The cup-bearing boys, giving bracelets
And rings to her husband's warriors. I heard
The oldest soldiers of all calling
For ale from Hrothgar's daughter's hands,
And Freaw was the way they greeted her when she
gave them
The golden cups. And Hrothgar will give her
To Ingeld, gracious Froda's son;
She and that ripening soldier will be married,
The Danes' great lord and protector has declared,
Hoping that his quarrel with the Hathobards can
be settled
By a woman. He's wrong: how many wars
Have been put to rest in a prince's bed?
Few. A bride can bring a little
Peace, make spears silent for a time,
But not long, Ingeld and all his men
Will be drinking in the hall, when the wedding is
done
And Freaw is his wife; the Danes will be wearing
Gleaming armor and ring-marked old swords;
And the prince and his people will remember those
treasures,
Will remember that their fathers once wore them, fell
With those helmets on their heads, those swords in
their hands.

Of his soldiers, sitting with ale in his cup
And bitterness heavy in his heart, will remember
War and death, and while he sits and drinks
His sharp old tongue will begin to tempt
Some younger warrior, pushing and probing
For a new war:

"That sword, that precious old blade
Over there, I think you know it, friend.
Your father carried it, fought with it the last time
He could swing a sword; the Danes killed him
—and many more of our men—and stripped
The dead bodies: the brave, bold Danes!
One of the princess' people, here,
Now, might be the murderer's son,
Boasting about his treasures, his ancient
Armor—which ought to be yours, by right."
"Bitter words will work in a hot-tempered
Brain, pushing up thoughts of the past,
And then, when he can, calling his father's
Name, the younger will kill some innocent
Dane, a servant—and bloody sword
In hand will run from the hall, knowing
His way through the woods. But war will begin
As he runs, to the sound of broken oaths,
And its heat will dry up Ingeld's heart,
Leave him indifferent to his Danish bride.
Hrothgar may think the Hathobards love him,
Loving Freaw, but the friendship can't last,
The vows are worthless.

"But of Grendel: you need to
Know more to know everything; I ought to
Go on. It was early in the evening, Heaven's
Jewel had slid to its rest, and the jealous
Monster, planning murder, came seeking us
Out, stalking us as we guarded Hrothgar's
Hall. Hondshew, sleeping in his armor,
Was the first Geat he reached: Grendel
Seized him, tore him apart, swallowed him
Down, feet and all, as fate
Had decreed—a glorious young soldier, killed
In his prime. Yet Grendel had only begun
His bloody work, meant to leave us
With his belly and his pouch both full, and Herot
Half-empty. Then he tested his strength against mine,
Hand to hand. His pouch hung
At his side, a huge bag sewn
From a dragon's skin, worked with a devil's
Skill; it was closed by a marvelous clasp.
The monster intended to take me, put me
Inside, save me for another meal.
He was bold and strong, but once I stood
On my feet his strength was useless, and it failed him.

"The whole tale of how I killed him,
Repaid him in kind for all the evil
He'd done, would take too long; your people,
My prince, were honored in the doing. He escaped,
Found a few minutes of life, but his hand,
His whole right arm, stayed in Herot;
The miserable creature crept away,
Dropped to the bottom of his lake, half dead
As he fell. When the sun had returned, the Danes"
With my life, my death was not written. And the Danes’ Protector, Healfdane’s great son, heaped up Treasures and precious jewels to reward me.

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“He lived his life as a good king must: I lost nothing, none of the gifts My strength could have earned me. He opened his store Of gems and armor, let me choose as I liked, So I could bring his riches to you, my ruler, And prove his friendship, and my love. Your favor Still governs my life: I have almost no family, Higlac, almost no one, now, but you.”

Then Beowulf ordered them to bring in the boardhead Banner, the towering helmet, the ancient Silvery armor, and the gold-carved sword: “This war-gear was Hrothgar’s reward, my gift From his wise old hands. He wanted me to tell you, First, whose treasures these were. Hergar Had owned them, his older brother, who was king Of Denmark until death gave Hrothgar the throne: But Hergar kept them, would not give them to Herward, His brave young son, though the boy had proved His loyalty. These are yours: may they serve you well!”

