

BEOWULF VERSUS GRENDDEL

by Jon Mayhew

Beowulf lay in the hall of King Hrothgar with one eye open, waiting. He had travelled far from his own home to defeat Grendel, the monster that harassed and devoured the Danish people. Once, Hrothgar's hall had been a place where warriors would sing songs, drink mead and celebrate their victories. Now it was cold and shadowy; holes let moonlight and rain in through the roof. Nobody held parties in Hrothgar's hall anymore because if they did, the hideous Grendel would appear from nowhere and snatch them away. Instead of music, the stout, wooden beams of the hall rang with the screams of the dying and the crunching of bones. Hrothgar's kingdom had become a place of sadness and misery; a land where people barred their doors at night and glanced nervously into the darkness before hiding away in their homes. Songs and tales of Grendel, the devourer of warriors, drinker of blood, spread across the land and seas and, finally, they reached Beowulf's ears. Eager to prove himself, Beowulf had declared that he would slay Grendel or die trying.

Beowulf lay, listening to the steady breathing of his warriors as they slept. Silence pressed in on him. Shadows deepened in the corners of the hall. A single column of smoke trickled up from the great fire in the centre of the hall towards the roof. Where was the monster? Why didn't it come?

Having heard tales of Beowulf's strength and bravery, King Hrothgar had welcomed Beowulf and his men with open arms. They had thrown a huge party in their honour. Beowulf had noticed sadness behind their smiles as they raised their drinking horns to him. It was almost as if they expected him to lose the battle.

Something scurried in the corner, making Beowulf jump and reach for his longsword. He breathed a sigh of relief; it was only a mouse gathering up crumbs of bread from under the tables that lined the hall. One of his men grumbled in his sleep and turned over. The embers in the fire hissed.

Beowulf froze. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as a sly mist crept under the great doors and through gaps in the wall. Something was coming. He leapt up to warn his men but a great crashing drowned his voice. The huge doors to Hrothgar's hall sagged inward and a dark shape stood silhouetted by the moonlight. Beowulf could see that it was human in shape but couldn't make out any features apart from the long, cruel talons that sprouted from his fingers.

Leaping forward, Beowulf raised his sword but Grendel leant down, snatched up the first warrior who slept by the door and sank his long teeth into the man's neck. The other soldiers were up and grabbing for their blades in the darkness. Grendel gave a shuddering cackle as he crushed the life from another man. Then grunted in surprise as Beowulf's blade clanged against his armoured skin.

Beowulf's arm felt numb from the blow. It was as if he had struck solid rock. Normal blades didn't work on Grendel's charmed hide. A cold dread filled him as he wondered how he was going to defeat such a monster without his sword. Grendel's eyes glowed red as he brought his huge fist down on Beowulf's shield, cracking it in half. Two of Beowulf's men leapt forward, their spears snapping against Grendel's

tough, grey skin. Grendel laughed again and swept them aside with one long, muscly arm. They flew across the hall, smacking into the tables and chairs and lying still. Beowulf had to act quickly or they faced defeat.

Without hesitating, Beowulf grabbed the monster's arm, swinging it round behind its back. Grendel gave a roar of anger but fell forward, face-down on the floor. "Give up, foul beast!" Beowulf snarled, his muscles bulging as he forced Grendel's arm further up his back. The fiend just snarled and twisted and wriggled, desperate to get free. Beowulf planted his foot firmly on the creature's back, pinning him down. He could smell blood and rotting meat on Grendel's foul breath. His skin felt rough and cold.

Blood pulsed in Beowulf's head; his whole body ached with the effort of keeping hold of the writhing monster. He knew, though, that he must not let go. Slowly, Grendel's hate-filled hisses became whimpers of desperation as he pulled and wriggled harder and harder. Beowulf gritted his teeth and tightened his grip, feeling the bones within the scaly wrist crunch. Grendel gave a scream of agony and rolled onto his back. With a sickening, tearing sound, the monster's huge arm came out of its socket, leaving tendrils of sinew and gobbets of thick, green blood. The creature stood panting for a second, glaring at Beowulf with hate-filled eyes. Beowulf stared back, then raised Grendel's arm like a club and swung it at the monster. Grendel gave a shrill scream and staggered off out of the shattered doors and into the mist. Beowulf stood panting, watching the hideous shape vanish. He knew in his heart that not even Grendel could survive such a wound. He'd won.

