



# The Knife in Your Hand

## *A Shadow of the Demon Lord Adventure for Novice Characters*

The legend of the Beast of Valderhalen Hollow is a tale long told, but rarely told the same. In some versions, the Beast is a horrific monster that captures and devours the good-hearted, the kind, the innocent. In others, the Beast is a savior, a true protector of the very things it is so wrongly accused of devouring. And in others still, the Beast is but a dragon like any other, a fire-breathing hoarder of treasures and time. But one story persists above all others: that of the Beast as the keeper of the *Savage Ornament*, a profane blade whispered to hold the power to slay anything, even the Beast itself. In truth, the Beast—like all subjects of fable—is all of these things, and much more.

*The Knife in Your Hand* is an adventure for novice characters that forces the group to make tough, life-changing (and possibly life-ending) decisions in a world where nothing is clearly black or white, but instead grey, with splashes of red. It offers a story of triumph and survival, and the myriad ways in which those two intertwine to define our lives. In the end, the characters must choose how best to use the weapon given to them, for a blade does not become life, or death, or redemption until it is wielded by a hand that makes it so.

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## BACKGROUND

The Beast of Valderhalen Hollow was once a dragon, not a very big or old dragon, but a dragon to be feared nonetheless. Now the Beast is something... else, something both more and less dangerous, both new and old, alive and dead.

The origin known only to the once-dragon is this: years ago, it found itself a mountainous cavern in which to make its home. It gathered its shiny, glittering treasures and trophies and made a perfect place for itself. What it didn't know was that something—in fact, many somethings—already lived there. A large and teeming brood of small humanoids called echinemons, each with long fur and longer teeth, had already laid claim to this space. The creatures, angered by the dragon's intrusion and determined to punish the giant who had entered their home uninvited, devised a plan. They created a paste of blood, dung, saliva, and other bodily fluids, which they slathered on their bodies, layer upon layer, until they no longer resembled living creatures, but rather armored golems. Then one by one, while the dragon slept, they entered its body through every orifice they could find. They paralyzed the dragon with their venomous bites and then consumed it alive, from the inside out.

That was long ago. Whether intentionally or not, the echinemons didn't kill the dragon. Instead, over the generations, they cultivated a parasitic relationship with it. They keep it alive, sort of, so they and their children could live inside its warmth and feed on its flesh for eternity.

Over time, the Beast has become so bloated that its decaying-yet-living body now fills the caverns entirely. Its putrid exhalations and distended gut foul the area, poisoning the air and causing noxious fires to start at random. The echinemons evolved to breathe in this environment, making them immune to the toxins (but not to the fires). In fact, they now find it difficult to breathe in clean air.

To raise their young, the echinemons capture living creatures—including humans. They put the creatures into a state similar to that of the dragon and then plant their eggs inside them. When an egg hatches, the newborn eats its way out of its host.

At the point where the characters enter the story, the Beast has become a thing of legend in

the towns and villages in the area, a whispered promise of destruction or salvation. Some travel there to seek their deaths, and others with the promise of bringing back the *Savage Ornament*. No one knows the truth of it, for those who travel to the Hollow do not return to tell the tale.

### THE LEGENDS OF THE BEAST

Three major, and mostly true, legends are told about the Beast, and player characters can easily learn them all from locals who live under the Beast's shadow.

**Horrible Monster:** The Beast is a horrific monster that lures innocents to its lair and devours them. This is true—sort of. In fact, the echinemons lure people in and trap them there.

**Blessed Savior:** The Beast is a savior, a protector of the pure and good. Weirdly, this is also true, for the Beast still guards the *Savage Ornament*, a blade that is a perfect object of purity and goodness. When the dragon was more alive, it carried the blade tucked inside its mouth, between its many rows of long teeth. The stories say it is hidden there still.

**Mighty Dragon:** The Beast is a dragon that hoards rooms upon rooms full of treasure. This is also mostly true, for it was once a dragon and as such, did fill the caverns with great mounts of shiny trinkets and treasures. However, most of these were long ago absorbed by the creature's growing flesh as it pushed against the walls of the caverns; now they are hidden and buried beneath its layers of scales. Retrieving such treasures is foul and filthy work and might expose avaricious explorers to further dangers.

## THE SAVAGE ORNAMENT

The *Savage Ornament* is a long knife with a pearly white blade that remains clean no matter how often it is used. The red and black handle is made of a translucent material from which tiny tendrils burrow into the flesh of any who bear it. The weapon's origins are lost and unknown, but it is widely held to be a demonic weapon, one that carries a wicked curse.

