

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 10

By the time the two men reached the cave, Sam was waiting for them at the entrance. “Watch your head. It's a little low here.” Stooping over slightly, Starsky laid a protective hand over Hutch's head, and led him through the narrow opening, into the cool darkness of the interior. He carefully eased Hutch into a sitting position near the cave wall. “It’s not much, but it’s dry, and I think I can hide the opening by covering it with a few limbs. You rest here. I’ll be back as soon as I get this place camouflaged.”

Hutch, his head still throbbing, gratefully leaned against the cool rock wall. The cessation of motion seemed to ease the pain somewhat. He reached up and touched the bandanna, relieved to find that the wound didn’t seem to be bleeding anymore. In some ways, the darkness of the cave was comforting. Here, in this murky underground chamber, he was on equal footing again. He could allow himself the luxury of pretending once he left here, he would see again.

Starsky returned to the mouth of the cave and called Sam, who was still nosing around the cooking stones of the old campfire. When the dog came trotting back to him, Starsky squatted down, bringing them eye to eye. “Sam, I want you to stay here and watch over Hutch. Got it? Protect Hutch.” The dog’s intelligent eyes told Starsky he understood. He stood up and gave Sam the official ‘STAY’ command, and as reinforcement, rewarded the dog with a pat on the head, before leaving the campsite.

Sam posted himself at the entryway, ‘Guardian of the Stronghold’, ready to protect and defend. Full of self-importance, he surveyed the area with a watchful eye, and waited for Starsky to return.



As the final streaks of daylight faded from the sky, Starsky hurried to gather fallen limbs, pine needle fans, and any other brush he could use to disguise the opening to the cave. By the time he’d completed his task, the night and the collection of greenery cloaked their hiding place from intruders. As he and Sam retreated to the safety of their new bunker, Starsky carefully brushed away their tracks with a spray of pine needles. He then closed the last remaining open space with a small seedling and a strategically placed small boulder.

Starsky felt his way along the rock wall until he reached Hutch. In the inky obscurity of the cave, he eased himself down next to the blond. “Hey, how ya doin’, partner?” For a few seconds, there was no response; only Hutch’s quiet breathing.

Starsky figured he'd fallen asleep; then finally, he answered softly, "Great. Just great."

Hutch sat propped against the cave wall, his thoughts as bleak as the darkness surrounding him. He knew Starsky was waiting for him to say more; hoping he'd say something clever, something funny, something to reassure his partner that he was okay. For the moment, though, words escaped him. The shadowy confine of their hideout was just a taste of what life would be like from now on, if his sight didn't return. He couldn't talk about his fear. Starsky had enough to worry about, without dealing with his insecurities right now. His partner's voice cut through the darkness softly.

"You cold?"

"Yeah, a little," came the tired response.

Starsky shrugged out of his jacket and laid it over Hutch, tucking it in around his shoulders.

"Better?"

"Yeah...thanks...better."

Starsky scooted over next to Hutch, shoulders touching. He hoped the additional body heat would offer Hutch the warmth he needed.

Sighing, Starsky leaned back against the wall too, and tried to let the tension drain from his body. He hadn't had time to think since they'd left the clearing at the bottom of the ravine earlier that day. Was it really only today? As he slowly began to unwind, mental images of the red and white Torino, engulfed in flames, replayed in his mind, churning up feelings of remorse. It didn't seem right to mourn for a car—he knew that. After all, it was just a thing, not a living being. He tried to shake off the feeling that he'd lost a loved one, but found he just couldn't.

Sam had positioned himself at their feet, his head facing the entryway, his ears and eyes trained on the opening for early detection of any sound or movement that may pose a threat to his humans. It felt good, being together again. These were the times he was happiest. Didn't matter where they were, as long as the three of them were together. He'd see that no harm came to them. That was his job, and he delighted in the opportunity to prove his loyalty and love for them. Most people thought dogs incapable of complex thought, but Sam knew better. He remembered things. He remembered life before these two had found and rescued him from a world of fear and abuse. He would never forget.

Silent moments ticked by slowly, exhaustion overwhelming them all. Outside, a lone owl's call echoed through the night.

“You hungry?” Starsky whispered, feeling the need to hear a human voice...even if it was his own.

Hutch stirred from his revelry. “Yeah. I’d even eat one of those sugar laden time bombs you call a candy bar. Too bad you didn’t stuff a couple in your pockets.” His voice held a note of amusement that Starsky found comforting.

In a moment of sudden inspiration, Starsky snapped his fingers. “Hey, wait a minute...” Hutch could hear him digging through the pockets of his jeans and jacket. “Ah-hah!” Triumphant, he produced the object of his search. He broke the snack bar into three pieces, then passed one to Hutch, and one to Sam. “We’ll have to share, but it’s better than nothin’,” he said proudly.

Hutch gratefully accepted the food, stuffing half of his portion into his mouth. The moment he crunched down, he realized it couldn’t be candy—it wasn’t even sweet. “Starsky, what the hell is this?”

“Mmmm...one o’ them’s gian’t mmilkbomes,” Starsky mumbled, his mouth full of the brittle snack.

Hutch stopped, mid-crunch, hoping he’d heard wrong. “Starsky, tell me you didn’t say what I just thought you said.” In the darkness, he could hear Sam and Starsky chomping away on their thirds of the dog treat. The rottweiler smacked his lips in loud delight, obviously enjoying every morsel.

“What? You’re always tellin’ me how nutritious they are!” Starsky answered defensively. “Besides, you got any better suggestions?”

