

# HEROES OF TIME LEGENDS

A prequel of the heroes of time series

# THE HEALER

BY WAYNE D. KRAMER

Copyright © 2024 by Wayne D. Kramer  
First Edition

Heroes of Time® is a registered trademark of Heroes of Time Productions LLC

Published by Heroes of Time Productions

All rights reserved.

This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024905944

Illustrations by Jade Zivanovic and Steam Power Studios  
(copyright retained by Heroes of Time Productions)

Interior Formatting by Melissa Williams Design

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Kramer, Wayne D., author.

Title: Heroes of time legends : the healer / by Wayne Kramer.

Other titles: Healer.

Description: [Louisville, Kentucky] Heroes of Time Productions LLC, [2024] |  
Series: Heroes of time series. | Audience: young adult.

Identifiers: ISBN: 9781955997188 (hardcover) | 9781955997171 (paperback) |  
9781955997164 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Healers--Fiction. | Rogues and vagabonds--Fiction. | Thieves--  
Fiction. | Magic--Fiction. | Magnetism--Fiction. | Talismans--Fiction.  
| Danger--Fiction. | Loss (Psychology)--Fiction. | Magicians--Fiction.  
| Medicine, Magic, mystic, and spagirc--Fiction. | Spirits--Fiction. |  
Adventure stories. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Action and adventure  
fiction. | Science fiction.

Classification: LCC: PS3611.R3636 H43 2024 | DDC: 813/.6--dc23

prologue

# A PLAN FOR WEIRD THINGS

*3/6/3161 P.A.*

**F**ulgar Geth could heal with his fingertips. At least, that's what he believed as he knelt in the meadow amid trampled wildflowers. That's what seemed to happen when he lifted the head of a vibrant, orange lily and pinched its broken stem—when the tiny burst of whiteness appeared between his fingers and the stem stood up straight, once again holding the blossom's weight.

He released the restored lily and smiled as it pointed toward the evening sun, whose brightness contrasted with the planetary rings crossing the sky in the south. The unfortunate flower had been one of many victims of his friends as they stampeded about the field of wildflowers and feathery, purple heather.

Fulgar jumped up and took off after the three boys, hoping to intercept and tag one of them. At eight years old, he was the youngest of the bunch, which only made him more determined. His thick hair of black with hints of white and blue was tousled

## THE HEALER

by the crisp ocean breeze blowing in from the south. Across the field, maybe a hundred paces away, tall flamethyst torches were lit around an open-air shelter beside a playground, where some of the boys' parents conversed and watched their younger children. Fulgar's parents weren't among them—he lived close enough to walk home—and certainly not his best friend Binny's, for different reasons.

Three colors of hair, his friends declared, should make Fulgar a superhero. One or two colors were common. Binny's dark-brown hair was streaked with two stripes of blond, from his bangs to the back of his neck. Rare as it was to have three, those colors were currently of no help to Fulgar. His friends were still outrunning him.

He stopped, huffing. This was going to take more than his legs alone. Binny was especially lanky and tall and hard to catch.

Unseen by his fleeing friends, Fulgar dropped to the ground, disappearing under a canopy of heather.

A laugh drifted back to him. "Little Fully's the squirtiest squirt that ever was!" jeered one of the boys.

"Hey," said Binny, "wher'd he go?" Fulgar imagined Binny turning vainly in circles, and he cracked a smile.

"Maybe he ran home to his momma," said another one of the boys.

"Nah, he was right behind us." Their steps came a little nearer. "C'mon, we gotta find him. If I leave him behind again, his parents'll kill me."

They came closer. Fulgar remained within the weeds, still as a rock. At least three little bugs were itching trails along his skin, but he remained vigilant, waiting for just the right moment.

A gentle buzz ran through his arms—a warm, tingly sensation he often felt when near metal—a light internal tickle, like a parade of tiny ants running through his veins.

One of the boys had a metal belt buckle, a second boy some-

## PROLOGUE

thing smaller. Buttons, maybe? Fulgar concentrated on his senses. The buckle he could work with; the buttons probably not.

Two pairs of legs stopped within inches of him, one in front and one behind. He reached toward the buckle, felt for the shiver of magnetism, and tugged back his arm. Simultaneously, he used his leg to swipe away the pair behind him. Two kids plopped to the ground at once, yelping in shock.

Fulgar sprang up. "Ha!"

Binny was right before him, flinching. Fulgar reached out to tag him, but Binny ducked away and slammed an arm into Fulgar's gut.

"Ugh!" gasped Fulgar, hunching over.

Binny pulled Fulgar back up, shaking his head. "Nice move. Too predictable. You gave me too much time to react."

"I still tagged two of you at once," Fulgar replied in his gently lilting but currently strained voice. The other two were back on their feet. They brushed weed chaff from their clothes and tried, with limited success, to look unfazed, their eyes fixed on Binny.

Binny gave Fulgar's shoulders a firm pat and leaned in close. "A true hero would've gotten all three."

Fulgar fixed him with a glare.

Dorin looked up from his belt buckle and shot an accusing finger at Fulgar. "He's a witch or something!"

"I'm *not* a witch!" Fulgar yelled back.

"A sorcerer, then!"

"I am not!"

The other boy, Finn, spat to the side. "Nah, he's just a weirdo."

Binny held up both hands to calm the others. "No, no. What you all mean to say is *cursed*." Fulgar dropped his jaw, feeling betrayed. "But in a good way!" Binny amended.

"I'm not *cursed*, either!" Fulgar stomped his foot, wind gusted from the spot, and the torch-fires around the shelter flared dramatically to twice their height, turning every head.

## THE HEALER

“Nothing to be ashamed of, scamp,” said Binny, regaining everyone’s attention. He looked at the other boys. “Don’t you chumps know? He was saved by *magic* at birth!”

Fulgar slumped his shoulders with a conspicuous eyeroll. “*Binny . . .*”

“Right when he was being born,” Binny continued, “some mage touched him with an ancient staff. Since then he’s always been . . . different.”

Dorin and Finn stared at Fulgar, their wide eyes taking him in.

Then they spluttered with laughter. Fulgar wondered if this day could possibly get any worse.

“*Fulgar!*” It was his mother, calling from the shelter. The edge to her voice, sharper than usual, caused him to whip around. “Fulgar, your father’s home. Let’s go. Now, please!”

Dorin and Finn had already wandered off. Binny met Fulgar’s puzzled gaze. “I’ll see you later, ’kay?”

