





BEOWULF

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Based on the screenplay by

NEIL GAIMAN & ROGER AVARY

With an introduction by **NEIL GAIMAN**

 HarperCollins e-books

For Grendel
Talibus laboribus lupos defendimus.

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Introduction

Sometimes I think of stories as animals. Some common, some rare, some endangered. There are stories that are old, like sharks, and stories as new on this earth as people or cats.

Cinderella, for example, is a story which, in its variants, has spread across the world as successfully as rats or crows. You'll find it in every culture. Then there are stories like the *Iliad*, which remind me more of giraffes—uncommon, but instantly recognized whenever they appear or are retold. There are—there must be—stories that have become extinct, like the mastodon or the sabre-toothed tiger, leaving not even bones behind; stories that died when the people who told them died and could tell them no longer or stories that, long forgotten, have left only fossil fragments of themselves in other tales. We have a handful of chapters of the *Satyricon*, no more.

Beowulf could, so easily, have been one of those.

Because once upon a time, well over a thousand years ago, people told the story of *Beowulf*. And then time passed and it was forgotten. It was like an animal that no one had noticed had gone extinct, or almost extinct. Forgotten in oral lore, it was preserved by only one manuscript. Manuscripts are fragile and easily destroyed by time or by fire. The *Beowulf* manuscript has scorch marks on it.

But it survived...

And when it was rediscovered it slowly began to breed, like an endangered species being nurtured back to life.

My first exposure to the story three hundred years after the only manuscript was acquired by the British Museum came from an English magazine article pinned to a classroom wall. That was where I first read about them, *Beowulf* and Grendel and Grendel's even more terrible mother.

My second encounter was probably in the short-lived *Beowulf* from DC Comics. He wore a metal jockstrap and a helmet, with horns so big he could not have made it through a door, and he fought enormous snakes and suchlike. It didn't do much for me, although it sent me in search of the original in the shape of a Penguin Classics edition, which I re-read years later when Roger Avary and I came to retell the story in movie form.

The wheel keeps turning. *Beowulf* has long since left the endangered species list

and begun to breed its many variants. There have been numerous accounts of *Beowulf* on the screen already, ranging from a science fiction version to a retelling in which Grendel is a tribe of surviving Neanderthals. It's all good: different retellings, recombining story DNA. The ones that work will be remembered and retold, the others will be forgotten.

When Roger Avary and I were first asked if we thought there should be a novel inspired by the film we had written, we said no and suggested that people simply read the original poem instead. I'm glad that the powers that be ignored us, and just as glad that they found Caitlín R. Kiernan to retell this version of the story.

Because she did. She took the tale of *Beowulf* and the script to the film and she told a tale that pounds in your head, a mead and blood-scented saga that should be chanted at midnight in swamps and on lonely hilltops.

She tells a tale of heroism and firelight and gold, punctuated with love and secrets and moments of extreme violence. It's an old tale, one that deserves to be retold as long as people care about heroes and monsters and the dark. It's a story for each of us.

We all have our demons.

Beowulf thought his was Grendel...

Neil Gaiman
2007

Prologue

There was a time *before* men, a time before even the world existed, when all the cosmos was only the black void of Ginnunga gap. To the farthest north lay the frozen wastes of Niflheim, and to the farthest south, the lands of bright, sparking furnaces belonging to the giant Muspéll and so named Muspellsheim. In the great emptiness of Ginnunga, the cold northern winds met the warm breezes blown out from the south, and the whirling gales of sleet and snow melted and dripped down into the nothingness to form Ymir, father of all the Frost Giants. The giants called him Aurgelmir, the gravel-yeller. Also formed from these drips of rime was the first cow, Audhumla. With her milk she fed Ymir, and with her tongue she licked the first of the gods, Búri, from a block of salt. In later times, Búri's son, Bur, had three sons by the giantess Bestla. They were Odin, Vili, and Vé, and it was they who slew great Ymir and then carried his corpse to the dead heart of Ginnunga gap. From his blood they fashioned the lakes and rivers and seas, and from his bones they carved mountains. From his massive teeth they made all the stones and gravel, from his brain the clouds, and from his skull they constructed the sky and laid it high above the land. And so it was that the sons of Búri built the world, which would be the home of the sons of men. Last of all, they used Ymir's eyebrows to build an enormous wall, which they named Midgard, which was raised up beyond the seas, all around the edges of the world's disk, that it might always protect men from the enmity of the giants who had not been drowned in the terrible deluge of Ymir's blood.

