

# BEOWULF: Legend Retold

The classic tale thoughtfully re-envisioned by someone who hadn't read it recently.

by Damien Riegel, 2008

## Chapter 1

Behold the camp of the Geats, in the centre of the wood. Clear your vision and gaze into the night blackness that obscures forms, and behold the lonely flame crackling in the centre of the camp. Come nearer, friend, and watch as the strong man with broad shoulders and a firm face lifts the blood-coated blade to glisten in the somber glow of the campfire.

The man, with lightly heaving chest, gazes somberly upon the clear red blade, then looks down at the still, crumpled form lying motionless beside him. With imposing face he lifts his gaze to behold his comrades, and raises his voice toward them with the bold power of a leader. "They saw an easy prey while it slept," he begins, echoing the regret of the five dead robbers. "They took upon themselves an evil task that they thought would bring them worldly gain." Thoughtfully passing his gaze over the red-coated blade, he wipes the blood from the steel finish onto the dead man's coarse garment. "But they did not know when they thought to fall in wait upon weary travelers..." he rises his proud eyes to pass over the faces of his comrades, "...that here dwelt the troop of *Beowulf!*"

And behold the din of the cheering of a proud troop, a troop that knew naught evil could befall them, for their unity was strong and their pride was solid. Never had they fallen at the hand of an adversary, and never would glory slip their grasp: this was the company of *Beowulf*.

But far beyond this troop of hardened men, beyond the great sea and over countless rolling plains, come with me to a hall of many splendours. A feasting hall of the king it was, a merry hall of many delights, built with sweat and adorned with treasure, and assuredly beyond aught that I could assay to impart with justice unto you.

Here men abode with carefree pleasures; a place of merry-making and of joy it was. But here also abode the lurking thought of terror, and not a one of these gay souls could pass from their memory the vestige of yester-nights.

Wine drunk and bellies full, the men laughed and sang as the night drew near. Minds obscured with wine, souls blinded with mirth, each man lay his body down to see a good night's rest. Hearts contented, not a face spared a smile...but the great hall, Heorot, was by no means free from lurking evil.

For even then, as they lay and beckoned to blissful dreams, the creature was rising, rising so slowly, from the murky depths of the forbidden swamp. The beast was Grendel, master of terror and hater of joy. Slowly he rose, swallowing musty air in his foul nostrils. Up he pulled to the dank shore, and then off he went, slithering, snarling, and sniffing the air. Tramping through brush he set off into the gloomy fog, trailing behind him a pungent wake, a vile trail of swamp-water that drips from every limb. Behold his snarl as he shakes off seaweed, and

raises his nostrils to the air: they call him to Heorot. They call him to plunder.

Behold once again the feasting hall of Heorot, the dimly glowing lamps, the peaceful slumber of mirthful hearts. Turn to the mighty door that shields the slumberers from the cold night air: what is this...a tremor?

The doors quaked with more and more violence, until in the wink of an instant the bar snapped in two and the splintering door flew open in a flash. There, amidst curling wisps of fog, stood the greedy form of Grendel, inhuman arms outstretched where they threw open the mighty door.

With no thought of turning; no shadow of mercy, he stepped into the hall to survey his feast. Which would be the first, the first for his pitiless ravage? The meal was before him, each rising in terror from its mirthful slumber. Then with cold, evil whim, he reached for one, grabbed it by the neck and lifted the gasping form, chuckling at the terrified screams. Spinning 'round he grabbed another, and another, and with a final grin he stifled the few remaining lamps, and in the darkness grabbed the fourth. Then off he tramped back into the fog, sneering at his own delight, heading back to his pungent den, where he would eat the screaming victims one by one--sucking up each savory limb, treasuring each scream and chuckling at every thrashing arm. Grendel had no pity; Grendel had no mercy. He could not fathom his own demise: he had never met *Beowulf*.

