

The wizard hadn't come this year. Again. Without the wizard, their farm produced less each year. Without the wizard, they couldn't feed Boy. Callum's parents didn't see it that way.

"If that animal can't provide for us, he'll have to go," Mom said, stirring the last stew before hibernation.

"But he's getting better! He can tell left from right now," Callum said.

"Yeah, half the time,"

"He's a bit slow, but I can keep training him."

"Callum, it's been three years."

"He learns every year!"

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.

It made sense, but it made him squirm. They chose to care for Boy when he wasn't adopted with the rest of his litter, so he was their responsibility.

"We'll talk about it later. Right now, we need to get the farm ready for the winter. Go help Dad, okay?"

Callum shrank but nodded. He only had a few hours before his body would start its hibernation.

"And leave time to wash up—Hamish is coming over for dinner"

He slouched his way out of the kitchen, threw on his woolen coat, and strolled out to find his Dad. A frigid breeze cut through his coat to his bones. It 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.

The Wizard of Life protected the world from evil threats; he didn't always have time to help farmers with their crops. Why else wouldn't he have come this year? The wizard kept the world safe, so Callum would keep Boy safe. He'd have to find a way to finish the hound's training by the end of the day or he'd lose him forever. Unless...

He had to find his Dad. He wouldn't be in the harberry field since they'd finished the lackluster harvest yesterday. They'd spent the past week plucking the berries leaving red stains splotching their fingertips. The boarvers needed to be herded into their den for hibernation, but Dad would want them to graze a while longer. That left the tool shed. Callum tucked his hands into his armpits and trod along the dirt path. He found his Dad piling axes, hoes, and hammers onto the wood floor; they brought their tools into their den during the winter to prevent the steel toolheads from coming loose.

"Grab a bunch and bring 'em in Cal, no time to lose," Dad said.

"There's still a few hours; we can take our time." Callum said.

"We'll relax when we're done."

Callum swallowed his words and scooped up a couple hammers and some hatchets and carried them along the dirt path back into the farmhouse. He'd have to work Boy into the conversation naturally. Callum lugged the tools through the living room and into their den.

Warmth enveloped Callum like a hug and he fought to keep his eyes open. The heavy wool blankets piled on the bed invited him to sleep, and the fireplace's crackles soothed him. Hibernate later. He had a farmhound to save.

He pushed his lethargy aside and organized the tools in a corner where they'd be out of the way. A hatchet's head wobbled when he placed it on the ground; his Dad would try to fix it before getting rid of it. His Dad clanged into the den apparently carrying every single tool in one trip.

"Grab the scythe, Cal."

Callum eased the Dad-sized scythe from his arm, careful not to disturb whatever tangle kept everything from tumbling to the floor. Free of the scythe, he dumped the rest into the corner and set to organizing them.

"Why do we have so many tools?" Callum asked.

"Every time I get rid of one, there's a perfect opportunity to use it a week later. When I don't, the tools pile up like this," his Dad huffed, "there's a few more back in the shed, start hanging these while I get them."

"This hatchet head is loose, should we get rid of it?" Callum held out the hatchet and wiggled the head. After all, Boy had no use, and they'd get rid of *him*.

His Dad frowned and snatched it from Callum. He inspected the eye of the hatchet, then the axe blade. With a grunt, he yanked the head off.

"Handle's split. We can make a new one come spring. In the meantime..." his Dad pushed through an access door into the woodshed—a chill breeze cut through the den. Callum pulled his coat tight and followed his Dad. "Listen," he said.

The woodshed door rattled, and Callum winced from a jet of freezing air hitting his face. His Dad wedged the hatchet head into the crack underneath the door and *kicked* it. The rattling stopped and the jet reduced to a wisp.

"The wood shifted last winter, and the door's been rattling ever since," Dad explained.

Callum took a deep breath. He took his chance, "Maybe we can find another use for Boy like you did with the hatchet."

