

Summary: "Heartily know, when half-gods go, the gods arrive" -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sequel to "[When Half-Gods Go](#)": then starts the healing.

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...the gods arrive

by **K Hanna Korossy**

"Heartily know, when half-gods go, the gods arrive." -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sequel to "[When Half-Gods Go](#)": then starts the healing.

Finding a hostage and catching the monsters responsible for his captivity and torture was a very satisfying end to one nightmare. And the frightening start of a whole new one.

Yet it was one he was infinitely more willing to deal with, Hutch thought as he rocked his partner back and forth. At least they were in this one together and he had a lot more faith in how it would end.

The last week had been hellish by any standards, starting with Starsky's kidnapping and the nearly week-long search for him, few clues to go on, hope dwindling each day, imagining the worst all along. It had culminated in Starsky's rescue only the day before, but what they'd rescued had been a mere shell of the man, Hutch's partner having retreated somewhere into the battered body, in denial of the nightmare he'd been saved from. Starsky's shellshock and instinctive cling to his partner had convinced Hutch to bypass the hospital and opt for at-home care and a visit from Jace, their mutual doctor friend, and had eased them through the motions of first aid and a little bit of cleaning up. But while Starsky had slept straight through since then, his body beginning its mending, his soul wasn't as easy to free or heal. The ordeal hadn't ended in the clearing where they'd confronted the cultist kidnappers.

So this, Hutch relaxed a little, this was a good step. The screams and almost incoherent panic that Starsky had woken in had broken up into heavy sobs at Hutch's reassurances. Hutch's flannel shirt was already wet clear through at the shoulder where his partner's face was pressed against it and still the tears came, but he didn't mind. His one worry now was his partner's peace of mind, and Hutch was willing to help restore that any way he could.

"That's it, buddy, you're safe now. It's all over."

Starsky knew at least that by now, but knowing it and feeling it were two different things. It would take a while before he'd feel completely safe again, but one thing at a time. Hutch started rocking again. For now, this was what they both needed.

"I've got you..."

A few years ago, he would have recoiled from a display of vulnerability like this. A guy--let alone a fellow cop--in tears would have disturbed, maybe even disgusted him. And then Hutch found he was in a job where everyone needed to fall apart like that sometime, as well as finding someone who offered him a safe place to do it in. There was no weakness in that, only trust, and certainly no cause for shame. On the contrary, the pride in his partner for having been strong enough to survive was all Hutch was aware of feeling. That, and concern for what Starsky still had to go through before they could really put it behind them. But they were together now and Hutch had to believe that was what mattered most.

Starsky, already heavy against him, slumped further as the tension of release drained away and left him wrung out. Hutch accepted the weight without a second thought. He himself was still sluggish, weary from all the missed sleep of the week before, but Starsky had all that to recover from, plus emotional and physical healing to do. Hutch knew from experience that days of sleep were normal after a traumatic ordeal, the body mending but also the mind taking a little time and distance to cope with what had happened.

In the meantime, this was the easy stuff.

Hutch gave his half-asleep partner an affectionate squeeze before starting to unwrap himself. "Let's get you flat again, buddy," he said as he got Starsky settled back into the bed and covered in blankets. Dull, exhausted eyes stared at him from between swollen lids, comfortably benumbed once more. Not quite there, as his lack of any reaction to Hutch's movements demonstrated. That would change too, as reality settled in to stay and it was time to face the demons that were only hovering on the periphery now, but all in good time. They weren't there yet.

Hutch swallowed a weary yawn and tried for a smile instead, more for his own sake than his mostly oblivious friend's. "I'll be right back," he said softly, curling his hand briefly around the bandaged one flopped open on top of the covers, before he stood and shambled into the bathroom for a cool, wet washcloth. Hutch folded it and laid it over those heavy-lidded eyes, then left again for the kitchen.

Dobey had been there when Starsky started awake, but there was no sign of their boss now, only a kitchen table tidied of their interrupted lunch and some soup sitting on the cooling stove. Hutch sent the older man a mental thanks as he retrieved a bowl and filled it halfway with Edith Dobby's delicious smelling soup. *Vegetable...isn't that the kind Starsky's aunt was so terrible at making?* No, that had been chicken soup.

Hutch smiled faintly at the thought, then sobered. Starsky's family--he'd nearly forgotten. Rachel Starsky had called him in the middle of the week, several days after her son had missed his usual

weekly call. If only she'd called sooner they might have started looking for Starsky earlier...but Hutch refused to let himself think that way. She hadn't known. And they intended to keep it that way. Dobby had helped snow her with some story about Starsky suddenly going undercover, anything to keep from telling her that her eldest was missing and possibly dead. She'd accepted the story reluctantly, but Rachel also trusted him to tell her if something was wrong. He should call her now that he had news, Hutch thought tiredly, the world pressing a little heavier on his shoulders. Well, maybe in a day or two when, hopefully, Starsky would be well enough to talk to her himself. Hutch had his hands full enough with one member of the Starsky family without worrying about the rest of the clan.

His partner hadn't moved since Hutch had left the room, still sprawled under the blankets in graceless exhaustion. Probably completely under by now, Hutch thought with a grimace, but Starsky had been dehydrated when they'd gotten him back, not mentioning the malnutrition and thin body. Dealing with that was as necessary for healing as sleep.

He sat on the edge of the bed, putting the bowl down on the table beside it before peeling off the warmed washcloth and giving the stubbled face beneath it a pat. "Starsky? C'mon, buddy, wake up. Soup's on."

Again the flat blue eyes opened to half mast, too stuporous even to be startled awake.

Hutch ignored the absence of the usual keen intelligence in that gaze. "That's it. Be a good boy and eat your lunch and then you can go back to sleep." He maneuvered the pillows and the boneless body with gentle movements, shifting Starsky higher against the pillows. Then he retrieved the soup and, checking it quickly to make sure it wouldn't burn, tilted a spoonful to Starsky's mouth.

It took a moment to register, but either Starsky was too tired to fight or aware enough of his safety, for he opened his mouth and slowly swallowed the bite, and the next one. Only instinctive behavior perhaps, but Hutch was willing to take what he could get. The bowl of soup slowly disappeared, followed by a glass of juice, and then he was gratefully shifting Starsky back to reclining, supported slightly on one side to keep pressure off bruised ribs.

The blue eyes blinked slowly, trying to follow the movements, and Starsky's mouth moved for a moment before the rusty voice worked. "'utch?"

Hutch stilled. "Yeah, buddy?" he said softly.

But that was all that Starsky seemed to need. He stared at the blond, his eyes drooping more and more until they shut and he slipped back into sleep.

Hutch rested a hand for a moment against the warm cheek, trying to decide if he was feeling grateful or grieved, before giving it up as hopeless and rising to his feet. A last stop at the bathroom to re-wet the washcloth, and Hutch draped it back over his partner's face. Then he moved quietly away, stopping in the doorway to stare at the sleeper.

One more small step. One of the easier ones. At least Starsky really knew where he was now, who he was with, that he was safe, even if it had been a brief awareness. And next...

Rubbing his forehead, Hutch returned to the side of the bed and the chair next to it, easing himself down to keep watch.

It was a quiet vigil, one on which Hutch found himself often dozing off. Starsky slept the dead sleep of the exhausted and overwhelmed, still and silent. It would have been reassuring, except for how out of character it was.

Starsky usually slept like a splayed jellyfish, arms and legs in an impossible sprawl all over any piece of furniture he fell asleep on. Hutch had woken early at many a stakeout or after a late night at one of their places to shake his head in wonder at his partner's dormant acrobatics. This time, though, Starsky seemed to be in the sleep of the dead. As the day wore on, he slowly drew up into a fetal curve but other than that lay still and silent, even the familiar light snore absent. Only an occasional uneasy stir shook him, slight enough that a simple touch of his partner's hand settled him back into heavy slumber.

It was when dusk arrived that the walls started moving in.

Hutch found himself glancing around the lengthening shadows of the bedroom with mounting unease, trying to tell himself they weren't even as he felt them shrink. The atmosphere of unwellness in the room was stifling, crawling into the back of his throat like the suffocating panic he'd felt as he'd searched fruitlessly for his partner only a few days before. Hutch scrambled to his feet. *Need to get out of here.*

The next minute he was stalking the perimeter of the apartment, the inchoate panic dogging his steps.

Dear God, how can anybody... The question haunted him, much like the one every good cop asked himself. When a child was the victim, when the crime was unusually atrocious, the question would always crop up--how could anybody do such a thing? They never found any answers, only some consolations. But this time the question wouldn't go away, enraging, terrifying. *Wish I still smoked;* Hutch paced restlessly instead as he tried not to think about it. How *could* anyone deliberately take away the person most important to him, the one he needed, loved the most, and put him through hell like that? Starsky, one of the most dynamic, bright, caring people Hutch had ever met. And for what, a madman's whim? *Oh, Starsk...*

Thinking about what his partner must have gone through nearly made Hutch's stomach turn.

He didn't know it all but he knew enough--the druggings, the confinement, the slashed palms, the mind games. And none of it made any sense. It was probably that lack of logic, of predictability, that frightened him most of all. *God, I need him to help me figure it out just like needs me.* Hutch always had.

Except Starsky needed him more. Hutch stopped, staring at the darkened door. That was the one thing that superseded his own needs, but helping Starsky usually ended up helping him too.

Hutch braced his shoulders and resolutely headed back. They would get through this. Somehow.

The room was dim but not as airless now, and Hutch slipped back into his chair with a silent sigh.

He'd removed the washcloth some time back, and Starsky's head was turned toward him, mouth slightly open in the depths of sleep. Hutch rested his gaze on that face more familiar than his own, just looking. The unruly dark curls, even wilder than usual. The unshaven curve of the jaw. The unusually pale complexion, flushed a little with the warmth of the room and the bed. The still-smudged closed eyes.

A sudden memory struck, of lying feverish, trapped under the wrecked LTD in Topanga Canyon, the presence of death close by, and suddenly that face appearing above him, grinning at him even through tears of relief. The same face that had floated into Hutch's drugged vision in another equally desperate time, lying sick and helpless in a back alley, too weak and tired to run anymore. Both times, the sight of that face had meant relief and safety, a badly needed rescue. But even more so it had meant comfort and love, someone he could trust to make everything right again.

It was no different now. Soaking up the sight of those features Hutch would have sold his soul a few days before to see, he felt himself relax into the chair, breath coming a little easier. Such closeness, almost dependence on one another for their own well-being was a scary thing. But it was what would get them through this too.

A knock sounded at the door, yanking Hutch rudely out of his thoughts.

Heart speeding up a little, he silently flowed out of the chair and collected his gun off the nearby dresser before slipping out to the front door. Hutch flattened himself behind it before opening it a cautious crack. And blinked.

"Mister...uh, Friedman?"

He'd only met Starsky's uncle once or twice before, but the man's resemblance to his sister Rachel was striking. And over the years, Hutch had heard an awful lot about his partner's Uncle Al and Aunt Rosie. Despite Starsky's mixed feelings about the part of his childhood spent in his uncle and aunt's home, there was nevertheless no question of his love for his relatives. Now, the smaller man stood on his doorstep with what seemed uncharacteristic hesitation, a box held uncomfortably in his arms.

