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CAMPAIGN



# **Dungeon Crawl Classics #2**

## **The Lost Vault of Tsathzar Rho**

by Michael Mearls  
**AN ADVENTURE FOR FIRST LEVEL CHARACTERS**



Remember the golden days of role playing, when adventures were underground, NPCs were there to be killed, and the finale of every dungeon was the dragon on the 20th level? Well, those days are back. Dungeon Crawl Classics feature bloody combat, intriguing dungeons, and no NPCs who aren't meant to be killed. Each adventure is 100% good, solid dungeon crawl, with the monsters you know, the traps you fear, and the secret doors you know must be there somewhere.

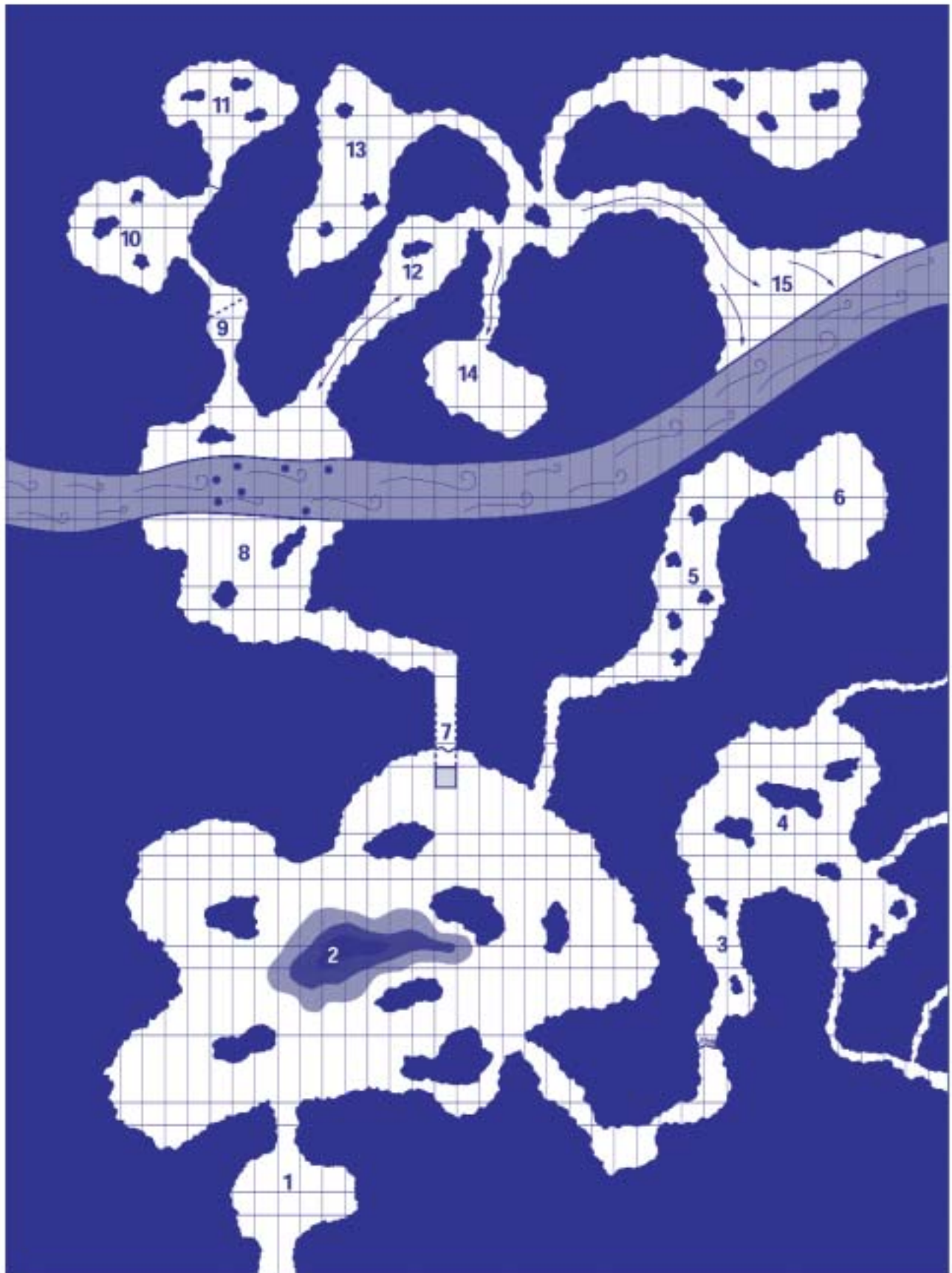
In *The Lost Vault of Tsathzar Rho*, a simple expedition to rid the village of a marauding ogre soon becomes more than it seems. A mysterious force has transformed the ogre and the kobold tribe he once bullied into twisted, demented creatures. When the characters enter the ogre's cave, they find a passage behind leading deep into the mountains. Soon they arrive at the lost vault of the sorcerer Tsathzar Rho. This extended dungeon crawl will advance a party of first level characters up to third level.

