

Flight

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I had found a small clearing near the crest of the hill which would serve well to provide a secure shelter for the night. The town from which we fled lie in the distance, visible below as a soft blanket of lights. The thick darkness around me isolated me from the horrors below, lending me the sense of security I needed to finally get some rest. Not so Scott. We had been running since morning, and neither the tranquility of these woods nor the exhaustion of our flight seemed to shake him of his fear that we had been closely stalked throughout our journey. His fright seemed not one of submission, as I had expected, given the unrelentless psychological abuse with which his kidnappers had treated him. Instead he seemed bolder, more aggressive than I had ever known him. Pushing to move on, alert to every noise and shadow, he was like a tightly wound spring ready to snap at any moment. I knew that without a night of real rest, the physical exhaustion would take its toll, and I would lose him. His stamina impressed me, but as I watched him push ahead with the determination of a wrought machine, I feared I was losing the innocent, tender boy I had grown to love. The passion I saw in his eyes, now, I was afraid of.

After creating a small nook in which to sleep, I turned my attention to comforting Scotty, to convince him it was safe enough to shut down his defenses for the night and get some sleep. We would both require a good night's rest to remain alert through the long trek across the countryside tomorrow; rest that could provide the difference between successful escape and capture. We would not be discovered here: we had made a clean, unexpected breakaway; we were well hidden; and there were too many places to look for us. Although he conceded, I could see he was still fighting his instinct to keep moving. He still imagined our pursuers at our heels, waiting in the darkness to take him back to the horror which he had endured for so many months. A storm had been brewing, and though I found the thunderous roar of the wind and dark cover of the clouds reassuring, obscuring any trace of our presence, I could see Scotty eyeing the motion of the heavens as if confirmation that his captors had called forth the very powers of the supernatural to retrieve him. Even the basic tenets of physics were his enemy, under the control of our stalkers. That's what they had done to him.

I was not his enemy. I was determined to remain his friend throughout this ordeal. I knew that now I, more than anyone ever, had to retain his trust. As he lay here beside me in the brush, I could hear his breath easing. He was finally calming down. I slowly caressed the hair on the back of his neck as I held him tightly to my chest, hoping to make him feel safe. The thick, black hair felt like a teddy bear in my hand, and I realized that I had been comforting myself as much as I had him. Dark eyebrows were prominent on his expressionless face, and his fair, slick features were cast a pastel blue by the moonlight streaming in through the clouds. His shirt was loose around his long neck, exposing his soft, white skin. At the base of his neck, a deep scar retreated to the depth of his buttoned breast -- the result of inhumane treatment, now healing, but still showing traces of tender, red flesh. I avoided it, fearing it was still painful, hoping to help him clear his mind, if only temporarily, of recent events. The scars to his psyche were as easy to detect. Watching him silently in the darkness, I could imagine him as I had always known him. Care-free, caring; his easy wit; his sense of humor: it always felt good when we laughed together. I was able to laugh deeper with Scotty than with anyone else I had ever known. We had a connection that allowed us to tickle each other at the roots of our emotions, and allowed us each to touch the other's spirit without fear of reprisal or exposure. A bond had developed through trust and experience -- allowing us also to share our deepest pain, diluting it to the point of tolerance.

I could feel his pain now, but I feared that that connection may have been shattered. Illogically, maybe selfishly, this was now my greatest anxiety. Through the whipping wind, I could hear his breathing, before heavy and labored, now smoother and more steady. He was finally trying to ease his body into rest, and sleep, but only under the condition that I would keep him safe -- from fear more than from discovery. I would stay with him so that he would not be alone. I had to promise that I would not leave his side throughout the night: no matter when he should awaken, I would be there beside him. That would be the easiest promise I ever had to keep. My exhaustion drew me into a pale, uneasy sleep. I would not leave our cocoon for any reason without my friend. But when I awoke to a crack of thunder merely an hour later, it was I who was left in the cocoon alone.

