



CHAPTER 1

Wun Lung

The world of Pangaea is the soil of the Gardener, a majestic being sent by the Creator to nurture the land and its races. A child of the Creator, the Gardener has evolved with the myriad inhabitants over the ages as he tended to his crops and shaped the lives of civilization. Through guidance and harmony, the Gardener has used his gifts to protect and guide his flock through the dark times of years past. The Gardener now senses with these gifts that a new age is soon to be upon us. Therefore, it is time for him to bring balance back to the world once again, for the lands of Pangaea are rife with darkness and despair.

Years of hardships and war caused a rift amongst the good races of the lands. Out of this rift grew humans' rapid expansion and need for conquest, but at its core, it was fueled by a great evil, and all the human cities were under its bloody banner. The culture of humans became a dark and twisted version of its former glory.

But that is about to change, thinks the Gardener.

Like the seasons that follow one another, he can see the signs of things to come; many possible possibilities are ripe for his picking. Now the Gardener sets his mind's eye upon the world and finds a darkness growing. However, he also finds several lights growing brighter with each passing moment. Now he must tap his well of true power, harvesting those devoted to the Sacred Tree and their pledge to the cause of all that is good and fair in this world. Letting go of his mortal shell, he gains knowledge and insight into all of his seedlings now ready to sprout. His divine essence then travels on the winds of destiny as he rides its currents... its ebbs and flows.

It is on this wind that we find a mysterious smoke. At the whim of its master, the smoke travels along until it encroaches on the outskirts of Haven, a small city rife with poverty and injustice. The smoke blends into the night air and then defies its strict master by going against the current direction of the breeze. Thunder splits the night and rain falls steadily, yet the smoke clings to the rooftops and drifts down into a dark alley, ever moving at a slow, steady pace.

As lightning flashes, several figures are seen closing in on an elderly man and a small child. The cries of help from the aged man and child are lost in the rain and thunder of the deserted alley. They begin to cower, both with their backs pressed against the wet stone wall. Smoke drifts in and begins to fill the alley, which at times is laid bare by the erratic pulses of the storm's fury. The old man is Old Doggery, and all that can be heard over his fast-beating heart is the steady pitter-patter of cold rain as it begins to pour down heavily.

To Old Doggery, the lightning and thunder only heighten his panic, but still the old man puts the child behind him protectively, sensing the inevitable tragedy soon to come. A deep breath seems to suddenly calm the old man, and his body

relaxes and releases its tension. He cannot understand it, for he knows of the clan's vicious ways and what that could mean for his grandchild. The clan's reputation for theft of not only valuables but also children—taken to be indoctrinated into the clan—should have him terrified. The Clan Shitake, under orders from the emperor, has taken control of Haven, which has become bleak and dangerous. Nevertheless, Old Doggery needed medicine for his daughter, whom he cherishes more than his own life.

Therefore, he took a shortcut to save time and distance, and now he finds five clan members surrounding him and his small grandchild, Jakobe. When the cutthroats pull out blades that reflect the lightning on their cold steel, Old Doggery still cannot figure out why he is not frightened out of his loose skin. The old man catches a familiar scent in the air, and a flash of lightning reveals a shadow drifting in as if born of the smoke.

It gives birth to his arrival, as the man moves with the grace of clouds across the sky. Swiftly and suddenly, the smoke-enshrouded form takes out the nearest evil cutthroat. A quick hand to the throat, a sharp intake of air, and another one of the vicious clan members goes down before the smoke-figure's presence is known. The three other miscreants react as if just woken from a dream, all of their faces masks of confusion and hesitation.

Now the figure fully emerges from the cloud of smoke—a tall man of nearly 6'3", wide of shoulder with a lanky gait. He is clothed in black and gray with a wide peasant hat, which is common in the human realms. The Smoking Monk lifts his eyes level with the cold-hearted killers; several moments of silence follow. The monk tokes deeply from his pipe, his face revealed as his eyes reflect the glowing embers from his bowl. He takes one long toke and lets out a cloud of smoke, which

drifts over the three assailants.

“You’re the Smoking Monk,” says one of the killers, with panic in his voice. Nodding slightly, the monk answers the question with some of his own.

