

LEGENDARY HEROES

by Ben Bova

For the first time that bitterly cold winter, Heorot was bright again, ringing with song and a king's gratitude to the hero. Then the beast roared, out in the icy darkness.

"But he's dead!" King Hrothgar bellowed, pointing to the shaggy monster's arm that now was affixed over the mead-hall's entrance doorway. "I killed him," exclaimed Beowulf, "with these bare hands."

Hrothgar turned to his queen, Wealhtheow, sitting beside him on the dais between the royal torches. She was as beautiful as a starry spring night, her raven-dark hair tumbling past her shoulders, her lustrous gray eyes focused beyond the beyond.

Wealhtheow was a seer. Gripping the carved arms of her throne, shuddering under the spell of her magic, she pronounced in a hollow voice, "The monster is truly dead. Now its mate has come to claim vengeance upon us."

Hrothgar turned as white as his beard. His thanes, who had been sloshing mead and singing their old battle songs, fell into the silence of cold terror.

The captives from Britain huddled together in sudden fear in the far corner of the hall. I could see the dread in their faces. Hrothgar had planned to sacrifice them to his gods if Beowulf had not killed the monster. For a few brief hours they had thought they would be freed. Now the horror had returned.

I turned to gaze upon the lovely Queen Wealhtheow. She was much younger than Hrothgar, yet her divine gray eyes seemed to hold the wisdom of eternity. And she was staring directly at me. How and why I was in Heorot I had no idea. I could remember nothing beyond the day we had arrived on the Scylding shore, pulling on the oars of our longboat against the freezing spray of the tide.

My name is Orion, that much I knew. And I serve Beowulf, hero of the Geats, who had sailed to far-off Daneland to kill the monster that had turned timbered Heorot, the hall of the stag, from King Hrothgar's great pride to his great sorrow. For months the monster had stalked Heorot, striking by night when the warriors had drunk themselves into mead-besotted dreams. At length none would enter the great hall, not even stubborn old Hrothgar himself. Until Beowulf arrived with the fourteen of us and loudly proclaimed that he would kill the beast that very night.

Beowulf was a huge warrior, two ax handles across the shoulders, with flaxen braids to his waist and eyes as clear blue as the icy water of a fiord. Strength he had, and courage. Also, he was a boaster of unparalleled brashness.

The very night he came to Heorot with his fourteen companions he swaggered so hard that narrow-eyed Unferth, the most cunning of the Scylding thanes, tried to take him down a peg. Beowulf bested him in a bragging contest and won the roars of Hrothgar's mead-soaked companions.

After midnight Hrothgar and his Scyldings left the hall. The torches were put out, the hearth fire sank to low, glowering embers. It was freezing cold; I could hear the wind moaning outside. Beowulf and the rest of us stretched out to sleep. My shirt of chain mail felt like ice against my skin. I dilated my peripheral blood vessels and increased my heart rate, to make

myself warmer, without even asking myself how I knew to do this.

I had volunteered to stay awake and keep watch. I could go for days without sleep and the others were glad to let me do it. We had all drunk many tankards of honey-sweetened mead, yet my body burned away its effects almost immediately.

I felt alert, aware, strong.

Through the keening wind and bitter chill I could sense the monster shambling about in the night outside, looking for more victims to slaughter.

I sat up and grasped my sword an instant before the beast burst through the massive double doors of the mead-hall, snarling and slaving. The others scattered in every direction, shrieking, eyes wide with fear.

I felt terror grip my heart, too.

As I stared at the approaching monster I recalled a giant cave bear, in another time, another life. It had ripped me apart with its razor-sharp claws. It had crushed my bones in its fanged jaws. It had killed me.

Beowulf leaped to his feet and charged straight at the monster. It rose onto its hind legs, twice the height of a warrior, and knocked Beowulf aside with a swat of one mighty paw. His sword went flying out of his hand as he landed flat on his back with a thud that shook the pounded-earth floor.

Everything seemed to slow down into a dreamy, sluggish lethargy. I saw Beowulf scrambling to his feet, but slowly, languidly, as if he moved through a thick invisible quagmire. I could see the beast's eyes moving in his head, globs of spittle forming between his pointed teeth and dropping slowly, slowly to the earthen floor.

Beowulf charged again, bare-handed this time. The monster focused on him, spread its forelegs out as if to embrace this pitiful fool and then crush him. I ducked beneath those sharp-clawed paws and rammed my sword into the beast's belly, up to the hilt, and then hacksawed upward.