I crept to the edge of the shelter, led by the roar of the wind, a sound even louder than the pounding of my racing heart. The sky was a deep cyrillician blue, rich and sultry, illuminating the field ahead. Clouds seemed lit from below by the reflecting moonlight, creating a painted background for the scene ahead. There on the hilltop was Scott: standing in the turbulence, his arms held high as if trying to catch the air. His open shirt billowed wildly in the weather. His smooth chest was devoid of moisture, the sweat of the day having evaporated in the dry wind along with his crippling fear of discovery. He stood there now erect on the hilltop looking down on the city almost in defiance, exposing himself to his enemies, the expression on his face betraying an intense energy within. He seemed almost capable of flight: as if at any moment he could ascend to the heavens and be free of his tormentors, of his past, of his fears. I approached him as if hunting a butterfly: trying to gauge his reaction, to draw him in without startling him into flight. It appeared as if his subconscious mind had suddenly rejected the instincts to hide and run which had driven him all day long. Now he would take control and face his fear. No more submission. No more burrowing underground. No more turning inward to escape the pain. This was a turning point I felt I had to let him be free to explore, while still ensuring his safety. I walked toward him, hoping we had retained enough of a bond that I could still know what he was feeling. I did not know exactly who it was I was looking at, or how he would react to me. As I came near, his arms, still held high, turned and extended toward me. He still trusted me. I would hold that trust.

Fine peachfuzz ran along his long, sinewy neck. His forearms, exposed under unbuttoned cuffs, revealed soft hair burnished off near the wrists where he had been bound. The shallow contour of his chest was cold in the wind, and his upturned collar framed the beginning of his round, firm shoulders. He still looked so young and innocent, but his body spoke the language of maturity, of prowess, of experience. As I took him in my arms he grabbed me tightly and whispered softly in my ear.

"I'm so scared."

"I know. I'm here. We'll be O.K."

"We should never have left. This should never have happened. You shouldn't have come for me."

"I had to, Scotty. I should have come sooner. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. I need you, Scott. I'm less without you."

"I'm scared"

"I know. You'll get past this. We'll get past this. I know that right now you can't see beyond the fear. But this will end, Scott. I'll always be here for you. I'll help you through this. We'll be safe again and you'll be O.K. Trust me."

"I'm so confused."

"You're tired."

"I'm scared."

"I know."

"I'm so alone."

"I'm here. Let me in."

His breathing gave way to shallow, short sobs. His body trembled in unsteady rhythm. I felt his tears on my neck as he whimpered, and his hands grabbed my arms as if they would flee from my body if he did not hold them there tightly. His body heaved, and together we fell to the ground. He pushed himself backward along the earth with his legs, forcing his shirt down around his biceps, scraping the smooth curve of his back against the dirt. I stroked his arms, trying to calm him, and lay my body atop his to try to halt his motion. We struggled on the ground for several minutes, the wind lending counterpoint to our frenzy like some bizarre, atonal symphony. As I ran my cheek across his bare chest, I allowed myself to feel the small details of his body before resting my face upon the cool skin of his neck. His breathing slowed, and I stopped fighting his movement. Arching his back, he left the tail of his open shirt resting flatly on the ground as if pressed tightly against a pane of glass, revealing his slim, cylindrical frame. He opened his tear filled eyes and caught mine squarely as I rose. As I stared into those expressive pools, he parted his lips barely enough to whisper: *"take me."*

Here, now, in his deep black eyes, I finally saw the soul of the Scott I recognized. I peered into them as if watching a movie. The horrendous scar which cut across the torso of his otherwise perfect body was nothing but a billboard to the story revealed in his expression. I saw the soul of a boy forced to become a man with agonizing speed. They spoke of an innocence lost forever under a cruel hand and dark minds. I watched the conflict within a mortal trying to reconcile the attention inflicted by devils. His captors told him they loved him. They told him they would care for him. They disciplined him with pain and abuse, and kept him close in their dark hearts with whispered, ugly truths. They held his life, and stole his dignity. Dancing between survival, despair, fear, and isolation; where does a man maintain any sense of humanity?

Here was my friend, trying to gain a grip on reality, trying to jumpstart long shutdown senses and emotions, trying to overcome his numbness in the only way he could remember how. Reinforcement of this reflex -- that intimacy and feeling exist only through violence and penetration -- was not the path for Scott's healing. I pulled him tightly close to me and ran my fingers through his hair. We sat that way, silent, motionless, for several minutes. Tears began to run down his grass-stained cheeks and he asked without meeting my eyes: *"Why not?"*

"Because I love you," I answered. The tears were mine.

He curled his body tightly into a ball and pulled me around him. We would rest tonight, and I would have my friend back... not the same, innocent boy I remembered: sadly, that Scott was gone forever. But in his place would grow a stronger, self-confident man. Retreating to our cocoon, the howling wind finally gave way to the patter of soft rain. For an hour, he cried, saying nothing, and I did nothing other than retain my secure grip, feeling his every movement and sigh. We were still linked, and I would make sure his future would be filled with compassion, caring, and the ability to love and to be loved. I still had his trust. Tomorrow, rested and cleansed of our overwrought emotions and fears, we would traverse the countryside to safety. And tonight, in each others arms, we would sink together into a single, deep, sleep.