

July, 2017

2CGazette

A Dungeon Master's Periodical

5e Compatible

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Produced by 2CGaming



Nolan '15

Beneath the Ice

The 2CGazette—July, 2017

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Created for 2CGaming's Patreon - the 2CGazette: www.patreon.com/2cggaming

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Beneath the Ice

Encounter Level 7 (Scales 5 to 11)

Summary

White dragons are at home in icy climates, but their affinity for cold weather goes beyond just handling low temperatures. They're effective burrowers, capable swimmers, and can cross treacherous ice and snow without missing a single step. Fighting one on its home turf seems like a very bad idea, and taking on a mated pair is downright suicidal. But sometimes there's no other option.

Encounter Statistics

Terrain Tags: Nature, exterior, ice

Favors: Rangers, druids, resistance and immunity to cold

Foils: Slow characters, barbarians

Encounter Weight: Heavy (fully-rested parties)

Creatures:

2x Young White Dragon

XP: 7,000 experience points (4,600 from creatures, 2,400 from terrain)

Encounter Weight

Going up against a pair of dragons requires not only a fully-rested party, but some advance preparation. Groups that have access to *potions of resistance* or any other means of gaining resistance or immunity to cold damage will fare far better than those who run in under-equipped. The better the party prepares, the fewer resources they will expend. Completely unprepared groups may be unable to overcome the dragons and be forced to retreat, or perish in the attempt.

The Frozen Lake

The approach to the dragon's lair is protected by sheer cliffs, but once the party arrives, the wide-open area around the lake is even more dangerous. The dragons live in a cave 300 ft. beneath the icy water, and while they can't breathe underwater, they can hold their breath for up to 5 minutes and swim faster than most humans can run, making the journey easy. Their natural immunity to cold also protects them from the lethal temperatures down below. Read the following text to describe the scene:

The tall cliffs around you suddenly give way to a vast, open plain. Snow is piled up around holes that reveal an icy lake beneath. While the lake itself is covered in a sheet of thick ice, there are several large holes, 10 ft. in diameter, that indicate recent activity. If the water is as cold as it looks, falling in might be last mistake you make.

Terrain

The snow covering the ice makes the entire area difficult terrain. Creatures taking the Dash action must make an Acrobatics skill check against DC 12, falling prone on a failure. They only make this check once per turn, regardless of how many times they take the Dash action.

The ice above the lake is 5 ft. thick, each 5-ft. cube has AC 12 and 50 hp. It is immune to poison, psychic, and cold damage and vulnerable to fire damage. As an object, it automatically fails Strength and Dexterity saving throws and is immune to effects that require other saving throws. Holes broken in the ice refreeze after 10 minutes, meaning they will remain open for the entire fight. If a hole opens beneath a creature for any reason, it must make a Dexterity saving throw against DC 12. On a failure, they fall into the water. A successful save allows them to move to an empty space within 5 ft. of the hole's edge.

Creatures that enter the water beneath the ice for the first time on a turn or start their turn within it take 7 (2d6) cold damage. Creatures ending their turn in the water

must make a Constitution saving throw against DC 12 or become Incapacitated until the end of their next turn, repeating this save as needed at that time. Creatures that have resistance to cold damage have advantage on this saving throw, and creatures that are immune to cold damage are immune to this effect.

Climbing out of the water requires a DC 15 Athletics or Acrobatics skill check made as part of the movement. On a failure, the creature loses its movement and is unable to climb out of the water. On a success, they pull themselves onto the ice at the cost of all their movement, ending prone. A creature can use its action to Dash and attempt this check again. Creatures with a climb speed automatically succeed on this check.

