

The Skund Enigma

Queen Agantia of Skund says that she wants a trade deal with Sto Lat, which would be fine, if anyone in Sto Lat was sure that she existed. Still, it would have been undiplomatic not to send an ambassador.

But now, the ambassador has asked for help – or maybe he's just gone insane. The clacks message is unclear. It's your job to find out.

Background

Queen Agantia exists okay. Whether she's entitled to the title of "Queen" might be a legal question, except that she *is* the law in Skund, for practical purposes. Or at least in her bit of it.

The truth is, she started out as one of the merely *borderline* crazy witches who infest the Forest of Skund. She even had a gingerbread cottage at one point. But she was a witch with *ambitions*, even by the standards of the borderline crazy category. In fact, *especially* by those standards. She was aware that most witches who go solitary tend to lose it and end badly, and she fought off that danger for some years before she plotted an alternative path; to become a legendary witch *queen*. Of course, that's a path with its own pitfalls, but it at least has a better life expectancy, on average.

But for her to ride that particular narrative, she needed a theme; she had to lean into a particular style. She decided that the one with the best odds for long-term survival, on balance, was the Snow Queen/Ice Witch tale. She took to wearing a lot of blue and white, and moved into a half-ruined tower on a hill near a small woodcutters' village, **Frogmallow**, on the hubwards side of the forest. Then she set up as the local witch, and as she made herself moderately useful for medical purposes and was less deranged than a lot of other witches in those parts, the villagers didn't complain too much. Over the next few years, she recruited some restless or gullible locals as personal staff, expanded her influence to a few more villages, and improved the prosperity of the region by freezing some more annoyingly mobile trees in place, taking control of some of the more dangerous local wildlife, and most importantly, quietly recruiting a really good shipping manager to handle trade in charcoal and sentient timber. Many of the more sapient of the local mobile trees were happy when she undertook to ward them against being summoned by other magical entities; by the time they realised that they were being *domesticated*, and were now subject to regular culling, it was too late – she had power over them.

With her income secured by some frankly cynical use of witch-magic, Agantia declared herself a countess, and had her tower spruced up. She instituted a formal taxation system, and came to informal arrangements with the local shamans whereby they didn't preach against her and she ensured that their mushroom patches were left intact. Actually, they were quietly expanded. Countess Agantia established a secret trade in high-strength mushrooms to the seediest dives in Zemphis, rapidly expanding her income.

At this point, things were in a virtuous circle, and if Agantia used magic to improve her tower – now an Ice Castle – that just fitted the story. The duration of these enchantments is of course "until Agantia dies or is depowered", but that suits her just fine, as the Ice Queen role has enabled her to postpone aging indefinitely. She promoted herself to Duchess and then Queen; it was around this time that Casanunda the Dwarf visited, briefly charmed the Queen, received the title of Count, and then left. She became a remote figure in her seemingly ever-taller tower, speaking only to a few trusted advisors (furniture salesmen and drug distributors), while her subjects inevitably decided that you didn't have to like her but you had to respect her (or she'd freeze your bits off).

Lately, though, things have turned difficult. The tale she's wrapped around herself has warped the local climate, to the point that the area under her authority is stuck in permanent winter, which is causing the collapse of the local agricultural system; her people are beginning to go hungry all too often, and Agantia understands the problem well enough to see that this could lead to revolution. She's become less a tragic figure than a boss villain. The arrival of the clacks might have helped her; she sponsored the construction of a spur line from the terminal in the village of Fustic Wells, which has helped Skund plug into the Disc's trade networks. Unfortunately, the most immediate and profitable use of this has been communication with her *distribution network* in Zemphis. Her narrative function is now in some respects that of a drugs kingpin.

And now, the negative feedback loop is accelerating out of control. Supernatural winter has clamped its jaws down on her pocket kingdom, which is freezing into a tighter and tighter time loop. Faced with looming starvation, Queen Agantia telegraphed a suggestion of trade negotiations through to Sto Lat – which she knows to be the primary agricultural trading nation on the Sto Plains – offering vague exotic specialities in exchange for cabbages and other agricultural products, while calling in some long-standing debts from her (rather dangerous) trading connections in Zemphis in order to finance emergency food imports.

The latter has caused her criminal partners in Zemphis to send some people to *explain things* to the Queen, who they assume is a local drug-grower with a fancy title and delusions; they arrived around the same time as an ambassador from Sto Lat, **Sir Petroc Washlink**. Meanwhile, signals up and down the telegraph line to Fustic Wells have become increasingly garbled, as operators within the Land of Winter are basically stuck in a time loop and those just outside are a little confused about the current date, which is required to encode messages correctly. Maintenance teams sent to assist have been caught up in the confusion and gone offline, or have been attacked by wolves.

So the Sto Lat ambassador has been trying to signal out, but his messages look *weird* and are increasingly failing to get through the signal disruption. The Sto Lat government complained to the telegraph company, who apologised, and then admitted that they had technical difficulties. A little discussion and comparison of notes has led to an informal team-up. The PCs are being sent in to fix the problem. Or at least, to discover what it is.

Specific Starting Conditions

The Tower of Ice in Skund, located on a low hill, looks fabulous and glittery and very cold. It's surrounded for miles around by protective magics in the form of winter winds that move approaching flying beings backwards and sideways, subtly at first but increasingly forcefully; the last quarter-mile or so of the approach is simply impossible, as anything in the air there is swept sideways and backwards. Visitors have to approach on foot. The time loop effect also makes it impossible to scry into the area; actually, the spell gets a vision of a blizzard (which players may mistake for a joke about old-fashioned TVs). Oh, and there's a hungry five-headed vampire goat locked up in the basement; Agantia thought that a witch queen might need a monstrous pet.

