



Late-Night

Tea-Time

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Issue 1

Our first issue is a collection of delights!

Take pride with you every day, and be unapologetically who you are.

Just like Avsiud, your uniqueness is beautiful!

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IncuVerse: Incubus House

Tea and Conversation

The Cathédrale du Thé hummed with lively conversation, air rich with the perfume of tea and blooming flowers. Stained glass stretched up with curling ornamentation framing the vivid colours. Greenery and even trees gracefully curved towards the ceiling.

Avsiud absolutely lounged in his chair. It didn't look large enough, by itself, for that, but he proved that he could make the most out of any space at all. Just over his head, Kurton circled, the magical winged phallus shimmering with iridescent sparkles.

And just as Avsiud started to doubt his memory, the handsome figure of Zulot caught his eye. His fellow incubus had his own distinctive beauty: noble in countenance, deep in skintone, with dazzling golden eyes and dark rose hair in a romantic style. He moved with tremendous poise, and dressed so smartly, in such an elegant way. The white shirt's translucent quality showed well with his darker skin behind it.

Avsiud, as always, dared with his fashion. He always wore his hair in a bob, in some luscious red shade, which he usually matched with his bold eye makeup. Though today his outfit remained practical and comfortable-looking, it still looked distinct to anyone else in the vast cathedral.

"Zulot! You made it after all." Avsiud pulled himself to his feet, resembling a cat. "I thought perhaps I had remembered the wrong time, but it's always a pleasure to come to the Cathédrale. Still..." He leaned closer and took Zulot's hand, squeezing it gently and patting it with his other hand. "It's always better with company."

Zulot grinned, brilliant as his face lit up with delight. "Avsiud! And the inimitable Kurton. I'm just on time, but I usually like to be early." He dipped down from the waist and kissed the top of the other demon's hand. "It is always better with company."

"You really are a prince." Avsiud drew the other incubus along by the hand, into the magnificence and grace of the cathedral around them.

In just a short time, they found themselves sitting at a table by a stained glass work twenty times their height at least. The broad leaves of plants arched around and over their seat, monsteras listening in.

Kurton fluttered about Zulot's head, investigating, refamiliarising himself with the other demon he had seen so many times, but not in some time. Shimmering sparkles rained down upon the two at the table.

Avsiud's secret smile spread lightly as his keen eyes settled on Zulot. "I know you've wanted for a long time to open a house of pleasure," he carefully stated, but with perfect assurance. Not even the slightest hint of doubt touched his face. "I think it's time you did so. I'd like to help you with that, and of course Kurton too."

The fascinum flapped his tiny black wings, sparkling a rainbow down on Avsiud now, hovering around his crown.

Zulot's eyes widened, a soft gasp escaping his lips. The prince of incubi shifted in his seat, his rich-toned skin flushing slightly.

"Open a house of pleasure?" Zulot fidgeted with the cuff of his white shirt, the translucent fabric clinging to his toned arms. "Do you think it would be popular?"

Kurton fluttered down to land on the table, his tiny black wings creating a soft buzzing sound. He tilted his head, studying Zulot with what appeared to be curiosity and amusement. The fascinum's iridescent body shimmered in the colored light filtering through the stained glass.

Avsiud leaned forward, hair swaying with the movement. His dark eyes sparkled, reflecting the sparkles from Kurton. "Of course! A temple of pleasure, a sanctuary of sensual delights. Think of it: luxurious furnishings, the finest wines, and an experience for every guest. Nothing basic, nothing so simplistic as just a brothel. This will be so much more and so much greater."

The fashionable incubus reached out to caress Zulot's hand. "You have a natural charm, a magnetic presence. Combine that with your unique interest in magic, and you could create something truly extraordinary. A place where pleasure and wonder intertwine."

Zulot bit his lower lip. "It's a big undertaking. I've never managed anything like that before." He could see it, in his mind, taking beautiful shape.

