

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
 Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
 Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
 Armor and gold and the great estates
 Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's
 Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
 Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
 Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's
 Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing
 The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought
 safety

With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf's
 father

Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,
 To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only
 Given him armor and sword and all,
 Everything his rebel nephew had owned
 And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
 Had kept those shining gifts, held them
 For years, waiting for his son to use them,
 Wear them as honorably and well as once
 His father had done; then Wexstan died
 And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures
 And weapons and land. He'd never worn
 That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf
 Called him to his side, led him into war.

But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;
 The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,
 When the rush of battle brought them together.

And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
 The kind of words his comrades deserved:
 "I remember how we sat in the mead-hall,
 drinking

And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf

Needed us, he who gave us these swords
 And armor: all of us swore to repay him,
 When the time came, kindness for kindness
 —With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us
 to join him,

Chose us from all his great army, thinking
 Our boasting words had some weight, believing
 Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
 For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
 This monster himself, our mighty king,
 Fight this battle alone and unaided,
 As in the days when his strength and daring daz-
 zled

Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone
 And now our lord must lean on younger

Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
 Flames burn at his flesh, help
 Our glorious king! By almighty God,
 I'd rather burn myself than see
 Flames swirling around my lord.

And who are we to carry home
 Our shields before we've slain his enemy
 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
 So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
 He ever did deserved an end

Like this, dying miserably and alone,
 Butchered by this savage beast: we swore
 That these swords and armor were each for us all!"

Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement
 As he dove through the dragon's deadly fumes:

"Belovèd Beowulf, remember how you boasted,
 Once, that nothing in the world would ever
 Destroy your fame: fight to keep it,
 Now, be strong and brave, my noble
 King, protecting life and fame

Together. My sword will fight at your side!"
 The dragon heard him, the man-hating monster,
 And was angry; shinning with surging flames
 It came for him, anxious to return his visit.

Waves of fire swept at his shield
 And the edge began to burn. His mail shirt
 Could not help him, but before his hands dropped
 The blazing wood Wiglaf jumped
 Behind Beowulf's shield; his own was burned
 To ashes. Then the famous old hero, remembering
 Days of glory, lifted what was left
 Of Nagling, his ancient sword, and swung it
 With all his strength, smashed the gray
 Blade into the beast's head. But then Nagling
 Broke to pieces, as iron always
 Had in Beowulf's hands. His arms
 Were too strong, the hardest blade could not help
 him,

The most wonderfully worked. He carried them to
 war

But fate had decreed that the Geats' great king
 Would be no better for any weapon.

Then the monster charged again, vomiting
 Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
 Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
 Watching for its chance it drove its tusks
 Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood
 Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

2675

2680

2685

2690

And then when Beowulf needed him most
 Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
 And skill, and the boldness he was born with.
 Ignoring
 The dragon's head, he helped his lord
 By striking lower down. The sword

2695

Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
 Blade had done its work, the dragon's
 Belching flames began to flicker
 And die away. And Beowulf drew
 His battle-sharp dagger: the blood-stained old king
 Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
 The beast in half, slit it apart.

It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble
 Cousins had joined in the dragon's death.
 Yet what they did all men must do

When the time comes! But the triumph was the last
 Beowulf would ever earn, the end
 Of greatness and life together. The wound
 In his neck began to swell and grow;

He could feel something stirring, burning
 In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew
 The beast's fangs had left it. He fumbled

Along the wall, found a slab
 Of stone, and dropped down; above him he saw
 Huge stone arches and heavy posts,
 Holding up the roof of that giant hall.

