

V

No use of a growl, a whoop, a roar, in the presence of that beast! Vast, red-golden, huge tail coiled, limbs sprawled over his treasure-hoard, eyes not fiery but cold as the memory of family deaths. Vanishing away across invisible floors, there were things of gold, gems, jewels, silver vessels the color of blood in the undulant, dragon-red light. Arching above him the ceiling and upper walls of his cave were alive with bats. The color of his sharp scales darkened and brightened as the dragon inhaled and exhaled slowly, drawing new air across his vast internal furnace; his razorsharp tusks gleamed and glinted as if they too, like the mountain beneath him, were formed of precious stones and metals.

My heart shook. His eyes stared straight at me. My knees and insides were so weak I had to drop down on all fours. His mouth opened slightly. Bits of flame escaped.

'Ah, Grendel!' he said. 'You've come.' The voice was starting. No rolling boom, as I would have expected, but a voice that might have come from an old, old man. Louder, of course, but not much louder.

'We've been expecting you,' he said. He gave a nervous laugh, like a miser caught at his counting. His eyes were heavy-lidded, minutely veined, wrinkled like an elderly mead-drinker's. 'Stand around the side, if you don't mind, boy,' he said. 'I get a cough sometimes, and it's terrible straight out front.' The high dead eyelids wrinkled more, the corners of his mouth snaked up as he chuckled, sly, hardly hiding his malice. I quickly ducked around to the side.

'Good boy,' he said. He tipped his head, lowering an eye toward me. 'Smart boy! He he he!' He lifted a wrinkled paw with man-length talons for nails and held it over my head as if to crush me with it, but he merely brought it down lightly, once, twice, three times, patting my head.

'Well, speak, boy,' he said. 'Say "Hello there, Mr Dragon"' He cackled.

My throat convulsed and I tried to get my breath to speak, but I couldn't.

The dragon smiled. Horrible, debauched, mouth limp and cracked, loose against the teeth as an ancient dog's. 'Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*, eh? Scared enough to pee in their pants! He he!' He looked startled by an unpleasant thought, then cross. 'You didn't, did you?'

I shook my head.

'Good,' he said. 'That's valuable stuff you're standing on. Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver (nyeh heh heh) . . . *Now*.' He moved his head as if adjusting his flaking neck to a tight metal collar and put on what looked like, for him, a sober expression, like an old drunk preparing a solemn face for court. Then, as if involuntarily, he cackled again. It was horrible, horrible! Obscene! He couldn't stop himself. He cackled so hard a brilliant tear like a giant diamond rolled down his cheek. And still he couldn't stop. He raised up the taloned paw and pointed at me. His head tipped back, laughing, blowing fire out his mouth and nostrils. He tried to say something, but the laughing got worse. He rolled over on his side, stretching up one vast, wrinkled wing for balance, covering his eyes with one claw, still pointing with the other, roaring with laughter and kicking a little with his two back feet. I felt cross all at once, though I didn't dare show it. 'Like a rabbit!' he brought out. 'Nyee he he he! When you're scared, you look - nyee he he he - exactly . . . (gasp!) exactly . . .'

I scowled and, realizing I had my hands out in front of me

like a rabbit sitting up, I jerked them behind my back. My scowl of rage nearly finished him. He hooted, gasped, sobbed, began to choke with laughter. I forgot myself completely. I snatched up an emerald the size of a fist and pulled it back to throw it at him. He was sober instantly. 'Put it down!' he said. He drew in breath and turned his huge head straight at me. I dropped it and fought to keep my bowels from moving down.

'Don't touch,' he said. The old-man voice was as terrible now as the eyes. It was as if he'd been dead for a thousand years. 'Never *never* touch my things,' he said. Flame came out with the words and singed the hair on my belly and legs. I nodded, trembling all over. 'Good,' he said. He stared at me a moment longer, then slowly, slowly turned his head away. Then, old womanish, as if he were, though still spiteful, slightly embarrassed, he got back up onto his treasure pile, stretched out his wings, and settled.

