

The House of Broken Clockwork

A dark(ish) urban fantasy tale of inexplicable discoveries and missing persons.

There's a ruined house on the edge of town. Some of you know that there's some strange stuff been showing up there. Some of you just know that a teenager has gone missing. So although you're ordinary people, you're all converging on the place for reasons of your own. Maybe it's your job, maybe it's your obsession... But none of you know what you're getting into. After all, how could you? Ordinary people think that the world makes sense.

Background

The starting setting is a generic small British town – call it **Newton Magna**. The place is moderately prosperous – there's regular employment available, and some shops still open even in the 2020s – but not wealthy. And it's not deep commuter belt country, which means that housing is affordable for locals, but also means that housing stock isn't so valuable that it's automatically looked after.

And so there's an empty, disintegrating house a quarter-mile or so outside of town. Nothing terribly sinister; it was once a farmhouse, the farm was combined with another rendering this house surplus to requirements, it was let to farmworkers for years, then the farm cut back on workforce, but the farm owner didn't really want to let it to anyone else, it needed work... It went downhill from there, and now it's pretty much a shell, though the owner has been persuaded to keep it maintained well enough to avoid active danger to anyone going inside. But it's a shell with an old-fashioned cellar, accessed by a solid stone staircase and dimly lit by daylight coming in through a broken coal chute hatch. And because of Arcane Reasons, this cellar is the locus for a possible Gate to the Broken Clockwork World.

However, the Gate has to be opened, from our side.

The Other Side

The Broken Clockwork World city of **Jarlu Arn** suffered during the Breaking; basically, a lot of it isn't there any more, including the artificers' quarter. Hence, although it still has a lot of the old technology, it can't maintain much of this stuff, and its surviving and newly acquired rural hinterlands are barely enough to keep it fed. The city's priests, most of whom *have* survived, have been desperately trying to contact their gods for assistance, even invoking ancient prayers that are said to grant direct access to the Realm of the Gods. This produced some visual effects but little more, so they tried some divinations – and realised that they had some kind of possible *Gateway* here. Then they heard reports from brave travellers of portals elsewhere leading to an Unbroken World, and put two and two together.

So one of their number, **Perrulle Gadd Ha**, a priestess previously gifted with the ability to commune with the gods on rare occasions, attempted to reach through the latent Gate, and found ... minds. Not divine minds, but something. The priesthood assembled a ritual that might do more, and the priestess sent it through to whoever might hear.

Recipients

Unfortunately, it took an exceptionally open, unguarded mind to receive this message, and for game purposes, there were just two such available in range; **Freddy Brodie**, a homeless former soldier, PTSD sufferer, and PC who has just enough sense to stay off the booze (because it takes him out too easily), and who is passing through town on his quest for work and better dreams, and **Ian "Iggy" Rogers**, a flaky, wildly over-imaginative teenager and a PC's brother who has been rendered

emotionally fragile by a less-than-wonderful upbringing. Iggy was closer to the key location, or found it first, and so stumbled across some stuff fallen through from the Broken World – notably some bits of mechanical junk.

So he took that to the person he felt would be best able to understand it; eccentric inventor and TV repair guy **Alan Orford**, another PC. Alan was puzzled by this stuff and tried posting about it online, which didn't get him many responses that he found useful, but did unknowingly draw the attention of a third PC, **Patricia Newbery**. So now those two are following up on what they've heard, just as Freddy is being drawn to the house by his dreams.

The Crisis

But Iggy has now returned to the house again, drawn back by a yet stronger dream, and under its influence, gone into the cellar, marked symbols on the floor, muttered words from his dreams under his breath, and thus triggered a Gate. It's pulsing irregularly, and may require some minimal trigger to open it again, but it will grow in strength, tearing a hole between the worlds – so it needs to be stopped. And Iggy fell through it, landing in a bit of broken terrain a few miles from Jarlu Arn, and will need rescuing.

So on our side, Iggy has just become a possible missing person, drawing his big brother to the house which he was talking about and the cop who's first on the case to come after him, while other PCs converge on the place for their own reasons. Meanwhile...

In the Broken Clockwork World, the first people who the confused and terrified Iggy happened to encounter were a band of **wandering scavenger-outcasts**, who took him prisoner on the off-chance that he might be worth a ransom. They're currently treating him partly as a guest and partly as a prisoner, but although he's scared and can't speak the language, Iggy is accustomed to not having much control over his own life, and is getting by. He's also realised that these people are hungry and almost as scared as him, and is feeling sorry for them – though having knives and guns waved at him from time to time is ensuring that he's also still nervous, especially as he obviously can't speak the language. He's being kept with his hands tied, usually watched by three or four of the band at any time, but he can still walk around, because the band prefers to keep moving to avoid patrols from the city and angry farmer vigilantes who class them as bandits and barbarians.

However, the priests in Jarlu Arn realised that something had happened out on the edge of the Badlands, as watchmen reported a powerful flash of light while Perrulle Gadd Ha *sensed* something powerful. She and the other priests performed divinations, and realised that they had indeed caused the creation of a Gate – but an irregular, pulsating, powerful Gate that will eventually rip a hole in the fabric of both realities if not closed again. They have some ideas as to how to accomplish this, but they need more information.

So the city sent steam cavalry patrols to the area with orders to bring anyone they find back to the city, alive. (But they're a bit jumpy, so they *might* do something stupid...) Unfortunately, physical tremors caused by the Gate opening, and disturbances caused by aggressive searching by the soldiers, have stirred up a few damaged and very confused automatons, which are now wandering the area. And reports are only now reaching the city that some bandits out in the wilds claim to have a hostage for ransom – though that news won't reach the priesthood straight away.