If you enjoy this adventure, look for the rest of the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* series!



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## Lost Vault of Tsathzar Rho - Level 1



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### Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
Background .....	2
Level One: The Caves .....	4
Level Two: The Outer Vaults .....	11
Level Three: The Inner Vaults of Tsathzar Rho .....	21
Wrapping Up .....	25
Creature Stat Blocks .....	25



If you like this adventure, be sure to look for the rest of the Dungeon Crawl Classics series at your local game store.

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# Introduction

Welcome to a land of endless adventure, where strong steel, steady nerves, or a magical spell is all that is necessary for a humble peasant to become a mighty hero. This module is written in the spirit of the golden age of role-playing games, when wonder, excitement, and plain old fun were always just around the corner. It presents a three-level dungeon that takes beginning characters all the way up to 3rd level. Wits, courage, and a small amount of luck are all that stand between victory and defeat. Though this module focuses on combat, it is by no means a mindless series of battles. Cunning players will find encounters that reward ingenuity, planning, and good tactics. Those who rush forward without thought will soon find themselves generating a new character.

## Background

In the ancient days of the world, Tsathzar Rho was an ambitious sorcerer of considerable power. He forged gates between worlds, bent demons to his will, and cultivated magical abilities the likes of which the world has not since seen. Yet, as the saying goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Tsathzar Rho mastered magics of the ninth circle, enslaved the demon-generals of the murkiest abyss, and shattered the Silver Gate of the Eighth World, yet still he desired more. While his successes grew his power, so too did they cultivate his arrogance. In time, he sought out power and magic beyond the reckoning of men, gods, and even the demons that whimpered at the mere mention of his name. He sent prayers and supplications to the Outer Gods, the Old Ones, the Lords of Infinite Emptiness, and other mighty beings that existed outside of planes. In his hubris, Tsathzar Rho believed he had the skill and cunning to bind such unspeakable horrors. Delving into texts judged ancient even in his distant epoch, he called forth the Keeper of the Gate and demanded that the Outer Ones appear before him.

In doing so, he sealed his fate for all eternity.

The Outer Gods did indeed answer Tsathzar Rho's call, but they came neither to hear his appeals nor to witness his magic. Their very nature warped and twisted the fabric of reality, causing a tremendous explosion that disintegrated Tsathzar Rho's tower and turned the region around it into an ashen waste. The local men and elves breathed a sigh of relief and continued with their lives, thankful that the tower's ominous presence had been expunged from the horizon.

