

Queen Mica's Scintillant Palace: Level 1

Set on one of the more modest of the verdant western Aberjourn Hills in the Clack Valley of Errynor in Alarius, near the northeastern edge of the Wood of Veiled Leaves, and roughly 1½ miles, nearly 2½ kilometres, east of the Faerie town of Dumbra, is this radiantly-glittering, many-towered, Faerie castle-palace.

The map is divided into three sections.

At the left side is a sketch of how the Palace appears as seen from the south. There is a valley north of the Palace through which the Amber Stream river flows west to east, which is not visible on this drawing, as it is hidden among the hills as illustrated.

The central part of the map shows a basic drawing of the parts of the Palace that are liable to be encountered by visitors following the path that winds its way up to the hilltop from the woods to the south.

The right side's panel provides a little more information on the setting, including that the Queen herself may have met any visitors approaching the Palace. She seems always to know when such folk are nearby. A full portrait of her is available separately in the Atlas, further to the torso version by the central map.

The Palace itself seems full of incredibly beautiful wonders, most of which prove inaccessible once visitors reach the hilltop. Inside, the chambers and corridors are light, airy, radiant and filled with delightful sights and scents, with ramps - no stairs - rising to the upper parts of the walls and towers. Of course, as the final sentence in the on-map descriptive text notes, things are not quite as they seem.

By activating the "Reality" toggle in the FCW version of the map, the truth of the Palace's nature, and that of the Queen herself, are revealed, as the whole is actually a huge giant ant colony. The surface view now is not nearly so inviting, with great spoil-heaps of excavated earth and rock covering the entire hilltop - if still in towering spires in places. Far from rising above ground, everything is really inverted, with ramps descending into the earth instead.

The central map section shows the same three numbered entryways as the illusory version, and that each shares similar features with the surface Palace, however loosely. All though is now unilluminated and subterranean, without any of the former beauty and wonder, beyond the natural architecture and engineering associated with any ant colony.

To the map's right in this view is a set of schematic drawings providing cross-sections through the main, central, Palace complex, to assist GMs in following the quite complex tunnel layouts here. As the cross-sections indicate, there are five vertical Levels to the Palace itself, plus a further four outlying Palace Wings, each of which is mapped separately in the Atlas. Links to reach the Wings can be found on the main Palace Levels 2 and 3 maps.

GMs may wish to perpetuate the illusory nature of the Palace for non-Faerie player characters visiting the site. In which case, simply continue the inversion process, with the deeper levels of the colony's tunnels seeming to be apartments in the higher tiers of great towers soaring above instead, even to illusory views of the surrounding countryside through the windows or from balconies. The colony's giant ants would continue to appear much like Queen Mica in her humanoid portrait guise (so all wearing blue crystalline armour, but with not even the warriors carrying weapons). Such would seem to be servants, guards and courtiers. All would though bear a disconcerting facial resemblance to the Queen. This process can be continued, or taken to whatever length, seems appropriate. As the site is a Faerie portal, not all the "illusions" are necessarily unreal,

and the Queen is a part-Faerie creature in her own right - albeit still at heart a giant ant queen. For example, Queen Mica never leaves the colony-palace, yet when encountered in the woods nearby, her illusory self there can physically interact with objects and characters, as well as in the Palace itself. Sometimes, she simply uses a foraging worker ant as a convenient avatar, and can swap from one to another anywhere within the vicinity of the Palace instantly, at will. At other times, her power is strong enough near the Palace for her illusory form to become physically real without any need for such an avatar. She will never be encountered more than half a mile, 0.8 km, from the Palace however, which sets the limit for her power.

Notes for both versions of the Level 1 map follow. First, there is a commentary on how the base maps for all parts of the Palace layouts were designed.