Game Setup

Do the usual introduction thing, and establish familiarity with **GURPS**. Explain that this scenario starts in a low-key way – where it'll go later remains to be seen – and the characters are a bit of a mixture of 50 -point characters, i.e. moderately competent normals. So these are ordinary people in

our world (or what appears to be our world) who get dropped into what *might* turn out to be a dark, fantastic, or even horrific situation.

Offer choice of PCs:

Note that these are low-point-value “normal”; they do all have some skills and abilities that can be used in the scenario, but this one is largely about roleplaying and just making best guesses at best courses of action.

Alan Orford: An inventor and mechanical tinkerer who’s recently been puzzled and fascinated by some weird machine components that have been showing up somewhere nearby.

Freddy Brodie: A homeless ex-army guy whose problems haven’t exactly been reduced by the weird dreams he’s been suffering lately.

Joe Rogers: A hot-tempered young pub brawler who’s intensely protective of his kid brother, who has just gone missing.

Patricia Newbery: A bright, charming, intuitive woman who is also painfully prone to believing weird stuff she reads on the Web – but who is at least good at guessing which parts may actually be true.

PC Irene Harker: A diligent young police constable, following up a missing persons report involving what may be a vulnerable teenager.

Distribute character sheets, go over the usual **GURPS** basics, invite questions on character specifics. People should note that the character sheets have a few background notes on the back.

The PCs

The PCs start off separately, so there’s a bit of GM railroading to get them into the same place at the same time – no point in trying to conceal this, so here we go... **It’s early evening time in early summer, during the school holidays, and the weather is dry:**

PC Harker: You were despatched to look into a missing persons report; apparently, a 15-year-old named Ian Rogers hadn’t come home for a while, and his mother called it in. (It’s the school holidays at present, and he hasn’t been home all day.) The time involved is still just a few hours, so the station sent you down to the house alone for now. When you got there, you found an all-too-common story; a worried mother now half-regretting the call, half-scared for her son, and a father refusing to take the situation as seriously. You also recognised the father; Charlie Rogers has a few Drunk and Disorderlies on his record, and is the sort to make you more inclined to listen to his wife than to him. Then she mentioned that her other son, Joe, was worried for his little brother, said that he might be poking around the old ruined farmhouse in the copse east of town, and had run off there to look for Ian. Well, you know Joe Rogers of old, too; the last couple of years, he’s been even more trouble in pubs around town than his dad. Something told you that you should follow up on this, just in case Joe got himself into trouble, or Ian was there and needed help – so you called the station to get someone else down to the Rogers home and took your car over to the ruined house.

Joe Rogers: When you got home from work today, it was to discover that your kid brother Iggy has gone missing – well, hasn’t been around since the morning, which isn’t like him. He’s a quiet lad, and sometimes needs protecting – including from your bloody dad. Not that the old man would raise his fists to the kid, usually, but he raises his voice enough to make Iggy unhappy, though not usually enough to run off. Iggy is too nervous for that. But you do know that Iggy has been sleeping badly at night lately, and wandering off on his own during the day, and he told you there was something weird about the old ruined farmhouse east of town. Well, Iggy has a bit of a crazy imagination, and

he won't leave his daft ideas alone. So that must be the best place to look for him, and your parents are no bloody use for a thing like this, so you're heading down there to make sure he's okay.

Freddy Brodie: You came to this small town from the bigger place a few miles away, put up in a dirt cheap B&B for a couple of nights having scraped together the cash, chased up a couple of possible jobs which didn't come to anything – but you're really not sure why you did any of that. Perhaps it felt right, but God knows why you thought that. Anyhow, you decided to head back somewhere with more temporary jobs before the cash ran out. But rather than take a bus, you decided to walk the first part at least. Maybe that would help clear your head; there've been these *words* ringing in your head every morning lately, almost like singing, but not meaning anything. Then, on your way out of town, you past this old, falling-down house, a few yards off the road. You shouldn't have let it distract you, but something about it caught your attention. God knows what. But still, here you are, poking round the place. You've just found the stairs down to what's presumably the cellar, and something about it feels... *familiar*...

Alan Orford: The advantage and drawback with your local reputation is all the junk that people bring to you. You have to spend a lot of time telling kids and cranks that the guts of a 1970s alarm clock aren't worth anything, and that fixing their old TVs would cost more than a new model. (Typical disposable consumer electronics rubbish!) On the other hand, occasionally you get something interesting. What young Ian Rogers brought you, though, was... something else. It looked at first glance like bits and pieces of high-quality clockwork, with a few parts that probably came off small hobbyists steam devices – exactly the sort of thing you love. But the questions started when you tried taking some of it apart, and none of your tools quite fitted or worked. You ended up machining up a few tools just to get to square one. And there were no readable engineering marks or manufacturers' logos either. Some failed Asian industry design, maybe? You dug out some books, but none of these parts were made to any set of standards you could identify; even the more useful boards on the Internet didn't have a clue, and you had to give up there because your questions had flushed out a load of cranks. You asked Ian, but he was evasive at first. (He's a strange kid.) Yesterday, though, he finally mentioned that he'd picked these things up in some old house just outside town, just lying around. Then he said he'd come back and tell you more today. But he didn't show up, you don't know why not. So your curiosity got the better of you, and you dug your bike out, and with a bit of looking around, you tracked down the house he was talking about. Well, here it is, and it's a total mess, but you might as well take a closer look while you're here.

