Summary: Witches tag story: Now for that vacation. Sequel to "A Real Break."

For Barb.


Categories: Gen

Genre: Action/Adventure, Episode Related, Zinefic

Warnings: No Warnings Needed

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Going Fishing

by K Hanna Korossy

"So, Hank offered us his truck without you even asking?"

Starsky's chin was resting on one crooked arm propped against the window as he watched the scenery go by, and he hid a smile behind his fingers. "Well, he mighta heard we were goin' out for the weekend again."

He could sense Hutch's wry expression, the raised eyebrow. "That's very perceptive of him, considering I didn't know about it until yesterday afternoon."

Starsky's smile grew into a grin. "Department grapevine," he said succinctly.

"Ah. Same goes for Jim loaning us his gear, I guess."

"You're catchin' on fast, Blondie."

Hutch snorted, but he was smiling, too.

It was too nice a day not to smile. The city tended to make you forget days like this existed, hiding them behind smog and dirt and the build-up of people's inhumanity, which was why Starsky supposed Hutch liked to go out into the green stuff sometimes, to remind himself what else was still out there, untouched, full of promise. Him, he liked to lose himself in other escapes: books and movies, a beautiful lady, a bag of cheese curls. A simple man, Hutch had called him once, and he'd meant it as a gibe, but there was truth to it. It didn't take much to revive
Starsky's spirit. His complicated partner, however, seemed to require great quantities of green stuff. And so here they were.

Not that he usually accompanied Hutch on these back-to-nature kicks. No, sir, partner togetherness only went so far. Starsky was perfectly happy to drop his friend off at the edge of some nature trail and promise to be back for him in two days, while he himself returned to the smog he knew. But that had been before their recent trip to Pine Lake, Hutch's attempt at indoctrinating his partner to the "joys" of roughing it. Only, they'd run into cultists and a human sacrifice and a little more of a threat than your average wild grizzly or -- Starsky shuddered -- rattlesnake.

"You cold?" His ever-attentive partner had caught the minute tremor and held out his own extra jacket in his free hand.

Starsky smiled again, pure fondness this time. "'M okay."

So here he was, looking after Hutch, not about to let him go alone into the woods after what had happened last time and, meanwhile, his partner was yet again looking out for him.

Dealing with the wild cold yonder seemed like an awfully small price to pay.

The city around them had given way to suburbs, then stretches of road lined only with trees and the rare house tucked between them. Not too many houses survived in those parts, between the mudslides and the occasional fires, but a few persevered. Starsky knew how they felt. You bloomed where you were planted because you didn't know any other way, such as a New Yorker like him settling in La-La-Land where his mother had planted him. The rewards, he glanced at his partner, could be well worth the risks.

Hutch glanced at the scrawled directions in his hand -- some campsite a guy down in Vice had told him about -- and made a hard right onto one of the most pitted roads Starsky had had the misfortune of riding on.

"You sure we're going to the right place?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes, Starsky, I'm sure," his partner answered with exaggerated patience. The answer meant nothing at all -- Hutch would insist they weren't lost right up until he reached the Atlantic Ocean -- but the tone shut Starsky up. Hutch tended to grouse about Starsky's lack of enthusiasm, or trust, or manners, or whatever drifted through that blond head of his whenever he was in a good mood, but there had been a suspicious lack of lecturing so far. Which meant Starsky was on his good behavior. One wrong word, one small push too far, and Hutch would turn the truck around, and then so much for the weekend away he really needed. What fun was fussing if the other person took you seriously?

Okay, so he'd been wrong: the next road was even worse than the one they'd been on, but at least it was heading into the trees now. Maybe they would reach the place before Starsky's teeth bounced right out of his mouth.
Could a bad mood go on for weeks? It seemed like ever since Anna the ballet dancer had returned to Russia, Hutch had been cranky. He missed the lady, Starsky got that, maybe even more than Hutch realized. But it wasn't just that. Maybe he was tired of losing people he loved, or maybe Anna's world had given him a glance at how different a life he could have led. Or maybe it was just that dealing with scum was a lot harder after you'd had a taste of beauty. Starsky had turned it over until it made his head hurt, but the bottom line was that Hutch was unhappy, verging on worn out. Hence Starsky's caving in on the trip up to Pine Lake. But that hadn't proved to be much of a rest, either. And so . . .

"Here we are," Hutch announced happily as the truck jolted to a halt. Ahead of them, the dirt road narrowed into a footpath -- or at least what Starsky figured was supposed to be a footpath, although that seemed highly complimentary -- and disappeared among the trees.

