

HOUSE OF THE TYRANT

A FANTASY SETTLEMENT BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

Forty years ago, a monstrous tyrant seized control of the prosperous cliffside city of Novy Dom and dubbed itself **King Menaka**.

The tyrant has ruled from secrecy ever since, surrounding itself with byzantine layers of bureaucracy and ruling by terror, disinformation, and generosity in equal measure.

Those old enough to remember the coup keep the secret of Menaka's true nature, but the city is rotten with lies, treachery, and fear.

RUMORS FOR NEARBY PLACES

- Novy Dom was once a vital gateway for trade, but now buys little from the surrounds.
- A paranoid and secretive King took power in a coup.
- Visitors must hire a guide, or run afoul of the city's strange customs.
- Citizens still revere Cicollus, a god whose miracles ceased generations ago.
- The king of Novy Dom is hideous and has not been seen for decades.
- King Menaka has the power to create sustenance from thin air.

CITY IN THE CLIFFS

Novy Dom is carved from canyon cliffs, where the Greatcleft River meets the Blighted Narrows.

Adventurers approaching by water will likely be met by the boats of the Trade Guildhouse, escorted into the city, and interviewed.

Those arriving overland will first encounter bondservants of the Gatherers Guildhouse (looking for wood and small game in the nearby blightlands).

The city's protective wall has long been abandoned, its towers left to ruin.

Two levels of wood-and-chain public 'walks' are slung between the rocky walls, connecting the major structures to the shores and to each other.

TRADE & GUIDES

Trade in Novy Dom is entirely controlled by its six noble **guildhouses**. Resting, resupplying, or quartering here will require establishing ties with one or more of the guildhouse families.

If met on proper terms, hospitality is possible (especially after gifts are offered or after conspicuous displays of wealth).

THE GUILDHOUSES

The six guildhouses of Novy Dom control the city's industry: silk-making, dyeing, gold-mining, tool-making, external trading, and gathering from the surrounding land.

A single family controls each function: the elder generation (d10 'uncles' and 'aunts') sets policy and grooms d12 younger nobles who oversee 2d20 bondservants (indentured laborers).

STRUCTURE

The guildhouses contain four to five levels connected by well-guarded spiral stairs. Bondservants live in the humid lower levels. The middle levels are dominated by the guildhouses' workshops, while nobles and their personal servants reside and entertain above.

SCRIBES

The Royal Ministry's three-score scribes are seconded from the guildhouses for three-year terms, for which they are part clerk, part hostage.

THE SENIOR MINISTERS

The three senior ministers are rarely seen outside the Royal Ministry or the citadel. Except for Menaka's **edicts**, the senior ministers define, and are exempt from, the laws of Novy Dom.

This has led them each to indulge in unsavory tastes: murder, torture, and demon worship.

Menaka appears to turn a blind eye to these habits, but secretly encourages them. The king wants the ministers hated by the population—if none can survive a coup, their loyalty is assured.

THE GIRAGITA

Menaka's spies are everywhere, and not all of them are human. The cliffs of Novy Dom are crawling with Giragita, dog-sized chameleons that act as Menaka's eyes and ears.

The Giragita normally blend into the cliffs' rock, but they can be spotted easily when they move.

They can climb surfaces of any angle with ease and can support many times their own weight with just a single limb.

They crawl about day and night, listening at windows and doors and from the undersides of the walks, always attentive for seditious behavior.

They respond viciously if attacked, but they move too slowly to endanger those with long weapons.

