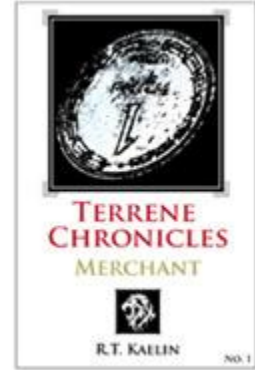


The Terrene Chronicles

The Terrene Chronicles are a series of short stories inspired by past events only alluded to in R.T. Kaelin's high fantasy novel, Progeny. Reader response to the novel has prompted the author to write and publish a set of standalone short stories inspired by historical events referenced in Progeny.

Fans of the first volume in the Children of the White Lions have stated their desire to know more about the expansive world of Terrene and its rich history. The Terrene Chronicles will give old and new readers alike a chance to see what shaped the people, countries, and events of the world of Terrene.



For more information, visit www.RTKaelin.com

Bundle 1: Merchant No. 1: Market

7th day of the Turn of Sutri, 4973

The marketplace buzzed with chaotic, urgent energy.

On the first Seventhday of each turn, the great bazaar at Deepwell in Thimbletoe drew patrons from all over. It was by far one of the better-attended trading posts in the Five Boroughs and the crowd today was larger than normal as the first selections of summer produce were now available. Close to a thousand figures scurried about, lit up by the late morning sun, hurrying from stall to booth, pausing to inspect the goods on display, and – if the merchant was lucky – haggling over merchandise and price. The bulk of those moving through the rows of booths were Halflings, but a number of tall Longlegs from Cartu wandered the market as well. A singular Sun Elf had wandered through earlier, causing a bit of excitement in Merchant's Row.

It had been early in the morning – the hazy fog had yet to burn off – when the elf had wandered by. Nundle had done his best to interest the visitor from Feylaryn in a long-term contract for shipments of red apples from Alewold, but the pale, blond elf had ignored his pleas, wearing a scornful expression and pausing for only the briefest of moments before moving past Nundle's stand. Unfortunately, the elf's response had been a harbinger of what Nundle's day would be like.

Would have helped to have apples actually on display, I bet...

It was almost mid-day and Nundle sat dejectedly on his small stool, no longer trying to encourage passersby to stop. Letting a long, exhausted sigh out, Nundle tilted his head back and rested it on the riverstone wall behind him, shutting his eyes tight against the brilliant sun in the cloud-dusted sky.

Perhaps I should just close up and go home. It's too beautiful a day to waste being miserable. And since summer is almost over...

The Turn of Sutri meant Harvest was just around the corner. Nundle wondered if he should take advantage of the nice day and find something else to do.

I have no money to squander...I suppose I could go to the river. Fish, maybe?

Nundle ran both hands through his wild red hair, pulling at it in frustration.

Gods...I hate this.

"Rough day, Nundle?" asked a friendly voice.

Opening his eyes, Nundle lifted his head and studied the Halfling before him. Thick, curly black hair sprung out from a round head, framing rosy cheeks, beady black eyes, a bulbous nose, and a mouth much too small for his large face. Nearly everyone agreed Bom Whipplerock was unusual looking. Even Bom admitted as much.

Sitting tall on his three-legged wooden stool, Nundle shook his head in dismay as another frustrated sigh seeped out before saying, "You could say that, Bom. So far, I have arranged for a single shipment of Garno's summer squash and two crates of his turnips to an inn just over the border in Cartu."

Bom was quiet for a moment, most likely waiting for the rest of Nundle's sales. When he realized Nundle was done, he asked awkwardly, "That's all?"

Sticking a finger through a hole in his breeches and scratching his knee, Nundle replied, "It was a very rough day."

Sympathy washed over Bom's face. "I'm sorry, Nundle. Truly, I am."

Nodding his head, Nundle said, "I know you are, Bom." He could not keep his misery from his voice. Nor did he care to try anymore.

Bom took a step closer, nervously inspecting his finely cut, blue vest and fashionable white cotton shirt. "Perhaps I could send a prospective buyer over in your -"

Interrupting him, Nundle shook his head and said, "No. I will not take charity, Bom. Thank you for the offer, though. It is quite kind of you." Bom was one of the more successful merchants in the region and had been a friend to Nundle the past few years, trying to teach him the intricacies of trading. Either Bom was a bad teacher or Nundle had been a poor student.