He squinted at it, suddenly not so sure about this brilliant plan of his. "This is it?" he asked dubiously.

"What did you expect, that we'd drive all the way?" Hutch asked, then blinked at Starsky's look. "Starsk, it's called 'getting away from it all.' If we could drive there, it wouldn't be very away, would it?"

Starsky grimaced. "I just didn't expect it t' be so . . . green."

Hutch smiled at him. "Camping usually involves green, buddy."

The good mood was hard to resist. Starsky uncurled a little. "So we have to carry our stuff the rest of the way? How far is it?"

Hutch was already climbing out of the truck. "Oh, not far -- about two or three miles. We can hike it." He paused, twisting to look back at Starsky. "It'll be fun."

"Fun," Starsky muttered under his breath. "I've had fun and this ain't it."

"What was that?" Hutch called.

"Nothin', nothin'."

His partner stopped as they each reached the opposite side of the truck bed, and gave him a serious look over the top of their gear. "Starsky, you don't have to do this if you don't want to. You can come back for me Sunday afternoon -- I'll be fine."

It was tempting, and there were few things Starsky would have liked better. But one of those things was seeing Hutch unwind out in that godforsaken jungle, and so he managed a weak grin. "You're just scared I'll catch more fish than you, like last time."

"Hey, that was beginner's luck." Hutch waved his finger at him.
And Starsky felt his misgivings slide away. Two days with this guy who'd scolded hitmen and cult leaders with that menacing finger if they dared threaten Starsky, away from all those threats and distractions, just enjoying each other's company. What was he complaining about?

They sorted out the gear, and Starsky noticed the bulk of the heavier pieces went into Hutch's pack, but he didn't say a word. Let the blond do his protective bit; it wouldn't help either of them if Starsky developed sore shoulders from carrying weight he wasn't used to. But he saw and knew and appreciated it.

And they set off.

It really was a nice day. The sky was a remarkable shade of blue Starsky had rarely seen, sort of a deep azure where patches showed through the treetops. The trees were unlike any in the city, tall and deep green and swaying with the breeze, while little animals he didn't want to think about chattered and rustled in their branches. Yeah, he missed the comfort of familiar city blocks and the background noise of car engines and construction and voices, but this . . . this had its place. It wasn't quiet, but the different kinds of sounds and the splashes of shade and light were *kinda* soothing.

Hutch was back to doing the silent thing, the only jarring note in the place, and Starsky finally hefted his pack and jogged a few steps ahead, to walk abreast his partner instead of trailing behind. Then he glanced around and, finding a good candidate, pointed.

"Hey, those mushrooms poisonous?"

Hutch immediately slowed to take a look, and nodded. "Yup. Most of them in this area are."

"Too bad. Mushroom sauce woulda been good on those trout I'm gonna catch."

Hutch's eyebrow rose. "*You're* gonna catch? I'm starting to worry about your lack of self-confidence, Starsky."

He just grinned, paused a beat, then pointed again. "What're those?"

"Moss colonies. You can use them to find direction -- they usually grow on the north sides of trees."

Starsky frowned. "How do they know which side is north?"

The answer was expectedly dry. "Because, unlike you, they don't need street signs to know which direction's which."

"Oh." A different sound filtered through from the other forest noises, and Starsky cocked his head. "What's that?"

Hutch was listening, too, and the corner of his mouth turned up. "That's a chipmunk scolding us. We probably invaded his territory."
"Huh." Starsky glanced around but couldn't see the rodent, which was just as well. Anything that size with fur was just another rat to him.

Hutch suddenly put out a hand, pulling Starsky to one side, away from his edge of the trail, and at Starsky's questioning glance, simply said, "Poison oak."

Starsky gave the plant an even wider berth, trying to commit its appearance to memory. "That like poison ivy?"

"Same family, and they cause a similar rash, but--" And Hutch was off and running.

Starsky finally relaxed, only half-listening but enjoying what he heard.

Much better.

The hike only lasted an hour or so, just long enough for Starsky to start getting weary of the weight of the pack on his shoulders. It was then the path they were on turned to run alongside the stream he'd been hearing for the last ten minutes, and a hundred feet or so farther, Hutch announced they were stopping there.

Hutch wiggled out of his pack and helped Starsky shrug out of his. Then he set to work while Starsky stood uncertainly by, watching. "Where're we gonna stay?"

Hutch flexed an eyebrow at him. "Right where you're standing."

Starsky's nose wrinkled. "You mean we're gonna sleep on the ground?"

