

THROUGH THE PALE

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF 2ND TO 4TH LEVEL



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THROUGH THE PALE IS A FIFTH EDITION adventure for three to six characters of 2nd to 4th level, optimized for a party of four 3rd-level characters. A mature phase spider has claimed a remote cave system as her lair, drawn by a planar thinning created years ago by a wizard's fatal experiment. As the creature prepares to lay her eggs, her hunting has grown increasingly aggressive, threatening nearby settlements and travelers. The ghost of the dead wizard still haunts the caves, trapped between the Material and Ethereal planes, unable to find rest. Can the party navigate the web-choked chambers, confront the phase spider before her brood hatches, and perhaps grant peace to a tormented soul? This adventure takes place in Cartosia, but the names of people and places can be changed to place this adventure in any remote wilderness across a variety of campaign settings.

BACKGROUND

Twenty years ago, the wizard Bhasad Crowmane sought isolation for his research into the Ethereal Plane. He ventured into a remote cave system, far from the scrutiny of academies and guilds, where he could conduct his experiments without interference. His work focused on creating a stable viewing portal—a window between worlds that would allow him to observe and study phase spiders and other ethereal entities without the danger of direct contact.

His final ritual succeeded catastrophically. The spell tore open a permanent weak point between the Material and Ethereal planes, and the magical backlash killed him instantly. His soul, caught between worlds at the moment of death, became trapped in the liminal space his magic had created. The wizard's body remained in the cave, surrounded by his research notes and possessions, while his spirit flickered helplessly between planes.

Years later, the planar thinning attracted exactly what Bhasad had hoped to study. A mature phase spider, driven from her territory in the deeper Underdepths by competing predators, discovered the weakened boundary while hunting on the Ethereal Plane. The location was perfect for her needs—the thinning enhanced her natural phasing abilities and would provide ideal conditions for establishing a permanent lair. She claimed the cave system as her own.

For nearly two decades since, the cave has been a source of dark rumors. Whispers circulate about a dead wizard's ghost and the treasures he left behind. The phase spider's presence has discouraged most investigation; those few adventurers brave or foolish enough to explore either turned back in fear or never returned at all. Bodies accumulated slowly in the spider's webs, wrapped in silk and stored for future feeding. The situation was dangerous but contained; a local hazard rather than a regional threat.

Recently, however, the phase spider prepares to lay her eggs, and her behavior has become increasingly aggressive. She hunts in an ever-widening radius, attacks more frequently, and defends her territory with intensity. Travelers vanish from nearby roads and livestock disappears from outlying farms. If her eggs hatch—and hundreds are expected within days—the region could face an infestation of phase spiders that could take years to eradicate.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

There are several reasons the party might be compelled to investigate the cave system and confront the phase spider within. A few of these reasons are outlined below:

Bhasad's Legacy. Rumors persist about a dead wizard's cave containing valuable research notes, spell components, and magical items. Recent phase spider attacks have only reinforced the stories. **Some versions even mention the wizard's ghost still haunting the chambers, watching over his lost treasures.**

A Growing Threat. Local settlements have pooled 100 gp to hire the party to eliminate the phase spider terrorizing the area. Six people vanished last month alone, and the local militia is too frightened to investigate after their last patrol disappeared. Community leaders emphasize the urgency.

Foolish Courage. Jemet, the sixteen-year-old son of a local smith, ventured into the caves three days ago, determined to prove himself by recovering the wizard's treasures. He ignored all warnings and went alone. His frantic parents offer the party 10 gp for his safe return—everything they can scrape together.

GENERAL FEATURES

The cave system is a natural formation that has been dramatically altered by the phase spider's occupation. Massive webs stretch across chambers and passages, and the planar thinning created by Bhasad's fatal experiment has left lingering effects throughout. Unless otherwise stated, the cave's features are described as follows:

Ceilings, Walls, and Floors. The cave consists of natural stone passages and chambers carved by water over millennia. Ceilings vary in height from 8 feet in narrow passages to 30 feet in the central cavern. Walls are rough stone, slick with moisture in places. Floors are uneven but not difficult terrain. The cave is damp throughout, with occasional pools of still water and steady dripping from above.

