

SIREN SONGS

By

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Based on the true tragedy at Smalls Lighthouse

SIREN SONGS

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When we were kids you pretended to be a blanket-winged dragon. You chased me around the backyard, wrapped me in your wings, and said "now you're a dragon too". Thank you for having fun with me, for making the world magical, for being my biggest cheerleader, and for loving me so ferociously.

This one is for you, Joey.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Thomas Howell...mid 40s, small, a bit grubby, a craftsmen and ex-cooper. Defensive. A dreamer and a bit of a romantic. Player of the violin.

Martha Howell...late 20s, dark hair, beautiful in her own way. Soft and graceful as though moving underwater. Alluring. A mermaid in her own right. She haunts her husband as he descends into madness.

Thomas Griffith...early-mid 20s, quite tall and powerfully built, a laborer. Hot headed. Youthfully stubborn. Sketches in his free time.

Henry Whiteside...early/mid 50s. Builder of musical instruments and Smalls Lighthouse.

SETTING

October 1800 - February 1801 at Smalls Lighthouse; 20 miles off the shore of Wales in the Irish Sea.

FOR THE SET

I've written in the use of a trap door but I am open to alternative designs. The lighthouse technically has two locations: the living quarters and the lamp room. Feel free to combine these rooms or build up.

FOR THE MOVEMENT

These moments should last as long as they need to. The important thing is that the monotony as well as the passage of time is felt.

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ACT 1 SCENE 1

October. HOWELL and GRIFFITH are on a boat together rowing out toward the lighthouse. Griffith is enjoying Howell's suffering far too much.

GRIFFITH. Well come on then, put your back into it—

HOWELL. Speak for yourself—I build coffins—I'm not—I don't—

GRIFFITH. (*Enjoying Howell's pain*) What's that? I cannot hear you between the death rattles you call breaths.

HOWELL. It's no wonder you're good at this— farm hand. (*Straining against the waves*) Built like a damn horse.

GRIFFITH. Says the man knee deep in his grave already. (*Pause.*) We're nearly there.

HOWELL. Least we left early—while the water is still hushed. Any later and it might've meant our deaths.

GRIFFITH. That's just you and your damned wives-tales again. Our deaths? Come now, be serious.

HOWELL. I wouldn't be so hasty- everyone knows that the water is far more unpredictable after sunrise. It's always better to leave quite early. Or is that just on Sundays?

GRIFFITH. The water is always unpredictable. She's a great and treacherous beast waiting to wash away sailors and witches—

HOWELL. Treacherous? The ocean is as treacherous as my own sweet wife who weeps at dreams and butterflies.

GRIFFITH. Odd; I don't remember the last time I heard a keeper's wife described so gently. Usually you hear "unfaithful". "Vile". "Adulteress"—

HOWELL. Mind your tongue, Griffith.

GRIFFITH. Oh, I only meant—

HOWELL. I know what you meant. I am not immune to the things people whisper about the wives of lighthouse keepers. My wife is a divine creature. She is more

than you or me. Water weeds swim in her eyes. Her hair is soft and dark as the feathers of some delicate black bird. And her blessed face, I swear was kissed by the moon herself. She is a creature far too fair for any mortal man.

GRIFFITH. Are you a poet or have you hair on your chest? Save your breath. If your wife is as lovely as you say, a creature so, *divine*—why do you leave her? If I had a wife so magical the very thought of leaving would make me positively ill.

HOWELL. You talk as though you are not married yourself—

GRIFFITH. You know I am—

HOWELL. Did you marry a potato?

GRIFFITH. Come aga-

HOWELL. Your wife. Is she unfortunate looking? Tread on by a horse, perhaps?

GRIFFITH. How dare—

HOWELL. Well, you leave her so easily some might think you were running.

GRIFFITH. You've twisted my words.

HOWELL. Aha! So you are sick with heartache after all? Is there a bellyful of emotions lurking beneath that leathered hide of yours?

GRIFFITH. All I meant is that your wife is the same as any other. Flesh and bone.

HOWELL. (*Chuckling*) Clearly you have never met my wife.