Fulgar nodded and ran to meet his mother. As they started home, it took him only a moment to realize that her steps were uneven. She was limping.

“Mum,” he said, “why are you walking like that?”

She sighed, her face looking tired and puffy. “It’s just work. I’ll be fine.”

“Barrels again?”

She nodded.

Currently, the guilders of Milltown, a tiny village in the kingdom of Tuscawny’s southernmost province of Sharm, had her working mercantile deliveries. The work was strenuous and often involved hauling barrels of ale for delivery to taverns. There were stronger folk in the labor force, better suited for that sort of work, but sometimes it seemed the guilders liked putting less-educated people through turmoil. Fulgar didn’t understand why anyone would enjoy that.

“You should tell them to get someone else,” said Fulgar.

## PROLOGUE

“That’s just the way work is. Some days are harder than others, my starlight.”

Fulgar glanced all around for anyone in earshot. “Mum, don’t call me that—not *here*.”

She stopped, looked down at him, and ran gentle fingers through his tousled hair. He saw watery little glints in her eyes for a moment, until she blinked, took his hand, and started walking again.

Despite her gimping stride, his mother moved quickly and didn’t show any pain. If his father had already gotten home, Fulgar briefly wondered, why hadn’t his dad come instead of his mother?

They were home in little more than fifteen minutes. Their house was at least three generations old, a faded yellowish color of stucco, with plenty of cracks and windows that sometimes felt warm or cool around the edges, depending on the weather. Many other houses in the district had plumbing. Theirs had a rickety wooden outhouse. Fulgar had mastered the skill of holding his breath while using it.

His father was seated on the couch, rubbing the bridge of his nose. On the table beside him was a half-emptied bottle of “the brown stuff”—a bottle, usually in the cupboard, that Fulgar wasn’t allowed to touch.

There was a heavy, unsettling aura inside the house. It made Fulgar feel rigid and cool. Adding to the coolness, the room’s one window was cracked open.

His father acknowledged Fulgar with a short nod, his face looking distant. “Hey, buddy.”

Behind Fulgar, his mother placed her hands on his shoulders. “Fulgar,” she said through a breath, “we have something to tell you.”

“Belinda, I don’t get it,” said his father, interrupting. “The more I think about it, the less sense it makes. You, a mere civilian, going off with a long-distance caravan, for a merchant you only just started with . . .!”

## THE HEALER

His mother spun Fulgar around so he faced her. “Fulgar, dear, wait in your room while your father and I have a quick talk, or you can play outside if you’d like . . . but please stay close.”

“Moon hasn’t said anything about tenure, right?” continued his father, undeterred. Fulgar, far too riveted by the gravity in his parents’ words, didn’t go to his room. “There’s not even a commitment!” Fulgar figured his father must be referring to Moon’s Mercantile, where his mother had recently been assigned an assistant’s job. His father shook his head emphatically. “No, no, no. We have to challenge this.”

“We can’t, Koen,” she replied, her voice sounding resigned. “I’ve already talked to them. Going to the guild chief will only make things worse. The guilders make things hard enough. What happens when they find we’ve gone over their heads? I don’t want them giving you and—” She glanced at Fulgar. “Giving *us* any more trouble.”

Fulgar felt the rising tension in the room, felt his fists clench into tight balls.

His father shot up from the couch. “I’m talking to your labor assigner, then. First thing tomorrow. Who is it this time—Berle?”

“*Please* don’t. We can’t risk you going into grievance . . . or worse. We’ll just get through this and be done.”

Looking anxious, his father rose and paced back and forth behind the couch, fingers pressed against his forehead. “But for how long? Weeks? *Months*?”

Across the room, a decorative metal plate sitting upon a shelf seemed to bounce the tension back to Fulgar, joining with him in magnetic connection. Without a second thought, he raised his arm and sent the plate soaring across the room, where it clanged hard against the wall and fell dented upon the floor.

His parents stopped talking, their wide eyes now on him.

Fulgar had startled even himself. He wasn’t sure why he’d done that. Maybe he just didn’t want to hear his parents going round and



## PROLOGUE

round like this.

“Mum, Dad . . . why am I a freak?”

“Oh, Fulgar,” said his mother.

“Who told you that?” demanded his father.

Fulgar looked at the floor. “My friends. But it’s true. I do weird things.”

“Weird things,” his father repeated sharply. “Your friends—*they’re* the weird ones.”

A teapot whistled in the kitchen.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” said his father.

His mother leaned in and combed her fingers through Fulgar’s hair. “Don’t dwell on this, Fulgar. *Weird* is just another word for *misunderstood* . . . but, perhaps, Eloh has a plan even for the weird things.”

“I was cursed at birth,” Fulgar added.

“You were *blessed* at birth. We all were . . . by the miracle of *you*. What you have is a gift. Pray to learn the purpose behind the talents you have.”

Cupboard doors slammed in the kitchen. Something fell and broke, followed by a curse from his father.

“You’re going away, aren’t you?” asked Fulgar. “Somewhere far.”

“Yes, my dear,” she replied. “It’s a merchant trip. We have to cross the mountains in the north. You’ll be a big helper for your father while I’m away, won’t you?”

Fulgar nodded. He felt numb, crushed by the weight of something significant that he knew he didn’t fully understand.

His mother hugged him, and the strength of her embrace brought both the full weight of her love and the gravity of change.

“I love you, my starlight,” she said.

“I love you, Mum,” he replied.

Fulgar went back outside, feeling the need for fresh air. Hands in his pockets and head downcast, he walked quietly away from the

## THE HEALER

porch and toward the gate at the edge of their yard.

Binny appeared from around the gate. “Wow, that was a real tear-jerker.”

Fulgar’s body tensed, his jaw clenched at the sudden intrusion. “Why are you here? Were you *listening*?”

Binny raised his hands in a calming fashion. “Sorry, man, didn’t mean to. I wanted to tell you something I couldn’t in front of the others—something exciting, something *big*. You okay?”

“I guess,” Fulgar replied, shuffling his feet in the loose dirt.

Binny gave Fulgar’s arm a light jab. “Hey, goof-brain, you know I’ve got your back, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“You know the problem with this world?” said Binny. “There’s always someone who thinks they’re better—that they can control you. Not with me, though. I’ve got a plan to change all that.”

Intrigued, Fulgar looked at him. “You mean, you could stop the guilders from treating my parents so mean?”