Light. The cave is illuminated by whatever daylight filters in through its mouth. At night, ghostly glows in areas where

the planar boundary is particularly thin provide dim light in a 10-foot radius.

Planar Boundary. The thinning between planes creates unsettling effects throughout the cave. Transparent, ghostly shapes occasionally flicker at the edge of vision—glimpses into the Ethereal Plane. In certain areas, characters may briefly see Bhasad's ghost or catch sight of the Ethereal landscape overlapping with the Material. These visions are disorienting but harmless. The boundary is thinnest in the central cavern, where the effect is most pronounced.

I. THE THRESHOLD

A massive sinkhole yawns open in the rocky hillside, its mouth approximately sixty feet across. A thick oak tree has fallen across the opening, its trunk serving as a natural bridge over the darkness below. Dense webbing clings to the tree's bark and stretches between its branches. The air here feels strange, as if reality itself has grown thin. Faint whispers seem to drift up from the depths, though no words can be distinguished.

The sinkhole drops fifteen feet to the cave floor below. The fallen tree provides a stable crossing point, though characters must succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to traverse it without slipping. Failure means the character falls prone on the tree but doesn't fall off. Failure by 5 or more means they tumble into the webs below, becoming restrained.

Encounter: Bhasad's Ghost. As the party approaches the sinkhole, a translucent figure materializes near the fallen tree. Bhasad Crowmane appears as a middle-aged human man with wild hair and robes that flutter in winds that don't exist. His form constantly flickers: sometimes solid, sometimes barely visible, occasionally showing glimpses of the Ethereal Plane through his body. He doesn't speak at first, seeming surprised that the party can see him. Bhasad is not hostile. He's been alone for two decades, desperate for release. When he realizes the party can perceive him (thanks to the phase spider's presence strengthening the planar connection), hope shines in his spectral eyes. He attempts to communicate, his voice echoing strangely as if coming from a great distance:

"You can see me. After all this time, someone can finally see me."

Bhasad can share the following information if the party engages with him:

- He is Bhasad Crowmane, trapped here since his ritual went catastrophically wrong twenty years ago
- A phase spider has claimed the cave as her lair and is preparing to lay eggs—hundreds of them
- His physical remains lie in a southeastern alcove in the cave's lowest level, along with his research notes and possessions

- He desperately wants to be freed but cannot leave this place on his own
- His notes contain the method to release him: place his copper ritual focus on his remains, sprinkle them with powdered silver (found in a pouch on his body), and speak the phrase referenced in his notes (Bhasad can't remember it off the top of his head).
- The ritual takes only a minute to perform

Bhasad doesn't know exactly where the spider is at any given moment—she phases between planes constantly—but he warns that she's violently territorial and won't tolerate intruders. He's observed her hunting patterns and knows she's most aggressive near her egg chamber in the northern alcove. If asked about survivors, Bhasad sadly confirms he's seen several people taken into the cave over the years. Some might still be alive, cocooned within the cave, but he cannot interact with the Material Plane enough to help them.

Once the party has spoken with Bhasad, he fades somewhat, promising to appear again if they call for him. It is difficult for him to follow them into the cave's depths—his manifestation is strongest here at the threshold where the planar boundary is particularly thin.

2. ENTRY PASSAGE

The walls of this passage are draped in thick sheets of webbing that hang like tattered curtains. The air is cold and damp, carrying the smell of decay. Several cocoons hang suspended from the ceiling at varying heights, their silk wrappings yellowed with age. Some are clearly very old; little more than empty husks with skeletal shapes visible through torn sections. Others appear more recent, their contents still bulky.

