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Written by Edoardo Albert

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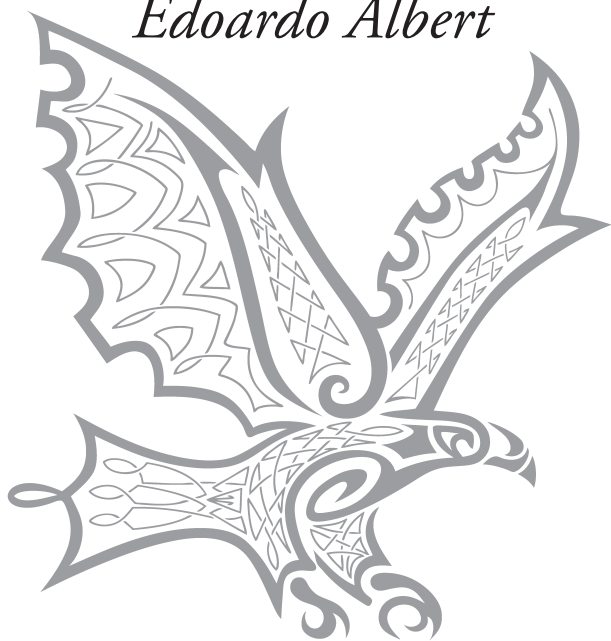
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OSWALD

Return of the King

The Northumbrian Thrones II

Edoardo Albert



LION FICTION

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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 swum 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 curraghs 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 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 to 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.

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“Leave the steering to a fisherman’s daughter that knows the waters round here like her own hair, and you tend the oars.” Gunna tied her skirts off around her hips, tipped a staring Brother Aidan such a wink that he flushed red, gave Oswiu a long smile and, once Oswald was in place, nodded to the *ætheling*. “This is how it should be done.”

The curragh, its spine flexing against the water, sprang forward, and Gunna held it along the wave ridges, crooning a soft song to the wind as she steered, the men bending to their labour, and the raven, having opened one eye to check all was well, returning to its rest. Under Gunna’s hands, the curragh outran the oncoming storm, leaving the rolling clouds massing on the horizon.

“There be another boat, northways, but it is drawing east, away from Coll, not to it.” Gunna pointed and Oswald stood, swaying but steady, to see where she indicated.

It was a large curragh, and it sat heavy in the water, for shivering between the men pulling oars were three or four shaggy, short-horned cows.

“Cattle raid.” Oswald turned back to Gunna and smiled. “We have them.”

“But there’s only three of us, and one woman,” said Brother Aidan, squinting against the spray as he counted. “There must be ten men on her.”

Oswiu laughed. “I would swap you for Gunna. Besides, two sons of *Æthelfrith* are a match for ten other men, on sea or land.”

“Their boat is heavy laden and slow. Ours is light and fast, and its pilot,” Oswald nodded to Gunna, “is the most skilful I have seen.”

“Nevertheless, I have seldom heard good of fights conducted at sea,” said the monk.

“Neither have I.” Oswald smiled. “So we will not fight.”

*

It was like a heavy highland cow, driven mad by a swarm of stinging midges, flinging itself about until finally it collapses under its own weight. The curragh, steered by Gunna, danced around the cattle

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raiders in their larger boat, flicking in and out of their range, drawing their insults and skipping away, pulling the oars from the hands of rowers, pitching men into the sea so that they clung like bedraggled children to the skirts of their mother and, finally, ripping the sail through with a finely judged sword pass.

The cattle raiders, helpless, wallowed in the sea, the animals lowing plaintively in the belly of the boat. Whenever a raider attempted to clamber back into the boat a little pointed jab was sufficient to send him back into the sea.

