



## *Sareh*

### Eternal Springs

by Scott Walker

Sitting across from Marc, Sareh lightly rubbed the pendant attached to her necklace. Her eyes slowly slid from the inn's door, across the evening's worth of dust-covered patrons, and ended up at the bar counter. She looked back at Marc, sighed.

“Didn't ask you to believe me, Marc. You asked the question, I gave you my answer. Sorry if you don't like it.”

Marc blinked a few times, then began studying his glass of wine. “Well, it's just...what you're saying...what you're saying is hard to believe.”

The woman shrugged. “Lots of unbelievable things been happening, Marc, case you haven't been paying attention.”

The residents of Eternal Springs had recently learned that even this far out from the center of the Wastelands – practically on the border of the Sea of Grass – they were no longer beyond the reach of the Sand Devils. Only the presence of the Swordsmen, the closest thing to law and order in the Wastelands after the Magistrates and local military left, kept the city of Eternal Springs functioning behind its large, high walls of adobe and plaster.

“True. But that doesn't exactly prove your claim, does it?”

A smile threatened to play across Sareh's face. “No, indeed. But as I said, I'm only telling you what I saw. You asked me here – you don't like the conversation, leave.” She took a long pull on her mug of ale, scanned the noisy, and steadily more crowded, room again. Marc took the opportunity to take a closer look at her face. He began to suspect that her decidedly unfeminine and common clothing – heavy jacket and shirt, leather pants, traveling boots – lack of makeup, sparse jewelry, and even the smudges of dirt on her face were all deliberate efforts to hide a more than common beauty.

“Yes, I'd like to ask you about the Sand Devil you killed. Exactly how did you manage that?”

Sareh waved a finger at Marc. “I never said that. I said I saw it destroyed.”

“And what, do you think, destroyed it?”

“This,” she said, holding the small oval of hammered silver around her neck so that Marc could see its surface. The dimples, bubbles, and etched lines on the pendant made it hard





*Sareh*  
Eternal Springs

to see the inscribed rune. Marc leaned across the table to get a closer look.

“Is that...is that really a Celestial rune? May I see it?”

Sareh was already taking off the necklace before he finished. Her calloused hand dropped it into his soft, open palm. Marc turned the pendant over, examining it from various angles, then reached down into the pack at his feet, retrieved a small bound book, and began quickly flipping through pages.

A smoky haze was taking over the air in the inn, and there were no empty seats left. The inn's patrons were slowly shedding the day's dust, finding temporary relief in spirits and the company of others equally weathered and worn by the relentless sand and wind of the Wastelands. The noise made normal conversation difficult, and the bar maid had to repeat her question before getting a response.

“How you two doing?” the bar maid asked.

“Another ale, on his tab,” Sareh said, nodding towards Marc. “Sorry to ask again, but have you seen anyone in a green cloak?”

“Not yet, but I promise I'll send 'em your way.” The maid smiled at Sareh and disappeared. Marc remained silent, still looking for something in the book. He looked closely again at the pendant, checked another page in the book, seemed to come to some conclusion.

“All right, so you saw the Sand Devil bend down over your friend -”

“Not friend.”

“Right. Over your...acquaintance?” No reaction. “Your acquaintance. How do you know your acquaintance didn't kill the Devil?”

“He was halfway to Na'naat. I tried to save him, but there are only so many organs you can stuff back into a person, you know?”

Marc made a face, cleared his thought. “Fine. And when the Devil reached down to your acquaintance, he...burst apart? Shattered?”

“Yes.”

“And the same thing happened to the second Devil?”

“Yes.”

“And that's how you survived the attack? The Devils, what, got spooked? Ran off before killing you?”

“Yes.” Sareh reached out, her open hand resting on the table. Marc looked confused,





*Sareh*  
Eternal Springs

then slowly put his hand in hers. Sareh rolled her eyes. “The pendant....?”

Marc quickly withdrew his hand, a flush blossoming on his cheeks. He handed her the necklace, which she put back on.

“I must confess, if what you say is true, and I'm not entirely convinced it is, I have no idea why this rune would have that effect on the Devils.”

“Darling,” a female voice whispered in Marc's ear, “if the fair Sareh says something's true, rest assured that it is. Her word's beyond reproach in circles Gallidon himself couldn't buy his way into.”

Marc turned to see a young woman dressed in a simple green cloak, long red curls dangling out of the hood and framing a face of alabaster beauty. Momentarily caught between trying to process the outrageous claim and discern who had made it, Marc's mannered habits eventually took over, and he found himself standing up and offering a small bow.

“My, such a gentleman. Thank you.” The woman in the green cloak took Marc's seat before he could protest.

Sareh finished her ale, and, without taking her eyes off the woman in the green cloak, said, “Thanks for the drinks, Marc. Buy me a round tomorrow night, I might have more to tell.”



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