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BUNDERWAL EXPLAINED THE WAGER

"It is so simple as to be embarrassing. The door yonder leads out to the urinal. Look about the room; select a champion. I will do likewise. Whichever champion is last to patronize the urinal wins the game for his sponsor."

"The contest seems fair," said Cugel.

The two champions seemed in no hurry; they paused to comment upon the mildness of the night, then, almost in synchrony, went to the trough. Cugel and Bunderwal followed, one to each side, and made ready to render judgment.

The two champions prepared to relieve themselves. Cugel's champion, glancing to the side, noticed the quality of Cugel's attention, and instantly became indignant. "What are you looking at? Landlord! Out here at once! Call the Night-guards!"

Cugel tried to explain. "Sir, the situation is not as you think! Bunderwal will verify the case! Bunderwal?"

A BAEN BOOK

CUGEL'S SAGA

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CHAPTER I FROM SHANGLESTONE STRAND TO SASKERVOY

1 FLUTIC

IUCOUNU (known across Almetry as 'the Laughing Magician') had worked one of his most mordant jokes upon Cugel. For the second time Cugel had been snatched up, carried north across the Ocean of Sighs, dropped upon that melancholy beach known as Shanglestone Strand.

Rising to his feet, Cugel brushed sand from his cloak and adjusted his hat.

He stood not twenty yards from that spot upon which he had been dropped before, also at the behest of Iucounu. He carried no sword and his pouch contained no terces.

The solitude was absolute. No sound could be heard but the sigh of the wind along the dunes. Far to the east a dim headland thrust into the water, as did another, equally remote, to the west. To the south spread the sea, empty except for the reflection of the old red sun.

Cugel's frozen faculties began to thaw, and a whole set of emotions, one after the other, made themselves felt, with fury taking precedence over all.

Iucounu would now be enjoying his joke to the fullest. Cugel raised his fist high and shook it toward the south, "Iucounu, at last you have exceeded yourself! This time you will pay the price! I, Cugel, appoint myself your nemesis!"

For a period Cugel strode back and forth, shouting and cursing: a person long of arm and leg, with lank black hair, gaunt cheeks, and a crooked mouth of great flexibility. The time was middle afternoon, and the sun, already halfway into the west, tottered down the sky like a sick animal. Cugel, who was nothing if not practical, decided to postpone the remainder of his tirade; more urgent was lodging for the night. Cugel called down a final curse of pulsing carbuncles upon Iucounu, then, picking his way across the shingle, he climbed to the crest of a dune and looked in all directions.

To the north a succession of marshes and huddles of black larch straggled away into the murk.

To the east Cugel gave only a cursory glance. Here were the villages Smolod and Grodz, and memories were long in the Land of Cutz.

To the south, languid and listless, the ocean extended to the horizon and beyond.

To the west, the shore stretched far to meet a line of low hills which,

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thrusting into the sea, became a headland. ... A red glitter flashed across the distance, and Cugel's attention was instantly attracted.

Such a red sparkle could only signify sunlight reflecting from glass!

Cugel marked the position of the glitter, which faded from view as the sunlight shifted. He slid down the face of the dune and set off at best speed along the beach.

The sun dropped behind the headland; gray-lavender gloom fell across the beach. An arm of that vast forest known as The Great Erm edged down from the north, suggesting a number of eery possibilities, and Cugel accelerated his pace to a striding bent-kneed lope.

The hills loomed black against the sky, but no sign of habitation appeared.

Cugel's spirits sagged low. He proceeded more slowly, searching the landscape with care, and at last, to his great satisfaction, he came upon a large and elaborate manse of archaic design, shrouded behind the trees of an untidy garden. The lower windows glowed with amber light: a cheerful sight for the benighted wanderer.

Cugel turned briskly aside and approached the manse, putting by his usual precautions of surveillance and perhaps peering through the windows, especially in view of two white shapes at the edge of the forest which quietly moved back into the shadows as he turned to stare.

Cugel marched to the door and tugged smartly at the bell-chain. From within came the sound of a far gong.

