

Barely Composed

A SHORT STORY
EXCLUSIVE TO SUBSCRIBERS



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Barely Composed

What made Serena trust him in the first place? She wasn't one of these silly types that took random men home with her, *good God, no*. Later, as she stood staring into the yellow eyes of that *thing*, smoke gusting from the massive hole in the floorboards (well, that was her security deposit gone) and the pepper spray dangling uselessly from her hand, the part of her brain that wasn't completely stumped with shock lifted its weedy

echo of a voice to say, *But you took all the right precautions. You risk-assessed everything.*

It all began in the café.

Latino music bounced from the speakers, so carefree. *Why couldn't she feel like that?* Behind the counter, steamers blasted milk into a froth. Baristas bashed their coffee utensils about, loosening the grains, voices raised above the din; rhythms piled, teetering, on top of each other. Serena frowned, twiddling her pen. Why was she so comforted by this non-stop racket when all she had craved, for so long, was peace and quiet?

Having won the Youth Musicianship Classical Composer of the Year Award (her heart tightened and she took another sip of her too-hot cappuccino), Serena had achieved what all her peers had been scrabbling for. Apart from all the professional recognition and praise (obviously!), the main prize was funding for an entire year out. She was job-free, responsibility-free, free to explore

her music and take it to the next level. True, there was no space in her new basement flat for her grand piano but without her parents breathing down her neck, just an electric keyboard was pure bliss.

So why, instead of glorying in her newfound personal space, was she here again? Drinking in the cacophony and eavesdropping on other people's conversations while she doodled in the margins of blank music sheets... The fact was, she wasn't free at all. She had to produce something new – something incredible, or at least as good as the sonata that scooped up the prize. She sighed and glanced down at her inky scribbles. *You're squandering your time sketching pianos instead of playing one.*

There was that boy again. Standing in the queue.

For a few confused seconds Serena found her eyes lodged on the black t-shirt with the skull on it, the messy dark hair drooping over his eyes.

She practised her best smile, watching his profile as he waited in line for his coffee. Excitement leapt in her stomach. *He had his guitar with him!*

It was clear what she had to do. It was ridiculous, outlandish, but she felt the decision had already been made somewhere inside her body. In her – legs? *Don't be weird.* But her foot was jiggling madly under the table as if the idea had slipped down her thigh and was ready to kick free.

He picked up his coffee. He checked it, stirring. Was he turning to go? She'd have to wave, keep this smile going, though her mouth was already quivering to keep it up. How to begin asking – ? Oh, wait. He was going to the milk and sugar counter first...

Once more through the facts. Serena had a very visual mind and could happily score the T-shape in her head, imagining her pristine handwriting unfurling under each column.

'Bad idea' column first: they'd only chatted once, and briefly. She couldn't remember his name. How

could she invite a near-stranger into her home? But it was quite possible he'd already noticed where she lived, since it was directly opposite the café. There was that time she felt (imagined?) his eyes on her back as she walked home.

What did she have to lose? *Scratch that. Not a valid reason.* She would keep pepper spray in her pocket the whole time. *That's not a reason either, but good risk management.* She nodded to herself.

'Good idea' column: he was clearly a 'nice young man' as her mother liked to say, despite his rough, teenagehood-barely-left-behind appearance. Only yesterday she'd seen him hand over a scarf for lost property in this very café.

The possibility of squandering an entire year and having nothing to show for it was actually making her sweat. Who was she kidding? She had plenty to lose just by sitting here and letting the opportunity walk right past.

Just then the boy turned and began his gentle swagger to the door. *Go go go!*

Serena stuck her hand up, smiling furiously. The boy stopped and peered at her through his hair, confused. Was that a frown? *Oh no, don't alarm him. Turn it down.*

“Hi again?” She let out a small sigh and dropped her hand. Was she really doing this? *Shut up. Don't overthink it.*

He smiled, loped over. Okay, it was normal. Everything in the world was normal.

You have to explain straight away or it will seem weird. “We met – the other day?” She flushed as he came closer, his head tilted to hear her over the music and coffee machines.

Just get on with it. “I've been meaning to ask you...I had an idea. It's just an idea, don't feel obliged or anything...”