Time marches on; life dares not desist. The men of the hall cannot prevail, but Grendel's hunger knows no end. Where is there hope? Can terror ever be abated?

The trees drop their leaves and snow litters the ground. Seasons come, and seasons go, yea, for a nightmare's stretch of twelve cold winters. Heorot is a dismal place. The cheer is gone; the mirth is gone. There is no peace in sleep. There is no hope for the morrow.

Then come a day when the great door of Heorot creaks opens to welcome another guest...a guest of a different sort. For there was yet a brave soul noble enough to voyage mile over mile that he may raise hand against Grendel and cleanse the hall of its vile parasite. He with fourteen thanes had arrived at Heorot, from beyond the sea where he heard of the evil plight; he the hero of boundless might and fame: *Beowulf* had come!

## Chapter 2

"You see before you the first real feast Heorot has seen since the days of evil began twelve winters ago," says King Hrothgar at the head of the table in the great hall. "Your coming has inspired at the least a little hope in every one of us, *Beowulf*." The king's voice is lofty but quavering. "I pray you do not disappoint us."

*Beowulf*'s strong face is resolute. "You need not fear, O King Hrothgar,

any more: this foul beast Grendel will trouble you no more after this night. He has consumed too many, terrorized for too long, and pitied too little. Withal this Grendel is an evil thing unworthy to exist; its cord of life must be cut which has long past expired."

"How do you plan to cut it, pray tell?" gibes one of the king's advisers. "Do you not know that the invincible creature's skin is too thick to be pierced by even the strongest of swords? Or perhaps you think Grendel will take a look at you and flee for his life!"

Beowulf's proud face is seared by the words, but his imposing answer shows no hesitation. "I will fight Grendel with his own weapon: brute strength and willpower. And with those, and tact, I will see that Grendel's cord indeed is cut."

King Hrothgar smiles at his skeptical adviser. "You see, Unferth, he is not a fool."

But Unferth is not convinced that Beowulf can truly save them from the evil that has held them for so long. "What brings upon your mind the notion that you can stay the hand of Grendel? I see before me a man who carries himself with pride and strength, but I see no tried hero or calloused warrior. There are no tales of your feats, or of the battles you have fought. You come to the hall to make of yourself a hero, by slaying the great beast Grendel. By what arrogance do you convince yourself you are able to pit yourself against such a monster?"

Beowulf's proud face clouds with anger, but in a moment it is checked and he answers calmly. "Have you not heard the tales, good Unferth, of my battle with the twelve brothers of the whispering lakes? Or of my rescue at the hands of the savage princes of Tildon?"

"Those names mean nothing to me, nor to any other in this hall, Beowulf."

The king intervenes, "Geatland is far from here, my friend. No doubt there are many things we know not of."

"Then indeed you have not heard," muses Beowulf, "of my victory against the Enchanter of Angroth, or even of the very *existence* of the whispering lakes and the accursed fortress of Tildon?"

"Nay, assuredly I have not," answers Unferth, "heard of your fights with the weak brothers and the cowardly princes, or he who *calls* himself an enchanter."

"Stay your tongue, Unferth," sighs the king with a raise of his hand. "Beowulf will prove himself to-night." The weary king raises his glass. "Whether to victory or to defeat, Beowulf will prove himself to-night."

### Chapter 3

The night is quiet; the night is still. The moon is a golden locket a-hanging from infinity, draping its silvery blanket of moonlight o'er the grassy turf. The air is still, yet the air is fresh; behold the peace of the beautiful night.

Then comes Grendel, his unsightly form o'erpassing the moonbathed way, snuffing and snarling and dead on a path to Heorot. On a path he is to a savory

feast, in a golden age of many feasts: a golden age of evil pleasure that knows no end. He cannot fathom his own demise...he has never met *Beowulf*.

His black shadow stretching he stands upright, sneering at the door to the hall of men. With a snarl of delight he rips open the door, flooding the hall with the light of the moon.