His partner laughed at him. "Well, sure, dummy. Where did you think we'd sleep?"

"Cabin?" Starsky ventured hopefully. His face fell at Hutch's expression. "Look, uh, maybe I should go back, stay in the truck? You know, keep an eye on it?" He pointed back the trail toward the truck . . . or where he thought the truck was, anyway.

Hutch pulled a roll of canvas out of his pack and unfolded it, smoothing it out on the ground. "You're not gonna sleep in the truck, Starsky."

"It'll be just like a stakeout."

"Forget it, pal. You're stuck here now. Your idea, remember?" He gave Starsky a pointed look.

Oh. Right. Starsky dropped the doubtful expression and adopted a melodramatically pained one. He could do this. "Yeah. Okay. Fine. Uh, you want some help with that?"

"Sure. Hand me the stakes, wouldya?"

Starsky went through his partner's pack, twice. "I don't see any. I thought we were gonna catch our food while we're here?"
Hutch paused, then stared at him. "Starsky, I need the tent stakes, the pointy metal things that anchor the tent? Not beefsteaks."

"Oh, right." He felt a blush creep up his cheeks and bent over the pack again, this time with success. "These?"

"Right." Hutch gave him another look, which Starsky returned with a sheepish shrug, before bending over his work again.

The tent actually wasn't a bad affair, easily big enough for two, and, Hutch assured him, water- and animal-proof. Starsky was skeptical about it holding up against a bear, but there weren't supposed to be bears in that area . . . so they said. He'd brought along his Smith & Wesson this time, though, just in case.

The raising of their home-away-from-home brought to mind another domestic need, and Starsky glanced this way and that before venturing to ask.

"Hey, where's the can?"

Hutch didn't even look at him, struggling with the last ties of the tent. "Any tree that looks good, buddy."

Tree? No one had mentioned that. Starsky stared at his partner with growing unease. "You mean you just pick some place and go?"

"Well, not too close to the campsite."

"What about toilet paper?"

"Leaves." Hutch stood, brushing his hands and knees off and then turning to look at him. "Just be careful you don't use poison oak."

"You're kiddin'."

"Nope." But then he relented, or maybe realized just how uncomfortable Starsky was. "Not about the tree, anyway, but I did bring along some camping toilet paper. You just bury it when you're done. And I'll go with you and we'll find a good place, okay?"

That was small comfort, but Starsky took it. He couldn't help ask, however, "You do this every time you go camping?"

"You get used to it," came the non-comforting response.

"You get used to it," Starsky muttered. But he went.

Fifteen minutes later, the bathroom established, the tent set up, and the necessities for a campfire laid out, Hutch turned to unpacking the fishing gear. "How 'bout whoever catches the most fish doesn't have to clean up after dinner?"
Starsky, for his part, was laying out the other necessities he'd stuffed into the bottom of his pack: a stick of salami, a bag of Oreos, and one precious can of beer for emergencies. "Naw, I think I'll pass tonight."

Hutch looked up at him, surprised. "What happened to beginner's luck?"

"I'm savin' it up for later."

His partner still wasn't moving. "If you don't feel like fishing, we can--"

"Hey." Starsky held up his hand. "I'm okay. You go fish. I just don't feel like it right now. I wanna take it easy."

Hutch was frowning now. "Is your back bothering you? Did the pack--?"

He was a good one to talk about an aching back. Starsky knew his partner's had been bothering him lately. He smiled now, soft and honest, unable to be irritated by the concern of his friend, even if it was excessive. "Hutch, I'm fine. Go have your fun. I just wanna hang out, honest."

And Hutch got it, reddening slightly in that endearing kind of embarrassment he showed when he got caught with his emotions hanging out. "You're just afraid I'm gonna show you up," he said, but softly, not the usual teasing challenge they threw at each other.

"Just givin' you a head start," Starsky answered in kind.

The moment held briefly, then broke, and they went back to their unpacking. But that was what he'd come for, Starsky reflected with a private smile.

It certainly hadn't been for the facilities.

The evening passed with the kind of languor Starsky hadn't often experienced without a television. Hutch had taken his time setting up on the creek bank not too far from the campsite, laying out his gear with an intensity than privately amused Starsky. That was his partner: serious and organized, even about his fun.

As for himself, the hike and all the fresh air had worn Starsky out. The Zane Grey he'd stuffed in his pack quickly lost his interest, and he found himself wandering down to the creek to check out what his partner was doing.

"How's it going?" he asked the fisherman amiably.

"Just be patient, Starsky. Ninety percent of fishing is about patience," came the slightly testy response.

