

# The Merchant

by Paul Comstock

"Hello! Yeah, you the merchant. I need to talk to you. Now!", a voice said from outside his small stall located at the edge of the marketplace. Healfdene yawned, in no huge hurry to respond to the rude voice.

"I'm warning you, merchant. Open up or I'll cut my way in."

Healfdene sighed, and replied, "I am coming. Please wait and be patient." At first he hadn't paid close attention to the yelling voice, but now he could clearly tell that the voice was female, and that its owner was young. This fact alone helped to quell his hesitation, but he was still wary. He had only been robbed twice in his lifetime because he was wary and careful. This could be a ploy to limit his resistance to a robbery.



"Are you alone, young one?" he asked.

"Yes," the voice stated, tense and insistent, "now open up, and you will be rewarded for your time quite handsomely."

He peeked out one of the many small holes in the fabric surrounding his booth. It was a very course, tough and heavy fabric that would be difficult to cut through. He held a small but deadly dagger in his right hand as he peered through the hole.

On the other side was a young woman, dark haired and dressed in a very unusual outfit. The material it was made of was black as night and tight fitting, showing that the woman had an extremely athletic body and was very attractive. Healfdene gave a low chuckle as he noticed that the woman also wore a small belt with many articles on it including a small light rope, and a dagger more deadly and impressive than the one he held. Any man stupid enough to be enamored by this one would probably not live long.

The woman wore no face enhancers, and needed none. She was a natural beauty and could easily attract any man she chose. Her features were distracting, and surely an asset in her obvious profession as an assassin. Healfdene hesitated no longer. This one could obviously have robbed him of not only his possessions, but life itself if she had desired to do so.

He first put the dagger down so he did not upset his visitor. Holding a weapon would surely cause a misunderstanding he did not need, so he placed that upon the display table in the front of his booth. He undid the small chains and clasps which held the opening to his stall closed tight against outsiders, and started lifting the flap.

The woman did not wait for him to complete his task, and slid into the stall with such grace and skill that he knew he would not have awoke this morning if this one had chosen to take his life.

"Close it! Close it!" she said, almost grabbing the corner of the make shift door from his hands. 1

Healfdene turned and bowed to his visitor. He was a master merchant, and had learned long ago that in every personal dealing, whether for trade, profit, or entertainment, one sold himself to another and rarely anything else. Besides, this young woman did impress him with her skills. "I am honored that an assassin of your skill has chosen my meager self to grace me with your presence today."

The woman sneered, "I don't have time for niceties. I need to have you do something for me, and I need it done right. Your stall is by far placed best for my purposes, but I warn you that if you don't do exactly as I say that you will pay."

The look of steel in her eyes left no doubt. He would do whatever she asked, and pray that he could do the task correctly. "I am your humble servant. Ask what you will."

The woman sneered, "OK, well I guess you'll have to do." She took a small bag of coins from her pouch, and set it on his display table. "This will be yours for doing just one simple thing. I will need a path kept clear on this side of your booth, from the front to the back, and in the back an opening which a person may pass through."

Healfdene frowned slightly, but then quickly smiled. "Of course. There is already an opening in the back which I use to leave my booth from time to time to meet other merchants at the Rams Head Tavern."

"It is agreed then?"

"Yes, yes of course!"

"Good. If anyone should ask, we never had this conversation, and you are not to tell anyone of this meeting," she said, and then she was gone, moving through the market area with such grace, that he could not have said for certain which direction she went.

Healfdene then made adjustments to his stall to meet with the young assassin's demands. He did not want anything to go wrong with this, as he was sure that his visitor had a bad temper, and could kill him just out of spite. Assassins were feared almost as much as the priests of Rheda were in this city.

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The assassin had chosen to visit him in the dead hours of morning, just before dawn. A time when the streets were unnaturally quiet, and not many stirred. By the time he had rearranged his shop to meet the assassins demands, it was almost dawn. Most of the other merchants were starting to open their shops. Only a few who chose to sell by candle light and lantern light were still asleep.