Patricia Newbery: You've been poking around the cog-finder threads lately, sifting through evidence and trying to focus on what looks legitimate, when someone threw in a link to a post on a mechanical engineering hobbyist board. Somebody called "Alan_O", who didn't seem to have a *clue* about the bigger picture, was asking questions about stuff that clearly resembled Cogwheel Mystery traces. Apparently, it had been showing up in an old house in his part of the world. So you dug around his profile and past posts – and realised that he must live fairly close to you! And half an hour on Google Maps pinned down a very short list of ruined houses over that way that fitted with what he said. Well, this wasn't on the main cog-finder hangouts yet, so there might be a chance that the authorities aren't onto it so far – and while the stories about Men in Black are maybe a bit exaggerated, *somebody* seems to be sanitising important sites. So you've taken a day off you had owing and headed out. There's just one problem now you've got to the most promising location, though; there's a police car parked outside. Still, just the one – better get in before the authorities descend in force and shut the place down!

The Ruined House

Choreograph encounters at the house. (If anyone asks, although it's almost falling down, it looks like it's safe to enter – Alan can spot signs of basic shoring up with a **Carpentry** roll, Irene may be aware that the owner has been induced to keep it safe with an **Area Knowledge** roll.) The suggested sequence:

Joe arrives looking for his brother, begins poking around inside, and finds **Freddy** already there at the foot of the cellar stairs and probably freaking out a bit. (Freddy might get a chance to hide, using **Stealth**; no modifier to his roll, but other people get -3 to **Per** to notice him because of bad light; if he succeeds, he can observe Joe's subsequent interactions with Irene.) Give them a chance to play out an initial interaction, which may be a bit hostile. Then, before that can get messy, **Irene** turns up and asks what's going on. They should start poking around the cellar, which has enough junk there – much of it mechanical, which may seem a bit odd for a farmhouse – for Iggy to be concealed. Kicking some dirt aside, they expose some odd markings on the floor, which remind Freddy of the dreams he can't remember; they seem to have been drawn in chalk. **Fright Check** (p. B360) for Freddy, at -1 for isolated location but no other modifiers. But meanwhile...

Alan and **Patricia** are just starting to poke around upstairs, Alan having arrived first, when they meet each other. Allow a few seconds of interaction, then tell them that they hear voices from elsewhere in the house – and that draws them to the stairs down to the cellar. Alan immediately gets a straight Vision roll to notice the heaps of mechanical junk, which resemble the sort of stuff that Ian was bringing him. Allow a few moments of roleplayed interaction there, and then say that Freddy is getting distracted by the patterns on the floor. Suddenly he reels back, a second *before* anyone else becomes aware of things getting strange.

The light level in the cellar increases, rapidly growing until it's equal to full daylight. Everyone feels like they're standing on an illuminated panel – which then sweeps upwards in a fraction of a second. This is a circular area of effect, wider than the house; anyone who tries running will still be caught up in it. For a second longer, electrical sparks flicker around everyone's fingertips and anything metallic. Then everything goes quiet.

The PCs can react immediately; Joe may be stressed enough to lash out at someone and need restraining. But everyone in the cellar gets a Vision+1 roll to notice that the daylight coming through the broken coal chute cover is different – not as bright – and after a few moments, everyone gets a Hearing-2 roll to hear some worrying creaking and cracking noises from above them, like the structure of the house isn't as solid as it was a few minutes ago.

So everyone will want to make their way up the stairs (which are fortuitously solid brick). This is when they realise that fragments of the building are *missing*, and with a Hearing-3 roll, that there's no birdsong or distant traffic noise outside. And the light is still very wrong. So they'll eventually have to venture outside, and discover how weird stuff has actually become.

Through the Gate

They're now on the Broken Clockwork World. The house is no longer where it was; instead, it seems to be standing in an area of rough ground, dotted with tufts of grass and scrubby plants; there are also heaps of mechanical junk, much of it larger than what was in the cellar – Alan can say that it includes what seem to be rusty steam boilers, railway-style wheels, and a lot else that isn't immediately identifiable. Although the effect that apparently brought them here has mostly finished, **there are still flickers of light and sparks chasing along the brickwork**, expanding outwards and upwards as they slowly dissipate.

But the weirdest thing of all is the sky; as their eyes adjust, the PCs will see that there's no obvious sun and not many clouds, but **the sky is full of the ghostly shapes of gigantic cog wheels and gears.** The light level is about equal to full daylight, despite the lack of an obvious light source.

This is obviously worth a **Fright Check** (p. B360) for everyone, at -4 for extreme but not-obviously-dangerous weirdness and another -1 for isolation (no longer being in familiar territory), for a total of -5. This may leave the party messed up for a while; feel free to interpret the table results loosely to keep things playable.

The other thing that characters may try, sooner or later, is try making radio or mobile phone calls, or taking photos. Unfortunately, no electronics work here, though Alan's torch will, if he tries that – Irene's won't. Alan can confirm that they're flat dead – it's not just no signal, it's no display, no nothing. If both torches have been tried, **Electronics Repair+3** (= IQ-2) will note that Alan's torch is old-school incandescent, Irene's uses LEDs.

Also, if Freddy wants a weapon, a minute or so and a straight **Scrounging** roll will find him a functional sort-of-spear among the junk (must be used two-handed, for thr+2 damage). If he's looking in a hurry (say because a fight has started – see below), he can try once per turn with a roll at -3, but unless he makes the roll by 4+, the "spear" will be functionally useless by the end of the fight.

However, before they set out beyond this site or get too bogged down, the party gets a hostile encounter.

