

Summary: *"Then Starsky saw Hutch hip deep in the lake, and confronting his worst fears. He saw himself surface and begin to wade towards Hutch. It was like watching a movie of their lives. This Other...Lord of the Otherworld was going to be with Hutch while Starsky was away. And yet it seemed Starsky was destined to be there and see them together, to see Hutch believing that the Other was Starsky."*

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All art is by Dargelos.

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Death by Water: A Tale of Faery

by Dargelos

Starsky carried the mugs of steaming coffee to the fireside and handed one to Hutch, avoiding half consciously, the caress he expected and which Hutch offered, then withdrew. "Careful," he warned, "'s'hot. We need any more wood before I join you down there?"

"It might last the night." Hutch tipped the wicker basket onto its side. They had found a small supply of wood in the cabin when they arrived at Pine Lake that morning, but the spring weather was cold and raw and the wood was quickly being consumed.

"But who's gonna run out for firewood in the cold light of dawn?" Starsky asked. "You hold down the fort and I'll be right back."

He left the cabin and trotted around to the makeshift shed which housed the wood supply. The air was chill, but Starsky welcomed the chance to leave the cabin for a few minutes. He had agreed to this vacation because he felt it would give him time to sort out some of the misgivings that had been nagging at him for the last month or so, but the near solitude of the lake was not, after all, the place most conducive to solving personal problems.

A fine mist hung in the air and ground fog swirled around his ankles. "Werewolf weather," he muttered. "Aaaooowwwwoooo." There was a strange purplish tint to the sky. as if it should have

been overcast, yet all the stars were brilliantly visible and the lucent full moon hung just above the horizon.

*Make this night loveable,
Moon, and with eye single
Looking down from up there
Bless me,
One especial
And friends everywhere.*

A little too romantic, Starsky reflected. What he wanted was a place to think, to consider what his life had become and what it would be in the future. It had been just short of a year since Gunther had tried to rob him of his life, four months since Hutch had pulled him into his arms and said: "I love you and I want you." Simple... it had been easy then to respond to so much love and to put out of his mind the inevitable results of saying 'yes'.

The wood was split and he made a mental note to thank Hutch for doing it. He didn't like axes—hadn't since the time, as a rookie, that he'd seen what a brain-burn case had done to his family with a fire axe. *Long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.* He whistled as he piled logs into the cradle of his arm, as though music had power to push back the nameless fears that night can bring to even the most rational of men. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stirred. There was something uncomfortable about this darkness. Shadows were denser, more threatening, their imagined terrors more real. These shadows were ready to pluck at his sleeve or twine around his ankles like all the nasty vines in all the fairy tales he'd read as a child. Oh for a branch of mountain ash! Out of the corner of his eye he saw something—a shimmer of light, as if someone was moving a candle just beyond his line of sight. He froze for a moment, then turned slowly, knowing all the while he would confront only darkness.

All day and all evening, Starsky had been almost seeing things, strange things lurking along the periphery of his vision. He'd mentioned it to Hutch, approaching the subject casually, and Hutch's reaction had been—naturally enough—laughter and teasing jokes about ghoulies and ghosties, and things going bump in the night. Hutch had a knack for making all the bad things go away, even if they were only in Starsky's head and not lurking on the border between this world and the next. He shoved the cabin door open, ran in and kicked it shut. The sharp acrid smell of the wood fire greeted him. Hutch was no longer in the room. "Sure is cold out there," Starsky commented to the empty room. "Hutch? You here?" Something moving swiftly out of the heavy shadows grabbed him from behind and Starsky yelped and fought instinctively, dropping the logs with a deafening crash.

"I am Count Dracula," Hutch proclaimed. His teeth raked Starsky's neck.

"Will you cut it out?"

"I want to bite your neck."

Starsky pulled away. "Give a guy a heart attack, why don'tcha?" He rubbed his throat where human canines had grazed the skin. "Jeez, you play rough... and I'm all fulla spit." Hutch's eyes glazed over and he walked towards Starsky with arms outstretched.

"I'll wipe it off for you, Master," he intoned.

"Hutch, what is with you tonight?" Starsky demanded, retreating.

"While the Master was gone the fairies came and turned me into a zombie... or was it the zombies turned me into a fairy? Anyway..." He grabbed Starsky again and kissed his throat. "That's some dynamite hickey you've got, fella," he whispered against Starsky's neck.

"You drive me crazy."

"I know. I return the compliment." Hutch helped him gather up the wood and tossed several logs onto the fire. "Now we can be warm and cozy all night." A wave of sparks rose and fell to the stone floor of the fireplace in a bright shower. Starsky bolted the door, then came back to the couch and curled up beside his lover.

Their sex life had been erratic for the last month, ever since they had passed the first stages of passion. Torn between his desire for Hutch and his misgivings about their relationship, Starsky found the physical demands of that relationship difficult to deal with. Hutch was a patient man, but the strain was beginning to show and Starsky found himself wondering if this weekend would see the end of the affair. Yet, at that moment, he desired Hutch as much as he ever had. "Nice," he murmured. It was difficult to consider the situation logically when Hutch looked so delectable.

"What is?"

"This, the way you look, the way you look with the fire behind you like a halo."

"Feeling romantic tonight?" Romantic and confused. He was too much in love with this man.

"Mmmm." He lay back against Hutch, reassured by the warm, solid flesh at his back. This was real, it was human and substantial and it drove away the nameless fears with a potent power of its own.