"Neither have I." Avsiud's secret smile widened, a knowing glint in his eye. "But Kurton and I will be there every step of the way. I've had some experience with Phantasies, you know. Dhiar's original shop has travelled all over."

The red-haired incubus leaned in closer, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur. "Imagine it. A place where the mundane melds with the magical, where pleasure takes on new and wondrous forms. And you could bring it all together. All it needs is your guidance and special interest in the mystic arts."

The prospect of such a grand endeavor intrigued Zulot. "It could be interesting," he admitted, starting to grin along with Avsiud. "But where would we start? How would we even begin to set up something like that?" His thoughts raced, trying to bring it all together.

Kurton, sensing the shift in Zulot's mood, fluttered up to perch on the prince's shoulder. The fascinum's tiny wings tickled Zulot's neck, sending a shiver down his back. He reached up with a gentle hand, a steadying presence close by. Kurton's presence seemed to offer a sense of comfort and encouragement.

Avsiud clasped his hands together, eyes sparkling. "Well, the first step is always the most exciting: brainstorming! We'll need a location, of course. Somewhere with a bit of mystique, perhaps in the Great City. We'll need to design the space, create an ambiance that's both alluring and inviting."

The fashionable incubus's mind raced with infinite possibilities. "Aside from the custom experience available as the outstanding feature of the house, we could have themed rooms, each one a different realm of pleasure. One room could be a lush, exotic garden, another a celestial observatory, and perhaps a third, a mysterious underwater grotto."

Zulot's eyes widened, his imagination further stoked by these possibilities. "That sounds intriguing," he admitted. "A consummate experience of pleasure. Even just stopping by for a drink or to relax would be something worth experiencing."

"I think it will be popular." Avsiud glanced over as a well-dressed demon pushed a silver cart to the table, smiling to the three and starting to unload tea and finger foods. Small wedge sandwiches smelling of fresh cucumber and creamy cheese, colourful macarons, and glossy rice crackers sat perfectly arranged on a tiered platter. "The Abyss is full of wonders, and a house of pleasure should be no exception. We'll create a place where fantasies become reality, where guests can dream and have that dream, with a prince of their own to take them through their desires."



The red-haired incubus reached out to touch Zulot's arm, fingertips tickling the translucent material along his skin. "And think of all the wonderful people whose fantasies we'll bring to life for them. Adventurers, scholars, tourists in our beautiful home. The possibilities are endless."

Zulot practically bounced in his seat, though he did spare a brilliant smile for the waiter, who visibly appreciated it as he finished and pushed the cart off again. "It does sound fascinating." His voice quaked around the edges with barely-contained excitement. "This would be a perfect application of magic! Something that everyone can appreciate, no matter what their personal experience in it might be. It can be a work of art and expression."

Kurton fluttered off Zulot's shoulder again to circle the table. The fascinum's iridescent body left a trail of sparkling dust, accenting the atmosphere of the grand Cathédrale.

"We could offer dreamscaping services. Using magic to create shared dream experiences for our clients." Avsiud felt triumphant, and it showed in his expression. "Or perhaps even replace bad memories with good experiences. It's so often that people come here to get away from the connections tethering them to previous existences. Sometimes, you just want to forget."

The red-haired incubus leaned back, reaching out to select a cucumber sandwich. He set it delicately and carefully on the saucer. "Our abilities make us perfectly suited to healing emotions. We just have to find the right people to bring along with us."

"It sounds wonderful." Zulot eased back in his seat, fingers curling around the cup of tea in front of him. "Though we'd want to be careful, of course, doing anything too adventurous with memories, after all. They have so many ripples...if you're not careful, it can be dangerous."

Avsiud nodded with growing enthusiasm. "You're right, it could be dangerous if not handled properly. That's why we'll need to be very careful in how we go about this. We'll need to find skilled practitioners, experts in the pursuit of pleasure. You're one of the most proficient in magic among demons I know." He shrugged, a soft bounce of his shoulders.

