswiu and first bishop of Lindisfarne.

Corman First missionary sent to the Northumbrians from Iona.

Diuma Warrior monk of Iona.

Talorc Warrior of the Seal People. Accompanies Oswald from Iona.

Gunna Fisherman’s daughter.

Glossary

Angles One of the three main peoples that migrated to Britain in the fifth to seventh centuries. The Angles settled in the east and north.

Bernicia Anglian kingdom centred on Bamburgh. With Deira, one of the two constituent kingdoms of Northumbria.

Britons Original inhabitants of Britain. Ruling families, and possibly much of the populace, displaced by incoming Anglo-Saxons between fifth and seventh centuries.

Dal Riada Sea-spanning Gaelic kingdom, linking Ulster and Argyll.

Deira Anglian kingdom, centred on York. With Bernicia, one of the two constituent kingdoms of Northumbria.

Dumnonia Kingdom of the Britons corresponding to Cornwall.

Freya Anglo-Saxon goddess, known for her beauty.

Gododdin A tribe who lived in what is now the south-east of Scotland and the north-east of England, with strongholds at Edinburgh and Traprain Law.

Gwynedd Kingdom of the Britons in north-west Wales.

“Hwæt” The traditional way to begin a recitation or song. Can be translated as *listen, hear this*.

Hel The underworld of the Anglo-Saxons. A place of grey shadows rather than torment.

Jutes The Jutes settled in Kent and the Isle of Wight.

Loki Thunor’s brother.

Picts The original inhabitants of what later became Scotland.

Rheged A kingdom of the Britons, roughly centred on Carlisle.

Saxons One of the three main peoples that migrated to Britain in the fifth to seventh centuries. The Saxons mainly settled along the Thames Valley and to its south and west.

Scop A bard and poet – the keeper of the collective memory of his people.

Seax A short sword/long knife, worn by all Anglo-Saxons (indeed, it gave the Saxons their name).

Spear The mark of a free Anglo-Saxon. Slaves were not allowed to carry weapons.

Strathclyde A kingdom of the Britons, with its chief stronghold upon Dumbarton Rock.

Thegn A nobleman – that is, a warrior.

Thunor Battle god of the Anglo-Saxons.

Tufa Imperial standard of Edwin.

Wayland God of smiths and smithwork.

Woden Chief god of the pagan Anglo-Saxons.

Wyrd Key Anglo-Saxon concept. Can be translated as fate or destiny.

Pronunciation Guide

How do you pronounce Æ?

In Old English, Æ (or “ash” to call the letter by its name) represented a vowel that sounded like a cross between “a” and “e”. Try saying it like the “a” in “cat”.

A note on names

The names in this book are difficult to say. Two conquests – the slow motion one of the Anglo-Saxons and then the lightning bolt of the Normans – have consigned most of the personal names in use during the seventh century to obscure history books. The only exception is Oswald himself, a king whose cult became so widespread and famous that it was able to weather the Norman storm and continue into medieval and modern English, alongside Edwin and Alfred, two other great Anglo-Saxon kings. But of the rest, almost all were swept away, as Robert and Richard and, most of all, William shouldered Leofric and Godwine away from the baptismal font.

Another factor in the loss of Anglo-Saxon names was the conviction among the Anglo-Saxons that a name was personal property and, as such, should be unique to the person and not handed out to later generations, even if related. A notable example of this is that while Cerdic founded the kingdom of the West Saxons, the most long-lasting of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, none of his successor kings ever bore the name of their legendary forefather. As generations passed, and original names became harder to come by, the solution was to combine words in compound forms, so producing names like Godgiftu (Gift of God) and Sigeberht (Victory Bright). But while names had to be unique they also, particularly in the case of noble or royal families, had to indicate family relationship. This was done

by alliteration and using the same stem. Thus Alfred the Great, the youngest of five brothers and one sister, was the only one whose name did not begin with Æthel. Presumably, once his parents had got through calling on Æthelbald, Æthelberht, Æthelred, Æthelstan and Æthelswith they decided they could not face another Æthel in the hall (Æthel means “noble” – an appropriate name stem for an ætheling) and plumped for Ælfræd (which means “elf wisdom” or “counsel”). Although modern English is the direct descendant of Old English, the sound of the old language strikes the present-day hearer as akin to that of Danish – search on YouTube for readings of *Beowulf* in Old English to hear how it sounds.