Hutch curled a lock of Starsky's hair around his finger. "I've been thinking about our relationship."



That makes two of us, Starsky thought wryly.

"They've been pushing, Starsk. They want me to take the Lieutenant's exam, but...."

"But you don't want to leave me behind? Come on, Hutch, we've talked about this before, you know how I feel." He retrieved his coffee and found it still warm. Separation was part of it. If they were going to be lovers it was politic to consider a job change. He shuddered a little. Nothing would ever be the same again.

"Maybe it's the mother hen in me, but I don't like the idea of anyone else partnering you. Makes me itchy. I guess I want to take care of you."

The admission struck a responsive chord and made Starsky uncomfortable. No one else met his standards for partnering Hutch, and yet he felt that he might soon fail to meet those standards himself. He was older, hurt, slower, and would soon become more of a handicap than an asset. It would be better for his own peace of mind if Hutch was off the streets. "I've been thinking about making a change too," he confessed. "I thought maybe the Academy."

"There's juvie."

"Naw, not the way things are between us. Hey, there's a lot of things I could do."

"Name a thousand."

Taken by a wave of playful lust, Starsky whispered something creatively obscene to his lover and Hutch began to laugh. "You can do that?" Starsky nodded. "Then you don't have to worry about a job. You can get a place in a circus or a bordello any time you want."



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Outside in the cold shadows of muted moonlight, a figure stood motionless for hours, watching intently as the dance of their fire slowed and faded. Beneath his bare feet, the grass was withered and brown. At first light he walked to the water's edge and slid under the surface of the lake.

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Starsky woke early and slipped out of Hutch's arms. He put the coffee back on the stove and while it reheated, he got dressed. It was too good, this affair with Hutch, everything was too right and it scared him a little—more than those ghoulies and ghosties from the night before. He knew this... aberration wasn't in his nature, nor was it in Hutch's. What was it that brought two previously heterosexual men into a relationship like this? Hutch—like he'd tried to analyze it in the last weeks, but each time the answer had been the same—they were in love with each other. A nebulous sort of answer at best.

Hutch, he knew, had told his family, something Starsky couldn't conceive of doing under any circumstances. It was not the kind of thing his mother would want to hear, and Nicky.... Starsky shuddered. He had been raised to believe his lot in life was to work hard, marry, and make babies, as if the renewal of life was his sole responsibility.

He reflected, as he poured himself a cup of coffee, that his attitudes, shaped before he was old enough to question them, went a long way towards explaining his current discomfort. If he stayed with Hutch, the responsibility would never be fulfilled. He could almost see himself confessing: "I'm sorry, Ma, but I can't give you the grandchildren you want because I'm wasting it on Hutch." But then the waste was a matter of opinion after all, and for the first time in his life he had the feeling that nothing of himself was being wasted. Surely this was the right path for him to follow, and yet he knew how the world would condemn him for his choice. If he could stop hearing his father and brother saying: 'fag', if he could stop feeling responsible for his mother's happiness, if he could stop caring what others thought of him; always 'if'. It seemed as though his life was being lived in past or future tense, never in the present. The coffee was hot and bitter on his tongue.

If he loved his lover less the choice would have been simple, but Hutch was his world, outside of which there seemed to exist nothing but gray people. And within that sphere, Hutch was the sun and the moon. He wasn't comfortable feeling so about anyone, but he didn't seem to have any choice in the matter.

He watched Hutch sleep, curled 'round a pillow with the sheets tangled between his legs. The fair features were older, heavier than they had once been, and yet were no less fine or beautiful to Starsky. "I don't understand it," he murmured softly.

He moved to the window and parted the curtains on a hazy morning. They were here to fish if nothing else, and Hutch looked ready to sleep the day away. Starsky was seized with the need for action; he was crackling with energy.

"Wake up, wake up, let's go fishing," he said, shaking his partner gently.

Hutch lifted his head and looked around blearily. "What time is it?"

"Nine. C'mon, Hutch."

"S'too late. 'sides, it's nasty out." He pulled the blankets over his head.

"It's not too late." Starsky tugged the blanket down and Hutch hauled it back up. "And how do you know it's nasty out? It's cool out and a little misty but the weather isn't awful."

"Mmmm. Go back to sleep, Starsk."

"You're the one who wants to fish allatime," he whined.

Hutch sat up in bed, looking ravishingly disheveled and scowled at his cheerful lover. "Do you know what time we got to sleep last night?"

"I wasn't looking at my watch. Lissen, you're almost up now, why doncha just hop outa bed and toss on some clothes? The fish'll wait and so will I."

Hutch's scowl relaxed a little. "I really am tired, Starsky, but if you want to go, go. Have fun and bring back something for dinner, okay?"

Starsky gathered up his fishing gear. "Fair enough, lover. Trout sound good?" But Hutch had flopped back into blissful unconsciousness and did not answer.

