

## Coins



*The Ob-lob  
lust for  
gold is so  
great that  
they wash  
their coins  
more  
carefully  
than their  
children.*

*-Nadansk  
Ghal,  
Wu-Hra  
Pathmaker*

The youth Chochukoti was sullen as he slouched toward his uncle's stall at the Merchant Hall. "Uncle Solistano," he said. "Father said I was to come see you. To learn... something important." The last words were accompanied by a sort of nihilistic shrug, eloquently indicating his suspicion that nothing could ever be important.

Solistano grunted. He sat behind a table scattered with papers, inkstones, quills, and coins of many nations. The disorder radiated from a well-oiled brass scale and its tiny lead weights. Just beside it was a bowl of fine Opetkan glass, decorated with rising lines of blue cobalt. The lines were tight together, running straight for most of the bowl's circumference before sprouting the lines and curves of Ob-lob writing. The writing was staggered so that the tiny letters wouldn't overlap.

The boy looked left and right before mumbling, "If it's about the ways of women and men, I already know it all, cousin Seenitera was going on about it after a couple glasses..."

"Your cousin," his uncle said, shaking his head and grimacing. "If her mouth isn't open for wine, it's open to blather or it's open for... ugh. That's not why you're here, so you can lighten your blush. Your father wants me to show you something about money."

At that the boy perked up, before immediately attempting to quell his enthusiasm into a mature and worldly interest. "Really?"

Solistano's throat produced another rough sound. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, holding up a coin.

"Of course, it's a Dindavaran gold mark," the boy replied.

"Of course." After a brief rummage, the older man picked up another coin. "This?"

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"An Imperial pound."

"If I offered you one, which of these would you choose?"

Chochukoti tilted his head. "The pound, I suppose."

"Why?"

"Dindavara is closer than The Empire, so I suppose the coin is rarer."

"Hmph." Solistano put down the mark and picked up another pound. "If I offered you these two, then which?"

A shrug. "Doesn't matter."

"Hah! You really do have a lot to learn."

The boy's blush of embarrassment, which had indeed faded, surged back with resentment.

"The coins trade one for one for one, why should it matter which I pick?"

"Sit."

Chochukoti slouched into a chair.

"On the Dindavaran coin," his uncle said, leaning in to point with stubby fingers, "We have the mountain, I think they believe their god made the world there or some such. On the back, the sword, of course. You know what 'dindavaran' means, yes?"

"People of the sword."

"And the runes?"

Chochukoti shook his head.

"Me either—not exactly. I think the mountain side has something like, 'our wealth is not gold, but courage.' The back is 'where gold ends, steel begins.'"

"They like their coinage dramatic, don't they?"



"The Dindavarans like their traditions, which is why you should have picked this one and not the pound."

In reply to a quizzical look, Solistano put the mark in the bowl. The level of the water rose exactly to one line, which Chochukoti could read with a squint.

"Gold mark."

"The water tells it true, is the coin as big as it ought to be?" The older man pulled the coin out and dried it with a grubby towel. He set it on one arm of the scale, a lead weight on the other. "It was, and it

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weighs as it should too. I call that a clean, whole mark."

He swept the weight off with practiced fingers, replacing it with another mark coin. This time, the scale slowly tipped. Looking closer, Chochukoti could see that this coin was a bit more worn and battered. When his uncle put it in the water, it seemed to him that the level rose just as it had before.

"Look closer! The level's lower. I paid very dearly to have this bowl made just so. This mark isn't a whole mark. It's been scraped."

"Scraped?"

With practiced movements, Solistano brought from under the table a small bucket and a sharp knife. With a slow smooth slice, he shaved a thin plane from the coin's smooth side.

"Scrape it too fast or too deep and the coin looks bad. Some people don't care, but you should."

"That's not much gold."

"No it's not, and it took me only seconds to get." The bucket had several similar slivers glinting on its bottom. "Shave a hundred coins and pretty soon you're talking about real money."

"Is *that* what you do in here all day?"

"Not only that," Solistano said, his tone hurt. "Some coins aren't worth shaving. Take the Confederate pound. A smart man can trade one bad mark for two good feddies."

"Because you can bore out from the hole in the center and it's harder to notice?"

Solistano cackled. "That's one reason, but to sell what you shave you have to melt it together, and that Confederate gold is impure. Look. The Dindavaran coin, you can mark with the back of a knife. It's soft because it has lots of gold. Can't do that with the feddy. Too much brittle stuff melted in."

Chochukoti picked up the Confederate coin. He hadn't seen as many of them.

"Why's it the same on both sides?"

His uncle shrugged. "Confederate coiners have lazy imaginations?"



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"Where's the symbol for Broadlands? There's the hill for Black Mountain, the bull god of Green River and the trees of North Hold, but no symbol for Broadlands."

"The hole in the center is Broadlands. It represents their secret gods."

"Huh." He put it back on the table. "If I'm offered an Imperial pound or a Dindavaran mark, which should I take?"

"Depends. A mark that's clean and complete is your baseline, but I'd take an old Imperial pound, a Grace IX or older, over a clipped mark."

"Why does the age matter?"

"Why do you think?"

As his nephew frowned in concentration, Solistano picked up the two imperial coins and put them on the scale, which tipped once more. "Yet if I gave them the water test, they're the same size. Eh?"

"So The Empire has been polluting its coins?"

"It's called 'debasing the currency.'"

"Why would they do that? Everyone knows they've got more gold than the ground."

"That's why. 'Everyone knows' The Empire's coins are good. They're like the voice of The Empress in your purse, recommending your money worldwide.

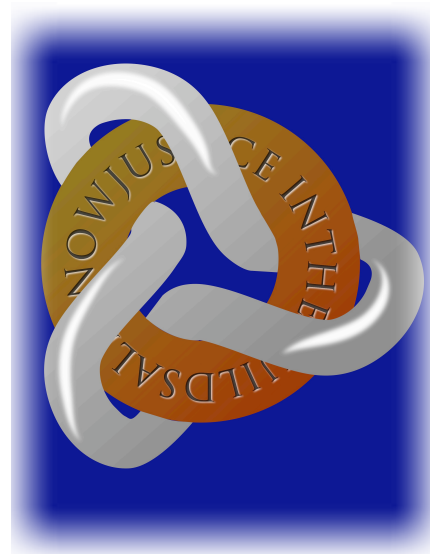
'Her reign eternal first before heaven' and all that. Each of the last three Empresses has cheapened their coins. I'll give them credit though—the milled edges make them worthless to clip. Like the Uldish wreath here," he said, picking up another coin. "Shaving that's more trouble than it's worth."

"Wreaths aren't even gold, either."

"No, they're silver wrapped around a disc of gold-infused copper. They trade at five wreaths to the mark. But if you melted down that mark and those wreaths, it would take the materials in *six* wreaths to pay for the gold in one mark."

"That doesn't make sense. How can the Dindavarans prosper if their coins have a worse margin than their neighbors?"

"The ones who could do something about it don't know or don't care, and the ones who know don't tell and buy up wreaths



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whenever they can. The beauty of the wreath is that even though the raw value of its component metals is less, its complexity makes it hard to counterfeit. Clever Ulds. Its value is not only what's *in* it, but the trust it puts in *you*."

Chochukoti thought it over. "If I was counterfeiting, I guess I'd make an easier coin that's less expensive. That's only sensible."

"Counterfeiting? *Counterfeiting?* That's a topic for another day. Usually more trouble than it's worth, with Empresses more or less doing the job for you."

Solistano grinned and, for the first time that morning, Chochukoti smiled back.

