

Beowulf: The Prequel

By : charles schwenk

This story is a prequel to the English epic Beowulf that explains how he acquired his strength and chose his mission as a warrior.

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BEOWULF: THE PREQUEL

by Charles Schwenk

You have heard of the glory of Beowulf the Great, slayer of the foul monster Grendel and of Grendel's cursed mother, who dragged the ring-giver to her lair, much to her own regret; Beowulf, who slew the dragon of the treasure hoard, the dragon who murdered our people for the loss of but one gold cup. Though Beowulf's own blade, Naegling, failed him in time of need, with the help of his kinsman Wiglaf, he put an end to the cursed worm, though he lost his life in the battle.

Now you shall hear of the boyhood of Beowulf and how he gained the strength of thirty men in his hands, the strength he used to rend the arm from the murdering Grendel, the descendent of Cain, the first murder.

King Hrethel, well-known among the tribes, a noble leader of the Geats, was as a father to Beowulf, though Beowulf was not the son of his loins. You know from the tale of Beowulf the man that he carried the banner of war into battle for the first time at the age of seven.

The one who carries the banner serves to rally the warriors at crucial times. He must hold it aloft and never release his grip upon it. This the young Beowulf did as no grown man had ever done. He planted his feet in the earth like the roots of a tree and stood without fear, looking like Odin himself. Indeed, when we asked him he would say,

â My duty is that of any warrior. I fight with all my strength and the Lord Odin chooses the victor. ALL who fall in battle are honored dead.â

I have told you before, in my first song of Beowulf, that his heart was not savage. Drunk, he slew no hearth mates; a sign of a gentle heart. This was the reason Beowulf's heart was not savage. He did not hate his enemy. Many saw him take water to an enemy who lay groaning on the battlefield, when the struggle was over and Odin had granted us victory.

This is why Beowulf sailed from his home to rid Hrothgar of Grendel, and why, in his old age, he fought and killed the dragon. He would rather fight dragons and monsters like Grendel than to war against his fellow human beings.

The manner of his transformation from a brave youth into Beowulf was in this wise: He was in the midst of a battle that was going against the Geats. As he saw an host of the enemy swarming towards him as flies swarm on a goat's carcass, he called to the Great God Odin saying,

â Odin, I thank you for my warrior's life. Receive my spirit in death.â

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The Lord Odin wields men as men wield swords. At this moment, he chose to appear to Beowulf. As Beowulf later told all those assembled in the mead hall to feast their victory,

â Men say the Great God Odin is a warrior. This is not so. The great Odin is a light as bright as the sun but smaller than the point of a sword. From this light comes a voice and this voice sounds as does the surf in a storm. He said to me,

â ASK.â

â I knew that he would grant me whatsoever I most desired. As a warrior, I might have asked for victory in battle. But it is for Odin, not man to choose the victors in battle. I saw only my own duty and I asked,

â God Odin, grant me the strength to hold fast to my banner and never drop it, even though I may be killedâ

Beowulf said that he knew Odin had granted him his request. He sometimes wondered if it was right to call the light he saw and the voice he heard â Odinâ . Later, he said,

â Perhaps I am wrong to think I saw Odin. What I saw was something that has no name yet controls all things. Since It or He has no name, we should not and cannot call him by name. We should refer to him indirectly. Since he controls all things, perhaps we should call him, â The Wielder of All Thingsâ .

In a moment, the light was gone and he was overwhelmed by the enemy. In his right hand he took the banner of the Geats and with his left hand (his weak hand), he grasped the first of them by the throat. Before this warrior could slash Beowulf with his sword, Beowulf had shaken him as a dog shakes a rat and dropped him, with a broken neck, at his feet. He grasped the next warrior by his sword-arm and, twisting, wrenched the manâ s arm from his torso in a moment. Next, he grasped a warriorâ s lower jaw and pulled it off. Each of these pieces of warriors, pieces of men, was thrown into a little pile at his feet. For those who came within range of his one hand, all was lost.

When his own comrades found him, they saw what it means to be a war wolf. He stood, rooted to the spot, with the banner of the Geats held aloft in his right hand. Though he would not move from his place, he howled at the enemy and mocked them, grinning with teeth reddened by the blood of a warrior whose throat Beowulf had torn. Around him were the bodies of the men he had slain instantly. Some say there were a score of men and others say there were only as many as one could count on both hands. Others, who were not yet dead but were missing arms or with mangled legs, were crawling away from Beowulf as do wounded birds from a cat.

