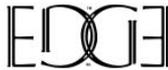


COINS OF CHAOS

**Edited by
Jennifer Brozek**



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CALGARY

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WHY WOULD SOMEONE LIKE ME

— a magician steeped in the mysteries of magic — turn to something as mundane as a coin to fuel a great spell? The answer is simple: no one ever believes a coin worth so little can carry so much power. The beauty in this ritual's design is the fact that, like children, once I set these coins upon the world, I no longer have control over them. They will succeed or fail upon their own merit.

I chose the 1913 Buffalo nickel because of a homeless man. He showed me the power such a small bit of art could carry. I am not the only Carver. I am one of many. Yet, I believe I am the only Carver who has attempted such a ritual as this.

Which is why I carved each nickel with care. They carry with them the seeds of my life, my success, and should anyone discover them all, my destruction. Twenty coins in total. Each one different than the last. Each imbued with chaos, hate, pain, and desire for destruction. With each life destroyed, taken, maimed, ruined, lost ... my life goes on. These coins are my immortality.

With other magic, I follow these coins on their journey through time and space. I examine each life sacrificed so I may be eternal. I'm willing to share seventeen stories from across the ages with you. Just seventeen. It would not be in my best interest to let you see them all, now would it? Powerful though I am, unwary I am not.

But I will let you see. It is why you have paid my price after all. I always honor my debts.

— The Carver

SILVER AND COPPER, IRON AND ASH

NATHANIEL LEE

THE RABBIT'S BACK WAS BROKEN, clenched in the smooth jaws of the trap. Its blood speckled the snow around it like a poisonous mushroom. James grunted and knelt to the ground to laboriously pry the jaws apart and claim his prize; the first success in a long day of checking the trapline. The creature wasn't much — rice-wafer bones and wispy, patchy fur — but it would mean meat in the pot, another few days of life and warmth in the icy chill.

James pushed the spring-loaded black iron arc back until it clicked, the hammer lifting into place like a spider sensing vibrations on its web. He scuffed dirt and leaf-litter gently across the newly reset trap and stood to carry his kill away before cleaning it; no sense filling the whole clearing with the smell of blood and scaring away everything but sour-fleshed predators and scavenger birds.

"Nice rabbit you got there," came a sudden voice from the shadows under the trees.

James spun, his knife already in his gloved hands. A man stood a short distance away, clad in a ragged coat that was far too thin for the Colorado mountain winter that was fast upon them. The man raised his hands in supplication.

"No harm meant, sir, no harm meant. If I'd wanted to steal, I'd'a made off with that rabbit whilst a-waiting for you to come." The man's beard was as mangy as the rabbit's fur, his skin pasty gray and unwholesome. All the past year and more, James had seen far too many men like this on his infrequent trips to town;

hungry men questing toward the coast in search of food and work, their farms and their lives dried to dust and blown out from beneath them.

"I've got nothing to give," James said shortly, not lowering his knife. "If you head down the mountain into the Springs, there's a mission can give you a blanket and a bowl of soup, at least."

"Aye, there would be," the tramp said, "if they weren't full to bursting already. Please, sir, I wouldn't ask if I weren't in need. A warm place to sleep, a cup of something hot. Might be as how you've some work needs doing, repairs to a shed or hauling or some such?" The man's crooked teeth glistened as he bared them in what was likely meant to be an ingratiating grin.

"We've nothing to spare and no work needs doing." James' conscience bit at him, and under its goad he heaved a sigh. "But wait for a spell, and I'll carve you some of this rabbit, at least. What's left will do for stew, and that'll be more than we'd have had otherwise."

The tramp's eyes gleamed, and he nodded his approval. James dusted off a handy stump and set to work with practiced hands. In a few short moments, he'd stripped the carcass of skin and offal, lifting the thin haunches and the lion's share of the meat for the other.

"No wax paper, I'm afraid," James said, in a weak attempt at a joke. He folded the skin and the offal aside, intending to get every bit of use he could out of the unlucky creature. Something clinked when he did. "What's this?" With his knife, James slit the rabbit's stomach open, and after a moment's rooting, came out with a silver coin. The tramp made a gasping sound, quickly strangled. James' mouth twisted. "No wonder the dumb beast was so thin, if this was filling its stomach."

The coin was a nickel, an Indian-head. He wiped at it with his gore-smeared thumb. 1913. Not quite twenty years old. There was something off about it, though. James scrubbed it in the snow, leaving the metal mostly clean. Tool marks were clearly visible where someone had chipped and scraped at the metal, twisting the familiar image. The Indian's profile was misshapen, feral, almost lupine, and the figure's mouth stretched up and up the side of its face, reaching almost to the ears. It looked like it was smiling.

