



THE YELLOW SILK



DON
BASSINGTHWAITE





PROLOGUE

*Month of Marpenoth,
Year of the Tankard (1370 DR)*

Timbers groaned and *Lady Swan*, a caravel out of the port of Telflamm in Thesk, lurched again. Fa Pan lurched with it, slamming hard into a rough wall. Wood scraped the flesh of his arm. He thrust himself back to his feet with the butt of his spear and staggered on along the narrow passage. Sounds echoed down from the deck above. Shouts and screams: the brave sailors of their ship, the foul pirates of the black-sailed hulk that had loomed up out of the cool autumn night. It was impossible to tell who was doing the screaming and who the shouting; the echoing sounds carried only chaos and death.

He knew—the captain knew, all of *Lady Swan*'s crew knew—what the pirates were after. Down in the hold were bales of fine silk and eastern spices, the wealth of a trading expedition. How the pirates had known about the cargo and what route *Lady Swan* would take across the Sea of Fallen Stars was

another question. The grim set of the captain's mouth had said much. There was a traitor among his crew.

Fa Pan ran. He had been permitted to stay above when the pirate ship was first sighted because of his fighting skill, but his companions, nothing more than merchants, would still be huddled in the cabin where the captain had ordered them to take refuge. If they remained there, they would only be trapped when the pirates came. Better they faced the foul outlaws bravely!

A hatch opened somewhere. Air came rushing through the passage. Another night it might have brought a welcome breath of fresh air. Tonight it brought the smell of death, a worse reek than the usual stifling stench of the ship's bowels. It was cold, too. A sorceress led the pirates, her spells calling down sleet to sweep the ship's decks and waves of ice to make wood hard and brittle. The fighting above was treacherous, as bad as anything Fa Pan had ever seen in years as a soldier. The pirates barely seemed to notice, but just threw themselves into the struggle in a slipping, sliding frenzy.

They were madmen. Fa Pan didn't know where he and his companions could go to escape them, but fighting had to be preferable to huddling in the dark. "Jen! Wei! Te Chien! Yu Mao!" he yelled ahead down the shadowed passage. "Open the door! We need to help! Nung—"

His voice died on his lips. Fa Pan came to a stop so sharp that he nearly tripped over his own feet. There was a dim light ahead, splashing out from around a cabin door that stood ajar. The captain had ordered his companions to keep their refuge dark and their door closed tight. They would not have disobeyed. Fa Pan's stomach rose. He stepped forward silently. Spear ready to thrust, he pushed against the cabin door with one booted foot.

It swung open to carnage as bad or worse than that on deck.

The glow of a tiny, magical crystal that Wei prized turned the cabin into a wash of nightmare images. Fallen bodies cast horrid shadows. Blood mingled with the darkness to draw those shadows out into unnatural, oozing, weeping shapes. Almond eyes that had gazed on the splendors of the Great Empire of Shou Lung and the wonders of the Golden Way stared blankly at the rude wood of barbaric Faerûn, far from their home. Fa Pan clenched his jaw. The pirates had already come for the merchants of Shou.

But how? He had passed no one in the passage. Breath hissed between his teeth. The traitor among *Lady Swan's* crew. Someone could have hidden down here before the attack with the intention of eliminating any resistance from below deck. But if that was the case, then the traitor might—

A foot scraped on the floor behind him.

Reflexes trained in the army of the Emperor sent him diving forward, twisting as he fell to bring his spear up across his body. The weapon jammed in the narrow confines of the doorway, but it was enough. A heavy blade bit into the spear shaft instead of him. Fa Pan kicked out blindly. His foot met flesh and produced a grunt of pain in the shadows. A second lashing kick, though, found only air as his attacker whirled away down the corridor. Fa Pan pulled himself to his feet using his own jammed spear as leverage, wrenched the weapon free, and ran after him. "You!" he shouted. "Stop and face me, murderer!"

He couldn't have said what language he spoke. His mind was clouded by rage. Ahead of him, the killer of his companions thundered down the passage, a vague form

just out of spear's reach in the shadows. Fa Pan could see that he was a muscular man, though, a wicked blade clenched tight in each hand. He tried to remember who among *Lady Swan's* crew might fit that description, but his thoughts could only focus on one thing. Revenge. The big man must have realized that as well; even when the rocking of the ship sent him staggering from side to side, he didn't slow down.

Neither did Fa Pan. As his attacker leaped for the short, steep ladder that led to the deck above, the Shou lunged and thrust. His attacker kicked up, getting out of the way of the spear's sharp point just in time. The move sent him sprawling gracelessly through the hatch, however. Fa Pan snatched back his spear and swarmed up the ladder before his enemy could recover enough to launch a counterstrike. His attacker was rolling over onto his back. Fa Pan stabbed his spear down. "Die, treacherous—"

His spear froze in midthrust. There was light above deck, magic conjured by the pirate sorceress to illuminate the struggle. The radiance was broken by the chaotic, shifting shadows of sailors and pirates, but for the first time, Fa Pan saw the face of his attacker—smooth, noble, almond-eyed. Shou. And familiar.