GRIFFITH. A beast then?

HOWELL. A creature; there is no doubt. (*Beat*) I leave because the woman, lovely as she is, is also a woman. She is strong-willed and stubborn, and speaks to me like I'm one of the children. I do sincerely wonder if when I leave, she transforms back into the fantastical beast she was before she married me. A unicorn running between the trees, kicking and biting at any who attempt to bridle her.

GRIFFITH. You speak like a madman. Or a little girl who has only just learned about changelings. Besides, if your wife is such a wicked thing, why not simply—you know, put her in her place?

HOWELL. Hah! Come now, Griffith, you are a silly stupid man if you think you can bridle a unicorn. You cannot beat the life from something so pure, so lovely. Haven't you been listening? She is made of magic. I am only a man.

GRIFFITH. You're a great fool running away from his wife.

HOWELL. And what of you, eh?

GRIFFITH. What about me?

HOWELL. In all these years of knowing you, I have never—

GRIFFITH. You do not know me, Howell. Best get that straight.

HOWELL. I only meant—

GRIFFITH. You've said quite enough. My family is my business. My own.

HOWELL. To speak of them is not to lose them.

GRIFFITH. True—but to speak of them so freely—so intimately—it's not right.

HOWELL. Do not speak to me of the ways of a gentleman, farm hand.

GRIFFITH. And I should not like to know every inch of your wife you tired old man. (*A beat, and then a laugh; trying to change the subject*) I think your hands know the beds of the dead better than they do your wife's flesh, cooper—

HOWELL. You go too far—

GRIFFITH. —we're here.

WHITESIDE. Lads? Lads! Yes, welcome! Hurry on up—the tide isn't getting any better! (*Howell and Griffith enter Small's Lighthouse and are met by a jittery*

WHITESIDE. He is clearly very uncomfortable being here.) Hello gentleman! I'm Henry- Henry Whiteside.

HOWELL. Thomas Howell.

GRIFFITH. Thomas Griffith.

WHITESIDE. Pleasure to meet you both. (*Pause*) Well—here she is, lads. My greatest achievement: Small's Lighthouse. As you can see the cabin is quite umm—cozy. I'll show you around, though to be fair there isn't much. We've supplied a great deal of books on the far wall; given that you're both here, I assume you're literate, if only just. We've stocked what provisions you'll need to survive the winter, beans, potatoes, peas, potatoes, pork, beef, more potatoes. Oh, and, a bit of jam, courtesy of Mrs. Whiteside. (*A sickening wave crashes against the rock, making the men sway—Whiteside looks positively ill with fear.*) Pardon me, lads. Lu-last year I was um, I was stranded here for over a month before anyone could get to me—I was down to the last shreds of my salted cod. The storms were...I nearly went mad and died (*he laughs nervously; sadly*). It- it was in all the papers. You know, I think it takes a certain kind of man to be a lighthouse keeper. You are both confident in your ability to maintain her and to keep her lit through the winter? Suppose it's a bit late to be asking. As you no doubt are aware, storm weather is upon us and, well, truth be told it might take quite some time, to safely sail another boat this way should you run into trouble. We're a good 20 miles from shore, but if I've learned anything during my time here, it's that the Welsh are entirely too curious about their neighbors—even their neighbors out on the water; they'll

probably notice any signs of distress before the Navy.

GRIFFITH. A fair assessment—

HOWELL. We'll be fine, I'm sure. *(Howell stays with Whiteside—Griffith on the other hand is already beginning to explore and feel the size of the room.)*

WHITESIDE. Good. Yes, well then. As I mentioned, there is quite a stock of dried meats, some stews, and carrots have also been preserved; they are stored just over there on the far wall. Traps for birds are somewhere around here if you run low or get desperate. Those large wooden tanks there hold your coal and your fresh water. Should last the both of you the 3 months. I honestly doubt you'll need quite so much, but the winter here, she can be a bit—

HOWELL. Unpredictable? *(He smirks at Griffith who rolls his eyes.)*

WHITESIDE. Exactly sir, well put.