"Most of the demons here don't study magic in-depth. It's not a pursuit for everyone. But think of the possibilities, Zulot." Taking the sandwich wedge in his delicate fingers, he brought it to his lips and took a small bite. "We could create a place that's not just a house of pleasure, but a place where the boundaries between the mundane and the magical blur, and where pleasure takes on new and extraordinary forms."

Zulot looked over the brim of his cup after taking a sip. The black tea's rich aroma mingled with bergamot and a citrus local to a realm of the Abyss. It combined the bright tartness with a certain sweetness and a complexity that complemented the bold tea. "An excellent choice, as always." He licked his lips, and they glistened, soft-looking and almost shimmering. "So, a house of pleasure, a house of magic. You have my support. This is a wonderful idea, Avsiud. I'm very glad you invited me here today to talk about this."

"I knew you'd be the one to speak to about it!" Avsiud raised a hand for Kurton to alight upon, and he nuzzled his familiar companion. "So, do you have any ideas for who you might like to bring on at this early juncture?"

Zulot smiled, eyes sparkling. "I think it would be a good idea to bring in some experts in various fields. Perhaps we could get someone from the Museums of Dis, or a magus specializing in

illusions." He tilted his head, considering it for a moment. "Perhaps a fox, or fae, even? It depends on who's available, but we can keep our options open."

He sat up a bit straighter. "Someone with experience in designing enchanting spaces, or crafting experiences that transport people to different realms." Another sip, and Zulot's gaze dropped to the rippling, jewel-like tea left as Kurton took flight once more.

Avsiud set his cup down, cupping his hands around the warm ceramic for a moment longer. "We'll need someone who understands the intricacies of the psyche, and how to tap into the deepest desires. Someone who can craft experiences that are both pleasurable and thought-provoking."

The prince leaned forward, taking a moment to breathe deeply. "I do think it would be beneficial to bring in varied individuals, people who can share their unique perspectives and expertise. A faun who specializes in architecture, or a siren who can design aquatic spaces, just for example."

Kurton, perched for the moment on Zulot's shoulder, chirped softly, as if echoing the prince's thoughts. The fascinum's tiny wings fluttered rapidly, releasing a small puff of iridescent sparks that danced in the air.

Avsiud's eyes lit up with excitement, his fingers tapping a lively rhythm on the armrest. "Oh, I see exactly what you mean -- it's a master plan, Zulot! We'll create a space that's not just a house of pleasure, but a living, breathing entity that can adapt to the desires of its patrons. A dear companion to see, in the form of a house."

He reached out to grasp Zulot's hand, his fingers intertwining with the prince's. "And I have just the person in mind to help us get started. His name is Lyra, a wizard with a talent for crafting enchanting experiences. He's been studying the art of dream-weaving, and I have no doubt he can help us create a space that's both pleasurable and magical."

Avsiud squeezed the other demon's hand. "I'll contact him. We could meet and discuss the project in more detail. But I think we should start making preparations for the opening night, don't you?"

Zulot's eyes sparkled with excitement, alight with anticipation. "I'd like that. Let's make this a night to remember."

A Wizard's Magic Words

A Cosy Retreat

Cedric's footsteps landed softly on the way down the stairs. He carried his books, papers, and pens over to the overstuffed and now old sofa, first setting them down and then sitting himself, to go through them.

Another set of steps sounded to herald the arrival of Badgerton, who waddled down into the basement. The fluffy badger roamed around the dimly-lit basement, finally finding his usual bed and flopping into it with a huff.

"There you are, old chap." Cedric grinned, looking up and over to the comfortable place Nicky helped him build for their closest friend from the wild. "You know I can't write properly without you!"

Badgerton looked approving of this, nodding his head a bit as he curled up in warmth and softness. As long as the wizard knew his place in the scheme of things, then it was acceptable.