Fa Pan gaped. "Yu Mao?" he breathed. His colleague, a man he had traveled with for the months it took to journey from east to west, looked up at him. He was smeared with blood: clothing, arms, hands, weapons—a pair of wide-bladed butterfly swords. Shou weapons. Fa Pan had seen him practicing with them almost every morning! Knotted around his thick neck was a black scarf. Black like the sails of the pirate ship. The traitor hadn't been among the crew of *Lady Swan* at all.

Fa Pan hesitated.

Yu Mao didn't. Big hands opened, dropping his swords, and reached up to seize the shaft of Fa Pan's spear just behind the head. Shoulders as wide as a westerner's tensed and heaved to the side. Fa Pan's feet slid on a deck still icy from the pirate sorceress's spells even as Yu Mao used the momentum to pull himself up and around. His leg snapped up into Fa Pan's belly from beneath. Air exploded out of Fa Pan's lungs. Gasping, he stumbled back and felt the shaft of his spear slide from his grasp. Yu Mao shouted something in a western tongue. All around them, pirates looked up then jumped back. A tiny child-like figure—one of Faerûn's halflings, though surely the wickedest Fa Pan had ever seen, with one eye covered by a leather patch—called something out in return, but all Fa Pan could understand was Yu Mao's answer.

"He's mine."

His gut twisted. The shaft of his captured spear thrust at him, but Fa Pan managed to dodge back. Yu Mao thrust again. And again, forcing him back across the icy deck. From the corners of his eyes, Fa Pan could see that the battle was almost over. There were more pirates standing than there were sailors. Pockets of combat were dying out; some of the surviving sailors were even starting to throw down their weapons in surrender. They might hope for mercy from the pirates, but Fa Pan couldn't see any hope of mercy from Yu Mao. The other Shou's eyes held the mad glint of bloodlust. Fa Pan gulped air and gasped, "Yu Mao—why?"

His feet hit something soft and heavy. A fallen body. He staggered, tried to recover.

The spear shaft cracked against his side then snapped up against the underside of his arm. Numbing pain washed through him. It was all he could do to stay upright

and stumble back a few more slippery paces. His attacker stalked after him, spinning the spear around sharply and reversing it in his grasp. Before Fa Pan could dodge, Yu Mao lunged. Fire lanced through Fa Pan's shoulder. The force of the blow knocked him back; he slammed into the ship's rail then jerked forward a step as Yu Mao ripped the spear back out of his flesh.

Fa Pan gasped against the shock. His good arm groped for the rail to hold him upright. He managed to focus on Yu Mao. His former colleague was surrounded by pirates, just another one of their number. "Why?" Fa Pan choked. Yu Mao spat.

"You wouldn't understand." He lunged again, spear out.

Fa Pan threw himself backward onto the ship's rail—over the ship's rail. For a heartbeat, it felt as if he were balancing on the narrow wood, caught by hands of the spirits between ship and sea. Then the balance shifted and he fell.

He hit the water hard and sank deep. Light vanished, choked off by the night and the dark water. Already cooling with the season, the water had been further chilled by the sorceress's spells. The shock of it stung his wound and he screamed, a lungful of air exploding into a cloud of pale bubbles. The cold brought a kind of calm as well, though, a soothing, weightless suspension. Fa Pan hung there for a moment, eyes half-closed, mind half-dazed, as the last of his air trickled away.

And when his lungs ached with emptiness, he opened his eyes, gazed up at the glow of the sea's surface, and drew in cold water.

Family legend held that his great-great grandmother, a famous beauty, had attracted the notice of a spirit of the

bright little river that ran through her hometown. Her dalliance with the spirit had not been long, but it had brought the touch of the spirits to her bloodline—a touch that included the ability to breathe water as easily as air. Fa Pan hadn't made much of the strange ability since he had been a child; most of the time, it was easier to live without revealing himself as one of the spirit folk. Certainly he had never told Yu Mao. That ignorance was probably the only reason the murdering traitor had let him get as close to the rail as he had before striking. Fa Pan was safe in the water—for the moment, anyway.

He kicked his feet, propelling himself back up to the surface, and lifted his head cautiously into the air. The sounds coming from the ship's deck now were shouts of triumph, punctuated only briefly by wails from the survivors. The battle was over. The pirates had won. Yu Mao still stood beside the rail, as if surveying the results of his treachery. He wasn't alone for long. A second figure joined him—the pirate sorceress. The two embraced. Fa Pan recognized her now. He had seen Yu Mao with her and that wicked-looking halfling in Telflamm! Traitor to *Lady Swan*, traitor to his companions, traitor to Shou Lung—for the love of a woman? He choked back a groan.

Yu Mao had been right. He didn't understand. But if Yu Mao had wanted to destroy everything and everyone that might send news of his treachery back to his homeland, he hadn't quite succeeded.

Trying to board *Lady Swan* again or to sneak aboard the pirate vessel would be suicide. He was wounded and the pirates had him outnumbered. There was no way he could exact retribution on Yu Mao himself. The goods of the trade expedition were only silk and spices—losing them was nothing. His life and his witness to Yu Mao's

treachery were more important. There were those who had to be told of what happened here. The choice between shame and retribution would be theirs.

Fa Pan let himself sink back into the comfort of the water. They had glimpsed the northern coast of the Sea of Fallen Stars earlier in the day. His wounded arm dragging awkwardly, Fa Pan began the long struggle for shore.