Then Wiglaf's gentle hands bathed
 The blood-stained prince, his glorious lord,
 Weary of war, and loosened his helmet.
 Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,
 Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound
 His string of days on earth, seen
 As much as God would grant him; all worldly
 Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
 Soon:

"I'd leave my armor to my son,
 Now, if God had given me an heir,
 A child born of my body, his life
 Created from mine. I've worn this crown
 For fifty winters: no neighboring people
 Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
 Against us or talked of terror. My days
 Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
 For its word to be spoken, ruling as well

2700

2705

2710

2715

2720

2725

2730

2735

As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
 Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
 This life happy; I can die, here,
 Knowing the Lord of all life has never
 Watched me wash my sword in blood
 Born of my own family. Belovèd
 Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
 The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,
 But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
 Bring me ancient silver, precious
 Jewels, shining armor and gems,
 Before I die. Death will be softer,
 Leaving life and this people I've ruled
 So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

2740

2745

2750

38

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
 As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
 Asked, entered the inner darkness
 Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his
 sword.
 Flushed with victory he groped his way,
 A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
 Piles of gleaming gold, precious
 Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
 And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
 Made but rotting with no hands to rub
 And polish them. They lay where the dragon left
 them;
 It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
 Its final battle. (So gold can easily

2755

2760

Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
 No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
 Hanging high above, a golden
 Banner, woven by the best of weavers
 And beautiful. And over everything he saw
 A strange light, shining everywhere,
 On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
 Moved, no other monsters appeared;
 He took what he wanted, all the treasures
 That pleased his eye, heavy plates
 And golden cups and the glorious banner,
 Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
 Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,
 Had finished the fire-spitting terror
 That once protected tower and treasures
 Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
 Had ended those flying, burning raids
 Forever.

2765

2770

2775

2780

2785

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
 To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
 Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
 Hoping his wounded king, weak
 And dying, had not left the world too soon.
 Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and
 found

2790

2795

His famous king bloody, gasping
 For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
 Over his lord, until the words
 Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
 Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
 "For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
 Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
 For all of this, that His grace has given me,
 Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
 Still came to my lips. I sold my life
 For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
 What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
 Help them; my time is gone. Have
 The brave Geats build me a tomb,

2800

When the funeral flames have burned me, and
build it

Here, at the water's edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."

Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them
well:

"You're the last of all our far-flung family.
Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow
them."

The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

39

And then Wiglaf was left, a young warrior
Sadly watching his beloved king,
Seeing him stretched on the ground, left guarding
A torn and bloody corpse. But Beowulf's
Killer was dead, too, the coiled
Dragon, cut in half, cold
And motionless: men, and their swords, had swept it
From the earth, left it lying in front of

Its tower, won its treasure when it fell
Crashing to the ground, cut it apart
With their hammered blades, driven them deep in
Its belly. It would never fly through the night,
Glowing in the dark sky, glorying
In its riches, burning and raiding: two warriors
Had shown it their strength, slain it with their
swords.

Not many men, no matter how strong,
No matter how daring, how bold, had done
As well, rushing at its venomous fangs,
Or even quietly entering its tower,
Intending to steal but finding the treasure's
Guardian awake, watching and ready
To greet them. Beowulf had gotten its gold,
Bought it with blood; dragon and king
Had ended each other's days on earth.

And when the battle was over Beowulf's fol-
lowers

Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's
Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay
dead,

And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
Near Beowulf's body, wearily sprinkling
Water in the dead man's face, trying
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
Life in their lord's body, or turned
Aside the Lord's will: world
And men and all move as He orders,
And always have, and always will.

Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
"I say what anyone who speaks the truth

Must say. Your lord gave you gifts,
 Swords and the armor you stand in now;
 You sat on the mead-hall benches, prince
 And followers, and he gave you, with open hands,
 Helmets and mail shirts, hunted across
 The world for the best of weapons. War
 Came and you ran like cowards, dropped
 Your swords as soon as the danger was real.
 Should Beowulf have boasted of your help, rejoiced
 In your loyal strength? With God's good grace
 He helped himself, swung his sword
 Alone, won his own revenge.
 The help I gave him was nothing, but all
 I was able to give; I went to him, knowing
 That nothing but Beowulf's strength could save us,
 And my sword was lucky, found some vital
 Place and bled the burning flames
 Away. Too few of his warriors remembered
 To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
 And now the giving of swords, of golden
 Rings and rich estates, is over,
 Ended for you and everyone who shares
 Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
 How you bolted and ran none of your race
 Will have anything left but their lives. And death
 Would be better for them all, and for you, than
 the kind
 Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!"