“It’s summer and the sea’s warm; why you be trying to get in the boat?” Gunna laughed. Oswald threw a rope over the curragh’s stern post and they began towing it towards Coll. The cattle raiders, still clinging to the side of the curragh, offered threats and curses, but the sea soon chilled their insults and sapped their energy. By the time they reached Coll, the cattle raiders were content to crawl upon the beach and collapse upon the sand. There, waiting for them, were the men of Coll, the sons of Feall, fingering blades and staffs and fish hooks.

“Send them home.” Oswald stepped from the curragh and stood between the exhausted men, lying groaning upon the beach, and the sons of Feall.

One of the men stepped forward and Oswald nodded to him. He knew him of old.

“They came when we climbed the stacks of Staffa and took our cattle while we clung above the waves. There was no glory in this raid, only thievery, and thieves should die. That is our law.”

“It is my law too.” Oswald squatted down and grabbed the wet hair of a man lying beside him, pulling up his face, covered in sand. The man coughed, seawater trickling from mouth and nose. “But disgrace is worse than death. Send them back, and soon all the islands will know that these raiders, these brave, bold raiders, were caught by a girl.” The ætheling pointed to Gunna. “She it was who stung them, harried them and then dropped them, one by one, into the sea. Let them live, and then never let them hear the end of it!”

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The men, the sons of Feall, broke into laughter, while Gunna did again something she had not done for many a month before meeting Oswald: she blushed, flushing all the redder when Oswald came to stand in front of her.

“Never in my days have I seen a curragh better handled, Gunna, fisherman’s daughter. I thank you for saving us, and for bringing back the cattle of Coll.” And the ætheling made the courtesy to her, in the fashion of his people, and Gunna, tongue-tied, bobbed in front of him as a bird upon the wave.

“Come, Oswiu, we must upon our business with Mother. Brother Aidan, will you wait here for the moment? I’m sure these people would appreciate the blessings of a monk of Iona.” Oswald turned and made his way through the sons of Feall, the men parting before him and whispering his name when he had passed, and Gunna, fisherman’s daughter, stared after him.

Oswiu tapped her on the shoulder. “I have to see Mother for now, but this storm will last a while, I think, so we shall not be returning to Iona today.”

Gunna glanced at him distractedly. “What?”

Oswiu saw her staring after his brother. “Oh, never mind,” he said, and stalked off in Oswald’s wake.

It was a short walk across the machair to the small house where their mother dwelled. Oswald had expected to see her sitting on her stool outside, sheltered by the white walls, skilled hands weaving while her eyes looked south across the sea, in the direction of Iona. But the machair lay bare save for its summer sprinkling of flowers. Overhead, Bran rolled upon the air, croaking greeting and warning to the ravens of the island, who answered in kind, rising upon the wind to greet their visitor.

“Why are we coming to see Mother?” Oswiu asked.

“To ask her counsel and her blessing.”

“She would not say against your claim?”

“Our claim, brother. We are both Idings, sons of Æthelfrith; we each may claim the throne of Bernicia and therefore Northumbria.”

“I can see it: the two of us standing in the great council, the witan

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of our people hearing our claim, and then choosing me over you.” Oswiu laughed, and there was no bitterness in his laugh. “As likely as me becoming a monk.”

“As likely as us both surviving this.” Oswald stopped and turned to his brother. “Think on this: Cadwallon of Gwynedd and Penda of Mercia have brought down the High King, our uncle, the man who killed our father. Not since the days of the emperors has there been a king of such power in these islands as Edwin – I have heard tell that where the king’s writ ran, it was possible for a woman with babe at breast to walk alone and untroubled from sea to sea. Now the king is dead, and the law with him. Now there is only the sword, and the men who wield it, taking what they will. The wolves are circling, Oswiu, the ravens picking at the flesh, and we have hardly the men to do more than raid among raiders, to plunder and despoil and make a brief, sorry stay against death.” The elder took the younger brother’s shoulders and held him. “This world reeks of death, brother, and glory is but a lightning flash before night falls. If we go to reclaim our kingdom, we go as the lightning, fierce and fast, but we must have more men. So again, we go to Mother, for she is family to the kings of Dal Riada, and cousin to Colman, High King of the Uí Neíll. If she will, she can ask of the king many men; enough to make us more than raiders; enough to win us our father’s kingdom.”

