Siren Song

Playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0vkY7SyUYdyaUa5J9tC6rz>

Map: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1Z8wbDEfCiPSeZsJibVIcOwKZSjVK4w_I&usp=sharing>

When the first notes of *Talk* by Hozier rang through the air, the people walking down Mercer Street stilled.

Then Vic started to sing.

Their voice was sweet and clear, and the passers-by held their breath as Vic’s fingers glided over the notes. For a moment, their section of Mercer Street was enchanted by music.

The words passed easily though their lips from years of practice. The melody slid through the crowd like a snake through water, filling the peoples’ minds and spilling over into their eyes. In the back of the crowd, a red backpack appeared and disappeared.

As the song ended, cheers erupted from the crowd and Vic’s guitar case was filled with crumpled dollar bills. They smiled, waved, and brushed their red-dyed bangs out of their eyes. Their blue electric guitar was stark against the grey Seattle sky. They plucked a few notes and a new song started, *Tip Toes* by half•alive. Some of the crowd continued on its commute but most stayed, entranced.

Vic always thought there was something a little off about how people reacted to their music. Even as a child, crowds would form when they sang nursery rhymes. As they nervously glanced around the crowd, they found glazed-over stares. The people seemed far away. And yet when the song ended, the assembly whistled and cried out, once again dropping coins and cash.

Vic took in the bounty- enough for lunch, surely- and began to pack up. The crowd predictably groaned, a few waving fistfuls of money and demanding an encore. Vic awkwardly smiled and continued packing. Eventually, the crowd dispersed and they were free to find a place to eat.

A friendly-looking Thai place let Vic take their guitar case inside, and didn’t question the wad of ones they placed on the table after. The Museum of Pop Culture was a bit of a walk, but they decided that it would be a profitable place to busk. After thanking the waitress with a generous tip, they slung their guitar case across their back, pulled their hoodie strings even, and made for their next destination.

The streets of Seattle were busy and loud. Chatter and far-away performers filled the air with static. It shouldn’t have been concerning when Vic saw the same bright red backpack several times. What *was* concerning was how the red backpack followed their tells. When they shifted to one side of the sidewalk, their tail followed.

“Hey! You’re that singer!”

A voice started Vic out of their thoughts. A girl with cotton candy hair was waving at them.

Vic smiled. “Yeah, that’s me.”

The girl skipped over- with a small group of friends in tow- and stuck out her hand. “Oh my God, I’m such a huge fan! I hear you all the time when I walk down Mercer.”

With a nervous laugh, Vic took her hand. “Wow, thanks!”

“I’m Melany, this is Carey and Luca.” Melany gestured to her friends, who seemed dismissive. Carey, the one with bleached-blonde hair sneered.

“Pleasure. Are you gonna play us some music or not?”

Vic blinked, hard. They furrowed their brows, put-off by Carey’s rudeness. “Um, I’m sorry but I was actually headed to another park. I could, uh, play for you another time though?”

Melany pouted, but seemed panicked by her friend’s judgement. “Oh, come on, just one little song?” She reached for the strap of their guitar case, and Vic flinched back, gripping it tightly. Their lips pressed into a hard line.

“Sorry, no. Maybe bring your friends by next time I’m playing and you can hear something.”

Vic felt a tug on their case from behind. They’d forgotten about the last girl, Luca.

“Come on,” Luca purred, drawing out her words much longer than necessary as she tried to pull the guitar off of Vic’s back. “I bet you aren’t even good, that’s why you won’t play for us.”

Vic’s mind spun into a panic. They didn’t really give a damn about what these girls thought. But there was something in their eyes, something voracious. Something threatening. “Okay, okay, stop it!” Dislodging Luca, they swung the case off their back and removed the guitar before plugging it into their portable amp. Then they strummed the first notes to *Do It All The Time* by, ironically, IDK HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME*.*

As soon as they opened their mouth, Vic knew they were in trouble. Right away the girls’ eyes turned to them with a hunger. They only played the first half of the song before discomfort made them stop. They felt as if the vitality had been sapped out of their fingers. Wearily, they took off their guitar.

“Wow, he’s good!” Carey gushed, her tone suddenly changed.

“They,” Vic mumbled under their breath as they packed up.

“What was that?” Carey asked, but before Vic could answer she continued. “Doesn’t matter. Can you play us another?”