A rough, naturally-formed tunnel at the northwest end of this chamber descends into a lower chamber. The phase spider instinctively keeps its victims here to warn against potential intrusion. Seven cocoons hang throughout this chamber in various states of preservation. Most contain only bones and scraps of equipment—victims from years past. A character who investigates the cocoons and succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check can identify the following:

- Four cocoons contain only skeletal remains, picked clean by the spider
- Two cocoons hold partially decomposed bodies from several months ago
- One cocoon contains a more recent victim—a young woman dressed in traveling leathers, dead for perhaps two weeks

Treasure: Victims' Belongings. The most recent victim carries 15 gp, a silver pendant worth 25 gp, and a worn deck of cards with an extra card tucked inside—the Queen of Wands from an entirely different deck, bearing an inscription on its back in Elvish: *"May fortune favor the bold."* The other items that

can be found in this chamber are mundane and of little-to-no value.

3. ETTERCAP DEN

Thick sheets of webbing drape across the upper reaches of this broad chamber like a second ceiling, creating a dense canopy of silk that sways gently in unfelt currents. Near the center of the room, a circular opening in the floor descends into darkness below. The webbing grows particularly thick around this pit, anchored to the stone in multiple layers.

A ten-foot-tall ledge at the north end of this chamber ascends to a narrow tunnel beyond. The ledge can be climbed with a successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check. Characters can also climb down the central pit, though doing so without becoming tangled in webbing requires a successful DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. On a success, the character descends safely. On a failure, they become restrained by the sticky webbing halfway down, dangling in the pit. A restrained character can use their action to make a DC 12 Strength check to break free. If they remain restrained at the start of their second turn, hundreds of small spiders emerge from the dense webbing and swarm over the trapped character, biting exposed skin. The character takes 2d4 piercing damage at the start of each of their turns while restrained. The spiders disperse immediately once the character breaks free.

Encounter: Ettercap Ambush. Two ettercaps cling to the ceiling among the dense webbing. They're aware of intruders the moment anyone enters the chamber but wait for the opportune moment to strike. Characters with a passive Perception of 16 or higher notice the ettercaps moving among the webs above. Otherwise, the creatures drop down on the party when they're most vulnerable—ideally when characters are near the central pit or distracted by examining the room. The ettercaps fight viciously but aren't suicidal. If both are reduced to half their hit points or fewer, they attempt to flee through the pit to the lower level or retreat to the northeastern passages.

4. TUNNEL

This narrow tunnel curves gently through the stone, barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast. Thick webbing claustrophobically coats the walls and ceiling as the silk-covered surfaces seem to press inward.

This winding passage connects to the central cavern below through an opening at its south end. The tunnel is 5 feet wide in most places, occasionally narrowing to as little as 3 feet.

Cocooned Survivor. Halfway through the passage, a large cocoon is wedged against the eastern wall. Unlike the ancient, desiccated corpses in the entry passage, this one is fresh—wrapped within the last few days. A character who

examines the cocoon hears faint, labored breathing from within. This is Jemet (CG he/him dwarf **commoner**), the blacksmith's son, still alive but weakened. Cutting him free requires one minute of work with a blade, or the webbing can be burned away (though this alerts the phase spider immediately). Once freed, Jemet is conscious but has 1 hit point and is poisoned from the spider's venom. He's terrified and desperately wants to leave, but is too weak to do so without assistance. He can share that the spider attacked him from nowhere, simply appearing out of thin air and striking before he could react.