Crossing his arms, Bom said softly, "I know you don't want to hear it, but I will make the proposal again, Nundle." Since last Harvest, Bom had been making overtures to purchase what remained of the business Nundle had inherited from his great-uncle. Bom had even offered Nundle employment in his own company.

Standing up from the stool, Nundle said dejectedly, "Please don't, Bom. After today, I might finally be tempted to accept." Despite his troubles, Nundle could not imagine selling his great-uncle's trading enterprise. It would be an admission of Nundle's utter failure as a merchant.

Eyeing him carefully, Bom nodded once. With evident restraint, he replied, "I suppose I understand."

Doesn't sound like you do.

Nundle started to move past Bom to the front of his booth. Glancing into the crowd milling about the market, he halted when he saw a familiar figure walking through the market. Julo Hinglegrog was eyeing the various commodities and items displayed for sale, seemingly oblivious to the wary stares, quiet whispering, and hushed pointing by the local Deepwell citizens. Visitors from afar paid no attention to the pretty Halfling female. Julo wore a calf-length, sky-blue dress with faded orange bows pinned to her shoulders and carried a plain satchel with two long loaves of what appeared to be three-grain bread sticking out. Her rich auburn hair was pulled back tight, tied into two long braids that looped back around to the top of her head.

What is she doing here?

Sensing something was wrong, Bom turned to look in the direction Nundle stared. He let out a low whistle and said, "Very brazen of her to come to town today. With the crowd being here and all."

Nundle nodded, agreeing, "Yes, it is. The Custodian will not be pleased." Custodian Cullop obsessed over these market days, trying to ensure nothing would interfere with the commerce.

Bom shook his head. "You are absolutely correct. Do you think he knows she is here?"

Before Nundle could respond, Julo happened to look in their direction.

Oh, no...

The pretty Halfling's lips began to turn up into a smile before Julo caught herself. The grin arrested, turning Julo's face into a wistful, sad expression as she locked eyes with Nundle. For a moment, Nundle considered jumping behind Bom or dropping to the ground to hide in the cover of his stand, but he did not.

She's seen me now. No use hiding.

The pretty Halfling turned and began to stride straight toward Bom and Nundle.

Oh, please, Julo...not now.

Placing a hand over his mouth to hide his words, Bom mumbled, "Being seen with her cannot be good for business, Nundle."

Covering his own mouth, Nundle hissed, "I know."

Halting a few feet from the pair, Julo said primly, "Hello, Nundle. It has been a long time since we have seen one another." She ignored Bom, which surely made Bom quite happy. Out of the

corner of his eye, he saw Bom turn away while pretending to inspect Nundle's signs posted on his stand. Nundle felt the eyes of at least a dozen nearby vendors and Deepwell locals staring at him and Julio.

Why are you doing this to me?

Nundle nodded and said carefully, "Yes, Julio, it has been awhile." The girl waited hopefully, expecting him to say more. Regretfully, Nundle did not.

I really am so sorry, Julio...

He hated that he was purposely snubbing her. He would have preferred to be much more polite, even sociable with her. Julio had once been a close friend. There had even been a time when he had thought of asking her to be his wife.

That can never happen, now.

With a small, disappointed frown, Julio nodded crisply and said softly, "I see the way of things." Her expression danced between anguished sorrow and stubborn pride. Letting out a small sigh, she said, "I had hoped you might come to accept things over time, Nundle. I always thought you were different."

Nundle wanted to say a number of things, but all that felt safe at the moment was a quiet, "I am sorry."

Julio dropped her chin and said promptly, "I will be on my way, then, Nundle Babblebrook. Good day to you."

"Good day to you," replied Nundle quickly, but he was speaking to an empty space. The auburn Halfling had already turned and had started to walk away, her blue dress swishing as she padded down the dirt street.

Once she was a dozen paces away, Bom stopped staring at the thoroughly uninteresting signs, leaned close, and said, "You would do well to keep her at a great distance, Nundle. Halflings like her are a bad sort."

Not liking Bom's tone, Nundle faced his friend and asked, "Like her?"

Eyes darting about the marketplace, Bom whispered, "You know. Mages."

Why are you whispering? Everyone saw her here...

Staring after the retreating form of Julio, Nundle said pointedly, "She is a good soul, Bom." He looked back to find Bom gawking at him as if he said the sky was green.

Bom stated plainly, "But she can do magic." His tone was full of justification, as if poor Julio truly deserved her plight.

