

After the Alchemist's Accident

Herr Doktor Hieronymus Prung, D.Alch (Mad), has just had a little accident. So his house no longer has a roof, the cellar is full of Things Man Was Not Meant To Want To Know, his cat is down a couple of lives, and the Doktor... is out. So, as his domestic staff, you probably ought to clean up the mess.

It might have been better if Herr Doktor had hired staff on the basis of intelligence, or indeed had just hired the occasional carbon-based humanoid, but never mind – you know your duty. It's alchemical hazmat procedures you're a little unclear about.

Background

The PCs are indeed the domestic staff formerly employed by the late Doktor Prung – the entire full-time staff, in fact, though a couple of middle-aged ladies from the nearby village of **Unter Befehlen** came in daily to cook and attempt cleaning. Fortunately, these ladies aren't around this morning when things go bad.

Anyway, **Boulder** and **Stalagmite** require little explanation. They're a couple of trolls who grew up in the mountains together; Stalagmite is slightly older and a bit more outgoing, and really loves to party, despite his tendency to hangovers, and came up with the idea of looking for work down in the human lands; Boulder, being uncomplicated and overconfident, said sure, why not, and somehow they set out before Stalagmite could come up with another idea or anyone could talk them out of it. They then landed a job guarding the door and doing some heavy lifting for Doktor Prung, and haven't yet got around to wondering if any other jobs might be better paid or more exciting. Boulder is actually fairly happy here; Stalagmite has been suffering from a shortage of opportunities to party.

Keystone is another hired door guard, who seems to have started out on some old now-ruined castle somewhere (gargoyle reproduction is a bit of a mystery even to gargoyles), but who developed a peculiar bump of curiosity at some point, and then, while hanging around on a gutter in a small human town, was introduced to the art of photography. Determined to apply this to his homeland, he headed back to wilder areas, then snagged a job with Herr Doktor Prung, sitting over his front door and throwing rocks at unwelcome visitors in exchange for enough of a cash salary to keep him in photographic supplies.

Mr. Grushk is a gnoll, and therefore looks and smells like a walking compost heap (which does seem almost appropriate for a professional gardener), and is adapted to live as a scavenger. However, he's exceptionally bright and adaptable by gnoll standards, and has picked up a significant amount about nature in general and life in the wilderness over the years. This includes a little bit of applied herbalism, which may be related to the fact that he seems to have a little bit of magical sensitivity. Unfortunately, he's less used to dealing with sapient beings, which probably explains why he's so terribly gullible (as his fellow employees have noticed). The boss used him to help identify magical ingredients (notably reannual plants, including snow lotus), but didn't pay him more than the rate due a competent gardener – his nominal job title.

Lastly, **Mister Pestiferous** is Herr Doktor Prung's cat, and used just to be a domestic pet. However, Herr Doktor Prung wasn't always careful about what liquids he left lying around cooling in saucer-shaped dishes. When both had adjusted to the idea that Mister Pestiferous was now a sapient being, he went back to hanging around the laboratory while Herr Doktor was working, picking up a certain amount about alchemy and natural philosophy in the process, and played the occasional game of chess against Herr Doktor in the evenings. He's still very much a cat, though.

The Setup

Prung was working on a series of experiments using magically highly active herbal ingredients identified by Mr. Grushk. Unfortunately, he nonetheless suffered an alchemical accident, involving time-warping magical energies; the retort he was working with dropped through the floor into the basement and then simultaneously exploded and imploded, quite violently. This unusually self-contradictory phenomenon was fortunate for his staff, who weren't subjected to anything *too* violent, but still sufficed to turn Prung himself into something non-viable. It also ripped a hole in reality in the cellar, which the **Things from the Dungeon Dimensions** quickly discover. They can't get through it completely – there's too much of an entropy gradient (as anyone with a moderate grasp of natural philosophy may guess) – but they can stick the odd tentacle through. And they can use it to access living minds, in order to influence them and start insinuating themselves into the world, subtly but effectively.

So Death shows up to collect Herr Doktor, and – not being in favour of the Things very much – drops a few hints to any PCs who can see him about the situation needing fixing. Meanwhile, the ladies who cooked and cleaned for Herr Doktor, seeing a column of smoke and a heap of rubble, turn around and go back to Unter Befehlen, where they tell everyone. Some of the other villagers, being suspicious of mad alchemists and disapproving of explosions, head up to see what exactly has happened.