He held up his hands placatingly, then settled onto the grassy bank next to his partner, watching the water flash and sparkle as it caught the sun. It was kind of hypnotic, and eventually he leaned back, resting his head on his interlocked hands and peering first at the water, then the patterns of
leaves and sky above. The sun had started its downward curve, and the azure sky had darkened to a soft amethyst. They might even be able to see some stars from there, despite the trees, unlike in the city with the cloak of smog and the pollution of light.

Funny, he'd never thought of light as pollution before.

Starsky sighed deeply, his soul utterly still for the first time he could remember.

"Starsk?"

He jerked, then shot upright, the darkness and unfamiliar feel of the place disorienting. Heart pounding, he reached for his gun.

"It's me." A hand, gentle but unyielding, braced his shoulder, the other checking his hand. "It's me."

The "me" was as potent as any name would have been, and Starsky relaxed, a moment later realizing where he was. Creek bank, out in the wilderness -- Hutch.

"You fell asleep." His partner's dim outline was starting to gain features as Starsky's eyes got used to the near darkness. "Dinner's on."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Maybe Hutch wasn't the only one who'd needed a break. "Okay," he said hoarsely. "Just surprised me." He took the hand that had restrained him and was now being offered to him instead, and let himself be pulled to his feet.

"Sorry."

"Well, it woulda been better if you'd been Farrah Fawcett. . . ."

"Sorry," Hutch said in a whole other tone, turning away to climb the few steps up the bank to the campsite.

Apparently, he'd been asleep quite a while; not only had darkness set, but Hutch had started the fire, which blazed merrily away now, a pot bubbling on it.

"Fish?" Starsky asked doubtfully. Stew maybe? It looked kinda funny for that. . . .

"Mac and cheese. The fish weren't biting today." Hutch suddenly was very busy with the supplies, setting out dishes and mugs.

Starsky grinned at his partner's back, then at the pot. "S okay. I love mac and cheese."

"I know." Hutch didn't as much, always complaining about all the artificial stuff in it, but even though he'd probably packed it for Starsky's sake, he ladled generous portions for both of them onto the two tin plates.
Starsky took his and settled cross-legged in front of the fire, Hutch joining him a moment later. The food was unexpectedly good, warm and filling and with a tang of wood fire Starsky liked. "I think you should do all the cooking," he said around a full mouth of noodles and gooey sauce.

Hutch made a face at him, waiting until he'd chewed his own mouthful before answering. "Oh, were you planning to make something, Davy Crockett?"

Actually, he didn't know the first thing about cooking over a fire, but Starsky shrugged gamely. "How hard can boilin' a trout be?"

Hutch's bite caught in his throat, and there was some back-pounding and drinking -- cold creek water, Starsky found -- before he could answer. "Don't strain yourself. I'll cook."

Starsky smiled and went back to eating.

Another few mouthfuls went down easy before he spoke again.

"How long was I out?"

"Does it matter?"

He pondered the unexpected answer. "Guess not," he admitted.

"That's why I like it here, Starsk."

There was a wistfulness in his partner's voice that caught his attention, and Starsky contemplated it as he cleaned his plate, then rose to get seconds. He silently took and refilled Hutch's plate, too, then sat again beside him, and they ate in the familiar full silence of old friendship.

Washing up was easy enough to do with the creek nearby, and no leftovers remained to tempt any animal, large or small, Starsky saw to that. As a finale, Hutch fixed them each a cup of hot chocolate -- marshmallows in Starsky's -- and they sat back to watch the fire and sip.

Starsky eyed his partner over the edge of his mug, knowing Hutch knew it and was waiting for him to take the lead if he had something on his mind.

He did. "Hey."

"Hmm?"

"What would you wanna be if you weren't a cop?"

For a long minute there was only the sound of the fire popping and the forest life.

"You still there?" Starsky asked pleasantly, finally.

"I'm thinking." Another few beats. "You know I started medical school."

"And met Vanessa, yeah." Starsky cringed. He'd forgotten old lovers weren't invited on this trip.
But there was only a slight hesitation before Hutch continued. "I think I would've made a good doctor."

"I know you woulda made a good doctor. But what did you want to be?"

From Hutch's expression, it didn't seem to be an easy question. "Probably a farmer," he finally said.

Starsky blinked. Not what he'd expected, but once he thought about it a moment, it made sense. "Like your grandfather," he nodded.

Hutch nodded more slowly, thoughtfully. "He wouldn't've been anything else; the land was in his blood. I think he hoped I'd take it over someday, but I didn't want to be tied down then, and when Mom and Dad offered med school. . ."

