



# Beowulf, circa 700

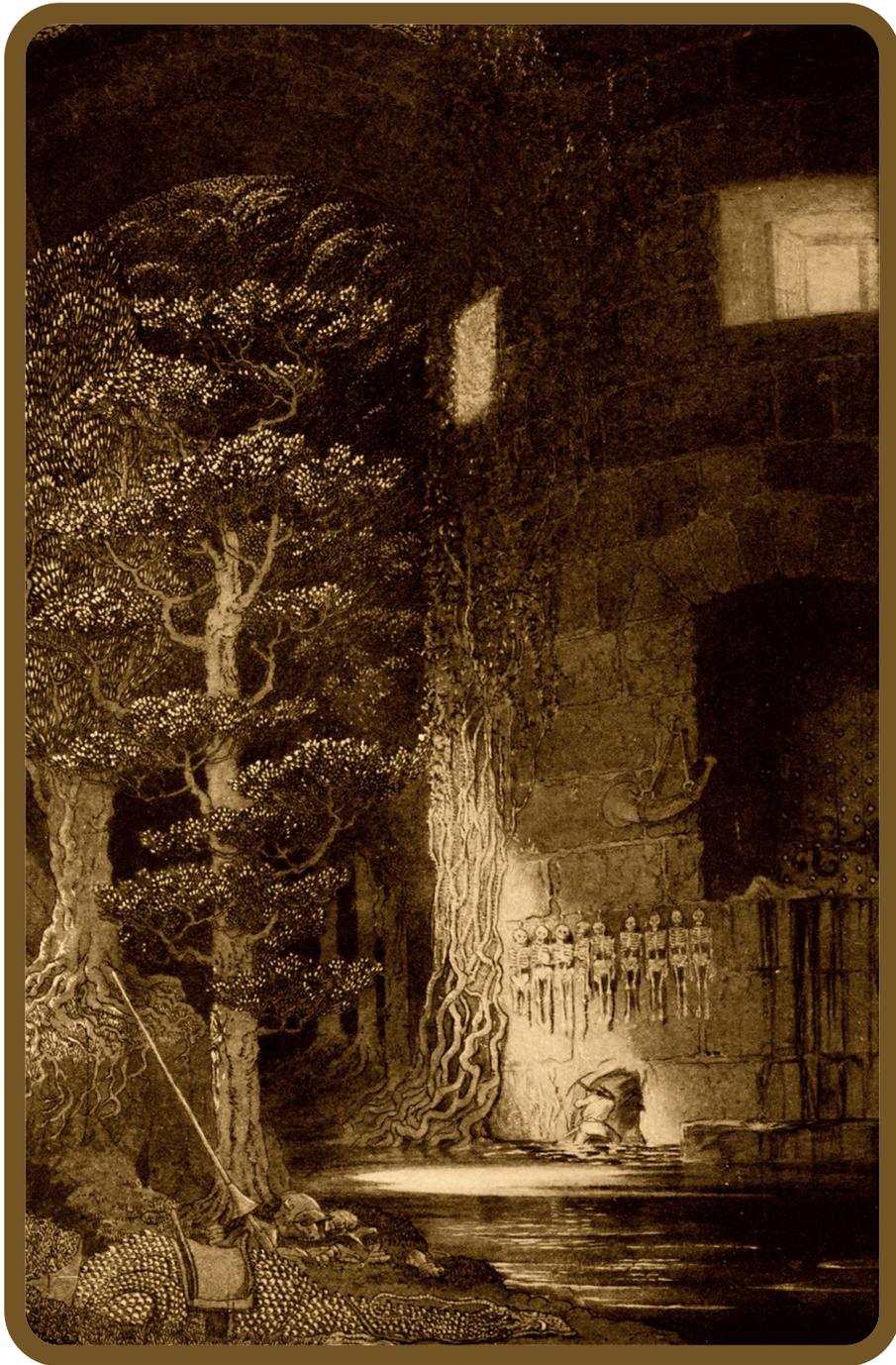
A few miles from here  
a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch  
above a mere; the overhanging bank  
is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.  
At night there, something uncanny happens;  
the water burns. And the mere bottom  
has never been sounded by the sons of men.  
On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:  
the hart in flight from pursuing hounds  
will turn to face them with firm-set horns  
and die in the wood rather than dive  
beneath its surface. That is no good place.

