



OUT OF THEIR ELEMENT
by Michel Boto

CHARACTERS

BARNABAS

BLUE MAGICIAN

CAESAR SALAD

CAPTAIN of the guards

DUKE of BISMUTH

DUNGEONMASTER

EXECUTIONER

GUARDS

OLD MAN

PEACE MINISTER

PLUMBOMO the king

PUDINGO

SCARAMIS

THERMIS

THREE BANDITS

ACT I.

SCENE ONE

(The laboratory of the two royal alchemists Thermis and Pudingo. They are sitting at a table, fast asleep, with their chins in their palms, amid the strange medieval gadgets and instruments of their work. Pudingo's head slowly slips off his hand and bangs against the table. He wakes up, startled, and begins playing with a test tube.)

PUDINGO

I'm working! I'm working!

(looks around)

Oh. Nobody's here.

(Pudingo slaps Thermis on the back of the head to wake him up.)

THERMIS

Ow! What did you do that for?

PUDINGO

Wake up! You're always sleeping on the job. God, it's a wonder we ever get anything done with you taking a nap all the time.

THERMIS

I'm not *always* sleeping. And I told you: I have an iron deficiency in my blood. I need a lot of rest to stay sharp.

PUDINGO

Well, you're awake now, so get back to work or you're going to have a tooth deficiency.

THERMIS

(picking up some equipment and testing it)

Yeah, yeah. I'm working.

(Pudingo goes across the room and fills a cup from a cask of ale.)

PUDINGO

I'm telling you, Thermis. We could do a lot of really great work together if you'd only buckle down. We could be the cream of the alchemy crop, you and I. But you don't have the will.

THERMIS

Of course I don't have the will. I never wanted to be an alchemist in the first place.

PUDINGO

Neither did I. But one can't choose what he wants to be. He merely does what he can, and tries to rise above the rest. And that is why I am the boss--because I have the will.

THERMIS

I thought I was the boss.

PUDINGO

No, Thermis.

THERMIS

But the king said I was in charge, didn't he?

PUDINGO

No, Jeremy was in charge, remember?

THERMIS

Oh, right. Jeremy. Where is Jeremy anyway? I haven't seen him for almost a month. I bet he's out playing badminton instead of working. As usual. Why did the king make such a lazy bastard who never shows up for work the boss? Because he's got the "will?"

PUDINGO

Jeremy died of the plague three weeks ago.

THERMIS

Oh. Then I guess his son's got the will. Are we in it, do you think?

PUDINGO

I doubt it, Thermis. Anyway, he's dead and not coming back, and since I am the senior alchemist that makes me the boss.

THERMIS

And I say I'm the boss because I have a stronger education in the sciences.

PUDINGO

Look, this isn't up for discussion.

THERMIS

I say it is. In fact, let's vote on it. We'll decide fair and square who should be the boss.

PUDINGO

You don't get to vote for the boss. And anyway there's only two of us left. You can't have a vote with only two people.

THERMIS

Sounds to me like somebody's scared they'll lose.

PUDINGO

Scared? Nothing scares me. I was in the War, boy. I've seen sights you'd soil yourself if you had to witness. I'm not scared of anything.

(Thermis clucks like a chicken.)

THERMIS

That's you. That's my impression of you.

PUDINGO

Fine! You want a vote? Let's vote! Who do you think should be boss?

THERMIS

Wait. We're not going to say it out loud, are we? I thought we'd have a secret vote. It's more democratic that way.

PUDINGO

Ugh, whatever. Just vote.

THERMIS

Hold on, I'll get a box. Then we can write down our choice and put it in the box, then when the polls close we can count the votes. All right?

PUDINGO

Yes, yes, just hurry up already.

(Thermis searches for a box.)

PUDINGO

Christ, I should've left you asleep. You get even less work done when you're

awake.

(Thermis finds a small chest with a hole in it and sets it on the table.)

THERMIS

Now, we'll each take a bit of scroll and write down our selection.

(Thermis hands Pudingo a piece of vellum and a quill. Pudingo struggles to write on his piece.)

PUDINGO

My quill isn't working. God, I hate these things. Whoever wins this election ought to make it their first priority that we develop a better method of writing.

THERMIS

Ooh, an exciting campaign promise from contender Pudingo. But will it be enough to sway the people?

(Thermis puts his scroll into the box. Pudingo slowly finishes his vote and shoves it in. They stand there for a few moments in silence.)

PUDINGO

Well?

THERMIS

What?

PUDINGO

Count the votes, idiot!

THERMIS

The polls haven't closed yet. We have to let every worker have their chance.

PUDINGO

But we're the only two left in the laboratory. Everybody else is dead.

THERMIS

Oh...right. OK then.

(Thermis opens the box and pulls out the scrolls one at a time.)

THERMIS

Let's see. One for Pudingo.

PUDINGO

Yes!

THERMIS

One for Thermis.

PUDINGO

Gee, I wonder whose vote that could have been!

THERMIS

(removing a third scroll)

And one more for Thermis.

PUDINGO

What? Let me see that!

(Pudingo snatches the vellum away and stares at it.)

THERMIS

What an upset! It looks like I'm boss after all.

PUDINGO

This is insane. I demand a runoff. This time, *I* will be in charge of the box.

THERMIS

Whatever. I'm still going to win.

(Pudingo thoroughly checks the box inside and out.)

THERMIS

What are you doing?

PUDINGO

Checking for hidden votes. This time it's going to be a clean election.

THERMIS

Hidden votes? Dum-dum-dum! Do I smell a scandal in the Thermis campaign? That may drive some supporters away. This doesn't look good for the Thermis camp.

PUDINGO

Just shut up and vote. Here.

(Pudingo hands Thermis a scrap of parchment and the two vote again. Thermis takes an awfully long time to decide what to write, but finally scribbles something down. Not trusting Pudingo, he very carefully and secretively places his vote into the box. Pudingo opens the chest and pulls the votes out. He reads them both and rolls his head back in annoyance.)

PUDINGO

Now this is just getting ridiculous. Here's my vote for myself--

THERMIS

Oh, don't say who voted for whom! It's secret! Secret!

PUDINGO

And here's one vote for you, crossed out, with Jeremy written beneath it. You can't vote for Jeremy, Thermis.

THERMIS

I can vote for whoever I like!

PUDINGO

The man's a fucking corpse, Thermis. How's he going to run the laboratory?

THERMIS

It was a vote of protest. I knew I wouldn't win because you poisoned the well with your cruel slander about rigged elections.

PUDINGO

This is going nowhere. Let's just get back to work, hm? Have you bothered to get anything done all week?

THERMIS

Of course, I did. I'm not as lazy as you make me out to be.

PUDINGO

Well, let me see it.

THERMIS

It's not finished yet.

PUDINGO

Let me see it anyway.

THERMIS

No! It's top secret.

PUDINGO

Fine. We'll finish my invention then.

THERMIS

Your...invention?

PUDINGO

Yes. It took me six months to realize the plans for it, but yesterday I finally got it assembled. Give me a second.

(Pudingo goes off-stage and pulls a cart into the laboratory. A large machine, completely concealed by purple cloth, is seated atop it.)

THERMIS

Oh, dear.

PUDINGO

Yes, Thermis. It's my most magnificent creation to date. I call it--

(Pudingo grabs the end of the cloth and tugs on it, revealing the contraption. On the side facing the audience in large, dripping letters are painted the words, "THERMIS RULES")

PUDINGO

The lethal injection device!

(Pudingo walks around the device, always facing Thermis, with a smug look of pride on his face.)

PUDINGO

Well, what do you think? Jealous? We'll see who the king makes boss of the workshop when I show it to him at his birthday party.

THERMIS

I didn't know it was yours. I thought it was just a piece of junk.

PUDINGO

Junk? Do you know how long I worked on this. How many days I went without sleep drawing up the blueprints for this, doing experiments, tests, thousands of tests, millions of dull minutes studying and thinking just to--

(Pudingo turns his head and at last sees the vandalism of his masterpiece. He gives a faint, horrified gasp, and then a shrill, high-pitched scream.)

THERMIS

Sorry!

PUDINGO

Sorry? Sorry? You've ruined it!

THERMIS

I'm sure it still works. You can just paint over it, can't you?

PUDINGO

I'm not doing anything to it. *You* can just paint over it. One hundred times if you have to until I say you can stop. Now get to work! And be careful not to get paint on the dials.

(Sad and ashamed, Thermis bows his head and walks off-stage. He comes back with a can of paint and a brush and begins painting over the words.)

PUDINGO

All I need is one lucky break and I'm out of here. Just one invention to really hit it big and you won't ever see me in this hell-hole of a laboratory again. Alchemy. Pfoo. What a load of nonsense. Everybody knows it's a go-nowhere job. Well...everybody except the king. The real future's in technology. Death weapons, that's the way to make a fortune and get your foot in the door. The only way to make a name for yourself is to find better and better ways to kill everybody else. Otherwise you end up throwing your life away trying to turn worthless rocks into gold.

THERMIS

(stops painting and turns to Pudingo)

I wouldn't say it's throwing your life away, Pudingo. I mean, if it could be done it'd

be a miracle for all the poor people in the world. Just think: if there were enough gold for everybody then no one would be poor. Why, we could churn out alchemy machines for every city in the kingdom and soon everyone would be swimming in as much gold as they could make. Then we'd all be rich beyond our wildest dreams!

PUDINGO

No we wouldn't, you idiot. And who told you you could stop painting? Get back to work.

(Thermis starts painting the machine again.)

PUDINGO

Wildest dreams...you really are stupid, you know that? If everybody had gold it wouldn't be worth a damn thing. It'd be worth less than lead even. Look at all the villages around this city. To the east you've got Waterford, to the north you've got Waterbury, to the south you've got Watertown, and to the west Waterbridge. What's the one thing all of them are lacking since the king built that dam to irrigate his garden? Actual water. And how much is water worth to them? I mean really clean, pure drinking water. You could take an ass packed to the bristle with barrels of water, spend six hours in one of those villages, and retire on what you made in that single day of watermongering. Now take this city. We've got three rivers running through it, not to mention all the manmade brooks, streams, fountains, and so on. What's a handful of water worth to one of us here inside the castle walls? Not a God damned copper cent, that's what. If you stuck out your hand and tried to get me to drink from it I'd either laugh at you or think you were some kind of pervert. Are you so stupid to think gold isn't the exact same? If we all had it, it wouldn't be worth a thing. The reason it's so valuable is because nobody has any except the most powerful—and the only thing that keeps them in power is the ability to find more of it for themselves. Someone has to go spend the time and money and muscle power to find it, dig it up, refine it, and bring it back. If any idiot could just stumble upon it—or worse, if any idiot could put a piece of lead in one end of a machine and spit out a gold brick from the other--what do you think it'd be worth?

THERMIS

I don't know.

PUDINGO

That's right, you don't know. You don't know a lot of things. And that's why I'm the boss. Now let me see how you're coming along.

(Pudingo closely examines Thermis' paint job and steps back.)

PUDINGO

All right, it's fine I suppose. Put the paint away and then take my lethal injection device to the warehouse. I'm going to take my lunch break at the tavern. I'll be back in a few hours.

(Thermis exits with the paint and brush, and soon returns empty-handed.)

PUDINGO

I'm sorry I yelled at you, Thermis. But it's vital for the smooth and efficient operation of this laboratory that my authority remain firm and always in view of the commoners.

THERMIS

Can I eat lunch too?

PUDINGO

After you put this away.

(Pudingo puts on his hat and overcoat.)

PUDINGO

And make sure you're back here in twenty minutes. I want this room swept before I return.

THERMIS

Man!

PUDINGO

Don't "Man" me, Thermis. I won't run a loose ship like your friend Jeremy did. The people have spoken and I'm the new boss. I'm a strict one, but also a fair one. Now get back to work or I'll have the king's guards cut your thumbs off and feed them to you.

(Pudingo exits. Thermis turns the machine around and pushes it off-stage, revealing that he had previously painted the words "PUDINGO SMELLS" on the other side.)

SCENE TWO

(Coming back from his lunch, Thermis hangs his cloak and hat and begins sweeping the floor of the laboratory. He sighs and looks up, and there is a knock at the door.)

THERMIS

Just a minute! Oh God, is he back already? I haven't even begun to clean up the lab!

(Thermis sweeps furiously and then throws the broom offstage. He answers the door, and Barnabas the court paige effetely walks in carrying his bag of royal messages and decrees.)

THERMIS

Oh...hello, Barnabas.

BARNABAS

Thermissss, how *do* you do? Everything going well, I hope?

THERMIS

Yeah, all right. Just cleaning up a bit.

BARNABAS

I have a message for you from His Highness the King.

THERMIS

For me?

BARNABAS

Well, not you specifically, but for the entire alchemist's workshop. Unless Pudingo is dead, in which case I suppose it *is* for you....specifically.

THERMIS

Oh, no, he's not dead. Unfortunately.

BARNABAS

Come now, I thought you two were friends.

THERMIS

We were...until Jeremy got the plague and Pudingo became the boss. Now he's turned himself into a bossy little tyrant overnight. Always telling me what to do

and saying I don't know anything and he's so much smarter and braver than I am because he was in the Great War and I wasn't.

BARNABAS

(laughing)

The Great War? Really? Thermis, did he ever tell you what he did in the Great War?

THERMIS

Well, no. But with his background in engineering I assumed he was some sort of siegecraft operator or something.

BARNABAS

Pudingo was a bookkeeper during the war. When the battles were over he'd go out with his little tablet and count the hands of the dead enemy soldiers.

THERMIS

What? He's always going on about how gruesome and terrifying war is and all he did was count dead people's hands? Ooh, I can't wait till he gets back!

BARNABAS

It was gruesome, I'm sure. But Pudingo never saw a day of real battle his whole life. He was what we in the infantry called a "stylus pusher."

THERMIS

Ho ho! When he gets back I'm really going to let him have it! All those speeches about bravery and the will and all that nonsense! And he never saw a day of battle you say?

BARNABAS

His father, you may know, is a very influential member of the court. He arranged it, somehow. But say, dear boy, why were you not in the War? You must have been at least twelve at the time. We could have used a strong youth like you at the front. Didn't you want to fight for your king?

THERMIS

My father wouldn't let me. As soon as I turned eight he put me to work.

BARNABAS

I always consider myself thankful that I never had such a low background as to have to do manual labor as a child--or an adult. It must be absolutely dreadful.

THERMIS

It's nothing compared to this. At least I was essentially my own boss. My father

died when I was ten. Now look at me. Pudingo's got me sweeping the floor while he's out having a good time.

BARNABAS

Terrible!

THERMIS

This morning I showed him a new invention of mine. A lethal injection device to give to the king on his birthday. I worked on it for six months straight, toiling and sweating--never sleeping! He just sat there all the while reading books or inviting loose women to the laboratory and trying to impress them with lies about all the work he's done and how important he is. And do you know what he said to me this morning when he saw my machine? He said: "What a perfect gift for the king. And to think I built it all on my own." And I said: "But Pudingo, *I* invented it without so much as a contributory molecule of sweat from your hand." "No, no, Thermis," he told me, "you are mistaken. I invented this machine, and you sat here idly doing nothing. Now tell me how it works so I can explain it to the king."

BARNABAS

He really is a tyrant! Oh, I couldn't bear to work in such a Hell for a single second!

THERMIS

It's terrible. Truly terrible!

BARNABAS

Have you considered standing up for yourself?

THERMIS

But how would I do that? He is the boss. You said so yourself.

BARNABAS

You could always strike.

THERMIS

Thtrike? What'th a thtrike? Er, what's a strike?

BARNABAS

It's where you, the worker, demand that your voice be heard by Pudingo, the tyrant of the workshop.

THERMIS

Surely there must be laws against that kind of behavior. Especially in the king's alchemy lab!

BARNABAS

So what? Trust me, Thermis. If you stand up for yourself and don't back down, if you make a lot of fuss and refuse to be treated this way, Pudingo will acquiesce.

THERMIS

And if he goes to the king? Won't he have me arrested?

BARNABAS

If he does, who will do all of his work for him? You said yourself you do everything while he sits around. He'd be too afraid for the truth to come out.

THERMIS

Hm, a strike, eh? You know, that just might work.

BARNABAS

Well, I'll be back soon. I'll go deliver these other messages while Pudingo is still away. Think over my advice, Thermis!

THERMIS

I will! Goodbye, Barnabas! Thank you for your help!

BARNABAS

So long!

(Barnabas exits. A little later Pudingo comes in and hangs his coat and hat. He surveys the room, sees Thermis sitting down and gives a little mumble of disgust, and walks offstage to retrieve the broom. He returns and throws the broom at Thermis.)

PUDINGO

Stand up, you! This place is still filthy! Get to work!

THERMIS

No!

(throwing the broom back at Pudingo)

You get to work! I'm going on strike!

PUDINGO

Strike? Don't be ridiculous.

THERMIS

I'm not working for you anymore until you meet my demands!

PUDINGO

I think technically one has to be doing something before they can refuse to do it anymore. Anyway, that sort of behavior is illegal here.

THERMIS

I don't care! I've had it up to here with how you've been treating me today. You've gone crazy with the little amount of power you think you have.

PUDINGO

Is that so? Well, kiss your thumbs goodbye, Thermis. I'm going straightaway to the guards.

THERMIS

No, don't! It was all Barnabas' idea! Stop!

PUDINGO

Barnabas? That lisping idiot told you to strike? Well, I should have known.

(sits beside Thermis and puts his arm around his shoulder)

Dear Thermis, don't you know? Barnabas is only trying to get you into trouble.

THERMIS

Me? But why?

PUDINGO

Aren't you aware that members of the court get paid a bonus if they uncover plots in the kingdom? Why, he only told you to strike because he planned to tell the king. Tell me, did he say he suddenly have to leave?

THERMIS

Yes, actually. Oh, God! He went to inform on me and collect his reward!

PUDINGO

I'm afraid so. He poisoned your head with ideas of mutiny just so he could profit from it.

THERMIS

Yes, yes! I should have known it! He was telling me how terrible you treat me, and I tried to convince him that you're really not so bad but he wouldn't listen. I said, "Come on, now, he's not that bad. Pudingo is still my friend even if he is a bit mean now that he's boss." But Barnabas was like, "Thermis, don't be such a coward. You know he mistreats you and if he isn't beating you with a cane he will be soon." And I tried to tell him you don't even have a cane, but he broke me down, Pudingo. He broke down my weak, easily influenced mind.

PUDINGO

Dear, stupid, Thermis!

THERMIS

And Pudingo, that's not the worst of it. He called you a...stylus pusher.

(Pudingo jumps up from the bench, furious.)

PUDINGO

What! He told you about that? That...no good bastard! I'll kill him.

THERMIS

No, no, Pudingo! Then you'll go to prison! Don't do it for me! Please!

PUDINGO

He has dishonored us both, Thermis. I shall not let him get away with this! It's one thing to call my bravery and merit in battle into question, but this getting you into trouble with the king is unforgivable!

THERMIS

Let it be, Pudingo. I beg you!

(Barnabas comes into the room.)

BARNABAS

(shutting the door)

Ah, Pudingo is back. I hope you've had a talk with him, Thermis--about what we discussed.

PUDINGO

He certainly has! Get out! Get out before I strangle you with my bare hands, you trouble-making cow!

(Pudingo tries to shove Barnabas out of the room, but he resists.)

BARNABAS

You can't fight the voice of the people, Pudingo. They will be heard! Fight it, Thermis! Fight the power!

PUDINGO

Get out right now! Stylus pusher, eh? And what were you doing the entire war? Checking your wig in the mirror while everyone else was fighting. "Tim, ith it on

thtraight? Maidenth might be watching. Tim? Thir Tim?"

BARNABAS

Oh, that's right, make fun of my speech impediment. Very mature. You're just jealous of my position and prowess in battle.

PUDINGO

Out! Get out!

BARNABAS

Wait, wait! I'm here for a reason! I have a message from the king to deliver!

(Pudingo stops pushing and lets Barnabas remove the message from his bag.)

PUDINGO

Well, go on then. But give it to me and get lost!

(Barnabas hands the message to Pudingo and slams the door. Pudingo begins unrolling the scroll.)

PUDINGO

Do you see what I suffer to protect you from those who want to take advantage of your good-natured stupidity, Thermis?

THERMIS

(ashamed)

Yes, Pudingo. I will never cross you again.

PUDINGO

Excellent. Now let me see here.

(Barnabas peeps through the door, yells "Stylus pusher!" and disappears again.)

PUDINGO

(clears his throat, annoyed)

Now let me see what this message is all about. "Humble servants of His Royal Highness, Me, King Plumbpomo the Twelveteenth, hereby inform you that you shall be--"

(Pudingo stops reading and turns his head to Thermis. Thermis slowly picks up the broom and

begins sweeping the floor.)

PUDINGO

"--you shall be on this evening, that of the twenty-fourth day of the eighth month of the four hundred, two-and-fiftieth year of this millennium, summoned to the court of His Royal Highness, Me Again, King Plumbpomo the Twelveteenth, to unveil the progress made by the alchemists' department in the matter of converting lead into gold. It is furthermore hoped by His Royal Highness that no less than 50 per cent of the lead ingots delivered in the past six months shall have been fully goldified and ready to be made into jewelry, coins, and other baubles of national importance. Peace out, King Plumbpomo." This evening? Fifty percent? Thermis, do you know what this means?

THERMIS

That we get to dress up really fancy and have a free dinner on the king?

PUDINGO

No! It means we're going to have to tell the king that after six months and who knows how much money he's squandered on this insane pipe dream we haven't changed a single drop of lead into gold.

THERMIS

Oh. I hope they have soup. I like soup.

PUDINGO

Stop thinking about food all the time! We're going to die, Thermis.

THERMIS

But I like food, and I don't like dying. So why should I think about what I don't like instead of what I do like?

PUDINGO

What are we going to do? No, forget you. You should have been wiped out long ago. But what am *I* going to do?

THERMIS

You could tell him the truth and beg for leniency.

PUDINGO

Don't be ridiculous.

THERMIS

I've always believed honesty is the best policy. Those are words to live by, Pudingo.

PUDINGO

Honesty is the best policy for people too stupid to be good liars. Otherwise they just get caught in their lies. But those of us who are true craftsmen, who have spent years perfecting the art of robbing Peter to pay Paul--and then stabbing Paul in the back and robbing him too--we make bubbles of our lies, grab ahold of them, and rise to the top like the cream in a bucket of milk. We are the best of the best. But honest men on the other hand. Honest men are the scum that sinks to the bottom and stays there forever. And that, dear Thermis, is why you are sweeping the floor and I am the boss.

THERMIS

Funny, but it seems like it doesn't matter who's what anymore. Tonight the king's going to find out the truth--and when he does I'm dreadfully sure he's going to kick both of our buckets.

PUDINGO

Unless I come up with something so brilliant he'll have to believe it.

THERMIS

I say we take some gold paint, paint all the lead ingots, and hope he doesn't look too closely at them.

PUDINGO

Shut up, I'm thinking.

THERMIS

Or, or, we could just kill him with something blunt and run away. Hey, we could use the lead!

PUDINGO

Will you be quiet for five seconds so I can think? We can't paint the lead, we can't kill the king. Just shut up. It has to be something incontrovertible. Faking the gold is easy enough, but it's even easier to uncover. No, we have to give him the lead. But we have to make him think that somehow he's better off not having gold. We have to make him believe that by not doing what he asked us to do, we've actually done him a favor. Hmm..

THERMIS

We could tell him lead is worth more than gold.

PUDINGO

No...or wait...

THERMIS

What? Will that work?

PUDINGO

No. Your idea is stupid. But it has given me another. We could tell the king that I've discovered, through my own private research, that lead is about to become so scarce that its price will shoot through the roof. If we can get him to believe it, perhaps I can convince him to give me enough gold to buy up all the lead in the surrounding kingdoms--in order to gain a monopoly for the upcoming scarcity. Then, when I'm out of the borders of the kingdom, I can take the gold and live a life of luxury and amusement for the rest of my days. Oh, Thermis! This is brilliant!