The Damaged Killer Doll

Once the PCs are over their initial shock and start looking around, they find that there are dangers in this environment. A damaged Assassin Doll has heard voices, dragged itself out from under some junk, and switched to kill mode, or the best approximation it can manage. The PCs all hear a clattering and clanking noise, and then a figure appears round one of the heaps of junk. It's about human size, but impossibly skinny for a human; it resembles a mannequin made of tarnished iron and brass, save that it's missing an arm – the stump ends in flailing levers – and its legs are presumably also damaged, because it's moving with a staggering limp. Worryingly, though, it's carrying a large knife in its one good arm, and it turns its head so that blank black glass eyes are looking at the party, then advances on the nearest human, knife raised with clearly malicious intent.

Tell the players that this might sometimes be worth a Fright Check, but the PCs are still in the process of adjusting to the weird environment, so this is just one more bit of weirdness.

The Doll is a threat, but it's damaged enough that the PCs should be able to deal with it:

ST 9, DX 10, IQ 6, HT 10

Will 6, Per 9, Speed 5.00, Move 4, Weight 85 lbs.

HP: 18

Dodge 4, Parry 8, DR 1.

Traits: Automaton; Cannot Learn; Catfall; Combat Reflexes; Doesn't Breathe; Doesn't Sleep; Fragile (Brittle, Combustible); Indomitable; Machine; Mute; No Sense of Smell/Taste; Odious Personal Habits -2 (ignores all social cues).

Skills: Acrobatics-10, Dancing-13, Knife-13, Main-Gauche-13, Stealth-11,

Attack: Large knife (13), 1d-3 cut at C or 1 or 1d-2 imp at C, Parry-10.

Notes: *Automaton* includes Hidebound, Incurious (6), Low Empathy, No Sense of Humour, Slave Mentality. *Machine* includes Immunity to Metabolic Hazards, Injury Tolerance (No Blood, *Unliving*), Unhealing (Total). *Fragile (Brittle, Combustible)* means crippled limbs break off, death = complete destruction, and major wounds from fire or explosion require HT roll not to catch fire (automatic on 10 HP damage), then 1d-1/round further damage. *Unliving* means take damage as per p. B380 – reduced damage from impaling and piercing attacks.

If it's fighting Irene, as is likely, use random hit locations on everyone (given that she has a stab-proof vest); see p. 552. The Doll is mindlessly malevolent and basically out to kill anything that moves, which at least means that it will tend to switch away from unconscious opponents to deal with whoever is moving more. If it's destroyed, it collapses in a heap of bits. A few moments and an Engineer (Clockwork) roll will say it was like nothing ever made on Earth; it must have used an incredibly efficient energy storage spring, and God knows what it used to see with.

The Cavalry Patrol

The PCs may defeat the Doll, but if they don't, the next encounter may show up to rescue them, putting a bullet or two in the Doll before it can wipe them out. Otherwise, the cavalry show up while the PCs are looking at the remains of the Doll and trying to work out what the heck it *was*.

There are half a dozen of these; the captain is riding a cavalry horse (p. B459; Move 8/16, DR 0, 22 HP) with a gasmask of its own, and the five troopers are riding steam horses (**Steampunk Conveyances** p. 7-8; Move 3/8, DR 10, 58 HP). All the humans are wearing gasmasks and what are pretty clearly uniforms and carrying carbine-style rifles (6d pi, Acc 4, RoF 2, Shots 10, ST 10, Bulk -4, Rcl 2), which anyone with military experience can say are an unfamiliar design but look quite handy; they use these with Guns (Rifle)-12, and their Riding/Driving skills are also 12, giving them Dodge 9.

They are still reasonably disciplined troops, their orders are to bring "interesting" discoveries to the city, and the PCs don't look obviously threatening, so although they're a little bit jumpy, they're unlikely to attack the PCs unless severely provoked – but an **Observation** or Per-based **Soldier** roll will pick up that some of the patrol are looking around *very* cautiously even while the leader tries to communicate with these outsiders – this may be hostile territory for them. Unfortunately, there is the small matter of no shared language... Time for some **Gesture** and wordless social skills. But it'll be pretty clear that they want the PCs to come with them. They point back the way they came a lot, and sometimes say, very clearly, "*Jarlu Arn*". **Gesture** can pick up that this somehow describes where they want the PCs to go.

Which the PCs will have to do, really; it's hard to avoid under the circumstances. Hopefully, they won't be travelling as prisoners, but the patrol's mounts aren't suited for passengers, so they'll have to walk. They'll find themselves herded to the centre of the group, but the guns are pointing outwards. Their treatment will be polite, non-hostile, but cautious.

Meeting the Priests

A half-hour's walk or ride brings the group to what's still standing in this region of space of **Jarlu Arn** – a solidly enough built city of stone and brick, most of its buildings three or four storeys, in an unfamiliar architectural style (brick infill between heavy stone pillars, flat roofs shaded with canopies of thin metal plates supported by wooden stands, oval windows of red-tinted glass) – except that a whole curving line of buildings look like they've been cut off with a giant knife, and are crumbling as a result; the ground adjacent to the cut is rough soil with some straggly plants growing on it, not paved street. The captain gestures and says (again) "*Jarlu Arn*".

A few passers-by in baggy green shirts and trousers stare at the arrivals curiously, but it soon becomes clear that the citizens of this place look gaunt and distracted, moving with shuffling steps as they go about their business. They look more hungry than fearful, though. The PCs are led through cobbled streets to what is clearly some kind of public building – a truncated pyramid atop a low stone platform, with huge iron doors that swing open smoothly as they approach. (a Per-based relevant **Engineer** roll gets that these must be powered by some fairly clever mechanical engineering). Inside, it's clear that this is a church or temple of some kind, with rows of pews facing an intricately carved raised pulpit, colourful tapestries on the walls depicting what are clearly mythological scenes, and a row of seven huge statues, each a good twelve feet tall and sculpted very skilfully. On the left (from the PCs' point of view) these depict a stern, dour middle-aged man holding a lightning bolt (Arn-Oda), a matronly woman holding a sheaf of corn (Kijgee), and younger woman holding a crescent shape in one hand and the other hand open, her face enigmatic (Zin-Sel); in the centre is a slender male figure in just a loincloth, his hands held flat and open (Jarluchaxnat, god of the city); on the other side are a grim, androgynous figure holding a huge two-handed sword (Reshki), a bearded man holding a hammer and what looks like an old-fashioned navigational instrument (Ink-Thur), and a beautiful woman, heavily veiled but otherwise rather skimpily dressed, with her hands behind her back (Ajta-Zel).