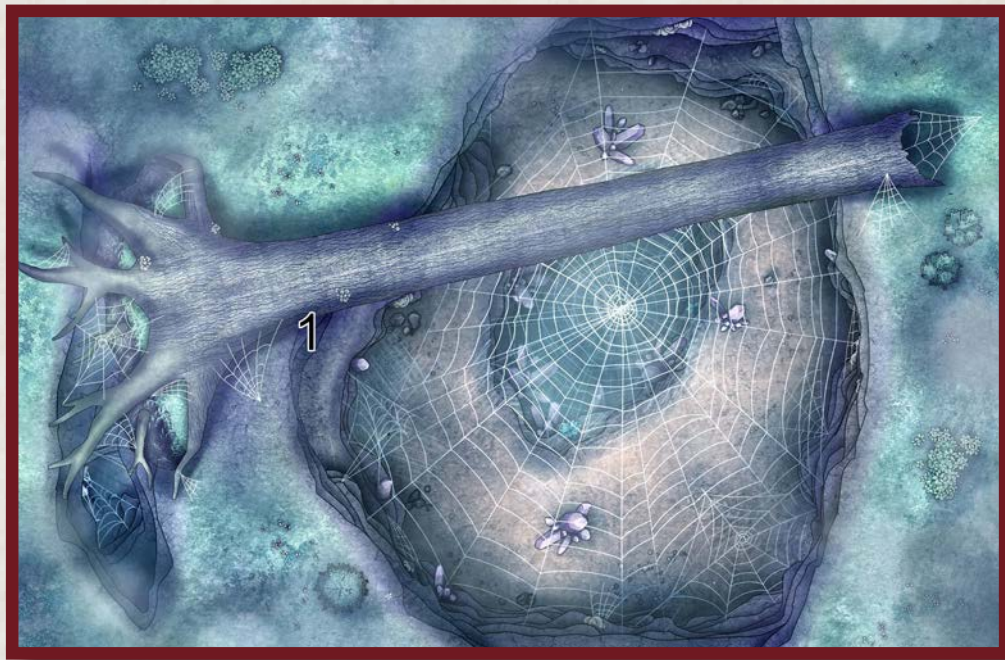
Hazard: Planar Echoes. The planar thinning in this passage sometimes manifests as brief, disorienting flashes. When a character moves through this area, roll a d6. On a 1, they momentarily see the Ethereal Plane overlapping with the Material—ghostly, colorless versions of the tunnel stretching in impossible directions. The character must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or take 1d6 psychic damage as reality fractures around them. Additionally, they have disadvantage on the next ability check or saving throw they make as lingering disorientation clouds their mind.

5. MOLT PIT

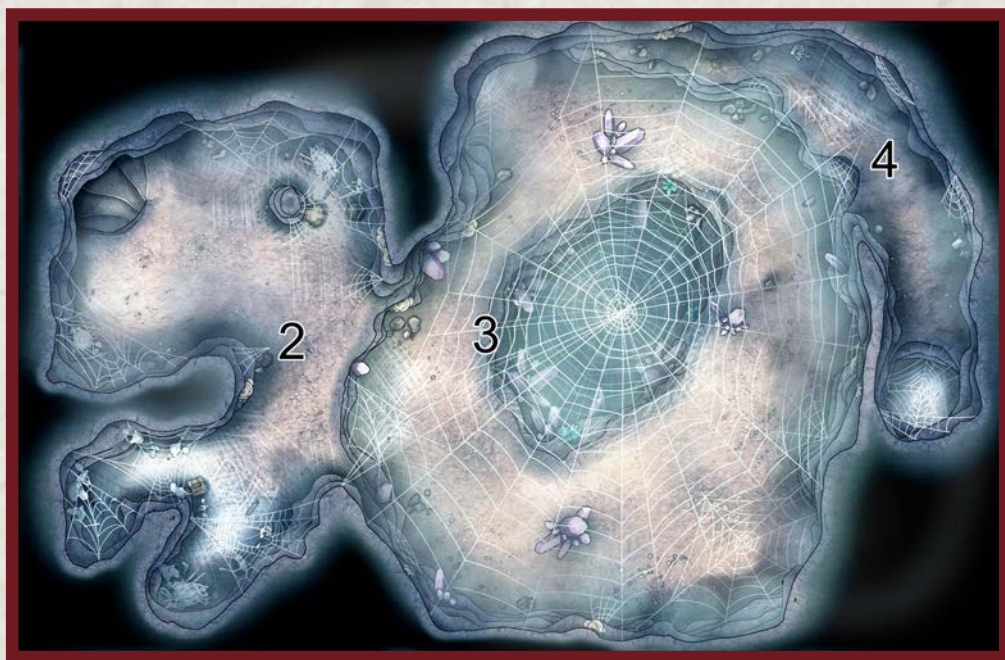
This small alcove is dominated by a rough, circular depression in the stone floor. The hollow is filled with a grisly collection of molted spider exoskeletons. The translucent, chitinous shells are layered atop one another like discarded armor. Each successive layer is larger than the last, while fragments of bone and rusted metal glint among the remains.



