

## 45 – Sirensong

We left the carriage behind and walked for about an hour, reaching an area that Armen informed me was known as ‘Silvermarsh’. During the entire trip, Leopold was using the Bone Whistle to follow the scent-trails on the air, thanks to the Scenting Tongue’s ability contained within.

The landscape here was relatively flat and I saw the outline of a sizeable town to the southwest. Nearby were the remnants of a small village that’d been partially swallowed by a large swamp. Trees, boulders, and the various houses were all dragged down into the soft earth and boggy waters that covered a large swathe of the area. I wondered how a Siren had ended up here, but then another concern suddenly reared its head.

I did not have a Watcher familiar nor my Spirit Glasses, both thanks to Leopold, so how would I be able to see the Siren?

I voiced this concern to the Summoner and he glared at me with an annoyed look in his eyes.

“A Siren is not an apparition,” he said. “You do not require a Watcher to observe it.”

The answer surprised me. “If it’s not an apparition, how can I contain its spirit?”

Leopold narrowed his eyes and gave me his ‘Are you stupid?’ look, which I was quite used to by now. “You can contain the spirit of anything with a soul...”

“Even a human??”

“Yes. Although it would be meaningless to do so, and anything with a strong personality complicates the process and makes it more dangerous, unless you can convince them they have no choice but to submit themselves to your will.”

The implications were grim, but I couldn’t help but think that he was wrong. After all, if I could selectively pick which trait or ability that I wanted to contain within an object, then it seemed possible that I could select an Otherworlder’s unique Role abilities or perhaps even their Attributes.

**“I do not think that is a path you wish to travel down,”** Armen warned.

*You’re right. I’m worried Leopold’s disregard for human lives might have started rubbing off on me... but still, the possibilities seem quite grand.*

I followed behind Leopold, with the Pridelings and the Ethereal Spinner close behind me like an escort, and we went through the sunken village as we made our way to where the largest of the many swamp lakes lay.

The houses were all long-abandoned and I wondered if the Siren was responsible for the swamp’s formation or if it was unrelated.

Without knowing it, Leopold began answering my speculations, as he said, “Some years ago, a heavy storm flooded the marshlands here and temporarily connected its lakes and ponds to a large river to the east. Sirens are normally ocean-dwelling creatures, but they are also curious by nature and seek humans when they can, as they feed upon them. One Siren followed the river to this marshland, but stayed for too long and when the water receded it became stuck here. It is slowly starving to death, as the people in this area quickly learnt to steer clear of its territory. It occasionally feeds on Adventurers and Mercenaries hired to deal with it, as they always underestimate its charming song.”

The fact that such a disruptive creature had stayed alive for several years spoke volumes of its power, I thought. Although it was possible that Harrlev just had access to far less Otherworlders than Arley, and, given their past history, they were probably reluctant to ask their erstwhile enemy for aid. It was also likely that, since the area wasn’t of huge strategic importance and lay near the border, it the Siren was allowed to stay, as it potentially could thwart invaders from Arley.

No sooner had we passed the last house and neared the waters than a song started flowing across the marsh. Faint rings flowed across the stagnant water, carried far by the reverberations of the singing voice. It was clearly a female voice and its melody was mournful and melancholic, but the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard.

The two Pridelings gripped me by my wrists and pulled me forward, while the large spider leapt up into a tall tree that slumped down into the water at a thirty-degree angle a few metres away from us. I saw as Leopold pulled out the voodoo doll from a pouch on his belt, before the shadowy Nirvah in her harpy eagle form took off from his shoulder and opened her eyes, staring off towards the source of the singing voice.

As Leopold stared intently at me, I realised that he was taking precautions because he needed to use Nirvah as a scout to locate the Siren.

“I’m not going to try anything,” I told him.

“I don’t believe your words.”

“How are we going to capture the Siren?” I asked him.

“*We* are not doing anything. You just do as I tell you until it has been caught.”

I saw how he briefly glanced to the spider that waited in the tree nearby, then realised he planned to catch the Siren in its ethereal web. The Pridelings pulled me further out into the water, a body-shivering cold flowing up my legs as I became more-and-more submerged.