CHAPTER 1

*Month of Hammer,
Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)*

The door of the Wench's Ease slammed open without warning—slammed open so hard that it almost tore off its worn hinges. A crowd came pouring out of the tavern and into the cold winter night. No, not a crowd. A mob. Women and men, fishing folk of Spandeliyon, shouting loud enough that the screams of the thin man being dragged roughly out of the Ease were barely audible. “No!” he pleaded. “No! It was an accident! It was an accident, I swear—”

His screams ended in a thick grunt as someone punched him hard in the gut. A cheer went up from those closest to him. Those farther away muttered their disappointment and tried to push closer. In the crush, the mob's victim twisted free and made a desperate break for freedom, dropping to the slush and mud of the ground and trying to scramble away between his tormentors' legs. He didn't get far. The mob surged around him, kicking and stomping.

Tycho Arisaenn, curly black hair on his head and

three days' of dark stubble on his face, slipped through the crowd and up to the door of the tavern. Most of the Ease's customers were outside now—the sole occupant of the doorway was a broad-hipped matron who leaned against the doorpost with a sour look on her face. Those few customers still inside yelled at her to close the door and stop letting the cold in. She ignored them. Tycho slid up to her. "Oloré, Muire," he said, rubbing his hands together. Even inside thick mittens, his fingers were chilled. "Quiet night?"

The woman spat into the muck.

Screams turned into shrieks. Tycho turned to look. The mob's victim was up again, bloody but still struggling. Six pairs of arms held him firmly, though, and bore him aloft through the crowd to the massive, old tree that stood in the yard outside the Wench's Ease. Tycho's breath hissed through his teeth as he realized what they meant to do. He took a step forward, but Muire's heavy hand snapped out and grabbed the leather of his coat.

"It's too late," she said.

"Rope!" called someone. "Get rope!"

"Here!" A coil came hurtling out of the mob. Practiced hands caught it and looped it quickly then threw the looped end up and over a thick, scarred branch. Someone else grabbed it as it fell back down. The screaming man was thrust forward and the noose cinched tight around his scrawny neck. He looked up, eyes wide.

"Mercy!" he gasped. "Give me Tyr's justice!"

The woman cinching the noose slapped a rough hand across his face. "It's dockside justice for you, Ardo, and may your traitorous soul sleep tight in Umberlee's cold arms! A man who would turn on a mate deserves no better!"

Ardo's protests vanished into the roar of the crowd as the woman stepped back and snapped one arm into the air. Four burly men hauled sharply on the free end of the rope and Ardo was wrenched up to dance with the snowflakes on the night wind. A cheer went up with him. The front ranks of the mob darted forward to yank on his kicking legs with arms muscled by days of hauling nets and pulling oars, hastening Ardo's ignominious departure from the world. The men and women who couldn't get close enough to participate yelled encouragement and toasted their triumph with tankards of the Ease's dark ale.

Muire sucked on her teeth and glowered. Tycho glanced sideways at her. "What happened?"

Muire snorted. "Word is that Ton didn't just fall overboard from his and Ardo's boat last tenday. His body finally washed up today. His throat had been slit. Nobody could have done that but Ardo." She jerked her head at the mob and the skinny man's swinging body. "Bad night for him to come drinking."

"Bind me." Tycho tucked his hands up into his armpits and frowned. Off at one edge of the mob, a small cluster of men stood by themselves. At the heart of their cluster was a lanky thug in a dark-red tunic, a heavy fur mantle over his shoulders for warmth. Tycho nodded at them. "Lander's here, Muire."

"A man can drink where he wants. Even Lander."

Tycho gave her a thin smile. "Did you know that he and Ton had a . . . let's say a 'common friend' who wasn't too happy when Ardo didn't want to pick up Ton's debts? Has Lander been doing much talking tonight?"

"Some," said Muire in a quiet voice.

"Funny coincidence, Lander and rumor both coming 'round to the Ease tonight," observed Tycho. "With

both Ardo and Ton gone, I wonder who'll be taking their boat."

Brawny arms came up and folded across Muire's broad chest. "You might want to keep that sort of thinking to yourself, Tycho, or Ardo won't be the only one on the tree. I wouldn't want to lose a good musician and a good customer in one night."

"That's a lovely sentiment."

"Ardo left an unpaid account."

"How much?"

"Enough that I wouldn't have minded a piece of his boat, too." Muire uncrossed her arms and stepped back into the smoky warmth of the tavern. Tycho followed—or at least started to. "Where do you think you're going?" asked Muire.

"Inside where it's warm. It's cold out here, Muire!"

"It's where your audience is." An arm swept around the dim interior of the Wench's Ease. "I can't pay you if I've got no customers and right now they have other things on their minds. Get the crowd back in and you can come with them."

"You're not going to have a good musician for long if my fingers fall off from frostbite!" protested Tycho. He started forward. Muire thrust him back. Tycho gritted his teeth. "Fine," he said. "You want them calm?"

"No. I want them drinking."

The door slammed in his face. Tycho gave it a swift kick that set the old wood shuddering and turned around. A few people on the edge of the mob were already looking at him. Tycho fought back a growl and gave them a smile instead. "Back inside. You heard the lady. Or at least you heard Muire and she's as close to a lady as you'll find at the Wench's Ease!"

