

Fish Out of Water

All Matthew knew, was that he was out of his realm of expertise. A land creature isn't supposed to be found in the ocean, and that's exactly what Matthew was. A land dweller. You don't find bears swimming in the deep blue and similarly you don't find whales humping along dry ground. Now Matthew, his boots, Levi's, flannel, vest, and hat all found themselves on a much-too-small life raft in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight, and this particular life raft wasn't exactly filling Matthew with too much hope. He examined the chipping paint and the soft, worn edges of the raft, realizing that he had a lemon of a vessel. Fortunately for him the water had been almost completely flat during his stay in God's Earthly limbo, but should a storm develop, even a minor one, he'd be clenching a little harder in those Levi's. The only thing worse than the boat was the incredibly dry thirst that he'd developed in his time on the water. He didn't understand it, but it would go away when he slept, but once he woke back up there was a constant dry scratch at the back of his throat.

The center thwart bent from his weight even though he wasn't but 140 pounds of bone and tissue. The dingey wasn't more than ten feet long but he swore he could see the bow bend in a different direction than the rear. The wood seemed to be soggy, and the ribs were broken every other. Matthew was a sore sight as well, but he couldn't suppress his anger and resentment towards the boat, thinking that it might be the catalyst in his last adventure that results in his demise. Occasionally, Matthew would throw what some would call a hissy-fit, flailing his legs and arms around, causing more damage to the boat, and not accomplishing anything. He couldn't satisfy this anger because there was nothing to take his anger out on without causing more problems, and there wasn't much to do when it came to changing his situation. Because of this he would oftentimes find himself punching or slapping the water. Perhaps it was these oddly

rhythmic beats thrown into the water that attracted the newcomer. The only part of his miserable assumed end that brought him any kind of comfort, was this stranger that now occupied a place in Matthew's life, and it took the form of a siren. One that occasionally visited him.

Matthew had begun to notice how she always knew exactly when to show herself, exactly when her presence would be appreciated. Matthew was the kind of fellow that one would describe as the "glass-half-empty" sort, and whenever he would fall into his detrimental way of thinking, she would appear. It was never dramatic or theatrical, rather it was silent. He'd be smacking his chapped and peeling lips from his thirst and staring down at his hands, past the rowing blisters he had developed on his palms, at the planks as they swelled and contracted with the rise and fall of ocean when he'd hear a knock or feel the weight shift in the boat and would look up at the bow to find her there, peering in at him over the breasthook.

Her perfectly manicured fingernails would scratch and play with the sun faded wood as if she were a little girl, nervous to say hello. Whenever her presence was made known, Matthew lost track of the rest of his worries as if the ocean around him settled to complete stillness. The first few times she visited Matthew she would only peek over the edge of the raft, occasionally fiddling with something in the boat, only to quickly disappear the second Matthew moved. As time went on, she became more comfortable and began to study Matthew and the boat for longer, even when he moved. Eventually she would rest herself on her elbows up on the gunwale, moving closer to Matthew, appearing more blithe than intrigued with every visit.

The first time she introduced himself, Matthew was more than terrified. All that ran through his mind were the superstitious tales of a deck mate, rambling about sirens more beautiful than Aphrodite luring men to their deaths. "*Ye best beware the sirens, lad! For they'll*

be the ruination of ye, sure as the tide pulls the drowned to their briny graves. No fate be more wretched than a sea-worn soul, believin' he's found his respite—only to be swallowed whole, bones and all, by the deep's insatiable maw!” As Matthew began to believe that she wasn't there to kill him, and she started to get used to his appearance, Matthew determined that this was not your typical siren. This one must've been ostracized for not luring and killing stranded cowboys such as Matthew, but was instead reprimanded for simply being curious. Matthew had determined she wasn't a threat.

One day, Matthew was sitting up in the dingy to straighten out his back, looking out over the horizon when a strong gale blew his hat from his head out into the water. Immediately he panicked as this hat was an important piece of protection from the sun, save the clothing on his back. He quickly stood up, rocking the boat and almost tipping over when, almost as if she were waiting, the siren rose out of the water with the hat on her head and started swimming over to him, all while maintaining eye contact.

“If you throw one more goddamn rock, I'm liable to beat the holy shit outta you! You're breakin' 'em, not tossin' 'em! Now fuckin' work!” A rough voice subjected to years of screaming came out of the sirens mouth much to Matthew's bewilderment. He hadn't heard her make a peep, and now with a perfect Western American accent, she scolded him. Before he knew it something hit him. She had never swung at him, and he had no idea what it could've been, but it was enough to send him toppling over into the ocean. Instead of meeting the water, he met ground.

Matthew hit the hard dirt and when he looked up from the ground, he saw where he was. Instead of a boat, there was a stump. Instead of a siren there was a prison guard, instead of an

ocean there was a prison courtyard, and instead of a hat there was a stone. Matthew hasn't been wearing his cowboy garb; he was wearing black and white stripes with chains around his ankles. His mouth wasn't dry because he couldn't drink salt water, it was dry because he had been splitting stones with a pickaxe all day in the dry Arizona heat. Those blisters weren't from rowing, they were from hard labor.

Once gaining his hold on reality, he looked around and started to get back up. The guard had apparently had enough of Matthews antics and resorted to what has proven to be the most efficient method of discipline and leadership when found in the confines of incarceration, and that is good old-fashioned violence.

“Goddammit! You're a fuckin' lunatic you know that? I don't get why you always tossin' rocks my way. You do your job, and I'll do mine. I know I'm a guard, but I don't want no trouble, but that don't mean I'm unwilling to do what I've gotta do.” The prison guard rubbed his head as he walked away, venting to himself more than talking directly to Matthew.

Matthew rose up out of the dirt and sat back upon the stump he was on before, analyzing where he had found himself. Was this worse than the boat? Which one was the dream? If the boat were a dream, how does he know this isn't one as well? He thought to himself about how he could be in an even tighter spot than this one and he'd have no idea, all because this was a dream. He stared at the sand between his shackled ankles while he pondered to himself when he suddenly realized that he needed to get back to work. Even if this was a dream, that punch felt real, and he didn't want to upset anyone again, fearing it should lead to another beating.

Matthew stood up, grabbed the pickaxe, and began swinging at the pile of stones in front of him, working the sunshine away through his calloused palms.