Owl’s words from long ago suddenly rang through my head: “*What does every good trap need?*”

I was dragged further out into the stagnant swampy water, while the song of the Siren grew louder and I felt it begin to affect my body. The Ward that I’d placed on the front of my clothes began to glow faintly and I knew it was working to counteract the charm. I turned my head to look back at Leopold who remained by the waterline with the doll in his right hand and saw that his Ward was glowing too. I wondered what would’ve happened if we hadn’t worn them.

When I was submerged to my waist and most of my robe-coat was soaked-through, the Pridelings let go of my wrists and waded back to their master.

“Don’t move!” Leopold yelled at me.

I frowned. Once again I was being used by someone else as bait...

As I stood there, shivering from the cold water, I felt *things* occasionally bump into my legs, as though investigating this new presence in their stagnant watery home. I didn’t want to imagine what sort of critters lived in the swamps of this world, but it was hard not to imagine monstrous leeches and flesh-gnawing eels.

I suppressed a shudder.

The song grew louder as its source moved closer. Almost as if it could taste my presence in the murky water.

As it came closer-and-closer, but I still couldn’t see the Siren anywhere, I started to worry that it was under the water or somehow invisible to my eyes. It was either that or its voice was so incredibly loud that it could be heard from kilometres away.

With every moment, the mournful aria grew in volume, and when it was starting to hurt my ears, I felt a strange euphoria overtake me, feeling not too unlike when Armen’s magic healed me.

“**You are being charmed,**” he reminded me.

*I hope the Ward will hold.*

The Wraith did not reply, which felt ominous.

A tingling sensation began to crawl across my skin and I took an involuntary step towards the singing voice, before the glow from my Ward suddenly exploded with light and started to shine a muddy pink hue that was visible to my eyes despite not wearing my Spirit Glasses. At the bottom of

the Ward strip, the crisp paper was starting to char, as though held near an immense heat. However, the subconscious pull halted immediately.

I looked back to Leopold, and saw that he was standing ankle-deep in the water. He must’ve stepped towards the sound too before the Ward properly kicked in.

*It seems as though there’s a delay on them... that could turn out to be a bad thing.*

Then a trembling came from nearby and I saw the enormous spider shift in the tree it waited atop of, as well as Nirvah in her harpy eagle form floating high above.

When I turned back to the sound, I didn’t fully register just how loud it was, but I realised I couldn’t hear anything except that sad singing voice. Looking down at water, I saw how countless ripples emerged from something just barely poking above the water some hundred metres ahead in the bog water.

It looked like a floating mass of seaweed, but then I saw the glint of two almond-shaped eyes that were as black as the ink I’d used to draw the Wards. Only the top-half of the creature’s head was above water, and yet its voice was so incredibly loud, as though blasted through the huge speakers I’d seen at concerts and festival stages.

The water shook as it came closer to me. As it closed the distance, it lifted its head up out of the water, the dead plants and leaves falling off her head. Her face was revealed to be an ash-grey colour with those bottomless black eye and long sharp ears like those of an elf from fantasy stories. Black hair fell down in front of her hair and down its back, and her overly-wide mouth was full of hooked needle-thin teeth and it moved weirdly as she sang.

Her upper body was slowly revealed as she raised herself further out of the water, coming ever closer. My Ward was starting to smoulder at the bottom, as it was struggling to halt the charming spell of her song. I looked back towards Leopold, but he held out the voodoo doll in front of him, telling me to remain put or face excruciating pain.

I flicked my eyes back to the Siren, just in time to see as its lower body became revealed. Thick and slimy grey tentacles pulled themselves out of the water as she reached the shallower water near me. There were at least eight of them, possibly twelve, possibly more.

I took a step backwards, and felt a heavy pressure, knowing that Leopold was squeezing the doll tightly.

A long purple tongue emerged from her overly-wide mouth and a few of her tentacles lifted themselves fully out of the murky water, trailing mud and dead leaves, reaching for me like alien arms.

Armen stood before me like a bulwark and easily deflected her first attempt to grasp me.

The Siren looked at her tentacle in confusion, then gingerly reached for me again, but this time Armen seized hold of it and she struggled to pull it free from his grip.

In that same moment, the Ethereal Spinner leaned out of the tree above, holding a complex web between four of its spiky leg-tips like a net. Then, from one moment to the next, moved its disgustingly-long limbs down and caught the Siren in its web.

Despite the Siren being larger than a person, she was still dwarfed by the enormous spinner. She trashed against the ethereal bonds and Armen let go of her tentacle.