Blood spurted over me. The monster bellowed with pain and fury and knocked me sideways across the hall. Beowulf leaped on its back, as languidly as in a dream. The others were gathering their senses now, hacking at the beast with their swords. I got to my feet just as the brute dropped ponderously back onto all fours and started for the shattered door, my sword still jammed into its gut.

One of the men got too close and the monster snatched him in its jaws and crushed the life out of him. I shook at the memory, but I took up Beowulf's dropped sword and swung as hard as I could at the beast's shoulder. The blade hit bone and stuck. The beast howled again and tried to shake Beowulf off its back. He pitched forward, grabbed at the sword sticking in its shoulder and wormed it through the tendons of the joint like a butcher carving a roast.

Howling, the monster shook free of him again, but Beowulf clutched its leg while the rest of us hacked away. Blood splattered everywhere, men roared and screamed.

And then the beast shambled for the door, with Beowulf still clutching its leg. The leg tore off and the monster stumbled out into the night, howling with pain, its life's blood spurting from its wounds.

That was why we feasted and sang at Heorot the following night. Until the beast's mate

roared its cry of vengeance against us.

"I raid the coast of Britain," Hrothgar cried angrily, "and sack the cities of the Franks. Yet in my own hall I must cower like a weak woman!"

"Fear not, mighty king," Beowulf answered bravely. "Just as I killed the monster will I slay its mate. And this time I will do it alone!"

Absolute silence fell over Heorot.

Then the king spoke. "Do this and you can have your choice of reward. Anything in my kingdom will be yours!"

Before Beowulf could reply, sly Unferth spoke up. "You have no sword, mighty warrior."

"It was carried off by the dying monster," Beowulf said.

"Here then, take mine." Unferth unbuckled the sword at his waist and handed it to the hero.

Beowulf pulled the blade from its scabbard and whistled it through the air. "A good blade and true. I will return it you, Unferth, with the monster's blood on it."

Everyone shouted approval, even the British captives. There were an even dozen of them: eleven young boys and girls, none yet in their teens, and a wizened old man with big, staring eyes and a beard even whiter than Hrothgar's.

The monster roared outside again, and silenced the cheers.

Beowulf strode to the patched-up door of the mead hall, Unferth's sword in his mighty right hand.

"Let no one follow me!" he cried.

No one did. We all stood stunned and silent as he marched out into the dark. I turned slightly and saw that Unferth was smiling cruelly, his lips forming a single word: "Fool."

"Orion." Queen Wealhtheow called my name.

She stepped down from the royal dais and walked through the crowd toward me. The others seemed frozen, like statues, staring sightlessly at the door. Hrothgar did not move, did not even breathe, as his queen approached me. The Scylding thanes, Beowulf's other companions, even the frightened British captives -- none of them blinked or breathed or twitched.

"They are in stasis, Orion," Wealhtheow said as she came within arm's reach of me. "They can neither see nor hear us."

Those infinite gray eyes of hers seemed to show me worlds upon worlds, lifetimes I had led -- we had led together -- in other epochs, other worldlines.

"Do you remember me, Orion?"

"I love you," I whispered, knowing it was true. "I have loved you through all of spacetime."

"Yes, my love. What more do you remember?"

It was like clawing at a high smooth stone wall. I shook my head. "Nothing. I don't even know why I'm here -- why you're here."

"You remember nothing of the Creators? Of your previous missions?"

"The Creators." Vaguely I recalled godlike men and women. "Aten."

"Yes," she said. "Aten."

He created me and sent me through spacetime to do his bidding. Haughty and mad with power, he called me his tool, his hunter. More often I was an assassin for him.

"I remember...the snow, the time of eternal cold." But it was all like the misty tendrils of a dream, wafting away even as I reached for them.

"I was with you then," she said.

"The cave bear. It killed me." I could feel the pain of my ribs being crushed, hear my own screams drowned in spouting blood.

"You've lived many lives."

"And died many deaths."

"Yes, my poor darling. You have suffered much."

She was one of the Creators, I realized. I loved a goddess. And she loved me. Yet we were destined to be torn away from each other, time and again, over the eons and lightyears of the continuum.

"This beast that ravaged Heorot was not a natural animal," she told me. "It was engendered and controlled by one of the Creators."

"Which one? Aten?"

