

Doth We Not Bleed?
An addition to Rules of the Assignment
Musings from Starsky vs Hutch
by Brit

If you prick us, doth we not bleed?
If you tickle us, doth we not laugh?
If you poison us, doth we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
—Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Noise. It had been stone-dead silent a second ago, then there's noise. Too much noise. Joey Webster laying bleeding and babbling on the ballroom floor and Kira....*Kira* crawls over next to him and is stroking his head, whispering comforting words, intimate words, words that sound a helluva lot like the words she whispered to me as she lay by *my* side. Probably the same words she whispered to Hutch....

My ears are still ringing from the grenade blast. The noise is echoing not just through what's left of the dancehall, but through my head...through the palms and bush....*a jungle? Vietnam? What the hell?*

For one weird, Technicolor instant I'm in fatigues again... the air is hard to breath.... the dirty paneled walls disappear and all I see is dense foliage...my Sergeant—Polanski—threw himself on top of a grenade at the last possible second to save the rest of our squad. His brains and guts are splattered on my uniform. Down the side of my face. I thought I would lose my marbles right then and there, but someone spoke my name.

Spoke gentle words to keep me together. Speaking gentle words to keep Webster together. Spoke gentle words to keep me in her bed....

It was all just words with her. The ones she said and the ones she wouldn't say.

I can smell the acrid smoke, feel the lingering heat from the blast, and I've *got* to get out of here. *So close*.....we all came so close to becoming little pieces scattered all over the dance floor. I'm on sensory overload and it's all just too much. Let Hutch and Kira take care of Webster, *I'm outta here.*

I stagger past them, tripping over the debris. Hutch is getting to his feet and gives me *that* look—the one he gives me when he's worried about me. But I have got to get out of here. I make it out the door and into the street. Nice, safe, Bay City street. Well, safer out here than in there, anyway. Find my baby and lean against her sleek red side. Breathin's easier out here. I give myself a minute to clear my head. The flashback to 'Nam threw me for a loop. Shouldn't have surprised me much, handling a grenade and all. But still—that hasn't happened in years. My head's finally clearin', but I'm shakin' like I got the DT's.

I know I should call in for assistance, but the heck with it. Let them handle it. They can have the mess and each other.

She doesn't love me.

I know that now. I don't know when I realized it or how. But I know. It was all just so many words. Words and a warm body. Nothing more. The realization doesn't even hurt that much. There's just a disappointment that leaves a big gaping hole in my gut. But I'm not sure what's the most disappointing—that she doesn't love me, that Hutch broke our trust, or that I was dumb enough to think that what I felt for her was love. I think it's probably that. How could I have possibly thought what I felt for her could equal what I felt for Terry? Or even Rosie?

I guess I'm a little more freaked out than I thought I was. My legs were just about to turn to jello when a hand slips under my arm and grabs me by my elbow. Reaction from the flashback takes hold and I spin, pushing the arm away and grabbing a handful of shirt. My other arm draws back in an open-palmed strike, ready to shove their nose up into their cranium for instant death—a little survival technique they taught us in the jungle.

But it's *him*. I don't know who was more shocked or surprised first—him or me. But he relaxes first.

"The...grenade...I..." I couldn't say more, and didn't need to. He knows it was a flashback. He's seen them before. His arms around me and draw me in to a hold that held no room for shame, no room for anything else but...*us*. Nothing else mattered at that moment—not Webster, not Kira, not all the crap of the last couple of days. The only thing that matters is that I need him and without my so much as blinking he's there.

I feel myself crumble, only to be held up by his strength. By his love for me. I feel it in his grip as surely as I've always known it. Even with all the hurt, love was still there. Maybe that's why it hurt so much.

Blondie shifts us aside and manages to open the Torino's door and slide me into the passenger seat. I feel like I just ran 20 miles with weights strapped to my legs. Reaching across, he grabs the microphone and calls in for an ambulance, then backup to clean up the pieces inside. Replacing the mic, he squats down next to me, his hand on my shoulder.

"You alright, buddy?"

I manage to nod and run a sleeve under my nose.

"I'll be back in just a second. Wait for me?"

Again, I just nod. I'll wait. Where else could I go?