"Detective Hutchinson." The man's voice was lightly accented, just like Rachel Starsky's was. "I'm sorry to bother you--this is a bad time?"

"Uh, no." He shoved the Magnum out of sight into the back of his jeans and held the door wider, glancing back at the bedroom as he did. Only silence from the darkened room. Hutch turned back to the visitor. "Come in, please."

"I'm sorry, I must go soon but...your boss, he said Davy is here with you, yes?"

Hutch ran a nervous hand through his hair. So the relatives did know. He would have to call Rachel soon before she really got worried. "Well, uh, he is but he's sleeping. Can I...take a message for him?" The words stumbled, lame.

Intelligent blue eyes, much like his nephew's, studied Hutch with more discernment than the blond was comfortable with. He had a feeling the man wasn't fooled for a minute, and chewed the inside of his lip as he began to wonder what he'd say if Friedman insisted on seeing Starsky. Not that Hutch would let him, there was no question of that, but the detective had no wish to upset his partner's family, either.

Uncle Al suddenly reached out the box instead and, caught off guard, Hutch automatically reached out and took it.

"No, no message, except that his family asked about him." Another piercing look and a cant of the head. "He *is* all right, yes?"

"Well, like I said, he's sleeping and he's pretty worn out, but he'll be all right." It was the truth, if a highly edited version of it. A euphonium, Starsky had called it once, trying for "euphemism."

"Maybe Davy could call his mother when he wakes up? She worries..." There was a look in the eyes of his partner's uncle, an understanding that he knew Hutch wasn't telling everything and Rachel had reason to worry, but he would keep his peace for the time being.

Hutch nodded, grateful. "And this...?" He nodded down at the box.

Friedman shrugged dismissively. "Just some food my Rosie make. For you both." He leaned closer confidentially. "The soup, it's not much good, but the blintzes--ah!" He grinned.

Hutch couldn't help but grin back. Blintzes, huh? "Thank you. I'm sure we'll both enjoy them very much, and please thank Mrs. Friedman too."

His only answer was a wave as the little man turned and disappeared down the steps in a trot.

Always moving, those Starskys...

Smile fading, Hutch shoved the door shut with his elbow and took the box into the kitchen. Already he could smell the scents coming from within, and added to the supplies Dobey had left behind, the refrigerator was rather nicely stocked. Remembering Starsky's own warnings about his Aunt Rosie's chicken soup, Hutch set it aside carefully with a small smile and proceeded to eat a long delayed dinner.

The food made everything seem a little better, like it so often did. His steps a little easier, Hutch checked again on the still-silent form in the bedroom, then returned to the living room.

The phone had been unplugged since the evening before when an untimely ring had shaken a still-skittish Starsky, and Hutch crawled under the table to plug it into the wall again, snatching the receiver up as he climbed to his feet and dialing the precinct. Dobey had already gone home--Hutch had figured as much--but it wasn't hard to get the information he wanted. Marcus' three

men had all been booked and were facing deposition hearings that week. All had given statements and full confessions, the fight having left them with their capture and the death of their impromptu leader. That was what Hutch wanted to know. It took only a little wheedling before Dobey's secretary promised to send someone by with a copy of the statements and all of Hutch's paperwork from the "incident." That done, he hung up and squirmed under the table to unplug the phone again. There was no one else he was interested in talking to.

One more stop in the kitchen. Hutch gathered a second bowl of Edith Dobey's soup, a glass of water, and a small stack of crackers. Starsky had kept the last meal down--it was an encouraging sign that the nausea-inducing drugs were pretty much out of his system and he could handle a little more food. The little steps of progress, Hutch reminded himself.

The bedroom was dark by then, only the faintest edge of purple left of the sun's light. Hutch set the tray down and opened the blinds, then the window to let in the faint fall breeze. It carried the smell of the nearby ocean, a reminder of life outside, and he breathed in deeply for a moment before turning back to the bed.

It was a repeat of before, trying to be gentle as he stirred his partner awake but getting little more than a drowsy start. Adjusting the pillows and the half-asleep brunet. Going through the motions of feeding the soup and crackers, followed by the water, saying something occasionally without any delusions about being heard.

Something had changed though, something subtle. Before, the dark blue eyes had been glazed, uncomprehending. Now they were merely ponderous with sleep, not attempting to rouse more fully. Starsky was waking up but putting it off as long as possible, and Hutch knew it. But he was letting his partner take it at his own pace and didn't push.

The food gone, he helped Starsky up and guided the sleepwalker to the bathroom, needing to help only a little as the necessities were tended to, another sign of Starsky's increased awareness. Then back to the bed, and this time Starsky burrowed under the covers with a sigh of peace that made his partner grin.

There was still one thing that needing taking care of, one he'd been putting off but that was better done before Starsky fully awoke. Hutch eased himself down on the edge of the bed and carefully pulled out the box stashed beside the nightstand, the box of supplies Jace had brought by that morning when he'd come to check on his patient.

Starsky was covered in bruises, the worst centered around his abdomen and lower back, evidence of repeated beatings and kicks. There was little to be done for those besides gentle handling and the healing of time. The cut on his head was also unbandaged and left alone to mend. But Starsky's hands, wrists, and ankles had been a mess and were swathed in the stained gauze Jace had wrapped them in the night before.

Hutch found the supplies he was looking for, setting them on the nightstand before placing the box on the floor. Then he carefully took one of the wrapped hands in his own, shearing through the gauze with a pair of scissors before slowly unwrapping it.

The bandage extended from the lower part of the fingers to all the way down past the wrists, and Hutch had to steady his breath as he was reminded what they hid underneath. The slash across the palm had been too old an injury for Jace to stitch and was infected from a week of ill treatment. Swollen and a fierce red, it looked painful and very tender to the touch. The wrist was a little better, fading purples and blacks of deep bruising almost hiding the nicks and tears of abraded flesh, leftovers from the rough rope binding.

Swallowing his revulsion, Hutch set to cleaning away the discharge of the infected cut, smearing it and the wrist with antibiotic cream. He watched his partner's face as he worked, looking closely for signs of pain, but besides a slight frown that creased Starsky's forehead as he slept, there was no reaction or attempt to escape Hutch's ministrations. That was a relief--he had no desire to hurt his partner any more than Starsky already had been.

One wrist finished, fresh gauze covering the indecent wounds, Hutch gently pulled the other hand into his lap for the same treatment. It looked just as bad as the first, and Hutch finished it as quickly as he could, tucking the newly wrapped hand out of sight under the blankets. Then he moved down to the feet.

The ankles were a little better than the wrists; presumably Starsky had not worked as hard to free his feet as he had his wrists, and neither the bruising nor the broken skin was as pronounced. But something about the sight still stirred fresh anger in Hutch, anger he'd managed to quell while working on the hands. *He was already tied up, hurting and drugged--where was he going to go? What good was it tying his bare feet together too?* But Hutch already knew the answer. He'd never be able to shake the memory as he'd broken into the clearing, of the sight of his partner kneeling before a post to which his hands and feet were tied behind him. The position had looked painfully uncomfortable, not allowing movement or even any kind of rest, but the cultists had clearly meant to humiliate and leave their sacrifice staked out and vulnerable. Even so, Starsky had found room to shrink back from the circle of his captors surrounding him when Hutch arrived, and the look of stark terror on his face then...

Hutch blinked hard. He didn't remember all the details after that, having given way to the frenzy in him that *needed* to get over there and tear away those ropes. After that there had been only rage, and awareness that his freed partner was somehow still able to fight at his side, and then the cultist who'd managed to sneak up behind Hutch with knife in hand and the gunshot that dropped him where he stood. Suddenly, the enemy was defeated and it was just the two of them, Starsky holding Hutch's gun on him, then turning it on himself...

Hutch dropped the roll of gauze and ran for the bathroom, his stomach rejecting the earlier dinner all at once.

He sat hunched by the porcelain bowl long after the spasms faded, gasping with his eyes squeezed shut. There was a selfish reason he'd concentrated on Starsky and deliberately not thought about that scene in the clearing since then. Maybe he just needed more time, though Hutch suspected he'd never make peace with the memory. The only remedy for it was the constant reminder sleeping in the bed next door, Life slowly raising and lowering his chest and beating against Hutch's fingers. The simple fact of life was the first and most important thing, and then there'd would be the slow return of awareness and talking and laughter and the presence

that Hutch took for granted but was oh, so grateful for. The nightmare had happened--nothing could change that now. But they could go on.

Hutch climbed shakily to his feet, rinsing his mouth at the sink before going back into the bedroom and picking up the first aid where he left off.

The second ankle was just finished and Hutch was pulling the blankets in place over the bare legs when the doorbell rang, a harsh, jarring sound in the peaceful home.

The impact on Starsky was immediate. The brunet's foot jerked away from his partner's hand as he jolted upright in the bed, a cry smothered in his throat and wild eyes wide open.

Hutch cursed under his breath as he lunged around the bed and grabbed the shaking shoulders. Starsky tried to pull away from his hands even as his eyes frantically sought out Hutch. The blond didn't let go but gentled his grasp. "Starsky, it's all right. It's just somebody at the door. Everything's okay. You're safe."

One beat, then another, and suddenly Starsky sagged, panting. Apparently only just then feeling his body's complaints, as one white-encased hand clutched his ribs, the other fumbling up to reach Hutch's hand on his shoulder. And the confused blue eyes never left his face.

Hutch squeezed first Starsky's shoulders, then the bandaged hand that was still trying to latch onto him despite the clumsiness of all that gauze in the way. He offered an encouraging smile. "I'll be back in just a second, okay? Somebody's at the door. It's okay."

Starsky didn't want to let him go and Hutch didn't want to leave, but he was afraid whoever was out there would ring again and he didn't want to startle his friend further. With another quick promise, he gently freed himself and ran out to the front door.

The courier from the station. Hutch all but grabbed the files from the startled man's hand, offering him a rushed thanks and good-bye before shutting the door in his face and, dropping the stack onto the dresser as he went, returning to the side of the bed. Starsky still sat there curled forward, trying to catch his breath.

"Starsk? Hey, partner." Hutch reached out a tentative hand and Starsky grasped it without even looking up, holding on as if for dear life. Another *déjà vu* struck, this time of sitting across the desk from each other at the station, Starsky dying of slow poison, reaching out for his partner like that despite the detectives that milled around them. Needing the strength of their contact.

"Marcus?" Starsky suddenly spoke, his voice cracking on the word. He licked his lips and tried again, looking up to meet Hutch's eyes. "Marcus? Adam?"

"They're gone, Starsky. Adam Rysack's dead, Marcus and the other three are in jail. You're safe now."

Starsky's eyes darted briefly around the room as if confirming his words before returning to Hutch. He swallowed heavily. "Gone."

Hutch frowned, not positive what that meant but taking a stab at it. "All of them. You're at home now--my place." Then, as a softer afterthought, "You're gonna be okay, buddy."

