

## THE GRENDEL

WHEN King Hrothgar came to the throne of Denmark (in the fifth century after Christ), he decided to build a great banquet hall in which he would entertain all his friends. And because he was a popular king, who had fought bravely and won many fierce battles, and because he had more friends than most kings tend to have, he decided that the hall would have to be larger and more splendid than any in the land of Denmark. This was how Heorot came into being. Heorot the mead hall, the home of feasting and of singing and of storytelling.

Thatched with heather and decorated by blazing beacons and gilded antlers, the hall would fill every day with warriors and travelers, musicians and poets. King Hrothgar himself would sit at the very end of the hall on a raised dais, and sometimes his wife, the fair Queen Wealtheow, would take the seat beside him. The servants would race past the roaring fires carrying steaming plates of eel pie and roasted boars' flesh to the trestle tables that ran the full length of the room. Hunting dogs, lying on the straw, would raise their heads as the meat went past, their tongues hanging out and, by the end of the feast, they too would have been rewarded with scraps of meat and marrow bones. The mead would never stop flowing. And as the sun reached out to claim possession of the night sky, the music from the harps would still ring out across the fields along with the laughter and the chatter of old comrades at ease.

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The Grendel heard that sound.

Curled up in the darkness of the swamp, it heard, and one poisoned eye flickered open. Softly it growled to itself. For the Grendel understood nothing of pleasure and so hated it. Hatred ruled its life. It was descended from Cain—the same Cain that had been cast out of Eden for the murder of his brother. The Grendel blamed all mankind for the sin of its ancestor and its own fall from grace. The bitterness of centuries ran in its veins, congealing its blood. In its every waking moment it writhed in a torment of self-pity and half-formed dreams of revenge. Now, hearing the sound, it slithered through the mud and began to limp toward the hall.

It was at that gray time between night and day when it reached Heorot. Now, at last, the revelers were asleep, intoxicated by the wine and good companionship. The Grendel struck quickly and greedily. Thirty warriors were snatched up from where they lay. Thirty brave men met a brutal, cowardly death. Glutted with blood, the Grendel slunk away, back to the solitude of the swamp. Even in its victory, it knew no pleasure. It had done what it had set out to do; neither more nor less.

The next morning, when King Hrothgar awoke, the sweetness of the banquet turned in an instant to the bitterness of betrayal and death. Blood was everywhere, splattered on the walls and in pools on the flagstones. Nobody had woken up, so stealthily had the Grendel come, and now they found that their clothes were stained with the blood of their friends. Bones and twisted scraps of armor lay on the floor, grim reflections of the debris of the night's feasting. At once a great cry of anger and outrage went up. Spears were seized, swords unsheathed. But it was useless. How could they fight an enemy they could not see—an enemy they had never seen?

Twice more the Grendel came to Heorot, each time returning in the twilight hours to claim another thirty Danish warriors. After that, the hall was closed, and with the booming of the door it was as if all happiness had come to an end in the reign of King Hrothgar. A shadow had fallen not only across Heorot but across the whole country, and the emptiness of the banquet hall soon came to be a fitting image for the hollowness in the heart

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of all Denmark.

Sometimes King Hrothgar would return alone to his beloved Heorot. He would sit on his dais, drawing patterns in the dust with one finger. Then he would search with his eyes to see memories of freelight in the darkness and strain with his ears to hear echoes of laughter in the silence. He was an old man now. Twelve whole winters had passed since the Grendel had come to plague him.

It was at Heorot that he met Beowulf.

He was sitting in his chair, muttering to himself, when the door of the banquet hall crashed open. He squinted as bright sunlight flooded in, capturing a million motes of dust within its golden beams. A figure stepped forward, silhouetted against the light, which could almost have been emanating from his own body. The dust formed a shimmering aura around him. The king trembled. Never had he seen a warrior so tall, so strong.

The stranger approached and fell onto one knee. He was dressed in a blue cloak over a silvery mail shirt. In one hand he carried a richly decorated shield, in the other a spear. His helmet masked his face, but it could not hide the fair hair that tumbled down onto his shoulders or the bright blue eyes that shone despite the shadows.

"Your Majesty!" the figure said.

"Who are you?" Hrothgar demanded, recovering himself.

"My name is Beowulf," the warrior replied. "I come from the land of the Geats. I have crossed a great sea to come before you, to serve you. And I do not come alone."

There was a movement at the door, and fourteen more men entered the hall, bringing with them—or so it seemed to the old king—the light that had for so long been absent. As one they knelt before him, forming a semicircle around his throne.

"We are soldiers of King Hygelac," Beowulf continued. "My noble father was Edgelthow, a famous fighter among the Geats. I too have found fame in my lifetime, and seek to add to that fame by destroying the beast that has emptied this most stately hall. My own sovereign, over a friend of the Danes, bids me wish all health to Your Majesty. He too will be glad to see this monster die."

"Noble Beowulf!" the king replied. "Well is your name known to me—and that of your father. I bid you welcome. But this creature has already taken ninety of my finest warriors. I fear your quest is hopeless."

"Not so!" Beowulf said with a grim smile. "Tonight, as we feast once again in great Heorot, I will tell you something of my past exploits which will remove your fears for the present."

