



CHAPTER 2

The Drunken Monk

Wiping the vomit from his mouth, Yul stumbles through the streets of Strainhold. They are wet from the previous day's rain, making the muddy paths difficult to travel. Except for vendors selling wares, the streets are almost empty. Those that do travel keep their heads down as they quickly go from place to place. Yul barely recognizes the emperor's soldiers, who now occupy the city; it is just another uniform to the Drunken Monk. The corruption and violence that accompanied the troops has also gone unnoticed by the moody monk. Those with sound minds...and large purses...had fled the territory in fear. Now only those who are desperate and poor have been left behind. Some are stubborn and refuse to lose everything; all have their reasons for staying. Now treated like slaves, only those who profit from such times have smiles on their faces.

Yul, oblivious to it all, knocks out one leg of a fruit stand. Before it collapses, he uses his foot to support it. Drinking from his wineskin, the monk leans back and seems to fall asleep while the table is fixed. When finished, the owner of the stand

slaps Yul's leg away, causing the monk to stumble rapidly but never fall. Coming to a stop, the Drunken Monk sways back and forth, mumbling to himself. He then takes a deep breath and lets it out. He stands still for several moments, a fierce look upon his face. Shaking his head after clearing his mind, he licks his lips and begins walking with surer steps.

Yul Lager is a burly man, round of shoulder and with a barrel chest, standing 6'2" but looking shorter due to his posture. Yul looks down at his ever-growing belly and decides to find a place to train. But, within the three hours of practice, he broods rather than exercises, which is his routine these days. Working up a thirst for whiskey, he heads for the only tavern in the area (actually, the only tavern that will let him through the doors).

Marcum, owner and barkeep of the Deep Mug, watches Yul enter and approach the bar. He notices his patrons stop and stare at the bearded drunk as he makes his way over with a scowl on his face. With only a slight delay, the sounds of music and laughter resume. Marcum cannot help but feel sorry for Yul. Ever since the young man saved the barkeep's life, he feels he owes a debt that not all the whiskey in the city could repay. Yul's behavior in recent months has cost the chubby barkeep plenty of coin, and in these times, coin is rare. Marcum's trade has always been one of a listener, a friend to talk to when full of drink, and he knows Yul is a good man on a dangerous path.

"My friend, what will you have?" asks Marcum, wiping the counter for Yul.

"I will have whiskey tonight," answers Yul, taking a seat. Marcum pours Yul a mug and sets in down on the bar. He then leans in close.

"It is on me, but please, no trouble tonight, Yul."

“What if you’re throwing out the garbage and you’re attacked again?” Yul asks while smirking at the round man. This causes the barkeep to lean back quickly, his girth delayed as it struggles to catch up to his mass.

“Right you are, my friend, right you are,” he says, as his chins wobble up and down in agreement.

Yul drains his mug quickly before Marcum starts to hobble away at the shout of his name. Yul calls him back, and the large man refills his mug immediately, before he heads off to the customer waving his arms at him. Yul drinks for hours, focusing his eyes on his drink as his thoughts wander the corridors of his mind. Unable to get a foothold, the monk slips into his usual routine of anger and blame.

These days Yul likes nothing more than fighting...well, drinking and fighting, that is. At first it got him some good coin; being hired for security at taverns seemed like the perfect job. In time, those that hired the monk realized his potential to cause property damage and scare away customers was greater than the cost of his services. Now with a reputation for trouble, he is basically a degenerate. Yul uses a special technique to enable him to drink much more than normally possible, which is a shame, because the technique is meant to let one practice for many hours at a time without tiring. Yul battles his demons alone at the bar, until a man named Karnik bumps into his shoulder trying to get the barkeep’s attention.

“More wine, you fat...” The man never finishes his insult as Yul smashes his fist into his face. Nursing his whiskey, he never takes his eyes off his mug. The foul-mouthed customer comes out of his daze. Now bleeding freely from his nose, Karnik turns to Yul, enraged. With a sudden roar, he wraps his large hands around Yul’s throat and squeezes tightly. Quickly pressing his chin against Karnik’s hands, the Drunken Monk

reaches back, grabs the back of Karnik's head, and slams it down hard against the bar. The barkeep gets a most desperate look on his face.

Two of Karnik's cronies approach Yul from behind. The two men grab each of Yul's shoulders, hauling him off his stool. The Drunken Monk, all while drunkenly backpedaling, delivers elbow after elbow to his assailants' faces, finally sending them crashing into tables as food and drink go flying into the air. After several minutes of mayhem, Yul finds himself back at the bar. Marcum watches as his establishment empties before turning to Yul with a most dire look upon his face.