Underwater Combat

The standard rules for underwater combat are pretty simple. When making a melee weapon attack, a creature that doesn't have a swimming speed (either natural or granted by magic) has disadvantage on the attack roll unless the weapon is a dagger, javelin, shortsword, spear, or trident. A ranged weapon attack automatically misses a target beyond the weapon's normal range. Even against a target within normal range, the attack roll has disadvantage unless the weapon is a crossbow, a net, or a weapon that is thrown like a javelin (including a spear, trident, or dart). Creatures and objects that are fully immersed in water have resistance to fire damage.

The dragons both have a swim speed, allowing them to avoid all of these penalties, and if the party ventures into the depths unprepared, they may not ever return to the surface. You should remind the players of the rules for underwater combat, and tell them how to mitigate them (getting a swim speed through magical means), and maybe even warn them of just how bad an idea it is to dive into freezing water without some kind of preparation.

The Dragon's Lair

Accessing the lair through the water requires swimming down 300 ft.; a creature with a 30 ft. speed using its action to Dash can cover that distance in 10 rounds, taking a total of 70 (20d6) cold damage from the water during the journey. A creature that fails its saving throw against becoming Incapacitated can still move, but can no longer take an action to dash, which will add another round of travel to the journey. Alternatively, a creature can access the lair through the air vents the dragons have made, but they are only six inches in diameter, making a non-magical entry likely impossible. Spells like *gaseous form*, *dimension door*, or a druid's wild shape ability can all enable a creature to enter the lair this way.

Tactics

During the party's initial approach, the dragons should take turns flying out to strafe them with their breath weapons. Once both dragons have attacked in this way, they retreat to the frozen lake. This will give their breath weapons time to recharge before the party arrives. They'll hide in their lair, relying on their keen senses to detect the approaching party. Only an especially stealthy group will be able to get the drop on the dragons (passive Perception 16), but if they do, allow them a surprise round when one of the dragons swims up to the surface to investigate.

During combat, the dragons will use their breath weapons any time they are available. While waiting for them to recharge, they'll engage in melee combat very aggressively. Each dragon should pick a different target, attacking the most available foe. They're not afraid of taking opportunity attacks in order to maneuver around the battlefield, and they can use their burrow speed to break holes in the ice. The dragons can burrow through the ice with only 5 ft. of movement, leaving a 10 ft. by 10 ft. hole behind. If they do this beneath a character, that character must make a Dexterity saving throw against DC 12 or else fall into the water.

When a dragon is reduced to half its maximum hit

points or less, it retreats beneath the ice, back down to its lair. If the dragons notice the party pursuing them, they will swim out and fight to the death to defend their lair.

Treasure

The dragon's lair is well stocked with treasure, as one would expect. Within, the players will find 4,000 gold pieces, 8,500 silver pieces, 10 gemstones worth 100 gold pieces each (Jade, Pearl, and Garnet), and two flawless star sapphire gems worth 1,000 gold pieces each.

This is also a great opportunity to provide the players with magic items, as almost anything can be believably found within a dragon's lair. You can also give the players a dragon egg or two, which would be reasonably valued at 10,000 gold pieces or even more, but is not something that can simply be sold at the nearest general store. See the Plot Hooks section for more ideas of how to implement a dragon egg in your game.

Plot Hooks

Your main plot hook is whatever reason you give your players to make the very foolish decision of attacking a dragon's lair. This might be an important magical item they need to advance the plot, or it might be an optional item they simply desire for its power, such as a sunblade or dwarven thrower. Giving them a powerful magic item like that can unbalance the game, but you have a built-in method to deal with that here. If the item is too strong, have it attract unwelcome attention from other dragons. The two things a dragon hates most are dragonslayers and thieves.

You might also have the dragon egg be the main draw here, which you can have hatch and join the party as an NPC, or simply give the party a cash infusion for selling it. But selling a dragon egg is likely an involved process with many bidders, some of whom are likely the agents of dragons or even a dragon itself in disguise trying to get some alone time with the egg's owner so they can avenge the death of one of their own.