Starsky left the cabin loaded down with rods and tackle boxes. It wasn't so strange, really, this unexpected passion for his partner. Hutch had been his anchor since the attack which had nearly cost Starsky his life. Hutch was his life in a very real sense. a part of him longed to crawl back into bed, to lie close to his lover and listen to him breathe. That calm, regular sound had comforted him on more sleepless, troubled nights than he could count. He continued down the leaf-carpeted path to the lake and loaded the gear into the rowboat, wondering if he would ever be able to lose the tiny, priggish, nagging voice, which told him he was committing a sin against his nature. It wasn't fear of divine retribution disturbing him, since he'd long ago realized that Hell wouldn't be so bad with Hutch there, but rather he feared that when Death came for him again—and he would recognize the face of Death as surely as he knew his own—there would be nothing of David Michael Starsky left in the world. What he feared most was the utter annihilation. He would leave nothing, would be remembered by no one. The thoughts were so devastating he had no choice but to push them firmly to the back of his mind.

Lake and sky were a uniform gray and the only sound Starsky was aware of was a quiet rushing, not quite rain and not quite the sound of trees moving in the soft breeze. He fancied it was, perhaps, the sighing of the forest. Spring life reasserting itself. The smell of decaying vegetation from the previous fall hung in the air. All around him, the landscape was desolate in gray and brown.

He climbed into the boat and pushed off. In the middle of the lake he cast his line and waited for the fish to come to him. Line, boat, and water were all perfectly still. He closed his eyes and dreamed.

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From beneath the liquid crystalline layer of water, the man watched his quarry. He reached out and snagged the line.



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Starsky's eyes flew open as the rod jerked in his hand. "Ohmigod, I gotta bite! Hutch! HUUUutch!" The pull on the line was strong and steady. He heard Hutch call his name and looked up to see his partner on the shore, wrapped in the blanket they'd slept under the night before, and looking about ten years old. "It's the Loch Ness monster, Hutch," he yelled, standing up to give the line a good yank. The boat began to tip, and he saw the expression on his lover's face change from a smile to horror. Then Starsky hit the water. Oh Christ, he thought as he sank in slow motion, am I gonna be cold. Then reality overtook him as he felt himself being sucked down. Something tangled around his ankles and he kicked, trying to free himself. The downward drag was inexorable, and his lungs began to ache with the breath he'd taken before he fell. He knew he was going to drown and what disturbed him was the thought of how angry Hutch would be with him. A face very liked his own floated in front of him. "G'bye, Starsky," he told himself just before the cold and darkness overcame him.

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Floating....

Wrapped in the weeds beneath the lake's surface, wrapped in strong arms that bore him down steadily, deeper than he imagined the lake could be. Strange water creatures darted around and between them, watched from the tangled weeds. The face that was his own floated into view.

"You got me. I'm dead."

"No, but not alive," the stranger with his face told him.

"I'm the lady of the lake, right?" Starsky had heard it said that a man cannot conceive of his own death, and now he believed. If this was death it was damned peculiar.

"You will come to understand your purpose," the stranger promised. "You are my tanist. You will walk in my footsteps. You will be Life and Death."

"I can't cope with riddles this early in the day."

"This you owe me," he was told, "and yourself."

"For killing me? Are you kidding? I don't want to die—not now, and I don't want to be Death."

"You've been an efficient tool of mine for many years."

"I don't want to be remembered like that," Starsky moaned. Would that be his legacy? No love freely given, no hostage to the future, only a killing machine meeting its end in a stupid accident.

"No, please..."

"The world will have more of you than that," the Other promised gently. "When you see me as I really am, you will understand; when you walk in my footsteps. You owe this service to me for not taking you those times you came to me. For not taking your lover. I could have had you many times. I could have taken everything, but I did not. For this you owe me service." The man's hand touched Starsky's chest over the heart, and Starsky felt his flesh tingle. There was no choice. He nodded. "I am a king, Lord of Life. I am Death, David, and *I am thou, thyself!*"

Then Starsky saw Hutch hip deep in the lake, and confronting his worst fears. He saw himself surface and begin to wade towards Hutch. It was like watching a movie of their lives. This Other...Lord of the Otherworld was going to be with Hutch while Starsky was away. And yet it seemed Starsky was destined to be there and see them together, to see Hutch believing that the Other was Starsky.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," the Other called, waving Hutch back.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hutch yelled. "You're okay? You're underwater for half an hour and you're okay?"

"Hutch, it was more like a couple of seconds." The Dark King put his hand on Hutch's arm and the touch was like living heat; Starsky could feel it. Hutch pulled away slightly and looked into his lover's face. Starsky knew Hutch had the feeling that this was not Starsky but some impostor from beneath the water. The Dark One laughed.

"What's so fucking funny?"

"You.... I love you, Kenneth Hutchinson. Let's go inside."

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Starsky found himself thrust back into the world, walking an unfamiliar road in an unfamiliar country. "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more," he muttered. He had been walking for a very long time. He couldn't remember escaping from the lake or from the strong arms of Death, and yet all his senses told him that he was alive and traveling in a strange place. It was cool on the road, and a scent of pine and juniper hung in the air. He stopped to rest by a pond at the side of the road, and as he gazed into the still water, the face he saw was his own and yet not, for he was the Lord of Death, and the silver-tongued prince was a guest in Starsky's flesh. As he walked, he thought of Hutch, felt Hutch and Death together, and shuddered a little at the thought. He remembered the King's touch—warm and electric, like that of a welcome lover. They were together, all three, in the cabin even as Starsky walked the path. Parted from his lover, they were still connected by the threads of love and life and spirit. They would, Starsky realized, always be one and Hutch would know who lay in his arms while Starsky was gone.