**Life for a Life** Touching the weapon reveals it is eager to serve, but that it demands a price. To pay the price, you must plunge the weapon into the heart of a defenseless creature, thus killing it. If you do so, you become cursed (as if by a rank 6 spell) until the relic curses someone else or until you die. While cursed in this way, you make attack rolls with 3 banes when you attack with any weapon other than this relic.

**Enchanted Long Knife** The *Savage Ornament* is a long knife. If the weapon cursed you, the relic grants you 2 boons on attack rolls you make using it. In addition, attacks with this weapon deal 2d6 extra damage.



## SECRETS

The *Savage Ornament* has two secrets that might reveal themselves in time. Whenever a creature uses the blade to kill another living creature, roll a d6. On an even number, the wielder gains 1 Corruption.

Second, any wielder who becomes cursed by the blade must make a Strength challenge roll each time the moon rises full, even if the wielder is no longer cursed. The wielder makes the roll with a number of banes equal to his or her Corruption. On a failure, the wielder takes a permanent and cumulative -1d6 penalty to Health. If the penalty reduces the wielder's Health to 0, the wielder's body withers and dies.

## INVOLVING THE CHARACTERS

Before you run this adventure, you need to find a way to involve the player characters. You can place the Hollow in any mountain range you like and the legend of the Beast of Valderhalen Hollow is an old and popular story in nearby communities. Thus, player characters visiting any of the places near the cave might hear one or more of the stories in a tavern, around a campfire, or whispered as a cautionary tale to young children and star-eyed travelers. Depending on which of the many stories the characters come across, they might venture to the Hollow for treasure, their own sense of justice, or to slake their curiosities. Other villages and towns near Valderhalen Hollow might have lost one or more citizens to the Beast and seek help to retrieve their loved ones. Alternatively, they might feel unsafe so close to the dangerous Beast and seek heroes to take the creature out once and for all. A simple hook to involve the group follows.

### A PLEA FOR HELP

The adventure begins when the group meets a woman named Leoren along the road or in an inn. She hails from a faraway town called Duskglenn. She's distraught, for her younger brother, Sameth, went to confront the Beast for reasons unknown, and he hasn't returned.

Leoren tried to gather a group of people from their town to help rescue her brother, but even that far away, the whispers have done their job—whether or not they are willing to admit it, the people are too afraid to confront the Beast.

Disgusted by their cowardice, Leoren set off to save her brother by herself.

The travel-stained clothes and worn look make it clear to the characters that Leoren has been traveling for a while. If the characters are at all kind to her, she doesn't hesitate to tell them her story. She also speaks plainly when it comes to describing the citizens of her hometown, whom she quickly and forcefully labels "shirkers and poltroons." She doesn't expect a group of strangers to help, but she asks anyway. She says she has no interest in whatever treasures the Beast may hoard; she merely wants to find her brother alive.

If the characters decide not to help her, she might tell them the story of the *Savage Ornament*, a tale she heard on her grandfather's knee, but which she swears is true. She promises to help the group find and retrieve this treasure—and any others in the creature's den—if they agree to assist her.

### LEOREN

**Size** 1 human

**Perception** 10 (+0)

**Defense** 11; **Health** 21

**Strength** 11 (+1), **Agility** 11 (+1), **Intellect** 10 (+0),

**Will** 11 (+1)

**Speed** 10

#### ATTACK OPTIONS

**Spear** (melee) +1 (1d6)

## VALDERHALEN HOLLOW

By most counts, Valderhalen Hollow is a typical mountainous cavern, filled with deep and twisting tunnels. Of course, the majority of the spaces can't be accessed because the body of the Beast has expanded to fill the entire main chamber and many of the side passages as well. The Beast's tail stretches long down one of the tunnels, its legs push out through the others. Only the main entrance—a thin tunnel that leads into a small antechamber—remains partly unfilled by the putrid flesh.

Before the characters get close to the cavern entrance, they notice the air growing thick with a rotting stench. A greenish-brown color hangs in the air. The odd coloring in the air comes from tiny spores that settle onto clothing, hair, and skin, imparting the stink to anything they touch.

**Rot Spores:** The spores aren't poisonous, but they do make it difficult to breathe, seeming to



scratch and claw their way down the characters' throats with every inhale. Each living and breathing character in the area must immediately make a Strength challenge roll with 1 boon. On a failure, the creature becomes impaired until it completes a rest. Each hour thereafter, impaired creatures must repeat the roll. On a failure, they take a cumulative -1d3 penalty to Health. The penalty remains until the creature removes the impaired affliction.