The market was always a magical place. It was the hub of life and excitement for many of the residents of the city. It contained many common as well as uncommon items. Exotic things like spices, fine cotton clothing, and other items which needed to be seen to be believed. And with every item came a story.

The most interesting of all the items, and the crowd drawer was the singing stone, which he kept as a center piece above and behind himself. It was such a crowd pleaser, he often had to hide it so that he could get some rest from the crowds. Such stones were rare in Britain, but they were not so rare that his life was put in danger by owning one. There were probably a dozen merchants who had one in this marketplace alone.

2 It was said that these stones had magical powers. Not only did they vibrate and sing when touched,

but they also gave off light in the right conditions. Some said that the stones performed differently depending upon their color, and that they were remnants of an ancient race.

Healfdene knew nothing of this, but he told the stories, and many listened as they would touch the stone and feel its vibrating, some saying that they almost heard the stone talking to them, but not quite understanding. He had had many an offer to buy this stone, but none that he had accepted.

Healfdene had sent his son, Potic to a city to the south to retrieve some special items. Today was the day he was to return. It was a dangerous trip, but Potic, even with his disregard for his father's profession, had proven to be a natural fighter and adventurer. He had no doubts his son would make good time and return with what he had asked for.

The goods would bring much profit in this city. The demand for quality goods at decent prices was extremely high, and almost everything he carried was selling faster than he could keep it in stock. He had been here for three months now, and every day seemed to get better. A merchants life could be difficult or wonderful, and more often than not, it was not wonderful.

At times like these, when things were good, his life was very enjoyable. It was time like these why he became a merchant. He smiled, and then frowned. Why did things like this morning with the assassin have to ruin it for him. There was always something.

He sighed, setting up his booth for the morning throng. The weather was good, and the traffic high through out the market even though it was still early. It looked to be a good day.

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By mid morning, Healfdene had sold items to five different customers. It was definitely a good day as there was little haggling, he was making large profits. The market was very crowded today, and there was much profit to be had.

He was distracted by a disturbance in the crowd. He had much experience with crowds, and he could tell that someone or something was moving quickly toward him. No one seemed overly disturbed, so he surmised that it must be a person moving quickly. He couldn't tell exactly how many were in the group, but they were definitely headed his way.

He was only mildly surprised to find it to be the same female assassin that had visited him earlier, followed only a brief distance behind by a beggar who looked familiar to him, though he could not name the man. The assassin quickly stopped, allowing the beggar to move in front of her, she then pushed the beggar toward his shop, and on through. As she passed, she smiled a very sinister smile at Healfdene, and winked. It caused a shiver to run through him.

Only a second later, three other beggars hurried up to his booth, and attempted to follow the other two. Healfdene had not made the path through his meager shop very large, so he was quite able to stand in the way of the followers. It was his shop, and one disturbance today was enough.

"You can not go through here. Be on your way!"

One of the followers acted as though he was about to argue, but his fellow noticed that there was a city guard not far away, and nudged his friend, "I am sorry. We must have taken a wrong turn. Please excuse this intrusion," he said quickly, as they hurried off.

Healfdene sighed. He had done as was asked, and it looked as though the assassin had been pleased. That was one less worry. He went to the back of his booth, and peered into the alley behind. No one was there, as he had expected, and there was no sign of anyone in hiding. He closed the flap and tied it securely, not trusting any opening that was at his back.

As he turned, he was startled by a silvery winged creature as it flew into his booth, squawked something almost understandable at him, and then grabbed the singing stone. Healfdene was very frightened, but he was not about to let this winged thing steal his most prized possession. He lunged at the creature, trying to get the stone before it could take off with it. The beast made a terrible shrieking squawk, and clawed his hand, leaving a deep gash.

Healfdene immediately withdrew his hand from the stone, long enough for the beast to make his exit from his booth, causing many in the crowd to curse and scream as it flew over their heads. Those closest to his booth here now all staring off at the silvery creature as it headed north, and outside of the city.