And here, under the sanctuary of Midgard, would all the innumerable lives of men be lived. Here would they rise and struggle and fall. Here would they be born and die. Here would the greatest among them find glory in mighty deeds and, having died the deaths of heroes, be escorted by the Valkyries through the gates of Odin's hall, Valhalla, where they feast and drink and await Ragnarök, the final battle between the gods and the giants, where they will fight at Odin All-Father's side. The great wolf, Fenrir, will be at last set loose upon the world, and in the oceans, the Midgard serpent will be unbound. Yggdrasil, the world tree, will shudder, its foundations weakened by

the gnawing jaws of the dragon Nidhög. An ax age, an age of clashing swords and broken shields, when brothers will fight and murder one another; a wind age, a wolf age, there at the twilight of the gods when all the cosmos will dissolve, finally, into chaos.

But *before* the coming of that end, which not even the gods may forestall, there would be all the generations of men and women. All the countless wars and treacheries, loves and triumphs and sacrifices. And the greatest of these might be remembered and repeated in the songs and poetry of skalds, for a time.

There, under Midgard, would be an age of heroes.

PART ONE

Grendel

1

A Prowler in the Dark

The land of the Danes ends here, at this great wedge of granite cliffs jutting out high above the freezing sea. The foam of icy waves lashes the cruel shingle, narrow beaches of ragged bedrock and fallen boulders, polished cobbles and the stingy strands of ice-and snow-scabbed sand. This is no fit place for men, these barren, wind-scoured shores in this hungry, sun-shunned time of the year. By day, there are few enough *wild* things—only seals and walrus and the beached and rotting carcass of a whale, only the gulls and eagles soaring against the mottled, leaden sky. During the long nights, the shore becomes an even more forsaken and forbidding realm, unlit but for the furtive glimpses of the moon's single pale eye as it slips in and out of the clouds and fog.

But even here there is refuge. Perched like a beacon shining out to all those lost and wandering in the cold stands the tower of the Scylding king Hrothgar, son of Healfdene, grandson of Beow, great-grandson of Shield Sheafson. The tower throws specks of warm yellow against the gloom, and tonight, in the shadow of the tower, there is a celebration, revelry even on an evening so bleak as this.

Within the sturdy walls of the king's new mead hall, which he has named Heorot, the hall of harts, his thanes and their ladies have assembled. The fires burn bright beneath thatch and timber, driving back the chill and filling the air with delicious cooking smells and the comforting aroma of woodsmoke. Here, high above the reach of the angry sea, the king has at last made good his promise, the gift of this mighty hall to his loyal subjects. In all the lands of the Northmen, there is no other to equal its size and grandeur, and on this night it is awash with drunken laughter and the clatter of plates and knives, the rise and fall of a hundred voices speaking all at once, not so very different from the rise and fall of the sea outside, except there is no ice to be found here anywhere, and one might only drown in the endless cups of mead. Above the wide fire pits, pigs and deer, rabbit and geese roast on iron spits, and the flames leap

and dance, throwing dizzying shadows across the walls and laughing faces and the massive oak timbers carved with scenes of warfare and the hunt, with the graven images of gods and monsters.

