

QuickRead

Roland's D-Day Time Patrol Mission an excerpt from: D-Day



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The Time Patrol

There once was a place called Atlantis. Ten thousand years ago, it was attacked by a force known only as the Shadow, on the same day over the course of six years. The last attack led to Atlantis being obliterated to the point where it is just a legend.

There are many Earth timelines. The Shadow comes from one of those alternate timelines (or perhaps more than one). It is attacking our timeline by punching bubbles into our past that can last no more than twenty-four hours. In each bubble, the Shadow is trying to change our history and cause a time ripple.

By itself, a single time ripple can be dealt with, corrected, and absorbed. But a significant time ripple that is unchecked can become a Cascade. And six Cascades combine to become a Time Tsunami.

That would be the end of our timeline, and our existence .

To achieve its goal, the Shadow attacks six points in time simultaneously; the same date, in different years.

The Time Patrol's job is to keep our timeline intact.

The Time Patrol sends an agent back to each of those six dates to keep history the same.

*This is one of those dates: **6 June** .*

The Missions Phase I

Sjaelland Island, Denmark, 6 June 452 A.D.

*Famed was this Beowulf: far flew the boast of him,
son of Scyld, in the Scandian lands.
So becomes it a youth to quit him well
with his father's friends, by fee and gift,
that to aid him, aged, in after days,
come warriors willing, should war draw nigh,*

liegemen loyal: by lauded deeds

Roland wasn't there, and then he was there, but he'd always sort of been there. It was the best way to explain how he arrived so abruptly, becoming part of this time and place. Without fanfare or excitement among those around him, not just because of the bubble, but also because everyone around him was passed out from drinking. He was in the bubble of this day and this place, not before, and hopefully he wouldn't be here afterward, especially since he was sitting on a bench, his head slumped forward on a plank table looking at (and smelling) puke drooling out of the mouth of the warrior whose head was next to him. There was also the matter of the guy having really, really bad breath.

Even Roland had limits.

It is 452 A.D. Attila doesn't sack Milan because the city bribes him with massive amounts of gold; Wen Cheng Di, only twelve years old, becomes the Emperor of Northern Wei; Pope Leo I helps convince Attila to not sack Rome and to withdraw from Italy; the City of Venice is founded by fugitives fleeing Attila's army; why else would someone build a city in a swamp?

Roland lifted his head and peered about the immediate area. Other than his head, he remained perfectly still, all his senses on alert, although his sense of smell had already been wiped out.

Hearing wasn't much more useful, as these guys had some major nasal problems, their snores cutting through the air as deeply as their smell.

Some things change; some don't.

Nada would have gone on a rampage and kicked some major butt. Not a single warrior was pulling security, never mind the requisite fifty percent awake as per Rogers Rules of Rangering. Of course, Robert Rogers had over 1,200 years before he'd be born and start making up rules.

Roland counted fifteen guys in armor, and one idiot who'd taken his armor off and was just in breeches and tunic. He was lying on top of one of the trestle tables on his back, arms folded on his chest, head resting on his rolled-up tunic.

Roland realized that idiot was Beowulf, since the poem indicated he'd boasted he could beat the monster on its own terms: *mano a mano*, or, more accurately, *mano a monster*. In the poem, he handed his sword to someone then stripped off his armor and shirt. Apparently, that part of the poem was true.

Never underestimate the power of human stupidity, Nada had said more than once. Roland considered that a Nada original, not knowing the now-deceased team sergeant had appropriated it from Robert Heinlein. Of course, it was such a basic truism, how could anyone lay claim to it?

Roland straightened up to get a better view of the entire place. The hall was fifty meters long by thirty wide. A large fire pit in the center held glowing embers and a few remaining flames, dimly lighting the interior. Thick beams arced overhead, and shadows flickered along the outer walls. Dual rows of trestle tables and benches lined the hall. At one end was a dais on which there was a large throne, with a lesser one next to it. There were shields, axes, and swords hung here and there, martial decorations that made the place feel like an oversized team room.

A manly-man sort of place; the ultimate man-cave.

Roland felt at home.

Continuing his scan, Roland adjusted his initial assessment. Everyone wasn't asleep. A man dressed in black pants and tunic, with a spear across his lap and a sword sheathed at his hip, was sitting cross-legged in the shadows, his back to one of the corners of the hall. Roland couldn't make out details, but there was no doubt *he* was watching everything.

And Beowulf's chest was moving too rapidly. Not the steady rhythm of slumber. The boast wasn't equal to the reality.

Roland got up, the Naga in hand, and did a physical recon. The watcher's eyes tracked him, and Roland saw that Beowulf cracked his eyelids to observe.

There were old bloodstains everywhere. There had indeed been a slaughter in this place a while back. Not twelve years, as the poem indicated. Probably a few months. Roland had a feeling that the poem exaggerated a lot of things, as stories always did the farther they got from the reality.

According to the poem, there'd been thirty killed during Grendel's last rampage. The bloodstains indicated that number might be accurate. The telling thing about Roland was that he could guesstimate a number of dead from old bloodstains.

There was movement, and Roland turned.

"What are you doing?" Beowulf demanded.

"Checking the perimeter," Roland said.

"You're one of King Hrothgar's hunters," Beowulf said. "It was brave of you and your comrade to volunteer to spend the night with my men and me."

What comrade? Roland could see a door behind the throne dais, but heavy bars had been laid across it and hammered into place.

Beowulf slid off the table. "A name, stranger?"

"I am Roland the Slayer." His earlier mission with the Vikings was coming in handy, although that had occurred four hundred and fifty years before now, or a few weeks ago, in Roland time. He hoped none of the others had already laid claim to the Slayer add-on, like one of the Vikings had. The reality was that Roland had slain quite a few in his own time; and other times.