"I cannot survive on your coin alone, can I?" he asks. Wiping blood from the counter, trying to control his anger, Marcum nearly faints. When no answer comes forth, the barkeep demands an answer. "Right!" he exclaims, his chins bobbing once again in agreement.

Yul places five silver coins on the bar and waves off Marcum and his complaints. With adrenaline clearing his mind, Yul tries to figure out how it has come to this, with him disrespecting his addiction and not taking care of himself. Nothing good has come of it of late. The Drunken Monk tries to meditate; his mind takes him back to a time when he thought he was happy, a time before Wun Lung was born.

Melina Luvani was always a troubled woman; she grew up around drugs and bad influences for most of her life. Until her teen years, she had never tried any drugs; in time, she soon became addicted. When the Treaty War broke out, she fled the city of Southguard, and after a brutal rape by an enemy soldier—which resulted in her becoming pregnant—she made her way to a settlement outside the city. There, she met Yuan Lun, an artist known for his sculptures. Even with the knowledge of her pregnancy, he decided to wed her and care

for the child as if it were his own. Yul Lun was born during a harsh winter, a fitting climate for the product of rape. For many years, the family was well off, but often Melina would withdraw from the world, avoiding her child's need for comfort. She tried her best to hide her pain, for looking upon Yul only reminded her of her grief, so she would avert her eyes when he was near.

By his seventh year, now understanding his role in life, Yul's goal was to make his mother happy; it brought him joy. A year later Wun was born, and there was no greater wound young Yul could have received than to see the smile on his mother's face. He remembers the look of sadness that would come over her face as she gazed upon him; it made him all the angrier. Watching his mother coddle little Wun over the following years, he became very aggressive and resentful toward his half-brother. Pampering the little boy and treating him like a precious treasure made Yul realize what love truly is, or so he thought at the rash young age of twelve.

His thoughts adrift again, images of Wun Lung now calling his name appear in his mind. The colors and clarity are vivid and sharp, and he notices his half-brother is older than when they parted.

Opening his eyes and examining his mug, Yul leaves the tavern and decides to bed with a woman. Taking a deep breath of air does little to clear his mind. For over two years he has been drinking excessively, which is normal for the Drunken Monk. However he now also neglects his training, which throws him off balance. Lately he cannot find his focus; nothing helps him maintain his center. The image of Wun Lung stays with him and only serves to make his anger rise. Walking and stumbling through the muddy streets, people give the foul-smelling drunk a wide berth as they seek the indoors. Stopping to dry heave,

Yul bends over and convulses, yet nothing's expelled. As Yul resumes his half-walk, half-stumble routine, a group of soldiers passes by.

"It's almost curfew," a soldier shouts. But it goes unnoticed, and the Drunken Monk never looks up. Yul is oblivious to the changes around him. Being caught in a vicious cycle he cannot escape has blinded his senses. Anger rises at his half-brother and at himself for letting his mind and body deteriorate to the point of blacking out frequently and becoming flabby. Luckily, there is no one around to beat up on his way to Bust's house of ill repute. Bust, or Boozo, as many know him, was at one time a skilled thief. Eventually he slipped up trying to rob a warehouse, was tortured for days, and escaped with his life but missing some of his mind. Now Boozo does a little bit of everything. He is good at getting anything you want...at an inflated price, of course.

Yul makes it to Boozo's without any problems. Leaning against the doorframe, he drinks from his wineskin. The area has always had a bad reputation, but its scavengers stay clear of the monk these days. After they learned their lessons the hard way, word got around to avoid the drunk. Yul cannot help but laugh as Boozo steps out of a secret exit only five feet from the main door that is not even concealed very well. Apparently it is only a secret to Boozo. Shifting his body, Yul startles his friend, causing him to draw a dagger. Yul takes note of the quick reflexes. Some might think him dimwitted but not Yul; he knows how clever and resourceful he is.

"Yul Lager, what can I do for you?" asks Boozo nervously, glancing around into the darkness.

"I was looking for a companion for the night, maybe Tracy," says Yul, slurring his words, imagining her curvy body.

"Sorry, my friend, Nancy is my only girl left. My three

other girls, who you know very well, have disappeared. Not surprising, really, in these times.” The Drunken Monk cannot help but look disappointed.