"I know that." Nundle pushed past Bom, mumbling, "And I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Thankfully, Bom remained quiet.

Nundle moved to stand in front of his small booth and stared at the meager presentation. As his dwindling list of contracted suppliers had been reduced to farmers dealing in yet-to-be-harvested produce, his display was embarrassingly bare. Instead, his stand was covered with a number of crude, hand-painted signs proclaiming the future availability of his goods. One read, *“Plump, Tasty, Turnips – Perfect for stews, spicing, or baking – soon!”* while another proclaimed, *“Sugarblue Potatoes! Best in all of Alewold Borough! Soon!”* The only tangible sample he had was a bound bunch of dried smoking-leaf hanging from the great black sign stretching across the two front posts of his booth. Nundle stared at the well-made sign with giant, red block letters, rimmed in white, announcing the stand as the *Babblebrook Mercantile Company*. The sign was all that was left of the two-story shop his great-uncle had left him.

His day had already been going poorly. After his encounter with Julo, he was in an even fouler mood. Staring upward, it now felt as if the sign mocked him.

Gods...I'm sorry, Uncle Huber.

Staring at the sign, Nundle had never felt more like a failure.

This is pointless...I'm an awful merchant. I don't know why you left the business to me...

Making a decision, Nundle mumbled, “I’m done for the day, Bom.”

Bam moved to stand beside him and said encouragingly, “There’re still a few more hours left before market closes, Nundle. Don’t give up. Your Uncle Huber had periods of trouble at times, too.”

Nundle let a derisive chuckle escape. “Six years of ever-decreasing sales is not a ‘period’, Bom.”

The other Halfling remained quiet.

I suppose he's run out of nice things to say...

Nundle listened to the noise of the market behind him, the hum of hectic commerce poking at him, teasing, and jabbing at his ego. Just then, a fateful shift in the wind brought with it a heady aroma of cooking herbs mingling with some hearty meat stock wafted past. Nundle’s stomach gurgled.

Oh my goodness...that smells wonderful.

He huffed, trying to push the odor back out of his nose.

I can't afford to buy it, so no use in smelling it.

Bom was making it difficult to ignore the smell of an excellent meal, however, drawing in a deep breath followed by a satisfied grunt. “Smells like Joscoe is making his rosemary stew.” Swiveling his head in the direction of the Smiling Snake Inn, Bom exclaimed hungrily, “Gods, that smells good.”

“I did not notice,” lied Nundle.

Bom stared at him curiously. “How could you not? Take a deep breath. It is fantastic!”

Nundle shrugged helplessly. “I’m getting over an illness, Bom. My nose...” He shrugged as if to say he could not help it. In actuality, he felt fine.

Bom continued to study him, remaining quiet. After a moment, he nodded, accepting Nundle’s answer. “Ah...well, then. I suppose if you can’t smell it...”

Wanting to forget about the incredibly scrumptious-smelling stew, Nundle began the process of tearing down his stand, reaching up to grab the turnip sign off the post hook. As he moved to grab another sign, a dark shadow fell over him, accompanied by the sound of boots scuffling on the dirt behind.

“Are you closing for the day, merchant?” asked an unusually deep voice.

Not a Halfling... I can afford to be rude to a Longleg.

Longlegs – or “men” as they called themselves – towered a few feet over the Halflings of the Boroughs. It hurt Nundle’s neck to negotiate for a time with them. Pulling his hand away from the sign, Nundle was about to turn and say he most certainly was closed.

Suddenly, Bom whirled around and interjected, “Not at all, good sir. Merchant Babblebrook is most certainly open for business.” Nundle rolled his eyes.

Oh, Hells, Bom...I really don’t feel like it...

Reluctantly, Nundle turned around and found himself staring at a shiny, silver belt buckle of a Longleg. Tilting his head back, Nundle tried to examine the prospective client’s face, but was frustrated by the halo of bright light the sun cast behind the silhouette of the Longleg’s head.

“May I help you?” asked Nundle wearily.

“Perhaps,” replied the man. Lifting his arm, he pointed at the hanging bunch of smoking-leaf. “What cut of leaf is that?”

A slight tickle of anticipation ran up Nundle’s spine. Standing up straighter, Nundle said, “Sweetbush, sir. Known as one of the finest in the Five Boroughs.”

The man frowned and said, “I am quite aware of that fact, little merchant. How much can you get me?”

