



Another Dawn Patrol

by

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Chapter 1: Somewhere in France

Squadron Leader Major John Blaine stood on the doorstep and counted the planes coming back in from A-Flight. Like enormous versions of the bees in the old wicker hive in the farmyard behind him, the biplanes circled above, buzzing, then coughing, then sputtering to silence as the pilots guided them down into what had once been a wheat field. There was Captain Hutchinson's plane touching down, bouncing, and taxiing, while that must be Lieutenant Starsky's that took another loop before following; in the air behind them were three others. Five. They'd lost two.

Blaine's fists clenched; his broad shoulders hunched a little more; he turned back toward the farmhouse and went inside to brood and wait for Hutchinson's report. They'd lost sixteen flyers in the last fortnight. Headquarters kept calling with crazier jobs for them to do, and the replacements were younger and less experienced every time, fresh-faced babies who should have been shouting on a rigger field, not burning alive in the air. He sent them up, in old crates of aeroplanes held together by spit and glue, and every time a few of them came back. So he could send them up again. Blaine the Executioner.

These boys haunted his sleep, and not just the dead ones; the brighter their eyes, the sweeter their smiles, the more they seemed marked for death, and the more he'd dream of them. He dreamed of Hutchinson in ways he didn't like to think of, awake. Now he stole a glance through the dust-smearred window as the captain of A-Flight lifted his goggles and pulled off his leather helmet. The bright blond hair, matted to his skull, still glinted in the sun; so did his teeth against smoke-dirtied skin as he grinned at the mechanic and Sergeant Watkins, chatting with them as lightly as if he'd been strolling through a garden party instead of swooping through the air with machine-gun fire all around him.

Blaine turned away from the window, into the shadows of the room.

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As Captain Hutchinson swung out of the plane, Watkins went on talking. "...beat the odds again this time, sir. Shrapnel?"

"Yes." Hutch remembered when he thought about it, the jar and noise and the moment's suspended breath while he waited for the engine's sputter or the smell of leaking petrol, or pain... but none of it had happened and he'd gone back to firing at the Hun in his sights. Got him, too.

"Well, look here, sir, not ten inches from your seat."

Didn't the man think he knew it? But he made a show of looking at the ragged holes in the side of the plane, behind the cockpit. Straightening, he slapped his own buttock twice through the thick leather flight coat, saying jocularly, "I needed those ten inches, Sergeant!" and then got away. To Starsky.

The dark curly hair was all on end from his flight helmet, and he was leaning on the plane and chatting with his mechanic Evans. All in one piece—both of them were—the exhilaration bubbled up in Hutch and he did a foolish kind of dance step and slowly, showily, lifted one leg and kicked Starsky in that round posterior of his. Someone behind him laughed.

"Ouf!" from Starsky, also a put-up job as he didn't so much as turn away from the plane. Hutch leaned next to him, their shoulders just nudging each other. It wasn't what he wanted to do, but the best he could manage

with all these people around them.

"How'd you like it, Starsk?" Their eyes met and they grinned at each other.

"All right." This, in the code they'd developed without ever consciously trying, meant that Starsky had seen Hutch's plane get aerated but had realised he'd make it, and that Starsky himself hadn't brushed as close to death when Hutch wasn't looking. "You intact?"

"Yes, I think so."

Evans had gone, and they now had a good view of a scene neither wished to see—Hollister standing under the wing of his plane, head bent, while his mechanic tried to cheer him up.

"That was a hot one, wasn't it?" asked Starsky.

"Pretty warm." Hutch hated to dwell on a patrol when it was over. He'd have to report to Blaine, and that was bad enough, in all conscience. But Starsky needed to unwind, to debrief, so Hutch let him.

"Who'd we lose?"

"Brand and Machen."

Starsky grinned meaninglessly and rubbed his grimy chin. "Well, we're going to lose Hollister too by the look of it."

It did look like that. Nearly a year of service under their belts, both of them could see the signs of a man who'd given up, and on a patrol, despair was as fatal as anti-aircraft fire. "Poor kid," Hutch said. "Machen was his best friend."

It cut too close. They had to move, or else think about it, and that was out of the question. Hutch ran around the tail of the plane and Starsky followed. Hollister's mechanic turned melancholy eyes on them. "I was tellin' him we all got to go sometime, sir," he said, twisting his cap in his hands.

Hutch left Starsky to respond and put a tentative hand on Hollister's shoulder. "Sorry, Hollister," he said, knowing it was nonsense, "but he went quickly—he didn't feel any pain—"

"Poor Machen," and Hollister's voice broke.

So did Starsky's patience, and his hand slapped at Hutch's arm, then grabbed it. "Come on, Hutch," and pulled him away.

It was true they couldn't do anything. They were alive, and they were the wrong ones, no comfort to Hollister. Hutch followed as Starsky ran between the planes, caught up, and passed him as they reached Woolsey and Selfridge, who began to run too. They whooped and slapped at each other in the sunshine, smelling the petrol and the dust of the yard. Alive.

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He'd left Hollister frankly weeping over Machen's kit, still packed on the bunk that had been Niven's before him, and Hall's before that... the kid hadn't even had a chance to unpack before they were stuffing him into a rat-trap plane and sending him up to be killed... Hutch pounded down the stairs to the mess, where Starsky waited for him with strong drinks and foolish jokes. But Phipps was standing between them.

"Oh, there you are," said the older officer. "The CO wants to see you."

"He does?" Of course he did. "Right." He turned away, paced across the room to the door of Blaine's office.

Starsky said behind him, to Phipps, "Shall we step into a better world and speak of lighter things?" Hutch gritted his teeth with envy.

It was small, dim, and warm in the office. Once it had been the pantry, and a dutch door led to the remains of a kitchen garden. Blaine was half-seated on the lower part of the door with the upper half open. He was smoking, looking out, and he didn't move when Hutch came in, which made it certain that he knew just who it was.

"Yes?" The voice seemed indifferent.

Hutch took a parade stance, stared straight ahead at the lines on the wall where the shelves had been. "We got to the bridge." If he just said it he wouldn't have to think about it. "The bombers scored a direct hit and wiped it out." Wouldn't have to remember that there'd been an ox cart right in the middle, and the oxen had bellowed while the man had screamed, and the pieces of the cart and the bridge had fallen, burning, into the river.

Blaine threw his cigarette out the door and stood up, his eyes lambent with something that might have been triumph. "They did?"

"We lost two men." Also burning, falling. "Brand and Machen." His voice had gone soft, damn it, on the names. It wasn't true that they didn't feel anything. He'd been close enough to see sometimes—the grimace under the helmet, the way men fought to get the plane under control while it burned around them. Close enough to hear them shout. Scream.

Blaine darted behind, to the door—he could move amazingly fast for such a burly man—and slammed it shut. Stalked back across the office, pausing just behind Hutch. "Oh, you did. Lost two men."

A moment's pause, and then Blaine was behind his desk, and Hutch said, "Yes. That's all." He turned, strode to the door, opened it.

"Wait a minute, Hutchinson," Blaine said, like a trap snapping shut. Hutch turned slowly. Blaine's eyes blazed at him. "You were responsible for those new men."

Hutch closed the door very gently, walked four measured steps back to the desk, leaned over it, his fingertips light against the paper-strewn wood. "Yes," he said softly. "That's right. I was responsible for those two men. We ran into that Heinie nest on purpose." And now he was remembering, couldn't stop, and this was why he hated giving reports—the way Starsky had waved and pointed, the way the German planes had stooped like hawks out of the clouds, the way they'd dived and swooped and turned, the engines roaring and the guns rattling—"W-we sent the Huns an engraved invitation to come over and meet us!" Brand's plane had spiralled down with a long kite's-tail of black smoke.

"Yes?" was all Blaine said though he knew—he'd been a flier himself before he'd been kicked up in rank.

But Hutch would remind him if the CO needed a reminder. It was playing behind Hutch's own eyeballs now like a flickering newsreel, and he would share it. "We were outnumbered and forced to fly low." At the bottom of the sky... all that space above like a weight on his shoulders. "We had to—to fight our way out."

"All right." Blaine was implacable. "Suppose you did. You could've been more cautious."

"Cautious!" Hutch's hands were fists now. "You don't think I enjoyed losing those boys, do you?" When had they moved around the desk? Their faces were perhaps six inches apart. He could smell the cigarette on Blaine's breath. "Getting them burned up, scattered all over France? Sending 'em up in crates that should've

been on the scrap heap *months* ago!"

And Blaine actually smiled, or bared his teeth, and said, "That's right! Now tell me, tell me what's on your mind. That I'm a murderer. That I ought to be giving you better planes, older men, better fliers." He leaned even closer. "Say it, why don't you say it!"

Hutch took a deep breath. This was absolutely mad. He could feel the heat of Blaine's body and tension thrumming in the air. He drew back. Stood at attention again. "I'm not blaming anyone. Sir."

They stared at each other, Blaine breathing hard, and then he whirled and went to the fireplace. Leaned on the mantel. "Dismissed," he said, harshly, eyes on the fire.

Hutch didn't linger. He was out and halfway across the officer's mess before he realised that he couldn't possibly just lean on the plank of the makeshift bar and pretend to unwind. Not after that report. Starsky looked around and Hutch jerked his head and went straight through, out the door, into a sunlight as harsh and burning as acid.

He didn't know where to go. He paused at the gate, and Starsky caught up to him. After a moment, he felt a brief touch, and Starsky said, "Come on, you need a run," and took off, almost as fast as if he were back in his plane. Hutch followed.

They ran the other direction, away from the barn and the wheat field and the planes, away from the rest of the squadron and the clanking of the mechanics. Ran like boys across a tangled expanse of grass, and Hutch had no idea what had grown there—along the dividing line of poplars, down into a shallow bowl of earth and back up a low hill, down the smooth curve of the other side. They ran in silence until the farmhouse was out of sight and they were both blowing like grampuses.

They fell in the grass, rolled over on their backs. At the bottom of the sky, but just then it didn't seem heavy. Hutch lay breathing. Nothing in his head.

It was even unexpected when Starsky leaned over him. "You didn't even find the time to *wash*," scolded Starsky, who obviously had. "Such a pig."

Hutch reached up to feel the clean skin of Starsky's cheek. Circled his thumb at the corner of Starsky's mouth, feeling a little prickle of saliva and the dry edgy chapped lip. Down to the warmer throat, up again to the slightly rough jaw. Fingers reaching the springy hair. Starsky's eyes gathered the height of the sky, burning clear and crazily innocent. Hutch felt all the cesspools of his mind draining.

Starsky swallowed. Without looking away, he scrambled in his pocket for something, then pulled out a big white handkerchief, also fresh since that morning. He wet it with spit and scrubbed around Hutch's mouth; even though he might have complained another time, now Hutch just lay still and let his friend do what he pleased.

And was thoroughly kissed for his acquiescence.

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It seemed Starsky could find anything: time, innocence, food, friends, wherever he went. Hutch never had understood how his best friend and lover always managed it, even though he'd been seeing it happen since they were both in school.

This afternoon, at the end of a very official captain's inspection of the A-flight planes (and then a very unofficial session sharing a flask with Richardson, the head mechanic, and talking about letters from home), Hutch came in to find Starsky and Watkins in the farmhouse kitchen nursing a pot on the fire. The smell

caught him at the door and absolutely mesmerised him. Smooth and rough, sweet and bitter as Starsky's tongue had been, when they'd kissed in the field. Hutch's mouth filled with saliva until he could hardly ask, "Starsk? Chocolate?"

"Bullseye," said Starsky with a grin over his shoulder, but his hand never stopped stirring. "Now, Watkins, do you think some more of that honey of yours? Is there any left? Needs something to sweeten it a bit more, don't you think?"

"Yessir," Watkins answered. "Yes indeed, sir. I shall go and see if there might be any in the messroom, of what I had put up Weddinsday."

"Do," said Starsky. Watkins left the kitchen.

Hutch approached and looked over Starsky's shoulder at the deep brown sauce as it folded around the spoon. "Where did you get it? What are you doing with it?"

"Well, it's the sort one uses for cooking, too bitter to eat as it was. So we're making chocolate sauce with a little milk and the sergeant's honey. There had better be more honey," Starsky's forehead creased a little. "Do you remember, was it all used up this morning?"

"I don't recall." Hutch swallowed. It had literally been years since he'd tasted the confection, and though at home he'd rarely wanted it, now it was like a drug in his nose.

"Don't drool in the pot," Starsky teased. He lifted the spoon and let a drop fall onto the index finger of his other hand, then put the finger and the chocolate into his mouth, while Hutch watched every movement as if it were an enemy plane in his sights. The pink tip of Starsky's tongue flicked out and his eyelashes flickered, and Hutch swayed forward without meaning to move.

"Now? Here?" Starsky asked incredulously, but his voice was low and breathless, and Hutch didn't step back. His lover took a breath and said, "*Hutch*," which was little help if the goal were to discourage. Starsky did turn a little, shoulder raised, and fumbled a bit but then turned back and that strong left hand touched Hutch's mouth with hot thick wetness. "Careful," voice full of laughter and lust, "careful—Watkins will be back at any moment." Hutch's lips parted, and the chocolate-coated fingers slipped in.

They had a few seconds, he hoped. It was impossible not to tease the ends of Starsky's fingers with his tongue, suck them in deeper, chew them gently. Impossible not to feel himself harden as Starsky shivered. Hutch pulled in a deeper breath of chocolate and Starsky—and there was a scuffing sound on the flagstones outside the door. The fingers left his mouth, the whites of Starsky's eyes showed, and he turned his back, scrubbing his hand against his thigh. Hutch fell back a half step and said as casually as possible, "Yes, you're right, it needs more honey."

"And honey I have, sir," said Watkins' voice, "honey I have."

"That's wonderful, Watkins," said Hutch, hoping he wasn't overdoing the enthusiasm. "It would have been a terrible pity to waste the chocolate just because there wasn't enough honey left. Perhaps, Lieutenant, you'll learn to plan ahead better next time."

Starsky kept his back to them but glanced over his shoulder at Hutch. "I had a plan or two," he said, and Hutch couldn't allow himself to wonder what those plans had been. "Now do go away, Hutch. If I start talking to you I really will ruin this."

Hutch grinned and went.

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Hutch had checked on Hollister but found him fast asleep, still draped over Machen's kit, and left him. Now, after dinner and an exceedingly strange dessert of oatcakes and chocolate sauce—the sauce being restricted to A-flight—they were drinking whiskey and talking, and Hollister was at last creeping down the stairs to rejoin the living.

Starsky was playing his favourite record on the gramophone he'd discovered when they moved into the farmhouse. Hutch didn't particularly care for "Poor Butterfly" himself, but then there wasn't much selection. He shook the elderly *Times* he was reading, to change how the lamplight fell on its creased pages, and registered that Hollister was sitting in a corner by the bar and that everyone was leaving him alone.

Done winding the gramophone, Starsky straddled a chair next to Hutch and began to read over his shoulder, then reached over and lifted the glass from his hand to take a gulp from it. Hutch grinned, lowering one arm to let Starsky see the newspaper better, knowing that he didn't really much like whiskey anyway and suspecting that he didn't want the liquor to catch up to him tonight. Hutch was all for that though he wasn't sure Starsky could manage not to get drunk. It was a rare evening either of them managed sober, here in France.

Squires, captain of B-flight, was on the other side of the paper, talking, not seeming disturbed that he had about half Starsky's attention and even less of Hutch's. "I say, Hutch, do you remember Briggs from the 37th?"

"Briggs, yes," said Hutch absently.

"He was killed the other day, down the line. Pulled the wings off an FE."

"Was he? I hadn't heard of it." And he didn't want details now, but fortunately Squires wasn't interested in giving them.

Starsky chuckled. "I'll never forget Briggs' first solo flight. Remember that time he pancaked on the top of that house in the early morning, and found himself hanging upside-down looking into the girl's bedroom?" He took Hutch's glass again.

Hutch laughed too, remembering Briggs' outraged face as he told the story. "Yes! And she opened the window and—" gesturing—"bashed him on the nose!" Now all three of them were laughing. Squires took a sip of his own drink, shaking his head.

The record ended, and instantly Starsky was on his feet. "Uh-uh-uh," and he was moving the arm back and grabbing the crank to start it over.

"Oh," Hutch complained, "you're not going to play that again, are you?"

"It's a beautiful thing," Starsky protested.

"No," said Hutch.

"Makes me want to cry," which was amusing, though untrue. Very few things made Starsky cry, and it never happened in public.

"Yes, me too," Hutch said, and Starsky grimaced at the sarcasm and went back to working the crank.

But Hutch wasn't the only one tired of the thing: a pillow flew from the other side of the room and jolted Starsky and the gramophone. Hutch did hope the record hadn't been badly scratched as he knew they'd be hearing it again anyway.

But perhaps not right away. "Who did that?" Starsky turned, picked up the pillow, and threw it back. "You do *not* appreciate good music!"

Thump as the pillow connected again against Starsky's ribs. It was a solid horsehair one and Hutch hoped it wasn't leaving bruises. Starsky threw it back again and followed it—maybe he was getting drunk—with the cover of the gramophone.

"Hey, *hey*," protested Hutch. "The furniture, the *furniture*!" The farmer and his wife would expect to find it all in one piece when they got back, and though that was unlikely, breaking it up for fun was definitely against regulations.

"I've got to deal with these people," Starsky said, but Graham, the original pillow-thrower, had clearly ceased finding the joke funny and was being barely restrained by his friend Lowry.

Starsky went over and hooked the pillow from his flailing hand. "I'll take that, I'll take—" and Graham, wild now, stamped on his foot. "Ow!" Starsky hopped away, trying to hold his own foot and move off at the same time.

Hutch, half-standing, had to laugh. "I told you you'd get hurt, now why don't you come sit down—" but by this time Graham and Starsky were on the floor bashing each other and rolling into people's legs.

"Starsky," said Squires, not moving, "Starsky—" which Hutch thought was pretty feeble since Graham was in B-flight. In any case this wasn't the time for verbal persuasion. He grabbed Starsky and hauled him up while Lowry got hold of Graham. Hutch instantly forgot him. Tucking Starsky into the chair, he shoved the newspaper into his hands and took a handful of hair to shake him by.

"*Ouch*," said Starsky but didn't struggle.

In the gramophone's silence, Bentham had begun to sing, from his perch on a big empty water-barrel. The first line was lost in scuffling, but by the time he heard the second, Hutch knew the song. It was one they often sang, its morbid lyrics and jaunty tune somehow fitting.

"...the walls all around us are bare,
They echo the peals of laughter,
It seems's though the dead are there.

So stand by your glasses steady,
This world is a world of lies,
Here's a toast to the dead already,
Hoorah for the next man that dies."

Lowry picked up the tune on that accordion of his, another find of Starsky's while shopping in the village—for just a song, he was fond of saying—and other men began to join in. Hollister, Hutch saw, was staring straight ahead with a haunted expression; this was hardly music to cheer him up.

"... the good have gone before us,
And only the dull left behind."

Now everyone at Lowry's table was singing, fumbling the words a little, and Bentham relaxed against the post behind him and let his voice drop during the chorus:

"Let's stand by our glasses steady,
It's all we have left to prize,"

Starsky was pretending that the spoon he'd picked up from someone's teacup was a piccolo, and was trying to whistle around it as he moved his fingers up and down the handle. Hutch, with another spoon, was marking time against glasses and, with a flourish, Starsky's head.

"The drunk are the de-ad already,"

—the office door opened and Blaine stood looking out at them—

"Hoo-rah for the next man that dies!"

They got raucous and silly on the last line, drawing it out. Blaine slammed his door at the end of it and Lowry played a little flourish as people began to talk amongst themselves again.

"Hoorah for the next man that dies," Starsky sang, quietly, not entirely in tune, and then got up to start the gramophone again. Hutch saw that Graham was out of protests, and picked up the spoon Starsky had abandoned, held the two back to back and beat them thoughtfully against the table, listening to the soft zinging noise.

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Phipps was first out of the office, Blaine following, and that made the men who were still at all sober begin to gather even before they heard what Phipps said. "Turn that gramophone off, will you, Esmond? Thanks." Blaine stood on the lowest step of the staircase and the rest of them formed loose rows before him. "Quiet, lads, attention there, please .... Orders for tomorrow morning." Hutch was in the front row. There was a dead sort of look on Blaine's broad face and Hutch thought it was going to be bad.

He was right.

"A-flight," said Blaine, not quite facing Hutch. "A-flight on the early show, over Boulet sector. We're making an advance, five o'clock in the morning. We're to patrol four kilometres behind enemy lines. Strafe enemy reinforcements and munitions convoys. When the barrage starts—" yes, there would be a barrage, and it would be right around A-flight's heads— "then B-flight will cover our observation ships and artillery. You'll take up the details amongst yourselves later on."

Take up the details? Such as who would get A-flight's personal effects? What music to play at the funeral? Was Blaine mad? Had the generals back in their snug meeting rooms completely lost their minds? Hutch felt a heady cocktail of fear and rage and black humour mixing in his veins.

Blaine was looking at him now, but Hutch was damned if he'd give the man the satisfaction of knowing how he felt. He drew himself up straighter, forced the corner of his mouth up in a bitter curve. Blaine's eyes slid away.

"That's all, thank you, gentlemen, good night," he said.

Phipps added, "Dismissed, gentlemen," and the rest trickled away, but Hutch felt nailed to the spot by Blaine's evasive gaze. And Blaine didn't move either.

Then he said, as if the words were being squeezed out of him, "All right, what is it?"

"A-flight has only got five men," Hutch said mildly.

Blaine seemed to have fixed his eyes on Hutch's chin. "More replacements are on their way up."

And Hutch had thought tomorrow's job could not get worse. "More replacements?"

"Yes." Blaine pulled his shoulders back. "They'll be here first thing in the morning."

"You're telling me," Hutch wanted to confirm it, "that I'm expected to go out on a job like *that* with two inexperienced men."

"Those are the orders."

Hutch wanted to laugh. Knew he shouldn't. Swallowed, gritted his teeth, and smiled tightly. "Right."

Blaine's eyes widened as if Hutch had shouted. Hutch stepped around him, went to the little flight-roster blackboard next to the staircase, and did what he hadn't had the heart to do before—wiped away the names of Brand and Machen. He heard the CO walking away, the office door closing. His hand rose, the rag still in it, and for a moment he saw himself just wiping down the board, erasing them all at once and to hell with the roster. The drunk were the dead already, weren't they? And everyone in that list who wasn't dead was drunk.

But in the end he just put the rag down and went back to the bar. Squires was there, and had poured Hutch another drink. Hutch threw it into his mouth, swallowed without tasting it.

"I'm glad I'm not in A-flight," Squires told him.

A puff, half-chuckle, escaped Hutch even while his throat still burned. Then, after a moment, he said, "Speaking of A-flight, where's *Starsky*?" By the end of the question his voice had risen to a shout, but there was no response, and he looked around but couldn't find Starsk anywhere.

Squires answered, "Oh, he's down there," gesturing.

So the whiskey and the day had caught up with Starsky after all. He was snuggled up to the barrel where Bentham had been sitting, fast asleep with his cheek against the rough wood.

Starsky's instant-sleep routine always made Hutch laugh, really laugh, transporting him back to their school days and the very first time they'd drunk anything stronger than cider, or the nights revising together before exams. "Look at that," he said, and hoped the whole mess couldn't hear the tenderness in his voice. "End of the day and he's out like a light. Hey, Starsk," shaking his shoulder, resisting the urge to scoop the lax body up in his arms like a baby's. "Come on. Time for tucky-uppy, Master Starsky," mimicking his own old nurse. Starsky didn't stir. "No sign of life." He looked up at Squires, who shrugged, and then past him at a little jug on the bar. "Wait a minute... here ...." The jug still had about an inch of water at the bottom, and Hutch poured it carefully into Starsky's forelock, so it ran down his forehead and dribbled off the end of his nose. "*Come* along now, Master Starsky, time for tucky-uppy."

Squires was laughing as well, now, as Starsky pursed his lips and blew through them, swiped his hand ineffectually at his face. "Rain, rain, go a-way," he murmured.

"Now come *on*," Hutch said, pulling him up by one arm and catching him when he gave at the knees.

Starsky got his feet under himself, swayed but didn't fall, opened his eyes. "Good morning, all," he said.

Hutch grabbed his head and turned it as if he'd been a big doll. "Say good *night* to the gentlemen, now—" pushing the head up and down as if nodding.

"Good night to the gentlemen," Starsky said docilely.

Hutch turned him and repeated the performance. "And to these other gentlemen."

"Good night to these other gentlemen." Starsky's voice was less slurred but he was still playing along.

Hutch said, "*Good* night, gentlemen," and hoisted Starsky across his shoulders. "Alley-*hoop!*"

And he was warm, and heavy, and squirmed a bit as Hutch held on, leaned forward, and started to climb the stairs. But the labour was worth it to touch Starsky now, hold his arm and his thigh, and smell his body beneath the liquor he'd drunk and the smoke from everyone's cigarettes. Voices called after them, still joking, "Say good night to the gentlemen... good night... good night ...."

If only there were any private space upstairs, but even Hollister's tears had been common knowledge. Any noise went right down the stairwell. And the only double bed in the house was Blaine's, because the room was separate and he was the Major. The rest of them all slept in two rooms, cots set in rows, less private even than a school dormitory.

Starsky's bunk was made up and his polka-dotted silk pyjamas neatly laid out on the pillow, but Hutch dumped Starsky unceremoniously on top of them and stood looking down at the tousled, candlelit figure. "Tight as an owl," he said, and didn't bother any more to even try concealing the depth of emotion he felt.

Starsky held up one hand and Hutch took it, held it, squeezed the firm flesh.

"Crazy like a fox, you mean," said Starsky in a perfectly clear voice—then tugged so hard and suddenly that Hutch fell onto him. He was all crooked on the bed, sprawled over Starsky almost as Hollister had been over Machen's bedroll and kit bag—and the brush of that mortal reminder made Hutch burrow into the warm living body under him, though this was even more foolish than their flirtation in the kitchen. As if Starsky had the same thought, they clutched hard at each other, just breathing. Then, gradually, Starsky's fingers moved in Hutch's hair, a palm angled across his back, and Hutch got up on his elbows and looked down at sleepy, dark-fringed eyes. Moved one arm awkwardly until he could brush the rough cheek with the backs of his fingers. Pushed a fingertip against the lower lip and then hooked it into Starsky's mouth.

Starsky pressed both lips against the finger and shifted his hips, then did it again. "Oh," said Hutch and dropped his head into the pillow next to Starsky's, forehead rubbing in the almost liquid softness of the silk pyjamas. Starsky must be drunk, after all, and Hutch must be too. He had to get up. His muscles didn't obey him and all the blood in his body seemed to be rushing to his groin. "I have spots in front of my eyes, Starsk," he said, which was the truth. White spots on a chestnut brown background.

"Well, what d'you expect?" Starsky nudged with his head, twisted his shoulders and hips and turned both of them on their sides. Hutch slowly, reluctantly, got up and sat on the edge of the bed, helping Starsky pull the pyjamas out from underneath him.

"These," said Starsky, holding the brown and white silk pants, "these," pulling out the top by the collar, "these were a going-away present from a little frou-frou."

The story of how Starsky had acquired those pyjamas was an ongoing saga, endlessly changing, in which the only consistent character was Starsky. "Who-who?" Hutch asked this time.

"Frou-frou."

"Oh." Hutch twisted around, snagged a pack of Players from the crate that served as a bedside table, and pulled one of the cigarettes out.

"Frou-frou," Starsky explained to Hutch's back, "Frou-frou was sweet. My piebald pyjamas are a cherished souvenir. I will now discard the lower half as usual," and the silk dropped past Hutch's peripheral vision as he was lighting his cigarette at the candle. It flickered and a drop of wax slid down the side of the bottle that

was their makeshift candlestick. The bed rocked as Starsky worried at his clothes. Hutch moved to the low stool on the other side of the crate, and began to smoke in earnest while Starsky got himself out of his uniform jacket and shirt, toe-heeled and kicked off his boots, then pulled on the pyjama top and fastened one button in the wrong hole. Then he fell back into the pillow as if too exhausted to do any more. His eyes were closed.

"You certainly *look* drunk," said Hutch.

Starsky didn't say anything, so Hutch lifted his chin and began to loosen the knot of his tie, unbutton his own jacket. He'd hung both jackets up and was over in front of the hooks on the wall taking off his shirt, cigarette hanging from his lips, when Starsky suddenly yawned widely.

"What's the matter with you, Hutch?" he asked, voice sleepier than his eyes had been. "You're moping about something."

"Oh, no," Hutch said, then took the cigarette out of his mouth. "No, I was just thinking about Hollister."

"Oh."

"It's pretty rough losing a best friend, isn't it?" Hutch snapped his fingers. "Poof, and he's gone."

There was a pause before Starsky spoke; his voice sounded firmer. "Go on, go to bed."

