

Yes. That. On the pot. What's it meant to be?

That, said The Alchemist. That represents the bladed branches of the stag.

His voice was dry in his mouth. His voice was fire-cracked and heat-worn.

Why, said David Hartley. Why?

Because the stag is the life force of the moors just as fire is the life of forging. I thought you'd know that.

I do know that, said David Hartley. I do know that.

Only then did The Alchemist look at the brothers and their father, and the glances that passed between them. In the latter he saw an aged man who had lived for six long decades of turf-digging and loom-mending, of flint-slitting and rock-breaking and pond-dredging and rabbit-trapping and slate-fixing, all with nothing to show for it but twisted fingers and a locked left knee, a squint and a crooked spine. He saw that the old man's dark eyes seemed to hold the seeds of fire too, and that his chin was pointed and one temple scarred with a white mess of flesh healed into a tight pattern like the fossilised form of flowering lichen across a wet valley rock. The mashed markings of a true coin smelter.

The Alchemist extended an arm. He held out a palm, requested alms.

David Hartley produced a pouch and poured half of it into the hand of The Alchemist who took the shears and clipped each coin in turn until he had a small pile of slivers.

With neat movements he circled the fire and roddled the coals and pumped the bellows.

The remaining coins he deftly stacked in a tower on the floor.

With his poker he tapped the pot and the four men leaned in to see that the guinea shards were changing shape. Softening and collapsing. They were gaining a liquid sheen.

The Alchemist signalled for the men to step back as he unwrapped another cloth and set down beside him a selection of moulds and dies of different sizes. He carefully arranged

them. He touched them once. He touched them twice, then with tongs he lifted the pot from the fire and poured its contents into four of the moulds. The pot he set aside.

Still squatting and stock still, The Alchemist muttered words to himself. The Hartleys could not determine what he was saying. His whispered words ran into one another. Strange incantations. He uttered a song without a melody. An inaudible spell for the casting of the metal. A twisting of the tongue.

Then in a sudden burst of movement The Alchemist snatched up a spelter stamp in one hand and hammer in the other. The stamp he pressed down onto the first mould and he twirled the hammer once and then twice over the back of his hand in a conjurer's display of showmanship before swinging it and bringing it down hard on the head of the stamp. He struck again and again, the shrill judder of metal on metal reverberating.

The stamp he cast aside before seizing the next one – this slightly larger – and swinging and striking in quick succession. Four times he did this, one after another; the stone space echoing with the hammer's call.

Then he laid his tools aside. There were beads of sweat on his brow now. They looked black. As black as the dew that settles on the coomb of a coalman's shovelled remnants.

The Alchemist turned the moulds upside down and tapped the bottom of each so that their contents fell into a bowl of water that steamed with each newly-forged coin. Then he spoke. He said: the white hot hiss is a vicious liquid kiss from the lady of the fire who is softer than silver and swifter than light.

What's that? said Isaac Hartley. What's he saying?

The mottled dirty water he threw onto the hot coals and these too hissed and steamed and spat tiny gobbets of dead and dying embers in a cloud of smothering muffled smoke that had all the men but The Alchemist, who seemed impervious to it, hacking and rubbing at their eyes.

He rattled the bowl and swirled its contents then flicked the newly-forged and stamped coins into his hand. From a pocket

he produced a rag and a small snuff box of dark daubing into which he dipped a blackened digit and dabbed some of its contents onto each coin. With an economical flourish he buffed each disc.

He slowly stood and handed a coin in turn to young William Hartley and Isaac Hartley and the old man William Hartley the elder. At David Hartley he paused and held the coin aloft between thumb and forefinger and in the half-light it seemed to turn and spin of its own accord and he said come, come press a coin into my palm and I'll return you two like a curse reversed on a gypsy's tongue.

David Hartley took the coin.

He touched it. He studied it. It still held within it the warmth of the fire. He examined it further.

He said: this work is good.

The Alchemist said nothing.

Here, he's milled the rim, said William Hartley, and David Hartley studied the tiny writing that ran around the side of the coin.

Do you know what these words say? asked The Alchemist.

No, I do not said, David Hartley. They are not in any language that any right-minded man round these parts would know even if they were book learners.

That's because these words is Latin, said The Alchemist. *Decus Et Tutamen*. They say: An Ornament and a Safeguard. A hundred years or more this coin has carried these words and I'd wager it'll carry them for a hundred more.

What's all this Latin for?

Latin is the language that the crown favours, said William Hartley Sr. It's what they speak across foreign waters and it makes the king think he's better than common folk.

I'm not no fucking common folk, said David Hartley. I'm a king too; a king that's more respected amongst his own folk than these betterny-bodies who think their shit smells as sweet as pollen. And I'm a king that doesn't need no fucking foreign

tongue from across no foreign waters to make him feel big about himself, nor a crown upon his napper. All I wear is the sky above me, and the only throne this man needs is that which sits above the shitting pit.

The detail is good, brother, said William Hartley. See the laurel upon my guinea. See the drapery on the neck. See the lions. This work is beyond even the best Coiner's capabilities.

This work is nothing, said The Alchemist. This I can do a thousand-fold.

Then a fold it is I have for you.

A fold?

Aye. Sheep fold. Away from here. Over the top dip. You'll use it.

The Alchemist looked at David Hartley blankly as the eldest brother spoke.

Once a week or two weeks or whenever it is that the valley has given up enough grubby coins to make it worth your while you will come and you will go to that fold where there is a roof and a pit and you will clip and smelt until the pile is doubled.

Still The Alchemist said nothing.

You will be watched and you will be protected, continued David Hartley. Looked after. There will be lads as lookouts checking the moor for nose blow-ins and any man that wants to bring us down.

They will watch you too said Isaac Hartley.

Why? said The Alchemist.

Isaac Hartley smirked.

Because the man who trusts others is the first to fall. We trust no fuckers, magic man or otherways.

Isaac Hartley cast aside his coin and said: good work counts for nothing if you cannot be trusted.

Can you be trusted? said David Hartley.

I ask myself the same question of you, said The Alchemist.

At this William Hartley snorted.

Shall I knock this man sparko, our David?