“Yes, you are correct, but what clan do you represent? I don’t recognize the insignia.”

Before they reply, the monk notices the killers are not as affected by his cannabis as they should be.

“We are of the Clan Shitake,” replies a braver voice of one of the clansmen.

The Smoking Monk is reminded of years earlier, when he first traveled on his own; he encountered bandits who were kidnapping children, a heinous act that is continuing even today. He wonders if these clans have sprung from those incidents. His immediate question answered, the Smoking Monk decides to let the clansmen live to tell of his reappearance, since he believes it can serve his purpose better than their deaths.

“Ah...the Clan Shitake, I will remember that. Now, since you have only frightened the old man and child...and I was just passing through...I will let you leave in peace. Be gone then, or die,” offers the monk, gesturing with his pipe.

Two of the killers look to each other as the other steps forward to speak. He says, “No...but we will be honored to take you to our master. He has been looking for you.”

The only response the clan member gets is a face full of smoke followed by a series of attacks that burst through it. Using the smoke to keep himself obscured, the monk delivers rapid strikes that further disorient the assailants. A life ends as the Smoking Monk’s pipe connects to one of the killer’s temples. As embers burst from the pipe, the Smoking Monk fans his free arm, sending the hot projectiles at the remaining two members of the clan. Taking advantage of the distraction,

the monk attacks again suddenly. With a graceful flow of movements, he overwhelms the last two killers with fast direct strikes that target vital areas of the body.

All five are dead or dying in the dark, wet alley as Old Doggery finds his voice. "I thank you, my friend," murmurs the old man, who is wet to the bone.

A slight snoring seems to jar his senses. "Ah...young Jakobe, all is well now," he croaks, looking down at his grandchild clinging to his leg.

When his eyes return to his savior, all he sees is a cloud of billowing smoke, which soon dissipates with the wind and rain.

If one could follow the young monk (and there are not many who could), they would find themselves up over roofs, down through alleys, and into the slums, whose boundaries have grown over the years to include much of the town. Wun Lung, the Smoking Monk, stares at a fire as bums and the destitute mingle about, scavenging for food and drink. As the rain steadily falls about his wide hemp hat, he sees several beggars approaching. Only one of them seems brave enough to break the monk's quiet moment alone by extending his hand. Still holding his pipe and toking deeply, Wun Lung places several precut pieces of broad leaf, a dark tobacco that is aged to bring out its natural sweet taste, on an upended barrel. With one hand he begins placing his cannabis bud into broad leaves and rolling them up.

"Some smokes for your pains and those of your friends," offers the generous monk to the beggar whose hand is outstretched.

"Still looking out for us, I see...my friend," slurs the beggar, who seems to recognize the Smoking Monk from years past.

He then takes the perfectly rolled broad leaves and bows in gratitude to the quiet monk, quickly setting flame to one of the wraps and passing around the rest to his fellow vagabonds. Wun

Lung sits deep in thought, his dark complexion orange with the fire's glow. Igniting his own wrap, he thinks of recent events and rumors of dark times.

Wun Lung is not your ordinary monk; he was trained by Master Chong in a deadly form of martial arts called the Smoking Monk Style. It was one of the five Deadly Addiction Styles his master had created over much inner debate many long years before. The styles are based off substances which enable a martial artist to achieve incredible feats of prowess. All of the students of Master Chong were chosen because of a special ability to withstand the negative side effects of their Addiction. Each pupil focused on a traditional form of martial arts, such as the Crane and Tiger styles, or the Element styles based off Air, Fire, Water and Earth. Combined with an assortment of techniques involving substances such as Cocaine and Cannabis, they are able to reach supernatural levels of awareness of one's mind and body. Wun loves cannabis, and it is his drug of choice, but his style lends to smoking and using many substances, all to enhance the natural ability he was born with.

Taking a long pull on his wrap, Wun's thoughts bring him to a time when he was training with his master, and he smiles as he imagines him sitting opposite from him, his voice strong yet sincere.

“Dark times may come to us one day, but one must not let it influence their emotions and state of mind. Let the smoke out, and with it all your anger and your fears. Let all distraction go my young smoking dragon; clear your mind and relax. Let the herb expand your awareness to see what is not seen; what is near and what is far; what are past, present, and future. Then you will see through the darkness that comes, and you will know what you will have to do.”