He was in the foulest of moods. I doubted that I could learn anything from him now. I'd be lucky to get away alive. I thought all at once about what he'd said: 'Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*.' He had a point. From now on I'd stay clear of them. It was one thing to eat one from time to time – that was only natural: kept them from overpopulating, maybe starving to death, come winter – but it was another thing to scare them, give them heart attacks, fill their nights with nightmares, just for sport.

'Fiddlesticks,' the dragon said. I blinked.

'Fiddlesticks, that's what I said,' he repeated. 'Why *not* frighten them? Creature, I could tell you things . . .' He rolled his eyes up under the heavy lids and made a noise, '*Glaagh*.' He remained that way, breathing hard with peevish anger. 'Stupid, stupid, *stupid!*' he hissed. 'The whole damned kit and caboodle. Why did you come here? Why do you

bother me? – Don't answer!' he added quickly, stopping me. 'I know what's in your mind. I know everything. That's what makes me so sick and old and tired.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Be still!' he screamed. Flame shot clear to the cave-mouth. 'I know you're sorry. For right now, that is. For this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. I'm unimpressed – No no! Be still!' His eye burst open like a hole, to hush me. I closed my mouth. The eye was terrible, lowering toward me. I felt as if I were tumbling down into it – dropping endlessly down through a soundless void. He let me fall, down and down toward a black sun and spiders, though he knew I was beginning to die. Nothing could have been more disinterested: serpent to the core.

But then he spoke after all, or rather laughed, and reality snapped back. Laughed, spoke, and broke my fall not as a kindness to me but because of his cold pleasure in knowing what he knew. I was in the cave again, and his horrible smile was snaking up his wrinkled cheek and his eye was once more half-closed. 'You want the word,' he said. 'That's what you've come for. My advice is, don't ask! Do as I do! Seek out gold – but not *my* gold – and guard it!'

'Why?' I said.

'BE STILL!' The cave went white with his fire, and the rock walls roared the echo back. Bats flew like dust in a granary, then returned to their places, a few at a time, until all was still again, motionless, as if lifeless. His wings, which had stretched out slightly, relaxed and settled.

I waited for what seemed hours, huddling, my fingers protecting my head.

Then: 'You want to know about the Shaper.'

I nodded.

'Illusion,' he said. He half smiled, then let it go as if infinitely weary, sick of Time. 'I know everything, you see,'

the old voice wheedled. 'The beginning, the present, the end. Everything. You now, you see the past and the present, like other low creatures: no higher faculties than memory and perception. But dragons, my boy, have a whole different kind of mind.' He stretched his mouth in a kind of smile, no trace of pleasure in it. 'We see from the mountaintop: all time, all space. We see in one instant the passionate vision and the blowout. Not that we *cause* things to fail, you understand.' He was testy all at once, as if answering an argument that had been put to him so often he was sick of it. 'Dragons don't mess with your piddling free will. Pah! Listen to me, boy.' The dead eye brightened. 'If you with your knowledge of present and past recall that a certain man slipped on, say, a banana peel, or fell off his chair, or drowned in a river, that recollection does not mean that you *caused* him to slip, or fall, or drown. Correct? Of course it's correct! It happened, and you know it, but knowledge is not *cause*. Of course! Anyone who argues otherwise is a stupid ignoramus. Well, so with me. My knowledge of the future does not *cause* the future. It merely *sees* it, exactly as creatures at your low level recall things past. And even if, say, I interfere – burn up somebody's meadhall, for instance, whether because I just feel like it or because some supplicant asked me to – even then I do not change the future, I merely do what I saw from the beginning. That's obvious, surely. Let's say it's settled then. So much for free will and intercession!'

The dragon's eye closed to a slit. 'Grendel!'

I jumped.

'Don't look so bored,' he said. He scowled, black as midnight. 'Think how I must feel,' he said.

I almost said 'I'm sorry,' but caught myself.

'Man,' he said, then left a long pause, letting scorn build up in the cave like the venom in his breath. 'I can see you understand them. Counters, measurers, theory-makers.'