“Guilders, bosses, soldiers, teachers, parents—anyone trying to make you do things you don’t want to do. Let me show you something. But you’ve got to keep it just between us, okay?”

Fulgar’s eyebrows lifted, a scandalous pang swelling within at the promise of something secretive and only for him. “Okay,” he replied.

Binny dug a hand into his pocket and pulled out a round object on a string, a kind of medallion with a coppery-red shimmer. From a swirling pattern in the center emanated fiery tongues, like little flames blown by a gust.

“It’s a talisman,” said Binny. “Got it from my uncle’s place last week.”

“You took it?”

“He said I could have it.”

Fulgar frowned. “Is this the uncle your mum said to stay away from?”

## PROLOGUE

Binny snorted a laugh. “What’s it matter? Listen, thickhead, there’s a legend around this. Whenever this talisman changes hands, the new owner is challenged to find the old shrine where it came from. It’s hidden and ancient. It’s a place of *magic*, Fulgar.”

Fulgar’s eyes bulged. He’d heard stories about ancient powers before, dormant energies hidden within Eliorin since the great cataclysmic ages of the distant past, just waiting to be discovered.

“Did your uncle ever find the shrine?” Fulgar asked.

Binny shrugged. “Nope. But he’s something of a git. He never tried very hard.”

“You think it’s for real?”

“It’s out there,” Binny replied. “I know it. Finding the shrine grants these ancient powers to *you*. Some say it’s a force even stronger than the Light of the Land.”

Fulgar shook his head. “Nothing’s *that* strong.”

Binny shrugged. “Depends who you listen to. Even if the magic is half as strong, that’s a lot.”

“I dunno,” Fulgar replied with a slight smirk. “I already have powers.”

“Sure, man, but this is a whole other level. You can’t just be born into this—you have to *earn* it.”

“How do you get these powers?”

A mischievous grin stretched Binny’s mouth. “All you have to do is want it.”

Fulgar furrowed his brow. “Want it?”

“Yeah, like bad enough to find it, you know, and willing to accept it. Not just anyone can handle power, but *you’ve* already got a head start.” He leaned toward Fulgar. “Listen, mate. It’s my dream to find this place. I figure, maybe it could be our dream together, you and me. We can find this place, both of us, if we really put our minds to it. Can you be committed, though?”

Fulgar blinked in thought, glancing back at his house, where at this very moment his parents struggled with the demands of others.

## THE HEALER

“Yeah, I can commit.”

“Look, I can’t stop your mum from leaving or your dad from working tomorrow. That’s still gonna happen. This is a longer-term thing. It’s gonna take some time to find what we need. You understand?”

Fulgar sagged a bit, but he knew that was reasonable. “Yeah.”

“Imagine it, Fulgar. Power over anyone—and not to boss people around or do boring stuff like rule a land—but just so *they* can’t rule over *you* and those you care about. That’s what real freedom is.”

Real freedom. Fulgar ran it over in his mind, trying to grasp it. Over and over, he had seen his parents ordered and pushed around by the guilders in town. Neither of them had made it into university when they’d had the chance, back when they were seventeen years old, because some so-called masters who didn’t even know them decided they weren’t suited for the higher studies they’d desired.

On top of that, Milltown, deep in the kingdom’s rural south, was far too small for job stability. His mother might work a daycare one week and muck stables the next. Now she was a mercantile assistant, but later she might be something else. Father might tend gardens one week and dig postholes the week after. It seemed the jobs only got harder for them, more and more demanding.

But had they been allowed to pursue their desired disciplines and careers, they might now live a better life. They might have meat instead of porridge, plumbing instead of a freezing outhouse. It wasn’t all bad, of course, but things could be easier, and it was only because of other people that they were stuck with hard work and minimal pay for the foreseeable future. There was no escape from the vicious cycle.

“Okay,” Fulgar said. “I’m in.”

Binny clapped Fulgar’s shoulder. “Alright, squirt, I’ll leave you be.” He veered off, thrusting a fist into the air. “Freedom!”

Fulgar couldn’t help but smile just a little.

He kept walking, thinking of his parents, what it would be

## PROLOGUE

like living alone with his dad, how long his mother might be forced away. Before he knew it, he was back in the field where he'd played with his friends earlier.

By now, everyone else was gone, and the torches around the shelter had been snuffed out. The sun was mostly set, the sky in twilight. He cut across the field and found the paths they'd trampled through the heather and field grass.

A little dot, lighter than everything else, caught his eye, and he stopped. There, in the path, was a white butterfly. It had only one wing, which it raised and lowered rhythmically, its tiny body shuddering.

Feeling intense guilt, he approached it. "We did this to you, didn't we?" He spoke in a gentle voice, as though soothing an injured friend. "I don't think I've ever seen such a perfectly white butterfly before. I'm so sorry about your wing."

Fulgar searched the ground among the demolished flowers. It took a few moments, but he finally found it—the butterfly's missing wing.

He stooped down and carefully plucked the wing from the ground with two fingers. Then, just as gently, he guided the butterfly into his other hand and lifted it up before his face.

Like a flood, emotion filled him. Thoughts of his mother rushed into his mind, amplified by the sadness he now felt for this helpless, innocent creature that had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong moment.

"Dear Eloh," he said softly, "just as through me you can heal this butterfly . . . please, show me purpose."

Then he put the severed wing back on the butterfly, right where it belonged. It stayed in place, and the butterfly, no longer shuddering, moved its antennae about in a curious fashion. Seconds later, it beat its wings and took to the sky in perfect flight.

Fulgar watched the butterfly for just a few moments, smiled, and turned back toward home.



chapter 1

# BLARKLE HEIST

*5/9/3177 P.A.*

“**I** imagine you have quite a high opinion of yourself right now,” said Fulgar, blood rushing to his head, adding color to his already-tanned skin. Hanging upside down in fishing net tended to have that effect.

Entering via the rooftop had seemed like a good idea at the time, a means of avoiding detection. The upper lofts of the cargo warehouse were sturdy and free of watchful eyes. Normally, the facilities of Miskunn’s harbor were kept in tiptop shape.

But he had hit a collapsible spot in the floor, clearly a trap, and fallen right through. If that’d been the extent of it, he would at least be properly upright. Instead, he’d landed roughly upon a slippery ramp, fallen backward, and slid headfirst through the hole that brought him to this dismal, inverted state.

The room looked like a simple administrative office, with a sturdy wooden table and a hefty metal door, like the sort that might conceal a vault or prison cell. Standing there was a tall, burly man with tousled, greasy-black hair. His big head was shaped like a chunk of building stone, oblong with a rather uneven-looking face.