For a moment he thought it would all crash down on Starsky again, and he watched worriedly as his partner took a breath that wasn't wholly steady. But instead the hand that held on to his tightened briefly and then let go, the brunet beginning to visibly shore himself up again. Hutch almost shook his head. No matter how many times he saw his partner's resilience, it never ceased to impress him.

"You hungry?" he asked suddenly, unwilling nevertheless to let the other think too long. "Dobey brought some soup and meatloaf with potatoes from Edith, and your uncle was by with some blintzes--"

"Uncle Al?" Starsky was blinking at him in confusion, and Hutch forced himself to slow down a bit. For someone who was still tattered and near the edge, his partner looked pretty good, but that could still change in an instant if he was overwhelmed.

"Yeah. Dobey told him you were here. It's okay, I just said you were asleep and would call him later."

But Starsky's attention was already elsewhere, staring at his bandaged hand, then slowly pulling out the other from under the blanket to also study.

Hutch gently took hold of both hands, careful not to put pressure on the palm or wrists. "It's all right. They're a little banged up but Jace says they'll be as good as new in a few days."

"What happened?" Starsky's voice was beginning to take on the dazed tone of before, but it was the question that made Hutch's stomach twist. Surely Starsky hadn't blocked it all out? Maybe progress was a lot slower than he'd hoped.

"What do you remember?" Hutch asked cautiously. His hand slid up his partner's arm to take hold of the elbow, supportive. He and Jace had manhandled fresh pajamas onto the dead-asleep patient that morning but they were damp now, no doubt due to the stress of waking.

Starsky was shaking his head slowly back and forth. "Adam. Said he...saw Marcus' dreams." Horror began to creep into his eyes and the exhaustion roughened voice. "Couldn't...fight 'em all..." His breath came harder, near the gasping terror he'd woken in. "Hutch--"

But Hutch was already moving close, wrapping an arm around the shivering shoulders, pulling the dark-curved head back onto his shoulders like before. "Take it easy, it's okay now. No one else is here, just me." That was important. Part of recovery was feeling safe enough to expose all the pain and need and sort through it all. "Take it easy. It's all over, Starsk. It's over and your safe." How many times had he said that? And how many more would he have to?

Hutch waited again for the collapse, but the shuddering breaths eased a little, the pounding heart slowing, eventually falling into rhythm with his. There was something special about someone who could match their pulse to yours, so in tune with you at the deepest levels that they could always follow you, even when out of tune with the rest of the world. The thought of losing that

kind of unique bond made Hutch almost as scared as his partner, but he squelched the thought and just held on. Hutch rubbed the back of his partner's neck lightly, his hand half-buried in the curls.

Starsky finally started to pull back, face flushed and eyes averted in embarrassment. "I'm okay now."

"Okay." Hutch gamely released him and accepted the lie, still letting his partner set the pace. "Do you want to eat or take a shower?"

"What time 's it?"

Hutch glanced at the clock. "Close to ten. You had some soup and crackers not long ago, but I can warm up some meatloaf for ya if you want."

Starsky looked at him uncertainly for a moment, clearly not remembering the meal. "Shower," he finally said, wearily pushing back on the covers.

There was a fine line between giving needed help and crowding, and this was where it got a little fuzzy. Hutch hovered close, ready to give a hand but only if he had to. Starsky wavered on his feet for a minute but steadied, then shuffled toward the bathroom. Hutch met him at the door with a towel and change of clothes, and Starsky took them without a word before disappearing into the bathroom.

Hutch stood there a moment by the door, uncertain, then, hearing the water come on inside, headed toward the kitchen to warm up food.

This was where it got tougher. Starsky's earlier torpor had been difficult to watch and lonely, but Hutch had known his role then--nursemaid, cook, defender and comforter as needed. Now...he had the soul to look after as well as the body, and that was far more difficult. One of the key rules for helping a former hostage recover was to get him where he felt safe and return control to him, letting him make decisions, asking instead of telling, taking charge only when absolutely necessary. Which meant letting Starsky lead the way while helping him figure out where he needed to go. And that wouldn't be easy for either of them.

The water turned off by the time the food was almost ready, but it was several quiet minutes before the door opened, releasing a cloud of steam and one only slightly better-looking, bedraggled brunet. In fact, it looked like the shower had used up just about all his meager collection of strength, and Hutch didn't wonder this time about being needed, plopping the food down and hurrying over to snag one of Starsky's arms and guide him back to the bed.

The fresh bandages had all gotten wet, of course, and Hutch frowned at his forgetfulness but didn't say anything, instead focusing on untangling covers and rearranging pillows. "Hungry yet?" he asked.

His only answer was a mumble from deep within a pillow, but the gist of it came through. Hutch grinned.

"Maybe later, huh?" He reached to turn out the light. "Sleep well, partner."

That brought only a sigh of sleep.

Hutch sat there, motionless, waiting until the soft breaths were all long and even before digging out the box of medical supplies and redoing each of the bandages. Then, too tired to worry even about the cooling food or about being fully clothed, Hutch kicked off his shoes and crawled onto the other side of the bed, asleep almost the minute his head hit the pillow.

Cops, like mothers, slept with one ear open while on duty. Hutch wasn't, officially, but what he had to listen for was just as important as any job he'd ever been assigned. Even more so.

But it still took a minute for the quiet mutters to sink into his sleep-heavy brain, let alone to make sense of them. It was only when Hutch rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with one hand and pushed himself up on his elbow that he saw what had woken him.

Starsky rolled restlessly this way and that on the bed next to him, face contorted in fear of something only he could see. Perspiration dampened his hair, and his mouth moved silently. But it wasn't hard to read the "no" repeated over and over, or to guess who he was saying it to.

Hutch sat up, reaching out again to gently shake his partner. "C'mon, Starsky, wake up," he ordered, "C'mon, partner, it's just a nightmare. Starsk?" He chafed the pale cheek. "Hey. Please, pal, come on out of it."

Starsky sat up so suddenly, he nearly knocked against Hutch's chin. Hutch jerked back, still holding on to his friend's arms.

"Hutch?" Starsky gulped breathlessly. "Hutch?"

"I'm right here, partner." He moved his hands upwards, massaging the tense shoulders. This was getting old fast, but he just smiled with encouragement. "Back with me?"

Not quite yet. "Marcus?" Starsky asked.

Hutch flinched inside. He had no idea why his partner was so worried about Marcus instead of his recent captors, but apparently that demon wasn't quite laid to rest. "In jail, buddy," he said kindly. "Remember? Just you and me here."

Starsky didn't answer, but the fear was slowly seeping away, to be replaced by the now-common fatigue. He shrugged himself free of Hutch's hands and straightened up, however, clearly not intending to go back to sleep just yet.

Well...that was good, wasn't it? Maybe they'd finally do some talking. First things were first, though, like working off the fear that still haunted those blue eyes. "You wanna watch some TV?" Hutch asked nonchalantly. "Or eat? I've still got those blintzes Aunt Rosie sent."

It took a minute to make the connection, then Starsky's face cleared. "Yeah. Sounds good." His voice was--almost--as steady as if the nightmare had never happened and it wasn't close to the middle of the night.

"All right." Hutch stood. "I'll dish up some food and meet you in the living room, okay?"

Starsky nodded with barely disguised relief at being given a little space. Hutch almost smiled, sadly, to see it. *Not too good at hiding from me right now, partner. Then again, you never have been.* Nor he from the brunet, for that matter.

On the way to the kitchen, Hutch swung by the TV and turned it on, finding a channel playing an opera. He also grabbed the plate of cold food he'd left sitting on the sofa the night before and went back into the kitchen to fix up plates yet again, two sets this time.

There was some movement from the bedroom, and he watched out of the corner of his eye as Starsky appeared in the doorway, still looking sleepy and a little uncertain. He checked for Hutch first, relaxing as he found his partner, then scuffed around the sofa and dropped into it to watch what was playing. A minute later, Hutch heard him fiddling with the knobs, finding something else to watch, and the blond grinned to himself. The moments of normalcy were still too brief and far in between, but they were starting to come back.

Balancing a tray with four plates and two glasses, he finally went out into the living room to find his partner curled up into one corner of the sofa, deeply engrossed in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Hutch set the tray on the coffee table and detoured into the bedroom for a minute, returning with one of the blankets still warm from the bed. That he tucked around the lump at the end of the couch, winning him a friendly glower. Yep, more and more normal all the time.

"What's all that?" Starsky waved at the overflowing tray.

Hutch sank down beside him and made himself comfortable. "Dinner. I figure we both have some catching up to do."

Even the oblique mention passed a shadow through his partner's eyes and Hutch gave himself a mental kick, but they couldn't avoid the topic indefinitely, either. He glued on a cheerful smile.

"So that's what a blintz looks like, huh? Mind telling me how I remind you of a cheese-filled crêpe?"

That actually won a genuine if tired smile, the first in way, way too long. It almost hurt. Starsky shrugged gamely while reaching for a plate of the pale pastries. "I dunno. Long, skinny, and blond?"

It was Hutch's turn to glower at his partner. Man, he hadn't even realized how much he missed these stupid conversations, the idle talk that was still so important a reminder that the other was there, listening, really listening, to both what was being said and what wasn't. The humor eased the soul, but it also let them say things without being obvious about it. It was protection now, Starsky not being ready to talk but needing that connection, and Hutch was ready to play along for however long needed. That was how it worked.

They settled back to eat and watch TV.

But it was strange, the sudden swing from a living nightmare to living the mundane. The unreality of just sitting and watching TV with his partner not quite two days after finding him in the clearing was almost jarring, and Hutch found his gaze travelling back to the figure next to him over and over, confirming his reality. It was a deceptive one, he knew, the apparent peace of the moment hiding much unsettled. But the oasis of the moment, a brief return to normalcy, felt like something they both needed. Hutch sat back to enjoy the simple pleasure of relaxing with his friend.

It went by too fast. Starsky only ended up nibbling at his food despite his earlier apparent hunger, and somewhere along the way began to doze. Two violent starts later, Hutch finally pulled him over so that he was settled against the blond's side, his head resting against the beating heart of his partner, and that was how he fell deep asleep. Hutch just pulled the blanket up over them both and turned the TV down.

The *Twilight Zone* episode turned out to be part of a marathon, the episodes blurring together after a while, but ticking off the hours. Before Hutch knew it, light was beginning to show at the window. But he wasn't paying attention, or listening to the TV anymore, staring instead at the sleep-eased features of his best friend, the man who had helped him through so many struggles by sharing his own strength. And who now needed him.

How do you help someone put back together the pieces of their soul? Like after a forced drugging and withdrawal? his mind offered wryly. Starsky had known just when to bully and when to comfort then, when to talk and when to listen, getting Hutch through each day he hadn't been sure he could get through on his own, until he was ready to do it himself. And that had been while Starsky dealt with some pretty powerful aftershocks himself. Sometimes it seemed like they could do anything together, and other times Hutch felt like he could never do as much as Starsky did for him. *Not for him*, the inner voice chided. ***With him.***

With him. Hutch took a deep breath, unexpectedly reassured by the thought. It wasn't something he had to do alone, was it? That was the point.

Together, babe. We will do this together.

