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Hrothgar, the “Shaper”, Heurot

The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.

Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,

Young followers, a force that grew

To be a mighty army. So his mind turned

To hall-building: he handed down orders

For men to work on a great mead-hall

Meant to be a wonder of the world forever; 70

It would be his throne-room and there he would dispense

His God-given goods to young and old---

But not the common land or people’s lives.

Far and wide through the world, I have heard,

Orders for work to adorn that wall stead
Were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
Finished and ready, in full view,
The hall of halls. Heorot was the name
He had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings 80
And torques at the table. The hall towered,
Its gables wide and high and awaiting
A barbarous burning. That doom abided,
But in time it would come: the killer instinct
Unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.
Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
Nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
To hear the din of the loud banquet
Every day in the hall, the harp being struck
And the clear song of a skilled poet 90
Telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
How the Almighty had made the earth
A gleaming plain girdled with waters;
In His splendour He set the sun and moon
To be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
And filled the broad lap of the world
With branches and leaves; and quickened life
In every other thing that moved.

Grendel

So times were pleasant for the people there
Until finally one, a fiend out of Hell, 100
Began to work his evil in the world.

Grendel was the name of this grim demon
Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
In misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:

Cain got no good from committing that murder
Because the Almighty made him anathema 110
And out of the curse of his exile there sprang
Ogres and elves and evil phantoms
And the giants too who strove with God
Time and again until He gave them their final reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
For the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
Were settling into it after their drink,
And there he came upon them, a company of the best
Asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
And human sorrow. Suddenly then 120
The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:

Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
From their resting places and rushed to his lair,
Flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
Blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
Their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
And mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
The storied leader, sat stricken and helpless, 130
Humiliated by the loss of his guard,
Bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
And the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
For one night later the merciless Grendel
Struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.

It was easy then to meet with a man
Shifting himself to a safer distance
To bed in the bothies, for who could be blind 140
To the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
Of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
Kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,

One against all, until the greatest house
In the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
The lord of the Shieldings suffered under
His load of sorrow; and so, before long,
The news was known over the whole world. 150
Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
The vicious raids of Grendel,
His long and unrelenting feud,
Nothing but war; how he would never
Parley or make peace with any Dane
Nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
No counsellor could ever expect
Fair reparation from those rabid hands.
All were endangered; young and old
Were hunted down by that dark death-shadow 160
Who lurked and swooped in the long nights
On the misty moors; nobody knows
Where these reavers from Hell roam on their errands.

So Grendel waged his lonely war,
Inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
Atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
Haunted the glittering hall after dark,
But the throne itself, the treasure-seat,

He was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

Beowulf

So that troubled time continued, woe
That never stopped, steady affliction 190
For Halfdane's son, too hard an ordeal.
There was panic after dark, people endured
Raids in the night, riven by terror.

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane
Was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
High-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
That would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
To sail the swan's roads and search out that king, 200
The famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
No elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
His ambition to go, whilst he moved about
Like the leader he was, enlisting men,
The best he could find; with fourteen others

The warrior boarded the boat as captain,
A canny pilot along coast and currents.

Time went by, the boat was on water, 210
In close under the cliffs.

Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
Sand churned in surf, shining war-gear
In the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
Away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.

Over the waves, with the wind behind her
And foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
Until her curved prow had covered the distance
And on the following day, at the due hour, 220

Those seafarers sighted land,
Sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
And looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
Over the side, out on to the sand,
And moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
And a thresh of gear. They thanked God
For that easy crossing on a calm sea....

Beowulf's Explanation for his Journey

We have arrived here on a great errand 270
To the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
There should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.
So tell us if what we have heard is true
About this threat, whatever it is,
This danger abroad in the dark nights,
This corpse-maker mongering death
In the Shieldings' country. I come to proffer
My wholehearted help and counsel.
I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
To defeat his enemy and find respite--- 280
If any respite is to reach him, ever.
I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
Otherwise, he must endure woes
And live with grief for as long as his hall
Stands at the horizon, on its high ground."

