# Beowulf and the Monster Grendel

*Neil Foster Macphail*

What the Coast Guard Saw

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he steady wind coming in from the sea had a chill running through it. The guard whose job it was to guard the coastline had been walking up and down the cliffs by the beach for hours now and the lambent glow of dawn over the trees was still an hour or two away. The moon was half full, and shone whitely over the waves, making a flickering path from the horizon to the shore.

The guard’s face was toward the sea and his back was to Heorot, the mighty mead hall of King Hrothgar of Denmark. Then as now, mead halls were built for people to drink and dance and sing in. The old stories were told and kings awarded land and treasure to their most worthy thanes. Heorot was by far the largest mead hall anyone had ever heard of, until it burned down. (At the time of this story, it has not burned down yet.) On this night, the hall was dark, silent and empty. The hall had not been used much for more than ten years, and there was a very good reason for that.

At first the guard wasn’t sure, but after he’d watched for a while, he detected a dark mote floating in the middle of the silvery ribbon of moonlight. After he’d watched longer, he knew it was no whale or walrus, but a boat, heading his way. So much for waiting for the dawn and returning to wife and bed.

As he waited to see if the boat was going to land on the Danish coast or sail on by, he stopped his pacing along the cliffs and simply waited, leaning on his tall ash spear and keeping his ears open for anything happening to the right or left of him. Over the rhythmic sound of the surf and the steady wind he could hear low voices talking, and the many small creaking, splashing and thumping sounds that oars make. Knowing if he blew his horn to sound the alarm, armed men would come running, he waited.

After a long while, he heard closer voices come over the air, along with metallic clinks and the thump of wooden shields and bundles of spears being tossed onto the rocky bank where the boat was now moored. He heard a low, solemn voice giving a brief prayer, no doubt one of thanks to the seas for being calm. He heard the snorting of horses and the clumping of their hooves, and soon enough they climbed up the stony escarpment and came into view. Iron tipped lances were held high as no fewer than fourteen mail-clad warriors with iron helmets rode toward him. Some of them had swords as well, in case anyone somehow got in too close to kill with the lances or a thrown spear. He was watching those swords to see if any came out of his sheath, and those spears, to see if any of them lowered threateningly. They did not.

He called out “Who are you men, crossing the sea in your tall ship, and disembarking in chain mail corslets and iron helmets? Whose great banner is this? I am the warden this night, keeping watch for enemies. I have never seen such fierce, well-equipped warriors on my strip of beachfront. I hope you have not come as spies on your way to invade the lands of the Scyldings? I need to know where you are from, and quickly.”

“Good night to you!” a warm, rumbling voice came back to him, with only slightly accented Danish. The speaker was a huge, bear of a man with a thick mane of wavy reddish-brown hair and beard under his plumed iron helmet. He was tall, but he was not slender or graceful. The horse he sat upon was dark and large. The warrior was not fat, but he was very thick, even taking into account his heavy chainmail shirt which protected him from neck to knees. On a wide belt, he carried a sheath which held an unusually thick and large sword. His calves were bare and hairy above rough leather boots. His hands were large and strong. Small, dark, deep-set eyes twinkled under arched, bushy brows. “Well, I suppose it is not ‘Good morning’ quite yet! But it seems a bit late to wish you a good night...”

“We’ve not had a good night in Heorot for over ten years now,” the guard of the coast told the enormous warrior.

“So I have heard,” said the imposing figure. “In fact, that is why I have come. We are from the house of King Higelac of the Geats, and we have come to lend a hand to your difficulty.” He pronounced the word “Geats” in the manner of his people, and it sounded more like “Yay-ats.”

“Are you suggesting that we spear-Danes cannot handle our own difficulties?” the coast guard grated out.

“I meant no offense,” replied the Geat, in the manner of a man who frequently gives offense without meaning to.

“Do you think we have no skilled swordsmen in Denmark?” the guard asked.

“I am sure you have skilled swordsmen in Denmark,” he agreed.

“King Hrothgar was a fierce warrior in his day, and his loyal thane Unferth has acquainted many with his bright blade Hrunting, to their hurt,” the guard continued, perhaps a bit defensively.

“Unferth? Isn’t he the one who...”

“Yes. Unferth. And Unferth is a mighty warrior and faithful thane of King Hrothgar,” said the guard. If he had warmed up to them at all, this last comment had made his voice chilly again. The newly-arrived Geat had touched upon a sore point.