A moment passed. Cugel looked nervously over his shoulder, and again pulled at the chain. Finally he heard slow steps approaching from within.

The door opened and a pinch-faced old man, thin, pale, and stoop-shouldered, looked through the crack.

Cugel used the suave tones of gentility, "Good evening! What is this handsome old place, may I ask?"

The old man responded without cordiality: "Sir, this is Flutic, where Master Twango keeps residence. What is your business?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," said Cugel airily. "I am a traveler, and I seem to have lost my way. I will therefore trespass upon Master Twango's hospitality for the night, if I may."

"Quite impossible. From which direction do you come?"

"From the east."

"Then continue along the road, through the forest and over the hill, to Saskervoy. You will find lodging to meet your needs at the Inn of Blue Lamps."

"It is too far, and in any event robbers have stolen my money."

"You will find small comfort here; Master Twango gives short shrift to

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indigents." The old man started to close the door, but Cugel put his foot into the aperture.

"Wait! I noticed two white Chapes at the edge of the forest, and I dare go no farther tonight!"

"In this regard, I can advise you," said the old man. "The creatures are probably rostgoblers, or 'hyperborean sloths', if you prefer the term. Return to the beach and wade ten feet into the water; you will be safe from their lust.

Then tomorrow you may proceed to Saskervoy."

The door closed. Cugel looked anxiously over his shoulder. At the entrance to the garden, where heavy yews flanked the walk, he glimpsed a pair of still white forms. Cugel turned back to the door and jerked hard at the bell-chain.

Slow steps padded across the floor, and once again the door opened. The old man looked out. "Sir?"

"The ghouls are now in the garden! They block the way to the beach!"

The old man opened his mouth to speak, then blinked as a new concept entered his mind. He tilted his head and spoke craftily. "You have no funds?"

"I carry not so much as a groat."

"Well then; are you disposed toward employment?"

"Certainly, if I survive the night!"

"In that case, you are in luck! Master Twango can offer employment to a willing worker." The old man threw open the door and Cugel gratefully entered the manse.

With an almost exuberant flourish the old man closed the door. "Come, I will take you to Master Twango, and you can discuss the particulars of your employment: How do you choose to be announced?"

"I am Cugel."

"This way then! You will be pleased with the opportunities! . . . Are you coming? At Flutic we are brisk!"

Despite all, Cugel held back. "Tell me something of the employment! I am, after all, a person of quality, and I do not turn my hand to everything."

"No fear! Master Twango will accord you every distinction. Ah, Cugel, you will be a happy man! If only I were young again! This way, if you please."

Cugel still held back. "First things first! I am tired and somewhat the worse for travel. Before I confer with Master Twango I would like to refresh myself and perhaps take a bite-or two of nourishment. In fact, let us wait until tomorrow morning, when I will make a far better impression."

The old man demurred. "At Flutic all is exact, and every jot balances against a corresponding tittle. To whose account would I charge your refreshment? To

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Gark? To Gookin? To Master Twango himself? Absurd. Inevitably the consumption would fall against the account of Weamish, which is to say, myself. Never! My account at last is clear, and I propose to retire."

"I understand nothing of this," grumbled Cugel.

"Ah, but you will! Come now: to Twango!"

With poor grace Cugel followed Weamish into a chamber of many shelves and cases: a repository of curios, to judge by the articles on display.

"Wait here a single moment!" said Weamish and hopped on spindly legs from the room.

Cugel walked here and there, inspecting the curios and estimating their value. Strange to find such objects in a place so remote! He bent to examine a pair of small quasi-human grotesques rendered in exact detail. Craftsmanship at its most superb! thought Cugel.

Weamish returned. "Twango will see you shortly. Meanwhile he offers for your personal regalement this cup of vervain tea, together with these two nutritious wafers, at no charge."

Cugel drank the tea and devoured the wafers. "Twango's act of hospitality, though largely symbolic, does him credit." He indicated the cabinets. "All this is Twango's personal collection?"

"Just so. Before his present occupation he dealt widely in such goods."

"His tastes are bizarre, even peculiar."

