

It was just another night in Hrothgar's hall, high Heorot, and the bloodstains on the plank floors hardly showed at all. Men sat at the long boards, drinking and swapping lies. Mead, beer, and wine flowed freely, most of it down the gullets of those warriors who'd stayed in noble Hrothgar's service long enough to have seen too many of their comrades die at the hands--if they were hands--of the fen-dwelling fiend the scops named Grendel. (How the scops ever got close enough to the hellspawned monster to learn his name without being themselves devoured remained a mystery.)

While the doughty Danish warriors sopped up enough liquor to float a longship, serving wenches passed between the feasting boards, refilling cups and drinking horns while at the same time slapping down or encouraging the attentions of the men, as they pleased. Among this lot there was one young woman who stood out from the rest, though not even the most nimble-tongued harper could ever say that she stood above them.

"Well, woodja looka that, Hengest," said one of Hrothgar's men, staring across the hall through booze-bleared eyes. "They got kids serving in here now?" His seatmate gave him a comradely thwack in the head. "Thass no kid, Wulfstan, you beetle-brain. Thass m' sister, Maethild."

"Uh." Wulfstan squinted at the doll-like woman threading her way through the maze of tables. The other wenches towered over her, as did some of Hrothgar's boarhounds. It wasn't that she was a dwarf, although Hengest could have told Wulfstan that the girl had borne more than a few crude gibes from would-be wits who wanted to know where she kept her hammer or asked to see her treasure hoard. (In the latter cases, Maethild generally contrived to lay hold of a something heavy and hammer home a few free lessons in manners.) She was as sweetly formed a woman as the Lady Frey had ever blessed: hair of gold, eyes like a windswept summer sea, trim waist, and thighs that could crush a full keg of autumn ale between them. She was simply... short. She balanced a heavy jug of beer on her shoulder as effortlessly as if it were made of cloud instead of clay, sometimes using it to beat aside too-familiar hands.

"You washed 'er wrong," Wulfstan said at last. "She shrunk."

Hengest bellowed with laughter and thumped Wulfstan on the back. "I like you, Woolfspam," he slurred. "I don' got a lotta friends here yet 'cos I jus' come south to get into Hrothgar's service. See, I'm hopin' I'll be the one to killa monster that's been makin' all you Ring-Danes slink outa this fine hall ev'ry night so's he won' eatcha. Ol' Hrothgar, he'll pile a ton o' treasure on the man does that, and that man's gonna be me. But I like you. I like you a lot. Tell ya what: If you don' get eat up an' I killa monster, you marry Maethild. Deal?"

Wulfstan gave the diminutive maiden another long stare. "Well, she looks cheap to feed. 'Kay. Deal." The two men shook on it, and both of them fell off the bench backwards in the process. Hengest was the first back on his feet. He bawled out his sister's name.

One of the serving women reached down to tap Maethild on the shoulder. "You're wanted."

"I know." Maethild gave her brother a look of disgust which the other wench misinterpreted.

"Look, if you don't want him bothering you, drop that jug where it matters. I've been watching you; you don't have any trouble handling these trolls."

"That's no troll; that's my brother."

"He is?" The wench looked from tiny Maethild to titanic Hengest, mystified.

"Are you sure?"

"Different fathers," Maethild replied. "Mine was a swordsman, his was a scop."

"A swordsman? Your father was the swordsman?" The wench was even more baffled by this sliver of family history.

"A short swordsman," Maethild replied tersely, and stomped across the hall, thumped the jug down on the board, gave her brother a killing look and snapped, "What?"

"Now, Maethild, be nice," Hengest soothed. "We don' wan' 'nother thing like

wha' happen' in Healfdan's hall."

"Huh?" Wulfstan blinked. "Wuzza hoppen Healfdan's hall, hey?"

"Nuthin'." Hengest was suddenly embarrassed.

"I'll tell you what happened in Healfdan's hall," Maethild replied pertly.

