

A muscular man wearing a white, featureless mask is crouching in a dark, moody environment. The lighting highlights his physique, particularly his chest and arms. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and dramatic.

Everyday Spectres

The Collectors

Camilla Bruce

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I.

He whistled a sonata, then he paused to have a moment's silent concentration while putting the blue contact lens in place on the iris. The little piece of plastic covered up the silver colored eye, the vertical black slit that separated the slice of grey in two halves. Then he hummed a bit, tied the scaled tail to his leg with soft cotton strips and pulled on a pair of spacious pants. It looked odd, of course, he was a fit man, and the big pants seemed meaningless on his slender frame, but it couldn't be helped. It wasn't easy hiding a tail of such considerable length and thickness.

He didn't brush his hair; he wasn't a vain man. On the contrary, his female colleagues often complained about what they saw as lacks in his appearance: the clothes that had seen better days; worn fabrics and dead fashion, wrinkled white shirts and boring black ties. His cufflinks, though, were clean and shiny. The faceted blue topaz twinkled happily when he fastened them by his wrists. Even Septarian realized that it would be bad business for a jeweler to display dull silver and dirty stones.

He checked his e-mail while sipping his morning coffee, the first of several cups to follow when he came into work. The morning hours were always lazy, and it wasn't until lunch-time, when all the businessmen came in to buy diamonds for their girlfriends, wives and lovers, that the day at the store really began. But that was fine. They were never idle. They had to clean and polish the display pieces every day. And there was paperwork, cataloguing, and that other business to

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attend to as well, the business that really drew money to the firm.

All the e-mails were about the next auction. It would be held in the store's spacious cellar. They had just redecorated down there, golden tapestries and velvet stools. Should please many of the foreign buyers. At least that was the thought behind it. Serena had seemed so sure about it; he had just nodded and let her decide. Personally, he cared as little about his surroundings as he did about his appearance, which explained the heaps of clothes, books and magazines that were scattered around in his apartment.

The chairs in his home were in leather and the tables were expensive wood. He slept under a velvet canopy, but he couldn't care less. He had hired someone to furnish the place. But there was one thing he cared about, a trait passed down through generations; he cared about stones and precious metals. He cared about the treasure, as was his legacy.

He came in to the store before the ladies; he could tell by the lack of cars in the small parking lot behind the store. He switched on the lights and took in the scent of dust and polish. Molten gold. The carpet was the dusty part, much too old, but he liked it. It was a plum colored weave with silver fringes. Those were their trademark colors: plum and silver. All their little boxes and plastic bags, cards and signs, were made in a combination of those two colors. The store was called Dragon's Den. It was ironic of course. But people never saw that which was clear in sight. Septarian paused and scratched the back of his neck, the hair that covered it was thick and black with a purple hue to it. People never saw that

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either, though they might notice the shimmering, lavender colored scales that covered his neck, shoulders and most of his back, ending up in that thick and long tail. It was the reason he kept his hair long, despite his otherwise conservative style, to hide his reptile skin. The hair covered up the peculiar shape of his ears as well, long and pointed, able to adjust in many directions. They carried his one carelessness; he wore earrings, pear-shaped diamonds dangling from silver hoops. His one vanity. He had seen them on a plum colored, velvety cushion one day, and fallen in love. And so he had his ears pierced. It had frightened his co-workers as he wasn't usually one for spontaneous actions. They had thought him stressed or otherwise unbalanced, he remembered with a wry smile, part annoyed, part amused by their reaction. They might think what they wanted though, about his composure, but the old one knew that it was just this, his ability to stay focused and in control, that had helped him survive for so long, and was the reason why he still, after so many decades, led his clan in the war against the knights.

Above the counter hung a large print of a Chinese dragon, one of the old ones from back when they were beasts with wings. It was a long time since that now, ever since the dragons began coupling with the princesses, their species had developed quickly. As had the knights, unfortunately...

There were no winged dragons left now, the only real dragons were Septarian's kind, half-human, half-reptile and, as they preferred to think, with the best genes from both camps.

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Septarian went into the display room and fished his security card from a pocket. He crossed the floor and approached the large safe, a human-sized steel door in the wall. He punched in the code. There was a lot he had to do before the store opened. While he lifted out trays of loose diamonds and finished jewelry and slid them in place in the display cabinets, the security guard from the night shift came to say goodbye. He was a young, fit man with a bright blue hair that everyone outside their circle thought was dyed. He informed his boss there was fresh coffee, then he yawned and went to get his jacket.

Coffee again. Septarian looked forward to it; he was such a caffeine addict. But he took his time. He didn't like to leave work unfinished, so he waited until all the plum-colored trays were where they were supposed to be, and even dusted off some emerald rings that Serena seemed to have forgotten, before entering the meeting room behind the store. The coffee maker stood on table by the door. It smelled heavenly. He grabbed an apple from a plastic bowl, just to feel somewhat healthy; he wasn't much of a breakfast boy. Seated by the wooden table, he rested his legs on another chair and sipped the black liquid while stroking his own calf with the tied-up tail, as was his habit when he felt good. His tail muscles were stiff; he had forgotten to exercise. Again. It was no good! Tails went limp if one didn't use them. It was important to stretch and bend it after a long day tied to the leg.

The guard had left last night's newspaper on the table and Septarian quickly flipped through it while humming quietly

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and mentally preparing for the day. He had some lovely rubies waiting for him. Some he would sell, others he would use in a new design he was toying with. He might not be the best of designers, but he still got fairly good prices for his jewelry and it was his passion and great joy, much more important to him personally than the princesses that the others were so nuts about. Not that he complained though, he owed them his wealth and his youth, but still...

They filled a gap in the market, Septarian and his staff. They hunted the male princesses, very rare and very precious, those boys. It took skill to sniff them out and collect the musk-enchanted essence which was not to be confused with semen; it was much rarer and much more precious than that—from their bodies. Female princesses were easier, mainly because they were so many, and because knowledge of how to find and catch them was easily accessible. If Septarian had wanted easy money, female princesses would have been an option. However, the auction prices were astonishing, much better, for the males, when they had gotten a particularly good catch. Essence from a young, male princess could have dragons fly in from all over the globe.

Serena came in, threw her fox fur over a plastic chair. She tousled his hair as she passed by and he lowered the newspaper with a grunt.

"Good morning," she greeted him merrily. Her cup stood by the coffee maker, she had washed it and put it there herself the night before. The red-haired, red-scaled dragon sat down on the opposite side of the table. She looked posh, as always, her burgundy suit was tailored and hid the tail

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perfectly. Her auburn hair fell in waves around her freckled face and her gaze, hazel now but naturally gold, measured her boss.

"You didn't bring Charlie today?" Septarian had a soft spot for Serena's youngest child.

"No," she smiled and drew rings on the table with her finger. "His daddy will bring him a little later to say hi." She smiled warmly. Septarian noticed that she had painted her claws with tan-colored nail-polish. It had always been one of her greatest complexes, the black claws that ran in the family. Personally, Septarian found it pretty.

"G'morning!" Cathleen, Septarian's other female staff member arrived. Her blue coat landed on the table and was followed by her classy shades and they were ready for one of their always somewhat improvised morning meetings.

Cathleen didn't drink coffee, she pulled a bottle of water from her huge hand bag and sat down in a chair, next to Serena. Her white-blonde hair, the fake blue eyes, gave her a childish and innocent appearance, which was also all false of course. Cathleen was bait, and a brilliant hunter.

"Did you see the security guard?" Septarian asked, wondering if the man was late again.

"Sure," Cathleen shrugged. Her voice was a low and a little husky, "he is out there."

"Good," Septarian straightened in his chair. He still looked at Cathleen and his voice was expectant, "So, what do you have? Did you find the boy?"

"Oh yes," Cathleen's pink-painted lips formed the words as she stretched her long legs leisurely under the table. She

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wore her tail tied up under the short dress. It was cleverly done, Septarian couldn't see it. But it probably wasn't very comfortable, he mused, moving uneasily on his chair by the thought of it.

"Piece of cake!" The she-dragon exclaimed with a mock yawn and smiled widely at her boss.

"Good girl," Septarian said dryly, "and where is my essence?"

Cathleen, still smiling reached down in her hand bag again, this time she pulled up a small package wrapped in black cloth. They had to do it like that, as not to expose the essence to light. Cathleen placed it in Septarian's waiting palm. He closed his fingers around it and sat back in his chair. Began to slowly unwrap the thing.

"Any problems?" he asked Cathleen.

"No..." she said indifferent. "He was eager enough." Cathleen's latest princess had been a young, promising football player. Getting him into an intimate situation, intimate enough the essence could be milked from him, could have been tricky, with all the security and management people surrounding the boy. Cathleen had obviously managed though. "Sweaty," she wrinkled her little nose. "He could at least have taken a shower..."

"Yes, it's a crappy job," Serena joked beside her, and reached for the purple glass bottle that Septarian had unwrapped. He gave it to her and she removed the little stopper to smell at its contents. "Good quality though," she judged. "The sweat should be worth the pay."

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"Yeah, I figured as much," Cathleen seemed smug and pleased with herself. "And I have experienced worse." She played with a lock of her hair with her fingers, resting her elbows on the table.

Septarian got the little bottle back and smelled at the essence too. It was strong and rich, almost a little too strong. Septarian preferred the sweeter kind. "Should earn us a small fortune." He was content. "Wonderful work, my dear," he complimented his co-worker.

"Thank you." She winked at him, but not in a flirty way, just playful, as was her nature. Playful like a kitten, of the big and beastly kind, like a puma, or a white tiger, flashing its fangs.

Soon it was time to enter the store and take care of that part of the business. They were a small store, but exclusive. Septarian loved to work with the stones, to polish and clean them and create beautiful frames for them of silver and gold. He was a real dragon like that, cherishing the treasure. The store itself had been in his family for years, but it was Septarian who had made it a success. Dragon's Den was thriving under his care, mainly because he had made the essence auctions a part of their dealings.

Serena was Septarian's cousin and represented that family line in the board, which basically consisted of the two of them and an old uncle who constantly fell asleep in their meetings and forgot to tie up his tail, but it was Septarian's store more than anyone else's, and no one was ever denying that, or otherwise challenging his position as Grand Chieftain of the Den.

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Now he took his coffee and entered the workshop at the back of the display room. He sat by the tidy workbench, where he could see the store through large glass panes and the customers could see him. It gave the store a sort of modern and genuine feel to it, or that was the purpose behind it. At the Den, you could see the jeweler at work, as an assurance you would not buy any pre-fabricated, mass produced junk. Of course, his humble efforts were hardly enough to fill one tenth of the cabinet space, but it looked good anyway. The huge windows also satisfied Septarian's need for control. It was his job to look after the treasure, and look after the treasure he did. He liked sitting there, sipping coffee, looking at his precious trinkets and play around with them to give them a form in platinum and gold.

Cathleen was in the office making calls about the next auction. She knew nothing about jewels; she couldn't separate a quartz crystal from a diamond or a moonstone from an opal. Septarian shrugged.

He could see Serena showing an Asian customer their new sapphire collection. Pink sapphires were so popular these days, almost outshone the traditional blue ones. Septarian didn't quite understand why, but nevertheless let Serena convince him to buy a collection. He didn't regret it though. As usual, his cousin was right and the jewelry sold out faster than they could import it. The potential buyer patted his chest lightly, as if feeling if his wallet was still there while listening to Serena's speech about the stones' brilliance and special qualities. He would buy, Septarian felt sure of it, to please

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Serena if nothing else. Else he wouldn't be thinking about his wallet and the loss it was soon to experience.

By the entrance stood Willy, another huge blue dragon. Blue dragons were fantastic guards, as was Willy, when he was there and not home in his bed sleeping, which he all too often was. Otherwise, he was a nice man, and did his work wonderfully.

Septarian opened the box of rubies and smiled at his little gems. They were so pretty and sweet, like summer's first strawberries in color. Septarian adjusted the light and bent over the red sparks to have a better look.

There was a knock at the door.

"Septarian," it was Cathleen, "I think you should hear this." She had the wireless phone in her hand and Septarian gave her a questioning gaze before reaching out for it.

"Yes?" he barked into the phone.

"Hello, boss," It was Lawrence. Septarian's informant. His slow drawl filled the jeweler's ear like old and sugary syrup. "I have some very interesting news for you."

"Really?" Septarian said indifferently. He never could stomach the other dragon's flare for drama. He also strongly suspected that he sold information to the knights as well, if he felt sure no one would find out.

"Oh, come on, some enthusiasm?" Lawrence's voice gained a complaining edge.

"Tell me what you got." Septarian fought to hide his dislike and failed miserably.

"All right," Lawrence sighed. "We don't have to like each other, never mind that I'm your blood hound. Your eyes and

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ears in the underworld." His voice rose with tension, signaling that a dramatic rant was being slowly and painfully born.

"Or the guy who sniffs out prey for us." Septarian interrupted calmly. "What is it that is so important you can't talk to Cathleen about it?" Unlike Septarian, Cathleen had found a way to stomach the little weasel, and they worked fairly well as a team. Then again, Cathleen was all about people.

"There's a rumor. There's a boy..." Lawrence's drawled.

"Oh, we like boys," Septarian said dryly and Cathleen, still by the door, raised her eyebrows.

"He's a princess," said Lawrence.

"Really?" said Septarian, his voice tired, even to his own ears. The dragon on the other end became more stupid by the day. Septarian sighed and reached for the pen in his pocket, the small notebook he kept there. "Where?" he snarled into the phone. "Who is he?"

"Nathaniel something," Lawrence finally got to the point. "He is supposed to work at Majesty, an ice cream bar." Septarian scribbled down the name. "Look, I'm not sure," Lawrence interrupted himself, "but if the rumor about this boy, and his scent, has only a fragment of truth to it, then it is worth checking it out."

"And what does it say?"

"Huh?"

"The rumor, Lawrence!" Septarian wasn't a very patient creature, his knuckles whitened around the phone.

"Ah, they say he is powerful. Best boy we've had here for years."

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"Who are they, then?" Usually he didn't ask. Usually he wasn't quite as annoyed. But he had been having fun with the rubies and all ... The interruption was all but welcome.

"Ah ... the usual ... blue dragons mostly. No work, looking for a free drink ... trying to avoid touching the family legacy."

"Good, good," Septarian wiped his brow with the back of his hand as if weary. "If there's something to it, I'll make sure you get your share as usual." Lawrence wasn't in it for the money; he had enough. He wanted samples of the essence, as he didn't have that kind of money required to buy it at auctions. It was a fair deal, Septarian thought. They were saved the trouble of looking, he was saved the trouble of sampling. Lawrence made his head ache though.

"Here," he reached the note to Cathleen and waited for her to take it. "Sounds like it could be nothing, just a rumor, but check it out!"

"Sure." She winked at him and slid her shades in place. "See you later!" She closed the door behind her.