Weamish raised his white eyebrows. "As to that I cannot say. It all seems ordinary enough to me."

"Not really," said Cugel. He indicated the pair of grotesques. "For instance, I have seldom seen objects so studiously repulsive as this pair of bibelots.

Skillfully done, agreed! Notice the detail in these horrid little ears! The snouts, the fangs: the malignance is almost real! Still, they are undeniably the work of a diseased imagination."

The objects reared erect. One of them spoke in a rasping voice: "No doubt Cugel has good reason for his unkind words; still, neither Gark nor I can take them lightly."

The other also spoke: "Such remarks carry a sting! Cugel has a feckless tongue." Both bounded from the room.

Weamish spoke in reproach. "You have offended both Gark and Gookin, who came only to guard Twango's valuables from pilferage. But what is done is done. Come; we will go to Master Twango."

Weamish took Cugel to a large workroom, furnished with a dozen tables piled with ledgers, crates and various oddments. Gark and Gookin, wearing smart long-billed caps of red and blue respectively, glared at Cugel from a

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bench. At an enormous desk sat Twango, who was short and corpulent, with a small chin, a dainty mouth and a bald pate surrounded by varnished black curls. Under his chin hung a faddish little goatee.

Upon the entrance of Cugel and Weamish, Twango swung around in his chair. "Aha, Weamish! This gentleman, so I am told, is Cugel. Welcome, Cugel, to Flutic!"

Cugel doffed his hat and bowed. "Sir, I am grateful for your hospitality on this dark night."

Twango arranged the papers on his desk and appraised Cugel from the corner of his eye. He indicated a chair. "Be seated, if you will. Weamish tells me that you might be inclined to employment, under certain circumstances."

Cugel nodded graciously. "I will be pleased to consider any post for which I am qualified, and which offers an appropriate compensation."

Weamish called from the side: "Just so! Conditions at Flutic are always optimum and

at worst meticulous."

Twango coughed and chuckled. "Dear old Weamish! We have had a long association! But now our accounts are settled and he wishes to retire. Am I correct in this, Weamish?"

"You are, in every last syllable!"

Cugel made a delicate suggestion: "Perhaps you will describe the various levels of employment available and their corresponding perquisites. Then, after analysis, I will be able to indicate how best I can serve you."

Weamish cried out: "A wise request! Good thinking, Cugel! You will do well at Flutic, or I am much deceived."

Twango again straightened the papers on his desk. "My business is simple at its basis. I exhume and refurbish treasures of the past. I then survey, pack, and sell them to a shipping agent of Saskervoy, who delivers them to their ultimate consignee, who, so I understand, is a prominent magician of Alмеры. If I shape each phase of the operation to its best efficiency — Weamish, in a spirit of jocularly, used the word 'meticulous' — I sometimes turn a small profit."

"I am acquainted with Alмеры," said Cugel. "Who is the magician?"

Twango chuckled. "Soldinck the shipping agent refuses to release this information, so that I will not sell direct at double profit. But from other sources I learn that the consignee is a certain Iucounu of Pergolo. . . .Cugel, did you speak?"

Cugel smilingly touched his abdomen. "An eructation only. I usually dine at this time. What of your own meal? Should we not continue our discussion over the evening repast?"

"All in good time," said Twango. "Now then, to continue. Weamish has long supervised my archaeological operations, and his position now becomes open.

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Is the name 'Sadlark' known to you?"

"Candidly, no."

"Then for a moment I must digress. During the Cutz Wars of the Eighteenth Aeon, the demon Underherd interfered with the overworld, so that Sadlark descended to set matters right. For reasons obscure — I personally suspect simple vertigo — Sadlark plunged into the mire, creating a pit now found in my own back garden. Sadlark's scales persist to this day, and these are the treasures which we recover from the slime."

"You are fortunate in that the pit is so close to your residence," said Cugel.

"Efficiency is thereby augmented."

Twango tried to follow Cugel's reasoning, then gave up the effort. "True." He pointed to a nearby table. "There stands a reconstruction of Sadlark in miniature!"

