

Demon Sun
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Earth

". . .there's whiskey in the jar-o!"

The set ended with a firm chord and a ragged cheer from the crowd. Patrick flapped his chording hand, shaking out an incipient cramp before it could take hold. He slung his guitar over his back and leaned close to the mike. "That's all for tonight, folks, and thanks for listening. We'll see you next week, same time, same place, for another night of Celtic folk-rock with Ceilidh."

* * * *

Tires screeched. Hope looked away from the "walk" signal and saw the car before it smashed into her. The world went black.

* * * *

Patrick staggered as he stepped off the small stage.

"What's wrong, Patrick?" Trish, the tin whistle player, darted to his side, steadying him.

"I don't know," Patrick frowned. "I just felt very—I don't know, dizzy or something."

"Bit too much beer, eh?" Dan, the bodhran player, nudged him with an elbow.

"Maybe," Patrick shrugged it off. "Anyway, good gig tonight. See you all for practice tomorrow?"

"One of these days we'll have to start practicing the day *before* the performance, not the day after," Trish complained.

"Not as long as none of us are free Thursday nights," Dan said.

Off stage, his two friends stowed their instruments with the ease of long practice. Patrick secured his guitar in its case, fumbling. His hands felt distant, disconnected from the rest of his body, and his head floated at the end of a tether.

"Are you staying for a beer?" Trish asked, touching his arm.

"Not tonight," Patrick shook his floating head carefully. "Think I'm getting sick or something."

"Get to bed, then," Trish said. "Get some sleep so you can play tomorrow."

"That's the plan," Patrick agreed.

He waved a casual goodbye to Dan and set off, guitar in hand, for the bus stop, glad for once he didn't own a car. He didn't feel safe to drive. What was *wrong* with him, anyway?

Patrick reached home in a fog, barely aware enough of his surroundings to take his guitar with him. He managed to lock the door and get his boots off before collapsing facedown on the bed.

* * * *

Music swirled around him, wild and fey. Guitar? Mandolin? Something stringed, anyway. It teased at his soul, pulling him into a world he'd known before, a world of swirling, shifting color, drawing at his heart with poignant strength. He remembered this place, a refuge of his childhood, where dreams became reality and music soothed his soul. . .

* * * *

When Patrick woke, the music lingered in his head. It settled under the surface, vibrating and tickling at his nerves, a subliminal companion as he rose and dressed. Last night's malaise faded to a dim memory, an explanation for why he still wore rumpled clothes rather than a reason for concern.

He drifted through the day, listening to the inner music. It grew stronger during Ceilidh's rehearsal, coming through his fingers into the world. . .

"What's that?"

"Shh! Don't interrupt him!"

Patrick heard the voices and wondered what they meant. He opened dreamy eyes and saw. . .

She floated in a sea of feathered clouds, a small, delicate beauty all but obscured by heavy black bindings. Her blue eyes begged him, pleaded with him, *help me*.

He cried out in protest at the cruel bindings and the vision dissipated.

"That's never happened before, man," Dan shook his head, eyes wide. "Who was she? How in hell did you get her here? And how come you've never played like that?"

"Holy shit," Trish breathed, staring at the emptiness left by the vision.

"It's the music," Patrick blurted. He continued, not thinking, just speaking. "The music builds a

bridge. You said I've never played like that before. That's because I haven't been there since I was twelve, to the land of music. That's where she's from, and she's being held captive, and I need to save her."

He broke off, realizing how crazy he sounded. "Sorry. I think I'll just call for the men in white coats now."

"Nah, dude, don't do that," Dan waved off his suggestion. "I want to see you do that trick again."

So did Patrick. He folded his fingers around the neck of his guitar, struck a chord, and wondered how the hell he could do this consciously. But the song still tickled under his skin, ready to break free through the conduit of his hands and instrument.

This time he watched the magic happen. Ludicrous and out of place in the middle of a mangy, half-cleaned, poorly-furnished apartment, a shifting globe of mist formed. It shimmered and rippled, bands of color moving through at random, then it grew and expanded and opened like a lotus blossom. The girl looked out at them, bound and helpless, pleading with her eyes. *Help me.*

He poured more soul into his playing. The girl strained against her bonds, crystal teardrops shining in her eyes. She rocked back and forth with the effort to do something, *anything*—

Then vanished in a shower of rainbow fragments when Dan's cell phone shrieked.

"Fuck!"

