**A Sip of Tea**

The man in front of him was rather bland, Jason thought. But then again, perhaps that was due to the fact that, save for the slightly thicker stubble that protruded from his second chin, he looked identical to the eleven others who shared the table. Jason wondered for a moment if hierarchy among these types was always determined by who had the greatest amount of facial hair. He chuckled inwardly at the thought.

The men at the table however, did not see the humor. Their stiff grimaces might have been intimidating in some other time or place, but when worn on twelve slightly chubby men who looked as if they were on the verge of bursting out of their identical suits and ties, it was nearly comical.

The stubbly pack leader had apparently waited long enough. He placed one fist after another on the wooden table and, with a surprising amount of restraint, managed not to snap it in half. He then leaned forward so that Jason could see the beady eyes beyond the two blackened veils that sat on his face.

“The combination, Jason,” he spoke as if the words had taken a considerable amount of effort to pronounce.

Jason had been rather enjoying his meal up until this point. It was a nice restaurant, with delectable dishes and adorned silverware, and the Chinese cuisine had been a much-needed change of taste from the dull and dreary. At the moment, however, he found it difficult to dig into his spring rolls with such a repulsive creature leaning over his plate. All good things came to an end.

He put down his chopsticks and leaned back into his seat, the last traces of a smile disappearing from his face.

“The. Com-Bi-Na-Tion,” the man said again, with all the patience of a kindergarten teacher speaking to a blank-faced child.

Jason reached out with his right hand and brought his tea cup to his lips. Faint wisps of steam rose over the transparent brown surface. The cup felt smooth and cold despite the steaming liquid within. He shifted his eyes towards the handle and examined the material. Fine china.

In front of him, the man remained largely impassive, but if Jason had lifted the shades from the bridge of his nose, he would have seen the fury, wild and frenzied, gathering in his eyes. Jason began a silent count of three.

*One*

The dark leaves resting at the bottom of the cup lent the tea a pleasant fragrance that wafted over him like lilies on a summer day. He breathed in the soothing scent and allowed it to both calm and sharpen his mind.

*Two*

He took a sip of the tea. The liquid seemed to cool on the surface of his tongue before warming up again inside of him. He felt it heat his stomach and boil his blood. He smiled delectably at the pleasant sensation.

*Three*

A sudden twist of the shoulders and his right arm snapped towards his left. What had once been a beautifully-crafted ornament of marble and china hovered momentarily in shattered pieces above the unfortunate man’s skull. A moment later, both the remains of the cup and the man’s entire two hundred pounds dropped to the floor and Jason was leaping off his left foot, slamming the back of his elbow into the man behind him.

By now, the pack leader had decided to take matters into his own hands, and grasped Jason by the collar, yanking him in. Sensing only the best intentions, Jason decided to oblige and lunged in the direction he was being pulled, propelling his forehead straight into his adversary’s nose.

The resulting collision was not so much an impact between two human beings as it was a car smashing through a multi-layered brick wall. The pack leader’s face crumpled inwards and the momentum carried them both over the table so that Jason found himself sprawled on top of an unmoving heap of beard and flesh, blood splattered across the width of his forehead. For a moment, the nine remaining thugs stood in absolute silence, some widening their eyes and others squinting behind their darkened shades, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Then, the restaurant exploded. Not a literal explosion, but one of chaos and frenzy as the rest of the patrons evacuated their seats and fled the restaurant. Jason was tempted to join them, but he reasoned that there might be more men outside, and he wanted to end the day with his suit more or less intact.

The thugs, perhaps reminded that they were in the public eye, hardened their expressions and encroached on Jason.

Jason steadied himself as the last of the men came at him. He had to give them credit – they just didn’t give up. That, or he had seen the fatigue on Jason’s face, which was partly genuine and partly exaggerated to put Jason in an advantageous position. It never paid to underestimate the enemy. Even so, the man was careful. He advanced slowly, hands held up to protect his face, his expression now not so much a conniving leer as it was a determined grimace. Unfortunately for him, he just wasn’t fast enough.

As the distance between them approached a precise amount, known and gauged only by Jason, Jason stepped with his left foot and pivoted sharply to his right, lashing out with his rear leg with all the torque of his rotating upper body thrown into the blow. The kick had many names.

Paintings whose eyes would follow you across the room.