2865

2870

2875

2880

2885

2890

Then Wiglaf ordered a messenger to ride
 Across the cliff, to the Geats who'd waited

The morning away, sadly wondering
 If their beloved king would return, or be killed,
 A troop of soldiers sitting in silence
 And hoping for the best. Whipping his horse
 The herald came to them; they crowded around,
 And he told them everything, present and past:
 "Our lord is dead, leader of this people.
 The dragon killed him, but the beast is dead,
 Too, cut in half by a dagger;
 Beowulf's enemy sleeps in its blood.
 No sword could pierce its skin, wound
 That monster. Wiglaf is sitting in mourning,
 Close to Beowulf's body, Wexstan's
 Weary son, silent and sad,
 Keeping watch for our king, there
 Where Beowulf and the beast that killed him lie
 dead.
 "And this people can expect fighting, once
 The Franks, and the Frisians, have heard that our
 king
 Lies dead. The news will spread quickly.
 Higlac began our bitter quarrel
 With the Franks, raiding along their river
 Rhine with ships and soldiers, until
 They attacked him with a huge army, and Higlac
 Was killed, the king and many of our men,
 Mailed warriors defeated in war,
 Beaten by numbers. He brought no treasure
 To the mead-hall, after that battle. And ever
 After we knew no friendship with the Franks.
 "Nor can we expect peace from the Swedes.
 Everyone knows how their old king,
 Ongentho, killed Hathcyn, caught him
 Near a wood when our young lord went
 To war too soon, dared too much.
 The wise old Swede, always terrible
 In war, allowed the Geats to land
 And begin to loot, then broke them with a lightning
 Attack, taking back treasure and his kidnaped

2895

2900

2905

2910

2915

2920

2925

2930

Followed, sweeping across the field,
 Smashing through the walls, waving Higlac's
 Banners as they came. Then the gray-haired old
 king
 Was brought to bay, bright sword-blades
 Forcing the lord of the Swedes to take
 Judgment at Efor's hands. Efor's
 Brother, Wulf, raised his weapon
 First, swung it angrily at the fierce
 Old king, cracked his helmet; blood
 Seeped through his hair. But the brave old Swede
 Felt no fear: he quickly returned
 A better blow than he'd gotten, faced
 Toward Wulf and struck him savagely. And Efor's
 Bold brother was staggered, half raised his sword
 But only dropped it to the ground. Ongentho's
 Blade had cut through his helmet, his head
 Spouted blood, and slowly he fell.
 The wound was deep, but death was not due
 So soon; fate let him recover, live
 On. But Efor, his brave brother,
 Seeing Wulf fall, came forward with his broad-
 bladed
 Sword, hammered by giants, and swung it
 So hard that Ongentho's shield shattered
 And he sank to the earth, his life ended.
 Then, with the battlefield theirs, the Geats
 Rushed to Wulf's side, raised him up
 And bound his wound. Wulf's brother
 Stripped the old Swede, took
 His iron mail shirt, his hilted sword
 And his helmet, and all his ancient war-gear,
 And brought them to Higlac, his new lord.
 The king welcomed him, warmly thanked him
 For his gifts and promised, there where everyone
 Could hear, that as soon as he sat in his mead-hall
 Again Efor and Wulf would have treasure
 Heaped in their battle-hard hands; he'd repay them
 Their bravery with wealth, give them gold