“Of course. I do not mean to suggest otherwise,” he said, lowering his head and ploughing on in the discussion. “But am I right in thinking Heorot is still a hall far too dangerous in which to celebrate?”

“You are right.”

“And have Hrothgar, or Unferth and the other thanes found a solution to your... difficulty?”

“They have not.” The last was said a bit grudgingly.

The wind continued to increase in speed, starting to hiss through the cedar trees atop the cliffs. The spreading glow of dawn had begun in the sky behind the trees.

“Fixing a problem such as this is far easier said than done. Are you a deft swordsman at least?” the guard asked, after a bit.

“Formidable more than deft” the thick warrior admitted.

“You do look formidable, at that,” the guard replied. “Well, men from the house of *Higg*-il-ack of the *Yay*-ats...” he said, pronouncing the names as best he could and overdoing it a bit. He clunked the butt end of his spear against the ground beside his boot with a formal air. “...you shall pass!” he announced, finally. He was a man who took his job very seriously.

And fourteen armed warriors rode past him up the cliffs, and into the cedar trees beyond which King Hrothgar’s great horned hall Heorot sat empty.

As for the guard, he resumed pacing the paths by the cliffs, waiting until the sun came up fully over the trees and he could return to wife and bed.

Young Beowulf Goes Swimming

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*s you know well, my sister-son, the story of Beowulf has been told for nearly a century now, and by many men, each imagining it in his own way. It is rather a fad at this point, and no doubt it will soon be forgotten once people tire of it. No one is in any great hurry to write a version of it down, and if they do, who knows what version it will be? If there is one thing men cannot ever learn to do, it is agree. About much of anything.*

*How some men tell it, Beowulf was the offspring of a she-bear and a human man. The man is said to have been named Ecgtheow, or perhaps this was just a good nickname for a skilled swordsman and not the name his mother gave him. Because of being half bear, they say, the child Beowulf’s hands were strong and clumsy like paws, and he swam and fought nearly as mightily as a young bear would have. Beowulf grew to be a stocky bear-man they say, and when he rejoined human society, he had a mighty thirst for mead. Mead, as you know, is the alcoholic drink your father’s sister makes from honey. Beowulf is said to have been a famously mighty swimmer and fighter. It is related that he had trouble navigating the deep waters of human social settings, however. One thing we do know is that when fighting, Beowulf often broke or dropped his swords and settled matters bear-handed instead. On that, everyone agrees.*

*When many of the rest of us tell the story though, we imagine that Beowulf was simply born a human child to a human woman who died near a forest, and that for seven winters he was raised by a great, shaggy she-bear who suckled him like she would one of her own cubs. Until he was old enough to walk, he rode around on the great bear in the daytime, clinging to her thick pelt with his strong little fingers. At night he slept, curled up against her warm furry belly, her breath pouring over him like a soft blanket. The great beast taught him how to swim and fish and hunt and fight in the icy rivers and pools where they lived. She couldn’t teach her little foster son which fork to use, nor which end of the sword to hold, nor the politest way to say something delicate, however. And so when he rejoined human company, we relate, those things came to him very slowly. This much is known about Beowulf.*

*Many things go without saying, and so I need not spend time in relating them again. Everyone knows of impulsive Heatholaf, talkative Swerting of the cracked cup, all the stolid and endlessly-discussed kings of the Spear-Danes, the famously savage Eorle tribe and their conflicts with the Danes, and of course Yrmenlaf and his worn boot, the wolf and the ivory comb. And you yourself have certainly heard enough stories about the wooden bowl of unlucky Hygd of the golden hair and could tell the stories about what happened to her on her twentieth name-day as well as I. Naturally I need not spend any of our time telling you about Heorogar, as you have known about his exploits and what he did at the smithy, and the tragic result of it all, since you were no taller than my belt. The stories are endless, and just like real life, none of them ends happily. (Screaming in blood we are born, screaming in blood we die. The bravest of us do not scream, but we all bleed and we die in the end. It is what we do in the time between that makes all the difference.)*