GRIFFITH. When we approached, I thought we had arrived at a giant tree house built on the rocks.

WHITESIDE. She certainly does give that impression, doesn't she? But there's no need to worry—I built her on 9 legs of solid oak and cast iron— *(While Whiteside talks, a wind blows through Smalls' legs, producing a sharp whistle—a scream. This does not comfort Griffith or Howell)* She's been built and reinforced in such a way that water will pass right under her. Brilliant isn't it? Smalls Lighthouse will outlive the three of us, I guarantee it.

GRIFFITH. Is there any way to reach the outside?

WHITESIDE. Ah, yes, of course. Though I doubt you'll find yourself tempted to use it—there is a platform just out the north-eastern door fixed to a crane that will take you to the gallery. When the weather is fair it's a lovely view; but given where we are—wishing for fair weather, you may as well wish for pomegranates. But, come along. I'll show you where to find the landing as well as the lamp, and the supplies you will need to keep it lit and yourselves from freezing to death. *(Howell and Whiteside begin to go up the ladder to the lantern room. Griffith stays.)*

HOWELL. Griffith, will you be joining us or will you be standing there the whole time?

WHITESIDE. *(Gently)* Let him look, there isn't much to show. You'll both have plenty of time to explore, I imagine. Let the boy look while it's still a pleasure.

GRIFFITH. I'll only be a moment.

HOWELL. Mr. Whiteside, the lantern room?

WHITESIDE. Follow me- and mind your step. *(Whiteside and Howell go upstairs.)*

Griffith sets down his bag of belongings and takes in the sea. Distant mumblings from upstairs are heard.) –she runs on coal so you will need to mind the windows and keep them clean. Mariners these days don't mind if the light is dim and don't pay well enough for us to keep them any brighter. They'll see it all the same—if they're doing their job.

HOWELL. And if we should need help?

WHITESIDE. Ah, yes. Should anything happen, raise the um—(*a rustling*) here she is, the distress flag. Raise it high, the rope is just over there, and the Navy ships are sure to see it and come to your aid. Only for emergencies of course—

HOWELL. Of course. (*Griffith removes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his forehead and nose. The waves crash against the cabin, the wooden legs creak. The men return.*)

WHITESIDE. I should leave before the water turns. I used to be a musician you know, but I spent far too many evenings alone here, tuning my fiddle to the wailing winds of the gallery. (*He coughs nervously, unsure of how to continue*). Well then. If um, if for whatever reason the distress flag doesn't work or blows away, well—it's a funny thing, but I did manage to reach help by writing a message on a bit of paper, corking it inside a bottle, and throwing it out toward land. It arrived precisely where it was needed only 2 days after I'd written it. I'm sure that the waves and God's good grace will treat you as kindly; should you need it, as I did.

HOWELL. We shall try it should it come to that. God willing, I hope it does not. The next time we meet we shall have a very dull report I am sure.

GRIFFITH. A logbook full of weather patterns and drawings of seabirds.

WHITESIDE. You're an artist, Thomas?

GRIFFITH. In a town of two, I am an artist. In Wales, I am a farmer with too much time.

WHITESIDE. (*A small chuckle*) Right. Right, of course. Well. Take care the both of you. Look after each other and this old girl. And at all costs, keep the light burning. (*Whiteside exits through the trapdoor. Howell and Griffith are finally alone, surrounded by waves in a treehouse on the edge of the world. Lights dim and the men prepare their beds. Griffith takes the first watch.*)

SCENE 2

Howell is dreaming. It's a dark and stormy night. Griffith drags MARTHA by the ankles into the cabin. Martha is wild as the storm that is about to consume them all.

GRIFFITH. *(yelling over the storm)* Help me with her!

HOWELL. What are you doing?!

GRIFFITH. Hold her there! *(Howell goes and grabs hold of her arms)*

MARTHA. *(Unintelligible rantings—pleadings—swears)* *(Griffith drops her legs all of a sudden, raising a warning hand at Martha, who stops)*

GRIFFITH. You've got to put them in their place you know—

HOWELL. In their place?

