

THE LENSES OF HEAVEN

AN ADVENTURE LOCATION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

Ancient Saaru stood at a confluence of astral paths so dense, travellers (or invaders) could arrive from anywhere.

To protect the city, the gods of Saaru gifted it with a pair of magical lenses. Set in the heavens at a place they named **Tlarba**, the lenses concentrated the astral paths away from Saaru, allowing gatekeepers to intercept any would-be uninvited arrivals.

Over time, many chose not to continue to Saaru at all, and **Tlarba** grew rich—and strange.

TEMPLE OF THE LENSES

The temple complex is the first part of **Tlarba** that anyone sees, and often the last. It is controlled by an order called the Custodial Order of Saaru, although for centuries the order has served only itself.

LAWS OF THE LENSKEEPERS

The Order privately laments that its most precious relics are virtually the front door mat. They fear that one day, some daemon might emerge and damage the lenses—or simply steal them—plunging **Tlarba** into irrelevance.

- It is a crime to refer to the lenses separately (lest the gods think that mortals don't appreciate the other one).
- It is a crime to talk about the lenses within earshot of the lenses (lest daemons overhear, and steal them).
- Dirtying the lenses (especially with blood) merits a fine.
- Failing to pray for the safety of Saaru upon arrival merits a fine.

Typical fines consist of 10% of an arrival's portable wealth.

THE TEMPLE SQUARE

Actually an enclosed courtyard lined with artisans required by the temple: a whitesmith, translator, book-binder, soap-maker, gem polisher, spicer, cobbler, and two vestment makers.

The artisans are mostly **selks**, with a few **slews** and **craesten**.

SLEWTS

Eight sticky **slews** slip in and out of their briny pools.

When **on duty**, they watch over the lens chamber, attacking with their devastating *concussion onager*, particularly against flyers, or anyone damaging the lenses.

If engaged, they grapple.

THE KITCHENS

Kwal, the cook, is a massive **craesten** with a shell of copper and mint-green rust.

He is a master of variety, and delights at using unexpected ingredients. If he is **on duty** and feels he can overpower newcomers, they will wind up in a stew or pie.

Five **selk** servants assist and defend him. The oven is home to thirty, kitten-sized fire sprites, loyal to Kwal.

THE THRONE OF PEARL

A pair of translucent **ghost selks** guard the stairs; **chalk hounds** guard the throne and the exit to the **streets of Tlarba**. One of the **lenskeepers** sits in judgment of petitions to leave via the lenses.

PRIVATE CHAMBERS

Each **lenskeeper** sleeps in a sparsely furnished private cell. They meet in the central sitting room to eat, conspire, and take hallucinogens. d6 will be present.

RITULARIUM

This raised altar is where the **lenskeepers** pray to their 'gods', three hideous astral daemons.

None but the six **lenskeepers** and their twelve **polisher-adepts**, (d12 of whom will be here at any one time) are allowed here. Interlopers are quickly attacked.

At a workstation, adepts grind astral sand into (highly flammable) lens-cleaning grit. At another, they compress it into ammunition for the **slews'** onager.

Lenskeepers cannot die while between the three gravestones.

THE CONDENSARIUM

Anyone travelling astrally near **Tlarba** will materialize on the lower lens, which is 20' above the floor of astral sand.

The **lenskeepers** can reverse the effect by hoisting the upper lens slightly, which propels anyone between the lenses on their way.