And spirit truly eased for the first time in a week, Hutch let himself fall asleep, the curls soft under his hand and the monsters arriving on Maple Street in the background.

It was a bad sign when you had to work to figure out what day it was and where you were waking up. Hutch mentally counted off--*Sunday*. As for where...the heavy weight sleeping against him wasn't quite the right shape and size he usually cared to wake up to, but it would do, Hutch thought fondly.

Starsky still seemed deeply under and the bathroom was calling most urgently, so Hutch set about gently extricating himself. Starsky's face creased at the movement, an incoherent mutter protesting the loss of a warm pillow, but Hutch eased him down into a more comfortable position

with a few whispered words, and soon his partner's breaths were long and even again, warm against Hutch's hand as he pulled the blanket higher.

Oh, man, sleeping like that hadn't been a good idea, though. His back protested every motion with sharp twinges in chorus with his neck. A shower--he desperately needed a warm shower. Hutch gingerly reached over and turned off the television mid-children's show, pausing to assess his partner again as the brunet muttered something else and turned over. Starsky's face twinged for a moment, no doubt registering his sore ribs, then he slid back into sleep again.

Hutch shook his head, yawning widely as he turned to head for the shower.

He still didn't dare take more than fifteen minutes, half-straining over the rattle of the water to hear into the living room as he let the wet heat pound away some of the crimps and knots. Cleansing, loosening--too bad there wasn't anything that could do for the mind what a good shower did for the body.

What do you call falling asleep on the couch to a Twilight Zone marathon, a togetherness kick? Hutch snorted, shaking his head as he turned off the water and toweled himself dry. A shave and he really would feel like a new man. Hutch slathered the cream over his face with one hand as he opened the door with the other and leaned out. No sign of life from the living room. *He still needs sleep--eyes are still too dark and sunken. Thank God the nightmares are leaving him pretty much alone.* They'd been there and done that, but the worst dreams usually went away when the other stayed close. *Needs to eat too. Maybe if I pick him up some of those donuts he loves?* Except that Starsky really needed some nourishing stuff to regain not only the dropped weight, but also his strength, the limitless energy. The light in his eyes. *Dear God, I miss that the most. I won't complain about the rest, but let him find that light again.* Without it, Starsky just wasn't himself.

Getting soapy in your old age. But he wasn't really, was he? He was just responding to Starsky as his partner needed it. Whatever Starsky needed--how could he do any less? *Whatever it takes, buddy, I'm gonna get you back,* Hutch swore to the slightly haggard face in the mirror. *And if I don't stop talking to myself, Starsk's gonna be the one who'll need to take care of me.*

The day was almost a copy of the one before it except that Starsky slept on the sofa instead of in the bedroom, and Hutch breathed a little easier as some of his worry lifted. His partner had lost the sickly look of exhaustion and slept more naturally now, replenishing his body's used-up reserves. He woke easily enough for meals and bathroom breaks, sleepy but aware, if laconic. No smiles or jokes, but then that wasn't unreasonable for someone who had just been through what he had, right? Still, it was a sign of how far they had yet to go. As was his partner's tendency to start at every sudden sound, slipping back to sleep just as quickly with a quiet word or touch.

In the meantime, it was Hutch who passed the day immersed in a nightmare. His own reports sat around him, ignored, as he'd gone straight to what terrified and drew him the most. Steeling himself and knowing he could never prepare for it, Hutch sat down to read through each statement given by the three captured cultists.

It was so much worse even than he'd expected.

...kicked and hit him...some herbal stuff, supposed to make you puke your guts out...don't know, left him there three, four days, maybe?...rituals...blood...salt water when he asked...begged...

It was hell typed out into neat lines, leaving Hutch's eyes and throat burning. Impossible for anyone with common decency to read straight through, let alone someone who felt every twinge and blow described, imagining it happening to one he loved. Hutch stopped often to sit and stare desperately at the figure stretched out on his sofa.

Begged... God, he begged. I'd beg for his life in a heartbeat, but he's so strong... But if it saved your life, Starsk, I'm glad. Should be thankful I got you back at all. And he was; dear God, he was. He just would have traded all he owned to erase the past week from both their lives.

Hutch's eyes were blurred and his stomach sickly knotted by the time he finished and just sat, staring blankly at the white sheets in his hands. Starsky's torment.

With a burst of savage, pent-up anger, Hutch tore them into the tiniest pieces his shaking hands could manage and stalked into the kitchen to bury them in the trash. He wanted no chance of Starsky finding them; living once through that was far too much already. And Hutch never wanted to see the files again in his life.

It was only after splashing cold water onto his face and clutching the edge of the sink for several minutes that the images finally retreated enough from his mind for him to go on. The boring paperwork, even the incident reports, would be a welcome distraction and Hutch hurried to return to it and throw himself into the work, unwilling to think for a while. He'd never felt so strongly like killing somebody before, not at Giovanni's, not at Vic Bellamy's place, not even at Forest's mansion, and the unfamiliar rage made his insides clench.

But the quiet sounds of sleep from nearby were soothing, a constant reminder of the present, as was the familiarity of the rote work. Hutch let it seep into him, loosening the kinks, easing the fear, filling his thoughts. This was his recovery program, Starsky helping him even asleep. Helping each other get through this.

With a ghost of a smile, Hutch returned to the paperwork.

The shadows were long and the light fading fast before Hutch looked up again, realizing with a start that it was going on eight, past dinnertime for them both.

He rose and walked into the kitchen, figuring as he went. Edith and Rosie's offerings were both getting a little low; time to figure something else out. Good thing he kept his larder better and more healthfully stocked than his live-on-pizza partner's, Hutch thought, but nothing seemed terribly appealing until his eyes lit on a carton of eggs. *Omelet...perfect. Starsk loves omelets, 'bout the only good taste he has in food.* Whistling under his breath, Hutch took out the eggs and cheese and butter, and with a little more digging, a still-salvageable tomato and pepper, survivors from his shopping trip before Starsky had disappeared and the world went dark.

Maybe with his back to the living room and the sizzling of the food, Hutch didn't hear the early warning signs, or maybe it was just a worse one to begin with. But the first indication something was wrong was the already loud, hoarse cry behind him.

Hutch whirled, spatula tumbling to the floor. The food vanished from his thoughts as he raced around the kitchen table and out into the living room. *Gun's too far away...* But the next second he already knew it wasn't needed. The enemy came from inside, not out.

Starsky was struggling to free himself from the tangled blankets, eyes open but unseeing, fighting an invisible adversary. The déjà vu to the day before slammed into Hutch so hard, Hutch nearly choked with it, but there was no time for that. He yanked loose the blanket, dropping it to the floor as he sat on the edge of the sofa cushion and urgently tried to calm his partner.

"Starsky! Take it easy. You're okay, you're--*oof!*" One of the brunet's floundering arms caught him in the chin, rattling his teeth. Hutch didn't want to add to the feeling of confinement and need to escape that Starsky was apparently struggling against, but one of them getting hurt wouldn't do much good, either. He leaned forward, wrapping his arms as quickly as he could around the struggling figure. "Starsky, it's me. It's Hutch. You're safe now, just have to wake up. Come on, buddy, don't do this to me..."

He knew it the moment Starsky snapped out of it, one minute suffused with desperate energy, the next weak and shaking with emotion, drawing in great sobbing breaths.

"Easy, pal, easy," Hutch coached, doing a one-handed massage of Starsky's back as he felt stiff fingers bunch in his own shirt. "Gonna be okay, Starsk, just breathe slow and deep. I gotcha." And he did, for he couldn't have held tighter if he wanted to without risk of hurting his partner.

Starsky did take a deep breath, then groaned, grinding his face into Hutch's neck.

"What's wrong, partner?" Hutch asked, alarmed.

"Ribs. Hurts."

Darn it, he'd forgotten about that. Hutch loosened his hold a little, trying to see into his partner's face. "Jace left some pills in case you needed 'em. Let me go get 'em for you."

But the curls shook tightly. "Uh-uh. Don't wanna be...doped up."

Hutch swallowed, smiling without humor. This was so hard. "Okay, no weird pills. How 'bout some aspirin at least?"

A pause, then a nod.

Thank God for that. "I'll be right back," Hutch promised. He had to pry loose the cold fingers, but he let the brunet down easy against the back of the sofa, not liking the pinched expression he finally saw clearly. "I'll only be a second."

Two other bottles tumbled out of the medicine cabinet in his haste to find the aspirin, and when he reached the kitchen and the oily smoke hit his nose, Hutch also remembered the food he'd left on the stove. With a stifled curse, he turned the stove off even as he grabbed a glass out of the cupboard and filled it with water. The omelet remains would have to wait.

Back to the living room. Hutch crouched by the sofa, offering two of the round pills and the water, ignoring the tremor of the hand that took them. He took the water glass back when his partner was finished, setting it carefully on the coffee table before turning back to study Starsky.

He'd seen his friend look better. The dark head was leaned back against the top of the sofa, eyes gazing blankly at the ceiling as Starsky slowly caught his breath. Both arms were now wrapped around his middle, ostensibly protecting his aching chest and abdomen, but the effect was a vulnerable look that made Hutch wince. *Like he'll break if he has to take anymore.* That his partner still reacted like that there, in the safety of the Venice apartment, was one more indecency Hutch chalked up to the cultists' tabs.

Hutch sat down on the coffee table opposite the couch and turned the anger off just as quickly, not wanting to expose his temporarily defenseless partner to the negative feelings. Instead, he reached out, gently rubbing the side of Starsky's neck, curling his hand around the nape before bringing it forward to cup a burred cheek.

"Starsk?"

He watched the throat move in a hard swallow. "M fine."

"Liar," Hutch said tenderly.

Starsky's head rolled a little to the left to look at him. "Where's Adam?"

Hutch's hand involuntarily tightened a fraction. "He's dead," he said flatly. "The rest of 'em are in jail."

Starsky closed his eyes and nodded. "You?"

It was a good thing their usual conversations half-consisted of mind reading already. "I'm fine," Hutch said firmly. The last thing he wanted was Starsky worrying about him.

Starsky opened his eyes briefly to examine him, checking his words, then relaxed a little and shut them again, not saying anything further.

Hutch resumed his caress, still watching his partner's face carefully. "You wanna talk about it?"

The brunet's jaw clenched under Hutch's fingers but he didn't answer.

"Starsky?" Hutch prodded carefully. "What did you dream about?"

"I forget." Cold and uninviting, but Hutch had long learned not to wait for invitations.

But this wasn't the time for pushing. "All right," he accepted that. "How 'bout some dinner then? I think I charbroiled the omelet, but I can make another one."

Another shake of the head. "M not hungry."

Hutch grimaced but chose not to comment on either the frigid tone or his friend's obvious need for a few good meals. "Okay," he finally sighed, pulling his hand away and beginning to rise.

Starsky's eyes flew open, seeking him out with alarm as he reflexively grabbed for Hutch's sleeve. "Where ya goin'?"

Hutch stared at him. For a first real reaction, it was not what he'd been looking for. "Just to the kitchen. I've gotta eat even if you don't. I'm just gonna fix some more eggs." Hutch's heart was bleeding with compassion; he could hear it even in his stupid words. He only hoped Starsky could too, because the man looked like he badly needed it. "Wanna come with me?" he added lightly.

