



# HAND OF VENGEANCE

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DOUGLAS BOND

AUTHOR OF THE CROWN & COVENANT SERIES



# HAND OF VENGEANCE

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DOUGLAS BOND



P U B L I S H I N G

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For

Brittany and Jesse

Rhodric, Victoria, and Gwenna

Cedric, Desmond, Giles, and Gillian





## The Falcon-Eyed Watchman

“To arms! To arms!” the watchman cries in fear.  
“A sail! A sail! The dragon ships are near!  
The shields are set and now the sails are furled!  
Now oars extend like claws that rend the world.  
And men, like wolves, they grind us with their keels,  
Our shores, our crops, our homes, beneath their heels.  
With cleaving axe and ruthless blade, our wives  
And tender bairns they shatter, and our lives.  
Hold fast! The saintly warrior king appears,  
And with him valiant thegns who turn our tears  
To steadfast courage stout and purpose strong,  
Who steel our will to stand against the wrong.  
To arms! To arms! Let not your valor quake!  
We’ll fight and die for our Defender’s sake!”

Douglas Bond

*"The minds of the Anglo-Saxon race . . . maintain that your sin  
will find you out . . . [that] the kingdom of hell is within us."*

Dorothy L. Sayers

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# PRONUNCIATION KEY FOR PROMINENT NAMES

Cynwulf: Kin-wolf  
Elafius: E-laugh-ee-us  
Godwine: God-win (friend of God)  
Haeddi: Hah-e-dee  
Thegn: thane  
Wulfhere: Wolf-hair





# THUNOR'S BONES

Cynwulf slept little that night. The timorous beasts with whom he slept fared no better. Clumping together in terror, they bleated piteously at the rumbling that shook the timbers of the make-shift bothy. From where he lay on his sea-grass and eider-down matt, Cynwulf pulled his wolf hide over his head to muffle the rumbling. He imagined in his mind's eye Thunor wielding his dreaded hammer, laying waste the rocky promontory of nearby Bedlowe Craig, which jutted into the heavens above Lindisfarne.

But it was morning now. Thunor had at last spent his rage and put up his hammer, and all was still. Through gaps in the planking above, Cynwulf saw the twinkling of sunlight, giving promise of a fair late-winter day. All was still, that is, save the stirrings of his few sheep and the slaverling, persistent muzzle of Chester, the wolfhound, at his side.

"That were a troubled night, then, were it not?" said Cynwulf, scratching the coarse head of the beast at his side.

He flung aside his night covering and rolled onto his feet, Chester's tail eagerly thumping the planking of the bothy.

Thrusting an axe into both sides of his ox hide belt, Cynwulf drew aside the door of the bothy. Chester bolted into the morning, the sheep bouncing behind. Cynwulf paused at the sight. Sunlight shone brilliant white off the backs of the sheep and sparkled like gemstones on the wet grass all about. Winter had been long, and dark, and frigid, and a sight bathed in warmth and beauty such as this was rare on the coast of Northumberland.

Fire-red sky the morning before this one and the metallic scent of tempest last evening had prompted Cynwulf to draw out of the sea and weigh down his longboat with stones. It lay upside down high up the beach, a smaller version of his bothy.

It had been after another violent tempest two years ago that Cynwulf had looked out on his stretch of tideland to discover the battered remains of a Viking ship, its occupants nowhere to be seen, their cleaving blades silenced by the violence of the sea before they could slake them on the inhabitants of the island settlement. Though he shared blood with their race, he could feel nothing but relief that they had perished, every man of them. The plunderer's battered vessel was the sole survivor, and from it Cynwulf had salvaged enough planking to build his own man-sized longboat. He had, with great effort, levered the forward half of the doomed Viking ship onto high ground, and with still greater effort, flipped it upside down. Amidst the odd looks and jests of his neighbors, he had ever since been crafting it into a living place for himself, for Chester, for his few sheep, and perhaps one day for a woman.