All pigs eat cheese.

Old Snuggle is a pig.

If Snuggle is sick and refuses to eat, try cheese.

Games, games, games!' He snorted fire. 'They only think they think. No total vision, total system, merely schemes with a vague family resemblance, no more identity than bridges and, say, spiderwebs. But they rush across chasms on spiderwebs, and sometimes they make it, and that, they think, settles that! I could tell you a thousand tiresome stories of their absurdity. They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity – the simplest insanity ever devised! Simple facts in isolation, and facts to connect them – and and butts – are the *sine qua non* of all their glorious achievement. But there are no such facts. Connectedness is the essence of everything. It doesn't stop them, of course. They build the whole world out of teeth deprived of bodies to chew or be chewed on.

'They sense that, of course, from time to time; have uneasy feelings that all they live by is nonsense. They have dim apprehensions that such propositions as "God does not exist" are somewhat dubious at least in comparison with statements like "All carnivorous cows eat meat." That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality – puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. Mere tripe, believe me. Mere sleight-of-wits. He knows no more than they do about total reality – less, if anything: works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. It keeps them going – for what that's worth. As for myself, I can hardly bear to look.'

'I see,' I said. It was to some extent untrue.

The dragon smiled, seemed almost friendly for an instant.

'You've been very attentive and thoughtful,' he said, 'all things considered. So I will tell you about Time and Space.'

'Thank you,' I said, as heartily as I could manage. I had more than enough to think about, it seemed to me.

He scowled, and I said no more. He took a deep breath, shifted his forelegs to a position more comfortable, and, after a moment's thought, began:

'In all discussions of Nature, we must try to remember the differences of scale, and in particular the differences of time-span. We (by which I mean you, not us) are apt to take modes of observable functioning in our own bodies as setting an absolute scale. But as a matter of fact, it's extremely rash to extend conclusions derived from observation far beyond the scale of magnitude to which the observation was confined. For example, the apparent absence of change within a second of time tells nothing as to the change within a thousand years. Also, no appearance of change within a thousand years tells anything concerning what might happen in, say, a million years; and no apparent change within a million years tells anything about a million million years. We can extend this progression indefinitely; there is no absolute standard of magnitude. Any term in this progression is large compared to its predecessor and small compared to its successor.

'Again, all special studies presuppose certain fundamental types of things. (Here I am using the word "thing," notice, in its most general sense, which can include activities, colors, and all other sensa, also values.) As lower minds function, study, or "science," is concerned with a limited set of various types of things. There is thus, in the first place, this variety of types. In the second place, there is the determination as to what types are exhibited in any indicated situation. For example, there is the singular proposition - "This is green" - and there is the more general proposition - "All those things are green." This type of inquiry is what your usual reasoning takes care of.

Undoubtedly such inquiries are essential in the initial stage of any study, for lower minds. But every such study must strive to get beyond it. Unfortunately—'

He glanced at me, suspicious. 'You're not paying attention.'

'I am!' I said, clasping my hands to show my seriousness.

But he shook his head slowly. 'Nothing interests you but excitement, violence.'

'That's not true!' I said.

His eye opened wider, his body brightened from end to end.

'*You* tell *me* what's true?' he said.

'I'm trying to follow. I do my best,' I said. 'You should be reasonable. What do you expect?'

The dragon thought about it, breathing slowly, full of wrath. At last he closed his eyes. 'Let us try starting somewhere else,' he said. 'It's damned hard, you understand, confining myself to concepts familiar to a creature of the Dark Ages. Not that one age is darker than another. Technical jargon from another dark age.' He scowled as if hardly capable of forcing himself on. Then, after a long moment: 'The essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order. The universe refuses the deadening influence of complete conformity. And yet in its refusal, it passes toward novel order as a primary requisite for important experience. We have to explain the aim at forms of order, and the aim at novelty of order, and the measure of success, and the measure of failure. Apart from some understanding, however dim-witted, of these characteristics of historic process . . .' His voice trailed off.