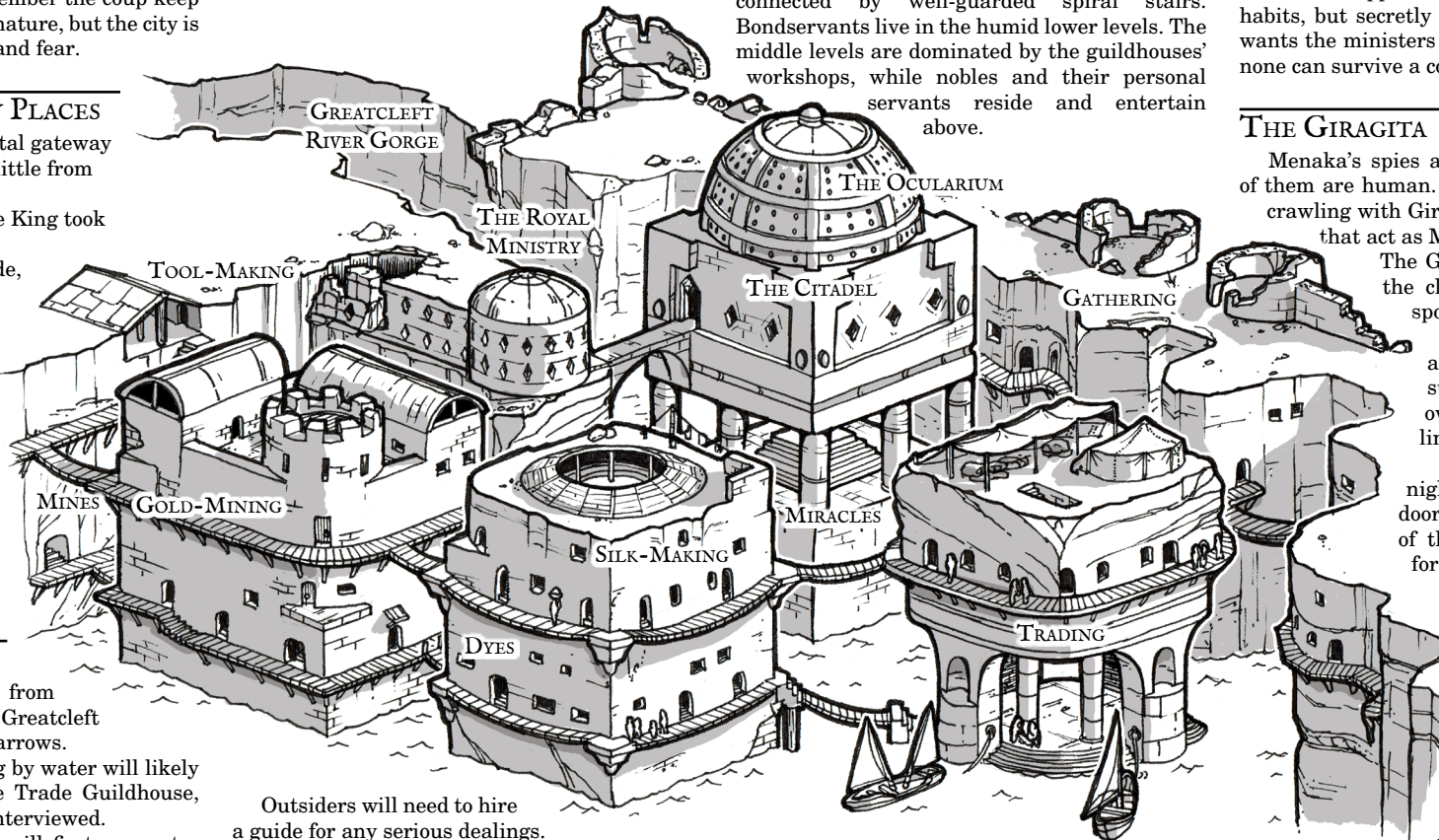
Menaka sees and hears everything they do through a psychic link.

The connection normally works one way, but Menaka can speak to them, and they can relay the king's

messages in their hissing, wet speech.

In a sense, the entire Royal Ministry is just a baffle, designed to stabilize Menaka's rule, while the Giragita are the real agents.

They are wretched, competitive, suspicious, and superior.



Outsiders will need to hire a guide for any serious dealings.

Guides—usually junior nobles of the guildhouse—are part chaperone and part agent, making introductions and brokering transactions (all while taking a hefty cut on top of official fees).