However, the PCs may be more concerned by the group of five people, three women and two men, dressed in crimson robes, who respond instantly to the group's arrival. They initially speak to the leader of the soldiers, and then one of the men is almost pushed forward by the others. He's younger than the rest, gaunt-faced, clean shaven, and straggle-haired, and clearly nervous, but he looks for whichever PC looks to be furthest forward and most cooperative, and when he's permitted, reaches out to touch them gently on the forehead.

This is **Hishad the Priest**, who's the only one at this temple who has the **Gift of Tongues** (p. 10), and he's trying to use it in *Affliction* mode; if he's really not permitted, he'll try to use it in *Mind Reading* mode. Either way, the subject feels something inside their mind, and gets the option to resist or not – so that's a contest of Wills, with Hishad having IQ/Will 13. The Affliction lasts 1 minute per point of victory; Mind Reading lasts as long as Hishad maintains concentration. He'll keep trying until he gets somewhere, although if the PCs keep successfully resisting, the other priests and the soldiers will get increasingly antsy and unsure.

Once Hishad can communicate, he will try to explain the situation – though he may eventually switch to Mind Reading mode for a while to let the PCs talk to him while he listens. Note that only people who've successfully received the Gift of Tongues can understand what he (or the other priests) say. Maybe set a **digital timer** for the length of the conversation, initially at least, to bring it home to the players that this is difficult and inconvenient.

Hishad explains, as quickly as possible, that they believe that the PCs have come from another world; is it intact? *This* world has recently suffered a disaster; its gods are dead or departed, its lands are broken and out of alignment (*"distant lands are now close, while our neighbours are scattered beyond our knowledge"*), and its great cities are devastated. So the priests have been seeking whatever help or solutions might be available, and lately they've heard of *Gates* appearing to another world. So they have been trying to direct prayers to that other world, invoking rituals that might improve communications... They're desperate, the world is falling into chaos, it's not clear how well crops will do in this broken world, they were just trying anything...

And then, a few hours ago, one of their number who could previously sometimes commune with the gods sensed *something*, and watchmen reported a flash of light out in the wilderness. So they sent

soldiers there, but found nothing. It's possible that a band of wilderness bandits got to whatever happened first. Yes, perhaps somebody came through; after all, when the PCs came through, the patrol out in the same area saw another flash, which was how they were found.

Pause to let the PCs discuss this and ask a question or two of their own, before Hishad cuts in...

But – there's a problem, and here Hishad seems scared and nervous and even apologetic. The priests have been examining the Gate, and have realised that it is terribly unstable. Having been opened once, it has now opened again of its own accord, and those amongst them who were once capable of communing with the gods now sense a dark, headache-inducing void, which may well be growing. They don't know what might happen if this continues, but it might well not be good – for either world. They can suggest rituals that should send the PCs home and then reverse the opening, but these should be conducted soon, preferably by someone with some sensitivity to the powers involved.

This is the point where the PCs should start arguing for rescuing Iggy. Of course, this will slow things down, and will involve some risks for anyone involved in the rescue, so the priests will be uncertain – but the PCs should be rather insistent about this. If the players are on the ball, they can argue that Iggy opened the Gate in the first place, so who better to close it? Hopefully, they'll present a good enough case, or be stubborn enough, that the priests will agree. They can certainly help, and not just with numbers of soldiers; Iggy has most likely been captured by wasteland outcasts, and their scouts have some idea where to find those people.

Rescuing Iggy

The expedition that the priests will organise will consist of two patrols of steam cavalry, akin to the group who initially met the PCs, each with five troopers on iron horses and an officer on a real horse. In addition, they can come up with a sort of large-wheeled, steam-powered open carriage, with a rather nervous-looking driver who's introduced as **Chall the Driver** and just about enough seating space for the PCs plus Hishad, who's coming along to enable communication, and a stern-faced middle-aged woman who's introduced as **Perrulle Gadd Ha**, a priestess who is expert in communication with higher powers. Perrulle is a devout believer who's withdrawn into scholarship and mysticism in the wake of the Breaking, and who doesn't talk much – but the first time she says anything, Freddy will find her voice oddly familiar, like something from a forgotten dream.

The carriage is clearly a bit battered and creaky; if Alan is present, he gets an unmodified **Mechanic (Steam Engine)** roll to guess that it's suffered heavy and stressful use recently and is sorely in need of maintenance. With an **Engineer (Clockwork)** roll at -2, he can work out enough of how it works to offer maintenance suggestions by rolling Mechanic (Steam Engine) at -2 (it's very unfamiliar technology, but the problems are basic stuff for him), which will predispose the driver to like him; the city has lost some of its mechanics in the wake of the Breaking, and nobody had much idea about this design, so this is genuinely helpful. Alan being helpful can also help the expedition make better time across the wilderness (+2 to later Reaction rolls from the locals). Also, anyone with **Driving (Automobile)** skill can watch the Driver at work; they get one **IQ** roll after a few minutes, and another later in the adventure, to work out enough of the operating principles to be able to drive it at -3.