## THE HEALER

He guffawed at Fulgar's plight, like a poacher with a fresh catch.

Fulgar struggled against the netting, trying but failing to reach the sword sheathed at his side.

The man sauntered up and palmed Fulgar's head within a massive hand, turning him so their eyes met. The man had big eyes—ugly, gray, and bloodshot—with yellowed whites. Drool pooled in the corner of his lopsided mouth.

"Already had a pretty good opinion o' meself." The man spoke through a husky accent, reminiscent of one from the northwest fringe of Sharm province, near the mountainous border with the province of Brumm. He gestured at Fulgar's inverted position.

"O' course, this *does* improve it. Ye fell right int' me trap!" The man grinned wickedly and chuckled through the gaps in his teeth. A few of the ones he did have were gold. "Fulgar Geth, ain't it?"

Fulgar extended a hand through the netting. "And you'll be Volk Vorovka. It is such a pleasure for you to meet me."

Volk scowled at the hand as though Fulgar were offering a cut of rancid meat. "Royal Guard'll be glad t' get ahold o' you, I reckon. It be all over the harbor that yer wanted. Stealin' pocket change, no doubt, bein' too pathetic t' snatch any respectable dosh." He reached through the net and pulled the sword from beside Fulgar's waist. "Cain't be havin' this, now." He tossed it to the floor with a series of clangs and walked back toward the table.

"Oh, bad form!" Fulgar protested. "Now you're stealing my sword?"

Volk snorted. "Little street rodent like you prob'ly stole it in th' first place."

"That . . . is entirely beside the point!" Fulgar squirmed about in the net, trying to keep his eyes on Volk. "Besides, you'll find it's not worth much."

Volk whirled around, coming close again. "Prob'ly worth more than *you*! Usually, ye'd not even be worth the trouble o' turnin' ye in."



## BLARKLE HEIST

He plucked a few of the hairs from Fulgar's head, snatching strands of black and blue but missing the white. Having an unusual three colors, his hair was long and thick, often with long strands swaying this way or that, all of it presently reaching toward the floor.

Volk chuckled darkly, the drool in his mouth threatening to spill over. "But I knows, t' the right folks, yer worth more fer different reasons." He rubbed the hairs between two fingers, right in front of Fulgar's face, then let them fall to the floor.

"If you're referring to my three colors of hair," Fulgar said, watching the hairs fall, "that's nothing new. I'm already registered, you know."

There was no consensus among commoners as to why kingdom officials cared to know about people with three hair colors. Some believed it a means of segregation, perhaps to privilege certain people or to indicate lineages of noble interest. Some saw it as just another arbitrary way to track the population. Some felt it steeped in superstition, as if to indicate special traits or abilities. Naturally, Fulgar knew nothing of privilege or lineage but saw plenty of merit in the notion of unique abilities.

Out on the streets, hair like his might earn the occasional lingering glance—mystified or curious or, sometimes, suspicious. Many people didn't even notice immediately, and even if they did, Fulgar found that most people weren't bothered by it. Most interpreted it simply as they saw it—different hair colors—and weren't convinced it meant much more than that.

Volk's awful eyes narrowed. "But I knows yer not registered, and that's part o' the value."

"Oh, please. There aren't many twenty-four-year-olds who can skirt registration requirements. I'm rather well-known to the Guard, you know, and get along quite well with a few of them."

"Yer a useless whelp, and soon you'll be wettin' yer britches in prison. After I gets a nice reward, o' course."

"Ah," Fulgar chirped, "but you only *think* I'm caught!"

## THE HEALER

He flicked his right wrist, frowned when nothing appeared from his sleeve, and flicked it again with the same result.

“Lookin’ fer that?” Volk pointed to the floorboards, where rested a small dagger.

Fulgar tittered. “Well, I see how you could *think* that’s what I’m looking for.”

Volk grunted, subjecting Fulgar to a rancid whiff of something like pickled herring and onions. “Barmy little maggot,” the man growled, walking off toward the table. “After me cargo, no doubt.”

“It’s not like you’re the victim here,” Fulgar ventured. “I have it on good authority that the cargo you’re about to load is already stolen.”

“Yer just a common thief, a little rat scroppin’ fer a bit o’ cheddar.” He collected some papers from the table. “Me, I’m a legitimate businessman. A reseller, as it were.”

“You mean to tell me all that pretty, sparkling metal you have in here is *not* stolen, then?”

Volk pointed an ominous finger. “I mean t’ say, me source an’ cargo be none o’ yer business.” He pulled open the heavy door and shouted, “Oy, mates, load it up!” He pushed the door shut again with a resounding metallic boom.

“How perfectly boring,” said Fulgar. “You mean to just leave me hanging here until the soldiers show up?”

Volk gave a dreadful smirk. “I knows yer not here alone, Fulgar Geth. Binny, right? You two are partners. We had a feelin’ you mangy thieves might show up. He’ll be along any moment t’ double me reward.”

“We’re like brothers,” Fulgar replied, “but you’ll have no such luck with him. It’s not like he’s just going to walk in right through the door.”

With dramatic flourish, the door flew open and slammed against the wall. There stood Binny in a dark frock coat, holding something like a handheld ballista, larger than a typical crossbow.

## BLARKLE HEIST

Wearing a sly grin beneath the hooked nose of his rectangular face, he coolly brushed a wavy lock of hair away from his forehead. The blond streaks of his otherwise dark-brown hair made him look especially wild, like an anthropod badger loaded for bear. “Ahoy, ye brainless picaroon! Lookee what I found!”

Volk stuffed his papers into a coat pocket with an agitated growl. “Binny! *Yer* the brainless one fer showin’ yer face ’ere!”

Binny addressed Volk with a short bow. “Greetings, my good man! Beg pardon, but I was actually talking to *him*.” He pointed at Fulgar.

Volk took the bait and turned to glare at Fulgar. Binny fired the ballistic weapon with a loud *twang*, and its bolt sheared through the net’s tether above. Fulgar writhed enough to keep from landing directly on his head, but the back of his neck took a hit against the floor, hard enough to blur his vision and deaden his hearing.

When his senses returned moments later, Volk had overturned the heavy wooden table and grabbed a crossbow. Binny flung aside his bulky weapon and rolled away just as Volk shot and shattered a terracotta pot.

