

Lair of the Ice Spiders

In a high mountain valley on the southwestern slopes of Mount Edal, overlooking the vale leading to Diviner's Hall in southern Snake Pass, is the entrance to this cave system. Its hanging valley can only be reached by a difficult, trackless climb, and although old tales speak of it having once been a pilgrimage site for bards, such folk come-by here only very rarely now. Few others know of the site's location, perhaps fortunately.

The map layout was based on a randomly-rolled one from the Inkwell Ideas "Lairs" set of Dungeonmorph Dice, with information about the contents here adapted from, and inspired by, the accompanying book, "Dungeonmorph Delves & Descriptions: Crypts, Lairs, & Sewers Edition".

The **Mount Edal Entrance Cave** is the cliffside opening in the hanging valley. At its inward end, the cave opens out into a pair of tunnels leading deeper, tunnels which the light from the Entrance barely reaches. The Cave itself is irregularly around 12 feet high at most (3.5 metres), with neither of the tunnels more than 8 ft high (2.5 m) beyond it. Unlike many underground cavern systems, the air grows colder further in. The browner-textured rock is mostly a hard sandstone, some of it metamorphosed into still tougher quartzite around Glowberry Chasm and the areas shown with greyer floor texturing. This greyer rock is granite, which forms only the floors and the very lowest parts of the walls in places, as well as the entirety of the Chasm (though not its upper walls and ceiling).

Both passageways end in larger caves. The narrower, more southerly tunnel opens into the up to 12 ft high (3.5 m) **Bard's Muse Cave**, which has a less than 8ft high (2.5 m) dead-end extension off its southeastern side. Its inner northeastern side opens into a sheer drop into Glowberry Chasm. This is the place that bards used to come, seeking inspiration by summoning the ethereal Muse from the Chasm by playing just the right tune from the Cave, or so legends say. Occasionally, bards still visit, though probably more as a symbolic gesture than with any real hopes of summoning the Muse (assuming such a creature still exists here). The smaller side cavern contains minor items left by previous bardic visitors - single, coiled lute strings, plectrums, flute reeds and the like, mostly - although a couple of old complete instruments lie here too, a small harp and a simple, wooden flute.

While no higher, the more northerly tunnel is generally broader, opening out into the much larger **Golden Bridge Cavern**, which has a 15 ft ceiling (4.5 m) by the tunnel's mouth, rising to almost 20 ft (6 m) by the drop into Glowberry Chasm. There is somewhat more fallen rubble on the floor here than in the Bard's Muse Cave, much of it near the southeastern wall (that in the Bard's Muse Cave is also more obvious by the northwestern wall there, on the opposite side of the same intervening rock mass). By far the most notable feature though is the broad Golden Bridge that completely spans Glowberry Chasm in a gently-soaring arch, peaking about 10 ft (3 m) above the cave floor levels on either side. The Bridge is magical, created by a spell cast long before. It is perfectly safe and solid most of the time. When someone is crossing though, there is a small chance it may flicker-out for a second or two. Winds have a tendency to swirl in and over the Chasm, strong enough to blow-out unprotected light sources like a torch at times. On the far side, where the cave roof is roughly 20 ft high (6 m), the wind can also cause the white, snow-like powder on the floor by the twin entrances to Snow Fungus Cavern to swirl around mistily. The perceptive may spot a few small humanoid-seeming creatures or statues near the eastern and southeastern walls across the Bridge, or in the entryways to the northeasterly Cavern. These are mummified Newtfolk, set as guards by the sorcerer Ervus, busy with his own plans in that further Cavern. The mummies have their eyes and mouths sewn shut, and only move slowly about. However, they are unusually perceptive, surprisingly strong for their size, and will attempt to catch and drag intruders over the Chasm edge. Their exact numbers are up to the GM. The air grows colder above and beyond the Chasm.

Glowberry Chasm itself is very deep, and the cavern ceiling rises in a similar shape to the floor Chasm at least 60 ft (18 m) above the central arched top of the Bridge over the mid-Chasm. Numerous pale spots of light in the depths reveal its lowest part to be crowded with animated plants, the Glowberries, vicious, bramble-like thorny plants that are unable to climb the Chasm's walls, but which thrash about when they contact one another. This motion helps pollinate their small, unremarkable flowers, which flowers in turn produce the self-illuminated glowing berries that both name them, and enable them to continue growing here, in their unlit subterranean cavern. The berries have magical properties, and continue to shed light like a candle each for a day or two after harvesting, decreasing, but never quite extinguishing, thereafter. Trying to collect any is quite another matter. The light is sufficient to illuminate parts of the lower Chasm wall, as seen from the Caves here and the Bridge, as well as something of the bushes, albeit incompletely and palely.