"Well met, Roland the Slayer," Beowulf said.

There was an edge to the way he said it that bothered Roland. He ignored the feeling and continued to look around. The large, double wooden doors at the front of the hall had a bar carved out of a single, large tree across it, sealing the entrance. That would take several men to remove. Roland wondered if they had things like fire exits in these old halls, given that they used a real fire and they probably needed one. He was more concerned, though, with a monster breaking in, than getting out in case of fire.

"Why did you volunteer to join us?" Beowulf asked. "In all the excitement and ceremony, there was not time to talk."

A good question, Roland thought. For lack of a better answer, he said, "My God directed me to." He hoped Beowulf wasn't an atheist, but so far, the God thing had seemed pretty popular and much more literal in ancient times.

"Which God?" Beowulf asked.

Roland noticed that the watcher was scanning the room while also listening. The download throbbed in his head, trying to alert him to something. Reluctantly, he allowed it access. There were a couple of Christian references in the epic poem, but it was speculated

they were added later. And Beowulf's question didn't seem to lend itself to the one God thing, whatever that was, and the download provided the term: monotheism.

Roland grabbed the first Norse god that popped up in the download. "Hel." Roland wanted to smack himself as soon as he uttered the name. *Seriously, Edith?*

"Why would Hel want you here?" Beowulf demanded of Roland.

"I don't question the ways of the gods," Roland said. "I do as I am bid."

Beowulf appraised him. "You appear to be a fierce warrior."

"I've done my share of"—Roland had to think, grasp, improvise—"warrioring." Not his forte.

"The monster is mine," Beowulf warned, "if it dares show. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Roland said.

"And what is your name?" Beowulf challenged the watcher, who had not spoken. "Are you a slayer, like your fellow hunter?"

The watcher uncrossed his legs and stood. He was tall and lean, with a narrow face. His eyes were sunk deep under thick eyebrows. His hair was dark, unevenly cut. Unlike Beowulf and the thanes, he didn't sport a beard, although dark stubble shadowed his face. "I am just a Jager. My name is unimportant."

Roland recognized the term without the help of the download: a Jager in his time was a member of a special operations unit for several different Northern European countries. Here and now, it meant Hunter.

"Most names *are* unimportant," Beowulf said. "But my name is well known." He walked forward toward Roland. "What have you heard of me?"

Now that Roland could see him better, Roland gave Beowulf some points. The guy had some serious size and muscle. And scars. He was Roland's height, not quite six and a half feet. He wore a pair of leather pants, boots, and that was all. Roland felt positively overdressed for this party with his Naga, leather tunic, and pants.

Roland accessed the poem to answer his question. "That you are the one who defeated Breca and slew the sea monsters."

Beowulf stood a little bit taller as he came up to Roland. "I did. I fought for three nights in the chill water. In the end, I dispatched five of the creatures with my sword."

Five nights and nine monsters in the poem. Reality was a bitch.

"And what have *you* done to earn the attention of the gods?" Beowulf challenged.

"I slew a prince of the Britons," Roland said, "when he was guarded by an elite force." Technically, Roland kept the prince from being conceived, but he was using poetic license, because, well, he could. "I killed the great warrior Ragnarok Bloodhand."

Beowulf cocked his head. "I have not heard of this Ragnarok Bloodhand." *Sort of.*

"It was a long time ago," Roland said. "I have also killed monsters. Some sea serpents." Roland still hadn't spotted an unsecured way of getting in or out of the hall other than the front doors. Breaking that wood bar would take quite an effort and cause a racket, which partially explained why the men were sleeping. "I have battled kraken," Roland expanded, feeling a smidge cocky since his tale wasn't an ancient poem embellished over the years, but hard reality. Plus, Beowulf was irritating him.

"I have heard of kraken," Beowulf grudgingly allowed.

"Fierce sea creatures with many tentacles," Jager said, staring at Roland, seeming to have no interest in Beowulf at all.

“And I’ve killed Valkyries,” Roland said, then realized he had once more stretched past the limits of poetic, but now he focused on Jager.

“They take the bodies of the dead,” Beowulf said. “Why would you fight one? You’d be fighting the will of the gods.”

“It attacked me,” Roland said.

“Then perhaps you should be dead,” Beowulf said as if it were a real conundrum. “Perhaps you *are* already dead, which would explain why you do the bidding of the Goddess Hel.”

The hair on the back of Roland’s neck tingled, a warning he’d learned never to ignore. He looked at the double doors. “Is there another way in here?”

Beowulf shook his head. “Only the front can be opened from the inside. We sealed every other door.”

Too late, Roland realized his mistake as the monster dropped from above and landed on the floor with a solid thud, right next to the fire pit, cracking the flagstone beneath.

Nobody ever looks up.

Roland spun to face the monster as it shredded two of Beowulf’s thanes before they were awake, blood, viscera and flesh splattering about.

With his first glimpse of Grendel, Roland realized this was a lot worse than he had imagined it could be.

The monster was just that: twelve feet tall, humanoid, but with green scales covering his body. Massive hands ended in five fingers, with thick claws that came to a sharp point extending four inches. Grendel’s eyes were set deep and far back in the sockets. They glittered with yellow malice as he searched for his next victims. He didn’t appear to have a neck, just shoulders bulging with muscles, sloping up to the broad head that existed mainly to house a very wide mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth and four large fangs, two up, two down.

The better to kill you with.

The Missions Phase II

Sjaelland Island, Denmark, 6 June 452 A.D.

*... the other, warped
in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale
bigger than any man, an unnatural birth*

*called Grendel by the country people
in former days.*

If Grendel hadn't paused to dine, he probably could have taken out all the thanes before they mounted any sort of defense, but the monster tore a chunk of meat off the thigh of one of the dead. He wolfed it down as the surviving warriors scrambled awake.

