

“If that animal can’t provide for us then we’ll stop providing for him,” mom said while stirring their last stew before hibernation.

“He’s getting better, mom! He can tell left from right now,” Callum said.

“Yeah, half the time,” she replied.

Callum shrank, “Please mom, I know I can train him,”

“Callum, you know that if a farmhound doesn’t learn to herd by their second year they never will,” she said.

“But how can you know that if no one even *tries*?”

His mother set down her wooden spoon and turned her attention to Callum.

“We barely have enough food for ourselves Callum, would you have us starve to feed Boy?” she said.

What she said made sense, but it didn’t sit right with him, and he couldn’t find the words to explain why. He slouched his way out of the kitchen, threw on a coat and slumped down onto the grass outside. The frigid breeze cut through his coat and carried the scent of onions and beef from mom’s stew. Callum *hated* onions.

He couldn’t spot Boy out in the field; he was probably off chasing his tail again. If only he could find a way to get the hound to understand him so he could train him, and his parents would have to keep him. He grabbed a stick and swung it back and forth listening to the air hiss.

“WOOF!”

Callum jumped up from the grass. “How did you sneak up on me like that Boy?” He was always amazed by his silent approaches despite almost being as tall as him. Slobber dripped from Boy’s muzzle – more slobber than usual. He had dropped a mauled scrounger in the grass. Another of Boy’s presents.

“Thank you, maybe we can cook this up for the winter,” Callum said, although there was barely any meat on it.

Boy looked up at Callum, then down at the stick in his hand.

“Fetch?” Callum asked.

Boy cocked his head.

“Fetch!” Callum hurled the stick with all his might and Boy sprinted off. Moments later, he returned with the stick, dropped it at Callum’s feet, and crouched down.

“WOOF!”

Callum sighed, “We don’t have time to play fetch, you have to learn how to herd sheep or mom and dad will get rid of you.”

“WOOF!”

Well, he couldn’t argue with that. He chuckled the stick again trying to make the most of his time with the hound, when an idea occurred to him. The next time Boy brought the stick back, he broke it in half – their signal that fetch was over. With a huff, Boy sank into the grass.

“Boy, herding time, come!” Callum led Boy to the quiet pasture where the plump sheep grazed and pulled his coat tighter against the wind.

“Go Boy!” The farmhound raced off into the pasture with his head lowered and teeth bared. Shuffling and bleating, the sheep clumped together trying to keep safe from the huge black hound. Callum signaled ‘left’ with a whistle – a sharp rising tone - and Boy circled the sheep and guided them to the left. Callum signaled to the right – a slow falling tone - and Boy kept going left.

“No Boy! The other way,” He tried the right signal again prompting Boy to go left with *more* conviction. Callum tried the left signal, just for fun, and Boy switched direction. What was that hound thinking? He whistled the signal for forward – two staccato notes – and Boy drove the sheep in the direction he faced.

*Okay, let’s try something,* Callum signaled left, and Boy circled right. Callum whistled the left signal twice more until Boy circled around the sheep three-quarters of the way then signaled forward, so with a few extra steps Boy managed to wrangle the sheep to the left. Callum signaled right and Boy went right, then Callum signaled forward. *It worked!*

After replicating the process a few more times, Callum called Boy to rest, and the plump sheep resumed grazing. Boy, panting, plopped down beside Callum.

“I knew we shouldn’t have given up on you,” Callum scratched behind his ear. The sun would set soon bringing the first freeze. Plant shells peeked from the ground ready to encase themselves for the winter, the animals grew lethargic and fat, and the air stilled. He soaked in the last hours of good weather with Boy by his side.

“Let’s get mom and dad to show them before the sun sets,” Callum said. They started back to the house when Boy growled.

“What is it Boy?” Callum said.

“WOOF!” Boy sprinted to the front door, Callum jogging close behind until he heard raised voices inside.

“...don’t want any trouble,” his father spoke to their neighbour, Hamish.

“Then give us food for the winter and I’ll be on my way,” Hamish said.

“We have none to spare Hamish. Please!” father said.

Boy burst through the door and growled at Hamish who had a dagger pointed at Callum’s parents.

“WOOF!”

“Boy! Heel!” Callum shouted.

“WOOF!”

Hamish turned to the dog and laughed, “Stupid hound, you’ve been getting enough food, that’s-” his father grabbed Hamish’s wrist with both hands trying to wrench the dagger from him. Hamish swung with his other fist and his father crumpled to the floor.

Boy leapt onto Hamish and snapped at his face, his dagger skidding onto the floor. Callum scrambled for the dagger as Hamish screamed.

Callum’s mom shrieked, “OFF BOY!”, but the hound sunk his teeth into his forearm. Callum snatched the dagger and ran to help Boy. Hamish punched the hound off him and scrambled to his feet. Callum’s hand shook, was he really going to stab his neighbour? Hamish kicked Boy in the ribs.

“Leave him alone!” Callum shouted

Hamish looked to Callum, then down at the dagger.

“Leave Callum out of this Hamish! Think of your own son,” his mom kneeled beside his dad.

“Who do you think I need food for?” Hamish said, turning his back to Callum. *Now!* He could stab Hamish before he hurt anyone else - but his feet wouldn’t budge, and his hands trembled. *Come on, do it!*

“We’ll starve, Hamish,” mother said.

“woof”, Boy struggled to rise from the floor.

Hamish spun to Boy and stomped on his head with a sickening *crunch*.

“NOOOOO!” Callum rushed Hamish, but he snatched Callum’s wrist and *twisted*, forcing Callum to drop the dagger.

“Now you have one less mouth to feed, need I make it two?”

Hamish wrapped his good arm around Callum’s neck and squeezed.

“Mom... help...” He struggled, but Hamish’s arm was like iron around his neck.

“Hamish, stop!” his mother shouted, “I’ll give you what you want, just let us be”

Hamish didn’t let up, “Get it now,” he growled.

“Please, let him-”

“NOW!”

His mother scrambled into the pantry while Callum clawed at Hamish. He kicked and squirmed, but Hamish was too strong for him. His vision swam and his lungs burned. He tried to scream, but his voice wouldn’t work. His mother rushed back into the room with a sack full of grains and threw it to Hamish’s feet. Callum collapsed to the floor and gasped for air.

While heaving and staring at the floor, he heard the door slam shut followed by his mother rubbing his back. Though his father didn’t stir, his chest rose and fell. Callum didn’t dare look at Boy.

“Mom, is Boy going to be okay?”

His mother held him in an embrace and squeezed.