

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 7

Starsky was moving pretty fast, and Hutch was finding it more and more difficult to keep up. They'd been hiking at this pace for almost an hour, when he noticed that their surroundings had taken on a gray hue. The colors around him seemed to be fading into black and white, and his head felt like it had a sledge hammer pounding inside. Hutch knew they had to keep moving, and if he complained, Starsky would insist on stopping to let him rest. At this point, the risk was just too great. Sam, on the other hand, had grown restless and dissatisfied with the slow pace. He forged ahead, taking the lead, but never straying far from the two men. Starsky was content to let him go on ahead, as long as he stayed in sight.

Periodically, Starsky looked back, watching his partner for signs of fatigue. When he noticed Hutch was losing ground, he slowed down and waited for him to catch up.

“You okay?” He could see that the bleeding on Hutch's temple had stopped, but his face had taken on an unhealthy pallor. “Need to stop awhile?” He reached up and touched Hutch's face to check for fever, and was relieved to feel cool skin beneath his hand.

“I think we should keep moving,” Hutch answered, with little conviction. “It's nearly dark now.”

Starsky thought that odd, considering it wasn't quite six p.m.. The sun wouldn't go down for another couple of hours. But before he could say so, Sam came to a sudden stop about ten feet ahead of them. His early warning radar kicking in, the dog's hackles rose slightly. Starsky put up his hand, motioning for Hutch to wait, then signaled with a finger to his lips, to be quiet.

Sam advanced slowly, snuffling the ground before him. His feet quietly padded over the dense, pine-needle covered ground, as he swung out to the right, circling slowly, and eventually returning to the point from which he started. Cautiously, the dog moved inward with each cycle tightening the circle, making it smaller and smaller with each go round. Still the hair along his neck and shoulders stood straight up, cautioning of some unseen danger. Following instincts inbred since dogs first walked the earth, the rottweiler drew himself up aggressively. Curling back his lip in a show of gleaming white teeth, he growled, warning the two men he'd found his prey.

Starsky eased forward, not knowing what to expect. “What ya got, Big Dog?” Starsky spoke just above a whisper. “A snake?” Since the incident at Dobey's cabin,

Starsky's aversion to snakes had intensified ten-fold. The dog chuffed softly, waiting for Starsky to take a look for himself. Beneath the soft cover of the pine straw, Starsky saw a gleaming, silver object. Unsure what he was up against, he looked around quickly and found a dead branch lying where the last heavy wind had blown it from the tall tree just above. Using the sturdy stick, Starsky carefully moved the pine straw aside.

"What the hell?" Even after studying the contraption closer, he couldn't identify it.

"What is it, Starsk?" Hutch moved up to where Starsky and Sam were hunkered down, staring at the foreign object on the ground. Though his vision was blurry, and the darkness was even closer than a few moments ago, Hutch was still able to see the object of their attention. "I thought those damn things had been outlawed," he muttered with disgust.

"What is it?"

"Haven't you ever seen a steel-jaw leg-hold trap?"

"Heard of 'em, but never saw one. We don't do much trappin' in New York," Starsky answered dryly.

"They're the cruelest trapping device ever invented by man." The jagged steel teeth of the trap lay dormant, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to pass too closely. When Sam eased his snout a little closer, Hutch grabbed his collar and snatched him back roughly. "Stay away, Sam!"

"Hey, relax," Starsky said, laying his hand on Hutch's arm. "He's not gonna get too near. Remember, he's the one who found it and warned us."

"Sorry, Big Dog." Hutch scratched the rottweiler's ear contritely. Sam leaned into his hand, reveling in the affectionate touch. "That trap's big enough to take his leg off, or even break his neck, if he stuck his head too close."

"So, what kind of animals do they hunt with these things?" Starsky's curiosity was piqued by the unusual device.

"You could catch just about anything you wanted with one this big. Most of the time they're smaller, and they're used to trap foxes, wolves, beavers, whatever has the misfortune of happening up on it. That's one of the drawbacks. They're non-discriminating. Deer, squirrels, rabbits, anything could step on one. My Dad lost a couple of great hunting dogs to traps that someone illegally set on our land." A look of sadness touched the crystal blue eyes, as Hutch thought of Buddy and Duke for the first time in more than twenty years.

"What would one this size be used for?"

