

PROMPT #3: Your main character has been stranded on a desert island for months. Alone... or so they thought. One morning, they wake up to a message written in the sand.

## [untitled]

by **Calixte Walls**

He scratched the short itchy hairs on his chin, the lingering sting of a fresh shave making him wince. It was a rough job, but the best an old worn pocketknife could do. His rough, calloused hands weren't helping much either. He splashed sea foam on his face, the cold water bringing him relief before the salt of the sea found its way to his most sensitive cuts. He groaned and stood up, the crashing waves groaning in return. A smile spread on his face in a way you might see in one of those old 1950s magazine ads, and if he had a tie, he would tighten it around his collar. The gentleman waved goodbye to the ocean, promising to come back to her once the day's work was done. The glitter of the sand in the waves sufficed as a wink in return, and he headed away from the shore and into the brush.

He couldn't remember how long he had been here. He tried keeping track of the days at first but quickly gave up once he passed one hundred. It's not like it mattered to him anyway; he had settled into the rhythm of his new domestic life. He had a steady job: patrol the island during the day, scavenge what was needed, and hunt when he could. The island wasn't a harsh boss— if he kept to his quota, he never had a cold night or empty stomach. There was plenty of lush forest for kindling, and he had even managed to secure himself a nice little shack further inland. And in lieu of water-cooler chit-chat, he could always ease his mind during the day by listening to the tide crashing on the distant shore.

The best part was he didn't have any annoying coworkers, being the sole survivor of the crash that had brought him here in the first place. He had cried at first, of course, but he soon realized that it was a dog-eat-dog world, and some people just couldn't hack it. Besides, he wouldn't have wanted anyone else here to compete for *her* attention. She had always been there for him, providing fish when he was hungry and quiet lullabies at night for when he couldn't

sleep. Her gentle waves tugged him closer as if she had been waiting for him all along. It was true, he didn't need anyone else here with him; it was perfect this way. His love watched him from afar, and in return, he wouldn't keep her waiting.

Once the day's work was done, he clocked out from his hunting and gathering and strolled back towards the shore to watch as the daylight crept below the horizon. The orange of the sinking sun played flirtatiously on the ocean's breaking tide, and his eyelids sank lower and lower over his salt-dried eyes. Soon, he found himself stumbling back to his shack, the world around him feeling blurred and soft. The smell of damp wood filled his nose, and he felt the crunch of leaves pricking his back as he crawled underneath his hobbled-together shelter. His last waking thought was the sound of the sea's echoing calls as the world around him succumbed to darkness.

When he awoke, it was abrupt. He was used to the warmth of the sun's rays and the growing sound of the morning's high tide nudging him to consciousness. Yet this sound wasn't familiar, soothing, or any of the noises he had become accustomed to. It was unfamiliar— a dull scraping in the sand that pricked his ear and pushed him out of the shack and onto his feet. He stumbled his way through the brush, reaching the shore with the beating heart of a crazed animal. As his eyes adjusted to the bright light of the new day, he saw it. There on the sand—freshly written and jaggedly carved into the earth — were three bold letters.

**SOS.**

The sight sent a wave of nausea through him. He could have laughed, it seemed so ridiculously cliché. And he might have been laughing, but if a sound came out of his mouth, it would only be the rough gargling of a man who hadn't spoken since he crashed here. *Crashed.* Yes, a horrific accident that had left him stranded and the rest of his crew dead. He was certain of it. Once he had gotten his bearings, he had looted the ship and the bodies of his crew for anything that could be of use to his survival. He felt their cold, lifeless hands and looked into the emptiness of their eyes as he tore off uniforms and collected personal belongings. He was alone on this island — utterly alone. Yet the message in the sand suggested otherwise, the large, curved lettering taunting him with its mere existence.