He was getting tired and very hungry when he entered the clearing and saw the house. It was every one of his childhood fantasies, made of gingerbread and candy, shingled with what looked like the fudgiest brownies Starsky had ever seen. He couldn't help but grin as he considered the possibility of eating the roof off of the little house, and reaching up, he broke off a corner of the

nearest shingle and popped it into his mouth. "To die for," he sighed as the brownie seemed to melt, gluing his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

"Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?" The butter cream frosted graham-cracker door swung open slowly. Oh, oh, Starsky thought, licking his fingers. "Well hi, honey, what're you doing here?" Olga Grossman stood in the doorway.

"I—I was hungry," Starsky admitted, wondering what Olga was doing in a gingerbread house in his dream...or his death. Her presence startled him. "And your house looked delicious," he added lamely.

"That's what it's here for, good-lookin'. C'mon in and I'll show you the bakery." She led the way into the little cottage. "I run a legitimate business, you know...cookies, cakes, pies, a little candy." She popped a cheese danish into his mouth. "Nice, huh?"



"Mmmngh."

"Right. Like I said, a nice legitimate little business and all that nonsense about my helpers disappearing is just a lot of bad publicity started by my competition. I run a clean shop here."

Starsky was boggled by the sheer amount of pastry lying around for the taking. He was suddenly very, very hungry and at his elbow he found a plate of chocolate chip cookies on which were printed 'eat me' in chocolate letters. He reached out.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Olga warned. She smiled and patted his cheek. "We're testing those. Let me show you my workroom. Come this way." She led him into a room containing an oven, above which was a sign which read: 'Work will make you free'.

Starsky looked around and found the plate of cookies beside him. He glanced up at Olga who was studying him.

"You see, clean and in good repair according to OSHA standards. I wouldn't do it," she warned when she noticed him eyeing the cookies. She opened the oven door and pointed inside. "Go on, take a look."

"Uh, I'll take your word for it," Starsky said, backing away. He understood exactly what she had in mind. But on the hearth, the plate of cookies beckoned him with the insistent 'eat me!'. Before Olga could forbid it, Starsky took a cookie from the plate and bit off a large piece.

The gingerbread cottage disappeared and was replaced by a plain, white-washed room. They were standing in front of a door above which a sign read: 'Arbeit Macht Frei'.

"There's no escape, honey," Olga told him. "I told you not to eat the cookie. Now you might as well have a look... a good long look." She opened the door on a scene of much more imagined horror than Hansel and Gretel had ever caused. Inside the tiny room was a crush of humanity, starved and fearful, filthy and so foul-smelling that Starsky's insides lurched as much from the smell as from the realization that they were his people and he was going to die with them. A rough hand shoved him and he stumbled and fell. a brutal kick doubled him up. He was hauled to his feet and dragged struggling towards the door by the men in the coal-scuttle helmets. Olga clucked sympathetically.

They shoved him into the room, and all around were eyes sunken into skull-like heads, dead eyes that knew only fear. The smell was almost more than he could bear. "Where am I?" he demanded and the eyes were averted. But he knew without asking and the horror of it corkscrewed into his vitals. He was going to die. But that was impossible, he thought. He was Death.

They were locked into a room so small they were unable to sit, unable even to lift their arms from their sides. They could not even fall, though Starsky knew the time would come. Olga was standing beside him. "I'm the one they don't talk about," she confided with a hideous, yellow-toothed grin. "I'm the sow who eats her farrow. *My magic oven, glowing red, will turn you into*

gingerbread." There was a slight smell of gas in the air. "But understand, I am necessary. Without me there is no life." Then she was gone.

A voice rose from the sea of bodies, above the incredible stench of filthy, frightened human beings.

"Magnified and sanctified be His Great Name throughout the world..."

What good will it do you? Starsky wondered bitterly as he recognized the words. A few voices said amen.

"His Great Name be blessed forever and unto all eternity."

"I am Death," Starsky announced, but no one seemed to hear him. "I am here for all of you."

The volume of the voices swelled. *"Blessed be."*

"I am Death and I will die with you," Starsky whispered. "Amen," the voices answered. Starsky raised his voice with the rest and said, "Amen." They drowned out the hiss of gas.

"Amen," they all said. In the silence which followed the hissing grew louder. I am Death, Starsky thought. I will be quick and merciful.

*When at night I go to sleep,
Fourteen angels watch do keep:*

"May He who makes peace in His heights, make peace for us."

He lay under them all in the pit. He lay against the soft, greasy earth. Is this death? he wondered. The weight of bodies was no weight. The guards shut out the light as they covered the bodies with dirt... rich, black earth. Darkness.

I am Death and I am afraid.



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Sleep, child, sleep and be at peace." And he was alone under the earth, within the earth, warm and sheltered. "Sleep, my child, Dumusi—Absu... child of the abyss." Warm tears fell on his face.

"Woman, why do you weep?" he asked gently. He gave up his body to the earth and nourished it. His limbs became one with the great forest and his blood fed the streams. He was in all things and they in him, and still She wept warm tears. He was washed in her tears, cradled in them and he was comforted. Around him the other bodies had turned into poppies—rich and red with a soft, secret black interior and a heady scent that made him remember things he thought he had forgotten. He remembered things he had ever known. He slept.

He slept for a long time, and to his sleep came dreams of a ship, and a long journey west into a twilight land. He dreamed of people who greeted him and called him 'my lord', twilight people.