Queen, and taking our king's life.
 And then he followed his beaten enemies,
 Drove them in front of Swedish swords
 Until darkness dropped, and weary, lordless,
 They could hide in the wood. But he waited,
 Ongentho
 With his mass of soldiers, circled around
 The Geats who'd survived, who'd escaped him,
 calling
 Threats and boasts at that wretched band
 The whole night through. In the morning he'd hang
 A few, he promised, to amuse the birds,
 Then slaughter the rest. But the sun rose
 To the sound of Higlac's horns and trumpets,
 Light and that battle cry coming together
 And turning sadhearted Geats into soldiers.
 Higlac had followed his people, and found them.
 "Then blood was everywhere, two bands of Geats
 Falling on the Swedes, men fighting
 On all sides, butchering each other.
 Sadly, Ongentho ordered his soldiers
 Back, to the high ground where he'd built
 A fortress; he'd heard of Higlac, knew
 His boldness and strength. Out in the open
 He could never resist such a soldier, defend
 Hard-won treasure, Swedish wives
 And children, against the Geats' new king.
 Brave but wise, he fled, sought safety
 Behind earthen walls. Eagerly, the Geats

And lands and silver rings, rich rewards for the
 glorious
 Deeds they'd done with their swords. The Geats
 agreed. And to prove
 Efor's grace in his eyes, Higlac
 swore he'd give him his only daughter.
 "These are the quarrels, the hatreds, the feuds,
 That will bring us battles, force us into war
 With the Swedes, as soon as they've learned how
 our lord

Is dead, know that the Geats are leaderless,
 Have lost the best of kings, Beowulf—
 He who held our enemies away,
 Kept land and treasure intact, who saved
 Hrothgar and the Danes—he who lived
 All his long life bravely. Then let us
 Go to him, hurry to our glorious lord,
 Behold him lifeless, and quickly carry him
 To the flames. The fire must melt more
 Than his bones, more than his share of treasure:

Give it all of this golden pile,
 This terrible, uncounted heap of cups
 And rings, bought with his blood. Burn it
 To ashes, to nothingness. No one living
 Should enjoy these jewels; no beautiful women
 Wear them, gleaming and golden, from their necks,
 But walk, instead, sad and alone
 In a hundred foreign lands, their laughter
 Gone forever, as Beowulf's has gone,
 His pleasure and his joy. Spears shall be lifted,
 Many cold mornings, lifted and thrown,
 And warriors shall waken to no harp's bright call
 But the croak of the dark-black raven, ready
 To welcome the dead, anxious to tell
 The eagle how he stuffed his craw with corpses,
 Filled his belly even faster than the wolves."
 And so the messenger spoke, a brave
 Man on an ugly errand, telling
 Only the truth. Then the warriors rose,

Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared
 At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they

saw
 Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold
 Ring-giver resting in his last bed;
 He'd reached the end of his days, their mighty
 War-king, the great lord of the Geats,
 Gone to a glorious death. But they saw
 The dragon first, stretched in front

Of its tower, a strange, scaly beast
 Gleaming a dozen colors dulled and
 Scorched in its own heat. From end
 To end fifty feet, it had flown

In the silent darkness, a swift traveler
 Tasting the air, then gliding down
 To its den. Death held it in his hands;
 It would guard no caves, no towers, keep
 No treasures like the cups, the precious plates
 Spread where it lay, silver and brass
 Encrusted and rotting, eaten away
 As though buried in the earth for a thousand
 winters.

And all this ancient hoard, huge
 And golden, was wound around with a spell:
 No man could enter the tower, open
 Hidden doors, unless the Lord
 Of Victories, He who watches over men,
 Almighty God Himself, was moved
 To let him enter, and him alone.