Hutch put the smoke out against the windowsill and tossed out the butt. Then he crossed to his own bunk, sat on it, took off one boot. "Machen... he was just a baby. Couldn't have been much older than that brother of yours."

Starsky actually got up on one elbow. "Oh, Nicky," he said, nonchalant. Then, more seriously, "I hope this war is over by the time he gets out of school."

Hutch took off the other boot while Starsky's absentminded eyes watched him. Then Starsky flopped back down on the bed. "Ha, you know, I haven't seen him in so long, I probably won't even recognise him when I do see him." Another breath or two, and then he said, "Hutch, pull down the bedclothes."

"Of course I will." Hutch got up to push his trousers off.

"I mean, do it now."

He folded the trousers first, hung them over the pipe that served as the cot's headboard. Then he untucked the blanket and sheet and opened the bed.

There was a long wheat-straw there. Hutch grinned at it, recognising a far different code than they'd spoken beside the biplane. "Davey-boy," he said, since they were still alone, "you'll never do it. You're drunk. You're going to sleep through the night."

"If *you* wake up," Starsky said, then paused for another yawn, "try me."

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Blaine had the best bed on the farm, and knew it—another little irony in a life too full of them. He rarely slept the night through. Often he never went to bed at all, writing condolence letters or filling out forms or just brooding over the fire in his office until fatigue took him, and he napped with his head on his arms on the desk or drowsed with his body curled into the hard angles of the armchair. Sometimes he spent half the night, it seemed, sitting on the lower half of the door and staring at the dark sky, smoking in order to have

something to do with his hands.

Sometimes he left the farmhouse and prowled around like a watch-dog. It was neither more nor less useless than anything he did during the day. He listened to the quiet clucking of the chickens in their shed, the tick of cooling machinery, the rustling of fieldmice in straw. He saw how the night's greys and dark blues leached out the colours that sometimes seemed too harsh and insistent during the day. He breathed air temporarily purged of petrol and smoke.

Tonight there was a full-faced moon, drenching everything in milk. A cloudless night, the kind he hoped they'd never have in England, to give the generals ideas about night flights. He walked around the near fields and the farm's outbuildings, then stopped in the yard and looked up again. The expanse of stars seemed impossibly deep and full. He stood under the sky and lost himself.

Then a sound jarred him, a man's low cry. It wasn't the first time he'd heard such a thing, though no one ever spoke during the day of whatever fear or sadness pushed those sounds out of sleeping throats. Blaine folded his arms as if to be sure his own feelings stayed silent, where they belonged.

The sound came again, a groaning undulation, and it sounded different than Blaine remembered hearing before. From the wrong direction, for one thing. There was a shed at the far end of the group of outbuildings, where seed had once been stored, and the sound must be echoing in some bizarre way, for what would a man be doing sleeping there? He took a step toward the sound, and then another one. He stalked it, silently, and told himself he did not recognise the voice he heard as it cried out again. And again.

Now he stood in front of the shed door, and he could see that tiny threads of light were coming through the cracks between boards, around the rough hinges. He cursed the melodrama of real life when he realised that a good-sized knot-hole pierced the door at about knee-height. He was not going to grovel in the dirt of the yard to see... whoever was in the shed. He was an officer and a gentleman.

"Starsky," said Hutchinson's voice, hoarse, pleading. "Oh, god, Starsk," and Blaine dropped to his knees as if shot.

At first he saw only a confused welter of gold and brown, and then he gradually pulled the shades of colour apart and understood them. There was a heap of straw on the floor of the shed, and two fur-collared, dark leather flight jackets spread out on top. Across them lay Hutchinson, naked, limbs splayed, and Starsky bent over him, also naked. The blond's head hung down and the fall of his hair was bright as the candle-flame, where it burned in a bottle on the other side of the shed. The brunet's hands and head were moving, and his hips too; he straddled one of Hutchinson's legs and humped slowly as he sucked... sucked Hutchinson's penis. Blaine could not believe his eyes.

The blond's arms were bent above his head, his back arched, his head rolling slowly to one side, then the other. Where Starsky's hands were, Blaine could not quite see, but obviously they were touching the other man intimately. Starsky raised his head and stilled, and both Hutchinson's hands flew up, reached for the dark hair and bronze shoulder. "Don't stop," he begged.

"Won't," said the other softly. "I'll never stop, never want to stop," and he bent again, licked the gleaming red skin with long strokes, moved his arms. Hutchinson squirmed.

"Oh *not* there, Starsky, no!" Even Blaine could tell that he was lying, that wherever Starsky was touching was exactly the right place. Starsky took the whole organ into his mouth at once, impossibly, his jaw wide-stretched and his throat working, and Hutchinson opened his mouth as wide but no sound emerged. His hands flailed, grabbed at the air and the straw and the leather of the jackets, and his whole body jumped and jerked as if lightning-struck.

Blaine found himself so aroused that he could hardly breathe, wanted some warm thing to rub against as if without it, his lungs would never work again. He reared back, knelt up, hands on his own erection as it throbbed and leaked through the cloth. He squeezed as hard as he could, hurting himself, trying furiously to see something else in his mind's eye beside gold and brown, skin and hair and leather and straw. He staggered to his feet, not even caring if the two inside could hear him, intent only on getting away.

As he closed the door into his office behind him, he groaned, unable to make it even to the armchair before he had to open his trousers, pull his wet length out, rub it hard and fast as he saw that golden head tossing, heard that desperate voice again. *Don't stop... not there...* . "No!" Blaine grunted through clenched teeth as he came, spurting through his fingers, spasms of release striking out through every limb. He leaned back against the door and shook for a long while afterward, before he could light the lamp and clean up his indiscretion.

He wondered if he could possibly, ever in his life, forget what he had just witnessed.

Chapter 2: Hoorah for the Next Man

Unusually, Hutch was almost the last flyer on the field the next morning. He sat alone in the mess joking with Watkins and eating cold oatcakes. The honey really was gone now, and Watkins was complaining that Starsky was the only officer who ever helped him with the bees. "Up they'll go in the air with their lives in their hands, but will one of 'em face a bee? No. It's a phineminon, sir, that's what it is, a phinee—phenomenon." He poured milk into Hutch's teacup as he spoke.

"Whoa!" Hutch cried just before it overflowed.

"Sorry, sir," and Watkins picked up the teapot by way of apology, but Hutch waved him off and lifted the brimming cup to his mouth, gulping the bland, cool liquid.

"What's the time, Sergeant?"

"Nearly five o'clock, sir. Dawn just coming up."

"What's the weather like?" Not that it mattered, Hutch knew; they couldn't call off this flight for a typhoon.

"Bit cloudy, sir."

Strange, it had been so clear the night before—or, rather, the very early morning "Starsky!" he bellowed.

There was a whoop from the upper floor. Starsk must have fallen back to sleep *again*. Another whoop, closer, and thumping on the staircase, and then Starsky appeared, hair wild, a scarf knotted around his neck and the pyjama top still on, though buttoned properly now. He plopped into a chair. Hutch looked at him, then leaned out and ducked his head to check that he really had trousers on, and boots. "Oh-ho-ho," he said, "good *morning*, Mr. Starsky. It's a *beautiful* morning, Mr. Starsky."

Starsky folded his arms on the table and put his head down on them. Was he pretending to be hung over, or really so worn out by their nocturnal game? "Have an *egg*, Mr. Starsky." Hutch knew he disliked them.

Watkins still didn't. "Hot from the nest, sir." Starsky groaned.

Hutch poured a cup of tea and the right amount of milk, tugged Starsky's head up by the hair and inserted the cup underneath. Starsk grimaced as he drank, and Hutch said, "No honey left." Then, to Watkins, "Don't stand there gaping, Sergeant, bring Mr. Starsky a couple of headache powders on toast." And then heard,

thready and remote, men singing.

It wasn't as though B-flight was likely to serenade them as they left—"What's that?"

Watkins craned his neck as if he could see through the wall. Perhaps that bushy moustache of his acted as a sort of antenna like the one on the field telephone. "Replacements just arriving, sir."

Hutch took another gulp of cold tea. "Send 'em in."

"Very good, sir," and Watkins marched off.

The singing went on, and that was definitely an auto. "... up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile...." The voices trailed off as the engine stopped.

A few moments later Watkins was ushering the newcomers through the door. "This way, gentlemen, please."

Starsky looked over Hutch's shoulder at them and said, quietly, "Here they are."

Hutch turned in his seat. Watkins crossed the room and said, "The replacements are here, sir," his voice weirdly apologetic.

"They get younger every day," said Starsky behind him.

These certainly were the youngest Hutch had seen. He turned back for one last gulp of tea, said, "This war goes on much longer, they'll be coming up here in their perambulators."

"Go on," Starsky said, smiling, "fix 'em up."

Watkins led him back to where the boys stood in a row, at attention. "Gentlemen, Captain Hutchinson."

Hutch looked at them, and they were absurdly young. Slightly in front of the others was a tall boy with dark brows and an expression of self-conscious bravery; then the one nearest the door looked no more than ten years old and sleepier than Starsky, eyes and mouth drooping. There was a short one with huge light-brown eyes and red cheeks, and a baby-faced strawberry blond with a wave in his hair. They all looked as if they were masquerading in their fathers' uniforms. "Good morning, gents," said Hutch, his voice involuntarily gentle.

They chorused, "Good morning, sir," like a fourth-form class. The tall, dark boy stepped forward and saluted, pulling a folded paper from his coat-belt.

"Russell," he said, "second lieutenant, sir. Reporting from the pool for duty, sir." His chest visibly swelled as Hutch shook his hand and took the orders from him.

"How do you do, Russell, good to have you here." He looked at the others still looking like they'd salute at the drop of a hat, and said, "Oh, stand at ease, we've no formality here."

The strawberry blond said fervently, "Oh, *thank* you, sir."

"What's your name?" Hutch asked him, and shook his hand.

"Burt, sir."

"Bert, eh? Bert what?"

"Henry Burt, sir."

Hutch laughed a little. "Oh." He turned to the others and got their names, Cleaver and Smythe, and found himself at the bottom of the stairs, too like Blaine, having to ask, "How many hours have you fellows had?" Machen had had thirty training hours in the air and had never used live ammunition.

Russell spoke right up, proudly. "I've had eighteen, sir."

Hutch had to move away from the staircase. He took two steps, locked his hands together behind his back and said, more gently than ever, "Eighteen. And you?"

"Thirteen, sir," said Burt.

"Fifteen, sir," Cleaver chimed in.

A breath left his mouth like laughter, and he turned back to sleepy Smythe, "And how many hours have you had?"

"Seven and a half, sir."

Hutch patted the newel at the bottom of the stairs, mindlessly, and could only repeat, "Seven and a half, eh?" But he had to pull himself together and get A-flight into the air. "I'll take Russell and Cleaver. Better get your things on right away—we're going over to strafe trenches in the Boulet sector."

Russell looked as if Christmas morning had come. "Now, sir?"

"Right now. No time for breakfast, quick."

"We've had it, sir!" said Russell, and he and Cleaver flew out the door while Burt and Smythe came up to Hutch like disappointed puppies.

"When do we go, sir?" Burt asked.

Hutch looked past him at the door of Blaine's office, wholly unable to meet the wide blue eyes. "Oh, you'll go soon enough. Get some tea, or coffee if you want it."

Actually he followed them to the bar to introduce them to Botts the orderly, and made sure they were going to get a real breakfast—he hadn't believed Russell. Wrote the two new names on the blackboard under A-flight, hoping they'd stay there.

By that time, Starsky had had time not only to put on his flight coat, but to fall asleep again in his chair. Hutch ran around behind it—"Come on, now, will you, what're you doing asleep?"—and tilted the chair back until it nearly went over. "Come on—"

"Whoa!" and Starsky jolted awake, eyes and mouth round, then sprang from the chair as Hutch righted it and they both ran out the door, down to the airfield, where plane engines were already firing up.

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Only four planes came back.

Blaine was outside, nearly on the airfield himself, which was unprecedented, but he couldn't help himself. The other three pilots got out quickly. Hutch sat staring straight ahead at his instrument board or perhaps the nose of his plane, very slowly lifting his goggles, peeling off his helmet. Then he paused. Watkins was

beside the plane by that time.

"Not Lieutenant Starsky, sir?"

Hutch looked at the sergeant as if he were speaking German, then nodded. Got up stiffly and swung out of the plane. Blaine watched him square his shoulders and then walk toward the house.

Hollister ran up, into Hutch's way, far more visibly upset than the flight captain, who merely stopped walking as if he faced a wall. The younger flier's voice shook: "There were two Bosche after me—Starsky was trying to help me!" He put out one hand but did not quite reach Hutch, then let the hand fall.

Hutch looked at him, then straight ahead again; walked on without speaking. Blaine spun on his heel and went back to his office, knowing where the flight captain was so single-mindedly headed. When he got there, with that measured step, Blaine was still barely inside the door, but Hutch brushed heedlessly past. He stood beside the desk and looked only at the fireplace. Blaine shut the door and walked behind him. "Yes, Hutchinson," he said, wanting it over with.

Hutch spoke in a soft, rough monotone, as if he had been rehearsing his report all the way back. Very likely he had. "We fought off the counter-attack for an hour. Then they found us. We lost three men: Russell, Cleaver, and S--" He turned farther away from Blaine, now facing the desk itself, "Starsky. That's all." He got out of the office door without ever meeting Blaine's eyes.

Hutch's pain rang like an echo through the room, and Blaine could not just sit hearing it. He pulled a bottle from his desk drawer and went out to stand at the officer's bar. Hutch was methodically scrubbing away the two chalk names at the bottom of the list, then raised his hand and paused, then wiped off Starsky's name, just below his own. His fist clenched hard on the rag, pressing it against the board, and he stood for a moment with his head bent before he put the rag down and turned toward the bar.

Blaine was there, with the bottle and two glasses. Hutch took one look and walked right past him to sit at a table, in front of a newspaper he must already have read.

Botts took a bottle and a glass over without anyone telling him—the best whiskey they had, Blaine noticed, and one of the big glass mugs they used for beer. Hutch looked up and his eyes were not quite so blank; the corners of his mouth twitched as if he were trying to smile.

"I'm sorry about—Mr. Starsky, sir," Botts said.

Hutch's voice was still that gentle rasp. "Yes."

Botts stood for another moment, and then left. Blaine, looking on, felt more a voyeur than he had the night before, outside the shed, and could not bear it. His own bottle and glass in hand, he walked over to the table. Hutch's head was bent and he was riffling the corners of the newspaper pages. The slight fluttering sound happened twice, then again after a pause; then Hutch lifted his hand and rubbed the greyish fingers as if feeling the ink on them. Blaine took another step closer, now almost touching Hutch, who looked up with such wariness that Blaine couldn't speak for a moment either.

He lifted his bottle and glass and poured a good big shot. Then lowered the bottle, but kept the glass up, between his face and Hutch's, and said, "To him."

Hutch's expression softened and he grabbed for his own bottle so suddenly that it rocked in his hand. He splashed whiskey into the mug and raised it, looking at the amber liquor. "I'll drink to that. To S-starsky," and despite the stammer his voice was still firm. "S-sleep tight." And he tossed back the whiskey as if it had been water.

Blaine pulled at the leather-clad shoulder and said, "Come on. Come and tell me what really happened."

"I want to sit here." And this time the smile Hutch produced was recognisable, though not convincing.

Some madman had set the gramophone going, and the opening notes of "Poor Butterfly" penetrated Blaine's consciousness. "Hey, there," he called out, "turn that off. Now! Please."

This, for some reason, galvanised Hutch. "No, no," he said, and turned to face in the general direction of the gramophone. "Play it, go ahead, play it!" To Blaine, "What does it matter?"—and then back to the B-flight men standing at the machine—"You fellows don't appreciate good music! Play it!" A deep breath, which caught a little, then he looked up at Blaine again, still trying to grin. "Maybe Starsk'll hear it." He swallowed. "Be funny if you thought he could, wouldn't it?"

Blaine got his hand all the way around Hutch's arm and tugged up, hard. "Come *on*," he said, and fairly dragged him to his feet.

"Yes, sir," Hutch said, with irony, and picked up the whiskey and the mug before really following Blaine into the office.

Blaine stood at the door again, closed it behind them, and let Hutch choose his own ground, which turned out to be in front of the fireplace. The fair head bent over the low flames and the hand holding the glass braced against the high narrow mantel.

"Sit down," said Blaine, not making a fuss about it, and Hutch looked up as if a little startled to find his CO in the office. He dropped without complaint into the armchair. Blaine grabbed the footstool and hauled it into place, sat on it, put the bottle and glass on the floor, and leaned forward. He took Hutch's whiskey from his unresisting grasp and poured him half the mug-full, then pushed it back into his hand. "Tell me."

"Well." Hutch was looking at the fire again, and it sent writhing shadows over the pale, set face. "It... strafing a convoy after the first barrage... trying to get out, under a cloud bank." The very incoherence was compelling, and Blaine nodded. Hutch lifted his free hand and brought it down in a slow clawing motion. "Jerries came down on us like that. Poor little Cleaver went first—I don't think he ever fired a shot. And Russell must've gone about the same time. I didn't see." He swallowed. "Then Hollister."

"Well?" asked Blaine.

"Something must have happened—" Hutch gestured with the glass this time, a sideways, dismissive motion. The whiskey sloshed.

"He funkyed," Blaine said, certain.

Hutch paused before admitting, "Yes, he did a bit. He got in a jam—" and Hutch's voice just stopped, his mouth still a little ajar.

"What?"

"A-and," Hutch said, showing his teeth, "and Starsk went after him. Help him out. Like I told him. C-cover the tail." He looked at the glass, seemed to recognise it slowly, took one gulp and then another. "Jerry got behind him, and... shot him down out of control."

Blaine was leaning still closer. "You sure?"

"Mm-hmm." Then, as if Blaine were arguing the point, "Yes, I saw, it was right underneath me. There was nothing I could do, he had his tail surfaces all, all shot away. Got in a spin—" he drew the motion in the air

with one finger—"and as he went down...." Hutch's mouth was turned up at the ends and he was making chuffing noises like laughter, but his eyes made Blaine reach out blindly and grasp at what turned out to be one knee. "He waved," said Hutch. "Goodbye."

"Where'd he go down?" asked Blaine, and shook the knee he held a little when Hutch didn't answer.

"I don't know, somewhere behind our lines. I went after that Jerry... bald-headed ...."

"You get him?"

Hutch sighed. "No. Put a bullet in his motor. He came down behind our lines somewhere."

"Behind *our* lines!"

"Mm-hmm." Hutch rubbed his face, chin to forehead and back, then leaned his elbow on the arm of the chair and shaded his eyes, turned them toward the fire again. His lips were unsteady, or Blaine thought they were, that it wasn't just the firelight. The fingers across his brows and eyes were shaking too. And then his shoulders heaved, once, as he gasped for breath. Blaine held on and Hutch made no sound at all for several moments. Then he took in a deep swift breath, less a gasp than the last. "S-s-sorry," he whispered.

"All right," Blaine said nearly as softly.

A brisk double-knock at the door made them both jump. Blaine got up, but pressed down on Hutch's knee when he stirred. "Come in," Blaine said, standing between Hutch and the door.

It was Phipps. "Pardon, sir. An artillery car just brought in a German aviator."

It wasn't too unusual for prisoners to wait at the farmhouse for transit. "Who brought him down?" Blaine asked.

"They say the leader of A-flight brought him down." Phipps glanced past Blaine as Hutch surged to his feet. "You, Captain Hutchinson."

"Steady," Blaine told the younger man, who strode past unheeding, blazing like an avenging angel. Blaine and Phipps rushed after him.

"Good morning, sir, that's the prisoner, there," said one stranger, and the other, in a slightly different uniform but with the telltale grime of the pilot on the lower half of his face, stepped forward and looked from Blaine, to Phipps, to Hutch, who was leaning on the end of the bar and staring as if he expected the man to turn into a fire-breathing dragon and wanted to be sure he knew where the vulnerable spots were to attack.

Phipps, the only officer in the place who spoke German, asked the prisoner's name, and then introduced him: "Hoffmann Von Mueller, Major Blaine."

Blaine bowed slightly, and Von Mueller clicked his heels and snapped his head down, then up. Very smart, if a bit painful looking.

Hutch was still staring so hard that it was impossible to ignore him. "And Captain Hutchinson," Phipps said to Von Mueller, who looked back with a puzzled innocence that made Blaine want to interfere.

"Phipps," he said, "tell him that Hutchinson is the man who brought him down."

Phipps spoke briefly; Von Mueller, obviously surprised, said a few words to Phipps and then turned to

Hutch. Something about compliments, he was saying, something about flying, or flier... Blaine didn't know, but it went on for a while, the man's face as frank and open as—well, as Starsky's would have been.

"He says he's delighted to meet you," Phipps said, clearly editing.

Hutch paced forward, as tense as a wire, until he was barely two feet from the German, toe to toe. He blinked, then gave his first genuine grin since A-flight's return—sincere, if a little tight. One hand reached out for a shake and Von Mueller responded, then flinched back. His hand was wrapped with dirty gauze.

"Oh, sorry," Hutch said easily.

"Wass?" asked Von Mueller, turning to Phipps. "Wass?"

Phipps translated, and Von Mueller grinned toothily. "So-sorry," he tried.

Hutch said, "Sorry, yes. Will you have a drink?" and led the German to the bar, where he and Botts filled Von Mueller in on exactly what drinks were available.

"Cognac," Von Mueller chose.

"Cognac!" said Hutch, clapping the man's shoulder.

Blaine edged back. He wasn't needed. Of course not. Hutch would rather get drunk with the man who'd killed his lover than discuss that lover with Blaine. Little though he could have predicted it, Blaine thought there was something about it that fit the war, the mad and ugly life they now led. And his own position in the slaughterhouse.

In any case he could hear the field-telephone ringing; someone at Headquarters wanted to speak to him. He left the officer's mess to its own devices.

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By late afternoon, they were all drunk. Von Mueller had learned to sing three or four English songs, which he did with a good strong tenor and an increasingly daffy expression, lapsing into yodelling descants when he lost track of the lyrics. It really was impossible to be angry at him. Hutch had taken down scores of Jerries himself. It was this crazy war, that's all, and if Sta—but Hutch couldn't think that, couldn't let his thoughts touch that, or he'd really lose control. He concentrated on teaching Von Mueller to make English sounds. "Very nice," he said, "very nice, but do you think you could manage to say '*the* next man *that* dies,' not 'zee nex' man zat die'?"

The man grinned at him, bleary-eyed. It had been a long while since Hutch had seen anybody this drunk and still functioning. Mostly functioning. Von Mueller's eyes crossed a little as he very carefully put the tip of his tongue between his teeth. "Ththth," he buzzed. "Thee."

"That's right," Hutch told him. Turned back to the others and raised his hands—he was the impromptu conductor tonight, and they all waited for the downstroke, accordion and all. He took it slow, for Von Mueller's sake. "Hoo-rah-for-the-next—"

But Von Mueller was stuck, like a scratched record: "Theeeeeeeee—" he sang until he ran out of breath, his mouth stretched in an open-mouthed smile and his eyes all lit up with mischief.

Hutch patted his shoulder. "Very nice." Turned back to the others: "—the next man that dies—" and drew out that note himself, they all did, while Von Mueller stood up, lifted his glass, and ran his voice up and down on the vowel sound he really understood.

"Very good!" Hutch patted him again, sat him back down. Bent over the German, he missed Hollister's first movement, but then suddenly the young hothead was tackling Von Mueller, hitting out at him, nearly knocking over the chair before Hutch and two or three others pulled him away.

And then it was Hutch that Hollister turned on: "You can laugh with him, joke with him, a man that just murdered your best friend! He's dead, you know that, don't you—don't you!"

"Shut up!" He pushed at Hollister, who sagged in the others' hold. Hutch could *not* have Hollister speak of—

"And so are Brand and Machen, my best friends—" falling in the air, smoke from the plane—"they're dead—" Starsky's hand going up as he'd done a thousand times, when it didn't mean—"they're not coming back any more, they're not coming ba—"

"*SHUT UP!*" Hutch had lifted Hollister with one hand in the front of his uniform, almost off the ground, and his other arm was drawn back to strike. Everything looked pinkish. His mouth was open but he couldn't seem to get any air. Someone was hanging on to him, several hands actually, and Hollister's face was moving, rippling. Hutch hoped distantly that he wasn't the one making those awful heaving noises. And then Hollister's head dropped and he was pulled away, and it *was* the other man crying and not Hutch.

Hutch's field of vision lowered suddenly. He must be sitting down. His elbow was against something hard. His other hand was in his lap, fist still clenched.

"—lieve he's forgotten Starsky already—" Hollister sobbed.

Hutch found he was breathing after all, so he concentrated on it. In and out. Some of the other voices began to come to him. Von Mueller's—well, that was all right, Hutch never had understood what the German said. Blaine's, asking "What's that?"

Phipps said, "He wants to know if Hollister flies."

"Tell him yes," said Blaine dryly, "off the handle more often than not."

Now that was quite funny. Hutch thought about it. Blinked. Felt the tears fall and wiped at them quickly. He *wasn't* crying. He wouldn't.

He'd been... yes, he remembered now, he'd been... "Hey," he said hoarsely, and everyone looked. "Pack up your troubles."

Lowry started to play at once. Men were singing. "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile." Botts brought him a drink, and his hand was steady when he picked it up. A few moments later, he had turned sideways in the seat to watch the others sing. Von Mueller stood near the bar, leaning against a post, probably unable to stand alone by this time. Phipps spoke to him quietly.

The door slammed open, and Watkins came in, and stood blowing his moustache and opening his mouth, but nothing came out. Hutch had just registered the oddity of that when a filthy, dishevelled, polka-dotted figure carrying an armful of champagne bottles was hustled in by about six of the ground crew. They were all cheering. Hutch stood up though he thought it must be an hallucination. But he blinked, and the wild, black-faced creature was still there. "S-s-" he said, and no more. Took one step, and then was running, and it was a good thing all those people were there to catch them both as he grabbed Starsky's jacket collar, then his head, then his jacket again. "Starsky," he got out.

Starsky's eyes were bright, and he was gasping with laughter, looking only at Hutch, who couldn't look away and couldn't bear to touch his friend's skin for fear he'd lose his grip completely. Their feet were back

under them and they stood ringed by uniforms and Starsky was right here, warm, looking at him. Grinning with all his teeth showing. Looking at him.

"Sit down, man," said Phipps and they were pulled and pushed over to the bench by the wall. Sat down. The others melted away somehow.

"Starsky. Where—where'd you get the champagne?" And that made Starsky laugh all over again. Hutch laughed. The whole mess was full of the sound of it.

Starsky tried to reach out toward Hutch and one of the bottles slipped, so he hugged them close again and staggered to his feet. They went to the bar and Starsky plopped the bottles down. Phipps was there and Squires behind him, and Von Mueller was still holding up the post.

"You know," said Phipps, "we thought you'd gone west. Tell us what happened."

"Well," Starsky puffed a little and then said, "the last thing I remember was pancaking into a trench, and seeing my wings 'n' things fall off, then I woke up with a bump on my head, feel it?" He turned to Hutch and bent his head.

Hutch's fingers slid into greasy, dusty, warm, tangled curls, and he did find the bump but kept rubbing anyway, and Starsky spoke with his head still down. "And a stretcher bearer pouring some rum down my throat. Woo! You should have some of that rum!" His eyes twinkled at Hutch and he raised his head.

"*You* didn't have any of that rum, did you?" asked Hutch.

"Just a couple of drops," and Starsky turned back to Phipps but Hutch could only let his fingers slide down the back of Starsky's head, to near his collar, and rest there. "But I stopped for some refreshment on my way back and I *brought these*—" grabbing at the champagne and handing bottles to Phipps and Squires and Botts. Hutch was holding one flight-coat sleeve now, so he couldn't take a bottle. Starsky held out the last one, and Von Mueller's bandaged hand closed over the neck. The drunken German bent his head forward and snapped it back against the post.

"Oh," said Starsky, taken aback, "oh, what's that?"

"Oh," Hutch began to laugh again, "that's the man that brought you down! Introduce him, will you, Phipps?"

Phipps spoke, and Von Mueller repeated the last word or so, syllable by slow syllable, and then stared hard at Starsky. His face slowly opened into an expression of absolute joy, and he flung himself forward, catching Starsky in his arms. "Aaaah!" he cried. Then began to talk earnestly, privately, the word "freund" all that Hutch could make out.

"What's he saying?" Starsky asked, a little desperately.

"I don't know," Hutch said.

Phipps chuckled. "He just wants you to have a drink."

"Oh, a drink! A drink, a drink," Starsky disentangled himself from the clinging prisoner and grabbed the bottle that Bott had peeled down. With a pop the cork came free and foam shot out. "There!"