It took a deliberate effort for the fingers to loosen from his shirt, but the animation died from his partner's face nearly as quickly as it had come. "Sure," was all he said, voice almost neutral again.

But Hutch knew better. For a moment there he'd seen all the fear and anger and pain that dwelt behind that flat expression, and he wasn't about to forget it. *You're calling the shots right now, buddy, but only as long as you're not hurting yourself.* Maybe Starsky needed the denial a little longer before he was strong enough to deal with everything, but they would deal with it.

He had to help his friend up off the couch, the aspirin not having taken effect yet. Starsky moved like an unsteady toddler, but at least he was up and Hutch wasn't about to complain. Even if Starsky was only moving in order to stay with Hutch. For someone who didn't want to talk, his partner certainly seemed to need the company, but that was just fine with the blond. He had no intention of going anywhere.

After making sure Starsky was settled in a kitchen chair, Hutch set about cleaning out the burned pan and omelet pieces, wrinkling his nose at the smell. Once the pan was washed, he set to combining the ingredients again, starting with a fresh trio of eggs.

"What time is it?" Starsky asked quietly behind him.

"Uh..." His pocket watch was inaccessible but the kitchen clock was just near enough to see.

"Nine-thirty-three. These late dinners are starting to become a habit."

"Nine-thirty...PM?"

Hutch turned, startled. Then smiled softly. "Yeah, PM. Sunday night."

The day was obviously also a surprise, and Starsky fell into silent thought. Hutch turned back to the omelet. He remembered how it felt to have lost a week, remembering so little from the Friday

Forest's men had grabbed him to the Thursday he'd woken up in Huggy's apartment, completely at a loss except for Starsky sitting nearby, smiling at him as if Hutch were the best thing Starsky had ever seen. The time in between was better off lost, once bits and pieces started coming back and Hutch put together what had happened, but it was still hard to take in. Without Starsky there to be the anchor through all the chaos, he would have been completely bereft.

There was a shift of movement and an in-drawn breath from the kitchen table, and Hutch flinched sympathetically as he worked. "Aspirin kicking in yet?"

"A little."

"How're your hands doing?"

A pause, and he took a half-glance back to see Starsky studying the wrapped appendages. "Itch some," the brunet finally said. "Throbbin'."

Hutch nodded. "They got a little infected but Jace left some stuff for it. We should change the bandages after dinner."

No answer again. Usually conversation was so easy between them, even the silences comfortable and communicative. When something was wrong with one of them, that was usually where it would show up first, telling in its own way. Like now, the silences of fear and confusion and fatigue of mind. *I know you so well, you don't even have to talk anymore*, Hutch mused as he shredded cheese into the egg mix. *Is that what you hear too, whenever something's buggin' me and you won't leave me alone 'til you figure out what it is and help me fix it?* And it always worked. They knew each other so inside-out, it had to.

Hutch swallowed, his hands slowing, then stopping. "It's gonna be okay, partner, I promise," he abruptly whispered, needing to say it out loud. Starsky was hurting too much to be listening well and probably needed to hear it too.

A hitch of breath was the only reaction he got, but Hutch could almost hear his partner's thoughts in response, wondering how everything could be all right when he felt so messed up and miserable inside. The blond had been there himself. Hutch dropped the spoon into the bowl and turned, crouching by the figure hunched at the table. He grasped his partner's arm above the elbow, pressing it once.

"I promise," he repeated seriously. "We'll get through this."

Starsky stared at him for a long moment, then nodded once, eyes shadowed but calmer. Hutch never lied to him and they both knew it.

Hutch stood and returned to the stove, finishing the omelet within a few minutes. But he ate alone and with little appetite.

The night dragged on, a mix of healing and hurting. Hutch was exhausted, dragging and ready for bed, but Starsky didn't seem the least bit interested in sleep. Not surprising, Hutch considered wearily, seeing as the other had slept the day through. If they'd stayed up to talk, that would have been one thing, but it was almost as if Starsky was waiting out the night before he could allow himself to sleep. Hutch frowned to himself--did that even make sense? He couldn't tell anymore, his mind too fuzzy with fatigue.

He'd have turned in and left Starsky watching TV to his heart's content in the meantime, except that his being out of the room for even a minute seemed to distress his partner. Not that Starsky said a thing, but the agitated way his gaze followed Hutch as if afraid that the blond would vanish at any moment, spoke enough for him. And so Hutch had found himself making excuses for staying up and nearby, eventually settling on the sofa next to Starsky in front of the TV again. There, he finally succumbed to fatigue, curling up next to his partner. Starsky didn't seem to mind, apparently comforted just by Hutch's presence and content even with unconscious company. *If that's what you need, buddy...* Healing had many avenues, of which talking was only one, and feeling safe and not alone was definitely another of them.

As the world faded away, Hutch could have sworn he felt a hand brush lightly through his hair. He hadn't even realized how bruised his own heart was until the pain eased with the gentle comfort. The warm, safe body next to him and the low murmur of the TV in the background soothing him, Hutch fell asleep with a smile pulling at his lips.

The sofa was going to kill him. He tried to stretch without groaning or jarring the snoring lump next to him, feeling every single complaint his back made against his new sleeping arrangements. "Gonna end up in traction before we sort this out, buddy," Hutch murmured to the mess of dark curls, all that was visible from the blankets next to him, before disentangling himself and limping to the bathroom.

They'd forgotten to do the bandages the night before, of course, he reminded himself sourly at the sight of the knocked over pill bottles in the sink, but he had no desire to wake Starsky to do them now. It could wait; his partner looked too comfortable and worn to bother.

But Starsky would probably sleep the day through again, waking at night, and the inversion of sleep and wakefulness worried Hutch. He turned the shower on and stripped, grimacing at the direction his thoughts were taking. He was no psychologist, but he knew his partner and it was becoming obvious that Starsky wasn't comfortable with the night, preferring to be awake until light broke. It was okay short-term, while everything else in his system was still equalizing itself too, but it wouldn't do as a new way of life. Even the times they pulled night duty and had to sleep days, Starsky had always complained about yawning all night and tossing and turning the day through. His doing it by choice just wasn't healthy.

The water was beginning to steam and Hutch climbed in gingerly, the sting of his sore back almost welcome as the hot shower worked its magic. Psychologist...it was almost a dirty word between the two of them. They'd both attended mandatory counseling sessions with Berrimen, the department shrink, but usually they found each other to be the best listening board. Even

now, even somewhat at a loss, Hutch had no intention of bringing in a relative stranger to force Starsky to open up to when it was too painful yet for him to even talk to Hutch. But maybe seeking a little advice wouldn't be amiss.

For now, though, the most important thing was that Starsky felt safe and in control, and the fact that he was sleeping as well as he was at all was a good sign. *They took so much from him...* The thought made Hutch blink hard, and it wasn't from the water in his eyes. *His dignity, his confidence, his control. Even his identity--his clothes, ID. I'd be surprised if he wasn't having a tough time bouncing back.*

By the time the shower was done, Hutch had made some decisions and headed into the bedroom for a change of clothes and to plug in the phone and make some calls.

The first one was to their doctor *pro tem*, Jace Broadhurst, and his friend greeted him warmly. "Hey, Ken, you had me worried here. You were gonna call me yesterday to tell me how he's doing!"

The days were beginning to blur, Hutch thought thickly, rubbing at his forehead. "I'm sorry, Jace, I just..."

"I know. So how is he?"

Simple question, not so simple answer. "He isn't ready to run a marathon yet, but he's gettin' there," Hutch hedged. "His ribs have been giving him some trouble but the aspirin seems to take care of that, and I'm still trying to get him to eat."

"Well...we both figured that much. You know what to do for him. But that's not what I was asking and you know it. How's he *really* doing?"

Hutch's shoulders slumped. "I don't know yet, Jace. He's had a few nightmares but otherwise he seems to be sleeping okay, except he sleeps all day and stays up at night. I also can't get him to say more than two words, and he won't talk about what happened yet."

"It hasn't even been three days, Ken," Broadhurst soothed. "He's still getting back on his feet--don't expect him to be ready to sort out what's in his head before he's physically strong enough to deal with it."

That made sense, Hutch had to concede. "What about the sleep inversion?"

"My guess is it's just part of his coping. When he figures the rest out, that'll fall into place too."

"So you don't think I should worry?" Hutch asked skeptically.

Broadhurst hesitated. "Ken, I've known both of you for a long time now, but that's not even close to how well you two know each other. What do you think?"

Hutch leaned his forehead against the heel of his hand. "I think he's hurting."

"You both are," Jace said quietly. "You've both been through a traumatic ordeal, and that's not gonna go away overnight. But the best treatment for that is support and care. Do you think Dave could get that any better from anywhere else?"

Put like that, it seemed pretty obvious. Hutch shook his head. "No."

"So give both of yourselves some time. You've got the best kind of instincts where he's concerned, the kind you get from experience and...well, love. You can figure out what he needs and give it to him. It won't happen right away, but it'll happen."

Hutch's mouth turned up at one corner. "You shoulda been a shrink, Jace, you know that?"

Broadhurst laughed. "Every doctor worth his salt has to be part psychologist, Ken, but with you two it's easy. Best remedy I can offer one of you is always the other. More people had partnerships like the two of you and I could cut my practice by about two-thirds."

Hutch couldn't help a grin at that. "Thanks, Jace. Add it to my bill, would ya?"

"Can do. Let me know how things are going, huh?"

"I will, buddy. Thanks." And he gently hung up the phone.

Jace was right. Talking to Berrimen still wasn't a bad idea and Dobey would probably order them both to do it before they returned to duty, but that would wait. They had to sort through some things first, just the two of them. Nobody knew his partner like Hutch did, and that would work for them if he gave it enough time. He took a deep breath. It was just hard to be patient when the person most important to him was in silent pain.

Two more calls to make. It was with guilty relief that Hutch found Dobey out of the office when he tried his boss, and he left a cryptic, short message with the secretary that the black man would understand. Dobey had been the one who'd kept him going all during the search for Starsky, and the man was a friend as well as their captain and deserved to know what was going on. And Hutch appreciated just the fact that Dobey had been tactful and trusting enough to leave them to themselves over the previous two days; he knew how hard it had to be for the captain, one of the few who'd been privy to how badly off Starsky really was. But Hutch wasn't quite ready yet to answer all the inevitable questions, or be showered with sympathy.

The last call rang only once before it was picked up with a jaunty, *"You got the Bear, so name your fare."*

Hutch found himself grinning again. "Huggy?"

"Hutch! One of my two favorite detectives! And how's my other favorite doing?"

"He's been better, Hug, but he's sleeping right now. That's why I'm calling--any chance you could come over here for a couple of hours while he's asleep and just stay with him? I've got a few things I need to take care of but if he wakes up, I don't want him to be alone."

"You have but to ask! Y'want me to come now?"

"Soon as you can make it. Thanks, Huggy."

"Hey, he's my friend too, y'dig? I'll bring along a dose of my Starsky Special, put some meat on those skinny bones."