To make matters more difficult, many of the names in this book come from Brittonic and Goidelic, the related languages that diversified from the original proto-Celtic, with Brittonic going to produce Welsh, Cornish, Cumbric and Breton, and Goidelic giving us Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic and Manx.

To help readers (and the writer!), Dr Alex Woolf, senior lecturer in history at the University of St Andrews, has very kindly transcribed the most difficult names into the International Phonetic Alphabet and modern English. Here they are:

Name	International Phonetic Alphabet spelling	English equivalent
Rhieienmelth	χRi: nve:ld	Hrîēnvelđ
Rhoedd	χrɔið	Hroyth
Rheged	Xreɡed	Hreɡed
Lamnguin	la:vngwin	Lav'ngwyn
Oswiu	Ozwŷi	Oswíuh
Ségéne	ʃeɡe:ně	Shégénuh
Cynegils	ku:něɡi:lz	Kúnegils
Cyniburh	ku:něbũɣ	Kúneburch
Cearl	Ca:ɪl	Char'l

Of the Events in Edwin: High King of Britain

King Edwin, having taken refuge in exile with Rædwald, the king of the East Angles, learns that his host has agreed, under pressure, to hand him over to the man who has been pursuing him across Britain for the previous decade: Æthelfrith, king of Northumbria, and his brother-in-law. Unsure whether to flee or face his fate, Edwin goes out into the night, and in the darkness meets a stranger who promises him that he will overcome his enemy and gain greater power than any king since the days of the emperors. But this promise comes with a price: when the sign the stranger shows him is repeated, he must accede to the wishes of whoever shows the sign.

Desperate, but now with a smidgeon of hope, Edwin agrees and returns to the hall of King Rædwald to learn that Rædwald has decided not to forswear his obligations as host: with Edwin at his side, Rædwald decides to ride out and attack Æthelfrith, even though the king of Northumbria is the most powerful man in the land.

Æthelfrith is taken by surprise, but he just has time to send his young son, Oswald, away with a retainer. However, once safe, Oswald refuses to run further and the boy, twelve, watches from afar as Æthelfrith's small band of men is overrun and his father is executed, slowly, by Rædwald, whose own son died in the battle.

Rather than await the mercy, or otherwise, of her brother, Acha, Æthelfrith's wife, flees into exile with her children, Oswald, younger brother Oswiu and sister Æbbe. Edwin is now unchallenged king of Northumbria and, when Rædwald dies after falling from his horse, he becomes paramount, the High King of Britain. While in exile, Edwin had married Cwenburg the daughter of Cearl, king of Mercia, and she had borne him two sons before succumbing to illness, but

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he had not remarried. Now, to help secure his kingdom, Edwin contracts to marry Æthelburh, the sister of the king of Kent. As part of the marriage agreement, Edwin, a pagan, agrees that Æthelburh, who is Christian, may continue to practise her religion and that she may bring a priest with her when she travels to Northumbria.

On her way north, Æthelburh is ambushed by a raiding party led by Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd, one of the kingdoms still ruled by the native Britons. Learning that she is betrothed to Edwin, Cadwallon enjoins her to ask Edwin how he betrayed Cadwallon and his family when he sheltered with them during his exile. Speaking to Æthelburh alone, Cadwallon accuses Edwin of raping his sister while he lived in Gwynedd.

Æthelburh arrives in Northumbria, with Paulinus, her priest, and James, a deacon, where they find that Edwin's sons from his first marriage, Osfrith and Eadfrith, are grown men and, naturally, suspicious that any children from this new marriage of their father will compromise their own chances of gaining the throne. Edwin's pagan priest Coifi regards Paulinus with considerable suspicion, but he is struggling with the failing of his own spiritual vision, which before had allowed him to read the patterns of *wyrd* in the chance happenings of everyday events, from the fall of leaves to the crackle of logs on the fire.

On their wedding night, Æthelburh asks Edwin if he raped Cadwallon's sister. Edwin refuses to answer, but asks his new wife to trust him.

Enraged by the attack upon his betrothed, and Cadwallon's theft of the dowry Æthelburh had brought from Kent, Edwin launches a sea-borne attack upon Anglesey and, catching Cadwallon unaware, takes him prisoner. But, at the entreaty of Cadwallon's sister, Edwin spares his life and instead sets him adrift upon the sea, without sail or oar, expecting the ocean to do his work for him.