Fulgar struggled with the net, flailing about for the opening. Volk cursed and started loading another crossbow bolt. Binny drew a single-edged shortsword, leapt up, and dashed toward Volk from across the room.

Volk’s thick hands must have made him clumsy with the crossbow. He glared up at Binny, gave up loading the crossbow, placed both huge hands upon the upturned side of the table, and shoved it with impressive force.

“Binny, look out!” Fulgar shouted.

Binny clearly hadn’t expected to see a table zooming toward him with such aggressive speed. He leapt just as the table came at him, but he was a hair too late. The table slammed into his shins mid-jump and toppled him heels over head.

Volk took up his unloaded crossbow and ran out the door,

## THE HEALER

slamming it behind him. Metallic clicking followed that could only mean the door had been locked.

“Great,” muttered Binny through gritted teeth, rubbing at his shins. “It locks from the *outside*.”

Fulgar finally managed to free himself of the net. “Are you insane? Did it not occur to you that he could catch both of us in here? Clearly this room is rigged. Why else would they have a prison door and a trap in the ceiling?”

“I got you out of the net, didn’t I? You’re welcome, by the way.” He pointed a thumb at the door. “Can you do something about this?”

“Well, I can’t trip the lock, not from this side on a door like *this*.” He approached the door and placed his hands on it. “Solid metal, sure enough. It’s going to be noisy . . .”

Binny rubbed his hands together in eager anticipation. “Yeah, fine. Come on! If we make straight for the holding area, we can still get out of here with some of that cosmic metal.”

Fulgar shook his head. “Binny, this job is blown. These people are armed with crossbows and Eloh knows what else. Assuming we make it out of here alive, this is going to turn the officials’ attention right at us! Volk already knew we were coming!”

Binny clapped a hand on Fulgar’s shoulder. “Hey, everything will work out just fine. You’ll see. Remember, even just a satchel-full, and—”

“We’ll be set for months,” Fulgar finished. “I know. But I’d rather be poor and free than rich and dead.”

“Maybe even *years*, mate. We *need* this, or the officials might be the *least* of our problems.”

Fulgar rolled his eyes. “You don’t even know what this stuff is, do you?”

“Sure I do. It’s a valuable metal, black with sparkles. Blarkle.”

Fulgar’s brow furrowed. “And that reminds me. You’ve told me next to nothing about this prospective client of yours. How do you

## BLARKLE HEIST

know they're good for it?"

Binny tilted his head with an exaggerated sigh. "Some secretive group, if you must know, like religious fanatics or something. But here's the thing: They might have information about the talisman, clues how to find where it belongs or even about the nature of its power. Plus, they have sway with the soldiers, the Palace, anyone they need. Which, of course, makes our success that much more important. They can help keep the officials off our backs." He slapped Fulgar's arm with vigor, a twinkle in his eye. "See? We're doing real king's work now, like good model citizens!" He gestured toward the door. "Now we just need to get to the blarkle before they load it."

Fulgar groaned, went back to the heap of net, and retrieved his tiny dagger and sword from the floor, sheathing the sword. "I hope you know what you're getting us into." He stretched his arms toward the door. "Stand back."

Fulgar felt the tingles of magnetism vibrate from inside his arms, growing in strength. His arms began to shake as the attraction intensified, and he slowly turned his forearms upward and pulled back, as if trying to move a loaded wagon tied to his arms. Creaking sounded from all around the door, and the surrounding wooden frame started to split. With a firm yank from Fulgar, the door flew open with a dramatic shower of splinters.

"Now *that's* breaking out in style!" cheered Binny. He flung himself through the doorway, sword held before him.

Fulgar shook out his shoulders, feeling the slight drain of energy leaving his body. With a sigh, he drew his own sword and followed behind.

The landing outside the door overlooked a sea of containers far below. Stairs led down to the left. Binny was already halfway to another landing, which branched off to a narrow, wooden elevated walkway. The warehouse below was a complex tangle of carts and pulley systems for moving hundreds of crates between vessels in

## THE HEALER

the harbor, throughout the facility, and to any variety of drays for further transport inland. Fulgar heard men shouting from somewhere within the expanse but saw no one.

“How are we supposed to know which one has our metal?” Fulgar called out.

“Whichever one they try to keep us from!” Binny shouted back, only deepening Fulgar’s anxiety about this job.

Binny stopped just before he reached the landing and held up a finger. Fulgar halted at the signal, and Binny turned his head, listening. “This way!” He hopped the last few stairs and took off to the left, darting down the elevated walkway.

Just below them on both sides were rows of tall crates, most of them sealed and ready for transport.

“Binny, wait!” Fulgar hissed. “They’re going to see—”

A crossbow bolt struck the railing to Binny’s right, followed by shouts from below of “There!” and “They escaped!” and “I want ‘em alive so t’ gets me reward!” Fulgar and Binny ducked down instinctively, but there was little cover to be had in this vulnerable position.

“If we get out of this,” Fulgar said, “*I’m* leading the next job!”

“Nice sentiment,” Binny replied, “but I prefer bigger fish to street crumbs.” His attention snapped to the action below. “Out the way!” he shouted as he lunged into Fulgar, narrowly dodging another bolt.

The move cost Fulgar his footing. He tripped over the railing and fell atop one of the tall crates, landing hard on his back and knocking the wind from his lungs. He sucked in a breath and raised his head with a groan.

“Good idea!” Binny called from the walkway. “We’ll split up and draw them out!”

Before Fulgar could protest everything about that statement, Binny leapt off the other side of the walkway. Instead of landing solidly upon a crate, he fell right through the top with a resonating crack of wood.

## BLARKLE HEIST

Fulgar turned over, able to see the cargo beneath him from between the boards of the crate. His eyes were met with tiny, sparkling pinpoints amid a sea of black.

Despite their predicament, he took a moment to stare at the unusual material, unable to turn away. Its beauty was striking to him, irresistible. He felt drawn to it, as if the stuff beckoned him to reach out and take it.

Completely unbidden, his intrinsic power surged with sudden excitement, a rush of buzzing warmth pulsing through his veins.

“The metal!” he gasped. This was the material they were after. He was sure of it.

He heard another crack of wood and realized that Binny had just kicked his way out of the side of his crate.

From his vantage point, Fulgar saw four men, including Volk, spread throughout the area, making their way toward Binny. None of them seemed to realize that Fulgar lay atop the prized cargo.

Fulgar turned back to the sparkling metal, so close to the greatest fortune they had ever achieved, desiring more than anything to hold it. He turned back to the scene below, scanning for Binny.