“Have I not kept my oath?” howls fat King Hrothgar from the alcove set into the farther end of the long hall. He is an old man, and his battle days are behind him now, his long beard and the braids in his hair gone white as the winter snow. Wrapped only in a bedsheet, he rises slowly from the cradle of his throne, moving as quickly as age and his considerable girth will permit. “One year ago...I, Hrothgar, your king, swore that we would soon celebrate our victories in a new hall, a hall both mighty *and* beautiful. Now, you tell me, *have I not kept my oath?*”

Momentarily distracted from their drink, from their feasting and happy debaucheries, the king’s men raise their cups and raise their voices, too, drunkenly cheering on old Hrothgar, and never mind that only a handful among them are sober enough to know *why* they are cheering. At the sound of their voices, Hrothgar grins drunkenly and rubs at his belly, then turns to gaze down at his queen, the beautiful lady Wealthow. Though hardly more than a child, this violet-eyed girl adorned in gold and furs and glittering jewels, Wealthow is neither burdened with nor blinded by childish illusions about her husband’s fidelity. She knows, for example, of the two giggling maidens whom he bedded this very night, farm girls or perhaps daughters of his own warriors, with whom the king was still occupied when four thanes came to bear him from his bedchamber out into the crowded hall. Hrothgar has never made the least effort to hide his whores and mistresses, so she has never seen the point in pretending not to see them.

“Ah, mead!” he grunts, and grabs the gilded drinking horn from the queen’s hands. “Thank you, my lovely Wealthow!” She glares up at him, though Hrothgar has already turned away, raising the horn to his lips, spilling mead down his chin and into the tangle of his beard.

The drinking horn is a breathtaking thing, and she has often spoken aloud of her wonder of it. Surely, it was made either in remote and elder days, when such fine craftsmanship was not uncommon to this land, or it was fashioned in some distant kingdom by a people who’d not yet forgotten that artistry. It is a mystery and a marvelous sight, this relic rescued from a dragon’s hoard; even clutched in the meaty hands of a man so crude as her husband, the drinking horn does not cease to please her eyes. The finest gold etched with strange runes the likes of which she’s never seen before, and there are two clawed feet mounted on one side so that the horn may be set down without tipping over and spilling. For the handle, there’s a winged dragon, also of wrought gold, with a single perfect ruby set into its throat. Horns and fangs and the jagged trace of its sinuous, razor spine, a terrible worm summoned from some forgotten tale, or perhaps the artisan meant this dragon to recall the serpent Nidhöggr Rootnibbler, who lies coiled in the darkness at the base of the World Ash.

Hrothgar belches, wipes at his mouth, then raises the empty horn as though to

toast all those assembled before him. “And *in* this hall,” he bellows, “we shall divide the spoils of our conquests, all the gold and the treasure. This shall ever be a place of merrymaking and of joy and *fornication*...from now until the end of time. I name this hall *Heorot!*”

And again the thanes and their women and everyone else in the hall cheer, and Hrothgar turns once more to face Wealthow. Droplets of mead cling to his mustache and beard like some strange amber dew.

“Let’s hand out some treasure, shall we, my beauty?”

Wealthow shrugs and keeps her seat, as the king dips one hand into a wooden chest that has been placed on the dais between their thrones. It is filled almost to overflowing with gold and silver, with coins minted in a dozen foreign lands and jewel-encrusted brooches. The king tosses a handful out into the waiting crowd. Some of it is snatched directly from the air, and other pieces rain down noisily upon tabletops and dirt floors, prompting a greedy, reckless scramble.

Now the king selects a single gold torque from the chest and holds it above his head, and again the crowd cheers. But this time the king shakes his head and holds the torque still higher.

“No, no, this one is not for *you* lot. *This* is for Unferth, my wisest man, unrivaled violator of virgins and boldest of all brave brawlers—where the fuck *are* you, Unferth, you weasel-faced bastard! *Unferth*—”

Across the long hall, at the edge of a deep pit dug directly into the floor, so that men will not have to brave the cold wind and risk frostbite just to take a piss, Unferth is busy relieving himself and arguing with another of the king’s advisors, Aesher. Unferth hasn’t yet heard Hrothgar calling out his name, the old man’s voice diminished by the endless clatter and din of the hall, and he stares into the dark pit, a great soggy mouth opening wide to drink its own share of mead, once the thanes have done with it. There is a hardness about this man, something grim and bitter in his gaunt face and braids as black as raven feathers, something calculating in the dull glint of his green eyes.