THERMIS

And what about me?

PUDINGO

With me gone you'll no doubt be made the new head of the alchemist lab. It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?

THERMIS

Yes, yes it is!

PUDINGO

You see? I'm doing this for you too. In fact, I'm doing this mostly for you, Thermis.
(feigning a frown)

Or don't you care? I guess you don't. You've always neglected the acts of friendship I've taken for your benefit.

THERMIS

Oh, Pudingo! You truly are the most selfless, giving person in the entire world. Always thinking of your friends' fortunes over your own.

PUDINGO

I can't help my nature. I'm a charitable and giving person. It's just not possible for me to act contrary to myself. Now come on. As soon as you finish sweeping I want you to go straightaway to the warehouse and carry all of the lead that you can to the king. I will go and put on my fancy clothes.

THERMIS

Can't I wear fancy clothes too?

PUDINGO

I'm afraid you won't have time, dear Thermis. It will take you most of the afternoon to carry all of that lead on your back to the court.

THERMIS

I could use a horse.

PUDINGO

And get the king's carpets all dirty? No, you'd better carry it yourself. If you ruin his rugs he might have one of his servants beat you.

THERMIS

OK. You're right. God, you always think of these things that might get me into trouble that I otherwise would have walked right into. You're my guardian angel, Pudingo.

PUDINGO

I know, Thermis. I know. Now get to work.

(Pudingo takes his coat and hat and exits. Thermis hastens his sweeping of the laboratory floor.)

SCENE THREE

(Plumbpomo's dungeon. The dungeonmaster, a fierce, filthy creature who also serves as the royal executioner, whips and tortures a weak, old prisoner suspended from the ceiling by shackles and dressed in smudged, torn rags.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Won't talk, eh?

OLD MAN

I don't know who!

DUNGEONMASTER

(reeling back to whip the old man again, he sneers through his teeth)

I think you're lying!

OLD MAN

No, no, no, no, please no!

(The dungeonmaster lashes the prisoner again, his limp, suspended body swinging from the blow.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Are ye gonna tell me or shall I do it again?

OLD MAN

I don't know! I swear it!

DUNGEONMASTER

Spare yourself, old man. Tell me! Who! Who ate my lunch?

OLD MAN

Please...

(The dungeonmaster drops the whip and slaps the old man repeatedly until he can no longer lift his head.)

DUNGEONMASTER

You don't know...do you? No, I can see it in your eyes. When a man who knows

what you're after is tortured you can see something in his eyes. It's the struggle! The struggle within him to hide the information upon pain of death. But when a man doesn't know, there's a pain in his eyes instead. It's a wish that he did know what you wanted to hear so he could tell you--tell you and end the torture!

(loosens his shackles, the old man falls)

All right, you can go. But believe me: when I find out who ate my sandwich he will find no mercy here. Only anguish and, too soon for my taste, death.

(The old man feebly crawls away on his hands.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Oh, and Dad: Happy birthday. I'll see you at home.

(The old man exits. The dungeonmaster hangs the whip on the wall and starts tidying up the dungeon--his pride and joy. He even begins to whistle as he polishes the chains and instruments of his profession. A castle guard comes in.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Who is it?

GUARD

It's only me. You'd better make room for two more. We've got a new pair coming down in a moment. But don't bother putting them in a cell. We're going to execute them tomorrow morning.

DUNGEONMASTER

Oh, excellent! What are they? Cutthroat pirates captured by the navy? Refusing to reveal the location of their treasures, they've been locked up in here to face me. Don't you worry, I'll get it out of them.

GUARD

No, I'm afraid it's nothing that adventurous.

DUNGEONMASTER

Traitors then--out to seize the crown for themselves but betrayed by a spy. I'll sharpen two pikes to display their fiendish, treasonous heads before the citizens. The blood will drip from their closed eye sockets and threaten the same fate to the rest of their conspiracy!

GUARD

You really have quite an imagination. But no. It's a little more boring than that, Dungeonmaster.

DUNGEONMASTER

Rrrrapists then! Yes, I can see it now. The spectre of their midnight work haunting the villages as the bodies of women and children are found...desecrated and ruined beyond an open casket funeral in the morning. Oh, these two disgust me! I'll not be able to promise they'll stay alive till tomorrow morning!

GUARD

Listen: you'll not touch these two at all. I want you to put them in shackles over there against that wall and give them their dinners and then LEAVE THEM ALONE. They're alchemists. Nerds. Their crime is stupidity and laziness, nothing else.

DUNGEONMASTER

Alchemists? What the hell is an alchemist?

GUARD

They're scientists--if you can call it a science. They seek the secrets of immortality, the secrets of the basic elements, and the power of God Himself. At least, that's what they were supposed to be doing. It turns out they've spent the past six months running up a pretty large expense account and from what I can tell at their disaster of a meeting with the king this evening all they managed to invent was some sort of chair that injects poison into you. And it just so happens they didn't do the majority of the work on that. The guy who built it died of the plague, a fellow named Jeremy, and then one of them had the balls to try and claim it was his own invention after the one called Jeremy had already shown it to the king on a previous occasion. When the king pointed that out to him, the other one panicked and threw a lead brick at the queen.

DUNGEONMASTER

But she's pregnant still! Isn't she?

GUARD

Very pregnant. Some of the men went to help her, and the stupid bastard tried to run away.

DUNGEONMASTER

The little swine!

GUARD

Fortunately I was still by the door and was quick enough to stop him before he could escape.

DUNGEONMASTER

Excellent work.

GUARD

Then the other one fell on his knees in front of the throne and begged forgiveness from the king. He even tried to tell him some half-witted story about gold becoming worthless in the coming months and that if His Highness would only give him a little time and a large portion of the royal treasury he'd come back with enough lead to make the king the wealthiest man in the entire world.

DUNGEONMASTER

And these two are scientists, you said?

GUARD

Well, I didn't say they were intelligent. Just well-educated. There's a difference, you know.

DUNGEONMASTER

I almost feel pity for them.

GUARD

I didn't know you were capable of feeling pity for anyone.

DUNGEONMASTER

I myself had a very stupid son once. I guess it makes me a little sympathetic for those types of people.

GUARD

I didn't know you have a son, Dungeonmaster. Congratulations! Going to be a torturing, bloodthirsty son of a bitch like his father?

DUNGEONMASTER

No, no...He went off to become a theologian or some nonsense, and when the Great War came he split off from the rest of the monks and joined some peace activists camping outside the castle. Then when the king demanded more troops be raised from the serfs, they grew unruly. A group of 'em pulled the gatehouse guard's pants down and the rest poured inside. Oh, it was a sad day when I first spotted him from the machicolation. Chanting, playing fruity little songs about peace and kindness and Jesus on his lute.

GUARD

The lute? No! A dungeonmaster's son playing a lute!

DUNGEONMASTER

It broke my heart, sir. It really did. I knew from that moment on that my son had chosen a different path than me.

GUARD

Did you put your foot down? If one of my sons ever disgraced my name like that I'd cut off his ear and send him back to my wife until he's come to his senses.

DUNGEONMASTER

Yes, I put both feet down firmly in the stone, and with a sigh of deep sadness poured molten lead and oil all over the lot of them. King's orders, they were. I begged the captain to have his archers put them out of their misery, and if I had told him my son was among them he might have done it too. But I was ashamed, and so they all slowly burned and suffocated to death. And the king put the ones who'd got covered the most in the court on display. As if they were statues!

GUARD

You mean those statues in the courtyard are real people?

DUNGEONMASTER

And one of them's my son--my stupid, stupid son. All he wanted was an end to the war.

GUARD

Yes. What a terrible, atrocious waste of innocent lives peace brings. When will men learn that it brings only death?

DUNGEONMASTER

I don't know, sir. I don't know.

(The two pause for a moment in contemplation, and then the moment passes as if it never happened.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Well, bring 'em in then. I'll get them all accommodated for the execution. We've got some absolutely terrific fish and pork stew on the cauldron. It'll make a last meal fit for a king.

(The guard gasps.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Now don't get upset. It's just a turn of phrase.

GUARD

Oh, right. OK, I'll go and see if they're ready. The men are still having a bit of fun with them. "Breaking them in," if you will.

DUNGEONMASTER

Boys will be boys.

GUARD

Haha, yes, they certainly will, won't they! I remember when I was just starting in the guards we used to have quite a bit of "fun" with the prisoners too--if you know what I mean.

DUNGEONMASTER

Indeed. I have a bit of fun with them myself when I'm in the mood for that sort of thing. Which is nearly always!

GUARD

Yes, you know, sometimes even to this day it really helps get rid of all the tension in my aging body to just come in here in the dead of night, take one of the more resilient prisoners, and just really give it to him.

(The two are chuckling as they talk.)

DUNGEONMASTER

My favorite is to do it Christmas Eve.

GUARD

Oh, mine too! I like to come in dressed in one of my wife's red silk robes, pretending I'm Father Christmas, and give them the gift that keeps on giving!

(The both laugh raucously. The dungeonmaster slowly stops and has a weird look on his face.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Wait, we were talking about beating them up, right? And not, you know, something else. All this innuendo is a little too subtle for me.

GUARD

Yes...of course we were talking about beating them up.

(pauses, nervous)

Weren't we?

DUNGEONMASTER

I hope so. I wouldn't want to think you've been raping male prisoners all these

years. What was all that crap about the gift that keeps on giving? And wearing your wife's robe?

GUARD

(walking backwards to the door)

Just a joke! Ha-ha! See? A joke! Well, so long. I'll just...go and...see if the boys are done...beating them up, I mean!

(almost trips on a stair)

My shift's almost over anyway, so uh, I guess I'll go home...and see my wife...whom I'm married to...so...bye!

(The guard exits. The dungeonmaster shakes his head and begins whistling and cleaning again. Pudingo and Thermis, wearing prison garbs, are forcefully pushed into the room. The door slams shut behind them.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Ah, hello! Welcome to the dungeon!

(he goes up the stairs to them and puts his arms around their shoulders)

I am the executioner who will have the honor of beheading you tomorrow morning. But for now, please, call me The Dungeonmaster. I know you probably aren't used to surroundings as dirty as these, but to me it's a second home and for most of our guests the accommodations are actually an improvement in their living situation. If there's anything I can do to make your arrangements more comfortable, please let me know. For now, I'll go and get some locks for your manacles. Just sit tight and wait for me to get back. I hope you're hungry, because tonight we're having one of my wife's delicious stews!

(The Dungeonmaster exits.)

PUDINGO

Ugly isn't it?

THERMIS

He's not so bad. Maybe if he cut his beard a little and took a bath.

PUDINGO

Not the Dungeonmaster, the dungeon!

THERMIS

Oh, yes. Gruesome. But it's better than being in there with those guards.

PUDINGO

(rubbing his sore body)

Thank God! I thought they'd never stop beating me!

THERMIS

At least you got off with a beating. They ganged up on me while you were unconscious and made me the Official Knob Polisher.

PUDINGO

Somehow that title suits you.

THERMIS

Shut up! Do you know how many doorknobs there are in this castle? My wrists are so tired! I think I've got carpal tunnel syndrome! If we ever get back to the laboratory, I'll never beat the maidservants for being idle again. I never realized how tough their job is.

PUDINGO

We're not going back to the laboratory. Were you here ten seconds ago? We're going to be executed by that walking, talking bear in less than 8 hours.

THERMIS

I'm not worried about that. It's not the first time I've had my head on the chopping block. In fact, it'll be the fourth. I'm like a stouthearted adventurer in a fairy tale. Every time I was about to get it in the neck, at the last moment something happened to rescue me from death. Once it was a fire in the plague pit that spread to the rest of the city, another time it was a last-second pardon from the mayor, and once--once I soiled myself so badly and cried so much that they spared me purely out of disgust.

PUDINGO

Yes, you're a regular swashbuckling cavalier. Fairy tales are full of brave knights who, in the face of danger, have been rescued by the little mound of shit in their armor.

THERMIS

Yes, yes, and that's me! That's what I am!

PUDINGO

You mean the knight or the little mound?

THERMIS

Shut up! I'm tired of listening to you talk down to me like I'm stupid! What have you got to be so cocky about? You're the one who got us into this. It was you who

stole Jeremy's invention and got us in trouble in the first place. And don't talk to me about bravery. Who was it in there weeping like a child and begging for mercy from the king? And then when he refused to give you a second chance you make up that story about gold being worthless and that even though he couldn't trust you to do six months' worth of simple scientific research, he can trust you with half his treasury in another kingdom out of his reach. Yeah, you must be brave to feed a load of horseshit like that to the king of one-third the known world.

PUDINGO

Yes, I'm so sorry I lack the courage and old-fashioned chivalry to just stand there sweating and not saying a thing for twenty minutes and then, when everything seemed like it couldn't get any worse, lobbing a hunk of metal at a pregnant woman and trying to make a break for it.

THERMIS

Why are we fighting, Pudingo?

PUDINGO

Because we hate each other, Thermis.

THERMIS

No! We're friends, remember? We should be working together to find a way out of here.

PUDINGO

God, you're right. We *are* friends, Thermis. I'm sorry that I've forgotten that the past few days. We've been together thick and thin, good and bad, and we've certainly found ways out of worse situations than this.

THERMIS

Well, maybe not.

PUDINGO

No, no, don't worry. If we put our heads together we'll escape somehow. We've always been able to before and we'll do it again. I promise you!

THERMIS

Oh, I'm so glad to have the old Pudingo back!

PUDINGO

Now, think, Thermis, think. First we have to get out of the dungeon, but after that I'm afraid it's no easier. We have to escape the castle, the kingdom even. Plumbpomo is not known to take cancelled executions lightly. He'll surely have men searching every tree and haystack within his borders. We must get out of the

kingdom!

THERMIS

But how? How?

PUDINGO

Perhaps we can bribe the dungeonmaster.

THERMIS

Or maybe we can kill him!

PUDINGO

Maybe. But let's hope it doesn't come to that. It's better if we get out without harming anyone. If they catch us escaping, they'll be less lenient with two murderers than two scientists.

THERMIS

We're going to be executed anyhow. I don't see how leniency comes into it.

PUDINGO

There are worse things than death. Getting one's head cut off with an axe by someone who is skilled at his job is a matter of a few seconds. It's probably even painless. But trying to escape, and worse, murdering members of the castle guard, why that's bound to get us tortured.

THERMIS

I know this is a bad time to bring it up, but I wonder why they aren't using the lethal injection device now that it's finished.

PUDINGO

Probably because I faked most of the results in my report. Jeremy died before he finished it, and frankly I haven't a single idea how the thing works.

(Thermis starts laughing.)

PUDINGO

(smiling)

What's so funny?

THERMIS

Remember how he used to come into the laboratory and ask us what we'd been doing all day? And instead of telling the truth and say we were sleeping we'd show him fake blueprints and he'd go, "Hm, looks good, but this piece here won't work. Better redraw them."

PUDINGO

(laughing)

And then he'd leave and we'd go back to sleep!

THERMIS

Oh, good old Jeremy. He was a terrible boss, but that's what made him so great.

PUDINGO

Remember the practical joke we played on him?

THERMIS

We played lots. Which one?

PUDINGO

His coat. Remember? We filled it with dead rats and when he went home all the dogs in the castle were following him. He was running around for hours before he realized it was the coat they wanted!

THERMIS

(serious)

Hm. You know, it was probably all those dead rats that gave him the plague.

PUDINGO

(becoming serious as well)

Hm...that's very likely what happened.

(The pair pause in reflection, and then begin laughing again. They both sigh as the laughter wears off.)

THERMIS

Ohhhh, I love you Pudingo. You're like the brother I would have had if he hadn't died of consumption at the age of two.

PUDINGO

You too, Thermis. You too.

(They hug, and pat each other on the back. The dungeonmaster returns with irons for their legs and hands.)

DUNGEONMASTER

I'm back! Hope you two didn't miss me. Now then, follow me.

(With Thermis and Pudingo in tow, the dungeonmaster walks down to the wall and runs the chains through the rings bolted to the bricks. He holds out the shackles and they obediently reach out their arms to him.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Now just slip your hands in here, yes, that's it, and I'll lock it with this key, all right...and there we are! Well, make yourselves comfortable. Stew is almost ready! I'll bring you down some in a moment.

(The dungeonmaster stuffs the key into his shirt pocket and heads for the door.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Oh, I almost forgot. There's only two of you here so it almost seems unnecessary. But I like to keep an orderly dungeon so one of you is going to have to be head of the prisoners.

PUDINGO

Oh, me! Pick me! Me! I'll do it!

DUNGEONMASTER

Hm, you seem qualified. All right, you're the new head of the prisoners. You're responsible for overseeing the health and welfare of the other prisoners, namely the other guy over there, and also for making sure the dungeon is kept tidy while I'm not here. Got it? Good. I'll get the stew. I'm starving. While I'm gone make sure this place gets cleaned up. I like a nice, clean workplace. Understood?

PUDINGO

Clear as a bell, The Dungeonmaster!

DUNGEONMASTER

No need for formalities. Please, call me The.

PUDINGO

I'll have this place spotless by the time you get back, The!

DUNGEONMASTER

It better be, boy!

(The Dungeonmaster exits.)

PUDINGO

Well?

THERMIS

What?

PUDINGO

You heard the man. Get to work! Start sweeping the floors.

THERMIS

Sweeping the floors? With what? There's no broom. And besides that I'm chained to the wall. What do you want me to do? Sweep with my feet?

PUDINGO

If you have to.

THERMIS

Why do I have to do it?

PUDINGO

I'm the boss, that's why.

THERMIS

This is no fair.

PUDINGO

Life isn't fair. Now get to work.

(Pudingo sits down against the wall and tries to take a nap. Thermis silently starts kicking the dust around with his feet. Some of it hits Pudingo in the face.)

PUDINGO

Watch it, will you! I'm trying to take a nap here!

(Thermis kicks the dust more carefully. He begins sobbing quietly.)

PUDINGO

That's better. And don't cry so loud. I can't sleep with you making so much noise.

(The Dungeonmaster flings the door open wide and trots down the stairs with a heavy,

disappointed heart.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Unfortunate news, prisoners!

PUDINGO

(standing up and cleaning his pants of dust)

What is it, The?

DUNGEONMASTER

The most depressing bit of information I've gotten in a long time. The King is in trouble! His kingdom is in danger of being usurped.

PUDINGO

Oh, no! What can we do?

THERMIS

What can we do? Who gives a fuck? The guy was going to have us killed.

PUDINGO

Quiet, you. I didn't tell you to stop, did I?

DUNGEONMASTER

A mother lode was discovered in the Grivelein Mountains. More gold than any man has ever seen--right there for the taking! It's flooding the city at this moment. Save the jewels and platinum, the King's treasury isn't worth a damn.

PUDINGO

What? You mean...

DUNGEONMASTER

And even worse, the son of that blasted pencil manufacturer Egg Salad had heard the news first and sold off all of his own gold shortly before it hit the market. Then he bought up every last bit of lead in the kingdom and hid it somewhere in his estate. Can you imagine? Lead is worth more than gold now!

PUDINGO

Ha-ha! I was right all along! I can't believe it!

DUNGEONMASTER

(pulls the key out of his pocket and unlocks their chains)

And that's not the worst news of all. The King's demanded you be released at once. There's to be no execution after all. My whole day's schedule is shot now!

(Pudingo and Thermis rub their wrists and walks towards the exit.)

THERMIS

(sad)

Oh, this is terrible! What a sad day for everyone!

PUDINGO

Thermis, what are you? A moron? Don't you know what this means? With the exception of the king and this sadistic bastard's problems this is one of the greatest days of our lives! We're free! And what's better we're alive!

THERMIS

(sniffing)

Yes, I know, Pudingo. And I'm very happy about that. But why couldn't it wait five minutes? Now we won't get any stew!

PUDINGO

Fine, Thermis.

(opening the door)

You stay here and eat stew with...that. I'm leaving.

(Pudingo exits the dungeon. Thermis idles for a moment, rubs his empty belly, and runs after him.)

THERMIS

Wait! Wait! Don't leave me here by myself, Pudingo! I'll get lost! Wait for me!

ACT II.

SCENE ONE

(A road in Dulland. Lead is found everywhere as ornamentation, but not garishly so. Pudingo is trying to pull a cart full of gold while Thermis takes his job as the guard of the cart too seriously and begins scanning the distance for thieves and scaring away curious passersby with his spear.)

PUDINGO

Thermis, can I be the guard now? I'm tired of pulling this wagon.

THERMIS

No! We agreed before we left to take turns every fifty miles.

PUDINGO

Yes, and taking turns is very fair and I wouldn't want to change that. But I didn't realize when we were carving out this little arrangement that the capital of Dulland is only 20 miles from the capital of Plumania.

THERMIS

Sorry! Those were the terms of the agreement. We can't change them now!

PUDINGO

Why not?

THERMIS

What good is an agreement if the things you agree on keep changing?

PUDINGO

Then can you at least stop scaring away the peasants? How are we supposed to find someone to trade this gold with if you keep waving that spear around at anybody who comes close?

THERMIS

They might be thieves. You can never trust these Dullanders, Pudingo. And anyway, they won't talk to us so what's the big deal if I scare them away or not?

PUDINGO

They probably won't talk to us because you stabbed an old man in the eye.

THERMIS

It was an accident! He was coming too close to the cart. I just meant to warn him!

PUDINGO

You made him cry, Thermis.

THERMIS

If a man can't take a little stab in the eye with a spear now and then, what kind of man is he?

PUDINGO

I don't know. One that wants to use both of his eyes, I guess.

THERMIS

Don't worry. We'll find a marketplace sooner or later. Just keep pulling and I'll keep guarding.

PUDINGO

Well, we'd better hurry then. It'll be dark soon and all the shops will close up for the evening. And I don't want to be sitting around waiting to get robbed by a highwayman because we couldn't get back across the border before sundown.

THERMIS

Right! If anyone's going to rob and possibly kill us it's going to be one of our own countrymen!

(The Duke of Bismuth approaches.)

PUDINGO

Thermis, take a look at that guy. He looks rich. I bet he knows where we can unload all this gold.

BISMUTH

(bowing)

Werklood säämlyanöö!

(The Duke comes very close to Thermis and extends his hand to greet them.)

PUDINGO

He's speaking in tongues! He's possessed!

THERMIS

Get back you!

(Thermis stabs the Duke in the eye with his spear. Bismuth clutches at the wound and doubles over in pain, groaning.)

PUDINGO

Get him, Thermis! Now the other one!

(The Duke retreats a few steps, and stands up. He is still holding his wounded eye.)

BISMUTH

Ugh....I see you are foreigners. I should have known.

THERMIS

It's a Devil's trick, Pudingo. Don't be fooled!

PUDINGO

Wait, Thermis. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. Let's hear him out.

BISMUTH

I'm not possessed, alien friends. This is the language of Dulland: Dullandski. I took you at first for natives and was giving you a simple greeting before you...assaulted me.

PUDINGO

Oh...Oh! We're sorry! Aren't we?

THERMIS

Yes, sorry about that.

BISMUTH

Don't worry. A veteran of battle like myself should have seen that one coming. But now I suppose I won't see much of anything coming.

PUDINGO

We didn't mean to be so belligerent. We're here under orders from the King--the King of Plumania that is. We wish to buy some lead.

BISMUTH

You've come to the right place then. Dulland is the center of the lead-trading world.

THERMIS

But no one's said a word to us since we got here. No one but you, anyhow.

(Bismuth looks at his bloody hand with his bad eye, then moves his hand slightly so he can view it with his other eye.)