The memory of his slow-speaking Master Chong eating

peyote buttons brings a chuckle to his lips as he considers what motivated him to leave his good friend and quiet life to start out on this journey.

While visiting with his elven friend Aero, who maintains the gardens in the legendary elven city of Silachril, Wun was smoking in the gardens and meditating. It was then that he had a vision of his father dying in bed, and what followed was darkness and death throughout the lands. Cities ran red with blood as chaos and war spread throughout. The vision became more of a feeling of dread as the images became hidden from him in blackness and gloom. Soon after attaining what his master had called “gaining insight,” Wun started following his visions and intuitions, which convinced him to embark on a quest for truth and the wishes of his former master. While Wun was with the elves, rumors spread of the emperor’s conquest, how his army had rapidly taken over most of the human nations and cities. Rumors also told of newly formed clans—as vicious and cruel as the emperor and his soldiers—that displayed very interesting tactics.

The Smoking Monk followed his insight, which over time has led him to his recent encounter with the Clan Shitake. Wun heard some rumors that the clans were based in Addiction Styles, which set off alarm bells in his mind.

Wun Lung begins toking on his pipe in rhythmic fashion, and it begins to stoke and release plumes of smoke in synch with his breathing. As the monk delves deeper into his meditative trance, he attains a level of awareness brought on by years of training and, of course, his Arluv bud, a special blend of cannabis grown by Aerotheman Solarien, a good friend who Wun calls Aero. Through the veil of darkness in his vision emerges a figure in Wun Lung’s mind. The young monk clearly sees an image of his half-brother Yul, obviously

older and, not surprisingly, with drink.

So stunned is the Smoking Monk that it brings him out of his insightful meditation quicker than he planned. Wun wonders if Yul could be involved with these clans and the dark rumors on the ears of many these days. Yul Lager is the Drunken Monk. Not only is he Wun's half-brother, but he is also the only other student to train alongside the Smoking Monk many years ago.

Trying not to let his past with his brother (as bad as it was) interfere with his emotions, Wun thinks things through about his visions and feelings. His instincts tell him Yul is not behind the clans and the emperor's engine of war but actually a potential victim of their evil ways. Yul, like Wun, learned from Master Chong and has what their master called "a special trait," making him somewhat unique. The Smoking Monk's feelings tell him Yul would never betray Master Chong, but finding the truth—no matter how bad it could turn out to be—is necessary.

Once again, Wun smokes from his pipe and begins to meditate, finding his balance and focus between his consciousness and beyond. The memory of his first meeting with Master Chong comes to mind. Master Chong, at the time, was fleeing from a newly corrupted government and, according to him; he had burned his huge crops of cannabis and other substances in the fields to provide an escape. Wun was six years old and on his way home with a package when he stumbled into the huge fields of smoke and actually made it through to clear air on the other side. All the while, he could hear screams and sounds of confusion coming from the burning fields. However, his state of mind was slowly becoming surreal. Master Chong told him how surprised he was to see the young boy come through the smoke in a daze.

“With all the other substances I added to the cannabis, I am surprised you are not dead,” Master Chong had exclaimed those many years ago.

Wun does not remember much of that day but does chuckle at his memory of all the food he ate later on. It was then that Master Chong took an interest in the young boy, and he would soon train him in the Smoking Monk Style.

Master Chong explained to Wun that he had a special trait, one that would allow him to endure and adapt to his addiction. It was not long after that his half-brother Yul became a fellow student of Wun’s. He and his Yul have the same mother but different fathers. Even though the two had already had a torrid past, they trained for many years together, each learning a unique Addiction Style. They both were instructed in all things that grow, how they can be used alone or together or mixed with other substances for many purposes. Some are to heal or confuse, others to stop pain and cure disease. They learned of all addictions and the strengths and weaknesses that they bring, from the growing of the crops to the brewing of the gin.

Both enhanced their martial arts and improved mind and body, over time allowing them to endure and learn more than they thought possible. Each had unique training suited to fit his styles and natural abilities, and both honed their skills and techniques over several years of intense training. Master Chong also taught them to respect all addictions and how to cope with the side effects—good and bad, long and short—and to teach others the same, to a certain degree.