With a chuckle to himself, Cedric leafed through his papers and plucked out a couple. He rearranged them in order, then twisted his pen to write. He liked this type of writing implement; though it had a tendency to make uneven lines, they built the inkwell in with magic artistry.

Cedric sat nestled in a particularly lavish blanket, one of the best he had. He leaned over the side of the sofa, looking over the supplies he brought down with him: a platter of sandwiches rested on the coffee table, his preferred tippie in a tall crystalline glass beside them. By his calculations, the candlelit lamp burning nearby should keep everything just dim enough for pleasant company, and at the same time bright enough to do his work. Badgerton had settled in already, one of his favourite blankets pulled over his especially fluffy form, ears twitching lazily as he dozed off.

"It's good to have a day off," Cedric murmured, not really expecting a response from the badger. He couldn't help but smile at the contented little snuffles coming from the silly beast. The candlelight flickered gently, casting dancing shadows on the walls adorned with familiar and comforting artwork. The effect evoked the same experience of phantasmagoria, shadow-play of fantasies to send one to sleep. The air hung almost thick with the soft scent of herbs and spices, courtesy of the small enchantments around the room to keep the atmosphere just right.

"Perhaps we should make this a regular thing, Badgerton," Cedric continued, more to himself than anyone else. "Just a quiet afternoon, a good book, and some pleasant company." He reached for his book, a thick tome of poetry he intended to reference in his work. The pages were soft and worn, the words within them as familiar as old friends. He'd always been fond of the work, most of the lines written into his memory. They were easy to remember, like a song that installs itself in the mind and plays out on endless repeat.

As he flipped through the pages, Cedric's mind wandered back to his days at Norwich Academy. It was a pleasant time, without much in the way of incident. He remembered the long hours spent in the cathedral-like library, the exhilarating and imaginative duels, and the quiet moments shared with Nicky. Those days seemed so far away now, yet they felt as fresh as yesterday. When he breathed in, he swore he could still taste the misty afternoons looking out on the grounds.

Cedric smiled as he took a bite from one of the sandwiches. The flavours exploded in his mouth, warming him from the inside. He savoured each bite, letting the richness of the bread and the



harmony of the fillings linger on his tongue. The bread he'd baked yesterday, tender and with a flaky, thick crust. Its golden shell tasted of the hand-churned butter and the fine salt in it.

Once he swallowed the last bite of the first sandwich, Cedric leaned back into the soft cushions of the sofa. The room was perfectly quiet, except for the occasional snuffle from Badgerton.

The candlelight flickered gently, warm glow dancing over the room. Cedric's eyes fluttered closed, and he let himself drift into a state of peaceful reverie. The words of the poetry book floated through his mind, each verse a gentle lullaby that he had already repeated a thousand and one times to himself. A sense of contentment washed over him, a feeling of being exactly where he was meant to be.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoed down the stairs, breaking the tranquil silence. Cedric's eyes opened again, and he slowly smiled as Nicky's familiar figure descended into the basement. The red-haired man's eyes sparkled with mischief, and his lips curled into a playful grin.

"I see where everyone's gone. Marmalade has taken over the sitting room," Nicky quietly rumbled. "Looks like I've found the cosiest spot in the house."

Cedric chuckled, sitting up a bit straighter and draping the blanket over the back of the sofa. "You have indeed. Care to join us?"

Nicky's grin widened as he made his way over to the sofa, flopping down beside Cedric with a muted thump. The cushions still felt slightly overstuffed, even after years of use.

Nicky wrapped an arm around Cedric's shoulders, pulling him close. "Of course," he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to Cedric's temple. He breathed in, closing his eyes for just a moment, to let the sweet scent of the chestnut hair fill his whole attention for that instant.

The room felt like it grew even warmer with Nicky's presence. Cedric leaned into the embrace, his heart thumping faster. Badgerton stirred slightly, his ears twitching as he recognised the familiar scent and sound of Nicky. Judging him no threat, and also not bearing treats, the badger huffed with near-indignance before curling up again.