However, such an intrusion into the mortal realms could not pass without leaving a permanent stain on the fabric of reality. Tsathzar Rho and his vaults were not destroyed. Rather, they were drawn into the Outer Gods' realm and forever altered to those dread beings' needs. Before Tsathzar Rho had drawn their notice, they had never before cast their baleful glance upon the world. Now, the time has come for the Outer Gods to

announce their presence and demand faithful prayers from the creatures of the world. The fabric of the planes has realigned, allowing Tsathzar Rho's demesne to appear once again. Tsathzar Rho now sleeps within, preparing to enter the world as the Outer Gods' prophet and high priest. As his spirit gains power, the world shall fall under the Outer Gods' domain.

Yet not all hope is lost. The Outer Gods know little of the mortal realm. By happenstance or fate, their plans have spiraled beyond their control. Tsathzar Rho's vault materialized within a mountain that long ago arose from the land. The sorcerer's spirit lacks strength and stands upon the edge of oblivion. Only one portion of the Outer Gods' plan of conquest has worked properly. The black chrysalis at the tower's center exerted a reality-warping field of energy that transformed creatures into evil servants of Tsathzar Rho's new form. A tribe of kobolds that lives within the caves where the vault materialized, along with the vermin and creatures that also dwell there, have been physically and psychically altered to defend the chrysalis and worship it as a god. When Tsathzar Rho is born, he shall find a small cadre of fanatics waiting to assist him.

Into this situation step the characters. The sudden change in the alignment and demeanor of the creatures in the cave has not gone unnoticed. A brutish ogre who lived there has begun to raid neighboring villages and waylay travelers. Previously, the ogre relied on extortion and intimidation to rob merchants and dominate the kobolds. The change has driven the creature mad, transforming it into a psychotic marauder. The characters are asked to track down this creature and slay it. In doing so, they discover that something is amiss. Further investigations lead them to the caves now altered by the coming of the Outer Gods' prophet.

The caves consist of three levels. The first level, the outer caves, is inhabited by insects, rats, and other vermin that have been turned into evil, predatory creatures by the Outer Gods' influence. They attack intruders and

fight to the death. The second level consists of the kobold tribe's caves. For years, these creatures subsisted on lizards and rats they hunted in the deep caves. Once a year, they supplemented their diet with a raid into the countryside, seizing a traveler or small band of merchants to add to their larder. Now, they are a bloodthirsty cult dedicated to the Outer Gods. They harbor dreams of conquest and epic blood sacrifices to appease their overlords. Tsathzar Rho's vault is the final dungeon level, its remaining chambers and galleries having displaced the earth. Within its halls are the kobold's leaders and the current avatar of Tsathzar Rho, first prophet of the Outer Gods.

## Starting the Adventure

The Lost Vault of Tsathzar Rho is easily inserted into any campaign. Simply place it near any frontier town or village. As outlined above, the local villagers ask the PCs to defeat a marauding ogre. The region around the village is normally peaceful. The locals know of the cave where the ogre, kobolds, dire rats, and other creatures live, but never before have they caused any trouble for the men and elves of the area. As they begin the adventure, the players should have a sense that the creatures within the caves are normally peaceful. The physical changes the creatures have undergone and their extreme aggression should spark their curiosity. Otherwise, the characters may simply defeat the ogre, carry its corpse to town as proof of their deed, and continue on their way.

## Presentation

Each encounter area within this dungeon is presented with three headers.

**Appearance:** A brief description of the area, including any rules that apply to action that takes place within it, treasure hidden in the area, and other elements.

**Inhabitants:** This section lists the EL for creatures encountered in the area and gives their possessions and physical descriptions.

**Development:** This section discusses tactics, likely actions, and other events that are likely to occur in the encounter area based on the characters' actions.

Think of the appearance head as setting the stage for the action, the inhabitants section giving information on the actors present for the scene, and the development portion giving you ideas and outlines for how the action develops.



# Level One: The Caves

The first dungeon level is a series of natural caverns clustered around a subterranean river. The rock in this area is universally damp and slick. The floors are studded with stalagmites, and the air is thick with humidity. The following rules apply in all situations within this level.