### EXPANDING THE ADVENTURE

One way to expand this adventure is to make finding the cave more difficult by introducing challenges en route to the Hollow. You could hide the Hollow in the mountains, forcing the player characters to explore the area and contend with both environmental dangers—storms and rockslides—as well as monstrous ones—a few eager boggarts looking for breeding partners, a hungry drake, or a wing of vampire bats emerging to hunt by the light of the moon. Making the characters work a bit before they reach the cave entrance heightens the danger and makes the entire enterprise more challenging.

## ENTERING THE HOLLOW

A half-oval opening on the side of the mountain leads into the stinking caverns. The entrance tunnel is about 10 yards deep and wide enough to walk two abreast and tall enough for Size 1 characters to stand upright. The tunnel itself is clean and uncluttered. If not for the smell, which grows stronger with each passing step, it would be hard to believe anything even inhabited the space.

The tunnel ends at a large, round room. The only exit, which stands on the far side, is completely blocked by the monstrous, melting flesh of a dragon's head. At its largest point, the head is about 10 yards tall and 6 yards wide. The characters can make out the Beast's long snout, eyes, and the horned crest at the top of its head. It looks as if it was beautiful once—some of its scales remain, still shining in sapphire and smalt, and the very tips of its horns are ivory sheened, but now, the creature rots and despairs. Its decaying maw has been sewn shut many times with crisscrossed ropes turned blue-black by blood and time. Wires encircle its snout and sink into the soft flesh. Both slitted nostrils are propped open with structures made of wood and bone. The skin is ripped and ragged around the holes, dripping with mucus. Worn, gunk-coated

ladders lead up to them. At the base of the Beast's horns are signs of them having been cut away, hatcheted out in big chunks or carved upon with weird symbols and drawings. One eye has been hollowed out, creating a tunnel that leads into blackness. The other is closed.

**Trap:** Any character examining the entrance to this chamber finds, with a success on a Perception challenge roll made with 1 bane, a hidden lever set in the wall. If the total of the roll is 20 or higher, the searching character also spots the teeth of an iron gate that has been lifted up into the ceiling. Pulling on the lever causes the gate to fall. Lifting the gate back up into the ceiling requires a Size 1 or larger character to get a success on a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane.

## THE BEAST'S PLEA

When the group enters, the Beast opens its remaining intact eye. Somehow both dead and alive, covered over in an albugineous film, it flames red and gold beneath, hinting at some awareness. Characters with Intellect scores of 11 or higher hear, in their minds, "Kill me."

It's possible that not everyone in the group hears or even understands the Beast's telepathic plea for death. Those who do sense it experience a resonating vibration in the back of their skulls, followed by a series of fuzzy images of the years upon years the Beast has suffered this half-life at the hands of the echinemons. Some might also get an image of what seems to be a long, white tooth, perfectly sharp, and capped at the widest end by a red and black handle. If Leoren is present, she never hears the dragon's telepathic pleas.

## THE CRUX OF THE MATTER

Throughout the group's explorations, the dragon speaks to the characters' minds, quietly pleading with them to end its life. It shows them a mental image of someone using the *Savage Ornament* to stab it in its hanging heart. If someone takes the relic from where it rests in the dragon's mouth, and agrees to its terms, they can use it to kill the dragon and free it from its captivity (also taking out the echinemons in doing so, since they suffocate without the unwholesome atmosphere in the tunnels). Doing so would require a great sacrifice on someone's part, though the personal costs of the sacrifice would not be evident right away.



If the dragon dies, the characters hear a soft “thank you” in their minds, followed by an image of heaps of treasure and a simple map. If the characters stay too long inside the dragon, they’ll notice it deteriorating more rapidly than before. Within a day, the body falls apart almost entirely, collapsing into a carpet of blue, black, and red slime.

## THE DENIZENS OF THE DEPTHS

Moments after the Beast makes its request, 6 **echinemons** appear, half of them climbing out from the Beast’s nostrils and the rest entering through the cave entrance behind the group. The creatures seem both human and created, covered in a malleable yet hard coating made of black, and brown, and green... something.

Once the creatures get into position, another echinemon climbs out from the Beast’s hollow eye, jumps down from the Beast’s snout, and bows as low as his covering allows before the newcomers, introducing himself as Gragun (as

echinemon but Defense 15 and Health 27), the leader of the echinemons. Gragun stands a bit taller than the others (but that mostly seems to be because he has more layers of armor built up on his body) and he wears an ornate garb of thick woven ribbons.