Cugel went to inspect the model, which had been formed by attaching a large number of silver flakes to a matrix of silver wires. The sleek torso stood on a pair of short legs terminating in circular webs. Sadlark lacked a head; the torso rose smoothly to a prow-like turret, fronted by a particularly complex scale with a red node at the center. Four arms hung from the upper torso; neither sense organs nor digestive apparatus were evident, and Cugel pointed out this fact to Twango as a matter of curiosity.

"Yes, no doubt," said Twango. "Things are done differently in the overworld."

Like the model, Sadlark was constructed of scales on a matrix not of silver wires but wefts of force. When Sadlark plunged into the mire, the dampness annulled his forces; the scales dispersed and Sadlark became disorganized, which is the overworld equivalent of mortality."

"A pity," said Cugel, returning to his seat. "His conduct from the first would seem to have been quixotic."

"Possibly true," said Twango. "His motives are difficult to assess. Now, as to our own business: Weamish is leaving our little group and his post as

'supervisor of operations' becomes open. Is such a position within your capacity?"

"I should certainly think; so," said Cugel. "Buried valuables have long engaged my interest!"

"Then the position should suit you famously!"

"And my stipend?"

"It shall be exactly that of Weamish, even though Weamish is a skilled and able associate of many years. In such cases, I play no favorites."

"In round numbers, then, Weamish earns how many terces?"

"I prefer to keep such matters confidential," said Twango, "but Weamish, so I believe, will allow me to reveal that last week he earned almost three hundred

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terces, and the week before as much again."

"True, from first to last!" said Weamish.

Cugel rubbed his chin. "Such a stipend would seem adequate to my needs."

"Just so," said Twango. "When can you assume your duties?"

Cugel considered for only a moment. "At once, for purposes of salary computation. However, I will want a few days to study your operation. I assume that you can provide me adequate board and lodging over this period?"

"Such facilities are provided at a nominal cost." Twango rose to his feet. "But I keep you talking when you are surely tired and hungry. Weamish, as his last official duty, will take you to the refectory, where you may dine to your selection. Then you may rest in whatever style of accomodation you find congenial. Cugel, I welcome you into our employ! In the morning we can; settle the details of your compensation."

"Come!" cried Weamish. "To the refectory." He ran limping to the doorway, where he paused and beckoned. "Come along, Cugel! At Flutic one seldom loiters!"

Cugel looked at Twango. "Why is Weamish so animated, and why must one never loiter?"

Twango shook his head in fond bemusement. "Weamish is a nonpareil! Do not try to match his performance; I could never hope to find another like him!"

Weamish called again: "Come, Cugel! Must we stand here while the sun goes out?"

"I am coming, but I refuse to run blindly through this long dark corridor!"

"This way, then: after me!"

Cugel followed Weamish to the refectory: a hall with tables to one side and a buffet loaded with viands to the other. Two men sat dining. The first, a person large and thick-necked with a florid complexion, a tumble of blond curls and a surly expression, ate broad beans and bread. The second, who was as lean as a lizard, with a dark leathery skin, a narrow bony face and coarse black hair, consumed a meal no less austere, of steamed kale, with a wedge of raw onion for savor.

Cugel's attention, however, focused on the buffet. He turned to Weamish in wonder. "Does Twango always provide such a bounty of delicacies?"

Weamish responded in a disinterested fashion. "Yes, this is usually the case."

"The two men yonder: who are they?"

"To the left sits Yelleg; the other is Malser. They comprise the work-force which you will supervise."

"Only two? I expected a larger crew."

"You will find that these two suffice."

"For workmen, their appetites are remarkably moderate."

Weamish glanced indifferently across the room. "So it would seem. What of yourself: how will you dine?"

Cugel went to inspect the buffet at closer range. "I will start with a dish of these smoked oil-fish, and a salad of pepper-leaf. Then this roast fowl seems eminently edible, and I will try a cut off the rare end of the joint. . . . The garnishes are nicely turned out. Finally, a few of these pastries and a flask of the Violet Mendolence: this should suffice. No question but what Twango does well by his employees!"