It was an old line, but it got a laugh. A couple of people started to look longingly at the Ease's closed door. The rage that had sustained the crowd was fading fast with Ardo dead. "That's right," Tycho told them, "nice and warm in there." Hammer was a month better spent indoors and by a fire than outside on a cold night. It wouldn't, he guessed, take much to remind everyone of that. He shook off his mittens and stuffed them in his belt then tugged on the wide leather strap that ran over one shoulder and across his chest. The chunky curved box of his strilling slid around from where it hung behind his back. Tycho settled the instrument in his left arm—its butt against his shoulder, its long neck in his curled hand—with practiced ease and unclipped the short bow from the strap with his right hand. The strilling would be out of tune in the cold, but this wasn't going to be a fine performance. He set the bow against the instrument's deepest string and drew it slowly across.

The sound that echoed out of the strilling's wooden body howled like a winter storm coming in off the Sea of Fallen Stars. It got everyone's attention immediately.

The people closest to the sound moved back a pace out of sheer surprise. Tycho stepped forward. He wasn't a tall man and most of the mob gathered outside the tavern stood a good head above him. Physical size, however, wasn't the only measure of a person's presence. "A dark night for dark deeds, friends," Tycho called. Pitched to carry, his voice rang out in the night. He walked on and the crowd parted before him, giving way before the simple force of his confidence. Tycho met the glance of each man and woman with a somber look. "A man who turns on his friends is no man at all. A man who would kill his friends is a monster."

He pushed the bow across a different string. The howling storm turned into a haunting moan, a forlorn wail that slid up and down in pitch as Tycho shifted his fingers on the strilling's neck. More than one head in the crowd looked up at the body hanging from the tree. Tycho paused under it and looked up as well. "Ardo, you stupid bugger," he murmured under the music. The dockside of Spandeliyon was not a good place to fall on the wrong side of rumor. The voice of the strilling changed again and soared up into the night before fading away. In its wake, the mob—no, the crowd—was silent. Even Lander and his men, Tycho saw with a satisfied glance, were quiet.

He let the silence hold for just moment longer then sent his bow dancing across the strilling's strings once more. This time, though, he rattled out a wild tune. Something to get feet tapping and put minds in memory of happier things—like Muire's ale. He'd had enough of the cold. "Now who'll join me in drinking to Ton?" he called. "A murdered soul needs the company of a toast or two from the people who loved him best!" He took a turn through the crowd, giving people a nudge in the direction of the Ease. "He was your friend, Det." Tycho elbowed someone else. "And you, Rana. Brenal, I remember you and Ton hoisting more than a few together!"

He worked the edges of the crowd like a herding dog. Slowly, people began to move back into the tavern. The ground was a treacherous churned surface in their wake, but Tycho danced back and forth across it, bow on strilling keeping perfect time. His calls turned into a patter, rolling off his tongue. "Ervis. Pitch. Blike. Come on, inside with all of you. Drink one for Ton and remember an old mate. Sing a song for him. Umbero, you were his friend. You, too—" Tycho turned around one more time and found

himself face to chest with a dark-red tunic. He looked up to the raw-boned face above it and finished smoothly “—Lander.”

The thug smiled like a shark. “Oh yes,” he said. “Like two peas in a pod we were.” A couple of the men who stood with him laughed.

Tycho returned the smile. “Like two dice in a cup,” he added, “or two fish in a net.” His bow paused for a moment on the strilling. “No, forgive me. Two fish in a net would have been Ton and Ardo.”

Lander’s eyes narrowed. “You want to watch what you say about dead people.”

“I never say anything ill of the dead.” Tycho’s smile narrowed as well. “The living, on the other hand, are another matter.” He sent new sound rippling from his instrument and spun around to usher the last of the crowd back into the Wench’s Ease. “Come in and drink, Lander,” he called back. “You owe Ton that.”

He didn’t wait to see if Lander took up the gauntlet, but just followed the stragglers through the door and into the tavern. Warm air embraced him like a lover and he gasped with relief. The crowd had already settled back into their familiar places, filling the Ease almost completely. Many already had more ale in their hands and Muire’s serving women were scrambling to keep up with the demands of those who didn’t. Tycho let the strilling slide down from his shoulder and wove his way through to the bar. “There you go, Muire,” he said, tugging open his coat and loosening his scarf. “Your customers are back again and drinking. Now how about a hot one?”

On the other side of the smoke-darkened wood counter, Muire grunted and turned to draw a tankard of ale from a cask. “You’ve got the gift,” she admitted grudgingly.

“What was that, Muire?” asked Tycho in a mock shout over the noise of the tavern’s patrons. “I didn’t quite catch it.”

“Don’t try me, Tycho. Just because you’ve been traveling doesn’t make you a wit. I still remember when you were just another Spandeliyon dock rat, squeaking out songs for a copper and getting into trouble.” The tavern door opened again, letting in another gust of cold air. Muire glanced up and her gaze hardened. “Some things don’t change.”

Tycho twisted around to follow her glare. The Ease’s door was just closing behind Lander and his men. The thugs began making their way around the outside of the room to a table—hastily vacated by the customers who had been occupying it—close to the big stone fireplace. Lander gave Tycho a harsh stare. The curly haired man just turned back to Muire. “No,” he said, “I guess they don’t.”

