

# Talevin's Tale

by

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TALEVIN'S TALE  
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Part I:

The Journey Begins

(1)

Being thrown through the air can be kind of nice; that is, of course, until you come down. That is why you should always be mindful of what you say, because you never know when someone is going to take offence to you, grab you by the collar and seat of your pants, and toss you across the room of a crowded tavern. Unfortunately, Talevin never heard this advice; though he probably wished he had about the time he slid off the table and landed face first on the floor.

He didn't look very comfortable, lying in the midst of broken dinnerware and surrounded by perturbed tavern patrons (most of whom were bigger than him), with his right cheek squished into a straw covered floor, one leg hanging off of a chair still occupied by a very large, unhappy man, and his opposite foot stuck to a tabletop by his boot buckle.

But I get ahead of myself. Perhaps I should back up and start from the beginning.

This is the tale of a young, trouble prone boy and his trouble seeking friend. Neither companion seemed to be headed much of anywhere until they met

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one fateful evening in the tavern of an old, rowdy inn. But meet they did. And change the course of many lives, too, I might add, not to mention—Oh dear, I fear I will ruin the telling of a marvelous tale if I am not more careful. You must forgive me.

And while I'm a tad off topic, let me warn you. These two troublesome companions could hardly be considered heroes. If anything, bumbling idiots of ill-begotten luck might be a more honest description. Well, perhaps not idiots, but they certain had a knack for learning all of life's lessons the hard way. Yet, despite their plethora of faults, they were given to good-natured demeanors and possessed kind hearts . . . most of the time.

And this is how they met. . . .

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It was a chilly night in Hunkerton. Not bitterly cold, just cool and damp from an early morning rain. Winter was rapidly approaching, though, and tempers were short as folks worried about storing food and supplies before the snow arrived.

It was not a large town. Hunkerton was more or less a farming community than a township or villa. In fact, it was so small that Lord-Duke Byron Dale nearly forgot to collect annual taxes on several occasions, or so rumor would have you believe (far be it for a Lord-Duke to forget to collect his dues!). The

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crop season had been poor, yielding little better than half the previous year's produce, and once taxes were collected, the people would be left with next to nothing.

With the day's work at an end, the only inn for miles around was crowded with the usual local patrons. Leaning against the bar, sitting at tables, or standing in the middle of the floor—all the conversations were the same. The people cussed and complained about their terrible luck. It was a gloomy sort of atmosphere day in and day out. Nothing changed and no one expected things to change. Work all day, complain all night, and do it all again come tomorrow. And, unfortunately, no one was inclined to do anything about it.

The problem was that if someone didn't do something soon, people were going to starve, or at least get really, really thin. Something needed to happen, and anything would probably be better than nothing. So when the tavern's doors opened and a stranger strolled in, heads came up from mugs and conversations halted in mid-sentence. Had you asked them, they could not have told you what they were hoping for, but I'm sure a knight in shining armor would have done just fine by most of them. In fact, the majority would have greeted an old man wrapped in fraying robes and wearing a crumpled conical hat with looks of high expectation. Desperation can make people cling to the smallest strands of hope.

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Yet, when their eyes fell upon the figure in the doorway, the very building itself seemed to groan. Hopeful thoughts disappeared and patrons resumed where they had left off.

Stanjah Moonin, Hunkerton's one-and-only trader, sighed and tossed his head back, downing a mug full of ale in one swig. His eyes already showed his heavy inebriation.

The innkeeper flung a soggy cloth he'd been using to wipe down tables in the newcomer's direction and spun about disgustedly. "Nothin' but a kid!" he spat. Then he helped himself to some of his own ale. At the rate they were going, there would be nothing left to drink by snowfall. The thought depressed him further, so he poured himself another cup.

"What are ya doin' in these parts, kid?" Juggs spoke up. He was a farmer—a BIG farmer: gruff to the core, unshaven, wide shoulders, thick legs, and really, really tall. His grimace slightly opened his mouth, revealing his lone front tooth.

The kid—fourteen years old, rail thin, smooth faced with all his teeth (so far)—looked back without fear. He shrugged his slender shoulders and moved in the direction of a vacant stool next to Stanjah Moonin. "Ale. And a bowl of stew, please," he said to the innkeeper.