"How was your day, love?" Cedric asked, his voice soft, an intimate tone between them. Nicky sighed contentedly, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on Cedric's arm. "It was good. I stopped by the pub and had a chat with old Pudding-Quake. He's doing well, by the way. He's got a new act he's working on, something with fire and ice."

Cedric lifted his gaze from the fingers on his skin. "Fire and ice? That sounds dangerous."

"Oh, it is!" Nicky laughed, a deep, rich sound. It was hard to judge which voice was really deeper, but Nicky's had a slightly rougher quality. "But Pudding-Quake has always been a bit of a daredevil. He's got a knack for it, you remember how he is. I'm sure he'll pull it off."

Cedric nodded, smiling wider again, his heart warmed by the thought of his old friend. "I'm glad to hear he's doing well. He always was one of the best of us."

Nicky's fingers continued their lazy promenade on Cedric's arm, sending little shivers occasionally, disturbing the hairs. "He is. And so are you."

Cedric's cheeks flushed, giving him a delicate glow. The low light and warm shadows flattered his already handsome features. "Thank you, Nicky. That means a lot to me."

Nicky leaned in, his lips brushing softly against Cedric's. The kiss was gentle, a promise of more. Cedric melted into it, breath shaky against the lightly-chapped lips on his own. The room almost seemed to draw back, the shadows leaning closer like the blanket draped behind them.

Nicky's eyes sparkled. "You know, I think we should make this a regular thing. A quiet afternoon, a good book, and some pleasant company."

"I had that exact idea, just a moment ago!" Cedric tilted his head down, looking up with his grin spreading. "Badgerton loved it."

Nicky's grin widened, and he leaned in for another kiss. This one went deeper, following through on the promise from earlier. Cedric's hands wandered, tracing the lines of Nicky's body, feeling the warmth of his skin through his clothes. He had a slightly harder body, more overtly muscular, but Cedric had been sporty in school as well. Nicky's lifestyle demanded more action, while Cedric's was less demanding of it.

Cedric reached up, fingertips gliding through the bold red locks that slipped between his fingers, tickling his skin. "I'm not going to get any work done, at this rate."

"But you're not complaining." Nicky nosed him, grinning about the same. "Why don't we make a collaboration between us? That can be inspiring, can't it?"

With a soft laugh, Cedric gave a nod. "That sounds good. But I'm going to expect you to do your share of editorial work." He touched the tip of his finger to the tip of Nicky's nose.

"Agreed. Now, where was I?" Without hesitating, Nicky leaned in to brush his lips against Cedric's.

Merryweather Investigations

Market Day

"You can get the best deals here on fae things!" Amichie called back, wings fluttering as he drifted along in the air. The corgi didn't seem self-conscious, perhaps because of the market's location. Natives to the city knew Le Jardin as the arts district, but it really welcomed and housed most of the population of faeries and demons alike. The mundane population wandered in and out of so many places, surrounded by unseen and unnoticed marvels and wonders.

Dorian glanced skyward, checking the time and weather. They could enjoy brunch if they made it a little quick. He returned his full attention to Amichie in front of them. "Which of those things do we need?"

"Fairy shit's cool!" Rudy piped up, hands in the pockets of his loose black pants. His expression showed that despite his phrasing, he really meant it. That was just the way he talked sometimes.

Dorian nodded once, to acknowledge the merit of this statement. A polite gesture, but a fair one. "I don't know how much cool we *need*, though."

"Dorian, look!" Amichie called, from a stall ahead. "Hazelnuts at a good price! Let's get a bushel!"

That was enough to pull the dark-haired figure away from his fiery friend. Rudy looked around at the market. Hazelnuts didn't thrill him, but one of the tables nearby caught his attention. Rudy headed over to look at the items offered.

Enchanted Items, one sign proclaimed, though in an older language that might not be so familiar to all the tourists who might be walking around.

