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 himself King Menaka.
The tyrant has ruled by 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).

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 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.

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.

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.

TRILEMMA ADVENTURES

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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 walls 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
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4. A bladder of buoyant gas lets him float about
5. A dome of new stone sprouts from the old citadel; a thousand spy-holes allow Menaka to see the city well into the night (along both levels), and their honored guests may take food here, taxes for the next d3 months.
6. Blood-red 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 ablaze.

**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 ministers 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, tabular '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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Edited by Radek Drozdalski, Brent P. Newhall & Andrew Young.

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