Oswiu swallowed. “Ah, Oswald, there may be a small problem with your plan.”

Oswald let go and stepped back, staring at his brother with a sudden, terrible suspicion.

“What have you done?”

Oswiu swallowed again. “I – I don’t think we will be getting much help from the Uí Neíll.”

“Oswiu...”

“Um, you remember when we sailed with King Colman’s warband last year? I was injured in the first raid and stayed at the king’s hall to recover while you went off. His – his daughter was very kind to me.”

“Oswiu...”

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“And – and the baby must be due soon.”

“Baby?”

Oswiu closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“You – you mean to tell me you tupp a princess?”

“Yes.”

“But not just any princess: Fina, daughter of Colman, High King of the Uí Neíll.”

“Yes.” With each assent, Oswiu’s voice squeaked higher.

“The Uí Neíll who promised us many men to reclaim our kingdom.”

“Yes.” Oswiu’s voice had reached falsetto.

“Argh.”

Oswiu waited, eyes tight shut, but Oswald said nothing more. He opened one eye. His brother, seeing him, balled his fists.

“I should...”

“Yes, you should.”

Oswald quivered, strung between rage and restraint, then abruptly he turned away and marched up the machair towards the white house.

Oswiu, seeing him go, ran after him, but before he could get too close, Oswald held up his hand in warning. No nearer.

So, one brother trailing the other, Oswald and Oswiu, the sons of Æthelfrith, arrived at the house of their mother, Acha.

As the æthelings approached, a woman emerged, a rich shawl wrapped over her shoulders and hair but otherwise plainly clad, and then a moment later a young woman followed her, to stand waiting outside the house, a broad smile upon her face. Seeing her, Oswiu hurried on, catching his brother as they neared the house.

“I did not know Æbbe would be here as well,” he said.

“I – I hoped she might,” said Oswald, then breaking into a run he surged up the machair, past the outbuildings and workshops and the men, women and children greeting and gaping at the æthelings, to the two waiting women.

“Mother.” He made the courtesy to the older woman. “Sister.”

Before they could answer in kind, Oswiu wrapped his arms

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around Æbbe. “Sister! I thought you were in Ulster with our kin there. When did you come back here?”

Æbbe laughed and extricated herself from her brother’s embrace. “I was going to send word to you today, only you have come to me!”

“This is a fine chance.” Acha put out arms to enclose both sons in her embrace before pushing them away so she could see them, and once again commit their faces to memory, lest this be the last occasion on which she see them in this life. She looked searchingly from her older son to her younger, and then back again. “But I see it is no chance that brings you both here today.”

The brothers looked to each other, communicating silently, then turned to their mother.

Oswald, the elder, spoke, as Acha knew he would.

“News came to the abbey today.” The ætheling was pale and his mother knew he was struggling to find words. He always hated to tell her ill tidings, so she brought his discomfort to an end by holding her finger up.

“I know. Word reached us today as well. The king, my brother, the man who killed your father, is dead.” Acha held her hand to her heart. “I have not seen Edwin for many, many years, not since he fled from Æthelfrith, but he was kind to me when we were children, and he did not pursue us after your father died.” Unexpected tears welled from her eyes, and the queen, who had endured betrayal and death and exile dry-eyed, turned away and stood, her body shaking, in tears.

Her children stood about her, uncertain, until Oswiu gestured to his sister: do something. Æbbe stepped forward and put her arm about the exiled queen, and slowly Acha’s shoulders stopped shaking. Taking a breath, Acha turned to her children and forced a smile. But seeing them all together, the smile grew true.

“Come, my beloveds, let us eat and be glad, and then take counsel together, for we have much to ponder.”