LOWER HALLS

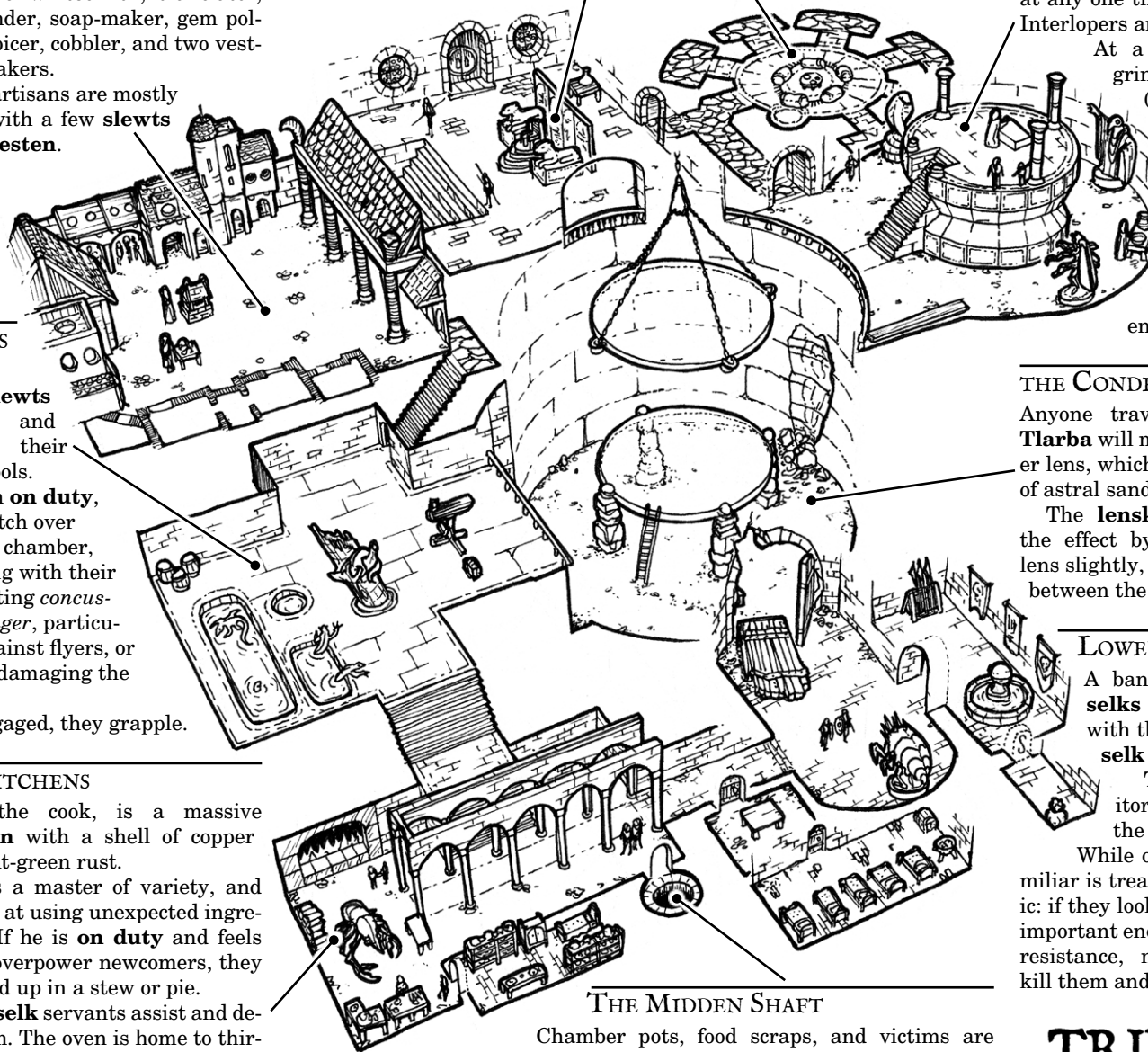
A band of thirteen **grush selks** guard the lower halls with their leader, the **ghost selk** Amana.

Their response to visitors depends entirely on the **duty schedule**.

While on duty, anyone unfamiliar is treated with a simple logic: if they look tough, numerous, or important enough to put up serious resistance, negotiate. Otherwise, kill them and take them to Kwal.

THE MIDDEN SHAFT

Chamber pots, food scraps, and victims are all thrown into this hole, a conduit to a massive refuse pile nearby in the astral plane. See **Onward to Saaru**.



THE DUTY SCHEDULE

Over the centuries, the alien diversity of the lens guard has caused many misunderstandings, complaints, and violent incidents between its members.

To keep the peace, a mash of agreements, refinements, exceptions, and supplementary clauses has accumulated. It is now so complex that almost nobody understands the specifics. Even so, each guard group defends its rights (as they understand them) with bloody-minded intensity.

Whenever adventurers first encounter each of the guard groups, roll to determine whether they are on duty:

d4 Room Duty Schedule	
1	Start of shift - guard duties are conducted vigorously and to the letter.
2	Off duty - relaxing, eating, or gaming. Will consider interactions a request to perform unpaid work.
3	Schedule confusion—an argument breaks out about whether the group is on duty or not. d8 individuals believe they are.
4	End of shift - the group does its best to refuse entry to their chamber for d10 minutes, at which point they're off duty and will let everyone pass.

PEOPLE OF THE TEMPLE

GRUSH SELKS

The majority of Tlarbans are grush selks: tall, skin-and-bones humanoids with large eyes, mottled skin, and copious bristles ('grush').