“What did you say to him?” asked Muire.

“Nothing that he’d understand,” Tycho told her with a crooked grin.

Muire shook her head. She took a stout iron from a rack over a brazier and plunged it into the tankard of ale. The iron hissed and the ale seethed briefly. Muire passed the tankard across the bar. Tycho shifted strilling and bow into one hand and raised the warm drink with the other. “To Ton and Ardo,” he said quietly. Muire retrieved a tankard of her own and clacked it against his.

Tycho barely had a mouthful of ale down his throat, though, before there was a shout from the tavern floor. “Hoy, bard! How about a song?” Tycho gave Muire another crooked grin.

“No, things don’t change, do they?” He set his tankard

down and shrugged out of his coat then turned around, settling his strilling back against his shoulder. "All right, Rana, you want a song?" He rubbed his bow against the strings of the strilling. "Here's one I learned in Suzail, all the way west in Cormyr—"

"No fussy western songs!" Rana pounded her fist on the table. "Play us a proper Altumbel tune! Something we can sing along with!" More shouts joined hers. Tycho smiled.

"Fine with me, Rana. If you sing, people will throw me coin to drown you out!" Laughter washed around the room and Tycho sang out. "*Old Raren had a daughter fair, a pretty maid with golden hair, and her heart was full of good until she met—*"

"—*the king of piiiirrates!*" bawled the crowd. Tycho laughed and began to play.



Partially obscured by a veil of cloud and silvery streams of snow blowing down from on high, the moon cast pale light across the shacks, storehouses, and tenements of the Spandeliyon waterfront. The silhouettes of taller houses and a solid fortress stood a short ways inland, away from the stinking docks, but the town was quite obviously an unplanned jumble. Its buildings were like driftwood cast up on shore by the near-constant sea wind, ready to be scoured away by the next storm.

How Spandeliyon managed to survive storms was, in fact, almost puzzling—from farther out on the Sea of Fallen Stars, the whole of the peninsula of Altumbel presented a profile not that dissimilar to a barely submerged reef.

Kuang Li Chien drew the heavy quilted wool of his

waitao coat more tightly around himself and watched the docks of the town draw closer. The small crew of the fat little ship on which he had taken passage scrambled around him, making the ship ready for docking. Up near the bow, the captain was shouting at the shore. After a moment, a door opened in one of the shacks on the dockside. A stout figure emerged in a flood of warm light and stumped up to the edge of the dock to squint into the dark and shout back. Li narrowed his eyes and listened, picking out the foreign words.

“Steth? Steth, is that you, you old—” The trade language of the west was simple enough, but some of it still gave Li difficulty. He couldn’t quite understand the phrase that the dockmaster used, but he guessed that it was not very flattering. “What are you doing? Daylight not good enough for you or have you gone back to your old habits?”

The ship’s captain replied with a rapid string of curses, most of which Li also missed. He understood the captain’s final words well enough, though. “—passenger who wouldn’t let me rest until we docked!”

“A passenger for Spandeliyon?” asked the dockmaster. “At this time of year?” Captain Steth’s response was another incomprehensible rattle of blasphemy that sent the dockmaster running into his shack. He emerged with a torch, shouted back at the captain, and began lighting lanterns at the dockside. The ship turned, slowing to a glide in the icy black water. Li swayed with the heavy bump as it nudged against the dock. A rope was thrown down to the dockmaster, who looped it around a mooring post, and the ship swayed out then shifted back, restrained. More ropes were thrown down and made fast, and slowly the ship settled into a gentle rise and fall beside the dock. A

port in the ship's rail was swung open and a gangplank run out. Li picked up his pack and made his way over to the plank and down onto the dock. None of the crew got in his way.

Steth was already down and talking to the dockmaster. Both men looked up as Li stepped into the lantern light. The dockmaster's eyes went wide then narrow, and he shot a glance at the captain. "You didn't say he was an elf! Bringing an elf-blood to Spandeliyon? You are mad!"

Li's jaw tightened. His smooth skin, fine features, and tapered eyes had earned him this reaction elsewhere in the west, though not with this hostility. The captain saved him from having to explain himself—he dealt the dockmaster a sharp blow to the back of his head. "He's not an elf!" he hissed. "Haven't you ever seen a Shou before, Cul?"

The dockmaster managed to look startled once more. "From Thesk? Like one of those eastern Tuigan horde riders?"

Li drew a sharp breath, stood straight and returned the dockmaster's gaze. "I am not a barbarian," he said, forming the thick syllables carefully. "I come from the Great Empire of Shou Lung." More eastern, he added silently, than your uncivilized mind could possibly comprehend and far greater than you could believe. "I require directions. I need to find a wine shop."

"What?" Cul glanced at Steth once more, but this time the captain shrugged and shook his head. The dockmaster looked back to Li and licked his lips. "No wine shops here," he said slowly and with great volume as if that would make him easier to understand. "No wine shops. There is a wine merchant in—"

The dockmaster used a word Li didn't recognize, but

pointed in the direction of the tall houses and fortress Li had seen from the ship. The wealthier part of Spandelion. A wine merchant for the rich people, Li guessed. He frowned.

“No,” he said. He spoke clearly, but kept his voice at a normal pitch. Let this old goat sound like a backward fool if he insists, he told himself, but I will not! “Not a wine shop.” He searched his memory for the proper word. “A taven.”