Three openings lead off the large, open cavern area east of the Golden Bridge. That to the southeast descends by a set of rock-cut granite steps to the Thawing Queen Spider Cave through a 12 ft high (3.5 m) irregular archway, while both openings in the northeastern wall are nearer 10 ft (3 m) in height. The more northerly passage retains this approximate height throughout, while the southern entrance is little more than a short archway. The **Snow Fungus Cavern** beyond is an enormous, open area, whose rock ceiling reaches

around 50 ft or more (15 m) over the central space. This is difficult to tell however, partly because of the vast **Great Ice Wedge** that occupies the entire floor-to-ceiling space across much of the central and eastern Cavern, effectively dividing it into two parts, and partly because the entire Cavern roof is covered by the rippling Snow Fungus, which looks like pale-blue winter clouds. Every few hours, the fungus releases fresh spore clouds that descend like snow showers over everything here. As the granite floor is unusually smooth, almost polished, these spores move, swirl and drift about in even the slightest breeze, eventually being swept-off into the Glowberry Chasm. The spores are harmless, but irritating, as like fine dust, they get everywhere very quickly, and when “snowing”, or in disturbed swirling, they can reduce visibility like mist, fog or a snowstorm. The Cavern is very cold, colder indeed than even the huge amount of ice here should make it seem. This is not ordinary ice, but stasis ice, a magical type of ice that effectively stops time for anything encased in it, and which requires magical effects to cause it to melt in these contained conditions. The mummified Newtfolk of the Chasm cavern may be encountered in here as well, lurking by the walls in several places, as indicated, including by the broad, short, nearly 9 ft high (2.5 m) tunnel leading off southeast into the Elemental Ice Crystal Cavern.

Other notable features in the Snow Fungus Cavern are six crudely-erected **Tent Huts**, made from leather panels attached to wooden frames, each of loosely hexagonal plan, with an angled roof. Each has a closed, leather-curtained doorway in an outer side (shown as openings on the map for clarity). Each Tent Hut contains a Human-head sized, dark green magical crystal, that pulses and throbs with light. These crystals have been extracted from the adjoining, colder still, Elemental Ice Crystal Cavern, and their purpose is to help accelerate the ritual being carried out by the Serpentfolk Sorcerer Ervus in the secret chamber attached to the inner side of one of the northwestern trio of Tent Huts. He is deep in meditation, seated on the floor there, magically linking the energy from the stones and directing this into melting the ice and releasing the great Winter Wyrm (a powerful, ice-breathing, flightless dragon) he believes to be encased in the Great Ice Wedge. Unfortunately, the creature actually held in the stasis ice is really a Giant Ice Spider, a huge, animal-intelligence form of Ice Spider, which, while also able to breathe ice as a weapon, will be virtually unkillable once released. If disturbed, his Newtfolk mummies will cluster around to attack the intruders, while tampering with any of the green crystals during the ritual will cause it to explode like a shrapnel-bomb.

Southeast from the Snow Fungus Cave is the **Elemental Ice Crystal Cavern**, a probably 40 ft high (12 m), dead-end cave, albeit neither aspect is certain, because it is largely filled with stasis ice, into which have been cut various angular passages and more open areas, none of which is more than 6 ft high (1.8 m), and some areas - notably the narrower ones - are lower still. Ice chips and uncovered stones fallen from the ceiling in ages before the ice was here, are scattered on the floor in places, with blue and green glows from the translucent ice showing the location of elemental crystals still mostly buried fully within the ice. The green crystals have magical elemental water properties, the blue ones elemental air. The ice itself shows structured crystalline patterns, which seem to have resulted in the angular form of the tunnels cut into it. Removing a crystal with insufficient care from the stasis ice may break it, releasing a disoriented elemental creature of appropriate type, liable to swiftly vanish back to a more appropriate elemental setting as soon as it recovers enough, although the shards of such a crystal may still be used in working relevant elemental magics. Not all the crystals are equal in power, and hunting for the rarer, larger, more powerful kinds will naturally take more time. What has been achieved here by Ervus now, in recovering his six green crystals, has taken two years.