Introduction of Beowulf to Hrothgar

Then a proud warrior
Questioned the men concerning their origins:
"Where do you come from, carrying these
Decorated shields and shirts of mail,
These cheek-hinged helmets and javelins?

I am Hrothgar's herald and officer.

I have never seen so impressive or large

An assembly of strangers. Stoutness of heart,

Bravery not banishment, must have brought you to Hrothgar."

The man whose name was known for courage, 340

The Geat leader, resolute in his helmet,

Answered in return: "We are retainers

From Hygelac's band. Beowulf is my name.

If your lord and master, the most renowned

Son of Halfdane, will hear me out

And graciously allow me to greet him in person,

I am ready and willing to report my errand."

Wulfgar replied, a Wendel chief

Renowned as a warrior, well known for his wisdom

And the temper of his mind: "I will take this message, 350

In accordance with your wish, to our noble king,

Our dear lord, friend of the Danes,

The giver of rings. I will go and ask him

About your coming here, then hurry back

With whatever reply it pleases him to give."

Beowulf's Speech to Hrothgar

And standing on the hearth

In webbed links that the smith had woven,

The fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail shirt,

Resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke:

"Greetings to Hrothgar. I am Hygelac's kinsman,

One of his hall-troop. When I was younger,

I had great triumphs. Then news of Grendel,

Hard to ignore, reached me at home: 410

Sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer

In this legendary hall, how it lies deserted,

Empty and useless once the evening light

Hides itself under Heaven's dome.

So every elder and experience councilman

Among my people supported my resolve

To come here to you, King Hrothgar,

Because all knew of my awesome strength.

They had seen me boltered in the blood of enemies

When I battled and bound five beasts, 420

Raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea

Slaughtered sea-brutes. I have suffered extremes

And avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it

Upon themselves, I devastated them).

Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
Settle the outcome in a single combat.
And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
Dear prince pf the Shieldings, friend of the people
And their ring of defense, my one request
Is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far, 430
The privilege of purifying Heorot,
With my own men to help me, and nobody else.
I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
In his reckless way to use weapons;
Therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame
And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
Is how it will be, a life-and-death
Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells 440
Must deem it a just judgment by God.
If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;
He will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,
Swoop without fear on that flower of manhood
As on others before. Then my face won't be there
To be covered in death; he will carry me away
As he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;
He will run gloating with my raw corpse
And feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,

Fouling his moor-nest. No need then 450

To lament for long or lay out my body:

If the battle takes me, send back

This breast-webbing that Weland fashioned

And Hrethel gave me, to Hygelac.

Fate goes ever as fate must.”

Beowulf vs. Unferth

From where he crouched at the king’s feet,

Unferth, a son of Ecglaf’s, spoke 500

Contrary words. Beowulf’s coming,

His sea-braving, made him sick with envy:

He could not brook or abide the fact

That anyone else alive under heaven

Might enjoy greater regard than he did:

“Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca

In a swimming match on the open sea,

Risking the water just to prove you could win?

It was sheer vanity made you venture out

On the main deep. And no matter who tried, 510

Friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,

Neither would back down: the sea-test obsessed you.

You waded in, embracing water,
Taking its measure, mastering currents,
Riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,
Winter went wild in the waves, but you vied
For seven nights; and then he outswam you,
Came ashore the stronger contender.
He was cast up safe and sound one morning
Among the Heathoreams, then made his way 520
To where he belonged in Bronding country,
Home again, sure of his ground
In strong room and bawn. So Breca made good
His boast upon you and was proved right.
No matter, therefore, how you may have fared
In every bout and battle until now,
This time you'll be worsted; no one has ever
Outlasted an entire night against Grendel."

Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:
"Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say 530
About Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
That was doing the talking. The truth is this:
When the going was heavy in those high waves,
I was the strongest swimmer of all.
We'd been children together and we grew up
Daring ourselves to outdo each other,

Boasting and urging each other to risk
Our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.
Each of us swam holding a sword,
A naked, hard-proofed blade for protection 540
Against the whale-beasts. But Breca could never
Move out farther or faster from me
Than I could manage to move from him.
Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
For five nights, until the long flow
And pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
Night falling and winds from the North
Drove us apart. The deep boiled up
And its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild.
My armor held me to hold out; 550
My hard-ringed chain-mail, hand-forged and linked,
A fine, close-fitting filigree of gold,
Kept me safe when some ocean creature
Pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
And swathed in its grip, I was granted one
Final chance: my sword plunged
And the ordeal was over. Through my own hands
The fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.

