

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 8

The two detectives trudged on, Sam in the lead, having earned the honor by proving himself a valuable scout. For the past hour, it seemed to Hutch that an opaque, gray curtain had dropped over his eyes. Images blurred, dissolving into colorless, indefinable shapes. It was getting dark, and he hoped Starsky would soon find a place to hole up for the night. Though his spirit was willing, Hutch wasn't sure he could keep up much longer. For the time being, he just concentrated on staying within arm's length of his partner, but the pounding in his head was beginning to make even that small task near impossible.

Starsky realized that in his eagerness to put as much distance as possible between them and the two gunmen, he was pushing Hutch pretty hard. In the last twenty minutes, he'd watched his partner's face fade to an ashen gray, and his steps grow more labored. But Starsky was spurred on by the reality that all that stood between them and the assassins was one bullet in the gun he'd confiscated from the shooter, and two shells in the Magnum. He wouldn't kid himself. He knew that Hutch was in no condition to fire a gun. So the odds in their favor of coming through this alive were on a downhill slide.

He stole another glance back at Hutch, just in time to see him stumble, and grab for the nearest tree to keep from falling. Starsky quickly reached out and caught him with a steady hand. Wobbly-kneed, and dizzy, Hutch finally righted himself, but Starsky was reluctant to relinquish his grip. “You doin’ okay?” he asked.

“Me? Yeah,” Hutch lied, unsuccessfully. “Never been better.”

Starsky wasn't buying it. He realized Hutch couldn't go much further. “You're a lousy liar, Hutchinson,” he said, half-seriously. “Look, I promise I'm gonna find us a place to hide out overnight. Can ya hang on a little longer, till the sun goes down?”

Hutch raised his face, clearly confused by what Starsky had said.

“Hutch? You okay?” Concerned by his reaction, Starsky carefully eased him to the ground. Hutch still didn't answer.

“Talk to me...Hutch?”

“It...it's already pretty dark, Starsk.” Hutch looked toward the sky, then around them. “I think maybe we need to stop till morning...that's all,” he stuttered, an element of anxiety straining his voice.

Starsky blanched when he realized what Hutch was trying to say. He discreetly looked around them and saw the daylight still plainly filtering through the canopy of trees. A knot of fear pooled in his stomach. Anxious not to alarm Hutch, he lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Yeah...right...I think you’re right, buddy. I just got’a find us a safe place.”

Starsky had to know. At the risk of scaring Hutch out of his wits, he had to know just how much he could see. “But first, do me a favor, okay?” Starsky held up three fingers before Hutch’s face. “Take a look here, and tell me—how many fingers?”

It seemed a nonsensical question to Hutch, and it irritated him that Starsky was playing stupid games at a time like this. “What? What the hell are you talking about, Starsky? How many fingers?”

“Humor me, okay? Tell me how many fingers you see.”

Hutch squinted his eyes, straining to focus on the pale, blurry image before him. As he began to comprehend his inability to perform this simple task, a myriad of emotions flitted across his face, none of them encouraging to Starsky.

“Two...I...I mean...three...no...” He stuttered, uncertain. Slowly he reached out before him and grasped Starsky’s hand. “Starsk?” His grip tightened. “What...what’s going on? I can’t focus...” His voice diminished with each syllable.

Starsky was silent, not trusting his own voice to speak. In that instant, the reality of just how critical their situation was, began to hit home. How would they get out of these woods with Hutch injured, and gradually going blind? Not to mention staying just a step ahead of two professional hit men? One look at Hutch’s face, and Starsky knew he had to keep his head, or they’d both be dead before daybreak.

“It’s okay...” he whispered, as he pulled Hutch toward him, and wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders. “It’s gonna be okay, buddy. It’s just a temporary thing. You lost a little blood when that bullet grazed you.” When Hutch’s hand tightened on his arm, Starsky knew he wasn’t reassured. “Come on, partner, we’ve been through a lot worse,” he cajoled. “We’re gonna get outta here, I’ll get you to a doctor, and they’ll fix you up good as new. I promise.”

Hutch needed to believe him. He pulled back from Starsky and tried vainly to see his eyes. Hutch knew he could always read the truth in those eyes. “Starsk, I’m going blind, aren’t I?” he choked out.

“No,” Starsky answered adamantly. “I told you—it’s temporary.”

Hutch reached up and unconsciously rubbed his eyes, as if doing so would bring his sight back. “Starsky,” he said soberly, “listen to me.” He looked up and saw the

blurred image of his partner's face. "You can't get out of these woods alive if I'm stumbling along behind you, slowing you down every step of the way."

"What are you sayin'?" He already had a pretty good idea where this was leading, and he didn't like it one bit.

"What I'm saying is, you and Sam should go on without me."

"No way."

"Just how do you think we're going to get out of here?" Hutch challenged.

"Same way we get outta any jam—together." Starsky's voice was resolute and matter-of-fact.

Hutch took a deep breath and loosened his iron grip on Starsky's arm.