She shook her head. "It makes no difference. I am here to see that the beast does not succeed. You must help me."

Deep in my innermost memories I recalled that the Creators squabbled among themselves like spoiled children. They directed the course of human history and sent minions such as me to points in spacetime to carry out their whims. Many times I have killed for Aten, and many times have I died for him. Yet he brings me back, sneering at my pains and fears, and sends me out again.

I am powerless to resist his commands -- he thinks. But more than once I have defied his wishes. At Troy I helped Odysseos and his Achaians to triumph. Deep in interstellar space I led whole fleets against him.

"Has Aten sent me here, or have you?" I asked her.

She smiled at me, a smile that could warm a glacier. "I have brought you here, Orion, to help Beowulf slay both monsters."

"Is Beowulf one of your creatures?"

She laughed. "That bragging oaf? No, my darling, he is as mortal as a blade of grass."

"But why is this important?" I asked. "Why has your enemy used these beasts to attack Heorot?"

"That I will explain after you have helped Beowulf to kill the second monster."

"If I live through the ordeal," I said, feeling sullen, resentful.

"My poor darling. I ask so much of you. If I could do this myself, I would."

Then she kissed me swiftly on the lips. I would have faced an entire continent filled with monsters for her.

The tingle of her lips on mine had not yet faded when the others around us stirred to life once again. And Wealhtheow was somehow back on her throne, on the dais beside her husband, aged Hrothgar.

Her husband. The thought burned in me. Then I realized that one of the men in this timbered mead-hall was one of the Creators, in disguise, controlling the monsters that killed Hrothgar's warriors. Why? What was the purpose of it all?

That was not for me to know. Not yet. My task was clear. The king and queen left the mead-hall, heading back to Hrothgar's fortress. The others milled about for a while, then started back through the frigid winter night also.

It was easy for me to slip away from them and start down the rocky trail that led to the sea. The moon scudded in and out of low dark clouds. In its fitful light I could clearly see the

spoor of dark blood that the dying monster had left from the night before. This is the track Beowulf was following. I hurried along it.

The blood spoor ended at the sea, where the waves crashed against the craggy headland. Our longboat was still tucked up on the rocks, I saw, its mast stored along the deck. No one guarded it. There was no need. The boat was under Hrothgar's protection; no Scylding would dare touch it.

Bitter cold it was, with a wind coming off the sea that sliced through my chain mail shirt and chilled me to the bone despite my conscious control of my blood circulation.

The rocky cove stretched out to my left. In the moonlit shadows I thought I saw caves in among the rocks at the cove's far end. The den of the monster, perhaps.

A growling roar, like the rumble of distant thunder, came across the icy wind. I raced across the rocks toward the caves.

The second cave was the monster's den, half awash with the incoming tide, dimly lit by phosphorescent patches of lichen clinging to the rock walls.

The beast was even bigger than the first one, glowing faintly white in the dimly-lit cave, snarling at Beowulf as it reared up on its hind legs. Even mighty Beowulf looked like a pitiful dwarf next to its enormous size.

He was already bleeding from shoulder to waist, his chain mail shirt in shreds from the beast's raking claws. He clutched Unferth's sword in both hands and swung mightily at the monster, to no avail. It was like hitting the brute with a tress of hair.

The monster knocked Beowulf to his knees with a blow that would have crushed a normal man. His sword blade snapped in half. And I realized that Unferth had given Beowulf a useless weapon. Crafty Unferth with his glittering reptilian eyes was the other Creator among the Scyldings.

I ran toward the beast and again the world seemed to slow into dreamy, languid motion. "Beowulf!" I shouted. "Here!"

I threw my own sword to him. It spun lazily through the air. He caught it in one massive hand and scrambled away from the monster on his knees.

I circled around to the side away from Beowulf, trying to draw the brute's attention before it killed the hero of the Geats. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a gleaming horde of treasure: gold coins and jewels heaped on the dank cave floor. Swords and warriors' armor, spears and helmets were strewn in profusion. The monsters had brought their kills here for many years. The beast ignored the kneeling Beowulf and bellowed at me, dropping to all fours as it moved to protect its horde. But it moved slowly, as if in a dream. I dashed to the pile of weapons and pulled out the first sword I could reach.

Barely in time. The monster was almost on top of me. I slashed at his slavering jaws and it howled in pain and fury. I fainted sideways, then stepped back -- and tripped on a helmet lying at my feet.

