

**THE ONLY TORINO
IN AZERBAIJAN**



**PEOPLE DON'T
remember pain.
When they look
back, they can
remember how
they reacted to it,
what they said,
how scared they
were, but actually
feeling it again?
Not really possible.
Or so Starsky
had thought.**

IT HAD BEEN PAINFUL for him to watch Hutch fall under the power of a terrifying disease. He wouldn't forget a minute of it, never, and he knew because he'd been trying for over a week. It had actually, physically hurt to witness his suffering, to see his strength and beauty swallowed whole, and be able to do nothing at all to help him. Well, there was that one time, but that was so little. And going after Callendar, but he'd had to leave him alone then, which felt close to betrayal.

Now, even though Hutch no longer fought for every breath, it was damn hard for Starsky to watch him lying there, so wasted by fever and pain that if he hadn't known better, he might have thought—but no. He wasn't going to think about that. Okay, he couldn't fool himself about how dangerously close Hutch had come to a grotesque death, but he wasn't about to let himself get morbid. He hoped that when this was over, Hutch wouldn't be able to remember any of it and maybe then he could forget all of it, too.

Hutch hadn't been really awake enough yet to know he was going to live, and Starsky was determined to be there when he did, to be the one to break the news. For almost a full day after Hutch's condition had really started to stabilize and improve, Starsky was still sitting with him. He often let his fingers move to the pulse at Hutch's wrist; the soft thumping there was the only reassurance he could trust to keep reminding him that Hutch was getting better. Despite the intrusive presence of medical personnel in the room with them, he let his hand slide down over Hutch's, sometimes stroked his hair to loosen the dried tangles, taking as much comfort from such intimacies as he could get. It sure as hell beat the alternative he'd dreaded from the moment Meredith gave them the news that Hutch was infected with the killer disease.

That night, Hutch started to wake up, even though Meredith had said he'd probably be out until morning, which vindicated Starsky's insistence on staying with him. When Meredith himself appeared with a couple of nurses, he expected to be shoved out of the way as he had been before.

This time, though, the doctor pressed a hand on his shoulder, urging him to stay put.

“It’ll help if he sees you’re not worried,” Meredith said, with an actual wink and half a smile.

The sheets rustled as Hutch started to come around. Weird how something like that could sound so loud. As Hutch’s eyelids trembled with the effort to open, Starsky wanted to shake him awake, pull him into a hug and shout that he’d survived. Instead, he held his breath, chewed his lower lip to work off a little tension as he watched the expression on Hutch’s face pass from confusion to fear. When he thought he saw real consciousness in his eyes, the first joy he’d felt in over a week made him squeeze Hutch’s hand a little too hard. He caught himself and tried to be gentler as he moved into Hutch’s limited line of vision.

“Hey, Hutch,” he started out, trying to keep his voice soft and reassuring. “You’re all right now. Hear me, buddy? We did it. Got Callendar. Got you cured. You’re gonna be all right.” It took nearly all the energy he had left to keep from laughing out loud. “You’re okay. Okay?”

Hutch’s eyes widened for a second. He seemed to understand, even tried to talk. His fingers twitched a little. Before Starsky could do any of the things he’d been longing to do when he got Hutch back, Hutch and the moment had faded back to unconsciousness.

It was morning before Hutch woke up again. Despite a bed, courtesy of the hospital administrator who said he’d earned it, along with a hastily packed collection of clean clothes and

toiletries delivered by Huggy, there had been little chance Starsky would take advantage of them to do much recuperation of his own that night, or throughout the days to come. He'd already turned in his report on the Callendar dragnet and he'd been granted indefinite personal leave after that. The only thing personal he needed leave to take care of was Hutch.

As he kept watch through the next day of Hutch's recovery, he thought he saw some color returning to his face, though not enough to get happy about yet. Hutch's features had merely taken on the same expression he'd seen too many times before, like when he slept off a rough shift, or an injury, or some fresh disappointment in love.

There was seldom any privacy for him to tell Hutch out loud all the things that kept going through his head, but even while Hutch slept, he felt an urgent need to keep telling him at least he was all right. He needed to know he was no longer dying, no longer alone. Maybe Starsky needed the reminders, too. They always did that in the movies. *Talk to him. He'll be able to hear you.* Maybe it was true. If the nurses and other hospital people moving in and out of this real-life drama had a problem with that, tough.

So every now and then, he let a thought come out in a quiet voice that Hutch might be able to hear, and ignored whoever might be looking at him funny. *We brought in Callendar. Judith got the cure out of him, just like I said.* "You're going to make it, Hutch." *I promise.* "I promise."