Their body language is alien, but they are full of feeling and passion.

GHOST SELKS

A small percentage of selks that reach maturity begin to manifest the astral nature of their kind, becoming translucent and insubstantial. Physical forces (including attacks) affect them, but much less than normal. Their own attacks are unimpeded.

In **Tlarba**, ghost selks live and train as a

warrior caste. They wield the weapons traditional of Saaru, developed in the wars with the **craesten**: short, chitin-breaking seax and double-ended javelins, one end a cluster of sharp quills (to more easily find armored eyes), the other end cut from a paralytic resin.

CRAESTEN

Hulking terrestrial lobsters, craesten are also native to Saaru. They are enormously strong and heavy, and despite the loud clacking of their legs, move gracefully.

They are ignorant of human body language and tone of voice, which can make them seem stupid or naive at times, but they are intelligent and perceptive. Their natural armor lends them an unshakable confidence and humor: they know instinctively that in the worst case, they can simply eat you.

When upset or angry, they produce a strong citrus smell, highly alarming to selk.

Spilled craesten blood produces a potent magical entropy that makes nearby spellcasting difficult.

SLEWTS

The slewts of **Tlarba** are glistening, orange amphibians. They are smaller than most humans, but lean and muscular.

Slewts spend their off-duty hours frothing up their pools and warbling together in high-pitched harmonies.

On duty, they crew the onager, and climb the walls and ceiling to grapple by stealth.

Slewt slime bonds metal to metal instantly, which makes a mess of armor (especially mail). They grapple armored foes with this in mind, hoping to pin a weapon or arm in place before moving on to softer targets.

Slewts will readily surrender if battle goes against them, and gleefully rejoin battle moments later.

CHALK HOUNDS

Seemingly animated statues, chalk hounds are elemental spirits coaxed into inhabiting a white mineral paste. The two in the throne room are works of art, every inch engraved.

They are sleek looking but graceless when on the attack. Their feet flake and crack with every step, leaving white footprints. To artists, every step is vandalism.

The hounds have the courage of the unfeeling, and are unfazed by weapons (except for mattocks). Once they attack, they continue to fight until literally broken into bits.

They don't heal naturally, but the **polish-er-adepts** can redecorate, repair, or rebuild them when necessary.

LENSKEEPERS

Over the centuries, **Tlarba** has completely succumbed to the daemonic influences it has sought to keep from harming Saaru.

The lenskeepers maintain the facade, but contact with Saaru has been completely lost.

What the lenskeepers want most is the the astral sand that comes through with each arrival, and which powers their magical rituals. Visitors and their belongings are imperceptibly lightened, some tiny fraction of their essence shaved away and deposited on the condensarium floor.

Conversely, returning visitors to the astral realm diminishes **Tlarba** itself, and so the lenskeepers have a bevy of excuses they use to delay those who wish to depart:

- Applicants are insufficiently deferential and will have to wait;
- It is a holy time for the lenskeepers, and they are not seeing petitioners for weeks;
- The application fee or gift was insufficient or inauspicious;
- The astrological timing is not correct for using the lenses;
- One of the applicants is cursed, and can never again be sent through the lenses.

Either the lenskeepers or their servants will instruct adventurers to find lodging in the temple square. After a time, an excuse will be found to move them into **Tlarba**.

LENSKEEPER MAGIC

Each lenskeeper's bond with their daemon gods allows them to draw from the following powers thrice daily:

Telekinetic grip, wall of angry spirits, shatter, summon fiery locusts, cause blindness. Four together can summon a major daemon at the cost of one spell each.

POLISHER-ADEPTS

The adepts are weak from deprivation and abuse, but defend their masters faithfully. In battle, they use these powers at will (each carries a 50% chance of death for the adept):

Dispel magic, acid spittle, orb of pain, polymorph (boa, huge wolf spider, giant flesh-boring maggot).

One secretly wears a gleaming, enchanted breastplate under her robes.

ONWARD TO SAARU

The huge heap below the midden shaft contains the original idols from the Ritularium. If restored and re-sanctified, the lenses could once more be used to reach Saaru.

THE STREETS OF TLARBA

A dense and dusty city of selks, craesten and slewts toils under a flickering, yellow sky.

Artisans vie for the right to serve the lenskeepers; loyalists plot their overthrow. Weird aliens seek converts to a hundred astral gods; stranded sages search the stars for a way to Saaru, or just home again.

*Written & illustrated by Michael Prescott
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