Unfortunately, they include **Manfred Grollheist**, who is angling for the job of village headman while the current incumbent, his maternal uncle **Fritz Wartzbolle**, is declining into old age. Manfred is inclined to organise the villagers into an Angry Mob – otherwise they might even be helpful to the PCs – and will treat the nonhumans with hostility. Worse, he's intensely narrow-minded and prejudiced as well as ambitious, making him a natural for possession by a relatively subtle and devious Thing. He won't accept anything that the PCs say at face value, and sooner or later, he'll blunder too close to the rift, be possessed, and set to work organising and bullying his fellow villagers into suitable vessels for further possession.

(Incidentally, Herr Doktor kept most of his money in the bank – he was quite modern in that respect – but there's a bit of working cash in the desk in his study if anyone needs it.)

The Start

It's a nice day in the mountains; Stalagmite and Boulder are standing by the front door chatting s-l-o-w-l-y, Keystone is sitting on its lintel watching the play of light and shade on the mountain peaks, Mr. Grushk is weeding the rose beds, and Mister Pestiferous is in the kitchen idly trying to decide whether to break into the larder or to go pester Herr Doktor into feeding him. Then, there's a very loud noise that's simultaneously “BOOMMMM!” and “MMMmoob...”, and things vibrate furiously for a moment, and then get confusing for a moment more.

When the PCs recover their wits, they find that the structure of the house has suffered badly; stuff has fallen off shelves, slates are sliding down the roof, a few bricks have come loose from the walls, and most of the windows are cracked. Also, Boulder and Stalagmite have been thrown off their feet, but are otherwise unharmed; Keystone is still perched on the lintel despite the fact that much of the wall seems to be slowly starting to disintegrate, Mr. Grushk is upside-down in the rose beds with his wheelbarrow neatly dismantled next to him, and Mister Pestiferous is somehow sitting on top of a wobbly heap of pots, pans, firewood, and broken crockery.

Ask for immediate responses. If anyone talks about entering the house, note that it's not looking 100% stable, but don't stop them. If Mister Pestiferous goes to see the boss, he will quickly see that the ... event ... must have happened in the lab, and has left the boss looking distinctly unhealthy. (In fact, some kind of Test to resist traumatic unpleasantness might be appropriate, or even a cat might gain the Trait **Distinctly Queasy and Distressed** for a while.) There's also a **large** hole in the laboratory floor, and a lot of strange lights and noises coming up from the cellar.

Next: Anyone outside gets a Test to notice something; if anyone (probably Keystone) has extra height (probably by staying on that lintel), the roll will be a bit easier. This is just to spot a couple of figures who were approaching from the village of Unter Befehlen – doubtless the cleaning ladies employed by the boss. They have evidently seen the explosion; they pause and converse for a moment, then turn and head hastily back toward the village.

Ask for any other immediate actions, then...

Death Comes for Herr Doktor Prung

Anyone outside gets a chance to notice Death arriving first, then anyone indoors, but as usual he's not easy for some people to notice. Mister Pestiferous sees him automatically, Mr. Grushk gets a d10 Test, and the other three get d4 Tests. (The effect of course extends to his horse.)

Anyone who sees him outside can be told **“You see a rather pale-looking fellow, though he’s wearing a hooded robe. His horse is a nice-looking grey,”** before he dismounts, ties his horse to a convenient post close by the garden, and stalks into the house. *Inside the house*, anyone who sees him will automatically recognise the skeleton in the robe. Either way, if anyone shows any signs of noticing him, he nods politely and says “EXCUSE ME. I WON’T BE A MOMENT.”

(If anyone is crazy enough to take a swing at him, he ignores it as the attack just passes through him; his horse is protected by being outside time, so attacks on that, or any other attempts to interact with it, just sort of mysteriously fail.)