Hutch grabbed the nearest glass, which still had dregs in it, and pushed it under the bottle. He would have drunk from Starsky's boot at this point. "Don't waste it!"

Botts gave Starsky a clean glass and then took the bottle from him to pour for everyone around the bar.

"All right?" asked Starsky looking around. "All right!" He raised his glass. "To—" his eyes fell on Hutch. "To friendship."

Hutch's throat closed and he couldn't move for a moment. Then he gulped down the needle-sharp liquid while the others cheered and repeated, "To friendship!" Starsky put his glass down on the bar but kept holding it; Hutch clinked his into it, their hands nudging.

A horn blasted outside. Watkins cried out, "Lieutenant Starsky! A driver out here named Flaherty, says he's waiting for you, sir."

"Oh!" Starsky said, pushing his glass away and grabbing an unopened bottle, "Hutch! I've got a chauffeur waiting outside!"

"A what?"

"A car and chauffeur, going to take me on a personally conducted tour of all the inns and taverns of France."

"Won-derful!"

"Come on," and Starsky tugged Hutch along by his uniform.

"We should bring the Jerry," Hutch joked.

"No," Starsky said as they went out the door, "can't do that."

It wasn't an automobile, it was a motorcycle with a sidecar. The driver had his goggles down and all, ready to go, though he held an absurd bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"Oh, but he can sing," Hutch said about Von Mueller.

"Too bad." Starsky pushed Hutch into the sidecar and handed him the bottle and, taking them from Flaherty, the flowers. Then he jumped in on top and Flaherty gunned the motor and zoomed away.

"Oof!" was all Hutch could say. His hands were full and in the air and his legs were awkwardly draped, but he didn't mind a bit. He closed his arms around Starsky, who squirmed around until they were slightly more comfortable and shouted to the driver. Hutch couldn't hear that part. Then Starsky lay back against Hutch and sighed. Hutch closed his arms around the warm weight and let his own head fall back. Curls rubbed against his chin and cheek. The car jolted and rocked. The motorcycle was almost as loud as one of their planes.

Starsky turned his head and spoke into Hutch's ear. "Flaherty knows a super place," he said.

"How do you always find" but Hutch didn't really care, didn't care about anything just then. "God, I love you," he said, voice low and perhaps covered by the motor noise.

But Starsky heard. "Don't stop, " he said.

Chapter 3: Without Official Leave

Hutch lay in the sidecar, looking up at the impressionist heavens, its swirling blues and pinks and golds in streaky clouds... a single bright star. He was fascinated in a tipsy way with the stillness of the sky while the fuzzy dark tops of poplars whizzed by on either side, leaning in and then away, and the intermittent bulks of

lorries whipped past and stole the very air around them. "Whoo!" cried Starsky, "Whoa!" as Flaherty swerved and speeded. Hutch was surprised at his friend's reaction—they were both used to being in fast-moving, swooping vehicles—but perhaps it had something to do with not piloting, or driving, himself.

At one point, Starsky gave a kind of squeak and all his muscles seemed to tighten, so Hutch raised his head in time to see a lorry completely blocking the road as it crossed and Flaherty buzzing closer and closer to the solid end of it. Hutch just had time to hold on to Starsky and get about halfway through the thought that at least they were both in it, and then the bulky load lurched forward—the motorcycle tipped wildly as they went nearly into the ditch—and they were past before Hutch really absorbed how close they'd been to the tail-lights. Very close. Very extremely close, so that he could see not just the red warning glare but the little point of intensity where the filament burned and the darker swirls where colouring or glass was thicker. He let his head fall back again as Starsky shouted, "Road Hog!" and sat more heavily on Hutch, leaning against him.

Hutch ruminated, earnestly, but he was finding it hard to get from one idea to another. It was easier just to watch the sky hanging over him and feel Starsky's weight and the cradle-like rocking of the sidecar.

Eventually the motorcycle twisted round and stopped. Starsky clambered out and Hutch sat up, looking at the now-battered bouquet and the obviously shaken bottle, and then at the quiet farmyard where they were.

"Doesn't look like the Inns and Taverns Cook's Tour," he said.

"No," said Flaherty, pulling off his goggles and then his helmet, "that little extravaganza hasn't yet begun, m'boyo. Your pal here wanted to clean himself up, so I've brought the pair of you to the place I lay m'weary head on leave."

The door of the farmhouse opened, and a French matron emerged, paused to look at them, and put her hands on her hips.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Starsky in the moment's silence.

"Sure and I'm sure," Flaherty said, and then to the woman, "Soir, Mama Marthe," and something else in French. Hutch decided that French sounded even stranger through an Irish brogue. Flaherty walked up to the woman, still talking, and then put his free hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. She kept her hands on her hips until the kiss, and then sighed and smiled and patted the motorcyclist's cheek. Began to chatter to him, swift and half-scolding. Flaherty answered with an indulgent smile of his own. After a bit he turned back, grinning, and said, "Come on, boys, she won't bite."

The two fliers approached the farmhouse, which was stone and yellow brick like the one they were living in, but quiet, the yard untrampled and the little garden neatly kept. A pot of geraniums on the windowsill reminded Hutch suddenly and sharply of an English cottage, and he caught his breath and looked at Starsky, whose grimy face reminded Hutch of too much, whose distance at this moment comforted him not enough.

Flaherty reached out and took the bouquet to hand to Marthe with a little bow. Hutch had thought—well, it was foolish, he supposed—but he glanced over and found that Starsky was taken aback too. Marthe eyed them with a dry and knowing look, and Hutch swallowed. He felt caught out, suddenly fifteen years younger. She reached out and patted his face as she had Flaherty's, and told him something soothing which unfortunately he had no idea of; then she led the way inside.

The main room here was smaller than the officers' mess, and dim. Marthe bustled over to the kitchen door, still talking, and vanished through it. The men looked at each other.

"I take it you'll not be speaking French at all," Flaherty said.

"I took it in school," said Starsky, rueful.

"So did I," blurted Hutch, "but I can't understand the way these *foreigners* speak it."

Flaherty laughed, the sound brief but real and unshadowed. "Well, she's gone to heat water, for she's as adamant as the Lieutenant that he must wash. I'm to take you upstairs and show you where everything is, and then leave you. When you're cleaned up, come down and she'll have food ready, and *you'd* best be ready to eat it."

Starsky asked, "It won't be eggs, will it?"

"I don't suppose so," Flaherty answered. "At this hour? Probably some sort of stew." And after a brief pause, "Come on, then." He picked up a candle, already burning in a rough cream-coloured pottery stand, and they went up the staircase and down a narrow corridor, past two other doors. Flaherty moved confidently and opened the third door as if he were their host, which it seemed he was, in a way. Hutch wondered in what way.

Starsky evidently did too: "Are you... a relation?" he asked as they all went in to the room, a little low-ceilinged one with a bed, small table, washstand and wardrobe in light-painted wood.

"Not really. Oh," with a broad grin, "you're not thinking she's me mistress! Mother Mary, I'd love to see her face if she found out you thought she was a kept woman! No, I met Mama Marthe when," and he sobered, "when I brought her some things. From the front. Belonged to a French boy I knew, working the ambulance, and he'd told me where to bring them if he... couldn't. To his mother. And then Marthe and me got to talking, and I visited her the next time I'd a moment's leave, and, well, I kept coming here. She's just about adopted me. I've a spare uniform in the wardrobe ..." he looked at Starsky. "The arms will be a bit short, and the trouser-legs maybe long, but you'll be glad to get out of those things, I should just think."

"You would just be right," Starsky said fervently.

"I'll leave you to it, then, and go help Marthe with the water." He looked at Hutch, paused, and then left, putting the candle on the table.

Hutch watched the door closing and then went to Starsky. He cupped the oval face in hands that were suddenly unsteady, and looked down at it.

"Can't I wash first?" asked Starsky.

"No, I don't care," Hutch said, and kissed him. Fingers moving on the dirty skin and hair, lips pressing hard, then drawing back to pluck tenderly at the warm, dry mouth that stretched in a half-smile. Then it was Starsky who pulled close, holding on tightly, opening his lips and moving into Hutch's mouth, tongue lapping, teasing, stroking. And Starsky who tucked his head into Hutch's neck afterward. Hutch wrapped his arms around his lover, rocked him a little, rubbed his back. "Starsk," he murmured. "Starsky. David."

Starsky sighed, a catch in the middle of the long breath, and rubbed his head a little back and forth against Hutch's jaw.

"I don't know, don't know," Hutch said, "if I can see that again. When you waved, going down"

"I love you too," Starsky told him, in a voice that was neither desperate nor casual. As if loving Hutch was too important to take for granted but too basic to make a great fuss over.

Hutch kissed the little strip of forehead just under the hairline, where it was almost clean. "Next time would you just take me with you? Just shoot, take out the fuel tank."

And Starsky stepped back, hands grabbing Hutch's arms, his expression fierce. He shook Hutch a little with each word he spoke: "Not. One. Chance. Absolutely not!" His eyes blazed so in the dim candlelight that Hutch just stared. Starsky's angry grip loosened. "Don't you know? I couldn't have made it alone, couldn't have landed if you weren't up there. And if I had and you'd gone" His face softened; one hand came up to Hutch's cheek and cupped it gently. "Ah, no. We can't do that. Don't ever want to see this golden angel fall."

Hutch had to kiss him, then. And once more after that. But then Starsky pulled back slowly, and said, "I need that wash."

Reaching for the buttons of the piebald pyjama-top, Hutch said, "I'll wash you, young Master Starsky," wiggling his fingers.

But Starsky caught his hands and held them. "No, Hutch, really, no. You undress me, touch me that way, and I'll go off like a shell. We can't, not here."

"I have to touch you," Hutch said, seriously. "That way. Every way."

"Yes, tonight, later, I promise. When we can both get undressed and nobody's to come in."

"We're AWOL," said Hutch, a discovery.

"You just thought of that now?" Starsky grinned at him. "You *are* drunk, angel."

"A little pissed," Hutch admitted.

"You could lie down," and Starsky nodded at the bed.

Hutch shook his head. "And watch you get undressed? And not touch you? Better not. I'll go help with the water." And he realised something else he'd been too taken up with his lover to understand. "Flaherty expects it."

"At first, yes, but I think... well, you should go," Starsky decided. "I think he won't dare bring it while we're in here alone."

"Just how well did you get to know him?"

But Starsky only shrugged. Hutch leaned in and just touched his lips to the grimy skin.

"I do believe you can find anything at all, or anyone," he said, on his way out.

"*Do* believe it," Starsky said.

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Marthe handed Hutch a battered tin bath, which he carried up the stairs pretty steadily, because he was careful. After the relaxation of the ride and the moments alone with his lover, he had to get hold of himself again, get the liquor in his system under control. He thought he could.

Starsky had started washing already, bare to the waist and bent over the wash-basin, splashing at his face. Hearing the door creak open, he rubbed his eyes and looked around, then grimaced.

Disappointment was not what Hutch had expected to see. "What?"

"I want to shave," said Starsky, "but I need hot water and I don't know where the things are. Where's

Flaherty?"

Hutch put the tub down in the middle of the floor and went over to the wardrobe. The first door he opened had the hanging clothes behind it, but the second had shelves, and the shaving cup and soap and razor were there. "You're a big baby," he said as he put them in Starsky's hands. But he had to smile. "Flaherty's coming," he murmured.

"All right," said Starsky, ducking his head a little.

Hutch understood the gesture and stepped back. "You should see the pot Marthe is heating water in," he said. "Looks like the cauldron in *Macbeth*. But she had a kettle on, too, so that water's on its way."

Starsky repeated, "All right," and then met Hutch's eyes with more of a spark in his own. "You could use a shave too."

"After you," Hutch said. "Maybe while you're in the bath." But he couldn't dwell on that if he were going to keep his hands off Starsky now, so he stepped back and said, "I'll go see about that water."

He met Flaherty on the stairs with water and towels, which was good for Starsky but meant that he was left with Madame Marthe in the kitchen, and his fragments of schoolboy French. She smiled at him and gestured toward the teapot on the table. So she'd kept back a little of the hot water; Hutch found himself grateful. It was French tea, of course, which was to say that it was too weak, but pouring the cup and drinking it gave him something to do. Marthe sat across the table from him and looked curious, but after speaking a few phrases that Hutch only shrugged at, she gave up on speech and just nodded companionably at him from time to time. Then Flaherty was back, and she chatted with him a little.

"She wants to know if you're in the ambulance, or in the trenches," Flaherty said after a bit.

"Tell her, if you like," Hutch said, knowing it sounded a little short; still, it was better than his first impulse, which was that he'd rather be dead than do either. He sipped his tea and said more gently, "Her son was in the ambulance, you said?"

"Yes," said Flaherty, pulling in his chin and sitting back in the high wooden settle so that his face was in shadow. "Robert—" he gave it the French pronunciation, and Marthe turned her head toward him—"was a volunteer." He sighed, and Marthe reached over and patted his hand.

"You were friends," said Hutch, feeling his way.

Flaherty looked up, met his eye, said nothing. Then he looked over at the fire. "Bert," he said, voice falling. For a moment Hutch thought he'd said "bear," and had to work out that it was a nickname. "He was all right. We hit it off right away, to be sure." He poured himself a cup of tea and drank. Then smiled, sadly.

"Everybody called him 'Bert, excepting me—I called him Teddy, and I think he never really understood. Provincial kid, he was." He sipped again and put the cup down, wrapping both hands around it. "Had those little eyeglasses, you know, not pince-nez but the other kind, hooked over his ears." He looked down at the cup and then up at Hutch. "It was a box-shell. I've never told—her—much about it."

"Don't," said Hutch, who could guess.

Flaherty swallowed. "Well, and isn't the water hot, then?" He turned to Marthe and obviously asked the same thing in French. She got up, patting his shoulder as she crossed behind the chair, and dipped her finger in the pot, then shook it and spoke. Now Hutch was looking, he could see the faint curl of steam off the surface of the water.

After that, they were occupied carrying pails up the stairs. Starsky had put the pyjama top back on, so he

carried pails too. Marthe poured cold water into the hot, tested the temperature with her elbow as if for a baby, and then poured a little more in before she would let Starsky at the tub. Hutch handed one of his empty pails to Flaherty and kept the other. "I've to wash up myself," he said; "I'll use the basin." The other man nodded and followed Madame Marthe out.

Starsky eyed him sceptically. Hutch raised his hands in the air, the empty one high, the one with the pail about halfway. "You told me to shave," he said. "Honestly."

Starsky's mouth curved up on one side, and he turned toward the bed and took off his pyjama-top again. Hutch took off his own coat, uniform tunic, tie, shirt and undershirt, facing the washstand. The mirror had a tall spindle on either side, and he hung his clothes on the right-hand one. He could hear the rustle of Starsky's clothes and then a dull plashing sound as he got into the tub. And then a sigh. Hutch smiled at the mirror, too small to show the rest of the room past his shoulders. Starsky had lit two more candles, which were on either side of the mirror; Hutch moved the edge of his coat farther away from the flame and then picked up the shaving cup and brush. There was still soap inside, so he used it. Opened the razor and leaned close to the mirror. "Suppose this is Flaherty's cutthroat?"

"His or the boy's," Starsky said.

"He tell you about him?"

"Only that he was dead."

Hutch didn't respond, the edge of the blade warming dangerously on his skin. He scraped along his jaw, thoughtfully. After a few passes, he felt his hand a little unsteady and held it away, standing up to loosen his shoulders and back. "You knew I was half-pissed and you told me to shave with this thing," he complained.

Splashing, Starsky answered, "Go ahead, live dangerously."

"Who, me?"

Actually, Hutch took the shaving slowly, and except for a little nick under the chin that hardly bled, he was all right. And quite proud of himself. He washed off the extra soap and then scrubbed around his ears, the back of his neck, under his arms.

"Hutch," Starsky said, and the slightly pathetic tone of his voice made Hutch grin—Starsky wanted something, he knew.

"Mmm?" He used the towel, rubbing briskly.

"Hutch, will you pour some water for me? Over my head?"

Though Hutch knew his lover was just rinsing his hair, it was still funny—they'd done this sort of thing as a joke so often in school, and occasionally since. "My pleasure," he said, picking up the ewer.

But he paused for a moment to look at Starsky sitting in the tub, knees sticking out and elbows held up as he soaped his head. And then walked forward, watching the working shoulders, the way soapy water slid over his clenched-up face and down the wet hair of his chest. Knelt beside the tub and wiped at Starsky's forehead, then thumbed across his eyelids. Wet his hand with a little of the ewer water and did it again before he said, "Tilt your head back," and put his hand back against Starsky's forehead to keep the water off. Poured it slowly, and Starsky rubbed his hair, his mouth working soundlessly too. When the water was gone, Hutch put the ewer down without looking and reached into the drenched hair, between Starsky's hands, squeezing the wet mass of it, cupping his chin with the other hand, and then was too drawn to that mouth to keep from kissing it.

"Mmpfh," Starsky said, but he kissed back while they milked most of the water from his hair. Hutch leaned over the tub and drew Starsky's head to his shoulder, rubbing the wet neck from jaw to collarbone.

"You'll be soaked," Starsky murmured. "And I'm ready to get out." So Hutch reluctantly drew back.

They dressed; while Starsky was finishing, Hutch used the pail to empty the bath water by throwing it out the window. There was nothing below but a little scraggly grass.

The legs of Flaherty's trousers *were* too long, and Starsky turned up the cuffs. "Gay blade," Hutch said, making Starsky grin.

When they went down, carrying the bath and the pail, they found that Marthe had set up a whole meal, bread and stew and a bottle of wine. "Merci," Starsky began, stumbled through a few more words, and then just smiled and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. She beamed.

"D'you think she'd like to adopt any more British soldiers?" he asked as he dropped into a chair.

"Not if I can help it," Flaherty said.

Marthe ladled stew onto their plates; as she served Starsky, she patted his shoulder and spoke. Flaherty translated with a grin. "She says you clean up nicely."

"This is too much," Hutch said, overtaken by compunction as he looked at his food. "She's too kind. Isn't there," he thought of money but couldn't quite bring himself to suggest it, "isn't there something we can do for her?"

"Save the world from the Kaiser," said Flaherty, flippantly. "Isn't that what we're all doing here, then?"

Hutch wondered whether Marthe believed it; whether anybody could, who knew the cost.

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Just as they were leaving Marthe's, Flaherty laughed at something she'd said, and then translated, "She says she can find you nice French sweethearts. She's always saying that to me, too—she means good girls, to be sure, girls to marry you."

"Good grief," said Hutch.

"Thank her," said Starsky, "but no thanks."

They waved and called "Goodbye" and were off. The road was deserted just here and the motorcycle seemed quieter. Hutch sat up, his legs tucked round Starsky, and if they shouted, they could hear each other.

"Like me own mother," Flaherty said, his brogue more noticeable, for some reason. "Old... Cat'olic... not like she'd understand, to be sure."

Hutch wasn't at all sure he understood, himself, and rarely dwelt on it anyway. What did reasons and words matter? Starsky mattered. He held tighter.

"Where are we going?" Starsky asked.

"Amiens."

On the way, they stopped at two local taverns, but didn't linger in either place. Farmers with mugs and

pottery cups frowned or stared at them; the beer was flat, and the vin too ordinaire.

Still, it had some alcohol in it, and the second time they got back into the sidecar, Hutch rested his forehead against Starsky's neck, with the fur collar of the flight-jacket against his temple, and let himself drift... drowsed, the buzz of the motor and occasional jolt of the sidecar less and less conscious as sensations... he slept.

Starsky moved and woke him. The motorcycle was still, in a dark cobbled street that was unremarkable but for the bicycles against the wall and three autos straddling the walkway further down. "Come on, do, Hutch." Hutch sat up and Starsky clambered out, straightening his jacket while Hutch followed. Flaherty hung his helmet on one of the driving handles, and led the way across the street at an angle, to an unmarked wooden door. He knocked, paused, knocked twice and paused, then knocked three times. The door was cracked open and a man looked out, his face attentively blank. Voices and the quick notes of a ragtime piano came to Hutch faintly.

Flaherty said something and the man at the door replied, then opened it fully and grinned at them. Looked Hutch and Starsky up and down, but said something that sounded like "désastre" or perhaps "des asses"—Hutch was trying to decide whether to be offended and if so, what to do about it, when Flaherty laughed and said, "He says you're flying aces."

"Well," said Hutch self-deprecatingly.

"Mais oui," said Starsky jauntily, using up nearly all the French Hutch thought he knew.

Flaherty laughed again and they came all the way in, down a half-flight of stairs into what had probably once been a cellar. Flagstones on the floor, brick walls, electric light looking garish and naked as it glared on a dark-wood bar. The piano was at the far end of the room under another light, and there were small cafe-style tables scattered around. Hutch looked harder at the slim suited figure at a nearby table, hat tilted forward and seeming to ride too high on the small head, and realised it was a woman he was looking at. They were at an invert's club.

The piano paused and voices called out, presumably song titles, as the musician talked back and then launched into another tune. Starsky grinned over his shoulder as they both recognised it: "You Made Me Love You."

Flaherty led them over to the bar. "The real treat here, for you monoglots," he said, "is the bartender."

The trousered form bent over behind the bar rose up, a dusty bottle in one long-fingered hand, and farther up than Hutch had expected. He also hadn't expected the dark face, the hooked nose, the bright and knowing eyes. "Bon soir, messieurs," said the black man.

"Now don't make me look the fool, 'Braceur," Flaherty said.

"Oh, sorry," the bartender said, blinking. "English, is you?"

"Yes," said Hutch. "RAC."

"Bien sûr," 'Braceur answered, looking back and forth between them. "Yessir, nobody could doubt it."

The accent was odd; perhaps they looked puzzled, for Flaherty explained. "'Braceur is from the States—New Orleans."

"Long time gone now," 'Braceur said dismissively. "What'll you gentlemen have?"

He served them and moved to the other end of the bar in response to a patron's call; then wiped his way back with a pale cloth between his dark hand and the bar's dark wood. Hutch kept staring, though he knew it was rude. 'Braceur stared back, brows lifted.

"I'm sorry," Hutch said, "I" but nothing came to him.

"You," Starsky said, nudging him, "need to remember who *brought* you to this club."

He knew Starsk wasn't really jealous, and apparently the bartender could tell as easily, because his face relaxed and the wide mouth lifted into a smile. "You are a caution," he said. He leaned forward, bracing his forearms on the bar. "Should be good and used to it by now," he said. "Anyway this is a club for... folks out of place. Like that child," he pointed with his chin to the crossdressed girl Hutch had seen on their way in. "Don't even have a girlfriend far as I know. Just the clothes for her, I guess. And she smokes here—sure she can't at home." He shook his head.

"How'd you end up here?" Starsky asked. "In Amiens?"

"I tell you all that, we'll both be here tomorrow's a week."

But they did go on talking, about Amiens and the countryside and other peaceful topics. Perhaps 'Braceur was as glad as they were to speak English for a while. The pianist played a rag, then "Dark Eyes," which made Starsky shake his head and grimace. He didn't like Russian music, Hutch knew.

Hutch looked around at the piano, half-turning, and Starsky moved to keep the body contact they'd slipped into, almost unconsciously. He was standing with his back to the bar and elbows on it, Hutch's arm loosely across his waist and the hand just tucked into his belt. Their shoulders had been touching; now the angle of Starsky's bent arm zigzagged across Hutch's chest, and his foot was between Hutch's. The warm hip was just at crotch-level, and Hutch tightened the grip of his arm involuntarily.

Starsky tilted his head back a little to meet Hutch's eyes, smiling. "Maybe we should ask for a dance tune," he said.

"A mazurka?" Hutch asked, really meaning, *how long are you going to play with me tonight?*

By Starsky's widening smile, he heard both questions. "A tango," he said, answering both.

Hutch bent his head, smelling Starsky's hair, nearly touching it. "There's not enough room here to tango," he murmured. "Besides, you always insist on leading."

"You can't dance, Hutch." The voice breathy and beautiful. If Hutch didn't pull back now, he didn't know what he might not do under the interested eyes of a bar-full of French inverts.

But he just couldn't move away. It was Starsky who took the hand from his waist and turned to face the bar, placing Hutch's hand on the wood and covering it with his own. "Flaherty," he said, still sounding winded, "um, should know somewhere we can put up for the night."

"Flaherty," said 'Braceur's voice, "ain't just available." They both looked up, and the bartender was looking back with amusement. "He and, hmm, I think Guillaume, slip out a while back. But if it's 'commodations y'all are after, I can help. Got a couple rooms above this, rent 'em by the night."

"Do you," said Hutch, but he was glad to hear it. And glad to see how quickly Starsky pulled out a handful of francs. Too impatient to haggle. Well, so was Hutch.

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The room was small and not very furnished, but it had a high enough ceiling that Hutch didn't feel like ducking, and a bed with clean sheets, a tin of Vaseline on the washstand, water in the ewer, and towels. A single curtain across the dark square of window. A gas fixture at the door that gave a warm yellow light. Good enough.

Starsky hung his coat on a hook and took Hutch's to drape it over the top, and then he began to unfasten his collar button. Hutch took a step forward and covered Starsky's hands with his own. "Let me."

"I think we'd better strip you first," said Starsky.

So they both attacked Hutch's buttons, buckle and hooks, fingers tangling and fumbling, impatient. Starsky worked efficiently, without detours for stroking and kissing, and Hutch knew he wouldn't be able to do the same. They also folded Hutch's clothes neatly on the seat of a little wooden chair.

Then Hutch sat on his folded trousers, hands on either side of Starsky's waist, and looked up at the dark downturned eyes. "Let me," he said again, and meant more than just permission to undress his lover.

"Yes."

It was slow, slowly frantic, for every inch Hutch uncovered he wanted to touch. He opened the buttons of Starsky's shirt and rested his forehead on the pale lisle of the undershirt. Starsky's chest rose and fell and, before getting the belt unbuckled, Hutch pulled the hips into himself and pressed his ear against Starsky just where his ribs ended, below the undershirt buttons, listening to him breathe, to his beating heart and the tiny noises of his stomach. Eyes closed, Hutch turned his face completely into Starsky and took a long, sighing breath. Starsky petted his hair, and then bent forward, hips levering back, to kiss Hutch's forehead. Hutch reached for the waistband of his lover's trousers, undid belt and fly.

As he drew them down, Starsky pulled the undershirt over his head, inside out, and simply dropped it to the floor. It passed Hutch's peripheral vision as the piebald pyjamas had, and now he could smile at the memory.

He rubbed Starsky's knees, up a little into the legs of his underpants, then down again to the garters holding up his khaki socks. Undid the little clips, unbuckled the garters, took the right-hand one off and then the left. Hutch cupped a slender foot in his hand and thought of kissing it. But the logistics defeated him, and he decided to save that gesture for later. In bed.

He rubbed up the outsides of both legs at once, bunching the pants' legs and watching the fly as it bulged and gaped. Starsky was breathing hard now, and quickly, his mouth open, and Hutch reached farther up and inward until his fingers found the taut hot length, just brushed his fingertips back and forth while Starsky was swaying with the sensation, leaned forward and fastened his mouth on the hairy skin somewhere near Starsky's navel.

"Agh," said Starsky, holding his lover's head, pressing, "Damn."

For a moment Hutch resisted, then let Starsky guide him, rubbed his cheek against lisle and Starsky, let the cock poke and thrust at him, mouthing along its length.

"*Hutch*," Starsky said, untangling his fingers from Hutch's hair and pushing at his own pants, "...forgodssake ...."

Hutch sucked the cloth and Starsky grabbed his head and pulled him furiously to his feet, shoved him in the direction of the bed and tugged off the offending underwear so fast that Hutch was sure he must have hurt himself. "Did you even unbutton them?"

"Get in bed," Starsky growled, and crawled in after him, bumping arm and leg and hip.

"No," said Hutch as his lover clambered over him, "let me, let me," and scooped the squirming body into his arms, covered it with his own body, rubbed skin against skin luxuriously. They seldom were able to be naked together, especially where both of them could lie relaxed and comfortable, and though they were hardly relaxed now the bed was level (unlike their haystack) and large enough for all their limbs. Hutch kissed collarbone and shoulder, rib and stomach, hipbone and thigh; he stroked everywhere his hands could reach; Starsky swore and called his name and groaned, rocking his hips from side to side, thrashing his head. His hands struck at Hutch, grabbed at him, pounded the mattress. Hutch spread the legs below him farther apart, farther still, ducked his head until his face was in the bedclothes, nudged back to the testicles, and when he licked them they shrank and wrinkled and Starsky shouted louder, then ejaculated, pumping and gasping and pumping again. Hutch raised his head and watched, blinking only as he was sprayed, feeling warm drops on his eyelids and cheeks and forehead.

"Oh," Starsky said. "Oh Hutch."

Hutch knelt up and wiped his face with both hands, then looked at his smeared palms and licked the right one. It wasn't as erotic that way. He rubbed the rest off into the sheets.