“A taven?” The dock master blinked. “Oh, a *tavern*.” The man tried to hide an unpleasant smile and failed miserably. Li frowned again. He swept the wide sleeve of his waitao aside and unclipped the scabbard that hung at his belt. He held it loosely, casually, but making certain that Cul could see both it and the protruding hilt of the heavy, curved dao within. If the man’s empty eyes had gone wide before, they practically bulged out of his head now. His hand twitched for a knife sheathed at his belt, but Steth caught his arm.

“Yes,” said Li calmly. “A tavern.”

The captain answered for the dockmaster. “You could have asked me,” he growled. Li just gave him a blunt glance. Steth grunted. “Fine.” He nodded to his left. “Go that way and you’ll find the Eel.” He nodded right. “That way is the Wench’s Ease.”

There was an unspoken warning in his voice: both taverns were dangerous places. Li wouldn’t have expected any less. “Which one is most close?” he asked. Steth shrugged.

“Both about the same.”

A cautious man lets his weapon precede him, Li thought. He gestured with his sword hand—to the right. “This one, this ‘wencheese’—how will I find it?”

“Wench’s Ease,” the captain corrected him. “Walk

until you find a tree. It's the only one in dockside. There's a sign."

"I don't read your language."

Cul found his voice. "Don't need to. There's a picture of pretty wench on the sign," he said in a greasy tone. "You'll see that."

"If I don't," Li told him, "I will come back and you can guide me yourself." He turned right and began to walk.

Behind him, he heard the dockmaster mutter, "Arrogant bastard, isn't he?"

"Cul, you don't know the sweet chum half of it," answered the captain.

Li didn't look back, but just stared into the shadows ahead and let their voices fade behind him. His scabbard he kept out and ready. The cramped streets seemed empty, but that could change all too quickly. Spandeliyon was so far proving itself to be nothing more than he had expected—nothing more than he had been warned to expect. He clenched his teeth. The surface of the street under his boots was barely frozen mud, treacherous in the thin moonlight. He should, he supposed, be grateful for the cold. It killed whatever stench might have oozed out of the mud in warmer weather and kept the people of the town indoors by their smoking fires.

In that, at least, he actually found himself envying them. A fire would be a blessing. As, he thought, would a torch. He should have demanded one of the sniveling dockmaster. But then again, he should also have asked more about the picture on the sign he sought. "Wench," he murmured to himself, trying to puzzle out the meaning of the word.

The snow was beginning to fall more thickly by the time the street opened up into a small courtyard and Li

spotted the tree the captain had mentioned. It was actually much larger than he had been expecting, an old giant stripped naked by winter. A small knot of figures clustered around its base, two of them holding up a third. Li almost called out to them for directions before one of them shifted and he saw what they were doing. The third man had been hung from the tree's branches—the other two were busy stealing his boots. And his stockings. And his pants. Li sucked in a sharp breath of disgust.

The thieves must have heard him. One looked up, yelped at the sight of an armed man, and slapped his partner. Both fled, leaving the dead man turning slowly in the cold air, pants dangling loose around his knees. Li averted his eyes as he passed.

Only one of the buildings around the tree bore any sign at all. Not that a sign seemed truly necessary—light and song seeped through gaps around the door. Some of the light splashed across the sign above as well, revealing a lurid painting of a laughing woman so buxom she almost spilled out of her bodice. Li guessed that he had found out what “wench” meant. He averted his eyes again, shifting his gaze to the ground, apparently the only safe place to look.

It wasn't. The snow and muck between tree and tavern had been churned up, as if by many feet. The hanged man's killers had emerged from under the sign of the wench. His hand squeezed the scabbard of his dao and he glanced up briefly at the corpse dangling from the tree. “May the Immortals grant me better luck in this place than they did you,” he said. He reached out and opened the tavern door.



There was nothing better than a good song to loosen hearts—and more important, Tycho thought, throats. He grinned to himself as he sawed his bow across the strilling. The dark ale of the Wench's Ease was flowing as smooth as bait on a hook. Even Lander and his men were drinking and singing along with the tavern regulars. Muire and her serving maids were busier than they had been in a tenday and if Muire was happy enough at the end of the night, there might even be a little extra coin for him. All he needed to do was keep the mood up. "How about another?" he bellowed over the din.

A cheer came back to him. Tycho sent a ripple of music dancing out from the strilling then scraped the bow slowly, drawing the crowd's attention to him. "Ahhh," he rasped sadly as his audience fell quiet, *"the wizards of Thay, they have a way with magic and with spells. They shave the hair on their head and they dress all in red, and they're dour like clams in their shells."*

The bow scratched a string for emphasis. A few people laughed and Tycho flashed them a smile. *"But there's a reason they're bald-ed, and dress like they're scalded and all have the humor of rocks."* He paused and the crowd leaned forward in anticipation. *"That isn't a pimple. . . ."* He winked at one of the serving maids. *". . . you see on their . . . dimple . . ."*

"It's pox!" he yelled and the crowd joined in, banging tables and singing lustily. *"It's pox, it's pox, they've got the Thayan pox!"*

Tycho strutted out into the middle of the floor and spun around to the shouts of the crowd, playing fast and hard. *"Well, there's Thayan pox in every port, in sailor's shack and prince's court—"*

"The pox, the pox, they've got the Thayan pox!"