It surprised him when a familiar figure leaned out of the booth to call to him, "Well, hello, Mr. Dilandol!"

"Subaru?" Rudy leaned closer to look. The last time they saw each other was a long way away. The red-haired youth narrowed his eyes and took in the shop's stock. "Is this...all your stuff?" A couple of pieces looked vaguely familiar. They seemed like a cross between souvenirs and tools. Colourful, but not *too* colourful.

Rudy turned back to look at Subaru, then the display again. "These things, what are they for?"

Subaru looked like he might laugh. "For enchantments. But, of course, they are quite harmless to a man of your strength."

Rudy grinned as he picked up one of the things and turned it around in his hand. "Yeah! Of course."

As Amichie rubbed his paws together in excitement, Dorian looked back over his shoulder. His brow flattened, jaw setting.

He started walking back where they had come from. "I will be back momentarily, Amichie." Without waiting for a reply, he continued down the way. It took him only a brief glance around, and he stepped into the market stall.

"I'm incredibly jealous of your muscles!" Rudy announced, his eyes going wide as he heard his voice saying that. "Uh oh."

Subaru tried not to laugh, but a high, quiet giggle kept escaping from him. At least it wasn't anything dangerous.



Well, not *too* dangerous. The truth always had unpredictable effects.

Dorian raised an eyebrow. He stepped closer to Rudy, surveying the items on display and, at last, bringing his gaze to the one in his companion's hands. This wasn't even as complicated as two plus two.

"It's a charm that enchants those affected to tell the truth entirely." He tilted his chin up, announcing this with total certainty.

Rudy's eyes opened wider. "Whaaaaat? For real? I had no idea!"

Rising from his seat, Subaru held his hands up in front of him. "It's a temporary effect. Like a sample of the item." He offered a sheepish grin. "It's a really popular item. I can see why it caught his eye!"

"I have popular tastes!" Rudy beamed, puffing out his chest. "I'm a cool guy!"

Dorian pressed his lips into a thin line. His eyes narrowed.

Completely unrestrained, Rudy strutted a bit around the stall. "I ate nine cookies yesterday, straight from the jar!" Then his eyes widened and he froze in place.

Slowly, gradually, he turned back to look to Dorian. Rudy steepled his eyebrows. "I really enjoyed them?"

Dorian sighed and reached out, to pluck the amulet from Rudy's hands and set it down on the table, almost exactly where it had rested before he picked it up. "We are leaving. Good day, Mr. Hoshikawa." He jerked his chin towards the marketplace outside. "Come, Dilandol."

Dorian knew exactly what he was looking at. He also knew that Rudy had no business being left unsupervised with anything that could make his tongue looser. Dilandol volunteering extraneous information, in Dorian's mind, could only lead to disaster.

Especially when he was already wound up from the atmosphere of the market. Dorian had a feeling that if he let Rudy continue to explore on his own, he would end up hearing far more than he ever wanted to know about his friend's many secret exploits around their shared home.

"Okay, okay!" Rudy called back, waving his hands in surrender. He jogged to catch up with Dorian, who was already striding away from the stall with purpose in his steps. "Slow down, speedy!"

Dorian glanced back over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow, pointedly not slowing down at all. "I'm not going to make you run to keep up with me, Dilandol. But I also don't have time to waste dawdling."