As they head out, a Soldier roll from Freddy will note that this group has a look he knows; troops heading into hostile territory. They're jumpy and probably tired and stressed; they may be trigger-happy. Any of the PCs can certainly pick up that this group are keeping their hands on their guns at all times. Given that the idea is to rescue Iggy, not start a fight, smart players may get nervous about

this, and perhaps start trying to talk to Hishad about the plan. However, there isn't much of a plan yet; the officer in charge wants to determine the situation first.

This turns out to be simple but functional; a sweep through the wilderness, with a couple of scouts out, looking for any sign of people. Freddy can say that this is fine so long as you're not looking for anyone who's competent and trying to escape your attention or ambush you; it's probably the best these people can manage, given that they're in a hurry. If he says anything about this, Hishad may say that the bandits have shown no sign of being professional soldiers. Anyway, after an hour or so, it pays off; one of the scouts, who'd been moving up a ridge ahead of the main group, comes back at speed; there is some kind of encampment on the other side.

Here, things become a matter of roleplaying. The problem is that the locals are used to a hierarchical, rather authoritarian society, where illegal behaviour is stopped by the simplest and most brutal method available. Negotiations a hostage rescues aren't really part of their vocabulary. So, left to his own devices, the officer in charge will organise a simple assault; two groups of three riders will move forward to flank the camp, and then the other patrol will charge while the flankers provide covering fire. Which is basically a decent plan for smashing a hostile group, but doesn't factor in the need to rescue someone from that camp... and if and when the PCs look at what's down there, they'll get the impression of more of a refugee encampment than a bunch of bandits...

Talking the locals into trying something more subtle is up to the PCs, though fortunately for them they can accomplish a lot by convincing the priests, who outrank the officer. He won't risk any of his own men, but can be convinced fairly easily to let some of these freakish outlanders risk their necks (while some of his men get into sniping positions). However, he'll need to be reassured that he won't be held responsible if they get themselves killed.

If they do try an approach, the PCs will initially find themselves faced with some shabby, suspicious individuals waving a random collection of guns and what are clearly improvised blade weapons mostly made from scavenged bits and pieces of industrial metals. However, they aren't instantly hostile. These "bandits" do fortuitously speak the same language as the city people (though with a slight accent). They really are more like refugees, complete with kids and non-combatants hanging back, but they're mostly scared of the city troops, and have enough sense to realise that a small, seemingly unarmed group coming forward first suggests that they can get away from this without a fight – but they'll also try threat displays to avoid looking weak. **Diplomacy** is indicated, and some roleplaying.

They have Ian under guard in one of their rough tents. Even without a comprehensible request, they'll guess soon enough that he may be something to do with these newcomers, and bring him out. He'll be naturally happy to see people with whom he can talk, especially Joe, and happy enough to hear that there's a way for him to get home – but he's also seen how badly off these people are, and he'll say that they need help, and remind the others of this at every opportunity. He's not been hurt, and will make every effort to talk Joe down from any kind of hostility. The PCs can induce the "bandits" to let him go easily enough with a combination of the carrot of a chance of help from the city people and the stick of those mechanised cavalry up on the hillside.

If and when the PCs then get him back to the city people, the latter will be pleased enough that there was no fight, and mostly just want to move on to the next stage. However, Iggy and the PCs may well want to persuade them to do something for the refugees. About all they can do is extract an undertaking from the priests that the city will provide what aid it can; some trading for supplies and cooperation in looking for more, insofar as the city can afford to give anything away.

If the PCs Don't Stop the Cavalry from Attacking, it'll turn into a messy massacre – mostly one-sided, but with enough fighting back to cause fatalities on both sides. This is worth Fright Checks (p. B360) when the PCs approach the scene, at -2 for messy violence. Iggy will be okay, having hidden in the tent, but he'll be in shock, and will regard the city troops as monsters, and won't be at all happy with the PCs for apparently taking their side. Although the PCs will be able to persuade him to cooperate in getting home, his hostility will be evident to Hishad and Perrulle, and indeed to the soldiers, making communication harder there; future reaction rolls from these locals to the PCs will be at -2. Also, the ritual that gets the PCs home will be less precise, which will translate to a more bumpy landing.

Either way, though, when Perrulle first speaks in Iggy's earshot, he'll start and look at her oddly; her voice is familiar to him from his dreams. She in turn will realise that he is the mind her prayers reached, and will act weirdly subservient towards him.

Returning Home

So the whole group sets out for the ruin of the house from the other world.

The Approach

As they get closer, passing between heaps of scrap and junk, the soldiers will group around the carriage, looking outwards defensively. Occasionally, some of the junk shifts, and whenever it does the soldiers turn guns that way. If anyone asks, the priests don't know where this hostile clockwork comes from, but before the Breaking, some cities were prone to warfare; this area may once have been associated with an armoury or a munitions factory or something. Or perhaps it just fell out of the Breaking of the machinery of the world. If Freddy wants a weapon, a minute or so and a straight **Scrounging** roll will find him a functional sort-of-spear (must be used two-handed, for thr+2 damage).

However, the point of the exercise is to find the exact place where the PCs arrived – and they are the people best equipped to find that. None of them have **Navigation**, but it defaults to IQ-5, and this is an easy (+3) task, so that's a net IQ-2. *Alternatively*, someone with **Intuition** (i.e. Patricia) can roll vs. IQ-1 (there are usually a couple of bad choices for each good one). The group needs three successes to find the place, and only two people can try at a time (others will get in the way and generate too much argument). Each time that both fail, *or* either of them gets a critical failure, the group ends up in a dead end or feeling more lost, and the soldiers and Chall the Driver get more jumpy (cumulative -1 to Reactions).