Master Chong spoke of his first three students of the Addiction Styles and what addictions they favored; they were masters of the Heroin, the Coca, and the Mushroom. It ended badly between them, and the original three students of the Addiction Styles left Master Chong in anger. Wun remembers

his master worrying that his original students would break their vow and teach the deadlier secrets to those without the trait needed to cope with their addiction. Teaching the secret styles to those who do not have the special trait ends in disastrous results. Corruption cannot be avoided under the heavy influence of drugs needed to master the styles.

Wun and Yul both took the same oath, as Master Chong insisted upon it. Master Chong also informed the two that their styles would, with practice and time, be superior to those of the original three. If his fears came true and his original students broke their vow, the Smoking Monk and the Drunken Monk would need to execute justice.

Wun's thoughts return to the present, and now he wonders if his master's fears have come true. The Clan Shitake is obviously another name for the Clan Mushroom, and in the short time Wun has been back, he has seen horrible deeds and heard worse about the secretive clans. Slavery, rape, drug abuse, rigged gambling, and apparently waging war have become common tales of the clans. Stories of violence so brutal, it defies belief. The oppression of the people so heavy, it has broken those who are weak and trapped with no recourse. Wun can actually feel the culture changing in his bones, and it brings forth memories of his master, who left both him and Yul after many years of their constant fighting. It was a time when he was truly lost.

Wun has always been a quiet and introverted person. Smoking cannabis only deepens his moods and, feeling empathy as he watches the beggars get hungry off his smoke, he decides to cook some food. He takes off his peasant hat and removes an iron bowl, a metal version of the hat, with the ability to serve as a pot to cook in or hopefully, one day, for the monk to enlarge the bowl of his pipe.

The monk cooks a dish of spicy chicken and shares small words with those who are crowding around the fire. He then cleans his gear and gathers his belongings quietly as the bums fill their bellies. Lighting a wrap and toking deeply, he thinks of Old Doggery, for Wun has heard of his daughter's illness and knows how hard it is to get medicine in these times. Wun has always had a reputation for being a generous person, for he spent much time in the slums of the cities after his master left. There is a tale of him curing a plague that nearly killed all in the run-down part of Haven. That reputation holds to this day. As Wun departs unnoticed by the beggars, he makes his way to Old Doggery's house, careful not to be seen.

Old Doggery sits watching his grandchild sleeping on the floor next to his ill mother and blames himself for nearly getting himself and little Jakobe killed. But Old Doggery knows the medicine he procured is not working on his daughter anyway. The old man tries to have faith in the Creator and prays to the Gardener to come and heal his only child.

Old Doggery gets up, pours a drink of water, and nearly drops the mug to the ground as a shadow detaches itself from under the staircase. Wun Lung steps into the firelight, and before the old man can speak, the Smoking Monk raises his open hands and says, "I am here to see if I can help your daughter."

The old man is silent as he looks hard into Wun's eyes, then his face softens.

"You're too kind; anything you can do would be most welcome," says the old man, gesturing for Wun to follow. Coming to his daughter's bed, the old man's eyes tear up.

"Penelope has been ill for over two weeks; no one seems to be able to do anything," pleads the old man desperately. "Since the emperor's troops have taken control, healers and medicine have become hard to find, and what healers there are have

little to work with,” he adds, shaking his head.

Wun bends down and proceeds to examine the sick woman. Looking none over thirty, her pale skin looks silky and gray.

“I have to take off her clothes and examine the skin closely,” says the monk to the old man in soothing tones.

“Fine, my boy, do what you must,” groans Old Doggery as he watches the monk undress his daughter. Wun takes several minutes checking the ailing woman’s skin and feeling her pulse. After probing her chi, the monk meditates on her illness. Several quiet minutes later, Wun stands up and walks over to a table, opening his backpack as Old Doggery walks over.

“Can you help her?” asks the old man, with hope in his eyes.