“Time and again, foul things attacked me,
Lurking and stalking, but I lashed out, 560

Gave as good as I got with my sword.
My flesh was not for feasting on,
There would be no monsters gnawing and gloating
Over their banquet at the bottom of the sea.
Instead, in the morning, mangled and sleeping
The sleep of the sword, they slopped and floated
Like the ocean's leavings. From now on
Sailors would the safe, the deep-sea raids
Were over for good. Light came from the East,
Bright guarantee of God, and the waves 570
Went quiet; I could see the headlands
And buffeted cliffs. Often, for undaunted courage,
Fate spares the man it has not already marked.
However it had occurred, my sword had killed
Nine sea monsters. Such night-dangers
And hard ordeals I have never heard of
Nor of a man so desolate in surging waves.
But worn out as I was, I survived,
Came through with my life. The ocean lifted
And laid me ashore, I landed safe 580
On the coast of Finland.

Now, I cannot recall
any fight you entered, Unferth,
That bears comparison. I don't boast when I say
That neither you nor Breca ever were much

Celebrated for swordsmanship

Or for facing danger in the battlefield.

You killed your own kith and kin,

So for all your cleverness and quick tongue,

You will suffer damnation in the pits of hell.

The fact it, Unferth, if you were truly 590

As keen or courageous as you claim to be

Grendel would never have got away with

Such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,

Havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.

But he knows he need never be in dread

Of your blade making a mizzle of his blood

Or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter---

From the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear.

He knows he can trample down you Danes

To his heart's content, humiliate and murder 600

Without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.

I will show him how Geats shape to kill

In the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to

May go bravely to morning mead, when morning light,

Scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south

And brings another daybreak to the world."

Wealtheow

Then the gray-haired treasure-giver was glad;
Far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
And keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
On the warrior's steadfastness and his word. 610

So the laughter started, the din got louder
And the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
The men in the hall, then handed the cup
First to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,
Urging him to drink deep and enjoy it,
Because he was dear to them. And he drank it down
Like the warlord he was, with festive cheer...

So the Helming woman went on her rounds, 620
Queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,
Offering the goblet to all ranks,
Treating the household and the assembled troop
Until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.
With measured words she welcomed the Geat
And thanked God for granting her wish
That a deliverer she could believe in would arrive
To ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,

A daunting man, dangerous in action

And eager for it always. He addressed Wealhtheow; 630

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, said:

“I had a fixed purpose when I put out to sea.

As I sat in the boat with my band of men,

I meant to perform to the uttermost

What your people wanted or perish in the attempt,

In the fiend’s clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,

Prove myself with a proud deed

Or meet my death here in the mead-hall.”

This formal boast by Beowulf the Geat

Pleased the lady well and she went to sit 640

By Hrothgar, regal and arrayed with gold.

Then it was like old times in the echoing hall,

Proud talk and the people happy,

Loud and excited; until soon enough

Halfdane’s heir had to be away

To his night’s rest. He realized

That the demon was going to descend on the hall

That he had plotted all day, from dawn-light

Until darkness gathered again over the world

And stealthy night-shades came stealing forth 650

Under the cloud-murk. The company stood
As the two leaders took leave of each other:
Hrothgar wished Beowulf health and good luck,
Named him hall-warden and announced as follows:
“Never, since my hand could hold a shield
Have I entrusted or given control
Of the Dane’s hall to anyone but you.
Ward and guard it, for it is the greatest of houses.
Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame,
Beware of the enemy. There’s nothing you wish for 660
That won’t be yours if you win through alive.”