His touch served to amplify words that couldn't possibly convey what he felt, words that only laid out a few basic truths.

You only gotta be sick a little longer, then you're gonna be fine. "I'm here, buddy." Right here. I'm right with you.

He was jacking up some courage to tell Hutch about the most basic truth of them all when he was startled by a small movement behind him. He got up and turned to face Judith Kaufmann. He hadn't heard her come in and he couldn't help showing now that he wished to hell she'd leave. Something about her tired smile got to him. He hoped that showed, too.

Judith tucked the end of a stethoscope inside her lab coat and pushed her fists down into its pockets. "He'll be in some pain when he wakes up this time. If you want to be here then, this would be a good time for you to take a break and eat something."

Starsky turned back toward Hutch.

Judith stepped closer. "He won't hear you. Not for a while yet."

"I know that," Starsky said, a little too quickly. "Sorry. I just, I couldn't stand not touching him before. Hard not to now." He reached toward Hutch's face again, but pulled back. "When I put my hands on that window before, you know? Thought it would feel like a fever. It was cold. He hates bein' cold. Weird, considering where he comes from."

Judith mimed a shiver. "It's cold in *here*, too. Boy, with the money they save on the crummy food in this place, you'd think they could afford some heat."

Starsky knew an attempt to break the ice when he heard it. He cast her an apologetic look. "Welcome to California."

"Mm. Look, Dave, I'll get something decent sent in. I think we could both use a nice Reuben or a burger or something. What do you say?"

“Okay.”

Judith hesitated, then stood right at his side and spoke to him at a level Hutch’s borderline awareness wouldn’t pick up. “I can’t help thinking...technically, we were too late. I’m not complaining, but I really don’t know why he’s still alive.”

Starsky nodded. “I do,” he said, for anyone to hear.

Judith looked up at him, her eyes wide with understanding, and not for the first time since all this had started. He’d try to treat her more gently, if only for Hutch’s sake.

“I’ll have somebody come and get you when the food’s here. I’ll be in the office if you need me.”

With a nod to acknowledge her kindness, Starsky stood still, listening to her footsteps and the click-thunk of the door.

The silence that followed after she left turned up the volume on his own brainwaves. He was so tired that he was starting to imagine things—all the ugly things he’d shoved out of his mind when it was still far too possible that Hutch would die. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, then went back to his chair next to Hutch’s bed. In a few minutes, his awareness had drifted from a kind of open-eyed, sightless half-sleep to a focus so consuming he began to think that if he blinked, Hutch would disappear.

The one time he’d been with him after the plague had kicked in full-force, he’d been angry at Judith for putting so many obstacles in the way of being with Hutch—the damn mask and gloves and everything—and then hovering around when he needed the dignity of time alone with him, for Hutch to overcome his natural pride and stubbornness to tell him how he was really taking it. He’d started to and the flat-out truth had torn

through his heart. And he'd realized it might well be the last time he'd ever have with him, to tell him all the things people want to say to each other before it's too late, but usually don't. Things he could barely tell Hutch when they were drunk, let alone sober, in a dead-quiet room in front of strangers.

He felt some shame now that his outrage had spilled over onto a lot of people who didn't deserve it. Not just Judith. After that one time he'd been allowed in to see Hutch, he'd charged out of the isolation ward determined to haul in Callendar's worthless body and dump it at her feet. On his way through the lab he saw Meredith and all the other wizards looking calmly down into their microscopes like the probability of failure held no horror for them at all. He'd hated their emotional control then, even hated them. He was sure he'd shown it, and yet, they would be the ones who ultimately saved Hutch's life.

Now that his own job was done, his perspective on theirs had broadened. Their motivation might have seemed cold to him then, but they'd fought nonstop to beat the disease. Pretty selfless guys, but no glory for them, unlike the bullshit they were handing out about him on all the TVs and radios they had on all over the hospital, about how he'd saved countless thousands of lives. He knew his motivation had been his love for just one of the victims. Maybe that should have made him feel less honorable, but it didn't.





YOU TAKE THOSE PILLS yet?” Starsky called from Hutch’s bathroom. He rinsed off his toothbrush and stuck it back in the tumbler, then stared at his reflection in the Victorian mirror until he realized he wasn’t going to get an answer that way.

“Hutch?”

“Yeah. Out here.”

The dull voice came from the semi-enclosed balcony Hutch called his greenhouse.

“Great. Catch pneumonia.

See if I care.” He stomped across Hutch’s pitiful excuse for a floor, his intolerance of the great outdoors filling his head with visions of relapse. He stopped to check on the freestanding fire pit that he’d tinkered with earlier until it produced flames. Turned them up a notch.