*The story of Beowulf takes place not too long ago, when things were not much different from how they are today. People had regular, normal everyday names, just like we do, Healfdene, Hrothulf and Ongentheow being as popular then as they are today. They spoke more or less as we speak still. Like now, folks were always trying to create peace, knowing all the while that peace never lasts. People loved to get drunk on mead and ale in long, high halls just as they do now, telling stories of heroics in battle just like we do. Then, as now, there was always someone killing someone over something that only seems important to people who have been drinking. Families had trouble getting along, and young men kept their swords sharper than their wits, and their ale mugs full. Many claimed to be Christian, but saw to their charms and runes and the phase of the moon and listened to their grandmother’s stories, the same as you and I.*

*Just like today, if someone ended up killing you, it would most likely be your brother.*

The very first thing most people ever heard about Beowulf at the time was that he was a strong, but clumsy young man. Even when he had not been at the mead, he often said the wrong thing, the honest, blunt truth, and he could not be taught the subtleties of fancy swordwork, though Higelac insisted his most skillful thanes try and teach his sister-son the art of battle. In fact, Beowulf was known for throwing, dropping, bending and outright breaking most of the old swords they normally used to teach young men how to fight. There was no use giving him a “waster” practice sword of stout oak or hickory, as he’d soon shatter that.

But when young Beowulf got a certain look in his eye and rushed at you, no matter how good you were with a sword, you knew you had better run before he got you in his grasp. A spear was a better choice, to try to keep him at a distance, but if you let him get his hands on the shaft, he would usually bat it aside, or roughly knock it flying from your best two-handed grasp, or shatter it to matchsticks in the grip of one hand. As he did this, he would lay hold on you with the other hand before pulling you into a crushing bear hug. Beowulf liked fighting, but he had no patience for weapons practice.

Besides fighting and drinking mead, Beowulf loved to swim. He could hold his breath underwater for so long it didn’t seem human, and he could swim off into the distance and explore islands and coastlines one normally needed a ship and favourable winds to reach.

When Beowulf had just about finished growing, he and his friend Breca had a glorious summer when each sought to outdo the other at absolutely everything. Breca could beat Beowulf in a footrace, and in playing the lute (which Beowulf could not master at all), and Beowulf could beat Breca at wrestling and climbing trees. Both were extremely powerful swimmers, living as they did by the sea and loving to wrestle with the surf.

One day the sea was far too rough for swimming in. A storm looked likely, and both young men were warned that if they stupidly went swimming and drowned, on their own heads it would be. So being young men with something to prove, they decided to do it anyway. That it really was the very best idea either of them had ever had. They knew they could both swim for a day entire, crossing channels between their own shore and ones out of sight over the horizon. And they knew that they were just as at risk of attack by dangerous sea creatures as they were of drowning. But they were young, and they’d just been warned that it was too dangerous, and so they did it immediately. When you say the word “dangerous” to a young man, he often hears you say “exciting” instead.

Now it is not of course unheard-of for a man to swim a channel or strait and not stop until the same time the next day. But Breca and Beowulf, swimming side by side, wearing war blades in case of shark attack, swam for two, then three days. By the fourth day it was clear that Beowulf was the stronger swimmer. On the fifth day, Breca fell enough behind that in some crashing surf Beowulf lost track of him entirely and could not find him again. Breca was carried by the waves to a distant outcropping of land, and as for Beowulf, he got swept up in currents that eventually took him to the coast of Finland, where exhausted he emerged from the sea scraped and bleeding, sword in hand and wild tales on his lips, asking for mead.

It was the best summer ever.

Welcome to Heorot

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hey’d been waiting for over an hour outside the great mead-hall of Heorot. This gave the king plenty of time to arrive and assemble his court, and it gave the Geatish warriors plenty of time to admire the front of the hall.

It was by far the largest building any of them had ever seen. It was built of dark cedar all bound together with cast iron band decorated with gold filigree, and had a low, broad, peaked roof. Its roof could only be called “low” in light of how enormous the rest of the structure was. The roof was gold, though whether it was of gold paint, gold leaf, or plates of gold was impossible to tell without climbing up. On the front of the structure loomed two enormous wooden shapes like horns, reaching at angles skyward. Apart from the front and back entrances, Heorot was bordered on all sides by cedar trees.

The heavy oaken doors, bound in frames and cross-girdings of cast iron with gold decorations, hung on heavy iron pins that fitted into heavy iron rings. They were securely locked. Two Danes in full war gear stood as door wardens, spears in their right hands and swords on their belts. They did that thing guards do, where they never look away from you, but never look at you directly either. A bird called to its mate in the trees.