Patrick felt like echoing the profanity. The music drained away. He felt empty, hollow, like maybe he'd never play again.

Dan answered his phone and walked into the kitchen. Trish gave Patrick an impenetrable look.

"You're. . . it's not going to happen again, is it?"

"Very insightful, Trish." Patrick rubbed his head. "It's gone. There's no music anymore. Now what?"

"I don't know. Too bad you can't play like that all the time, we'd be rich."

"No doubt."

Dan finished his call and returned to the living room. "Sorry, dude. Bad timing."

"Yeah, I'll say. It's done. There's no more magic. None."

"Damn."

"Yeah."

They stared at each other in glum silence for a moment.

"I'm going home," Patrick decided. "I need to think."

He ignored the responses. No music. His nerves felt dead. *He* felt dead. He wanted to see the girl again.

He brushed off the others like annoying flies and made his way back to his own apartment, two and a half blocks away. He hoped, maybe, while he walked, the music would come back, but it didn't. It didn't come back inside his home, either. The comforting chaos of his apartment surrounded him, but it did no good. No more music.

He stashed his guitar in the usual place behind the couch and flopped into his favorite (and only) chair. The emptiness inside burned. All his life he'd dreamed of magic. Now it finally happened to him, real magic, right in front of his conscious eyes and mind, and he'd lost it to a cell phone ringer. Without even helping the girl. . .

Restless eyes, shifting around the apartment, fell on the bottle atop the refrigerator. Vox. Gift from a friend, because of course he couldn't afford a pricey vodka like that on his own.

"Vodka is my friend," he muttered, picking himself up off the chair and finding a highball glass. Vox on the rocks. What better way to become comfortably numb?

The alcohol relaxed him, although it did nothing to ease his inner distress. He still felt empty inside. He could see her, with thick black bindings (not leather, looked more like. . . like. . . slightly inflated bicycle inner tubes) holding her immobile, tear-filled eyes sparkling. . .

The vodka did its thing and Patrick slipped off into a parody of sleep.

Demon Sun

His body died. Yuck. Dead and unpleasant, like a lump of meat left out on the counter too long,

heavy and distasteful. The music teased and tantalized him. Not in his body, outside. Where? Must get to it. Just leave the disgusting dead body behind. (*Not dead*, his analytical side insisted. *Drunk. Dreaming.*)

He ripped himself out of his body and left his name behind. Once free, he became the music. It pulled him, stretched him, sucked him in. . . to Demon Sun.

He remembered this place from childhood. When he'd described the land of music to his mother, she'd laughed and told him it sounded like he'd found a magic new dimension. Dimension, Demon Sun—an amusing play on words for a young boy. And here, in Demon Sun, music was born. It filled him, pulled him along on drifting bands of glorious chording, tickled him with pure harmony. He flowed with it, one with the music, reveling in what he thought he'd lost forever.

Then he saw something that jarred him out of his state of bliss. A woman, made of ivory, cupping an iridescent fluttering square in her hands and bending to whisper to it: *flutterby*. She released it. Her blue eyes raised and fastened on him.

One smooth ivory hand beckoned him closer, and he came, wondering at the familiarity of her eyes.

"Collector."

"What?"

"I name you Collector."

"I have a name," he protested. "I think."

"I am the Namer of Names, and I name you Collector."

"Collector. Why?"

"Because it is your function. By collecting, you will free them all from the prison."

"What? Who?"

"All," she replied enigmatically, waving her hand. "From the prison."

"If all are imprisoned, then how are you free?"

"Because no one can imprison the creative soul." She smiled, then caught a bit of shimmer from the air. "*Bubble.*"

She released the bubble, and it floated away.

"Fare well, Collector," the Namer said, then vanished.

A glimmer of light caught Collector's eye. A small shiny bag sat where the Namer had been. He picked it up, wondering. It looked like a handbag a little girl would carry back in that other world, all pink and sequins and beads, with a delicate silver chain and the kind of clasp that would pinch unwary fingers. He put it down. . . or tried to. The chain settled firmly around his wrist and refused to come off.

As he struggled with the stubborn handbag, something settled around Collector with a dramatic whoosh. He looked up, catching a fleeting impression of tattered black wings, then blackness smothered him and he knew no more.

* * * *

On Earth, the woman would be the ultimate Goth. Collector wondered where the thought came from, then shrugged off curiosity in favor of being able to think again. He picked himself up off the cold, harsh floor, and stared in horror at the beautiful, eyeless face of the woman in black.