"So instead you got tied down in LA."

Hutch took a sip from his mug. "Sometimes it feels that way," he said quietly. "But I would do it again if I had the choice." He looked at Starsky.

And there was no doubt in Starsky's mind why he felt that way. His own time had never felt wasted when he was with Hutch, no hardship of the job -- and there had been many of them -- bad enough that it was not outweighed by the gift and strength of their friendship.

Sometimes he wished he could have had that and a saner life too: being partners in running a business, maybe, or firefighting, something else. Not because he didn't love the job, because he did and always had and probably always would. But Hutch never had felt as strongly about it as he did, and was more sensitive to the darkness of what they did. It ate at him in a way it didn't at Starsky, and that, in turn, ate at Starsky. So, yeah, it would have been good to be partners in a different game.

Only, it wouldn't have worked, and he knew it. It was the kidnappings and the shootings and the life-and-death situations that had shown him the depths of his partner and the true value of the man, and made him care about -- no, love -- him like Starsky never had anyone before. Without that trial by fire, would he ever have seen past the Midwest rich-kid exterior? To his shame, maybe not.

But now he had, and the bond had been forged, each crisis making it stronger. They knew what they had now, and fought harder to keep that than they did against any evil in the city. They could leave now with that bond in place if they wanted to.

And yet they didn't. The weight was heavy, his partner's back sometimes bowed with it, although Starsky shared the load as best he could. And sometimes, like that afternoon, saw it shed completely. But as for the future . . . he didn't know. Hutch didn't, either; Starsky was certain of that. Maybe they would reach that point where they couldn't stay. Maybe age and experience would make it more bearable and the burden would lift. But as long as they were on the job, as long as this man was by his side, Starsky would help carry the weight, and knew the favor would always be returned.
A lonely frog began to croak somewhere downstream, and soon another joined it in chorus.

"Stars are out," Hutch observed softly.

Starsky tilted his head back. So they were. "You know anything about constellations?" he asked, not to get his companion talking this time, just out of simple interest.


The name Simon Marcus had called Starsky when the cultist had kidnapped him. Starsky knew where his partner's mind had just jumped to, and he gently admonished, "Hutch."

A pause, then a hand, trembling once, squeezed his shoulder.

They sat and drank in the silence that, like the ever-active forest around them, was never completely quiet.

When they climbed into the tent soon after, Starsky tried to think about the conversation -- and not about the hard ground beneath his sleeping bag -- but soon fell asleep despite both to the sound of Hutch's soft breathing next to him.

There was, at least, no window on the tent, and it was to bright sunshine that Starsky finally crawled out into the next morning, squinting as he rubbed his eyes. His back hurt from carrying the pack, the rest of him from sleeping on the ground, and he was stiff with cold. Why had he come to this no man's land again?

His partner was nowhere in sight, but the fishing pole that had sat next to the dormant campfire was gone, as was Hutch's small tackle box. Starsky's, however, sat waiting next to his side of the tent, along with his mug. And he was guessing that was coffee in the small pot that sat in the campfire ashes.

Yes, thank God. He closed his eyes through the first cup, then finally squinted them open to study the alien world around him while the second cup woke him completely.

It looked fresher by the morning light, greener somehow. The sky was the light blue shade of his partner's eyes, and wisps of clouds passed by, looking close enough to catch on the branches of the trees. Starsky's crankiness reluctantly faded. It was a beautiful morning, there was no denying it. Now, if he had a bathroom, he would've even been willing to give up his grudge against the great outdoors.

But no bathroom, unfortunately, and so Starsky awkwardly tramped out to relieve himself in the vegetation, then gathered his kit and wandered down to the creek to wash up.

Hutch glanced up at him as he came down the small incline to the water line, giving him a bright smile. "If it isn't Rip Van Winkle!"
"Go jump in the lake," Starsky muttered without heat, and slowly got down on sore knees to reach the water. At least he'd made sure he was downstream.

"Looks like someone got up on the wrong side of the sleeping bag this morning." Hutch was obviously feeling brave that day.

Starsky glowered at him. "There is no right side of the sleeping bag. There's only the rocky and the chilly side."

"Aw, c'mon, you telling me you're not enjoying a beautiful morning like this? Smell that fresh air!" Hutch took a deep breath, as if Starsky needed a demonstration.