Which will he take? Which of the creatures will meet its dismay? With a careless snuffle he strides on in, not caring which: for all are his. He grabs the nearest; watches it start like a terrified squirrel. This man will taste good. It will suffer well.

Then up from a cot arises a man; ready for Grendel; ready to fight. Of little matter; this man delivers itself unto me.

Then pain--great pain upon the invincible one--for the man is upon him; has grabbed his great arm! Grendel screams out in pain, wrenching free his great arm...but he cannot pull loose; he cannot pry free. What is this thing? What is this creature that will not let go?

The iron grip must end here and now. This man must die, must suffer, must scream and feed Grendel's lust. But it will not let go; Grendel cannot escape.

First victim forgotten, Grendel's rage boils hot. None will defeat me! What is this deep curse? He will not succeed; he will suffer and die!

But power is vain; Grendel fights against steel. Vicious and mad, Grendel wrenches and pries, and with one final spin he at Beowulf lurches.

A rip fills the air; a cleavage to hear: what is this? What has come? Grendel screams and roars as blood pours from his shoulder, and Beowulf's steel clutch holds the severed arm still. Grendel lashes once more, spinning and clawing, but Beowulf dodges and Grendel grows faint.

The battle is over. Grendel's rage boils hot, and his bloodlust is strong...but he must turn, and flee, wounded and bleeding, to escape this hated thing that has wounded it so.

The moon has gone; the night is a shadow. Grendel stumbles and lumbers away from the hall, fleeing for life to a den of protection. Still his hate runs hot, and his bloodlust is strong...but something else is here. Grendel's heart is charred with something new; the first time to feel it in all his existence. *Pity* lays upon him. Pity for his helplessness; pity for his dying self, for his draining blood. His great clawed fist rolls open on the ground. This pity, perhaps, could be stretched to another? To a man, perhaps, who is dying and pained? Nay. Nay, pity is only for Grendel. It belongs to no other.

#### Chapter 4

The sun rises in the morning, the powerful orb of glowing red light rising far away in the east. Its joy-rays charge the air, reaching o'er plains and rolling hills, to fall upon the weary hall of Heorot.

Its dark reign is over; the nightmare is ended. As Hrothgar arises and

goes to see how his thanes did fare, he looking 'round the entryway sees a great mess of blood. His dim eyes falter; could Beowulf have failed? For Grendel leaves no blood; only of men can it be shed. But his eyes then rest upon Beowulf's calm form lying on his cot in serenity.

There is no blood on Beowulf's cot, and he himself is hale. Then only one thing remains: could it be the blood of Grendel? (For surely Beowulf is no coward to flee from a fight.)

Then coming nearer he sees, beside Beowulf's bed, the huge, full arm of Grendel's grotesque essence. From there spilt the blood; from there was ripped a part of Grendel, a part of the beast of terror.

The dark reign is over; the nightmare is ended! Grendel has fled, and *Beowulf* has prevailed! Now the Danes can rest in peace, and feast in their great hall at every night that they so desire, fearing not that a creature may come and disrupt their peace! Yea, the dark reign is over; the nightmare is ended: *Beowulf* has prevailed, and Grendel has fled!

The arm as a trophy o'er the great door must hang, and ever after a memorial be: that here, Beowulf the Geat, kinsman of Hygelac, slew the great beast; in a struggle of might alone, ripped off Grendel's arm and sent him to flee, where nothing was left but a coward's death.

Can there be an end to triumph? Will vict'ry ever end? The dark reign is over; the nightmare is ended, and the Danish men in a golden age now dwell! Triumph ends not; vict'ry fails not: the creature is dead, never to trouble this hall again!

Beowulf, the hero, must be praised and rewarded for this last night's great feat on behalf of the Danes. Yea, Beowulf has saved us from Grendel's cold grip.

The dark reign is over. The nightmare is ended. Awake, my friends: we are free!