Before speaking, Hutch swallowed the broken bits of biscuit, already growing soggy in his mouth. “Awww...Starsky, this is disgusting! There’s...there’s all kinds of...of animal body parts, and bone, and...God knows what else, in these things—some of which are too repulsive to even list on the box.”

Not the least bit deterred, Starsky tossed another bite into his mouth. “So? You said the same thing about Spam, but it hasn’t killed me yet, has it? Better eat up, buddy. S’all we got. And if you don’t eat it soon, Sam’s gonna think you don’t want it, and consider it fair game.”

Knowing everything Starsky had just said was true, Hutch tried not to think anymore about it, and resigned himself to making the best of his lowly meal. Upon finishing his own, Sam stuck his big nose between the two men and began a sniffing-snorting search for rogue biscuits that just may have escaped The Dark One’s notice. Starsky couldn’t help but laugh when the wet proboscis wedged its way under his armpit, and up his neck, ending the search with a loud sneeze just below his left ear.

“Knock it off, ya big dummy.” He playfully rolled Sam onto his back and patted his belly. “That’s all I had. Sorry. I’m not holdin’ out on you.” Sam flipped himself upright, then proceeded to submit Hutch to a similar search.

“Whoa, boy!” Hutch tried to fend him off. “Hey, Starsk, I think we need to transfer him to Vice. Mahoney could use someone with his talents in their department, don’t you think?” Both men laughed, as Sam carried on his fruitless search for more treats. Finally accepting defeat, he returned to his station at their feet and plopped down with a loud sigh.

The cave grew quiet again. Hutch leaned back, praying for sleep. The pathetic dinner and a few good laughs with Starsky and Sam had helped divert his thoughts from the darkness. Now, as the sounds of night once more encroached upon their hiding place, his mind began to wander again.

“Hutch...you awake?”

“Yeah...I’m awake.”

“Listen, I’m sorry I made ya eat a milkbone.”

“You didn’t ‘make’ me, Starsk. I was hungry, it was food, and you’re right—it was better than nothing.”

“Hey...Hutch?”

A light smile teased the corners of Hutch’s mouth at the child-like quality in Starsky’s voice.

“Yeah?”

“Ever notice how every time we take a vacation, it ends up with somebody tryin’ to kill us? Think maybe we should give up on vacations?”

“I admit we’ve had a few ‘less than perfect’ vacations,” Hutch conceded, “but we’ve had some fun times too.”

“Yeah?” Starsky was quiet for a moment. “Name one.”

“Well...let’s see...How about Dobey’s cabin?”

“Are you nuts? What about the rattlesnake in the frig, and those devil worshipers tryin’ to sacrifice us? Is that your idea of a good time?”

“No...I’m talking about afterwards. Remember how many fish you caught? Got’a admit, you did pretty good for a greenhorn.”

In his mind's eye, he could almost see Starsky's chest puff out proudly. "Yeah...yeah...I did, didn't I? Well, maybe that vacation wasn't so bad." They grew quiet again.

"Hutch?"

"Mmmm?"

"How's your head feelin'?"

Hutch realized for the first time that the pain had subsided.

"It's let up. Maybe if I can get a few minutes of shut-eye, it'll go away completely."

Starsky took this as a hint to stop talking, and fell silent, thinking again about the lost Torino.

Minutes later, Hutch whispered, "Starsky? Are you asleep?"

"Nah...too quiet in here. You know me. I need a few sirens and honkin' car horns outside to sleep good."

"Yeah...guess you do," Hutch chuckled softly, and paused before continuing, debating whether to broach the subject that had been eating away at him all afternoon. "Listen, buddy, I'm really sorry about your car. I know how much the Tomato meant to you."

"Awww...it was just a car." Wondering if Hutch had been able to read his thoughts earlier, Starsky tried to sound blasé. "I can get another."

"Yeah. Right." Hutch was quiet for a moment. "Hey, maybe we can get the Department to pay for replacing it. I mean, after all, this wouldn't be happening if we hadn't arrested and testified against Morrisetti, right?"

"You think so?" Starsky asked, eagerly. A moment later, he added, less exuberantly, "But we don't really know for sure Morrisetti's behind this."

"Most likely, he is."

"Mmmm.... He IS the most obvious choice."

Starsky mulled this over a few moments, considering for the first time that with his insurance, funding from the Department, and the expertise of Merle the Earl, he may

be able to duplicate the Torino. The thought temporarily cheered him, until he remembered Hutch's blindness.

"Hutch?"

"Hmmm?"

"This blindness thing is only temporary."

"I hope you're right. But I suppose there's the possibility I won't get better."

Starsky reached over and patted him on the knee. "Hey...whatever comes, we'll deal with it. If that means searching the world over to find a doctor that can help you, then that's what we'll do."

"What if I can't be helped, Starsk?" The vulnerability in his voice cut Starsky to the quick. "What if I can't be a cop anymore?"

Without missing a beat, Starsky answered in a firm voice, "We're gonna find you some help, Hutch. But if you can't be a cop anymore, then we'll just find a new line of work. So either way, you're covered, partner."

Hutch imagined in his mind, the hard glint in Starsky's eyes when he said that. Determined, unrelenting, and faithful to a fault. Sam inched up between the two men and laid his head on Hutch's lap. It seemed to Hutch, the dog understood their conversation, and was trying to affirm all that Starsky had said.

Hutch took a deep breath and relaxed. He was in good hands. His two best friends would make sure of that.

End of Chapter 10