

Then he traveled across the curving waves
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruling this wide
 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
 My older brother, a far better man
 Than I, had died and dying made me,
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgeth's
 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
 In this hall. You see for yourself how much
 smaller

Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've
 lost

To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
 How many times have my men, glowing
 With courage drawn from too many cups
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the
 benches

Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
 Still, death taking more and more.

But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."

Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

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Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,
 Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly
 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):

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"You're Beowulf, are you—the same
 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

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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
 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,

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Where his treasure was piled and his strength pro-
 tected

His towns and his people. He'd promised to out-
 swim you:

Bonstan's son made that boast ring true.
 You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I
 think

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Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
 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
 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
 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
 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,
 It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
 From the north, and the waves were savage. Crea-
 tures
 Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
 Into life—and the iron hammered links
 Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
 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
 Free; I fought that beast's last battle,
 Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

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"Other monsters crowded around me,
 Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
 Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
 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
 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
 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
 The living when they drive away death by them-
 selves!
 Lucky or not, nine was the number
 Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
 Anywhere under Heaven's high arch, has fought
 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
 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
 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

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Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
 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

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
 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!"

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 cheer-
 ful clanking

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
 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
 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,

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For allowing her hands the happy duty
 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:

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"When we crossed the sea, my comrades
 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!"

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Welthow was pleased with his words,
 His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
 To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

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The feast went on, laughter and music
 And the brave words of warriors celebrating
 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
 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
 Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with
 him.

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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:

"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
 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
 And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds
 full."

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Then Hrothgar left that hall, the Danes'
Great protector, followed by his court; the queen
Had preceded him and he went to lie at her side,
Seek sleep near his wife. It was said that God
Himself had set a sentinel in Herot,
Brought Beowulf as a guard against Grendel and a
shield

Behind whom the king could safely rest.
And Beowulf was ready, firm with our Lord's
High favor and his own bold courage and strength.
He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his
sword

Hammered from the hardest iron, and handed
All his weapons and armor to a servant,
Ordered his war-gear guarded till morning.
And then, standing beside his bed,
He exclaimed:

"Grendel is no braver, no stronger
Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall
not,

Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold
And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth
Scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists
Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I
will meet him

With my hands empty—unless his heart
Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting
Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom
Extend His hand where He wills, reward
Whom He chooses!"

Then the Geats' great chief

dropped
His head to his pillow, and around him, as ready
As they could be, lay the soldiers who had crossed
the sea

At his side, each of them sure that he was lost

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To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns
And the friends he had left behind where both he
And they had been raised. Each thought of the
Danes

Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats
And not Danes now slept. But God's dread loom
Was woven with defeat for the monster, good for-
tune

For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them,
And through the might of a single man
They would win. Who doubts that God in His wis-
dom

And strength holds the earth forever
In His hands? Out in the darkness the monster
Began to walk. The warriors slept
In that gabled hall where they hoped that He
Would keep them safe from evil, guard them
From death till the end of their days was deter-
mined

And the thread should be broken. But Beowulf lay
wakeful,
Watching, waiting, eager to meet
His enemy, and angry at the thought of his coming.

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Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently

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Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited
Hrothgar's

Home before, knew the way—

But never, before nor after that night,

Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless;

Straight to the door, then snapped it open,

Tore its iron fasteners with a touch

And rushed angrily over the threshold.

He strode quickly across the inlaid

Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes

Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome

Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall

Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed

With rows of young soldiers resting together.

And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,

Intended to tear the life from those bodies

By morning; the monster's mind was hot

With the thought of food and the feasting his belly

Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended

Grendel to gnaw the broken bones

Of his last human supper. Human

Eyes were watching his evil steps,

Waiting to see his swift hard claws.

Grendel snatched at the first Geat

He came to, ripped him apart, cut

His body to bits with powerful jaws,

Drank the blood from his veins and bolted

Him down, hands and feet; death

And Grendel's great teeth came together,

Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another

Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,

Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper

—And was instantly seized himself, claws

Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.