The innkeeper grunted. He dribbled a few drops of ale into a mug then filled the rest with water before

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handing it to the boy. The stew had one small nugget of meat, two corn kernels, and the rest was broth—also watered down.

Eyes drawing together at the sight of his meal, the kid looked up at the innkeeper questioningly, but his smile quickly returned and he nodded his thanks. It wasn't much of a meal where he was from, but maybe this was how they ate in these parts. A crusty old spoon was flung in his direction, so he wiped it off on his tunic and dipped it into his meager portion of stew.

“You gonna waste food on that runt, Quill?” Juggs rhetorically inquired of the innkeeper. “Ha! He turns sideways and he disappears.”

Someone should have told Juggs that he was going to look like that by Winter's End unless something seriously changed, but no one did. They were too busy thinking the same thing. Why waste food on a stranger, especially one so obviously incapable of helping them?

Juggs wasn't finished yet, either. “I bet he ain't a day over sixteen years. Probably never even seen a whisker on that there face. We ain't got the food to be wastin' it on the likes of him!”

“I'm not so worried about the food as I am about the ale,” Stanjah Moonin spoke up, looking sadly into his mug, “but I think that boy can use a little sustenance.”

“Oh, I'm all right, Mister,” the kid spoke up,



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clearly taking no offence to Juggs' comments. His bowl of stew was already empty and his watery ale followed in one swig. He wiped an arm across his mouth, not that there was anything to wipe away (he was not about to waste anything on drippage), and spun around on his seat to face Stanjah. "Are you a trader?"

"Oh, that was the wrong thing to say," Quill said to himself.

Suddenly, instantly, the tavern grew deathly quiet.

Stanjah stiffened. He spoke slowly and quietly, yet his words could be heard throughout the open room, as could the threatening undertone. His voice was as rough as the stubble covering his face. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. You didn't hear me? I asked if you were—"

"No, boy, don't—" Quill tried to warn.

"—a trader," the kid finished.

Quicker than a hummingbird's heartbeat, Stanjah Moonin left his seat and took hold of the kid, scrunching up two fistfuls of well worn coat and lifting him to his feet. "No one, and I mean no one, calls me a traitor!"

"But, sir," the kid replied pleadingly, "you just looked like a trader to me! I meant no offence by it!"

Stanjah was so mad that his face flushed with such heat that he could have replaced a hot iron with

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his cheeks and smoothed out the wrinkles in a crumpled pair of trousers. Stale breath blew out of his mouth in incredulous huffs. “You . . . you rotten . . . why I ain’t ever heard such audacity. . . . I can’t believe . . .,” his rage made him stammer.

“I’m so sorry! Really!”

“Arrrrrrrgg!” Stanjah gave up on words and grabbed the kid by the collar and the seat of his pants. With a mighty heave, he thrust him into the air—

As you have probably already guessed, the kid sent hurtling through the air was none other than our hero (and I use that term loosely), Talevin. In his defense, let me say that he held on to his dignity as best he could while gliding—all right, flipping end-over-end in a rather loose-limbed fashion—across the room. He didn’t cry out in fear all that loudly, and what did come from his lips sounded no more like a womanly screech than what you or I might have done had we been in a similar straight.

—and eventually Talevin skidded across Juggs’ tabletop, knocking the very, very large man’s dinner to the floor and spilling a brimming mug across his lap before coming to rest. Talevin’s right cheek squished firmly into the straw covered floor, while one leg stretched across Juggs oversized lap and the other stuck to the tabletop by a boot buckle.

When Juggs jumped up with a roar, Talevin’s leg dropped to the floor. His weight then pulled his boot buckle free from the table, but not before tipping it

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over and spilling the last few fragments of Juggs' dinner to the ground.