He found him after a few moments.

One of Volk’s men, a wiry-looking redhead, was coming right into Binny’s path, a loaded crossbow held ready in his hands.

Binny was about to be shot.

Fulgar slid off the crate and ran between the carts and roller conveyors where the larger crates rested, wending his way to Binny’s position. He passed beneath the elevated walkway, sword in hand, his breaths rapid and anxious.

He rounded the corner of a crate just in time to see Binny and the redhead meet up. Binny’s hands were raised, and the crossbow was aimed directly at him.

“You’re comin’ with us,” said the redhead. “No matter if you’re bloodied and unable to walk.” He shifted his aim toward Binny’s

## THE HEALER

legs, ready to squeeze the weapon's trigger lever.

An instinct, increasingly familiar with time and practice, pulsed within Fulgar and evoked a forward thrust of his free arm. An energetic jolt passed from his sword arm through to the one now outstretched, like a tiny, prickly ocean wave coursing through his limbs.

At that moment, the crossbow twanged.

Fulgar's eyes were on the bolt as it sprang from the crossbow, and with a deliberate upward jerk of his arm, the bolt's path skewed over Binny's head, leaving the projectile to puncture a crate just above him. With a following downward twitch of Fulgar's arm, the redhead's crossbow smacked to the floor.

Confusion twisted the redhead's face, and Binny wasted no time reacting. He charged into the redhead with his shoulder, slamming him into a crate. He pushed off a feeble sweep of the man's arm and punched him square in the face, decking him.

Binny turned around and found Fulgar. "I take it that bolt didn't change course due to some bizarre *indoor* gust of wind."

"No," Fulgar said, still staring at the crossbow. "No, that was me." The power pulsing through him was unusually strong, had been since landing near that dazzling metal. Attracting and moving something as large as the metal door was easy compared to this. An object in motion was very difficult to alter. He'd never done it with something as potent as a just-fired crossbow bolt.

He didn't always understand his abilities with metal and magnetism. Innate instinct told him it was all connected to other strange powers, such as the healing of small things like flowers and minor injuries, which he'd known since childhood. It was sometimes stronger in the heat of a tense moment or when his will was especially high, but he couldn't remember it ever feeling quite as strong as it did now.

"Well," said Binny, "that was *fantastic*."

"I heard 'em over this way!" someone shouted.



## BLARKLE HEIST

Binny grabbed Fulgar by the biceps and guided him around the corner of a crate. “We’ve gotta lose these guys!” he said in an urgent whisper.

“I . . . found the sparkling metal,” Fulgar said, barely gathering his thoughts, “in the crate I landed on.”

Binny’s face lit up like Candletide. “Ha! That’s brilliant! So, we go wide in two directions, spread these guys out, and circle back to the crate.”

“Move it out, *now!*” roared Volk. Rattling sounds followed, the cargo rollers turning.

“Gheol’s foul flames!” Binny seethed.

“We’ll never be able to get to it if they’re all around it,” said Fulgar, “which is probably why they’re now focused on the container rather than us.”

“I know, I know.” Binny thought a moment, looking aside. “Okay . . . we’re gonna have to get out of here.”

Fulgar raised his eyebrows. “We’re giving up?”

Binny’s eyes snapped back to Fulgar. “Jostle your brain or something? Of course not! We need to watch where they load it, maybe get to it before the ship leaves port.”

Fulgar gave him a wide-eyed look. “You mean get from here to their ship, then take the sparkling metal from their ship, and then get ourselves *off* of their ship without being apprehended?”

“Yes.”

“You’re mad.”

“Look, *this* is our chance. Once aboard, they’ll disperse to get the ship ready. After a bit, they’ll think we’ve given up. We’ll pose as dockhands—they’re constantly bringing crates on and off ships—and make a quick break for it.”

“We’re more likely to get shoved overboard,” Fulgar grumbled.

Determination shining in his eyes, Binny looked about. “There, that way!” He pointed down the length of an aisle toward a stairwell leading to the lower floor.

## THE HEALER

Fulgar glared at the stairs, then at the sunlight from bay doors somewhere to their right, then at Binny. “We should exit *that* way, toward the daylight.”

Binny shook his head adamantly. “This is one of those double-decker facilities for loading the bigger ships at deck height. Ground level will be another floor down.”

Voices and the rattling sounds of the rolling container drew closer. They were out of time to debate. Fulgar nodded, and they made a break for the stairs. He had no idea if anyone saw where they went. They were just lucky to be alive at this point, although he had a bad feeling their luck was running out.

It felt like the stairs went down three floors rather than one, with a landing in between that switched back the other direction. They finally emerged into an expansive holding area with more crates and rows of locked, barred doors that resembled a wooden cellblock. The soft lapidary glow of flocalcite lighting illuminated the space.

Fulgar was focused on the lighting and the lack of any active cargo doors. “Binny,” he said in an accusatory tone, “where’s the sunlight?”

“Hmm,” Binny replied, scratching his chin. “This must be where they keep more valuable cargoes under lock and key. I’ve heard of places like this.”

Shouts echoed from the stairs above. “Yer both trapped like rats down there now! Be down in a wee spell t’ collect yer sorry hides, don’cha worry.”

“I *knew* it!” Fulgar shouted. “They saw us go down here, and there’re no open exits. We should’ve made for the bay doors upstairs!”

Binny held out his hands in a calming gesture. “This’ll work out just fine.” He picked a row and started forward. “Come on. Let’s just . . . find another way out.”

“You won’t find it,” said a female voice. “At least, not on your own.”

## BLARKLE HEIST

Fulgar and Binny halted in their tracks, looking around dumbly for the source.

“Over here, you two.”

Fulgar saw her first, standing within one of the barred holding containers, a dark-complexioned woman about his height and, he guessed, about the same age. She was skinny, dressed in a dingy, tattered shirt and a torn length of skirt, her black hair flecked with tiny patches of white and curling over her shoulders. Her lean, triangular face was both sharp and soft at once, with vibrant brown eyes like spicy cinnamon bark.

Fulgar stared at her, at a loss for words. Slovenly as she appeared, he was struck by the keen, searching expression of her face and the rolling accent of her voice, like chimes ringing in perfect singsong succession. He loved the sound of chimes.

“Are you . . . cargo?” asked Binny.

“Well, kind of,” she replied. “I mean, I’m in a container, aren’t I?”

“But . . . why?”

She seemed to search the container’s ceiling for an answer. “Wrong place, wrong time, you could say.”