"So," she said, "what have we here?" The woman rose from her twisted throne and glided towards him. "Rumor has it you're called Collector."

"So the Namer named me."

"Well, Collector, you'll find your task impossible to complete inside my Labyrinth. Collect all you wish, but there will be no re-assembly, and no reunification, do you understand me?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"All the better," the Dark Queen purred. "You can wander my Labyrinth in utter confusion. And I will continue as I have, remaking this world in my image."

She gestured and shadow-creatures swept Collector back into darkness.

* * * *

When he woke again, Collector lay in a tunnel spun of cobwebs. He barely felt the music. He

scrambled to his feet, dimly aware that the handbag still dangled from his wrist, and bolted. No thought, just movement, get *away*. . .

The cobweb corridors twisted and turned. He tripped, fell, got up and ran again. Then he stopped, panting, head cocked. What was that?

The music sounded stronger, that way.

He set off to find the music, slower this time, paying more attention to the monotonous grey surroundings. He followed the elusive tug and found himself standing in front of a small child, huddled on the floor and crying.

"What's wrong, little girl?" Collector knelt beside her, and she raised tear-filled blue eyes— *the Namer's eyes, the Bound One's eyes*—to his face.

"I'm broken," she said, "and no one can put me back together again."

Collector extended a hand towards the girl, who caught sight of the dangling handbag and reached for it, eyes lighting with interest through her tears.

"Pretty," she said, then touched the sequins.

The silver clasp snapped open quicker than thought and sucked the little girl inside. Then it snapped shut again, without even a bulge.

Collector stared.

Blue eyes.

Collector dropped to the curved, faintly sticky floor. Here in Demon Sun, anything was possible. . . including that a soul could splinter into pieces, which then needed to be collected. The Bound One, the Namer, the Inner Child, all shared the same eyes, here in this ever-changing world.

Collector lurched to his feet. "I have to collect them. But how many? And how? Trapped in this cobweb labyrinth, how can I do this?"

By collecting, you will free them all from prison. . .

Shifting, changing, the music led him through the cobwebs, sometimes stronger, sometimes quieter. Then he smacked into something shiny, black, and solid.

"Forgiveness. . ."

Collector stared at what he'd run into: a pillar of gleaming black marble, veined with a delicate tracery of white. "Who are you?"

"I wish to speak with you. Approach, please?"

Collector tentatively stepped around the column. Blue eyes blinked at him from a height that threatened to puncture the tunnel.

"Hello," Collector said, around a sudden surge of despair. How was he to recognize the pieces of the broken soul if they didn't look like people?

"I am Obelisk. And who are you, stranger to this realm?"

"I am Collector," he replied, accepting the talking rock with only eyes and no mouth. "And not entirely a stranger here, although I've been away a long time. Long enough that I have no memory of the Dark Queen."

Obelisk moaned, a sad, quiet sound. "Animara, the Eyeless. She denies herself. She rips our world to shreds. She denies us. We will all die if she has her way."

"Why? Why does she do this?"

"Because she denies that she needs us, and thinks she can live on her own. But she needs us, and we need her, and we all need you. . . Collector."

"Am I right, then? I need to collect the bits of you, and put you all back together?"

Obelisk blinked. Her eyes, so huge and dominant in her otherwise featureless self, locked on his bag. "You are the Collector."

Collector sighed. "Very well, then. I would rather talk to you, as you're the only friendly person nearby."

He opened the bag and held it while Obelisk vanished inside like a stream of smoke into an air filtration system. Then he hefted it, more than a little amazed at the insignificant weight.

"Follow the music it is, then," Collector said aloud, and moved on.

Without the music leading him, Collector would have felt bleak despair, trapped in the

featureless grey webwork of the Labyrinth. He had no idea how far he'd traveled, or how many turns he'd made, or even if he'd made the same four turns over and over and over again. But the music drew him, stronger now, stronger. . .

"Hello," a voice purred.

Collector stopped and stared. Familiar blue eyes smouldered at him from an exotic cream and brown mask. Half feline, half human, and all sensual, the being slunk towards him.

"You must be Collector," she said, gliding close to him. A smooth palm caressed his cheek. "I am Lyra. But I don't want to be collected. . . yet."