Eventually the Geats heard the thudding and clanking of the mechanism being unfastened from inside, and the heavy doors swung open. A tall, slender thane with a ginger mustache stood there. He was named Wulfgar, and he had a brief word with them: “Ok. Where do you come from again, with all of these gleaming battle-shields, your finely crafted mail shirts, your helmets, bright banner and these proud lances?” he started out. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

The towering leader of the visiting warriors replied “We are close friends and faithful servants of Higelac of the Geats, and would like to speak to King Hrothgar of the Danes about his... difficulty. My name is Beowulf, sister-son of Higelac.”

Wulfgar said “I’ll go have a word and see what our generous and gracious lord has to say about this.” And he turned behind him and called out more loudly, “My liege, some Geatmen have sailed here over the sea, led by one they call Beowulf. They wish to have a word about our situation. Perhaps it would be a good idea to speak with them?”

The Geats could hear, then, the voice of one old, but filled with energy, saying “I remember this man when he was just a tiny lad. His father, long since passed on, was named Ecgtheow. Lost both of his parents, Beowulf did, the way I heard it. They say he has the hand strength of thirty men. Maybe he *is* the answer to our difficulty. Tell him and his men to come in and that they are most welcome!”

Wulfgar told Beowulf and his Geatish warriors, “These loyal thanes will keep your battle gear safe out here until you’re done conferring.”

The two guards gestured to the well-worn weapons racks that stood to either side of the doors. Clearly the Geats were to store their weapons outside while talking with King Hrothgar in the hall itself. One did not enter the presence of the king armed for battle. Their helmets and coats of mail they could wear inside. If any of them had been using a walking stick or staff to lean on, perhaps this might have been allowed. But not blades. There was a great deal of unbuckling of belts and the clunking of iron-tipped lances being tossed into a pile. Their shields they placed in a long row leaning against the wall as well.

Wulfgar waved them in, and they all trooped into the relative dimness of the great wooden hall, pausing for a moment to take in the wide expanse above them. The entire place was full of long, low tables of dark, sturdy oak. They bore the marks of not only years of spilled drinks, but on a few toward the back could be seen deep gouges and more ominous-looking, darkly spattered stains.

Hrothgar was seated on a raised platform to the left and halfway to the rear of the hall. He was white-bearded and elderly, but it was clear he had been a tall, strong man in his youth. With him sat his queen Wealhtheow, auburn-haired, lovely and very young compared to Hrothgar, but clearly the mother of a couple of teenaged children who sat nearby. A retinue of various thanes and earls sat below, waiting.

Still wearing his mail shirt and iron helmet, Beowulf strode over to stand below the king’s platform, his men following a couple of steps behind him, still gazing around them at the hall.

Beowulf’s warm, growly voice rang out “Hail, Hrothgar! I am the sister-son of Higelac and his faithful servant. I have done a number of amazing things since I was a boy and look to do more and greater. I heard of your difficulty here in Denmark from sea-farers passing through who told me of the magnificence of this mighty hall, standing empty and forlorn each evening when men ought to be in here drinking and telling tall tales. My own men urged me to come try my hand at setting things aright here. They knew of my enormous strength, and have seen me covered in gore, defeating enemy warriors five at a time without help, and crawling out of the waves, having slain many underwater creatures. I hope, gracious Hrothgar, that you will permit me to help you in your difficulty, and that I have not travelled here in vain. I have heard only a bit about your difficulty and who or what is causing it. Perhaps you would tell me more about the situation?”

Grendel

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*s you know very well, my sister-son, the difficulty the Danes were having was with a violent, dark creature of the shadows and watery fens named Grendel. They say that when he heard the Danes loudly singing and drinking and telling tales of their recent victories in battle, that this uproar filled his heart to overflowing with hatred and black spite. Now, some in telling the tale say that Grendel was a giant, and it is clear that he was very large. Others say he was some kind of troll or aquatic pond demon. Still others say he was a kind of ghoul or ghast, but one that was at least partly made of meat like you and I. Some paint him as a misunderstood, sorrowful, neglected exile, resorting in his sorrow and lack of human companionship to home invasion and cannibalism. (For he was a cannibal.)*