I wish I could tell you who was madder, Stanjah for being called a "trader," or Juggs as he watched his dinner scatter across the filthy tavern floor. What I can tell you is that both men were equally capable of expressing their feelings on the matter. After an astonished moment of watching his food fall and feeling the spreading ale stain on his trousers (that looked a lot like when . . . uh, never mind), the oversized farmer grabbed Talevin's ankles and swung him around once before releasing him in the general direction of the inn's entrance. The young man's lanky form struck the center of the free-swinging double doors. They split open for his forced passage out onto the street, then swung back and forth a few more times, eventually coming to rest just as they had been before Talevin had hit them.

And so the grand path of our suave hero begins with picking horse droppings from his teeth. I'm sure there have been worse beginnings . . . though I can't imagine how.

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Talevin picked himself up and dusted off his clothing. He was thankful for the thickness of his woolen coat; it's padding had played a large part in preserving his bones from breakage as he had been thrown about.

"Well, that was rather rude," Talevin said to himself. He leaned over and raked his fingers through his short, wild hair, brushing out dirt and straw. Although he was usually an easygoing sort, it tended to ruffle his proverbial feathers when he was tossed around like a sack of feed.

Straightening his coat then pushing open the tavern doors, he was immediately bombarded with loud voices and a jeering Juggs with his back turned. Stanjah Moonin was sitting at the bar, paying no mind to what was going on around him, but all other eyes (with the exception of Juggs) witnessed Talevin's reentrance.

"...and what an ugly kid! Why, if I'd a had a workhorse half that ugly, I'd a put it out of its misery ages ago...." Juggs face was red with mirth, his gape-toothed smile stretching from big ear to big ear

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beneath a severally humped and twisted nose.

Chuckles followed the farmer's every word, but none compared to the high-pitched laughter echoing from the rafters. A few of Quill's patrons looked up curiously and, seeing nothing, quickly forgot about it. Sometimes sound carried funny in old buildings.

Talevin was not amused, not in the least. He listened to the big farmer, growing madder and madder. It was not his fault that he was awkward looking, with thin limbs and a bony face. His coat and pants added to the misfit look by being several inches too short at the cuffs, but he could not help that either. When he had some money, the first thing he intended to do was to purchase new clothes. Until then, he had to make do with what he had.

"...Wow—and blond hair! If that ain't the hair of a sissy-man, I don't know what is," Juggs continued, delighting in the attention he was receiving. "Have you ever seen a golden-haired man that wasn't? I ain't never."

Instead of the laughter he had expected, Juggs received nothing but stunned looks from his audience. Then just before he lost consciousness, he heard a squeal of laughter descending from above. As he screwed up his uncomprehending features, trying vainly to figure out why his audience didn't laugh, the chair Talevin had raised in anger came crashing down on his head., breaking into splinters over the big man.

"Oh," Juggs mumbled, dropping to his knees,

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then flat on his face.

Quill wove his way through the tavern and gave the large farmer's foot a nudge. "Juggs?" He remained motionless. The innkeeper gave him a firmer kick, again to no avail. Quill turned to Talevin, who was staring at his antagonist with disbelieving eyes. "Oh my, you knocked him silly, boy!"

Even Stanjah spun on his stool to see what had happened and exclaimed, "Well, paint me a face an' call me Charlie."

Talevin, of course, had not intended to hurt the man, but neither had he considered the consequences of his actions before he swung the chair in anger. And part of those consequences included Juggs' friends, Buddy and Boo-Ray. Before Talevin had a moment to digest what was happening, Buddy and Boo-Ray were upon him; one tackled him hard in the legs at the same instant the other dove into his upper body from the opposing direction.

"Look ou—!"

*Crunch.*

The warning from the rafters came much too late. It sounded like the high-pitched voice winced as it said, "Oooooo."

Talevin's legs went forward, his torso went backwards, and it indeed looked painful. Though Buddy and Boo-Ray were hardly the size of Juggs, they were still big and strong next to Talevin, and both outweighed him by a sack of grain or two.

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The trio came down heavily then took to bouncing and rolling around the floor, knocking over tables, chairs, and patrons in an equally opportunistic fashion. Fists swung and feet kicked; it was turning into a right ole bar brawl. Quill's tavern had not had a good fight in some time because no one had had the energy to start one. It used to be a nightly event, back when times were better and people were happier. You could always count on leaving a good day's work behind and seeing a good night's brawl break out at Quill's. It was a grand time, those days.

