

Sareh Dead Port

by Scott Walker

After four months of hard travels, a show-down with cursed spirits, and a return trip across half a continent, my reward is being swindled in Tar Mira by a half-witted, wart-nosed, blind, old man?

"That's the best offer you've got, Molan?" Sareh looked down at the trinkets and cheap jewels on the table between her and the merchant. It wasn't her best haul from the southern kingdoms, but it wasn't her worst. Still, Molan was ripping her off, and they both knew it.

"Dearest Sareh, I would be the laughing stock of the bazaar if I offered a penny more.



Simple rings with glass for stones? Crude bracelets with broken latches?" Molan offered her a sympathetic look, probably not entirely faked. "Since the local lower houses decided to take the administrative responsibilities of the city into their own hands, the markets have become more volatile – and less forgiving of cut-rate offerings."

"I guess with the disappearance of Gallidon, the City Administrator isn't just a snake, he's become a defanged snake, huh?"

Molan chuckled. "Well, Administrator Kebev is still as scaly as ever. But his days are now filled with actual work. He has to deal with the politics of fighting off and manipulating several lower houses, all of which see themselves as the next natural heir to Tar Mira's independent status and wealth. The houses are reticent to openly move against the Administrator; it's easier to remove the power from the position than remove the person. I suspect Kebev misses the days when his worst political nightmare was deciding which lower



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house Festival Dinner he'd have to suffer through...but on the upside, the Bazaar's Buyer's Circle has found some new leverage by playing the houses against each other. The Bazaar markets are keenly adept at extracting advantage from any situation."

"Fascinating," Sareh replied, stifling a yawn. "Now, are you quite sure you've given me your best offer?"

Molan glanced down, ran his stubby fingers through the shallow pile of jewelry. "Where did you find these, anyway?"

"Dead Port."

Molan's expression turned to disbelief, and he leaned back from the jewelry before he caught himself. He opened his mouth, thought better of what he was going to say, and closed it again. He couldn't stop his eyes from glancing down at the long sword hanging from Sareh's waist; the dagger strapped upside down across her corset, the heavy, soiled leggings; simple black shirt covered by a loose, open brown jacket; leather boots, and a floppy, large-brimmed hat without even a hint of fashion about it. Molan had known Sareh for years, watched her grow up, tried to look out for her, but her penchant for snubbing society's rules of what was proper made it increasingly difficult. How had she managed to get to her thirties without marrying? She certainly possessed the looks; she could have half a dozen Lower Noblemen at her beck and call, regardless of her less than noble bloodline. Molan sighed.

"Sareh, every few months you show up on my doorstep to peddle cheap wares, usually with some spine-tingling story to help drive up the price. Despite how far-fetched they were, I never once thought you were outright lying. There's no need to start now – it won't fetch a higher price."

Sareh reached for the bottle of red wine and refilled her glass. "Molan, what if I told you those were straight from a bordello in Dead Port?"

"I'd say you were lying," Molan said gently. He almost thought she might be serious, and the thought of getting some authentic Dead Port merchandise would certainly up his reputation in the Linneske Bazaar. He might even snag a seat on the Buyer's Circle...but how could she possibly have retrieved these, much less survived?

"No one has made it back from Dead Port and lived to tell about it. The place is infested with a plague that has no cure. Why should I believe that you alone achieved what the best of the Empire could not? And if you did, why bring them all the way to me?"



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"First, I never said I was alone. Second, I'm giving you first right of refusal out of respect for my parents and what you've done for me, Molan. Did you even see the locket?"

Molan noticed her attempt to conceal a smile, returned one of his own. "Well, let's have another look at it, shall we?" Molan inserted a loupe into his right eye and brought the silver locket up for inspection a second time. As before, he noted that it did have an older style to it. Probably one hundred years old based on the engravings and craftwork. Perhaps this particular piece really was worth another look.