"Your own fault." The voice was still weak. "Get up here... I can't come there."

"You come very well here, thank you," Hutch said, and rolled the limp body over.

"Can't get on my knees," Starsky said, muffled in the pillow though he'd turned his face to one side.

"Fine." He straddled the lush hips, not caring particularly that his own cock was throbbing, aching, dripping from time to time. He cupped Starsky's shoulders in his hands, bent forward and kissed the damp nape of the neck, as sweetly fragrant as a baby's; licked the shell and lobe of the ear. Starsky murmured, not really words, and Hutch went on making love to the shoulders, the spine, the muscles of his lover's arms and the curve of his back. The swell of the buttocks. The dimples above them, below the spine.

"You're not," said Starsky, spreading his legs.

Hutch didn't bother to answer. He knew it was mad: the need he felt to possess every inch of his lover, feel every part of him alive and warm, make pleasure for him with every touch. But madness felt all right, just now. Unless Starsky didn't want it, Hutch would taste him everywhere.

Starsky didn't resist. His muscles tightened and relaxed, bunching and softening under Hutch's teasing mouth. Hutch sucked and licked, rubbed his teeth against the skin, and Starsky groaned again, thrusting into the sheets.

Grabbing the round cheeks, Hutch stroked both at once with his thumbs. Soft, velvety, compact, so good in his hands that he repeated the motion, then did it a third time before shifting his hold and slipping his thumbs along the crevasse between. Starsky's knees slid in the sheets, even farther apart.

Then Hutch licked the top of the crack. Starsky jolted in the bed. "Hu-utch," he said, and repeated it as Hutch lapped farther. The vowel lengthened, the consonants were less distinct, and it felt as if time were slowing, like a motion picture but with sound as well, as Hutch went deeper and Starsky keened and whispered his name.

Only once had Hutch even read a description of this act, and it was in an old book, so full of euphemism that he and Starsky had only laughed over it. Imagining it had been repellent. Hutch had been sure that one would smell faeces.

And now he could, slightly, clean as Starsky was; and now even that did not matter. Starsky seemed unable to keep still or silent; the skin was fascinatingly soft and wrinkled to the tip of Hutch's tongue, and nothing that belonged to his lover could ever repel him. His mouth was watering, insanely hungry for the loss of Starsky's control, the way he began to shout and shake. Hutch believed neither of them had ever been so alive.

Starsky somehow got his arms and legs under him and raised himself, almost dislodging Hutch, and then Starsky had twisted around and manhandled him onto his back.

"Let—" Hutch began again, but Starsky shook his head.

"No," he said, eyes wild, hair every which way in elf-locks, and even when he was not speaking his mouth was ajar, lips wet. "No." He took Hutch's mouth in a kiss so fierce that their teeth butted each other, squeaked as they moved. Their lips were pinched, and they tasted a faint tang of blood. Hutch rediscovered his cock's urgency, and groaned, trying to rub more effectively against whatever part of Starsky was so warmly and tightly pressed there. Starsky raised himself and Hutch groaned again before he felt the grip of Starsky's hand on his cock and the weight back on him.

Now he would have said yes if he could speak, but he couldn't. Starsky eased off, went on kissing but not in that take-no-prisoners way, got softer and shorter and wetter and sweet, so sweet, sucking at Hutch's lips as if they were flowers and Starsky a bee. Nectar in Starsky's mouth too. Hutch shut his eyes, let his neck relax, tasted Starsky, felt the strong hand stroking, squeezing, milking him, and wanted never to come if that meant this would go on forever.

But of course it would not, and with a strange mixture of satisfaction and grief Hutch felt his balls tighten and his erection swell, the rush of orgasm sweeping up his body until he cried out into Starsky's mouth and seemed to fill the narrow space between them with semen.

"Good, good, good," Starsky told him, all but crooning, kissing now with a touch as light as the brush of a feather, all around and down to the neck, burrowing his head in and holding tight with legs as well as arms. Something felt wet there, in the wrong place for Starsky's mouth, and Hutch pulled his lover's head up to look. The dark lashes were matted and drenched, and Hutch felt his own eyes sting. Cupped the dear long face in his hands.

They just looked. They didn't need vows. Anyway all they could have promised was this raw closeness that they were already sharing.

#### **Chapter 4: Give Me What I Cry for**

In that drifting sensation just before the end of sleep, Hutch heard five clear notes from the piano downstairs, and woke matching melody with words in his mind: "You made me love you...."

He opened his eyes, registering where they were. And when: the window curtain now flushed with a dim, pinkish light. Starsky's arm curved over him, and as he stirred a little, the arm tightened and Starsky's face nestled closer into the nape of Hutch's neck.

Hutch lay remembering the first time they'd heard the song, before the war. A garden party; sun and still air scented with flowers; the gramophone on a rickety little table under a tree, and a girl—one of the guests he didn't know—in a pale lacy dress singing along: "You made me love you. I didn't want to do it, I didn't want to do it. You made me want you. And all the time you knew it, I guess you always knew it."

Starsky had been leaning back against a tree trunk, jacket open and hands in his pockets. He'd worn a boater that day, with a ribbon that matched his yellow waistcoat. Hutch remembered what an effort it had been to move his hand from Starsky's shoulder to the rough bark, to lean there facing the girl and the gramophone rather than swinging round and trapping Starsky against the tree, lifting his chin and gazing into his eyes.

"Give me, give me what I cry for," the girl sang. "You know you've got the brand of kisses that I die for!" Starsky moved his head; the trunk pushed at the hat so he reached up and took it off before it fell, and he looked round with his uneven half-smile just as the girl sang again, "You know you made me love you!"

Hutch ruffled his friend's hair, then took the hat from Starsky's hands and pushed it down on his head, sliding it forward over his eyes. People around them laughed, and Hutch's mother took the opportunity to lead them both away, taking their arms and telling them which guests would help them get good places—she had decided Starsky should work in the City and Hutch as a political secretary.

Later, they stole a few moments alone in the library as the guests came inside at twilight, and Starsky took off his hat and leaned against the wall, daring Hutch with his eyes.

So Hutch put one hand on each side of Starsky's shoulders, palms flat against the flocked wallpaper, and leaned in until their faces nearly touched. "You made me love you," he murmured, and Starsky grinned again just before their lips met.

Now, in France, Hutch sighed and rubbed the hair on Starsky's forearm the wrong way, then smoothed it. He felt a kiss on the back of his neck and then heard Starsky's sleepy voice: "What're you thinkin' 'bout?"

"Vaseline," Hutch said, which was true enough as it was in his line of sight, the tin gleaming dimly on the side nearest the window, and he had been wondering how often it had been used. By men here... together... but only temporarily so.

Starsky was chuckling, and shifted around to kiss the side of Hutch's neck and then his jaw and cheek. "Want to use some?" His lips tickled Hutch's ear; his breath puffed hot and loud there.

Hutch shifted onto his back, and Starsky hung above him looking down, his hand now flat on Hutch's chest. "I want to be at home, and have our own tin and our own bed to use it in."

Starsky ran his hand up Hutch's neck to his face, petted it, looking intently as if to memorise what he saw. "We will."

"Would you go back to work in the City?"

"Depends." The answer wasn't flippant; Starsky looked thoughtful, though his hand went on stroking Hutch's forehead, his eyebrows, his hair. "It wasn't a bad job, at the bank. Boring, a bit, but you know most of them are. Yours was hardly a gay old time."

"No." Hutch had been writing most of the speeches and letters credited to the MP he'd worked for. "I don't think I want to do it anymore."

"It shouldn't be hard to find jobs, after the war," Starsky said. "Should be a lot of openings."

God knew there were fewer young men to take civilian jobs than there had been a few short years ago. Hutch reached up around Starsky and pulled him down so they were chest to chest. "I don't want to go back," he said, meaning to the farmhouse and the biplanes and all the death.

"Now you're lying," Starsky said tenderly. "You won't let those boys go up without you."

"Any more than you would," Hutch admitted after a moment.

Starsky lowered his head, and they kissed slowly, mouths closed.

"B-flight must be going up today," Hutch said when they separated.

"Won't hurt them this once." Starsky kissed Hutch's chin, one corner of his mouth, and then the other. "Should I—" a few more small kisses, and purposeful squirming below the waist—"get that Vaseline?"

"Get it," Hutch said.

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It was quite a while later that they went back down to the bar. Ahead on the stairs, Hutch stopped, one hand stretching out to keep Starsky back. He could hear someone weeping, breathless sobs, and another voice murmuring comfort.

They waited what seemed like a long time, but the crying didn't stop. Finally Starsky grew impatient and slipped around Hutch to thump down the last few stairs. Then, of course, Hutch had to follow.

They found 'Braceur bent over a slim figure crumpled in on itself at one of the tables. At the sound of their arrival the black man stood, one hand still on the weeper's shoulder, and then the other sat up and pushed back a tangled mess of honey-brown hair. It was the girl they'd seen in the bar before. She now had a black eye and a split lip. The hat was gone, but the rest of her men's clothing, though disheveled, was recognisable from the previous night.

The girl was red-faced and the two Englishmen embarrassed, but 'Braceur said with poise, "You all didn't get introduced properly last night. This here's Marie-Denise. I know one of you boys is Hutchinson but I disremember which."

"I am," said Hutch, stepping forward. By sheer reflex, he held out his hand to the girl, then didn't know whether to complete the gesture or take it back. She reached out her left hand and laid it in his right, and he held it awkwardly. "My friend's name is Starsky."

"Bonjour," she said in a shaky voice.

Hutch looked at 'Braceur, who said, "Come on now, honey, speak English."

"Good mor-ning," she said carefully.

"Marie-Denise here needs help," 'Braceur began as if they had come downstairs especially to hear this story. "Her fiancé done found out where she spend her free time. And look how he show what a big man he is." The long-fingered hand took the girl's chin and turned it so the bruise and the wound were toward them.

The bartender looked at the airmen. "Now if she can get to her grandmother, the old lady can protect her. She's the one done got the money, and that man want the dowry. He *will* behave then. But it's a ways and Marie-Denise scared to go."

"We'll take her," Starsky offered.

Hutch opened his mouth and then shut it. It wasn't that he didn't want to do what he could, it was that... well, now there was no help for it. He sighed just a little and turned back to Marie-Denise, holding her hand more firmly. He smiled down at her. "Tell us where we're going," he said.

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Blaine was on the field telephone, and Phipps was an highly interested—and amused—audience. Blaine turned away from the round face with its twitching moustache and concentrated on the tinny voice that was saying such ridiculous things that he found himself echoing them.

"Of course," he said impatiently, "you must keep discipline. I'm not disputing that. Military police are for that purpose." Buzzing question. "What? No, I do *not* think it's a good idea to put them under arrest! Why? Well, because I need them *here*, that's why!" A more prolonged, more annoying buzz, like a blowfly in a window. "They did? She did... a Frenchman... his sweetheart... down a *well*?"

Phipps was openly snickering now, his arms bent in front of him to hold in the sound, and Blaine, a little giddy himself, covered the receiver and waved the other hand in a swatting motion. Then back to the telephone. "Oh they did. Oh, they *are*, well why didn't you say so before? Of course I'll discipline them! All right... thank you... yes, goodbye." He put the receiver back into the telephone pouch. Got up from where he'd been sitting on the edge of the desk, and Phipps rose from the chair and came around to meet him in the centre of the room. Blaine shook his finger at the other man. "Drunk as lords—raising Cain—and you laugh, you old fool."

"Well, really now," Phipps said, beaming. "Confidentially, Blaine, I envy them, don't you? Now tell the truth."

He'd envied them more than he did now, but he wasn't going to tell Phipps so. "Apparently," he said, wondering what the true story could possibly be, "they put some French girl's sweetheart down a well or something." Phipps smirked again. "If I didn't need them so badly, I'd leave them to the military police." The threat was entirely empty, and Phipps' eyes said he knew it. Blaine would have to think of something much better to say to Starsky and Hutchinson, when they got back. He had actually opened his mouth to try again, when he caught the first faint sound of an oncoming motor. "Wait a minute, there's B-flight." He counted the circling motor sounds on his fingers: thumb, index, middle—he looked at Phipps. "More trouble. Come along." They went out to the field.

And it was a good thing Blaine had begun to do this, because Squires couldn't get out of his plane: he was pulled down the tail and lowered to the ground by the crew. Blaine began to run, and kept going even when he saw that Squires could walk—he seemed woozy and weak, and—yes, that was blood running down his left arm and hand.

"*Come* along, sir," one of the ground crew was saying. Blaine shouldered the man on the right out of the way and took Squires' elbow himself. Phipps did the same on the other side, supporting the wounded arm.

"Hullo, Squires, what happened?" Blaine asked as the flier's dilated, shocked stare turned to him.

"Von Richter's moved in," Squires said, as if amazed, "across the land."

But the news, not the tone, was what bowled Blaine over. "Von Richter!"

Phipps echoed, "Von Richter!" and so did various others in what was now a crowd of men, moving along awkwardly as they all pushed close.

"Yes," Squires said to Blaine, "we ran into one flight and then another. There was nothing we could do about it. Suddenly the air was... full of them."

Phipps was talking and gesturing, sending one man back to the farmhouse and another few ahead to a heap of repair supplies, as yet unpacked, to move a couple of bundles off a good-sized crate.

"It's lucky any of us got back," said Squires. "They can *really* fly."

"Many of them?" asked Phipps.

"We were outnumbered four to one."

"Good grief," said Blaine.

"We didn't have a chance," Squires insisted, as if he really thought that Blaine would reprimand him. Blaine patted his arm, and spared a thought for how strangely easy it was to be this companionable with Squires when he could never have taken Hutchinson's arm this way. Much less patted him.

They sat the flier down on the crate. "Here," said Blaine, "now take it easy, give me that arm—" but it was Phipps who took it and spoke to the youngster—what was his name again? Smythe?—who had run back for supplies.

"There, that's right, now, get your tourniquet on that, right," Phipps murmured.

Blaine had to know, and the crowd was too closely packed for him to see for himself. "Who'd you lose, Squires?"

"Thornley and Murrow... Esmond and... Hollister." Squires was looking down at the blood running over his palm, the white knotted cloth of the tourniquet above his elbow.

"Hollister?" Blaine frowned; by rights Hollister shouldn't have been up with B-flight at all. "Four out of seven."

"How did Hollister go?" blurted Graham, who evidently hadn't seen.

"He was trying to help Thornley as a matter of fact," Squires said.

Irony again. Blaine shook himself mentally and said to Phipps, "You'd better get Captain Squires to the Medical Officer."

And then they heard an aeroplane motor. Frozen for an instant, they all sprang back to life when they heard the anti-aircraft guns and realised it was a German plane. Everyone was shouting: "Down! Jerry! God, a Hun!" Some men ran for the buildings, others ducked behind the supplies; Squires tried to get up but Phipps and one of the mechanics held him down. "Stay where you are, sir!" Blaine crouched low beside Squires' knee and waited. The red-painted plane passed low, then circled back even lower—something dropped from it—the grin on the pilot's face was plainly visible. If it wasn't Von Richter, it was someone doing quite an admirable imitation. The plane swooped upward and whirled away, ignoring the anti-aircraft fire as if it were simply not in good taste.

Everyone who could, leapt up and ran across the field to where the object had dropped. One of the mechanics got there first. "Look, sir, boots!" He bent to pick them up.

"Wait!" Blaine shouted. "Don't touch those!" He got there. They certainly looked ordinary enough, though he didn't much like to think where the Germans were getting pairs of British ammo boots. Blaine nudged them with one foot, and they fell meekly over as empty boots should do. "Well, they're all right. Let's look at them."

He picked them up. They were connected by black waxed twine and there was a paper tag, carefully lettered in exceedingly straight lines. Blaine read aloud before he'd thought: "One pair of trench boots for the use of British flying officers. You'll be safer on the ground—Von Richter."

Then Blaine was rocked on his feet as all the men around him grabbed and pulled the boots and his arms and hands, even the cloth of his uniform. "Gi'me those boots—damn Heinies—give—I'll take those—take care of—"

"All right!" Blaine shouted, and they backed off. He turned all the way around, scowling. "I... will... keep... these... boots. Now pay attention. There are going to be no volunteer patrols. Don't you realise these boots are just a trick to get you up in the air? None of you is going to commit suicide by going up alone!" They weren't happy, but they were silent. Blaine permitted himself a tight smile. "Don't worry, you'll die soon enough. But not a man leaves the ground without my orders! Understand?"

There was a general murmur: "Yes, sir."

"All right. Come along, Phipps." And the two of them went back to the office, Blaine still clutching the boots and now not only wondering how to chew out Hutchinson and Starsky really properly, but how to head them off doing anything foolish about the boots as well.

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The MO had a new load of casualties and the ambulance-drivers were all out, but Flaherty had to go back to the hospital anyway, and could take Squires. So the B-flight Captain was still at the farmhouse when Hutch and Starsky got back. They packed him securely into the sidecar while he talked about the flight that morning, and then Starsky put their new bouquet in the bend of Squires' right arm.

"I'm not that crocked," said Squires. "Anyway I'd rather have grapes."

"Then hand them on to a nurse," Starsky insisted.

"A French girl give them to you?" Squires seemed interested.

Starsky just winked. In fact, it had been Marthe, when they went back for Starsky's clothes. The chrysanthemums were from her own garden.

Hutch put one hand on Starsky's shoulder and shook it as they walked in. "Wait 'til we get home," Starsky said under his breath.

Hutch grinned. He actually didn't understand why Starsky kept trying to give him flowers. "I prefer roses," he said, joking.

Blaine tore strips off them, or clearly meant to, but it was hard not to see Phipps smirking to one side, and Blaine was obviously distracted by the advent of Von Richter. After the chewing-out, Hutch was told to stay, and the two of them looked at maps and tried to figure out the location of the nearest German aerodrome. Blaine had been keeping track of what the flight-captains had been saying about how long it took for them to run into German patrols after flying over anti-aircraft and what direction the planes seemed to come from; also he had some information grudgingly wrung out of someone on the other end of the field-telephone. It didn't look impossible to find. Blaine didn't say he had a plan, though.

"Don't I get a look at those famous boots?" Hutch asked when Blaine dismissed him.

The CO narrowed his eyes, and Hutch remembered that he was not in good odour at the moment. "I'm sure someone in the mess can tell you about them. Now run along, and don't slip off anywhere before tomorrow."

Hutch went out to the bar, and Starsky was waiting for him—had a glass of whiskey all set up, too. Hutch picked it up and sipped gratefully. "Oh, yes," he said fervently. "Thanks, old man."

Starsky half-smiled and took a drink, then said quietly, "About those boots, Hutch."

Hutch had begun to smile too. They hardly needed to say another word to each other. "I was just thinking the same thing."

"I believe I'll have a word with Evans." Starsky set his glass down.

"Good idea—I should talk to Richardson too." Nothing could be more normal. Hutch inspected with the head mechanic every couple of days, and it was an unusual day when Starsky didn't check whatever plane he was using and chat with his mechanic.

"Mm-hmm."

They went out to the barn.

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In fact, it was very, very early in the morning when they eased out of bed and got into their flight gear, so Hutch had even kept the promise he'd not actually made to Blaine. Starsky, digging in his coat pocket to find a glove, made a soft exclamation of surprise and pulled out a little paper cachet.

"What's that?" whispered Hutch.

"Flaherty gave it to me, in case we ever run into another Jack Johnson of a Frenchman trying to rearrange your pretty face," Starsky answered. "Says it's called a Mickey Finn."

Lowry, in the next bed, turned over and murmured, and the conspirators froze until it was clear he was still asleep. "Later," said Hutch, taking the cachet from Starsky's hand and tucking it into the breast pocket of the polka-dot pyjamas.

It was Starsky who was going to sneak into Blaine's room and retrieve the boots while Hutch helped wheel out the planes. Hutch hoped his friend's ability to find almost anything was working at full strength now. Apparently it was, as Starsky bounced out to the planes, waving the boots and their tag in the air above his head. "Got 'em," he crowed softly and unnecessarily.

Very shortly their unauthorised mission would be no secret. Nobody could start two biplanes at 4.30 ack emma without everyone for a mile around knowing it had happened. But by the time anybody got out to the field, they'd be gone. The men they'd persuaded to help would make themselves scarce, and could anyway claim they'd been unable to disobey Hutch. Rank did have its privileges.

The dew was heavy on the grass, soaking Hutch's pants above his boots and weighing down the skirts of his coat. The air was wet and misty—chill—he shivered as he pushed the plane, in between two of the younger mechanics. The sky was clear from ten to two o'clock, a dark but luminous blue like the inside of a sapphire. Nearer the horizon, what clouds there were showed misty and broken. The moon had gone down a long time ago, but the stars were still out, and birds were singing, loudly enough that Hutch thought crazily of shushing them.

The motors sounded absolutely obscene, roaring, echoing against the flat sides of the buildings. Surely they must always do that? But Hutch had never listened during the day. Two planes didn't sound like seven, anyway. He distinctly heard the cough of Starsky's motor, and then the way it smoothed out as they taxied.

Once they were up, Hutch ignored the cold wind and the noise, exhilarated as always by the soar and drop of the plane through the air and how it answered to his touch on the controls. It was grand being so far up, above it all, where a drainage ditch and a deep-edged brook and a trench all looked much alike, and the

brush cover of anti-aircraft looked like landscaping, bushes carefully spaced on some vast lawn. The roads drew themselves in pale lines across the ground. Occasionally the small dark blot of a person moved in a farmyard or village street.

Flying east, they were travelling into the dawn, and getting up father made the day seem to gain on them. The sun was still not visible but it was now definitely morning, grey-blue above, red and purple below. Hutch swooped closer to Starsky, waved at him, then veered. Gained altitude but bore south, getting the map from the previous evening fixed in his head and matching it to the contours of the living earth below.

He glimpsed the bustle of the German aerodrome, with its ordered ranks of planes ready to go up, and dumped altitude, dropping swiftly enough to almost buzz the tops of the tallest trees beneath him. Starsky followed suit. Still, it didn't take long before the anti-aircraft boys were shooting at them, and undoubtedly calling ahead to the 'drome. The German equivalent of Blaine was having his brekker interrupted by the ringing phone. That was some satisfaction as Hutch tilted and turned, wheeling, rolling and swooping unpredictably. Then he was past, looked around and saw Starsky, waved. Starsk waved back.

Now they were really coming close, and there were more gunshots—this time Hutch found the right hump of brush and returned fire. Not too much: he'd need his guns in a moment—now, in fact—for the airmen. Below he could distinctly see the expressions and hear the shouts of the Germans they were beginning to strafe. They buzzed low, firing up one side of the airfield, riddling every plane they could with their machine guns. One lucky shot burst a petrol tank and sprayed everyone nearby.

They wheeled, rolled out in perfect synchronization, and strafed back down the other side of the row. By this time, most of the Germans had stopped gaping, shouting, shaking their fists, or running aimlessly about and had started climbing into their planes. Hutch shot a mechanic starting a propeller and the man dropped to the ground. He shot at the pilot too but didn't hit him. Dropped a bomb, and then another, from the set hanging under his wings. They made satisfying fireworks, and one of them could take out as many as three planes at once when he placed it just right.

He took out one of the hangars, a small one, and shot two or three men who were wrestling with a gun on a tripod. Then he shot a pilot as the plane taxied and caught the petrol tank of a plane just lifting off—it burst into flame and fell the twenty feet or so to the ground. The dead pilot's plane flipped itself over and blocked the way for another plane, which tried to turn but could not do it fast enough. They crashed together. Hutch went up as he reached the end of the field and rolled away from the gunfire.

Starsky was shouting—Hutch could just hear it, but not the words. He looked over, saw his friend giving a thumbs-up gesture and then ducking down and retrieving the boots. Hutch nodded and returned the thumbs-up. They took one last run at the airfield, and Hutch dropped another couple of bombs while Starsky held the boots over the side of the plane to drop them not ten feet away from the gleaming red plane that Hutch agreed was probably Von Richter's. Hutch leaned over as far as was safe and called out, "Ha ha ha! You can keep the boots—they don't fit!" That was satisfying too, though probably nobody on the ground heard or could understand him if they did.

The two planes soared up like kites, owning the sky. Only flight and victory together felt like this. Hutch couldn't stop smiling, and could see the gleam of Starsky's teeth too. Wished he could touch him, grab an arm or a leg.

Then, below them, the stutter of guns—one useless volley, and then a better-aimed one. Hutch felt the jittering impact but no pain. Heard the motor rasp, belch, hiccup, and then stop with shocking abruptness.

He was almost a hundred feet above the ground.

Everything seemed very silent. The air rang in his ears as it passed. The wings and tail were undamaged, he

discovered, and that high hillside that was pressing so close as he glided lower was also bouncing wind at him. He veered away from it; looked down. The vineyard below him was flat but full of trellises or something. Starsky was shouting and gesturing; Hutch patted the air, palm downward, to calm his friend and indicate he was landing.

Hutch angled the tail downward and dropped more slowly as the wind pressed up on the surfaces of both sets of wings. He turned and glided away from vineyard and hill, across a field with too much brush and too many intermittent trees for his liking, and then swerved to parallel the narrow dirt road. No poplars on either side, which was strange, but Hutch was not looking a gift road in the mouth just now.

Carefully... carefully... fighting the steering to keep the plane level and straight with the road. A hard bounce—there went the landing wheels. Another one, and two shorter ones. Hutch felt like a skipping stone. Dust rose in clouds. The metal of the undercarriage screeched horribly as it scraped against the ground. Hutch clenched his teeth and then was sorry as they jolted together over and over.

And then the plane was still, and Hutch was in one piece. He took a deep breath.

Starsky had been circling and making a more controlled landing, his own motor sputtering, but only from bringing the throttle down. Beyond its coughing beat, Hutch could hear remote shouting and realised they were *still* behind enemy lines.

He scrambled out of the cockpit and pulled out the grenade he hadn't thought to throw during their raid, pulled the pin and tossed it into the seat, ran like hell to Starsky's plane and grabbed the side and the wing support, swung himself onto the lower wing and sat with his legs dangling. "Let her rip, Starsk!"

The plane groaned with the new weight on one side, rumbled across the uneven turf, but though it was excruciatingly slow and Hutch could see the long coats and coal-scuttle helmets and bayonets nearing, they did go up, wobbling a little. Starsky was working hard with the steering wheel and the throttle. Hutch wished he could help but it was all he could do to hold on and anyway, good as they were at working together at some things, a biplane was not a two-handed game.

Hutch smiled, thinking of two-handed games. The empty air beneath his feet and under his rear gave him a little constant zing of fear, the exploding grenade and aeroplane made him jump even though he'd expected it, and the jump made him clutch hard at where he was holding on, and Starsky was so near him and so busy... Hutch was hard as a rock. Aching with it.

Starsky's mouth was moving—Hutch concentrated, watching it, until he identified the words and realised the madman was *singing*: "Come Josephine in my flying machine! Going *up* she goes, *up* she goes!"

Hutch joined in and got a sideways, grinning glance from Starsky: "Balance yourself like a bird on a beam, in the air she goes, there she goes!"

They were being shot at again, but it just seemed like percussion for a moment. Almost. The plane spun, veered back on a new angle. "Uh-oh-oh!" Now Hutch could understand better what had made Starsky so vocal in the sidecar. Singing seemed preferable to howling in Starsky's ear while he was fighting the controls so hard. "Oh, my," Hutch sang, a bit shrilly, "the moon is on fire!" And then the rattle of gunfire passing much too close shut them both up.

What exactly happened next, Hutch never really knew, but there was an explosion in the air in front of them, a kind of pop and jump in the plane, and oil began to squirt out through the instrument panel and all over Starsky's face and goggles. Hutch saw him swipe frantically at the black liquid and heard the engine miss and sputter.

"Starsk!"

Starsky, insanely, pulled his goggles off and got oil in his eyes. "I can't *see*!" He was shaking his head and rubbing at his eyes—the oil went on fountaining everywhere, into his mouth, all over his face. The plane's nose tilted down and the whine of their falling was louder and louder.

"Starsky!" Hutch couldn't hear the name himself, and couldn't hear Starsky but knew he was repeating that he'd been blinded. They lurched and spun and Hutch was sliding off the wing—his arm around the wing-supports and one hand clamped on the edge of the cockpit and wet with oil across the back were his only two solid contacts with the plane. He gulped and actually looked down, saw *how* they were tumbling, and called out as loudly as he could, "We're in a right-hand spin—pull her out!"

"But I can't see!" Still, the blackened hands reached for the controls and clutched harder when they slid away, performed actions both of them had memorised by now. The plane straightened, her nose lifted, and they settled into a glide as the engine coughed its last.

"That's it," said Hutch, "right forward."

One last burst of gunfire, and then that ended, too.

Starsky, eyes staring and watering over the oil, turned blindly to Hutch and asked, "We're over our own lines now, aren't we?"