“Nancy...I don’t think even I am drunk enough to bed her,” announces Yul, looking frightened. Boozo opens the door and gestures for Yul to go inside, avoiding eye contact.

“Nancy is on the second floor, in your usual room,” explains Boozo, sweating profusely.

“You can have her all night if you have the coin,” he adds, pushing Yul into the foyer. Closing the door, Boozo talks to himself, arguing about friendship, and soon his voice fades with distance. Shaking his head, Yul stares at the staircase like an enemy. He drains his wineskin dry before challenging the steps, hoping his liquid courage is up to the task. Swaying from side to side, he makes his way to the top of the staircase and stops in front of Nancy’s door. A part of him tries to resist knocking on the door, so his knuckles barely make contact on his first attempt. Trying not to make a sound, he stands quietly letting fate determine his course. The door opens in a rush, revealing a short, slender woman with dark hair.

“Yul, come in!” exclaims Nancy, pulling him by the elbow. Yul never thinks of asking her how she knows him, but he is a regular and has greeted her in passing from time to time. When the door closes behind him, she rubs up close and looks into his eyes.

“So will it be all night?” asks Nancy with a smile, which is way too big on a very small head. It reminds Yul of a piranha feeding. He heard once that she was born of a halfling and an ogre, and right now, it sounds like a good theory to Yul. At first unable to speak, Yul finally finds his voice, pulls out some coins, and places them on the table.

“All night,” he answers. Nancy hugs Yul tightly, and her

perfume envelopes him, mixing with the exotic aroma of incense burning in the room. Breathing in deeply, Yul pulls her tightly to his body as Nancy nuzzles his neck. With a sudden clash of lips, they begin to move with speed, tearing each other's clothes off and kissing deeply. Yul throws her to the bed and mounts her in a rush. Joining as one, they begin to get rough with each other. Hard and violent is the sex, like a storm finding release. The rising chorus of moans leads to climax, as their bodies tense with pleasure. When Nancy smiles and reveals a bloody lip, Yul's mood plummets like a stone. No memory comes forth as he looks upon her face, wondering when he caused such a wound. Falling into his pillow, sleep comes quickly as heavy breathing settles over the room. Waking up several hours later, Yul watches Nancy from behind as she leans over to snort lines from a tray.

Not bad from this angle, thinks the monk, trying to squeeze some whiskey out of his empty wineskin. Nancy hands the tray to Yul, who then snorts a couple of lines of coca before washing up.

"Anything to drink?" asks the monk, drying himself off with a towel.

"Of course; here is some whiskey," she replies, handing over a full bottle of the stuff. Nancy lights several incense sticks and then grabs the bottle of whiskey back as she straddles Yul tightly. She swigs until it drips from her chin. Then, with alluring eyes locked onto Yul's, she reaches down and fondles his manhood. Yul feels ashamed as his whiskey dick falls limply in her hands.

But Nancy is good at her profession. Kneeling down, she pleases him orally to stiffen his resolve. Sliding him inside her, they begin another session of passion, this time for even longer than before. The whole ordeal begins to feel surreal

to Yul, who is lost in the sex, drugs, and alcohol. Later Yul begins to gather his belongings in confusion. Sex used to be the only thing that would let him relax; now there is no peace to be found anywhere. The monk notices a nervous look on Nancy's face and feels a moment of danger in the air, but seeing her lip and the many bruises she has gotten, he feels ashamed and thinks of it no more. She leads him back to the bed and kisses him again. They lay for a while as Yul forgets he was leaving and falls asleep once more.

Ignoring all the warning signs in the waking world, his dreams are his last hope of salvation. They are of his death and of his dates with all of his prostitutes, all while cloaked figures watch from the shadows. His dreams scream to him, warning of his bar fights, where his drinks are being poisoned, and his bouts with women, whose perfume, incense, and liquor are all tainted with substances made to dull his wits and keep him unbalanced. He misses all the signs, especially the four cloaked men watching him and Nancy from an adjoining roof.

Hidden in the shadows watching Yul and Nancy are four members of the Clan Shitake. For hours they watch their target, confident all is going well. Crenshaw cackles with glee, for it was his plan from the beginning to poison Yul and keep him weak. Two months ago Yul found his way to Strainhold, and it was Lieutenant Crenshaw of the Clan Shitake who spotted him first and noticed his fall from grace. He was dirty, smelly, and way too drunk. Crenshaw remembers feeling pity for him then, for he was excited at the chance to take on the Drunken Monk. His master had given all of the members descriptions of the two half-brothers and had spoken of their skill.