Cugel arranged a tray with viands of quality, while Weamish took only a small dish of boiled burdock leaves. Cugel asked in wonder: "Is that paltry meal adequate to your appetite?"

Weamish frowned down at his dish. "It is admittedly a trifle spare. I find that an over-rich diet reduces my zeal."

Cugel laughed confidently. "I intend to innovate a program of rational operations, and this frantic harum-scarum zeal of yours, with all shirt-tails flying, will become unnecessary." Weamish pursed his lips.

"You will find that, at times, you are working as hard as your underlings.

That is the nature of the supervisory position."

"Never!" declared Cugel expansively. "I insist upon a rigid separation of functions. A toiler does not supervise and the supervisor does not toil. But as for your meal tonight, you are retired from work; you may eat and drink as you see fit!"

"My account is closed," said Weamish. "I do not care to reopen the books."

"A small matter, surely," said Cugel. "Still, if you are concerned, eat and drink as you will, to my account!"

"That is most generous!" Jumping to his feet, Weamish limped at speed to the buffet. He returned with a selection of choice meats, preserved fruits, pastries, a large cheese and a flask of wine, which he attacked with astonishing gusto.

A sound from above attracted Cugel's attention. He looked up to discover Gark and Gookin crouched on a shelf. Gark held a tablet upon which Gookin made entries, using an absurdly long stylus.

Gark inspected Cugel's plate. "Item: oil-fish, smoked and served with garlic and one

leek, at four terces. Item: one fowl, good quality, large size, served with one cup of sauce and seven garnishes, at eleven terces. Item: three pastries of mince with herbs, at three terces each, to a total of nine terces. A salad of assorted stuffs: six terces. Item: three fardels, at two terces, to a total of six

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terces. Item: one large order of quince conserve, valued at three terces. Wine, nine terces. A service of napery and utensils: one terce."

Gookin spoke. "Noted and calculated. Cugel, place your mark at this point."

"Not so fast!" spoke Weamish sharply. "My supper tonight is at Cugel's expense. Include the charges to his account."

Gark demanded: "Cugel, is this correct?"

"I did in fact issue the invitation," said Cugel. "I dine here, however, in my capacity as supervisor. I hereby order that the charges for sustenance be waived. Weamish, as an honoured ex-employee, also eats without charge."

Gark and Gookin uttered shrill cackles of laughter, and even Weamish showed a painful smile. "At Flutic," said Weamish, "nothing is left to chance.

Twango carefully distinguishes sentiment from business. If Twango owned the air, we would pay over coins for every gasp."

Cugel spoke with dignity: "These practises must be revised and at once!

Otherwise I will resign my position. I must also point out that the fowl was underdone and the garlic lacked savor."

Gark and Gookin paid him no heed. Gookin tallied the charges on Weamish's meal. "Very well, Cugel; once more, we require your mark."

Cugel inspected the tablet. "These bird scratchings mean nothing to me!"

"Is that truly the case?" asked Gookin mildly. He took the tablet. "Aha, I notice an oversight. Add three terces for Weamish's digestive pastilles."

"Hold up!" roared Cugel. "What is the account at this instant?"

"One hundred and sixteen terces. We are often rendered a gratuity for our services."

"This is not one of the occasions!" Cugel snatched the tablet and scribbled his mark. "Now be off with you! I cannot dine in dignity with a pair of weird little swamp-hoppers peering over my shoulder."

Gark and Gookin bounded away in a fury. Weamish said: "That last remark struck somewhat close to the knuckle. Remember, Gark and Gookin prepare the food and whoever irks them sometimes finds noxious substances in his victual."

Cugel spoke firmly. "They should rather beware of me! As supervisor, I am a person of importance. If Twango fails to enforce my directives, I will resign my post!"

"That option is of course open to you — as soon as you pay off your account."

"I see no great problem there. If the supervisor earns three hundred terces a week, I can quickly discharge my account."

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Weamish drank deeply from his goblet. The wine seemed to loosen his tongue. He leaned toward Cugel and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Three hundred terces a week, eh? For me that was a fluke! Yelleg and Malser are slime-divers, as we call them.