BISMUTH

Ungh, you have an interesting way of showing your gratitude. Anyhow, it is not a surprise no one is speaking to you, but do not take it personally. The language of the Dullanders is not an easy one. In fact it is among the hardest languages in the world. It is this complexity which makes the language so rich and potent. Why, I could make a single word which would require a whole paragraph in Plumanian. And the slightest error in my spelling or pronunciation would give the word a significantly different meaning altogether.

PUDINGO

Incredible!

BISMUTH

Yes, we are very fond of our achievements in this area. Did you know that our Bible is only three pages long and the shortest word found therein--quite an anomaly--is 13 letters long? It is true. Yet there is not a single drop of wisdom that is lost from the original. But, my new friends, this power comes at an unfortunate price. Because the language is so rich and complex it creates a lack of self-confidence in our people in communicating with one another. So the majority of the undereducated classes go their whole lives without speaking for fear of offending someone by saying the wrong thing by accident.

PUDINGO

How terrible. It must be depressing to go through life without speaking a word to anyone else.

THERMIS

What's the word?

BISMUTH

What?

THERMIS

What's the shortest word in your Bible?

BISMUTH

Do you really want to know?

THERMIS

Sure, I do.

BISMUTH

It is olvüülainetta.

THERMIS

Which means...

BISMUTH

It is a passage from the story of the Virgin Mary. In your language it would mean...give me a moment to think...

(pauses)

"Yea, and the pain of giving birth sent her to the base of a--"...hm, I don't know how to translate üla...it's a type of tree..."and she cried, 'I wish I was dead!' And the üla replied, 'Mary! Jerk me around a little at the base and I shall drop sustenance on you and soon you will feel satisfied.'

PUDINGO

Sir! Really! That is definitely not in the Bible!

BISMUTH

Isn't it?

PUDINGO

I would know if such a thing were, and I can safely tell you it's not.

THERMIS

I think he's right.

BISMUTH

Hm. Well, it's in *our* Bible. Maybe I've done a poor job translating it.

THERMIS

No...I'm pretty sure I've never heard any Bible stories about the Virgin Mary giving birth to the baby Jesus and then copulating with a talking tree before.

BISMUTH

Jesus? Jesus Who?

PUDINGO

This is a waste of time, Thermis! It'll be dark in a few minutes. Now we'll never get any lead and King Plumbpomo will throw us back in the dungeon.

BISMUTH

Nonsense, my new friend! Do you know who I am? I am the Duke of Bismuth, youngest brother of the King of Dulland! Give me your cart of gold and I will take it to a merchant and bring you back as much lead as you wish. But where is your ass?

THERMIS

Oh, God! I knew he seemed a little odd!

PUDINGO

He means for carrying the cart, stupid. We don't have one, your Dukeness. We've been taking turns pulling the gold.

BISMUTH

Well, that won't do. But I'm afraid I can't spare you an animal at the moment. One of you will have to pull the cart and follow me on my horse.

(Thermis and Pudingo shout "Not it!" in unison, but Pudingo is slightly slower.)

PUDINGO

Oh, damn! Listen, sir, can't we just stay here with the gold while you negotiate with the merchant?

BISMUTH

Hm, I suppose.

THERMIS

Bring us back something to eat too. Something good too. Not some of this smelly Dullander food the peasants eat. It's so...smelly.

PUDINGO

Thermis! He's not our servant. Show a little more respect.

BISMUTH

They have good food at the tavern down the path, but I'm afraid we won't have time to go there *and* the merchant's.

(removing a handkerchief from his blouse)

Take this. It bears the royal crest of Dulland.

(Pudingo takes the handkerchief but is perplexed by its purpose.)

PUDINGO

Um, thanks.

(smells it)

Did you want me to eat it? Or what?

BISMUTH

No, give it to the barkeep at the tavern. Then just make some gestures as if you're hungry, hold your fingers up to indicate there's two of you, and he'll serve you the finest meal in the house. You both can eat your supper here on the cart and take it easy until I get back. Try to enjoy at least this one brief part of your journey to my wonderful country.

PUDINGO and THERMIS

Thank you!

BISMUTH

Don't mention it. I will be off then, but I shall return as soon as I have settled a bargain with the leadseller!

(The Duke of Bismuth exits. The sound of his galloping horse fades.)

PUDINGO

OK, Thermis. Wait here and be on the lookout for bandits. I'll get us something to eat. And Thermis--

THERMIS

Yes?

PUDINGO

Try not to stab anybody important in the eye while I'm gone.

THERMIS

You can count on me!

PUDINGO

Yes, I can always count on you. It's what I can always count on you to do that worries me.

(Pudingo exits. Thermis resumes his vigilant watch, but soon sits down against the cart and begins snoring. A man in a blue robe slowly creeps up on him. He pokes Thermis with his finger, finds him to be fast asleep, and peeks under

the canvas covering the cart full of gold.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Ooh! He-he! This is perfect!

(Thermis wakes up groggily, looks around without noticing the old man right beside him, and falls back to sleep. Realizing he was too loud in his excitement, the Blue Magician goes about things more carefully.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Do you see that, Pete? A cart full of gold and only this one blockheaded guard protecting it? If I can outwit him then it will be all ours. I've spent decades perfecting my gold-into-lead spell, and the one ingredient I've lacked is a large enough sample of gold to fill all of Dulland with lead by the stroke of my wand and a few simple phrases in the ancient tongue. But now, Pete...now we have more than enough. And it's ours for the taking! I just need to shove this oaf over, ever so quietly. Then I'll pull the cart home, ever so quietly. And ever so quietly I'll cast a spell, and ever so quietly I'll make myself a castle of lead. And everything will be isolated and peaceful and quiet. How quiet, Pete? Why, ever so!

(The Blue Magician gently lifts Thermis, but he falls back against the cart. A second time he tries it, but again Thermis sinks back against the cart. The Blue Magician shakes his head, sits Thermis up straight, and wiggles his fingers. Thermis stays frozen in this position, and the Blue Magician tries to pull the cart by the handles, but finds it's too heavy for him. He goes around back and tries pushing it, but this doesn't move it either. Again and again he strains to move the cart, but it doesn't budge a hair's length.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Oh, this isn't working! But wait...maybe...yes. Pete, that's it! I'll get this idiot to do the work for me! Tee-hee! I'm so evil sometimes I scare myself! I scare you too sometimes, don't I, Pete? Hee-hee!

(The Blue Magician wiggles his fingers and Thermis rises as if he were an automaton, silently going to the handles of the cart and pulling it as the wizard follows him, dancing and wiggling his fingers. The stage is now empty and silent for

several seconds, and then Pudingo arrives carrying a little barrel of ale and a big sack full of food. His pace slows as he returns to the spot where the cart was. Pudingo looks around and the food and ale fall from his hands.)

PUDINGO

I'm screwed!

(Pudingo bends over to pick up the food and spies Thermis' spear lying on the ground. He picks it up and looks around again.)

PUDINGO

Thermis, my friend, where are you? Your Dukeness? Anybody?

(Whispers from off-stage grow louder. Someone mutters, "I think the filthy bastard went this way!" Another yells, "I'll rip his fucking guts out when I get ahold of him!" Yet another scolds him in a subdued tone, "Quiet! Do you want someone to hear you?" Pudingo nervously picks up the spear and stands defensively, waiting for the approach of whoever is coming towards him. The first voice, louder than before, shouts, "I think I see something! Down there! Come on, let's get him before he slips away again!" The curtain falls.)

SCENE TWO

(The forest outside of the Blue Magician's house-- a large, dead tree with a window and door.

Thermis, entranced, pulls the cart of gold with the Blue Magician dancing oddly and wiggling his fingers in Thermis' direction behind him.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Good! Now...

(he shoots his fingers out straight)

Stop!

(Thermis freezes in his tracks.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

We're here, Pete! We're home at last! Now we just have to make this idiot carry the gold inside.

(The Blue Magician mutters a few magic words and wiggles his fingers. He waves his hand to swat an insect buzzing around his face, then his other. The pest lands on his face, is swatted away, then lands again. The Blue Magician swipes and curses it for harassing him, shouting angrily for it to be gone. He finally manages to capture it in his palm.)

THERMIS

(speaking dully in his trance)

Your bidding is my desire, O great and handsome Blue Magician.

(Thermis sets the cart down and walks to the old tree.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

What are you doing?

(Thermis breaks a branch from the tree and walks back to the cart.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

I was getting rid of a pest. Go back to the cart, blockhead!

(Thermis lifts up the branch slowly and then thrusts it quickly into the Blue Magician's eye. The old wizard hunches over and howls in pain. Thermis continues standing motionless with the branch, waiting for his next command.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Ohhh, my eye! You put out my eye, you stupid bastard!

(putting pressure on the wound with his hands)

Ack!

(pulls hands away)

Now I've put the bug in the wound! You damned fool! I wasn't casting a spell, I was trying to catch a fly!

(The wizard painfully covers his eye with his unsoiled hand and with the other casts a spell over his face. Slowly he removes his hand and stands upright again.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Forget it all! I was better off with the tree slaves. I'll just kill this one off and eat his flesh for dinner. What? But Pete, this one doesn't even know--yes, yes, I know it's the rules. But--oh, all right, all right!

(The Blue Magician wiggles his fingers and Thermis comes out of his trance.)

THERMIS

Where...am I?

(Thermis remembers his duty and finds the cart...and the strange surroundings he is now in.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

(angry)

What do you want then?

THERMIS

What do I want? Who are you? Did you bring me here?

BLUE MAGICIAN

Yes, yes, I brought you here. What do you want? Tell me!

THERMIS

What do you mean what do I want? I want to know where I am and who you are.

BLUE MAGICIAN

I am the Blue Magician. I brought you here because you were in danger. Don't you remember? A gang of bandits were after you for your cart and I rescued you. You really remember none of it?

THERMIS

No...What happened to your eye? It looks terrible.

BLUE MAGICIAN

It was the price I paid for rescuing you. Now what do you want, damn it!

THERMIS

Why do you keep asking me what I want? If anything, I owe you, if your story is true.

BLUE MAGICIAN

One who stabs a blue magician in the eye can demand anything he wants from him.

THERMIS

Then it is not me you should ask, but this bandit who attacked you.

BLUE MAGICIAN

No, no, he will only kill me if I go back. So instead I am asking you.

THERMIS

But I don't want anything. Your kindness and bravery are enough of a gift. It is I who should be offering what I have.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Listen, stupid: I don't have a choice. I am bound by the laws of my service to the great goddess to be indebted to you at a price you name. It is my punishment for allowing a mortal to wound me in the one spot where I am susceptible to attack. Now we can either stand here all night arguing about chivalry or you can tell me what you want.

THERMIS

Do you have any lead? I could really use a few thousand tons of lead.

BLUE MAGICIAN

A few thou--why, what do you take me for? A philanthropist?
(checks his temper)

I mean...dear boy, lead is very important to me. It is, er, of religious significance to me as a man of the cloth. I cannot give this to you. But ask of me something more valuable than lead and I will give it to you with no hesitation.

THERMIS

What else do you have?

(glances at the tree)

That your home?

BLUE MAGICIAN

Uh..yes..but you don't mean to deprive an old man of his home, do you?

THERMIS

Nah, it looks pretty shitty. But maybe you've got something inside I could have.

BLUE MAGICIAN

What's most valuable to you of all things?

THERMIS

Hm. Well, like I said, I really need to find lead. And fast. Otherwise the king is going to chop off my head.

BLUE MAGICIAN

So really it is not the lead you are after, but your own life. The lead is merely the vehicle by which you gain what is more important to you.

THERMIS

Well, true. But life is sort of taken for granted as being most important. Plus, how could you give me what I already have?

BLUE MAGICIAN

I can't, as you put it, give you what you already have...but I can perhaps help you protect your assets.

THERMIS

(wary)

Go on.

BLUE MAGICIAN

I have here a good friend of mine--my only friend actually--a magical snail by the name of Pete. I promise you that he will save your life one day when nothing else seems to offer you that hope.

THERMIS

Really.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Oh, yes. You can trust my word on that. Quiet, Pete.

THERMIS

Hm, well, if he's your only friend, maybe I'd rather take the lead. Friendship is more important than some metal or easily replaceable religious symbols, isn't it?

BLUE MAGICIAN

No.

THERMIS

Oh, all right then. Where is he?

BLUE MAGICIAN

He's invisible. But open your hand and I will place him there. You must remember! Be gentle and never forget where you put him. Otherwise he may be hurt or crawl away and get lost.

(Thermis opens his hand and the Blue Magician takes the snail from his pocket and places it on his waiting fingertips.)

THERMIS

I don't feel anything.

BLUE MAGICIAN

He's very light.

(Thermis moves his hand.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Careful! Careful.

THERMIS

How will I know he's still there?

BLUE MAGICIAN

Talk to him. Ask him where he is.

THERMIS

(pulling his hand up close to his mouth and shouting)

Hello! Petel!

(The Blue Magician pulls Thermis' hand down gently)

BLUE MAGICIAN

You're going to deafen him like that, my friend.

(Thermis shrugs and empties his open hand into his pocket.)

THERMIS

Gee, I feel kind of bad you saving my life *and* giving me your only friend. I wish I had something to give you as a token of my appreciation.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Perhaps you can, my new friend. Perhaps you can. Something in the cart you're always dragging around, maybe?

THERMIS

Oh! I've got it!

(Thermis digs around under the canvas covering the cart. The Blue Magician becomes excited.)

THERMIS

I completely forgot about this.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Oh? You don't say.

THERMIS

I *do* say. I sent Pudingo out for nothing.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Really. Pudingo, hm? Well, he doesn't need to know about our little...exchange.

THERMIS

You're right. Besides, I can give you half and he won't know the difference. Ah, here we go.

(Thermis returns from his excursion under the tarp and produces a head-sized leather bag. The large grin on the Blue Magician's face fades.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

What is this?

THERMIS

Beans. Please, take it. I have more. It really was foolish of me to ask Pudingo to go to the inn. We had plenty of beans in the cart. You see, I forgot I packed them because I put them in first, and then we put all the gold in on top of them. Now that I think of it, that's where I put the map too. I wish I had remembered that 15 miles ago.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Beans? What the hell are beans?

THERMIS

I know it isn't much. But please. They're yours.

(The Blue Magician grabs the bag and looks inside, expecting to be impressed very little. His face suddenly glows with astonishment. His hands tremble.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Älmyakki...

(The wizard shuts the bag again and clutches it to his bosom protectively.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

You're right. This isn't much. But it will have to do. Let us say goodbye to each other now.

(Thermis sticks out his arms to embrace the Blue Magician.)

THERMIS

Well, until we meet again. I can't thank you enough for everything. I only wish I could remember what happened. You know, it amazes me that I could have been so--

BLUE MAGICIAN

Yes, bye!

(The Blue Magician runs into the tree-house and

slams the door behind him, leaving Thermis frozen in a one-man hug. Peering behind his window, the wizard's eyes shift suspiciously to the right and left. Thermis unfreezes and confusedly returns to the cart. Picking up the handles, he turns it around and struggles to heave it back off-stage.)

SCENE THREE

(Pudingo is where we left him at the end of Scene One. Three bandits have encircled him with daggers drawn and though Pudingo is desperately trying to scare them off with his spear, it is obvious they are not really frightened by it but are just cruelly toying with him.)

BANDIT 1

Don't let him cast one of his spells!

BANDIT 2

You've tricked us out of our money at cards for the last time, magician.

BANDIT 3

He doesn't look like no Blue Magician to me.

BANDIT 1

Don't be fooled! He's only disguised himself as a stylus pusher.

PUDINGO

Back! Get back! I'm not afraid of you! Stylus pusher or not, I was in the Great War! I know how to kill a man and I'm not afraid to!

BANDIT 1

Oooh, we're real scared, aren't we?

BANDIT 2

Be careful, boys. He was in the Great War!

(They all three laugh.)

BANDIT 3

We was in the war too, young man. That is, until we wasn't paid for the work we done.

PUDINGO

Plumania would never hire such scum to fight for it! Plumania is an honorable country!

BANDIT 2

Oh, sure. But it's not so easy to maintain one's honor when the troops aren't being fed or paid and they're tired of marching every day on empty stomachs.

BANDIT 1

And that's why we got hired. One of the king's fancy little maidens of a minister came and he tells us to do whatever necessary to get grains for the horses and ales for the soldiers. So we *did* what was necessary and burned a few villages to the ground and ransacked the storehouses. We even brought us some women for the men so they wouldn't get lonely. And what's the thanks we get? This little pansy puts a proclamation on our heads for a bounty to anyone that brings us back to the king dead or alive. He calls us traitors and thugs. Traitors! We were helping our own people win the war! Thugs! We were only doing what he told us to do! We were heroes!

PUDINGO

I know this story...you aren't heroes. You killed your own people!

BANDIT 3

Thinking outside the box. That's all it was.

PUDINGO

You burned your own countrymen's homes down and looted the bodies afterwards. That isn't heroic. That's horrible! You're nothing but dirty murderers and thieves!

BANDIT 2

We prefer the term "logistical consultants." And we *was* heroes until that little wretch Pizango turned his back on us when it was politically favorable.

PUDINGO

Pizango? But that's...my father's name.

BANDIT 1

What!

BANDIT 2

Did you hear that? This is the fucking cunt's own maggoty flesh and filthy blood!

BANDIT 3

Now we really have to kill him!

BANDIT 1

And send his head back to Dad gift-wrapped care of The Three Traitors of Plumania!

BANDIT 3

Now that's thinking *inside* the box, Gene!

(The three bandits close in on Pudingo, who drops the spear and sinks down to the ground. The galloping of a horse approaches, and Bismuth bursts onto the stage with his sword drawn and slashes the three surprised bandits to death in moments. Resheathing his blade, Bismuth pulls Pudingo up by the hand and kicks one of the bandits as he tries to crawl away. The bandit makes a final effort to move, then gives up the ghost and lies motionless next to the other two bodies.)

BISMUTH

Are you all right?

PUDINGO

Yeah...just a little shaken up.

BISMUTH

What did they want with you?

PUDINGO

I don't know. They thought I was someone who cheated them at cards. A magician.

BISMUTH

Ah, yes. There are a couple of magicians in this region who are, shall we say, less than popular with the villagers.

PUDINGO

Thermis is gone. And I think the bandits may have something to do with it. All I found when I came back was his spear.

BISMUTH

Hm, this is bad news indeed. But I'm afraid I have some more for you. The merchant is quite willing to sell you as much lead as you like, but he seemed rather unimpressed with your offer.

PUDINGO

What? There was more gold in that cart than most people have ever seen in their lives.

BISMUTH

I'm afraid you won't find too many people in Dulland who are interested in gold. It holds no value to us.

PUDINGO

Well, what does he want then? The king isn't going to like this!

BISMUTH

I don't know what you can offer him. But it seems moot whether he would have accepted the gold or not. If the bandits did take it, then that means there are more of them than these three. Your cart--and your friend--are surely long gone by now. Maybe even dead.

PUDINGO

Thermis dead!

BISMUTH

I wouldn't put it past them. They'd sooner kill you than have you witness their crime and remember their faces.

PUDINGO

Oh, God! My poor, stupid Thermis! His head was empty, but he was a fine friend in moderate doses!

BISMUTH

Yes, I'm almost sure he's dead by now. Probably tortured first, too.

PUDINGO

Oh, I knew I shouldn't have left him alone!

(Bismuth tries to console Pudingo by patting him on the back. He then rolls the three bandits over into a pile and checks their bodies for treasure. He puts something shiny into his pocket and then stabs all three bodies again.)

BISMUTH

I just wanted to be sure.

(Thermis, exhausted and out of breath, drags the cart slowly into the scene. Pudingo and Bismuth come to meet him and help him with the cart. They drag it to the center of the stage and set it down. Pudingo slaps him on the back and hugs him.)

Bismuth tousles his hair.)

PUDINGO

Thermis! You're alive!

THERMIS

(heaving with exhaustion)

Helhh...yes...helhh...

(he gasps and catches his breath, wiping his brow)

Bandits. Blue Magician saved my life. Granted wish. Stabbed eye. Invisible snail.

PUDINGO

What is he saying?

BISMUTH

He's delirious. Most likely crazy after whatever horrific events happened to him. But it sounds as if he's met the Blue Magician--the very wizard these bandits were meaning to kill when they came after you.

PUDINGO

Thermis, is this true? You met the Blue Magician?

THERMIS

Yes. Blue Magician. Gave half our beans to. As reward. Saved life.

PUDINGO

So it's true!

BISMUTH

My God! Did he say beans?

PUDINGO

Yes, beans. Why? What's so important about some beans? I had forgotten them myself until just now. But we brought two sacks with us in case we couldn't find any other source of food.

BISMUTH

Two sacks! Käärsoni! Why didn't you tell me you had beans to begin with? Don't you know what this means? We can go to the merchant at once!

PUDINGO

With what? A sack of beans? Is he some sort of bean aficionado or something?

BISMUTH

Dear friend, there haven't been any beans in Dulland for almost three hundred years. A strange disease wiped them out and our land was cursed never to grow them again. Even a handful of them would buy you all the lead you could ever desire! Why, with a whole sack you could buy enough mules and carts to carry his whole warehouse of lead back to Plumania with you!

PUDINGO

We're saved!

THERMIS

(still breathing heavily)

Hoo...*(gasp)*...ray.

BISMUTH

Where are the beans now?

PUDINGO

In the cart.

(Pudingo frantically rummages through the back of the cart for the sack of beans.)

BISMUTH

My dear Thermis. I admire your giving spirit in rewarding the magician for saving you, but to give him a whole sack of beans...I fear what evil he might do with such immense wealth at his disposal.

PUDINGO

Aha!

(Pudingo holds up the bag and brings it to Bismuth, who grabs it and puts his arm across his chest.)

BISMUTH

My friends, I swear an oath to you on everything I hold sacred that not a single legume from this bag shall go undelivered to the leadseller's. Wait here and I will return as soon as I can with your lead.

PUDINGO

That's very kind of you, Duke, but surely the merchant has closed up for the night.

BISMUTH

Trust me. For a child's handful of these beans he would come here in his

nightgown. For a whole bag he will probably carry thirty carts of lead across the ocean if you told him to. Now be on the alert for more bandits. Take this.

(The Duke throws his sword onto the ground in front of Pudingo and Thermis.)

BISMUTH

I'll be as fast as I can!

(The Duke runs off, shouting, "Hyahh!" The galloping of his horse drops off into the night. Pudingo and Thermis stare at the sword, then at each other. A few silent moments pass by, and they both fight to pick it up and claim it for their own.)

PUDINGO

It's mine!

THERMIS

Gimme!

PUDINGO

He said I could have it!

THERMIS

No, he said I could! Get away!

(They lamely attempt to slap each other's faces, but neither is brave enough to get too close. Finally Pudingo overpowers Thermis and takes the sword, crawling to the top of the cart and wielding it defensively. Thermis grumbles and retrieves his spear.)

THERMIS

I don't care about your stupid sword anyway! The spear is better!

(Thermis twirls it.)

THERMIS

I bet you can't even do this.

(Pudingo tries to twirl the sword and drops it.)

Thermis races over and picks it up, running away from the cart again with both weapons. He stares at the both in glee, and tosses the spear towards the cart.)

THERMIS

There. You can have that.

(Thermis fights an imaginary foe with the newly-won prize. Pudingo climbs down from the cart, pouting.)

THERMIS

What's wrong? I was only joking. You can have it in a minute.

PUDINGO

I was such a coward, Thermis. If it weren't for the Duke I'd be dead right now.

THERMIS

What?

(glancing over his shoulder at the pile of bodies)

Those three? Don't worry about it. I mean, the Duke is probably a trained fighter. You were an accountant during the war.

PUDINGO

I was a scribe!

THERMIS

Whatever. My point is, some people are made into fighters and some people are made into scientists. And that's what you and I are. We aren't cut out for this kind of thing. So why be ashamed of what you aren't instead of being proud of what you are?