Palace Mapping Notes

The basis for the five mapped levels of the main Palace (but not the four Palace Wings) was randomly-generated using a variant of the Goblin's Henchman Pay-What-You-Want booklet "Carapace", available on the DriveThru RPG download site here:

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/261079/Carapace>

"Carapace" contains three methods for randomly constructing complexes like Queen Mica's Palace on-the-fly. One of these, the "Point Crawl", produces essentially 2D layouts, either horizontally or vertically. Here, this was used to create three vertical chamber layouts, with the chambers then connected using the normal semi-random number of passages within and between them, as the booklet describes. Think three linked ant-farm panels, basically. The schematic drawings alongside each of the main Palace Levels illustrate more-or-less what this mechanism will generate, as well as showing how the various chambers connect with one another in this complex.

A different option was used to design the base-maps for the four Wings, hence none of these have schematic drawings beside them. Each was instead generated from layouts in videos available on the Dwarven Forge YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/DwarvenForgeOfficial>

and images posted on the Dwarven Forge Discord, all using items from the cast modular terrain "Burrows" pieces made by the same company. The nature of such modular terrain items does make for more rectilinear layout patterns than those generated by "Carapace", but this would make it possible to set-up layouts on the tabletop, for those owning such Burrows pieces, that are similar to what appears in the Palace Wing layouts overall. Note though that alterations were made to the sizes, shapes and orientations of the tunnels and chambers at times as shown in the final Community Atlas maps, so exact matches will not be possible.

Across all the subterranean Palace maps, the nature of each chamber in the complex was randomly decided using the Appendix 2 tables in "Carapace", with a few changes and additions. Although added to the map as notes, for clarity, these are repeated in the descriptive texts accompanying each map.

Should they be needed as GM's aids, "Carapace" also has random encounter tables too, based on the AD&D Monster Manual (although they were not used here), and an insect-colony scenario set in a small wilderness area, designed to be run from the random systems in the booklet alone.

General Palace Notes

Queen Mica's Scintillant Palace in its "Reality" version, has been thus designed as a giant ant nest, with the tunnels, chambers and layout scaled for such creatures as described in the D&D 3.5e rules, where most ants were around 6 feet (1.8 metres) long/tall, and the queens were at least 9 ft long (2.7 m). The passages and most chambers can be assumed as roughly 10 ft, 3 m, high, with floors and ceilings of similarly irregular character to the mapped walls, where not noted otherwise. The passages can be considered as loosely circular in cross-section, so about as high as they are wide, where that may be important.

Each level is vertically separated from the next by an average of 50 ft, 15 m, from the floor of the higher level to the ceiling of the lower. The angles shown on the maps for tunnels that connect between levels are based on this assumed separation distance, and are approximate only, especially given the irregular form of all the interior surfaces.

Chambers on a given level are not all at the same depth as one another. Areas with pooled water will tend to be somewhat lower - or the chamber floor may slope down towards such pools. Places with warmer air will often be higher than the average, and cooler places somewhat lower, for instance.

Level 1 - Illusory View

On this version of the map, the Palace stands intact with its shimmering blue glow on the hilltop. Queen Mica has her humanoid appearance, and the map provides a sketchy plan of those parts of the Palace which may be readily accessed by visitors to the place, surrounded on the plan sketch by a golden-yellow radiance, loosely indicative of the size of the illusory appearance of the Palace and its immediate surroundings. The three numbers on the Surface View sketch correspond to the three numbered locations on the central sketch plan. Although the map has a specific grid to help scale it, GMs should feel free to vary the actual sizes of what is shown here, if required, given that none of it is objectively real. However, the relative placement of features, and access routes among them, should be retained, and the solid lines representing walls should be respected as regards what can be reached and where from among the mapped places. The width of the passages might be considered the most strongly fixed feature overall. Each labelled location is given further comments below. Most Faerie characters should be able to see through the illusions with little effort. Non-Faerie characters will have much greater difficulty.

* **Amazing Towers:** GMs should elaborate on the visual wonders here to whatever extent seems desirable, given such places cannot be reached at all. As the View from the South suggests, most of the Palace's towers are indeed clustered on the northern and western sides of the site, in Queen Mica's idea of her home, at least. Their number and appearance need not be constrained by the "View's" sketch.