The woody quacking of a mob of eider ducks caught Cynwulf's ear, and he scanned the seashore where dozens of the black and white waterfowl ducked and bobbed in the shallows for their breakfast. Cynwulf's innards churned as he watched them feed. Just as he had hoped,



after such a storm as had hurled itself upon the island last night, the sand beach was strewn with new-fallen trees from the mainland north.

"All hail!" said Cynwulf with a smile. "In Thunor's thundering tempest, the god has prospered my way." Sea-battered Lindisfarne had few trees and so was largely beholden to the storms and the tide for fuel and timber. And both storm and sea had smiled upon his path that day. From this stretch of beach alone he would find fuel to sell and perhaps enough timber to frame the west transept of the priory chapel, for a fee. And after such a storm, there'd be any number of repairs needed on the island. Cynwulf smiled with satisfaction. He would put Chester to watching the sheep after breakfast and set to the windfall with his saw.

He turned back toward his sheep and the rolling grasslands, Chester, intoxicated by the sun-drenched morning, baying and lumbering ahead of the woolly mob.

There was a thought nagging at Cynwulf's mind, one ill-formed but persistent. He tried shaking his head to fend off that thought, but it was no use. He had lived too many springtimes to ignore it. It was in the warming time when the Norsemen go a-viking. The isle of Lindisfarne, though barren and windswept with few inhabitants who owned little, was the first landfall jutting out into the North Sea, and so could ill afford to ignore the vulnerability of its situation. Though it might seem that raiding such a place was an expenditure of energy not worth the trouble, the fair-haired barbarians, from time to time, could not resist. It happened but one springtime in five, but when it did the dragon-prowed ships, red-striped sails billowing, appeared out of the mist and ran their grinding keels onto the shore, disgorging wild men, far from home, lusting for blood. Cynwulf mused that for them, plundering and killing on his island was merely a way to stretch their legs after the long sea crossing, a mere practice exercise, getting them in trim for the real viking on the mainland.

Musing thus, Cynwulf followed his animals, the damp wetting his leggings as his thoughts had his spirits. He half expected to see the wooden watchtower atop the winding neck of Bedlowe Craig a-smitten by lightning and but a charred skeleton remaining. But Thunor had been merciful, and it stood firm in its high place overlooking the treacherous North Sea. He could just make out the silhouette of Branduff, the morning watchman, scanning the horizon for sails. Some men were sharp of tongue. Branduff was the ideal watchman: his tongue was silent, and his eyes were sharp. Little evaded his watching.

Sun-drenched morning that it was, Cynwulf's attention was drawn next to a sound in the sea grass and low scrub brush that bordered the sands of the tidelands. He cocked his ear. Surely it was a song thrush foraging for snails. The speckle-breasted bird's merry *chir-chir-trilling* made Cynwulf smile and had an effect he could not explain. How could the merry call of a tiny feathered creature make him so to swell within himself and to feel that somehow all might at last come to rights in the world? He could not explain it.

Nevertheless, warmed with these feelings, Cynwulf bounded to the top of the knoll and studied the grasslands to the north, nearby the priory and the sprawl of thatched living places that radiated around it and smoke from cooking fires cavorting in the breeze above the settlement. He had found himself observing the comings and goings of people in the settlement more often in recent months. Might not the fair one, the girl with the geese, Haeddi, might not she lead her geese south toward his living place to fill their gullets with slugs and snails near the craig? The scrub and shallows near the craig, were they not plentiful with slugs and snails? His heart warmed in another fashion with the prospect.

But as he studied the shoreline between himself and the priory, he did not see Haeddi that morning, and the

rhythm of his heart reset itself to its normal beating. He did, however, detect something amiss with the landscape. Halting in his stride, he attempted to reconstruct the familiar sight in his mind.

"Ah so," he said aloud. "Yonder tree's gone missing."

On a tempest-swept, barren island, when a tree went missing it was impossible not to take notice. Perhaps it was struck down in the night by the lightning, by Thunor's hammer, so Cynwulf mused. But as he neared the place where the old tree had stood, gnarled and unchanged throughout the seasons of his life, he saw its roots splayed and washed clean by the heavy rain. He quickened his pace.