As Nundle was about to reply, Bom took a series of quick steps from the stand, saying, “If you will excuse me, I have my own business to attend to.” Bowing slightly to the Longleg, the Halfling said, “Happy travels, sir.” The Longleg grunted, more interested in the smoking-leaf than returning a polite farewell. As Bom passed the trader, he turned and gave one last encouraging smile to Nundle before starting to hurry east along Merchant’s Row.

Don’t get too excited, Bom. I’m sure to fail at this sale, too...

The trader stepped into the space Bom had occupied and leaned down to sniff the bunch of Sweetbush leaf. Nundle studied the Longleg closely and decided he had to be from the Commonwealth of Cartu. His skin was tan, features were sharp and severe, and he wore his dark brown hair in the manner most Cartusian Longlegs did: braided and bound in colorful rope. A dark blue cape draped over his shoulders, reaching almost to the ground, covering simple brown, traveling clothes and metal-studded boots.

After taking in a lungful of the pleasant, sweet aroma, the Longleg stood tall with a satisfied expression on his face. Nundle caught a flash of silver metal beneath the cloak and spotted the hilt of a long dagger. Nundle frowned.

Not good...

Nundle was not armed. Halflings never were. There was no crime in the Five Boroughs.

With a smile, Nundle asked, "May I have your name, sir?" It was something his great-uncle had taught him.

Get the name of who you are dealing with. If they cheat you, you can track them down.

Nundle was not worried about being cheated. He simply wanted the name of the Longleg with the weapon wandering around the Deepwell market should anything happen.

Fingering the smoking-leaf, the tall trader said absentmindedly, "You may call me Ervan."

Oh, may I?

Nundle knew the chance was slim that the Longleg had given his true name.

Ervan turned a wary eye to Nundle and asked, "So, how much of the leaf can you provide?"

The prospect of a sale overrode Nundle's concern about dagger. Trying to beat back the hope threatening to intrude upon his dreary morning, Nundle asked, "By what measure, sir? Cartusian bundles or Borough rolls?" His great-uncle had also taught him to open negotiations with such a question in an attempt to gauge the other party's experience in trading.

"Either, merchant. I am quite familiar with both," replied Ervan with a knowing smirk. "Elven cords work as well. Or perhaps Yutian rings? What about Oaken pounds?" Fixing Nundle with a hard gaze, he added, "You can choose whichever is most convenient for you, Master Merchant."

Nundle's flicker of hope fled as quickly as it had come. He had no idea what an Oaken pound was. Or a Yutian ring. And he never could remember the conversion between Borough rolls and the cords of Feylaryn.

Hells.

With a small, resigned sigh, Nundle said, "I have just over fifteen Cartusian bundles today. I get another ten next week." It was a significant amount of smoking-leaf. Regular orders typically were for only a bundle at a time. Two weeks ago, Nundle had made the mistake of overbuying an

allotment of the Sweetbush cut, committing a large portion of what little he had left in the company's coffers to the purchase. He had thought it would sell better than it had so far.

The Longleg nodded slowly, pensive. With a cocked eyebrow, he said, "Truthfully, I could use more."

More than twenty-five bundles?

Nundle stared; flabbergasted the Longleg was willing to buy so much. Trying to hide his surprise, Nundle said carefully, "I could possibly arrange for more, sir. How much are you looking to acquire?"

Staring straight at him, Ervan said evenly, "Assuming we can agree on cost, I will take all twenty-five you mentioned. And I'd like another eighty if possible."

Unable to help himself, Nundle exclaimed, "Eighty!? Are you jesting?" The trader must be one of the larger dealers in Cartu to want a shipment of such size. Nundle openly gaped at the trader, knowing he was giving away his anxious excitement, but he did not care. If Nundle could sell over a hundred bundles of smoking-leaf at any sort of respectable markup, he would make an excellent profit.

Confident he had the upper hand, Ervan smiled with satisfaction and said, "I am not jesting, little merchant. Can you meet the order or not?"

Thinking quickly over his list of potential sources for more Sweetbush, Nundle said, "I believe so, Mr. Ervan, sir." In all honesty, Nundle was not sure. He thought if he called some of the last favors others owed him, it might be possible. "It might take two weeks, though, for the eighty bundles to arrive."