One of Beowulf's thanes charged him, more courage than smarts, leaping off the top of a table, axe raised for a mighty blow which Grendel didn't even try to stop. The axe thudded into the side of the monster's head, and the weapon pinged back, flying out of the thane's hand as if he'd struck a stone.

The man didn't have time to reflect on that as Grendel swiped with one paw, slicing through leather armor, skin, tendons, and bone with equal ease, eviscerating the man.

"Back!" Beowulf ordered the surviving thanes. "He's mine."

Roland sighed. The guy told a good tale, but there was no way he was going to—

Beowulf jumped, higher than any man Roland had ever seen jump outside of the Olympics. He went over Grendel's head, twisting in the air like a gymnast and landing on the beast's back. Beowulf slid an arm around, trying to get a chokehold.

Bad move, since it appeared that, unlike Roland, Beowulf hadn't focused on the "no neck" part of the creature's anatomy. Beowulf's arm slid up across the face, Grendel's fangs slashing his flesh as the arm went by the huge mouth, and then the warrior had nothing.

Not quite correct. Before he could fall off, Beowulf gripped hold of Grendel's forearm as the beast reached to rip the irritant off its back. Beowulf didn't let go of Grendel's arm. Beowulf had grabbed the proverbial wolf by the ears—by holding onto the arm, he kept the claws on that hand at bay, while it had to fight off the others with its free hand. The beast shook the arm, trying to dislodge Beowulf's grip as the surviving thanes attacked.

This distracted Grendel from chomping down on Beowulf. Grendel used his one free hand to fight, and he began to dispatch warriors in disconcertingly quick order.

Roland took a step closer, uncertain how to proceed. The poem was Beowulf's, not Roland the Slayer's. Pieces and parts were coming true. If this went according to script, or rather poem, Beowulf would rip the arm off, and Grendel would run away to his lair and bleed out.

The other thanes hadn't read the poem, nor were they obeying orders as they charged forward, spears, axes, and swords flailing away. Metal bounced off Grendel's scales. The scene would almost have been comedic: Beowulf hanging like a doll from one of Grendel's arms, shaken about while the beast fought the thanes with its other.

Except for all the blood flying about, and the screams, and the bodies being torn apart and dropping to the stone floor, never to rise again.

Roland was twitching; he'd never been one to hold back from a fight. It didn't appear that Beowulf was making any progress on getting that arm off. In fact, it became apparent as Grendel spun, arm extended, and slammed Beowulf's back into a wood post, that the warrior wasn't going to last much longer.

There was only one man left, Jager, and he was also holding back.

Who are you? Roland wondered.

Jager glanced at Roland. "We charge together?"

What's this 'we' stuff? Roland didn't answer. He charged by himself. Rather than going for a fatal blow, he aimed the point of the Naga staff toward Grendel's shoulder.

Instead of penetrating, the point slid up and then over the scales on the shoulder. Roland stumbled forward, having put all his effort into what should have been a severing thrust through the scales with the Atlantean metal.

This isn't good, Roland thought. He saw Grendel swinging Beowulf in circles, and he belatedly realized the monster was going to use the warrior as a club.

Beowulf slammed into Roland.

Roland was knocked the ground, the Naga falling from his hand. Dazed, he looked up. Beowulf, unbelievably, was still hanging onto the arm, but it was obvious he was almost done. With no more thanes attacking, Grendel reached with his free hand for the Danish prince.

Roland grasped for the Naga, trying to get back into the fight, but he was too slow as Jager dove forward and grabbed the weapon. He rolled under Grendel's swipe then jabbed the point of the Naga upward into Grendel's unarmored armpit. The blade slid in, and Grendel emitted a howl that shook the hall.

Jager held onto the Naga staff, straining with all his might, levering the blade in the beast's flesh, cutting through flesh and bone.

Grendel screamed again as Beowulf made one last effort, and the half-severed arm ripped free. Black blood spurted from the socket.

Beowulf fell to the floor, clutching the monster's arm. Jager stood fast, the Naga at the ready. Roland got to his feet, grabbing a nearby battle axe. Grendel staggered back several steps and howled once more, while looking at where its arm had been as if confirming what the pain was informing it.

Then it ran for the main doors.

None of the three survivors pursued it.

Grendel grabbed the beam securing the doors with his one hand and tossed it aside. It pulled the doors asunder and was gone into the darkness. There was another howl of pain, but this one was moving away.

Roland looked back.

Jager sat down on the closest bench, putting the Naga down. And Beowulf?

Beowulf was holding Grendel's arm above his head, muscles quivering with the effort. The prince let out his own howl, this one of triumph.

The Missions Phase III

Sjaelland Island, Denmark, 6 June 452 A.D.

*Every nail, claw-scale, and spur, every spike
and welt on the hand of that heathen brute
was like barbed steel. Everybody said
there was no honed iron hard enough
to pierce him through, no time-proofed blade
that could cut his brutal blood-caked claw*

Roland was drenched in blood. He recognized the copper smell, and he could feel it all over his skin, soaking into his leather garments. There was no texture quite like it. He sat next to Jager, not sure of his next move. Jager was also saturated with Grendel's blood.

"This is a fine blade."

Roland looked to his left. Beowulf was holding the Naga staff in one hand. In the other, he had Grendel's hand. The rest of the arm stretched to the floor, where the severed shoulder lay.

There was a shivering howl in the far distance, and Roland looked toward the sound, which echoed through the front entrance of Heorot.

"He ran," Beowulf said. "It is a shame I could not finish him here."

"He won't last the wound," Jager said. "There is too much blood."

"This is true," Beowulf said. "Still, I wanted to present the queen with the body."

"You have a worthy trophy," Jager added, indicating the arm.

Beowulf smiled. "True, also."