It was only with long years of practice at staying dour in the face of his aggressively morning-person partner that Starsky maintained his scowl, but he did pleasantly tell Hutch what he could do with himself after he jumped in the lake. A chuckle was the only response he got, but it lifted his own spirits, too. When had he last heard Hutch laugh? Probably when Anna had been there.

Starsky dunked his face in the cold stream water, shaking it off like a dog, then roughly brushed his teeth. Shaving wasn't a requirement this trip, at least, and soon he was dressed and feeling more or less human again.

And ready to wipe that smirk off his partner's face. "You catch anything yet?" he asked sweetly.

Hutch appeared an hour later, looking wary. "You ready for lunch?"

"Anytime." Starsky held up his string: four gleaming, fat fish. "Your treat or mine?"

"I'll cook," was the terse response, answer enough. Starsky, at least, didn't let Hutch see him smile.
Lunch rivaled anything he'd ever had at the Taco Stand or the Dog Pound or any of his other favorite haunts. Fried fish -- he'd have to remember that one, because surely boiled couldn't taste as good as this crispy, flaky feast. And Starsky was also enjoying Hutch's stew aplenty.

"Why don't we switch places?" Hutch offered after clean-up, his nonchalance not fooling Starsky for a moment.

"Why?" he asked innocently.

"Well . . . you should try out different spots, get a feel for fishing in different environments."

"Oh. Okay." Maybe he should have fought it, but . . . this was Hutch's trip, too, after all. Starsky collected his gear and traded places with his now-smiling partner. If it was that important to Hutch, the location didn't matter much, right?

Apparently not. Starsky started catching fish almost as soon as he sat down, three more already within the first hour.

As the sun climbed and the shadows grew longer, Hutch reappeared from around the bend and without a word settled next to Starsky and they fished in silence together. And when Starsky got another bite, he let Hutch show him how to reel it in -- almost but not quite losing it in the process -- and unhook it.

The afternoon was warm and drowsy, and Starsky eventually lost interest in the fish, lying back on the river bank as he had the day before, listening to Hutch hum snatches of songs under his breath. It was too bad they hadn't been able to bring the blond's guitar along, because they could have had a great sing-along around the campfire at night, but it would have been too much to carry. Instead, Starsky drowsed and listened to the private a cappella concert, and thought maybe this wasn't so bad, after all.

"So you've never been camping before?" came Hutch's voice from beside him, pitched low as if not wanting to break Starsky's spell.

He stirred, having to remind himself how to talk. "I went a couple'a times back in New York, up in the mountains around the city with the Scouts. One time my dad even came along."

"I didn't know you were a Boy Scout."

His mouth tweaked with the memory. "Just for a year. We didn't have enough money before then, and then Pop was killed. . . ."

A long silence. Insects were starting their early twilight song around them, and it actually sounded sort of pleasant. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yeah. You know kids and runnin' around in the wild. But I grew out of it."

Hutch snorted. "Starsky, you never grew out of comic books or cartoons."
True. Starsky shrugged at the sky. "That's different."

Hutch's tone changed. "You never did any of those with your dad."

He didn't answer, didn't need to, but Hutch knew that, too. To those blue eyes alone, there were no secret places left inside Starsky. The rest was just details.

"My grandfather took me fishing every summer. Taught me everything I know."

Starsky had figured as much but was still interested, turning his head slightly to look at the figure next to him. "Yeah?"

"Yup. He said if a man knows how to fish, he knows how to live."

Hutch's grandfather wasn't known for his clarity. "I guess you missed the lesson on patience."

Starsky couldn't help grin. "I've put up with you for almost ten years now, haven't I?"

"Yeah..." And he'd needed a lot of putting up with sometimes. Hadn't it only been a few months ago he'd been mooning over Rosey's departure, moping along like a kid with a crush? Hutch hadn't even called him on it, just listened and tolerated and accepted it until Starsky was ready to move on.

But a year before when... when he'd lost Terry and his heart had been torn out of his chest, it hadn't been tolerating then. Hutch had coddled and carried him, as tender as Starsky was raw, when the worst of the hurt hammered him down. Only after, when he'd started timidly back into the stream of life again, had Starsky realized just how much his partner had shared and made bearable his grief. And as he looked up at the back of the blond head next to him, all Starsky could feel was a deep, warm love.

He fell asleep, and never felt the hard ground beneath him.

"You wanna play some chess?" Hutch pulled the little travel set out of his pack and held it up.

Starsky looked up from the plate he'd just cleaned off, stifling a burp. They'd had fried fish again for dinner, but it tasted as good as before and now he was stuffed. Playing a game sounded perfect as an encore, but Starsky's fishing beginner's luck seemed to extend to chess, and Hutch's ego had taken enough blows for one day. "How 'bout cards?"