Death cannot currently enter the tower. So, in quite moments, he's taken to sitting on a rock about a hundred yards from the front door, watching with typical cool curiosity.

Queen Agantia is stuck in the Tower, living off the power of magic and stories. She'd like to break the closed loop, but being at the centre of things, every time she turns around, it resets – literally; she goes into a twirl, surrounded by a swirl of ice crystals, and she shifts back to her mental starting point.

The Village of Frogmallow is about half a mile from the Tower. The villagers are caught in enough of the time loop that they can't escape, but not enough to save them from the need for food. They're pinch-faced and hungry, and working through the last of their food stores. The PCs won't be caught up in the loop immediately, but can't afford to wait around. There's also a semaphore terminus station and a blacksmith's forge, and the ambassador, assorted Grand Trunk employees who've made it this far and then been caught up in the time loop, and the Zemphis drug gang enforcers are staying in the inn.

The Skund Hinterlands – the area radiating out from the Tower – are cold and getting colder. As characters start out from Fustic Wells, they soon pass through an area where it's noticeably *Chilly*. And the last five hours of travel involve *Freezing* temperatures. The woods are also infested with hungry wolves, which is only realistic, but which is also a product of the magic; wolves just fit the story.

Setup

1. Determine players' familiarity with the Discworld, GURPS, and the Discworld RPG. Explain that this scenario is set in a period around the latter part of the run of novels, so the telegraph system exists, but not at the very end, so there's no steam power – travel is by horse, stagecoach, or boat.
2. Sort out who wants to play what, noting that Miss Baccarat is a witch, and getting the hang of the magic system may involve a little effort.
3. Distribute character sheets. Explain the meanings of each box.
4. Explain skill system as required (3d6, roll low), and explain that stuff in square brackets is points cost – not generally used in play.

The Briefing

The PCs, **apart from Hiram Frogge**, work as trouble-shooters for the government of Sto Lat. For those who don't remember the novels, Sto Lat is a moderate-sized city-state twenty miles or so hubwards of Ankh-Morpork, governed by the generally popular Queen Kelirehenna I ("Keli" for short). Although Sto Lat is a far lesser power than Ankh-Morpork, its feudal influence extends a fair way across the plains, and it's the centre of the all-important brassica trade in the region, so this isn't an entirely trivial job. Basically, the four PCs *are* the Sto Lat security service, reporting to Igneous Cutwell, who is the queen's all-purpose chancellor, supposedly a Wizard Ipississimuss but he never casts spells, and Master of the Queen's Bedchamber. (Patriotic citizens do not appreciate jokes about that.)

Late one morning, they are summoned to Mr Cutwell's office, where they discover him polishing off last night's pizza while juggling papers. There are also two other people there, a thoughtful, bespectacled fellow in leather engineer's garb (*point to Hiram*) and an older, managerial character who is introduced as "Mr Loring of the Grand Trunk Telegraph Company." Cutwell himself is a plump but well-groomed fellow with a perpetually harried expression.

As for Hiram – flashing back a couple of hours – he was passing through Sto Lat on a routine inspection run when he was called into the office of the local manager – Mr Loring – and told that there's some kind of problem on the spur line to Skund, some way hubwards of here, and the Company wants him to work with some people from the Sto Lat government who are going to investigate. Loring will explain more when they meet up with these people; it's even possible that the locals have some useful information. But right now, the local government bigwig, a Mr Cutwell, wants to meet ASAP.

Once everyone settles down, Cutwell starts talking.

*"I don't know how much any of you people know about the Nation of Skund, but it may not be enough, so let's go over the basics. We all know about the **Forest** of Skund – couple of hundred miles hubwards from here, edge of the Sto Plains, typical bloomin' enchanted forest, walking talking trees, mad witches, gnomes, all that nonsense – but it's never been clear if anyone was really in charge of it. Enchanted forests tend to be too much like work. Anyhow, the main road skirts the forest to turnwise. However, there are occasional stories of an isolated sort of monarchy, on the far side of the forest, off the big travel routes.*

"Actually, I've checked the files, and it turns out that the best information we've got on the subject dates back a few years. The royal court was visited by a gentleman of the dwarf persuasion who called himself Count Giamo Casanunda, and who charmed his way in, stayed two weeks, and then left just before we received complaints from five annoyed husbands, three habitual card players, and the carpenters' guild. Anyway, while he was here, someone asked him where he received his title of nobility, and he replied that he was granted it for performing a small service for Queen Agantia of Skund. Well, Casanunda also described himself as an outrageous liar, but on the other hand, somebody did check this with the College of Heralds in Ankh-Morpork, and they confirmed it.

"I checked because a month or so ago, we received a telegraph message, supposedly from the very same Queen Agantia of Skund, and the good people at the Telegraph Company –" He nods to the other two – "authenticated its origins. The Queen declared a wish to open formal diplomatic relations with Sto Lat, and expressed a special interest in a trade deal. She apparently would like a regular supply of cabbage-based consumables, and suggests that she can offer, ah..." He consults his notes, "...High-quality mushroom-based consumables and self-motivated furniture." He shrugs. "Wood from an enchanted forest does have special properties.

"So, our policy is polite relations with anyone who wants them, and people buying our cabbages is good. So we sent an ambassador, Sir Petroc Washlink." (Some of the PCs know the name; Washlink is a competent if stodgy civil servant in the foreign office.)