“That's okay, go ahead.” He was beaming. Did he think she was an idiot? But no. Such a friendly face. *Good idea column – tick!*

He pulled out a chair and flipped it backwards before he sat down, leaning his forearms on the

backrest. *Why do people do that?* Serena mentally tutted, but then she saw the way his strapped-on guitar case shunted to the side as he moved. Of course, that would make it difficult to sit the right way around.

“Well, the thing is...”

Her smile wobbled as it hit her. She was having a conversation. It had been so long. A month was an age. All her friends’ faces came rushing back: all the phone calls she hadn’t dared to make, wanting to hide from their scratching, itching jealousy. Maybe trying to protect *them* from it too – yes. She would call them some time, but give them just that: *some time*. Right now what she needed was an easy-going conversation with someone, just... to hang around with a person who was laid back. Wasn’t that how you were supposed to feel in your early twenties? Light-hearted and open-minded and ready for anything. But Serena had always needed to achieve. This was what had moulded her as a person and she knew no other way.

She had to stick to her career path, that much was obvious. Her path was already unrolling, a path which was more real, more vital now that she'd won this award. She *loved* her path. She didn't need diversions, she needed... to *diversify*, yes. She gave herself a quick smile. *Good word play.*

Suddenly it all flowed out of her. "The thing is, I'm a classical composer. I play piano. I'm Serena, by the way – I don't think I. Anyway. I've been getting a bit stuck and I wondered what it would be like to, er..."

She glanced at the top of his guitar case poking over his shoulder. He waited, smiling at her, his brown eyes bright.

Serena smiled back, though nerves still twitched the corners of her lips. "I wondered what it would be like to collaborate, you know. Mix things up a bit. What is it that you play? 'Rock music'?"

The boy, whose name turned out to be Ben, downed his coffee rather quickly after that. Was he a bit –

eager? As they sauntered across the pedestrianised street and down the concrete steps to Serena's flat, she mentally reached for the *bad idea column* then stopped herself. *Not now. Follow through what you've started.*

Just as she nudged open her front door, a streak of grey-black fur bolted past her leg and up into the street. "Crazy cat," she muttered then called after him, "Hamlet!"

Ben made a choked, snuffling sound beside her. "You named your cat *Hamlet*?"

Serena narrowed her eyes, her inner guard pinging up. *Don't get uptight. He's not like your usual, snooty crowd.* After all, it was time she tested out this casual, laid back attitude for herself. Yes. If nothing came of their musical collaboration, she would settle for that.

She shrugged with one shoulder, letting her hair slip over one eye. "Yeah. He gets this kind of tragic look about him sometimes."

Ben chuckled more openly now. “Cool. You’re funny.”

Serena was relieved to have him behind her as they stepped into the flat, so he couldn’t see the blush of pleasure that warmed her cheeks. She was *cool* and *funny*? Not once had anyone said that of her – not since junior school, anyway. Not since the piano lessons got serious, when she had to practise every day, at six in the morning and then again after school...

She put the kettle on then remembered she had some bottles of light beer in the fridge. That was a bit more *rock’n’roll*, wasn’t it? She beamed at her quick, adaptive thinking, then her smile sank as she reached for the cold bottles: the leftovers of a house-warming party to which only two people showed up. She hadn’t really known them that well; she’d recognised their faces from the music college but couldn’t remember their names. They’d hung around for as long as politeness demanded and then left.

She kicked the fridge door shut with her foot, rattling the bottles inside, and strode into the lounge.

“How about a beer?”

Ben grinned. “Awesome.”

She tried to make light conversation but there wasn't much to say. She was the host and the collaboration was her idea, so unless she was going to risk giving him the wrong message she really ought to hurry up and make the first move. Musically speaking, of course.

“Okay. We should probably play something we know first, to show each other what we do?” She shuffled her fold-out chair into position in front of the keyboard and flexed her fingers. “I wrote this piece a little while ago...” Why mention the award? *Why set yourself up for disaster?*

Serena blinked slowly as she drew a neat line through that question, exhaled, and began to play.

Her fingers rambled almost lazily over the tune, searching it out once more. It brought it all back to

her: that sense of a journey she'd had when she first discovered this bittersweet pattern of notes. How she adored that reaching feeling, the grasping of a new melody. It was like spotting a rare mountain flower as the wisps of cloud parted. That was when the excitement usually burned through: the urge to play it back to other people. But to do that, you had to come off the mountain, didn't you? That moment of discovery couldn't last forever.