“Do not be so quick to laugh,” he says to Aesher. “I’m telling you, we have to start taking this matter seriously. I’ve heard the believers now extend from Rome all the way north to the land of the Franks.”

Aesher scowls and stares down at the yellow stream of his own urine. “Well, then answer me this. Who do you think would win a *knife fight*, Odin or this Christ Jesus?”

“*Unferth!*” Hrothgar roars again, and this time Unferth does hear him. “Oh, what now?” he sighs. “Can I not even be left in peace long enough to piss?”

Aesher shakes his head and snickers. “Best hurry it up,” he says, laughing. “You’ll

not want to keep him waiting. What is a man's full bladder when placed alongside the will of his king?"

"Unferth, bastard son of that bastard Ecglaf! Where *are* you, you ungrateful lout!?"

Unferth hastily tucks himself back into his breeches, then turns reluctantly to push his way through the drunken mob. Some of them step aside to let him pass, while others do not even seem to notice him. But soon Unferth has reached the edge of the king's dais, and he forces a smile onto his face and raises his hand so that Hrothgar will see him standing there.

"I'm here, my king!" he says, and Hrothgar, catching sight of him, grins even wider and leans down, placing the golden torque about Unferth's thin neck.

"You are too kind, my liege. Your generosity—"

"No, no, no. It's nothing less than you deserve, nothing less, good and faithful Unferth," and then Hrothgar gazes out upon his subjects once again. And once again an enthusiastic cheer rises from the crowd. The king's herald, Wulfgar, steps forward from the shadows of the throne to lead the drunken thanes and their women in a familiar chant, and soon enough most of the hall has joined him. Warriors bang their fists and cups against tabletops or leap onto the tables and stomp their feet as Heorot rings out with song:

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

He faced the demon dragon

When other men would freeze.

And then my lords,

He took his sword

And brought it to its knees!

Now Hrothgar's musicians have all joined in, taking up the song with their harps and flutes and drums. Even Unferth sings, but the king's gift lies cold and heavy about his throat, and there is considerably less enthusiasm and sincerity in his voice.

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

The greatest of our kings.

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

He broke the dragon's wings!

But the torrents of joyous noise spilling forth from Heorot—the laughter and the fervent songs, the jangle of gold and silver coins—these are not a welcome sound to all things that dwell in this land by the sea. There are creatures in the night that are neither man nor beast, ancient beings descended from giantkind, the trolls and worse things still, who keep themselves always to the watches, to dank fens and forbidding marshlands. Past the mighty walls and pikes of Hrothgar's fortifications, beyond gate and bridge and chasm, where farmland and pasture turn suddenly to wilderness, there stands a forest older than the memory of man, a wood that has stood since before the coming of the Danes. And in the vales that lie on the far side of these gnarled trees, are frozen bogs and bottomless lakes leading back down to the sea, and there are rocky hillocks riddled with caves, tunnels bored deep into the stone even as maggots bore into the flesh of the dead.

And in one of these caverns something huge and, to the eyes of man, ghastly crouches in the muck and gravel and a bright pool of moonlight leaking in through the cave's entrance. It moans pitifully and clutches at its diseased and malformed skull, covering misshapen ears in an effort to shut out the torturous sounds of revelry drifting down like a thunderous, hammering snow from Heorot. For even though the mead hall and the tower on the sea cliff are only a distant glow, there is a peculiar magic to the walls and spaces of this cave, a singular quality that magnifies those far-off noises and makes of them a deafening clamor. And so the troll thing's ears ring and ache, battered mercilessly by the song of Hrothgar's men even as the shore is battered into sand by the waves.