"Healfdan was my brother's former lord, a windbellied braggart. His way of telling a woman to hold her tongue was to give her a couple of healthy slaps. He heard me speaking my mind to my brother and he didn't care for my tone of voice, so he tried teaching me my place." She showed her teeth. "Once. They call him Healfdan of the Seven Fingers now."

Wulfstan's lower jaw dropped. Hengest writhed with the shame of having so unsuitable a sister. "'S why we come here," he mumbled into his beard. "After what she did to Healfdan, we hadda run. I couldn't fight all of his men myself."

"Who asked you to?" Maethild demanded. "If you'd only have given me a sword--"

Hengest slammed his knuckles onto the table and rose from his place in a rage.

"No woman of my blood is gonna use a sword, an' spesh'ly not one that's dangerous 'nuff 'thout one!" he hollered, and then slumped across the board, dead to the world.

"Beautiful," Maethild sneered over her brother's snores. She shot Wulfstan a hard look. "Well? Are you just going to sit there gaping like a lutefisk or are you going to leave the big lumpbrain here for Grendel to eat tonight?"

"Uh..." Wulfstan rubbed his temples as if his hangover had arrived ahead of schedule. "I guess I could haul 'im outa here. Leas' I c'n do for fam'ly." He was young and brawny, like Hengest, whom he soon had draped over his shoulders like a lamb's carcass. He started for the great door of Heorot, but a small hand clamped itself to the back of his belt and held him firmly.

"'Family'?" Maethild inquired. Her smile was too sweet. A sober man wouldn't have believed it for an instant.

"Uh-huh. I'm gonna marry you after your brother kills the monster." Drunk as he was, Wulfstan caught the warning light in Maethild's eyes, swallowed hard, and added, "Your brother said. An' we shook on it." He hauled Hengest out of Heorot's high hall hastily.

He tried. He just managed to clear the doorway and make it out into the chill night air when Maethild laid hold of his belt again. For the first time, a glimmer of realization sparked feebly inside Wulfstan's brainbin: This wee wench was holding him immobile. Not only that, a backward glance revealed she was doing it one-handed. What was even more frightening, she was smiling at him that way again. "You... want something?" he asked nervously.

"The question is, what do you want, noble warrior?" Maethild asked, dainty and demure. "Do you really want to marry me or was it just the mead talking?" Wulfstan didn't answer. Right then, what he most wanted was to escape this strange young maiden and live to see another dawn. He had the feeling that these two distinct desires were intimately connected.

"Don't be shy," Maethild coaxed. "I swear to you, I won't be offended if you say that you'd rather not be my husband."

"You won't?" Wulfstan cheered up visibly. This lasted all of two breaths. His smile crumbled along with his hopes. "We shook on it," he repeated. "It's sealed in honor. If I try to back out, your brother'll kill me." He was speaking as distinctly as though he'd drunk nothing but goat's milk all evening. The cold night air and Maethild combined to have a radically sobering effect on him.

"I can handle Hengest," the little woman assured him.

Wulfstan had no doubts on that score. He had the feeling that Maethild could handle Grendel itself, if she had a mind to. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. "No good," he said gloomily. "It'd be all right if we'd done it in private, but we struck our bargain under Hrothgar's roof, with plenty of folk there to witness the terms."

"Huh!" Maethild snorted, then spat dead center between Wulfstan's feet. "Any who saw you two at your stupid games were just as mead-muddled as you! They won't remember a thing."

"The women will." Wulfstan's face thinned with misery. "I don't know what got into me, promising to marry anyone, let alone you. I've been in Hrothgar's service for years and I've managed to avoid getting shackled to a wife. Any one of those wenches who heard me give my word to your brother will run tattling to Hrothgar if I break it. Hrothgar's big on honor. He'll force your brother to fight me if I back out of the bargain, no matter what any of us want."

Maethild considered this information, head bent, chin in hand. After due deliberation she looked up at Wulfstan, and if her earlier smiles had been disquieting things, the grin now bunching her cheeks would have sent a lesser man screaming straight down Grendel's gorge as the lesser of two evils. "I know how we can fix everything. Come with me." She led him away from Heorot's moonshadow, far from any of the buildings comprising Hrothgar's hold, almost to the edge of the wild lands whence Grendel roved and rampaged.