Collector's eyes popped open when she kissed him, then his hands reached out and stroked silken fur. "The bag may have a mind of its own," he mumbled, all senses afire with the scent, touch, thrill of Lyra. *This one must be her sex drive*, he thought, then lost even that much coherence when his clothing melted.

"It will not collect me," Lyra growled, nibbling at his shoulder. "You need me."

Need her. . .

"Wait," Collector panted, breaking away. "This isn't fair. You're broken. I'm here because I can help put you back together—will you *stop* that?"

"You don't want me to."

"No—I mean, yes—I mean, stop."

Collector wrenched himself away from Lyra's intriguing, silken body, although he could do nothing about the tail coiling sensuously up his leg. He concentrated ferociously and brought back his pants. Lyra pouted.

"Better," he said, wrenching himself back under control. "Now keep your hands to yourself. Please. I need to figure out how to get out of this place, this Labyrinth. Because at least one part of you is outside, and I missed her. You. Whatever."

Lyra licked her semi-feline mouth with a very red tongue, and drew a fingertip along her lip. Collector lost his train of thought.

"A trade, then," Lyra said. The tip of her finger slid inside her mouth, then out and trailed down her chest. "I get you what you want, you give me what I want. Deal?"

This is the dream world, the land of music, my Demon Sun. What's wrong with having a little fun?

"Deal," Collector said, and if his voice sounded hoarse, Lyra said nothing of it.

"You want out of this maze? Use your power. You have it."

"Power? What power?" Lyra's body moved slowly, sensuously, curving in suggestive ways. . .

"I have no power. What are you talking about?"

"Use the music," Lyra said, gyrating to her own internal rhythm. "Tear a hole. Men are good at thrusting through things. Do it."

"Uh. . ." Collector yanked his concentration back into line before his pants could vanish again. Could he shape the music? He'd never tried. He'd attempted to bring the music into his other world, but never controlled it. Lyra ran her hands down her sides, undulating a step closer to him. Collector closed his eyes.

What kind of music to tear a hole?

Heavy metal. Loud, growling, obnoxious heavy metal. If that couldn't do it, nothing could.

The quiet, underlaying thread of gentle music in Collector's head shifted into howling electric guitar and pounding drums. The fabric of reality trembled.

Collector peeked through a half-raised eyelid. He couldn't see Lyra, so he opened his eyes further and watched the wall fluctuating under the assault of the noise in his head. He kept it up, filling his whole being with the driving, pounding beat.

"Yes!" Lyra squealed, distracting him. "Keep it up, Collector!"

Concentrate.

The wall shivered, then with a shriek of tortured guitar strings, tore. Lyra dove through the rent and Collector followed.

They fell together into Demon Sun at its finest, glowing swirls and whirls of color wrapping

around them and slowing their descent. Lyra laughed aloud and threw her arms wide.

"Free! Now it is my turn!"

She caught Collector in her embrace, and he didn't even wonder where the giant pillow that caught their entwined bodies came from.

* * * *

Collector looked at the pink handbag with deep regret. It snapped shut, trapping Lyra safely inside. He didn't want her in there, but what else could he do? His duty was to collect the fragments of the Bound One and reconstruct her. Somehow. He couldn't do that with Lyra distracting him. But oh, what a distraction. . .

"Namer of Names," he said to himself. "Concentrate. Remember. Belief creates reality here."

"Collector," the Namer broke into his thoughts. "We meet again."

"You named me well," Collector smiled at the ivory woman. "Have you any advice or wisdom to offer before I collect you?"

"Your task is harder than you think it is."

"What?"

"The Bound One is in the other world," then the Namer slid into the handbag with a quiet puff.

"Oh, no," Collector said, then sat down abruptly. The other world. He'd never reached the other world consciously. He'd come and gone, drifting in and out of dreams, bringing only memories to either place.

Wish a thing, and it can be, a half-remembered voice whispered in his mind. Who? He knew that voice. . . *Hope*.

Hope. She'd been his next door neighbor when he was a kid, until her family moved away. She was the only person who believed in Demon Sun, because she'd been here too.

And Hope had blue eyes.

"Wish it, wish it, wish it. . ."

Earth Again

"He's coming around!"

Patrick coughed and gasped, thrashing.

"Hold still! Dan, hold him, before he hurts himself!"

Patrick went limp before they could pin him. "I'm all right," he croaked, voice weak and rusty. "Just don't want to be here."

"Where you been, man?"

