

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 11

“Benny, I can’t go another step. It’s too dark to keep lookin’ anyway.” Al Bernard tripped over a tree root, nearly falling headfirst. Grabbing for the nearest stationary object, he stumbled into White, almost toppling them both.

“Watch it, you clumsy oaf!” White shoved the other man back, causing him to actually take a dive this time. “We’ll go just a little further. The battery on this damn lantern is about to go out.” He rattled the flashlight, as if doing so could miraculously recharge the failing C-cells.

“How are we going to camp out here? We ain’t got any sleeping bags or nothing.”

“How did you get into our line of work, being such a wimp?” White sneered.

“I ain’t a wimp. I’m just asking a question.”

“Listen, I know what I’m doing. We might be able to slip up on them, now that it’s dark. Don’t forget, the blond one’s wounded. They don’t have a flashlight. and they don’t have any water. I’m betting they’ve stopped somewhere to rest.”

Al Bernard started to argue, then thought better of it. There was something in the tone of White’s voice that implied he’d be wise to stop while he was ahead.



Starsky woke with a start. His surroundings a sea of darkness, he was momentarily confused. He wasn’t sure what had startled him, until he heard the deep growl from Sam, alerting him that something was wrong. The dog crept toward the cave entrance, his body low to the ground. Starsky eased up and crawled along the cave floor, following Sam. As they neared the entrance, Starsky whispered a command to the dog, afraid he’d give away their presence to anyone, or anything nearing their hiding place.

“Sam! Wait!” Starsky whispered loudly. With the moonlight as a backdrop, he could see the dog’s silhouette still advancing toward the camouflaged doorway. “Sam!”

This time the canine halted in his tracks, tossing a look back at The Dark One. Sam fought the primal urge to curl back his lip and snarl at the approaching intruders.

Fortunately, his desire to obey Starsky was stronger. Muscles taunt, and eyes wide with anticipation, he waited impatiently for Starsky to give him the signal to launch an assault.

As Starsky eased up next to Sam, he heard the sounds of masculine voices drifting on the cool night breeze. He listened intently, hoping to figure out which direction they were coming from, and how close they were. “Terrific,” he groaned. “I think they’ve caught up with us, boy.” Starsky dropped onto his stomach, pulling Sam down with him as he went. “We can watch ‘em from here. You just put a lid on it, okay?” He felt the dog’s muscles tense beneath his hand, and tried to calm him with a gentle word. “It’s okay, Big Dog. It’s okay.”

Sam obviously didn’t agree with this approach. Nonetheless, he lowered his head and watched quietly as the bushes on the far side of the old camp fire rustled and parted, revealing the two gunmen who’d attacked his humans that afternoon. Starsky’s grip on the dog tightened. “It’s okay,” he whispered soothingly. Sam’s ears pricked, and his body trembled with excitement.

“You said we were gonna stop half an hour ago, Benny. I’m exhausted.”

Starsky saw the dim beam of a flashlight before the two men stepped into the open. The breath caught in his throat, hoping they wouldn’t realize that he, Hutch, and Sam were only a few feet away. What if Hutch wakes up and calls me? The thought made Starsky’s blood run cold.

“Let me see your hand,” the other voice said. Starsky watched tensely as the stout man who Sam had attacked earlier in the day, held out his injured wrist for his companion to see. “The swelling’s already starting to go down. I can’t believe this is what you’ve been complaining about all afternoon.”

“Oh yeah?” Bernard’s voice rose in anger. He was beginning to tire of White’s constant bullying and insults. “That’s easy for you to say cause you’re not the one who’s been in pain! I been telling you all afternoon that that damn mutt might’a had rabies, or lockjaw, or some other crap that we don’t know about. I bet if he’d nailed you, we’d already be back in LA and you would have seen a doctor!”

“Can you bend your fingers? Can you hold a gun?”

Al reached under his jacket and pulled out his 38. Even though his hand was tender, his beefy fingers easily wrapped around its stock, demonstrating he wasn’t out of commission. “Okay, I can hold a gun, but that doesn’t mean it’s not serious,” he argued.

Disappointment coursed through Starsky, realizing it was two against one again. Earlier, he’d thought he’d only have to contend with one enemy.

“Okay. If it’ll make you shut up, we’ll stop here for a few minutes; then we move on. I still think our best chance is to surprise them while they’re asleep. I’m telling you,

we better catch them by morning. Morrisetti may already have his goons out looking for us.”

“Thanks, Benny,” Bernard said earnestly, having won what he considered a major concession. “A little rest’ll help. Although, I don’t see why we can’t just stay here till sunrise...” The bigger man’s voice trailed off, at White’s look, warning that he should leave well enough alone.

“Hey!” Bernard spotted the ruins of the old campfire. “Look at this! I think they’ve been here, Benny!”

The taller man walked over to the campfire, squatted down, and cautiously touched the rocks, testing for heat. “I doubt it. This campfire’s old. The stones are cold, and there’s no sign of tracks around here.”

“This looks like a good place to spend the rest of the night,” Al said eagerly. “We could get some shut-eye and start out again as soon as the sun rises.”