Roland stood and held his hand out. Beowulf reluctantly passed the Naga staff to him. There were voices outside the hall, human voices, but they weren't coming any closer.

Beowulf shook Grendel's massive arm. "I must take this to the king and queen."

He staggered toward the door, pulling his prize.

Roland watched him. Daylight was beginning to show outside. Beowulf was framed in the entrance as he posed there and once more held the trophy over his head.

A roar from a crowd greeted him, the locals having spent the night uncertain who or what would be coming out of Heorot this morning.

Roland glanced at Jager. "That was smart."

Jager shrugged. "I took the opportunity."

"That's how the arm came off," Roland said. "You weakened it, yet he acts as if he tore it off by himself."

Jager shrugged. "It is what it is."

"He said you and I were comrades," Roland said.

"He did say that," Jager allowed. "But you are new to me, and I am new to you." He looked about. "You're not the man who fell asleep after the feasting and drinking."

So much for wasn't there, and then was there, but always sort of been there.

Roland made a mental leap that would have stunned Mac and impressed Moms. It was like the painting fading out. Only those who'd been through Gates saw it. Regular people, everyone else around, couldn't.

"Who are you?" Roland asked, his hand tightening around the staff of the Naga.

"Jager."

Several people had joined Beowulf at the entrance to the hall, the voices loud and boisterous.

"Have you faced many monsters like Grendel?" Roland asked.

"You said you killed monsters," Jager said by way of not answering.

"True. But I've never seen anything like that. Are we sure it's dead? It opened those doors with one arm."

Jager was staring at the figures in the entrance. "It was pouring blood. It will die. The wound is too grievous to close."

The crowd entered, led by a man and woman, each wearing a crown, flanking Beowulf.

"King Hrothgar," Jager said. "And his queen. They were in here before the darkness came, and the hall was closed and the doors barred."

Beowulf was carrying the arm and making light of it, but the sweat on his forehead and the quiver in his arms indicated he was straining. Roland checked the download. Yep: King Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow.

"Your warriors can mount the trophy, my king," Beowulf said, finally dumping the arm in front of the dais as the royals took their seats so they could look down on everyone.

Hrothgar signaled, and a cluster of men hurried forward to do exactly that.

"I am sorry, my king," Beowulf said in a loud voice, "that the rest of the body is not here. My plan was to hold his arm and strangle the beast, but I couldn't find purchase on his neck." Beowulf raised his own arm and showed where the fangs had slashed through flesh.

"My maidens will bind that," Queen Wealhtheow ordered.

"Let us give glory to God!" Hrothgar cried out. He pointed at Beowulf. "From henceforth, he will be as a son to me."

"The scales of the creature were impenetrable," Beowulf said, directed toward the king, but in a loud enough voice to be heard throughout the hall. Two maidens were ripping linen from their dresses to bind his wounds.

"No weapon could have penetrated," Beowulf continued. "Using my bare hands was the only way to defeat the monster."

Roland glanced at Jager, who just shrugged. Roland noticed a trickle of blood coming from the bottom of Jager's tunic.

"It was difficult," Beowulf continued. "I had to battle the beast alone after it killed my men. And then—"

Roland stepped out of the shadows. "This man was wounded by the beast. He requires assistance. He fought bravely. All were not killed."

"Not smart," Jager said.

A hush fell over the hall as everyone turned to see who dared interrupt the hero's story.

"How did you survive Grendel?" Hrothgar asked Roland.

Feeling Beowulf's glare directed his way, knowing that the story had to hold in order to become the epic, Roland lowered his head.

Jager stood. "He was taking me out of harm's way, King. By the time he could return to the battle, mighty Beowulf had already torn off the beast's arm."

Hrothgar waved a hand, dismissing Roland and Jager from his attention, and turned back to Beowulf. "Continue."

A single maiden came over to tend Jager's wound.

Roland tuned out the boasting. Jager had a nasty gash along his right side.

"It's just a scratch," Jager said. "There's no need for assistance."

"The mark of the beast," the maiden said, giving Jager a look which was so blatant that even Roland was astute enough to understand the intent. "It must be cleaned, or it will rot." She jerked aside his tunic.

Roland saw the scars and knew Jager wasn't joking when he said he considered it just a scratch. He also cared nothing for the maiden.

Roland sat close to Jager on the side away from the wound. He pressed the tip of his dagger against the skin over Jager's liver and asked, "Who are you?"

The Missions Phase IV

Sjaelland Island, Denmark, 6 June 452 A.D.

*Now, Beowulf, thee,
of heroes best, I shall heartily love
as mine own, my son; preserve thou ever
this kinship new: thou shalt never lack
wealth of the world that I wield as mine!
Full oft for less have I largess showered,
my precious hoard, on a punier man,
less stout in struggle. Thyself hast now
fulfilled such deeds, that thy fame shall endure
through all the ages. As ever he did,
well may the Wielder reward thee still!*

"Who are you?" Jager replied, unfazed by the dagger. "Sent by Hel to help the mighty Beowulf? Tell me, Roland the Slayer."

They were interrupted when a party of warriors came in through the ruined doors. The leader announced they had tracked the blood, and Grendel's footprints, as far as possible.

"Across the moor, sire," the leader said, "and then they ended at the edge of a blood-stained pool. We circled it, and there was no sign of the monster leaving. It is down there, rotting and being eaten by fish."

"Optimism," Jager said in a low voice to Roland. "How quaint."

The maiden tending to him was confused. "What are you speaking of?"

King Hrothgar stood, chalice in hand. "All praise mighty Beowulf. Slayer of Grendel. Bravest of brave." He emptied the chalice. "I will compensate you and the families of the men who died so bravely," Hrothgar continued. "I will pay gold."