Young White Dragon

Large Dragon, Chaotic Evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 133 (14d10 + 56)

Speed 40 ft., burrow 20 ft., fly 80 ft., swim 40 ft.

| STR | DEX | CON | INT | WIS | CHA |
|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|
| 18 (+4) | 10 (+0) | 18 (+4) | 6 (-2) | 11 (+0) | 12 (+1) |

Saving Throws Dex +3, Con +7, Wis +3, Cha +4

Skills Perception +6, Stealth +3

Damage Immunities cold

Senses blindsight 30 ft., darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Common, Draconic

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Traits

Ice Walk. The dragon can move across and climb icy surfaces without needing to make an ability check.

Additionally, difficult terrain composed of ice or snow doesn't cost it extra movement.

Actions

Multiattack. The dragon makes three attacks: one with its bite and two with its claws.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target.
Hit: 15 (2d10 + 4) piercing damage plus 4 (1d8) cold damage.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target.
Hit: 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage.

Cold Breath (Recharge 5-6). The dragon exhales an icy blast in a 30-ft. cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw, taking 45 (10d8) cold damage on a failed save, or half as much on a successful one.

Finally, you might have the dragons themselves be the plot hook, whether it's stopping their raids on nearby towns or taking on a contract from a monster hunting organization. As ever, killing a pair of dragons should have consequences.

Changing the Flavor

Cold water is a potentially lethal hazard to the unprepared but can be easily circumvented with magic. The other typical dangerous fantasy liquids are acid and lava, and while there are dragon types that are immune to their effects, you aren't likely to find any players willing to dive into there even with magical protection. As such, changing the dragon types or their elements will make the encounter much harder. This is compounded by the fact that white dragons are typically weaker than other dragons of the same age, so any substitution will make the party's foes more dangerous. You can still make these tweaks, but consider using a lower level version of the encounter, easier tactics, or both.

Scaling by Level

EL 5 (-2,300 XP) - Remove one young white dragon. 5th level isn't a significant downgrade, but it's enough of a drop in power to warrant removing one of the dragons. Retaining the dangerous terrain keeps both the challenge and character of the encounter.

EL 9 (+2,300 XP) - Add one young white dragon. A third dragon makes this fight much more dangerous without making it more complicated. This is an easy tweak to handle a more capable party.