He was no longer merely the standard-bearer. He was now Beowulf. He howled as does the wolf who is alone as night comes on; a long and mournful howl of loneliness, not of triumph. The sight of this man-war-wolf will not leave me whilst I live.

Later, at the victory feast, all wanted Beowulf to speak of his wild deeds. He said nothing but,

â Lord Hrethel, I honor you before all other warriors. Never would I make war on you but I tell you now that I will not fight for you again. I do not regret killing our enemies but I will not become Beowulf again. In the rage of war I might as soon kill my kinsmen as our enemies. All men have, in their hearts, the war-wolf. In me, it is too strong. I will give up the life of a warrior and take up the opposite extreme, the life of a woman. I will not accept the name of Beowulf. Call me whatsoever else you will.

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He refused to wield a sword or to do battle but set to work chopping wood, milking animals, and doing the chores of women. His nature was gentle and he was quiet so the other young men did not abuse him, being content to merely call him "old woman", an insult that he did not mind. All the while, he was growing in strength.

He did not share in the revelry of the mead-hall but instead served the food and drink.

At one great feast, there was one Breca, a fierce warrior whose heart was savage. More than once, when the mead was on him, he slew a hearth mate. As he drank this night, his mood became black, and the other warriors stayed away from him.

As Breca's anger grew, he grasped a log from the fire and raised his arm to strike another warrior, but the Wielder of Men had ordained that he would slay no man this night. Beowulf, coming up from behind him, grasped his wrist and held fast. Breca turned and, with his free hand, attempted to dash the brains from Beowulf, only to have his hand caught in the grip which has since become famous among the men of Middle Earth. Spinning Breca around, Beowulf caught both hands behind the back of the warrior and said calmly,

"Hold, friend."

Beowulf's calm fed Breca's rage as wood fuels fire. He twisted his arms, thick as the branches of an oak tree, in Beowulf's grip. But Beowulf held Breca fast till his anger subsided and all in the hall ceased, for a moment, from their revels and stared, dumbfounded, at the sight of the "old woman" subduing the man who had hewn arms and legs from the bodies of his enemies since his thirteenth year.

The Thanes joined together in loud laughter as they taunted Breca,

"Is it mead or age that has withered your strength, Breca?", they roared.

"My strength is with me," he replied and dealt the nearest one a dreadful blow from which he did not rise for half an hour.

He then turned to Beowulf and said,

"You have driven the anger and the drink from my body and you have kept me from spilling the blood of my kinsmen so I say to you calmly and soberly, you are my friend. Let no one again insult the friend of Breca."

Beowulf received respect from that time on, though he still refused to become a warrior. Indeed, it was only after the murder of his friends that he embraced the name "War Wolf". These events unfolded in this way:

It began in that time of year when the summer stores are gone and hunger leads warriors from raiding parties. Our warriors were confident that our village would not be attacked, and a false security that proved to be. They set out to raid a nearby village leaving only a few warriors to guard our homes. Beowulf they saw as no help at all in this task.

The Lord Odin had ordained that this should be the moment that Beowulf would be reborn. A party of warriors, we never discovered the village from whence they came, came to raid our village while our own warriors were gone. When their sails were sighted, the women and children scurried for safety. The few warriors lamented that they had none of their comrades but resolved to make the enemy pay dearly for their lives. None noticed Beowulf as he sat lost in thought. In his mind's eye he saw his friends as the enemy

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advanced.

The two faced ten times their own number of seasoned warriors and slew four of them before they themselves were killed but sixteen remained to plunder the village, slaying and dishonoring our women and children. Beowulf, meanwhile, wept as he saw his dead comrades. Then, above their bodies, in the air, he saw the light he had seen on the battlefield. Below the light, planted in the earth, was his father's sword, Naegling, which glowed with the same light. From the point of light above the sword came one word, spoken in a voice like the sea in a storm.

â TAKEâ

In his mind, Beowulf took the sword and, when he awoke from his trance, found the sword actually in his hand.

Two of the enemy were advancing upon him. His heart was not savage and he felt no hatred of his enemies but as they came on he knew that until a great king arises to make peace, all tribes of men must be enemies. He would kill these men and all others who opposed him and in the end, he would make peace. He stepped into battle alone, armed with his sword, and yet he drove the invaders away, leaving twenty dead. He was never tested so severely in battle again until he faced that cruel monster Grendel. But this is a story you already know well.

END

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