This was what she wanted, she realised, the muscle memory in her hands flying off undisturbed while her central thoughts pulled in protectively around this worrying, disturbing new bubble. She wanted the unobtainable, the impossible; to swim in those strange waters of inspiration and never come up for air.

She distracted herself from the cold finger-touch of this idea, refocussing herself on the notes, the melody that *she* had discovered, that *she* had won an award for. Whatever she feared about failures around the corner, she still had this: the praise, the

recognition, and this air-of-the-mountainside flourish of notes swooping up like a firework then scattering out their soft droplets, lights fading...

She couldn't help but smile inwardly at her perfect execution, the flow of a well-thumbed sequence, reaching for that same mountain flower again... But was that all it was now? A memory recalled and repeated, like an old photograph fading on the mantelpiece?

As she dabbled out the last lingering refrain, panic shot through her.

Had she lost her artistic freedom – was that it? Was that the price of critical acclaim?

Wasn't it bad enough that she'd lost all her (so-called) friends?

She lifted her hands from the keyboard and it all evaporated. The silence rang harder, more truthful than any of the music as she searched Ben's face for an answer to these questions.

She took in his strange hesitancy, the frozen disbelief in his eyes. But in a second it morphed into a weak smile.

“Wow, that was amazing. Man, I wish I could play something as awesome as that.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

A beat of relief and a little sip from that addictive cup of praise – *gosh, it had been so long since anyone had listened to her play!* – but it wasn’t quite enough to quell all these uncertainties that rose like patchwork colours around her.

But Ben saw nothing of that. Having settled on the sofa, the boy – *well, he was hardly a man, was he?* – swung his guitar onto his lap and was already plucking out a tune. His eyes glinted with secrets as he spoke to her in a lofty, storytelling voice.

“This is for my band who are no longer my band. We had a disagreement. The Demon of Death Metal came to visit and gifted me with his special riffs, and they were not happy.” He pointed an eyebrow at her, waiting for her reaction.

“Um. O... kay?” Serena giggled.

**“But when it comes to my music and the beat of
my drum**

I can blame no-one

but me and that de-mon.”

**What was this? A fable? But Ben was absorbed
into his playing and a seriousness cast over him. A
delicate instrumental opened up, wistful, mellow-
stringed. A few bars in, he switched to heavy
strumming and Serena sat up straight at the sound
of his singing voice as it broke free, surprisingly
smooth and loud and even. Why had she not
expected this? Of course he sang. This was a rock
song, wasn't it?**

**But it was alien, so different, for someone to be
singing and playing at the same time. Like rubbing
your stomach and patting your head. Serena
listened and saw the layers as clearly as if they'd
been painted in the air: sweeping blues and greens
for the body of the background and thinner ribbons
and trickles of instrumentation threading through.**

There was no competition between them, no cacophony. Even as she tried to separate the layers, she couldn't: they were bound together, the fabric of one song. It was impressively complex in its own way, but then the verse-bridge-chorus pattern got repeated and that struck her as simple. Pleasingly simple.

But... she wouldn't be doing any of that with her music.

What was she thinking, bringing this rocker back here for a collaboration? How? Their styles couldn't mix, could they?

She sat forward in her fold-out chair, tensed, pinching the corner of her keyboard between finger and thumb.

The song ended. Serena had missed the second half, fretting about what the two of them could or could not do together.

She gave him a slow smile, inwardly scrambling back over the parts that still rang in her head: the instrumental at the beginning, Ben's velveteen

voice ringing bright and wide against the ceiling. Oh, and those words in the chorus. As they echoed back she did a double-take:

Push away the words inside my head

'Cos I'm the voice that lives and all of you are dead

Dead to me, oh yeah...

“That was great, you have a really great voice!” she gushed. Already her words were coming out too fast. “If you don’t mind me asking, what was that stuff about voices in your head?” *Stop! Do you really want to ask him that?* “I mean, it was really interesting, but it hit me how different it is, to have words and such specific meanings attached to the music. Of course, I know that should be really obvious, I *have* heard rock and pop music before, but still...” *Enough talking.*

Oh. Had she criticised his lyrics? His poetry? Was it too soon for that?

But Ben nodded along, unoffended. “That’s true. You *do* end up with really specific meanings to your

songs when there are lyrics. But that's part of the, the soul, I guess, of rock and heavy metal."