The guides also keep their clients from making common (illegal) gaffes, such as trying to have hushed conversations, disrespecting the nobility, or circumventing their assigned guide in any dealings.

THE ROYAL MINISTRY

The visible face of the Royal Ministry is its police, warriors dressed in layers of form-fitting white silk.

They are trained and well armed, with excellent swords and finely made boiled leather armor beneath their silks—but stern resistance from troublemakers will surprise them.

TRILEMMA ADVENTURES

THE WATCHED PEOPLE

The population is accustomed to the eyes of the Giragita, and they make a point of ignoring them.

It is the height of bad etiquette to overtly notice one, and explicitly illegal to point one out. Doing so is guaranteed to concern nearby citizens and will earn a sharp rebuke from guides.

GUILDHOUSE LEADERSHIP

Few guildhouses run smoothly. When it becomes relevant, roll d6 to determine how power is held and the concerns of those who hold it.

1. A single elder rules, focused on industrial output above all else.
2. An elder trio leads with the support of the others; they are effective and aligned.
3. A powerful leader is focused entirely on private/selfish goals (money, sex, collecting) while the others dither on the periphery.
4. The titular leader, sidelined by the others, rages self-destructively.
5. Output practically ceases as elders focus obsessively on **treachery** (see below).
6. The ruling elder is dead or missing (wasting sickness, murdered, drowned); business halts as elders compete to fill the power vacuum.

TREACHERIES

Deep within each guildhouse lurks an urgent, treacherous project. Roll d6 as soon as it becomes relevant:

1. A trio of uncles has so much dirt on the senior ministers that they are exempt from the Royal Ministry's oversight.
2. The nobles are actually **Nuss exiles**, their humanity only skin deep. Avoid marrying in.
3. Younger family members plot to assassinate a senior minister and are looking for brave and/or expendable allies.
4. The elders worship Cicollus, smuggle in their own food, and only feign to eat the food from the **Gallery of Miracles**.
5. The guildhouse specializes in close-quarters fighting and has a secret cache of weapons.
6. The guildhouse wants to unload a profusion of stolen goods, preferably outside the city.

LAWS AND PUNISHMENT

The Royal Ministry maintains a dense network of legal codes, sufficient to ensure that everything that transpires within the city is illegal in one way or other.

The *application* of the law is completely arbitrary, at the whim of the Royal Ministry, or as the result of a noble calling in a favor to satisfy a personal grudge.

Anyone targeted for persecution will be arrested by agents of the Royal Ministry.

FAVORITE LAWS

Those arrested are accused of some specific variation on the following:

- Withholding information
 - Seditious speech, insolence (or insufficient deference) toward the institutions of the city, asking questions
 - Buying something at the wrong time, in the wrong quantity, not buying something, or paying the wrong price
 - Excessive indulgence in foreign customs
 - Behavior that implies one of the above might be occurring, wasting Royal Ministry resources and eroding the social fabric
- Demanding that the law be applied uniformly is, of course, a direct challenge to the authority of the Royal Ministry and grounds for arrest.

FAVORITE PUNISHMENTS

Minor offenses result in an exorbitant fine or d12 weeks of 'corrective service' (forced labor as a guildhouse bondservant).

Serious offenses result in d6 months of corrective service, forfeiture of all property, mutilation, or all three (50% chance of each).

EDICTS OF THE KING

Each week, Menaka issues an edict to the guildhouses, galvanizing them into action. The Royal Ministry considers noncompliance to be treason.

Most believe the edicts are responses to the spying of the Giragita, but in truth, Menaka issues them randomly as part of a campaign to keep Novy Dom divided and mistrustful.