* **Courtyard of Wonders:** A similarly magical, open-air, place, surrounded by high, smooth, glittering, stony walls pierced by windows well above the surface level, with three openings off it (note there are no doors anywhere in the illusory Palace). These lead into the Grand Entrance Tower, the Pool Tower and the Great Library. The Courtyard can contain whatever additional features might seem most interesting to GMs, such as statues, living performers and entertainers, colourful minor magical display effects, and so forth. All very eye-catching and pleasant. The walls cannot be climbed by any means,

nor damaged or breached in any way, given they do not actually exist in this form. Should a real option be required, these are simply some of the mountainous piles of excavated material such as are shown on the Reality version of the Surface View illustration.

* **Glittering Buildings:** Much like the Amazing Towers noted above, these can be as magically impressive as desired, since they too cannot be reached at all, set along the Palace's eastern side. Again, the Surface View can be used as a loose guide to the overall appearance of these if necessary, and elaborated upon.

* **Grand Entrance Tower 1:** Likely to be the first place encountered physically by visitors to the Palace, this seems to be an impressive entryway into the Palace's castle form, with a large, very fancy, opening on its southeastern side, where the path runs up from the valley below. Inside, it is bright and airy as usual, decorated as the GM may prefer. A large pool of pleasantly-scented water is slightly off-centred towards the south, compared to the Tower's circumference, with a delicate fountain spouting up from its middle. Two ramp-corridors lead up off the northwestern and northeastern sides of the Tower, and a broad opening leads north into another east-west aligned corridor, then north again into the Courtyard of Wonders. This is the Tower labelled "1" on the Surface View drawing, and also "Surface Entrance 1" which descends vertically into Chamber 1 of the Level 1 "Reality" map (see that description below for further details that could be added here, including more unsettling ones, such as the grating noise).

* **Great Library 3:** A huge, high room, filled with shelves of books, scrolls and papers, stretching up to the ceiling and beyond, as there is an opening in the ceiling of its eastern half, with a balcony above where more such shelving can be seen reaching higher still. There are no stairs, steps or ladders by which to reach the higher shelves however, although there may be an occasional "librarian" adroitly climbing up or down the shelving, seemingly with little effort, despite their apparently cumbrous blue crystalline armour. This is marked as place 3 on the Surface View illustration, and Surface Entrance 3 that passes into Chamber 4 on the Level 1 "Reality" map (whose creaking noise - see the Chamber 4 notes below - could be one of the climbers on the bookshelves, perhaps). The items here, while apparently fascinating, seem oddly devoid of substance, little of which can be recalled subsequently by anyone who attempted to read anything here. The Library can be entered only from the Courtyard of Wonders. Once inside, it is possible to reach the balcony by climbing the shelves, and also to use the corridor running east to reach the Warming Room at the passageway's further end.

* **Path from Valley:** Unlike most of the other features on this view of Level 1 at the Palace, the path leading up from the valley to the south below is a genuine track in the woods, as it is also the main foraging trail to and from the Palace site for the ants. It leads windingly, though fairly directly, up the less-steep slopes to the Grand Entrance Tower detailed above.

* **Pool Tower 2:** Seeming to be the corner tower at the southeast of the Palace, this can be entered from either the corridor just off the north side inside the Grand Entrance Tower, or from the Courtyard of Wonders. It contains a small pool and fountain, which appear to be identical to, if smaller than, those in the Entrance Tower itself, including having the same pleasingly scented water. A corridor leads off west past the Entrance Tower to the Reception Hall, and a ramp-passageway leads up to the north from here. There are several

chandeliers suspended from the ceiling which light the room with a delicately relaxing, steady, pale luminescence. It is not clear what the source of the light in them may be, however. This is also place 2 on the Surface View sketch, and Surface Entrance 2 into Chamber 3 on the Level 1 “Reality” drawing.