Scouting and Mechanical Menace 1: PCs can make the search a little easier – and, mostly, impress the soldiers with their willingness to take chances – by scouting ahead a short distance on foot. This is worth +1 to reactions on its own and gives +1 to Navigation rolls, but at some point they'll need to make a **Per** roll at -1 to spot another mechanical threat emerging – a sort of rusty iron spider thing. If they succeed, they can fall back and let the soldiers shoot it; if they fail, or if they choose to stand and fight, they have to survive two rounds of combat before the soldiers ride the thing down. It attacks by clawing twice with skill 10; each claw does 1d-2 cut. These claws count as weapons, so unarmed parries are at -3. It has ST 12 if it's grappled. If it's fighting Irene, use random hit locations for everyone (given that she has a stab-proof vest); see p. B552. Fighting that hand-to-hand gets a further +1 reactions from the locals.

Mechanical Menace 2: After the first test on which either or both navigators get a success, as the group are heading down a path between scrap heaps, something dog-sized, looking like a jumble of jagged-edged metal, comes scabbling out of the junk on damaged limbs and leaps onto the side of

the carriage. Any PCs on the carriage who want to try get one melee attack on this; a cumulative 3 points of damage on it cause it to fall away. In any case, it is destroyed by gunfire from the two nearest soldiers, but if it was hanging on the carriage, the PCs get a Fright Check at -1 – that was much too close. Either way, Chall the Driver, being a civilian who didn't actually volunteer for this job, gets a Fright Check, base 10-, with modifiers as for Reactions to the PCs (i.e. +2 if Alan has helped with the machinery, -2 if Iggy is hostile to the locals, -1 for each Navigation problem so far) and an extra -2 if the thing was hanging on the side of the carriage when it was shot. If he seems too disturbed, a PC may be able to take over the driving.

Meanwhile, Perrulle sets to work talking to Iggy, insisting on aid from Hishad in communicating with him. She knows that she has to talk him through the rituals necessary to re-open and then close the Gate – and she's improvising this stuff as she goes along. By the time the group finds the disintegrating remains of the house, they are deep in conversation – though if Iggy has cause to dislike the city people, this will only have been achieved by sheer force of personality from Perrulle. If Freddy guesses that he might help and can also communicate with her, he can pick up the gist of what she's saying and the basics of the chants that she hopes will open and then seal the Gate.

The House is looking even worse than when they last saw it. This is partly down to the lack of proper foundations and the shaking it got when the Gate opened, but it should be clear that things are going *bad* here. Although the light level from the bizarre sky is akin to daylight, the shadows around the building are darker than they should be – despite the purple sparks and flames that are running along the edges of the walls and window frames. The atmosphere near to the house feels close and oppressive, as if a tropical storm is about to break there, and sounds are slightly muffled and partly drowned out by a shrill note on the edge of human hearing. Perrulle looks at the scene and briefly wails in terror; anyone who understands her can say that she's saying that she's sensed a *rending* in the world. But then she pulls herself together, as the troops deploy to form a defensive perimeter – not that they look exactly happy with the situation.

The Ritual

Now they're in the right place, Perrulle will encourage Iggy – and Freddy if he's been involved with the instruction process – to lead the PCs into the centre of the crumbling structure. This doesn't exactly feel safe, but she and Hishad will be very (truthfully) insistent that working through this process may be the only way to prevent the Gate expanding randomly and damagingly on both worlds. It needs to be sealed from both sides, so they *have* to go home, *now*. However, they don't need to go down to the cellar; in fact, Perrulle and Iggy need to be able to see each other.

She'll then start a complex chant while locking eyes with him, and he'll follow a bit haltingly. If Freddy seeks to assist, he needs to make an IQ roll, with +1 or +2 allowed if his player roleplayed close attention to the explanations; on a success, he can join in some of the chanting. The lights then briefly contract around the building, and grow brighter, shifting from purple to bright blue to white. Then, there's a brief metallic howling, as if of the grinding of titanic gears, and a flash of light, similar to the first transfer but now rushing inwards from all sides, and everything goes quiet.

The Men in Black

(This last scene is largely here to provide a sense of complication; if the game is running out of time, it can be skated through or narrated. The point is that the PCs don't return to life as it was, but to complexity and uncertainty – and some mystery.)

As the shimmering lights dissipate, the PCs' eyes take a moment to adjust, before they realise that they're home, but not alone. It's the middle of the night on their home Earth when they arrive, and

the house – in a yet more fragile and crumbling state – has appeared in the same location from which it came – and from outside the building, the PCs will note the glare of high-power spotlights and a hubbub of voices.

First off, though, they'll want to get clear of the building, which is clearly on the verge of collapse. At least part of the cellar void has reappeared under the ground floor, which isn't fully supported, and there are a lot of creaking noises. The characters without Combat Reflexes are Mentally Stunned and have to make **IQ** rolls to get moving, at +1 if someone who's already okay is motivating them; that includes Iggy (IQ 10). Try once per turn; after five turns, the floor under the place where the PCs were standing starts to give way – they get one more IQ roll to respond and a DX roll to jump clear, after which they fall 3 yards, hitting a hard surface with velocity 8 – call it 2d-1 crushing damage for most of the characters, 2d for the huskier Joe. They'll then be stranded in the cellar until helped out. Meanwhile, anyone who does run for it in time needs a Per-2 roll to spot one random hazard in the confusion on the way out and avoid it; otherwise, they need a DX-2 roll to duck or sidestep at the last moment. Fail both, and it's either 1d-2 crushing or 1d-3 cutting damage – 50/50 chance of either.