Not a very pleasant smile at all.

"Well, now, a good-luck rabbit indeed," said James. "Could buy a meal, or part of one." He held the coin out to the tramp, whose hands were greasy slick around his gift of rabbit meat. The man recoiled as though James had proffered a scorpion.

"Not for me," the tramp said. "I'm not that desperate. Not yet."

James shrugged. "Some soap, then, or a bit of ribbon." He dropped the coin into his pocket.

The tramp was backing away, heading downslope. "If I've nothing else to offer," he called out, "then let me give you some advice. That coin's a hungry coin. Throw it away and forget you ever saw it. Nothing it buys is anything you'd want." He was running, now, his ratty boots kicking up a spray of powder from the ground. His voice floated through the trees and the deepening shadows. "Throw it away!"

James shook his head and gathered up his rabbit. Delphina would be waiting.

BY THE TIME JAMES arrived home, the sun had reached the tops of the mountains, the treelines visible in exquisite detail even in the gloaming, so clear and crisp was the air. James' house was nestled in a small vale on the northeast side of the peaks. Normally, the sight of lamplight peeking out between the cracks of the shutters — or, in the brief summers, the fluttering floral-pattern curtains — made James' heart swell with pride and satisfaction, picturing Delphina inside, singing to herself as she went about the business of managing their tiny household. But today, he felt only a flutter of unease. The dark and lowering mountainside gave the valley the appearance of an open and jagged-toothed maw, his house perched like an egg on the tongue of some incomprehensibly vast beast. How swiftly the dark jaws could close and snuff out that light...

Something was following him. He had enough woodcraft to know that, although he hadn't been able to catch sight of it. A rogue wolf, perhaps, or a mountain lion; something solitary and hungry, cautious but lured by the smell of blood on him. He'd have to sit up with the rifle for a night or two and make sure the goats didn't come to harm.

With a final glance at the darkened woods, James hefted his gunnysack and began the final climb down to the fragile safety of walls.

"James!" Delphina turned at the sound of his entrance. She darted to him, quick as a hummingbird to a flower, and he gathered her to himself, snow still melting on his boots. He let his hand drift down to her midsection, the new thickness barely perceptible, and she covered his chilled fingers with her hearth-warmed palms. She leaned in and tilted her head up, gliding her nose along the fringe of his jaw, where his bristling beard gave way to delicate skin, tissue thin over pulsing arteries. Her lips brushed against his neck, once and again, more firmly. Her arm tightened around his waist, and James laughed and pulled away.

"I'm all over dirt, Delly. Let me wash up before you drag me down."

Delphina blushed at his teasing, embarrassed still at her need for him. "I missed you," she said.

"And I you." James left the sack beside the cutting board. "There's a bit of rabbit meat to add to the stewpot, at least. Oh, and here's a piece of luck." He fished the carved nickel from his pocket. "Add it to your purse, Delly. We might need it before the winter's through."

"Oh," Delphina said. She plucked the coin and held it to the light. "What an odd design."

"It'll spend as well as a prettier coin," James grunted, filling the wash basin and grimacing at the cold touch of the water. Delphina said nothing. "Darling? I've been out all day; I could use that stew."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course." Delphina shook her head and returned to the bubbling pot on the stove.

Conversation, normally so fluid between them as to be effortless, seemed on this evening to dry up like the frozen creeks of the mountain winter. James blamed his lack of success at hunting and vowed to redouble his efforts. Delphina had made an effort to conceal it, but it was plain as the gathering night that the stew was a watery affair, vegetable stock eked out to its very limits. Lost in his personal recriminations, his failure to provide for his family, James barely noticed Delphina's growing distraction. He ceded most of his portion of stew to her without saying anything; he could tighten his belt and survive, but the child she carried had no such options. She ate mechanically, unseeing, with one hand clutching her coin purse to her breast.

THAT NIGHT, JAMES' sleep was troubled. He found himself pursued through the woods by things that looked like wolves, for all that he'd only seen wolves on a handful of occasions, and they'd always been warily respectful and left him unmolested. But now he ran for his life through dark and frozen trees, his feet crunching on the hard-packed snow, the ice-tinged air searing his breath in his lungs, fire-cold and steaming, while black shadows lunged and darted on every side. He could smell their fur, wet and matted and sour, with a stench he recognized from his days on the trapline, blood and meat gone septic.