“When’ere you see a wizard itch, you know what is that makes ’em twitch!”

“The pox, the pox, they’ve got the Thayan pox!”

In Tycho’s head, the trickle of coins that Muire usually doled out at the end of the night was turning into a small flood. He laughed. *“Even temples aren’t safe anymore,”* he sang, *“you never know who walked through that door!”* He swept out his arm and pointed his bow at the Ease’s own rickety portal—

—which opened.

For one moment, the slightest fraction of a heartbeat, the crowd—and Tycho—paused. Framed in the tavern doorway was a tall man dressed in a long quilted coat of blue wool. Snow clung to his shoulders and to the fur-edged cap that he wore. If the snow bothered him, however, there was no trace of it in his travel-tanned, fine-boned face. He stood straight as a mast, stern and dignified.

For a moment.

“The pox!” howled the crowd in perfect time. “The pox! *He’s got the Thayan pox!*”

The stranger’s mouth drew a thin line across his face.

It wasn’t clear who in the crowd laughed first. It simply started and spread, sweeping through the tavern like a storm until everyone was hooting and guffawing. Tycho tried to fight it off but couldn’t. Laughter rose from his belly and forced its way out of him. He barely managed to get his bow back to the strilling and scratch out the last bars of the song before doubling over in helpless mirth.

The only people in the place not laughing were the stranger and Muire. The stranger stepped into the tavern, slamming the door shut behind him, and stalked over to the bar. Muire gave Tycho a fierce look. The bard

swallowed a laugh and reached out to the stranger as he passed. “Oloré, friend,” he choked. “Welcome to the Wench’s Ease.” He couldn’t hold back a crooked smile. “The merriest tavern in Spandeliyon.”

The stranger twitched away from his hand as though Tycho carried the Thayan pox himself. “Leave me, singer,” he said in a thick accent and walked on.

At the nearest table, Rana’s laughter turned into an ugly snort. “Arrogant elf-blood,” she spat at the stranger’s retreating back.

“He’s not elf-blood, Rana,” Tycho told her, straightening up. “He’s a Shou.”

“Elf, Shou—you don’t see much of neither in Spandeliyon.”

“No,” agreed Tycho, “you don’t.” He nodded distracted acknowledgment as others in the crowd shouted for another song, but didn’t raise his strilling again. Instead, he turned and went after the stranger.

The Shou was just stepping up to the bar. Tycho gave him a surreptitious examination as he approached. The Shou was tall, lean, and stiff, a sturdy doorpost of a man. The pack he carried slung over one shoulder was large and heavy. The wool of his coat was dusty, dirt muting the fine blue of the quilted fabric. It was fraying slightly along the hem and at the cuffs and elbows. Unless he missed his guess, the man had come a long, long way. Clipping his bow to the strap of his strilling and shifting the instrument around to ride on his back once more, Tycho bellied up to the bar beside him. The Shou glanced at him out of the corner of his almond-shaped eyes.

“I said leave me, singer. I do not want a song.” The Shou man turned away as if Tycho were already gone from his mind and set a scabbard containing a heavy Shou saber on

the bar. He looked to Muire. "A clean cup with good wine or pale ale." He set some coins on the bar.

Sembian copper pennies. A scant price for a mug of ale in another port, but just right for dockside Spandeliyon. The man, Tycho judged, was an experienced traveler.

Muire glanced down at the pennies, not even blinking at the saber beside them. "A clean cup I can give you," she said, "but we only have dark ale here." The Shou nodded and Muire turned away to the ale casks. Conversation in the tavern was returning to normal, laughter dying out to be replaced by the usual hum and murmur. Much of it, Tycho was fairly certain, would be about this unusual visitor.

The Ease's patrons were whetting their appetites for a good story and, bind him, he'd be the one to give it to them! He leaned in. The Shou fixed him with an angry glare, but Tycho didn't back away. Instead he smiled at him. "You've come to a poor town on a cold night, honored lord," he said in the musical Shou tongue.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the stranger's eyes widen ever so slightly in surprise. "You speak Shou," he replied in the same language.

"A little bit," Tycho told him modestly. "You aren't the only traveler here. I had the pleasure of spending some time in the Shou town of Telflamm in Thesk and learned your language there."

The stranger nodded. "Ah," he said. He looked directly at Tycho. "That would explain why you speak it like a lisp-ing whore from Ch'ing Tung."

Blood rushed to Tycho's face. He opened his mouth, a stinging insult rising to his lips, but Muire cut him off before he could deliver it. "Your ale, sir," she said, setting a tankard down before the Shou—and one before Tycho

as well, foamy, thick, and hastily drawn. “And yours.” The Shou man picked up his tankard and nodded to her. When Tycho reached for his own, though, Muire gave the tankard a shove that sent foam slopping onto his hand and sleeve.

“Let it go,” she hissed. “I don’t know what you’re saying to him, but I can read faces as well as anyone.”

“Muire—”

“I’ve had enough trouble tonight. Apologize to him!”