He dreamed of Hannah. She was sitting, gray and still, in her wheelchair before an ancient silver oak. In the night sky was left a thumbnail crescent of moon to illuminate a landscape crystalline with snow. "Hannah, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I am waiting for you, my child. Nothing in life is ever lost."

"I want to get back to Hutch," he told her, suddenly homesick and lonely beyond words. "Will you take me back to him?"

She extended a thin finger in the direction of the tree. "This is the way into life. Follow the path through the maze."

"Is Hutch there?"

"Your life is there."

He entered the hollow of the tree, and winding before him was a twisting path that disappeared into the earth. He followed it, twisting and turning.... Follow the yellow brick road... walking in darkness until he saw a light in the distance, a light which grew ever brighter as he approached, until, at the center of the maze, the light blazed like a newborn star. The walls of the maze began to twist around him, spiraling like great arms wrapping him up with the sun. He was floating alone in the sky with the dust of the stars in his hair and in his eyes and in his mouth. He felt the sun enter him and he shut his eyes and listened to it pulse within his chest, a slow regular beat, as the spiral closed on him. It grew tighter and tighter until he thought he would be crushed by it. It rippled and flowed like the currents of time, *He passed the stages of his age and youth, Entering the whirlpool* and suddenly it burst sending him shooting through time and space. He tried to remember to breathe.

The holly and the ivy...

He remembered....

He remembered who he was, he remembered his mother holding him out to his father. "Your son," she said, and his father smiled. *Puer nobis nascitur, O, the rising of the sun and the running of the deer...* First step, first word, the birth of Nicky...'where do babies come from?'... first love...'we'll get married when we're sixteen, okay?'... Bye baby bunting, daddy's gone a-hunting.... 'Papa's dead, Davy. You have to be strong for me, now.' *Lully, lula, thou little tiny child....* 'hello, Mrs. Green, I'm glad to see you again'... 'Dear God, don't take Papa, Grandpa, Terry, Hutch, *When the bough breaks* don't take Hutch, please, oh please, I'll do anything... I can't live without him!'

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"Am I dead?"

Feminine laughter. "Open your eyes, child."

He did so and looked into the face of his mother, though younger than he remembered her. "What are you doing here, Ma?" He looked around and found that he was lying in her arms in an open field.

"Welcome to your kingdom," she said and kissed him with a kiss that tasted of honey.

*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day:  
I would my true love did so chance  
To see the legend of my play,  
To call my true love to my dance.*

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Long lashes brushed Hutch's cheek as they kissed. The wet clothes were flung into the bathtub, and Starsky pressed Hutch against the cool tile of the bathroom wall, heat pouring off his body.

"Starsky, I'm worried..." His voice trailed off.

"Your lover is quite safe."

But who was it had said that?

Starsky?

the Other?

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"Mama?"

"You are the Winter-Born King," she said. *I found Him in the shining of the stars*, "As you flourish, so flourishes the land. *I mark'd Him in the flowering of his fields*, as you fail so fail the hopes of the fields and orchards. You are the Lord of the Dance.

"You will be a hunter and a lover and a willing sacrifice to me. You will serve me in all ways..."

"I can't," he said, thinking of Hutch. *Thinking of a key, each confirms a prison.*

"You cannot serve only yourself, my son, or live in a void. But there are more ways to serve me than you know."

Then he was alone. "Ma... Mama?" His kingdom stretched out before him, dark and bare of all but promise. He felt life struggling to burst free. What am I supposed to do? he wondered. Am I supposed to make the flowers grow or something? It seemed to Starsky that he was destined to stumble through this world never quite knowing what it was he was supposed to do or be or think or feel—stranger in a strange land.

The path he walked was familiar, he decided after a while. IT had been many years since he had walked here, but he remembered the way to school as surely as if his mother was at his side, holding his hand. He entered the schoolyard and watched the children playing. There were faces he remembered from his childhood, and one he had never hoped to see again. Terry. She stood in a group of children, zipping jackets, straightening caps, and clipping mittens onto sleeves.

"Terry..." She turned away from him, and lifting a small, squalling child into her arms began to walk across the schoolyard. Starsky called her name, but she merely turned and smiled and kept walking. She walked slowly, stopping to speak to some child or other, or to retrieve a ball or Frisbee thrown wildly. Starsky followed at a brisker pace, thinking to catch up to her easily, but no matter how quickly he moved, she always seemed to be just out of reach.

He began to run, following her around the schoolyard. At first he called her name, but then, short of breath, he concentrated on catching her. He ran ever faster, but Terry's leisurely pace never altered. He ran until he thought he would drop from exhaustion and still he was no nearer. And as he ran, he saw wonders. Green things sprouted beneath his feet and the trees swelled with buds which burst into bloom, white, pink and yellow against a sky so blue it almost blinded him. He heard the life in the songs of cicadas and cardinals and tiny green frogs singing in ponds teeming with life, smelled life in the lilacs and hyacinths and apple blossoms, felt life throbbing beneath his feet and in his heart and at the tips of his fingers. He was electric with it and he ran on and on behind her in endless circuits, around and around and around....