“Ah,” replied Binny with a knowing laugh. “Stealing?”

“Something like that.”

They heard steps and voices descending the stairs.

Binny gave the woman a short nod. “Well, best of luck to you.” He started off. Fulgar didn’t move, as though the woman herself were magnetic and wouldn’t let him.

“Wait! You’ve got to break me out of here.”

Binny turned back, an eyebrow sharply arched. “Oh, and why is that? Because, in a couple of minutes, we’re going to be target practice for some crossbows.”

She placed a hand over her chest in grandiose fashion. “Because *I* can help you escape without getting killed. There’s only one other way out of here, and I know where it is.”

Fulgar snapped his gaze to Binny. “We can’t just leave her here.”

## THE HEALER

“Really?” said Binny. “Because I rather think we can.”

Fulgar gestured at the bars on the crate. “This same fate could be our own! She can help us.”

“Oh, come on. She’s a petty thief—just like us, maybe, but clearly not as good.” He looked at the woman. “No offense.”

She responded with a cross-armed glare. “Let’s just give it a minute, then. I can wait.”

“I’m helping her,” said Fulgar. “You can go if you want.”

“There’s a good man!” she cheered as Binny threw up his hands.

“What’s your name?” Fulgar asked her.

“The name’s Jinx.” She reached between the bars and shook his hand. It was a wonderful hand, dainty and strong.

“Jinx?” replied Binny. “Not really selling yourself as much of a good-luck charm, milady.” He backhanded Fulgar’s arm. “Okay, well, if you’ve got some grand scheme, now’s the time, me bucko.”

“Right,” said Fulgar, looking down at the door’s lock. “This is just a simple lever tumbler lock, the sort they probably have a skeleton key for. So, the levers inside just need to be pushed into the right position to open it.”

“And you have a way to do that?” asked Jinx. “Without the key?”

“Yeah,” said Binny, “you have a way to do that?”

“As I said,” replied Fulgar, his voice calm, “it’s a matter of positioning the levers inside.”

Jinx gave them a sideways, inquisitive stare. “Who *are* you guys?”

Fulgar placed his hands around the lock. “Like no one you’ve ever met.” He stooped down and placed an ear against the front of the lock.

Binny stared at him, his stance jittery. “Okay, Fulgar, you do that . . . and I’ll be right back.” He took off down the aisle and turned a corner out of sight.

## BLARKLE HEIST

“Fulgar,” Jinx repeated. “I like that name—has a strong, rugged sound to it.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s your friend doing?”

Fulgar coughed a laugh. “What he does best: mischief.” He closed his eyes, concentrating on the lock. “Now, please, I must listen to the levers.”

This was a trick he’d practiced on many a lock ever since he’d first sensed the buzz of magnetism within his body. The trick didn’t always work, but the surge of energy he felt right now gave him confidence. Sometimes the internal lock parts were made of nonferrous metals—tin, copper, brass—but that didn’t really matter. He could make things magnetic that weren’t before, if only for a short time.

Jinx stood very close, practically against the door on the other side, looking down at him. “I *love* your hair. Three colors, too! That’s amazing. Never change it.”

“Please,” said Fulgar, “I really need to concen—”

He stopped at a series of clicks within the lock, and the door swung open.

“Oh!” Jinx squealed. “Fulgar, you’re *brilliant!*” As soon as he stood, she ruffled his hair with both hands, yanked him forward, kissed him on the mouth, and wrapped her arms around his neck. Wide-eyed, and not knowing how else to react, he hugged her back, his arms encircling her slender waist. It was a brief moment, short and sweet and invigorating, filling him with warmth like an exquisite mulled wine that made his every sense demand more of everything he’d just felt.

“Come on out, ye whelps!” shouted Volk from the stairs.

Somewhere else in the huge room, a loud cracking sound whipped into the air, followed by something of a *whoosh*.

Fulgar chanced a glance around the corner of the crate he stood halfway in with Jinx. Volk was flanked by four of his cronies,

## THE HEALER

pointing toward the source of the sudden commotion. “Over there!” He ran off with two of his men, while the other two stayed behind to guard the stairs.

“What was that?” asked Jinx.

Fulgar smiled. “That’ll be Binny.”

Perfectly on cue, Binny showed up, slightly out of breath. “Right—best be on our way, then. That crate of flamethyst won’t distract them for long.”

“Oh, I *like* you guys!” said Jinx. “Alright, then, let’s get out of here.”



Cricket song blended with the crackling of woodfire, and a pleasant, smoky aroma hung in the air, a scent that Fulgar had come to associate with the relaxing end of a long day. The planetary rings of Elinorin were bright across the southern sky, their perimeter washing away the light of any stars that were near them. Higher in view, a crescent moon seemed to smirk in the mostly clear sky.

Typically, this was a view he shared only with Binny. Tonight, after having escaped the cargo warehouse, they were joined by Jinx. Their wiry new companion had been true to her word and led them through a service door nestled in the farthest possible corner of the facility’s lower floor.

Binny had not been totally wrong about the building’s layout. The floor above was indeed for loading larger ships. It just turned out that both larger and smaller ships were loaded from there, reserving the lower level for special containment. Hence, highly volatile minerals, like flamethyst, and more concealed shipments, such as people intended as cargo, were kept in the same separated area.

The flamethyst fire had been a stroke of brilliance on Binny’s part. What started from within a small container soon erupted into

## BLARKLE HEIST

a large enough blaze to threaten the entire facility. It completely flummoxed Volk's pursuit and attracted the attention of harbor authorities, providing all the cover they needed to slip away unhindered.

Unfortunately, that which gave them cover to escape also made it impossible for them to go back and find their desired prize, whether still in the warehouse or aboard Volk's ship. If they ever got another chance at "blarkle," it would have to be another day.

Once north of the harbor, they continued west, running as fast as they could until reaching the Miskunn city limits, where just beyond sat the edge of a large, dense forest. On their way through the fish markets, they had managed to snag a few snappers from the edge of a cart, the ones most likely to be discarded anyway if left unsold much longer.

Now seated beside the campfire, Fulgar couldn't keep himself from casting frequent glances at Jinx as she sat cross-legged, roasting stick in hand, the firelight adding a certain edge to her already fine features. She was rugged yet dainty, gangly yet strong, and despite her tattered clothing, or even partly because of it, she was very attractive.