Death’s task is of course to collect Doktor Prung. If anyone asks if it’s really Prung’s time, Death will produce an hourglass with a gilded lead frame and odd-shaped bulbs somehow reminiscent of laboratory glassware, look faintly ironically at all the sand in the bottom bulb, say “YES”, and put it away again. Death will also at least throw a glance at Mister Pestiferous and say “OH HELLO. NICE KITTY, I BELIEVE IS THE TERM.” If Mister Pestiferous speaks to him, he’ll say “OH, ONE OF THE TALKING ONES. YOU SUFFERED A LABORATORY ACCIDENT, I ASSUME.” He’ll be amiably polite – he likes cats – and if any questions about Mister Pestiferous’s survival come up, he’ll produce a plain hourglass-shaped box, unlatch and open it to reveal a plain hourglass, peer at it and say “YOU’RE FINE, AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT.”

He can further explain that he genuinely can’t say how much longer Mister Pestiferous has, or even how many lives he has left. “IT USED TO BE QUITE SIMPLE. ONE CHECKED OFF EACH UNFORTUNATE INCIDENT, AND AFTER EIGHT CHECK MARKS, WELL, THE NINTH TIME WAS FINAL. BUT NOW, IT’S ALL SEALED BOXES AND UNCERTAINTY. BECAUSE OF QUANTUM, I’M TOLD. CALL ME OLD-FASHIONED, BUT I PREFERRED THE OLD WAY.” This also explains why Mister Pestiferous can’t give Doktor Prung a life, should the question arise, despite any precedent in the novels.

The other PC he’s fairly likely to talk to a bit is Mr. Grushk. “AH, AND WHAT DO YOU DO? ... YOU ARE QUITE PERCEPTIVE FOR A GARDENER.” He’s always polite, but he isn’t chatty for the sake of it. He’ll be equally polite to anyone else who can see him, but brisk; “IT’S ALL VERY WELL YOU BEING SO ATTENTIVE, BUT I HAVE A JOB TO DO”. If anyone thinks to challenge him to a contest for Prung’s life, he’ll point out that (a) even if they win, he’d be obliged to collect something of equal value, and (b) in any case, a number of Prung’s vital organs have been jellified, and some of his intestines are actually now on another plane of existence, so bringing him back to life probably wouldn’t accomplish very much for very long.

But Death also notices the consequences of Prung’s accident, and although officially he can’t interfere, his inclination is to drop some *hints* about the matter. Standing over the body, he snaps his fingers, and Herr Doktor’s ghost form coalesces in front of him. “AH, HERR DOKTOR ANDROMONTHORUS CARMINE VON PRUNG. I WOULD SAY THAT IT IS A PLEASURE TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE, BUT PEOPLE RARELY SEEM TO APPRECIATE THAT.”

Prung blinks. “Vot happened?”

“YOU WERE SOMEWHAT CARELESS. I OBSERVE THAT CATASTROPHIC EXPLOSIONS ARE A COMMON FEATURE OF YOUR PROFESSION.”

“But – I vas most careful! Any explosion vould instantly reverse itself!”

“HMM?” Death stares into space for a moment. “OH YES, VERY INGENIOUS. BUT I AM AFRAID THAT ALL THAT ACCOMPLISHED WAS TO CREATE AN IMPLOSION AT THE SAME MOMENT AS THE EXPLOSION.”

“But – zat vill mean zat zere is unt disruption in local causality! It could cause...”

“HUSH, DOKTOR PRUNG.” Death raises a bony finger that commands silence. “I AM SURE THAT YOU NOW UNDERSTAND THAT CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS, BUT IT IS A LITTLE LATE FOR THAT. AND SOME OF THE LIVING ARE LISTENING. I AM AFRAID THAT THE RULES ARE VERY CLEAR ON THIS SORT OF THING.”

“Zey are?”

“YES. WE CANNOT HAVE YOU TELLING THEM HOW MUCH DAMAGE YOU MAY HAVE DONE TO THE STRUCTURE OF SPACE AND TIME. THE NEXT THING WE KNOW, YOU WILL BE SUGGESTING TO THEM HOW YOU MIGHT REPAIR THAT DAMAGE, SAY BY CREATING INTERFERENCE WITH THE CYCLICAL ALCHEMICAL REACTION. AND THEN WHERE WOULD WE BE?”

“Umm – vere?”