GRIFFITH. Grab the rope

HOWELL. Why? *(He grabs a nearby stretch of rope. Martha begins to kick but Griffith takes his hand and holds it over her nose and mouth until she has no choice but to calm down.)*

GRIFFITH. Are you calm? *(He presses into her mouth.)* Are you calm? *(She nods under his hand. Griffith lets go and allows her to breathe again.)* Well don't just—

HOWELL. What are you—

GRIFFITH. Take her—

HOWELL. But I—

GRIFFITH. Goddamn it, Howell! Filthy coward— *(Howell jumps and moves to hold Martha down while Griffith begins to bind her legs together with the rope. Martha is able to shake the gag from her mouth.)*

MARTHA. Get your hands off of me!

GRIFFITH. Don't listen to her, she's a temptress—

MARTHA. Please—let me go—release me—

GRIFFITH. It's her fault we're in this you know!

MARTHA. I didn't hurt anyone—

GRIFFITH. A woman out at sea—it's bad luck—!

MARTHA. I haven't stolen or—

GRIFFITH. That's it—you know what I'm going to do, miss?

MARTHA. Just let me go, sir—I only needed to get across—

GRIFFITH. I'm going to toss you over.

HOWELL. What?

GRIFFITH. Howell, grab the little beast!

HOWELL. But I—

GRIFFITH. She's a thieving stowaway—delivered us into a storm—we've got to toss her.

HOWELL. She'll die!

GRIFFITH. Let the mermaids have her! You know what they do to people who fall into the ocean, dontcha, miss? They peel your skin off an—

HOWELL. Stop this—we cannot throw her over board!

MARTHA. Everyone knows that mermaids do not harm women. We are only doomed to become them. I swear it, I will find you and I will fashion myself a crown from your skull and a tail from your greasy hide.

GRIFFITH. Grab her!

HOWELL. No!

GRIFFITH. I said—

HOWELL. I won't—!

GRIFFITH. Fine. Have it your way— *(Griffith shoves Howell overboard. The lights go out and a splash is heard. Martha screams. Another splash. Lights are dim coming up. The lamp still flickers all around the cabin. Howell has fallen out of bed and his wife, Martha leans down to wake him.)*

MARTHA. *(Sweetly)* Hello.

HOWELL. Are you real?

MARTHA. Guess. *(Beat)* You were having another nightmare.

HOWELL. Mm...I dreamt you were a mermaid.

MARTHA. How very pretty.

HOWELL. You tried to eat my skin.

MARTHA. *(smiles and chuckles)* What a beast I must be. *(She plays with his hair)* You've been falling asleep with that dreadful book on your chest again

HOWELL. Have I?

MARTHA. It gave you terrible dreams the last time too. You know, my mother always used to tell me that reading spoils the mind— *(Howell chortles a bit)* clearly, it's already spoiled yours.

HOWELL. You think so?

MARTHA. Mhm—

HOWELL. Really? *(He grabs her arm.)*

MARTHA. Don't you dare— *(He pulls her to the floor—she tries to muffle her*

laughter.)

HOWELL. You better quiet yourself—you'll wake the children. You're such a fuss—

MARTHA. You're an old surly man and a monster and I don't love you.

HOWELL. Such poetry! *(They settle into each other comfortably and she kisses him.)*

MARTHA. Must you leave me?

HOWELL. You wish me to stay after all?

MARTHA. No *(he tickles her and she giggles)*. I want you to leave, I do, just not for so long. I like having a week to myself. Even two. But when the months begin to pass—it's almost as if, I don't know, you begin to disappear a little. You become a ghost. The blankets no longer smell like you and I have nothing to remember you by.

HOWELL. Do you not see my face in our children?

MARTHA. They turn into harpies as soon as you leave.

HOWELL. Harpies? I doubt it.

MARTHA. It's true. They are more creature than kin.

HOWELL. I'll be home before you know it.

MARTHA. Then you must leave before I begin to miss you.

HOWELL. So soon? *(A rooster crows)*

MARTHA. It's nearly time.