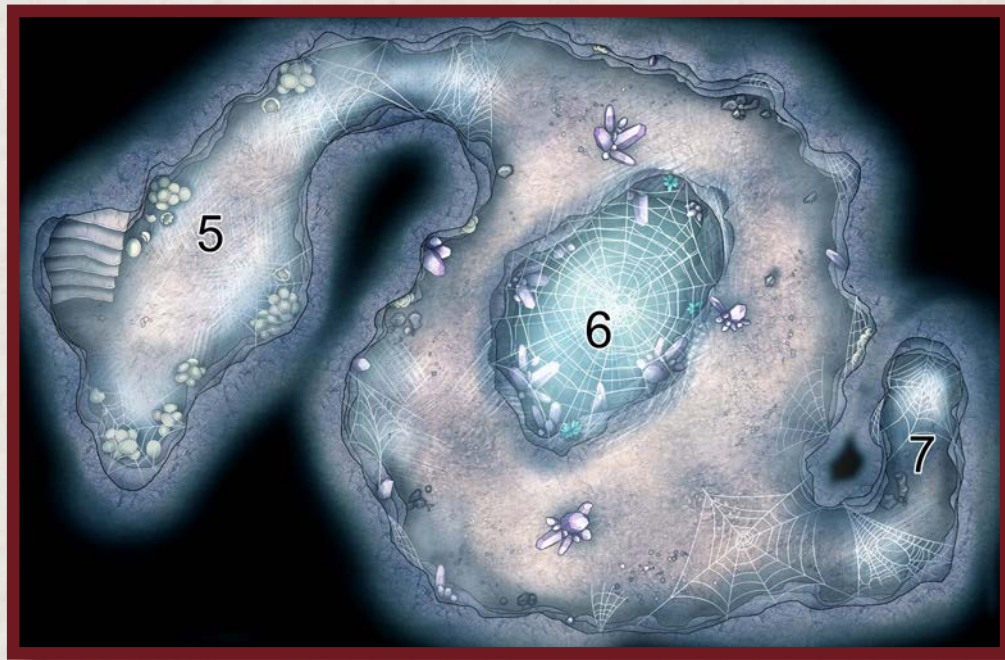
THRESHOLD



UPPER LEVEL



LOWER LEVEL



This alcove serves as the phase spider's molting site, where she retreats during vulnerable periods of growth. The depression contains at least a dozen shed exoskeletons, the oldest nearly disintegrated, the most recent still somewhat intact and disturbingly large.

Treasure: The Molt Pit. Characters who search through the unpleasant collection and succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check find items that have fallen or been dragged here over the years: 45 gp in various coinage, a silver ring worth 20 gp, a *potion of healing*, and a small leather pouch containing three uncut garnets worth 15 gp each. Additionally, a character who succeeds on a DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check recognizes that fresh phase spider chitin could be harvested from the most recent molt for enough material to be worth 50 gp to an alchemist or armorsmith interested in exotic components.

6. PHASE SPIDER DEN

This vast chamber opens before you, the air shimmering with an otherworldly quality, translucent shapes flickering at the edges of vision. At the chamber's heart, a massive pit descends into deeper darkness, its opening completely choked with layer upon layer of dense webbing that forms an almost solid mass of silk. The web structure pulses with a faint, sickly luminescence. Around the perimeter, scattered cocoons hang from the ceiling and walls, and the floor is littered with bones picked clean of flesh.

This is the phase spider's primary lair, where she rests between hunts. The central pit is 20 feet across and approximately twenty feet deep, serving as her egg chamber. The webbing filling the pit is so dense that nothing can pass through it without cutting or burning a path. The planar thinning is most pronounced here. Ghostly overlaps of the Ethereal Plane are constantly visible—colorless echoes of the chamber existing in both worlds simultaneously.