"How much are you worth?" Jager asked Roland in a low voice. "How much is any man's life worth?"

"It's worth what we believe in," Roland said.

"A life is worth only the lives it can take," Jager said.

The maiden's hands were shaking, but she continued to clean the wound. Roland gave her points for that. He wished they'd sent someone like Moms or Mac on this mission. Someone who could chat with this guy and figure this out.

Roland looked toward the front of the hall. Beowulf was being showered with gifts. Seated between the king and queen, he had just donned a new armor breastplate, the metal shiny and bright in the light from the roaring fireplace.

"You didn't answer my question," Roland said, focusing his attention on Jager and giving a little extra pressure to the knife.

The maiden had finished her bandaging. Her earlier come-hither attitude was gone. "Fare well, sir," she said, and then scurried away.

"She was frightened so easily," Jager said.

"Most people are frightened by what they don't understand," Roland said.

"So you're frightened right now? Is that what you're saying?"

Roland shrugged. "I don't have to understand a lot of things. I just have to be able to kill what I need to kill."

Jager nodded. "Spoken like a true Jager—a true Hunter."

"How did you know you could penetrate into the armpit?" Roland asked.

"A Grendel only has a few vulnerable spots," Jager said. He was watching the hall. Food was being brought in. The wine and ale were flowing, voices raised loud in relief and victory. "Armpit works, but isn't fatal. Directly into the mouth, and then the brain, is fatal, but requires going into the beast's attack. There is a spot on the back of head, right at the base. It's a hard spot to get an angle on. But it is instantly fatal. That's the best place."

"You've fought its like before," Roland said.

"I have."

"And the scales can defeat Naga steel," Roland wondered aloud.

"Look at my spear," Jager said, nodding toward where it leaned against a beam. "And please, remove the dagger. It is not needed."

Roland knew he shouldn't, but he did. He slid the dagger back into the sheath, got up, and retrieved the spear. The haft was wood, the tip a piece of dull iron a foot long, widening to a four-inch base.

"The weight is off," Roland said, hefting it in his hand.

Jager held his hand out. Roland handed the weapon over, ignoring the voice of Nada screaming at him in his brain.

"Your weapon," Jager said, "which you call a Naga?"

Roland nodded.

"It's at the core of this blade, covered in iron. We used scraps, whatever we could find, to make our weapons. The scales on the first Grendels *could* be penetrated by Naga steel, as you call it. Then the beast's scales were improved. But that is not the worst thing about Grendels," Jager added.

"What is?" Roland asked.

Jager slanted his head so he could look at Roland out of the corner of his eye. "You know nothing of them? This was the first you've met?"

Roland nodded.

"Good," Jager said. "That is good." But he didn't answer Roland's question, which seemed to be as much his forte as fighting.

"You still have not told me who you are or where you come from," Roland said. "Or how you know of these Grendels."

"Nor have you answered my question," Jager replied.

Roland sighed. He got up and grabbed two large flagons of ale that had just been placed in front of a couple of thanes sitting at the closest trestle. The men glared at him, thought about it, then grabbed a serving girl to get them more.

Roland brought the ale back, handing one to Jager.

"Thank you," Jager said. He raised it. "To glory and death in the Hunt!" He took a deep draft, draining half the large cup.

Roland did the same. They set the cups down.

"Jager means 'hunter' in my world," Jager said, "but it will do for here. My old name is gone. It is the name I will die with. Are you indeed Roland?"

"My old name is gone, too," Roland said. "When I joined my team, I gave it up. They gave me the name Roland."

"It's a good name," Jager said. "They could have chosen worse."

"They could have," Roland agreed, thinking back to some of the suggestions that had been written on the board in the Den, back at the Ranch, so many years ago when he was recruited into the Nightstalkers.

"It was chosen by comrades," Jager said. "That is good also. And you've faced kraken. I hate them. Nasty things. Easier to kill than a Grendel, though. But if they get you into the water, then the odds turn against you."

"Where are you from?" Roland was getting frustrated, knowing he was far down a slippery slope. Was Jager from the Shadow? But then, why had he fought Grendel, if Grendel was the Shadow's creature? But the first rule of Time Patrol was not to talk about Time Patrol.

"A place far from here," Jager said.

Roland wanted to hit something or someone. He drained the rest of his cup. Then he grabbed two more from in front of the toughest-looking of Hrothgar's thanes. Once more, they didn't dispute him. Apparently, being covered in black blood from Grendel gave one some carte blanche.

He brought the cups back, putting one next to Jager. "Speak to me. I came here with the directive to make sure all develops as it should in the poem."

"Poem?" Jager snorted. "What does a poem have to do with any of this?"

Roland was flustered. "The poem of Beowulf's heroics"—Jager snorted again—"will be—" Roland didn't know what to say.

Jager shook his head. "But his supposed heroics just happened. Other than the things he's claimed. You speak as if you know what *will* be written is *already* written."

The first rule of Time Patrol. The first rule of Time Patrol. Roland repeated that mantra in his head.

Jager was staring off into the distance, his forehead furrowed. "There were some who thought..." He fell silent. "You *are* from *this* world, aren't you?"

Roland considered the question, saw no breaking of the First Rule, and answered, "Yes."

"Yet you speak of a poem that is already written of events that are just occurring."

Frak, Roland thought.

"So you are from this world"—Jager was speaking slowly, thinking out loud—"but not of this time."

Double frak.

"You are from the future of this world," Jager concluded. "Why are you here?" He didn't wait for an answer. "To make sure your world survives." He nodded. "Yes. Yes. That makes sense. Why you would be here in this place. Now. Because your world *does* lie in the balance today."

He fell silent, and Roland sensed the mood, so he waited.

"If we could have done that," Jager finally said, "things might have turned out differently. We could have saved our world. Some did think the Darkness was able to travel not only between worlds, but also in time."