“WHERE INDEED. NO, WE CANNOT HAVE YOU ATTEMPTING TO CORRECT YOUR MISTAKES BY SENDING INFORMATION BACK THROUGH THE VEIL WILLY-NILLY, MERELY TO PREVENT THE WORLD BEING DEVASTATED BY AN INCURSION FROM THE DUNGEON DIMENSIONS. THE BLAME IS YOURS, AND REPAIRING THIS DAMAGE IS THEIR TASK. SHOULD THEY SOMEHOW GUESS THAT THERE IS A PROBLEM THEY CAN SOLVE, OF COURSE.”

“Uh, jah...”

“WELL, THIS HAS BEEN AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION, BUT I REALLY DO HAVE OTHER BUSINESS TO ATTEND TO.” Death puts his hands together, and then draws them apart, and a scythe appears between them. It spins once. He turns to any living watchers. “WE WILL MEET AGAIN, OBVIOUSLY. QUITE WHEN, I CANNOT SAY. IT’S PROBABLY TO DO WITH QUANTUM. BUT HOPEFULLY, NOT TOO SOON, BY YOUR STANDARDS.” And then he and Prung walk off through the wall. Outside, he alone gets on his horse and rides away.

The Cellar

The PCs will hopefully decide to check the cellar next. They’ve all seen it from time to time; it’s a medium-sized room half-full of assorted old boxes, barrels, and domestic stuff (tools, bits of furniture, etc.) which is currently not being used. Except that, just off-centre in the room, there’s something a bit self-evidently wrong.

The Gateway

There’s a swirling, irregular, roughly circular ... phenomenon, which looks jet black except that if you look at it for a moment it seems to be shot through with flashes of silver and grey. It is framed by smoking crimson flames; the curious thing about them is that, as the PCs watch for a few seconds, they burn brightly, die down a little until they appear to be about to go out, then slowly start to burn more brightly as they seem to *suck smoke in*, before they grow to maximum brightness and the cycle begins again. Nobody has to roll any dice to guess that they’re in some kind of time loop.

It's possible that the PCs will try to do something simple about this, but if they take a close look at the problem, they'll soon find whichever bit of them gets closest to the flame getting increasingly numb and tingly; metal weapons poked close to the flame start looking a bit rusty on the surface, and wood or stone start spalling small flakes. And none of this seems to do much to the flames; at most, they just get disrupted for a moment, then flare back onto the cycle. Mister Pestiferous can have a d12 Test to comprehend explicitly that being cycled back and forward through time isn't good for anything, and especially not living things. The PCs might try throwing water at the flames, and some does reach them, though a lot of it turns either to steam or to ice, or possibly both at once, on the way, but again, any effects it has simply get reversed out as time runs backwards, some of the water comes back out into the face of whoever threw it, and the loop re-establishes itself.

Let the PCs experiment with all this briefly, and then the *trouble* starts.

The Tentacles

As the PCs observe the gateway, a bundle of sickly green tentacles dripping some kind of purulent ichor emerge through it, and begin flailing around for a moment, before somehow gaining an awareness of their surroundings (the bulbous excrescences that may or may not be eyeballs may be relevant), and attacking everyone present.

Each PC gets one tentacle to deal with; they'll need to roll at least one Test each to avoid being grabbed – assess what they say they're doing and what Traits they claim apply to determine the difficulty – and then, if they are grabbed, at least one Test each to resist being dragged through the portal, with more following until their grip is broken or they are severed. Characters who haven't been grabbed can aid those who have in any ways that sound plausible. The tentacles are strong-human strong, but not troll-strong, and are tough but not unbreakable; they will give up if an intended victim seems too much like work.

On the Other Side of the Gate

If a PC does get dragged through, they find themselves standing on a plain of silvery sand under a dull dark grey sky, facing a crowd of creatures, none less than seven or eight feet high and some much taller and spindlier, all made up of claws, rotting flesh, chitin, the occasional rusting metal plate, and some unidentifiable but unpleasant materials, as the tentacles loosen a little. They also feel themselves being examined, with a sense that something is rummaging around inside their heads as well as the monsters looking at their appearance. This triggers a Test to resist gaining the temporary Trait **Horried and Appalled**.