"I didn't bring a deck, just-- Oh." The protest died as Starsky pulled a deck from his own pack. "Okay."

"Crazy eights?" Starsky started dealing.

"Sure you can handle that?" Hutch asked, grinning.
"Winner each round gets an Oreo," he held up the other retrieved item from his pack. And grinned at Hutch's pained expression.

"I thought prizes were supposed to be incentive, Starsky."

"Shut up and play, Blondie."

Luck had switched sides during dinner, because Hutch won most of the games, six to three. Fortunately, he didn't want the Oreos, so Starsky ended up happy, too.

They finally sat back to watch the fire while Starsky teased bits of cookie out from between his teeth.

"I got a postcard from Anna the other day," Hutch suddenly spoke up.

Starsky's eyebrows rose. That was unexpected. "Yeah? She back in Russia yet?"

"It's the Soviet Union now, Starsk, but no, she isn't. She's in Philadelphia, still on tour." He stirred. "Actually, she wants me to go out and visit her before they have to go back home."

Starsky watched the flames of the fire dance. "You could if you wanted to. You've still got some days coming. . . ."

But Hutch was shaking his head. "No. It's over. Going out there would just drag it out. It wouldn't do either of us any good."

"But ya miss her," Starsky said carefully.

Hutch's smile was bittersweet. "I miss a lot of things, buddy."

The frog chorus was going again, this time a whole choir full. Starsky listened to them with half-an-ear, not knowing what to say.

Hutch eventually glanced up at him. "I had a lot of time to think in the hospital when I was sick, Starsk."

Sick. He meant dying, actually, from the plague. Starsky probably remembered it better than he did; Hutch had been delirious through a good part of his stay, hovering near the edge of death for three eternal days before the serum finally pulled him back. The lump in Starsky's throat made him hoarse. "Yeah?"

Hutch was fiddling with his cup, turning it over in his hands as if trying to memorize its feel. "I know . . . I know sometimes you've got a lot to put up with me, too, partner, and I don't make it easy for you."

. . . lying there in the hospital bed, feverish skin and bones. . .
"But I don't think I'd be happier anywhere else, Starsk. This is just . . . this is just me. I don't think it would've been that different if I'd been a farmer, I'd just be doing it alone. And, yeah, the job makes it harder sometimes, but sometimes it makes it easier, too, because it reminds me. . ."

. . . clinging to each other in a back alley. . .

. . . the smile on young Lisa's face. . .

. . . catching him when he fell. . .

. . . the kittens named after them. . .

. . . crying together in the middle of the night. . .

"Yeah," Starsky said with feeling.

Hutch's eyes reflected the fire as they looked up at him, and in them, Starsky saw that same well of affection that had hit him earlier in the day. There had never been any doubt in his mind it was mutual, but the candidness and depth of that love still amazed him.

He pulled his gaze away first, humbled, and went back to staring into the campfire, feeling Hutch's gaze soften in comprehension before he did the same.

It was a long time before either of them stirred, and then it was only for muted good-nights before they turned in.

Starsky listened to his partner lying and thinking next to him, until he drifted off into dream-filled sleep.

The trill of a bird near the tent, followed by the flutter as it flew off, were the first things Starsky was aware of the next morning. The next were the muted snores of his partner in the snug tent.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, bleary eyed, to stare in disbelief. Him, waking up before Hutch? It had to be a sign of the Apocalypse or something.

But it was in sleep, ironically, that he saw how really exhausted his friend looked: the pits around his eyes, the lines of his face, the utter stillness of badly needed sleep. Maybe it wasn't just the job that did that to him, but it sometimes kept him from the recharging he needed. Sleeping in now was probably a good sign, an indication Hutch was relaxing, laying a few ghosts to rest, maybe even figuring some things out, and he needed more of it and the great outdoors. Starsky shook his head and eased himself up quietly. He'd have to start learning more about camping, because it seemed they'd be going out more often from now on. Might as well start now.

Besides, it was their last day out there. Starsky softly unzipped the tent flap, crept out, and climbed to his feet, glancing over the fishing equipment that lay nearby as he stretched. Maybe
he could catch them some fish to take home for eating that night, or sharing with the Dobey's, maybe freezing some for later boiling.

Fifteen minutes later, salami and fishing gear in hand, Starsky walked down to the creek.

Six beauties, three of them at least six-pounders, bobbed on a string in the flowing creek water before his tousle-headed partner made his appearance.