He leant over his guitar, watching her face as if waiting for a particular reaction. Serena sat very still, hoping he'd continue.

Ben shrugged and carried on, casting his gaze around her sparse living room as he thought it through. "The way I see it, there's a battle going on inside everyone. That's what rock music is all about. That's what heavy metal gives a voice to."

Serena frowned. Why would anyone want to give voice to that? To celebrate some kind of inner, private difficulty – your own pain?

"But..." What could she say, without expressing outright disdain? "I'm just worried that it's so different to what I play."

But Ben had been so honest. It was her turn to open up. She owed him that. More than just a blunt 'no'. "When I play music, I'm feel like I'm escaping to something bigger than myself. Something... pure." Her mouth grew dry. Each moment, she was

daring herself into this honesty, a little step further, but she felt bigger and *pureer* for having said this out loud.

Suddenly she wanted to laugh at herself. Of all the people she might open up to! Never had she guessed she would try to explain such personal, abstract things to a near-stranger, a *rocker* no less.

Ben was grinning at her. Clearly the differences between their styles didn't bother him at all.

"I like that. Yeah, I think music does that, too."

Eh? How could it do the two things at once? Weren't they totally opposite? Serena shifted in her chair, not knowing what to say next. "Okay... Well, I'm not sure how we can collaborate – musically, I mean. I'm really sorry if I've wasted your time. I love what you play but we're coming from such different places! I wouldn't know where to start!"

She tried to laugh it off but it fell flat. The fact was, she wanted him to stay. She'd told him too much, foolishly let down her guard and it made her feel warm and wanted. What excuse did she have

now, to keep him here? Could she ply him with more beer? Silently she tried to count how many were in the fridge. Had it been a six pack or an eight pack?

“I think we can do something,” said Ben. “Just experiment. Don’t expect too much. Just *play*. Like, I’ll play a riff and you play it back to me but with a slight change. Make it bigger. *Purer.*”

They spent half an hour throwing snatches of melody back and forth. More than anything, this was what Serena loved about their ‘jam’ as he called it. Big, soft, clouds of relief blossomed around her. She imagined they smelled of peaches and cream. She drew in long, slow gulps of it, quenching a thirst she hadn’t realised she had. While she and Ben bounced tunes off each other, altering phrases a little or a lot before tossing them back like a strange musical game of ball, another part of Serena grew preoccupied with this feeling of relief. *Why* was she so relieved? Was it just the

company of another musician who didn't judge her?
Was it just... fun?

How cooped up had she become in just one month?

Serena began to throw in 'wrong' notes, out-of-key discords, and thrilled at the way their melodies began to twine together like some sort of crazy jazz.

But that was when the thumping noise started, loud and impatient.

Serena huffed at the rude interruption. "Who is *that*? I do have a doorbell, you know..." she muttered, strutting towards the door.

"Wait," Ben said, catching her arm. "Are you... expecting someone?"

Serena stared at the hand clutched around her arm, then at Ben's face. He was pale, trembling.

"No. Are *you* expecting someone?" She threw it back as a joke but he flinched at her question. *What was with him all of a sudden?*

She pulled her arm away and marched to the door. When she opened it –

“What the hell?” There was no-one there. Serena ran up the steps, glanced up and down the street, her cheeks growing hotter each second. “Hello? Hello? Anyone care to bang on my door again? For no particular reason? No?”

She came back inside, swinging the door shut behind her. “I don’t understand it. There’s no-one there. Is there any way the banging could’ve come from next door? Ben?”

Ben was frozen, his eyes staring at nothing, knuckles white around the neck of his guitar.

His voice was hoarse, distant, as if his throat constricted reluctantly around the words. “They said ‘He returns’ but that was only the beginning of the message. They couldn’t read the rest.”

Where was the guy who was so full of life a minute ago, whose velveteen voice swelled up to the ceiling?

“What? Ben, what are you talking about?”

“I thought I could get away from him. I thought if I changed my style, mixed things up a bit...” He looked up at her, pleading. “I’m really sorry.”

“For what? Ben, what is going on? And what’s this got to do with someone banging on my front door?”

He just stared at her through his floppy hair. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Serena dug her fists into her hips. “Ben, don’t tell me your band mates are playing some stupid game on you?”

