Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where Grendel’s mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he dives to the depths of this watery hell.

THE MONSTER’S MOTHER

5

... He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone’s answer; the heaving water covered him. Over. For hours he sank through the waves. At last he saw the mud of the bottom. And all at once the greedy she-wolf who’d ruled those waters for half a hundred years discovered him, saw that a creature from above had come to explore the bottom of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws, Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him, tried to work her fingers through the tight ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore and scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor and sword and all, to her home; he struggled to free his weapon, and failed. The fight brought other monsters swimming to see his catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at his mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth, as they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly, that she’d brought him into someone’s battle-hall, and there the water’s heat could not hurt him,

nor anything in the lake attack him through the building’s high-arching roof. A brilliant light burned all around him, the lake itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw the mighty water witch, and swung his sword, his ring-marked blade, straight at her head; the iron sang its fierce song; sang Beowulf’s strength. But her guest discovered that no sword could slice her evil skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless. Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped and tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet, and that too failed him: for the first time in years of being worn to war it would earn no glory; it was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf longed only for fame, leaped back into battle. He tossed his sword aside, angry, the steel-edged blade lay where he’d dropped it. If weapons were useless he’d use his hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame comes to the man who means to win it and care about nothing else! He raised his arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor. She fell. Grendel’s fierce mother, and the Geats’ proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she raised herself again, and repaid him with her clenching claws, wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best and strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled and in an instant she had him down, held helpless.

Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew a dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared to avenge her only son. But he was stretched on his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted by the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.

The hammered links held; the point could not touch him. He’d have traveled to the bottom of the earth, Edgitho’s son, and died there, if that shining woven metal had not helped—and Holy God, who sent him victory, gave judgment.

For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens, once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy sword, hammered by giants, strong and blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons. But so massive that no ordinary man could lift its carved and decorated length. He drew it from its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,

and, then, savage, now, angry and desperate, lifted it high over his head. And struck with all the strength he had left, caught her in the neck and cut it through, broke bones and all. Her body fell to the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet with her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

The brilliant light shone, suddenly, as though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven’s glory.
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword.

260
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel’s vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar’s

265
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,

270
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.
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