Growling, Tycho took a deep swig of ale and glanced over at the Shou. The man seemed to have forgotten him already. He was scanning the crowd of the tavern, holding his ale but not actually drinking it. There was a look of deep intensity on his face. Though any number of the Ease’s patrons were staring at him, he didn’t appear to make eye contact with any of them. Lost in his own haughty world, Tycho thought balefully. He gulped some more ale—and swallowed his pride with it. He leaned over toward the Shou. The man’s gaze snapped back to him immediately with the experience of a trained fighter. Tycho realized that he held his tankard in his left hand. One swift move would have his right around the grip of his saber. Tycho stayed still, as if absolutely nothing were wrong. “I’m sorry if my feeble attempts at Shou have offended you, sir.” In spite of the stranger’s insult, he stuck with the language. “My name is Tychoben Arisaenn, but everyone calls me Tycho. May I know your name?”

The Shou’s mouth twitched into a narrow frown. “My surname is Kuang and my personal name is Li Chien and if you insist on addressing me again, you will go to the gates of the afterlife with that name upon your lips.”

This time, Tycho actually choked. Heckling, even dismissal—those were one thing. He could deal with them.

He had dealt with them, in taverns all around the Sea of Fallen Stars from Spandeliyon to Suzail, Procampur to Arrabar, and back again. Blunt intimidation, on the other hand, was something else. His jaw clenched. “You might want to have a care, Master Kuang. Threats aren’t taken lightly around here.”

“That’s wise,” the Shou replied. “A man should take seriously every threat made to him—as well as every threat that he makes himself.”

Both of his hands were still, right open to seize his blade, left steady and ready to toss his tankard. Tycho had been through enough tavern brawls to recognize the body language. Behind him, he heard Muire curse quietly. “Tycho . . .” she said with low warning.

Her words seemed to echo. The Wench’s Ease had suddenly grown quiet, Tycho realized, the hint of violence drawing every eye. Tycho ignored both Muire and the stares of the crowd. “What do you want here, Master Kuang?” he asked, abandoning attempts at Shou. “If you want trouble, you didn’t have to travel so far.”

The change in language seemed to give the stranger pause. He blinked and his frown grew deeper as he noticed the attention of the crowd as well. He straightened up and looked out at all of the Ease’s patrons.

“I am looking for a man,” he announced in his thick accent. “A man who was a pirate.”

Tycho’s lips curved up and he snickered—then laughed. So did the crowd. For the second time that night, laughter washed through the Ease. Unlike the first time, however, there wasn’t anything good-natured about it. Tycho gave the Shou a thin smile. “Master Kuang, have you heard of Aglarond? It’s the country to the northeast of Altumbel. Its ruler is the Simbul. The Witch-Queen. She doesn’t like

pirates and she doesn't have much mercy for the ones that she catches off her coasts. There have been a lot of pirates recently who decided it would be better if they were to stay away from Aglarond and take up a more peaceful profession. Like fishing. In Spandeliyon."

He nodded out to the crowd. A good number of the Ease's patrons—a very large number—opened their mouths in gap-toothed grins.

The Shou said nothing. Tycho wondered if the man had followed what he had just said. "Master Kuang?"

"I understand," the Shou said narrowly. He stood stiff and said in words that sounded carefully practiced, "The man I'm looking for is a one-eyed hin—a halfling—who was mate on a ship called the *Sow*. His name—then—was Brin."

Laughter died instantly. Grins disappeared. Even Tycho felt his anger drain away. "Master Kuang. . . ."

Kuang Li Chien gave him a sharp glare. To the crowd, he said, "I will reward anyone who takes me to Brin. I have business with him."

For a moment, no one moved. Then a chair scraped back. "I'll take you to Brin," called a voice.

Lander stood up.

Breath caught in Tycho's throat. He glanced at the Shou. The man was giving Lander a measured look that turned into a curt nod. "Very well." He twisted around and set his tankard, still full, on the bar. As he picked up his saber, Tycho caught his eye and tried to give him a slight shake of his head, a silent warning. Kuang Li Chien just pressed his lips together and turned away. "I will give you the reward when we find Brin," he said to Lander.

"Fair enough." Lander adjusted his mantle and walked over to the door. A box beside it held cheap torches for

patrons who needed them. Lander flipped a coin into the box and took one, holding it over a candle to light it. In only a moment, the torch was burning and a wreath of smoke surrounded Lander. He opened the door. Cold air and snow gusted inside. "After you," he said.

"No," insisted Kuang Li Chien, "I will follow you." Lander shrugged and stepped out into the night. The Shou followed him without a backward glance.

The door slammed shut on a silent tavern. No one said anything—at least none of the Ease's regular patrons. At the table Lander had just abandoned, his men began snickering and jostling each other as they rushed to drain their tankards. After a few long moments, they rose and walked out the door as well. Once they were gone, Tycho blew out a long breath. "Bind me," he murmured. He lifted his tankard to his lips, gulped the bitter ale, and turned around to glance at Muire. Her face was hard. Both of them looked at the Shou's untouched tankard. "Dead man's ale, Muire," Tycho said.

The tavern keeper took the tankard and dumped the ale inside into a slop bucket. Tycho nodded and turned back around. Throughout the Ease, conversation was muted as people dived deep into their ale. Tycho pulled his strilling back up to his shoulder and put bow to string. Music rippled out, bringing sound back into the tavern and pushing away memory of the Shou's brief, ill-fated visit.