Without meaning to, Talevin had sparked a fire in the people of Hunkerton. People stood, excitement stirring them from their lethargy, and cheered. Most cheered for Buddy and Boo-Ray, the hometown favorites, some even cheered for Talevin (though they thought he'd get killed), and everyone cheered for the fight. Though Quill stood back where he couldn't be seen and witnessed the trashing of his establishment, he had to smile. Prior to Talevin's arrival, Hunkerton had been a place filled with the walking dead. Now his people were acting alive again, and that gave him hope.

Buddy and Boo-Ray were like most country boys, used to fighting but having no concept of how to do it well. They flailed away, missing much more often than hitting, and when they did make contact it was usually in the wrong places, hurting themselves as much as their opponent. Talevin, however lighter and

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weaker he was physically, knew something about scrapping. He had learned numerous lessons during his childhood from malicious noble children. Kids with too much power and not enough . . . well, nobility, gave him firsthand experience on what professional training could accomplish. After having enough combat techniques tested on you, one begins to pick things up.

To everyone's surprise, Talevin held his own against the larger and stronger brothers. Eventually, more of the tavern crowd was cheering for him than for the local boys, so impressed were they by his tenacity. Time and again, just as it looked like he was done for (Buddy would be winding back for a big wallop, or Boo-Ray would be trying to stomp on his knees or hit him with a stool), he would suddenly be out of harms way. Slick as a greased pig on melting ice, Talevin would slip away and come back with a well-placed punch or two of his own.

"I'll teach you right good to attack Juggs!" Buddy bellowed. He swung hard and Talevin leaned back to avoid the wild blow. It wasn't even close.

"It ain't fair if ya keep movin'!" Buddy complained.

"But I don't want to get hit!" Talevin returned in exasperation. He was so used to doing what he was told (because of his good upbringing) that he felt bad for not doing as Buddy had requested—I suppose I should mention here that Talevin really wasn't that



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stupid. He was a reasonably intelligent boy. It was his naivety that made him appear an idiot . . . generally speaking.

“But I want ta hitchya!” Boo-Ray exclaimed, and took a frustrated swing. When Talevin ducked, Boo-Ray’s punch nearly took off his brother’s nose. Luckily, Buddy was standing just out of range. If only someone hadn’t bumped him from behind at that very instant, placing the very tip of his rather blessed-in-size nose in the path of Boo-Ray’s fore knuckle, he might have been all right.

“Hey! Watch where ya swingin’!”

“Watch where ya putin’ ya booger blower!”

Talevin jumped out from between the quarreling brothers. They collided together and fell to the floor, kicking and gouging. He could immediately tell that they were evenly matched.

Eventually, Buddy gained a seat on top of his brother. He grabbed his shirt and raised a fist, but before he could swing, his brother bit his hand and threw him off. Then Boo-Ray tried to leap on him, but Buddy caught his brother with his feet and pushed hard. Boo-Ray landed atop a nearby table. The legs broke, dumping the country boy to the floor.

“Oooo, ya gonna pay,” Boo-Ray said, struggling to his feet.

“No, *yer* gonna pay!” Buddy returned emphatically. He charged his brother, head lowered like a charging bull.

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Remember when I said it was turning into a right ole bar brawl? Well, any right ole bar brawl has to have one thing to make it what it is: everyone has to get involved. As things were, most of Hunkerton's finest stood nearby, content to watch, shout, and remain out of the way. Little were they aware that a presence had dropped into their midst, determined to be the bane of idleness. Around the room, the mischief monger floated, nudging here, muttering a few words there—until everyone was sufficiently incited. Then it scampered back to its perch and waited for things to ignite before slipping quietly back into the ensuing din.

“You step on my toes one more time and I—”

“I never stepped on your toes! But if you say one more thing about my momma, you can chew on my boot leather!”

“First you stomp on my toes, theeeeeeeeen you accuse me of talking about that hairy beast you call ‘Mother’?” The speaker hopped in his chair, holding the seat tightly in both hands to drop a wooden leg firmly onto the neighboring patron's foot. “How's do you like it?”

“YAAAAAAOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWW!”