*The creature Grendel was not the usual kind of spirit or ghost that we are familiar with, as he could bleed, and needed to eat. But he was not quite like you or I, being larger than the largest Scylding you have ever seen, and impervious to wounding with weapons. He was not merely a cannibal, as he did not simply sneak unsuspecting shepherdesses and goatherds conveniently far from help, but came by night and burst straight into Heorot, a place filled with a collection of the most dangerous, drunken spear-Danes in all of Denmark. Any creature in search of a simple meal would never choose Heorot as his larder. Yet Grendel did, bursting in in the night, mortally wounding mighty warriors without so much as a dagger or hammer, abducting them and fleeing back to his watery lair, leaping and laughing, part of the corpse in a leathern sack to eat later, and some of the body and blood in his belly already.*

*And we know he was not only a water creature as he moved easily and quickly over distance upon land. We know the Creator of All Things would not allow Grendel to touch the king, and so the creature tormented Hrothgar by brutalizing his bravest warriors. We know he was not lonely and looking for womanly companionship, as he showed no interest in stuffing any of the lovely damsels of Heorot into the leathern hunting bag he bore at his waist to stuff half-eaten warriors into.*

*All we know for certain is that he hated mirth and merriment, that he ate people, that he enjoyed it immensely, and that he lived with his mother.*

After all was discussed, Beowulf and his men were given seats in the hall, and refreshments, and the skald of Heorot played his lute wonderfully well and in a powerful voice sang an instructive religious song.

The song reminded them all of how the Almighty Maker had first imagined, and then brought into being, the land where they lived, bordered on all sides with wild ocean and battered by beautiful and powerful winds that combed away the morning ocean fog from the majestic trees. About how he made Man and Woman and told them to make more people, which they did, in the most delightful of ways, resulting in a pair of brothers named Cain and Abel.

The song related how, like many brothers, the two did not get along, and so Cain invented murder. In sweet and pleasing stanzas the song related how, having barely dropped the rock that dripped with the blood of his brother, whose corpse was residing in a shallow grave, Cain tried to hide from the All-Knowing what he had done. The song concluded by explaining that Cain for his sin was sent into exile, and wandered the earth fathering giants, demons, trolls and sea monsters, who shared their progenitor’s malice and thirst for violence and murder, bloodletting and brother-slaying.

Beowulf and his men applauded loudly when the song ended, and Hrothgar explained “And so Grendel, this monstrous Child of murderous Cain hates our freedom and so this evildoer makes Heorot far too dangerous a place to stay after dark. For twelve years, whenever we have tried to celebrate anything here, we have soon entertained that grim visitor in the night, and some of our best warriors have been bagged and carried off half eaten.” Hrothgar gestured disgustedly at the tables toward the rear of Heorot which bore a dark stain. The flagstones there, though clearly scrubbed thoroughly, also bore similar stains.

Beowulf stood up to lay out his plan. “I have heard, during my professional assessment of the matter, that this creature uses no weapons. So I propose to meet him without weapons of my own. Not a spear, not a shield, not a dagger, axe or sword of any kind. Not even armour. I intend to *wrestle* him.” At this, Beowulf threw his iron helmet on the table with a loud clunk, and pulled his mail shirt over his head, tossing it beside the helmet. Standing there in only his homespun under-armour padded shirt that kept the rings of his mail shirt from digging into his flesh when stopping blades, he threw out his arms to ask for Hrothgar’s approval. “If I win, I will have solved your difficulty. And if I lose, you will have but to send my things back over the sea to my uncle. If I am defeated, there won’t *be* anything left of me to bury, once Grendel has had his supper here in the hall.”

Hrothgar thought for a moment and then spoke quietly: “I remember your father Ecgtheow. He got heavily involved in a very bloody feud with the Wulfings and ended up killing Hetholaf. He wasn’t quite able to make things right over there, so he had to flee to our lands here, right when I was taking the throne. I sent some wergild money where it needed to be sent, and eventually things blew over and he was able to return. And now you are come to repay my kindness with your own. I must warn you that you aren’t the first to attempt this. Many men have gotten drunk and promised to put Grendel under their blades, only to end up leaving my hall gory and reeking of murder in the morning. And now my body of warriors is desperately depleted, and I am at my wits end. Very well. You may try. Let us drink in Heorot tonight!”

And so they did.