Patrick forced his eyes open and looked into the worried faces of Dan and Trish. "Demon Sun."

"What?" Trish blinked.

Dan snorted. "Never knew you did drugs, man."

Patrick shook his head and pushed himself upright. "No drugs. Magic. I went to the land of music. I named it Demon Sun as a joke when I was a kid. Don't know how I got there, but I did, and now I'm here, and I have to find Hope."

"What are you hoping for?"

"Not that kind of hope, Trish." Patrick stretched. Having a physical body again hurt. "Hope Forrester. She's a person. I need to find her. *Now*."

"Who?" Dan scratched his head. "Never knew you knew any women, either."

Trish smacked him. "Watch it. I'm a woman. And don't you dare say I don't count."

"I need to find her. Immediately. Before it gets any worse."

"Internet," Trish said, puzzled but decisive. She located the computer under the pile of clean laundry and sat down to search.

"I'll try to explain," Patrick said, standing and stumbling over behind Trish. "It's like this. When I was a kid, I went to this place sometimes in my dreams. It was a world full of colors and music. I tried to describe it to my mom once and she said it sounded like I'd been to a magic new dimension. Demon Sun. Thought it was a good name for the place. The only other person I ever told was the neighbor girl, Hope. She understood. She even went there a few times. We talked about it. But her family moved away and I never saw her again. And as for Demon Sun. . . I couldn't go there

anymore after I hit puberty. Never forgot it, though. Always trying to recapture the music. Never quite managed it." Patrick sighed. "Anyway, that's who the Bound One is. The girl in the vision? The one all wrapped up in inner tubes? That's Hope. And I need to find her in real life. I've got—"

Patrick felt a sudden sense of extreme panic. *The bag!* He raised his left arm and saw it hanging on his wrist, as secure as before.

"I've got her in here," he said softly, holding the bag in a protective embrace, ignoring Dan's raised eyebrow. "Parts of her, anyway. Creativity, willpower, innocence, lust. . . she's fragmented. Something happened to split her into pieces. One of the pieces is here. I need to find her physical body before I can put her together."

"Trippin', dude." Dan nodded approval. "Knew you'd come up with some good reason for that coma shit."

"Coma?"

"We thought you were in a coma," Trish said, without looking away from the computer screen. "You were just. . . limp. No response to anything. We were about to take you to the hospital."

"Hospital! Try the hospital! Maybe whatever broke her hurt her physically too!"

"Yeah, yeah, thought of that. Give me a minute, okay? I'm still working on accessing certain... resources."

"Trish? What are you doing there, anyway?"

"Don't ask. You really don't want to know."

Patrick considered that for a moment. Trish presented an enigma on the best of days. He knew very little of her life outside of the band. She did something with computers, he knew that much at least, and some kind of freelance work that paid well but was very sporadic. That about summed it up.

"You're probably right," he agreed.

Dan made a grab for the pink bag and Patrick snatched it away. "C'mon, dude. I just wanted to see it."

"She's my friend. You think I'm just going to hand her over to your grimy paws?"

"Talented paws," Dan said, examining his hands. "And not grimy. Just. . . a little dirty."

"This Hope of yours. Middle name Ariel?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"She's your friend, as you pointed out. Would she be about thirty-eight?"

"Has it been that long? Unbelievable. Yeah, that's the right age."

"Right. Hope Ariel Forrester, age thirty-eight, is currently in Mercy Hospital. Right here in town. Can you believe the luck?"

"Hardly," Patrick marveled. "We grew up in Indiana. How'd she wind up here, I wonder?"

"Find out later." Trish closed out whatever she'd been doing and powered down the computer, pushing away from it with a controlled motion. "Let's go now."

Trish drove them in her battered little Honda Civic. Patrick spent the ride clutching the pink handbag, quivering with tension.

They ran into a solid brick wall at the hospital, in the form of security.

"Family only," the receptionist stated. "It's the rules. No exceptions, unless the family clears it."

"And how do we get hold of the family?" Patrick said through gritted teeth.

"There's actually a visitor present. Would you like me to contact him? If a family member gives permission, I can allow you to visit your friend."

"By all means, contact him!"

Patrick waited, heart in throat, as the nurse moved in extreme slow motion to pick up and dial the phone. He knew it for illusion, a trick of perception slowing time this way, but still seethed with frustration.

"What did you say your name was again, sir?"

"Tell him it's Patrick, from Logan Street." Whoever the male relative was, he should remember Patrick. The two families had been close and shared most holidays and celebrations.