“No,” Vic said firmly. “I have another gig.” They swung their guitar case back over the shoulder and began to walk away. Again, there was a tug at their shoulder. Vic tugged back, breaking the person's grip. Another set of hands, and another, held them back. They spun, horrified, as they saw both Carey and Luca gripping their case. “Let go!”

“Play us another song!” the girls cried in a hollow echo.

As Vic’s panic mounted, another voice joined the cacophony. “Let them go!”

A boy with a bright red backpack stood at the edge of the commotion. In the moment of distraction, Vic pulled their case free and ran. Shouts of dismay followed them, but not the slap of shoes against concrete.

Vic turned down Warren Avenue. They kept running, looking for another street to duck into. At their next turn, they found themselves in an alley behind a cafe- and a dead end. When they turned around, they found themselves face to face with the boy with the red backpack.

“Hey, I’m Joey,” he said with a smile and wave. Vic clutched their guitar case to their chest, hoping Joey wouldn’t notice. He did, and frowned. “I’m not here to make you play me something, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Then what are you here for?” Vic snapped. They were out of patience, and cornered like a feral cat.

Joey’s eyebrows danced dangerously close to his hairline, and he put up his hands in a show of peace. On his face, he held an easy-going grin. “Call me a fan. I’ve heard you play, Vic, and I think we both know that there’s something weird going on with you.”

“Weird?” Vic huffed, but a nervous sweat had begun to form on the back of their neck. “How do you even know my name? Maybe you’re the weird one.”

When Joey laughed, Vic felt something stir within them. His laughed was contagious, and despite the situation, Vic wanted the laugh along too. Almost against their will, a giggle forced its way out of their chest. Upon seeing this, Joey immediately stopped laughing. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Do what?”

Joey’s face contorted into a scowl, but Vic could tell it was directed inwardly and not to them. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, I’m a comedian, right? I do stand-up at open mic nights, whatever. No matter what it is I say, when I start laughing the crowd laughs too. They get this far-away look in their eyes, right? They cheer, they swear that I’m the best comic they’ve ever listened to, and when my bit is over they can’t help but to want more. Sound familiar?”

Vic startled. What Joey described, they saw every day in the crowds they drew. They nodded.

“Okay.” Joey dug around in his pockets and pulled out a card. “Listen, Vic, those girls back there? They weren’t human.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were monsters. I couldn’t quite tell what, but there weren’t friendly. Have you ever had strange encounters? Maybe after a performance?”

Vic could name a few. When they were a child, maybe five or six, there was the lady after they sang in the junior neighborhood talent show who scooped them up and almost walked away with them. She put them back down after their aunt yelled at her. There was the group of boys a couple years ago, when they were fifteen and freshly kicked out who followed them after a day of busking, but were scared off by a woman who yelled at them. There was the person with green hair last month at a party they were hired to sing at who kept trying to get Vic to leave with them, and only stopped when Vic’s friend Sid told them to buzz off.

“Monsters?”

“Yeah.” Joey handed them the card. It was strangely heavy, despite looking and feeling like paper. When they flicked a corner, Vic found it didn’t bend. On it was a symbol, a swirl of crossing lines that they couldn’t decipher. They blinked, and suddenly it shaped into an electric guitar. “You said you were headed to The Museum of Pop Culture, right? At the front desk ask for Lup and show her that card.”

Vic shook their head. “Okay, no. I appreciate the concern or whatever, but I’m not trying to get on the front page of the Seattle Times.” Vic pushed past Joey, determined to go anywhere *but* the Museum of Pop Culture. The Queen Anne Marketplace sounded promising. Or maybe Counterbalance Park. It was a little early for that particular crowd, but surely there would be people passing by.

“If you want to find out about your parents, you should really go before the museum closes!” Joey called after them.

Vic’s blood ran cold. They whipped around, icy furry painting their features. “I don’t have parents.”

Vic decided that Queen Anne’s Marketplace was too close. Besides, the crowd that Counterbalance Park drew always tipped better. They stormed off, and to their relief, Joey didn’t follow them. They could still feel rage in their bones as they set up in front of the park.

And yet, even as they set up, curiosity pricked under their skin. Earlier they said that they didn’t have parents- that, of course, wasn’t true. But their parents decided that they didn’t have a child, and that was fine by Vic the moment they were told to leave. As they plucked a few notes on their guitar, they expected something loud, fast, and angry. Instead, they played *Out Like a Light* by the Honeysticks.

Like usual, a small crowd gathered as soon as they strummed the first riff. The song was slow, sad, and when they looked over the crowd they saw eyes glazed over, far away, and wet with tears. When it ended, folded bills fell from hands and into Vic’s open guitar case.

