

# Stranger's Tea

A light went on, the light in the room third from the right on the third floor of the Victoria-Esther hotel. The light cast a gentle square of pale yellow on the otherwise dark pavement below, illuminating the nocturnal wanderings of a cat through the deserted street. The man at the base of the wall paused, considering the room in which the light had just gone on, in relation to the one to which he was headed. Deeming it suitably different, he proceeded to throw his weighted rope in a practiced arch to the balcony of the room five apartments from the left edge of the building, two floors up. He listened, hearing no noise as the weight hit, he pulled. The rope caught. He tested his weight, then began to climb.

As he neared the top of the rope, he prided himself on the elegance of his execution so far, especially on his stealth. He then reached the top of the rope and proceeded to trip over the rail, making an inconveniently loud noise as he came down hard on one of the two chairs that presided on the balcony.

As he righted himself, the sliding door to the balcony sprang open as if it were on hinges. It hung there for a moment, and then the light turned on, seeming to be belatedly caused by the opening of the door. A man, dressed in a loose fitting bathrobe, stood at the switch to the light. He stood next to his trunk of tea, which lay open, and exposed the vast array of black teas contained within it. He stood and stared distractedly, with a rather creepy warm smile hung on his face, hung in such a way as one hangs a coat on a coat-rack (With a noose wrapped about the collar), or perhaps even more so a rack meant to hold either bicycles or hats. The Tea Merchant took a longish shuffling step across the carpet toward the intruder on the balcony.

"Hallo, my deer-man! You maddish deer/man hybrid!" He said, walking still closer to the balcony. At this point the Intruder saw that the Tea Merchant was mad, and so — of course — he was certainly the man he was looking for. He also noted that the man would be of no apparent threat to him.

"Deer sir! You look famished. I would be pleased to offer you some of my tea. Are you tired? It must have been a hard climb. Do sit down. And come off of that balcony, for it is dreadfully cold outside this time of night. Or day, really, the weather in

these parts is quite dismal at all times of the year. Many an instance has it been that I have tried to persuade it to be a little nicer, but—" The man on the balcony, in accordance with the Merchant's suggestion, came in from the cold, shutting the door with a loud thump, cutting off the other man's rambling. The Intruder did not do this without, of course, checking the relative ease with which he could open the door, should the need have arisen for a rapid departure.

There was no longer any need for stealth (When you are served tea by someone, they often have noticed you), thus the intruder no longer required a mask, and so he slipped his off. The Tea Merchant disappeared down the hall in which the light switch was situated, assumedly hunting for the supplies for the making of tea. Tea drinking etiquette usually demanded a place to sit down, the man by the balcony reached behind him without turning around, and slid the door open again. He sprung backwards onto the balcony, yet again tripping over the overturned chairs that lay scattered about the place. After righting himself for the third time that evening, the Intruder stood the two chairs, as sitting in chairs that have fallen over usually failed to end with you in a position to use the table.

The Tea Merchant returned from inside of his rooms, spilling through the door, and laid the items held in his arms on the table. Though unremarkable in intricacy, the man did have with him a surprisingly grand number of tea-making implements, and garnishes in abundance (which immediately set the Intruder on guard again. In his opinion, and the opinion of his guild, tea should always be drunk pure). The Merchant sat down at the table. The man who had been sitting at the table picked up the hotter of two tea kettles. The steam cloud that spewed up from the tiny cup when the water was poured was immense, and was pleasantly contrasted in temperature with the chill night air. It did stink of the stronger and less natural stench of black tea, though, and as he had guessed, he was being served that beverage (black tea was an affront to nature, or so claimed the Green Tea Guild).

Even though the Intruder had anticipated this, it was still rather appalling to be given such an atrocity (in his culture, serving up such a drink was about analogous to being promised caviar and instead being served a dish of weasel eggs, which had also happened to him, but he didn't like to recount that.), and what was worse was that he

would most likely have to drink some of the stuff. The Intruder ceased to glare with loathing at the tea, and instead then picked up the kettle again, and poured tea into a second cup situated next to his.

“Milk? Sugar?” Even as this was the first the Intruder had spoken all evening, he still limited himself in words, as his squeaky yet simultaneously scratchy tones elicited shivers down even his own spine, and brought to mind images of a hundred disembodied fingernails picking up a small rodent and running it along a blackboard made of sandpaper.

“Milk, simply milk,” replied the Merchant, distractedly, and the Intruder prepared the cup as specified. But not precisely so, as the man who served the tea had seen an opportunity, and had taken it. Slipping a small vial from the inside of his sleeve, he picked up the teacup, waved the vial, hidden in the palm of his hand, over the cup, spilling the contents into the hot tea, and placed the cup in the middle of the table, next to his own.

The Merchant who sat across the table stood up, reached toward the teacups, and picked one up, raising it to his mouth and taking a tentatively polite sip. The man without tea sat and stared, in a stupor of inevitable triumph. Intent on watching the man sip his tea, the tea-less man reached distractedly across the table and picked up the remaining cup, also distractedly raising it to his mouth to sip, no longer caring about the atrocious taste of the tea. It was a curious thing, though, that the man across the table from the Assassin- for that was what the intruder was- had not yet dropped dead, as the lethality of the poison which he had put in the man's tea was pleasantly unpleasant, and usually killed within a few seconds of consumption.

As the Assassin took what was his third- and consequentially final- sip of his poisoned tea, he realized rather quickly what had happened. He stood up rapidly, in a sudden (and perfectly reasonable) panic, turned to the rail, and fell, barely conscious, to the ground several floors below. The tea cup which he was no longer capable of carrying fell independently of him, and hit the ground a split second before the man did, making a slight clinking noise, before shattering on the pavement. The man landed afterward, and lay there, still, not moving, and with a distinct inability to drink tea. That would — had the Assassin been alive (in a way which he was still dead, but able to

observe himself as a corpse) — have been more devastating to him than the fact that he was unable to consider his problems.

“Hmm. Unlucky chap!” said the Tea Merchant, from his balcony, “It must have been something in the tea.” He looked down again, at the shattered cup that lay on the ground below. “Shame, really. I did rather fancy that cup. What a waste.”

He turned to the table, and began collecting up the stuff littered about the surface, then disappeared back into his room, to repackage the tea he had taken out, and continued on in his insomnia-cal activities.

Over the course of the proceeding several minutes, several lit squares appeared on the silent street below the hotel's front. Within each square, a shadowed silhouette appeared, glanced over the side of their balcony, saw nothing out of the ordinary, and went back inside. The shattered man lying on the pavement below had landed close to the wall, and thus was obscured from the view of every balcony.

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An End