"The 'Darkness?'"

"It makes the monsters."

"We call it the Shadow," Roland said.

Jager nodded. "The same. It goes by different names in different worlds."

"So you do not work for it?"

Jager turned and finally gave Roland his full focus, his eyes dark. "It killed us. Destroyed our world. There are, were, only a handful of us left. The Jagers. I might be the last, for all I know. And I will never find out any different. This world is where I will end. It was a one-way journey. This is my final Hunt."

"Hunt?" But Roland had seen the lack in that stare. There was nothing behind those eyes that was the essence of what most considered human anymore, no empathy, no love, no fear, no emotion at all, nothing other than revenge.

"We fought the Darkness for generations," Jager said. His voice was so low that in the hall filled with revelry, Roland had to lean forward to hear. "It sent its monsters into our world over and over again. Each generation, they were harder to fight." He laughed bitterly. "Kraken? We could kill them. The—" He paused. "It doesn't matter, what the others were. Finally, the Grendels came through the doors into our world. Many good Jagers died learning their weaknesses. But once we did, we killed them, almost as fast as they were coming through. Almost."

Jager fell silent.

Roland began to reach for his second mug, but noticed that Jager hadn't taken another drink from his first mug. Roland pulled his hand back. Waited.

"Tell me," Jager said, "where do these people think this Grendel came from if they have never seen its like before?"

Roland accessed the download. "*They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden*," he quoted. "It's believed they are descended from Cain."

Jager's blank look indicated that name meant nothing to him, so Roland accessed the download once more because, honestly, the name didn't mean much to him, either. "Cain was the first human born to the first humans created by God, Adam and Eve. He had a brother, Abel. He killed Abel out of jealousy and anger."

Jager pondered that. "The first human born. A murderer. We had legends, too. The fatherless thing, that comes from the poem?"

"Yes."

"Fatherless. Interesting. I suppose, in a way, the Grendels are fatherless. And you are here to make sure the poem remains true?"

"Yes, and—" Roland paused. Was that his mission? "I don't know what my mission is. I have only twenty-four hours to make sure nothing is changed."

Jager arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps I have changed things. Perhaps I am why you are here. Perhaps you should stop me."

Roland shook his head. "I don't think so. In the poem, Grendel's arm *is* ripped off. He goes to the water hole and dies. Beowulf would never have done that without you. So, you are part of this."

"Interesting," Jager said. "Can you tell me how the poem goes?"

"I have rules," Roland said. "I cannot speak ahead of the time."

"That's fine," Jager shrugged. "Knowledge can be dangerous. I have wondered if we grew overconfident," he added, as much to himself as Roland. "If we'd lost sight of everything beyond the Hunt. Our world was focused on supporting the Jagers. Everything was built around that. The older ones told me there used to be more to living than Hunting. That there were songs—" He nodded toward the front of the hall, where a bard was providing entertainment. "That there was happiness before the Darkness attacked. That a child was looked at as more than just another possible Jager or, if not Jager potential, one who would spend all their life working to provide food and shelter for Jagers. We'd given up so much. Sometimes I think the Darkness had already won, before it finally won."

Roland wasn't quite following, but he remained silent.

"We'd learned *how* to kill Grendels," Jager said, "but we hadn't learned *what* the Grendels really were. When we finally realized, it was too late." Jager sighed and sat back against a pillar of the hall. "Those of us who were left near the end, the last Jagers, made a vow to prevent what happened to our world from happening to other worlds. Perhaps the Darkness was overconfident, too. It was beginning to pull some of the Grendels back through the doors. We feared they were being sent to other worlds, so we infiltrated their lair. The Valkyries who were running it *were* overconfident. They did not guard the doors. They saw no need. Every chance we got, we sent a Hunter through the door after Grendels went through."

Jager picked up his first cup. Drained it. He indicated the second cup Roland had bought over. "I thank you, but I must have my wits about me. My skills."

"Of course."

"Then it was my turn," Jager said. "And I went through. And here I am."

"Is it really dead?" Roland asked.

Jager nodded. "Yes."

"Then your Hunt has been successful," Roland said.

"Is that what your poem says?" Jager asked.

Roland checked. "Grendel is dead."

"And that's the end?"

"No."

"No," Jager agreed. "Because that wasn't the only one that I followed through the door of the Valkyries. There was another. This will be the beginning of the end if I do not complete my Hunt." He grabbed Roland's hand. "But you do come here from the future?"

Roland didn't know how to answer a blatant First Rule question.

Jager saw the hesitation. He let go of Roland's hand. "If only we could have done that. Gone back." He closed his eyes. "But." He opened his eyes. "You know from this poem how it is *supposed* to happen, right?"

Roland broke First Rule by giving the slightest nod.

"But you're here to make sure that it happens as it is supposed to," Jager said. "So nothing is certain."

Roland rubbed his forehead. He was from the future, but behind Jager's dissection of the current situation.

"If you fail," Jager said, "the poem will not be written. If I fail, the poem will not be written. Of course, it's about more than the poem, correct?"

Roland nodded. He'd lost track of the First Rule.

Jager looked out over Heorot. "Another monster comes tonight in your poem?"

"His mother comes to avenge him."

There was a spark in Jager's eyes. "The mother? What happens?"

"She grabs a thane of the king along with Grendel's arm." Roland indicated the grisly trophy that had been mounted. "Drags both back to her lair. Beowulf goes after her in the morning. Kills her."

"Not likely," Jager muttered, staring at an obviously inebriated Beowulf sitting between two maidens. He brightened. "But the mother will come. That is good. Very good."

"Why is that good?"

"She's the dangerous one," Jager said. "She's the one that will destroy your world."

"How?"