An hour went by smoothly, calmly. Septarian played with his gems. Thoughts of Lawrence and the new promising boy, of Cathleen's hunt, were all gone, as the old dragon, eager as a pup, sorted stones in piles of "keepers" and "sellers". Of course such peace couldn't last though, and before he knew it, the blonde dragon was back. She knocked twice and entered briefly with her lambskin gloves still in hand, then she nodded towards the meeting room without saying a word.

Septarian rose with a deep sigh. He wasn't in the mood for business today. On good days, he could be a fierce

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businessman, but not today. Today he wanted to play with rubies.

Serena was already seated when he entered. She sat by the table again, much as she had the same morning. She was restless and her feet shifted under the table. There could be new customers coming in any minute so she was eager to hear the news.

"Well?" Septarian said as he sat down. His gaze fixed expectantly at Cathleen. She sat down too, on the edge of the table, a bottle of water in her hand as usual.

"Well," she echoed him. "I went to Majesty, and yes, he works there." She confirmed it with a nod. "He is the manager's son," Cathleen paused, "and the rumor is right, he is a princess, no doubt."

"And?" Septarian urged her on.

"The place reeked of knights," Cathleen moved, uncomfortable. Her cleaved tongue danced.

"But we always expect that," Serena said calmly. "That's not a surprise. They must have smelled him too."

"But they haven't made a move yet?" Septarian asked. It was important to know if they had chosen to strike yet or not. If they had established some kind of connection with the prey. They did have a few good hunters...

"No." Cathleen shrugged. "And neither will we, just yet."

"Why?"

"He is gay."

"Are you sure?" Septarian's eyebrows lifted in surprise. It didn't happen all that often, and especially not so close to home.

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"Very sure!" Cathleen placed the bottle on the table. "He didn't even look at me, even though I pushed my cleavage up under his nose; besides, I caught him looking at a boy, and by looking, I mean drooling. He is young," she added, "and horny!"

"Such a shame, we could have gotten a great price for a local one at the next auction. Now we will never get him in time," Serena complained calmly and sipped her coffee. "I suppose the knights found out too."

"Do the knights have any gay hunters in town? Or someone straight able to pull it off?" Septarian played with his cufflinks.

"I don't know," Serena said, thoughtful. "Wouldn't be surprised if they flew a gay one in though, if this kitten is such a catch."

"I could smell him from across the street.. "He is a power drug," she declared, "I really wish I could have him!"

Septarian was slightly disappointed. A young, powerful princess, right under their noses ... He cursed himself quietly for not having a male hunter on the payroll. Later, he thought, he would arrange interviews with a couple of males. You never knew when you needed one. As for today, however, the situation seemed rather hopeless.

"Though I do know someone who could do it." Serena's voice reached him through his thoughts.

"Me too." Cathleen chimed in. Septarian felt hot.

"Oh no, you must be joking!" he burst out. "Hunting isn't my thing at all!"

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"But it used to be," Serena purred. "Back in the days, you were the best."

"And gay," Cathleen reminded him, as if he didn't know that.

"It would be a sad thing to see him slip through our fingers," Serena spoke in that reasonable voice of hers. "There's good money, and if we get him, the knights won't." She pushed all his buttons at once.

"Forget it!" He rose from the chair. "I'm an old beast," he declared. "I'm not interested in things like that anymore."

"It would be for the auction, though. Just business." Cathleen could be reasonable too when she wanted to. Damn women! Septarian really felt like going to his workshop, locking the door and sorting through those rubies.

"No," he said firmly. "I don't hunt anymore. I make jewelry and do the paperwork!"

"Grumpy old man," Cathleen teased him with a wry smile. "It would do you good."

"No, it wouldn't!" He replied sternly. "It wouldn't do me any good at all. It's a stupid suggestion! I pay people to hunt so I won't have to do it myself."

Of course he couldn't help but think about it afterward, while he sat behind the glass and looked at the stones again. He heard Serena talk to the customers and just the sound of her voice annoyed him now. Not because she had suggested what she had as much as the fact that he couldn't stop thinking about it. He had trained himself to not think about young men like that. Like prey. That belonged to another phase of his life, and he had seen that as progress on a

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personal plane, seen it as a victory, that he was able to hire his own hunters and didn't have to do the dirty work himself anymore. His firm was a success; it was his privilege to lean back and count his treasures. The hunting had been so exhausting in the end, made him feel drained and old. It was hard walking that line, try not to hurt, be hurt. But then it was the knights, and the thought of them was what made it all so hard. He really didn't want the knights to get the essence from a boy described by an experienced hunter like "power drug". Those bastards didn't deserve anything good, and especially not something as potent as that.

It had always been a war. The dragons and the knights. None of them were human, but some had the benefit of looking more human than others. Of course that was bitter. Heaven only knew what the knights really were, but they were old as legend and their secret society was formed long before the dragons shed their wings. In the old days, the knights had wanted to extinguish the dragons so they could have all the princesses to themselves. The desire to kill seemed to have mellowed somewhat over the years, as culture seeped into even their thick, little brains, but it didn't mean that the knights were friendly towards dragons. They would still kill them if they could, or at least Septarian was convinced that they would. But even he had to admit that they didn't seem to be out to erase the whole breed anymore. It had turned into a sort of cold gentlemen's war. A competition.

Maybe they had given up the killing because the dragons were too hard to kill? As were the knights, which was what all

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of it was about, really. It was about the essence that could be found in certain human bodies. Stimulation of certain points could make them produce the "princess drug", once. There was only one dose per princess, but that was more than enough.

The main thing the drug did was to prolong the dragons' and knights' lives. In modern days, a shot at birth usually saw to that. Depending on the princess, the essence could also do other things: enhance certain talents or sharpen certain senses. Many collectors experimented with the essences, combined them and made potions and elixirs. The hugest collections had thousands of tiny bottles, collected through the ages, filled with fragrant princess essence.

Septarian didn't have a collection, but he was a collector. His job was to find and collect the essence and then sell it to the highest bidder.

As for the knights, they didn't like sharing. Neither did the dragons. Which explained the hatred. It was about competition, about not wanting to share the precious drug with the other species. It was about survival of the fittest, only so far, they had been fairly equal. Probably because both parties strengthened their lines by mating with humans. At first they only mated with princesses, as was natural to get to the essence. Later, it became custom to mate with other humans as well. As in rest of society, young dragons were now encouraged to follow their hearts.

As on cue, Serena's human husband, Tommy, arrived at the store, with little Charlie on his arm. Septarian looked up from his rubies and smiled. He really liked the little boy; he

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was a lovely dragon-child. It was a toss up with dragon-ladies if they lay eggs or gave birth the human way. Personally, Septarian had hatched from a soft, jelly egg. But Charlie had been born from his mother's womb. She came out now, from behind the counter and greeted her family, lifted the little boy from her husband's arm.

Tommy was many years her junior, of course. And he was the reason why she no longer hunted actively. It was a shame. She had been good. But then she met this young teacher, and suddenly the old dragon-lady wanted a home and a family. They had a five year old daughter too, and this little boy, red scaled and yellow-eyed as his mother. His little tail peeked out from the bundle of blankets and swung from side to side while Serena carried him and Septarian quickly checked the security mirrors to see if they were alone in the store.

Serena's children were the closest he would ever come to having any; Septarian knew that. And that was why he enjoyed having them around at the shop, he supposed. Cathleen called him an old softie. He supposed she was right. This was what life had come to for him. For good and for bad. He didn't think things would change much from now on, so he counted his blessings as well as his treasures.

Septarian watched Tommy clean his glasses before following Serena in to the meeting room. It was time for little Charlie to have his banana. Septarian sighed and looked down at the small, sparkling jewels again.

By lunch, he had decided he would go and have a look at the young princess. But he didn't say it to anyone.

II.

Septarian's black, almost soundless car slid in place in the parking lot close to the ice cream bar. He felt awkward and out of place. This was a neighborhood full of young people, young, shiny and colorful people that made him stand out like a undertaker or something equally dark and sinister in his black suit and tie. But his cuff-links shone and sparkled...

He smoothed the fabric of his suit, a nervous gesture. He hated to catch himself doing things like that. Then he pocketed the keys and scanned his environment. His reptile eyes didn't care much for light, so he put on his shades and made the vampire look complete. He supposed it would have been a cool thing, had he wanted to be tall, pale and strange, but he didn't particularly want to. He just did.

His nostrils flared as he sifted the air, and yes! He could smell it too! The sweet, alluring scent of princess, pulling him in, like flowers calling for a bee. It was heavy and sensual, this particular scent, and wrapped around him like a smooth cloak while he walked towards the Majesty, a clean-looking, modern ice cream bar on a corner. Ah, Septarian sighed to himself, this one was power drug indeed. Luscious and thick, this smell. It almost felt like he could lick it from the air. Rich musk revealed the sex of the princess. It made it stir in the dragon, but just for a second. He was done with the hunting. He had other jobs now. This was purely recognition. And an ounce of curiosity...

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The dragon crossed the busy street with eager steps. Then he realized that what he was doing, and slowed down. He was much too old to be ensnared by a scent. But what a scent!

Before going inside, he took a deep breath and reminded himself he was in charge of his instincts. Then he pushed open the glass door under the shiny letters spelling out the place's name and stepped inside on the clean white tiles.

The scent was overpowering in there. Thick as fog. A complaining sound rose from Septarian's throat and he fought a sudden instinct to run and hide. Instead, he took off his shades, held them so hard they made warning noises, threatening to break if he didn't let them go.

It wasn't a big place, maybe ten round tables scattered around on the floor, grey marble and white chairs. They formed a half-circle around the bar. The store was silent but for the humming sound of the freezer. A thick lady and her offspring sat by a table, quietly licking their ice cream cones. Septarian had planned on hiding in a corner, but there were no hiding-corners in this place. Bright light flowed in through the huge windows and there wasn't as much as a plastic plant to hide behind. Septarian felt nervous, nervous about the exposure, about meeting the man that smelled so good. Suddenly he panicked and turned on his heel, the blood flushed through his veins and made his limbs prickle while his scalp felt like it was shrinking. His cheeks colored bright red and the shades gave in and snapped while the dragon rushed back towards the door.

"Are you all right, sir?" Septarian spun around as if caught in an unspeakable act. Blue eyes looked at him with

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indifferent curiosity as the blond youth came out from a door behind the counter. He was pretty as a sunset, long, lazy curls of which most were caught at the neck by a purple plastic barrette. Blue eyes and lips like dark roses. The superlatives were unavoidable; he was a revelation! His jeans rode low on his hips, revealing a glimpse of naked hip bone. His white cotton t-shirt was skintight and made his skin look healthy tanned. He wore an all too small pink apron, with Majesty printed on it in gold letters. The scent of the essence was so intense now that it pulsed around the dragon. Made his heart race and sweat to break out on his skin. All his muscles were tense.

"Yes," he croaked hoarsely. "I am fine."

"Good!" The boy smiled, beamed like a firework in fact. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Septarian managed. "Yes, I..." He approached the counter again, uncomfortably self-conscious. He walked awkwardly, didn't he? He should throw away the broken shades.

"What do you want?" the boy asked cheerfully, and Septarian blushed.

"Just ... a cone." he managed. "Vanilla..."

"Vanilla, eh?" The pretty boy raised one of his eyebrows, and his eyes twinkled under long lashes. Septarian blushed. Was the boy flirting with him? It couldn't be.

"Topping?" Was that suggestive? Or was he an old dragon imagining too much?

"Cherry..." he croaked.

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The ice cream boy raised his eyebrow again and began looking through the messy bottles on the counter. "I'm sorry," he said. "No cherry here." He gave Septarian a sideways glance. "Oh,——" he picked one up, "here it is!" The boy grinned.

Septarian got the message. In fact, it went straight to his groin and he blushed furiously, which in turn, annoyed him no end. Sure, he had been out of the loop for a while, but this was ridiculous!

"Good ... eh. Thank you!" He stumbled in his own words. He took the ruby red ice cream from the boy's hand and shivered just a little when he pulled a bill from his pocket and placed in on the counter. There could be no touching. Touching was too much. The ice cream boy seemed to notice, he smiled warmly with just a hint of seriousness to his eyes.

"Thanks," he said. "Next time you should try the blueberry. It is lovely." He dropped his gaze and picked up the money. Did he wink at Septarian? Could be his imagination...

"Keep it," Septarian was surprised he had any voice left at all.

"Sure," the princess smiled slightly and turned around, crossed the floor to the cash register and presented Septarian with a view of his jeans-clad rear. Across the pert little thing, faded blue letters spelled out Blueberry.

It was then Septarian fled for real. Like a skittish little shadow of what had once been a hunter, he took his vanilla-cherry ice cream cone and rushed out on the busy sidewalk. The little bell above the door rang when he left. The sound was bliss. Escape! He walked, fast and furious, until the scent

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didn't wrap around him anymore, until his body didn't fill with the essence of the boy every time he breathed, until the ice cream tasted cherry and not horny youth, reeking of lust, hinting at orgasm with every move that he made. Septarian felt sick, as if he'd had a sugar overload. His belly was turned inside out. The ice cream in his hand glittered evil in the harsh sun, a sinful jewel of cream and syrup. But he didn't throw it away. He threw his shades though, in the nearest trashcan. Then he walked over to the parking lot, slowly, as in a dream.

He sat in his car and stared at the melting ice cream, the cherry topping on the napkin the boy had wrapped around the thing. What was his name? He tried to remember from the notes he'd made, so many years, so many princesses. Names became a blur after a while. This one, Nathaniel. He was fairly certain. Nathaniel with the blueberry-butt.

Septarian sighed and leaned his head on the steering wheel. It smelled of leather and perfume and he felt sick again. Still he ate the ice cream. Every last, sweet drop of it.

He didn't go back to the store. He went home and opened a bottle of wine. He took one of the large glasses from the shelf, filled it to the brim. Then he called in sick. He never called in sick. When Serena asked if he wanted her to stop by with some take-away Chinese and a bottle of wine, he said yes with the passion of a drowning man being offered salvation. By the time she arrived, he was already drunk, huddled under a blanket on the sofa, his tail smacking against the floor rhythmically.

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"But sweet boy, what is wrong?!" She was worried. She had used the spare key and now she stood in his living room with her arms full of white, cardboard food containers, smelling of rice and curry. The wine bottle dangled from her fingers and motivated him to turn over and speak.

"Nothing," he lied. She arched her eyebrows and twisted her mouth into an ironic smile. "I'm not a boy," Septarian said. "That's what's wrong." And so followed the whole horrid tale, including his own anything but brave retreat out the door with the dancing bell.

Serena chuckled. He gave her a stern look, but then she began laughing. Then she chuckled again, all red-faced with a glass of wine in her hand.

"It's not funny," Septarian barked. "The knights can just go in there and take him. What is so funny about that?"

"You are!" Serena grinned.

"I can't see why it's funny that the knights get a hold of something so powerful!" He tried to make her see his point.

"Oh come on, Septarian! This isn't about the knights!" She sat down her glass on the polished table. "Besides, they won't get him if you do."