He offered us protection

When monsters roamed the land!

And one by one

He took them on—

They perished at his hand!

The creature wails—a keening cry that is at once sorrow and anger, fear and pain—as the ache inside its head becomes almost unbearable. It claws madly at its own face, then snatches in vain at the darkness and moonlight, as if its claws might somehow pluck the noise from out of the air and crush it flat, making of it something silent and broken and dead. Surely, its ears must soon burst, and this agony finally end. But its ears do not burst, and the pain does not end, and the thanes' song swells and redoubles, becoming even louder than before.

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

We honor with this feast,

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

He killed the fiery beast!

“No more, Mother,” the creature groans, rolling its eyes and grinding its teeth against the song. “Mother, I can’t bear this. Only so much, and I can bear *no more!*”

Tonight we sing his praises,

The bravest of the thanes.

So raise you spears!

We’ll have no fears,

As long as Hrothgar reigns!

The creature clenches its great fists together and gazes up into the frigid night sky from the entrance of the cave, wordlessly begging Máni, the white moon, son of the giant Mundilfæri, to end the awful noise once and for all. “I *cannot* do it myself,” the creature explains to the sky. “I am *forbidden*. My mother...she has *told* me that they are too *dangerous*.” And then it imagines a hail of stone and silver flame cast down by the moon giant, falling from the sky to obliterate the hateful, taunting voices of the men forever. But the singing continues, and the unresponsive moon seems only to mock the creature’s torment.

“No more,” it says again, knowing now what must be done, what *he* must do for *himself*, since none other will ever end this racket—not the giants, not his mother. If there is to be peace again, then he must make it for himself. And gathering all his anger and suffering like a shield, battening it close about him, the monster steps quickly from the safety of shadows, slipping from the cave and out into the shimmering, unhelpful moonlight.

From his place behind the king’s throne, Unferth watches as the mead hall sinks ever deeper into drunken pandemonium. His own cup is empty and has been empty now for some time, and he glances about in vain for the slave who should have long since come to refill it. There is no sign of the boy anywhere, only the faces of the singing, laughing, oblivious thanes. There does not seem to be a single thought remaining anywhere among them, but for the drink and their women, the feasting and the baying of old Hrothgar’s praises.

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

As every demon fell—

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

He dragged them back to Hel!

Wulfgar sits nearby on the edge of the dais, a red-haired maiden camped upon his lap. He lifts his cup to her lips and dribbles mead between her breasts, then she giggles and squeals as he licks it off her chest. Unferth frowns and goes back to scanning the crowd for his slave, that lazy, crippled whelp named Cain. At last he spots the boy limping through the crowd, clutching a large goblet in both hands.

“Boy!” shouts Unferth. “Where’s my mead?!”

“Here, my lord, I have it right here,” the slave replies, then slips in a smear of cooling vomit on the dais steps, and mead sloshes over the rim of the cup and spatters on the floor.

“You’re *spilling* it!” Unferth growls, and he grabs a walking stick from Aesher, a sturdy, knotted length of birch wood, and strikes Cain hard across the forehead. The boy reels from the blow, almost falls, and spills more mead on the dais steps.

“You clumsy idiot,” sneers Unferth and hits Cain again. “How *dare* you waste the king’s mead!”

The boy opens his mouth to reply, to apologize, but Unferth continues to beat him viciously with the stick. Some of the thanes have turned to watch, and they chuckle at the slave’s predicament. At last, Cain gives up and drops the goblet, which is empty now, anyway, and he runs away as quickly as his crooked leg will allow, taking shelter beneath one of the long tables.

“Useless worm,” Unferth calls out after him. “I *should* feed you to the pigs and be done with it!”

Hrothgar has been looking on from his throne, and he leans to one side and farts loudly, earning a smattering of applause from the thanes. “I fear you’d only poison the poor swine,” he says to Unferth, and farts again. “Doesn’t this damned song have an end?” And as if to answer his question, the crowd begins yet another verse.

