

Extract from The Raven Waits

'I respect your offer, Prince, but I cannot accept your help.' Beowulf's tone was pleasant but there was a lightness about it which showed he did not regard Hrethric seriously. 'I have vowed to stand alone against this monster, Grendel, and if my duguth are stupid with wine, so much the better; they cannot interfere. I have also vowed to fight without helmet, or sword, or shield, or precious corslet.' Angrily he threw the fumbling Hondscio aside and pulled off the ringed armour. His chest and shoulders shaped the tunic's soft cloth. 'I shall take your monster in my arms. I shall hold him in the grasp of my hands which have the strength of thirty men. I shall wrestle with him, thigh against thigh, chest against chest, throw him here upon this floor and bend back his spine until it cracks under my weight.'

'May it be as you say. May the fight be quick, your power greater than that of your adversary and his defeat speedy and complete. Otherwise you, too, may catch the sickness.' Angenga's voice was low and Beowulf strained for the words.

'Sickness, Poet? What sickness is this? Do not riddle with me.' His arms were folded, his feet astride. Charmed by the fight he had described, his eyes were on the doors by which Grendel would enter. He was already the conqueror.

'It is no riddle. It is plain for all to see. I talk of the sickness of fear.'

'Fear?' Beowulf repeated. 'Fear?'

Then he began to laugh. He threw back his head and the noise burst from his wide mouth, swept down the hall and rose to the rafters. It passed through the walls and reached the huts and apartments of the Scyldings who listened in amazement to a sound which for twelve winters had never in the darkness issued out of Heorot. It broke into the ears of his drowsing companions who started up and, uncomprehending but obedient, added their clamour. Discordant and meaningless, their shrieks were a wine-soaked descant to their leader's deeper swell, and together the disbelieving laughter and the inane din grazed past Angenga and Hrethric at the doors and rushed down the avenue of trees.

The strange vibrations radiated across the heathlands, penetrated the fens and marshes, and Grendel, moodily picking over the bones of Oslaf, raised his head.

Author's comments

The Raven Waits is based on the first half of the the Anglo Saxon poem, 'Beowulf'. I have always enjoyed its terror and courage, darkness and beauty, loyalty and fellowship, and the dramatic, outlandish fights. But the novel is not a translation. I have omitted sections that do not progress the plot and have made several additions.

One of these is Angenga, the exiled poet from Britain, who witnesses these events in Denmark and who will later record them. I also develop Hrothulf's ambitions for the throne, hinted at in the original. Perhaps the most significant change for the reader is the importance of the young prince, Hrethric. Although he is mentioned only briefly in the poem, I give him a central place and tell the story from his point of view.

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