He stared at the crude message, the freshness of it boring into his mind. Despite how the morning tide crept high onto the shore, licking at the wound in her coastline, the call for help remained unwashed and untouched. It was as if the ocean herself was letting the message linger, daring him to acknowledge it. He scoured the area around the signal, hunting every broken branch, every moved rock, and every trace of disturbed earth. The once calming waves now seemed oppressively taunting, mocking him with their crashing and laughing. She had been his — his constant, his solace. And now she had invited someone else to their sacred home, dragging in a newer, more un-weathered inhabitant. No, *replacement.* He was sure of it.

His feet grasped onto the rocky shore as his search led him further towards the coastline, the sight of fresh driftwood and glittering nails guiding his way. Descending into a rough inlet, he clawed at the sharp cliffside for balance as he moved. Soon, his eyes rounded the corner of the cliff, and a full view of the alcove unfolded before him. He had expected something like this, but the sight was disgusting regardless. A pitifully small boat lay crumpled between two jagged boulders on the shoreline, a far cry from the ship that had brought him here. Blood streaked the fractured wood jutting from the wreck, smearing a scarlet trail across the beach. It was pathetic, nothing more than a humble fisherman's boat wandered too far from its safe harbor—no doubt the sailor encountered some rogue wave and was tossed helplessly onto the island. The gentleman couldn't fathom why the ocean had spared this interloper, granting them sanctuary instead of dragging them beneath the depths as they deserved. Surely, there was no grand tragedy here — no tale of a mighty ship and crew lost to stormy seas and treacherous bluffs. Nothing to rival his own.

The sharp crack of branches shattered his thoughts. His head snapped toward the direction of the disturbance; the man's senses heightened despite the continued cackling of the crashing tide. Ignoring its taunting lull, he scrambled back up the cliffside, every movement fueled with burning purpose. He stalked his path back through the rocky shore before finally glimpsing movement in the distance — a figure crouched near the message in the sand. He edged closer, his breath shallow. The figure was taller than he expected, lean and weathered like the sea had claimed and reshaped him. His clothes were tattered and bloody, and he shakily grasped a large branch that he used to retrace his message in the ground. The man's gaze followed the stranger closely as he clumsily scraped the stick through the sand, causing it to crackle and snap. He could feel the weight of it — that disgusting scraping noise, the imposition of someone else marking his earth. Before long, the intruder was forced to fling the now useless tool to the side, stumbling off to the cliffside in search of a more suitable stylus.

The gentleman slid from his hiding place and quickened his steps to catch up to the man. The two climbed higher up the cliffside, the jagged earth clawing at their soles, soothed only by patches of gooey moss clinging to the wet rocks. The sailor knelt at the precipice, obliviously grasping for a long, solid piece of wood that lay there. Quietly, the man mirrored him, grabbing for a serrated stone at his feet. Suddenly, the newcomer turned, as if he could hear the skin of the man's hand tightening around the rock — and their eyes met. The stranger's expression was unreadable and stoic, but the sides of his pupils shot towards the edge of his eyes. As the gentleman surged forward, the sailor recoiled in animalistic instinct. Not expecting the sudden reflex, the gentleman's footing slipped on the mossy rock, the ground giving way beneath him. He scrambled, but his legs betrayed him. A sharp rock caught his ankle, and with a piercing cry, he pitched forward, tumbling helplessly into the water below.

Below, the ocean roared, her waves rising to meet him like a suffocating embrace. He hit her hard, the icy suffocating shock seizing his mouth, his throat, and his lungs. The water surged, pulling him deeper into the undercurrent as he clawed at his face and body. The salt burned his eyes as the light from the surface blurred into darkness, fragmented by her swirling arms. Soon, his struggles slowed, and his mind grew murky as panic gave way to an eerie calm. The ocean cradled him, her currents softening as she guided him deeper. She whispered to him in her tides — he belonged to her now, as he always had. Above, the waters calmed, as though nothing had disturbed her at all.

The stranger lingered for a moment on the cliffside, his gaze fixed on the now-still waves below. Eventually, he turned away, leaving only the faint impression of his footprints on the moss, which clung to them briefly before fading. All that remained was the rhythmic breath of the water, and the coast was empty once more.