Hutch grinned again. "Okay, see you soon." He hung up the phone. Skinny bones--of all the things he'd thought of his partner, that was never one of them, Hutch shook his head in amusement, but he was certainly all for getting the brunet to eat. With any luck, Huggy's unique brand of charm and "specials" would prove more irresistible than Hutch's efforts had been.

A groan from the other room suddenly cut into his thoughts. Hutch scrambled to his feet, nearly tripping on a trailing pajama sleeve, and hurried out of the bedroom.

"Starsky?"

Just the worried call of his name made Starsky's eyes snap open and he looked around disorientedly, pale and sweating. "Hutch?"

"Right here." He reached the side of the sofa and sat down on it, fixing the twisted blankets.

"Another bad one?"

Starsky collapsed back against the pillow and closed his eyes as he tried to catch his breath. "S'okay." The blue eyes snapped open again. "Marcus?"

"Gone, partner. In jail," Hutch answered quietly, painfully. Apparently feeling safe had only sunk in so deeply yet.

"He was here," Starsky murmured sleepily, already drifting. "Thought he...got ya."

"It was just a dream, buddy. I'm here and Marcus isn't. It's safe." He carefully encircled one of the bandaged hands. "Go back to sleep. I'll stay here 'til you do."

The mutter of a reply was too faint to hear but it sounded relieved.

Hutch breathed a quiet sigh, reaching out his free hand to feel the flushed face for fever. . *Nope--he's almost cold. Just another nightmare.* "Just." Hutch looked forward to anything being "just." The hand was utterly limp in his own, and he gently tucked it under the covers before rising and fetching another blanket from the bedroom, adding it to the pile on the sofa. And then he sat beside the front window and stared down at the street until Huggy arrived.

Hutch felt around on the lintel for the key for a moment before realizing he had it on him. In a sudden odd rush of protectiveness, he'd removed it soon after bringing his partner home, and stuck it into his wallet with the LTD's key. Now, he had to shift the bag in his hand to get it out and quietly unlock the door.

Hutch slipped inside, not wanting to wake Starsky should he be sleeping. And he was, much as Hutch had left him but this time with Huggy sitting nearby, half-watching him.

Their informant friend looked up and grinned as Hutch entered, tossing aside the magazine he'd been flipping through. "M'man!" he stage whispered. "Am I glad to see you!"

Hutch dropped the bag onto the table by the door and worriedly turned to meet Huggy's gaze. "Something wrong?"

"Not now. But your better half wasn't too happy 'bout wakin' up and finding my handsome face instead of yours. Took me a while just to convince him you weren't missin' or lyin' dead somewhere."

The thought made him unexpectedly shiver, a little too close to recent fears of his own. "I was hoping he wouldn't wake up," Hutch murmured. "Sorry, Hug." He glanced with concern at the sofa again but the brunet seemed comfortably asleep and oblivious to his arrival.

"Hey, no problem. He woke up to use the facilities, y' know? And he just wasn't expectin' t'see me."

The thin black man suddenly sobered. "He was askin' about Marcus. I gather that's our friend Simon?"

Hutch cringed, trying not to recognize the twinge of despair in his gut. "Yeah, he's been asking about him a lot. Just about every time he wakes up from a--when he wakes up," Hutch quickly amended. Some of what happened would remain between him and Starsky.

But Huggy stared at him with wise, knowing eyes. "Uh-huh. Well, I told him Marcus was doin' his dreamin' from inside San Quentin now, but I think he'll believe it more from you." Huggy shook his head in mock disbelief. "Though how anybody would want a white bread officer of the law over a personification of street class and re-fine-ment like myself is beyond me." A melodramatic sigh.

The act cheered him just like it was meant to, and Hutch smiled. "Thanks again, Huggy, I'll take it from here."

"Yeah, well, you take care of both of you, y'hear? I don't want t'be playin' babysitter for the both of you." Huggy gave him another loaded look, then sauntered out the door. Hutch shut it quietly behind him, leaning against the heavy wood for a minute.

"Hutch?" came a groggy call suddenly from the sofa. Hutch turned in surprise.

"Hey, Starsk." He smiled, rounding the end of the couch. "Heard you gave Huggy a hard time."

The blue eyes narrowed in bewilderment, not responding to the tease, and Starsky pushed himself up a little. "Where were you?"

"Just had some errands to do. Nothing special." The bag on the table could wait.

"Thought..." Starsky's voice trailed away, as did his gaze.

Hutch gave him a fond smile, resting his hand for a moment on the side of the curl-covered head. "Don't think so much, huh? I'm fine, I just had a few things to take care of and I asked Huggy to come over and keep you company. Don't worry about me--let's concentrate on getting you back on your feet, okay?"

There was a flash of irritation in the dark blue, and something else. Fear? Hutch's hand fell away as he grimaced inside. He shouldn't have left without Starsky knowing--here he'd been trying to give his partner back control and then he disappeared on him without giving the brunet any say in the matter. *Good, Hutchinson.* But the errands had been important and at least he'd gotten what he needed.

He patted a blanket-covered knee as he stood. "It's a little late for lunch, but how does an early dinner sound? Or did Huggy ruin your appetite?"

Another bewildered look. "I didn't eat. I don't think. Did Huggy bring somethin'?"

"A 'Starsky Special,' he said, but I didn't have a chance to see it. Wanna risk it?" Hutch asked, grinning.

A listless shrug and no smile in response, and Hutch's quickly faded away as he helped his partner rise and slog into the kitchen.

God, I miss him. Let him come back soon, please.

The Starsky Special, just like the rarer Hutchinson Special, could be anything Huggy felt like whipping up at the moment, but that day it was a plump hamburger with unusually fresh trimmings, a bag of potato chips, and a fat, fudge-encrusted, nut-filled brownie. Hutch just shook his head, impressed at how the barkeep had gone all out to tempt his friend. And it worked. Even Starsky couldn't be ambivalent about that meal, and Hutch was cheered to watch his partner polish off half the burger and most of the brownie before pushing the plate away. It was only about a fourth of what Starsky could pack away when he was hungry, but, thank God, it was a start.

One more step. They're slow and small and I wish I knew how many we had left, but each one takes us a little closer.

Next came bandage changing, the first Starsky had been awake and aware for. Hutch found himself glancing up into his partner's face repeatedly as he removed the bandage, exposing the slashed palm. The cut was slightly less puckered and red than before, responding to the antibiotic, but it still looked painful and cruel. Hutch wasn't surprised when the hand shifted a little in his own, no doubt tight and aching as Starsky had complained earlier. The wrists were little better, the bruising faded enough now to reveal the torn flesh.

But Starsky didn't say a word, eyes dark and opaque, revealing nothing as Hutch gently cleaned and put ointment on each wound before rebandaging it and moving on to the next. *It's hard not to think about it when it's right in front of you, isn't it, partner?* he thought soberly. *Wish you'd tell me what's goin' on in that head of yours.* For once, he really didn't know, and Starsky wasn't talking.

The evening continued equally quietly, Starsky dozing in and out in the easy chair next to the sofa, and Hutch finally able to concentrate enough to read a book next to his partner. And this time when he'd finally announced he was turning in, Starsky only gave him a wave, transplanting himself back in front of the television to wile the night away.

Hutch paused, watching him from the bedroom doorway. "Hey, you wanna do some of the paperwork since you're up? Good cure for insomnia," he hinted lightly.

The dark curls shook without turning. "Uh-uh. Just gonna watch some TV."

"Starsk..." He came over and leaned against the back of the sofa, peering over into his partner's expressionless face. "The work would probably do you good, keep your mind busier than that junk," he waved at the TV.

Starsky just shook his head again.

Hutch made a face and silently left to get ready for bed. *Tomorrow, Starsk. We've tried it your way, buddy, and you've gotten 'bout as far as you're gonna go this way. Now it's my turn.*

Later that night, something woke Hutch from restless sleep, a covert glance revealing the dim human shape in the chair near the bed. He wasn't surprised. But feigning unbroken sleep, Hutch repeated the promise silently to himself.

Tomorrow, partner. One way or another.

The day dawned clear and beautiful, heralded by a chorus of birdsong coming in through the open bedroom window. Hutch stretched and then just lay for a moment and listened. *Need to get Starsk out there--he hasn't been outside since...* A sudden memory of the night before resurfaced and Hutch turned to look at the nearby chair, but it sat empty.

He rose and dressed quickly before going out into the living room. The TV was on, some morning talk show's cooking segment playing. Without audience; Starsky was his usual mess of blankets and askew pillows on the sofa, his half-buried face showing the lines of another long, sleepless night.

Hutch sighed, then strode on into the kitchen and began to make breakfast as loudly as he was able.

It worked--two minutes later an irritable pair of blue eyes peered over the arm of the sofa at him. "What're you doin'?"

The exhaustion in his voice was thick enough to part with a comb and Hutch felt a momentary pang of guilt--apparently even the sleep his partner was getting wasn't providing much rest. But he smiled cheerfully. "Fixing breakfast. You want one piece of toast or two?"

"I wanna *sleep*," Starsky said crossly, making to lie down again.

Choices--control, Hutch reminded himself, his insides a worried mess. "It's late morning, buddy. We can either have breakfast or we can take a walk--gorgeous day outside. What d'ya say? I'd really like the company."

The last was tossed in almost as a throwaway, but it had its desired effect. Starsky hesitated, clearly wanting to turn him down and not quite able, not if Hutch really wanted him to. *That's what I'm counting on, partner. Help me help you.* A frustrated mutter told him the decision was made, and he watched surreptitiously as Starsky struggled to his feet and then slouched into the kitchen, one arm around his middle.

"Ribs bothering you?" Hutch asked quietly. He got a noncommittal noise in response, interpreted it as a yes, and silently added the aspirin bottle and a glass of juice to the table before turning back to his preparations. "So, one piece or two?"

"Hutch..." There was pleading in the voice but he ignored it. Then a quiet sound of resignation. "One."

"Butter?"

"Don' care."

That'd also be a yes, Hutch decided, taking the butter dish out from the refrigerator, then, as an afterthought, a lemon. He put some water in the kettle to heat and dug out the tea bags and honey from the cupboard. *Should have remembered before.* Starsky had always liked tea when he was under the weather, but even better, it was a good combination of soothing heat and caffeine to keep him up.

The toast was ready a minute later, but Hutch waited until the kettle was simmering and he'd fixed two cups of tea to go with it. He also added to the table some of the grape jelly Starsky liked, then set out both plates of toast and teacups.

Starsky only raised an eyebrow at him before halfheartedly starting into his meal. Hutch relaxed a little; at least he was eating.

They sat together in near silence, Hutch polishing off his two pieces of toast and jam before Starsky even got halfway through his one. Hutch finally sat up a little straighter, affixing a smile to his face. "How 'bout that walk after breakfast?"

"No." It was accompanied by a firm shake of the head, eyes on the table.