As Edwin's power grows, other kings grow fearful and the king of the West Saxons sends an assassin to try to kill him. Only the self-sacrifice of Edwin's oldest friend saves the king, but even so Edwin is seriously wounded. The attack happens on the same day that

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Æthelburh gives birth to their first child, a daughter, and in pledge for his recovery and for victory over the West Saxons, Edwin offers his daughter for baptism and suggests that he too will follow her into the new religion.

Following his recovery, Edwin defeats the West Saxons and forces them into alliance. That leaves only the kingdom of Mercia as a potential threat to him, but King Cearl is grandfather to Edwin's elder sons and without heir himself. Going to Cearl's hall, Edwin extracts a pledge from the old king that Eadfrith, the younger son, shall be his heir and king of Mercia, while to his elder son, Osfrith, Edwin promises the Northumbrian throne. However, Cearl's warmaster, Penda, has grown powerful in defence of Mercia, his power increasing as the king ages, and Edwin sees that Penda will not lightly give up that power when Cearl dies.

Returning to Northumbria, Edwin calls a witan, a council of his thegns, to discuss the pledge he made: that he would accept the new faith, brought by Paulinus, should he achieve victory over the West Saxons. Edwin's decision to bring this matter to his people is strengthened by Paulinus giving him the sign that the stranger in East Anglia had shown, and asking him to accept the new religion. Many men speak in the witan, in favour and against the new religion, but the decision is made to adopt Christianity when Coifi, priest of the old religion, stands within the witan and abjures the old gods as unable to deliver to those most devoted to them any true blessings in this life or the next. The decision made, Coifi, in an iconoclastic frenzy, rides to the nearest sacred grove and profanes it.

Edwin and his sons and his thegns accept baptism in the newly built and as yet incomplete church in York, and Paulinus travels around Northumbria with the king, preaching and baptizing.

His overlordship now accepted by most of the kings of Britain, Edwin decides that he must secure the throne of Mercia for his son. While Cearl is happy to declare Eadfrith his heir, Edwin is sure that Penda will not relinquish the crown, even though he is not a descendant of Icel, the founder of Mercia's royal house. So Edwin decides that Penda must be removed. Summoning all the kings

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to York, that they might do homage to him, Edwin plans to kill Penda and ensure a smooth transition to the throne for Eadfrith. But, unknown to Edwin, Penda has entered into alliance with Cadwallon. For the king of Gwynedd had survived his ordeal by ocean and returned to his kingdom to rebuild his strength. So, when Edwin rides with his sons, in stealth, to cut down Penda, they are themselves surprised by the trap that Penda and Cadwallon have prepared. In the battle, Edwin, High King of Britain, is killed, and Osfrith too, while Eadfrith is taken prisoner.

When news of this reaches Æthelburh she takes her children and, with Paulinus, flees into exile, taking ship to her kin, first in Kent and then to her mother's people in France. James the deacon remains to minister to the people of Northumbria, but Cadwallon ravages the kingdom, exacting revenge for the humiliations suffered by him and his people.

News of the High King's fall travels through the land and eventually reaches a small island off the west coast of Scotland, where a community of monks has established a monastery and where a young prince, in exile, has for a while found peace...

PART 1

Return



Chapter 1

“He’s dead.”

Oswald stared at the breathless young monk panting in front of him, sweat beading his shaven forehead and braiding into rats’ tails the hair trailing down his back.

“Who is dead, Aidan?”

“The king! The king is dead.” Brother Aidan’s eyes were bright with excitement. He pointed away, over the flat expanse of machair, the grass speckled with buttercup and vetch, to the strand by the abbey. Oswald stood up from his digging and shaded his eyes against the early sun. There, on the beach, the young prince saw figures milling around a beached boat, its sail still flapping in the morning breeze.

“The brothers brought the news,” said Aidan. “They were supposed to be bringing us a fine white cow that the king had promised to Brother Fintan in the scriptorium, but when they heard they just jumped in the boat and sailed back here.” The young monk turned to Oswald, his face becoming suddenly solemn and his address formal.

“Is it not fine tidings for thee?” he said.

Oswald shook his head, but he could not help smiling. “Is it? I do not know, Brother Aidan. You tell me the king is dead, but which king? There are many on these islands.”

“*The* king. The High King. The king who killed your father.”

The smile went from Oswald’s face. “Edwin,” he said. “My uncle.”

“Yes, he is dead and his sons either dead or taken.”