They earn three to twenty terces for each scale found, depending on quality.

The 'Clover-leaf Femurials' bring ten terces, as do the 'Dorsal Double Luminants'. An 'Interlocking Sequalion' for either turret or pectorus brings twenty terces. The rare 'Lateral Flashers' are also worth twenty terces. Whoever finds the 'Pectoral Sky-break Spatterlight' will gain one hundred terces."

Cugel poured more wine into Weamish's goblet. "I am listening with two ears."

Weamish drank the wine but otherwise seemed hardly to notice Cugel's presence. "Yelleg and Malser work from before dawn until dark. They earn ten to fifteen terces a day on the average, from which the costs of board, lodging and incidentals are deducted. As supervisor you will see to their safety and comfort, at a salary of ten terces per day. Additionally, you gain a bonus of one terce for each scale exhumed by Yelleg and Malser, regardless of type. While Yelleg and Malser warm themselves at the fire or take their tea, you yourself are entitled to dive for scales."

"Dive?" asked Cugel in perplexity.

"Precisely so, into the pit created by Sadlark's impact with the mire. The work is tedious and one must dive deep. Recently —" here Weamish drank an entire goblet of wine at a gulp "— I scratched into a whole nest of good quality scales, with many 'specials' among them, and the next week, by great good fortune, I did the same. Thus I was able to amortize my account, and I have elected to retire on the instant."

Cugel's meal had suddenly gone tasteless. "And your previous earnings?"

"On good days I might earn as much as Yelleg and Malser."

Cugel turned his eyes to the ceiling. "With an income of twelve terces a day and

expenses ten times as much, how does one profit by working?"

"Your question is to the point. First of all, one learns to dine without reference to subtle distinctions. Also, when one sleeps the sleep of exhaustion, he ignores the decor of his chamber."

"As supervisor, I will make changes!" But Cugel spoke with little conviction.

Weamish, now somewhat befuddled, held up a long white finger. "Still, do not overlook the opportunities! They exist, I assure you, and in unexpected places!" Leaning forward, Weamish showed Cugel a leer of cryptic significance.

"Speak on!" said Cugel. "I am attentive!"

After belching, swallowing another draught of wine, and looking over his shoulder, Weamish said: "I can only emphasize that, to overcome the wiles of

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such as Twango, the most superb skills are necessary."

"Your remarks are interesting," said Cugel. "May I refill your goblet?"

"With pleasure." Weamish drank with satisfaction, then leaned once more toward Cugel. "Would you care to hear a great joke?"

"I would indeed."

Weamish spoke in a confidential whisper: "Twango considers me already in my dotage!" Leaning back in his chair, Weamish showed Cugel a gap-toothed grin.

Cugel waited, but Weamish's joke had been told. Cugel laughed politely.

"What an absurdity!"

"Is it not? When by a most ingenious method I have settled my accounts?

Tomorrow I will leave Flutic and spend several years traveling among the fashionable resorts. Then let Twango wonder as to who is in his dotage, he or I."

"I have no doubt as to his verdict. In fact, all is clear except the details of your 'ingenious method'."

Weamish gave a wincing grimace and licked his lips, as vanity and bravado struggled against the last reeling elements of his caution. He opened his mouth to speak. ... A gong sounded, as someone at the door pulled hard on the bell-rope.

Weamish started to rise, then, with a careless laugh, subsided into his chair. "Cugel, it

now becomes your duty to attend to late visitors, and to early visitors as well."

"I am 'supervisor of operations', not general lackey," said Cugel.

"A noble hope," said Weamish wistfully. "First you must cope with Gark and Gookin, who enforce all regulations to the letter."

"They will learn to walk softly in my presence!"

The shadow of a lumpy head and a dapper long-billed cap fell over the table.

A voice spoke. "Who will learn to walk softly?"

Cugel looked up to find Gookin peering over the edge of the shelf.

Again the gong sounded. Gookin called out: "Cugel, to your feet! Answer the door! Weamish will instruct you in the routine."