At last, in a place of utmost privacy and desolation she said, "Now we'll settle things between us once and for all." And she took off her dress.

Wulfstan whistled long and low. "Loki's left nut, I swear I've never seen a sweeter little piece of--"

"This old thing? I've had it forever." Maethild dimpled as she fingered the cuff of the fine mail shirt that until this moment had remained hidden beneath her dress. "It was Daddy's, and it fits me slick as an eel's skin. Now if you can get me a sword, we'll have this whole ugly mess settled by morning."

"Er?" Wulfstan shifted Hengest's body to a more comfortable perch on his shoulders. "Howzat?"

Maethild clucked her tongue, impatient with the big warrior's failure to grasp the beauty of her scheme immediately. It seemed perfectly obvious to her. "You promised to marry me after my brother killed the monster. If my brother doesn't kill Grendel, the deal's off."

Wulfstan goggled at her in horror. "You're going to give poor Hengest to the monster! Hel's tits, woman, if that's your plan, you can do it without me!" He emphasized his refusal to participate in fratricide by dropping Hengest headfirst to the ground. Maethild's brother groaned but didn't wake.

Maethild folded her arms across her chest. She'd lied about the fit of her father's mail: It was more than a trifle tight at the bosom, forcing her breasts up and perilously close to out at the neckline. "You're a fine, strapping, handsome man, Wulfstan. I might not mind marrying you, if it came to that, but you're stupid. If I wanted Hengest dead, I've had more than my share of chances. He's my brother, you big twit, and I love him, even if he's more of a chunkskull than you."

"Thank you?" Wulfstan replied doubtfully.

"If anything's getting killed tonight, it's Grendel. Now give me that sword."

"Give 'er that sword an' die," Hengest announced from the ground. He clambered to his feet, but only made it as far as hands and knees. "I said no woman of my blood uses a sword an' I mennit. 'S a marrera honor. So there." He underscored the last word by flopping facedown on the earth.

The look that Maethild and Wulfstan exchanged was the first thing the two of them had ever had in common. "Don't tell me," the little woman said, her voice dull. "He said the H-word so now you'd rather die than go against his wishes."

"Well, I wouldn't rather die," Wulfstan admitted. "But I will if I must. A warrior's honor is a matter beyond question, more precious than many gold arm-rings, brighter than the hunting hawk's eye, all that marks his place in the world when Hel's dark doorway closes on his spirit and forth he fares upon the wide whale-road, flames setting sharp teeth to timbers of the swan-winged ship that bears him--"

"Yatta, yatta, yatta," Maethild concluded. "In other words, I don't get any help from you about that sword."

"Er... no." Wulfstan gave his own blade a nervous sideways glance. Though the mail shirt was all the armory Maethild seemed to possess, he vividly remembered the wench's iron grip. If she took it into her head to wrest his sword from him, he dreaded the outcome.

"Oh, relax." Maethild waved away his troubling thoughts as if he'd laid them out like milestones for her to read. "I won't even try taking yours. If I failed, I'd be dead, and if I succeeded, you would. That was never part of my plan. I'm a woman, so I haven't got any of your precious honor to uphold by racking up a corpse-tally. You take care of Hengest; I'll look after the rest." She turned on her heel and strode off into the dark.

"Wait!" Wulfstan cried after her. "What do you mean? Where are you going? What're you gonna do?"

From already a long way away, Maethild called back over one shoulder, "I don't have to marry you if Hengest doesn't slay Grendel, and Hengest can't slay a monster that's already dead. Bye!" The night devoured her, a slip of silvery mail that vanished like a dream.

Wulfstan heard what she said, but it took him awhile to believe his ears. He started after her, a cry of protest on his lips, then looked back at Hengest's sprawled body. He couldn't just leave a comrade lying out here, so near the dark borders where monsters dwelled. This, too, was a matter of honor.

Reluctantly he hoisted the snoring man back onto his shoulders and bore him to safety, but his heart had run off into the night with Maethild.