“Yes, she had the misfortune of being ill and then bitten by a spider while she was weak,” explains the monk, gathering his many pouches about the table and emptying their contents. Old Doggery nearly knocks over a lantern, eager to help Wun with some light. However, Wun’s quick reflexes save the oil lamp before it hits the ground. Wun then begins inspecting his various pouches and glass tubes of plants and chemicals. Taking an empty tube, he begins to add some powders and plant life. After adding cannabis oil, he shakes the vial vigorously for several seconds.

“I can help her, but you must do exactly as I instruct,” demands the monk in soft but commanding tones. Wun takes his vial and adds a thick, foul-smelling liquid to it and shakes it once again until the liquid is brown and of a smooth consistency.

“Give her two teaspoons twice a day with her tea, until all of it is finished,” explains the monk. Grabbing several chews from his pouch, which are basically small leaves wrapped around a recipe to be slowly absorbed into the body; he then adds in several ingredients for the current situation and hands

them to Doggery.

“Have her take these for the pain. Her joints are going to ache for a couple of weeks. She must *chew* on these only, drinking only the juices,” instructs Wun. “Do not let her swallow the chew itself. If she does, make her vomit immediately,” he warns.

“Penelope can chew one a week, and that will leave you with plenty to spare,” Wun continues. “If her pain is too great, let her chew two at a time for an hour a day,” finishes the Smoking Monk sternly. As he gathers his belongings, his eyes find the small boy still sleeping. He notices bruises on the small child.

“If you need to use a chew for the boy, cut it in half.”

Wun secures his gear as Old Doggery prepares a pot to boil water. Seeing the monk ready to leave, the old man hobbles over with tears in his eyes.

“Thank you, thank you so much. I feel ashamed I have nothing to repay you with,” stammers the old man sincerely. The monk looks at the old man with compassion in his eyes, and then an idea comes to him.

“If you are questioned about me, tell the truth, and explain I mentioned heading for Southguard. That will be all the payment I desire,” Wun says with a warm smile on his face as he leaves the old man’s home.

The Smoking Monk, ever alert, looks around before heading into the shadows and the rain. The young monk is always thinking, his mind racing with the possibilities of his next move. He decides to follow his instincts and insight, for what they are worth, to guide him to discovering the truth behind his visions. Wun moves quickly through the shadows, exiting the city of Haven. The lithe monk is soon crossing the fields of wheat that lead into the countryside. The scattered

trees provide little cover from the rain; nevertheless, Wun's feelings urge him to keep on the move. His addiction urges him to wait and plan carefully, to be passive and calm. Wun's instincts tell him he cannot afford to stay in one place, so he picks up the pace and weathers the cold rain that steadily falls.

The sounds of rain and thunder and the accompanying radiant flashes of lightning are not the monk's only companions as he makes his way to the city of Strainhold. Many hours later, Wun rests within the shelter of a large grouping of bushes on a small rock outcropping. The monk rests confidently in his ability to sleep yet remain aware and looks quite comfortable wrapped in his cloak. Focusing on his brother Yul and the possibility of him being in Strainhold, he seems to be sound asleep, yet he searches for answers. As the smoke from his pipe drifts on the damp night air, its nebulous shape is disturbed and carried along by shapes in the night.

Suddenly Wun's eyes open and he quickly sits up, listening intently. He stays absolutely still, intuiting his feelings of danger. Raindrops drum their beat as Wun quickly ignites a wrap off his bowl and sets it down. The monk then ties a spare cloak to the bushes inside his shelter and slips out without notice into the rainy forest. With the ease of a cat, he is quickly up a tree with a good vantage point, studying the area with great interest.

Not bad; less than fourteen hours and they tracked me, thinks Wun, who left no easy trail to follow, except for only the best trackers.

The monk pulls deeply from his pipe and closes the large lid. He holds his breath for a long time, and his exhale reveals no smoke at all. After several moments, Wun spots figures moving stealthily toward his former shelter. The sharp-eyed monk counts four in total and judges by their movements that they are not amateurs. One of the shady individuals gives

hand signals to the other three, and soon they separate and circle the shelter at a distance. Three of the trackers each pull out a box and set fire to the contents, causing a steady flow of smoke to issue forth. They then each take out a blowgun and load tiny darts before signaling back to their apparent leader.