Hutch met him in the doorway, holding a plastic flowerpot with something dead-looking leaning out of it. Before Starsky could comment on it, it was airborne, backwards over Hutch’s left shoulder. It landed on the concrete floor, bounced and rolled to a stop somewhere.

“Half my plants are dead,” Hutch said as he walked toward the living room with a face as long as his arms. “I give the fuck up.”

Oh boy. Here we go.

"Them or you. I picked you." Starsky pulled Hutch toward the fire pit. "Got the fire going here. What say we settle down for some terrific hot soup?"

"You made soup?"

There was one way to answer this question, and there was another way. He chose the other way. "Just for you. Take off your shoes and settle down there. Wait."

Starsky hurried out to the living room, grabbed two of the big cushions off the couch, and made his way back to the fire without stumbling over any of the crap Hutch always left lying all over. He dropped the cushions on the floor in front of the fire and steered Hutch to the one farthest from the greenhouse.

"Starsky, what is this?"

"Life," Starsky said. "That's all. It's just life. With a fire and soup. Sit down and shut up."

It was good to see Hutch grin again. Third time today: first at the airport, then getting out of the car in front of Venice Place, and now.

Starsky went to the kitchen and returned with a tray bearing a steaming bowl, one of the dishcloths Hutch used for napkins on formal occasions, and a large spoon.

"There you go, tiger. Dig in."

"Aren't you having any? What's in this?"

"Pretty squeamish for somebody who's gonna move to Azer-buy-whoozit and live on yogurt berries."

Hutch sneered and muttered, "Azerbaijan. Yogurt *and* berries. Moron."

“It’s chicken and noodles and I don’t know. Other stuff. From Silverman’s. It won’t kill you.”

Hutch blew on a spoonful of soup and tried it.

“See? Not bad. I had some already. You finish.”

While Hutch did as he was told, Starsky stared at the flames. *Warm.* So good to be warm again. He draped an arm around Hutch’s shoulders.

“Quit it. I’m trying to eat.”

Starsky withdrew his arm and sat still. Watched the fire. Watched Hutch.

“What are you looking at?”

Caught in the act. Well, it was worth a try. He wanted to remember forever how Hutch had looked for the two seconds or so he’d been allowed to watch the firelight play over his face, the backlight on his hair from the greenhouse. Forever.

“Starsk? What?”

“Oh nothing. Just thinking maybe I’ll pick up some yogurt tomorrow.”





TUCKING HUTCH IN later that night turned out to be trickier than Starsky had counted on. Hutch had come home still wired from the thrill of escaping death—a high they'd both experienced often before, but never with quite the same

drawn-out drama. Getting him to finish off the soup had helped. As Hutch burrowed under his covers, yawned, and started to doze off, Starsky began to feel things really were getting back to normal.

He stretched and headed for the bathroom for a quick shower with whatever hot water Hutch had left him. He got as far as the end of the bed when Hutch cried out sharply.

Starsky turned to see him curled up in pain, his eyes wide with fear, and he hurried back to him.

"What is it, babe? What hurts?"

Hutch grabbed at his arm, pulling, and Starsky went down on one knee. Hutch's breathing was hesitant, as if he was afraid of what the next inhalation would bring on. It was a flashback of what Starsky had seen him go through at the height of the plague's hold on him. But this time, no gloves, no mask.

No witnesses.

His hand floated over Hutch's face from hair to jawbone and then remained there, stroking him, until Hutch was calm again. Until *he* was calm again.

"All right now, Hutch? Okay?"

"Yeah," Hutch said in a hoarse whisper. "Just a cramp. It's okay."

"Where this time?"

"Stomach."

Starsky relaxed a little. Judith had warned he'd be getting those for another couple of weeks. "Scared the shit outta me."

"Sorry." Hutch smiled for a moment.

Starsky let his hand fall to Hutch's shoulder. Fussed with the blanket.

"I'm all right, you know. Really. Why don't you go on home?"

"Are you crazy? I'm not lettin' you out of my sight."

Hutch stared at him, his eyes dimmed, but alert enough. "You're gonna watch me sleep, and you think *I'm* crazy?"

Starsky started to snap at him but swallowed the thought and sighed. "Cut me some slack here, okay? It's been a hell of a week."

"You think *this* week was bad, you shoulda been around for the one before," Hutch said.

A cold wave washed through Starsky. He didn't want to act like Hutch's remark had gut-punched him, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

"You mean the week when you were dying and I was off on a fucking *pleasure* cruise?"

"Okay," Hutch said quietly. "Let's hear it."

"Oh come on, Hutch. You think I don't know what you went through? Jesus! I stared at it through that damn window—and tried not to imagine it the rest of the time, as if that was possible. I hope you don't ever have to know what that's like."