When Hengest woke from his stupor next morning, he was less than grateful to Wulfstan. "You gristle-head!" He drove the heel of his hand into his comrade's chest. "What'd you let her do that for? Go off unarmed, a helpless woman--" Breathless, Wulfstan was beginning to wonder whether there was any such thing as a "helpless" woman, but his personal doubts took second place to defending his actions in the teeth of Hengest's accusations. "Hey! You're the one wouldn't let her have a sword," he pointed out.

"Well-well, you should've done something!" Hengest bellowed with the force of anyone, man or woman, caught in the wrong but desperate to shout down the truth. He gave Wulfstan another wallop.

The two men had been sleeping in a corner of one of Hrothgar's lesser houses until dawnlight roused them both. Though Hengest had been dead-drunk for most of the last night's doings, when he woke he recalled enough to rile him and he pummelled the rest of the details out of Wulfstan's hide. Wulfstan did little to stop him, feeling a little responsible for Maethild's fate. However, enough was enough. When Hengest next raised his fist, Wulfstan intercepted it and clamped his own beefy hand around it.

"If you want something done, let's do it now," he gritted. "Let's follow her trail. Maybe we're not too late to save her."

"Too late?" Hengest's snort was almost as derisive as his sister's. "She set forth after dark and it's now past dawn. What do you hope to save? Grendel's leftovers? But all right. She was my sister: Least I can do is pick up the pieces."

The two men set out as silently as possible, treading on tip-toe and speaking in whispers. They needn't have bothered: The rest of Hrothgar's men slept the deep sleep of the totally sozzled. Outside the hall, daylight hit them between the eyes like Thor's hammer. They stumbled out of the Ring-Dane settlement, moaning and squinting, headed in the fenward direction Maethild had taken the previous night.

"Poor li'l Maethild," Hengest sniveled, wiping his nose on the back of one hairy hand. "Soon as we find her body--what there is of it--I'm gonna give her the best funeral Hrothgar's money can buy. And I'll make up a fine death-song for her, too. I've got me some talent in that line," he said proudly. "My dad was a scop."

"I know. Maethild told me." Wulfstan's feet dragged. He missed the girl. He was scared spunkless of her, but he missed her all the same. The thought that he'd never see her again--that the fair, proud, headstrong wench was now just another lump of meat in Grendel's gut--pierced him to the marrow. He wished he were back in the hall letting Hengest pound the carp out of him. Physical pain might help to dull the pangs of regret ripping him apart inside.

"It'll be a good death-song, you'll see," Hengest vowed, marching onward. "I thought I'd start it something like: 'Beauty and boldness both dwell in the

damsel's doings. Manliest of maidens, Maethild, swordless sought the mangier of men, grim Grendel, gruesome in gore.' Well? How do you like it so far?" "Mnyeh." Wulfstan really wasn't in any mood to play the appreciative audience, although his friend's fine grasp of the scop's art of alliteration left nothing to be desired. Eyes on the ground, he trudged behind Hengest indifferent to everything. The only way he knew that they'd entered the fen country which was Grendel's haunt was when his shoes stopped stamping on earth and started squelching through mud.

Hengest didn't like having his versifying brushed aside like that. He renewed his assault on literature, determined to gain Wulfstan's admiration. "That's not all there is," he insisted. "I haven't even given it a good start yet." He turned around and walked backwards, the better to simultaneously cover ground and make sure Wulfstan was giving his poetry the attention it merited. " 'Small in stature, sizeable in spirit, sibling of scop's-son Hengest, took she to task the tall warrior Wulfstan, wight unwilling to ward her well, worthless, witless--' waaaugh!"

Hengest tumbled heels over head, putting an abrupt end to his volley of verbal barbs against Wulfstan. Wulfstan himself hardly noticed Hengest's impromptu somersault any more than he'd heeded the man's reproachful poesy. What did grab his attention was the small, shrill voice that came from under the big man's body, filling the air with a stream of curses that lacked alliteration but packed plenty of vim.

"Frey's frickin' cat-cart, can't a girl sit down to catch her breath without one of you lunks falling on top of her?" Maethild railed. "Why in Hel's name don't you look where you're going?"