The dream shifted, as dreams do, and James realized he was running through his home, the three rooms stretching into an impossible, endless mansion, like the one he'd toured once as a child in Virginia. He slammed doors behind him, trying to conceal himself, but his pursuers had grown cunning, sniffing him out in each new hiding place. He cowered at last behind his bedroom door, hearing the heavy bodies shuffling on the other side. The wood was drafty, and he felt a cold and wet pressure on his bare heels. A puddle? A questing nose?

A tongue?

At once, James realized that Delphina was not in the bedroom with him. With a shout, he fell forward onto the bed...

...and woke up. He was curled around the emptiness that should have contained Delphina, his hand resting in the small depression her form left behind. The sheets were cold. Pale light filtered through the curtains and the cracks in the shutters.

James heard movement from the kitchen. He'd drawn breath to call out to Delphina, find what had driven her from their bed, when she shuffled into view, and something froze the sounds in his throat. She wore her bonnet and nightdress, as usual, but her posture was... wrong. Her back was toward him, her face in shadow. She was crouched over something she held in her hand, a predatory stance that curdled James' stomach. She bent her head low and *snuffled*, like an animal trying to catch a scent.

Sleepwalking, James thought. *She's having some sort of ... strange dream.*

Her shambling form moved away, toward the common room and the big central fireplace, and James bit his lip to keep from crying out in fear. As she left, he caught a glimpse of the thing she clutched in her hands. Something small and round that gleamed silver in the starlight.

James shuddered, and sleep failed to return to him that night, just as Delphina did.

IN THE MORNING, James took the coin purse with him when he left. Delphina was working on her canning, looking pale and fatigued in the watery morning sun.

“Feeling better, Delly?”

She turned, and James had to swallow an exclamation; her eyes looked nearly bruised, as though she hadn’t slept all night. Her body appeared almost skeletal under her dress, the baby a bulge like a wasp-gall in a sapling oak. “I’m hungry,” was all she said. Her hands kept drifting to her side, as if looking for the missing coin purse. James felt it pulsing in his pocket like a second heart.

James swallowed. “I’ll go out this afternoon, find us some more game. We’ll have stew and jerky for a month if I can bring down a big buck.” He gave her his most confident smile, but her lips barely twitched in response.

James surreptitiously hurled the carved nickel and its disturbing image out into the woods before he went to work hauling wood and water. The simple physical labor absorbed him, and for a time he was able to forget all of his troubles in the repetition and the narrow focus of one more step, one more log, one more swing. By mid-morning, he was lathered in sweat despite the fragile chill of the air — a storm was coming soon, and no question about it — and he headed for the house for a cold drink and a slab of thick brown bread.

He shooed away from the stoop one of the half-feral cats Delphina coddled. They’d get a cat when they had a barn to protect from mice, James had told her, but Delphina loved to dangle strings for the tatty, ragged creatures and offer them tidbits of the kills James brought home. He’d shrugged and tried to ignore them; cats were shifty and untrustworthy by nature, in his experience. This one, a half-eared ginger tom, was standing almost at attention, its snake-yellow eyes fixed on James as though he were no more than an unusually large vole.

He aimed a half-hearted kick at it, and it dodged lightly backwards, eyes still staring. James’ foot came down and squished unpleasantly. The little beast had left a “present” for Delphina, after the manner of its kind: a tidy collection of internal organs from some unlucky rodent. James scraped his boot off on the

side of the stoop, and as he did, he caught a glint of silver from the tiny pile of anonymous reds and purples.

Slowly, unwilling to countenance what he felt in his gut must be true, he reached down and plucked a gore-smearred coin from amid the mouse guts. The cruel, jagged-toothed grin of the carved Indian head was striped with blood. It looked as though it had just fed.

James whirled to curse the cat, but the creature was already gone. He wanted to hurl the coin away from him, finding its touch loathsome beyond the tacky feel of drying blood, but he stopped himself. It had already come back once.

If I skip a meal, James thought, ignoring the protesting rumble of his stomach, *that just means more for Delly and the baby*. He turned and stalked off to the rocky field behind the house, snatching up his spade while he did.

AFTER HE'D BURIED THE COIN, James went to wash up, pulling icy water from the pump. Normally, he'd heat it over the fire, but he didn't feel he could face Delphina's sunken-eyed gaze after this morning. He told himself the cold was invigorating, and he sat on the wood-chopping stump to think things through.