The twisted chain necklace was of the style common to the southern coast, as was the thick, rounded rectangular shape. The inscription was hard to make out, though. Molan carefully placed the locket in a shallow tin, and then reached behind him for a glass vial of clear liquid. He poured a small amount of liquid over the locket, which began to bubble and smoke. The acrid smell wrinkled Sareh's nose, even though she'd witnessed this a hundred times before. Molan used a pair of small tongs to lift the locket out of the tin and gently dunk it in a large bucket of water. He then dried the locket and placed it back on a cloth in front of him, hunching over to scrutinize it.

"It's an interesting dialect but not hard to make out: 'To my Emerald Lady of the Emerald Port. Love, Sorlant.'" Molan looked up. "Where did you say you found this? A bordello? How can you be sure?"

"Got your attention now, do I? Yes, a bordello. Just because I don't shop in them doesn't mean I don't know what they look like. Why?"

"My girl, do you know who the Emerald Lady is?"

"No."

"She was Lady Eserlda of the Lower House Dangrol. They ruled the Emerald Port for decades. Sorlant was, I believe, a commoner who sought her affections. Killed by an overly protective brother of Eserlda, if memory serves."

"What happened to Eserlda?"

"She disappeared shortly after Sorlant's murder, but her exact fate was never known.





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You're saying you actually got this from Dead Port?"

"That and everything else on the table." Normally, Sareh would have pursued the history lesson, but she didn't have that luxury – she needed coins if she was going to catch the ship leaving port in two hours, and she had plenty left to wrap up in Tar Mira before then. "So, you interested?"

"Um...yes. In the locket, anyway. But you never answered my earlier question: how did you make it out of Dead Port alive? Everyone who has gone in has disappeared."

Sareh smiled impishly. "Ah, well, I wouldn't want to bore you with another far-fetched story, now would I?"

"Indulge me, please."

"A year ago I heard a rumor about a group of bandits who had set up camp inside Dead Port. I asked around, spent some time running down leads, and eventually was able to verify at least part of the rumor. Someone was regularly entering and leaving the city. I convinced them to share their secret with me."

"So, there's no plague?"

"Hardly. But there are forces at work that frown on visitors entering Dead Port and feel even more negatively about people leaving it. It just so happens that I know how to make them look the other way." Sareh wasn't comfortable sharing more, especially since she didn't trust Molan to keep a secret. Besides, she needed to get moving. "I don't have time for haggling over every item, Molan; it's a package deal, so name your price."

Molan sat back, removed the loupe from his eye. He picked up the locket, rubbed his thumb back and forth over the inscription. Molan was already thinking about two different dealers in the Bazaar who could authenticate this for him, but he was convinced enough to gamble on his hunch. "I'll give you two gold for the whole lot. More if you can bring another shipment like this."

"Two gold and fifty silver."

"Two and twenty-five, Sareh, and I'll buy you an effeine to celebrate."

"I hate the stuff, and you know it. I'm in a hurry, so two and a quarter will have to do. Imperial coins, if you please."

"Very well," said Molan, as he got up and crossed the room. Removing a small key from his pocket, he unlocked a metal banded box. Sareh could see several sacks of various colors and





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shapes inside, and Molan removed several coins from one of them. "If you really can get more items from Dead Port, you'll be able to retire a very, very rich woman."

"I'm not interested in retiring just yet. But the rich part wouldn't hurt." Sareh finished her wine, pocketed the coins and picked up her hat. "Molan, I'm not sure when I'll be back in Tar Mira, and the way things are going, I may not even recognize the place when I do. If I do manage another plunder run on Dead Port, I promise that you'll be the first merchant to make an offer. In the mean time, I've got another appointment to attend to."

"But – where are you going, girl?"

Sareh casually flipped her hat onto her head, looked over her shoulder, and said, "Think I'll try being rich for a while and see if it suits me..."



Illustration *Molan* by Andy Underwood.

Illustration *Lady Eserlda's Locket* by Andy Underwood.

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