And after the gleaming armor four horses Were led in, four bays, swift and all Alike. Beowulf had brought his king Horses and treasure—as a man must,

Not weaving nets of malice for his comrades, Preparing their death in the dark, with secret, Cunning tricks. Higlac trusted His nephew, leaned on his strength, in war, Each of them intent on the other’s joy. And Beowulf gave Weland’s gift, her wonderful Necklace, to Higd, Higlac’s queen, And gave her, also, three supple, graceful, Saddle-bright horses; she received his presents, Then wore that wonderful jewel on her breast. So Edgith’s son proved himself; Did as a famous soldier must do If glory is what he seeks: not killing his comrades In drunken rages, his heart not savage. But guarding God’s gracious gift, his strength, Using it only in war, and then using it Bravely. And yet as a boy he was scorned; The Geats considered him worthless. When he sat In their mead-hall, and their lord was making men rich,

He held no claim on the king’s good will. They were sure he was lazy, noble but slow. The world spun round, he was a warrior more famous Than any, and all the insults were wiped out. Then Higlac, protector of his people, brought in His father’s—Beowulf’s grandfather’s—great sword, Worked in gold; none of the Geats Could boast of a better weapon. He laid it In Beowulf’s lap, then gave him seven Thousand hides of land, houses And ground and all. Geatland was home For both king and prince; their fathers had left them Buildings and fields—but Higlac’s inheritance Stretched further, it was he who was king, and was followed.

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead
And Héðred, his son, who’d ruled the Geats
After his father, had followed him into darkness—
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding
Their king—then, when Hild’s one son
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,
Took the throne he’d refused, once,
And held it long and well. He was old
With years and wisdom, fifty winters
A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness
And dreams and brought terror to his people. The beast.
Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden
Path beneath; a man stumbled on
The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient
Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold
The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and greedy
Stole a gem-studded cup, and fled.
But now the dragon hid nothing, neither
The theft nor itself; it swept through the darkness,
And all Geatland knew its anger.

Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,
Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,
Taking the jeweled cup.
That tower
Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there
Years before by the last survivor
Of a noble race, ancient riches
Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty
Came. Death had taken them, one
By one, and the warrior who watched over all
That remained mourned their fate, expecting,
Soon, the same for himself, knowing
The gold and jewels he had guarded so long
Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He brought
The precious cups, the armor and the ancient
Swords, to a stone tower built
Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed
Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves
In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:
"Take these treasures, earth, now that no one
Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning;
Allow them to return. War and terror
Have swept away my people, shut
Their eyes to delight and to living, closed
The door to all gladness. No one is left
To lift these swords, polish these jeweled
Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These ham-
mered
Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish
And crack; the hands that should clean and polish them
Are still forever. And these mail shirts, worn
In battle, once, while swords crashed
And blades bit into shields and men,
Will rust away like the warriors who owned them.
None of these treasures will travel to distant
Lands, following their lords. The harp’s
Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall
On its swift wings, the stallion trampling
In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every
Kind, and their masters, hurled to the gravel
And so he spoke, sadly, of those
Long dead, and lived from day to day,
Joyless, until, at last, death touched
His heart and took him too. And a stalker
In the night, a flaming dragon, found
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins
But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried
Itself with heathen silver and jewels
It could neither use nor ever abandon.
So mankind’s enemy, the mighty beast,
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds
Of years; a runaway slave roused it,
Stole a jeweled cup and bought
His master’s forgiveness, begged for mercy
And was pardoned when his delighted lord took
the present
He bore, turned it in his hands and stared
At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace
To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred
A dragon’s anger. It turned, hunting
The thief’s tracks, and found them, saw
Where its visitor had come and gone. He’d sur-
vived,
Had come close enough to touch its scaly
Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous
Jaws, through the grace of almighty God
And a pair of quiet, quick-moving feet.
The dragon followed his steps, anxious
To find the man who had robbed it of silver
And sleep; it circled around and around
The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,
He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.