"I can't! I can't even speak to him, and how on earth am I going to seduce him if I can't talk to him?"

"You could let him seduce you," Serena suggested calmly. "He was trying very hard you know, blueberry-butt and all."

"Oh, shut up!" Septarian complained. "He is on a testosterone high! Any man would do! Cathleen with a fake beard would probably do! What is that stupid boy doing?" His

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thoughts abruptly changed direction. "He is begging to get caught!"

"If not caught, then fucked," Serena said bluntly and stirred in one of the food containers with her sticks. "Though it could be he actually likes you, Septarian. Have you thought about that?"

"Come on." Septarian felt miserable. "Cathleen said she'd seen him look at another boy; he's just needy."

"So you have thought about it," his cousin smirked. "You are a good looking dragon, Septarian." She was serious now. "Even if you don't care, or ever think about it."

Septarian rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "It's no use, Serena, I'm not going there again."

She looked at him for a moment, then she leaned over the table and placed her hand on his. "Boy, he really left you crushed," she said. "I'm so sorry, Septarian." She gave a sad smile. "But it's been years since you lost him."

"It has nothing to do with him." Septarian shrugged. Felt uncomfortable.

"No, of course not," she withdrew her hand, sensing his discomfort. "So what do you want to do, then? With the ice cream boy?"

What did he want to do with the ice cream boy? Maybe it was karma, Septarian thought the morning after while preparing a raw egg shake for his hangover. He had been a fierce hunter in the past; probably hurt many boys, too. He briefly recalled a young princess from the fifties. A stammering, sweet voice and a suit that was all too big for him. His hair was slicked and glossy as was the custom back

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then. He had a flower in his hand, a cornflower. Septarian had helped him fasten it in his buttonhole. And it wasn't the only hole he had filled that night. Ah! The shame of it all! It had been a competition then, not to beat the knights as much as delving in the glory of being the best, the most efficient hunter on the team. Septarian pressed the cool glass to his forehead. He longed for silver and opals. Sapphires and platinum. Peace and quiet and no blueberry-butts to disturb his peace of mind. No rosy lips and telling eyes. Septarian sighed and put the glass down. Then he shed his thick silk robe to the floor and went back into the shower. He jerked off under the running water, picturing what the ice cream boy would look like all naked and wet. Then he toweled off again and tied up his tail.

What did he want to do with the ice cream boy? The question remained unanswered.

Thankfully, being in his own territory had a way of calming him down. As soon as he was safely back at work in his own environment, Septarian relaxed a bit. What did it matter anyway that a curly haired beauty wanted to have some verbal fun with an old beast? It was just a game to the youth, the dragon reminded himself. They were like that, young princesses. He should, as the older and wiser one, just take a deep breath and let it go. He would also leave word at the appropriate places, that he was looking for a good-looking male to hunt a powerful princess. He would pay well for the essence and cover all expenses.

"How fun is that?" Serena asked when he told her during their break. "To pay for his date, but not be in on it."

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"That's what I do all the time." He stared intensely at the newspaper in his hands.

"But this is the ice cream boy!" she argued. Her eyes were a little red-rimmed too, after their wine party the night before. "And he wants to fuck you!"

Septarian looked up at her over the paper edge. "As I'm sure a lot of people want to do..." he said half-teasing, half-offended, though perfectly aware of where she was headed. "I'm fine," he assured her. "I'm not lonely, and I'm not miserable. I'm a little horny, but that's ok."

"And if the knights gets to him before we find a hunter..."

"Then we send Cathleen with a beard."

But that same afternoon, after the store had closed, he found himself outside the Majesty again. Dizzy from the heavy scent of princess, he stood for a moment on the sidewalk with closed eyes, just savoring it. He had to look out for their prey, he'd told himself while driving there. Make sure there were no knights about. Make sure he wasn't taken yet. It was just business. Of course, another part of him was perfectly aware that he lied.

There were many more people there this afternoon. Children and mothers, a young couple in love. They had bought strawberry ice cream and fed it to each other with colorful plastic spoons.

Septarian had to wait in line. He felt lightheaded. Didn't really know what to expect. What to say. His mouth felt dry. He might not be able to speak at all. Maybe this was a stupid idea, coming back. Then again he had at least beaten himself. Beaten his own fears. They used to say that was a good

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thing, healthy for the soul, or something along the lines. Only his fears were still there, after all, and when he first caught sight of his princess again, they came back full force. The boy wore green today. Nature's wonder! Septarian watched as he scooped chocolate ice cream from the container and into paper cups. Then he checked his own reflection in the mirror running along the wall. He frowned. It was awful. He felt sure people could tell he had been drinking the night before. An old, drunkard with no fashion sense, dressing like the young man's grandfather. Wonderful! It was sure to impress, wasn't it?

But at least this time he knew more what to expect and it made him feel a bit more in control. He knew he would be swept off his feet, so it wasn't such a shock when he was.

"Well, hello there," the ice cream boy said, surprised when it was Septarian's turn. "You are back," he confirmed. He smiled a little shyly. Septarian felt all warm inside. Hadn't expected that.

"I would like some ice cream," he said stiffly, still uncomfortably self-conscious and awkward feeling.

The ice cream boy took a deliberate look around, and with a secretive smile he asked, "Did you come back for the blueberry?"

"I wish!" Septarian burst out and wanted to smack himself as he said it.

The ice cream boy just grinned though. Batted his lashes and shifted on the floor. "And what kind of ice cream do you want?"

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Septarian sat by one of the round tables and ate cappuccino ice cream with a spoon. He had coffee too, pure and black. He felt all warm and fuzzy inside. There was no denying it. He felt twenty years younger in just two days. He fought to keep the silly smile that he felt was forming from his lips. He didn't want the whole world to know what a ridiculous state he was in. He drank in the scent of the princess with each breath and let the ice cream melt on his tongue. Took his time. Smiled. Glanced at the boy who smiled at him in return, when he wasn't busy with the customers. He felt somewhat in charge of the situation again, not only at the boy's mercy.

There was euphoria in this emotional high, the tension and the desire that uncoiled in the pit of his belly and hissed. Maybe he could do it after all? Maybe he could hunt again?

The boy came by his table. He had a cloth in his hand and used it to clean the already shining marble. He smiled at Septarian.

"What is your name?" he asked quietly.

"Septarian," said Septarian and watched the boy's surprised expression. Yeah, it was a pretentious name, no denying it! He often wished that his mother would have settled for John, but that wasn't likely to happen in any of the old dragon clans. "And yours?" he asked.

"Nathaniel," answered Nathaniel. "No short version," he warned playfully. No one but the manager's son could flirt like that on the clock, Septarian thought amused, while admiring the way that he moved, the young, lean body. The curve of

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his back and then the sweet, sweet smile. He asked the boy how old he was.

He was older than Septarian had thought. Twenty-two. It was good, at least not a child, just a youthful appearance. Septarian knew much about that; he was well into his second century and still not a wrinkle! This boy, however, had an air of freshness to him that old, tired dragons didn't have. Septarian figured he sometimes forgot how young he looked himself, because he felt old, and was painfully aware...

"Tell you what," said Nathaniel, "Come by on your lunch break again, and I'll serve you something nice," he flirted.

"Sweet?" Septarian could flirt too. When he didn't feel like his scalp was about to crawl down from his head.

"Sure, sweet as can be." The ice cream boy grinned. "I'll even give you free coffee." Then he took his cloth with him and was gone.

Septarian finished his coffee, smiling. Put the cup down. Nodded to the boy behind the counter, though he was busy serving a long, thin woman with face like a tanned walnut. He finally caught his eye though. The boy smiled. Septarian smiled, felt all happy. And then he left.

Walking down the sidewalk, happy and content with himself, through drifting veils of princess scent, he suddenly smelled it, something rotten in the air. Knights! It was expected, yet it felt like a fist in the gut. Of course they would be in the area, watching, like he did. Had they gotten a hunter yet? Would they move in? Try to snatch him? Probably. No, certainly!

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Septarian turned around; in the setting sun he didn't see much, just a silhouette of a man entering the Majesty. The knight paused with one foot on the threshold, and presented the dragon with a bow.

III.

He dreamt about the knight that night. It was an uneasy, uncomfortable sleep. There was absolutely no way he could have gone back to the ice cream bar and warn the princess about the knight without appearing nuts and forever losing his chance. Still he wished he had done it.

He was aware though, had that uncomfortable knowledge at the back of his mind, that he was in no way on any higher moral ground than that sneaky bastard of a knight! Still it felt that way. He felt protective, almost. Even if he was about to lure the boy into a situation where he could milk his essence and sell it to some ancient Asian fire dragon or something along the lines.

Septarian was torn. While he lay awake, tossing and turning, he kept picturing how the knight would behave, walking into the ice cream bar, talking to his boy. His boy, for that was what he was in Septarian's mind, where everything was allowed because no one would ever know. He kept picturing the conversation they would have. Half the time the knight would be rejected, Nathaniel would measure him up and down with his blue, blue gaze and answer indifferently when the knight asked him for his name and age, why such a beautiful boy worked there. In the other half of Septarian's fantasy scenarios, Nathaniel gave in, purred like a kitten with a bowl full of cream, smiled sweetly at the handsome knight, and agreed to go out with him. Or worse, asked him to come behind the counter and fuck him silly up against the fridge. It was not a good night for Septarian.

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Of course, since he hadn't slept he also looked like he hadn't the day after, when he nervously approached Majesty during lunch. They had a date. Septarian was entitled to be there. But maybe Nathaniel didn't want to anyway, now that the knight had been there, setting his knightly seductive snare. It would be hell to go in there and see embarrassed awkwardness or regret in the boy's eyes. To see pity even. Then he would just have to work twice as hard, he reminded himself. It was all a part of the game. The competition. It shouldn't matter what the princess thought. All that should matter was the valuable essence. This was completely ridiculous. Being all worked up about a boy!

The bell above the door rang loud and hard, once, like a blow to the jaw, when he entered. Nathaniel's eyebrow rose slightly and Septarian figured he looked mad. Instantly, he smoothed his features and even managed a smile. A game, he told himself. It was a game, and hopefully he still knew how to play it.

"Hello, handsome," the young man said with a smirk. Apparently the dragon's smile had worked. Septarian let out his breath, relieved, and took off his shades.

"Hello yourself, beautiful," he answered, and hoped that the boy wouldn't see him blush. He hated himself for blushing. Why did he blush? It wasn't like he was some inexperienced, insecure virgin! He had been a fierce man-hunter for decades! Oh, this princess! The oh so alluring scent of him!

Nathaniel looked satisfied with the answer though; he bent over the counter, leaning on his elbows.

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"So, you're here for your treat, then?" he flirted and wet his lips with his tongue. For one amazing, numb second Septarian was about to lean forth and kiss him, then he remembered who he was and where he was, and the courage left him. Better not, anyway. Better play it safe, as not to let the prize slip.

"Please, can I?" He smiled instead, pretended not to see the pleading eyes of the boy. He tried not to feel regret when Nathaniel withdrew and the luscious lips disappeared from his view.

The place was empty but for the two of them and Septarian leaned on the counter, chatting merrily while the princess played with ice cream and chocolate sauce behind the counter. He sliced a skinned peach in half, his fingers got slick with fruit juice and Septarian moved uneasy on the spot when the young man absentmindedly, or so it appeared, licked the messy fluid from his skin. But the sudden tightness in his pants aside, the conversation flowed easy enough between them and Septarian was relieved to find out he hadn't lost all his people skills over the past decades while he was sitting in his workshop crafting jewelry. It was as if each witty comeback fueled his self-esteem and made him a little braver. Every little smile or happy laughter from the boy made him feel less of an old, dry reptile and more of a virile man.

It appeared the young man was actually taking a break from University, and did, in fact, have higher ambitions than his father's ice cream bar, he just didn't know just what he wanted yet. Thus the little break. Upon learning that

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Septarian was a jeweler, he revealed a profound interest in stones and what to do with them that Septarian didn't buy for a second. He still thought it was sweet though, sweet of the young man to try. It was a compliment as good as any.

Nathaniel wore a dark blue t-shirt under the apron, and a pair of faded jeans, without any letters today. He sprayed whipped cream over Septarian's peach, staring him in the eyes as he did it.

"Sweet cream," he commented.

"I'll bet," Septarian replied.

"As much as you like," said the boy.

"As much as I can get." Septarian felt hot.

"The fruit is so tender it's almost falling apart." Nathaniel apparently had a thing for naughty metaphors.

"It's ripe and juicy then." Septarian took the glass bowl of ice cream from the Nathaniel's hand. The purple plastic spoon slid through layers of chocolate and vanilla.

"Bursts to the touch." Nathaniel looked about as flushed as Septarian felt. The dragon's nostrils flared, smelling the essence so close; his cock ached again and his mouth filled with tiny explosions of the taste, of sugar and cream. It made his head spin and his heart race. His gaze was locked with Nathaniel's blue one.

"Strange," Nathaniel said. "We have almost the same eye-color." He shifted, broke their stare and poured coffee into a white mug. "And here I thought I was so rare." Nathaniel smiled at Septarian. The blue eyes twinkled and shone as gems in the sun.

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"You are rare," Septarian smiled back at him. His tongue made love to the plastic spoon. He wondered what the boy would have thought about the silvery gray that was his natural color. The knights were lucky like that. They didn't have to hide. "Any interesting guests lately?" he asked his new princess. He didn't know why. He dreaded to hear him talk about another, yet he couldn't help it either. Not that Nathaniel would have told him if he flirted with others. Hell, he might have six men just like him. Horny and moon-eyed on the other side of the counter, making his days at the ice cream bar bearable. The dragon couldn't blame him for that. But it was a dangerous game the young one was playing.

Septarian fought just to sit still, fought not to reach out and touch him, to let his hands roam that slender frame and eat at his mouth with his lips. What would the knight do if faced with such a temptation? Probably the same as Septarian, stand put, afraid to break the spell and lose that sparkling gaze upon him, the gaze that made him feel so good. Like a man, like a beast, like a sex machine. As delicious as the sliced peach, begging to be devoured, that was how Nathaniel made him feel. Like a juicy piece of man-flesh, and he liked that feeling so very much!

"Do you want to go out with me?" he asked, the purple spoon in the air, his mouth wide open in utter surprise that he had actually said what he'd said.

"Yes." Nathaniel's smile widened and he pushed the coffee across the counter towards his guest. "I'd like that," he said simply and Septarian's heart sunk back into his chest. He smiled, relived. Took another bite. Smiled again.

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"Would you like some?" Septarian asked, motioned to the ice cream.

"Thanks!" He took another spoon, a yellow one. It landed besides Septarian's in the pile of fruit, sauce and ice cream, split the peach in half. "Oops!" he said. Septarian thought of penetration.

"Tomorrow, then?" he asked. "You want to go out, tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Nathaniel smiled. "Tomorrow is fine."

"I'll pick you up." His voice sounded hoarse all of a sudden.