PUDINGO

Maybe. I just wish I hadn't been so helpless. I curled into a ball like a child!

THERMIS

So? I would've done the same thing if the Blue Magician hadn't saved me. Who cares? You shouldn't be so uptight. Things are finally working out for us for once. I mean, in an hour or so the Duke is going to come back with more lead than I think King Plumbpomo ever imagined we'd come back with.

PUDINGO

He probably expected us to fail.

THERMIS

Of course he did. If he thought he could rely on us he probably would have at least given us some horses to pull this cart.

PUDINGO

You're right.

THERMIS

And now we're going back to him with a whole caravan full of lead. And what's more, we didn't spend a single grain of his gold.

PUDINGO

You're...right. Thermis, I have an idea.

THERMIS

Oh?

PUDINGO

Say we didn't tell the king about the beans.

THERMIS

He'll be kind of curious how we got the lead then, won't he? After all, we didn't just walk out of Dulland with thirty cartloads of free lead.

PUDINGO

No, we didn't. We paid for it with a wagon full of gold.

THERMIS

We did?

PUDINGO

No. But we did. See?

THERMIS

Ahhhh, ok. I mean, no. No, I don't see.

PUDINGO

We take the lead to the king, all right? Only, we don't take him the gold. We'll hide it somewhere in the countryside where only we two know about it. Then we wait for the price to rise again, and that's when we go and dig it up and sell it!

THERMIS

Hey, that's good. That's real good! But, Pudingo. Why don't we take the gold, buy

every bean in the country, and come back here? We could make a bazillion times as much that way!

PUDINGO

Thermis, how is it two people as stupid as us can be such brilliant economists? It's almost scary.

THERMIS

It's the manner of the trade, Pudingo. Maybe we aren't as stupid as we once thought.

PUDINGO

We'd better light a fire. It's getting chilly and who knows when the Duke will be back.

THERMIS

Did you ever bring something to eat from the inn? We may be rich as kings now, but my stomach isn't any fuller for it.

PUDINGO

Oh, yes! The food. It's um...

(Scanning the ground, Pudingo sees the sack containing the food, which is caught beneath the wheel of the cart. He tugs on it, but it's clearly smashed and stuck for good under the wheel.)

PUDINGO

The bandits took it.

THERMIS

Oh, too bad!

PUDINGO

But we do have this.

THERMIS

What?

(Pudingo pulls out the Duke's handkerchief. Taking the sword from Thermis, who is less than eager to hand it over, Pudingo cuts the handkerchief in half. They begin chewing on it.)

PUDINGO

It's not that bad, actually. Not bad at all.

THERMIS

Mine tastes weird...like....ew!

PUDINGO

Just close your eyes and pretend you're eating a seven course meal. Soon enough we'll be doing that three times a day. With four desserts and a roasted pig for a midnight snack. Mmm.

(Wincing and about to vomit, Thermis continues to chew.)

THERMIS

Mmm.

(he swallows, and tries to talk without gagging)

Heavenly.

PUDINGO

Mmmmmm.

(swallows)

Don't worry, Thermis. Things can only get better for us from here on in.

ACT III.

SCENE ONE

(The lead-adorned throne room of King Plumbpomo. The king, a fat, short man, is standing in the middle of the stage in only his underwear with the royal tailor taking his measurements. They both are rather annoyed by the process. The room is otherwise empty save the Captain of the Guard, who rigidly takes his position at the right side of the main entrance and holds a pike.)

PLUMBPOMO

How much longer is this going to take, tailor? I'm busy.

TAILOR

It takes as long as it takes, Your Highness. And the longer the body, the longer the measure.

PLUMBPOMO

Are you calling me fat?

TAILOR

It's not my place to judge Your Highness, Your Highness. I only regret now that I accepted this job on a commission rather than per an estimate. And I fear if I let these trousers out any further the fabric will demand suffrage.

PLUMBPOMO

Not in my kingdom!

(The tailor winds up his measuring tape and jots a few notes down.)

TAILOR

All right, Your Highness. Give me a week or so.

PLUMBPOMO

Good, good, go, get out of here! Idiot!

(The tailor grabs the bundle of clothes and his

papers and exits briskly.)

PLUMBPOMO

Idiots! I'm surrounded by idiots?

(looks around)

Where are my clothes? Oh, for Heaven's sake! Captain!

CAPTAIN

Hup!

(The Captain of the Guard clicks his heels together.)

PLUMBPOMO

Go and fetch my clothes from that tailor!

CAPTAIN

Hup!

(The Captain pivots mechanically and exits the throne room. Plumbpomo paces this way and that. He goes to his throne, picks up his newly-crafted crown of pure lead, and places it delicately onto his head with his fingertips.)

PLUMBPOMO

What a burden it is being the only intellectual in the kingdom! Oh, if only I hadn't burned down the university! What was I thinking? I'm so alone now in my genius. So alone! No one to discuss important matters like politics and philosophy with. No one! All around me are idiots and lackeys who are only capable of doing what I order and nothing else. Why, if I asked them their opinion on something as simple as the weather what would they do but stare at me in fear and ask me what *my* opinion on it was?

(The Captain enters with the king's clothing. He puts it on as the Captain returns to his post.)

PLUMBPOMO

You! Captain!

CAPTAIN

Hup!

(The Captain clicks his heels. Plumbpomo slowly

saunters towards him.)

PLUMBPOMO

What is your name?

CAPTAIN

Me sir? I'm the Captain!

PLUMBPOMO

I know that, idiot! Tell me your real name! Your given name!

CAPTAIN

Why, nobody's ever asked me that before, Your Highness. Even my wife calls me Captain. But I suppose before I was in the guard service people used to call me Leon.

PLUMBPOMO

Leon? How majestic sounding. And tell me, Leon, what do you think of politics and philosophy?

CAPTAIN

Um, what do you think of it, My Lord?

PLUMBPOMO

I didn't ask you what I thought of it, Leon! I asked you what you thought of it!

CAPTAIN

(gulping)

Um...well, sir...I don't really follow the arts.

PLUMBPOMO

Let me take an easier approach, Leon. I suppose you've had no schooling anyway. Suppose we discuss courage. You're a fighting man, aren't you?

CAPTAIN

I like to think so, Your Highness.

PLUMBPOMO

How do you define courage, Leon?

CAPTAIN

Well...I guess it's like what makes you willing to fight and risk danger.

PLUMBPOMO

Is that the only requirement?

CAPTAIN

I don't know, My Lord. I suppose so.

PLUMBPOMO

But, Leon, aren't those who prey on the innocents also willing to fight and risk danger? Are these people courageous?

CAPTAIN

Yes, sir. I suppose in a sense they are.

PLUMBPOMO

What! No, no, no, you idiot! You're supposed to say no!

(spins around, waves hand in anger)

Damn it! How am I supposed to engage the Socratic method with idiots like you!

CAPTAIN

I could say no if you want me to sir.

PLUMBPOMO

Forget it! What's the use of exchanging ideas with someone who has all the wrong opinions about everything?

CAPTAIN

Begging your pardon, My Lord, but why are my opinions wrong simply because you don't agree with them?

PLUMBPOMO

Because I'm the king, damn it! I am always right!

CAPTAIN

Then forgive me for asking, but why does His Highness bother having an exchange of ideas?

PLUMBPOMO

You're too stupid to understand it, Captain!

CAPTAIN

Try me, sir.

PLUMBPOMO

When the stupid man talks to his king, he is always wrong except when he agrees

with the king. Do you understand?

CAPTAIN

I think so, sir.

PLUMBPOMO

But, on the other hand, when the wise man talks to his king, he is sometimes right even when he disagrees with the king. And this makes the king go, "Ahhh. I see your point." And both benefit from this exchange.

CAPTAIN

And how many times has this happened to His Highness, Your Majesty?

PLUMBPOMO

Never! Why do you think I burned down the university, Captain? The Church is supposed to be sending me men of learning, wise men, great men to be my counsel. But all I get are a lot of idiots with fancy clothes and exaggerated voices who faint in the sunlight and disagree with me about everything. Don't they know who I am! I'm the King!

CAPTAIN

So what My Lord really wants is someone wise enough to anticipate what the king thinks on a given subject and then pass it off as his own opinion while at the same time pretending to be independent in his true thoughts and confident enough to express them.

PLUMBPOMO

Of course! What do you think I meant by "wise men?" Did it really take you so long to figure that out? No wonder you're only a...a...Captain of the Guard! Ohhhh!

(Barnabas enters carrying a box of scrolls.)

PLUMBPOMO

Barnabas! The wisest man in all of Plumania!

BARNABAS

Your Majesty?

PLUMBPOMO

It is always a pleasure to see my sweet Barnabas!

BARNABAS

Oh, well, thank you, sir. I've brought the census. It took twenty years, but we finally have the results in from every village in the kingdom. It was tough to get

many of the peasants to participate--even to give us their names so we could add them into the population figures. They took it for some kind of scam. But we killed the ones who refused and the rest soon cooperated.

PLUMBPOMO

Twenty years? Has it been so long? But how can they still be accurate after two decades?

BARNABAS

Don't worry, Your Highness. We took the liberty of estimating how many people would die and be born each year when we started.

(Barnabas unrolls one of the scrolls.)

BARNABAS

This one's on population growth trends. His Highness will be pleased to hear that the population growth of Plumanian citizens is averaging 10% in all counties. Ten years ago the population of Glacia was 20,000. Five years ago it was 30,000. We're expecting very much from the Glacian people in terms of tax revenues over the next few years. In Phrylogia the numbers are even more encouraging.

PLUMBPOMO

Excellent news, Barnabas! Tell your staff I'll be doubling their salaries next year for all their efforts.

CAPTAIN

Begging your pardon for interrupting, sirs, but Glacia was destroyed by a massive flood two years ago. No one survived.

BARNABAS

Oh...

CAPTAIN

And His Highness had Phrylogia quarantined and burned to the ground only a month ago to prevent the plague from spreading to any of the people who lived there.

PLUMBPOMO

Yes, that's true. I had forgotten about that.

BARNABAS

Not a problem, sir.

(Barnabas removes a pen from his box and

scratches a line slowly out of the scroll.)

BARNABAS

Glacia...

(scratches another line lower down.)

and Phrylogia. There. Give me a few days to revise these numbers.

PLUMBPOMO

Oh, forget it! I don't care how many people live here anyway! Tell me what news you have about lead. I want to know how much money you've made me, Barnabas!

BARNABAS

Um, right, sir.

(rummages nervously through his box)

Lead...lead...

(produces a scroll)

Ah, lead. Yes, we've been able to press the people with a 100% lead tax and managed to gather nearly four and a half thousand pounds.

PLUMBPOMO

Good, good! But what else?

BARNABAS

What else? Um...

(reads the scroll desperately, flips it over)

Oh, OK. We also have some good news from the fight against the murderous traitor, Caesar Salad. Two pencil factories and a lead cosmetics warehouse were captured and the spoils are on their way back as we speak. Also, that traitorous murderer is now barricaded inside of a cave to the north, but is expected to be smoked out and captured within days. I will have more news on this matter as it arrives, Your Highness.

PLUMBPOMO

Send a letter to the Baron. Caesar Salad is to brought to me alive. I want to know who else is involved in this plot against me if it takes years of torture. If he's killed then his co-conspirators will escape the justice they deserve.

(Barnabas bows. He collects his scrolls and carries the box of them out of the throne room.

Plumbpomo sits at his throne and twiddles his fingers. A trumpet is heard in the distance, and Thermis and Pudingo soon enter the throne room.)

PLUMBPOMO

Captain! Who are these two?

(The Captain clicks his heels together.)

CAPTAIN

Former alchemists, Your Highness. They were imprisoned in the dungeon for disobeying your demand to make a gold machine, then freed when their prediction that the value of lead would soon far exceed that of even gold came to pass. You recently sent them on a mission to secure as much lead from the kingdom of Dulland as they could buy, Your Highness.

PLUMBPOMO

Oh, right. And how badly did you two fail on this, the simplest of all missions?

PUDINGO

We hope it pleases the King to know that for the one wagon of gold Your Majesty gave us as an investment, we were able to return with thirty times as many of lead.

PLUMBPOMO

Thirty ti--you're joking, aren't you? You know I don't like jokes!

THERMIS

It's true. Look outside!

(Plumbpomo steps off his throne and peers out the window, then back at Thermis and Pudingo. He slowly walks back to his throne.)

PLUMBPOMO

Thirty times...

(counting on his fingers)

This means nothing to me!

THERMIS

What!

PLUMBPOMO

Had I sent someone more competent he surely would have brought me back sixty wagons if not more. I should have sent Barnabas. He would not have failed me so miserably.

PUDINGO

Your Highness, please take into consideration how worthless gold is. We were

lucky to find anyone to take it.

PLUMBPOMO

Nonsense! I remember now who you two were. You lied to me and made excuses for your own laziness, and now you are doing it again. Be grateful I don't send you to your deaths!

(Barnabas rushes in.)

BARNABAS

Your Highness! In the east, a farmer found a wagon full of gold bearing your Royal Mark! It was buried under a haystack!

PUDINGO

(to Thermis)

That was your great hiding place? You buried a wagon full of gold under a haystack?

THERMIS

Why would anybody look for a wagon full of gold there?

PLUMBPOMO

This must be the very gold I gave you two. But how did you purchase thirty wagons full of lead without gold?

BARNABAS

Perhaps they didn't, My Lord! It is known Caesar Salad's cousin is the Duke of Bismuth, heir to the throne of Dulland. It's possible these two are part of a great conspiracy meaning to overthrow Your Majesty and install a king loyal to the Dullanders.

PLUMBPOMO

Filthy Dulland scum!

THERMIS

Hey, they aren't so bad once you get to know them.

BARNABAS

Proof, My Lord! Proof of their guilt!

PLUMBPOMO

Do you deny knowing the Duke of Bismuth?

THERMIS

Know him? Who do you think arranged for us to get all of this lead?

BARNABAS

Oh, their treachery knows no end, Your Highness!

PLUMBPOMO

So you meant to help the Duke and his cousin overthrow me? And what was your reward? The wagon of gold? Tell me!

PUDINGO

All right, all right! I admit we were going to take the gold, but we aren't part of a conspiracy!

BARNABAS

How then did you manage to get thirty wagons of lead and sixty Arabian horses?

PUDINGO

Beans. We traded it for a bag of beans.

PLUMBPOMO

Beans?

BARNABAS

They mock you, Your Highness! They know they'll soon be dead for their treason and waste your time by laughing at you!

THERMIS

No, it's true! We tried to sell them the gold but they didn't want it. Then a wizard came and I gave him a bag of beans for saving my life. He acted weird as if they were more magical than the talking snail he gave me as a present, and then the Duke of Bismuth came and told me that beans were very valuable in Dulland and that they could buy us whatever we wanted. He rode off with the sack of beans to the lead merchant and came back an hour later with the thirty wagons. I swear it's the truth!

PLUMBPOMO

Wizards, magic snails--this is ridiculous!

PUDINGO

(to Thermis)

You didn't tell me he gave you a magic snail.

THERMIS

Oh, it must have slipped my mind.

PUDINGO

How come I don't get one? I want a magic snail too!

BARNABAS

Let me kill them myself, Your Highness! You don't deserve to hear such insults to your intelligence!

PLUMBPOMO

And tell me, where is this magic snail this so-called wizard gave you?

(Thermis reaches into his pocket and holds out his hand.)

THERMIS

Right here!

(Plumbpomo walks towards Thermis and peers into his hand.)

PLUMBPOMO

I don't see anything.

THERMIS

He's invisible.

PLUMBPOMO

Well, of course he is! How silly of me! Why wouldn't he be? After all, only an idiot would trade a bag of beans worth thirty wagons of lead for a visible talking snail!

(Plumbpomo swipes Thermis' hand and smashes the floor, grinding the invisible snail into pulp. Thermis drops to the floor by his foot and cries.)

THERMIS

Pete! No! Oh, Pete! How could he?

BARNABAS

Please, Your Majesty, let me cut their throats and send their heads back to the Duke of Bismuth as a warning!

PUDINGO

Heads! That's it! I had almost forgotten!

PLUMBPOMO

What scheme are you plotting now?

PUDINGO

In the first wagon you will find the heads of the three most notorious traitors to ever escape from Plumania alive. The very ones who my father, Pizango, declared to be enemies of the state. They were killed by the Duke of Bismuth in a heroic battle that saved my own life, and he asked nothing in return.

BARNABAS

Why would he? You were already in his service as co-conspirators.

PLUMBPOMO

No, Barnabas. I think I understand now what's going on. These two are far too stupid to be part of any plot against me. But I think they have been used to further that plot more than they realize.

(to Thermis and Pudingo)

My dear, stupid, Thermis and Pudingo, do you not understand? Do you really think beans are so valuable to the Dullanders? No, they are as worthless as they are here. What happened was you allowed the Duke to fool you into thinking they were some great treasure. In reality, he probably threw them into the first ditch. Why would the heir to the throne of Dulland need to pay a lead merchant anything? Especially when his cousin, the treacherous Caesar Salad, is one of the largest purchasers of lead in the world? No, I'm afraid they used you two. No doubt they know something about this lead I don't. Perhaps it's cursed. Perhaps poisoned with witch potions to the point where one can no longer safely use it for toothpaste and goblets. In any case, the lead will have to be destroyed.

BARNABAS

What shall we do with these two?

PLUMBPOMO

It is possible their story is true. But if it is, it makes them thieves of the Royal Treasury. And if it isn't, then all the worse for them on the Day of Judgment. Either way, my sentence is passed. Take them to the dungeon. They'll die tomorrow.

(to the Captain of the Guard)

Captain!

(The Captain clicks his heels.)

CAPTAIN

Hup!

PLUMBPOMO

Have your men take these two to the dungeon.

CAPTAIN

Hup!

*(The captain exits, then returns with two guards.
They pick Thermis up off the ground, and drag
him and Pudingo out of the throne room.)*

THERMIS

Pete! Peeeeeete!

SCENE TWO

(Castle dungeon. A withered old man, half-naked and chained to the wall, stands motionless. Thermis and Pudingo are pushed violently through the door and down the stairs by three guards. The dungeonmaster follows.)

DUNGEONMASTER

All right, boys. All right. Take it easy. We don't want to injure them before the big show tomorrow.

(The guards shackle Thermis and Pudingo to the wall with the old man between them and exit.)

DUNGEONMASTER

I'll be back in a sec. Don't go anywhere.
(exits)

PUDINGO

Great! Just great! Yet again I listen to you and look what happens.

THERMIS

Me? What did I do?

PUDINGO

It was your big idea to hide the gold. I wanted to give it to the king.

THERMIS

My idea? It was your idea! You forced me to go along with it!

PUDINGO

What? How are you going to stand there and--you--why I should--

(Pudingo tries to strangle Thermis but his hands are held fast by the short chains. Thermis kicks him in the shins, and they begin feebly trying to fight one another. The old man wakes up and surveys the fight.)

SCARAMIS

Boys, boys. Calm down.

THERMIS

Shut up, old man! This doesn't concern you!

PUDINGO

Yeah, put a lid on it!

SCARAMIS

Doesn't concern me? Oh, dear boys, don't you remember your own teacher?

(Thermis and Pudingo stop fighting and take a hard look at the old man.)

PUDINGO

Scaramis?

THERMIS

Is it really?

SCARAMIS

Heh, yes, boys. It's me. It's been many years, and I've let my hair grow out a bit since then.

THERMIS

Can this really be the same Scaramis who used to lead us on hikes to the mines?

PUDINGO

The same Scaramis who challenged the entire class to a pushups contest and won?

SCARAMIS

That was a long time ago.

THERMIS

Oh, Scaramis! It's wonderful to see you, sir!

(Thermis attempts to hug him, but is thwarted by the chains' brief reach.)

PUDINGO

But what are you doing here? You are one of the gentlest and wisest men who ever lived! What crime could you have committed?

SCARAMIS

I failed the king, boys. That is my crime. He put me to work in the laboratory to fill the spot left by you, and when I couldn't do what he asked--no, demanded me to

do, he became furious and locked me in the dungeon. They're going to execute me tomorrow.

PUDINGO

No!

THERMIS

Terrible!

PUDINGO

And to think even the great Scaramis, the wisest alchemist of them all, cannot do what Plumbpomo wants! It is truly impossible then.

SCARAMIS

No, Pudingo. Nothing is impossible.

PUDINGO

Then...you know something we don't.

SCARAMIS

I haven't quite been able to change lead--or anything else for that matter--into gold. Nor have I, as the king wanted, been able to turn gold into lead. But the process is still possible in theory. I know it as sure as I know my own name!

THERMIS

But how?

SCARAMIS

I have all the notes back at the lab. I've spent my life on this journey, and I refuse to believe it's a lost cause.

PUDINGO

Professor, I don't want to insult all that your life has meant to you, but it just isn't possible to convert one element into another. It can't be done!

SCARAMIS

You always were a quitter. If you weren't such a quitter you'd let me finish so I can tell you that it indeed can and has been done! Not gold, mind you. But something just as beautiful--if not more. Perfectly malleable, ductile, it crackles like amber and doesn't melt except at the very highest temperatures our forges can produce!

THERMIS

But what is it?

SCARAMIS

I call it deleterium, as I first discovered it while working at my private workshop by the river Dele.

PUDINGO

If it's truly so great, why then didn't you show it to the king and save your life? Surely he could find a use for it and--

SCARAMIS

No! Don't you boys understand? I can't tell anyone about it! It's a terrible metal that ought to be destroyed forever! I didn't find this out until my apprentices became sick after handling the stuff. A fortnight went by and their intestines ruptured out of their backsides. It was terrible! The most disgusting thing I had ever witnessed in my life! I still have nightmares about it! No, Pudingo, if the king were to see it I'm afraid his greed would make him deaf to the terrible end that deleterium would bring him. I was about to burn my notes and the one remaining sample when I was summoned by the king. And here I am now.

PUDINGO

He could use it as a weapon against his enemies then.

SCARAMIS

No, better to forget about it. Let's hope no one ever finds my notes! I wouldn't even tell you boys this, were it not already known even in the dungeon that you will die tomorrow. My terrible secret will die with you. Promise it! Promise me that!

THERMIS

I promise.

SCARAMIS

Pudingo!

PUDINGO

OK, I promise! I promise! God.

(The Dungeonmaster returns carrying a sword. He sets it against a wall and unlocks Scaramis' chains.)

SCARAMIS

Wait, I thought I had until tomorrow!

DUNGEONMASTER

Been moved up to today. They just captured Caesar Salad and some nobleman

from Dulland. Bringin' them here tomorrow to kill all four at the same time.

(The Dungeonmaster drags Scaramis to the center of the dungeon and pushes him down. The old man begins crawling around and struggling. The Dungeonmaster picks up the sword and hits him on the back of the head with it. Scaramis blacks out. Lifting the old man's head up, the Dungeonmaster slides a nearby chopping block beneath his face and sets it back down.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Right. Let's do this.

(The Dungeonmaster lifts the sword above his head with both hands and brings it down. The head falls and blood splatters out of the wound, drenching Thermis and Pudingo.)

THERMIS

Scaramis!

PUDINGO

No!

(The Dungeonmaster begins whistling and kicking the head around the room.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Look, boys! I just invented football!

PUDINGO

For the love of God, show some respect!

(The Dungeonmaster turns to face Pudingo with his foot resting on top of Scaramis' severed head.)

DUNGEONMASTER

You're right, lad. You're right. How could I have been so careless? Only a selfish child keeps his toys to himself.

(The Dungeonmaster kicks the head at Pudingo, who reflexively sticks out his hands to block it.)

DUNGEONMASTER

Oop! No hands! That's a penalty.

(He punches Pudingo in the stomach and resumes playing. A guard opens the door and peers in. The Dungeonmaster stops playing and tries to look serious.)

GUARD

Um, the Captain is here to see you. He says it's important.