And so it was that the servants returned to Heorot and swept the floors and cleaned the tables and relit the beacons and fires. For that one night, Heorot relived its former glory, only this time it was not Danes who filled and refilled their goblets, but Geats. This time the stories were all tales of the exploits of Beowulf, how he had enslaved the five giants and destroyed the seething mass of sea serpents.

"Your monster comes here unarmed," he told King Hrothgar, "so unarmed will I fight it. Yes! Neither sword nor spear will I carry. With my bare hands will I fight and defeat the beast."

The Geats raised their goblets and broke out in song. The notes were carried by the wind away from Heorot, out and across the fields. Rainier now, they traveled over the swamp until at last they reached the lair of the Grendel. Once again, the poisonous yellow eye flickered open. Its brain turned the information over as though it were chewing a piece of meat. Music. Heorot. Man. It reached out with one hand and pulled itself to its feet.

In the banquet hall, the Geats had finished eating and were lying on their rugs, their eyes closed. Only Beowulf remained half awake. He had taken off his coat of mail and helmet and had given his sword to his attendant. Unarmed, he lay beside the door, listening to every breath of the wind, to every leaf that rustled on the ground outside.

Gliding through the shadows, the Grendel came. Pushing through the mists that shrouded the moors, it pressed on toward Heorot. When at last it saw the mead hall, its pace quickened. One scaly foot came down on a twig, snapping it. Beowulf heard the sound and opened his eyes.

The Grendel reached the door of Heorot. At the touch of its hands, the solid wood crumpled like paper.

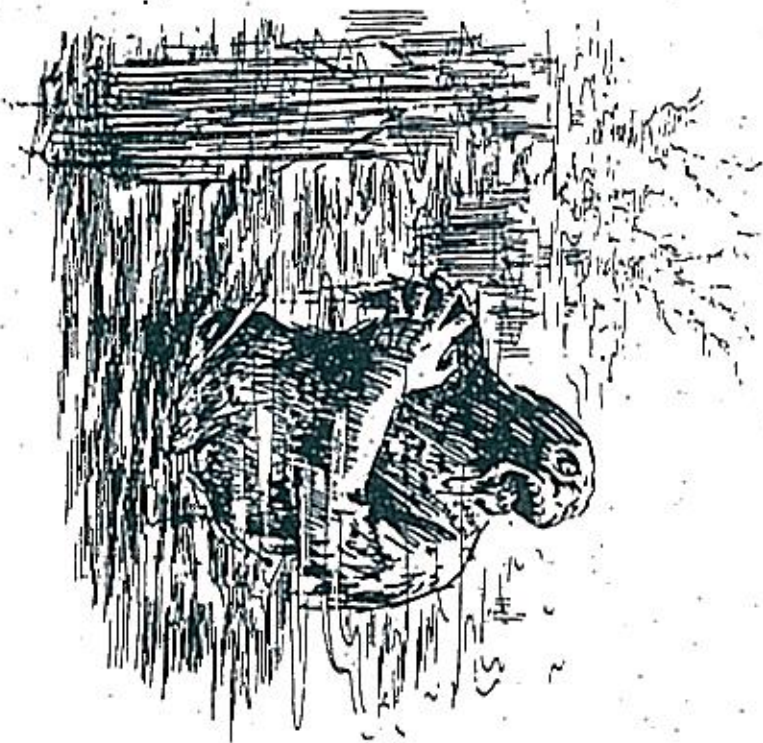


Two flames ignited in its eyes as it stepped inside, seeing for the first time the fifteen Geats. Saliva dripped from its mouth.

Beowulf had expected it to make straight for him. But one of the young soldiers had chosen to sleep on the other side of the door, and it was this unfortunate youth that the monster seized first, tearing him into pieces and swallowing them whole.

Only then, driven to a brutal frenzy by the taste of blood, did the Grendel stretch out its hands and seize Beowulf.

At once it knew that it had made a fatal mistake. Even as its claws tightened, it found itself grasped with a strength that it would have thought impossible in a human. Suddenly afraid, it tried to pull away, to slither back into the darkness in which it had been born, but it was too late. Its whole arm was frozen in Beowulf's grip. Struggle though it might, it could not escape.



It howled. It howled in terror and sobbed in pain. Hearing the sound, the remaining Geats awoke, reaching for their weapons. But although they could make out the shape of a huge bulk beside the door, it was still too dark to see the Grendel, and when they stabbed at it with their swords, somehow their blades passed straight through it, as if through a shadow.

The Grendel screamed at Beowulf, their heads so close that they almost touched. The monster who had never once in its life known fear had now discovered terror. It had to get away, away from the impossible man who still held it in a savage grip. And away it went—snapping the tendons in its own shoulder, unlocking the bones and tearing the skin. Howling with pain, it fled from Heorot, back into the night, blood gushing from the horrible wound that it had inflicted on itself.

And inside the hall, Beowulf held the dreadful trophy of his victory. It was the monster's hand, its arm, its entire torn-off shoulder. These he hung beneath the gable of the roof. Heorot was cleansed. Never again would the creature return.

For the Grendel was dying. Even as it fled, sobbing, through the night, its lifeblood was flowing out of it. By the time it reached its home in the swamp, it was cold, colder than it had ever been before. Tears flowed from its eyes as it buried its raw, jagged shoulder in the mud, trying to ease the pain.

When dawn finally came, it was dead. It had died miserably, alone in its lair, and its soul had been welcomed in Hell.