Wun Lung watches eagerly, as he can see the smoke still rising from his wrap as it slowly burns within his former shelter. The monk then catches the aroma of the smoke emitting from one of the boxes his pursuers placed, and he is truly surprised. Wun knows the purpose of such a device: to weaken his cannabis and his style, a way to gain an advantage over his abilities. Focusing on the leader and the pin fastening his cloak, recognition comes to the monk quickly: the Clan Shitake!

* * * * *

Captain Dyer Bracket of the Clan Shitake is ecstatic about finding the Smoking Monk so quickly. A smile of extreme pleasure is on his gaunt face as he scouts his target's makeshift shelter. The captain gives the signal to separate and ignite their aroma boxes and then closely watches the smoke drift up from Wun Lung's shelter, hoping to get a good look through the dense cover.

As his men load their blowguns, Captain Dyer can just make out Wun's cloak as he peers into the shelter looking for any sign of his prey. Pulling out a pouch and popping several mushrooms into his mouth, he gives his men the order to attack as soon as he cuts down the leafy section of the shelter. The clan members never realize their mistake as Wun's vantage point also serves to keep him at a distance from their aroma devices. Now prepared for their tricks, he quickly makes a special chew before biting down hard on it. Wun skillfully slips behind one of the clan members closest to him, waiting for the moment to

strike. Captain Dyer, so stoned, never notices the dark shape drifting behind his man. The rush of his high narrows his vision, for the chance to capture the Smoking Monk alive is an opportunity for advancement he cannot pass up.

Wun Lung watches the leader of the group eat some mushrooms and pull out a long sword. The captain then rushes the monk's shelter in a burst of speed, slashing away the bushes and rolling to the side, and in a split second the three other clan members release their poisoned needles at Wun's spare cloak. As soon as the Smoking Monk's closest enemy shoots his first dart, he slides his stiletto into the base of the clansman's brain that is at the back of the group. Unheard because of the sound of rain falling heavy and his skill, he is able to quietly lay the body flat and hide it in the tall grass. He then quickly dons his enemy's cloak and picks up his weapon. Pulling the hood up, Wun's disguise is now complete. Pushing aside the dawning knowledge that his master's fears were correct, the Smoking Monk gathers himself and focuses on the task at hand. Wun mimics his false allies and waits for their leader's signal, and all watch as the captain inspects the area around the shelter for traps. After examining the shelter, Wun can only guess the meaning of the captain's hand signals but assumes it is basically, "He is close; keep an eye out."

Watching the two trackers look around tensely, Wun Lung thinks he has guessed correctly. Now he takes the opportunity to get closer to another one of his enemies and gets in position to take down the next of his prey without causing alarm. Trying to distinguish the strange noises that are common in a storm and peering into the night, the clan member never sees his death coming. Wun then hides the

body as best he can, kicking some leaves over it with his boot.

Now with two of the killers dead, the Smoking Monk knows his ruse is almost up. He edges closer to the killer to his left, leaving the captain, who is further away, for last. When the hand signal is given, one that Wun cannot even guess at, he throws his dagger into the eye of the nearest clansman, ending his life in an instant. The two remaining combatants stare at each other as recognition sets in, and Captain Dyer laughs at himself.

“Very clever, Wun Lung,” admits the captain, who then eats another handful of mushrooms.

“I wish I could say the same,” replies the Smoking Monk, now toking on his pipe with strong pulls. The captain’s eyes glaze over, and a look of extreme pleasure flushes his pale skin.

“I don’t think taking you alive is an option anymore,” teases the clan member. Wun only watches the captain closely, hoping to get further answers.

“Tell me of the clans and of their leaders,” replies the monk. This seems to please the captain further, as he laughs wickedly, reminding Wun of a lunatic at large.

“I am honored to be your death,” purrs Dyer Bracket of the Clan Shitake while trying to provoke a response with his sword pointed right at the monk’s heart.

Trying to break his confidence and throw off the captain, Wun keeps the game moving along. “What makes you think you will do any better than they,” asks Wun, pointing to the dead men lying on the ground. The crazed captain, eyes now wide open and dilated, seems more than eager to explain.