Hiding that treasure deep in its tower,
 As the dragon had done, broke God's law
 And brought it no good. Guarding its stolen
 Wealth it killed Wiglaf's king,
 But was punished with death. Who knows when
 princes
 And their soldiers, the bravest and strongest of
 men,
 Are destined to die, their time ended.
 Their homes, their halls empty and still?
 So Beowulf sought out the dragon, dared it
 Into battle, but could never know what God
 Had decreed, or that death would come to him, or
 why.
 So the spell was solemnly laid, by men
 Long dead; it was meant to last till the day
 Of judgment. Whoever stole their jewels,
 Their gold, would be cursed with the flames of hell,
 Heaped high with sin and guilt, if greed
 Was what brought him: God alone could break
 Their magic, open His grace to man.
 Then Wiglaf spoke, Wexstan's son:
 "How often an entire country suffers
 On one man's account! That time has come to us:
 We tried to counsel our beloved king,
 Our shield and protection, show him danger,
 Urge him to leave the dragon in the dark
 Tower it had lain in so long, live there
 Till the end of the world. Fate, and his will,
 Were too strong. Everyone knows the treasure
 His life bought: but Beowulf was worth
 More than this gold, and the gift is a harsh one.
 I've seen it all, been in the tower
 Where the jewels and armor were hidden, allowed
 To behold them once war and its terror were done.
 I gathered them up, gold and silver,
 Filled my arms as full as I could

3060

3065

3070

3075

3080

3085

3090

And quickly carried them back to my king.
 He lay right here, still alive,
 Still sure in mind and tongue. He spoke
 Sadly, said I should greet you, asked
 That after you'd burned his body you bring
 His ashes here, make this the tallest
 Of towers and his tomb—as great and lasting
 As his fame, when Beowulf himself walked
 The earth and no man living could match him.
 Come, let us enter the tower, see
 The dragon's marvelous treasure one
 Last time: I'll lead the way, take you
 Close to that heap of curious jewels,
 And rings, and gold. Let the pyre be ready
 And high: as soon as we've seen the dragon's
 Hoard we will carry our beloved king,
 Our leader and lord, where he'll lie forever
 In God's keeping." Then Wiglaf commanded
 The wealthiest Geats, brave warriors
 And owners of land, leaders of his people,
 To bring wood for Beowulf's funeral:
 "Now the fire must feed on his body,
 Flames grow heavy and black with him
 Who endured arrows falling in iron
 Showers, feathered shafts, barbed
 And sharp, shot through linden shields,
 Storms of eager arrowheads dropping."
 And Wexstan's wise son took seven
 Of the noblest Geats, led them together
 Down the tunnel, deep into the dragon's
 Tower; the one in front had a torch,
 Held it high in his hands. The best
 Of Beowulf's followers entered behind
 That gleaming flame: seeing gold
 And silver rotting on the ground, with no one
 To guard it, the Geats were not troubled with
 scruples
 Or fears, but quickly gathered up

3095

3100

3105

3110

3115

3120

3125

Treasure and carried it out of the tower.
 And they rolled the dragon down to the cliff
 And dropped it over, let the ocean take it,
 The tide sweep it away. Then silver
 And gold and precious jewels were put
 On a wagon, with Beowulf's body, and brought
 Down the jutting sand, where the pyre waited.

43

A huge heap of wood was ready,
 Hung around with helmets, and battle
 Shields, and shining mail shirts, all
 As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought
 Their beloved lord, their glorious king,
 And weeping laid him high on the wood.
 Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
 Of funeral fires; smoke rose
 Above the flames, black and thick,
 And while the wind blew and the fire
 Roared they wept, and Beowulf's body
 Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,
 Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord:
 A gnarled old woman, hair wound
 Tight and gray on her head, groaned
 A song of misery, of infinite sadness
 And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow
 To come, slaughter and terror and captivity.
 And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke.
 Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
 Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
 Could find it from far and wide; working
 For ten long days they made his monument,

Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
 And high as wise and willing hands
 Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
 Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
 Ancient, hammered armor—all
 The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
 Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
 Ground, back in the earth, again
 And forever hidden and useless to men.
 And then twelve of the bravest Geats
 Rode their horses around the tower,
 Telling their sorrow, telling stories
 Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
 Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
 As noble as his name. So should all men
 Raise up words for their lords, warm
 With love, when their shield and protector leaves
 His body behind, sends his soul
 On high. And so Beowulf's followers
 Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
 Crying that no better king had ever
 Lived, no prince so mild, no man
 So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

THE END

3130

3155

3140

3145

3150

3155