Hutch leaned in a little closer for a better look. “You could catch a bear in one this big. Trouble is, he’d probably lie here and suffer for days before dying. It’s a documented fact that some animals chew off their own limbs to escape. Any self-respecting trapper doesn’t use them at all. There’s really no reason to.”

“Why do they use ‘em then?” A frown creased Starsky’s brow, as he processed what Hutch was telling him. He realized he was pretty ignorant about the whole subject, never having hunted or trapped in his youth.

“Cheaper than the humane traps,” Hutch answered. “Also, there’s very little chance of an animal getting out of one. Most of the people who lay these traps don’t check them regularly, and they want to make sure their catch stays caught.”

Hutch ran a hand over his face. “The thought of what could have happened if you or Sam had stepped on that damn thing turns my stomach.”

Starsky swallowed hard, and looked at the trap again, grateful for Sam’s keen senses. “You think you could trap a man with this thing?” Starsky asked, the wheels turning in his head.

“Sure, if it was camouflaged well enough.”

“You think we should leave it set?” Starsky weighed his words thoughtfully. “I mean, it could slow down those two jokers if they pick up our trail.”

“And, if they miss it, it’ll still be here, ready to spring shut on some poor, unsuspecting animal,” Hutch reminded him.

Starsky thought about it for only a heartbeat, then jabbed the pressure pad on the trap with the end of the branch. The diabolical device slammed shut like the jaws of a lethal predator, crushing the branch as if it was no more than a spindly twig. Startled, Sam let out a yelp, before ducking for cover behind Hutch’s right leg.

Hutch looked at Starsky and smiled sadly. “It might’ve slowed them down, but you did the right thing.”

Starsky recovered the sprung trap with pine needles, concealing the evidence they’d passed this way. “Yeah, nobody, animal or man, deserves that.” He clapped Hutch’s shoulder. “What say we put a little more distance between us and the bad guys, huh? We still have a couple of hours before dark.”



By the time Al Bernard had climbed back up the incline to get another gun from the car, then rejoined White, the two detectives had more than an hour head start on them.

White looked up from where he sat loading fresh shells into the magazine of the high-powered rifle. “Took your own sweet time, didn’t you?” he complained.

Ignoring the jibe, Bernard reached into his jacket pockets and retrieved two large bottles of spring water and tossed one to the other man. “I brought back a couple of them bottles of water you’re always sucking on, and these crackers I found in the glove compartment. Thought we could use them on the trail.”

Surprisingly impressed that his imbecile partner had thought of something as fundamental as the need for food and fluids, White caught the crackers and water bottle, tucking them into his own pockets. He accepted it without comment, unwilling to give Bernard the satisfaction of praise for thinking on his own for a change. He certainly didn’t want to encourage that behavior. He preferred to do the thinking for the both of them.

Bernard opened the cap on his own bottle and took a long, thirsty swig, recapped it, and placed it back into his pocket. “I bet those cops are wishing they had a drink right now.” He smiled, picturing the two men stumbling through the woods, dehydrated and tired.

“Finding water is the least of their worries,” Benny said sadistically. “The hunt is about to begin—and that means the fun is about to begin.” His eyes glowed with an unnatural cruelty. “Did you bring back the flashlight and compass like I told you?”

“Sure, Benny. But I don’t get it. What do we know about tracking somebody down in the woods? I’ve never done a job like this. What if they get away?”

White’s lip curled back into a caricature of a smile. “Just so happens the only thing I ever learned from my old man was how to hunt and track. The only time he thought I could do anything half right was when I’d track down an animal and kill it. White’s memories rushed forward, melting with the present, the smell of the pine needles and redwood trees transporting him back to his unhappy youth growing up in Oregon.

“You used to hunt?”

“Yeah. My old man lived to hunt. He said the thrill was in the ‘chase’. At least he was right about something.” A cruel smile twisted his lips. “He taught me a lot about tracking, and living off the land.”

Bernard shook his head in disbelief. The two had never shared personal details of their past, and this revelation took him by surprise. This was a far cry from the Benny he knew.

“Just follow me, and I guarantee we’ll get them. I’m tired of the same old routine. The chase will be exciting.”

“I just hope we catch ‘em soon. My whole arm feels like it’s on fire,” Al Bernard whined.

“Shut up about your arm, will you? I’ve already told you, I’m not taking you to a doctor until we finish this job. So I suggest you shut your yap and get moving!”

End of Chapter 7