Nodding, the Cartusian trader said, "That is an acceptable time. Now, I can offer you..." Ervan paused, seeming to consider a price. Nundle guessed the Longleg already knew what his offer was going to be. With a firm, decisive nod, Ervan said confidently. "Thirty silver rounds per bundle should be a fair rate." Ervan might as well have punched Nundle in the stomach.

With a sinking feeling, Nundle slowly repeated in disbelief, "Thirty silver?" He had paid forty for the stock he had and did not think he could get the other ten from his supplier for the same amount. Moreover, he severely doubted he could obtain the other eighty the Longleg wanted for anything less than fifty silver rounds per.

"That's my offer, Merchant Bumblebook," replied the Longleg firmly.

Perturbed the Cartusian got his name incorrect, Nundle said, "The name is Babblebrook." He leaned back and pointed to the large and obvious black sign next to Ervan's head.

The man glanced at the sign, pretending as if he had just noticed it. "Oh. So it is." Nundle waited for an apology or correction, but none came.

Gods, I really hate being a merchant...I need to find something else to do with my life...

Summoning the courage to negotiate a price so he might be able to eat for a few weeks, Nundle said, "I cannot accept anything less than forty-five silver rounds for a bundle. And that price is only good for what I can provide today." Forging ahead, Nundle said resolutely, "The price for any of the rest will be sixty-five per."

Ervan smiled widely at the stated amounts. "You are trying to raid my purse, little merchant." Making a show of peering at the meager stand and Nundle's old, tattered clothes, the trader said, "I would think you would be anxious for the sale."

Angry at what the man was inferring – no matter how true it was – Nundle declared, "A sale, yes. But you are asking me to donate to your enterprise, *Ervan*." Nundle twisted the man's name to show he did not believe in the authenticity of the moniker. "I run a business, friend, not a charity."

Holding up his hands in protest, Ervan smiled and said, "Fair enough, little merchant. You drive a tough bargain. I suppose I could be persuaded to pay a flat rate of forty – for the first hundred bundles of Sweetbush smoking-leaf you could provide. And I expect the last five for free in exchange for the purchase I am making today."

Gritting his teeth, Nundle said sharply, "It is you who are the highwayman." All politeness was gone from his tone. Six years of ruining his great-uncle's great business weighed heavily on Nundle. One failed venture after another had stacked up over the years. "I swear, *friend*, if you continue to try to take advantage of me, I will be sure to report you to the Custodian." Leaning forward, he hissed, "Weapons are not allowed within the marketplace as I am sure you know."

With narrowed, critical eyes, Ervan glared down at him. "Now, Master Merchant Rabblebook, I am not sure I appreciate your tone. I am offering you a good deal." Turning to look across the open market, the Longleg said, "I came across another Halfling promising me a good cut of Oldfire Downs leaf for thirty-eight per bundle. Forty seems fair to me for your Sweetbush."

Beyond frustrated, Nundle shouted, "Oldfire leaf tastes like burnt shoe-leather...you are mad!" Comparing the two cuts was like comparing a cup of weak, cheap lager to a cool pint of full-bodied, red summer ale.

Nodding in agreement, Ervan said, "Perhaps it does." Crossing his arms, the Longleg sighed. "I mean no offense, little merchant. You are a much shrewder bargainer than I assumed you might be."

Now comes the flattery...

Nundle said nothing in response. He simply glared at the Longleg.

The trader grinned and said magnanimously, "I will give you forty-two. No more. And you are responsible for all delivery costs." Nundle did not like the smile on Ervan's face.

Cautiously, Nundle asked, "Where is delivery?"

Ervan's confidence faltered a moment. In a quiet voice, the Longleg said, "Harmony."

Years of frustration bubbled to the surface as Nundle nearly shouted, “The capital of Cartu? It’s... you... why, you are... Gods, I should...” Nundle shut his mouth, not knowing what to say. What Ervan had offered was worse than his first proposal. It would cost Nundle a fortune to ship the smoking-leaf to the foot of the Yaubno Mountains.

Years of failure, wrapped tightly and stuffed deep strained against Nundle’s normally good nature.

Please! Just once I want something to go right for me!

Nundle glared at the trader.

The man simply grinned at Nundle, “What say you, Merchant Biddlebook?”

Nundle’s immense frustration, restrained for years, hidden behind countless polite smiles, pleading entreaties, and humble apologies, finally burst.

