

This is my own interpretation of the ending of the old English epic poem *Beowulf*.

An uproarious cheer tore through the hall, thunderous and booming. The rafters quivered under the barrage of sound, like feeble lungs bowing to the strain of disease, and the arm, flung carelessly up high, wobbled ever so slightly. Yet the men paid no heed, seized by elation and drunk on the prospect of festivity. They swarmed the hall like frenzied ants.

Beowulf's lips cracked as his smile reached from ear to ear, two mountain peaks accentuating his cheeks. He countered the clamor with a cry of his own, a whooping that burst from deep within his chest. At this the men only howled louder, fueling the frenzy, slapping each other across the room. Beowulf lost himself among the confusion, amidst the promises of treasure unimaginable and a banquet that would satisfy even the giants that dwell beyond the hills. Before long, mead spilled into the hall, a glinting river of amber that soon would seep through the cracks in the walls.

And still above sat the arm, perched in the rafters solemnly, silently. Without eyes, it watched.

And while the celebration pressed on, Grendel lamented his circumstance. A touch of grief marred his ugly features as he agonized over the loss of his arm—that wretched arm that would now be a trophy prized among men. For generations, man would hold that arm, as clammy and grotesque as it may be, and recount the glory of Beowulf as he had slain the foul beast once plaguing Hrothgar's kingdom. Grendel scowled in bitter distaste.

Even from his cave nestled deep in the moorlands, swamped by viscous marsh, he could still hear the hearty laughter that poured from Herot. The broth in his belly turned sour. The stump of his arm throbbed violently, a rhythmic tempo that synced with the beat of his heart. He

released a ferocious cry, perhaps one that would even penetrate the walls of Herot, but nothing stirred aside from the ever-present mist drifting along the face of the pond. Grendel sat, moaning, “My arm! My wretched arm has been torn away from my body! O, woe!”

With intent set in his beady eyes, he left the security of his cave and ventured out into the moorlands, past the lake, up the hill to where Herot stood, proud and firm. Despite the blood spurting from his arm, drenching the ground where he had trodden, Grendel stepped toward Herot, and the jovial laughter resounding across the valley rekindled the flame of conviction burning within his chest.

He threw open the hall doors, and the muggy, mead-filled air splashed his senses. The candlelight shivered, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The fireplace roared intensely, undaunted by his entrance, rising higher and higher with the flame in his chest. Men hollered and shrieked—their rationale blunted by the effects of alcohol, and the lighthearted chaos that once reigned had now been snuffed out. Only Beowulf stood tall in the mead hall, steady gaze drilling into Grendel’s figure.

Grendel took a step forward, stump still bleeding profusely, and called out in a language unknown. “My arm! I have come to retrieve my arm from you savage beasts!” He almost cackled at the irony of calling them beasts.

Beowulf, with no noise, launched forward, cheeks rosy and hair disheveled. The sides of his lips curled upward. Grendel’s innards coiled like snakes, yet he stood. And with but one arm to aid him, he slashed at Beowulf, cursed him with all his might, with all the blistering fire in his chest, and lunged. The two engaged in a twisting dance, as Beowulf slung himself around the beast with crushing strength. Grendel felt his bones slowly cracking, the fire in his chest burning brighter than before. In one fell swoop, he hurled Beowulf from his back, sighing in relief at the

loss of weight, and tore into Beowulf once more, though none of his swipes even glanced the warrior's armor.

“Here, men, here! Toss me thy sword!” Beowulf yelled, arm outstretched. The nearest warrior tossed his sword, and without missing a beat, Beowulf caught it with ease, the hilt sliding into his fist.

“But sir—Grendel's vex has blunted our weapons!” one of Hrothgar's men cried.

“That may be so, but my strength is so great that I may slay this beast with naught but a flat sword,” Beowulf said.

Grendel would have scoffed had rage not bound him with steel chains. The race that God had left untouched—humans—had been created in His divine image, and Grendel, though a hellbeast to be damned for all eternity upon his slaughter, felt disgust ripple through him. He took one look at the arm, now dangling, and once again did a primal ferocity seize him.

Grendel stood taller than ever before, his scaly hide shimmering under the dim candlelight. The so-called hero seemed to stagger backward before once again regaining his foothold, but apprehension clung to his every fiber. Grendel surveyed the crowd to glean if they had witnessed Beowulf's momentary weakness, but none had. No matter—he would strip Beowulf of his self-assured exterior and expose the soft, vulnerable inside. Because every man, when reduced to nothing but flesh and bone and sinew, boasted no strength.

Beowulf lurched forward upon Grendel's approach, but he masked this sloppy reaction with a blow from his sword. It clipped the beast's calloused skin, leaving no mark in its wake. Grendel heaved a maniacal laugh, though everyone in the hall thought it to be a war cry. The gallant hero did not falter this time, swinging his sword and striking Grendel's side. The beast

clutched his side with his one arm and keeled over, on his knees, like a priest in prayer. He mocked the thought.

Grendel felt his life escaping with every drop of blood that stained the floorboards. His eyes were drooping, and the thumping in his chest had dwindled to nothing but mouse feet. His back hit the floor, and in that moment, Beowulf brought the sword above his head, breaths ragged and cheeks rosy from exhaustion. Grendel, from his position on the floor, glared at the arm perched atop the rafters, cursing the unfairness of it all, watching as the sword drew closer. He stared at Beowulf, feeling oh-so-helpless as the hero towered above him, more menacing than God had ever appeared in his night terrors. Would he meet this God who had cursed him in the afterlife, or even then would he be barred from salvation, left to mull over eternal punishment? Grendel did not like to contemplate this, but in his final moments, he had nothing to cling to.

“Curse this god of yours, so high and mighty atop his elusive throne! Curse this race that he blessed while I am to rot away in the deepest expanses of hell! Curse you, Beowulf—you who are so revered for acting upon the most basic of human impulses, massacring everything in your path. I cannot roll over and die,” he howled, and Beowulf almost comprehended the words.

Beowulf hesitated no longer and swung downward, sword perpendicular to the floor. But Grendel, with his final breaths, rolled to the side, out of range, and Beowulf could not stop the momentum; his swing had been too reckless and strength too overwhelming. There was no time for even a single thought to cross his mind—not one of dread, not one of acceptance, only the vast nothingness of a man’s mind whose thinking could not keep step with his movements.

The sword, though blunted, impaled his forehead, sealing the hero’s tragic demise. Felled by his own hand, Beowulf dropped to the floor, head propped up by the sword but body limp. Grendel had not stirred, and the crowd could only gape in horror and morbid curiosity at the two

bodies on the floor. Two opposites, tempted into battle by creeds of their own making, now fallen. The hall went silent, as if everyone were collectively slumbering. Only the arm stirred, plummeting to the floor. It was then, gawking at the arm, that the crowd could determine no clear victor.