The final segment of this cave system begins in the small, but impressively tall **Thawing Queen Spider Cave**, at the foot of the granite-cut steps southeast off the farther cavern across the Glowberry Chasm. The walls here arch steeply up to a rounded, flattened dome ceiling around 35 ft above the central floor (10 m). There are large spiderwebs rimed with frost over parts of the walls, extending down to the floor in a couple of places. Across the bulk of the flatter stretch of ceiling, these form a dense nest, partly embedded in stasis ice. The ice is slowly thawing, hence the pool occupying much of the central expanse of the floor, an accidental byproduct of the ritual being carried out in the Snow Fungus Cavern. Ervus is unaware this is happening here. It is doing so because the Queen Spider's ice patch is magically linked to that of the Great Ice Wedge, such that if it begins to thaw out, hers must thaw sooner, awakening her in time to regain control over her pet there, the Giant Ice Spider, as soon as it emerges. The Queen, an intelligent, highly-adept magic-using being, used her life-force to spin the fields of stasis ice here long ago, preserving her, albeit in a lich-form state now, with her fellow Ice Spiders (in the adjoining Ice Spider Chasm), and her Giant pet. When her stasis ice patch finally melts, she will drop like a dead, dusty hulk of roughly horse-size towards the pool, but will stop some way above it, suspended by her webbing, until her initial disorientation passes. Her lich-form is semi-corporeal, so she is able to pass through solid matter with a degree of difficulty, and if anyone else is here when this occurs, she may parley or flee.

Once the stasis ice here has completely melted, it will form a permanent pool in this Cave, allowing those gazing into it in quiet meditation on a specific subject for a short time (say ten minutes or so), to see something important connected to that subject, usually something previously unknown, or misinterpreted as unimportant. A series of sandstone-cut rock steps leads up from here to the northeast into a dead-end, narrowing alcove, only some 10 ft high at most (3 m), at the end of which is a chest containing various items of importance to the Queen. Only an Ice Spider can open this, as it requires the use of their frosty breath, and all eight limb-tips to be inserted correctly into its locking holes.

What would be a broad, arched exit to the south into the **Webbed Walkway Cavern**, is largely blocked by a rock pillar there at floor level. However, this pillar narrows taperingly towards its top in the archway, some 25 ft above the floor here (7.5 m), so is much easier to slip-by along the ceiling, or higher-up on one of the walls, especially for an Ice Spider using the webs already there. More webbing continues into the Cavern, whose ceiling lies an irregular 40-50 ft (12-15 m) above the upper Walkway's top. The webs are all largely frost-rimed, but quite intact. This Walkway crosses above the lower, and connects to a small, largely web-filled cave some 15 ft high (4.5 m) on the southeast side of the Ice Spider Chasm. More webs connect the under-surface of the upper Walkway to the top surface of the lower, which then links to another pair of similarly-sized webbed caves at its west and east ends, the eastern one split into two alcoves. Each walkway is quite thin in vertical section, no more than a couple of inches (5 centimetres), made from sandstone rock, which appears to have been converted into a form of quite smooth-surfaced concrete, creating the suspended Walkways. They are impressively strong for their appearance, and will easily support the weight of several active adult-Human-sized humanoids, or indeed still more, without problems.

Below the Walkways is the **Ice Spider Chasm**. This descends to unknown depths, and the whole top is covered with webbing, attached to itself, the Chasm walls and the undersides of both Walkways, much of it again frost-rimed. These webs are up to cable-thick, and continue far down into the Chasm, where side-caves and alcoves contain pockets of stasis ice, each containing a single Ice Spider. As the stasis ice has begun melting around their Queen, touching any of the webs here, will send tremors down into the depths, and begin to melt the ice pockets there too, such that the first Ice Spider will haul itself sluggishly initially onto one of the Walkways in less than 15 minutes, with more to follow. Each Ice Spider is a highly magical, intelligent creature, now further infused by seeping elemental magic from the nearby Crystal Cavern through their long ages of stasis, making them almost immune to physical and even magical attacks. They are able to use their frost breath straight away, and there are dozens of the horse-sized creatures waiting to be reawakened.