The beast went back to its treasure, planning
A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,
Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
The hours till the Almighty’s candle went out,
And evening came, and wild with anger
It could fly burning across the land, killing
And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was
gone,
And its heart was glad: glowing with rage
It left the tower, impatient to repay
Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone
Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned
Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came
quickly.

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Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon
Burned down their homes. They watched in horror
As the flames rose up: the angry monster
Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs
Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness,
Visible for miles, tokens of its hate
And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats
Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back
To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn
Could come. It had wrapped its flames around
The Geats; now it trusted in stone
Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they
would not.
Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and an-
nounced
That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,
Had melted away in the dragon’s burning
Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf’s
Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused
Himself of breaking God’s law, of bringing
The Almighty’s anger down on his people.
Reproach pounded in his breast, gloomy
And dark, and the world seemed a different place,
But the hall was gone, the dragon’s molten
Breath had licked across it, burned it
To ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats
Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader
And lord, began to plan it, ordered
A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that
Wood would be useless, that no linden shield
Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
Of the beast’s breath. That noble prince
Would end his days on earth, soon,
Would leave this brief life, but would take the
dragon
With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure
It had guarded so long. And he’d go to it alone,
Scorning to lead soldiers against such
An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing
Of the beast’s claws, or wings, or flaming
Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse
Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher
Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar’s
Unlucky hall. He’d killed Grendel
And his mother, swept that murdering tribe
Away. And he’d fought in Higlac’s war
With the Frisians, fought at his lord’s side
Till a sword reached out and drank Higlac’s
Blood, till a blade swung in the rush
Of battle killed the Geats’ great king,
Then Beowulf escaped, broke through Frisian
Shields and swam to freedom, saving
Thirty sets of armor from the scavenging
Franks, river people who robbed
The dead as they floated by. Beowulf

Offered them only his sword, ended
So many jackal lives that the few
Who were able skulked silently home, glad
To leave him. So Beowulf swam sadly back
To Geatland, almost the only survivor
Of a foolish war. Higlac’s widow
Brought him the crown, offered him the kingdom,
Not trusting Herdred, her son and Higlac’s,
To beat off foreign invaders. But Beowulf
Refused to rule when his lord’s own son
Was alive, and the leaderless Geats could choose
A rightful king. He gave Herdred
All his support, offering an open
Heart where Higlac’s young son could see
Wisdom he still lacked himself: warmth
And good will were what Beowulf brought his new
king.

But Swedish exiles came, seeking
Protection; they were rebels against Onela,
Healfdane’s son-in-law and the best ring-giver
His people had ever known. And Onela
Came too, a mighty king, marched
On Geatland with a huge army; Herdred
Had given his word and now he gave
His life, shielding the Swedish strangers.
Onela wanted nothing more:
When Herdred had fallen that famous warrior
Went back to Sweden, let Beowulf rule!

But Beowulf remembered how his king had been
killed.
As soon as he could he lent the last
Of the Swedish rebels soldiers and gold,
Helped him to a bitter battle across
The wide sea, where victory, and revenge, and the Swedish
Throne were won, and Onela was slain.
So Edgith's son survived, no matter
What dangers he met, what battles he fought,
Brave and forever triumphant, till the day
Fate sent him to the dragon and sent him death.
A dozen warriors walked with their angry
King, when he was brought to the beast; Beowulf
Knew, by then, what had woken the monster,
And enraged it. The cup had come to him, traveled
From dragon to slave, to master, to king,
And the slave was their guide, had begun the Geats'
Affliction, and now, afraid of both beast
And men, was forced to lead them to the monster's
Hidden home. He showed them the huge
Stones, set deep in the ground, with the sea
Beating on the rocks close by. Beowulf
Stared, listening to stories of the gold
And riches hidden inside. Hidden,
But wakeful, now, the dragon waited,
Ready to greet him. Gold and hammered
Armor have been buried in pleasant places!
The battle-brave king rested on the shore,
While his soldiers wished him well, urged him
On. But Beowulf's heart was heavy:
His soul sensed how close fate
Had come, felt something, not fear but knowledge
Of old age. His armor was strong, but his arm
Hung like his heart. Body and soul
Might part, here; his blood might be spilled,
His spirit torn from his flesh. Then he spoke.
"My early days were full of war,
And I survived it all; I can remember everything.
I was seven years old when Hrethel opened
His home and his heart for me, when my king and lord