*"The messages we got back from Sir Petroc along the way were routine. But then he sent a rather expensive telegram complaining at length about the cold weather, which seemed a little odd given that we're in early autumn. But we were just organising a shipment of winter-weight diplomatic service uniforms when we received another telegram, saying, quote, **Send witches spuds and money**, unquote. We replied requesting clarification, but we were informed that the spur connection to Skund was suffering service problems. So I asked Mr Loring here, the Grand Trunk's regional manager what that meant."*

Loring picks up the story with a grunt. *"What it means," he says, "is that our spur connection off the Grand Trunk line to Skund has suffered accelerating inexplicable breakdowns, and is currently out of commission.*

"I should explain that the spur was only constructed a couple of years ago. It was sponsored by, I'm told, the Monarchy of Skund, and apparently consists of a four-tower line, leading from the station at a place called Fustic Wells to what we're told is the capital of Skund, a place named Frogmallow. The government there covered almost all the costs, and the line's been moderately busy.

(Hiram can say that towers tend to be about twenty miles apart, so a four-tower spur line should be about 80 miles – but much depends on the local terrain. Both Cutwell and Loring will admit that the

lack of decent maps of this area is quite discomfiting, but Skund is an enchanted forest, so the local topography may well have been a bit unstable in the past.)

“But then, these last couple of weeks, the line has been suffering synchronisation problems. The date stamps on messages coming up the line kept being wrong, and we weren’t getting confirmation of signals going down the line. We sent a maintenance crew, and didn’t hear back from them after the first tower. So we sent a security crew, and didn’t hear anything from them at all.

“We were just deciding what to do next, when Mr Cutwell here came to us to ask about the loss of communication. So we’ve agreed on a joint response.”

Cutwell nods. *“Sir Petroc is one of our people, and a diplomat, and Sto Lat policy is to look after our own. You four are to re-establish contact with the embassy to Skund, determine their situation, and rescue them if they need rescuing, but avoid diplomatic incidents if at all possible. Establishing friendly relations with the government of Skund, if there is one, would be a bonus. Mr Frogge here will be accompanying you as a technical advisor, and you’re to bring him back in one piece. I’m sure that his orders are to get the telegraph line working again...”* (Loring nods.) *“...and please do preserve good relations between Sto Lat and the Grand Trunk Company.*

“You’ll all have seats on the fast mail coach to Fustic Wells, which takes a little less than three days I understand, and sufficient funds to get yourselves over to this Frogmallow place from there. I understand that the staff at the telegraph towers will be instructed to provide you with what assistance they can. Now, umm, any questions?”

Handle questions appropriately, but tell players that their coach will be leaving within a couple of hours – they’re all assumed to have baggage packed against such eventualities. They can also pick up reasonable special equipment on government or company accounts, if there’s anything that occurs to them; that certainly includes cold weather clothing. Hiram has staff ID that gives him free use of the telegraph system for work purposes.

Traveling to Fustic Wells

The mail coach, which leaves from Sto Lat’s central square, does indeed take just under three days to Fustic Wells. It’s not violently uncomfortable, but it’s a wooden-wheeled coach running on unpaved roads; Miss Baccarat may even prefer to travel alongside by broomstick some of the time. Captain Harquin, on the other hand, might better travel as luggage, as he’s a little disturbing to be sitting alongside.

The first day’s travel is through the relatively populous if dull cabbage-growing lands of the lower Sto Plains, with a number of very brief stops to drop off and collect mailbags, and some *slightly* longer stops to change horses – which give time for comfort breaks, but don’t take too long. Urlbind may start offering to gamble on random events out of boredom. The stop for the night is **Much Come Lately**, a small village where there’s a decent coaching inn (the Snod Bonnet) and a telegraph station if anyone thinks of any messages they want to send. The second day is more of a straight run through less densely populated country, with more cattle pastures and orchards and *slightly* fewer cabbages, with stops taking place more often at rural coaching inns and less often in villages; Urlbind will need a self-control roll not to start offering bets on numbers of cows in the next field. The stop for the night is in the hamlet of **Seven Bangs**, which has a fairly grotty inn (the Jolly Green Cabbage) and a barn where locals pickle cabbage for export.

Late in the afternoon on the next day, the coach pulls into **Fustic Wells**, another small village notable only for the sulphurous springs which produce water that isn’t appealing to drink but which

Outcrop will be assured promotes the growth of beneficial lichen on trolls, an outsize telegraph tower with three faces (Hiram will note immediately that the trailing-facing one isn't active), and an inn of sorts (the Spring Inn).

The Company staff in the telegraph station will be quite happy to meet Hiram, once he produces his identification, and will accept the others if Hiram vouches for them. They can confirm the story which the party have been given; communications down the spur line to Frogmallow started going erratic a couple of weeks ago and have now declined to uselessness. Yes, two company parties went that way, and both then dropped off communication; this is obviously worrying. If anyone asks about the nature of communications from Frogmallow, they'll note that the majority of messages from there went hubwards, to various addresses in **Zemphis** – but these were generally encrypted, with a few in clear that looked like they were using code words. (Area Knowledge (Sto Plains) at +5, which defaults to IQ+1 for most of the PCs, to recall that Zemphis is a trade town of long standing which has gained a rather sleazy reputation in recent years.) They don't know much about Skund or Frogmallow, beyond the fact that, yes, that is an enchanted forest, full of flaky witches, crazy shamans, and nervous wood-cutters. The tower also has a small repair shop, which Hiram can use if he wants to tinker with anything.