After another long pause, he said: 'Approach it this way. Let us take this jug.' He picked up a golden vessel and held it toward me, not letting me touch it. In spite of himself, as it seemed, he looked hostile and suspicious, as if he thought I might perhaps be so stupid as to snatch the thing and run.

'How does this jug differ from something animate?' He drew it back out of reach. 'By organization! Exactly! This jug is an absolute democracy of atoms. It has importance, or thereness, so to speak, but no Expression, or, loosely, ah-ha!-ness. Importance is primarily monistic in its reference to the universe. Limited to a finite individual occasion, importance ceases to be important. In some sense or other - we can skip the details - importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite. Expression, however - listen closely now - expression is founded on the finite occasion. It is the activity of finitude impressing itself on its environment. Importance passes from the world as one to the world as many, whereas expression is the gift from the world as many to the world as one. The laws of nature are large average effects which reign impersonally. But there is nothing average about expression: it is essentially individual. Consider one definite molecule—'

'A what?' I said.

The closed eyes squeezed tight. He let out a long, cross sigh of red-orange fire.

'Put it this way,' he said. His voice had grown feeble, as if he were losing hope. 'In the case of vegetables, we find expressive bodily organizations which lack any one center of experience with a higher complexity either of expressions received or of inborn data. Another democracy, but with qualifications, as we shall see. An animal, on the other hand, is dominated by one or more centers of experience. If the dominant activity be severed from the rest of the body - if, for example, we cut off the head - the whole coordination collapses, and the animal dies. Whereas in the case of the vegetable, the democracy can be subdivided into minor democracies which easily survive without much apparent loss of functional expression.' He paused. 'You at *least* follow that?'

'I think so.'

He sighed. 'Listen. Listen closely! An angry man does not

usually shake his fist at the universe in general. He makes a selection and knocks his neighbor down. A piece of rock, on the other hand, impartially attracts the universe according to the law of gravitation. You grant there's a difference?'

He waited, furious with impatience. I met his eye as long as I could, then shook my head. It was unfair. For all I knew he might be telling me gibberish on purpose. I sat down. Let him babble. Let him burn me alive. The hell with it.

After a long, long time, he said, 'It was stupid of you to come.'

I nodded, sulking.

He stretched his wings - it was like a huge, irascible yawn - then settled again. 'Things come and go,' he said. 'That's the gist of it. In a billion billion billion years, everything will have come and gone several times, in various forms. Even I will be gone. A certain man will absurdly kill me. A terrible pity - loss of a remarkable form of life. Conservationists will howl.' He chuckled. 'Meaningless, however. These jugs and pebbles, everything, these too will go. Poof! Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver . . .'

'You don't know that!' I said.

He smiled, showing all his teeth, and I knew he knew it.

'A swirl in the stream of time. A temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks, so to speak - pure metaphor, you understand - then by chance a vast floating cloud of dustspecks, an expanding universe—' He shrugged. 'Complexities: green dust as well as the regular kind. Purple dust. Gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust, *worshipful dust*!' He laughed, hollow as the cavern around him. 'New laws for each new form, of course. New lines of potential. Complexity beyond complexity, accident on accident, until—' His leer was like icy wind.

'Go on,' I said.

He closed his eyes, still smiling. 'Pick an apocalypse, any

apocalypse. A sea of black oil and dead things. No wind. No light. Nothing stirring, not even an ant, a spider. A silent universe. Such is the end of the flicker of time, the brief, hot fuse of events and ideas set off, accidentally, and snuffed out, accidentally, by man. Not a real ending of course, nor even a beginning. Mere ripple in Time's stream.

I squinted. 'That really could happen?'

'It has happened,' he said – and smiled as if it pleased him – 'in the future. I am the witness.'

I thought about it for a while, remembering the harp, then shook my head. 'I don't believe you.'

'It will come.'

I went on squinting at him, hand on my mouth. He could lie. He was evil enough.

He shook his ponderous head. 'Ah, man's cunning mind!' he said, and cackled. 'Merely a new complexity, a new event, new set of nonce-rules generating further nonce-rules, down and down and down. Things lock on, you know. The Devonian fish, the juxtaposed thumb, the fontanel, technology – *click click, click click* . . .'