HOWELL. *(He kisses her forehead and holds her.)* It always is. *(Martha disappears as Griffith returns from his shift leaving Howell on the floor of the cabin all by himself.)*

GRIFFITH. What're you doing down there?

HOWELL. It was—was just a dream. Just a dream. *(Lights Dim...)*

SCENE 3

In the dim light, time passes by and all the while the flashing of the lighthouse lamp moves around the cabin. Perhaps a small bit of string music plays; it is the beginning of storm season though, so perhaps it is only the sound of the wind and the rain and the waves crashing just beyond their bedroom.

Griffith and Howell set up their cots and get their spaces ready. They take turns

tending to the light and alternate sleep patterns.

Howell removes 3 books from his pack though he knows he will only read 1 of them. He sits on the edge of his cot and thumbs through the worn-out pages. Martha enters and crosses to him. Martha is only here so much as Howell carries her with him and is only present in Howell's mind. After a moment he sets the books aside in a stack. Martha leans down and whispers in his ear. He moves the books higher and organizes them more neatly. Martha smiles, satisfied and exits. Howell lays down on his cot and sleeps.

While Howell fusses with his books Griffith makes his bed and removes his shoes. Griffith doesn't have much but he does carry with him a lock of hair bound by a delicate ribbon. He holds it a moment before placing it underneath his pillow.

Griffith goes to light the lamp and to keep watch while Howell sleeps. A moment passes where it's just the passing light of the lamp, the ocean, and the men. Howell tosses and turns in his cot. He lays still finding his comfort. Griffith comes in and wakes Howell from his rest—it's his turn to keep watch. Griffith starts to get into bed but once Howell leaves, he tip-toes to the wall with the lock of hair he keeps and watches the dark water. He listens to the storm outside. For a moment it is beautiful. The wind picks up and underneath him there is the sound of screaming—it is only the wind whipping through the legs of the lighthouse. He does not run to bed but moves with intention. He throws the covers over his head until it is morning.

Howell enters the room, exhausted. He falls into his bed and immediately sleeps. Griffith wakes as his partner falls. He gets himself a drink of water and stares out the window. He is lost in the waves until Howell begins to mutter in his sleep. Griffith takes from his pack a small piece of paper and a pencil and begins to sketch what little he can see beyond the storm.

*Howell wakes up and Griffith immediately puts his things away. Howell stretches. Takes a moment. Goes to a bucket in the corner and relieves himself while Griffith puts away his things. When Howell comes back, he grabs his book, *The Odyssey* and begins to thumb through it. It is his favorite.*

GRIFFITH. I've never met a man who read to himself quite so loudly. *(Howell slams the book down, rolls over in his cot, and goes back to sleep. Griffith goes and lights the lamp. They get into their routine where Griffith starts the lamp, wakes Howell through the night, and they change hands. This happens a few times.)*

(It is daytime and the men are pacing about the room.)

HOWELL. What rubbish!

GRIFFITH. It's true—he didn't write any of them.

HOWELL. But you'll credit them to a drunk poet who died in a barfight?

GRIFFITH. Better than a buggering sheepherder—

HOWELL. Take it back!

GRIFFITH. Make me. *(More time passes and the men sink into their rhythms. Regardless of the rest, Howell will always end his day reading through The Odyssey, and Griffith will always end his day lying in bed holding his wife's lock of hair.)*

(It is daytime. Griffith makes notes in the logbook while Howell reads on his cot.)

GRIFFITH. What day is it do you think?

HOWELL. Does it matter? *(Griffith sketches from his cot; Howell dives into his book. He walks as he reads and finds himself looking out over the edge of the water.)* “By nights he would lie beside her, of necessity, in the hollow caerns, against his will, by one who was willing, but all the days he would sit upon the rocks, at the seaside, breaking his heart in tears and lamentation and sorrow as weeping tears he looked out over the barren water.”

GRIFFITH. What's that?

HOWELL. It's about Kalypso. Isn't it lovely? How he takes his heart and breaks it open on the rocks—

GRIFFITH. What's a kalypso?

(Howell hangs his head a little, closes his book, and carries his loneliness back to his cot. Lights Out.)

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