Beowulf vs. Grendel

And before he bedded down, Beowulf,
That prince of goodness, proudly asserted:
“When it comes to fighting, I count myself
As dangerous any day as Grendel.
So it won’t be a cutting edge I’ll wield
To mow him down, easily as I might. 680
He has no ideas of the arts of war,
Of shield or sword-play, though he does possess
A wild strength. No weapons, therefore,
For either this night: unarmed he shall face me
If face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord

In His wisdom grant victory
To whichever side He sees fit."

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster
Under his head and his whole company
Of sea-rovers at rest beside him. 690

None of them expected he would ever see
His homeland again or get back
To his native place and the people who reared him.
They knew too well the way it was before,
How often the Danes had fallen prey
To death in the mead-hall. But the Lord was weaving
A victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.

Through the strength of one they all prevailed;
They would crush their enemy and come through
In triumph and gladness. The truth is clear: 700
Almighty God rules over mankind
And always has.

Then out of the night
Came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift;
The hall-guards were slack, asleep at their posts,
All except one; it was widely understood
That as long as God disallowed it,
The fiend could not bear them to his shadow-bourne.
One man, however, was in a fighting mood,

Awake and on edge, spoiling for action.

In off the moors, down through the mist-bands 710

God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.

The bane of the race of men roamed forth,

Hunting for a prey in the high hall.

Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it

Until it shone above him, a sheer keep

Of fortified gold. Nor was that the first time

He had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar's dwelling---

Although never in his life, before or since,

Did he find harder fortune or hall-defenders.

Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead 720

And arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door

Turned in its hinge when his hand touched it.

Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open

The mouth of the building, maddening for blood,

Pacing the length of the patterned floor

With his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,

Flame more than light, flared from his eyes.

He saw many men in the mansion, sleeping,

A ranked company of kinsmen and warriors

Quartered together. And his glee was demonic, 730

Picturing the mayhem: before morning

He would rip life from limp and devour them,

Feed on their flesh: but his fate that night
Was due to change, his days of ravening
Had come to an end.

Mighty and canny,
Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching
For the first move the monster would make.
Nor did the creature keep him waiting
But struck suddenly and started in;
He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
Bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
And gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
Utterly lifeless, eaten up
Hand and foot. Venturing closer,
his talon was raised to attack Beowulf
Where he lay on the bed; he was bearing in
With open claw when the alert hero's
Comeback and armlock forestalled him utterly.

740

The captain of evil discovered himself
In a handgrip harder than anything
He had ever encountered in any man
On the face of the earth. Every bone in his body
Quailed and coiled, but he could not escape.
He was desperate to flee to his den and hide
With the devil's litter, for in all his days
He had never been clamped or cornered like this.

750

Then Hygelac's trusty retainer recalled
His bedtime speech, sprang to his feet
And got a firm hold. Fingers were bursting,
The monster back-tracking, the man overpowering. 760

The dread of the land was desperate to escape,
To take a roundabout road and flee
To his lair in the fens. The latching power
In his fingers weakened; it was the worst trip
The terror-monger had taken to Heorot.
And now the timber trembled and sang,
A hall-session that harrowed every Dane
Inside the stockade: stumbling in fury,
The two contenders crashed through the building.

The hall clattered and hammered, but somehow 770

Survived the onslaught and kept standing:
It was handsomely structured, a sturdy frame
Braced with the best of blacksmith's work
Inside and out. The story goes
That as the pair struggled, mead benches were smashed
And sprung off the floor, gold fittings and all.
Before then, no Shielding elder would believe
There was any power or person on earth
Capable of wrecking their horn-rigged hall
Unless the burning embrace of fire 780
Engulf it in flame. Then an extraordinary

Wail arose, and bewildering fear
Came over the Danes. Everyone felt it
Who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall,
A God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe,
The howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
Keening his wound. He was overwhelmed,
Manacled tight by the man who of all men
Was foremost and strongest in the days of this life.

...