"He wants to meet you here. He'll be right down."

The man that emerged from the elevator was older, careworn, and haggard. He was also David, Hope's brother.

"Patrick? Is that really you?"

"David." Patrick smiled. "It's been a long time."

"Over twenty years." David studied him warily. "How did you know about Hope?"

"It's hard to explain." Patrick shifted, uncomfortable. "Actually, I don't know much, only that she's hurt. What happened?"

"Car accident," David said shortly. "Car ran a red light and right over her while she was crossing the street. She's pretty bad off. They've got her on life support. They think she'll be that way probably forever."

"Oh, no. . ." Patrick felt the blood drain from his face. "No."

"Yes," David nodded. "I don't know what to do. Mom and Dad are dead, Willie's in Germany with the military, and I'm the only one here to make the call."

"Sucks, man," Dan put in. David raised an eyebrow.

"Look, David. . . these are my friends, Dan and Trish. We're in a band together. And something weird is going on."

A brief glint of humor flashed in David's eyes. "You're holding a pink handbag, Patrick. What makes you think you have to tell me there's something weird going on here?"

"The bag's part of it, okay? It's—it's your sister's."

"Yeah, that does look kind of like something she'd carry. Funny, she never mentioned you'd been in touch."

"That's because, strictly speaking, I haven't." Patrick raked a hand through his hair. "Look, I'd like to see her. Can I?"

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt. Not them, though."

"Right. Wait here?"

Dan and Trish nodded.

Patrick followed David through the maze of hospital corridors and elevators to Hope's room. She lay there, a pathetic sight. Tubes came out of places they didn't belong. Her skin sported abrasions, bandages, and a sickly gray pallor. Her body arched with a mechanical, unnatural rhythm, forced by the machine to expand and contract, pushing air in and out of her lungs.

"Oh, Hope. . ." Patrick felt an unexpected sting of tears behind his eyelids. He hadn't seen Hope in twenty-six years, discounting the parts of her soul he'd collected in Demon Sun, and the memory of the bright, active child hurt, compared to this husk of a woman.

"Pretty bad, I know," David said, moving to rest his hand on his sister's, careful not to disturb the IV port.

"So sad, to see her like this, after all these years. . ." Patrick touched the handbag for reassurance. "I am the Collector," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." Patrick looked at Hope, then her brother. "Look, I can't explain this. How about if I just show you. . ."

He rubbed the bag and started humming. The music responded. It grew in his head, and he hummed along with it, eyes squinched shut against the horror of Hope's arching body. David cried out in wonder and he opened his eyes to see the Bound One floating in her lotus-nest of feathered clouds, smiling at her brother.

"What is this?" David asked, one hand reaching for the insubstantial vision.

"Magic," Patrick said, locking the tune in his head. The vision remained steady. "The wreck shattered your sister. Her soul is in bits. Most of them went into the land of music, where she and I played as children. One of them stayed here, bound by the life support. I need to collect her."

"You need to what?"

"I have most of her soul in this bag. I need the rest, so I can reassemble her and set her free in the land of music."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Patrick. Have you lost your mind? But no, I'm sane,

and I'm seeing this too."

"I'm not insane. This magic is all real. I need to collect her. But she's bound. . . it may not work."

Patrick opened the bag, but it did nothing, just as he'd suspected.

"I think it's the life support," he said. "I think it needs to be unplugged."

He resumed humming, and the Bound One became more solid. *Help me.*

"Unplugged! And what do you mean, you need to collect Hope?"

"Magic is real, David. It's right in front of you. Believe, and know I mean your sister no harm. Let her become whole again. Unplug her."

"I think you need to leave," David said, voice trembling. "This is not your decision."

"Maybe not," Patrick said. "But it's the right decision. Here." He dug a scrap of paper out of his wallet and scribbled his phone number on it, holding it out to David, who just looked at it. "Call me when it's done."

David ignored the paper. Patrick laid it on the bed.

"You need to leave now."

Patrick released the magic, then left. What else could he do? David could have him thrown out in a heartbeat. He found his friends in the waiting area and shook his head. Trish's face fell.

"No luck?"

"No," Patrick said, morose. "She's still bound. I can't collect her."

"What now?"

"Back home?"

"No reason to stay," Dan agreed.