That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,

Knew at once that nowhere on earth

Had he met a man whose hands were harder;

His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing

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Could take his talons and himself from that tight

Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run

From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide
there:

This was a different Herot than the hall he had
emptied.

But Higlac's follower remembered his final

Boast and, standing erect, stopped

The monster's flight, fastened those claws

In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel

Closer. The infamous killer fought

For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,

Desiring nothing but escape; his claws

Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to
Herot

Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,

And Danes shook with terror. Down

The aisles the battle swept, angry

And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully

Built to withstand the blows, the struggling

Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;

Shaped and fastened with iron, inside

And out, artfully worked, the building

Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell

To the floor, gold-covered boards grating

As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.

Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot

To stand forever; only fire,

They had planned, could shatter what such skill
had put

Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor

Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly

The sounds changed, the Danes started

In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible

Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang

In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain

And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's

Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms

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Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

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That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Gren-
del

From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained
demon

Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man's blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder

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Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them;
Beowulf,

A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend, No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was
the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

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And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall
From faraway lands, princes and leaders
Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake

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Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life. 845
 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 Surf had covered his death, hidden 850
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-
 hooved

Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them 855
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 On earth or under the spreading sky
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north, 860
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

And sometimes, when the path ran straight and
 clear,

They would let their horses race, red 865
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier
 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
 And could sing them all through, story after story,
 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's 870
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well—

Siegmund's 875
 Adventures, familiar battles fought
 By that glorious son of Vels. And struggles,
 Too, against evil and treachery that no one
 Had ever heard of, that no one knew
 Except Fitla, who had fought at his uncle's side,
 A brave young comrade carefully listening 880

When Siegmund's tongue unwound the wonders
 He had worked, confiding in his closest friend.
 There were tales of giants wiped from the earth
 By Siegmund's might—and forever remembered, 885
 Fame that would last him beyond life and death,
 His daring battle with a treasure-rich dragon.

Heaving a hoary gray rock aside
 Siegmund had gone down to the dragon alone,
 Entered the hole where it hid and swung 890
 His sword so savagely that it slit the creature
 Through, pierced its flesh and pinned it
 To a wall, hung it where his bright blade rested.
 His courage and strength had earned him a king-
 like

Treasure, brought gold and rich rings to his glori-
 ous

Hands. He loaded that precious hoard 895
 On his ship and sailed off with a shining cargo.
 And the dragon dissolved in its own fierce blood.

No prince, no protector of his warriors, knew
 power

And fame and glory like Siegmund's; his name
 And his treasures grew great. Hermod could have 900
 hoped

For at least as much; he was once the mightiest
 Of men. But pride and defeat and betrayal
 Sent him into exile with the Jutes, and he ended
 His life on their swords. That life had been misery
 After misery, and he spread sorrow as long 905
 As he lived it, heaped troubles on his unhappy
 people's

Heads, ignored all wise men's warnings,
 Ruled only with courage. A king
 Born, entrusted with ancient treasures
 And cities full of stronghearted soldiers, 910
 His vanity swelled him so vile and rank
 That he could hear no voices but his own. He de-
 served

To suffer and die. But Beowulf was a prince

Well-loved, followed in friendship, not fear;
Hermod's heart had been hollowed by sin.

The horses ran, when they could, on the gravel
Path. Morning slid past and was gone.
The whole brave company came riding to Herot,
Anxious to celebrate Beowulf's success
And stare at that arm. And Hrothgar rose
From beside his wife and came with his courtiers
Crowded around him. And Welthow rose
And joined him, his wife and queen with her
women,
All of them walking to that wonderful hall.