The song died down and was replaced by melodic screeching. Like a scared animal caught in a beartrap and yelling that it didn't want to die. For one very brief moment I almost wanted to attack the spider and free her, but then it passed and I realised that her charm still was active, even if she wasn't singing.

The glow from my Ward died down but still pulsed in rhythm to ever sound the Siren made.

A dull tinnitus whine replaced the loud song, but I could at least hear the sounds around me now. Like the splashing of water as the Siren attempted to break free, and the careful approach of Leopold and the Pridelings that flanked him.

“Cease your struggling or I will kill you!” he yelled.

I thought for a moment that he was talking to me, but then saw that his eyes were fixated on the Siren, there was a hunger in his eyes that made me think that now was my time to strike. The shadowy harpy eagle landed on his shoulder and directed its bright gaze at me, making Armen disappear and the heat vanish from my Ifrit Claw.

*Seramosa, if you can hear me, get ready. I might soon have the chance to break free of my bond and get rid of the creature that you fear.*

I felt a weak pulse in my right hand and knew that she had heard me, even if she was unable to manifest while Nirvah stared at me.

“*I don't want to die!*” the Siren screeched in a melodic and pitch-perfect lilting voice.

“Then cease your thrashing! You will not break free!”

The Siren immediately stopped struggling.

*Holy shit, he's speaking to the Siren using Omniglot... I had no idea that was possible.*

I suddenly wondered if it was possible to communicate with Goblins as well, since seemed to possess a primitive language.

“*I starve! Feed me that one and we may speak!*” she screamed and pointed at me with a tentacle, one of her few legs/arms that wasn’t bound by the sticky ghost web of the blue spider.

Leopold was not so far away from us now, so he didn’t have to yell his answer. “I will not feed him to you.”

The Siren thrashed against the net in response, like a petulant child being denied ice-cream by a parent.

With a gesture, Leopold sent one of his Pridelings forward, and, when it stood next to the Siren, two-thirds of its body was submerged. A loud crackle came from its right claw as it stabbed into one of the tendrils.

The Siren’s body spasmed and its tentacles collapsed under it. It let out an angry snarl that had none of its melody or beautiful tone. Then one of the untethered tentacles reached out, wrapped around the Prideling’s neck, and *snapped* its spine. *Just like that.*

I took a step back, and when I realised that Leopold wasn’t watching me as intently, I backed away until I was next to him. Meanwhile, the Siren was back to trying to break free of the bonds, while the Spinner worked to spin another web to add to the first.

A look at his Ward showed that it was as close to falling apart as mine. Within the next few minutes they would deteriorate to the point that the sigil I’d drawn would be broken at the bottom, which was probably not a good thing...

“We don’t have much time left,” I whispered to the Summoner, not wanting the Siren to hear.

“I know,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m so close.”

“Are you trying to make it fear us and submit?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“Let me try something,” I told him and withdrew the Focus from my pouch. I felt as his hand cautiously squeezed on the doll in his hand.

I lifted the Focus towards the Siren and filled it with my energy, but tried to imagine that the shape of what would be blasted out was a wide field and not a narrow impact, such that it affected the creature’s mind more than its physical body. I imagined that it bore the shape of monsters and ghost, while filling it with the fear that I carried with me like a constant companion.

“Repel!” I shouted and saw the trembling water in front of me be pushed aside by a roiling invisible orb of pressurised air.

When my spell hit the Siren, it immediately stopped its attempts to break free. It didn’t even utter a word. I had no idea what it had seen nor felt as my spell took hold, and I couldn’t help but feel bad.

But I wanted to live, and tormenting this creature was part of how I’d get out of this mess and break free myself.

“Contain it now!” Leopold ordered. “Before it comes to its senses!”

He shoved a wooden box into my left hand. Nirvah was still staring at me, so I could use my right hand without damaging the box, as I opened the lid to see that there was an intricate metal mechanism within, which, like the carriage that Leopold owned, seemed out of place in this world. I recognised the mechanism as being that of a music box.

*He wants to trap the Siren’s voice in a music box. Why?*

“What’s her name!?”

Leopold looked to his Soul-Pacted Nirvah, then turned his gaze back to me a moment after and said, “Lyssalynne.”