"Yes, but the ground's just as hard here."

Waveringly, they came down—"Look out, here it comes!" Hutch warned—bounced on their wheels, rolled and jounced and then flopped completely over into a trench. Hutch fell right to the bottom, with a few bits of the plane, into mud the texture of oatmeal and onto a number of blunt, hard, rounded, edged, and jagged objects that he declined to think about. Looked up the walls of the trench, and past what looked like the dome of a skull but could, after all, be a helmet, at Starsky hanging upside-down from his seatbelt. Petrol was dripping over him and straight down from the front of the plane.

"Are you all right?" Hutch asked.

"I'm pointing the wrong way!" Starsky was indignant, and Hutch snorted as he was scrambling up.

"All right," he said unsteadily as he wrapped his arms around the soggy torso and lifted. "Watch out for the petrol...." and suddenly Starsky came loose, slid out, and when Hutch tried to break his fall they both went straight down into the mud, rolling out of the way of the petrol and yelling wildly as their clothes and limbs tangled.

Starsky looked like nothing on earth. "Can't see," he was still complaining, so Hutch handed him the tattered and soiled end of the streamer on his helmet as a joke, then had to take it away again when Starsky tried to really use it to rub his eyes with. Opening the buttons of his friend's flight coat, Hutch reached in, felt around—Starsky began to laugh and squirm—and pulled out the man's handkerchief, which was much less the worse for wear than anything else they had. Starsky swabbed at his eyes. "Well, we made it! We made it," and somehow that was so funny that they collapsed into laughter again, and were all but hysterical when the soldiers from the next manned trench finally found them.

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Blaine was so angry he literally could not stand still, jittering around the office so much that his orderly was having a terrible time helping him dress. He always shaved here: the light was better, and he could keep an ear out for early flights. Phipps sat quietly and spoke words meant to be calming, but nothing helped. Blaine

thrust along the sides of his head with his hairbrush, bent over the mirror, positively ranting and conscious all the time of a chunk of ice in his stomach that neither this morning's coffee nor the sizeable tot of whiskey he'd put in could melt.

"This command is a farce!" He dropped the brush and stood up. "They command themselves—orders don't mean anything anymore—it's a circus."

Phipps said, "But you must remember that—"

Blaine took a step to the door and looked out the upper half. Nothing. "I remember giving orders!" Then, to the orderly, "Give me my tunic." While he was turning and putting his arms into the jacket sleeves, he said, "Those orders have been disobeyed. In the infantry or any other branch of the service—" he was doing up buttons with such abrupt motions that he felt a thread give in one of them, and looked down at it—"an officer in command can keep discipline. What can I do?" The orderly had brushed his shoulders over and over now—what was the man thinking of? "That's all right, thank you." And then the man almost jumped back. Blaine pulled down on his cuffs, the front of the tunic, the cuffs again. Turned to Phipps. "They're laughing up their sleeves!"

"Or dead," Phipps reminded him.

As if he needed it. "Yes, or dead." There was a motor noise, and he strode to the door to look out. A troop car stopped in the yard, and two bedraggled but familiar figures climbed out of it. Blaine ground his teeth, the ice gone in a rush of flame that lit him up like a lamp. "No, they're not dead!" he growled, then shouted, "Hutchinson! Starsky!" The orderly handed Blaine his Sam Browne belt, which he put on with fumbling hands while his two strays came in at a jaunty march step. It was a wonder they didn't salute. But bright morning faces they did not have—they looked as if they'd been pulled through a dusty hedge backward and then, perhaps, dipped in tar.

They looked happy. Blaine wanted to kill them. He couldn't seem to get the shoulder strap buckled properly, but he wasn't letting the orderly get between him and these two—these two—"All right, you can go," he told the enlisted man.

"*Thank you, sir,*" and the man fled into the yard.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Phipps said evenly as Blaine slammed the door so hard it quivered afterward in the frame.

"Good morning, Phipps," each man said sweetly, their voices overlapping.

Yes, Blaine decided, he would kill them. Slowly. The smugness of their little smiles *alone* was enough reason.

"What do you fellows imagine I'm here for, to watch you turn the army into a circus?" They faced the wall and stared at it, not a flicker on their faces to show he was even present. "I've played fair with you for *months*. But this is organised warfare, not your own private feud. You went out against *Von Richter*—we're outnumbered four to one!" Now he was close enough to Hutch's face to see the tracks of sweat and spatters of oil and mud. He smelled like he'd been fighting all night long. His jaw was set now. "You *fools!*" Blaine roared, and Hutch jerked just a tiny bit. "When we need every man and every plane." Yes, and just *where* were the planes they'd left in? "Well," drawing back to see Starsky's face as well, "I'm not going to stand for it any longer. I made out a report on this situation for Headquarters—" and he'd almost sent it, too. "There'll be a court-martial in this." The phone rang.

"Fifty-ninth," Phipps said, and listened.

Blaine stood for a few seconds waiting for the phone, and the corner of Hutch's mouth quirked slightly. The feel of his hair, his skin and muscle, and the bone underneath was suddenly so real to Blaine that he had to move back, and anger rang in his ears and filled his throat.

And what was the matter with *Phipps*? "Come on, give it to me!" He took the receiver and turned half away from Hutch; Starsky was still in his field of vision, but that wasn't nearly as bad.

"Hello! Yes, it's Blaine." Buzzing, but not as pointless as usual. "What? The 'drome was bombed? What 'drome, where?" Von Richter's. Blaine's head went back and the pale glow of Hutch's hair moved slightly. He glanced at Starsky's face and found him openly smiling. Still, they did seem to have—"Destroyed it? Really?" Blaine whistled, unable to stop himself. "Yes, sir, yes, yes! From here, yes they did! No, sir, no, only two of them. What?" The words were a dream. Blaine was sure of it. He *had* dreamed them, over and over when he wasn't dreaming of even more impossible things, like discharge... or Hutch "Oh," he said weakly. "Excuse—excuse me, sir, would, would you mind repeating that again?"

They were the same words this time. New rank, new post. Away. From the front. Appoint a successor. *Away from the front*. "With pleasure, sir! Right away, sir, thank you!" And he'd been threatening these boys with court martial. He wasn't even off the phone and he couldn't help laughing. "Goodbye—thank you-hoo-ho-ho ..." The phone shook in his grasp as he gave it back to Phipps, stepped between the two fliers, turned and took them both by the unwashed napes of their necks. Boys, that's all they were. He shook them and they looked sheepishly at him, sideways. He laughed some more. They'd have to grow up now. No more pre-dawn raids or wild AWOLs or dalliance in the hay.

He went behind his desk and opened the lower drawer where he kept his bottle. There were only two glasses there, and he took them out and set them on the far edge of the desktop, then found an old one for himself under a paper. "Oh, get me another glass, would you, Phipps?" The man grabbed it up out of nowhere, like magic, just as he always seemed able to do. That made Blaine chuckle too.

He didn't need any other intoxicant but his news, but he poured a good inch of Old Sporrán into the bottom of each of the glasses and handed them out. "Here you are, Phipps... Hutchinson... Starsky... myself." He raised his own like a toast. "Ah, now I've got you, Hutchinson. Now you will have to grow up." He drank. None of the others did, clustered warily around the desk and looking at Blaine as if he had lost his mind at last. Well, it had been a near thing. He hitched up one trouser leg and sat on the edge of his desk. Took a deep free breath. "Headquarters *liked* your raid this morning. They liked it so well that—" he savoured it again for a moment—"they've appointed me up to Wing!" In fact, he suddenly remembered, he'd been told to take the very same car that had delivered Hutchinson and Starsky, and he needed to get outside and tell the driver so.

He bounced up from the desk and moved Phipps out of the way. "Excuse me, Phipps." He threw on his coat and hat, picked up his cane, and then realised he hadn't finished, so he went back to where the two fliers were staring blankly at each other. They still hadn't drunk anything. Well, Blaine decided, he'd leave the bottle. "Before I go, I'm ordered to appoint someone in my place." He looked at the two stunned boys and felt a stab of compunction. But really, who else? There *wasn't* any other choice. "Here," he said more gently, "at my place at this little desk."

"What do you mean?" asked Hutch, by which Blaine understood that the flier thought he knew. Didn't want to know. It *was* too bad.

"I mean that someone is going to be you. Good luck, Squadron Leader Hutchinson." He saluted, without irony, though Hutch's eyes flashed resentment. That was a good thing: he was beginning to grasp what was happening to him. "Right," said Blaine and turned away, beauty and love and death and irony all collapsing together in the shadows of the office as he left it. He heard the phone ring behind him but didn't look back—it was always for the commanding officer, and he wasn't that any more.

Chapter 5: The Bells of Hell

A week later, Hutch sat in the dark office, shouting into the field telephone and finishing his second bottle. A third was supposedly on its way.

"Well, *let* the infantry get demoralised! No!" The door opened behind him, letting in a few strains of "Poor Butterfly" and a wave of longing that made Hutch swallow, staring hard into the fire and focusing on the call. "I *can't* put planes over them because I haven't got anybody left to fly them! No!" He glanced up, and his heart jumped—it wasn't Botts, it was Starsky, standing with his head bent in shadow, watching Hutch. "What?" he asked the telephone. "Replacements? Yes, six of them. All kids!"

Starsky shook his head, the slow uneven smile a whole conversation about the fools who thought seventeen-year-olds with under ten hours of training were worth sending up to fight. Hutch's mouth twitched too, and he explained to the telephone more moderately, "Von Richter's squadron has shot us out of the air. He's killed all our best men." Starsky frowned and shook a finger at Hutch, who reached out and grabbed for it, then let it slip from his hand. "Green kids can't stop him! He'll shoot them down just as he did the others." But he couldn't stop smiling now and he was afraid the caller would hear it. "Yes, I know I have my orders." There, that was sobering enough. More than enough.

Starsky sat down on the footstool which Hutch had thrust to one side, reached to the floor and picked up the bottle, shook it to find out that there was perhaps a quarter-inch left in the bottom. He frowned at Hutch again, then picked up the glass Hutch had been drinking from, poured the liquor, and drank it himself. "It'll be done," Hutch told the phone, "but I tell you they haven't a chance on earth. Yes. All right. Goodbye." He tucked the phone back into its pouch, on the floor beside his chair, and looked at Captain Starsky, trim in his uniform tunic and belt. Even his tie was neat these days, and he hadn't been drunk in the whole week Hutch had been Squadron Leader.

"Brass hats," he said to his friend. "Sitting up there in easy chairs. If I had any excuse not to put those green kids out there... " He let the sentence trail off, knowing that Starsky knew, and then realised, "Hey, where's my new bottle?"

"You've had *two* today already," Starsky said. "Take it easy, boy."

"*Easy*?" Hutch sat forward, irritated. "What are you, a Temperance lecturer? Captain Starsky?"

Starsky was completely still for a moment, then put the glass down. "I'm sorry," he said and stood up.

"Wait a minute," said Hutch in something like panic, reaching out and taking the fabric of Starsky's trouser leg in his fingers. "Wait, I'm sorry. It's, God, oh, it's bad, isn't it? I'm as jumpy as the dickens."

By the time he was finished talking, Starsky was seated again and was holding the hand that had clutched at him. "All right. I get like that too." They just looked at each other for a minute or so, and then Starsky half-smiled again and Hutch felt relief run through him like a shot of liquor. "You know," Starsky said, "I can't get used to being up in front of that flight all alone. I miss you up there."

Hutch couldn't even say what it was like to wait down here for A-flight, count the planes as they returned, look out the door to see who was still alive. Instead of speaking, he pulled on the hand that gripped his so securely, and Starsky followed—Hutch slipped from the low chair onto his knees and Starsky was there, pressed close, his other hand warm and strong at Hutch's back. Hutch, held the curly head still, fingers buried in that rich hair, while he kissed the mouth that smiled and pressed back against his own. Starsky's hands held him tightly, then moved sensuously over him, and their hips rubbed back and forth as their

tongues did. And Starsky said Hutch couldn't dance.

When their mouths separated, Starsky was slumped against the footstool and Hutch had one knee between his legs and the other snug against his hip. Hutch got up far enough to let the firelight paint Starsky with red and orange. Across the floor a draught of cold air from the door slid like a reminder, or a warning.

"I told Botts not to bring it," Starsky said as if Hutch had asked again. "Don't drink any more tonight, beautiful." And he reached up to rub Hutch's cheek.

"All right." Hutch turned his mouth into the palm and kissed it.

Through the door, they could hear a motor and singing voices. Though the tune was indistinguishable, the voices sounded young.

"Replacements." Hutch dropped back into reality. He stood up and pulled Starsky to his feet. "More lambs to the slaughter. Remember Blaine used to call himself the Executioner?"

"Poor old man—he was nearly half-witted when he left this place."

"Yes. It's a rotten job. But," Hutch smiled, "he didn't have you."

Starsky took Hutch's face between his hands and kissed him once more, gently, then stepped back and checked his necktie, pulled down his tunic. "Right. I'll go fix 'em up." A mischievous sideways glance. "Sir."

"Dismissed," said Hutch, smiling.

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Hutch heard the boys come in still singing, "The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling, for you but not for *me*, the bells of Hell go—" and then they broke off, and the gramophone stopped too, so Starsky must be doing his official Captain act.

Hutch left them to it, and checked a few details on the map and in the written orders that Phipps brought in. Signed the bottoms of forms that Phipps filled in with the names of the replacements. Couldn't put it off any more after that. He stood up, stomach tightening.

"Ready for orders?" Phipps asked rhetorically, then preceded him out to the mess as he'd now done six times before. Hutch stood in the doorway and watched as Phipps strode to the same old place in front of the stairs and called out, "Tention! Right, lads, line up please—orders for tomorrow morning."

And Hutch walked out, seeing the faces that turned toward him, then faced forward—mostly unfamiliar, mostly too young. He and Starsky were really getting to be the old men of the squadron. In the week he'd been CO they'd lost fifteen pilots.

Starsky wasn't in the ranks before him, Hutch realized as he looked them over; then heard feet on the stairs behind him. Knew who it was—Starsk and somebody else. Presumably one of the new boys.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Hutch began. "There's no secrecy about these orders. GHQ has discovered that Fritz is making a big push the day after tomorrow. They've started minor advances already. You're to patrol the Manté Woods sector. That's opposite the German Sixth Army. You'll fly four patrols during the day, which means that every man will be in the air at dawn tomorrow." A few men nodded. Some looked apprehensive; others, especially the newest, looked excited and pleased. "As usual, you've got the dirty work to do—low flying, machine-gunning infantry, strafing supply trucks and any shock troops they try to bring

up. You're flying directly below Von Richter's patrols, so you better—" *write your wills*, an unruly part of his mind shouted—"watch out," he really said, inadequately. "That's all." He turned to go, unable to look even at Starsky, but then a hand grabbed his arm above his elbow and he turned, saw a younger face than he'd expected, and he just stood with his mouth a little open.

"Hutch!" said the newcomer.

He was a little shorter and slighter than Starsk, with a Roman emperor's nose and eager dark eyes... Hutch knew him. "Nicky! Nick Starsky, where did you spring from!"

"Hendon," Nicky said with an unaccustomed touch of modesty.

Hendon. Flight training school. "You're—" Hutch looked over the boy's shoulder at his best friend's face, almost unrecognisable for the stiff, shocked expression it wore. Looked back at Nicky. "You're one of the replacements."

"Yes," Nicky said. Hutch looked back at Starsk. The way they communicated silently had always made Nick nervous, so it was nothing new when the youngster moved farther into Hutch's line of sight and said, "I go up tomorrow, don't I?"

"Yes," said Hutch, still dazed, "you do."

Starsky stepped in front of his brother, and now his eyes were blazing. "Hutch." He took a breath. "You're not sending *him* up tomorrow. You can't do that."

"Every man goes up tomorrow, Starsk." There was suddenly no understanding in the evening-blue eyes, and Hutch turned away rather blindly himself.

Starsky caught his arm much more roughly than Nick had. "If you think I'm taking him up against Von Richter, you're crazy!"

"Oh, but listen, Davey, I'm an excellent fl—" Nicky sounded offended.

"Shut up!" Starsky turned back to Hutch again. "He's not going up!"

Couldn't Starsk see? Couldn't he tell that for Hutch this was like hurting himself, sending his own brother into that lion's den? Didn't he know that Hutch couldn't possibly have this conversation at all in the officers' mess?

If he didn't, there was nothing for Hutch to say. He spoke to Nick instead. "Be ready at dawn tomorrow."

"Yes sir!" Nicky said proudly.

Hutch got himself into his office. Shut the door. Walked over to the fireplace and leaned one hand on the mantel. Looked down at the flames that had danced over Starsky's face not an hour past.

He heard the door slam open and then shut without surprise.

"And you're the one who said *Blaine* was sending green kids up to get killed!"

Hutch went to meet his fate, stood looking down at his lover's angry face.

"Combat manoeuvres!" Starsky said with scorn. "Ground school! He got through it in *four weeks*, nine hours in the air! He doesn't know what it's all about—what chance does he have up there?"

This couldn't be the first time Starsky had wondered—could it? Really? "As much chance as any of the others." Hutch wanted to be gentle. He lowered his voice. "There can't be any exceptions, you know that." Then he tried coaxing. "Do you think I want to do this? Those are the orders."

But Starsky had always been so much better at coaxing. He put one hand on Hutch's waist, tilted his head to one side. "Oh, I know it's orders, Hutch, but give me three days. *Two* days. Then I can get him up in the air and show him a few basic tricks, and at least he'll have a fighting chance." Hutch didn't respond, so Starsky moved in even a little closer and went on, "He doesn't know anything, Hutch—he can't even do a half-loop and roll out. Do you hear that? He can't even roll out!"

Hutch took a step back and Starsky's hand fell away. This time, when he moved closer, there was nothing even faintly seductive about it. "What *good* is he going to be up there? Do you think he'll bring down any Bosche planes? No!" He gripped Hutch's shoulders. "They'll *slaughter* him, Hutch. Give me just a few days."

Hutch's throat hurt. He wanted to hold Starsky close, and he wanted to make him understand—and he wanted, oh how much, to give in, say 'all right, we'll wait a few days and train them all, these babies, and Nick we'll send home somehow'... but none of it could happen. Generals far up the line were moving hundreds of troops before the sun even rose tomorrow. He spoke slowly. "Every man goes into the air at dawn. I'm, I *am* sorry, Starsk, but there it is."

"I won't take him up." Starsky's voice was low and his chin pulled in, his gaze level and cold. Hutch had seen him this way before, but not often, and it had never been Hutch that he'd been this enraged at.

"Those are the orders," Hutch said.

"I don't care. I won't do it."

Something rose in Hutch and he discovered it was anger of his own. "*Those are the ORDERS!*" he shouted right into Starsky's face, tapping an index finger just below his collar bone, poking. "Are you deserting? Are you *running away*? There's *nothing* I can do, you fool! Do you hear me?"

There was such a long silence that the last question almost ceased to be rhetorical. "I hear," Starsky said at last. "Major."

He turned and was all the way to the door before Hutch got out, "Starsk—"

"No," said Starsky, not turning or even looking back. Then he left.

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When Hutch had moved into the CO's quarters, in a little room off the pantry-office whose original use he hadn't been able to figure out, he had stood for a long time looking at the bed. It was of course larger than the cots upstairs, but small for a real double bed, and the mattress was weirdly uneven. Hutch suspected straw or something in the bottom layer, and only hoped there wasn't much wildlife he had to share it with.

He'd grown used to his cot, and this mixture of hard, lumpy foundation and the soft featherbed on top was making him restless all night long. And anyway he kept thinking. Starsky always said he thought too much.

He stood now with one hand on the carved wooden footboard and just stared at the bed. He knew he wouldn't sleep and thought there was little point in even lying down on it. Wondered how many nights Blaine had really slept in it.

He did get onto the mattress, even between the covers, because there wasn't a chair in here, and tried to read

a very dull old novel that someone had sent out to the house. Hutch wondered whether it had actually been a recommendation or whether it was just the only one in English anyone had come across. They ought to have sent Starsky looking for reading-matter; he would have found something better.

Hutch sighed and put the book down. He thought about Starsky too often at the best of times. Now the best book ever published couldn't have held his attention over the thoughts of his old schoolfellow, his devoted best friend, his gloriously passionate lover—the subordinate officer who had stalked out of his office as if they were strangers. "Oh," he said aloud, "Starsk," the syllables hoarse. He closed his stinging eyes.

He could cry here, if he wanted. No one would hear. He could indulge himself just this once. Be the stoic commanding officer tomorrow, the grieving lover tonight.

But he was afraid that if he started, he might not be able to stop.

He got out of bed and put on his clothes again, pulled the cloth coat from the hook and went out the dutch door.

He'd go and look at the planes. There might even be a mechanic or two burning midnight oil over them. Someone to talk to.

He stumbled a little in the yard, not sure what uneven ground or object or inattention had caused the lurch in his step. Then made his way to the barn that was now their main hangar and repair shop. He realised as he neared it that there was a light on in there somewhere, and a low sound that was—yes, a voice—Starsky's voice. Hutch was certain. But who on earth was he out here with, and for what purpose? Surely he wouldn't, so soon—Hutch strangled that thought almost unborn and crept to the door of the barn, eased it open and himself around it, as careful as if there were German spies in here.

He could see the glow of a lantern but not what it lit. Could hear Starsky's voice, intense and low but not particularly intimate. Walked silently in that direction, using the remains of the cow stalls as cover. They were at one of the planes, probably Starsky's own. The lantern was hanging from a wing-strut. Starsky was standing beside the plane. The person in the cockpit ducked his head, and Hutch saw it was Nick.

"No, don't look," said Starsky. "Just reach for it. Sit up again, do it over."

"Oh Davey," and Nicky was outright whining. "I've done it already—did it over and over at Hendon—what's the matter with you?"

"And they must have had their brains up their arse-holes, to let you out with these bad habits," Starsky answered grimly. "You're breaking them tonight. Now. You will not sleep until you can show me *without looking* how you'd pull out of a spin and throttle down. Goddamn it, if I could I'd have you in the air and the dark be damned!"

"At night? In the middle of the *night*, Davey? What bee have you got up your—don't look at me like that! You think you're the only one who can talk like a, a grown-up? You think *I'm* the only duffer in the new crew? Well, let me tell you, big brother, I held the record for kills at Hendon. The most they'd seen in the time in over a year!"

"Kills? At Hendon? What did you shoot at, sheep?"

"They were blanks, of course. Don't be sarcastic. I was good, I tell you, one of the very best. You don't think they let everyone out after four weeks and three days? You may be the big lad of the family and all that, but we're both in it now. Both going up tomorrow and both *fliers*. Drop the baby brother stuff. *I am not a baby any more!*" Nick was leaning out of the cockpit, his face near his brother's, weird in the upward-striking

light and the blank goggles of his helmet. He grabbed the fur collar of Starsky's jacket and Hutch stepped forward involuntarily.

The movement caught Nick's eye and he sat back, pulling up his goggles; Starsky turned. They both stared at Hutch for a moment, and then Starsky turned away, slapped the side of the plane, and stood with his head down and his shoulders tense.

Hutch didn't try to speak to him. "A little late-night revising, Nick?"

"Davey's idea." Nick was sullen.

"He's doing his best for you." Hutch risked a look and saw the tense shoulders move, not really a shrug. He knew the bitter thoughts that movement held in, so he tried to focus on Nick. "And *his* best D'you know the last time I saw him do the trick he's showing you now? I was sitting on the wing, right here." He patted the spot.

"In a *spin*?" Nick looked at him with eyes narrowed.

Hutch nodded. "My bird went down and he came to get me. It was both our lives, Nick, and Starsk couldn't see at all, oil in his face, working only by where he knew things were and what I could tell him." Nick's mouth was hanging open. Hutch patted his arm. "You remember that. I'll never forget it. Watch your brother, Nick, and stick close to him. There's not a better flier on our side *or* theirs. You learn from him."

Nick looked at his brother's averted face; at Hutch's; back to Starsky's. "I will," he promised. "Tomorrow, Davey. I'll stick close, I really will. And you'll *see*. I am good. I can learn. You won't worry any more once you see me up there."

Starsky lifted his head and reached; Nick took his hand. "All right," said the older brother. "Now, I suppose you should get some sleep, hmm? Go on." Nick just sat for a second. "Go on," Starsky repeated.

Nick scrambled out on the other side of the plane. "Well," he said, "good night, then, chaps."

"Night, Nick. Sleep tight," Hutch told him.

"You'll, er, bring in the lantern, Davey?"

"Yes."

Hutch stepped back as Nick slipped away, in case Starsky wanted to collect the lantern and just go. But Starsky was motionless, looking at the rough soil of the floor. The barn door shut with a thud.

"You should sleep too," Hutch said at last.

"I don't think I can."

"Oh, Starsk," and Hutch's voice almost broke, "Starsk, you can *always* sleep." He folded his arms in front of him to keep from reaching out. Looked at the floor himself, the line of shadow where the wing cut off the warm, yellow light.

"Hard on you too," Starsky said tightly. "I know."

Hutch nodded.

In the silence he could hear the hiss of the burning oil-wick.

"Look at me, can't you?" Starsky whispered, hardly louder than the lantern.

Hutch raised his head. Starsky stared back, his eyes wide and so bright Hutch might even have thought they were full of tears.

"W-would it help to hold on?" Hutch asked.

"After tomorrow. I, I can't do anything, I can't, now—"

"Yes, all right, I understand, it's fine," Hutch blurted. "I didn't mean *sex*, you know."

Starsky rubbed his nose with the back of his wrist, and when he lifted his head there was a little curve to his mouth. "I know. I know that."

After another pause, Hutch said, "Go on in."

Starsky nodded, and unhooked the lantern. "Want this?" he asked.

"No, I'll just walk for a while."

"Take it. *Take* it, lummoX, what if you put your foot in a foxhole?"

"I'd have to be a lot closer to the front lines for that."

Bad as the joke was, Starsky's lips quirked a little, and Hutch felt slightly better. He took the light and their fingers brushed.

"Sleep tight, Starsk," he said.

"Don't roam all night long," his friend answered.

Hutch nodded.

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Hutch was at his desk by 3.30. There was always paperwork to do. Rather than light the real lamp, he'd kept the lantern, which was probably dangerous with all that paper, but made him feel less lonely. Foolish but true.

The stern black-sided box clock on the mantel said nearly four when a knock made Hutch jump. "What? Yes?" he called, rattled.

"It's me, Hutch. Erm, sir," said Nicky, poking his head in. He was already in full uniform, only the flight gear missing.

"Oh, Nicky," said Hutch. "Yes, come in. What's the trouble?"

"I, oh, I know it's against all the rules and regulations for me to burst into your sanctum sanctorum like this, but... could I have just one word with you, please, Hutch?"

He looked forlorn, and sleepy, and perhaps twelve years old, which was about the age he'd been when Hutch had last seen him for any appreciable time. Hutch got up and took him by the shoulder, shook him gently and then patted him, sat him down. "Of course you can, Nicky. Of course."

"Good old Hutch." Nick was clearly relieved. Actually they hadn't been getting along very well when Hutch

had visited Starsky at home. Nick had trailed along behind the two of them, and it had been irritating for everyone.

Still, the last thing Hutch wanted at the moment was to be bad friends with the boy. "I'm glad you came. Now what is it?"

"Well... you know, I do wish you and Davey wouldn't scrap over me like this. Honestly, I'm an excellent flier. I went through combat manoeuvres without a hitch."

"Combat manoeuvres, hmm?"

"Oh, now, don't you laugh too."

"It's not at you." Hutch looked at the fire for a moment, then back at the boy. "We went through Hendon too, Starsk and I. And then we came out here and had it all to learn again. And in those days, new men had fifty, sixty hours in the air before they had to learn real combat manoeuvres. Now you've had, what—"

"Nine."

Hutch looked at the flames again, swallowed. "Nine." Starsky had said so, but it hadn't stuck in Hutch's mind. He reached out blindly and took the living flesh and bone of Nick's shoulder in his hand once more, held it. "Nine."

"You think—" Nick said, a discovery—"and Davey thinks too, you both think I won't get back tomorrow."

And Hutch paused too long before he said, trying to be hearty, "No, no." Nick stared sullenly, and Hutch crouched beside the arm of the chair so his head was below the boy's. "You've always been a quick learner, Nick. Good reflexes. You just... nobody can afford to be too careless or overconfident at first. It's like a game at school. You've got to be on your toes, watching everything, never forgetting anything you learn. You'll be all right." He got up, then, and turned to the desk, fumbled in the papers there for his packet of cigarettes. "You smoke?"

"Oh, yes sir," and Nick sounded such a boy then, and looked up with such gratitude, that Hutch almost couldn't bring himself to hand over the cigarette. But he did, and took the few steps to get a long match from the mantel and stick it in the fire, light his own Gold Flake and then Nick's. "Thanks, Hutch," Nick said, very sophisticated now, drawing on the cigarette and waving the smoke away. Hutch tossed the match in the fire again and stood, hoping the shadows hid his half-smile. "You know, I liked your comparison about this and a game at school."