Getting more information from long-term locals, say in the Spring Inn, will require positive reactions or equivalent social skill use, which the party isn't great at; Carousing, reinforced by buying drinks, may help. Winning people's money off them in games of chance could be a mistake, unless you promptly use it to buy them lots of drinks. However, the PCs can have three goes at making a good impression, with the landlord, some rather layabout-ish types who can be encountered in the common room, and the locals who drift in as night draws in. If the PCs ask about Skund, Queen Agantia, or whatever, neutral or friendly locals will scratch their heads and agree that Skund has apparently acquired a Queen these last few years ("though I recall when she were just a marchioness!"), apparently her palace is a few days to trailing from here, and yes, the telegraph folks put some of their towers up that way. None of them have seen that palace, though; attracting attention from queens is assumed to have dangerous consequences, and they're comfortable enough as nominal vassals of the Duchess of Carrack. The local cabinet-makers and wood-turners get decent timber from some of the woodcutters that way, but it all be a trifle rustic an' full of cliched hicks, if 'e be askin' meself.

There's just a little trade passes through – the Queen seems to have set up some furniture making shops herself, and there's the occasional city type (who are of course assumed to be shady and tricky) comes through this way, and comes back a few days later with a consignment of furniture or not. The last such group passed through a bit over a week ago, and come to think of it, hasn't come back yet. But lately, woodcutters heading that way have usually come back complaining about the cold; seems like there's some cold weather set in lately, with a bitter wind keeping blowing from turnwise, all of which gets the forest wolves unhappy and hungry, so there's not been so much travel thataway. Yes, they saw the Company teams; dunno what happened to them.

If anyone asks about religion in these parts, the locals will shrug and say that Hoki the Jokester serves them well enough, but those bucolic weirdoes in the deep woods seem to base their religion on mushroom cookery – which they consider faintly disreputable, though they can't explain why.

The village isn't really big enough to run to any kind of proper shops, but the landlord at the inn has some odds and ends that travellers might use, and can point them at locals who are prepared to sell various other things they might need, such as cold weather clothing or a mule to carry their luggage.

(A Merchant skill roll will let them get better supplies cheaper.) Of course, the same locals will be even more anxious to sell them hand-turned self-mobile furniture.

Following the Spur Line

The party clearly needs to head to Frogmallow; given that they arrive late in the day, and need to sort out some gear, they'll presumably be setting out the next morning. As the telegraph towers are about twenty miles apart, along an old trade path, the best bet is surely to stop off at a tower each night, making for a four-day journey. Most of the party could in theory make better time (getting Harquin out of his armour might be necessary), but in practise, on a rough and winding track (and as it will turn out in increasingly wintry conditions), 20 miles a day is a good speed.

This implies roughly 5 hours a day of travel, and as most of the party are effectively unencumbered (especially if they have a mule along to carry their luggage), they'll lose 1 FP per hour – so breaking for 10 minutes of rest every hour will allow them to avoid serious fatigue issues at first. However, if Harquin keeps his full armour on, he'll be burning 4 FP per hour; if the group take 20 minute breaks, they can reach the end of the day with Harquin down to 1 FP and staggering, which would actually slow them down more... It might be an idea for him to shed his armour once they're out of sight of town, and put it back on just before they reach the next tower.

Of course, that disregards the effects of cold (see *Specific Starting Conditions*), but fortunately it only gets cold enough to be a significant problem on the last day of travel.

Miss Baccarat may note that she can work reconnaissance by broomstick; actually, she may calculate that she can do the whole trip solo in a day. (The warding winds will put paid to that if she tries it, of course.) She can get about half way there before the headwind becomes actively tiring to fight, with FP cost rising from 1/hour for regular flight in cool conditions to 1/30 minutes and then 1/10 minutes, while keeping the broomstick on course starts to cost her MP.

Day 1: To the First Tower

The first day goes relatively quietly; just a cool day hiking down a track that skirts the edge of a forest. Okay, the trees seem to be whispering, but they're not saying anything much worse than "Oh look, people!". If anyone tries to interrogate the trees, they'll have to waste a few minutes determining by trial and error which of them feel like talking, but they will eventually be able to strike up a conversation. The trees, however, don't have much to say; people go pass occasionally, but they don't track details. *"Though it must be nice to travel sometimes. I used to travel sometimes, but I don't anymore."* Why not? *"A lot of the time we used to travel when someone summoned us. That got boring, so when the human lady promised us we could stop being summoned, we said yes. I suppose that's why we can't move at all now."*

The trees don't know much more about the human lady (*"She... doesn't have a branch or leaves"*), and will agree if pressed that not being able to move at all is a bit boring, but they're a pretty stoic bunch.

The First Tower

Eventually, the group reaches the first semaphore tower, which has just enough room to put them up indoors. The three-person crew have adequate supplies, but may be genuinely grateful for a bit of variety if they can trade with the PCs for different rations; things are fairly routine here. They've seen both the company parties passing through, and have of course noticed that nothing has come back about them; they're rationally worried.

However, if anyone gets into a technical discussion with them over the communications problems, anyone making a Psychology roll will realise that their thought processes are a little scrambled, and they're surprisingly slow to grasp that the problem involves date and time stamps.

Day 2: Wolf Attack

On the second day, the PCs will note that the temperature is a little colder, and about halfway through the day they suffer a narratively necessary encounter with a small wolf pack (numbering one less than the size of the PC group). Characters get to make an Observation roll at +2 (so the default roll is Per-2); the party then get rounds to prepare equal to the largest margin of success. If everyone fails, the wolves get *surprise*; they surge from the undergrowth a half-move away, and can make All-Out Attacks. PCs with Combat Reflexes can defend themselves; everybody else has to Do Nothing that turn and must make an IQ roll at the start of a turn before they can start acting. Also, Miss Baccarat gets an IQ+Magery roll at -3 to get a sense that this is a bit too much of a storybook event.