DUNGEONMASTER

Fine, fine.

(They exit.)

THERMIS

Are you all right?

PUDINGO

(weakly)

Yes.

THERMIS

I've been thinking, Pudingo. If all that's happened to us recently has shown me anything, it's that you certainly can't trust a king.

PUDINGO

(still unable to speak)

Agreed.

THERMIS

I mean, once in awhile you find a guy like the Duke, who seemed at the time really friendly and an honorable man--the type of nobility you'd expect from nobility. But I mean, think about it: what's he doing in the meantime? Trying to take over our country and make his own country twice as big. And why? Dulland is huge. It seems like as much as they may act like regular guys, they're really all a bunch of assholes. It's as if having that much power, no matter how nice you might be on a personal level, makes you incapable of being anything but a big, moist turd when it comes to making decisions affecting other people. Want something another country has? Make somebody else do it or cut off their head. Want someone else's country? Make a million get it or cut off a million heads. Well, I'm not going to fall for it anymore. From now on, I don't listen to anybody but myself. And, on rare occasions, you.

PUDINGO

(hoarsely, but slightly improved)

I see what you mean, Thermis.

THERMIS

Furthermore, why do we even need kings to begin with? I mean, the farmers farm, the fishermen fish, the hunters hunt, the tailors tail, the forgers forge, the scientists science--do they need someone to tell them every day to keep doing what they do? If we all woke up tomorrow and Plumbpomo was gone, would anything be any different? I doubt it. We don't need a Plumbpomo, or a Caesar Salad, or a Duke of Bismuth, or even a jerk like the Dungeonmaster for that matter. And we especially don't need people like that bastard Barnabas with all his tricks and scheming. God, what I wouldn't give to have him down here right now. It'd be *his* head we'd be playing football with instead of Scaramis'.

(The Dungeonmaster returns, downhearted.)

THERMIS

Oop, better be quiet. He's back.

DUNGEONMASTER

Oh, not again! What did I do to anyone to deserve such bad luck!

(Walking to the pair of prisoners he trips over the head of Scaramis.)

DUNGEONMASTER

(unlocking their shackles)

Oh! You two are to be freed. Again. It seems neither Caesar Salad nor the Duke of Bismuth have any knowledge of you, even when given the opportunity to face lesser sentences for their crimes. Caesar Salad also confessed that he had hidden arms and funds headed for his troops among the countryside disguised as wagons carrying official royal supplies. So it appears you've been saved from death by a coincidence for a second time. How terribly depressing! I miss the old days when the executions went by so efficiently fast that there wasn't time for a pardon! But times always change for the worse.

(The Dungeonmaster sits on the chopping block with his chin in his hand, shaking his head in grief. Thermis and Pudingo free themselves from the unlocked chains. Pudingo bends over and grabs his stomach as Thermis makes his way to the door.)

Pudingo, let's go!

THERMIS

Wait, Thermis.

PUDINGO

(Pudingo picks up the sword. It wobbles under his weak arms as he approaches the Dungeonmaster's back. The latter turns around too late--Pudingo brings the heavy blade down and slays him.)

Holy shit. What did you do?

THERMIS

Don't worry, I'll make it look like an accident.

PUDINGO

Who accidentally gets their ribcage smashed by a sword?

THERMIS

Shut up! I'm trying to think! OK...

PUDINGO

(Pudingo puts the sword into the dead Dungeonmaster's hand.)

There.

PUDINGO

THERMIS

Yeah, that looks believable. Maybe you can tell the guards he was so fed up with living that he somehow managed to take a sword half the length of his body, hold it away from himself, and somehow have the immense strength to stab his own stomach. And all of this conveniently took place after we left. We were two seconds away from being free and you go and mess everything up because some guy punched you in the stomach!

PUDINGO

Shut up! I said shut up! You were the one talking about not needing a Dungeonmaster or a king anymore! Well, now we have one less problem.

THERMIS

Jesus, I was talking about philosophy here. I thought maybe we could flee to

Dulland...start a savagely brutal puppet show satirizing the king or something. I didn't mean we should go around heaving swords at everybody like some sort of sword-heaving...thing.

PUDINGO

It's over and done now. And by the way I didn't do it because he hit me in the stomach. I did it for Scaramis. Or did you forget about him already?

THERMIS

No.

PUDINGO

Nobody deserves to have their head kicked around for fun, least of all an old man that was only punished for not being able to do something nobody can do. You were right, Thermis. Fuck the Dungeonmaster, fuck Barnabas, and fuck the king. I'm going to see this whole castle destroyed if it takes me the rest of my life.

THERMIS

I think it might.

PUDINGO

I don't. Come on, we're going to the laboratory.

THERMIS

Why there?

PUDINGO

I'll tell you when we're there. It'd be less dramatic if I revealed my plan to you now.

THERMIS

Oh, OK.

PUDINGO

Wait a second.

(Pudingo kicks the Dungeonmaster's corpse forcefully.)

PUDINGO

OK, let's go.

(Pudingo and Thermis flee from the dungeon. One of the guards walks in sees the body, then runs out calling for the Captain.)

SCENE THREE

(The alchemy laboratory. The room is unlit but one can hear the door open and the voices of Thermis and Pudingo muttering low.)

PUDINGO

Ow! Get off of me!

THERMIS

I'm sorry, but I can't see anything.

PUDINGO

Give me some tinder.

THERMIS

I don't have any. The guards confiscated my pouch when we were arrested.

PUDINGO

Great! Hold on. I'll be back.

(exits.)

THERMIS

Where are you going? Don't leave me! I'm scared of the dark! Pudingo? Pudingo?

(The room becomes silent. Soon the light from a torch becomes stronger and Pudingo enters. He takes a lamp from the desk and lights it, then leaves to take the torch back. Thermis uses the lamp to light the rest of the room, and Pudingo returns. Pudingo casually hangs his coat on the wall. Thermis carelessly tosses his on the floor.)

THERMIS

Well, we're here. Now what?

PUDINGO

Now we look.

THERMIS

Look for what? Will you stop being so vague? God, you're such an attention hog.

PUDINGO

We look for Scaramis' notes. He said he hadn't had time to destroy them before he

was summoned to the court. That means they must still be here somewhere.

THERMIS

He wouldn't have had time to hide them very well.

PUDINGO

Right. Look everywhere.

(The two begin rummaging through all of the papers, books, equipment and storage containers in the laboratory. After a thorough search, they stop.)

THERMIS

I give up.

PUDINGO

There's got to be some other place.

THERMIS

Maybe he was just making it all up. He was old, you know.

PUDINGO

No, I don't believe that, Thermis. He must have a secret hiding place.

THERMIS

...A secret hiding place?

PUDINGO

Yes, somewhere that only he would know to look.

THERMIS

I think I know where he put them.

PUDINGO

What? Where?

THERMIS

Check under the floor. Beneath the table.

(Pudingo pushes back the table, then kneels on the floor and lifts up a false stone. He reaches inside and pulls out a handful of loose papers.)

PUDINGO

Thermis, I think I found Scaramis' notes!

(Pudingo moves closer to the light and reads the first sheet.)

PUDINGO

But this just seems to be a drawing. It's me being kicked by a mule. And there's you and Jeremy laughing.

(goes to the next paper)

This one is me being eaten by a bear.

(reads the next)

Now the bear appears to be sodomizing me while Jeremy rides a dragon. And the one who's supposed to be you has gigantic muscles and sacks of gold in his hands.

(tosses the stack of papers onto the table)

Thermis, what are these?

THERMIS

Nothing!

PUDINGO

Is this what you were doing while I was working?

THERMIS

No!

(Pudingo sighs and goes back to the hole. He reaches in deeper and pulls out another stack of papers, looks at them, then tosses them away again. He takes out another, and another, and another, and finally pulls out a folio from the very bottom of the hole. He takes it to the light and examines the first page.)

PUDINGO

Notes and accompanying illustrations on the production of the element deleterium from worthless sources by Scaramis of Plumania. This is it!

(Pudingo reads the next few pages silently while Thermis recovers his drawings and admires their varying greatness aloud.)

PUDINGO

Everything is here, Thermis!

THERMIS

I know! I thought I lost all of these.

PUDINGO

No, I mean the deleterium. We can begin making our own. It even says he built a machine for producing it. It's somewhere in the warehouse.

THERMIS

Why on earth would you want to make deleterium? Weren't you listening to the old man?

PUDINGO

Yes, Thermis, I was listening to him. Deleterium is a beautiful, useful substance whose qualities exceed those of any known metal on earth--

THERMIS

That causes your stomach to blow out your ass after a week.

PUDINGO

Yes, that's the most important part, Thermis. In fact, if it weren't for that I'd say deleterium was completely worthless.

THERMIS

What?

PUDINGO

Will you do me a favor?

THERMIS

What?

PUDINGO

Go to the court and ask to see the king. Tell them we need to show him an important new discovery immediately.

THERMIS

But why? I don't want to go back there! You can't make me!

PUDINGO

Why? I won't insult your intelligence by explaining it to you.

THERMIS

I'm not stupid.

PUDINGO

I know you aren't. You'll figure it out on the way to the castle. Trust me, please.

THERMIS

Why don't you go?

PUDINGO

Because I have to study these notes and make the machine work.

THERMIS

Then I'll stay and do that and you can go.

PUDINGO

OK, if that's what you want. You do know Latin, of course. That's what Scaramis wrote the book in. Latin. All right, Thermis, I'll go do something as simple as asking for the king to see us and you can sit here and read this book--this biiiig book entirely composed in Latin.

THERMIS

Fine, I'll go to the castle. But if I did know Latin I wouldn't let you tell me what to do. Nobody is telling me what to do anymore.

PUDINGO

I know, Thermis. I know. Nobody is telling either of us what to do anymore. Now go to the castle! Hurry!

THERMIS

I'll be back as soon as I can!

(Thermis runs out of the laboratory. Pudingo continues reading the book, then closes it and scratches his head. He puts on his coat and exits. Some time passes and he returns pushing a large contraption beneath a cloth onto the stage. Once again he hangs his coat on the wall, returns to Scaramis' book, and continues reading quietly.)

PUDINGO

Seems simple enough.

(Pudingo pulls the cover off the machine and tries to operate it. Its wheels grind a little, but it stops after a couple seconds.)

PUDINGO

Hm.

(studies the book again)

Oh, of course! I forgot to put a basic element in.

(looks around)

I suppose all the lead we had is hanging from the king's body by now. What else can I use?

(his eyes scan the room and fix on Thermis' abandoned cloak)

It'll have to do.

(Pudingo picks up the coat, wads it into a ball, and stuffs it into one end of the machine. He then adjust some controls on the large contraption and starts it up again. It grinds into operation and begins chugging and producing smoke. Pudingo coughs and tries to wave it away. There is a loud sound like a steam whistle, and then the machine dies suddenly once again. Pudingo goes to the opposite end of the machine and lifts a door. He steps back in amazement, then goes forward and holds up the brick of deleterium. It gives off a glow brighter than any lamp in the laboratory, and its beauty overcomes Pudingo. He feels to his knees and stares at it in silence. A long time passes, and Thermis comes back.)

THERMIS

Pudingo, the king agreed to see us but we have to go now or he'll be pissed! Oh, by the way, I figured out what you're up to. Real nice. I just hope we aren't around to enjoy the schadenfreude. Pudingo? Hey, wake up!

(Thermis approaches him. Pudingo doesn't move.)

THERMIS

Is that--? It's beautiful. Pudingo? Hey. Pudingo.

(Thermis waves his hand in front of Pudingo's fixed stare. He knocks the deleterium from the latter's hands, and the spell is broken. Pudingo stands up and collects himself.)

THERMIS

You all right?

PUDINGO

Yes...I was just...

THERMIS

You shouldn't get too close to that thing. You know what it'll do to you.

PUDINGO

You're right. I was being stupid.

THERMIS

Did you hear what I said? About the king? We have to go there now if we want him to see us.

PUDINGO

OK. I'll take the deleterium.

THERMIS

(scoldingly)

Pudingo!

PUDINGO

I'll wrap it in some cloth first. That should keep us safe from any dangerous effects of the metal.

(Pudingo collects some rags and wraps the deleterium.)

PUDINGO

There. All right, Thermis, let's go!

THERMIS

Let me just grab my coat. Hey, where is it?

PUDINGO

You weren't wearing a coat when you came in.

THERMIS

I know. But I thought I left it here when we first arrived.

PUDINGO

Not that I recall. Maybe you left it at the dungeon.

THERMIS

No...I'm pretty sure I was wearing it. Hm. I could've sworn I threw it here on the floor.

PUDINGO

Nonsense, Thermis. If you had left it here, you would've taken it with you when you went to the castle, right?

THERMIS

Right...

PUDINGO

But you just admitted that you didn't have it when you came back. So you either left it at the prison or you left it at the castle.

THERMIS

I don't remember...

PUDINGO

We should go. We don't have time for this, do we?

THERMIS

You're right. OK, let's do this.

PUDINGO

Wait, let me get my coat. It's cold outside.

(Pudingo hands the deleterium to Thermis, grabs his jacket, and they exit.)

ACT IV.

SCENE ONE

(The Minister of Peace and Barnabas are conferring in the dark, empty dungeon of the castle. The chopping block has been removed, but the stains of the Dungeonmaster and Scaramis' blood are left to dry on the ground.)

BARNABAS

God, it's so dark down here. Why couldn't we meet in my office? I have a lovely fire there, and dried fruits and wine we could eat if we get hungry.

PEACE MINISTER

It's not so dark. Anyway, the darkness doesn't bother me. You don't need light for talking.

BARNABAS

This place smells weird too.

PEACE MINISTER

It's the smell of blood drying. The Dungeonmaster was murdered a week ago in this very spot.

BARNABAS

Oh, God! I hadn't heard! This is all too gruesome for a clerk!

PEACE MINISTER

There were no witnesses, but the Captain of the Guards believes an old man about to be executed somehow overpowered the Dungeonmaster and attacked him with his own sword before the latter was able to wrest it from him again and hew the prisoner's head before dying himself.

BARNABAS

A servant to his duties and his king even unto the end. What an empire we could have if we only had a few more like the dead Dungeonmaster!

PEACE MINISTER

Yes, what an empire we could have... You know, Barnabas, these two alchemists showed the king a rather interesting new type of metal--this "deleterium." I've had my people in the peace ministry experimenting with it as soon as we got our hands on a sample.

BARNABAS

And?

PEACE MINISTER

It's the most remarkable thing I've ever seen. You can bend it and bend it and it never breaks. You can heat it up until it's like clay and mold it to whatever shape you want, then it cools again and is virtually indestructible. It's nowhere near as heavy as iron or steel either. It's truly a miracle from God.

BARNABAS

Delivered by Thermis and Pudingo? There must be quite a lack of heralds in Heaven at the moment.

PEACE MINISTER

With this metal we could conquer the world, Barnabas. Arrows that pierce every enemy, swords that cleave a fully-armored man in two, war horses clad in the stuff to trample over the barbarian infantries like ants, ships that never break up at sea or float vulnerably while the enemy hits it with volleys of flaming arrows--the kingdom of Plumania would be unstoppable!

BARNABAS

And what if those enemies get ahold of the metal, or, God forbid, learn to make it themselves?

PEACE MINISTER

But God does forbid it, Barnabas! The Lord does not make miracles for the entire world to enjoy, but only for those who are blessed by devotion to Him. The heathens in Dulland, the lands to the South, the lands beyond the sea and so on will never have deleterium because He does not will them to have it! It wouldn't serve his purpose otherwise.

BARNABAS

Many times the desire of men to be God has overcome even the power of God himself. Even a handful of lead could persuade some men to abandon their alleged obedience to morality and decency. And I'm afraid, my friend, that deleterium is a thousand times more valuable than lead. I am not suggesting that God would give deleterium to our enemies, but that our enemies might take advantage of the weaknesses in a few of our countrymen. Perhaps some skilled metalworker will become fed up with his pay and sell his secrets to a foreign kingdom in the hopes of being rewarded richly.

PEACE MINISTER

But that is the beauty of the thing, Barnabas. Even if the entire world were covered in deleterium, it would not spell the end of our empire. It could only be a means to

equilibrium among the world's kingdoms--ours being the largest. Even a schoolteacher's spanking rod made from the branch of a willow tree can be deadly, but what good is it against willow pants? One would need a bronze spanking rod. And what good is that against bronze pants? One would need an iron spanking rod. And what good is iron against iron? Or steel against steel? Or, for that matter, deleterium against deleterium?

BARNABAS

And what comes after deleterium? Magic? Faith? Will we be using ice rods and fire pants?

PEACE MINISTER

That is not for me to worry about. My job at the moment is to protect Plumania from invasion and preserve the peace and safety of all its citizens. That is why you must speak to the king.

BARNABAS

Why me?

PEACE MINISTER

He doesn't listen to me until it's too late. And that time is approaching dreadfully too quickly. You, however, already have a finger on his lip and a lip on his ear, and can persuade him--no, must persuade him--to expand the production process immediately so that we can properly supply our troops for an attack against Dulland. I know the rebellion by that little pencil merchant's son, Caesar Salad, was paid for by Bismuth and the kingdom of Dulland. It's only a matter of time before they try something. That's why we have to be ready.

BARNABAS

I can only suggest things to the King. He makes up his own mind.

PEACE MINISTER

Then it is your job to see that he makes the right decision--the only decision, Barnabas. Plumania must have the means to defend herself!

BARNABAS

I'll see what I can do.

(Several horns blare the arrival of the king to the throneroom far away.)

BARNABAS

The king has gone to his throneroom. The ceremony is about to start!

PEACE MINISTER

Ceremony?

BARNABAS

He's honoring those two idiot scientists for their service to the country.

PEACE MINISTER

Why wasn't I invited? Were you invited?

BARNABAS

(sighs in annoyance)

Yes, George, I was invited.

PEACE MINISTER

Well, I wasn't invited. But then, what do I know about serving the country? I'm just the minister of peace in charge of protecting the whole kingdom from attack.

BARNABAS

I'm sure your invitation was just lost in the mail.

PEACE MINISTER

Who delivers the mail then? I'll have them fired for this!

BARNABAS

Who delivers the mail?

PEACE MINISTER

Yes. Who delivers it?

BARNABAS

The mail, the mail. Like court messages and such?

PEACE MINISTER

Yes! Who is responsible for delivering messages from the court! I want to know who to see about this!

BARNABAS

Uh...phew, what was his name again?

PEACE MINISTER

Wait a moment. Aren't you the one who delivers the important messages?

BARNABAS

Well, some of them, yes.

Some or all?

PEACE MINISTER

Only some.

BARNABAS

And the invitations to royal ceremonies?

PEACE MINISTER

What about them?

BARNABAS

Do you deliver them or not?

PEACE MINISTER

Sometimes.

BARNABAS

And this time?

PEACE MINISTER

This time what?

BARNABAS

Did you deliver them this time?

PEACE MINISTER

Deliver what this time?

BARNABAS

(pauses, pretends to remember)

Oh, you mean did I deliver the invitations to the royal ceremonies?

PEACE MINISTER

Yes, yes! Did you deliver them or not?

BARNABAS

Hm, uh, boy, let me think. Um, yes...I definitely delivered them.

PEACE MINISTER

And mine?

BARNABAS

Your what?

PEACE MINISTER

This isn't funny! Did you lose my invitation Barnabas?

BARNABAS

This isn't fair! I don't want to be the one to have to tell you that you weren't invited! Why does the king always make me look like the bad guy? Everybody blames the messenger!

PEACE MINISTER

(hurt)

So it's true. I wasn't invited.

BARNABAS

I'm sorry, but no. I just didn't want to hurt your feelings.

PEACE MINISTER

No...it's ok. I understand.

BARNABAS

If it were up to me you'd be front and center at every occasion. However, I'm not the king. But if I were...trust me, George. You'd be my one and only adviser. No more spending long hours alone in your dark tower with your maps and swords.

PEACE MINISTER

But I like my maps and my swords. And I like my tower.

BARNABAS

Yes, and why shouldn't you? It's a great tower, and your maps and swords are the finest in the world. But the king would take them away from you if he could. Don't you see it, George? Don't you sense his distrust of you? You said yourself he only bothers to ask your advice when it's too late. He doesn't respect you.

PEACE MINISTER

My whole life is devoted to protecting Plumania.

BARNABAS

Yes, and what do you get for it? You protect Plumania, and only Plumania, George. You don't owe the king anything for that. If anyone owes someone something, it's him that owes you. Without you, he would already be a slave to Dulland like we would. No, that's not true! He wouldn't be a slave. They would execute him and spare him the punishment of breaking rocks in the lead mines while the rest of his country suffers for his inability to rule. Does he deserve to get off so lightly? Do the rest of us deserve to be punished for his errors?

PEACE MINISTER

But if he'd listen to me we wouldn't have to--

BARNABAS

If he'd listen to you! But why should he, such a wise and brilliant king, be forced to listen to an idiot soldier like you, George? What do you know that he doesn't already?

PEACE MINISTER

If he's so wise and brilliant why is half his kingdom in jeopardy of being lost?

BARNABAS

But he isn't wise, and he isn't brilliant! Whoever said he was? Not me. But don't you agree that a king *should* be the wisest in his land? Shouldn't he confer with his advisers only as a way to entertain himself with their ignorance? What does a real king, a great king, need other people for except for amusement?

PEACE MINISTER

What are you suggesting then? That he is a bad king?

BARNABAS

I'm not suggesting anything, George. I never said he was bad, although if you believe that then I would keep such opinions to myself if I were you. Or at least, don't share them with people you can't trust. But we're friends, and I won't breathe a word of what you say to anyone else.

PEACE MINISTER

Thank you, Barnabas. Sometimes I forget that you really are the only person I can count on.

BARNABAS

Forget it entirely, George. Let's not speak another word of this. Now you go back to your wonderfully dark tower, and let me handle the king. I'll be late as it is if I don't go soon.

PEACE MINISTER

God be with you, Barnabas! Let's hope the king isn't too stupid to open his ears!

BARNABAS

God be with you, Minister of the Peace.

(The Peace Minister exits the dungeon. Barnabas strolls around the dungeon, picks up a torch from

the wall, and stoops down over the drying pools of blood. He sticks a finger into the stuff, rubs it with his thumb and smell it, and then wipes it on his clothes.)

BARNABAS

Oh, how unprofessional of me, George. I almost forgot.

(removing a small envelope from his pocket, clears his throat)

“You are cordially invited to the castle of King Plumbpomo for an honoring ceremony held therein at the stroke of six. As this is an official event of the kingdom, all members of the court are required to attend. Here is your invitation. Please dress formally. Signed, Your King, Plumbpomo of Plumania.”

(Barnabas holds the invitation over the torch and lets it burn, then drops it into the pool of blood, puts the torch back on the wall, and leaves the dungeon whistling a tune remarkably similar to that of the late Dungeonmaster.)

SCENE TWO

(The king's newly-decorated, beautifully shimmering, deleterious court. Thermis and Pudingo are making chit-chat with the Captain of the Guard at his post by the entrance. Barnabas walks in briskly, and bends over the throne to whisper into the king's ear.)

PLUMBPOMO

Yes, yes. All right, I'll think about it. Where is he anyway? I explicitly instructed every member of the court to be here and not a single one of them has shown up. I have half a mind to put them all in the dungeon for a night and show them what it means to respect one's king! It seems as if you, my dear Barnabas, are the only one still loyal to me. Every day fewer and fewer of my decrees are obeyed. I'm beginning to wonder if I have a friend left--save you--in this entire court. Well, then, let's be done with it. Where are the two alchemists! Come forward!

(The king stands up as Thermis and Pudingo meet him in the center of the room. Barnabas grabs a deleterium platter left behind by the king with the two medals on it, and joins the group at the king's right side.)

PLUMBPOMO

Hm. Were you two always this short? It seems I've gotten taller since the last time we met.