"You do that," Nathaniel's voice was hoarse too. "You can pick me up here, I live upstairs," the boy explained.

"Seven?" His gaze was fixed on the deep rose lips that glistened with melted ice cream.

"Eight." The lips smiled.

The bell rang and the magic was broken. Annoyed, Septarian had to take his ice cream and step aside to let the large woman and her kids buy their treats.

They only spoke of safe things after that, while the lady and her children licked their ice cream cones, like his regular guests and the flavor of the month. Nathaniel's smile made his heart warm though. And he'd had about as much excitement as a grumpy old man could take in a day, as it was.

"Tomorrow, then," the dragon confirmed before he left, and received a beaming nod in return. It made those pesky butterflies form and create a storm of wings in his belly.

He felt restless afterwards, paced the Den, back and forth, ignoring his co-workers strange looks. When no one was

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looking, he smelled at his own clothes, felt sure he could smell some essence in the fabric, a vivid memory of his princess-to-be. He worked the diamonds into tiny frames of yellow metal, picturing the young man's smile. The coffee tasted bitter on his tongue, erasing the memory of peach and whipped cream. He snapped at Serena, didn't mean to, but she was disturbing his thoughts that were oh, so far away. And he felt scared! Terrified! What was the princess expecting him to do? He hadn't been dating for fifty years. In the end, he asked Cathleen. Not because he thought her advice any better than any other's but because she happened to be there while he was in the meeting room pouring himself another cup of coffee.

"A date?" Her neatly plucked eyebrow rose. "Why? Are you going on one?"

Septarian thought it awfully rude of her to ask like that, when she could just be polite and answer the question.

"Maybe," he replied. "Perhaps ... Just for work ... of course..." He didn't look at her.

Serena appeared in the doorway. She had a well-known sheet of paper in her hand, printed on thick, cream-colored paper. It was the list of essences for the next auction, fresh from print, he assumed.

"What?" Her gaze darted back and forth between them. "Are you asking her to grow a beard, Septarian?"

"Beard?" Cathleen sounded offended. "He wants to know what to do on a date."

"Really?" Serena's gaze landed on him. "So you'll do it yourself, then?" She smirked at him. Septarian felt

increasingly confused. This was really not what he had wanted; he wanted answers, not a discussion regarding his decisions.

"Just work," he lied and choked on his coffee. He spent several minutes just coughing.

"It's the ice cream boy, isn't it?" Cathleen said at last, when Septarian was done making noise. "I knew you would fall for him. Who wouldn't?"

Septarian snorted. He really didn't need to hear that, as if his current state was something common and unavoidable like sneezes on a cold, rainy day.

"I haven't fallen," he said between gritted teeth. "I just wanted some advice. And now I don't anymore!" He finished his sentence and marched out of the room with his coffee in his hand, feeling very immature and childish.

Serena came out after him, of course. He knew she would; she always did that.

"Septarian." She stopped him before he had a chance to enter his workshop and close the door. "It's not that much that has changed," she said softly. She stood behind him, facing his back, and he refused to turn around. He knew he'd behaved like an idiot. He wasn't really offended that they made good fun of him; it was just all this tension building up inside of him that he had no idea what to do with. His colleagues were a convenient target, and he felt slightly guilty for using them as an emotional laundry basket, but not enough to restrain himself. "Don't let him see your tail unless you trust him." Serena said. "Tell him your scales are a skin condition that will pass. There is no need to show him your ...

you know, unless coupling is needed to harvest. But you can use your mouth, you know that."

"It was easier back in the day," Septarian sighed. "We used to just ... put out the lights!"

"Yes," he could hear it in her voice that she was smiling. "But less fun." She was shifting on the floor.

"But I was actually more worried about what he's expecting of me," Septarian admitted. "What are the rules? I don't know anymore." His shoulders slumped, and Serena noticed because she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest, leaning her head against his back.

"Dearest cousin," she said with affection. "Why don't you and I go for a drink after work, so I can give you a crash course in modern dating?"

Septarian let out his breath in a relieved sigh.

"But no wine," he warned. "I can't be hung over."

Strangely enough they managed to stay somewhat sober. They ate dinner at a classy restaurant, observing the couples, focusing on the task, which was probably what saved them. Usually such nights out turned in to rather drunken affairs.

Serena answered his questions patiently, and soothed his insecurities. Deep in her eyes, he could see a hope that he would come around, be his old self again, whole and confident, not scarred and burned. And for the first time in many, many years, he felt that she might have her wish granted.

It had been a good thing, going out. Not sitting at home, alone, thinking. Building piles of maybes, of things that could wrong, as he all too often did. He was too tired and tipsy to

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lie awake that night. His eyes closed as soon as his head touched the pillow, his tail still on the ice-cold floor. He scrubbed it the next day, with a lavender scrub that Serena felt would fit his color. Polished the scales, though he planned on not showing them. He was only to harvest the essence after all, if he could, of course. If the young man would let him that close.

He was restless at work. Had no appetite. Not even for coffee. He kept thinking about little details, silly as they were, like how to best bring out the luster in his hair before the date? Which cuff-links to wear? Sapphires to compliment the princess' eyes? Garnets to symbolize his passion? In the end, he chose neither, but cherry colored amber. It reminded him of that ice cream cone he ate the first time he was at Majesty.

Ten to eight, and his steps were light. He had already been wandering around in the neighborhood for half an hour, waiting for the time to pass. He breathed deeply to keep his embarrassingly fragile nerves under control, clenching and unclenching his fists before entering the ice cream bar. The little bell rang. Such a merry tune. He couldn't hide his smile when he entered.

At first he didn't grasp the picture. He saw them among so many others. People. Customers. A girl with short, dark hair was behind the counter. In front of it was the princess. His golden hair shone, scented freshly of apple shampoo, wafting all the way to the door. Next to him stood a man, or at least that was what Septarian thought, until the scent caught in his nostrils and his internal alert went off: knight. A strong knight. Septarian's gaze, hidden behind the usual shades,

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instantly fixed on the intruder talking to his princess. Fixed on him, and froze. The man in the black trench coat was all too familiar, olive skin, black eyes. The hair that ended by his jaw, cut in a most knightly fashion, as always. The golden hoops in his ears were Septarian's work. Crafted in happier days. He knew him well. All too well!

"Cid!" The dragon hissed and had to fight his own impulses to stay focused, unfazed, and not let his cleaved, red tongue spill out of his mouth.

"Septarian!" The dark gaze fixed on him in return. No surprise in his expression. He had been expecting Septarian.

"You know each other?" Nathaniel's innocent voice. He beamed like a sun in the middle of a thunderstorm.

"What are you doing here?" Septarian removed his shades and stared at the knight with all the hate he could measure.

"Cid has just moved here." Nathaniel's voice was insecure now. He'd picked up on the tension, of course. How could he not?

"As Nathaniel said I just arrived here," his chalk white teeth blinded Septarian when he smiled. "It's nice to see you again, Septarian." So servile. "We went to college together," he effortlessly lied with his attention back on the princess.

"Really?" Nathaniel sounded surprised, no, confused! He had crossed his arms in front of his chest. He wore a lovely sweater, horizontal stripes in black and pink. Dressed for a date, Septarian remembered. The boy's hair flowed down his back in happy coils, free of the plastic barrette.

"Yes." the knight smiled so wide, Septarian wondered how anyone could buy it. "We used to be best friends," he stated

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and actually winked at the dragon. Such nerve! Such rudeness! Septarian fumed inside.

"Are you ready to go, Nathaniel?" He tried to keep his voice calm and not look at the smirking knight. It was he after all, who had a date with the beau.

"Sure," said Nathaniel and gave a little half-smile. His gaze gave nothing away. He was probably put off now, by the coolness in Septarian's eyes, the ice in his voice, but it couldn't be helped. It was either that or an inferno. "Just have to get my jacket," Nathaniel gave them both a peculiar look, then he disappeared behind the counter, went through a door.

"Cid!" Septarian hissed. "You have no business here. Go!"

"Oh please, Septarian, he is game, as much mine as he is yours," the pretty face twisted into an expression of loathing.

"I am not discussing this with you, Knight! He is mine. Go!" Septarian whispered in a fury, causing the old ladies nearby to look up from their chocolate-chip ice cream and stare.

"Knight, eh?" Cid's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "It's not like you have forgotten my name! How could you?" he smirked. "After all the things we've done..."

"Shut up!" Septarian burst out.

"Still sore, are you?" The bastard winked again then he gave a dry laugh. "No, you haven't forgotten about me at all!" he said and looked all smug and victorious.

"The princess is mine!" Even in his state of shock, he managed to focus on the important thing. Serena would have been proud of him.

"Oh, quit it! It's a fair game," the perfect lips formed the syllables. "Or have you fallen in love with the boy?" He arched an eyebrow. "You have, haven't you? Taking a chance on love again, are we?"

"Shut up! Don't be stupid!" Septarian paled.

"Does your little dove know what you see in him, then?" The horrible knight rubbed his fingertips together. "Money," he grinned at Septarian and sent a spear of guilt through his gut. "Maybe I should tell him?"

Nathaniel came just then. With his jacket over his arm. His expression was still bewildered and his gaze darted between the two, dark males standing in the ice cream bar, arguing.

"Are you ready?" Septarian reached out his arm and it slid across the youth's shoulders to hold him in a possessive grip. The ladies were staring; he didn't care.

"Sure," Nathaniel glanced up at Septarian, and then he gave the evil knight a sweet smile. Cid smiled back to him, all confident looking.

"I'll see you tomorrow then, Nathaniel. Hope I didn't ruin your night." He gave Septarian a short bow that made Nathaniel's eyes widen with curiosity. He probably didn't see many bows like that, Septarian figured as he guided his princess to the door. It probably made him admire the knight! Think him all exotic and fascinating.

"Bye!" Nathaniel waved over his shoulder, to the girl behind the bar. "My sister," he said. "She is covering for me."

"Nice..." It was hard to be polite. His insides felt all torn up. "Introduce me sometime."

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"Sure." Nathaniel sounded cold, a little offended by the dragon's lack of interest. The bell rang a sad tune when they stepped out on the sidewalk.

IV.

"Nice car!" Nathaniel tried to save the night, chattered about all and nothing. Septarian tried, he really did try, to fight off the spell, to not be so grave. Nothing was lost, he reminded himself. He still had the princess. He was there, right beside him! They were alone and the essence smelled just as lovely as before. This was the time to be professional and charming, seduce the little thing into a puddle of want, but a hard lump had formed in Septarian's throat, and it was hard to speak, form the words and focus on their conversation.

Cid was back...

"You have been together, haven't you? In college?" Nathaniel's blue gaze sought his in the mirror. Septarian realized the princess had been quiet for a while, just watching the road ahead. He hadn't even asked him where they were going. Septarian felt touched, and so very sad he couldn't be what Nathaniel wanted him to be tonight.

"Yes," he said. "I am sorry, Nathaniel, it was a bit of a shock."

"Seeing him again?"

"Yes."

Nathaniel shifted on the seat: "Would you rather not go out tonight?" He shifted again. "We could do it some other night."

"No!" Damn it if that pesky knight was going to win! "I want to be with you I just have to get used to the thought of him being here."

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"I'm seeing him for coffee," Nathaniel admitted. His cheeks looked flushed and he made great care not to look at the dragon. "Do you mind?"

"No," he gritted his teeth and watched the road. "Or yes!" he admitted. "I'd rather you didn't, but I'm not your father."

"Are you jealous?" The young man sounded rather smug.

"Of course I am," Septarian gave a wry smile. "But I suppose I am privileged as it is, you being here with me and all."

Nathaniel sat quiet for a while. "So what happened?" he asked. "Bad break up?"

"I suppose you could say that. He left me."

"That's all?"

"It's enough!" Septarian raised one eyebrow and looked at him. "To me that is more than enough!"

"He tried to make me cancel my date," Nathaniel told him innocently.

I bet he did."

"He is jealous too?"

"Not really," Septarian slid his shades in place. "He just likes to win."

"Are you saying that he wouldn't be so eager if he hadn't known I was seeing another man?" Nathaniel asked.

Septarian gave him a sideways glance.

"You," he said. "He would have been eager for you if you were covered in mud and kept a harem."

"And you?" They were flirting again. It was good.

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Me too," Septarian's smile was sad. "I would be jumping up and down, eager as a puppy, hoping to get your attention."

"That is so sweet," Nathaniel remarked, content. "If the mud was chocolate, I'd let you lick it off," the shameless boy continued, his mind quickly drifting to all kinds of naughty places, as was his habit.

He said no more about Cid, but Septarian couldn't help but think about him. As he parked the car and led his boy into the restaurant, a favorite place where they served old-fashioned meals by a roaring fire, his mind kept drifting back to him, and back to those days when love was a pair of golden earrings.

They hadn't met in college. Of course not. None of them had even been to college. They had met a misty night outside an old bricked building. Inside that building was a princess, a young red-head, sweet and ripe like Autumn's raspberries, ready to be picked and savored. Septarian stood outside, lighting his cigarette under a gas light. To his utter disappointment, the street reeked of filthy knight and he had likely been beaten to the prey. He felt exhausted and sad. He had driven himself to his limit hunting this one, traveled through Paris, Rome and Berlin to catch up with the raspberry, and every time he thought he had him, he had slipped between his fingers, and they were back on the road. He had been fairly confident though, that the princess would be his at last, before he caught scent of the knight. It was in Italy, and Septarian had never known such a scent before. It was different, smelled more spicy than your regular knight,

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and it unnerved the young dragon, kept him alert and on his toes. The alert hadn't helped him much though, as in the end he could do nothing but stand outside the door smoking, while the knight was inside milking fresh essence from the princess' fair skin.

He felt so tired. So lost. The city was strange and the stars looked different than home. He looked at his watch, at the gas lamp. His cigarette glowed in the fog. He wrapped his thin frock coat tighter around his body and adjusted his hat, tried to make his pointed ears fit. At least he would wait it out, Septarian figured; at least he would see this opponent that had been one step ahead of him all the way from Rome.

Just how bad a decision that was, Septarian had bitterly learned later, though one didn't fake love like that. One didn't cause the hell that the two of them had, with their little Romeo and Romeo affair, without feeling anything, so his guess was it had been mutual to begin with. And Cid had been so sweet, though not on the first night.

"There you are," Septarian said coolly, dropping his cigarette. He watched the knight step out on the pavement and into the dim circle of light. "So that is what you look like." He failed miserably at keeping the disappointment about his loss from his voice. He didn't really look at the knight until after he had said it though, and was at once taken with his peculiar appearance. The shiny, jet black hair. The eyes that seemed to glow and glitter. He had a soft spot for eyes like that, glittering. Cid looked dark and exotic and completely captivating. Septarian couldn't really blame the raspberry-princess for wanting this one.

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"Who are you?" asked the arrogant knight, as if they hadn't been chasing the same prey for weeks.