Is that why he was here – why he was so eager to play music with her? His own band had turfed him out and he was a loner. So that was what he was on about at the beginning of that song. All that weird stuff about a demon.

Then why so frightened?

Ben straightened his back and blew out a breath. “Serena. I haven’t been completely upfront with you.”

He nodded to her keyboard chair but she wasn't going to sit down. No way. All her nerves prickled with the weirdness, the wrongness, of this sudden change of tone.

“What do you mean?” she snapped back.

“There's another reason I wanted to do these sessions with you.”

Oh no. He's a stalker. He'd been watching her for weeks, hiding around corners, lurking in the café pretending not to be interested while all the time he was snooping on her... And how lucky for him when *she* asked *him* back to her flat!

Serena scowled and slid her hand over the pepper spray in her pocket while Ben scoured the wood patterns in her floorboards for the right words. Something wasn't right. She wasn't really stalk-worthy, was she? She definitely wasn't famous, not outside the cliques of young classical composers. She was okay-looking, but nothing special. Mum had always been clear on that.

“This is going to sound insane...” Ben winced at her, curling and uncurling anxious fists around his guitar.

“Seriously, Ben, if you keep me in suspense for much longer, the truth might not sound quite so bizarre...” *as what’s in my head*, she finished silently.

“I’m... kind of being followed.”

“What?” *He was the stalker victim?*

“Yeah. But it’s... not your average sort of person.” He eyed her carefully, as if she were the one behaving strangely. “That demon I mentioned. He’s real, and I was hoping to – well, to try and shake him off. Or placate him. When you asked me back here, to work together, I couldn’t believe it. This was the best opportunity I was ever going to get – or so I thought.”

Serena stared at him open mouthed. Why was he saying these idiotic things? Did he think she was stupid or something? Was he testing her, trying to trick her?

Ben was busy searching her face and apparently took her expression of angry shock as a cue to keep talking. He leant forward, warming to his tale.

“But the runes, they keep saying, ‘The demon returns.’ Or ‘The demon is returning’. Same thing this morning. So I guess it’s really happening.” He blinked at the wall opposite. “Unless he’s actually after *you*. Oh no. That wouldn’t be... good.”

“*Will you please stop talking like a crazy person?* I am not five years old, I do not believe in Father Christmas and I will not swallow these stupid tales so you can – what? Take the piss out of me later?” She glared down at him, the pepper spray a smooth outline in her pocket. *I swear to God...*

He shook his head solemnly, meeting her gaze. “Listen. We... Each style of music has its own kind of muse. But on some level what’s inside of us is also outside of us. It’s like what you said about *reaching* for something *bigger* than ourselves.” He began to enunciate more, emphasising every few words as if it made them somehow true.

“For God’s sake, Ben! Stop talking nonsense!”

“Don’t say ‘God’!” He cried, glancing around. “He doesn’t like it when you say that.”

“*He* doesn’t *like it?*” It was her turn to over-enunciate.

The hammering began again. It was coming from the adjoining wall this time, hard and persistent. The size of the fist that was doing it... It couldn’t be a fist.

“What the hell?” Serena cried. “Next door is empty! God...”

Ben gasped – *seriously, was he freaking out again at her saying ‘God’?* – but Serena was too busy darting out of the flat again and up the steps to take much notice of him. The shop next door was closed, its white-washed windows dotted with old, peeling adverts for nightclubs, but there was a basement beneath – where the noise was coming from. Maybe there were works going on? It was only her imagination that made the noises seem aggressive, and Ben’s inane storytelling didn’t help.

Serena paused at the top of the stairwell. The dankness below rose up to greet her. The narrow area at the bottom of the steps was smaller than the one in front of her own flat: just a short concrete floor with an inset drain running along the edge of the building. An empty crisp packet winked from the corner.

No sign of any works going on. No noise, either. Was Ben playing games with her? But why? And how?

She went down the steps gingerly, her hand hovering over the filthy rail just in case. She pressed the doorbell twice and banged on the door. *Yeah, I can make a racket too.* Nothing. Not even a light on.

She cupped her hands around her eyes to peer through the glass. “Hey! Hello?”

This was a complete joke. This was a –

A pair of yellow lights like eyes blinked from somewhere in the gloom. Serena sucked in a

breath, trying to follow what was lost again in a moment. Gone. Nothing there. But what *was* that?