"Hey..."

Hutch looked up at him again. "Hey, what?"

"You believe me, don't 'cha?"

Hutch nodded, and gave him a half-hearted smile. "Yeah..."

Not satisfied, Starsky pressed further. "Do you trust me, or not?"

Exasperated, Hutch closed his eyes a moment before answering. "Now what kind of a dumb question is that, Starsky? You know I trust you. Think I'd turn you loose with a loaded gun around Sam and me if I didn't trust you?" Hutch's lips twitched, almost smiling, but then went somber again. Starsky didn't laugh.

The silence hung heavily between them. The question still unanswered. When Hutch raised his face, all traces of humor had vanished. His voice raw with emotion, he whispered, "Do you really need to ask?"

Starsky saw the desperation in his eyes, and heard the pain in his voice. Reaching down, he laid his hand over Hutch's. "If you really trust me, Hutch, you know I won't let ya down. I say we're gonna get outta here, and I mean it. Me and Thee. Hmmm?" Starsky waited expectantly.

"Okay...all right....Me and Thee." Hutch knew it was pointless to argue. Starsky was too stubborn—and they were wasting time. "Just tell me what you want me to do." There was no doubt in his mind that if anyone could find a way out, Starsky could. And maybe he was right about the blindness. Maybe it wouldn't get any worse...maybe it was

temporary. Hutch pushed back the ensuing panic, refusing to think of the possibility that it wasn't.

Starsky looked around, noticing for the first time that Sam was no where in sight. "Now where did that big goomba go?" he mumbled.

"What?"

"Sam...where'd he go? I don't have time to fool around lookin' for him. Damn!" Starsky stood up, frustrated and torn between his concern for the dog and his unwillingness to leave Hutch alone and unprotected. Sensing Starsky's dilemma, Hutch spoke the words he knew were rushing through his partner's mind.

"Go look for him, Starsk. I'll wait here. You can find him faster without me."

Starsky hesitated. He knew neither of them would willingly leave the dog behind; but he also knew time was precious, and they had little to spare. He looked around, then back at Hutch, sitting on the ground, looking helpless and scared.

"Starsk. I mean it. Just hurry, okay? I'll be fine."

Knowing that indecisiveness was not a luxury he could afford, Starsky quickly pulled the confiscated pistol from his belt and handed it to Hutch. "Okay. Take this, and keep low. If you hear anything, just try to stay outta sight. I'm gonna look around for him, but I won't go far and I won't be gone more than ten minutes."

"Got it." Hutch nodded.

"And I'm gonna kill that big dummy when I do find him!"

"Hey." Hutch smiled. "You're lecturing me about being careful and being quiet. And you're about to charge out of here like a bull elephant on a tirade. Go easy on Sam. Okay? He's just a dog, you know."

"Yeah? Well try telling him that."

As Starsky set off in search of Sam, he remembered another time when he'd left Hutch alone in the woods. The results had been disastrous. When their plane had gone down in the vast wilderness area of the Klamack forest, he'd been totally unprepared. The experience he'd gained then gave him the knowledge and confidence he'd need to get them out of here alive this time.



Sam wandered ahead, stopping occasionally to sniff some unfamiliar oddity. He sensed that things weren't going well, that both of his humans were edgy and serious, like sometimes when they were working. Though many humans wouldn't believe it possible,

the dog did comprehend the difference between work and play. He was sensitive to the changes in Starsky's and Hutch's moods, intensity, anxiety level—and especially, fear.

The thing that unnerved Sam the most right now was Hutch's strange behavior. The Light One, usually sure-footed and confident, now seemed hesitant and insecure with every step. More than once, the dog had gently guided him around some impediment blocking their way.

So far, it was unclear to Sam what was expected of him. He figured somehow, he'd just know when the time came...like earlier, in the ravine. His heart had pounded fiercely when the armed man had been bearing down on The Dark One. The rottweiler hadn't waited for the command to attack; he'd acted entirely on the need to protect someone he loved. But they hadn't seen another human for over two hours, and he suspected the danger had passed. So why were things still so tense?

Sam tried not to stray far, but when he caught sight of his arch enemy, 'the squirrel', it was hard to remember he had a greater mission. Long ago, he'd declared war on any, and all rodents who dared cross the boundaries into his domain. In doing so, he'd entertained himself endless hours, spying on, and stalking the fast-footed, furry, little creatures, never once successfully bringing about the demise of a single prey. Now he was finding, to his dismay, that they seemed to have free reign in this strange, new frontier. He zigzagged back and forth, his nose to the ground, enjoying the chase, but guiltily knowing his humans weren't going to be too happy if they called and he didn't come. Still, the diversion was too great to pass up!

It had been hours since Sam had eaten the hamburgers Hutch gave him in the car. Between hunger pangs, and his instinctual need to chase the squirrels, the dog was destined for trouble. In the quiet forest, it was easy to detect the rustling leaves as tiny squirrel feet scurried in every direction. Deeper he went, disregarding time and distance.