“Who did this?” Oswald stared intently into the young monk’s face. “Who killed him?”

“Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd, and Penda of Mercia.”

The young prince nodded once, then stared away into the

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east, towards the hills of Mull across the Sound. The monk, in his excitement, shuffled from one foot to the other, then when Oswald said no more he touched the young man's arm.

"Will you be going back?" he asked. "Back to Northumbria? The throne is yours now, I think."

Oswald's gaze turned slowly on his questioner. "My father is avenged, but not by my hand." He held up his right arm. "You know the name Domnall Brecc, king of Dal Riada, gave me when I fought in his warband? Oswald *Lamnguin*, the Whiteblade, but it was not this arm that cut down the High King and," the young man's gaze focused suddenly on the even younger man in front of him, "I do not know whether to weep or laugh."

"Weep *and* laugh," said Brother Aidan, "for that is our life in this world: sorrow and joy joined as flesh to blood. The Lord has taken vengeance on your father's killer in his pride, and the Lord, in his mercy, has spared you the blood guilt of your uncle's slaughter."

A raven croaked nearby, and Brother Aidan looked to the sound. The great black bird took wing and flew towards them, the young monk ducking out of the way and stumbling backwards as the raven settled upon Oswald's upheld forearm in a dry, bone rustle of feathers. The raven ducked its head and croaked its greeting, and Oswald answered in kind, the sound straining his throat muscles as if ripped from the flesh.

"I will never get used to that bird," grumbled Brother Aidan as he picked himself up from the springy machair, brushing grass and clover from his habit.

Oswald tickled the raven's throat and the great bird tilted its head to better direct the man's fingers, clicking with enjoyment.

"Bran pays you no mind," said Oswald. "You should do the same with him."

"I know he pays me no mind," said Aidan. "It's bad enough being ignored by the abbot, but to be ignored by a bird..."

"He's training you in humility," said Oswald. "You are a monk, after all."

"The raven never returned to Noah."

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“Doves are stupid birds.” Oswald continued scratching under the bird’s beak. “Bran is not stupid.” Oswald looked around, squinting into the distance. “Have you seen my brother? I must speak to him.”

“The last time I saw Oswiu, he was trying to persuade one of the fishermen to introduce him to his daughters.”

“But women are not permitted on Iona,” said Oswald. “I thought at least here he would be kept from temptation.”

“They weren’t on the island. They were on the fisherman’s boat, waving to Oswiu like a pair of moon-struck maids. Your brother, seeing them, dived in the sea and swam out to their boat; the last I saw, he had dived under the curragh when the fisherman tried to hit him with an oar.”

Oswald shook his head. “Will he ever learn?”

“He is young,” said Aidan. “Younger even than me, and eight years younger than you; the blood is hot and thick at that age, and if the cold sea won’t cool it, then nothing will, save to tup a maid.”

“He should learn restraint.”

The monk shrugged. “So should we all.”

Oswald bent his head to the bird and whispered before launching the raven into the air.

“Bran will find Oswiu.”

The young monk watched the bird claw its way into the sky, before settling into a long circling glide, the beat of the slaughter birds as they waited above a battlefield for its red harvest.

“If you were not ætheling, worthy of the throne of Northumbria, Abbot Ségéne would have commanded that bird stuffed. He shudders every time he sees it, and makes the sign against the Eye – but beneath his habit, so that none may see it.”

“I thought, of a time, you Irish worshipped different gods to my people. The raven is Woden’s; it belongs not to the Tuatha de Danaan or any of the old gods of your people.”

“It is still pagan.”

“Bran is no pagan – he is a bird, and my faithful friend, so I will stand beside him. Besides,” and here Oswald pointed away to the south of the little island, “he is my eyes as well!” Silhouetted against

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the bright blue sky, the raven flew back towards them, calling his finding.

“How did you find me?” The young man, dark where his brother was fair but in all other ways his younger image, grumbled as he stumbled towards the landing beach, the sole of Oswald’s foot hurrying him along whenever he lagged. Beside him, and not nearly as abashed as the young ætheling, the fisherman’s daughter walked, rolling her hips and flashing the whites of her eyes at the startled glances of passing monks.

“Bran found you,” said Oswald.

Oswiu looked around, scanning the sky for his accuser. “I hate that bird,” he said.

“Bran does what I tell him.”

“As do we all.”

“You do not.”

Oswiu flashed a grin back at his brother. “Of course I don’t – ow!”