“Stop banging, okay?” Her voice wavered as she turned for the steps. “I’ll call the police!” *You sound like a child.* Yeah, well. She crept back upstairs, slower than she would have liked, her knees weak. She *felt* like a child.

Back in the flat, Ben was packing away his guitar.

“Well that was weird,” said Serena, closing the door. “Where are you going?”

“He’s there, isn’t he?” Ben’s cheeks were drained of all colour. He slung his guitar over his shoulder then sighed and set it down on the floor again. “Yellow eyes?” he croaked, hardly daring to look at her.

Serena’s heart leapt clumsily against her ribcage. “*What?*”

Ben just nodded and slumped onto the sofa again, moaning softly.

Bang bang bang.

Serena jumped. “Hey, enough of that!” she shouted at the wall, then clutched her cheeks, her throat. She turned to Ben. “What is this? What is this really about?”

“I think it might be after me. But – just in case. Listen to me. Don’t show fear. It’s like flashing the jugular, in the spiritual sense. Then he really will get you.”

“Get me? Don’t be so ridiculous. Anyway, I thought he was supposed to be after you.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t know how all of it works.” Ben rubbed his face.

It wasn’t real. This whole thing was completely stupid.

BANG BANG BANG.

The wall was shaking. It was actually quivering with the impact.

“Stop it!” cried Serena. She crept up to the wall and placed her hands flat on its surface.

A brief silence. It frightened her. It was almost as if that thing was listening for her – but that was

ridiculous. She was imagining things, letting Ben play his tricks. Another beat of silence. She dared herself to keep her hands there, resting flat against the wall.

Ha! There was no-one there!

The wall bounced under her touch, the weighty thump directly underneath her hands. Serena gasped, pulled back. It was following her!

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” she shouted. She couldn’t quite catch her breath. “How dare you, Ben? How *dare* you come in here and... and...”

But all her anger dissipated. Her knees might have been made from ice-cream for all they were doing to hold her up. Her breath sawing in and out of her chest, she bent double, clinging for the arm of the sofa as she manoeuvred herself onto it.

The room itself began to feel soft and squidgy, just like her arms and legs. God, it was a wonder she could normally hold her head up on her neck, it felt so heavy... and clammy to the touch. Was this what it felt like to have a panic attack?

“You....” she said between gasps. “No, it’s not real anyway,” she muttered, taking turns between holding up her forehead and trying to grasp the arm of the sofa. Everything was retreating from her now. She’d entered a crazy dream land. Reality itself had betrayed her, through this ridiculous, idiot boy.

The room began to fade as Ben’s face peered over her, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

“Serena? Are you fainting?”

“No! I’m just sitting down. I’m having a quiet sit down.”

Breathe. None of this is real. Why are you freaking out as if it were real?

“Because the banging is real,” she said out loud.

“What’s that?” said Ben.

“Oh,” she said and started to giggle. She couldn’t help it; it was all so ludicrous. “The voices in my head – it’s just like your song, Ben. I am like your song.”

She turned to him, his concerned expression. Her last words echoed back to her: *Your song*. She

sounded drunk. Maybe fear could do that to you. Or maybe just being stuck in a flat on your own with all this unspoken *pressure*, with no-one to talk to who wasn't a part of that pressure – apart from Hamlet who after all was only a cat. And even he had run out on her.

Her eyes blurred with tears.

“Oh Serena, I'm so sorry.” Ben stroked her arm, staring angst-ridden into her face. It was like something out of a really weird novel. A romance gone wrong.

She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. She wanted Ben to stay. *Really?* But this simple fact gave her a pang of relief, while all the other facts of her world swirled around in patterns she couldn't understand.

“Ben. Explain. Is this... Are you involved in a cult?”

“No.” He shook his head, the beginnings of a smile creeping up to his eyes.

Was he really holding her hand? Yes, he was holding her hand. Their fingers interlaced tightly.

“So, then.” Speaking took so much effort. “Is heavy metal a religion?”

Ben barked out a laugh, short and mirthless. “No.” The fingers of his free hand tapped out invisible tunes against his thigh.

“So be honest with me. What is this ‘demon’ really? How does it work?”

Ben winced as another flurry of punches thundered against the wall. “I... We invoked him. You lay out the runes and play your best songs. That’s how you get his attention. And then... he comes to you. If you’re good enough, he’ll give you things. Riffs. But they never said he would get hungry.”