Took me from my father and kept me, taught me,
Gave me gold and pleasure, glad that I sat
At his knee. And he never loved me less
Than any of his sons—Herbald, the oldest
Of all, or Hathcyn, or Higlac, my lord.
Herbald died a horrible death,
Killed while hunting: Hathcyn, his brother,
Stretched his horn-tipped bow, sent
An arrow flying, but missed his mark
And hit Herbald instead, found him
With a bloody point and pierced him through.
The crime was great, the guilt was plain,
But nothing could be done, no vengeance, no death
To repay that death, no punishment, nothing.
"So with the graybeard whose son sins
Against the king, and is hanged: he stands
Watching his child swing on the gallows,
Lamenting, helpless, while his flesh and blood
Hangs for the raven to pluck. He can raise
His voice in sorrow, but revenge is impossible.
And every morning he remembers how his son
Died, and despairs; no son to come
Matters, no future heir, to a father
Forced to live through such misery. The place
Where his son once dwelled, before death compelled him
To journey away, is a windy wasteland,
Empty, cheerless; the childless father
Shudders, seeing it. So riders and ridden
Sleep in the ground; pleasure is gone,
The harp is silent, and hope is forgotten.
And then, crying his sorrow, he crawls
To his bed: the world, and his home, hurt him
With their emptiness. And so it seemed to Hrethel,
When Herwald was dead, and his heart swelled
With grief. The murderer lived; he felt
No love for him, now, but nothing could help,
Word nor hand nor sharp-honed blade,
War nor hate, battle or blood
Or law. The pain could find no relief,
He could only live with it, or leave grief and life
Together. When he'd gone to his grave Hæðcyn
And Higlac, his sons, inherited everything.
And then there was war between Geats and Swedes,
Bitter battles carried across
The broad sea, when the mighty Hrethel slept
And Ongentho's sons thought Sweden could safely
Attack, saw no use to pretending friendship
But raided and burned, and near old Rensburg
Slaughtered Geats with their thieving swords.
My people repaid them, death for death,
Battle for battle, though one of the brothers
Bought that revenge with his life—Hæðcyn,
King of the Geats, killed by a Swedish Sword. But when dawn came the slayer
Was slain, and Higlac's soldiers avenged
Everything with the edge of their blades. Efor
Caught the Swedish king, cracked
His helmet, split his skull, dropped him,
Pale and bleeding, to the ground, then put him
To death with a swift stroke, shouting
His joy. "The gifts that Higlac gave me,
And the land, I earned with my sword, as fate
Allowed: he never needed Danes
Or Goths or Swedes, soldiers and allies
Bought with gold, bribed to his side.
My sword was better, and always his,
In every battle my place was in front;
Alone, and so it shall be forever,
As long as this sword lasts, serves me
In the future as it has served me before. So
I killed Dagred, the Frank, who brought death
To Higlac, and who looted his corpse: Higd's
Necklace, Wethow's treasure, never
Came to Dagred's king. The thief
Fell in battle, but not on my blade.
He was brave and strong, but I swept him in my
arms,
Ground him against me till his bones broke,
Till his blood burst out. And now I shall fight
For this treasure, fight with both hand and sword."
And Beowulf uttered his final boast:
"I've never known fear; as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me."
Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:
"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes
to me
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"
Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on
his breast,
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked
there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and
shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Fought with fate against him, with glory
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped
him
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars: his weapon
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few brief hours on earth.
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.