I wondered how he had learnt the name of a Siren, but his reliance on Nirvah made me certain that he was just doing as he was told, lacking any say in the matter. I shuddered. A soul-pact seemed a tremendously-stupid decision, no matter the reward or power it might give.

With the Music Box in my left hand I waded towards the Siren, who lay half-submerged and was completely silent.

*I’m sorry for what’s about to happen.*

I reached my charcoal-black right hand out towards the Siren and then invoked the Binding Litany, while cautiously reaching towards its soul with a tendril formed of my own.

As our souls touched, I felt a surge of euphoria and my skin tingled strangely, but I managed to keep my head.

*Lyssalynne, Siren of the Silvermarsh Swamp,  
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,  
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,  
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

As I used the tendril of my soul to pull the Siren’s soul through me, the euphoric feeling intensified and I began to hear her singing deep in my ears. I gritted my teeth and hurried through the last half, while mentally moving the creature’s soul to the Music Box in my hand.

I still tried to implement an insidious trap that I had been planning for some days now. I was not sure if it would work the way I thought, but, instead of selecting a specific ability or trait of the Siren, I wanted to try and imprison its entire personality into the Music Box, such that it could lash out at Leopold when he tried to use it. Or at least, that was the hope.

*Lyssalynne, servant to mine will,  
Offer me thy entire soul,  
Become one in bond with the object that I wield,  
And until thy task has ended,  
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

Suddenly the Siren glowed and began to thrash. A muddy pink light suffused her entire body and began to devour her as it moved across her body. The Music Box likewise began to glow, growing in intensity with every passing moment.

I knew that it was too late for Lyssalynne to fight against what was happening to her, so it was a tragic thing to watch her struggle as she was pulled, body and soul, into the Music Box.

*I wonder if there’s a way for a trapped spirit to be released.*

The Binding Litany did always end with “*Until thy task has ended*”, but I had no idea how it was possible to determine that a contained spirit’s ‘task’ had ended. Maybe if I met another Exorcist I could ask about it. Although, tracking down other Exorcists seemed more likely to invite trouble than anything else.

The glow subsided and I felt as the Music Box in my hand trembled.

Before I could even attempt to touch the lid of the box, Leopold grabbed it from my hands and waded back to the shore of the swamp.

I followed behind him, not too close to alert him, but close enough.

Armen appeared next to me.

And so did Seramosa.

My Ifrit Claw, my charcoal-black right hand, suddenly sputtered to life as fire bloomed from the palm and crawled across its surface. As it reached the tips of my fingers it grew and created claws, fulfilling the prediction Armen had made.

Leopold crouched on the ground with the Music Box opened before him. Even Nirvah, in her harpy eagle visage was utterly obsessed with the object. Neither of them noticed how my hand was vaporising and flash-boiling the water near it thanks to the unnatural flames that covered it.

“Play me the Keening’s Choir!” Leopold demanded of the instrument wherein the Siren was trapped. I had no idea what sort of melody *that* was supposed to be, but I guessed it was probably not good, especially considering how even the Soul-Pacted Nirvah on his shoulder was anxiously staring at the box and waiting for its answering sound.

*“I will eat your eyes!”* screamed the melodic and lilting voice of Lyssalynne from the Music Box.



Leopold didn't have time to turn before I grabbed him around his neck with my flaming Ifrit Claw. In the same moment, Seramosa became corporeal and flew into the air, before descending on the Ethereal Spinner that still sat atop the tree in the water.

I squeezed my Claw around Leopold's neck, hearing the sizzling and bubbling of his skin, fat, and flesh. He didn't have the ability to scream and for some reason Nirvah didn't turn to look at me, as though her spirit had been defeated or as though Leopold's no-doubt-intense pain was making her freeze-up.

With a powerful wrenching move, I tore my flaming hand through his neck, while feeding my remaining energy into the roaring flame in my hand, turning his neck to ash, such that only the charred fragments of his spine connected his shoulders to his head, but this quickly fell apart as well.

His head fell to the ground with a *thud*, and I saw as the Prideling that'd been charging for me vanished. I turned and looked behind me and saw that the enormous spider had vanished as well.

A second later, I felt the overpowering exhaustion as my energy flared out and I stumbled back a few steps before dropping to my knees.

Just a metre away lay Leopold's burnt and blackened head.

I had taken a life.

But this time I didn't feel bad about it.