Hutch leaned forward, his hand near but not quite touching his partner's. "C'mon, Starsk," he said quietly. "You haven't been outside in nearly four days and it's beautiful out there. We don't have

to do a lot, just maybe go down to the end of the block and back, or we could drive to the beach and just sit and--"

Starsky stood so quickly that his chair nearly fell over, one arm automatically going to his protesting side. "Something wrong with your ears, Hutchinson? I said no! I don't wanna go anywhere, I don't wanna do anything, so forget it, huh?" And he turned and stalked as quickly as his abused body would allow, into the bathroom to slam the door behind him.

Hutch sat frozen at the table. He was quite capable of going after his partner when Starsky was in denial, getting in his way, nudging, prodding, even yelling if he had to until it all exploded and came out into the open. But this was still shaky ground he was treading on, and he wasn't sure he hadn't pushed too hard. Hutch slumped in his chair. *God...I don't want to hurt him any more than he is. If I make him do what he doesn't want to, I'm not much better than those animals who had him prisoner.* His intentions were better, of course, but what good would that do if it ended up pushing Starsky away, taking away from him even this one last refuge and retreat of safety? He's helped me so much--what if I can't help him? And how much of what Hutch wanted was really for Starsky, anyway, and not his own selfish desire to have his partner back?

That's not it and you know it. You'd trade places with him in a second. But he's gonna need to face this and it'll hurt worse before it gets better--are you strong enough to take him through that? Hutch's hands curled into fists on the tabletop. He had to be. That was all there was to it.

A long ten minutes later, he was clearing the table when the bathroom door rattled and Starsky reappeared, eyes averted from the kitchen as he slowly made his way back to the sofa. It was only after he'd sunk down into the cushions that he quietly spoke.

"Hutch...I'm sorry."

Hutch didn't look up. "It's okay."

"No, it ain't. I just...don't want to talk about it right now."

"You have to sometime, buddy," Hutch said softly, still now as he looked out into the living room, but Starsky's eyes were on the TV.

"I don't wanna go out." The tone of finality said the topic was closed, and Hutch only pressed his lips together and didn't argue.

It didn't end up being exactly as he imagined, keeping Starsky awake and busy the day rest of the day. His partner seemed willing enough to go along with the first part even though his eyes were glassy with fatigue--and Hutch had no doubts he still intended to stay up all night too. But as for being together...ultimately the only way Hutch was able to stay within ten feet of his skittish friend was to sit and watch TV with him, neither of them paying much attention to the mind-numbing daytime fare. Hutch resolved to throw the stupid set away as soon as they were through this mess, certain he'd had enough of it to last his lifetime.

Lunch came and went with as much enthusiasm as breakfast. Starsky nibbled at the leftover hamburger from the day before and drank most of the tea Hutch set out on the coffee table for

him, but that was the extent of his interest in food. Afterwards, he simply sank back into the listless stupor that was beginning to characterize his waking hours, alternating between ignoring or snapping at his partner, and flashes of guilt and fear for pushing away his closest ally. The mood swings Jace had predicted had been quite the understatement, Hutch thought tiredly.

This wasn't going at all like Hutch had hoped. His partner had always known what he needed-- why couldn't he return the favor? The fear that had been gnawing at him all week threatened to eat right through him. Hutch had no idea what the next step was, and that scared him most of all.

There had still been paperwork to do; between the shooting, injury, arrest, crime, and evidence reports, not to mention Starsky's insurance paperwork, the pile sent from the office had been impressive. Hutch did what he could, leaving a much smaller pile that only his partner could do and that Starsky would have to finish himself. There was also Starsky's statement still to be collected, "whenever medically feasible"--but when the patient wasn't even willing to talk, let alone go through what had happened to him, Hutch figured that wasn't feasible yet and let it be.

He finally stretched, realizing the room was growing dim with the beginnings of twilight. The evening game shows were just beginning, a burst of applause splashing from the TV as he turned to look at the form huddled before the box. Starsky was still awake, at least physically, too tired and distracted to be taking in what he was seeing but his eyes stuck to the screen nevertheless. Hutch shook his head at the sight, trying not to feel the ache of seeing his lively, active partner reduced to a shadow.

He couldn't look any longer and his gaze absently circled the room instead, lighting unexpectedly on the bag that sat by the door. And the first sparkle of hope he'd felt in a long time lighted his heart.

Hutch stood, crossing the room to pick up the plain brown bag and switch on the living room lights before he went to the TV and flicked it decisively off.

It took a moment for the act to register and Starsky to rouse himself, but the brunet finally stirred. "Hey!" The familiar anger began to build again in his eyes.

Hutch ignored it, shoving aside the clutter on the coffee table to sit on its edge. "I brought you something," he said simply, unrolling the bag.

Starsky eased himself a little higher on the sofa, eyes warily on his partner.

Hutch glanced into the bag, then reached in for one of the items and carefully removed it before holding it out to the brunet.

The edge in the dark blue eyes softened as they took in the worn folded brown leather, and Starsky took it with almost reverence. "Where'd ya get it?" he asked quietly as he opened up the wallet, all the familiar cards and pictures inside.

"Impound. They found it on scene and Dobe cleared the paperwork so I could have it." He reached into the bag again, taking out a newer leather case and handing it over. "We think they destroyed your badge, though. I had to get you a new one."

That was hesitantly accepted and opened too, and Starsky glanced at him in surprise at the sight of the badge within. "That's my number," he said blankly.

"Course it is, dummy." Hutch smiled softly, no sting in the words. "That's you."

Starsky just stared at the two leather folds, silent.

Hutch paused a moment, then dipped into the bag once more to pull out the Smith & Wesson in its holster.

Starsky blinked at him. "That was at the scene too?"

"It was at your place. Looks like you took it off before..." Hutch let that trail off, licking his lips. He'd hoped his partner would remember that part. "Just thought you'd want to have it with you."

"Yeah," came the near whisper, two fingers absently rubbing the cracked leather straps.

"One more thing," Hutch said, feeling along the bottom of the bag. "I had to dig a little for this one--they didn't know it was yours and it was in with the confiscated belongings, but I thought you'd want to have it." The circles of metal dug into his palm as he clasped it tight, then laid it in Starsky's hand, his fingers pressing his partner's for a moment in silent promise.

Starsky swallowed hard, the thin leather thong and coin charms threaded through it held gingerly in his open hand. The snapped ends of the leather attested to the force with which it'd been torn from his neck.

He cleared his throat finally, voice still hoarse when he spoke. "Thanks." And his eyes shone as they rose to meet his partner's.

Hutch felt a little choked himself. "Welcome back, buddy." His eyes fell back on the charms, remembering, the emotions overflowing. "Starsk...for a while there, I wasn't sure I'd get you back. We hardly had anything to go on--wasn't even sure you were still alive." He gulped hard. "I was so scared--"?

"Don't." The desperate word cut him off and Hutch looked up in hurt surprise. He had to talk about it, even if Starsky didn't want to. But the frantic look in his partner's eyes made that inconsequential and he straightened up, worried.

"Starsky?"

Starsky was trying to sit up as quickly as possible, which wasn't too quick for him, his movements jerky. "I can't," he whispered urgently. "I can't." His wallet and badge slipped off his lap onto the sofa, and Hutch just caught the gun before it fell to the floor, only the necklace still clutched in Starsky's hand. "I can't."

This was a nightmare he couldn't get out of. Hutch reached out automatically, trying to help his partner disentangle himself, but dropped his hand when Starsky jerked to avoid it. He'd pushed too soon--that was it. Starsky had always been there for him and now he'd blown the opportunity to do the same, right when his friend needed it most. Because of his own selfishness. He'd wanted, *needed* so badly to talk but Starsky hadn't been ready for it, and now he'd destroyed even the fragile peace between them. Hutch's heart tautened in painful self-condemnation and dismay.

But he couldn't lose Starsky now, not after all they'd gone through. He'd given his partner options, control, tried to make him feel safe, but Starsky was still running. It was now or never, because as much as it scared him that his partner wasn't ready for it, Starsky wasn't getting any better, either.

Starsky was halfway to the bedroom doorway when Hutch jumped up after him, skirting the sofa to catch up to the brunet. "Starsk, wait."

"Leave it alone," Starsky said despairingly, breathing as labored as if he'd run a marathon.

"Please, Starsk, we need to talk about this. I need to talk about this. Running away isn't going to solve anything, buddy." He reached for an arm, caught a wrist instead and instantly grew gentle, not wanting to re-injure.

Starsky seemed to have no such concerns. He jerked his hand sharply from Hutch's careful but firm hold, then sucked in a breath and held the hand close to his chest as the pain registered.

Hutch's heart was pounding--this was going all wrong, just all wrong, but now he had a new concern. "Take it easy," he soothed, voice becoming as tender as if he were addressing a frightened child, much like his partner looked. With slow, non-aggressive movements, he reached an arm around the brunet's back, his other hand carefully steadying the bandaged palm. "C'mere." Hutch coaxed the shaking man back to the sofa and eased him down. He kept talking quietly, his tone lulling. "Let me just make sure you didn't hurt yourself, okay? I'll be careful." Hutch unwrapped the gauze as he talked, meeting no resistance now.

It wasn't an improvement. Starsky was trembling, every single wall he built gone without trace, every defense crashed. *So easy to hurt now...* That was when it came down to the heart of me and thee, when they had nothing else left except the other. Hutch put all his concern into his touch, praying it was enough.

The bottom layers of the wrapping were stained a little with red, and Hutch unwound the end to reveal part of the gash on the palm had reopened, leaking blood. "I'll be right back," he said calmly, not surprised to get no response, or to find Starsky in the same position when he returned with his supplies. Cupping the hand in his own, he lightly pressed down with a sterile bandage, giving the brunet a sympathetic glance as Starsky's breathing briefly quickened. "It'll feel better soon," he mollified. "Just take it easy, pal."

A minute later the bleeding had stopped, and Hutch added the ointment with delicate strokes. The anesthetic in it almost immediately eased the tension in the injured hand. Hutch finished the bandaging with relief. "Isn't that better?"

No answer, Starsky looking miserably like he wanted to be anywhere but there. It reminded Hutch abruptly of an alley and his partner's broken, "It hurts, Hutch. Oh, God, it hurts." Struggling against the poison in his system, he'd been at the end of his strength then too, burying himself in his partner's arms only when Hutch had reached out for him and drawn him close.

Hutch leaned forward. "Hey, maybe we better get you to bed, huh?" he said gently. "You look pretty beat."

But Starsky was staring at his hand, as if still seeing the damage hidden by the bandages.

Hutch stilled, waiting, worry almost a physical pain.

Starsky finally spoke, his voice as distant as his thoughts seemed to be.

"I couldn't fight them... There were too many of 'em."

Hutch's heart skipped a beat at the halting words. "You didn't see 'em coming, Starsk."

One violent shake of the head. "Just one guy...said his van wouldn't start...he was workin' on it when I got there an' I believed him." He blinked tiredly, his head shaking slower now. "Should've known... Came inside and su'nly there were a lot of 'em. Couldn't even...yell."

He wasn't close enough for Hutch to hear clearly his faltering words, or to feel his partner's presence. Hutch slid forward, fully in Starsky's space now as he rested a hand on his partner's leg and rubbed up and down one shoulder with the other. Facing death every day lessened the need for macho hands-off.

"Woke up...there. Tied up. Din't know where...cold outside...couldn't see..."