PUDINGO

(bowing)

Perhaps, Your Majesty.

PLUMBPOMO

(unenthusiastically)

Anyway...Pudingo and Thermis, for your invaluable service to the court and kingdom of Plumania, for your unending allegiance to the crown and for furthering the protection and wealth of its walls with the discovery of deleterium, I bestow upon you these medals of honor.

(Barnabas hands Plumbpomo one of the medals, who in turn attempts to place it around Pudingo's neck. Pudingo shies away and won't let the king give it to him.)

PLUMBPOMO

Such modesty! Come on now, we had these made especially for you! You deserve it, my boy.

PUDINGO

With all due respect, Your Highness, I don't deserve it. What reward can you give that is greater than the kind words you have already spoken about me to all of these people?

(The King confusedly looks round at the empty throneroom while Barnabas sneers at Pudingo mistrustfully.)

BARNABAS

Let me, sire.

(Barnabas takes the other medal from the tray and chases after Pudingo, who leads him around the throneroom refusing to let the former catch up to him.)

PLUMBPOMO

(chuckling)

Now, now, Barnabas. If he doesn't want to wear it, we can't make him.

(to Thermis)

And how about you, alchemist? Will you also refuse to accept this token of my gratitude?

(Barnabas gives up, and they both return to their original places.)

THERMIS

(curtsies as if holding the ends of an invisible ball gown)

Forgive me, Your Highness, but I cannot accept this either.

PLUMBPOMO

Very well then. I suppose this ceremony is over. Which is good because I have an important announcement to make. Only moments ago I made a decision that had been weighing heavily on my mind--one that could very well alter the lives of the entire kingdom.

BARNABAS

(eagerly)

Yes?

PLUMBPOMO

Deleterium, that wonderful metal you boys have discovered, is surely a gift from God. And gifts from God are never meant for one person, or a group of people, but for all those who enjoy his compassion and unending providence. It is with this in mind that I have decided the following: the whole of Plumania's industrial resources shall be devoted to the production of deleterium. Beginning tomorrow, I will commission engineers from all over the country to assist in the transition from an agricultural society benefitting no one but those who love beans and wheat to a society of the future. The farmer will make way for the deleterium factory, the fisherman will make way for the waterwheels to power our industry and the boats to carry its glorious gift to those who cannot reach it, the hunter in the forest will take up an axe and cut down wood for the blast furnaces, and so on until all the makeup of my kingdom shall be employed in the production of deleterium.

(Pudingo and Thermis look at each other nervously. Barnabas looks, on the other hand, as if his stomach is upset.)

PLUMBPOMO

No one will be left out, not even the sick or the blind. Every citizen willing to work for a better future will have his own piece of the pie. The streets will be paved with the thing, the signs and wagon wheels sparkling magnificently, the peasant women adoring themselves in the deleterious mirrors as the tailor sews for them clothing with a golden needle once only affordable by ladies and baronesses. Plumania shall become not only the greatest of all the kingdoms in the entire world, but the greatest benefactor to the rest of its inhabitants. We will share our joys with others, even our enemies, in hopes that together we can cooperate for a brighter, shinier future.

PUDINGO

(nervously)

Um, Your Highness, sir. Maybe this isn't the way to go about things. Let's start with the top and work down later.

PLUMBPOMO

What?

THERMIS

I think he means...perhaps we should focus on making the nobility of Plumania equal first...and worry about everyone else later. There's really no need to get the peasants involved with this.

PLUMBPOMO

Come on now, you two! I have just shared my glorious vision for the happiness of my entire kingdom. Are you really so cold and insensitive to the misery of the Plumanians? Are you blind to the wretched poverty and day-to-day humiliations they suffer under the present system?

PUDINGO

In all fairness, sir, it's *your* system.

PLUMBPOMO

Nonsense! Should I be held guilty for the way they are living? It is they way they have lived since the first days the kingdom was established. I am merely a criminal of circumstances beyond my control. Do you think I wanted to be born a king? Do you know what a burden it is to have my genius taxed by mundane affairs every moment I am awake?

BARNABAS

They are mocking you again, Your Highness.

PLUMBPOMO

I think so, Barnabas. And what do you say about my plans?

BARNABAS

Me, Your Highness? Well...I...

PLUMBPOMO

You agree with them, don't you? Of course you do! No, these two are full of themselves--that's what they are! Equality of the nobility! Don't be silly, boys! The nobility are full of no-good, power-grabbing animals who would sooner take all of the deleterium for themselves than share it with their God's-eye brother! A bunch of finely dressed turds! Take Barnabas for example.

BARNABAS

Ahem.

PLUMBPOMO

(laughing)

Do you think I actually trust him? That he wouldn't plunge a knife into the back of my neck the first moment I gave him the chance? And that's why I keep him as an adviser. What good would it do me to protect myself against the treacheries of the upper class if I didn't have its cleverer members closest to my beating heart? He protects me from them because for him my throne is his at some time in the future and he doesn't want to jeopardize that. Barnabas is nothing more than a fox who saves a chicken's life from the other foxes if only to keep the meat from rotting

while danger is still in the air. And I may be a chicken, but I'm no birdbrain. No, the nobility do not deserve anything more than the rest of the kingdom. My decision is final. Tomorrow at dawn the greatest works project since the days of Rome will be undertaken, and there is nothing anyone can do to stop it!

PUDINGO

We won't help you!

THERMIS

Yeah! Without us you won't know how to make deleterium. We'll destroy the machine if you insist on going through with this!

(The King's good mood is spoiled and he becomes angry with the two alchemists.)

PLUMBPOMO

Are you threatening *me*? *Me*! How dare you? Do you not know when to do what you're told? Do you still fail to realize how truly great and beneficent I'm being? This is my hour of magnanimity and you're trying to spoil it with your insufferable...elitism? What do you hope to gain? Do you think that by making the nobles rich they'll let you join their club? Think again, sons of bookkeepers. You're nothing but commoners and no amount of money is ever going to persuade those snobs that you are anything else. Do you still insist on this treachery?

PUDINGO

(weakening)

Yes.

THERMIS

Y-yes..

PLUMBPOMO

Then you will be the entertainment at tomorrow's big event. Captain!

CAPTAIN

(clicks heels)

Hup!

PLUMBPOMO

Place these two under arrest. They are to be executed as soon as possible for the worst crime in any kingdom's lawbooks--the crime of class warfare against the poor.

CAPTAIN

Your Majesty...uh...tomorrow we are...actually...already executing the two captured traitors, Duke of Bismuth and his cousin Caesar Salad.

PLUMBPOMO

Oh, yes. Well, tell the Executioner he gets two more. What's so difficult about that? Eh?

CAPTAIN

N-nothing, Your Highness.

PLUMBPOMO

(annoyed)

Then take them away, Captain.

(The Captain of the Guard once again escorts Thermis and Pudingo out of the throneroom. The King returns to his throne and rubs his eyes with his hands.)

BARNABAS

What shall I do about the medals?

PLUMBPOMO

What does it matter? Melt them down and make arrowheads for whatever you and the Peace Minister are plotting for all I care.

BARNABAS

Plotting, Your Majesty? We aren't plotting.

PLUMBPOMO

Yes, if you insist, Barnabas. Leave me. I've got the blues now.

BARNABAS

Shall I rub your feet, Your Highness?

PLUMBPOMO

(irritated)

Leave me, Barnabas.

(Barnabas starts to leave, then turns back.)

BARNABAS

You didn't really mean all those things you said about me, did you? You don't truly

think I would betray you.

PLUMBPOMO

I don't know what to think anymore, Barnabas. I don't feel quite myself for the past week or so. I'm more lucid than I've ever been, but at the same time everything seems obscured by fog and uncertain. My stomach ails me, my feet ache...I have the energy of twenty men but my body has such pains that I can barely stand very long. This deleterium crown I wear is a third the weight of my old one, yet it sinks into my scalp like a boulder and leaves welts around my skull.

BARNABAS

How terrible, sir!

PLUMBPOMO

I'm at my weakest point, Barnabas. Put your sword into me now, while the room is empty, if that is your will. I'm too tired to struggle or yell out, and I've become so bored with life in the past days that it wouldn't matter to me anyway.

(Barnabas sets the platter on the ground and runs to his King. He begins to rub his shoulders and massage his back.)

BARNABAS

Now, now, Your Majesty! We mustn't talk like that if we're going to get better! You want to live to see your grand vision followed through, don't you?

PLUMBPOMO

I do, Barnabas. I do. But it feels as though it isn't my vision at all, but someone else's that has lately come into my brain. The old Plumbpomo would have never dreamed of such a thing--the old Plumbpomo scarcely had what can be called an imagination.

BARNABAS

You just need some rest, Your Highness. You'll get better. You just take yourself a nice, hot bath, and I'll brush your hair with your favorite lead comb.

PLUMBPOMO

My deleterium comb arrived today. The last of the alchemist's first batch was used to produce it. Oh, Barnabas!

(begins sulking into his hands)

I don't know what to do! I feel as if I'm already dead!

BARNABAS

(disgust and hatred flash in his face)

Now, now, Your Majesty. Don't lose your nerves before the unveiling of your great project.

(Plumbpomo bends forward to cry into his lap as Barnabas furtively produces a small dagger from his belt and holds it high above the king's head.)

PLUMBPOMO

I feel so isolated here! The court laughs at me and ignores my ceremonies and decrees! I have enemies mounting attacks and insurrections within and without my borders...I am the loneliest man in the kingdom.

BARNABAS

I have a feeling a great weight will be lifted from your shoulders soon.

PLUMBPOMO

I wish it were so!

(The Captain of the Guard suddenly returns and Barnabas violently returns the dagger to his belt--stabbing himself in the stomach in the process. He opens his mouth to scream, but covers it with his hand and moves about behind the throne in agony.)

CAPTAIN

Your Majesty, it pleases me to inform you that the two prisoners have been safely escorted to the dungeon to await execution tomorrow at dawn.

PLUMBPOMO

Good, Captain. You may return to your post. Barnabas, I suppose we can call this ceremony off as no one is left but you. I think I will take that long, hot bath after all. Goodnight.

BARNABAS

(unable to speak)

Mm-hmm!

(Plumbpomo stands up, resuming some of the pomp and dignity of his former spectacle, and exits the throneroom. As the Captain dutifully looks on without moving or showing interest, Barnabas takes a few steps away from the throne and collapses on the floor.)

SCENE THREE

(The gallows. The entire pavilion is already partially coated in deleterium. Construction equipment and handworkers' tools are set down in preparation for the grand project of the king. The castle's new executioner is at the top of the gallows examining his new, shining deleterium axe.)

EXECUTIONER

(runs his finger along the edge)

Hm, seems much sharper than my old one.

(hefts it by the handle)

Lighter too.

(The Captain of the Guard enters and calls out to the executioner with a wave of his hand.)

CAPTAIN

Hello!

EXECUTIONER

Good morning.

CAPTAIN

Don't think we've met. You're the new executioner, aren't you?

EXECUTIONER

Guilty.

CAPTAIN

Did you know our old one? Ah, he was a fine man. Pity about his death.

EXECUTIONER

No, I hadn't the pleasure to've known him. I heard a loose prisoner did him in.

CAPTAIN

Supposedly. If you ask me, an old man like that couldn't have lifted that sword let alone overpowered our dungeonmaster and killed him.

EXECUTIONER

You think it was someone else?

CAPTAIN

I don't know. It isn't my job to think this or that. Just to hold out a spear and stab anybody who's doing the wrong thing. That's the only reason I've done so well for myself.

EXECUTIONER

As bad as I feel for your old dungeonmaster--I'm sure he was a fine man--I can't help but say I'm doing pretty well these days too thanks to this promotion.

CAPTAIN

I think with war inevitable we're all going to be doing pretty well for ourselves in this business. There's rumors around this place that they may tap me to be leader of the mounted cavalry if we do attack. It'd feel great to be up there again in a *real* battle. It's been such a long time...such a long time.

EXECUTIONER

Were you a soldier before?

CAPTAIN

Sure. Oh, it was quite a life. You never get that feeling out of your system. It just sort of sleeps when you go back to your regular life waiting for you to wake it up again.

EXECUTIONER

Well, I've heard the rumors myself and it's sure to be an all-out war any day now. That means more battles for you--

CAPTAIN

And more traitors for you.

EXECUTIONER

Yes, it looks like everybody's luck is about to change for the better.

CAPTAIN

God willing, sir.

(A trumpet blows from offstage.)

Excuse me.

(The Captain exits, and soon returns with a line of prisoners led to the gallows. The first is Caesar Salad, the second a hooded Duke of Bismuth, then Pudingo and Thermis. The trumpet blows again and the King and Barnabas appear. The King climbs the stairs of the gallows and surveys the

city.)

PLUMBPOMO

Where is everybody? What kind of assembled mass is this for my big announcement?

BARNABAS

(squints)

I think there's a milkman down the street, Your Majesty.

PLUMBPOMO

Barnabas, did you send out the public invitation to the ceremony?

BARNABAS

Why...of course I did, sire.

PLUMBPOMO

Then why is no one here?

BARNABAS

Perhaps they didn't heed the message.

PLUMBPOMO

Perhaps I should get a new messenger.

(Barnabas exits angrily.)

PLUMBPOMO

No matter, I will make the speech anyway. It will have to spread by word of mouth.

(clears throat, holds hand up to the heavens dramatically)

My dear Plumanians, I have had a beautiful vision of our shared future that I would like to share with you. A great house-cleaning project that will improve the lives of every citizen by a thousandfold. And like any house-cleaning, of which I would know nothing about but was assured by my maid this morning, first we must dispose of the garbage that stands in our way. Captain, you may bring the first prisoner.

(The Captain clicks his heels, shouts, "Hup!" and pushes Caesar Salad up the stairs of the gallows with the end of his spear.)

PLUMBPOMO

"Caesar," as you call yourself: you have been found guilty of treason, raising an

army for insurrection against your divine King, and generally pissing me off to no end for the past month. Do you have any parting words before your head is separated from your body and you are no more?

CAESAR SALAD

I would like to recite a poem I wrote in the dungeon early this morning awaiting my execution.

PLUMBPOMO

Oh, God. I hate poetry. Executioner, do it.

(The Captain pushes Caesar Salad down onto his knees over the chopping block, lifts up his hair, and the executioner's axe falls splitting the head from the neck smoothly and quickly. A large spurt of blood flies from the wound. Pudingo, who is second to last, slips behind the stunned Thermis. Thermis recovers, notices Pudingo has moved behind him, and tries to get back of him. The two keep switching positions and fighting each other while the Captain and Executioner push the body off the gallows to the ground behind it. The king meanwhile has noticed and points at them. The Captain goes downstairs with his spear and gives them both a jab.)

CAPTAIN

Be still!

THERMIS

He tried to go behind me!

CAPTAIN

I said be quiet.

THERMIS

No you didn't.

CAPTAIN

Well, I meant to. Be quiet!

THERMIS

But!

CAPTAIN

Enough!

PLUMBPOMO

Captain, bring the next one up here. Let's get this over with.

(The Captain pushes the Duke of Bismuth up the stairs, pulls the sack off his head, and returns to the base of the gallows.)

PLUMBPOMO

For attempting to incite a rebellion in our country, for funding the armies of the no-good pencil merchant's son, and for being so damned polite and cooperative the entire time we've had you in our custody, I hereby sentence you to death at the executioner's axe. Consider it a gift of mercy that your end will be so painless and quick. Do you have any last words?

BISMUTH

Only that I truly pity all of you. When the armies of Dulland pour into this castle and find the blood you've spilled this morning, there will be no gifts of mercy for you or anyone else responsible.

PLUMBPOMO

(feigning angst)

O-o-o-oooh!

BISMUTH

I only wish I could be alive to see the look on your face when your head is paraded around the street on a rope dangling from a wagon.

PLUMBPOMO

Well, sadly you won't be. Executioner, do your thing.

(The executioner goes to grab the Duke and drops his axe. The Duke picks it up and hands it to him, for which the executioner bows gratefully, then escorts the prisoner to the chopping block and finishes him off. He unceremoniously kicks the body off the gallows onto the ground where Caesar Salad fell.)

PUDINGO

God, I don't want to die!

THERMIS

Don't worry, Pudingo. I told you before a thousand times: something always comes to rescue me at the last second.

(waits)

Just wait.

(waits)

Something will come.

(waits again, even longer)

PUDINGO

We're going to die, Thermis.

(The Blue Magician appears in a cloud of smoke.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Hello, stranger!

THERMIS

The wizard! I knew it!

BLUE MAGICIAN

Yes, I'm here to save your life as we agreed.

THERMIS

Oh, thank you! Thank you!

BLUE MAGICIAN

Now, if you'll just give me back Pete I'll have you and your friend out of here in a jiffy.

THERMIS

Pete?

BLUE MAGICIAN

Yes...my snail. Remember what I told you? Or did I explain it?

THERMIS

You said the snail would save my life someday.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Exactly! Now, boy, where is he? I've missed him so much! Pete! Where are you? Pete!

THERMIS

Um...well...he's not exactly here.

BLUE MAGICIAN

What do you mean? I told you not to lose him!

THERMIS

Well, I didn't! But I showed him to the king and the king smashed him with his foot!

BLUE MAGICIAN

What? He's...dead?

THERMIS

I'm afraid so.

BLUE MAGICIAN

Oh! Pete! No!

(The Blue Magician sits far away from the gallows to the front of the stage and sulks into his hands.)

PUDINGO

Great. Now what's going to save us?

(The Captain pushes Thermis up the stairs.)

PLUMBPOMO

Thermis the Alchemist, you have been found guilty of our most heinous crime and shall be put to death for it. Do you have any last words?

THERMIS

Yeah.

(Thermis spits in the king's face.)

THERMIS

Fuck you.

(The Captain forcefully pushes Thermis onto the chopping block.)

PUDINGO

Thermis!

THERMIS

Don't worry, Pudingo, trust me--

(the executioner lifts the axe)

something always happens at the last second and saves--

(The axe falls and Thermis' head falls off with a torrent of blood. Crying, Pudingo is led up the stairs by the Captain as the executioner pushes Thermis' body off the gallows. Barnabas reappears as Pudingo is pushed down onto the chopping block.)

BARNABAS

Wait! Don't kill him till yet! I don't want to miss seeing that stylus pusher get it in the neck!

PUDINGO

Don't worry, Barnabas. Soon you'll all be getting it in the neck.

(The Captain kicks Pudingo in the face.)

CAPTAIN

Quiet, you! Don't make this any worse for yourself by making threats against the court!

BARNABAS

No, let him say whatever he likes. Just remember, Pudingo, the last thing you're going to think when your head is severed from your body is probably the one bright idea you've ever had your entire life.

PLUMBPOMO

Pudingo, you too have been charged with this most heinous of crimes against the people of Plumania. And for that, it is my unfortunate duty to--

(Barnabas cries out loud in pain, grabbing his stomach. The backside of his tunic flies open as his bloody innards violently burst out of him. He falls dead.)

PLUMBPOMO

What the--Barnabas! Say something!

CAPTAIN

I think he's dead, sir.

(The Captain rushes to the corpse and pokes it with his spear.)

CAPTAIN

Yep, it's pretty safe to say he's--

(The Captain clutches his stomach, gasps for air, and meets the same fate as Barnabas.)

PLUMBPOMO

What on earth is going on here?

PUDINGO

(laughing)

It's the deleterium, you stupid bastard! Why do you think we hated your plans for the city? You and the court were the only ones meant to suffer this fate. Why, it'd just be cruel and reckless if we killed everybody.

PLUMBPOMO

Is that so? Executioner, do it to it!

(The executioner kills the grimly chuckling Pudingo, then drops his axe, grabs his belly, and falls over with a burst. The king steps back in fright, and flies down the stairs. He runs from one end of the stage to the other, then slowly walks to the center.)

PLUMBPOMO

Are we really all to die then? If so, then I suppose I should not be so pessimistic about it or spend my last moments grieving. On the bright side, at least our coffins shall be the envy of the entire world. Yes, when I think about how beautiful deleterium is, how magnificent a sight it can be even in its raw, untouched state, I know I will die in the comfort of knowing that my beloved Plumania will be the most luxurious mass grave in the history of mankind.

(Plumbpomo grabs his stomach, succumbs to the explosion of his entrails, and falls dead. The Blue Magician slowly lifts his head up from his hands and looks backwards at the corpses. His eyes fall on a piece of ground near his right side and he

sighs in relief and joy. Scooping up a piece of the earth with his hands, he holds it as if it were a baby.)

BLUE MAGICIAN

Ah, I knew you hadn't really left me. What's that? Of course we can go home. Yes, I missed you too, my dearest friend. No, I'll never give you away again. I've learned my lesson, I promise. A moment ago no amount of gold, or lead, or even beans could have made me happy. But now that I have you back, my dear, dear Pete, it's as if the next thousand years will be worth living again--instead of worth escaping.

Thanks

Once again, Masha Rubina has proofread and formatted this script, finding all of the obvious typos, missing Character List names, and logical errors I overlooked when writing it.

A Few Notes

I just wanted to write a few notes here about the play. The most important is probably about Barnabas's speech impediment. In the original first scene, all of his lines indicated his inability to say the letter s without a lisp, but after reading it a second time in the final draft I realized that some lines were almost impossible to comprehend. I leave it to your imagination to give him the voice he had in mine. One interesting additional point is that when Thermis accidentally mimics him, this impediment *is* written out. That is because otherwise the fact that Barnabas has a lisp may be a bit of a surprise.

As an amusing way to humiliate myself, I've included below the original, shitty script for this play that I wrote sometime around 2001 or 2002—which I must warn you, was written when I was just turning 20--and the outline, as well as the outline(s) for the new attempt at finishing it that begin in December 2005 and some dialogue between a rather different Scaramis and Pudingo that, while adding some depth to the story's parodying government fiats and money-creation in banks that has since become much more subtle, also made it hard for me (and most likely anyone else who would have read it) to sympathize with him after he gets his head chopped off by the executioner.

Original Outline (if you could call it that) from 2001 or 2002

A king summons two alchemists to turn lead into gold. They both realize it can't be done, and decide to convince the king that lead is going to be far more valuable than gold soon. He sees through their ruse and sends them to the dungeon to be executed. Just as the executioner is about to carry out the sentence "someone" bursts in and tells them that gold sales have plummeted and lead become an enormous treasure, and that the new king, Plumbpomo has commuted their sentence in order to speak to them about something important. In his court, the king announces that they are indeed wise men, and that they are to become his chief scientists. Then he instructs them to visit their new lab at once and begin working on turning gold into lead. They simply travel to another country where lead is worthless, buy all of it for a handful of gold, and return. The price of lead skyrockets in the other country, and upon hearing this news King Plumbpomo becomes frustrated at Thermis and Pudingo's lack of progress. Again they find themselves in jail, and it is there that they decide to screw over the entire aristocracy and flee the country. They devise a way to invent a new metal, called deleterium, that is beautiful to look at, malleable, durable, and most importantly rather rare. What they fail to tell the king is that it also causes your internal organs to liquefy when you are in contact with it for more than a month. They demand to see the king and show him their new plans. He is pleased, and tells them they have 24 hours to create the new metal. They do so, and it becomes so envied by the court that the king orders more to be distributed to his closest friends. Eager to oblige, they produce en masse hundreds of pounds of deleterium. As its abundance grows and its popularity spreads, it becomes coveted by the lower classes. Struck by the beauty of his deleterious kingdom, Plumbpomo decides that henceforth everyone should be allowed to buy the metal. When Thermis and Pudingo oppose this idea and refuse to make enough for the lower classes, the king accuses them of being elitist class enemies and has them executed on the spot. In two months, the entire kingdom is dead.