"As supervisor," said Cugel, "I hereby assign you to this task. Be quick!"

In response Gookin flourished a small three-stranded knout, each thong terminating in a yellow sting.

Cugel thrust up on the shelf with such force that Gookin sprawled head over heels through the air to fall into a platter of assorted cheeses which had been set out upon the buffet. Cugel picked up the knout and held it at the

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ready. "Now then: will you go about your duties? Or must I beat you well, then throw both you and your cap into this pot of tripes?"

Into the refectory came Twango on the run, with Gark sitting bulge-eyed on his shoulder. "What is all this commotion? Gookin, why do you lie among the cheeses?"

Cugel said: "Since I am supervisor, you should properly address me. The facts of the case are these: I ordered Gookin to answer the door. He attempted a flagrant insolence, and I was about to chastise him."

Twango's face became pink with annoyance. "Cugel, this is not our usual routine! Heretofore the supervisor has habitually answered the door."

"We now make an instant change! The supervisor is relieved of menial duties. He will earn triple the previous salary, with lodging and sustenance included at no charge."

Once more the gong sounded. Twango muttered a curse. "Weamish! Answer the door! Weamish? Where are you?"

Weamish had departed the refectory.

Cugel gave a stern order: "Gark! Respond to the gong!"

Gark gave back a surly hiss. Cugel pointed to the door. "Gark, you are hereby discharged, on grounds of insubordination! The same applies to Gookin.

Both of you will immediately leave the premises and return to your native swamp."

Gark, now joined by Gookin, responded only with hisses of defiance.

Cugel turned to Twango. "I fear that unless my authority is affirmed I must resign."

Twango threw up his arms in vexation. "Enough of this foolishness! While we stand here the gong rings incessantly!" He marched off down the corridor toward the door, with Gark and Gookin bounding behind him.

Cugel followed at a more leisurely gait. Twango threw open the door, to admit a sturdy man of middle age wearing a hooded brown cloak. Behind him came two others in similar garments.

Twango greeted the visitor with respectful familiarity. "Master Soldinck! The time is late! Why, at this hour, do you fare so far?"

Soldinck spoke in a heavy voice: "I bring serious and urgent news, which could not wait an instant."

Twango stood back aghast. "Mercantides is dead?"

"The tragedy is one of deception and theft!"

"What has been stolen?" asked Twango impatiently. "Who has been deceived?"

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"I will recite the facts. Four days ago, at noon precisely, I arrived here with the strong-wagon. I came in company with Rincz and Jornulk, both, as you know, elders and persons of probity."

"Their reputations have never been assailed, to my knowledge. Why now do you bring them into question?"

"Patience; you shall hear!"

"Proceed! Cugel, you are a man of experience; stand by and exercise your judgment. This, incidentally, is Master Soldinck of the firm Soldinck and Mercantides, Shipping Agents."

Cugel stepped forward and Soldinck continued his declaration.

"With Rincz and Jornulk, I entered your workroom. There, in our presence, you counted out and we packed six hundred and eighty scales into four crates."

"Correct. There were four hundred 'ordinarys', two hundred 'specials' and eighty 'premium specials' of unique character."

"Just so. Together, and in the presence of Weamish, we packed the crates, scaled them, affixed bands and plaques. I suggest that Weamish be summoned, that he may put his wisdom to the solution of our mystery."

"Gark! Gookin! Be so good as to summon Weamish. Still, Master Soldinck, you have not defined the mystery itself!"

"I will now do so. With yourself, Weamish, Rincz, Jornulk and myself on hand, the scales were encased as always in your workroom. Weamish then, to our supervision, placed the cases upon the wheeled carrier, and we complimented him both for the nicety in which he had decorated the carrier and his care to ensure that the cases might not fall to the ground. Then, with Rincz and me in the lead, you and Jornulk behind, Weamish carefully rolled the cases down the corridor, pausing, so I recall, only long enough to adjust his shoe and comment to me upon the unseasonable chill."

"Precisely so. Continue."