I don't know how long he's gone. Things were a bit fuzzy, but it gave me time to sort out a few more pieces. Think about him and me, what we've been through together and separately. How he's the only

one I coulda broke down in front of like that just now. How he's the only one I've ever trusted enough when the nightmares became too much to bear alone—nightmare from the wars overseas and here in the city. I think of the mistakes we've both made and how it's always been "me and thee." *Always*. Until now. Something's changed. Something broke.

But is it broke beyond repair?

It doesn't take long for the black and whites to arrive. A couple of ambulances follow close behind, plus the bomb squad and ATF for good measure. Kira comes out after a bit, trailing Webster as he's wheeled to the ambulance. As it pulls away she makes like she's going to come over to talk to me, but Hutch runs interference. Some of the iceberg that's been hangin' around in my gut for the last couple of days melts a bit when I see the look he gives her—the one usually reserved for people waving a gun in my face. She looks a little surprised and makes her way over to a squad car instead. *Thanks partner, I don't need to be one of her strays again right now.*

Hutch directs some of the boys in blue to wrap things up then slips into the Torino's driver's seat. Must be he's got one of them bringing his car to the station. I don't mind him driving. I'm not so sure I'd trust myself behind the wheel right now. He gives me a quick look—*you okay?* I manage a nod—*I'm alright*. The horror that overwhelmed me's gone. Left as quickly as it came. *Man!* I really pity the guys that have those on a regular basis. What a living hell. The ride to the precinct is quiet, which is good. I'm still chewing through a few things. There'll be time for talking later.

At the station we work pretty much in silence except to clarify a few points and compare notes for the report. The blues can take care of the paperwork from the other witnesses and Webster was pretty well sedated, so there'll be no talking to him tonight. I don't where the heck *she* went to and I didn't really care. Every now and then I catch myself staring at Blondie or him at me. I know what he's thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing: *how did we ever get to this point?*

It's eating me up, all of this, and I'm passed surprising myself with how much I want to talk to him. *Geez, help me understand, Hutch!* But first things first. After a case like this, there's just an order of things that have got to happen. That's the rules of the assignment. The rules we live by. I look up to see he's staring at me again.

"Talk?" I ask.

He nods. "Now?"

I shake my head, look at my watch. "An hour."

"My place?"

I shake my head again. Not there, not mine either.

He tries again, sounding hopeful. "Pits?"

“Beach.”

He looks a bit startled at first, remembering the last time we were there. Finally he nods and I throw my finished report in Dobey’s “in” basket. Grabbing up my jacket I head for the door.

“Starsk?”

I turn expectantly, hoping he doesn’t try and start now. I’ve still got a lot to sort through.

“I didn’t... I... *Never mind.* I’ll see you in a hour.”

I can see the anguish in his eyes. But I’m not quite ready to forgive and forget. Maybe later. Talk first. I nod again and head out of the station to the lot. My lady’s out there waiting for me, but I sure don’t mean the...*woman*....who’s sittin’ in the front seat of the Torino. *What could she possibly want now?*

“*Get out.*” I don’t say it as a request. I’m in no mood and let my voice show it.

“*Get in.*” she snarls back. Talking to her is the last thing I want to do, but I have a feeling it’s the only way I’ll get her out of my car. I slide in behind the wheel but there’s no way the key’s going in the ignition.

“Dave, we need to talk.”

Words, more empty words.

“I don’t think I have anything to say to you.”

“That’s fine, you can just sit there and listen, then. David Starsky, you are a *jackass.*”

I guess I looked surprised. “*Excuse me?*”

“I guess I can understand you being upset with me, but you have no right to be mad at Hutch.”

“*Excuse me?!*”

“He didn’t do it.”

Now I know I looked surprised. “What are you talking about?”

“Hutch, he didn’t...”

“*Stop it!* Look, Kira, I may be a lot of things, stupid maybe, but I’m not blind. I know what I saw!”

“And what exactly did you see, Dave? Tell me.”

How dumb does she think I am? I was near shouting, but I didn't care who heard me. I tick the facts off my fingers. "First, you answer the door with your hair and clothes mussed up, *right?* You're nervous. You obviously weren't expecting me and obviously didn't want me there, *right?* Next, Hutch comes out..." It's still hard to say. "Hutch comes out of *your* bedroom, tucking his shirt back in, *right?* Even after I told him that I loved you, *he slept with you anyway, right?*"

"*Wrong!*" She hollers right over the top of me. I'm surprised that it pulls me up short.

"What?"