"Did you? That's about what it is. A great big, noisy, rather stupid game that doesn't make sense at all. And we're making points for the brass hats in their easy chairs, looking on from a safe distance." He looked into the flames again. "A game. That's just about what it is."

"Mmm," said Nick, obviously out of his depth. "I see." He stood up. "Well, thanks for talking to me about it, Hutch. Major Hutchinson, I should say, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, you *should*," said Hutch, swiping at and deliberately missing the dark head. "Can't believe I've got two of you insubordinate Starskys here now."

"I'm glad I'm in your squadron. You know, Hutch, er," and Nick seemed uncertain all over again, fiddling with something in his pocket and looking everywhere, "you know I, I used to be jealous of you. And Davey. You know, such great chums, I felt ...."

"Only natural," Hutch told him.

"Well, I'm not now. I've made a few good friends myself, you know, close chums, in school, and now I... just wanted to say I'm sorry I was such a little squib before. I *was* wet."

"You were just a kid," Hutch said. "I was too, come to that. It's not as if I'd hold it against you, Nick. Really not."

"Well, good, because... well, I suppose it is possible that one might not get back. It has been known, hasn't it?"

"Yes." The weight was back in the pit of Hutch's stomach with that word.

"In that case, I, er, would you mind if I left this with you?" He pulled the fidgeting hand from his pocket and held it out. There was a glint of metal and something soft hanging from the edge of the outstretched hand. Hutch picked the thing up and discovered it was a round medal on a ribbon, engraved with something, but in the dim light of lantern and fireplace he couldn't begin to guess at what it said.

"What is it?"

"Something I got on a crew last year. Silly, but, er, it's rather important to me."

Hutch nodded. "I'll keep it for you," he promised.

"See you later," said Nick then, and Hutch nodded. The boy slipped out.

Hutch sat holding the rowing medal for some time, while the windows shaded toward perceptible light.

~~~~~

When the dawn patrol returned, both brothers were with it. While the planes were refuelled and given running repairs, the pilots had tea and stretched their legs, washed and chatted. Starsky was everywhere, bouncing, exhilarated; he came up behind Hutch in the barn and booted his rear to startle him as if they were both still fliers together, or even schoolboys. Hutch supposed he should have been a little official, but he just laughed. Starsky shook him back and forth by one shoulder, beaming.

Later, narrating the patrol in more detail, Starsky said, "Damn, we *are* the Chosen People," a kind of joke he very rarely made even in private. "Hutch, he really isn't at all bad. And he stuck to my tail like I had a tow-rope on him." He shook his head fondly. "He *is* a good kid, isn't he?"

Hutch felt as if his own face might split open, he was grinning so hard. "Yes, he is."

And Nick came back from the forenoon patrol too, though they'd lost most of the newest replacements by then, and Graham as well, who had been captain of B-flight. Hutch promoted Smythe, who had survived against all odds and was on his way to becoming a good, steady pilot, though he hadn't much flair. And still looked like a schoolboy, of course.

Starsky waved jauntily as they took off at 12.30, and Hutch waved back, thinking they might yet end this day without too much grief.

But, as he learned later, the day's third patrol got the personal attention of Von Richter.

Only two of A-flight returned, and Nick was not one of them. Hutch knew right away, and did not question his intuition; he didn't go to the landing field, wanting to hear this report in private. He leaned so hard on the ledge of the dutch door that both his hands were asleep by the time Starsky reached him.

As soon as both parts of the door were shut, Starsky rasped out, "He's gone." He swallowed with a little gulp that seized at Hutch's throat too. "He's gone. I really thought"

"So did I," said Hutch, standing within arm's reach but not trying to touch.

After a moment, Starsky went on, his voice thinner and thinner as he spoke, "Hunter's the other one who's back. I think... I'll have a lie-down before we go again," and he blundered through the door, leaving Hutch aching to go after him but having instead to wait for Smythe's report.

Hutch thought of putting Smythe in charge of the day's last patrol, but it just wasn't a plausible choice, so once more Hutch took Starsky's salute, saw six planes take off, and then got on the field telephone to Headquarters to tell them to send replacements, more aeroplanes, and extra petrol for training flights. "If you're not going to really teach those boys to fly, I will!" he shouted, and sputtered so much at HQ's reply that Phipps took the receiver out of his hand and spoke soothingly into it. In the end they did get a promise for a few more tanks of petrol. They'd have to find the time to train themselves.

The fliers were late coming back. Hutch paced restlessly through the house, the empty officer's mess, the yard, the barn still busy with repairs, the house again. He was looking over the rough fence at Watkins' chickens when he heard an engine... another... a third. And that was all.

He ran out to the field and stood looking up as the last of the planes was landing. The engine was firing rough and part of the tail was gone, so it listed and wavered as it came.

Hutch knew who was flying it. His hands were fists, and he thrust them into his coat-pockets while he watched the kite come down, bounce, sway as if it might topple over—there was something wrong with the upper wing, too, on the same side as the tail damage—and, at last, stop. Starsky rolled out of it almost immediately, and then leaned on it while the other two pilots got out.

Hutch walked up, slowly, turning his head from side to side as if he could take in anything but Starsky, and hung on to one of the wing supports. "How'd you like it, Starsk?"

"That was a hot one." Starsky fiddled with his helmet, limp between his hands.

"Who'd you lose?"

"Smythe. Bannister. Lockley."

Now Hutch really did look at the other two pilots, making their weary way across the yard, and the swarms of mechanics descending on the planes.

"I think," he said, "we bear a charmed life."

Starsky's head snapped up and he pushed away from the plane, whirling on Hutch. "*Charmed?*" His voice rose. "A *charmed* life!" He threw the helmet on the ground, then turned away and rubbed his face with both hands.

"Or a cursed one," Hutch added quietly, picking up the helmet.

Starsky folded his arms and looked up. Hutch followed his gaze to the harmless-looking blue of late afternoon, only a few fleecy clouds to break it. After a minute or so, Starsky sighed and turned back, looked at the farmhouse for a moment and then began walking.

"There are pots and pots of hot water," Hutch said on the way. "Watkins has been busy." He paused, uncertain of his reception, but Starsky's expression was normal, so he said, "I'd bathe you myself, but I

thought it wouldn't be good for discipline."

"Why, thank you for the thought, Major. I would very *very* much enjoy a creature comfort right now." But Starsky's voice was strained, exhausted, and Hutch let him go ahead into the mess before going round himself into the office.

~~~~~

Hutch needed to give Starsky the rowing medal, of course. He intended to. But he wanted privacy for it, and an unofficial atmosphere, and somewhere that they hadn't had sex, so there'd be no misunderstanding at the start. He couldn't even think of a place, not to mention a time.

When the first batch of replacements came, early the next morning, Hutch felt so foolish waiting in his office that he came out himself to greet them. Starsky seemed put out by that; after Hutch had taken the envelope of orders from young Keighley, Starsky said abruptly, "Come, I'll show you where you'll bunk," and led them away without looking at Hutch.

There were six replacements, which meant they had a flight's worth, and Hutch was apprehensive that they'd get a job, but the gods smiled on them or the paperwork was fouled somewhere, and for a wonder they didn't. The other two survivors of yesterday's four patrols were almost dead to the world, asleep most of the day and aimlessly wandering the officer's mess the rest of the time. Finally Hutch beckoned them into his office.

"Sir?" Hunter looked as if he thought he were going to be reprimanded for something and was frantic with the effort of remembering what it was.

"At ease, gentlemen. I just pulled you aside to ask you a favour."

Hunter stared; Jones raised dark eyes and kept his chin down, a gesture that for a moment caught at Hutch's breath, but he went on almost naturally, "W-we'll be getting a number of new men, as you know." Now there was a bright remark. "And you'll remember what it was like your first day or two here." He couldn't recall how long ago they'd arrived and hoped it wasn't only two days ago—but no, all the newest crop were gone. Along with Nick. "I'd just like to ask you to help them out a bit, you know, introduce them to Botts or play cards with them or show them where the bog is."

"Prefect at last," said Jones dryly, "Mum'll be so proud."

Hutch felt his lips twitch and looked down. Then thought, well, why not? Nobody had told him the CO *had* to be a humourless bastard. So he looked up again and let the smile come, and Jones grinned, and even Hunter began to relax.

"That's right," Hutch said. "In fact, B-flight needs a Captain, Jones, how about it?"

That surprised Jones. Then he grinned again, and again Hutch thought of Starsky, when they'd first arrived here, what seemed like a hundred years ago. "Isn't it just mad, then, this old war?"

Hutch agreed that it was.

## **Chapter 6: All's Fair**

It wasn't that Starsky was angry, or blaming Hutch, or even grieving very obviously.

It wasn't that Hutch was taking his new rank too seriously, letting it separate him too much from the men, though they were almost all strangers to him now.

It wasn't that they had nothing to talk about any more. There was always something to say about the planes or the training flights or the patrols, what HQ was proposing that struck Hutch as absolutely mad or what Watkins or Botts or one of the young fliers had said that struck Starsky as funny.

They worked together, talked and joked, and on the surface everything was fine, but ....

Hutch realised that it had been many evenings since he had last heard "Poor Butterfly," and then it turned out to be one of the youngsters who was playing it, and burlesquing it for his friends. Starsky looked on, smiling gently, from the bar. There was nobody left but Hutch who knew how strange that was.

Very early one morning, Hutch had gone upstairs to tell Starsky about an emergency mission, and the piebald pyjamas were not in evidence. Starsky had gone to bed in old short-legged singlet underwear that Hutch would have sworn he didn't even own.

And though they'd kissed from time to time, held each other once or twice, especially when Hutch was particularly discouraged, they hadn't had sex for... was it really since Hutch had been appointed CO?

Yes, it was.

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Some of the new recruits were older, men who would have been rated C-3 and given only desk jobs early in the war, but who were now being accepted as volunteers. Also, Squires was sent back after his arm healed, and he took the captaincy of B-flight again. So at the end of the month there were a few people in the officer's mess who didn't make Hutch feel older than Ezekiel. Or Starsky, for that matter, which might have been why he didn't walk into Hutch's office so often these days, with or without a bottle.

He'd come tonight, though, with a bottle and a deck of cards, and Hutch was absurdly grateful. He'd also brought Squires and one of the new men, Jack Mitchell, about their own age but with a game leg. He'd been in a reserved profession, too, studying medicine, but gave it up to join the RAC. "I'm planning to go back, though, chaps—live through this—" Mitchell said as Starsky dealt, "so I got some experience for myself, learned what I could from a commercial pilot, before I went to Hendon."

"Good idea," said Squires, sorting his hand.

"Good luck," said Starsky. He didn't really seem to like Mitchell very much.

"Luck? And you my flight captain?" Mitchell grinned.

"Ah, well, 'men have died and worms have eaten them' in spite of my brilliant leadership."

"Never thought I'd see the day I'd hear you quote Shakespeare," Hutch said lightly, but by the glint of Starsky's eye and the lift of his eyebrow, he wasn't much amused.

Hutch also hadn't thought to see Starsky turn out such a fine poker player—at one time he would never have been able to bluff Hutch even if he could the others. At the end of the hand, Hutch pushed chips in his friend's direction and moaned, "There goes my leave."

He was joking and they all knew it, but Mitchell asked a few minutes later, "What *does* one do to get leave around here?"

"Getting shot worked for me," Squires said. "Raise."

"Fold," Hutch said. "I do request it. For any man who has served the regulation time without. Phipps keeps track, I sign the forms, GHQ refuses. It's some sort of ritual."

"What, no Mademoiselles from Armentierres?" Mitchell joked, but he did look disappointed as he laid another pair of chips on the table.

Starsky snorted, then half-sang, "Pa-arlez vous!" as he put down his own chips.

"What?" asked Hutch.

"Oh, it's a new song, or newish," answered Starsky. "The mechanics are always singing it, got about a thousand verses. 'Mademoiselle from Armentierres, pa-arlez vous,'" and now there was a discernible tune, and the other two joined in: "'Mademoiselle from Armentierres, pa-arlez vous! Mademoiselle from Armentierres, hasn't been fucked in forty years—hinky-dinky parlez vous!'"

Hutch waved his hands at them. "Keep your voices down, for pity's sake. I'm supposed to have a little dignity." Then he snorted himself. "*That's* about the joys of leave?"

"She seems pretty, hm, active in the other verses," Squires put in.

"Hinky-dinky?" Hutch asked.

Starsky smirked. "Maybe she says it to her clients."

"And that would be why they don't come back," said Hutch; then Squires asked for a card and they went back to the game. They were midway through the third hand when the field telephone rang. Hutch went to answer it. Starsky gestured to the others and began to clear away the game. When Hutch said, "Er, yes, sir, let me just write that down," Starsky hooked a piece of paper out of a drawer and handed it to Hutch, winking at him, and then the other three left.

He seemed all right, Hutch thought.

But when he was giving the next day's orders, in the brighter light of the officer's mess, he looked over at Starsky and was shocked by the worn, exhausted look on his face. He looked played out, and that frightened Hutch. At the end of the orders, he added impulsively, "Captain Starsky, let me show you the route on the map, in my office—" then, to the others, "Dismissed."

Starsky's eyebrows rose, and Hutch knew he wasn't fooled, but he did walk into the office as if the request were quite normal. He shut the door and then said, "What are you on about? I know that sector like the back of my hand by now. Somebody move the river while we weren't looking?"

Hutch put his hands on his friend's shoulders. "I just realised something. I looked at you and thought, he hasn't slept. How long has that been going on?"

"Oh, I sleep. Didn't you tell me? I can always sleep." But he was looking to the side and Hutch was too close to miss the lines in the corners of his eyes, the dark circles.

Hutch raised one hand and rubbed lightly where the lines were. Starsky's lips parted as if to speak, but then he didn't say anything, or resist when Hutch drew him closer, pulled his head down onto a waiting shoulder. "I was wrong," Hutch said softly, cradling the bent head and stroking the long back. Starsky took a long breath and put his arms around Hutch's waist, relaxing slowly.

It felt good, the curly hair against Hutch's cheek and jaw, the slight swaying movement as they breathed becoming a little rocking motion that soothed both of them, the calm warmth between their bodies. "Meet me tonight," he said after a while.

Starsky raised his head. He looked into Hutch's eyes, as if searching for something, and he seemed so hopeless of finding it that Hutch cupped the lean cheek and rubbed it—but Starsky didn't look comforted, though he didn't pull away. "You know what," he said at last, "I'm not even hard in the morning any more. I don't think... I don't think I can."

"I want to see you sleeping," said Hutch. "More than anything else. I think now that was the best part of Amiens."

There was a spark of humour in Starsky's eye. "Not the *best* part," he said.

Hutch kissed his forehead. "I want to hold you," he said, coaxing, voice low, "want to feel all your muscles relaxing, and see the way you stick your tongue out just a little"

"I do not," said Starsky as his head settled on Hutch's shoulder again.

"Yes, you do. When you're really, truly, deeply asleep."

"Well, *you* snore."

"I know."

Starsky snorted, and Hutch chuckled too. But then the strong hands settled on Hutch's arms and Starsky held him off, took a half-step back. "I can't," he said, "get up out of your bed, out of your arms, and climb into that plane. Can't do it."

It was a moment before Hutch could nod, a moment more before he said, "All right." He let his hands fall away, hang by his sides.

Starsky leaned in and kissed him, firmly, with lips closed. "It's got to be over some day."

And Hutch let him go out of the office, managing not to ask, 'Over how?' because he was afraid of the answer.

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Hutch took a group of newer fliers up the next morning for training, while A-flight was out. The different roar of the plane when he was inside it, the lift and movement in the air, the edge of danger that was never gone and, in a training exercise, never unbearably acute, worked its usual magic and he felt a bit more alive than usual. These boys were shaping up, too, manoeuvring more fluidly, twisting around in the air as if they were beginning to enjoy it, sending themselves into spins and pulling out. Hutch grinned and waved at Keighley in congratulation, though any time he saw a plane pull out of a right-hand spin he remembered Nick. If only they could have done this together.

Though that might not have made any difference in the end. *'Men have died, from time to time, and worms have eaten them ....'*

They landed, and Hutch swung quickly out of the plane so the mechanics could pull it out of A-flight's way: they were due back soon. Keighley sauntered over to talk to Jones, who'd been hanging about the farmyard watching. The others dispersed; Hutch talked to Richardson about petrol supplies and materials for repair, and got a list of their needs to pass on to Phipps.

He must not have made much noise coming out the barn door, though he hadn't been quiet on purpose, because Jones and Keighley were at the corner of the building talking, and went on as if he were not there. They were both looking out at the yard, side by side with Jones' hand on Keighley's shoulder.

"...glad to be out of it, that's all."

"There's no denying the Jew man's the better flier," Jones said, voice objective; "you've only to see them in the air."

Hutch froze, and eavesdropped without shame.

"Don't care, Squires is good enough. He does the job, he brings us back if he can... he doesn't go *after* them the same way." Keighley rubbed his face. "It's like Starsky's, oh, I don't know, *searching* for one of them."

"All of them, more like." Jones rocked Keighley back and forth, like a shake but far slower. "It's his job, look you."

Keighley shook his head. "You know what I mean. Or searching for something that they have and we don't... or something ...."

Hutch reached back, not wanting to hear any more, opened the door and swung it shut. Both men jumped and turned, and Hutch had a smile plastered on his face. "What's this?" he said, "You look like you heard a shell," and patted Jones' shoulder as he passed. Both of the youngsters grinned, relieved.

*Searching for something that they have and we don't.* Hutch hated the thought and could not rid himself of it. A-flight came back with only one casualty, and Hutch told himself that *that* didn't seem like recklessness, and there was nothing unusual in Starsky's eyes—if there were he would see it. Nobody else, nobody, knew Starsky so well.

But Keighley had seen him fighting when Hutch had not. Hutch sat at his desk though the afternoon's paperwork was done, staring at the wall and tapping his teeth with a pen.

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Blaine found him there.

It had been so strange to drive up to the farmhouse again, in the sunlight of a warm autumn day, and though these fields bore no harvest the grass-seeds swayed ripely in the wind and smelled rich and good. He could hear the clank of repairs from the barn, and muffled singing and talking as well. There was a rooster on a barrel in the yard, and Watkins was stroking its neck and talking to it while Phipps looked on. Just as the car came up, the rooster crowed and Phipps laughed a little.

"Personality, sir, that's what he's got," Watkins said, "personality," and then they both turned toward the car.

"Blaine!" Phipps exclaimed. "Hello!"

"Hello, Phipps!" As the car pulled up, Blaine reached over the side and grasped the hand Phipps held out, broad and dry and warm as it had always been. Phipps was like bedrock, never to be eroded.

"You look like a new man," said Phipps then, and Blaine grinned. He knew it. Less alcohol and smoke and grief, more sleep, and even a little club he'd found where he could take some RandR... they had made him feel all over again that life was worth living.

"I never felt better," he said, and it was only a slight exaggeration. "Hello, Sergeant Watkins, how are the

chickens?"

"Top-hole, thank you sir, top-hole," Watkins said, rocking a little on his heels and blowing his moustache the way he always did when pleased.

"How's Hutchinson?" Blaine asked Phipps, and was unsurprised to see the round face cloud a little.

"Oh," Phipps said carefully, "he's inside."

"Right. Hop up behind if you like," Blaine told him, then patted the back of the driver's seat. "Go on, Hooper." The car drove the last dozen feet to the house; Blaine picked up the tin from the seat beside him, jumped out and went around to the office door.

The top half was open so he had a glimpse of the desk and Hutch slumped in the chair behind it, the pen moving evenly to his mouth and away like a metronome. Blaine knocked on the ledge of the door and Hutch jumped, then stared speechlessly as Blaine turned the handle and came in.

"Hello there, Hutch!"

"Blaine," he said evenly, and then with a little irony, "Do come in."

The fair hair seemed flat, and dimmer than before... there hadn't been enough time for it to begin to grey, had there? Surely not. The younger man had lost weight. When he stood, the cloth of the uniform hung a little loose. They shook hands and Hutch picked up his chewed pen and resettled in the chair. Blaine perched on the edge of the desk and fidgeted with the square tin in his hand, tossing it in the air and catching it again.

"How are you?" Blaine asked.

"You're looking fine," Hutch responded.

"Couldn't feel better." Blaine looked around the office, which looked so exactly the same that he expected to find his own razor on the hook of the washstand, his own cigarettes and used glass on the mantel, his own signature on the papers. "Same old place, eh?" He twisted around to look at Hutch again, tossing the tin.

"Just the same. Could you stop playing with that?" And Hutch pointed at the tin with the pen he was still fidgeting with himself.

"Oh, sorry. Nerves, I know." And that made Hutch frown. Blaine looked down at the thing in his hand and recalled why he'd brought it. "Say, Hutch, you remember those Jiffy cork-tips you used to scream about? I, erm, found some in the mess at our place." He held out the tin and Hutch looked warily into his face, then at the thing in his hand, then took it. He turned it over, shifted it to his other hand, and looked at Blaine again.

"You brought these along for me?"

Blaine nodded.

"Oh," said Hutch, "well, thanks very much. Um, have a drink or something."

"No, no, too early in the day."

"Ah." Hutch put the tin down and the pen too, folded his arms and tilted back in the chair.

"I say, Hutch, I hear Headquarters have been giving you a hard time, lately." Blaine felt awkward, so he

attempted a jocular tone. He hardly knew the hard-eyed man who stared at him now, certainly not from his fantasies since he left here, and he felt very far out at the end of a limb.

"No, no, no," said Hutch, politely.

"The old man," Blaine tried to laugh a little, "says you've been kicking up the very devil."

"Does he?" Hutch rubbed his chin. "Well, you ought to know—you're up there."

"Huh, yes."

Then, suddenly, Hutch sat up straight and put one hand on Blaine's knee, making him jump though the touch was wholly impersonal. "Come on, Blaine, come on, what is it? You're not here for the country air."

Blaine reached into his breast pocket and took out the envelope, clearing his throat. "Too important to telephone about."

Hutch opened it and pulled out the papers, unfolded them and began to read, then got up and carried them to the better light of the doorway. Blaine turned to watch him. The sunlight woke the colour of his hair again but outlined the little hunch in his shoulders and the lanky, ungraceful quality Blaine didn't remember him having before. Hutch shook the papers, moved the top one to the back, read some more. Then froze, got the first page on top again and reread, then folded the whole bundle again and strode back to the desk to wave it in Blaine's face. "That. Is. Insane. You know that, don't you?" He tossed it on the desk.

"Yes," Blaine admitted, "I know it is."

Hutch paced away, then back.

"The enemy are making their biggest push so far the day after tomorrow," Blaine said, not sure how much Hutch had actually read. "They've concentrated all their munitions and supplies at the Soulet railhead. You destroy that, you'll stop their drive."

Hutch was at the map now, where it hung behind the desk, and he looked up at it, then tapped the paper with one finger. "But look, Blaine, here's Soulet—it's crazy. Sixty kilometres! The entire German air force would be on our tails before we were halfway. The flight couldn't make it!"

"But one plane could."

"What do you mean, one plane?"

Blaine leaned forward and Hutch still stared. His pale lashes didn't even blink. "One plane," said Blaine. His voice dropped. "One man. At dusk. It's up to one man to go in alone. Have to take a chance at getting through before they can stop him."

Hutch blinked then, and recoiled. "Do you think I can ask a man to do a job like that? He'd be dead before he started!"

Blaine said evenly, "What can you do? You can't refuse."

In the silence that followed, Blaine thought about why he'd really come, the way General Barringer had sought him out and convinced him—because he'd have some influence, because Hutch knew him, because Barringer thought Major Hutchinson unstable and feared the delay if he did refuse the mission. There was no time for disciplinary action and the appointment of a new CO from a distance. Tonight was the only time this job could be done.

Hutch turned and leaned his shoulders against the map. "I'll go myself," he said.

"No, I'm afraid you can't do that," Blaine told him, and went on sympathetically as Hutch frowned again, "I know exactly how you feel. I had it myself, for months. Here at this desk, chained to it." Just remembering brought back the echo of it, and he sighed. "You'll have to ask for a volunteer. The instructions are all here." He picked up the bunch of folded pages again and held it out.

Hutch looked at it for a moment, then took it. "Right." As if he couldn't bear to think any more about it, he strode right to the door to the mess, opened it, went through. "Hutch!" someone called out, gladly—not Starsky—and the gramophone stopped.

Blaine went to the door. Another tall blond was at the bottom of the stairs, looking at Hutchinson as he crossed the room; Phipps had been at the bar with Blaine's driver but was on the move toward the staircase, and Starsky got up from the table where he'd been sitting with Squires—there wasn't another face in the room that Blaine knew.

"Attention!" called Starsky. "Gentlemen!"

They all began to gather at the foot of the stairs, slowly, obviously puzzled: this wasn't the time of day for orders. "I have a job for you," Hutch said, prowling over near the bar, voice as casual as if he were talking about something to do with the chickens or the bees, and a few youngsters near Blaine visibly relaxed. Not all did, though. A dark boy with his chin tucked down, a Welshman by his looks, frowned; Starsky came to stand at Hutch's elbow, gazing at him soberly, then—eyes widening—at Blaine in the doorway, then back at Hutch. "This just came in from Wing, gentlemen." Hutch opened the folded packet and read from it: "Enemy in the twenty-second and twenty-third sectors plan major offensive on entire front nineteenth inst' of ack emma." He looked up, across the faces turned toward him and mostly invisible to Blaine; Hutch smiled a little, almost fondly. "Day after tomorrow," he said, and glanced down. "Munitions for the advance are concentrated in a dump at the railhead at Soulet." Up at the faces again. "Our squadron's been ordered to destroy it. Now, Soulet is sixty kilometres beyond the German lines. There's no chance for a flight to get through. But one man, flying low, hedge-hopping, might possibly succeed." He swallowed, raised his chin. "The chances are ten to one he won't come back."

Not a man in the room drew breath. Then Starsky said, "I'll go," as if they had been talking about a walk in the fields.

Hutch took a convulsive step forward without looking at Starsky at all. "I need a volunteer," he said, weakly, and then a few more voices said, "Major—I will—sir?—volunteer—" but Starsky gripped Hutch's arm, turned him slowly, looked into his face.

"There's no one else," he said. "You know it."

And indeed the room might have been empty, for all the notice Hutch gave anyone else now. He stared for a long moment, then held up the papers, and Starsky let go the taller man's arm and took them. "Those are the instructions. You leave at dusk," said Hutch.

"Three hours," said Starsky, nodding. He turned toward the staircase, paused with one hand on the newel. "Somebody—Phipps?—tell Evans to get my bird ready, will you?" He went up without looking back.

Hutch stood watching, his face very still. Blaine left the doorway and approached him. "Hutch," he said, not wanting to startle the man, but as far as he could tell, Hutch didn't even hear. Blaine put a hand on the tense shoulder, gripped it. "Hutch."

Hutch's head turned a little, paused, then the rest of the way. "Blaine," he said.

"It's done," Blaine told him.

"No," Hutch said, "it's not," but he did go back into the office. He looked round the dim room rather vaguely. "Have a drink or something, Blaine—sit down—" but Hutch didn't sit himself. He walked to the other door, looked out into the yard for a moment, and then went out without another word.

Blaine didn't follow.

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When Hutch went back into the mess, stopped at the bar for a bottle and glasses, and then went up the stairs, Mitchell was the only one besides Botts who even tried to speak to him. "Hullo, Hutch!" said the blond flyer, as he had when Hutch had come out of the office, but fortunately Blaine didn't seem to hear and Hutch couldn't be bothered.

In the bedroom where about half the fliers slept, Starsky had cleared the little table and had the mission papers spread out there. On his bed was a bulging kit bag and a separate stack of things topped with a sealed envelope. He looked up as Hutch came in and gave the crooked smile that almost seemed out of place on his mouth, it had been gone so long. "Oh, good, hello," he said. "Look, the stuff in the bag—don't bother sending all that home. You know my sizes, you can see that the tunics and so forth do some good. The other things—well, anything you don't want, my mother will, probably."

Hutch stopped himself from protesting that there was no need for any of this as they'd be together again in time for supper, and also stopped himself from begging Starsky not, not to *say* that... he just came in, went over to the bed, and stood looking down at the smaller stack of belongings. Starsky turned back to the papers. The bottle was still corked, so he put it and the glasses on their sides on the bed and picked things up one by one. The envelope said "Hutch" on it. He left it alone. Underneath were a book, a battered tin, the polka-dotted pyjamas... he pulled the top out, squeezing the soft material. He could feel a kind of lump, so he spread the top out and felt for it—in the pocket—it was the cachet Flaherty had given them. Hutch had remembered putting it into the pyjama pocket but had only hoped it was still there. It was crumpled now, and had leaked a bit, but there was still a respectable amount in it.