“Hungry?” Now she was sitting up. Now she was shaking, her legs threatening to melt away from under her, even as she sat. “Hungry for – ?”

He shook his head, not looking at her. “He needs music to be pleased; placated. Soon after he came,

I began to lose it. To lose my grip on my music. His riffs weren't... mine. They were incredible, obviously – they came from the underworld – but I began to see parts of myself I wasn't happy about. The spirit of heavy metal, if you displease it, is not a healthy thing to have around.”

Finally he turned to look at her. “Perhaps I was wrong to think that I could distract him or throw him off with something new, a fresh combination like with classical...” With his free hand he touched her cheek as if she were fragile, breakable.

He's made you fragile. He's drawn that creature here, used you as bait! He wasn't really interested in her or her music. She tried to swallow but there was a lump in the way. Disappointment lodged in her throat, stinging her eyes.

You are not going to cry...

Shut up! Shut up, shut up!

“Ben!” she began, then flinched as the banging started up again – from the middle of the floor. She froze, staring. Ben was very still next to her.

“Serena?” he said. “What’s underneath this flat?”

“Nothing. It’s a basement flat, remember?”

He was letting go of her hands, untangling himself from her even as she grabbed for him.

“Don’t show fear,” he said. “Confront him.”

“Ben, don’t go! Where are you going?”

“If he sees me, he’ll kill me. I’ve *displeased* him... I don’t know how to make it right.”

“You’re not going to leave me here like this! With that *thing?*”

Ben hesitated, eyes narrowed as if it pained him to picture it happening. “You, on your own, have a chance. Maybe this was what the message meant by ‘He returns’... Look, he gives gifts, remember?”

“I don’t want gifts.” She pointed at the shuddering floorboards. “That doesn’t sound like someone who’s in a generous mood!”

“He’s a noisy kind of guy.”

Serena stared in mute disbelief as Ben gave her hands one last squeeze and ducked out of the flat.

The thud of the door closing wasn't the loudest, but it was the one that beat back in her chest. The one that hurt the most.

Great. So now I'm on my own. Except I'm not. I'm with this insane hallucination, possibly a beast from another realm who wishes to 'return' and give me a nice gift which may or may not involve eating me.

But did she have a chance of placating this monster, whatever it was? If any of this was true, could she... play her way out of it?

Head ringing, Serena stumbled back to her chair and sat down, fingers poised over the keyboard.

When I ordered my cappuccino-with-sprinkles today I did not see this coming.

She took a deep breath, trying to ignore the vibrations that buzzed in the soles of her feet.

Suddenly it burst out of her. "Just shut up and give me a moment! Okay?"

The noise stopped. Sallow-faced and hardly able to believe what was happening, Serena shoved her fear aside and began to play. Soon she was

climbing that mountain again, but this time she sidestepped her usual path and mentally danced about, picking up 'wrong' notes, blues notes like pretty little weeds until she clutched a mismatched bundle of stems. These were not her normal flowers but ragged plants torn up from the roots. The music turned into a piece that was part award-winning sonata, part memory of Ben's rock song. She recalled his face, his friendly brown eyes and she threw in her longing, too, for that perfect moment when they played back and forth, their notes lifting with questions which turned out to be each other's answers. Finally, as her fingers dared their way down to the lower keys she let her anger pulse through: Ben's fear and selfishness smearing all the colours in the air like a hand wiping through a still-wet painting.

No noise from the demon. If there really was a demon.

She played on, letting her anger flow through the melody, snatching riffs from earlier that day.

“Oh yeah, you like that, don’t you? Get some of that...”

Stop it. Stop it now. This isn’t you.

“Isn’t me? Who is me? Who am I?”

Was she talking to herself now? But maybe that needed to be done. Maybe that was a part of all this. Could it be that’s what had made her vulnerable to a myth such as this? A demon that preyed on fear as well as music. The inside becoming the outside...

It was just like Ben’s song: there were these voices inside her head, creating battles for her. She didn’t need battles. Her critical inner voice was always nagging at her. Yes: *her* voice. It might have been influenced by things her parents said to her while she was growing up, particularly her mum, but she’d had plenty of opportunity to grow away from that, hadn’t she? She was her own person. But what real chance did she have to pull away from all of that when she had to mix with those snobby, prissy girls at the music college?