Dad whipped his head around to face Callum. Callum's face burned and he clenched his hands into fists. *Stand your ground.*

"A broken hatchet doesn't need food."

"I'll give him some of mine."

"Then you'll starve. He can't herd the boarvers, he refuses to listen to commands, and he eats more than any of us. We're getting rid of him. End of discussion."

Callum opened his mouth, but he had no response. *Come on, think of something!*

"Organize those tools."

Dad marched through the den leaving Callum alone. The door slammed shut with finality. They might as well be killing Boy, and he couldn't do anything about it. He punched a wood pile with all his might—pain jolted up his arm as his knuckles cracked against the wood. He spun to the stupid axe head, wound up a kick, and booted the steel. His boots didn't pad the impact, and

his toes crunched. He stumbled and leaned against the log pile. He sunk himself onto the plank floor praying he hadn't broken anything.

Dad was right. Boy was no use to them. He drained their food stores and gave nothing to the farm in return, but Callum couldn't accept it. He had to find a way to keep him before the day ended, even if it meant going hungry this hibernation. If his Dad could find a use for a broken hatchet, Callum could find a use for a half-trained farmhound. He limped to his feet, the pain subsiding, and kicked out the hatchet head with his other foot.

"Here Boy," Callum whispered. He crouched his way through the harberry field to the boarver pasture. He called for Boy again and waited.

Decayed harberry shrub leaves covered the field, and they crinkled under Callum's feet. The wizard's visit three years ago had kept the leaves green a week into winter. Someday, Callum would learn growth spells and he'd make more harberries than they could harvest. Dad said magic was dangerous, but it'd be worth the risk to keep his family prosperous.

"WOOF!"

Callum jumped, "How did you sneak up on me like that?" Boy's silent approaches always amazed him since Boy stood at his height. Slobber dripped from Boy's muzzle—more slobber than usual. He'd dropped a mauled scrounger in the grass.

"Thank you, maybe we can cook this up," Callum said—though the vermin had little meat on it.

"We have to bring the boarvers into the den, understand?" The farmhound cocked his head.

Callum pointed to the triangular wooden hut a few hundred metres away. Boy followed his finger, then looked back to Callum.

"WOOF!"

Wizards hope he understood. "Round them up," Boy raced off into the pasture with his head lowered and teeth bared. Shuffling and bleating, the huge woolen cattle clumped together trying to keep safe from the black hound. The boarvers dwarfed Boy and shouldn't have been threatened by him; did they truly fear Boy, or did they choose to cooperate? Callum signaled 'left' with a whistle—a sharp rising tone—and Boy circled the boarver 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 boarver 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 boarver three-quarters of the way then signaled forward, so with a few extra steps Boy managed to wrangle the boarver to the left. Callum signaled right and Boy went right, then Callum signaled forward. *It worked!*

Callum turned the boarvers left to face their den and signaled Boy forward. Callum used the forward command often to keep the hound focused. Soon enough, the boarvers huddled 20 metres away from the den.

Callum scurried inside the den which he had set up for the boarver a few weeks ago. They hay crunched under his feet as he propped open the oversized door with a stone. Callum scanned the empty den quickly to check for anything wrong. All the boarvers needed was shelter from the weather; their bodies would do the rest.

“Round them up,” Callum said.

Boy rushed back into action barking at the boarvers. They bleated in protest but gathered into a huddle. Callum used his process to direct the boarvers inside. One by one, they wandered into the den, stomped the hay a few times, and sunk to the floor. Callum took away the stone and latched the door shut with a satisfying clunk.

“Good job Boy! Come here,” Boy tackled Callum and slobbered on him, “I knew we shouldn’t have given up on you,” Boy licked his face, and he giggled—everything would be okay. He sat up and took in the setting sun. The white sky faded to silver as he took a deep breath of the crisp breeze and let his body melt into the grass. He could curl up here with Boy by his side and wake up in the spring.