

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 9

As Starsky and the dog approached Hutch’s hiding place, Sam trotted on ahead, and enthusiastically greeted his other human. “Where’ve you been, Big Dog?” Hutch half-heartedly tried to keep Sam from licking him from ear to ear. “Been getting into mischief? Bet you were chasing those poor, old squirrels again, weren’t you?” Sam’s big mouth hung open, his tongue lolling out one side, giving the impression he was smiling at Hutch’s uncanny insight.

“For once, that wild streak of his has paid off.” Starsky squatted down in front of Hutch. “He’s found us a place to spend the night. It’s a cave, and it’s pretty close by. We can hike there in less than ten minutes. You up to it?” Starsky reached out and gently touched a fresh spot of blood on the bandanna tied around Hutch’s head. This wasn’t good. The bleeding had started again, and Hutch looked even paler than before.

Hutch pulled back, sharply drawing in his breath. “Watch it, Starsk, that hurts.”

“Sorry.” Starsky tried not to sound concerned. “Just wondered if it was bleeding again.”

“I don’t think so. But...”

“But what?”

“I think my eyesight’s getting worse; so we’d better move fast, while I can at least make out shapes.”

Disheartened by Hutch’s words and the renewed bleeding, Starsky felt a lump in his throat. “Okay. That’s okay. I’ll let Sam go ahead; he can warn us if they try and cut us off.”

“I’ve been thinking, Starsk. It’s still just possible those guys didn’t follow us. I mean, we haven’t seen or heard any sign of them since we left the clearing back there. Sam would have alerted us if they were close by. Maybe this trek through the woods is more than they bargained for, and they decided to call it quits.” Even as he spoke the words, Hutch realized this was probably just hopeful thinking on his part.

“I hope you’re right. But I don’t think we should assume anything yet. Let’s head for the cave, hole up for the night, and then I’ll scout ahead in the morning before we start back toward the highway.”

Hutch nodded. Everything Starsky said made sense, and right now, he'd just have to rely on his partner's good judgment.

"I'll guide you through the trees. There's no trail or anything, so it's rough to navigate. But that could work to our advantage; harder for them to track us." Starsky helped Hutch to his feet and waited for him to regain his balance.

The dog, who'd stood by watching, wondered again what was wrong with Hutch. When Hutch seemed to be steady on his feet, Sam eased himself against The Light One's leg, offering his support in the only way he knew how. In return, he gently patted the dog's head.

Starsky quietly watched Sam's noble act of compassion, and the way it seemed to comfort Hutch. His heart swelled with pride and love for this gentle animal, and thought again, how ironic that only a twist of fate had brought him into their lives.

Sensing The Dark One's eyes on him, Sam looked up, watching for a signal. Starsky gave the dog the command he'd been waiting for, "Sam, Go." The rottweiler turned and headed back toward the abandoned camp site, his two humans following closely behind. He moved with ease, while they laboriously climbed over jagged rocks, and pushed onward through the heavy undergrowth, Starsky beating the path ahead of Hutch, clearing any obstacles he could in advance. When the men reached their last major hurdle, a gigantic, rotting tree trunk, the dog realized they'd stopped, and came back to wait for them.

"Oh, man, I forgot about this tree. This could be a little tricky," Starsky said. "It didn't look that high a few minutes ago," He ran a hand through his uncombed, curly locks, then walked the length of the tree, starting at the end where the uprooted base was exposed. Beneath the bare roots, the ground was soft and crumbling, eventually falling off into a steep drop. It appeared to Starsky the tree had been growing along the slope, and as it matured, the soil eroded, until the earth could no longer support its massive weight. Going around that end was not an option. Walking toward the top of the tree, he could see that most of it extended out over the cliff's edge. It was amazing to him that the enormous tree had grown as large as it had without toppling over. Discouraged, he decided there was only one solution.

"All right...okay...I'm gonna boost you up. I want ya to get a good grip, and wait up there till I can get across. Then you can lower yourself down, and I'll help ya to the ground. Okay?"

"Sounds easy enough," Hutch said agreeably. In reality, he had his doubts, knowing his partner's penchant for oversimplifying things.

Starsky formed a stirrup with his hands and bent over slightly. "Okay, Blintz. Foot here. And up."

Hutch did as told, and flexed his knees before springing up, then landing in a belly flop on top of the wide tree trunk. Though he hung on for dear life, the slimy lichen growing on the decomposing wood made it impossible to keep from slipping. “Starsky!”

As Hutch disappeared over the top of the log, Starsky made a mad dash to scale the wall of wood, clutching and grabbing for his partner, just beyond his reach. Unable to find anything stationary to hang onto, Hutch tumbled over the other side, heading for a hard fall. Sam stood by watching the humans’ antics with interest until he realized Hutch was coming over the tree in a most unusual manner. What fun! Loping up to join in the game, the big dog unintentionally became a cushion between the blond and the hard ground. As Hutch landed ungracefully on the stunned rottweiler, they both began a wild, downhill slide on a carpet of slippery, damp leaves and pine needles.

Starsky’s head appeared above the log just in time to see Hutch and Sam—arms and legs flailing—skid another six feet down before colliding with a small stand of pine saplings. Scared out of his wits that they were hurt, Starsky slid over the log and jogged down the incline to where man and dog lay in an undignified heap. Slowly, Hutch raised his head, trying to untangle himself from Sam, who had ended up on top of him, spread-eagle. Sam slipped to the ground next to Hutch.