A single, honey-gold string popped into view before Nundle, hovering a few feet before him. Nundle’s eyes opened wide as he stared at the long strand of energy, rippling and twisting before him. It glowed and pulsed, beckoning to him. Nundle took a single, surprised step back.

What in the Nine Hells?

The trader stood on the other side of the string and continued to smirk at Nundle, apparently oblivious to the golden strand hovering between them both. Nundle tried to follow the shimmering gold strand, looking up and down its length, but it seemed to travel in whatever direction he looked.

That’s it, I have lost my sense.

Nundle blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes.

It’s still there... what is –

He jumped back suddenly, shouting a surprised, “Ah!” as more bright, golden ropes of energy popped into existence and quickly surrounded him. Nundle stared about as each string appeared, spinning around to see how many there were. By the time he whipped around to find the Cartusian trader gawking at him, he had counted over a dozen.

Nundle heard himself mumble, “Gods... what are...”

Unnerved, Ervan tilted his head forward. “Pardon?”

Nundle ignored the Longleg. Panicking, he wanted the little ropes of golden energy to go away. The moment he thought about shoving them away from him, the strands began to move, twisting and twirling. The more he struggled with them, the more they interwove themselves. Nundle reached out with his arms, trying to physically push the strings away but his hands passed right through them. He tried again and again.

Go away!

As he flailed about, trying to force the strings to go away, he realized his panic was causing the strands to fall in upon one another, knitting themselves together into a pattern.

Ervan asked, “Master Babblebrook, are you feeling alright?” There was no tradesman posturing in his voice. The Longleg sounded genuinely concerned. Or afraid.

Nundle stared at the strange pattern of gold strings and willed them to go, ‘throwing’ them away from him. He watched in horror as the bundle of honey-colored strands collided with the trader, sinking into the Longleg’s chest. Alarmed, Nundle shouted, “Oh! Gods! I’m so sorry!”

The trader appeared entirely unaffected by the pattern. In fact, the pattern of gold strands simply faded into the Longleg and disappeared. Nundle gaped at Ervan, expecting some violent reaction.

What in the...

A long moment of quiet settled between the two even as the bustle of the market continued about them. Neighboring vendors stared.

Ervan peered at him, worried, and asked quietly, “Are you ill?”

Nundle’s eyes darted about, searching for the strings of gold. They had vanished. Every single one of them. Spinning around, he looked behind him, up, and down. Any evidence of the glowing strands of energy was gone.

Uhh...

Turning to face the trader, Nundle said carefully, “I...don’t think so. I’m just...ah...” Nundle was shook by the experience, but did not think he should share it with anyone.

Everyone will think I’m mad.

Ervan’s brow drew together in consternation. “If you do not want to deal today, I will be happy to leave you alone.” Nundle continued to peer about at the empty air.

What in the Nine Hells was that?

He noticed the purveyor of quarry stone and uncut gems at the next immediate stall – a rude Halfling named Doffer – was staring at Nundle with unconcealed disdain.

Great...he’s bound to tell everyone I ruined the sale by acting like a crazed madman.

Ervan took a hesitant step backward, saying, “I believe I should go. I can find another to trade with.” The Cartusian began to turn, preparing to walk away and take Nundle’s best sales prospect in weeks with him. The threat of more failure trumped his wonder and confusion concerning the strange meshing of strings he had just witnessed. Turning his full attention to the trader, Nundle pleaded, “No! Stop!”

Nundle was stunned when the Longleg froze in mid-step, one boot heel off the ground. He waited for Ervan to either continue or turn back, but the Longleg simply stayed in the strange position.

He looks like he's posing for a sculptor's statue...

Encouraged that the trader had not been completely scared off by his strange antics, Nundle hurried around to stand before the man. In an anxious voice, he begged, "Sir, please... I really would like you to stay. I am sure we can come to an acceptable arrangement for us both."

Ervan stared at Nundle and said immediately, "I believe you are correct, little merchant."

A moment skipped by.

"You are?" asked Nundle in bewilderment. There was not a hint of dishonesty in the Cartusian's voice.

Nodding, Ervan said, "If you say we can make a deal, I believe we can. What do you propose?"

"Uhh..." Nundle hesitated, caught off guard by the suddenly agreeable Ervan. By all rights, this Longleg should be halfway across the marketplace, hurrying away from the mad Halfling and trying to forget his name.

He'd have to know my name to forget it, I suppose.