"You're *wrong*, you idiot! *He couldn't!* Are you hearing what I'm saying? Hutch *couldn't* make love to me yesterday!" She starts fidgeting with her purse strap. "We...tried, but when it came right down to it, he *couldn't*. He said he couldn't betray *your* trust in *him*. Not me, *him*."

"But...*but I thought...*why didn't he say so?"

"Because you never gave him the chance, you jackass!" She sighed and turned so that she could lean closer to me. My mind was racing. When did he try and tell me? Before I left the office what did he start to say? '*I didn't...*' Didn't *what*, Hutch? Was he trying to tell me then? Did he try to tell me at Kira's before I laid into him?

"Hutch probably didn't say anything because he felt guilty, even though we weren't doing anything wrong." One lacquered hand reached out to touch my cheek. "David, this isn't as complicated as you're making it out to be."

That about choked me. I was still reeling from the fact that Hutch didn't go through with it. *Why, Hutch?*

"*Complicated?*" It came out with a spat. "It's not that complicated for me, lady. I thought I loved you. I thought you loved me, too but I was—"

"But I *do* love you, David!"

I give her a look that tells her what I think of that statement.

"You're a great guy. You're kind and you're tender and—"

"And you're full of it and I'm a fool. Get out. Get out of my car." I reach across her to open the passenger door in case she can't take a hint.

"But David, I do love you! Why can't I love both of you? Haven't you ever made love to—"

"*Get out, Kira.*" I ram the key into the ignition and crank her over. I didn't want to hear it. I had more important things to concentrate on tonight. She finally gets out and shuts the door, but leans through the window so that I can't drive off yet.

“I know you may not understand right now, but I *do* love you, David. It doesn’t have to end like this. Tell me you’ll think about it.”

My only answer to her is to throw the Torino into reverse and peel away. Away from her words. What if she was lying? I sure as heck can’t trust her now. But Hutch.... *He didn’t do it!* What if he didn’t? *But he was going to.* So, what does that mean in all of this? Too much. It’s almost too much to think about. The streets rush by in a blur and the only words I’m focusing on are the ones that keep running through my head: *He didn’t do it....He didn’t do it...He didn’t do it....*



There’s something about the ocean that can make a man feel awfully small. There’s a great big world out there and you’re just a little speck on it when you see it all from heaven. Sometimes remembering that puts things in perspective. Sometimes it just overwhelms you.

We were here not too long ago for another reason. We were at odds then too, but with the rest of the world, not each other. It was still “me and thee.” But now...now I still wasn’t too sure.

It’s funny how you can spend a lifetime building up a partnership with a person, taking a stand together, establishing your own set of rules for the rest of the world to live by, only to have it all disintegrate in a heartbeat by one selfish moment. Yeah, he didn’t do it, but he was going to. What does that mean? Why didn’t he tell me? Can I trust him not to do it again? Yeah, it’s funny, but I ain’t laughing.

Can I let nine years of friendship slip away like it never was because of one stupid mistake? I guess that depends on if Hutch even sees it as a mistake. *Either you follow the rules of the assignment or you get another assignment.* Dammit, Hutch! I never thought you’d go that far. We’d butted heads before, but we never crossed the line. I guess I just don’t understand.

What’s really weird is even though there’s all this crap between us we can still work together. That same intuition is there—never changed. At the dancehall he didn’t need to ask to know that we needed to discuss information about the case. We just came together for an exchange. We didn’t have to signal each other to move out and circle the dance floor, we just did it. Moved in unison like always. And when Joey flaked out and pulled the pin on the grenade, Hutch kicked it out of his hands knowing—*knowing*—that I’d be there to follow through. If he didn’t instinctively trust me to carry my share of the load, there wouldn’t be enough left of any of us to fill a lunch bag.

I start pitching rocks across the water, watching their wake ripple and die out. Terry had once said that she felt like a little girl whose beachball was floating out into the ocean and there was nothing she could do to get it back. I’ve understood a bit of that sense of helplessness and loss more than once. *Awh, sweetheart, do you know how I miss you?* You taught me what loving a woman really was. How could I begin to think that I really loved Kira with that kind of love? *I guess...I guess I was lonely, Terry. I guess I wanted to be in love so much that I made myself believe it was the real thing and that she loved me too.*

Think, Starsky, think! What happened when you told Kira that you loved her? We had been curled up in front of the fireplace sipping wine. We'd been kissing and getting ready to make love for the first time. *No*. Have sex, that wasn't love. "*I love you, Kira.*" I said it so quickly that I think I surprised myself. She tilted her head and gave me a tender look. Yeah, the kind of look you give a stray dog. Then we went to her bedroom.