"Who do you think I am?!" He was so easily fueled. His temper was even shorter than usual.

"Some chameleon?" the knight grinned evilly, not only insulting Septarian's family line but also suggesting he looked plain and one with the environment. It did, however, tell Septarian the knight knew exactly who he was.

"Witty," he cocked his head. "And you won! Was he worth it?"

The knight pulled out a small vial from the black trench coat he wore, tossed it up in the air and caught it in his palm. He wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Every drop of it," he declared, and put the vial back in his pocket.

"Did he taste like raspberries?" Septarian was past the point of reason.

"Maybe," the knight winked at him. "You'll never know!" And then he took off. Walked away from the exhausted dragon and into the shadows and the fog.

If it hadn't been him standing there under the gas light, he probably would have thought the knight funny, but as it was, he still hadn't overcome the insult a year after, when their paths crossed again in Vienna.

Septarian entered the hotel on a cold, rainy afternoon. The princess lived there, he felt sure of it. He had sniffed his way through the whole city and now he sat down to have a well-earned drink and keep watch, in case the princess showed. He hadn't been sitting there for long though, when that

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particular smell, that enriched stench of knight arrived. He whispered from a distance into his excellent dragon-ear,

"Down boy, it's all gone! Every single drop of him."

Septarian spun around on the bar stool in time to see the smug knight pocket another one of his vials.

The anger he felt then brought tears to his eyes, but what could he do? Make a fuss in the hotel bar? Accuse him for winning fair and square? The knight was better. Simple as that. Faster and a better tracker. It had nothing to do with looks or seduction skills, Septarian comforted himself. Yet it felt like a defeat that hit in his male ego like a blow.

"You!"

"I'm Cid," Cid smiled. "And you are that dragon, Septarian."

"What do you want?" He had ice in his voice.

"I was going to offer you a drink, since you didn't,—" he coughed, "-get a drink." He patted his pocket with the vial and beamed at him. "But something tells me you'd rather not have my company."

He felt this thing, a pull, then, resulting in Septarian wandering yet another year thinking about the knight. Every day, he wondered what would have happened if he had said yes? And why the knight had bothered to ask in the first place. To taunt him, of course, but there had been something there, something else. Septarian suspected that the fascination he felt for the knight, the attraction to his scent, was mirrored in the other.

All of these were hidden emotions of course, the kind of feelings one rather didn't touch or examine too closely, the

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kind of thoughts that appeared at night, or during a heated fantasy. On the surface, he still hated all knights with a passion, and particularly him, Cid, who had humiliated him twice. So strongly did he feel about him that when they met a third time, on a beach in the Caribbean, both approaching an empty boat that just moments before had contained a young princess, Septarian attacked without warning. Growled and ran into the other headfirst, forcing Cid to the ground.

"You?!" he cried. And then they kissed. Rolled around in the fine sand and kissed each other mad and senseless. Their thin summer suits were ripped from their bodies as they rolled. The knight's eyes literally glowed in the velvet night.

"I'll ride you to heaven, Dragon!" the knight promised hotly and took Sectarian's cock in his hand.

"And I'll show you my treasure," Septarian replied and let his tongue spill into Cid's mouth.

And that had been the beginning of their illicit affair.

Of course people around them had been furious, first and foremost, Septarian's mother, at that point a very old and scary dragon.

"You!" she said. "The seventh Chieftain of the Den, in love with a knight!" She spat the last word. "It's lunacy! A disgrace!"

But Septarian was in love and didn't care. He lived happily with his knight, ignoring the awkwardness of the two of them going to secret meetings in their own camps, hunting for the same princesses. For their first anniversary, he wrought the gold hoops out of metal for his love. Cid gave him an antique collector's bottle of purple glass.

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It had been sweet in so many ways; the sex was grand, and the knight was clever. They drank wine and talked for hours, grew closer as secrets were revealed on both sides. Septarian could still remember the feel of him, the smooth, dark body on top of his own, the look in his eyes, shiny with alcohol and want. The little dimples he got when he laughed...

It had to be love, for Cid too. Why else would he go through it? In the end, they even had a trial for him, where they forbade him to hunt and use essence. It had been a horrible blow to Cid. So much of his self-esteem was tied up in the hunting. Septarian had stood by him though, with piles of comfort food and as much sex as he wanted, soothing words, suggestions for the future, made him belt buckles and cuff-links of platinum and gold as gifts.

They traveled to Asia that summer, visited relatives in dens and monasteries. When they came back home in August, Perceval was there. The blond knight had moved into the building across the street. The scheme was so obvious it was ridiculous, but that didn't help at all. Cid fell for it, because he was ripe, because in the end what he was a hunter, and Septarian was the reason why he couldn't hunt.

Somehow, it became Septarian's fault.

The blond knight, new in town, seduced his lover with subtle hints he would be allowed to collect again, if he only got rid of the dragon. How foolish it had been of Septarian to think the rest of the knightly brotherhood would let Cid just go like that. A hunter of his proportions. Of course they couldn't let him go! They must have been surprised though, that he didn't just leave him to begin with, after the trial. Why

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else would they send this blondie, this beautiful young knight, to persuade him? To help him turn his feelings for Septarian into something dirty and shameful.

Not love anymore, but hatred. Like it was his fault, his scale-clad body's fault, that tempted the knight, and seduced him. Cid began whipping himself with chains. His back bled and he cried. Septarian cleaned the wounds and bandaged them.

"It's your fault!" Cid hissed. "You've done this to me!"

"Don't say that!" Septarian cried. "I love you!"

"No, you don't! An animal can't love a man, just lust for him. And a man cannot truly love a beast!"

Still Cid remained with him for another half year, torn between his order and his lover, growing more bitter by the day. Spending more time with that awful blond knight. Reading religious scriptures and drinking poison to strengthen his will. Septarian despaired but could do nothing but watch while he fell apart. The hateful words stung like bees, the self-mutilating actions hurt the dragon's heart. He often cried when he was alone, feeling all powerless in this new situation. And who could he turn to for help? No one. No one wanted to help his knight. Many of the dragons didn't even talk to Septarian anymore, because of him.

The end was therefore unavoidable, and the last month of their life together was pure torture for Septarian, with the spiteful words of the self-loathing knight, the scars that formed on his golden skin. The hatred for Septarian that grew by the day...

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When Cid finally left, it was a relief. And pain. For he still loved Cid. Yes, he did. From the bottom of his heart. He loved how they had been together, before. Loved him for the good days, and missed him like crazy. Missed him, loved him. The body in his arms at night, the sound of his even breathing.

Later it transformed into anger. How could he blame Septarian for his own feeling of guilt? How could he deem Septarian something lesser than him?

From what he heard, Cid lived with Percival. Moved on just like that. He called it redemption. A hunter again, back in the fold. Sleeping with knights now, not beasts.

And Cid had always been the better hunter of them. It was what bothered Septarian now, as he sat by the oak table, pouring wine in Nathaniel's glass. If Cid had entered Majesty before he did, he felt fairly certain he wouldn't be sitting here with the princess at all. Cid would. It was just a lucky chance he'd got ... but not fair. Cid was better.

He wanted to ask Nathaniel if he'd rather be on a date with Cid, but realized how stupid it would sound and let it be. No need of making a fool out of himself, more than he already had.

He couldn't beat Cid. Never could.

Nathaniel talked about the University, and Cid followed him half-heartedly. It felt as if he was already mourning the loss of the boy. It was silly, he knew it, but he couldn't help it. Cid did this to him, made him feel so small.

"Do you like Cid?" he asked.

"I wouldn't tell you, if I did, would I?" Nathaniel joked. Septarian assumed that he did.

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Nathaniel had fish. Septarian ate red meat, as was fitting for a beast. He knew he was being overly dramatic, but couldn't help it. He admired the boy over candlelight and his heart ached. He was so lovely to look at and his soul was so gentle. He toasted to him and Nathaniel smiled when he raised his glass. But he had shadows in his eyes. He, too, knew that something wasn't right.

Septarian spoke about the store, about how generations before him had built it up, and about his work as a goldsmith. He felt sad all the time.

Nathaniel told him about his boyfriend at the university. They broke up a while ago.

"It was just sex," said Nathaniel. He was probably trying to comfort Septarian, who he assumed, true enough, was thinking about his ex. "And you and Cid?" he asked. "Was it love?"

"And a lot of hatred," Septarian smiled bitterly. The boy was so sweet, but the dragon so broken.

"Oh..." Nathaniel said and folded his napkin. "But it's over now," he comforted. "It's in the past. Dessert?"

It tasted sweet and then not. Septarian hated himself for the sudden depression, this spell that had caught him, but couldn't manage to dig his way out of it. He was stuck. Stuck in the past, in the pain. He tried to be witty, to follow Nathaniel's words and contribute to the conversations but it was as if an element of horror had been inserted to their date. They left way earlier than he had planned. He never bought that second bottle of wine. Septarian knew the date had been a disaster and felt sorry for Nathaniel, but couldn't

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help it. The boy talked about stars on their way back. His gaze was glued to the sky. He seemed sad and didn't want to look at Septarian. It was a relief when they arrived at his street.

Septarian stopped the engine and turned to face his young princess. Nathaniel's gaze was glittering, so very blue. It was now he should do it, the dragon knew that he should. Save the night. Claim victory. This was his very last chance! Cid, the essence and the firm, it all tumbled around in his head. And the boy was so beautiful, his expression so expectant. The dragon's mouth went dry and his heart began to race. The hell of the first days without Cid came tumbling back again, and he froze up in his seat.

"Are you all right, Septarian?" Concerned now, the pretty face, the sweet voice.

To lose him had to be hell. To have him close and then ripped away. To have that blue gaze of his turn cold and indifferent, his eyes look upon him with scorn! Contempt! Like Cid had looked at him, his gaze like fingers of frost ripping into his flesh, like he wasn't worth shit, like his heart was worth less than the dirt under the knight's feet, like his love was nothing but a nuisance. A laughable matter!

"Sure ... I'm fine." He swallowed hard.

"Do you want to..." Nathaniel motioned towards his building with his hand. The shiny sign above Majesty's door. He could read hope in the young man's eyes.

"Not tonight." He looked away, fright seeping like toxic water into his system, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

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"Sure." Nathaniel too swallowed visibly.

"Nathaniel, it's not—"

"It's ok," he interrupted. "I don't take it personally," he lied. And tomorrow he would go to Cid. And Cid would have him and love him. Cid would take his essence and rip his heart apart, or was it the other way around? Equally scary, those two, both had the power to bring a dragon to his knees.

Nathaniel moved to open the door.

"Wait!" He wanted to give him something to remember him by. Give him a memory to keep when he went to give his treasure to the knight. He knew that this had likely been Cid's plan all along, why else would he reveal himself? Septarian knew this so well, but still he couldn't help but succumb to the terror, as the absent knight played him like a puppet and triggered all his fears.

He leaned over and Nathaniel met him half-way, his lips were already parted, soft and moist. The princess moaned quietly into the kiss, against the dragon's lips. It was a perfect kiss. Septarian grew hard and aching. "Thank you," he whispered when it was over. His thumb caressed the princess' chin. So beautiful. So dangerous. So deadly to his heart.

"Farewell."

V.

"So we didn't get the ice cream boy," Cathleen remarked while reading through the revisited list of auction items. "Why?" she looked up, "What happened?" She was entitled to ask, of course. It was what he did if she failed.

"I'm sorry." He avoided her gaze. "I failed."

"Knight." Serena added from behind to explain his failure.

"Ah..." The white-haired dragon accepted the explanation. Septarian could feel Serena's hand on his back. A silent comfort. The night before she hadn't been much comforting at all.

"Fool!" she had accused him in a hissing voice. "If I didn't know any better I would have suspected you of being in love with your own misery!" She lashed out. "And now you are miserable, and he is miserable. Of course he'll sleep with Cid now, you idiot!" Septarian stood before her, gazing at the floor; his cheeks were flushed and he felt like a schoolboy in front of the evil teacher. He stood there and struggled as not to feel the regret. He knew his decision had little to do with reason, and after the kiss, he had been thinking more than once that the possible hurt might be worth the taste. The opportunity was lost to him now, though, and time would heal the bruises. He'd told Serena that, told her that it was over, nothing more to think about.

"You like that, don't you?" she'd said then. "Being all safe again. Really brave, Septarian! Really, really brave!"

Today, however, while they gathered in the meeting room to prepare for the auction, she was being all sweet and

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supportive. He loved her for that. It made him feel less like a fool, and more like the Chieftain of the Den. Grand Host of the Princess Auctions.

They were all dressed in traditional attire: silk robes that reached the floor and let their tails move freely. The women's robes were patterned with flowers and birds, much like kimonos. Septarian's robes were a pearly grey to match his lavender scales and silver eyes. It was good to see the girls' natural colors again. He thought they looked so odd with contacts.

The cellar was illuminated with torches and bubbling champagne stood on silver trays along with more traditional drinks like spiced buffalo blood and scotch. There were a lot of dragons there tonight, scales in all the colors of the rainbow, mingling and chatting. Shimmering robes and glittering scales filled Septarian's vision as he entered the true heart of his den; greeted a green friend from Mongolia, nodded to a cobalt-scaled African buyer wearing some amazing robes in orange and black. It should be a good night. A good night indeed. The floor was powdered so their tails would move smoothly and effortlessly. There were no chairs but stools, so their tails could swing back and forth when the tension grew during the auction.

Some of the guests were creepier than others; there was an old Russian magician with golden scales even on his face, and venom dripping from his tongue. A fabulous local lady from a rare line of black-scales whose pearls were said to represent all the knights she had killed and devoured. Septarian didn't know if it was true, but he remembered the

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woman raising a strong voice against him in the days when he was still living with Cid.

Serena was their public speaker, and as Septarian's cousin, their hostess. Her blue robes contrasted her scales beautifully and she practically shone on the small stage. She presented herself, presented Septarian. He bowed from his spot by the vault where they kept the essence. Cathleen. She bowed as well, dressed in an icy pink. Septarian prepared himself as the chatter died out and all the dragons' attention was on the red-scale. It was his job to go in there and find the tiny bottles, bring them out, hidden under a piece of black cloth, give them to Cathleen who crossed the room with the bottle in her hand and gave it to Serena on the stage. It was all done with much excitement and anticipation. Highly beloved rituals all. The guests' gazes never left the hidden treasure, and never was Septarian more the Chieftain of the Den than when he proudly presented his gems, were they necklaces or essences, and saw the admiration and desire in some stranger's eyes.

But not tonight. Tonight, he had to fight to focus. It had been two whole days since his miserable retreat from the battlefield of love. Two days since he saw his princess' shiny eyes for the last time and, as the fool that he was, let him go.

It became clearer and clearer he regretted it all. But then again he couldn't let himself feel the regret. Didn't dare touch it. As Serena so not politely had pointed out, he was not brave. He had no courage when it came to his heart. He had never learned how to suffer, that was the problem. It was not part of the proper education for the Chieftain of the Den in

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Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Those values, sharing and caring, were soft and modern, and Septarian was a very old creature.