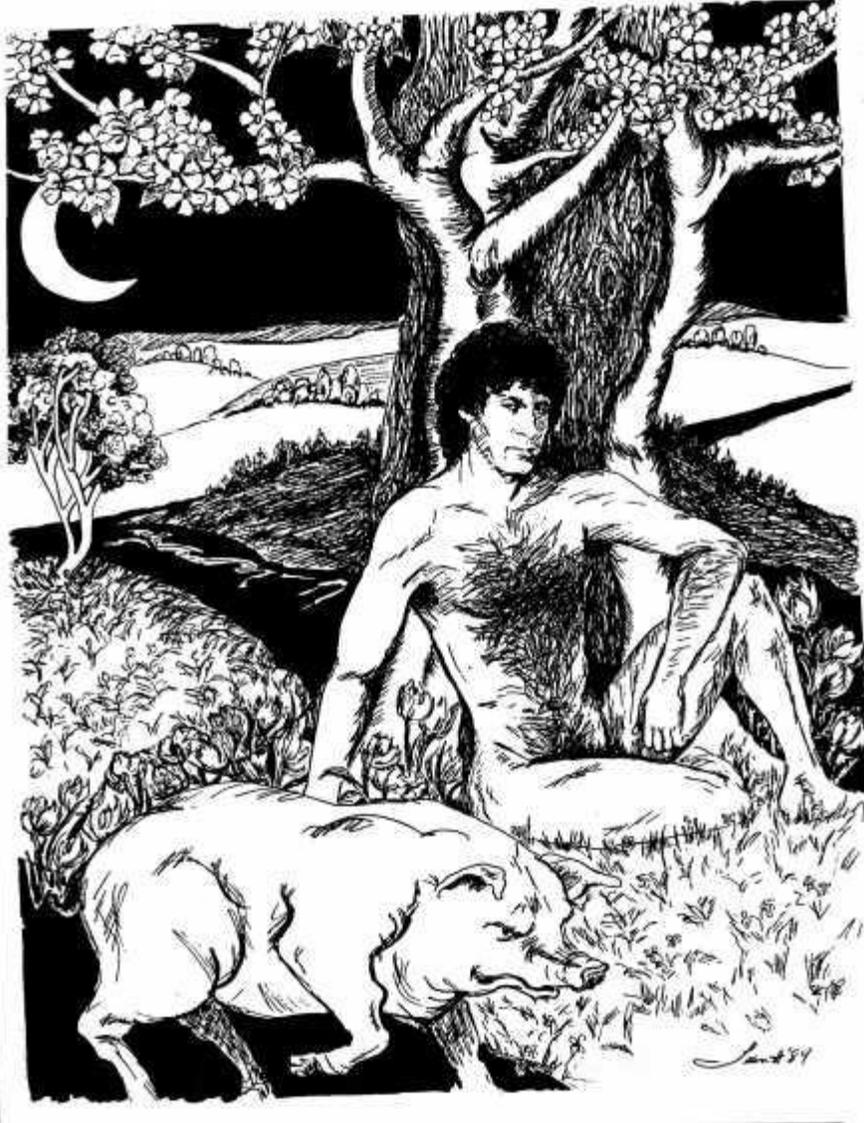
*When Spring unfolds the beechen leaf, and sap is in the bough;  
When light is on the wild-wood stream, and wind is on the brow;  
When stride is long, and breath is deep, and keen the mountain air,  
Come back to me! Come back to me, and say my land is fair!*

Finally, with his last breath he called: "Terry, please stop," and fell to his knees. She turned and said: "Wouldn't it have been better just to ask to begin with?" Starsky fell backwards onto the ground with a groan.

"I don't understand any of this," he panted as she sat beside him. The child in her arms had changed into a pig, and the other children from the schoolyard had been replaced by swine as well. "They're pigs!" he said, stupidly.

"They're my children," she told him. Then she laughed. *"Speak roughly to your little boy and beat him when he sneezes; he only does it to annoy because he knows it teases."*

He stared at the land around him. They were no longer in the schoolyard but atop a small hill that overlooked acres of farmland. The trees were newly green and many were massed with blossoms, and the grass thick was thick emerald. "Did I do this?" he asked as he lay back on the soft cushion of grass. She nodded. "I don't remember falling down a rabbit-hole, hyacinth girl." He laughed then, with all the force of his being, a huge laugh first from the mouth and then from the belly, and his laughter tore him away from all he had ever known and opened him to the new life before him.



"Spring comes with the sun," she explained simply. "Without you there would be no spring, no life. *Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, who creates the light of fire.* All life is part of the wheel of the year and part of us. There is no escape. But each creature serves in its own way." She bent and kissed him, then pulled away. "I will meet you again before the fires after the hunt." She pressed a dagger into his hand. "For me you will be the hunter, and when the hunt is over, I shall be your wife."

Starsky stood up slowly and turned towards the forest. He could smell his quarry there—the king stag who was his other self—dark king of the waning year—waiting for the winter born one. He walked away from the dark maiden, mother of swine and birds and horses, hyacinth girl. He walked down the hill and across the ripening fields. He entered the forest.

Starsky felt their lovemaking—Hutch and his Other—like a flame, urgent and demanding. Hutch knew. He knew it was not Starsky in his arms and yet he felt Starsky within the stranger. Starsky could feel him searching... and he felt his own identity, his Starsky-ness slipping away.