With a smile and a shrug, Nundle said, "Well, to be honest with you, sir, in order for this be worth it to me, I would like to charge you nearly seventy per bundle, but –"

Ervan cut him off, saying decisively, "Done." The Longleg extended his arm and offered his palm, offering to seal the deal the in the traditional manner of Longlegs from Cartu.

Nundle stared at the open hand for a second, stunned. Looking up to study the face of Ervan, Nundle wondered if he were finally going mad. "Pardon?"

The trader stood still with his arm still outstretched. "I accept your terms, Master Merchant. Clasp my hand and we can arrange details."

What is...

The realization he had just made a very large – and profitable – sale hit him.

Hells...I don't care - I'll take it.

Nundle reached out and gripped Ervan's hand, his own small hand engulfed by the Longleg's large palm.

Nundle Babblebrook! Master Merchant of Deepwell!

Sweeping an arm to indicate his stand, Nundle asked formally, "Shall we discuss the intricacies of the contract?"

"That is an excellent idea," replied Ervan.

Nundle moved behind the booth and pulled out his ledger sheets and parchment to write the contract. His neighbor, Doffer the quarystone merchant gaped at him.

Hah! Didn't think I'd ever make another sale, did you?

Nundle grinned at Doffer.

Well... me either.

Over the next few minutes, he and the Cartusian trader worked out the complete terms to the exchange, keeping Nundle's mind busy. He was excited that he might be able to go purchase a bowl or two of Joscoe's famous stew now.

Or maybe some fresh pebblefish with butter and kives...

When it came time to discuss the advance payment, Ervan happily agreed to Nundle's proposal that he pay half of the full amount immediately, handing over thirty seven gold rounds. It was more money than Nundle had held in his hand for over four years. Word had started to spread as other neighboring vendors gaped in awe as he finalized the transaction. Each one of them was surely wondering what shrewd negotiating technique he had suddenly discovered.

As Ervan left to prepare to arrange for a wagon team to move his newly purchased Sweetbush smoking-leaf across the Boroughs, into Cartu, and on the way to Harmony, Nundle stared after the blue-cloaked Longleg trader, marveling at how quickly his fortunes had turned.

What just happened?

Doffer, the quarry stone supplier, waited only until the Cartusian had walked out of earshot before stomping over and demanding rudely, "Nundle! How did you –" Doffer cut off suddenly.

With a satisfied smile, Nundle glanced over at the boorish Halfling. "Is something bothering you, Doffer? Should you not be happy for your fellow tradesman? I would think after all of the..." Nundle trailed off as he realized the Halfling was no longer looking at him, but rather past him. Doffer had an expression of utter distaste etched on his face as he whirled about and shuffled quickly back to his own stall.

Spinning around, Nundle found the pretty Julo Hinglegrog standing a few paces from him. The auburn-haired beauty stared at him with her head cocked to the side. The look in her eyes betrayed a bit of hopefulness that did not fit the situation.

Surprised by her return, he said, "I did not hear you approach, Julo."

With a thin smile, Julo said, "You were busy gloating, Nundle. Surprising, actually. That's not in your nature..."

Slightly embarrassed she had seen him act that way, he said quietly, "Yes...well, Doffer deserves it. He rubs every sale of his under my nose. And I just made more in that sale than he will in six turns."

Julo nodded along as he spoke, but simply stared silently at him when he was done. Nundle quickly grew uncomfortable and was a little upset that Julo was ruining his moment of triumph.

People might think I associate with mages if she keeps coming around...

After a long moment of quiet, Julo stepped close and leaned toward him. The intoxicating scent of spring lilac water filled his nose, taking him back a number of years to a happier time when Julo was a respectable Halfling. With her round, blue eyes fixated on him, Julo whispered. “You truly have no idea how you did that, do you?”

Nundle stared at her. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes tightened and she muttered, “I saw the strings, too, Nundle. Only the gold kind, but I definitely saw them.”

The realization of what had happened hit him with the force of a thousand fists. For the briefest of moments, Nundle considered turning and running away.

Oh, Gods! That was magic...

Despite the rapid rise of fear over the recognition of what he had done, Nundle held his position. Something intrigued him about the strings. He felt a tug of curiosity at the back of his mind.

What are those strings?

He stared at Julo, entirely unsure what to say.

Julo stood straight and said quietly, “It seems you and I have something to talk about after all, Nundle.”

Nundle knew his life was about to change.



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