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Hrothgar stood at the top of the stairway
And stared at Grendel's great claw, swinging
High from that gold-shining roof. Then he cried:

"Let God be thanked! Grendel's terrible
Anger hung over our heads too long,
Dropping down misery; but the Almighty makes
miracles

When He pleases, wonder after wonder, and this
world

Rests in His hands. I had given up hope,
Exhausted prayer, expected nothing
But misfortune forever. Herot was empty,
Bloody; the wisest and best of our people
Despaired as deeply, found hope no easier,
Knew nothing, no way to end this unequal
War of men and devils, warriors
And monstrous fiends. One man found it,
Came to Denmark and with the Lord's help

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Did what none of the Danes could do,
Our wisdom, our strength, worthless without him.
The woman who bore him, whoever, wherever,
Alive now, or dead, knew the grace of the God
Of our fathers, was granted a son for her glory
And His. Beowulf, best of soldiers,
Let me take you to my heart, make you my son too,
And love you: preserve this passionate peace
Between us. And take, in return, whatever
You may want from whatever I own. Warriors
Deserving far less have been granted as much,
Given gifts and honored, though they fought
No enemy like yours. Glory is now yours
Forever and ever, your courage has earned it,
And your strength. May God be as good to you
forever
As He has been to you here!"

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Then Beowulf an-

swered:

"What we did was what our hearts helped
Our hands to perform; we came to fight
With Grendel, our strength against his. I wish
I could show you, here in Herot, his corpse
Stretched on this floor! I twisted my fingers
Around his claw, ripped and tore at it
As hard as I could: I meant to kill him
Right here, hold him so tightly that his heart
Would stop, would break, his life spill
On this floor. But God's will was against me,
As hard as I held him he still pulled free
And ran, escaped from this hall with the strength
Fear had given him. But he offered me his arm
And his claw, saved his life yet left me
That prize. And paying even so willingly
For his freedom he still fled with nothing
But the end of his evil days, ran
With death pressing at his back, pain
Splitting his panicked heart, pulling him
Step by step into hell. Let him burn

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In torment, lying and trembling, waiting
For the brightness of God to bring him his reward."

Unferth grew quiet, gave up quarreling over
Beowulf's old battles, stopped all his boasting
Once everyone saw proof of that prince's strength,
Grendel's huge claw swinging high
From Hrothgar's mead-hall roof, the fingers
Of that loathsome hand ending in nails
As hard as bright steel—so hard, they all said,
That not even the sharpest of swords could have cut
It through, broken it off the monster's
Arm and ended its life, as Beowulf
Had done armed with only his bare hands.

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Then the king ordered Herot cleaned
And hung with decorations; hundreds of hands,
Men and women, hurried to make
The great hall ready. Golden tapestries
Were lined along the walls, for a host
Of visitors to see and take pleasure in. But that
glorious

Building was bent and broken, its iron
Hinges cracked and sprung from their corners
All around the hall. Only
Its roof was undamaged when the blood-stained
demon

Burst out of Herot, desperately breaking
Beowulf's grip, running wildly
From what no one escapes, struggle and wriethe
As he will. Wanting to stay we go,
All beings here on God's earth, wherever

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It is written that we go, taking our bodies
From death's cold bed to the unbroken sleep
That follows life's feast.

Then Hrothgar made his
way

To the hall; it was time, and his heart drew him
To the banquet. No victory was celebrated better,
By more or by better men and their king.
A mighty host, and famous, they lined
The benches, rejoicing; the king and Hrothulf,
His nephew, toasted each other, raised mead-cups
High under Herot's great roof, their speech
Courteous and warm. King and people
Were one; none of the Danes was plotting,
Then, no treachery hid in their smiles.

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Healfdane's son gave Beowulf a golden
Banner, a fitting flag to signal
His victory, and gave him, as well, a helmet,
And a coat of mail, and an ancient sword;
They were brought to him while the warriors
watched. Beowulf

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Drank to those presents, not ashamed to be praised,
Richly rewarded in front of them all.
No ring-giver has given four such gifts,
Passed such treasures through his hands, with the
grace

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And warmth that Hrothgar showed. The helmet's
Brim was wound with bands of metal,
Rounded ridges to protect whoever
Wore it from swords swung in the fiercest
Battles, shining iron edges
In hostile hands. And then the protector
Of warriors, lord of the Danes, ordered
Eight horses led to the hall, and into it,
Eight steeds with golden bridles. One stood
With a jeweled saddle on its back, carved
Like the king's war-seat it was; it had carried
Hrothgar when that great son of Healfdane rode
To war—and each time carried him wherever

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