Starsky’s heart was pounding like a drum. If Al convinced Benny to stay on until daybreak, they’d most likely spot the opening to the cave. What if he hadn’t done a good enough job of camouflaging it? What if he, Hutch, or Sam made a sound and alerted the men to their presence? Next to him, Sam’s body still trembled with anticipation. When Al Bernard spoke, the dog recognized his voice and became all the more incensed.

Starsky took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Panicking was the worst possible thing he could do now. He began slowly backing toward the dark end of the cave, quietly pulling Sam along with him. In the inky blackness, he felt his way along, finally locating Hutch. When he reached his partner, Starsky clamped his hand over Hutch’s mouth and whispered in his ear. “It’s me. Don’t move. Don’t make a sound. They’re right outside. We’ll have to be very quiet, and maybe they’ll move on. Okay?”

Hutch nodded his head silently, and Starsky removed his hand. Now fully awake, Hutch could hear the voices of the two men. It sounded like they were arguing. Sam circled around to Hutch’s left side and nuzzled against his shoulder, happy to see Hutch awake and alert.

Starsky moved his head close to Hutch’s again. “They’re Morrisetti’s men all right. Calling each other Al and Benny. Mean anything to you?”

Lowering his voice to a whisper Hutch leaned in close to Starsky’s face. “No. Probably out-of-towners. Could we take them? Right here...right now? I mean, we’ve got the element of surprise on our side.”

“I thought about it,” Starsky answered. “We’ve got three shots, no light, and once they know we’re here, we’ve no choice but to fight our way out. I might be able to take ‘em out with three bullets, but it’s doubtful, shooting in the dark like that.” Starsky felt

Hutch's head drop forward, dejectedly. Hoping to ease the tension, he added humorously, "I mean, the whole Department knows I'm the crack shot in this partnership, but even a terrific marksman like me needs a little light." Hutch didn't laugh.

Starsky tried another approach. "Hey, I promised to get you outta here, and I will. I just don't think this is the way to go. If I miss, they've got us pinned down with no way to retreat. And they have a flashlight, Hutch. A flashlight. Kinda tips the scales in their favor." In his mind's eye, Starsky could see the frustration on Hutch's face, the feeling of inadequacy, knowing he couldn't help his partner take out the two gunmen. Starsky reached around and lay his hand on the back of Hutch's neck, giving it a little squeeze. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

Hutch nodded, silently accepting Starsky's line of reasoning.

While his two humans were engrossed in conversation, Sam eased up and quietly crept back toward the cave opening. He knew Starsky had ordered him to stand down, but like any good soldier, he knew his duty. He'd obey his orders from The Dark One, but he'd also be waiting, ready to spring into action if the gunmen made a move against his humans. Sam lay down, flattening himself on the cave floor, ears peaked, and eyes sharply focused on the mouth of the cave. He waited patiently...ready...and prepared to kill, if necessary. The minutes crept by slowly.



"Let's get moving."

Sam sat up at the sound of Benny White's voice rousing his partner from his brief rest.

"How far do you think they could have gotten?"

Sam's head cocked to one side, listening to the voices that posed a threat to his humans. Though the hair on the big dog's neck bristled, he maintained his post and his silence. One step in the direction of the cave, and he'd take them down.

Hearing the men talking again, Starsky patted Hutch's forearm, and whispered. "Sit tight. I'm gonna listen and see if they're leavin'."

He quietly inched his way back toward the opening, where he bumped into Sam, startling them both. Starsky threw both arms around the rottie, making certain he didn't dart out of the cave. He could feel Sam's heart hammering beneath his hand, first rapid, then gradually slowing back to normal.

"It'll be daylight soon. Let's hope we run up on them before the sun rises. If we don't, we'll lose our advantage."

“If I don’t get some food in me soon, I’m gonna pass out, Benny...”

Gradually, the voices grew faint, as the two men hiked further away from the campsite. Sam squirmed, letting Starsky know he didn’t appreciate being sneaked up on and held prisoner just when he was getting ready to let the bad guys know who was boss. When Starsky released the dog, he hit the floor of the cave with a thud, before righting himself and sounding off with a big, loud sneeze.

“What the devil were you doin’ up here, Big Dog?” Starsky took the dog’s face in his hands. “What am I gonna do with you? Huh? I thought you were back there with your head on Hutch’s lap. But were you there? No. No, instead, you were up here, gettin’ ready to launch World War III all by yourself, weren’t ya?” Starsky scratched Sam’s ears, then gave him a loving pat on the head. “You could’a given us away, ya know that?”

Since Starsky’s voice didn’t sound mad, Sam took this as a commendation for a job well done and slurped his big tongue over Starsky’s face in response.

“Cut it out, ya big goomba!” Starsky chastised good-naturedly.

The immediate danger having passed, Starsky inched his way toward the back of the cave to let Hutch know the two men were gone. If his estimates were correct, it would be daylight in another hour or so, and the three of them would have to make a break for it. As Starsky filled Hutch in on the plan, he didn’t notice Sam slipping quietly out through the camouflaged opening to the cave.

End of Chapter 11