*The beast ran in the wood that had lost the man's mind;*

He had ceased to be the man called Starsky. In the land of endless summer the king hunted his brother beneath the fierce sun and full moon and stars like a field of luminous flowers. He had never seen so many stars. Blossoms dropped from the trees as he passed and were replaced with the swelling of the fruit. He bent to drink from a stream, and saw, in the water, a face burned almost black by the sun; in his eyes was a gleam that the eyes of David Starsky had never held. He was the hunter and the hunted. He felt the presence of the great stag his brother very near. King Stag stepped out of the clearing, manlike and antlered, and charged the hunter. Starsky's knife drove home.

He said a prayer for the soul of his brother, then cut out the stag's heart and ate it. On the crown of his head, half hidden by the tumble of long black curls, he felt the sprouting of twin horns.



Starsky slung the body of the stag across his shoulders. Where he walked, poppies and cornflowers sprouted, red as blood and blue as the ocean. In his path grew grass as green as his lady's eyes, and the wild thyme and clover perfumed his way.

He carried the body to his lady and laid it at her feet as a cat would give a bird to its mistress. *Behold, thou art fair, my beloved; also our bed is green.* She placed a wreath of eglantine roses, perfume and thorn, on his brow and named him Summer-Crowned King... The Old One.

*"Listen," she said. "Listen to my words, the words of the Great Mother—Isis, Astarte, Diana... Ceridwen, Demeter, Anna..."*

*"When you have need, once in the month when the moon is full you shall assemble to adore the spirit of Me. Sing, feast, dance, make music and love in My presence for Mine is the ecstasy of the spirit and Mine is joy on earth. My law is love unto all beings, Mine is the secret that opens upon the door of youth, and Mine is the cup of the wine of life that is for the Cauldron of Ceridwen, the holy grail of immortality. I give you knowledge of the spirit eternal, and beyond death I give peace, freedom and reunion. I demand no sacrifice for I am the mother of all things and My love is poured out upon the earth."*

His hands crept across the crown of his head, tangled in the mat of curls, touched the stag-horns that grew there. King stage he was, and soon the hunter would come for him. Soon, soon...

*Who is this that cometh out of wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?*

*"I am a stag of seven times," he said. "I am a tear the Sun lets fall, I am a hawk above the cliff, I am a wonder among flowers."*

She drew him down into an embrace that took his breath away. *I put my hand on her belly and she said: "D'you want to fill me?"* She was sweet, like heather honey, and smelled of roses and salt-spray and new-mown hay. Her eyes were as green and deep and inviting as the sea. *Gently, gently, gently, Johnnie, gently Johnnie, my jingo."*

Her long black hair fell like a silken curtain over his face and she rocked back, sheathing him within her body. *I am the spear that roars for blood, I am a hill where poets walk, I am a boar ruthless and red, I am an infant...* Their play became a delicate dance of desire and they were one in flesh and spirit and memory. She was surely his sister. *I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse.* "My bull, my lovely white bull," she murmured, "my lovely beast be consecrated to me alone, to me and mine alone." Around the bonfire other couples imitated the Lord and the Lady. She was exquisite in disarray, her scented hair spread on the ground around her, her scented flesh like porcelain with breasts molded to the shape and size of his hands. Her fingers ran through his fur. "All love serves life," she said. "All love celebrates. *I am the womb.*"

*"Of every holt,"* her celebrants chorused.

"I am the blaze,"  
"On every hill,"  
"I am the queen,"  
"Of every hive,"  
"I am the shield,"  
"For every head,"  
"I am the tomb,"  
"Of every hope."

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Hutch's eyes flew open as the sharp pleasure began to ebb. "I know you, goat-foot god," he said.

The gray man, lord of the Otherworld, lay beside him and smiled. "You have nothing to fear from me."

"Starsky?"

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*"Behold, thou art fair, my beloved... My beloved is mine and I am his; he feedeth among the lilies."*

The sun was hot on his face and he was covered with sprays of wheat and ripe apples. *Comfort me with apples for I am sick of love* He was dead and Vanessa bent and kissed his unresponsive mouth. "Goodbye, my husband." She pressed a small hand to her belly. "This cup is the covenant. *I am the womb of every holt.* Your seed is sown." Someone set a torch to the pyre on which they had laid him.



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At the end there was his Mother. "It's finished, isn't it?" he asked her.

"It's never finished, child. *Hear the words of the Star goddess, the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, whose body encircles the universe.*"

She stretched out her hand to him. *"I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto Me."*

I am the blaze on every hill.

"Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices," Vanessa said as she separated from Terry, *"for all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence in you."*

I am the queen of every hive.

Olga emerged, wizened and worn from the exquisite cocoon of Vanessa and stood there too, among the others. *"And you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery:*

for if that which you seek you find not in yourself, you will never find it without."

I am the tomb of every hope.

And finally Hannah. *"For behold, I have been with you from the beginning and I am that which is attained at the end of desire."*

I am the shield for every head.

They stood together, all five, cloaked in fractured light and wind and water and earth, each a part of himself. Then there was only his Mother.

"Mama, Shall I at least set my lands in order? I am a lover of men as well as women."

"To Evohe." She faded away like the Cheshire Cat leaving only a lunar crescent like a smile hanging in the empty night sky. "Blessed be."

There came to him in that moment before he was consumed by the white fire a last dream. He dreamed himself a bird of fire endlessly circling, a cat on a hearth, a white mare in a field of white flowers, a sow, a dolphin cradled in the sea, a tall tree, a blade of grass.