The wolves are mostly just *hungry*, at a storybook sort of level. They mostly attack normally; if they take an injury, their next action is an All-Out Defence.

Wolves: ST 10, DX 12, IQ 4, HT 12, Will 11, Per 14

Speed 6.00, Move 9, SM 0, Dodge 9, DR 1

Bite (14): 1d-2 cut, Reach C

Discriminatory Smell, Night Vision 2, Temperature Tolerance 1 (Cold), Ultrahearing

Brawling-14, Tracking-14

1: HP: 10

2: HP: 10

3: HP: 10

4: HP: 10

The Second Tower

The second telegraph tower is similar in design to the first, but the crew there are holed up and scared. Also, they already have one visitor; a member of the maintenance crew who came through a week or so ago. They were attacked by wolves just a little further on, and this guy seems to be the only survivor. He made it back to the tower, and is slowly recovering from a couple of wolf bites. The armed crew that followed a few days later left some medical supplies and carried on; there's no further news of them.

The tower crew are deeply confused by the situation, and get even more confused if anyone tries to discuss the technical problems with them. If anyone made the Psychology roll at the last tower, it's clear that they're running an even worse case of temporal confusion; if not, a roll here at +2 picks up the problem.

Day 3: The Shaman and the Mushroom Grove

The temperature on the third day of travel is colder again. PCs may be nervous of wolves, but a few miles on, they'll discover a scuffled and bloody area and the remains of three dead wolves, dragged to the side of the track; the security crew actually dealt with the pack, and any remnants now regard humans as too much trouble, despite their hunger. The ghost of one of the maintenance crew might be summoned around here, but can only confirm the story so far – and add that he's no expert, but he thinks that the timing problems round here are even worse on the spirit plane than in the material world. Time-synchronised signalling doesn't work so well when time has been messed

about with, and the looping and twisting is even worse in the direction where the party are heading. It's up to them, but hey, maybe that's what the party should be looking at.

Later in the day, though, the party will have another encounter. There's a small hut beside the track, with a *sort of* garden, surrounded by a low fence. This is slightly enchanted – a small spell to keep wildlife out of the garden. A glance shows that the garden is full of mushrooms and toadstools of varying sizes and colours, clearly being managed but not very tidily. After a few moments, a wild-eyed fellow in a rough robe, with straggly hair and beard, emerges from the hut and says hello.

This is **Robshadow**, a shaman. If he's asked why he has a garden full of mushrooms, he'll say that they're useful to help him "contact the spirits", but Naturalist roll (default IQ-6), while confirming that pretty much every shroom in this garden has *interesting* properties, will suggest that there's enough stuff here to keep someone's consciousness as elevated as a kite for months – and while Robshadow seems to be having a little difficulty keeping his eyes pointed the same way, he's not too far gone.

Pressing him on this point will soon make him shrug and sigh; he doesn't realise that there's any need for secrecy, he's just a bit embarrassed at having sold out. *"Okay. We've got a deal going with The Man. Or with The Woman, I guess you'd say. She was setting up with the big crown thing, and she said that she wouldn't harsh our mellow so long as we didn't harsh hers. It was cool. Then she said that there was stuff she could do with the shrooms, and we were the experts, so maybe she could steer some supplies our way, save us from having to worry about the munchies while we were making contact with the great spirits of the woods. She even rigged the fence so that animals wouldn't get in*

"But hey, don't tell anyone, please. Kind of embarrassing, having a deal going with the breadheads..."

He's generally harmless and genuinely a shaman. If the party don't mind running a little late, he'll even conduct a communion with the local spirits at their request. He hasn't done this for a while, and will be even more embarrassed when the Big Green Dude of the Trees shows up and starts complaining, in a whiny petulant tone, about the witch-woman who's making a mess of the etheric plane locally. The Big Green Dude doesn't actually understand what's happening – it's mostly just interested in trees – but it might be induced to show up again later if it can help fix this problem. It'll whisper its secret name in Miss Baccarat's ear and tell her what mushroom to eat; then, she just needs to make a straight Summonation roll and spend 1 MP to call it. Oh, and she'll need a HT roll at -2 to avoid hallucinating like crazy for several minutes.

The Third Tower

The crew in the third tower will greet the party okay, but they're not in a good state. They're confused about times and dates, which is stopping them looking after themselves properly; they have fair food supplies, but a Housekeeping roll would help them hang in there until this problem is (hopefully) solved. They can, with a little effort, recall that the Company security crew came through and moved on towards Frogmallow.

Day 4: The Village

The next day involves a trek through an unseasonable, wintery landscape. A little while after they set out, the wind picks up enough to inflict *Extreme Cold*; HT rolls at -3 or lose 1 FP, *Cold Resistance* or *Temperature Tolerance 1* or *2* negate the -3, *Temperature Tolerance 3* ignores the problem, and Troll Brains get +2 IQ for the few minutes while the wind lasts. It's all a bit bleak, but there's no more wolf attacks along the way; it really may be too cold for dangerous wildlife, and even the trees seem to have stopped whispering. However, the last couple of hours of travel involve *Freezing* temperatures

(roll vs. HT every 30 minutes or lose 1 FP, arctic gear gives +5, Temperature Tolerance negates) – so that’s four rolls each. So, late in the day, a tired and doubtless nervous party arrive in the village.