Then they get outside, and things go a bit crazy. As anyone steps out of the house, they find themselves pinned and dazzled by an array of spotlights, and a megaphone voice demanding that *“Remain still with your hands up!”* Anybody who obeys that will be fine; anybody who keeps moving or argues will first get a warning of *“Armed Police!”* and then, unless they stop immediately, be tackled by two burly coppers (ST 12, Brawling/Wrestling-12) each, with a couple more behind them pointing guns. The cops will only shoot if a PC gets past them and seems to be making a serious effort to escape entirely, but it could just possibly happen; if so, they're dealing with Guns (Rifle)-13 and MP5s that do 3d-1 pi with Acc 4 if someone gets a chance for an aimed shot.

Being polite and reasonable is a good idea at this point (and will actually work *fairly* well). The person most likely to do something stupid is Joe, especially if he fails the **Bad Temper** roll which should be required at this point. Fortunately, if Iggy is around, he'll be holding Joe back (+1 to his self-control roll), and he may just choose to yell insults at the coppers – he can also re-roll if he starts a fight and then finds himself staring down the barrel of a gun. If it's relevant, the PCs may note that the whole site is closed off with temporary barriers and police tape. (Fortunately, anybody who was looking at the spot where the house used to be managed to get clear when the Gate reopened, so they didn't get a house dropped on them.)

The people behind the voices don't let the PCs approach until they've identified themselves at least vaguely plausibly, and even then they'll be blatantly on their guard; there's clearly a whole Armed Response Unit here, and they've been told that something very dangerous and possibly deceptive *might* come out of the place where the house was, and then wasn't until a few minutes ago; they're a bit spooked, and while not pointing guns without reason, they're deferring to anybody who seems to have some idea what's going on (which primarily means the civilians down from Whitehall right now). **Diplomacy** can help here; using it successfully against **Will 11** produces visible relaxation from an armed copper, and PCs can use the same roll against several of them at once; pointing out that you're not armed and emphasising that you're not hostile are *each* worth +1 to the roll. Similarly, a straight success on **Savoir-Faire (Police)**, at +2 for being someone they know, will get all the police treating you as on their side (though it doesn't affect the “civilians”). However, the more hostile, sarcastic, or difficult anyone is, the more they get bundled towards a convenient police van, possibly in handcuffs.

There is *one* bit of clear good news at this point, though; there are enough competent policemen here to supply one application of TL8 **First Aid** each to anyone who's injured. This means 1 HP back for free from initial bandaging, then 10 minutes and a skill-13 roll (including bonuses for the good kit carried in those cars) to restore 1d HP (including that initial free 1 HP). Also, if anyone ended up in the cellar, a team of coppers will head in to fish them out – though they will be accompanied by a pair of armed officers, with orders *from a civilian* to look out for anything that looks out of place, and to be prepared to shoot if necessary.

Anyway, the PCs are likely to find themselves the subject of an *ad hoc* on the spot examination. It then rapidly becomes clear that pretty much all the questioning is coming from a group of three people in civilian dress, meaning suits and ties; **Savoir-Faire (Police)** at +2 or **Savoir-Faire (Military)** unmodified will pick up that the most senior-looking uniformed copper here (who Irene will recognise as her Chief Inspector) is *deferring* to these people, while looking like he's bitten a wasp; he's clearly been told by someone with clout that he's *not* in charge. But once the PCs are all identified, or even sooner if necessary, those civilians move onto a first line that they evidently consider urgent:

*“Did anything else come through the Gate with you? Are you **sure**?”*

If the PCs fail to reassure them quite convincingly, they will quickly tell some of the armed officers to check around the perimeter of the site, accompanied by one of the civilians at the back of the group – “And take care!” The coppers will be puzzled – “*What are we looking for?*” – and will get a nervous response. “Anything that doesn't belong. If it's human, you can try to talk to it; otherwise, do **not** let it get away.” Fortunately, there's nothing for them to find.

If anyone asks who these people are, the answer is a half-smile and “We've just come down from London to help with this little oddity.” If Irene can ask any of her colleagues about them, the answer is “Bunch of Whitehall spooks. They started calling a couple of hours after you went missing, and showed up an hour or so ago. They've got clout with the Chief Constable, too. What did you run into that's got them so excited, anyway?” Also, Patricia's **Expert Skill (Ufology)** may allow her to come up with a few departmental names and rumours to mention, but these will just get the spooks looking amused; still, they fit some of the drier recent rumours about official reactions to UFO reports. If anybody starts talking about what happened, though, while the uniformed police are looking disbelieving and exasperated, the civilians look concerned, say “Right, we'll run a full debrief somewhere quieter”, remind Irene very pointedly that as a police officer she's signed the Official Secrets Act “which *does* cover this incident”, and move to get the PCs taken away in one of the several vehicles parked around the place.

By default, Irene gets put in a police car and sent back to her station with a promise of further contact later, while everyone else gets taken to County Police HQ; anyone who made serious trouble or threatened loudly to contact the press gets chucked in a police van and then in some cells there well away from the common herd, and the rest get hauled off in police cars for a somewhat friendlier chat. The point of the exercise here is to get out of this final scene as something better than pawns or prisoners, and to see how much loyalty the PCs display together. Over the next day or so, the PCs will be cross-examined thoroughly by the spooks, and then made an offer; either they sign a lot of documents promising *never* to talk about what happened, to *anyone*, or they accept new jobs with the government. Except for Iggy, and possibly Freddy; when the spooks realise that they represent some kind of channel to the Broken Clockwork World, well, they can either agree to assist, or be sectioned as “obviously crazy”...