* **Reception Hall:** This charming, spacious room is at the southwest corner of the Palace, linked by the corridor east to the Pool and Grand Entrance Towers. A ramp-passage leads up to the north from its northwest corner. There are beautiful, soft, thick carpets all across the floor which make walking across the room a pleasant, yet slow, proposition, as each step needs effort to move over the heavy carpeting. There are also tables with snacks, sweetmeats and drinks, and servants to proffer attention, such as the taking and storing of outer coats, cloaks, hats and gloves from visitors. This is Chamber 2 on the Level 1 “Reality” map.

* **Warming Room:** Apparently the tower partway along the Palace’s outer eastern wall on the Surface View drawing, inside there is a roaring fire on one or other wall, or sometimes in the middle of the room with a flue above passing through the ceiling above it. The fire’s location changes from time to time. The room is always quite hot as a result. This is also Chamber 5 of the “Reality” Level 1 map view. Rising ramp-corridors are at its eastern wall corners to both south and north, while a further level corridor links west into the Great Library. Aside from the mobile fire, there are also piles of fuel for it scattered about in various places, so traversing the Room is not easy.

Level 1 - Reality View

Once the “Reality” toggle is activated on the FCW file version of the map, the Palace is revealed as the surface entrance to a vast giant ant colony, with three cave-like openings among the gigantic, partly-solidified piles of excavated earth and rock strewn across the whole hilltop. The path from the valley to the south still winds up to here, but it then continues across a flatter area between some of the great earthen heaps, passing near all three entrance points, ending finally at Surface Entrance 3. This flatter zone is the equivalent to the open Courtyard of Wonders on the “Illusory” Palace view. Quite when, or even if, non-Faerie visitors might begin to see the Palace as it is, is for GMs to decide, and as noted earlier, the illusions could be continued throughout an entire stay here. Chamber descriptions for Level 1 follow.

* **Chamber 1:** Surface Entrance Tunnel 1 leads vertically through the ceiling of this chamber from its above-ground cave entry. Those affected by the illusion are either carefully carried down into here, or magically floated down, with no indication to them that anything out of the ordinary has occurred, preventing the illusion from being broken. They never fall. Access tunnels run to Chambers 2.1 (west, 45° descent) and 2.2 (east, also at 45°). Rainwater collects in a fairly deep pool in a hollow in the middle of the floor, from which a narrow channel flows north along the connecting passage to 1.3. A grating noise can be heard here at times. The Illusory equivalent is the Grand Entrance Tower.

* **Chamber 2:** This is the Illusory Reception Hall. Its floor is very rough and uneven. An intermittent hissing noise can be heard. The east passage connects to 1.3; the northwest tunnel leads down at 40° to 2.7.

* **Chamber 3:** The water channel running north from 1.1 ends in another quite deep pool here, off-centred towards the east wall of the chamber. The water seeps away into the earth, a small amount eventually staining the ceiling and walls in 2.15 below (there is no access-route that way). A sloping tunnel descends from the cave at Surface Entrance 2, passing through the ceiling's northwest. A debris-pile forms a ramp of sorts below this entry area, away from the pool, up to 4 ft high (1.2 m). Those visitors affected by the illusion will be guided safely down into this chamber if necessary, to preserve their happy state of ignorance. This is the equivalent of the Pool Tower. Connecting tunnels run south to 1.1, west to 1.2, and northeast, descending at 40°, to 2.14. Lines of softly glowing fungus cross much of the ceiling, providing limited illumination.

* **Chamber 4:** Descending Surface Entrance Tunnel 3 from the cave there, opens in the western ceiling, leaving a 5 ft (1.5 m) drop to a debris pile "ramp" below, onto which those retaining their illusory impression of the Palace will be carefully lowered. This is the equivalent of the Illusory Great Library. A vertical descent chute opens in the eastern floor, straight down to 2.11. A connecting passage runs east to 1.5. A creaking noise may be heard in here.

* **Chamber 5:** The Illusory Warming Room, this has a very rugged, uneven floor, and the air is hot. A tunnel west links to 1.4. A steeply-descending passage south goes to 2.13 (65°), while a less steep northeast passage leads down to 2.18 (40°).