Any character who attempts to run must make a Balance check (DC 15) or slip and fall on the wet stones and slick rock of the cave floor. Roll a d10 and treat the result as a percentage to determine how far the character moves before falling prone. On a 10, the character moves his full distance before slipping. Characters who fall take no damage.

The walls are as slick as the floor, causing a –2 circumstance penalty to all Climb checks.

The caverns and passages are cramped and cluttered with stalactites and stalagmites. Outside of room 1, characters who fight with Large weapons suffer a –2 circumstance penalty to hit.

Water drips from the ceiling, forming puddles and keeping the caverns damp. The incessant noise of water dropping into puddles echoes through the entire level, causing a –2 circumstance penalty to all Listen checks.

**Development:** Losses amongst the monsters on this level, including the kobolds, are not replaced. The kobold champion who commands this level, Slazzik Balefire, is a pariah amongst the leaders of his clan and was given this assignment to prove himself worthy of serving in the Outer Gods' legions. He fears that any reports of failure to his superiors can result in his execution and replacement. Thus, he prevents any word of the characters' actions from reaching the second or third dungeon level.

The kobolds attempt to focus their defense on area 7. If the characters defeat several bands of the creatures then retreat, they station up to a dozen warriors near the cavern hole and rotate guards to keep a constant watch. If for some reason the kobolds cannot hold area 7, they make their stand in the guardroom at area 12. In this case, they set their rats loose and use them as a screen near the river at area 8. If the guards in room 12 here the sounds of combat as the characters battle the rats, they rush down to join the fray.

Otherwise, adjudicate the kobold's plans and actions as you see fit. Keep in mind that the kobold's leader does not want to alert his superiors of any trouble, but his underlings are under no such compulsion. If the characters slay Slazzik Balefire, any surviving kobolds flee down the river to the second dungeon level.

## Room 1 – The Ogre's Cave

**Appearance:** Logbrag the ogre has dwelled here for many years, as evidenced by the piles of garbage, old bones, and scattered items found here. The floor is thick with debris, a full six inches deep of bones, dirt, and loose rocks along the edges of the room. A crude fire pit is dug in the chamber's center, while a thick pile of blankets and furs covers the floor. An iron spike driven into a crack in the wall serves as a hook for a lantern.

Hidden beneath the furs is a *+1 large wooden shield*. Logbrag uses it to support his back. Two sacks tossed into a corner hold Logbrag's treasure and a week's worth of rancid meat and hard, moldy cheese. The ogre's treasure consists of 300 gp in silver, gold, and copper.

**Inhabitants (EL 2):** Logbrag the ogre's appearance has been changed by the Outer Gods' influence. His skin has turned jet black, while his eyes glow green. Rancid, oozing pustules cover his back, and in a few places along the wall dried puss and blood mark where he attempted to itch himself on the rock.

**Development:** Logbrag has proven difficult for the kobolds to control. Though the Outer Gods' warping influence should have made him pliable and obedient, it instead twisted his mind and turned him into a psychopath. As the characters approach, his delusions cause him to believe they are the emissaries of the gods sent to escort him to the afterlife. He speaks in halting Common of the changes to his body, the kobolds from the caves, and strange dreams he has been having lately. After a minute or two of conversation, he hefts his club with a resigned sigh and attacks, shrieking that the gods will not have his soul without a fight.

## Room 2 – The Great Cavern

**Appearance:** This wide, vaulted chamber opens almost 60 feet above the characters. Stalactites and stalagmites dot the chamber, almost turning it into a series of smaller rooms. A small pool of water in the center of the room is shallow but broad. The water within it is warm but potable. The walls and rock formations here are particularly wet. They glisten by the light of the characters' torches or lantern.