Then a hissing, slobbering voice slides into their mind; *"This is a **living creature** from the **real world**. So what is it that it wants?"*. The PC may actually reply to that, but the Things aren't really interested in what they have to say. A few more moments of having their brains rummaged, and then comes another comment. *"Trivia! Useless! Mere hopes for food and mating and beauty!"* (Adjust the details for which PC is being examined.) *"We can find so much better!"*

Then, for a moment, the creatures ignore the PC as, it is evident, utterly beneath their notice, and the tentacle releases them, writhes for a moment as others join it, and they slide towards the gate behind the PC. This is a clear opportunity to leg it, just ahead of the tentacle. Assuming that the PCs are smart enough to do so, roll some dice and look thoughtful, but they can make it.

If any other PCs had regrouped and decided to follow the victim to save them, this leads to a collision in the cellar. Time is kind of wobbly around the gate, so don't worry about relative timings. Hopefully everyone will have the sense to leave the cellar for now, regroup, and decide what to do next. Those hints from Death aside, Mister Pestiferous for one knows enough magical lore to know that this situation is really bad and needs fixing.

The Villagers

However, there are complications. While the PCs were appraising the situation, the village women who saw the disaster from a distance went home and told everyone else. The villagers weren't sure how to respond, but decided that forming an angry mob with pitchforks is always a safe bet. (They keep a few pitchforks in reserve for just such an eventuality, despite mostly being a goat-herding village.) A few, perhaps a bit confused, are carrying flaming torches, despite it being broad daylight.

Despite all of which, they might potentially actually be useful – if it weren't for the fact that they are being led by **Manfred Grollheist**, who (a) wants to establish his leadership potential in the village, and (b) is a prejudiced jerk who *likes* whipping up hostility towards outsiders and non-humans as well as seeing it as a way to accomplish that goal. So while the PCs are pondering and thinking of solutions to their problem, they hear a generic burbling from outside, and can look out to see the mob.

These are generic humans, wielding pitchforks or occasionally torches, whose current dominant Trait is **Confused Mob Mentality**. They aren't terribly good with their improvised weapons (or, in the case of Grollheist, the axe he's picked up along the way), or for that matter at throwing rocks, which they might also try, and any kind of solid hit will make most of them back off or fall over and crawl away, but there are a lot of them, they have a leader, and hopefully the players will decide that it'd be smarter not to antagonise the neighbours too much.

But Grollheist is whipping them up into xenophobic anger. When he finds out what's happened to Doktor Prung, he'll try to drive the PCs out of the neighbourhood, then claim the credit for organising to get rid of the problem. He has the Trait **Knows a bit of Public Speaking**, and has been working on the villagers for long enough that some of them are inclined to accept what he says from the outset.

Given their general lack of social skills, the PCs are going to have trouble dealing with this. Still, they may be able to make friends with one or two villagers on the side, and maybe, say, find out about Grollheist's ageing uncle, **Fritz Wartzbolle**, who is becoming a bit unhappy about the "lad's" increasingly naked ambition. He could be a useful ally, but not a very powerful one.

Grollheist and the Things

All this would just be a nuisance, but the big problem is that Grollheist has a mind which is eminently susceptible to the influence of the Things; he has the right combination of low cunning, greed, and selfish short-sightedness. If he gets in sight of the gate, because the PCs take him there to show him the problem (and he won't accept anything they say otherwise), because they leave the house and the villagers blunder in for a look round, or because he sneaks in with a couple of hangers-on to see what's going on, one of the tentacles will reach towards him – but rather than grabbing him, it will rear up, with one of the maybe-eyeballs pointing towards him, and everyone else will hear a faint burbling hiss of "yes" in their minds. And after this, the tentacles won't actually attack, physically, so long as Grollheist is around – allowing him to claim that they're "just some kind of tree roots, and no danger at all".

If he gets to stick around in the cellar for a while, Grollheist will quickly be taken over by the Things; otherwise, it'll happen over a night or two of seductive dreams. Walking around with conviction quite literally blazing in his eyes (a faint green that looks kind of sickly when you look at it) gives him the Trait **Terrifyingly Charismatic**. A lot of villagers will go along with what he says, muttering that "he maybe has a point". (And it's more interesting than goat-herding.) He'll make things as uncomfortable as possible for the PCs; if he has time, he'll start organising the construction of some crude but functional ballistae with enough hitting power to hurt a troll. And he'll get people drilling with improvised polearms, some of whom have just enough militia training to be useful.