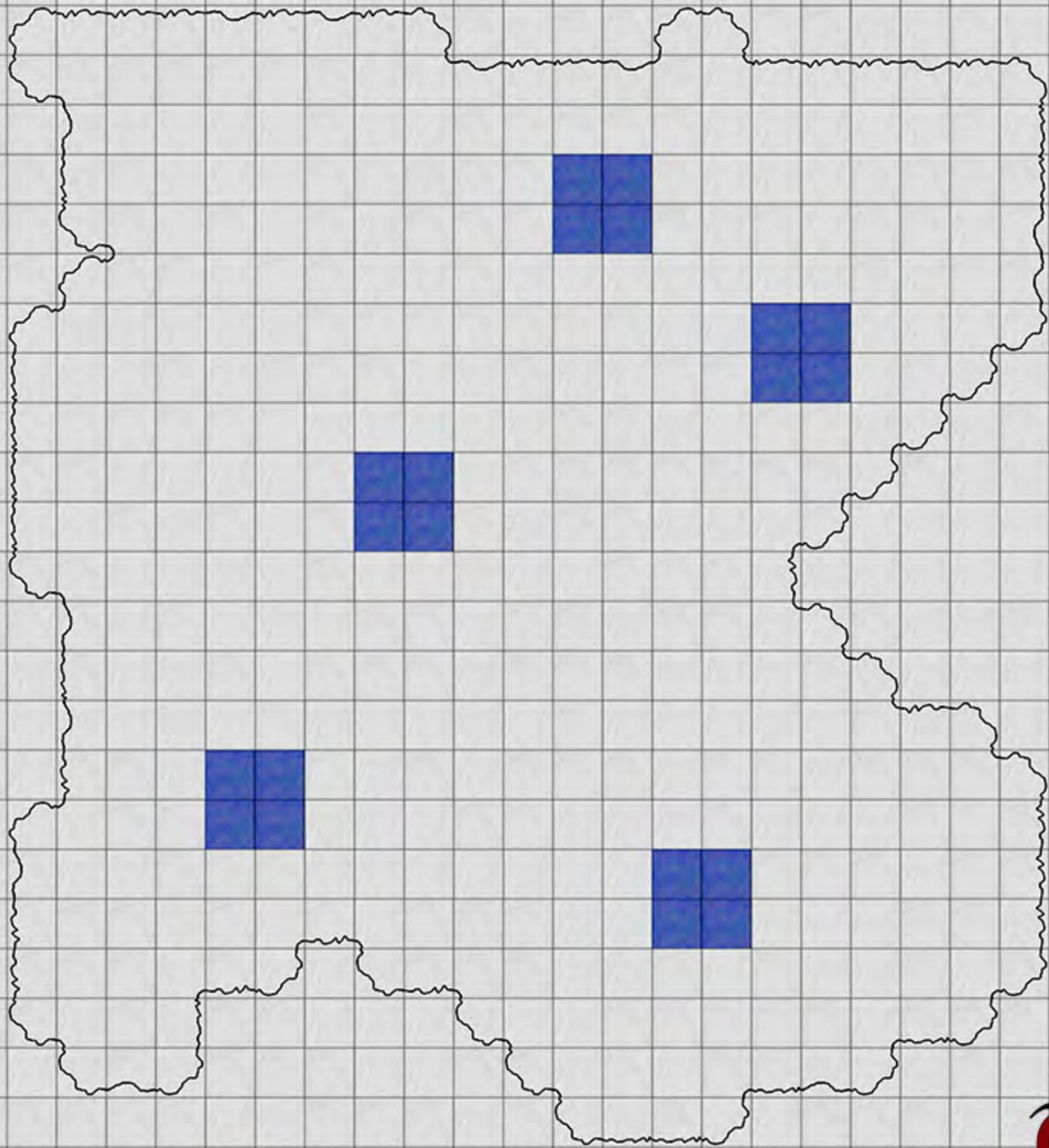
EL 11 (+7,700 XP) - Replace one young white dragon with one adult white dragon. Add three white dragon wyrmlings. Now we're getting into some fun tweaks. 11th level characters are much stronger, entering the third tier of power, and they need a proper challenge. The adult white dragon is much more dangerous than a young one, and the three wyrmlings have weak bite attacks but potent breath weapons, allowing them to harry the party with hit and run attacks and wear them down.

Scaling by Tactics

Easier - Avoid using the dragons' breath weapons on multiple characters, and keep the fight above the water until one of the dragons is slain. Taking the battle beneath the ice makes it much more dangerous, the longer you delay that transition (including avoiding it altogether), the easier this fight will be for the players. You can also avoid burrowing through the ice beneath the characters, which will keep them from being dumped into the water. You should dump a couple of them, however, as the frozen lake is a significant part of the encounter's charm.

Harder - Try to hit multiple characters with each use of the dragon's breath weapon, and start the fight by having the dragons burrow up through the ice beneath characters, potentially dumping one or more of them into the water. Retreat both dragons as soon as one of them is reduced to half of its maximum hit points, forcing the players to pursue. Don't forget general tips for making fights harder: focus the dragons' attacks on the same target, attack spellcasters that are concentrating on powerful spells, and try to split the party.

Lethal - The best way to make this fight lethal is to ambush the party as they approach the lake with hit-and-run attacks. Have the dragons surface, fly up just enough to use their breath weapons, then dive beneath the water again. The lake is big enough that the dragons can burrow up unpredictably, and they can use their blindsight to tell where the adventurers are on the other side of the thick ice, avoiding readied actions and traps the party might set.



Snow  Water  Lake Boundry 