Throughout the tavern, everyone, with the exception of Talevin and Quill, was suddenly caught up in a rip roarin' bar room bash. Talevin, the young man that he was, deftly dodged most of the free-flying limbs and furniture, but finally thought better of his

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position in the center of the room and climbed over Quill's bar. There he squatted with his back to the bar, only a few feet from the innkeeper. And fancy that! There was a fresh loaf of bread cooling on a shelf right before him.

"Not the window!" Quill's hands squeezed the sides of his head, as if trying to keep the steam from coming out of his ears. Talevin was far from his notice. It was one thing for the cheap tables and chairs to be broken, but the windows were another matter. They were expensive, and the winter would be mighty cold without them.

But there was no helping it. Guss Roberts' boy, Russ, had picked up a bench to smack Panky Turgawits with. He raised it high over his head and right into the window behind him. The glass gave a loud pop as it broke and tinkled as it fell. Russ tried to bring the bench forward again only to have it hitch up on the top of the window frame, yanking it out of his hands. A split second later, Panky was ramming his shoulder into Russ's midsection, and both went flying through the inn's brand new, used-to-be-a-window exit.

The destruction went on for some time. Poor Quill watched his livelihood crumple before his eyes. His happiness completely forgotten, he flopped onto the bar and dropped his head onto his arms, sobbing, "No, no, no-oh-oh . . ."

Talevin, always the sympathetic sort, placed his

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hand on the innkeeper's shoulders (the one not busily putting food into his mouth). He was trying to think of something comforting to say when a shout of alarm brought the brawl to an immediate end.

*"THIEEEEEEEEEEEF!"* Juggs deep voice bellowed overtop of the ruckus. He was standing; one hand held the sore spot where Talevin's chair had struck him, the other tightly gripped the furry arm of the most bizarre looking creature Talevin had ever seen.

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“It’s thievin’ fingers were in my pocket when I came to. I think it’s a demon!” Juggs proclaimed.

“That ain’t like no demon I ever seen,” Boo-Ray said.

“You ever seen a demon?” Buddy inquired disdainfully.

“Uh, no, ‘spose not.”

Long, folded ears bobbed and flopped about, nearly reaching the creature’s rounded jaw line, as Juggs gave it another shake. Its tiny nose, tipped with pink and upturned like a pig’s snout, twitched nervously. Wide, innocent eyes of an unnaturally blue hue fluttered around the faces of the townspeople, fearfully. It smiled tentatively, exposing triangular teeth, small but sharp, while still hanging by the arm from the clenched fist of Juggs the farmer.

Dressed in clothes designed for children, much of the creature’s body was covered, but what was exposed was covered in fur. The fur was pink like the tip of its nose, though several shades lighter. Atop its head, a tri-corn hat covered a mop of longer, hair-length fur, darker in color like the nose. And from its

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hip hung a rapier, still in its sheath, looking like little more than a needle next to Juggs impressive girth.

The creature's free hand lifted the three-cornered hat from its head and gave a flamboyant sweep and bow. "Pilfer the Famed, at your service," announced Juggs' captive.

"Hey! You's the one that warned him"—Buddy pointed at Talevin—"when we was attackin' him from behind! That wasn't fair! That was you, wasn't it?"

"All in good sport, chap," Pilfer responded. It looked as if he tried to shrug his shoulders indifferently, but it was hard to tell in his current position. "Say, be a good mate and set a bloke down," he said to Juggs.

"Not 'til I get my coin back! What are you anyhow?"

"He's a sprite," Quill spoke up. "There all thieves, the lot of them."

"Please, let's not profile—" Pilfer began.

"I've heard stories of them thievin' critters," declared Russ. "But I thought they were called Kendals, or, or Kanders, or some such thing."

"You don't know nothin'." Panky Turkawits, now sitting on the window frame, picked a piece of glass out of his elbow as he spoke. "I heard story's of this one—the famous highway halfling, 'cept his name ain't Pilfer in the stories. It's Oliver De-something-r-other, and he travels with an invisible

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companion.”

“I tell you, it’s a sprite!” Quill said emphatically, but no paid him any mind.

