

Bound No More

My lungs fight for oxygen as I barrel past stores and houses, through alleys, and around blocks. Blood is coursing through my veins. My face is numb and tight from hyperventilating. I can barely keep my eyes from squinting all the way shut. I run until I can't feel my legs, then keep running. I have no intention of stopping, but my foot catches on the edge of the cobblestone road, and I soon find myself sprawled across the ground, on my back. I try to get up, but my arms and legs are too weak. Someone touches my elbow, and I jerk my arm away. I look to find an older woman with soft, dark skin standing beside me. She is talking, but I don't recognize what language she is speaking. She reaches her hand toward me again, and this time I don't have the energy to pull away. She touches my face, and as I feel her fingers brush away my sweat-soaked hair, my vision goes dark...

The branches of an old deceased tree fracture the sun's light into shadows that shade the earth.

A girl sits below, book in hand, and dreams of what her life would be like if she'd had a different birth.

Something calls from afar, but she fears to flee.

She wishes for life anew, but her soul is tied to the tree.

I jolt awake. The sudden change in my breathing pattern causes me to fall into a fit of coughs. My lungs feel tight and sore from last night's exertion. It takes a moment for my eyes to register my surroundings. I don't recognize the room I'm in or the cot I'm lying on. Memories of my escape flood through me all at once. *Oh no. Have they caught me?! Was I not able to get away from them?!!*

I jump to my feet, but my body isn't ready for this much expenditure, and I lose my balance, crashing to the left and knocking over something that shatters on the floor. Someone enters the room and rushes over to me. I turn my face up to see who it is, but their features are silhouetted by the sun streaming in through the window behind them. They reach down to touch me, but I scramble to get away from them. This action is met with a woman's soft voice. I recognize the voice from last night.

"I don't understand what you're saying," I tell her. She nods her head and leaves the room. She comes back with a bowl of some sort of food. She points at the cot, then at me, then at the food. The woman sets the bowl down on the cot and reaches her hands towards mine. I hesitate but allow her to help me up. When I'm sitting on the cot, she goes to pick up what I knocked over.

I look down at the bowl now in my hands and wonder if I can trust this woman. I left my country to start a new life, but I hadn't planned on ending up here, wherever *here* was. I look around the room again, searching for some hint as to where I am. Whether this woman is with the communists after me or not, I'm too hungry to push away whatever food she's given me.

Praying that it isn't poisoned, I eat everything and set the empty bowl aside. The woman is just barely finishing cleaning up my mess when I look at her again. It would appear that a jar had shattered when I fell, and she had to sweep up the bits and pieces. I want to apologize, but I know she won't understand. I also don't know if I'm sorry. If she is on the same side as the communists, I'm glad I'm destroying parts of her home or wherever we are.

She looks at me before leaving the room. I am uncertain of what to do. *Should I try asking for help, or should I try to escape?* I need to find my way to Spain. I definitely can't go back to the

Philippines now that bad people are trying to locate me. I had initially planned to leave my country for more opportunities and escape the corrupt government, but after the communist terrorists crashed my plane, I now have more reason to find a new home.

Only a handful of people escaped the plane crash. Unfortunately, one of the survivors had been a terrorist. He had chased me for what seemed like hours. I only outran him because he had sustained an injury in the crash. He shot at me, though, and I had barely gotten away. I have no idea how far or where I ran, only that I was trying to put as much distance between the crash and myself as I could. The plane had gone down at the edge of a body of water. I'd run into some trees until I reached a city. I startled a few people as I ran, but I was too scared to stop or ask for help. Considering that the terrorists had boarded our plane back in the Philippines like the rest of us, it is likely that the woman I am staying with has no connection to them. However, we could have landed in a country under communism. I hope this is not the case.

As if on cue, the woman enters the room again. This time, she has a young man with her. I look back and forth between her and the man, unsure of what they might be planning.

"Hello, I am Tamar," he says, "do you speak English?"

I gasp with relief and reply, "Yes, but it is not my primary language."

He quickly says something to the woman who is grasping his arm. She looks relieved at whatever he told her. She then says something back to him. He nods and turns to me.

"This is Ana, and she wonders what is your name?" Tamar asks.

"Hiraya," I answer, "and I want to know where I am?"

"This is Ana's home," Tamar replied. Ana says something to him.

"Where have you come from?" he asks. I explain to Tamar that I'd been on a plane to Spain when the incendiaries attacked, but as I recount what had happened, I find tears building up in my eyes. The memories are too fresh, and the fear is too tangible. I can still hear the gunshot that killed our pilot and the other passengers' horrified screams as the plane fell from the sky. I can smell the blood and feel the panic I'd had when clawing my way out of the exit. I'm shaking now. Ana puts a hand on my shoulder. I can understand that she is trying to comfort me without Tamar saying so. I know now that I do feel bad about breaking her jar. Ana speaks to Tamar again.

"Your plane landed in the Black Sea. Ana says that you are safe here with her. You are in the country of Sakartvelo," he states. I assume there is a different name for this country in my language, but it helps to know that we are near the Black Sea.

We go back and forth like this for a while. It is a bit difficult to understand what Tamar is trying to communicate with me because of his accent and my limited understanding of English. I am infinitely thankful for Tamar, though. Translation would be entirely impossible without him.

"If you want to get to Spain, you will need help from our government," he states

"How can I do that?" I ask

"I will take you to the police," he replies. Ana nods, and as they turn to leave the room, she motions for me to follow.

After a week of contact with local law enforcement and three days of planning, I finally had a new way to get to Spain. I couldn't believe how fast I was able to get help. Everyone was so kind and helpful. Never in my life had I had so many people supporting me. It was amazing how everyone was so willing to assist a complete stranger. Ana would drive me to a bus station to cross the border to

Turkey, where I'd get on another plane. I would have a covert police escort to prevent any dangers. Fortunately for me, one of the few things I'd been carrying on my person when the disaster happened was my passport. That is why I can leave so soon. Ana, Tamar, and I had reported the whole situation to the local police station, and they are looking for the suspect and other survivors. The government agent assigned to my case permitted me to continue on my journey. Since my parents were born in Spain, I had acquired Spanish nationality and obtained citizenship before leaving the Philippines. After we had resolved all that, the only thing left to do is go.

I look over at Ana as the rickety old car pulls up to the bus station. She smiles at me, and the corners of her eyes wrinkle.

"Thank you," I say, even though I know she doesn't understand my language. She nods her head, though, and motions for me to get out. I step out of the car and wave to her as she drives off. I wait until she is out of sight before I buy my ticket and get on the bus. I feel a tightness in my chest as I think of all that this woman and her country has done for me. All of the other survivors of the plane crash had been recovered and aided. The authorities also caught the sole living terrorist and he is now in an international prison.

The bus soon departs, and I think about everything I've been through since leaving my home. Everything I've sacrificed to get to Spain. I still believe it will all be worth it in the end. *I did it. I've finally broken free from the fate that tied me to my birth country. I have severed the toxic roots that bound me to that tree. Now I can plant a new seed and start a new life. Because I'm bound no more.*