Act I Scene 1

The two alchemists, Thermis and Pudingo, are asleep on the floor in their laboratory. One of King Pomo's paiges arrives, sounded by a horn-playing servant. The two jump from the floor and pretend acting like they were hard at work. The paige announces that the king wishes to see them, and wants them to bring along some of the lead they turned into gold as he requested. The paige and horn-player leave and Thermis and Pudingo blow a fuse over what to do, knowing full well that making gold from lead is impossible. Thermis suggests they fool the king somehow and devises a plan to trick his majesty into believing lead will soon be more valuable than gold. They bring some of the lead along as "evidence."

Act I Scene 2

The king is seated in an elaborately decorated throne. Several horns announce the arrival of Thermis and Pudingo. A falsetto-voiced paige tell the king who they are. Another informs the king that the queen is feeling ill and won't be able to come to dinner. Pudingo asks a nearby subject why everyone has such high voices and the man (of course, in falsetto) explains that the king has recently declared that all male subjects of the court must be eunuchs. Pudingo comments that the paige who saw them earlier was not speaking that way, immediately followed by a scream offstage. The king calls them forth and asks them to show him the gold. In (and sometimes out of) falsetto, they begin to explain that through their research gold is becoming increasingly common and will soon be replaced by lead, and urge him to obtain as much lead as he possibly can and to get rid of the gold. They show him the piece of lead, which they claim was originally gold. He doesn't buy it, and is outraged that they would turn a piece of valuable gold into a worthless rock. He sends them to the dungeon to be executed tomorrow. Four guards with falsetto voices drag them away.

Act I Scene 3

Thermis and Pudingo are in shackles in a stone-walled dungeon. They talk about how insane the king is, and one of two prisoners next to them agrees. He's in for theft, but the guy next to him was arrested for treason just for talking to the king. Thermis asks what he said, and the man (in an extremely deep voice) goes, "How's it hangin'?" A guard comes in and drags the thief off. Thermis resolves that the situation can't get any worse. They hear a scream. Pudingo replies that he saw that one coming. The executioner finally comes in and has them stand up and bend over two stone blocks. They say their last goodbyes as he sharpens the axe and prepares to chop off their heads. Suddenly a paige runs in and announces that their sentences have been commuted due to a recent economic turnaround in the lead market and a drop in gold. The king's gold is worthless and he is poorer than most of the public. The son of a pencil manufacturer has already overthrown the royalty and established himself as the new dictator for life. Thermis and Pudingo are freed. The executioner is disappointed, and decides he can still lop the other guy's balls off while he's down there.

Act I Scene 4

The king is frantically pacing his court, and wearing a lead crown. Thermis and Pudingo rush in and start shouting Thank you's at his feet. He tells them to get up and then admits he was wrong to not believe them. He promotes them to Chief Science Advisers and gives them enough lead to buy a new lab since he had the old one destroyed. Then he instructs them to use their marvelous invention to turn all of his kingdom's gold into lead. As they are leaving they decide just to sell the lead and flee the country. Thermis ponders whether they should tell the king that having all of that lead around could be poisonous. One of the paige's leans over and in falsetto declares, "I sure as hell wouldn't."

The Original Script in All Its Shitty Glory

Out of Their Element

By Michel Boto

Cast

Court Herald 1-4

Executioner, The

Guards 1-4

Herald Accompanying Messenger

Page 1, 2, 3

King Pomo

Messenger 1, 2

Prisoner 1, 2

Pudingo

Sitherly

Thermis

Act I.

Scene 1

(The laboratory of the Medieval alchemists Thermis and Pudingo, who are currently asleep on the job. The door to the laboratory flies open and a trumpeter walks in, stands against the wall and signals the coming of a messenger. At the sound of the horn the two alchemists jump up, scared half-to-death, and begin pretending to work. A messenger

walks in with a rolled up scroll.)

Messenger: Ahem!

(Thermis and Pudingo stop “working.”)

Messenger: His Majesty King Pomo wishes to see you at once.

Thermis: Regarding?

Messenger: Regarding his decree that the two of you, in God’s infinite mercy and wisdom, find a way to turn lead into gold for the explicit purpose of increasing the kingdom’s treasury.

Pudingo: Yeah? Tell him we aren’t finished! These things take time.

Messenger: No matter, King Pomo demands it. He wishes you to report to the court within the hour with no less than one ounce of pure gold. Good day.

(The Messenger clicks his heels and leaves, the trumpeter follows.)

Thermis: An ounce! An ounce of gold!

Pudingo: Can you believe that? Now we have to go up there and explain to him that we’ve found absolutely nothing in all this time!

Thermis: Maybe if you hadn’t spent so much time sleeping on the job we could’ve gotten some work done.

Pudingo: Me? You slept just as much as I did!

Thermis: Well of course I did. If we can’t get any work done with you sleeping all the time it doesn’t really matter what I do, does it?

Pudingo: I don’t see that it makes any difference anyhow. Finding a way to turn lead into gold is just plain impossible. Only a madman would seriously believe he could. It’s about as likely as finding a way of preventing cavities.

Thermis: Well if you thought it was impossible, why on earth did you ever become an alchemist?

Pudingo: Well it was either this or go to dental school like my old man. And I was going through a bit of a youthful rebellion stage. I got swept up in the anti-war movements at college. We were all protesting the Crusades outside the castle gates and singing folk songs about peace and unity. Oh, it was great.

Thermis: Really? What happened?

Pudingo: Well they started dropping these (makes gestures with his hands) really huge rocks on us. Fourteen mandolin players were killed. Anyway, I was too ashamed to return to school after that so I dropped out and became an alchemist.

Thermis: How did your father take it?

Pudingo: Oh, he killed himself two days later. But I mean he was in his thirties anyway. He’d lived a longer life than most.

Thermis (pacing): Do you know what this means, Pudingo? We're both going to be arrested and executed for sure!

Pudingo: Say! We could always lie.

Thermis: To the king?

Pudingo: Sure, I mean what do we have to lose? I say we paint a rock yellow and take it on up to him. We'll tell him it's gold.

Thermis: No, no, no. He'd see right through that. But it does give me an idea.

Pudingo: Oh yeah?

Thermis: Do you still have that piece of lead he gave us?

Pudingo (searching): It's around here somewhere. (pulls it out from the inside of a book)
Ah! Here we go.

Thermis: Pudingo, my friend, I have a plan.

Pudingo: Go on.

Thermis: The king wants us to turn lead into gold, right?

Pudingo: Yes. So?

Thermis: Why does he want us to turn lead into gold?

Pudingo: Because gold is worth far more than lead. Everyone knows that.

Thermis: So what if we convince him that it isn't worth more?

Pudingo: But Sitherly would surely tell him that we are lying!

Thermis: What does Sitherly know?

Pudingo: Well he is the king's financial adviser after all.

Thermis: Bah! We are men of science, Pudingo. If you can't trust men of science who can you trust? Now trust me, he'll believe every word of it.

Scene 2

(King Pomo's court. Pomo is seated in his throne. Sitherly is standing next to him. Two heralds are against each wall, with various magistrates and members of the court standing around talking. Thermis and Pomo walk in wearing lead hats and the heralds signal their arrival. A page walks in front of the king and bows.)

Page (in falsetto): Your majesty, the alchemists have arrived.

King Pomo: Very well.

Page 2 (bows, in falsetto): Your majesty, the Queen wishes to inform you that she is feeling ill and will not be attending dinner this evening.

King Pomo: Oh, curses! What other bad news can you people possibly bring me today?

Pudingo (motioning for a nearby page to walk towards him): You there, psst!

(The boy walks over to him.)

Page 3 (in falsetto): Yes?

Pudingo: What's going on?

Page 3 (in falsetto): Sir?

Pudingo: The voices. What's with-why is everyone speaking like a twelve year old girl?

Page 3 (in falsetto): Eunuchs, sir.

Pudingo: Eunuchs!

Page 3 (in falsetto): It was the king's orders.

Pudingo: Whatever for?

Page 3 (in falsetto): No one knows, sir. One day he just decreed that all of the men in the land be castrated. Something about proving something or other to his wife.

Pudingo (shocked): ALL of them?! The messenger, the one who told us the king wanted to see us, he was speaking normally.

(There is a loud scream offstage.)

King Pomo: You there! Alchemists! Step forward!

(Thermis and Pudingo walk towards the throne slowly and bow.)

King Pomo: Excellent.

(There is another scream offstage.)

King Pomo: Ignore that. Just another villager having his testicles removed. So, you two have good news I take it.

Thermis and Pudingo (in falsetto): Yes, sir!

King Pomo: What are those..things on your heads?

Pudingo (in falsetto): A hat sir.

King Pomo: Well I can see that it's a hat. What's that it's made out of? Is that lead?

Thermis (in falsetto): It is, your majesty.

King Pomo (mistrustful): You alchemists certainly are queer folk. And by that I mean to say that I think the both of you are a couple of flaming queens.

Pudingo (in falsetto): Thank you, your lordship.

King Pomo: So? Did you do what I ordered or not?

Thermis (in falsetto): Why, we did you one better, sir!

King Pomo: Really? How so?

Pudingo (in falsetto): Well you see, your majesty, we did in fact turn lead into gold, but came upon an even more remarkable discovery.

King Pomo: Which is..

Thermis (in falsetto): Turning gold...into lead! (holds out the piece of lead)

(The crowd gasps overdramatically.)

King Pomo (annoyed): Tell me something, alchemist. How exactly does turning a piece of gold into a piece of lead amount to anything but wasting my precious gold?

Thermis: Well, your majesty, it has come to our understanding by a very trusted source that must remain anonymous for the sake of anonymity, that very soon the entire gold market will collapse and the only metal worth anything to anyone will be lead.

King Pomo (intrigued): You don't say. Tell me more.

Sitherly: Your majesty!

(King Pomo looks up at him in surprise.)

Sitherly (in falsetto): I mean...your majesty!

King Pomo: What is it now, Sitherly?

Sitherly (in falsetto): This is the most preposterous thing I've ever heard! Turning gold into lead, gold becoming worthless. Can't you see that they're obviously lying to get out of the responsibility for failing to succeed as you desired?

King Pomo: Is this true?

Thermis (in falsetto): Of course not!

King Pomo: So if I were to torture you for days on end, to whip and tear and burn you piece by piece, you would still stick to your story?

Pudingo (in falsetto): Forever!

King Pomo: If I were to burn off your limbs with a single candle, break your ribcage bone by bone, and allow the remainder of your body to be savagely beaten by two angry lesbians

—

Thermis (in falsetto): All right, all right! We were lying!

Pudingo: Oh, way to go, Thermis. I kind of liked the sound of that last one.

King Pomo: I see. You have shown me that I cannot trust even men of science these days. So be it. Guards! Take them to the dungeon! Thermis and Pudingo, you will be executed tomorrow at dawn.

(Four guards approach and drag them off.)

Guard 1 (in falsetto): All right, off you go then!

Guard 2 (in falsetto): Come along now!

Scene 3

(In the dank, poorly-lit dungeon under the castle. Thermis and Pudingo are shackled and sitting against a cobblestone wall. There are two filthy prisoners next to Pudingo.)

Pudingo: What a madman!

Thermis: The king?

Pudingo: Of course the king! If anyone should be locked in shackles in a dungeon it's him.

Thermis: It could be worse.

Pudingo: We're about to die! How could it possibly be any worse than this?

(There is a loud scream from offstage again.)

Pudingo: Well, I didn't see that one coming.

Thermis: I say we just accept our own impending deaths. It will make the next few hours much easier.

Pudingo: I think it's already dawn.

Thermis: Oh God, Pudingo! (grabs Pudingo) I don't want to die! Don't let them take me!

Pudingo: Easy, Thermis, easy! (pushing Thermis off of him) We have a good five minutes left.

Thermis: You're right. You're right, Pudingo. I don't know what got into me.

Pudingo: Say, Thermis.

Thermis: What?

Pudingo: I've always wondered something.

Thermis: Yes?

Pudingo: If you were trapped in a situation like this and your sister was there, and you both were about to die, would you—you know?

Thermis: Good Heavens, Pudingo, that is the sickest thing I've ever had enter my mind! My own sister! Please!

Pudingo: I was just curious.

Thermis: I mean, have you ever seen my sister? She's the ugliest woman on the face of the earth. Now my cousin Therese, maybe.

Prisoner 1: What's that? Did someone say my name?

Thermis: I said Therese. My cousin Therese.

Prisoner 1: Oh, I thought you said Felice.

Thermis: Go back to sleep, criminal.

Prisoner 1: Easy there, we're all in the same boat now, aren't we?

Pudingo: What's a harmless old man like you in here for anyway?

Prisoner 1: I killed 8 people with my bare hands.

(Pudingo moves further away from the prisoner.)

Pudingo: What's the other one in here for?

Prisoner 1: Who him? Treason.

Pudingo: Really? What did he do?

Prisoner 1: The king claims he was mocking him in front of the queen.

Pudingo: You're kidding me. Hey you, what did you say to him?

Prisoner 2 (in deep voice): "How's it hangin'."

(The door to the dungeon opens and the executioner enters.)

The Executioner (sighs): Ahhh! There's nothing like chopping off a few heads in the morning to get one going. (looks back at Thermis and Pudingo) Are you two ready? Then again, I guess no one's really ready for it, are they? (motions for them to stand up) Well, come on then. Let's get this over with. Oh! Wait a second, I'm forgetting someone. (looks at the two prisoners) You there. Old man. Don't I have you for a castration and then execution this morning?

Prisoner 1: I don't really see why you have to castrate me if you're going to execute me right afterwards.

The Executioner: Well it wouldn't make much sense to execute you first, would it? Come along now.

(The old man stands up and The Executioner leads him out of the dungeon. A few seconds later they hear a screaming and then a loud thud. A few more seconds later The Executioner returns.)

The Executioner: All right, let's get this show on the road. (grabs an axe from the wall) Which one of you wants it first?

(Thermis and Pudingo shake their heads.)

The Executioner: Well, all right then. I suppose (replaces the axe, and removes an extremely large one) I'll just have to do you at the same time. Mind you, sometimes I don't knock it clean off on the first blow so be sure to lie perfectly still or your in for one hell of a headache.

(Thermis and Pudingo lie on the block with their heads together.)

Thermis: Well, Pudingo. I guess this is goodbye.

Pudingo: Yeah, see you later.

(The Executioner examines the tip of the blade and prepares to swing it downwards when the door to the dungeon flies open and a herald enters and blows his horn. The Executioner drops the axe in surprise.)

The Executioner: Oh, really! What is it this time?

(A messenger enters. He unrolls a scroll and begins reading it.)

Messenger (in falsetto): By decree of His Majesty King Pomo, the two prisoners Thermis and Pudingo are to have their sentences reprieved and are to be released at once. Thereafter, the two former alchemists are to return to the court where the King wishes to speak to them.

The Executioner: Well, if that isn't just great. Some birthday this has turned out to be. (removes a pair of keys and unshackles Thermis and Pudingo. The two rub their wrists and run out of the dungeon. The Executioner starts looking at the remaining prisoner.) Well, I guess I can push up your appointment. (pulls out a large knife)

Scene 4

(King Pomo's court. The king is pacing around distraughtly and wearing a leaded crown. The court is empty otherwise except for a guard at the door. Thermis and Pudingo enter.)

King Pomo: Thermis! Pudingo! My favorite alchemists!

(Thermis and Pudingo look at each other confusedly.)

Thermis: Your majesty?

King Pomo: How could I have doubted it? You! How could I have doubted you? The both of you!

Pudingo: Is something wrong, your majesty?

King Pomo: The gold! It became worthless overnight.

Thermis: How could something like this happen?

King Pomo: Do I look like the type of person who knows this sort of thing? Just know that it did. Sitherly must've known you two were right all along. I suspect he double-crossed

me in order to sell off his gold early and invest in lead. Now I'm the poorest person in the land! All of this! (points at the furniture and ornaments) It's all worthless gold! No one will even buy it off me.

Pudingo: That's terrible, sire!

King Pomo: Listen, you two. That-that machine or whatever it is you say you invented. The one that turns gold into lead. Bring it here and I will reward you handsomely!

Pudingo: Er, of course, your majesty.

King Pomo: Here, take all of this with you. (starts handing the two of them gold jewelry and trinkets.) Turn it into lead and bring it back here immediately. I have to buy back my bedroom furniture from the creditors. (begins to leave) Hurry now!

(King Pomo runs out of the courtroom. Thermis and Pudingo start walking towards the door.)

Pudingo: Thermis. (they stop)

Thermis: Yes?

Pudingo: What do we do now?

Thermis: Well, I'm not coming back here, that's for sure. I say we take all of this gold and flee the country.

Pudingo: Do you really think we can afford to travel on all this? I mean it's not exactly lead we're carrying around.

Thermis: True. (they begin walking again)

Pudingo: Do you think we should tell him that having all this lead around is poisonous?

Thermis: I sure as hell wouldn't.

Pudingo: Oh Thermis, have a heart. Do you really think the poor man deserves to die a painful death just for being greedy and stupid?

Guard (in falsetto): Yes!

(Thermis and Pudingo nod and exit.)

Revised Script from December, 2005

Act I.

A king summons two alchemists to turn lead into gold. They both realize it can't be done, and decide to convince the king that lead is going to be far more valuable than gold soon. He sees through their ruse and sends them to the dungeon to be executed. Just as the executioner is about to carry out the sentence "someone" bursts in and tells them that gold sales have plummeted and lead become an enormous treasure, and that the king, Plumbpomo has commuted their sentence in order to speak to them about something important.

In his court, the king announces that they are indeed wise men, and that they are to become his chief scientists. Then he instructs them to visit their new lab at once and begin working on turning gold into lead.

Act I Scene 1

The two alchemists, Thermis and Pudingo, are asleep on the floor in their laboratory. One of King Pomo's paiges arrives, sounded by a horn-playing servant. The two jump from the floor and pretend acting like they were hard at work. The paige announces that the king wishes to see them, and wants them to bring along some of the lead they turned into gold as he requested. The paige and horn-player leave and Thermis and Pudingo blow a fuse over what to do, knowing full well that making gold from lead is impossible. Thermis suggests they fool the king somehow and devises a plan to trick his majesty into believing lead will soon be more valuable than gold. They bring some of the lead along as "evidence."

Act I Scene 2

The king is seated in an elaborately decorated throne. Several horns announce the arrival of Thermis and Pudingo. A falsetto-voiced paige tell the king who they are. Another informs the king that the queen is feeling ill and won't be able to come to dinner. Pudingo asks a nearby subject why everyone has such high voices and the man (of course, in falsetto) explains that the king has recently declared that all male subjects of the court must be eunuchs. Pudingo comments that the paige who saw them

earlier was not speaking that way, immediately followed by a scream offstage. The king calls them forth and asks them to show him the gold. In (and sometimes out of) falsetto, they begin to explain that through their research gold is becoming increasingly common and will soon be replaced by lead, and urge him to obtain as much lead as he possibly can and to get rid of the gold. They show him the piece of lead, which they claim was originally gold. He doesn't buy it, and is outraged that they

would turn a piece of valuable gold into a worthless rock. He sends them to the dungeon to be executed tomorrow.

Act I Scene 3

Thermis and Pudingo are in shackles in a stone-walled dungeon. They talk about how insane the king is, and one of two prisoners next to them agrees. He's in for theft, but the guy next to him was arrested for treason just for talking to the king. Thermis asks what he said, and the man (in an extremely deep voice) goes, "How's it hangin'?" A guard comes in and drags the thief off. Thermis resolves that the situation can't get any worse. They hear a scream. Pudingo replies that he saw that one coming. The executioner finally comes in and has them stand up and bend over two stone blocks. They say their last goodbyes as he sharpens the axe and prepares to chop off their heads. Suddenly a paige runs in and announces that their sentences have been commuted due to a recent economic turnaround in the lead market and a drop in gold. The king's gold is worthless and he is poorer than most of the public. The son of a pencil manufacturer, Caesar Salad, has already overthrown the aristocracy and established himself as the new dictator for life over the Western half of the kingdom. Thermis and Pudingo are freed. The executioner is disappointed, and decides he can still lop the other guy's balls off while he's down there.

Act I Scene 4

The king is frantically pacing his court, and wearing a lead crown and jewelry. Thermis and Pudingo rush in and start shouting Thank you's at his feet. He tells them to get up and then admits he was wrong to not believe them. He promotes them to Chief Science Advisers and gives them enough lead to buy a new lab since he had the old one destroyed. Then he instructs them to use their marvelous invention to turn all of his kingdom's gold into lead. As they are leaving they decide just to sell the gold and flee the country. Thermis ponders whether they should tell the king that having all of that lead around could be poisonous. One of the paige's leans over and in falsetto declares, "I sure as hell wouldn't."

Act II.

As their first duty as economic minister and assistant, Thermis and Pudingo travel to another country where lead is rumored to be so abundant it is worthless, buy all of it for a handful of beans (they have never heard of gold, so its use as a bargaining item is nonexistent), and return. Beans become a riotous hit in the other country, and upon hearing this news King Plumbpomo becomes frustrated at Thermis and

Pudingo's lack of progress. He sends them back with more beans, but Thermis spends them all on a magical snail which the seller ensures him will save his life one day. After the king accidentally steps on the snail, they find themselves back in prison, and their cellmate this time is a master alchemist who once taught them at school. He is so deep in belief that alchemy is a real science that he argues with them for a long time. The alchemist master reveals he has never made gold, but was able to produce a substance very similar to it called deleterium, that is very beautiful to look at, malleable, durable, and most importantly rather rare. What they fail to tell the king is that it also causes your internal organs to liquefy when you are in contact with it for more than a month. They demand to see the king and show him their new plans.

Act II Scene 1

Thermis and Pudingo are in the laboratory with a massive pile of lead they've secretly bought from another kingdom. They have no idea how to turn gold into the substance, as it is impossible as far as they know, so they plan to merely pretend that they did the work and bury the gold somewhere until its price begins to rise again. The king barges in and sees all of the lead, and is pleased. However, he heard of a mysterious purchase of a rival kingdom's entire supply of lead and fears his enemy in the West is planning to raise an army. He becomes paranoid and orders them to step up production even quicker. As there is no plausible way for them to find more lead in a hurry, they lie and tell the king the machine is broken. He doesn't believe them, and accuses them of working for

Caesar Salad. They are arrested and taken to the dungeons once again.

Act II Scene 2

Between ideas of escaping and further lying to the king, Thermis suddenly remembers an old element he had invented by accident in Alchemy school. It was called deleterium. The problem with it was that while it was beautiful to look at, never lost its luster or durability, and was useful for all sorts of industries, it also caused one's internal organs to liquefy after a few months' contact. If they could convince the king that it was better than gold and lead combined, they could simply produce enough of it to satisfy his personal greed, wait for him to die, and then flee the country. They request to send a message to the king--their last hope riding on his tempestuous whims.

Act II Scene 3

Plumbpomo is pleased, and tells them they have 24 hours to create the new metal to show him. They do so, and it becomes so envied by the court that the king orders more to be distributed to his closest friends. Eager to oblige, they go back to produce en masse hundreds of pounds of deleterium for the nobility.

Act II Scene 4

The minister of peace is summoned. She tells the king that the new material is perfect for the production of weapons, armor, and siegecraft. She has already had the process automated in a factory so that Thermis and Pudingo are hardly useful anymore. As soon as Caesar Salad is destroyed, she suggests they both be executed. The king says he will consider her suggestion and orders her to speed up the production so that he can attack within three days.

Act III.

As its abundance grows and its popularity spreads, it becomes coveted by the lower classes. Struck by the beauty of his deleterious kingdom, Plumbpomo decides that henceforth everyone should be allowed to buy the metal. When Thermis and Pudingo oppose this idea and refuse to make enough for the lower classes, the king accuses them of being elitist class enemies and has them executed on the spot. In two months, the entire kingdom is dead.

Act III Scene 1

The royal court, where Caesar Salad has been captured and brought before the king to receive judgment. He is to be executed the next day and is taken away.

