

Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 Some broad linden shield: my hands
 Will fight for me, struggle for life
 Against a monster. God must decide
 Who will bring me to death's cold grip
 Grendel's hand, or I, will be
 What it has to be, to invade
 And gorge his blood, our blood he can,
 If he can. And I will have come,
 There'll be nothing left for me to prepare
 For his grave: Grendel's bloody
 Flesh to the moors, his bones
 And smear torn to the walls
 Of his den. No Dane
 Will fret about our shrouds,
 And if death take me, send the mail
 Mail to Higlac, return
 The honor I had from Hrethel, and he
 Myland.⁷ Fate will unwind as it must!

7

Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "If you've come to us in friendship,
 Of the men your father found at our court
 Edgeth was in a bitter feud,
 Killing Hrothulf, a warrior:
 Your father's men were afraid
 If he returned to us and they'd drive him away.
 Then he traveled across the seas
 To the land of the Danes to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruled the
 Kingdom and its gold
 My older brother, a man
 Than I, had died, making
 Second among the king's sons, first
 In this nation, the end of Edgeth
 Quarrelled, sent treasures through the
 Furred the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd bring that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 My heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Did to us, the damage he's done, here
 In his hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost

7. Or Weland: a mythological blacksmith, known for his gifted hammer and wonderful workmanship.

terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 With his madness, smother his lust!
 How many have my men, glowing
 With courage, down from too many cups
 Of ale, swayed after dark
 And stem them with a sweep of their
 And then, in this mead-hall
 With new light won, hunched
 Stained red, the floors from the benches
 Savage assault—and my men
 Still, death taking more and more
 But to table, Beowulf, a hero's honor:
 Let us toast your victory for the future."
 Then Hrothgar's courtiers
 Yielded benches to the visitors
 And led them to the table. The keeper of
 Came carrying the carved flasks,
 And poured the night sweetness. A poet
 Sang to time, in a clear
 Praise of heroes and visiting Geats
 As one, drank and rejoiced.

8

Unferth⁸ spoke, Ecglaf's son,
 Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly
 And sharp (vexed by Beowulf's adventure,
 By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone
 In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever
 Acquired glory and fame greater
 Than his own):

"You're Beowulf, are you—the same
 Boastful fool who fought a swimming
 Match with Brecca,⁹ both of you daring
 And young and proud, exploring the deepest
 Seas, risking your lives for no reason
 But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
 Not to, but no one could check such pride.
 With Brecca at your side you swam along
 The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
 Over the ocean's face. Then winter
 Churned through the water, the waves ran you
 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
 To survive. And at the end victory was his,
 Not yours. The sea carried him close

8. One of Hrothgar's courtiers, skillful with words. 9. A contemporary and young companion of Beowulf.

To his home, to southern Norway, near
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
His towns and his people. He'd promised to outswim you:
Bonstan's son made that boast ring true.
You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
Staying a whole night through in this hall,
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you."

Beowulf answered, Edgeth's great son:

"Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face
Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried
To tell us about Brecca's doings. But the truth
Is simple: no man swims in the sea
As I can, no strength is a match for mine.
As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—
We were both too young to know better—that we'd risk
Our lives far out at sea, and so
We did. Each of us carried a naked
Sword, prepared for whales or the swift
Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.
He could never leave me behind, swim faster
Across the waves than I could, and I
Had chosen to remain close to his side.
I remained near him for five long nights,
Until a flood swept us apart;
The frozen sea surged around me,
It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
Into life—and the iron hammered links
Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
Woven across my breast, saved me
From death. A monster seized me, drew me
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws
Tight in my flesh. But fate let me
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself
Free; I fought that beast's last battle,
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

9

"Other monsters crowded around me,
Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,

Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
By morning they'd decided to sleep on the shore,
Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
Would stop their passing. Then God's bright beacon
Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
The living when they drive away death by themselves!
Lucky or not, nine was the number
Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
Anywhere under Heaven's high arch, has fought
In such darkness, endured more misery or been harder
Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
The monsters' hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
The swift-flowing waters swept me along
And I landed on Finnish soil. I've heard
No tales of you, Unferth, telling
Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
Brecca's battles were never so bold;
Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
No boast, have announced no more than I know
To be true. And there's more: you murdered your brothers,
Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
Won't help your soul; you'll suffer hell's fires,
Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf's
Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
To raid your hall, ruin Herot
And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
But he's learned that terror is his alone,
Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
Of reprisal; he's found no fighting, here,
But only food, only delight.
He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
The Geats will show him courage, soon
He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
Comes up again, opening another
Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
May enter this hall: that evil will be gone!"

Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
In Beowulf's bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.

There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
 Hrothgar's gold-ringed queen, greeted
 The warriors; a noble woman who knew
 What was right, she raised a flowing cup
 To Hrothgar first, holding it high
 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
 Joy in that feast. The famous king
 Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
 Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
 Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
 Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf's
 Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'
 Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
 For allowing her hands the happy duty
 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
 Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
 Edgeth's brave son, then assured the Danish
 Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
 Ready:

"When we crossed the sea, my comrades
 And I, I already knew that all
 My purpose was this: to win the good will
 Of your people or die in battle, pressed
 In Grendel's fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
 And courage, or here in this hall welcome
 My death!"

Welthow was pleased with his words,
 His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
 To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

The feast went on, laughter and music
 And the brave words of warriors celebrating
 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane's
 Son, heavy with sleep; as soon
 As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel
 Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
 When night had covered the earth with its net
 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
 Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with him.

He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats'
 Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped
 That Herot would be his to command. And then
 He declared:

"No one strange to this land
 Has ever been granted what I've given you,
 No one in all the years of my rule.

Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then
 Keep it free of evil, fight
 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
 And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full."

10

Then Hrothgar left that hall, the Danes'
 Great protector, followed by his court; the queen
 Had preceded him and he went to lie at her side,
 Seek sleep near his wife. It was said that God
 Himself had set a sentinel in Herot,
 Brought Beowulf as a guard against Grendel and a shield
 Behind whom the king could safely rest.
 And Beowulf was ready, firm with our Lord's
 High favor and his own bold courage and strength.

He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his sword
 Hammered from the hardest iron, and handed
 All his weapons and armor to a servant,
 Ordered his war-gear guarded till morning.
 And then, standing beside his bed,
 He exclaimed:

"Grendel is no braver, no stronger
 Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall not,
 Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold
 And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth
 Scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists
 Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I will meet him
 With my hands empty—unless his heart
 Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting
 Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom
 Extend His hand where He wills, reward
 Whom He chooses!"

Then the Geats' great chief dropped
 His head to his pillow, and around him, as ready
 As they could be, lay the soldiers who had crossed the sea
 At his side, each of them sure that he was lost
 To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns
 And the friends he had left behind where both he
 And they had been raised. Each thought of the Danes
 Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats
 And not Danes now slept. But God's dread loom
 Was woven with defeat for the monster, good fortune
 For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them,
 And through the might of a single man
 They would win. Who doubts that God in His wisdom
 And strength holds the earth forever

In His hands? Out in the darkness the monster
Began to walk. The warriors slept
In that gabled hall where they hoped that He
Would keep them safe from evil, guard them
From death till the end of their days was determined
And the thread should be broken. But Beowulf lay wakeful,
Watching, waiting, eager to meet
His enemy, and angry at the thought of his coming.

11

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
And rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning; the monster's mind was hot
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
Eyes were watching his evil steps,
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
Grendel snatched at the first Geat¹
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
Drank the blood from his veins and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death

1. Hondshew. The name is given at line 2076, in Beowulf's report of the entire expedition to Higlac.

And Grendel's great teeth came together,
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
—And was instantly seized himself, claws
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac's follower remembered his final
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster's flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

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That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man's blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.