When she looked back at him, he averted his eyes on some insufferably bizarre instinct and poked his stick needlessly at the firewood, sending up sparks. He had just finished his portion of fish, the warm morsels settling pleasantly in his stomach.

"So, then, what's the story on you two?" she asked after long moments of silence, mostly the result of exhaustion.

"Story?" said Binny midway in the act of sitting on a log. "What makes you think there's a story?"

Jinx shrugged, speaking through a bite of snapper. "Roaming about a cargo basement, getting chased by a gang, picking locks with your hands—that one's *still* got me reeling—nicking fish like it's no big deal, and clearly you neither one have got a proper home. Are you vagabonds or something?"

## THE HEALER

“We’re your classic sob story,” Binny answered. “My parents were worked so hard in the wheat fields during the hottest summer in modern history, without any breaks or water, that they collapsed within an hour of each other.” He nodded toward Fulgar. “His mum was forced into a merchant convoy that never came back, and his dad descended into a drunken stupor. All of ’em were victims of the guilders in some way or another.”

“Wow,” said Fulgar flatly with a turn of his stick, “it sounds so poetic to hear you tell it.”

“And so no one ever taught you it isn’t nice to steal?” asked Jinx with half a smirk.

“We take only from those we believe can afford to lose it,” Fulgar replied. “Sometimes we share our spoils with others who struggle more than we do.”

“You justify it, then.” She held up her free hand. “Look, I’m not judging or anything. Me, I’m just trying to get by and survive . . . you know, till some better luck comes along.” She bit off another piece of fish, talking between chews. “I don’t quite get that from you guys, though—the survival thing. Whatever you want to call it, you clearly justify it.”

“Everyone justifies their choices,” Fulgar replied. “I’m not really happy about it, I admit, but we are justified by a system that is foundationally unjust.”

“You mean the labor system?” asked Jinx. Fulgar nodded.

“We grew up watching it ruin our parents,” Binny replied. “One chance—*one*—to impress a bunch of power-hungry university snobs enough to let you pursue what, at the time, you *think* might be your desired occupation. Some people do well, sure, but we got the other side of that coin. We got to watch our folks get beat down by guilders who valued them about as much as pack animals. We got to watch their hope for anything better erode with every job that only got harder and harder, more and more degrading.”

“Despite all that,” added Fulgar, “I actually still tried doing



## BLARKLE HEIST

things their way.”

Jinx wore a look of confusion. “What’s *their* way?”

“You know,” said Binny, “march yourself to the university at the age of seventeen to declare what you’re good enough at to pursue further studies.” He exhaled a laugh. “Good-boy Fulgar here gave it a shot. I didn’t even bother. Told him to come find me when the masters screwed him over, too.”

Fulgar sighed with a weak smile of reminiscence. “I tried to have faith that maybe it could work out better for me. It was . . . faith misplaced.”

“And what did you try to declare?” asked Jinx.

“Medicine, herbalist—medical practice as a physicker. It’s not that I didn’t know enough. It’s not that I lacked ability. Standing there before the professors, I was nervous—terrified, and I choked on my answers. My confidence evaporated. I was so scared that what had happened to my parents would happen to me that I manifested that very outcome upon myself. The masters voted me down. And that was it—my one chance. I was on my own. If I ever wanted *honest* work, in the eyes of officials, it would be whatever the guilders assigned me.”

Jinx’s eyes were wide. “And there’s no way to change that outcome? Challenge it or ask for another chance?”

“The only way is to be adopted—chosen—by an expert with enough influence to attain guild or royal approval. I have no such person to turn to. Always, your fate is in the hands of someone else.”

“We’ve got big goals for the future, though,” said Binny. “We won’t always be scrapping around like this.”

“What about you, Jinx?” asked Fulgar. “How did you end up in that cargo container?”

Jinx gazed at the fire, setting her roasting stick and fish bones aside. “Simple enough, I guess. You two are citizens here, so you can come and go and do . . . your justified things well enough. I washed up on the western shores, apparently from a shipwreck, barely alive

## THE HEALER

and remembering nothing. My real name isn't Jinx, but it's the only name I know. Soldiers found me, kept me from dying, found no evidence of me being a citizen of Tuscawny, and designated me for 'kingdom service.'"

"And what does that mean?" asked Binny.

"You get assigned—maybe to a guild chief or a knight or a noble's household—and you work, not for money you can do what you want to with, but basically to be kept alive."

"Sounds almost like slavery."

"Yeah," she replied reflectively. "Yeah, you could call it that, even if *they* don't."

Fulgar felt a heavy weight in his stomach. "And you have no memory from before washing ashore?"

Jinx shook her head. "None. I still know how to speak, what words mean. I know I look like someone from the Coral Ash Islands, because I've heard people say that. But I don't remember my family or who I was with or what happened at sea. I've never had enough freedom to figure that out. Smarted off one time to my last master, the steward of Fort Morga—a real galoot, that guy. He didn't like that, so he went out of his way to have me traded off to some other land. I was set to be deported. So, I guess you guys aren't really the lowest of your labor force after all."

"Wait a minute," said Binny. "I thought you were caught stealing."

"And that bit was true. How many of you 'proper' citizens get caged up in a crate for stealing food scraps? I managed to escape from the steward, but I got caught."

Fulgar and Binny shared a look, both a mix of surprise and disgust. Forced servitude in the kingdom of Tuscawny was the kind of thing sometimes rumored about but almost never overtly confirmed.

"You should stick with us," said Fulgar, noting the guarded expression on Binny's face. "At least for a while, to give you some

## BLARKLE HEIST

time to find a direction.”

Binny slumped his shoulders and stared at the fire. “Well . . . yeah, I suppose a little while won’t hurt. Just follow our lead. We’ve got important jobs to be done and can’t afford too many slip-ups.”

“Like this last one, eh?” she replied wryly.

Fulgar turned to Binny. “We almost died on this job, you know.”

Binny half-smiled back at Fulgar. “*Almost*. Wouldn’t be the first near miss.”

Fulgar moved to the ground to rest his head upon the log. “So close to that enchanting metal, only to come up empty-handed.”

“Well,” said Binny, “not exactly.” He dug a hand into his satchel and pulled out a palmful of small, sparkling diamonds. Amidst his awe, Fulgar frowned, trying to determine when Binny could have retrieved them. Then he remembered the crate that Binny had fallen into.

The diamonds weren’t what they had been after, but at least they were something.

“See, Fulgar—don’t I always take care of things?” He moved to rest against his own log. “Now, let’s get some sleep.”