

BEOWULF

UNFERTH'S CHALLENGE

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Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,
Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly
235 And sharp (vexed by Beowulf's adventure,
By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone
In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever
Acquired glory and fame greater
Than his own):
 "You're Beowulf, are you—the same
240 Boastful fool who fought a swimming
Match with Brecca, both of you daring
And young and proud, exploring the deepest
Seas, risking your lives for no reason
But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
245 Not to, but no one could check such pride.
With Brecca at your side you swam along
The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
Over the ocean's face. Then winter
Churned through the water, the waves ran you
250 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
To survive. And at the end victory was his,
Not yours. The sea carried him close
To his home, to southern Norway, near
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
255 Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
His towns and his people. He'd promised to outswim you:
Bonstan's son made that boast ring true.
You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
260 Staying a whole night through in this hall,
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you."

Beowulf answered, Edgeth's great son:

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

“Other monsters crowded around me,
 Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
 Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
 295 But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
 Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,
 Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
 By morning they’d decided to sleep on the shore,
 Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
 300 On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
 That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
 Would stop their passing. Then God’s bright beacon
 Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
 And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
 305 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
 The living when they drive away death by themselves!
 Lucky or not, nine was the number
 Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
 Anywhere under Heaven’s high arch, has fought
 310 In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder
 Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
 The monsters’ hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
 The swift-flowing waters swept me along
 And I landed on Finnish soil. I’ve heard
 315 No tales of you, Unferth, telling
 Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
 Brecca’s battles were never so bold;
 Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
 No boast, have announced no more than I know
 320 To be true. And there’s more: You murdered your brothers,
 Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
 Won’t help your soul; you’ll suffer hell’s fires,
 Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf’s
 Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
 325 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
 To raid your hall, ruin Herot

And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
 But he’s learned that terror is his alone,
 Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
 330 Of reprisal; he’s found no fighting, here,
 But only food, only delight.
 He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
 And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
 No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
 335 The Geats will show him courage, soon
 He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
 Comes up again, opening another
 Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
 May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!”
 340 Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
 Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
 At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
 In Beowulf’s bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.
 There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
 345 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
 Hrothgar’s gold-ringed queen, greeted
 The warriors; a noble woman who knew
 What was right, she raised a flowing cup
 To Hrothgar first, holding it high
 350 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
 Joy in that feast. The famous king
 Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
 Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,
 Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
 355 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
 Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf’s
 Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats’
 Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
 For allowing her hands the happy duty
 360 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
 Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
 Edgeth’s brave son, then assured the Danish
 Queen that his heart was firm and his hands

Ready:
“When we crossed the sea, my comrades
365 And I, I already knew that all
My purpose was this: to win the good will
Of your people or die in battle, pressed
In Grendel’s fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
And courage, or here in this hall welcome
My death!”
370 Welthow was pleased with his words,
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.
The feast went on, laughter and music
And the brave words of warriors celebrating
375 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane’s
Son, heavy with sleep; as soon
As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel

Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
When night had covered the earth with its net
380 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
Through the world. Hrothgar’s warriors rose with him.
He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats’
Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped
That Herot would be his to command. And then
He declared:
385 “No one strange to this land
Has ever been granted what I’ve given you,
No one in all the years of my rule.
Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then
Keep it free of evil, fight
390 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full.” . . .