“So do I.”

They hadn't really made eye contact all day until now. Was there such a thing as conceding victory? Something told Starsky they'd both just managed it.

Hutch shifted his weight and reached out to knock Starsky's arm with a loose fist. “So you're really gonna go shopping for yogurt tomorrow, huh?”

“Yeah, sure,” Starsky said, grateful for the diversion. “Why not?”

“Quit the force?” Hutch had that teasing look on his face, the one where his smile made it all the way to his eyes. “Maybe move to Azerbaijan?”

“Oh, whoa. Not so fast, buddy! Gotta be sure I can bring the Torino.”

He loved hearing Hutch's soft laughter again, even if it was at his expense. “You might have to leave that tomato at the border, Starsk.”

“Why?”

“No roads.”

“Oh. Well, then. We can build 'em some. Yeah. A gift of real Western civilization in exchange for all that extra life.”

“Build roads,” Hutch said, very slowly. “For the only Torino in Azerbaijan.”

“Sure! Think of it! We'd be celebrities. Get keys to all the cities, or villages or whatever they got there. Clean up in the Azer-buy-whoozit chicks department, too, no doubt.”

Goofy plan, but Hutch seemed defeated by the sheer logic of it.

“Starsk, I don't know about you, but if I'm gonna be in this game for a hundred and forty-six years, I need a worthier goal than that.”

“Oh.”

The faintest shadow of a question appeared between Hutch’s eyebrows, and his lips parted.

A stupid joke had suddenly become serious. Starsky wasn’t sure why that bothered him but he was pretty certain that right now wasn’t the time to find out.

“Okay, champ,” he said abruptly. “Get some sleep.” He reached for the lamp on the night table and switched it off. “You sure you feel okay?”

He felt Hutch’s hand on his arm. “I’m fine now. Thanks.”

“Okay then. I’ll be around if you need anything.”

Hutch said something. Starsky couldn’t tell what, but thought it best to let the darkness suggest sleep instead of any more talk. He drew his arm away and let Hutch’s hand drop to the covers.

Darkness fell around the old brass bed.

After several moments, light from somewhere, maybe the moon, maybe street lamps, started to filter down through the skylight to play over the ornate headboard that arched over Hutch’s pillows. Shadows moved with his shallow breathing. Starsky stood still, watched, and waited until it became slower, deeper.

Satisfied that Hutch was asleep, Starsky back-tracked out of the narrow space beside the bed and picked his way across a floor still littered with art supplies—he’d take care of that in the morning—and wandered into the kitchen. The taste of soup he’d sampled from the deli carton earlier was starting to claw at his insides. It needed company, so he picked through the tiny refrigerator as quietly as possible for something a

human being would want to eat. Instead, he settled for some goat cheese, oatmeal bread, raisins, and orange juice, which he took out to the table in the greenhouse.

Surrounded by what was left of Hutch's rain forest—he'd see what he could do about that tomorrow, too—he ate without awareness, eyes fixed on the space that separated him from the lights and shadows inside.

What if they really could have another hundred-something years? What would they do differently with them? *Piss 'em away*, as if they had all the time in the world?

The cynic in him thought *yeah, probably*.

And what about just forty more? Twenty? Or two, for that matter? What then? What would make time seem more important: having more of it, or less? That was one question he could answer a lot better now than if somebody had hit him with it a week or so ago. But when he examined his answer more closely, he realized that somewhere along the way, he'd stopped thinking about his life as something involving only himself. Or even, someday, himself, some lovely lady, and a backyard full of kids.

Somewhere along the line, his vision of the future had blurred into Hutch. In fact, being with him in the here and now was what made it possible for him to imagine a future at all.

Where the hell had that come from? And what did it mean?

It was chilly outside. He'd forgotten that. He got up and went back inside. Wandered to the foot of Hutch's bed and stared at him for a while.

Looks like a little boy. Who'd said that? Oh yeah. Judith.

Judith who was back in Alabama now. He couldn't imagine living in Alabama. Man, the choices people make. Well, Judith was welcome to hers. At least she had a noble purpose. He was glad she'd stuck to it at the airport. Hutch could do much better.

A person could learn to like yogurt. Eventually. If you put enough stuff in it, you wouldn't have to taste it, so it wouldn't have to be all that bad. *The only Torino in Azerbaijan*. Yeah, that'd be something else, all right.

But Hutch had also said, *I need a worthier goal*. He'd seen the question in his eyes right after he'd said it. He hadn't been ready then to acknowledge that he been asking himself the very same question.

Now, maybe he was.



Authors love feedback!
mara_snh@yahoo.com