Shortly later, Hengest stood staring down at his sister--blood-smeared and bruised, but very much alive--and the little souvenir she'd been dragging cross country. "Shaft me with a holly bough, we're bugged," he declared. "Now what's wrong?" Maethild snarled. "Wulfstan and I didn't want to be forced into marriage by some stupid promise you two made while you were boiled as a pair of owls, so I found the way to get us out of it without besmirching anyone's precious honor. And when you insisted that it was another matter of honor that I couldn't have a sword, I worked around it."

"Obviously," Wulfstan said, eyeing the item she sat on. It was the size of a goodly log, but there were no trees of that girth in the area. This was another sort of limb altogether.

Black-clawed at one end, bloody and raw at the other, Grendel's arm now served Maethild for perch and pulpit as she declaimed, "The monster is dead, I didn't use a sword to kill it, Hrothgar's going to piss treasure all over us, so why are we bugged, brother dear?"

"Because, my darling, dimwitted sister, you're the one who killed the monster!" Hengest yelled. "With your bare hands, no less. Oh, Hrothgar's going to love this. He'll piss, all right, but it won't be treasure."

"He wanted the monster dead," Maethild said sulkily. "It couldn't be much deader. It bled like a stuck pig when I tore its arm off, and when the fiend fell I beat its head in with the shoulder end--it's meatier--just to make sure. I don't see the problem."

Hengest struck a scop's dramatic hark-and-attend pose and launched into spontaneous song: "Hear ye of Hrothgar, holder of high Heorot, besieged by the bothersome beast, gruesome Grendel, fen-walking fiend, he whose nightly nourishment was the doughty Danes. And yet when Hrothgar's highest heroes fell as fiend-fodder, the marsh monster's loathsome limb was lopped, his death devised by a damsel, dainty, delicate, and demure. Gone, gone is Grendel, girl-slain! Saved are the skins of warriors by a wee woman! Say now, ye scops, were there ever in Middle Earth as Hrothgar's henchmen such sappy sissies?" He finished with a scowl and said, "Now do you get it, stupid?"

Maethild said nothing, matching Hengest scowl for scowl, but Wulfstan spoke up: "He's right, Maethild," he said reluctantly. "Hrothgar would rather throw himself down Grendel's gullet than have his men rescued by a woman. He'll kill you for this."

"Let him try." Maethild was hunkering down for a battle.

Her brother rolled his eyes.

"This is exactly what happened in Healfdan's hall. Damn. I guess this means we've for the swan-road again. And I liked it here." He sighed heavily.

Maethild's face softened to see her brother's sorrow. "I'm sorry, Hengest. This is all my fault; I'm too impetuous. I've got my father's temper, his armor, and his strength, but I keep forgetting that I don't have his--"

"Nah, nah, don't fret yourself." Hengest put his arm around his sister fondly.

"When it all comes down to the bone, I'm that proud to have you for my kin. Remember those bandits we met on the Jutland road? The ones you... surprised?" Maethild grinned; she remembered. "Never thought a man's jaw could drop so wide."

"Never thought a man's jaw could shatter into so many pieces, either." Hengest patted her on the back with only a little less force than he used on his male companions. "The trouble is, sister, the world's just not ready for women like you, and that's the world's loss, if you ask me. I say that if lords like Hrothgar find any shame in taking help at your hands, then we oughta let the pride-blind buggers fight their own fen-fiends."

"Does this mean you're going to get me a sword?" the maiden asked eagerly.

"Let's not get carried away. Tearing monsters limb from limb's handwork, sort of like embroidery and tapestry weaving and such, but using a sword--! That's not ladylike." He shook his head. "No woman of my blood is gonna--"

"All right, all right," Maethild said. "Never mind that now. First you'd better help me dump this into the nearest bog before word gets back to Hrothgar and he sends all his men after us." She bent to grab Grendel's severed arm.

"Not all his men." Wulfstan laid one hand on Maethild's shoulder. "You're not going anywhere." Seeing her glare at him, he swiftly added, "Not unless you decide that's what you really want, Maethild."