That tramp had recognized the coin, had warned him against it. A hungry coin, he'd said. If James had thrown it away then, would it be haunting him now, giving him terrible dreams and making his Delphina look like death warmed over? If he found the tramp, could he learn more about it? But what were the chances of finding a single nameless man in the streets of the Springs, and that time better spent checking the trapline and looking for a late-season deer to bring down. The coin had to come from somewhere, hadn't it?

James resolved himself. He'd trek back up the trapline, but when he came to where he'd found the rabbit the other day, he'd track it back and find where it had picked up the cursed thing to begin with. Perhaps then he could make an end to whatever nightmare he'd been caught up in.

The day proved to be cold almost to the point of immobility, the sky a dark and lowering gray that only deepened as time went on. The threat of a blizzard was apparent in every abortive gust of wind, every ice-coated branch, every plugged fox den and silent stream. James checked his traps methodically but without hope, catching only a scarf-thin squirrel for all of his efforts.

When he reached the last trap in the line, he found everything preserved as if in a photograph. The red spots still dotted the snow like ersatz flowers, and the ground was trampled with his and the other man's comings and goings. Casting a short distance away, James quickly picked up the rabbit's distinctive two-and-one pattern in the snow. The animal had run in a curiously straight line, as though running an errand. Or as though terrified beyond reason. James checked the time as best he could, with the sun invisible behind the brooding clouds. He should be able to make it home before dark, assuming the rabbit hadn't gone too far. It couldn't have maintained the speed indicated by its nearest tracks for long.

The rabbit's trail led through the woods toward the saddle-back between two peaks and the narrow horse trail that went over the pass, at least in the summer months. It veered aside only for trees or rocks too large to climb over, and James had no difficulty following it even over hard ground or across frozen streams; it always resumed on the other side.

After three miles, James began to worry about losing the light before he made it home. After another mile, he'd given up and had to hope that he'd at least get back to familiar territory before full dark hit. Spending a night lost in the woods might finish him, especially as he hadn't eaten since the previous morning. His stomach writhed inside him like a separate animal, and one none too pleased with its master, at that.

At last, James caught sight of hard angles and metal through the trees, welcome signs of human habitation in the deep mountain woods. He pushed through the final leafless bushes into a small clearing and gasped.

It had been a traveling party of some kind, once, long ago. The wagon's ribs showed through where cloth had rotted away. The wood was bleached and preserved, like in a desert; the high altitude, cold, and dryness had left it nearly fossilized. James could see a snapped axle that had punched up through the floor of the wagon; no force on Earth would have been able to get that rig moving again, especially not if it had been trapped in the pass by weather. The remnants of a campsite were visible, here and there, peeping from beneath the snow. James wondered how many years the charred embers of the tiny fire had sat nearly undisturbed beneath snow and melt and snow again.

The central piece that caught and held his attention, however, was the human corpse propped in a spread-legged sitting position against the unbroken wheel of the wagon. It was clad in the rags of a dress and bonnet, blown now to shreds in the constant wind. The flesh had rotted away, leaving tendons and skin tight against bone; no signs of being disturbed by wildlife, which was odd. Worse than odd: downright uncanny. The skeletal hands lay face up by its sides, and all around it were scattered a ruin of animal bones, a veritable graveyard of rabbits and squirrels and raccoons; to be visible above the snow, they'd have to have been piled several inches deep all around the sprawled body. James, caught somewhere between entrancement and revulsion, took a step forward only to hear something snap beneath his boot. He reached down and retrieved a long, thin leg-bone. Not deer. Not bear, either. James had a suspicion he knew what kind of bone it was. He peered closer; the end was cracked open, as wolves did when they sought the rich bone marrow from their prey. The bone bore marks all along its length.

Tooth marks.

Human tooth marks.

James looked up at the horrid, desiccated thing that lay half-crumpled against the wagon, the body that had lasted so much longer than all of its companions. How many others lay beneath the snow in that terrible clearing?

The rabbit tracks led through the snow quite clearly up to the open palm of the corpse, and then away in that odd straight line. Straight to James and his traps.

His traps that hadn't been there the year before. Hadn't been close enough. Hadn't been in reach of the coin's call.

James turned and fled into the growing night, while the storm hovered overhead.

AT THE CABIN, James was almost unsurprised to see a fresh hole where only that morning he'd broken the frozen earth and dropped the baneful coin into the dark. He stopped and muttered an oath when he saw what was inside it, however.