Patrick stared moodily out the window as Trish drove. The grey sky glowered at him. "It's not right," he said. "Those tubes. The wires. The way the machines forced her to breathe."

"Life support?" Trish shook her head. "Never seen it, in person. It sounds unpleasant."

"I never want to see that again."

"Me either," Dan put in from the back seat. "Let me off at the smoke shop?"

Trish snorted. "Fine time to be out of papers, old man." She pulled over to the curb to let Dan out. "At least you mentioned it before we passed the place."

With Dan gone, Trish gave Patrick one of her most opaque looks. "Are you in love with this woman Hope?"

"What?" Patrick's eyebrows shot up. "Love? I haven't seen her in over twenty years, how could I be?"

Never mind his encounter with Lyra.

"She's my friend," he said, when Trish made no response. "Maybe if her family hadn't moved away we would have fallen in love and been one of those ridiculously sappy couples that never knew anything but each other. How the hell should I know what would have happened. But now, she's still my friend, even unconscious in a hospital bed, and that's enough for me."

"Thanks. That clears things up."

Patrick didn't have time to wonder what she meant, because his apartment building loomed ahead, a soulless construction of red brick and tiny windows. He thanked Trish for the ride and trudged up to his unit. Gravity dragged at him, trying to pull him back down the stairs, but he reached his home safely and flung himself down on his couch.

The phone woke him. Patrick couldn't place the noise at first, then couldn't find the phone in the dark, but finally located the handset and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"It's done."

Click.

Patrick gave the phone a questioning look. What—

Oh.

It's done. Hope's brother. He'd reached the right decision.

Patrick dropped his phone and scrambled for his guitar. His fingers felt fat and uncoordinated

as sausages, with individual minds of their own, as he fought the case open. But he got the instrument out and began playing before he'd even consciously heard the music.

This time, when the Bound One appeared, her bonds crumbled as he watched. Her eyes shone with incredulous joy and she stretched up, up, out of the hunched position she'd been forced into for so long. *Thank you!*

The bag opened on its own, sucking the Unbound Soul into itself. It bulged now, although still very light, and Patrick felt a sense of triumph looking at it. Success!

But now what? How was having Hope's soul in a bag going to help in the land of music, where Animara the Eyeless struggled against herself and unmade reality?

Time to get back to Demon Sun. Just do it, don't think. . . play. He let the music flow through him, felt the magic begin. . . then heard the laughter.

It echoed across the bridge between worlds, a chilling, evil sound. Animara. It could be no other, not with that much malice packed into it.

"Damn you!" Patrick cried out. The magic stopped. It just *stopped*. He couldn't even hear the music anymore.

No matter what he played, said, or did, no magical bridge formed to Demon Sun.

Eventually, he gave up and went to bed, too dispirited even to get drunk.

Return

Demon Sun trembled. From little puffs of discoloration to bolts of black lightning, blackness invaded the land of music, unmaking the colors. It burned. It smothered. It clung.

It shattered when Collector swung the bag and hit it.

Collector tumbled to the amorphous ground with a triumphant chord sounding in his head. Finally! A blow to the blackness! But he still had to seek out the source of the devastation, Animara. And some intuition told him she would not be pleased to see him.

A shriek of pure rage rent the shifting beauty of Demon Sun and Animara herself stepped through the tear. Her eyeless gaze locked onto Collector.

"You! How dare you return to my realm!"

Before Collector could respond, the bag tugged at his wrist. Blue eyes opened on its side.

"Dark Queen. What have you done with my eyes?"

The chain slipped off Collector's wrist and the bag dropped, shifting into a woman. Animara shrieked again and leapt forward, grappling with Hope. Blue eyes met black pits and Hope broke the other's grip.

"All that is petty, cruel, and evil within me is now in you. I have defeated you before. I will defeat you now, eyes or no eyes."

Collector remembered the words of a long-ago self-defense instructor: *A real fight is usually decided in thirty seconds. More than that is all Hollywood.*

Hope reached out and embraced her dark side. Animara shrieked, struggling against the hold.

"You are part of me, and I am part of you. Denial can not change this. I accept you. I control you. You will not win!"

The Dark Queen's shrieks grew more ragged and desperate as her body boiled and melted into Hope.

The colors of Demon Sun swirled, the music rang like a bell, and Hope turned to face Collector with a radiant smile. A hint of Lyra gleamed in her eyes.

"I'll be waiting for you. . ."

Hope shifted into swirling mist and merged with the music.

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