"...Wonderful bouquet," Serena's voice sounded from the stage. "Nineteen year old male princess. Athlete. Fair skinned. The essence has a particular glow to it that suggests it can be used for healing..." Septarian entered the vault and found the soccer player's tiny bottle among the other ones. They lay there on ice to keep them fresh, twelve in a row. He hadn't managed to give them number thirteen, but he couldn't really regret that. Somehow it felt all wrong, the idea that someone was to take a piece of Nathaniel and fly it to Mongolia, blend it with other essences or use it as an aphrodisiac. Septarian felt certain it was what Nathaniel's essence would be used for, sex. How could it not be? The boy was brimming with it. Septarian gave a complaining sound as he passed the bottle on to his associate.

His mood grew increasingly darker by the bottle. At bottle four, a light and merry essence from an older princess, a bearded red-head that Cathleen had to travel far up in the mountains to get, Septarian felt pissed. Pissed at himself, at Cid. At the whole situation and his own bad temper. That damned stick he kept up his ass that prevented him from doing and saying that which he felt he should, but sent him running like a rabbit at the first sign of wolf. He was so stupid! For two whole days now, he had been trying not to dwell on those particular feelings, but now, just now, while the auction he had been working so hard for was a fact, when his den was filled with buyers from all the corners of the

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world, just then, did it burst, explode, and stick like pesky madness and regret to all of his insides.

Nathaniel! Septarian felt like crying. He should at least have tried, shouldn't he? Should have made the boy an offer. Septarian was old, he would survive another blow and now the princess had been drinking coffee, and god knows what else, with Cid. That coward, Cid! Cid was the one who lacked in stamina and conviction, not Septarian!

He registered that the essence got a very nice price and was about to go to Russia, then he re-entered the vault to pick up the next bottle. An ancient one they had gotten from their dealer in Greece. Very rare and still half-full.

A dragon scared into silence by a knight! What a disgrace it was, Septarian fumed inwardly as the auction went on. He let Nathaniel go, a boy he really liked, because he feared the consequences of trying. It wasn't even about the essence. Not anymore. Maybe it never was? And then, hope struck as sudden and blinding as lighting, making the dragon's ears perk up. He stood as frozen on the spot with a bottle of essence in his hand, his mind working overtime to sort out his thoughts: for he realized that if Cid had taken the essence, he would leave the boy alone. And if he left the boy alone, he might be miserable. And if he was miserable, he might be in need of comfort, and he could do that! Even if the boy was no longer interested, he could do that thing for him, hold him and comfort him. Be near him, if nothing else. He didn't care if he was a princess or a prince, he just wanted to be there with him.

Septarian lowered the bottle back on the ice.

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"Cathleen," he called quietly. "You have to take over!" he whispered as soon as her sweet face peeked inside the vault.

"What?" she asked confused.

"Don't..." he warned her and pushed his way out, gave her tail an assuring pat with his own as he passed her. Then he was off, in a hurry now that his mind was made up. He rushed upstairs, grabbed his car keys and the shades from his suit jacket. He could still hear the murmuring and smell the herbs they were burning downstairs, but the auction meant nothing anymore. The night air felt cool against his skin and he checked his watch. No time to miss, now. Nathaniel would soon be finished at work and after that Septarian didn't know where to find him.

He missed him! Now that he allowed himself to think about the boy, he missed him. Badly! Nathaniel had been like a little wonder, a miracle, in Septarian's bland life. The idea of seeing him again set his blood on fire, sent his mind spinning. How ever had he thought he could just live on? Just bury the idea of Nathaniel and move on? He wasn't the kind of man one forgot. He was special, in every aspect, so vivid and pure.

When he parked by the Majesty, he had two shocks following each other. The first one was that he suddenly remembered his attire. The robes and the lack of contacts. The tail that lay on the seat beside him. The second shock was the scent. The air was just as thick with essence as before, Nathaniel-kind, no other, the kind that made his throat dry and his cock hard and hungry. Septarian pondered for a moment. What to do? Run off, go home and change? But then again, maybe Nathaniel was to meet Cid after work,

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and he didn't want to risk it. Not now, when he had decided, and was so close! No dirty, filthy knight was to feel his boy, oh no! The dragon, fueled by new anger, opened the door. Trusting people's ability not to see what they saw, but still aware enough not to make a scene, he crossed the street and turned the corner by the Majesty, tail trailing proudly behind him.

As he had assumed, there was a back door. He only had to cross a couple of hedges and climb a gate to get there. A red door set in the brick wall. The trash cans by the building were full of empty ice cream containers and old biscuits. The door was closed, but the dragon was old. And strong. He ripped the door from its hinges and cursed quietly when the metal broke. He would have to pay for the damn thing later.

Behind the door was a small staircase leading up, and another red door. Septarian tried the door and the sweet scent of vanilla and chocolate instantly filled his nostrils. He could hear Nathaniel's voice from behind yet another door, just as red as the first one.

"Banana?" he said in a kind and pleasant voice. "Of course you can have banana!"

Septarian looked around. It was a small storage room, shelves and a refrigerator, all illuminated by one single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The shelves were filled with boxes and plastic bags full of spoons. One box had bags of coffee in it, another one bottles of cherry syrup.

Septarian did as countless monsters before him; he hid in the shadows by the refrigerator and prepared to wait for his prey, wait, until the store was closed and Nathaniel was

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alone. Then he would jump out from a dark corner in the young man's own workplace, swinging his tail boldly in front of the other man's gaze. Probably scare him half to death. Oh yes, the plan was grand!

Time passed slowly like melting ice cream on a cold winter's day, but finally the sounds from the Majesty were no more. Only washing sounds. Someone filling water in a plastic container and splashing it around. Septarian could see him for his inner eye, scrubbing the sticky counter, and he sighed out loud with the beauty of it, not because he was cleaning, of course, but because he was pretty.

After the splashing had been going on for a good while, and Septarian's left leg was cramped, the door to the storage room opened and Septarian saw Nathaniel come in. When the boy had placed the bucket of dirty water on the floor, he leapt forth from his hiding place. No more games now; his silver eyes shone in the dim light. His powerful tail swung under the robes.

"Septarian!" Nathaniel spun around. "What are you doing here?"

"Nathaniel," he said, his voice was passionate with all that he felt.

"Septarian?" Nathaniel repeated; his voice was a little insecure now. His hands clutched at the shelves behind him. "Were we going to meet tonight? Why are you in here?" His gaze flickered and it hurt the dragon. He didn't want his princess to be afraid.

"Look at me Nathaniel," he bid him. "I couldn't rest. I had to come, to explain. I had to tell you!" He pulled the

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supernatural, dark and consequently depressed lover-card. Did his best to look grave and tormented as he continued. "I am a monster," he whispered. Smacked the tail against the floor to make his point.

Nathaniel gave him a long stare. First his eyes widened and his gaze was surprised, then Septarian could see clarity seeping through the cloudy haze of confusion and the beautiful eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I knew there was something fishy about you guys!" he burst out. Sounding almost offended. "So what kind of monster are you? And what is that?" he pointed at the tail.

"That is my tail," Septarian said. "I am a dragon." Patiently, he waited for Nathaniel to say that he thought dragons were a myth, that they didn't exist and that he didn't believe it, scream and rage or ask if he could breathe fire. Nathaniel did nothing of the sort.

"And Cid?" he asked calmly. "Does he have one of those too?"

"No," Septarian said bitterly. "He is a knight. Knights don't have tails." Why was he talking about Cid anyway? This was to be Septarian's moment. His horrible secret revealed!

"Wow!" Nathaniel said, strangely calm, and scratched his forehead. "I suppose I should be scared now, huh?" His gaze finally met Septarian's.

The dragon nodded, crossed his arms in front of his chest, cocked his head slightly and waited. He was almost offended now. So this was what so many seasons of X-Files did to people, he mused. Made them all jaded and hard to impress. He also figured he'd been out of the loop for far too long...

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"So, mister Dragon," Nathaniel lifted his gaze and looked at him. So incredibly blue those eyes, glittering like a summer sea. "What do I owe the honor of you chasing me down?" Ah, the boy was all too clever. "I feel a little stupid. I've been nuts about you," he said bluntly.

Septarian felt guilty. He was happy that the young man had said that, but he realized he was also very uncomfortable with the truth of things. Suddenly he wished that Nathaniel wasn't a princess, but just a boy. Just a boy that he'd met that he liked, one who would embrace his reptile side and love every one of his scales, because they were his. And there were no knights. And no essence! And no buyers from Tibet. And this scene they were playing out in the storage room was the truth, a monster showing the boy he loved his tail for the first time, asking him to accept his nature. Not the end of a filthy masquerade. A race for the essence. For money.

"Don't feel stupid," he tried at last, and touched Nathaniel's cheek. "I hunger for you too." As if that hadn't been obvious enough the last week. He'd been behaving as love-stuck as anyone, drooling all over the boy. There had been no betrayal in Septarian's lust.

Nathaniel didn't lift his gaze but crossed his arms in front of his chest. Mirrored Septarian's earlier pose. He'd let go of the comfort of the shelves, but he obviously still felt a need to protect himself. It hurt in the cold reptilian heart.

"I hope you are being romantic and not literal!" he joked. At least, Septarian hoped he was joking.

"Most definitely romantic!" the dragon said and took a deep breath. Then he kissed the boy. He tasted fresh as dew

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on a fine dawn in May. The kiss was gentle, then hard. He tasted of hot blood and fire as well.

Nathaniel sighed, then his body softened against Septarian's, the young one molded against his form. Oh yes, he was pressing closer; his arms unfolded to slide across Septarian's shoulders and it felt nice and natural to have them there; he smelled so lovely, essence and ice cream, a hint of salt. Septarian wound his long, cleaved tongue with the boy's, moving like a snake in the cave of his hot, little mouth.

"God!" Nathaniel broke off the kiss and gasped for air. "You are quite a kisser, Mr. Dragon!" His eyes went wide with amazement. "And those eyes!" He lifted his hand half-way, as if to touch them. It wasn't unusual. People always wanted to touch that which they hadn't seen before. Especially if they liked what they saw.

"Nothing like yours after all," Septarian whispered.

"They are beautiful." Nathaniel smiled. He was still standing close, so close Septarian could feel his heart beat through the thin fabric of his t-shirt and the thick silk of his robes.

"Do you still want me? After seeing this?" Septarian asked with passion. His lips were pressed against Nathaniel's neck. His tongue played across his skin. "Nathaniel?"

"Oh yeah!" Nathaniel gave a shuddering breath, then he paused and looked Septarian in the eyes again. "You do it the usual way, right? There is no anatomic catch I should know about?" He pretended to be joking, but Septarian could see he was sincere.

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"No," he gave a wry smile. "Nothing unusual."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Nathaniel was still pressed close to his body, where the outlines of his draconic arousal could be felt through the slick fabric. Now the naughty boy rolled his hips and made it feel all kinds of good. Septarian moaned and smacked with his tail.

"Why aren't you afraid?" He asked the boy, confused.

"I don't know," Nathaniel gave a strange, little laugh. "Maybe because it's you ... I don't know!" His gaze was so blue, so bewildered and blue. "I just don't think you'll hurt me."

Guilt struck, fast and blinding. And was over just as fast. Septarian growled and pressed Nathaniel closer to his chest. His hand drifted down the small of Nathaniel's back and then his palm spread possessively on the perfectly rounded buttocks. He pushed the pert, little thing closer. Oh yes, there he was, hard and firm and not a little boy either.

"Nathaniel," he said surprised and heard the other give a dry, little laugh.

"Yeah," the boy replied and rubbed his cock against Septarian's. "That's me." He tilted his head and let his weight fall against Septarian, hanging on to him by the arms that encircled his neck, offering his mouth, eyes closed, cool hair pooling across Septarian's arms holding his weight. Septarian let out his breath and kissed him, nothing shy about the kiss, nothing hidden. He groaned and rhythmically pushed his groin against the princess' while rubbing Nathaniel's tongue roughly with his own, memorizing the texture and the heat, the

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feeling of his young flesh in his arms, the soft sighs and the scent of musk that mingled with that of the essence.

He was completely shameless, this boy, not like his last conquest in the fifties at all. Unbidden, Nathaniel forced down the zipper of his own pants and freed his damp erection from the denim.

"Ah," he moaned as he freed it. "Touch it! Please!" He looked at Septarian from under half-closed eyelids. His gaze was dark with desire. How could Septarian do anything but oblige?

He had almost forgotten what it felt like to hold a human penis, the smoothness of it, the bit of sticky fluid at the tip. Also the raw vulnerability of it. Septarian moved his hand up and down and the boy turned to mush in his arms, melted like an ice cream cone, gasping and moaning while his hips moved furiously to increase the friction.

"Easy, my sweet," Septarian whispered. "Don't go without me."

"I won't," Nathaniel grinned, but his eyes looked dazed and Septarian didn't believe him.

"Come." He let the princess' cock go and pushed him gently towards the door.

"In there?" The dragon heard a smile in Nathaniel's voice, like a naughty child who knew he was about to do something particularly naughty. Which it probably was, seen from Nathaniel's point of view.

"Yes, in there," he confirmed and led the giggling Nathaniel into the ice cream bar. He had been thinking dirty things about that counter ever since the first time he saw it.

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Not only was it practical, it was also appropriate that it was there their coupling was about to take place.

He pushed Nathaniel towards the glass panes. "Bend over," he bid him in a whisper. His fingers were shaking when he began opening the clasps that held his robes in place. He could see Nathaniel in front of him, tugging at his own pants, forcing the material down his hips. His buttocks shone white in the dim light and Septarian let his fingers caress them, took that exquisite moment to feel the half-globes in his hands before he parted them with his thumbs and let one finger trail the cleft. The boy groaned and his body jerked.

"Are you all right?" Septarian asked him teasingly.

"If you do it soon, I am!" The princess' voice sounded strained. "I have no lube—"

"It's all right." Septarian looked at the glistening shaft that peeked out from the grey robes. "It's not required," he said and let out his breath. Let his finger toy with the opening of the boy, saw him curl his hand around his cock, play with it. "Don't you even want to see it? My dragon-thing?" He asked Nathaniel playfully. He didn't want to scare him later.

"Of course I do," Nathaniel replied in a huffy voice and turned around, eyes shiny and lips moist. His pretty fingers touched it before he looked, grabbed a hold of him as he was holding himself. Septarian wasn't afraid of the judgment. He had a nice cock: dark lavender, scaled and firm. The scales were so fine they wouldn't tear a man, and the head was as smooth as baby's skin, leaking rich amounts of clear moisture from the deep slit.

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Nathaniel made hot sounds in front of him, then he rose up on his toes and kissed him. His fingers masturbated Septarian with sure strokes, had the dragon fuck into his palm before he knew it.

"Ah, you tease!" Septarian broke off the kiss, his tongue spilling from his mouth.