A mole, perhaps? It was hard to say. It was stuffed halfway down the gullet of a rattlesnake, of all creatures, which itself had apparently choked the emaciated fox that was wedged, foreparts first, into the tiny mole's burrow. None of those animals should even be abroad at this stage of the year, save perhaps the fox,

if it were in some dire extremity. James couldn't imagine what could stir a rattler to venture into ice and snow, but clear enough something had. James fetched his spade and pried the grisly trio apart; sure enough, clutched in the half-digested forepaws of the little rodent was the silver nickel, still somehow gleaming despite the hefty coating of filth it now bore. James shoved it in his pocket. He'd say nothing to Delphina.

That, as it turned out, wasn't a problem. Delly's usual cheerful burble was reduced to monosyllables. She looked more wan than ever, and she greeted James' poor news of hunting with no more reaction than if he'd announced the presence of snow in the mountains. For his part, James found he had no appetite. He couldn't bear the smell of the stew on this second evening; it tasted like bark and leaf-mould in his mouth. He found his hand creeping to his pocket, to touch the coin and run his fingertips along its gleeful, hungry smile. Delphina ate rapidly, hardly seeming to taste her meal, either. They exchanged perfunctory monosyllables and retired to bed, James clutching the coin in his fist so hard that it dug into his skin. He could smell Delphina beside him, not her unwashed hair or the sickness he could see in her eyes, but the rich, warm smell of the blood beneath her skin.

Sometime after midnight, lying still awake, James realized that the strange sensations in his midsection were *hunger pangs*. He bit his lip and slipped silently from the bed. He was unable to resist a final lingering sniff of Delphina's uneasily sleeping body before he went.

IN THE MORNING, James left a short note telling Delphina that he had gone to town to pick up some last-minute supplies before the storm hit and locked them in till spring. He took their meager stock of cash with him, including the coin. He was stiff and awkward as he began the brisk walk to the city; he'd spent an uncomfortable night crouched in the common room, wrapped in the thickest quilt they had, unwilling to risk building a fire and waking Delphina. He'd put the coin down and picked it up a dozen times an hour, unable to bear the feel of it against his skin, but equally unable to bear being without it. He wondered if he had a fever, something picked up from an animal or that hideous abandoned camp up in the mountains. Hallucinations would be a much more comforting explanation for the past two days.

James wasn't certain what his plan was. All he knew was that he had to get rid of the coin before it drove him mad — if it hadn't already. He'd found it and claimed it; surely that meant he could also *spend* it? He tried not to think about what the coin might do once he'd let it loose in the dense population of the Springs, but he reassured himself that he was surely imagining most of the effects, regardless. Surely. Once the coin was out of his possession, he'd be able to leave the distracting thoughts behind.

The streets were busy with cars, horses, and pedestrians. James forgot, sometimes, up in his and Delphina's cozy home, that the rest of the world was not as bound to the seasons as they were. Traffic on the great roads would continue even in the depths of winter, and commerce in the city would hardly slow. He meandered somewhat aimlessly through the outskirts of the city. Should he purchase canned goods, for all that they'd barely eke out their existing supplies? Traps or a better gun? A coil of rope? Rope was always useful; rope and twine seemed to disappear the moment his back was turned. Muffled, booted city-dwellers and travelers jostled past James on every side, a constant distraction. He couldn't seem to find his bearings. He was so very hungry.

A tug at his sleeve brought James up short. He turned and beheld a half-familiar face, gnarled features nearly lost amid a tangle of hair.

"It's you!" James said. "You were there when..."

"The coin, yes," the man said. "I knew you'd come down here soon enough. Done its work, has it?"

"Its work?"

"Hunger has a power that's hard to know until you've faced it down, don't it?" The man's face was haggard; he clearly hadn't eaten or slept since James had last seen him, and for goodness knew how long before that, as well. "You've been, what, two days in its grip? And already you're here to fob it off on the first unlucky sap you can find." He grinned, displaying his snaggle-tooth grin. His breath reeked. "It won't work, you know. It has to be willed. Can't just slip it in with the change for a shiny new hammer."

"Then I'm lost," James said. "And Delly and the baby with me."

"Never give up hope, friend," the tramp said. He held out one filthy hand.

"You... you want the coin? But you said —"

"I know what I said!" The man's face contorted as he visibly brought himself back under control. "A man can change his mind, once he's seen his prospects more clearly. I've looked it in the face good and hard these past two days; I reckon I can handle it now. I'll take whatever it can get for me." He extended his arm again, insistent. "Give me the coin, and I'll be on my way."