"Mornin'," Starsky said with a smile.

"Just barely. You shouldn't've let me sleep so long," Hutch complained, bending down to splash some water on his face. He sniffed at his shirt, the one he'd worn the day before, and made a face but didn't go back for another, and Starsky's smile widened.

"Why?" it was his turn to ask.

It seemed to take Hutch by surprise, and after a few seconds of trying to come up with an answer, shrugged.

"You wanna get your gear, do some fishing 'fore we have to go back?"

"I think you've caught all the fish in the stream, Starsky. Actually, I was thinking of taking a little hike."

Starsky reeled in his line. "Sounds good. Mind if I join ya?"

Hutch stared at him a long moment before shaking his head and turning away. That'd be a "no."

The trail they'd taken to the campsite continued winding its way along the creek for some time, then began to turn away and slowly climb. They followed it at a leisurely pace, Hutch stopping him once to point out a doe drinking at the now-distant stream, indicating and explaining other flora and fauna as they went. Forget farmer -- the blond probably would have made a good park ranger, Starsky couldn't help think as he listened patiently to the differences between wildflowers and cultivated ones. He didn't really care and couldn't have repeated much of it later, but that didn't matter. That was just one of the ways he and Hutch fit together.

The trail grew steeper, and Starsky soon had to put all his attention to just watching his feet. A backslide wouldn't have been life-threatening along the wooded path, but it might be painful, and so he studiously followed his partner, complaining about exercising while on vacation, and listening with a smile to Hutch's expected retorts.

And then they reached the ledge.

Hutch must have known it was there, because he stopped at once and stepped to the side so Starsky could join him on the grassy outcropping. But even as Starsky tore his gaze away from the scenery to glance at his companion, he saw the same awe in Hutch's face that he himself felt.
The world lay stretched out before them.

Okay, so it wasn't exactly the whole world, and they weren't that high up. But between the driving and their climbing, they'd gained enough elevation that some of the hills of the park sloped in gentle swells below them. Small patches and streaks of blue water shone between the trees that dotted them, and the puffs of clouds cast moving shadows over the grassy inclines.

It was as beautiful as anything Starsky had seen, and that included in the city.

For a long time they stood and stared in silence. Even when Starsky finally spoke, it was with a reverent whisper.

"Makes ya feel kinda small, doesn't it?"

Hutch's mouth slowly curved. "I don't know. I think it makes all that stuff I was worried about feel kinda small, actually. If there's a God who can make something like this—" He only half raised a hand, as if no sweep of the arm could do it justice. "—I think He can probably look after two tired cops, don't you?" Hutch turned to smile, really smile at Starsky.

Starsky's very soul felt as if it were lightening, remnants of a few ghosts of his own loosening their grip and floating away on the breeze. Funny how much easier he could breathe up there.

He looked back at Hutch and grinned, feeling . . . happy.

"Guess so."

But he knew so.

And, more importantly, so did Hutch.

Starsky had brought the beer with him in his nearly empty pack, still chilled from sitting in the stream. It seemed the proper time for a toast. Starsky fished it out and popped it open, fielding Hutch's raised eyebrow with a grin, and tipped it in silent salute to his partner. Then he took a long draught before handing it over.

Hutch solemnly saluted back and then nursed the rest, like he usually did.

Only when the sun started inching downward from the sky did they finally stir themselves, Hutch giving Starsky's stomach a pat before they reluctantly turned away and started back.

Going downhill went a lot faster than going up, and all too soon they were back at the campsite, amidst the lengthening shadows of mid-afternoon. Starsky turned in one spot, taking in the circle of their temporary home, feeling surprisingly wistful as Hutch struck the tent and started packing. He was almost sorry it was time to go back, even if it meant a return to restrooms and no wild animals and city blocks that were hard to get lost in. Some small part of him he'd never noticed before would miss this.
Starsky helped pack the utensils and plates, then rolled up the sleeping bags. He helped Hutch heave his pack into place, then took his turn being helped into his own, heavier now with the fish packed in it. He'd insisted on taking that himself.

They headed back toward the truck without a word, a chipmunk chittering at them as they left. But it wasn't for lack of things to say. There was too much to put into words, in fact, and so they only listened.

And Starsky liked what he was hearing.

They reached the truck still in silence, the forest noises fading behind them, and slung their gear into the back, where Hutch secured it with a rope. And then paused to meet Starsky's gaze over the bed of the truck.

But Starsky was the one who spoke first.

"You know, this camping stuff ain't half bad."

And Hutch laughed.