

GOLDEN PEPPER

Jay Lake

DEATH CAME ON BLACK-FEATHERED WINGS for a woman in Port Ruin. She was the wife of a simple man, no great *magos*, or *strategos* of the armies, but rather a reseller of spices traded from the sun-drenched south. Yet when Death arrived in the last minute of her life, he found the man standing before her bed, waiting for him.

Few could see Death, and fewer still could stand before him.

"I have eaten of the goatweed from the Islands of the Moon," the spice-reseller said. "So that I might meet your gaze."

The man's voice quavered only a little, though his fear gleamed in the wide whites of his eyes. He was fat, and small, with thin hair and a patched robe. Behind him, his wife's breath rattled. She was fatter than he, pale, with pain on her sleeping face.

"I hope the taste suited you," said Death, always the gentleman.

"Thank you, it did, a little." The spice-reseller nodded his head, the slightest dip of respectful acknowledgement. "I have an offer."

Death smiled, the muscles of his lips creaking like old coffins in a flood. "I have been offered everything that has been under the sun."

The man persisted. "I will lay you a wager. The life of my wife against three peppercorns."

Death's smile blossomed into a rare laugh that set the skeletons of mice to dancing within the walls, while a rotting dog in the alley outside staggered to its feet and trotted into the marketplace. "On what terms would I stake three peppercorns against my sacred duty?"

"That she live so long as my love never fail her," said the spice-reseller. Sweat poured from him.

"So if you love her forever, she lives into eternity and I am richer by three peppercorns?"

"My day will come, and my love will fail then with my heartbeat."

Perhaps, thought Death, but he held his tongue on the matter. He was enchanted by the man's audacity. "And the peppercorns...?"

The spice-reseller opened his hand. Three tiny pebbles gleamed there. "Golden pepper," he said. "From the godfarm on the Islands of the Sun. These would ransom this city." A smile slid across his desperate face. "I am told they also offset a pale cheese quite well."

"I have no need of riches," Death said. "I find your terms more interesting—that your love should never fail. What do you believe this means?"

"We could make a contract," the man said, defeat heavy in his voice.

"No..." Death smiled again, swept the peppercorns into his own bony hand. "I will know. And I am in a curious mood this day."

DEATH SAILED THE GREAT WESTERN SEA in a cockleshell boat. A wind blew ever out of the Lands Beyond, which lay always at Death's back no matter which way he faced, so his sail billowed full and fair. He was at his sport, a soul's holiday in the moments between slices of time, skipping over the waves and scrying the movements of the birds in the silver sky.

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*Few could see Death,
and fewer still
could stand before him.*

The boat bucked against a rising sea. Curtains of rain wasted themselves against distant swells, threatening Death with a soaking even with the wind he brought for himself. The peppercorns hung heavy in a pouch at his belt, ransom of cities.

Over the years in Port Ruin, a tired man raised his voice to his wife, then hushed himself.

Death let the peppercorns rattle across the bones of his hand.

Over the years in Port Ruin, an indebted man spent his last coin to bring his wife the first flowers of spring.

Death rolled the peppercorns between his hard knuckles.

Over the years in Port Ruin, a hard-working man kept his wife in comfort despite midnight beatings and secret deals with his creditors.

Death crushed the peppercorns to dust and let the wind take them.

One long year in Port Ruin, a gray-haired man breathed his last while his wife cried at his side.

Death was pleased. The spice-reseller's love had never failed. Such dedication in a mortal man. Perhaps there were some whose word could be trusted. Death reefed his sail and slid his boat into a slip at Port Ruin before he fetched the old spice-reseller's shade.

"You will never see her again," he told the ghost. "Your wife is doomed to eternal life, though she will sell herself to kings down the long years. Had you loved only a little less perfectly, you might have spent all of time with her."

Amid a shower of golden dust the dead man strode into eternity, tears standing in his eyes. Death returned to the water's edge, thinking on winter wind and the flavor of souls. ☺

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