### ECHINEMON

A breed of humanoid monster, the echinemons stand about as tall as humans do and have thick fur covering their bodies. They have bestial features dominated by long, hollow fangs that drip paralytic venom. Echinemons smear their bodies with a mixture of mud, excrement, and blood that hardens into armor when it dries.

Echinemons speak a halting dialect of the Common Tongue.

#### ECHINEMON

DIFFICULTY 10

##### Size 1 monster

**Perception** 11 (+1); darksight

**Defense** 14; **Health** 22

**Strength** 12 (+2), **Agility** 9 (–1), **Intellect** 9 (–1),  
**Will** 12 (+2)

**Speed** 8

**Armored Carapace** Thick mud and filth forms a hardened shell over the echinemon’s body. When the echinemon becomes injured, the covering falls away and the echinemon takes a –5 penalty to Defense and gains a +2 bonus to Speed until it can spend 1 hour reapplying the substance.

#### ATTACK OPTIONS

**Venomous Teeth** (melee) +2 with 1 boon  
(1d6 plus Poison)

**Poison** A living creature must get a success on a Strength challenge roll or become poisoned for 1 minute. While poisoned in this way, the creature is defenseless and immobilized. If the creature is already poisoned, it instead takes 1d6 extra damage.

#### SPECIAL ATTACKS

**Implant Egg** The echinemon uses an action to implant an egg inside the body of one defenseless creature it can reach. The target becomes the host. The egg remains inside its host until it hatches or is removed. While a target remains a host, it is defenseless and immobilized.

Each time the host completes a rest, it must make a Strength challenge roll with 3 banes. On a failure, the host takes a cumulative –1d6 penalty to Health. Once the penalty reduces the host’s Health to 0, the egg hatches, killing the host immediately.

Removing an egg requires 1 hour of work by a surgeon who has a healing kit. At the end of this time, the surgeon makes an Intellect challenge roll with 1 bane. The surgeon safely removes the egg on a success, or breaks the egg on a failure. The noxious juices released from a broken egg deal 2d6 damage to the host, but the host is freed from its effects.





## A MONSTROUS WELCOME

Gragun speaks the Common Tongue, but in a slow and deliberate manner. He welcomes the characters with a wide sweep of his arms toward the Beast, inviting them to enter his people's home. He reassures the group that the Beast is no longer alive and cannot harm them.

If asked about the voice, none of the echinemons admit to having heard it and insist the Beast is already long dead. They also claim to know nothing about the blade. This last part, at least, seems to be true.

If anyone asks about Sameth, Gragun says the young man is safe inside, and that he will happily take them to him. He laughs away any concerns about sacrifices or traps, saying they no longer do that as his grandfather outlawed the practice before he was born.

If the group goes willingly, Gragun leads the way through the dragon's eye.

If the group resists (or even dallies for too long in making a decision), one of the echinemons near the door releases a lever, causing the heavy iron gate to quickly drop down across the cave entrance. Any creature under it must make an Agility challenge roll. On a success, the creature moves 1 yard to either side of the gate. On a failure, the trap strikes the creature, dealing 1d6 + 2 damage and knocking the creature prone. The creature is immobilized until someone else lifts the gate.

The echinemons—minus Gragun—attack the characters to subdue them, while Gragun moves inside the dragon's carcass via the eye socket.

## INSIDE THE BEAST

Three entrances grant access into the Beast: the eye hollow or either one of the nostrils. If the characters agree to go willingly with the echinemons, the monstrous folk lead the group in through the eye.

### THE EYE HOLLOW AND THE GREAT ROOM

The eye hollow is the 'cleanest' and driest of the three entrances. The circular tunnel is humid, rotting, and sticky, coated in black slime and grey decay. It is nearly 4 yards in diameter and about 7 yards long. It leads to a large room that's been hollowed out of the Beasts' interior.

The room is like a grand cathedral gone to rot. Here, it's possible to see the Beast's bones, the decaying skin, and its internal organs, all covered everywhere with bite marks and places where the tissue has been carved off. There are symbols carved all along the flesh and the bones.

**Stench:** The stench here is overwhelming. Each living and breathing creature must get a success on a Strength challenge roll or become fatigued for as long as the creature remains in the tunnels and for 1 hour thereafter.

**Exits:** A small, ragged tunnel at the front of the room leads into the mouth. A much larger tunnel opens toward the back of the room and leads deeper into the Beast.