Encounter: The Pale Huntress. The **phase spider** is aware of intruders the moment they enter this chamber. She doesn't immediately attack; instead, she phases into the Ethereal Plane and observes, looking for the best moment to strike. When she does attack, she phases in from an unexpected angle, such as appearing behind the party's back line or dropping from above. After striking, she then phases out before retaliation is possible. She is joined by two **shadows**, which are drawn to the life energy of the living and attack alongside her, though they don't coordinate with her as they are simply opportunistic predators. They manifest when combat begins, emerging from the walls as shrieking forms. The spider fights intelligently, using her Ethereal Jaunt ability to maximum advantage. She focuses on isolated targets, attempts to separate the party, and retreats to the Ethereal Plane whenever seriously threatened. If reduced to half her hit points, she becomes more aggressive and desperate, as her eggs are directly below and she's fighting to protect them.

If the party defeats or drives off the phase spider without destroying her eggs, she may attempt to return while they explore other areas. If they begin to destroy the eggs (by descending into the pit and setting them ablaze or otherwise eliminating them), the spider fights to the death with suicidal fury.

Destroying the Eggs. If the party wishes to eliminate the spider's brood, they must access the egg pit below. Burning through the dense webbing in the pit takes 10 minutes and immediately alerts the phase spider, who attacks relentlessly to defend her offspring. Alternatively, the party can descend after defeating the spider. The eggs themselves—hundreds of translucent orbs clustered throughout the cavity—are fragile and can be destroyed with fire, weapons, or crushing. Eliminating the entire brood takes approximately 5 minutes of deliberate effort.

7. BHASAD'S REMAINS

This small alcove is barely ten feet across, its entrance partially obscured by hanging webs. Within, a human skeleton lies slumped against the far wall, dressed in the tattered remains of dark robes. The bones are positioned as if the person died sitting upright, one hand outstretched toward a circle of strange symbols carved into the stone floor. The symbols glow with a faint, pulsing light that casts unsettling shadows across the chamber.

This is where Bhasad Crowmane died twenty years ago, his ritual succeeding catastrophically in the moment of his death. The carved symbols are the remnants of his planar viewing portal. They still function, though their purpose is now moot. Characters who examine the symbols and succeed on a DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana) check recognize them as a permanent tear between planes, stable but unable to be closed.

Bhasad's Remains. The skeleton still wears a copper amulet etched with planar symbols; the ritual focus needed to free his spirit. Searching the robes reveals a small leather pouch containing powdered silver (worth 25 gp) and a journal containing Bhasad's research notes. The final pages describe his experiment and include a failsafe ritual he designed in case his soul became trapped between planes—a possibility he acknowledged but clearly didn't expect. The instructions are clear: place his copper ritual focus on his remains, sprinkle them with powdered silver, and speak the phrase "*The door is opened, the threshold crossed, the watcher released*" to release any trapped essence.

Treasure. In addition to the ritual components, the alcove contains the following: Bhasad's spellbook, his *wand of web* (7 charges remaining), a *spell scroll of misty step*, 40 gp in a coin purse, and a silver ring engraved with arcane symbols worth 50 gp. His research journal is worth 100 gp to interested wizards or academics.

Freeing Bhasad. If the party performs the ritual described in his notes, Bhasad's ghost appears one final time. He thanks them genuinely, his translucent form steadying and brightening for the first time in decades. Then, peacefully, he fades from existence. The ritual takes 1 minute to complete.

AFTERMATH

With the phase spider defeated and her eggs destroyed, the immediate threat to the region is eliminated. The planar thinning created by Bhasad's ritual remains, but without the spider's presence to strengthen it, the boundary slowly begins to stabilize. The cave system becomes safer, though it will likely never be entirely mundane—ghostly echoes and strange sensations persist for those who venture within. If the party rescued Jemet, his grateful parents pay the promised reward and spread word of the party's heroism throughout the community. Jemet himself is chastened by his near-death experience and abandons any further treasure-hunting aspirations, at least for the time being. If the party freed Bhasad's spirit, they've granted peace to a tormented soul who suffered two decades in limbo. His research notes and possessions are theirs to keep, and any wizards or academics they approach show significant interest in his work on planar boundaries.



REFERENCES

This work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 ("SRD 5.1") by Wizards of the Coast LLC and available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>. The SRD 5.1 is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

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