Oswald brandished a birch switch at him. “Hurry up. We have to get her off Iona before the abbot hears you brought a maid ashore.”

“I didn’t bring her – she came herself, didn’t you?”

The fisherman’s daughter smiled sidelong at Oswald, who did his best to ignore her. Aidan, tagging behind, thought it best to lag so that the brothers might sort the matter out between themselves.

“You encouraged her.”

“I wouldn’t say encouraged...”

“Paid?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Here, what be you thinking I am?” The fisherman’s daughter stopped fast in her tracks and turned to face Oswald, hands on hips, outrage on her lips. Her hair was black, her skin white and still unstained by wind and sun. The ætheling, forced to stop, looked her in the face, steady and long, and blood flushed the girl’s cheek and she dropped her gaze.

“I think you are beautiful,” said Oswald, “and I know we must get you off this island. Now, hurry.” Taking the lead, Oswald strode

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towards the beach, where currachs lay upon the strand like seals sunning themselves.

The fisherman's daughter fell in beside Oswiu. "Why didn't you tell me about your brother?" she whispered, staring after Oswald as he led them on.

Oswiu groaned. "Not you as well."

"What do you mean?"

"I dived into the sea to speak to you, and your father nearly killed me with that oar, but one smile from him and you'd do anything." Oswiu stared after his older brother. "How does he do it?"

"God's grace lies upon him." Brother Aidan had caught up. "And he gives of it freely and without thought." The monk too looked after Oswald. "I do not think he even knows it is there – it is as natural to him as breathing is to us."

Oswiu shrugged. "Maybe that is true – you are a monk. But I've seen him in battle, when we sailed with King Conadh Cerr and fought at the disaster of Fid Eoin, when Cruithne cut down Dal Riada, and men were calling on their mothers to save them, and others were falling upon their own swords in despair. Then my brother rallied what was left, and brought us back to our boats, holding the hordes of Cruithne at bay with a sword that flashed brighter than the sun." Oswiu looked at the monk. "Then he came back for me, who was stunned and stupid and too young to have been allowed upon the war boats, and dragged me back to his curragh, and I live and am not dead." The ætheling nodded towards his brother. "That is why men follow him. That is why I follow him, and will never betray him."

Aidan nodded. "That is well. Treachery is ever the greatest threat to ætheling or king."

Oswald stood waiting for them upon the beach by a curragh pulled up onto the sand. Three benches ran across it, a short mast carried a small sail, and its oars lay shipped within.

"That's a big boat for one maid," said Oswiu, hands on hips, looking at the vessel.

"We're going as well," said Oswald. "We're going to see Mother."

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*

Out of the Sound of Iona, the sea kicked up a great rolling swell that carried the curragh to the height of each crest before it slid, light as a leaf, into the deep, green valley. Oswiu and Aidan laid out with the oars, the fisherman's daughter – her name was Gunna – tended the sail so that, when the curragh rode up out of the valleys onto the wind-scoured wave ridges, it flung the boat onwards, swift and sure, all but keeping pace with the seabirds that hawked hopefully around them. Bran, disdainful of these pale creatures, remained perched upon the bench next to Oswald, its eyes hooded in sleep, as the ætheling moved the steering oar through the thick water.

Brother Aidan, facing south as he rowed, kept a weather eye to his right, to the south-west, where clouds were massing. The sky had been clear out of the Sound, but as they'd passed the tall stack of rock that was Staffa, its milling seabirds screaming insult at the small passing vessel, he had seen the first massing, and passing the Treshnish Isles he had thought to suggest landing. But Oswald had laughed off the idea and taken a spell rowing, and for a while it seemed for sure that they would outrun the storm. But now he was not so sure. Upon the wave tops, the wind was pulling the water into fine spray. His habit, with the hood up and its wool coated in beeswax, kept him reasonably dry, but Oswald, on the steering oar, was wiping the spray from his face as he peered north, searching through the spume for the low shores of Coll.

"You did not tell me we were going on the green pilgrimage afore we set off," said Aidan, "else I would have asked the abbot's blessing – and his shriving."

"I did not think we were." Oswald looked around doubtfully. "I do not know where we are."

Oswiu, weary, shipped his oar. The boat, light as down, skimmed back into the deep valley and the world was water.

The air slack, Gunna left her tending of the sail and, gathering her skirt around her knees, stepped lightly over the benches to where Oswald sat holding the steering oar at the rear of the boat.