“I am not like them. Captains and higher ranks are taught secret techniques; the higher the rank, the more numerous and deadly are the skills learned,” answers the captain with a flair for the dramatic before attempting to skewer Wun straight through the heart. The Smoking Monk senses the

attack coming moments before it is launched but opts to let the captain take the lead. With his long sword—and also using the sword’s scabbard as a weapon—the clan captain attacks with deadly intentions, but the smooth, precise parries of the monk deflect all incoming attacks. To an untrained eye, one might think the laughing captain is in control of the fight, but a perceptive observer would notice the ease with which Wun evades the relentless attacks, using his hands, feet, and pipe.

Soon the monk begins to press the captain, now believing his enemy has exposed the sum of his style and skill. What Wun knows for sure is none of the four clan members who tracked him had the special trait needed to endure their addiction. With his master’s memory fresh in his mind, he decides to end the contest quickly. The monk flows into a form known as The Monk Breaks Up the Weed, and after a series of attacks that the clan captain cannot even follow, it ends with Wun’s fingers piercing the man’s temple and driving into his brain. The dance was graceful even in its violence, but the outcome was never in doubt for the Smoking Monk. What is in doubt is the future. Wun wonders how many members are in the clans and how many clans there are in total. Wun begins to feel a growing paranoia in his heart, and this time it is not his weed’s fault.

* * * * *

Deep within an abandoned mine, in the southernmost region of Pangaea between the Black Desert and Enslaver’s Peak, lay the headquarters of the Clan Shitake. A lone figure races through its dark, damp tunnels heading to the upper levels, where he is delayed briefly until a password is given. On his way without hesitation, he enters the meeting room of Master Portabella, the clan’s leader and the Mushroom King.

Bowing low on one knee, the lieutenant avoids his master's eyes, keeping his own fixed on the floor in front of him.

"Have you confirmed with your own eyes the reason I sent you?" asks Master Portabella in calm but serious tones.

"Yes, Master, Wun Lung killed nine of our men in total. Captain Dyer was the best of them, but he fell easily to the Smoking Monk," states the lieutenant nervously.

The master barely pays attention, as his thoughts are on other matters.

"That will be all. Be on your way," orders the Mushroom King as he sips his special tea. When he is alone, the Mushroom King returns to his quarters and to his pleasures within. Sitting on a large pile of cushions surrounded by women and men of all ages, the master of the Clan Shitake drinks plenty of his mushroom tea, trying to relax. A nagging feeling has been occupying his thoughts, ever since he was ordered to watch for Wun Lung and to recruit him... or kill him if he refused the offer. Unbeknownst to his peers, the Mushroom King has known of Wun for almost seven years.

Since he first learned of the Smoking Monk, a part of the Mushroom King that he thought long-extinct had been reawakened. The Master of the Mushroom begins to question the last twenty years of treachery. Just a fleeting glimpse and a subtle probing of Wun Lung's mind many years ago started a chain reaction of feelings that continues to confuse the Mushroom king. Master Portabella does not have time to ponder such feelings, as he senses Eldest Brother's mind intruding on his own. Quickly Master Portabella finishes his cup of tea, and he nearly drops it before a servant can grab it. A sudden stab of pain behind his temples is the first and only greeting as the voice of his master enters his mind.

"You have witnessed the Smoking Monk. What is your

impression?” asks the distant and forceful voice of Eldest Brother, the Master of Heroin and oldest of the three original students of Master Chong. Master Portabella, the youngest of the three addiction masters, hesitates slightly before responding.

“He is more skilled than a captain. I would put him in the league of a lieutenant, but that is yet to be tested,” replies the Mushroom King within his mind.

“He will not join us willingly,” adds Master Portabella, the pain in his head increasing as he unconsciously rubs his temples and awaits further orders.

“If he will not work for us and your plan fails, kill him,” orders Eldest Brother. “He will go to the Drunken Monk soon, so do not fail,” adds the Master of Heroin, cutting off the telepathic connection abruptly. Oblivious to their master’s private conversation, the Mushroom King’s sex slaves continue to service him. A man and a woman begin to please each other at their lord’s request. After a long, vigorous bout of sexual deviances, the master has almost forgotten his growing doubt that has taken hold of his heart. That doubt is not forgotten; it has only been suppressed by a power not his own.