She never loved me. Not really. Not the real kind of love I was looking for. I'd been three kinds of fool.

Hutch makes his way down the shoreline toward me. We're not too far from his apartment in Venice, so he probably just parked his beater and walked the block to the beach. I've lost count of the number of flat stones that I've skipped into the water. He hesitates as he approaches when he realizes what I'm doing. Perhaps I've given him the wrong impression and he thinks it was my badge that I was again offering up to Poseidon, throwing away my career along with our partnership. I pull another stone out of my pocket and dance it across the water. The moonlight across the waves has soothed my hurt some, but I still need answers.

"Mind if I join you?" He's finally by my side. It's the same question I asked him months ago, but for a different reason. I dig a handful of stones out of my pocket and offer them to him. He starts lobbing them back out to sea. I watch him for a minute before starting back up myself.

Hutch looks pale. The moonlight makes his hair look almost white. We just stand there skipping stones for a while without saying anything. It's awkward, but that's where we're at with each other.

"I don't know what to say, Starsk."

I sigh. I'm not really all that angry anymore. I lost that somewhere along the way tonight. Still kinda hurt though. Confused mostly, but that's fighting against my need to understand why he was gonna make love—no *have sex* with her—even after what I said. I needed to understand, *wanted* to understand so I could forgive him and we could move on. We both seemed to have run out of rocks at the same time so we start to slowly wander down the beach following the shoreline.

"Starsk, after I left your apartment I went over to her place to break it off. Shoot, tell her off. I couldn't believe she was playing the both of us like she was. I mean, for her and me it was just fun and games. But after you and I talked, I figured there was something more going on between you. I mean if you said you loved her...." He stopped and looked far off to where the sea met the sky as if trying to see something. "*I heard* you say that you loved her, Starsk, but I just couldn't *see it*. I...I don't know if that makes any sense, and maybe I don't have the right anymore to say it, but I didn't see it there. Not like with Terry."

He glances at me but looks away when he sees me glaring at him. "The love you had with Terry was... *beautiful*. It was right. It made me ache with the wonder of it. There was no doubt in my mind that the two of you were supposed to spend your lives together." We start walking again, a bit slower than before. "Even with Rosie, I knew you loved her and she loved you, but, well, I didn't see how you could overcome the obvious obstacles, Starsk. I'm sorry, but I could tell it wouldn't last."

“You know me so well, huh?” I guess there’s a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” There’s no reproach in his voice, only a sincere acknowledgement of the truth.

“Okay. So because you could see that Kira and I weren’t gonna spend the rest of our lives together that made it okay for you to sleep with her?”

“I... *no!* No. That’s not it. It was a mistake, I was wrong, Starsk.” He shakes his head in disgust.

I stop and grab him by the arm, pulling him around to face me. “Then why? *Why Hutch?* I don’t understand!” My grip on his arm tightens as I search his face. “You’re the best friend I got in the whole world. I love you. *I trusted you!* I thought we would never betray my trust like that. *Please, just help me understand why!*”

Hutch looks everywhere but at me. “Starsk, I...I wish I could explain it to you, but I’m not so sure why myself. I was...hell, I don’t know why. When we were first put on this assignment it was just a game with us, like that with all the other girls—just don’t break the rules and see who could make points with her first. It was just a game. But then I started to like her, too. She made me laugh. She... I don’t know. She filled a need somehow.”

“What kind of need?”

Hutch shrugs and runs a hand over his eyes as if he had to clear his vision. After a heartbeat he finally looks me in the eyes. “I don’t know what it was, how to describe it. I’ve just felt so...nothing’s been the same for me since I don’t know when. Sometimes I look in the mirror and I hardly recognize myself. She just...I don’t know. I liked being with her. But when you told me you loved her, the rules of the game changed.”

It got so quiet for awhile that I felt I had to prompt him. “So you went to her apartment.”

“Yes. To tell her off. Tell her that I wouldn’t be seeing her anymore because you said you loved her.”

“And?”

“And she told me that she loved you.”