"She's pregnant," Jager said. "That's what we missed. We focused so much on the ones that fought us, we ignored the ones that went into hiding. The mothers."

"We have to kill a baby Grendel, too?" Roland asked.

"If she spawns," Jager said, "there won't be *a* baby Grendel. There will be thousands of eggs that hatch all at the same time, tens of thousands. Do you think they"—He indicated the hall—"could defeat ten thousand Grendels?"

The Missions Phase V

Sjaelland Island, Denmark, 6 June 452 A.D.

Heorot emptied as darkness approached, except for the thanes of Hrothgar, Beowulf, and ignored in their dark corner, Jager and Roland.

Jager had refused to talk further of his world, his life, Grendels, or anything. He withdrew into a mode Roland was familiar with: pre-combat.

Roland watched as the thanes took their armor off and put swords and spears aside. After all, Heorot was now safe.

He was startled when Jager spoke after such a long silence. "This poem of that—" He indicated Beowulf. "Why is it important?"

"I'm told it is," Roland said. "It is part of the start of"—the download confused him with possible answers, so he went back to the Met, to what they had seen—"art."

"Art." Jager said the word. "I was told stories of it by the old ones. They used a word with it: beautiful." He sighed. "I'd like to know what 'beautiful' is before my Hunt is over. What art is." He shrugged. "But it does not matter. She comes. I sense her approach."

They were both ready. Roland had ceded the Naga to Jager, given his greater experience fighting Grendels. He had the spear. If Mac had been there, he'd have commented that it was the ultimate sacrifice Roland could make: to give up his weapon.

"Does she have a name in the poem?"

Roland checked. "No. She is termed an Aglaeca, which means a ferocious fighter."

"Aglaeca." Jager nodded. "That works."

The fire began to die down. More fell asleep. Roland wondered how much longer he had here. If he were pulled back before—

"If the poem is important," Jager said, his eyes scanning the hall, "then we must follow the words as best we can and kill her in her lair. I do not like the field of Hunt in here. We let the Mother take whomever she takes. Follow her back to the lair. Kill her."

Roland nodded. He felt the pressure of time, unsure what hour he had arrived the previous night. It had been late, given how quickly dawn came after the battle. He had some hours, but—

The front doors were thrown open, and Aglaeca was there, larger than Grendel, stooping to enter Heorot.

There were just two guards alert and awake, and they were dead within seconds. It went against Roland's nature to hold back from a fight, but this wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter as Aglaeca plowed her way toward the throne, slaying any thane who woke at her approach.

"She's going after Beowulf," Roland said. "We can't—"

Jager was already moving. He shouted something in a language that Dane, and the download, didn't recognize.

Twenty feet short of Beowulf, Aglaeca paused. Her entire body had to turn in order to see to the side, as she also had no neck. Larger, fifteen feet tall, covered in scales, her only noticeable difference from Grendel was a ridge of black scales on the top of her head, a foot high, and continuing down to her back.

Jager yelled again as Roland ran up next up to him, spear at the ready.

Aglaeca snatched the severed arm from the post to which it was hammered. She rumbled for the door, carrying the body like a doll in one hand, the arm in the other. The monster disappeared into the darkness as the inside of Heorot began to finally awaken, at least, those who hadn't been killed.

"Why did it run?" Roland asked. "It could have killed Beowulf."

"It knew the language I spoke to it," Jager said. "It knows I'm a Jager."

"But why not fight?"

"Her survival is her priority," Jager said. "Even more than revenge. That was another way they were able to defeat us. They can sublimate their emotion to their purpose. Often, we humans can't do that."

Roland nodded.

"Time for me to finish it," Jager said.

"I'll help," Roland said. He looked over. Beowulf was awake, but still drunk. He was trying to make sense of what had happened, but other than Roland and Jager, no one had witnessed the complete assault. It would be a while before any sort of coherent group could be put together to go in pursuit.

"Beowulf is alive," Jager said. "When I finish it, he can take credit. That is your task. This is mine."

"I'm coming with you," Roland said. "You can use the Naga."

Jager shrugged and sprinted for the door. Roland ran after him. They loped through the darkness, Jager slightly in the lead, bent forward at the waist, his eyes toward the ground. There was a full moon, and Aglaeca's tracks were easy to follow. Roland could also swear he heard Jager sniffing every now and then, as if tracking a scent.

The terrain became treeless, a moor that extended to the horizon. Jager suddenly halted, holding up a fist. Roland stopped, providing security.

"In there," Jager said, indicating a dark pool. The surface was black, with even darker swirls in it, as if a painter had dipped a brush into deepest shadows then spread it. "They build hollowed-out lairs in places that are only accessible via water. In the beginning, the kraken would guard the water. That should have been something we considered more carefully. What it meant. But we killed all the kraken. And we'd killed almost all the Grendels. What we didn't know was there were a few lairs we didn't get. That's where the mothers were. Everything else was all a great diversion, and it worked quite well. When the spawn burst forth from the dark waters, they overwhelmed us."

Roland didn't like getting in water. He'd had a brutal time passing the various swim tests his military schooling had required him to take. He'd always felt if he wanted to swim, he'd have joined the Navy, not the Army. He was a rock, muscle-bound and solidly built; there wasn't much buoyancy built into his body.

Jager walked around the edge of the pond, kneeling occasionally. He stopped at one point. "It's down here."

"How do we do this?" Roland asked.

Jager smiled sadly. "This is my hunt. We have a tradition in the Jagers. *Had* a tradition. Every hunt is remembered by a trophy. Thus, every Jager is remembered by his trophies. My lodge, my home, is long gone, along with my trophies. And this will be my last. Promise me to take my trophy with you."

Roland thought of the walls of the Den back at the Ranch, where the Nightstalkers had hung their forms of trophies from various missions. "I will."

"Good."