For a moment only, he felt that savage pressure again, and became the stuff of stars floating free.
For a moment only he was nothing and all things. ...*to call my true love to my dance, sing O my
love... my love...*



~ ~ ~

He pushed up, breaking the surface of the water like a knife. He sucked air into his aching lungs and looked around for Hutch. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he assured his partner who was hip deep in the lake and frantic.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hutch yelled. "You're okay? You're underwater for half..." Hutch paled. He reached out to Starsky and pulled him close. "You sure you're okay?" Starsky nodded, reassured by the comfort of familiar arms. He looked up at the beloved face and found there the assurance that he had sought all along. This was the path he was meant to walk and the companion who would walk it with him. Acceptance. They loved, an answer not so nebulous as he had once imagined. It seemed the most significant fact of his existence at this moment. His life was his own, and love was his service. It was a legacy of which he could be proud. "I accept," he whispered, misgivings falling away like dead leaves.

*Companion me in sunny meadows
Entremble me in evening haze,
You shine upon my path through shadows,
You cool of wind, you breath of blaze.*

"What?"

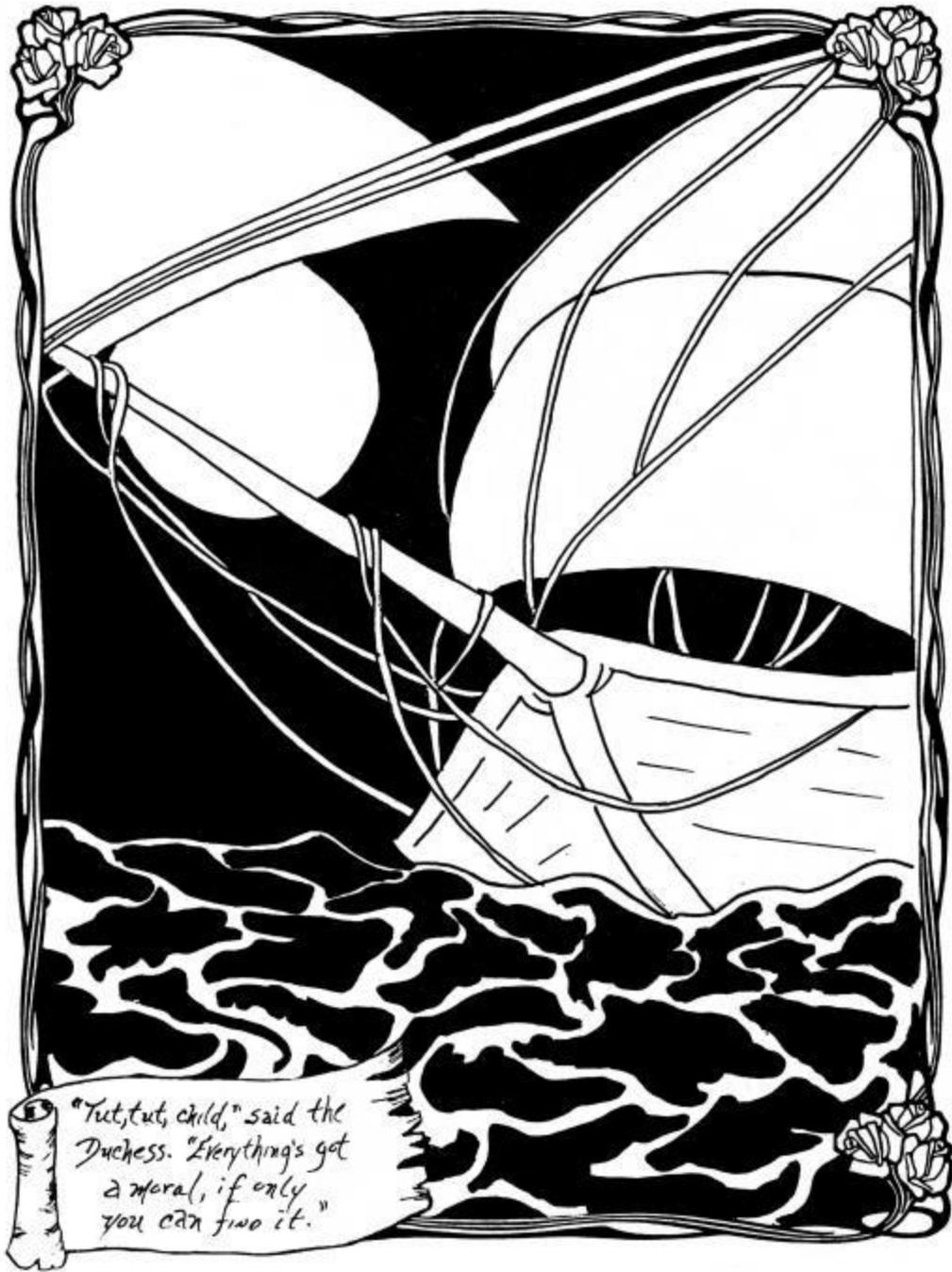
"I love you, Kenneth Hutchinson. Let's go inside."

As they waded out of the lake he asked: "How long was I gone?"

"I'm not sure... it was like a dream, Starsky, like all this happened before."

Starsky saw that spring had arrived while he was gone. Trees swelled with buds and the grass which had been withered was green. "I'll tell you your dream if you tell me mine."

Hutch frowned, then laughed too. "Once upon a time," he said.



"Tut, tut, child," said the Duchess. "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it."