A hole in the northern section of the ceiling leads to a passage to the deeper underearth. As the hole is over 60 feet from the floor, the characters may have trouble spotting it by torchlight or with darkvision. A

severed length of rope directly beneath the hole in a small puddle of water is the only clue of its presence. Water drips down from the hole, splashing down into the puddle. If the characters try to use a grappling hook to reach the hole, they must make an attack against AC 15 to lodge the hook in place. The hole opens to a passage with a rough, upward slope with plenty of places for a hook to catch.

**Inhabitants (EL 2):** Four stirges dwell amongst the stalactites here. Normally, they roost in here by day and hunt in the area outside the cave by night. The creatures were called here by the malign influence that infuses this area and they never attack any of the creatures under its control. Most of the time, they cling to the ceiling with their claws and sleep until they grow hungry enough to seek a meal.

The stirges have undergone a strange, subtle change to their bodies. They appear thin and emaciated, but as soon as they draw blood from an opponent they expand, stretch, and swell. Blood oozes from their skin, and if slain they pop like water balloons.

**Development:** As soon as the characters enter the chamber, the stirges prepare to attack. Remember that with most light sources the characters cannot see the stirges until they dive downward. Unless a character specifically states he is inspecting the ceiling, the stirges charge from their roosting spots and attack with surprise. Otherwise, the characters must make Spot checks opposed by the stirges' Hide skill.

### Room 3 – The Beetle Cavern

**Appearance:** This corridor heading into this place from the north opens 10 feet above the cavern's floor. If for some reason the characters run into this chamber (such as if fleeing the stirges from area 2) they must make Spot checks (DC 20) or fall into the chamber, taking damage as normal.

This area is the southern end of a cavern similar to area 2. It is composed of light green rock and is choked with stalactites and stalagmites. Puddles dot the floor, reflecting light from torches and lanterns. Owing to the puddles and a rough, uneven floor, all creatures with less than four legs must move at half their normal speed or make a Balance check (DC 15) to avoid falling prone. Use a d10 as described above under the general rules for this level to determine where in his movement a character falls.

**Inhabitants (EL 1):** Three giant fire beetles occupy this area. Their bodies have been subtly changed

by the Outer Gods' influence. The fiery, glowing gems set into their bodies have changed to resemble tiny, human skulls. Their internal organs have slowly metamorphosed. In time, they will become voracious predators capable of devouring stone, metal, and other materials. For now, they simply emit a horrendous stench if chopped open in battle. This stink causes no effects beyond its unpleasant odor.

**Development:** The giant fire beetles have been drawn here from the deeper cavern regions by the call of the Outer Gods. They are unable to join their comrades in service due to the 10-foot cliff between the cavern and southern passage. Angry and agitated, they swarm through the room and chitter wildly, attacking anyone who enters here with a vicious abandon. If the characters use missile weapons against them, they flee to the north.

### Room 4 – Parts Unknown

**Appearance:** This large cavern connects this complex to distant areas of the underearth. The floor is thick with dust, and the air is stale and musty. The floor slopes downward to the east, leading to three narrow passages that run several hundred feet before opening to caverns within the subterranean realms. You may expand on these regions as you wish, perhaps connecting them to a distant realm of underworld oceans and degenerate, decadent walled cities of the underdark.

**Inhabitants (EL 1):** Three more giant fire beetles dwell here. They have undergone the same changes as the beetles in area 3, though they have been here longer and are slowly starving to death. They spend their time lurking in the cavern's eastern areas, tucked behind rock formations.

**Development:** The beetles lurk in the eastern portions of this chamber, one to the northeast and two to the southeast. They have been here for a week and have found little food, forcing them to conserve their energy as much as possible. When they hear the characters approaching, they immediately attack. One beetle strikes from the north, while the other two arrive a round later. The beetles surge towards lightly armored characters. Driven half-mad by hunger and the Outer Gods' baneful influence, they fight to the death.

If the characters drove the three beetles from area 3 to this cavern, they take cover behind rock formations. After their fellows here attack, they rush forward from a third direction to flank and defeat the characters. Note that all six beetles fighting together count as EL 2.