"Cool." Nathaniel smiled and suddenly let go of both cocks, pressing himself close again so that the lavender colored cock could greet the pink one and drench the latter in dragon juices.

Septarian truly felt like the ancient demon when he used his hands to wrap his robes around them both, capturing the princess close to his body, while kissing him deeply, his teeth tugging at rosy lips.

"Do it! Do it now!" Nathaniel urged him on, pushed away from Septarian with his palms flat against Septarian's naked chest. He turned around before him and bent, legs spread as much as he could with his jeans around his ankles. "Fuck me!" he begged, long past the point of flirtation, offering up his butt like a ripe peach.

"Yeah," Septarian spread the buttocks apart again, found the pink entrance with his gaze, with his finger, with his dripping cock. "Oh!" Nathaniel was tight. He pushed hard, harder, forced his way inside. Nathaniel smelled of cock and sweat beneath him. He stood still and didn't flinch, seeming to want Septarian inside as much as Septarian wanted to be there. The purple rod sunk into him slowly, opening him up as it went.

"Are you all right?" Septarian had to ask.

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"Sure," the boy said and gasped for air. Septarian rewarded him by withdrawing a bit, then thrusting back inside. Nathaniel moaned.

"Feels good?" Septarian whispered.

"Yeah." He sounded like melted butter and chocolate, purring like a cat before the dragon. Septarian bent forth and opened the plastic barrette with his teeth, spitting it out on the floor so Nathaniel's long hair flowed freely across his shoulders and down on the counter. Then he pushed all the way inside.

The boy was receptive as a flame in the wind, moving with Septarian, back and forth meeting him halfway, as the old one began fucking him in earnest. Long, hard thrusts, with his hands placed on the young man's hips, keeping him steady and in place while his cock filled him up repeatedly. Oh, it was all he had dreamt it would be! Better. Tighter. Septarian threw his head back and let a growl rise from his throat. He registered that Nathaniel was touching himself again, pumping his cock eagerly. He moaned, panted. It was all good. Nathaniel's buttocks and thighs felt smooth against Septarian's coarse dragon skin when their bodies met. He took time to push Nathaniel's t-shirt up over the small of his back so that he could touch it. Let his fingers caress the smooth plane.

"I'm coming!" Nathaniel cried, sounding ecstatic.

"Yes, you do that," Septarian whispered and savored the feeling when the young body convulsed, how Nathaniel's muscles contracted around his cock. Then he secured the narrow hips in a new grip and fucked him some more, harder

and faster, while the young man's hand was quickly covered in semen, the scent of it reaching the dragon's nostrils, driving him mad with its earthy musk.

He came without a word, struggling for breath, bent over his young lover's back, deep inside of him, where it was warm and soft.

It was the best orgasm he could remember having.

When it was over, he let himself tumble to the floor and pulled young Nathaniel with him. His cock was still inside of the boy who landed half on top of him, with his front facing the ceiling. They were both panting, their skin was moist with sweat and semen. Septarian's grey robes crumpled beneath them.

Nathaniel chuckled softly. "You finally got your blueberries."

"Yes and they were sweet," Septarian grinned, feeling extremely sated and happy with himself. He could feel his own semen trickling out of the princess and it made him feel oddly proud.

"I can't remember ever having anticipated a fuck like this before," Nathaniel slowly moved on top of him. He let the limp penis slip out of him so he could turn around and face the dragon, lie down with his cheek pressed against Septarian's chest.

"Did it meet your expectations?" He had to ask, though he felt pretty sure the boy had enjoyed himself. He took one of Nathaniel's fine hands in his and kissed it.

"Yes, Mr. Dragon," the princess stretched himself leisurely and smiled down at him. "It was very much as anticipated,

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except for the tail ... and the purple," he grinned. "I don't know," he mused. "Somehow I've always known I was meant to be with someone truly special." His fingers played with Septarian's hair. It cut in the dragon's heart, and touched him at the same time, the way he so innocently assumed they had a future, took it for granted that Septarian would be around. To Nathaniel, it was just the beginning. The dragon, with all his secrets, wasn't so sure if he'd feel the same way if he knew about the auctions.

"Nathaniel, look, there is somewhere I'm supposed to be tonight." Septarian wanted to explain, though he knew he really shouldn't. Men must never know they are carrier of the fruit of life, the key to immortality, it was the ancient law. Only a few, like Serena's Tommy, knew, and got a long life as well as a pending death threat, should he ever leave his wife, to prove it. But men in general must not know, as it would cause unbearable consequences, like princesses selling their treasures to God knows who, or wars over the essence. There simply weren't enough princesses to feed all mankind as well as the older species, and the dragons and knights were sure to die out if they didn't get enough essence. Yet he wanted to explain. Because it was him. Was Nathaniel...

"Where are you supposed to be?" Nathaniel gazed down on him.

"An auction." He didn't lie. "At my store. I ran off," he said, and grinned sheepishly, "to see you." And he didn't really hear it, until he said it, just how romantic that sounded. Nathaniel did, and he grinned, satisfied.

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"And if I say you cannot go?" Nathaniel teased him playfully. "If I say you are to stay here with me and do it again ... and again?" Septarian felt light-headed at the prospect; he hadn't seen it coming. Quite frankly, he'd been prepared to hold a heart-broken Nathaniel's hand tonight. "Come on," Nathaniel tempted him with an alluring gaze and a feel of his penis that was already erect again. He laced his fingers with Septarian's, led their hands between their bodies to feel the growing flesh. "Can't they have an auction without you?"

"Sure..." As things were now the ice cream boy was the eye of the storm, and the man he was in love with, even though he kept secrets from him, which of course hadn't kept him from fucking him. Septarian closed his eyes and gave a sudden deep and dramatic sigh of despair.

"What?" Nathaniel's sweet voice said into his ear. "No more fucking?"

Septarian opened his eyes. "I'll fuck you, Nathaniel. If that's what you want." It was the least he could do, really.

"Only if you want to." He sounded insecure.

"Of course I want to!" Of course, it wasn't about being nice at all. Yes, he wanted to be in Nathaniel again. Yes, he wanted to taste his skin, his lips, his hunger. The least he could do? He was just a dirty, old dragon with a juicy treat. Deep, deep inside, he knew he would never let go. If he could, he would be there always, like that; naked and horny with the princess in his arms. Septarian gave another dramatic sigh. "I think you just got yourself a slave," he muttered. "As long as you want me, Nathaniel, there is

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absolutely nowhere I'd rather be." He made his point clear by lifting his great tail from the floor and let it glide up the young man's thigh, across his ass top probe at the narrow crack of his buttocks. "New species." He smiled amused to Nathaniel, who cried out with surprised glee. "New possibilities."

VI.

He woke up at dawn, under the messy bed linens in Nathaniel's apartment above the Majesty. The young man lay beside him, breathing into his ear. His naked body lay across the bed and his arms were draped across the dragon's chest. Septarian's tail had curled around Nathaniel's ankle during his sleep. Septarian smiled a happy smile. The princess had really captured him, hadn't he? Chained him by the cock and caged him in his bed. Who ever said that princesses were the weaker part in these relationships? Just rumors, all of it! Fairy tales and myths! He grinned again and pulled the sleeping human closer. He was probably exhausted, poor thing. Septarian kissed his forehead softly ... Then guilty conscience came crashing down, spoiling the glorious morning. He still hadn't figured out what to do about the essence situation. Even though Cid probably stood knocking on Majesty's door this very moment, Septarian hadn't gotten around to milking it from the young's body yet. Even if he had been naked in the same bed as him for hours, fucked him from all angles possible, he still hadn't gotten the essence! He really, truly, was not a hunter anymore. Hardly a dragon at all! Septarian sighed loudly, again wishing for a less complicated situation. Why, oh why, hadn't he done it yet? Was it because the ancient ritual of extraction suddenly felt like a violation? Because he didn't want to take from Nathaniel what was his? Even if he knew that if he didn't do it, the knights would. Cid would. Another dragon would. Nathaniel reeked of power; he was like a magnet for their kind.

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"Oh, baby," Septarian whispered to the sleeping boy and pulled him even closer, as if protecting him. But he couldn't do that, not in the long run, couldn't protect him against himself.

"Septarian." Nathaniel came alive in his arms, blue eyes blinking, lean body stretching. "Wanna fuck?" He grinned. It was a joke. A little true. But a joke.

"Aren't you sore?" Another joke that was part true.

"Not enough to say no." Nathaniel wasn't joking anymore and Septarian rolled him over and climbed on top. He didn't think more then, not with his cock hard and eager inside of Nathaniel, not when the young man's moaning filled the air and his cock twitched on his belly. Not when his graceful arms pulled his face down to kiss and nibble at his lips and make love to his tongue. Not a worry in the world just then, when he was shrouded in the other male's scent.

He could milk Nathaniel afterwards, he thought while approaching orgasm. Do it, and have it done, pretend he was going to suck him off and lick the essence from his skin. He should milk him, and then Nathaniel would be free. No dragons and knights would be looking for him then, and the dragon would have another treasure for the den, even a new boyfriend if he could manage to keep his mouth shut. Septarian closed his eyes and moaned. The supple body beneath him moved eagerly to adjust, his legs high up in the air, resting in Septarian's hands. And he knew he couldn't do it. Couldn't do it. Couldn't face the betrayal. So he came deep inside of Nathaniel, and then he sucked him anyway. Let his

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reptile tongue lick the shaft until it exploded with hot salt in his mouth. But he didn't milk the essence. No, he didn't.

The sun was bright when they stepped out on the pavement. Nathaniel had Septarian's car keys in his hand. Better not walk around with a tail.

He quickly explained to the boy where the car was parked and savored the scent of apple shampoo as he did it. Nathaniel had been in the shower, but Septarian saved himself for his own spacious, tail-friendly bathtub. It meant that he reeked of sex and princess. Somehow he couldn't think it at all disgusting.

The grey silk of his robes was wrinkled and odd looking in the sunlight. He tried to smooth it with his hands but it didn't work, so he just let it be. Nathaniel had the day off and was going home with him. Neither of them could really see any good reason to part. Neither of them wanted to. It was like tripping, this thing they had. A sugar high.

Septarian fished out his cell phone from the grey silk, flipped it open and turned it on. Instantly it began beeping and complaining, gave small annoyed sounds for each message he hadn't received during the night. Most of them were from Serena. That was no surprise. She would be proud of him now, he figured. He'd been brave. For real!

A shadow met his own and he watched them bleed together. Their shapes matched, he already knew as much. It was not the first time they'd become one.

"Cid, what are you doing here?" He didn't look up from his cell phone. They stood on the backside of the Majesty, so it was actually kind of a surprise that the knight appeared. He

must have held a close watch, Septarian figured, and seen Nathaniel emerge to get the car.

"May I ask you the same question?" The knight sounded amused. "Because you have obviously not been milking the boy, though you have, to my knowledge been here all night."

"We played chess!" Oh God, did he feel smug today. Happy as a lark!

Cid gave a dry laugh. "Seriously, Septarian, are you losing your touch?" Cid teased him. "Are you afraid you can't make it flow?"

Septarian didn't have to answer that. Nathaniel came around the corner in his car. It suited him, Nathaniel thought. The young beauty and the shiny black car. Nathaniel bent over and opened the door for him. He had obviously decided he was going to continue driving then. Septarian decided it was fine.

"Oh look, it's your man," Cid arched an eyebrow.

"Yes," Septarian replied, "I'm his princess," his tail smacked the pavement. Cid bent down and looked into the car, at Nathaniel.

"Gotten some tail, have you?" he asked. "Just be careful so he doesn't tire of you," he warned, somewhat hostile sounding.

"Cid," Nathaniel was insecure, "If this is about that coffee, I really was tired that day."

"No!" the knight interrupted. "Not about the coffee. I just want you to be careful, that's all, so this beast doesn't chew up your heart, like he did mine!"

"What?" Septarian was furious.

"I'll tell you all about it, if you like!" Cid still spoke to Nathaniel, whose blue gaze was unreadable.

"He lies," Septarian pushed the knight way from the door. Cid's golden earrings dangled and shone in the sun. It was good handiwork, some of the best he had done, Septarian mused. "I made those," he bragged and pointed before seating himself in the car. "If I hurt him so much, he'd hardly wear them would he?" Not if he was so disgusted by him either, he thought to himself. Not if he truly hated the dragon.

"Oh, I'd almost forgotten," the knight's hand flew up to one of his ears.

"Sure," Nathaniel leaned forth and smiled to Cid across Septarian's lap. "Goodbye, Cid."

"Nathaniel, I mean it!" The knight cried, but Septarian closed the door and shut his voice out.

"Never mind him," he said.

"Is it true?" Nathaniel asked playfully. "Did you destroy his heart? Are you a dangerous dragon?"

"Am I?" Septarian replied with a wink.

"Very!" Nathaniel grinned.

Nathaniel became, in a very short amount of time, very attached to Septarian's apartment. He didn't even seem to mind the mess of piles and heaps of clothes and newspapers. As Septarian recalled, he actually had quite a few of them himself in his home. It probably meant that he shared Septarian's, according to Serena, magic ability not to see them. The princess came with Septarian in the tub. He scrubbed his scales and other places with a soft sponge and a

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lot of love. Boy in bathtub was good, Septarian thought and let himself be spoiled.

"Sleeping with a dragon is so cool," the young man declared as they towed off. "Especially with you," he smiled.

Septarian tried to say it again then, wanted to open his mouth and tell Nathaniel how special he was, what a rare kind he happened to be, and why Cid was standing outside the Majesty making up lies about his lover in a desperate attempt to break them up. He wanted to say more as well. He wanted to ask him if he thought sleeping with a dragon was all the sleeping he needed, and if he could please only sleep with him from now on? But as long as the heavy cloud of things unsaid hung above them like a threatening storm, he couldn't.

But he had beaten Cid, hadn't he? For the very first time. Of course, it didn't matter, but it was sweet. Wasn't important. But very sweet! Now all he had to do was milk that essence and ... He sighed.

"What is it?" Sweet hands drifted down his back, down his tail, and a warm cheek pressed against his scales. "Aren't you happy?" Nathaniel asked him.

"Yes," Septarian smiled and looked into the mirrors surrounding them in his black marble bathroom. "Very happy!"

Things took a few peculiar turns after that. Septarian had taken Nathaniel to the store after dinner, just to show it off. It was Sunday and the Den was closed. They still hadn't cleaned up after last night's auction so the air was full of strange scents, blood and resin, champagne and smoke.

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Nathaniel appeared to be satisfactory impressed though, as he walked through the display room, admiring the pieces.

"Wow." Nathaniel grinned. "I think I'm dating a rich dragon," he remarked jokingly.

"I've never met a poor one; it's kind of our trademark," Septarian joked back. "With the treasure you know."

"Oh yes." Nathaniel gave him one of those warm smiles. "And do you think you can date a mere ice cream boy?"

"Of course, don't be silly," Septarian shrugged. "I've never met anyone like you."