Act III Scene 2

Plumbpomo tells Thermis and Pudingo to come forth. They are to be honored for their help in winning the war, and he tries to place deleterium medals on them but they won't have it. He mistakes it for modesty, and praises them again. Then he reveals his new plan: deleterium shall be the chief industry of the kingdom. It will create thousands of jobs, raise the standard of living of everyone, and will make the substance affordable by all citizens. He unfolds a dream that the entire kingdom be covered in it so it will be the envy of the world, where every citizen will be wealthy beyond their wildest dreams and peace and enlightenment will return to the land. Horrified that their plan to kill the nobles has backfired, they refuse to cooperate. Plumbpomo, thinking they oppose him because they don't want the masses to have deleterium, sentences them to death for the ultimate crime--class warfare.

Act III Scene 3

The executioner's gallows. The entire scene is covered in deleterium, down to the axe. Thermis, Pudingo, and Caesar Salad are on the chopping block. As they are being executed, the spectators in their beautiful jewelry begin to suffer the consequences as their internal organs liquefy and shoot out of their orifices. Thermis is up first, but is still confident he will be saved at the last moment. As he is about to be killed, the brother of the magician who sold him the snail arrives and tells him he wants it back, and in exchange he will transport him to safety. Thermis confesses the snail was stepped on by the king, and the magician says, "Oh, nevermind then." and disappears. Thermis is executed. The king wants to know what is happening. Pudingo tells him the truth, then the axe falls. The executioner hasn't a moment to enjoy his work, for he too dies. As everyone but Plumbpomo drops dead, the king remarks, "At least our coffins shall be the envy of the entire world. It will be the most luxurious mass grave in the history of mankind." He dies.

The Original Act I Scene One from December 27th Which Prompted Me to Re-Revise the Outline (Actually, the Second Version. The First, Written the Day Earlier, Was Even Worse)

SCENE ONE

(The laboratory of the two royal alchemists Thermis and Pudingo. They lie fast asleep amid the strange medieval gadgets and instruments of their work. There is a banging at the door. Slowly Pudingo wakes up.)

PUDINGO

God, what time is it? Thermis, wake up. Someone is at the door.

(Thermis shakes his head negatively and murmurs. Pudingo scratches himself.)

PUDINGO

I wonder who that could be. Thermis, did you order Chinese while I was asleep?

THERMIS

Hm?

PUDINGO

Wake up! I said, "Did you order Chinese food?" There's somebody at the door.

THERMIS

Oh. Yeah, I did. But that came hours ago.

PUDINGO

Did it?

THERMIS

Maybe three, four hours ago. The sun was still up. That reminds me. I didn't, uh, have any money for a tip so I gave him some of your hair. But it doesn't look that bad. I'm sure you could just go to a barber and have him even it out on the other side.

PUDINGO

Wait, wait, wait. Where's my food? I told you before I took a nap that if you ordered anything from the Chinese place to get me four spring rolls and a bottle of mineral water. All that's here is a bunch of wrappers and two empty bottles.

THERMIS

(meekly)

Well...you were asleep...so I ate it.

PUDINGO

What?

THERMIS

Anyway, what's the big deal? We'll just order some more. Not like _we're_ paying for it, right?

(The knocking at the door grows louder. A trumpet blows.)

PUDINGO

Oh, shit. That's who it is. It's a royal messenger. Look busy. I'll answer the door.

(Thermis pushes all of the garbage off the laboratory counter and starts pouring a strange liquid back and forth between two beakers.)

THERMIS

Maaan. I'm tired of looking busy every time the king wants to tell us something. We're reasonably smart, aren't we? Why can't we just invent some sort of long-distance communication device so they'll stop coming here? We could call it (gesturing)

"the telephone." Think of what an impact it would have on society. The workplace would change as we know it. People everywhere could use it to pretend like they're busy when their bosses want to tell them something. Wouldn't it be great? Well, except for the bosses. To them I'm sure the decline in productivity and worker behavior would be a serious problem. In fact, remind me if we ever invent the telephone not to give one to our assistants.

PUDINGO

We can't afford assistants, Thermis.

THERMIS

Oh, right. Then we definitely can't afford to give them telephones!

PUDINGO

Will you shut up and look like you're working! The king will have our heads cut off

if we're caught sitting around again.

(Thermis starts playing with the equipment. A royal paige barges into the room carrying a scroll. He unrolls it and reads aloud.)

PAIGE

Servants of the court of Plumbpomo, hear ye well: Thermis of Nox and Pudingo also of Nox, alchemists in His Majesty's Royal Service, your presence is demanded immediately in the king's hall.

(rolls up the scroll)

Oh, and if I were you I'd bring some of the gold you've produced with me. He wants to see what progress you've made considering he's sunk almost a quarter million into this little scam you've got going for you.

THERMIS

What scam? We're legitimate!

PUDINGO

Alchemists!

THERMIS

Right, legitimate alchemists!

PAIGE

Don't be ridiculous. Everybody knows what alchemy means. The whole kingdom is onto you. Don't forget when this little scheme of yours is finished and you're running off to the border with sacks full of money while the army's right behind where that money came from. While you're in here eating your fancy and exotic Chinese food that costs 2,000 mark a plate we're out there starving on nothing but frog-legs and lobsters. Blehhh! And why? Because the king's taxed everybody silly to pay for this white elephant. That money could've been used to serve some important social benefit--like inventing new fancy hats for the aristocrats to wear. By God, that'd be something we all could enjoy. But no.

(in a mocking tone)

The King wants to turn lead into gold.

(in a normal voice)

And where is it? What have you done in the past six months? Nothing! I don't see a single speck of gold-colored dust in this entire room. Oh, I'm gonna enjoy seeing the two of you on the cutter's block when you tell the king the truth!

PUDINGO

Hey, Jeremy.

PAIGE

What?

PUDINGO

Fuck off.

PAIGE

Yeah, I'm going. But only because I want to get a good spot to stand in when you two stroll into the king's court with empty hands. See you later, assholes!

(The paige exits.)

PUDINGO

Christ, I hate him!

THERMIS

Me too.

PUDINGO

The nerve of him accusing us of being swindlers.

THERMIS

We didn't go to alchemy school all those years for nothing.

PUDINGO

We didn't go to alchemy school. There's no such thing.

THERMIS

Oh. Right.

PUDINGO

But we did go to the science academy.

THERMIS

We certainly did.

PUDINGO

And we know enough about science to know exactly how to turn lead into gold.

THERMIS

Including the knowledge that it can't possibly be done.

PUDINGO

Absolutely.

THERMIS

Who does he think he is? He thinks he's smarter than us. Us!

PUDINGO

Pfeh!

THERMIS

And what's all this stuff about the king being angry at us. We came to the scientific conclusion you can't make gold out of lead two hours after we started this project.

PUDINGO

Yes, we did. But, uh, did you seriously want me telling that to the king?

THERMIS

You mean you didn't tell him? Why the hell not?

PUDINGO

I don't know, Thermis. I was afraid. And now we're doomed!

THERMIS

No doubt he'll have us arrested on the spot when we give him the bad news.

PUDINGO

And I don't even get a last meal because you ate it!

THERMIS

Arrested and thrown in the dungeon. Who knows what horrendous, grisly torture awaits us there? The rack, maybe.

PUDINGO

The rack!

THERMIS

The needle machine.

PUDINGO

Needles!

THERMIS

The drills.

PUDINGO

Drills!

THERMIS

The thumbscrews.

PUDINGO

Thumbscrews! Oh, my!

THERMIS

That spiky coffin thing.

PUDINGO

Eh--what spiky coffin thing?

THERMIS

You know, the coffin with the spikes in it and you get in and they close it.

PUDINGO

I think they call it an iron maiden.

THERMIS

Iron maiden. Yes, I always forget what that one's called.

PUDINGO

The iron maiden!

THERMIS

The poisonous raccoon helmets.

PUDINGO

Helmets!

THERMIS

Oh-h-h-h, I regret ever having invented those things. Well, except for the poisonous raccoon helmets. I only had a dream about those once. But trust me, they're terrible. Hey, maybe when we give the king the bad news we can calm him down by showing him the blueprints I made. They're rather clever. You take a starving raccoon, right? Then you inject poison into him in small doses so he builds up an immunity but it stays in his bloodstream, then you put him into a sack with one

opening, put the sack into a regular knight's helmet, and place the helmet on your intended victim. The raccoon, being so hungry and trapped in the sack, has no choice but to gnaw his way through the person's face till he gets out the back of his head. It's so messy and gruesome. The king would really get a kick out of it, I bet.

PUDINGO

Yeah, I'm sure he'll be so excited he'll want to test them out right away.

THERMIS

And that's not the worst part. Just when you think the torture is bad, you get summoned for the execution. Well, no, on the other hand maybe the torture is so painful and terrible that you pray for death all along and are relieved when it finally comes. Or not. What do you think?

PUDINGO

Good God, we're fucked.

THERMIS

Now, now. I'll think of something. You just leave it to this big brain of mine to figure a way out. I've gotten us out of worse spots. Remember the time we were homeless, unemployed, and starving to death? I got us that sweet job as alchemists, didn't I?

PUDINGO

We're doomed beyond belief.

THERMIS

What we need...is an excuse.

PUDINGO

Gee, you think?

THERMIS

And not just any excuse. It also has to be believable. But what? Hmmmm...OK, Pudingo. I think I have it.

PUDINGO

Sure you do.

THERMIS

How much lead did the king give us?

PUDINGO

What does it matter?

THERMIS

Just tell me. How much?

PUDINGO

I don't know. Maybe 4,000 ingots.

THERMIS

Right, well, we need as much of it as possible. How much of it were we able to convert into gold?

PUDINGO

None of it. That's the problem, blockhead. Were you here twenty seconds ago?

THERMIS

Excellent! Don't you see? We take all the lead back to the king, right?

PUDINGO

Er...

THERMIS

Then we tell him it's gold!

PUDINGO

I should save the king the trouble and kill you myself.

THERMIS

No, no, don't you see? We tell him gold is out--

PUDINGO

Gold...is out.

THERMIS

And lead is in. Lead chic. A boom in the lead market. Or there will be one, anyway. We'll just make up some economics mumbo jumbo and confuse him into agreeing with us.

PUDINGO

So let me see if I understood you clearly, as I'm of the tendency to not understand you whatsoever. You want us to tell the king...the king of the entire kingdom...who trusted us and sunk who knows how much money into this laboratory and our daily expenses...you want to tell him that --oops, we made a mistake--and due to some deep understanding of the global economy that only we have, gold is about to become worthless and lead is going to be so valuable that he shouldn't kill us. Did I get that right?

THERMIS

Yes! It's perfect, isn't it?

PUDINGO

You were right the first time. We should've just told him the truth. Well, let's go, Thermis.

THERMIS

What about the lead?

PUDINGO

Leave it. I think the lesson to be learned here is that honesty is the best policy. Or rather, when you don't have the brains to come up with a good lie, honesty is the best policy.

THERMIS

You know, thinking of all these torture devices and such, and seeing as how we're probably going to die, perhaps in hindsight it was a bad idea to stall the king for more time and money last month with my "lethal injection device." A little ironic, isn't it?

PUDINGO

It was MY lethal injection device. As I recall, I told you about the plans and you tried to one-up me and invented the "fetal projection device".

THERMIS

The finest baby catapult since Archimedes.

PUDINGO

Tell me what use a baby catapult could possibly have.

THERMIS

Well, how else are you going to launch them far distances? Because you can't throw a baby over a castle wall. Believe me, Pudingo, I've tried.

PUDINGO

And since you brought up MY lethal injection device, I'd appreciate it if you stopped going around telling people it was yours. I swear, your memory gets worse every day.

THERMIS

What makes you think I go around telling people I invented it? I don't remember doing that.

PUDINGO

Maybe it was the time you painted "PROPERTY OF THERMIS" on it in big letters while I was in the toilet, then gave it to the king without telling me.

THERMIS

It was a joke. Anyway I told the king we both worked on it.

PUDINGO

You painted "PUDINGO SMELLS" on the other side.

THERMIS

Let's not bicker about who painted this or stole that. You're failing to see the irony that I so deftly pointed out earlier in the scene.

PUDINGO

There is no irony because I'm not going to die. We're going to go up there, throw ourselves at his feet, and if that doesn't work

(pulls a dagger out of his tunic)

I'll throw this at him instead. And then run as fast as I possibly can.

(Thermis takes an ingot of lead and hefts it in his hand.)

THERMIS

Yeah, and if he's still conscious I'll chuck this at his pregnant wife's stomach! That ought to slow those bastards down a bit!

PUDINGO

Good thinking, Thermis. Now come on, we'll just make him angrier by not showing up on time.

(The two alchemists stow away their weapons and exit the laboratory.)

Note to Self on the Rewriting of Scene One from December 28th, 2005

This scene must be rewritten. The current one is too silly and weak. There are plenty of jokes, but not enough meaning or funniness. A scene should either be a fully encapsulated part of a larger story, or a bridge between two capsules. Either it is a torrent of rain creating a mud puddle, or it is the coat I throw down over it to escort the audience. This scene is more like a few minutes of bad vaudeville than either. The audience/reader should never be forced to step in mud.

The Re-Revised Outline That I Wrote After Realizing Act I Scene One of the New Script Sucked

Act I

Scene I

Laboratory. Thermis and Pudingo argue over who is the boss.

Scene II

Barnabas tries to get Thermis in hot water. He leaves them a message. They devise a plan how to escape their responsibility.

Scene III

The dungeon. Thermis and Pudingo are freed.

Act II

Scene I

Dulland. Being incapable of transforming all the gold the king gave them to lead, Thermis and Pudingo go to Dulland where lead is plentiful and cheap. They, however, fail to communicate with the Dullanders because of their complex language and unwillingness to try and say anything. Finally they meet with the Bismuth, Duke of Bleimar, who explains why no one wants to speak. They tell him they came to buy some lead, and he is perplexed why anyone would buy it when it is so readily available everywhere. But they persist and he agrees to find them a buyer. Pudingo leaves with Bismuth and Thermis is in charge of watching the gold. The Blue Magician comes, and wanting the gold for his lead-making spell, kidnaps Thermis and the cart and leaves as a group of bandits approach the returned Pudingo in the darkness.

Scene II

Outside of the Blue Magician's tree house, a bug starts pestering the wizard and he waves his hand to make it go away--unintentionally freeing Thermis from the spell. The Blue Magician tries to cast another one when Thermis realizes where he is, but Thermis grabs a tree branch and pokes the wizard in the eye. Due to the terms of the old myth that one who pokes a wizard in the eye may ask the wizard to give up something of value to him, Thermis wants him to give him all of his lead. But the lead holds religious importance to the Magician, and he refuses, offering something he claims is far more valuable by a thousand fold--his companion and magical snail, Pete. It is destined to save the life of its owner someday when he most needs saving, and Thermis is seduced by this offer and takes it. The magician begins crying that now he has no gold to make lead from, and his only friend is gone. Out of Pity, Thermis searches himself for something to offer the wizard. He has in his pocket a bag full of dried beans that he had forgotten about, and offers half of them to the wizard. Strangely, the wizard seems astounded by such an offer, and gladly accepts them. He snatches the beans and runs off into his tree and slams the door

shut, peering through the window and clutching the bag. Thermis picks up the cart, turns it around, and begins walking back.

Scene III

Back at the scene of Pudingo and the missing cart, the bandits come closer and eye the food with drawn daggers. Suddenly the Duke of Bismuth rushes out and slays them all. He brings news from the merchant, bad news: he isn't interested in "worthless pieces of shiny metal and wants something of concrete value." Thermis arrives with the cart and retells the story. The Duke goes white, and asks if Thermis really gave away half a bag of dried beans out of pity. He explains they are one of the most sought after and rare commodities in the entire kingdom of Dulland. He assures them they could have the merchant's entire warehouse of lead in exchange for a handful, and with the rest buy enough mules and wagons to carry it all back. The Duke takes the beans, vowing an oath not to molest a single bean, and leaves. Pudingo and Thermis are overjoyed that things worked out so well, and Thermis suggests they not tell the king what happened and hide the gold somewhere for themselves.

Act III

Scene I

Instead of being happy to see them, the king, now bedecking his throne completely in lead and wearing lead jewelry and a crown, is furious when Thermis and Pudingo arrive with their vast treasury of lead. He is not impressed with the amount of lead they purchased, and Thermis tries to placate him by showing him the magical snail which can save its owner's life. He and Pudingo argue because Pudingo wanted a magical snail too, the king crushes it with his foot, trots off, and Thermis begins to cry. Then Thermis has the idea of taking their hidden gold, buying all of the beans in the kingdom, going back to Dulland, and being rich beyond their wildest dreams. Then the king returns with Barnabas, who has discovered their gold hoard. He convinces the king that Caesar Salad must have bought them off with the lead which they gave to the king, kept the gold, and are planning to assassinate him so that Salad can become the new king. They are sent back to the dungeon to be executed as traitors again.

Scene II

Back in the dungeon, they meet their alchemist mentor, Scaramis, who is to be executed since he took over their job at the laboratory but failed to produce any lead from all the king's gold. He confesses he was able to make a new material, called deleterium, which is more beautiful than gold and more useful (it even cures the plague), but has the nasty side effect of killing anyone who is in close contact with it for more than a week. They promise not to reveal it to anyone, the alchemist is dragged off to his death, and they at once begin to plan how to use deleterium to save their own skin. The dungeonmaster comes in again, announcing that Caesar Salad has been captured but denies knowing Thermis or Pudingo even when admitting they are his conspirators may lessen his punishment from death. He also

admits hiding large caches of gold in the countryside given to him by Dulland for his coup. Deciding they are innocent, the king has them freed.

Scene III

Thermis goes to stall the king while Pudingo tries to find the deleterium in the laboratory and the alchemist's notes on how to produce it. He uncovers it in a hole in the floorboards and tries to decipher it. The mentor had apparently stolen an invention of Jeremy's that the latter was never able to complete, and discovered the way of getting it to work. Pudingo pulls the canvas from the machine--it has the words "SCARAMIS RULES" painted on the front. He gets it up and running and produces a brick of deleterium. Thermis comes back as Pudingo is marvelling its beauty, and reminds him how dangerous it is. Pudingo quickly tosses the metal onto the ground and backs away, and Thermis tells him the king has agreed to see them. They carefully wrap the deleterium in the cloth from the machine and leave for the court.

Act IV

Scene I

The minister of peace is speaking with Barnabas, and has concluded his investigations on deleterium, and found it to be the only substance known to science capable of piercing itself. With an entire army of deleterium-studded and armed soldiers, the king could conquer any country he wanted--starting with Dulland, who the peace minister suspects was behind Caesar Salad's secession after the latter confessed the Duke of Bismuth was his cousin. He wants the king to start using deleterium for making massive amounts of weapons so they can prepare to attack Dulland immediately. Barnabas agrees to tell the king and advise him to take it into consideration, but will probably not decide right away.

Scene II

The king's lavish, shimmering deleterious court. Thermis and Pudingo are to be honored for their new metal, but won't allow the king to pin medals made from the stuff to their chest. He mistakes it for modesty and unveils his plans for increasing the country's overall wealth by specializing in and converting the whole kingdom's industry to the production of deleterium. It will become widely available and used for everything, and its benefits will be felt in even the poorest of homes and throughout the entire world. His grand utopian scheme horrifies Thermis and Pudingo, and they try to convince him that only the elite (and Barnabas) should be allowed to enjoy its beauty. Disgusted, the king accuses them of committing the worst crime in the constitution--class warfare--and sentences them to beheading the next day. They are less than scared by this, after having gone through it twice, and escort themselves to the dungeon. The king summons the peace minister and announces his plans are approved.

Scene III

The gallows. The entire city, including the gallows, are shimmering in deleterium.

The captain of the guard meets the new dungeonmaster, who has been singing a song about chopping while sharpening his new deleterium axe, and announces he has been called back into service, as well as his son, and his cousin has recently opened a factory for deleterium that has made his entire family a fortune. He thinks there might be a new war soon and is thrilled at the chance to be able to fight again. "It's been so long since I got the chance to kill someone." "Me too!" "I guess we're both having a run of good luck then. These are truly happy times for everyone." The four prisoners (the Duke of Bismuth wearing a hood over his head that is only taken off when he is about to be executed) are led in and the king makes a rare appearance to read off their sentences himself. Pudingo and Thermis keep trying to go after the other and they interrupt the speech by the king. The captain of police tells them to shut up and they keep fighting, so he tells Thermis to pick a spot. Thermis, excited to be in charge at last, yells, "Get thee in front of me, asshole!" The king finishes his speech and leaves the gallows to observe the executions from a "safer distance." Caesar Salad is allowed to say a parting word, then gets the axe. The Duke of Bismuth is next. Then, despite being last, Thermis is pushed up to the gallows, but remembers the snail that will save his life. Suddenly a magician appears, the brother of the one who sold him the snail, and tells him if he returns the snail the magician will transport him to safety. Thermis says the king stepped on it, and the magician disappears. Thermis is dead. As Pudingo is pushed up he laughs at them all for they will soon die anyway. Barnabas is the first to fall. The captain of police is next. The king is scared, but makes the dying executioner kill Pudingo anyway. Then as the entire city dies, the king pronounces his death quote and falls.

The End.

Notes and The Substance of the Argument Between Pudingo and Scaramis (Who Originally Was Quite An Asshole)

The Alchemist's Argument

Alchemy is a science. It is not the study of creating wealth through exchange, like a baker selling bread or a blacksmith forging swords, but of creating wealth. Creating wealth itself is not a science, for anyone can create wealth through labor. To create wealth without labor, without exchanging something--that is the greatest scientific adventure in human history.

Pudingo's Argument

Were it possible to create wealth without labor, that would truly be astounding. But the development of such a system is itself labor. Men have tried to perfect alchemy for thousands of years, and that in itself is the labor that has gone into it. If the

process were easy to discover, with very little labor going into it, the discovery would have been as valuable as the discovery of earwax. But nobody as yet has been able to do it, and that is why success would be so sweet. And if man is able to make something as worthless as lead into gold, lead will soon become a much sought after resource and it will no longer be worthless. Therefore the value of gold will decrease at the same rate that lead will increase. And then man will begin looking for a new worthless material to turn into a new valuable material--perhaps turning sand into lead, so that lead may be turned into gold, or maybe he will bypass the whole process and turn sand into gold so that in 100 years there will be no beaches left and the pyramids of Giza will be nothing but warehouses and distribution centers.

And were it possible to create wealth without exchange, without the use of any labor or resources, that would also be truly astounding. But you cannot create something from nothing. You cannot simply invent wealth out of thin air. A society built upon such a system would always be on the verge of collapsing. Why should anyone want to ever work again if they can make their own money? And if nobody is working, goods will become scarce, and the value of all that wealth created by the alchemists would be as valuable as the carbon dioxide they create so much of now.

The Alchemist's Second Argument

It's true that labor has gone into alchemy for millennia, but gold will always be gold. It will always be beautiful, it will always be desired in a way that lead and sand will not, and that is where its value comes from--the labor is but a necessary evil, a trifle. The only labor required will be that of the process of converting one substance into the other. With modern techniques like the water wheel and the sprocket the whole process could be simplified to maximize production while minimizing labor.

And it's true, if everyone were able to make their own wealth then few would produce any food or goods. Why break your back if you don't have to? But who said anything about everyone? Only a select few would have the knowledge. And those few would become the lords of the earth, who could make and break kingdoms by the number of times their whim feels like spinning the wheels of the great machine. "Give me one half your kingdom, or I will flood your land with gold and turn you into a beggar." "Send your wife and your daughters to my castle tonight or in the morning you will wake to find I have bought up all of your country's grain and sent it out to sea in an armada of leaky ships." Yes, if everyone could control their own wealth things would be disastrous. That is why it must be safeguarded by men of science and learning, the alchemists--and of course, their

loyal friends.

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