“*What!?*”

He gives me a sad smile. “She said she loved you and in the same breath she said that she loved me too, and what was so wrong with that, she asks. I tell you, she threw me for a loop. She’s quick, I’ll give her that.” He starts that chuckle he mocks himself with. “Crap, I always brag on how I’m the brains and here she had me chasing my tail with some cockeyed logic about being able to love two people at the same time. And I bought it. *I bought it!* What an idiot....”

I can tell he's been beating himself up ever since I tried to. The little part of me that's glad about his pain is smothered by the part of me that wants to reach out to him. Hutch has stomped away a few steps toward the water and spins back toward me with a load of hurt in his eyes.

"Starsk, I can't begin to make this up to and I don't expect you to be able to forgive me—"

"Just tell me why—"

"*I don't know!!* I was stupid and selfish, I needed—"

"No. Listen, Hutch. Tell me why you *didn't* go through with it."

That shut him up. Shocked him that I knew. I tried again.

"Is that true? You couldn't go through with it?" He finally nods, not looking at me. "Then why? Why *didn't* it happen? And why didn't you tell me?"

"I guess I was afraid. Circumstantial evidence, Starsk. I was afraid you wouldn't believe me."

"Maybe not. But you've never given me reason..." We both silently finished the sentence "*until now.*" I reach out for his shoulder. The muscles there are bunched up. "Tell me now. I'll believe you."

We start walking again. Somehow that makes it easier. A few minutes go by, and I let it, knowing he'll talk when he's ready. With each step I feel the knot inside me loosen and the bitterness that was threatening to rip apart my heart is left behind with each step. Hutch finally speaks, his voice hushed with shame and regret.

"I couldn't do it because...because I love you too much. I was ashamed. Regardless if we did it or not, I almost did. I was going to. I almost let what I thought I needed to become more important than our friendship. I can't call whatever I was feeling a need be loved by her, because that wasn't *love*. What I had with Gillian was love. This...this was more of what I had with Van during the good times, which was few and far between. And that was enough for the moment, but could never be enough for a lifetime. That's what I needed. That's what I was looking for, but it wasn't there in her arms. Or in her bed. We ended up there, but when it got down to it, I couldn't do it because I knew how much it would hurt you. I knew if I betrayed your trust in this, it would betray everything with us and I couldn't stand that. I couldn't lose you, Starsk."

"But when I got to Kira's apartment and you came out, why didn't you tell me then? Sure I was mad, but I would of listened!"

"I was too ashamed by what almost happened. I was embarrassed and disgusted with myself that I put my need for her before what you were feeling for her. I put that before *us*. It doesn't matter that she said she loved me. What mattered is that you said you loved her. You mattered. But I didn't realize that until it was almost too late. Her saying she loved us both sounds so stupid, so shallow now. But I

wasn't thinking *then*, just feeling...just *needing*. She made me feel special. She made me laugh. But it wasn't enough."

"God knows we haven't had a lot to laugh about lately." So much had happened in the last year. Hutch's botulism and getting shot. Emily's blindness. All that crap with Nicky. Not to mention Rigger's death and our losing faith in the system of rules we based our lives on. I picked up another stone from the sand and threw it back into the ocean. "It's been quite a year."

"Yeah, that it has."

I look over at him and see the tautness in his face, the circles under his eyes. There's a few more lines that weren't there months ago. The last year had really taken its toll from him. Shoot, on both of us. I shouldn't have been so surprised that something had to finally give. It's just too bad that it was almost us.

"I would of believed you. Maybe not right then and there, but eventually."

Hutch just nods, not able to meet my eyes. "I know that now."

All the garbage flip-flopping inside my head and gut are enough to drive me insane. But mostly, right now, I disgust myself. "I can't believe I thought I loved her! How could I mistake what I felt for Kira with what I had with Terry?" It feels like her name rips right out of my heart. *Terry, the one love of my life*. I suppose all the others were poor substitutes for Terry.

"I don't know why I didn't see it before, Starsk. You know that Kira even looked a bit like Terry?" I give him a look. "The way she wore her hair. The quick wit. That twinkle she'd get in her eye." He looked back down at his shoes. "How comfortable she was around me. I miss her too."

I reach out and give his shoulder a squeeze. Sometimes I forget that Hutch mourns the friend he lost, too.

"Starsk, I..." He looks up to me and there's tears in his eyes. "Starsk, I am *so, so sorry*. I never wanted to hurt you. I'd give anything to take back yesterday—"

"Anything?" He looks uncertain. I guess he didn't expect me to be able to name something that would actually be big enough to mend the rift between us. "Get rid of your car."