"How old are you, Septarian?"

There was a moment's silence. "...I was born in 1807, why?" He tried to look indifferent.

"I figured as much," Nathaniel smiled. "You take me way too literarily; it's kind of an old fashioned way to react." His grin widened and Septarian couldn't help but blush. This would also be a good opportunity to tell him about the essence, Septarian thought. He opened his mouth half-way, prepared himself.

"So the auctions in the cellar ... do you only sell like rare pieces and gems?" Nathaniel interrupted his thoughts and served him yet another golden opportunity to have it said out loud, that which was between them.

"No—" But then he was suddenly interrupted by several loud bangs on the back door, as if someone was trying to tear it down with their fists. "Hide!" Septarian smelled trouble. An angry customer. Or knights ... Cid! "In there!" He pointed to the door to his workshop. "Under the work bench!" he instructed. Nathaniel gave him a confused look and was gone.

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Of course it was Cid, fuming like an ox as he passed through the door unbidden.

"What did you come here for?!" Septarian was annoyed.

"I can't understand why you keep tempting me with that princess!" Cid burst out. "Is it so that you can have me around, is that it, Septarian? Because you know I won't leave as long as he's intact! We'll I don't think it's fair. Neither to me or the princess!"

Septarian was flabbergasted. "No," he cried. "That is absolutely not why!" He denied the accusations, tried to keep his voice down, uncomfortable aware of said princess' presence.

"Then why can't you for the love of God just take the essence and be done with it!" Cid cried out and clenched his fists by his sides. He stood right in front of Septarian in the display room, just a few inches separating their faces.

"You just don't like losing!" Septarian tried.

"It's not about losing when you don't claim the prize!" Cid was furious. His black eyes shone.

"But I have claimed the prize!" Septarian was shouting too now, unable to keep it inside. "I want all of the boy, Cid, not just the essence!"

A bitter expression formed on the knight's features.

"I figured as much," he said. "I knew you'd fall in love..."

"Does it bother you?" Septarian asked calmly, feeling brave. He stood before the knight with his arms crossed, wearing blue for a change, not black.

"And if it does?" The golden hoops danced when Cid cocked his head. "Does it matter to you?"

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"No." And it was true. At long last, it was true. Cid was not a part of him. He had been erased from Septarian's body, his heart and his soul. He was gone.

Cid looked away from him then, to the floor, the tip of his elegant, Italian shoe.

"Now that, Septarian, that is losing," Cid said, obviously referring to himself. He shifted on the floor and his dark gaze met Septarian's again. "Please drain your bitch so I can get out of this city!" he said in a hard voice. "They won't let me give up before the essence is gone."

"Sure." Septarian felt calm now. He even opened the door for the knight on his way out, feeling sorry for him, somehow. "Goodbye, Cid," he said. And meant it.

He stood in the doorway leading into the workshop. Nathaniel rose slowly from the floor, smoothing the fabric of his jeans as he did. They didn't look at each other.

"Why did you make me hide?" Nathaniel asked. He didn't smile and he didn't play now.

"I don't know," Septarian answered honestly. "Maybe I was afraid someone would come and take you away from me."

"Do you think I am that weak?"

"No!"

"I didn't date that man, or whatever he is, because I liked you!"

"I thought so." Septarian leaned against the door frame, his arms still crossed in front of his chest.

"A princess, huh?" He smiled a little. Septarian was glad to see that.

"Yes." he confirmed. "But it doesn't mean—" he began.

"I know!" Nathaniel interrupted. He sounded tired.

"It's what makes us live so long," Septarian explained.

"There're only a few people in the world who have this essence."

"The princesses, right?" Nathaniel combed through his hair with his hand.

"Or a prince," Septarian said softly. "It's like a competition." That didn't sound good! "I mean, between us and ... them ... about the princesses ... Dragons and ... knights." He stumbled in his own words and wet his lips nervously with his long, long tongue.

"A competition, eh?" Septarian knew he wouldn't like that! Nathaniel's eyebrows rose, questioning.

"For the essence."

"And the princess? Does she—or he—even live when you're through?" He seemed a little insecure now.

"Oh yes!" Septarian said quickly. "They never even know!"

"And how fair is that?" Nathaniel sounded far too reasonable.

"Not fair at all, and I'm sorry for that! But Nathaniel, please, I just want you to know that, even if we met like this, it's not why I like you, I—"

"I know," Nathaniel interrupted him again. "I'm not stupid, Septarian, and I have mirrors. I don't think I need some mystical essence to make men sleep with me. Or dragons, whatever—Though I did find it weird that two dark hunks should appear just like that out of nowhere at the same time," he added. "Now I know why."

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"But I don't ... I didn't—" The dragon struggled to find the words, the right words that would mend everything and restore the young man's trust in him.

"Don't worry, Septarian, I heard you talking to Cid," Nathaniel cocked his head and sought out his gaze with his own. Something soft had come into his expression. "Unless you said all that, about falling in love and wanting it all, just to hurt him?"

"Of course not." The thought was ridiculous. "I'm far too messed up to be subtle," he admitted.

"But you could have, if I wasn't me, then you could have done it?" Nathaniel asked. "Milked him, me, for this essence and then left?"

"Yes," Septarian said honestly. "My firm is founded on it. It's what we sell at the auctions in the cellar. And it's why I don't hunt anymore," he added.

Nathaniel took a moment. "Are you sure you would still like me?" he asked at last. "If I wasn't a princess?"

"Of course," his voice was surprisingly calm and confident, even to his own ears.

"I think we should do it then." He crossed the floor, slid his arms around Septarian's waist. "Let him have his wish granted."

"Who?"

"Cid," Nathaniel said casually. "You should do what he asked you to and remove that essence. That way I'll know that it's my body and not just my liquids they want, the next time dark-clad males come into the store," he joked with just a tiny bitter edge to his voice.

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"Are you sure?" Septarian was surprised.

"Sure," he kissed Septarian's blue-clad shoulder. "I have no use for it."

"You're not mad at me?" Septarian returned the embrace and filled his palms with golden hair.

"I met you because of it, didn't I?" The boy was really too sweet! "Does it hurt, the milking-thing?" He added in a worried voice.

"Oh no!" Septarian burst out. "Not at all!"

It was evening before they came back home. Septarian opened a bottle of wine.

"It's an occasion," he explained.

"Me giving up my essence?" Nathaniel asked jokingly.

"No. You being here." He could be romantic when he wanted to. His reward was in Nathaniel's eyes when he took the glass from his hand.

"Bedroom?" his wanton Nathaniel asked.

"Bedroom indeed," Septarian replied. He patted his pocket, made sure it was there: the little blue bottle and the straw. He brought the wine and his glass as well, prepared to stay in there for a while.

Nathaniel lay naked on the bed. Legs spread, arms flung over his head.

"I like your bed," Nathaniel remarked as Septarian came climbing in after him. He had placed the wine on the nightstand and was currently untying his tail while carefully maneuvering above the boy. Nathaniel had placed himself very much in the middle of the spacious bed; Septarian thought it a sign of healthy ego. He balanced on his knees

with the young man between his legs. His erect cock bobbed slightly as he looked down at the new treasure he'd found. Nathaniel gazed up at him as well, looking all calm and happy. Septarian thought that he'd done nothing to deserve this and that he was a very lucky dragon-man.

"Kiss me?" The pretty one's question was a demand. Septarian obliged happily. His cock smeared the human's belly with moisture when he lowered himself down to serve his young master. "Nice." Nathaniel was happy too. He smiled and sighed, Septarian could feel his pulse, sense his body heat as it rose. He set to lick his neck, his shoulders; his long tongue swirled across the tender skin. Nathaniel moaned quietly, his nipples too were sucked and caressed with cleaved expertise until they felt like raspberries to his tongue. Nathaniel sighed softly and arched up from the mattress.

"I want to suck your cock," Nathaniel said with his usual bluntness.

Septarian sat up again, leaned backwards, resting his weight on outstretched arms, giving the boy what he wanted. Nathaniel shifted beneath him, rolled over and crawled closer to the dragon on his fours; his lips were already parted.

"Nice," he smiled and let his little pink tongue dart out to taste the purple cock, gently probing and licking at the cleaved head, licking it clean from fluids. Septarian embraced Nathaniel's golden head with his hands, held him so he wouldn't disappear, so his mouth wouldn't, his tongue.

Said mouth opened wider and Septarian felt the heat of breath, the rhythmical puff of hot air against his cock. Then he felt all of it; smooth and wet. Tight. Hard. Muscles working

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at his flesh as the young man sucked him eagerly, let him slide inside, held him there and worked him mercilessly.

Septarian felt like he was going to die. He watched the blissful expression of his lover under the tousled blond hair, the cleft of his ass and the spread legs on the other side of the bed. He moaned and his fingers curled into fists full of golden locks. Nathaniel's head bobbed up and down before his crotch, scaled lavender cock disappearing inside and reappearing between his rosy lips, glistening now with saliva and juices. Nathaniel's expression was so serene yet so filthy; his dark eyelashes hooded his eyes as he focused on his task. He moaned, too, around the dragon cock, and Septarian couldn't hold back.

"I'll make it up to you," Septarian promised in a strained voice as the thick fluid that was dragon seed came pouring into Nathaniel's sweet mouth, trickling out across his lip, like ice cream almost. Milky white. Septarian's hips jerked and he fought to hold them still as not to cause his lover discomfort. His cock was still embraced by smooth flesh, still caressed by that tongue. His body still sent jolts of pleasure through his system. He let Nathaniel's hair go, smoothed it, stroked it, while listening to his own sounds, the harsh, rasping cries that changed into rhythmical moaning, sounds of heat and battle, not like the human sounds at all.

Nathaniel let his cock go with a smacking sound; he sat up to his knees and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Was that nice?" Nathaniel asked smugly. Septarian didn't answer. Not only was it a silly question, he wasn't sure if he could find the right words. He pulled Nathaniel close instead,

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kissed him, tasted himself in his young lover's mouth and loved how it made him feel. His tail caressed Nathaniel's smooth thighs while they kissed and kept the young one warm and wanton, his cock firm against Septarian's thigh.

"Lay back," Septarian whispered. "I'll milk your essence now."

"Sure it won't hurt?"

"I'm sure," Septarian grinned. He leaned over to the nightstand and found the small, blue bottle and the tiny straw. Then he dove in between Nathaniel's legs, head first.

Nathaniel's cock was like a ripe fruit in his mouth. All hard and ready. The tiny drop of fluid at the tip teased his taste buds with unexpected pleasure. Septarian felt the blood pound against his tongue, felt the juices rise in his lover while he sucked and licked at the hard rod, felt his balls harden and become taut and ready in his hand. Then he stopped!

"What? Not fair!" Nathaniel complained and tossed on the mattress, visibly shuddering when Septarian let his cock slide out of his mouth.

"Wait!" It came out in a hoarse voice, in a hurry. The long dragon tongue kept teasing the warm skin; sweeping across it, across his balls. Playing. Nathaniel moaned again. It was good. Septarian felt like he was going crazy himself; it tasted and smelled all too strongly of Nathaniel down there, fresh, young man, and essence vapor. Septarian gasped for air and shivered as he came closer to his goal, found those two hidden glands behind his sack and set to kissing them ripe with his lips. Then he massaged them firmly, using his whole mouth, sucking at his skin and rubbing with his tongue until

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Nathaniel cried out with pleasure and the essence finally came seeping through his skin, shimmering and fragrant. Septarian moaned loudly and licked it up, sucked it from the fine pores, gathered it in his mouth, every single drop of it. As usual, he had to fight not to swallow. It tasted so heavenly, but he wouldn't. Couldn't. Instead he forced himself to keep it in his mouth until he had the tiny straw placed in the bottle, then he let it slide down in blue glass. When he was done, he removed the straw and put the little blue cap back on. Then he cried out. One long, hard sound, just to get rid of the tension and the rush. Nathaniel lay panting. His cock was still hard and he held it with his hand, to comfort it, from the look of it.

"Thank you." Septarian looked down on Nathaniel. "That was amazing," He shook his head, tossed with his hair, rolled with shoulders as after a work-out session.

"And now?" the boy stretched out beneath him. "Will you sell it? At an auction?"

"No." Not this time. "It's yours." He slumped down on top of Nathaniel. Not a princess anymore. Just a prince. And just as gorgeous...

"You can have it," he smiled and caressed the dragon's cheek. "If you don't sell it," he added as a warning.

Septarian chuckled. "You are too good to be true." He kissed his lips. In his mind, he was already crafting a bottle, a beautiful one of silver with golden topaz and lapis lazuli. "I'll never part with it," he whispered. So low that Nathaniel probably didn't hear it. "It'll be my grail."

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He forced Nathaniel's legs gently apart with his tail, sunk in between them, lifted Nathaniel's legs in the air by the thighs. Septarian held on to him just where his buttocks met his legs, so he had control of both. Nathaniel's hips rolled backwards on the mattress, effortlessly like a wheel, opening him up.

"I'm going to fuck you now," Septarian warned.

"You do that, Mr. Dragon." Nathaniel gave a nod.

Septarian entered him, slowly. Gasping at every inch of male goodness he conquered. Nathaniel, knees up by his shoulders now, made sweet, sweet sounds as well. His hands had snuck down to his crotch again, stroking the rather impressive cock he had, rhythmically. His eyes were hooded by heavy eyelids so they were but a trickle of blue, a glittering glimpse of the ocean. Septarian pushed all the way inside and gave a deep, shuddering breath before he withdrew and sunk back inside. Harder now, in and out. The boy moaned and wet his lips with that pink, pink tongue. His hair was a halo of golden fur; Septarian fucked him faster. Slid in and out of the teasing hole, savored the grip of it, the warmth of his body. The air around him crackled and became electric blue. It ignited and caught on fire. Septarian laughed. Because he could. The fire died again within seconds. It was just a parlor trick, nothing more.

"You can breathe fire!" Nathaniel smiled dazed and horny.

"Sure I can!" The old dragon smacked with his tail. "I'm a dragon," he proclaimed.

Nathaniel twitched beneath him and came with an outburst, drenching his own hands in semen. It was such a

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beautiful picture that the dragon came too. With a huff and a blue spark, he buckled on top of Nathaniel and spurted another load of seed deep, deep inside his behind. It was all sweet. All good. Septarian had won.

Early morning, Septarian was fastening his cuff-links. He stood by the bed and looked down at his lover, at the tousled hair, the serene expression, the semi-erect cock on the flat belly. Septarian reached inside his jacket and pulled out a card. Plum and silver. He left it on the bed stand, in case Nathaniel needed him during the day. With a regretful sigh, he gave the naked form another long stare, then he left, closing the door silently behind him as not to disturb his new boyfriend. The apartment smelled of coffee. He had already had three cups, which was good, because he hadn't had much sleep the night before. Ice cream boys with blueberry butts would see to that, as was their nature.

On his way down, in the elevator, he whistled a sonata. Then he thought about mating.

The End

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