It all began to spill out in hoarse pieces, Starsky's voice becoming feverish with the desperately needed release, sometimes too agitated to be coherent. The words choked him as he stuttered them, fists clenched in his lap and frantic tension held only in check by fatigue. He was out in the clearing once more, no longer aware of his partner, of his safety, of the sweat that dropped into his eyes.

And Hutch listened, appalled, not daring to move, forgetting to breathe, not wanting to interrupt the accumulated flood. Even what he had already known came as a bitter shock as he glimpsed it through his partner's eyes, listened to it pour out of his partner's soul. The brutal treatment and the waning hope and growing fear of what lay next. The fight against memories of his first kidnapping, and the sadistic punishment of his one attempt at escape. Praying Hutch would come in time but not expecting he would, and then the disbelief of his partner's arrival. And the blurring of reality that had led him to hold a gun on his partner, then turn it on himself. All throughout a cop's mind involuntarily recording every detail, to his own distress.

At the end, it was Hutch's eyes that were filled, not his partner's, who sat slumped with exhaustion and weary shock. The release of stored poison had to be a relief, but shame and pain and weary hopelessness haunted his dark eyes.

But Hutch finally knew what to do. Release was only half the cure. The rest was replacing what had been let go and lost, and Starsky's belongings had only been the physical part of that.

Hutch slid over onto the edge of the sofa next to his partner and very gently gathered him in.

Starsky shuddered and then sank into the embrace, too tired to even hold on, just letting himself be warmly engulfed and shielded for a little while from the world outside. He rested his cheek against Hutch's shoulder and took one unsteady breath after another.

Hutch just rocked as he had in the clearing, as he had in Martini's alley and in the middle of various nightmares in dead of night and in the back room of Giovanni's Italian restaurant. Even words wouldn't do much good here, Starsky too hazy to make sense of them, though Hutch whispered a few occasionally just so his partner would hear his voice.

"I'm here now, I'll take care of you. Just rest, buddy."

His voice was thick, stuck in his throat along with his heart. It still scared him badly to know how close he'd come to losing this one person who meant so much to him, but feeling the body in his arms, the soft curls rubbing against his chin, diminished the nightmare into meaningless "what ifs."

Starsky was still breathing harshly, his heart pounding against Hutch's chest, the memories undoubtedly close and suffocating. Hutch was too familiar with that terror that threatened to bury you alive and choking. He folded Starsky closer, surrounding him with the warmth and intensity of his own emotion, trying to ward off the fear. Promising a safe place to fall apart. His hand drifted up to the curls, smoothing them with comforting strokes. "Thank God I got you back, partner," he whispered with gentle intensity. "Don't know what I woulda done without you."

Starsky's throat bobbed for a moment, then he turned his face inward so that his forehead pressed against Hutch's neck, blocking out everything outside the two of them.

That was fine by Hutch. For the moment, he didn't even want his partner worrying about or dealing with anything else. Starsky only needed the comfort and security to start healing, and they'd always provided that for each other. It suited Hutch's need to protect too, in overdrive ever since he'd first found his battered partner in that clearing.

He listened to Starsky's breathing and heartbeat, mentally tracking both as they began to slow and steady. The worst of the humiliation, the pain and fear was gone, dredged up by his partner's confession and now dissipated by the comfort and reassurances. They would still need to talk some more about it, but Hutch fervently hoped its power was gone, the dampening of his partner's spirit lifted. Those lifeless eyes had bothered him far more than the physical injuries.

Starsky finally lay still in his arms, only occasional tremors running through him. All the distressed tension was gone from the heavy limbs; Hutch was willing to bet his partner was already half asleep, his breaths long and even. Peace had settled over them both somewhere along the way, the sweet, well-earned kind that reached the soul and stayed.

"Ready for bed now, Starsk?" he asked softly, not wanting to break the spell.

He didn't, the serenity too solid now to disturb that easily. Starsky didn't answer but Hutch didn't ask again, merely shifted to get his feet under him, then pushed himself up, taking Starsky with him. The brunet blinked drowsily, legs moving on automatic as Hutch steered him into the bedroom, one arm still around him.

"Easy does it," he lulled, easing his partner down into the waiting bed. Starsky curled up on his side as the blond pulled the covers up, eyes half open and staring at nothing but the earlier lines of strain smoothed from his face. He still looked far too old and tired, but sleep was the best remedy for that and Hutch had faith that sleep would bring more rest and less nightmares now.

"Good-night, Starsk," Hutch whispered, giving his partner's fingers a squeeze before beginning to rise from the edge of the bed.

The fingers turned, closing over his hand for a moment and squeezing back.

Surprised, Hutch glanced up into his friend's face, but the blue eyes were already shut. He smiled, throat suddenly a little rough again as he silently put a hand on Starsky's cheek for a moment. Then he turned and left the sleeper to his rest.

He wouldn't need to stay by his partner's side in order to sleep well tonight, neither would Starsky need him there. Wearily, Hutch made up the sofa and shed his clothes before crawling into his makeshift bed. He'd write up Starsky's statement the next day--Hutch knew he wouldn't forget a word of it. Now, however, he was exhausted in mind and body, not far behind his partner, though it was a good kind of tired. They'd made it through the worst and the next day was the first in some time he looked forward to...

Hutch fell asleep.

It wasn't all easy after that, of course. Starsky slept late into the morning and still woke tired. The earlier listlessness and avoidance was almost gone and he didn't ask anymore about Marcus, much to Hutch's relief. But the mood swings still lingered, if lessening. Starsky's familiar grin and bounce didn't return at once, either, though they increasingly started putting in appearances, and Hutch found his own joy and laughter returned with his partner's. To borrow Starsky's favorite word, it felt terrific.

Food was also still a sensitive subject, Starsky picking at meals with a decided lack of enthusiasm. That was, until Hutch broke down and bought tacos and fixings one afternoon, and watched in disbelief as his partner polished off eight of them. His sympathy greatly diminished, he started fixing healthy things they could both agree on...with the occasional addition of a salami or box of donuts. It took a little while, but Starsky finally lost the gaunt look of illness and regained most of his dropped weight.

The bandages became unnecessary after a few days more, light scars all that was left as reminder of the ordeal for anyone who cared to look. Hutch didn't. But it was only when Jace pronounced Starsky fit that Hutch really started breathing easier again, to his own surprise. He hadn't even

realized what a weight Starsky's physical pain and recovery had been until it was gone. The way Starsky looked at him, though, he had a feeling his partner had known it all along.

Even the phone was finally plugged in, Starsky starting less and less severely each time it rang, and eventually he felt comfortable enough to call his mother and uncle and reassure them he was okay. Hutch sat across from him throughout both conversations, Starsky's eyes locked on his for strength, but that was good too. They were doing a lot of borrowing like that from each other, Starsky listening to him talk almost as much as he listened to his partner. But then, they'd always done that. At least they were finally talking, randomly, whenever one of them felt like it. The sharing got easier as they went.

Only going outside remained an obstacle until finally, coaxed out by another beautiful fall day and, probably even more so, Starsky missing his car, Hutch coaxed his partner out to the quiet of a local park. The Venice apartment had been a safe place to take time out and rest and heal, and that was what Starsky had needed for a while, but cocoons grew confining once they served their purpose. Hutch had watched his partner carefully as they'd ventured out, seeing the tension return to his partner's thin frame, half-dead memories resurrected. But he'd glued himself to Starsky's side, one hand constantly brushing the brunet's shoulder or arm in reminder that he was okay and not alone. Starsky only relaxed partially but Hutch considered that a step too, impressed again by his partner's strength. It was just one more thing they still had to talk about and work through.

He still worried about Starsky moving back to his own apartment, a place his partner hadn't been back to since his attack and kidnapping. In the end, he needn't have bothered. Their co-workers in the department had long cleaned up any sign of Marcus' men having been there, and Starsky simply seemed relieved to be back home. Though he'd asked with slight hesitation if Hutch wanted to stick around for a while--there hadn't been much room for embarrassment between them of late. Hutch didn't tell him just how willing he was to stay, not quite ready for the quiet of his own empty apartment or for leaving his partner on his own yet. But with the ease that Starsky resettled into his home, Hutch wondered if his friend already knew and had invited him more for his sake than for the brunet's. It wouldn't have surprised him a bit.

So by the time their appointments with Berrimen, the department's psychologist, came around, Hutch felt like they were both ready. Still, it was with an agitated flutter in his stomach that he sat in the reception room and waited for his partner. His own appointment had been first, and half as long as Starsky's, the actual victim's. Berrimen was no stranger to how the two of them worked, though, and had probed at least as much into how Hutch was feeling as how he thought Starsky was doing. In the end, the man had cleared Hutch for duty, shook his hand, and told him how lucky he was. It was nothing Hutch didn't already know.

But he found himself watching the clock far more than he was reading the magazine in his hand, wondering what was going on behind the heavy wooden door of the psychologist's office. There were still times when Starsky went quiet or seemed a little uncertain, and undoubtedly that would continue for some time; there were some things only time could cure. But on the whole, his partner was back and Hutch was constantly grateful for that gift. Surely he hadn't missed something in Starsky? Berrimen *had* to clear him. There was no way Hutch was hitting the streets without his partner at his side.

The oak door creaked open and Starsky emerged alone, face serious. Hutch wiped a damp palm along his pants leg as he stood, his eyes on the brunet. *He didn't pass.* That had to be it. Well, okay, that just meant they still had some work to do. Whatever it took, Hutch was ready and willing.

Starsky came up to him and Hutch immediately grasped his shoulder, giving it a consoling rub, trying to find the right words to say, to promise that it would get better. Trying not to feel the heavy weight in his gut.

And then Starsky's face abruptly crinkled into a grin. "He cleared me. Said it sounded like I'd already gone a bunch o' rounds with a shrink."

Hutch stared at him, suddenly confused.

Starsky shrugged. "I told him I had, only my shrink moonlights as a dumb street cop." The grin threatened to take over his face.

"H--he cleared you for duty?" Hutch stuttered. Even as his partner nodded, it finally sank in. *He's back! Oh, thank God, he's back...*

The relief spilled over before he even registered it, and Hutch let out a whoop, lifting his laughing partner right off his feet in an exuberant bearhug. "Tomorrow?" he asked breathlessly.

"Tomorrow," his partner affirmed, nodding.

Returning to the streets the next day--it seemed almost unreal. Hutch gulped, the one arm still around his partner's shoulders tightening for a moment. *We're back.* It was unbelievable.

Starsky was watching him, no doubt knowing what he was thinking. And he suddenly smiled, that shy, affectionately soft smile he rarely seemed demonstrative and unembarrassed enough to give his partner. "Thanks," he said quietly. But that smile had already said it all.

Hutch nodded back as earnestly as the thanks was given, trusting his expression to speak for itself all the depths he couldn't express. "Welcome back, partner," he whispered.

And then Hutch laughed, the joy uncontainable.

"So," he clapped Starsky's shoulder, turning the brunet and leading him out the door. "We have to go out and celebrate. How 'bout we go down to Huggy's and order the biggest, thickest, juiciest steaks..."