Frogmallow is about half a mile from the Tower, which is visible in the distance through the cold mist, and clearly bigger and shinier and spikier than one might expect in such a backwoods area. When they arrive, a few villagers are out and about, or peer at them through windows; they look thin and drawn, though they can manage a little bit of interest and even hope.

People and Things in Frogmallow

The villagers are pinch-faced and hungry, as they’re working through the last of their food stores. If they’re asked what’s going on in these parts, they mumble about unseasonable weather, and being willing to trade for supplies, and the queen organising emergency supplies from outside, and are the new visitors here about that? They can pay... But they’re strangely vague about how long this has been going on, and just shrug off any suggestions about leaving the area, let alone evacuating *en masse*.

The PCs won’t be caught up in the time loop immediately, but at the end of every day they’re there, they must make a Will roll; every time they fail, they’re at -3 to the next roll, and when their effective roll falls below 3, they’re stuck in the loop. Outside of houses, conditions are *Extreme Cold*; HT rolls every 30 minutes at -3 or lose 1 FP, *Cold Resistance* or *Temperature Tolerance 1 or 2* negate the -3, *Temperature Tolerance 3* ignores the problem, and Troll Brains get +2 IQ.

Frogmallow is actually quite well-appointed for a small village, and not just because it has a semaphore terminal tower, a couple of substantial (if currently inactive) woodworking shops, and a couple of warehouses that may be explained to outsiders as holding self-mobilising furniture prior to shipment, but which actually also hold quite a lot of dried hallucinogenic fungus in bales. However, the obvious first place for the PCs to go is the inn, which perhaps worryingly turns out to be called the Winter Queen and has a sign showing a queen in a glittery crown and a fur robe. Inside, various people are sitting in huddled groups around a fire that isn’t quite as large as the weather might demand. The innkeeper scurries over nervously and asks what he can do for these good people; he can manage a couple of rooms.

The people round the fire fall into three groups:

1. The ambassador (**Sir Petroc Washlink**) and his two aides, **Gervaise** and **Henrietta**. He’s happy to see the PCs, assuming them to be his security detail, but all three of the diplomats are a bit vague what’s going on here. *“This Queen doesn’t have much of a clue about diplomatic niceties. She’s supposed to be accepting me credentials some time. I can see why she’s asking for a trade agreement, though. This place could use a few cartloads of cabbages.”* The “witches spuds and money” telegram actually came from Gervaise, who’s realised that this is a supernatural problem and will say as much quietly to the PCs out of Sir Petroc’s hearing; he’s out of his depth, but worried.
2. The clacks company security crew: **Jim**, **Jimbo**, **Jaxie the Spanner**, and **Big Jamie**. They’re a competent bunch for normal purposes, but they were exhausted and freaked out when they first arrived, and focused hard on fixing the semaphore system, which made Jim, the team leader, especially vulnerable to getting trapped in the narrative loop; he and Jaxie are now completely locked in, taking the roles of mechanics who are always finding new things to tweak and ideas to try, and they should have the tower back up and running tomorrow, or maybe the day after at latest. The other two are slipping that way, although if the PCs try to talk them back around, Big Jamie will make uncertain attempts to support the attempt, and

Jimbo will quietly take a handy PC aside, and say he doesn't like what's happening here, and the meals in the inn keep shrinking, and his brain seems to be filling up with cold fog, and is there a way to fix it?

3. The goons from Zemphis: **Polite Words Freddo, Camel-Face Chas, and Habar the Knife.** They're thoroughly locked into the time loop, and the mental contortions this involves has trashed any capacity they ever had for subtlety; they lounge around in front of the fire, swords impolitely close to hand, taking sips at what inspection would prove to be empty beer mugs. Streetwise is a good skill to use in dealing with them; they're also susceptible to Carousing, and will accept Gambling challenges, though winning much off them could be dangerous. They're pretty unsubtle once they get talking; they're here to have a little chat with "Her Majesty" (the quotation marks are audible) about some financial arrangements. Because, y'see, them and their business associates are in the delicacies importation trade, and there are credit arrangements in that line of business, and everyone understands them and knows that you don't just go asking for faster payment out of the blue... Anyhows, they've got here lately, and got an idea of the lie of the land, and they'll be heading up to the castle for their chat... Tomorrow. Yeah, definitely tomorrow.

It's entirely possible that the PCs will end up in violent conflict with the goons at some point, so they need stats:

Zemphis Goons: ST 12, DX 11, IQ 10, HT 10, Will 10, Per 10

Speed 5.25, Move 5, SM 0, Dodge 9, DR 1 (leathers)

Punch (12): 1d-2 cr, Reach C, Parry 10 (once with each hand, -3 vs non-thrusting weapons)

Knife (12): 1d-1 cut, Reach C, Parry 9

Sword (12): 1d+2 cut, Reach 1, Parry 10

Combat Reflexes

Brawling-12, Gambling-11, Games (Craps *and* Cripple Mr Onion)-11, Intimidation-13, Knife-12, Shortsword-12, Streetwise-12

Freddo: IQ, Will and Per 11, Streetwise-14, Mercant-10. HP: 12

Chas: ST & HP 14, Punch 1d-1 cr, Knife 2d-3 cut, Sword 2d cut. HP: 14

Habar: DX 12, Speed 5.5, Fast-Draw (Knife)-13, Brawling-13, Knife-13, Shortsword-13, Thrown Weapon (Knife)-12. Carries three knives, and can throw up to two for 1d-2 imp. HP: 12

The PCs will probably also visit the semaphore tower, where they'll find the three crew members repetitively moving paperwork around. They're very glad to see assistance from the Company, and hope that this temporary glitch can be fixed soon; apart from anything else, with this unseasonable cold snap, they've had problems acquiring enough supplies locally – could Mr Frogge perhaps help expedite an order for extra rations?