"Weamish rolled the carrier to the wagon and the cases were transferred into the strong-box, which was immediately locked. I wrote a receipt to you, which Rincz and Jornulk countersigned, and on which Weamish placed his mark as witness. Finally I paid over to you your money, and you gave me the receipted invoice."

"We drove the wagon directly to Saskervoy, where, with all formality, the cases were transferred into a vault, for dispatch to far Alмеры."

"And then?"

"Today, Mercantides thought to verify the quality of the scales. I opened a case, so carefully certified, to find only lumps of mud and gravel. Thereupon all cases were investigated. Each case contained nothing but worthless soil, and

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there you have the mystery. We hope that either you or Weamish can help us resolve this shocking affair, or, failing that, refund our money."

"The last possibility is out of the question. I can add nothing to your statement. All went as you have described. Weamish may have noticed some peculiar incident, but surely he would have notified me."

"Still, his testimony may suggest an area of investigation, if only he would present himself."

Gark bounded into the room, eyes bulging in excitement. He called out in a rasping voice: "Weamish is on the roof He is behaving in an unusual manner!"

Twango flourished his arms in distress. "Senile, yes, but foolish so soon? He has only just retired!"

"What?" cried Soldinck. "Weamish retired? A great surprise!"

"For us all! He settled his accounts to the last terce, then declared his retirement."

"Most odd!" said Soldinck. "We must bring Weamish down from the roof and at once!"

With Gark bounding ahead, Twango ran out into the garden, with Soldinck, Rincz, Jornulk and Cugel coming after.

The night was dark, illuminated only by a few sickly constellations. Light from within, striking up through the roof-panes, showed Weamish walking a precarious route along the ridge.

Twango called out: "Weamish, why are you walking on high? Come down at once!"

Weamish looked here and there to discover the source of the call. Observing Twango and Soldinck, he uttered a wild cry in which defiance seemed mingled with mirth.

"That is at best an ambiguous response," said Soldinck.

Twango called again: "Weamish, a number of scales are missing, and we wish to ask a question or two."

"Ask away, wherever you like and all night long — anywhere except only here. I am walking the roof and do not care to be disturbed."

"Ah, but Weamish, it is you of whom we wish to ask the questions! You must come down at once!"

"My accounts are settled! I walk where I will!"

Twango clenched his fists. "Master Soldinck is puzzled and disturbed! The missing scales are irreplaceable!"

"No less am I, as you will learn!" Again Weamish uttered his strange cacchination.

Soldinck spoke sourly: "Weamish has become addled."

"Work gave his life meaning," explained Twango. "He dived deep into the slime and found a whole nest of scales, so he paid off his account. Ever since he has been acting strangely."

Soldinck asked: "When did he find the scales?"

"Only two days ago." Once more Twango raised his voice. "Weamish! Come down at once! We need your help!"

Soldinck asked: "Weamish found his scales after we had accepted the last shipment?"

"Quite true. One day later, as a matter of fact."

"A curious coincidence."

Twango stared at him blankly. "Surely you cannot suspect Weamish!"

"The facts point in his direction."

Twango turned sharply about. "Gark, Gookin, Cugel! Up to the roof! Help Weamish to the ground!"

Cugel spoke haughtily. "Gark and Gookin are my subordinates. Inform me as to your wishes and I will issue the necessary orders."

"Cugel, your attitudes have become intolerable! You are hereby demoted!

Now, up on the roof with you! I want Weamish brought down at once!"

"I have no head for heights," said Cugel. "I resign my position."

"Not until your accounts are settled. They include the fine cheeses into which you flung Gookin."

Cugel protested, but Twango turned his attention back to the roof and refused to listen.

Weamish strolled back and forth along the ridge. Gark and Gookin appeared behind him. Twango called up: "Weamish, take all precautions! Gark and Gookin will lead the way!"

Weamish gave a final wild scream, and running along the ridge, hurled himself off into space, to land head-first upon the pavement below. Gark and Gookin crept to the edge of the roof to peer pop-eyed down at the limp figure.

After a brief inspection, Twango turned to Soldinck. "I fear that Weamish is dead."