**The Heart of the Dragon:** A single structure, hanging nearly 10 yards above the floor, descends from the ceiling on a thick, ropy cord. The glowing red, pulsating, and beating object is large—5 yards across—and sends a shuddering light through the room at regular intervals. This is the dragon's heart, the last of it that still lives.

**Flesh Hut:** Beneath the heart, at the center of the great room, is a large structure, similar to a hut, made entirely of body parts—bones and skin stretched and tied together with reddish ropes of twisted tissue and sinew. Sameth and two other humans are inside the hut.

One human is dead, his stomach burst open, apparently from the inside. A small humanoid nestles inside the cavity, chewing on its host's innards. There might also be a dead animal or two back there, though it's hard to tell, due to the state they're in.

A woman sits on the floor next to the body, her stomach hugely distended. She sits and stares. Her hands are wrapped around her stomach, bound together in that position. At some point after the characters enter the room, the woman yells out and two of the echinemons rush over to her. She "gives birth" to a young echinemon (as **echinemon** but at half the Health and no Implant Egg), which pushes and pulses slowly from her stomach, ripping the skin open to emerge. Without help, she dies within a few minutes.

Sameth lays on a rug made from hair and fur. He is barely conscious, groaning and mumbling to himself. His stomach bulges slightly. If anyone gets close enough to him, he reaches out his hand and begs for release from his pain.



Gragun explains to the characters all of these people willingly sacrificed themselves to become great mothers—those who agreed, like the dragon before them, to ensure the survival of the echinemons. He doesn't seem perturbed by Sameth's distress, saying all great sacrifices require some discomfort.

### COMBAT

If the characters threaten the hosts, the echinemons attack, fighting to the death. If the characters already dealt with the six in the chamber before this one, three more come out from side passages to aid their leader if he still lives.

## THE NOSTRILS AND THE MOUTH OF THE BEAST

The left and right nostrils are equally awful—dripping green and oozing in pustules. The tissues are so deeply rotted that they give in with any pressure, sucking boots and feet into the muck. It's warm and humid, creating a stench that seems to sink into the tongue and coat the lungs. Both nostrils lead to what was clearly once the Beast's mouth, but which is now a falling-in cave of rotting flesh and gaseous spores, surrounded by tall white teeth.

The cave was deliberately designed to be a room of sorts, although there is little in here other than half-sunk storage boxes.

On the left-hand side, between the tall white teeth, is something longer, taller, and shining white: the *Savage Ornament*. It can be easily pulled from its position (in fact, anyone who does so might hear the dragon quietly sigh with relief in their head).

## THE TAIL TUNNEL

This tunnel leads out from the back of the large room. It starts out large—about 21 yards across—but narrows until it's barely large enough for a human to walk upright. It's clear this tunnel is still inside the Beast (likely its tail). At the end, a circular pucker shows a bit of light (and oddly, a bit of fresh air) at its very center. There's a weird bone lever situated on the right-hand wall. Pulling it causes the door to iris open.

On the other side of the door is a bit of a drop

down, but outside the door the tunnel is made of actual stone. Here, the air is fresher, everything is dry, and there are even holes in the top of the tunnel that provide some light.

This tunnel is about 100 yards long, twisting and turning through the mountain. Evidence in the walls shows the tunnel was once a mine. At the end, a hole in the high side of a mountain leads outside.

### GOING DEEPER

If you want to add additional experiences to the adventure, there are a number of doors and entryways along both sides of the stone tunnel. These caverns have had many lives, and who knows what creatures, treasures, and discoveries might be found along its many walkways and in its myriad rooms?

## CONCLUSION

If the characters make it out of the Hollow alive, they complete the adventure, at least in the most basic sense of the word. If they also make it out with their consciences clean and minds intact, they have truly beaten the Beast of Valderhalen Hollow.

If the group stabs the dragon in its heart, it dies, and the dragon sends a mental map to what seems to be a large room filled with treasure. This map appears to be deeper in this same mountain. The mental image lasts until the dragon falls apart; if no one transcribes it to paper before then, it will be lost in the folds of memory. Retrieving this treasure could be the basis of another adventure or it might just contain 1d3 enchanted objects and 100 gc worth of coin in various denominations.

If the group helps Leoren kill Sameth (or did not stand in her way), she might ask to accompany them. If the group agrees, she joins them as a major secondary character. If Sameth is still alive and the characters agree to go with her to try and get him help, she rewards them with her life's savings, a tidy sum of 50 gc. She then requests to join them in the future.

The characters might also have the *Savage Ornament*, which they may decide to keep, to sell, or to leave behind, as they choose.