Hopefully, the PCs will have taken the hint by now; this problem needs fixing, and the glittery ice castle about a half mile away looks like the epicentre of the problem.

A Brush with Death

Assuming that Miss Baccarat is present when the party head towards the tower, they have one encounter along the way, just before they get there. Cresting a slight rise in the ground, she notes a hooded figure sitting on a rock, apparently gazing at the tower. The other PCs don't see anything, or at least nothing important, though they won't see any reason to object if Miss Baccarat chooses to stop and talk to nobody much. They might see it as humouring her.

The figure has a scythe lying at his feet, and looks up with a bony smile if approached. "OH HELLO," he says. "YOU'RE HERE TO INVESTIGATE."

Death will be quite amicable, but won't give much away unless prompted in a way that suggests the PCs are just confirming what they know; there are *rules* about these things. If asked what he's looking at or why he's just sitting around, he raises a bony finger and extends it towards the tower. Space visibly contorts where he's poking, and his arm bounces back. "IT'S ONE OF THOSE THINGS PEOPLE TRY OCCASIONALLY. QUITE INGENIOUS, REALLY."

Why can't he get in? "THERE IS NOTHING DYING WITHIN THAT SPACE. WELL, NOT FOR NOW, ANYWAY."

If anyone mentions time loops: "YES. A TWIST IN TIME. AT THE VERY CENTRE, IT MUST BE TWISTED INTO A CLOSED CIRCLE. IF IT GOES ON MUCH LONGER, SOMETHING WILL HAVE TO GIVE WAY. THAT WILL BE MESSY."

If anyone mentions stories: "YES. HUMANS DIE, BUT THEIR STORIES LAST A LITTLE LONGER. SNOW QUEENS AND ICE PRINCESSES AND SO FORTH. ALWAYS SHOWING UP IN NEW SHAPES. PEOPLE CAN NEVER LET IT GO. AND ICE IS A GREAT PRESERVATIVE."

And so on. Improvise replies as necessary.

The Tower

The tower may be made of rock crystal with a rich blue tint, or it may be made of ice; there's no easy way to determine, and the walls are dangerously cold to the touch. It's too frosty and glittery to see inside, though. The front door is unlocked.

Inside, the place turns out to be mostly a vast hollow space, dominated by a great flat-topped mound of sheer, smooth, transparent ice about 40' high. There are three things to note:

1. A door to one side, leading into a smaller stone-built section of the building.
2. Buried within the ice mound, a tiny cottage, built of some tawny brown material. Its roof seems to be made of tiles of the same material. *[This is of course Agantia's original gingerbread cottage; as it's a witch's place of power, she had to incorporate it into this new and greater structure.]*
3. A figure in some kind of swirling white robe or dress can be glimpsed at the top of the mound, though they keep moving out of sight. Distant notes of ... orchestral music? ... echo down from up there. This is of course Queen Agantia, her hair glittering ice-white, her pale skin subtly tinged with blue. Reaching her means ascending a steep slope of sheet ice, absent special climbing equipment... Well, no chance, really.

Gate Scan castings inside this place will likely give any observers a migraine. Reality is being badly stressed.

Oh, and the temperature inside the castle is an extreme version of *Intolerable Cold* (p. 191); HT roll every *minute* at -6 or lose 1 FP, *Temperature Tolerance* 2 turns the -6 to -3, and *Temperature Tolerance* 3 negates the problem. Troll Brains get +3 IQ – encourage roleplaying there.

Now it's up to the PCs to deal with the situation. They can try calling up to Agantia, and she'll reply (in a pleasant soprano voice); "Hello – can you help me?" She'll even start discussing things with them helpfully, but after a few seconds, she spins around, there's a huge flurry of ice crystals, and she starts over; "Hello – can you help me?" She's in a *bad* time loop up there.

Getting up there is a problem, of course. Flying up magically is simply not an option; the temporal distortion plays havoc with energetic magic, and a DX roll will be required to avoid a crash for 1d-2

crushing damage. Climbing sheer ice would be *difficult* without special equipment, even if any of the PCs had the skill. Sending Hiram back to the village blacksmith to improvise some pitons is a possibility, though obviously it'd take a few hours and the ascent would likely involve some FP loss to the cold. Firing missiles anywhere near Agantia triggers the defensive aspect of the time loop; they spin round here a few times and then hurtle back at the shooter; fortunately, the law of comic inevitability means that they nick his ear and embed in the wall.

Perhaps the party can find something around the castle?

The Kitchen

Opening the side door reveals a remarkably ordinary-looking kitchen, with another door in the opposite wall. Weirdly enough, it's merely *chilly* in here, giving the PCs somewhere they can withdraw to recover from the cold. Poking around discovers a large cooking pot with the very last remains of a mushroom stew in the bottom; there's also an empty wine bottle by the side. Alchemy, Carousing at -2, or Housekeeping at -2 will recognise the label; this is Lezek Estate Wine, made from re-annual grapes, which grow backwards through time. Making a stew with this stuff and hallucinogenic mushrooms may be considered a *brave* experiment. (Agantia was trying to attain a sufficient level of mystic consciousness to take control over her own story. It didn't work quite right.) Any PC talking about trying any of the stew gets a weird migraine headache.