Off-balance, I staggered backward. The beast swung at me; I could see those razor-sharp claws coming but there was nothing I could do to stop them. The blow knocked me onto my back. The monster's jaws reached for me, teeth like a row of swords. I clutched my own sword in both hands and rammed it upward into the beast's open mouth, but it did no good. Its teeth closed around me. I was going to be crushed to death, just as I had been all those long eons ago. But the monster suddenly howled and dropped me. It turned to face Beowulf, bleeding, battered, but hacking at the beast's flank with the fury of a berserker.

As the brute turned away from me, I scrambled to my feet and thrust my sword into its neck,

angling it upward to find the brain or spine.

It collapsed so suddenly that it nearly smothered Beowulf. For long moments we both stood on tottering legs, gasping for breath, spattered with our own blood and the monster's, staring down at its enormous carcass.

Then Beowulf looked up and grinned at me. "Help me take off its head," he said.

It was pearly-pink dawn when we staggered out of the cave. Beowulf carried the monster's gigantic shaggy head on his shoulder as lightly as if it were a bit of gossamer.

We blinked at the morning light. Icy waves lapped at our ankles.

Beowulf turned to me, his cocky grin gone. "Orion, I told Hrothgar before all his thanes that I would kill the monster myself, with no one's help."

I nodded, but said nothing.

Suddenly his broad, strong face took on the expression of a guilty little boy's. "Will you go on ahead and say that you searched for me, but could not find me? Then I can come later with the beast's head."

I glanced down at my bloody arms. "And my wounds?"

"Say you were set upon by wolves as you searched in the night for me."

I smiled at his stupid pride, but said, "Yes, I will do it."

"Good," Beowulf said. He dropped the monster's head and sat on a rock. "I will rest here for a while. I could use some sleep." So it was that I returned to Hrothgar's fortress and told the king that I had searched for Beowulf to no avail. All that long morning and well past noon we waited in growing gloom. Unferth said confidently that the monster had killed Beowulf. He was considerably disheartened when the hero of the Geats finally arrived -- with the monster's shaggy head on his wounded shoulder.

That night the feasting at Heorot was without stint. The torches flamed, the mead flowed, the thanes sang praises of Beowulf and the women vied for his merest glance. Hrothgar's bard began to compose a saga. The king promised the British captives that they would be ransomed and returned to their dank, dreary island. Only Unferth seemed unhappy, slinking in the shadows and glaring at me.

Queen Wealhtheow sat on her throne, smiling graciously at the uproarious celebration. Long past midnight, the king and queen left the mead-hall. Warriors and even churls paired off with women and strolled off into the darkness.

At last timbered Heorot fell silent. The torches were extinguished. The hearth fire burned low. I was left alone, so I stretched out on the earthen floor next to the fading embers and willed myself to sleep.

I dreamed, yet it was not a dream. I was standing in another place, perhaps a different universe altogether. There was no ground, no sky, only a silver glow like moonlight that pervaded everything. Wealhtheow stood before me, but now she wore a form-fitting outfit of glittering silver metal. A warrior goddess, she was.

"You did well, Orion," she said in a low voice.

"Thank you."

"Your wounds?"

"They are already healing," I said.

"Yes, accelerated self-repair was built into you." I wanted to reach out and take her in my arms, but I could not.

Instead, I asked, "Can we be together now?"

In the deepest recess of my memory I recalled a time, a lovely woodland filled with tame,

graceful animals that we called Paradise, when we were together and happy. The other Creators, especially the jealous Aten, had torn her away from me.

"Not yet, my love," she said, with a sadness in her eyes that matched my own despair. "Not yet."

"At least, can I know why I was sent to Heorot? Why was it important to slay those beasts?"

"To save the British captives, of course."

That surprised me. "The captives? Those pimply-faced youngsters and that emaciated old man?"

She smiled knowingly. "One of those pimply-faced youngsters is the son of a Roman who stayed behind after the legions left Britain. His name is Artorius." I shrugged. It made no sense to me.

"He will be important one day. A light against the darkness." She reached out her hand to me. "The sword you found in the cave. Please give it to me." Puzzled, I detached the scabbarded sword from my belt and handed it to her. She slowly drew out the blade, examined the inscription on it, and smiled.

"Yes," she said in a whisper, "he will need this later on."

I read the one word inscribed on the matchless steel blade.

Excalibur.