After aimlessly chasing several admirable foes, Sam zeroed in on one particularly big, fat, gray squirrel. The creature's considerable experience evading larger, cagier adversaries than a domesticated dog gave him the edge he needed to outfox the enemy. Oblivious to the cunning and dexterity of his foe, the rottweiler pursued the rodent with abandon, crashing through the bushes, over rotted, fallen tree limbs, his big paws, plodding along, with little chance of success. The squirrel, tiring of the contest, bounded up a great, old redwood, scampering to the top, ending the competition in the blink of an eye. Sam's skidded to a stop, astounded by his prey's disappearance. His head lifted high, he sniffed the air, trying to pick up the scent. But instead of squirrel, his snout detected the aroma of food—faint, but distinct.

Mr. Squirrel was forgotten, as the rottie followed his nose, sniffing and snuffling out the smell, growing stronger, and more appealing as he neared the source. Finally, the dog broke through to a small clearing. The scent was strong now, as he neared a circle of burned logs and charred rocks, the site of a long ago camp fire. The delicious aroma of cooked meat juices, undetectable by the human nose, still permeated the rocks, but left no

tangible traces behind. Sam licked the rocks, but found only a slight memory of the meat juices that had once sizzled over the hot stones.

Disappointed, the dog resorted to exploring the area near the camp site, just in case any precious crumb had been left behind. Less than six feet behind the ancient cook fire was a large, dark aperture in the rock wall. Sam advanced cautiously, not quite certain this adventure was worth the risk. His sensitive nose poked and prodded the dirt, searching for anything that might pose a threat. Heaven forbid he should run into another one of those strange critters with the twitchy tail and unpleasant odor! He detected the scents of squirrel, rabbit, and some creature he couldn't identify. Only a faint whiff of man lingered near the mouth of the cave. The interior of the chamber was cool and very black. Except for a few insects, no living thing appeared to lurk in the darkness.

Satisfied there was nothing warranting his attention, Sam returned to the cook site to take one last tour. At the sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs, the dog's ears perked. Someone, or something, was approaching the clearing. Sam drew his body up into an aggressive stance, hair raised and muscles poised to spring. His keen eyes strained to see beyond the curtain of vegetation and trees. When Starsky's beloved face appeared through the brush, Sam's long tail swished back and forth like a windshield wiper. That is, until he saw the look on The Dark One's face.

“There you are!”

Uh-oh...Busted. It was obvious that Starsky was NOT happy. Lowering his head, and drooping his tail between his legs, Sam tried very hard to look remorseful and apologetic for taking off on a 'wild squirrel chase'. Of course, that wasn't an easy thing to do, considering the fun he'd had chasing them, and exploring the cave.

“I've been lookin' all over for you, ya big dumb mutt!”

Apparently, Sam decided, the tail drooping thing wasn't working.

Daring to slink forward a couple of steps, the dog chanced a quick glance up at The Dark One's face. Hmm... He sounded a lot madder than he looked. Encouraged by this sign of good fortune, he decided to try a more direct approach. Tail wagging, and tongue lolling, he cantered up to The Dark One, reared up, placing both paws on Starsky's shoulders, and proceeded to give him a thorough face washing.

His anger now a fleeting memory, Starsky took the big canine's head in his hands and brought them eye to eye. “You had me worried,” he chastised. “Don't I have enough on my mind without you takin' off for the wild, blue, yonder? Huh?” Again the huge tongue shot out, bathing The Dark One's face with affectionate slobber. Starsky reluctantly chuckled, and scratched the dog's ears before peeling the oversized paws off his shoulders.

Sam trotted back to the site of the old campfire and wagged his tail. He looked at Starsky and woofed playfully, hoping the man would have better luck scaring up a morsel of food than he'd had. "What 'cha got, boy?" Starsky went over to where the dog stood, and saw the remnants of an earlier camper's presence.

What really caught his attention though, was the opening in the rocks about six feet past the timbers and cooking stones. A cave! Knowing how nosy Sam was, Starsky figured the dog had already checked for inhabitants, so he bent over slightly and entered the dark, cool chamber. Without a flash light or lighter, his vision was limited; but he could see enough to know the cave was somewhat dry, and may be a feasible shelter for the night.

Sam stood at the doorway and chuffed softly to get the man's attention. Starsky came back out, then stooped down and patted the dog's head. "I guess you expect me to think this is why you didn't obey me," he said good-naturedly. "You don't fool me for a minute, Big Dog. You were chasing squirrels, weren't you?"

Sam's tail wagged furiously, and with it, his whole back end. Whether Starsky believed he had sought out the cave, or found it by accident, it was apparent he was pleased. Sam saw no reason not to take credit.

"Okay, let's go back and get Hutch. He's all alone, thanks to you. We got'a hurry if we're gonna get settled in before nightfall. So stay close," he admonished the dog. "Heel!" Duly, chastised, Sam fell into step next to Starsky's right leg and stuck close the entire way back.

End of Chapter 8