James pulled the silver disc from his pocket. It hovered over the callused palm of the dirty beggar. It was hard to let go; James felt as though the coin were exerting some magnetic influence on his fingertips.

"How much hungrier can you get?" the man asked. "And your... your wife, your little one? I know, Jimmy. I know."

James released the coin. It tumbled for what felt like long seconds, minutes, perhaps hours. Then it disappeared, snapped into the tramp's grip like a drop of water into sun-parched soil. James felt a sudden openness, a clarity of vision, as though a hood had been pulled from his head. He watched the expressions warring on the tramp's muddied face, anger and glee, fear, resignation, and something harder to name.

"Thank you," James started to say, the oddest thing a man ever said to a panhandler who just took his money, but the tramp's eyes snapped open, and James stopped dead. He was reminded of the eyes of the rabbit in his trap, white-rimmed and full of pain-mad terror so fine it coalesced into a kind of power. The man fled into the crowd, leaving James standing stupefied at the corner.

It wasn't until later that he remembered: He'd never told the man his name.

JAMES DAWDLED IN the city for a time. He'd made some purchases in a desultory fashion; mostly he wanted to give the tramp a good, long head start. He didn't want to meet those eyes coming toward him on the trail up the mountain, in the dark and the cold of the wilderness. When he judged it as late as he could let it before the storm trapped him in the valley, he started on his way, his meager purchases bumping in his leather satchel. The clouds overhead looked improbably soft and cheerful, like a warm feather bed; a cruel illusion, that.

The first flakes began to fall as he neared the cabin, tiny, rock-hard things almost more hail than snow. This storm was settling in for the long haul, it seemed.

The light was on in the cabin, a butter-yellow gleam as welcome as the first songs of the angels in Paradise. James found his pace increasing, his appetite surging again for the first time since that miserable rabbit had found him. Delly would be at the stove, perhaps, just putting the finishing touches on dinner. He could almost see the vision as he drew near the door, almost smell the roast beef.

He paused on the threshold. He *could* smell a roast, it seemed. Not a well-prepared one, either; had Delly let the meat burn?

Where would she have gotten a roast *from*?

James rushed into the house, noting almost distractedly that the door was unlatched and hanging open. Inside, the smell of burning meat was stronger, almost overpowering. The fire had been left to burn down; the chimney was clogged and smoke filled the room. The heat radiating from the room almost stopped James at the door. By the far wall, he saw by the far wall, Delly had set up her ironing board and the rack of irons near the fireplace.

On the floor beside them, Delly lay, the tramp's body half on top of hers. A formerly red-hot iron was smashed into the side of his face, caving in his skull and setting his flesh to burning and bubbling, still warm enough to feel through James' clothes.

The tramp's dirty teeth were locked together in Delphina's ivory-pale throat. Blood dribbled down and soaked both of their clothes, sizzling on the iron and filling the room with the smell of burning.

James knelt on the floor. The cans in his bag clattered as they hit the floor. His tears burned tracks down his face like acid. He reached a hesitant hand out to touch the gruesome tableau, as though it might not be real, as though he might prove it all a dream.

As his fingers touched the tramp's stiff shoulder, the man's jaw fell open. Something flashed in the firelight as it fell to the floor.

Clink, clink, clink.

Behind James, there was a gust of wind, and the door slammed open. Slow footsteps, like wooden peg-legs, made a staccato rhythm on the cabin floor. The fire flared up, thick black smoke pouring out. James felt the soot sting his eyes. He reached forward and picked up the coin, then turned.

The skin-and-bones thing from the mountain camp grinned back at him, fleshless face blank, eyes sunken like white marbles

deep in the bony sockets. Its bonnet flapped incongruously around its hollow cheeks.

It held out one hand, like a winter-bare branch.

Moving carefully, James placed the coin almost reverently into the thing's palm. It drew back, pointed to him, to the man and woman locked in their death embrace behind him.

James nodded. He understood. He opened his mouth like he was taking Communion at church, and watched the twig-like fingers lift the coin up to catch the light, and then down.

James tasted silver. Then copper.

And lastly ash.



SUCH A HUNGRY COIN. LIKE A growing child. Only this one eats more than food. When it does, it becomes more of what it will be. I knew the thing from the mountain, once. A woman who wanted to live forever. She took the coin, knowing it would make her hungry. She lives still today. At least, I have heard rumors of such. The coin ... ah, that fickle thing ... it has abandoned her to feast on more succulent flesh.



—The Carver