On any given week, roll d6 to determine the current edict:

1. Each guildhouse has been told that d3 traitors lurk within it and must be turned in by week's end. Making painful choices is a sign of loyalty.
2. A rebellion is brewing among the bondservants; work shall cease until the traitors are rooted out.
3. Subversives and criminals are moving freely at night, therefore a curfew is established and the walks must be empty after sunset.
4. Output is flagging, so the guildhouse which remits the most tax for the Royal Ministry

by the next full moon shall be exempt from taxes for the next d3 months.

5. To ensure the Royal Ministry rules sagely, all written documents within the city must be surrendered to it; mostly accurate copies will be returned in d6+1 months.
6. Because of their exemplary conduct, the elders of one guildhouse shall inspect the private documents of another. They shall provide leadership advice and a report to the Royal Ministry. (Menaka chooses the pairing that will cause the most friction.)

NOVY DOM ENCOUNTERS

During the day, encounters are continuous on the busy walks. Roll d6 to determine the most noteworthy group at any given time.

Add 2 to the roll for encounters on the upper walks.

1. Benefactors from the Gallery of Miracles delivering blood-red food
2. A Nuss exile, not quite passing as human
3. d3+3 Royal Ministry police escorting detainees (roll d3 – 1: a guildhouse noble, 2-3: d3 bondservants)
4. An eavesdropping **Giragita**
5. d6 bondservants (of a random guildhouse) on errands, carrying goods or messages
6. d6 bondservants maintaining a suspended walk or a building facade
7. d3 entertainers (music, tumbling, poetry)
8. d3 Guildhouse nobles (with d6 bodyguards and hangers-on) visiting other nobles on business or pleasure

ENCOUNTER DISPOSITION (D6)

1. Curious, perhaps even friendly
2. Cautious, but keen for news from outside
3. Angling for advantage; hoping to make a sale
4. Trying to avoid notice; concealing something
5. Indifferent, wary if engaged
6. Actively looking for a scapegoat or victim

THE GALLERY OF MIRACLES

The majority of the food in Novy Dom comes from here, an open gallery in the citadel, directly beneath Menaka's Ocularium.

At noon, red blood of a rare and precious variety drips from the darkness beyond a ceiling grate.

The Royal Ministry's High Benefactor chants rituals of transmutation while a line of aides catches the drops in silver pans, where each transforms into weird, sweet fruits, small

animals, dense cakes, or wine. All the food is blood red.

The droplets fall until mid-afternoon. Elders and their honored guests may take food here, while junior Benefactors deliver food to all parts of the city well into the night (along both levels), their red robes aflutter.

KING MENAKA'S OCULARIUM

A dome of new stone sprouts from the old citadel; a thousand spy-holes allow Menaka to observe much of the city from the dark interior.

None but three senior minsters come here, and they never discuss Menaka's true nature.

EYES OF THE TYRANT

Menaka is a great, scaly sphere the height of a man. A dozen chameleon eyes pivot and peer in every direction and a soft, tubular 'mouth' dangles from the underside.

A bladder of buoyant gas lets him float about the Ocularium at will.

BLOOD OF THE CHAINED GOD

At the center of the Ocularium hangs Menaka's prized possession: Cicollus, a half-forgotten godling in humanoid form. Hooks suspend him from the ceiling, and poured iron encases his head. Menaka bleeds him to perform auguries, and his blood feeds the city.

If freed, Cicollus will be quite dangerous. Hunger and pain will drive him to replenish himself immediately so that he can ascend to safety. Involuntary blood sacrifices are likely.

As a minor godling, Cicollus' magical aura is enormous; sensitives can detect it easily from anywhere within the city.

NUSS EXILES

The Nuss dwelling in Novy Dom have abandoned their true forms (a heresy to most Nuss) to adopt human shape. This requires effort; when exhausted or angered, the guise slips a little.

They will do nearly anything to protect the secret of their presence in Novy Dom. In truly desperate situations they will abandon humanoid form to sprout whatever they need: new limbs, mouths, tentacles, claws, blade-like horns, spikes, protective fur, or scales.

They dissolve into iron-smelling goo if slain.

For more about the Nuss, see adventure #13, **The Extent of Gamandes**.

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