His first thought was of what he would do with the wood. It was sycamore wood, tough and suitable for fine furniture for a laird's mead hall. Perhaps he could sell it on the mainland, though he sensed that it might have more value on the island, where wood was scarce. Frowning, he mused long on this. He felt he might be about to overtake and come alongside some principle, that he might be near dropping his anchoring stone in the mouth of the nature of things in a bewildering world. He often felt that way. But as was usual when he did, the feeling passed, and he returned his mind to planning what he would do with the wood.

Circling his prize, Cynwulf nearly lost his footing on the edge of the hole where the tree's roots had rested these many years, perhaps centuries. He was about to take his mind back to his twofold prosperity and how he might use it to win Haeddi's hand and take her to his living place for wife, when he noticed something round and pale in the red earth beneath where the ancient tree had stood. He picked his way into the hole and fell to his knees. Mud from the rainfall felt soft and cool on his feet and calves. With his hands he cleared away earth from the object.

Cynwulf had seen human remains; many times had he seen this. Pale gray bones, flaking with age, and a skull, seemingly smaller than his own, yet without flesh and hair

it was difficult to tell for certain. Gently, he moved the soft earth away from the head.

“And just how is it,” he said conversationally as he worked, “how is it that you came to rest in the sod of this holy island?”

Vacant eye sockets gazed up at Cynwulf for reply. “Ah, you’re not of a mind to say, are you?” said Cynwulf, and he mused on the human that had been formerly housed therein.

“Bad teeth, poor soul,” he said aloud. The creature’s jaw-bone had, over the years—or centuries—slackened. With the gaping teeth of the mandible parted from the upper teeth, its seeming expression made Cynwulf feel as if this person had died mouth-agape in full-throated laughter. He had seen men die in battle, and none he had seen had died laughing. Next he cleared earth from where the neck would have been, and so downward to the opposing clavicle bones and to the knobby joints of the man’s shoulders. And so forth he worked, clearing muddy earth around the cage of bones—like bent ribs on a longboat—that encircled the chest cavity.

Cynwulf’s labors were suddenly disturbed by a throaty cawing. A flurry of wings pummeled the air. Preening on the roots of the stricken tree perched a raven, its oily black feathers shimmering in the sunlight.

Cynwulf rose to his feet. “There’s nothing left here for you,” he said to the sooty-feathered beast. “Your long-ago kin may have had their feast, but there’s nothing left for you.”

With a scolding croak, the bird spread its wings and lifted off in a gust of wind, soaring effortlessly toward the priory, its black wing feathers stretching wide like clutching fingers from Valhalla.

But the ominous bird had aided Cynwulf. He had work to be about. All men die. What could be so strange about finding human remains beneath the sod? Not finding such

bones would be the strange thing. Men daily trod unknowingly upon sod inhabited by generations of their predecessors. Frowning in thought, and as he made to climb out of the root-hole grave, Cynwulf turned his eyes for a final look at the skeleton. Ought he to re-inter it? He stood pondering the question. That was when he noticed it. Whether by the shifting angle of the sun, or his varied position, he now saw an odd protrusion slanting upward from the rib cage near the left clavicle. Cynwulf was familiar with human anatomy: flesh and muscles, bones and sinews. He had experience of such things. And here he saw something that was not part of human anatomy. Again he sank to his knees by the remains, clearing still more earth away from the rib cage and shoulder bone.

His heart quickened for the second time that morning. Slowly, he wrapped his fingers around the protrusion that jutted from the left side of the rib cage, the side in which the man's heart had once beaten. Drawing it out with care, he held in his hands the pitted remains of a Roman short sword.



*Cynwulf*, shunned for being part Viking and part Saxon, lives beneath a beached Viking ship on the outskirts of the Anglo-Saxon community surrounding Tildric Hall. Life is hard enough for him as a half-breed misfit—until the fateful day his battleaxe is found in a dead man's skull. Charged with murder and facing the sword of Anglo-Saxon justice, Cynwulf's longings and dreams now hang in the balance—and so does his life.

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