Hutch looked over his shoulder at Starsky. Then he fiddled with the stuff on the bed, juggled the bottle, and in a moment reached over his best friend's shoulder with a half-filled glass.

"No, really, Hutch, I'll need my wits about me."

Hutch stepped around to face him. "One toast," he said, and didn't say 'last toast,' but knew Starsky wouldn't deny him. The familiar hand closed around the glass and Starsky began to raise it, but Hutch reached to cover the top. "Not right now. Tell me the details first—I didn't read it all."

"Well, it's certainly interesting," Starsky said, putting the glass on the table and tugging a map from underneath some other papers. "Look here." They bent their heads together over it. Hutch breathed deeply, the scent of Starsky's hair and skin headier than the liquor. "It seems that for about a quarter-mile here, there's hardly any anti-aircraft."

"Handy."

"Yes. That's where I'll cross. Then north to here, then fly low into the Louen valley—you know there's not much activity there either. The hills will hide me for these ten miles or so... then, see, here's the railway. I can follow the tracks right into Soulet." Hutch, not really meaning to, moved a little closer, felt the brush of curls. Then he did mean to, and put a hand on Starsky's back. "Round here are all those ammo dumps and warehouses. I bet a hit anywhere there will set the whole thing off." He leaned a little into Hutch's palm.

"Course the enemy High Patrol gets back around dusk, so... I'll have to avoid them." He glanced up and then gazed, as if surprised to find Hutch so near.

"The whole area'll be alive with Archies," Hutch said to his lover's solemn gaze. "They'll call ahead if they spot you... you'll run into barrages ..." He closed his own eyes and Starsky grabbed his neck and brought their foreheads together.

"I'll just have to, just keep going," he said. "That's all."

It was undoubtedly all, and Hutch tilted his head and captured Starsky's mouth before any more words could come from it. Starsky pulled back and said, "What if," but Hutch leaned farther and found his lips again, nibbled at them and sucked, and Starsky apparently decided that the risk of discovery no longer mattered to him either.

Hutch had always loved the way Starsky kissed him. His tongue seemed longer than Hutch's, slimmer, more agile, dancing and flirting. He tasted... like himself, like the teeth Hutch traced with a tongue-tip, like honey and bread and fresh water, like the air they seemed to be trading, and Hutch tried not to think that this was the last time but couldn't help it, gasped, felt the sting in his eyes and nose—Starsky held his head and when their mouths parted, he pulled Hutch's face into his neck. The position was impossibly awkward and Hutch vowed he would not move.

"I'll find a way," Starsky whispered.

Hutch held on as tightly as he could.

"I will," his lover promised again, and Hutch took a deep breath and lied.

"Yes."

They parted slowly.

"Here's my suggestion," Hutch said. "Toast with me, then have a lie-down."

"I won't sleep, madman." Starsky smiled so tragically that Hutch had to look away.

"Humour me?" he asked.

"All right. If you promise to call me in time."

Hutch nodded.

They gathered up the sheets of instructions and moved the kit bag and personal possessions onto the table; then Starsky picked up his glass and waited for Hutch to follow. "Do you *have* a toast?"

"Friendship," said Hutch, thinking of the champagne the night he'd thought Starsky dead.

They drank, and then Starsky plopped down on the cot, not even taking off his shoes. Hutch settled on the edge and stroked the curly hair, the ears, the warm pulse at the temple, the closing eyes... outlined lips and stroked down the cheeks and under the jaw, down the long throat.

"Someone... will come ..." Starsky murmured.

"No, they're all too embarrassed." Hutch stared down, imprinting the sight in his memory more carefully even than he had the maps.

"Oh... all... right ...." Nearly out. The eyes tracked under the lids, the mouth worked as he swallowed.

"Plenty of time," Hutch said. "Plenty."

Starsky's lips parted, slowly, just a little; his tongue pushed out, just the tip. Hutch's hand stilled. He waited a little longer before he got up.

Then he picked up the instructions, and put them into his left hand—fished in his pocket and got out Nick's rowing medal, which he put with the pyjamas and other things. Pulled Starsky's flight gear from the hook—loosely cut, it would fit well enough—and left the room, bundling it up around the papers.

## Chapter 7: The Bottom of the Sky

Below Hutch the mangled trees thrust up at angles like sticks in a badly made fence. The trenches were narrow gutters, and helmets like flat plates tilted, faces round as cups peeking out. Then No-Man's-Land stretched under him, a desert of barbed wire and mud and more sticks. He dodged above what had once been an orchard, where nobody had tried to dig out the burnt remains of trees to make trenches, and though he knew he must have been seen, there were certainly no big guns wasted here.

The reason this area near the Louen valley was relatively unguarded was that there was little left in it that either side wanted. It wasn't even really on the way to anywhere—he'd have to turn north again in another five miles or so to find the railroad line.

Here was the river itself, running brown and white over rocks and logs, and edged with more mud and rocks... the impression was probably all in Hutch's mind, but the water didn't look clean. Hills rose on either side, and they did cover him but they also shut out the low sunlight and made him feel he was running late. "Oh, my ears and whiskers," he said aloud, looking up again. He kept checking, kept thinking he heard another motor, kept gauging the depth of danger above him. He *had* always—as long as he'd flown at all and certainly every minute he'd flown in combat—hated having to fly low, at the bottom of the sky.

Starsky had never minded as much.

Hutch looked up again and began to whistle, forcing his mind away from the thought of Starsky.

The river passage seemed long, even dull, but was safe. Now as he hopped the plane up over the ridge of the northern hill, he took a deep breath—and let it out as he saw nothing but the dark-green/light-green/gold/brown patchwork of farmland below. Now he flew low enough to see the rows of plants, swooping up to cross the tree-lines at the edges of each field, then down again. Almost too easy.

He found a road, roughly north-south, so he followed it, buzzing along at about the height of the poplars, sometimes between them. Nobody was driving here. He did surprise a boy on a bicycle, which fell over and spilled groceries from its basket into the dust. Hutch felt sorry about it but of course could only fly on. A dog jumped and barked as if it thought it could catch him. That made him smile.

And then—he almost missed it—there was the train track, crossing the road and leading east and west. He turned east. He had to fly higher here, as the trees on either side of the tracks were too close together for the plane to fit, so he could see better over the fields and the shallow roll of the land. The sun was low now, the shadows long, the clouds grey and blue where they had been white and pink and golden.

This was the time the German patrols came back to base.

If he didn't outright run into them, this timing might be an actual advantage, as the fliers would be tired and

the planes nearly out of fuel. Even if they were called out after him, they'd either have to delay to fill their petrol tanks or come out for only a short flight.

Anyway he hoped so. He would really rather be able to go back and hear Starsky scold him for his trick with the cachet.

A train passed under him, headed west, and he hopped up to avoid the wind it swept with it. Then he came down again, over the long narrow roof of a station.

After a little more time, the buildings he passed were closer together, more vehicles were on the roads he could see when he flew a little higher, and there was a haze in the air from the mass of chimneys ahead—it was the city. And this track was leading him straight into the district he needed, past little storage sheds and scaffolding and—ah! Now that was gunfire! Hutch tipped the plane and wove left and right, looking over the side to locate the gunners, and saw a row of them with machine guns no larger than the ones he had himself. Not much to worry about, but they did show him he was getting closer to something of military value. Yes, ahead were scaffolds and large flat roofs, train-cars lined up and loaded, men and barrows, lorries and automobiles passing busily back and forth. A much bigger gun spoke, and a shell burst not six feet from his right-hand wing. He kept straight, and managed not to fly into the path of the next shell, on his left. He rolled and twisted in the plane. He was so close.

A train was passing under a bridge, full of provisions or ammo, so he dropped one of his own bombs and got a direct hit. Swerved to the side before the guns could find him, found a cluster of warehouses and scaffolds that looked pretty bombable, so he dropped two, one after the other, and swooped up as tall plumes of brown and black smoke leapt at him, carrying beams and large chunks of something, maybe corrugated iron.

"Whoa!" he shouted. Another shell burst close by. He dipped lower and buzzed the top of another warehouse, saw men running across the roof and dropped another bomb. This time the smoke caught him and he closed his mouth tight, dust and ash and little chunks striking the plane and his body like hail. He coughed.

There was a siren wailing and a lot of engines below, so he almost missed the buzz of planes behind him. He wheeled and drove right at them, supposing they'd be protecting the ammo dump, and dropped a bomb that blasted like a volcano, lifting and tossing his plane and the others as well. Yes, that was the dump. He fought his tiller and throttle, dipped and rolled, and the other fliers must have been disoriented, because he was nearly at the edge of the warehouse area and they hadn't found him again. He dropped his last bomb on a cluster of railroad engines, and put his throttle on full, roaring west as straight as a bullet.

"Let's see," he told himself, "let's just see, here, just—"

He flew past fields and roads, a whole little village and a vineyard, over a set of hills and into a broad valley, keeping as low as he could stand to be and trying not to actually cross his fingers. "Let's see if—let's just see—"

Then a German air patrol found him.

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Though Blaine hadn't really expected to see Hutchinson before Starsky left, and wasn't terribly surprised not to see him just after the plane took off, it began to be... odd... that the squadron CO didn't come back from wherever he'd gone to ground. The dusk dimmed into night; still Blaine was alone in the office. Phipps came in and began to do paperwork, and he didn't know where the major was either. Blaine dozed in the chair by the fire, waiting.

And then a noise woke him, a shout, and another—a pounding on the stairs—stunned silence in the mess—the office door slammed open so hard that it bounced back and was slammed again. Blaine got himself out of the chair and turned to confront... Starsky.

"No," said the younger man. "No." He looked around as if Hutch were to be found in the dark corners of the room. Then he darted suddenly to the other door and into the CO's bedroom, and then backed two steps out of it. "No." Blaine moved and so did Starsky, and the older man caught the younger one by the shoulders and looked into his wild eyes.

"Where's Hutchinson?" Blaine asked stupidly, because he had heard the plane take off and there was only one place Hutch could have gone if Starsky was here.

"No," Starsky repeated.

"Pull yourself together," Blaine said, wondering if the other man could. He'd never seen shell-shock induced quite this way, but then he wasn't a doctor.

Nothing seemed to change in the oval face, but after a few moments Starsky said, "You came in a car. I need it."

"Nonsense," Blaine said. He gave the thin shoulders in his hands a little shake.

Starsky didn't visibly react.

Blaine tried a new tack. "I don't understand what happened. I thought you had accepted the mission."

"I had," Starsky answered fairly naturally. "Hutch—Hutch—I don't know what he did. Put me to sleep. Took my place. Must have done." He stopped speaking, face still blank.

After a little while, Blaine shook him again. "Starsky."

Starsky's eyes met his again, and he said, "You're right about the car, I wouldn't be able to get through. And not a plane either"

"You're not going anywhere. You're the senior officer now," said Blaine.

"Oh, no," said Starsky, "you're not doing that to me."

"There's no one else."

"Squires. Phipps. I don't care," said Starsky, brows drawing together and eyes really focussing, "if you fucking appoint *Botts*, but it's not going to be me. I'm not going to be here. Unless I bring Hutch back."

"That's desertion," Blaine told him.

Starsky picked Blaine's hands off his shoulders but didn't back away; he tilted his head back and his lips parted, but it wasn't a smile. "That's your decision. You can send me on a daring one-man rescue mission or list me as missing or AWOL or call the military police to go after me—whatever you like. But I'm going."

Blaine shook his head.

Starsky's expression became less feral, and he put one hand against Blaine's chest. "Don't you see? It's *Hutch*. It's Hutch."

"You still think this is some kind of... game." Blaine stepped back, and again, and found himself against the desk.

"Oh, no." Starsky folded his arms, pulling into himself. "Not a game. I've learned a lot since you left, Blaine. How to get along without," and he took a breath but visibly decided not to explain, "an awful lot."

"Even honour?"

"I'd trade my honour for Hutch's life," Starsky said. "How could I not?"

"But, you fool, it's not like that. *Not a game*. Not a trade. He's living or dying out there now and what you do won't *affect* that."

"*I'm going to find him!*" Starsky shouted. "I'm going to find him, Blaine, I'll find him alive or, or—I'll *find* him. I know where he went. How he'll come back. Where he'll cross. I'll—" he paused—"I know. I need Flaherty. He'll go with me. He's with the 19th Ambulance, call them, will you? Phipps—" he turned, and Blaine didn't understand how he'd known the man was in the room when Blaine himself hadn't seen him come in—"Phipps, will you call? And if I could have the car to go that far, it'd save time."

Starsky hadn't taken in a word Blaine had said. Seemed to have forgotten altogether that he was a soldier, that Blaine was his superior officer, that this was an ongoing war. Phipps should call the military police, and the two of them could hold Starsky down physically, if necessary, until the men came. Blaine stared at the indomitable figure in the centre of the room, shadow to Hutchinson's light. He opened his mouth—and heard his own voice say, "Call the ambulance, Phipps."

He only hoped none of his own superiors would ever ask him to explain.

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Hutch woke up, groggy, raised his head and banged it into metal. Let it fall again, against another hard surface, and thought about where he could be and why everything seemed to hurt. And it was so dark. He raised one hand, unsteadily, gasping as a fiery sensation stabbed his upper arm, felt up the leather of his coat anyway, found the thin, torn metal of a wing over him and pulled back as it cut him. Made a fist to protect his hand and bumped along the edge, puffing at the jolt of pain in every movement, found the part above his face and got his hand around it, found that it was loose. Come to think of it, the metal had jounced when he put his head into it. He tried to push it away, but the effort hurt too much.

He moved his other hand up his stomach and chest to his face, tugged at the goggles until they went onto his forehead, and discovered that it wasn't as dark as he'd thought. Night time, must be, but he was outdoors and a gentle grey came in around the wing. He pushed up with both hands and dislodged it, slid it to one side until it caught on something else, and he could see the sky.

He rested for a little while, looking at the stars. The sky was such a tender evening colour. Like Starsky's eyes. He thought he could feel something wet, not sure where, and wasn't eager to find out if he was badly injured. Maybe he'd rest just a little first. His eyelids were drooping.

Some time later he jerked, gasped, and woke again. For a moment it didn't matter where he was: he remembered so vividly the swooping, rolling, rattling movement of the air battle, the smell of smoke and petrol and his own sweat, the late sun in his eyes and the shadows of the other planes crossing him. Machine guns. Tapping and then punching holes into his arm and leg, and then trailing down out of the body of the plane. They hadn't hit the engine, and he'd gasped for grateful breath and tried to fly with one hand, moaning with pain—nobody could hear him, after all—and trying to see through the water in his eyes and the dirt on his goggles. Hearing the screech of the plane dropping too fast and unable to do much about it.

"Starsky, Starsky," he'd said senselessly, and now didn't remember anything after that.

He wondered if he could move. He lifted his head carefully and looked down his body, still half-concealed by the broken wing, but it didn't look like much other debris was around him. The dark lump to one side and the other one in the branches of a dead tree were enough for most of the plane. If he was careful he could probably sit up.

He managed that, and squinted a little in the dimness, trying to see what his injuries really were. His thigh was bleeding pretty freely, but when he eased his hand over the wounds he couldn't feel pumping, just oozing. And there seemed really to be only one wound in his upper arm—though it burned fiercely, the bullet obviously hadn't broken the bone or hit an artery—he thought he'd be dead if that were true.

He pulled off his helmet with his good hand, and unbuttoned the top part of his coat, so he could reach in and get his handkerchief. He remembered getting Starsky's for him and grinned a little. Actually, though, wiping his face would be a bad idea. The dirt wouldn't hurt him up there, and he would probably need the cleaner cloth later. He let his hand slip out of the coat again.

He felt as though his mind was moving very slowly. Wished he could think better, because when he made it back to Starsky, he knew he'd have an argument on his hands, and he wanted to be better prepared.

Eventually he mocked up a rough bandage around the outside of his trouser leg, untangled himself from the debris of the plane, and managed to locate a length of slim pipe or curtain-rod or something to be a kind of walking stick. The moon was up and he got a good look at his surroundings.

It was not going to be an easy walk. He was in the middle of one of those villages that had been in the path of the ground war, reduced to rubble, skeletons of buildings and lines of walls looking only half-built, no higher than a man's waist and ragged at the top. In all directions were bricks and bits of furniture and trash of every kind. Things were rotting and weeds were trying to grow. There must have been streets here once, but Hutch was not sure he could find them or that finding them would do any good.

Well, no use looking any more. If he didn't get moving, he'd never get back to Starsky. Just one little step at a time, just keep moving west, and he'd run into somebody sooner or later.

He hoped they wouldn't be German soldiers.

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By dawn he had found a real road. It even went west.

"Going west," he said to himself, "gone west," and couldn't decide whether that was quite a good joke or rather profound.

He tried singing to distract himself from the way each step jabbed at him like a knife, sometimes icy and sometimes scorching. "Mademoiselle from Armentierres, pa-arlez vous! Mademoiselle from Armentierres, pa-arlez vous! Mademoiselle from Armentierres, hasn't been fucked in forty years—hinky-dinky parlez vous!" A lot of verses, it was supposed to have a lot, but he could only remember this one, so he sang it over and over for a while. The song had a nice rhythm for walking. He tried "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," but he didn't know all the words to that either. He was beginning to feel cross.

He was so hot, and the coat was heavy, and though he talked to Starsky the exasperating man wouldn't answer.

"Poor Butterfly," he sang, "'neath the blossoms waiting—
Poor Butterfly, for she loves him so.

The moments pass into hours,
The hours pass into years,
And as she smiles through her tears,
She whispers low,

"The moon and I
Know that he'll be faithful,
I know he'll come
To me by and by—
And if he don't come back,
Then I never sigh or cry,
I just must die,
Poor Butterfly!"

"How's that? I know all the words!" But nobody replied.

His leg wasn't working very well now. He tried to lean more on the pipe, but it was on the wrong side. "You are *utterly* wet," he told himself. "Stop grizzling, get on with it."

He rested a lot. Getting up was the hard part.

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He had been lying under the poplars, looking at the way the leaves brushed back and forth against the sky and wondering why that rather flat blue seemed so much closer while he was lying in the grass than it did when he was flying in it. He must have fallen asleep again, though he didn't remember closing his eyes, because he woke up hearing shouts and the sound of a motor, and tried to sit up, thinking about machine guns and planes. But that made him roll a little onto his wounded arm and he fell back, making some sort of weak noise, and then hands were grasping him and his muscles were too lax even to struggle.

"Hutch," he heard, "Hutch! Hutch, come on, Hutch," and he couldn't figure out why, after ignoring him all day long, Starsky suddenly wouldn't shut up. He dragged his eyelids up and looked. Starsky's face hung over him, mouth unsteady and eyes seeming to bulge, and Hutch tried to figure out how to ask about it, but then the strange-looking eyes blinked and bright sparks dropped and were wet on Hutch's face. And then Starsky's head was a weight somewhere near Hutch's throat, and there were some odd choking noises and their bodies moved in little jerks.

Hutch raised his good hand and pushed his fingers into the thick curls. "Ah, no," he said, or meant to; his own voice wasn't steady. "No, don't cry. You found me, I'm here, don't." He found the bare skin of Starsky's neck and rubbed. Starsky held on tighter.

After a while, he took a deep, long breath. "You ever, ever, *ever* do that again and I'll fucking kill you myself," he told Hutch, the words muffled against the leather of the flight coat.

Hutch smiled. "You promise?"

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"Where are we?" he asked as they were trying to get him into the sidecar.

"Somewhere in France," Starsky answered, preoccupied.

"I *know* that," Hutch said irritably, pushing at his lover's hands.

"You need ether, I do believe," said a voice he remembered, but not well. He turned his head and frowned, thinking.

"Flaherty," said the other. "Don't bother, you already said hello when I bandaged you. You don't remember."

"Why not?"

"Well," and a surprisingly gentle touch came on the back of his head, "It might have to do with this lump here. Now be a good boy, will you now, and let us get you in this car, so we can take you back to something resemblin' civilisation?"

"Home?"

And Starsky, already in the car and pulling Hutch down on top of him, began to laugh. "Oh, I wish," he said. "Come on, turn more, you great lummo."

"It would've been better if we tucked him up in here an' you rode behind me," Flaherty said.

"No," said Starsky, and Hutch settled against him, liking the firm voice and the supporting arms. And the hand stroking into his hair. Flaherty tugged on his legs, bent them, and Hutch yipped; Starsky held more tightly still. "It's going to hurt, boy, I can't fix it," he said.

"All right," Hutch said, gritting his teeth. The hand on his face and the neck his forehead fitted into were nicely chill, but it occurred to him that chilliness and skin were not compatible concepts. "You're cold," he said as the motor was starting.

"You're burning up," Starsky said a few moments later, and Hutch wasn't sure he was answering.

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He was never very clear about the ensuing events. They seemed to have stopped at the farmhouse, or anyway he rather thought he heard Watkins' rooster crowing, and Starsky said impatiently, "I can't get out, now can I? He'll have to come to me," and the whole vehicle shook though it felt as though it was not driving any more. Hutch tried to lift his head, but Starsky pushed it back down. He was talking again. Hutch couldn't make sense of it. Another hand touched his hair, and he knew it wasn't Starsky's; he pulled his brows together and tried to lift his eyelids, but they were so heavy.

"*Major* Starsky?" he thought he heard Flaherty say, a while later.

"Apparently," Starsky answered.

They were on the road again—Hutch couldn't tell how long—the rocking motion and buzzing sound had become as normal as the rise and fall of Starsky's chest and the sound of his swallow or his voice. Then they stopped, and with a great effort Hutch opened an eye, but there was nothing but poplars and sky to see.

"Just a *minute*, Flaherty, for God's sake."

"Well, I need to take a piss anyway."

"Fine, go on."

The motorcycle wiggled. Starsky's hand patted Hutch's cheek. "Hutch, are you awake? Could you just wake up for me, a minute?"

"M'wake," said Hutch.

"More than that," Starsky said tenderly, and drew in his chin, wiggling his shoulders and pulling up on Hutch's head until they could see each other. Hutch leaned into Starsky's hand, took a deep, sudden breath as his leg bumped the side of the car while they moved. Those eyes, that were deeper and so much safer than the sky, held his. "I'm seriously considering shooting myself in the foot," Starsky told him.

"One's, one 'f us," said Hutch, feeling rather fuzzy but determined to get this out, "is enough to have a g'mpy leg."

"Yes, you're right. And I have to go back, I suppose. I mean, who's left, Mitchell?"

"Be careful."

"I will. Oh, *Hutch*, I'll be there alone now," and Starsky shut his eyes.

Hutch carefully stretched his neck, reached with his lips, kissed one eyelid and then the other, and Starsky smiled even before he opened them again.

"Why we stopped," Starsky whispered and kissed Hutch, drinking the sleep and pain from his mouth, sucking it away, making the sick fever that drained his strength into a flare of sexual heat that made him feel briefly energised. So long since they'd been like this together. He tried to rub his turgid cock against his lover and gasped with pain. "No, no," Starsky murmured, kissing gently over Hutch's face, "later for that, later, save it for me, won't you?" Their foreheads pressed together. "Don't go falling for some nurse," Starsky said, and the emotion in his voice was probably laughter.

"No," Hutch promised. "And you, don't you go pub-crawling with Flaherty."

"Who's taking m'name in vain, then? If you're talkin' about me then your lovmakin' must be over." Hutch put his head down again when he heard the driver's voice, and soon the motorcycle was gunning up. "Only a kilometre or so now to the hospital," Flaherty said. And they drove off.

## **Chapter 8: Letters from the Front**

At the hospital, Hutch was bathed and re-bandaged and packed in cold compresses, covered up and checked so frequently he felt he'd never sleep solidly again. But after a day or two, he began to really sit up and take notice enough that he was allowed pen and paper. As soon as he was, he wrote to Starsky.

"How do you like it? I hope it's not too hot. The bottle is in the lower left-hand drawer, even handier for you, leftie. Get Phipps to get you clean glasses. It isn't bad here, or wouldn't be if it weren't a hospital. It was a nice house before. I felt like that about the farmhouse too." He paused, looking at the way the sunlight came in the far window and fell across two other ward beds, presently empty. This letter was almost certain to be read by at least one other person than Starsky, somewhere on the way to him. "A pleasant little building, and I liked the fieldstone," he wrote, wanting to say that remembering their last kiss, all their lovemaking, sustained him. Instead he went on, "I think a good deal about the things we did to pass the time when we weren't flying. Do you remember running across the fields that day?" He stopped again to think of it himself. Another time Starsky had given him renewal. "Don't let the bedbugs bite," and he wondered if he'd have the nerve to write a more tender avowal even if he could be certain only Starsky would read it. "Give my love to the bees and the chickens."

The days were long without the structure of A-flight and B-flight and the paperwork and the phone calls and the next day's orders. Before he even got a letter back from Starsky, Hutch was telling him about it: "I never

thought," he wrote, "that there was anything in those days but fear and boredom—and my friendship with you, of course. But now I don't have the fear pressing on me, and the boredom is," he paused. Looked up into the shadows of the ceiling. Put the letter aside for a while. "Overpowering," he finished eventually.

He played checkers with the man who cleaned the wards at night, who was a local called Pierre Boule, and with the day nurses, when they weren't run off their feet. Those games were slow, though, because the nurse could only drop by his bedside and move a checker at a time. He read old newspapers and magazines and single-sheet flyers about venereal disease. "They're wonderful motivators," he wrote to Starsky, teasing him. "I don't know what I might not do without them. I'm having to beat the nurses off with sticks." In fact the women who worked the wards moved in a kind of weary routine that he recognised from the big-push times at the farmhouse. Their faces brightened professionally when they saw him, but he couldn't flatter himself that they thought of him as anything but a patient who wasn't as much trouble as some.

His wounds continued painful. His arm felt as though it had a cord drawn through it, and pulled whenever he moved it; the entry-point was bruised, he noticed when they changed the dressing. But the hole itself was closed, and wasn't swollen, or hardly so. The wounds in his leg, though... they'd had to remove two bullets, and so the openings were larger; around the stitches, his leg was puffy, discoloured, and it ached persistently and deeply, as if the very bone were bruised.

He didn't write to Starsky about any of this. He wrote about the dog that lived on the grounds and barked outside his window; about the food, which was quite good; about the men who came and went in the other beds of the ward.

One he mentioned but didn't give many details about was an artilleryman named Henderson, who'd been blinded and buried in a trench. He couldn't seem to understand that his eyes were really damaged, and all day he spent picking at his bandages and pleading with everyone who neared his bed to put on a light, to take off his helmet, to get rid of this terrible blindfold .... Matron came to see him, and then authorised Sister Cartwright to give him something strong enough to make him sleep. Later stretcher-bearers came in and moved him out.

"Where is he going?" Hutch asked Cartwright, who was standing near his bed.

"A private room," she answered. "He's disturbing the whole of the ward, and keeping him under isn't good for him."

That night, Hutch dreamed of being stuck in the dark, voices passing him but refusing to tell him why he couldn't see.

When he got the first letter, he kept it for an hour or two unopened, looking at the slashing black strokes of Starsky's penmanship, knowing that reading it would take little time and rereading it would never be the same. He worried at the envelope flap, trying to convince himself that it was important to get it up in one piece.

"My dear friend," the letter began, and Hutch smiled involuntarily, staring at the line. He read it again, "My dear friend," and touched the margin nearest the words. "I've got your first letter, in which you say so little about your condition. You need to do better, Hutch. I had no trouble finding the bottle, thank you, and Phipps has been invaluable. He asks after you. Everyone does. I can only tell them you remember the farmhouse, for pity's sake. You see?"

"It felt so strange giving orders for the first time, especially as they all knew I'd been out looking for you, but I was able to tell them you were alive and that the 59th had been given a commendation for our part in stopping the enemy advance. I bet they haven't told you that, so I'm writing it to you.

"Something happened to me. I don't know whether it was while Flaherty and I were driving around the front, questioning men in lookouts and anti-aircraft hides, and just about anybody we came across, after a while. There are places—I knew, but I hadn't seen them—where the trenches are dug right into the bodies of the troops who were there when the last trench collapsed. There are so many places where people used to live, but I'm not sure they ever can again. Or maybe it was afterward, when I was looking at all those young faces—so young—and telling them about the commendation. But I'm really proud, Hutch. You did an amazing thing, and a lot of boys like those won't be dead in the walls of trenches because you did it.

"We're still training whenever we have a free hour .... Now those dots represent a pause to talk to young Jones, who I agree with you has a good deal of potential. He wants to do some of the training, and while I would have laughed at the idea a week ago, I think now he does have something to teach. And I have a soft spot for him because he's one of the men who asks after you. Hum, wonder if he does it on purpose?"

"He also reminds me of Nicky."

Hutch put the letter down and let his head fall back on the pillow. Seeing Nick's name on paper brought back how it had felt to write the condolence letter after his death, and made him think that he really should write to Mrs Starsky again. And to his own family.