“He ain’t invisible right now, but I bet they’re in league with one another!” Russ declared, clearly implicating Talevin, who was caught with half a loaf of bread hanging from his mouth and the other half in his hands. “Where’s yer cloak?”

“You can’t see it. It’s invisible, pea-brain,” Panky reminded them.

“I knew there was something about you,” Juggs said loudly. “I knew you was no good.”

Talevin swallowed what he could and said, “I’ve never seen him before. Honest.”

Quill raised a hand. “Hey! That’s my bread—!”

“You think were gonna trust the words of a thief?” Juggs grabbed Pilfer by his ankles and shook him, ignoring the sprite’s indignant cries of protest. “Let’s see what’s been taken from us!”

Of course, nothing fell from the pockets or pouches of the upside down sprite. This was not an unfamiliar situation for Pilfer the Famed. All of his pouches were tightly closed, and all of his pockets were covered with flaps buttoned in place. His leather hat dropped to the floor and it sounded as if a hundred bells were hidden all about his person, but Juggs vigorous shakes were in vain.

“See-ee-ee,” Pilfer’s voice bounced as he was jerked about. “I’m completely innocent of the crimes

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you so unjustly accuse me of.”

“Set the foolish thing down,” Stanjah’s gruff voice said.

Juggs grunted and dropped the halfling creature onto its tri-corn hat. Pilfer, apparently quite used to such treatment, skillful rolled over his shoulder and back to his feet, somehow managing to slip his hat back on in the process.

Giving each short leg a quick brush with the tips of his fingers, then adjusting his collar, Pilfer gave the thron a generous, toothy smile. “Well, pleased to meet you, but I really must be off—”

Stanjah grabbed the scruff of his neck, preventing the sprite’s hasty exit. “My coin, Sprite.”

“Why, good sir, I believe you are remiss. I possess nothing of yours.”

The trader ignored him and slipped a knife through the ties of one of Pilfer’s numerous pouches. It fell to the floor with a *ka-chunk*. Careful not to touch it, Stanjah used his knife to tip the pouch open, spilling its contents over the straw covered boards at his feet. “Hmmm, fourteen coppers and two silvers, bearing the very same imprint of the fourteen coppers and two silvers that are missing from my pouch.” He bent low, placing his face right next to Pilfer’s floppy ear. “Must be a coincidence.”

Clearing his throat, the sprite said, “Ah-hem—um, that surely was your coin, but a—ah-hem—a bargain is a bargain, and I’m afraid I must



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insist on keeping it.”

“Perhaps we can work out another bargain, then.” Stanjah’s voice lowered threateningly. “I will trade you this little trinket I found in my money pouch, that just happens to look a lot like an ordinary pebble, for those sixteen coins there—”

“She’s a beaut, but I’m afraid I—”

“I’m afraid I wasn’t finished. This stone for the coin, *and* I let you leave here with your hands still attached to your wrists.”

“I see . . .” Pilfer’s mouth worked noiselessly for a second. “Yes, well, I’ve never been one to pass up a good business opportunity.”

“What was that all about?” Juggs asked. “Just take it back from the little devil.”

Stanjah smiled enigmatically while he picked up his silvers and coppers. “Try it at find out,” he muttered.

Meanwhile, Pilfer prepared to exit once again. As he walked to the door, he said, “So pleased to meet you all, but it has been a long day and I really must part until another time.”

“You ain’t goin’ nowheres until we get our money back!” Juggs slipped a finger beneath the sprite’s money belt, from which hung several pouches. “Perhaps I’ll just take this from you and throw you out.”

Pilfer the Famed stopped in his tracks. His back stiffened with his hand on the door. “Remove your

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hand from my belt, sir.”

The large farmer laughed. He lifted the small creature with one thick finger. “I hardly think yer in a position to—”

Instantly, Pilfer’s tiny sword cleared its sheath and pricked the artery in Juggs’ neck. There was no mistaking the look in the sprite’s eyes; he was deadly serious, as ridiculous as he looked hanging by his belt several feet from the floor. Nose to nose with the farmer, his small features no longer seemed quite so cute when he snarled, “Unhand my belt, fiend!”