Rummaging in the cupboards finds all sorts of stuff, though most of it is quite mundane. A Housekeeping roll at +3 (i.e. IQ at -1) finds one item of real usefulness; a small jar of Klatchian coffee beans, along with the wherewithal to grind them and make up the coffee. An IQ-based Carousing roll at +4 (i.e. a straight IQ roll for those without the skill) identifies this as a chancy but potent cure for inebriation; it grants brutally clear insights into reality. Introducing this stuff to Agantia might be a good idea. Cruel, but good. The GM might also take the opportunity to allow the PCs to find a flying broomstick, especially if Miss Baccarat doesn't have hers with her for some reason.

It's just possible that starting a fire and heating up some knives from the kitchen drawers would turn them into useful ice-climbing implements. Allow this if all else fails.

The Thing in the Basement

Opening that other door shows that it gives access to the cellar; there are steps leading down, and PCs may decide to go have a look. They'll find the space illuminated by generic luminous fungi™, and divided into two by a set of bars; a key to the padlock which holds the "cell" door closed hangs on a nail by the entrance. The occupant of the "cell" is, rather bemusingly, perched on a slightly projecting stone seven feet up the wall, working its jaws slowly; it fixes visitors with five disturbingly pensive gazes. It is, in fact, a five-headed goat.

A Naturalist roll at -1 (i.e. IQ-7) identifies this as the famous Five-Headed Vampire Goat of Skund, generally believed to be an endangered species because, let's face it, a five-headed vampire goat is born to be a heroic monster-slayer magnet. Even if nobody recognises it, anyone studying it for a few moments gets a Per+1 roll to notice the disturbing fangs, and noticing those allows a re-roll on the recognition attempt. It's obviously an excellent climber; the stories about the species confirm that. Perhaps it could get up the ice mound? Yes, in fact it could, but how does one persuade it to do so, let alone do so with a rider? (Getting it possessed by a friendly spirit is one possibility.)

Five-Headed Vampire Goat: ST 15, DX 11, IQ 5, HT 12, Will 11, Per 12

Speed 6.00, Move 7, SM 1, Dodge 8, DR 2

Bite (13): 1d+1 cut, Reach C. It can bite five times/turn, of course, but no more than three times against any single opponent

Slam (13): Runs straight into the opponent; cannot defend on the same turn, Does 1d+1 crushing, and the opponent must win a quick contest of ST or be knocked down.

Bad Temper (9), Night Vision 4, Temperature Tolerance 1 (Cold)

Brawling-13

HP: 15

Options

The trick is to shut down Agantia's time loop, which may mean shutting down Agantia, though a dose of Klatchian coffee would also do the trick – dousing her with a jug full would be enough, as she'd inevitably inhale some, and get her head back in contact with reality. Dispelling the effect isn't an option; even given somebody with a lot of power with Magianism, you'd be running head-on into a massive narrative-based working.

Actually hurting her is tricky, though; you have to get through the closed time loops and ice queen mythic significance she's got wrapped around herself. Landing an attack on her requires an IQ-2 roll to adjust for the headache-inducing weirdness of space in her immediate vicinity as well as a standard attack; she effectively has Move 5.50, Dodge 12, 10 HP, and HT 12, and the attacker takes 1d-2 burning damage on contact – halved if they immediately drop their weapon. Meanwhile, she'll be draining an automatic 1d FP from each opponent each turn (a cold effect)

Pushing her off the top of the mound would actually separate her from the centre of the enchantment and break the effect as well as doing her 3d+1 crushing damage from the fall. Treat this as a *Grapple and Pin* (p. 183); of course, the contact would do the above 1d-2 burning, and the FP drain would be ongoing. However, any PCs atop the mound would need to make a DX roll or take the same fall. A related possibility that PCs might try would be an explosion adjacent to her, and actually, that should work; damage aside, she gets a DX roll at -1 for every 3 points of damage she suffers not to be blasted away from the centre of the distortion and break her link to it. A vampire goat slam would probably be the best way of achieving the desirable result.

Other than all that – well, let the PCs come up with their own ideas and try them out. The only way to communicate with her usefully would be to get inside the time loop with her, which would require a Will roll at -2 and cause *Intolerable Cold* effects on the victim *every turn*, but perhaps Outcrop or Harquin could survive this okay. They then have to find some way to reconnect her to reality; okay, being punched by a troll could accomplish this...

Optionally, if Miss Baccarat is on or near the mound when the effect is broken, she gets a Magic roll to influence how time comes back into alignment. Improvise! The smart move is to make the village's potato crop flourish, but players may have their own ideas.

If anyone (including Agantia) does get killed, though, they will of course be picked up by Death. The aftermath of the dimensional chaos will allow everyone to observe this. Death and the deceased will ride off into the realms of the dead. *"BE SEEING YOU..."*

Resolutions

All this leaves a bit to clear up, though. The telegraph system will come back online soon enough, marked by green flares going up from the nearest towers. Sending a message out requesting urgent emergency famine relief for the village should be a high priority, unless Miss Baccarat has solved that problem as above. Sir Petroc can get onto the case, and may be confused and in need of suggestions from PCs; this one can be pitched as a triumph for Sto Lat foreign policy if it's handled cleverly. Also note that with the magical effect broken, Miss Baccarat (and anybody else) is free to get in and out of the area by broomstick. A bit of medical aid might also be desirable.

If the session has run short on time, the PCs might get a final confrontation with the drug-dealing goons from Zemphis, who'll develop sleazy ideas about taking over the local shroom-growing industry. For that matter, somebody is likely going to pick up control of the area if Agantia is gone, and if she isn't, she'll be facing a distinctly disaffected (and hungry) population; the players might even throw in some ideas about how the place should be run.