Vic knew they were good, but moving a crowd to tears with one song? Maybe there *was* something weird going on. They once again felt the prickle of curiosity, and as faces came and went through their set, they continued to feel it until the sun began to dip under the clouds. The Museum of Pop Culture would be closing in an hour.

They packed their things and arrived at the Museum of Pop Culture fifteen minutes before close.

“Hey, you!” a deep voice yelled when they were not five feet in the door. “Stop right there!”

Vic stilled as a security guard ran over to them. “Can I help you?”

The security guard, a little out of breath from the run over, pointed a shaking finger at their guitar case. “You can’t bring that in here.”

Vic scowled. “Listen, I’m not even going into the Museum, I’m just going to the front de-“

The guard shook his head. “Don’t care. Can’t have that in here. What are you going to do, with it anyways? Steal stuff? Leave it in your car.”

Vic sighed, irritated. “I don’t have a car- Look, I’m just here to talk to Lup.”

Immediately, the man’s demeanor changed. “Oh. Can I uh… see your identification?”

“You mean this?” Vic pulled the card from their pocket.

“Mhm.” The man examined it, then pointed further into the building. “Sorry, front desk is right there.”

Vic thanked him and continued on their way, glancing at various displays as they made their way to the front desk. The museum was strangely empty. Its usual bustle was gone, and the aura remaining was hollow, but something in the air felt *electric*. On arrival, a cheerful boy about their age greeted them.

“Welcome to the Museum of Pop Culture, how can I help you? I do have to warn you we’re closing in about ten minutes.”

“Yeah,” Vic squinted at the nametag the boy wore. “Angus, could you uh, get Lup for me?”

Angus smiled widely. “Yeah, for sure!” He stood and disappeared behind a partition, and when he came back he was accompanied by an older woman. When she got closer, Vic could see her nametag read *Lup*. “Here she is!”

Lup smiled warmly. “Here I am.” She held out a hand, presumably for Vic’s card, and they dropped it onto her open palm. Lup examined it closely, nodded, and walked over to the side of the desk, and lifted the gate. “Come on in, dear.”

Cautiously, Vic followed Lup as she led them past the partition that Angus had walked behind earlier. Lup pulled another card from her pocket, similar to Vic’s and swiped it through a card reader on a door. The door buzzed happily and opened, and through the door Lup lead Vic down a set of stairs.

“Where, exactly, are we going?” Vic asked nervously.

“The Forum,” Lup replied with an air of reverence.

The hallway they were in suddenly widened and Vic gasped as it opened up into a beautiful amphitheater. People roamed the aisles, looking for places it sit, facing the lit stage. On the stage stood a girl who looked about ten painting a gorgeous landscape of Puget Sound. As soon as Vic saw it they were spellbound, taken in by the splashes of blue against silver.

“Over here!” Vic turned and saw Lup had already sat down and was patting the seat next to her. Vic picked their way over and sat, watching as the girl finished her masterpiece. When she was done, the amphitheater exploded in applause. Then Lup stood.

When she spoke, her voice carried across the entire space, and the people hushed to listen. “Everyone! We have a new arrival! Please give a warm welcome to- ah, dear, I don’t believe I got your name.”

“It’s Vic.”

“Everyone please give a warm welcome to Vic!”

The assembly again erupted in cheers. Vic sheepishly waved. Lup fluttered her hands. “Now, Vic, could you show us what you can do?” She smiled and gestured to the stage.

Vic nodded, for the first time in a long time nervous to perform. They jogged down to the stage, hopped up, and stared out at the crowd. They felt immense pressure wash over them- this wasn’t performing on the streets, this was showing an assembly what they can do.

What song do they play? Something they knew they could perform in their sleep? Something dangerous? Something personal?

They locked onto the latter, and started playing *Line Without a Hook* by Ricky Montgomery.

Vic closed their eyes as they played, feeling the eyes of everyone burning into them. It was intense, it was freeing, and they felt the music in their feet and in the room and filling the space until it overflowed.

The song came it its conclusion, and the amphitheater was silent. Dread filled Vic from head to toe. *What now?*

Vic felt their bangs get pushed back by the force of the crowd’s gleeful screams.

“That was crazy!”

A familiar voice caused Vic top turn around- Joey stood, still wearing a red backpack and a playful grin.

“Yeah?” Vic laughed breathily.

“Mhm.” Joey extended his hand. “Welcome to the Forum.”