Roland looked at the water with some apprehension. "Should we tie off so—" And then he was stunned as Jager slammed the haft of the Naga staff into the back of his head.

Roland fell to his knees, dazed. He heard a splash and knew that Jager had gone in. He tried to stand, but his head was spinning, and he fell backward, hitting the ground hard. Roland had

been caught on the edge of an IED blast early in his career while on a tour in Iraq, and this was a replay, his mind trying to process, to get his body to move, but unable.

Roland heard distant voices approaching. Men. Afraid. Questioning.

He carefully sat up, wincing at the pain in the back of his head. He looked at the dark surface of the pool. There was no sign of Jager. Turning his head, he could see a party of warriors tentatively approaching in the full moon, their weapons at the ready, torches held by young thanes to light the way. Beowulf was in the lead.

Ripples began to disturb the surface of the pool. Roland stood up, spear at the ready, hoping to see Jager appear, ready if it was Aglaeca.

“What are you doing?” Beowulf demanded as he arrived with the other warriors.

“Jager is in there,” Roland said.

The water was frothing as if the entire pool were boiling, air bubbles bursting, but no sign of either man or beast.

“Then he is a dead man,” Beowulf said. “We will wait until the monster emerges and slay it.” He didn’t sound overconfident.

Roland was watching the water. “There is blood.” At least, he thought so, but the water was so dark and foul, it was difficult to discern. “Jager will prevail.”

The download was intruding: according to the epic poem, Beowulf dove into the water after making a brave speech about who should get the treasures he’d just received from King Hrothgar if he didn’t return. But the warrior didn’t look like he was getting wet any time soon.

“I’m going after him,” Roland said.

“You’re mad,” Beowulf said.

Roland graced him with a smile. “I am.”

He took a deep breath and—

Aglaeca’s hand broke the surface. Beowulf and the other warriors took several steps back, but Roland raised the spear over his head, ready to strike. Aglaeca’s head appeared, mouth wide open, fearsome fangs exposed, but the eyes were vacant, dead. The body floated, then rolled over, facedown, the Naga buried deep into the base of the skull.

Jager burst to the surface, gasping for air, his face streaked with dirty water and blood. He was next to the monster, thoroughly spent. Roland grasped Jager’s hand, pulling him ashore.

“You’re wounded,” Roland said. “I’ll—”

“No need,” Jager said.

Beowulf and the warriors were coming forward, emboldened by the death of the beast.

“Get it out of the pool,” Roland ordered as he was pulling aside Jager’s tunic. Puncture wounds were spaced across the right side of his chest. Aglaeca’s claws had struck home at least once. Air bubbled out of two of the wounds.

“You got a sucking chest wound,” Roland said to Jager. “I can—”

“No.” Jager’s voice was low, but firm. His head was up for the moment, looking down at his own body. “There is poison in their wounds. When they are that many and that deep, there is no recovery.”

Beowulf and several warriors had managed to loop a rope around the Aglaeca’s body. They pulled it out of the water onto shore.

Jager’s head slumped back. “It is my time.”

Roland gently moved Jager’s body so that he could hold his head off the ground. One of the warriors pulled the Naga free from the body. He looked at Beowulf, then at Roland and Jager, and carried it to them, an offering of respect.

Roland took the Naga and placed it across his lap. Then he looked down at Jager. “If it is to be your time, then let me send you off with an epic tale, my friend, of a mighty hunter.”

Roland had Jager’s head gently cradled in one hand, as he began to speak in a soft but powerful voice:

*“They praised his acts of prowess
worthily witnessed: and well it is
that men their master-friend mightily laud,
heartily love, when hence he goes
from life in the body forlorn away.
Thus made their mourning the men of the Jagers,
for their hero’s passing his hearth-companions:
quoth that of all the kings of earth,
of men he was mildest and most beloved,
to his kin the kindest, keenest –”*

“That is beautiful,” Jager said. “The way the words play. It is—” He died.
And then, Roland was gone.

The Return

ROLAND WAS SLIDING through the tunnel of time, forward.

To one side was another timeline, where Grendels were climbing out of dark pools, thousands of them, a plague of death against which the Danes could not stand. Then the rest of the Viking world succumbed, and the beasts spread into England, Germany, and around the world, until that timeline coalesced into a black orb of nothingness.

Just death.

Roland noted that timeline in his peripheral vision outside the tunnel he was traversing back to the Possibility Palace, but his focus was on the small piece of scale from Aglaeca he held in his hand.

A trophy with which to remember a hunter.

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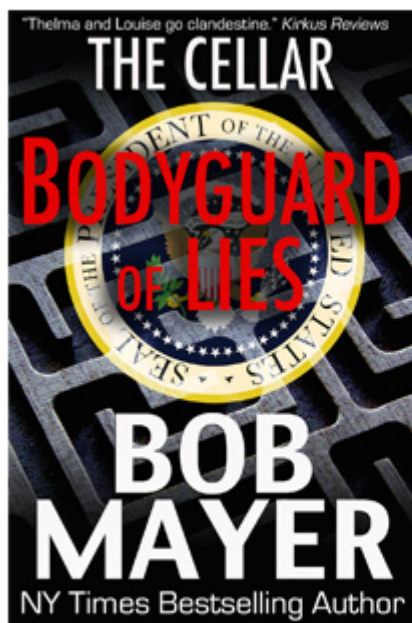
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About Bob Mayer



Bob Mayer is a NY Times Bestselling author, graduate of West Point, former Green Beret (including commanding an A-Team) and the feeder of two Yellow Labs, most famously Cool Gus. He's had over 60 books published including the #1 series Area 51, Atlantis and The Green Berets. Born in the Bronx, having traveled the world (usually not tourist spots), he now lives peacefully with his wife, and said labs, at Write on the River, TN.

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