The roar of rejoicing rocked the rafters of high Heorot, Hrothgar's hall. Men muddled in their mead called out their incredulity, but doubt itself was dimmed and done for when Hengest Scop's-son sang his song again, to the approving thunder of thanes' drinking vessels banging on the long boards.

"Beo-who?" asked one man, a trifle less sunk in wine than his table-mates. "Never heard o' him."

"Sure you did," his friend assured him. "We all did. Can'tcha hear what Hengest's singing? How Beowulf the Great showed up here an' killed Grendel and then he went' back an' he killed Grendel's mama too, jus't' make sure there'd be no more o' that kinda goin's-on in Hrothgar's holdings?"

"Uh?" The warrior blinked in bewilderment. "But-but-but if there was this Beo-thingie come here with a whole buncha men li' Hengest says, how come I don' remember any o' 'em? An'-an' Grendel's mama? I don' 'member the beast havin' no mama."

"Ever'bod'y's got a mama, dung-for-brains. Stan's to reason. An' Tiu's titties, half the time you're so drunk you don' even 'member-'member--" The second Ring-Dane paused, his face the blank wide-open space of freshly made parchment. "Well, I forget what it is that you don' 'member, but anyway, you don'. 'Sides, if Beoleopard the Geat didn' show up here with alia his men li' Hengest's singin', then how'n Hel you 'splain we got that hangin' up there onna wall? Elves?" And he pointed triumphantly at the grisly trophy nailed to the wall. Grendel's severed arm added its unique aesthetic note to the interior decor of Heorot, to say nothing of its unique aroma.

"Oh." The first man studied the monstrous relic awhile, then said, "Well, seein's believin', even if it's not rememberin'... I think."

"Right," his friend confirmed. "There's the arm, there's Hengest singin' all about it, what more d'you want? If you can't trust a scop, who can you trust? To Beowoof!"

"To Beowhoosh!" The two men clanked tankards and their toast was soon taken up by every male throat under Heorot's broad roofbeams. Their continuing tribute to the mysterious hero of the hour soon drained every liquor-bearing vessel in

the hall. A roar went up for the serving wenches to fetch more drink. As they awaited their turn at the mead casks, one woman turned to another and said, "Beowulf this and Beowulf that; I think the men have finally gone loony as a pack of lemmings. I don't remember anyone named Beowulf the Geat coming to visit, do you?"

"Why, of course I do, Gytha dear," Maethild purred. "Hrothgar himself sent me to warm the hero's bed after he slew Grendel."

"You?" Gytha's eyebrows rose.

"If you don't believe me, you can come see the lovely mail shirt he gave me as a morning gift before he and all his men went back home again," Maethild said sweetly.

Gytha's skepticism went up a notch. "What on earth could you do with a mail shirt?"

"Oh... give it to a hero's son." Maethild set her jug aside, folded her hands coyly over her belly, and looked modest. "If my brother's song and the monsters arm aren't enough to make you remember the mighty Beowulf, maybe when I bear the hero's babe it'll jog your memory."

"Bear a hero's babe? You?" Gytha scrutinized Maethild closely.

"Mmmm." Maethild smiled and cast her eyes sidelong to where Wulfstan sat drinking with his fellows. She was well aware that she and Hengest both owed the young warrior a deep debt for having showed them the way to remain under Hrothgar's roof despite her rash behavior in the matter of Grendel's dismemberment. Gratitude was a more stimulating emotion than Maethild had ever suspected. Now that she didn't have to marry the man, he looked very attractive indeed. If, as her brother said, the world wasn't yet ready for a woman like her, perhaps it would be ready in her daughter's day, or her daughters' daughters'.

First things first.

"A hero," Gytha muttered. "A hero that not one single, solitary, sober person in all Hrothgar's holdings remembers. And you say you'll bear this once-upon-a-maybe hero's babe? Hmph! I'll believe that when I see it."

"You will, Gytha," Maethild said softly, taking up her jug and sashaying over to Wulfstan's table. "You will."

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