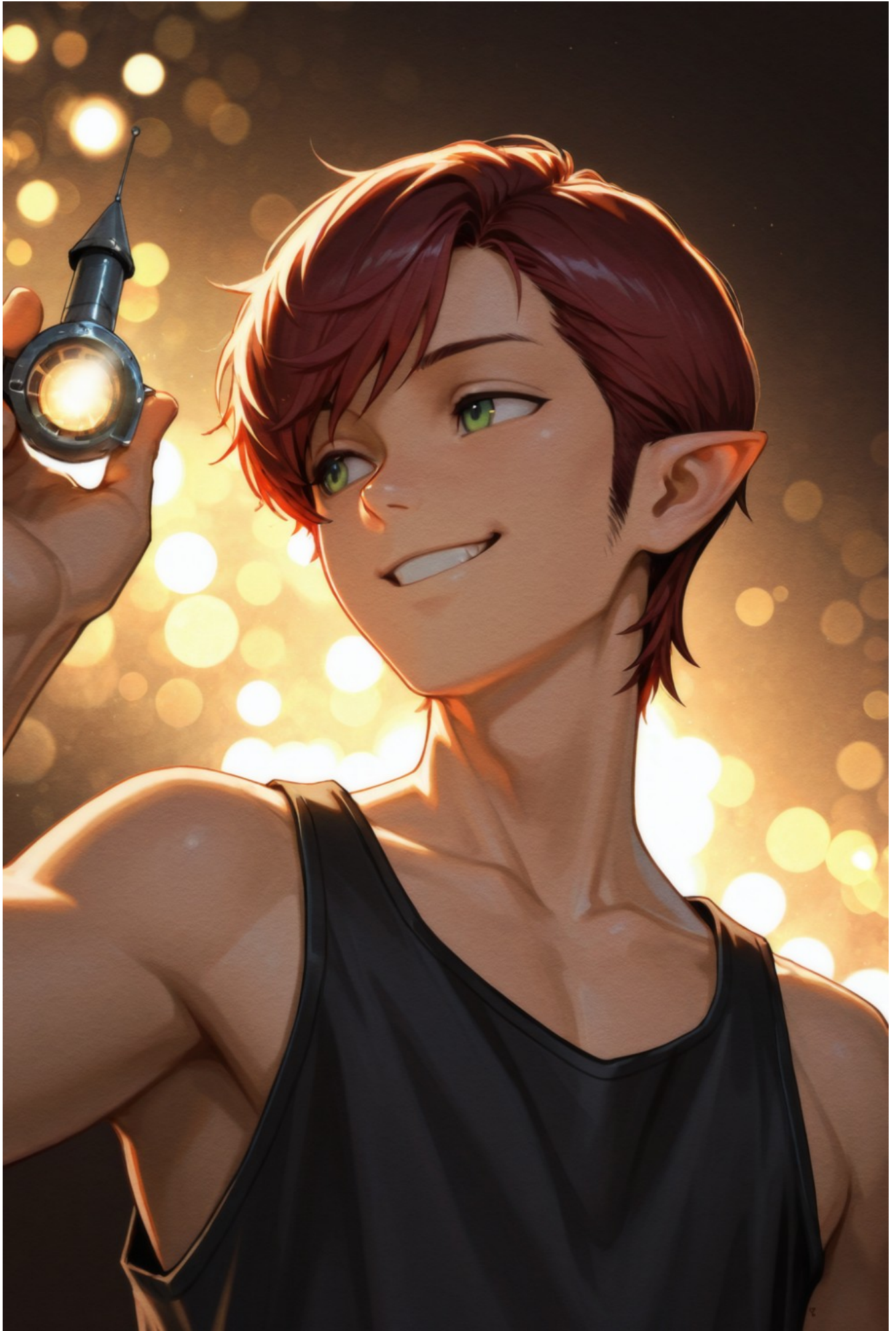
Rudy huffed, but he lengthened his strides to match Dorian's pace. "Fine, fine! I get it! No dawdling allowed when the hotshot detective is on the clock!"

Dorian didn't even dignify that with a response. He just kept walking, hands shoved deep into his pockets. The marketplace bustled around them, filled with the sounds of haggling shoppers and hawkers calling out their wares.

"Hey, speaking of hotshots..." Rudy started, grinning with a mischief that never seemed far from his face. "You know, for a guy who's supposed to be all mysterious and aloof, you sure do have a way of drawing attention to yourself."

Dorian glanced over at him, one dark eyebrow arched. "Excuse me?"