A laugh that sounds a heckuva lot more like a sob rips out of him. I swear if he cries....

"Forgive me?"

I want so much to try and forget the whole ugly mess, but there's still a small part of me that's angry and hurt. I sober and look him square in the eye.

“Promise me that you’ll never do anything like that to hurt me again. Promise. *And I want your word, Hutchinson.*” The gaze that meets mine is still hurting, but steady.

“I promise.” There’s a few heartbeats that pass. It’s so quiet out there that you can only hear the crash of the waves. “Will you forgive me? Please, Starsk, I need to hear you say it.”

I’ve always been able to read him like a book. Every thought, every nuance. What I see in his eyes, in his face—regret, remorse, grieving—is enough to convince me. And deeper yet, I can see his love for me.

“I forgive you.”

I didn’t notice how tense he was until I said the words and saw him visibly relax. We weren’t home yet, but we were on the right road again.

“So....” We say it at the same time. Laugh a little. I gesture for him to speak first. He stands there with his hands in his hip pockets, staring down at the toe of his shoe as he kicks over a piece of driftwood half-buried in the sand. His face still looks haunted.

“So, what do we do now?”

“Well, I think a beer or two are in order.” We both turn, in unison—some things just don’t change—and make our way back toward civilization. “Then we can figure out where we go from here.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t we okay with this?”

“Hutch, I’m not going to pretend that I’m still not...well, hurt. But we’ve got too much invested in each other to let...*this*...ruin it. Just give me a little time. Besides...” I chuckle a bit. “Who else would want us?”

He smiles a bit, grateful that we’ll work it out, but still kicking himself for ever putting us here in the first place. “What about Kira?”

“What about her?”

“You know she’s going to call.”

“So let her call.”

“Do you still love her? Starsk, if you think it could work it out—”

“No. No, it’ll never work. I’ll find myself another assignment.”

Hutch snorts. “Gotcha. It’s a new game, buddy, but with the old set of rules.”

“Which rules?”

Hutch stops and looks at me hard. I turn back to face him.

“The kind it used to be. *Me and Thee.*”

I nod. “Me and Thee. The kind it’s always been.” I say it like a vow.

“We make her choose between us and which ever one she picks, they tell her to go flake off. Deal?”

“Deal.” I yawn. “Man, do I feel beat up.”

Hutch nods. “Cheap. Used and abused. I mean, she was just using us to keep her bed warm. Man, we could of just been hot water bottles to her.”

I snort and give him a cocky look. “Well, pal, maybe *you* could of been...”

He’s a bit thrown that I can joke about it so soon. It was a lame attempt on my part to lighten the mood, but it was worth it to see him smile and rolls his eyes. If I don’t stop the spiral of hating himself, we might never get back to normal. Our walk has taken us back in front of the restaurant below his apartment.

“I don’t get her.” Hutch mutters. “What does she think, that she can use us like this and nobody gets hurt?”

“If you prick us, doth we not bleed?” I quipped quietly. Hutch’s eyes register mild surprise. I admit, I love to confound him. Sobering a bit, I rattle it all off. “If you prick us, doth we not bleed? If you tickle us, doth we not laugh? If you poison us, doth we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” My high school English teacher would be proud.

“Merchant of Venice,” he whispers.

“I’ve read a few things more than Ripley’s and the Enquirer, you know.”

He grins back at me and jabs a finger at his chest as he nods toward the ‘Venice Place’ sign engraved on his apartment building. “*Merchant of Venice.*”

“Nuh-huh. *Detective of Venice.*”

Shoot, I didn’t think it was that funny, but he laughs anyway. I join him for a minute, but when the laughter stops, it’s a bit awkward. I hate this. I hate the hesitancy between us. Hutch senses it, too.

“Starsk, I am so, so—”

“I know Hutch, I know. I’m sorry, too. It’s...it’s just gonna take a little time.” I sigh and give him a bit of a smile to show that I’m trying. That I’m confident we can get past this. He looks up at me and I can see the tears welling up. So help me, if he starts in, I won’t be far behind.

“I know you may not believe me now, but I... I promise I will never give you another reason to doubt me. *I love you, man.* And those aren’t just words with me.”

I pull him close and the tears finally come to both of us. “I know. I know, buddy. Me too. I never stopped.”

~Brit
8/4/00