“Hutch! Hutch, you hurt?” Starsky dropped to his knees, taking Hutch’s face in his hands, searching him for any signs of injury. Sam sat up, a goofy expression on his face, wearing a blob of rotted leaf goop stuck to the top of his big noggin like a beanie cap.

“I don’t think so,” Hutch answered, reaching up and gingerly touching the already tender wound on his head. “What about Sam?”

Upon hearing his name, Sam pressed his cold nose against Hutch’s neck, tail wagging, communicating his thanks for the exciting ride downhill.

“Looks like he’s fine,” Starsky answered distractedly, running his hands up and down Hutch’s arms, then his legs, still not satisfied nothing was broken. “Can ya stand up?”

“Yeah, I think so. Just give me a hand.” Holding onto Starsky for support, Hutch rose slowly on shaky legs. “You know, sliding downhill like that’s pretty scary when everything is already just a blur. For all I knew, we were headed for the edge of a cliff.”

Starsky’s mouth went dry. That thought hadn’t crossed his mind. He’d been worried about broken bones, while Hutch and Sam could have ended up at the bottom of a cliff. Peering past the stand of saplings, he was stunned to see that some unexplainable phenomena must have enabled Hutch to sense what he couldn’t see.

Distraught, Starsky hurried to apologize. "I'm sorry, Hutch. I should'a found a better way than to expect you to climb over something that dangerous. Are ya sure you're okay?" Hutch couldn't make out Starsky's face, but he heard the anxiety in his voice.

"Forget it. I'm fine." Hutch brushed himself off, picking dried leaves from inside his collar. Sam continued wagging his tail, a big canine smile animating his face. "This whole damn trip's been doomed from the start," Hutch grumbled. "Let's just get to the cave before it's too dark for you to find your way back there."

Chastened, Starsky brushed as much of the dirt and leaves off Hutch's clothes as he could. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a soft, twelve-foot, nylon dog lead and threaded it through his belt loop, then attached the fastener. "Here," he said, sliding the end with the grip over Hutch's wrist. He placed the soft handle in Hutch's palm. "If you slip again, I got ya, okay?"

Hutch's fingers closed around the leash. "Right," he answered cynically. "This way all three of us do a kamikaze run down the side of the mountain." When Starsky accepted the cutting remark without a comeback, Hutch immediately regretted the thoughtless words. "Look, I didn't mean that, Starsk. My head's killing me, and that fall seems to have made it worse. I didn't mean to take it out on you. None of this is your fault."

"It's okay. I guess I had it comin' anyway. That wasn't exactly a brilliant maneuver on my part."

"You're doing the best you can. That's all either of us can do. I'm just...just tired...that's all." Trying to convey with touch what he couldn't say with words, he reached out and laid a hand on Starsky's shoulder. He felt a little of the tension ease from Starsky's body.

"Come on, Blintz. It ain't exactly the Hilton, but I think you'll be able to get a good night's rest, anyway."

Totally forgotten by his humans, Sam woofed indignantly. "Sorry, Big Dog," Starsky said, squatting down to brush the debris from the dog's head. He looped an affectionate arm around Sam for a quick hug. "Good thing you were down there to break Hutch's fall. Think I should recommend you to Cap'n Dobby for a medal when we get home?" The rottie barked a little louder this time, giving Starsky's suggestion his stamp of approval. The dark-haired detective stood up. "Okay, then. Sam, Go!" Starsky reached around and placed Hutch's hand on his shoulder. "Hang onto me, partner. And don't worry. If you let go, I've still got ya on a leash," he said, snickering.

"Cute, Starsky...cute. But if you say 'heel', I swear, I'll deck you!" Both men laughed. Beautiful music to the big dog's ears, as he plunged back into woods and headed toward the old camp fire.

Hutch followed, keeping his hand firmly planted on Starsky's shoulder, as they followed Sam to the cave.



Al Bernard mopped sweat from his grimy face with the stained sleeve of his jacket. "Wait up, Benny. I need to rest," he complained.

Benny White knelt on one knee for a closer look at the slight indentation in the mud and leaves, trying to determine if it could have been made by a man's shoe. The animal tracks next to it definitely looked like dog tracks. It wasn't much, but the closest thing to a clue he'd found so far. He was beginning to lose his cool. They'd been tracking the two cops for nearly three hours and hadn't seen them once. He knew one was wounded, and had thought the chase would end quickly. Listening to Al's incessant bitching was getting old fast. If he didn't shut up soon, White thought he'd be tempted to put a bullet between the complaining man's eyes out of sheer need for a little peace and quiet.

"It's getting dark, you idiot. If we don't catch up with them soon, we'll have to make camp."

"My arm's killin' me. And I'm hungry. I still don't see why we can't just leave 'em out here to die. We can still collect our fee. Morrisetti won't know. By the time anybody realizes they ain't coming back, the scavengers in these woods will have taken care of the bodies."

White spun around, roughly grabbing his partner by the front of his shirt, jerking him up, nose to nose. "I'm not telling you again," he gritted out between clinched teeth, "we're going to finish this job. There's more here at stake than money. Morrisetti will put a price on our heads if he finds out we screwed up. The only way we can come out of this alive is to fix it."

"Okay...okay...lighten up, will you?" Al held his hands up in supplication. "I'm with you. I'm just sayin—"

"Can it!" White shoved the larger man forward. "I'll tell you when to stop. And it won't be before dark! Now, I think they may have gone through here, so get moving."

End of Chapter 9