Party in Heorot

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*ou have of course heard of Unferth, his mighty blade Hrunting and his great valor in battle, my sister-son. You know that, like too many of us, Unferth had killed his brothers. Not just one, either. Both of them. But he had distinguished himself in battle, and became one of Hrothgar’s most trusted ring-thanes. Like the rest of Hrothgar’s men, though, he was helpless when it came to Grendel. Reluctant, eventually, to even mention Grendel by name.*

*So why did he act the way he did that evening? Was he jealous of Beowulf? Or was he just testing the young hero to see how determined he was? Was he doing his job as council to the king, and trying to shield his lord from false hopes placed in time-wasters with bigger boasts than boots? Or was he just drunk? Was he a sly and determined, manipulative man, or was he a frustrated hero who deeply regretted the fact that he was not up to facing Grendel? Why did he behave the way he did before Beowulf faced Grendel? And why did he act so differently afterward?*

*Like with so many things, it depends upon who is telling the story.*

Heorot had filled up with Danes. They needed music and drinking to get over their fear of the place, and so ale and mead flowed in quantity. The skald played merry tunes. War stories filled the room, sometimes told from on top of tables. The cooking fire leapt high and all manner of meat was being roasted, broiled, boiled, braised and fried. Beowulf ate many platefuls of fish and drank several tankards of honey mead.

Once things were in full swing, a large warrior with well-crafted armour, a battle scar across the bridge of his nose, a blond beard and the gold ring of a thane glinting from his right hand spoke up. Loudly. “Aren’t you the Beowulf who lost the swimming contest with Breca?” he called from his place right below the king.

At this point, all but the most drunk of the revellers stopped talking to see what would happen. As for Beowulf, not wanting to cause trouble in Hrothgar’s hall, and not being confident in his skills of diplomacy, he waited to see if Unferth would move on and look to bother someone else.

But Unferth would not drop it. “I heard you two irresponsibly risked your lives in the bosom of the remorseless sea just to get bragging rights. Idiots! And everyone knows that Breca, being a skilful swimmer, easily outswam you and arrived safely in the land of the Heathoremes, while you proved unable to keep up and that you washed ashore up the coast, claiming to have been swimming for a week straight. And now Grendel, if you really have the pride to stay and face him, will outdo you in violence just as easily and as seriously tonight as Breca did in swimming those few years ago!”

In typically diplomatic fashion, Beowulf answered “Are you not Unferth? From the redness of your cheeks, I’d say you’ve drank more ale than you can handle, my dear Danish friend. I see you’ve heard of our famous swimming contest, but have got the wrong end of the stick entirely:

“You see, it is true that the waves roiled dangerously rough that week, and it is true that Breca and I set out to wrestle with the waves and make for a distant shore to see who was the stronger swimmer. We brought with us our blades to fend off sea creatures, for there are sometimes sharks in those waters. Breca was a strong swimmer, but he could not keep up with me, so I made sure I did not leave him behind. Due to our ability to hold our breaths and swim underwater for long periods, we made good progress, and swam a marathon of five days, treading water only occasionally to rest. By the fifth night, Breca was completely exhausted and I was tiring as well. The rough waves separated us and I had to go on alone, not being able to find him. It was at this point that something bit into my mail jacket, which I was swimming in. It was what we call a *necra*, at home.

“Naturally, I was not wearing my under-armour padded shirt, so the rings dug cruelly into my ribs and crushed the breath from my lungs, and the creature began to drag me to the bottom. He wasn’t able to bite through my mail, but he was determined to carry me to the bottom and eat me nonetheless. I wielded then, as I do now, my special sword Naeling, which will not bend nor break, and which I do not drop easily. Naeling it was that went in under the creature’s eye and sprang out through the back of his neck, filling the icy salt sea around us with his hot salt blood.

“Because of his blood in the water, and some of mine as well, his fellows began to circle. I surfaced long enough to get me another breath, then dove down and taught the underwater predators to taste steel. Their bloody bodies piled up below me, nine of them, and it was then, in the light of the rising sun that I saw land, with cliffs and rocky beach. A powerful current carried me to the shore of Finland and cast me upon the rocks, where I lay exhausted for some time.

“I do not boast, but I have never heard that Breca, nor any of you Danes, have performed these kinds of feats, in the water, nor yet in battle. Are you not Unferth, the man who will suffer in Hell for all eternity for having killed both of his brothers with your sword Hrunting?”

Unferth looked at Beowulf and said nothing.

