

## No More Chains

The low branches of the trees were thwacking him in the face, their traitorous roots grabbing his feet and making him stumble. The weak rays of moonlight fighting their way through the ominous clouds were doing little to help him navigate through the dense vegetation.

His legs were pumping with desperate energy, his lungs screaming and refusing to let some air in. His left arm was hanging limply from where it was attached to his shoulder, unresponsive and heavy, slowing him down. His owner just had to break it viciously today. His right hand was clutching his dead limb with crushing force, as if wanting to bring back sensations to it from sheer will alone. Sinister thoughts were clawing their way to the front of his mind, but he kept pushing them back, again and again, relentlessly. His body was begging him to stop, to get some rest, to just lean against a tree for a few seconds.

But he won't give up, he couldn't. He couldn't stop now, couldn't go back. He would have his ears cut off, or his nose, or worse. He would be whipped, shown as a bloody example for the others to not follow his path. He would be hanged. *He would die.* And that was not allowed. He was not dying here, not like that, not like a cowering shell of what was once human.

But he could hear them closing in. Faster than he thought they would.

Heavy panting, bushes rustling violently, loud thumping noise coming closer and closer. They were not chasing him anymore, they were hunting him down. And they had dogs. Who were closer than he first thought. He had started to slow down, his body starting to shut down, but his sudden panic pumped some energy right back into his veins. Bullets began whizzing past him, embedding themselves in the trunk of nearby trees, sending pieces of bark flying everywhere.

He bursted out of the forest onto the beach, the sand slowing his pace. He fought back against it with all his might, *he was not going down now*. The dark mass of the sea was luring him, taunting him with the promise of freedom. He would soon be joining her, would soon be tasting the alluring taste of freedom.

He scrambled behind a large boulder and set off to brush aside the thick foliage he had used to carefully hide it. His raft, his salvation. He could only pray to whatever god was listening that its little stay in the damp sand had not damaged the wood. But now was not the time to pray, and gods always took their sweet time answering anyway.

He mustered all the strength left in his exhausted body and began pushing the boat into the water. He could hear the damn hounds, they were practically breathing down on his neck at this point.

Just as the beasts rounded the boulder, the raft was finally afloat. Not wasting a second, he grasped the oars and scrambled on the raft. Which slightly dipped underwater once he settled his weight on it. Dread seized his body, but he couldn't stay. His pursuers had barged onto the beach, and there was no turning back now. He began to row with his good arm. Clearly, adrenaline was doing wonders here. The dogs were now just barking at him, seemingly unwilling to go into the water. His pursuers, however, were relentless. They were still shooting at his retreating figure, knee-deep in the black water of the sea.

As he was rowing further and further away from the shore, a smile was quirking the edges of his mouth higher and higher. He had made it. He had escaped. He was *free*. He had gained his freedom, alive. No begging, no suffering. Yes, his body was sore, his arm bent at an unnatural angle and his face beginning to swell from all the thwacking branches. But his neck was not bearing the weight of a collar, his wrists were free. No chains in sight.

Just him, the stars and the endless sea ahead.