Even though he wasn't at the front now, England still seemed very far away.

In the next letter, Starsky mentioned Nick again: "I can't help but think I ought to have looked for Nick as I did for you. I wonder sometimes about whether he was still alive when the plane crashed. I saw him go down, but I didn't see the crash—some Hun was firing at me by that time—the front of his plane was smoking, but that doesn't always mean anything. Of course if he'd survived I would have heard by this time."

This letter was a lot of short paragraphs about a variety of disconnected things, and seemed to have been written over the course of days.

"Phipps and I read bits of our letters to each other. Quite a domestic scene. His wife tells him that their dog has had puppies but hasn't enough milk for all of them. They're not sure what to do because the milk rationing is too strict to hand any of it over to the dogs. Phipps said sadly that the war seemed to be turning the whole world upside-down, as he had always considered puppies to have their own automatic milk rations. He also began to think he'd like a dog round here. I certainly hope he doesn't find one. Can you imagine having a dog yipping round the mess? Or on the field when a flight's taking off?"

"And then there's the question of what we'd do with it when we went home.

"Watkins keeps trying to recruit helpers with the bees. He's got this trick in which he gets them to crawl all over his chin and neck, clear down onto his shoulders, a whole swarm of them, like a long beard. He's been showing it off, and he can't figure out why the boys aren't eager to have such a close relationship with 'the most industrious of God's creatures'!"

"I reread your letters; do you mine? I walked around the fields just today while A-flight was gone. I can't stay shut up in the office all the time.

"We lost seven men this week—a whole flight's worth, though not all at once. I'm trying to think whom among them you knew: Keighley, Hunter, Poole, Fitzgerald, Carter, Scott, Christopherson. The last three are Canadians. In fact, Carter handed me the orders for his crew the same day I took command, so I know you never met them. The very first thing they heard from me was about the commendation. I do hope they didn't feel they had to live up to it.

"I'm becoming a regular old woman on these boys' behalf, don't want them to do anything rash."

That did amuse Hutch: Starsky as old woman. For some reason he imagined a Breton sort of high hat and white mobcap, voluminous skirts and little black shawl—at last he realised he was thinking of a child's book with Mother Goose on the cover. Starsky as Mother Goose. He laughed aloud.

He wrote back to tease Starsky about that, and to say, "Of course I reread your letters, over and over. I miss—" and then had to remember the censors again. He wanted to say, miss you, miss your hair and skin under my hands, miss your mouth and the way we hold each other, miss the sounds you make when we're together... he closed his eyes and let himself visualise, feel it again. Without looking, he put the letter things back on the bedside table, heard the pen roll and fall, but he didn't care. He reached under the bedclothes to find the swelling evidence of his memories, held it and wished Starsky was holding it, or that it was Starsky's flesh in his hand. How Starsky's mouth tasted, his sweat when they were making love, beading on his forehead and on his throat and in the crook of his arm and... Hutch clenched his teeth. If he thought about Starsky's cock in his mouth he'd be undone. He didn't know what he wanted: the desire was so fierce, but he knew he'd not want to face the nurse when she changed him. He twitched and bumped his leg and pain shot through him, so acute that it distracted him completely.

Later the nurse applied carbolic acid, and the smell of the wound as it bubbled and hissed was worse than the pain, though that made him writhe. "Sorry, Sister," he forced through his clenched jaw, and she smiled but her expression told him that she was apprehensive.

Later, when he could sit up, he started a new sheet of paper and wrote rapidly and messily, "God, Starsk, it hurts, it hurts so much, I don't know how I can stand it. And it's so ugly. I don't see how it could ever heal. It will be so ugly, how can I stand you to see it? What if it just stays open? I know some wounds do, they just never seem to get better—or maybe there'll be gangrene, what then? I could die here in this bloody hospital, and you so far away, I love you Starsky, I love you," babbling to the bottom of the page, and then he didn't even wait for the ink to dry before he tore it in pieces and crumpled them into another sheet.

He was writing more awkwardly, because he couldn't balance the board they'd given him on both legs any more.

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He wrote his real letters very carefully, sending news about his arm and asking to be remembered to Phipps and Watkins and Jones.

He'd just put a letter aside and was setting up a game of patience on his writing board when Flaherty came into the ward. Hutch wasn't the only man there he knew, and he stopped at two other beds briefly, but the bouquet of chrysanthemums in his hands was for Hutch, as the giggling young nurse who brought them a vase confirmed.

"You *really* shouldn't have," said Hutch, a little grim at the laughter up and down the ward.

Flaherty grinned. "Now would you deprive them of this innocent amusement?" He bent over Hutch and fussed with his pillows in a totally unnecessary manner. "A tisket, a tasket," he murmured, "I brought a letter—it's under the edge here."

"Romantic," Hutch said as the motorcycle driver sat down.

"It is a bit," Flaherty admitted. "I've a soft spot for it."

They chatted a little, and then Flaherty said, "You'll be wanting to read that letter, maybe answer it too—I've

some official business hereabouts, so if you want me to courier for you—I'll stop back, shall I?"

"Do," Hutch said, and shook hands with him.

He managed to wait until Flaherty had left the ward, to turn fairly naturally to the side and find the folded paper, to pull some other pages onto his board so he could cover the letter if he needed to.

"Hutch, my Hutch, my beautiful lover," it began. "I lie in this bed you used to sleep in, and I can't believe I refused you when you wanted to share it with me. I dream about you. I daydream of you. I walk around in a daze, sometimes, thinking of your smile and the way the light sits in your hair. I remember you in flannels and in that silly swimsuit you wore when we bathed in the sea at Portsmouth. I can see you with a book under a tree, a picnic I would wager you don't even remember, and I stared and thought I would never forget how you looked then. I miss the touch of your hands, so much. I can't write it."

Then, after a gap, the colour of the ink seemed a little different. "I wrote that for myself, really, but now our friend is here and he says he'll see you get it. I want you to know this. Don't ever doubt it. I love you.

"I think it's better not to sign this, so you'll have to guess who I am."

The last line made him laugh though his eyes were wet. And now for the first time he understood the way Phipps always kissed his letters from home after reading them. It had seemed silly. Now it didn't. He touched his lips to the paper and tucked it into the front of his pyjama top.

"I love you," he wrote shakily, at the bottom of the nearly-finished letter, "David, don't forget, whatever happens. Sometimes I'm frightened here. But not as badly as I was before, when I thought I might lose you. I do remember the picnic. I have nothing to do but lie here and remember everything about you and everything we've ever done together. Thank you for sending that note. I'll treasure it. I'll love you forever." He was nearly weeping just writing it.

When Flaherty came back, he asked, "Why *are* you playing messenger?"

"Ah," Flaherty said, "we Irish know how rare a thing it is to have a happy ending. I'm glad to look on at it, to be sure."

"It's not ended," said Hutch, keeping his opinion about happiness to himself.

The doctor had mentioned gangrene. Hutch was afraid, from the look in Flaherty's eye, that he had somehow found out.

He was sure when he got his normal mail a few days later. The letter from Starsky was very short, this time. "Dear Hutch: You need to tell me all about your leg now. Don't keep me in the dark and don't lie to me. Read this, and then close your eyes and think about the times we've been closest, the times you've been held most tightly, the times you have felt the very safest. Then open your eyes and write. I must know." And then nothing but the signature, bare at the bottom of the page.

He waited until after the doctor's next rounds to follow the instructions.

Normally, the man talked mostly to the nurses, but Hutch put one hand on his wrist and held him until the calm, scholarly-looking face turned toward him. "I know," Hutch said carefully, "that you treat many soldiers who can't make any decisions for themselves—" he thought of Henderson—"but I'm in my senses and I want to know about my leg."

"You were watching while I examined it," Doctor Franklin said.

"I know it doesn't look good, and it hurts a great deal."

"There's not much circulation lower down. The flesh is low in temperature, swollen and discoloured. We shall start injections of hydrogen peroxide tonight. The choice at this point is to send you home now, or to continue treatment here, even to amputation."

There it was, the word he'd feared next to death, and it was a strange comfort to hear it, to believe that he wasn't just panicking unduly.

And as for the choice, that was easy. If he went to England, he wouldn't have an unguarded word from Starsky so long as he was in the army.

"If I'm going to have a leg taken off, I want it done here."

"It's not entirely your decision to make," the doctor said mildly, looking through the tops of his glasses.

"Of course. But I want it understood that this is my preference. It would be too bad," and Hutch tried a smile which he thought wasn't entirely unrecognisable, "if you sent me home because you thought I wanted it."

"Many patients prefer the thought of major surgery done at home rather than in a military hospital," Franklin commented, "or abroad at all for that matter."

"I trust you," said Hutch. "Not as if you don't have enough experience!"

"That's so," said the doctor, his mouth twitching. "Well, this is all before the fair. Let us see how the peroxide injections go, shall we?"

"Right," Hutch said almost breezily.

He talked to the nurses too, about the amputation procedure and the recovery process. Starsky would want to know. And Hutch did too. Like any other fear, when he faced it, it was lessened.

Still, he literally did close his eyes and remember the trip in the sidecar, the time in Amiens, the thousands of times he'd looked in Starsky's eyes and had known he was exactly understood. And then he wrote. He described his leg, the way it felt and the way it looked; he reported what Franklin and the sisters had told him; he wrote about his fears. "If it heals cleanly, which it well may, I'll be stronger afterward, not fighting the infection any more. I can't get a false one made here, they tell me, but eventually they would have to send me home to England even if they aren't too busy to amputate me here. I should be able to walk, and you always did tell me I couldn't dance. No more sea-bathing, I suppose.

"It will be quite unattractive, I'm afraid. But then, it's not a thing of beauty right now.

"I'm a bit nervous about going under, and my observations of people on morphia here are not too cheerful either. Terrible dreams they seem to have. Though I know it's foolish to worry about dreams.

"I'm sure it will go well. I'm sorry it took me so long to write to you about it. I just funk'd—there's no excuse."

Flaherty brought the answer, and a good thing too. As it was, Hutch didn't know where he'd keep it to be absolutely sure the nurses wouldn't find it.

"You know," Starsky wrote, "how I've loved both your long legs, especially when they're wrapped tight around me or hung over my shoulders. But I don't love one of them more than the other—or wait, I lie, now I come to think of it. The right one is my favourite. It's got that little mole behind the knee—such a good

place to nibble—what a relief to know it'll still be there. The other one was a beautiful thing too, but I can learn to do without it if you can. I'm thinking some positions will be easier. You know those moments when we seem to have too many arms and legs for comfort. Perhaps I'll do some sketches. Perhaps I'll just sit here and think about it....it's a good thing Phipps isn't in the office with me at the moment.

"Hutch, just get well, just be alive, and I'll survive too. And we'll have that bed and that Vaseline. No fear.

"I have some ordinary news too, but I'll send that in a public letter."

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Blaine had taken the telephone call from Starsky with a good deal of apprehension, unable to imagine what new rule-bending he was going to be asked to support. But in fact, Starsky was apparently not planning to desert his post in the near future.

"We've got a prisoner here you might want to talk to for yourself, before they come for him," the young major said.

While Hooper drove into the farmyard, Blaine looked around, again feeling that peculiar nostalgia. He had hated every moment of the time here, hadn't he? Why did he feel as if the youngsters climbing into their planes had a brightness, a liveliness, that nobody he'd ever seen elsewhere could match?

Starsky was sitting, hatless, on the barrel under the tree; one leg was drawn up and one arm propped on it. He was looking up through the branches, his head leaning against the bark. Blaine got out of the car.

"Hello, Major," he said.

"Oh, hullo, Blaine," Starsky said. "Beautiful day, don't you think?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes."

Starsky smiled broadly and jumped down off the barrel. "The trouble with you, Blaine," he said, dusting off his backside unselfconsciously, "is that you don't appreciate the little things. Now you look up for one moment."

Blaine did. The tree had lost a lot of foliage but what was left was a poignant, almost springlike yellow, streaked with green. Above, the sky was a plangent autumn blue, deep and clear.

He looked down to see Starsky still grinning at him. "Hutch says it seems closer when he's grounded. The sky. What d'you think?"

"I think the both of you are a little mad," Blaine said without really planning to.

Starsky laughed. "You always have," he said. He reached out and patted Blaine's shoulder, then guided him—not to the office door, but toward the barn.

"Is it your prisoner that's made you so happy?" Blaine asked.

"No," Starsky answered. "I've had a letter. Never mind that."

"Where are we going? You're not keeping the prisoner out here?"

"No, I want to show you the *real* reason I asked you to visit."

Blaine looked at him with deep misgiving. Starsky laughed again. "Oh stop!" he said. "Honestly, it won't bite. *I* won't bite." He held open the barn door and waved Blaine inside.

Blaine stood for a moment among the smells of old fodder and petrol and metal, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. There was a bulk in front of him—an aeroplane—a red one?—a *German* one.

"The order of events," said Starsky, still sounding amused, "was as follows: one of the A-flight men brought this bird down. The pilot, a youngster by the elaborate name of Von der Jost und Reidtstadt—we could probably call him the Pink Baron or something—managed to get himself down without too much damage. He ditched the plane in an unused trench. He also knocked himself out, and spent most of the day there, then got out, disoriented, and wandered around looking for someone to give him a lift back to base, not realising he was behind our lines. He did find someone, who brought him here, and he's tucked up nicely waiting for you and Phipps to speak to him. But take a look at *this*, Blaine. This plane can practically fly right *now*. And over here—" Starsky beckoned, moving closer to the plane, where some bulk of machinery hung like a square metal wart, "is the reason he was flying along surrounded by an escort. It's a camera."

Blaine could see that it was. "Well, Intelligence will want to see the film," he began, but Starsky was shaking his head.

"They can have that, but it's small beer. Don't you see what *we* could do with this bird?"

Blaine remembered this voice using the phrase 'daring one-man rescue mission' and said, "D'you mean what *you* could do with it?"

"Oh, actually no," Starsky said. "I've got a couple of volunteers. I want to try the thing out, of course," and he grinned again, "but it needs someone who can work the camera and I've only taken a few shots with a Brownie. We've got a man, matter of fact, who's a regular enthusiast, could tell us what the difference was to an English-made camera, everything. And *he's* got a best chum, quite a good fighter. What I need is the all-clear from Intelligence, the paint and supplies to fix this plane and camouflage another one, and then we can send up a reconnaissance flight to beat them all. Get some good shots of Von Richter's new 'drome, wouldn't you like that?"

Blaine looked at him for a moment. "Who *are* you?" he asked. "I've never met you."

Starsky folded his arms. "No, perhaps you never did," he said. "D'you remember telling Hutch he had to grow up?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think I have done. Anyway, I've a whole new appreciation for getting out of this war in one piece. And getting as many of these boys out in one piece as I can. This," he patted the camera, "this isn't just sending boys up in old crates to get taken apart, or over the top to get blown into tomorrow. This is a good risk. I'd take it myself, but I wouldn't be as good at it as Grant and Jones will. That's the honest truth."

Blaine looked at the man before him and thought it was. And wished he really had met this Starsky before.

## Chapter 9: Scars

"I don't think you ever told me what happened to that information, whatever Grant and Jones found out," Hutch said, adjusting his hat so the brim shut out the late sun that had lain across his eyes and shone white in his lashes.

"Never knew," answered Starsky, rolling his head to one side to look up at Hutch.

Blaine watched them with an emotion he couldn't quite define. There were only two canvas chairs at the beach house, so he had one as the guest while Hutch had the other; Starsky sat on a rug next to Hutch's chair, leaning back against Hutch's leg—his false leg, stiff under the cotton sheath of his trousers. Blaine didn't understand how Starsky could be comfortable there. The brunet had another rug over his knees, presumably for modesty as the day was warm and he was wearing a bathing suit.

"Did you, Blaine, or did it just vanish into Intelligence's vast maw and never come out?" Starsky was looking at him now.

"What an image," said Hutch. "Please let's not dwell on it."

Starsky thumped the wooden shin, but not hard.

"No, I never found out either," Blaine said.

"I rather expected it to end in some sort of mission, you know, probably a suicide one—another single-bomber sort of thing like you tricked me out of," Starsky said to Hutch.

"He envies me because I get the good seats," Hutch said to Blaine.

"But I suppose what really happened was that it went into a file somewhere or was making its way through dozens of forms and offices, and before anything could get done, the Yanks arrived."

"Or Armistice," Hutch added.

"Probably," Blaine agreed. "I don't know."

Hutch picked up a glass of lemonade from the little crate beside him and sipped from it; then he handed the glass to Starsky, who also drank, now looking out to sea. He just glanced at Hutch as he gave the glass back.

Blaine asked, "Are either of you going to France this year? For Armistice Day?"

"No," Starsky said absently, still looking toward the horizon.

"Neither of us needs to go back to remember," Hutch said, his hand resting briefly on Starsky's hair, then on his shoulder.

Starsky sat up straight, and Hutch's hand fell away. "That's quite a cloud bank out there," he said, "looks like rain. If I want to bathe I should probably do it now. Do either of you mind?"

"No, no," Blaine said.

Starsky got to his feet, dropping the rug in a heap, and Hutch smiled up at him. "Go on, have your paddle."

Starsky bent and tapped Hutch on the nose with one finger. "You're only lucky we have a guest, or I'd haul your carcass down there and drop you in."

"And make my buckles and hinges rust," Hutch said.

Starsky tapped once more, then sketched a salute for Blaine and went off down the beach.

"You could bathe too, if you wanted," Hutch said.

"Oh," Blaine said, startled, "no. Thank you, but really I'd rather not."

They both sat and watched Starsky wade in, pause, wade farther, and then begin to swim.

"A lot of us do go, especially on anniversaries," Blaine said. "That's all, why I asked. It's been ten years."

"I know," Hutch said. "And we have been back, actually, to Amiens and to the hospital I was in. Not to the battlefields. Or the graveyards."

"No?"

The blue eyes that had once haunted his dreams turned toward him, and Hutch said evenly, "No. The dead we remember—well, you know, Blaine, if you drop a corpse from a hundred feet up in a burning plane, there's not much left to bury, as a rule, or any reliable ID. If Nick had a marked grave we might visit it, but as it is .... Do you go back?"

"I've been," Blaine said. "I took my son."

"That's a different sort of reason," Hutch said. "He's young for it—did he understand, you think?"

Blaine shrugged. "He seemed to. I—" he cleared his throat—"didn't tell him everything, of course."

"You can't tell everything." Hutch's voice was thoughtful. "I learned that in France, actually. In hospital, writing to Starsky. We wrote a lot. I did. I opened my heart. But I never could tell everything, you know, and that was to Starsk, who knows me better than anyone. And he never could tell me. Not *everything*. He still hasn't. He has dreams... well, so do I, sometimes. So do you, I expect."

"Yes," said Blaine.

"Yes," Hutch echoed. He fingered the arm-rest of the chair, then put his hand on his leg and worried at the material of his trousers, as if he weren't aware of doing it. Then he seemed to notice, and stopped.

"How *is* your family?" he asked after a pause.

"They're well," said Blaine, smiling. "Maggie's blooming and Johnny, well, every father thinks his son remarkable."

Hutch made a grimace that might have been the sun in his eyes again, or some measure of agreement.

Blaine wanted to ask about his hosts, whether they ever planned to have families of their own. It seemed a little adolescent, self-indulgent, to live like boys on holiday or collegians or something, endlessly. Surely they weren't still .... Blaine stopped himself from speculating, the denied memory of that night scene of a decade past blinking at him, bright and distracting as a warning buoy.

"So you come here every year?" he asked, changing the subject.

"When we can. Last year Starsky's mother was ill and we stayed in London."

"Do you do everything together?" Blaine was appalled to hear his own voice say that.

Hutch was amused. "Not everything. He loves those dreadful comic films." He turned his gaze back to the water, where Starsky was standing up in the shallows and waving. Hutch waved back. "And I seldom swim."

Blaine suddenly wanted, badly, to be frank, to ask everything he knew was rude and intrusive and altogether wrong. "How, do you," he said, and his voice was so strained he hardly recognised it himself.

"It's amazing what can be hidden in plain sight. What can be written down to pity. People think Starsky positively heroic and self-sacrificing," and Hutch's voice was warm. "He laps it up, of course. Loves it."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Sometimes. But, Blaine, should I just eat myself up with wanting something I think I oughtn't to have? Is that a good way to live?" And now Hutch's gaze was ruthless.

Blaine couldn't hold those eyes. His own fell.

"I rather like where we've ended up, myself," Hutch said.

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Later, after Blaine had gone, they'd had their evening meal and taken a late walk because it didn't really rain, and were getting ready for bed. Starsky cleared his throat and spoke after a lengthy silence: "Sorry I cut out on you."

Hutch raised his eyes from the leg harness he was unbuckling. Then lowered them again. "And I thought you really wanted to bathe," he said.

Starsky, clad only in his short underpants, knelt on the sand-strewn floor and started to work on the buckles himself. "What I *really* wanted was to get that suit wet," he said, mouth twitching into that half-smile of his. "Love the way you look at me then."

Hutch loved to look. The suit was dark blue, and clung round Starsky's chest, his ribs and hips and heavy genitals; when it was wet, the man might as well have been naked. The back view was good too.

Hutch reached out and ran his fingertips along Starsky's jaw, which tilted up and their eyes met. That anyone could look away from Starsky was incredible to Hutch. He reached up with his thumb and ran it along the scar from cheekbone to jaw, pale even though they'd been so often in the sun lately; shifting his hand slightly, he drew the same thumb down Starsky's nose and dropped to trace his lips. Then Hutch opened his hand and covered as much of Starsky's face as he could, holding it. Starsky closed his eyes.

Then he opened them; Hutch dropped his hand; they worked on the harness and resumed the conversation. "So you gave Blaine a show too," Hutch said.

Starsky glanced up sceptically under his lashes. "You really think he is, don't you?"

"Certain of it," Hutch said. In the decade they'd lived together since the war, he'd come to feel that no man who loved men could hide from him—which was probably conceit, but he'd never admit it aloud. Anyway Hutch could tell the gaze of men who were attracted to him.

They finished removing the harness and Starsky got up, dusted off his knees and put the leg away. Hutch slid and hopped along the edge of the bed, then swung his real leg up. They kept a crutch on that side in case Hutch needed to get up at night. Starsky took off his underwear and came to bed. Hutch watched.

There was a scar on his chest, too, and along one upper arm, all the marks of a crash just as one of B-flight came in to land, and Starsky had been first there, trying to free the pilot from the wreckage. That was one of the things he dreamed of; he'd said as much.

"Tired?" Starsky asked, pausing on his hands and knee on the mattress, cock and balls hanging, his eyes bright.

"Come here," Hutch said, rolling on his hip, and Starsky did.

They'd discovered each other in sex and comforted each other, explored and celebrated, been angry and desperate and full of grief, lazy and good-natured and even a bit bored; how anyone could be more married, Hutch could not imagine.

For some reason, the love they made here at the beach house was often special. As they kissed and petted each other now, Hutch thought tonight would be a good one. He felt unusually aware of the textures of Starsky's hair and scalp under his moving fingertips, the tastes of his mouth and lips and cheek and neck, and when Hutch blinked and looked, the long curve bobbed as Starsky swallowed, lashes dark against his sun-tanned cheeks just brushed with red.

Hutch placed tiny, teasing kisses on the pulsing artery, sucking but keeping the contact short, and Starsky made a quiet sound and moved toward the headboard to get the softer skin of his lower throat into the way. Hutch obliged, and then lapped the spot just above his lover's collarbone, and Starsky hummed again. A slow, sweet night, it looked like.

Starsky moved his hands on Hutch's head, combing through his hair, carding and tangling it. Hutch was glad he hadn't had it cut, though he'd meant to. The fingers closed and tugged a little. Starsky raised his head, looked Hutch in the eyes, then came down, taking his mouth, the slow rhythms of jaw and tongue and lips pulling Hutch to and fro like waves. Starsky's hand, too, swept up to Hutch's shoulder and down the spine, up and down, pressing flat and dragging slowly while the other hand still held and kneaded his head. Hutch's leg slid between Starsky's, which twined around it, rubbing too. Hutch pulled the sturdy torso even closer, squirmed to feel their cocks rub together, grow together, moisten each other.

He arched his neck and pulled in a deeper breath, and another because Starsky was kissing his throat now, rolling him onto his back and lying on him, hands moving up and down both Hutch's sides, reaching lower, one hand skimming over his thigh and the other cupping the stump. Rubbing it gently. Hutch's cock was held between their stomachs and Starsky's hung next to Hutch's leg, brushing farther along the thigh as Starsky moved to suck on Hutch's nipples.

That felt good, but pleased Starsky more to do than Hutch to have it done, and after a little while Hutch rubbed his lover's cheek to get his attention, stretching his other arm to the bedside table and the tin of Vaseline. "You?" he asked.

"Yes," Starsky said, "yes," rising, pulling the lid off but not taking the tin. He knelt straddling Hutch, flipped the lid toward the table, and took his own buttocks in both hands to separate them. Hutch scooped out some of the greasy ointment, put the tin in the corner of Starsky's leg and his own side, and reached under to play around, moisten, stretch, fondle the opening while he took the eager cock that bobbed in front of his face firmly in the other hand. Starsky rocked back onto one hand and forward into the other, swivelled and twisted, threw his head back.

"Yes, dance for me," Hutch said.

"*Angel*," Starsky said, and he sat down on Hutch's hand, not entirely on purpose. He got up again, both of them grinning and Hutch scrambling underneath to position his cock, and Starsky sat again, slowly, groaning, holding the stump that Hutch pushed against him, gripping and releasing each inch of cock as he took it. Then pushed up and sat down again, and now the moan came from Hutch, who pressed into him as much as he could, then sagged as Starsky raised himself again.

It would be perfect, Hutch thought, if only he could suck Starsky at the same time, but such contortions were beyond him. Instead he fumbled for the Vaseline again and used both hands, spreading grease back and forth the length of Starsky's cock, twisting round a little and squeezing a little, swirling around the head and finding the sweetest spots. "So good," Starsky told him, moving faster.

Hutch let go with one hand, moved it to finger, then press, then rotate the balls in their fuzzy sac, feeling them contract and roil, and at the last moment rocked up, holding tighter, pushing down with his leg and up with his stump to hold Starsky in place, tilting the stiff cock upright and mouthing whatever skin he could reach, hair and scar and nipple as Starsky let his orgasm go.

Hutch fell back and Starsky fell with him, making a sound midway between laughter and speech, his muscles still contracting and forcing Hutch's mouth open in a silent cry. Starsky grabbed the headboard and thumped it against the wall, said "Yes, come on, come on," in Hutch's ear, and licked—that did it for Hutch, a drop like a change of air-pressure while flying, and another, and again.

Starsky closed Hutch's mouth with a kiss, holding on with all four limbs. Hutch slid his hands up from waist to hair and gripped, back to kissing as if they could start all over again, though he knew what would really happen now was a slow drift into lassitude and sleep.

And *later* they'd start again.

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But Hutch dreamed.

He was back in the village where his plane had crashed, but his leg was already gone. He was on crutches, and he had been swinging himself awkwardly through ruins for hours, it seemed, without ever reaching the road.

He had to find... he knew it was someone, and he knew he'd done this before without ever finding... whoever it was.

His leg hurt. Gone, but it hurt anyway, and blood gushed out of him. He twisted his head around, rocking dangerously, to see the trail he was leaving.

He was in No-Man's-Land; he was climbing a hill; the hill was made of rubble and he saw corpses buried there. A hand was hanging out of a gap between two stones, livid, dead, with Nick's medal cupped in it. Hutch remembered he had promised to keep the medal safe, so he reached for it—fumbled and dropped it, and it slipped farther away the more he pursued it, rolled down the hill. As he looked down after it, nearly weeping in frustration, he could see the poppies and the crosses, emblems of the harvest of blood these fields had borne.

There wasn't a hill. He had no crutch. He crawled from one of the white crosses to another, searching for Nick's name. For Starsky's. He began to cry, deep wrenching sobs, and the movement woke him although his blinking eyes were dry.

It was very dark, the middle of the night. Starsky was muttering and moving his head, dreaming too. Hutch's leg, the one that was not there, ached—and at the same time he felt Starsky's body pressing tight where the leg would have been, filling the space. The double sensation was stranger than his dream.

He tightened his arms around Starsky, kissed the damp neck and inside the nearest ear. "Da-avid," he whispered, rocking a little. "David my only love."

"Ut-th," Starsky muttered, three parts asleep.

"Yes," Hutch breathed, tucked his face in behind Starsky's head, and slept again until the sun woke him, woke them both. And then they made love.

*Love is the divinity who creates peace among men  
and calm upon the sea, the windless silence of storms,  
repose and sleep in sadness.*

*Love sings to all things which live and are,  
soothing the troubled thoughts of gods and men.*

*—Plato, Symposium*