He just stared in disbelief with the rest of the crowd as he watched his singing stone fly away. Soon, it was only a small dot against the purple sky. Just before it was almost out of sight, it dove down into the horizon. This might mean nothing, but it might also mean that if the creature had gone to its lair, and if it wasn't too far away, he might yet get back his stone.

The last of the crowd took their eyes off the creature and forgot about the strange occurrence shortly after the creature began to fly away. Everyone but himself went back to their normal routines. He hurriedly returned to his booth and prepared items for a short journey. He expected to be gone at most a day, and preferably only for this day. He did not want to be in the streets or in the wilderness at night, for both held dangers he wished not to consider.

Potic should have returned by now, but still there was no sign of him. Healfdene was not worried about his son, but he certainly could have used his help now. He dare not wait any longer. His best chance to retrieve the stone was now.

Leaving a note for his son, and paying a fellow merchant to watch his stall, he headed north out of the city. Traveling through the city itself during the daylight hours was not dangerous or difficult. He made good time, and with an hour's walk, he was at the northern edge of the city.

The woods to the north of the city turned out to be not much more difficult or dangerous. He considered himself lucky that he came upon no dangerous and hungry beasts before arriving at a small tower which sat in the middle of the clearing. He made a wide berth of the tower, and continued north. If his eyesight and guess of the beasts flight, he determined that the creature had dropped somewhere with a few minutes of this tower.

A tower in this good repair, and in such a location was obviously a Lords keep. It was good policy to avoid confrontation with ones such as these. After all, he was only a simple merchant.

Eventually he found a path leading to a hill top. The daylight was fading, and if he didn't find the beast soon, he would have to find a safe place to hole up for the night. He sat down to rest, and in the warming sunlight, and twittering of birds, found himself asleep.

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"Kaw.... Kaw..... " The sound quickly caused him to awaken with a start. Before him was the very creature which he sought, or at least one which looked the same. He noticed that it had the same markings, but was not carrying his stone. He watched warily as it brushed its slender fingers over the ground, eying him carefully. He waited while the thing walked carefully around him. Analyzing him in a very intelligent manner.

The silvery creature seemed intelligent, so he thought maybe he could bargain with it. That was something he understood. He carefully opened his pack and removed some bread and cheese. He  
4 tore off a bit of the bread, and offered it to the creature, tossing it a little in front of himself.

It sniffed the bread, but did not seem interested. Healfdene then tried some of the cheese. The creature seemed much more interested in this, and soon ate the little piece that was offered. More, the creature croaked in an unnatural voice, surprising him.

The strange thing was intelligent then, and he was making progress. He warily picked up a stone that was nearby, and showed it to the best. He gestured with both the cheese and the stone indicating that they could trade.

The creature looked puzzled for a brief time, but then squawked and flew away. Healfdene was strained and tired from the effort, and sat down to rest a little before attempting to follow it again.

He didn't have to wait long before the the creature returned with not only his stone, but three others as well, all of different colors. Healfdene didn't hesitate to give the creature the rest of the cheese, which it took, leaving the stones. He picked up the stones, being careful not to anger the beast in front of him. It ignored him, gnawing on some of the cheese before flying off.

Healfdene returned to the marketplace just as the sun was setting. He arrived to find his son there, eagerly preparing to find his father and help him. "So, you finally made it back," Healfdene stated, surprising Potic.

"Father! I'm so glad you are not harmed. I was just preparing to go and search for you. You shouldn't try such things alone. It is very dangerous, and you are getting old."

Healfdene smiled, and dumped the four stones in front of his son. "Maybe not as old and foolish as you might think."

"But... Where?"

Healfdene laughed. "Perhaps you will have more respect for this old man in the future! He then made his way into the booth, and started unpacking. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep. Tomorrow is another day full of opportunities."

He laid down on one of the small mats in the corner with a smile on his face, as he looked upon his son, who obviously had developed a healthy respect for his father.