At first Crenshaw was not impressed with his target. Two

months later, he is now rethinking his evaluation of the monk. With less time and a fraction of the drugs they have used on Yul, Crenshaw has broken many men and made them slaves or worse. Yul's resistance is astounding, and Crenshaw can see the monk fighting the poison every day, and it gives him pause. His last communication to his master recommended killing the monk quickly, which resulted in a verbal beating by Master Portabella for even suggesting such a thing. It is now anger that Crenshaw feels looking at Yul, and that anger grows every day, fueled by the chance to become a general within his clan.

Crenshaw was abducted when he was six years old, taken by the Clan Shitake. He was tortured and worked hard for many years, until the age of twelve, when he was sent to Master Portabella. It was then that Crenshaw started training in the clan's deadly arts. Thriving and excelling, he quickly rose in the ranks over the years and built quite the reputation for himself. A cold-hearted killer through and through, nothing pleases him more than watching the life slowly drain from his victims. Playing games and toying with his prey is his way of making the feeling last as long as possible. You will not find Crenshaw killing in a fit or in the heat of the moment; you never notice him until his dagger is in your back.

Crenshaw gives the signal to return to their hideout and looks long at Yul before slipping into the shadows and making his way to the former constable's residence, which is now his own. Arriving at the hideout, he gives his men their orders and grabs a pot of water. He adds several mushrooms and sets it on the stove. Gathering his tea leaves, he prepares a larger mug while gathering food on a plate. Sitting down, he quickly eats and pours his tea into his mug. He takes time to enjoy his beverage, savoring every sip. Deciding it's pleasure time, he gets up, proceeds into the basement, and unlocks the storeroom.

There, hanging from chains, are three women, disheveled and bloody. Crenshaw rubs his hands in anticipation and creeps forward. All three begin thrashing against their bonds but to no avail; it just makes the killer smile broader. He then removes the gag from one of the women and lays his finger on her lips.

“Shhhh,” he indicates with his harsh whisper.

Feeding off their fear, he closes his eyes in ecstasy and, without warning, begins violating her as her screams go unanswered. The two other victims cry in muffled fits, tears running freely onto their bare chests. The terror builds as Crenshaw pulls his blade from its sheath. Holding the first woman by the neck while raping her, he brings the blade level with her eyes, and her shivers send the killer into a realm of bliss. Slowly he carves Yul’s name into her chest while still maintaining his fast-pumping rhythm. When he climaxes, he plunges the blade up to the hilt into her heart and then watches with glassy eyes as her body goes limp.

Looking at the remaining two missing prostitutes lovingly, he leaves them with parting words. “Don’t worry, my comrades will service you soon,” he says, beginning to laugh maniacally. Uncontrollable fits of laughter overtake the lunatic and, when done, he pulls out from the dead woman. Closing the door but leaving it unlocked, he finds the closest clan member.

“Let the men have their way with the two women before we frame Yul for their murders. Bury them as we planned.” Crenshaw seems pleased with himself. *Soon the Drunken Monk will be in jail, and his brother will surely come to his aid*, thinks the lieutenant.

“And the rank of general is not far behind,” he says aloud, laughing devilishly.

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Master Portabella's astral form hovers near the ceiling, watching Crenshaw and his men. He thinks to himself that his first general should be there and not with Master Caine, abroad on an island gathering creatures for the army. However, he admits that Crenshaw is handling things well for a lieutenant, for only the generals learn the more deadly techniques of the clan. He is impressed with his work so far.

Willing his astral form to fly to Yul's room is just a matter of thought, and the master now looks upon the Drunken Monk sleeping. He feels a stirring in his soul as he looks upon his former master's student. He dare not get this close with Wun Lung, for Master Portabella knows of his latent abilities.

Therefore, he looks upon Yul with sadness. It has been a long time since the Mushroom King has felt any sympathy for anyone, and it causes further turmoil within his heart. Without hesitation, he recalls his astral form back to his body, where even now a slave services him. But his thoughts are still with the two brothers, who fall deeper into his plot. Sipping his mushroom tea, a fire burns in his eyes as Eldest Brother's thoughts seep into his unconscious, asserting themselves once again. Thoughts of the brothers now gone, he relaxes. The Mushroom King enjoys his distractions for a time. Such occasions are becoming rare.