Killing Grollheist will probably seem like a tempting idea to some PCs, but aside from the fact that it'll make the other villagers see the PCs as monsters, it *won't work*. It'll just open him to full control

by the Things, who can feed enough anti-entropy through the gate to keep him going whatever anyone does to him. His increasingly battered body and the sickly green fire now fully visible in his eyes might be considered off-putting by some, but he'll declare that he's been *sent back* on a mission from the gods to lead a sacred crusade against inhuman monsters, and any villagers who aren't impressed will be too scared to argue. At this point, the only way to kill him properly will be to close the gate.

Grollheist Takes Charge

If, as is dangerously possible, Grollheist gets to really take charge of things, matters will get worse, even (or especially) if the PCs slip away. He'll declare any success against the PCs to be a sign that "proper human beings" can get rid of "*Them*", driving the monsters out of *all* neighbourhoods. He'll want to take over Prung's house, which he honestly believes he wants because it's an appropriate symbolic HQ and a decent fixer-upper (especially once he's added a ballroom) – but of course it's actually so that the Things can continue insinuating themselves through the gate. This will make access to the gate for the PCs harder, though all the building work will offer opportunities to slip into the place in various ways. And he'll soon have people with polearms and siege engines set up to defend the gate.

Not everyone in the village will like this – Fritz will actually become something of a centre of secret resistance – but there'll be a sense that there's not much to be done about it, and at least Grollheist is getting things done. If Mr. Grushk glimpses Grollheist, even from a distance, though, it'll be increasingly obvious that there's magic (or more some kind of *anti-magic*) on him – and somehow it doesn't look good. It shouldn't be hard to guess that the Things are involved here and need to be stopped.

Meanwhile, the PCs may be driven out of the house and into the mountains. Fortunately, some of them have wilderness survival skills.

Closing the Gate

Also fortunately, the PCs do just about have the wherewithal between them to work out a way to close the gate. The flames are clearly keeping it open, and they keep burning because they're in a closed time loop. Water just gets drawn into the loop, puts the fire out for part of the cycle, then get hurled out of the flames as time cycles back, adding steam to the smoke. As Pestiferous and Grushk will eventually be able to work out between them, helped by Death's hints, the trick is to disrupt the loop by adding a cycle with a different frequency. Pestiferous for one can use what he's picked up about alchemy to guess that adding a new time-disrupting element to the process might disrupt it, and if all else fails, sifting through the notes in Prung's study will give sufficient clues. However, that means getting Pestiferous into the study, plus someone to turn the pages for him.

What constitutes a time-disrupting effect? Well, Pestiferous and Grushk were both around Prung enough to have picked up a bit about his studies of reannual snow lotus. As they'll eventually be able to deduce, the way to accomplish the desired result is to distil some essence of snow lotus into flammable form, and add it to the flame. Yes, the PCs need to make **snow lotus gin...**

Grushk knows plenty about snow lotus; if he can get into the garden, he'll be able to gather up enough of the plant. They'll then need to infuse it into distilled alcohol, so they'll need some alchemical equipment; scrounging in Prung's old lab finds some appropriate bits and pieces, including dilute alcohol. Then they just need a place to work, a fire for heat, and an hour or so to work.

Finally, they need to get to the gate with a flask or two of snow lotus gin, fend off one last tentacle, and lob the flask into the flames. The ensuing visual effects get fairly dramatic, as the fire flashes backwards and forwards in time simultaneously while the alcohol burns very pretty shades of sickly violet, phosphorescent green, and putrescent yellow. Finally, the gate collapses shut with some ear-

splitting wibbly noises as a bundle of tentacles stretches through and attempts to hold it open, before being severed by the closure process.

Aftermath

With his power cut off, Grollheist collapses gibbering, muttering “You must obey me! I know what’s best! Get rid of the foreigners!” The villagers are left confused, and Fritz Wartzbolle can try and get them back to some kind of sanity; it’s up to the PCs what they do next. Grollheist will be eating through a straw for the foreseeable future; what happens when he recovers or the next time he comes anywhere near anything magical is a matter for the sequel.

Though the PCs may be left with a spare bottle or two of reannual gin. Remember that letting anyone drink much of that if they don’t already have a hangover risks damage to the fabric of causality...