'I think you're lying,' I said, confused again, aswirl in words.

'I noticed that. You'll never know. It must be very frustrating to be caged like a Chinaman's cricket in a limited mind.' His cackle lacked spirit, this time. He was growing very weary of my presence.

'You said "Fiddlesticks,"' I said. 'Why is it fiddlesticks if I stop giving people heart attacks over nothing? Why shouldn't one change one's ways, improve one's character?' I must have been an interesting sight, that instant, big shaggy monster intense and earnest, bent like a priest at his prayers.

He shrugged. 'Whatever you like. Do as you think best.'

'But why?'

'"Why? Why?" Ridiculous question! Why anything? My advice to you—'

I clenched my fists, though it was absurd, of course. One does not swing at dragons. 'No, why?'

The dragon tipped up his great tusked head, stretched his neck, sighed fire. 'Ah, Grendel!' he said. He seemed that instant almost to rise to pity. 'You improve them, my boy! Can't you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from – the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment – that's what you make them recognize, embrace! You *are* mankind, or man's condition: inseparable as the mountain-climber and the mountain. If you withdraw, you'll instantly be replaced. Brute existents, you know, are a dime a dozen. No sentimental trash, then. If man's the irrelevance that interests you, stick with him! Scare him to glory! It's all the same in the end, matter and motion, simple or complex. No difference, finally. Death, transfiguration. Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen.'

I was sure he was lying. Or anyway half-sure. Flattering me into tormenting them because he, in his sullen hole, loved viciousness. I said, 'Let them find some other "brute existent," whatever that is. I refuse.'

'Do!' he said leering scornfully. 'Do something else, by all means! Alter the future! Make the world a better place in which to live! Help the poor! Feed the hungry. Be kind to idiots! What a challenge!'

He no longer looked at me, no longer made any pretense of telling the truth. 'Personally,' he said, 'my great ambition is to count all this' – he waved vaguely at the treasure around him – 'and possibly sort it into piles. "Know thyself," that's my dictum. Know how much you've got, and beware of strangers!'

I scraped away rubies and emeralds with the side of my foot. 'Let me tell you what the Shaper said.'

'Spare me, I beg you!' He covered his ears with his claws, gave a hideous grin.

But I was stubborn. 'He said that the greatest of gods made the world, every wonder-bright plain and the turning seas. He said—'

'Ridiculous.'

'Why?'

'What god? Where? Life-force, you mean? The principle of process? God as the history of Chance?'

In some way that I couldn't explain, I knew that his scorn of my childish credulity was right.

'Nevertheless, something will come of all this,' I said.

'Nothing,' he said. 'A brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity. My advice to you—'

'Wait and see,' I said.

He shook his head. 'My advice to you, my violent friend, is to seek out gold and sit on it.'

VI

Nothing was changed, everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It's one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poets' versions of time past and visions of time to come; it's another to know, as coldly and simply as my mother knows her pile of bones, what is. Whatever I may have understood or misunderstood in the dragon's talk, something much deeper stayed with me, became my aura. Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire — my scent and the world's, the scent of trees, rocks, waterways wherever I went.

But there was one thing worse. I discovered that the dragon had put a charm on me: no weapon could cut me. I could walk up to the meadhall whenever I pleased, and they were powerless. My heart became darker because of that. Though I scorned them, sometimes hated them, there had been something between myself and men when we could fight. Now, invulnerable, I was as solitary as one live tree in a vast landscape of coal.

Needless to say, I misunderstood in the beginning: I thought it an advantage.

It was the height of summer, harvest season in the first year of what I have come to call my war with Hrothgar. The night air was filled with the smell of apples and shocked grain, and I could hear the noise in the meadhall from a mile away. I moved toward it, drawn as always, as if by some kind of curse. I meant not to be seen that night. For all the dragon's talk, I had no intention of terrifying Hrothgar's thanes for nothing.