Beowulf continued, “Neither you, nor yet Breca, nor any of the spear-danes either, are equipped to deal with Grendel. The creature fights eagerly, enacting unspeakable horrors upon Heorot, knowing he need not worry that any will stand against him and prevail. Well, I and the other Geatish warriors have come to do just that.”

Again, Unferth said nothing and simply took a pull from his ale cup. King Hrothgar, though, laughed with delight at Beowulf’s speech and encouraged everyone to drink to Beowulf’s success. Loud clattering of dishes, clinking of mugs and ringing of metal goblets rang out again, along with the kind of laughter that comes when people suddenly feel better about something that has been troubling them.

Wealhtheow the queen, resplendent in her gold jewelry and dark green velvet gown then brought out the special wine in a large, decorative wine bowl, and made the rounds of the hall, serving first her husband the king, wishing him health and a joyous evening, and then moving down the ranks from there, once he had taken a kingly pull at his golden mug. She had richly decorated gold and silver jewelry, sword ornaments and elaborate drinking vessels to award some of the Danes who had served well in battle recently, and had not yet been recognized.

When she came to Beowulf, once she had served him and given him a gold torc for his neck, she gave a grateful speech in which she thanked God that he had come. “My fervent wish that help would come to Heorot from over the water has come true,” she announced.

Beowulf then gave a speech of his own, saying it had been his intention when entering his ship to come, to do or die. He ended by saying “I shall perform a great deed of battle, or I shall end my life here, in this mead-hall.”

The Danes applauded deafeningly. They drank and sang and told tales well into the night, trying to stay awake in case Grendel made an appearance, and knowing that their noise would draw him.

The cooking fire died down to embers, and the hall grew darker and darker. One by one, though, young men and women sneaked off together, and old men and women and cowardly people quietly went to their own homes hoping no one would notice. A great number of people drank enough to pass out comfortably under a table. The benches had been intended to serve as beds, too. Many had brought a blanket or cushion to use them for this very purpose.

It was expected that mainly the young warriors would stay to meet Grendel, and gradually the elderly and the women left, for the most part. A few brave shield maidens remained, determined to prove brave as any man. (It was, after all, 918!)

Eventually, when most people had fallen asleep, the king rose and said to Beowulf “I have never entrusted Heorot, hall of the Danemen, to anyone else. I have not seen it done since I was old enough to hold a shield up high. I leave it with you now, asking you to be honourable and brave. Watch for the enemy! Enjoy the food and drink until he comes, and when he comes, make sure you survive this glorious adventure.”

Then a small group of armed thanes escorted the king and queen out of the hall by torchlight to their regular sleeping quarters and all was still. Beowulf sat, quietly drinking mead with a few of his Geatish warriors, but one by one they eventually all slept, taking their place toward the rear of the hall. “Could you not watch with me one more hour?” Beowulf said ruefully to their sleeping backs. Then he lay down with them, so no one appeared to be on watch. But Beowulf did not sleep.

Enter Grendel

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eorot seemed completely vulnerable to attack, silent and still, wooden horns reaching toward the dark sky. There was no moon.

Like a shadow that oozed silently from one shadow to another, a form made its way from the marshlands, past the rocky, fog-shrouded cliffs and toward the mead-hall. No one was watching from the rear of the hall, and if anyone had been, he might well have missed the dark movement entirely.

Eventually, drawing close to the rear doors of the hall, Grendel reached out an inhumanly long, sinewy limb with claw-like nails on the ends of the fingers. Almost gently he laid his hand, palm flat, upon the doors, then his shoulders bunched and with a thunderous roar the iron-bound oaken doors burst inwards, tearing free from their supporting pins. Needing to duck his head, the creature padded into the hall, his heavy breathing, and the quiet slap of his bare flat feet on the flagstones audible.

As one man, everyone in the hall awoke and flinched in unison, heads tucked and knees drawn to chests, listening in the dark and hoping not to be the one the creature noticed first. Even Beowulf, lying down with the men near where the rear doors now lay on the floor, remained where he was in order to assess his foe before confronting him.

Grendel wasted no time. He grabbed Hondshew, an unlucky Geatish warrior lying beside Beowulf, with shocking quickness and tore him open with his iron claws, gnawing at the screaming man’s ribs and slurping greedily at the blood that fountained forth in thick gobbets over a table, bench and a swathe of floor. Then, like a child nibbling a carrot, in a surprisingly delicate motion the yellow-grey teeth snipped off the man’s hands and feet and these too got savoured and swallowed.