He rose up like a savior,

When hope was almost gone.

The beast was gored

And peace restored!

His legend will live on!

Hrothgar grunts a very satisfied sort of grunt and smiles, surveying the glorious, wild confusion of Heorot Hall.

“I ask you, are we not now the most powerful men in all the world?” he mumbles, turning toward Aesher. “Are we not the *richest*? Do we not merrymake with the best of them? Can we not do as we *damn well please*?”

“We can,” Aesher replies.

“Unferth?” asks King Hrothgar, but Unferth is still peering angrily at the spot where his slave vanished beneath the table, and doesn’t answer.

“Have you gone deaf now, Unferth?”

Unferth sighs and hands the birch walking stick back to Aesher. “We do,” he says halfheartedly. “We do.”

“Damn straight we do,” mutters Hrothgar, as perfectly and completely content in this moment as he has ever dared hope to be, as pleased with himself and with his deeds as he can imagine any living man has ever been. He starts to ask Wealthow—who is seated nearby with her handmaidens—to refill his golden horn, but then his eyelids flutter and close, and only a few seconds later the King of the Danes is fast asleep and snoring loudly.

Through the winter night, the creature comes striding toward Heorot Hall, and all things flee before him, all birds and beasts, all fish and serpents, all other phantoms and the lesser haunters of the darkness. He clambers up from the mire and tangle of the icy bogs, easily hauling his twisted bulk from the peat mud out into the deep shadows of the ancient forest. And though his skull still rings and echoes with the song of the thanes, he’s relieved to be free for a time of the moon’s ceaseless stare, shaded now by those thick, hoary limbs and branches that are almost as good as the roof of his cave.

“I will show them the *meaning* of silence!” he roars, and with one gigantic fist shatters the trunk of a tree, reducing it in an instant to no more than splinters and sap. *How much easier it will be to crush the bones of men, to spill their blood*, he thinks. And so another tree falls, and then another, and yet another after that, the violence of each blow only fueling his rage and driving him nearer the true object of his spite. The creature’s long strides carry him quickly through the forest and back out again into the moonlight. Now he races across the moorlands, grinding bracken and shrub underfoot, trampling whatever cannot move quickly enough to get out of his way, flushing grouse

and rabbit from their sleeping places. Soon, he has reached the rocky chasm dividing Hrothgar's battlements from the hinterlands. He pauses here, but only a moment or two, hardly long enough to catch his breath, before spying a lone sentry keeping watch upon the wall. The man sees him, as well, and at once the creature recognizes and relishes the horror and disbelief in the sentry's eyes.

He does not believe me real, the monster thinks, and yet neither can he doubt the truth of me. And then, before the man can cry out or raise an alarm, the thing from the cave has vaulted across the ravine...

"Did you hear that?" Unferth asks Aesher.

"Did I hear *what*?"

"Like thunder, almost," Unferth tells him, and glances down at the fat hound lying on the dais near Hrothgar's feet. The dog has pricked its ears and is staring intently across the hall at the great wooden door. Its lips curl back to show its teeth, and a low snarl issues from its throat.

"Truth be told, I can't hear shit but for these damn fools singing," says Aesher. "Ah, and the snoring of our brave king here."

Unferth reaches for the hilt of his sword.

"You are serious?" asks Aesher, and his hand goes to his own weapon.

"*Listen*," hisses Unferth.

"Listen for *what*?"

The dog gets up slowly, hackles raised, and begins to back away, putting more distance between itself and the entrance to the hall. Between the throne and the door to Heorot, the thanes and their women continue their drunken revelries—

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

Let every cup be raised!

Hrothgar, Hrothgar!

NOW AND FOREVER PRAISED!

"Whatever's gotten into him?" Queen Wealthow asks, pointing to the snarling, retreating dog, its tail tucked between its legs. Unferth only spares her a quick glance before turning back toward the door. He realizes that it isn't barred.