\* \* \*

Quickly the one who haunted those waters,  
who had scavenged and gone her gluttonous rounds  
for a hundred seasons, sensed a human  
observing her outlandish lair from above.  
So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him...  
Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer  
carried the ring-mailed prince to her court  
so that for all his courage he could never use  
the weapons he carried; and a bewildering horde  
came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts  
who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail  
in a ghastly onslaught. The gallant man  
could see he had entered some hellish turn-hole  
and yet the water did not work against him  
because the hall-roofing held off  
the force of the current; then he saw firelight,  
a gleam and flare-up, a glimmer of brightness.

— translated by Seamus Heaney





## The Hoard of the Gibbelins

1912

The Gibbelins eat, as is well known, nothing less good than man. Their evil tower is joined to Terra Cognita, to the lands we know, by a bridge. Their hoard is beyond reason; avarice has no use for it; they have a separate cellar for emeralds and a separate cellar for sapphires; they have filled a hole with gold and dig it up when they need it. And the only use that is known for their ridiculous wealth is to attract to their larder a continual supply of food. In times of famine they have even been known to scatter rubies abroad, a little trail of them to some city of Man, and sure enough their larders would soon be full again.

— Lord Dunsany

# Conan the Destroyer

1984

**B**ombatta had moved to the archway as soon as the girl spoke, and thrust his torch through it. “Stairs!” he muttered. “How much deeper into the bowels of this place must we go?”

“As deep as we must,” Conan said. And pushing Bombatta aside, he started down.

\* \* \*

The wide stairs spiraled down into the depth of the mountain, and here Conan could see signs of the earthquake that had toppled the statues in front of the temple. Cracks spider-webbed the walls, and once there was a jog in the stairs, as if someone had cut neatly through them then pushed one a handspan to the side. True spiders has been there once, as well. Thick cobwebs clogged the passage, but at the touch of the Cimmerian’s torch, they hissed and flared away.

\* \* \*

Directly opposite the door through which they entered a monstrous stone head, fanged and glaring, as tall as a big man, projected from the wall. Two other doorways, set equidistant around the circle from the first, led from the chamber. Or rather, one did, for the other was broken and choked with rubble that spilled in a fan into the room. The rest of the walls were carved in bas-relief, images of fabled beasts, gilded, with gems set for their eyes while other formed hooves and claws and horns. At intervals around the walls great plaques of gold were set, covered with strange script. The low domed ceiling was tied with onyx and set with diamonds and sapphires, twinkling in the light of the torches, as if to represent a night sky.

\* \* \*

Soundlessly the stone jaws of the monstrous head opened, spreading wide enough to swallow three men whole, and in that mouth burned fire such as no eye there had ever before seen.

— Robert Jordan

# Escape the Dark Castle

2017

This part of the castle is a perplexing maze of narrow, musty passageways—each darker than the last.

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A skeletal form lies slumped in the corner of this dark chamber. Beneath the dust of ages, it still clutches a mouldering map.

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To enter this door you are forced to push aside thick, thorn-covered vines. They spring to life, binding your wrists and hauling you into the thicket beyond.

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To continue here you must first scale a crumbling wall of bone...

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Here, three slippery stepping-stones lead out over a wide, plague-infested cesspool. It will take great balance and skill to leap between the stones and reach the other side. The bubbling waters contain disturbing reminders of those who have failed here before...

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In this long-forgotten cellblock, row upon row of rotting plague victims reach out with decayed hands, baying with deranged fury as their mutations take hold...

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This passage ends at a low sewer grate spewing dark, odious water. With the sounds of footsteps rapidly approaching, you have no choice but to crawl inside the network of narrow tunnels beyond.

— Thomas Pike, Alex Crispin and James Shelton