"You know what I mean!" Rudy laughed, unperturbed by the warning in Dorian's tone. "All tall, dark, and brooding, striding through the market like you own the place. No wonder everyone's staring at your butt." He sighed with great drama, draping his hand on his forehead. "Dreaming."



Dorian didn't even spare him a glance this time. "I'm not here to impress anyone. Especially not with my glutes."

"Pff." Rudy snorted, trying but failing to hold back a laugh. "Yeah, I bet! But your glutes are like, top-tier."

Dorian just didn't have time for the nonsense. Though he did take a certain amount of satisfaction to know that Rudy verifiably, and under the effect of a truth charm, had admitted things he normally wouldn't say.

"Hey, by the way..." Rudy continued, showing his regular obliviousness. "You find out anything about that whole...thing yet? Amichie was freaking out earlier, but he wouldn't tell me any details."

Dorian's steps faltered ever so slightly, but he recovered quickly. "That's an ongoing effort. I'll let you know as soon as I know anything I can confirm, but I prefer not to share speculation that might be wildly off."

That was a trait Rudy had quickly become familiar with. He pouted a little, but he nodded even so. "I get it. I don't like it, but I can't really say anything about it, 'cause it's respectable and I kinda wish I could do the same thing, but I can't 'cause it's already hard for me to just not talk about stuff!"

Dorian just grunted in acknowledgement. When he thought about it, this wasn't all that different from how Dilandol usually was.

Then Dorian spotted Amichie down the path, still haggling with a vendor over some kind of glittering trinket. Bushels of hazelnuts sat underneath him, tiny wings flapping furiously but keeping him in the air as gracefully as a swan swimming in a placid lake.

"Ah, there you are!" Amichie called out, waving them over excitedly. "You won't believe what I found! It's supposed to grant one wish come true, but only once a year on the summer solstice at exactly midnight!"

Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the faint signs of a headache. "Wonderful," he pronounced, a bit too exact. "Just what we need. Another magical McGuffin to lose track of."

Rudy clapped his hands together, eyes sparkling with delight. "Ooh, can we try it out? Pleeese, Dorian? Just a little test wish? I promise I won't ask for anything too crazy, like world peace or world domination or anything!"

Dorian closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and counted to six in his head. Then he opened them again, and fixed Rudy with a steely look. "No." He took in a soft, almost inaudible breath. "Because it is not even remotely the solstice, and it is not midnight."

Rudy's smile faltered for just a split second before it returned full force. "Oh. Oh! Right."

Dorian returned his attention to Amichie. "Did you manage to haggle a reasonable price out of him this time? Or are we going to be eating bread and water for the next month to pay off this little indulgence of yours?"

Amichie bristled, his little corgi chest puffing out indignantly. "Excuse you! I'll have you know I'm a very shrewd negotiator! I got him down to a mere-"

Dorian held up a hand, cutting him off mid-rant. "Later, Amichie. We can discuss the finer details of your bargaining prowess back at the office. I am only teasing."

Rudy snickered, but he kept quiet.



"Fine, fine!" Amichie huffed, but he grudgingly stuffed the trinket into his little onesie pocket. "But you would have regretted missing out on this once in a lifetime opportunity, Mr. 'Too Cool' Merryweather! I'm doing you a big favour!"

Dorian actually smiled, slightly, softly, barely showing at the corners of his mouth. For him, that was effusive, beaming, radiant. Perhaps today would not especially be a return to sanity, or boredom as Rudy would say. But this particular pair of troublemakers always made every day more interesting, and thus richer.

"Let's go home." Dorian called, gathering up the hazelnuts in his arms, with little effort.

Rudy nodded in agreement. "You have incredible arms and upper body strength!"

With a soft, almost inaudible sigh, Dorian just kept going at a steady pace, leaving Amichie and Rudy to catch him up. The market teemed around them, happy conversations and the exchange of treasures throughout. The morning grew a little warmer, and the sun smiled down on the city, making the walk back home very pleasant indeed.



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