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men
With pain and affliction in former times
And had given offense also to God 810
Found that his bodily powers had failed him.
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly
Locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived
He was hateful to the other. The monster's whole
Body was in pain, a tremendous wound
Appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split
And the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted
The glory of winning; Grendel was driven
Under the fen banks, fatally hurt,
To his desolate lair. His days were numbered, 820
The end of his life was coming over him,

He knew it for certain; and one bloody clash
Had fulfilled the dearest wishes of the Danes.
The man who had lately landed among them,
Proud and sure, had purged the hall,
Kept it from harm; he was happy with his night-work
And the courage he had shown. The Geat captain
Had boldly fulfilled his boast to the Danes:
He had healed and relieved a huge distress,
Unremitting humiliations, 830
The hard fate they'd been forced to undergo,
No small affliction. Clear proof of this
Could be seen in the hand the hero displayed
High up near the roof: the whole of Grendel's
Shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp.

Then morning came and many a warrior
Gathered, as I have heard, around the gift-hall,
Clan-chiefs flocking from far and near
Down wide-ranging roads, wondering greatly
At the monster's footprint. His fatal departure 840
Was regretted by no one who witnessed his trail,
The ignominious marks of his flight
Where he'd sulked away, exhausted in spirit
And beaten in battle, bloodying the path,
Hauling his doom to the demons' mere.

The bloodshot water wallowed and surged,
There were loathsome up throws and over turnings
Of waves and gore and would-slurry.
With his death upon him, he had dived deep
Into his marsh den, drowned out his life 850
And his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.

Beowulf on the Encounter:

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
“We have gone through a glorious endeavor
And been much favored in this fight we dared
Against the unknown. Nevertheless,
If you could have seen the monster himself 960
Where he lay beaten, I would have been better pleased.
My plan was to pounce, pin him down
In a tight grip and grapple him to death---
Have him panting for life, powerless and clasped
In my bare hands, his body in thrall.
But I couldn’t stop him from slipping my hold.
The Lord allowed it, my lock on him
Wasn’t strong enough, he struggled fiercely
And broke and ran. Yet he bought his freedom

At a high price, for he left his hand 970

And arm and shoulder to show he had been here,

A cold comfort for having come among us.

And now he won't be long for this world.

He has done his worst but the wound will end him.

He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain,

Limped and looped in it. Like a man outlawed

For wickedness, he must await

The mighty judgment of God in majesty."

There was less tampering and big talk then

From Unferth the boaster, less of his blather 980

As the hall-thanes eyed the awful proof

Of the hero's prowess, the splayed hand

Up under the eaves. Every nail,

Claw-scale and spur, every spike

And welt on the hand of that heathen brute

Was like barbed steel. Everybody said

There was no honed iron hard enough

To pierce him through, no time-proofed blade

That could cut his brutal, blood-caked claw....

Beowulf vs. Grendel's Mother

Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:

“Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better

To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.

For every one of us, living in this world

Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can

Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,

That will be his best and only bulwark.

So arise, my lord, and let us immediately 1390

Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.

I guarantee you: she will not get away,

Not to dens underground nor upland groves

Nor the ocean floor. She'll have nowhere to flee to.

Endure your troubles today. Bear up

And be the man I expect you to be.”

...

Beowulf got ready,

Donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;

His mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail

Would soon meet with the menace under water.

It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:

No enemy's clasp could crush him in it,

No vicious arm lock choke his life out.

To guard his head he had a glittering helmet

That was due to be muddied on the mere bottom

And blurred in the up swirl. It was of beaten gold, 1450

Princely headgear hooped and hasped
By a weapon-smith who had worked wonders
In days gone by and adorned it with boar-shapes;
Since then it had resisted every sword.
And another item lent by Unferth
At that moment was of no small importance:
The brehon handed him a hilted weapon,
A rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
Had been tempered in blood. It had never failed 1460
The hand of anyone who had hefted it in battle,
Anyone who had fought and faced the worst
In the gap of danger. This was not the first time
It had been called to perform heroic feats.
When he lent that blade to the better swordsman,
Unferth, the strong-built son of Ecglaf,
Could hardly have remember the ranting speech
He had made in his cups. He was not man enough
To face the turmoil of a fight under water
And the risk to his life. So there he lost 1470
fame and repute. It was different for the other
Rigged out in his gear, ready to do battle.