In the midst of this, Beowulf raised himself up on one elbow, and as the creature passed near, snatched at Grendel’s hand. The sharp smack of Beowulf’s palm on the back of Grendel’s wrist reverberated off the walls. Quiet cracking sounds coming from his knuckles as Grendel tried to pull his hand free, Beowulf held on with his bear-like strength. Although Beowulf’s hands were huge, Grendel’s left wrist, which Beowulf held in his right hand, was as thick as Beowulf’s thigh.

While Beowulf had Grendel by the wrist, Heorot’s mightiest and Beowulf’s own Geatmen tried to help him by hacking at Grendel with swords and knives and smashing at him with war hammers, staves and clubs. Every weapon glanced off the creature without doing him any harm at all. It didn’t seem quite natural.

If Beowulf himself had tried to dispatch Grendel with any sort of weapon, whether wood, stone, bronze or iron, it would similarly have failed to break the skin. But this is not what Beowulf tried. Something inside Beowulf made him want to strive with Grendel man to man, so to speak, and without either being armed in any way that the other was not. So Beowulf slowly got to his feet, still holding Grendel’s huge wrist in one hand. His teeth glinted, bared whitely in a fierce grin that people who’d fought alongside him had often seen. Standing upright now, the Geat wove from side to side slightly, assessing the situation.

At first Grendel was confused. He had never felt a grip like this one. He tried to pull his hand free, and could not. Feeling terrifying, seemingly inhuman strength in Beowulf’s grip, the creature started immediately to think of escaping out the doorway. Beowulf planted his heels and could not be pulled off balance by the larger creature. Then Grendel began roaring and flailing his other arm, with its iron claw-like nails, trying to tear Beowulf, in his soft homespun shirt, wide open. Beowulf sidestepped this without letting go. All Grendel’s efforts achieved was to partly shatter a bench that was within reach, and leave deep gouges across a tabletop and several feet of wall.

The two combatants went around and around in a tight circle for a while, knocking over and breaking mead-hall benches as they trod heavily upon them, smashing repeatedly into the walls. With all of the thudding and crashing, and Grendel’s enraged roaring, the battle could be heard by anyone living quite a distance from the mead-hall.

Then Beowulf pushed Grendel up against a wall, trapping Grendel’s free arm against it, planted one booted foot against the creature’s hip, stood on the other leg and began pulling. At this point he grabbed Grendel’s wrist in both of his hands. Looming awkwardly, gangling Grendel was trapped between Beowulf and the cedar boards of the rear wall. The two continued to strive back and forth. If not for the iron bands which tied together the structure of the hall, Beowulf and Grendel would certainly have done serious structural damage to the building, and as it was, the horned hall shook mightily and creaked like a ship battered from all sides in a wild storm.

Arching his back and slowly turning a dark shade of scarlet, Beowulf pulled as he had never pulled before. His veins and sinews stood out alarmingly and he was holding his breath with the effort. Grendel’s roars of rage and threat started to turn to anguished groans of pain at that point. He struggled to free his trapped off-arm from between his body and the wall where it was wedged, so he could scoop up Beowulf and bite his feet off.

At first it looked like it was only a matter of time before the looming, groaning, frantic creature got free and put an end to his tormentor. But then, with a sound like a mighty tree slowly falling, Grendel’s shoulder started to pull out of socket. Wet snapping, popping, tearing sounds continued. Beowulf growled with the effort, the leg he was balanced on shaking, the one planted against Grendel’s body trembling, and beads of sweat pouring off his face.

At that point, with a sickening rending sound, Grendel’s arm came right off at the shoulder, trailing a stream of dark blood, splinters of bone and a shred of greyish skin. Beowulf fell straight over backward when the limb tore free, the immense arm landing directly on top of him, as he continued to grip it tightly in one hand, while breaking his fall with the other. Then the mighty Geat got up, took a determined step forward and onlookers swore he was about to start clubbing Grendel to death with the creature’s own severed arm. The low growl that came from behind Beowulf’s bared teeth at that point did not sound human at all.

Grendel shrieked deafeningly and clutched at his ruined shoulder, then making a sound like a hungry kitten, fled heavily into the darkness, bleeding profusely and stumbling as he went.