It all flowed back to her. Those last few weeks at the Youth Musicianship Classical Composers' Bootcamp left her feeling like she'd torn herself out of a bramble bush. The looks, the snide comments – no-one said anything devastating to her but she was left with a hundred little cuts, the sort of pain that beats afterwards like a heart inside your skin. They were all so upper class, so *lovely* as they scratched her with their words. All the award did was prove how *conventional* her composing was. Her music was nothing new. Nothing exciting.

Serena raged against them, feeling the liquid hatred rush into her veins and through the music. Her fingers roved around, searching for the notes that told her story.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Serena halted. “Seriously? That’s not enough for you?”

Bang-bang-bang. ***BANG-BANG-BANG.*** Two floorboards split, bumped up with the impact.

Serena stood up, heat rising to her face. “What do you *want* from me?” Her voice sounded hysterical. But no. She was going to take control.

She took a step forward, eyes sweeping the floor.

“It’s not all about you,” she told it. “Just because you’re some music-giving demon that’s decided to ‘return’ or whatever, it’s *not about you! Hey! STOP IT!*”

Serena reached for Ben’s empty beer bottle and smashed it against her side table. She held out her weapon, ready.

The banging stopped. For two beats, the silence rang. The emptiness left behind were like dents punched in the atmosphere by those giant fists, those... imaginary fists?

Serena paused, pepper spray in one hand and bottle end in the other. She could have seriously hurt herself doing that, caught a piece of flying glass in her face or even her eye! But no inner voice criticised her for it. The quietness welled. It

billowed like a hammock under a dreamy sky.
Peace.

She blinked, drinking it in, weapons still held aloft and murderousness in her veins. For she still didn't know what that thing was, and it was probably waiting for her. She sensed... a listening. It was considering her. Deciding what to do.

Well, damn it, the thing had ruined her floor. She was just going to have to tear up the last of those boards and stare at that God-damn thing in the face.

“No way are you haunting me,” she told the silence, the phantasm that hid under her floor. “No way. We deal with this *now*. I will confront you *now*.”

She crept forward, curled over like she was the predator now. Some part of her should be laughing at this, how stupid she must look right now. But she didn't feel like laughing, she felt... Furious. Powerful. A metallic flavour on her tongue.

“You know what, I don't need a stupid demon to help me with my music... I *am* that demon.” She

carried on talking, willing herself closer, trying to distract herself with these strange, made-up ideas. Made-up, but they felt true.

“I have a demon of my own, you know, made of colours in the air. Of mountains...” Okay, that sounded weird. But she felt taller, brave. She waved her weapons. “*My* demon is inside me, and she will kick your sorry arse,” she said, and she meant it.

She flung herself onto her knees and began pulling up the broken floorboards, not caring how the split wood coursed into her palms. It would hurt later. But she had to do this thing while it made sense.

A gust of hot smoke rose up, choking her. She staggered back, coughing and covering her mouth with her arm, grasping for the pepper spray as it rolled across the floor.

An almighty crunch, and the demon’s maroon, leathery head stuck through. All hope fled from Serena in a shallow, quavering sigh. The beast’s beady yellow eyes stared at her with pinprick

pupils. Short stumps of pointed bone curved from its forehead. The red skin rippled with furrows which deepened and gathered towards the place where its hairline should have been. Instead, two massive tusks sloped out either side of its head, bigger than a bull's. Steam rose from its hulking, muscle-bound body.

But what was this? The beast was twisted awkwardly to one side. Was it injured?

What was Serena supposed to do now besides swallow dryly and feel the pathetic limpness of her arms at her sides?

The Demon of Death Metal, if that's what it was, appraised her with those yellow eyes, though after a second the suspicious scowl morphed into something else.

The creature unwound itself, bringing its arms to the front. It was cradling something, but Serena didn't dare look down.

A new, gentler sound entered the room. Low, rumbling... a soothing thrum. Was that – purring?

The demon returns... The demon is returning...

Serena managed to tear her eyes from the creature's hideous face just long enough to make sense of what he said.

“Excuse me, is this your cat?”

Thank you for reading.

I would love to hear what you think of this story, or any of my stories for that matter. Honest, constructive feedback helps me improve my writing so I can provide better and more satisfying entertainment for readers such as yourself.

Please get in touch with me either on Twitter @AnnaTizard or through my contact page at www.annatizard.com.

